

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN ADAM PENDLETON AND KRIST GRUIJTHUIJSEN AT THE ARTIST'S STUDIO

Quote Number One. (Or how to thrive on linguistic prospects.)

KRIST GRUIJTHUIJSEN

What's today's date?

ADAM PENDLETON

Obama won on Tuesday, November 4th, so today must be Thursday, November 6th.

KRIST GRUIJTHUIJSEN

And what time is it now?

ADAM PENDLETON

It's about 4:30pm.

KRIST GRUIJTHUIJSEN

If you had to give a small statement concerning your practice, what would this consist of?

ADAM PENDLETON

I guess it would consist of a series of obvious observations about the work not in relationship to form, but in relationship to process. That the work uses existing languages, forms and images as a basic foundation.

KRIST GRUIJTHUIJSEN

Could you expand a bit more upon this usage of existing languages, forms and images? In other words, could you explain what the term quotation means to you?

ADAM PENDLETON

I think it changes depending upon what you're trying to achieve. Critically, I think the idea of quotation is a problematic track. As an idea, it opposes a necessary engagement with pertinent critical forms or discourses. I think in the realm of language, within certain linguistic vocabularies, appropriation is a very liberating idea, but quotation is a very limiting one. Within the sphere of art it's the other way around, wherein quotation can feel more expansive as a position while appropriation is more limiting as an operating space. Any kind of definition that I do have is a functioning one. It is one that works itself out in my work. The making and the doing is its own definition. Quotation or appropriation is a way of confronting reality on its own terms.

KRIST GRUIJTHUIJSEN

Let's talk a bit about the perception of autonomy in your work. In what way does this notion concern your artistic production?

ADAM PENDLETON

Well, my work cancels out the idea of any kind of autonomy. It's actually anti-any-kind-of-idea of separation. It much more concerns networks of knowledge and the connections between things that are often made disparate or have been disconnected. So my artistic production is an argument against autonomy, which is why perhaps on display 'autonomy' often serves it well.

KRIST GRUIJTHUIJSEN

That's true since it's a collage, a collage of networks that appropriates the possibility of language. In that sense you do treat it in exactly the opposite way.

ADAM PENDLETON

Yes, as much as possible. I'm certainly not thinking about ideas of autonomy in relationship to the work. And I think that those contradictions are much more pertinent and interesting to me. Autonomy doesn't welcome ideas of complexity into the conversation of the work, and I think the work is about presenting the complexities of these networks of information. So there's room for chance, or a swerve. I'm using that word specifically in regards to how the writer Joan Retallack

speaks to this idea of a swerve in relationship to culture. Something happens that shifts our sense of reality, and she particularly refers to people who she feels have altered our sense of reality or culture—some of the usual suspects, but nonetheless true—like John Cage, Gertrude Stein and Wittgenstein.

KRIST GRUIJTHUIJSEN

Could you talk about the literal and figurative use of language in your work?

ADAM PENDLETON

That's a very appropriate question because those are exactly the two types of languages that the work intends to address or at least put into conversation with each other, particularly now with the *Black Dada* paintings and installations I've been doing using black cubes. I've brought these two ideas of what language *is* within certain circles and what language can do together within the space of the work, so you have this intersection of concepts describing something that's elementary but also alien and abstract. The work advances toward a more abstract space and a more literal space at the same time. Representing these ideas of blackness, literally and theoretically, and playing with the type of language associated with that kind of contemporary art production and then, too, pushing our more literary or academic approaches and understanding of language forward within the same space. The less language represents its language-ness the more it represents those two spheres of discourse, particularly when you consider the maker. So in a strange way I feel as though I've become this kind of player in the work.

KRIST GRUIJTHUIJSEN

As mentioned earlier, your practice aims to create a re-historicized present. Could you expand a bit more upon this notion?

ADAM PENDLETON

Beginning at the beginning:

'The dangers of taking pleasure in the past and the benefits of remembering in order to reinvent are not clearly posted. There is a risk of peddling nostalgia, of getting lost and/or paralyzed in emotionally inflected territory in which recreation of the past obscures and replaces (or displaces) the present. To aid critical understanding of past specificities, and their effect in the present, it seems more productive to consider loose continuums of production than to provide a form of periodization as punctuation. How to balance multiple relations to history? Alternatives to traditional historiographic practices might trace spatial and temporal configurations of interconnected events, activities, and associations of ideas nested in cultural circumstances, and the design provide spaces for multiple meanings, conflicting imaginations, conflicting 'facts' and partiality. Historiography might be approached akin to artistic methodologies, utilize juxtaposition and artistic license, render ambivalently rather than declaratively, and ultimately acknowledge, not only in principle but as part of a historicizing method itself, that historiography is a creative as well as interpretive practice: that it is a form of production.'

KRIST GRUIJTHUIJSEN

A quotation of Cerith Wyn Evans?

ADAM PENDLETON

No, not Cerith Wyn Evans, Julie Ault.

KRIST GRUIJTHUIJSEN

That's Julie Ault?

ADAM PENDLETON

Quoted in a Cerith Wyn Evans book.

KRIST GRUIJTHUIJSEN

So this is your response to the question?

ADAM PENDLETON

Well, I like what she says here in terms of history, particularly what she says toward the end, that history, creating historical narratives, trajectories or what have you, is a creative act itself. For me history is perpetually a fiction. Part of my work is thinking about systems of display as they relate to historical representation throughout our culture. Much of my work is an attempt to manipulate these forms of presentation/representation. You hear Julie Ault saying in that quote that creating a series of juxtapositions can create alternative—maybe not so much alternative histories, although it does that too—but alternative spaces for these histories. At least this is how I interpret the text in relationship to my own work. It is about a plural rather than a singular entity or trajectory. Even though the work tends to be very reductive, the forms that are used in the work speak to the necessity of/for pluralities. I think that's why I am so drawn to Sol LeWitt's *Incomplete Open Cubes* and the fact that LeWitt referred to these 'complete' works as incomplete, something which provides possibilities to extend from. Through the Xeroxing and cropping, the editing of these very geometric lines, I end up extending these ideas of incompleteness. Then too, as John Cage writes in his essay 'The History of Experimental Music in America', he quotes de Kooning saying 'The past does not influence me; I influence it.' I think the distinctions between past, future and present dynamics, as early as the 1950s, became an important part of many people's conceptual logic when you think of the theoretical dimensions of people's work like Bucky Fuller and Marshall McLuhan. It's about feedback loops, the 'action' of cause and effect. I like the idea that things happen and they don't stop happening, they continue. It's our way of looking at things that change without things ever having slipped into the past. I think that's what de Kooning was trying to say.

KRIST GRUIJTHUIJSEN

It's almost like once is not enough...

ADAM PENDLETON

Right.

KRIST GRUIJTHUIJSEN

Saying that once doesn't leave an impression.

ADAM PENDLETON

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Which is kind of true, you know? That's interesting because, repetition is such a huge part of the work. Repeating forms, repeating words.

KRIST GRUIJTHUIJSEN

But I think it's more about interpretation. And repetition is interpretation.

ADAM PENDLETON

Yes, it is. It's a means of interpretation.

KRIST GRUIJTHUIJSEN

But aren't you also questioning yourself about your position and your function within specific histories by using all these quotations?

ADAM PENDLETON

Absolutely.

KRIST GRUIJTHUIJSEN

Could you elaborate on the element of expectation and the language of the cliché in your performances?

ADAM PENDLETON

I think there's an element of subversion in the work. A kind of dichotomy where I am thinking about playing with what people will expect from certain tropes and using those expectations to their full advantage while at the same time introducing forms of disruption that aren't normally found within certain existing forms (like a Baptist Revival). I'm subverting these expectations to cause a clash between the assumed and the un-assumed in which I'm often dealing with levels of the socio-political—the things people expect from a black artist. Though expectation in relation to cultural assumptions does not move in one direction, so I am also projecting about the kinds of assumptions the audience or viewers are making about me as the maker of the work which, particularly in many of the texts, takes advantage of a suspension between fact and fiction in regards to me as 'its maker' I use these expectations to my advantage. For example, by using the term "black Dada," which I think creates certain expectations, the work puts the audience in an awkward position because, naturally, they want to be welcomed into the space of the obvious. Sometimes, particularly in my performances, I'll use direct devices, statements, calling out to kinds of assumptions—those of the audience and mine—as material: 'fat bitch,' 'old hag,' 'faggot.' I am, at least intellectually, willing to lay myself bare but there's a kind of invisibility in that approach, which creates a conceptual paradigm between me and the viewer or the listener, and 'faggot' is just so literal.

KRIST GRUIJTHUIJSEN

Do you think that there's any criticality toward the beauty of construction?

ADAM PENDLETON

Absolutely. Because so many things are...

KRIST GRUIJTHUIJSEN

To be more specific, the attraction, the appeal factor of the performance, meaning the beauty of language, the beauty of the scene that attracts and plays with the emotion of the audience. Could you relate or talk about the critical aspect of this?

ADAM PENDLETON

Well, very purposefully there were two things going on. In a sociological sense many of the things that took place in *The Revival* were a comment on the distinctions that are perpetually made between mind and body, body being the more visceral pleasure/emotion-driven side, and mind being this more—cold is not the right word—but more intellectually driven side invested in unemotional endeavours or pursuits. So from a critical standpoint *The Revival* puts those two distinctions together—they are almost fighting with each other. While one is going in one direction the other is going in another, and a lot of that relates back to where many of these texts were coming from and their authors' intentions. Almost no one whose text I used for *The Revival*, particularly when it comes to writers like Paolo Javier and Charles Bernstein, or even somebody like John Ashbery, intends to create a space for transcendence or for overt outpouring of emotion in their writing. In fact, their intentions almost on the whole are the complete opposite. I understand one aspect of their desire for language is to hold emotion at bay, whereas the intention of Gospel music is to pull the heartstrings to make you feel a certain kind of way, a wave of 'transcendence'. Naturally, these are simplifications, the history of Gospel is quite complex and has less to do with words than an *attitude*, and most avant-garde writing practices are opposed to emotion

as a sentimental instrument, a conditioning tool rather than ‘emotion’ per se. The sermon at the center of *The Revival* was a means to use a Brechtian model to explore these distinctions in the sense that I was both inside the action and outside, commenting on it. In fact, the very juxtaposition of Gospel and experimental writing had a Brechtian impact that perhaps forced a critical distancing from both approaches, and one that also took note of their commensurability within the space of the performance. I intend to use the space of performance to find a third way, basically where the structure isn’t either/or. It goes back to dismantling the Greeks, challenging their fallacious binary either/or, and asserting the potential for bringing together these two spaces, these two sides of logic. And it was interesting to me because one of the really young poets—I keep mentioning his name, Paolo Javier—whose text comes very early on in the piece, felt very abstractly related to the space of the Gospel music or at least the space that the Gospel music created.

KRIST GRUIJTHUIJSEN

Let’s go into the details of your show at Haunch of Venison. Could you talk a little about the set-up and its conceptual framework?

ADAM PENDLETON

The show is essentially centered around the idea of Black Dada, which is simultaneously a literal and conceptual idea and form. What is Black Dada historically? And, in both political and personal terms, how does it act as a means to skew linear historical narratives? On one level the works in the exhibition function to ask these questions, while on another the work moves toward the specific through the realm of the general (language, line, image). The works in the exhibition repurpose existing contexts or at the least ask different questions of them like the ‘off-message’ minimalism of the black cubes, which function as phenomenological meaning-making devices.

KRIST GRUIJTHUIJSEN

Your work often, on purpose, pushes the idea of representation and (dis)placement of the subject to a point where the spectator could easily misinterpret the work. Why do you have the urge to push it that far?

ADAM PENDLETON

I like the idea of people attempting to derive something logical out of an illogical situation, attempting to connect and order information. It is a complete experience, which, in theory, produces real physical space. A number of theoreticians in the 1960s spent a lot of time trying to illustrate the invisible flow of information throughout our physical space, spending a decade making drawings of this invisible architecture. In a way, the work speaks to this kind of invisible architecture. The architecture of a highbrow/lowbrow dynamic where the separation between, say, pop culture and art history is absent, or more specifically, between Gospel music and minimalism. I’m really using the work as a line—making a mark but at the same time erasing the line and exploring the perceived gaps between me and someone else. It’s not a statement or an affirmation of my position, rather it’s an illustration of my subjectivity and my objectivity. What remains is an inclusive space that is not so much this third element as much as it is another means of perception.

KRIST GRUIJTHUIJSEN

Could you pick one work similar to a work in the show, which you think specifically reflects upon your practice, conceptually but also formalistically?

ADAM PENDLETON

Black Dada LC/AK/AA is a two-panel painting that measures eight by six feet. It is a diptych, which for me means a separation between something that is whole, or separating something that is whole. It begins with an image of a Sol LeWitt

incomplete cube from, I believe, 1971, that I photo-copied and then cropped so that you're only looking at a specific part of the image of LeWitt's cube. So, it's no longer the image of the cube, it's an incomplete image of the image of the incomplete cube. It really looks like the painting is an object of an idea, an idea of an object. The Xerox is enlarged in a photographic process to the largest scale possible, so this object is the result of certain mechanical limitations, which is something people often don't know about the work—that I actually like using mechanical limitations as rules because I like rule-based thinking or approaches, but not always in terms of creating rules which is more manipulative in a way—creating rules until you like the output.

KRIST GRUIJTHUIJSEN

What does that mean when the rules of form, image, performativity and graphics run parallel while at the same time come together in this conservative form like a painting?

ADAM PENDLETON

Talking about how the painting is made rather than describing the object as such answers that question, because the object is how it is made, which is probably one of the reasons why I still take pleasure in the idea of painting. A painting is (can be) how it is made. In this particular case, it is interesting because it shows the steps and it reveals itself while becoming something else simultaneously, and I quite like that. The image is blown-up and the films are used to screen what we're looking at, which is a black on black diptych with lines that both mark and create space as they negate it, as they comment on it. That's why I really like these lines because they comment on something very basic and I think the words in the painting are very basic; the former in a more art-historical way and the latter in a more socio-political way, but they also converge. Is it a performance of art history putting these words in relationship to each other, 'black' and 'Dada'? I think about these two words and the saying of them and the feeling of them and the action of these two words coming together—two separate things coming together and becoming one: the Black Dada. Black Dada, a noun and a verb. Black Dada it. And for me, at least visually, there is a real gesture of a performance rather than it being 'performative'; which is a kind of way of not acknowledging the realness and pertinence of the decision of having the black and the Dada converge.

KRIST GRUIJTHUIJSEN

What does painting actually mean to you?

ADAM PENDLETON

Presentation. I was asked some questions recently about painting, related to the 'painting is dead' thing though more interesting, and I said that if I was to entertain the notion I would not ask 'is painting dead?', but 'what did we ask of painting to kill it?'

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