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Adam, Why Arial?

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Adam, why do you choose Arial for the letters that sit across the surface of your paintings and objects? Why not Helvetica, the industrial sans serif typeface with letterforms that are both more formally resolved and in tune with the art histories to which your work connects?

In the series “Black Dada” (2008–09), you use photocopied enlargements of Sol LeWitt’s *Incomplete Cubes* (1974) layered with large capital letters to spell part of your work’s title. These paintings (well, silkscreens on canvas) attempt to connect to more than one era—the 1910s of the Dada movement, through your use of its broken language strategies and your title, and also the 1970s of the unfinished Conceptual art project, through images of the *Incomplete Cubes*.



Black Dada (LK / LC / AA), 2008–09. Silkscreen on canvas (diptych), 48 x 75 7/8 in. each

In “System of Display” (2008–09), a series of wall-mounted mirrored black boxes, you layer found images, photocopied and enlarged, with text fragments screened on the glass surfaces. This comprehensive series is mounted as a relentless row of ten or more boxes on the gallery wall, each containing a different found image and text fragment. Clues to the meaning of the series are located in the individual works’ titles. For example, *EE (Generates / Giulio Paolini, Young man looking at Lorenzo Lotto, 1967)* (2008–2009)

reaches to both the late 1960s of Italian Arte Povera conceptualist Giulio Paolini and the late fifteenth-century Renaissance-to-Mannerist painter Lorenzo Lotto.



EE (Generates / Giulio Paolini, Young man looking at Lorenzo Lotto, 1967), "System of Display" series, 2008–09. Silkscreen on glass and mirror, 9 3/4 x 9 3/4 x 3 in. each

Poet Jena Osman recently described your layered text-image compositions as copies that “lovingly degrade the past in order to create a new lineage that can move into the future.”¹ In an interview with curator Krist Gruijthuijsen you said, “My work cancels out any kind of autonomy . . . it much more concerns the connections between things that are often made disparate or have been disconnected.”² It seems pretty clear that you’re trying to recompile history by creating a set of signs whose place in time is complicated. So, Adam, why Arial?

Monotype Arial was designed in 1982 by Robin Nicholas and Patricia Saunders, based on an existing sans serif typeface. However, Arial is almost identical in both proportion and weight to the popular sans serif Linotype font Helvetica—this is less than a coincidence.

In the early 1980s, IBM was designing the first electronic laser printers and wanted to include the most widely used typefaces of the time, Times New Roman and Helvetica. Although Times New Roman was produced by both Linotype and Monotype foundries, Helvetica was offered only by Linotype. As IBM already had a deal with Monotype, they quickly needed a Helvetica alternate. Monotype quickly designed Arial to match the size and shape of Helvetica while basing the individual letters on the humanist forms of MT Grottesque. The awkward result passes as Helvetica to the untrained eye and satisfied IBM in 1982. By 1992, Microsoft also had a deal with Monotype to include their typefaces with the Windows 3.1 operating system. (Apple had selected Linotype and the typographic integrity of Helvetica was installed as default.) Windows was an unqualified success—millions of personal computers were loaded with Arial and millions of users made no distinction between Helvetica and its body double, Arial.

Helvetica itself was nothing new anyway—it was a redrawing of Neue Haas Grottesque in the 1950s, which itself was based on Akzidenz Grottesque from the early twentieth century, in turn derived from the Standard Grottesque of the late 1800s. Arial could easily fit into this lineage. As described in the Readme file that ships with v3.0 of the font software, “Arial contains more humanist characteristics than many of its predecessors and as such [sic] more in tune with the mood of the last decades of the twentieth century.”³

BLACK BLACK DADA DADA

Helvetica (L) and Arial (R)

In his small book *The Shape of Time*, Yale historian George Kubler proposes a realignment of art history based not on chronological procession (with one work following, updating and replacing the previous), but rather multiply-streamed parallel progressions moving through a constellation of distinct formal problems. One work does not necessarily exist at a fixed point in time, but rather connects to one or more formal problems that may also have jumbled chronologies. With this rearrangement, Kubler suggests that time moves not forward in a straight line, but intermittently and coincidentally in retreating and recursive loops—“more knot than arrow.” He continues, “The rest of time emerges only in signals relayed to us at this instant by innumerable stages and by unexpected bearers . . .”⁴

So, Adam, is Arial a signal? If so, to when is it pointing? It can't be the 1910s of Dada, the 1960s of Arte Povera, the late fifteenth century of the Renaissance nor the mid-1970s of Conceptual art—Arial didn't exist at any of these times. More likely, Arial signals the present moment and contemporary professional graphic design. Your paintings initiate themselves into this formal language by employing its codes: enlarged and cropped images, severely restricted palettes and layered sans serif typography. (I even remember you introducing me to an earlier work by saying “It's like an album cover.”) But then, why Arial? It's a half-resolved typeface, a debased Helvetica at best, produced in the service of IBM and Microsoft! Come on.

Your work aspires to be in many times at once, to insert itself in the between spaces of an open art history. But what makes this work work? As soon as you signal the codes of professional graphic design, you turn your back on it—you choose Arial. The result is hard to place. I suppose that's the point.

David Reinfurt
4 June 2009

1. Jena Osman, “Torrent” in *Adam Pendleton: EL T D K* (London: Haunch of Venison, 2008), 54.
2. Krist Gruijthuijsen, “Quote Number One,” (interview with Adam Pendleton) in *Adam Pendleton: EL T D K* (London: Haunch of Venison, 2008), 89.
3. Microsoft, Readme.txt file included with version 3.0 of Arial font software, 2001.
4. George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), 17.