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# Adam Pendleton WITH ALLIE BISWAS

Words are essential in Adam Pendleton's art. The artist's engagement with experimental prose and poetry over the past ten years, along with his cross-referencing of visual and social histories, has made space for new types of language within conceptual art. Pendleton's largest U.S. museum show to date, *Adam Pendleton: Becoming Imperceptible*, opened at Contemporary Arts Center New Orleans in April, before traveling to the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver, where it is on view through September 25.

**ALLIE BISWAS (RAIL):** You made an instrumental move in getting your career off the ground by taking your art to galleries and making them look at it. There's a story that your work was included in a show in New York at Gallery Onetwentyeight, the director of which assisted Sol LeWitt, and that's how LeWitt saw your work.

**ADAM PENDLETON:** Yes, that's true. Those earlier works (almost) always incorporated language, for one. Otherwise, there was a system to how the thing was composed. So I was convinced that, even though visually they looked like abstract painting, they were very much conceptual. That was actually the most gratifying thing, of course, when LeWitt came into the gallery and commented on my work. Whatever my view on this paternalistic language and its historical accuracy, he's been called the father of conceptual art, so when he said, "Oh, I like this!" I was this young kid who was totally sure of this already and could turn around and say to anyone who would listen, "See, it is conceptual!" [Laughter.] But who knew why he was drawn to the piece. I never had the opportunity to talk with him about it, but we did trade at the time.

Some of the earlier works I appreciate more than others, like any artist. But for me, it was all happening in public. So I sometimes think that I basically went to art school in public. I did my first solo show in New York at Yvon Lambert in 2005, and I did a project at Wallspace in 2004 just before that. I was twenty.

**RAIL:** It sounds a bit absurd, doesn't it?

**PENDLETON:** Now it does. [Laughter.]

**RAIL:** What was happening to your work and your process during this time?

**PENDLETON:** The work changed, and—I guess because of my age—I was very open to that. I think a lot of what art students are trying to do is related to trying to find something—the thing that they feel "works." You look around, and it does seem like artists who have had any kind of trajectory have been able to maintain a kind of logical progression of their work. So I think a lot of people are trying to find that first thing that works for them. But actually, the thing that works is learning how to manage the chaos of making art. That's what really works.

**RAIL:** Your performance from 2007 [*The Revival*] caught the attention of a lot of people. Would you agree that this work took your career in a different direction?

**PENDLETON:** That was when my own thinking about my work changed dramatically, yes. You have all of these ideas, and then you realize that what you make can't be a half-step toward those ideas. You actually have to manifest it. So I had this idea of taking a Southern-style religious revival, and turning it on its head, and then fusing it with experimental language. It was really that simple. I think it was the first time I had the idea to deconstruct, reconfigure, and reimagine an existing form and ask: what else could this be? What happens if you remove



Installation view: *Becoming Imperceptible*, Contemporary Arts Center New Orleans, April 1 – June 1, 2016. Courtesy the artist.

the religious aspect, but you leave the gospel music, the musical component? What happens if you take out the religious language and put in language that's related to queer activism or contemporary poetics? It was about creating a capacious space, breaking down one form and creating something else.

**RAIL:** Was *The Revival* the first time that you had made a performance?

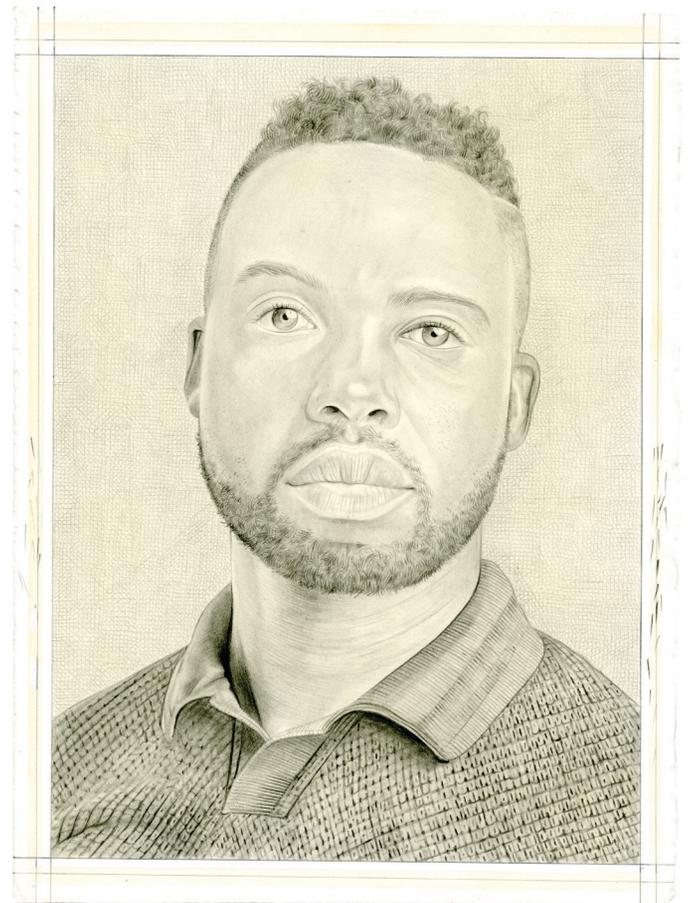
**PENDLETON:** On that scale, for sure, but I had been collaging texts and making performances before that.

**RAIL:** When did language start to be laid into your photographic painting works?

**PENDLETON:** Well, language was always an important part of my life. I used to write poetry—don't all teenagers write poetry? [Laughter.] It's funny that, while things have changed a lot, they haven't changed much at all, and I think a lot of this was just the environment that I grew up in. My mom had Adrienne Rich's books in the house and June Jordan and Audre Lorde, so I was reading their work when I was very young. My dad was a musician—not professionally, but he played music when he was at home. In many ways I think that we are a product of our environment, although I am not inclined toward reading people's biographies to make sense of who they are and what they do. My brother and my sister were in the same house and they're not artists. But of course you see these things going on, and they piqued my interest. But there was also a political drive from a very early age. I always thought that art was something that could effect change, and I think that in a strange way that was the real drive. What could I do that would actually change things around me, or change how we imagine the world and our built environment? Art was this thing that could shift attention.

**RAIL:** Maybe now is a good time to talk about Black Dada, which could be read as connecting language to a political drive.

**PENDLETON:** The paintings that I showed in my first solo show in New York were text paintings, and they appropriated the writing of people like Toni Morrison, Rich, Jordan, and Lorde. They basically attempted to represent the cadence of someone speaking the words that were visually present. They were two-color silkscreens, and I think quite special in a way. Linguistically, they referenced one poetic tradition, but in terms of layout and so on they had a concrete poetry aspect, though less austere somehow than that might sound. They were quite erotic and loving. Later I became introduced to writers



Portrait of Adam Pendleton. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui. From a photo by Taylor Dafeo.

like Joan Retallack, Ron Silliman, Leslie Scalapino, and Charles Bernstein.

**RAIL:** What impact did those writers have on you?

**PENDLETON:** Reading their work caused a big shift in my own work. It wasn't a visual thing. It had more to do with theoretical positions around language, going from one school of thought—I guess you could call it a lyrical school, which the poets I was reading had a very political foundation with regards to content—to a very different school, which was more aligned with how conceptual artists thought about language: language as material. So there was this productive overlap between language, conceptual art, lyrical poetry, and activism—whether formal or content-based or both. I didn't feel it necessary so much to take sides. I wasn't a poet as such, and think I took from the different genres or schools what felt useful at that time. *The Revival* was the first time those ideas were presented publicly and cohesively, and it just happened to be a performance. Black Dada, in one sense,



Adam Pendleton, *WE (we are not successive)*, 2015. Silkscreen ink on mirror polished stainless steel. 46 13/16 × 61 1/2 × 5/8 inches (W) 46 13/16 × 35 5/8 × 5/8 inches (E). Courtesy the artist.

*What could I do that would actually change things around me, or change how we imagine the world and our built environment? Art was this thing that could shift attention.*

represents the things that I started to do with language in a visual space following *The Revival*.

**RAIL:** So this political drive was the foundation for how you were approaching everything that you were making. But what was the actual intention?

**PENDLETON:** Black Dada is an idea. When pressed, I often say it's a way to talk about the future while talking about the past. It surfaced in a conversational space, when I was just talking to friends. I had Amiri Baraka's book *The Dead Lecturer*, which contains the poem "Black Dada Nihilismus." I found the language striking: "Black Dada." Just that. The "Black" and the "Dada." "Black" as a kind of open-ended signifier, anti-representational rather than representational. And then "Dada"—sort of nonsense. A sound, but also referencing a moment in art. So this language became a productive means to think about how the art object can function, and does function, in the world. What can art do? I think all artists should be asking themselves this question. Not "what is it?" It's whatever you want it to be, but what can it do? What do you, as an artist, want it to do? Black Dada also became a way to create a conversation and to insert my work into conversations about appropriation that I was observing at that particular time, in about 2008. I don't know if you remember how everyone was talking about appropriation around that time, as though it was something new, and it, of course, wasn't. So it was a way to shift perspectives, but it also, again, created space for myself as an artist. I still reside there as an artist, but I keep pushing it and trying to change the shape of it, and of the space(s) it creates.

**RAIL:** And you put together a Black Dada book. How did that develop?

**PENDLETON:** I created a reader, yes. That began as a conversation with Jenny Schlenzka, who is a curator at MoMA PS1, about this idea of Black Dada in relationship to institutions, and how it could change institutional dynamics. The reader is essentially organized into three different sections: "Foundations"—so, foundational ideas to Black Dada, which are represented in text by thinkers from W.E.B. Du Bois to Gilles Deleuze to Stokely Carmichael—and then it shifts into "Language," which includes a range of writers whose works I've been drawn to such as Harryette Mullen, Retallack, Jordan, and others. The third section is "Artists' Positions," which collects texts by or about artists whom I relate to Black Dada, including Ad Reinhardt, Joan Jonas, and Stan Douglas, who is represented by his screenplay for *Inconsolable Memories*. It's going to come out next year for a show I'm doing in Berlin. The original version was spiral-bound, really an old-school reader. The version that is being

published will include the content of the original reader along with essays by curators and critics who have engaged deeply with Black Dada including Adrienne Edwards, Laura Hoptman, Tom McDonough, and Susan Thompson.

**RAIL:** I'm currently working on an anthology of black art, which compiles texts that were written by and about artists in the 1960s and '70s. At present there isn't any publication like it that people can refer to. You wonder, why does this sort of book not already exist?

**PENDLETON:** It's interesting that you say that, because around that time, in 2007, I started to think that a lot of gestures that I had made were actually retroactive. I felt that I was creating something that should have existed ten, twenty, forty years ago. It was like I was inserting things into the art-historical canon. For example, with the Black Dada paintings—which relate formally to modernist painting and the monochrome—I was infusing that space with very different language, quite literally, and also sort of messing it up. Messing it up slightly, but a lot at the same time, so it's also a contradiction, this duality, how a little bit is *a lot*. So, again, maybe these paintings were made in 1914. It's illogical. What did LeWitt say: "Illogical judgments lead to new experiences."

**RAIL:** Tell me about your residency at MoMA.

**PENDLETON:** The initial aspect of it is over, yet the broader project continues. It was an incredible opportunity to interact with the collection, but also with the institution, in a more intimate fashion. It was really just the institution saying, "Let's see what happens."

**RAIL:** So what did happen? And how does the context of a residency affect your way of working?

**PENDLETON:** The one problem I have with residencies is that I don't really like working in places outside of my own spaces. I like to be around my books, my things. I can't really pack up the studio and go to Beirut. So I thought about my work in relationship to the institution in an antagonistic way. I also thought about what kind of discursive or formal gesture I could make that could disrupt the ebb and flow of how this very large entity functions. I began a conversation with Joan Retallack—who is an essayist and poet, and who used to teach at Bard College—saying, "What if we did something at this place, at the Museum of Modern Art? What could we do?" At the time I was reading a short text that was published for Documenta 13 by Michael Hardt titled *The Procedures of Love*, and so I was initially going to do something around that text, whether that be a public conversation with Hardt, or something else. In the text, and this is a real summary, he talks about the political potential of embracing difference. In essence, potential resides in the

differences between us, not in the similarities. I started talking to Joan about this and she went back to this idea of love and eros, and to Plato, to the Symposium. She conceived this event called the *Supposium* and the basic premise was that she invited different people—myself, along with poet Anne Carson, Sandi Hilal of Decolonizing Architecture, film theorist Peter Krapp, and literary theorist/poet Fred Moten—to give talks that began with the word "suppose." So "Suppose..." That was the conceptual conceit, or the point of departure: *suppose*.

**RAIL:** How was the event executed?

**PENDLETON:** We delivered the talks in MoMA's Founders Room to about 100 participants. Each person was asked to take notes during the talks of phrases or words that captured their attention, and then these notecards were collected and redistributed, and we created a kind of group text from these fragments. As I say this to you now I realize that in a strange way the *Supposium* did somehow articulate what Hardt was talking about. Joan described it as a procedural thought experiment. For me, it became this question about how to have productive dialogues. How can we have productive public conversations and exchanges? How do we repurpose this idea of "I'm talking and you listen?" How does that become more about call and response? That was also a key aspect of *The Revival*: call and response and community through difference, something that has often been a key to black music as well.

**RAIL:** During *Supposium* you talked about Black Lives Matter. You had previously used the slogan in your installation in the Belgian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2015, but prior to this you had shown paintings in London, earlier on in the same year, that incorporated these words.

**PENDLETON:** Yes, my show in London was the first time that I exhibited work using that language. But the subject matter came up during *Supposium*, because that was shortly after George Zimmerman was found not guilty for murdering Trayvon Martin. I was asking the question, "What language stands its ground?" "Stand Your Ground" was the law that created the legal gray area where Zimmerman got off. He was "standing his ground." I thought: we need language that stands its ground.

**RAIL:** So you were reacting in real time, as it were. It's not as though two years went by after these incidents took place, and then you decided to respond through your work.

**PENDLETON:** I couldn't help but respond to the absurdity of the situation. It was the absurdity of it all coupled with the ongoing task I've set for myself of figuring out what Black Dada is. It is a kind of "black space" one could say. It is also a social space—it creates a social space. I think it gave me the room to respond to Black Lives Matter, even just on the level of the language. They are both very clear short statements.

**RAIL:** And you were looking at these two statements in relation to each other.

**PENDLETON:** Beyond anything else, I wanted to look at them in relation to each other—first as an artist, but then as a citizen. And in that context, as a citizen, there was another set of concerns. Jenny and I joined the protest in New York after the Zimmerman verdict. They had to close down Times Square for a short period of time. People were singing "Ella's Song" by Sweet Honey in the Rock: "We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes." Just thinking about the role of voice in general, and how Occupy Wall Street was a collective voice, but there was no individual voice that rose above all others. During the protests against the Zimmerman verdict, I was looking for a voice. There were different utterances, but you could tell that no one really knew how to speak, which fascinated me for many different reasons. Was that an evolution? Something new and important? Or was it somehow a weakness? So it was almost as though, after that, I was asking, "Does 'Black Lives Matter' function? Does this language function? What can it *do*, what does it *do*?" and I brought those questions along with others into the visual and conceptual space of my work.

**RAIL:** Is Black Dada shorthand for “This is Adam?”

**PENDLETON:** No. It’s a kind of refusal.

**RAIL:** Regardless, people understand that you’re not coming to it in this very straightforward way—

**PENDLETON:** —In 2008 I was invited by curator Krist Gruijthuisen to be a part of a show he curated within Manifesta 7 called *it’s a matter of fact* and I ended up writing a Black Dada manifesto. Basically it was a system for collecting sentences. So the first line of my text is the title of his exhibition *it’s a matter of fact*, and then it collects. So it goes from one, two, four, eight, sixteen, thirty-two, sixty-four, et cetera, accumulating a repeating series of sentences that are also attracting new language to them as it evolves. In effect it is the theoretical underpinning of the Black Dada project, it deliberately aligns aesthetic/political distinctions, creating a chronology-based affinity between conceptual art and political actions in the ’60s, for example, which had this conceptual and performative intelligence. What always fascinated me was that shortly after I wrote that, I read it publicly in a few places. But then the graphic designer/artist Will Holder also started reading the text around the world in quite different places, and I love this idea of Holder as my doppelgänger or something. You know, going around as the ambassador of Black Dada. It’s so simple—the “Black” and the “Dada.” But you’re right, there is nothing straightforward about it.

**RAIL:** By taking the hashtag Black Lives Matter and inserting it into the work, and being in a position where you can present it widely, do you think that you are one of the only artists to have really gone public with it? Do you think this has given you a kind of “credibility” in the minds of certain other people, in the sense that they are presented with an artist who feels very strongly about this current moment in time and he has acted upon it? Given the expression’s widespread usage, obviously through social media in particular, its popularity could perhaps even be viewed as “fashionable.” That sounds inappropriate, but I think you’ll understand what I’m getting at.

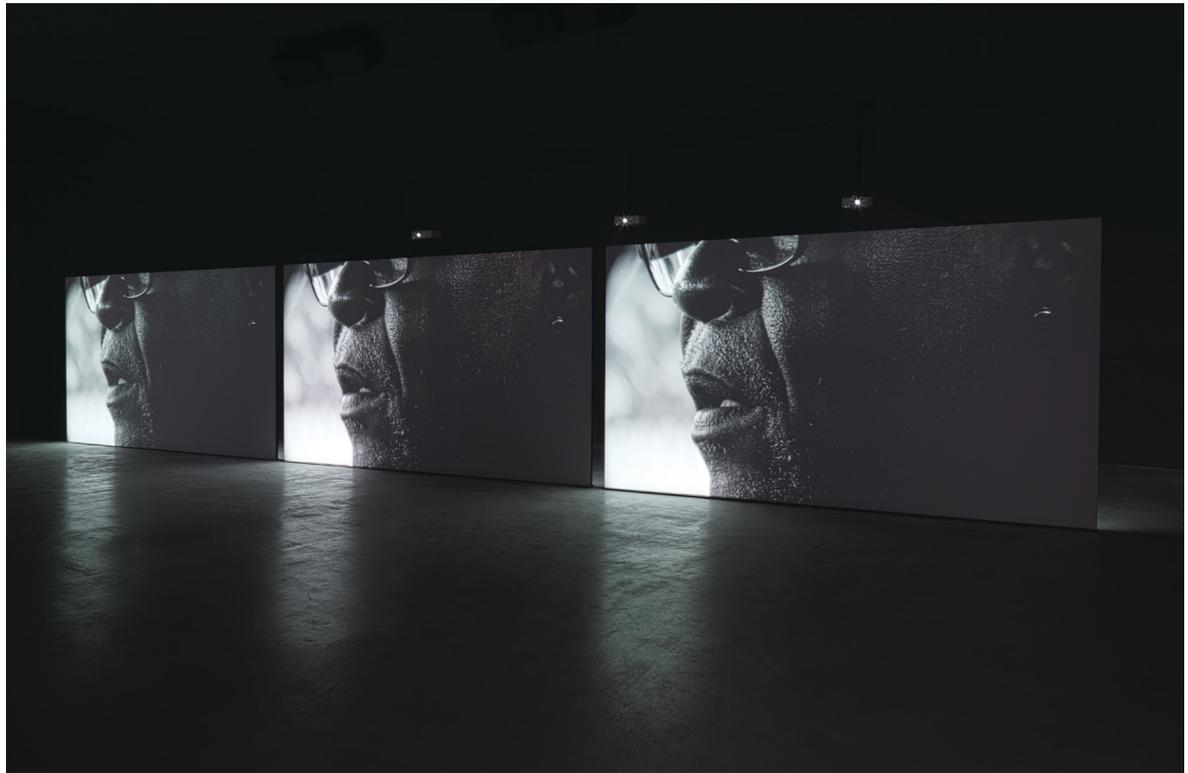
**PENDLETON:** You’re the second person to use the word “fashionable.” The thing is that there are stakes involved in everything that we do. This is paraphrasing the words of Rachel Blau DuPlessis: my intention as an artist is not to use the modes and methods of protest in the sense of saying, “This is wrong” and “That is right.” It is, however, to draw attention to things at times, in different ways through different registers. So I wanted to bring it out of the space of actual fashion, where things are short. Occupy Wall Street, in a strange way, is like the past already, even though it’s not, and even though it impacts everyone’s life. The same thing with Black Lives Matter—you have it in the media and everyone’s talking about it. In 2013 it came about and now, in the mainstream media, it’s like, “Oh would they stop carrying on” or, “Okay, we get it” or, “They’re interrupting Bernie Sanders now? Don’t they know he’s on *their* side?” Again, this language *has* not and *will* not leave the space of my work. It was about bringing a different kind of rhetoric and attention to the language, to the moment, to the movement.

**RAIL:** It was about extending the temporary space that it exists in, and creating a legacy.

**PENDLETON:** Let’s bring Black Lives Matter into the temporality that art objects and discourse can often afford. I showed these paintings in a show at the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver in 2015 and the local art critic came around and said, “Oh, yes, these are nice paintings but this is so yesterday. Six months ago maybe this would have meant something, but it just seems so old.” There is the case in point—“this is so old”—when actually these are things that as a country we have been grappling with for hundreds of years. It is neither new nor old.

**RAIL:** For those who appreciate the importance of not forgetting about this moment in history, you have made sure that it doesn’t get forgotten about.

**PENDLETON:** —Which goes back to that question about how things function retroactively.



Adam Pendleton, *My Education: A Portrait of David Hilliard*, 2014. Three-channel black-and-white video, 9 minutes 19 seconds. Courtesy the artist.

**RAIL:** Let’s talk about your show, *Becoming Imperceptible*, which was presented at the Contemporary Arts Center New Orleans this year, and has now traveled to the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver.

**PENDLETON:** I wonder what people will make of it when they see the exhibition because the work is very slow moving. It’s open but also hermetic and a lot of the decisions and steps I make are very slow and deliberate. And not necessarily in a way that I think would be readily apparent to anyone else. So I am curious.

**RAIL:** The show is curated by Andrea Andersson. What conversations were you having with her?

**PENDLETON:** Andrea has a Ph.D. in comparative literature, and she has a background in contemporary poetry. So that’s actually where the conversation started. Then we moved to how I think about ideas of representation, of politics and abstraction—how these two things relate—which is how my body of work has evolved: from language, to language and image, to a more abstracted or abstract space. So in the exhibition, we really thought about the operation of each floor.

**RAIL:** It’s a substantial exhibition—you cover three floors.

**PENDLETON:** Yes. We thought critically about the operation of each floor.

The first floor is visually similar to the installation I conceived for the Belgian Pavilion in 2015. It is maximalist, a kind of system of displaying a complete overview of the work. There’s a distinct visual rhythm. It’s a collage in space.

**RAIL:** What happens on the next floor?

**PENDLETON:** On the second floor things begin to empty out, and you begin to see that very much in the work itself. I use one piece to create another piece to create another piece. It becomes a part as a whole or a whole as a part. But again this idea of how to represent something comes up, modes and mechanisms of representation. What is a fragment? So you have a portrait of Satomi Matsuzaki, the lead singer of Deerhoof, who I filmed for a 2009 three-channel video called *Band*. She is taken out of the space of that original, which documents Deerhoof in a recording studio working on a new song, and it now exists as a six-second loop where all you see her do is turn her head. It’s just on repeat, an index of a larger work. Then the same thing happens with Baraka’s poem “Black Dada Nihilimus.” I represent it through a wall painting that lists almost all of the proper nouns from his text in the order that they appear. It’s a kind of visual note taking.

Then you have the “System of Display” works, also on the first floor, which began by using many images, but now use very few images and again look at the question of what bears the burden of representation. Is it the language

or the image? How do they function together? There are also ceramic floor pieces that I made via the influence of “clairvoyant poet” Hannah Weiner. Then, as you move up to the third floor, this idea of portraiture that began with the loop of Satomi carries over, but this time it’s a video portrait of David Hilliard, who was Chief of Staff of the Black Panther Party. This portrait is related to another I made of Lorraine O’Grady and both are partially influenced by Gertrude Stein’s textual self-portraits.

**RAIL:** What are the final works that the viewer encounters?

**PENDLETON:** Three large, five-foot by ten-foot silkscreens on mirror-polished stainless steel that are based on a photograph of water taken by Josef Albers. They’re hung in a raw, corridor-like space along one wall. In the end, they look like abstract columns that distort the viewer’s image of her- or himself. The show encompasses various historical references, from the Bauhaus to Malcolm X to the Black Panthers to Godard. The objects carry these histories and ask them to coexist in a way—to ask, what is their potential?.

**RAIL:** How do you make the works? I have read a lot about the role of photocopying in your practice.

**PENDLETON:** A lot of the things I do are very matter of fact. Let’s say for the Black Dada paintings, I use an image of LeWitt’s incomplete open cubes: Xeroxing it, cropping the Xerox, scanning it, enlarging it, and then laying this text over top of it. I take an object and do something to it, and then do something else to it. I would say everything is some sort of collage and has always been. This is true even in the earlier works that didn’t necessarily look like a collage, because what I was doing was taking someone else’s language and then I was sort of inserting myself on top of it—inserting my own rhythm and my own mode of presentation.

**RAIL:** What is appropriation for you? What is that doing within the work?

**PENDLETON:** To borrow or steal? It’s a complicated question. I think that’s why I’m very slow, because I have to create the space where a kind of transition can occur—where it can go from being an image of an incomplete open cube to a mark or a line. That’s a conversation that you have with the material, slowly, over time. Now, because I’ve been using these images, these materials for so long, I no longer even think of my use as an act of appropriation. I think about it in a more discursive sense of just being in conversation with, or rubbing up against, something. I said once that we are appropriated as human beings, that’s what we are. I mean, how can anything be anything other than appropriation—which is why the term is so loaded and also so over-determined. ☞