

SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

Artforum
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Adam Pendleton



View of “Adam Pendleton: Becoming Imperceptible,” 2016. Contemporary Arts Center, New Orleans. Photo: Traviesa Studio.

*Adam Pendleton is an artist based in New York whose work disrupts the burden of representation in images and texts through two-dimensional objects and installations. Here he talks about the link between education and language in the context of his forthcoming book, *Black Dada Reader*, to be released later this year by Mousse Publishing, and his current exhibition, “Becoming Imperceptible,” which is on view at the Contemporary Arts Center New Orleans through June 16 and will also travel to the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver from July 15 through September 25, 2016.*

I’M NOT A PARTICULARLY DIDACTIC ARTIST—I follow questions that lead to other sets of questions. I didn’t set out to respond to the location of New Orleans for this show, but more to address how artwork can change or be changed by the space it happens to reside in at any given moment. Some language in the exhibition takes on a specific resonance because it’s installed in New Orleans, and of course that language would mean something different in Stockholm or Tel Aviv.

The phrase “Black Lives Matter,” for example, I abstracted, then pulled apart and collaged. What interests me about it as an articulation of political ideals, as well as a movement, is that the utterance of these three words means something very different depending on who says it, where, and when. Like all language, its projection is seldom linear. It may speak to and come out of a response to police brutality in the US, but it incidentally carries meaning and political weight in countries where the experience for black or brown people is as particular and subjective as it is universal. “Black Lives Matter” drafts a provisional space within which others can perceive themselves. It resonates

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for an African kid in the Paris *banlieues*, but the gesture might also inspire a queer person in Turkey, or an undocumented migrant in the US.

For my video portrait of David Hilliard from 2011 to 2014, I drove around Oakland for hours to visit various sites significant to the Black Panthers' history, while David talked about how he had initially become a Panther. I foregrounded his education because it was one, according to him, rooted in conversation among friends about how to make sense of the world around them and committed to articulating an alternative. At one point in the piece, David relates an anecdote in which he asked Huey Newton, "How do you define politics?" and Newton responded, "It starts with a hungry stomach." It's fascinating to think that these seventeen-year-old guys were reading Frantz Fanon, listening to Malcolm X, and making sense of it with each other from an intellectual and also aesthetic standpoint. The Black Panthers had an impact that shifted the conversations around race and justice not just in the US but all over the world, and set a precedent for the impact Black Lives Matter has had as well.

How do you respond to state-sanctioned physical and intellectual brutality? How do you respond collectively? The reply of artists to these questions after World War I was called Dada. In my own work, I tend to put an idea out there, and then I deliberately delay its being represented in any physical manner. With the *Black Dada Reader*, it went from rumor-language to an object with very limited distribution, and after several years few people still have seen the actual reader, even if many have encountered the visual shadows of it in posters Marc Hollenstein and I made based on pages from the *Reader* for the installation that I did for the Belgian pavilion at the Venice Biennale last year. By culling together writing from such authors as W.E.B. Du Bois, Gilles Deleuze, Gertrude Stein, and Harryette Mullen, along with texts by and about artists ranging from Joan Jonas to William Pope.L, among other critical texts from curators and writers who have engaged with related concepts, the *Reader* forms a comprehensive entry point into thinking about the theoretical and aesthetic implications of this idea of Black Dada. I am asking myself: "What can Black Dada do and what does Black Dada look like?" Amiri Baraka first articulated the language of Black Dada in 1964 with his poem "Black Dada Nihilismus." I had the chance to briefly meet Baraka not too long before he passed away, and I told him I made Black Dada paintings. He looked at me with bewilderment, as though to say, What the hell is that? That space between us in that moment is in many ways what Black Dada is and could be.

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