

SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

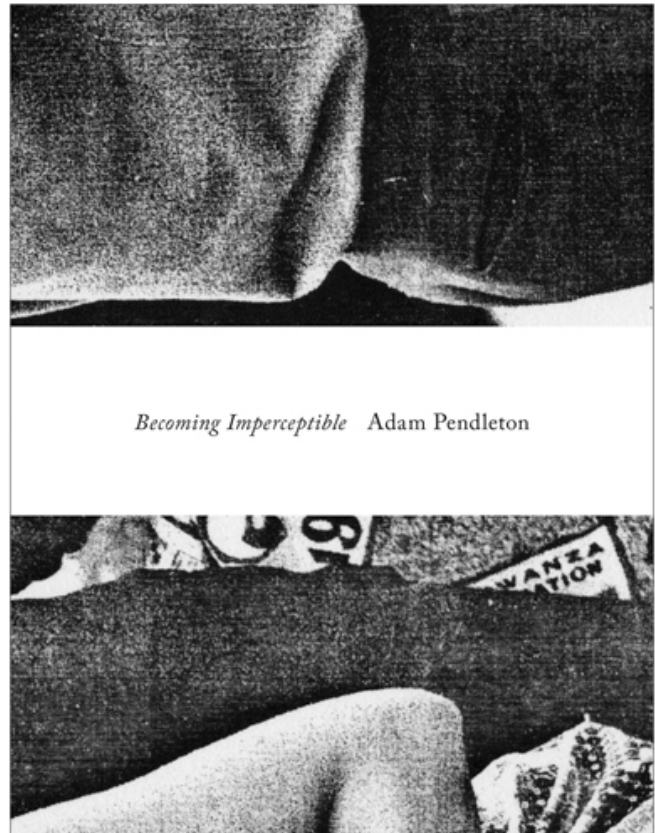
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Becoming Imperceptible

by Wendy Tronrud

I began looking at Adam Pendleton's artist book, *Becoming Imperceptible*, at the same time I was rereading Michael North's *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-Century Literature* (Oxford University Press, 1994). North articulates how the various avant-gardes of early 20th-century America and Europe used an ethnographic frame through which to "dispense of conventional language," as Hugo Ball writes in his Dada Manifesto of 1916. He details how white avant-gardists used this ethnographic frame as a conceptual device through which to imagine and exploit blackness as an authenticating condition for their various artistic experimentations (not unlike minstrelsy of the earlier 19th century). *Becoming Imperceptible* engages with this history of avant-garde experimentation and its relationship to ethnography, racial appropriation, and legibility. Pendleton's art practice, concerned with language as well as image and history, makes apparent how many of North's claims about the earlier avant-gardes continue to persist into our present moment.

The first and largest section of *Becoming Imperceptible* assembles found historical images from the early to mid-20th century, reproduced here in photocopy-quality black and white, a visual aesthetic Pendleton often uses in his artwork. These found images—mostly comprised of interior spaces, decorative objects, and white female figures—are juxtaposed against each other and against images taken in the Congo during the period of its independence in 1960, along with more generic ethnographic images of African people. As one flips through the book, the same images repeat, but always in different variations; their sizes change, as does their accompaniment and placement on the page. Each photograph feels familiar; you may have seen the image, or something almost like it, somewhere before. However, Pendleton does not include an image guide, perhaps as a nod to the questions of abstraction that trouble this book.



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Pendleton often foregrounds the importance of process and experimentation in his work, as evidenced by this book's title. His work forges a cross section between black history and aesthetics, poetics, and Conceptualism, and this artist's book is no exception. *Becoming Imperceptible* is the first in a series of artists' books published by Siglio Press in collaboration with the Contemporary Arts Center, New Orleans, where Pendleton recently exhibited a show of the same title, from April to June of last year. This artist's book doubles to a lesser extent as a catalogue for his show and includes three essays by art critics and curators on Pendleton's work, along with two texts by Pendleton himself, "Black Dada" and "Amiri Baraka," ending with installation shots from the show. At stake in this book is what Adrienne Edwards, in her 2015 *Art in America* article on Pendleton's work, termed "blackness in abstraction." The pressure on black artists and writers to figuratively represent black life is an old story, one that continues to delineate the history of abstraction along racial lines. Pendleton articulates this most clearly when he writes in his text about Baraka: "Amiri Baraka is read through one of the two lenses under which Black American Culture is legible: realism and expressionism. Everything must figure, one way or another. [...] He is denied the frame of abstraction and of the concept." One of the questions I see Pendleton asking in *Becoming Imperceptible* is: how does one undo this denial? Dada, as an art methodology, uses negation as a way out of various cultural or aesthetic norms—negating Eurocentrism for the non-European, negating sense for nonsense—all of which, as North shows, reproduces the conditions that essentialize and relegate blackness to the position of background material. How then does one deny denial or out-Dada Dada?

Pendleton has built a body of work informed by what he calls "Black Dada," a title that alludes to Baraka's poem "BLACK DADA NIHILISMUS," published in his poetry collection *The Dead Lecturer* (1964). Baraka's book, written while he still used the name LeRoi Jones, marks a departure from his association with the Beat Generation, and it is full of masks, voices, and questions about political art. It is an epochal work, necessary to understanding Baraka's poetic engagement with the political radicalization happening in the United States in the early- to mid-'60s. "BLACK DADA NIHILISMUS" announces at least one of its poetic strategies through not only establishing a relationship between its title's three terms, but also by privileging "black" among them. Dada and nihilism are not the roots of the origin story of modernity, Baraka suggests; black is. There is a lot more to say about this poem than I can do justice to here, but it is important to mention how Baraka disassembles linear narratives of (art) history by linking references from across time: Toussaint Louverture, Patrice Lubumbashi, Piet Mondrian, the Bronze Buckaroo, etc. They are interwoven in the space of this poem, another gesture that questions the typical origin stories of modernity. Pendleton's reference to this poem and book carries these concerns into his own artistic practice. Baraka is Pendleton's double of sorts, one of many doubles that proliferate in his artist's book.

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Pendleton doesn't use "Black Dada" to define Black Dada, so much as to proliferate its possibilities, similar to Ball's manifesto and to Baraka's poem. "Black Dada is a way to talk about the future while talking about the past. It is the present," he writes. Pendleton's work with Black Dada is ongoing and includes a "Black Dada" manifesto that he wrote in 2008, "Black Dada" paintings, and a *Black Dada* reader which he has circulated amongst friends/colleagues and blown up into wall-sized artworks. (The reader is forthcoming from Mousse Publishing.) Pendleton's use of Baraka as a reference point for Dada reveals his particular interest in the ways in which mid-20th-century art history is often historicized apart from the black radical movements and poetics of the same period, a concern clearly very much at the heart of Baraka's *Dead Lecturer*.

This enforced schism is highlighted throughout Pendleton's book. While its title, *Becoming Imperceptible*, announces the ongoingness of a process of imperceptibility, the sharp contrasts of the black-and-white imagery are enhanced through the photocopy-like quality of their reproductions. Rather than further demarcating this distinction, however, these stark contrasts simultaneously condition their own unreadability because of the images' lack of clear origin and their size and quality. Like a syllabus aesthetic, one that distances Pendleton from its composition as author and artist, these images are something found, endlessly reproduced, becoming imperceptible through their own proliferation. Pendleton may be asking: haven't we seen this all before? And I suppose I ask this question, too. What more does Pendleton want us to see or to know about the limits of the white avant-garde and the conditions or limited origin stories of abstraction? Is abstraction something that an artist employs, or might Pendleton insist that it happens through our own gaze? In other words, who gets to abstract and who gets abstracted?

Something this book doesn't trouble enough is the distinction between abstraction and objectification, although maybe that is the point. I ask this most specifically of the ways in which the images of people (primarily white women and black men) get formatted throughout this book, and how the female figure is often paralleled with images of domestic objects. Is he calling attention to this troubling parallel, reproducing it, or both?

Of the book's selection of images, the most easily recognizable repeating figure is one of Sol LeWitt's *Incomplete Open Cubes* from 1974. Signaling back to these cubes, Pendleton writes in "Black Dada": "History is in fact an incomplete cube shirking linearity." This incompleteness exposes history as a narrative form in the process of being written and revised. I cannot help but think back to Baraka's poem, which begins not with a word but with a period placed somewhere mid-stanza; the poem begins with an ending and then continues on. Like Baraka, Pendleton negates the negation that Dada supposedly used to dismantle Western culture. What is left is the possibility of repetition or of transformation.

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