From Dada to Black Dada:

Adam Pendleton's Contemporary Dada Activism

Antonia Rigaud

In his manifesto "Black Dada," Adam Pendleton writes:

> Black Dada: we are not naive
>
> Black Dada: we are successive
>
> Black Dada: we are not exclusive (*Black Dada Reader* 341)

Pendleton, like other conceptual artists (Sol LeWitt and Adrian Piper come to mind) has an unusually large frame of reference. His work encompasses the history of trans-Atlantic avant-gardes and, in the case of the "Black Dada Manifesto." adapts Tristan Tzara's early Dada text, "Monsieur Antipyrine's Manifesto":

> We are not naive
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> We are successive
>
> We are exclusive (*Seven Dada Manifestos* 2)

Tzara wrote this text for the first "public" Dada evening in Zurich in 1916[1], almost exactly a century before Pendleton's variation. Interestingly, Pendleton recasts Tzara's declarations with the insertion of "Black" before "Dada" and inverts Tzara's seemingly elitist gesture, "we are exclusive." In 1916, Tzara might have reflected that the internationalism of the Dada movement that took root in neutral Switzerland was an example of Dada's openness rather than exclusivity.[2] Pendleton's recognition of the non-exclusivity of Dada opens it up for the notion of "Black Dada" and pays heed to the importance of Dada in his work. This also allows him to offer a reappraisal of Tzara's paradoxical call for exclusivity in

[1] The "First Dada Soirée" at the Zunfthaus zur Waag, Zurich, 14 July 1916, was the first performance outside of the Cabaret Voltaire and the first time that the word "Dada" was attached to an event.

[2] However, Dada was not without prejudice. Notably, Tzara's Jewish status was not invisible. See Legge.

relation to the radical eclecticism of Dada's outputs as well as its disdain for the institutional separation of "art" from other aspects of modern society.[3] Dada, at least in the hands of Tzara, was opposed to all the elements that went into the Eurocentric, hierarchical notion of art. One century later, the call for being exclusive rings of course differently. Pendleton's Dada is decidedly inclusive, a transformation of the Dada impulse to deconstruct Eurocentrism into a new kind of Dada shock aesthetics: one that recognizes the "blackness" that binds Dada into a communal and inclusive aesthetic of shock.

Adam Pendleton was born in 1984, twenty years after Amiri Baraka published his controversial poem, "Black Dada Nihilismus," which announced a new direction in African-American art and literature. Baraka's subsequent founding of the Black Arts Movement – which was meant to shape multiple media including theater, the visual arts, and poetry – introduced a spirit for countering white hegemony. Pendleton too, strives to bring together the resources of text, visual art, and performance, evoking a recognizably conceptualist lineage. However, when Pendleton first exhibited his work in 2004, the notions that Baraka found and forged in the 1960s, the decade of Black Power, were no longer sufficient for the real experience of the multicultural subjects in Pendleton's world. To use John Gillespie's useful characterization of Baraka's poem, instead of construing the world in a duality of black versus white, Pendleton set out to create "a blackened account of the world" (106). His first works classified under the Black Dada title appeared in 2008, by which time he was already positioning himself as an artist in relation to a whole history of avant-garde art and the often ossified racial and cultural politics that avant-garde artists of the past fell into. His appropriation of Tzara's manifesto negates the negative by transforming "exclusivity" into an inclusive gesture.

What motive could Pendleton have for paying attention to Tristan Tzara instead of a more visually oriented Dada artist like Francis Picabia? Perhaps the attraction is, first, that Tzara was an exemplary hyphenated subject: a Jewish Romanian who wrote in French and helped inaugurate Dada with a group of like-minded expatriates and fugitives from the tragic violence of World War I. Tzara's work with African and indigenous poets and his persistent effort to overthrow the conceptual implications encoded in the term "primitive" also make Tzara a precursor of Black Dada. Pendleton picks up the hyphen in his work – African-American, black-white, painting-poetry – he is not only a poet and performer like Tzara, but also a visual artist. In his paintings and performances, Pendleton

[3] Peter Bürger remarks, "Dadaism, the most radical movement within the European avant-garde, no longer criticizes schools that preceded it, but criticizes art as an institution, and the course its development took in bourgeois society" (22).

mixes words and images in order to bring about what he calls "Black Dada": a state of mind as much as a concept from which to explore the relationships between avant-garde aesthetic practices and politics today. Tristan Tzara features as a canonical figure in Pendleton's 2017 anthology, *The Black Dada Reader*, which revisits the canon of modernism and postmodernity by creating a genealogy that links individuals like Tzara and Hugo Ball to individuals like Sun Ra and June Jordan. Pendleton's response to the Dada movement is also mediated by a very American rejection of the hyphenated, the strange emergence of Dada in Amiri Baraka's manifesto-like poem "Black Dada Nihilismus," and the history of activism that followed it.

These references form, in Pendleton's work, an intersection, a crossroads of several histories: the European history of Dada as a response to World War I and the Russian Revolution as a response to the same war, led by Vladimir Lenin who was also in exile in Zurich in 1916; the history of the Black Arts Movement (that responded to the Civil Rights Movement) organized by Amiri Baraka and posited against certain Black writers and artists, like Ralph Ellison, who objected to what they saw as the illiberalism and nationalism of Baraka's thought; and Pendleton's own moment, which encompasses both the hopes raised by the Obama years and the radicalization of the Black Lives Matter Movement in relation to Trump.

Tzara, looking back in 1953, explained the connection between the contemporary and the poetic impulse with an example culled from the Spanish Civil War:

> C'est pendant la guerre d'Espagne que la poésie a pris un essor nouveau; elle devint pour beaucoup d'entre nous une arme de combat et on n'a qu'à penser à l'assassinat de Garcia Lorca pour se rendre compte que la poésie avait cessé d'être un jeu innocent.
>
> It is during the Spanish Civil War that poetry gained a new impulse; it became for many of us a combat weapon, and one only needs to think about the assassination of Garcia Lorca to realize that poetry had stopped being an innocent game. (*Œuvres complètes* 404)[4]

Garcia Lorca's death came long after the Dada explosion. Yet, Tzara's reflection that poetry was not an innocent game, but one deeply implicated in the guilts and anxieties of Europe, also retrospectively encapsulates Dada. Read in this light, Dada offers an attitude to respond to contemporary conditions, which Pendleton grasped when he discovered Amiri Baraka's poem:

[4] Except where published translations are cited, all translations are the author's own.

> 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. ("Adam Pendleton: Our Ideas")

The concept of Black Dada allows Pendleton to think about art and politics together in the context of a "Dada genealogy," which also allows him to rethink the history of the avant-garde not as a phenomenon of heteronormative white males but as a subversive strain that undermines the given categories of any power structure. Black Dada is also a tool through which to rediscover the political potentialities of language. In other words, Pendleton's project is that of a rediscovery of the utopian potentialities of the Dada movement, associated to the conditions of early twenty-first century life.

Of course, by the time Adam Pendleton was orienting his work to the Black Dada project, the very notion of the "avant-garde" had long been disputed under various headings. Furthermore, if we define the avant-garde as inherently critical of art institutions, historically those institutions have thrived by absorbing that critique. Although avant-garde artists and theorists propose to counter the Eurocentric hierarchies, our histories of the avant-garde tend to conform to them, exiling to the margins all but a handful of "minority" artists. Finally, as Peter Bürger has argued, if the avant-garde is seriously meant to oppose and overthrow the market and capitalism in the world system, it must be judged a failure. Bürger's thesis is more colorfully construed as the "death of the avant-garde," which has produced several articles and books arguing the topic from various pro and con perspectives.[5] Pendleton is anything but naïve about reconstructing Dada. His gesture is meant to invite us to think anew and askew the history of the avant-garde, reminding us that the trope of the end of the avant-garde is often connected

[5] Bürger's book has had a tremendous on impact on North American art criticism, notably around the questions of politics and identity through the journal *October* and the work of critics such as Rosalind Krauss (*The Originality of the Avant-garde*) or Douglas Crimp (*On the Museum's Ruins*). With the beginning of the twenty-first century, more critics have been concerned with looking at the avant-garde from the "periphery" such as Partha Mitter ("Decentering Modernism") or Cathy Park Hong (whose "Delusions of Whiteness in the Avant-Garde" opens with the line "To encounter the history of avant-garde poetry is to encounter a racist tradition"). These critics have opened up a new contemporary reappraisal of some avant-garde blindspots.

to its loss of subversive powers, particularly through its involvement with institutions of knowledge and art.

Pendleton is one of a number of artists of his generation, and those who came before him like Mark Bradford or Glenn Ligon, who have responded to the critique of the avant-garde by asking basic questions about the narrowness of its historical treatment and presentation. A critique of the avant-garde's Eurocentrism that excludes the work of hyphenated and marginal groups within that history, as well as the culture of the Global South, is merely re-establishing the very hierarchies it is supposedly dismantling. These artists present a radical response to the subversive potential of avant-garde culture.

Focusing on Pendleton's gesture as a poet and an archivist in his 2017 *Black Dada Reader*, I would like to interrogate the notion of "Black Dada" as a way of creating a genealogy of subversive gestures which allows him to, as he writes, "talk about the future while talking about the past" (338). Pendleton invites us indeed to think about the past in order to see what the Dada ethos can bring to our contemporary conditions, and what new utopian potential it can offer.

"That Dada Strain": Black Dada Genealogies

The central position Pendleton gives to Dada in his work calls for a reflection on the status of the term in United States avant-garde culture simultaneously with its reception in the 1910s and the reception of non-European art cultures by Dada. In one reading, Dada presented a missed opportunity in the American avant-garde to transcend the notion of primitivism which was so conjoined with the politics of segregation in that era and afterwards.

Dada in the United States is fixed by mainstream art history as, first and foremost, a cultural transfer of Dada principles from Europe to the United States by different artists, notably Marcel Duchamp and Francis Picabia, key figures in the transatlantic dialogue. Duchamp and Picabia visited and made lengthy stays in New York in the period between 1913 and 1918. They associated with other artists – Alfred Stieglitz and Man Ray among them – who were similarly influenced by both cubism and the various new media and techniques that coalesced under the name Dada in this period: photography, collage, the introduction of found objects. Man Ray famously observed in a 1921 letter to Tzara: "All New York is dada, and will not tolerate a rival, – will not notice dada" (65), which was an expression of the artist's general perception that Dada was more than a particular art "style," but was a phenomenon of ordinary American life in New York. Among the "imports" from Europe were masks and sculptures from Africa and Mexico presented by Marius de Zayas, a Mexican artist who settled in New York in 1907 and often visited Paris where he connected with the avant-garde circles there. De Zayas was an important collector and curator of

indigenous art while at the same time working with Stieglitz on mounting exhibitions and publishing avant-garde quarterlies. De Zayas was particularly close to Picabia and Picasso. From the latter, he picked up his interest in African art, which spurred his 1916 book, *African Negro Art: Its Influence on Modern Art*. As we look closer at Dada in New York and its effects, we find that the African and Mexican vectors are of enormous importance in "blackening" Dada and in recognizing Dada's diversity. De Zayas was looking at African art in France while Tzara was collecting it in Zurich. This was not simply a coincidence, but an example of the expansion of interest in non-Western art that was never fully exploited – could not be fully exploited – in the framework of established colonialist and racialist systems. Ileana B. Leavens reveals that by 1916, through their friends in Paris, Stieglitz and de Zayas were acquainted with Dada in Zurich and that de Zayas had probably read Tzara's *First Celestial Adventure of Monsieur Antipyrine* (1916) which includes segments of invented languages seemingly derived from Africa or Oceania. While Tzara was still in Zurich, de Zayas initiated a correspondence with him and was perhaps the first "American" to notice the Romanian dadaist.

The Dada project was founded on the notion of liberation and a double heritage, which looks at moments of historical ruptures and of poetic ruptures: the French Revolution and the Commune on the one hand, and the poetic heritage of figures such as Baudelaire, Nerval, Rimbaud, and Lautréamont on the other. But, of course, the real foundation of Dada was the earthquake of World War I. Critic Bernard Blistène suggests that:

> Plus qu'aucun autre mouvement, si mouvement il y eut, Dada est une vaste entreprise de sabotage, de liquidation des modes et des codes où la violence est créatrice parce qu'à la fois subversive et transgressive.
>
> More than any other movement, if there actually was a movement, Dada is a vast enterprise of sabotage, purge of modes and codes, where violence is creative because it is both subversive and transgressive. (162)

If, as Man Ray claimed, New York was Dada, then it is perhaps unsurprising that the art and literary culture of New York took up the Dada aesthetic principle of dissolving the line between the refined and the crude – employing noise, shock, the tabula rasa, simultaneity, and collage – as an echo to what the dadaists were doing in Zurich. Marcel Duchamp, master of chance, ready-mades and refuser of traditional artistic categories is without a doubt its most illustrious representative to our contemporary eye. Duchamp first emerged as a significant artist during his extended residence in New York and through his association with advanced galleries and collectors, notably Walter Arensberg. Duchamp made New York the locus of the most advanced art of the time. In the broader history of Dada,

Duchamp figures not in terms of "firsts," but in terms of an overall distillation of the Dada spirit and its exportation, in as much as that term is not taken too literally, to the "New World." The word was gradually installed within the cultural landscape: through the *New York Dada* magazine in 1921, and the "Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism" exhibition (1936-37); which was followed in 1948 by the show *Collage* and in 1968 by *Dada, Surrealism and Their Heritage.* These exhibitions underline the interest cultural institutions had for this movement which sought to refuse any type of institutional power and meaning in accordance with the motto "DADA DOES NOT MEAN ANYTHING" (Tzara, *Seven Dada Manifestos* 4). Robert Motherwell participated in the installation and development of Dada within the country's cultural landscape with his 1951 anthology, *The Dada Painters and Poets*, which reminded the American public of the importance of Dada in the development of post-war art. Motherwell explains in his introduction, "there is a real dada strain in the minds of the New York School of abstract painters that has emerged in the last decade; painters, many of whom were influenced by the presence of the Parisian surrealists in New York during the second world war" (xix). As Rudolf Kuenzli explains in his introduction to *New York Dada*: "This process of reception, transformation, and appropriation of anti-art or a-art by Americans for their own experiments in uniting art, life, experience, and technology makes New York Dada a very important period for the development of American art and literature" (4-5), a period which Pendleton draws from to develop his own twenty-first-century Dada.

We can see how a certain history of Dada was transmitted and codified among artists and art historians after World War II. However, Pendleton's notion of that history is concerned with showing that Dada had multiple grafts and was not a matter that was handed down by "great artists." In this way, he projects on that history a larger sense of community. De Zayas seems, in his 1916 book on *African Negro Art*, to reflect a notion that was shared by Tzara and the dadaists – a notion of the importance of "Negro" art for anti-art. Leavens quotes a crucial passage in de Zayas that shows how African art could be construed in a very dadaist way, as a matter of movement: performance rather than object:

> It is logical to believe that since the Negro discovers his first criterion in movement and is an animist, it will be movement and not objects that he tries to represent primarily. But movement cannot be represented except through the trajectories of the thing that moves. And these trajectories can only be represented by geometrical combinations of lines. Hence, in my opinion, the geometrical structure of the negro sculpture. (63)

De Zayas' comment which favors trajectories over objects – much as Arp would let colored paper bits fall on a sheet, which he would then pin, thus creating his

painting – is consistent with Tzara's own message of resituating African and Oceanic poetry on the same level as "European" poetry and mixing it into his own poems. In his essay, "Note 6 sur l'art nègre," Tzara wrote of his two "brothers," one born out of the Renaissance, the other born in Africa, which illustrates fundamentally the dialectical leap of Dada as Tzara perceived it. He describes what can be learned from the "African brother" with a call ""Du noir puisons la lumière" 'From blackness, let us extract light' (*Découverte* 27; *Seven Dada Manifestos* 57).

The call to draw up light from blackness is a call to subvert and to disrupt traditional artistic hierarchies and to push Western artists, institutions, and audiences to open themselves to African art, not as "primitive" art, but as creating a regenerative space for art. Tzara explains this in an essay where he reflects on the climate of openness to "primitive culture" inaugurated by Matisse discovering an African statuette in a curiosity shop in 1906. Tzara writes:

> Le seul fait que l'art nègre entre, de nos jours, à l'égal des arts consacrés, dans le domaine culturel universel, où tant de millénaire sagesse et de beauté forment le trésor qui est l'héritage de l'homme d'aujourd'hui, n'est-il pas le signe que l'idéologie moderne, du moins à son avant-garde, est prête à envisager la libération des peuples noirs comme une nécessité inéluctable?
>
> The sole fact that Negro art is entering today, along with all the accepted arts, the field of universal culture, where so many millennia of wisdom and beauty form a treasure which is the heritage of man today, isn't this the sign that modern ideology, at least its avant-garde, is ready to envision the liberation of Black peoples as an inexorable necessity? (*Découverte* 62)

We can see how Tzara's openness to non-European arts allows him to bring together the notion of art as politics, situating aesthetic openness as the first step towards political progress.

Pendleton's artistic strategy of simultaneity and inclusiveness is concerned with thinking about living conditions. It is indeed probably in the Dada attitude towards a holistic understanding of art (the social and religious function of art Tzara refers to) that Pendleton bridges the gap between a high modernist experimental aesthetic and a concern for the political. Explaining that an intellectual climate or rather an aesthetic mood can foreground political liberation is a foundational idea which runs from Tzara to Pendleton via Baraka. Cécile Bargues has argued that Dada is "le sauvage de l'histoire de l'art" 'the savage of art history' (21), a quotation which applies also to Baraka's and Pendleton's desire

to make things "savage," to break traditional codes and, in so doing, to situate art on a social and political plane.

It is from these varied transitions of a European Dada influenced by the margins and by the so-called "primitive" towards a United States Dada, that its spirit seems to find a vehicle in jazz and African-American culture. Poet Jerome Rothenberg puts this idea forward in *That Dada Strain* (1983), a poetry collection in which he explores the links between experimentation and African-American culture. He borrows his title from a jazz standard sung by Ethel Waters in 1921 and thus puts forward the simultaneous dimension of the Dada strain, allowing one to think about it as an "omnipoetics". Critic John Melillo explains that the song "That Dada Strain" is not only about a rhythmical explosion: "This 'da-da' reflects and refracts the white world's socially constructed noise of blackness, transforming black noise into a form of rhythmic power" (Melillo 74). In an article entitled "Jazz as Decal for the European Avant-Garde," Jed Rasula explains how jazz was a mirror for the European avant-garde which helped bringing together Dada practices within the context of the early twentieth century United States. This Dada genealogy shows the great importance given to formal experimentation, the collision of the crude and the cultivated, noise and harmony, and, perhaps, a tendency especially on the part of white critics to forget the initial political project of Dada and to reproduce the notion that "art" borrows from non-art such as popular song and imagery without reconsidering the power relationships and logic of that notion.

Yet this power was not merely latent, as is shown by the second moment of this Dada genealogy when Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka's "Black Dada Nihilismus" poem appeared as a quasi-manifesto in his 1964 collection, *The Dead Lecturer*: the declaration of his separation from the experimental poetic scene of Greenwich Village, the Beat poets as well as the Black Mountain poets. All of these schools were marked by the first Dada strain initiated by Duchamp. Duchamp, in 1964, was re-emerging in the framework of the post-abstract expressionist scene and seems to have become a touchstone for artists as different as Robert Rauschenberg and Andy Warhol. Baraka's poem constitutes a return to the true Dada violence based on a strategy of shock. It seeks to confront its readers and calls for a violent and radical separation from the past which would mark the beginning of a new, political career for the poet and activist. Baraka's Dada poetics contributes to his insurrection narrative and presents the readers with a number of problematic moments (antisemitism and macho violence are all over the poem, critical to its shock effect). Despite these reactionary gestures, the poem has had a lasting influence on later generations, playing a distinct role in renewing the place of Dada in US culture, most notably in continual reference to this work by Adam Pendleton. "Black Dada Nihilismus" celebrates a jazz aesthetic. Before *The Dead*

Lecturer, Jones had already written one book on jazz *(Blues People: Negro Music in White America*) and evidently uses the kind of dissonance and disjunction associated with free jazz to regulate and modulate his modernist poetic practices in "Black Dada Nihilismus." I would argue that the convergence between the jazz-tuned poetics and the turn to Dada rediscovers the political unconscious of Dada as another war, in Vietnam, pointed to the corruption of American culture just as World War I exposed the lies in "Western" civilization. The Vietnam war, in this view, was an extension of the fundamental and systematic injustice of the Jim Crow system in which African-Americans were denied their basic civil and human rights.

The Civil Rights era changed the city of Richmond, Virginia where Pendleton was born, but did not overthrow the fundamental structure of American racism. Pendleton's work can be read as a third moment in this Dada genealogy that, in a Hegelian fashion, sublates and reflects on the other two moments. If the United States has proven a welcoming ground for a loose "Dada strain," which must be taken into account in Pendleton's use of the term Dada, he of course borrows the phrase "Black Dada" from Baraka in a hermeneutic gesture that is much more than a homage or a necessary reference. Pendleton uses the phrase in order to think about the connection between art and politics in the United States today and in the larger context of the reconfiguration of global history as we move beyond the triumphalist narrative of the rise of "Western civilization." Pendleton received critical notice in his thirties when his artwork, as well as that of other African-American artists, seemed attuned to Barack Obama's "Post-racial America". However, the non-exclusivity that Pendleton emphasizes and the notion of the "post-racial" are not synonymous. Rather, Pendleton is working on understanding the hidden hybridity, the conjunction of the black and the Dada strain, from the point of view of an artist immersed in the country's systemic inequality, the mass incarceration that has continued Jim Crow in another guise, and the violence to which Black Lives Matter has responded. Like other artists dealing with avant-garde styles and themes (most notably, Mark Bradford), Pendleton has refused to see the avant-garde as determined by white violence to the extent that it is actually a blackening of aesthetics, an appropriation of other than "European" styles in which the appropriator is appropriated from within. By creating a genealogy of Black Dada that so amply includes supposedly "white" figures, Pendleton performs the task of negotiating a non-exclusivity that does not ignore the historic fact of exclusion.

"A way to talk about the future while talking about the past": Rethinking History

One of Pendleton's most quoted sentences comes in an interview he gave in 2018 at the Pace Gallery: "Black Dada is an idea. When pressed, I often say it's a way to talk about the future while talking about the past" ("Adam Pendleton: Our Ideas"). Pendleton's idea prefigures many of the cultural moments in the 2016-20 period, most notably Nikole Hannah-Jones's "1619 project," which seeks to re-vision the founding of America by making its central motive and theme slavery and the ethnocide of the indigenous population. Pendleton has created specific visual work for the "1619 Project" for *The New York Times* which shows his concern with participating in changing the traditional narrative of United States history by situating slavery as foundational.[6] As in the "1619 project," "Black Dada" helps us see what has been treated as accessory – the use of art from non-European cultures or cultural products from "low culture" – as central and redefining. The Colonial Other, here, turns out to be within the Colonizer. This mix-up of our notion of identities and roles is not a way of glossing over identities and roles – a post-racialist gesture – but a way of tracing appropriations without using the language and concepts of the appropriators. This of course was the radical promise of Dada, its anti-art program. As a way of evoking the future through the past, Pendleton invites us to look at history with new eyes, following a new chronology. Dada was looking for the tabula rasa, but Pendleton (and Baraka before him), uses the term to suggest, in his *Black Dada Reader*, a different cultural history, or a new mental landscape, a sort of textual version of the "Dada strain."

The Black Dada Reader is an anthology construed as a work of art – and as art, it operates formally on its content. It is organized in three sections which constitute a sort of genealogical tree through which emerge invisible connections between very diverse figures. Pendleton's anthology is meant to become a conceptual guide, a performance, and an artwork in itself, in as much as an idea pursued can be a work of art. It traces, through skips from text to text, a Black Dada resistance to the various hierarchies and commodifications to which art history has so often acted as an adjunct rather than a critic. It uses dissonance and the logic of refusal – including the refusal to refuse, if necessary, contradiction itself – as its ideological argument. As Jenny Schlenzka puts it:

> The idea was to develop a platform at the museum for different conversations around race, gender, and sexuality that shift the institutional language away from the concepts of "black," "female," or

[6] These pieces can be seen on the Pace Gallery's website: https://www.pacegallery.com/journal/adam-pendleton-creates-new-work-new-york-times-1619-project/

> "gay" – subjects that tend to perpetuate essentialism by quota – and towards a conceptual framework that allows identity to emerge as a continuous process. (Pendleton, *Black Dada Reader* 15)

The "Foundation" section presents names which are a little surprising when put together: W. E. B. DuBois and Stokely Carmichael make sense together, as do Adrian Piper and Joan Retallack, since both are philosophers and artists belonging to the conceptual movement of today's avant-garde. However, the presence of Godard and Deleuze, a French filmmaker and philosopher, is more surprising. In the same way, Hugo Ball's presence perturbs our notion of the history of African-American culture and suggests that Pendleton is not interested in a linear history (one that would go, for instance, from DuBois to Amiri Baraka and Stokely Carmichael), but rather that it should be made clear that all histories do not exist in their separate silos but rather feed each other.

With Pendleton, the "Dada strain" is built from bringing together different traditions and texts: the *Reader* indeed does not conceptually separate established categories of poetry, essays, historical and creative texts. What is important in each section is a spirit of call and response between different texts, all of which share a Dada ethos of openness to chance. Pendleton here reconstructs the archive of a community of feeling. One must however note that some expected names are missing. Where are the poets of the Harlem Renaissance, many of whom knew New York dadaists? Where is James Baldwin, who was certainly a figure in the trans-Atlantic circuit between the United States and France? The *Reader*'s very structure, with its open-endedness, allows readers to add their own names, or even expand the field to events: the Black Dada strain in the Detroit uprising, the Stonewall riot, the Black Lives Matter protests come to mind. Instead of a closed narrative line, the *Reader* seeks to bring out a state of mind, to be an object which readers will want to complete from the perspective of their own Dada genealogy. Pendleton revisits the history of the avant-garde in order to underline the links between his work and the generations before him in order to propose a new perspective on the avant-garde. He superimposes heterogeneous references to bring about a "Black Dada" aesthetic and to allow us to hear known voices from a new perspective, that of the collage and the shock of surprising connections. In an essay entitled "Black Dada" published in Joan Retallack's *The Supposium*, he explains his relationship to the canon in his visual work:

> 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 a very different language, quite literally, and also sort of messing it up. (56)

The artist considered as a master of disorder, "messing things up," situates himself in a direct Dada genealogy and constitutes a fundamental aesthetic principle as he seeks to destabilize received ideas and the status quo.

In a following and more specifically literary section entitled "Language," Pendleton presents five poets, four of them women, three of them white. Bringing together Gertrude Stein and June Jordan invites us to reflect on the possibilities of language from Stein's modernist experimentations to June Jordan's reflections on Black English in the essay "Nobody Mean More to Me Thank you and the Future Life of Willie Jordan." Pendleton suggests that language is not static but eminently political and, insofar as it separates the correct and the incorrect, operates as a discipline. Language is at the heart of Pendleton's own work, even as a visual artist. He is aware of language's power, the somewhat absurd power of mere sounds or marks on paper to change the world – in a manner reminiscent of the dadaists. He explains this in a 2018 text:

> I have been trying to find a language for the recent deaths of Trayvon Martin, Jordan Davis
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> Language that occupies
>
> That stands ground
>
> . . . .
>
> I'd like to locate the/a continual present of a Black English
>
> A language that:
>
> . . . [requires] that you not only have a repertoire of vocabulary or syntactical devices/constructions, but you come prepared to do something in an attempt to meet the person on a level that both uses the language, mocks the language, and recreates the language. ("Suppose to Choose" 11-12)[7]

His own comment, of course, quotes the "stand your ground" movement that justified, in the eyes of the jury, Trayvon Martin's death. His quotation is from John Edgar Wideman's essay "Frame and Dialect: The Evolution of the Black Voice in American Literature" and, along with him and other authors from the *Reader*, it is meant to point to the ways language is imbricated in and can be used to change our contemporary conditions. The quotation from Wideman mentions three attitudes towards language: to use it, to mock it, and to recreate it. These are three actions which seem to constitute Pendleton's "Dada strain".

[7] The last paragraph is quoted from John Wideman. Second ellipsis and square brackets in Pendleton.

In the "Language" section, Gertrude Stein's "Fourteen Anonymous Portraits" question the notion of identity and anonymity, and transitions from narration towards abstraction: the first portrait presents a malevolent character, "Harold Stephens," but the text soon moves towards "Portrait of So and So," or "Portrait of When," ending with a series of "Anonymous Portraits" that gently tease the notion of portraiture and its difference from still life. Pendleton also works on pronouns and their ability to express a collective identity. The series *Who We Are (We Are Not)*[8] oscillates between abstraction and recognition and situates us in a space very close to that created also by Stein. We can see that poetic language, for Pendleton, must resist narrativity and thus follows in the footsteps of Tzara and Dada poetic experimentations. The poem "Black Dada" is organized around repetitions and variations of the same phrase from its very opening: "it's a matter of fact" which is repeated in an echo of Stein's poetry; as a weaving together of echoes, the poem evolves through stops and turns. This is how Pendleton describes his writing process for the "Black Dada Manifesto":

> In 2008 I was invited by curator Krist Gruijthuijsen 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. 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. (Biswas)

Accumulation and repetition enable a creative process which both familiarizes the reader with the language of the poet and defamiliarizes language by decomposing it into formulas gathered in a text where narration is at times replaced with a form of stammering, or a gathering of diverse linguistic situations:

> the performer must not be credited
>
> the performance must be done on location
>
> feet, do your stuff
>
> sigh and then breathe
>
> i want a young man with long eyelashes
>
> white wings of a magpie

[8] The series can be viewed on the Max Hetzler Gallery website: https://www.maxhetzler.com/exhibitions/adam-pendleton-who-we-are-20191

red shingle roof

i'm unable to find the right straw hat

how will I know when I make a mistake?

presentness

soap

we ate them (Pendleton, *Black Dada Reader* 339)

The poem is both hermetic and made of straightforward language, creating a linguistic and poetic movement which brings a sense of instability.
In the final section of the *Reader,* entitled "Artists' Positions," a certain number of experimental figures appear. Ad Reinhardt is an interesting example from this list. Indeed, Reinhardt represents a "high modernist" and formalist perspective on art, suggested by the notion "art-as-art" which is developed in the text printed in the *Black Dada Reader*. Reinhardt's "ultimate" paintings have indeed been associated with strict formalism in art history, something which we find in this text:

> Art-as-art is as old as art and artists. Artists have always practiced, if not always professed, secretly or openly, art-as-art as artists. Artists-as-artists have always worked the same way and have always made the same things. (qtd, in *Black Dada Reader* 227)

However, the particular text referenced by Pendleton introduces a level of ambiguity to the formalist perspective because Reinhardt associates "art-as-art" with a vocabulary of political action reminiscent of the decade of the 1960s in which he was writing: "Art-as-art is always a battle cry, polemic, picket sign, sit-in, sit-down, civil disobedience, passive resistance, crusade, fiery cross, and non-violent protest." These notions are very close to Pendleton's own contemporary vocabulary as an artist committed to and involved with the Black Lives Matter movement.

The presence of Reinhardt in this list creates an unexpected irruption of formalism and testifies to the fact that Pendleton thinks about his "Dada" references from a very wide perspective, and maybe less in relation to what they specifically say than in relation to the way they answer each other and modify each other through their juxtaposition. Each section mixes periods, genres, and identities in order to propose a synthetic "Black Dada" history. In a distant echo of T. S. Eliot, who explained that each artist invents his own tradition, this "Dada genealogy" is a guide into the way we can think about the past of the avant-garde. It belongs to the modernist tradition of Ezra Pound's *Guide to Kulchur* or William Carlos Williams's *In the American Grain*: it is a matter of looking at the culture and history on which he builds his work. This is also what Baraka did in "Black Dada

Nihilismus," which paints a wide cultural landscape, as well as what the dadaists did. Cécile Bargues points out that Tristan Tzara brought together Dada poems and Maori poems, creating a situation of mutual reflection. Thinking about history becomes a matter of opening up historical narratives, of rethinking creation from a simultaneous perspective. This attitude is perhaps best encapsulated in the notion of being: "not naive / . . . successive / [and] not exclusive": Pendleton's poetics is indeed very much aware of the blind-spots of history, as well as of its successive evolution, but seeks to offer an inclusive vision of history.

"Find[ing] the fugitive in the text"[9]: Reinventing Avant-Garde Utopias

The situation in which Amiri Baraka found himself in 1964, the year of the expansion of the War in Vietnam, the passage of civil rights legislation, and the Watts riots, called for extreme measures – such as the poem "Black Dada Nihilismus," a chant for revolutionary cultural violence. The cultural situation in which Pendleton sees himself still contains real systematic violence, however sublimated. Nevertheless, the solution of exclusion – however achieved – seems both a strategic and ethical failure. Instead, Pendleton proposes a different way of defining United States culture based on bringing together diverse influences that all share the common point within a seeming contradiction, an open-ended radicalism. Instead of a straightforward radical program, made up of linear bullet points and a simple logic, Pendleton urges us to consider the spirit of "Black Dada," a program of digressions, breaks, and the art of chance. Hybridity is at the heart of this open-ended archive. In her introduction to the *Reader*, curator Susan Thompson explains:

> Black Dada declares and inquires, signals and speculates, conjoins and contrasts. Predicated on simultaneity, apposition and fragmentation, it operates within disjuncture and dissonance. It is expansive, inclusive, elastic, but not passive. It does not accept, it asserts. And reasserts. Black Dada interjects, suggests, and implies, but does not explain. (10)

As Thompson shows, Pendleton's artistic gesture is about opening gaps, creating spaces for fragmentation and disjunctions in order to keep texts alive ("not passive") and connected to their subversive powers. In his essay "Disfiguring Abstraction," Charles Bernstein proposes a way of thinking about the history of experimental art according to a new perspective which is akin to Pendleton's: "Radical modernisms, as art histories and museum practices at their most dynamic, do not aim to purify but to plurify" (497). The *Reader* is an invitation to

[9] Moten 16.

think about history in plural terms, as an open discourse forever to be reconfigured.

Fred Moten, in a text written at Pendleton's invitation in 2018, reflects on "the fugitive in the text" (16) The concept of fugitivity which is so important to Moten's work is particularly useful for thinking about Pendleton, particularly his manifesto-poem "Black Dada" which appears at the end of the *Black Dada Reader*. The poem follows the tradition of the avant-garde manifesto and presents a new conception of the work of art, but here, the discourse is *practiced* in the poem itself. The text is traversed by political calls such as:

> BLACK DADA.
>
> Did our conceptual artists join hands with our freedom fighters?
>
> Did they demonstrate in Birmingham?
>
> Did they cover their faces when the hoses were turned on them?
>
> History is in fact an incomplete cube shirking linearity.
>
> BLA K DA . B DA. BLACK D D.

Pendleton presents here his theoretical position: to create awareness about the conceptual avant-garde of the 1960s and its blankness in the face of the firehoses that were turned on the Civil Rights protestors.

The poem in its entirety seeks above all to blur any clear meaning, it is made of the superimposition of different voices, all in a spirit of anarchy very close to Tzara's instruction for "How to Write a Dadaist Poem" by cutting and rearranging newspaper bits. Pendleton calls our attention to the contemporary by cutting and rearranging "found texts," or texts belonging to the Dada spirit, in order to create new meanings, surprise, and an awakening.

Pendleton's montage aesthetic borrows from the Dada movement, and more generally from experimental poetry, and situates the poem in a state of radical openness. Fred Moten explains the radical dimension of montage: "Montage renders inoperative any simple opposition of totality to singularity. It makes you linger in the cut between them, a generative space that fills and erases itself" (qtd. in Moffitt). This regenerative space is the space of "Black Dada" which Pendleton seeks to bring to life in order to give new energy to the utopian potentialities of Tzara's Dada.

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