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Donovan, Thom: Adam Pendleton

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Conversations between Artists, Writers, Actors, Directors, Musicians—Since 1981

# BOMB

Adam Pendleton

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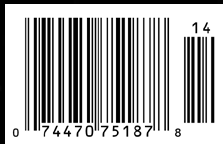
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ART / ADAM PENDLETON

# ADAM PENDLETON

by  
Thom Donovan



*Abolition of Alienated Labor*, 2010, various works, installation view,  
MoMA PS1, Long Island City.

I first encountered Adam Pendleton's work in the fall of 2007. What immediately captured my attention was Pendleton's virtuosity as a performer, and how he foregrounds problems of language, specifically poetic language, with regard to the history of live art and African-American aesthetic discourse. In his 2007 work *The Revival* (commissioned by Performa), he uses the format of the Baptist revival to involve his audience in a scene of witness. Fittingly, during the performance, Pendleton included testimonies by contemporary artists and poets, who spoke of histories of sociopolitical struggle and dissent.

Last winter, Pendleton met with me for coffee before his performance of the *Black Dada* manifesto in the East Village. After our conversation we decided that we should continue, possibly building toward an interview. The following spring, I visited Pendleton at his studio in Germantown, New York, where we spoke about his then-upcoming installation in MoMA PS1's *Greater New York* exhibition. After a lot of conversation, we finally turned a recording device on. Our attempt to engage BOMB's process through conversation, interview, and subsequent transcription and development seemed appropriate, given Pendleton's consistent commitment to process. In his performance works, but also through his printing projects and his pictorial-letterist installations such as *System of Display*, he reflects on social movements and questions of historical representation through procedural methods.

Pendleton is a rare artist in his ability to synthesize disciplines and mediums, and to steer with collaborators toward "total works," which yet remain drafts of a larger essayistic practice. His works—like those of his many avant-garde forebears—are experimental in the truest sense. He sets up a laboratory in which our social and political desires can appear, however fleetingly. Historical materials (images, sounds, and printed language) become a point of departure for making present what cannot be grasped by representations of history (narratives, archives): the emergence of events and situations, which can only become known



retroactively. Recent live art has rarely been more conscious of its origins in civil disobedience and the civil rights movement, where we view the body as a site of social antagonism, and as a “case” for struggles for recognition and justice. With Pendleton’s work, even though we are often left with aporias and blind spots, we feel the force of historical matter self-organizing and finding form beyond representability and essence. We discover the protest of the object—works of art and performance resisting their subsumption by common epistemological frameworks and modes of narration posing as truth.

—Thom Donovan

**Thom Donovan:** I am looking at *System of Display* in the flesh for the first time. There is a precision about the works that is very striking, a sense of clean lines that seem to contain and organize the space. Would you comment on the notion of framing in relation to historical content? You’ve appropriated photographs from art publications, among other sources, then silk-screened them onto mirrors.

**Adam Pendleton:** When I was thinking about making these works, it was a project to index information, an illogical approach to organizing information. I wanted to come up with a system, and what I came up with was not so much a system of organization but a means of



Untitled, 2009, performance view.

display. There’s something very matter-of-fact and literal about these works: images silk-screened onto mirrors and fragmented or lettristic representations of individual words silk-screened onto glass. And that’s essentially the only thing that composes them, except for the frame, which is a practical device of sorts. But then you have all these instances where the simplicity of the system is complicated by subtle decisions as to how information has been framed—both literally and metaphorically. The mirror brings to the surface the tension between subjective and objective positions. It calls attention to how the individual creates relations

and organizes information based on a multiplicity of concerns—historical, ahistorical, personal, apersonal, etcetera. The mirror foregrounds the contingent aspects of these dynamics, which are always in play. It allows for a deconstruction of the image that exists inside the frame, because it literally brings things that are outside of the frame *into* the frame, into the space.

**TD:** Mirrors are such a particular material, and they convey so much, both in a phenomenological and in a symbolic sense. Mirrors multiply perspectives, make points of view entropic or atopic, to use Robert Smithson’s terms. Obviously, mirrors allow for self-recognition and reflection, literally. Individuals can be at the mirror stage, but so can groups struggling for recognition within history. What do you think about the use of mirrors in art, historically and in the work of artists who have informed your own work?

**AP:** With Smithson’s work, we don’t face the self. His mirrors tend to be on the floor, so the nature of the encounter is very different. How an artist employs the material constitutes a kind of portraiture—a refraction or representation of the way a body moves through space, even just intellectually. Smithson’s works are not at eye level, and there’s an evasive quality about them. They are also quietly dramatic in a sci-fi kind of way. Whereas if you look at Joan Jonas’s performative use of the



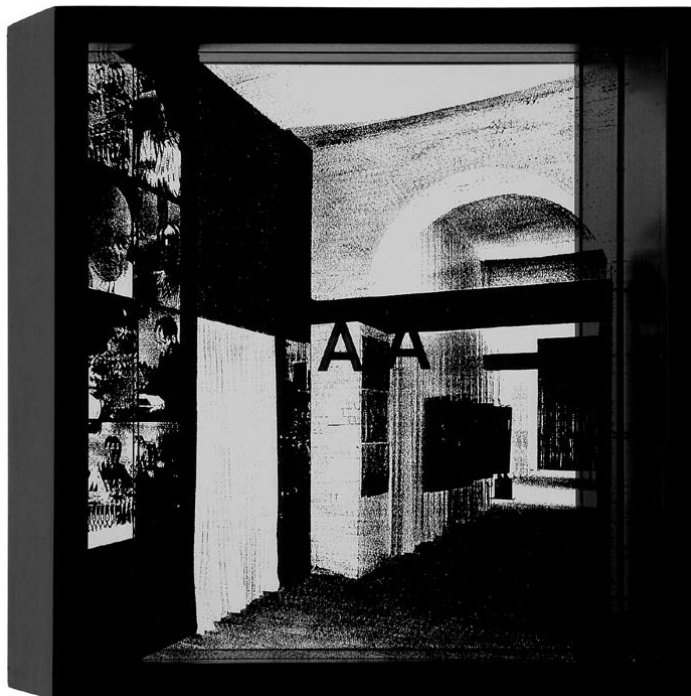
*System of Display*, 2008–09, silk screen on glass and mirror, 9 7/8 × 9 7/8 × 3 inches each, installation view, 2009. All images courtesy of the artist.

mirror—and art-historically we're in the same period as Smithson's—she is looking into the mirror while the audience is watching her, while she is watching herself. She is using the mirror in relation to motion. As soon as you think about it in these terms, you become aware of how it limits the range of movements while seemingly multiplying the possibilities of perception. In Jonas's photo documentations the mirrors almost look like weights on her body, weighing her down; they are simultaneously a liberating and an oppressive material. It's an engaging contradiction. Whereas in Smithson's work the mirrors are not being employed in relationship to movement. They are on the floor and tend to be reflecting or separating something or a pile of something. In both cases the mirrors speak to different conceptions of potentiality. Though we think of a mirror as reflecting what is around us, it can also be a means of escaping what is around us. With both Smithson and Jonas, there is a notion of escaping certain conditions.

**TD:** The idea of escape through a mirror brings up the cartoonish image of the mirror as a portal, as in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass*, where it opens into a new dimension. I also think of Smithson's interest in science fiction. His "atopias" can be seen as utopias (no-places) and his "memory-trace objects" of detritus as "yesterday's news," which still carry future possibilities.

**AP:** A lot of the images that I end up using in the *System of Display* are performance photographs or film stills. You're looking at frozen motion; and in order to have a real encounter with these pieces you need to move around them so that you're animating the dead space of the image. The photographic document is a dead space and the mirror reanimates the possibilities of that particular death.

**TD:** In your 2009 video work *BAND* you appropriate a live-music format (as you did in *The Revival*). It's a three-channel video loosely based on Jean-Luc Godard's post-May '68 film *Sympathy for the Devil*. How does this video—as an object—function in relation to live performance? Or how does the piece function as an "event"—with all the post-'68 inflections of this term?



Detail from *System of Display*, 2008–09, silk screen on glass and mirror, 9 7/8 x 9 7/8 x 3 inches.

**AP:** It's funny because the piece began as an appropriation of Godard's *Sympathy for the Devil*. But looking at it now, I see that it is not something that exists in its shadow, but rather in contrast to it. It's a piece that I believe could only exist today. So many of the things we look back to—particularly around '68—involve failure, are a history of failure. *BAND* acknowledges failure as it attempts to move toward something useful. It involves a kind of criticism that develops useful tools for critical, constructive engagement. When I first looked at *Sympathy for the Devil*, I said, "This is a handbook for filmmaking," because it is so simple in many ways. I thought to myself, I can create an event, which for me means creating conditions of experience. Gilles Deleuze writes beautifully about the poetics of event, the fragmentary and intangible nature of a live event that is doubled by our witnessing and reflecting upon it. In *BAND* you're looking at the band Deerhoof making a new song. It's very clear what they're doing, but our experience is infiltrated by our own projections onto what we are experiencing. *BAND* is a way of looking at and organizing

something that is happening, yet it goes beyond representation. I could have made a straightforward documentation of a band playing music, which would have been this 13-hour thing filled with many ordinary moments.

**TD:** Like *Gimme Shelter*, the Maysles brothers' 1970 documentary of the Stones...

**AP:** Exactly. Guys with guitars making music. There is a visual vocabulary that precedes my work and the making of *BAND*. I was subverting this vocabulary.

**TD:** It's even more difficult with documentaries, where the filmmaker is working very hard to create an illusion of truthfulness.

**AP:** You have people like Hito Steyerl, who engage these ideas very successfully—the document as a falsehood, which in the end represents some kind of truth. Does this falsehood simply become a representation of itself, or does it represent something else? (Which is what traditional documentary film is supposed to do.) The mechanics of the

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BAND, 2009, three-channel HD digital video, stereo sound. Total running time:  
12 minutes, 29 seconds.

documentary create a notion of time happening again; of the past happening again; of the present being a condition of the past but then sharing the same space with it. I think this is what *BAND* does. It asks many things to share the same space—for example, the footage of Deerhoof and audio pulled from a 1971 documentary about a day in the life of a 17-year-old African-American male by the name of Teddy.

**TD:** How does your relationship to film and photo histories extend to printed language and to print publications?

**AP:** I am working on a book, *grey-blue grain*, that will further address notions of the documentary, specifically in regard to my own work. In 2009 I did a three-part exhibition of the same name with de Appel and Kunstverein in Amsterdam. In no way was it a retrospective, but the project focused on work made between 2007 and 2009. The book will be a reflection on the project, a kind of a guidebook to my work, a means of pointing toward and organizing all of the things that move through it.

Since I am constantly lifting words, sentences, images from a wide variety of sources each project typically begins and ends with a stack of books. The book will address the question of how to best represent this process.

**TD:** It just occurred to me that the title, *BAND*, is so generic or even archetypal. The idea of a band, of people playing together, evokes improvisation, event. There is, in other words, a horizon. You don't know what will happen when you see a band. And this is the religious aspect—the rock band as a minor deity and the concert hall as church or temple. Through the band the future seems to open up.

**AP:** I'm glad you mention the word *horizon*. I've been occupied by the experience of the document—holding information or content—as a horizon. There is a line and it is basically a kind of horizon. If you will, it is one long note. I have been thinking about Phil Niblock's work, which has these very subtle tonal shifts in it and this long note. What does it mean when things move below or above this line (that I'm calling horizon) through subtle tonal

**I'm interested in things that have been around the block, that are scuffed a little but not smooth enough for things to slide off of them—they're still tacky.**

shifts? How does this experience move above or below it? I think that's why I used the generic title *BAND*, which could just as easily be called "apple" or "man." Is *BAND* an archetypal experience of a band? In many ways perhaps it is, but something is off. I like playing with these tonal shifts. This is also why *The Revival* was named similarly. "The Revival." It's like going to church; everything is normal on the outside, except that the preacher's a drag queen.

**TD:** Does the archetypal form the line and define what's above and below it?

**AP:** Everything in my work has become very matter of fact: *BAND*, *System of Display*, *The Revival*, and *Black Dada*. *Black* and *Dada* creates a relationship on paper that is a literal merging of two things. *Dada*, meaning *yes*, *yes* and *black* as an open-ended signifier. Taking these very basic notions and allowing them to become a functioning definition—something you can put in someone's hands—is how I hope to repoliticize a neo-avant-garde.

**TD:** Thinking about the making of *BAND* I realized that Godard's shift in his filmmaking at the time was toward the filmmaking of the Russian revolutionary Dziga Vertov and his "cine-eye." It was a shift from bourgeois to non-bourgeois aesthetic practice, embracing Brecht and the early Soviet filmmakers who tried to make cinema a pure means in which documentary, fictional film, and newsreel became conflated. Likewise, moments of reception and of the making of the film were made visible: you're seeing yourself watching an audience watching the filmmaker viewing the footage he's shot. As with your work, there's an ethos of means. This is what the poet-scholar Joan Retallack calls the "poethical wager" in regard to avant-garde practices—pure means exceeding anything that is known in

advance (or admitted or pretended to be known). Why do you think Godard is an interesting filmmaker to revisit at this time, and why especially in terms of your own practice?

**AP:** I come back to this notion of failure. Recuperating after failure. I cannot stop thinking about the pluralities of time. I'm always thinking about the conditions of making a mark. Making a mark or a gesture that matters. Fortunately, and perhaps paradoxically, failure offers numerous opportunities for success. It's a matter of perspective. Godard was a filmmaker who—particularly when he made his last "bourgeois film" (his words)—was always willing to put failure on display.

I have a real desire to move things forward. A lot of my work is about a forward motion—through rehashing or through the redisplay of things that have been around the block. I'm interested in things that have been around the block, that are scuffed a little but not smooth enough for things to slide off of them—they're still tacky.

Godard's films from the '60s *La Chinoise*, *Weekend* project something I am equally drawn to and critical of, and *Sympathy* is interesting as a transitional work. Even though these films are brutal in some respects, they're highly aestheticized. Godard's actors are very attractive; everything is attractive. It's as though we can figure out our problems while sipping our tea.

**TD:** Godard is conjectural, right? He's always testing some hypothesis. He moves horizontally in his film structures so that he can change his mind. I see the same ethics of process in your work—means are placed over ends. You can change your mind and make adjustments, perhaps even flip-flop.

**AP:** What made *Sympathy for the Devil* particularly relevant to me is that Godard questioned use: What was a useful politics? What was a useful art? What was a useful position to occupy? Godard grappled with these questions in every part of the film, whether in his decision to shoot The Rolling Stones in the particular way he did, or in his use of absurdist agitprop.

**TD:** His didacticism is not unlike Brecht's. His use of inter-titles . . .



**AP:** Godard has an inter-title that reads “outside black novel.” It’s a scene of some Black Panther-looking characters in a junkyard. One guy is reading from Eldridge Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice*, while white women, wearing long white robes, are being led around the junkyard by the other Panther-looking guys who are all carrying machine guns. There is so much going on that it’s both disturbing and achingly comical.

**TD:** In your abstract for your *Greater New York* project at MoMA PS1 you write that in your works *System of Display* and *Black Dada* language functions as “an open structure seeking to model a potential ethos for contemporary avant-garde practice and process.” Given the current state of the art world, which to many would seem anything but ethical, what kind of ethos are your works modeling? And how might such a model help to provoke change? Your piece at *Greater New York* was titled *The Abolition of Alienated Labor*, taken from a 1963 work by Guy Debord. How does the title relate to your ethos model?

**AP:** Off the subject, *détournement* has never been considered in terms of my work but it is something I constantly utilize. Debord took someone else’s work (an industrially produced painting by Giuseppe Pinot-Gallizio) and wrote all over it. That’s what I’m doing in a lot of my work. Taking something from culture and writing all over it.

Maybe going back to failure is the best way to answer your question. I couldn’t say whether the Situationists failed or not. My feeling is that when you contribute, there is no failure. It’s like an unspoken law. I like your use of the word “provoke.” When you provoke you have contributed. When you become part of what happens next you have contributed.

**TD:** Your piece at *Greater New York* incorporated an audio component based on Abbey Lincoln and Max Roach’s 1960 composition, *Triptych: Prayer/Protest/Peace*. I am curious about your interpretation of their work as being abstract. You have described Lincoln’s vocals as resisting legibility or signification, and instead remaining at the level of gesture—scream, cry, sob. This reminds me of experimental poetry, which is often charged with

not “meaning” anything or with being “too abstract.” To what extent does the Lincoln/Roach audio piece complicate the categorical and cultural partitions between white and black (or “ethnic”) avant-garde practices?

**AP:** The avant-garde can put the body on the line—people tend to forget that. That’s why I often say that Rosa Parks was avant-garde. Of course there are so many hallmark readings of a person like her, because it is more convenient to deradicalize her than to radicalize her. She becomes a hero. And to be labeled a hero is one of culture’s ways of depoliticizing you. You become part of what culture has dealt with. In this sense, one should always strive to be the opposite of a hero.

Lincoln and Roach put the body on the line. They challenge our notions of a black/white avant-garde. That’s what I like about the composition. What they’re trying to do through the language of music is to be a mirror of their time. As composers they look at how to compose without words. In this composition, attention is drawn to a tonal residue, as if they wanted to bring emotion into an experimental space. This is something that interests me—bringing emotion and the body into conversation with the experimental. That’s one of the things I was thinking about while working on *The Revival*. As a singer Lincoln put her voice on the line. Speaking about performing the piece she said that, as a singer, she wasn’t comfortable doing this—to yell and scream and basically abuse her instrument. It’s like a guitar player smashing his guitar.

**TD:** In his “Letter from Birmingham Jail” Martin Luther King Jr. writes, in reference to the decision to perform acts of civil disobedience in Birmingham, “We had no alternative except to prepare for direct action, whereby we would present our very bodies as a means of laying our case before the conscience of the local and the national community.” I think one can trace the emergence of live art practices in the ‘60s and ‘70s back to the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements and the violation of bodies. These social movements created the conditions for what we have come to think of as “live art.”

Listening to a singer one listens for words, or for a story. But the Lincoln/

Roach composition is purely gestural. Here, voice evokes a different kind of language—one that is communicated through the medium of the body. This relates to the “making vulnerable” which occurs through modes of protest, making one’s body the “case” through civil disobedience. The connection you’re making between the value of live art practices and modes of civil disobedience is very poignant.

**AP:** It’s a whole new art history. It relates directly to my process. The *Black Dada* drawings illuminate process, but they’re also a kind of hybrid form. I often think of them as something you could glue to a stick and go into the street with, using them as a sign for protest. In their elegance I hope there’s something disturbing too—something not quite right. That’s what protest is: it’s saying that something is not right and we are moving toward something else. I hope my work can embody some of that spirit.

**TD:** This goes back to the notion of future or horizon. There is an architecture, something in place, but it’s incomplete, or unbuilt, or a virtual ruin. It’s abandoned before it has been shown, or is being shown as something abandoned before it has ever been built.

I don’t think many artists would discuss their work in terms of protest. I am very interested in how art may be taken up in the service of protest, even be a format for protest, and how all protest is aesthetic. What does it mean to be an artist whose work engages personal and public protest within current socioeconomic conditions—at large and in the small niche of the art market?

**AP:** I think I become a player in the work, although it’s very hard to find me in there. This is intentional. Of course I cannot utilize the same means through which you would protest. My means must become polyphonic. So I must, in a way, disappear. Rachel Blau DuPlessis talks about this in regard to her work; she says that it’s not her responsibility to make declarations, or to say this is wrong and that is right. Nor is this my intention. I think I’m pointing toward *incompleteness* as a condition of being, as a responsible, ethical condition of being.