

frieze

Trouillot, Terence: Adam Pendleton

October 2021

**Profile:** At New York's Museum of Modern Art, ADAM PENDLETON has filled the building's expansive atrium with painting, sculpture and sound in a polyvocal composition celebrating poetry, wildness, Black multiplicity and resistance *by Terence Trouillot*

# ADAM PENDLETON

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**P**oetry is exploring ideas with intention, not direction,' Adam Pendleton tells me as he walks me through the build of his latest exhibition, 'Who Is Queen?' – a large-scale installation featuring sound collage, video, painting and sculpture – six weeks ahead of its opening at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA). Pendleton often speaks in absolutes that are, at times, quite opaque yet irresistibly intriguing. This sentence, however, struck me as a perfect metonym for the artist's practice – which spans bookmaking, drawing, painting, performance, sculpture and video – a dynamic mélange of expressive gestures and experimentalism grounded in research and executed with laser precision and focus. The phrase also helps explain, perhaps, who he is: not only as an artist, but as a person. It even gives insight into his diction: Pendleton speaks slowly, judiciously, with a cadence that is both considered and lyrical. 'I see paintings as documents of marks,' he tells me during my visit to his studio in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, on a grey summer day, 'like bruises and scratches. They represent an understanding of how we are living through these afflictions – the poetics of being.'

Pendleton's tone is often serious: his work deals with important social issues, looking at the nexus of race and politics within the history of art. At the same time, he is unapologetically married to his craft. He works exhaustively, with one eye constantly on the next project: 'I don't know what to do when I'm not working, so I'm always looking for something to do. I eat and work. I don't really know what to do outside of making art.' He tells me this with a smile, followed by his guttural laughter: 'This is all pleasure to me.' Beyond his gravitas, Pendleton is charming, jovial and light-hearted. Much like his work, he is difficult to pigeonhole. As he is quick to point out: 'I don't think we speak in one tenor or tone: we all have this sense of multiplicity.'

Multiplicity is at the core of Pendleton's thinking about art and life. But his medium of choice is language, in all its permutations – be it text, sound, image, movement or space. His work straddles the liminal expanse where language both begins and ceases to function, all through the lens of a Black ontology.

At MoMA, the sound component of 'Who Is Queen?' layers a recording of Amiri Baraka reading a selection of poems – among them 'Not a White Shadow but Black People Will Be Victorious (For Black Arthur Blythe)' – originally delivered at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis in 1980, over Hahn Rowe's composition 'Yellow Smile' (1994) and phone recordings of a 2014 solidarity protest in New York, following the police murder of 18-year-old Michael Brown in Ferguson. In its construction, the piece is inspired by pianist Glenn Gould's *Solitude Trilogy*, a series of three-hour radio documentaries produced for the Canadian Broadcast Company between 1967 and 1977. Gould's documentaries employed what he dubbed the 'contrapuntal' method: a technique borrowed from music in which independent melodies are played simultaneously. In *Solitude Trilogy*, however, independent voices are layered over each other; the result being a polyphony of monologues reflecting on Canada's most remote areas. As Pendleton describes it, Gould 'layered these voices to create a total work, a total form'.

In 'Who Is Queen?', the contrapuntal action is also attributed to interplay between the different components of the exhibition: singular works – representative

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Adam Pendleton

of different voices in harmony and, perhaps at that time, in discordance with each other – are brought together to form a whole. Here, Pendleton conceives of exhibition as musical and visual score, while also disavowing the idea of Blackness (and Black resistance) as a homogenous entity.

In 2000, after graduating early from high school, Pendleton left his hometown of Richmond, Virginia, to study art in Pietrasanta, Italy, with the aspiration of becoming an artist. In 2002, at the age of 18, after many months of sending slides of his work to New York galleries, he moved to Brooklyn. Around that time, Pendleton began paintings that incorporated text, using words as a visual form of abstraction in a way that has come to characterize his works on canvas. Soon afterwards, dealer Kazuko Miyamoto – an assistant to Sol LeWitt at the time – included Pendleton's work in a group show at Gallery Onetwentyeight in New York. (LeWitt purchased Pendleton's painting by exchanging it for one of his own pieces.) Over the course of a string of US solo shows, he came to draw increasingly from African American poetry and literature in his text-based works, imbuing run-of-the-mill phrases from Toni Morrison, for instance, with what Ken Johnson, in a 2005 review for *The New York Times*, described as 'romantic urgency'. Then, in 2007, he presented *Revival* – a large-scale performance comprising a 30-person gospel choir, jazz pianist Jason Moran and Pendleton as a secular preacher – commissioned by Performa. Pendleton's abstract, lyrical sermon included fragments from political speeches by Jesse Jackson and Larry Kramer, among others. Emotional and powerful, *Revival* was his first foray into performance and brought him international attention, while also solidifying a process deeply entrenched in the research of Blackness, social movements and the poetics of resistance.

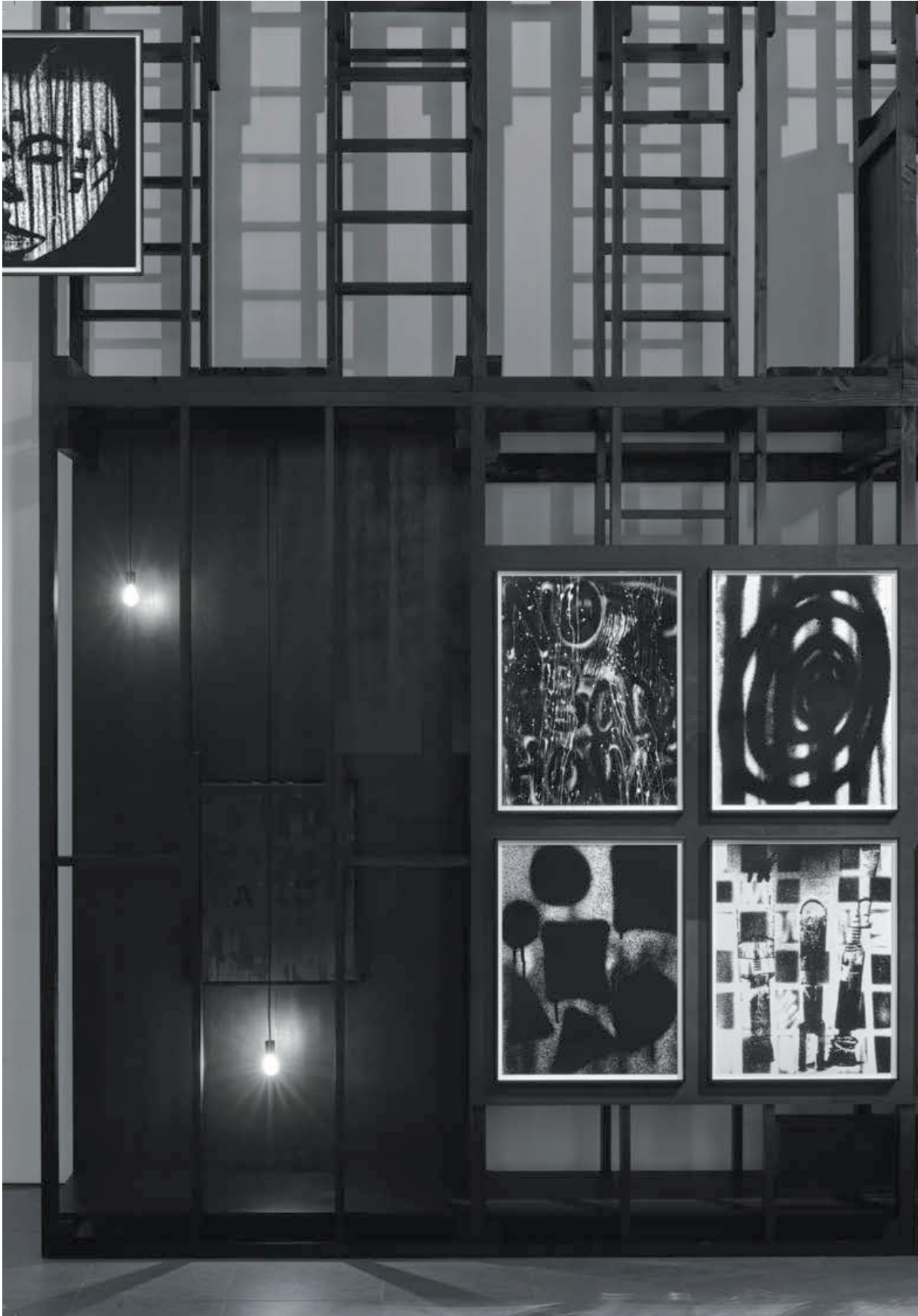
I first met Pendleton in 2017, following the release of his book *Black Dada Reader*, an anthology bringing together conceptual and political texts from the European avant-garde and the Black arts movement of the 1960s. The publication grew out of an in-studio document that Pendleton used to conceptualize his own ideas around 'Black dada' – a notion borrowed from Baraka's poem 'Black Dada Nihilismus', published in *The Dead Lecturer* (1964). In 2008, Pendleton wrote a manifesto called 'Black Dada' and produced a suite of paintings that featured different letters from the eponymous phrase over LeWitt's cubes ('Black Dada', 2008–ongoing).

But it wasn't until 2012, after starting a two-year artist residency at MoMA, that he came to further flesh out his ideas. In the museum's archive, Pendleton researched

**Previous page**  
Untitled (*THEY WILL LOVE US ALL OF US QUEENS*), 2021, silkscreen ink on canvas, 3 × 2.2 m

**Opposite page**  
'Who Is Queen?', 2021, exhibition view, Museum of Modern Art, New York





the artist-led magazine *Avalanche* (1970–76) and, in 2014, presented 'Supposium' with poet Joan Retallack: a convening partly inspired by Plato's *Symposium* (c.370 BCE), which invited Anne Carson, Sandi Hilal, Peter Krapp and Fred Moten, along with Pendleton and Retallack, to participate in playful thought experiments beginning with the word 'suppose'. He also amassed a collection of texts that would later form *Black Dada Reader*: a theoretical juxtaposition of ideas that dislodges our linear understanding of art history, finding a through-line between the European avant-garde and Black radical thought. For Pendleton, Black dada is 'a way to talk about the future while talking about the past.'<sup>1</sup>

In 2017, Pendleton began discussions with Stuart Comer, MoMA's chief curator of media and performance, about creating an installation that would take up the museum's Marron Atrium. At his studio in late July, the artist showed me an exquisite maquette, detailing a floor-to-ceiling scaffold made from charcoal-painted wood and featuring eight speakers, a dual projector and screen, light sculptures, paintings and one textile work inspired by Malcom X's 1964 speech 'The Ballot or the Bullet'. He played me the sound component on a Bluetooth speaker. Rowe's dizzying melody filled the room while Baraka's voice slowly amplified – his tenor a remarkable baritone that reverberated as he delivered each line with great gusto. Behind him, the shouts from protestors – the call and response 'Whose streets? Our streets!' – transported me to the summer of 2020, when millions took to the streets across the globe in response to the police murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and many more.

I imagine Pendleton's polyvocal soundscape expanding across MoMA's cavernous atrium, reaching the halls of the galleries that surround it. I hope it does. Pendleton later tells me that the piece is algorithmically programmed to layer the tracks differently as the recordings loop, creating a unique composition each time. The work will also incorporate conversations between writers, thinkers and musicians – including Joshua Chambers-Letson, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Jack Halberstam, Michael Hardt, Susan Howe, Matana Roberts, Ruby Sales, Lynne Tillman and Simone White – throughout the run of the exhibition.

Pendleton started painting at a very young age in the basement of his family home and the medium and its process remain at the core of his artmaking. Developing an obsession with a particular word or phrase – such as 'we are not' in *Untitled (WE ARE NOT)* (2020–21) – Pendleton spray paints the phrase ad nauseum in various iterations until, from the sheer act of repetition, the words begin to lose meaning, holding space for something purely abstract and almost unrecognizable as text. 'I guess I am drawn to these fields of illegibility,' he explains. He then takes high-resolution photographs of the spray-paint originals and manipulates them on Photoshop before printing the image on large canvases, primed with black gesso. Pendleton likes to refer to this moment as a 'translation'. The works are inspired in part by Glenn Ligon's text paintings and Martin Barré's spray-paint *tableaux*, but they evoke a unique tension and harmony between the media of drawing, photography and painting.

In the studio, I took a moment to ask Pendleton about the significance of the exhibition's title. 'I had this language in my mind in the form of a question,' he replies. 'In some way, the question is turned towards me, but also towards all of us

**'Who Is Queen?' is a question about who is powerful and who is powerless.**



**Opposite page**  
*As Heavy as Sculpture*, 2021, installation view, 'Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America', New Museum, New York

**This page**  
*So We Moved: A Portrait of Jack Halberstam*, 2021, video stills

**Pendleton spray paints the phrase in various iterations until the words begin to lose meaning, holding space for something purely abstract.**



Summer 2020 #1,  
2020, silkscreen ink  
on Mylar, 97 x 74 cm  
each. Courtesy: the  
artist and David  
Kordansky Gallery,  
Los Angeles

at the same time. Very much at the heart of this exhibition is this tension between the individual and the collective and how that space is negotiated and articulated. How we live, essentially. As always with Pendleton's use of language, the phrase is meant to retain and lose its meaning. However, the word 'queen' has a particular charge: both as a colloquialism for a queer man and as feminist counterpoint to the patriarchy. 'Who Is Queen?' is a question about who is powerful and who is powerless.

Over the course of our conversation, the artist refers to Halberstam's introduction to *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (2013) by Moten and Stefano Harney. In it, Halberstam describes the journey of Max, the child protagonist of Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963), who leaves his home and family to live on an island filled with frightening beasts. Halberstam likens the 'wild beyond' to the undercommons: a space for Black, Indigenous and queer folk that goes beyond the existing (oppressive) structures of society. For Pendleton, Halberstam's 'theories of the wild [act] as a kind of mechanism to rethink social, political and visual formations - trying to maintain a radical dimension of queerness - to queer something, to make strange'. Perhaps Pendleton is coyly asking: 'Who is the queen of the wild?'

Halberstam appears in the video component of 'Who Is Queen?', filmed in a way reminiscent of Pendleton's video portraits of Yvonne Rainer (*Just Back from Los Angeles*, 2016-17) and Ishmael Houston-Jones (*Ishmael in the Garden*, 2018). Another film captures images of the Robert E. Lee statue in Pendleton's hometown of Richmond caked in graffiti. As I make my way through the MoMA atrium where 'Who Is Queen?' is being installed, I am aware of how precarious the structures look, how high they are and how much I want to climb them, move through the nooks and crannies. The space is indeed wild, an environ of great solemnity, but also desolate and eerie - an 'un/place' as Halberstam observes in *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire* (2020), 'where the people who are left outside of domesticity reside [...] an anticommunity of wildness.' **END**

1 Artist's statement for the exhibition 'Our Ideas', 2018, Pace Gallery, London, UK

Terence Trouillot is associate editor of *frieze*. He lives in New York, USA.

Adam Pendleton is an artist. 'Who Is Queen?', his solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA, runs until 30 January 2022. His work is on view in 'Portals', former Tobacco Factory, Athens, Greece, until 31 December. He lives in New York.

