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Art in America

BLACKNESS IN ABSTRACTION

By Adrienne Edwards | January 5, 2015



Black Sun, 2013-2014, Black silicone, 120 x 120 x 1 3/4 inches. Courtesy of Pace Gallery

EMBOSSSED CIRCLES OF matte black silicone form a constellation through which barbed projectiles burst, extending beyond the limits of the round form filling the 10-foot-square relief. The unwieldy circles come together through a false impression of repetition. In the oxymoronically titled *Black Sun* (2013-14), artist Adam Pendleton (b. 1984) reimagines a drawing by the late musician/poet Sun Ra, creating a work that is enveloped and consumed in a metaphor of darkness.

Blackness in abstraction, as we find in *Black Sun*, shifts analysis away from the black artist as subject and instead emphasizes blackness as material, method and mode, insisting on blackness as a multiplicity. In this sense, we can think of what it does in the world without conflating it—and those who understand blackness from within a system that deems them black, that is black people—with a singular historical narrative or monolithic subjectivity. Glenn Ligon was in the vanguard of this shift, and other artists



System of Display, T (NIGHT/Jean-Marie Straub, Not Reconciled, 1965), 2011, silkscreen ink on glass and mirror, 63 by 48 inches. Courtesy Galeria Pedro Cera, Lisbon.

he also places the words "Black Dada" in a sans serif font, in all capitals, deleting some of the letters. As a rule, the letters align with the edges of the frame. The final composition is silkscreened onto two canvas panels in shades of black ink. In this series, we can see how Pendleton stands both with and against historical Conceptual art. He employs systems to make works in a serial fashion, yet he manipulates Conceptualist LeWitt's forms and mixes them with expressions of blackness, proffering a critique that insists on troubling easy cartographies of art discourse.

While Pendleton's "Black Dada" wall works are well known and often included in museum collections, the other parts of his "Black Dada" project have been less visible. He wrote the Black Dada manifesto, meant to be performed live, in stanza format in 2008. It correlates the framework of Hugo Ball's 1916 Dada Manifesto to the ideological and aesthetic proclivities of the 1964 poem "Black Dada Nihilism," by LeRoi Jones, aka Amiri Baraka. Pendleton's coupling of these two seemingly incommensurable texts reveals his penchant for the "archive," in his case a personal library of books on literature, modern and contemporary art, experimental dance, film and philosophy. He voraciously mines these books—which include *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa 1945-1994* (the expansive 2001 catalogue for the exhibition curated by Okwui Enwezor) and volumes from the Cinema One and Modern Film Scripts series, specifically those on Jean-Marie Straub and Jean-Luc Godard, to name only a few—for images and language that he then uses throughout his work. The imagery silkscreened onto mirrors in his

of African descent, including Steve McQueen, Jennie C. Jones, Ellen Gallagher, Rashid Johnson and Samuel Levi Jones, have realized black abstract works. Before them, Barbara Chase-Riboud, Melvin Edwards and Jack Whitten did as well.

Blackness, in the fullest sense of the word, has a seemingly unlimited usefulness in the history of modern art. One need only think of Jackson Pollock and the influence of black culture on his painting through his engagement with jazz music. Within abstract painting made in the U.S., Frank Stella, Robert Rauschenberg, Mark Rothko and Ad Reinhardt have created canvases in shades of black. Perhaps these artists were marking their exhaustion with painting or indicating a turn toward a new phase in their art-making, or perhaps these works were solicitations to the viewer to pursue the illegible and the unknowable.

IN 2008 PENDLETON initiated a body of work titled "Black Dada," starting with 8½-by-11-inch photocopies of images of works in Sol LeWitt's sculpture series "Incomplete Open Cubes," begun in 1974. Pendleton maneuvers transparency film (proportional to the size of the final work) along the photocopy, identifying details that resonate and tracing them with a pencil. Once cut along the marked lines, the chosen fragment becomes the new image and is scanned and transferred to Adobe Illustrator. Here, Pendleton positions it in a 96-by-76-inch frame, which he divides into two 48-by-76-inch sections, creating a diptych. Within the frame,

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ies "System of Display" (2008-), for instance, is derived this way.

Pendleton's archival tendency is particularly evident in the *Black Dada Reader*, an evolving collection of essays and reference materials the artist assembles as a pivotal part of his process. It contains the myriad conceptual threads that ideologically buttress his practice. Though plans are under way for publication later in 2015, the *Black Dada Reader* has been self-published so far, reaching only a small group. Thus the actual proposition and meaning of "Black Dada" is only partially known.

The copy I possess is apportioned into sections. The first is titled "Foundation" and begins with W.E.B. Du Bois's essay "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," from his seminal 1903 book *The Souls of Black Folk*. Here the activist and scholar, in considering the history of black people in the United States, poignantly advances the related concepts of "the veil" and double consciousness. For Du Bois, the veil is a metaphor for the social, political and economic factors that divide black America from white America. In my copy, Pendleton has underlined the following lines about double consciousness:



Black Dada (K/A), 2012, silkscreen ink on canvas, diptych, 96 by 76 inches overall. Courtesy Pace Gallery

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

Ball's Dada Manifesto and Jones's "Black Dada Nihilism" follow Du Bois's essay.

Featuring Du Bois's concepts of double consciousness and the veil, the *Black Dada Reader* brings a set of sociological concerns articulated over 100 years ago to the present, accentuating their profound contemporary resonance. A material connection to Du Bois's metaphor of the veil can be found in Pendleton's "Black Dada" paintings, where it is embodied in aesthetic terms. The veil is formally manifest in Pendleton's use of black hues, a demarcation of difference. It is also apparent in his selection of only a few letters in each work from the title "Black Dada," such that, on the canvas, the meaning is illegible.

Pendleton references social and historical conditions through the formal methods of abstraction, producing a point of convergence—the artwork—which requires the viewer to look elsewhere for the narratives that inform it. I am suggesting that blackness is not simply matter for the expression of an artwork. Rather, blackness is a conceptual paradigm that is inherent to Pendleton's work and infiltrates all of its dimensions. This understanding of blackness's immanence follows from the writings of scholar Nahum Dimitri Chandler, who in turn draws heavily on Du Bois. In *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (1940), Du Bois analyzes his life through the lens of race—a lens that is problematic and fallible yet real. His notion of the "autobiography of a concept of race" is at play in Pendleton's art and, it could be said, so is the autobiography of conceptual art.



a woman on the train asks angela davis for an autograph (14017), 2014, silkscreen ink on Mylar, 77½ by 59½ inches. Courtesy Shane Campbell Gallery, Chicago

standing discourse around it. Most recently, art historians Kellie Jones, Kobena Mercer, Huey Copeland and Darby English have productively explored its manifestations in relation to abstraction and Conceptualism. Prior to this, black representation has been formulated by Du Bois, Baraka and Alain LeRoy Locke, in different ways, though always as an important constituent of a much larger agenda toward black racial advancement. The philosopher Locke, Du Bois's contemporary, marshaled a group of artists, patrons, scholars and writers in the 1920s, and is best known for editing the anthology *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance* (1925). Du Bois, an early architect of black racial advancement, believed art to be useful propaganda, famously remarking:

All art is propoganda, and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propoganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propoganda.

For Du Bois, the emphasis was on the creation of black art for black audiences, which aesthetically necessitated turning to Africa for inspiration, dramatizing black life, portraying so-called black features and characteristics and leveraging suffering for expressive purposes. A similar agenda was advocated in the Black Arts Movement, which was founded by Baraka in the 1960s and '70s in Harlem, fueled by the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. In relation to black artists whose work is conceptually inclined, Baraka wrote:

What and Where are you in this hell created by slavery and capital (which includes colonialism and imperialism)? What has it done to you and how are you reacting or acting toward it? . . . And what exactly is it signifying? What do these works aspire to

Pendleton's excavations of his "archive" are acts of abstraction; they remove from their source concerns, ideologies and sensibilities that can be traced through a genealogy of thinkers invested in the question of blackness. In Pendleton's work, conceptual art tells its story through references to LeWitt, Adrian Piper and Ligon, as well as to Gertrude Stein and the language poets. For Pendleton, concepts have a life of their own, each a trajectory through the subjective context of lived experience. His maneuvers—presenting history and its documents through a personal lens and creating artworks based on his promiscuous interests in myriad subjects—often put the viewer in a mode of questioning. At times, this seems to be Pendleton's very objective, echoing Du Bois's sentiments on the concept of race as having "illogical trends and irreconcilable tendencies."

ART HISTORIAN Lucy Lippard defined Conceptual art in part as the "dematerialization of the art object." Pendleton's work attests to a change in this historical definition. Rather than a dematerialization of the object, in the "Black Dada" paintings, there is an absence of the black subject, who nevertheless impels the works. This absence can be thought of as a reflection of the limitations of black representation in visual art.

Pendleton's melding of contradictions in his work takes place within the history of such representation and the long-



View of My Education: A Portrait of David Hilliard, 2011-14, three-channel video, approx. 9¼ minutes. Courtesy Pace Gallery.

do? . . . It is called conceptual art, therefore we want to know, through the work itself, what is the concept we are being exposed to, but also as my old friend Morris Hines used to say, "And then, so what?"

In all instances, black representation has involved the confluence of an artist's individual perspective or desire for personal agency with the discourse of these movements circumscribing the parameters of blackness in art. There has been a tendency toward figuration and realism in these movements, which have operated on principles of transparency, immediacy, authority and authenticity. These well-meaning efforts ultimately reinforced a reductive notion of "black art" or the idea of an essence locatable in works of art by black artists. More recently, essentializing inclinations can be found in compilations of abstract art, as in the 1980 show "Afro-American Abstraction," curated by April Kingsley for P.S.1 in New York. She wrote in her catalogue essay that while the artists in the show have a commitment to modernist forms, the art "evokes a subtle involvement with their African cultural heritage. A majority, in fact, have visited Africa, and certain characteristics of the great African artistic tradition are visible, whether intended or not.

IN RESPONSE TO the demands placed on black artists for social content in their art, I put forward blackness in abstraction. Applicable to artwork in any medium, it is an attempt to understand how artists negotiate and exhaust the paradigm of black representation in visual art. I resist a precise definition, while making a claim for its emergent condition and profound capaciousness. There are infinite manifestations, best comprehended through specific instances.

In My Education: A Portrait of David Hilliard (2011-14), Pendleton investigates the systems in which blackness is reified through the historical particulars of Black Panther Party founding member David Hilliard. Pendleton offers the three-screen video as a kind of counterpart to his all-black wall works, as if to reactivate that which was foreclosed by his material choices. Here, the autobiographical aspects of a concept of racial blackness are straightforwardly presented. The approximately 9-minute video comprises documentary footage Pendleton and a film crew captured in 2011 as they drove with Hilliard through a series of neighborhoods in Oakland, Calif., the prime loci of the Black Panther organization. They go from empty lots, streets, houses and storefronts where the Panthers operated programs for the black working poor to the site of the Apr. 6, 1968 shoot-out in

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View of My Education: A Portrait of David Hilliard, 2011-14, three-channel video, approx. 9¼ minutes. Courtesy Pace Gallery.

which Bobby Hutton, Black Panther treasurer, was fatally wounded by police (two days after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.). In the video, Hilliard, a lecturer, educator and former Black Panther chief of staff, recalls the shoot-out and the series of events that led to Hutton's death.

Filmed in black-and-white with a meditative, introspective timbre, the video employs multiple camera angles that are montaged to foreground the conflict between Hilliard's recollections and the official state and federal records as well as to highlight the dissonance between the various interpretations of the Black Panthers in American history. The juxtapositions serve to question the reliability of any historical example. Interspersed throughout are close-ups of architecture, such as expanses of craggy, rocklike gray plaster (a surface typical of homes in California), that act as visual pauses. At one point, an eruption of plaster appears in the midst of Hilliard's cadenced account of the shooting. The insistence of his voice in combination with the abstracted images reminds us that even when the subject is not visible and the scene of the crime has been disinfected long ago, the subject is continuously and insistently called upon again and again.

With My Education: A Portrait of David Hilliard, Pendleton slices and sculpts imagistic captures of reality that link the moment of the then to the moment of the now. The portrait inserts a new historical record into the collective archive. It reorients our attention to film's ability not only to observe a life or to materialize a concept but to examine larger social and cultural events in order to reconsider them entirely. Pendleton's blackness in abstraction, in joining past and present, suspends time and space, much as Hilliard's mulled contemplations enrapture and carry us along.

Pendleton's traversal of mediums—specifically those addressed here—demonstrates more than a desire to create cross-disciplinary art. Rather, it illuminates the ways that the text and image sources he culls for his works draw on the historical, social and political factors that forge a subject.