ADAM PENDLETON (American, b. 1984) is a voracious reader who transforms the words and illustrations he consumes, imbuing them with new meaning. Black Dada is the animating force behind the artist’s work; it explores the concept of blackness through abstraction. Pendleton extracts images and texts that speak to avant-garde art and socio-political movements from their sources, thereby dissociating them from their original context and offering them up for fresh consideration. By fragmenting, layering, and collaging this material he reveals new and unexpected relationships that comment on race and culture. In this exhibition, Pendleton’s juxtapositions are presented in a highly choreographed installation that empowers viewers to decipher personal meaning as they navigate the space of the gallery.

For the Wall Work on the left wall, Pendleton combines an image of a pivotal event in art history with text related to the Black Lives Matter movement. The 1955 photo depicts Marc Chagall’s (French, b. Belarus, 1887–1985) paintings at the inaugural Documenta exhibition. Chagall, a Jewish artist who painted in a modernist vein, had been subject to Nazi censure, with his work being included in the infamous 1937 Degenerate Art exhibition. Degenerate Art brought together examples of abstract and expressionistic art now recognized as masterpieces and argued that their “distasteful” aesthetics threatened the moral foundation of German society. Chagall’s inclusion in Documenta, a postwar celebration of contemporary art that continues through today on a periodic basis, demonstrates that the same artwork may be demonized and praised in different times and places. By layering the abstracted text “WHAT IS BLACK LIVES MATTER?,” over the Documenta image, Pendleton loosens the constraints of present-day associations. With the historic backdrop, he encourages viewers to reconsider the meaning of the topical phrase with one eye to the past and one eye to the future.

Overlaying the Wall Work is a photo taken at the Bauhaus art school that documents a photographer and his subject. By showing the subject along with the photographer and his camera, and by implying the presence of the third unseen photographer of the scene, it illustrates three perspectives on a shared experience. Pendleton covers the photo with the phrase “IF THE FUNCTION OF WRITING.” These words begin Ron Silliman’s (American, b. 1946) The Alphabet (2008), a groundbreaking book of Language poetry. Begun in the 1970s, the Language poetry movement granted the reader a central role in the creation of meaning. This convergence of references—Documenta, Black Lives Matter, the Bauhaus, and Language poetry—serves as a meditation on the role that cultural, economic, and political circumstances play in an individual’s understanding of local and global events.
Of the Black Lives Matter movement, Pendleton says, “The political dynamic isn’t new. What’s new is the language that is at once a public mourning, a rallying cry, and a poetic plea.” On the central wall, Pendleton provides historical context by evoking the American Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. In this Wall Work and the accompanying paintings, he pulls apart the phrase “A VICTIM OF AMERICAN DEMOCRACY,” derived from a 1964 speech by Malcolm X (American, 1925–1964) titled “The Ballot or the Bullet.” Although not an exact quotation, the words capture Malcolm X’s conviction that democracy had failed African Americans. This is an idea that continues to resonate. Pendleton explores the topic through the aesthetics of the all-black, allover composition often associated with the avant-garde and employed—to dramatically different effects—by Abstract Expressionists, Minimalists, and Conceptual artists. With block letters on black ground, rendered in the democratic medium of spray paint, Pendleton’s canvases evoke the spirit of resistance found in graffiti and protest art.

The language of social justice continues on the right wall, where collages feature the phrases “BLACK LIVES MATTER” and “A VICTIM OF AMERICAN DEMOCRACY.” Towering over the collages is an image of three kitchen knives with dark shadows. Pendleton was drawn to the forms while exploring a 1962 book on Italian design. Displayed in such close proximity, the collages charge the utensils with symbolism. However, Pendleton does not assign a particular significance to the knives, letting viewers arrive at their own conclusions.

Finally, hanging against a white wall is a lone Mylar work with the fragmented question “WHAT IS BLACK LIVES MATTER?” printed on its surface. Here, the question’s almost indecipherable form reflects the difficulty of providing a universal response. Like the Bauhaus photograph, the piece encourages individual reflection and reminds the viewer that others will have different responses to the question. It thus prompts conversation, which is at the heart of the work. Says the artist, “Black Dada is a way to talk about the future by talking about the past. It is our present moment.”

Left to right

what is…/Chagall (wall work), 2017
Adhesive vinyl

if the function of writing, 2017
Silkscreen ink on Mylar

A Victim of American Democracy IV (wall work), 2016
Adhesive vinyl

Untitled (A Victim of American Democracy), 2017
Silkscreen ink and spray paint on canvas

Untitled (A Victim of American Democracy), 2017
Silkscreen ink and spray paint on canvas

Untitled (A Victim of American Democracy), 2017
Silkscreen ink and spray paint on canvas

Untitled (A Victim of American Democracy), 2017
Silkscreen ink and spray paint on canvas

Knives (wall work), 2017
Adhesive vinyl

Untitled, 2016
Collage on paper

Untitled, 2017
Collage on paper

Untitled, 2017
Collage on paper

what is…(study), 2017
Silkscreen ink on Mylar

All works are courtesy of the Artist and Pace Gallery.

*“Wall Work” is the artist’s terminology for his immersive floor-to-ceiling works, composed from photographic and text-based collages.*