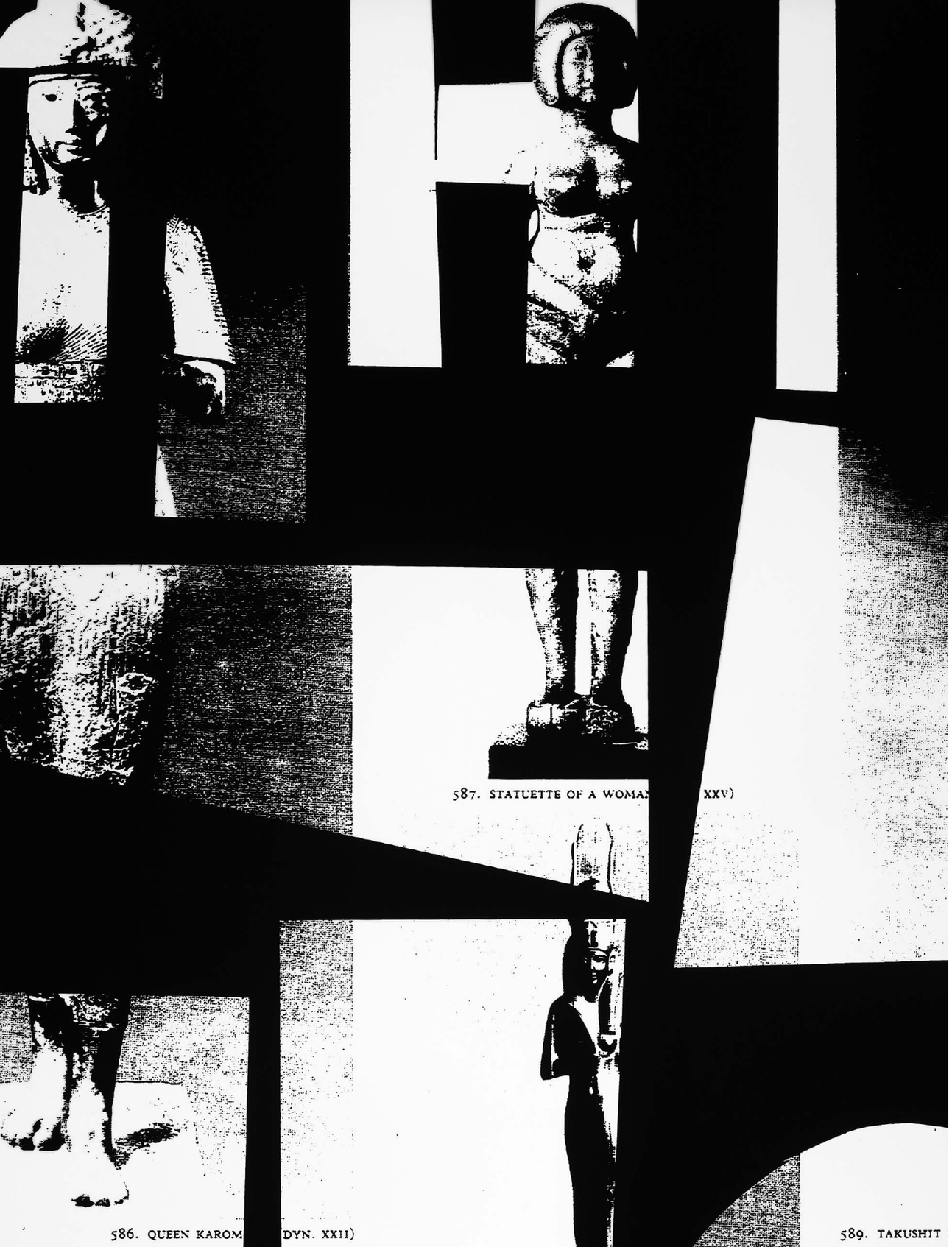

Adam Pendleton Our Ideas

PACE

Contents

“Black upon black”: Afterlives of the Archive

Alec Mapes-Frances

“When men die, they enter into history. When statues die, they enter into art. This botany of death is what we call culture.” Chris Marker and Alain Resnais’s 1953 film essay, *Les statues meurent aussi (Statues Also Die)*, opens with these sentences in voiceover. “An object is dead when the living gaze trained upon it has disappeared,” it continues. “And when we disappear, our objects will be confined to the place where we send those of the blacks: to the museum.”[1]

The “dead statues” of the “blacks” are mostly African and Oceanic: “black art,” as the film calls them, extracted from indigenous milieus, traded on the market, and eventually fixed behind museum glass in the imperial centers of Europe: Belgium, France, England. “Classified, labeled, conserved in the ice of display cases and collections,” such objects “enter into the history of art, the film’s voiceover observes.”[2] Over a delicate but insistent soundtrack, the camera pans slowly and lingers on silent figurines, masks, tools, and other artifacts, setting these carefully composed frames alongside shots of exhibitions, labels, and museum viewers.

Marker’s text is more or less an indictment of colonial reason.[3] His commentary narrates the ways in which these decontextualized objects, stripped of their historical, cosmological, or ecological significance, become *for* the visual pleasure of the Western consumer-viewer, but are also denied their former familiarity, their practical immersion in a cultural fabric. Instead, these objects are asked to address “us,” to seduce “us,” and to pleasure “us.” “We want to see suffering, serenity, humor, when we know nothing,” Marker says. “Colonizers of the world, we want everything to speak to us: the beast, the dead, the statues; and these statues are mute; they have mouths and don’t speak; they have eyes and don’t see us.”[4] As Resnais’s editing shuttles us between the museum and the colony, the empty eyes and open mouths of the masks are gradually overtaken by documentary footage of diplomatic summits, tribal celebrations, anticolonial demonstrations, police violence, industrial workers, modernist housing developments, and other features of African modernity circa 1950.

In its use of documentary and archival montage, *Les statues meurent aussi* has something of an affinity with the practice of Adam Pendleton, for whom twentieth-century documents of colonialism and decolonization, as well as the entanglements of African and European modernisms, play a critical role. Pendleton’s compositions can be said to share with the film a precise, uncompromising archaeology. For Pendleton, this “archivism”—which sometimes goes by the name Black Dada, after LeRoi Jones’s (Amiri Baraka’s) poem “Black Dada Nihilismus” (1964)—has the partial aim of disrupting existing organizations of visuality, particularly regimes in which blackness remains essentialized as a monologic, self-identical condition. Like the Dada scalpel, or like Marker and Resnais’s editing table, Pendleton’s work cuts up and redistributes the systems of capture and architectures of display—white walls, white pages, white plinths, reflective glass, flat files, captions, and labels—that function as the interface of the archive (by which we might also mean the museum, the collection, the catalogue, the reader, the library). Using a repertoire of images and language taken from films and books, Pendleton further refracts his counter-archive across mediums such as mirrors, plexiglass, Mylar transparencies, publications, and videos, creating uncanny dynamics of displacement, reiteration, and linkage. It is by continually returning to the archive and overwriting it that Pendleton articulates the unfinalizable notion of Black Dada.[5]

Much of the unfinalizability as well as the visual textures of Pendleton’s practice can be credited to the photocopy, which effects an initial compressive “flattening” on its objects irrespective of origin or medium. Intentionally degraded, the photocopier’s “poor” images emerge from the bottleneck of a narrow information channel, resulting in a high-contrast black-and-white.[6] Low fidelity is precisely what gives the content its sense of circulatory potential: from the *Black Dada* drawings and paintings to the *Black Dada* flags, from *Black Dada Reader* (a collection of photocopied texts published by Pendleton in 2017) to the wall works that enlarge the *Reader* into an environment, photocopies multiply and accumulate.

Pendleton’s works on Mylar, covered in photocopier-distorted African masks and documentary photographs, striated with black marker and graphomaniacal lettering, are examples of the above. These works resemble the acetate transparency pages included in early versions of the *Reader* and are in fact proportional to the dimensions of a standard printed page. These 8½-by-11-inch transparencies, photocopied from the artist’s own books, drawings, handwriting,

1. Chris Marker, *Commentaires* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1961), 11. *Commentaires* contains a complete transcript of the film’s voiceover, which I have translated from the French with reference to an existing translation by Lauren Ashby, “The Statues Also Die,” *Art in Translation* 5, no. 4 (2013), 429–38.

2. Marker, *Commentaires*, 20.

3. The film was commissioned by Présence Africaine, a Paris-based literary review and publisher founded in 1947 by the Senegalese intellectual Alioune Diop, and subsequently banned by France’s national censors for its anticolonial politics. It did not become available in its unabridged version until 1968.

4. Marker, *Commentaires*, 15.

5. “Unfinalizable” in Mikhail Bakhtin’s sense. See Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

6. See Hito Steyerl, “In Defense of the Poor Image,” *e-flux journal*, no. 10 (November 2009).

and paper collages, are placed on top of one another; they are scanned, processed, and silkscreened onto larger-scale transparencies, then mounted on white board and framed. Though each work is unique, the method is somewhat modular and, like much of Pendleton's work, involves the recombination of fixed elements in diverse permutations. And, although the Mylar works are the final products at the end of a series of translations—a chain of imaging, editing, layering, and printing processes—they embody a sense of incompleteness and also of promiscuity, pointing toward further processes to come, further layers, further copies. Their transparency resembles that of photographic negatives or slides for an overhead projector. Sealed behind glass, like the masks they reproduce, these images, we imagine, might still be fed back into the machines that produced them, multiplying to exhaustion.

Compositionally, the Mylar works are complex and various. Many of them include bits of apparatus (captions, page numbers, footnotes) from the volumes they sample, coded marginalia that provide some minimal context for the images, such as the dimensions of a Dan or Dogon mask, or the owner of a Gabonese figurine. These marginalia are not necessarily there to be read but rather to signify the existence of a framework of labels and references. More often than not they are struck through and obscured by the black lines of Pendleton's markers. Many of the Mylars have no bibliographic text at all, and the images appear suspended, detached from numbers, locations, provenance. Some of the images, however, are recognizable, and most have been deployed by Pendleton in previous forms: El Lissitzky's 1927 *Cabinet of Abstraction* at the Hannover Provincial Museum; Sophie Taeuber-Arp's *Untitled (Dada Bowl)* and *Untitled (Poudrier)* from 1913 and 1916 respectively, as well as her 1922 Hopi *kachina* costumes; an "Indépendance du Congo" banner from 1960, with its distinctive modernist typeface; propaganda posters promoting Britain's colonial empire; and historical photographs of the elections that followed decolonization in the 1950s and '60s. Other images are hard to identify: uncaptioned masks and figurines and anonymous photographs of people presumably of African descent. Pendleton's writing and overwriting, scrawled liberally in black marker across the compositions along with various geometric motifs, is similarly difficult to parse. Sentences are truncated or overlaid with other sentences and shapes. "WHAT IS THE BLA"; "WHAT A DAY WAS THIS"; "IF THE FUNCTION"; and so forth—sentences that, like the masks and figures, do not resolve themselves easily.

The sense of incompleteness that inhabits Pendleton's oeuvre relates to the modality of Dada, and also, perhaps in a more complicated way, to the modality of "Black." As Marker's commentary for *Les statues* maintains, the "black" of "black art" is already an impoverished and overprinted black—a history of blackness inscribed on blackness. "In the last century,"

writes Marker, "the flames of conquerors turned this whole past into an absolute enigma. Black upon black, black battles in the night of time, the sinking has left us only with this beautiful striped wreckage which we interrogate."[7] The lack of historicity attributed to Africa by Hegel, or the "zone of nonbeing" described by Frantz Fanon at his most quintessentially Afro-pessimistic, is properly attributed to the colonial annihilation of vital networks of cultural and historical meaning.[8] In a sense, the imperial logic of the "enigma" of blackness can be exploited, and, against that logic's simultaneous incitement to legibility, identification, and revitalization, an anti-essential inscrutability may be affirmed. What is left are detached, anonymous, "dead" objects like the cut-out, distorted masks that drift beneath Pendleton's black grids and hatching.

Perhaps one of the crucial questions in considering the indigenous art present in the work of Marker, Resnais, Pendleton, and a whole host of Western artists working in the wake of modernism is: what does this "dead language" of "black art," as Marker puts it, look like from the perspective of the objects, the "black" objects that gaze blankly at one another in a circuit distinct from that of the visual economy of whiteness that interpellates them, catalogues them, accounts for them, and exchanges them? Or, what are the afterlives of these objects, and what do they continue to *do* in the present, despite being degenerated by techniques of imaging and procedures of collecting? Blackness as such, as Fred Moten argues, has a particular association with objecthood, decay, and death; its modern history is one in which the human is made object, the object of a white will or a white fantasy and sentenced to both social and actual death.[9] But blackness is also the place where the otherwise isolated and degraded object becomes a resistant object, an agentic object, a fugitive object. Moten's statement that "the history of blackness is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist"[10] does much to characterize a chiasmus of the animate and inanimate: the historical conflation of black objects and black people, certainly, but also, the bare fact of the resistive animacy of the object, of the archivable, of that which has been archived.

7. Marker, *Commentaires*, 13.

8. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1968), 1–2. "There is a zone of nonbeing, an extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an utterly naked declivity where an authentic upheaval can be born. In most cases, the black man lacks the advantage of being able to accomplish this descent into a real hell."

9. Fred Moten, "The Case of Blackness," *Criticism* 50, no. 2 (2008): 177–218. "The cultural and political discourse on black pathology has been so pervasive that it could be said to constitute the background against which all representations of blacks, blackness, or (the color) black take place . . . blackness has been associated with a certain sense of decay, even when that decay is invoked in the name of a certain (fetishization of) vitality."

10. Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 1.

A certain future tense is no doubt characteristic both of Pendleton and of Marker and Resnais, through whose work the dead or spent objects of the archive are reproduced and placed into generative networks of meaning. It is not so much about revitalization, giving the material "new life," as much as it is about reimagining decay as itself a space of ghostly possibility—of death, "where one goes by losing one's memory," as Marker has it. And it is precisely in a weaponization of their illegibility, deterioration, and compartmentalization that the "black objects" begin to point to an "art of communion" in their afterlife. "What we have is this," Marker writes, with echoes of Fanon. "From the bottom of this loneliness, that which will create a new community. Black art was the instrument of a will to grasp the world and also of the will which undertook to change its form."[11]

Futurity in decay. And, as it indexes decay, the Mylar material itself has a preservative significance: the sheets are made from the same material as the plastic sheaths that protect archival papers and also resemble microfilm and microfiche, the analog storage mediums for newspapers and other perishable papers. Here, Mylar is a material that simulates and perhaps even parodies the archival imaginary and its will to permanence, to propriety, to have and to hold. It dramatizes the hauntological "resistance of the object," and, together with the photocopier's processing, emphasizes the uncanny historical texture of the work: uncanny because it feels both in and out of time, made from images that are embalmed and put to rest, but which, through a seemingly infinite combinatorial inventiveness, are anything but restful.

Achille Mbembe, who has written widely on the so-called necropolitics of the colony and postcolony—the "living dead" of chattel slavery, colonialism, apartheid, etcetera—defines the institutional archive precisely as a tomb of ancestors, a place where the remains of ancestors are kept to ensure that these remains "do not stir up disorder in the present."[12] This "instituting imaginary" of the archive, necessary for the maintenance of the institution, contends with a second impulse: a kind of "chronophagy," a simultaneous consumption of the past and future and a destruction of remains.[13] Normally, this is carried out by the chronophagic imperial state in order to abolish or indefinitely suspend its own debts.[14] Mbembe argues that the archive thus has a paradoxical status: "On the one hand, there is no state without archives—without its archives. On the other hand, the very existence of the archive constitutes a constant threat to the state."[15]

From this perspective, Pendleton's compositions could be considered desecrations: violations of the official indifference or quietist "commemoration" that result from the attempt to neutralize the dangerous duplicity of the archive.[16]

The dead, whether they are statues or people, whether they are victims of colonialism, policing, or American democracy, refuse "commemoration." In Pendleton's work, they mark, instead, a future emancipation.

11. Marker, *Commentaires*, 24.

12. Achille Mbembe, "The Power of the Archive and Its Limits," in *Refiguring the Archive*, ed. Carolyn Hamilton et al. (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), 22.

13. Ibid., 22–23.

14. Ibid., 23. "The constitutive violence of the state rests, in the end, on the possibility, which can never be dismissed, of refusing to recognise (or to settle) one or another debt."

15. Ibid. Jacques Derrida makes a similar point when he insists that "the archive always works, and *a priori*, against itself." See Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 12.

16. Mbembe, "The Power of the Archive," 24.