



## Who Is Queen?

Adam Pendelton:  
*Untitled*  
*(WE ARE NOT)*  
2020–2022  
Silkscreen ink  
on canvas  
304.8 × 594.4 cm

What is the driving force behind our need for images? From a historical perspective, it was the ancestors, and the sacrificed humans offered to the gods, and the animals they hunted. Images served to commemorate phenomena that, it was felt, must not be forgotten. They addressed the perennial question of “post mortem,” our complex emotions in the face of death. In many societies, cultural processes developed to immortalize a ruler or hero at the end of his or her life and to preserve the survivors’ thoughts and feelings in an “eikon.” The deceased was ritually enshrined, mourned, and honored with a portrait, a sculpture, or even an edifice in order to usher them into the afterlife. But it was also done to make the past tangible, to rescue important moments of time from extinction by means of a durable image. Can such a simple explanation account for our immense and still-growing need for images? Is today’s relentless image-hunger evidence of a kind of necrophilia, a peculiar love of dead things that are nevertheless deemed worthy of contemplation? **When we say, more briefly, that we love images because they preserve something that has died, or rather, something that we hold sacred, from passing away entirely, we are no longer referring to funerals, sacrificial rituals, or ancestor worship.** Museums, as we wrote in the last newsletter in another vein, are like morgues. They archive the beautiful, cherished icons, serving as institutions that remind us of past and, more and more frequently, contemporary cultures. They are important repositories of our history, but they can hardly keep pace with the ever-increasing rapid expansion and financial valorization of our canon of images. **Meanwhile, galleries and auctions are also fulfilling the function of providing guidance and institutional power. Galleries are creating exhibitions of museum quality, such as the recent “Avedon 100” at the Gagosian Gallery in New York, commemorating the 100th birthday of master photographer Richard Avedon. From our experience at auctions, we are familiar with the applause that accompanies a particularly high bid for a cherished artwork which only a few in the room have the means to acquire.** Today, no one buys an expensive work of art because he or she is in mourning. Rather, we are acquiring a memento, a keepsake. The buyer bears witness to a strongly held belief or value. Our need for images is psychologically based on an affect: we are deeply touched by a work because it encapsulates life, culture, and our part of human history. It can almost exude a life of its own, it can set in motion an impulse, a flame, a desire that far exceeds hunger, thirst, and sexual pleasure.

The love of art is fundamentally associated with admiration and sorrow, with the fear that something that is close to me and almost sacred, that comes from beyond and surpasses my presence, could fall into oblivion. **In this sense, the current craze for contemporaries, aside from high speculation, appears as a kind of religious war among collectors, often conducted among themselves and without the involvement of public museums, but rather in concert with gallery owners, art advisors, and auctioneers. It is important to note that not everyone participates in this, but rather certain individuals, and at particular moments.** Conversely, when we embark on a journey to Agra, we visit the *Taj Mahal*, the most famous testament of mourning, erected by the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan as a mausoleum with an 18-hectare garden after his wife, Mumtaz, died in childbirth in 1631. Upon reentering the *Museum of Modern Art* in New York, say during an exhibition at the end of 2021, we may encounter Adam Pendleton's archival project "Who Is Queen?" in which he referred to the Dadaist Hugo Ball and Amiri Baraka's poem "Black Dada Nihilismus," written in 1964. Historical fragments, texts, images, and sounds appeared on a tall black balloon frame. **Pendleton had placed his project into the steep 18-meter high atrium like a *Tatlin Tower*. You could see a film with historical scenes alongside large, seemingly spray-painted images made of letters and words. Throughout, a massive assemblage of black and white fragments communicated a protest that shook the museum of modern art, established by old white men and super-rich women, as if it had been struck by lightning. The work expressed both sorrow and a powerfully dosed ancestral cult — the first with regard to the hypostasized transience of officially sanctioned culture, while the second was dedicated to people of color, who had been subject to criminal neglect for far too long.** Of course the artist himself was Queen, in the same sense that artists throughout history have provided guidance to the cultures in which they worked. Similarly, present-day New York presents itself as a center for female artists who are only now being fully discovered. An exhibition of Georgia O'Keeffe's works on paper from 1915 to 1918 honors her as a meticulous investigator and inventor of abstract art. Twenty-five years of Cecily Brown's painting are being showcased in an exhibition at the *Metropolitan Museum* that is nothing short of magical. Louise Bourgeois' large bronze sculpture, "Spider," was auctioned for \$32.8 million. In rapid succession this May, the auction houses *Christie's*, *Sotheby's*, and *Phillips* not only confirmed the market values of highly sought-after artists such as Banksy, Basquiat, Hockney, Richter, and Ruscha but also successfully sold works by recently deceased women artists, albeit at significantly lower prices: Etel Adnan, Lynda Benglis, Lygia Clark, Lynne Drexler, Alice Neel, or Alina Szapocznikow. As much as the world today relinquishes ancestral worship, it continues to bring forth new role models and cultural achievements as if from the beyond—and not only in New York.

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