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The Trickster Art of Pope.L Draws Power from Negation

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In 1978, Pope.L got on his hands and knees in a suit and safety vest, and made his way through the bustling crowds of Midtown Manhattan. Titled *Times Square Crawl a.k.a. Meditation Square Piece*, his performance combined a disturbance in public space with abjection and perverse humor, setting the tone for his subsequent experiments with what it means to make art and move through the world as a black man.

William Pope.L, who exhibits under the name Pope.L (his mother invented it by appending the first initial of her family name to his father's surname), was born in Newark, New Jersey, in 1955. He was raised and educated in the tri-state area, attending the Pratt Institute, Montclair State College, the Whitney Independent Study Program, and the MFA program at Rutgers University. He broke into the New York scene during that period, making *Times Square Crawl* while still a student.



Pope.L: *Times Square Crawl a.k.a. Meditation Square Piece*, 1978, C-print, 10 by 15 inches.

© Pope.L/Courtesy Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York.

In subsequent works, Pope.L has repeatedly used his own body as medium and material. As part of the project *How Much Is That Nigger in the Window* (1991), he sat in the storefront of the now-shuttered location of the New York nonprofit

Franklin Furnace and smeared mayonnaise all over his body to make himself white. The ongoing *Black Factory Archive* (2004–) is less immediately confrontational, but nevertheless provocative. It's a nomadic participatory work, in which Pope.L asks people to donate “black objects”—anything that “a person believes represents blackness to him or her.”¹ The archive has traveled the United States in a van and also lives online. These works, each in its own way, interrogate the public nature of blackness. With a title and setting that framed the artist as a product, *How Much Is That Nigger in the Window* addressed the black individual's historical status as a commodity as well as the impossibility of his being anything other than black. As the mayonnaise dried it became clear, revealing the color of Pope.L's skin beneath it. In the *Black Factory Archive*, the very construction of “black” as a meaningful category is put to question. In both cases, the character and value of blackness are shown to be defined through social and economic relationships. Personhood is always subject to negotiation.

Pope.L asks incessantly: How much can I, a black man, be *for* myself? In his work, he becomes both object and effect, equally a denigrated pseudo-subject and a force that repels those around him with his own disconcerting embrace of indignity. The question of how the self is produced through encounters with the other has preoccupied many black thinkers, such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Frantz Fanon, Fred Moten, and Frank B. Wilderson III. It has also fascinated nonblack writers like Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose insights Rosalind Krauss applied to the art historical analysis of sculpture. She paraphrases Merleau-Ponty's discussion of a subject's paradoxical interface with the other as “the way in which the picture of the self as a contained whole . . . crumbles before the act of connecting with other selves.” Merleau-Ponty-via-Krauss tells us that “for each of us . . . there are two perspectives: I for myself and he for himself; and each of us for the other.”² For Merleau-Ponty, the “I” can come into existence only upon interaction with the other and a world of embodied sensations.³ Krauss invokes Merleau-Ponty to get at the continuities between Minimalist and Post-Minimalist sculpture, namely an investment in exploring the “externality of language and therefore of meaning” and in turn the externality of the self, “a self completed only after it has surfaced into the world.”⁴ Pope.L uses his own body instead of crafting mute sculpture to reflect

on the treatment of the self as an object. “Am I, a black man, for myself? How much?” his oeuvre asks. And it offers a pessimistic answer: potentially not at all.

In this way, Pope.L’s relationship to blackness—or, dare we say, his use of blackness, whether his own or that of others—departs from the precedents set by the Black Arts movement of the early 1970s, glimmering with rhetoric of empowerment and pride. For Pope.L, affirmation is always couched in negation. His *Hole Theory* (2002) is an artist’s book that may or may not be the key to understanding all his output.⁵ He defines the book’s project thusly: “Hole Theory is / Theory in process engaging / Lack as an ongoing interaction.”⁶ Pope.L’s engagement with lack goes back to the “have-not-ness” of his difficult childhood in Newark.⁷ It also rewires Lacanian psychoanalytic thought—which figures lack as a fundamental aspect of desire, and of being itself—to speak to a racialized condition. Maintaining a relationship with trauma and absence is what generates creative force. For Pope.L, blackness’s lack has value. It’s a having of nothing, which is worth holding onto.

Wordplay and paradoxes such as the valued void that is *Hole Theory* run throughout Pope.L’s work. His “Skin Sets” are another example of his fascination with the malleability of meaning. Pope.L has created countless iterations of these drawings and paintings, each with a different phrase rendered by hand: WHITE PEOPLE ARE GOLD, BROWN PEOPLE ARE THE GREEN RAY, WHITE PEOPLE ARE THE CAMEL AND ITS NEEDLE, BLACK PEOPLE ARE CROPPED, RED PEOPLE ARE A PHOTOGRAPH, GREEN PEOPLE ARE KAFKA CONSTRUCTION QUEENS, NEW YORK, NEW YORK, and so on. The phrases swerve toward and away from intelligibility. Poetic lines from *Hole Theory* can be read as descriptions of what happens in the language of “Skin Sets”: “Beneath this sentence is a hole.”⁸ And: we have left “the ground of meaning.”⁹



View of the exhibition “member: Pope.L, 1978–2001,” 2019–20, showing work related to The Black Factory Archive, 2004–, at the **Museum of Modern Art**, New York. Photo Martin Seck.

This kind of play recalls a tried-and-true brand of absurdism in the Western modernist canon but is equally indebted to a position, almost a transhistorical philosophy unto itself, found throughout black folklore: the trickster. Much has been made of the trickster in African and black diasporic vernacular traditions, which are populated by clever characters like Anansi the Spider, Papa Legba, and Brer Rabbit. Henry Louis Gates Jr. wrote about the “signifyin’ monkey” of black folklore who “speaks figuratively, in a symbolic code; the lion interprets or reads literally and suffers the consequences of his folly.”¹⁰ The trickster succeeds by outwitting his oppressor. The monkey bobs and weaves around the lion, King of the Jungle, who can only lumber through the trees, at least one foot always on the ground.

Like the trickster, Pope.L wages his war with a wry sense of humor. It’s a way of inviting viewers in, he has said, rather than alienating them with more acerbic wit.¹¹ The Crawls and other performances and videos could be massively and one-dimensionally heavy if not for the proverbial wink, a jaunty hop-step in the artist’s disposition, augmented by cartoonish props like the Superman suit he wore while crawling for *The Great White Way: 22 Miles, 9 Years, 1 Street* (2001–09), or the potted flower he held during *Tompkins Square Crawl* (1991). Pope.L aims to create discomfort, but the audience is rarely the butt of the joke. Yes, we’re tackling difficult questions, but it doesn’t mean we can’t have fun while doing it. Humor becomes a form of generosity. “Hey,” Pope.L seems to say, “we’re here to make meaning *together*.”

Though performance is the molten core of Pope.L’s practice, he also works in sculpture, writing, video, theater, drawing, and rumor. This varied production does not merely supplement his performance work, like the material output of many other performance-oriented artists. Rather, the objects/entities circulate in some sort of fucked-up baroque Gesamtkunstwerk. Take, for instance, a lesser-known Pope.L work: *distributingmartin* (2000–). It’s a net art piece accessible through a trapdoor of sorts within the *Black Factory Archive* website. Simply constructed web pages linked in a labyrinthine structure detail a head-spinning but straight-faced fabulation about Pope.L’s quest to infect the US population with the DNA of Martin Luther King Jr. In addition, *distributingmartin* entered the texture of New York through a media campaign involving posters, billboards, magazine ads, and mail, as well as gossip that Pope.L spread about his fictitious feat. For years the project lay dormant, until he incorporated it in *Du Bois Machine* (2013). That work is a ten-foot-tall wooden sculpture of a man’s legs, positioned upside down on a stand, with a speaker at the crotch broadcasting the voice of a young girl, who narrates a linearly coherent version of the *distributingmartin* web-story.¹²

There is a recursive, circular relationship between works like these. The gravitational center is Pope.L himself. This is the case not simply in the sense that, like any other artist, Pope.L is the generator of all this activity, but in that his fashioning of Pope.L as an entity is itself an artwork. “I do not picture the hole, I am the hole,” he writes in *Hole Theory*. This hole has the power to generate other holes, material or immaterial, full or empty: “a voodoo of nothingness.”¹³



View of the exhibition “member: Pope.L, 1978–2001,” showing *Sweet Desire a.k.a. Burial Piece*, 1996, inkjet prints and video, at the Museum of Modern Art.

© Pope.L/Courtesy Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York.

Pope.L’s ambivalence toward form, his creation of works that generate multiple versions and embodiments that elude art historical classification, is his way of slipping past barriers that divide art and life. Looking to *Hole Theory* for guidance, we can see Pope.L’s vision of art as a vortex where meanings come loose and anything can happen. *Flint Water Project* (2017), an installation, performance, and intervention staged at What Pipeline gallery in Detroit, is an example of how Pope.L has worked to activate art in the world, and vice versa. Pope.L bottled contaminated water from Flint, Michigan, a majority black city that has suffered for years at the hands of what could generously be called “criminal negligence” and more accurately “environmental racism” or “leaving the poor to die.” He sold the bottles as an edition, the proceeds of which benefited relief efforts. The work directly shifted material conditions by leveraging the economic systems of the art world. *Flint Water Project* accepted the terms of art’s circulation, mobilizing the

spiritual alchemy of the readymade (read: capitalist voodoo) toward an end other than pocketing the cash. The gesture was decidedly different from artworks that “shed light on” a problem or tweets like “reminder that Flint still doesn’t have water.” Instead, it exploited structures that show no signs of crumbling soon. *Détournement*, but make it nasty.

Work like *Flint Water Project* casts a long, melancholic shadow over Pope.L’s performances in the 1970s. Oh, how things have changed in the intervening years. At a press conference in advance of “Instigation, Aspiration, Perspiration,” the trio of major events in New York dedicated to his work this fall (a retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, a new installation at the Whitney Museum, and a new Crawl commissioned by Public Art Fund), Pope.L spoke about the city then and now: “New York City has a cute dress on, but underneath there’s still darkness.”¹⁴ The new Crawl, titled *Conquest*, did not have the electrifying and horrific force of the artist’s early actions. It felt as sanitized as the tony West Village neighborhood that grounded it. An official parade permit buffered the event from the regular goings-on of downtown Manhattan. Pope.L himself did not crawl; instead, he recruited dozens of volunteers to participate in a relay. Groups covered separate, short distances, with attendants cheering them on and providing water bottles at the end of each segment. This relieved participants of the grueling labor that made the Crawls so compelling in the first place. The lightening of the work is certainly not Pope.L’s fault; rather, it’s a function of the times we live in, when chance is minimized and activity highly regulated. Ours is a hypermediatized world of flashmobs and Instagram stunts, where public spectacle is not unusual, and documenting it is even less so. The slippage of this dynamic places Pope.L and his practice at a crucial juncture in the story of this city, of the art world, and of culture at large. How can art carry the disruptive force of a man dragging himself down 42nd Street? How can it speak to us, when the language of “disruption” has been snatched up by corporations and state actors?

Pope.L’s cross-institutional survey reminds us that the question is still on the table, even though it seems harder than ever to answer. Museums operate in a mode of continuous growth that depends on economic inequality for funding, while presenting programs that emphasize dissidence and social justice. Provocatively called “member,” MoMA’s portion of Pope.L-palooza holds its own amid the media storm of the museum’s expansion and rehang (which a friend summed up as “bigger and with more blacks”—not untrue). The exhibition reminds us that

performance is always hard for museums to handle, but “member” captures the energy and irreverence of Pope.L’s work much better than I’d expected. No effort is wasted trying to activate the artist’s archive by restaging his past actions. Instead, the show is matter-of-factly museological, presenting video works alongside photo and video documentation of performances, and bolstering the pictures with costumes, drawings, and props related to the work. These objects not only help furnish a holistic understanding of what the past forty years have been for Pope.L, but they also serve to illustrate the ideas and forms that interest him. The only downside to this approach is that it sometimes feels a bit like an overdetermined scholarly effort to place him, the unplaceable, in a clear art historical niche.



Pope.L: *Choir*, 2019, 1,000-gallon plastic water storage tank, water, drinking fountain, copper pipes, and mixed mediums; at the [Whitney Museum of American Art](#).

© Pope.L/Courtesy Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York. Photos Ron Amstutz.

Shown at the Whitney, *Choir* (2019) is a large installation that finds Pope.L working once again with water. An upside-down fountain (a reference to Jim Crow—era segregation) drips water into a massive white tank, which is hooked to

copper pipes that run through the galleries and up the walls, into the building's engineering and ending, unseen, somewhere on the inaccessible second floor. A microphone pointed at the tank's belly amplifies its rumbling throughout the gallery; burbling and dripping sounds play in the lobby, where dented glasses of water perch on narrow shelves by the admissions desk and the elevator as part of the related installation *Well*. *Choir* builds on Pope.L's engagement with the politics of water, as expressed in *Flint Water Project*. It manages not to wither under the residual heat of the controversy that led board chairman Warren Kandors to resign this past summer. In classic Pope.L fashion, politics—realpolitik and air-quotes-politics alike—are deftly handled. *Choir* stands in for the systemic yet diffuse, sometimes violent machinations that lurk behind the museum's galleries and insulate its walls. It takes a very particular kind of artist to be able to wade into these waters without sinking. Some would say it takes a nihilist, yet Pope.L is anything but.

Though the tradition of the trickster informs Pope.L's work, it would be a mistake to tie him to its lineage too assuredly. The trickster operates as though his speed and wit can liberate him and his people from their oppression. Pope.L is a different kind of figure entirely. He knows things are far more complicated. If anything, Pope.L crystallizes the trickster's problematic. He engages traditions that imbue objects with the energies of a spiritual realm, from capitalism to voodoo. His own objects crackle with the spirit of the trickster. What I mean to say is that Pope.L, after forty years in the game, does not embody the trickster, but rather explores and illustrates what is at stake in such a position. On the trickster hang hopes and fears about institutions, oppression, and survival. Can we navigate dexterously enough to triumph over the powers that be? Or do we resign ourselves to find solace in our ever-narrowing ability to imagine an alternative? Most frightening of all: if the trickster cannot outsmart the oppressor, then what chance do the rest of us have?