

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

William Pope.L on “Acting a Fool” and Alternative Futures

by Samuel Jablon

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William Pope.L, “Trinket” (2008), mixed media, dimensions variable, approx. 38 x 16 ft (all images courtesy Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art 2015 and the artist © Pope.L)

Chicago-based artist [William Pope.L](#) works in a variety of mediums, including painting, spoken word, installation, and performance, to challenge ideas of race and social stereotypes. His practice questions society’s claims on identity and the body. Pope.L has famously crawled all over New York City: for his piece “Tompkins Square Crawl” (1991), he climbed through the gutters of Tompkins Square Park in a suit, and in “The Great White Way,” he crawled the entire 22 miles of Broadway over a period of five years wearing a superman suit with a skateboard slung over his back. He has eaten an issue of the Wall Street Journal while sitting on a toilet in his piece, “Eating the Wall Street Journal” (2000). He copyrighted his personal slogan: “The Friendliest Black Artist in America©.” His paintings and sculptures often use a variety of white foods: mayonnaise, flour, and milk. Pope.L is a master of, in his words, “genre-hopping”; he does not sit still, he’s constantly in motion challenging ideas of who we are, what we are, and what it means to be American.

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Pope.L's work is filled with humor, contradictions, and a certain belief that life is fluid and turns definitions inside out. I emailed with Pope.L to discuss his practice. His most recent exhibition *Trinket* at the Geffen Contemporary at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles explored social democracy, and how artworks perform their status as artworks.

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Installation view of 'William Pope.L: Trinket' at Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art (courtesy the artist © Pope.L)

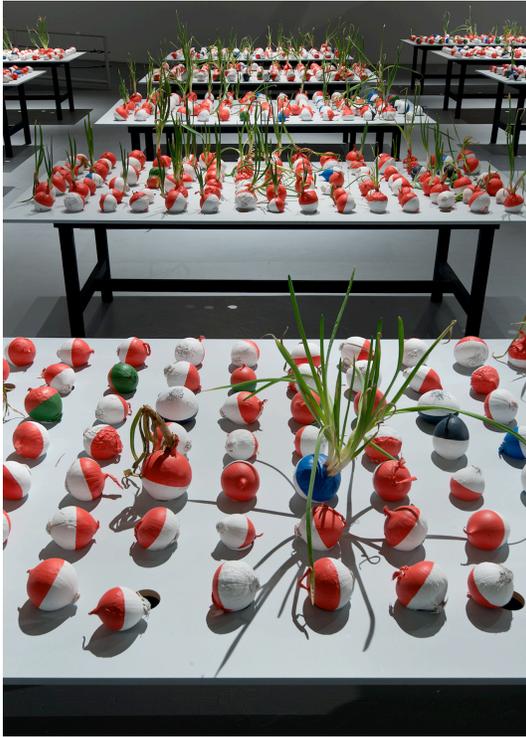
Samuel Jablon: *What I find really interesting about your work is your ability to move between mediums. Could you talk about how you choose which medium is best?*

William Pope.L: I move like a butterfly and sting like a bee. I find genre-hopping more fun perhaps than media-sprinting. The best medium for a project is usually the wrong one.

SJ: *I'm thinking about some of the text you use, specifically "White People Are The Future," and I'm curious about the use of contradiction in your work. To me there is this sense of white privilege that is an obvious statement, and there is also an element of questioning and asking people to examine their individual roles within race, class, and society. How do you see your use of contradiction?*

WP.L: I find my work "White People Are The Future" and the notion of contradiction

used in the same question by you fascinating because everyone knows there's no contradiction. Several hundred years from now Green People historians will look back and view White People as the Neo-Egyptians of our times. Apologies, I was trying to be funny. So much for humor. Ha! Contradiction and affect together again at last! Hmm. Could you re-state the question?



Left: *Installation view of 'William Pope.L: Trinket' at Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art (courtesy the artist © Pope.L)*

SJ: *Sure. I love the concept of “Green People historians.” Maybe it is naive to think that our distant future will be different, but one can hope for something new. The contradictions in your work create this tension and this dual belief structure, as in “White People Are The Future,” which raises the question of what we will accept as our collective future: do we accept the obvious status quo, or do we strive to create a different reality?*

Your work poses questions that challenge the past and present day, and also entertains notions of alternative futures. There is lightness to your work that makes these difficult questions accessible. Could you talk about your use of humor in your practice?

WP.L: Humor is a water-soluble, personal lubricant made social. I like the idea that when people laugh their mouths open and all sorts of things can fall in — bits, ideas, cracks, sites, very tiny police-persons, subversives, dust, hope — an erotics of humor must be cathected to the flesh as well as the waste of the flesh — the castoff flavors that ooze out of our tittering and guffaws and nervous nelly-a-tions — humor can be used as a structure that dis-a-wows while building an architecture of what-the-fuck ...

Contradiction. Don't exist in the real world. What I mean is, in a way, contradiction is too logical, too closed off and neat and packageable-like — similar to opposites, contradiction is frequently understood as figured on binaries. Bargain basement epistemology. But contraries, which I prefer, are more flaky (note: keep the extra 'f' for fucking or flucking or...), so they are more the knot one encounters on the ground where most of us crawl. Acting a fool. To be contrary. To act the fool. To act your act off. To disappear the ass in presencing the act. To put your foot in in in in someone else' ass —

SJ: *The work comes from the fringe, and still engages with the “real world,” and speaks to people. It offers a glimpse of an alternative reality. By putting your foot in someone else's ass, are you attempting to wake them up to possibilities?*

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WP.L: ‘The work comes from the fringe’ you said ... I am not sure what that means anymore. True, I am not Jeff Koons and nor am I Robert Ryman’s son — I’ll leave that to Will and only visit on leap years. Me? Fringe? Sounds sexy. But I have always been at the heart of what is America in being black, so if there is fringing going on, it’s the typical, knotty kind where one can be most central yet so much on the edges —

SJ: *I see your work as very active and forward-looking. What does the future look like to you?*

WP.L: To me, the future looks like tomorrow. You know, like a [Rip Van Winkle](#) kind of thing. I think that was Rip’s problem, the motherfucker misspelled ‘future’ and look what happened to him — it’s also funny that he had to fall asleep in order to experience the future — makes you wonder about the relationship between sleeping and possibility: Is the only possible future that through which I sleep? Is possibility too raw and cracker-like to be experienced any other way? And then there is this thing called ‘hope’ — there is no future without the ability to fantasize, to cast a doubt adrift in the sentiment and melodrama of the politics of time is to believe in futuring —

SJ: *Your work is like an alarm clock going off without a snooze button. Do you believe art has the ability to create enough of a discourse to change the status quo?*



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WP.L: Can art save the world? Well, to be honest, all things being equal, can anything save the world? And even if it could, should it? Should humanity be allowed to continue

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on its merry? Humans are like fish. We struggle in the open air, we wriggle and claw and flex our gills at nothing cause this is what we do when we are frightened of our own freedom, this misery we have created for ourselves is a kind of miracle and a freedom.

SJ: *Everything you do seems to be part of a performance; you're always engaged, always on, always challenging. What role has performance played throughout your career?*

WP.L: My [show](#) at MOCA LA ... brought together a number of works that are hinged together via the idea of artworks that perform their status as artworks — even the paintings in the show 'act out' in this on-the-sleeve, off-the-cuff, presence sort of way — and it's not, I believe, that a work or a person is always on, like say Robin Williams was always on (he's still on even in the dust he's on), it's more like there is no other ontology than the stage, staging and being staged —

SJ: *Your work has been everywhere lately from the [cover of Artforum](#) to your solo at the LA MOCA. What's next for you?*

WP.L: The next thing I want to do is have a sandwich and a coke.

William Pope.L: [Trinket](#) ran March 30—June 28 at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) (152 N Central Ave, Los Angeles).