

ARTNEWS

Careful Whisper: Pope.L Discusses His Documenta Sound Work, Hidden Across Kassel

BY *Nate Freeman* POSTED 06/08/17 1:02 PM



A whisperer during a live-performance component of Pope.L's *Whispering Campaign* (2017). COURTESY THE ARTIST AND MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

On Thursday at noon, Pope.L was sitting at L'Osteria in Kassel, in blue jeans and a Yankees cap, with salt-and-pepper stubble and a professorial air, drinking a coffee. I figured he had chosen this small bistro on the Königsplatz to meet because later in the afternoon the plaza would host the first live performance in Kassel of *Whispering Campaign*, his contribution to Documenta 14.

But perhaps he chose L'Osteria because *Whispering Campaign* was already happening, right there: the men's and women's bathrooms at the bistro are some of the dozens of sites in both Kassel and Athens where the unseen but heard sound installations that make up the work are installed—the hoarse voices emanating out from unseen speakers, speaking in circles about the metropolitan landscape, making the work a ghostly but pervasive presence in these two vastly different cities twinned by an exhibition.

“It’s a really large enterprise, and this go-around it’s even more difficult to encompass,” Pope.L, who shows at Mitchell-Innes & Nash in New York, said while sitting next to me at L'Osteria’s zinc bar with free pistachios. “But I’ve been making works for the past ten years, maybe longer, where my intent is to make something that even *I* can’t encompass myself. So it felt perfectly within that agenda.

Two years ago, Documenta curators Dieter Roelstraete and Monika Szewczyk approached Pope.L about appearing in the next edition of the show. The artist had close ties to both: Roelstraete had worked at the MCA Chicago, where in 2015 Pope.L staged *Cage Unrequited*, a 25-hour non-stop live recitation of John Cage’s *Silence: Lectures in Writing*, and Szewczyk was the visual arts program curator at the Logan Center for the Arts at the University of Chicago, where Pope.L is an assistant professor.



“They usually do an open-ended kind of invitation—‘as high as the sky,’ that sort of thing,” he said. “And as you work together it gets more specific about what your interests might be, what their interest might be.”

He made two trips to the city while planning and arrived days ahead of time to oversee the installation, working closely with the curators on the ground to make sure everything was set, all over town. In the lead-up to the show, he had local designers in Chicago work with his studio to devise a map on newsprint with pins marking the different sites that would be distributed at the quinquennial.

After finding out I didn’t have a copy, he reached into his strap-laden black backpack and handed me one, saying, “One of the problems is that we’re trying to

get it to out to people so they can do their treasure hunting, as it were. And most of the text is in back.”

The text—that is, what’s being read in whispers, emanating from the hidden speakers—is centered around the relationship Kassel has to Athens, but loosely. It’s at times the musings of a flaneur taking in each city through the lens of art-historical time loops, at times a spy narrative, at times a stream-of-consciousness dialogue between the artist and himself back in Chicago, at times the numbers of those dead in war and conflict. They are read in English, German, and Greek. Sometimes the Brothers Grimm—Kassel’s most famous native sons—make an appearance, on one occasion at a dodgy Fünffensterstrasse dive. It goes:

Ferdinand Grimm stumbles out of the narrow but welcoming doorway of the Night Time 24 Hour Bar and Grill and promptly vomits all over my pink pants. I’m stumbling into the doorway from the opposite direction, the opposite direction.

It’s all a way to color the connection between Kassel and Athens, Germany and Greece, the historical link that still tethers them like a bungee.

“It’s the relationship between Germany and Greece for the over this, what—last couple hundred years? Or even older?” Pope.L said. “But what looms largest is the contemporary field between these two countries. Well there’s the EU—which people think Germany emblemizes in some way—and Greece, which seems to be the client of Germany in some way. If this were the States, it’d be the welfare department and then the mother and her kids coming to get her check.

“I’m riffing off of certain historical materials,” he went on. “The Grimms, the idea of telling a story, that’s a big part of this—and I teach the Grimms as part of my academic work.”

Whispering Campaign is a new work, but Pope.L also has older material installed inside Documenta-Halle: drawings from his “Skin Set Project,” which he began in 1997 and is still contributing work to. There are eight in total, with the first three installed together, with the titles printed in bold covering the whole of the loose-leaf paper: *Black People Are the Silence They Cannot Understand* (2001–02), *White People Are the Cliff and What Comes After* (2001–02), and *Black People Are the Wet Grass at Morning* (2001–02). Annotations fill out the work in felt-pen ink. Szewczyk chose the works, culled from a field of hundreds.



Works from Pope.L’s Skin Set Project, on view at Documenta-Halle in Kassel.
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

“Monika was interested with my language and slogans and a language that is very oral—and those drawings are very oral, and of course whispering campaign is very much about this energy, oral energy,” Pope.L said.

They also have a distinct political energy that differs somewhat from the swaths of charged works here in Kassel, in that it is work by an American dealing with American racial identity in a show with few American artists. To that end, Pope.L had one stipulation for the curators who were choosing work from the “Skin Set Project” to display in Documenta. They couldn’t stick to just black or white, but had to expand to other colors he references in the series—*Red People Are My Mother When She Sick and Visiting Me in the Hospital* (2010) and *Yellow People Are the Dog’s Seed* (2010) are also on display in the Halle.

“You can’t just choose all ‘Black People Are’ or just ‘Black People Are’ and ‘White People Are’—what some people have done,” he said. “I say you have to have drawings where you use other color families, I don’t want it to be a literalizing relationship, *especially* in—I say that in the States as well. If someone wants to choose a group of drawings to put in an exhibition you can not literalize it.”

I asked if he had started to say that in the context of a place like Kassel—or in the context of a show like Documenta—that it was especially important not to make this a binary between black and white.



Pope.L, *Whispering Campaign*, 2016–17, in Athens on April 14, 2017.
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

“This practice started in the States prior, so I already made that decision years ago,” he said, “that if some curator wanted to make a group of skin sets and exhibition they had to think that way. But in this context? Even *more* important. I

didn't want to come in here, and—just imagine going into the Halle and all you see is 'Black People Are' and 'White People Are.' It would be *very* odd.”

These are the stakes at play when Pope.L brings his work to Documenta, and that extends to the performance, which the artist described to me in our chat a few hours before it went down. He explained that it would be five people—one on a bike, and the four others wandering around. They have machines, called boosters, that amplify both prerecorded sound and sound coming in from a live mic. They're like the speakers that street preachers use. It's a three-hour performance, with recorded whispers for the first hour, live whispered observations for the second hour, and recorded whispers for the third hour.

“Whispering is very hard on your throat, especially to do it for an hour, and the concentration that I require—” Pope.L said, before cutting himself off, which he did a few times while we spoke. “So what happens is it's only for an hour that they use their voices.”

The performers are directed by Pope.L on how to move during the performance, but they improvise the vocalization while sticking to objectively describing what they see before them in the Königsplatz, with their observations tinted by their understanding of Kassel history, and the context it's placed within.

When I arrived at the performance halfway into the improvised portion, I looked around and couldn't see the performers; I couldn't hear the performers. After keeping my eyes peels wandering the Königsplatz, I spotted a young woman with a small black speaker strapped to her shoulder, and a little mic by her chin, but it wasn't until I was closer that I could hear her intoning in German, raspily, words that were becoming the work's text—Pope.L's text—in real time. After turning away and trying to find her again, I couldn't, as she had blended into the crowd of commuters, not observers, imperceptibly, and the whispering was out of my ear reach. When I found her again, I could see her mouth moving, but no one watching, and no one listening, as if she were talking to herself.

It reminded me of something the artist had mentioned during our talk, about the first reaction some people have when they notice these wandering people whispering.

“People say they're nuts at first,” Pope.L said. “It's almost like that thing today that I think I've been channeling—you know how people have their Bluetooth, and they're talking to themselves, seemingly?”

He paused.

“And you go, oh *no*, they're actually *communicating* with someone,” he said.