

HYPERALLERGIC

The Politics of Adversity in Pope.L's Flint Water Project

Flint Water Project politicizes the readymade, posing the bottles as symbols of gross negligence and misconduct on the part of city and state officials, and the dire consequences.

By Natalie Haddad
October 28, 2017



Installation view of “Flint Water” (2017), What Pipeline, Detroit (all images courtesy the artist and What Pipeline unless noted otherwise. © Pope.L)

DETROIT — Conceived by Pope.L as “an art installation, a performance, and an intervention,” *Flint Water Project* at Detroit’s artist-run gallery What Pipeline expands on the Chicago-based artist’s social practice, using art to raise awareness of the crisis in Flint, Michigan, which resulted in lead poisoning, Legionnaire’s disease, and deaths from Flint’s contaminated water supply, and to raise money for the citizens of Flint.

The crisis began in April of 2014 when Flint, under a state-appointed emergency manager, changed its water supply from Lake Huron to the Flint River to save money. In what began with a ceremonial “[closing of the valve](#)” after 50 years of water routed from Detroit’s treatment plant, and assurances from a representative of the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality that “Individuals shouldn’t notice any difference,” residents began complaining almost immediately about the smell and color of the water. By August 2014, E. coli and total coliform bacteria were detected in the water, and by the start of 2015 elevated lead levels were found.



“Flint Water” (2017), single unsigned bottle

In January 2016, Michigan Governor Rick Snyder and President Obama declared a state of emergency in Genesee County. Every child

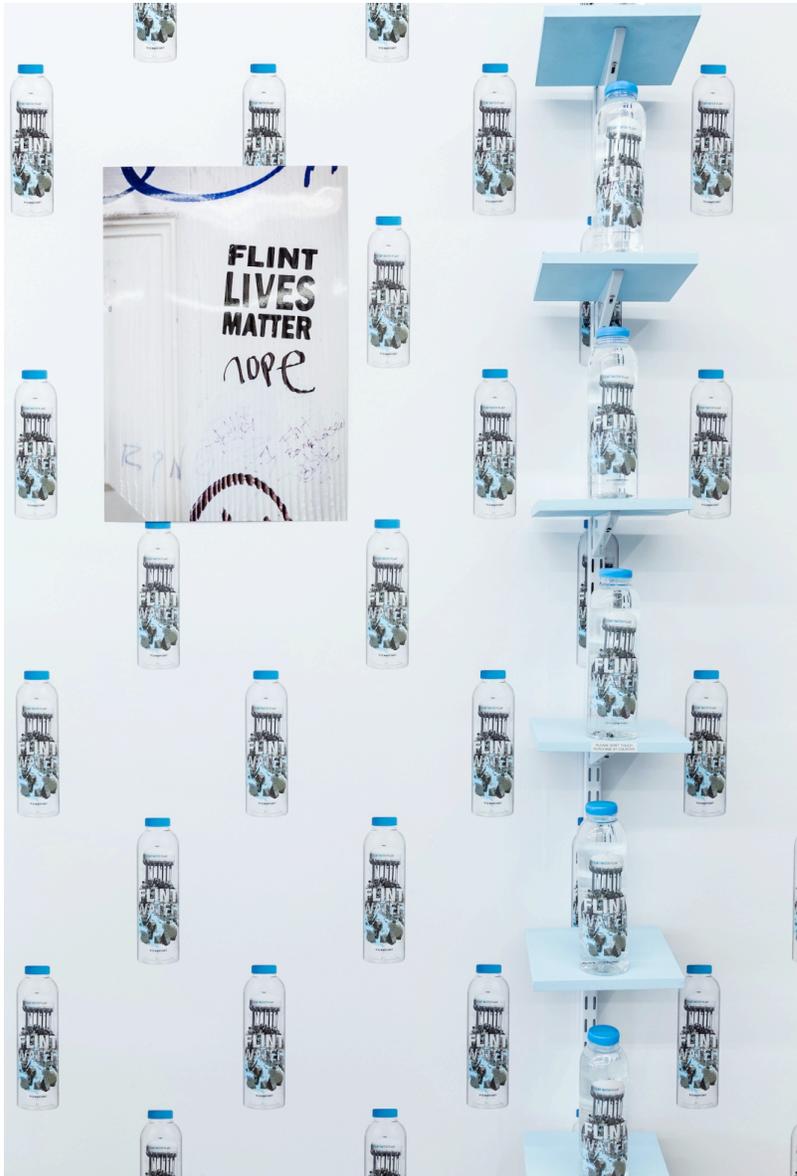
under the age of six in Flint has been exposed to lead poisoning, thousands of residents have sustained long-term, irreversible damage to their health from the water, and the Legionnaire's outbreak led to 12 deaths. Although city officials are now declaring the water safe, Flint residents received the same word three years ago, incorrectly, and many are still wary.

Flint Water Project, supported by the Knight Foundation as part of the Knight Arts Challenge and a [Kickstarter](#) campaign, came about when What Pipeline invited Pope.L to create a project in Detroit. The Kickstarter page states, "When Pope.L was asked by What Pipeline to do a commission for Detroit, he felt that whatever he did it should not re-victimize the city as had been done too often in the past. What if Detroit could be the hero and come to the rescue of another Midwest city in need?"

The project merges conceptual art with social practice, raising money for United Way of Genesee County and the nonprofit organization Hydrate Detroit by selling bottles of contaminated Flint water as an edition of 1,200 (signed and unsigned). The one-room gallery is transformed into a water-bottling facility and storefront: bottles of water sourced from the home of Flint resident Tiantha Williams and bearing "Flint Water (16 fl. oz. non-potable)" labels are displayed on single shelves, with more bottles in stacked cardboard boxes.

The walls, papered with images of the bottles, are lined with unframed photographs by Flint photographer Eric Duto — including corroded pipes, a toddler with a Fiji brand water bottle, an advertisement for water-related lawsuits, and a graffiti-ed "nope" accompanying the slogan "Flint lives matter" — along with water-themed artworks selected by Pope.L from What Pipeline's collection. There is also a copy of a letter from Flint Mayor Karen Weaver informing residents of the status of the city's tap water (noting, at the time of sending, that

unfiltered tap water remained unsafe to drink). Gallery associates filled bottles from a large tank filled with water from Williams's house over the course of the exhibition.



Installation view of "Flint Water" (2017), What Pipeline, Detroit

While Pope.L's practice belongs to a lineage of politically and socially engaged art that evokes the likes of Mierle Laderman Ukeles and Suzanne Lacy, his interventions have a level of ambiguity that raises questions along with awareness. His 2004-2006 project, *The Black Factory*, for instance, invited discussions of race, class, gender

and democracy, while proceeds from its gift shop (stocked with donations from visitors that represented blackness to them) went to local organizations. Similarly, in *Pull!*, from 2013, teams of Cleveland residents pulled a truck through the city to inspire a city-wide conversation about labor.

As Sarah Rose Sharp noted in an [article](#) for Hyperallergic, *Flint Water Project* raises questions about art and commerce by repurposing potentially toxic water as art. It also politicizes the readymade, positing the bottles as symbols of gross negligence and misconduct on the part of city and state officials, and the dire consequences. While the gesture itself is admirable — and the funds raised are urgently needed — the bottles beg the question: Can symbols of adversity double as symbols of agency?

Symbols of privation can create the illusion of a powerless citizenry, something that Flint residents have been combating out of anger and necessity: When the state offered little to no resolution, locals distributed shipments of donated water (some from private corporations), organized protests, and lobbied Snyder's administration and the EPA. While the role of Detroit as a hero to Flint strengthens the alliance between two beleaguered Michigan cities and empowers Detroit, it serves as a reminder that Detroit's growth over the past decade does not extend to Flint and that both cities have too often been cast in the role of victim.



Pope.L auctions a bottle of Flint Water signed by the artist during the opening of “Flint Water,” September 7, 2017 at What Pipeline, Detroit

Both Detroit and Flint have long been targets of national media exploiting the area’s economic and social hardships. In 2009, *Time* magazine ran a cover story entitled “The Tragedy of Detroit” with a bird’s-eye view of dilapidated structures, and in 2013 the same magazine ran a Detroit cover story with the ominous headline “Is Your City Next?” Images of the city’s architectural ruins and abandoned homes are portrayed as emblematic of the city, and national pundits preyed on Detroit’s bankruptcy, brought on by corruption in the office of former Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick. (Several years ago, someone visiting Detroit told me she wanted to see the city “while it’s still around.”) Flint, too, has endured bankruptcy, job loss, violence and a diminishing population, down over the past 50 years from 200,000 to just below 100,000.

These issues have far-flung sociopolitical ramifications, but so too does the perception of adversity; the effects of both are evident in Trump’s victory (by 11,000 votes) in Michigan, traditionally a blue state, and exacerbated by the exploitation of citizens and resources by

officials seeking financial solvency or personal gain. In Flint, with state-appointed officials making decisions that directly impacted residents' health and lives, the general population was granted no initial participation, and, furthermore, no hint that they needed to speak out — or avoid the water supply.

Although Pope.L's involvement and thoughtful approach to *Flint Water Project* are central to its success (with sales of the bottles picking up toward the end of the show's run and continuing through What Pipeline and, potentially, other museums), the artist's collaboration with locals from Flint, Detroit, and surrounding suburbs attests to the fortitude of Michigan citizens to help each other in times of crisis. While Dutro's photographs, Williams's tap water, and the efforts of What Pipeline co-owners Alivia Zivich and Daniel Sperry are prominent examples of such cooperation, less visible factors like Kickstarter contributions from Michigan residents and preliminary assistance from Sandra Jones at Greater Holy Temple Church in Flint have bolstered the project.

Pope.L's attention to the crisis also speaks to a connection between Detroit, Flint, and Chicago, despite differences between the metropolitan areas and vastly different national perceptions of the cities. The populist element of his social practice echoes the history of Flint — birthplace of the UAW and a national symbol of workers' rights — while it defies the moneyed exclusivity of the art world. The price tag on the bottles (\$20 unsigned; \$250 signed) opens their availability beyond wealthy collectors. The tank, which cannot be reused due to possible contamination, is a prime artwork or artifact for a museum collection.



Installation view of “Flint Water” (2017), What Pipeline, Detroit (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

State handling of the water contamination exposes the race and class dimensions of a purportedly politically neutral crisis: 56 percent of Flint’s population is black and over 40 percent is below the poverty level. Flint native Michael Moore has called the crisis a “hate crime based on this race hatred of this particular [Republican] party” and argued that such an issue in a predominantly white city would likely be remedied more promptly. Pope.L’s presence as a black conceptual artist is a stark contrast to those responsible for the crisis, many of whom (including Governor Snyder) are white Republicans; his

examination of race relations and identity throughout the breadth of his practice adds an oblique commentary to the exhibition.

By insinuating questions into the often-didactic field of social practice, the exhibition sheds light on the multiple issues that can arise with crises *and* responses. Ultimately, the attention and aid provided by *Flint Water Project* are its more important accomplishments, but it's time Michigan and the nation wipe out Flint's and Detroit's need for the word "need."

Flint Water Project continues at What Pipeline (3525 W. Vernor Highway, Detroit, Michigan) through today. Flint Water bottles are available through December 31 from What Pipeline. All proceeds go to United Way of Genesee County and Hydrate Detroit.