

Forbes

Intrepid Art Of Pope.L Takes Over New York, Crawling Through The West Village, Spilling And Crashing Into The Whitney And Sprawling Through The MoMA

Sep 18, 2019
By Natasha Gural



Pope.L. "The Great White Way, 22 miles, 9 years, 1 street" (2000-2009). Performance.
©POPE. L. COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS AND MITCHELL-INNES & NASH, NEW YORK.

"The works that really get under your skin, those that really stir you, test you," the invariably innovative multi-disciplinary artist Pope.L told an

intimate audience in a rare public press event this morning. “If it wasn’t happening, you wouldn’t be interested.”

Pope.L: Instigation, Aspiration, Perspiration, an ambitious triumvirate of exhibitions by the Public Art Fund, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and The Museum of Modern Art, erupts Saturday with *Conquest*, his biggest group performance, involving some 140 to 160 people representing the city’s diversity in every manner from race and socioeconomics to range of mobility.

The volunteers will crawl, some redefining the action in wheelchairs or relying on walking aids, in relay on a nearly one-and-a-half mile-long route from the mostly absurdly affluent West Village to the new granite steps of Union Square, the city’s seat of public protest, passing landmarks like the NYC AIDS Memorial Park at St. Vincent's Triangle and the marble triumphal Washington Square Arch.

In the West Village “you have to do a crawl that’s costumed, that’s dressed up. This is a dressed up crawl,” the quick-witted artist said this morning. “We have funding. ... Being that low to the ground you experience all sorts of things, and some are olfactory.”

Attire is paramount to the site-specific crawls. In *The Great White Way: 22 miles, 9 years, 1 street* (2000-2009), L.Pope donned a Superman costume and a tied a skateboard with the DC superhero’s logo on his back so that he could crawl and flip over to ride on the board. The Superman theme is subverted throughout his work, including on the logo for *Conquest*, which replaces the signature capital ‘S’ with a ‘C.’

The unprecedented collaboration between the three institutions presents an idiosyncratic challenge for the Newark, New Jersey-born (1955) visual artist and educator now based in Chicago.

Organizing some 30 group and solo crawls over the last four decades, Pope.L, best known for his theatrical performance art, is shifting away from being an active performer to surrendering his work to the volunteers in an unrehearsed public event that will take over streets for about five hours with the city’s dispensation under a parade permit.

Pope.L has spent most of his career working under the radar, if not underground, not seeking the consent of local authorities. There’s nothing contrived or predictable about the far-reaching artist who speaks candidly and colorfully about his work.

“Pope.L is a master of communications. His works are ephemeral, but of course they live on,” Nicholas Baume, director and chief curator of the nonprofit Public Art Fund, said this morning. “His work has always been slippery, elusive, and hard to pin down, package up, and present in an elite gallery exhibition.”

Following the momentous crawl, the artist will create a new installation at the Whitney entitled *Choir*, amplifying his longtime scrutiny and use of water, and inspired by public drinking fountains, as well as John Cage’s singular music and sound. Organized by Christopher Y. Lew, Nancy and Fred Poses Associate Curator at the Whitney and co-curator of the 2017 Biennial, with curatorial assistant Ambika Trasi, *Choir* will move 800 gallons of water through pipes, tanks, pumps, and electromagnetic valves to produce “a murmuring, singing, crashing circulatory sonic landscape.”

On view from October 10 through the winter of next year, *Choir* will be accompanied by *Well*, a sculptural installation of drinking glasses nearly full of water to be placed in ten locations throughout the museum for viewers to discover. They will be visible but not within reach. Using “lack” of resources as a material, L.Pope exposes the basic human need for water and the crisis that follows when it’s inaccessible.

“As all this water is moving about, you will hear these voices that emerge and submerge,” Lew said this morning. “You are chasing these ghostly voices.”

Choir is “completely immersive,” said Lew. Its intention is to “ask questions of the viewer. It’s also talking about music, field songs, experimental noise, also the idea of performance as a closed system that is performing for the viewers.”

“Pope.L sees (*Well*) as a passive corollary to the more active choir,” Lew added.

Pope.L won the Bucksbaum Award for his contribution to the 2017 Biennial.

The MoMA presentation will focus on thirteen early landmark performances from 1978 through 2001 that helped define Pope.L's career and exemplify the artist's primary interests. The exhibition will explore performances through a combination of archival videos, photographs, ephemera, sculptural elements, and live actions.

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

An exhibition of groundbreaking performances and related videos, objects, and installations, *member: Pope.L, 1978–2001* will be on view at MoMa from October 21, through January 2020.

“The idea of being on the ground exists in a world beyond the crawls. Reading and wiring are critical for understanding this work,” Comer said this morning. “We’re dovetailing these different practices of his work with active engagement with writing and reading.”

Pope.L’s extensive experimental theater practice will be highlighted at MoMA with a wide-range of provocative works including *Egg Eating Contest* (1990), *Aunt Jenny Chronicles* (1991), and *Eracism* (2000), along with daring street interventions such as *Thunderbird Immolation a.k.a. Meditation Square Piece* (1978), *Times Square Crawl a.k.a. Meditation Square Piece* (1978), *Tompkins Square Crawl a.k.a. How Much Is That Nigger in the Window* (1991), *ATM Piece* (1996), and *The Great White Way: 22 miles, 9 years, 1 street*.



Pope.L "How Much is that Nigger in the Window a.k.a. Tompkins Square Crawl. New York, NY" (1991). Digital c-print on gold fiber silk paper. 10 by 15 in.

©POPE. L. COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS AND MITCHELL-INNES & NASH, NEW YORK.

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

Pope.L's early works chronicle a rapidly evolving New York City throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

"By the 1970s, New York was having a tough time fiscally," he said. "My idea is that people aren't prices of" (excrement).

Organized by Comer with Danielle A. Jackson, MoMA's Curatorial Assistant, Department of Media and Performance, the exhibition will include an extensive catalogue that carefully examine Pope.L's career, to purposefully document each work and explore the artist's ongoing legacy.

"All these works have this puzzle in them," Pope.L said this morning. "*Chorus* is spatial and sonic puzzle."

As child, Pope.L said he "hated going to church, but I learned something there. Gospel is a loud clamor. ... The central part of (gospel and blues) is it's hard to put your finger on this essence. How do you reach God? (Damned) if I know."

"Coming from theater, it matters what people think," acknowledged the artist who has long operated on the periphery of the art world. "It's important that you create things they want to engage with. When I was in art school 'entertainment' was a bad word, but Laurie Anderson said 'no'. I do care what people think. I like that energy and I like that collaboration. I don't know how the reactions will be."

Anticipating myriad responses to *Instigation, Aspiration, Perspiration*, he said: "It's odd to see these things all in one place. It's a lot of pressure. It was my decision. Failure is good. We will see how it goes. A member is only a part of something. The show is not only about what's there, but what's not there."

The museums thanked Mitchell-Innes & Nash, a New York gallery representing modern masters along with contemporary emerging and established artists, for contributing to the exhibitions.

Unaffiliated with *Instigation, Aspiration, Perspiration, Embodiment*, a group exhibition of works by Pope.L, Jonathan Lyndon Chase, Cheyenne Julien, and Tschabalala Self, will be on view at Mitchell-Innes & Nash until October 26.