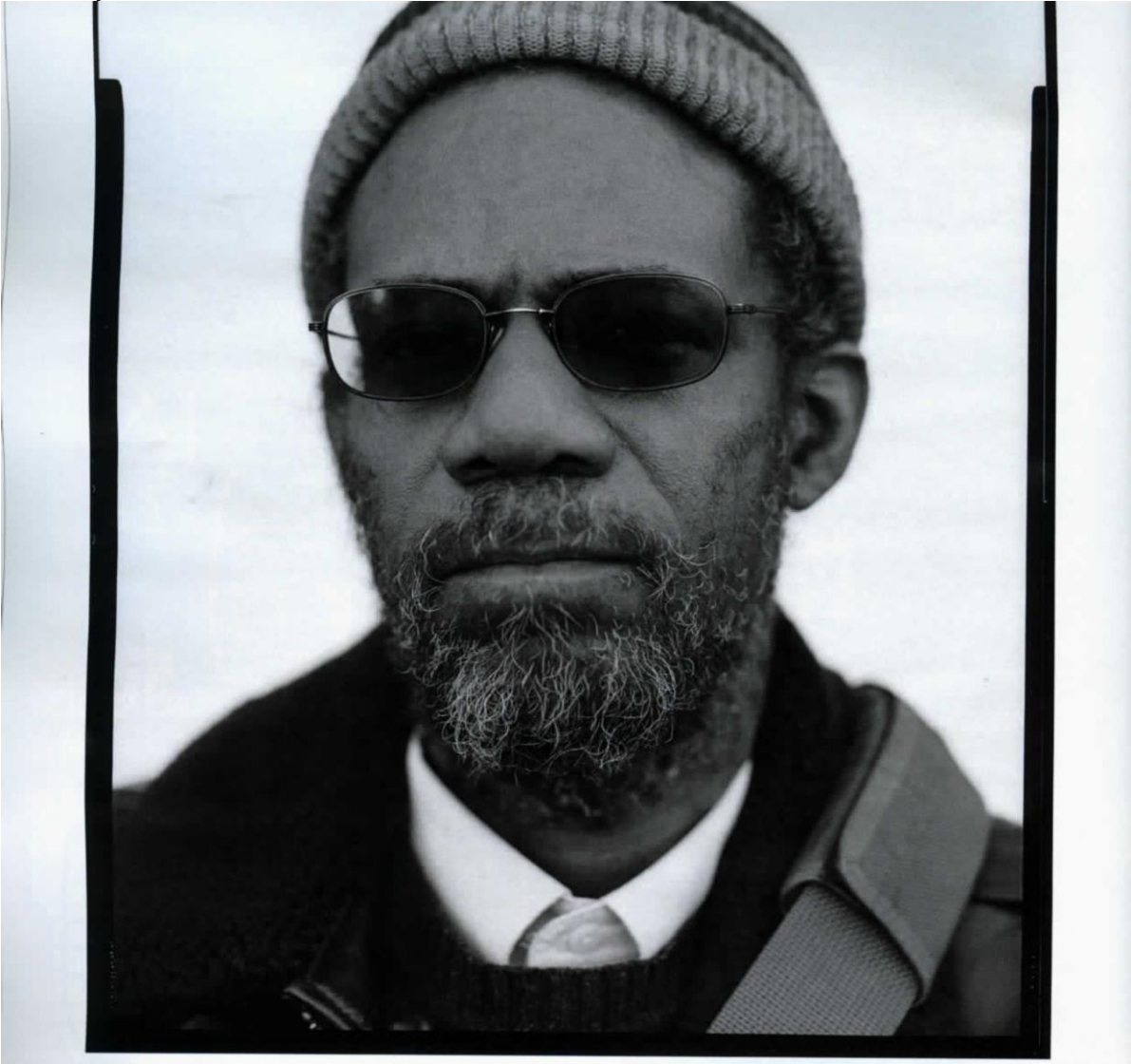


Interview

February 2013



William POPE.L

By ROSS SIMONINI
Portrait GRANT DELIN

SOMEWHERE BETWEEN
FORMALISM AND THE
CONCRETE STRUGGLES OF
RACE AND IDENTITY, ARTIST
WILLIAM POPE.L MAKES
WORKS THAT LITERALLY
PULL PEOPLE TOGETHER

WILLIAM POPE.L IN CHICAGO, NOVEMBER 2012.
ALL CLOTHING AND ACCESSORIES: POPE.L'S OWN.

Beginning in the late '90s, William Pope.L famously crawled along 22 miles of sidewalk, from the beginning to the end of Broadway—Manhattan's longest street—wearing a capeless Superman outfit with a skateboard strapped to his back. In varying fits and starts, the performance, titled *The Great White Way, 22 Miles, 9 Years, 1 Street*, took nine years to complete, with each installment lasting as long as Pope.L could endure the knee and elbow pain (often about six blocks). It is among 30-plus "crawl" pieces that he has performed over more than three decades of work as an artist.

Pictures of the denigrated superhero dragging himself through the business district are among the clearest and most iconic images in Pope.L's oeuvre, but for him, the documentation isn't as essential as the actual experience of exhaustion and self-imposed labor that comes along with performing the work. For this reason, the 57-year-old Pope.L often invites participants to collaborate with him, organizing large group crawls and interactive installations. This June, with the help of local citizens working alternately in teams, he plans to pull, by hand, an eight-ton truck 45 miles through the streets of Cleveland for 72 consecutive hours. It's a follow-up to his 2011 post-Hurricane Katrina New Orleans piece, *Blink*, in which volunteers pulled a truck, lit up with projected photographs of the city, from 6 P.M. until 6 A.M. Such performances live in the space between the work of a community organizer and that of a shaman, mobilizing people and attempting to address societal concerns through an abstraction

of grand themes such as labor and identity politics.

Other classic Pope.L performances have included 2000's *Eating the Wall Street Journal*, which he did on a toilet, to allow the paper to pass through him, transformed; and his copyrighting of his personal slogan: "The Friendliest Black Artist in America©." He also makes photographs, sculptures, writings, and paintings, often using a variety of white-food-based materials: mayonnaise, flour, milk. His book *Black People Are Cropped: Skin Set Drawings 1997-2011* was recently published by JPR Ringier and chronicles his ongoing drawing series—a project with a poetic, absurd perspective on human skin color. The book contains his bright scrawlings of pseudo-stereotypes—such as *Red People Are Boner Cosmic* and *Green People Are Shitty*—and a philosophical essay-poem on sociology.

This spring, Pope.L will have an exhibition he describes as "an ambloquy, a discourse on ambiguity," at the Renaissance Society in Chicago, his current home. In December, I spoke to him via e-mail, at his request, and later, on the phone.

ROSS SIMONINI: Is your work a form of activism?

WILLIAM POPE.L: When people use the word *activism* today, it sounds like *after-ism*—something you do after, reactionary; or *back-sterism*—something you do backwards. The space I create in my work for others is more formalist, like, "change the world," or, "change the frame on that painting."

SIMONINI: Do you want to change the world?

POPE.L: I think that corporations and states have actually co-opted that phrase. I guess that phrase would be connected more to the '60s. And I think, initially when I was using it, maybe 20 to 25 years ago, that co-optation wasn't as clear or formidable as it is now. You have to respond to your times. But I think that phrase is connected to the idea of art transforming anything or the idea that radicality in small things is a revolution or the concept of being able to make a life less onerous by offering opportunities to that life.

SIMONINI: Is this what you mean when you say you want your work to be "socially responsible"?

POPE.L: Obama charms when he speaks of social responsibility, but in the art world today, it's not sexy. A sexier phrase might be "social networking." What is the difference between social responsibility and social networking? Well, the former requires that you show up, and the latter requires that you might have to buy an app for showing up.

SIMONINI: How did your thinking about *The Great White Way* change over the years it took to complete?

POPE.L: One of the problems with time-based endurance performances like my crawl works is they have this marvelous creamy nougat center operating inside the performer, and this space is unfortunately not available in the images and mythologies that surround the work. So, typically, the surface of the work becomes the life of the work. Most folks only get the neatness of the feat. How many miles? How much pain? How many people said or did not say this or that? I am not interested in that.

SIMONINI: Did you enjoy crawling through the streets? Do you enjoy making the work in general? Or is it not about enjoyment?

POPE.L: No, I did not enjoy crawling. Overall, I enjoy making work with others. I enjoy the small moments of revelation that are only possible in the company of others. I enjoy making a clear puzzle. I realize more and more that making is unmaking. To make something is to undo it. To make something is to make it less mysterious, that is, in the process of removing a veil, one of many. You gain more intimacy, but it may not be very pleasant.

SIMONINI: Why did the crawl pieces expand from solo crawls to group efforts [such as the crawl to the Abyssinian Meeting House in Portland, Maine, on October 5, 2002]?

POPE.L: From its very earliest beginnings, the crawl

project was conceived as a group performance. Unfortunately for me, at that time, I was the only volunteer. Sharing the pain, as it were, allowing the experience of public prostration in motion to be public in a larger way, across more than one body, created a stronger argument for the work as a means, not just an anomaly. The work's initial strangeness as a solo activity made it more attractive to the art world because it took on a more object-like character, more personal and maverick. But for me, it was always just another convention. And gloriously so. What is more conventional than crawling?

SIMONINI: When you mobilize a group of people, as you will be in your upcoming *Pull!* performance, are you trying to transform them?

to have a project that was also going to be very practical, because what we're doing is in response to a lot of the talk about employment problems in the city and the quality of the jobs. So we're going to actually pay people to pull.

SIMONINI: You're making jobs.

POPE.L: The pulls have been based on volunteerism. But what I found, for example, in New Orleans, where we did the first pull after Katrina and the oil spill, was that people who would like to be involved in a project like this cannot, because they're looking for work. Or because they think in some way it's anti-work. You know, it's art.

SIMONINI: Right.

POPE.L: It's also, I think, a very material, formal issue in terms of, What do you do with the capital that you



"I KNOW IN ART THERE ARE THESE TENDENCIES TO WANT TO DISAPPEAR THE AUTHOR. BUT YOU ARE THE DRIVER OF THIS THING."

LEFT: WILLIAM POPE.L'S TOMPKINS SQUARE CRAWL (A.K.A. HOW MUCH IS THAT NIGGER IN THE WINDOW), NEW YORK CITY, 1991. PHOTO: JAMES PRUZNICK. ABOVE (FROM LEFT): POPE.L'S *BLACK PEOPLE ARE CROPPED*, 2008; *WHITE PEOPLE ARE THE INTERIOR*, 2004; *BROWN PEOPLE ARE ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS*, 2008. FROM HIS *SKIN SET DRAWINGS* SERIES, 1997-2011. IMAGES COURTESY OF WILLIAM POPE.L.

POPE.L: Do I think you can change people by enlisting them in pulling a truck by hand 45 miles, when it would be so much easier to drive it? No, no, no. And sure, I create the opportunity, but people do the changing themselves. So is it change that's going on here? Or something that was always there but was just looking for a place to light?

SIMONINI: Why pull a truck?

POPE.L: Well, it's a 1987 GMC step van. It's similar to the kind of all-purpose vehicle that's still in use by, for example, UPS. It's sort of a workhorse, and I think it's symbolic of a certain backboned industrial use. And what we're going to do with it is we're going to basically treat the surface of the truck with writings. We're doing all kinds of research about employment within the states of Illinois and Ohio, and we're gonna actually post job opportunities for people.

SIMONINI: How would you describe the situation in Cleveland these days?

POPE.L: I think they're fighting against an image problem, countering the self-image of "The Mistake on the Lake," as they talk about it. There's a sense of malaise in the city. I think Cleveland is about a kind of constant sense of having to pull yourself up by your bootstraps. That, of course, is the sense among many American cities. But I didn't want to only have a bootstrap project; I wanted

have? Do you use it to create some kind of visual, formal interpolation that has its own *raison d'être*? For example, let's say, bringing people into a project who maybe could not otherwise participate. So I see that as a formal choice. I know it has social implications as well, but I also see it as a way of shaping the visual life of the work. Because that means if you spend that money to get people involved in the work, then you can't spend it on—I'm not going to say decorative, per se, but the visual effects that you're going to achieve are going to be in proportion to that choice.

SIMONINI: Would you say that a viewer has only truly experienced one of your works if she's participated in it?

POPE.L: That's an interesting question. Some people, for example, are interested maybe in what it looks like: How many people participated? Did people like it? Did people not like it? But I believe in questions like, "How did the work interact with the community? What were some of the discussions that came up in terms of the creation of a work? Were some of the choices you made based on feedback you received from the community regarding what kind of work they wanted?" It's not that the work is gonna be a slave to the community, but some works are much more porous to community opinion than others.

SIMONINI: Do you (CONTINUED ON PAGE 130)

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(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 45) think about this community-based work as being within any kind of lineage?

POPE.L: Perhaps with what some of the Constructivists in the '20s were thinking about, in terms of a desire to create works that have to do with the fabric of what people do every day—specifically, labor. It also connects with Fluxus. George Maciunas [Fluxus artist] was very clear that art had to do with labor. That's why he was involved in real estate activism. [Maciunas transformed several ramshackle loft buildings in SoHo into live-work Fluxhouse Cooperatives in the late '60s.]

SIMONINI: Do you feel like any of this work is autobiographical, or do you think it's not important that you be viewed as its author?

POPE.L: I know in art there are these tendencies to want to disappear the author, but you are the driver of this thing. It's just like a small corner store: To say that I am not important to the work in terms of being the one who wakes up and opens the store in the morning and closes it in the evening—I mean, that would be silly and, actually, inaccurate to disappear myself. What is important is to try to bring as many of the participants as you can—and actors and performers, if you will—into the work to put pressure on your own participation, so that one day, perhaps, I will not be as operative in it. But in most cases, practically speaking, that's not currently possible in most of the models I know. I mean, even if, theoretically, you want to totally disappear yourself, I think the problem would be: Can you?

SIMONINI: How were you introduced to performance art?

POPE.L: My earliest performances were in undergraduate school. They came out of making a set of works called communication devices. I was attending Montclair State College [in New Jersey], but back then, I believed that the work had to have an answer, had to possess an answer, had to have it in its grasp, like a real object. And I thought all I had to do was make enough of these things, these performances, and I'd find the answer. Of course, I was wrong.