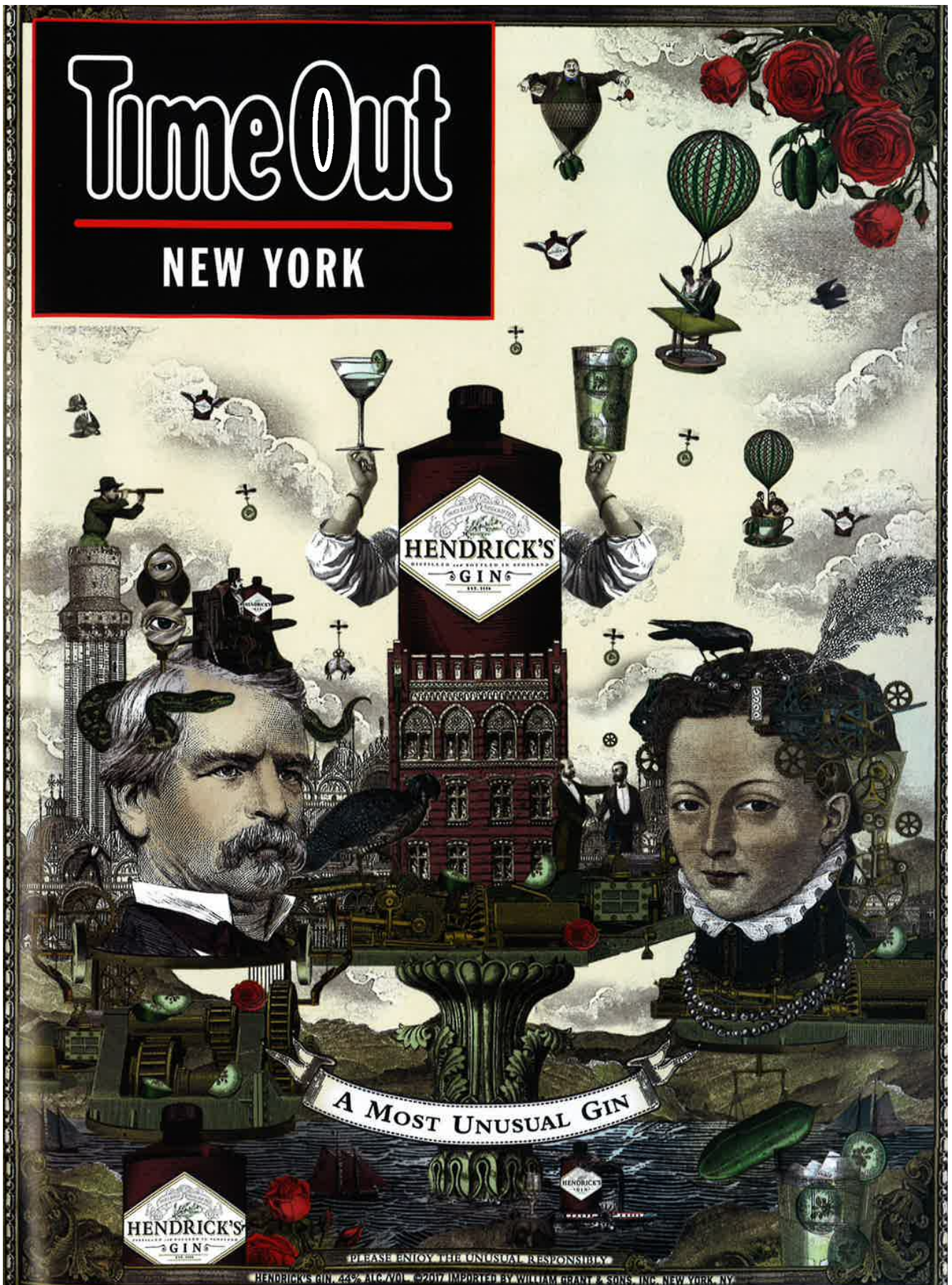


MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

# Time Out

NEW YORK



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**BEST KNOWN FOR** absurdist public performances, William Pope.L has a history of dealing with the politics of race and identity—which the African-American artist doesn't limit to black versus white: His installation at the 2017 Whitney Biennial, for instance, consists of a four-sided structure covered with rows of rotting bologna slices meant to represent the percentage of Jews in New York City. With a solo show opening in midtown, Pope.L talks about his fascination with the relationship between words and pictures, his fondness for quirky materials and the importance of truth in his art.

**Writing seems as key to your work as making art. Is one more important than the other?**

Not really. The idea of being a writer making visual things intrigues me, but what I'm really interested in is the relationship between language and image, and how language can become an image.

**As someone making political art, how do you answer those who say that art can't effect political change?**

I say if that were true, then volunteering at homeless shelters wouldn't matter, but anybody who works in one would tell you that it does. So



Crawling to Richard Pryor's House

if that sort of participation matters, then I think arts participation matters too.

**Why is race so important to your work?**

Because race is important to Americans. It's the way we order the world. It tells us who's in and who's out, who is suspect and who is not. We wouldn't be who we are if we were not so twisted up about it.

**On a different note, you use bologna to count the number of Jews in New York for your piece at the Biennial. In the wall label, you admit your numbers are off. Why—and why use Jews?**

Like race, demographics are a way to order reality. If you can count people, then you can know "who" they are. But that's a flawed assumption: How is it possible to know if you're being accurate or that you're even counting the right people? The shortcomings in my system are meant to expose those of similar practices used

to quantify certain populations. So I'm not necessarily pointing at Jewishness, though I will say that the relationship between Jews and blacks is very complex.

**Throughout your efforts there has been a certain questioning of truth, a topic that's on a lot of people's minds these days. Do you think the times have finally caught up with your work?**

That's a pretty funny thing to ask, but no, it hasn't. The irony is that for most of my life I was taught to lie. My family was often on welfare, and my mother would say, "When the welfare people come over, you have to act good." We had to act like we were a solid family. It's nothing against my mom. I understand she lied as a survival tactic, but at the same time it was pernicious and infected your whole being. It's important to me as a grown-up not to do what I was raised to do.

→ "Pope.L: Proto-Skin Set" is at Mitchell-Innes & Nash through June 30.

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