

ARTNEWS

'Someone's Got to Suffer': Pope.L's Group Crawl Takes Over Manhattan

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A performer with Pope.L's *Conquest*.
SCOTT LYNCH FOR ARTNEWS

The crawlers knew where to go by following the sound of a trumpet.

It was bright and early in New York at Corporal John A. Seravalli Playground when a group was congregating to kick off *Conquest*, artist Pope.L's performance in which participants would drag themselves across a predetermined path. Organized by the Public Art Fund, this was a new work in a lineage of past "crawl" pieces by Pope.L, who was on hand on Saturday to tell the crowd that he hoped to cause a stir.

"I just want to introduce some controversy," he said to the group ahead of the performance. "This is not my crawl. Yeah, I know it's what it says on the sign. But today, I'm giving it away. I want to share the pain."

The artist began doing endurance-minded “crawl” pieces during the late 1970s. Other iterations have seen the artist wearing a business suit, carrying a potted flower, and creeping through a gutter in New York’s Tompkins Square Park (for *Tompkins Square Crawl* in 1991) and moving across a 22-mile stretch of Broadway on his hands and knees with a skateboard strapped to his back, all while wearing a Superman suit (for *The Great White Way, 22 Miles, 9 Years, 1 Street*, dated 2001–09). All of the crawl pieces explore notions of vulnerability, struggle, and privilege.

In a time when each of these themes have become buzzwords amid larger debates about identity, Pope.L’s work has become a source of fascination, and New York’s institutions are recognizing him accordingly. Having won the Whitney Museum’s \$100,000 Bucksbaum Award during the 2017 edition of its Biennial, Pope.L will be the subject of a solo show at the museum opening next month. Also in October is the opening of a survey of his work at the Museum of Modern Art.



Pope.L’s *Conquest* (2019).
SCOTT LYNCH FOR ARTNEWS

For *Conquest*, the 64 year-old artist let others do the work for him. Some 140 volunteers came out to take their turn crawling along a 1.5-mile-long route through Chelsea and Greenwich Village, culminating in Union Square. Each crawler was given a blindfold to wear and a flashlight to carry; elbow pads and knee pads were optional. But, having been given these items for free, Pope.L got to take something from them—one shoe per performer had to be temporarily forfeited in order to participate.

Participants had to apply to be part of the performance, and they were selected to reflect the racial and age demographics of New York City. One thing they all had in common: enthusiasm for taking part in the project.

In the audience was Adam Weinberg, director of the Whitney; dealer Lucy Mitchell-Innes, who represents Pope.L; and artist Anicka Yi. There were also 140 performers present—one of which was a writer from *ARTnews*.

On Saturday morning, I began to feel a sense of apprehension about what I was about to do, which turned out to be a common sensation. “I was practicing the best way to crawl last night,” one fellow crawler told me. “I decided the best way is to be on your elbows and on your knees.”

One child participating had clearly done his research, as he brought along a skateboard that he used to push himself along in the style of *The Great White Way*. He even had a lightning bolt shaved into the side of his head, which may have been a nod to Pope.L’s costume in the artist’s prior crawl.

Conquest was split into segments that were roughly a block or two long, and in each part there were five crawlers. In my team, which crawled through Chelsea along Gansevoort Street, was artist Coco Fusco, who seemed particularly excited to bring her own story of the crawl to her performance art students at the University of Florida in Gainesville.

“I want my students to understand in a more lived way what creating visual metaphors means and what working in public space is like and testing your physical limits,” she explained. “I also wanted to send a message that I do care about my other colleague’s work!”

During our crawl, which lasted about 10 to 15 minutes, Fusco led the team. I trailed behind, overly aware of both potholes in the sidewalk and my own lack of upper body strength. Ahead of Fusco were two workers with the Public Art Fund, one of whom was sweeping the street in front of us, the other occasionally spritzing the air with the scent of tobacco. This scent was meant to pay homage to land that was once home to tobacco farms, which housed the slaves and slaveowners who developed the land into Manhattan during the 17th and 18th centuries. (Part of Pope.L’s point, it seemed, was to bring attention to the struggle that led to the current form of the city we live in.) For a brief moment, the sickly sweet tobacco scent would mask the stink of the already-pungent New York streets. “Spritz coming in!” the perfumer would announce before a spray.

Once the crawl was complete, there was an undeniable feeling of triumph, and spectators applauded as though they were at a sports event. Fusco took off her blindfold and smiled a big toothy grin, doling out high fives to the rest of us.



Pope.L gets doused by his own “Flint Water.”
ANNIE ARMSTRONG/ARTNEWS

Pope.L himself walked alongside the crawlers for the duration of the performance, offering support and chatting with viewers a relaxed smile. Though he did assert that he was happy to pass over the struggle of the crawl to others, he lamented another concern with the piece that some have voiced to him—that *Conquest* is insensitive to those who are homeless or unable to walk on two legs.

“Over the years, I had developed a fundraising component, but this one doesn’t have it because of its size,” he told *ARTnews* of a past way of dealing with the points about homelessness. “I think there’s a legitimate critique there.”

The crawl came to a close at Union Square to uproarious applause from an impressively large crowd. A stage was set up by Public Art Fund, and crawlers along with Pope.L basked in the satisfaction of having completed the work—but not for long.

“All right, I guess someone’s got to suffer, so that’s your cue,” Pope.L said to the crawlers, who were handed water bottles labeled “Flint Water,” in reference to the Michigan city where citizens, many of them black, only have access to drinking water contaminated with lead. (Many have alleged that the local government has not done enough to remedy the issue, and Pope.L has made work about the water crisis in response.)

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

After all was done, some of the performers doused Pope.L in water. After shaking himself dry, he said, "OK, now go home!"