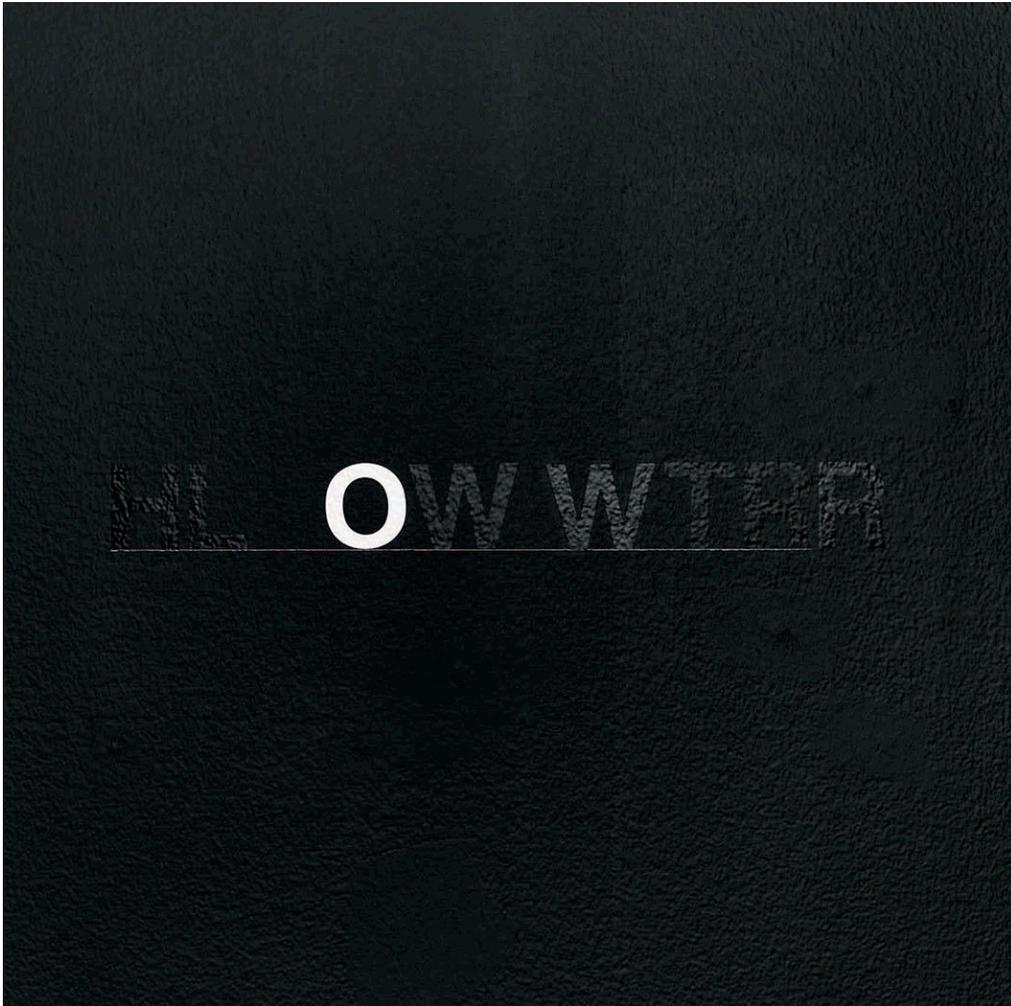


MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

# ARTFORUM

## POPE.L WALKS INTO A ROOM

SIMONE WHITE ON THE ART OF POPE.L



Pope.L, *Choir* (detail), 2019. Photo: Ron Amstutz. © Pope.L.

POPE.L WALKS INTO A ROOM. Hair looks good. Everybody knows Pope.L's hair be looking dry and wild but maybe Pope.L's supposed to be unkempt. Pope.L walks right up to me, has something to say important, not conversational, not in a conversational tone he starts talking in an urgent manner. I do take note of people's appearances, most everybody's in the way when they come up to me to say something, I don't pretend not to look. Pope.L starts talking to me like we're familiar so I figured I forgot and knew Pope.L from before but I never forget a face even though since I gave birth I

can't remember shit I can't recall words like I used to. I like to characterize my thinking as orderly if baroque recklessly minute in its particularity so being unable to recall words feels like psychosis but is just aging. I asked my mother about it and she said you should get some sleep. Pope.L starts talking about how the room isn't right. And I'm thinking, what do you want me to do about it? But then I realize he's tryna be conceptually helpful like artists are helpful and nice to you sometimes when you have a good idea but it's poor poorly conceived in terms of materials and they start building you a new setup verbally or as if conversationally they could make your concept more adequate. It is like watching someone reach into your organs. (I don't know what this would look like but I have some imaginary stock from a c-section and my dad eviscerated in an ER; the dark hilarity of those traumas in residue.) One time Jace with the Nosferatu fingers of one hand casually manipulated a track I had cued up on my laptop, exposing or imposing his information on the things, the track and the software, too dumb for him, he appeared to crush the machine as he barely contacted, barely saw or only saw with his fingers, its interface; he revealed the sense in which my blundering was beneath him. I have always found the revelation of my ignorance to be a tremendous relief, coming into maturity or full womanhood and to terms with my lack of ego with respect to my slowness or neurological difference and somatic delight in the genius of others. But I'm what you call noncompetitive. Jerry used to say "you are a profoundly dialectical negro" but he was mistaken. I think I have actions of contemplation that oscillate about that which is unspeakable. My mind is prostrate with respect to discursive positions. Pope.L's bemused stage-whispering. Pope.L's dirty water given to running, given in general to who would drink dirty water.\* Pope.L's hair was laid/I couldn't stop wondering wtf happened to him. He was talking about the "layered amphitheater of performance" or that is my language but it was coming out of Pope.L so I accepted it as that which is or was delivered of study

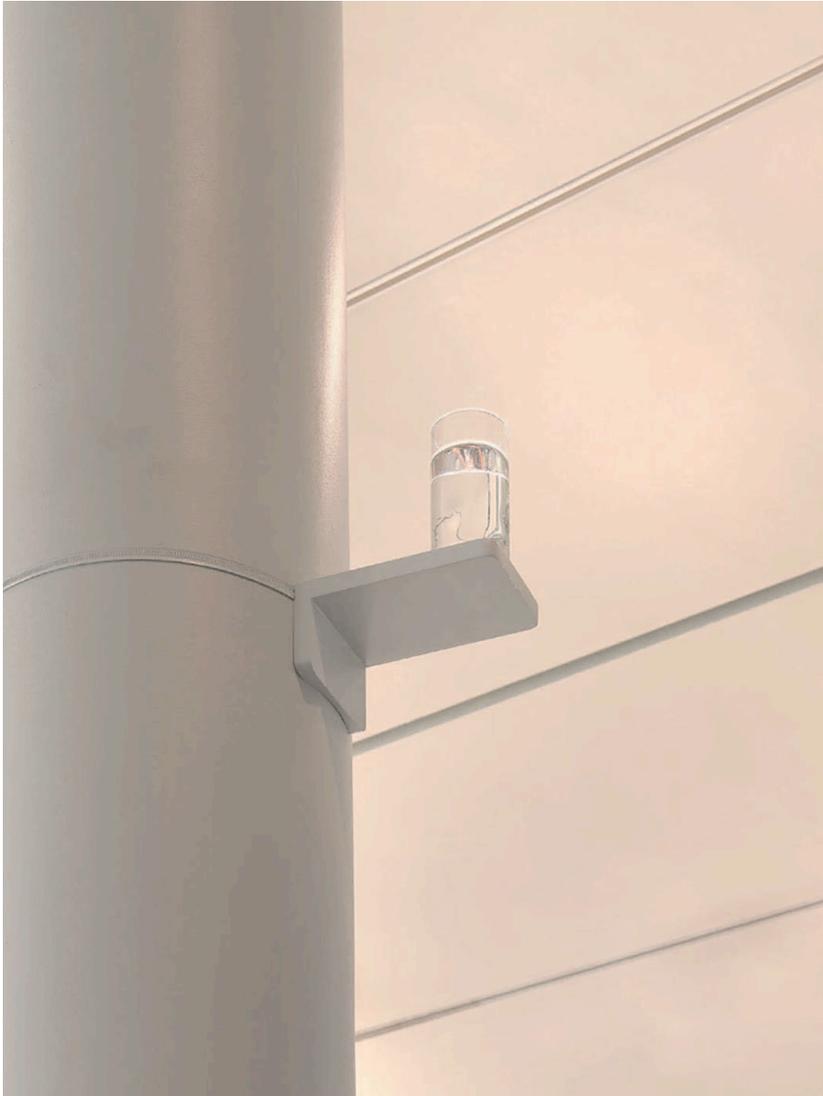
Pope.L was close up and in my face  
Kind of berating me over a balcony rail  
in an amphitheater

Lol

Ghostlike, Pope.L comes toward folks on this tier of the balcony; it is inexplicable but nobody except me is freaked out, everybody else is "audience," which you wouldn't think meant dead to the world but apparently it does because this motherfucker has hereby floated and people are in no way upset. Maybe I'm upset by his tone or the pretense of exchange/dialogue without taking into account any of my prerogatives. I'm like, damn, I AM AN ARTIST.

Lol. Pope.L is certainly a better artist than me, just saying.

Often, actually, exchanging an article such as of clothing. My stinky denim shirt. My scuffed boots for yours, brother. Your potted daisy makes me howl with inappropriate laughter. I love flowers so much, yet I'm a terrifically bad gardener. Kofi texts from Mississippi about the cotton gin and I resist saying anything to him about the Beasley because he seems too bothered by seeing the machine out in the field to entertain that kind of thing. Pope.L's choir fucked me up, though. Pope.L kills frequently.



Pope.L, *Well*, 2019, wood, glass, water. Installation view, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Photo: Ron Amstutz. © Pope.L.

The question of can I or can't I take part in the performance, really involve myself in it as the space of the amphitheater has tripled, emphasizing Pope.L's exercise of control over the problem of perspective by staying up in my face. We are off to the side of the actual stage where people are looking but I'm beginning to suspect um

“You need to commit more dramatically to the source of the conflict.” I feel I’m being patronized.

WHICH FUCKING CONFLICT

“I have to pick up Isaac. What I have to say right now is that I love being a woman. I have loved coming to be her although it is not at all glamorous.”

I should like to alt-title Pope.L’s *Choir*, 2019, *NGGR WATER*. \*

Stuck in black vinyl letters on a near-black wall of the gallery at the Whitney Museum of American Art, which purports to contain the work, these words articulate a problem of phraseology presented by *Choir* itself and by Pope.L’s wider practice. The alt-title, *NGGR WATER*—which homophonically represents the phrase “nigger water” but is neither that nor the sculpture it becomes, in and through *Choir*, of black vinyl and blue painter’s tape and wall—could release energy that arrests the onlooker with the heavy wet blanket of an epithet (effects of cessation or ending). But the phrase also excites at a profound linguistic level, plopping into what the poet Lyn Hejinian described in her 1983 lecture “The Rejection of Closure” as the *aporia* between words and meaning that constitutes the generative center of an “open” poetics (effects of creation or becoming).

Alt: titles

- How Much is That Nigger In the Window?
- How Much is That Nigger IN the window?
- How Much is that Nigger In the window?
- The four Winters
- A bunch 1978-2001

Title page detail from the exhibition catalogue *member: Pope.L, 1978-2001* (MoMA, 2019). © Pope.L.

I have argued that when poetry appears in the museum, we witness the aftermath of a battle already lost. It is within the power of the neoliberal art world to intuit and attack the “ever-regenerating plenitude of language’s resources . . . [the infinite combinations of words]” (Hejinian again) as an authentic source of the new new that it cynically—which is to say, unremarkably—pursues as objects (or, worse, as performance, but I haven’t

gotten to that yet). Poetic vitality is threatened by the museum's capacity to cast words, to reorganize and slow them as objects.

**To short-circuit sensually in response to *Choir* is not a black penalty but a beautiful possibility embedded in the conceptual universe of Pope.L's work.**

Say the poem *NGGR WATER* appears in the museum as the installation *Choir*. Applying the thin-skull rule, let the onlooker be black. (As Yvonne Rainer asks in her delightfully skeptical catalogue essay "Some Questions and Observations for Pope.L": "Does my race matter to you?") So that the aporia in question is a question: What stands between *nigger* and *water*, in terms of sign, sound, and sense?



Pope.L, *Flint Water 6 Pack*, 2017, plastic bottles, water from Flint, MI, cardboard box, 9 1/2 x 12 x 8 1/2". © Pope.L.

Answer: A thousand-gallon plastic tank stands between them, in a gutted gallery space, its ceiling panels removed to expose the Whitney's infrastructure—transplanted by Pope.L to serve the installation's demands for nigger water and sound. I cannot say whether the amplified sound of water filling and then being pumped out of the vessel at regular intervals (that's the action of the piece—the tank is filled by an upside-down public-school-type water fountain suspended from the ceiling, then emptied via a little pump and copper pipes) takes up more or less space than the massive tank. The sound and the object vie for dominance, as do multichannel recordings of the roar of the water and muffled historical black song, taken

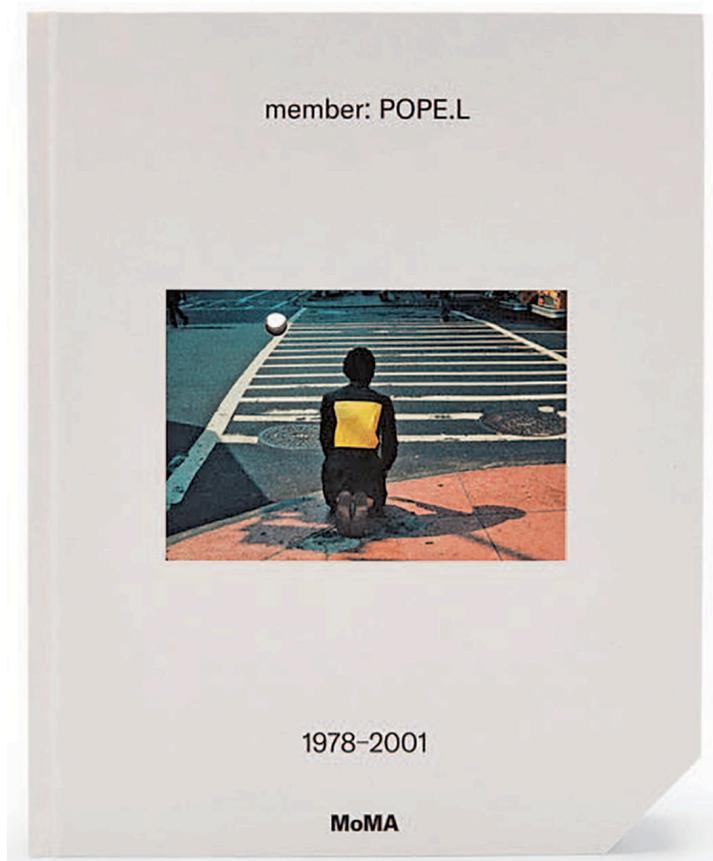
from both traditional and Hollywood archives. Being black, with the ability to hear and see, I was corporeally overwhelmed, insofar as I understood *Choir* to require a response at the level of knowing myself hailed by *NGGR WATER!*—a kind of nonsense take on the Fanonian *dirty nigger!* that’s always hovering close. I am subject N AN ANECHOIC CHAMBER / CONSTANTLY YELLING, as Pope.L’s text declares. Yet *Choir* materializes the intuition that knowledge of what the black subject cannot be is some pseudomolecular shit one can flush swiftly down the drain. Perhaps I should just listen to something else. Or, *nigger, your plastic tank is both empty and full!* All this comes to mind before dealing with Pope.L’s ongoing engagement with the toxicity of the water supply of Flint, Michigan (as well as that of his home city, Newark, New Jersey), or with John Cage, cited as an inspiration—before I talk about the side joke of all the half-full glasses of water displayed on teeny platforms in choice corners of the museum.

To short-circuit sensually in response to *Choir* is not a black penalty but a beautiful possibility embedded in the conceptual universe of Pope.L’s work. Let’s return to and *read* the wall text quoted above, a characteristic riddle. (I take “riddle,” pragmatically, from the official lexicon of the exhibition. Elsewhere, on paintings, he has written: PURPLE PEOPLE BUST A NUT IN THE GRAVY AND WE LEARN SOMETHING; BLACK PEOPLE ARE WHITE PEOPLE ON FIRE; I DON’T PICTURE THE HOLE. [I INHABIT IT.]



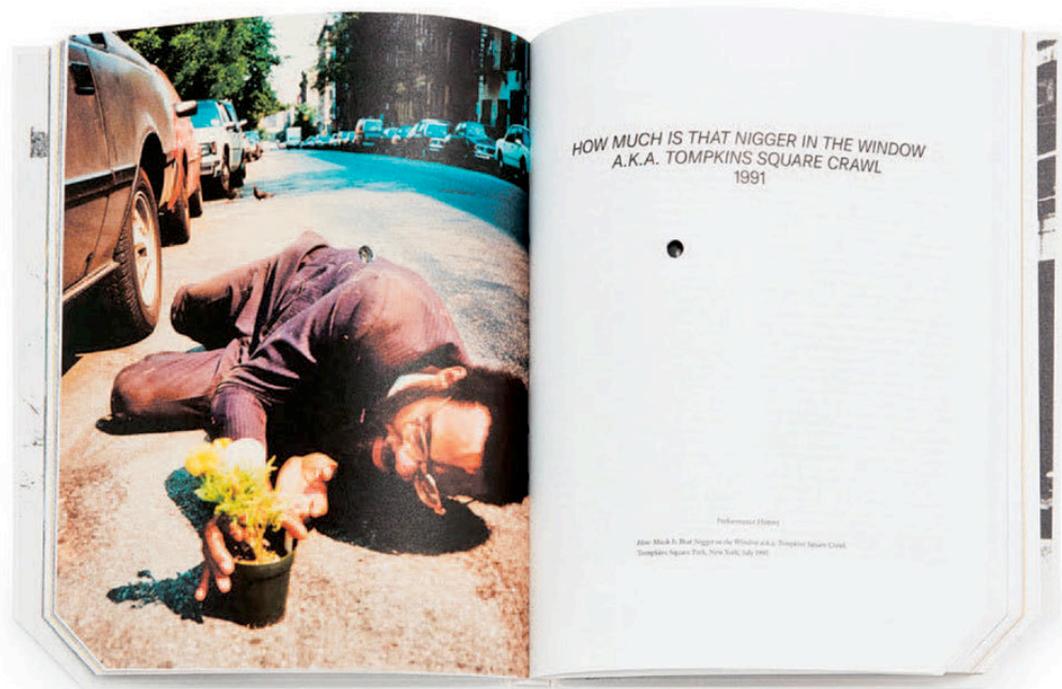
Pope.L., *Purple People Bust a Nut in the Gravy and We Learn Something*, 2012, mixed media on paper, 12 x 9". From the series "Skin Set," 1998-. © Pope.L.

*In an anechoic chamber constantly yelling imagine a person constantly falling cause it haunt to be yours and cannot be. Interior of silent box/hole reveals an assault, the sound of exception, both originary and eternal: The person held within is overcome, becomes unable to stay upright (crawls, lies down) as a result of apprehending the impossibility of having haunt/hurt/want in relation to belonging to another (yelling as the sound-presence of repulsive force). Discovers from this vantage the hoax of presumptive catastrophe.*



Cover from the exhibition catalogue *member: Pope.L, 1978–2001* (MoMA, 2019). © Pope.L.

\*\* The game of alt-titling is not mine but Pope.L's, initiated by his alt-title, scrawled inside the Museum of Modern Art's catalogue, for *member: POPE.L, 1978–2001—HOW MUCH IS THAT NIGGER IN THE WINDOW?*—his catchall for the series of 1991 performances that included his (now famous) *Tompkins Square Crawl*.



Spread from the exhibition catalogue *member: Pope.L, 1978–2001* (MoMA, 2019). © Pope.L.

The catalogue has a hole punched through it. It is most certainly a machine-made hole because the book is section-sewn, hardcover, substantial—about an inch thick. The bottom-right corner is also lopped off. Both of these design gestures are remainder marks. I am aware that I am being instructed by the catalogue in its mimicry of a thing that has been sent to the realm of the noncommercial. Sent and humiliated, really, by virtue of its having failed to sell. I am being instructed to consider the limits of our business—of Pope.L and whoever would regard Pope.L in performance.

You can't buy this except you did.

You can't have this but you do.

Lack is not a thing, it is a concept; and even as a concept it becomes spectral when you hit it with the light of possession.

You can't do this because you won't.



Pope.L, *ATM Piece*, 1997, video, color, sound, 1 minute 54 seconds. Installation view, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2019. Photo: Martin Seck. © Pope.L.

Pope.L's performances' being available for purchase—MoMA bought photographs, ephemera, and other evidence from thirteen performances, and now holds the rights to perform two—is what there is to consider. On the one hand, the museum provides access (at least for the duration of the show) to work it would otherwise be impossible to experience.

Performance = you have to be there. In the video documentation of *ATM Piece*, 1997: Pope.L, dressed in a mini-kilt made of dollar bills, gingerly wraps a sausage-link chain (sight gags! puns!) around the door handle of a Chase bank just steps away from the Park Avenue Viaduct, until a police officer arrives and stops the whole proceeding. One minute and fifty-four seconds.



Pope.L, *Training Crawl (for The Great White Way: 22 miles, 5 years, 1 street)*, 2001, ink-jet print, 10 x 15". © Pope.L.

If you weren't there, or the cash-flesh-chain symbology isn't personally lubricating ("Humor is a water-soluble, personal lubricant made social," the artist said in a 2015 interview with *Hyperallergic*), the video brings out another, powerful dimension of the work insofar as one is able, retrospectively, to grasp the *specific* temporal fragility of Pope.L's street performances—the artist's time-based time—before the museum wanted to buy them. Positioned in an audience decades away from the performance, one imagines oneself in the outermost ring of the previous and more intimate rings of onlookers who surrounded Pope.L, his naked back to the glass door of the bank: *Let me do my work. Get it in before the cops come.* This is why photographs of Pope.L grimacing, sweating in the road, and resting his head on the sidewalk while performing *The Great White Way: 22 miles, 9 years, 1 street, 2001–2009*—looking a fool, too, in that Superman getup—are not *merely* archivally significant. The MoMA show highlights Pope.L's performance work with and as the problem of sustaining an irruptive insight that exists as a volatile compound of absurdity, combat, and romance within something like community or sociality. I take such forms of togetherness to exist mostly in opposition to . . . bizarre materiality, let's call it. Nigger-in-the-title materiality—Richard Pryor's "Supernigger," Julius Eastman's "Crazy Nigger," Pope.L's "How

Much Is That Nigger in the Window?”—testifies to the presence of such epistemological irruptions into the world, and to the forces of eradication they continuously attract to themselves as what brings forth the irruption.



Pope.L, *ATM Piece*, 1997, pair of Timberland leather boots, approx. 12 x 8 x 12". © Pope.L.

On the other hand, Timberlands turning to dust in a vitrine, the boots worn by the artist on the respective occasions of *ATM Piece* and *Tompkins Square Crawl*—Timberlands are not just shoes. They are the recognized hustling shoe of the urban BAM (Black American Male), good for all weather and all hustles.

**There is a terrible racial loneliness proposed by the solo performances of Pope.L, which speaks to me of the absolute banishment of black people from certain realms of sociosexual belonging.**

There is a terrible racial loneliness proposed by the solo performances of Pope.L, which speaks to me of the absolute banishment of black people from certain realms of sociosexual belonging. Which isn't to say that black people are outside or can be banished from gender, sex, or love. Hortense Spillers laid the groundwork for a syncretic black feminism when she claimed that the "black American male embodies the *only* community of males which has had the specific occasion to learn *who* the female is within itself." Pope.L's strapless pink tulle gown in *The Aunt Jenny Chronicles*, 1991 ("to me Aunt Jenny was sommmmm-thing, foreign, inhuman, grotesque. . . . Her sexuality scared me she was so alive. So alive, so ancient so . . ."), and his various prosthetic dicks that signify on the dickless, whether cis-female, trans man, or anybody harboring delusions about the black man's penis, suggest that a reconstructed black sexuality might begin to situate itself within the adaptive power to project or throw one's actual experience of sex and gender onto precisely the most alienating frame. I mean to imagine a possibility nonidentical with drag, with this possible difference taken up in the representation of black love—that is, the material intimacies of black people, familial and otherwise—as entangled with the fear of being bewitched or consumed entirely by the simultaneously hypersexual and brutalized bodies of one another. I am happy, therefore, to imagine myself, in my womanhood, to be embraced by Pope.L's soloness as a threatening collaborator. A love who is black.

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