

## The Architect's Newspaper

### William Pope.L, a prolific artist known for his public interventions in New York, dies at 68

By Daniel Roche • December 27, 2023



Pope.L performing *The Great White Way* circa 1991 (MINNYC123/Wikimedia Commons/CC BY 4.0 DEED)

Legendary artist Pope.L, née William Pope.L, died in Chicago on December 23 at the age of 68. His passing was confirmed by ARTnews. Separate heartfelt announcements were made on social media by the Julia Stoschek Foundation; and artists Theaster Gates, Kevin Beasley, John Corbett, and Dieter Roelstraete.

Known for his elaborate performance pieces and public interventions, Pope.L was born in 1955 in Newark, where his family had immigrated from Alabama. In a recent interview, Pope.L credited his grandmother for encouraging him to become an artist despite growing up in poverty.

In 1973, William Pope.L enrolled at Pratt Institute where he was introduced to a variety of media—drama, performing arts, photography, painting—he would later incorporate into his work. Pope.L completed his BFA at Montclair State University in 1978. He went on to receive an MFA in visual arts from Rutgers University.

While producing visual and performance art, Pope.L was a lecturer at Bates College in Maine where he helped produce stage performances. In 2010, he was appointed as a faculty member at the University of Chicago.

The late artist's oeuvre is understood as social commentary on issues related to homelessness, class, and race. In February 2015, Pope.L's self-portrait, *Foraging (Asphyxia Version)*, was on the cover of *Art Forum* where the artist placed a plastic bag over his head—a critique of police brutality in the wake of Eric Garner's death.

Some of his most known pieces include *eRacism*, a series of over 40 endurance-based performance pieces where Pope.L would crawl on his hands and knees, often in a business suit or sports jersey. In one of the most well known

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works, *The Great White Way*, Pope.L crawled 22 miles up Broadway from Lower Manhattan to his mother's house in the Bronx wearing a Superman costume. Pope.L notes that his performance work in Tompkins Square Park was meant to inspire conversations about homelessness, a piece that was inspired by his own brother, aunt, and father "living on the street" he said.



Tompkins Square Crawl by Pope.L circa 1991 (Pope.L/Wikimedia Commons/CC BY 4.0 DEED)

In a 1996 interview with *BOMB Magazine*, Pope.L said he wanted his crawling to be a medium for thinking more seriously about poverty in New York City. "We'd gotten used to people begging, and I was wondering, how can I renew this conflict?" Pope.L said. "I don't want to get used to seeing this. I wanted people to have this reminder."

Pope.L held prestigious accolades, including a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2004 and a Creative Capital Visual Arts Award. His work has been on display at the Whitney Biennial in 2002 and 2017. In 2019, MoMA held a retrospective looking back upon Pope.L called *member: Pope.L, 1978-2001*.

In 2019, Pope.L's piece *Conquest* debuted which revisited his iconic crawl series on the streets of New York City, hosted by Public Art Fund. Pope.L hired 140 volunteers to crawl 1.5 miles through New York for the project.

Pope.L gave one of his last interviews with Louisiana Channel in May 2023. The artist was asked what it means to make art in the U.S. "It's to enter the difficult questions of our time," he said, "and to enter these problematics and commit yourself to that difficulty."