

# Pope.L

The trickster-artist offered crucial lessons as to what was and was not real.

by Christopher Y. Lew



On the 8th floor of the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Tom and Diane Tuft Trustee Room – a minimalist wood-paneled chamber in a Renzo Piano–designed building – offers a stunning view north, toward the Hudson River, the High Line, and the Standard Hotel. It was here, one October evening in 2017, that I watched as Pope.L received the Bucksbaum Award for his contribution to the 2017 Whitney Biennial, an exhibition I curated with Mia Locks. For each Whitney Biennial since 2000, one featured artist has received this award for their potential to make a lasting impact on American art, and it's safe to say

Pope.L has done just that. Adam Weinberg, then director of the museum, spoke about Pope.L's uncompromising dedication to his art and his important critique of society before presenting him the award, a thick slab of acrylic engraved POPE.L THE BUCKSBAUM AWARD 2017. Dressed in a baseball cap and black Carhartt work jacket, Pope.L gamely accepted it and posed for pictures, leaning back with his right arm up as if pitching a curve ball into the crowd.

I remember sidling up to Pope.L in between folks wishing him congratulations to ask him how he felt about having received the award, which also comes with a check for \$100,000. Without hesitation he told me “this was not real” – am I falsely remembering him pointing a finger in the air and gesturing to the hubbub around him in the starchitect room situated in the gentrifying Meatpacking District? – but, he said, his child is real.

I don't know if he intended this to be a lesson, but I've held on to those words as if they were. That lesson came at the right time, though he wouldn't have known it, as my daughter would come into the world the following year. Quickly, I understood how the world can reorient itself to center around one's child. Certainly, this was one of many things I learned from Pope.L.

I also took his words as a warning. What isn't real is the hype, spectacle, and attention that the art world can bestow on an artist. For Pope.L, the recognition was certainly deserved. He created incredible, urgent work for decades – when people were paying attention, and when they weren't. I gleaned from his lesson the importance of accepting the fleeting nature of recognition, which comes and goes in a fickle way. To get caught up in it is a kind of fantasy. It is not *real*.

Pope.L was real, though. Alongside the wit, absurdity, and irreverence that imbued his practice, there was the rigor, and a grounding that enabled him to get things done. Without all that, how else could he – in 2019 and with a skeletal studio staff – create three simultaneous exhibitions at MoMA, the Whitney, and the Public Art Fund? The title of the triple-venue show says it all: “Instigation, Aspiration, Perspiration.” I organized his Whitney installation, and that project alone, with its monumental scale, synchronized elements, unknown unknowns, and plumbing (!) would have overwhelmed most artists. Featuring an inverted drinking fountain that harkened to segregation-era America while gushing nearly 1,000 gallons of water into a large holding tank as sounds from field recordings and other sources filled the darkened room, the installation, *Choir*, was an enigmatic “experiment” with outcomes that Pope.L himself couldn't anticipate. When the sound of the rushing water was not as powerful as he'd hoped, Pope.L asked his audio engineer, Matthew Sage, to record and overdub more water sounds. Rather than insist that the sound be as he imagined it, he began to improvise, stringing circular weights from the ceiling, adding blue tape to the walls and water tank, and leaving the debris – sheetrock dust, screws, and wood scraps – lying on the floor. He said with a sly smile, “people will be looking for these things” as he turned the gallery into a kind of theater set to play with, all the while seemingly misdirecting viewers with clues in the dark. ●