

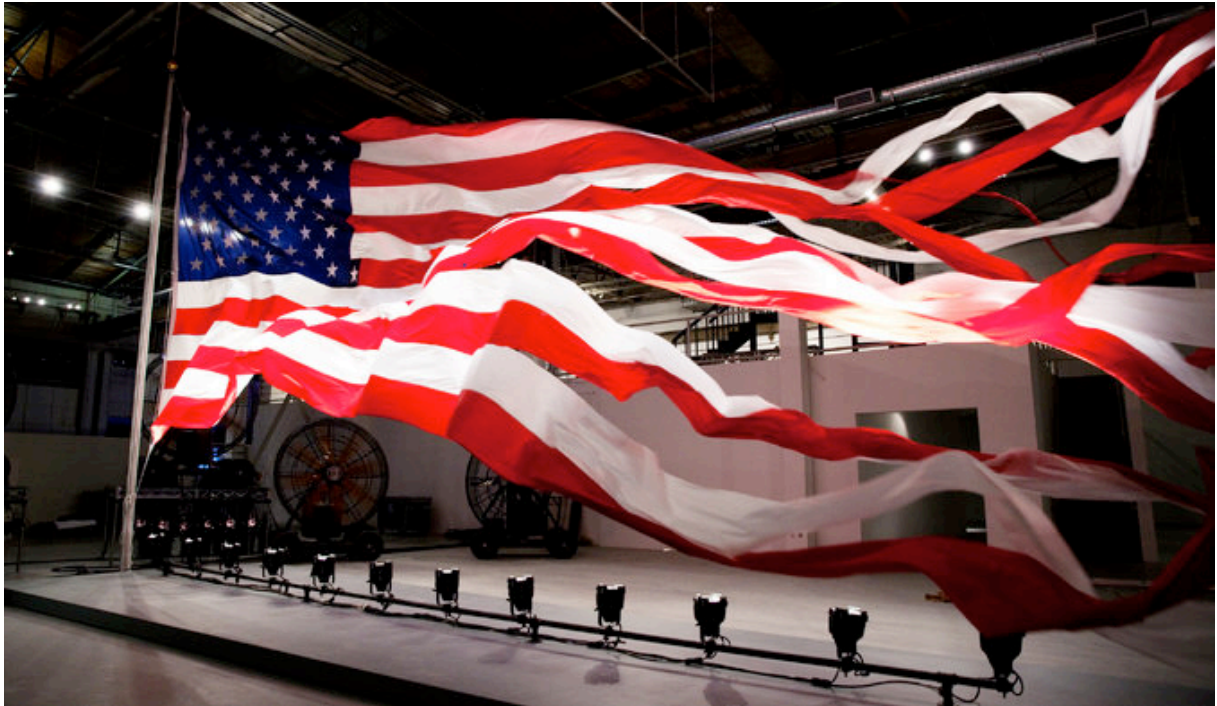
# The New York Times

ART & DESIGN

## William Pope.L Makes Statements From the Fringes

By Jori Finkel

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William Pope.L's "Trinket." Credit Emily Berl for The New York Times

LOS ANGELES — It was a plaintive sight: a monumental American flag drooping so low on its pole that it would touch the ground were it not for a wood platform. The artist William Pope.L was tending to the flag carefully. He lifted the tail end, where the stripes were separated at the seams, and spread them apart, the way you might separate a girl's long hair before braiding it.

“This is just to make sure it catches properly and doesn't tangle,” he said. An assistant switched on four large Ritter fans, the kind used by movie studios to whip up 40-mile-an-hour winds.

Soon the flag was flying high, a wild, hydra-like form. Only it was not flying in the open air but inside the belly of the Geffen Contemporary, a branch of the Museum of Contemporary Art here, where Mr. Pope.L was readying his largest museum show to date.

The effect was startling: The fabric of American democracy was disintegrating.

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“That is one possible fate of America. And some people believe we are already there,” said Mr. Pope.L, 59, who had flown in from his home in Chicago for the day to join a small installation crew and still looked like he was dressed for a Midwestern winter, wearing a black windbreaker and a gray knit cap.



William Pope.L at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. Credit Emily Berl for The New York Times

“I think there are cracks in the seams of what we are. There is a post-Vietnam malaise as the aspirations of the ’60s fell short in many ways,” he added. “The ideals of our country have been tarnished by imperialistic moves.”

The man with the perplexing last name has a rich history of provocative art installations and performances that shatter clichés about race, class and gender, going back to one in 1991 at the Franklin Furnace in New York, called “How Much Is That Nigger in the Window.” Among other things, he stripped down to his underwear and smeared himself with mayonnaise — a gloopy sort of whiteface.

His new show of nine recent works at the Geffen, which opens on Friday and runs through June 28, is called “Trinket,” as is the flag itself — a title that seems to trivialize grand notions of patriotism.

“I was thinking of those little pins, lapel pins,” he said, “these cheap, shiny things like wampum. They seem to one side of the trade worthless and to the other side, priceless.”

But he added that ridicule was not his intention. “If anyone thinks I’m besmirching or making fun of the flag, I would say that I don’t share their idea of patriotism,” he said. “If

I am being critical, and the flag is as strong and resilient as they say it is, it should be able to stand up to this. This doesn't mean I don't love my country. I'm asking questions of it.”

Still, there has been blowback. The Seattle fabricator hired to make the nylon flag refused to add a requested 51st star; the museum hired a seamstress to do it, reflecting Mr. Pope.L's sense that the nation's current borders are too rigid.

More approachable and less confrontational in conversation than his art might predict — he uses a lighthearted “toodleloo” for “see you later” — Mr. Pope.L said he would not be upset if people interpreted the torn flag, which originated in 2008 in a smaller form in Kansas City, Mo., as a response to accusations of racial profiling and police brutality in recent months.



William Pope.L crawling up Broadway in 2001. Credit Lydia Grey Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, NY.

The show's curator, Bennett Simpson, however, cautioned against a single political reading: “It's a screen people will project on. But it's wrong to say his work is antiwar just because it was first made during the Iraq war, or that the flag is about racial injustice now. You just can't reduce it to any one thing.”

Mr. Pope.L's wide-ranging oeuvre — which includes drawing and painting as well as video, text and performance — is also hard to classify. Some see it as a form of political activism, while others connect him to a ritual-rich, antiauthoritarian brand of postwar European conceptualism, from the shamanistic guises and “actions” of Joseph Beuys to the living, decaying sculptures of Dieter Roth. The art historian Kristine Stiles has

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proposed that Mr. Pope.L's performances "belong to the mental, social and political theater of the absurd."

The artist is a fan of Samuel Beckett, whose novels influenced a new work for the Geffen called "Migrant." For this piece, blindfolded performers will at set times crawl toward one another along scaffolding near the flag. They will grope, like so many Beckett characters, in the darkness.

Mr. Pope.L is famous for his own "crawls," physically punishing street performances dating to the 1970s in New York. To feel and express some of the vulnerability that homeless men and women experience, he relinquished his own verticality in an aggressively vertical city. The crawls were "immensely important," said Adrienne Edwards, a curator for the Performa arts organization, who considers the artist "wickedly sophisticated in the way he involves or implicates us in his encounters."

"Pope.L is not just there to entertain you but to teach," she said. "He creates this open space by twisting and turning things, making things illegible, so that you will join him."

During one crawl through Tompkins Square in 1991, he wore a business suit while arduously dragging his body along the ground, using his elbows and knees. For other crawls up Broadway, in a nine-year project called "The Great White Way," he wore a Superman costume. He has since organized group crawls with volunteers in different cities to call attention to "the tons of homeless people on our streets."

A native of Newark, Mr. Pope.L started the crawls during his 20s while studying art in graduate school at Rutgers — a time when his brother, aunt and two uncles were living on the streets. His brother had recently been released from prison. "There's this cycle where people are institutionalized and then released without the family being notified," he said.

Raised in New Jersey and New York City, he described his childhood as "unstable," with an alcoholic mother and an absent father. But he also remembers moments of camaraderie, including the verbal play that his mother, uncles and aunts enjoyed in the kitchen. One would make up or read a line from a Gwendolyn Brooks or Langston Hughes poem, and others would take turns adding to it.

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"It was amazing to see how they would ad lib, one after another," said Mr. Pope.L, who has written poetry and fiction as well. "It was always fun when the ball dropped, but it was also fun to see how long they kept it in the air."

His mother was also creative with names, forging the surname Pope.L by combining their father's last name, Pope, with an "L" for Lancaster, her maiden name, using a self-conscious period in place of a hyphen. And his grandmother, who once had her quilts in a



show at the Studio Museum in Harlem, taught him how to make do with very little: “Have-not-ness permeates everything I do,” he once said.



A detail of an installation at the Los Angeles exhibition that includes hundreds of painted onions. Emily Berl for The New York Times

After earning his master’s degree in art at Rutgers in 1981, he turned to experimental theater. In 1990, he began teaching at Bates College in Maine. The first play he directed was Lorraine Hansberry’s “A Raisin in the Sun,” casting both white and black actors as members of the Younger family. He was on the college’s faculty for 20 years before joining the visual arts department at the University of Chicago, where he continues to teach today.

He said he took the Chicago job to be closer to his son, now 7, whose mother lives in the city. “In my family, for a whole phalanx of men, the relationships between sons and fathers have been very broken,” he said. Growing closer in turn inspired a new artwork at the Geffen: 29 small photographs called “Looking for the Sun,” pun intended, about how fathers both “possess and don’t possess” their children. He photographed his son without showing his face: in a crowd, from behind or just out of frame. It is a melancholy series about the blind spots of intimacy. The artist scattered the photographs throughout the galleries here, creating quiet moments off to the side of the boldly theatrical fraying flag.

“It’s hard to think of an artist with greater range,” said Elsa Longhauser, the director of the Santa Monica Museum of Art, who gave Mr. Pope.L a solo show in 2007. “He does create these powerful spectacles drawing attention to issues that you just can’t ignore but he also makes exquisite, subtle works.” The centerpiece of the show, “Art After White People,” was a grove of palm trees that he installed in a dark gallery and spray-painted white.

“The understanding was that the paint would kill the trees,” she recalled. “But they didn’t die — which in itself was an incredible metaphor.”

At the Geffen, hundreds of painted onions serve as the natural, unruly element displaced in the museum setting.

They will sprout but also shrink and wrinkle over the course of the show. “They will just get smaller and smaller and implode, consuming themselves from the inside,” Mr. Pope.L said, making them sound like raisins in the sun. “It’s a very American kind of dissolution.”