

Pope.L is an artist based in Chicago whose provocative, boundary-bending work spans performance, drawing, painting, video, photography, installation, and beyond. Upcoming projects include the 2017 Whitney Biennial (full disclosure: I am co-curating the exhibition with Christopher Y. Lew) and documenta 14. Here we discuss America, identification, and “where the shit comes out.”

AMERICANISMO

POPE.L AKA WILLIAM POPE.L
AND MIA LOCKS IN CONVERSATION

MIA LOCKS
How would you describe America? Is it a place? A symbol? A set of ideas? Where does it begin and end?

POPE.L
Some say America begins in Los Angeles and ends in Newark, New Jersey. I believe America is all the things you mentioned and more: a place, a symbol, and a set of ideas. That’s saying a lot, but not enough. America is about conflict and relation; disappointment and—what? Celebration? Procrastination? Masturbation? All very nice contrasts and they rhyme but—maybe these days it’s just disappointment.

ML Oh yes, so much disappointment these days!

POPE.L
But then I think I’m being ungrateful somehow—“We have so much here in the States! We so lucky!”—Hmmm. This is what we’re supposed to think, so we don’t feel pissed off. Today we can’t deny something’s afoot in the garden. There’s no more Black Savior in the White House to protect us from ourselves. Everyone knows it! Kind of. And it’s that “kind of” thing that has Americanismo written all over it.

ML But feeling grateful about being in America and feeling pissed off about our current political situation aren’t mutually exclusive, right? Our Black Savior might say these go hand in hand. Is that “kind of” you mention about ambivalence? Denial? Or?

POPE.L
Well, maybe you know him better than I do, but I think it’s just about being pissed off. It’s about stopping all this what’s-right-and-what’s-wrong and just getting pissed off—getting visible.

ML Fair enough. I feel you. Let’s talk about *Trinket* (2008-2015). I bring it up because it feels even more potent now than ever. Then again, everything feels more intense right now with you-know-who in power, and it’s hard not to read our present political moment into that work: a giant, tattered flag. It’s such a big, powerful thing, and yet it is so fragile, so fraught. I’m struck by this tension, how a really huge idea or object can give way to very humble forms of everyday experience. Or maybe it’s the other way around?

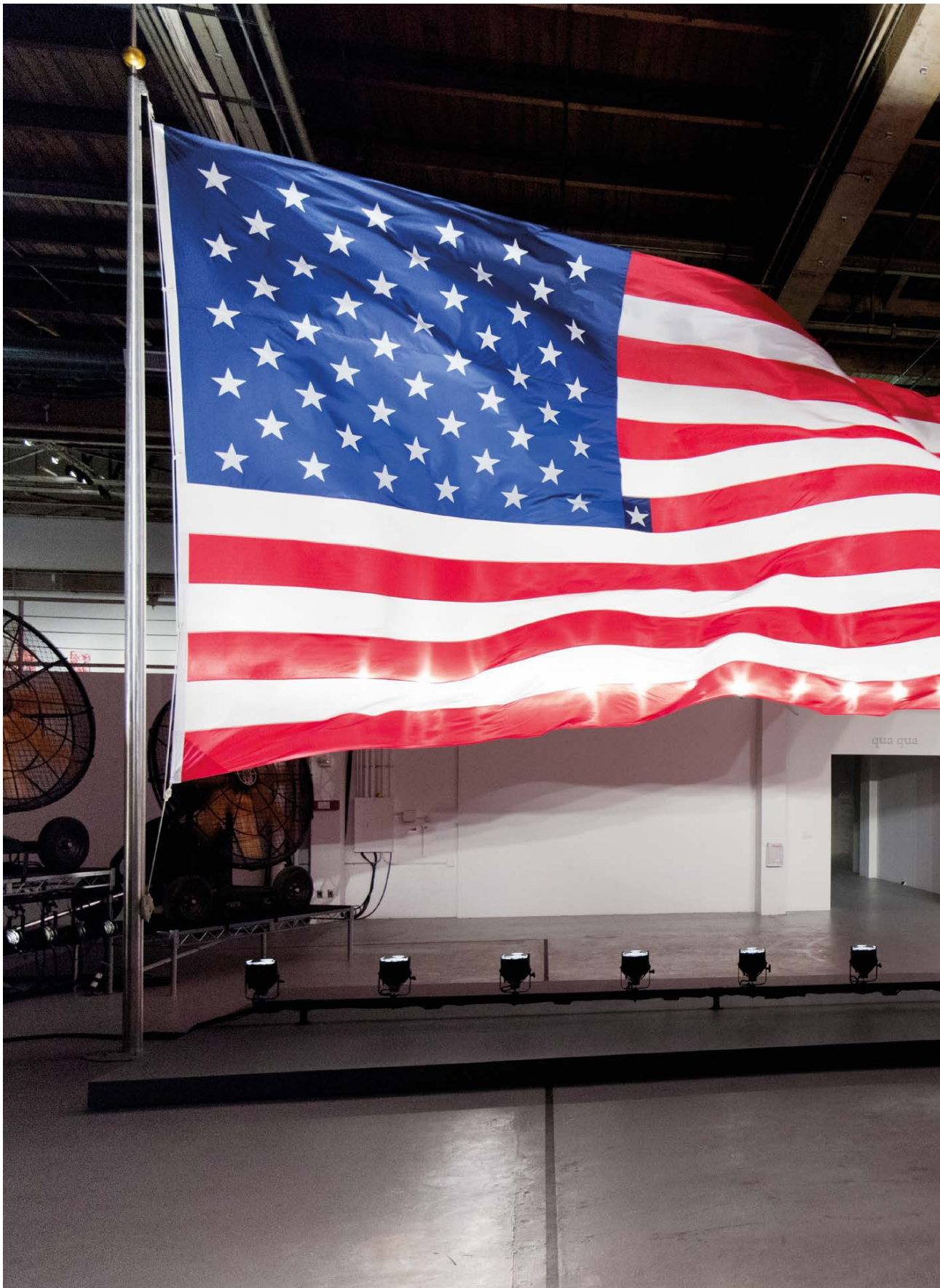
POPE.L
I typically find it’s the small things that loom largest.

ML Are theater and politics related? Cousins, maybe?

POPE.L
Politics and theater are both forms of life that manipulate life in order to make life their instrument. There’s a lot of ordering of things, rationalizations, the blind leading the blind. I suppose this all sounds very negative but it’s the way things get done. I do not think they—that is, politics and theater—have a more vital relation than, say, politics and the theater of raising a child, or theater and the politics of trying to find or keep a job. I think theater is nicer than politics—maybe that is its problem.

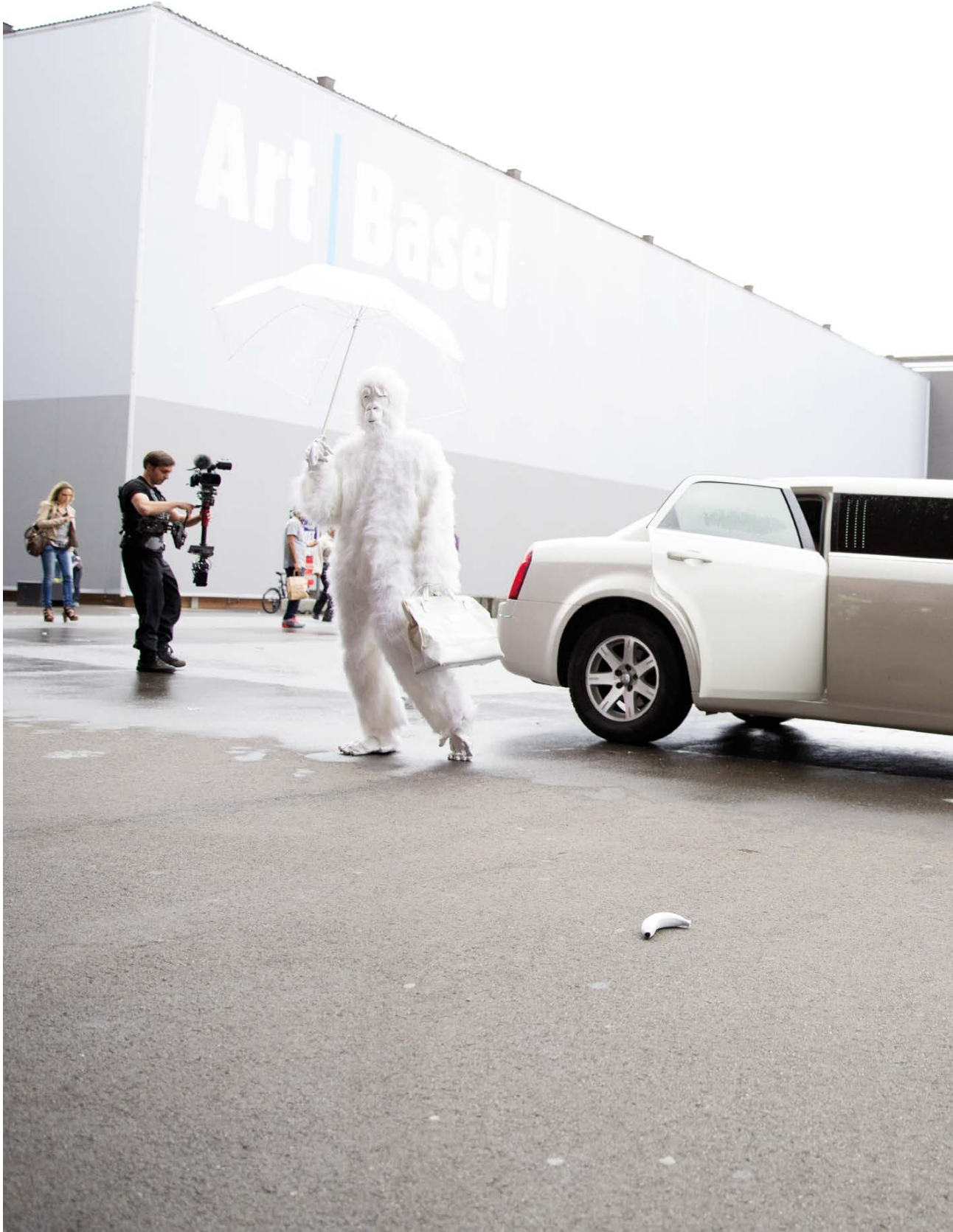


*The Great White Way, 22 miles, 9 years, 1 street (Whitney version #2) (stills), 1990. © Pope.L.
Courtesy: the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York*



Pope.L: Trinket installation view at The Geffen Contemporary at MOCA, Los Angeles, 2016. © Pope.L.
Courtesy: the artist; The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York. Photo: Brian Forrest





The Problem, 2016, performance at Art Basel, Basel, 2016. © Pope.L.
Courtesy: the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York

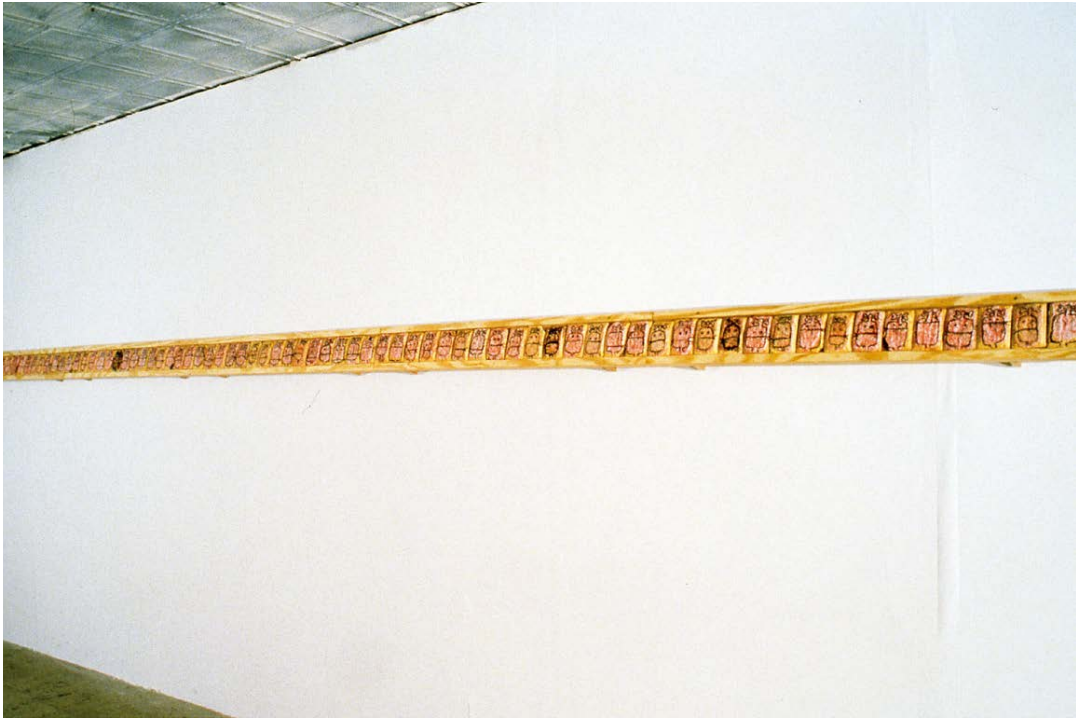




Setting the Table (version 2) (detail), 2005. © Pope.L.
Courtesy: the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York



Black Is, Black Ain't installation view at The Renaissance Society, Chicago, 2008. © Pope.L.
Courtesy: the artist; Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York; The Renaissance Society at the University
of Chicago, Chicago. Photo: Tom Van Eynde



Top - *Harriet Tubman Spinning the Universe*, 1992. © Pope.L.
Courtesy: the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York

Bottom - *Pop Tart Frieze*, 1998, *eRacism* installation view
at DiverseWorks, Houston, 2003. © Pope.L. Courtesy: the artist
and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York

ML I love the way you put that. “The theater of raising a child.” Has being a parent informed your work?

POPE.L
I can only hope.

ML Many works of yours activate the senses, employing various food items, such as peanut butter, mayonnaise, cornflakes, Pop-Tarts, chocolate syrup, bologna. Smell and taste seep into the “viewing” experience. And then there’s also the mobilization of the body, that living container we each exist within. This is perhaps most apparent in your performative pieces, but I think it connects to the food pieces, too. How do you think about embodiment in art?

POPE.L
Embodiment is where the shit comes out. It’s unavoidable. Both a plentitude and a lack. To be a body is to be smeared about, rubbed this way and that in the world, like an angry swan. As I get older, the myth of bodily plentitude gets less and less convincing. I saw it coming a while ago—I don’t know—I thought I had more time but I was kidding myself.

ML Kidding yourself about what? Shitting? Aging?

POPE.L
Shitting. Aging. Surveilling. Voting. A lot of shit coming out these days.



Mal Content, 1992. © Pope.L.
Courtesy: the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York

ML [laughter] Indeed. You once said something about putting yourself in a position of someone who has less than you, and how this is important to the way you think. Is identification an ethical process? A social process? An absurdity? What happens when one self-identifies, or identifies others?

POPE.L
Pardon, but your question implies we get to decide how we identify. Being Americans, we are trained to believe we can decide all kinds of things. Being an American myself, I like to pretend I can identify stuff—I come from the less, so why not identify with the less? The less is the best. Even so, identification is a blurry, messy process in which one’s contribution is always in question. I like to think when I decide something it’s always in a maelstrom. When I say I want to identify with the less or what is less, from where am I doing that?

ML Do you still identify as “the friendliest Black artist in America”?

POPE.L
I identify with the shadow of that idea. The edge of it, where the smile is. The penumbra where the shit lives. Therefore very friendly.

ML Anything you want to say about your project for the 2017 Whitney Biennial?

POPE.L
No.

ML: What about your recent performance, *The Problem*, at Art Basel in Switzerland? I wasn’t there, so I didn’t see it, but from what I understand you showed up at one of the world’s most illustrious art fairs in a white limousine, wearing a white gorilla costume, carrying a white briefcase and a white umbrella. What is whiteness in this context? What does it do?

POPE.L
Sometimes whiteness is zero—not nothing, because that’s neither true nor interesting—but a placeholder, a kind of open set that can be filled with anything—even the absence of anything.

ML What did you do once you got inside the fair?

POPE.L
I moved quickly. Poked at people with my umbrella. Visited my painting installation, lifted a few of them and absconded with money that magically appeared from out of their lower edges.

ML I see. Magic, huh? That’s interesting because lately I’ve been thinking about your work in relation to belief. We live in a world where some folks believe in “alternative facts,” while others tend to invest a lot of belief in this thing called “data.” But data is fundamentally flawed, always imperfect, limited. Do you care about data?

POPE.L
If by data you mean the raw stuff in the world, I’d say it has its immediate romantic, fantasy appeal; but then we humans have a way of turning the raw into the cooked just by thinking about it, just by perceiving it. Of course, cuisines and recipes differ—so my interest probably points more epistemologically there.

ML Does raw data taste better?

POPE.L
Donald Trump is a form of raw data. Let’s eat him.

Pope.L is a visual artist and educator whose multidisciplinary practice uses binaries, contraries, and preconceived notions embedded within contemporary culture to create artworks in various formats, for example, writing, painting, performance, installation, video and sculpture. Building upon his long history of enacting arduous, provocative, absurdist performances and interventions in public spaces, Pope.L applies some of the same social, formal, and performative strategies to his interests in language, system, gender, race, and community. The goals for his work are several: joy, money and uncertainty—not necessarily in that order.

Mia Locks is an independent curator based in New York. She is organizing the 2017 Whitney Biennial, with Christopher Y. Lew, which opens March 17th at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Previously, at MoMA PS1, she organized exhibitions including *Math Bass: Off the Clock* (2015); *IM Heung-soon: Reincarnation* (2015); *Samara Golden: The Flat Side of the Knife* (2014); and *The Little Things Could Be Dearer* (2014). She also co-organized *Greater New York* (2015), with Douglas Crimp, Peter Eleey, and Thomas J. Lax. From 2010 to 2013, Locks worked at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (MOCA) where she helped to organize *Blues for Smoke* (2012), with Bennett Simpson.