

HYPERALLERGIC

Pope.L's Conceptual Bottled Water Project Calls Attention to the Crisis in Flint

The famed social practice artist sells bottled water out of a Detroit gallery to highlight the continuing emergency.

Sarah Rose Sharp | October 17, 2017



Photo by Eric Dutro of one the young resident of Flint affected by the contamination of the city's water supply, part of Pope.L's *Flint Water Project* at What Pipeline (all images by the author for Hyperallergic unless otherwise noted)

DETROIT — In 2014 the city of Flint, Michigan decided (while under emergency financial management) to enact a cost-saving measure that temporarily switched the municipal water

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source from Lake Huron to the Flint River. The pH of this new water interacted toxically with Flint's aging infrastructure, resulting in the mass lead-poisoning of a large cross-section of an already embattled citizenry. Despite numerous complaints raised by consumers immediately following the switch, Flint city authorities continued to reassure residents that the water was safe to drink well into the following year, when it came to light that in fact the water contained lead levels that were, in some cases, dozens or hundreds of times higher than the Environmental Protection Agency's safety threshold. Flint officials have also been implicated in fatal outbreaks of Legionnaires' disease due to the contaminated water.



Installation view, *Flint Water Project* at *What Pipeline*

Fast-forward to 2017. Though issues with the water source and wider system have ostensibly been corrected, there are lingering concerns about the damage continuing as a result of the destabilized chemistry in the pipes of residential homes, not to mention the damaged trust of a citizenry that is reluctant to believe any official word from the city at this point, and the catastrophic implications of a generation of Flint children impacted by lead poisoning and listeria, while research about other complications is ongoing. Still, public attention paid to Flint waned amid so many other disasters — who can keep up?

Enter Chicago-based social practice artist Pope.L, who came to Detroit by invitation of experimental gallery What Pipeline to perform an intervention of his choosing. He chose to use his platform and cachet as an artist to highlight the ongoing concerns of Flint residents with the *Flint Water Project*.

“Flint is a touchstone, sure, but so is Detroit and Newark, NJ, and so many municipalities that have a history of struggle,” Pope.L wrote in an email to Hyperallergic. The outreach was, according to the artist, “relatively easy — we had excellent contacts, for example, Sandra Jones and her husband, Bishop Roger Jones of Greater Holy Temple Church of God, one of the three main centers supported by United Way of Genesee County.”



Co-curator Alivia Zivich at the retail counter of the “Flint Water Shop” in the What Pipeline gallery space

The contacts were made possible through the support of What Pipeline, which applied for the initial Knight Arts Challenge grant funding, and raised the necessary matching funding for the project through a [successful Kickstarter campaign](#). Using the inroads forged by WP and cultivated by Pope.L in July, as he began his work in Flint, the gallery was able to source water directly through the home of Flint resident Tiantha Williams and put it up for sale in a “Flint Water Shop” installed in the gallery’s location in Southwest Detroit. The walls have been papered with images of Pope.L-branded Flint Water bottles, interspersed with single shelves featuring dozens of the actual water bottles for sale. A retail counter and filling station are set up, staffed by an attendant live-bottling water out of a rain barrel with a siphon. The truck tank used to transport the water is on display, along with signed boxes of the available wares. An image of Williams’s infant son, Taylor, hangs on the gallery wall — he was exposed to Flint water, and though it is too soon to tell the extent of the damage done to his system, there is

already evidence to suggest his is part of the human cost of this disaster. This, and other images from around Flint by photographer Eric Duro, put a face on the human cost of cuts to municipal budgets.



Installation view, *Flint Water Project* at *What Pipeline*

While the main intention of the project is to continue to raise interest and awareness about the situation in Flint, the installation functions as a conceptual artwork on a number of levels. There are questions about the relationship of art and commerce, as the presence of a brand-name artist converts potentially dangerous water into niche art objects for sale at many times the source cost. (All proceeds from the sales of Pope.L's Flint Water will be donated to the United Way of Genessee County and Hydrate Detroit, a volunteer-lead non-profit group combating water shutoffs and advocating for affordable water laws in Detroit.) There is a funny superimposition of water-themed art from the gallery's stable of artists, interspersed with Duro's images between the shelves of water bottles, that creates a surreal interplay between art-as-idea and art-as-decorative-object.



Installation view, *Flint Water Project* at What Pipeline



Installation view, "Flint Water Project" at What Pipeline

"When he came to visit, we actually took him to Cass Cafe [a longtime Detroit eatery that features a rotating program of local artists in its dining room], and he's looking around and thought we should hang some art by local artists in the space, to soften the edges of the show,"

said Alivia Zivich. Hanging art over an art installation reinforces the aesthetic of the Water Shop as a capitalist boutique. The shop also hosts a kind of informal performance art work, as a shop attendant in safety goggles and gloves begins siphoning Flint water into branded bottles for sale as soon as visitors enter the gallery. As with the rest of the exhibit — and indeed, the greater situation in Flint — the line between performance and necessary safety precautions is unclear.



Gallery attendant bottling Flint water

“Initially, we were like, just gloves, because, for example, Tiantha drinks filtered water up there, at this point, although they bathe in their tub water. You will see people have a lot of irritation in their skin,” said Zivich. “So we thought gloves and goggles, just in case the exposure was a problem, and then I didn’t really think much of it, but then last week a guy came in who tests water professionally over in Windsor [Ontario, which borders Detroit], and he read the safety warning on the label, and said we need to watch out, especially with *e. Coli*, which can aerate easily.”



“Flint Water Project” at What Pipeline, installation view.

The logistical concerns for the gallery merely underscore the ongoing concerns of Flint residents, in their struggle for access to water they can trust. Pope.L has seized upon some contradictory facts during his research: “Now the EPA says the water is safe, but says citizens must continue to filter their water,” he said. “So is it safe?” While normally the open-ended questions raised by art are part of its appeal, they become incredibly sinister when it comes down to matters of public safety. Pope.L and What Pipeline are to be commended for their heady practice and their efforts to use art to maintain focus on the struggle for life’s basic necessities.

Flint Water Project remains on view at What Pipeline through October 21, 2017. Sales of Pope.L’s Flint Water can also be conducted online; all proceeds will be donated to the United Way of Genessee County and Hydrate Detroit.