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# Pope.L's Group Crawl: Protest, Pathos, Provocation

A communal performance through Greenwich Village kicks off explorations of the artist's career at the Whitney and the Museum of Modern Art.



William Pope.L's performance, "Conquest," on Saturday drew more than 100 participants crawling through the streets of Greenwich Village to Union Square. Credit Malin Fezehai for The New York Times

By Hilarie M. Sheets  
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"Crawlers, come to the line — please don your blindfolds," said William Pope.L, the multidisciplinary artist, serving as master of ceremonies before a large crowd who assembled Saturday in a Greenwich Village playground.

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Five men and women, each missing a shoe and encumbered with a flashlight in one hand, came belly down to the ground. They began to crawl along the gritty, unsavory New York City sidewalk, led by a marshal perfuming the air and sweeping the ground before them — and serenaded by a trumpeter playing melancholic riffs. The procession stopped traffic and drew people out of shops and restaurants, wondering what was going on.

Over the next five hours, some 140 people participated — wide-ranging in ages, ethnicity and physical ability — by dragging their bodies block-by-block, relay-style, along a 1.5 mile route through the Village. They traversed past the AIDS Memorial on Greenwich Avenue and under the Washington Arch. Then the collective action culminated at Union Square, with all the participants streaming up the steps, en masse, as the trumpeter and a drummer played “When the Saints Go Marching In.”



Mr. Pope.L speaking before “Conquest,” the Public Art Fund communal performance, began. Credit Malin Fezehai for The New York Times

The arduous, rebellious, absurdist spectacle was the largest group performance orchestrated by Mr. Pope.L, the Chicago-based veteran of more than 30 international “crawls” over the last four decades. He has used this willful gesture of vulnerability to explore race, class and power.

“Giving up one’s privilege in order to debase oneself is an act that you don’t have to do,” Mr. Pope.L said before the event, called “Conquest.” He is interested in what people can learn by doing — and witnessing — such an action.

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Organized by the Public Art Fund, the performance kicked off an exploration of Mr. Pope.L's career beginning this month, adding exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art (opening Oct. 10) and the Museum of Modern Art (Oct. 21).

The Modern's exhibition consists of 13 seminal performances and related videos and objects by Mr. Pope.L, from 1978 to 2001, which were recently acquired by the museum. At the Whitney, which had bestowed the 2017 Bucksbaum Award and its accompanying \$100,000 to the artist, Mr. Pope.L will offer a new immersive sound and sculptural installation, titled "Choir," its roots in the water crisis in Flint, Mich. An upside-down water fountain evoking Jim Crow-era segregation will intermittently gush 800 gallons of water into a tank, its sound amplified and mixed in with 1930s field recordings of African-American choirs singing spirituals.



Participants waiting to start the crawl. Credit Malin Fezehai for The New York Times

"The idea of the public fountain as a point of congregation echoes with what's literally happening on the street," said Christopher Lew, the curator of the Whitney's show, during the performance of "Conquest."

This trifecta of performances and exhibitions places the work of Mr. Pope.L, a provocateur who's long worked in the margins of New York's civic spaces, at the nerve center of the art world.

"There's this image of struggle and contradiction I'm interested in," said the affable, rangy 64-year-old artist, during a walk last month along part of the crawl route. He chose the Village, now

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among the most expensive and exclusive neighborhoods in the city, for its layered history — the place where blacks could intermarry and own land as far back as Dutch colonization; where artists and poets and musicians congregated in its more bohemian era; where the tragedy of the AIDS crisis was localized.



“Everyone who participated goes home with their own story about what happened. It’s a fantasy about community and making things O.K., no matter what shadows fall,” Mr. Pope.L said of the participants in Saturday’s massive group performance, “Conquest,” a public act of vulnerability. Credit Malin Fezehai for The New York Times

“Pope.L sees the paradox of this abjection happening in the context of Greenwich Village,” said Nicholas Baume, the director and chief curator of the Public Art Fund. He conceded that a performance centered on denigration could “sound like a pretty un-fun day out.” But the theatricality and community achieved along the path, Mr. Baume said, created “a wonderful mix of protest and pathos and humor and humanity.”

Born in Newark, Mr. Pope.L attended graduate school at Rutgers in the late ’70s, with an interest in experimental theater. He was first inspired to do a crawl by the prevalence of homeless people sleeping on city streets and in tunnels, including members of his own family at the time.

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He imagined “all those folks, who seemed inert and unwilling to lift themselves up by their bootstraps, starting to move as one.” By stubbornly refusing to give up their horizontality, he said, they “have this energy of moving forward.”

Early on, he was unable to convince others to join him. “I didn’t realize it was going to be such a big ask,” he said.



Mr. Pope. L in New York in 1991. The Chicago-based artist is a veteran of more than 30 international crawls over the last four decades. Credit Pope.L and Mitchell-Innes & Nash



“The Great White Way, 22 miles, 9 years, 1 street,” covered Broadway, in segments, from 2000-2009. Credit Pope.L and Mitchell-Innes & Nash

The MoMA exhibition will open with an image of the artist in a business suit striking out alone on his hands and knees in his first crawl through Times Square in 1978.

“People got pissed off because I’m black,” said Mr. Pope.L, who drew the curiosity and consternation of passers-by and authorities. “If you’re not drunk, if you’re not ill, if you’re not crawling to Jesus, what are you doing?”

A documentary video of his 1991 crawl around the perimeter of Tompkins Square Park — by this time, the artist had shifted to a more grueling, military-style crawl using just his forearms — shows a young African-American man, also in a suit, becoming irate that another black man would intentionally put himself in such a position. It led to a very intense, almost violent exchange.

For “The Great White Way, 22 Miles, 5 years, 1 Street,” Mr. Pope.L crawled the length of Broadway from the tip of Manhattan to the Bronx, in segments, from 2001 to 2009, wearing a Superman costume. “He’s constantly putting pressure on these symbols of success and aspirational behavior,” said Stuart Comer, the chief curator of MoMA’s department of media and performance, who organized the museum’s upcoming show.

As an observer on Saturday, Mr. Comer pointed out that “‘Conquest’ plays with how polarized the country is at this moment and what it means to try to create a space of assembly.” He added, “It’s about togetherness and the falling apart of the social fabric at the same time.”

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The artist designed T-shirts substituting the S in the Superman logo with a backward C as part of the costume for the participants in “Conquest.” He incorporated the blindfold and flashlight used in his 2011 group crawl in Göteborg, Sweden, and introduced music, scent and the relay format for the first time. “It sets up the individual-group dynamic much more vividly,” he said.



At the end of the performance of “Conquest,” crawlers were given water bottles marked “Flint Water” by the artist. Credit Malin Fezehai for The New York Times

More than 480 people responded to the Public Art Fund’s open call, from which the artist selected 140 with an eye to the greatest possible diversity. Several people crawled with their wheelchairs in tow. When 6-year-old Silas Kraus, who crawled with his grandfather, completed his segment, he excitedly asked the artist what the prize was.

“The prize can be a little bit elusive,” Mr. Pope.L responded with amusement.

Daniel Blanco Melo, a 33-year-old scientist from Mexico, heeded the artist’s instruction to each participant to choose a style of crawling that would be most challenging. Mr. Melo started on his back and did a kind of elbow crab walk; he finally flipped over, drenched in sweat but exhilarated. “I’m not a U.S. citizen, but I really do love the city, so what better idea than to actually kiss the floor in New York,” he said.



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Annie Leist, a 45-year-old artist who is sight impaired, crawled holding her white cane as an added degree of difficulty. "You really felt the experience of being this soft mass of human body on the hardness and roughness of the sidewalk," said Ms. Leist. She found it physically more difficult than anticipated but felt buoyed by people cheering her on. "It wasn't a race but it was sort of a competition with yourself," she added.

Mr. Pope.L dispensed a bear hug to each crawler who mounted the podium at Union Square. "Everyone who participated goes home with their own story about what happened," he said. "It's a fantasy about community and making things O.K., no matter what shadows fall."