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POPE.L CEMENTS HIS PROVOCATEUR STATUS WITH THREE SHOWS ACROSS MANHATTAN

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POPE.L ON AN AUGUST MORNING, SITTING ALONG THE ROUTE OF HIS FALL CRAWL. IMAGE COURTESY OF DAMIEN FRY.

On the bus ride home, or over the weeks or months following, it finally dawned on him. What had gone wrong? “The actor, tarted up in a toga, finally freaked out, jumped up onto a table,

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inadvertently flashing his colleagues, while yelling, ‘How fucking dare you, I’ve been up here saying these fucking lines for two hours!’” Pope.L recalls, admitting he lacked directorial experience. “I didn’t know what to say to him. I didn’t know what I was doing, and I didn’t know how to have him help me. I didn’t know how to enlist him in what I wanted, and that’s when I realized: You don’t have to do it all by yourself.”

Conquest, Pope.L’s most recent performance project, engages his largest and most public cast to date. Commissioned by the Public Art Fund (PAF), the September 21st “crawl” is also more procedurally detailed, and more apparently and explicitly mocking, than previous crawls. When I spoke with Pope.L in late summer, he insisted he was not participating in the crawl, but just as soon acknowledged that he has never been able to keep himself from crawling, at least a little bit, alongside the participants. The group of 140 (selected from an open call and aimed at replicating the demographics of New York City) navigate a (safe) series of hazards (blindfolds, holding a flashlight, one shoe off) to complete a one and a half mile team relay that begins in Seravalli Playground, heads east past Jackson Square, through the NYC AIDS Memorial and Washington Square Park before going due north to finish in Union Square Park.

“Lots of the history is sedimentary,” Pope.L says, considering the unique culture embedded in the route, which reveals a past that both enlivens and erodes the liberal progressive symbolism of New York City. The starting point memorializes Corporal John A. Seravalli for his service in the Vietnam War; another area is where the Dutch initially colonized Manhattan and where, in the 1700s, Black people could own land. Pope.L talks about the days when his whole family lived close by in the Lower East Side—days when Washington Square Park was a hub for artists, including himself.



POPE.L, HOW MUCH IS THAT NIGGER IN THE WINDOW A.K.A. TOMPKINS SQUARE CRAWL, 1991. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND MITCHELL-INNES & NASH, NEW YORK.

Today, he sees the community as “swanky,” a departure from the class setting of previous crawls. “What’s my problem with doing crawls in places that look taken care of, doing a crawl in a place that doesn’t seem to need a crawl?” he asks himself. “Maybe it needs it more than I think,” he continues. “So this is gonna be a mocking crawl.” While participants are crawling, one of the five marshals is given the role of perfumer, who scents the air with a non-toxic scent of teakwood and tobacco—prominent crops in the triangle slave trade. Participants are divided into groups of five, with each group crawling one block of the route. This is high intensity interval “slumming it.”

Crawling is a performance media at the cornerstone of Pope.L’s practice. For his best known crawling work, *The Great White Way: 22 Miles, 9 Years, 1 Street* (2000–09), he donned a Superman suit with muscle padding as he crawled military-style up Broadway, onerously scraping his body against the pavement a few blocks at a time, from the base of the Statue of Liberty up to the Bronx, over the course of nine years. Known in part for its logistical challenges and athletic intensity, this solo performance, along with other early crawls, was meant to draw attention to the conditions of have-not-ness, homelessness, the forced surrender of verticality, the danger of proximity to the street and the potentially suspect movement of blackness/maleness in public space. Horizontality proposes means for perceiving, but the positionality is not, itself, the condition of experiencing material need. Crawling, in the multiple styles Pope.L has done it, complicates the ability to move on accord of our own free will.

Critics occasionally disaggregate the crawls, solo versus group, but the difference is more a result of circumstance. “The intention when I started doing solo crawls was to have them be group, but at the time, I couldn’t convince anyone to do them with me,” he explains. Pope.L’s public and the field of willing crawlers have grown since the first, *Times Square Crawl* (1978), and there are, of course, humane guidelines for group engagement. The more corporeally self-flagellating and legally hazardous aspects of solo crawls would be improper to ask of (civilian) people doing a crawl for the first time.

I was first enlisted, albeit indirectly, to participate in Pope.L’s practice in 2015 in Los Angeles. It had just turned spring: the light is longer, but liminal, and the windy dusk lasts forever. In search of an escape from a categorically un-spring-like chill, I went into the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Having no significant relationship to contemporary art at the time, I approach Pope.L’s spooky *Trinket*. I’m put off by the volume and the immediate sense of displacement, but enter the gallery anyway to find a lonely, monumental American flag (widened, and with 51 stars) blown by four massive industrial fans, the type they use to make wind in the movies. The sounds of the moving flag grate my audio-critical sensibilities, inducing a nationalist sentiment from which I feel uninvited; similar to when it is transmuted to song as with “The Star-Spangled Banner,” that epic and untrue coerced community performance. For some, this sound is harmless white noise. I wither, questioning—in aims to suture the auditory bleed—what is the sound of the industrial fans? Of the ventilation system? The room? The flag? Can I isolate the sound of its tearing from the sound of its waving? If an American flag blows in the wind with nobody to sentimentalize it, does the wind blow at all? I sat with all these questions on the drive home, over the next week, month, over years and today.



POPE.L, THE GREAT WHITE WAY, 22 MILES, 9 YEARS, 1 STREET, 2000-2009, PERFORMANCE. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND MITCHELL-INNES & NASH, NEW YORK.

Pope.L eschews facile symbolism and inoperative referents, stirring witnesses towards internal provocation: he does not provoke, he presents the option to provoke oneself. His work is technically simple, but intense, and subtly tender. It engages participation through multiple senses and perspectives. It is time bound and time based. His materials are quotidian, accessible and decodable (at least, on some level). Symbols are utilized for play—physically, when objectified—and as they trigger senses and sensibilities in the viewer that disrupt straightforward interpretations. In a gallery or museum context, these qualities can be seen in installation work, like *Map of the World* (1999–2000), a large-scale reversed map of the United States that Pope.L made of frankfurters nailed to plywood, and painted with condiments which soupyly decompose to the floor, over time. Weakened by the stench, do we focus on our discomfort? Do we read further into a reversal of the map, the staple low-income food? Decomposition, itself? Respect? Blackness? All of the above, per a specific intersectional framework? Or do we rot, alongside, decomposing in futile attempts to deconstruct and assign meaning?

In performance, technical simplicity is Pope.L’s easygoing disposition. He permits decay, sets up structures for interaction and lets them play out, relinquishing control in favor of feedback that is neither positivist, nor readily actionable. Where timeliness increases sensory repulsion in his installations, in Pope.L’s performance work, time becomes a means to demonstrate endurance; as time elapses, he gets closer to his end point, closer to relief: the spectre of impermanence is a desirable, if not necessary, survival mindset. Perhaps predictably, different mediums digest Pope.L’s undergirding theory in distinct ways: his practice is not merely multifaceted, it applies pressure from seemingly opposite ends, it engulfs the viewer or even the “ends” themselves.

This fall, Pope.L “retrospects and re-prospect” a tripartite creative surge: *Instigation, Aspiration, Perspiration* is a trio of complementary exhibitions including the PAF-commissioned *Conquest* crawl, “member: Pope.L 1978–2001” at MoMA and “Choir,” a brand new installation at the Whitney occasioned by Pope.L’s receipt of the 2017 Bucksbaum Award

for his presentation at the 2017 Whitney Biennial. Though Pope.L theorizes that a true retrospective can only occur once the artist is dead, “member” looks back on 13 of his key performance pieces. But as much as it historicizes, it also mocks this endeavor with the walls of the exhibition space literally and symbolically punctured. “The show is as much about creating a whole,” Pope.L says with an expectant drawl, “as making holes.” Meanwhile at the Whitney, “Choir,” he explains, is “a non-stop movement of water and sound and maze via a series of pipes, electric switches and gushes.”

The shows are an opportunity for self and community reflection, a crucially needed information age checkpoint. Social norms are fluidly and continually renegotiated; networks, their promises and pitfalls, require closer inspection; the latent belief in naturally forward-marching progress is now complicated and no longer promised. We interface with Pope.L’s work and come to grips with our fears of the current era. “member” is a reminder that perception and history are ever reconstructed and unstable. Western symbolism and value structures are malleable and subject to decay, a truth we’re quick to hush for its existential insecurity. “Choir” prompts us to consider the meaning of this maze, the timing and cause of (liquid) outburst, the optimism of the perception of a sustainable and renewable font, the romance of the fountain, the assumed benevolence of networks, the function of organized systems of connection in light of these systems’ purported aim or positionality, glitches. *Conquest* requires—per its short interval relay style—consistent, willful re-engagement. It requires mutual effort—mutual interest in experiencing, for at least a day, the precarity of proximity to the ground.

Pope.L opens us to mocking our privilege, a study in shared disarmament that could lead to more than mere amusement. “If you already have privilege, maybe it’s easy to give it up... At the same time,” he stresses, “it is a choice, it’s a decision. And I want all of these people to make this decision together.” Withholding some direction and theoretical clarity is a hopeful, educative and generative act. Pope.L reveals the surprise theme of *Conquest*: “it has to do with love... It’s kind of corny, but there you have it.” His tenderness belies the inherent tension: the concept of love is as obtuse as any in his playbook.