

ARTFORUM

SPOTLIGHT

Pope.L
Vielmetter



Pope.L, *I-Machine*, 2014–20, two overhead projectors, acrylic and graphite on canvas, speakers, microphone, chair, Post-Its, solenoid, tubing, galab 451 photo timer, two glass trays, funnel with container, wooden box, wooden armature, painter's tape, threaded rod, bucket, 79 1/2 × 36 × 30". Courtesy the artist and Vielmetter Los Angeles. © Pope.L. Photo: James Prinz.

Pope.L's *I-Machine* (2014–20) has a handmade, provisional appearance that conveys a sense of a thing in a state of ongoing and perhaps hopeless becoming. The artist describes the work as a "self-blinding contraption... self-blinding because its function is to encourage unknowledge or ignorance or, at best, reflection on ignorance and doubt. by encourage, i mean, when one is in the presence of this assembly, one should feel prodded toward opacity, uselessness, dumbness and incompleteness rather than transparency, smarty-pantsness and wholeness."

I-Machine is an assembly of, among other things, two overhead projectors, one stacked on top of the other; the lens of the bottom projector has been painted, so it no longer functions, while the lens of the top projector casts an image of a shallow bowl filled with small plastic letters, a stack of coins, and some blue-tinted water. (Unexpectedly, this image looks something like the inside

of your eye when dilated.) The projectors are balanced on top of a paint-splattered steel-case chair, which sits on top of a wooden pedestal. The wooden pedestal has a small shelf on one side, on top of which rest a photo timer and the base of a stand that elevates a funnel-topped reservoir filled with blue water. The reservoir is connected to a tube that allows the water to drip into the bowl. Every few minutes, the photo-timer, which is connected to this tubing, allows a small amount of liquid to travel from the reservoir through the tube and into the bowl. The sound of the water flowing and dripping is picked up by microphone, amplified and transmitted through four speakers which fill the room. Finally, there are very many blue Post-Its, some bearing words, doodles, or series of letters arranged all over the surface of this entire object. A key to the work, as per the artist, is the idea of agnotology (literally: the study of ignorance)—but specifically the study of culturally induced, intentionally created ignorance. The term was coined in 1995 by Robert N. Proctor in a footnote to his book, *The Cancer Wars: How Politics Shapes What We Know and Don't Know About Cancer*. In his discussion of the ways in which politics and political entities—governments, corporations, the military—propagate confusion and misinformation to control the public, Proctor stated: “We need a political agnotology to complement our political epistemologies.”[1] When asked later about originating the term, Proctor replied: “I was only half-joking.” In the present moment, where information is so plentiful as to impede knowledge, and the verifiable fact of politically deployed misinformation continues to be hotly debated, the question of why citizens construct and enforce their own self-blinding grows in urgency daily.

Alongside *I-Machine*, we are spotlighting several recent paintings by Pope.L that also belong to the “Skin Set”—works (mostly paintings and drawings, and also this contraption) that highlight the absurdity of language, or “Race Talk” or the inescapable human drive to communicate, even if imperfectly. The works use a kind of reasoning that encourages a critical eye to systems and claims to logic, justice, and reason. Most of the “Skin Set” drawings and paintings include proclamatory statements about people or entities of various colors (blue, red, yellow, white, fuchsia, etc.)—for example, “Blue People Cannot Conceive of Themselves”—that do not make literal sense, but are not quite nonsense either.

Pope.L (b. 1955, Newark, NJ) is an artist whose practice resists easy categorization. Explorations of language and the absurdities of its use to name, taxonomize, and create relationships form a core of his diverse practice which encompasses painting, drawing, performance, video, street actions, installation, theater, sculpture, and writing. His work engages iterative, social, formal and performative strategies to explore systems, race, gender and nationalisms. Most often, the resulting work is indeterminate and fertile, provoking further questions rather than easy resolution. In 2019, the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and Public Art Fund presented three overlapping presentations of the artist’s work, collectively titled *Instigation, Aspiration, Perspiration*. MoMA’s survey, *member: Pope.L, 1978–2001* focused on several performances, recently added to the museum’s collection, including *Eating the Wall Street Journal* (first performed in 1991, and again in varying iterations) and *ATM Piece* (1997) that have defined the artist as a humorist and agitator, willing to use his body and make himself physically vulnerable, to provoke questions and frustrate assumptions about the structure of society. At the Whitney a large-scale installation, titled *Choir* (2019), expanded those notions and underlined the ways in which even necessary natural resources are embedded in issues of class and race, from Jim Crow laws that forbid people of color using public water fountains to the ongoing water crises in communities predominantly populated by people of color, like Flint, Michigan.