

Flash Art

• CONVERSATIONS

4 July 2022, 9:00 am CET

A couple of things. Or rather, a *cupola* things. A conversation with Pope.L by [Octavia Bürgel](#)



Pope.L, *Contraption*, 2022. Performer: Mickey Mahar. Ongoing live performance at Schinkel Pavillon, Berlin, 2022. Photography by Frank Sperling. Courtesy of Schinkel Pavillon, Berlin.

The word “interview” finds its way to the English language from a French relative, *s’entrevoir*, or “to see each other.” How, then, does one prepare to lead an interview where both parties are effectively absent, or at least faceless? Is a document of an interaction this heavily mediated -- by digital correspondence, by language itself -- valid under the rubric of journalism, or does the effort to communicate eventually negate itself?

In his practice, Pope.L engages modes of demonstration, obfuscation, protestation, and, in his words, masturbation, to infiltrate systems of language, culture, and oppression. For his first solo exhibition in Berlin, “Between a Figure and a Letter,” the American artist presents *Contraption* (2022), an enlarged, analogical wood chipper dominating the Schinkel Pavillon’s main floor. Lining a shelf on the room’s right side are wooden models -- architectural elements of Berlin’s controversial Humboldtforum and the Schinkel Pavillon itself -- that are periodically extracted and fed to the titular contraption by a performer carrying a pizza paddle. Borrowing its name from the US Capitol’s iconic cupola, the film *Small Cup* (2008), shown on the Schinkel’s lower level, shows farm animals grazing and stamping upon a miniature reproduction of the same building in Washington, DC. Selections from Pope.L’s text-based *Skin Set Drawings* are presented such that they remain just out of reach, enshrined within custom-made metallic frames that reflect distorted images back at the viewer. Resigned to partial legibility, these works formalize the gulf of “un-meaning” alluded to in the exhibition’s title: that between a figure and a letter.

I attended the opening of Pope.L’s exhibition at Schinkel Pavillon on April 8, 2022. I saw but did not speak to Pope.L at the opening of his exhibition. I did not speak to Pope.L at any point. The following text was staged via email. Pope.L has requested that his language and syntax be preserved in its original format.

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH



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Octavia Bürgel: Through these letters I am attempting to fabricate an encounter in which there is none. Is there a potential for an interaction in written language that transcends or subverts the spoken?

Pope.L: LET ME REPEAT YOUR QUESTION AS I UNDERSTAND IT: CAN WRITTEN LANGUAGE TRANSCEND OR SUBVERT THE SPOKEN? HMMM. I THINK WRITTEN LANGUAGE HAS THE ABILITY TO QUIET, FREEZE DRY, LEAVEN, ALLOW MORE NEURONS FOR REFLECTION WITHOUT THE DEMANDS OF IMMEDIACY WHICH IS BY NATURE INTIMATE, CHAOTIC AND CLOSE-MIKED AND SO, AS AN EVENT, HAS A LOT OF NOISE AROUND IT.

OB: Animals and animal byproducts such as processed meats are recurring motifs within your work. Can you describe the origins of this inquiry in your practice? Has their significance shifted contextually or in the course of your career?

PL: IN THE BEGINNING, LACK WAS THE ORIGIN OF MY THINKING ABOUT FOOD AND ANIMALS. BUT TO YOUR QUESTION: HAS MY THINKING CHANGED REGARDING THIS PRACTICE? YES. WHEN I STARTED THINKING ECOLOGICALLY, ECOLOGICAL THINKING, OR AT LEAST MINE, WAS MORE LIMITED, BUT WITH CLIMATE CHANGE ONE HAS TO THINK SIMULTANEOUSLY MORE INTIMATELY YET MORE GLOBALLY.

OB: The Schinkel Pavillon's press release states that this is your first solo presentation in Berlin. This is shocking to me, given Berlin's contemporary association with international art and artists, and especially in light of your prolific career. If the opportunity to present work in Berlin had come to you at a different point, how would the city's historical and contemporary (at that time) memory inform that work?

PL: HMMMM. PROBABLY A STUPID, MEANINGFUL, OVERWROUGHT SOMETHING SOMETHING CAUSE I'D BE TRYING TOO HARD

OB: Meanwhile, audiences debate the meaning of your "repurposing" of the Humboldtforum in the work on view at the Schinkel. Are you implying that this work is, conversely, smart but meaningless?

PL: ++IF AUDIENCES, IN FACT, ARE DEBATING MY REPURPOSING, WELL – THAT'S THAT'S FLATTERING BUT MAYBE THEY SHOULD FIND A BETTER WAY TO WASTE THEIR TIME. EVEN SO, I AM NOT IMPLYING CONVERSELY ANYTHING, RE: MEANINGLESSNESS. MEANINGLESSNESS IS COOL. I WISH LIFE WAS MEANINGLESS, THEN IT WOULDN'T HURT SO MUCH. BUT MEANINGLESSNESS, IF IT DOES EXIST IN THE PIECE, IS NOT ME BEING SMART. IF IT IS HAPPENING IT IS BECAUSE I WAS TRYING TO DO THE OPPOSITE. CORNY OF ME TO TRY? CORNIER TO ADMIT IT? BUT THERE IT BE. JEFF

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

KOON MIGHT HAVE SAID THIS: WE ARE ALWAYS SELLING AT THE LEVEL OF SOMEONE'S CROTCH —

I COULD ELABORATE ON THE THEMES OF THE SHOW. I COULD, I HAVE ELSEWHERE. BUT MAYBE IT'S MORE INTERESTING TO TO TO STUMBLE AND SAY THE SAME THINGS IN A DIFFERENT WAY. THE SCHINKEL SHOW WAS A PALIMPSEST OF INTERESTS — THINGS I WANTED TO CONJOIN IN ONE SET. THINGS THAT MAY HAVE NOT RELATED. THINGS THAT I HAD AN INKLING CONCERNING THEIR RELATE. ALSO SOMETHING ABOUT THE FLESH OF THE FIGURE AND THE AIR OF THE LETTER.



Pope.L, "Between A Figure and A Letter". Exhibition view at Schinkel Pavillon, Berlin, 2022. Photography by Frank Sperling. Courtesy of Schinkel Pavillon, Berlin.

OB: Does either possess inherent truth?

PL: ++HMMM. INHERENT TRUTH. WHY NOT? WHY NOT? OR WHAT DO WE MEAN BY INHERENT TRUTH ANYWAY? OK, FINE FINE LET'S SAY IT TOGETHER: INHERENT TRUTH — DO WE SUDDENLY FEEL BETTER?

OB: I like that you have written "hmmm" in many of your responses. This strikes me as *static* (crackling or hissing noises on a telephone, radio, or other telecommunication system) and also as stasis (a period or state of inactivity or equilibrium) — by which I mean, a way of remaining in a "present moment," which is rather a collection of singular moments happening to each of us without intersection. "Hmmm" is reassuring because, insofar as written language possesses those capacities you outlined above, to bear witness to it occurring is rare. Despite engaging you from my individual "present" (in a car somewhere between Amsterdam and Tilburg; on a regional train as it slithers through the German countryside; poring over my laptop at the table in my kitchen), I am being called to witness (in greater detail than the eye could observe or the ear could detect) you reflecting, which suggests, in some way, immediacy, without the threat of it...

PL: ++YOUR 'QUESTION' IS NOT POSED AS A QUESTION — HMMM. BE BE THIS FREEDOM? MY MY AUNTS + UNCLES, POST-FREED-SLAVE-FOLKS ALL, OF VARIOUS GENS, MADE ALL SORTS OF SOUNDS THAT INDICATED KEY COMMUNICATION DYNAMICS: CLICKS, SUCKING TEETH, GROWLS, SNARLS, SNICKS, SUDDEN INTAKES OF BREATH, OMINOUS CLOUD-LADEN PAUSES, ELONGATION OF WORDS BEYOND REASON, RISING PITCHES, BEWARE BEWARE OF RISING PITCHES; RE: INTIMACY MORE DIRECTLY, AND SINCE I'VE BEEN TRAVELING LATELY — BEEN THINKING OF THE FORCED COZINESS OF AIR TRAVEL, SARDINE-CANNED INTO A HUGE MOBILE DORMITORY AT 30K+ FEET ABOVE THE EARTH WITH OVER 200 PLUS FELLOW PASSENGERS AND TONS OF STATED AND UNSTATED RULES FOR KEEPPING US A PART, INTIMACY-REDUCTION TO THE MAX EXCEPT FOR THE VERY AIR WE SHARE, WE BREATHE —

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

OB: Do you feel that a revolutionary potential can be harnessed from the absurd?

PL: ++REVOLUTION (IT WAS YOU WHO POSED THE QUESTION) HAS GREAT POTENTIAL FOR ABSURDITY. MAYBE BECAUSE OF OUR ATTACHMENT TO ITS ROMANCE, WE WANT IT SO MUCH WE CANNOT SEE IT FOR WHAT IT IS. I THINK WE ARE NOSTALGIC FOR REVOLUTION NOT BECAUSE IT'S DISRUPTIVE BUT BECAUSE IT'S CLEAR, AND THAT IS WHY WE KEEP UPCHUCKING IT, BRINGING IT UP AGAIN AND AGAIN AND MAYBE THIS IS WHY IT ELUDES US, RUNS AWAY FROM US, MOCKS US. BUT WHAT WOULD WE DO WITH IT IF WE COULD ACHIEVE IT? I DON'T THINK WE CAN KNOW THIS. AND WHAT WOULD WE BE WITHOUT IT? MAYBE THAT IS THE ULTIMATE ABSURDITY OF THIS SORT OF THING — SCALE OF FANTASY VS. SIZE OF ACHIEVEMENT VS. THE NEXT STAR WARS MOVIE...

OB: You sometimes enlarge or exacerbate the conditions or materials of your lived experience. Do you see a distinction between performance in both contexts — in that of your “real” life and of your career?

PL: WELL, THE TWO GET BLURRED SOMETIMES. YES, I SEE A DISTINCTION. I CURRENTLY PRODUCE A VERSION OF THIS IN MY LIFE IN COLLABORATION WITH THOSE AROUND ME. I HAVE BEEN TOLD BY SOME THAT MENTIONING MY SON IN MY WORK IS A PROBLEM. ONE OF MY ASSISTANTS, JUST FOR A TIME, WAS CONCERNED ABOUT THEIR IMAGE BEING CAPTURED AS A PART OF MY WORK. SO THE PERSONAL AND THE WORK CAN INTERACT IN WAYS BEYOND OUR IMMEDIATE UNDERSTANDING. PERFORMANCE IS A CONTRACT-MAKING THING IN WHICH OUR UNDERSTANDING IS CONSTANTLY BEING NEGOTIATED. AND NOT TO APPEAR DISAGREEABLE, I DO NOT KNOW IF I'VE EVER ENLARGED OR EXACERBATED MATERIALS FROM MY LIVED EXPERIENCES... EXACERBATED?... MAYBE MASTURBATED...