



## THE ART NEWSPAPER

### Remembering Pope.L, the self-proclaimed 'friendliest Black artist in America'

His 50-year career was filled with transgressive performances, including the Times Square Crawls, which interrogated race and class

Margaret Carrigan | 28 February 2024



*Hospital*, Pope.L's South London Gallery show, opened weeks before the artist's death. Photo: Peyton Fulford. courtesy: Mitchell-Innes & Nash

"The idea of a finished artwork is a fiction," Pope.L told *The Art Newspaper* in a November 2023 interview—one of his last before his death. "The claim of 'being done' is wishful thinking and a bit impatient."

Indeed, Pope.L never saw his work as "done". His use of iteration and intervention was a hallmark of his boundary-pushing 50-year career that made him one of the most influential figures in performance art, if not contemporary American art writ large. In his performances as well as his videos, writing, drawings and paintings, he was perceptive, precise, wryly humorous while being deadly serious, and intimidatingly intelligent without a hint of hubris. Often using nothing but his own body, simple actions and a few common materials or props, his work unflinchingly explored the intersections of class, race, labour and language. This was all in a tireless effort to visualise what he termed the "have-not-ness" of many in a capitalist society that promotes itself as democratic.

Irreverence is palpable in much of his work, but he was far from impolite. For instance, early in his career, he performed one of the first of his "gutter pieces", *Thunderbird Immolation* a.k.a. *Meditation Square Piece* (1978), which saw him sit outside the building where the leading art dealers Leo Castelli and Ileana Sonnabend had their galleries. Situated in a lotus position on a swatch of yellow cloth surrounded by matches, he would intermittently douse himself with low-budget flammable comestibles like Coca-Cola and Thunderbird, a brand of fortified wine marketed at poor Black communities. When he was confronted by building staff who were upset by the intervention, he respectfully packed up and left.

In fact, geniality was part of his artistic calling card—literally. He copyrighted the phrase "The friendliest Black artist in America" and handed out business cards with it printed on them for years. Although race-related social dynamics come to the fore of much of his work, Pope.L pushed back on the claim that race was his central focus.

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His Skin Set Drawings (1997-2011) perhaps best illustrate this, with absurdist racialised statements presented like fact, including “Black people are Sodom and Disneyland”, “White people are good to eat” and “Green people don’t care what color they are as long as they get it for free”. Beautiful, funny, tragic, gruelling, smart and ridiculous all at once, he spared no one in his work, least of all himself.

From early on, Pope.L saw his role as an artist to be a “fisherman of social absurdity”, as he humorously put it. But that didn’t mean he saw himself as a jester, nor did he want to make fun of others. Take, for instance, his “crawl” performances, of which he would do nearly 40 different versions over the course of his career. In his first, Times Square Crawl (1978), he donned a pinstripe business suit with a yellow square on its back and pulled himself on his hands and knees up New York’s 42nd Street, which was then populated by homeless people, sex workers, drug addicts and other socially marginalised figures. According to the artist, the crawls were meant to counter “verticality”—a concept he used to underscore the wealth and health it requires to be socially upwardly mobile.

## Onlookers as collaborators

The exhausting physicality of the performance called attention to the issues facing society’s most oppressed but it was only one aspect of the work. Equally important was the reaction of onlookers, who Pope.L charitably deemed his “collaborators”. The resounding response could largely be summarised as compulsive avoidance.

Some passersby grew angry. In How Much is that Nigger in the Window a.k.a. Tompkins Square Crawl (1991), a Black man confronted him, first by yelling at the white cameraman Pope.L had hired to document the performance, and then by calling the police on the pair of them after the artist had explained the work to him, allegedly for making him “look like a jerk”. C. Carr, a critic who had been in attendance on the day of the performance, noted in her write-up of the event that the issue wasn’t confusion, but a deeply intrinsic understanding of what the artist was critiquing: just before fetching the police, the man had noted that he also wore a suit to work just like the one the artist had been wearing.

The most famous of these crawl performances, The Great White Way: 22 Miles, 9 Years, 1 Street, featured the artist crawling along Broadway, Manhattan’s longest street, in a Superman costume with a skateboard strapped to his back. Started in 2001, the journey took nine years, as he could only endure roughly six blocks of crawling at any given time.

“From its very earliest beginnings, the crawl project was conceived as a group performance. Unfortunately for me, at that time, I was the only volunteer,” Pope.L told Interview Magazine in 2013. Many of his later “crawl” pieces went on to feature large groups of crawling volunteers.

Born William Pope in Newark, New Jersey, to Lucille Lancaster and William Pope, he adopted his moniker of Pope.L in the 1990s, the “L” a nod to his mother’s surname. His mother, a nurse, suffered from trauma-related drug addiction that led to the family living in circumstances the artist described as unstable during his childhood. For a time he lived in New York City’s East Village with his grandmother Desma Lancaster, who introduced him to art. She was an artist—she showed quilts at the Studio Museum in Harlem during the 1960s—and cleaned houses to make a living. Among her clients was a portrait painter, who encouraged the young artist to draw.

In the 1970s, he pursued art at Pratt Institute, in Brooklyn, but dropped out because of the high cost of tuition. After working in various factory jobs, he continued his degree at Montclair State College (now Montclair State University) in New Jersey, and graduated in 1978, the same year he started his “crawl” performances. He earned a Master of Fine Arts degree from the Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University in 1981.

Economic precarity was at the heart of much of Pope.L’s work, especially since his father, aunt and brother all experienced living on the street at some point in their lives. Eating the Wall Street Journal, maybe the artist’s most recognisable work, confronted wealth disparity head on. Inspired by an advertisement in the eponymous paper that suggested one could increase their personal wealth simply by subscribing, Pope.L performed the piece in multiple different ways starting in 1991, when he first sat on an American flag and started eating pages of The Wall

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Street Journal, washing them down with milk and ketchup. It was a succinct commentary on the US's glorification of capital and consumption, one made even more poignant when he restaged it at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in 2000 while sitting atop a toilet in nothing but a jockstrap and covering himself with flour to temporarily colour his skin white.



Pope.L in his crawl performance *The Great White Way; 22 Miles; 9 Years; 1 Street* (2000-09) © Pope.L; courtesy of Mitchell-Innes & Nash

Institutional interest in his work surged in the early 2000s. He was included in the 2002 Whitney Biennial and again in 2017, when he was awarded the institution's top prize. Shows at San Francisco's Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (2007), the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Contemporary Arts Museum Houston and Studio Museum in New York (2014) followed. In 2019, a trio of exhibitions of his work opened at New York's MoMA, Whitney Museum of American Art and Public Art Fund in an unprecedented city-wide retrospective.

## An enduring legacy

Despite the fact that he claimed to be "more provocateur than activist", Pope.L produced work with the power to yield tangible real-world change. Consider the Flint Water Project (2017), in which he bottled and sold tap water from the Detroit suburb of Flint, Michigan, as a limited-edition artwork at the Detroit gallery What Pipeline. The performance and installation raised awareness of and funds for the health crisis in Flint caused by a disastrous application of an environmentally racist state policy that saw the predominantly Black town's drinking water source switched from Lake Huron to the lead- and bacteria-contaminated Flint River. The \$30,000 in sales from Pope.L's water bottles was donated to the non-profit organisations Hydrate Detroit and the United Way of Genesee County, which helped bring in clean water and advocated for affordable, accessible water in the area.

Moreover, an integral part of his career was teaching, and many of his students took to social media after his death claiming how his tutelage changed their life. From 1990 to 2010, he taught theatre and rhetoric at Bates College in Maine and, until his death, he was an admired visual arts professor at the University of Chicago.

"Pope.L was one of the most important artists of this or any century," Zachary Cahill, the director of fellowship and programs at the University of Chicago's Gray Center and a former student of the artist, told UChicago News. "It will take scholars decades to truly unpack the depth and complexity of his work."

The artist's first solo exhibition at a UK institution opened at the South London Gallery in November and runs until 11 February. A memorial is planned for this spring.