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CIARÁN FINLAYSON ON THE ART OF POPE.L



Pope.L, *Egg Eating Contest (Basement version)*, 1990, video, color, sound, 8 minutes 4 seconds. Installation view, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2019. Photo: Martin Seck. © Pope.L.

AMONG THE VIDEOS ON DISPLAY in “member: Pope.L, 1978–2001,” at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, many of which are grainy documents of Pope.L’s experimental theater works, is *Egg Eating Contest (Basement version)*, 1990, a piece first performed in East Orange, New Jersey, in which the artist appears as a sort of emasculated black nationalist strutting around a cellar in a tattered black tunic. Tacked on the wall is a sheet of beige paper; on the paper is a painting of a hairy scrotum. Pope.L, after dramatically producing a marker from the folds of the tunic, attempts to draw the shaft. But he isn’t looking. As he scrawls beyond the frame, the shot freezes. When the video resumes, he’s holding a solid black egg, which he carries reverentially offstage. He returns to behold his handiwork, and the drawing falls on his head, revealing another, smaller drawing of a dick sporting a bow near the tip. In a gentle, wheedling voice, Pope.L launches into a disquisition. “The problem with the white man,” he earnestly declaims, “is, he’s not very nice.” He elaborates an absurdist, infantile history of the transatlantic slave trade: “At naptime he takes all the blankie. And at snack time he takes all the treats . . . and when the black people get upset,” he says, working himself up to a frenzied stutter, “he says, he says, ‘Shut up! Shut up, I’m your salvation, shut up!’ and he ties them up and he loads them on the ships and he makes them sing spirituals about sadness and despair and death and stuff, and makes them do tribal imitations of Al Jolson. . . .” The piece goes on to satirize former trustee David Rockefeller, the African origins of Western modernism, and the administrators of those “Venerable Black Institutions of Higher Learning,” historically black colleges and universities.



Pope.L, *Egg Eating Contest (Basement version)*, 1990, acrylic, pressure-sensitive tape, spray paint, and ballpoint pen on paper, 65 1/2 x 42". © Pope.L.

Cutting in all directions, the monologue inflates tropes of black cultural nationalism until they become vulgar, silly, and impotent. The video concludes when the protagonist is electrocuted by his white assistant, although this was not the end of the performance. These works in the screening room are the only extant recordings of much of Pope.L's early theater work, and nearly all of them conclude this way—that is, abruptly, often cutting out mid-sentence. Also in this room, an artwork—*Package Received but Never Opened #21*, 2017, a gift basket wrapped in clear cellophane—is tucked away behind the screen and illuminated by a dramatic red light. A second work of mail art, *Package Received but Never Opened #167*, 2015, a parcel wrapped in brown paper, is installed high on a platform in a corner. Notably, along with the *Failure Drawings* on scrap paper scattered throughout the galleries, these fall outside the exhibition's chronological scope; they are among its only "autonomous" works, pieces of art in their own right, distinct from the stage props, costumes, ephemera, and other relics of live performances that constitute the majority of objects

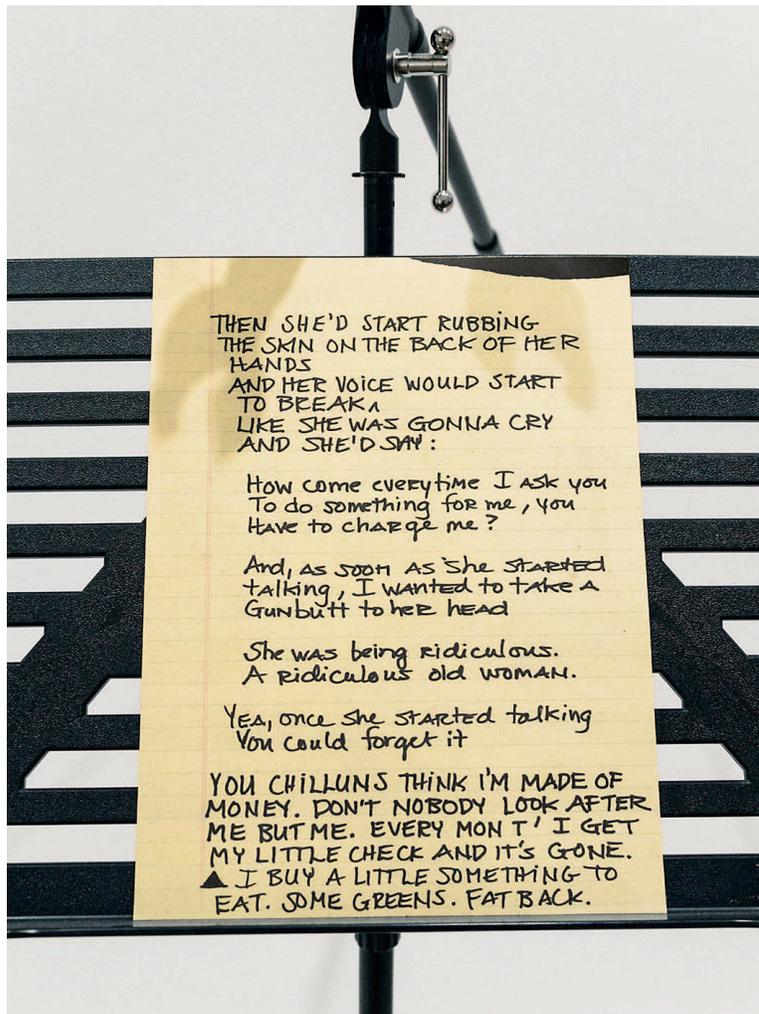
in the show. Foregrounding their status as mute, satirically self-contained sculptures, they throw into relief the difficulty of critically engaging with the videos, which are replete with moral provocations that cannot be adjudicated on the basis of these excerpts, none more than a few minutes long. To get ahold of the internal dynamics of these performances, we would need access to their full narrative arcs, some window into the totality of their abrasive propositions.



Pope.L, *Package Received but Never Opened # 21*, 2017, Maisie's Savory snack mix, The Popcorn Factory caramel popcorn, Emilie Roux Pretzel snacks, Walker's Belgian chocolate cookies, Ghirardelli dark chocolate blueberry squares, ceramic bowl, clear plastic, silk ribbon. Installation view, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2019. Photo: Chandra Glick. © Pope.L.

Absent this, the indulgences of “member” (the title is but one of the show’s many dick jokes) leave us to sit with Pope.L’s unflinching confessional fantasies. The catalogue restores a sense of critique, albeit wryly. The viewer might bristle at the manuscript for *Aunt Jenny Chronicles*, 1991, in which the narrator says of his centenarian aunt, “As soon as she started talking I wanted to take a gunbutt to her head,” and might wince at the accompanying photographs of a shirtless Pope.L lactating whipped cream while delivering the monologue, but the artist’s statements and press

releases quoted in the catalogue's chronology explain that the piece "explores the tensions between the fascism of youth and the wisdom of the aged, Black Matriarchy and the rainy day Patriarchy it nurses to power." The excerpt we are shown of the performance-lecture *Eracism (version 8b)*, 2000, contains a dreamy, dissociative, irreverent description of the rape of slaves and instructs us to "press our lips between the ass cheek of their pain." This is slyly resolved as an attempt at "an agit-poetic exploration of American racial Co-dependence." Pope.L, the obdurate "trickster," is taking us "on an evocative journey through the wilderness of our racial selves."



Pope.L, reproduction of *Aunt Jenny Chronicles* script, 1991/2019, paper facsimile. Installation view, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2019. Photo: Chandra Glick. © Pope.L.

Such characterizations ground Pope.L's stridently indeterminate work in progressive principles and ironize any offense it may give, muting its actual politics. In a conversation included in the catalogue, Pope.L is asked by curatorial assistant Danielle A. Jackson to discuss *The Black Factory*,

2004–2006—a project in which he and a team of assistants traveled around the United States in a delivery truck asking people to donate objects that represent blackness—as a work of theater. In his early days, he says, he would have called the idea “too-too-too fancy pants!,” preferring instead “a floppy, goofy, stupid proscenium.” A collection of the donated objects is installed in a hallway, marking a transition from experimental theater to full-fledged contemporary performance art—“the white biz,” as he calls it in *Aunt Jenny*. He attributes his arm’s-length relation to both “Theater” and “Art” to the influence of his grad-school adviser, Fluxus artist Geoffrey Hendricks, from whom he adopted the general attitude of that movement: “learned but stupid, fancy but poor, funny but sad.”

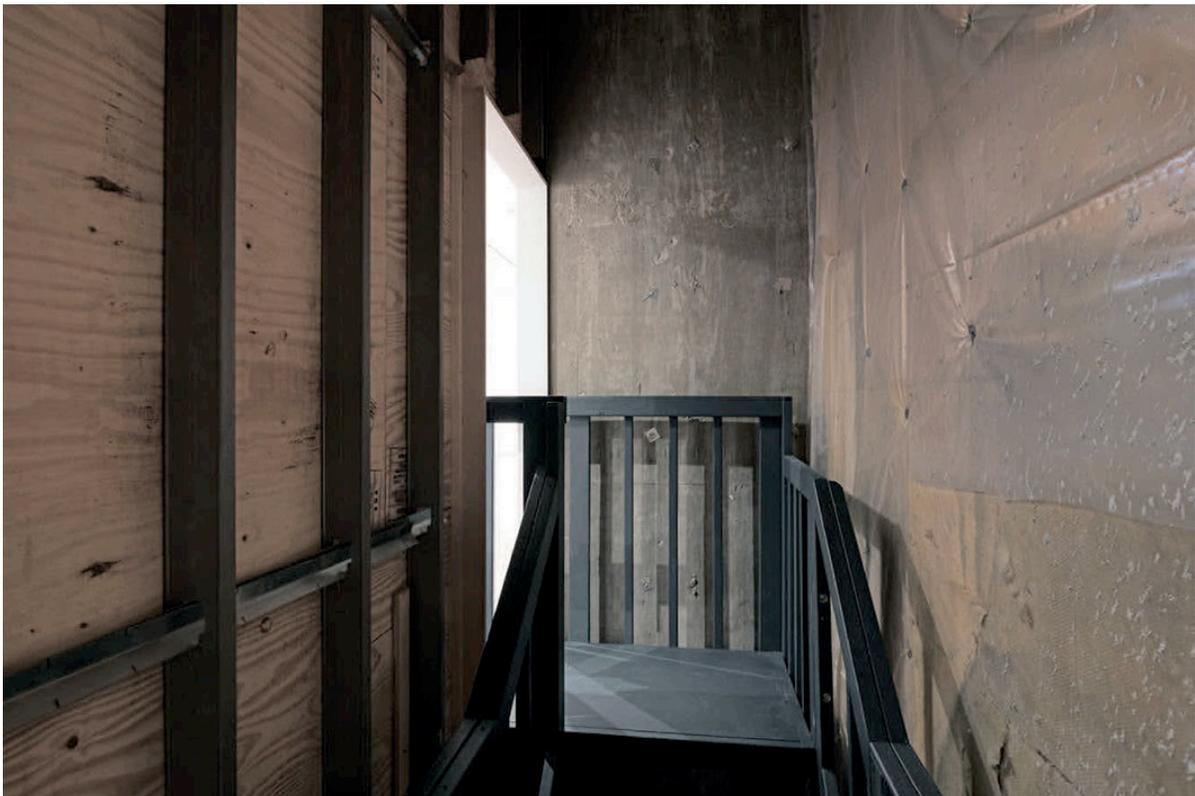


Still from Pope.L’s *Eracism (version 8b)*, 2000, video, color, sound, 10 minutes 24 seconds. ©

Pope.L.

To the preceding list, one might add “engagé but ironic.” Much of the work in “member” invokes political commitment only to disavow it. *ATM Piece*, 1997, finds Pope.L attempting to tie himself to the door of a Chase bank near Grand Central using sausage links and wearing only a skirt made of dollar bills. Offering one in an outstretched hand to an NYPD officer, he

gets removed within seconds. The apparent prompt for the performance, the wall text informs us, was a then-recently passed New York law making it illegal to ask for money within ten feet of an ATM. Pope.L, like the ancient *kynic* Diogenes, plays the fool whose own disturbed behavior reveals the insanity of the social order. But, to foreclose the possibility of strangers' experiencing his antics as work, possessing determinate social and historical content, he layers the action with nonsense until it is politically unintelligible to his audience of police and passersby—indistinguishable from a common bit of street madness. The more urgent or pressing the social issue that's made the substance of the piece, the more its purported commitments are diffused with visual gags.



Pope.L, *Snow Crawl*, 1992–2001, wood, mirrors, cardboard, and video (color, sound, 7 minutes 42 seconds). Installation view, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2019. Photo: Martin Seck. © Pope.L.

Peter Osborne has described cynicism as the means by which art and politics maintain their critical modes. One can easily imagine Pope.L as Diogenes, roaming with a lamp in the daylight looking for an honest man, or masturbating in public, or telling Alexander the Great to get lost. His own gnomic, antisocial, performative critiques of society (most especially the civil society of the racial state) employ similar heuristic tactics. For *Sweet Desire a.k.a. Burial Piece*, 1996, the artist is buried in the ground up to his neck and immobilized for eight hours while a bowl of

vanilla ice cream melts before him in the summer heat. Why do all that, Yvonne Rainer asks in the catalogue, when “a series of photos or a ten-minute video might have a comparable effect?” Rainer is right that the effect is the same—if one is watching the video. The jokey editing is cast in shadow by the wall text, which tells us that a subsequent iteration of this action was aborted halfway through because the crushing weight of the burial necessitated the emergency hospitalization of the artist. The content of the work is not the campy “Black Tantalus” image but the extravagant surplus of effort that went into making it. It succeeds formally because the intensity of the action is far in excess of its ostensible meaning. Other works in the show invert that dynamic: The charge of the symbolic content overwhelms the purported objects of critique, as, for instance, in *Black Domestic a.k.a. Cow Commercial*, 1994, where, before a Manhattan street audience of no one in particular, Pope.L sticks an American flag up the ass of a plastic cow figurine and nurses it from a glass bottle labeled race. Such works, and the show in its entirety, pose a number of demanding questions: Why pursue such outwardly dumb tasks with such dogged persistence? Why the cynical relation to the history and symbols of black radicalism? Why this life-or-death commitment to the bit? When, in *Black Domestic*, Pope.L looks sternly at the camera to ask, “If a black person owns a cow, does the meaning of the cow change?” it registers, like much of his work, as a parody of performance art, or as part of an antinomy of racial reason—black study ad absurdum. He showcases the excrescences of racial ideology, presenting it at its most excessive, amplifying the contradictions, and placing them side by side. The polemical conflation, occurring everywhere in this exhibition, of black and white as colors, concepts, and social relations is impossible to pin to a position. Pope.L says that he wants audiences to have to “juggle, swim, and contest to find their relation to the issues,” just as he has to.

It can seem like Pope.L is tarrying in the superstructure, asking viewers how it makes them feel when he does something scandalous.



View of “member: Pope.L, 1978–2001,” 2019–20, Museum of Modern Art, New York.
Center: *Member a.k.a. Schlong Journey*, 1996. Photo: Martin Seck. © Pope.L.

Darby English, in *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (2007), influentially argued that Pope.L’s work evacuates race, and by extension all other possible social categorizations, of stable meaning. One might want the work to do more—to probe what’s behind or beneath or on the other side of the processes of racialization. It can seem like Pope.L is tarrying in the superstructure, asking viewers how it makes them feel when he does something scandalous. This is a response his art both courts and preempts. A well-known piece from the relentless series of drawings and paintings “Skin Set,” 1998–, reads, “White people are the sky, the rope and the bonfire.” He’s written below in felt-tip marker, “Friends forever,” “Write or death write your breath,” and, in muted summation and negation of his practice, “Race is corny.”



Pope.L., *Sweet Desire a.k.a. Burial Piece*, 1996, video, color, sound, 4 minutes 19 seconds. © Pope.L.

Beyond taking aim at the usual suspects (white liberal philanthropy, blue-chip galleries, racial essentialism, black bourgeois respectability, “patriarchy in general”), Pope.L deploys his anarchic approach in lacerating self-examination. He suspects his own motives and questions the sincerity of his critique. A poem published in *Performance Journal* in 1991, partially reproduced in the show, concerns the suspicion that his street performances—particularly the famous crawls, in which he pulls himself, at great harm to his body, through the gutters of New York—are ultimately self-serving and amount only to his “pretending to suffer.” But his guilt about having a “good job in bad times” passes over into something careless. “Cashing my paycheck over the bodies in Palestine / See ’em laid out like Jewry on the Bowery.” The middle term, “Jewry,” is absent from the version of the text reproduced on a gallery wall as a disordered facsimile reproduction of his 1992 artist book *William Pope.L’s “How Much Is that Nigger in the Window”*: *Rap Street Journal*, the pages of which are heavily redacted for poetic effect. But the discrepancy between the published and unreproduced versions raises an issue that goes to the heart of the show—what are the ends of profanation and provocation? Why the accented homophony here—the riff on jewelry and Jews? Why risk a conflation—

linking “Jewry,” rather than the settler state, to the deaths of Palestinians—that lies at the heart of contemporary anti-Semitism? Why toy with language that impishly deflates the Palestinian struggle for self-determination? And what, precisely, is the point? One hopes it’s more than a prompt to motivate us—for the thousandth time—to *ask ourselves difficult questions*. Pope.L presaged the current vogue for skewering respectability, as well as the current aesthetic appetite for transgression—a rebuke, presumably, to a drearily “progressive” dogma, according to which even our beloved blue-chip trickster-gods must eat their leftist vegetables. The alternative—Pope.L’s anarchic transvaluation of values—seems to rejoice in its own trespasses in a way that arrives, strangely, at a kind of tameness. The messy-but-sharp installation of “member” notwithstanding, most framings of the artist’s work tend to domesticate it, so that it’s “about” shame but does not itself bear the burden of actually being shameful. It’s unclear whether the work’s jagged edges manage to catch on anything. Perhaps that, really, is Pope.L’s point—the desire beneath his flirtations with resignation and reaction, which want to assault the viewer’s sensibilities and cast the critic in the role of disciplinarian. “I am a naughty little Negro with a skirt on. And I want you—that’s right—you, little fella,” Pope.L taunts in *Eracism*, “to lift the skirt of my hypothesis and spank me with your naked intelligence. That’s right. I want you to lift the skirt of my hypothesis. And spank me with your naked intelligence.”

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