



POPE.L

[ARTIST]

“AS WITTGENSTEIN SAID, ‘WHAT PAIN?’”

Words disputed by Pope.L in this interview:

Become
In
For

At this year's Whitney Biennial, Pope.L exhibited 2,755 slices of bologna. He pinned the meat with a grid of photographs on the walls of a large pink and green cube and allowed its greasy orange juices to dribble down the walls and pool in green gutters around the cube's perimeter. Over the three-month exhibition, the meat festered and the smell grew increasingly putrid, filling the museum's galleries with the undeniable sense that something in the air was off.

Pope.L has a way of destabilizing his viewers. He calls everything into question— institutions, perceptions, cultural conventions, identities—and he does so by provoking us with absurdity. As he sees it, the bologna in the Whitney installation (titled Claim [Whitney Version]) represents flesh, and the number of slices is a reference to some percentage of the Jews in New York City. It's a comment on multiculturalism, and yet he purposely distorts the statistics, intentionally destroying the integrity of whatever statement he seems to be making.

These kinds of gestures are what have made Pope.L a slippery artist since the '70s, when he began performing on the street. He refers to himself as "the Friendliest Black Artist in America," and omits his first name (William) when exhibiting. He seems to eschew style, and instead experiments freely with a variety of materials and approaches, from abstract painting to writing to appropriative sculpture. He rarely settles into any clear political position, though the work often suggests what he calls "socially responsible" activist impulses, sometimes even philanthropy. Recently, he bottled and sold questionable, possibly polluted water from Flint, Michigan, to raise money for the city.

Likewise, Pope.L treats the concept of race with poetic nonsensicality. His best-known piece is a performance titled The Great White Way, in which he donned a superman costume and, over a period of nine years, intermittently crawled along the twenty-two miles of Broadway in New York City. Likewise, his ongoing Skin Set drawings are scrawled aphorisms on skin color: Black people are the window and the breaking of the window and Purple people are the end of orange people and Orange people are god when She is shitting. In these drawings, he seems to mock the whole idea of racial reductionism, and opens up a vast, ambiguous space for humor and interpretation.

The following interview—my second with Pope.L—was conducted through email correspondence over several months. His responses are written with the freewheeling, contradictory energy of his art, with both stuttered emotional reactions and carefully parsed explanations. Before we began, he sent me a contract that declared that he "owns all copyright and intellectual property rights to all his writing," which, of course, includes everything you are about to read.

—Ross Simonini

I. THE CRAB-LIKE ACT OF CREATIVITY

THE BELIEVER: Why do you omit your first name when you work as an artist?

POPE.L: It's a professional thing, I think. The more you are out there in public, the more you need to be conscious of that. I don't like to be conscious of my public-ness. Takes too much energy. Going by my family name puts my split right out in front. Somehow that calms me.

BLVR: Do you consider your art self different than your private self?

PL: Yes, each is a variation on the meme of me.

BLVR: When you perform do you feel you have to become a different kind of person? When you crawled up Broadway, what state were you in?

PL: In? In? Become? The state of "in" in the flesh of becoming... I don't think I become anything or am "in" anything, per se. While performing I simply focus a part or parts of myself to deal with a task. All the other parts of myself remain "in" there. If there is an art to performing, it's the managing-the-selves thing. But I suppose, yes, I do transform—in a way—from one state, cooler, to another: warmer or hotter. I become, as you might say, this other person: this more focused, more vulnerable, more generous yet more limited and narcissistic person.

'Cause the task is the only thing I want to do, that I need to do. In life the tasks are seldom so singular; the script is much more variegated, with layered shifts required and one's performance—well, it has to be messier and more disjointed to be successful—what does that mean when one is just living? When I was crawling up Broadway there was no unified state except... except perhaps pain and uncertainty, which is weird, 'cause I always knew where I was going.

BLVR: How does this state relate to the painting state?

PL: Painting is uncomfortable in a different way than, say, crawling, or just straight performing. These days a painting takes me a long time to make, and because of the nature of my studio life I paint in front of other people a lot. Painting as a process, at times, can be excruciating 'cause the way to "go" in making a painting is, at least for me, always clumsy, unmarked and blinding, even when I think I know what I am doing. However, the pain I experience in painting is more psychic, intellectual, and social than physical, which is perhaps why I write when I paint, even if I am not using words, I perform as a writer. It's scribbling as a crab-like act of creativity.

Writing as a verb anchors me in a fiction of communication and teleology—that there is a hither and a yon, an inside and an outside, a here and a now and a there and a then. Painting hamstrings writing via the clumsiness of the practice itself, its



Gold People Dick the Mist. © 2015 by Pope.L. 87 3/4 x 66 x 3 in. Reprinted courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, NY.

penchant for physicalizing as much as possible, then claiming the physical things like paint or shape or edge *only mean what they mean* or that they must! mean something not physical at all, something impossible to physicalize, like beauty or purity or transcendence. But all this is very productive in a kooky non-intuitive sort of way. Writing through the brain of painting brings in interesting baggage. Why and how helpful? Because the space of writing is largely in the head, and the space of painting, like performing, is mostly in the body, and their tension together, the one I'm interested in, where they cohabit, is in the world. So there is that.

II. SYNCOPATED ATMOSPHERES

BLVR: I see you are teaching a class called Writing for Performance at the University of Chicago. Are your performances usually supported by writing? If so, what kind of writing are we talking about? A script? A story?

PL: In the syllabus I changed the name of the course to Writing and Performance. I just did it. Well, I changed it 'cause the course-list title, the title you cited, suggests I am privileging writing over performance or vice versa. Ahh! The politics of titles. 'Cause you see, here at THE University of Chicago, where I am employed, text is king. However, I believe—and it's me who teaches the fucking course—I believe Writing AND Performance is a better title. It's clearer—more on the mark concerning what really happens when text and image get together in the world. The course is about the tension in performance between text and non-text. Most performances I make involve some sort of language-thing, OK, but usually that's intertwined with some sort of image-thing as well as a feeling-thing. The feeling thing, the tone thing, is the most difficult to pin down.

BLVR: Does the feeling thing usually come at the beginning or the end? Or is it always different?

PL: Truth is, the feeling thing doesn't always arrive, especially in visual art. Or it comes in bits and pieces that don't hang neat together. And it comes at different times even when it does arrive. When I am doing music, I find it comes sooner and clearer and I know its arrival with more certainty. Of course that "ease" can be a lie. In visual art, the feeling thing is almost always reluctant. At least with me it's always the same thing—it's always a reach, a strive, seldom a grab. But in music, it's the thing you don't need words for to get at what you're after. Yet frequently you need the words to get at something more than feeling—but what could be more than feeling? Not feeling anything at all. And what does *to get* mean in this context? *To get* means "to possess," "to understand," "to arrive at without *seeming* to consume," 'cause access just happens, right? It just appears; it's so!!!! immediate. But it's it's it's not! It's not! It's not! Yet it feels so unencumbered. How could something that feels so free cost anything? Tricky thing—feeling. Intimacy is sleight of hand in visual art. It's almost impossible for it not to be. Yet if you didn't feel it in the first place, you couldn't art it later. It's part of the craft of art that the soul can feel so direct yet require puppetry.

Even the crawls I did had this problematic. As Wittgenstein said, “What pain?”

BLVR: Are your performances usually supported by writing?

PL: All performances I make are supported by conceptualization but not all works show the language-crafting on their sleeves. I like that. I like that. That that that! That some require the overt flesh of words and others only “allow” the viewer to write the script. Of course, I frame the “allowance” within the parameters of the performance...

In grad school, I definitely privileged text over image. It was an oversight. Youth! A friend of mine, Lydia Grey, asked me why I privileged text over image. I blamed it on the father of conceptual art Joseph Kosuth. No, no. I didn’t have a good answer at all. And that bothered me. At the time, she and another friend, Mary Jane Montalto, had been introducing me to the work of theater director Robert Wilson. I liked Wilson ‘cause sometimes he’d run a scene nonstop for an hour or more with no text at all—even so, he was always suggesting aspects of discourse that I associate with language—for example, story, character, history, dialogue,

place—he did it mostly through his use of costume, setting, duration, and pacing. Looking at his shows, it was fascinating to witness someone suggesting so much reference but using so little language as text. Early Richard Foreman was similarly “empty” but much more blocky and static. Much of Wilson’s stage was familiar to me from other sources—I knew the glacial slowness of Beckett, the object-oriented sculpt-wordplay of the art avant-garde, but in Wilson’s world, timing was more important—basically he created syncopated atmospheres. What drove them? It was a lot like a music video—music was the color propelled by the contrapuntal.

BLVR: As a performer, do you think in text?

PL: As a performer, I do not think in text—I kind of try not to think. Kind of. At least not text-think. Muscle-think, OK. Place-think, OK. Feel-think, OK. Or situation-think. All OK. But very little text-think. I sometimes speak text when I perform, but it’s still not about the text. It’s about using the text as an instrument to create a moment or scene or achieve a task. Now, as a maker, a creator of the work itself, I definitely think more in text. However, when I was younger, I would have said, “Yes, as a performer I think in text.” But even then, even then I knew intuitively that that was not true but I had no other way to express it at the time—it was easier, safer, and more hip to just say, “Yeah—my shit come from language!”

MICROINTERVIEW WITH
BEAR GRYLLS
PART IV



BLVR: What’s it like to sleep cold on a rock? I bet it sucks.

BG: It’s never fun. Hard, cold places are never fun. But it never takes too much ingenuity or resources to work out ways to make yourself comfortable in the wild. Whether it’s fluffy grasses stuffed inside backpacks or making hammocks out of vines. I always think time spent making a comfortable shelter is time well spent.

BLVR: What’s the feeling when you wake up from sleeping like that?

BG: You wake up in the jungle, still soaking wet and cold—you got to get moving. The thing is not to think about it too much. Once you get the blood flowing again, you feel like a new person. I never feel very brave first thing in the morning. ✨

III. A CHILL WIND

BLVR: What’s your reading life like?

PL: I like to read but I get impatient with it or with myself. It’s not that I want reading to be an image or a movement or even transparent—I want it to be functional even if it’s nonsense or opaque. I want it to do something—to perform. These days much of what I read is either because I have to or because I absently grab from an ever-growing pile of all-the-things-I-want-to-read-but-never-shall.

Lately, I found something that checks several of my boxes—it’s functional, it does something, it’s fresh, and I can consume it in small doses and return to it without losing the entire thread. It’s stuff on the theory of ignorance. It’s a 2015 book called *Routledge International Handbook of Ignorance Studies*, edited by Matthias Gross and Linsey McGoey. A bit expensive but worth it. One of its key ideas is that ignorance can be theorized

and has value, for example, in science experiments which use double-blind testing. Or in the law, which, at least symbolically, characterizes itself as blind. An interesting figure that pops up here and there in the book is Donald Rumsfeld, former secretary of defense, with his notorious unknown unknowns. But what is most interesting about the material is its treatment of ignorance as both inevitable and a tool, a resource. Basically, new knowledge always produces new ignorance, which is not necessarily always a deficit. Non-knowledge sensitizes us to new opportunities. In addition, knowing the limits of one's knowledge is just as important as knowing the reach of one's knowledge.

BLVR: The series of *Skin Set* drawings seems to explore non-knowledge, body knowledge.

PL: Rather than a series, I think of *Skin Set* as a set; which is an open play of terms: artworks framed by a will to voice, to breathe—a fluid bunch of stuff, really, under continual revision based on the bit-by-bit inclusion of new members as the work becomes over time. *Skin Set* is most physical in that it is limited by my breath, my death. Hmmm. That sounds too romantic: the dead artist and his body of work sort of thing... Hmmm. What would happen if my death perpetuated my body of work instead of impeded it? How would that happen? In some ways artists have been perpetuating themselves for years via museums dedicated solely to their shit—sort of like presidential libraries—or, more recently like their corporations, nonprofits and foundations. I wonder if the ultimate success of Warhol will be his foundation? So that one day the only thing young artists will know of him is his mechanism. Is that something to aspire to?

BLVR: Are you preparing for your death as an artist? Is legacy important to you?

PL: No, I am preparing for my death as a person but but but so far it has not gone well. Bottom line, I am not ready to die. Recently my gallery sat me down at a special lunch to talk about estate and artist foundation shit. A chill wind. They meant well. The meeting was cordial. At first I thought it was going to be some kind of intervention, and in a way it was, but I did not expect—hmmm—that I would feel—

BLVR: You're selling bottles of contaminated water from Flint,

Michigan, as a fund-raiser. Besides raising money, what is your interest in distributing bottles of contaminated water?

PL: I visited Flint recently with Alivia Zivich and Daniel Sperry from the art gallery What Pipeline, and Eric Dutro, an independent photographer who lives in Flint. We talked with people as they drove up for supplies at a distribution point run by the state of Michigan. We were told by several people that they cook and bathe with the same water I want to bottle. Is the water safe? Well, that's not 100 percent clear. It's a scary situation. My interest in selling contaminated drinking water goes beyond Dadaist hoo-ha. Beyond the gesture. Or maybe Flint is ultimate Dada. Either way, all the monies we raise from the sale of Flint water go directly to supporting the people of Flint in their struggle.

Art-wise, the aesthetics in this work are in the immaterial: vulnerability, community, and a sense of connectedness. The citizens of Flint were ill-served by the folks who governed them—the city, the state, and the federal government. In 2015, the EPA said their new water supply was safe, but it was anything but safe.

I am selling Flint's polluted water because, as weird as it may sound, their water has become a very important part of Flint. The water is an object lesson and a reminder that Flint is not the only city in the US with serious water issues. Just down the road, people in Detroit, until recently, were losing their homes because they couldn't pay their water bills.

BLVR: Do you see any problem with equating art and social activism? Have you found that the activist impulse competes with the art impulse?

PL: Art. Activism. Activism. Art. They aren't the same, but maybe they should be. I mean, should art improve the quality of people's lives in a meaningful way? Fuck yeah. Should activism blow our eyes, ears, and minds? Fuckity fuck yeah. So there's no problem.

IV. A PERFORMANCE OF MOLECULES

BLVR: Your work is thick with ritual. What rituals are important in your life?

PL: Making my bed every morning.

BLVR: Do you look to historical rituals for insight?



The Great White Way, 22 Miles, 9 Years, 1 Street. Video still © 2001 by Pope.L. Reprinted courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, NY.

PL: I probably look to “the mistake”—you know, making mistakes as a tradition. And of course mistakes do not necessarily mean failure. It’s that ignorance-theory thing again, perhaps. I call mistakes ritualistic ‘cause the most essential, stupid, and important mistakes rely on repetition for their impact. We are attached to what escapes and ensnares us. People are hardheaded. Perhaps this is why the most fucked-up mistakes describe our most essential histories. In this way our rituals become tied up in time. Personally, I find social welfare, the way we do it here in the United States, has provided me with a lot of insight. My family was on welfare for a long while. I didn’t really understand the system in a deep way until my mom went to jail and we had to “simulate” her presence in order to keep receiving the checks.

BLVR: Your work is often described by its smell, and this is connected to your use of foods like bologna and peanut butter. What does smell activate for you?

PL: Smell, or odor or the olfactory, is sculptural—so imagine an installation that begins at the nose and pirates every cell in

the body. I imagine smell as the movement—or performing, if you will—of molecules from one thing or situation into and out of another. Some of the molecules enter our body and our consciousness and accomplish a kind of access I could never obtain on my own. Smell keeps the focus on the moment and is not experienced as historical. At the moment of impression, smell is all presence. Even when it reminds you of something else, the initial encounter is in-your-face physical. Even so, memory or history or the cheesy whiff of ideology is never far behind. We always want to make smell into something else ‘cause it is so obdurately itself. Things decay ‘cause they always have, but it is also true that things decay a little differently today than they once did. For example, the drastically reduced breakdown of plastics or pesticides and genetically modified foods. We smell different today and our deaths must also smell different.

BLVR: How did you arrive at bologna as a material?

PL: The first thing I do is I don’t call it bologna. I call it baloney. ★