

Forbes

Famous For Crawling Up Broadway In A Superman Suit, Pope.L Brings His Politically-Charged Absurdist Art To MoMA



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When the artist William Pope.L read an ad claiming that subscribing to the *Wall Street Journal* enriched the recipient, he decided to fully exploit the paper's mystical power by ingesting it. On several occasions, beginning in 1991, Pope.L has eaten the *Journal*, making the pages more palatable with ketchup. Once he even telephoned the editors, generously inviting them to lunch with him.

It wasn't just a prank. As he has explained it, "Capitalism is, at its root, a ritual based on superstition... and a training for empty consumption and endless evacuation." *Eating the Wall* that is widespread and seldom scrutinized.



Pope.L. *The Great White Way*, 22 miles, 9 years, 1 street. 2000-09. Performance. © Pope.L. Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash

POPE.L

Pope.L's absurdist exploits are the focus of an important new retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art. The exhibition and accompanying catalogue are worthy testaments to the artist's unique talent, while also inspiring the viewer to consider how Pope.L's provocative interrogations of economic inequality and racial prejudice can be models for political engagement more broadly.

Pope.L is most famous for acts of extreme endurance. He has crawled across Times Square on hands and knees, immaculately dressed in business attire. Donning a Superman suit – poignantly stripped of its superpower for want of a cape – he has dragged himself up Broadway, gradually traversing all twenty-two miles of it, from the southern tip to the South Bronx.

He called the Broadway excursion *The Great White Way*. As his title suggests, he performed it as an enactment of the invisibility and powerlessness he has confronted as an African-American. Key to the work is the fact that nobody asked for it. People had to confront it whether they wanted to or not, and inherently became a part of it, their reactions as central to the performance as his own unsettling presence.

This strategy of showing up someplace and inspiring new terms of interaction – as opposed to falling back in the controlled conditions of a theater or museum – is essential to Pope.L's confrontation of complacency, and especially effective in a wide-ranging project called *The Black Factory*.



Installation view of member: Pope.L, 1978–2001, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, October 21, 2019 – February 1, 2020. © 2019 The Museum of Modern Art. Photo: Martin Seck

Initiated in 2004, *The Black Factory* is a truck that rolled into cities and towns to collect objects that residents associate with blackness. The goods that Pope.L and his collaborators amassed ranged from overtly racist figurines to R&B albums to cheap canned goods such as pork n' beans. Some of these items (such as the canned food) were offered for sale, with proceeds

donated to the local food bank. Others objects were pulverized and reconstituted as Black Factory souvenirs. The remainder went into an archive that bracingly puts the pervasiveness and complexity of racism on display.

“What is the *Black Factory*?” Pope.L wrote in a 2003 brochure. “Simple! The *Black Factory* is an industry that runs on our prejudices. That means you don’t have to come to us, we come right to you!... We harvest all your confusions, questions and conundrums, and transform them into the greatest gift of all: possibility!”

Like *Eating the Wall Street Journal*, *The Black Factory* gives satirical form to standard values, evoking the simplistic mindset underlying the American Dream. *The Black Factory* essentially manufactures wishful thinking. And yet a transformation in how we think about race would have a real impact on prejudice.

Pope.L destabilizes obsolete myths with acute absurdity. The absurdity of Pope.L’s propositions is paradoxically what gives them viability.