

MoMA

Making Ways: André Lepecki on *The Great White Way: 22 Miles, 9 Years, 1 Street*

In honor of Pope.L (1955–2023), read an excerpt from member: Pope.L, 1978–2001, and come see the work on view in MoMA's galleries.

André Lepecki | Jan 24, 2024



Renowned as the “Friendliest Black Artist in America©”, [Pope.L](#) infamously proclaimed that “the Black body is a lack worth having.” In the wake of his unexpected passing on December 23, 2023, the weight of this phrase takes on added complexity. Pope.L’s active, living body was a central instrument in a broad range of grueling, provocative, and profound actions that helped to define an influential career spanning almost five decades. His work took to the streets and to the stage with performances that directly, indelibly engaged the specters of cruel histories in the present moment, actively stirring up the social absurdities they have produced. To mark his extraordinary life, the video for Pope.L’s performance [The Great White Way: 22 miles, 9 years, 1 street](#) (2001–09) is now on view at MoMA. This video documents a multipart performance during which the artist dragged his body along the entire length of Broadway, dressed in a capeless Superman costume and knit cap with a skateboard strapped to his back, and crawled for as long as he could. When the pain became unbearable, he would turn on his back and roll on the skateboard before starting to crawl again. The work is one of a group of landmark performances by the artist acquired by MoMA in 2019 that formed the focus of the exhibition [member: Pope.L, 1978–2001](#). An essay by André Lepecki about *The Great White Way*, excerpted from the exhibition’s catalogue, follows below.

—Stuart Comer, The Lonti Ebers Chief Curator of Media and Performance

I get down on my belly and crawl till I’m reality.

—Pope.L¹

Since [Times Square Crawl a.k.a. Meditation Square Piece](#) (1978), Pope.L has engaged in more than thirty individual and collective crawling pieces in different cities across several continents. In 1991, in one of his most iconic

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Crawls, [Tompkins Square Crawl](#) (part of the work *How Much Is That Nigger in the Window*), Pope.L donned a brown suit and crawled past Tompkins Square Park in New York's East Village while holding a small flowerpot containing a little yellow flower. Commenting retrospectively on those early works, Pope.L invoked his motivation as a "response to the steady increase of street people occupying the sidewalks of New York City, the community's refusal to recognize this calamity, and my coming to terms with this lifestyle as an ongoing problem within my immediate family."²



As his practice of "giving up verticality" progressed,³ however, the times changed. As Pope.L's own embodied knowledge of crawling evolved, other elements, which were already implicated in the Crawls from the start, became increasingly prominent. Those elements stretch the paradoxes of Pope.L's particular way of crawling to its limits. Already in his 1997 "Notes on *Crawling Piece*," Pope.L outlined one of those crucial paradoxes propelling his practice: "The real question / Lies in the juxtaposition / of destitution and plenitude."⁴ To acknowledge this complex and counterintuitive juxtaposition is to reveal the reality informing Pope.L's Crawls: crawling makes way for a mode of being whose full potentiality (plenitude) emerges only after going through the lived experience of existing in and as absolute lack (destitution). The latter is a condition Pope.L has often associated with Blackness. "The Black body is a lack worth having,"⁵ he told an interviewer shortly after he had embarked on his most epic crawl, *The Great White Way: 22 miles, 9 years, 1 street* (2001–09).

In *The Great White Way*, Pope.L donned a party-store Superman outfit, replaced the superhero's red cape with a red skateboard (with a yellow Superman shield at its center) strapped to his back, and began to crawl in segments of about six city blocks at a time for the entire length of Broadway, New York City's longest and most famous street, from its southernmost tip to its end in the South Bronx. The first installment of *The Great White Way*, from December 2001, began on Liberty Island and was documented in a six-and-a-half-minute video of the same title. The video opens with a shot of the American flag waving in the wind, followed by a close-up of the Statue of Liberty's face. The camera then pans down the height of the statue, and reveals Pope.L already in the process of crawling, belly against the ground, pulling his body with his elbows, moving painstakingly away from the foot of Lady Liberty with two black mittens protecting his hands from the frost.

Pope.L has barely begun the almost decade-long project before his movement is arrested. Almost immediately as he inches toward the water's edge, two National Park troopers confront him and his cameraman. One of them

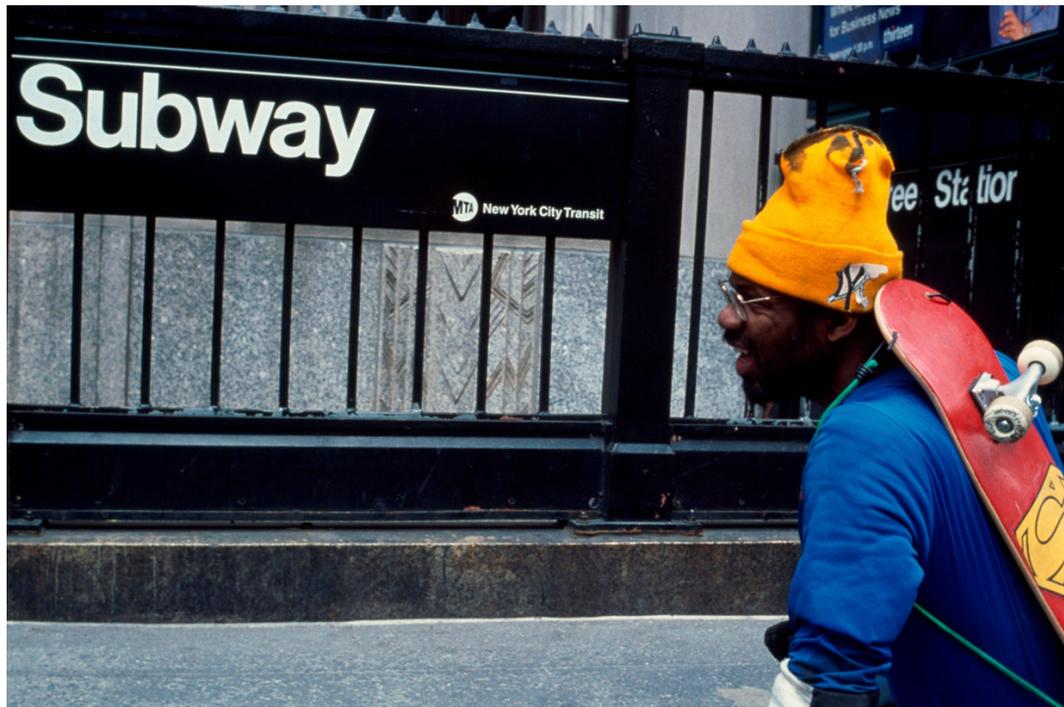
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orders Pope.L to immediately stop what he is doing and “get back to the boat.” On the video, we can hear the cameraman, James Pruznick, explaining to that officer that they have a permit to film. “Not for this,” the trooper replies. “He can’t do this. He has to get back on the boat. He can crawl back to the boat, I don’t care, but he has to leave.”

Being the “Friendliest Black Artist in America©,” Pope.L crawls to board the ferry, but just slowly enough so that the officer’s refrain, “He has to get back to the boat,” can be reuttered, so as to be relistened to, re-recorded, redocumented, and therefore rewritten, resignified. In this process, a police semantics is revealed, one that articulates that even with a permit, even with proper paperwork, even under the guise of art, on Liberty Island a Black man cannot and will not perform an “aberrant movement,” to use David Lapoujade’s expression.⁶ On Liberty Island, no juxtaposition of Black destitution and Black plenitude, no paradoxical, counterdoxical, “anachoreographic” Black movement is to be allowed.⁷ A Black man’s proper place is back on the boat. He may even crawl back to it, as long as he gets back on it.

This incident is more than enough for the artist to extract, for the record, a scene of racial choreopolicing.⁸ That’s why Pope.L makes his art: to “make things happen,” as he once said;⁹ to create “discomfort zones,” as Cynthia Carr once described his work;¹⁰ and to turn performance not into an object for spectatorship but into *the occasioning of an event*—a disruptor of quotidian habits that makes and unmakes subjects and their freedoms, subjects and their acquiescence, subjects and their movements, subjects and their (counter)powers.

Up the gangway and back on the boat, Pope.L finds a corner on the upper deck, where he remains still, in a semi-crouched position, left hand holding the white railings, waves shimmering before him, cresting against the ferry’s hull in rapid succession. The camera lingers on Pope.L’s back to produce the longest shot of the video. Slowly zooming away, the camera shows us a Black body being shipped between two islands, facing the open waters ahead, bobbing up and down according to the rhythms of the Atlantic Ocean as it meets the Hudson River, a rhythm cut only by the ferry’s prow slicing the waves and the resulting wake. Why is it that a six-and-a-half-minute video aimed at documenting a twenty-two-mile crawling performance on Broadway’s asphalt dedicates a two-minute shot to the artist sitting still, contemplating the water from the deck of a moving boat? And why is it that more than half of the footage revolves around Pope.L crawling in, staying on, and crawling out of a boat?



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There is something of the oceanic informing *The Great White Way*. The video suggests a kinetic unconscious of Black movement in the wake of the Middle Passage, one where the particular kind of crawling Pope.L executes—with its micromovements of bobbing the body up and down as it inches along—becomes the kinetic echo, the kinesthetic residue, the moving afterlife of oceanic turbulence, the movement in and of “the wake,” to use Christina Sharpe’s extraordinary expression and affective-political concept: “and while the wake produces Black death and trauma . . . we, Black people everywhere and anywhere we are, still produce in, into and through the wake an insistence on existing: we insist Black being into the wake.”¹¹ We can transpose Sharpe’s analysis of Black “existence in the wake” into this scenario of whiteness and its racial policing arresting Black movement and dispatching yet another black body onto a boat. In *The Great White Way* video, just as in Sharpe’s analysis of the images of “boat people” around the world, “one of the larger questions that arises from the image is how does one mark someone for a space—the ship—who is already marked by it?”¹²

The Great White Way, both as video and as performance, rechoreographs and resemanticizes the word crawl. It regrounds Pope.L’s Crawls as black oceanic events. Within the turbulent pull of the wake, to crawl gains a kinetic-political-affective meaning: to insist on surviving and not being dragged into the great white pit. These are Sharpe’s and Pope.L’s theories of Blackness transmogrifying into performance: to realize that living in the wake of the Middle Passage is to discover that American soil is but a bottomless, turbulent whirlpool, always about to drag down and drown those whose lives matter nothing, or close to nothing, to the great white way of power. If Pope.L crawls on asphalt, belly on the ground, it is because Black life still swims in the wake. Thus the task at hand: to painstakingly make way on one’s belly until a better, more joyful, and freer ground for living is made a reality.

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This essay appears in the 2019 exhibition catalogue member: Pope.L, 1978–2001.

All images: Pope.L. The Great White Way: 22 miles, 9 years, 1 street. Broadway, New York, 2001–09. Video (color, sound; 6:34 min.); five inkjet prints; painted wood and metal skateboard; Superman costume; orange wool hat. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquired through the generosity of The Jill and Peter Kraus Media and Performance Acquisition Fund, Jill and Peter Kraus, Anne and Joel S. Ehrenkrantz, The Contemporary Arts Council of The Museum of Modern Art, and Jill and Peter Kraus in honor of Michael Lynne. © 2024 Pope.L. Courtesy of the artist.

1. William Pope.L, “Notes on *Crawling Piece a.k.a. How Much Is That Nigger in the Window?* (Summer 1991/Streets of New York City),” *Art Journal* 56, no. 4 (Winter 1997): 66.
2. Alisia Chase, “Learning to Be Human: An Interview with William Pope.L,” *Afterimage* 33, no. 4 (January/February 2006): 21.
3. C. Carr, “In the Discomfort Zone,” in *William Pope.L: The Friendliest Black Artist in America*, ed. Mark H. C. Bessire (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002), 49.
4. Pope.L, “Notes on *Crawling Piece a.k.a. How Much Is That Nigger in the Window?*” 65.
5. Lowery Stokes Sims, “Interview with William Pope.L,” in Bessire, William Pope.L: *The Friendliest Black Artist in America*, 62.
6. David Lapoujade, *Aberrant Movements: The Philosophy of Gilles Deleuze* (South Pasadena, Calif.: Semiotext[e], 2017), 23.
7. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Wivenhoe, UK: Minor Compositions, 2013), 50.
8. See Andr. Lepecki, “Choreopolice and Choreopolitics: or, The Task of the Dancer,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 57, no. 4 (Winter 2013): 13–27.
9. Sims, “Interview with William Pope.L,” 64.
10. Carr, “In the Discomfort Zone,” 48.
11. Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2016), 11.
12. *Ibid.*, 48.