

On March 15, 1996, Pope.L strolled along 125th Street in Harlem—the bustling mecca of black America—wearing business attire, a backpack containing a stuffed white bunny, and, most conspicuously, an adjustable cardboard tube protruding from his crotch. Propped up by the base of a rolling office chair, the tube allowed Pope.L’s “member” to extend up to fourteen feet. Occasionally, the artist would pause to drop a raw egg down the tube, causing it to splatter on the sidewalk. Adding to the spectacle, Pope.L intermittently covered his head with a latex glove that expanded and contracted as he breathed.

Intended as “commentary on the supremacy of the white phallus,” and playing with stereotypes of black masculinity, the performance stirred up controversy before it could even be carried out: when news reached Capitol Hill that Pope.L might use National Endowment for the Arts funds toward the performance, the acting chairman of the NEA deemed the work “indecent” and rescinded the grant.

Pope.L

Attn:
Danielle Jackson
1167

Straight-cut

BM-1600

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color duplicate

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In 1991, Pope.L performed an early street version of *Eating the Wall Street Journal*. While sitting on an American flag on a New York City sidewalk, the artist slowly tore pieces of the newspaper and chewed them, washing them down with milk and ketchup. A performance that has evolved over time across a range of locations, *Eating the Wall Street Journal* questions the mythical allure of a newspaper that has long promoted power, wealth, and consumption.

During this exhibition, *Eating the Wall Street Journal* will be reinterpreted in three live performances. A yellow square on the floor marks the location of these performances. The site of these actions can be viewed continuously on a closed circuit monitor at the entrance to the exhibition.

Visit moma.org for schedule and further information.

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This exhibition is punctuated, and punctured, by holes, or cuts in the walls. They are a nod to Pope.L's 2002 manuscript *Hole Theory*, a meditation on the nature of holes. These voids are a tool used by the artist to call attention to binary structures of difference, from inside and outside to lightness and darkness. As the artist has noted, "you can read [holes] like a text—a secret, a code or a structure, a model, a mode of transport or transition from one state or condition or space to another."

Pope.L shares his *Hole Theory*.

Enter 340 on MoMA Audio or moma.org/a340 on your phone.



Pope.L

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Straight-cut

BM-1609

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Throughout *member*, the artist will regularly "haunt" the exhibition, arriving spontaneously to amble through the galleries, launching a dialogue between his past and present selves. If the adjacent hook is empty, Pope.L is present, lurking behind walls and interacting with holes—a wandering ghost that engages the voids left by performances past.

These labels have color duplicates

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In 1991, during his residency at Franklin Furnace, an alternative arts space in New York City, Pope.L staged *Tompkins Square Crawl* in the guise of his alter ego, Mr. Poots. Wearing a business suit and holding a potted flower, Pope.L crawled military-style along the perimeter of Tompkins Square Park in the East Village until his boots began to crumble.

Since the 1980s, the park had been a site of ongoing riots involving the homeless population who took shelter there, squatters, activists, and police. At the time of Pope.L's Crawl, Tompkins Square was barricaded for renovations. By assuming a prostrate posture, forcing onlookers to direct their gazes downward, Pope.L aimed to make visible historically disenfranchised bodies and displaced communities.

Pope.L's related artist's book, *Rap Street Journal*, critiques the social, economic, and political conditions in the United States at the time.

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Over the course of several performances spanning nine years, Pope.L dragged his body the entire length of Broadway, in segments, from its southernmost tip in Lower Manhattan to its northernmost end in the South Bronx. For each performance, he dressed in a capeless Superman costume and knit cap, strapped a skateboard to his back, and crawled up Broadway for as long as he could. When the pain became unbearable, he would turn on his back and roll on the skateboard a while before starting to crawl once again.

He characterized these actions as a “response to the steady increase of street people occupying the sidewalks of New York City and the community’s refusal to recognize this calamity.” On display here are the ghostly remnants of Pope.L’s disempowered superhero: the skateboard, the worn-out Superman suit, and the orange New York Yankees hat.

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The video documenting this performance ponders the following questions: “What do black people want?” “Who do they want it from?” “Why do they want it?” For *Sweet Desire*, which took place at the Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture in Maine on a hot August day, Pope.L had himself buried in the ground up to his chest for eight hours. Wearing a white collared shirt, red hat, and tie, the artist gazed on as a bowl of vanilla ice cream placed in front him slowly melted in the sun.

Having previously crawled on the ground, for this action Pope.L goes below grade, rendering himself completely immobile. Pushing his body to its limits through an extreme test of endurance (he had to be unearthed and hospitalized midway through a subsequent performance), Pope.L underscores the polarity of desire and what he calls “have-not-ness,” a contradictory condition he considers to be definitive of the experience of oppressed peoples.

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This street performance was Pope.L's first Crawl, a practice that would become a hallmark of his career over the next four decades. In *Times Square Crawl*, Pope.L lowered himself to his hands and knees and traversed a run-down stretch of West Forty-Second Street then known as the Deuce. Before a massive redevelopment project in the 1990s transformed Times Square into an epicenter of tourism and commerce, the area was notorious for its adult entertainment industry, drug trade, and homeless encampments.

Dressed in a business suit with a yellow square sewn to the back—the same motif used in his performance *Thunderbird Immolation*—Pope.L drew curious stares from pedestrians. By “giving up verticality,” the artist insisted on the visibility and value of homeless people, who have counted among their number members of his own family. His professional attire served to underscore the deep rift between aspirations of upward mobility and the absence of opportunity for many dispossessed communities in America.

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Sketched on hotel stationery, customs forms, and other ephemera, Pope.L's Failure Drawings portray otherworldly landscapes and phallic protuberances. Geological formations and drooping organisms resembling larvae and roots populate otherwise lifeless environments that appear by turns primordial and postapocalyptic. Produced during Pope.L's frequent travels, and numbering more than a thousand to date, the Failure Drawings ruminate on the transience of professional prestige, good health, and masculine authority. Here, a selection of drawings has been installed in cavities cut from gallery walls, and one of them can be viewed remotely via closed-circuit television.

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On February 19, 1997, wearing only Timberland boots and a skirt made of dollar bills, Pope.L chained himself with a string of sausages to the entrance of a bank on Forty-Second Street near Grand Central Station. Intending to hand out cash to the bank's customers, the artist attracted a bewildered crowd and was quickly confronted by a police officer who identified him as an "EDP" (code for "Emotionally Disturbed Person").

The impetus for the performance was a law passed in New York City the year prior, prohibiting panhandling within ten feet of an ATM. The law contributed to the growing criminalization of the city's poor and people of color. In *ATM Piece*, Pope.L mocks this policy by posing as a street person who, rather than begging, offers money to middle-class passersby. The artist described this performance as "an attempt to bring fresh discomfort to an age-old problem: *the haves* and *the have nots* and what they have to do with each other."

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Eracism is a set of nine scripted “solo art performance lectures” that investigate race, sexuality, and nationalism in the United States. Interspersed with songs and actions, the performances combine elements of experimental theater and stand-up comedy.

Eracism (version 8b), the iteration seen here, features a character named Mr. Poots (played by Pope.L) wearing a semitransparent tulle dress, a green headband, work boots, and a makeshift codpiece forged from a jockstrap and a plastic bottle with an eye drawn on it. Periodically, Mr. Poots opens a case and pulls out a glass jar filled with water and pours it over his head as he recites a meandering dialogue on “the spectrum of hate, the spectrum of night, the spectrum of invisible light which is American racism.”

In *Black Domestic a.k.a. Cow Commercial*, Pope.L roams the streets, tunnels, and buildings of midtown Manhattan dressed in a pastel suit and carrying a black-and-white plastic cow. Performing as a sidewalk oracle, he makes religious and philosophical declarations that border on the absurd. At one point, he installs a miniature American flag in the anus of the cow—the animal is conspicuously marked as “SOLD”—then sticks an empty wine bottle labeled “RACE” into its mouth. Partly a spoof on the popular 1990s advertising campaign “Got Milk?,” *Black Domestic* parodies racial stereotypes that turn identities into consumable commodities.

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In the photographs documenting *Thunderbird Immolation*, the artist is seen sitting in a half-lotus pose on a yellow square on the sidewalk outside a prestigious commercial gallery building in New York's SoHo neighborhood, meditating. Wearing a black suit, white dress shirt, and bow tie, he pulls out of a brown paper bag two bottles of Thunderbird wine, a bottle of Wild Irish Rose, a can of Coca-Cola, a plastic measuring cup, and wooden matches that he arranges in a ring around himself, occasionally spelling out words with them. He then periodically pours the wine (a cheap fortified alcohol marketed to inner-city neighborhoods) over his body.

By dousing himself in flammable liquid, surrounded by matches, Pope.L references the legacy of fire rituals and meditative practices associated with various eastern religions and acts of resistance. Using the yellow cloth as a framing device, the artist's silent action concerns interrelations between protest, self-empowerment, and poverty.

While teaching courses in theater and rhetoric at Bates College in Lewiston, Maine, Pope.L revisited his Crawl series, which until then had been carried out exclusively in New York City, never in a suburban environment. For *Snow Crawl*, Pope.L wore a capeless Superman costume, black boots, mittens, and kneepads while crawling through the snow. Shot and edited over several winters, the video explores themes ranging from religion to class privilege.

To view the video documentation of this performance, visitors are invited to enter the adjacent hole in the wall and climb the staircase. At the top, visitors will encounter another hole, excised from the ceiling, and a hollow mirror-lined plinth in which the video plays. Providing a kaleidoscopic view, the mirrors render Pope.L's body nearly illegible, transforming it into a psychedelic motif.

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In 2004, Pope.L embarked on a tour of the United States in a customized van, a nomadic laboratory designed to collect donated “black objects”—that is, “anything . . . a person believes represents blackness”—as part of his project The Black Factory. At each location, the van set up shop with an interactive program facilitated by “workers,” whose irreverent pranks, cabaret performances, and interventions developed from their engagement with visitors. Addressing would-be participants, the artist wrote, “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!”

Here, a selection of items from the project is on display beneath a mural of participants’ portraits. *SUM Film*, a documentary capturing the breadth of the Black Factory Project, is also on view.

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Eating the Wall Street Journal was conceived when Pope.L encountered an advertising campaign claiming that a mere subscription to the newspaper would multiply one's wealth. Taking this assertion to its absurd conclusion, Pope.L figured, "shouldn't ingesting [the paper] increase your wealth tenfold?" This logic became the basis of the performance.

The artist constructed a tall, four-legged throne with a toilet as the seat. Over the course of five days for three to four hours each day, Pope.L sat atop the throne, reading the *Wall Street Journal*. Resembling a "gargoyle mounted on a castle parapet," he wore only a jockstrap and doused himself in flour, a manufactured form of consumable whiteness. Once Pope.L finished reading the paper, he tore it into strips, chewed the strips (lubricated with milk and ketchup), and spat out the macerated globs.

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Shaving cream, an electric guitar, a tarred-and-feathered watermelon, and the spoken word are among the miscellaneous components of the theater-based work *Aunt Jenny Chronicles*, which Pope.L performed at various experimental venues in New York City. The central monologue, excerpted in this video, is based on Pope.L's childhood relationship with his Aunt Jenny, whom he remembers as a 114-year-old "mythological matriarch from the Old South."

Autobiography becomes material and metaphor in Pope.L's rhythmic script, which is peppered with raw anecdotes and reflections on feelings of shame, alienation, and admiration that characterize the artist's evolving attitude toward his relatives. Through the figure of Aunt Jenny, Pope.L references both private and cultural histories, from the Freedom Rides and race riots of the civil rights era to the black patriarchy modeled by *The Cosby Show*.

“Being black and male today in America is, for me, a consumer’s hell on earth. How much am I worth?” *Egg Eating Contest* addresses various modes of consumption—digestive, economic, sexual, and optical—through object manipulation and a monologue delivered by Pope.L’s prophet-like alter ego, Mr. Poots.

In *Egg Eating Contest (basement version)*, excerpted in the video seen here, the artist delivers a satirical speech that skewers patriarchy and racism while connecting the power dynamics of schoolyard squabbles to the historic racial violence of American slavery. At one point in the video, Pope.L, drawing with a marker, extends the height of a large cartoon phallus, exaggerating its size. He then tears the drawing away to reveal another cartoonish sketch of a penis, this time depicted wearing a bowtie. The video ends as a second performer enters, picks up a power cord, and plugs it into Mr. Poot’s jumpsuit, electrocuting him.

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