



With solo shows at MoMA, the Whitney, and a momentous public performance, Pope.L's New York moment is set to last

Coco Fusco

Coco Fusco speaks to the legendary artist about irony, artworld activism, and finally getting his due

The interdisciplinary artist Pope.L is the creator of several now-legendary performance-art works that explore the conditions of abjection, black masculinity, and racism with bracing irony. In 1997, for example, while dressed in a skirt made from dollar bills, he tied himself to the door of a Chase Manhattan bank in New York City with a 2.5-meter chain of Italian sausages. Since the 1970s he has created more than 30 performance pieces in which he crawls along urban streets, wearing costumes that range from business suits to Superman outfits. On September 21, 2019, he orchestrated his latest iteration of these pieces in Lower Manhattan: Entitled Conquest, this performance involved 140 participants. A few weeks beforehand, he spoke to Art Basel about his plans for this work, the complementary shows being held at the Whitney and MoMA this fall, and his perspective on recent activism in the artworld.

Coco Fusco: How has the meaning of the crawls changed over time?

Pope.L: The first crawls I did were done solo, even though, at the time, the initial idea came out of an image in which I saw a mass or group of folks crawling, moving as one, through the city streets. What kind of film would this be – horror, comedy, war? I crawled solo because I was the only one to do it. In a way, the meaning of the crawls today has returned to that original fantasy – group action as a moving mark, a choreography of willful, come-what-may contrariness.

CF: How does context – site, social history – affect the meaning of the performance?

PL: The earliest site was the streets of NYC in the late 1970s. The setting was down and out, rough and tumble – the city was experiencing fiscal problems, made visible by the number of homeless individuals on the street. With each new crawl, I think about the geographical and historical context – how the crawl will be read in and against the site and among thinking and being around bodies.

CF: What is the motive for making the crawl a group venture this time?

PL: The motive is the same – to create a certain kind of willfulness that does not explain itself. Sometimes this is in honor of homelessness, sometimes its opaqueness is left where it resides. Each crawl, solo or group, is a challenge in a number of ways, not just physically. For example, the geography of Conquest is in no way down and out – it's upscale, well-to-do, and confident. What does struggle look like in this context and how to show it? It has to be hyperbole – a mocking of the surface of things, since the surface is so 'together' in 'good' neighborhoods like the West Village. Hence the use of costuming in Conquest – the blindfolds, flashlights, perfume, one shoe off – and the use of the relay format, which I've never employed previously, exaggerates the organization of the action even more and packages it into a forced togetherness.



Pope.L. Photo by Peyton Fulford for Art Basel.

CF: What will you wear for this crawl? Is your chosen costume evocative of a particular persona?

PL: If there is a persona at work, it's always the idea of progress or the superhuman effort that triumphs over all hardship. A fantasy driven by pure willfulness or desperation that everything must be OK no matter what.

CF: How does this project relate to what you will be presenting at MoMA and the Whitney Museum this fall?

PL: All the projects deal with duration in some way. For example, the 'member' exhibition at MoMA ['member: Pope.L, 1978–2001'] is not so much a retrospective as an act of retrospection. It's a looking-back and seeing the holes, as well as the stuff around the holes – the works, the historicizing. 'Choir', at the Whitney, is a contraption that circulates a liquid, water, in a timed sound environment. 'Member' and 'Choir' share with Conquest a stubbornness in time re going nowhere with specificity and conviction – a willfulness decorated with 'good' works. Perhaps it's best explained by reference to the stray dog who, having no appointment, is always seen in hot pursuit.

CF: What are your thoughts about recent artworld activism aimed at donors and the morally suspect sources of their funds? I'm thinking here specifically about the situation with Warren Kanders at the Whitney and Nan Goldin's targeting of the Sacklers.

PL: I am not familiar with the Goldin/Sackler deal. I am somewhat familiar with the Whitney/Kanders deal. But I think these activities are interesting even so, maybe even exciting. But are they enough? Enough for what? To get some guy to resign? Is that all? And who said he resigned? Resignation for wealthy people looks different. Kanders's resignation is only the tip of the art iceberg – [it's] a world that sustains itself on what Kanders throws away, though it's not about him really. And if we looked in every closet for every lurking Kanders birthing, there would be no more artworld as we know it. And what would that artworld look like? I am curious. It would probably not be as glamorous or clamorous. It would definitely be more bad-tempered. And would I be a part of it? There you go.



Pope.L. Photo by Peyton Fulford for Art Basel.

CF: Regarding the Sackler issue, it is about the family that made its money from opioids and the activism that's being led by Nan Goldin. You say the protests may not be enough. Are you suggesting that getting dirty money out of museum budgets is insufficient? What other kind of intervention might you imagine?

PL: I think Nan Goldin is doing very brave, courageous work. I have heard from some younger artists, though, that they feel they cannot get involved politically in that way. They say to me, 'You can take that sort of risk because you are older and more established.' In some ways, more-established artists have more to risk when speaking out.

CF: I don't think younger artists have to absent themselves because they are less well known or less affluent. Many young artists do participate in all kinds of protest all the time – some feel they can precisely because they have nothing to lose. However, they are not named individually when there is press coverage because they are not as well known.

Regarding the matter of artists and activism, there have been some African-American artists who have argued publicly that they should not succumb to pressure to boycott a major exhibition like the Whitney Biennial when people of color have been excluded for so long. In other words, they see it as unfair that, at the moment they gain visibility, they are asked to forsake it. Do you have any thoughts about this?

PL: I think it is only by giving up something that things will change. That is the only way that it can happen. At the same time, I don't want to criticize those who take a different position on this. The thing is that the system requires dirty money in order to work. Artists might have to reinvent the system by leaving it.

What if Kanders had not stepped down? Would more artists have taken their work out of the biennial? Right before Kanders stepped down, the Whitney wrote to me, asking if I needed to talk. I didn't answer them. But as artists we are part of the family, part of the problem. We do play a role in this and can take action on moral grounds. We can imagine different ways of effecting change. For some that means making work that is so difficult that it troubles the museum as a system.

CF: Over the past decade, performance art has become respectable, and even desirable, for the mainstream artworld. What are your thoughts about the institutionalization of performance art? By that I mean the introduction of performance departments at major museums such as MoMA, the collecting of performance by museums, the outpouring of art-historical books about performance, and media attention? Does this help or hinder the medium?

PL: As the 'maverick' art form of art forms, performance art may need a little hindering.



Pope.L in his Chicago studio. Photo by Peyton Fulford for Art Basel.

CF: I remember seeing your exhibition at The Project in the early 2000s. I loved the text-based drawings about white people and black people. I also remember seeing an installation made with tons of hot dogs and mustard, and watching you eat The Wall Street Journal while sitting on a toilet on top of a ladder. Your work has always struck me as biting funny, raw, pithy, and wonderfully sardonic. Do you think it has changed? Has the perception of your work changed as you have received more attention from mainstream institutions?

PL: Thanks for the career shout-out. Appreciated. Hmm. The past is always that warm yellow glow, as if illuminated by paraffin. My past work was that work, that stuff. However, the work I do now is the work I do now. I am ignorant of my own work, in that way that only your own work can make you. The stuff I do now is certainly cousin to the paraffin work, but it's also orphaned. Aligning it with institutions orphans it even more. Ha! It seems to me that the more I receive attention from mainstream institutions, the more I see opportunities to take my old ideas less seriously.

CF: Can you explain what you mean about your new work being orphaned?

PL: I have learned over the years how little control artists have after you make your work public. Many artists still feel that their public stuff is theirs – that is a fantasy. I hear a lot about this from people in the entertainment industry, about how your personal self and your public self come into conflict. I tell my students that it's important to be part of the conversation about your work. If you are not part of that conversation, your work will be even more orphaned and the meanings you have created won't be part of the discussion. This, for me, is part of a larger issue of artists and agency.

'Conquest' took place Saturday, September 21, 2019. It was part of 'Pope.L: Instigation, Aspiration, Perspiration', which is the title of a singular concept that buttresses a trio of complementary exhibitions: 'Conquest', 'Choir', and 'member', organized by Public Art Fund, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and The Museum of Modern Art in New York City.

'Pope.L: Choir' opens at the Whitney Museum of American Art on October 10.

'member: Pope.L, 1978–2001' opens at The Museum of Modern Art on October 21.

Pope.L is represented by Vielmetter Los Angeles and Mitchell-Innes and Nash, New York City.

Coco Fusco is a New York-based interdisciplinary artist and writer.