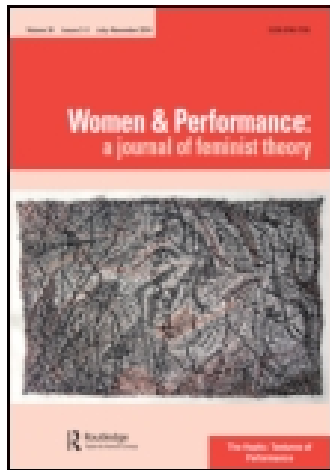


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INTERVIEW

An interview with artist, Pope. L

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The idea for this issue of *Women & Performance* was inspired by a quote from an interview with the artist Pope. L, who once described his crawl works as having “this marvelous creamy nougat center operating inside the performer, and this space is unfortunately not available in images and mythologies that surround the work.” Pope. L’s statement opens this issue, and our collective thinking about the texturized art making that make haptic modes of experience possible.

RIZVANA BRADLEY: When were you first introduced to performance art? When did you decide to start doing performance based works and why? Which artistic influences, if any, still remain meaningful figures for you and your practice now?

POPE. L: Performance art is a wide horizon of behavior, encounters and practices, so I am not so clear what it is or how it operates. Regarding performance as NAMED performance art, I was first introduced in college, but I’d have to say I was first introduced to performance in the Black Baptist church. I didn’t count religion as performance until much later. It was around the time of high school that I first “FELT the light,” as it were, of an audience – felt their eyes arrayed, organized around me, for me, against me. In church, the light was always on the pastor, or the deacons, or the church ladies, or god, never me – unless I fell asleep and got the slap. But in high school, the angle of incidence changed putting me at the focal point. Initially, I had the “light” experience in sport but a much clearer moment occurred after quitting the football team. I was in a Moss and Hart play. Out of nowhere I began to adlib against the text to the point where the play became – something else. Exactly what I wasn’t sure but no one stopped me; the audience seemed to love it, or at least most of them . . . Even I enjoyed it – sort of. Hmmm. Exhilarating but scary. I could think so clearly. See so unerringly. On stage. This side of myself was new to me – to me and to everyone else. Who was this foreigner? As for art influences still relevant to my practice today? – I’d say probably all of them. From Desma Lancaster to Marvel Comics to Miro to Varese to Jacob Lawrence to The Incredible String Band to Fassbinder to Lydia Grey to Dylan – maybe not Dylan. . . .

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RB: In a well-known interview with Martha Wilson in *BOMB Magazine*, you once said you were “suspicious of things that make sense.” Do you still maintain that position, and if so, how has that cultivated suspicion extended and informed your artistic practice through today?

PL: My undergraduate philosophy teacher once said it’s usually the things we take for granted or hold as a matter of course or first principle or unstated implied premise – it is these things with which we should be most critical. So – do I still maintain that position? Yes. How has this “suspicion” informed my practice? Hmm. Well, I think it has made me realize, over time, that it is very likely that I am not the most important node in my practice.

RB: Your crawl performances compel us to think about the bodily labor as well as physical exhaustion involved in such endurance-based work. But beyond the physical endurance involved, did this form of work make other aesthetic revelations or social insights possible for you? Are there certain mythologies that circulate about the crawl performances that you would like to dispel?

PL: The hardest aspect of solo crawling to describe and, in a way, the most interesting aspect is what happens to me inside. I believe some of the feelings and mental states I experience have to do with merely engaging in a marathon activity. When I say “merely” I do not mean un-important. One of the most difficult aspects of prolonged and willed discomfort is mental perambulation – the creamy nougat center of being, as it were – very messy. All sorts of nonsense gets a foot in there, in the noggin. Maybe it’s a lack of oxygen, maybe the heat or cold, the carbon monoxide from cars, the pain, the exhaustion, the fear that you might never walk again, all the old fears and a few new ones. ...

RB: Can you describe the deeper sensation of your crawl performances? What did it feel like, for example, to be so close to the ground for a sustained amount of time? Did you feel the energy change or shift between the solo crawls and the group crawls, (for example the 2002 crawl to Portland, Maine)?

PL: Group crawls are more fun and not focused on me so much. My earliest idea for crawls, from the very beginning, involved groups but alas alack I was the only crawler available at that time, soFor the past 10 years or so, from the get-go, I tell people who invite me to do group crawls that I, Pope.L, this guy, this fella, this body does not crawl. The focus should be on the group. Of course, most hosts do not accept this and we wrangle and tussle. In addition, as part of the design of the crawl, and to shift the focus even further away from me, we usually use the event as a platform to raise consciousness and monies for a specific charity and its work in the community. Even when I do a group crawl, I do not feel the choc-a-block of feelings I have when doing solo crawls. Maybe cause group crawls have a definite finish line. Solo crawls usually had no clearly defined stopping point. Or it was extreme. Exhaustion is the finish line. The sense that you are in it by yourself can be a bit tricky even when there’s tons of people on the street. I think the sense of

isolation, being the sole focal point of meaning for the event, and the Kafkaesque finish line is why my brain tends to mess with me in solo crawls—

RB: Could you talk a bit about the intimacy and closeness of bodies moving together *en masse*? What were some of the joys and challenges of orchestrating the group crawls?

PL: Well, like I said before most of my hosts, the folks who invite me, they think a group crawl is a solo crawl with people crawling after me but that is not the case at all. The group is its own power as group. It's a celebration of giving up something together in order to achieve something larger together – Something not necessarily guaranteed. Sometimes people do not finish – If I crawl, I almost never finish. People are permitted to participate in many different but equally important ways from actually crawling to caring for those who crawl to walking along and cheering crawlers on. It's very hard to walk along in an event like a crawl and not find yourself doing more than walking.

RB: The 2013 *Pull!* performance in Cleveland was a community art project that involved you enlisting people in the community to engage in the shared labor of pulling an eight-ton truck twenty-five miles through various neighborhoods in the city. Did you have conversations about the relationship between labor and art in the community? How did the community receive the work, and what sorts of conversations about art emerged in the midst of this scene of collectivized labor? Did making/doing the work of pulling together, engender a sense or feeling of community?

PL: *Pull!* was a very difficult, time-consuming and beautiful work. It was a very uncomfortable work in so many ways. The physical part was the least of it. I think people reacted to the work like they do most things: if they could fit it into their perspective, their lives, they found a use for it. Politicians were probably the most interesting or obvious case for “finding a fit.” But people came to the work serendipitously also, bumped into it as it were and found a use for it in that sense – of course, our job was to be all things to all people. Of course that is not possible. One thing great about pulling a ten ton truck 25 miles, it's very specific, time consuming, atavistic and seemingly pointless –seemingly in a contradictory and interesting way –because everyone knows when you pull something like a truck, there HAS to be a reason—

RB: Returning to the time of the Black Factory: Did the selection and/or curation of so-called “black objects” have to do with a specifically texturized imagination of blackness? Does the Black Factory potentially address the ways in objects become racialized? Can you speak to that field of imagined and texturized blackness, in light of some of the objects that were chosen?

PL: The BF, especially its name, was me, yours truly, insisting on one thing and messing with a few others, maybe to create a paste of what's happening now. Texturized? Hmmm. Is that a word? If not, it should be. Right next to Sandforized. I was interested in turning blackness into an aerosol. But not blackness per se, nothing against blackness but it's too perfum-y, too beautiful, too limiting to embrace this description—I was

trying to create a device that would model the feeling of being inside the contradictions, quasi-contradictions and para-fictions that is the affective experiential logic of blackness. I can speak to the feel I have for the objects that strangers chose but I wonder now, after thinking about it for a while now – I wonder, in what mind set were they chosen? I think some folks chose objects as an innocent joke; and perhaps these objects are the most objectionable (pun intended) – the kind of object that looks like the person just wanted to fill in the space called “I gave at the Black Factory” – you know, the person who donates the black cap off their pen – but at the same time the seeming mundaneness of this sort of giving, its absent-mindedness, in its flatness, its wolf-in-sheep’s-clothing surrealism, is the most frightening–

RB: Looking at some of the work in the *Skin Set* series, (the most well known perhaps being: *Black People are Cropped*, 2008; *White People are the Interior*, 2004), it seems these works ask us to explore, in much the same way that the Algerian philosopher, intellectual and revolutionary Frantz Fanon once did, race, specifically *blackness*. In other words, the work seems to be cognitively mapping ideas about race, form and abstraction. There seems to be a lot of interest in ideas about blackness and abstraction percolating in the art world now. What are your views on this, with respect to your practice?

PL: I am not sure. There is a crystal fierceness to Fanon that I respect and aspire to – *Skin Set* seems much more floppy and all over the place. Fanon seems more vertical and certain.

RB: I am very interested in your piece, *Forlesen*, an installation that was on view last year at the Renaissance Society in Chicago. Can you talk a little bit about the interior and exterior architecture of the piece, its sexualized form, its peeling texture, the liquidity, and the visceral encounter it demands and extracts from the viewer or those who enter its structure?

PL: The exhibition *Forlesen* is literally framed by a story by sci fi writer and citizen of Illinois, Gene Wolfe. The first page was framed and hung on one side of the show entrance, the last page on the other. The story in a nutshell: a man, Emmanuel Forlesen, wakes and asks, “What are those?” His wife replies, “Your feet. Now read the manual.” The man does. Drives to work. Returns home, questions his existence and dies. Maybe.

Forlesen deals with the body. The body of work. The work of the body. Held together by dysfunction and habit as well as function. Truth lies not in opposition, or complicity, or agreement but all three. Surfing the hinges of such an exhibition-environment is necessary cause not all connections matter or matter equally or are matter.

Matter is everywhere in the exhibition and if there is one thing that holds the separate works together it is duration. A wall peels. A video plays. A balloon deflates. Audio plays.

A curtain blows in an open window. Water evaporates....

An encounter with the show seemed to demand discerning a hierarchy that felt impossible. Perhaps the structure for viewing such a exhibition is in accepting what is between, what is missing. The show contained video, sculpture, drawing, balloons, architecture, three glasses of water, several curtains, autobiography, a metal hinge, porn and three stories.