



William Pope.L, *Eating the Wall Street Journal* (detail), 2000, mixed media, dimensions variable.

**NEW YORK AND NEW BRUNSWICK, NJ**

**WILLIAM POPE.L**

ARTISTS SPACE/THE PROJECT/MASON GROSS ART GALLERIES AT RUTGERS UNIVERSITY

Over the course of two decades of confrontational performance work, William Pope.L has used his body to probe race, desire, endurance, and deprivation. Once you see one of his projects, you're not likely to forget it—although it's possible you might not recognize it as art. For *Tompkins Square Crawl*, 1991, the artist, dressed in a business suit and awkwardly holding a tiny flowerpot, laboriously crawled on his stomach around the East Village park. (The sight of a black man intentionally lying in the gutter confused and enraged one onlooker so much that he called the police.) Skewering everything from patronizing white people to the myth of black-male sexual prowess through alternately ridiculous, menacing, clownish, shamanlike, abject, or completely disgusting actions or costumes, Pope.L uses the figure of the homeless person as a continuing model or foil. For *ATM Piece*, 1997, wearing nothing but a skirt made out of dollar bills, the artist attached himself with an eight-foot length of Italian sausage to the door of a Chase bank in midtown Manhattan. The idea was to hand customers a dollar as they entered; the action lasted

about a minute before security was on him. Not since Adrian Piper's actions of 1970–71 has an artist taken the everyday politics of race so directly to the street.

Although Pope.L has shown at the Project in New York and Los Angeles and was included in the 2002 Whitney Biennial, "eRacism" is the first survey of his work. This "Friendliest Black Artist in America" (as the MIT Press monograph that functions as an exhibition catalogue is titled) has taught theater and rhetoric at Bates College in Lewiston, Maine, for eleven years, and two Maine institutions—the Portland Institute for Contemporary Art and the Institute of Contemporary Art at Maine College of Art, with DiverseWorks Artspace in Houston as a third partner—co-organized this traveling show. Locally, Artists Space and Mason Gross Art Galleries at Rutgers University (where Pope.L received an MFA in 1982) divided up the host of objects, installations, collages, and about two hours of performance documentation that made up "eRacism," while the Project showed photographic prints and updated documentation of performances. On view at both the Project and Artists Space was footage of *The Great White Way*, 2000—, the artist's ongoing crawl up Manhattan via Broadway wearing a Superman suit with a skateboard strapped to his back as if for use in an emergency. The twenty-two-mile crawl, which has to be executed in stages, was initiated in early 2001 at the Statue of Liberty—a sort of version of the great northern migration. By the time Pope.L arrived via ferry in Lower Manhattan, Ground Zero had become part of his

route, and their juxtaposition amplified the grounded Superman's pathos.

Pope.L's installations and objects confront class as much as race, exposing problems broadly and painfully American. *Party Room*, 2001, is a small chamber with shelves for walls. Row after row of Wild Irish Rose whiskey bottles, each topped with a small stuffed toy, evoke the sometimes seamless transition from childhood to alcoholism or the connection between rural boredom and alcohol abuse that Pope.L has noticed in his adopted state. It probably also refers to his own childhood, as does *Pop Tart Frieze*, 1998, a row of unwrapped breakfast snacks lined up on a shelf, their pink frosted fronts defaced with racist graffiti—not kitsch, but, for the artist as a child, a coveted and unaffordable treat. In many works, Pope.L interacts with white foods like mayonnaise, vanilla ice cream, milk (which he drinks, spills, and pours), and flour (with which he has ritualistically coated himself in several performances) to construct and depict whiteness as something alternately unattainable, consumable, and revolting. To make *Eating the Wall Street Journal*, 2000, for example, Pope.L perched on a toilet about ten feet above the gallery floor, reading, then chewing up with ketchup and milk, then spitting out the *WSJ* onto a pile accumulating below. Scaffolding, toilet, newspaper, milk cartons, and other residue of the performance were on view at Artists Space as a work in its own right. "ERacism" can hardly "erase" what is deeply entrenched, but that does not stop Pope.L from keeping the issues on the (breakfast) table and shaping the debate one city block at a time.

—Meghan Dailey