William POPE.L
By ROSS SIMONINI
Portrait GRANT DELIN

SOMEBWHERE BETWEEN
FORMALISM AND THE
CONCRETE STRUGGLES OF
RACE AND IDENTITY, ARTIST
WILLIAM POPE.L MAKES
WORKS THAT LITERALLY
PULL PEOPLE TOGETHER

Beginning in the late '90s, William Pope.L famously crawled along 22 miles of sidewalk, from the beginning to the end of Broadway—Manhattan's longest street—wearing a capeless Superman outfit with a skateboard strapped to his back. In varying fits and starts, the performance, titled The Great White Way, 22 Mile, 9 Years, 1 Street, took nine years to complete, with each installment lasting as long as Pope.L could endure the knee and elbow pain (often about six blocks). It is among 40-plus "crawl" pieces that he has performed over more than three decades of work as an artist. Pictures of the designated superhero dragging himself through the business district are among the clearest and most iconic images in Pope.L's oeuvre, but for him, the documentation isn't as essential as the actual experience of exhaustion and self-imposed labor that comes along with performing the work. For this reason, the 57-year-old Pope.L often invites participants to collaborate with him, organizing large group crawls and interactive installations. This June, with the help of local citizens working alternately in teams, he plans to pull, by hand, an eight-ton truck 45 miles through the streets of Cleveland for 72 consecutive hours. It's a follow-up to his 2011 post-Hurricane Katrina New Orleans piece, Blind, in which volunteers pulled a truck, lit up with projected photographs of the city, from 6 a.m. until 6 p.m. Such performances live in the space between the work of a community organizer and that of a shaman, mobilizing people and attempting to address societal concerns through an abstraction.
of grand themes such as labor and identity politics. Other classic PopeL performances have included 2000's Fasting the Wall Street Journal, which he did on a live color television broadcast to allow the paper to pass through him, transformed and its copyrighting of his personal slogan: "The Friendliest Black Artist in America." He also makes photographs, sculptures, writings, and paintings, often using a variety of white-food-based materials: macaroni, flour, milk. His books Black People Are Cropped: Skin See Drawings 1997–2013 was recently published by JPR Ringer and chronicles his ongoing drawing series—a project with a poetic, absurd perspective on human skin color. The book contains his bright scribbles of pseudo-stereotypes—such as Red People are Bitter and Goin' and Green People are Shitty—and a philosophical essay poem on sociology.

This spring, PopeL will have an exhibition he describes as "an ambulatory, a discourse on ambiguity," at the Renaissance Society in Chicago, his current home. In December, I spoke to him via e-mail, at his request, and later, on the phone.

**BOSS SIMON**

Is your work a form of activism?

**WILLIAM POPEL:** When people use the word activism today, it sounds like after—something you do after, reactionary, or back-streets—something you do backwards. The space I create in my work for others is more formalistic, like, "change the frame on that painting."

**SIMON:** Do you want to change the world?

**POPEL:** I think that corporations and states have actually co-opted that phrase. I guess that phrase would be connected more to the '60s. And I think, initially when I was using it, maybe 20 to 25 years ago, that co-optation wasn't as clear or formidable as it is now. You have to respond to your times. But I think that phrase is connected to the idea of art transforming anything or the idea that radicality in small things is a revolution or the concept of being able to make a life less onerous by offering opportunities to that life.

**SIMON:** Is this what you mean when you say you want your work to be "socially responsible"?

**POPEL:** Obama charms when he speaks of social responsibility, but in the art world today, it's not seen. A sinister phrase might be "social networking."

What is the difference between social responsibility and social networking? Well, the former requires that you show up, and the latter requires that you might have to buy an app for showing up.

**SIMON:** How did your thinking about The Great Whips change over the years it took to complete?

**POPEL:** One of the problems with time-endurance performances like my work is that I'm doing something incredible, but it's not available in the images and mythologies that surround the work. So, typically, the surface of the work becomes the life of the work. Most folks only get the nascent feel of how many miles? How much pain? How many people said or did not say that or that I am not interested in that. **SIMON:** Did you enjoy chewing through the streets? Do you enjoy making the work in general or is it not about enjoyment?

**POPEL:** No, I did not enjoy chewing. Overall, I enjoy making work with others. I enjoy the small moments of revelation that are only possible in the company of others. I enjoy making the clear point. I realize more and more that making is unmaking. To make something is to make it less mysterious, that is, in the process of removing a veil, one of many. You gain more intimacy, but it may not be very pleasant.

**SIMON:** Why did the piece expand from solo crowds to group efforts (such as the crowd to the Abyssinian Meeting House in Portland, Maine, on October 5, 2002)?

**POPEL:** From its very earliest beginnings, the crowd project was conceived as a group performance. Unfortunately for me, at that time, I was the only volunteer. Shifting the pain, as it were, allowing the experience of public participation in motion to be public in a larger way, across more than one body, created a stranger argument for the work as a whole. Not just the anonymity. The work's initial strangeness as a solo activity made it more attractive to the art world because it took on a more object-like character, more personal and avaricious. But for me, it was always just another convention. And gloriously so. What is more conventional than chewing? **SIMON:** When you mobilize a group of people, as you will be in your upcoming Pull performance, are you trying to transform them?

**POPEL:** Do you think you can change people by enlisting them in pulling a truck by hand 14 miles, when it would be so much easier to drive it? No, no, no. And I overuse the opportunity, but people do the changing themselves. So is it changing that's going on here? Or something that was always there but was just looking for a place to light?

**SIMON:** Why pull a truck?

**POPEL:** Well, it's a 1967 GMC Step Van. It's similar to the kind of all-purpose vehicle that's still in use by, for example, UPS. It's sort of a workhorse, and I think it's symbolic of a certain backhanded industrial one. And what we're going to do with it is we're going to basically treat the surface of the truck with writings. We're doing all kinds of research about employment within the states of Illinois and Ohio, and we're gonna actually post job opportunities for people.

**SIMON:** How would you describe the situation in Cleveland these days?

**POPEL:** I think they're fighting against an image problem, countering the self-image of "The Mistake on the Lake," as they talk about it. That's a sense of reality in the city. I think Cleveland is about a kind of constant sense of having to pull yourself up by your bootstraps. That, of course, is the sense among many American cities. But I didn't want to only have a bootstrap project. I wanted to have... Do you use it to create some kind of visual, formal interpolation that has its own raison d'être? For example, let's say, bringing people into a project who may not have otherwise participated. So I see it as a formal choice. I know it has social implications as well, but it also seems as a way of shaping the visual life of the work. Because that means if you spend that money to get people involved in the work, then you can spend it on—no, I'm not going to say decorative, per se, but the visual effects that you're going to achieve are going to be in proportion to that choice. **SIMON:** Would you say that a viewer has only truly experienced one of your works if they've participated in it?

**POPEL:** That's an interesting question. Some people, for example, are interested in what it looks like. How many people participated? Did people like it? Did people not like it? But I believe in questions like, "How did the work interact with the community? What were some of the discussions that came up in terms of the creation of a work? Were some of the changes that you made based on feedback you received from the community regarding what kind of work they wanted?" It's not that the work will be a slave to the community, but some works are much more porous to community opinion than others.

**SIMON:** Do you...
think about this community-based work as being within any kind of lineage?

POPEL: Perhaps with what some of the Constructivists in the '20s were thinking about, in terms of a desire to create works that have to do with the fabric of what people do every day—specifically, labor. It also connects with Fluxus. George Maciunas [Fluxus artist] was very clear that art had to do with labor. That's why he was involved in real estate activism. [Maciunas transformed several ramshackle loft buildings in SoHo into live-work Fluxhouse Cooperatives in the late '60s.]

SIMONTIN: Do you feel like any of this work is autobiographical, or do you think it's not important that you be viewed as its author?

POPEL: I know in art there are these tendencies to want to disappear the author, but you are the driver of this thing. It's just like a small corner store. To say that I am not important to the work in terms of being the one who wakes up and opens the store in the morning and closes it in the evening—I mean, that would be silly and, actually, inaccurate to disappear myself. What is important is to try to bring as many of the participants as you can—and actors and performers, if you will—into the work to put pressure on your own participation, so that one day, perhaps, I will not be as operative in it. But in most cases, practically speaking, that's not currently possible in most of the models I know. I mean, even if, theoretically, you want to totally disappear yourself, I think the problem would be: Can you?

SIMONTIN: How were you introduced to performance art?

POPEL: My earliest performances were in undergraduate school. They came out of making a set of works called communication devices. I was attending Montclair State College [in New Jersey], but back then, I believed that the work had to have an answer, had to possess an answer, had to have it in its grasp, like a real object. And I thought all I had to do was make enough of these things, these performances, and I'd find the answer. Of course, I was wrong.