AFTERBIRTH OF A NATION: WILLIAM POPE.L'S *GREAT WHITE WAY*

Chris Thompson

The Right and Left, in different ways, have decided that man is a kind of animal whose needs can be met by making more and more articles for him to consume. If man is to be contained in that definition, and if it is not to be challenged, then that is what will prevail; and a world will be built in which everybody will get enough to eat and full stomachs will be equated with contentment and freedom, and those who will say that they are not happy under such a regime will be guilty of treason. How sad that is. We all were accomplices in this crime…Is it too late to say something to halt it, modify it?

—Richard Wright, letter to Dorothy Norman, 1948

My job in a way is to remind Americans about what self-image they want of themselves. Do we want an image of fear and compliance, or of adventure and democracy?

—William Pope.L

Geophagy

Before it had to be destroyed, William Pope.L's *Map of the World* was an epic drawing made of hotdogs screwed into the wall one by one in a parquet pattern, piled in places with sauerkraut, juices

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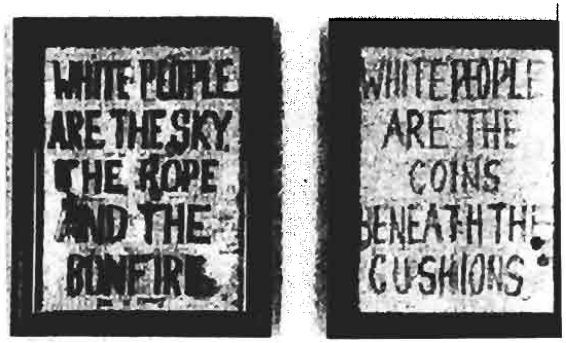

Fig.1. William Pope.L, *Black Drawings*, 2002. Photo courtesy of the artist and the Institute for Contemporary Art at the Maine College of Art.)

mixing and dripping with condiments. Filling an entire wall of the Institute of Contemporary Art at the Maine College of Art's rear gallery,[1] the map's territory traced a simplified outline of America, with the crooked Bush territories of Florida and Texas providing the only recognizable contours. The piece was an attempt, in Pope.L's words, "to poetically discuss American self-centeredness and the disease and awkwardness which lies beneath that arrogance" (Thompson 2002b, 14).

As if to underline the graceless hubris of this moment in American history, a seemingly horizonless state of September 12 at home and stepped-up imperialism abroad, the only hint that there might be another country in the world worth including in this U.S.-centric world picture was provided by a bunch of green bananas screwed into an outline of a shapeless land mass due south of the *Map*'s flaccid Floridian peninsula. Fielding interviews from arts reporters during one of the days prior to the opening, Pope.L gave an improvised tour of this unfolding geography to a group of white upper middle class Portland art aficionados who had just wandered into the in-progress installation. Moments before, in their walk from the middle to the rear gallery, the group had been given a series of sound-bytes by way of "contextual explanation" from their official tour guide, who told them that Pope.L's work "undermines dominant culture's myth of the black phallus," offering no further elaboration. They were still finding their bearings when Pope.L gestured at them with his screwgun, then pointed it at the bananas, and gave them a similarly clipped explanation: "Cuba."[2] Not a word from the visitors. Nearly everyone smiled, a few knowingly, perhaps hoping

that this would pass for or somehow transform into understanding. But by and large, the faces bore a look that mixed mild amusement with genuine confusion.

Fig. 2. William Pope.L installing *Map of the World*, Institute of Contemporary Art at the Maine College of Art, Portland, Maine, 2002. Photo: George La Rou, courtesy of the artist and the Institute of Contemporary Art at the Maine College of Art.

Prior to its installation, Pope.L had done a series of tests in his studio to determine the shelf life of the raw hotdogs once they were taken out of their packages and put on display. His experiments led him to expect that they would deteriorate slowly over a period of several months, reaching their rankest near the show's closing date of October 17, 2002. But after the very first week of the show it had become clear that they were rotting at an accelerated rate; he had not anticipated the deleterious effects of the show's heavy human traffic. The thick crowd that had gathered for the show's opening on July 26 brought a flood of perspiration, perfumes, and other incidental moistures that kick-started what should have been a far more gradual decay. Soon the franks had reached a state of such putrefaction that the gallery's air quality had become nearly hazardous. Cut out around its plywood edges with surgical care, *Map of the World* was eased out of its support and shipped off to the trash heap, leaving a haunting silhouette in its place, a monument to the way that the installation's viewers had also been its executioners.[3]

In his recent book *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative*, anthropologist Michael Taussig asks "what if the truth is not so much a secret as a *public* secret, as is the case with most impor-

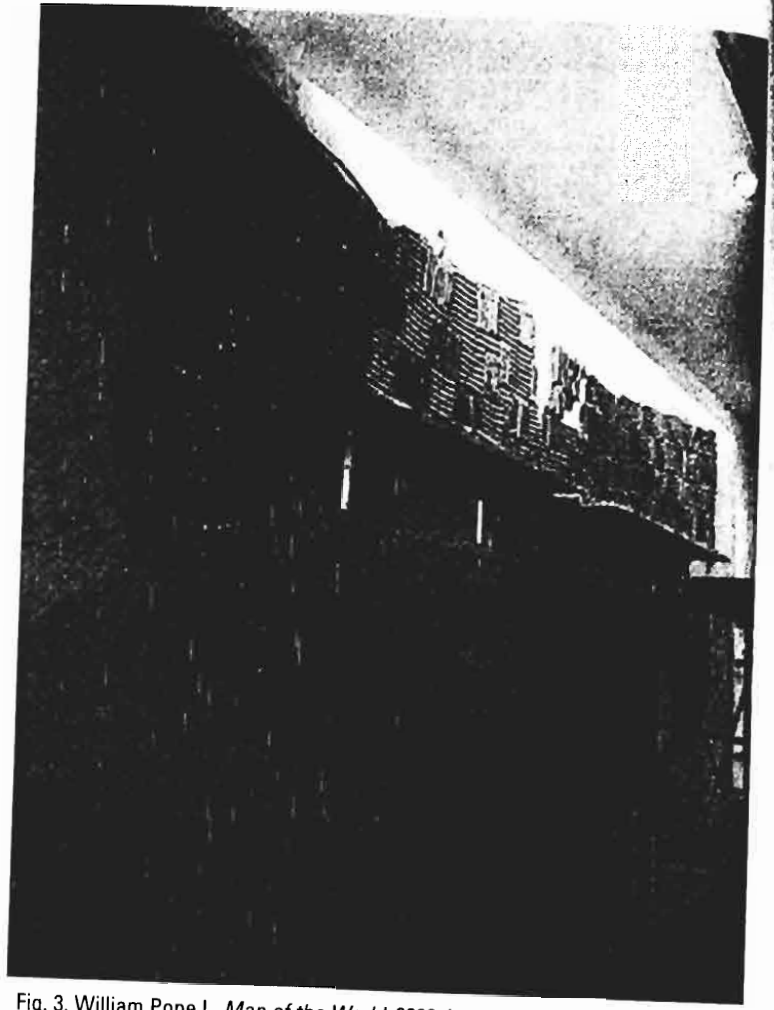

Fig. 3. William Pope.L, *Map of the World*, 2002, installation shot. Photo: George La Rou, courtesy of the artist and the Institute of Contemporary Art at the Maine College of Art.

tant social knowledge, *knowing what not to know*?" He suggests that it is precisely these secrets which we hold in common, and in a tacit consent, that form "the basis of our social institutions, the workplace, the market, the family, and the state"; and his book unfurls around the provocation issued by a second question: "Is not such

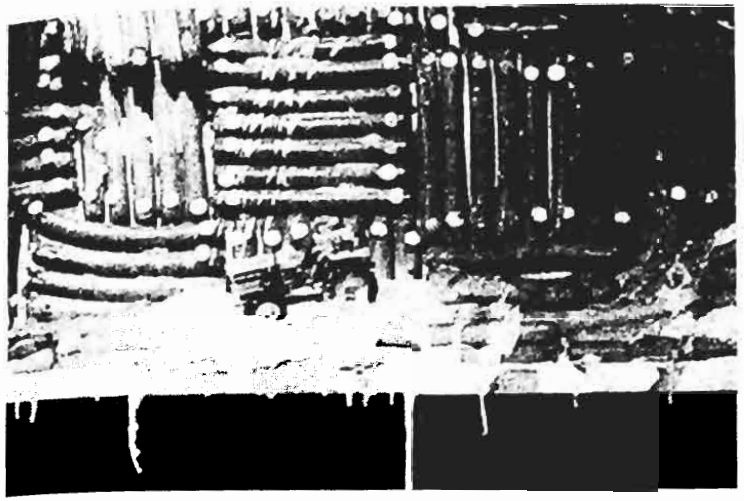

Fig. 4. William Pope.L, *Map of the World*, 2002, detail. Photo: George La Rou, courtesy of the artist and the Institute of Contemporary Art at the Maine College of Art.

public secrecy the most interesting, the most powerful, the most mischievous and ubiquitous form of socially active knowledge there is?" (1999, 2-3)

In his ongoing five-year performance entitled *Great White Way*, Pope.L has been crawling, in regular increments, on his belly, military-style, sporting a capeless Superman suit, the entire distance of Broadway from the Statue of Liberty all the way to a final resting place near his mother's home in the Bronx. *Great White Way* was conceived and the crawling had begun well before the events of September 11—even now there is no agreement as to what to call such acts of "terror" other than "events," as though like natural disasters they happened on their own accord—but since then Pope.L's crawl has become bound inextricably to them. In an interview that took place a few months after the "events," Pope.L had already begun to account for the ways in which his project's concern with the twin themes of adventure and democracy would be cast as a direct engagement with the legacies of the attacks. What was terrifying about them was also what made them intriguing, namely the way they threatened to expose the great public secret underlying American social intercourse; it was this that his performance, far from simply hinting at, had worked to stage in audaciously literal terms:

Fig. 5. Removing William Pope.L's *Map of the World*, 2002. Photo: Sarah Schuster, courtesy of the artist and the Institute of Contemporary Art at the Maine College of Art.

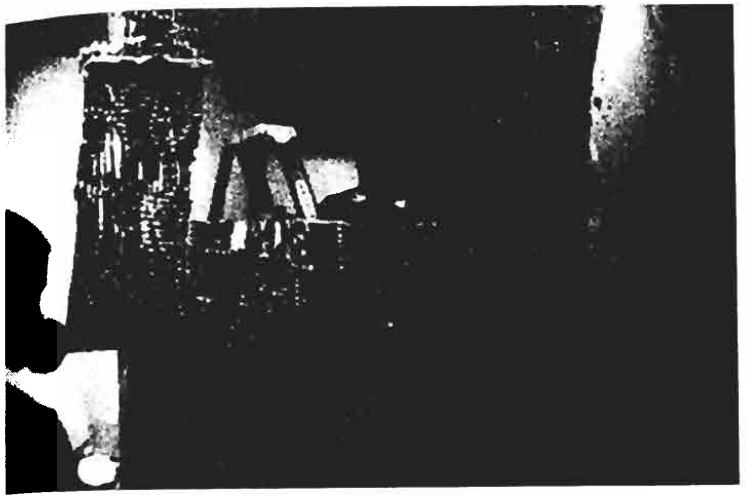

Fig. 6. Removing William Pope.L's *Map of the World*, 2002. Photo: Sarah Schuster, courtesy of the artist and the Institute of Contemporary Art at the Maine College of Art.

> 9/11 was a very interesting event. It was scary, and it *revealed a secret* about the United States that everybody knew and nobody would say, or they'd say it loudly, yelling so that everybody would *hear the volume and not the secret itself, which is that fear is at our heart, the fear that we may indeed have too much, and that it may be taken away*. 9/11 made this patently obvious. We are afraid. So here, in *Great White Way*, Superman cannot fly anymore, just like the rest of us trying to make it through the day. Here, the heroic act is to give up his verticality, to submit to life as it is.[4]

A good thing

After its removal and destruction, on the wall adjacent to *Map of the World* there remained another large wall-drawing, entitled *The Beginning of the World*. Like much of the work in the Institute of Contemporary Art's *eRacism* exhibition it was crafted from a smorgasbord of barely nutritious, highly processed filler foods, high in sodium, engineered for and marketed to those with little money, the

Fig. 7. William Pope.L, *The Beginning of the World*, 2002, installation shot. Photo: George La Rou, courtesy of the artist and the Institute of Contemporary Art at the Maine College of Art.

kind of food that gets you through the day while taking years off your life.[5]

Expressively rendered in peanut butter, *The Beginning of the World* depicted the torso and legs of a giant androgyne at the moment just after it had given birth to the quivering American landmass that would grow up to become *Map of the World*. Against a condiment-spattered backdrop, the air thick with the aroma of the dregs of schoolyard snacktime, the figure's left foot curled in a spasmodic blend of pleasure and pain as the long gestation came to its end. Along with it came the end of standard terms for identifying difference, which dissolve in the face of the radical possibilities that his image brings into being:

> Regarding the drawing: It is not a man. It is man-like (note: there is no phallus. Instead there is a space or hollow, this might refer to the female rather than the male). The name of the work is: *The Beginning of the World*. The world did begin not with men, it began with possibility in its fullest sense which would include women. The ball-like shapes at the genitalia can also be read as vaginal flaps (very distended).
>
> Regarding anticipating resistance: I do, but at the same time you need to let folks find their way. Everyone has a job to do. The artist cannot control audience. The artist can only be willing to converse (in whatever form). However, resistance is an important resource. To know my work one must feel its resistance and push back. Pushing back is not passive. As Martha Stewart would say, it's a good thing. (Pope.L 2002a)

"It's a good thing." Little wonder how the fallen domestic diva would respond to Pope.L's co-opting of her catch-phrase to affirm this ethics of resistance, particularly as enacted in his film *Syllogism*, which documents his failed attempt to balance a chocolate cream pie on the tip of his penis (Pope.L 2002b).

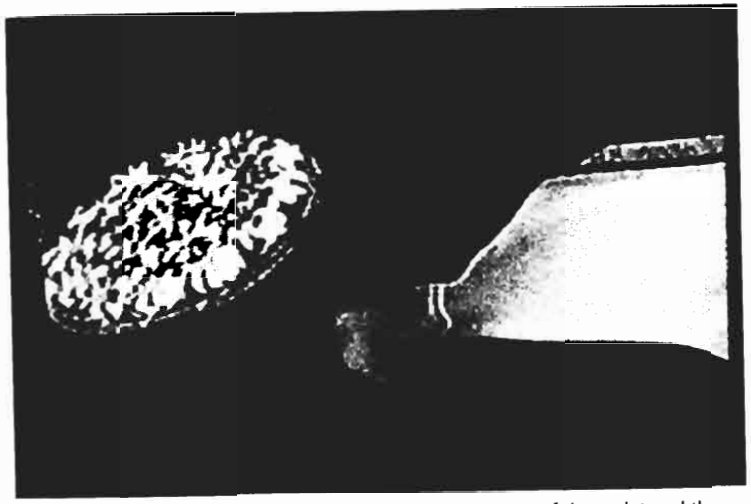

Fig. 8. William Pope.L, *Syllogism*, 2002, film still courtesy of the artist and the Institute of Contemporary Art at the Maine College of Art.

The pie's plummeting fall offers a comedic complication of the failure of verticality, its fundamental inability to fulfill the promise of permanence and authority imputed to it by its emblematic status. The penis, only a "fleshy tube" after all,[6] slowly buckles under the

shifting weight of the pie's evenly-divided white and brown layers. As it falls the layers slide apart. By the time it has hit the floor, been rendered horizontal, all the ingredients have mixed together. The condition of horizontality depends upon the fall, which enacts the

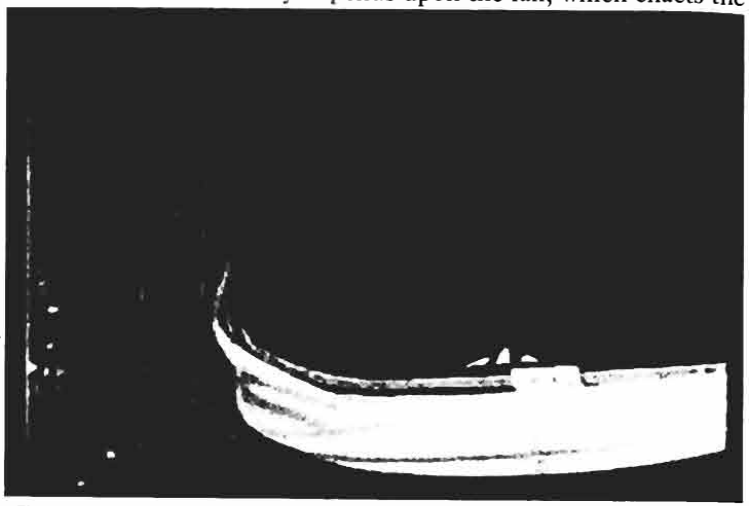

Fig. 9. William Pope.L, *Syllogism*, 2002, film still courtesy of the artist and the Institute of Contemporary Art at the Maine College of Art.

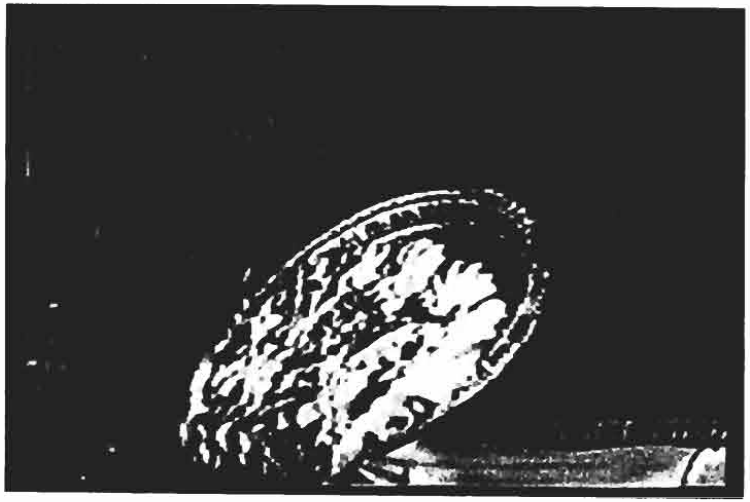

Fig. 10. William Pope.L, *Syllogism*, 2002, film still courtesy of the artist and the Institute of Contemporary Art at the Maine College of Art.

undoing of the vertical support, leaving its trace on the horizontal and making intelligible the possibilities that are open to it.

With its mingling of pathos, near-pornography, and a literalness as vivid as Pope.L's bright-yellow skivvies, *Syllogism* renders utterly unsustainable what would otherwise be an obligatory reference to psychoanalysis. It is precisely this combination of refusing and defusing of the symbolic power of vertical structures, systems and movements, that Pope.L performs in *Great White Way*, albeit in a much grander and more complex space:

> In Western society, we are given examples of the vertical: the rocket, the skyscraper, Reagan's and Bush's Star-Wars system... it's all about *up*. I want to contest and challenge that. In the crawl pieces, like *Great White Way*, I'm suggesting that just because a person is lying on the sidewalk doesn't mean they've given up their humanity. That verticality isn't what it's pumped up to be. (Pope.L and Thompson 2002, 71)

The performance of horizontality here is at once a resistance to the politics of the vertical and, through it, a commitment to the unpredictability of the encounters with others that produce social space; resistance and interference are essential to the democratic encounter. Indeed, openness to the demands of the encounter with ethical alterity, *Great White Way* suggests, is a precondition to a properly adventurous democratic project—which would perhaps entail a shift from representative democracy, and the calls for direct democracy that have unfolded from its shortcomings, to something that could be called an oblique, rather than either a direct or a representative, democracy. That is, Pope.L's project makes it possible to imagine an anarchic sensibility as the necessary support for the adventure of oblique democracy, perhaps a democracy after the fall: a mode of politics, at once idealist and experimental to be sure, that seeks—hoping without expecting necessarily to succeed—to enable the creative construction of community without having to enforce compliance with a manufactured consensus.

That such enforcement, whether outright or in subtler forms of coercion and seduction, has long since deposed participation by the many in the democratic process is by now a fairly obvious, and thus an effortfully well-managed, public secret. In his glossary to a recent collection of writings posing challenges to capitalism and global-

ization, Iain A. Boal defines democracy as the "system of periodic ratification of political masters by ballot; meanwhile, the major decisions...remain in the hands of the few" (2001, 376). Though the hours of real-time coverage of laborious punch-card inspections and down-to-the-wire Supreme Court deliberations following the 2000 presidential election did momentarily cultivate the sense that the democratic process in 21st-century America is an epic journey the pages of whose narrative can and must be filled with the deeds of everyday heroism enacted by folks just like us, this feeling did not linger long. Despite its flippancy, Boal's characterization of contemporary democracy as a domesticating process by which individuals are estranged from substantive political involvement is incisive. Even the war euphoria that followed September 11 was entirely domesticated, a kind of prepackaged dynamism, even at its most apparently febrile.

The notion of community that Pope.L has in mind is hardly the kind of feel-good festival multiculturalism that cultural critic Sarat Maharaj has called "multicultural managerialism": a kind of engineering of hassle-free diversity that can take a number of forms, whether stolidly bureaucratic or starry-eyed and celebratory, but that seeks to skirt the tensions and difficulties of cultural difference, to render everything ingestible and intelligible. This straight-forwardly celebratory bearing is hardly what *Great White Way* is after. Rather, it takes aim at the fact that, as Pope.L puts it:

> In our country we've been taught that there's nothing we can do about anything, and at the same time that we can do anything. So what *can* you do? I think you have to attempt *something*. That's the way to enter between the two. You *attempt* to do things. You're not going to make any claims about lofty goals, simply about your commitment to collaboration. The question is: how do you collaborate with the world without telling it what to do? The act of crawling is about an individual trying to tie together the disparateness of the American character without pretensions to total success. The individual knows that this isn't possible, but wishes nevertheless to try it, to do it in a committed way, to make that commitment to the community. [...] If you look at current news programming, you see the news media "showing both sides," as if there are only two. They pose clear boundaries around choices, but they're diametrically opposed so it's tough to enter the debate. Yet if I try to do everything I can't do *anything*. As a "have" nation, we've constructed a way to excuse ourselves from doing anything: "You don't have to do anything because you can't do anything... someone else is taking care of it, so don't worry"...

It is precisely at the heart of this contradictory condition that *Great White Way*, and Pope.L's project more broadly, positions itself, translating the paradox stated above—"we've been taught that there's nothing we can do about anything, and at the same time that we can do anything"—from entropy into action:

> We all know that contemporary life has contradictions. This has become a cliché. But finding yourself in the maelstrom of contradiction, how do you deal with it? [...] Some think it's idealistic, doing some little thing like this crawl. If you can't be idealistic, then what can you be? For me this goes back to our oldest ideas of democracy. Idealism is what gets you out of bed. Once you're out of bed, you need to find something more than idealism. But you have to get out of bed. (Pope.L and Thompson 2002, 71-2)

Autrebiography

His performance of the failure of the vertical ought not be read as the simplistic embrace of some kind of salvific horizontality, as though the act of crawling or the messy mix of pie fillings at rest on the floor were some straightforward enactment of an inherently ethical and non-hierarchical form of social interaction. Rather, the engagement with these modes of orientation takes the form of a theatrical undermining of the false boundary between the vertical and the horizontal as concepts. And yet his work nevertheless addresses the paradox that, though this boundary, like all of the boundaries we employ to mark off forms of difference from one another, may be false, it is not for that reason unreal.

In a recent series of discussions with Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Zizek, Judith Butler offers a formulation of this condition, one in

which power is inscribed in everyday social relations in ways that are able to permit race to continue to be used to perform acts of inclusion and exclusion even after it has been challenged and its mechanics and conceptual underpinnings deconstructed. She writes that

> Power is not stable or static, but is remade at various junctures within everyday life; it constitutes our tenuous sense of common sense, and is ensconced as the prevailing epistemes of a culture. Moreover, social transformation occurs not merely by rallying mass numbers in favour of a cause, but precisely through the ways in which daily social relations are articulated, and new conceptual horizons opened up by anomalous or subversive practices. (2000, 14)

Here she draws a conclusion that is particularly useful in thinking through the political implications of Pope.L's performances, their committed orchestrations of spectacular forms of public theater, and their deliberate triggerings of signifiers of racial, cultural, and class differences. Her point also provides a compelling challenge to the critical engagement with the notion of performativity in general, suggesting that it, in much the same way as the theory of hegemony that she outlines above, also "emphasize[s] the way in which the social world is made—and new social possibilities emerge—at various levels of social action through a collaborative relation with power." (2000, 14).

It is precisely this hinting at new social possibilities that *Great White Way* seeks to accomplish by grappling with the mechanisms of power at the level of the public secret. It enacts a kind of self-authorization, a process by which the self grants itself permission to speak this secret, at any desired volume, to do so in any form and by means of any staging deemed necessary, and to any desired audience, to improvise new versions for the telling and re-telling of it. The objective of the crawl is not simply to "out" the secret, but—grounding itself in the secret, one of whose primary currents is the fear that we have too much and it will be taken away—to feed off of the charge of its secrecy, to draw from the hold it has upon the imagination, and to use these energies to infuse the performance with a momentum and a dynamism that can sustain its experiments with social knowledge and the ways in which it is framed, policed, propagated and, possibly, reimagined.

In his 1964 book *White Man Listen!*, Richard Wright argued: "Truly, you must know that the word Negro in America means something not racial or biological, but something purely social, something made in the United States" (1964, 80). Pope.L's contention that "blackness is limited not by race but by our courage to imagine it differently" (Bessire 2002) reiterates Wright's insistence that race is an artificial (and surmountable) but nevertheless undeniably actual social fact. Wright refused to rely upon the false security of racial typologies in his analyses, rejecting the recourse, in the words of sociologist Paul Gilroy, to "typicality and racial representativeness in aesthetic and political judgement... because they arrest the play of these differences" (Gilroy 1993, 153). Pope.L's pronouncement similarly offers up the provocation to understand race not as a closed set of definitions but of a changing and dynamic set of possibilities, positioned obliquely in a changing and unfolding set of relations to one another. For while it is true that without great courage such a reimagining of blackness would not be viable, *Great White Way* underscores the corollary fact that grappling with the paradoxes, contradictions, and explosive tensions of race in America requires something more than boldness. In order for difference to be *imagined* in ways that are adequate to the complexity of the ways in which it is lived, it must at the same time be *imaged* afresh; it must be given forms that can be used by audience and artist as they collaborate in transforming possibility from something promising but shapeless into something palpable and articulate, helping to "out" the public secret and defuse the forms of authority its secrecy helps to substantiate.

One of his recent crawl installments took him past the site of the fallen World Trade Center. As his capeless Superman inched along past Ground Zero, the decidedly heterogeneous[7] crowd that had gathered to watch blended supporters and Whitney Biennial go-ers with tourists and some initially irate locals. Not long after Pope.L had begun the Sunday morning crawl, a taxi driver stopped his cab and got out to watch the spectacle, his face and posture registering a skepticism that moved increasingly towards anger as the performance progressed. Several people broke the invisible barrier between audience and performer, confronting him, demanding answers to their questions about what he was doing and why and why here and why now. One witness to the crawl describes the scene unfolding in "waves, moving from long periods of slow and painstaking action—

by the end of the performance the costume was in tatters—to intense moments of confrontation" (Bessire 2004).

As Pope.L continued with his crawl, refusing to stop even while being screamed at and threatened, it seemed that the witnessing of this perseverance, given a dramatic legitimacy by his sweat and exhaustion, caused this anger to morph into support and to unfold into a process of reflection. Perhaps the most dramatic moment in the crawl—and one that became the catalyst for the transformation of the event from spectacle into some sort of socially meaningful encounter—came when, in response to the growing crowd, a policeman came to investigate the scene and, after repeatedly telling Pope.L to stop and speak to him, finally forced him to stand up and engage him in conversation. "You need a permit for this!" he charged, to which Pope.L repeatedly answered, not so much coolly but calmly, at least on the exterior, "I just want to crawl," and then, "I want to crawl. I didn't know I needed a permit to crawl." As one viewer recalls:

> Their encounter became increasingly tense as the crowd watched. William [Pope.L] stayed calm, though, and would keep saying only that he wanted to keep crawling. Eventually the policeman backed down. That was a huge turning point for those watching—especially on the symbolic level, because here a white policeman had tried to force him to stop and he had found a way to keep going. That wasn't planned, but it was very important to the impact of the piece. By that point, he had done all but the last block of the crawl, and he was really working hard, so much so that he had to stop and rest from time to time. So after the policeman relented, the crowd cheered—even the taxi driver who had been upset by what Pope.L was doing at first—and continued to do so as he finished crawling that last block.(Bessire 2004)

Thus, in waves, as it were, it became apparent to its viewers that the crawl—however irreverent the Superman costume might have made it appear at the outset, however much it might have appeared to be a making-light of the loss of life caused by the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks—was or had permitted itself to become a decidedly serious, and indeed compassionate, response to these violences and their legacies. Indeed, if recourse to violence always belies a failure of the imagination, *Great White Way*'s procession past this site aimed at an imaging of nonviolence that could open up possibilities for imagining meaningful social action that it is always the function of violence to constrict. Its oblique theatricality and its sustained audacity had made it plausible as a performative public intervention. The ways in which Pope.L initially appeared to his audience, the ways in which he was imaged by and known to them, had, through the space of the crawl's performance, been worn through. With its passing, a different image emerged, one that opened to the unknown and, crucially, unknowable—an open image marking a moment in which it is possible to encounter "possibility in its fullest sense"(Pope.L 2002a).

Fig. 11. William Pope.L, *Great White Way (Crawl)*, 2002. Photo: Luc Demers, courtesy of the artist and The Project, New York.

If falling can be considered, in aesthetic terms,[8] an enactment of the transition from the vertical to the horizontal, crawling proceeds to stage the transition from the aesthetic to the social register. It accomplishes this by means of a savvy formalism, utilizing belabored horizontal movement to permit increasingly complex forms of meaning—visual and visceral, aesthetic and political—to accrue as the performer's and the viewers' experiences of it unfold over time (both the individual crawl segment and the long-term voyage from Liberty Island to the Bronx).

One elbow at a time, the crawl wears away and pushes through the ways in which knowledges of difference are imaged and imagined. It forestalls these forms of social knowledge until the illusory forms

of closure they offer become experienced as impossibilities. This enables us to speak about a difference that is radically and palpably provocative, able to unsettle the terms we would use to manage it, secure it; it offers up a resistance to "that dreaded, absurd, or merely tiresome Other, that necessary straw-man against whose feeble pretensions poststructuralists prance and strut" (Taussig 1992, 44)[9]

This tongue-in-cheek, belly-to-the-pavement literalness produces what Pope.L has coined "fractal blackness"—a vision, admittedly evolving and unapologetically provocative, of race that is multiple, shape-shifting, not reducible to polarized ways of representing difference. Drawing from W.E.B. duBois' seminal book *The Souls of Black Folk*, Pope.L grapples with what he calls duBois' characterization of "a soul at odds with itself," and transforms this into a notion of "fractal blackness" that holds on to duBois' emphasis upon a play of forces while moving away from its binarized and dramatized conflictedness. It works to accommodate the contradictions of a multiplicity of subjectivities and their evolving positionings and lets their friction become the basis for the crafting of a perspective that is inclusive, participatory, always more dynamic than the concepts we use to fix it.[10]

In his late essay "Peace and Proximity," Emmanuel Levinas wrote that "it is in the knowledge of the other (*autrui*) as a simple individual—individual of a genus, a class, or a race—that peace with the other (*autrui*) turns into hatred; it is the approach of the other as 'such and such a type'" (Levinas 1996, 166).[11] Throughout his writings, Levinas deliberately uses four separate forms for what in English is rendered by the word "other"—*autre, Autre, autrui, Autrui*—and does so with a careful inconsistency. It is consequently impossible at times to distinguish whether his use of the word *Autre*, for example, refers to God or whether it refers to a human "other." (Peperzak 1996, viii-xv; xiv). It is this manifold alterity, whose essentially proliferate status allows imaginative and affective contact with the other, that need not result in "knowledge of the other," that the crawl's "fractal blackness" puts in play.

Great White Way thus stages a strategic confusion similar to Levinas' linguistically slippery but conceptually precise otherness. It asks viewers to rise, or rather to descend, to the task of collaborating in the creation of a community built not upon erasing but rather nourishing differences and contradictions. It represents the sort of project, not so much anarchic as unanarchic—which is to say

not determined by the question of how it will be ordered—that Sarat Maharaj refers to as "autrebiography": working through "an overspill of sources and origins, a network of neural nodes and crisscrossing pathways. It's a volatile performative process, a spasmic mesh of self-building, self-demolishing connections" (Maharaj 1999,4). *Great White Way* might be seen as the crafting of an American autrebiography, catalyzing a participatory process of engagement with cultural difference and ethical alterity, posing questions about identity, community, and consumption that get under our skin and remain there. It performs and invites an audacious un-organizing of the public secret, telling it, yelling it, laughing at it and the forms of compliance that it demands. It thus un-organizes the mechanics that domesticate difference and neutralize its radical challenges to and claims upon the self.

In the way it resists speed, decelerates and de-verticalizes the body's movement through space, the crawl—approaching stillness and yet still moving, even if imperceptibly—serves as a more appropriate mode of imaging resistance than either fall or flight. It offers a persistent resistance both to the force and the swiftness with which the Twin Towers fell (we forget, and not without encouragement, to include the Pentagon in our memories of the terrorist attacks largely because it did not come tumbling down so dramatically) and the

Fig.12. William Pope.L, *Great White Way (Crawl)*, 2002. Photo: Luc Demers, courtesy of the artist and The Project, New York.

greater force and the swiftness with which the American media's information web sought to weave horror—enhanced because of the impossibility of separating the chaos that the attacks provoked from the precision with which they were choreographed—into the promise of a cohesive national will to justice.

The crawl, moving at a human speed, with stops and starts, wrestles the speed of spectacle into a state of slowness. In his crawl Pope.L uses his body as a pliant medium for decelerating things. Combined with the capeless heroism that consists in accepting the awkwardness and difficulty of human gropings and longings, the snail pace promises at some point to arrive not at a particular location but at the state of grace that comes only from the pragmatic commitment to push forth. Despite the cling of gravity and the bite of the concrete, the crawl continues with the poignancy, levity, and refusal of security embodied by the final words of Gillian Rose's book *Love's Work*, written even as she was living her own life to its end, and published shortly after her death in 1995. "Perhaps I don't have to wait for old age for that invisible trespass and pedestrian tread, insensible of mortality and desperately mortal. I will stay in the fray, in the revel of ideas and risk; [crawling,] learning, failing, wooing, grieving, trusting, working, reposing—in this sin of language and lips." (Rose 1997, 135)

Homeland security

Peace and security: the two are spoken of in the same breath, as though they were integral to one another, as though any strategy that aimed at achieving peace would need first to produce a condition of security, as though peace were the kind of something that could arrive and take its place in a site that had been secured for it.

The wish to contain uncertainty may be perennial, but the use of the concept of "security" as a managerial device is surprisingly new. As it shares a history with the development of that most perverse invention, the pre-emptive counter-strike—waged on terrorists and rogues abroad as well as the civil liberties that are imagined to shield them at home—and as it is the social underpinnings of these concepts that *Great White Way* works to contest, the genealogy of "security" warrants some consideration here, however oblique.

"Security" as a nameable strategic objective was a product of American military discourse at the close of the Second World War.[12] The way that this new term quickly captured imaginations is stunning, as is the suddenness of its appearance on the world stage. This point was actually noted by Joseph E. Johnson, chief of International Security Affairs in the U.S. State Department, when he pointed out in the summer of 1945, only days before the bombing of Hiroshima, that "the abstract noun 'security' has acquired a very concrete significance for us"; within no time, in Washington it had become "impossible to read a newspaper, or leaf through a magazine, or go to a dinner party" without encountering this new buzzword (Neocleus 2000, 7-15).

Discussing Senate hearings held in the autumn of 1945, in which a number of civilian and military officials offered testimony regarding the unification of American armed forces, Mark Neocleus notes that while discussions surrounding the same issue not two years earlier had rarely used the term "security," by the time of the 1945 talks it was on everyone's lips, and had now been sutured to the concept of the nation: "national security." The most forceful advocate of the concept, Navy Secretary James Forrestal, commented that "'national security' can only be secured within a broad comprehensive front," and was careful to draw the committee's attention to the fact that he was using the word "security" both "consistently and continuously rather than [the word] 'defense'"; this subtle sleight-of-hand captured the interest of one Senator who felt compelled to compliment Forrestal on this newest fashion: "I like your words 'national security.'"

The implementation of these words through the National Security Act of 1947 gave the American state the means, firstly, to think beyond the range to which it had been restricted by the term "defense," and secondly to endow itself with an ability to impose its wishes beyond its own national borders with a legitimacy that the term "national interest" could not supply. "Security" thus catalyzed the formation of both the U.S. National Security Council and the Central Intelligence Agency; the notion "appeared to place the state at the heart of the security question: it was the state which was to be secured and the state's security which was to be prioritized" (Neocleus 2000, 8). This prioritization continues to be fuelled by the United States' economic, military and cultural self-projection throughout the globe, but also by the production of seemingly innocuous forms of academic knowledge. Here Neocleous points to the $150 million granted by the 1991 National Security Education Act to contribute to bettering education in area studies and foreign languages in universities, part of that "broad comprehensive front"

to facilitate the domestication of the otherness which neither national nor personal security can abide. "Not only must any appeal to security involve a specification of the fear which engenders it," Neocleus suggests, "but this fear (insecurity) demands the counter-measures (security) to neutralize, eliminate or constrain the person, group, object or condition which engenders fear. Securing is therefore what is done to a condition that is insecure. It is only because it is shaped by insecurity that security can be secure" (Neocleus 2000, 12).

In translating America's "public secret," the fear that we will be, or indeed may have already been, reduced to "have-nots," into a public performance, *Great White Way* targets the mechanics of secrecy—the processes by which it is upheld as well as the aura of all-seeing ubiquitous power that it produces to cloak these processes and perpetuate itself. Pope.L pokes through this omnipotence-effect with hilarious gusto by presenting himself, before he even begins the crawl, as a capeless Superman. The emblem of heroism is stripped of its potency: Superman can't fly anymore—a gesture that is especially apt considering the fall of the World Trade Towers, two tall buildings that can no longer be leapt over. Superman has become the figure of national insecurity, and thus becomes a vehicle for addressing this relationship between security and democracy. In the figure of a fallen Superman, committed nevertheless to push on and court the risks that come along with this choice, the crawl problematizes the way in which democracy has been yoked to the security process. It points at the emptiness and the fundamental violence inscribed in guarantees of security, whether epistemological, ethical, or national. Democracy, it suggests, is compatible with adventure to the extent that it is incompatible with security and the processes by which this is secured.

Art after life

To return now to the rethinking of falling that crawling makes possible: if falling enacts the transition from the vertical to the horizontal, and crawling mediates the transition from the horizontal to the social, the completion of the crawl permits a return to a verticality whose terms now stand contested. The vertical body, removed from the terms of its opposition with the prone horizontal body, is now seen to be equally mortal, cut free from any but an incidental relation to rockets and skyscrapers, and in its subsumption into the contemporary scene of cultural translations, this body can be rendered anew as one mode of the crawl's form of resistance—an upright crawl. The phenomenology of the crawl in this respect comes quite close to Taussig's characterization of the shaman's practice: "The chanter chanting creates and occupies a strange position, inside and outside, part of, yet also observer of the scenes being sung into being." (1987, 111).

Here Taussig is speaking not of an *occupation of* multiple positions, but an embodiment of them, a subsumption in what Levinas called the "fabric of interhuman intrigue."[13] This is a condition of exposure and risk in which one's vulnerability is "a sign of what it takes to enter the interzone of mimetic space" (Taussig 1992, 111). Though Taussig refers to it as an "interzone," this space is entirely different from the in-between space of the liminal, a term which he specifically rejects. He argues instead for the necessity of being bound to "both positions at the same time" in a way that forever dispels "the possibility of defining the border [between self and other] as anything more than a shadowy possibility of the once-was." (1992, 249).

It is this productively unsettled and unsettlable condition that that crawl produces. French Fluxus artist Robert Filliou once wrote, on a postcard bearing a simple line drawing of a few featureless stick figures running, dancing, jumping: "ART IS WHAT MAKES LIFE MORE INTERESTING THAN ART".[14] After the attacks of September 11, one wondered if it might be the case that death is what makes life more interesting than art. Rather than rehearse arguments about the contradictions between art and life, in inching toward its end as an affirmation of the individual human life that enacts it, each segment of the crawl frames the act of dying that animates the work of life. And indeed its labors, as in the case of any healing practice, take their toll on the horizontal body:

> I recover by refusing to do anything for the rest of the day and the day afterward. Once, recently, I broke this rule and got very sick. After a crawl, first thing I do is come to a rest, I just lay there and feel the moment. Then I stand up. This is a very important decision since I've been horizontal so long. I'm always aware when I'm about to stand up that I might not like what I feel or happens to me when I do finally get to my feet, 'cause then I'll find out what hurts and what doesn't, what damage has occurred to my body during the crawl. Mentally, getting to my feet is a bundle of

> feelings. I'm wondering if I'll fall down again, I'm wondering why I did it (it's never an easy crawl), I'm grateful that it's over, if people have attended the crawl, as an invited audience, I'm wondering if it has served them in any way, I'm also mentoring my expectations: saying to myself, the crawl is bigger than you, don't expect to understand it right away, it's not fair to yourself as a performer, it's not wise as a maker of culture, it's not possible as a cog in a much larger collaborative enterprise which is very porous in its construction. (Pope.L 2002a)

The return to verticality is always marked by the trace of the crawl's physical and psychical challenges. This trace bears a political and ethical charge as well; as Pope.L's return to his feet after the crawl announces, occupying a vertical position in the world is not the same thing as standing up.

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Notes

1. The first retrospective exhibition of his work, *William Pope.L: eRacism* was at the Institute of Contemporary Art at the Maine College of Art from July 26 through October 17, 2002. See Bessire (2002).

2. Fragments of a conversation between tour guide, visitors, and Pope.L overheard by the author while observing the installation of *eRacism*, Insititute of Contemporary Art at the Maine College of Art, Portland, Maine, July 2002.

3. Pope.L filled the void left in *Map of the World* with a makeshift installation consisting of a broken down armchair to which was mounted a portable oscillating fan that wafted away whatever microbes might have remained hanging in the air; this remained in place for the duration of the show.

4. Pope.L and Thompson (2002, 68-72); emphasis added in order to underscore the closeness of Pope.L's and Taussig's comments on public secrecy. An earlier and much shorter version of this interview had first appeared in the *Portland Phoenix* newspaper, exactly four months to the day after the 9/11 "events"; see Thompson (2002a, 14).

5. At first the Institute of Contemporary Art's staff thought that the presence of all of that raw food would give them problems with insect infestation; as it turns out, there are so many chemicals in supermarket hotdogs and peanut butter that even the bugs steer clear.

6. This definition comes from Robert Filliou's "Yes—an action poem" from 1967: "In the case of the male poet, the urethra passes through a fleshy tube called the penis of the poet, which hangs between his legs" (1967, 8).

7. "When we come to think of it," Gandhi wrote, "the distinction between heterogeneous and homogeneous is discovered to be merely imaginary. We are all one family." (Gandhi 1993, 309).

8. Here it is useful to consider Susan Buck-Morss' characterization of the aesthetic as "the body's form of critical cognition"; she argues that "this sensory knowledge can and should be trusted politically." Susan Buck-Morss, in Kester and Buck-Morss (1997, 38-45).

9. It is important to note that Taussig is speaking here of the notion of mimesis, a term which his study seeks to recuperate and recharge. His argument in this passage is with the current habituated aversion to the mimetic, one which owes to mimesis' frequent casting as "a naïve form or symptom of Realism", a holdover of "forced ideologies of representation crippled by illusions pumped into our nervous systems by social constructions of Naturalism and Essentialism." Although a thorough consideration of its genealogy would demand a separate study, it is worth noting the possibility of considering Taussig's version of the "mimetic faculty"—a dynamic mode of knowing that, "in steeping itself in its object", is thus overflowed by it, enabling "spirit and matter, history and nature, [to] flow into each others' otherness" (198)—as an elaboration upon and extension of what in his earlier work he calls "implicit social knowledge." In his *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing* (1987), he presents this as an integral if regularly overlooked form of knowing that relies upon absorption of unspoken cues and languages of the body and other ethereal modes of signification, enabling individuals to negotiate the complexities of social intercourse. He describes it as a sort of sixth sense, a social antenna—which would in *Mimesis and Alterity* become that "nature that culture uses to create second nature." It is, he says, something like a "theater of possibilities," "not simply a passive, reflecting,

absorbing faculty of social being; it should also be thought of as an experimental activity, essaying this or that possibility, imagining this or that situation, this or that motivation, postulating another dimension to a personality — in short trying out in verbal and visual image the range of possibilities and near-impossibilities of social intercourse, self and other" (1987, 393-4). It could be said that this "mimetic faculty," when understood in terms of the broader and more charged ethical sense Taussig has sought to invest it with, provides the link between "implicit social knowledge" and the patchwork of practices—ones in which Pope.L stages an intervention—that put it to use in order to sustain public secrecy, whose "truth is not so much a secret as a *public* secret, as is the case with most important social knowledge, *knowing what not to know*."

10. His comments on "fractal blackness" and this concept's dialogical relationship with duBois' work come from a series of unpublished notes to his current work-in-progress, *The Black Factory*; see Pope.L (2003).

11. On the difficulties Levinas faced in squaring his ethical philosophy with the political challenges posed by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, notably the way in which the figure of the Palestinian other destabilized his commitment to the welcome of and responsibility for (even this) other, see Caygill (2002).

12. This section draws from Mark Neocleus' important critique of security: Neocleus (2000, 7-15).

13. Levinas used this phrase to evoke the "unthought" dimension of the history of Western philosophy, speaking of the "interhuman intrigue as the fabric of ultimate intelligibility"; see Peperzak (1996, 150). On connections between Levinas' ethical philosophy and Robert Filliou's concept of "l'autrisme," see Thompson (2001, 1-8).

14. Speaking of connections between his work and the work of the Fluxus artists, Pope.L—a former student of Fluxus artist Geoffrey Hendricks at Rutgers University—has said that "For Fluxus the boundary between [art and life] isn't a contradiction, in that art and life feed into each other. I'm also interested in this idea of the false boundaries between things—such as the opposition between the vertical and the horizontal, or what have you—which could be likened to a Fluxus strategy." Pope.L and Thompson (2002, 72). Here Pope.L shares the sentiments of Fluxus artist Dick Higgins who once said of Fluxus that it "is not a moment in history, or an art movement. Fluxus is a way of doing things, a tradition, and a way of life and death."

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