

## **The Friendliest Black Artist in America©**

**By Mark H. C. Bessire**

CLAIMING TO BE THE FRIENDLIEST BLACK ARTIST IN AMERICA©,

William Pope.L confounds and conflates the public's "expectation" of a black artist. In this role he negotiates the history of America's relationship to difference, for example whiteness and blackness, a site he has been mining for over twenty years. Pope.L's practice, made up of objects, street performances and installation/performances, also illuminates the American desire to consume and neatly package ideas and behaviors that construct identity and bogus racial stereotypes. Lowery Stokes Sims has suggested that his practice be viewed as a "hybridization confronting the specter of the black male as menace," in light of the American expectation and reception of the black male and black artist. To unpack these issues, make them visible and to address the margins between the "haves and have-nots," Pope.L consumes *The Wall Street Journal*, paints in peanut butter, sells mayonnaise, negotiates decay and the object, and is unafraid to confront such American icons as John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr.

Two of his recent projects, *the Black Factory* (2001) and the *Black Drawings* (2001-02) continue to map his interest in "how the other is contained and controlled through hierarchical definitions of status"~ by revealing that constructions of social categories are shaped by contradiction. For example, blackness is defined as much through its protection, validation, and enshrinement as through its isolation, imprisonment and obfuscation. One position daims that race is everything and the other, that race is not theoretically tenable. For Pope.L, it is not a matter of choosing one, but rather of acknowledging both and constructing a space such as the *Black Factory* where these forces can interact or blur. His specific concern with race is a subset (but not less important) to his umbrella concern with categories. For Pope.L, if it is the powerful who rule, make the laws, and define the limits of society, then it must be the mission of the powerless to question and transgress. In the *White Drawings* (2000) whiteness does not refer to a people, Pope.L suggests, but to a system of laws, representations, institutions, psychologies, and behaviors whose function is to shore up the invisibility of whiteness,~ While negotiating these positions and attempting to blur boundaries between certainties, the friendliest black artist in America creates art that is conceptual and accessible as well as visceral and prosaic.

Issues of race and the "oscillating relationships between different states of lack" are central to the artist's work and these are often addressed through metaphors of consumption. America consumes products just as it accepts or consumes racial categories and definitions of marginalization. Pope.L's work challenges the fixity of categories and he frequently uses humor and unexpected juxtapositions to undermine the seriousness of his message. And with Pope.L, the message is multifaceted. "Bottom line," the friendliest black artist in America has suggested, "artists don't make art, they make conversations. They make things happen. They change the world."

### **A Fisherman of Social Absurdity**

Pope.L draws on humor to seduce and confuse his audience. The artist has articulated that "in the case of humor, it is not just about confronting, but also seducing and lubricating as well as confusing (intentionally). I am after the mixed signal." In the performance pieces *The Egg Eating Contest* (1990) and *White Baby* (1992) (both part of the larger project *How Much is That Nigger in the Window*) and the *White* and *Black Drawings*, the artist reveals how being black and male in America is both "a consumer's hell on earth, and also "a lack worth having." During *The Egg Eating Contest*, a white man named Mr. Cau-Casian asked Pope.L to "Please show our audience your instrument." This immediately raised the myth of the black phallus. Instead of revealing his member, Pope.L's lap was

suddenly lit up by a 25-watt light bulb under his pants. In typical Pope.L fashion, he used the humor of the unexpected light to disarm his viewer who anticipated something else. For Pope.L humor is a means of transgression and a loaded tool of visual and performance discourse. He lulls the audience into a comfortable place before they realize that the issue at hand is serious and profound and located in what C. Carr describes as the "discomfort zone."

Pope.L also uses humor to expose cultural conventions. The work is less a rebellion than an examination and exposure of existing conditions. In the monologue of *White Baby*, performed and installed at the Cleveland Performance Arts Festival in 1992, Pope.L comes as close as he ever has or probably will to unambiguously discussing his practice :

In *White Baby*, Pope.L entered the performances space dragging a white doll behind him like a child with a baby doll. He then walked up to a podium and explained : "I am being chased down the street by a little white baby with no clothes on. It is a nice baby. A little white baby. I do not like it; yet, I am tied to it. Now i want to hide from the little baby. Instead, I pull it along the neighborhood like a little doggie." Using the leash he proceeded to throw the doll up and around a pipe suspended from the ceiling so that the doll hung from the neck swinging in the air. Not an innocent image. Yet Pope.L's performance and practice are not a rebellion - he claims not to be a revolutionary, but a reminder.' And to this end, he frequently evokes a carnival atmosphere and manipulates humor in the face of seriousness to jolt his viewer. Umberto Eco has argued that carnival "parodies rules and rituals, but to be understood, rules must be recognized and respected." While inviting the audience to address his politics, Pope.L creates an image of unspoken rules that resonate for viewers through a disarming interpolation of humor and seriousness as a bundle of contradictions. These contraries came into play in *White Baby*, where the artist claimed: "I am white culture. Yet it's the Negro in me that makes me what i am. I believe my work is about disruption throwing a wrench into our hope for common sense when we know deep down in our hearts that that's just another form of fast food nonsense." In such statements and performances, Pope.L simultaneously recognizes the unspoken rules of hierarchy and challenges their definition. Eco could have been referring to Pope.L's talent as a "fisherman of social absurdity" when he suggested that humor "does not fish for an impossible freedom ... it is a true movement of freedom. "Through humor, Pope.L reveals that social conventions need to be exposed in arder to open the doors for a "true movement of freedom."

One needs to look no further tha *Menber (a.k.a "Schlong Journey")* (1996) to see how humor is used to raise an awareness of the uncertainty of definitions. In street performance, an outrageously exaggerated white penis attached to his groin blurred the boundary between the artist's black body and the whiteness of the fantastical codpiece. The obtuse juxtaposition of a long white phallus on a black male body opens a dialogue or "conversation" for the wiewer.

## Consuming Race

Pope.L also addresses issues of race through the metaphor of consumption. In this way, he exposes tho American desire to accept and consume packaged ideas and products that mask more volatile {and discomfoting realities. This includes not only how race, for example, the black male body, is consumed as a social construct, but also how the consumptiotion of certain products can serve as a metaphor for the estrangement of the disenfranchised. The artist further plays with this notion as he physically consumes products while foregrounding how a viewing audience consumes him as an object.

Consumption and marginalization were addressed in Pope.L's exhibition at The Project in Harlem in June of 2001. At the gallery, a grid of White Drawings (2000), an ironie, text-based work celebrating and ridiculing pero ceptions of whiteness, were displayed across From Broken Column (for Eva) (2001), a series ofbroken mayonnaise jars encased in wood and cellophane leaning against a wall below a pink billboard banner with the text "RACE BECOMES YOU." The notion of whiteness in the guise of consumable foods, such as mayonnaise, milk, white bread, and flour, is digested everyday by

consumers. In Pope.L's work, such products serve as metaphoric bundles of desire and disdain. An important formal property of these products is their whiteness or lack of color evoking Ralph Ellison's symbolic literary creation, the Liberty Paint factory. The factory's marketing slogans were "Keep America Pure with Liberty Paints" and "If it's optic white, It's the Right White," which reminded Ellison's protagonist in the Invisible Man of a childhood jingle, "If you're white, you're right". Like Ellison, Pope.L is attracted to the simple elegance of the imagery, the open-endedness of the wordplay combined with the knottiness inherent in racial categories themselves. Pope.L uses the imagery of spilled milk in *Milk Pour* (1999), a temporary street installation that transformed a gutter into a landscape of milk creating a visual and symbolic reference to the "puddles of milk" made when rioters commandeered a Borden milk wagon and smashed quarts of milk in the Invisible Man. Using another white substance, in *A Negro Sleeps Beneath the Susquehanna* (1998). Pope.L consumed and immersed himself in fifty pounds of flour and rinsed off the fleeting nature of manufactured whiteness in a river while carrying a broken mirror brilliantly reflecting nature and light.

In describing his first contact with whiteness, Pope.L recalls that at first he didn't see whiteness (no one does). It was like being white myself. Then I had my nigger moment (you know, someone called me a nigger) and everything came into a certain focus. Not a clarity, but a disparity-worth-having. Because it could not be avoided. Because it made me : black. And black was worth having because I was told I was worth having. And why would my family lie to me ? They loved me. They saw that I was in pain. And to help me feel better; they told me I was worth having as a black person.

Pope.L confronted another version of whiteness in the early seventies when he first viewed the white monochromatic painting of Robert Ryman in New York. Initially he didn't recognize the whiteness as a social construction; he saw the work as he had been taught in graduate school, as extreme, abstract minimalist expression. He first thought that Ryman "must think he's some kind of super-hero who only eats white food and help white people by making only white culture". The image shifted, however, and Pope.L suggested that "each time I encountered a new Ryman, I saw a new possibilities for art-making. Indeed, I saw these possibilities in art practice that, by definition, was doomed according to certain critics to a dead-end of stagnant self definition and pointless tautology." This experience was critical to Pope.L's practice, as he articulated that white was not a color, but a strategy. For Pope.L, Ryman's work revealed the problematic nature of whiteness in visual terms even if this was not his intention. "In fact, I'm sure he didn't intend this," suggests Pope.L, "but one can not choose one's parents nor one's influences. It almost seems that Ryman acts in my art-life as an absent father. Stern and unpredictable. Showing up with gifts unannounced. The gifts always too big or too small. A teetotaler drunk on absence. A king of something that's a fantasy to the son but even more so to the father." The experience realigned Pope.L's practice as he saw how these monochromatic works constantly pushed the definition of painting as medium - its physical structure, its context, its very existence, more than any other artist since Marcel Duchamp. Pope.L unmasked and transformed these explorations to issues of race: the white monochromatic painting dispersed, spoiled, and reconfigured in the guise of mayonnaise, flour, and milk.

In the painting *Estimate* (1997), Pope.L comes dangerously close to acknowledging and mocking Ryman as a rebellious son might mimic and ridicule a father. White paint is lightly applied to a rough wood panel, the grain of which is visible beneath the paint. Along the bottom of the board painterly letters like those developed in the *White Drawings* read: "MILK PENIS AS SEEN FROM PLUTO." Perhaps *Estimate* is a conflation of the myth of the black phallus (configured here in the guise of the irreproachable myth of Martin Luther King Jr.) and Pope.L's first encounter with Robert Ryman when Pope.L said "Ryman's got a lot of balls, throwing this much white around. Who the fuck does he think he is. The *white drawings* begun in 1997, the same year as *Estimate*, are an on-going series of text based drawings that also question notions of whiteness and myth through such ironic phrases as "White People Are A Disaster That Has Already Happened" and "White People Are Below Freezing." But with Pope.L's work, whiteness and blackness are, he suggests, "both forms of representation, even

though, politically not equals." As categories of social being he treats them as equal, for example, the *Black Drawings* make such statements as "Black People Are Children" and "Black People Are The Diamond 'Chitlin'." In his ever-expanding practice, Pope.L is also at work on series of Red, Yellow and Green Drawings.

### **Consumption, Decay, and the Object**

Commenting on *Eating The Wall Street Journal* (2000), an installation and performance work in which he chewed, consumed, and regurgitated the newspaper, Pope.L suggested that "our consumer society promises power and wealth simply by owning certain objects, which harks back to primitive magic and voodoo. I figured if i also eat it, just imagine how much power i can drain from this fetishized object." Pope.L also articulated the space of consumption in *fat Notes* (2000, volume 2), a literary compendium to another version of *Eating The Wall Street Journal* installed and performed at *Mobius* in Boston:

**Consuming is a people-thing and what we do to fill ourselves up.**

**Consuming is a food.**

**Consuming has to do with what we take into ourselves; our lives. How we replenish our soul .... Consuming is opening oneself up. As in sex.**

**Letting oneself go. As in defecation.**

Mayonnaise, white bread, peanut butter, sugar, milk, and ketchup were the foodstuffs of the artist's childhood when the presence of food was sometimes uncertain. Many of these products have become media for his object making. He considers the condiments as adhesives that make up the sandwich, a collage where you can resolve scarcity with a little imagination. In the performance work *How Much is That Nigger in the Window* (1990-91), the artist spread mayonnaise on his body creating an object of his body. And when Pope.L applied peanut butter to a large phallus attached to a jock strap in *The White Mountain (Wonder Bread Performance)* (1998) and romped through loaves of wonder bread, he conflated body and condiment.

While consumable foods are a theme in Pope.L's work, it is also their decay that plays into much of his practice. Many of the food products used to create his objects and installations are full of preservatives that the works decay slowly without any assistance from bugs which are inhibited by the chemicals used to process the food. In this sense, the works are time-based science experiments exposing visually how these processed products, like social hierarchies or race, are unnatural constructions. Processed foods such as mayonnaise, hot dogs, and Pop Tarts seem to laugh in the face of anyone who might believe that they would decay naturally. Decay and the unspoiling nature of processed foods have a historical precedence for the artist. Pope.L has suggested that growing up, food was defined through circumstance as much by scarcity and decay as by nourishment and presence: "I had to think about whether there was going to be enough [food to eat]. The idea that food was some kind of warm, nourishing entity that i understand. But i also see it as always possibly spoiling, disappearing or somehow going bad. My take on food involves those two things: nourishment and presence - spoiling and lack."

Using mostly peanut butter and latex, Pope.L has painted multiple versions of *Why i Don't Go to the Island Anymore* (1998 and 1999) directly onto a wall. In some versions of this work, Pope.L culls images from lynchings and World War II racist cartoons, representations of blacks that engage notions of the commodification of racialized black pain. Peanut butter, an invention of George Washington Carver, is the artist's chosen medium to present these appropriated loaded images. For Pope.L, the medium is intertwined with the subject matter. Peanut butter is an unforgiving medium. It cannot be erased or painted over. It tends to slip from its surface over time and compromises the material on

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which it is painted. In this case, the medium created by an American icon, peanut butter, cannot be erased, cannot be obliterated; yet, the obliteration of blackness was one objective of lynching. The artist has also articulated that it was "not simply the obliteration of blackness, but also the obliteration of memory; getting drunk on spectacle to forget (expunge) what one is actually doing; lynching was [in this sense] also a celebratory event." These paintings, Pope.L suggests, raise the notion of "who brings the pain and who possesses it," as they reveal in ail of their gloppy, aromatic painterliness the harsh realities of racism.

Map of the World (1999-2000) is another time consuming, time-based construction that plays with notions of representation and identity in a medium of decay. The map, an inverted view of the United States, is a collage of hot dogs adhered to the wall by nails and affixed to each other by Elmers (white) glue. The perspective could be interpreted as a proscenium view, that of the actor or object gazing out toward the audience rather than the viewer at the stage. The inversion invites viewers to consider their own positionality, underlining Pope.L's consistent interest in audience. The messy decay of this particular object serves as a metaphor for American self-centeredness and what Pope.L calls the "disease" and awkwardness that lies beneath that arrogance.

Pope.L's most popularized object is the Pop Tan Frieze (1998), which is placed in a position of suspended decay in the artist's studio or basement laboratory with fixatives. Painted on the individual Pop Tarts are racist cartoons, similar to those appropriated in *Why i Don't Go to the Island Anymore*. Frozen in their moment of decay, these mass-produced, ephemeral objects of breakfast ritual are perhaps an unlikely medium for such serious subject matter as racism. Yet, Pope.L consistently challenges his viewer to consider race through unexpected and obtuse lenses - in this case the Pop Tart.

The combination of simplicity and complexity in *The Polis or the Garden or Human Nature in Action* (1998) exemplifies the many layers of meaning Pope.L constructs through accessible and ephemeral materials. In this time-based, laboratory experiment-like installation, onions are painted black on one side and white on the other. The onions initially develop under a growth light and over time adjust themselves on a shelf or fall off as they sprout and then decay. The experiment studies decay, the artist has suggested, as a means to "obliterate the line between white and black:" "decay produces or flattens or equalizes difference [and] at the same time it can emphasize it." The polis was the Greek decision making body on which the u.s. government is modeled. This work investigating and exposing difference reveals the laboratory science approach of the artist and his interest in creating a dialogue between notions of whiteness and blackness and the absurdity of their polarization in American culture.

Pope.L also manipulates his body as a vehicle of decay. In *My Niagra* (1998), Pope.L pushed the boundaries of performance by transforming his body into a decaying entity and abject reality. His body was bound and confined with layers of materials and meaning. Cair Crawford described Pope.L, who was viciously attached to a bedspring hanging precariously from a ceiling surrounded by objects and containers, as "infected, wounded and incontinent, the figure imbued with suffering." JJ Crawford compared the artist's body to a *bocio* figure created by Vodun religious practitioners. In Benin for a range of needs including protection, empowerment, and the curing of illness. In her book *African Vodun*, Suzanne Preston Blier suggests that through "incongruity and disorder of everyday life, these works [bocio] challenge the status quo." By creating such a startlingly abject figure, the artist evoked various responses of sympathy, fear and disgust, ail of which challenged the "status quo." "What i admire about *bocio*," Pope.L suggested in a recent symposium with Blier, "is the way they interact (or as Ms. Blier says) are sutured into the daily life of their social world. *Bocio* are not about a dark, primitive African past. They are a functional, working part of the social-psycho-religious world of today's West Africa, and by diasporic extension, also places like Haiti, and parts of the U.S." In her essay in this book, "In the Discomfort Zone," C. Carr suggests that the "abject imagery in 50 much of

his work speaks to the subconscious damage done by racism and the humiliating consequences. Fear, anxiety, shame, dyspepsia." In *Burial*, Pope.L similarly transfigures his body into an abject entity. In the piece he is buried vertically in the earth, with only his head exposed. He was, in fact, 50 consumed by pressure from the ground in *Burial* (Portland) (1998) that he had to be evacuated before he was crushed. In *Burial (Sweet Desire)* (1998), the artist exposed himself to 98 degree temperatures while a bowl of vanilla ice cream was placed just out of reach of his mouth. In this case, with the extreme temperature, the artist's body transforms into a suffering, debilitated object, not unlike his experiments with food decay. In video documentation of the work, ice cream and head both seem to melt in the sweltering heat, and in this space of decay, one could only imagine vultures circling overhead.

### **Consuming the Artist**

Creating an object of his body, Pope.L also becomes a very consumable entity. Reception politics are inherent to Pope.L's work as he engages the audience to question what is expected from a black artist and how race is consumed. This was the case when the audience watching *The Egg Eating Contest* thought Pope.L was going to reveal his penis only to chuckle uncomfortably when his lap was lit up by a light bulb. In response to Mr. Cau-Casian, the audience member who asked the artist to "reveal his member," Joe Wood, cultural critic for the Village Voice, wrote that *The Egg Eating Contest* dredged "up the sick American fascination with our things, and caus[ed] me more than a little a confusion." Wood's insightful response to the performance reveals the complex emotions evoked in the spectator of Pope.L's pieces:

**Why, I wondered, did I, like the white Others, feel sad and guilty, and not angry and wronged, as I, a Black man, should? I also found myself asking something else: had Pope[.L] expected me to be part of this audience ... and brother, Pope[.L] answered both questions. By exhibiting himself while he was protesting our gaze, Pope[.L] had made me part of his audience. He'd trapped me because, after all, there I was doing what we all knew was, well, wrong: consuming him. What we were watching was a revelation of ourselves, our Consumer selves, and in a sense, our rapist selves, quite beyond our Black and White selves. Pope[.L], in the end, was showing us a mirror\_ he was selling us ourselves, which is to say that the piece worked brilliantly.**

While responses to Pope.L's work are often emotionally and mentally complex, the artist has questioned the consumption of his work by white critics and scholars who have attributed African influences to his piece *My Niagra*, where his body was interpreted as an abject *bocio* figure. In the symposium "Issues in African Contemporary Art," at the Maine College of Art, Pope.L discussed this comparison raising more questions than answers:

**Let me say loud and clear: I bear no malice toward Ms. Crawford or Ms. Blier when I say: How come all these white people know more about black folk than I do? In fact,**

**how come one of them knows more about  
me than i do?**

**When i look at my own motivations for my  
interest in *bocio* i cannot separate them from  
the expectations of Ms. Crawford or even  
those of Mark Bessire who asked me to  
speak here today and who was also intrigued  
by Ms. Crawford's claim, albeit for his own reasons.**

**I want Mr. Bessire and Ms. Crawford to find  
my work intriguing so i go along with the  
idea that there is, in fact, a link between my  
work and that of *bo* artist-activators. But in  
the same breath i also say to myself: Why is  
it not enough that i am a black American  
artist? Apparently i need to get blacker. More  
authentic. i must become the black  
American artist with dark, mysterious, atavis-  
tic roots in some primitive Otherness. Who  
is speaking here? Who is telling me this?**

**Of course, this is not the first time a white  
person has been instrumental in educating a  
black person about blackness or constructing  
for a black person the mask of blackness  
most attractive for the historical occasion.  
So if i find, for myself, a connection between  
*bocio* and my own work, how do i own it?  
How do i own it separate from the expecta-  
tions of others? Well, why worry about it?  
Why look a gift-horse in the mouth?**

By discussing in his symposium paper, the legitimacy of a black artist to appropriate African sources for use, Pope.L also voiced his concern about reception, specifically the critique of his work by critics, scholars, and curators.

For Pope.L, race is not as much the issue as is American culture's relationship to otherness, exemplified by its definitions of whiteness and blackness (and also its distinctions of difference in all its forms: racial, ethnic, cultural, gender, etc). The artist Adrian Piper addressed the critique of her work in a lengthy response to the article "Blacks, Whites and Other Mythic Seings," in which she criticized the author, Eleanor Heartney, for drastically misreading her work. For one, she complained that Heartney treated her "differently from the 'white' artists she usually writes about" and that she viewed her as a "race traitor." Piper also objected to Heartney's definition of race in relation to her work, as in the following description: "the Achilles' heel of Piper's work is the unequal way she treats the categories of black and white .... [T]oo often in her work, 'white' is treated as an undifferentiated state of being. The category of 'white' seems to be equated with privilege and is rarely allowed the shadings she so skillfully reveals in her analysis of 'black.'"

Piper and Pope.L both open a dialogue about the positioning of black artists by the art establishment, an issue that was addressed by Piper and many others in a selection of essays, entitled "Blinded by the White: Art and History at the Limits of Whiteness" in the *Art Journal*. In the articles the writers examine how issues of race influence the reception of artists of color by white critics, scholars, and art

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historians.

While Pope.L's work is unique in the art world, he has suggested that he admires the work of Adrian Piper and that of other black women who work intellectually, playfully, and in your face:

**When i was first introduced to [the work of] Adrian Piper she was playing with readability and legibility in a way that no other artist was doing at that time. Especially a female artist. Especially a black female artist. Piper, in a way, reminded me of my first encounters with Octavia Butler (her Patternist Series) or Toni Morrison (*Sula*) or Marita Bonner (*Blue Flowers*) or Philemona Williamson. All these folks work intellectually, sexually, technically playfully, and in your face, defamiliarizing and resistant to obvious one-shot interpretation. I liked this: it was bold and sneaky at the same time. But i wondered why position your work this way? In a sense, it was obvious, all of them were coming from what they perceived as a marginalized place yet they were choosing to enter the daylight with their pants down. They wanted to show their equipment. Wag it in our faces behind a screen of smarts. I said to myself: here is a Ryman that knows itself.**

What Pope.L regards so highly in these artists, the fact that they choose to display issues of identity and "wag it in our faces behind a screen of smarts," is also precisely what he does in *Member (a.k.a "schlong journey")* When he confronts notions of black phallus, makes it white and literally wags in our faces.

### Conclusion

Soon after moving to Maine (confirmed as the least diverse state in America by the latest national census report), i received a holiday postcard from someone named Pope.L stamped "I am still Black." This was followed by another postcard, advertising a movie on the front and stamped "The friendliest Black Artist in America©" on the verso, from Lewiston, Maine. Who was the artist living in Maine? William Pope.L; i have come to learn, has been making art for many years on the margins of the art world, subtly framing the cultural discourse on lack and otherness. His practice, he suggests, invites "viewers to question consumption and the contradictions, stereotypes, and contraries of otherness," but he also feels strongly that "we need to take responsibility for what we consume."

In one image from *Black Domestic Project* (1993-95), Pope.L photographed himself bare-chested holding a black and white spotted cow to which he feeds a bottle labeled "Race." Providing a humorous scene with contradictions addressing issues of consumption and racialized culture, this staged photograph is emblematic of his practice. It is a direct and confrontational critique of the manipulation of consumption, race, and the neatly packaged social ideas we are faced with everyday as consumers. It is also a spoof on the "Got Milk" campaign, which displayed a variety of celebrities (the epitome of American desire) consuming milk: The *Black Domestic Project* and other works are

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viewed by William Pope.L as part of a practice where he considers the world a laboratory or a gymnasium or a practice field. It is a place where he experiments and attempts to debunk old myths searching for new paradigms while creating new myths and confounding any notion of what is expected From the friendliest black artist in America. As William Pope.L so articulately suggested, "blackness is limited not by race but our courage to imagine it differently."

This essay is dediwled to the memory of Joe Wood.  
my high school classmale who also admired  
the work of William Pope.L.