

William Pope.L
The Long White Cloud

The Long White Cloud

Written and directed by William Pope.L

Commissioned by Te Tuhi

Curated by Bruce E. Phillips

Cast

Father: Stephen Bain

Son: Samuel Christopher

Mother: Aruna Po-Ching

Crew

Executive Producer: James McCarthy

Project Managers: Andrew Kennedy and Guy Nichol

Artist Assistants: Lauren Beck and Lydia Grey

Music: The Electric Boutique

Editing: Sam Tozer, Brown Street Productions

Sound: Chris Todd

Director of Photography: Ian Powell

Camera Assistants: Lukas Doolan and Paul Janman

Lighting Operator: Marshall Bull

Set Design: Brad Knewstubb

Set Builders: Andrew Kennedy and Rohan Hartley Mills

Costume Design: Kirsty Cameron

Costume Assistant: Isobel Dryburgh

Director's Assistants: Isobel Dryburgh and Alex Kozel

Stagehands: Clare Hartley McLean and Rohan Hartley Mills

Poster Design: David Giordano

Invitation, Advertising and Publication Design: Kalee Jackson

Runners: Bruce E. Phillips and Simran Saseve-Dale

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All the characters are real including you
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Foreword

Hiraani Himona and James McCarthy
Present and former Executive Directors of Te Tuhi

In 2013, Te Tuhi was the first New Zealand gallery to produce and exhibit a major new project by the prominent Chicago-based artist William Pope.L. Hailed by *Frieze* magazine as a 'neo-Dadaist agent provocateur', Pope.L creates politically charged and bleakly absurd work that troubles the themes of sex, language, race and beauty. His practice spans a wide range of media from painting and sculpture to performance works that intervene into public space or the theatre context. An important influence throughout Pope.L's practice has been situations from his life experiences of uncertainty and contradiction.

Exploring this for Te Tuhi, Pope.L created an elaborate work that was a live play, a video work and an installation. Through these different formats, Pope.L sought to connect the racial politics of the United States and Aotearoa New Zealand while also drawing attention to the unique complexities of both contexts. What resulted was a work that was experimental, ambitious and controversial in equal measure. We would like to thank Pope.L for his generosity, genius and daring in travelling to New Zealand and creating this unique work. We would also like to thank the local cast and crew who worked tirelessly to bring Pope.L's vision to life.

The Long White Cloud

Martin Patrick

The singular name William Pope.L refers to an altogether complex, mercurial amalgam of artistic selves and personae: artist, writer, performer, director. While he is perhaps most famous for his achievements in the realm of performance, the scope of his practice is much wider than that. His works speak in a multiplicity of tones and voices, consistently challenging the one-dimensional quality that too often characterises our received assumptions around cultural and historical narratives, even when we might reassure ourselves that we are significantly revising our perspectives. There is no room for safety in Pope.L's practice, one that is manifold, ever-shifting, and sharply critical in highly unexpected and disarming ways.

That said, the artist has in a very intriguing manner negotiated between academic and everyday worlds, the so-called alternative and commercial modes of disseminating art, and has created site-responsive performances and videos, as well as a range of idiosyncratic, stylised material works (drawings, sculptures, installations). Pope.L has consumed the most established right-wing US broadsheet newspaper as an endurance performance, tried (unsuccessfully) to give bills away from the money skirt he wore outside an urban bank, dragged a white baby doll along the ground on a string, sat and poured cheap Thunderbird wine over himself while conducting a number of other ritual-like procedures, attempted to commission a billboard reading "This is a painting of Martin Luther King's penis from inside my father's vagina" (again unsuccessfully) and sat in a gallery for three days with the hope of levitating a bottle of laxative. Plus there's a whole lot more ...

While this very quick glimpse of Pope.L's resume might conjure a slightly threatening figure, he has openly played with reductive and racist tropes by billing himself as "America's Friendliest Black Artist", and indeed he veers between intense, performative examinations of the lifeworld and a range of public art projects that are pitched with a genial, charming demeanour. Why wouldn't volunteers line up to take turns manually pulling an eight-ton truck along the streets of New Orleans or Cleveland for this artist? Why wouldn't they crawl together with the artist in Portland, Maine? No doubt because Pope.L has cred. And this is owing not simply to some notion of 'street authenticity' but extends outward from a peculiarly well-rounded, aesthetically striking and intellectually rich model of art-making that ultimately takes many different twists and turns. As the Chicago curator Hamza Walker writes: "Pope.L has forged an artistic practice that has nothing yet so much to do with race."¹

Of Pope.L's earlier performances, his series of 'crawl' pieces are the most renowned. In these the artist wears either a business suit or a Superman costume, the latter in the work *Great White Way* (spanning almost an entire decade) in which the artist chose to crawl along Broadway bit by bit from one end of Manhattan island to the other — a distance of approximately 35 kilometres. Long ago, the midtown area of Broadway was nicknamed "The Great White Way", due to its historic, early electric lighting. Recall too, that while Superman is often considered emblematic of mainstream America (much like Coca-Cola or Mickey Mouse) he was invented in 1938 by two young Jewish men, Jerome Siegel and Joseph Shuster, such that the character they created could be read as a rejoinder and rejection of their own ascribed status of 'other'.

In Pope.L's practice, his reading of the continuing entanglement of 'whiteness', 'blackness' and 'otherness' is richly evocative, and offers a heightening and intensification of everyday human experience via the poetic use of both visual and textual language that intermingles creative generosity and critical incisiveness. As performance theorist Shannon Jackson has noted, "Less remarked — and if remarked, less analysed — is the fact that Pope.L taught playwriting, avant-garde performance of poetry in the Theatre and Rhetoric departments of Bates College for nearly two decades."² But playing an interesting counterpoint to Pope.L's often brutal use of quotidian materials in his performances is his precise use of language that is subtly configured and, while also existing vibrantly on the page, often functions as a narrative to video works, is annexed into drawings or presented within lively interviews and artist statements. In a passage quite representative of the artist's inventively tactical wordplay, Pope.L writes:

Blackness is a notion, a desert, a nothing ... And we all seem to have a use for nothing. It is the fantasy we tell ourselves to mark ourselves off from the world and put us to sleep at night. It is what we use to make money. To make people cry. It is our cereal, it is our milk. It is what we use to kill ourselves with. It is our blanky made out of vapor ...³

The brand of poignant and distinctive humour particularly evident throughout Pope.L's works draws upon manifold influences, among them the Fluxus movement's actions and objects (Pope.L was once a student of the Fluxus artist Geoffrey Hendricks), the stand-up comedy of Richard Pryor, the existential absurdity of Samuel Beckett, the anarchic impulses of Dada and the multifarious, idiosyncratic activities of citizens who haven't been afforded the designation 'artist'. Pope.L's use of the sensory, viscous properties of food, drink, bodily fluids and medications both recalls his worries over the trauma of a bare cupboard and extends the influence of the Fluxus fixation on artworks which manifested properties of food and the body.

As dance historian Sally Banes notes: “The Fluxus movement was particularly fascinated by bodily processes, from ingestion to excretion. The name Fluxus itself ... comes from the word ‘flux’ — whose primary meaning is ‘a) a flowing or fluid discharge from the bowels or other part ... b) the matter that is discharged.’”⁴ Pope.L’s own works operate most often at the threshold between one thing and another. What are the discernible qualities of separateness, disunity, dissonance? How can challenges be thought or felt through the use of haptic, tactile means? How can an artist make mayonnaise, ketchup, Pop-Tarts or industrially processed bread *do* things, fuck with our heads, irrevocably?

Art historian Darby English in his perceptive reading of Pope.L’s approach cites the “productive potential of apositionality” favoured by the artist, and further comments that: “Although the play of differences weighs supreme in his work, it’s never simply as a matter of one difference against the other, but more like a meditation on the impermanence that inheres in each: the play *in* differences.”⁵ That the artist has often been viewed as an ‘outsider’ while simultaneously fulfilling ‘insider’ roles is of great relevance to his work, as it leads one to believe that such categories are simply that: categories, which often serve as a means of officially according and sanctioning privileged or degrading positions as viewed by society at large.

In Pope.L’s practice there exists what one might call a certain spectacular intersubjectivity of operation, as the artist often conceives his work with a clear notion of the audience playing a distinct role, whether later on viewing documentation, at the time of the project in question or in a dialogical relation to the artist. As Pope.L commented in an interview with curator Lowery Stokes Sims:

I like audience. I like giving good audience. I like people. My appreciation comes more from my background in theatre and rock bands than from being in the art world ... I also respect and fear the audience. Like my family, the audience is also bigger than me. I see my relation to audience as a kind of dance in which I must be sensitive to the ebb and flow of the choreography. This choreography is a collaboration. No one owns it. Its nature is mutually influencing. Bridges must be built and burnt viscerally.⁶

Along with the hard-core actuality of lived political situations, Pope.L’s creative practices intersect time and again with aspects of dreaming (whether sleeping or waking), conjured worlds and altered states. These have recently been explored even more intensively, in curious parallel with the rise of a so-called ‘social practice’. Pope.L has stated in an interview: “there can be no innovation without the gangplank of dreaming”.⁷ And as a starting point in eliciting public participation in a project he created for 2011’s *Prospect* exhibition in New Orleans, Pope.L asked: “When you dream of New Orleans, what do you dream of? // When you wake up in the morning what

do you see?”⁸ The resultant work, *Blink*, collated the more than 1000 images the artist received into a film, which was then projected on to the rear of an ice-cream truck which was painted black and towed processional-style by groups of volunteers through the streets of the city from the Lower Ninth Ward to Xavier University.

In speaking of the work, Pope.L commented: “*Blink* is about sharing the struggle with the darkness with others. It’s about dragging that darkness out into the daylight. It’s also about the dream inside the darkness We all have a hope that our dragging has a purpose, that’s why we can’t let go of the past. We’re not done with it and it’s not done with us. It’s a puzzle we have to work out. But it’s sometimes easier to figure a thing out if you have help.”⁹ And in relation to this emphasis upon projected works, I recall a statement by Antonin Artaud. Though keenly aware of the manifold extremes of the corporeal body, Artaud argued for a convincing language of dreams, and often in the form of projections upon a screen: “So I demand phantasmagorical films The cinema is an amazing stimulant. It acts directly on the grey matter of the brain. When the savour of art has been sufficiently combined with the psychic ingredient which it contains it will go way beyond the theatre which we will relegate to a shelf of memories.”¹⁰

Pope.L integrates an array of autobiographical experiences into his variegated practice, but these become so (re-)mixed in with his poetic allusions, performative tactics and over-the-top rhetoric that even to try to determine what is seemingly ‘real’ vs entirely ‘theatricalised’ is pointless. Pope.L appears to be saying we all deal with the same spectral shit and it’s going to continue to haunt us in potentially devastating ways unless we come to some acknowledgement of issues we rarely wish to face. These may involve race, class, trust, identity or a host of other things. An artistic approach that despite its often confrontational, highly stylised and excessive modes of operation intends to move the artist and viewer just a little closer towards more empathic and compassionate relations with other human beings.

Pope.L has been recognised for both the versatility and intensity of his art practice. The former of those traits goes a long way, whether valorised or not, but the latter attribute can be much more disorienting. Viewers don’t always seek out radical intensity in artworks, and are often confounded by such encounters. This again might be one reason that Pope.L works in so many different registers, as by and large he is a virtuoso of the manifold art project: performance morphs into sculpture, morphs into video, morphs into installation. For his Te Tuhi project in 2013, he took on content derived from his subjective reading of New Zealand’s history, viewing it within an existing theatrical framework. This framework continued to evolve while he was in residence in New Zealand.

The Long White Cloud acts as a departure for Pope.L in respect of its geographical location and adopted historical context, but not in terms of his in-depth reworking of cultural

and interpersonal problems, then and now (and looking toward uncertain futures and as yet unseen potentialities). A viewer taking the work at face value (quite hazardous in the act of assessing any Pope.L artwork) might get the impression that the artist has only barely addressed Aotearoa New Zealand.¹¹ But Pope.L is a shrewd and dedicated researcher and in his imaginative transformation of New Zealand-inspired content, one could say that, yes, he has potentially misread, but that all acts of reading are misreadings, and that such readings can become generative creative tools.

In the case of *The Long White Cloud*, Pope.L tailored, workshopped and refined a script he had been pondering for some time. Pope.L designed the work to be far more theatrical in its structure than many of his other recent performance projects, even to the point of the converting Te Tuhi's gallery space into a dark, cosy theatre, seating no more than about 50, akin to a small-scale independent repertory company's venue. The first iteration of *The Long White Cloud* was a one-off performance, which was videotaped and subsequently edited into a version shown in 'backstage' context throughout the remainder of the exhibition, along with the discarded props, food wrappers, bits of costuming, water bottles, duct tape, pages of script and other ephemera from the performance itself, left as residual detritus.

Two of the three actors in the cast play more than one character, at times shifting rather abruptly in their roles, a transition smoothed over to a degree by their evident abilities. But one imagines that Pope.L's scenario and script would seem out of the ordinary for many professional actors. Some themes recall earlier Pope.L works: food and drink, shadowplay, backstage and staged actions in general, innuendo and allegory. In the current project, Pope.L addresses, in ways that simultaneously recall earlier works and move in different directions, the enduring, problematic features of colonialism and nationalism as read through the more intimate but equally visceral traumas of dysfunctional family relations. Pope.L here reads the organisational units of 'family' and 'nation' as analogous in many respects, micro and macro versionings with uncannily similar attributes, both positive and negative. While *The Long White Cloud* could be viewed as a postcolonial parable, it is a heavily stylised work, and points in multiple directions.

The narrative action is disturbing, harsh, nightmarish. A twenty-year-old Son (Samuel Christopher) is keeping his Mother (Aruna Po-Ching) hostage, tied to the bed, terrorising her. The son goes to work at a sugar plant, and central to the plain grey set is a large metal chute, from which sugar and sand-filled black bottles descend. Sugar, of course, is a markedly changeable substance, either a sticky, mucky coating or dry, granular and sandy. The Son's co-worker, Walker (Stephen Bain), asks him: *You been back — how long now? / Too long / Two weeks? / What? Black? Being what? Black? What? / What's it like? Back. Being back. Home. Being. I mean. / Like before. Only like, like I'm on the inside of something ...*

/ Yeah. Well, like the inside of a labyrinth the color of a Rorschach, right? / I don't know about that. The confusion of the terms 'back' and 'black' are further exacerbated by the noise of the chute repeatedly discharging its contents. And this poetic shifting of words and phrases is a characteristic Pope.L strategy.

Pope.L threads references to the New Zealand context throughout the piece but they often remain elliptical, oblique, points rather than paths, surface imagery as indications of deeper structures: the Father character named Kupe, after the founding ancestral figure of Aotearoa; another story from Walker (the name refers to the renowned Māori historian Ranginui Walker, whose work Pope.L consulted as research) about the extinct piopio bird; a violent sexual tumble in which a ferocious N-Z word association game occurs (*Nigger / Zeppelin / Nasty / Zenith / Nautical / Zero / Nefarious / Zeitgeist*); ongoing mentions of clouds, islands and voyaging; and the red letters 'NZ' painted on the Father's bare chest. And if viewers seek any 'authentic' portrayal of New Zealand that would be exactly beside the point, as Pope.L repeatedly denies notions of authenticity, essence or truth-value, calling attention to artifice and absurdity rather than making a direct social critique.

Pope.L's *The Long White Cloud* is comprised of collaged fragments that do not make a seamless whole, but hint at larger things, still partial, still half glimpsed and not entirely clear. It gestures towards ideas of memory and its lapses — whether things actually happened or not and how this might affect and determine later responses; and leaves unclear if the disjunctive narrative indeed operates within some hybridised mix of dream-state and wakefulness. Moreover, with its allusions to and distorted representations of violence and rape, alienation and estrangement, *The Long White Cloud* is not easy viewing. But this is the favoured tactical mode of Pope.L, who does not offer up entertaining art as comfort food, but rather calls attention to our discomfort and disorientation in the hope of moving multiple discourses forward, even if sometimes laboriously, slowly and not without encountering hazards along the way.¹²

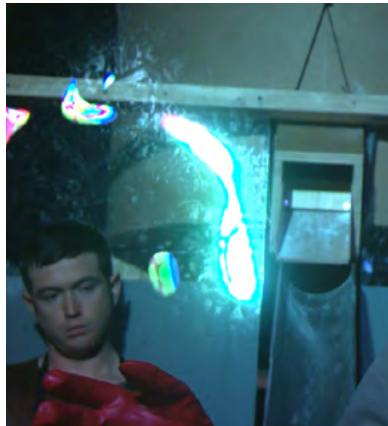
- 1 Hamza Walker, "Double Consciousness, Squared,"
<http://renaissancesociety.org/site/Exhibitions/Essay.William-PopeL-Forlesen.634.html>.
- 2 Shannon Jackson, *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 135.
- 3 William Pope.L, *some things you can do with blackness ...* (London: Kenny Schachter Rove, 2005).
- 4 Sally Banes, *Greenwich Village 1963: Avant-Garde Performance and the Effervescent Body* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 202.
- 5 Darby English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007).
- 6 Mark Bessire, ed., *William Pope.L: The Friendliest Black Artist in America* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 64–65.
- 7 Gerry Fialka, "Insanity and Social Sculpture: A Conversation with William Pope.L,"
<http://www.venicewake.org/Articles/GF/04Insanity.html>.
- 8 *Prospect 2 Event: Collectively Blink 10/22*,
<http://invadenola.com/2011/10/prospect-2-event-collectively-blink-1022/>.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Antonin Artaud, *Collected Works: Volume Three*, edited by Paule Thévenin,
translated by Alastair Hamilton (London: Calder and Boyars, 1972), 166–7.
- 11 For a critical assessment of Pope.L's Te Tuhi project by a New Zealand performance artist,
see Mark Harvey's review on *EyeContact*, 11 March 2013,
<http://eyecontactsite.com/2013/09/sweet-and-bitter>.
- 12 This essay was commissioned by Te Tuhi in 2013. A similar version of this essay is also
included in Martin Patrick's book *Across the Art/Life Divide: Performance, Subjectivity, and
Social Practice in Contemporary Art* published by Intellect Ltd in 2018.







































TE TUHI PRESENTS
W I L L I A M P O P E . L ' S

THE LONG
White
LOUD

"SON?LOVER?PATRIOT?NIGGER?CUMULUS?"

3 AUGUST - 20 OCTOBER



All the characters are real including you

Bruce E. Phillips

Sonny: I think there's something wrong with me.¹

The Opening. It is jet black and silent, 1 ... 2 ... 3 ... 4 ... 5 ... 6 ... 7 ... 8 ... 9 ... 10 ... house lights on ... actors centre stage ... applause ... actors bow and exit. I observe a stunned audience staggering down steps and exiting the gallery that had been transformed into a small theatre.

About 60 minutes earlier, this gallery was packed to the brim with an eager audience, wide-eyed and unsuspecting of what was to unfold. Talking to people afterwards, I find they were either deeply troubled, perplexed and searching for polite words, or enthusiastically blown away. Both reactions are understandable. For this audience was subjected to a menacing, mind-fucking and history-muddling storyline of David Lynch-like disquiet with Samuel Beckett-like wordplay and existential crisis. The artwork in question is *The Long White Cloud* (2013), a live play and installation by prominent Chicago-based artist William Pope.L, commissioned and produced by Te Tuhi.

In this work, an unusual narrative is performed by a cast of three actors, two of whom play multiple characters, grappling with overt and latent themes of love, language, race and beauty and troubled by bleakly absurd forms of sexual, mental and physical abuse. The abuse is not violence for shock and awe but is used as a metaphor for poverty, institutional racism, colonialism, nationalism and income inequality — a masticated composite of issues which, when mangled together, act as insidious strategies; used to control populations directly as straightforward oppression and indirectly by increasing the likelihood of domestic abuse that so sadly circulates through families and communities.

...

Pope.L: Social conditioning is a form of molestation.²

The Motivation. Pope.L is an intriguing artist to me because of his determination and skill in merging the murky cultural and political significance of art production together with the materiality of its making — a pursuit that has led him to blend a soiled conceptualism and a social conscience within complex reveries.

I first made contact with Pope.L in 2011 to explore exhibiting his ongoing series of text-based drawings in a group show called *What do you mean, we?* (2012).³ These works explore both nonsensical and racially charged phrases such as: “WHITE PEOPLE ARE THE SKY THE ROPE AND THE BONFIRE”, “BLACK PEOPLE ARE THE RAIN AGAINST THE WINDSHIELD”, “PURPLE PEOPLE ARE THE END OF ORANGE PEOPLE”. However, in conversation with Te Tuhi’s then Director James McCarthy I came to the realisation that Pope.L was a figure that would be worth exploring a more in-depth relationship with.

His work had never been exhibited in New Zealand before and was largely unknown in this part of the world — that is unless you happen to be interested in performance art or experimental theatre: if so you would probably be a fanatic Pope.L fan. An additional motivation of exhibiting Pope.L was to increase support for local artists who might be interested in producing artworks that address the global complications of race, gender or class inequality. Artworks that explored these topics were not fashionable at the time within the mainstream of the country’s art scene, as critic Anthony Byrt exclaimed in a review of the 2012 City Gallery exhibition *Prospect: New Zealand Art Now*:

... underpinning the exhibition was an alarming if unintentional thesis that perhaps we don’t want to deal with sticky questions at all; that when confronted with the grubby realities of globalization, we’d rather park up on our safe islands, make pretty things, and pat each other on the back instead.⁴

...

The Process. Email communication swelled and waned over 12 months or so until finally Pope.L and I decided to produce a solo exhibition — one that was ambitious enough for him to experiment and saw Te Tuhi taking on a new level of contribution to the local art scene. Initially, Pope.L proposed an extension of his crawl performances where he would emerge from a pool containing 25 tonnes of sugar then crawl 15 kilometres to downtown Auckland and lie on the road outside the central police headquarters. A few Skype meetings later, the project evolved into a narrative-based theatrical production that would nod towards New Zealand's colonial context.

This shift required Te Tuhi to transform its main gallery space into a small theatre with a modular stage set capable of being reconfigured at the artist's request. Pope.L made a sketch of the stage; Te Tuhi produced a model based on his plans; Pope.L produced a script; Te Tuhi held auditions; Pope.L reviewed the auditions via video links; Te Tuhi employed a set designer, a director of photography, a sound engineer, a lighting desk operator, a couple of director's assistants and a wardrobe consultant; Pope.L conversed with the actors via Skype. He finally arrived, after 20 hours of travelling, on a Tuesday afternoon and we moved directly into rehearsals and filming the following day. By the start of the next week we were in the editing suite, cutting the raw footage that would then be configured into a video projected within the installation component of the exhibition.

Despite all this organisation, it was crucial that Te Tuhi used a method of working that would accommodate Pope.L's Dada-esque and improvisational sensibilities. In my research I learnt that this is a key condition in his practice that enables him to probe for slippages of intent and meaning within language, materiality, form, history, politics and social behaviour.

Having absorbed the script, concluded auditions and started constructing the set, Pope.L and I also had to work around the organisational needs of promoting a project that still needed the option to grow. We had to find a way of including the public in this idea of art not being something fixed and knowable but something continually susceptible to change — a hard sell in our current age of entertainment and event culture that favours clear communication and easy-to-understand ideas. For in truth, Pope.L's project was in continual flux and unpredictability — its form is a precarious entity that reflected the volatility of the individual within society. If the exhibition were a person it would be much like the characters in Pope.L's script — someone who is hostile to the pressures of social conformity because hidden within conformity is a type of violence enacted by the many upon the few or by the powerful upon the powerless.

Seeking out the knife-edge of uncertainty and contradiction has been an important driver throughout Pope.L's practice and life. He explains:

I'm suspicious of things that make easy sense ... whereas contradiction does make sense to me. When I was able to accept that something could be true, and not true, I felt at home ... For example, one of the hardest paradigms is that your family can hurt you, and love you at the same time. How can that be possible? ... but being able to accept that contradiction at this level has been a guiding principle for me; it's not an answer, it's a positioning that's always unstable.⁶

For his exhibition at Te Tuhi, Pope.L sought to create what he termed a 'format-performance' accommodating a type of play existing in competing versions: live, recorded and edited. Through these different formats uncertainty was explored via an unfolding drama that acted out difficult family relationships as a microcosm of larger societal dysfunctions. Overall, the work was informed by a series of interrelated enquiries, including an attempt to find solidarity between the national and the individual; a search for clarity in a 'post-race' culture as it supposedly exists in the United States and New Zealand today; and the questioning of what such a culture is and what it feels like. It also explored the impossibility of truly connecting to another's situation or history.

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Given this content and approach to the work, it was important at the moment of promoting the exhibition that I was accurate and careful with language. This was critical in order to resist possible concluding statements that would profile the project as one particular thing. For it was indeed a project in the throes of becoming and was undoing itself through the meta-complexities of melding two connected but vastly different geo-political conditions. Pope.L explained it as a fraught process of searching for a type of factual reality only to have that reality become a guise. In an email to me he wrote:

So this history we want to make, this play, this song of in-betweenness will be about not knowing who we are and using the mask of, let's say for example the history of the United States or Aotearoa or my father or your mother or some fictional hybrid character made of bits of your mom, Māori culture and southern American black culture — this mask could be true and based on supportable evidence but if I use this mask to hide my face then there's that — isn't it?⁷

...

Walker: Yeah. Well, like the inside of a labyrinth the color of a Rorschach, right?⁸

The Critique. In the Rorschach test there is nothing on the page but ambiguous symmetrical ink clouds and yet we perceive things that are thought to trigger thoughts, desires, fears and biases, all fed to us through our subconscious. The complicated ambiguity in *The Long White Cloud* worked in a similar way. For example, some Pākehā practitioners found the work confronting, expressing concern that Pope.L had not spent enough time in the country to become aware of the specific endemic issues which his work partially references. He was scrutinised and compared to other high-profile 'international artists' who, in a growing trend, make a habit of flying into foreign countries or communities to tackle topical issues but fall short due to naive assumptions or misaligned agendas. This perspective was teased out in a review of the live performance written by artist and academic Mark Harvey. He writes:

In *The Long White Cloud* he's taken on the challenge of getting a crash course in Aotearoa's race relations, history and colonisation, spending no more than a week in person ... what would he know about the complexities of Aotearoa, we might ask? ... Is this just another American internationalist and colonising reading of us here in Aotearoa?⁹

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Pope.L and his artwork triggered a threat within the Pākehā psyche — one that, if I am truly honest, is motivated by a considerable amount of inherited colonial guilt and one that secretly wishes to 'protect' this country's colonial discourse. This 'protection' is driven by a latent desire that seeks to own the struggle of Māori and to limit the discourse to that of a strictly bicultural conversation.¹⁰ By wanting to maintain a legitimate position within the discourse, Pākehā take on the delusion that they are gracious liberators willing to relinquish their privilege, while in reality they secretly wish to maintain power by shutting down the possibility of outside influence. As Harvey explains, "we may position ourselves as morally superior to the institutionalized racism of America ... [but] many of us (Pākehā especially) are just as complicit to racism and colonization as Americans".¹¹

This is a dynamic tension that the work has been able to engender. However, to limit *The Long White Cloud* to implicating the id of white privilege would do a grave disservice to its many other more interesting aspects, such as the multi-layered dialogue, the blurring of familial personas and the manipulative power of historic narratives.

...

Dr. Bledsoe: ... for God's sake, learn to look beneath the surface ... Come out of the fog, young man ... Play the game, but don't believe in it.¹²

The Characters. Pope.L lands and stirs the pot — a mixture of histories and thorny cultural assertions — and then exits. While the concerns of unethical practice by 'jet-setting' artists are worthy of consideration, they are redundant in this instance. Pope.L's experimental perceptiveness operates in a way that avoids any absolute claims, damning critique or essentialist commentary. He never intended, nor was expected, to make an artwork *about* New Zealand but rather planned on seeking commonality with his own experience in order to establish some sort of dialogue.

As his drawn text works illustrate, there is an absurdity in the language we use to classify people and how we in turn are willing or coerced to be classified. Likewise, in *The Long White Cloud* Pope.L was seeking a common ground through the telling of stories, the manifestation of national identity and the formation of the family as a nucleus for society. This is most apparent in Pope.L's creation of the characters, whom he explains in the opening credits of the subsequent 2014 edit of the video component:

Samuel Christopher as:

1. Sonny;
2. The truth-ivist;
3. Symbolic of New Zealand.

Aruna Po-Ching as:

1. Mother;
2. Possibly her younger self;
3. Female high school friend, Cooper, based on a Māori activist;
4. The Intentionalist;
5. Symbolic of Great Britain;
6. Symbolic of the Author.

Stephen Bain as:

1. Father;
2. Possibly his younger self;
3. Male high school friend, Seddon, based on a former prime minister;
4. Factory worker, Ranginui Walker, based on the Māori activist;
5. The Constructivist;
6. Symbolic of America.

Directors Notes:

1. Sugar is not an export of New Zealand;
2. New Zealand is a former colony of Great Britain, currently friendly with the United States;
3. All the characters are real including you.¹³

Here, Pope.L lists not just the multiple characters that each actor plays but the plural attitudes and motifs that each holds within the frame of the play and in the reality beyond the frame of the theatre, gallery or camera. These meta-levels of persona absorption make *The Long White Cloud* a confounding case of social psychology. This said, however, Pope.L does leave compelling ciphers within the script and stage presence that pull the audience through the tangle of implied signifiers.

Scene 6. In the factory, Walker catches Sonny daydreaming on the job, which we learn is because he is sleep-deprived due to using his bed, the bed of his parents' consummation, to imprison his Mother: "so — I tied her up to it. Now she eats in that bed. Sleeps and cries and shits in that bed. Just like I did." After Sonny's outburst, Walker launches into a story. Walker, I should add, is modelled on the late Ranginui Walker, noted by Pope.L as a "Māori activist" but also a leading academic and historian known for his seminal text *Ka Whawhai Tonu Matou: Struggle Without End*, a book which fuses Māori creation myths and political realities to create a rigorous and persuasive narrative of the worldview mismatch between Māori and Europeans — an incongruity that has been used as a colonising strategy by the Crown and a tactic of subversion on the part of Māori.

Picking up on the power of story construction within the Māori oral tradition, Pope.L gives the character Walker the role of storyteller, the soothsayer, the elucidator, but also the manipulator of Sonny's mind and understanding of history. He tells a story of the extinction of the piopio bird, but in this telling the species is anthropomorphised: "These island piopio were special. Their loss of flight was compensated by their ability to read and write." This morphs into an account of the Treaty of Waitangi as not just an agreement between people but also that of family:

they [the piopio] wrote a treaty between nation and family: how nation begets family and how family begets children ... all this begetting. Nation begetting family, family begetting children. What's it all about?¹⁴

In this scene, many neural pathways of association are bridged between related but ill-conjoined subjects, crafted together as one. The montage of related but misplaced content is mixed, providing an uncanny resemblance to issues and histories that are present simultaneously on the levels of individual, family and nation. It is through this awareness that Pope.L's characters begin to reflect the construction of the 'self' — how we as complex beings form and reform our sense of identity through nature and nurture, through actor and character, and also, I would argue, through artist and artwork. We create certain and stable personas built upon unstable personal neurosis and upon all too persuasive stories of social collectivity.

This reading is reinforced in the second to last scene where a near naked Stephen Bain, having adorned himself in body paint, proceeds to improvise a type of haka. Sonny then arrives at his Father's place to meet Bain who, now playing Father and wearing a bowler hat and a red-painted 'NZ' emblazoned on his bare chest, sits on a stool sipping a can of Lion Red beer. The character posing as Sonny's Father is simultaneously, insidiously, an amalgam of Walker, former New Zealand prime minister Richard John Seddon, a symbol of the condescending paternal America and what Bain personally finds within himself to bring to the role.

Other references can be inferred here, ones perhaps not deliberately made by Pope.L, in particular the significance of the Father's bowler hat. Māori were fast to absorb the power signifiers of European fashion and the bowler hat was one such item. An example of this is found in the bowler-hat-wearing tekoteko that takes prominent position upon the apex of *Te Tākinga pātaka* — a late nineteenth-century pātaka on permanent display in the *Mana Whenua* exhibition at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa. The tekoteko represents the prominent Waikato chief and Māori king Tāwhiao who, so it is told, placed his hat on a North Island map to designate the land he claimed under his rule, thus naming it Te Rohe Pōtae (the district of the hat).

A bowler hat can also be seen in Charles Goldie's 1905 painting '*All 'e Same t'e Pākehā*' (*Te Aho-o-te-Rangi Wharepu, Ngāti Mahuta*). However, in this painting the symbolism of the hat is conflicted due to the painter's motivation to document the dwindling legacy of what he considered a 'dying race'. The bowler hat in this instance acts as an emblem of the submissive assimilation of Māori within a European-dominated civilisation, rather than being evidence of savvy resilience and subversive appropriation of the mana of another culture.

A New Zealand viewer of *The Long White Cloud* might also trace a connection between the stocky, beer-guzzling, 'NZ'-marked aspect of the Caucasian Father character and his resemblance to the delinquent figures in the paintings of Tony de Lautour. In paintings such as *Blackhead* (1995) or *Shore Party* (1999), de Lautour illustrates redneck 'kiwi yobbos' sporting 'NZ' tattoos and trashing postcard-perfect vistas with beer bottles. In light of these resemblances, the Father could be considered a ritualistic Pākehā male figure emblazoned with signifiers of nationhood and kiwi-esque characteristics — he is a monster caught between self, family and nation.

...

Cooper: I heard you got lost.

The Installation. Pope.L noted on 20 July 2013:

This project ... consists of two versions (that are cousins) operating together but at different points in the life of the project ... The installation version of the play is an edited video ... viewed from behind the set wall. The audience and set areas remain in the same condition unchanged as they were after the performance. Any programs or trash in the audience seating or props or debris on stage remain as part of the installation.

If the installation is indeed a 'cousin' of the live performance, then it is a distant relative — one knows all the dark family secrets but is a step removed. As instructed by Pope.L, after the performance all detritus was left undisturbed apart from a few minor details. The hired theatre spotlights were removed and replaced with dimmed gallery lighting, which provided the type of intimacy that a desk lamp at night gives. Another change was that the projection screen used during the performance was now blacked out from the front, so that the video component could only be viewed from backstage.

It was an unusual exhibition experience. 'Haunting' is the adjective most often used to describe it. After passing the gallery signage, exhibition visitors were confronted with a row of racked seating to the left, a dimly lit stage in front, a brighter spotlight illuminating the backstage area and the eerie sounds of screaming or stern dialogue reverberating throughout the space.

Many visitors were captivated by the work's sonic qualities, listening to the vaporous dialogue from the derelict seating. Others who were bold or inquisitive enough ventured backstage and were rewarded with the projected film. A few lingered upon the threshold of the stage, tiptoeing around beer cans and cigarette butts to inspect other strewn props and costumes or being tempted to run fingers through the mound of sugar. There was no one correct experience: viewing the work from in front of, behind or on the stage were equally valid forms of engagement; each offered its own rewards or disappointments.

Viewing the work in installation form was less threatening to some visitors I spoke to — an indication of the visceral effect a live performance can have on a seated audience. In contrast, the installation allowed people to wander about at their own pace and because of this it demystified the play, stripping away the fourth wall. For those who did not witness the live performance, the installation sometimes supported the contradictory feeling that a sinister violent encounter had been concealed.

Operating in this more open-ended and conflicting capacity, the installation was an abject remnant that allowed access but also hid information. It meddled with fragments of the live and

recorded material. As with all good storytelling, Pope.L edited the original performance and regurgitated it back out into the world in a different but uncanny form where it might continue to beguile, confound or subversively encourage resistance.

- 1 William Pope.L, *The Long White Cloud*, performance and installation, Te Tuhi, Auckland, 2013.
- 2 William Pope.L, "The Long White Cloud: Draft Script," 20 July 2013.
- 3 *What do you mean, we?* was a 2012 Te Tuhi group exhibition that explored the psychology of prejudice. See: www.tetuhi.org.nz/whats-on/exhibitiondetails.php?id=112
- 4 Anthony Byrt, "Prospect: New Zealand Art Now," Artforum, 2012, <https://artforum.com/inprint/issue=201205§ion=wellington>.
- 5 Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot: A Tragicomedy in Two Acts* (London: Faber & Faber, 1952).
- 6 Martha Wilson, "Interview: William Pope.L," *Bomb Magazine*, 1996, <http://bombsite.com/issues/55/articles/1957>.
- 7 Bruce E. Phillips and William Pope.L, "William Pope.L: *The Long White Cloud*," TT, 2013, <http://www.tetuhi.org.nz/exhibitions/exhibitiondetails.php?id=129>.
- 8 Pope.L, *The Long White Cloud*.
- 9 Mark Harvey, "Sweet and Bitter Pope.L," *EyeContact*, 11 March 2013, <http://eyecontactsite.com/2013/09/sweet-and-bitter>.
- 10 Ani Mikaere, *Colonising Myths — Māori Realities: He Rukuruku Whakaaro* (Wellington: Huia Publishers, 2013), 100–102.
- 11 Harvey, "Sweet and Bitter Pope.L."
- 12 Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (London: Penguin Classics, 1952, new edition 2001), 153.
- 13 Pope.L, *The Long White Cloud*.
- 14 Pope.L, *The Long White Cloud*.
- 15 Pope.L, *The Long White Cloud*.
- 16 Pope.L, "The Long White Cloud: Draft Script."

Images

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William Pope.L

The Long White Cloud, 2013 (video still of scene 6).

HD video, 33:01 mins, installation and live performance.

Commissioned by Te Tuhi, Auckland.

p.30–33

William Pope.L

The Long White Cloud, 2013 (installation view).

HD video, 33:01 mins, installation and live performance.

Commissioned by Te Tuhi, Auckland.

Photo by Sam Hartnett.

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William Pope.L

The Long White Cloud, 2013 (installation views: view on stage).

HD video, 33:01 mins, installation and live performance.

Commissioned by Te Tuhi, Auckland.

Photos by Sam Hartnett.

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William Pope.L

The Long White Cloud, 2013 (installation view: exhibition signage).

HD video, 33:01 mins, installation and live performance.

Commissioned by Te Tuhi, Auckland.

Photo by Sam Hartnett.

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William Pope.L

The Long White Cloud, 2013 (backstage installation view).

HD video, 33:01 mins, installation and live performance.

Commissioned by Te Tuhi, Auckland.

Photo by Sam Hartnett.

Contributor Biographies

William Pope.L is a visual artist and educator whose multi-disciplinary practice uses binaries, contraries and preconceived notions embedded within contemporary culture to create artworks in various formats, for example, writing, painting, performance, installation, video and sculpture. Building upon his long history of enacting arduous, provocative, absurdist performances and interventions in public spaces, Pope.L applies some of the same social, formal and performative strategies to his interests in language, system, gender, race and community.

He has exhibited extensively throughout the United States and internationally with street performances and exhibitions at museums, galleries and biennials such as Museum of Modern Art, New York; New Museum, New York; Performa, New York; Whitney Biennial, New York; MOCA, Los Angeles; Shinjuku Station, Tokyo; Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago; documenta 14, Athens and Kassel; Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art in Gateshead Quays, UK; Bienal de São Paulo; Artspace in Sydney; and The Renaissance Society, University of Chicago. Pope.L is also the recipient of numerous awards and fellowships, including the Joyce Foundation Award, the Tiffany Foundation Award, the United States Artists Rockefeller Fellowship, the Bellagio Center Residency, Solomon R. Guggenheim Fellowship, Andy Warhol Foundation grant, Creative Capital Foundation grant, Franklin Furnace/Jerome Foundation grant, National Endowment for the Arts fellowship, Artists Space grant, and more.

Hiraani Himona (Ngāi Te Whatuiāpiti, Ngāti Rangiwhakāewa and Ngāti Hikarara) has been the Executive Director of Te Tuhi since March 2015 and was previously Deputy Director of the South London Gallery which, like Te Tuhi, offers integrated education and outreach programmes. She has a demonstrable commitment to providing opportunities for diverse communities, including working in Māori development (Te Puni Kōkiri and the Ministry of Education), disability (Mental Health Media and Learning Difficulties Media), gender and sexuality (York Lesbian Arts Festival, Women Like Us) and youth at risk (Hi8us South).

James McCarthy is the former Executive Director for Te Tuhi (2009–14) and the Contemporary Art Foundation. Responsibilities included governance, trust management, council relationships, strategic implementation, and budget management through to diverse hands-on help when required. He took an active role in programming exhibitions and worked closely with his curators in their direction and delivery. Previous to this role he worked as the school manager of Elam School of Fine Arts, a senior technician at Massey School of Fine Arts in Wellington and an installer at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Auckland Art Gallery and Artspace. McCarthy has spent his life involved in a range of creative pursuits, including art, music, film, design and contemporary dance. In his earlier years, after graduating from Elam, he joined the iconic sound art performance group From Scratch and toured the world. He formed his own sound installation performance group Rotaction which performed for seven years in various galleries and festivals in New Zealand. The highlight of his career is the From Scratch film project with Gregor Nicholas *PACIFIC 3,2,1 ZERO* (Part 1) which won the Grand Prix and first prize in its category at the 1994 Cannes/Midem Visual Music Awards.

Martin Patrick, Senior Lecturer in Fine Arts at Massey University, Wellington, is an art critic, historian and writer. He is a regular contributor to and reviewer for a variety of publications, including *Afterimage*, *Art Monthly*, *EyeContact* and the *New Zealand Listener*. His research involves critical writing on interdisciplinary practices and experimental uses of media in the contemporary visual arts. Patrick received his PhD in the History and Theory of Art from the University of Kent at Canterbury, England, and an MFA in Photography from the University of Texas at Austin. He was a visiting assistant professor at the Department of Visual Arts, University of Chicago (2005–07).

Bruce E. Phillips is a Wellington-based writer and curator. From 2011 to 2016 he was the Senior Curator at Te Tuhi and in 2017 he continues as Te Tuhi's Curator at Large. He has curated many exhibitions featuring more than 200 artists, such as Jonathas de Andrade, Tania Bruguera, Ruth Ewan, Newell Harry, Amanda Heng, Rangituhia Hollis, Tehching Hsieh, Maddie Leach, William Pope.L, Santiago Sierra, Shannon Te Ao, Luke Willis Thompson, Kalisolaite 'Uhila and The Otolith Group. As a writer he has contributed essays to art magazines, journals and art organisations such as *ArtLink Australia*, *Art News New Zealand*, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, Enjoy Public Art Gallery, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, *Hue & Cry*, *Le Roy*, Letting Space, ST Paul St Gallery and Te Tuhi.

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