

N E U B A U E R
COLLEGIUM
THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

Pope.L: My Kingdom for a Title

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Neubauer Collegium Curator Dieter Roelstraete and artist Pope.L have been collaborating since 2015, when Roelstraete invited Pope.L to participate in *The Freedom Principle: Experiments in Art and Music, 1965 to Now*, an exhibition he co-curated with Naomi Beckwith at the MCA Chicago. They worked together again in 2016 when Roelstraete was a member of the curatorial team that invited Pope.L to participate in Documenta 14. In 2018 they reunited at the University of Chicago, where they co-taught a class titled “Art and Knowledge” as part of their fellowship at the Richard and Mary L. Gray Center for Arts and Inquiry (Pope.L is a faculty member of the University’s Department of Visual Arts). Roelstraete later edited the book *CAMPAIGN* (Mousse Publishing, 2019), which chronicles the ongoing collaboration between artist and curator. Their current project, *My Kingdom for a Title*, is a solo exhibition at the Neubauer Collegium featuring five recent works from Pope.L’s *Skin Set Project*, each of which is encased in a medicine cabinet and displayed as part of an immersive installation with clear allusions to the COVID-19 pandemic. To mark the occasion, Roelstraete and Pope.L explored the impressions made by the exhibition in writing. The following exchange is a record of their correspondence.

DR: My first question concerns what I’m pretty sure most visitors to the exhibition will agree is the most arresting feature of the exhibition – a canopy of face masks dangling and gently swaying above the artworks inside the space. When we first started talking about this exhibition, it seemed like you settled on this particular element early on. I have described it to some visitors of the show as a (for me) surprisingly confrontational gesture. It took some time for me to figure out why you appeared so confident, so early on, of using this very symbolically charged material – there continues to be some risk in facing our current global health crisis so directly, through this very medium. (I remember wondering whether it would be irresponsible to make an art installation using what at some point in time was considered a fairly valuable item of so-called “personal

protection equipment.”) Could you walk us through your thinking behind the various decisions related to the face masks and their deployment?

Pope.L: Sometimes, during the day, I'll just stop whatever I am doing during this day and say to myself, or or, to anyone who might be nearby, I'll say: "it's great to be alive." seemingly out of nowhere I'll say it. just like that. I might even giggle after saying it. As as if I've said something slightly naughty. and frequent times before I say it, I mentally check myself over and ask myself: "am I in pain? no., are there any immediate pressing problems? eh. well, not immediate immediate." then I allow myself to say it. saying it, for me, is an expression of joy as well as black humor, doubly minted and intended. **the masks are a kind of fruit in an arbor of death and breath in in a season of routine where we survive not by our wits but by making ourselves repetitive and stupid—and we all do what you have to, right? and and we all do it together, yes yes?**

There are these images or instances of the light blue mask I've collected in my memory in the fat in the nucleus of my cells: flattened, discarded on the sidewalk, pulled down below the chin like a bib or a goiter or some sort of prosthetic throat, people, black older gentlemen like myself, busy busy about their day wearing them covered in what looked like grease filth and grime still busy still busy, the uninteresting empty shelf in the supermarket where every day they should have been but were not and the handwritten sign that took their place, there was the day, couple weeks ago, suddenly there were too many of them spilling off the shelf an invasion onto the floor an avalanche of hope clogging the wheels of shopping carts on their way to the frozen food aisle, very annoying—

DR: One of the great privileges of seeing this exhibition come into being was... well, seeing it come into being. Being cooped up inside my office on the second floor while the installation was being built inside the gallery on the first, and seeing it crystallize and materialize hour after hour, day after day. Early in the process of building I had a fairly accurate sense of what the work was going to look like, what the space was going to look like (this was due in large part to the meticulous preparation on the part of the studio) – but there were a couple of surprises, of course, diversions, digressions, deviations. Introducing the fans into the piece signaled one such moment, and I'd like you to say something about that decision. It wasn't until I heard some visitors comment on the presence of the fans as presumed allusions to the Covid-19 crisis as an airborne catastrophe that I realized what the use of air flow might mean in an installation like that – I just thought, naïvely, that you just wanted to see the masks move, if ever so gently: an aesthetic decision more than anything else, in short. Could you share some of the thinking that went into *that* very decision? And I have the same question with regards to the plastic foil that dangles, half-peeled, from the medicine cabinets that contain the artworks. When I first walked into the space a couple of days before the "opening" I strongly assumed these were to be stripped off still – and I accidentally pulled on one of them just a tiny bit too hard. (That quickly changed, by the way – a day in I think I kind of understood what this "unfinished" look was "about.") What shaped your thinking behind that gesture?

Pope.L: Disease is a form of surveillance. Our lack observes us being in the world and takes notes. I I I wanted something to continue in the installation; something that would perform and act out after a viewer leaves the environment. I wanted this action in the space even if the action was pre-determined and repetitive. I wanted there to be a sense in the action of self-monitoring, that the entity that survives or continues on after the viewer leaves is somehow processing what is happening even if it is patently obvious, for the most of part, that it is not possible that this entity is able to do this.

DR: This is not the first time you've shown some of the *Skin Set* projects encased inside a medicine cabinet – but it is the first time you've shown a *number* of such cabinets. What has shaped your thinking behind this decision? What is it about medicine cabinets that, in your opinion, made them the perfect vehicle for these works? And what do the mirrors in particular add to the overall architecture of the installation? (I keep thinking about what these mirrors *do*, to the camera-eye for instance, and I keep coming up with different ideas.)

Pope.L: Yes, I showed one *Skin Set* in a medicine cabinet at Regards and a number of *Skin Sets* as a set in relation here at the Neubauer. Lately I've been thinking abt. sets within sets. that's not my normal way. in the past, I always thought of, dealt with one *Skin Set* at a time. all the while I may have been simultaneously working on a video and a building project and a play, I would work on each SS as if it were a phrase or statement like you'd work on an essay or any sort of written thing. but now I see the works more as things than texts or more precisely texts that are 'thinged' into being. So one keeps things inside of things. one keeps paintings inside of medicine cabinets. perhaps to keep them safe from disease, perhaps to hoard them and sometimes one wants to think about them but not look at them so there is a door. a door that looks back at you. maybe it's the thing's way of looking back at you. I'm not sure...

DR: A visitor to the gallery spoke of a perceived tension, inside the installation, between the opposing poles of sanitation and contamination. I have thought about that tension before, but not in those exact and very apt and compelling terms. This leads me to a two-pronged question: one concerning your relation to the concept of "abjection" in art, and another concerning the relationship *in your work* between the provisional and what one could call the finished product.

Regarding the idea of abjection – I'd be interested to hear whether that category means anything at all to you. I once heard someone refer to your work (this is a long time ago, and primarily concerned the crawls and the like – certainly the more performative aspects of your work) as "abject art." Would you object to being labeled abject? There's a lot of "soiling" going on in your work – various forms of sabotage, corruption, abrasion, debasement, etc. (I may be taking this too far.) And if that indeed is the case, how does our current cultural obsession with cleanliness filter into this long-standing strategy? How do you think the aforementioned tension between contamination and sanitation shapes your work, or this project in particular?

And this leads me to a related question concerning certain aspects of staging the *Kingdom* work, which centers on two elements: the loose foil that's left hanging off of the medicine cabinets and the black tape on the wooden bases of the fans. Why do I feel like these two cosmetic elements, so clearly theatrical, are "there" primarily to disturb my expectation of the overall installation as a perfectly balanced aesthetic whole? (I return, therefore, to the notion of *sabotage*.) Both elements seem to signal "improv" – an idea of the provisional that is of course very deliberate and final (quite the paradox). I'm curious to hear you address the matter of the foil in particular – and I'd like to know whether I'm right in reading these as crude signifiers of a fundamentally provisional ethic at the heart of your practice.

Pope.L: In the early days, my reaction, to the use of the term 'object' when it was applied to my work, was suspicion. the term seemed to connect my work to some key ideas close to my interests—sense before language, language as repression yet a bridge, yet a deceiver, the mind as the last frontier—but the term was complicated, messy, maybe itself a deceiver—as a tool for understanding, weirdly enough, that messiness seemed to be both its strength and weakness. in a way i am not sure what the term exactly refers to. if the object is located before the mirror stage then what is before the object? in the criticism i was reading at the time, there wasn't a lot of precision. it seemed some people meant it as a kind of primitivism bequeathed from on high. In addition, the term, as it was used popularly, suggested a private enterprise, super-personal beyond language—like someone once reminded me: 'Your Crawls are only about you not anything larger, just you.' So I was concerned that such a label would stereotype my interest in Blackness and poverty—

However, in doing my own reading, specifically via someone like Julia Kristeva, i could more clearly see the term's usefulness, wobbly as it is, to describe my interests, re: the unfinished, the undone, the fucked-up-beyond-and-around-with-with; wounds or soiling or mental illness or death or lack—and that that that those sorts of interests have always represented, for me, a slippery negotiation between sense of threat (bodily or psychic or social), an inability to extricate myself from the network of that negotiation, yet at the same time i developed an attraction to that negotiation (maybe a survival mechanism) until finally I resolved it as an ongoing struggle to articulate the vicissitudes of that negotiation—

And now, cleanliness? Today I can afford to be cleaner, I work at the University of Chicago. Cleanliness costs time and money. It is a privilege. One person's filth is another's health. But if my work is invested in the object then cleanliness is sheep's clothing, a ruse, trying to empty a house that will never empty, fixing the cracks in the negotiation quickly and neatly with bits of tape and promises—

DR: I'm going to sign off on a note that concerns scenography and theater. Why did you build the cage you ended up building? Whence this strangely cage-like structure that is at once transparent and opaque? Does the cage turn the entire installation into one stage set waiting to be animated by an as-yet unwritten play? If the abstract idea of "theater" and an equally platonic notion of "visual" art represent the twin strands of your

artistic DNA, so to speak, *My Kingdom* appears to come pretty close to a near-perfect synthesis – or am I overstating the theatrical aspect of the work? How much of it, indeed, is “theater,” setting, a stage, scenography?

Pope.L: Re: the cage. I wanted to divert, separate out the audience’s attention by literally creating a separation in the room. the Neubauer’s gallery space is a very interesting room. But but comes off very precious, very ersatz European, very unto itself. As an American, you either hate it or are disgusted by it. i wanted to separate it from another space in order to build or erect or perform something in it and at the same time preserve and make use of that separation—