Lacks Worth Having: William Pope.L and Land Art

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Figure 1. Pope., Times Square Crawl, 1978. Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, NY. © Pope.

William Pope.L's first Crawl took place in 1978 in Times Square. Dressed in a brown suit and a yellow safety vest, Pope.L maneuvered through the crowds on his hands and knees, trailed at some distance by a photographer. The photographer’s lens caught the scene: tourists look on disconcertedly; unflappable locals continue their commute; a cop puts a paternalistic hand to the artist’s shoulder to urge him back to his feet (fig. 1). Pope.L crawls on. Times Square Crawl would be the first in over thirty similar actions undertaken by the artist, in New York as well as abroad, alone as well in the company of entire communities—a signature work in Pope.L’s expansive, multimedia practice. Central to his critique of the legibility and visibility of the black body in contemporary discourse and urban space, the Crawls are landmarks in the histories of African-American art and postmodern performance. Yet they also belong to another category in twentieth-century art: the monumental, remote, largely American, and predominantly white tradition of Land art.
It may appear perverse to inscribe Pope.L in a category that is currently undergoing its own dramatic re-inscription. Recently, even the relatively modest sketch of Land art above has been called into question, destabilized by the work of scholars and curators who have expanded Land art’s rosters and challenged its coherence. Following Miwon Kwon and Philipp Kaiser’s landmark 2013 survey *Ends of the Earth*, which featured more than 100 artists from 17 countries, Land art no longer sits so securely within the regional and, to a lesser extent, gendered and racial identity once built around the canonical triumvirate of Michael Heizer, Robert Smithson, and Walter de Maria. Just as radically, Land art has been dislodged from its identifying medium. That is, “earthworks” no longer refers exclusively to works “made of earth,” but to a panoply of practices, from urban design to television. The palpable result of this procedural and geographical expansion perplexed some critics, who fretted that the exhibition had stretched the category beyond the bounds of reason. Kaiser and Kwon had made profligate additions to Land art’s edifice, the critics claimed, while failing to address the practical and conceptual consequences on Land art’s foundations. Expanding our notion of what “belongs” in a Land art exhibition, however, is rarely the problem. These anxieties about what might occur when everything is “let in”—to the category, to the exhibition, to the museum—betray what is really at issue when we speak of belonging: exclusion, and exclusion’s capacity to maintain the boundaries of disciplines and institutions.

Belonging can present itself as a merely ontological matter, but exclusion refuses abstractions, for it is not merely a matter of what practices, but also of what bodies, must be banned. In recent art history, the topical redress of exclusion was the work done by performance art, in a dual campaign to render visible and render specific these excluded bodies. Performances marked the already marked body—marked by gender, marked by color—and drew attention to those excluded or overlooked by institutions. By a paradox so common as to seem incontrovertible, this marked body is simultaneously the invisible body, lacking a full presence because of too *much* presence of something else. Pope.L’s crawls “belong” to the revelation of this paradox. Like Valie Export, Adrian Piper, James Luna, among many others before him, he challenges the invisibility enforced on him in public space by redoubling his difference through actions considered improper or gauche. The arrival of the cop on the scene of his first crawl testifies to the immediate institutionalized response to this impropriety. For the marked body, this response to *acting out*—acting unexpectedly or wrongly in public space—exposes the fact that such a body should not really be acting there at all.

By extension, these acts critique the presumption of universality in the modern conception of the public aesthetic subject, a presumption that excludes certain identities (non-white, non-male, queer) while veiling the specificity of others (white, male, straight). While this falsehood of universality is exposed with some work in social interactions in urban space, it continues on undisturbed in the sublime, and even finds a tautological justification within it. Everyone, after all, is excluded from the sublime. The severe, inhuman deserts we associate with Land art are this exclusion made manifest and made aesthetic. If this tiger’s leap into Land art seems sudden—if Land art seems hopelessly remote from the tactics and concerns of performance art—this may be because it has been
buttressed by precisely those ideologies that performance art set out to destabilize.

Those buttresses are now crumbling. And it is precisely at this moment, when Land art is considering its own belongings and exclusions, that its connections to performance art become newly visible. More to the point, the shifting, unstable structure left behind is now positioned to reframe performance art’s timeworn critiques, and to speak to that within those critiques which the terms of performance cannot. The discourse of Land art, grounded in histories of modern and postmodern sculpture, gives it the ability to address social invisibility in material terms. The paradoxically marked yet invisible body in performance art becomes the debased or dedifferentiated body, immersed in the (back)ground. By the same token, Land art, unlike performance, has language for the place where a body is not or should not be—spatial terms, that is, for exclusions that performance art can only make visible by inverting or canceling. In what follows, the hole will be one of these terms contributed by the discourse of Land art; immersion will be the other.

The capacity of this discourse to speak formally about holes and immersion suggests a preliminary explanation for the exercise of this paper. My motive here, in other words, is rhetorical rather than revisionist. Temporarily wresting the Crawls from their pertinent context as performance, this paper borrows the terms of one category to reveal the operations of another in a canonical work of performance art. But to take the Crawls out from where they belong, to express an alternative belonging, is also to address what is at stake in the present restructuring of Land art, where anxieties about belonging—and therefore exclusion—disclose its imbrication in twentieth-century spatial politics.

**Dedifferentiated Bodies**

Land art’s pretense to exclude the body, it should be said, is just that: pretense. The beauty and terror of the sublime landscape provided only the thesis and antithesis to Land art’s “concrete dialectic between nature and people;” the sublime itself was neither its aim nor altogether its effect. In fact, Land art is shot through with bodies—which is to say, firstly, that bodies are frequently in the shot. Figures appear in many of the iconic photographs of Land art, where they serve to mark the scale of the work and distinguish, by dint of contrast, what John Beardsley described as its “essentially horizontal character.” In one photograph of Michael Heizer’s *Dissipate 1* (1968), taken by Yale Joel and published in the April 1969 issue of *Life*, Heizer’s black troughs in the desert floor are joined by a single-engine plane and three men—figures on a desert that had long ceased to signify the sublime no-man’s land, but had rather become the habitat of the military-industrial complex. The presence of these faceless men and their aircraft plucks the scene out of both the time immemorial of natural land formations and the nostalgic time of ruins. For Robert Smithson, this modern contextualization of Land art is essential to its identity. Land art, he maintained, is dialectical rather than metaphysical, and as such, takes as its raw material not the void—not the desert unmarked by modern life, untouched by modern man—but those landscapes already scored by modernity’s interventions. It is significant that Smithson’s exemplar, in the essay in which he articulates the “concrete dialectic” at the heart of Land art, is Frederick Olmsted, whose Central Park
designs provide for Smithson a proto-form of the Land artwork. Ex-urban quarries and the crackled beds of military test sites were propitious sites for Land art, but no more so than a park at the center of a metropolis.

Smithson’s formulation must nonetheless be set against another, more pictorial presentation of the body in Land art: the Romantic and largely British tradition of the ramble. Richard Long’s *A Line Made by Walking* (1967), produced when the artist was a student at Saint Martin’s, turns the Romantic peregrination into a means of inscribing the land. A photograph documenting his walk shows a straight line, beaten by Long’s footsteps, receding towards a copse in the distance. Long’s body etches the landscape like a stylus; the anecdote of the walk becomes secondary to the trace it leaves, which in turn becomes secondary to the image—a dialectical de-figuring of the landscape through the figure. Nonetheless, the action ultimately emphasizes a pastoral *ground* upon which Long, as instrument, will produce a *second* figure, one that is graphic rather than representational, sublating the performative aspect of his walks into a pictorial framework.

Ostensibly more invested in the performing body (as well as less invested in dialectics), the English artist Hamish Fulton began his walks as a “passive protest against urban societies that alienate people from the world of nature.”¹⁰ Fulton explains, “Walking is about the attempt at being ‘broken down’ mentally and physically...to experience a temporary state of euphoria, a blending of my mind with the outside world of nature.”¹¹ This ecstatic state of “blending” with nature invokes a pastoral tradition in which the natural world gives respite from the taxing conditions of modern life.

Yet the means by which Fulton’s blending is achieved—extreme fatigue and mental strain (provoked by existential loneliness or boredom, who can say?!)—go one further: the walker is not *restored* by nature, but rather *dissolved into* it. Or, as Smithson would put it, he is “dedifferentiated” from nature. Smithson borrows the term from Anton Ehrenzweig to describe the “‘primary process’ of making contact with matter,” which engenders a sensation of limitlessness, similar to the Freudian oceanic, and marks a convergence point between Fulton’s Romantic model and its poststructuralist American counterpart.¹² Rather than presuppose a stable state-of-nature to which the city dweller may simply return, dedifferentiation requires actions that further degrade that dweller, “breaking down” the artificial boundaries that alienate him from nature, milling man into a substance fine enough to be stirred into nature’s soup. Communion by way of comminution.

The boundlessness that attends dedifferentiation may be demonstrated most dramatically in vast expanses of nature, but the phenomenon itself is social and psychological. Limitlessness is a consequence of the loss of boundaries between the “self and the non-self,” the latter encompassing landscapes as well as what, and who, may be found in them. This connectedness through breakdown or dedifferentiation is how Pope.L describes his Crawls. Following his *Times Square Crawl*, Pope.L began moving not on his hands and knees but on his elbows, dragging himself across the asphalt. Sweating and grimacing, Pope.L’s hyperbolic effort to move across a distance accelerates Fulton’s breakdown. Like Fulton, however, Pope.L emphasizes the positive result of his
bodily mortification in the promise of overcoming alienation—in his case, through both natural and social non-selves. “Crawling brings us back to basics,” he writes in a statement for a 2005 community crawl. “We crawl as small children, not because we are humiliated but because we are learning to be human. Crawling is a way to remind ourselves of our common struggle to be human.”13 Belly to the ground, the crawler is brought back to a prior stage in her social and psychological development, before self-possession and self-differentiation.14 By forsaking uprightness, Pope.L suggests, one asserts through one’s body the connection between standing and standing alone.

We can compare this to Denis Oppenheim’s description of his own walks, immersive experiences that extend rather than diminish his sense of mastery:

“The sense of physically spanning land, activating a surface by walking on it, began to interest me. When you compare a piece of sculpture, an object on a pedestal, to walking outdoors for ten minutes and still being on top of your work, you find an incredible difference in the degree of physicality and sensory immersion.”15

Oppenheim’s immersion here operates paradoxically to affirm his differentiation. It is an immersion less in landscape or in common humanity than in his own quickened body. The persistence of the second-person pronoun—which shifts from a general “you” to one closer to Oppenheim’s “I” (e.g. “being on top of your work”)—locates this quickening within an individual subject, who activates a surface rather than dissolving into space. Oppenheim gains through immersion a sense of extended dominion, of larger mastery, of more certain ownership.

This coordination of physical immersion and mastery is inverted in Pope.L’s Crawls. While Pope.L engages in the bodily mortification of the endurance act that characterize Fulton’s walks, mortification enters his work more directly in its social aspect—that is, as embarrassment. This is produced firstly through the inclusion of the audience as onlooker and potential participant. Documentation of the Crawls is careful to include their audience, whose reactions frequently demonstrate the unseemliness of Pope.L’s actions in acts of concern or confusion (the concerned cop in Times Square is one instance of this; his solicitousness is bleakly, gravely hard to imagine in this day and age). For Pope.L, the transformation of one mortification into the other depends on this external observer, and her eventual responsiveness. The artist explains,

“In a country like the United States, where moral virtue has traditionally been tied to uprightness of body carriage, for a healthy, sane person to choose to give up his or her verticality can be perceived as arrogant and attention-seeking. But I believe this interpretation dissolves or at least becomes less tenable when a viewer/participant watches a crawler for an extended period of time.”16

After an hour or so, Pope.L estimates, it becomes difficult not to empathize, to confront “our contemporary ambivalence toward organic matter, our bodies and the earth. Both are us and nurture us and yet we find them filthy.” Through the concrete observation of a particular body acting against our social expectations
of it, we are led to the broader, grosser fact of bodily existence—or rather, we are led to confront this fact through the concrete observation of a person contravening our expectations and mores. The spectator is a “viewer/participant” not just because she may herself get down and crawl alongside Pope.L, as numbers have been invited to do in his group crawls, but because, as another occupant of urban space, she is always already a participant in its social mechanisms. The recognition of breakdown as a shared or human fact is brought about not through the poetic act of an extended walk nor through allegory, but rather by watching, at length, a specific body who shares your social space in the process of breakdown.

Pope.L’s costumes, the second tactic to produce the Crawls’ politicization of bodily mortification, are integral to this recognition. They mark his body as one that performs, and thus deserves, and accepts, being regarded at length. Pope.L’s attire is selected precisely to ensure that he is noticeable: “He crawls in a suit so he’ll signify, so he’ll be seen as someone who shouldn’t be in the gutter, so he’ll be seen—period.” Pope.L’s attire in the crawls has ranged from a business suit to sports paraphernalia (The Black Body and Sport (crawl), 1999) to a jock strap, a teddy bear, and a giant balloon (Shopping Crawl (crawl with Balloon), 2001). The costumes render the performances absurd or vaudevillian or tragic, invoking Buster Keaton at one turn and the valorized, objectified body of the black athlete at another. Most frequently, they provide a kind of comic affect, undermining the sober, religious intensity of endurance artworks with cartoonish anticness. In Great White Way, Pope.L’s superhero suit is rendered still sillier by a skateboard strapped to his back “for emergency situations,” making him less the American hero than an overgrown child playing dress-up.

That, of course, is the point; as a black man in contemporary America, his costuming indicates, Pope.L is always playing dress-up, even and especially when wearing the attire of a white-collar adult. In 1991, Pope.L executed his Tompkins Square Park Crawl, in which he dragged himself around the perimeter of the East Village park while holding a small potted plant (figure 2). Accompanied by a white cameraman, Pope.L had begun to make progress around the park when he was approached by a couple of young black men. Visibly upset by the performance, one of them confronted the videographer, assuming that he was in charge. When the videographer demurred, the man turned to Pope.L, demanding an explanation. C. Carr recalls the event:

“The irony is that the angry man got what the piece was about…he cried, ‘I wear a suit like that to work!’ And just before rushing off to find a policeman, he got to the heart of what really distressed him: ‘You make me look like a jerk!’”

“What the piece was about,” in Carr’s estimation, was something far more particular than the human ambivalence toward the organic world. Pope.L could not execute the crawl without producing a commentary on bodies like his, the bodies of black men in America. To that viewer, a black man in a suit performing a joke of a task was satire that communicated, quite simply, that
black men in suits were jokes (jerks)—minstrels beneath all their pretensions to middle-class belonging.

The inclusion of that viewer’s body in Pope.L’s act functions by virtue of an exclusion that precedes it—namely, the exclusion of the black male body, which Pope.L calls the “BAM,” from the culture of masculinity. “In our society,” writes Pope.L, “masculinity is measured in presence. However, no matter how much presence the BAM contrives, it will continue to be marked as lack.”

Describing the dilemma of the black male body in psychoanalytic terms, Pope.L understands it as marked by its lack of phallic authority, a lack generally assigned to women, but extended to the black male through the fetishization of his body. The hypermasculine posturing of the black male, a kind of emphatic “presenting,” is a compensatory mechanism for this objectification, which constantly works to remove him from the shared space of equal subjects. Because his lack, in Lacanian terms, conditions his entrance into the symbolic order, it operates simultaneously as a principle of negative inclusivity. That is, the BAM’s lack limns the contours of a group to which all BAMs must belong, and secures for the non-BAM—that is, the white male body—the freedom to act as individuals. Thus Chris Burden can crawl through a bed of glass without thereby having to serve as representative of all white men; construed as a pure positivity, his body acts instead as an exceptional figure testing the limits of a quasi-spiritualized mortification, a kind of modern Saint Lawrence on the coals.

The psychoanalytic register of the Crawls makes apparent, finally, the power of their horizontality to effect a broad ontological critique. The
“chorepolitical statement” of the Crawls, according to Andre Lepecki, lies precisely in their challenge to the verticality associated with phallic power. By aligning the horizontality of his body in the Crawl with its manifest lack of social power, he reveals how the very orientation of space is phallocratically determined.²¹ For Lepecki, the Crawls produce a Heideggerian “stumble in being,” which reveals the non-coincidence of subjects and their worldly identities. In other words, crawling divests Pope.L of the power associated with personal autonomy while still marking him as an individual, thus throwing into crisis the assumed connection of (male) social power with full subjecthood. In this sense, Pope.L’s own Heideggerian appeal to his audience to recognize their ambivalence with organic life through the commingling of their bodies with the dirt finds itself redoubled by his undoing of phallic subjectivity through the horizontal Crawl. Fulton’s language of “blending” is thereby turned on its head—or rather, reoriented into the present, as a confrontation of rather than escape from the contemporary forces of power in social space.

The models of immersion in Fulton’s as well as Oppenheim and Long’s walks negotiate the dedifferentiation of subjects and environments as positive events that secure a certain pictorial, metaphysical, or psychosocial fullness. Pope.L’s Crawls refuse to solicit this experience, on the basis that the breakdown of the body is immanently political.

The Site of Exclusion

“You make me look like a jerk!”—the exasperated conclusion of the viewer in Tompkins Square Park was that Pope.L’s “acting out” included him, debasing his own body even as he remained standing, excluding him from the social and economic position signified by the suit he wore to work. It was not, as the artist surmised, that his surrender of verticality singled him out, and therefore made him appear “arrogant or attention-seeking.” No, his horizontality was offensive because it incorporated other bodies in an image weighted to make them plummet from the social ladder.

The recognition that the Crawls, by virtue of the BAM’s “negative inclusivity,” simultaneously incorporated these bodies while eluding universal experience eventually worked its way into the staging of the Crawls through the careful selection of their sites. Through this selection, Pope.L drives home that the common struggle to be human invoked by the Crawls cannot be imagined abstractly. The route of artist’s most ambitious crawl, The Great White Way, 22 Miles, 9 Years, 1 Street (2001–9), extended the length of Broadway, from the Statue of Liberty ferry to the Bronx (figures 3 & 4). The crawl maps its “common struggle” onto a specific immigrant or outsider experience: an arduous path that leads not to the bright lights of Broadway—the “great white way” as symbol for the American dream, mythically on offer to all its huddled masses—but to the limits of an outer borough. His Superman costume, as mentioned above, ironizes the heroism of Superman, that exemplary American alien nonetheless devoted to love of country and justice, who reassuringly possesses all the racial, gendered, and able-bodied markings of the nation’s powerful. In its place, Pope.L enacts an “everyday heroism” of making it in America: namely, strenuously undergoing any number of humiliations to get from the country’s gate to its segregated and economically underprivileged boroughs. The
“common struggle” of becoming human, his Crawl suggests, is more common for some.

Pope.L’s layering of human ontogenesis (from crawling to standing) onto social progression (from immigrant to Bronx resident) parallels the motive in a number of canonical Land artworks to telescope the natural and urban worlds. This motive has been recognized by recent scholarship that complicates the city/desert dyad that has dominated Land art discourse. By exposing the fiction of the pure or timeless desert where artists could retreat to resist the art market or the forces of modernization, this scholarship emphasizes the imaginative and institutional continuity of remote and urban spaces, and the diversity of Land art practices that explicitly engaged urban grounds. Not only was the desert “sewn into the economies of control, militarization, and capitalist production that played out in city and desert alike,” it was imagined by artists as both a site and a network—part of the gridded and systematized abstractions that increasingly characterized twentieth-century urban centers as well. Land artworks in remote sites therefore reflected these urban models.

Reciprocally, city planning projects and urban development contributed to the production of Land art’s discourse and the formation of its operations. The Crawls have their place in this history as well, where they have been mobilized as a collective response to urban planning. Similar to the Great White Way in the symbolic weight of its trajectory, the group Crawl Bringing the
Décarie to the Mountain, staged in Montreal in 2005, traced a route from the Décarie expressway to the base of Mount Royal. The highway, built for the '67 Expo as a feature of utopian urban planning, resulted in the displacement of a vibrant Montreal ethnic community—one that Pope.L sought to reunite in “one single act of struggle and sacrifice: moving slowly on hands and knees up the side of a mountain.” The symbolic scaling of the mountainside is conducted by the members of the very populations excluded by the Expo's urban formations, confronting with their regressive crawling its progressive (but ultimately detrimental) intentions. Infancy and history meet futurity around the royal figure of the mountain, dissolving the boundaries between natural, social, and urban formations.

Toward the close of his essay on Olmsted, Smithson reflects on the labyrinthine section of Central Park known as “The Ramble.” Central Park is exemplary for Smithson because of its immersion in equal parts natural, social, and urban formations, and in this the Ramble provides something of a master image for this dense and complex network of political and natural forces. Smithson lyrically describes the serpentine paths through the clotted greenery “as they lead one deeper into an infinity of curves,” a description that sits cheek-by-jowl with the observation that “the Ramble has grown up into an urban jungle, and lurking in its thickets are ‘hoods, hobos, hustlers, homosexuals,’ and other estranged creatures of the city.” This urban jungle provides a habitat for the outcasts and deviants, immersion for the alienated, seclusion for the excluded. Olmsted’s proto-Land artwork thus offers another form of negative inclusivity at the convergence point of landscape and urban life. The Ramble—that dense network of paths for idling, skulking, lurking, waiting, screwing, and colluding—the Ramble is where the dialectic between nature and people occurs within specific bodies, “dedifferentiated” in its dark and lush convolutions.

The Image of an Empty Place

The BAM is a body dedifferentiated by its lack of phallic power, but it is also a body more likely to be suffer concrete lacks—of economic security, healthcare, legal and institutional protection, adequate nutrition, and shelter. Pope.L’s rhetoric largely avoids these issues, gesturing persistently at the human experience of the Crawls, and their capacity to unite fellow crawlers with one another and with their organic nature.

Yet it remains the case that crawling carries lowly social status along with its ontogenesis. Crawling resuscitates a prior stage, before self-mastery and necessarily also mastery, prior to propriety as well as property. The full inversion of Oppenheim’s dominion, after all, is precisely that extreme evocation of Pope.L’s gutter-bound body: the homeless man who owns nothing, who is master of nothing. The pressure on Pope.L’s performing body exerted by the larger social fact of the BAM not only interrupts its capacity to speak to universal mortification, it draws it toward that image of social mortification so absolute that it has fallen through the bottom of the social and economic hierarchy.

The horizontal bodies of the homeless, “crawling through the gutters,” are denied belonging in social space, yet play a consistently vital role within it. Rosalyn Deutsche has narrated how this denial—the exclusion of certain bodies from the presumed vertical occupation of public space—produces both the
construction and perversion of the modern city. Public space, according to Habermas’s formulation, arose out of the distinction bourgeois sociality produced between public and private life. Indoor private truths were created by outdoor public persona, which in turn secured a domain for and practice of republican discourse. With the entrance of other classes into the city and the development of the welfare state, this public sociality began to fracture, and required for its maintenance the constant apprehension and expulsion of some category beyond it—the homeless. The homeless person, who is deprived of the fundamental distinction between private and public personas, thus threatens but ultimately constitutes the public sphere; he or she functions as “a negative image created to restore positivity and order to social life.” As with the Hegelian subject, the homeless other ensures that public space, and its political form of democracy, remain haunted by a sense its own incompleteness.

Yet this incompleteness secures a space for the operations of debate and ambiguity at the center of democratic society. To substantiate this claim, Deutsche invokes Claude Lefort’s conception of modern democracy as something that “draws its power from what Lefort calls ‘the image of an empty place’”—a region of uncertainty where, in the absence of monarchs and ecclesiastical authority, “everything can be up for discussion, including the legitimacy of its own contents.” Lefort theorizes that the demise of monarchical power, in which the body of the prince represented the kingdom as a substantial, unified entity, leaves in its wake an empty place, which becomes itself the locus of power. In contrast to monarchical rule, then, in democracies “the image of popular sovereignty is the image of an empty place,” whose paradoxical consequence is that the content of power in democracies remains empty, at once universal and disembodied. This same bodilessness, however, makes democracy precarious, dissolving bonds previously secured by the social body.

Pope.L’s first crawl was conducted during this dissolution in New York of the late 1970s. His choice of Times Square carries particular significance because of the Square’s failure, now as then, to provide adequate space for democratic assembly. Times Square is a place, in the French sense of place or public square, only nominally; although groups can gather there, their activities are subsumed by the exigencies of commerce, in the steady bustle of bodies moving through the Square, and the supra-human sensory demands made by advertisements. Times Square has lost the “image of an empty place”—not simply because it is, in a basic sense, saturated by advertisements, but because its assault on the senses generally repels locals and deals instead with tourists—not as residents, but as a universal and bodiless quotient, since only the bodiless consumer could withstand this bombardment, and only the universal one could make sense of its indifferent address.

The corporatization of the putatively public space of Times Square thus occurs in concert with the hollowing out of the democratic space of assembly and contestation, assuaging the potential for conflict that Pope.L’s mild crawling threatens to reintroduce. This very potential of disruption, however, is integral to the privatization of the Square. Paradoxically, Deutsche observes, “conservative urbanists promote the transformation of public space into proprietary space—the occupation of public space—by conceding that public
spaces are conflictual not harmonious terrains, yet denying the legitimacy of spatial contests.³⁷ In other words, public space is conceived as a tense field in which the bourgeois citizen must contend with grit and vagrancy (with “hoods, hustlers, hobos, homosexuals”), precisely because their delegitimized presence authorizes the transition of public space into proprietary space. Yet this tension does not signify a real turf war. Rather, it appears rooted in a source that must be continually apprehended and expelled: the homeless. The homeless person functions, in Deutsch’s words, as “a negative image created to restore positivity and order to social life.” This “negative image of the homeless”—which may, indeed, be extended to any image of the undesirable—thus stands in as a kind of impoverished and serviceable reflection of the “image of an empty place.”

“Blackness is a lack worth having,” Pope.L has proclaimed, a statement frequently read as a tactical inversion of denigration into affirmation, a negative image reasserted as a positive principle. Deutsche’s framework suggests that we might take this lack somewhat differently—as a lack “worth having” because it restores social order. Recognizing this means acknowledging the intimate relationship between undesirable and the constitution of the cityscape as the dialectical resolution to the negation of popular sovereignty. But it also accentuates the paradox implicit in the marked but socially invisible body. This paradox is gathered in the ambivalence of the “negative” as a judgment on one hand, and a spatial condition on the other.

It is here that the history of Land art comes into service. The inversion of the immersed body might bring to mind the clay-dowsed Charles Simmonds, whose trio of films *Birth, Landscape-Body-Dwelling, and Body-Earth* (1970, 1973, 1974 respectively) depict the artist emerging from a clay pit like some earthen god (fittingly, the series is known collectively as “Mythologies”).³⁶ But perhaps more apt are Land art’s holes for the body or its surrogates, which give sculptural form to this image of empty place. Sol Lewitt’s *Buried Cube Containing an Object of Importance but little Value* (1968), Anthony McCall’s 1972 *Earth Work*, a film culminating in the burial of a box containing the dirt of its own hole, and Claes Oldenburg’s 1967 rectangular, six-foot deep *Hole* excavated in Central Park are significant precedents for perhaps the most iconic Land art interment, Keith Arnatt’s 1969 *Self-Burial* (figure 5).³⁹ In a sequence of nine photographs, the artist is pictured as he is gradually buried vertically in the ground beneath his feet, which appears to swallow him whole.⁴⁰ Arnatt’s dead-panning disappearance act offsets the morbid character of the sequence; the satisfaction of seeing the sequence as whole, when stretched out over the nine days of its broadcast, may have felt considerably more anxious, considerably more doomed—a body condemned to invisibility, a ground stuffed with buried bodies.

One final example may illuminate Land art’s ability not just to represent the body-as-hole, but to suggest the disruptive power of doing so. Gordon Matta-Clark’s *Cherry Tree and Time Well* (1971) consisted of three trees, planted successively in the basement of a New York City building. After the third tree died from being denied light and open air, Matta-Clark plugged the hole where he planted the trees with concrete. Despite this sepulchral conclusion to his ostensibly ill-conceived dabble in horticulture, the work began with a thought that was neither funereal nor eco-sadist. The artist intended, he explained, “liberate
the building’s enormous compressive, confining forces simply by making a hole.” While exclusion of the homeless or the dead (two non-social non-beings) ensures the compactness and coherence of urban space, the production of exclusion as an image, as a hole, can suddenly ventilate the system. A hole in the city can return to it, if only through the magic of analogy, the exclusions it requires and—here is the aporia—make exclusion a matter of belonging rather than belonging a consequence of exclusion.

Figure 5. Keith Arnatt, Self-Burial, 1969. © Keith Arnatt Estate.

Hole Theory

“Hole Theory is guided/ By a lack to be with/ The world and in so being—/ Be right with the world.” These lines are drawn from the final pages of Pope.L’s 2001 artist book (revised by the artist in 2002) Hole Theory: Parts Four & Five. They go some way toward explaining his assertion that “blackness is a lack worth having.”

“When I say blackness is a lack worth having, I am speaking to the dynamic of pain, loss, joy, radicality, and possibility in the experience of being black. Blackness, if it is anything interesting, has to be determined by and implicated into much more than itself. The true nature of blackness is multiplicity...Lack must be a value worth having cause there is no way to avoid our own stink, our own history. Lack is an essential part of being human. To say lack is a value worth having is to claim ownership of a very intimate problematic.

Hole Theory is a means for reconciling oneself with lack, with stink, with history. It is also, and perhaps more importantly in this discussion, a means of reconciling oneself with the world through lack. If public space occupied by the rhetoric of conservative urbanists has eradicated Lefort’s “image of the empty
place”—if lack has, in a sense, been left out of the contemporary urban landscape—then lack on an individual level can begin to model that hollow space of ambiguity on a social level in which embodied, democratic action might thrive.

In the chapter “Walking in the City” in The Practice of Everyday Life, Michel de Certeau explores the possibilities of such action in the tactics of the “ordinary man.” Looking down at Manhattan from the 110th floor of the World Trade Center, he describes the exaltation of viewing the city from the seat of the powers that discipline subjects through the rational organization of space. But on the ground, something else is afoot. When the “ordinary practitioners” of the city move through it, Certeau writes, “their intertwined paths give their shape to spaces. They weave places together. . . . They are not localized; it is rather that they spatialize.”

For de Certeau, the swarming activity of pedestrians on the street constitutes “surreptitious creativities,” or stable tactics that remain unreadable from on high but proliferate down below, thickening into nodes of resistance within the city's disciplining systems. Walkers in the city make contact with the urban landscape; they shape it as one shapes words into sentences.

De Certeau’s observations echo the conviction in Pope.L’s Crawls: That bodies—even, and perhaps especially, those denied agency in public space—can produce spatial conditions, and can “work” the urban “earth” beneath them, not in spite, but because of their dedifferentiation and exclusion from the place of power and representation. Would it be too much to suggest that this surreptitious creativity can occur within the powerful representations of a historical discipline as well? If the anxieties about generalized belonging are in fact assertions of specific exclusions, a turn toward specifics might reveal quite a lot about the dominant category—like catching a glimpse of the backside of a tapestry, where the unsightly chaos of fibers contains a map to its assembly, as well as the means to dethread it. To include Pope.L’s Crawls in Land art is both to augment the genre and to puncture it, to clarify its claims and to riddle them with holes. Within this operation is a model for art history that would seek to include the previously excluded without thereby dislocating them from the discourses they’ve helped to construct. History thus develops as a hole theory of its own making, as a way of being right with the world, as the discovery of a lack worth having.

NOTES

1 Times Square Crawl was initiated alongside Thunderbird Immolation, also 1978, for which Pope.L doused himself in Thunderbird wine and sat in a lotus pose outside of the Sonnabend and Castelli galleries on a yellow blanket ringed by matches, recalling the Vietnamese monk Thich Quang Duc’s 1963 protest of religious persecution by the Diem regime. The two works are now grouped together under the title Meditation Square Pieces a.k.a. Gutter Pieces a.k.a. Times Square Crawl and Thunderbird Immolation. See Kristine Stiles, “Thunderbird Immolation: William Pope.L and Burning Racism,” in William Pope L: Erascism, ed. Mark Bessire (Cambridge and Portland: MIT Press and the Institute of Contemporary Art at Maine College of Art, 2002), 36–42.

2 Holert, Kwon and Kaiser refer to the notion of “relay” to describe the relationship between media practice and the sculptural production of Land art—between, that is, media and medium. The

3 See Julia Bryan-Wilson, “Ends of the Earth: Land Art to 1974,” *Artforum* 51, no. 3 (November 2012): 269–70; Kristen Swenson, “Land Art for the Media Age,” *Art in America* (October 2012); Benjamin Lord, “Expanding Fields, Narrowing Paths,” *X-Tra* Vol. 15, no. 2 (Winter 2013); Suzann Boettger, “This Land is Their Land,” *Art Journal*, vol. 71 no. 4 (Winter 2012): 125–129. Boettger’s critique is among the more incisive, but should also be distinguished from the rest of the peanut gallery, in that her concern is not that Kwon and Kaiser will damage the integrity of this edifice, but rather that they appear uninterested and/or uneven in addressing the consequences of the expansion. Kwon and Kaiser, as a matter of fact, explicitly locate their interest elsewhere. In their introduction to the exhibition, they maintain that the significance of this exercise of expansion transcends the immediate concerns of Land art to engage the challenges to and transformations of the museum brought by a range of unstable, unlocalizable, untransportable, or uniterable works, of which out-sized and “out-there” earthworks are but one.

4 Ralph Ellison condensed the paradox in the image of funhouse mirrors’ deflections: “I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves or figments of their imagination, indeed, everything and anything except me.” Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), p. 3.

5 The extensive body of literature on this discussion of the body in public space goes beyond the scope of this paper; however, one may cite quickly, with regard to the significance of this theme in feminist art history, the exchange of Janet Wolff’s 1985 essay “The Invisible Flâneuse: Women and the Literature of Modernity” and Griselda Pollock’s 1988 “Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity.”

6 Jane McFadden has traced Land art’s intersections with a number of categories associated with performance, notably Fluxus and Group Zero, uniting them on their basis of a general reconsideration of what belongs within the cultural category of art itself. She concludes, “Art of the land thus emerges less as a categorical determinant for work involving land or earth than as a complex terrain of contemporary practice, media, and politics.” While valuable, the broad scope of McFadden’s contribution, and its emphasis on the opposition of art/non-art, risk producing yet another mythology for Land art, disconnected from its particular discursive and formal tropes. In my desire to draw out these tropes further through my own reconsideration of belonging and exclusion in Land art, I am admittedly somewhat Modernist in orientation. Jane McFadden, “Along the Way to Land Art,” *Ends of the Earth*, p. 54.


8 “[L]and art,” writes Beardsley, “is in large measure about the landscape itself—as its scale, its vistas, its essentially horizontal character.” Beardsley’s description dovetails with Rosalind Krauss’s contextualization of Land art in a tradition of avant-garde sculpture that rejected verticality as a sign of sculpture’s complicity with the social order, signified by its “uprightness” and claim to a symbolic or transcendental register conferred on it by the pedestal. See Rosalind Krauss, “No More Play,” *The Originality of the Avant-Grade and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1984), p. 503–33 and *Passages in Modern Sculpture*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981). For Beardsley, Romanticism’s sublime landscape is Land art’s primary antecedent. Just as these landscapes required a viewer, in the absence of which the landscape is simply nature, Land art’s horizontal character could only be conceived in contradistinction through the verticality of humankind. John Beardsley, *Earthworks and Beyond: Contemporary Art in the Landscape* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1998), 100.


10 Qtd. in Beardsley, op. cit., 44.

For Smithson, this experience of physical engulfment and unboundedness is primary but not sufficient for the Land artwork, which must then communicate the experience through a “mapped revision . . . gather[ing] in the fragments that are experienced in the physical abyss of raw matter.” Robert Smithson, “A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects (1968),” Robert Smithson: Collected Writings, 103.


A similar claim about the effects of spatial immersion on subjecthood was made in a quite different context by Roger Caillois in his well-known essay “Mimicry and Legendary Psychaesthenia.” The relation of Pope.L’s Crawls to Surrealist experiments in social space, while intriguing, must be left for another time. Roger Caillois, “Mimicry and Legendary Psychaesthenia (1936),” trans. John Shipley, *October* 31 (1984): 12–32.

Qtd. in Tuffnell, opt cit., 61.


Ibid., 48.


The work in question is Burden’s *Through the Night Softly* (1973).


“The awe-inspiring creations of the American triumvirate of Heizer, De Maria, and Smithson continue to hold sway as the leading examples, if not the paradigm, of Land art: permanent monumental sculptures in remote, inhospitable locations that ostensibly escape the art system and demand reverential pilgrimages to experience them in situ. But the power of that discourse . . . has obscured other contexts, approaches, and practices.” Kaiser and Kwon, op. cit, 18–19.

In his insightful contribution to the *Ends of the Earth* catalogue, Julian Myers takes up one of the more infamous engagements: Michael Heizer’s ill-fated 1971 *Dragged Mass Displacement*, installed in front of the Detroit Institute of Arts, in which the artist had a thirty-ton granite block dragged across the Institute’s lawn, ultimately both incurring thousands of dollars in fines and occasioning the resignation of curator Sam Wagstaff. Myers attributes the failure of the work to the artist’s misapprehension of the contradictions of urban space, its tendencies to order as well as destruction. In particular, Heizer’s installation had remained tone-deaf to the topical struggles of Detroit in the early 1970s — the rise of violence and economic precarity above all. Julian Myers, “Earth Beneath Detroit,” in *Ends of the Earth*, p. 129–149. See also Emily Eliza Scott, op. cit.

Ibid., 132.


*Bringing the Decarie to the Mountain* was produced as part of an exhibition organized by the Saidye Bronfman Centre for the Arts. Artist’s Statement, “Décarie,” Liane and Danny Taran Gallery (Montreal: Saidye Bronfman Center for the Arts, April 28 – June 5, 2005).
In the course of describing its construction, Smithson’s essay covers everything from the downfall of the Parks Administration Department under Boss Tweed to the construction of the water pipeline used to fill the Park’s lake, enacting in essay-form the same imbrications he demands of dialectical Land art.

Smithson, op. cit., 169.

A census of New York City’s homeless taken in March 2015 showed that nearly 60% of individuals in the city’s homeless shelters are African-American, despite the fact that they make up only a quarter of the city’s population; the majority of these individuals are men. Statistics from the Coalition for the Homeless, http://www.coalitionforthehomeless.org/. Accessed 8 September 2015.

The artist’s insistence on this function of the Crawls may be both sincere and strategic, staking a claim on precisely those pretensions to universality that are conventionally denied non-white, non-heterosexual, non-male artists.


Ibid., 274.


By contrast, totalitarianism, whether Stalinist or Fascist, seeks to fill up this empty space with an image of the people-as-one. Claude Lefort, “The Logic of Totalitarianism,” The Political Forms of Modern Society (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), 279.

As Lefort observed, once statistics become more important than bodies, politics becomes mere “society,” and the vibrancy of the democracy is replaced by the pursuit of what one calls the good life. The body—or, in other terms, the biopower—by which one measures this good life is thereby reinstated into that empty place where democratic politics once operated.

Deutsche, 276.

Tufnell writes, “In Simonds's fantasy of integration and immersion, the figure of the artist becomes an archetype; streaked with mud, he is literally at one with the landscape, and almost indistinguishable from it.” Tufnell, op. cit, 65.

These photographs were initially made for TV broadcast; each still was shown for a matter of seconds over the course of nine days with no explanation. The work may be seen as an extension of his Liverpool Burial Piece, a “situational sculpture” that was produced with students at the Manchester College of Art. Each participant dug his or her own hole, and were then buried by non-participants. Lucy Lippard, Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972 (New York: Praeger, 1973), p. 50.

Pope.L Burial (Portland) and Burial (Sweet Desire) (both 1998) point back to Arnatt’s work. In both instances, Pope.L arranged to be buried neck deep in the earth—in the latter performance, in 98-degree weather, with a bowl of vanilla ice cream melting inches from his face. Yet where Arnatt is digested by the earth, Pope.L is in its vise grip, held from his own frustrated promise of sweet digestion. Indeed, the pressure from the earth around his body was so great in Portland that Pope.L had to be extricated and rushed to the hospital.


