Some Ways of Making Nothing
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BR(E)AKING ARCHIVES AND SABOTAGING INSTITUTIONS: JOSHUA CITARELLA’S COMPRESSION ARTIFACTS AND WILLIAM POPE.L’S BLACK FACTORY

Just as apophatic writing sabotages the system of kata-
phatic language, forcing it to perform its own limitations
until it collapses; certain apophatic art apparatuses sabo-
tage systems of art object commodification, systems of
art historical canonization, and even entrenched histori-
cal systems of constructing self-identity and difference.
This chapter analyzes two such apophatic art appara-
tuses. The first apparatus is Joshua Citarella’s Compression
Artifacts, an ephemeral gallery show that simultaneously
occurred in a temporary gallery in the woods and at dif-
ferent locations online, featuring impossible art objects
that simultaneously exist somewhere between physical
gallery space and digital archive space. The second appa-
ratus is William Pope.L’s Black Factory, a mobile “factory”
(performance/installation) for pulverizing inherited no-
tions of racial blackness, racial whiteness, and other bi-
nary constructs.
Both Compression Artifacts and the Black Factory cut out large swaths of the world (across time, space, human-art-histories, human-recognizable-media) and intra-act with them, while simultaneously refusing to allow themselves to be cleanly subsumed into larger apparatuses of “art world” assimilation. Both of these projects refuse to be out-meta-ed. They will not allow art markets to commodify them. By rigorously, ingeniously, and playfully refusing to let themselves be easily canonized by art-historical forces, both apparatuses reveal the mechanisms, presuppositions, and unspoken agendas of art institutions, art archives, and art markets. In all the places where sparks fly and things don’t quite slot in, the conforming contours of our cultural institutions are revealed.

As mentioned previously, one crucial difference between art apparatuses and quantum-behavior-measuring apparatuses is that the boundaries of art apparatuses can always be made to extend well beyond their immediate physical edges; whereas scientific apparatuses meant to intra-act with quantum-behaving materials can’t telescope outward without experiencing decoherence, the very bane of quantum-behavior measurement and quantum computing. In the case of both Compression Artifacts and the Black Factory, the edge of each physical apparatuses (in one case, three temporary walls and a floor; in the other case, a large truck) is really just a ruse, a decoy, a provocation meant to initiate a larger chain of outwardly telescoping boundaries. This outward telescoping is large part of the apparatal phenomenon that these apparatuses purpose to engender.

With both apparatuses, it is as if something really banal or silly has to happen within the immediate, local, lure component of the apparatus in order to trigger the outward-telescoping, macrocosmic, large-swath-cutting component of the apparatus. In the case of Compression Artifacts, a minimal sculpture and a few digital prints are placed in a well-lit gallery. What could be so media-mod-
ulating about this move? In the case of the *Black Factory*, a kind of medicine show truck rolls into town with three vaudeville-like performers acting absurd. What could be so identity-shattering about this move? The apparatal bait is set with banality and humor; and the larger net unfolds outward from there.

Neither *Compression Artifacts* nor the *Black Factory* are overtly anti-gallery or anti-museum. These aren’t really works of “institutional critique” in the art historical sense. But both projects are what one might call gallery-aware and museum-aware. Both apparatuses presume the existence and function of art institutions in the world, and both purposefully cut off the part of the world that includes these art institutions in order to involve galleries, museums, and art markets in their own apparatal intra-actions. In this sense, we are dealing less with mere institutional “critique” and more with holistic institutional modulation.

Two precedences from art history come to mind, one per project. Marcel Broodthaers’s *Musée d’Art Moderne, Département des Aigles* (*Museum of Modern Art, Department of Eagles*) is particularly relevant to Pope.L’s *Black Factory*. Both are mobile museums (or at least part of the *Black Factory* is a museum). Both are patently and absurdly thematized: Broodthaers’s museum is comprised of eagle-related images and objects (however obliquely interpreted), while Pope.L’s museum is comprised of black-related images and objects (however obliquely interpreted). Both are paradoxically acerbic and playful in tone. Both pedantically add value to their objects by transforming them into art commodities: Broodthaers by stamping bars of gold with eagle images and selling them at twice their value; Pope.L by signing canned goods, selling them at increased prices, and donating the profits to local soup kitchens so they can buy canned goods. Finally, both projects have proved difficult for art institutions to archive,
the projects themselves being their own archiving institutions.

Yves Klein’s *Zone de Sensibilité Picturale Immatérielle* (Zone of Immaterial Pictorial Sensibility) is particularly relevant to Citarella’s *Compression Artifacts*. Klein’s project consisted of selling a certificate for an invisible work of art. The buyer paid Klein a specified amount of gold leaf in exchange for the certificate. If the buyer wanted to keep the certificate, she would own the work of art but never be able to access it. In order to access the work of art, the buyer had to meet with Klein on the banks of the river Seine and burn their certificate of ownership while
Klein threw half of the gold leaf payment into the river. That event (the burning of the certificate and the throwing away of the gold) was the actual work of art, which the purchaser had been able to experience, but was no longer able to own. Somewhat similarly, at the end of Citarella’s *Compression Artifacts* exhibition, the gallery in the woods was burned. Years later (via the internet) Citarella sold chances (at $5 per chance) to be mailed some of the ashes of the burnt gallery. Winners were then mailed the ashes (see Fig. 1). They were asked to scatter the ashes, document this scattering, and post digital images of the scattering event to Instagram. Both *Compression Artifacts* and *Zone of Immaterial Pictorial Sensibility* translate (seemingly) solid objects into air, and reify (seemingly) abstract market value into gold (or at least into a $5 PayPal credit).

I mention both of these art historical precedences to emphasize the fact that apophatic art apparatuses are not inherently “new media,” or even new. Yes, *Compression Artifacts* and the *Black Factory* both do use the internet to achieve part of their apophatic effect, but the apophatic power of these apparatuses is not some de facto byproduct of merely using electronic networks. Instead, like Broodthaers and Klein before them, Pope.L and Citarella have rigorously constructed apophatic apparatuses, cleverly situated within their own contemporary worlds. All four artists simply use whatever relevant materials and media are at hand.

Both *Compression Artifacts* and the *Black Factory* ultimately wind up exhausting their material apparatal structures. Citarella burns his gallery and Pope.L submits his truck to a series of punishing performances (and one installation) before finally donating it to a local homeless shelter. Yet this exhaustion of the physical object alone is not what makes these projects apophatic, any more than merely abandoning the art object for ephemeral Fluxus performance was ever able to side-step the commodifying (re-)capture of the art market. Apophatic apparatuses
don’t annihilate matter as much as undermine faith in fundamental presence and ontological stability. Just as deconstruction first adopts the trajectory of an argument in order to then undermine that argument from within according to the argument’s own presuppositions and rules of engagement, so Compression Artifacts and the Black Factory begin with the presumed aura/presence of “the things themselves” (sculptural objects, donated objects) in order to “absence” these objects from within. Citarella uses Photoshop; Pope.L uses a blowtorch.

Both of these apparatuses are fairly complicated, so a good part of this chapter will simply be me explaining the logistical workings of the apparatuses themselves. Once we come to specifically understand the ways in which these apparatuses function, theoretical analysis of their accomplishments and implications should be a straightforward step away.

**Compression Artifacts**

*Compression Artifacts* was a group show curated by Joshua Citarella featuring work by Wyatt Niehaus, Kate Steciw, Brad Troemel, Artie Vierkant, and Citarella himself. All of these artists (particularly Vierkant and Citarella) make work that purposefully blurs the line between physical objects in a gallery and digital documentation of those objects online. The gallery was built in the woods in an undisclosed location. The physical construction of the gallery was streamed live on the internet. Once the gallery was constructed, the artworks were installed, and then documented photographically. The works were then de-installed, the gallery was disassembled, and everything (gallery and work) was burnt.

Documentation of the show was then posted to Citarella’s web site in the form of digital photographs, a short
low-resolution video, and an animated GIF. Initially, the photographic documentation appears straightforward enough, but upon closer inspection, things begin to seem amiss. The gallery keeps changing dimensions, and the artworks themselves keep changing appearance and location. Artie Vierkant is known for printing large images of Photoshop “brush strokes,” hanging these printed images in a gallery, taking digital photographs of these physical prints, adding more Photoshop brushstrokes to these digital photographs (of hanging physical prints of Photoshop brush strokes), and posting these digital > physical > digital images online. It seems that the same type of approach is happening to the documentation of Compression Artifacts, but on a much more holistic, messy, entangled, nuanced, and difficult-to-parse scale. There is a pile of sand that seems obviously photoshopped. The marble of the floor must also be photoshopped. The sculpture in

the middle (Citarella’s own piece) keeps changing shape and material, and at one point it is on fire, so those effects must be photoshopped. The gallery itself keeps changing dimensions, gaining a split level, gaining differently angled walls, increasing in length; so all of that must be photoshopped (see Fig. 2).

But what to make of the woods? The shots of the gallery interior show what we initially took to be a legitimate gallery somewhere in Manhattan, Paris, Berlin, London, or wherever. But the shots of the gallery in situ reveal it as a kind of stage set in the middle of some suburban looking woods. Has the gallery itself been photoshopped into the woods? It doesn’t appear that way. So, if we are now convinced that the gallery really was constructed in the woods when we had initially taken it to obviously be some gallery on West 26th Street in Chelsea, then what else are we to believe and doubt?

Citarella has created an apparatus for confounding several presumed dichotomies: offline vs. online; analog vs. digital; material vs. immaterial; outside-the-machine vs. inside-the-machine; documentation as after-the-fact supplementary media vs. documentation as integral and ongoing conceptual component of the artwork itself; group exhibition as art-market-sanctioned event vs. group exhibition as (post-)internet-art performance project. *Compression Artifacts* (hereafter CA) would not have been able to achieve such confoundings by simply taking a digital image of the woods and photoshopping a Bigfoot into it. We are not amazed anymore by believable images of fantastic scenes. We see them all day long in Hollywood science fiction movies. We have grown suspicious of (and even indifferent to) their claims of veracity. CA does something much more clever than merely trick us into believing that something “fake” is “real” – it purposefully straddles the line between the believable and the dubious. We waver back and forth in our reading of the narrative of this project. And while we vacillate and
hesitate, an intrinsic yet occult relationship begins to emerge between the value of contemporary gallery art, the value of Manhattan real estate, and the value of high-resolution photographic documentation.

On May 10, 2018 (five years after the project), Citarella announced on his Instagram account:

Let’s try something fun. Help me give Compression Artifacts the burial it deserves. I’m going to lottery off 10 containers of ash and we will scatter the remains around the world. I built the gallery in 2013 at an undisclosed location. After the show I demolished and cremated the remains and have been saving them ever since. The documentation images were so transformed in Photoshop that no one ever really knew what was there... people still ask if it was real to begin with. Signing up for $5 puts you in the lottery. Send me a video of you scattering the ash I’ll throw in an extra ticket for next month’s piece.²

This final act of networked distribution increases the dematerialization of the physical objects while simultaneously monetarily reifying the purely abstract and conceptual value that the project initially possessed. The announcement of the contest is distributed via Instagram. Lottery tickets are purchased via the micro-funding internet platform Drip. The ashes are distributed via the (semi-)analog network of the postal service. Presumably, some ashes will continue their distribution via river networks and wind currents. Finally, the digital traces of these physical distribution events will find their way back to the artist via email attachments and Instagram hashtags. All that is solid melts into air, flames, ash, and photoshop filters; only to return in the form of PayPal credit and (yet

more) digital image documentation. This final act of (re-)distribution all the more deeply confounds and entangles all of the dichotomies mentioned above.

Confounding the Original/Mediated Dichotomy

*Compression Artifacts* calls into question both the primacy of the original object and the derivative nature of its mediated documentation by confusing the line between the two. For example, did the morphing sculpture begin its life as a steel object, a wooden object, or a 3D software image that was only later turned into a physical object? If it began as a physical object, which was the original object, the steel instantiation or the wooden instantiation? Or was the sculpture ever even a physical object? Was it ever physically present in the gallery, or has it only ever existed as a digital object? Was the photographic documentation not really documentation at all, but instead the “original” art object? For that matter, was the gallery itself ever physically present? Perhaps *CA* is not an art exhibition at all, but simply a digital photography project.

Deconstruction has already taught us that just because a mark came first, that doesn’t mean it is inherently more relevant than its subsequent traces. So, let us set aside the concern about which instantiation of *CA* came first and assume for the sake of argument that the physical gallery is the “original” version. Perhaps the ultimate and final instantiation of the project is the most important, the final word, so to speak. But that won’t do either, because the final instantiation of the project is vials of indiscriminate ashes that might or might not be from the physical exhibition, distributed to winning entrants throughout the world who only properly participate in the project (à la Klein’s Zone of Immaterial Pictorial Sensibility) by scattering the ashes.

Perhaps we are asking the wrong questions by concerning ourselves with primary and ultimate instantiations.
Perhaps we should instead be trying to discern which of the instantiations (physical exhibition, online “documentation,” networked distribution of ashes) is most fundamental, primary, and important to the project. But that won’t do either, because they are all important to the overall functioning of the art apparatus. Like any proper apparatus (art, science, or otherwise), separating out the individual components and analyzing them separately interferes with the holistic functioning (and the “measurement results”) of the entire apparatus. If I were to make a case for which of the instantiations is most important, my money would be on the internet-contingent instantiation (the online documentation). But that’s not exactly right either, because without the physical installation, there would have been no livestream broadcast, no source images to tweak, and no ashes to distribute. Which brings us to the inescapable conclusion that the entire apparatus, including the physical gallery in the woods, is intrinsically internet-contingent. Likewise (and equally inescapable), the entire apparatus, including the online documentation and the distribution of ashes, is intrinsically contingent on the physical site-specificity of the gallery in the woods. Thus, nothing is made of our attempt to dissect and parse out the primary locus of the “art” within the apparatus. The art is what the entire apparatus winds up becoming; and in this particularly apophatic case, the CA apparatus winds up becoming a device to confound the dichotomies between originary vs. mediated, source vs. copy, presence vs. absence, logos vs. trace.

CA pits two equally wrong but well-entrenched mythologies against each other, and winds annihilating (or at least deeply problematizing) both. The first wrong mythology posits the modernist white cube gallery as a transcendental space of pure spiritual encounter between audience minds and image aesthetics. The second wrong mythology posits the “inside” of a computer
(and its accompanying networks) as a non-physical, disembodied, transcendental space of pure data. Of course, neither of these mythologies is the least bit true. The art gallery is entangled and shot-through with economics, real estate markets, class and race presuppositions, gravity, air condition, track lighting, unpaid interns, art handlers, collector contracts, and bottles of wine. Likewise, the inside of a computer and its accompanying networks are entangled and shot-through with silicon, electricity, proprietary code, microchip architecture patent lawyers, underwater fiber optic cables, contested transfer protocols, New Zealand mineral mines, Indonesian manufacturing plants, and non-European dump sites. CA doesn’t simply and naively presume to undermine passé physical gallery spaces with the new and virtual power of the internet. Instead, CA undermines, foregrounds, reconfigures, dallies-with, conflates, and further entangles both gallery and computer mythologies. Physical materials, concepts, aesthetics, networks, audiences, and markets are stretched, shrunk, intermingled, and modulated; not unlike Citarella’s warped gallery documentation images.

What, ultimately, are the “Compression Artifacts” of Compression Artifacts? Technically, they are the signature blurs and bandings that incidentally result from digital image file compression formats (GIF, JPG, PNG, etc.). Archeologically, they are the source artifacts of the actual gallery (the displayed digital prints and the sculpture, the wood used to build the gallery, and the burned ash remnants from the fire). Cognitively, they are the bits, pieces, and traces that remain in affective limbo after our failed, uncanny attempts to parse aspects of this project into clean categories of either “original” or “mediated.”

Realism Matters

The confounding, apophatic, braking effect that CA achieves is predicated on the realism of its media. This
is because humans are also part of the CA apparatus, and in order for our human dichotomies to be confounded, we need to believe certain things about the media with which we are presented. By “realism,” I don’t mean the hyper-realism of Hollywood special effects, or even solely the high-resolution of Citarella’s digital images. By “realism,” I simply mean that a given media element has the texture that our apperceiving bodies expect to receive, according to our normal, regular consumption of that medium. In the case of CA, these expected media textures persuade us that the objects/events mediated by the media were physical, and that they were actually installed somewhere in a physical location at an actual historical time. An image can’t be unheimlich or unhomelike without there first being something homelike and familiar about it. The realism (expected texture) of the media is the lure, the bait on the hook. The not-quite-right, uncanny tweak of the media is the hook itself that brakes any business-as-usual, interpretive becomings.

Again, this kind of media realism is not inherently triggered by high-resolution mimeticism. Instead, it is achieved by an expected grain of the media that synchs-up-with and checks-out-with the networks (technical and economic) through which we are meant to believe the media has traveled. So, for instance, the low resolution of the short video feed at the CA web page is read by us as realistic, because we are meant to believe that it is a video screen capture of a live internet video stream. If the video were high resolution, we would read it as unrealistic. (The “truth” is, the entire livestream was not archived. Although the construction took several days, the live stream was only streaming during part of one day.) Similarly, the high-resolution digital images of the gallery space also initially check out as realistic, because any

3 Joshua Citarella, interview with the author at Citarella’s New York apartment/studio, April 21, 2017.
gallerist with a gallery that white and that cubed would have paid the requisite money to hire a professional art photographer to light and shoot her group show. One reason the texture and resolution of Citarella’s digital images are so pitch-perfect is because he has a day job as a professional photographer documenting gallery art exhibitions.

In the case of CA, the actual choice of the sculpture and the prints included in the show is made in order to set up and prime the subsequent slippages in the texture and resolution of their digital documentation. The work in the gallery is created with the express purpose of sabotaging the seamlessness of its subsequent digital (re)distribution. This is exactly the opposite of an “old media” sculpture or photography show, where the sculptures and photographs are (ostensibly) chosen based on their aesthetic or conceptual merit in-and-of-themselves, with little regard for how they will appear in subsequent documentation. Then it simply becomes the job of the professional photographer documenting the show to make that Henry Moore sculpture look the best she can via lighting, shutter speed, tripod placement, depth of focus, etc. And yet, in the commercial gallery world, even this is not exactly true, because artists are regularly coached by gallerists to create works of certain dimensions (and even certain colors) so that the work will look more appealing in an online buyer catalog or will fit better over a collector’s sofa.

The minimal geometric forms Citarella chooses for his sculptures are a way to focus viewers on the line between what is “fake” and what is “real,” instead of focusing them on how aesthetically pretty the object itself is. The sculptural forms are chosen not for any inherent aesthetic value, but because complex sculptural forms would be less confounding. Basic forms seem more readily present

4 Ibid.
and more easily readable in photographic documentation. When these seemingly easy-to-read forms suddenly begin slipping and changing, we are all the more fundamentally confounded. In this sense, *Compression Artifacts* is a holistic apparatus telescoping outward through art markets and digital networks. In the context of the overall CA project, the sculpture and the prints in the show don’t really function as discrete, individual apparatuses (as they normally would in an urban gallery exhibition). There are no art patrons there in the woods to experience these pieces in the live, physical gallery context. Instead, the sculpture and the prints are actually the starter bait components of a much larger, holistic, apophatic art apparatus. They are the set-up for a punch line that comes much later.

There are some forms of contemporary sculpture (by Jon Rafman, for instance) meant to look in the gallery space as if they are physical instantiations of images from mediated space. If you were to take a realistic image of such sculptures, they would look as if they had been photoshopped, or as if your image’s GIF or JPG compression algorithm had glitched. There are other forms of contemporary sculpture (by Olafur Eliasson, for instance) that are simply impossible to photograph altogether. Your body in the physical space apperceives a certain image (a circular rainbow, a refraction of light), but when you go to take a digital picture of it, what your body is seeing is uncapturable by the camera apparatus. And again, there are certain forms of “digital sculpture” (work curated by the online gallery Panther Modern, for instance) that are purposefully meant to be fantastic and physically impossible, designed to populate virtual galleries of non-physical space.

Citarella’s sculptural object in CA is not really any of these three types of sculpture. It doesn’t look like it came from the internet. It is not impossible to photograph. It is not meant to exist exclusively on the internet. It is really
a fourth kind of sculpture meant to elude firm placement in either offline physical or online mediated space. By failing to settle down and neatly land in one space or the other, it acts as a kind of sabotaging wrench, munging up the works and sending off sparks along the physical–mediated divide. This kind of sabotage only works if the digital image of the sculpture reads believably as a representation of a physical object. This kind of realism is only possible if aspects of the sculpture are actually physical. According to Citarella, computer-generated 3D models of physical objects somehow lack the alchemy of physical stuff in the actual world. Physical materials that exists in space over time (marble, for example) reveal aspects of historical space and time.\(^5\)

In CA, the dividing line between the physical and the mediated is so problematized, that four years after the project, Citarella himself could not remember which images were photoshopped and which were not. Some of the components that seem to me the most photoshopped (like the fire) were actually physical. Other components that seem to me the most “natural” (like several of the welded angles of the metal sculpture) were actually photoshopped.

Even the vertical order of the documentation on the web page is carefully choreographed to promote maximum confusion. The web page begins with images that seem believable, then gradually progresses to increasingly unbelievable images, ending with the low-resolution animated gif which blatantly and unrealistically distorts the dimensions of the gallery.\(^6\) The result is the braking of “resolution” (in both the technical and cognitive senses). The documentation exists across a range of technical resolutions, none of which seem to have the final word

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\(^5\) Ibid.
\(^6\) Ibid.
on the accuracy and truth of the event; and the actual historical space of the gallery is cognitively irresolvable. Citarella says the “art” of his work happens in both the physical space of the gallery and the subsequent documentation of that space. To him, it’s not that a new third space is created. Instead, an uncanny effect is created by combining difficult and rigorous pre-Photoshop staging of physical objects with professional post-production Photoshop techniques. A new space is not created (that would be making something), but rather the combination of two existing spaces is apparatally choreographed in such a way that an apophatic braking event is caused. The cognitive aporia induced by CA is in some senses even more disturbing than the cognitive aporia induced by the affective linguistics of Arakawa and Gins’s Mechanism of Meaning. As humans, it is easier to dismiss linguistically induced aporia as “merely” a trick of language (even though language is itself a material force in the actual world). We are somehow less willing to dismiss photographically induced aporia. Evidently (even if the evidence is only in media textures), realism still matters.

Markets Matter/The Material of Markets

As mentioned above, although documentation of art exhibitions chronologically occurs after the creation of the artworks in the exhibitions, that doesn’t mean that the documentation has no effect on the creation of the artworks, particularly if the art exhibitions occur in for-profit galleries. Furthermore, the size of the gallery itself affects the monetary value of the artworks on display. As a professional photographer of art exhibitions, one of Citarella’s main jobs is to make the gallery look as large as possible. The logic goes like this: Manhattan real estate is expensive. The larger the gallery, the higher the rent.

7 Ibid.
The higher the rent, the more the gallerist must be making. She must be making all that money selling valuable art. A bizarre, tail-wagging-the-dog effect is thus created whereby it becomes as important to make the gallery look large in your catalog images of the exhibition (because not all buyers will be able to attend the actual exhibition) as it does to make the art look good.

*Compression Artifacts* was inspired by all of these bizarre (real estate and art) market forces. If Citarella’s photographic documentation of his own exhibition can make it look as if he and his friends had a group show in a large white cube Chelsea gallery, then it doesn’t matter where the gallery is, even if it is a gallery he constructed himself miles outside of Manhattan in the woods. At least this is one of the tongue-in-cheek conceits of *CA*. Artists who wish to make money from their art are forced to consider not just the technical production of a single work of art, but also its subsequent reception, critical journalistic evaluation, catalog distribution, conceptual marketing, art fair booth hawking, sale, resale, institutional collection, eventual re-exhibition, and ultimate art-historical canonization. Given an awareness of this outwardly telescoping chain of forces, the fact that real estate markets and perspectival photographic techniques for enlarging architectural interiors would be relevant to a conceptual art project seems at least a bit less bizarre.

The fun and critical ingenuity of *CA* is that it takes these economic forces and throws a wrench in them, playfully grinding them to an aporetic halt (however briefly), all the while obscuring its overt “exposure” of them. The project doesn’t read as straightforward “institutional critique.” The *CA* apparatus doesn’t merely cut out a large swath of the world called “the art market,” point a didactic finger at it, and make something called “critical awareness.” Instead, *CA* cuts out and follows the contours of
all of these market forces and digital networks in a way that causes these forces to publicly perform their own aporetic absurdity. Five-dollar transaction bits enter the apparatus, and ashes exit the apparatus. What is “made” in the interim is a kind of perpetually involuting Mobius strip, back and forth between offline and online, original and mediated, profit and profligation, object and image, art and dust.

The Black Factory

If Compression Artifacts cuts out a large swath of the world, the Black Factory (hereafter the BF) cuts out even more. Like CA, it too subsumes art institutions and art markets; but the BF moves well beyond them to chew on additional institutions like race, class, nationality, identity construction, difference, and gas mileage. Tempting as it is to launch right into the apparatal functionings of the BF, a pragmatic explanation of its myriad logistical functions is first in order before any theoretical analysis is even possible.

Pope.L initially imagined the BF as “a mobile art installation performance work that would travel not only geographically but also conceptually.” It would be housed in “a truck renovated to function like a cross between a lending library, an old timey medicine show, and a field research laboratory.”

Although the BF is (mostly) housed in a truck, the project itself is not the truck, but is instead an installation and a performance (and an archive, and two websites, and a contest, and numerous conversations). Even the truck itself isn't just a single thing. The truck houses

several stations that expand on performance day. There is “the workshop” (also known as “the pulverizing station”), the store, the inflatable igloo archive, the “black object of the day,” the online archive (accessible via a laptop in the back of the truck), the main website associated with the project (thblackfactory.com), and the auxiliary “Distributing Martin” website (distributingmartin.com) which is frequently linked to from the main website.

The BF project launched on May 8, 2004, at MASS MoCA as part of a group exhibition curated by Nato Thompson called *The Interventionists*. The truck went on three US tours, one per year, between 2004 and 2006. The tour stops were announced prior to the tour and people were invited to bring objects to the truck which they associated with blackness. On the day of the installation/performance, the truck would show up at a town (usually sponsored by a local arts institution), set up the different stations, and each person of the three-member crew would begin to perform a “node.” The nodes were structured interactive performances ultimately designed to engage visitors from the community in dialogue. There were around twenty different nodes, and these nodes would be repeatedly performed in cycles over a six-hour period. The black objects which community members brought were either photographed and archived in the online archive, and/or collected and added to the physical archive, or pulverized at the pulverizing station, the residue of which might be packaged and sold in the store.

Typically, each stop lasted a day and a half, although certain guerrilla stops (unplanned, unsponsored, spontaneous stops) might last as short as fifteen minutes. In 2004 there were six scheduled stops in four states over ten days. In 2005 there were twelve scheduled stops in fifteen states over six weeks. In 2006 there were twenty-four scheduled stops in twelve states over two months. That is the BF in a nutshell. Now for a more detailed explanation of each individual component.
A More Detailed Explanation of the Individual Black Factory Components

The Truck Itself

The truck was a 22-foot long, 1989 GMC, Grumman Olson paneled step van (ice cream) truck weighing six tons. Its previous owner had used the truck for occasional fishing trips in Maine.¹⁰ Once set up, with the attached inflatable igloo coming off the back of the truck, the entire installation was 54-feet long (see Fig. 3).

The cab of the truck, once parked and installed, expanded into the gift shop. In transit, the rear of the truck stored the igloo archive, the pulverization table, objects, props, and a sound system. Once parked and installed, the rear of the truck housed the computer station for accessing the online archive. Furthermore, according to

Pope.L, “The rear of the BF is also a work area [and ...] a hiding place for goof-off employees.”

After the third and final BF tour in 2006, the truck itself was used in several subsequent Pope.L projects. In 2009 at Art Basel in Miami it was partially buried under gunpowder. In 2011 it was used as a mobile projection unit which was pulled through the streets of New Orleans by local volunteers. Finally, in 2013, in a move reminiscent of Pope.L’s own durational body crawls, the truck was pulled throughout Cleveland for twenty-five miles by a rotating group of volunteers. After the 2013 event, the truck was donated to 2100 Lakeside Men’s Shelter in Cleveland.

The Pulverization Station

The pulverization station is

a set of 3 heavy duty plywood and steel tables whose tops, when properly assembled, resemble a contorted USA and Cuba. The tables are off-loaded at the vehicle’s rear and set-up on the side of the truck along with a hefty array of tools and workshop gadgetry.

In Pope.L’s own playfully acerbic verse:

We stand on this table. / Shout. Talk. Sing. Leap. Beg. Cajole. Shake in our boots. Act tough. Let our minds wander. Get the lack out. / Grind shit up on the table. Blind shit up on the table. Dance on the table. Spirit on the table. spit on the table... / Do experiments. Chew experience. Product the black that’s out-of-wack. Serve enchiladas, watermelon, sauerkraut. feather, iron, saliva...blood...tums...

11 William Pope.L, artist talk, August 4, 2004
12 William Pope.L et al., “the truck.”
The pulverization station is one of the locations where nodes are performed. Here, “black” objects are pulverized via electric grinder, blowtorch, pestle and mortar, and other means.

The Gift Shop
In the gift shop, the staple items for sale include a rubber duckie stamped with the BF logo ($5), “limited edition good used soap” ($1,400), and a plastic Yoda head shrink-wrapped together with racist Ben Klassen’s “white hate literature” *The White Man’s Bible*. Also, for sale is powder from the pulverized donated black objects, packaged as if it were spice for your spice rack, labeled with a gold black factory sticker signed by Pope.L. Additionally, canned goods are sold and auctioned for several times their original value, and then that money is donated to local food pantries so that they can buy more canned goods. Pope.L calls this scheme “Twice Sold. [...] a perverse reverse of capitalism.”\(^{15}\) As described by Pope.L, the list of canned goods includes, “peas, corn, pork n’ beans, pickled eggs (discontinued but hopefully coming back!), collard greens, peanut butter, tomato soup, evaporated milk (discontinued), airport candle, used soap, tee-shirts, used American flags, Tesco chicken curry (UK) and Sainsbury baked beans (UK).”\(^{16}\) According to Pope.L, “The BF has a graduated pricing scheme and we love to give discounts, for almost any reason at all.”\(^{17}\)

The Igloo Archive
The Igloo Archive is an inflatable igloo with hanging shelving throughout, displaying a rotating selection of physical items that have been donated to the BF archive.

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The igloo has window-like openings for people to look in and view the items. It is attached to the back of the truck. According to Pope.L:

Anyone may donate a black object. A black object is anything a person deems black or feels references blackness for them. The specific days for submitting black objects are called check days. During the tour, every day was check day.\textsuperscript{18}

\textbf{The Black Object of the Day}

The black object of the day is one of the donated black objects from the physical archive, placed inside a box built into the side of the truck. According to Pope.L, “You can only access this box by putting your hands into holes cut into the side of the truck and feeling around for knowledge.”\textsuperscript{19}

\textbf{The Nodes}

The nodes are the interactive aspect of the \textit{BF}. The number of nodes is variable. In 2005, during each six-hour installation, there were 20–25 different nodes. The nodes are performed in rotation. Once the rotation of nodes is completed, it is begun again, continually, until the six hours ends. Most nodes are short, around three minutes each.

According to Pope.L:

A node is a chunk of time defined by an activity or an event. An installation can also be a node. All nodes are designed. Some are scripted. Some not. Improvisation is key in playing a node. [...] The function of a node is to engage the audience-participant in an inward-outward journey. Most nodes are built around a theme,

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
for example, stereotypical views of migrant workers in the U.S. Some are built around a gesture, such as giving away free watermelon. Most have a turning point where the meaning of what was first proposed is shifted to create a conflict or contradiction or enigma or silliness. All nodes have three parts: 1. the come-on, which is the invitation to engage, 2. the shift, which is the raising of the stakes of the invitation. It can also be the introduction of a problem that has to be solved. An audience-participant can also raise the stakes. [...] 3. the leave, what the performer and audience-participant glean from the interaction.  

One particularly successful node was developed and performed by Pasqualina Azzarello, crew member and Miss Black Factory 2005. The node involved a tarot reading with a custom set of tarot cards. The outcome of the reading always involved the exclamation, “Shazam!,” and a prophesied shift in race, nationality, and gender for the participant.

I promised to defer my theoretical analysis until after the logistical explanations, but the shift within the node is the crux of the entire apparatus, so a bit of preliminary theoretical analysis is in order here. Pope.L’s motto for the entire BF project is, “The Black Factory does not make blackness. we make something better: opportunity.” The nodes are the heart of the opportunity that is made, because they are the interpersonal contact points at which each individual community member most overtly interacts with the overall BF apparatus. The “shift” phase in the node is precisely the “nothing” that the BF makes. It is the BF’s most apophatic moment. The shift is the point at which the brakes are thrown on the participant’s prior, operative understanding of her own culturally inherited
self-identity. The “leave” phase of the node is never pre-
determined. Yes, something is always left. Something al-
ways becomes. But what that something is cannot be pre-
determined. It must remain undetermined in order to
allow the shift to truly occur and accomplish its braking
work. Otherwise, we simply have one more series of pre-
determined becomings, with the artist’s pre-determined
ideology engaging in the same tired/rote, partisan-driv-
en agreements/disagreements with the participant’s pre-
determined ideology. Granted, “nothing” can never be
permanently (or even briefly) maintained in a world of
perpetual becomings. The wager of the BF is that after
the hard brake of the shift (Shazam!), at least the oppor-
tunity to live otherwise in the world will be made. This
opportunity is what is left, what emerges, what remains;
and the specific nature of this opportunity is inherently
different and personal, per person, per node.

Miss Black Factory

Miss Black Factory was a contest held in 2005 and again in
2006. Primarily the contest was a way to select one of the
three members of the crew. Her duties were exactly the
same as the other two members, except she held the title
Miss Black Factory. The first contest announcement ran as
a feature piece is the Spring 2005 edition of Art Journal,
and also served as a promotion for the upcoming tour.

In order to be eligible,

Anyone may enter who is 18 years old or older, has a
valid U.S. driver’s license, and a major credit card. Also
necessary are: a strong back, an enthusiasm for mak-
ing social change, good people skills, the ability to use
power tools, attendance at all BF rehearsals and tour
activities, and collaboration with CEO Pope.L. A few
not so necessary, but still excellent skill areas with
which Miss BF might be familiar: community orga-
nizing, playing music, street theater, chemistry, eth-
nic culture, international law, political theory, baking, working in a factory, etc.  

Miss Black Factory 2005 was Pasqualina Azzarello and Miss Black Factory 2006 was Josh Atlas.

The Online Archive
The “DONATED BLACK OBJECT ARCHIVE” is an online archive accessible at http://www.theblackfactory.com/archiveintro.html. It contains numbered pictures of black items that people brought to the BF, descriptions of those items, comments about the items by the people who brought them, numbered pictures of the people who brought them, and a series of questions answered by the people who brought them. Sometimes the items are donated for pulverization or collection in the physical archive. Other times, they are simply photographed for the online archive and then returned to their owners.

As of summer 2018, there were 934 donated objects in the online archive. Sometimes the pictures of the items and/or the donors are absent, in which case black placeholder images are put in their place, as “place holders for lost encounters.” Each item is assigned a color, but the colors are only ever accidentally associated with the items. The colors simply cycle in order. Seventeen items in a row will be listed as “blue,” then the next seven will be listed as “clear,” then the next thirteen will be listed as “white,” and so on.

Here are the questions asked of each donor:

Black Object: _
Why donor chose object: _

Date Donated: _
Color: [randomly assigned]
Donor Name: _
Age: _
Place of Birth: _
Nationality: _
Race: _
Ethnicity: _
Class: _
Religion: _
Sex: _
Gender: _
Current Residence: _
States/Counties/Countries you have lived in: _
Reaction to the experience of donating a black object: _

On the 2006 tour, the following questions were added:

Do you feel that Affirmative Action only benefits blacks? Why? Why not?
If you had a daughter and/or son is there any race from which you would not want them to marry? Why? Why not?
Should undocumented workers a.k.a. illegal immigrants be allowed to remain in the US? Why? Why not?
Should the US withdraw from Iraq? Why? Why not?
Should Israel give land back to the Palestinians? Why? Why not?

The objects donated range from thoughtful items that people have obviously prepared to bring after viewing the BF invitation in advance, to things that passers-by simply had in their pockets. Jazz CDs are inordinately represented. There are many items associated with Africa. Sometimes people take picture of their hair. Some items (particularly books) seem to have been donated by Pope.L
himself (since he references the same books in texts about the BF). There is also a photograph of a vagina, and a photograph of a penis (both from anonymous donors).

Upon entering the website for the entire BF project (theblackfactory.com), the visitor is led through a series of randomly sequenced introductory pages of various phrases and colors. Oftentimes, a randomly selected photograph of a black object from the online archive will appear on one of these introductory pages.

distributingmartin.com

distributingmartin.com is a website in the form of an interactive, multimedia, blog-like journal. As of summer 2018, distributingmartin.com itself never links to theblackfactory.com, but various pages throughout theblackfactory.com link to various pages throughout distributingmartin.com. In this sense, distributingmartin.com serves as an auxiliary site, or a back-story site, or a supplementary site, or at least a companion site to the BF project website.

distributingmartin.com contains journal entries beginning at the date of Pope.L’s conception (“15, or 18, or 23 October 1953”) and continuing into an imagined future where Martin Luther King Jr.’s DNA has been distributed throughout the world and has altered all humans. The journal entries talk about Pope.L’s old band (sardonically named John Wayne), his family, his old girlfriend, a novel he wants to write, his moving to Maine, his teaching, and the offline distributingmartin project. For the offline distributingmartin project, in 2001 Pope.L pasted posters throughout New York City that read, “THIS IS A PAINTING OF MARTIN LUTHER KING’S PENIS FROM INSIDE MY FATHER’S VAGINA” in white letters on a black background.

The blog entries are written in a non-linear, hypertext fashion, with words from each entry linking across the site to (mostly) personal photographs, other blog entries, fragments of the novel-in-progress, notes for the project,
various cryptic instructions and plans, and newspaper clippings about DNA experiments and biomatter theft.

The site lists “13 reasons to make a blog about spreading MLK’s body parts all over the Universe.” Reason #1: “fingers, toes, eyes, & ears are better in the stars, mountains, and clouds but easier to reach on MACs and PCs.”

The site lists 12 steps to the completion of the long-term distributing martin project. Step #8 is “Peace.” The first three paragraphs of this step are worth quoting in full:

Step 8: Peace

The Peace Gene Project is a bio-engineering enactment in which genetic material from Martin Luther was obtained and re-tooled with the help of artists and scientists from MQXRRSWQRXLRLQDXIXQBDGGSJRRABXRSLT, who participated in a special interdisciplinary program encouraging projects between specialists in different fields.

King’s genetic material was obtained via a lucky fluke. The possibility of a degraded or polluted sample is not out of the question. Regardless, the material was re-built, retrained, and retrofitted with new mechanics and subsequently re-introduced to the human body via the eating of fruit on sale in supermarkets, whereupon, after being ingested the MLK gene (or MILK gene) ‘turns on’ and replicates at an incredible rate: its motor was modeled on the amazing replication ability of the HIV virus. The MILK gene then seeks out receptor sites on a rogue protein curiously called the ‘Peace Gene’ and interacts with it to create fresh biological, social, and political environments, matrixes and potentialities within the human host.

Of course, the exact nature of these new environments can never be completely known. Interestingly enough, the outcome focus is very similar to Afri-
can vodoun rituals where a simple shift of wind may drastically alter the effectiveness of a spell or action. The so-called Peace gene (like the so-called Gay gene) is surrounded by much debate. Other names for the Peace gene are: the Flying Dutchman gene, the Ghost gene, or simply PG. Many thinkers do not so much doubt the existence of the PG as simply doubt the ability of humans (who are naturally bent to self-destruction) to take advantage of such a provocative biological resource.\(^\text{24}\)

In a sense, the offline *distributingmartin* project is a precursor and companion to the BF, just as *distributingmartin*.com is a precursor and companion to theblackfactory.com. *distributingmartin* is the imaginary distribution of DNA (to the stars, mountains, and clouds), and the actual internet distribution of a viral opportunity to imagine a future that might be otherwise; BF is the actual geographical distribution (stop by stop, town by town, state by state) of that same opportunity.

**The Documentation**

*theblackfactory*.com contains media documentation from the three tours in the form of the online black object archive, still photographs of the performances, short video promotional materials for the project, much writing by Pope.L poetically explaining the project in the persona of the BF CEO, and two separate written accounts of community members who attended performances. In 2005, Craig Saddlemire made a documentary film called *Get Off The Truck: Black Factory Rehearsal 2005*, which chronicled the training of the 2005 crew members by Pope.L, but there is little footage in Saddlemire’s documentary of any actual nodes being performed. In 2015, The Museum

of Modern Art acquired some physical items from the BF archive for their permanent collection (more on this acquisition later). As mentioned, the truck was donated to a homeless shelter in 2013.

An Analysis of the Holistic Functioning of the Black Factory Apparatus

Now that the logistical components of the BF have been explained, we are ready to consider the ways in which it holistically functions as an apophatic art apparatus. Prior to my own analysis, I want to let the CEO of the BF have his own say regarding the project, its goals, its purpose, and its function.

The CEO of the Black Factory on the Function of the Black Factory

The Black Factory was built to explore the space between what we think we know and what we can imagine.25

[The Factory] encourages us to take hold of the stereotypes of race and class which bind us to our indecision and apathy and to turn them inside out. It challenges us to grapple with the habitual ways in which we consume products, identities, and ideologies.26

The BF travels throughout America (or as much of it as we can afford on three miles a gallon), bringing possibility and the glaring light of amusement, boredom, pushy conversation and a flaky utopianism wherever it’s needed most.27

27 William Pope.L et al., “the truck,”
[The *Black Factory*] travels throughout America seeding difference where it is needed.\(^{28}\)

The *Black Factory* makes [...] the opportunity to make a new blackness. And what is this new XXXXXXXX? Difference! A boutique lackness. A lackness on the beach. And – where is this this this – reach? Well, where is your frolics? Lying on its multi-ethnic towel boiling under a hot, hot, hot pun.\(^{29}\)

Our big thing is to be clumsy, very earnest and manipulative and imperfect in the face of beliefs like:

1) everything matters
2) nothing matters unless you got money then nothing matters because you got money
3) nothing matters unless you are you and nothing but you because you are the center of the XXXXXXX so help you god and there is no god except you how lonely\(^{30}\)

Finally, here is Pope.L (more or less) as Pope.L, applying for a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2002, two years prior to the first *BF* tour:

[The *Black Factory* is] at once a mobile marketplace that trades in provocation and a nomadic laboratory for crafting consciousness.

I want to make “crucibles” for blackness. These crucibles are art works that have two functions: 1) to protect, validate and enshrine blackness; 2) to isolate, imprison and obfuscate blackness. The drama of these


\(^{29}\) William Pope.L et al., “overview.”

\(^{30}\) Ibid.
two opposing forces, at odds with each other, circumscribes a contradictory blackness.

To me, blackness is a many-sided hole. Or more paradoxically, a hole within a hole within a hole and so on. When I say this I simply mean an open-ended nature that is not about blackness but the world itself. The *Black Factory* is the concrete expression of this sort of thinking. It is the experiment with which I will test this very hypothesis.

By collecting, recycling and peddling the ingredients for re-thinking blackness, *The Black Factory* transforms the tensions and contradictions of race into a dynamic field of possibility.31

The *BF CEO* is well aware of the apohatic function of his factory, and poetically describes this function in admirably apohatic language, pitch-perfectly aligned with the tone of the project itself. Perfectly apohatic is the correlation between black and lack, and the idea that a hole-y lack might contain within it the bastard seeds of a holy fecundity. The *BF CEO* presents the factory as one very rigorous, complex, and exhaustive way of seeing what new possibilities might arise from pitching oneself, a few crew members, and dozens of communities headlong into the aporetic, telescoping hole of (b)lackness.

*The Black Factory Slams on the Brakes of Rote Becoming, Leaving the Door Open for X*

The *BF* makes nothing of (i.e., brakes the rote and cyclical becoming of) inherited, status quo, historical modes of capturing, oversimplifying, and binarily delineating (black/white) actually nuanced differences. As men-

tioned above, these apophasic brakes are most forcefully applied during the “shift” phase (the second phase) of the various performance and installation nodes. This hard braking is designed to produce an instantaneous opening-up toward reconfigurable difference(s), creating a brief worm hole into possibly othered becoming(s). This temporary wormhole is the productive opportunity that the factory makes. It makes a kind of open placeholder for future encounters. The labor of the BF is to do everything in its power to keep this wormhole open for as long as possible, to stall, ward off, and keep at bay its inevitable collapse and closure. This hole-stabilizing labor is accomplished on as many fronts as possible: by deferring the inevitable museological canonization of the BF so that it may properly run its institution-eroding course; by not overdetermining the performance nodes and by allowing the crew members to participate in the organic development and improvisational enaction of the nodes; and by letting the crew drive the truck away on the tour while the artist–CEO stays at home.

The BF makes nothing of all institutions (financial, national, socioeconomic, artistic) that would attempt to suck the project into their own contextualizing apparatuses. Instead, the BF lures and sucks those institutions into its own gaping apparatus, leaving the door open for whatever else may enter and exit. The BF is a brave project because of its scope, its openness, and its vulnerability toward being captured by other contextualizing institutions. This vulnerability (the artwork “looks like” a silly vaudeville ice cream truck cum inflatable igloo) actually functions as a lure that allows the BF to entice, trap, and capture topics like race, religion, gender, income, and housing; tweak them; and release them into the worm hole. The BF makes nothing of itself being made something of (some thing of), in order for it to make nothing of other institutional somethings.
The BF CEO states, “Someone once told me: ‘The BF stages a kind of moral constipation.’ I said to myself: ‘That’s cool. what does it mean?’ It’s a question that has to be asked and re-casted over and over again.” The BF stops-up previously configured and calcified ethical flows, in order to hold open the bung hole of becoming long enough for X to emerge.

Humor is part and parcel of the BF apparatus, as is self-deprecation, as is absurdity; because bald-faced earnestness can become a kind of codifying trap that propels one forward into already-proscribed, rote, partisan, cyclical becomings. Humor puts the brakes on these binarily determined, pre-scripted re-dialogues and re-debates. It sets the stage for something else to happen other than the same old presumptions leading to the same old binary positions leading to the same old circuitous arguments.

Pope.L says of humor:

Humor is a water-soluble, personal lubricant made social. I like the idea that when people laugh their mouths open and all sorts of things can fall in – bits, ideas, cracks, sites, very tiny police-persons, subversives, dust, hope – an erotics of humor must be cathected to the flesh as well as the waste of the flesh – the castoff flavors that ooze out of our tittering and guffaws and nervous nelly-a-tions – humor can be used as a structure that dis-a-wows while building an architecture of what-the-fuck.

In the same interview, Pope.L says of binary contradiction:

32 William Pope.L et al., “overview.”
Contradiction. Don’t exist in the real world. What I mean is, in a way, contradiction is too logical, too closed off and neat and packageable-like – similar to opposites, contradiction is frequently understood as figured on binaries. Bargain basement epistemology. But contraries, which I prefer, are more flaky (note: keep the extra “f” for fucking or flucking or...), so they are more the knot one encounters on the ground where most of us crawl. Acting a fool. To be contrary. To act the fool. To act your act off. To disappear the ass in presencing the act. To put your foot in in in in someone else’s ass —

The BF CEO doesn’t know exactly where the BF will lead, but humor and undermining inherited dichotomies are two apparatal mechanisms that lead to that wherever. The only guaranteed outcome provided by the BF’s hard braking apparatus is the guarantee that eventually, here and there, catch as catch can, new opportunities for re-configuration will be created. What these opportunities are and where specifically they lead is a massive speculative wager. As Pope.L concedes, “Part of doing this work is to let it go, is to not be so afraid to have a work that you can’t control. But you pay for that.”

Lest I put too much emphasis on the punk rock, “slam the brakes on in order to make nothing of rote becoming” aspect of the BF, I also want to focus on the final “leave the door open for X” aspect of the BF. If the first two node stages (the come-on and the shift) are the bait-and-switch, apophatic trap of the BF apparatus; then the final node stage (the leave) is the necessarily courteous but no less essential “easing-off of the emergency brake in order to accelerate into whatever new directions have

34 Ibid.
emerged” part of the BF apparatus. This third phase is the self-revelatory phase for the community member, who is invited during the leave to articulate her own self-revelations to the participating BF crew member, further historically actualizing the virtual potentia which began to ingress during the shift phase. Pasqualina Azzarello (Miss Black Factory 2005) noted that it was not enough for the participant to merely have a revelation, but that the node encounters were purposefully constructed so that the participant was then able to articulate this revelation to a total stranger, when just thirty seconds prior, the participant had not even had the revelation.36

In order for participants to feel comfortable enough to share their own immediate self-revelations with total strangers, a very intentional kind of courtesy and care had to be produced by the BF. The creation of this safe space (the space of “the leave”) was just as much a part of the BF’s tactical ingenuity and success as its creation of the uncomfortable “shift” space. According to Azzarello, the two spaces operated in tandem: “There was something in the discomfort that made people speak. There was a pressure for people to respond […]. But at the same time, there was a sense of safety where people could share.”37 To Azzarello, the actual “product” produced by the BF was the responses that the community members gave. Beyond just producing responses, the gift that the BF returned to its participants was allowing them “to inhabit their own experience.”38 Pope.L had obviously placed a great deal of trust in the Black Factory crew members. What was less immediately obvious to me, but what Azzarello was quick to point out, was the amount of trust Pope.L had also placed in the participating community members.39

36 Pasqualina Azzarello, telephone interview with the author, July 25, 2018.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
In order for the BF apparatus to allow each participant to inhabit and articulate her own experience of race, the BF had to maintain a fine-tuned balance between under-determining and overdetermining her experience. Had Pope.L underdetermined the come-on and shift phases (by leaving them out altogether), the participants would have had a very rote, impersonal, superficial, party-political, pre-scripted conversation about race in the US. On the other hand, had he overdetermined the “leave” phase by preaching his own political agenda to the participants, they would have been left with someone else’s relationship to race in the US without being allowed to consider anew the ways in which their own constructed identities and personal histories were colored by blackness.

In a reflective piece Azzarello wrote just after returning from the 2005 BF tour, she observes, “it seems there is a gap. not just between the self-image this country projects and its internal daily reality, but between our own ideas of this reality and how people actually interrelate when room is made for the possibility to see things differently. the smoke that the black factory generates, this symbol of proof that transformation is taking place, seeps into this gap and it makes its boundaries and limitations known, makes them visible, and serves to create a more holistic understanding of what a resource this can be, when made use of.”

This observation resonates with Pope.L’s own understanding of the potential agency of holes. Where there are gaps (between institutionally whitewashed histories and actually lived histories, between de facto inherited self-identities and more purposefully constructed “selves”), then there are always opportunities for productive slippage.

The Black Factory Negotiates Its Own Contingency Upon Art Institutions

The BF was funded by grants from arts institutions, and its regularly scheduled stops were sponsored by local art institutions. It even began its life in an art show at MASS MoCA, a major art institution. Hilariously (to me, at least) but inevitably (I suppose), in 2015, the Museum of Modern Art acquired objects from the BF archive for its permanent collection. Tellingly, the March 2015 Artforum news article reporting the acquisition reads:


As if the entire BF project could be reduced to and reside within a few physical objects and media related to it. At the MoMA web site, their online catalog entry is a bit less reductive and a bit more accurate: “The Black Factory Archive / 2004–ongoing / Medium: Archive with 210 items, including objects, multiples, ephemera, digital image files, and a film / Dimensions: Various dimensions”

So, a mobile performance/installation laboratory with its own online object archive has now been “collected” by a major art institution and entered into its online archive. Appropriately (at least as of summer 2018), there is only a placeholder image at the MoMA online catalog web page for the BF archive that says “Image not available.” If anything, like Broodthaers’s Museum of Modern Art, Department of Eagles, the collecting, museological nature of the


BF project itself insured that, once another museum tried to collect it, the ordinarily invisible mechanisms of the institutional act of collecting and canonizing could not help but be revealed. The BF was booby-trapped from the beginning to foreground the culturally commodifying, value-adding function of the art museum apparatus. Like a sabotaging wooden shoe, the BF allows itself to enter into the art-institutional mechanism, in order to throw a wrench in that same mechanism. A black factory for munging up a white-(cube), white-(run) factory.

The acquisition of ephemera from the BF by the MoMA might seem like a conceptual failure or an ethical sell-out, but the stated goal of the BF apparatus was never blatant institutional critique. The BF was never really anti-art-institution. It always had bigger institutional fish to fry. If collecting art museums wanted a piece of the BF action (and Pope.L anticipated they eventually would), the apparatal doors of the BF were always already open for this intra-action. The primary focus of the BF was never on museums anyway, but always on the individual personal encounters that community members had with the BF apparatus. The ephemera that the MoMA collected will never be able to reduce, encapsulate, finalize, and deaden those individual encounters. Because of the way the CEO has structured the evolution of the BF project over time, the only thing these pieces of collected ephemera can ever really do is instigate further individual, personal encounters with the (ghost of the) BF – a kind of Shazam 2.0. MoMA may have the physical BF archive, but the internet will always have the (much more expansive) online object archive, and Cleveland still has the truck.

Although the goal of the BF is not solely or even primarily to resist institutional commodification and archiving, such resistance is still at least one of its goals. As Pope.L himself clarifies (regarding his overall art practice):
Is resistance to the art market essential for performance art? Did its celebrated slippery resistance ever truly exist? Is resistance an obsolete concept for today’s consumers? / For my money, resistance to established power is always necessary, even if, especially if, the established power is radical, avant-garde, or subversive. / Or a gleaming castle on a hill that sells artworks, snacks, and central heating.

At any rate, the BF was already collecting art institutions long before art institutions were collecting it. Black Factory Donated Object Number 168 is a black-colored keychain and cards from Maine College of Art’s gallery, the Institute of Contemporary Art, donated on June 20, 2004, by Sarah Schuster. “Why donor chose object: Hi William, the ICA needed to be recycled back to the Black Factory I think!” And Black Factory Donated Object Number 248 is a catalog from the Cleveland Institute of Art donated by Tina Cassara on June 8, 2015, at the BF stop sponsored by the Cleveland Institute of Art. Cassara describes the donated object as “The Cleveland Institute of Art” itself. “Why donor chose object: A black hole, the invisible within the larger blackness.”

Regarding institutional support along the tour, the BF CEO is aware of it, and negotiates it as a kind of necessary evil. But his heart really is in the bare streets. He explains, “In a way, as a way, the BF is always performing. Rain or shine, we deliver the gusto so the cracks show.

With high gas prices, the truck getting 9 miles to the gallon [...] we’ll continue to waste gas and do guerrilla stops whenever we feel like it (though they can be the

45 Ibid.
toughest cause there is no institutional net to catch you when you fall), in fact, we have to do guerrilla stops! They are our politic-colonic. The crew might disagree, especially after a particularly grueling stop but no matter it’s what makes us go.

What be a guerrilla stop? That’s when we go to a place, park the truck and trek out to meet the natives sans beads and blankets, sans muskets and powder, sans truck, sans spectacle, sans theatrical frame, sans the confidence provided by our familiar. Whatever you want to call it, we leave as much of it behind as possible and go native.

We have problems getting venues to fund this guerrilla-thing, it has an elegant framelessness so it’s difficult to “product” so they don’t trust it. Even I have a hard time with guerrilla stops but that’s what happens when you let more life in—

One particularly noteworthy guerrilla stop was the last stop on the 2005 tour. Scheduled by Pope.L at the last minute, it was meant to be a video documentation opportunity in a remote, unpopulated location. The crew members were to perform for an absent audience while being filmed. Instead (as described by Azzarello), “we pulled in and did our job. we sang our song and carried on audaciously for the butterflies, rocks and trees. we were there for all of ten minutes when two atv riders pulled in. then some hikers. then a mom and her children. then one of the atv riders called his father, who showed up moments later. among them were a student, a soldier, two factory workers, a mother, a child and a cop. and there we were, in the middle of the goddamn woods, with an audience, and conversation that was among the very richest of the entire tour.”

One of the ATV riders was shipping

47 Azzarello, “insides-out.”
out to serve in Iraq the next day. The other ATV rider, his best friend, was opposed to the war. In this particular instance, even when the expressed intent was to acquire documentary footage for some future, art-institution-aware, archival purpose, the BF apparatus could not help but intra-act with local humans.

Regarding art-institutional funding of the tours themselves, it only ever covered part of the costs. The CEO explains:

Why do it in this particular way? Why an art object that loses money? Why a truck that gets 4 miles to a gallon of gas? Why a CEO, yours truly, who during every two week rehearsal period develops medical problems? Why do it? Why do it this way? [...] To fear a little less. To be encouraged a little more. To take a risk that I could share with others.49

The Black Factory Operates across Multiple Scales of Time

The BF is an ambitiously perspicacious apparatus operating across multiple scales of time. The BF is not just a series of three summer tours that occurred between 2004–2006. As mentioned above, it also anticipates (negotiates, and partially evades) its own eventual museological capture/collection, which doesn’t happen until nine years after the tour is completed. Pope.L continues to maintain the online black object archive, and both web sites at theblackfactory.com and distributingmartin.com. distributingmartin.com reaches into the past (beyond Dr. King’s assassination and right up to Pope.L’s conception) and into the future (when the MILK peace gene is distributed to all humans). The questions on the black object donation questionnaire about Israel–Palestine re-

48 A photograph of this encounter is viewable at http://www.theblackfactory.com/images_hiatus/10-cairo/csp-20.jpg.
49 William Pope.L et al., “CEO page 5.”
lations and US immigration paranoia continue to haunt the world. If anything, these issues have only intensified and become more relevant since they were added to the donation questionnaire in 2005.

As an archive of objects, the BF operates as a kind of memory modulation machine. It separates the subjective personal associations from individual objects and redistributes them amongst an entire archive of other memory-laden objects. Personal memories are mixed with cultural memories. “Black” memories are mixed with “white” memories. Entire objects, memories, and histories are pulverized, fine-grainedly shuffled, and fundamentally reconstituted. In this sense, the BF is mnemonically porous: a hole-y, memory-filtering sieve. Rather than merely being a cultural memory repository (which all archives are), the BF purposes to be a memory modulation factory (which most archives also are, but don’t realize that they are). The BF breaks apart, rearranges, and reconstitutes new cultural memories. Memories from the past made new for the future.

*The Black Factory Is Designed to Modulate Its Own Crew Members*

The performative nodes were not just meant to brake, switch, and open up participating community members. In order for the BF to truly brake the old and make new opportunities for X, the BF crew members also had to be improvisationally and intuitively open to where the conversations and events might lead. If the BF was to create new opportunities in the world, then the crew members couldn’t merely show up with their own bag of pre-packaged opportunities. That would only be a mobile opportunity distribution unit. Whereas the BF was supposed to be a mobile opportunity creation factory. As described by the CEO:
BF nodes sometimes had a clear goal, sometimes the only goal was to get at a feeling, not a position. To do this, a performer needed to reject final answers yet accept the performance situation. So – no matter what I say in these notes, no matter how confident they might sound, the on-going challenge was always to arrive at and accept a radical in-betweenness that disturbs.\footnote{William Pope.L, “CEO notes,” Black Factory, http://www.theblackfactory.com/ceo_notes.html.}

This radical performative openness was a lot to ask of a small set of three crew members, all under thirty years old, somewhere in the middle of Ohio, with Pope.L back in Maine. The CEO explained:

At the end of each day we’d talk on the phone. The crew would describe their successes and challenges and I’d offer perspectives and direction. There were two main challenges: 1) could or should they, as a primarily white crew, really engage people in a discussion about blackness? And 2) was blackness the end goal?

I answered their queries in this way: 1) you have to own the challenge. Whatever it is. Maybe you are black and you don’t know it? Or are not willing to admit it? Perhaps being black is a matter of commitment like being honest or being true or being free. I answered #2 like so: blackness is a conduit to speak about differences.\footnote{William Pope.L, artist talk, August 4, 2004.}

Pope.L did more than challenge and offer support. He ongoingly fine-tuned the functional logistics of the BF apparatus based on crew member feedback. According to Pasqualina Azzarello, “he listened after every performance to the lengthy lists of discoveries and challenges. he then privately ingested what he heard, and before each
and every show new additions were integrated into the mix: new characters, new approaches, new baubles in the pockets.”

From my own research of the project, it seems to me that the people whom the BF changed the most were the crew members and Pope.L himself. From the beginning, the BF was set up to be self-replicating. It was never meant to be permanently run by a group of experts in the know for a group of community members awaiting enlightenment. The CEO even includes these instructions for how to make your own Black Factory:

Reach out to someone.
Do this over and over and over AND OVER again.
If you take BACK YOUR HAND. It’s ok. IT’S OK.
Count to 5. THEN—
Put it out there again.
Keep doing this. OVER AND OVER AND OVER AGAIN—

You will notice after a while THAT
The clarity you initially possessed EVAPORATES AND
Any sense of system YOU ONCE HAD is NOW in bits and
doubts and tatters—
This is how to make your own BF—

NOW

Summary: Two Macro-Cosmic Apophatic Apparatuses

Pope.L’s Black Factory and Joshua Citarella’s Compression Artifacts are both apophatic art apparatuses that cut out

52 Azzarello, “insides-out.”
large swaths from the institutional world. The danger of such macroscopic engagements is always that your own apparatus will be folded into and recontextualized by the larger institutions with which you are trying to intra-act. This is (probably) ultimately inevitable. The game is to see how long you can defer your own commodification, and how many ways can you anticipate and thus steer your eventual commodification. How many wrenches can you throw into the institutional works? How can you throw the brakes of inevitable institutional becoming in such a way that new and heretofore unimagined ways of becoming might emerge? Not anti-institutional becomings or even alter-institutional becomings, but new ways of becoming that tweak the institutions themselves. How do you bait the institutions to swallow the trap of your apparatus? And how does your apparatus then deploy itself once inside those institutions, to mung up their de facto works? Much is at stake for art apparatuses that cut out such large and well-established chunks of the world.

Glossing Deleuze and Guattari’s cosmology of stratification and territorialization, Brian Massumi explains:

The force of collective, expressive emergence will be streamed into stratified functions of power. Unless the collectivity in the making resists pick-up by an established stratum, insisting on defining its own traits, in a self-capture of its own anomaly. In this case, they will retain a shade of the unclassifiable and a margin of unpredictability in the yes (or net) of existing systems of reference, no matter how hard those systems try fully to contain them [...] (especially if the collective learns to creatively shed its traits as confidently as it cultivates them) [...] The atypical expression] must
extract itself from captures ready and waiting, falling for an instant through the propositional mesh.\textsuperscript{54}

Not only do BF and CA resist commodification and fall through the nets of institutional capture, on their way down they manage to mung up and slice into those institutional nets. Then they take the scraps of institutional netting that they have torn loose, and use those scraps to fashion hole-riddled wings for plummeting down newly emergent black holes.
