

Some time in the second half of the fourteenth century—that cauldron of calamities so vividly chronicled in Barbara Tuchman's *A Distant Mirror*, the defining tome on the Great Mortality caused by *Yersinia pestis*—there appeared in England an authorless mystical treatise evocatively titled *The Cloud of Unknowing*. A uniquely enigmatic masterpiece of medieval spirituality, thought to be the work of a Carthusian monk, the text has become a founding document of so-called negative (or “apophatic”) theology: the *via negativa* according to which true religious experience defies the laws of human cognition and comprehension, positing the unknowability of God—and thus, to a certain extent, also His *inaccessibility*—as the essence of religious feeling instead. As our nameless mystic put it, “If you are ever to feel or see [God], so far as is possible in this life, it must always be in this cloud and in this darkness . . . [It is] a cloud of unknowing that is between you and your God.” This is a far cry from the optimistic tenor of Thomas Aquinas's influential teachings from the previous century, so trusting in the power of reason to divine the nature of God, who gave us reason's very power so as to better “know” and understand him. The anonymous fourteenth-century author's decisive turn toward a much more confrontational, forbidding transcendence was surely informed by the apocalyptic events of his lifetime, the defining event of which was the Black Death's toll of more than half of Europe's population at the time, some twenty-five million people in all. What good, in the face of an utterly incomprehensible, thought-defying catastrophe, the claims of reason? What was there to know and understand? Nothing. So let us find enlightenment in the darkness and surrender to unknowing instead; let us embrace the impenetrable cloud of negation.

I first turned to *The Cloud of Unknowing*—lured, I should say, by the poetic promise of its exquisite title more than anything else—in early 2017, while working with the artist Pope.L in the context of *documenta 14* in Athens and Kassel. The artist's critically lauded, wildly popular contribution to the prestigious quinquennial exhibition of contemporary art consisted of a nomadic, immersive crosstown sound piece titled *Whispering Campaign*, a complex, intricately woven meshwork of mutterings, readings, and soundbites by trained whisperers traipsing around Kassel, by speakers hidden in cars, closets, and subterranean shopping centers, on local radio waves. It may well be forever remembered for its ceaseless broadcasting of one gnomic utterance in particular: “Ignorance is a virtue.” (Pope.L's *Whispering Campaign* is the subject of a book I edited in 2019 simply titled *CAMPAIGN*. My most potent memory of this recurring spell is its upward spiraling, every day for a hundred-day period that summer of 2017, from a banged-up Opel parked underneath my bedroom window.) I am not sure I will ever fully understand *why* this one phrase should have been so central to the project. Following so close on the heels of the ignominy of Donald Trump's election to the highest office in the land, it was of course inevitable that Pope.L's *Whispering Campaign* would be perceived, to a certain extent, as an allegorical reflection on the power of gossip, hearsay, rumor, and acute disinformation to shape our political reality, though little did we (or I) know at the time how great a role *ignorance* would come to play in the subsequent unfolding of everyday American politics, with the mass-scale deadly consequences we are only too familiar with today. I do remember my deeply felt personal revulsion at hearing the very words, a sense of personal affront even: not only was knowledge, as the presumed opposite of ignorance, the very notion I had built much of my career in art on—over the years I have devoted much curating, theorizing, and writing to the conception of art as a form of knowledge production, of art as *research*—I also thought of “knowing” things as one of the truly great pleasures in life, a source of joy as much as the object of duty. Ignorance, a virtue? A curse, more likely—and the greatest curse of our current political moment it turned out to

be, too. (That much we “know” now.) Let us think, then, of the virtue of *unknowing* instead: a moment, perhaps, *beyond* knowing—*after* knowing's undoing. For what is there to “know” and “understand” in (and of) (and about) art?

I return to *The Cloud of Unknowing* today, not so much for unknowing's sake, but with my eyes on the cloud. For a cloud of some kind, it seems (a *shadow* of a cloud?), is what hangs, quite literally, over Pope.L's work in this exhibition—the first to be staged at the Neubauer Collegium gallery since the onset of the Coronavirus pandemic, which, at the time of writing, has cost the lives of 300,000 Americans. It is, fittingly, a cloud—the shadow, in this case, of a truly lethal ignorance—composed of *face masks*, of the disposable surgical variety, their signature light blue hues congealing in a room-sized celestial expanse of sorts. The exhibition, in other words, “begins” somewhere up in the air, hovering above our heads, directing our gaze away from the discrete artworks on display at eye level in the gallery, towards an all too poignant cipher of our current “distancing” predicament. (Who would have given a face mask a moment's thought at this time last year?)

There are echoes, in this arrangement, of art-historical precedents such as Andy Warhol's *Silver Clouds*, the pop art paragon's immersive installation of air- and helium-filled Scotchpak balloons, which premiered at Leo Castelli's gallery in New York in 1966; and, more importantly, Marcel Duchamp's controversial scenographies for the *Exposition internationale du surréalisme* at the Galerie Beaux-Arts in Paris in 1938 (which involved the suspension of 1,200 sacks of coal from the ceiling); and, more topically still, the *First Papers of Surrealism* exhibition at the Whitelaw Reid Mansion in New York in 1942, which famously featured sixteen miles of white string draped across the exhibition space, obscuring or hindering access to the Surrealist work on view, though some visitors to the exhibition—emphatically *not* the participating artists, it should be noted—later claimed the wiring helped guide them through Surrealism's densely woven associative warren of visual impulses. The historical reference to Duchamp's foray into anti-curating reorients our reading of Pope.L's immersive, *buis clos*-styled installation to the all-important matter of access, which has played such a devastatingly decisive role in the unfolding of the Covid-19 cataclysm in the United States. For it is the “problem” of access—in this case, access to the most basic rudiments of health care—that has proven to be such a defining factor in the dramatically disproportionate impact of the coronavirus on populations of color in the U.S., which are by and large also populations of lesser economic means and limited mobility.

For months on end, a billboard on what used to be my way to work, put up in the early days of the pandemic, misleadingly stated that the coronavirus “does not see color”—but we soon realized that it did, and does: Black and Latino Americans are two to three times more likely to contract Covid-19 than White Americans; they are close to five times more likely to be hospitalized than White Americans; and Black Americans are twice as likely to die from Covid-19 than their White counterparts. In actual numbers this means that, as of October 2020, 1 in 920 Black Americans had died (or 108.4 deaths per 100,000) compared to 1 in 1,840 white Americans (or 54.4 deaths per 100,000). Nationwide, Black Americans have experienced 20.8 percent of all deaths of known race while representing just 12.4 percent of the population. The aforementioned billboard was taken down some time ago, quite probably prompted by the fact that, despite making up just 30 percent of the city's population, Black people account for 60 percent of all COVID cases in Chicago, the majority of them clustered in South Side neighborhoods like the one where this poster was hung. An article published in *The Guardian* on October 23 pointed out, moreover, that “Metropolitan Chicago's essential

workers are disproportionately low-income and people of color,” while also noting that “the coronavirus experiences of Black Chicagoans are so starkly different from residents in whiter, wealthier communities it has observers asking: do conditions in majority African American neighborhoods make being Black, effectively, a pre-existing condition there?” This searing latter phrase (“Being Black is a Pre-Existing Condition”) has the peculiar ring of one of Pope.L's famed *Skin Set Drawings* (“Black People Are a Pre-Existing Condition”), ready to join the ranks of the following: “Black People Are Beside the Point”; “Black People Are Cropped”; “Black People Are Guilty”; “Black People Are Nice to Their Anger”; “Black People Are the Silence They Cannot Understand”; “Black People Are the Trees in the Park”; “Black People Are the Window and the Breaking of the Window”; and “Black People Are What Black People Lack.” (“White People,” meanwhile, “Are God's Way of Saying Sorry”—among many other things.) Such, indeed, is the nature of the cloud that hangs over us right now, casting its shadow across all the art made and seen in its wake.

A suite of five *Skin Set* paintings—featuring “Brown” and mostly “Violet” people this time, but none who are Black or White—constitutes the true core of the exhibition. The ghost of access, and the entanglement of its socio-political and medical meanings, likewise haunts the mildly morbid choice of their display—inside medicine cabinets. Seeing the works requires opening the mirror-clad cabinets in a manner as of yet undecided at the time of writing (white latex gloves such as those used in a medical exam?)—a consideration complicated by the current regime of epidemiological caveats and precautions. (The room is dark, the cabinets lit from within, the faint glow issuing from them luring the visitor into opening the cabinets to better appreciate the “message” contained within. The mirrors, meanwhile—well, they reflect: you, me, *us*. There is a strong suggestion here, inevitably, of art's putative *medicinal* properties—the ultimate panacea, vaccine to end all vaccines. How we crave its healing wonders: open sesame!) Once opened, the visitor stands face to face with the *Skin Set* paintings, encased in a Plexiglas box. *Skin Set* works such as these have long been beacons of familiarity in Pope.L's expansive, protean oeuvre; he has been making them for close to a quarter century now, and an exhaustive cataloguing of all the *Skin Set* works produced to date would likely run in the hundreds. Their sheer number, formulaic cast, and variability lend them a diaristic quality, the narrative sense of a life going on, meandering in places, but going somewhere regardless; the five paintings assembled inside the gallery for this exhibition were all produced in the course of 2020, during the first nationwide lockdown—at the kitchen table, so to speak (they are not “studio” works). Back in 2011, the curator Helen Molesworth observed the following in the pages of *Black People Are Cropped*, the first modest attempt at surveying the set: “I think when Pope.L shakes his head he makes drawings that keep him from laugh-crying to death. . . . Each drawing denotes a different color of person—red, green, black, white—and affords each a characteristic. He uses very low-rent materials (BIC pens, lined notebook paper, Wite-Out) that lend the works the definitive feeling of a doodle. They make the drawings look like scrawled notes made in boredom at the office, or the lapidary marks made on napkins while hungover at the diner. They are like doodles because they suggest a kind of unconscious at play, or they register whatever it is in us that wants to force order on the unordered.” (Savor, for a second, the paradox of a “definitive doodle!”) Indeed, the *Skin Set* works have grown more unwieldy over time (the artist himself has since taken to referring to this body of work as the *Skin Set Project*), both less ordered and less orderly, drifting away from the categorical syntax of its inception, away from “meaning” and the sense of resolve given in the early works' curt scansion (“White People Are Naked,” “Yellow People Are Lists”). In

a catalogue essay published on the occasion of the artist's exhibition at the nearby Renaissance Society in 2013, the conceptual poet K. Silem Mohammad noted: “In the *Skin Set Drawings*, arbitrariness in part inheres in the free play of linguistic selection: statements with a readily apparent general thrust (i.e. sweeping claims about race) veer off into unfocused or irrelevant areas, while still managing to maintain the sense that the works are interrogating attitudes about racial identity.” In these most recent *Skin Set* works, even the latter assertion appears to have dissolved, and we are left with little more than the seemingly abstract invocation of “color” in general. (“Veer off,” fizzle out: something has gone missing.) Not only have the sentences become less and less legible on a purely formal, visual level—becoming more and more painterly, less and less writerly—they have also left the illusion of grammar behind, the assumption of sense inherent in the use of language, of words. (A technical term comes to mind here—*anacoluthon*, which is really a figure of speech: “a shift in an unfinished sentence from one syntactic construction to another.” An act of *sabotage*, if you will, conjuring the etymological root of this precious term in the simple act of disrupting the streamlined process of production with the help of a wooden shoe, or sabot.) In the double effect of the dispersal of meaning and the thickening of graphic effects that obscure and hinder our attempt at simply “reading” the work, an impression of *fogging* is triggered—indeed, a *cloud* moves in.

(“An exhibition is a favorite darkness,” the artist remarked to his colleague Zachary Cahill in the context of his show at MoCA's Geffen Contemporary satellite space in Los Angeles back in 2015.)

In the hallowed year 1972, the French art historian Hubert Damisch published *A Theory of I/Cloud*, immodestly subtitled “Toward a History of Painting.” Ostensibly a study of the challenges posed to the High Renaissance's doctrinaire deployment of linear perspective by the Mannerist *démarche* of Correggio and subsequent painters of the Baroque, Damisch's argument zeroes in on the pivotal motif of the cloud as the agent of subversion snuck into the well-ordered universe of Renaissance art and culture. (The key evidence: Correggio's *The Vision of St. John on Patmos*, which adorns the cupola of San Giovanni Evangelista in Parma.) Damisch's theory of *I/cloud*, then, is one of complication, corruption, and soiling, seeking to sabotage the well-tempered master narrative of the modern insistence on clarity, linearity, transparency, and the like. As such, Damisch's treatise figures as an early salvo in the emerging field of postmodern art theory, a theory of decentralization, destabilization, and willful obfuscation. Allow me to quote the following handful of meteorological musings:

Cloud . . . is a theme that, thanks to the textural effects to which it lends itself, contradicts the very idea of outline and delineation and through its relative insubstantiality constitutes a negation of the solidity, permanence, and identity that define *shape*, in the classic sense of the term . . .

If *I/cloud* thus marks the closure of the system, it does so in opposition to the formal principle by which signs are governed, through its lack of any strict delimitation, as a “surfaceless body.” . . . If *I/cloud* assumes a strategic function in the pictorial order, it is because it operates alternately, now as an integrator, now as a disintegrator, now as a sign, now as a nonsign (the emphasis here being placed on the potential negativity of a figure, on whatever in it contradicts the order of the sign, the effect of which is to loosen the hold of the latter). . . .

Cloud is the obligatory accompaniment—if not the motor—of ecstasy and all other forms of ascent or rapture. More generally, it is regularly associated with an irruption of *otherness* or of the *sacred*. Beyond a certain point, a proliferation

of clouds, more or less deliberate and controlled, seems to be a symptom: it signals the beginning of the dissolution of an order (but not its *deconstruction*).

“Cloud” as *symptom*—and symbolizing the telling contrast, in Damisch's scheme, between *color* (“good”) and *delineation* (“bad”): this resonates rather well, of course, with the unstable, indeed positively *vaporous* preoccupation with “color” in Pope.L's *Skin Set* works as outlined above. (Color as a solid “theme” may have begun to dissipate somewhat, but color as a force field has gathered strength.) What color the cloud? *Why so blue?*

In the winter of 2018, Pope.L and I co-taught a ten-week class at the University of Chicago's Department of Visual Arts that was titled “Art & Knowledge”—part of the multi-tiered collaborative project that had begun with the artist's *Whispering Campaign* at *documenta 14* in 2017 and culminated in the publication of *CAMPAIGN* in 2019. (The current exhibition project continues this collaboration, inaugurating a new, post-*Campaign* chapter.) The course was conceived as an experimental, hands-on exploration of the tangle of relationships that hold art and knowledge together—and, I soon learned, simultaneously keep them apart. Indeed, for a couple of months, the class operated as a platform for articulating the various dimensions of the relationship (or lack thereof) between our respective fields' titular points of anchorage—his “art,” mine “knowledge.” The questions that were asked of this conjunction were, among others: Does art come *before* knowledge, or *after*? Is there art *without* knowledge? Is art *for* knowledge, or *in* knowledge? *Above* or *beyond*? Does art *equal* knowledge? Finally, and most pointedly: Should the ampersand in “art & knowledge” be read as “art or knowledge” instead? I often return to this dizzying string of exercise-like questions when asking of art *what it is about*—a question that acquires an especially shameful, embarrassing cast when I ask it of an artist like Pope.L in particular. “What is it about?” Well, what good is “knowing” the answer to that question? Is art knowable at all—and should it be? There is something slightly scandalous about wanting to know that points to a deep misunderstanding. The “point” of art, if such a thing must indeed exist, may be in *clouding* instead.

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