

*LIFE—a group show* is on view at Artists Space from May 29 – August 16, 2025.

Exhibition support for *LIFE—a group show* is provided by The Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery, Reed College, Elizabeth Leach Gallery, and Sarah Miller Meigs. Support is provided by Bernard I. Lumpkin and Carmine D. Boccuzzi. In kind support is provided by Marc LeBlanc.

Support for Artists Space exhibitions and programs is provided by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Lambent Foundation Fund of Tides Foundation, Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation, The New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in Partnership with the City Council, The New York State Council on the Arts with the support of Governor Kathy Hochul and the New York State Legislature, The Keith Haring Foundation, I.A. O’Shaughnessy Foundation, Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, The Cowles Charitable Trust, Lotos Foundation, Milton and Sally Avery Foundation, and the Friends of Artists Space.

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ARTISTS SPACE

*LIFE—a group show*  
Curated by Arnold J. Kemp

May 29 – August 16, 2025

Artists Space is pleased to present *LIFE—a group show*, curated by Chicago-based artist and educator Arnold J. Kemp. Built around an ongoing dialogue between the artist and Pope.L, which spanned four years before his untimely passing in 2023, the exhibition includes paintings, sculptures, objects, architectural interventions, videos, live performances, and newly commissioned poetry that express the joyful, mundane, and atrociously unstable textures of sheer existence. While it is not a memorial, the presentation stems from what Kemp describes as “an engagement against the amnesia that surfaces after a loved one passes.” Rather than closing a chapter, the show extends the vitality of an ongoing conversation, by gathering emerging and established artists, writers, and performers who join Pope.L and Kemp in confronting the complexity, absurdity, and materiality of being alive.

*LIFE—a group show* is Kemp’s first curatorial project in two decades. Emerging in the early 1990s, his speculative, conceptually rich practice has been matched by astute and visionary curatorial work. A significant figure in conceptual and performance art, his approach to curation mirrors his broader artistic practice: intuitive, interdisciplinary, and deeply rooted in summoning Black experience without solidifying it into a stable identity. At its heart, *LIFE—a group* show offers the exhibition itself as a kind of living structure—a densely networked constellation for holding feeling, contradiction, and dialogue. Kemp’s acute vision brings together a multivocal, intergenerational gathering of artists who, each in their own way, respond to the dissonance and intensity of being here—together, now.

Participating artists include:

Lindsay Adams, Zarouhie Abdalian, Israel Aten, Nick Bastis, Nayland Blake, Gregg Bordowitz, Carolyn Castaño, Patty Chang, Mike Cloud, D’Talentz (Nikita Gale, Aryel René Jackson, Tomashi Jackson, Ashley Teamer), Christopher Garrett, Renee Gladman, Robert Glück, Lydia Grey, Léonie Guyer, David Hammons, Geoffrey Hendricks, Xylor Jane, Margaret L. Kemp, Kristan Kennedy, Jinn Bronwen Lee, Eric N. Mack, Devin T. Mays, Malcolm Peacock, Pope.L, Nick Raffel, Ed Ruscha, Robert Ryman, Mindy Rose Schwartz, Cauleen Smith, Cameron Spratley, Catherine Sullivan (with George Lewis and Sean Griffin), Collection of Sur Rodney (Sur), Mami Takahashi, Christine Tien Wang, Fred Wilson, and poets David Buuck, Tonya Foster, Erica Hunt, and John Keene.

Gregg Bordowitz presented a performance on Thursday, June 5th at 7pm.

Malcolm Peacock will present a performance throughout the duration of the exhibition.

As an artist, I work to summon Black experience without solidifying it into a stable identity. The complexity of this work has required that for a time I curated exhibitions and made curatorial research a part of my artistic practice. In 2005, I handed over a 2500 sq. ft. gallery in San Francisco’s Yerba Buena Center for the Arts to the electronic music and romantic duo Matmos. They transformed the gallery into an experimental music studio for planned and impromptu recording sessions, and improvised interactions with invited guests and the general museum audience. In that exhibition, life and the real world met art in a way that encapsulated what I want most to do as a curator: to get out of the way of what art and artists can do and to simply allow art to happen like a UFO sighting, a cloud, or a sudden rainstorm. In this way, when given the right circumstances, art can get very small, hermetic and quiet, or big and messy. It could look like, to quote the painter and poet Etel Adnan, “the big mess of having a life.” This line of Adnan’s, and a highly edited consideration of a philosophical reckoning with metaphor, mortality, and meaning, produced the title for this exhibition.

*LIFE—a group show* is an armature that supports the continuation of a conversation that I was having with the late Pope.L (1955 - 2023) for four years before he passed away. We had known of each other peripherally and began to speak more frequently when I moved to Chicago eight years ago. In 2019, the gallerist Jeanine Jablonski contacted us both about doing a two-person show at her space in Portland, Oregon. We then took every opportunity to ponder the possibility together. The news of Pope.L’s passing came as quite a surprise and shortly after that, Artists Space approached me about curating any show that I wanted to curate. We talked about several possibilities and past curatorial projects. Eventually I settled on building an exhibition in which I could be fully an artist—uncompromising, performative, and conceptual. I wanted to do something around the conversations that I was having with Pope.L, which were always warm, filled with humor and often about the anxieties of operating in the artworld. I suggested to Artists Space that I would build an exhibition which circulated around Pope.L’s “non-art-objects,” which were in the possession of his life-partner, the artist and curator Mami Takahashi.

In the international art world, Pope.L was best known for his provocative performance art, which included crawling—where theater begins—in the streets. He would do this wearing a Superman costume or a business suit. He was also known for eating columns of financial news from the Wall Street Journal while smearing mayonnaise all over his torso to achieve an artificial whiteness. Pope.L’s theatrical performances, street actions, language, painting, video, drawing, installation, and sculpture express an unparalleled brilliance with equal parts well-considered comedy and tragedy. Ultimately his work pushed one to think and see extraordinarily into things that might be considered ordinary such as issues of race, gender, and citizenship. Because he makes one think, his work is called subversive and provocative. A sense of subversion is something that I wanted in this exhibition. I would say that many of the artworks approach the possibility of “conceptual-art-with-feelings.”

Pope.L’s books, his annual Christmas tree, his family’s Christmas stockings, a pair of boots he wore, and a wedding gift he made for his mentor, the Fluxus artist Geoffrey Hendricks, as well as some correspondence he wrote, are important touchstones for this exhibition. Some of the artists are presenting work that reacts specifically to objects Pope.L left behind. I wanted to invite artists that Pope. L greatly admired such as Mami Takahashi, Robert Ryman, David Hammons, Patty Chang, and Geoffrey Hendricks. I also looked to artists who were his former students or studio assistants and also three former students of mine.

The extraordinary people in this exhibition include 34 artists, four poets, and one artistic group. 29 of the participants are people of color and 22 of them are gendered female. I was thinking about how theater that begins in the streets requires a lot of players, and I thought of how Pope.L said that he loved Black people. These thoughts had a definitive influence on my choices. I tried my best to introduce artists who are not overplayed in New York. A handful are new to me, while others have been part of my artistic world for decades and are like family. The density of the exhibition, in terms of the number of objects included, is inspired by installations of Pope.L’s work that I saw at his primary gallery Mitchell-Inness & Nash in 2018, at MoMA in 2020, and at the Neubauer Collegium for Culture and Society at University of Chicago in 2021.

My conversations with Pope.L touched the spatiality of our interactions so that, although we might physically run into each other in Chicago and sometimes New York, we were also thinking expansively about Oregon’s and Maine’s two Portlands, Detroit, MI and Berlin, Germany. So, in choosing the artists or artworks for this exhibition I wanted to touch those sites of creativity and freedom. I also wanted to bring in artists whose practices touched the histories of Blackness, queerness, mentorship and the academic and

literary concerns that I shared with Pope.L. It felt extremely important to include writers, and it is an honor to display the poems of David Buuck, Tonya Foster, Erica Hunt, and John Keene, as well as the art objects of Robert Glück and Renee Gladman.

This exhibition is about living now and hesitates to introduce any such term as “meditation” or “reflection” because it is not apart from our world’s current state of affairs. It offers a point of view that is deeply personal, engaged and preoccupied with an articulation of what factually life might be said to be — that is, a performative, theatrical, mournful and often funny group show. This is a point of useful knowledge that this exhibition shares with anyone who is willing to sit in a room and listen to the discussion or simply watch as the actors (the objects and images in the exhibition) perform their roles.

Arnold J. Kemp  
May 21, 2025

Arnold J. Kemp (b. 1968) is a visual artist, writer, and educator who previously was an associate curator at San Francisco’s Yerba Buena Center for the Arts from 1993 – 2003. During his curatorial tenure Kemp created opportunities for solo shows for influential artists such as Ellen Gallagher, Tracey Moffat, Fred Wilson and Mark Dion. He also worked with artists such as David Hammons, Octavia Butler, Sun Ra Research, Kerry James Marshall, Bruce Conner, John Baldessari and others in accomplished group exhibitions. As an artist Kemp engages in a multidisciplinary practice that extends beyond the formal gallery system by taking the form of talks, performances, limited-edition artist’s books, and collaborations. In the same spirit Kemp creates art works in various formats, for example, writing, painting, performance, video and sculpture. His works are in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Studio Museum in Harlem, the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, the Portland Art Museum, the Schneider Museum of Art, the Tacoma Art Museum, The Manetti Shrem Museum of Art, the Hammer Art Museum, The Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center at Vassar and The Joan Flasch Artists’ Book Collection. Recent exhibitions include solo presentations at the Neubauer Collegium, University of Chicago; M. LeBlanc, Chicago; Martos Gallery, New York; JOAN, Los Angeles; Biquini Wax, Mexico City, Mexico; and Center for Maine Contemporary Art, Rockland, ME.