

**Carl Pope Jr./Matrix 138**  
**Palimpsest**

by Carl/Karen Pope

**January 31—April 4, 1999**

Wadsworth Atheneum  
Hartford, Connecticut

THIS MATRIX EXHIBITION IS SUPPORTED WITH  
FUNDS FROM THE NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS,  
A FEDERAL AGENCY, THE WARHOL FOUNDATION  
AND THE LANNAN FOUNDATION.



## Carl Pope Jr./Matrix 138

Indianapolis-based installation artist Carl Pope (b. 1961) has earned both notoriety and acclaim in recent years for his provocative, issue-oriented photographic and multi-media installations that expose socio-political issues in the context of local communities. As a cultural critic, Pope creates work that confronts audiences and challenges conventional thinking about race, gender and spiritualism as they relate to African American identity.

In *Palimpsest*, a new work created for this MATRIX exhibition, Pope has expanded his conceptual framework to include an examination of himself as “part of the social body.” Perceiving himself as analogous to a “palimpsest”—a parchment or tablet that has been written upon and imperfectly erased several times, leaving prior inscriptions partially visible—Pope posits his body and consciousness as the embodiment of society’s negative assumptions about race, gender and identity in all its complexities.<sup>1</sup> Through a series of transformative events, Pope explores the role of the “black body politic” as it relates to racial and cultural stereotyping, and declares his body an instrument of power.<sup>2</sup>

A collaboration between Carl Pope, Jr. and his twin sister Karen Pope, *Palimpsest* is an evocative installation composed of a wall-sized video projection on one end of the gallery with corresponding wall-text written by Karen Pope at the opposite end. The rhythm, sound and pulse of the video is



2

achieved through the interweaving of Pope's voice and that of his sister as they recite Karen's poem of reclamation.

The video presents documentary recordings of three operations to Pope's body. It unfolds with scenes of Pope's back being branded with the ancient West African adinkra symbol *Aya*, which means "I am not afraid of you." The appropriation of the symbol, and the branding of it on the body, affirms the compelling force of cultural heritage and Pope's personal rooting. He believes that with this symbol he can deflect racist assumptions about African Americans, and black masculinity.

In the video's second sequence, Pope undergoes a surgical procedure that involves the lifting and peeling back of the epidermis layer of the skin. This procedure reveals white flesh underneath and a pigmented layer so thin that when that layer is lifted and light shines through it, it appears white. Through this act, Pope attacks the idea of perceived racial differences, by exploiting the racist belief of the innate biological inferiority of blacks—an attitude long held by many whites.

In the third and final action on the video, the poem written and recited by Karen Pope is tattooed on Carl Pope's body, starting at the bottom of his right leg and moving up the leg, across his back to the nape of his neck. This poem, which is recited throughout the video, becomes a haunting whisper in this sequence. This dual performance encourages the viewer to think about how bodily experience—both



individually experienced bodily trauma, as well as collective cultural trauma—comes to reside in the flesh as forms of memory. As witness to Pope's physical and psychological endurance of pain, subconscious collective memories are triggered, inspiring self-reflection about who we are and what we have become.<sup>3</sup>

Pope's interest in performance-based and body-centered art crystallized in 1996 when Real Art Ways, a Hartford alternative arts organization commissioned *\*Silent Wishes, Unconscious Dreams and Prayers . . . Fulfilled*. This outdoor installation project, a memorial to Hartford youths killed by drugs, AIDS, and inner-city violence, exemplified the relationship of the self to the other. Arranged in a vacant lot on Albany Avenue, in a manner that evokes a timeworn cemetery, the installation consists of seventeen brownstone slabs that have been engraved with the words and thoughts of eleven teenagers killed in Hartford. Using these statements as a starting point, *Silent Wishes*, examines the assumptions these youths held about the value, quality, and length of their lives, and the role that these assumptions played in their untimely deaths. In examining the fatalistic attitudes of many of Hartford's youth, he began to question the role that assumptions and social impositions had played in creating his identity.

Additionally, Pope was inspired by performance and conceptual artist Adrian Piper, whose works explore the complexities of modern notions of identity, and performance

artist Sherman Fleming, whose work is centered on the black male body. As a result, Pope's work has shifted from the outwardly directed criticism of his earlier work—such as *The New Georgia State Flag Project* (1994) and *Some of the Greatest Hits of the New York City Police Department* (1994)—toward self-examination.<sup>4</sup>

Pope's *Palimpsest* which was conceived in 1992 and took a year to create—beginning in March 1998—is distilled into a six-and-a-half minute video that provokes a series of questions: how do people perceive difference? What does it mean to be 'black', to be 'white'; and how has the history of racism affected our perception of ourselves and others.

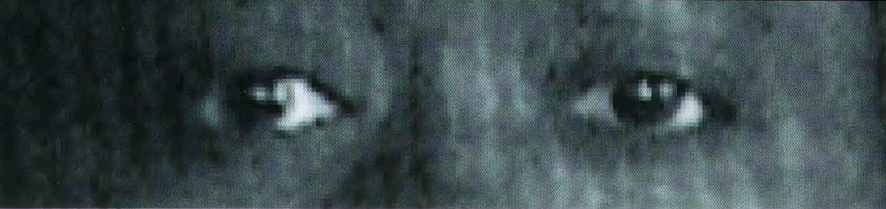
Deirdre L. Bibby

Curator of African-American Art and Executive Director of  
The Amistad Foundation

- 1 Carl Pope, in writing to Deirdre Bibby, August 1997.
- 2 hooks, bell, *Art on My Mind, Visual Politics*. New York: New York Press, 1995.
- 3 Alexander, Elizabeth, "Can you be Black and look like this?": Reading the Rodney King video(s)." In *Black Male, Representation of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art*. New York: Whitney Museum, 1994.
- 4 Powell, Richard J., *Black Art and Culture in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1997.

\*The site-specific installation, *Silent Wishes . . .* (1996), is located on Albany Avenue in Hartford. The installation is open to the public and can be viewed at any time.





...this is the expression  
internal inertia that is sight and sound

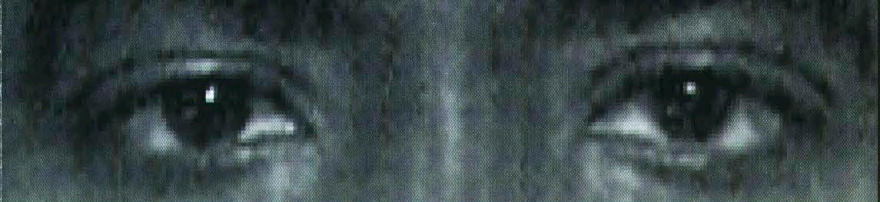
of which is rarely understood  
is often not acknowledged  
is mostly intellectualized

by those  
drawn  
to veer in my direction  
black

striations and vocalizations of a body of a self  
of a consciousness  
that dares to reverberate aloud  
without consent of those  
without participation of those

*fearful...but leering  
fearful...and defensive  
fearful...thus projecting  
flat imagery and ideology  
onto movement  
of my being  
and I am omitted...and I realize  
with selfhood  
subtle and gross  
homeostasis  
equilibrium  
of my humanness that  
is  
oscillating consciousness  
beyond an ensnaring  
veil...*

that would deny me clarity of self-awareness  
a conscious experience  
beyond  
peripheral illusion  
cast by those entrenched  
in deception and denial.



Born in 1961, Indianapolis-based installation artist Carl Robert Pope, Jr., has earned both notoriety and acclaim in recent years for the compelling and thought-provoking projects that he has created in several communities across America. Pope, who has a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Cinema and Photography from Southern Illinois University, first achieved national recognition in 1990 for an exhibition of photography on the homeless. Since this major body of work, Pope's projects have continued to expose important sociological and psychological issues.

#### **Work in MATRIX**

*Palimpsest*, 1999. Video projection, sound. Text of poem by Karen Pope, Indianapolis, Indiana. Featured performers: Carl/Karen Pope and Michael Sims. Videographers: Gina Katzel Dabrowski and Christa Erickson. Edited by Christa Erickson and Carl/Karen Pope.

#### **Selected One Person Exhibitions**

Cunningham Gallery, Indianapolis *Homeless: A Photographic Essay* '89; Raw Space, ARC Gallery, Chicago *Men, Women, Children* '90; Evansville Museum of Arts & Sciences, Evansville *Catharsis: A Survey* '90; Atlanta Arts Festival, Atlanta *The New Georgia State Flag Project - No Stars and No Bars: The Red Field Is For Courage* '94; Real Art Ways, Hartford *Silent Wishes, Unconscious Dreams and Prayers . . . Fulfilled* '96, (Site Installation).

#### **Selected Group Exhibitions**

Long Beach Museum of Art, Long Beach *Raymond Saunders: Some Choices* '88; Museum of Modern Art, New York *New Photography Six* '90; Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Minneapolis *New Acquisitions in Photography 1984-90* '90; Richmond Art Museum, Richmond *Eye Openers* '90; Herron Gallery, Indianapolis Center for Contemporary Art, Indiana University, Indianapolis *Indianapolis Collects* '90; Indiana State Museum, Indianapolis *Carl Pope/Doherty: Photographs* '90; Museum of Contemporary



# CARL/KA

Photography, Chicago **Vertical Axis: Photographs from Central States** '91; Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indianapolis **Dark Ages: Natural Phenomena and the Poetics of Science** '91; Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati **Biennial III, New Works** '91; ARC Gallery, Chicago **Black Fusion** '91; Indiana University Fine Arts Gallery, Bloomington **Homeless/Shooting Back: Photography By and About the Homeless** '92; Shircliff Gallery, Vincennes **Three Voices, Thirty Years of Afro-American Expression: Melvin Edwards, William Majors, Carl Pope** '92; Museum of Modern Art, New York **More Than One Photography** '92; Herron Gallery, Indianapolis Center for Contemporary Art, Indiana University, Indianapolis **Adrian Piper and Carl Pope** '92; Artist's Space, New York **Artist's Select** '94; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York **Black Male - Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art** '94; Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indianapolis **150 Years of Photography from the Collection** '96.

## Selected Bibliography about Carl Pope, Jr.:

Mannheimer, Steve. "New Works by Pope, Delbecq at 431 Gallery," *The Indianapolis Star* (March 13, 1989).

Curtis, Cathy. "Radical Differences in Two Black Artists," *The Los Angeles Times* (June 29, 1989).

Garmel, Marion. "Black Expo Art Exhibit Bounces Back to the Top," *Indianapolis News* (July 20, 1989).

Carpenter, Dan. "Exhibit Captures Dignity, Despair of City's Homeless," *The Indianapolis Star* (September 3, 1989), p.B1.

Mannheimer, Steve. "Photos Show Homeless Without Editorializing," *The Indianapolis Star* (September 17, 1989).

Calhoon, Sharon. "Homeless: A Photographic Essay," *dialogue* (November 1989), p.41.

Roberts, Catseu. "Carl Pope, Jr. Indiana State Museum," *New Art Examiner* (October 1990).

Stefan, Janis. "Museum of Modern Art Photos Focus on Humane Condition," *Sunday Star Ledger* (November 11, 1990).

# REN POPE

Hilgeman, Liese. *Adrian Piper and Carl Pope*, (exhibition catalogue). Indiana: Indianapolis Center for Contemporary Art, 1992.

Headoen, Susan. "The Inner-City Booze Market," *The Indianapolis Star* (June 28, 1992), p.1+.

Zender, Anne. "Don't Think of it as Art ... Images of Homelessness at the Fine Arts Gallery," *The Ryder Magazine* (October 23, 1992), p.15+.

Cose, Ellis, and Plagens, Peter. "Black Like Whom?" *Newsweek* (November 14, 1994), p.64+.

Hess, Elizabeth. "Visible Man," *Village Voice* (November 22, 1994), p.31+.

Dee, Jane E. "Words As Urban Art: Exhibition Recalls Young Victims," *The Hartford Courant* (September 9, 1996), p.1+.

O'Connell, Kathy. "Memorial to a Lost Generation," *The Hartford Advocate* (September 19, 1996).

Noel, Don. "Message to Hartford's Youth Leaves Lasting Impression," *The Hartford Courant* (September 25, 1996).

Robertson, Jean and McDaniel, Craig, "Studio View," *New Art Examiner* (October 1996), p.37.

Carl Pope, Jr. and Karen Pope wish to thank the Creator, their parents Mr. & Mrs. Carl Pope, James Rondeau, Andrea Miller-Keller, Jay Anderson, Sharon Steinle, Lea K. Green, Paul Kinsman, James Nakagawa, Dawn Martin, Speedy, Nari Ward, Christian Haye, Real Art Ways, Michael Sims, Regina Pope, Amos Kennedy, Roger Berry/Serigraphics, Deborah Kass and Patrica Cronin, D. Morrison Lyman, Mark Kornegay, Peggy Woodcock, Junior/Sacred Ink Tattooing, Yolanda McKay, Miriam Landman, Carl Tandatnick, M.D., Mauricio Wiener, M.D., Daniel Evelson Remba, M.D., Beatrice Evelson, M.D., Erling Sjovold, Dale Newkirk, A.W. Stuart, Christopher and Ann Stack, Dale Fuller, Shi-pu Wang, Dan Schlapbach, Kathey High/High Pictures and the Photography Department at Indiana University for their active support in the preparation of this exhibition and publication.

**Please Note:**

Carl Pope will present a MATRIX Lecture in The Hartford Courant Room on Sunday, March 14, 1999 at 2 p.m.

A reception in honor of the artist will follow.

Deirdre Bibby, Curator of African-American Art and Executive Director of The Amistad Foundation, will present a gallery talk on the exhibition on Tuesday, March 9, 1999 at noon.

Unless otherwise noted, all events are free with museum admission.



PALIMPSEST

**Carl Pope Jr./Matrix 138**  
**Palimpsest** by Carl/Karen Pope  
January 31—April 4, 1999