



Pope talks campus controversies

MARCH 9, 2016 by Lisa Zhang, Staff Writer



One of Pope's pieces for WCMA at Night speaks to consent and will be held at the squash courts. Photo courtesy of Cheryl Pope.

Cheryl Pope, a sculptor and installation and performance artist, came to the Williams College Museum of Art (WCMA) last Wednesday for a talk on issues of power, inequality and gender on this campus. More specifically, she came to talk, not to just to give one. This event was not exactly what you might call formal; in a spur-of-the-moment decision, we moved from the event's original location in the museum's upstairs rotunda into the reading room next door. We sat in a circle, on couches and cushions.

This is consistent with the type of artist Cheryl Pope is. "Listening is at the heart of my practice," she says.

In 2010, for a project called *A Silent I*, Pope asked high school students at a Chicago public school to anonymously submit one truth and one lie about themselves, things like "I am not a very sensitive person" or "I am that one girl with no future." She then selected 20 of these statements, reproduced them in the style of athletic championship banners and hung them up in the school's gymnasium.

For her upcoming WCMA at Night, set now for April 24 after a postponement from its original date last week, Pope says she wants to work with existing tensions or conflicts on campus. The talk at WCMA was just the latest step in a series of initiatives she has undertaken to understand what exactly students at the College identify the issues to be. In recent weeks, she has kept up correspondences with students at the College and visited the campus in search of spaces in which to hold the event. "I come here as an outsider," she said during Wednesday's event, opening up the floor for discussion.

During the subsequent conversation, which took place over more than hour and involved both students and staff, three main topics seemed to stand out. The first was the issue of the invitation and subsequent dis-invitation of two prospective speakers at the College, Suzanne Venker and John Derbyshire. (Venker was disinvited by the group that organized the talks, Uncomfortable Learning (UL), while Derbyshire's lecture was cancelled by President Adam Falk.) The second issue that was brought up was the perceived divide between athletes and non-athletes on campus. The final major topic discussed was sexual assault. Needless to say, an event that seeks to probe these issues – particularly if it attempts to address all of these issues – has the potential to be incendiary.

The reason that Pope's WCMA at Night was postponed is fairly straightforward. The logistics of putting together the event Pope envisioned in the time allotted made the possibility of opening at the date intended very slight. Permission had to be attained for some of the more unorthodox ideas Pope had in mind – the use of the squash courts as part for the event, for example. And, of course, if recent events have taught us anything, it's that caution should be exercised when approaching subjects that are

controversial or uncomfortable in nature. This isn't to say that we need censorship or even necessarily restraint – we shouldn't need or want to shy away from difficult issues. At the same time, we should be thoughtful about the events we plan, aware of potential issues or conflicts that might arise.

This postponement may yet prove advantageous, not just for the added time it provides for preparations, but because of a shift that might occur in the meantime in the general state of feeling on this campus. If conflict is the medium with which Pope wishes to work, then the climate of the campus at the time of the rescheduled WCMA at Night will be perfect for the very sort of topical mining at which she excels: not too close to the occurrence of these events to pose too much of a risk of reigniting the collective fury that directly followed them, but not too far off to run the risk of these issues being stale or irrelevant.

We are now at a moment in which we are past the thick of controversy. We are at a moment in which we are talking about things like UL and the issues that underlie it, questions of where the line between uncomfortable and unallowable is on this campus, of where free speech turns into hate speech. These are questions that we, as a community, might have paid less attention to had these incidents not forced us to pay attention. It remains to be seen whether Cheryl Pope's WCMA at Night will successfully walk the line between provocative and antagonistic. There is certainly the potential for either.

moniquemeloche

2154 W. Division, Chicago, IL 60622

p 773.252.0299 www.moniquemeloche.com