ABSTRACT OF: REFLECTIONS ON PUSHING AGAINST THE WATERSHED: A LIVE VIDEO STREAMED ART PERFORMANCE

Christo Doherty, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, The Wits School of Arts, Braamfontein, 2050, South Africa. Email: christo.doherty@wits.ac.za.

Marcus Neustetter, Nelson Mandela University, Faculty of Arts, School of Music Art and Design, Port Elizabeth, 6019, South Africa. Email: mn@onair.co.za.

Submitted: 16 October 2019

See https://direct.mit.edu/leon/issue/54/5 for supplemental files associated with this issue.

Pushing against the Watershed was performed on the campus of the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, located on the margins of the inner city and its sites of protest, clashes and economic juxtapositions. On the opening night of the Watershed: Art, Science and Elemental Politics conference, Neustetter, a South African performance/social artist, pushed a transparent plastic sphere containing 50 liters of water and an array of LED lights up the northern slope of the watershed that transects the campus of the university. The performance was livestreamed through YouTube from a cell phone by Doherty, a South African video artist and photographer. In our paper, we discuss the meaning in the context of Watershed and the implications for performance art when experienced as a livestream.

Pushing against the Watershed was designed to illustrate a physical struggle with the geography of the watershed and with water as a scarce and contested resource. The performance was witnessed live by various passersby, most going home at the end of the university day, but they were not the intended audience of the 46-minute action. Rather, the aim was a live video stream projected simultaneously at the opening reception of Watershed, at the summit of the watershed of the Vaal and Limpopo drainage systems and at the Institute at Brown for the Study of the Environment (Brown University, U.S.A.)[1]. The stream raised questions about relationships between liveness and presence and between veracity and liveness in video streaming. The immediate audience experienced the performance as it happened, but remote audiences—the intended audiences—experienced a mediated representation that may or may not have been live. This tension relates to the “telemediated” performance tradition explored previously by artists such as Sherrie Rabinowitz and Kit Galloway [2].

Since performance art emerged as a distinct practice in the 1960s, the artist’s presence has been central to its aesthetics and politics [3]. In this dialogue, we reflect on the challenge to artists and viewers of differentiating between performance art as an act or series of actions when performance happens outside the sanctified space of the white cube—without the artists’ control of the process and its interpretation—when it is livestreamed to an informed audience. We intended the performance to confront viewers with this dilemma.

The struggle with water was literalized by Neustetter’s personal engagement. The task of pushing the heavy ball uphill was intended to draw the viewers in, to provoke questions of the politics behind the act. Its physicality was captured visually and audibly, with Neustetter pushing, pulling, heaving, grunting, groaning and weeping with the futility of the task and the weight of the challenge that it symbolized. Viewers witnessed Neustetter’s suffering as he struggled up the gradient, leaning into the weight of the ball, slowed by the increasing difficulty of rolling it uphill as the incline increased and as the ball leaked water, losing tautness and traction. For those viewing, the somewhat voyeuristic act of witness suggests the passivity of populations faced with water crises, drought, collapsed infrastructure and inequality. Those on the “right” (privileged) side of inequality watch but do little.

Doherty however argues that the potential of the lens, in documenting the performance, provides hope for impact on the environmental crisis, but these messages risk getting submerged in the spectacle of the stream. Performance for Neustetter, the performance was not so much an illustration of the value of art-science interactions as a protest against disregard for the environment and the challenge of questioning this within an institutional setting. The distancing of viewers from the performance reinforces these politics. Neustetter argues that his solitary experience of the performance embodied humanity’s struggle in relation to global issues and the futurity that he and others feel within a larger system that resists engagement and action.

For Camus, the Sisyphus myth was an enactment of the paradox of existential freedom: Sisyphus, “accused of a certain levity in regard to the Gods” [4], is condemned to endlessly push the boulder up the mountain from the darkness of Hades to the light of ordinary life. Doherty suggests to Neustetter that the performance’s repetitive struggle against the laws of nature and society feels like an ongoing act to build experience and knowledge for the next set of unanswerable questions. For both, this is a reminder of conditions and imposed systems that need questioning, continually, from the perspectives of both science and art.

References and Notes

Based on a paper presented at the 2018 Watershed: Art, Science, and Elemental Politics program at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, September 2018. The full paper is available with the online supplemental materials.


