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

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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 performance as it happened, but remote audiences—viewers experiencing the performance reinforced this politics. Neustetter argues that his solitary experience of the performance embodied humanity’s struggle in relation to global issues and the futility that he and others feel within a larger system that resists engagement and action.

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.