Special Section: ArtScience/Watershed

ABSTRACT OF: REFLECTIONS ON PUSHING 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 Watershed, the South African performance/social artist, Marcus Neustetter, 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 of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. The performance was live streamed through YouTube from a cell phone, by a South African video artist and photographer, Christo Doherty. In this paper, the performance artist (Marcus Neustetter) and the producer (Christo Doherty) of the live video stream discuss the meaning of the live performance in the context of Watershed, and the implications for performance art when experienced by the audience as a live video stream.

Pushing Against the Watershed was designed to illustrate Neustetter’s physical struggle with the geography of the watershed and with water as a scarce and contested resource. The performance was witnessed live by various pedestrians and people in cars, most going home at the end of the university day. Although in passing they witnessed Neustetter’s performance and Doherty’s filming, the aim of the 46-minute action was not the live audience. 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 in the USA, at the Institute at Brown for the Study of the Environment (IBES), Brown University [1]. The live stream was important because it raised

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Fig.1. Marcus Neustetter struggles to push a water-filled plastic sphere up the gradient of the Witwatersrand watershed in Johannesburg in his performance piece, “Pushing Against the Water Watershed” at the opening of the Watershed conference. (©Marcus Neustetter. Photo: Zivanai Matangai.)

many questions about the relationship between liveness, presence and the relationship between veracity and liveness in video streaming. As the performance happened, the immediate audience experienced it, but the remote audiences – for whom the performance was intended - experienced a mediated representation that may or may not have been live. This tension relates to the tradition of experiments in “telemediated” performance art first explored by artists such as Sherrie Rabinozitz and Kit Galloway in the late ’70s and early ’80s [2].

Since performance art emerged as a distinct practice in the 1960s, the artist’s presence has been central to the aesthetics and politics of the form [3]. In this dialogue, the proponents reflect on the challenge to artists and viewers of differentiating between performance art as an act or series of actions, and the madness and criminality of others, when performance happens outside the sanctified space of the white cube without control of the process and its interpretation, and when it is live streamed to an informed audience. As the author/artists reflect, criminal acts have routinely used streaming technology, and Bender [4] has used the term ‘performance crime’ to describe the use of live video as an integral part of violent attacks, turning a crime into a spectacle with entertainment value.

In Pushing Against the Watershed, the performance was intended to confront viewers – primarily those who received the live stream video broadcast. The struggle with water was literalized by Neustetter’s personal engagement. The task of pushing the water-heavy ball uphill was intended to draw the viewers in, and to provoke questions of the politics behind the act. The physicality of this act was captured visually and audibly, with Neustetter, pushing, pulling, heaving, 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 of the watershed, leaning into the heaviness of the ball, slowed down by the increasing difficulty to roll the ball uphill as the incline increased and as the ball leaked water, so losing tautness and grip. For those behind the camera or watching the screen, the act of witnessing, somewhat voyeuristically, 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.

At the same time, Doherty argues that the potential of the lens, in documenting the performance, provides hope for impact in relation to the environmental crisis, but these messages risk getting subsumed in the spectacle of the streamed performance. Neustetter notes that the arts are frequently seen to illustrate the sciences, or to provide entertainment. Art-science collaborations require hard work from both sides from both artists and scientists, and for Neustetter, the performance was not so much an illustration of the value of art-science interactions, but a protest against the disregard for the environment and the challenge of questioning this within an institutional setting. The distancing of viewers from the performance – both passers-by and those in the reception – reinforce this politics. Neustetter argues that the solitary experience of the performance embodied the personal struggle we all have in relation to global issues, and the futility and hopelessness that he, and others, feel towards a larger system that resists engagement and action.

For Camus, the myth of Sisyphus was an enactment of the paradox of existential freedom: Sisyphus is “accused of a certain levity in regard to the Gods” [5] and is condemned to endlessly push the boulder up the mountain from the darkness of Hades to the light in order to attain the happiness of ordinary
life. Doherty suggests to Neustetter that the repetition, enacted in his performance, in the struggle of pushing 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 the conditions and imposed systems that need questioning, continually, from the perspectives of both science and art.

References and Notes
1. A recording of the live video stream can be viewed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UtL.fum5ZlgM