APPREHENDING THE ENVIRONMENT:
WATERSHEDS OF ART AND SCIENCE
Lenore Manderson, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, Braamfontein, 2050, South Africa. Email: lenore.manderson@wits.ac.za.
Christo Doherty, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, Braamfontein, 2050, South Africa. Email: christo.doherty@wits.ac.za.
Submitted: 30 July 2020

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

Watershed: Art, Science, and Elemental Politics, held at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 10–21 September 2018, brought together art and science concerns around knowledge systems, water insecurity and threats to human survival. The program included work from India, the U.S., Peru and South Africa: installations and exhibitions, walks and performances, poetry and book readings across the university campus. These events were integrated into panels and seminars. The bringing together of artists, scientists, policy-makers and activists was the first of the watersheds captured by the title; it was the first occasion for these fields, reflecting wide differences in epistemology and practice, to come together in a South African context. This special section includes many of the Watershed artists writing of their work in relation to the physical setting, where reduced rainfall is also predicted, and temperature rise will certainly exceed the global average [3].

Johannesburg, South Africa’s largest city and economic center, depends on electricity largely generated by coal, while its water is purchased from neighboring Lesotho. At the time of Watershed, Johannesburg’s water supply was relatively stable, but countrywide, there had been long-term drought and harsh water restrictions. Extractive and manufacturing industry, patterns of consumption and waste, contribute to environmental degradation, multiplying the effects of temperature changes, rainfall patterns, and lake, river and groundwater depletion. These local crises and their larger global scales provided the context of Watershed.

The university is also literally on the watershed that drains into the Limpopo, Vaal and Orange rivers. On the highest point, the Origins Centre, Watershed seminars were held and the work of several artists shown, including that of Christine Dixie and Hannelie Warrington-Coetzee (in this section) and Lucia Monge. The street running up the hill to the watershed ridge bisects the downtown campus; this was where Marcus Neustetter performed Pushing against the Watershed, as he and Christo Doherty describe in this section. In Hyena Sculpture, Warrington-Coetzee traced the high points of the watershed; she supplemented her sculptures with an animated “walk” by four hyenas across the watershed, and guided members of the public along it. Myer Taub, in Traces of the Spruit, took participants beyond the campus to follow polluted streams (spruits) drawing from the watershed. Others went beyond the city to reflect on environmental damage related to the country’s economic base. Dixie’s work, Below the Sediments (in this section), a series of five panels of brushed metal and polymer sheets, focuses on the use and waste of water for fracking in the semi-arid Karoo; Monge, in Mi Niño, Your Dry Spell, Their Waterfall, examined plant ecology and adaptive mechanisms in the Namaqua desert. Brian House’s work, Acid Love (in this section), references the history of the city, chemical processes and long wall mining and its overflown onto physical and social environments; House’s work on lethal acid mine drainage links with concerns of Atul Bhalla.

Bhalla’s work, Looking for Lost Water (Explorations at the Cradle), was located in the atrium of the Chamber of Mines [1,2]. The work (Fig. 1) included 18 14-foot screens printed with the image of the landscape around Johannesburg’s commercially abandoned mines, much of it granite stained by acid mine drainage. The screens defined the inner atrium area, where video and photographs depicted the physical landscape of Johannesburg’s illegal mines. Here thousands of young men, who have traveled without documentation from neighboring countries, work up to four kilometers underground in dangerously unsafe conditions. The improvised sorting barrels—pendukha—displayed in the center of the work are used by artisanal miners to separate gold particles from the rock in which they are embedded; the sounds of rock breaking down in these barrels echoed through the atrium. The barrels were decorated with gold leaf brought by Bhalla from India. The installation drew attention, without didacticism, to inequality, danger and poverty.

Zen Marie’s Paradise Fallen installation (in this section) is based on work on Réunion Island (Indian Ocean) and in Dakar, Senegal (Atlantic), and complements works referencing South Africa’s history and ecology. Through videos, large-scale drawings and photo litho plates, Marie attends to the impact of early imperialism, slavery and incarceration on these oceans.

As Watershed’s contributors illustrate, creative work allows for other modes of apprehending the current water crisis in South Africa, the ecological costs of mining and industrialization and the continued echoes of colonialism. Complementing, extending and at times challenging the science discourse of Watershed, the artistic work highlighted how globalization, commodity capitalism, industrialization and politics all impact on the management and rights to and precariousness of water.

References and Notes

Fig. 1. Atul Bhalla, Looking for Lost Water (Explorations at the Cradle), photographs, video, sound, text, print on fabric, gold, iron, galvanized steel, durable vinyl, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 10–30 September 2018. (© Atul Bhalla)