FACING THE MOMENT: ON PERFORMANCE AND THE POLITICS OF PRESENTNESS

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In February 2007 two performances took place at the same time, on the same night, in two different galleries in central Auckland.

The first performance, by Raised by Wolves (a performance art duo that consists of Biddy Livesey and myself), was timed to coincide with an exhibition I was having at Gamba Castle. Tao’s performance consisted of him humping a mattress on the floor for the duration of a Sonic Youth song. The room where the humping took place was small and the semen paintings that Tao had made prior to the event.

Biddy and I missed Tao’s actual performance, since we were at our own, but soon after we arrived at Gamba Castle we saw Tao’s performance being replayed on a TV that he held on his shoulders, a Herculean extension of the performance.

Our Mall-Wall performance was an example of a work of art that had a political objective – there were specific political outcomes that we would have liked to be fulfilled – outcomes relating to sustainability and environmental consciousness. Our performance illustrated the urban design principle of active edges. Active edges are a sign of a culture that promotes long-term sustainability over short-term profits, and similarly privilege public good, and public spaces, above private ones.

We attempted to balance the didactic element of the performance with general entertainment. As well as creating a big swell of improvised sound we placed them in a step-like structure. We then climbed the steps, to a work covered with microphones, triggering a range of sounds and notes.

The other performance by Tao Wells was timed to coincide with an exhibition he was having at Gamba Castle. Tao’s performance consisted of him humping a mattress on the floor for the duration of a Sonic Youth song. The room where the humping took place was small and the semen paintings that Tao had made prior to the event.

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awareness of reality and therefore better-informed political decisions. Being willing to act and experience things without aiming for specific tangible outcomes, thereby becomes a political action.

Graham has asserted that global warming presents us with a very particular challenge – one that requires that we act with the future in mind while not expecting to get any reward for this consideration, as the rewards for mitigating global warming will largely occur outside our lifetime.

Art does not have to literally tackle political problems, because as Graham argues, art has the ability to connect people to the moment – remind people that they are sharing the same moment – to really experience a moment means to be grounded in a specific environment. Being in the moment thereby enforces and confirms our shared conception of the environment, which will ideally lead to a fuller consideration of how we should treat it.

**Challenges to being present**

Modern technologies are moving people’s everyday lives further and further away from an awareness of the importance of inhabiting the present moment. Internet social networking site Facebook is not necessarily evil or even useless, but Facebook and digital social networking do privilege expectation and recollection over presentness. This is partly because the documentation of people’s lives and the self-categorisation of those documents becomes data that can then be sold, where as present-ness can less easily transformed into a commodity. Socialites have always existed. Putting a lot of effort into being seen, and being recorded being fabulous, has always happened. But institutions like Facebook are alluring because, they mean that there is no longer a limited number people in charge of displaying visual trinkets of social hubbub. Facebook offers the democratisation of celebratory.

In the world of Facebook, actions and events gain their worth through their re-presentation, usually in photographic form, to others. In this process, the act of experience – of being in the moment – is constantly deferred. There is a similarity here with tourism where the experiences of travel becomes secondary to the documentation of that experience. In comparison to Tao’s performance, Facebook is about as far away from sex and dance, and the live experience as you can get. With Facebook, the live experience is sometimes constructed purely so it can be documented. Photo albums can be constructed to show the best moments, and to string together these moments into a desired narrative. One has power to re-imagine, and reconstruct an event – without the nuisance of what the event’s reality actually consisted of.

One of my favourite phrases of our current era is, ‘Won’t you sit on my Facebook?’ which I once heard yelled in gest. The phrase sums up nicely the vast gap that exists between the momentary pleasure of sex (immense, intense, condensed) and the highly edited, post-the-moment experience of Facebook.

**The antidote is dance.**

Dance is the opposite of posing for a photograph, or stopping to be photographed. It is a form that inhabits the moment of its own production. A video of dance makes you want to be close to the real thing, experiencing the tactile-ness, the present-ness of the dancers body. Good dance reminds one of the joy of being present, to the edge of ones body, like good sex. Even ‘solitary sex’ is about the act of concentration on oneself, on the moment of yourself. Tao’s solitary sex dance wasn’t ever aiming for the tangible outcome of reproduction.

Art continuously has to justify its importance; art in every generation comes under scrutiny, self-scrutiny, and a pressure to explain itself. Political matters, ideas about our society, community and culture, shouldn’t be absent from art, but they shouldn’t be driving factors. And they don’t need to be the driving factors, because art can achieve political impact in its own way, and should not be held accountable against cruder tests such as community involvement or popularity brought about by spectacle. Such measures are less important than individual emotional responses, which can in turn become collective experience, and the possibility of more improvised collective change.

Being in the present is itself the product, and paradoxically, being in the present helps us to reflect more readily on the future and its needs.