

PERFORMA MAGAZINE

(e)merge: Andrew Wodzianski

Performance at the (e)merge Art Fair in Washington D.C.

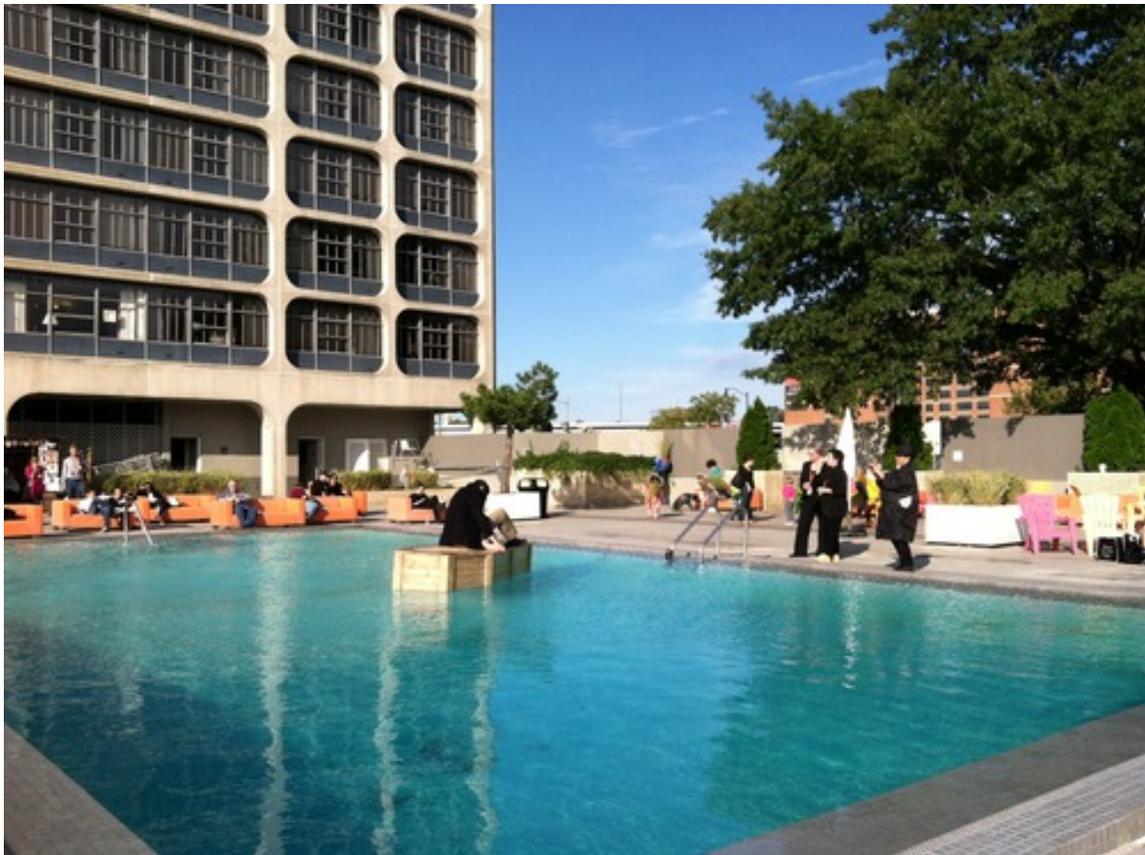
By Eames Armstrong, October 12, 2012



Andrew Wodzianski floated on top of a wooden coffin in the pool of the Capitol Skyline Hotel for thirty-six consecutive hours. A number of people asked me if, in the scope of performance art history, the length of his performance *Self Portrait as Ishmael* was a long time, or not such a long time. It is more useful to consider the specific context than to compare the piece to its predecessors. In Melville's *Moby Dick*, on which the performance is blatantly based, the narrator and (perhaps) protagonist survives the shipwreck by floating on a coffin-turned life-buoy for a day and a half before being rescued by a ship searching for the captain's lost son. And regardless of how familiar you are with the narrative of *Moby Dick*, the performance clearly dealt with the same major themes of mortality and folly. However, in actively taking on the role of Ishmael, Wodzianski was effectively taking on Ahab's characteristics of hubris, pushing at the limits of the body for the sake of performance, in an interesting conflation of the entire story into a very minimal durational performance.

I appreciate that the work wasn't monitored or live-streamed for "accountability." As such, the piece wasn't just about the artist himself, but had room to ask about the purpose of the audience as more than just a witness. The performance began at 5am

on Friday, and ended at 5pm on Saturday. I got there at about 5:10am. Wodzianski was already in place in the pool, and his crew of three were packing up to leave. If the performance occurs without audience, (if a tree falls in a forest?) and so much of the performance took place outside of fair hours, work becomes kind of a myth. It was dark, it was cold, his crew left, the door going back to the hotel was locked (the security guard had to let me onto the pool deck; I think she assumed I was *still* there from the night before) and we were alone, me watching, and him, laying there in the middle of the pool. For no real reason, I was afraid, suddenly solely responsible, and I felt really foolish for coming. It seemed so absurd- waking up at 4:30am to look at someone doing nothing, but there I was and there he was, doing something presumably even more absurd. Besides being very self conscious of my presence, I felt a strong pathos for the artist, which would have been very different if I knew him personally. I wrote a blog post while sitting there. I stayed until after sunrise on Friday, around 7am, which was such a weird and pleasant experience as to justify my exhaustion for the rest of the day.



A few days later, my memory of going there is so surreal that I can read my own action as a reverberation of the tragic futility of Wodzianski's performance. Through the rest of the performance, I was surprised to find myself feeling guilty that I couldn't be there for more of it. Maybe the role of the audience in performance has much to do with affirmation of the work, and I wanted to continue to perform my own appreciation, recognizing intent through compassion.

The space of literature is neat and immaterial, but performance takes those poetics and enacts them in real life, in real time. Rather than ending with a big splash, Wodzianski stayed true to the reductiveness of the rest of the work. At 5pm, he simply slid off the coffin into the water, pushed the coffin to the side of the pool, and exited.



Eames Armstrong writes the blog [D.C. Performance Art](#), where this article first appeared.