



## Andrew Wodzianski, Self-Portrait as Ishmael at (e)merge art fair, personal account

By Eames Armstrong on October 9, 2012



Andrew Wodzianski, right before the end of "Self Portrait as Ishmael" 10/6/2012 (e)merge art fair

At the (e)merge art fair, 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 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 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 up the position 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.

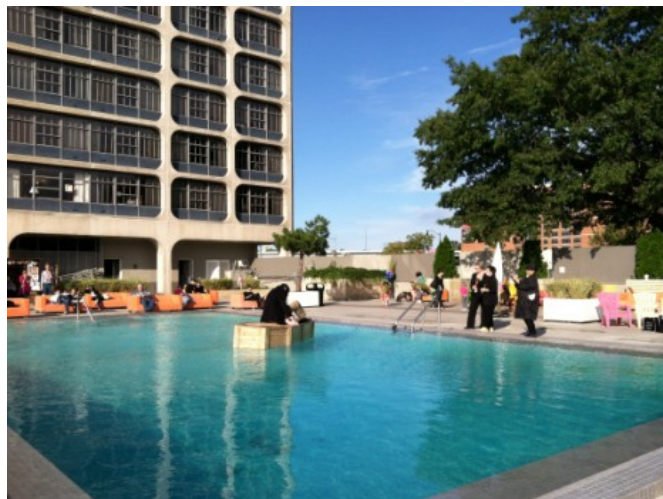
I appreciate that the work wasn't monitored or live-streamed for "accountability." As such, the piece wasn't just about the artist himself, but had room to ask about the purpose of the audience as more than just a witness. The performance began at 5am on Friday, and ended at 5pm on Saturday. I got there at about 5:10am, Wodzianski was already in place in the pool, and his crew of three was 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, it becomes a kind of myth.

It was dark, it was cold, his crew had 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, (reposted below.) I stayed until after sunrise around 7am, which was such a weird and pleasant experience as to justify my exhaustion for the rest of the day, which was a full 12-7:30pm at (e)merge.



A few days later my memory of going there feels 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 really 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 a 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, and pushed the coffin to the side of the pool, and exited.



(The above was first posted on DCperformanceart.tumblr.com on 10/8/2012, and the following, including apology, was posted on 10/5/2012)

It's 5:20 am, Andrew Wodzianski has begun his 36 hour performance. His launch party just left, and now it's just me watching him lay flat, barefoot, a bandana over his face, on a simple wooden coffin, rotating very slowly in the center of the pool. The fair doesn't open until noon, and I understand that Andrew will stay on the coffin until 5pm tomorrow. I'm acutely self-conscious of my presence, in how I'm implicating myself in perhaps at least the artist's memory of the work. This piece which has so much to do with interiority, displaying isolated reflection- Andrew just sat up, looked at me, I looked up from my phone (writing this) and he laid back down. I met Andrew awkwardly in a stairwell here last night, introduced myself and told him I blog and would be writing for Performa Magazine, and he said if I really wanted to get up of course I could come. He gave me a very small hello when I walked onto the pool deck while his team packed up. The hotel is three miles directly south of my apartment, the act of getting up and getting here is of course totally integrated with my experience of the work. A bizarre and pleasant reason to bike across the national mall in the early morning dark, I thought about how nice it was to have to work to see the work. I never get up close to this early (but perhaps sometimes out this late.)

I'm sitting on one of Capitol skyline's orange couches, which smells a little nauseatingly like it enjoyed last night's party. The traffic on South Capitol Street is highway loud, and Andrew has rolled onto his stomach as if to sleep. The inescapable question of bathroom use is yet to be determined. It's 6:30 now, and the sky just broke into a plum. I'm going to leave after sunrise and Andrew is going to stay, presumably alone until exhibitors and hotel staff come. In endurance performance I think about the significance of compassion, literally, 'to suffer with,' what does it do to stay, to witness, to experience a piece in its entirety, as opposed to in passing? A piece which hypothetically will not change in itself but the circumstance and situation will fluctuate hugely as it progresses, as the fair goes on and attendees come, sound, temperature, and light. Paraphilia is the pleasure of being watched, (he just looked at me again) and scopophilia is pleasure in looking. When I come back later today I won't have the same unique and private relationship to the performance, but I'll get to talk about it and share interpretation collectively. I'll let you know how that goes.

Please excuse poor sentences- and scattered ideas, posting from my phone.