

DAKAM'S
INTERNATIONAL
ART STUDIES MEETING
CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

CONTEMPHOTO '17 / IV. International Visual Culture and Photography
Conference

CINECRI '17 / IV. International Film Studies and Cinematic Arts Conference

CONTEMPART '17 / VI. International Contemporary Arts Conference

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PERFORMANCE ART AS REDEMPTION: RELEASING SISYPHUS

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to document the inspiration and creation of a performance art piece that was realised at Repulse Bay on the southern coast of Hong Kong Island. The art piece took the ancient Greek myth of Sisyphus as a starting reference and the paper will go on to explain how the myth provided the inspiration and framework for the development of the resulting performance art piece.

Consideration for the character of Sisyphus himself will be undertaken, who was he? and why had he been dealt this terrible punishment? The myth as outlined in the ancient texts of Homer will first be examined in an attempt to comprehend his predicament before further examination will be made of how the myth has been adopted and applied in various ways in literature, with Sisyphus becoming the archetypal suffering hero. Mention will also be made of the story's adoption by French philosopher Albert Camus who presented the protagonist, Sisyphus, as the quintessential existentialist 'absurd' hero.

The resulting performance art piece ultimately aimed to break the endless cycle of punishment meted out to Sisyphus, to free him from his eternal and meaningless struggle in an effort to create a window of opportunity that could be used for self-reflection, self-assessment and the possibility of change. The content of the performance included specific symbolic gestures that suggested and embodied the re-establishment of a sense of equilibrium prior to a final re-run of the trial of Sisyphus that aimed to be the final test, thereby ending his torment.

This performance piece is the latest in a series that will continue an exploration of ways to symbolically enact aspects of our daily life that may seem ordinary at first glance but which actually suggest that we are all Sisyphus.

The struggle of Sisyphus has become a global symbol of endless suffering and within the performance piece a resolution is sought, a way to free us all from mindless toil.

Who was Sisyphus?

Sisyphus, son of King Aeolus of Aeolia (now called Thessaly), founded and lived in Ephyre (now called Corinth) and was also its king. He was the grandfather of the hero Bellerophon who, with the assistance of Pegasus, killed the Chimaera - the female fire-breathing hybrid creature that inhabited Lycia (a province in the South West of contemporary Turkey). Also in Lycia, Bellerophon fought the warlike Solymi and the Amazons.

Sisyphus is mentioned in the two great classical works of Homer. *The Iliad* mentions 'a man called Sisyphus, as cunning a rogue as ever there was' (referring to alternative stories about Sisyphus including the tale of how Sisyphus had tricked Autolycus by recognizing his own bulls among the flocks of Autolycus after they had been stolen. Sisyphus had cunningly already put marks on the underside of his Bulls' hooves after he learned that Autolycus had raided other herds in the area). (*The Iliad*, p.121)

In *The Odyssey*, Odysseus travels down to the underworld to meet Tiresias seeking information in his quest to return home. While in Hades Odysseus witnesses Sisyphus already struggling with his eternal task of rolling the stone to the top of the hill before it 'came bounding down again to level ground'. (*The Odyssey*, p.187)

Why did he deserve this extreme punishment?

According to Lempriere's Classical Dictionary (Wright, 1951 p.587), there are a number of stories to explain the particular punishment meted out to Sisyphus and the most commonly held story is that Sisyphus was punished for playing a trick on Pluto, the ruler of the underworld, that allowed him, after death, to return to the world of the living. The story goes that Sisyphus, on his deathbed, had persuaded his wife to leave his body unburied but once he arrived in the underworld he asked permission from Pluto to return home for three days in order to punish his wife for not showing him the correct respect. Once back from hell, Sisyphus, reneged on the deal he had made with Pluto and lived out his life until he eventually died once again, of old age. Pluto was suitably angered by this and after Sisyphus had been returned to the Underworld by Mars, Pluto then inflicted the punishment of eternally rolling the huge stone to the top of a mountain.

Several other stories also attempt to explain why Sisyphus earned his punishment. In one story, Sisyphus witnessed Zeus carrying off Aegina, a mortal woman who was the daughter of Asopus (the Boeotian river god),

in his home town of Corinth. Sisyphus made a deal with Asopus, to inform him who had kidnapped Aegina if Sisyphus was awarded a fresh-water spring on the acropolis at Corinth. Through this deal, Sisyphus betrayed Zeus and earned the wrath of the gods.

Another story tells how Sisyphus managed to enchain the spirit of Death. Zeus had ordered Death (Thanatos), to chain King Sisyphus down in Tartarus (the deep dungeon of torment). The sly King Sisyphus asked Thanatos for an explanation as to the efficiency of the chains and as Thanatos released the chains to perform a demonstration, Sisyphus entrapped Thanatos in the same chains. Now that Death was enchained, nobody on earth died.

This enraged the gods. Ares (who loved battles) was incredibly annoyed as his opponents would not die. Some stories say Ares freed Thanatos himself, others tell that the gods threatened Sisyphus until he released Thanatos. Yet another story attests that Pluto sent Mars, the god of war, to free Death and his next victim after being freed was Sisyphus himself.

The punishment

There is no commentary on how Sisyphus suffers his punishment, this eternal 'bare repetition'. (Taylor, 1987 cited in Verhoef, 2014)

That is up to our own imagination and perhaps that is the enduring strength of the myth. Camus, for example ponders on the exact moment when the rock has rolled away from Sisyphus. From this moment on Sisyphus returns to the bottom of the hill carrying no physical burden. Compared to the effort of transporting the rock to the top of the hill, this moment must be an immense relief. During the walk back down the mountain, he is free to think, allow his thoughts to wander, perhaps even to consider his own fate and the absurdity of it. He is a tragic figure, he is fully cognisant of his fate and understands that there must surely be no release this time, even for someone so cunning and wily. Perhaps, each time he reaches the top of the mountain and begins his walk back down, his thoughts transcend the base task he has been set.

Sisyphus would be aware, if we are to take the stories of his exploits at face value, that the gods are all around. This gives him the determination to maintain his spirit, 'For Sisyphus, after all, the heavens are not empty. They are peopled with those gods who have condemned him to his rock and whom even now he defies by refusing that illusion of eventual mercy that would make him their slave.' (Gordon, 2008)

'Sisyphus has to assign his own meaning to life, and Camus argues that Sisyphus does this by accepting the absurd, by recognizing and embracing his fate.' (Verhoef, 2008) Within the confines of the imposed task, Sisyphus is his own supervisor. He determines how long it takes to transport the rock to the top of the hill, and how long it takes him to walk back down once the rock has rolled away from him once again.

Camus would suggest that Sisyphus may even have a positive attitude towards his task. After all, feelings of sorrow may arise only when he is looking back at the life he has lost, or when he wishes for freedom from his task. Once he has fully embraced his fate, these feelings of sorrow disappear. Camus goes on to propose that acknowledging the truth of our situation, however terrible, immediately renders them slightly less terrible. The situation that occurs while Sisyphus is fully occupied during the ascent of the mountain, with the physical exertion at its most extreme is what has been described as 'flow' (developed by Hungarian Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi)– 'the experience of being absorbed in what you are doing to the extent that you lose yourself' (Verhoef, 2008)

For Camus, the knowledge and acceptance of our fate represents the beginning of our escape from bondage. When Sisyphus is experiencing 'flow' he is fully absorbed in his struggle and has no time for reflection. During the brief periods of rest, as he makes his way down the mountain he is free to contemplate his fate and the absurdity of his situation. His acceptance of the situation is what frees him. He knows that after one more struggle with the stone he will be free again, albeit for a short time. For every struggle, there is an accompanying period of rest. Camus suggests that this awareness and acceptance is the beginning of happiness and as Camus ends his philosophical essay: "One must imagine Sisyphus happy." (Camus, 1942)

The Performance: Preparation

Traditionally rituals are used to dictate a frame of mind, to demonstrate an attitude and to focus the attention solely onto the present activity.

In order for me to initiate the climb, to transition from my everyday life into the performance I decided that I would adopt a short series of rituals that would help me to focus my mind and to demonstrate that the performance was underway. The rituals are designed to illustrate the underlying drive of the performance, setting things straight, undoing damage and returning the world to equilibrium. I reduced the possibilities down to two actions: putting water back into the sea and returning sand to the beach.

Once the rituals have been completed I plan to pick up my back-pack containing the stones and the plants I have previously collected along with the tools I will need once I reach the top of the hill. Following the introductory rituals, the climb would begin. I would follow a parallel path to the one that Sisyphus may have struggled, albeit less arduously.

Considering the documentation of the performance, I had thought that, like Sisyphus I should take on this task alone. This idea was bolstered by the fact that no-one was willing to accompany me to climb the hill. I would need to carry some tools with me, and so I would need a backpack for these, the stones and the small trees/shrubs I would use to plant around the stones on the summit. Perhaps one day these items, along with my planning drawings etc. may be assembled into an exhibition displaying the documentation of the event. Some performances are suitable for re-performing but I had felt that this particular performance should be a one-off. After all, the performance intended to stop the process.

The stones to be carried up the hill I will hopefully find at the foot of the hill, the small trees/shrubs are actually ones that grew unexpectedly in plant pots on my balcony from seeds brought by wild birds. The rate at which I shall climb the hill and the number of rest stops I will take will depend entirely on my physical condition on the day and is difficult to predict.



Figure 1. Map indicating the route taken during the performance (red line)

The Performance: The day

Luckily the day chosen for the performance (2nd July 2016) was overcast (taking some of the sting out of the sun) although it was still incredibly humid. The buses of mainland tourists had already begun to arrive at the beach for their obligatory walk across the sand and photo session.

On the artificially created beach at Repulse Bay (on the south side of Hong Kong Island) I stood with my back to the hills and faced the sea. In my hands, I carried two different materials: water and sand. Gently, I allowed the sand to filter through my fingers down onto the beach after which I slowly poured the water into the sea. Both the sand and water I had dispensed immediately merged with the rest and became imperceptible. Dropping sand back to the beach, pouring water back to the sea, both of these ritualistic actions attempted to restore

order and sought some kind of equilibrium. Perhaps my gesture of solidarity with Sisyphus would bring a similar equilibrium and cause the meaningless toil to end.

After a few moments, I turned and began my walk towards the hills behind me. South Bay Road runs up towards the hills and then at a junction it curls away to the left, I turned right and made my way up South Bay Close, past the International School on the right until the road ended in a cul-de-sac. Steps on the left led to the trail that winds up through the trees. This natural trail has not been manicured and ruined (or 'improved' as the local authorities term it) making the journey a very pleasant one, winding between boulders and roots under a thick canopy of leaves and branches.



Figure 2. The start of the trail

Once I reached the catch-water at Tsin Shui Wan Au I crossed the Tsz Kong Bridge and began the climb up the first of the twins (the two peaks that rise above Repulse Bay) collecting stones along the way. My goal was to reach the top of the first twin. The initial part of the climb alternates between trail and concrete steps but after a short while the path becomes pure concrete steps leading up as far as one can see. Every so often I stopped to take a sip of water and adjust my back-pack, which contained the stones that I would use to build a small cairn on the summit.



Figure 3. The Tsz Kong Bridge

As I climbed the steps I thought of Sisyphus and his endless toil, pushing the boulder to the top of the hill only to have it immediately roll back to the bottom. Sisyphus would calmly make his way back down the steps to begin his labour once more. He seemingly had no escape from this God-given punishment and yet he managed to find solace in the regularity of his work. Everything was laid out for him, he had no need to plan, to calculate anything or to wonder at the outcome. Everything was pre-planned and predictable. As he descended the hill he knew what was expected and how he would re-accomplish the feat. In some ways, he had found his own way to escape the torture, but I wished to free him completely from this torment.



Figure 4. Start of the climb

The performance was not easy to complete. The steps were steep and it took no little effort to ascend them, especially carrying a bag of stones. However, I never feared that I would fail to reach the top. If I did fail, then the performance will be over. The exertion is one of the main components of the piece and it was not meant to be easy. There was no guarantee that the whole process will go ahead as planned. In the past I had been a long-distance runner but it had now been several years since I stopped and with my current work commitments I cannot find enough time to reach the same level of fitness.



Figure 5. More and more steps

At the summit, I built a small cairn by the side of the trail, modest so as not to attract attention and I also dug into the ground and planted two small shrubs between the stones that would hopefully thrive, embrace the stones, and help to keep them firmly fixed in their position. This would keep them in place and prevent them rolling down the hill (I mean this symbolically, there will be no danger to the public!). Sisyphus would be free at last. He would be able to apply his physical strength and his strength of character in other pursuits of his own choosing. After thousands of years I may finally have released Sisyphus.



Figure 6. The stones at the summit

Conclusion

As I commented earlier, the rituals I performed on the beach attempted to put things back in to order: sand to the beach, water to the sea. I wanted to re-write the myth's ending, add one more chapter to the story of Sisyphus. Sisyphus has had time to contemplate his destiny, he has come to terms with his fate and with his endless task. His activity represented a kind of journey without actually travelling or getting anywhere. It is an expiration of energy with no reward. In my first performance *'Going Round in Circles' 2014*, I also explored the experience of work with no personal reward and the accompanying sense of wasted time and effort. (Ford, P.S. 2015)

Sometimes we cannot escape our fate but we can control how we endure it. Camus suggests that Sisyphus learned to accept his situation and perhaps even grow to be happy, enjoying the brief periods of rest between each period of labour. (Camus, 1942)

For Sisyphus, there appears no possibility of an ending and there is only the task at hand to focus on so that's what he does. He is able to revel in the predictability of his situation and uses the short rest periods for reflection. Reviewing Elliott M. Simon's book on the Sisyphus myth, John Mulryan states "...this represents the perils of human life, where nothing is ever resolved and one is forced to focus on process rather than results or personal achievement." (Mulryan, 2008)



Figure 7. The summit showing the stones and the top of the steps

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List of Illustrations

Figure 1. Map indicating the route taken during the performance

The route of the performance began on the man-made beach at Repulse Bay and followed the road and trail up to The Tsz Kong Bridge at Tin Shui Wan Au before climbing to the summit of the first 'Twin' (363m).

Figure 2. The start of the trail

At the end of South Bay Close, there is a short set of steps on the left. These steps lead up to the trail. A few metres after the steps it is necessary to turn left to a clearer trail, the one that seems more obvious to the right is actually more overgrown further up the hill.

Figure 3. The Tsz Kong Bridge

The Tsz Kong Bridge forms the junction for several trails, around the catch-water, down to Tai Tam Country Park and up to the summits of 'the Twins' and 'Violet Hill'

Figure 4. Start of the climb

Crossing the Tsz Kong Bridge, the steps begin. At first there are short stretches of steps but after a while, they become continuous and much steeper. Once this section begins the steps continue like this to the summit.

Figure 5. More and more steps

The steps are quite repetitive. After a while it feels as though they will never end, each twist and turn appears to be the same as the previous one.

Figure 6. The stones at the summit

The stones were set down on the right just after the top of the steps. Two small trees were planted between the stones in an effort to fix them in place. The trees grew at my home from seeds brought by wild birds.

Figure 7. The summit showing the stones and the top of the steps

Immediately after reaching the summit, there is a small clearing with a footpath distance post.

