

Social Justice Artist, Practitioner of Interrogative Design and Harvard University Professor Krzysztof Wodiczko

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Krzysztof Wodiczko (courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York).

By Nancy Nesvet

(A shortened version of this interview is featured in our March/April 2017 issue; the complete interview is included here).

Krzysztof Wodiczko, Harvard University's Graduate School of Design's Professor in Residence of Art, Design and the Public Domain, who also works with the Interrogative Design Group at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), combines art and technology with emerging social issues to produce creative projects involving veterans of war, disasters and other trauma.

His artistic practice, which he calls interrogative design, incorporates sound production, projections, specially constructed robots and other forms leads to lead to an unparalleled awareness of the viewing and listening public to the issues he presents, and an impetus to change their perspectives and future actions.

"The monument is a mission to change, in a productive versus a destructive way," Wodiczko said. He has found, in projection, a methodology that temporarily changes and makes relevant statues constructed long ago to assume the persona of a new generation, their issues and people. He has invented devices to enable people to communicate with each other and with the public, telling their stories and their histories.

This writer was fortunate enough to be able to interview him at Galerie Lelong, New York, and to discuss some of his past, present and future projects and his teaching at Harvard.

At Harvard, Wodiczko said, "my students mostly develop their own work, and I develop mine, but we confront similar issues. I do some tests in Boston, at Harvard, and in New York. I do a lot of thinking in coffee shops and planes, and I set up situations in those cities."

He is universally known for his projections, although his artistic practice involves other forms of communication. Members of the community he addresses are projected onto a statue or other architectural form, but he often includes only part of a body, as in the projection, "Ronald Reagan's Hand on the AT&T Building," (November, 1984), four days before the election.

He sees the one-handed gesture here as pledging loyalty, allegiance. That is all that is necessary in this work to capture the essence of the former President. He sees the body as a metaphor for the architecture on which he projects, noting that buildings are bodily metaphors; possessing a central core, with wings serving as arms, and the dome, a head. Supplementary fragments animate buildings; the body projected on it gives it life, makes it come alive, enabling it to literally speak.

His own history began with his birth in the Warsaw Ghetto during the Warsaw uprising. Growing up and educated in Poland, he witnessed the devastation of the nation, due to the destruction of the war and observed the inability of survivors to discuss their experiences or verbally express their feelings. His work, emanating from this history, deals with memorials, veterans and survivors.

Although he is Jewish, he insists, "One needn't be Jewish to be a survivor. To be Polish in my generation means to have suffered during the Second World War. Jewish certainly adds to the dimension, but it's not as important. 800,000 people were killed in Warsaw during the war." As a result of his membership in this generation, he deems himself a war veteran.

He told me that for one killed soldier, seven to 10 survivors psychologically repeat that death, as was the case in Warsaw. The soldiers and others killed are not war veterans, but those who survived are war veterans, and their children are also veterans, like himself.

"I am actually a war veteran twice because I am a survivor of the Holocaust, even though I don't remember the war," so he deems the children of war, like himself and those who remember the war all veterans. He went on, "I don't know how many traumatized victims are in Afghanistan. So the definition of war veteran, even of urban wars, is worthy of rethinking. The situation we live through now helps us to understand the human casualties of war more. I have had direct contact with some of those refugees from Syria and Iraq and I can assure you they are war veterans."

We discussed the various ways he enables people to speak of their traumatic experiences impacting their lives, the mission of his work. We began with his projection onto the Lincoln Memorial for Veteran's Day, 2012, extended from several nights to one month. The War Veterans' Project, (November 8-December 9, 2012) meant for the returned soldiers from wars in Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan, consisted of a video projected onto the statue of Abraham Lincoln in Union Square, New York, animated with the voices, gestures, faces and bodies of 14 veterans of those wars. Speaking through Lincoln's mouth, in a square known for social protest, they were, according to Wodiczko, "partially themselves and partially Lincoln" with all the veterans' trauma that entails.

"My initial thought was that Lincoln was a war veteran himself," Wodiczko elaborated. "He had fought in a war before he became key in triggering the explosion of the Civil War, so he knew what war was, but he also was a war veteran because he participated in another war and in the Civil War, visiting battlefields. He was suffering some traumatic condition, we have no proof, but I think he was suffering melancholia. We have no proof because he could not write his memoirs, because he was killed. But there was a sense of guilt, which is part of protection."

He went on to say, "One of the soldiers I spoke to, who had fought in Vietnam, was talking about a nightmare that he has had for the past 40 years which has to do with blaming himself for not doing enough to protect his comrades' lives. But any survivor of trauma suffers guilt. So maybe these veterans help this Lincoln to speak about that condition. Once the projection was on, the question "Why Lincoln" was not asked. It represents the past, which cannot change. It's motionless and speechless, as a state of melancholia. It's locked in its own past, which is the problem for veterans and those who survive traumatic events.

"They cannot see any possibility of living past that event, so they repeat the trauma within their selves. That person must unfreeze himself and live with the past, and move on toward the future. So the person who animates the monument, who speaks through the statue, must animate, unfreeze himself first. What does this is a sense of mission — to say something to younger people to pass on their experience and hope that people will not be so stupid. The recruiter should make people think, you might die but if not, you will come back as a destroyed person.

"Yes, its Lincoln", he continued, "but it is a monument with a mission towards change to recover from trauma in a non-destructive way. You have to try to live with experience in a more productive way if others cannot speak, like Lincoln was unable to speak. This monument does what Lincoln could not do. This insistence to give people the ability to communicate and his ability, through his projects, to be useful in this process, to create conditions where people can regain a sense of mission and make use of this project for their own lives so they are agents who act on behalf of others" has become his mission.

"Out of Here, The Veterans' Project," was shown at the Institute for Contemporary Art in Boston (2009-10) wherein the artist simulated a mortar attack in Iraq with sound and projections, involving the innocent public suffering the consequences. The eight-minute video projection, full of loud sounds of blasts and chaos, and projections of light emanating from bombs, ends in an eerie silence, extending again his definition of veterans to the victims and their survivors.

We spoke of an image Wodiczko projected on Nelson's Column Nelson's Column Projection, (1985) in Trafalgar Square, London. Offered Nelson's column for a projection, he said, "I thought that if I don't do something with Trafalgar Square having all this equipment no one else will. Trafalgar Square is already a monument to world domination — there are monuments in every direction, testifying to the grandeur of the British empire, so you don't have to do much — anything is political in this context to transmit the ideological geography of this place, with Canada House, South Africa House, surrounding it and Nelson's Column in the middle.

The politics at that time toward South Africa was very friendly. Margaret Thatcher was in, and had given the South African government additional funding, but lots of people were protesting in front of South Africa house. "After obtaining permission to project the image of a hand onto Nelson's column, he changed the projection to an image of a barbed wire-surrounded intercontinental ballistic missile. Having prepared an additional slide of a swastika, he turned the projector onto the façade of South Africa House, upon which he projected that image for two hours. It remained until the police threatened to arrest him as a public nuisance. He removed and pocketed the slide.

Wodiczko said, "The swastika was a risky symbol to use but I was congratulated by many people protesting at South Africa House for using this symbol because apartheid (in South Africa) and racist Nazi actions are very similar." If ever one doubted that art is a weapon, or that symbols matter, the replacement of an image of an intercontinental missile with a universally identified symbol of hate proves the effectiveness of art and symbol.

Symbols matter. Large projections in public spaces are seen by many.

As war produces veterans who concern Wodiczko in his work, so children in Japan who will not communicate face to face also concern him, resulting in a text and video, shown on television in Japan (1991). According to Wodiczko, "In Japan, nobody speaks to each other, especially young people, school refusers (not dropouts) have lots of things to say but no one wants to listen. High school students have a very clear picture of what is wrong. So I decided to build equipment so I could pre-record what they had to say and blast it through their back."

Realizing that this non-confrontational communication is valuable, he used cameras and recorders, allowing the students to speak in real time. An additional monitor allowed them to see what was behind them. They could also transmit to another person. He elaborated, "In a museum situation, you can bring in a manikin, and that is what I did. If someone is used to seeing human figures in museums, it is sculpture, but this is not sculpture, it is equipment."

Although potential applications from someone overwhelmed by shame or traumatic experiences might make use of the equipment to help this person speak through his or her back, because face-to-face communication is difficult, this particular project is for this situation, according to the artist. When I asked if such equipment is needed in this country, he replied, "It is not as needed in this country, because there is a culture of direct speech. We have the first amendment. Someone might try to reduce our access to it, but there are always the courts."

In this country, our cities are unfortunately full of homeless people, many of them war or trauma veterans. Wodiczko worked in Denver with the Colorado Coalition for the Homeless developing a vehicle for the homeless to carry their possessions and articles to sell or recycle for money.

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The War Veteran Vehicle was organized by the City of Denver during the 2008 Democratic Convention. "Almost all were war veterans, or ex-soldiers who didn't go through war, although in America, they are entitled to call themselves war veterans," Wodiczko said. "Many of them kill themselves. The largest department at the Veterans Affairs Hospitals, after surgery, is psychotherapy. Those who were psychologically able to participate in the project took advantage of vehicles, shopping carts, which I developed with them.

"These homeless residents of cities are then equipped psychologically and physically to recycle and collect cans to sell. It's a very difficult job so they have to present themselves in public space as people of action with survival skills. Although only a small number of homeless people can make use of these vehicles, those people can communicate with non-homeless to a barrage of questions, "what are you doing? what is this?" and eventually "who are you?", engaging in dialogue, responding and becoming instructors, actors, operators, performers and storytellers.

"When they have a specially designed vehicle, they are legitimate workers, because they have a tool that is clearly not stolen. So there is more opportunity with this equipment to be agents."

He continued, "Some conversations made it clear for the public that the vehicle is not for them. It's not a cool new thing, and they don't need it. But the vehicle puts the public in contact with the person, not with a faceless scavenger. So communication is established, provoked by this vehicle, for what Professor Wodiczko calls a "scandalized faction". It articulates the presence of this faction giving them an opportunity to further unleash their talents, their sense of humor, in a Brechtian way." He said that at the time, there were 100,000 homeless in New York City. And they are in large part war veterans. In his view "Nothing is as awful as an experience not communicated."

According to Wodiczko, "It is often easier to speak to someone foreign to me than to the closest person. I create ways for people to confront their desires and develop a different level of consciousness about what to do with their lives, because the agency of those people develops."

For the projection Weimar Projection, (for Kunsfest Weimar, Bauhaus University, 2016), refugees from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq spoke through the statue of Goethe and Schiller, their bodies, faces and gestures projected onto statues of those eminent men. Developed at Bauhaus University with about 30 students and people from outside the university, it involved social work, media and more traditional work.

"I set up various workshops and then we had two evenings of projections," Wodiczko said, describing the process that made the work possible. "What was important is that members of the family could speak in real time, so it became a vehicle of speaking in real time, making it a project of mapping, so each member became the level of Goethe and Schiller, who were those refugees."

The projection was captured with a camera and available for viewing next door. People said things from conflicting positions and points of view. Wodiczko commented on the need for such interactions: "It seems debate is no longer possible within parliamentary procedure because one party dominates, so very little can really be discussed, so the real debate and voice must be projected or exchanged outside of parliament." He emphasized that, as the last resort for the democratic process, public space still has an aura of protection as a space for telling the truth.

The mall in Washington, home of massive protests from umbrella coalitions, has made democracy very visible in Washington. Although he pointed out that "protesters speak to make the situation better, it is not enough to give someone a microphone." His projects don't lend themselves to the open mic arrangement as they take appearing, recording and developing the project over a period that often takes a year or longer. When I suggested that he could perhaps project onto the Washington Monument. Wodiczko noted however that, "after September 11, authorities lost the sense of difference between projection and projectile, so even unpacking equipment might get you into trouble."

In Zoom Pavilion, shown first at Art Basel 2016, Rafael Lozano-Hemmer and Professor Wodiczko developed face recognition software to bring together people in couples. They were automatically picked, determined by their position in space and their body language, using technology and psychology to pair them. When people saw their faces shown on a screen, in couples, they enjoyed it. Wodiczko noted, "We are incredibly upset at being under surveillance but our narcissism demands that someone is watching us. So protecting ourselves from the cameras is usurped by our need to be recognized. Nobody asked us if there was a record. People were drawn into this."

At a time when immigrants, often victims of global war and violence are threatened in our nation, Wodjisko's work becomes even more relevant. We are all veterans, as we are all immigrants whose ancestors came to escape circumstances in other lands. We must all see ourselves projected upon our statues of liberty and justice and realize our responsibility to ourselves and our nation to welcome all victims, communicate with each other and treat each other with dignity. Wodjisko personifies these tenets in his projections and other work.

Wodiczko has created well over one hundred projects. Upon receiving the Hiroshima Art Prize in 2005, Wodiczko accepted it on the condition that he would try to deserve it with future work, developing public projects to "contribute to world peace as artists" quoting the text describing the prize.

He continues his investigations into allowing people to communicate with each other, to overcome their traumatic experiences and those passed on to them, to enable us to move on to create a better world where we care for and about each other. This is the very definition of social justice, and Krzysztof Wodiczko is the epitome of a social justice artist. His next project opens in Seoul, South Korea, in July.