

## Providing a Forum: An exercise in Democracy. Krzysztof Wodiczko, "*Homeless Projection: Place des Arts, Montreal, 2014*"

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# PROVIDING A FORUM: AN EXERCISE IN DEMOCRACY

On the official launch night of Krzysztof Wodiczko's *Homeless Projection: Place des Arts, I stand in the rain, amongst a crowd of art collectors and specialists, community outreach workers and members of the media*. After a brief introduction to the work, the projection begins, and I witness the strange unchoreographed movement of a group of strangers turning their heads upwards, in unison, towards the Théâtre Maisonneuve. I can see what appear to be tribunes, spectral figures projected on the stepped

the day in a *curia* (from *coviria*, a "meeting of men"), a building housing political and religious power, where the seating consisted of long, deep and shallow stepped stone benches (*subsellium*). This is where the patrician and plebeian senators would sit side by side, speak and, on occasion, vociferate. For centuries, this democratic model was held as sacrosanct and considered exemplary by the West. Of course, if we examine the tropes associated with its official history and the actual make-up of the govern-

allowed to hold office, even if subsequently freed by their owners. Classical scholar Benjamin Isaac argues that slavery in Ancient Rome established a form of proto-racism, foundational to the "invention" of modern racism itself.<sup>2</sup> Under various dictatorships, senators were appointed rather than elected and had to be of senatorial rank to begin with. Today, as in Antiquity, upholding the principles of true democracy is no easy task. Corruption and nepotism thrive in our era of civil unrest, severe climate change and

formers, who are usually spectators, become orators here, addressing their audience from above. Having already lived in Montreal some decades earlier and coming back as a visitor, Wodiczko said that he was quite shocked by the sheer number of homeless in the downtown core. This is what led him to focus on the subject for this project. The artist has done other works on the marginalized and downtrodden—the homeless poor, immigrants and veterans. In this instance, he wanted to reverse the usual dynamics and



Bas-relief of the senators at work.

roof of the building. After viewing the video loop in its entirety, I understand that the 21 speakers are destitute, and they are among the thousands of homeless citizens populating the downtown core. They speak publicly, perhaps, for the first time. As I listen to their stories of grief, hardship and trauma, I feel sadness and outrage, but also a sense of exhilaration at watching a subversive event unfold. Ever the revolutionary, Krzysztof Wodiczko has just given us a demonstration of the true spirit of democracy. Imagine what it would have been like to witness proceedings in a Roman Senate, only here, those assembled are more like anti-senators. In Ancient Rome, often referred to as the "cradle of democracy,"<sup>1</sup> senators would gather to debate on matters of



Krzysztof Wodiczko, *Homeless Projection: Place des Arts*, du 8 oct. au 23 nov. 2014. Photo: Kes Tagney. Avec l'aimable permission de l'artiste et Galerie Lelong, New York.

ing bodies of Republican and/or Imperial power, this model was not without its flaws and limitations. In a general sense: were the poor, people of colour, women or slaves represented? In a specific sense: during particular dictatorships, were the members unbiased and duly elected? The answer to these questions is of course no. There was a minimum age for senators (*senex* means "old man"), meaning that they were generally older and, since they worked for free, most were independently wealthy. Women had no direct political power and plebeians were only reluctantly admitted later on, but always with limited power. Only magistrates and promagistrates had the right to sit on a *curule seat*, all others had to be content with stone benches. Moreover, slaves were never

turf wars, in which welfare is offered to multinational corporations while austerity regimes are forced on the poor, and where globalized state surveillance is the one thing that governmental bodies agree on regardless of ideology.<sup>3</sup> Wodiczko clearly chose the Théâtre Maisonneuve for the stepped external configuration on its roof, but also for its vocation as a performance hall presenting works of music, opera and theatre. It is as though the artist wished to turn the building's outer shell inside out like a glove, making it fulfil its vocation on several levels at once. Without ever having to enter the building, city dwellers need only be passersby to become audience members. They are made to watch a group of people in an auditorium as they perform. The homeless per-

allow them to tell their side of the story, giving those in the mainstream a glimpse into their world and, perhaps, an understanding of how they perceive the city and those who inhabit it.<sup>4</sup> Wodiczko did his research in situ: he found the most appropriate nest from which to interact with the community, the projection structure onto which to pass the message and the support team with whom to realize the project. His role here is one of a gentle and humble guide. His attitude towards research in the community is exemplary, enlisting the help of the local St. Michael's Mission—an organization serving the homeless of downtown Montreal—and, notably, that of its Executive Director, George Greene. The mission is housed in the basement of St. John the

## KRZYSZTOF WODICZKO

### HOMELESS PROJECTION:

### PLACE DES ARTS,

### MONTREAL, 2014





Krzysztof Wodiczko, *Guests*, 2009.  
Video installation, 17:17 minutes.  
In situ at the Polish Pavilion, Venice Biennale, 2009.  
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Lelong, New York.



Evangelist Anglican Church and adjacent to an UQAM pavilion. It is situated in the Quartier des spectacles which holds the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal (MACM), the Maison symphonique de Montréal (across the street), along with the old concert hall complex of Place des arts, combining Wilfred-Pelletier hall and the Théâtre Maisonneuve. As an artist, Wodiczko considers that he is in a privileged position to facilitate communication and to bring attention to certain causes. He believes that it would be "asocial"<sup>5</sup> not to attempt to meet public expectations, not to rise to the occasion. For him, civic buildings and public spaces are ideal cultural communications devices: architecture provides the backdrop for the major events and revolts of our lives, and can also set the stage for an intervention. Public buildings and monuments can serve to promote debate and discourse, and hence contribute to a true democratic process. It is fitting that Wodiczko should use the external facades of familiar structures in order to reach a greater audience within the city. In this instance, the theatre is a backdrop for the itinerants who live among us. It is the literal surface upon which the projection occurs, but it is also the metaphorical place where the itinerants/players demonstrate, through their placement on the stepped superstructure and through their bearing, physicality and posture, their new attitude and place within that setting. "Once you have managed to reintegrate society.... You can't mix in with the others... nobody wants you to have a regular life."<sup>6</sup> Like stigmata, the scars of time and violence inflicted on the city's architecture bear physical witness to our collective history. And it seems evident, from the profoundly troubling stories shared by the homeless themselves, that they also come to this forum bearing their scars.<sup>7</sup> They are stigmatic and stigmatized. It took Wodiczko a year to research, develop and realize this project. Thanks to George Greene, he gained access to the homeless around the area of the Quartier des spectacles and found 21 articulate speakers brave enough to share their lives with us. Those who have come forward have done so willingly, demonstrating a deep bond of trust with George Greene, but also with Wodiczko himself. Encouraging these individuals to speak in public could not have been an easy task. They lead parallel lives and rarely enter into contact with established society. Generally distrustful of its structures, they circulate like ghosts in the core of the city. By painstakingly recording and listening to their conversations, Wodiczko and his team helped a group of people, who usually go unremarked, who seem faceless, not only to speak, but also to educate their audience on what it is like to be homeless, and thus change established concepts and prejudices on homelessness. Wodiczko is nothing if not egalitarian in his approach. It is clear that he wanted to get a good representation so we see men and women, people of different races and ethnic backgrounds, who speak French, English and even Inuktitut. The artist considers the participants as co-artists and their artistry as one of survival. Wodiczko demonstrates

the utmost respect for the words, metaphors and methods they choose to convey their message. It is Wodiczko's capacity to truly listen to the participants that is an essential factor to the success of this piece. As Wodiczko explains, those who are homeless have been traumatized and retraumatized.<sup>8</sup> They had to be able to overcome this in order to tell their stories. Before the official launch of the work, Wodiczko gave those who participated a special preview. For him, this was a vital component of the project, allowing the speakers to see themselves in a different light, perhaps for the first time, as articulate citizens of the polis. With this inclusive attitude, he gives the participants a vehicle for the transmission of their messages, in the hope that they make the best possible use of it. The artist reverses the normal hierarchical roles by using an elevated projection surface, forcing the viewers to tilt their heads upwards in order to view the work.<sup>9</sup> This particular placement does indeed change the dynamics. Viewers are made to look up at those who are speaking and to experience, in a very physical way, their own lower hierarchical placement and smaller size. It is important to note that the Brechtian personality is often bodily depicted through posture or stance. In this sense, non-Aristotelian theatre can be tied to the concept of *Haltung*. In *Haltung* (*was ist haltbar?* or what may withstand or stand up to pressure), emotion becomes integral to the action. *Homeless Projection* shows us a rare instance when people who normally frequent cultural institutions—considered to belong to the elite—are made to stand, or emotionally, mentally and physically withstand the daily pressures and stresses routinely experienced by the homeless. As Wodiczko himself puts it, the projection onto the monument is a "bodily metaphor."<sup>10</sup> Active and engaged reception is therefore an intrinsic part of the work. The audience members become part of the process and part of the performance, opening their hearts and minds, ears and eyes to the homeless. Wodiczko expressed the hope that *Homeless Projection* will in some way 'decrease' the distance between the homeless and other city dwellers, giving them a better understanding. The homeless are often held responsible for their unfortunate predicament. With *Homeless Projection*, viewers are forced to deal with their prejudices about those who have been unmoored from human attachments and roam our streets, clinging to life despite everything. They are made to reflect on their usual reflexes, defence mechanisms and victim-blaming habits. They are forced to listen to these particular homeless people, not generic homeless actors but individuals who are shown to have distinctive personalities with likes and dislikes. They have the generosity to tell us how they got there. Although it is mostly assumed that mental health and substance abuse issues are the root cause, endemic and multigenerational socioeconomic hardships are just as often to blame. In the *Lehrstück*, or learning play, the player's role is to teach through conscious distance and, using what Brecht has called the *Verfremdungseffekt*,<sup>11</sup> to 'estrangle' and make remarkable those characters and

events that would otherwise be considered commonplace and unremarkable. At the very least, for the time of the projection, these homeless citizens of Montreal have their voices heard and the previously established hierarchy is set aside, levelling a usually unequal playing field. Jonathan Jones, an art critic for *The Guardian*, recently published an article entitled "Poverty Lines: Where Are the Poor in Art Today?"<sup>12</sup> He cites various examples throughout art history—Caravaggio, Brueghel, de Ribera, van Gogh, Velazquez—but, with the exception of street artist Banksy, is unable to find a single contemporary artist who takes an interest in this issue. Well then, here is one, Krzysztof Wodiczko.

Francine Dagenais

**Francine Dagenais** has worked as an essayist, theorist and art historian in the field of visual and media arts for over twenty years. Her essays have appeared in many specialized magazines, such as *Art Tomorrow* and *Intermedialités*, and recently in *Drone*, a publication put out by Mois de la photo à Montréal (2013). As a curator, she has organized several events and exhibitions for artist centres, universities and organizations such as ISEA. She lives in Montreal.

1 There is no Greek equivalent to the Roman Senate. Although the Greeks created the theoretical and foundational structure for democratic rule, the Romans established its bureaucratic and organizational one.

2 Isaac, Benjamin. *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004.

3 Nigel Rodgers gives concise explanations of the lifestyle, structures and systems of Ancient Rome in his book, *Ancient Rome*. East Bridgewater: World Publications, Inc., 2008. Giving valuable information and debunking a number of myths in the process, Mary Beard's remarkable *The Roman Triumph*, on the triumphalism of the Roman Empire, is an important book providing valuable insight into the legacy of Rome. Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007.

4 Gwiazda, Wojtek. "Krzysztof Wodiczko talks about his 'Homeless Projection' at the Montreal Biennale." *RCI Radio-Canada International*, 27 October, 2014. <http://www.rcinet.ca/en/2014/10/27/krzysztof-wodiczko-talks-about-his-homeless-projection-at-the-montreal-biennale/>. Web. 3 December 2014.

5 *Ibid.*

6 Transcription of the words spoken by one of the 21 homeless in *Homeless Projection*.

7 Stigmata were used as a means of branding, or tattooing, both slaves and animals. The term stigmata was first used by St. Paul to refer to the scars he received in the name of Christ. St. Paul was tortured in prison, exposed to death, punished by the lash, beaten with rods, and lapidated. Biblical references: Cor. 11.23-25, Gal. 6.14, Phil. 3.10, Col. 1.24.

8 Gwiazda, *op. cit.*

9 In Brecht's *Lehrstücke* theatre, "in seiner kleinsten Grösse," or giving (one)self the smallest possible dimension, is about learning modesty.

10 Gwiazda, *op. cit.*

11 Brecht introduces the term *Verfremdungseffekt* in 1923, but he mentions the technique for the first time in reference to the play *Man Equals Man* (1925). Brecht, Bertolt. *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*. Ed. & Trans. John Willet. London: Methuen and New York: Hill and Wang, 1964. 91.

12 Jones, Jonathan. "Poverty Lines: Where Are the Poor in Art Today?" *The Guardian*, 30 December 2014. <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/jonathan-jonesblog/2014/dec/30/art-and-poverty-where-are-poor-in-art-today>. Web. 31 December 2014.