Realism as a Course of Life: A Conversation with Krzysztof Wodiczko

In May 2012, Scapegoat spoke with Krzysztof Wodiczko about his ongoing engagement with the concept of realism since he began practicing in Poland in the early 1970s.

But realism as such in the mind of people in the 70s was still closely connected to socialist realism, so its politics were linked to the authoritarian politics of the communist party, or those who elaborated on them. Politics was poisoned by Stalinism and post-Stalinism, and realism was also poisoned by the legacy of that time.

I would say that social realism, as opposed to socialist realism, was set to be reborn after the end of Stalinism in 1956, when I was still a high school student. At that time the Polish philosopher Adam Schaf wrote a spirited defense of social realism against all of the criticism that was coming from those who supported the abstraction and expressionism flourishing after the end of Stalinism. Schaf attempted to defend the tradition of realism in an intelligent way, by referring to political and aesthetic debates on the topic during the early years of the Soviet Union. However in the mid-1970s, I read Linda Nochlin’s book on nineteenth-century art, Realism.

It was translated into Polish by the Academy of Science, as one of a series of excellent books on topics such as semiotics, semiotics, which the censors allowed because they could be superficially connected to the government’s theoretical ambitions.

Nohlin’s position was officially accepted, but reading and discussing her book was not a very popular thing to do, and her book’s elaboration of "critical realism" has been generally not well understood. However, it was something that was very useful for me methodologically. I read it together with Fit the Circle of Constructivism by Andrzej Witos, which was extremely important for me because it raised the political dimensions of the constructivist movement in the Soviet Union in both its analytical and productivist phases. It became very clear to me that both of those books politics was central, the politics of realism and the politics of constructivism. In both cases however unspoken was the issue of how to translate the ideal relations of an individual to his or her real conditions of existence (Louis Althusser’s definition of ideology) as a condition for action in the “real world” toward social change. Whether it was Gustave Courbet, Eduard Manet, or the constructivist revolution, each attempted to move from the world of imagery, illusion, or representation into the world of action, production and the transformation of reality. Vertov, Rodchenko, and Lon湜itka were all Marxists. The realist painters of the nineteenth century were not Marxists. But Marx himself was born into that milieu; he was a realist.

Philosophers and politicians with socialist and anarchist tendencies, including the utopian socialist Saint-Simon and the anarchist Proudhon alluded both realist artists and the constructivists.

So after reading Nohlin, realism became a very attractive proposition to me. I met her recently, when I received an American Art Critics award for an exhibition at Whitney’sICA called... Out of Here. The Veterans Project. This was the first time I had met her since reading her book in the 70s and I thanked her. I said, “you didn’t just influence my life, you set the course of my life.”

And she responded, “I also learned a lot from you.” Which was nice of her to say, at least I discovered she was aware of what I was doing.

In fact, the work at the ICA, as well as the previous interior projects, like the one in Calle-

r Le Rong on the anniversary of September 11, If You See Something…” and Gifts at the 2009 Venice Biennale, were all referring to realist principles. I think this works resonated with Roman Jakobson’s ideas about realism, when he argues (using my words, not his) that a realist drills a hole in a wall between ourselves and reality. The artist’s task and decision was to determine where to drill this hole, at what point in this wall, because through this hole we will only see a fragment that stands for something much larger.

I think this may sum up the nineteenth-century vision of realism.

55 Can you briefly describe these works?

KW Galleries rarely have windows. They are usually pure interiors and as such they stand for all our own interiors. The gallery is a second interior. The first is inside our own skull.

With our eyes partially blind, we are always trying to figure out what is going on outside, but at the same time so much has accumulated in our inner world. So when we enter an empty gallery it is already filled with our memories. The trick that I developed in a number of works was to create the illusion that the wall is broken somehow, that there are windows where there were not before, projecting the image of a window with its view.

I did this first in the 1980s at Hal Bromm Gallery in New York City. There I photographed windows and the view from an apartment that was for sale in the East Village. In the photos views of urban ruins appear beyond the blids of the newly renovated apartment. I then projected these windows into the gallery, which was the same size, because the galleries in the East Village had the same size as the apartments, because it was a residential area. I called the piece The Real Estate Projection and I added some real estate magazines and binoculars, just to add a romantic-archaeological aspect to the projection. This was a classic realist trick—it broke the wall into reality—showing people a scene that many people saw every day. Everyone came to the gallery, saw it everywhere, but didn’t expect the gallery to actually become this place, so they had to realize their relationship between the art world and real estate development. The work resonated with the critique made by Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara Gendel Ryan in their essay, “The Fine Art of Gentrification,” the project emphasized the neighborhood’s uneven development and the role of artists in real estate development and in constructing a romantic vision of what Neil Smith would later call The New Urban Frontier.

In 2005, I resisted this strategy in an exhibition at Galerie LeLong in Chelsea. Again there were windows projected, but this time you couldn’t see through them. They looked as if they were made of frosted glass, a very typical material in Chelsea galleries. They let light in, but you couldn’t see through them unless somebody knew right against them, and then there is a shocking moment when you realize that there is somebody there, and you can see many close details, but only while the person remains right at the glass.

I projected these windows as if they opened into a vestibule, a type of space you could imagine in Chelsea—it could have been a hotel lobby or the gallery entrance. Behind the windows stood people who were talking about the way they were being mistreated by Homeland Security, who had lost their jobs, who had been deported, who were discriminated against. You could hear what they were saying, but you couldn’t see them unless they leaned close to the glass. In this case the wall was not exactly broken. On the one hand, the viewers sensed the fugitive relations we each have to the outside world, and on the other, viewers had a strong feeling that the outside world was very close, that it could almost break through the glass, creating a disaster. There was someone with whom you have a voyeuristic relationship, a shadow of somebody that could actually be very close.

Perhaps we would have something that you weren’t supposed to hear or see something that you should report. The piece takes its very name from the Department of Homeland Security’s slogan “If you see something, say something.”
It is about the reality that is both dangerously close, frighteningly close, with which you don’t want to have reason to connect, but in which you only have a very tenuous sense. So it’s not the clas- sic realist trick, where I break the wall in order to see reality. In that piece you actually don’t see it, but you see what you don’t see. It attempts to illustrate how little we see, how impossible it is to really establish contact with reality, while at the same time bringing us close enough to it to realize how frightening this reality is, how unaccept- able it is, even if we don’t understand it. It also is impossible for us to identify with those people whose situations are worse than we can even imagine. This is a different form of realism because it exclu- sively the impossibility of gaining access to reality; while also giving us a hint of what it is we cannot access to. It is the reality of our interior; the authority of these structures you are subjected to and which you see outside. Like Homeland Security, the wall and the milky windows keep you from knowing what is going on. They can protect you from your own fears, or what Bush called “terror.” In Polish, terror only refers to the outside world, but in English it can be inside you. Bush’s War on Terror was in fact a war against the formal terror- ism, not against terrorism itself. A war was staged against the feeling of terror produced by potential terrorist attacks, which of course created its own paranoia. The Department of Homeland Security asked you to confront your fear of terror by being vigilant, which in my piece meant that you hear or see something beyond the milky glass you should report it. All the things that were said outside the gallery were connected, despite the fact that they were actual stories of Homeland Security mishandling a situation. Of course, I am strategically working under the formal terror, but reality has so many dimensions here, external and inner reali- ties, and the fear of reality is itself real.

You have explained one dimension of your work. You use a technique that you seem to get at a very fundamental relationship between a psychic space and the world outside, which is active in many other aspects of your practice, certainly in the exterior projections, but also in the vehicles, which are outside in the city. These two poles seem to be fundamental to any conception of realism: on the one hand naïve realism argues that things just exist in the world and on the other, critical theory claims that reality is fundamentally about how we think and perceive the world, so it is very much about subjectiv- ity. We think it’s great that you started with these interior works because in that way they resonate quite clearly with nineteenth-century notions of real- ism in art, especially in painting or film, but it would be interesting if you could now explain how the outdoor projec- tions and vehicles operate in relation to reality.

There is a big difference between my interior and exterior projects, especially in terms of their scale. When you are outside a building, the façade is too close for you to be able to project yourself onto it. You are like a baby, subjected to a projection screen. You feel this perception of a nameless survivor. This realism is different from the realism in art, especially in painting or film, in that it addresses the relationship between a psychic space and the world outside, which is active in many other aspects of your practice, certainly in the exterior projections, but also in the vehicles, which are outside in the city. These two poles seem to be fundamental to any conception of realism: on the one hand naïve realism argues that things just exist in the world and on the other, critical theory claims that reality is fundamentally about how we think and perceive the world, so it is very much about subjectiv- ity. We think it’s great that you started with these interior works because in that way they resonate quite clearly with nineteenth-century notions of realism in art, especially in painting or film, but it would be interesting if you could now explain how the outdoor projec- tions and vehicles operate in relation to reality.

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Any attempt to animate the outside of a building means something very different from the anima- tion of my exterior projections with video and sound (rather than side projection), there is somebody else there in the building, so your projection meets another projection. In many of my works, a building is made to speak through the voice and gestures of a person who may be suffering horrifying life conditions, child abuse for instance, which as a member of the public you may not want to know about. You might feel implicated in the condition, because you might have abusive tendencies yourself, or maybe you were involved and you deny it. It’s a frightening notion to simply have your own projec- tion and identification with the structure, because there is somebody else there and something of you is too that you may not want to confront.

This is a different realism. Here, because of scale, somebody who is supposed to be very small, even invisible, becomes fifty times bigger. In relation to that person you are fifty times smaller. You are forced to see the world from a bottom-up perspective and you feel this perception in your neck, you feel how small you are, which means you have something to learn from this person as if you were a student or a child. Through the

authority of these structures you are subjected to their sense of reality. This is a manipulative trick, because it relies on the structure’s own oppressive power, which of course should itself be questioned. This is exactly what I did in my earlier slides- how I demolished a building where the whole video-based projections with sound and motion narrative, someone else is speaking through those structures. So it’s not just a visual image (es- pecially of their photographic documents) there is some kind of action, some kind of struggle, some kind of resistance, because it’s not just this man who is animating the structure, it’s somebody else who is doing it with my help. In my works, that other person is a part of a reality that is being completely repressed by these structures, especially of their photographic documents) there is some kind of action, some kind of struggle, some kind of resistance, because it’s not just this man who is animating the structure, it’s somebody else who is doing it with my help. In my works, that other person is a part of a reality that is being completely repressed by these structures...
Alien Staff was realist in the sense that it provided equipment for immigrants to become realists through their own hands and minds. In his own words, "I wanted to start with what was wrong, to protest, to break the walls of all the discussion.

Both voices and objects became starting points for discussion. Around them there was always an ongoing re-narration and disruption of what the artist had been placed inside, like relics in a reliquary. Both voices and objects became starting points for discussion. Around them there was always an ongoing re-narration and disruption of what had been placed inside, like relics in a reliquary. Both voices and objects became starting points for discussion. Around them there was always an ongoing re-narration and disruption of what had been placed inside, like relics in a reliquary. Both voices and objects became starting points for discussion. Around them there was always an ongoing re-narration and disruption of what had been placed inside, like relics in a reliquary. Both voices and objects became starting points for discussion. Around them there was always an ongoing re-narration and disruption of what had been placed inside, like relics in a reliquary. Both voices and objects became starting points for discussion. Around them there was always an ongoing re-narration and disruption of what had been placed inside, like relics in a reliquary. Both voices and objects became starting points for discussion. Around them there was always an ongoing re-narration and disruption of what had been placed inside, like relics in a reliquary. Both voices and objects became starting points for discussion. Around them there was always an ongoing re-narration and disruption of what had been placed inside, like relics in a reliquary. Both voices and objects became starting points for discussion. Around them there was always an ongoing re-narration and disruption of what had been placed inside, like relics in a reliquary. Both voices and objects became starting points for discussion. Around them there was always an ongoing re-narration and disruption of what had been placed inside, like relics in a reliquary.

The core of the process is the way we act in the world, the way we act in our own lives. The way we act in relation to ourselves, to each other, to the world.

Faced with the mutability of realism, this becomes a means of falsifying and masking it. Under different historical conditions, this same realism may take on different forms, and at the same time engage a much broader reality of war in order to change it.

It seems to me that your dynamic, changeable, scaffold-like structures, are deliberately set up in relation to the actuality of war. Under different historical conditions, this same realism may take on different forms, and at the same time engage a much broader reality of war in order to change it.

The realism of this design is different than the one Lord Nelson referenced to, but she approached this issue through the structure of realism. This design projects an image of design projects in the nineteenth century of speaking of their technical and physical aspects, such as the transparency of the architecture of Auguste Perret. However, in the case of my work, I am working with a more Marxist realism.

We’re not exactly asking about structural realism, but rather the situation in which the artist acts in the world, engaging people, rather than working on their own, and producing something practical or functional.

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example of “naked truth.” You know she was a prostitute. It was a huge act on his part: he simply decided to point this woman as she was always depicted in the history of painting, but in this case he made her real social status and existential position explicit. She was looking at the viewers as if she was trying to estimate if they had enough money to pay her for her services. It is quite a provocative look, much more than a gaze, the aggressive and active position of a working woman. That is what you can see in the look of those people who are using Allen Staff or speak through those monumental projections. In Tijsiyou you see women speaking, you see them physically there and you see them projected there. It is very much a projection of the naked truth, and in this way it refers not only to the word “projection,” but also “projecting” meaning active. People can be projectors, so with the use of projection equipment they themselves become projectors of truth. It’s not that you are gazing at a passive image, people are actually projecting themselves onto you.

55 In that sense, projection is different from representation; it is a kind of presentation. KW

Literals, pro-action is a “forth-thrown”—an act and a process of throwing forth. That means you are throwing the truth forward for change, just as you do in a design project (pro-ject). However, projection is also related to re-action. You always reject something in order to project something else. In this sense you project something in the hope there will be some change for the better. So protest and project are connected with any type of critical design that incorporates doubt based in the rejection of something wrong. How does this relate to realism?

Pathos

is a critical projection and the parabola is a critical projector. In the veteranz vehicle project, the equipment extends the veterans themselves as projectors, in public space they project, they are no longer operating rocket launchers, but they operate a projector, hitting blank walls and façades with some truth, and inscribing their thoughts and words onto the wall even for a moment, so that the sounds of people and the city reverberate with what had been silent. To bring to light what is kept in the dark, to bear the silence of the city, the voca-
tion of realities. In this conversation we haven’t really grasped all the key elements that make a difference between present day realist methods and historical ones, because I haven’t really sorted this out.

55 You have outlined many different con-
cepts of realism within your practice and then brought them together un-
der the idea of the projection of truth. One idea that resonated very power-
fully in your discussion of interiority is Jacques Lacan’s concept of the Real. You mentioned two of Lacan’s three categories of the psyche; the imaginary and the symbolic. You also referenced Althusser’s use of Lacan in his definition of ideology. “Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence.” What about the Real? Is it not a privileged category in relation to reality? If the Real is the thing that cannot be symbolized, if it punches a hole in the imagi-
ary, perhaps then in questions of trauma as authentic experience that the Real might resonate with your work.

KW

Trauma is definitely a part of my work, because it creates this Real. The process of work-
ing on those projections or operating the instru-
ments often brings forward elements that are shattered or repressed as a result of traumatic experiences. Within these processes people often find an emotional charge and attach words to it, as a kind of a reanimation of oneself and a re-

collection of memories that were shattered or fragmented. D.W. Winnicott called trauma a “freeing of the fixation situation.” So if you do have to unfreeze it, so to speak, and again and bring some memory of the traumatic events back to consciousness. In order to start hearing oneself, you say certain things. Sometimes in my projects I ask people to prepare by doing some writing. A different part of the brain governs writing than speech, so sometimes when they write something and then read it, or speak about it, it really shocks them, but in a good way. Then bearing and seeing themselves speak in public, witnessed by a mass of people, or even when no one else is around, is a serious breakthrough for people who are isolated or disconnected from society, even when their memories are too painful for them to recall certain things, or talk about them. That’s the way these people can make use of my projects. Some of them give quite a lot and some of them less. Some don’t even take part in the project. They simply go away because they are not ready for it or don’t trust it.

I don’t think that trauma is something that Lacan explored very much himself, and Winnicott didn’t go very far either. Even Freud aban-
doned his interesting early work on the theory of trauma. Today there are many non-verbal methods of healing trauma. I am now in contact with people who work with trauma patients and they are quite interested in aspects of the way I work. Although, they are moving toward an exploration of body and eye movement instead of language to help people revive systems shattered by trauma. To some degree my work also was bodily productive and action in public space is not that directly verbal, but it still relies heavily on language, the realm of the symbolic. Maybe there is something else that I could do if I kept working with the survivors of trauma to make the work more performative and bodily. Still, profes-
sionals who work on trauma are entirely focused on the survivors, rather than those people who surrounded them. My work is on the other side of trauma as well, on those who are numb, on people in society at large who haven’t experienced trauma. If Foucault focuses on “fear-
less speech,” it’s also worth thinking about open and “fearless listening.” The Lacanian Real is there on all sides of a trauma: certainly in those who survived a horrible event, in those who experienced secondary trauma, and those who have never experienced it. It covers everybody in a moment of war. For the next fifty years trauma will be a major clinical problem in the United States. Society is sick. So what should artists and cultural organizations do? How can we respond to this reality, or this reality? It feels as if nobody is talking about this.

Notes
