

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

**Scapegoat Says** We would like to start with the debates about realism in Poland in the 1960s. Andrzej Turowski’s essay “Wodiczko and Poland in the 1970s” discusses these questions in the 1950s, 60s and 70s, focusing especially on the debate between formalism and realism. He argues that in the early 50s socialist realism was dominant, then following the end of Stalinism in the mid-50s there was a quick turn toward abstraction.<sup>1</sup> Could you talk about how you saw your work developing in relation to these debates.

**Krzysztof Wodiczko** I really began working as an artist in the 1970s, so the debates of the 1960s happened before my time. Turowski is bringing a historical background to the 1970s in order to provide a ground for readers who know nothing about that particular period, which was curious for its openness and apparently liberal relationship to art in comparison to socialist realism.

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 collaborated with 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 Schaff 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. Schaff 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*.<sup>2</sup> It was translated into Polish by the Academy of Science, as one of a series of excellent books on topics such as semiology, semiotics, which the censors allowed because they could be superficially connected to the government’s theoretical ambitions.

Nochlin’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 really an eye-opener for me methodologically. I read it together with *In the Circle of Constructivism* by Andrzej Turowski, which was extremely important for me because it raised the political dimension of the constructivist movement in the Soviet Union in both its analytical and productivist phases.<sup>3</sup> It became very clear to me that in both of those books politics was central, the politics of realism and the politics of constructivism. In both cases (however utopian, or even often misguided) there was an attempt to challenge the imaginary relations of an individual to his or her own real conditions of existence (Louis Althusser’s definition of ideology) as a condition for action in “the real world” toward social change.<sup>4</sup> Whether it was Gustave Courbet, Eduard Manet, or the constructivist revolution,<sup>4</sup> each attempted to move from the world of imagery, illusion, or representation into



Krzysztof Wodiczko, *If You See Something....*, 2005, composite view, installation at Galerie Lelong, New York. Courtesy of Galerie Lelong, New York.

the world of action, production and the transformation of reality. Vertov, Rodchenko, and Lisitsky were all Marxists. The realist painters of the nineteenth century were not Marxist, 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 affected both realist artists and the constructivists. So after reading Nochlin, realism became a very attractive proposition to me. I met her recently, when I received an American Art Critics award for an exhibition at Boston’s ICA 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 projections, like the one in Galerie Lelong on the anniversary of September 11<sup>th</sup>, *If You See Something....*, and *Guests* at the 2009 Venice Biennale, were all referring to realist principles. I think these works resonate 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 in for something much larger. I think this may sum up the nineteenth-century vision of realism.<sup>5</sup>

**SS** 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 blinds of

the newly renovated apartment. I then projected those 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-anthropological 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. Whoever 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.”<sup>6</sup> The project emphasized the neighbourhood’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*.<sup>7</sup>

In 2005, I revisited 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 leans 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 foggy relation we each have to the outside world, and on the other, viewers had a strange 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 you would hear 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 much contact and of which you only have a very foggy sense. So it's not the classic realist trick, where I break the wall in order to see reality. In this 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 unacceptable it is, even if we don't understand it. It is also impossible for us to identify with those people whose situations are worse than we can imagine. This is a different form of realism because it exposes the impossibility of gaining access to reality, while also giving us a hint of what it is we cannot gain access to. It is the reality of our interior; the gallery provides space for our fears and uncertainty about the world.

It also projects the interior against the exterior. We are inside, but all the issues and threats that come from the exterior are managed by the Minister of the Interior—or Homeland Security. It also refers obliquely to Orwell's windowless Ministry of Love in *1984*, which housed Oceania's Thought Police. There you can only imagine what is inside, and when you are inside you don't see what is outside. In my piece you are trapped inside by the same Homeland Security that keeps those people 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 fear of terrorism, 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 when you hear or see something beyond the milky glass you should report it. All the things that were said outside the gallery were suspicious, despite the fact that they were actually stories of Homeland Security mishandling a situation. Of course, I am stretching realism quite far, but reality has so many dimensions here, external and inner realities, and the fear of reality is itself also real.

**SS** You have explained one dimension of your practice: interior projections. They 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 interiority. 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 projections and vehicles operate in relation to reality.**

**KW** There is a big difference between my interior and exterior projects, especially the projections. When you are outside a building, the façade is taller than you are. It's no longer your interiority that you are confronting, but a superior body, in the shadow of which you live—a kind of father figure. You feel it in your neck when you look up. You are like a baby, subjected to a projection from the thing that looms over you, while at the same time you project yourself onto the structure. On the one hand it projects onto you, and on the other you identify with it; you would like to be like it. The seductive aspect of monuments is that everybody wants to be eternal, to have certain power and also to feel as lonely as them. Alone,

yet having some power over the world. So the relationship a person has to architecture from the outside is very different from being inside. Any attempt to animate the outside of a building means something very different from the animation of an interior. When you encounter one of my exterior projections with video and sound (rather than slide 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 their condition, because you might have abusive tendencies yourself, or maybe you were abused and you deny it. It's frightening not to simply have your own projection and identification with the structure, because there is somebody else there and something of you is there too that you may not want to confront.

So 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



Krzysztof Wodiczko, Arc de Triomphe: World Institute for the Abolition of War, Paris. Visualization and design assistance by BINAA: Burak Pekoglu, Brendan Warford, Kevin Driscoll. Courtesy of Krzysztof Wodiczko and BINAA.

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 slide-based public projections, but in the more recent video-based projections with sound and motion narrative, someone else is speaking through those structures. So despite their visual similarity (especially of their photographic documents) there is almost no relationship to my previous projections, because it's not me 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 most people. Who wants to have the biggest voice in the city be a man who was beaten up by his brother when he found him in bed with a man in the middle of the night? Who wants to hear that? Or, who wants to hear about some illegal immigrant who is doing all the work to make the food you eat and is paid so little that he or she starves? This person works like a slave and now they are telling you about it, sharing with you their perception of the world. Here, reality is being transmitted by symbolic structures that are imaginary and their reality may be revealed in the process.

If the tower stops functioning as a screen for your own projections because it is disrupted by someone else's appearance, then you also realize that something has been disrupted. It's a wakeup call.

In the earlier slide projections I tried to really re-actualize symbolic structures in the present, to see the frightening continuity between what's happening today and what those structures meant when they were made, by turning war memorials into symbolic war machines. Rather than simply commemorating those who died for their country, these structures actually perpetuate certain beliefs, which is why I began projecting onto buildings. The last one I did was in 1991 in Madrid during the first Persian Gulf War. There I projected a skeleton holding a gun and a petrol nozzle on either side of the Arco de la Victoria, dedicated in 1956 to Franco's army, in order to recall the phantasm of civil war. The socialist government had promised never to bring Spain into a war again, but under the pressure of NATO, the Spanish armada was sent to the conflict in the Gulf. Afterward people learned that 100,000 civilians had been killed, a fact that was mostly overlooked in the United States, but which activated public discussion in Spain. In response to this I projected the word "¿Cuántos?" onto the top of the monumental arch. This word has two

meanings, "how much?" and "how many?" So it questioned both the cost of oil and the number of people killed. This was also a reactivation, or re-actualization, of a historic war machine in a time when a new war machine was underway.

At that time I wasn't able to do video projections in the way I am doing them now. Not only were video projectors not strong enough, but I also did not have enough experience working with people. I developed this experience through projects like *Alien Staff* (1994) and *Mouthpiece (Porte-Parole)* (1996). Those projects forced me to learn techniques of working with people, so they could tell their stories. In these projects I worked with people who know what reality is, because they lived through it and are still surviving it. They see the world from the point of view of its wounds. They have a bottom-up perception. As Walter Benjamin would say, they see it from the perspective of the vanquished. That is what realists always wanted to achieve, to see the real conditions of life, to understand them from the perspective of a nameless survivor. This realism was possible in *Alien Staff*, which built on my earlier experience with *The Homeless Vehicle Project*. In the latter project there was something missing: capacities of communication and memory. Once homeless people began to use it in

a performative way, they started to speak of the conditions in which they lived. I was surprised how much the homeless operators, performers, presenters, and consultants had to say that the vehicle could not register, edit, or project.

*The Homeless Vehicle* was made in 1988 and 1989 in New York City. When I moved to Paris in 1991 and was surrounded by the xenophobia of Jean-Marie Le Pen,<sup>8</sup> I continued making similar equipment for immigrants. But because the issue of xenophobia was primary, I realized I could not make a vehicle; instead I would have to make communicative equipment that would be both a container and transmitter of immigrants' experiences in public space. There is a wall between immigrants' conditions of life, their perceptions and their experience, and the world in which they live. Their prophetic speech was proof to me of what was wrong with the entire democratic system, because the level of democracy in any country is measured by its relationship to strangers. Sodom and Gomorrah were punished because people misbehaved toward strangers. The democratic process is measured by its level of inclusion, and its ability to accept new discourses, in order to produce an agonistic democracy that doesn't force people to integrate, but accepts the need to disintegrate itself.



*Alien Staff* was realist in the sense that it provided equipment for immigrants to become realist artists themselves. It allowed them to testify to what was wrong, to protest, to break the walls of miscommunication by recording, editing, and presenting testimony of their experiences. In public space, this object with its recorded images and voices became a focus for discussion. Around it there was always an ongoing re-narration and disruption of what the staff was saying and what had been placed inside it, like relics in a reliquary. Both voices and objects became starting points for discussions about the fragments of the narrative inscribed within this thing, which meant that the very existence of the stranger was being explored, unleashing a passionate exchange. Real passions and emotions were triggered by this equipment, but throughout the exchange the immigrant remained very much at the centre of the process, mediating different people's responses. *Alien Staff* was a very informative work for me; it was not as good as I would like it to have been as a design, but both it and the *Homeless Vehicle* were very interesting experiences that helped prepare me for my most recent projects.

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We would like to ask you about the role of design. It was constructivism that first articulated the role of design as the vanguard of artistic transformation, right? In constructivism the autonomy of the artwork is abandoned so that it can engage with and transform everyday life. The moment when the boundary between art and design breaks down offers us another kind of realism, wherein the artist engages with reality instead of representing it.
- KW

The realism of this design is different than the one Linda Nochlin referred to, but she approached this issue through the structural realism of design projects in the nineteenth century, 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 Brechtian realism.
- SS

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.

**KW** True, there was also functional realism. The fact that artists reestablish contact with reality by working with others who have had even more contact with reality and then designing something with those people—not for them, but with them—is definitely realism. Perhaps, this already happened in the nineteenth century, with the utopian realists, such as Fourier and Saint-Simon. In my work there is an attempt to be transparent. I called the process behind the *Homeless Vehicle* a “scandalizing functionalism,” a method related to functionalism, but a perverted notion of it. Functionalism of the Bauhaus type always sought a solution, while my work functioned as a solution for an imaginary service, rather than an ultimate condition. The *Homeless Vehicle* was a political project, rather than pure design. It was designed to help produce new conditions that would render it obsolete. The reality to which this vehicle was responding could not be accepted; it needed to be transformed. The utopia here, if there is one, rests in the very hope that projects of this sort will help to build a new consciousness of reality to make the projects themselves no longer necessary. In a way the recognition of reality, the conditions of life and existence embedded in the design object, and the operators were the sole substance of the work. That's what makes a link between *Alien Staff* and the other equipment and projections that I developed with people. They are definitely part of the realist tradition, but I have no theory of realism.

- SS

It is an interesting question because we are sitting at a school of design. Some of your recent works, such as *The Arc de Triomphe: World Institute for the Abolition of War*, or the *Monument to the Abolition of Slavery* in Nantes, are very much design projects. They are highly symbolic design objects and at first glance they appear to function more in that realm than as practical spaces. However the Arc de Triomphe project is both a deconstructive and constructive pedagogical working machine in addition to being simply a symbol in the city.
- KW

Yes, the Arc de Triomphe project is clearly a working thing. The *Monument to the Abolition of Slavery* was deprived of its initial program. It was supposed to be a monitoring station that would transmit present day abolitionist actions
- against contemporary slavery. There was a real working dimension to it that was never really realized. However, what I proposed with the Arc de Triomphe project was the opposite. In this work I want this to really respond to changing realities and also help transform that reality. So I attached a machine to the symbolic skin or body of the Arc de Triomphe itself, which is purely ideological, a machine that perpetuates certain beliefs—so that the new spaces that surround the arch are designed to help to monitor, map, and alter changing realities, so there will be less conflict and less war. At the same time, the *Institute for the Abolition of War* is designed to un-poison culture by studying the architecture that actually perpetuates this culture and introducing an analytical and critical aspect to the working memorial. The project operates on two sites, attaching itself to the existing monument in a deconstructive way and at the same time engages a much broader reality of war in order to change it.
- The *Memorial to the Abolition of Slavery* also has a critical dimension, but is a more petrified structure closer to a classic monument. Julian Bonder, architect and co-author of the project, and I both congratulate the City of Nantes for letting us accomplish quite a lot within and through this monumental form. The project does more than most monuments of this sort, and that is their achievement. However, it was never fully realized according to the original competition-winning design concept that I proposed initially as a sole author. So my motivation to launch the *Arc De Triomphe* project was partially a result of being disturbed by the resistance of politicians and bureaucrats to this kind of project, their fear of creating something that will in fact act. At the speech during the opening of the memorial, I ended: “Il faut faire quelque chose” (“one must do something”). It is not enough to commemorate. I think the city is doing things—not directly through the memorial,
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- Fall of the Vendôme Column, from The Illustrated London News, May 27, 1871. Following the Paris Commune, Gustave Courbet was accused and convicted of inciting the destruction of the Vendôme Column, because it glorified imperialism and war.
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- Krzysztof Wodiczko, *Nelson's Column Projection*, 1985, Trafalgar Square, London, United Kingdom. Courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York.
- but around it and with it and taking advantage of it. I want things to be done through the projects themselves and not simply around them. So there is another aspect of realism here, more of a pragmatic aspect, if there is a link between realism and pragmatism.
- SS

Your *Arc de Triomphe* intervention has a relationship to the original monument that reminds me of the relation between the *Homeless Vehicle Project* and other public artworks that were built at the same time in New York City. This is something that Rosalyn Deutsche's piece “Uneven Development” discusses, the contrast between the act of symbolic legitimation that the *Homeless Vehicle* produces for homeless people and the symbolic legitimation that works of public art in Battery Park produce for surrounding real estate development.<sup>9</sup> Despite the fact that the vehicle does not operate as a monument, it operates in relation to monumental works of public art in a similar way. Insofar as it is a nomadic and relational device, it makes me think of the beautiful description of realism that Turowski references in his essay when he quotes the Polish constructivist Władysław Strzemiński: “There is no one absolute realism, no realism as such, but there is such a thing as a concrete realism, conditioned by given historical relations. Under different historical conditions this very same realism ceases to be a way of disclosing reality and becomes a means of falsifying and masking it.”<sup>10</sup> It seems to me that your dynamic, changeable, scaffold-like structures, are deliberately set in an oppositional relation to monumental art, which in its very petrified form is unable to keep up with the mutability of realism. This is why your détournments of these monuments are so provocative: your projections are three hours long, and they are always performed in relation to present conditions.
- KW

Courbet thought that he could create historical paintings as long as they were also contemporary, about and of the present. He projected the present onto the past and argued that the opposite of realism was not idealism, but “falsism.” What does “false” mean here? It refers to art that falsifies reality. Truth is a fundamental issue in my work as well, a truth that is wrapped up in public space, democracy, and *parrhesia* [the necessity to speak openly]. Right now I am interested in the realism of the democratic process itself. The *parrhesiastes* are the truth tellers—true realists—those who speak of their own lived experience in order to confront the fakeness of all of the false promises that authorities make and see the discrepancy between them and reality. In my work it is often the elected officials that need to be questioned, for what they really are doing and how they respond to real lives, needs, and critical issues. If the truth was the centre of *parrhesia*, then provocative dialogue by cynics was actually often used to get to the core of the matter, what is the true situation here. Even Socrates to some degree was a realist, because he was trying to get to the truth of people's lives. In that sense the equipment that I designed, and the processes users engage in are interconnected here in terms of design and projection. Together they lead to *franc-parler*, free speaking. These projects could come up with a proposal or vision, but they don't have to. In that way my work is *cynicistic*, not cynical—it doesn't come up with proposals in order to resolve problems, but it actually reveals the truth, the reality of somebody's life, the injustice. The risk involved in this is a realist risk. Following Diogenes' example, Courbet too took lots of risks. Perhaps his greatest risk, his statement calling for the destruction of the Vendôme column, was also an attempt to destroy falsity through realism. But he took many other smaller risks as well. In *A Burial at Ornans* he was reprimanded for showing people who were “ugly.” They we beautiful paintings of real people who lived through real (and ugly) conditions of their existence. This appears as a problem of pure representation, but it is also a matter of real relationships that were activated during the process of making the painting itself. Courbet had to paint those people himself and often he would work with them in a performative and narrative way in his studio. Like when he put himself at the centre of a painting, *The Artist's Studio*, surrounded by a wide assortment of characters. He was referring to Saint-Simon's stages of life, but at the same time he was representing a spectrum of society in his studio, the class structure of France.

What Manet did with *Olympia* is also a good
- Scapegoat

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example of “naked truth.” You know she was a prostitute. It was a brave act on his part: he simply decided to paint 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 *Alien Staff* or speak through those monumental projections. In Tijuana 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 “projector,” 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.

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

**KW** Literally, pro-jection is a “forth-throw”—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 rejection. You always reject something in order to project something else. In this sense you project because you are protesting (*pro-testing*). There is a relationship between project and protest. Protest is made of *pro* plus *testis*, or witness. I testify in order to pose something. Maybe I don’t propose, but I act in the hope for something different in the future. When I bear witness to a wrong, I do it 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?

*Parrhesia* is a critical projection and the *parrhesiastes* is a critical projector. In the veteran 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



Krzysztof Wodiczko, *South Africa House Projection*, 1985, London, United Kingdom. Courtesy of Galerie Lelong, New York. This projection was done the same night as the Nelson Column projection by turning the projector ninety degrees.

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 hear the silence of the city, is the vocation of realists. 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.

**SS** You have outlined many different concepts of realism within your practice and then brought them together under the idea of the projection of truth. One idea that resonated very powerfully 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 imaginary, then perhaps it is in questions of trauma as authentic experience that the Real might resonate with your work.<sup>11</sup>

**KW** Trauma is definitely a part of my work, because it creates this Real. The process of working on those projections or operating the instruments often brings forward elements that are shuttered 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 revival of memories that were shuttered or frozen. D.W. Winnicott called trauma a “freezing of the failure situation.”<sup>12</sup> So you have to unfreeze it, so you can act again and bring some memory of the traumatic events back to consciousness. In order to start hearing yourself, 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 hearing 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 those 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 abandoned 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 uses bodily performance and action in public space that is not 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 keep

working with the survivors of trauma to make the work more performative and bodily. Still, professionals who work on trauma are entirely focused on the survivors, rather than those people who surround them. In my work, I focus 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 “fearless speech,” it’s also worth thinking about open and “fearless listening.”<sup>13</sup> 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 Real? It feels as if nobody is talking about this. x



Krzysztof Wodiczko, *The Real Estate Projection*, 1987, Installation view at Hal Bromm Gallery, New York. Courtesy of Galerie Lelong, New York.



Krzysztof Wodiczko and Julian Bonder, *Memorial to the Abolition of Slavery*, Nantes, France. Photograph by Philippe Ruault. Courtesy of Krzysztof Wodiczko and Julian Bonder.

Notes

1. Andrzej Turowski, “Wodiczko and Poland in the 1970s” in *Krzysztof Wodiczko*, ed. Duncan McCorquodale (London UK: Black Dog Publishing, 2011).
2. Linda Nochlin, *Realism* (London: Penguin Books, 1971).
3. The original title of Andrzej Turowski’s book was *The Constructivist Revolution*, but he was forced to change it to *The Constructivist Circle* because the censors believed the word revolution should be reserved for political revolutions.
4. Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (London: Monthly Review Press, 1971).
5. This reference is to Roman Jakobson’s assertion that Realism is aligned with the Metonymic pole of language, rather than the metaphoric pole, which is aligned with Romanticism. Jakobson lays out this distinction in “The Metaphoric and Metonymic Poles” in Roman Jakobson and Morris Halle, *Fundamentals of Language* (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1956) 76-82. Linda Nochlin refers to Jakobson’s ideas in *Realism*, 164-65, 182.
6. Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara Gendel Ryan, “The Fine Art of Gentrification,” *October* 31 (Winter, 1984): 91-111.
7. Neil Smith, *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (London: Routledge, 1996).
8. At the time, the President of the National Front Party.
9. Rosalyn Deutsche, “Uneven Development” in *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1996). 49-107.
10. Władysław Strzemiński quoted in Andrzej Turowski, “Wodiczko and Poland in the 1970s,” p.23-25.
11. Jacques Lacan introduced his concept of the Real in the early 1950s, and it is a key concept in all his published seminars. See Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book 1: Freud’s Papers on Technique 1953-1954*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. John Forrester (New York, London: W.W. Norton and Co., 1991).
12. Donald Winnicott, “Metapsychological and Clinical Aspects of Regression within the Psycho-Analytical Set-Up[1954].” in D.W.Winnicott, *Through Paediatrics to Psycho-Analysis*. Ed. M.Masud and R.Khan. (London: The Hogarth Press and The Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1978), 281.
13. Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, ed. Joseph Pearson (Los Angeles, Calif.: Semiotext(e), 2001)

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