

Krzysztof Wodiczko's "Xenological Instruments", an Equipment for a City of Strangers: Urban Spaces and De-Alienation of the Immigrant

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Abstract

The article considers how the public art of Krzysztof Wodiczko's acts as part of the discourse of political intervention in the urban space of marginalized people through technological and artistic media. The analysis of his "Xenological Instruments" designed in the 1990s — and in particular their last version, the *Mouthpiece* (1995) — focuses on Wodiczko's "maieutic" work about immigrants in several international cities, and on his efforts to give them a voice and visibility in public space. Brought to different urban locations by "stranger's" bodies, these "instruments", which are technological prostheses with a portable screen, are able to stimulate the dialogue with local people opening the possibility of creating new democratic spaces of confrontation. Wodiczko audience interactivity outside the exhibition space of the museum, hoping to test the actual dynamics of our democracies and to charge his art with a "scandalous functionalism".

Keywords: Video; Performance; Wodiczko; Immigration; Public Art.

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I imagine crowds of strangers presenting themselves in such unsolicited disclosures as they make their way through the city (Wodiczko 2016d: 168–9).

We need art to design the transformation of life (Wodiczko 2016l: 81).

1 Introduction

Krzysztof Wodiczko is a pioneer artist concerning the implication of new technologies in the interactive forms of spectatorship, outside of artistic contexts. His social activism oversteps the museum *milieu* in order to investigate symbolic and collective urban places, whose issues relate to the most invisible people in society. Concerned about the disconnection between the “explosion of communication technologies” and “the explosion of cultural miscommunication” (Wodiczko 2016f: 129), Wodiczko proposes: “with media and technology we can achieve two things at the same time. We can do cultural work and provide access to the circulation of power for those who are least likely to have it” (Wodiczko 1999: 134). How to contribute to this mission of empowerment for the other? This article will analyze, mainly through Wodiczko’s own critical texts and a focus on the video device called *Mouthpiece*, how the media he designed in the 1990s, for the performances of immigrant people, deal with the production of new spaces (both dialogical and self-construction) of identities in modern cities. I will especially consider the way in which the design of these spaces becomes the artist’s responsibility of raising questions about the efficiency of our democratic system, and the function of the art itself.

2 Wodiczko and the Xenological Instruments

Born in Poland before emigrating to Canada in 1978 and then to the US, Wodiczko is an internationally known artist and the Director of the Center for Art, Culture and Technology at the MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology). His public art melds science and technology with political and social activism. Since the late 1980s, a period of particularly violent xenophobia in Europe, Wodiczko focused on the exclusion of alienated people, such as the homeless and immigrant population. His goal was to stimulate a process of de-alienation of these invisible subjects by drawing on issues of symbolic domination, exclusion and collective awareness. The only way to give them a voice and to try to make a change in the social sphere, according to Wodiczko (who considers himself an outsider of the art), is to intervene directly in the public space of the cities, where the question of visibility becomes central. In order to appropriate the urban landscape engaging in a discourse of human rights, his work included monumental video mapping, homeless vehicles design and — my focus here — the “Xenological Instruments”. For this third category, Wodiczko developed the notion of “Xenology”, an esthetical, ethical and political program, conceived as a test for modern democracy, and based on the de-legitimization of strangers to speak, and their right to break this wall of silence and alienation. Since 1988, Wodiczko (in collaboration with members of the MIT’s Interrogative Design Group and the Center for Advanced Visual Studies) designed a series of technological performative devices brought by immigrants, who could show a pre-recorded video about their private experiences projected on a portable screen, allowing the user to enter a dialogue with the passersby in the public spaces of several international cities. The objectives of these “Xenological Instruments” is to act as “equipment for a city of strangers” (Wodiczko 2016d): make the invisible stranger visible, push the viewers/listeners to reflect about their own strangeness, overcome the distance separating them from the others and open a new *agon*, a space of democratic confrontation and communication. The artist operates in this context as a “catalyst” (Wodiczko 2016a: 184) in a collaborative and collective project, adopting the Socratic method, maieutic: “my artistic method has consisted in creating a socio-aesthetic situation that allows, inspires and protects a process where others may become (if only briefly) artists themselves” (Wodiczko 2016h: 231). Wodiczko’s instruments perfectly fit into the 1990s tendencies of Relational Art, theorized by Bourriaud’s “Relational Aesthetics” (2002) and promoting also “micro-utopias” like the creation of an active subject via participation in the artwork, co-authorship (as a non-hierarchical production) and the restoration of community relations (Hewitt, Jordan 2016: 32). Meigh-Andrews notes that the experimentation with mixed media and multi-screen, and the participatory and interactive dimension of spatially expanded video, had been widespread since the late 1960s (2011: 126). In the 1990s, the streets a more frequent place for displaying video art, and, following the Situationist’s detournement and what Naomi

Klein called the "reclaim the street" movement, the people strongly reclaimed their right to appropriate the urban space with their suppressed voices, by creating their own "fortuitous encounters" (Schreuder 2010: 8, 123, 125). Schreuder writes: "video art neither marks nor confirms the meaning of a place in the way that a statue can, but instead demonstrates its flexibility and instability" (2010: 132). By creating "perfect moments", the artist offers the passer-by a new language, a critical reflection, an unexpected encounter or a different way of looking at the world (2010: 52). The performance as a discursive construct of the social art practice, follows ideally the theories formulated by Habermas (1989) about the activity of publishing, as Andrew Hewitt and Mel Jordan stress: "The public sphere is a *performative* arrangement; it is the activity of 'going public' or 'making something public' that fills particular places and spaces with public life" (2016: 27–44).

The first of Wodiczko's "Xenological Instruments", *The Aegis* (1988), has the shape of a pair of wings, and is the only one to have two screens connected to a computer, with a built-in voice recognition sensor that reacts to certain predefined phrases, and a microphone to interact with either his own video or others. The second is the *Alien Staff* (1992), an object composed of two parts: the stick — a built-in Plexiglas container where the user can store documents, memorabilia, photographs —, and the head — a video monitor with a speaker which played back the user's pre-recorded statements. The final version of these instruments, a "more radical" evolution for "the next generation of speech act equipment" (Wodiczko 2016h: 231), is the *Mouthpiece* (known in French as *Porte-Parole*) (1995), a kind of video prosthesis that becomes an extension of the body, "transforming the user into a kind of cyborg, a virtual subject" (Wodiczko 2016h: 231). Encircling the jaw, the interface has the shape of a mask with a small built-in video monitor and small loudspeakers. The small-size screen displays the moving image of the user's lips as he/she narrates his/her story and this — the artist explains — drives spectators in the streets to come closer to the performer: "as a result, the distance between immigrants using the *Mouthpiece* and non-immigrants is reduced not only physically but also, let us hope, in the psychological sense" (Wodiczko 2016h: 231). Wodiczko emphasizes the necessary and "prophetic" dimension of this media, which can turn the established and hierarchical social order into a real community: "[this equipment] puts every immigrant, every operator in the role of a prophet, interrupting history to open up a vision of community. Each one brings his or her own experience, and in this experience is the seed of a new community" (1999: 197).

The *Mouthpiece* project was originated by a public commission in 1995 from the FRAC (Fonds Regional d'Art Contemporain) in the city of Trélazé in France and it benefited from public funding until the exhibition of 1997 in Nantes. The work was made up of originally three (and then four) pieces of equipment, which was activated with the collaboration of the young second generation of immigrants in a professional French high school, who took the opportunity to tell personal stories of frustrations, hopes, family trauma and discrimination. In the mediation of the immigrant body through this device, an autobiographical voice finds the way to connect the private and the public sphere of this action. It is important to note here the two main sorts of production of space implicated here: an internal (or psychoanalytical) space related to the construction of the self; and an external (or political) space connected to the collective (re)construction of democracy. The two, of course, are strictly related.

3 *Mouthpiece*: therapeutic medium for the alienated Self

Concerning the space of the Self, one must first examine the preparation of the performance, during which Wodiczko adopted a psycho-sociological method, a kind of videotherapy, based on the effects of externalization and verbalization of personal traumatic experiences. The video was recorded during a one-hour interview similar to a psychoanalytical session: the participants had complete freedom of speech without any interruption or intervention, they could express what they never confessed to anyone, and most seemed to feel relieved to be heard and to take part be part of a project. Before being a tool to communicate with the other, this process was helping the construction of the Self. The vocal apparatus (the filmed mouth) — metonymy of the *prise de parole* through the media *Porte Parole* — is the strongest instrument of de-alienation. Personal memories break into socio-economic phenomena and individual issues meet collective impasses.

However, if the *dispositif* of the video storytelling let the immigrant emerge from his/her anonymity and invisibility, the robotic apparatus of the instrument allows questions of de-personalization and metamorphosis

to emerge in regards to the subject. The mask constitutes a "double", at the same time mimetic and repulsive, a living and animated *appareil*. It is also a transitional object between the inside and the outside, subjectivity and reality, revealing and covering. The small screen, with the edited and virtual image of the mouth (an extreme close-up that dematerializes the original expression of the lips and erases the singularity of the speaker), signals both the coexistence of the presence and the absence of the user, who projects the problem of strangeness and identification in this exteriority. *Mouthpiece* transforms the immigrant into a moving sculpture, an alien or a cyborg that acts as a reminder of the weight of silence. The medium functions as an ironic stigma, hyper-visible and abnormal, a sign of diversity, because the mediated image and speech are public and self-legitimated manifestations of the psychic status of the subject. This internal and reflexive space then allows the migrant to renegotiate a new definition of the Self through the sensory and psychological relation engaged with the virtual "double" on the screen. Nathalie, who has participated to the *Mouthpiece* project in Trélazé, confessed to have benefited from this therapeutic dimension of the testimony:

During this project, we spoke a lot, but we never felt judged. [...] In fact, we self-analyzed ourselves! [...] Now I have another life. I analyze what I say, and it's the project that forced me to do that [...] I live with my problems less, and that's the main thing. It is very hard, psychologically and physically, to wear *Mouthpiece*. It's a burden, and it's crazy when you think we need something like that to communicate. (McCorquodale 2011: 243)

The audience — whoever is confronted passively or actively with the *Mouthpiece* — cannot ignore the highly intimate value of these confessional narratives. We could recall that Eric de Kuyper speaks of the "obscenity of the intimacy" (1995: 17) (which is echoed in this case in a certain "obscenity" of the otherness), in an article about home movies and the almost unbearable and incommunicable private dimension of family life moments. People's attraction or repulsion related to the recorded speech depends also on the acceptance of the autobiographical pact (Lejeune 1975), and on the temporary and virtual access to another person's life. The real and physical presence of the witness plays a crucial role, being in this way an invitation to proximity, to surpass the exclusion, to actively involve the audience in the story heard and to forget the technological mediation. Writing about autobiographical images, Michael Chanan describes the exteriorization of the inside world of the subject, through representation and rhetorical strategies, as a coincidence between the personal and the political:

By presenting a chronotope that declares "this is my world at this moment", the represented world transcends the opposition between objectivity and subjectivity by including the subjective sense of the pictured world as an objective datum [...] it invites the embodiment through the camera-eye of the personal as political. (2007: 246)

4 The creation of a democratic space

The political space of democracy mentioned above (and a key factor of the project) appears in this overlapping between the personal and the political, the individual and the collective, through the mediation operated by the equipment during the performance. *Mouthpiece* was performed in different public spaces: supermarkets, stations, streets, museums, libraries, etc. As the artist points out: "the choice of locations [...] is crucial. Official events and symbolic environments are the best, because they are the least expected situations for immigrants" (Wodiczko 1995). According to Wodiczko, there are two publics: the passerby — the "outer public" — is a witness and an audience of the result of the final work of the immigrant — the "inner public" — who is implicated in all the stages of the experience and is the first interlocutor and collaborator of the artist and the vital force of the project (2016m: 288–9). Similar to all relations to the Other, the performance provoked a wide array of reactions from the people - repulsion and attraction, indifference and empathy — but the interaction in these crowded urban itineraries was generally positive, due to the presence of the instrument. This begs the question as to whether people were more willing at first to listen and believe virtual media and the moving image than they were a real speaking person. The viewers were effectively attracted by the technological and futuristic look (for that time of course) of the bizarre object. Once captured by the technical function, they could inquire about the meaning of the performance and ask more personal questions like: "where are you from?", "what are you doing here?". This moment, Wodiczko claims, is the beginning of the creation of a new

shared place: "Maybe a public space is being created in the very moment, the very act of performance, or in the act of dwelling in the polis" (1999: 197).

Informed by 1980s political theorists like Claude Lefort (1986), Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau (1985), Wodiczko articulates an "agonistic" definition of democracy, which is a process always unfinished and constructed on adversarial confrontations and through a multiplicity of voices (2016g: 21). The artist refers also to Foucault's idea (1983) of "fearless speech" and to the ancient Greek analogue concept of *parrhesia*, in order to interrogate the way in which art can contribute to change for the better, helping the invisible speaker, in an almost emancipatory process, to use public storytelling, self-representation and participation in the contemporary agonistic space. Rosalyn Deutsche affirms: "to borrow from Henri Lefebvre (1991), Wodiczko performed a 'critique of space', ripping aside appearances and revealing the conflicts-the subterranean violence — producing and haunting an urban space that was being made to seem harmonious" (2016: 7–8). Wodiczko defines himself as a "transformative avant-gardist" (2016l: 74) acting in the context of a "critical public art" that believes in the socio-aesthetical function of the artist. One of his key aims is to provoke concrete transformations in the social system through the critical practices within the institutions, media and cultural representations. He writes:

The aim of critical public art is neither happy self-exhibition nor passive collaboration with the grand gallery of the city, its ideological theater and architectural social system. Rather, it is an engagement in strategic challenges to the city structures and mediums that mediate our everyday perception of the world: an engagement through aesthetic critical interruptions, infiltrations and appropriations that question the symbolic, psycho-political and economic operations of the city. (2016e: 63)

We all know the typical paradox of contemporary art in the postmodern world: the most acclaimed "subversive" and "contesting" artists are financed and supported by the public and private institutions and corporations they are supposed to protest against. Policies of funding regularly help integrate and accept these artists' contestations in order to generate larger consensus, and neutralize real subversion. Schreuder points out the institutionalization of the video art in the public space from the 1990s onward, driven by government and commercial parties that at the same time admittedly care about the "autonomy" of the artist: "Such autonomy is only when it comes about through an alliance of parties. Then, art is not so much a means to true openness and diversity [...], but a result of an artificially contrived and strictly safeguarded openness within an urban area" (2010: 28).

The "transformative" quality of Wodiczko's avant-garde is then a voluntary and provocative reaction to this certain "weakness" and non-revolutionary form of the avant-garde. Wodiczko clearly claims his engagement: "I may say that I am perhaps a politician of art [...]. My art must be understood then as a form of aesthetic politics: of making space within the space of political art" (2016b: 160). His "critical public art" wants to express a detachment from what is generally called "art in public places", which, according to Wodiczko, can be defined as "liberal urban decoration" or a "bureaucratic exhibitionism", "isolating artistic practice from critical public issues" (2016e: 62). His persistence with critical and functionalist social engagement, freed from any self-exhibitionist and spectacle aestheticism, gives him distance even from the de-alienation pedagogy and the contested urbanism proposed by the Situationist's *détournement*: "Of course, the Situationist project of intervention now requires critical evaluation; some of its methods and aims seem to be utopian, totalitarian, naïve or full of avant-garde aestheticism to be accepted today" (2016e: 64). In the same article of 1998, Wodiczko works within the past and present avant-garde practices in order to demonstrate the historical legacy of his kind of transformative avant-garde. He virtually situates himself in the category "Present Critical Public Art: New Avant-Garde as 'Intelligence'", where he also includes "Barbara Kruger, Dara Birnbaum, Alfredo Jarr, Dennis Adams, Dan Graham, etc., also Public Art Fund (New York), Public Access (Toronto), Artangel Trust (London) etc." (2016e: 64). He describes their avant-gardism as a "critical affirmative action on everyday life and its institutions [...] from within [...] in order to raise consciousness (or critical unconscious) regarding urban experience" (2016e: 64). His enthusiastic ethico-political mission has continued throughout the 2000s, even for a memorial projected for 9/11 called *City of Refuge*: a floating public forum anchored in New York harbour as a reminder of the lack of consciousness about Western historical crimes. It is always the agonistic democratic ideology that push him to contest the memorial as a simple monument in honour to a tragic fact: the

memorial becomes the event itself, an "operative memory" calling for mutual responsibility in the terroristic tension (Wodiczko 2016i: 304).

The artist uses what he calls the "scandalous functionalism" (Wodiczko's website¹) of the designed object not to solve the problem, but to try to reveal and understand the problem, hoping that this function becomes obsolete and unnecessary. He aims to deconstruct the codes of the anonymous, normative and divided relations between the members of a society and their mental representations and expectations in the public space. His work can interrogate peoples relationship with this barricaded space of the city, dealing with the social distance despite the physical proximity and the utopia of western universalism's "safe" order. The "Xenological Instruments" are part of a mission of empowerment and reconstitution of human rights: "Its basic purpose is to provide a means of saying all the things that must be said and that no one wants to hear. In doing so, it does not prevent anyone else from doing the same. The *Mouthpiece* is thus a democratic artifice" (Wodiczko 1995).

5 Conclusion

These works - bringing art outside the museum and the migrant outside him/herself — try to design new democratic spaces where we can all feel like strangers, and where moving images modify their exhibition status. The "Xenological Instruments" are not merely objects of the gaze, but they also exploit the essential drive to integrate and activate the physical body of the people and the social body of the urban space. Wodiczko believes that his test for our democracies can only be performed outside the exhibition space, far from the galleries, where the audience interactivity — between the "inner public" and a random "outer public" — acquires a more challenging sense. The work of art serves as a pretext for communication and dialogue: once the emotional link is established, the medium can be forgotten and the people can go together to a restaurant, eliminating the fear of the stranger and the fear of one's own strangeness. In doing so, the hiatus between the private space of the individual intimacy and the functional sphere of the public space is interrupted for a moment. An ephemeral space is created during the performance, a space of self-representation, confrontation and debate where Wodiczko hopes to find the essence of democracy. In modern cities, artistic and technological media can temporarily open spaces of collision and cohesion in which new communities can negotiate their own notions of difference, through their body, their consciousness and their social *habitus* (in Bourdieu's perspective). Wodiczko likes to say that he offers the immigrant "an art of survival" (2016c: 112): useful or not, the existence itself of his "instruments" questions many central issues of our time, because there is no contemporary art without accepted public subversions, and there is no city without strangers.

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