
What can Involved Criticism do?

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Of the five winners of the Support for Research in Art Theory and Criticism, in partnership with the CNAP, *Critique d'art* has decided to publish in 2015 two reports on this research. After Daniele Balit working on Max Neuhaus's sound installations, here we have Christophe Domino proposing a report on his long-term work on the *World Institute for the Abolition of War*, by the American artist, of Polish extraction, Krzysztof Wodiczko. Christophe Domino's project undertaken with Krzysztof Wodiczko, stems as much from criticism as from an attempt to broaden his area of activity at a time when the classical discourse is suffering from rarefaction, not to say confinement. Paradoxically, it is by summoning a proven figure of criticism, an established stance of the critic, that of the trade guild (more than 20 years old), that Christophe Domino intends to apply this performative dimension of discourse on art, over and above mere writing, right to the at times crossed boundaries of the art project. This is a way of claiming the critic as author, and criticism as a participatory factor in the work. Around the *World Institute for the Abolition of War* project, on which Krzysztof Wodiczko has been working for several years, Christophe Domino, through a certain number of joint projects (documentary and critical research, French translation of *Abolition of War*, the artist's book, the production of texts, help with developing public spaces, exhibition projects, and the like) sees his critical contribution as an involvement in the work itself, as much as a dialectical experience where the work, like the discourse prepared about it, nurture one another, by way of special know-how, with the whole thing designed to produce a polyphonic and forward-looking object which is nothing other than a truly political art--which is to say a common art.

Jean-Marc Huitorel

- 1 Going hand-in-hand with a research project backed by the CNAP, this line of thinking here takes the shape of a log-book, as such describing its nature as process underway far more than as stabilized theoretical elaboration. It is based on an attempt to measure, in terms of coherence and relevance—conceptual and operational alike—a shift of critical involvement which, to be personal and supported by a particular experience, appears to stem from an influential and shared movement in critical practices. Without going astray in futile lamentations over the slow death agony of criticism encircled by eroding back-up and the rivalry of curating, what is above all involved is exercising the reflexive attention consubstantial with critical exigency. Under the title *Pour en finir avec l'art de la guerre (avec Krzysztof Wodiczko)*, the research consists in the effective contribution to the development of a work, an ambition and a particular type, of Krzysztof Wodiczko. It also has to do with the reflection about the shift and exercise of criticism in a situation of collaboration, putting in suspense the need for distance commonly required by the practices of analysis, the usual epistemological exteriority of the social sciences, and separation between object and subject which, from our ordinary Kantian fare to the demands of the human sciences, is a persistent and usually wholesome requisite.

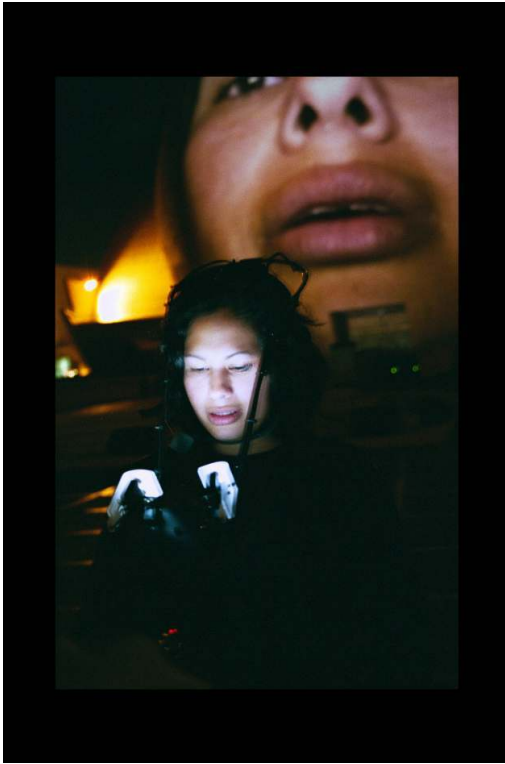


In/Outsiders, 2013. Dox Center for Contemporary Art, Prague © Krzysztof Wodiczko, with courtesy of the artist

- 2 The nature of Krzysztof Wodiczko's work invites both this shift, and we shall come back to this, but also continuous transformations of the practice of criticism, in accordance with an individual path marked by attention, as well as freedom with regard to the requirements of method. Through the regular exercise of journalistic criticism in the specialized press and in academic publications, amid the diverse aspects of the essay and through the experience of artistic connivance in exhibition curatorship, the application of situations and contexts of production, as well as that of teaching, the harlequinism of the critic is forever putting the interplay of positions to the test. The argumentary

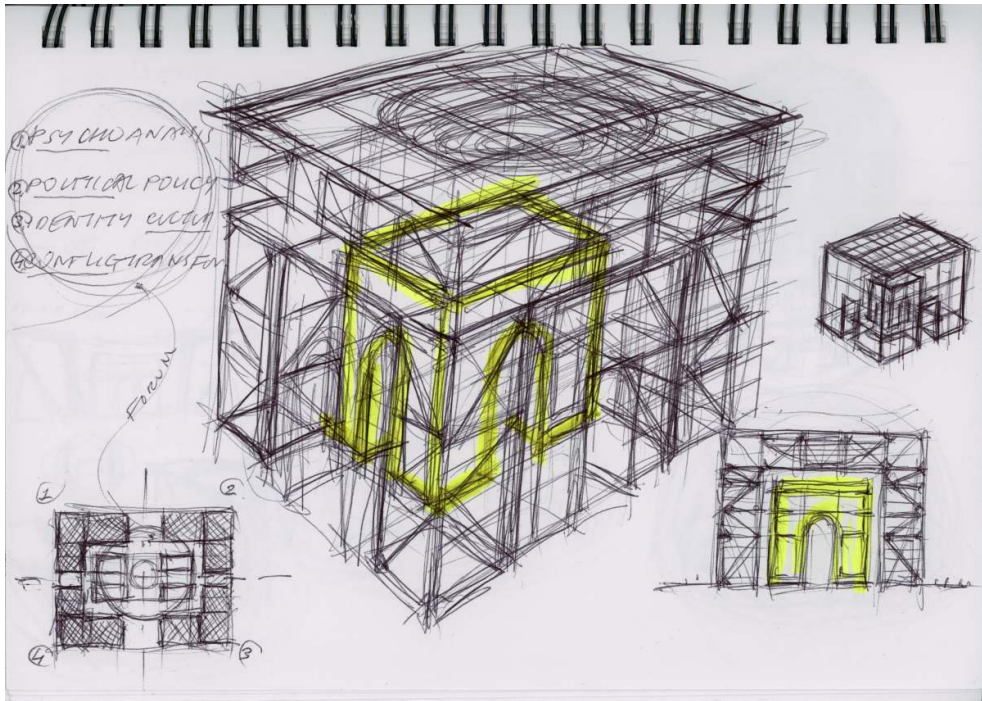
economy of formalist and deconstructive criticism, in addition to seeing itself relativized by postmodernism, and being caught by the general decredibilization of critical thinking in the context of predominant late postcapitalism, often finds few footholds in current forms of artistic propositions. These propositions make discontinuity, lability and formal heterogeneity a floating principle, which renders necessary shifts, re-inventions and reformulations of the types of discourse which underpin them, and comment on them. However, they in no way force a theoretical renunciation, except by internalizing submission and accepting their loss. In addition to its own logic, the secondariness of art criticism to its object leads it happily, and pragmatically,¹ to a permanent adjustment, such as someone like Gavin Butt identifies it in the collective volume *After Criticism: New Responses to Art and Performance*.² To question what performance and intermedia practice do to criticism, he reminds us, in his preface, the extent to which this stems from resistance to the doxa, as such *para-doxical*. “That is that, in order to continue to operate *critically*, criticism has to find a mode of working which frees it from the protocols of institutionalized forms of thought” and make it possible the “engaging in a ‘performative’ modality of criticism”,³ which it finds by applying its attention to the possible forms of writing.

- 3 While assuming the centrality of the act of language, it is evident, for me, that the formal and functional properties of many contemporary works open things up still further, pushing performativity towards action, collaboration and production. This dissolution of boundaries in the forms of critical engagement is not exactly new, but with an artist like Krzysztof Wodiczko it takes a particular turn, through questioning the afore-mentioned exteriority. For what risks, for what theoretical profits, and for what artistic hypotheses? If it is too early in the development of a project—whose realization, as we shall see, greatly eludes the agreed time-frame of the work of art—, the issues of position and method are raised, and perforce go hand-in-hand with a—positively—problematic involvement. But the artist’s career is rooted in the European legacy of Constructivism, formed as he was in industrial design in the Poland of the 1960s, a practice which he readily associates with his position as an artist.⁴ And which enables him to work, since the late 1970s, in various forms, public action, *in situ* imagery, lecture, monument, technological instruments, exhibition arrangement, and also through writing and publication, speaking, teaching⁵ and work with communities, and through the conception of monuments.⁶



El Centro cultural projection, (part II) ; Mexico, Tijuana, February 2001 © Krzysztof Wodiczko, with courtesy of the artist

- 4 His involvement as an artist in the socio-political arena is formulated not on the scale, often claimed in France over the past twenty years or so, of the “micro-political”. Quite to the contrary, he is not afraid of confronting the forms and challenges of the great narratives and history, borne along by a progressivism and an enlightened modernism. Wodiczko maintains a prolonged avant-gardism within a principle of *Transformative Avant-Garde*, to use the title of a collection of essays that the artist is about to publish with Black Dog Publishing. In it we read: “If, since the 1990s, our objective has been to contribute to the political, rather than to politics, to the *polis* rather than the police, to that which is *potentia* and multitude rather than potentates, to revolt rather than revolution, to *agon* and dissensus rather than consensus, to Democratic *parrhesia* and public interpellation rather than ‘patriotic’ or ‘civic responsibility’, to nomadology rather than the state apparatus... let us then continue our effort in inventing ‘art for the political’. There have been new and versified methodologies developed in this direction by artists, artistic and cultural groups, collaborative networks and coalitions.”⁷ Wodiczko applies this aim in the direction of the political through a subtle artistic tactic, which borrows from practices stemming from art (visuality, formal economy, exhibition, system) or not, and shows itself to be more attentive to the way in which works are received. Or to their *use*. By making room for the invisibles and marginals in the social landscape, he activates the question of the efficiency of art in the political field. Through forms produced and positions of declaration, his work stems from an engaged anthropological approach, steeped in the processes of critical art, and is part and parcel of the field of symbolic productions which operate beyond the boundaries of art, and are recognized as a criticism of contemporary culture, on the chosen slopes of this latter.



Project for *L'Arc de Triomphe*. Ballpoint pen drawing © Krzysztof Wodiczko, with courtesy of the artist



View of the exhibition *Arc de Triomphe*, Institut mondial pour l'abolition de la guerre, Paris : Galerie Gabrielle Maubrie © Krzysztof Wodiczko, with courtesy of the artist and the gallery

- 5 The reception of the work in France remains very partial, often reduced to a gesture (that of the public monumental projection, which he has been practicing since the 1980s), to a proposition (his *Homeless Vehicle*, 1988–1989).⁸ If he has been active at the international level since then, the loyalty of the Gabrielle Maubrie Gallery is needed to have access in Paris to the most recent works, in 2011, and then in 2014.⁹ Thus for the project of the

Institut mondial pour l'abolition de la guerre, which represents a culmination in the artist's career, in the form of a multi-faceted programme, of an extraordinary scale and ambition, incorporated within a time-frame which goes beyond the artist's longevity. With *The Institute* and the propositions and involvements that it encompasses, Krzysztof Wodiczko's intent is to develop his engagement as an artist in a paradigmatic way, through and beyond the monument and the memorial, towards the introduction of a way of acting within the common culture, and first and foremost within the field of representations, erudite and vernacular alike. *The Institute* incarnates the abolitionist key word. The approach is not naively that of a good pacifist artist's soul, but a group work, constructed and obviously political, which sees and reflects war as an anthropological phenomenon, but also on its institutional foundations, as a contract. *The Institute* is presented as a *media center*, a place of resources and information about war-related counter-propaganda, open, among other things, to the active pacifist movements on the planet, to academic lines of thinking about forms of conflict, and to the discussion about, and all kinds of approaches to, the phenomenon. In due course, his architectural structure will cover the Arc de Triomphe in the Place de l'Etoile in Paris, permitting visitors to have access to the details of the monument's iconographic and symbolic programme, such as it is at once eminently visible but not very readable, and in any event not read. *The Institute* is constructed like a material and symbolic structure. Around the desire to deconstruct war and the cultural forms which contribute to naturalizing war, it is a programme of civic action which associates testimony (in particular of the veterans of current wars), historical and anthropological reflection, the availability of information, and several types of actions and informations from the angle of a para-institutional social structure working based on the modalities of NGOs, incarnated in various forms of public images and systems, but also the book.¹⁰ In it he specifies a set of foundations, orientations and projects which form a first version of the work. Thus when he notes: "Putting an end to war is a bloodless form of revolution involving various theoretical and practical disciplines such as technology, media, law, politics, socio-psychology, psychoanalysis, anthropology, philosophy, and cultural and artistic production."¹¹ As his frequent use of "we" reminds us, the artist has for a long time been working within collaborative processes, which often go beyond the sphere of art, but are strongly attached to it. Based on the sharing of agentivity, his work is inclusive in the sense that aesthetic agreement about the work leads to its transformation into an act, a cognitive act first of all (through the revelations it prompts) then an act of consciousness, if not one of practical engagement.

- 6 From the viewpoint of the critical exercise, the project for the *The Abolition of War* appears to me like a form of artistic structure where the discursive share might be enlarged to a form of contribution, not to say collaboration. Not without shifting the operational framework and the principles of methodological credit of critical praxis. Whence the ongoing re-examination of the conditions of an 'embedded' criticism, of the nature of its actions and its theoretical and ideological plot. The forms of involvement are many and different, founded firstly on the dialogue with the artist; which, over and above the exchange of information, has been fashioned by divergences, but above all by complementarity in the anti-war engagement, in the broadening of references, and in the opening up of new specific issues, in the invitation to new contributors, and then soon in the proposal to take part in the development of the project, by proposing an operational relay: there is a focus on the realization of the project as a whole and awareness of its

objectives, also permitted by the particular form of efficiency in the socio-political space which the artistic mooring gives to themes which go well beyond it. In particular, this mooring makes it possible to go beyond the powerlessness of politics itself to be part, in the long term of essential issues. The question of the abolition of war is part of an idealistic ambition, like the architectural project involving the Arc de Triomphe, not to say an apparent ingenuousness. But could the efficiency of art not make it possible—without losing any of the exactingness of its concretization, including as institutional reality—to place the challenge of the debate really in the sphere of ideas and experiences given as a political reality? Verification of the artist's hypothesis can only be made by experimenting with it, by dint of extending the critical analysis that has become a force of action. In favour of the development of a research project, in association with designers, engineers and artists, a constitutive project of *The Institute* has been undertaken, namely a system of public consultation of an intelligent database about the culture of war.¹²

- 7 Henceforth, participation in the project, based on a convergence of theoretical and political interest, and a complementarity of engagements, leads to a redefinition of the systems of criticism, even when they essentially remain discursive systems. The overlay of roles, the overspill from frames and structures of thought which are part of the work's operation, obtain a space of critical exercise based on collaboration, like a kind of special experience of art.

NOTES

1. And we understand in this pragmatism in the logic that someone like Jean-Pierre Cometti has emphasized by retracing its historical development in American philosophy in particular, and updated in the field of aesthetics shed of still widely predominant essentialism, as he does, for example, in *La Force d'un malentendu*, published in 2009 by Questions Théoriques, and his other works on art.

2. *After Criticism: New responses to Art and Performance*, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004. With nine co-authors coordinated by Gavin Butt.

3. *After Criticism*, *op. cit.* p. 5 and p.11.

4. Wodiczko lays claim to both, in a constructed ambivalence, a serene and tactical porosity.

5. Krzysztof Wodiczko has been teaching for many years in Cambridge, Mass, at MIT; he now teaches at Harvard, and Warsaw University.

6. In responding to institutional programmes, playing not against the monument's function by trying to displace it, and making way for the words and personal experience of witnesses while often sidestepping the symbolic and architectural massiveness of institutional monumentality. So it is with the peace memorial at Hiroshima (1999) and the *Mémorial de l'abolition de l'esclavage* à Nantes (2012).

7. Wodiczko, Krzysztof. *Transformative Avant-Garde and Other Writings*, London: Black Dog Publishing (forthcoming) which takes up the answer to the October questionnaire which appeared in the review *October* in 2007 (n° 123).

8. Cf. my contribution on the work in *Practicable. From Participation to Interaction in Contemporary Art*, to be published by MIT Press, in 2015.
9. The exhibition *Arc de Triomphe*, Institut mondial pour l'abolition de la guerre, in June-July 2011, then in May-July 2014, and the exhibition *Blessures invisibles*.
10. *The Abolition of War*, published in 2012 by Black Dog Publishing in London, currently being published in French by the publishers Forme(s).
11. *The Abolition of War*, *op.cit.*, p. 15
12. Within the CoSiMa programme backed by the ANR, coordinated by the IRCAM, which associates the ENSADLab, technical partners and designers, Grande Image Lab (Ecole supérieure des beaux-arts Tours Angers Le Mans, site du Mans), Sliders Lab (Jean-Marie Dallet and Frédéric Curien) for the development of the intelligent archive *Critical DataWar*, which makes it possible to overlap digital technologies.