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

Francine Dagenais
PROVIDING A FORUM: AN EXERCISE IN DEMOCRACY

On the official launch night of Krzysztof Wodiczko’s Homeless Projection: Place des Arts, I stood in the rain, among a crowd of art collectors and specialists, community outreach workers and members of the media. After a brief introduction to the work, the projection began, and I witnessed the striking, multimedia visualization of a group of strangers turning their heads upwards, in unison, towards the Théâtre Maisonneuve. I can see what appear to be tributes, spectral figures projected on the stepped roof of the building. After viewing the video loop in its entirety, I understand that the 21 speakers are deadly, and they are among the thousands of homeless citizens populating the downtown core. They speak publically, perhaps, for the first time. As I listen to their stories of grief, hardship and trauma, I feel sadness and outrage, yet also a sense of salvation of watching a devastating event unfold. For the revolutionaries, Krzysztof Wodiczko has just given us a demonstration of the true spirit of democracy. I imagine what it would have been like to witness proceedings in a Roman Senate, only here, those assembled are more like anti-senators. In Ancient Rome, often referred to as the “cradle of democracy,” senators would gather to deliberate on matters of the day in a corta (from coro, a “meeting of men”), a building housing political and religious power, where the seating consisted of long, deep and rather shallow stone benches (subsidium). This is where the patrician and plebeian senators would sit side by side, speech and, on occasion, voicements. For centuries, this democratic model was held up as a standard and considered exemplary by the West. Of course, if we examine the trauma associated with its official history and the actual makeup of the government—allowed to hold office, even if subsequently tried by their own citizens. Classical scholar Benjamin Liba argues that slavery in Ancient Rome established a form of power-wielding, foundational to the invention of modern racism itself. Under various dictatorships, senators were appointed rather than elected and had to be of senatorial rank to begin with. Today, as in Antiquity, upholding the principles of true democracy is an easy task. Corruption and nepotism thrive in our own civil unrest, severe climate change and homelessness, where who are often spectators, become actors here, addressing their audience from above. Having already lived in Montreal some decades earlier and coming back as a visitor, Wodiczko said that he was quite shocked by the sheer number of homeless in the downtown core. This is what led him to focus on this subject for this project. The artist has done other works on the marginalized and downtrodden—the homeless poor, immigrants or veterans. In this instance, he wanted to reverse the usual dynamics and allow them to tell their side of the story, giving those in the mainstream a glimpse into their world and, perhaps, an understanding of how they perceive the city and those who inhabit it. Wodiczko did his research in site, he found the most appropriate next from which to interact with the community, the projection structure onto which to pass the message and the support team with whom to realize the project. His role here is one of a gourmet and humble guide. His attitude towards research in the community is exemplary, exhausting the help of local St. Michael’s Mission—an organization serving the homeless in downtown Montreal—and, notably, that of its Executive Director, George Greens. The mission is housed in the basement of St. John’s Place of Arts, Place des Arts, du 8 oct. au 25 nov. 2014, Photo: François Gély, 2014, Krzysztof Wodiczko, Homeless Projection: Place des Arts, Éditions, 2014. Kris Schick, Homeless Projection: Place des Arts, Éditions, 2014. New York.
Evangelist Anglican Church and adjacent to an UQAM pavilion. It is situated in the Quartier des spectacles which holds the Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal (MACM), the Maison symphonique de Montréal (across the street), along with the old concert hall complex of Place des arts, combining Wilfred-Pelletier hall and the Théâtre Maisonneuve. As an artist, Wodiczko considers that he is in a privileged position to facilitate communication and to bring attention to certain causes. He believes that it would be “associé” not to attempt to meet public expectations, not to rise to the occasion. For him, civic buildings and public spaces are ideal cultural communications devices: architecture provides the backdrop for the major events and revolts of our lives, and can also set the stage for an intervention. Public buildings and monuments can serve to promote debate and discourse, and hence contribute to a true democratic process. It is fitting that Wodiczko should use the external facades of familiar structures in order to reach a greater audience within the city. In this instance, the theatre is a backdrop for the itinerants who live among us. It is the literal surface upon which the projection occurs, but it is also the metaphorical place where the itinerants/players demonstrate, through their placement on the stepped superstructure and through their bearing, physicality and posture, their new attitude and place within that setting. “Once you have managed to reintegrate society…. You can’t mix in with the others… nobody wants you to have a regular life.” Like stigmata, the scars of time and violence inflicted on the city’s architecture bear physical witness to our collective history. And it seems evident, from the profoundly troubling stories shared by the homeless themselves, that they also come to this forum bearing their scars. They are stigmatic and stigmatized. It took Wodiczko a year to research, develop and realize this project. Thanks to George Greene, he gained access to the homeless around the area of the Quartier des spectacles and found 21 articulate speakers brave enough to share their lives with us. Those who have come forward have done so willingly, demonstrating a deep bond of trust with George Greene, but also with Wodiczko himself. Encouraging these individuals to speak in public could not have been an easy task. They lead parallel lives and rarely enter into contact with established society. Generally distrustful of its structures, they circulate like ghosts in the core of the city. By painstakingly recording and listening to their conversations, Wodiczko and his team helped a group of people, who usually go unremarked, who seem faceless, not only to speak, but also to educate their audience on what it is like to be homeless, and thus change established concepts and prejudices on homelessness. Wodiczko is nothing if not egalitarian in his approach. It is clear that he wanted to get a good representation so we see men and women, people of different races and ethnic backgrounds, who speak French, English and even Inuktitut. The artist considers the participants as co-artists and their artistry as one of survival. Wodiczko demonstrates the utmost respect for the words, metaphors and methods they choose to convey their message. It is Wodiczko’s capacity to truly listen to the participants that is an essential factor to the success of this piece. As Wodiczko explains, those who are homeless have been traumatized and retraumatized. They had to be able to overcome this in order to tell their stories. Before the official launch of the work, Wodiczko gave those who participated a special preview. For him, this was a vital component of the project, allowing the speakers to see themselves in a different light, perhaps for the first time, as articulate citizens of the polis. With this inclusive attitude, he gives the participants a vehicle for the transmission of their messages, in the hope that they make the best possible use of it. The artist reverses the normal hierarchical roles by using an elevated projection surface, forcing the viewers to lift their heads upwards in order to view the work. This particular placement does indeed change the dynamics. Viewers are made to look up at those who are speaking and to experience, in a very physical way, their own lower hierarchical placement and smaller size. It is important to note that the Brechtian personality is often bodily depicted through posture or stance. In this sense, non-Aristotelian theatre can be tied to the concept of Haltung. In Haltung (was ist halbbar? or what may withstand or stand up to pressure), emotion becomes integral to the action. Homeless Projection shows us a rare instance when people who normally frequent cultural institutions—considered to belong to the elite—are made to stand, or emotionally, mentally and physically withstand the daily pressures and stresses routinely experienced by the homeless. As Wodiczko himself puts it, the projection onto the monument is a “bodily metaphor.” Active and engaged reception is therefore an intrinsic part of the work. The audience members become part of the process and part of the performance, opening their hearts and minds, ears and eyes to the homeless. Wodiczko expressed the hope that Homeless Projection will in some way ‘decrease’ the distance between the homeless and other city dwellers, giving them a better understanding. The homeless are often held responsible for their unfortunate predicament. With Homeless Projection, viewers are forced to deal with their prejudices about those who have been unmoored from human attachments and roam our streets, clinging to life despite everything. They are made to reflect on their usual reflexes, defence mechanisms and victim-blaming habits. They are forced to listen to these particular homeless people, not generic homeless actors but individuals who are shown to have distinctive personalities with likes and dislikes. They have the generosity to tell us how they got there. Although it is mostly assumed that mental health and substance abuse issues are the root cause, endemic and multigenerational socioeconomic hardships are just as often to blame. In the Lehrstück, or learning play, the player’s role is to teach through conscious and unconscious, and using what Brecht has called the VerfremdungsEffekt to ‘strange’ and make remarkable those characters and events that would otherwise be considered commonplace and unremarkable. At the very least, for the time of the projection, these homeless citizens of Montreal have their voices heard and the previously established hierarchy is set aside, levelling a usually unequal playing field. Jonathan Jones, an art critic for The Guardian, recently published an article entitled “Poverty Lines: Where Are the Poor in Art Today?” He cites various examples throughout art history—Caravaggio, Bruegel, de Ribera, van Gogh, Velazquez—but, with the exception of street artist Banksy, is unable to find a single contemporary artist who takes an interest in this issue. Well then, here is one, Krzysztof Wodiczko.

Francine Dagenais

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

1 There is no Greek equivalent to the Roman Senate. Although the Greeks created the theoretical and foundational structure for democratic rule, the Romans established its bureaucratic and organizational one.
5 Ibid. 
6 Transcription of the words spoken by one of the 21 homeless in Homeless Projection.
7 Stigmata were used as a means of branding, or tattooing, both slaves and animals. The term stigma was first used by St. Paul to refer to the scars he received in the name of Christ. St. Paul was tortured in prison, exposed to death, punished by the lash, beaten with rods, and lapidated. Biblical references: Cor. 11.23-25, Gal. 6.14, Phil. 3.10, Col. 1.24.
8 Gwiazda, op. cit.
9 In Brecht’s Lehrstücke theatre, “in seiner kleinsten Grösse,” or giving (one)self the smallest possible dimension, is about learning modesty.
10 Gwiazda, op. cit.