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, amongst a crowd of art collectors and specialists, community outreach workers and members of the media. After a brief introduction to the work, the projector began, and I witnessed the strange photoreproduction movement of a group of strangers turning their heads upwards, in unison, towards the Théâtre Maisonneuve. I can see what appears 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 dead, 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, but also a sense of edification of watching a devastating event unfold. From the revolutionary, Krzysztof Wodiczko has just given us a demonstration of the true spirit of democracy. 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 debate on matters of the day in a court (from covertia, a “meeting of men”), a building housing political and religious power, where the seating consisted of long, deep and shallow stepped stone benches (sediliae). This is where the patrician and plebeian senators would sit side by side, speak and, on occasion, vote. For centuries, this democratic model was held as a source of social and political organization by the West. Of course, if we examine the images associated with its official history and the actual makeup of the government, it is not easy to find evidence of the way in which treaties and elected officials have been used by the powers that be to maintain the status quo. Corruption and nepotism thrive in our age of civil unrest, severe climate change and economic war, in which welfare is offered to multinational corporations while austerity regimes are forced on the poor, and where globalized state surveillance is the one thing that governmental bodies are able to ignore. In its place, and as a form of resistance, Krzysztof Wodiczko’s Homeless Projection: Place des Arts, the title of which speaks directly to the idea of "homeless", was created. This is a powerful example of how art can be used to challenge the status quo and bring attention to social issues.
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 Wifredo-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 “asocial”9 to not 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.”10 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.7 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 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 distance and, using what Brecht has called the VerfremdungsEffekt,11 to “esrange” 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?”12 He cites various examples throughout art history—Caravaggio, Brueghel, 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 Intermédialités, 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 stigmata 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 lacerated. 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.