

SOLDIERS SPEAK

"... OUT OF HERE: The Veterans Project"

by Krzysztof Wodiczko

Institute of Contemporary Art

Boston

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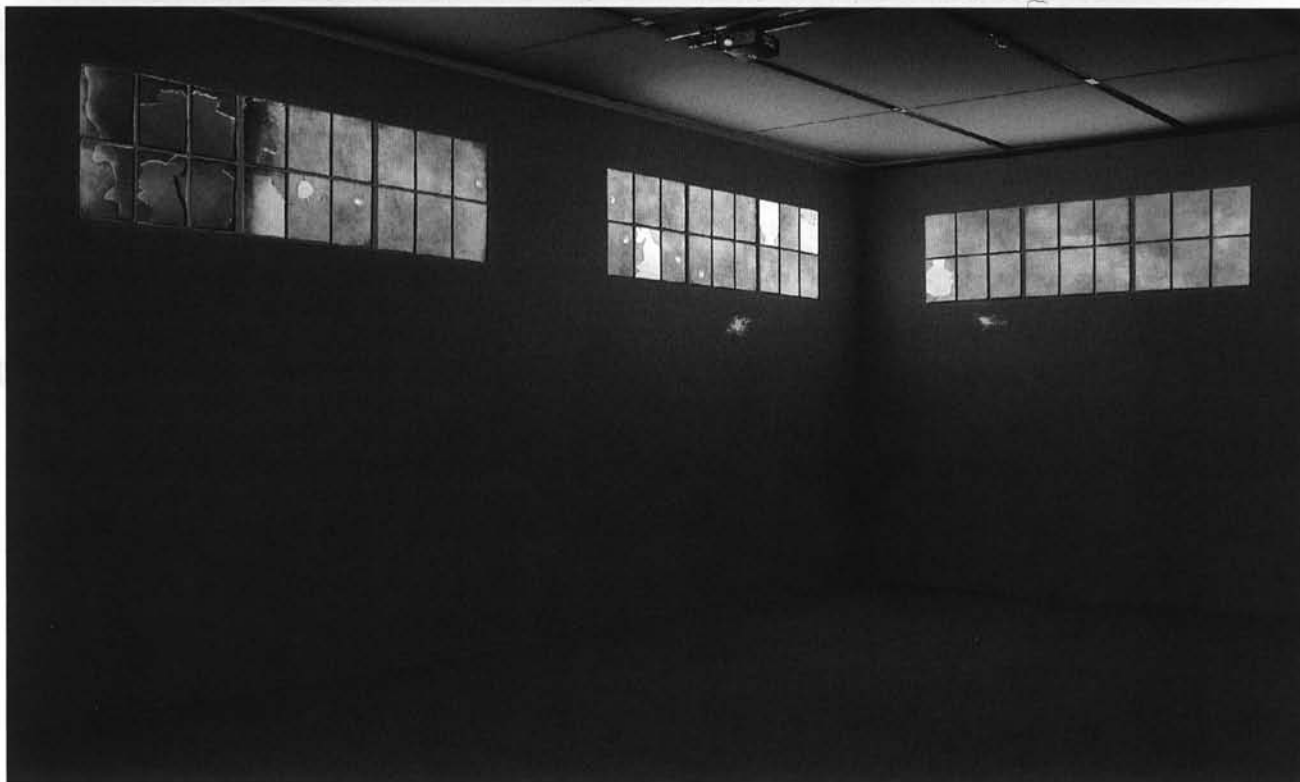
How public intervention functions as art and how art functions as public intervention has been a primary concern of Polish artist Krzysztof Wodiczko. In the 1980s he became known for his large-scale outdoor works in which composited images were projected onto public buildings. The projections fused with the architecture to create stark juxtapositions. These works questioned authority and often included images challenging power and war. At the same time, he was creating works that illuminated buildings in popular urban areas. For example, Wodiczko entered into discussions with the homeless population of cities he visited or lived in, including New York. These discussions led to his "Vehicles for the Homeless" (1988), a group of functional sculptures that reimagine the shopping cart. Wodiczko's "Vehicles" aimed to provide easy mobility and more storage, as well as security and protection to aid the homeless in the collection and transportation of their possessions. Interaction with the public, at times including the homeless or recent immigrants, brings a human dimension to Wodiczko's technological works.

The Iraq War is the subject of his installation "... OUT OF HERE: The Veterans Project" at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in Boston. Similar to his discussions with the homeless and immigrants, Wodiczko engaged with different veteran and refugee groups, listening to their stories about their experiences during and after their time in Iraq. Commissioned by and first presented at the 2008 Democratic Convention in Denver, the "Veteran Vehicle Project" was a public intervention in which a re-engineered military Humvee became a mobile projection machine. Rather than projecting bullets, this vehicle illuminated city walls with fragments of text—keywords from the stories—simultaneously broadcast from loud speakers attached to the Humvee. The ICA documentation from Wodiczko's "Veteran Vehicle Project" is presented alongside a clip from *War Veteran Vehicle*, a companion work

staged in England in 2009. A third monitor shows an excerpt from his *Veterans' Flame* (2009). In these projects, Wodiczko collaborated with veterans and refugees, working with them to create emotional and chilling stories that became the spoken texts used in the final works. *Veterans' Flame* is subtle and quiet as it pictures a single flame that flutters with the cadence of the text, while the vehicle projects are more bombastic interventions broadcasting out rather than asking one to reflect within. What gives these pieces their power is the precision of the choreography and the translation of the original texts into gestures, like the flickering of a candle's flame, that resonate beyond spoken language.

Wodiczko's first projections are silent. Oftentimes, a large image suddenly appears on a building to be viewed against the noise of the city. In his more recent gallery works, Wodiczko desaturates his bold visuals, creating what appear to be moving shadows behind glass walls. In "If You See Something . . .," presented at Galerie Lelong in New York in 2005, unidentifiable silhouette-like figures with varying opacities were projected onto the walls of the darkened gallery space, as if seen through milky glass. The accompanying soundtrack described the struggles of immigrants during the governments "see something, say something" policy, while viewers watched people going about everyday business—a window washer or two people deep in conversation, their voices passionately relaying the depth of their struggles. In *Guests*, created for the Polish Pavilion in the 2009 Venice Biennial, Wodiczko expanded the inside/outside metaphor as he continued to explore the plight of the immigrant using spoken texts and wall and ceiling projections of shadowy figures engaged in menial tasks. Although human beings are vocally present in these installations, they are never fully apparent.

In "... OUT OF HERE," individuals are similarly heard but never seen. The gallery is a dark and cavernous space and this setting puts the viewer inside while the action occurs outside. Projections of windowpanes create a clerestory along the upper perimeter of the walls. The location is not specified, but it is evident that the scene occurs in a place of conflict, in a momentary lull before impending chaos. The seven-minute loop reflects the horror, confusion, and uncertainty of war. The narrative is a compilation, with bits and pieces taken from different stories told to Wodiczko in numerous workshops he has had with veterans and refugees who volunteered to talk about their combat and wartime experiences.



The piece begins with sounds that reflect the simultaneous activities of Iraqi citizens and American soldiers: children playing, soldiers chatting, babies crying. The light through the window changes, clouds pass overhead, a soccer ball whizzes by. Suddenly, a helicopter is heard and then seen through the window as a shadow looming above. These simultaneous noises are followed by gunfire and voices shouting, "What's that, who's hit?" The windows crack and shatter. Bullets puncture the glass and silence ensues. The soldiers argue about whether or not to help, and ultimately decide to leave. When the Iraqi women discover a dead child, they begin to wail. The soldiers are offered a stark choice: save the civilians or protect their own. The piece highlights the impossible choices that confront soldiers in war.

In seven minutes, Wodiczko and his collaborators attempt to simulate the chaos of war. The work asks viewers to transport themselves to a place they have only seen on the news or read about in papers, and to think about what it means to be inside the action. The work is not a documentary or a chronological recreation of events, but rather a hauntingly beautiful and provocative sound sculpture. Wodiczko attempts to communicate how these experiences invade the soul and become embedded in memory. By recreating the anxiety and uncertainty of combat within the gallery space, Wodiczko creates a space to contemplate the horrors of war from the perspective of both soldiers and civilians.

JODY ZELLEN is a Los Angeles-based artist and writer who is currently a visiting artist at the Museum School in Boston.

Above

Installation view of "... OUT OF HERE: The Veterans Project" (2009) by Krzysztof Wodiczko; courtesy of the artist and Galerie Lelong, New York