A Conversation with Krzysztof Wodiczko

DOUGLAS CRIMP, ROSALYN DEUTSCHE, and EWA LAJER-BURCHARTH

Deutsche: Last winter you showed *The Homeless Projection* as a proposal in a New York gallery. What procedures would be required to execute the work in its proposed site of Union Square?

Wodiczko: I can only recall for you the procedures required for a work proposed for Washington Square in 1984. It was explained to 49th Parallel, the gallery that helped organize the project, that permission was needed from the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation and from the community board of the area. In that case, the Parks Department had no objections, but the community board, which was asked for approval on short notice, said no. A single individual, the head of the community board, was responsible for the refusal, because the decision had to be made in an interval between board meetings. He explained that the board had refused many other proposals, apparently because they are not interested in organized public events, which they feel would disturb the normal activities of the park. As you know, Washington Square has a very rich life, students, people exercising, drug traffic. I haven't attempted yet to realize *The Homeless Projection*, but I assume the procedures would be the same for Union Square.

Prospect Park, which administers Grand Army Plaza, where I did a projection in 1985, also has an agreement with the local community board. I was told that the agreement states that any cultural or artistic event that would bring politics to the park should be excluded. I was given the impression that my *Grand Army Plaza Projection* should not be politically explicit.

Deutsche: What do you suppose they think public art is?

Wodiczko: I think they want public art to consist of undisturbing but spectacular events or objects that will satisfy the community in an easy and immediate way, which I do not wish to oppose initially. It is essential to be able to take advantage of any administrative desire for art in public places, to "collaborate" in

Campanile and Church of Santa Maria Formosa.
Campo Santa Maria Formosa, Venice, 1986.

such events and infiltrate them with an unexpected critical element. In this case the main event was the annual Brooklyn New Year's Eve gala with a fireworks display by the Grucci family, music, and hot cider. My projection was intended as an integral part of the event.

Lajer-Burcharth: What was the reaction of the authorities who contracted you to do the event?

Wodiczko: I was invited to participate by Mariella Bisson, a special officer in the Prospect Park administration for organizing an art-in-the-park program. She is an artist herself and is very knowledgeable about the park's history, a committed "patriot" of the park, devoted to the notion of the park as a space of both historical and contemporary aesthetic experience. She has created a sculpture gallery in the interior—monstrous in its scale—of the Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Arch, and another art gallery in the boathouse in the park. She thought that one of my projections, regardless of its subject, would create an added attraction for the gala, differentiating this year's event from previous ones. But her supervisor was not informed about what I intended to project, even though it was known some two weeks in advance, since we had to do trial runs. Instead, the supervisor learned of the projection from the *New York Times*, whose section on what to do on New Year's Eve mentioned that U.S. and Soviet missiles would be projected on the arch. That must have smelled of politics to the supervisor. Not knowing how my projections function, how they illuminate the relation between image and architecture, the park administration evidently feared they had condoned a work of political propaganda. But once the projection was in place, it didn't have the shock of propaganda; the missiles looked very natural there. The projection lasted for only one hour, from 11:30 to 12:30 the next year, and when the supervisor arrived it was all over. But she still wanted to see it, so even though I was packing up my equipment, I set it up again for her. She was amazed by her own positive reaction to it, seduced by the brightness and glamour of the image, "pleasantly surprised," she said, by the integration of image and architecture. "The customer must be satisfied. Misunderstandings are out of the question!" as Witkiewicz wrote in the epigraph for his Rules of the Portrait Firm in the 1930s.[1] I heard that the threatened reputation of the art officer was restored immediately.

Crimp: What about the people who came to see the fireworks?

1. S. I. Witkiewicz (1885–1939), painter, photographer, playwright, theoretician, created The Portrait Firm in 1925 as an ironic response to bourgeois conditions of art in Poland. "The Rules of the Portrait Firm" were first published in 1928. A translation into French appears in *Présences Polonaises*, Paris, Centre Georges Pompidou, 1983, p. 73.

Wodiczko: That's a different story. Part of the public was disappointed that the slides didn't change. Slide projections mean, for most people, a "slide show," a multi-image spectacle. Because the public had to look for other aspects of the image than those of relationships between different images, they had to try to see the relation between the image and the architectural form. At first, people don't see architectural structures as images in themselves; they see them as physical surfaces, as screens for the projection. But keeping the image static helps to integrate it with the architecture.

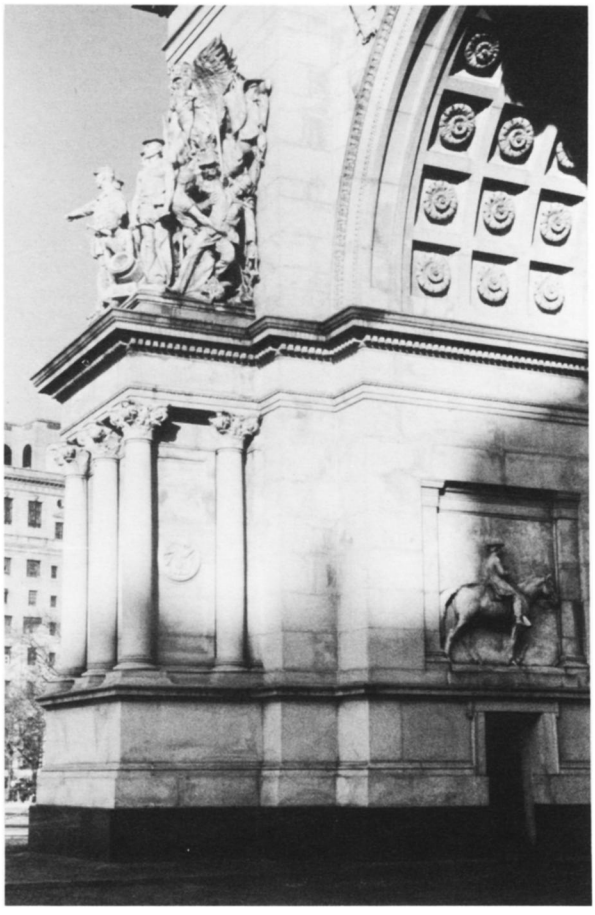
Deutsche: How many people saw the projection?

Wodiczko: I was told that 1400 people attended the event, but since the Grand Army Plaza is Brooklyn's major vehicular traffic circle and the red lights forced cars to stop exactly in front of the projection, many more hundreds of people must have seen it. Many cars stopped or slowed down despite the green light, and some circled around for a second look. Most of the people who came to the event were from the black and Hispanic community in Brooklyn, many of whom were school children. They were people who had no place else to go to celebrate New Year's Eve. Some members of the cultural intelligentsia, as well as some junior-high-school students who had seen photographs of my projections shown at the New Museum at that time, made an effort to be there. The projection was on the north side of the arch and therefore could be seen, not from Prospect Park, but from the small adjacent park in front of which the arch stands. Cars drive all around that park, making it a very circumscribed and intimate viewing area. There are no sculptures or reliefs on the north side of the arch. This is a monument to the northern army, so the south side of the arch is very busy with representations of the army marching south to liberate the South from "wrongdoing." The monument has absolutely nothing to say about the North, because if it did, it would have to reflect on itself. So despite the fact that the arch is symmetrically designed to carry sculptures on both sides, there is no sculpture on the north side.

Lajer-Burcharth: So you were interested in completing the monument symmetrically with images that ironically echoed the structure and the elements on the southern side. For example, you projected a padlock, a sign of constraint and limitation, on the keystone of the arch as a dissonant equivalent of the figure of liberation, the winged victory.

Crimp: It also reinscribes the North/South conflict with an East/West orientation.

Wodiczko: After growing up in the "East" it certainly helps to arrive in the "West" from the north, by which I mean Canada, in order better to see all sides of the



Bas-relief by Thomas Eakins and William R. O'Donovan on the Soldiers and Sailors Arch, *Grand Army Plaza, Brooklyn.*

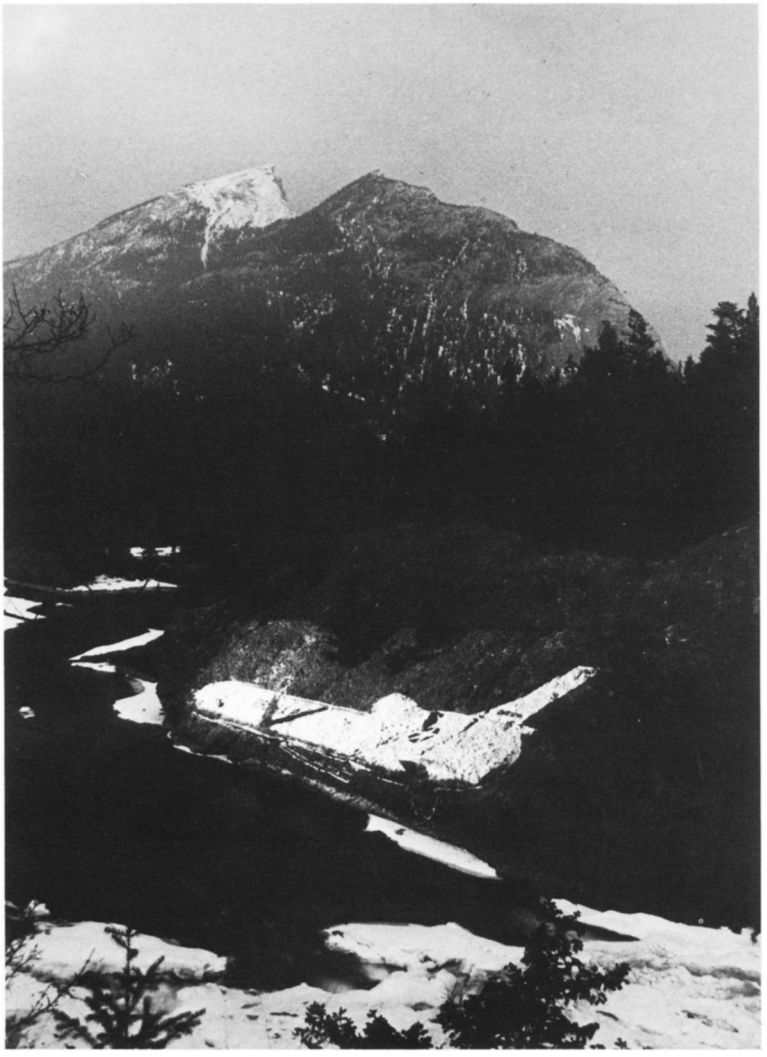
arch, especially the repressed, northern side. Ironically, this arch, which is conceived as receiving the victorious Northern army and which uses a classicizing beaux-arts style, is challenged by two small realist bas-relief sculptures by Eakins placed inside the arch. They are the only two figures actually walking north, coming back from the war, extremely tired. One of the horses is limping. As far as I know, this is the only monument in the world that contains such an internal debate, aesthetically and historically. The fact that a realist was allowed to enter the beaux-arts domain in reverse direction is extraordinary.

Anyway, my reorientation of the arch to an East/West conflict converts the reading of the arch from its commentary on the South to one of left and right, to the weight of the arch's two bases. The people viewing the projection offered their own interpretations. What I liked was that everyone was trying to impose his or her reading upon others. It turned into a political debate based on reading the symbols and referring to the contemporary political situation. It was a time when the public was being prepared for impending peace talks between the U.S. and Soviet governments. There were great expectations about

Krzysztof Wodiczko. The Grand Army Plaza Projection *during New Year's Eve fireworks.*

coming back to the conference table and perhaps for a reduction of the arms race. I wanted to respond to this, but, of course, it's impossible today to be optimistic and intelligent at the same time. So I wanted the people to see various possibilities. But since everyone was interested in convincing others of his or her own reading, only a few seemed to realize that the various readings were all simultaneously possible. One reading was that the missiles were two phallic symbols. Another was that the projection was about disarmament, the nuclear freeze, the liberal position. And a third group spoke of the interdependence of the superpowers, the fact that they are locked together, that they cannot exist without each other, and that there is a frightening similarity between them. Because the debate was open and easily heard, all the readings were most likely received by everyone, and hopefully this social and auditory interaction helped the visual projection survive in the public's memory as a complex experience. For a moment at least, this "necro-ideological" monument became alive.

Halfway through the projection, behind and above the arch, there was another audiovisual experience for eight minutes that gave the projection a new, enhanced context. The fireworks—detonations, explosions, aerial illuminations—this display would have had a double meaning for anyone who had experienced bombings of cities or who, growing up in the ruins of cities, had



Krzysztof Wodiczko. The Bow Falls Projection. *Banff, Alberta, 1983.*

seen films of those bombings. This was certainly the case for the Polish intellectuals among the spectators, among them the critic Szymon Bojko.

Bojko, who lives in Poland, wrote a popular book on Soviet constructivist graphic design.[2] He is able to address, both popularly and historically, the relation between art and propaganda. Through his connections in the Soviet Union, he knows a lot about Vkhutemas,[3] the Soviet predecessor of the Bauhaus.

2. Szymon Bojko, *New Graphic Design in Revolutionary Russia*, New York, Praeger, 1972.
3. Vkhutemas, an acronym for the Russian for Higher Art and Technical Workshops, was founded in the Soviet Union in 1920. In 1927 it was re-formed and renamed Vkhutein (State

Working in the '60s in the cultural department of the central committee of the Polish United Workers Party,[4] Bojko managed to influence the committee with very clear ideas on the organization of industrial design education, research, and practice. He came to see my *Grand Army Plaza Projection* with a group of Polish and American friends from New York, so I was very interested to see how they would respond. They were relieved to see that there were both Soviet and U.S. missiles, because they had heard that one of my projections in Stuttgart consisted of only a Pershing II missile and that one in Canada was of only a U.S.-built Cruise missile. So there was probably some talk of my not acknowledging both sides of the problem, which is a very sensitive issue in Poland. They also suggested the reading of the interdependence between the superpowers, and some of them mentioned the ironic relationship between the heroic monumentality of the arch and the new "heroism" and "monumentality" of intercontinental ballistic missiles. Poles are very well educated about public monuments. As the Polish playwright Sławomir Mrożek put it, "Somewhere between the monuments and the memorials lies Poland."

Lajer-Burcharth: Your projections also remind me of an important aspect of Polish May Day parades. The focal point of the parades, the pompous facades of the socialist-realist buildings on the main street in Warsaw, used to be adorned with huge, four-story-high portraits of contemporary Polish heads of state hung side by side with those of Marx and Lenin. This display was obviously a kind of wish fulfillment of the Polish rulers anxious to secure symbolic continuity between themselves and the unquestioned heroes of the communist past. The socialist-realist architecture was made to reinforce this continuity with the authority of its classicizing forms. And the portraits reciprocated as an endorsement by the current leadership of the excessive grandeur of this postwar architecture. Obviously, the effect of your projections is very different. Far from this reciprocal completion, the clashing of image and architecture calls into question the authority of both. But wouldn't you say that the Polish context is relevant to your attitude toward images of authority?

Wodiczko: Yes, to the extent that the architecture of the '60s, and even more so that of the '70s, the Gierek era, embodied a new style, a fetishism of progress, a Westernized, technocratic version of progress (echoing Lenin's New Economic Policy), a "state productivism," if I may put it that way. In this period the ac-

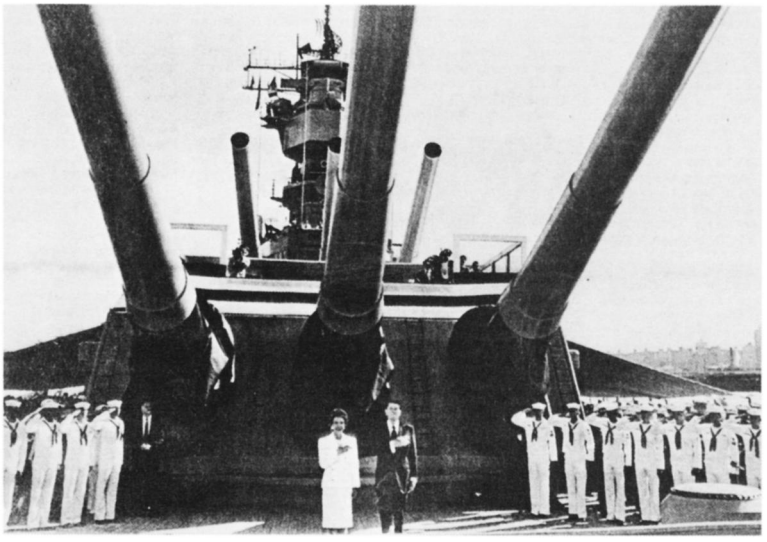
Higher Art and Technical Workshops); it was dissolved in 1930. For a brief history, see Szymon Bojko, "Vkhutemas," in *The 1920s in Eastern Europe*, Cologne, Galerie Gmurzynska, 1975, pp. 19–26.

4. Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza, the official name of the Communist Party in Poland, which was created during World War II from a merger of the Polish Socialist Party and the Polish Workers Party.

quired capitalist, "scientifically exploitative" organization of production was wedded to the state socialist, centrally planned, bureaucratic exploitation of workers' labor, all in the name of achieving a higher, which is to say, closer to Western, standard of living. The environmental evidence of Gierek's new "New Economic Policy" was painfully visible in the form of the rapid development of office towers, gigantic hotels, shopping centers, automobiles, super highways, and urban vehicular arterials. In this context, the grand official manifestations of the '70s provided an opportunity to see very clearly the propaganda effects of both the earlier, Stalinist architecture, which now looked "romantic," and the new, Western-style, abstract, technocratic architecture.

Lajer-Burcharth: With the advent of Gierek an important change was introduced into the official symbolic practices in order to take account of the new economic order. In the May Day parades, portraits of contemporary Polish leaders were no longer used. Gierek's leadership was represented instead by such signs of technocratic progress as the new Forum hotel, built by a Swedish contractor, at the site where the parade ends. This building and others built in the '70s be-

Intersection of Marszalkowska and Aleje Jerozolimskie showing Gierek-era buildings.



News photo of the "Liberty Celebration," 1986.

came the backdrops for portraits of Marx and Lenin. The architecture itself was intended to testify to the successful continuation of their ideals.

Crimp: Are you saying, then, that this kind of political manifestation was central to your own understanding of the relationship between image and architecture?

Wodiczko: It did help to be able to see the impact of a grand but temporary political decoration on the public's perception of buildings, of the cityscape as a whole. It also helped me to understand the effect of the absence of such decorations after they were taken down, to remember the architectural "afterimage" of a political slogan or icon, its lasting but illusive integration with the building. Such an experience suggests, of course, the possibility of a temporary, *unofficial, critical* "decoration," difficult to imagine in Poland, where censorship of the public domain is total, but a little easier to imagine here, where censorship is also strong but less centralized. Generally, Poland was a great laboratory of environmental ideology. But the imagery of official Polish propaganda is so architectural itself, perfect to the point of its own death. The obvious, sloganistic character, the lifeless appearance makes Polish imagery less subversive, less seductive, appearing to be less "natural" than American propaganda imagery, such as advertising or even an official event like the "Liberty Celebration." But Polish propaganda does have a powerful architectural quality which integrates well with the ideological/architectural environment. So I did learn much in Poland, but my education needed to be completed in the context of capitalist consumer culture. It was an advantage that I went first to Canada, where cultural studies of media and communications are very strong. My teaching affiliation with the Cultural Studies Program in Peterborough, Ontario, was important in

this regard. Only after several years outside Poland was I able fully to comprehend the degree to which artists and designers in Poland were ideologically trapped by the Westernized, "liberal" state socialism of the '70s. Artists earned their freedom to work with what were called "various means of expression," that is, to exclude official politics from their art, by including those very politics in the work they did on commission for the state propaganda apparatus. So one was political as a collaborator-artist in the morning and apolitical as a "pure" artist in the evening in the confines of one's studio. Only a few artists and designers realized that in such a situation they were really acting as collaborators with the system not in the morning but in the evening.

Crimp: Was this your experience?

Wodiczko: Not really. I was an industrial designer working full time in the design office of the Polish Optical Works in Warsaw, so I was not working freelance, not vulnerable to the changing desires of the ideological design market, and not needing to work for the propaganda apparatus as most painters, sculptors, and graphic designers did. I worked in a factory designing professional instruments such as microscopes, measuring devices, electronic systems for quality control, scientific research, laboratory, and medical purposes. At one point I was on a design team that was asked to design a geological compass . . .

Lajer-Burcharth: An ideological compass?!

Wodiczko: You almost spoiled my story, because you understand too quickly. There were all sorts of demands coming from the industrial brass to come up with a less professional, more popular tool in response to Gierek's program for an increase in the production of consumer goods. That was, of course, an idiotic demand for a professional instruments company. So I said publicly, in the design office, that we would design this compass only if there were no member of the Communist Party on the design team, because north is north, not east or west. A compass can only show magnetic north. Somehow, nothing happened to me, perhaps because as an industrial designer, a member of a still-young profession, I was treated as an eccentric in the industrial world. As a graduate of the Academy of Fine Arts, I was also treated as an "artist," even though I did everything I could to counteract that view. This experience taught me how thoroughly design is submerged in politics. I learned a lot about politics even regarding the most innocent measuring instrument, something that can be done only in the most technical manner. Imagine what my designer friends were going through when designing refrigerators!

Deutsche: What was your background before you worked as an industrial designer? Can you tell us something about your education?

Wodiczko: In the Soviet Union in the '20s the educational path lead from fine art to design, from analytical constructivism to productivism. For me, in the '60s and '70s, the situation was, of course, different. The period of Gomułka's de-Stalinization in Poland provided an opening for contact with Western design circles, such as the school in Ulm,[5] and with those of prewar avant-garde design, such as BLOK, Praesens, a.r.,[6] and the Koluszki school.[7] I studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw in the '60s. The graduate program in industrial design, in which I was a student, was directed by Jerzy Sołtan, a former assistant of Le Corbusier. At that time Sołtan was directing a similar program at Harvard, teaching the fall term in Warsaw and the spring term in Cambridge. I'm sure that Szymon Bojko's support was crucial to Sołtan's success in Poland. Sołtan, his assistant Andrzej Wróblewski, now president of the academy, and Bojko had devised a post-avant-garde strategy for post-Stalinist Poland. The special education of designers was a key point of their strategy. The program emphasized the developments of the students' individual and collective skills for infiltrating the institutional structure while working as common industrial designers, organizers of design offices in all branches of industry, teachers, researchers, and so on. It was a neoproductivist model. This was the period of the creation of the Industrial Design Council, whose head is vice-premier of the government and whose members are vice-ministers. So industrial design was very highly bureaucratized, much better organized than in the West or in Lenin's Soviet Union. I was trained to be a member of the elite unit of designers, skillful infiltrators who were supposed to transform existing state socialism into an intelligent, complex, and human design project. This positive social program for industrial design, indebted historically to the program of Vkhutemas, unfortunately shifted in the Gierek era to a technocratic, consumerist phase and thus adopted the international constructivist tradition in place of constructivism proper, the latter being the constructivism that developed in the Soviet Union as a means of building a society rather than decorating bourgeois society with objects. The de-politicization of constructivism's history was a very unfortunate part of our experience as artists. There is a famous museum of constructivism

5. The Hochschule für Gestaltung was founded in Ulm, West Germany, in 1955. Walter Gropius delivered the inaugural address, saying, "The work once begun in the Bauhaus and the principles formulated there have found a new German home and an opportunity for wider organic development here in Ulm." The school was closed in 1968.
6. BLOK (founded 1924), Praesens (founded 1926), and a.r. (Revolutionary Artists, founded 1929) were the major Polish constructivist groups as well as the names of their publications.
7. Katarzyna Kobro and Władysław Strzemiński taught at the industrial school in Koluszki in 1930–31 using a curriculum based on the educational principles of Vkhutemas and the Bauhaus.

in Łódź.[8] In the '70s it was already quite clear that the effect, and perhaps even the mission of this museum was to de-politicize the entire constructivist tradition, intellectual and artistic, affiliating it more and more with international, Western constructivism, the de Stijl movement, and neoconstructivism such as op and kinetic art.

Lajer-Burcharth: This tendency to de-politicize Polish constructivism by playing down its links with the Soviet experiment should be situated historically within the liberalization associated with Gierek. The reinterpretation of Polish artistic traditions as independent from Soviet art paralleled the reorientation of the Polish economy toward the West. This view of constructivism was also part of the defensive reaction to the postwar imposition of Soviet art policies in Poland, that is, to socialist realism. The imposition of Zhdanovist orthodoxy stalled any discussion of the alternative forms of culture for the new socialist society until the late '50s.

Wodiczko: Quite openly so. As part of the six-year plan of 1949, the guidelines of the council of architects specifically declared socialist realism a critique of constructivism. This "critique" collapsed the complex history of constructivism into one international bourgeois movement, excoriated as "cosmopolitanism, constructivism, and formalism," whose "abstract forms" were said to be "always foreign to the people." But the Stalinist position, for all its regressive effect, was at least conducted in the name of social responsibility, socialist content, the national cultural heritage, a human form for the environment, and so on. The Stalinist era represented a total politicization of art and design, including a politicization of the war against constructivism. The Gierek era, by contrast, represented a total de-politicization of art and design, including a war on constructivism carried out through its de-politicization. This most recent perversion of constructivism, then, resulted in what I call socialist technocratism.

Deutsche: So there was a de-politicization of constructivism in the East that is directly parallel to that in the West.

Lajer-Burcharth: Except that in Poland this process took place in a more overtly political context. In the West the de-politicization of constructivism was effected by the art-historical discourse, while in Poland it was an element of national cultural policy. The attempt to restore to constructivism its real history that is now taking place in the West has also begun in Poland, especially in the work of Andrzej Turowski. His *Polish Constructivism* appeared as late as 1981,[9] but

8. At the instigation of Strzemiński and the a.r. group, an international collection of modern art was formed in 1931 at the museum of Łódź, now the Museum Sztuki.
9. Andrzej Turowski, *Konstruktywizm polski*, Warsaw, Polish Academy of Science, Institute of Art, 1981.

Turowski wrote an earlier, popular analysis of constructivism in a book series devoted to twentieth-century avant-garde movements.

Wodiczko: His title for the earlier book was *The Constructivist Revolution*, which suggests the interplay between aesthetic and political revolution. The editors changed it to *In the Circle of Constructivism.*[10] It is against editorial policy to acknowledge openly anything as political, including constructivism. Turowski's repoliticization and rehistoricization of constructivism was a crucial experience for me. The Foksal Gallery, of which Turowski and Wiesław Borowski were the codirectors, had established itself as a center of criticism of artistic culture. It is a type of alternative gallery not really known here in that it was run collectively by critics, and not by artists. Through the presentation of works of art, critical texts, and debates, the gallery wished to affect the larger context. They applied the avant-garde style of manifestos and interventions, but "post-avant-garde" to the extent that they accepted the limitation of utopia, dealing as they were with a reality that was already organized in the name of utopia.

When Turowski entered the gallery as a young scholar of constructivism, he contributed a Marxist methodology to the gallery's tactics and strategies, which was a very significant change, because at that time the gallery critics and artists were operating with surrealist ideas. Turowski's presence resulted in a fusion of a moral critique of established artistic culture with a social critique, and self-critique, of that culture's institutions. Turowski wrote a very important short text entitled "Gallery against Gallery." It was the beginning of the concept of the gallery as a self-critical institution, an institution questioning its own place in society in relation to other institutions, and doing so to the extent of putting into question the entire institutional system of culture. Foksal also published texts called "What We Don't Like about Foksal Gallery" and "Documentation," which called for the destruction of all the art documents. The "Living Archive" created the exaggerated idea of an archive that would protect documents by preventing their further circulation and cultural manipulation.

Lajer-Burcharth: This occurred in response to censorship. In Poland, unlike other Soviet bloc countries, a certain independence is granted within the domain of culture so long as culture is willing to contain itself and refrain from interaction with other social activity. Foksal Gallery was one such island of cultural criticism that was allowed to exist. But even this self-imposed marginalization did not guarantee complete freedom of operation. When I was involved with another alternative gallery, founded after Foksal, we managed to publish several issues of a journal about critical aesthetic practices without asking for party approval for our editorial staff. We did this by using the paper allotted us for the publica-

10. Andrzej Turowski, *W kręgu konstruktywizmu*, Warsaw, Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, 1979.

tion of exhibition catalogues. Soon, though, we were forced to discontinue publication, not because of any specific contents, but because it is prohibited to put out a serial publication, something that can be distributed and read regularly, without the consent of the centralized apparatus of the state. Seriality itself threatened to spill culture outside its prescribed limits.

Wodiczko: The experience with censorship, with official culture, and with the entire institutional system, the changing meaning of each form of cultural activity in changing political circumstances, was a central part of my experience in Poland, especially because of my affiliation with Foksal Gallery but also because of my father. Throughout the period of Stalinism and the Gomułka and Gierek eras, my father was involved with serious cultural politics as a conductor and artistic director of city and state orchestras and opera companies. He was famous for introducing the Polish public to the contemporary, artistically ambitious repertoire.[11] People such as my father and those associated with Foksal Gallery, just as the people like Sołtan and Bojko, whom we have already discussed, learned to cope with the system of restrictions and liberties in order consciously to infiltrate and manipulate the system while also recognizing the extent to which they were being manipulated by the system. So, having close contacts with the mechanisms of censorship and self-censorship and with the politics of official artistic culture and of industry and education (I was teaching at Warsaw's Polytechnique), and having my father's example, I learned very quickly that we must adopt some kind of post-avant-garde strategy in Poland.

Lajer-Burcharth: Since you are speaking of the strategy of manipulating the system from within, of interfering with the codes, so to speak, were you familiar with the writings of Roland Barthes?

Wodiczko: Barthes was not unknown to me and my generation. Most of the French theoreticians, especially those working in the field of culture, were translated into Polish, possibly earlier than into English. Writings, films, plays, and art critical of contemporary bourgeois culture were always welcomed by the Polish censorship apparatus. It was, however, difficult to learn from writers like Barthes how to operate critically within the Polish situation. Once one realized the best strategies for one's own place, though, it was easier to understand what Barthes was suggesting for the West. But we should not forget that the situation during the late '60s and early '70s was in some respects similar in

11. Bohdan Wodiczko (1911–1985) was conductor and artistic director of the Baltic Symphony, Łódź Symphony, Cracow Symphony, Polish National Orchestra, Polish Radio Orchestra, Łódź Opera, and Polish National Opera. He was responsible for introducing postwar Polish audiences to Stravinsky, Berg, Nono, and other modern composers, as well as for engaging such avant-garde figues as Tadeusz Kantor as directors of opera productions.

France and Poland. We lost our student battles in 1968, too. We lost faith in our utopian revolutionary approach, and we needed new strategies. Polish students' demands differed from those of the French students, but there were many similarities. Poland and Czechoslovakia were part of the overall movement in the '60s. So after the failure of all of our revolutions, we found ourselves in similar situations, whether we happened to be reading Barthes or not. I wonder, by the way, whether Barthes would have understood the strategies of Foksal Gallery in the context of French cultural politics of the same period. But you know very well that Poland and France have been very closely connected. Many Polish students witnessed what happened in France in 1968. Turowski was one of them. The work of Daniel Buren and the Support-Surface group would not have been clear to me without the conversations with Turowski and some of his friends from Poznań . . .

Lajer-Burcharth: In Poznań there is a dynamic Marxist intellectual milieu, a rarity in Polish academic life.

Wodiczko: I realized that what the Polish constructivists Katarzyna Kobro and Władysław Strzemiński were dreaming about, "the organization of the rhythms of life" as the ultimate aesthetic project, was already organized all around us. So, learning from the constructivists the relationship between society and form, among politics, art, and everyday life, by combining this with the knowledge of futurist, dada, and surrealist interventions, we could begin to understand that our aim was not to contribute to the further organization of the "rhythms of life," but to interrupt, interfere, and intervene in the already highly organized "rhythms of life."

Crimp: So this strategy of interruption or interference, which might be said to characterize your work now, is something that you had already developed in the Polish context.

Wodiczko: Yes, seeds of my critical activity here in the public sphere can be found in my early works in Warsaw, especially in the two "de-constructivist" technical "inventions." The first of these was *Instrument*, presented to the public in Warsaw in 1971. I designed it with the help of technicians from the Experimental Music Studio. It was an electro-acoustic instrument/costume that transformed, through my hand gestures, the accidental noise of city traffic into modulated sounds that only I could hear. The second was *Vehicle*, constructed with the help of Foksal Gallery, and shown publicly in Warsaw in 1972. Through a system of gears and cables, the vehicle was propelled forward by perpetually walking back and forth on its tilting top surface. It thus transformed the conventional back-and-forth pacing associated with intellectual reflection or with being stymied into the forward movement associated with the official

Krzysztof Wodiczko. Vehicle. *Warsaw, 1972–73.*

notion of progress. You can see that my metaphoric vehicle was an ironic reconsideration of such an optimistic, techno-socialist project as Tatlin's *Letatlin.*[12]

Deutsche: If, to some degree, your work still involves the interruption of the official organization of society, how does such a strategy function here, in a different context? In Poland, as you've explained, you had to work within a social organization that includes official and overt censorship, while here censorship functions very differently; the entire organization of the social is much less apparent, much less obvious. How do you transfer the ideas which had formed your strategies in Poland to a different context?

Wodiczko: By trying to intervene in the public sphere as close as possible to the legal and technical limits that are imposed. Acting in the public sphere in the West, I have confronted not only a different category of censorship, but a different level. There is a greater general possibility for working in public, but this creates a need for more complicated strategies to deal with a complex set of institutional, corporate, state, and community restrictions. But the "transfer of ideas" to the West must be discussed in relation not only to forms and categories of censorship, to different kinds of artistic unfreedom, but also to the ap-

12. Vladimir Tatlin worked on his flying machine *Letatlin* between 1929 and 1932, at which time he attempted to launch it. He called his glider "an everyday object for the Soviet masses, an ordinary object of use."

plicability of the ideas to the new situation. It is safe to say, however, that, despite all the differences, there are great similarities in our everyday lives in relation to our physical environment, whether in Poland, Canada, the U.S., or the Soviet Union. There are similarities in the ways that architecture functions as an ideological medium, a psychological partner, in the way it educates, orders, participates in the process of socialization, in the way it integrates its "body" with our bodies, in the ways it rapidly changes or even destroys our lives. My public projections developed first in Canada, because in Poland I could not even consider such an art form simply because of technical limitations, and obviously because of the censorship of the public sphere. Even to use images from the press for my gallery projections, which I had done in an exhibition called *References*, I needed to have permission, because individuals don't own images; the state does. The result is that it is impossible to change the context of images, because the state is perfectly aware of the semiotics of the image. In order to use images, one must resort to metaphor rather than direct statement.

Crimp: Do people learn to read metaphors better in such a situation than they do here, to perform a hermeneutic operation on every image?

Lajer-Burcharth: This is, in fact, how culture survives. Filmmakers, writers, and artists who want to comment on social reality usually employ metaphor. Otherwise their possibilities of affecting public opinion are very restricted.

Deutsche: But can't the censors also read those metaphors?

Lajer-Burcharth: Yes, they can, but they are also embarrassed to admit that they can recognize them, because that would imply that they are aware of the shortcomings or problems that the metaphors address. They are afraid to admit to the pertinence of the criticism. This is why the books of the journalist Ryszard Kapuściński, which expose the corruption of such regimes as those in Ethiopia and Iran,[13] are permitted to be published. Otherwise, the censors would implicitly acknowledge their recognition of the analogies of those regimes with the regimes of Eastern bloc countries, of Poland itself.

Wodiczko: One must read Dostoevski's *Crime and Punishment* to understand the relationship between censor and censored. You learn the language of the censor in order to communicate, and, to some degree the censor must also learn your language. There is a final episode to the narrative of *The Grand Army Plaza Pro-*

13. Ryszard Kapuściński, *The Emperor: Downfall of an Autocrat*, trans. William R. Brand and Katarzyna Mroczkowska-Brand, San Diego, Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1983; and *Shah of Shahs*, trans. William R. Brand and Katarzyna Mroczkowska-Brand, San Diego, Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1985.

jection that is relevant here. Several months ago I went to Poland and presented Foksal Gallery with a proposal to show a reconstruction of the project in the gallery. The idea was submitted to the censorship board and the woman in charge explained that it would be impossible to present the work because it would violate article number eight hundred and something or other of the censorship code, which says that under no circumstances are weapons of the U.S. and Soviet Union to be visually depicted as of equal weight, volume, or quantity. An exhibition of documents of my public projections is opening at Foksal Gallery in September this year with *The Grand Army Plaza Projection* and a few others excluded. A catalogue with reproductions of the projections and my theoretical texts is being published. The texts, both in English and in Polish translation, are of course censored. "Public Projection," originally published in the *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* in 1983, attempts to situate my work in the relations among body, architecture, power, and ideology. This was accepted for publication with only one "criticism"; the words *power* and *ideology* must be omitted entirely.

Deutsche: But presumably you knew what would not pass the censorship when you submitted your proposals.

Wodiczko: No, because the laws of censorship have changed. But also the very essence of authoritarian existence is that you never really know what is allowed and what is not. There used to be a "black book" of censorship, a general list of rules and regulations. That has now been replaced by a code of specific regulations, which is changed regularly in response to changing circumstances, so the situation is much worse now. It is much more difficult to fool the system when there are very highly qualified censors immediately interpreting changing conditions and implementing regulations. Some of these people have PhDs; they are "intellectuals." It is a perfect illustration of Marx's definition of censorship, which is that it is centralized criticism. So in Poland there is a kind of centralized art criticism. No one in Poland can complain of the lack of "critical response" to his or her work. Art criticism is democratically guaranteed!

Crimp: Apart from the contents of the images, what is the response in Poland, not only of the censors, but of the intellectuals, to the production mode of your work? Is there any problem of their reading this as aesthetic activity? Are they sufficiently aware of recent developments, albeit marginalized, in the West to understand your mode of working?

Wodiczko: I don't think there is a general problem with understanding my working methods in Poland, nor is there a problem of information about art developments in the West. Information about the West is temporarily limited

today, but in the '70s it was quite accessible, and is beginning to improve again. Hans Haacke's and Daniel Buren's work, for example, is well known to Foksal Gallery, Akumulatory 2, Studio, and many other galleries. Foksal showed Lawrence Weiner, Art and Language, Victor Burgin, European and American Fluxus, and so on. Poland is marginalized less by lack of information about art in the West than by the lack of information about art in Poland available in the West.

Lajer-Burcharth: I don't think the political nature of Krzysztof's work would prevent people in Poland from accepting it as aesthetic practice. After all, they are used to looking for political messages coded in art rather than in the political discourse itself, which is considered totally corrupt.

Wodiczko: My work receives an informed response in Poland. If there is any problem, it is related to different perspectives on global politics, between my perspective, which developed just across the border from the U.S., and theirs, which develops across the border from the monstrous presence of the Soviet Union. Polish censorship and Polish intellectuals have similar but opposite doubts about my position with regard, for example, to the question of the equivalence of Soviet and U.S. weapons.

Crimp: What were the circumstances of your leaving Poland?

Wodiczko: I did not really leave Poland in 1977, in the sense that I had the idea of not returning. It's only that I didn't want to lose contact with the outside world. It was extremely crucial for me to see Poland from the outside. Each time I returned to Poland I was more aware of the extent to which social questions were neglected, how thoroughly we were locked into the prison of an Eastern European perspective. My position was never met with much understanding, even within Foksal Gallery. As long as questions were limited to the politics of culture, things were fine, but when I went beyond that domain, my views were treated as irrelevant. So I wanted to continue to travel back and forth. How naive I was! Obviously there is no such possibility. You might not get your exit visa; then again you might also not get your entry visa to a country in the West. I had to face the typical dilemma. It was set up for me by the Polish police, who began to blackmail my friends, reading all of our correspondence and sometimes quoting telephone conversations verbatim in order to terrorize friends, who also needed to get exit visas. This particularly involved a woman whom the authorities discovered had previously been secretly traveling with me. In the eyes of both the Polish police and the immigration authorities of the Western states, this should never be done, because two people, especially couples, might not return. When one person leaves and the other stays, it's less

suspicious to the bureaucracies in both East and West. The result was that my friend was psychologically assaulted by the police, and after a year was warned that she could leave only if I came back. The only answer to this was not to go back, because one should under no circumstances make a deal with the police. Such a deal often means to them that one is weak and frightened enough to accept other deals. I didn't want to lose my critical perspective about both socioeconomic systems, I wanted to learn more from being here, but I never planned consciously to stay. But finally a decision was, in effect, made for me, because one cannot stay anywhere indefinitely without papers. This is the sort of story that later gets collapsed into the "decision to emigrate."

Crimp: You were then in Canada?

Wodiczko: Yes. I had a number of part-time teaching positions there. The longest was at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Halifax, where I taught for three and a half years. I began teaching in the design program but later moved to the intermedia program, for which I acted as coordinator for one year. It was a very fortunate opportunity, because that program is connected to the visiting artists program, so I was able to meet and work with people such as Martha Rosler, Mary Kelly, Dan Graham, Dara Birnbaum, Allan Sekula, Connie Hatch, Judith Barry. I also coorganized the Cultural Workers Alliance,

Krzysztof Wodiczko. The School of Architecture Projection. *Halifax, Nova Scotia, 1981.*

a short-lived project, first in Toronto, then in Halifax. It was an unaffiliated, umbrella organization of the Left for members of the cultural intelligentsia, a forum for political and artistic discussion, particularly focused on the labor situation in the cultural sector. I managed to involve a number of the more radical students from the college, which provided them with an opportunity to discuss the relationship between the college and the community, the politics of the province, and of Canada generally, something which could not easily be discussed within the college. Certain people at the college considered it a conflict of interest to give any such support to the radical students, but I thought it my obligation to involve them, to help them to see critically their place not only within the college but within the entire cultural system. It was during this period that I began working with public projections.

Deutsche: Were you invited to do a projection on the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, or did you apply for the opportunity? And what was your projection's relationship to the exhibition *Difference: On Representation and Sexuality*?

Wodiczko: I was asked to participate in the "On View" series, smaller exhibitions held in conjunction with major shows, such as the *Difference* exhibition. It was not my primary focus to relate my projection to that exhibition. If there was a relation to the *Difference* show, it was mediated through the relation of my projection to the architecture and to the politics of the entire building. The situation at that time was very dramatic. It was winter and I was living very close to the main shelter for homeless men and quite close to a shelter for women. I saw many people living on the street, trying to survive the bitter-cold temperatures by burning tires. It was therefore shocking to me to see one of the largest buildings in the entire neighborhood empty. It was very evident that the building that houses the New Museum was completely dark. People speaking to me at the time of the projection had no doubts whatsoever about the meaning of it. I learned that the upper floors of the building were awaiting new tenants at a price of nearly one million dollars each and at the same time the New Museum received the basement and ground floor spaces for free, or at least for a very cheap rent. The very fact that the museum moved into the building creates a certain myth for the building. There are, in fact, two exhibition spaces there. One is for the New Museum exhibitions, and next door there is an exhibition of the former state of the building and how it will look after renovation, a real estate exhibition. There is obviously a connection between the presence of the museum and the subsequent conversion of the entire surrounding area into one of art galleries and other art-related institutions and businesses. I'm not saying that there is direct responsibility on anyone's part, but this is a mechanism and it's important to recognize and reveal our place within that mechanism, even if we cannot change it at this point.

Krzysztof Wodiczko. The Astor Building/New Museum Projection. *New York, 1984.*

Crimp: It is my understanding that the Astor Building functions similarly to the Museum of Modern Art Tower; that is to say, the real estate development of the "tower" is used to provide the financing of the museum's space and perhaps a portion of its operating costs. Is it not a part of your working methods, as it is of Haacke's, for example, to investigate the particulars of such a situation?

Wodiczko: If I were to project information onto the building about its operations I would certainly undertake systematic research, but what was immediately striking here was the emptiness of this huge structure when all around it people were living on the street. The bottom padlock was decided upon later, when I learned more about the connections between the museum and this art/real estate operation. So this was, first, *The Astor Building Projection*, and then, second, *The New Museum Projection.*

Crimp: Since we're on the subject of the New Museum, I wonder if you want to comment on the *Sots Art* exhibition shown there recently, insofar as it is a show of artists from the Eastern bloc, specifically the Soviet Union, working, with one exception, in the American context.

Deutsche: You've already made an interesting comment to me about the exhibition, noting that the museum relegated the critique of bourgeois culture—Connie Hatch's *Serving the Status Quo*, the Group Material work—to the small, back space while giving much greater prominence to the art which purports to be a critique of Soviet society.

Wodiczko: Without in any way taking back that comment, I have to express my enthusiasm for the fact that the New Museum provides so much space and time in its program for critical work, and I'm sure there are many reasons for a political stratification of that space. In order to survive, that institution must deal with a very complex situation, responding to the conflicting demands of its sponsors and supporters, as well as its various curators. If there had been a reversal of critical priorities in this particular case, it would have created a far greater impact on the community, which I obviously would have preferred, but it is impossible for me to judge the organizers' intentions. So, in spite of many reasons for dissatisfaction, this last season at the New Museum consisted of a fair number of critical exhibitions, including, for example, *The Art of Memory, the Loss of History.*

Crimp: Perhaps I can refocus my question regarding a so-called dissident art by Eastern bloc artists showing in the American context by referring to the event organized for May Day at the Palladium by Komar and Melamid, two of the central figures in the *Sots Art* exhibition. They staged a mock May Day celebration in the discotheque which is partially owned by Roy Cohn, who, as you well know, is one of the most repulsive reactionaries in recent American political history and has recently been disbarred in New York State. Another of the owners, Steve Rubell, was quoted in the newspapers as saying that one of the things he liked about the Palladium was that it was a place were young people could forget about the problems of Nicaragua. The Palladium is also the discotheque that uses art-world celebrity events as the drawing card for its clientele.

Deutsche: In such a context, I don't see how Kolmar and Melamid's May Day celebration can be seen as anything but cynical.

Wodiczko: Not everything is to be seen from the perspective of the New Yorker. From the vantage point of global relations, I would like to try to see their point,

which is not to say that I would support it. Though they have organized this event here, it is possible to imagine that they would prefer a double event, to stage simultaneously a discotheque in Red Square, for example. Perhaps they would like to be able to show the degradation of the Soviet May Day celebration by juxtaposing it with something equally degraded in this context, such as an art-world disco.

Lajer-Burcharth: But what is the purpose of staging this mockery of a Soviet political manifestation in New York in 1986? If Komar and Melamid want to criticize the atrophy of this particular symbolic practice, doing so in New York only diverts our attention from the historically specific factors responsible for this atrophy in the Soviet Union. And, when suggesting that these once spontaneous workers' celebrations ossified into their opposite in the East, do these artists wish to imply that the May Day parade has also lost its meaning in the West? One of the reasons for the loss of meaning of the May Day parades in the Eastern bloc is constraint: people are *forced* to participate. But in the West participation is, of course, still voluntary. It was a great surprise to me to see masses of people joyfully celebrating May Day in Denmark, where I lived after leaving Poland. It is Komar and Melamid's glib implication of the cultural and political equivalence of the two that I find problematic.

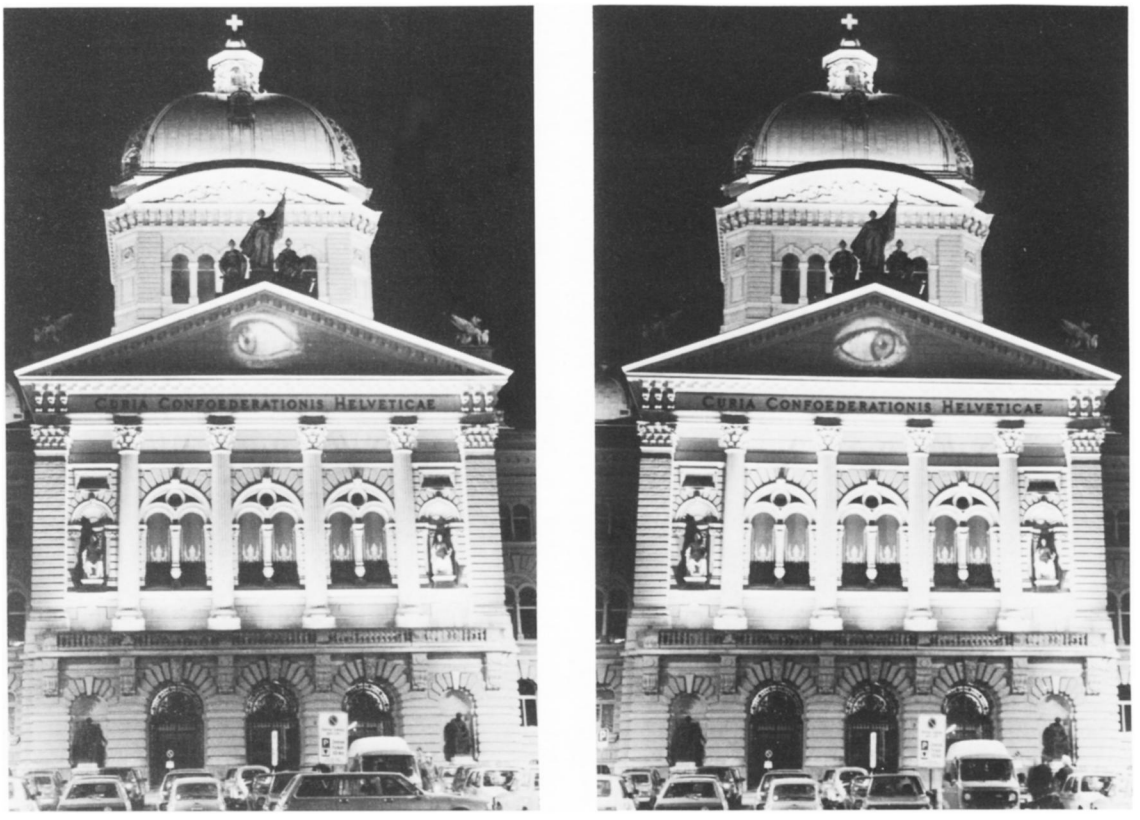
Wodiczko: It would be interesting if such an event could be extended—not for balance, not to adopt the liberal position—to show the disco as equally ideologically determined, as equally a part of official life as the political manifestations in the Soviet Union. But, in fact, Komar and Melamid are not clearly critical of either system. They submerge themselves with perverse pleasure in the repressive realities of both Soviet and American existence, wallowing in what they see as the equivalent decadence of both empires. They perform art-historical manipulations to support their political nihilism, creating, for example, pop-art versions of socialist realism. I question the political clarity and social effectiveness of adopting pop-art strategies for the critique of Soviet culture. Even though they developed a powerful humor, which would have been a liberating experience in intellectual circles, it would hardly have been so liberating for anyone who did not enjoy the privileges granted to artists in the Soviet Union. There is a similar problem in the reception of their work here in the United States, where people only have the most general notions of socialist realism and of the Soviet reality.

Deutsche: In discussing *The Grand Army Plaza Projection* you mentioned various possible readings of the work. But there are other works, such as the projection of the swastika onto the pediment of the South African embassy in Trafalgar Square, that have very unambiguous meanings. Does the necessity of responding to specific political events suggest a different kind of projection?

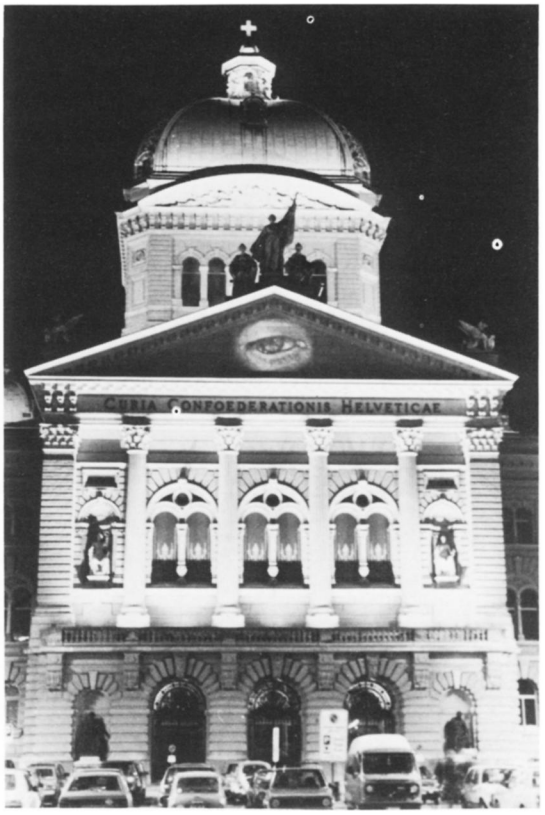
Krzysztof Wodiczko. The South African Embassy Projection. *Trafalgar Square, London, 1985.*

Krzysztof Wodiczko. The Nelson's Column Projection, *detail. Trafalgar Square, London, 1985.*

Krzysztof Wodiczko. The Bundeshaus Projection.
Bundesplatz, Bern, 1985.



Wodiczko: That was a very short-lived dilemma for me because I had to make a decision very quickly. I already had permission for the projection on Nelson's Column, permission to project hands onto the column. I had therefore already committed one violation in not projecting hands but rather a huge intercontinental ballistic missile wrapped in barbed wire, and tank treads underneath the lions at the column's base. But I knew they wouldn't be able to stop me. For one thing, bureaucracy doesn't work at night, even if the media does; BBC televised the projection nationally. I also knew that I had six xenon arc slide projectors concentrated in Trafalgar Square. No one knows when such an opportunity might happen again and it certainly never happened to me before. Many people would have liked the opportunity to affect this building, for example those who were demonstrating in front of it just at that time. The projection on Nelson's Column was to take place on two consecutive evenings. So the first evening, I



came prepared with slides with spots of different sizes to test the proper focal length of the projection on the South African embassy. I had a very short negotiation with myself. Artists are so trapped in their own so-called histories. I thought, "Wait a minute, this is not the type of work you do. You do not project swastikas." But the other side of me answered, "So what? Just because you haven't done this sort of thing before doesn't mean that there isn't a reason to do it now. What do you know of your so-called artistic development?" I agree with you, Rosalyn, that this might open up new possibilities for a more specific contextual type of intervention. It's public art, and one must respond to changing circumstances. It was just at this time that a delegation had come from South Africa to ask the British government for more money, which Thatcher actually gave them, a very shameful act. So my little negotiation was quickly resolved and I reproduced the swastika slides of different sizes. All I had to do was to use

one of the projectors from *The Nelson's Column Projection* and turn its 400mm. lens ninety degrees. It was projected over the sign in the pediment, which many people knew. There is a relief of a boat, underneath which it says "Good Hope." This building is the most illuminated of all buildings in central London, obsessively illuminated, as if it were afraid to wake up in the morning and not find itself. The projection lasted for two hours. Of course I consulted a lawyer. The only charge on which they would be able to arrest me was for being a public nuisance, and those were the grounds on which they stopped the projection. After two hours I saw the police sergeant coming. I switched off the projector and removed the slide, so he could do nothing. But he told me that if I were to resume the projection I would be arrested, and he also said, very pompously, "If I might offer my personal opinion, I find your projection in very bad taste." Photographs of the projection appeared in the press the following day in conjunction with condemnations of apartheid, so the South African embassy sent an official letter of protest to the Canadian embassy, which is just across Trafalgar Square, and which was exhibiting documents of my work. The Canadian embassy responded with a letter saying that the views of individual Canadian citizens are not the responsibility of the Canadian government.

Crimp: I'm curious to know more about the legalities of such a situation. Can a slide projection, which is after all immaterial, be considered a means of defacement?

Wodiczko: We should be precise. This is not a clear legal question but a paralegal response of the police based on their own interpretation of regulations. That doesn't mean that what I am doing is illegal, but neither does it mean that I cannot be arrested.

Crimp: Was it especially difficult to get permission from the Swiss government for the projection on the Swiss national parliament building?

Wodiczko: It was a bit difficult, especially for Jean-Hubert Martin, then director of the Kunsthalle in Bern, who was negotiating the permission for me, since my projection was done for a show he was coorganizing called *Alles und noch viel mehr.* I knew that I would have to use an image that would be acceptable to the bureaucracy, and here I think my Polish experience helped. One has to know the psychology of officialdom, which is in many ways similar wherever I work, because it involves the very concept of modern bureaucracy, the kind of bureaucracy which is supposed to be objective, objective in the sense of helping people take advantage of "democracy." I knew I wanted to project onto the pediment, since it was the only free surface on the building. It was a question of what would be acceptable, and then, when accepted, what would make a point. I figured no one would object to the image of an eye, and at the same time they

wouldn't have to know that the eye would change the direction of its gaze, looking first in the direction of the national bank, and then at the canton bank, then the city bank of Bern, then down to the ground of Bundesplatz, under which is the national vault containing the Swiss gold, and finally up to the mountains and the sky, the clear, pure, Calvinist sky. It was difficult for them to refuse to cooperate because the work was part of the Kunsthalle show, which had already received the support of the city. Of course, the parliament building belongs not to the city but to the federal government, which would not want to create tension between itself and the city. I had spent a certain amount of time in bars in Bern and I learned there about the Swiss gold below the parking area in front of the parliament, a fact which most people in Switzerland take for granted. It's not, after all, so bad to be a tourist. Sometimes you learn things that local residents take for granted and are then able to expose the obvious in a critical manner. But of course tourism cannot simply be treated as an individual experience. It is becoming an ever-more complex political phenomenon which requires its own analysis. I intend to focus my projectors on this phenomenon in my work for the Venice Biennale this summer.

Krzysztof Wodiczko. The Second Campanile San Marco Projection. *Piazza San Marco, Venice, 1986.*