



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Krzysztof
Wodiczko, 2020 July 23

Contact Information

Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/askus

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Krzysztof Wodiczko on July 23, 2020. The interview took place in Maine and was conducted by Ben Gillespie for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's Pandemic Oral History Project.

This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

BEN GILLESPIE: This is Ben Gillespie interviewing Krzysztof Wodiczko who's currently in Maine. It is July 23rd, 2020, and this is for the Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art Pandemic Project. Krzysztof, could you tell me a little bit about how 2020 has been for you and your experience of the corona virus pandemic and the larger events that have unfolded this year?

KRZYSZTOF WODICZKO: Well, I'm, uh, feeling suspended in time and space. It seem to be an unreal life. So I'm waiting for the return of the normal. At the same time, I'm not sure if I really wish that normal to return. Since there is something that feels good about this abnormality, about this exceptionality. I might return to this later, because I need to refer to specific matters and situations in trying to make it clear to you. Even if I might never reach a full clarity of what exactly it is that I might be missing, once the epidemic's time is over.

But in any case, I feel a loss of a sense of time. The loss of density and three dimensionality of time. I'm speaking of the kind of time that connects with pursuing plans and practically making things. Not just in planning things to happen. Inventing new things out of the process of doing things together with others. Learning from members of my team, production team, while experimenting and testing practically ideas and work in close proximity with each other.

So I suffer a loss of the chance to be physically part of events, and experiences as well. The events that bring a meaning to time and are indeed a measure of time. Or as one might say, through which the time and its value is being measured. So each new significant and truly experience event starts a new calendar in one's life. So time of making things seems gone. So for us who are always busy, the people who are always making things, the sense of time in general seems gone.

It seems too much of it, right? There is a sense now of a complete lack of it. I have been thinking of this a lot, but when was it? When I was thinking about it, was it yesterday? A month ago? A week ago? Two months ago? Memory of time, of how much time, there is left ahead and how much is gone, that exactly what's gone with the loss of sense of time. So loss of sense of spatial and psychological or psycho-social space also is the problem.

So that because this is the space in between, this kind of mediation space, between the people and myself in such a space in which also they, the people, are separated, but also communicating through it with each other. So the people whom I meet on Zoom meetings. And so the sense of space between them is gone. And the space between me and them is gone. No physical space between us.

So no spatial perspective on them and for their perception about me or my expressions and their expressions, bodily expressions, the language of the bodily expression that is limited. They are flat portraits fixed in present time, but absent without performative dimensions, as if it's frozen in time and space. So this two dimensional media ties people far away in so many ways, but also sitting so close, too close, in the private room of my personal space, speaking to me straight against my face. It's very confusing.

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So, that's how I feel in this situation right now. So I feel like looking through my little window of a computer screen, I see other windows in which other people are, as if they were imprisoned in the panopticon. So they're watching me, I'm watching them. So this—I don't know, there is always central tower that watching all of us. That's another issue because it's all recorded or not recorded, it's being visited without me knowing about this.

So that's—central tower opened up and this huge is actually is everywhere. It's not in the center, but we are looking at each other's window selves and appearing in each window. One next to another in a row of windows. That's pretty discouraging.

BEN GILLESPIE: Your work has been so interested with the ideas of profound [inaudible] communication in the past and the voices of the dispossessed. Do you feel any shift in your work as you move to this new setting, this new mode of psychosociality? It's just—

KRZYSZTOF WODICZKO: Yes. You actually are hitting a very important point. Because I do work with people. My projects are not just, as one would think, projections on monuments and buildings or designing some communicative instruments and equipment for people in public space. My work actually, the core of it work, is year, sometimes a year and a half, of working with people so they will be ready to project themselves or to communicate through the equipments with other people. So recording, rerecordings, initial contacts, conversations with people they require—is related to the process of building a trust with those people.

Well, that is trust is very hard to establish through Zoom or, you know, in any other communication devices. There has to be some face to face contact. Eye to eye contact. And also, you know, more of a situation and spatial situation that is appropriate for building up trust. That could be an institution which is a kind of extraterritorial space to which those people who want to speak through my projects will come and they might feel—or they could be studio or some professional space—anyway the space that belongs to others, to the project.

It doesn't belong to me or to them. So that weakens, kind of, open up towards each other. And of course, there was no limitation here, amount of time. Oh, no, that's tough, because the other thing that I mentioned before about Zoom connections, you know, applies to problems that I mentioned. They apply to this very important process of recording, or rerecording, and actually creating the possibility of public testimony, which is brave, honest, emotionally charged, and in which things are said that normally those people will not say. You know, exactly the ones that ought to be said, and communicated, the experiences and feelings of those people, whether they are homeless people or they are refugees or they are abused and neglected or are women or other members of society or people who are minorities, that somehow are silence and be invisible. For them to open up, it's very difficult.

It is—so that the process of which I am speaking has psychotherapeutic aspects and those are very hard. The conditions that are hard to make when you are meeting those people for the first time, via Zoom.

BEN GILLESPIE: So I was thinking, um. With your projects which are so oriented towards helping people to find their voice and finding an outlet, how have you observed the movements we have now, where there is a public finding a voice despite incredible distance, and the Black Lives Matter protests, and activism now? That seems really tie between this voice of the people and voices of the dispossessed and the erosion of institutional trust and how we can find ways to work together in a new way of life.

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KRZYSZTOF WODICZKO: Well, I'm watching the movements, the social movement protests, and what's happening around monuments, for example, and in various cities. Just looking at the flat screen. So it's extremely frustrating for me not being able to be part of the crowd and really understand what's happening in a more direct way, physical, bodily, tangible, human way.

At the same time, this isolation, uh, creates conditions for me to think about myself in relation to what's happening. To have a deeper thought about my own upbringing. The traces and elements of colonialism, and maybe systematic racism, that are inhabiting my soul. Something that maybe I brought myself from Europe when I arrived here from Poland. Because it's a global movement now, the soul searching is happening everywhere.

But, myself, I need to learn a lot and—there are many colleagues of mine as well—but artists, included, but myself, even if I am known for actually working and approaching and learning and addressing the issues that are, in part, now connected or part of the movement, you know, as a designer of a memorial to the abolition of slavery in Nantes, and also working with so many people of color and minorities in my projects for so many years. Including refugees from Africa fleeing civil wars. Well, those from 70 million of the displaced people right now in the world, you know, many of them are Black.

So also facing colonialism of my own country are the critical matter in some of my projects. Yes, I should think I should be fine. But in fact, this isolation and at the same time contact through events, through news, but also participating in discussions at Harvard, academic discussions, how to undo systemic racism as a part of academia in new programs and structures of teaching and new ways of learning, and the new subjects to learn.

I mean, all of this together, in this isolation, creates quite a challenge. It's very intense projection on myself and attempt to recognize what was not clear to me before, inside of me. Well, you know, as Michel Foucault would say, I of course, refuse the way I became. You know, by the culture in which I grew up. By not doing certain thing, not saying certain things, not only doing things wrongly, and but also a kind of crime of omission. You know, that is part of my practice and my intellectual part of my work in academia.

So we are rewriting, the reading lists. You know, so we are actually discovering fantastic material that was somewhere neglected and not taken seriously for exactly the reason that was part of the systemic racist culture.

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So that's where I am, in between the epidemics and the social movement. Between the virus, the disease, and the cultural ills and disease which needs to be cured. So undoing is something that I do.

Then, of course, projects that I do now, since I cannot physically be involved in experimenting and producing work, many of my projects are suspended. Not clear when I will be able to work on them. I do a lot of conceptual work. I actually plan things. I put together arguments for those things to happen. You know? In fact, I am shifting to some projects that I put aside because I never have time to do them. That is positive in some ways. However painful at the same time.

BEN GILLESPIE: This sort of draws towards a close, I have sort of a two-part question, if you'll indulge me. The first part is, what do you think mourning looks like, or memorialization looks like, as we continue in a COVID landscape and reconciling with the histories of, um, colonialism and slavery in the United States and systemic racism? And coupled with that, what is your hope for the future as we move forward?

KRZYSZTOF WODICZKO: Well—specifically, since I seem to be—well, I'm expected to say something about monuments, because I've done so much work with those monuments. Well, in fact, with living monuments, their trauma, who choose to join me in animating historic monuments.

So in a way, teaching the past rather than learning from the past. Teaching the past from the point of view of the present.

So that the projection on the past of the present or the present time on those monuments to the past in order to teach them. How they should think of themselves and also how we should think of ourselves in relation to the past and also in facing the future. What is the future we are trying to achieve? Exactly the question that you asked me.

So those questions are being asked, discussed, in front of the monuments, around them, and also against them. They are suspects and they are witnesses to crimes that happen in their past. And we wish that they will not happen in the future if we do something.

Well—but the dialog with those are not so—not only with those monuments but the dialogue among each of us in front of them or around them or against them. Sticking back to those—that's very important. So the issue is, really, whether those monu—it's not so much whether those monuments should stay or be gone, but what kind of process are we envisaging here that will really make a change for the future? And I feel that this process, as they could form of discourse, of exchange of points of view, of not singing the same song, so I just hope that this revolutionary time will lead us towards a new culture in which we will communicate and exchange our relation to the past and the future and the kind of agonistic way without violence and blood, of course.

Well, so that means that there is some work for everybody, including artists and designers. And I don't want to now discuss any specific projects. It's too early for it, of course, I'm elaborating here in my isolation on some options for myself and maybe proposals, larger proposals. It's too early for me to say anything about it. But I just feel that this democratic process, and kind of a

process of emancipation, we'll be much more advanced and will not stop. Because there is no way to simply fix anything here.

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On the horizon, of course, is that there will be no social divisions. There will be no racial divisions. There will be equality, and participation, and contribution of everybody to democratic process and to making change in every field. So, again, as I said, this is not an original statement. I share this hope with lots of people. And so I feel that also artists will have an opportunity to contribute in all kinds of ways.

One important thing is to find a forum for our doubts, and complexities, and even hypocrisies and uncover, reveal, just be honest, and confront all those things that were suppressed and hidden. I'm talking about, of course, us, wide part of the population. But we should join this course of future, exchange of points of view, working together, not in unison, but in some healthy, dynamic, discursive way, whether we are Black or white or any color. So that's my hope, my vision, my horizon against which we should be moving beyond the present moment, which, of course, is extremely inspirational. It is giving a burst to all kinds of ideas to move on.

BEN GILLESPIE: Well, thank you very much for speaking with me today.

KRZYSZTOF WODICZKO: I hope that, uh.

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