

CONSTRUCTING PEACE

Known for public works addressing social injustice, the Polish-born video artist turns to society's biggest challenge: ending war.

KRZYSZTOF WODICZKO INTERVIEWED BY CAROL BECKER

THE CALL TO DO AWAY with war once and for all is generally thought to be naive and overly idealistic. But this skepticism has not deterred Krzysztof Wodiczko, whose new proposal "Arc de Triomphe: World Institute for the Abolition of War" takes up the challenge in an extraordinary way. The Polish-born artist, raised in the aftermath of WWII, wants to create a "working war memorial"—one that would no longer glamorize the brutality of combat with heroic friezes but, rather, foster investigation into the true nature of organized slaughter.¹ The Arc de Triomphe—a tribute to the French Revolution and the ruthless Napoleonic Wars—would be transformed from an archetypal celebration of armed conflict into a symbolic declaration of its demise.

Wodiczko has always shown great insight into the collective psyche. He is best known for his image projections onto edifices and monuments, works that deal with some of society's most disenfranchised members—the homeless, immigrant workers, abused women and war veterans. Collaborating with anthropologists, archeologists and psychologists, he has attempted to enter the minds of the dispossessed, providing them a voice in the public arena.

For Wodiczko, winner of the Hiroshima Art Prize in 1999, there are no individual solutions to social problems. In his thinking, war casualties are not only the millions who die directly in the line of fire or who end up physically or psychologically shattered by its horrors; they are also the countless others—families, friends, children—who suffer by association. "In this way," he has said, "the spread of war trauma reaches the epidemic level."² His Arc project seeks to create



World War I victory parade at the Arc de Triomphe, Paris, 1918.

a new discourse on memory, memorialization and the largely abandoned practice of envisioning a world free of war. Wodiczko and I discussed these and related concepts when we met in New York City in February.

CAROL BECKER What is the basic thought behind your proposal "Arc de Triomphe: World Institute for the Abolition of War"?

KRZYSZTOF WODICZKO The concept is to create a spatial, institutional and media supplement to the Arc de

Triomphe de l'Etoile in Paris. My work would take the form of a scaffoldlike structure built around and over the Arc. The aim of thus "encaging" the monument is to re-present the arch as a war specimen—a relic and a suspect, an object of examination to help move humankind toward permanent peace. Vertical moving platforms and mechanical walkways will allow visitors to study the war iconography presented on the arch. Internal and external plasma screens, offering immersive and interactive environments, will display information related

“THERE’S A MAJOR CULTURAL WAR MACHINE THAT PERPETUATES AND REINFORCES OLD BELIEFS UNDERLYING THE CULTURE OF WAR. ONE OF THOSE BELIEFS IS THAT PEACE IS MADE THROUGH WAR.”

to the institute’s own project and inform us about the work on this subject done elsewhere. Other features will include a massive World Situation Map, charting ever-changing areas of conflict and calm. The goal is to conduct research, develop plans and engage in practical work to help create local, regional and global peace.

BECKER Why did you select the Arc de Triomphe?

WODICZKO It’s a natural choice. The Arc de Triomphe is the biggest triumphal arch in Europe. It’s huge—160 feet tall, 148 feet wide and 72 feet deep. I’ve been using media projections to “animate” monuments and memorials for a long time, and it was always on my mind to work with this particular structure because it’s the mother of all European triumphal arches. In fact, inside the arch an interactive media display currently enables visitors to press a button and view all the other arches in the world that took this as their model.

BECKER It’s truly archetypal.

WODICZKO It is the arch of arches, the first modern triumphal arch, designed after the Arch of Titus near the Roman Forum and completed in 1836. Another memorial was added underneath after World War I—the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, the first eternal flame memorial since Roman times. So this site now hosts two kinds of master models for war memorials in our time.

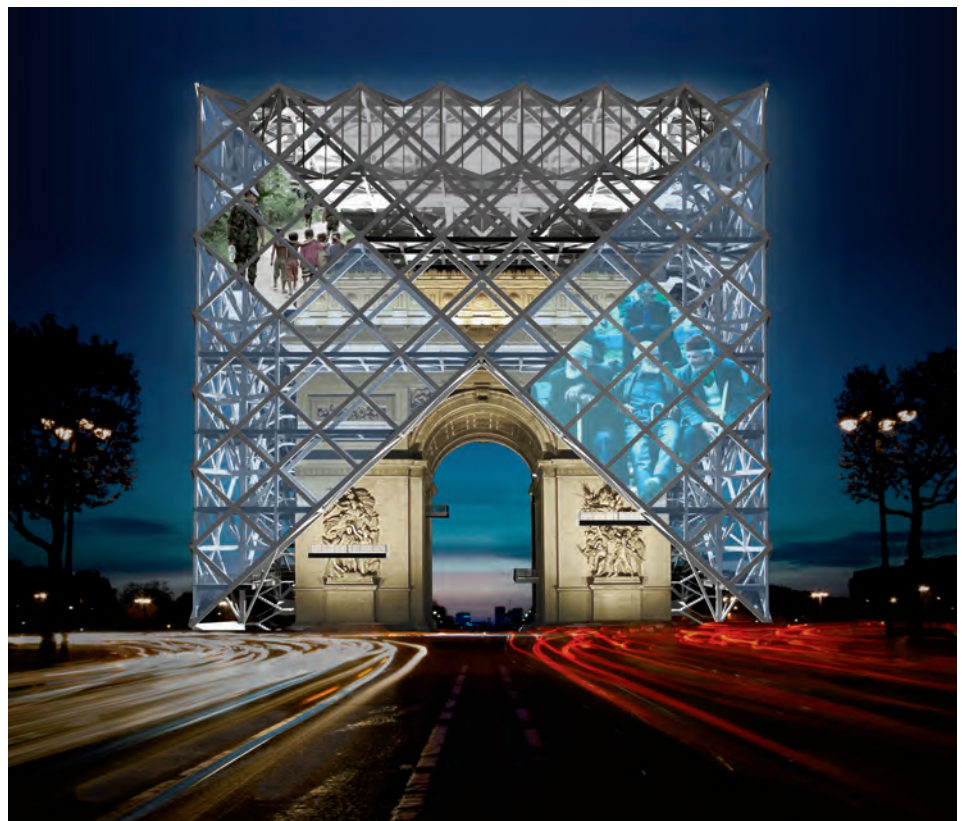
BECKER How did you come to this plan?

WODICZKO I conceived the idea 20 years ago and then, with the establishment of the European Union in 1993, I thought that something had to be done to this monument, which commemorates some of the bloodiest of all European adventures. Only

several years ago did I realize that image projection, my usual technique for reactivating symbolic structures, might not be enough. I had to treat its ideology—so deftly and beautifully inscribed into it—in a deconstructive way, to reread this monument while working to eliminate the need for such structures in the future.

Right now, there’s a major cultural war

machine that perpetuates and reinforces old beliefs underlying the culture of war. One of those beliefs is that peace is made through war. Memorials reinforce that idea. In the First World War, there were 17 million deaths; in the Napoleonic Wars, an estimated 4 million deaths. The main thrust of the war-culture narrative is that after all these people have died, after countless families and large stretches of the environ-





Above rendering of Krzysztof Wodiczko's proposed "Arc de Triomphe: World Institute for the Abolition of War."

Opposite, interior and exterior renderings of the project.

ment have been destroyed, the end result is peace. It's an absurd illusion. Peace is not achieved through war. After the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815, there were 122 major wars and smaller deadly conflicts in the remainder of the 19th century alone. Facts such as these should be publicly elaborated.

Many other well-entrenched notions serve the culture of war, too. Like the pleasure of dying for the leader—war masochism. Or the notion that dying young is dying better—the martyrdom of youth. It's crucial to analyze how war is made, how people are drawn into it, how ideological stereotypes and clichés perpetuate it. These subjects can be very closely examined with the help of the physical structure and the media armature I want to build around this famous monument. Consider, for example, the kind of masculine woman who hovers over and leads the figures in the Arc's *Marseillaise* relief. If we view the sculpture at eye level, we see that she looks mad. Looking closely is one way to recognize the iconic power of

these tableaux, a way to disarm them. It can inspire media projections, immersive environments and alternate narratives that invite debate and discussion.

BECKER So this is the proposed World Institute's main purpose?

WODICZKO The aim is to avert war, or perhaps to repair damages by creating a more dynamic and energetic peace, rather than continuing to foster a melancholic silence or a congratulatory postwar complacency.

BECKER Yours is a very radical approach—the undoing of all the assumptions most other war memorials were designed to embody. Can you talk about these structures in general?

WODICZKO Not all of them promote the conditions that lead to war. But most seem preoccupied with two things: sacrifice and the perpetuation of memory. At times those words are actually inscribed on them. So what they *do* is one problem; what they *don't* do is another. The word "memorial" is related to "memento"—to some kind of reminder and warning. There is

an etymological basis for thinking that a war monument should help prevent us from making the same mistake again. Such structures could actually contribute to making themselves obsolete.

BECKER Did this project evolve out of your being awarded the Hiroshima Art Prize?

WODICZKO The prize was certainly important. I received it based on many projects involving war memorials—for example, my projections on the Soldiers' and Sailors' Memorial Arch in Brooklyn in 1983 and on the Arco de la Victoria in Madrid during the early days of the first Iraq war in 1991. But I realized how much more I should try to do once that prize was given. I accepted it as advance credit. Almost immediately after receiving it in 1999, I staged a projection in Hiroshima about the bombing there. This was during the time I was presenting my work in museums. Then I started to think about what else I could do.

BECKER How did your upbringing affect your consciousness about these issues?

WODICZKO I am from the generation of people born during the last years of World War II, those who grew up amid the ruins of war—both moral and physical. To grow up like this is also to absorb, to be educated by, the damages of war in the deepest way. That is true for everybody my age in Poland and in a large part of the world, maybe the entire world,

perpetuated by artists. I don't blame them, but they certainly contribute to war propaganda and to the art of armament itself. If they have done so much in such a negative way, couldn't they also do the opposite?

BECKER You have said that we ourselves are war memorials.

WODICZKO Yes, as products of national, ethnic and religious groups,

“PARTICIPATORY MEDIA-ART PROJECTS IN PUBLIC SPACES GIVE SURVIVORS A CHANCE TO SHIFT FROM POST-TRAUMATIC SILENCE TO PUBLIC WORDS AND GESTURES.”



Hiroshima Projection, 1999, video projection; at the A-Bomb Dome, Hiroshima, Japan. Courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York.

as a result of the impact of World War II. I'm not a very unusual person. I just happened to be born at the wrong time in the wrong place.

BECKER Or at the right time to gain such awareness?

WODICZKO Yes. I was born in Warsaw in 1943, the year before the general Warsaw Uprising, which cost about 200,000 Polish lives, and two days before the smaller ghetto uprising, which resulted in some 13,000 Jews being killed outright and over 40,000 being transported to death camps. Having a Jewish mother, in addition to being Polish, was not the best idea at that time.

BECKER Do you feel that artists bring a unique perspective or methodology to such issues?

WODICZKO Artists have a position of tremendous responsibility. When they explore their own subjectivity, they discover a great world inside themselves that they then share with the rest of the populace. It is incredible what art can do: the best *and* the worst. Those war memorials, including the Arc de Triomphe, were made by artists—lots of artists, very good ones, often the best-educated of their day. So the culture of war is very much

we contain the culture of war inside us. Our unconscious teems with various shortcuts, ideological clichés and unexamined beliefs that are waiting to be exploited by those who are mobilizing masses for war. When the time comes, we are easily drawn in. That's why it's very important for artists to expose all the mechanisms of war. There is also another type of art, and I am busy trying to develop it as a category of practice—working with people to enable them to become co-artists, transmitting their own experiences of war or dealing with those recently returned from combat.

BECKER Are you referring to projects such as the “War Veteran Vehicle,” which you did in cities like Denver, Warsaw and Liverpool between 2008 and 2010?

WODICZKO Yes. I developed that vehicle to give public voice to veterans struggling with their return to civilian life. We transformed a military Humvee into a tool for self-expression by installing a powerful video projector and a loudspeaker where the missile launcher would normally be mounted. Veterans could amplify sounds and project text on buildings and monu-

ments to tell their stories and reflect on their existential situation. I've done similar projects with different groups and different iconographic devices, enabling the participants to become collaborators in a kind of technopolitical therapy. Public space is well suited for aiding this passage from private confession to transformative action. Participatory media-art projects in public spaces give survivors a chance to shift from post-traumatic silence to cathartic words and gestures. In my pieces, they engage in animating buildings and monuments, operating special equipment, all in order to transmit truths. In public space it is easier to tell the truth to thousands, even millions—or to the closest person in your life.

BECKER I believe the Arc de Triomphe proposal is the first time that you've talked not only about animating a structure but about building a second structure to envelop an existing one. Which is more utopian—the unlikely prospect of actually being allowed to erect the scaffolding cage or your core belief that human consciousness can be transformed?

WODICZKO I don't consider my proposal far-fetched. When I present-

ed it at Galerie Gabrielle Maubrie in Paris in 2011, I invited as many people as possible; then an image of the project was published in the newspaper *Libération*.

BECKER Did French viewers faint when they saw it?

WODICZKO Actually, they reacted positively. I can't know exactly what's behind such a positive response, because France has a very politically complex yet polite and sophisticated culture. But a curator from the Centre Pompidou came to see the show, looked at the maquette and asked, "Can this be built?" I said, "Well, if you could build the Centre Pompidou, you could build this. It even looks similar." My initial concept was for the project to be a disruptive intervention, to assault the sacred status of the monument. But now I believe my structure doesn't have to be permanent. It could be built for certain occasions and then disassembled. Its potential to be installed for a while and then taken down has become part of the project, so that's why the structure will resemble scaffolding. Keep in mind that the Eiffel Tower was supposed to be temporary.

BECKER If this project were ever actually built, would it mark an evolution of global consciousness?

WODICZKO Yes, it would. The work's purpose is the abolition of war. Period.

BECKER And you believe that's a real possibility?

WODICZKO That "utopian" end is not as remote as it might seem. If you had told somebody in the 18th century—or even in the early 19th—that slavery would soon be abolished, they would have said, "You're crazy." Historically, many people thought slavery was a natural part of human society, because it's in the Bible and existed with the Greeks at the foundation of Western civilization. Yet all along a few people fought hard against it—Quaker abolitionists in New York City in 1839, for example. Abolition came very late in the U.S.—1865—but it happened. Of course, slavery and a slave trade still exist, but the practice is illegal now, which makes an enormous difference. As for war, when the International Criminal Court was established in 2002, "crimes of aggression" were included under its jurisdiction. It is no longer acceptable for nations to

attack without sufficient provocation. They have to prove that their aggression was an act of defense.

BECKER You feel we're moving in a more hopeful direction?

WODICZKO Yes. It is a lot more difficult for war to happen in Europe now. Remember that the main reason for the EU was to reduce or eliminate wars in Europe.

BECKER In your new book *The Abolition of War*,³ there is a great essay by anthropologist Douglas P. Fry. His research counters assumptions about human aggression.

WODICZKO Fry is trying to demolish the myth that war is a part of human nature. His idea is important because it directly supports ending the culture of war.

BECKER If one believes humans are innately aggressive and will always be aggressive, then your project seems futile.

WODICZKO I have to clarify here. There is a difference between the aggressive tendencies of individual humans and all-out war.

BECKER But don't aggressive tendencies lead to war? Isn't that a causal relationship?

WODICZKO No.

BECKER Where does that aggression lead, if not to war? Aggression separates groups from each other.

WODICZKO "War" refers to armed conflict between organized societies. That's very far away from someone shooting someone else in a courtyard.

BECKER But is it really that far away?

WODICZKO Yes, it is. By simply saying that every act of aggression leads to war, we completely demoralize ourselves. We perpetuate the belief that human nature is inherently warlike. Humans can do horrible things to other humans, but that doesn't mean it's in their nature. It means we are capable of doing those things. But I also think we are capable of *not* doing them. ○



The Veteran Vehicle Project, 2008-09, video and audio projection from a military Humvee; at the Performing Arts Center, Denver. Courtesy Galerie Lelong. Photo Charles Roderick.

¹ Krzysztof Wodiczko, *Krzysztof Wodiczko*, London, Black Dog Publishing, 2011, pp. 346-62. ² Quoted by Dora Apel in "Technologies of War, Media and Dissent in the Post 9/11 Work of Krzysztof Wodiczko," *ibid.*, p. 321. ³ London, Black Dog Publishing, 2012.

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