

# Reinterpreting public places and spaces: a selection of Krzysztof Wodiczko's public artwork

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The paper is motivated by Krzysztof Wodiczko's public artwork. Wodiczko has been projecting images and videos into architectural facades that interfere with the social and cultural context. The intention of this study is to illustrate how artwork in public spaces may contribute to people's ability to improve their own circumstances. I will try to show a selection of projects in public spaces that have gone beyond the traditional and commercial public art market. The growth of expression that helped to reinterpret public space and make them a place where marginalized people can express themselves, establish their presence and insist on their rights will be exemplified. Samples of conversation that highlight the skills of conflict resolution, decision-making and the ability to discuss alternatives constructively will accompany the text.

**Key words:** public art, public spaces, monuments, memorials, democracy.

## **Reinterpretacja przestrzeni i miejsc publicznych: wybrane przykłady artystycznych interwencji Krzysztofa Wodiczki.**

Motyacją napisania tego artykułu są publiczne spektakle Krzysztofa Wodiczki. Jego projekcje przeźroczy i video na fasady budynków kwestionują socjalny i kulturalny kontekst. Intencją tego studium jest pokazanie jak sztuka w miejscach publicznych może wpłynąć na poprawę warunków życia. Będę zajmować się wybranymi projektami w miejscach publicznych wykraczającymi poza tradycyjną i komercyjną sztukę publiczną. Dyskutowane będą przykłady, których narastająca ekspresja pomogła coraz większej ilości pomijanych ludzi odnaleźć się i stanąć w obronie własnych praw. Przykłady konwersacji ukazujących zdolności rozwiązywania problemów, podejmowania decyzji i konstruktywnego dyskusowania alternatywnych rozwiązań będą wspomagać tę prezentację.

**Słowa kluczowe:** sztuka publiczna, publiczne miejsca, pomniki, miejsca pamięci, demokracja.

A few decades ago, artists protesting against the artificiality of museums and galleries began integrating art with public spaces and places. As a result, the term "public art" has been interpreted as art executed in the public domain – usually outdoors and accessible to all. Public art generally represents the media's agenda. Often, public spectacles use indirect and clever methods to achieve their goals, rather than doing what is obvious.

Public art has a very important role to play in our cities, especially in humanizing social activities. The average citizen is generally not interested enough in art itself to go to galleries and exhibitions, but there is a need for art to enhance their lives. The application of artwork in public spaces may contribute to people's ability to improve their own circumstances. Public art may inspire conversation that can result in the gaining of skills of conflict resolution, decision-making and the ability to discuss alternatives constructively. Art, images, video, theatre and music can rejuvenate public spaces and stimulate interaction. In many places, public art has become increasingly drawn into the resolution of conflicts and the promotion of peace and stability.

Over the past twenty-five years, this type of public art has played an increasingly important role in peace-making engagement, reconciliation and forgiveness. The architectural fabrics on particular sites were selected as the scenario for these spectacles. The work of a leading artist in this field, Krzysztof Wodiczko, has been selected for this review. He has been projecting images and videos onto architectural facades that interfere with the social and cultural context. His art has been about the reinterpretation of place and the changes that often remain in the participant and observers as a fragment of their inner and social lives. His artwork has a place in the urban context, even though it lasts only for a very short time. He has been passionate about his projects, which strive to remind people of individual problems and highlight positive aspects of humanity.

The objective of this paper is to review the growth in expression of public artwork by Krzysztof Wodiczko that helped to make public space and place where marginalized people can express themselves, establish their presence and insist on their rights. His early work dealt with slide projections. He was interested in the ‘anatomical’ character of architecture and ‘architecturalization’ of the body (Wodiczko 2005: online). In his mature projects, he has imagined spectacles that are more active and he has looked for a growing harmony between the art process and his investigation of democracy. Selected projects will be discussed to illustrate his methodology and transformation in his work. The assessment of the healing process of the survivors, the monuments and the public will serve as a conclusion.

### **Background: democracy and public spaces**

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, the principle of the despotic, feudal system in which one could have superior powers and rights over many others, gave way to the democratic system. Since then, artists have been in a special position to contribute to the exploration of different forms of democracy.

In the 1970s, there was a growing interest in public art, public space and site-specific art because of the rapid transformation of cities (Phillips 2003: online). It was an important stage when artists focused on context. Art became more specific – formally, visually or socially – and artists considered the implications of an intervention in one area. In the 1980s, the ideas of uneven development, urban struggle, and cultural resistance encouraged artists to think critically about art in relation to development in a city and the lives of its people. This raised the question of how a particular social group should be represented. More artists became directly involved in the lives of the inhabitants of cities. Project installed in public spaces proved that democracy cannot be organized in a well-mannered way without room for confrontations and a multiplicity of opinions.

Are our public spaces environments that are trying to say something to us and accommodate the exchanging of our thoughts and opinions? The places where the real public space should occur are often hidden in the shadows of monuments and memorials, as well as in many other places where we are afraid to go. Frequently, memorials and architecture built for some ceremonial purposes look strangely monumental and traumatize humans (Mare 2007: 38-40). The blank fabrics are speechless witness to the speechless people living in their shadows. Both require reanimation and intervention (MIT 2004: online).

The silent architectural fabric poses problems. Firstly, monuments barricade the public space and are monopolized by the powerful presence of historical events. Secondly, those who are most invisible and unheard, who should be first to offer the truth of their testimony, are often, initially, not capable of speaking as they are locked into post-traumatic silence. Monuments are in a state that is similar in many ways to post-traumatic stress, mostly because they are isolated from the events and life of people who very often live on their steps. They cannot articulate, in any motion or voice. Their mission has been paralysed. Any possibility to be of any use to the living around them would be a great relief for them (Fathom 2003: online).

### **Introducing Krzysztof Wodiczko**

An internationally acclaimed artist, thinker and well-reflected man, Krzysztof Wodiczko has developed a series of interventions in public spaces. He has been awakening the silent public spaces and the silent residents of the cities they inhabit by projecting giants images onto architecture. Wodiczko stated that “silence and invisibility are the biggest enemies of democracy” (Shulman

1998: online). One of the objectives behind his projections is to bring to light all of those voices and experiences, and to animate public space in an inspiring and provocative way. His public spectacles help to revise and amend monuments. His controversial projections transform buildings and structures into memory that matters. Each reflects the artist's involvement in a broad range of social issues. His intention is to handle cultural miscommunication and use art for healing ideological divisions.

Wodiczko became internationally famous during the eighties for his many outdoor projections of giant-sized images on buildings all over the world. Through images, he has raised questions that renewed and updated the architecture's basic function. In this way, he has enriched, transformed and manipulated the initial message of public architecture in order to shock, to denounce, and to arouse public opinion. Wodiczko has created over seventy projections of images onto public buildings or monuments, whether a façade, an arch, a column, a flight of steps, or a statue. His projects have been deeply rooted in social, political and economic contexts. He has animated public places with the testimonies of many different victims, the abused and homeless people. He always creates according to the circumstances surrounding the buildings or monuments upon which he projects the images and according to the characteristics of the victims. These public places have often become part of the scenery for passers-by.

### **Trafalgar Square, London, UK, 1985**

Wodiczko's well-known installation suddenly appeared on the South African Embassy in London in 1985 during a protest march in criticism of the country's apartheid system (figure 1). He projected a giant slide of a swastika, underneath which was a boat with the words Good Hope. Realizing the downfall of the Nazis as racists he was thinking that perhaps South African laws and beliefs could eventually change. His public artwork lasted two hours before the police came.

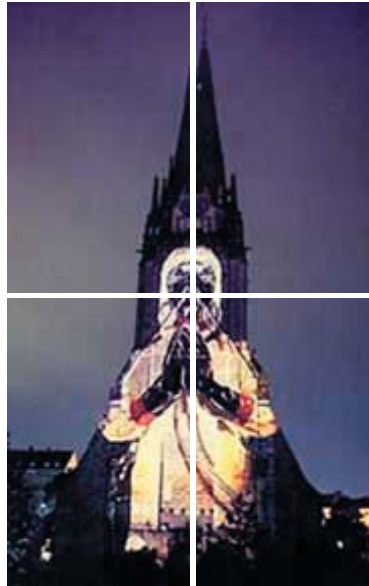
Wodiczko realised projections onto the Duke of York memorial in Pall Mall and onto Nelson's Column in Trafalgar Square (figure 1). This projection exposed the nature of this monument and architecture from a critically political perspective. This installation demonstrated a physical and exterior space and a psychological interior space. Both have been open to appropriation and reinterpretation.



**Figure 1**  
**Trafalgar Square, London, 1985**  
**(Source: Artangel online 1985).**

## **Martin Luther Church, Kassel, Germany, 1987**

The city of Kassel experienced an evacuation alert due to the threat of industrial pollution from nearby factories in 1987. A few months later during the night, Wodiczko projected the controversial image of a person praying in a hazardous materials protective suit onto a church (Figure 2) – one the few buildings that survived the allied bombing of the World War II.



**Figure 2**  
**Martin Luther Church, Kassel, Germany, 1987**  
(Source: Art for a change– online 2005).

He commented: “This will be a symbol-attack, a public, a psychoanalytical séance, unmaking and revealing the unconscious of the building, its body, the medium of power” (Wodiczko 2005: online). An attack is unexpected and comes with the night when the building, undisturbed by its daily function, is asleep.

## **Triumphal arches**

Wodiczko has continued to speak through monuments. Just days after the outbreak of the first Gulf War in January 1991, he initiated the projection in Madrid, Spain (figure 3). Images were projected onto the triumphal arch celebrating the victory of the fascist Francisco Franco in the Spanish Civil War. Wodiczko beamed a pair of death hands, one grasping on a machine gun and the other a gas pump nozzle. At the top of the arch he was questioning: “Cuantos?”, Spanish for “How much?” The city centre became a political art gallery. His artwork reveals the contradiction of the context and the events actually taking place there. It is to do with politics of space and the ideology of architecture.

Through most of the eighties, until the beginning of the nineties, Wodiczko was animating monuments with giant slides that he produced in order to actualize them so they could speak on contemporary issues. (Art21 2005, online)

As Wodiczko had been working on slide projections of stills, he developed a strong visual, though static language. Further development took place in the middle of the nineties when he introduced motion images and sound. The statements and questions became deeper and evolved more and more emotionally.





**Figure 3**  
**Triumphal Arches, 1991**  
 (Source: Art for a change and Blogspot- online 2005).

### **City Hall Tower, Krakow, Poland, 1996**

Since 1996, Wodiczko has been involved in the investigation of strategies of communication in public places. He has begun projecting video images involving sound and motion. The installations might look similar in photographs but they are completely different. His video projections create spaces for individual therapy and public reflection. In speech-acts, he has been testing ideas and expressions in order to initiate a critical dialogue within a specific marginalized culture, as well as with the greater community. Examples include images onto buildings of hands or faces of people who speak about personal experiences or crimes they have suffered, allowing the public disclosure of issues usually kept private. His artwork involves the construction of highly designed electronic objects to encourage interaction between speakers and the public.

It has been a challenge to see art through the optics of real life. Harmed people have produced the script and scenario for a memorial animation. They have been the ‘patients’ and ‘doctors’. Through their own healing, they have been attempting to heal the speechless monuments and they have brought them back to life. They have realized that they can make good use of this experience for their own lives and for the lives of others.

The shift to video was radical for Wodiczko when he started his public art installation in Krakow, Poland (Figure 4), as he did not have any experience in video images involving sound and motion. Maybe in Poland, his native country, it was more natural to start this type of verbal conversation. Since this project, he has been creating a situation for others to animate monuments and project themselves. The process of filming is a situation for victims to learn what to say and how to say it. He does not tell people what they should say (Art 21, 2005 online).

This type of project gives participants the opportunity to speak about their traumatic experiences. Through the animation of historic public buildings and monuments in large public places - in this case the big historical Market Square in Krakow - Wodiczko also extends this critical consciousness to other fields, emphasizing the active role of architecture in questioning and engaging society.



**Figure 4**  
**City Hall Tower, Krakow, 1996**  
**(Source: Bunkier online 2005).**

### **Bunker Hill Monument, Charlestown, Boston, USA, 1998**

Charlestown has seen an enormous number of murders in comparison to any other part of Boston (Fathom 2003: online). This happens mostly because of the “Code of Silence” - few of these murders were spoken about or reported to the police. The community expression: “if only monuments could speak” was transformed by Wodiczko and the monument started to speak (Figure 5) — the monument that had seen what was happening, who was murdered, where and by whom. At the base of the Bunker Hill Monument, there is a statue of the commander of the battle, the first revolutionary battle in Charlestown, fought to secure the rights for life, liberty, happiness and justice for all. In defence of these, the battle has been continued. Here, a group of mothers whose children were murdered in cross-fires or executions formed a self-healing group in order to speak about the truth and to be truth-tellers.



**Figure 5**  
**Bunker Hill, Boston, USA, 1998**  
**(Source: Bunkier – online 2005).**

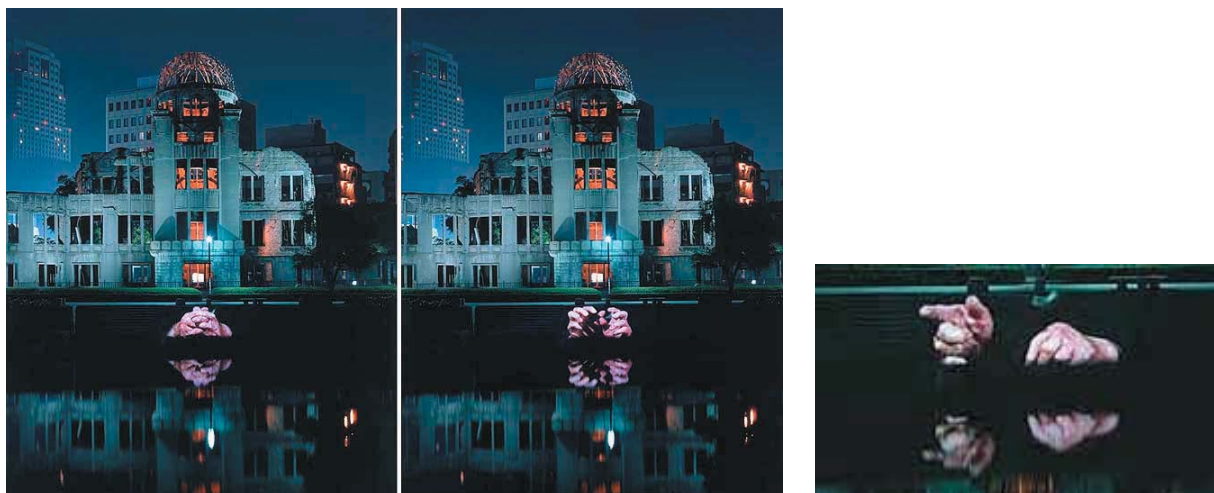
The Homeless projection at the Soldiers and Sailors Civil War Memorial, Boston, Massachusetts, USA (figure 5a) took place in 1986. A thirty-minute video was projected with sound onto the 221-foot obelisk on Charlestown's historic Bunker Hill Monument, Boston in 1998 (figure 5b). This video included interviews with Charlestown mothers of murdered children, who speak of their personal experiences around the themes of violence, freedom and tyranny. Wodiczko was particularly disturbed by Charlestown's high murder rate and the fact that residents were afraid to report the murders to the police. He walked the streets of Charlestown, visiting residents, hearing their stories of personal tragedy and sharing his own – the murder of his mother in the Warsaw ghetto one week after his birth (MIT news office, online 2004).

### **A-Bomb Dome, Hiroshima, 1999**

In 1998, Wodiczko was awarded the Hiroshima Prize for his contribution as an artist to world peace. This gave him additional motivation to keep developing more public projects. He proposed a projection in Hiroshima, Japan. The fallout of the bombing in Hiroshima has been physical, psychological and cultural. Wodiczko's intention was to "reactualize" the A-Bomb Dome monument – one of the few structures that survived the bombing – just underneath the hyper-centre of the explosion (Art 21 online 2005).

The Hiroshima projection has taken place on two building and river bank (figure 6). Survivors' hands were projected onto the base of the A-Bomb Dome as their oral narratives were played.

This, like his other projections, showed the visibility of the texture of the surface on which the images were projected. Both building and the projection reflected themselves onto the river and completed the picture. The river was the witness as the A-Bomb Dome building reflected in the water. The river was a graveyard for the building and people who jumped into it believing that it would help them cool their burns, but it only contributed to a quicker death as the water was polluted. The river continues its flow as if nothing has happened. There is fresh water coming. The river is like a tragic witness but with hope as its continual flow brings changes and healing.



**Figure 6**  
**Hiroshima Projection, Japan, 1999**  
(Source: Art for a change – online 2005).



## The Cultural Center, Tijuana, Mexico, 2001

Tijuana is a border not only between Mexico and the United States, but also between Tijuana and the rest of Mexico. Many people came from poor provinces to advance their lives by moving to the area of some 500 factories. Young women, drawn from all over the country, constitute 90 percent of this labour. They are, in fact, mostly teenage girls as young as 13 years old. For many of them, that is an advantage although they moved from an old hell to a new hell. But as Wodiczko said "...perhaps there is nothing worse than to stay in the same hell all their life..." (Art 21 online 2005).



**Figure 7**  
**Tijuana, Mexico, 2001**  
(Source: Art for a change – online 2005).

The workers from Tijuana form the core of the economy of the city, yet when their problems and their culture should be there – they are not. The workers are absent from this cultural center, inside of which is an IMAX theatre, which is the pride of the city. For the Tijuana Projection, previously developed instruments and video were used. The projection of two projects that took place on consecutive evenings on San Diego's Museum of Man and the Centro Cultural in Tijuana, situated on either side of the United States-Mexico border explored colonialism, borders, and illegal aliens. Wodiczko projected on Tijuana's dome the image of a man with his hands behind his head - the position taken during an arrest and search (figure 7), and young women who endured terrible conditions in the region's factories (figure 8).



**Figure 8**  
**Tijuana, Mexico, 2001**  
(Source: Art 21 – online 2005).

Workers participated in a year-long process to animate the landmark architecture to be more human. They forced the building to become them and appropriated the physiognomy of the architecture. Their faces filled the entire elevation of the domed building. They engaged in a highly mediated fearless speech and simultaneously responded to their own projections through



the instruments projecting their faces and voices on the dome. Abused and suffering enormous wounds they wanted to liberate themselves. They stood together to learn about political and human rights as well as spread the knowledge about those rights among young factory workers. They talked about their own experiences and relatives, who committed all sorts of crimes, including incest and rape (Vallen 2008, online). They invited others to participate to somehow recognize that human rights are not just for public spaces - they are in the workplace and also in domestic environment.

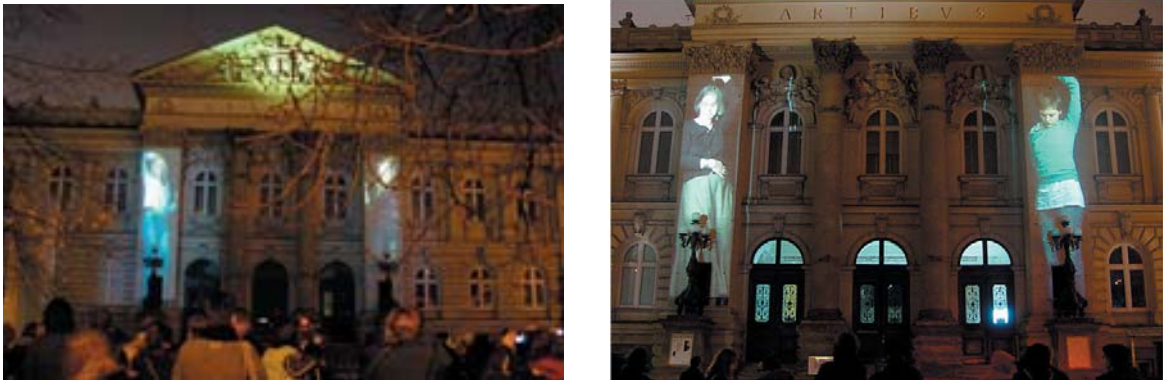
**Central Public Library, St. Louis, Missouri, 2004**

One of the city’s most historic buildings in St. Louis was staged for Wodiczko’s participatory and interactive projection. Stories of a group of city residents, who lost people close to them through urban violence animated the Central Library. A microphone was used to allow transmission between listeners and a person speaking back to the huge façade of this building (Figure 9). An argument was able to take place, wrestling with this monument. His public art reinterpreted iconic architecture and helped displaced people get the sense of community and feel accepted.



**Figure 9**  
**Central Public Library, St. Louis, Missouri, USA, 2004**  
(Source: MIT work & research – online 2004).

**Zacheta, Warsaw, Poland, 2005/2006**



**Figure 10**  
**Zacheta, Warsaw, Poland, 2005/2006**  
(Source: US embassy in Poland – online 2006).

In 2005 images of young women (Cariatides) were projected onto the Gallery pillars of Zacheta to create the illusion that they were holding the building up (Figure 10). The women were speaking out about the violence of men towards them. Some women were older, some younger, some weep, other are rather cold. The projection showed them in pairs. Each of these couples has a dramatic form of expression and sometimes the words of one woman are a comment to the words of another. The final video monologue is an appeal to women not being able to count on help from outside to not raise their sons as future bastards. This is the only chance for a change in the next generation.

## Conclusion

Public spaces are often barricaded and monopolized by propagandistic purposes at the expense of those who cannot speak. Memorials or monuments may serve an unintended purpose for speakers in public spaces. Wodiczko's idea of bringing these unheard, invisible, and uninvited speakers to public spaces creates conditions for individuals to be heard. His spectacles highlight socially significant issues while simultaneously illuminating contradictions of spatial politics. These overlooked people are not prepared to speak after being silenced through trauma. To become operational in public spaces, these people, along with the monuments themselves, go through various therapeutic stages with Wodiczko. He reinterprets the physicality of architecture in order to help to accept, accommodate and approach different kinds of memories and stories. There is a society of wounded people that must be addressed rather than overlooked. In Wodiczko's spectacles, when they speak the fear disappears. He has created this scenario, allowing the speech of victors and victims. They speak on behalf of potential victims, as well as to perpetrators of violence.

Wodiczko says: "The paradox is that I do not learn from theory what to do, but at the same time, I do not stay away from it" (Phillips 2003, online). In his opinion, many fragments of theory concerning public space, democracy and public art are not necessarily all connected in one unified theory. In his projects he wants to connect the theories, but they are about creative practical work that asks new theoretical questions – questions that may not yet have been asked by theorists. His works have ethical, psychological, and pedagogical character. Individual interpretation of architectural fabric is part of the transitional process. Architecture or space becomes a container for the inner world of the user and at the same time it is part of the outside world. The unrepresented or marginalized trust the situation and architecture to help them to both listen and communicate. This is an empowering way to think about art and architecture that can be used in multiple ways. The spectacles offer ways for people to step out of their communities and to engage in independent speech.

The democratic process and public spaces cannot be created if we do not include all potential speakers in the discourse. It is necessary to be inclusive towards the participants. It is they who are the most important. Before they can add their voice to the democratic discourse, they must develop their eradicated abilities to communicate. The process of unlocking their post-traumatic silence requires attention. Wodiczko works with a trauma theorist and therapist, so varied concepts and ideas can be injected. This is a recovery through 'reconnection' that emphasizes the role of public truth-telling and testimony.

It is much easier to accept reinterpreted architecture as the fabric for what is being said than, for example, listening to someone who speaks directly. The boundary between architecture and projected body is blurred. The skin of the architecture and the skin of the person are background and foreground at the same time. It is a shifting focus. Sometimes it can be too much for those to connect with silent and motionless structures but via this architectural fabric, a bridge has been

built linking with other people. Watching the reaction of various members of the public it has been noticed that those who do not believe another human being, often believe the “speaking” architecture. Wodiczko’s goal is to reveal the contradictions of our communities, something the majority often prefer to ignore. He is a creator who uses the audio-visual arts to reveal social and political problems. He offers double memorial therapy – therapy through the monument and the therapy of the monument. The intention is to understand our roles in history, to question what and how something is remembered.

## Note

Krzysztof Wodiczko was born in Warsaw, Poland, and studied industrial design at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, Poland. He spent half of his life behind “the Iron Curtain” and the other half in America, so he has a well developed critique of power and its abuses. Recognised worldwide for his socially and politically charged public projections, Prof. Wodiczko is head of MIT’s Interrogative Design Group in the Center for Advanced Visual Studies and teaches in the visual arts programme of the Department of Architecture. His work involves the investigation of strategies of communication in the public sphere. His projects have been exhibited at the Bienal de Sao Paulo (1965, 1967, 1985), Documenta (1977, 1987), the Venice Biennial (1986, 2000), and the Whitney Biennial (2000). In 1998, he was awarded the Hiroshima Peace Prize, which is awarded to a contemporary artist whose work contributes to world peace. Controversial projections created by Krzysztof Wodiczko transform buildings and structures into memory that matters. Each reflects the artist’s involvement in a broad range of social issues. His intention is to handle cultural miscommunication and use art for healing ideological divisions.

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