

ENACTING DEMOCRACY

PUBLIC SPACE: THEATER OF DISCOURSE

By Lois Ascher*



Krzysztof Wodiczko's projections: 1 - the Tijuana Border Project; 2 – Hiroshima, Japan

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In the afterword to the Signet Classic edition of George Orwell's *1984* Erich Fromm defines doublethink as: "holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously and accepting both of them" (Orwell 322) while believing in them BOTH consciously and unconsciously. It is the unconscious aspect of doublethink that is its most troubling quality, however. This is the identical coma that permits us to recycle our waste while allowing our sprinkler systems to function in a rainstorm or, in a more lethal paradigm, it is the ability to believe in the first amendment AND simultaneously accept the restriction of our rights to free speech and all that it implies by the very institutions charged with guarding them.

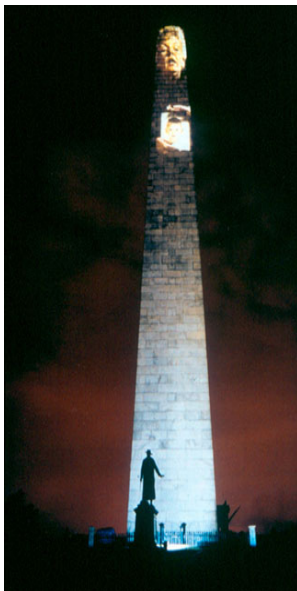
Fromm may well have applied this definition of doublethink to the delicate dance performed by the contemporary city dweller as he seeks to negotiate the urban environment, declaring his first amendment rights under the watchful eyes of an increasingly invasive surveillance - cameras, police presence, the Patriot Act, to name just a few- whose necessity he accepts without questioning. This incongruity occurs when the individual has so completely surrendered his self to the institution, that he experiences that "self" as a creature of the state or other organization. History is replete with examples of this surrender.

In contrast to this unconscious surrendering of the self to the status quo is the idea of democracy as an “agon”, defined as a contest which involves an “energetic discourse” (Phillips 33) rather than collective passivity. To be part of the democratic process, this discourse must occur in a public space which is, according to Rosalyn Deutsche, understood as “always structured by conflict and oppositionality” (Lee 85), and is “the basis of a democratic spatial politics.” (86)

The modern version of agonism assumes the creation of a constructive adversarial relationship that encourages engagement between opponents who accept *democracy. . . as a process* (Phillips 35), one facilitated by what Michel Foucault refers to as “fearless public speaking” (35). Under these conditions, being adversarial is not a negative response to circumstances. Rather it is a method . . . *to develop the dynamic conditions from which people learn to respect each other* (35). In a similar vein, Rosalyn Deutsche, sees public art, in its most viable form, not so much resolving the conflicts underlying social space as exposing them (Lee 86).

Krzysztof Wodiczko and “Reverend” Bill Talen are two public artists whose efforts to expose hidden conflicts and unstated political agendas fit Deutsche’s definition of public art. Wodiczko, a projection artist and social activist, and “Reverend” Billy, a New York based performance artist turned social activist, often utilize public space as agonistic theaters. Although they employ vastly different methods, both utilize *parrhesia*, that is frank or free speech, to raise public consciousness about democratic concerns: first Amendment rights, equal access to public space, and inclusion in the social and political community among others. Wodiczko often usurps the unsuspecting facades of city buildings to become his canvas. Talen takes as his canvas the urban environment itself - its piazzas, storefronts, squares-the gathering ground of the city dweller as he inhabits, often unconsciously, one of the most surveilled societies in history. It is, indeed, against this “uncritical evaluation” of history that both artists act.

Krzysztof Wodiczko interposes his artistry against silent assent and mind numbing daily routines. His projections seek to interrupt the unconscious pattern of daily life that makes us vulnerable to political and social doublethink. Whether his work confronts homelessness, immigration, poverty or urban crime, Wodiczko challenges the community to forgo silent assent and take up the responsibilities of citizenship in a democracy. "Silence and invisibility are the biggest enemies of democracy," Wodiczko comments. "If you cannot speak, none of your other constitutional rights can be exercised." (Wodiczko MIT News Office).



1- Krzysztof Wodiczko's projections at the Bunker Hill Monument, Charlestown (MA), 1998; 2 - the Tijuana Border Project

The Charlestown Code of Silence is an unwritten law that prevents individuals in the community from speaking out when crimes are committed—even to their own family members. In his 1998 Bunker Hill Memorial Projection in Charlestown, Massachusetts, Wodiczko asked that community and the general public to confront the silence that renders both victim and family member invisible. "The revolutionary battle of Bunker Hill is somehow connected with the daily struggle of Charlestown residents who are living in the

shadow of this monument overlooking the area in which someone was murdered”, Wodiczko says of his projection. “so the battle continues...for life, liberty and pursuit of happiness.”, he reminds us. (Art 21)

Cooperation with police, perceived as part of a system of institutionalized enemies to that population, is forbidden. This is not an undeserved charge in poorer urban communities, of which Charlestown is one: “Want to know why?” one projection participant asks. He answers, “Trust. I can’t trust them. . .yeah. . .you down there with that badge on. . .one thing I do know”, he continues, “that this is reality and that’s the Code of Silence.” (ICA Video projection scene 1) .

This enforced silence doubly victimizes relatives: once through the crime and a second time through an imposed subduing of their outrage and grief. Accordingly, Wodiczko projects images of grieving family members onto the face of the monument. Each holds a portrait of murdered loved ones, most often children: “This eternal flame burns in memory of Christopher King at age 20 murdered on August 26, 1986. It burns in memory of Jay King [his brother], murdered on April 7, 1991, age 27, recites Sandy, one bereaved mother. Another mother in the projection, Pam, said that the murder of her son had made her “rethink freedom and how I took it for granted, [it] was earned by other people and I just always expected it to be here.” (Purcell 56) “Thus, by transforming the appearance of the Bunker Hill monument, Wodiczko used the monument’s traditional meaning as a symbol of the freedom won in the Revolutionary War to make viewers question the meaning of freedom in modern Charlestown.” (56)

The act of doublethink imposed on this community as part of their daily existence forces their collaboration with the inert population that Justice Brandeis fears will signal the end of democratic freedom. The Orwellian necessity to simultaneously honor the values of free speech while muffling their own voices, generates anguish. Yet it is in the courage exhibited by those willing to speak that we recognize embodiments of agonistic democracy.



“Reverend Billy: Preaching to the Masses” – Photography by Anton Brink

Similar to Wodiczko’s efforts to recapture democratic control of public space are those of Reverend Bill Talen. As with Wodiczko’s work, Reverend Billy seeks to raise public consciousness about the disappearance of our first amendment rights under a flurry of misunderstood and misapplied patriotic initiatives. Complicating these issues, Talen recognizes, is a breakdown of community, and therefore communal awareness, in part fostered by the conversion of once inhabitable, humanly scaled “neighborhoods” into high rise, inherently anonymous structures, positioned side by side with big box chain stores, retail outlets and tony hotels. “In a healthy community”, Talen reminds us, “we’re talking, listening, dancing, helping each other... (*Multinational Monitor* magazine online).” “In place of our neighborhoods”, he declares we have currently produced “*ads, cell phones, surveillance, and traffic jams [which] have melded together to make sections of Manhattan the outdoor equivalent of a privatized (First Amendment-free) super mall.*” (*YES! Magazine*),

denaturing public space. Two places in which this battle is currently joined in Reverend Billy's territory are the 123rd and 125th street rezoning and development in Harlem and the Coney Island proposed neighborhood development allowing for retail and high rise hotels.

The substitution of phony "communal" establishments such as Starbucks for authentic coffee houses is part of Reverend Billy's lament. He criticizes Starbucks's "appropriation of social justice movements" and their transformation into "consumable [products]." (*Multinational Monitor*), referring to it as a kind of commercial shell game. The marketing of Starbucks' stores as updated versions of café society with their artificially designed "beatnik" environments, complete with comfortable, mismatched furniture AND \$5.00 lattes, is another incursion into neighborhoods where small mom and pop businesses, tailored to individual needs of particular neighborhoods, once supported healthy communities. Authentic neighborhoods create environments that encourage "people's knowledge of each other's histories..." (*Multinational Monitor*), declares Reverend Billy. Personal exchanges between people create communities out of individuals. Those communities both care for one another and act together to preserve their freedoms. Talen often responds to these invasions with what he refers to as "intervention." "So we seek to interrupt that", he says. "We sometimes call ourselves the Church of the Necessary Interruption (...) We like to think of our performance as a *reclamation* of community" (*Multinational Monitor*), he explains in one interview. And as community is reclaimed, a demand for the restoration of first amendment freedoms is restored.

Reverend Billy was arrested, for alleged "police harassment", as he attempted to defend the Critical Mass Bicycle Ride by reciting the first amendment in Union Square. The main issue for Reverend Billy concerned the NYPD'S increasing invasion of First Amendment freedoms, the public right to "peaceably assemble" in the expression of artistic, political and athletic autonomy. The fuse was lit when the Critical Mass Bicycle Ride, was shut down by governmental insistence on a parade permit, which of course when applied for, was refused. This ploy has, of course, been used quite effectively against Civil Rights protesters

by various government institutions. The importance of events like the Critical Mass Bike Ride in enacting democracy through the utilization of public space becomes part of a vital citizen initiative: *"These bikers don't wear logos" Reverend Billy points out, "and they are not en route to a purchase. The bicyclists are opening up public space as citizens see them wheeling by. . . Critical Mass bikers make it realistic that there is more in life than consumption. . ."* (YES! Magazine).

THE FEAR STOPS HERE

The struggle between Critical Mass and authorities in various communities along with other artistic efforts such as Burning Man, reminds us of historic intersections between our democratic and artistic heritages. The efforts of artists like Krzysztof Wodiczko and Reverend Bill Talen to liberate us from the mind numbing unconsciousness of an Orwellian nightmare provide our culture with a much needed democratic theater of discourse.

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