

Open Transmission

Krzysztof Wodiczko

An edited transcript of a talk given at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London as part of the series 'Spaced Out 3' – Smart Practices in a Complex World (March, 1997). Born in Warsaw, Krzysztof Wodiczko lives in New York City and is head of the Interrogative Design Group at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). An innate interdisciplinarity underlines his work, which originates from a training in industrial design. His overriding concern is the relationship to art, design, technology, ethics and psychology. His works *Poliscar*, the various *Projections*, the *Homeless Vehicle* and *Alien Staff* underscore the notion of art as a renewed form of communication with an emphasis on ideas about exclusion and strangeness in public space. The communication instrument of the *Alien Staff* and the discourse between objects and users is a compelling subject Krzysztof Wodiczko has been focusing on in recent years.

The city operates as a monumental stage and a script in the theatre of our way of life, perpetuating our preconceived and outdated notions of identity and community, preserving the way we relate to each other, the way we perceive others and ourselves. An intense presence of historic monuments, advertising, communication media and urban events merges with our own daily personal performance into one uniform aesthetic practice dangerously securing the continuity of 'our' culture. Media art, performance art, performative design: they must interfere with this everyday aesthetics if they wish to contribute ethically to a democratic process. They must interrupt the continuity of existing social relations and perceptions well entrenched in the theatre of the city. Such arts, using the words of Simon Critchley in 'Ethics of deconstruction', should 'interrupt the *polis* in the name of what it excludes and marginalises'. To preserve democracy one must challenge it; one must challenge its symmetry with an asymmetry of ethical responsibility.

The issue of sharing a permanent presence with other people has already been raised here. Permanent presence, or the presence of the other, suggests establishing some kind of communication with another party in order to cross barriers, walls, distances; or breaking down the alienation or estrangement between two different groups. Yet there has not been much said about the actual world in which we live. It would be a great delusion to assume everyone is in an equal position to share, to open up towards the other, to communicate his or her own presence and existence, to learn from somebody else's experience and to accept



• *Alien Staff* in use, June 1992. Barcelona, Spain. Photo: Galerie Lelong, New York

the presence of the other. This is definitely not the case today, in an era which has been called by the United Nations the 'migration era' – an era of international xenophobia or a fear of the other. This is also an era of uneven social relations affected by uneven urban development; an era of urban struggles, of survival through resistance as in the situation of the homeless or of street children born into poverty, hopelessness, violence; or of people who live with HIV infection, and many other marginalized and alienated individual beings, groups and populations. These people are definitely not in a position to share or even make their experience publicly known.

If we are talking about technology, then we must also think about communications technology. What is the position of communications technologies in the troubled communications breakdown that we are experiencing today? If we are so divided, then what is the meaning of an interactive situation between me and somebody else in order to work together, communicate or share things? If new forms of alienation are emerging today, forms that are yet to be discovered and studied, that's where I see the relation between ethics and aesthetics and technology. The more clearly I see it the more dissatisfied I am with my own work, which definitely still needs to absorb a lot of issues. I realize how behind I am in terms of the technological options we have, and the great possibilities that are there. When I speak with my colleagues in the Media Lab at MIT, I realize how late I came into the field of technology. There is already a new generation of people (especially undergraduate students) who are much better equipped at programming than are graduates or researchers. There is an incredible gap between those opportunities and the new responsibilities that they bring. It is in this situation that I am trying to present my work, which will perhaps inspire younger people to push it much further. I am trying to catch up with them; and they are hopefully trying to catch up with me in this area of art, of technological ethics, an ethics of cyborgs, an ethics of interactive environments and so on.

This photograph was taken by a photographer trying to grasp exactly the problems that are at the centre of my work as a designer – which is how to confront the communication gap, and the absence of or the need for something in between; for example, between the couple on the righthand side and the person on the lefthand side.

Our strangeness is a strangely familiar secret, an uncanny condition which, when kept in the ideological cave of our subjectivity, can explode against the presence of the actual stranger. For those in transit, the state of being a stranger accumulates as an experience with no form, language, expression, or rights to be communicated. It thus becomes a dangerous psychic symptom as Julia Kristeva has called the condition of the migrant. Between the speechless pain and despair of the actual stranger, and the repressed fear of one's own



• *Encounters with Immigrants, 1992–1993*. Photo: Galerie Lelong, New York

strangeness (see in the couple on the right), lies the real frontier to be challenged. Can art operate as a revelatory, expressive and interrogative passage to such a frontier? Can it be an inspiration of, a provocation to and an opening act for a new form of communication, a new form for a non-xenophobic community? Can it provide an iconic object, a symbolic environment, an interface, with which to create or design such a reconstructive psychocultural project? Well, it is clear that the person on the left is not equipped to deal with this framing, colonizing, intimidating gaze. Nor is he in any position even to accept his own experience of crossing, trespassing and all the process of ethical and political survival, of living through it all and opening it up to find the form and the language, and to present it, expose it, announce it to this couple on the right, who obviously are not open to hear it.

So some equipment, some 'thing' in between him and himself is needed, first as a kind of psychological object, a new form of what D. W. Winnicott might call a 'transitional object' -- an object that will allow him to play and achieve a distance, perhaps even an ironic distance, from the painful and impossible experience, in order to stand behind or next to his own experience and somehow open it to the couple. The couple need the object as well. For they cannot confront the presence of a stranger any more than they can confront their own strangeness, which is well repressed and hidden in their unconscious. They would prefer to expel the stranger, rather than accept him and thereby recognize their own strangeness. If, however, there was some kind of strange object between this person and them, they would focus on the strangeness of the object first, somehow putting aside for a moment the presence of a stranger. Perhaps in this intermediate moment, through this intermediate object, they might more easily come to terms with some kind of story or story-telling, some kind of performative experience, some kind of artifice, something artificial enough for them to accept the reality in a step-by-step way. I think that's what Freud and Kristeva meant when they were hoping for an artifice to help people come to terms with 'uncanny' strangeness. Of course they would want to establish a playful distance from their own fears through an artefact. That object does not yet exist; or rather, I have not yet managed to construct one successfully. I only attempted to do so and this is an experiment which probably will last quite a long time.

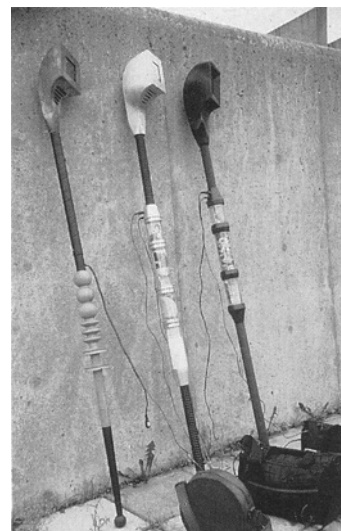
Such an experiment is a risk worth taking. The city is worth nothing if it is not open to strangers or the estranged. Technology or design is worth nothing if it cannot create such an opening. Each time the experience of a stranger is understood and heard, each time such acts occur, the city wakes up and comes back to life. It brings back hope for all of us if the city is a place of hope for the stranger. To heal one estranged speechless soul in the city is to heal the entire city. My role is to contribute to a therapy for the city and for its speechless actors. The

instruments that I design are an attempt to do this. My interests in psychology and technology merge as they do at MIT; but somehow social ethics is not yet a powerful component in this merger. At MIT my role is to bring this component as a part of my art and my design.

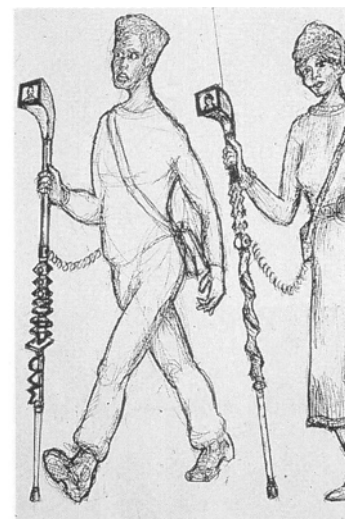
My first experiment was a very simple attempt to reactualize so-called 'primitive' technology. A walking stick, the ancient technology of the transient, the messenger, a migrant or a prophet – a staff with specially designed code of interchangeable carvings – could become a symbolic inscription for migratory experience. For example, being deported (expelled from a new country) three times would be articulated through three forms attached to the staff; or if someone spent one year in transitional camps, or someone worked illegally for a year or two, those things could be carved or sculpted on the staff. Of course that idea needed to be abandoned very quickly since all of the Departments of Immigration – which are *de facto* Departments of Anti-Immigration – would have learned very quickly about this 'secret' code, and no immigrant would risk using such a walking stick openly.

At the top of this walking stick, called the Alien Staff, there was a video monitor and a loudspeaker which would represent the speaking face and the voice of the stranger. Using this walking speech-act instrument, a stranger, a story-teller, would feel he or she was perceived as a respectful and articulate actor in today's urban landscape. In this way the stranger could be reinforced by his or her 'porte-parole', as a companion, a confidant. There would now be two of them: the stranger as a character and as an actor. The prerecorded and well-edited speech – the story-telling – could be broadcast with the disturbing, comically disturbing presence and speech of the actual person who recorded it. The relation between the stranger, his or her media image and anybody on the street – the interlocutors – would possibly create a complicated discourse in which the stranger could disagree with what was prerecorded, because every time the story-teller speaks, the story would be different. The interlocutor could then ask questions related to the lower part of the *Alien Staff* – the history of displacement inscribed there – and the third person would come and start responding to the discourse with larger questions, questioning the questions, questioning the discourse and speaking on behalf of 'we' rather than only 'me' and the 'other'. This would create a political, critical and ethical field where both the interlocutor and the stranger, by referring to what was prerecorded and what was broadcast, could actually take up an external and critical position to it.

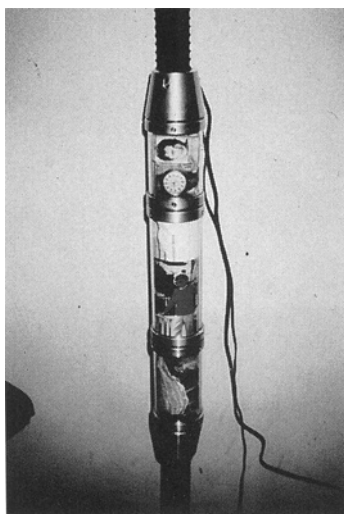
At the next stage of the experiment, I realized that I needed to replace the carvings of the lower part of the *Alien Staff* with interchangeable transparent containers: containers for sacred relics, important documents, objects of historical value for the stranger. The stranger is treated and at best tolerated as someone who does not have a



• *Alien Staff*, early models, 1993. Photo: Galerie Lelong, New York



• *Alien Staff*, early models, 1993. Photo: Galerie Lelong, New York



• *Alien Staff*, 1993. A reliquary section. Photo: Galerie Lelong, New York



• *Alien Staff*, 1993. Immigrant relics. Photo: Galerie Lelong, New York

history and must use story-telling, magic, song and other forms of performance and entertainment to insert his or her own history into the official culture; to propose himself or herself as a history. The issue is, what kind of history? The history of the time before crossing the border, or the history of the time after crossing the border – and I am emphasizing the history *after* one has crossed the border – that is, the history of the entire population, society or nation. This history is a performative kind of story that will eventually be distorted and absorbed by the grand national mythology and the city's monumental narrative, only to be challenged again later by another stranger.

The recollection of past experience infused in the present, in part creates a completely new history of the present, a critical history of the present. If I go through all the miseries of the past five or ten years, I must reuse them to imagine that this is going to continue; that the future is going to perpetuate that misery for myself and for my children. Therefore I – an immigrant and a stranger – am announcing what is wrong today. My utopia is based on a refusal to accept the place in which I am – a new concept of 'no place' – utopia. Utopia – that is a place that is unacceptable; and the hope that is born from this unacceptable experience is extrapolated into the future as another side of this utopia – so that the future will not repeat the injustices and catastrophes of the present and of the past. This concept of recollection, of remembrance, of critical reactualization and critical history is located somewhere in between Friedrich Nietzsche and Walter Benjamin. According to Stephan Moses, Benjamin suggested that the process of progress should be replaced by the process of remembrance and recollection. His utopia was functioning as the hope lived by the mode of the present, rather than as a projection of an ultimate social solution. I understand all immigrants as prophets, as prophetic peoples who through their disturbing performance and recollection of their present experience are each day announcing a better world for all of us. 'The Messiah interrupts history', says Benjamin.

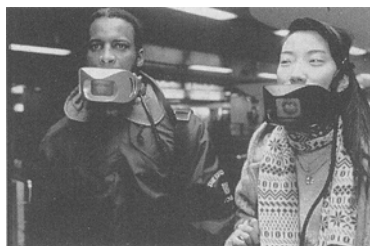
These are the relics of a Polish exile living in Brooklyn who went through hell working day and night without documents and as a slave, as a domestic labourer, for a woman, the oppressor. The exile had no choice, terrorized to the point where she entertained the idea of committing suicide, or giving up the job and going back to Poland, all of which were equally impossible solutions for her. She survived this but she kept it to herself or to be precise, to her unconscious. She never really spoke about all of this with anybody. When I suggested this instrument to her she rejected the possibility of 'using it' on the spot. Mentally she needed 'to destroy' this instrument – the *Alien Staff* – in order later to accept it step by step and perhaps in the end even to become addicted to it. At first it was a perplexed reaction on her part. She rejected this project and at the same time she was allured by the

possibility of exposing the history of her experience to a world ignorant of it. She also felt a need to share this with somebody, as well as with herself and even with her own consciousness. The process of video recording – of recalling details, trying to find documents and other relics, editing the story, translating very often from one language to another, speaking in two languages to the video camera – finally began. The same stories are different when spoken in different languages and on different days. To put it together, to concretize it in some synthetic way, is also to release the incredible load of speechless pain and responsibility for carrying all of this inside as a secret, as a uselessly hidden testimony to truth. Once the story is next to her, her strangeness is estranged from her in a healthy way; she sees and hears it now at a distance. She can know now that her anger and alienation are contained there (the psychological container is important here) and now she can be open. She can be very polite, she can negotiate between herself, her prerecorded double, the other person and the third person. She can also reserve her right to disagree with her double – her *Alien Staff* – at any time. As one rabbinical scholar said: ‘The one who believes the story is a fool but the one who denies the story is a wicked non-believer.’

It is a myth that immigrants can understand each other. In fact there is a world of disagreement and antagonism between them – as much as there is a world of disagreement and antagonism inside of each immigrant. The boundaries and de-militarized zones inside the mind of the migrant are in the process of shifting; they are unstable, so in a way the possibility of internal conflict is as close as the possibility of external conflict among the different ethnic groups, and of course between each of them as individuals and the rest of society as well. This is why I am thinking that the *Alien Staff* can be expanded and absorb more contemporary technology, allowing strangers – their ‘operators’ – to communicate with each other electronically when they ‘broadcast’ and speak. At the same time they could provide a communication service as social aid for the larger immigrant population and everybody else, assuming that, for example, some of the operators, immigrants, would become agents, angels (*l’ange* ou *l’agent*) or messengers who could then visit or explore different areas of the city where immigrants live. Such ‘angels’ would not only open up their own experience using the *Alien Staff* but also establish a trust – play and trust are interconnected according to Winnicott – to such a point that they could then transmit back and forth questions and advice; the questions would usually be legal ones, but could also be ethical ones to the communication base (the xenological base run by xenologists – immigrant experts on displacement), existential philosophers and legal advisers. Such an *Alien Staff* as a network is probably a very important option since many of the immigrants are not in any psychological, economic



• *Alien Staff* in use. Jagoda Przybylak, New York. Photo: Galerie Lelong, New York



• *Mouthpiece* in use, 1995. Helsinki, Finland. Photo: Galerie Lelong, New York

and social position to seek help or advice on their own and take advantage of their rights, if they still have any.

Alien Staffs were used in Barcelona, Warsaw, Helsinki, Rotterdam, Houston, Brooklyn, Marseilles, Paris – used by many people in many places even though there are only six of them. They can be shared and their containers and video-tapes are interchangeable. Confidence is a very important result of many of the conflicts, once one is prepared to open up all of this within the situation of the studio. A video camera is very patient. But then to accept this is another story. Once all of this is accepted it opens a new possibility: of thinking about one's own identity and participating in an experience and a life that are much richer, much more complex, than is the case for those who never cross the borders. Then the confidence and respect become a motivation for an action, or a speech-act, which is much more critical and demanding or provocative. It might perhaps reach the point (as in this case) where the person is invited to a TV station and appears on the national news. On occasions (and it has already happened twice), immigrants appeared on the official TV screen armed with their personal televisions, with both virtual and actual well-prepared statements, stories and visions.

So those are the three models historically lined up. The next generation of immigrant instruments, called *Mouthpiece* or *Le Porte Parole*, is not for everybody – but only for those who really want to use it. This is not an artifice positioned next to the stranger. This is a cultural prosthesis which can help the stranger him- or herself to become a powerful artifice, perhaps a cyborg. This equipment is to be used by those who are extremely angry and determined to speak. But also by people that feel more 'cyborgian' than others. A 'cyborg' is a cybernetic organism – a hybrid of machine and organism – a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction. Social reality is linked to social relations, our most important social construction, and to the world of change and technological development where, as Donna Haraway was saying, the 'distinction between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion'. On this basis the immigrant is in fact partially artificial and partially natural. It is also possible to say that once one becomes or is forced to operate this way, then maybe, as she said, 'dehumanisation is so inevitable that we might as well learn to like it'. If we can.

Of course the emphasis here is a prosthetic device. A prosthetic device not only is like an additional part or a replacement for a lost body-part but also empowers or extends the ability of a human or an animal. In this sense the 'cyborg' analogy is very close to the experience of migrants, and, as Donna Haraway also suggested, to women and other groups that are marginalized, silenced and oppressed. There is no way back to the 'lost land' or 'paradise'. In the proposed *Mouthpiece*, the combination, at the same time, of the deprivation of rights – speech rights – and the reinforcement of speech ability is ironic enough to let

us find some kind of analogy to Donna Haraway's concept of the cyborg, which she called an 'ironic metaphor'. This gag – this loud-speaker – like a cyborg, takes irony for granted.

These are my hopes and my ideas. My design and organizational projections have not begun to materialize yet, but more and more is possible. Right now at MIT we are experimenting with a version of the new *Alien Staff* that is further developing or creating possibilities for artistic virtuosity. Gesture is of course a very important part of what is happening around this 'sacred object'. Strangers assume 'baroque personalities' according to Kristeva: overemphasizing things, accentuating, full of gestures, in order to compensate for the lack of adequate communication, and also abilities. And 'locals' seem to be immobile, completely opposite, making no attempt even to exchange a gesture. As the stranger becomes a non-stranger, the non-stranger must become the stranger, and somewhere half-way a new communication, a new community, is possible.

Coming back to the new version of *Alien Staff*: the antenna here is probably not necessary but is an 'ambient' and important symbol of the possibility of a transmission between or among each of the instruments and the base. The larger form of the head of this instrument is something to do with the need to reinforce sound – the large speaker, which can actually be more effective in an urban environment. Also new containers are being tested, so one could show or conceal what is inside: there are two options. But most importantly there are electric sensors being used here. This means that hand gestures towards each container can speed up speech 'switching' on the particular story – related to particular personal relics. It can modulate in a variety of ways to make it more or less hysterical, comical or strange, depending on the virtuosity that it demands on the part of the stranger – performative virtuosity. Those metal components are actually functioning sensors – all of this technology was developed in the 1930s by the Russian inventor Theremin who invented an electronic musical instrument named after him and operated by gestures. The Media Lab at MIT has further developed this system using new mini-computers, programs and micro-chip technology in this and other new instruments to increase performative quality. Story-telling will become new art and new craft. It took many months for Joshua Smith of the Media and Physics Group at MIT to complete the program for this instrument. I realize only now how long it takes to work with this new technology and new research. Two years is a very short time when it comes to programming and experimenting with new interactive equipment. So I am behind my schedule! But the new instrument, the new *Alien Staff*, responds with its stories and their variations to many gestures already. The *Prophet's Prosthesis* is coming soon!