

Krzysztof Wodiczko is an artist and professor of visual art at MIT. Over a period of nearly 40 years as a public artist, he has created a distinguished and influential body of work that addresses ethical issues of democracy and public space. In this interview Wodiczko discusses the implications of such a utopian project today and the responsibility of artists to seek conditions that create dynamic discourses that enrich democracy.

Interview Questions for Professor Krzysztof Wodiczko, March 14th, 2007, Interrogative Design Group, Center for Advanced Visual Studies, MIT

BMW: Rivera's mural, Man at the Crossroads, is a uniquely American conception, designed to live in a free and multicultural society, where the potential for communism, had perhaps the best chance to grow. Can you discuss your understanding of the American constitution as it relates to this mural, and why a mural like Rivera's has the possibility to be censored and destroyed here in the United States?

KW: So its difficult to say exactly what would happen today with the equivalent of this mural, not the same mural, but a mural that would have, lets say similarly controversial figures and ideas and or attributes in it. In general it seemed to be unconstitutional to destroy the work of art, because it goes against the first amendment, which is the primary communicative right, guaranteed by the constitution. The question of course is to what degree can such a constitutional right can be exercised in a private space. So then the question is was Rockefeller center, private space, public space, or a space that was offered to the city according to some agreements with the state and the fact that there is a particular icon there or symbolic icon or figure of somebody who shouldn't be there according to someone who pays for the mural, doesn't mean that that person should demand removal of this part, or create condition for ultimatum, You either remove it or we remove entire mural. I don't know what was the agreement between Rivera and Rockefeller before they signed a contract of commission whether the possibility of Lenin being there was discussed or it was obvious and presented in advance or not. This still doesn't mean that Rockefeller should demand the change. If I was Rockefeller I would say alright I trust the artist I ask the artist to unleash all of his passion and mind, put together a project which may go beyond my imagination, even if I disagree some

aspects of it, I should embrace it, because maybe in that disagreement will be the greatest, deepest value of it, because it will be a center of discourse, it will actually reflect, or maybe create conditions for many questions asked.

I would consider in today's reality that it would not be as easy as it was then. Even if it was an image of Chavez, for example, today, in a equivalent of this type of mural or public project and it was to be located in such exposed privately owned public space, I think it would be difficult for the owners of that space, to simply act in a straightforward and direct way as Rockefeller at that time. At least I hope so. In both cases it goes against the very spirit of the constitution, so possibly one could appeal or set up some special commission, maybe some congressional enquiry to question should such act happen today, whether it was constitutional. Probably if it went to Supreme Court, it would be still a debate, between various judges and that depends on the configuration of the court, whether it's more conservative or less. So that's how I see it in front of the constitution. One should not assume too much, but one should hope that it would be more difficult to do the same kind of, to imagine the same situation in 2007. Now I believe that he himself had lots of faith in the American constitution so its possible that for him the very demand to make changes maybe went against his own hopes that he had invested in this country, United States. I would consider in today's reality that it would not be as easy as it was then.

BMW: How do you see Rivera's utopian vision to combine science and technology in relation to your own work that is also using technology to propose a more ethical world?

KW: It is clearly quite admirable project because it is so complex, because it has so many elements that seem to be irreconcilable. The viewer is in crossroads, not only man in crossroads. Perhaps one could imagine Rivera himself was in crossroads, maybe the crossroads is just a multiplicity of tasks of unresolved problems that are facing definitely leaders but also artists, just about every person, figure in this mural. One could project that on each party, each relationship between those figures. What would those people tell each other about the situation today? One could ask those questions looking at the mural. So there is room for quite an interesting work, that the spectators, visitors, users of that space, or casual visitors rushing through that space to work, and doing business,

they might ask themselves, or they might identify, there is a crowd of potential issues and questions. If we were to think of the possibility of creating a public project, ambition of which would be to pose questions today, we would probably need to do it, in different way than Rivera. So one thing is clear, that, although there are all of those tasks and movements, processes, memories of things that went wrong, warnings signals, it's a kind of memorial monument and at the same time utopian field, or lets say maybe even a configuration of various utopias, of that time. Yes, yes but perhaps we don't really face any doubt that is coming from each of those elements. We don't know what kind of doubts and problems Lenin himself was going through. Of course Rivera himself probably is not as present there, in terms of his own dilemmas and questions. Its seemed to be interesting because its difficult to put together and at the same time its questionable because it is put together as one project, in such a, kind of totalizing way. In other words it creates a type of utopia, which we today, may, question. Question as something that in itself, has an authoritarian, authoritative, if not some people would say totalitarian tendencies, despite the fact that those tendencies are depicted there as unacceptable. So the contradiction here is that there are all of those elements and there are lots of things that are not there, that are not visible, because there are so many things there. So one could get lost, or maybe too easily find him or herself in this kind of work, rather than properly getting lost in a multiplicity of questions. So its not an encouraging work in terms of the position of a subject today, that many artists are trying to share with the public and with each other today. So the artistic vision today is to create, to encourage sharing our doubts, rather than joining each other in one, large, utopian project. Rather to question the various system that we see very well. Its so well established as whether its this or that or some other form of capitalistic system that seem to be so well established that despite all of the calls by Chavez, and people in his circle and colleagues, other leaders around, they seem to be a minority of ideological concepts that are in danger of questioning the democratic process itself. So they are not really that solid as they claim to be because they are themselves contradictory. Instead we have various ways to questions and defend our right to question and refuse to be told what to think, within the existing systems. So man in the crossroad today is maybe the one who is trying to figure out how to deconstruct in a daily work, in a daily life, in various forms of micro resistances and refusals, or seeking conditions for more dynamic discourses how to make better the world in which we live.