

Krzysztof Wodiczko's Alien Staff

by Patrick Wright

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The Olympic Games which open in Barcelona at the end of July will last fifteen days but the preparations, which are said to have turned the city into a vast building site, have been underway for years. Motorways and railway lines have been moved. Tunnels have been blasted through mountain ranges, and the inevitable mascot-logo (a bumptious-looking creature called COBI) has been stuck up all over the city. The new glass airport terminal is still being unwrapped, but the electronic greeting machines are already bouncing fanfares across acres of resounding marble floor.

The rhetoric that has attended this remodelling of Barcelona strives to reflect the values of its socialist city council. The Olympic village may have necessitated wholesale demolition in the 19th century industrial quarter, but this hasn't deterred the architect from declaring it a 'homage to the utopian socialism of the nineteenth century'. As for the Olympic stadium, this refurbishes the one in which Barcelona's anti-Nazi Popular Olympics would have been held in 1936, had they not been interrupted by Franco's coup. The message could hardly be clearer: the Games will pull Barcelona out of the 'backwardness' and 'underdevelopment' that were Franco's legacy.

There are some who dissent from this modernising Olympic vision. Manuel Vazquez Montalban's book *Barcelonas* (recently published in English by Verso), offers a sardonic guide to the city behind 'the Olympic spectacle', worrying about the surrender of Barcelona to 'speculative frenzy' and predicting that its inhabitants will soon wake up to the fact that 'a large chunk of their memory, half head, half heart, has been lopped off'.

The recently established Antoni Tàpies Foundation is also striking out in a contrary direction. Last week it opened an exhibition of 'Instruments, Projections, and Vehicles' by Krzysztof Wodiczko, the wandering Polish industrial designer turned artist.

Stepping into the gallery, the visitor confronts a strange assortment of vehicles, which are neither up to the minute nor easily reconciled with the conventional idea of athletic performance. Some of Wodiczko's contrivances involve cogs and exposed stretches of bicycle chain that might have been borrowed from Heath Robinson. Ironically archaic in their futurism, these slow vehicles are mounted on thin wire-spoked wheels and accompanied by technical drawings which evoke Leonardo's sketches of imaginary devices which the world will never see. They are automated fragments of philosophy: mechanised riddles designed to tease away at the seams of conventional understanding.

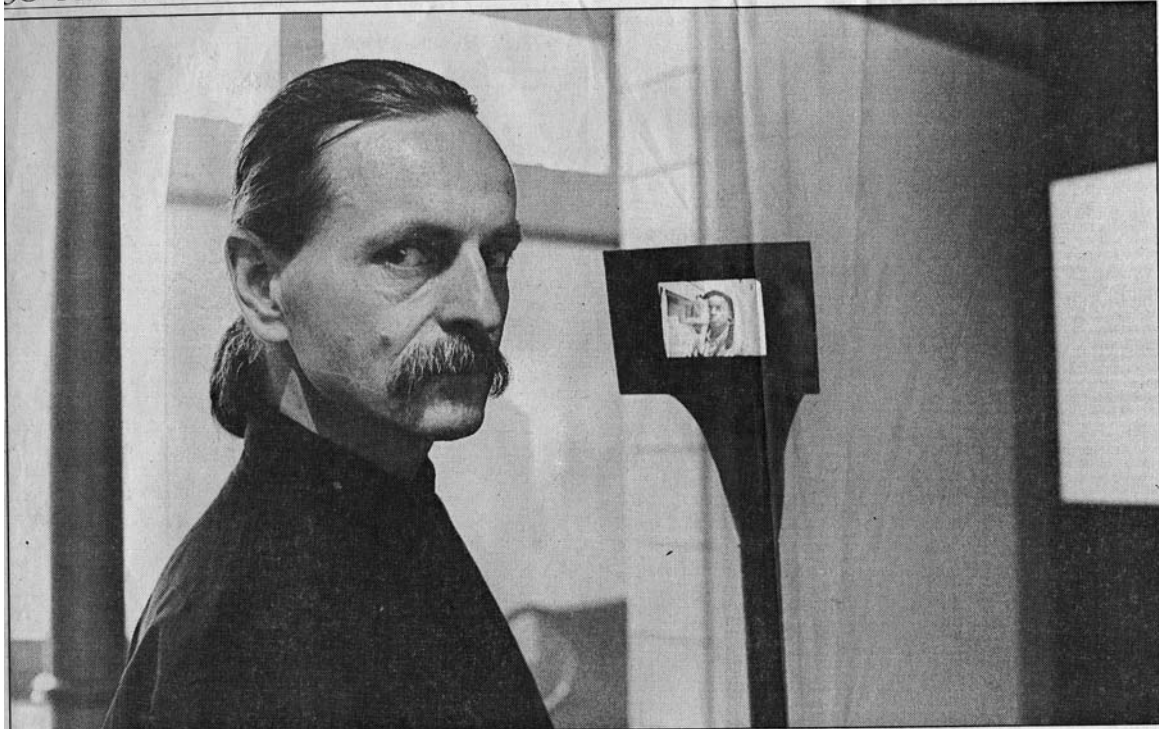
One, simply called 'Vehicle', consists of a long and narrow box mounted on two sets of those flimsy wheels. On top is a platform which tilts in a small see-saw motion. Photographs show the artist as a younger man, trudging up and down along the platform, while each tilt causes the vehicle to inch, almost imperceptibly, along the road. The 'Podium Vehicle' consists of a large and aggressively elevated orator's podium, of the sort from which braided dictators like to harangue the masses. The sound of the speaker's voice is caught in a microphone but rather than being amplified and projected outwards, it is drawn into the covered base of the vehicle where it is converted into the force that causes the whole contraption to creep forward on little wheels. 'Cafe vehicle' works in the same way: two people sit facing one another

across a table, while their conversation is sucked into an equally prominent microphone and used to drive them along in a direction which seems to be beyond their control.

Many of these allegorical vehicles date back to the seventies, when they were designed in critical response to communist reality as Wodiczko knew it in Poland. But the Tàpies Foundation has also gathered in more recent vehicles that Wodiczko has produced since moving to North America, where he has taken the side of the urban homeless and gone on to mock the design world by producing hypothetical life-style accessories for these outcasts or 'evicts' of the western city, who are normally left to make do with old sheets of plastic, cardboard, and hijacked shopping trolleys. There's a replica of Wodiczko's *Poliscar*, a curious Dalek-like contrivance, both menacing and toylike, that was first exhibited last year as a mobile communications unit that might help establish an information network among the fragmented homeless population of Manhattan. Also on show is the 'Homeless Vehicle' that Wodiczko had produced a few years earlier, when he redesigned the supermarket shopping trolley, adjusting this emblem of the consumer society to fit the needs of the homeless more precisely: adding larger rear wheels, lockable container sections, rudimentary washing and even sleeping facilities.

Some commentators have appreciated Wodiczko's inventions as devices intended to shock, connecting them to the idea of transgression associated with avant-garde figures like Georges Batailles. In truth, however, Wodiczko is altogether more careful than this. He aims to startle, and to reopen questions that conventional wisdom prefers to keep closed, but he is far from being just another blithe violator of common sense. Wodiczko may be an avant-gardist in some respects, but he is also a community worker - albeit of an unorthodox kind. Each of his recent vehicles is the record and product of a dialogue. He has worked directly with the homeless, enlisting their assistance as 'consultants', test-drivers or actors, and reaching into their situation in order to dramatise their difficulties as much from inside as possible. As he says, to understand somebody else's experience means to grasp what they have 'lived through', and that can't just be about registering the 'shock' of their existence.

Wodiczko has applied this approach in Barcelona. The 'Alien Staff', displayed for the first time in this exhibition, is made of materials associated with folk tradition: leather, copper and hand-crafted wood. It rises up from an adjustable foot, through a sequence of carved wooden elements which Wodiczko calls the 'Xenolog'. At the top the staff widens and curves round into a copper head in which a tiny television monitor and speaker are mounted.



Krzysztof Wodiczko and his Alien Staff . . . 'offered to Europe's migrants as an instrument with which to fight xenophobia'

The staff that dreams are made of

'An elegant fashion object with a TV on top.' **Patrick Wright** on a shepherd's

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Wodiczko accepts that when isolated in an art gallery, the Alien Staff may look like a 'mere thing or piece of equipment'. In this it offers a mockery of 'those stupid design utopias' which fail to recognise that 'a physical object in itself can't change anything'. But though it starts off looking as dumb as any absurdly pristine exhibit in the Design Museum, the Alien Staff soon spirals off into an energetic metaphorical life of its own.

Wodiczko has designed it in response to what he takes to be the major challenge facing Europe: namely to accommodate cultural diversity within its inherited framework of nation-states. 'The borders are shifting', he remarks: 'the map is changing for people who don't move anywhere'. The Danish vote against Maastrich may have been a vote against centralised administration, but wasn't it also a rejection of the reality that is mixed cultural identity? The idea of cultural rights is accepted within the comparatively recent Canadian constitution, but the European states drag behind. Rather than valuing migrants as 'the bearers of a new perception', or bestowing rights on them so that they in turn could be expected to accept obligations, Europe seems intent on building 'another Great Wall of China' and leaving its response to cultural diversity in the hands of draconian frontier guards and immigration officials.

The Alien Staff is offered to Europe's migrants as an instrument with which to work against the xenophobia that treats them all as barbarians at the gates. In its symbolic aspect it links the marginal world of the migrant with the very foundation of the European civilisation that now weighs so heavily upon them. The Alien Staff is built to resemble a shepherd's crook, that longstanding emblem of pastoral nomadism, but it also reaches back into the Bible to evoke the staff of Moses. The Alien Staff stands in 'a messianic tradition of a Jewish kind', but like the Old Testament in which its precedent is found, it belongs to Christian tradition as well. Commenting on the copper head of his staff, Wodiczko recalls the story of Moses's staff becoming a

snake and then alludes to certain connections between the Hebrew words for copper and snake. He goes on to cite the staffs of medieval pilgrims, the maces that symbolise municipal and parliamentary authority, and the batons once carried not just by the famous dandies of Barcelona but by bourgeois gentlemen throughout 18th and 19th century Europe. Even in more recent secular times, it has, he says, often been Jewish and Christian organisations that have fought hardest for the rights and welfare of immigrants.

And what of the curious strip of carved wooden elements that Wodiczko calls the xenolog? Wodiczko likes to think that the Alien Staff could be seen as an elegant 'fashion object' that declared the person holding it to be 'part of the city'. He hoped it would speak out on behalf of the migrant, saying 'Maybe I have profound things to say because I am different', and reminding us that some societies have found a positive role for strangers: as seers, confessors, critics and arbitrators.

The xenolog was partly inspired by a visit to the museum of popular art in Paris, where Wodiczko had seen staffs on which shepherds had carved the story of their journeys. He wanted the Alien Staff to function as a sign 'even if its significance is not understood'. Perhaps the xenolog is unified by a secret code known only to its bearer. Perhaps we can't read it because we persist in asking these migrants the wrong questions, concentrating on matters of immigration status, and lacking even the metaphors that might enable us to enter their experience. In principle, however, the xenolog would tell the story of the migrant holding it. Four ellipses might stand for annual extensions of temporary work permits. A double swirl might indicate two extended visitor's visas. Other elements could mark entry denied at borders, periods spent waiting for entry or exit visas, the splitting of families at borders, sudden deportations, or perhaps a particularly dangerous frontier crossing.

Wodiczko envisaged that the 'xenologist' - by which he means the migrant using the Alien Staff - would stand in a public place holding the copper head close to his or her face. Interested passersby would be invited to look into the tiny television screen on which the 'xenologist' would also appear, offering an exposition of the personal history recorded in the xenolog. As Wodiczko makes clear in the explanatory text, 'the small size of the monitor, its eye-level location and its closeness to the operator's face are important aspects of the design'. The tiny scale of the screen and the faintness of the sound emitting from the head of the staff would force observers 'to come up very close to the monitor and therefore to the operator's face'. They would, in other words, be brought eyeball to eyeball with their own image of the migrant, and also with the actual person whose life was usurped by that image.

When he started working on the Barcelona exhibition, Wodiczko contacted an organisation called 'SOS - Racisme' which put him in touch with a group of Moroccan migrants who lived on the dark side of Barcelona's bright Olympic endeavour, working as labourers on the walls that guaranteed their own exclusion. These men, who had left their families in small villages at home, told Wodiczko about their difficulties: the legal problems concerning their immigration status, their vulnerability to sudden deportation, their lack of organisation. Spain doesn't allow permanent residency to aliens, so life for these migrant workers was a constant struggle for the renewal of temporary permissions. They also experienced long periods of 'legal illegality' when the authorities lost their papers, or mixed them up with people of similar, or at least equally alien, names.

These Moroccan men took to the idea of the Alien Staff immediately. As Wodiczko explains, they recognised their need 'to assert both their memory and their voice', and to gain some control over their communication with the society that had stereotyped them as a problem. They knew that 'their story should be in the record of Catalonia', and not just as an impersonal register of work-permits and applications for visas.

They were scrupulously polite, inviting Wodiczko back for a meal, and agreeing to meet again for further discussion. But when the day came, they didn't show up.

Wodiczko had hoped to involve them in his Alien Staff project: 'We were trying to get some commitment from these people: to meet them and to persuade them that, far from confining their presence to the anonymous peripheral estates where they live, they should come to the centre of Barcelona and assert their presence where the culture and communication are'. But the Moroccans were accustomed to keeping well away from the central parts of Barcelona, fearing that the police would pick them up for no greater offence than looking different and out of place. As for the principle of conspicuous exhibition implicit in Wodiczko's staff, this could not be readily embraced by people whose security depended on invisibility. So the Alien Staff had been put through its preliminary street trials by a young woman of West African extraction. Being married to a Catalan man, she didn't have the residency problems of the men from Morocco; but she was familiar enough with Spanish racism, and could tell of the problems that had arisen when she and her husband tried to move into a middle class suburb.

Did the silent withdrawal of those Moroccan labourers mark the failure of the Alien Staff? 'I thought it would be immediately successful, but it wasn't', so Wodiczko remarks with a self-effacing laugh. Manuel Borja-Villel, director of the Tàpies Foundation's gallery, wasn't going to let matters rest there. For him this story just goes to demonstrate the vital difference between Wodiczko's initiative and the predefined utopias, whether they be offered by conventional designers or the boosters of Olympic Barcelona. As a 'dialectical' project, the Alien Staff was open to whatever developments occurred as those migrant workers became involved in it. Since there was no preconceived end in sight, it could hardly be accused of missing its goal. As with so many other allegories, it was the journey that counted.