MESSAGES TO THE PUBLIC:
KRZYSZTOF WODICZKO AND JENNY HOLZER VS. THE REAGAN REVOLUTION

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Abstract

In the week preceding the 1984 United States presidential election, Jenny Holzer and Krzysztof Wodiczko presented ephemeral works of art in public spaces in Manhattan that addressed the election and were highly critical of President Ronald Reagan. Previous considerations of Wodiczko’s AT&T projection, Holzer’s *Sign on a Truck* and the larger public art movement of that time have emphasized a post-structuralist interpretation, neglecting the applied political aspects in favour of their theoretical underpinnings. With a move towards the practical aspects of the works, this thesis examines the conditions that led to the presentation of these two works and considers what they can teach us about the larger practice of political public art during that period in New York. Chapter 1 considers the political, economic and artistic context of the United States—and New York in particular—in the early to mid 1980s. The Chapter 2 offers an analysis of Wodiczko’s AT&T projection, a night-time projection of the image of President Reagan’s French-cuffed hand onto the side of the AT&T Long Lines building, posed for a recognizable American ritual, the Pledge of Allegiance. Chapter 3 closely considers *Sign on a Truck*, for which Jenny Holzer deployed a giant screen, mounted on the side of an 18-wheeler truck, to display pre-recorded videos created by collaborating artists interspersed with “man-on-the-street” interviews commenting on the looming presidential election. By shedding the insightful yet constraining post-structural lens that has traditionally coloured the art historical understanding of these works, their essential educative aspects are revealed and a broader understanding is made possible, not only of these two artists and their respective projects, but also of the defense that was mounted by New York's public artists against the “Reagan Revolution.”
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INTRODUCTION

3 November 1984: Krzysztof Wodiczko projected the image of a French-cuffed hand onto the side of the AT&T Long Lines building in South Manhattan. The hand was that of United States President Ronald Reagan, posed for a recognizable American ritual, the Pledge of Allegiance (figure 1).

3 November 1984 & 5 November 1984: Jenny Holzer organized for an 18-wheeler truck to be parked at two different sites in Manhattan—Grand Army Plaza near Central Park and Bowling Green Plaza in the Wall Street area. A giant screen on the side of the truck displayed pre-recorded videos created by collaborating artists interspersed with “man-on-the-street” interviews commenting on the looming presidential election (figure 2).

6 November 1984: Ronald Reagan defeated former Democratic Vice President Walter Mondale to win a second term as President of the United States of America. Sweeping 49 of 50 states, the Reagan Revolution was poised to forge ahead.

The 1980s are popularly characterized as a time of excess. The prices of Impressionist paintings at auction were unprecedented and a topic of much conversation and debate.¹ Some contemporary artists did financially well in this climate. Participating in the neo-Expressionist return-to-painting, American artists such as Eric Fischl, David Salle and Julian Schnabel sold their paintings to speculators and young new-money art collectors with a desire to participate in anything au courant.²

Other artists, however, rejected the art market in favour of a publicly-presented,

² “To harness the exponentially increasing amount of ‘young money’ around, museums everywhere started up junior collectors groups so that, at the height of the '80s, the massed army of contemporary-art collectors included old-liners entranced by new art (like Jerry Elliott and Elaine Dannheisser); recently minted multimillionaires who realized, like [Eli] Broad, that 'it's stimulating to meet people outside the business world, who have a different way of looking at life,' and soon discovered the social-status possibilities of collecting; and the young investment bankers and arbitrageurs.” See: Peter Plagens, “Cents and sensibility: collecting in the '80s,” ArtForum 42, no. 8 (April 2003): 210-215, 253-255. For a more short-sighted account of the art market boom of the 1980s see: Peter C.T. Elsworth, “The Art Boom: Is It Over, or Is This Just a Correction?” New York Times, December 16, 1990, section F.
politically-oriented practice, producing artworks that prioritized consumption by the viewer over the purchaser. These artists observed the trend towards excess and decadence around them and saw the resulting impact on those who could not afford to keep up with the pace of the market economy. They observed Reagan—the man who stood as the face of the recent economic change in the United States—and identified key factors within the political and social systems that actively yet covertly steered the situation. These artists, assuming an unexpected role somewhere between seer and military avant-garde, took their art practice to the streets, spreading the word of their realizations and pursuing cultural guerilla warfare against the system, actively testing the level of practical impact, if any, their politically-minded art could have on an audience that extended beyond the gallery and museum walls.

Contemporary art critics who took notice of this politically-minded public art movement tended to interpret the work through a post-structuralist reading. While the origins of post-structuralism can be found in Europe (specifically France), with many of its key figures writing in French, in the late 1970s and through the 1980s texts began to appear in translation in North America. With English versions published in journals such as *New German Critique*, *Critical Inquiry* and *Diacritics*, art critics with leftist leanings and a propensity for philosophical methodology would have been acutely aware of the writings. As a new possibility for the interpretation of art and artistic practices, a post-structuralist lens was truly insightful in a context that had previously been dominated by

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3 This is not to suggest that in the early 1980s all artists either participated in the neo-Expressionist return-to-painting or had political public art practices. There were, of course, painters, sculptors, photographers, video artists, performance artists and conceptual artists actively producing at this time who did not neatly fall into either of these categories.
critical models that favored, at one time, Greenbergian formalism or, more recently, the glossy commercial representation of art as commodity. By their very nature, these older models were unable to adequately address the theoretical underpinnings of the new public art of that moment.

Hal Foster’s 1982 essay “Subversive Signs,” first published in *Art in America*, is exemplary of the post-structuralist treatment typically given to the early work of Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger and other New York artists with whom they are often associated. According to Foster, Holzer and Kruger sought to centre the subject and undo the “fascism” that Roland Barthes identified in language, and through their work the viewer is led to the (Foucauldian) realization that meaning, “however directed toward truth,…is finally based on power.”

Douglas Crimp’s critical writing of the 1980s also exhibits this general post-structuralist leaning. As a co-editor of *October*, Crimp published widely through the late 1970s and the 1980s, focusing his attention, on the one hand, on the return to painting witnessed at that moment and, on the other hand, to “the current generation of younger artists…that group of artists who remain committed to radical innovation.”

As opposed to the return to painting of personal expression, of which “the marketplace is glutted,” he characterized these young, innovative artists as decisively post-modern, a label used to address a new approach to medium, characterized by “quotation, excerption, framing and staging,” and also a definitive concern with “the

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7 Crimp, “Pictures,” 186.
structures of signification.”

Both Foster and Crimp are representative of a larger trend of the early 1980s, which saw post-structuralism as a dominant theoretical approach in contemporary art criticism. For example, one finds that in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, published in 1984, page space is shared equally by the likes of Douglas Crimp, Rosalind Krauss, Craig Owens and Hal Foster, on the one hand, and Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard and Michel Foucault, on the other. Similarly, *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, edited by Foster and published in 1983, presents the writings of Crimp, Krauss, Owens and Foster alongside those of Baudrillard, Frederic Jameson and Edward Said.

By considering the way in which these art critics describe Holzer, Kruger, and other artists who receive their attention, one finds that Foster and Crimp articulate an important account of the theoretical concerns with which these artists and works grappled. (One can hardly deny that Holzer’s *Truisms* address the relationship between societal meaning and power.) However, one also finds a void in the scholarship when it comes to the politically active aspects of the work. Holzer and Kruger, and I add to this list Krzysztof Wodiczko and Alfredo Jaar, were deliberately working in public spaces, addressing audiences made up, not of art world gallery goers, but of people on the street.

One cannot attribute this omission to a general absence of discussion concerning the public or a lack of awareness of this discussion on the part of the critics. While some

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artists, such as Jenny Holzer, did not often participate in discussions with critics concerning their artistic practice, others, such as Krzysztof Wodiczko, were actively engaged in conversations concerning their work and the broader role of art in contemporary society. On the one hand, Wodiczko’s writings reinforce the post-structuralist reading that Foster and Crimp champion. For example, in an article “Public Projections” first published in the Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory in 1983, Wodiczko betrays his theoretical influences, opening with, under the heading “Motto,” a quote by Michel Foucault from “Truth and Power”:

> It’s not a matter of emancipating truth from every system of power (which would be a chimera, for truth is already power) but of detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic and cultural, within which it operates at the present time.11

Wodiczko goes on to describe how buildings and monuments, the backdrop of his projections, function to order our gaze and structure our unconscious while masking and mythifying the relations of power, thus acting as an “ideological instrument of power.”12

However, while informed by post-structuralism, the artists themselves were not limited by it. Through his public projections, Wodiczko explains, he seeks to “arrest the somnambulistic movement, restore public focus” and to expose what is implicit about the buildings. Directly to the point, he states “the absent-minded, hypnotic relation with architecture must be challenged by a conscious and critical public discourse taking place

12 Wodiczko, “Public Projections,” 47.
in front of the building.” Thus, the artist’s attention to the very concrete (as opposed to theoretical) concern of instigating critical dialogue between individual members of the public is undeniable.

In this paper, I will closely consider two works that are exemplary of the public art movement in New York in the 1980s, Krzysztof Wodiczko’s AT&T projection and Jenny Holzer’s *Sign on a Truck*. Wodiczko’s AT&T projection and Holzer’s *Sign on a Truck* were both presented within the week preceding the election that saw Reagan re-elected for a second term. Both were temporary works presented in public spaces in New York City, and both commented on the presidential race. Both works were created by visual artists, and the audience for both would have consisted of the art community (i.e. artists, critics, curators, collectors, friends, supporters) as well as a more general public (i.e. passers-by who unexpectedly happened upon the work and decided to stop to view it).

It is now crucial for art history to research and offer more complex interpretations of Wodiczko’s projection and Holzer’s *Sign* beyond the insightful yet constraining dominant reading of this public art movement. Thus, in this paper, I seek to address the following questions: what are the conditions that compelled Wodiczko’s AT&T projection and Holzer’s *Sign on a Truck*? In other words, what was the context that led to the emergence of these examples of didactic art (keeping in mind that they are just two of many examples from the period)? And, furthermore, what can we learn about these works, and the larger practice of political public art of that time, by looking beyond the previously dominant readings of these works?
CHAPTER 1—Looking Back: The Anxiety of Ronald Reagan’s First Term

The hope of human freedom—the quest for it, the achievement of it—is the American saga.

Ronald Reagan

So why have “the ’80s” been characterized almost exclusively as a time of big ticket, blue chip art and high living?

Barbara Kruger

Ronald Reagan was a very popular president. By 1984 he had won the hearts of the majority of Americans by decreasing taxes, lowering unemployment and instilling in people the belief that times had never been better, so much so that few seemed to notice that the national debt had nearly doubled since he had assumed office four years earlier.

Reagan was a president of achievement long before his re-election in 1984. Having had the good fortune of running against Jimmy Carter in 1980, Reagan ran a campaign based on the promise of change, and was rewarded with a landslide victory, securing the largest electoral vote in history against an incumbent president: 489 to 49.

Carter had assumed office at a time when a situation of simultaneous inflation and unemployment seemed chronic. Conservative intellectuals were gaining ground with the assistance of think tanks like the Heritage Foundation, the Hoover Institution and the

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14 “Decadism,” in Money Talks (New York: Skarstedt Fine Art, 2005), 73.
The federal deficit was on a steep rise due in large part to programs such as Medicare, Medicaid and food stamps, which could be traced back to traditional Democratic ideals embodied by Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society agenda. Carter was fiscally conservative but socially liberal. Unfortunately for him there was no organized political constituency for his centrist approach, which put him in a position to be criticized both by the opposition and by his fellow Democrats. Furthermore, the Iranian Hostage Crisis loomed large as Election Day coincided with the anniversary of the day that 66 American citizens were taken hostage at the American embassy in Tehran. (The majority of the hostages would not be released until January 20, 1981.) The American people had little reason to put their confidence in a man who could not gain the confidence of his own party.

Thus Carter paved the way for Reagan’s presidential achievements. With a public yearning for change, the new president promised precisely that. In his first months in office, he moved simultaneously on almost all political fronts. For the domestic economy, he proposed a budget that called for the reduction and elimination of numerous federal programs including housing assistance, public service employment, food stamps and aid to working welfare mothers. While he also secured a twenty-five percent cut in federal income tax for individuals, this rate was not across the board and particularly favored the wealthy. The Economic Recovery Tax Act of 1981 reduced income tax for those in the

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17 Ibid., 12.
highest earning bracket from 70% to 50% while the rate for the lowest earners dropped from 14% to 11%. On the Cold War front, Reagan argued that Carter had not invested adequately in national defense forces, and that they would soon face Soviet nuclear superiority. Once in office, he swiftly enacted massive increases in defense spending and in weapons procurement in particular. Like Carter, Reagan viewed foreign policy in moral terms, but rather than Carter’s commitment to human rights, Reagan saw America’s moral cause as a world free of communism.

Reagan’s triumphs apparently outweighed his fundamental budgetary failure. Despite cuts to government spending on social programs and championing the ability of the marketplace to solve domestic economic problems, by the end of Reagan’s first term, the national debt had nearly doubled. Nonetheless, in the 1984 election, Reagan ran a campaign highlighting his past accomplishments and said little about his future plans; again he won by a landslide with Democratic nominee Walter Mondale securing only 13 Electoral College votes to Reagan’s 525.

In addition to addressing the economic situation of individual citizens through tax cuts and a reduction of government spending, Reagan's economic plan also included a slow stable growth of money supply and deregulation. Each of these four pillars was central to his plan to curb the growth of government and “reduce its intrusion into the

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21 See, for example, Reagan's July 17, 1980 speech at the Republican National Convention, reproduced in: Houck and Kiewe, 158-166.
22 Nelson, 17.
24 Nelson, 18.
25 Nelson, 19.
economic life of the country.”\textsuperscript{26} This turn to a free market model benefited middle to upper-class Americans, privileging industry and corporations, all of whom profited from cuts in capital gains taxes and an overall savings of an estimated $400 billion in depreciation allowances from 1980 to 1990.\textsuperscript{27} By the end of his first term Reagan had also secured deregulation of airlines, trucking, oil, banking and telecommunication industries.\textsuperscript{28}

By the end of Reagan’s second term, inflation was down from 12.5\% to 3.5\% and unemployment was down from 7.5\% to 5.3\%.\textsuperscript{29} However, during the same eight years, there was no increase in minimum wage, so the real value of minimum wage declined significantly during that period. Also symptomatic of Reaganomics was a growing income inequality, an increase in poverty and homelessness, and the destructive consequences of commercial deregulation. In other words, the rich got richer and the poor got poorer.\textsuperscript{30} As political analyst Kevin Phillips characterized the 1980s, it was a decade of “an ostentatious celebration of wealth”\textsuperscript{31} and yet “the economic policies and speculative biases of the 1980s...produced one of U.S. History's most striking concentrations of wealth even as the American dream was beginning to crumble not just in inner-city ghettos and farm townships but in blue-collar centers and even middle-class

\textsuperscript{26} Ronald Reagan, \textit{An American Life} (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 232.  
\textsuperscript{28} \textit{Ibid.}, 32.  
\textsuperscript{29} \textit{Ibid.}, 36.  
\textsuperscript{31} Phillips, xvii.
For some it was not acceptable for the concerns of the rich and the middle-class to be tended to while the needs of the poor were swept under the rug (and into the dark corners of the city's back alleys). For those who did not agree with Reagan's policies, his first four years in office were frightening. The 1984 election presented a way out—a way to get off a path that was clearly leading to the capitalization of society and the commercialization of the state.

A group of artists working in New York City at this time, including Krzysztof Wodiczko and Jenny Holzer as well as others such as Alfredo Jaar and Barbara Kruger, were amongst those who did not agree with Reagan and his economic policy. One of the most well known public art projects from this period in New York involved three of these artists: Messages to the Public. In 1980, the Public Art Fund, Spectacolor Inc. and Colab began the process by which a group of artists, including Holzer, Kruger and Jaar, were selected to present 30-second text pieces on the Spectacolor board in Times Square. Normally reserved for advertising, the sign presented short art videos interspersed among the usual commercials. Jenny Holzer displayed messages such as “Private Property Creates Crime,” “Fathers Often Use Too Much Force,” and “Protect Me From What I Want” (figure 3). Barbara Kruger selected her text-only work I'm Not Trying to Sell You Anything. Alfredo Jaar incorporated images into his Logo for America, presenting a map of the United States with the statement “This is not America” (figure 4). Although the overarching project was sponsored by outside funders (the Public Art Fund and

32 Ibid., xii.
Spectacolor Inc.), the works nonetheless reveal the artists’ pointed and timely societal concerns. They were not instructed on the content of their contributions, and thus independently chose to offer “messages to the public” that were clearly critical of that public. While this project was not directed specifically at Reagan and his policies, it nevertheless suggests an inclination towards social criticism and a desire to work in public spaces in order to relay pointed messages to a broad audience.\(^{34}\)

Following *Messages to the Public*, three days before the 1984 presidential election, Krzysztof Wodiczko projected an image of Ronald Regan's hand onto the AT&T Long Lines building, positioning the ghostly limb on such an angle and at such a height as to suggest that it was poised for the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance, implying a collusion between the United States government, as represented by the President's hand, and corporate powers, as represented by the AT&T building. This direct public representation of President Reagan expressed the artist’s anxiety over the election and the possible fallout from the presidential race.

In the same week, Holzer presented her *Sign on a Truck*. For the project’s video component, Holzer invited twenty-two artists to create short videos commenting on the

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\(^{34}\) This seminal work of 1980s public art was conceived by Jane Dickson. Dickson, an artist who worked as a designer for Spectacolor, was affiliated with Collaborative Projects (Colab) and was involved in the artists collective’s Times Square show in 1980. For this exhibition, Dickson asked George Stonbely, then President of Spectacolor Inc., if she could feature an advertisement for the Colab exhibition on the Spectacolor Board at 1 Times Square. He agreed, and expressed interest in a future collaboration. If Dickson could organize it and secure funding, Spectacolor would donate the billboard and Curtis King, a computer programmer to work with the artists. Dickson approached the non-profit Public Art Fund, who agreed to provide necessary funding, if she could organize the project. Dickson decided that 12 artists would be selected to start—one per month for one year—by a panel of art professionals including art critic Lucy Lippard; Janet Henry, artist and arts administrator; Rafique Auzouny, film maker; Mike Robinson, head of Colab; and Jessica Cusick and Jenny Dixon of the Public Art Fund. Each was asked to submit the names of 10 artists, from which the committee would make a final selection of the 12 artists who would be invited to participate. (Michael Brenson, “Art Lights Up Times Square,” *New York Times*, June 25, 1982, section C, and Michael Winerip, “Computerized Billboard Brightens Up Times Square With Art-of-the-Month,” *New York Times*, August 26, 1983, section B1.)
upcoming election. She strung the videos together, interspersing them with pre-recorded and live interviews in which members of the public were asked to give their opinions on the election. Thus Holzer's work not only publicly displayed her unease over the election, but she also asked people to publicly reveal their own anxieties in front of an audience of their fellow New Yorkers.

What Holzer’s video clearly reveals—and which will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3—is a common anxiety around the threat of nuclear war. Not unrelated to the anxiety of the post-World War II period following the truly shocking use of atomic weapons, Americans in the 1980s found themselves faced once again with the very real possibility that they would experience the devastation of a nuclear war not only during their lifetime, but in the not-too-distant future. Thus, this moment was characterized by a fear that was, at its foundation, about more than the consequences of having Ronald Reagan as president for another term, more than about atomic warfare even; it was ultimately rooted in the very basic fear of one’s own, personal death.

While Kruger and Jaar did not make work addressing the 1984 election directly, their respective art practices at this time indicate that they shared with Wodiczko and Holzer an anxiety over Reagan's policies and the fallout from his first four years in office. While neither artist regularly worked in public spaces during the 1980s, both presented occasional public art projects. For example, in 1984 Alfredo Jarr replaced approximately half a dozen New York subway advertising posters that promoted the CBS and featured

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35 This general fear, as it both presented itself in the 1980s and as it related to post-war anxiety, is perhaps best illustrated by the 1982 film The Atomic Café, a satirical documentary composed of archive footage from a variety of sources from the late 1940s to the early 1960s, including U.S. government films seemingly designed to reassure Americans that the atomic bomb posed no threat to their safety.
well-known news anchors, looking earnestly out at the commuters, with overwritten text stating “If it concerns you, it concerns us” (figure 5). Although Jaar replaced the entire poster, the only thing that changed was the pronouns in the quote, so that it read “If it concerns us, it concerns you” (figure 6). With a simple switch of pronouns, Jaar acknowledged the power at play with popular media and the power dynamics of the relationship that the media had with the public. One could argue that although this work did not directly address the election, it was an indirect commentary on the media involvement in the election. Thus, the work suggested that the media determined not only the public’s general concerns, but also more specific concerns regarding prime election issues and the candidates' respective platforms. Rather than being concerned with New York's rampant homelessness that had escalated since Reagan assumed office, the public was concerned with keeping taxes low and the de-regulation of industry in the hopes of establishing a healthy economy. (Neither the general media nor the art magazines took note of Jaar’s installation at the time.36 One cannot help but wonder: Did any of the daily commuters notice the switch or perceive the criticality inherent in the new message?)

Throughout the 1980s, Barbara Kruger made photographs combining black and white images from the popular culture of past decades with black, red or white text displaying contemporary slogans such as: “Put your money where your mouth is”; “I shop therefore I am”; and “We don’t need another hero” (figure 7). While the referents of the indexical pronouns (“you,” “me,” “we” and “us”) are uncertain, it is clear that the works show a concentrated attention towards power. The posters reflect on the consumer

36 This includes The New York Times and major monthly and weekly art publications, such as Artforum, ARTnews, Artweek, Arts Magazine, Flash Art and October, among others.
culture within which Kruger found herself, and address the complex issue of how that situation arose. They also demonstrate Kruger's understanding of how the capitalist, consumer culture felt about art. Art was not just another commodity; it had become a symbol of prestige, culture and power itself. So, while Kruger placed her posters in public places, she also framed them and made them readily available for sale. They were ready-made for the market—a market whose function she was well aware of. Perhaps it was an ironic infiltration of the system. Or perhaps she was just looking to make a living. Either way, the work is clearly a socio-political critique, which unavoidably participates in the system that it criticizes. But it is also clearly didactic. The works make use of images that are familiar in feel, if not specifically identifiable, and combines them with similarly familiar slogans in such a way that the viewer cannot help but question the function or purpose of the signs. One is inclined to ask: what is being advertised? What am I supposed to buy? Through thoughtful looking, one realizes that Kruger is selling lessons about consumerism. “Money talks... It makes art. It determines who we fuck and where we do it, what food we eat, whether we are cured or die, and what kind of shoes we wear. On both an emotional and economic level, images can make us rich or poor. I'm interested in work which addresses that power and engages both our criticality and our dreams of affirmation.”

Although their specific concerns varied, each of these artists responded to their anxiety with a move to educate people. Each of their respective projects suggests that the artists believed they had an understanding—a particular analysis of the state of things that differed from the “official” understanding as propagated by popular channels of

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communication—and sought to pass it on to individual members of the general public. Just as Jaar wanted people to recognize their lack of freedom in their beliefs and opinions, Wodiczko wanted people to become attuned to the political relationships behind closed doors, and Kruger wanted people to recognize the constraints that society places on individuals through the encouragement of a personal identification with consumerism. And they all sought an increase in critical thought. Each of the works discussed here is presented in public spaces, in such a way that it asks the viewer not only to think critically about what is immediately in front of her, but also to carry that critical approach with her into her regular encounters with society and the world.

The artists' self-identified need to publicly address political and societal issues through overtly ephemeral works suggests a sense of urgency—a recognition that immediate action was necessary at that moment in order to guard against the continuation of the current state of things. The purpose of Jaar's subway posters, for example, was to arm people for a resistance against pervasive attempts to control public opinion, an exemplary response to the culturally and politically-induced anxiety of the moment. There was no need for longevity because the work is only relevant and useful now, in the moment, in order to have an affect on this moment, in order to change this moment.

Such immediacy suggests a crisis point. In Jurgen Habermas' *Legitimation Crisis*, first published in 1973 and translated into English in 1975, the philosopher outlines two components of a social systems theory that had not previously been accounted for in a single theory—the social (associated with normative structures), and the system (associated with steering problems). In traditional societies the two were structurally and
substantively integrated, but as society advanced, the balance became increasingly
delicate. “We cannot exclude the possibility that a strengthening of productive forces,
which heightens the power of the system, can lead to changes in normative structures that
simultaneously restrict the autonomy of the system because they bring forth new
legitimacy claims and thereby constrict the range of variation of the goal values.”

According to Habermas this is precisely what has happened in advanced capitalism. He
described advanced capitalism as “organized or state-regulated capitalism,” and it refers
to, “on the one hand, the process of economic concentration—the rise of national and,
subsequently of multinational corporations—and to the organization of markets for
goods, capital and labor. On the other hand, it refers to the fact that the state intervenes in
the market as functional gaps develop.” Thus, the partial replacement of the market
mechanism by state intervention means the end of both competitive capitalism and liberal
capitalism.

In the early 1980s artists such as Holzer and Wodiczko interpreted the subject as
restrained by a feeling of passivity or of powerlessness. They were observing a crisis.

The changes instituted during the first term of Reagan's presidency constituted a
significant shift in the social system that resulted in an incompatibility between the new
steering principles and the normative social structure. Reagan's attempt to enforce
steering principles that would result in a return to liberal capitalism within a free market

40 I am not here arguing that these artists would necessarily have characterized themselves as Habermasian. However, Habermas’ ideas were certainly circulating at this time, and the artists would certainly have been aware of them. *Legitimation Crisis* was published in English in 1975. Even if they had not read it, one cannot help but notice that his theory of crisis resonates within their work.
society signified a systems crisis to which these artists were attuned and to which they responded. Rather than increasing state regulation and state intervention in the market—a definitive marker of advanced capitalism—Reagan was reversing that trend and moving towards a deregulated system, both on the level of large corporations and on the level of individuals through tax cuts that allowed individuals a perceived freedom to own as much of their labour-wage as possible and do with it what they would.

The advanced capitalist system that Reagan responded to was certainly in a state of endemic crisis because, as Habermas would describe it, “the goal values permitted in the domain of legitimation of a communicative ethic [were] irreconcilable with an exponential growth of system complexity and, for reasons pertaining to the logic of development, other legitimations [could not] be produced.” Despite the fact that citizens had grown accustomed to this system, they had collectively decided, through democratic election, that they wanted change. Not general systemic change, as this would involve a change to the democratic system as a whole, but a change in the steering principles that were guiding society on the level just below that of the general system.

For Habermas, crises are associated with the idea of an objective force that deprives subjects of some part of their normal sovereignty. The subject is condemned to passivity, experiencing a feeling of powerlessness. The crisis cannot be separated from the viewpoint of the one who is undergoing it. In the case of political systemic crises, it is the society as a whole that undergoes the crisis. However, the individuals who make up the society are often sheltered from any feelings of powerlessness because in advanced capitalism the crisis can appear to be entirely economic rather than social; powerlessness

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appears necessary because the power to make change seems logically impossible. It is precisely this belief that *Sign on a Truck*, the AT&T projection, and Jaar and Kruger's respective posters attempted to dispel. The artists interpreted the crisis situation as rendering the citizens effectively passive, attributing to them a feeling of powerlessness. The role of the artist—the duty perhaps—was then to give the people, *qua* social agents, the tools necessary to empower themselves in this time of crisis.

This attempt to educate citizens through art was not entirely new. With the upheavals of 1968 and its aftermath, the Conceptual Art that had risen to prominence in the 1960s became politicized. Artists such as Hans Haacke and some of those involved in New York's Art Workers' Coalition explicitly rejected more seemingly neutral aesthetic concerns in order to focus on overtly political issues, a move they believed necessary within their artistic practice given the political climate of the time. Haacke, for example, made a career out of exposing the previously invisible underlying political and socio-economic relations within which art practices and institutions exist, with installations such as the MoMA Poll (figure 8).

In the 1980s, some artists brought this educative move out of the space of the museum, exposing their aim to a wider audience. And rather than limiting their concerns to the institutional frame of the museum and its political and socio-economic underpinnings, this new generation of artists exhibited broader concerns, evident in the geographical and physical positioning of their works. Jaar's concerns, for example, were certainly not limited to the hegemony that existed within the museum system; rather, he was concerned with the hegemony experienced by society as a whole, as represented by
the average commuter taking the train into the city everyday for work. Kruger, Holzer and Wodiczko all presented their works in public areas visible to people moving through the city on foot, whether they were posters glued to lamp posts or displays on the Spectacolor board in Times Square, or a projection aimed at a downtown building. While their messages may have differed, each of these artists attempted to educate as many people—as many potentially engaged citizens—as possible. Jaar's subway signs exposed the hegemony inherent in the media system that people had come to rely on for “objective” facts and information. Kruger's image-text photographs pointed to collusions between consumerism, capitalism and gender/sexuality based on power, which were historically rooted but had evolved in contemporary society. Wodiczko's projections suggested the covert interests that lay hidden beneath society’s bureaucratic institutions as represented by their architectural façades. Holzer's posters and the Sign on a Truck presented the multiple voices that make up society’s diverse concerns, often hidden by the unilateral position presented by the government and the media. At base all of these projects betrayed a preoccupation with notions of power and ideology—hinge-pins of the European post-structuralist theory that had begun to make waves in intellectual circles in North America in the preceding decade.

Perhaps the increased concern with post-structuralist theory at this time also fuelled the anxiety regarding the social and political situation. Popular theorists at the time, such as Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes elaborated on notions of power, and theoretically-minded artists such as Holzer, Wodiczko, Kruger and Jaar would have been attuned to these concerns at this moment; thus, they would have
connected these anxiety-provoking theories to their present circumstances. Furthermore, this awareness of post-structural theory was not only increasing the existent sense of anxiety and urgency, but was also informing their artistic practice and their respective approaches to a solution to the anxiety, as evident, for example, in both Jaar and Kruger's concern with hegemony and their recognition and exploitation of the malleability of indexical pronouns. 42

The interconnected fears of powerlessness, nuclear war and ultimately death, caused by the presidential race and its anticipated outcome were not the only source of anxiety. While these artists were attempting to educate others to the realities of a government based on decreased social spending and increased corporate control of society, they found themselves professionally contending with a return to painting. In 1981, Benjamin Buchloh published his seminal text, “Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression” in October, where he linked the neo-Romantic ideology of the “return to painting,” pushed by the international market of the period, to the conservative “return to order” of the 1920s and 30s, which had signaled the demise of the avant-gardes. 43 This return to painting, practiced in both Europe and North America, is perhaps best exemplified by the Documenta of 1982, artistically directed by Rudi Fuchs, where the

42 Barbara Kruger, for example, quotes Foucault in her discussion of the power of text and the role it will play in the urgently needed replacement of “Official History” with “new history.” [Barbara Kruger with Philomena Mariani, “Remaking History,” in: Barbara Kruger, Remote Control: Power, Cultures, and the World of Appearances (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 13.] Alfredo Jaar’s 2004/2005 project, The Gramsci Trilogy, speaks directly to the influence of this political theorist on the artist’s politically-based practice. While Gramsci was not one of the contemporary theorists discussed here, he should be viewed as removed by just one degree, with his groundbreaking work on cultural hegemony and its use as a means to maintain the power of the state in a capitalist society, having had a profound influence of the work of Louis Althusser. See Alfredo Jaar, The Aesthetics of Resistance, Barcelona: Actar and Fondazione Antonio Ratti, 2005.

exhibition “constitute[d] a complete return to conventional modes of painting and sculpture, thereby breaking with the earlier Documenta’s inclusion of experimental work in other mediums such as video and performance, as well as practices that openly criticized institutionalized forms of both production and reception.”

Like critics such as Buchloh and Douglas Crimp, artists with politically-minded practices would have seen the return to painting as a return to conservatism in the arts. During moments of crisis, the artistic and cultural avant-garde provides a potential means of awakening people to the crisis at hand. Artists such as Eric Fischl, David Salle, Anselm Kiefer and Georg Baselitz who rejected this responsibility and engaged in the more self-centred return to painting represented a domestication of the arts. But the return to painting would have been seen not only as detrimental to the arts and society in general; it would also have been seen as personally threatening to those artists who did not participate in the neo-Expressionist painting revival. The public artists knew that left-leaning presidents were traditionally more supportive of the arts. In the early 80s, President Reagan had cut many funding programs, including those for the arts. The site-

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44 Douglas Crimp, “The Art of Exhibition,” October 30 (Autumn 1984): 50. Of course, the one exception to this characterization of Documenta 7, which Crimp acknowledges, was the contribution by Hans Haacke— _Oelgemaelde, Hommage a Marcel Broodthaers_. _Oelgemaelde_ consisted of a classical-style oil painting of Ronald Reagan, in an ornate gold frame, lit by its own dedicated picture lamp, and surrounded by red velvet stanchions. In other words, it included all of the traditional museological devices that Fuchs would have approved of. However, this was only half of the work. Hanging opposite to the portrait was a large-scale photograph of a peace demonstration that had taken place in Bonn just a few weeks before Documenta opened. This largest demonstration in post-war Germany was held to protest Reagan’s arrival in Germany to lobby for permission to test American cruise missiles on German land.

45 While there were critics at the time who rationalized the work of these artists by claiming that their paintings held up a mirror to society and exciting suppressed anxieties, one cannot deny that these artists maintained an inward focus, restricting the reach of their artworks on the walls of the gallery and the homes of collectors. See, for example, Nancy Grimes, “Eric Fischl’s Naked Truths,” ARTnews 85 (1986): 70-8; Steven Henry Madoff, “Anselm Kiefer: A Call to Memory.” ARTnews 86 (1987): 125-30.

46 Ronald Reagan’s initial 1981-82 budget allocated $88 million for the National Endowment for the Arts, down from $158.8 million the previous year. Fortunately, Congress rejected the President’s request, and
specific ephemeral work of artists such as Wodiczko and Holzer were hardly commodifiable; thus, an attack on the current order of things, and specifically on Ronald Reagan, can also be seen as an act of professional self-preservation for artists whose artistic “product” tended to exist outside of the market.

Through his speeches, the president had constructed a narrative that stressed the difficult times that had preceded his presidency. He described his successes as grand and just, positioning himself as the revolutionary hero, leading men and women in a “revolution” that would ultimately leave America stronger, freer and more prosperous than he had found it: “The hope of human freedom—the quest for it, the achievement of it—is the American saga.”47 The Republican president and his supporters had thus effectively usurped the terminology of those who struggled against him and his administration.

As Reagan tended to his morally framed economic revolution, these New York-based artists (Jaar, Kruger, Wodiczko and Holzer) tended to a revolution on the street—a revolution that would begin with images and could theoretically end in political change. Each employed particular methods in an attempt to educate the public, but two of them—Wodiczko and Holzer—took it a step further. By addressing the 1984 presidential election within the week preceding it, the AT&T projection and Sign on a Truck exposed the felt urgency of the moment and were exemplary in their aim for some level of practical change through their theoretically-informed work. Holzer and Wodiczko were budgeted $143.5 million for the arts agency. Nonetheless, Reagan’s first budgetary pass made his intentions for arts funding abundantly clear. See: James Heilbrun and Charles M. Gray, The Economics of Art and Culture (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 280.

educating those who would likely be voting in the coming week. One cannot help but wonder whether they were attempting to affect the outcome of that election.
CHAPTER 2—Shedding Light: Krzysztof Wodiczko’s AT&T Projection

[A critical vehicle] transmits those ideas and emotions that are indispensable to the comprehension of the urgency and complexity of a situation…. Those media projects employ the tactics and technique of projection to convert such celebratory structures, uncritical grand suspects and witnesses of the glorious past, into self-critical and critical vehicles.

– Krzysztof Wodiczko

Late in the evening of November 3, 1984, an image of the back of Ronald Reagan’s hand appeared on the face of the AT&T Long Lines building in Manhattan’s Tribeca neighbourhood. The hand, steadily positioned over the breast of the anthropomorphized building, was poised for the Pledge of Allegiance. The image of the hand was placed there by a projection of light, which was filtered through a slide, causing the light to assume a pattern of colours. This stream of coloured light then seemed to settle upon (but more accurately was reflected off of) the building. And there it was – Reagan’s hand.

The projector which placed the hand on the AT&T building was set up by Krzysztof Wodiczko, an artist invited by The Kitchen, a non-profit arts organization, to present this work in New York, as part of The Kitchen Performance Program’s bi-

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49 Nearly every published reference that I have found lists the presentation date as November 2, 1984. However, both the press release issued by The Kitchen announcing the event, and the letter granting the artist and the organizer permission to access a neighbouring building in order to perform the projection, specify the date as November 3, 1984. Given the difficulty in changing dates after press releases are issued and permissions are granted, I suspect that all subsequent references to the presentation date are incorrect. These include: Hal Foster, Recodings: Art Spectacle, Cultural Politics (Seattle: Bay Press, 1985), back cover; Brian Wallis, ed., Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), 416; Phil Freshman, ed., Public Address: Krzysztof Wodiczko (Minneapolis: Walker Art Centre, 1992), 107.
monthly Projections series. After acquiring permission from the American Telephone and Telegraph Company to project a slide onto the Long Lines building at 33 Thomas Street, and from Newmark & Company, owners of the building at 40 Worth Street, directly across the street from the Long Lines building, Wodiczko set up his high-powered Xenon arc slide projector on the roof of 40 Worth Street and aimed it at the communications centre.

Born in Poland in 1943, Wodiczko began employing the strategy of the public projection in his artistic practice after emigrating to Canada in 1977. Most commonly, his early projects consisted of slide images projected onto the façades of historically and politically significant buildings and monuments. Through his still projections, Wodiczko sought to expose truths which lay hidden beneath the facades of such buildings, a project with roots in the animism of modern Polish literature. Wodiczko, however, moves beyond this literary tradition:

What is implicit about the building must be exposed as explicit; the myth must be visually concretized and unmasked. The absent-minded,

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50 The Kitchen, Press Release: Krzysztof Wodiczko: Public Projection at the Telephone Building Located Between Worth, Broadway, Thomas and Church Streets, The Kitchen Archives, New York, undated, unpaginated. Wodiczko's project was part of The Kitchen's ongoing program of presenting projection works. Wodiczko submitted a proposal to Howard Halle, The Kitchen’s curator at that time, and once the proposal was accepted, Wodiczko had his first opportunity to present a projection (a medium he was already working with) in New York. See: Krzysztof Wodiczko, letter to Howard Halle, The Kitchen Archives, New York, undated, unpaginated.

51 Although Rainer Maria Rilke, the Austrian-born poet, is arguably the quintessential early twentieth-century animistic writer, this tradition (and Rilke’s influence) can be found in the post-World War II Polish School of Poetry (particularly in the work of Czeslaw Milosz) as well as the earlier generation of Polish literary modernists, coinciding with regained Polish independence in 1918. See: Jaroslaw Anders, Between Fire and Ice: Essays on Modern Polish Poetry and Prose (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009). The most poignant example is Bruno Schulz (1892-1942), who shares with Wodiczko a Polish-Jewish background, and who recognized aspects of himself in Rilke’s writings. Like Rilke, Schulz’ is a world of objects endowed with their own secret vitality, which an acute observer can access: “lifelessness is only a disguise behind which hide unknown forms of life.” “The Street of Crocodiles,” in: The Secret Life of Puppets, ed. Victoria Nelson (Cambridge Massachusetts and London, England, Harvard University Press, 2001), 91.
hypnotic relation with architecture must be challenged by a conscious and critical public discourse taking place in front of the building.\textsuperscript{52}

Thus, not only did the projections suggest that each building and monument exists as more than an empty shell, but were somehow alive with their own meaning, Wodiczko also intended to expose the myth as myth (or the truth of the myth), \textit{and most importantly}, the architectural myth-making system was to be challenged through the discourse caused by the presentation of the projections.

In November 1984, he brought his projections to New York, the city that would soon become his place of residence.\textsuperscript{53} The choice of the AT&T building speaks to a particular moment in American corporate and cultural history. At the time of the projection, AT&T, the largest telecommunications corporation in the USA, had recently faced an anti-trust suit, exemplary of a larger trend whereby the Department of Justice was attempting to decrease the size and minimize the power of large corporations. In 1974 the U.S. Department of Justice first initiated the break up of AT&T, in the face of growing public concern over its potential monopoly.\textsuperscript{54} In 1982 a consent decree between the Department of Justice and AT&T announced that effective January 1, 1984, AT&T's local operations would split into seven independent Regional Bell Operating Companies or "Baby Bells," leading to a surge of competition in the long distance

\textsuperscript{52} Wodiczko, “Public Projection,” 47.

\textsuperscript{53} The AT&T projection marks the beginning of a sustained relationship that Wodiczko developed with the city of New York. By the end of 1984, he had presented two more projections in New York: The Astor Building/New Museum projection, and the Grand Army Plaza projection. Two years later, Wodiczko began his collaborative project on homelessness centred in Tompkins Square Park in New York. Wodizcko currently resides part-time in New York City.

telecommunications market.\textsuperscript{55} Ironically (or perhaps not so ironically), although the cost of human connection over long distances dropped due to the increased market competition, local residential service rates – the services essential to American daily life – which were formerly subsidized by long distance revenues, were subsequently forced to rise faster than the rate of inflation.\textsuperscript{56}

The AT&T case is illustrative of a larger trend of concern over the regulation of large corporations in America at that time. Just prior to the AT&T deregulation hearings, another telecommunications conglomerate faced a similar charge. In some ways, the International Telephone and Telegraph Corporation (ITT) case was exemplary of the increase in anti-trust litigation at this time. ITT was established in 1920 when the Behn brothers, working as sugar brokers in Puerto Rico, acquired a small telephone company as a bad debt.\textsuperscript{57} They quickly bought or established telephone and cable lines in numerous countries in South America and then in Europe and became a force within the international telecommunications industry. Based out of New York, they were one of the first multinational corporations. By the time of the anti-trust suit in the 1970s, the Behn brothers had passed away and the company was run by Harold Geneen. ITT had applied to merge with the Hartford Insurance Group, one of the oldest insurance companies in the country, having a reputation for insuring both Robert E. Lee and Abraham Lincoln during


\textsuperscript{56} Crandall, 54-55. Telephone rates continued to rise faster than the rate of inflation through 1986. Since then, however, the increase in telephone rates has slowed. For an account of the relationship between long distance rates and local telephone rates following divestiture see: Samuel A. Simon, “The Repricing Movement,” in \textit{After Divestiture: What the AT&T Settlement Means for Business and Residential Telephone Service} (White Plains, NY: Knowledge Industry Publications, 1985), 47-71.

the Civil War. But in an attempt to protect the smaller company against the large conglomerate, the insurance commissioner for Connecticut ruled against the merger. ITT appealed the decision and, applying a level of pressure which could be interpreted as a mix of bribery and blackmail, the commissioner approved the merger. However, Department of Justice's antitrust program in DC, led by Richard McLaren, a hard-ball Republican lawyer who before joining the Department of Justice defended multinational corporations such as the Sealy Mattress Co. against anti-trust litigation, had been cautiously watching the actions of ITT, as it had with many of the international conglomerates, of which ITT was seen as an extreme example. McLaren opened what would be the biggest anti-trust case in history against ITT, and he wanted to see the case go as far as the Supreme Court. However, the day before the final decision was to be made by the Department of Justice, to everyone's surprise McLaren agreed to settle the case. ITT could keep Hartford if they gave up three of their smaller companies – Canteen, Levitt and Avis. It was the single largest divestiture in an anti-trust suit after what had been the largest merger in US history.

The ITT case was very public. What was not public at the time, but only revealed a few years later, was the fact that at the very same time, on the other side of the continent, San Diego was nominated (along with Chicago, Miami and Houston) to host the 1971 Republican convention. Incumbent President Richard Nixon was eager to hold

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58 Ibid., 150.
59 Ibid., 153-156.
60 Ibid., 156.
61 Ibid., 168, 170.
62 Ibid., 170, 173-4.
63 Ibid., 186-7.
the convention in San Diego, and the city obliged by submitting a bid, despite the fact that it was not adequately equipped to host a convention of that size. In a back-room deal (or more accurately, a deal made over drinks on a hotel patio), Harold Geneen offered to put up $400,000 of the city's requisite $800,000 for the bid. Nine days later, his petition to merge Hartford with ITT was approved. Between 1971 and 1973, through a series of hearings, it was uncovered that ITT had strong connections and allies within the White House. It was never indisputably established that the ITT-Hartford merger was approved in Washington as a direct result of the $400,000 offered in San Diego. Nonetheless, ITT's suspicious activities and back-room deals did not help the reputation of large corporations. Multinational and monopolizing corporations became suspect across the board, and AT&T (with a name not coincidentally similar to ITT) was not immune to this reputation.

Wodiczko's selection of AT&T's Long Lines building, rather than their headquarters, is also linked to the concern over the monopolizing power of the large

64 Ibid., 187-8.
65 Ibid., 191.
66 Ibid., 196.
67 Clues were first heard during the ITT anti-trust proceedings in 1971. In Spring 1972, there was a hearing to determine the fitness of Richard Kleindienst to assume the role of Attorney General. Kleindienst had been involved in the ITT-Hartford case, which he subsequently denied when scandal began to loom over the settlement. Once he was accused of lying about his role, hearings seemed necessary, and through which the judiciary board was able to explore further the general dealings of ITT and their relationship to the government. For more on the Kleindienst hearing, see: “Chapter 10: The Senators,” in Sampson, 217-257. Around the same time (Spring 1972), the Senate Foreign Relations Committee established the Multinationals Subcommittee to investigate the activities of American corporations abroad, with the first focus on ITT. In 1973, the Subcommittee began hearings to determine the legality of ITT's presence and activities in South America, and specifically with regards to their attempt to influence the 1970 Chilean presidential election. For more information regarding the Multinational Subcommittee hearings see: “Chapter 11: The Spymasters” in Sampson, 259-288.
68 Sosthenes and Hernand Behn, founders of ITT, deliberately chose the lofty name of International Telephone and Telegraph, hoping it would be commonly confused with the already well established American Telephone and Telegraph Company. See: Sampson, 23.
corporation. The Long Lines building was constructed in the early 1970s, designed as a telephone exchange centre. With its flat, windowless, concrete slab façade it has been described as one of the most secure buildings in America.\(^69\) In 1978, the clearly unimpressed American Institute of Architects described the building in their *Guide to New York City* as “A giant complex *in the guise* of a building... The only bow to the neighboring humanity is a bleak plaza to the east. Ma Bell, why not leave the air for people, and place your electrons underground?”\(^70\) Already four years after the building was completed, people identified its architectural features as conflicting with human life. By 1984, the Long Lines building, with its domineering stature and impenetrable, windowless façade, stood as a visible representation of the monopolizing American corporation that would interest Wodiczko—a self-identified Foucauldian—and garner the artist's attention.

It is no coincidence that the projection’s presentation date was three days before the US presidential election. Reagan’s first term had seen a recovery from the recession of 1981-1982; however, it had come at a great expense. Reagan's economic policy (popularly known as “Reaganomics”) was based on a lowering of taxes and decrease in government spending, but corporations would end up gaining some of the power that the government was giving up. Suddenly, rather than the government having a heavy hand in the private realm of consumption, it was the corporations who began to determine what people would or could have, in what quantities, at what time, and most importantly at

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what price—which in turn also determined which people could have what services. Thus, along with corporate deregulation and decreased taxes, one found an increased corporatization of the public realm.

The results of Reaganomics were also manifest through increased corporate involvement in the art world, and Wodiczko was undoubtedly at least in part reacting to the recent partnership of AT&T and New York’s Museum of Modern Art. In 1984 MoMA underwent a major expansion, funded through selling air rights for a condominium complex. Just a few months before the projection, MoMA reopened with *An International Survey of Recent Painting and Sculpture*, sponsored by the AT&T Corporation, who mounted a new advertising campaign to coincide with the show. The ad’s banner read “Some of the masterpieces of tomorrow are on exhibit today,” under which appeared a reproduction of an image by Robert Longo, characterized by Douglas Crimp as a “glorification of corporate style”\(^71\) (figure 9). That corporate interests had come into perfect accord with the art presented in MoMA’s reopening show is underscored in the catalogue’s preface, with a long paragraph of praise to AT&T containing the following statement: “AT&T clearly recognizes that experiment and innovation, so highly prized in business and industry, must be equally valued and supported in the arts.”\(^72\) Moreover, it is not for nothing that AT&T granted permission for Wodiczko (and The Kitchen) to present the projection on their building. Even if they did not know the content of the projection, one can speculate that they would have known, based on the artist's past public projections, that the content would at least be critical, if

\(^{71}\) Crimp, “The Art of Exhibition,” 78.

\(^{72}\) *Ibid.*
not controversial. One is tempted to explain AT&T’s seemingly valiant support of the arts by a need to self-promote in the wake of recent anti-trust litigation.

But what of the hand? As an anonymous hand, which it would have been to most viewers, it visually transforms the building into a body. The hand is raised, to the building/body’s chest, in a familiar position, ready for the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance. The architectural structure, symbolic of impenetrable corporate power, is performing an oath of loyalty to the country, or more specifically, to the symbolic stand-in—the flag. If the hand reads as Reagan’s hand, then the body of the building becomes Reagan’s body. Reagan’s body becomes theoretically inextricable from the monopolizing corporate power that exists beneath the façade of the AT&T Long Lines building; the President and the capitalist infrastructure (to employ the Foucauldian language of the time) become one, as they recite:

I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands: one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.73

Alternatively, one can interpret the symbolism as Reagan pledging allegiance to the corporate infrastructure as represented here by AT&T. Reagan's corporatization of public necessities such as oil and telecommunications during his first term suggests a commitment to the dominance of the capitalist system and the corporation within it—a commitment clearly stronger than any concern with supplying such necessities to the

American people.

One cannot help but be reminded of John Heartfield’s 1932 photomontage *The Meaning of the Hitler Salute: Little man asks for big gifts. Motto: Millions Stand Behind Me!*, where Hitler’s saluting hand reaches behind him to accept monetary notes from a second man, twice his size, towering over him (figure 10). As Heartfield uses Hitler’s salute to link the Nazi party’s leader’s electoral success with his courting of wealthy industrialists, Wodiczko uses Reagan’s hand to link the American President’s electoral campaign to the power and values of capitalist corporations. (Coincidentally, Germany’s 1932 election also took place on November 6.)

Thus, Wodiczko’s November 3, 1984 projection clearly addresses a moment when the American people were preparing to choose their leader for the coming four years and reflects specific aspects of that moment: increased corporate control of the economy and the arts; decreased governmental concern with public interests, demonstrated by the deregulation of public necessities. While his use of popular imagery and his appropriation of non-art contexts suggests what in the 1980s would readily be labeled post-modern strategies, the shaping influence of his life and work as an artist in Poland until 1977 should not be overlooked. The relatively independent cultural policy of the Polish state made it arguably the most liberal in the Eastern Bloc. Yet a contradiction resided in the everyday practice of the artist. On the one hand, artists were required to disengage art from politics in their personal practices, while on the other hand, for the purposes of survival, artists had to be engaged in official politics through the production of art for the state’s propaganda system. Or as Wodiczko and Karl Beveridge describe:
“[T]he state needs to develop effective propaganda to consolidate its power, but it also needs to develop the illusion of cultural freedom as part of the same propaganda.”

While still in Poland, Wodiczko began to respond to this situation with design proposals for vehicles that could be read as analytical models of the political mechanisms of the state. *Vehicle I* is the only one for which a prototype was built. The machine was propelled by the action of the artist walking “in an attitude of philosophical contemplation” back and forth along a tilting platform. However, for all the work expended, the vehicle was limited to moving in a straight line in one direction only. The strategy of the vehicle is clearly metaphorical—prompted by the need “to speak publicly with hidden meaning as a response to the prohibition of public speech,” as Benjamin Buchloh so aptly describes. It speaks to the disconnect between the amount of movement an individual is permitted or capable of and the effect that movement can have; despite the appearance of continuous self-propelled motion, the individual’s choice of movements is nominal.

Despite his history of politically motivated art work in both Poland and Canada prior to the AT&T projection, Wodiczko’s first New York presentation has never received thorough historical or critical analysis. Many other projection pieces since 1984 have, however, been widely written about, and from three main sources: essays by Rosalyn Deutsche, articles in *October* magazine, and interviews and statements from the artist himself. This triad is best exemplified in the Autumn 1986 issue of *October*. Of the

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six constituent articles, three centre on Wodiczko and his practice, with a fourth directly connected. The first article in the issue is a compilation of three shorter project statements written by Wodiczko: “Memorial Projection,” “The Homeless Projection: A Proposal for the City of New York” and “The Venice Projections.” The second article in the issue is “A Conversation with Krzysztof Wodiczko” involving Douglas Crimp, Rosalyn Deutsche and Ewa Lajer-Burchard. The conversation began with a pragmatic explanation of Wodiczko’s Grand Army Plaza projection from 1984/1985—from administrative and bureaucratic issues to the responses of individual viewers. This quickly moved to a discussion of Wodiczko’s Polish background, and the role of the artist in Soviet-Polish society. However, the concern with what appears to be a practical historical background and the formative experience of the artist in an eastern bloc country is consistently coloured by a concern for the theoretical implications of the functionings of a socialist (and thus assumedly militaristic and oppressive) regime. Michel Foucault is never far from the surface of the questions put to Wodiczko, and Wodiczko’s responses are equally flavoured. For example, when describing his career in industrial design, Wodiczko explains:

This was the period of the creation of the Industrial Design Council, whose head is vice-premier of the government and whose members are vice-ministers. So, industrial design was very highly bureaucratized, much better organized than in the West or in Lenin’s Soviet Union. I was trained to be a member of the elite unit of designers, skillful infiltrators who were supposed to transform existing state socialism into an intelligent, complex,

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Wodiczko made it easy for his interviewers, and later readers of the journal, to fit his experience and his practice neatly into a preconceived Foucauldian configuration of truth, power and hegemony.

The 1986 volume also features an article by Deutsche on Wodiczko’s *Homeless Projection* project—an article which, ten years later, would become the first chapter of her renowned book, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Practices*. The place that this chapter occupies in *Evictions* is telling. It belongs to a section on “The Social Production of Space.” Deutsche explains in her introduction that the chapters in this section were written during a time when she observed the coincidence of “massive urban development, intensification of official rhetoric about new public spaces, an explosion of interest in the aesthetics of urban planning, and a sharp increase in public art commissions” in New York City. The essays responded to this observation through an examination of art’s social function in contemporary urbanism, and through a questioning of the dominant model of discourse used to explain this function. According to Deutsche,

> Promoting the participation of art and architecture in urban redevelopment projects, this model neutralizes the political character of both art and the city. It couples an aesthetic ideology positing that art and architecture transcend social relations with an urban ideology that presents the spatial organization of cities as the natural product of biological, social, or technological evolutions undergone by a supposedly organic society. These concepts sanction art’s role in the urban environment as beneficial while legitimating existing urban conditions as inevitable.  

Although she is not discussing Wodiczko directly in this passage, one finds here the standard framework for understanding his work and practice. Deutsche sets up a structure for her analysis that consists of a heavily hegemonic urban situation socially produced so as to legitimize existing conditions. While the language may differ, and her specific concern with urban planning and homelessness may be new, Deutsche’s Foucauldian lens (now tempered with some Henri Lefebvre) should, by now, be familiar enough.

Together, the articles compiled for the Autumn 1986 *October* indirectly (though likely not unintentionally) reinforce the post-structuralist underpinnings of contemporary art criticism. For example, in “Memorial Projection,” Wodiczko betrays his theoretical influences, describing how buildings and monuments—the backdrop of his projections—function to order our experience and our movements while masking and mythifying the relations of power. The memorial monument thus acts as an “ideological instrument of power.”

The newly erected memorial was an ideological creation of the posteventful state, which did not camouflage but, quite the reverse, exhibited outright throughout its entire site its joyless, deadly, and heavy duty: the duty of the emotional consolidation of the myth of the event as embodying official public value.

Through his projections, Wodiczko explains, he seeks “to reveal and expose to the public the contemporary deadly life of the memorial.” The projection is an intervention “against the imaginary life of the memorial itself, and against the idea of social-life-with-memorial as uncritical relaxation.”

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80 Wodiczko, “Public Projections,” 47.
The various treatments of Wodiczko that I have considered here (as well as Buchloh's treatment of Holzer, which I will discuss in Chapter 3) are exemplary of a larger trend of the early 1980s, which saw post-structuralism as a dominant theoretical approach in contemporary art criticism. Buchloh and Deutsche offer articulate accounts of the theoretical concerns with which these artists and works grappled. However, one could argue that, while the post-structuralist readings are apt and can be said to accurately describe the work, the post-structural lens that dominated also acted as a filter—eliminating any elements that did not conform or simply were not desirable. Even when recognizing the implications of Wodiczko’s Polish background, his artistic engagement with the Polish state and his involvement with the anti-establishment Foksal Gallery, these overtly practical influences, which have led to overtly practical concerns in the artist’s practice, have been spun in a specific theoretical direction.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will part ways with previous treatments of Wodiczko’s (and Holzer’s) public addresses. In so doing, I hope to bring attention to other theoretical trends and concerns that influenced Wodiczko's practice and which should be treated on par with his (perhaps more obvious and more widely accepted) post-structuralist concerns. This will allow for not only a more complex understanding of this artist's practice, but also of the complicated theoretical milieu in which socially-minded artists were working at that time, and how they responded in a way that will prove to be both theoretically and practically political.

In the introduction to *Critical Vehicles: Writings, Projects, Interviews*, Wodiczko describes his overarching project: “[A critical vehicle] transmits those ideas and emotions
that are indispensable to the comprehension of the urgency and complexity of a situation…. Those media projects employ the tactics and technique of projection to convert such celebratory structures, uncritical grand suspects and witnesses of the glorious past, into self-critical and critical vehicles."\(^{83}\) Although written in 1998, this statement can be seen as epitomizing the nature of his projection work in 1984. First, the critical vehicle—in this case the projection—must result in the viewer's “comprehension of the urgency and complexity of a situation.” This notion of an urgent and complex situation is suggestive of the crisis described by Jurgen Habermas. Wodiczko clearly identified the situation of the 1980s in America as a moment of crisis—a complex moment coloured by an overwhelming sense of urgency. Through his projections he responded to this crisis by articulating it for others.

Wodiczko's focus on the AT&T building and its relationship to Ronald Reagan is indicative of broader concerns over the relationship between large corporations and the American government. First, the very existence of multinational conglomerates had begun to provoke anxiety among contingents of the American population since the late 1960s and early 1970s, with ITT as the most extreme example. Harold Geneen's directive, since taking over the company in 1959 was to balance ITT's international holdings with American holdings. He began to diversify and by 1965 the ITT umbrella covered insurance companies, car rental companies, hotel chains, housing developments—not to mention the original focus on telecommunications. A person could have easily lived in an ITT “self-contained paradise...insured from the cradle to the grave,

while they drove their ITT rental car from the ITT home to their ITT hotel."\(^{84}\)

However, in the early 1970s the company was shrouded by scandal—scandal that went beyond the connection between the $400,000 ITT offered for the City of San Diego to host the Republican convention and the approval of the ITT-Hartford merger. ITT's second controversy of that moment was the company's involvement with the CIA and the attempted takedown of a Latin American head of state. In Chile, ITT had gotten on well with Eduardo Frei, a Christian Democrat president,\(^ {85}\) but in the months before the 1970 election, it looked increasingly as though the Marxist candidate, Salvador Allende, would take the seat.\(^ {86}\) In other countries, Geneen had seen his telecommunications companies nationalized by newly elected Communist governments and thus was determined to not let this happen again. Thus, ITT began plotting (with other multinationals present in Chile, as well as, most importantly, key members of the CIA) to disrupt Chile's national economy in an attempt to provoke a coup. The plan was abandoned however, as it became clear that ITT was not going to get the necessary support from their collaborators. Nonetheless the story broke, resulting in the nationalization of ITT's telephone and cable company in Chile, as predicted, but with ITT exposed as the tyrant rather than the victim.\(^ {87}\)

In the early 1970s both of ITT's scandalous stories were leaked to the press, and the anti-multinational-conglomerate sentiment that had been building seemed instantly justified. Their actions (and accompanying paper trail of memos) revealed a capitalist

\(^{84}\) Sampson, 151.
\(^{85}\) Ibid., 263.
\(^{86}\) Ibid., 264.
\(^{87}\) Ibid., 261, 265.
force that acted as though accountable to no state or country in which it operated. It abided by no rules other than those imposed by the head of the corporation.

In the United States, the fear of the multinational corporation was one of the factors that had led to the steadily increasing regulations on industry such as oil and telecommunications. It was believed to be the government's duty to protect the interests of its citizens from the evils of monopolizing multinational conglomerates such as ITT. Reagan, however, back-pedalled on this issue with his move towards substantial deregulation of industry, a move intended to increase the freedom of those very companies, seeing them as companies led by citizens who deserved freedom to run their businesses free from excessive government interference.

But the ITT case proved that multinational corporations were willing (as they still are) to work directly against human freedom—and certainly democratic freedom—in the name of economic profit. The scandal also provided evidence that the American government was more than willing to lie in bed with multinational corporations behind closed doors. Neither party was to be trusted.

Wodiczko identified this moment of crisis that centred around capitalist culture in America as encouraged by the Reagan administration. Yet, by targeting the upcoming election, Wodiczko's AT&T projection suggests that he also interpreted the crisis as a legitimation crisis. By picturing the President pledging allegiance to corporate America or alternatively, by showing the President and corporate America as sharing a single body, Wodiczko suggests that the President is no longer a legitimate head of state. However, according to Habermas, a legitimation crisis requires a mass disbelief or non-
acceptance of the legitimacy of those in power. Through the democratic process, by which leaders are legitimized, the people elect a person to lead the country. The challenge with Reagan was that the vast majority of voters voted for him, so as long as they were functioning within the system of democracy, his power was legitimate. Wodiczko, however, had found a loophole: if, once in power, that individual chose to hand his power, or a portion thereof, over to a (non-democratically-elected) corporate body, he, in effect, rescinded his legitimacy as leader. The AT&T projection identified a crisis of legitimation to which the legitimacy-granting citizens had not yet become wise (and perhaps never would).

Wodiczko further sees his projects as “transmitting” the ideas and emotions that are necessary for the “comprehension” of this moment of crisis, indicating that he sees his critical vehicles—his art objects—as playing an educative role. One commonly understands education as the transmission of facts or knowledge usually within the classroom setting, but in a broad sense education can also include the transmission of ideas and emotions, particularly since, in this case, the end goal is not the comprehension of those ideas and emotions for their own sake, but rather of the urgency and complexity of the moment, the comprehension of which requires those ideas and emotions. In a move that could be interpreted as manipulative, Wodiczko does not reveal to people the complexity of the moment by representing it explicitly. The fact that the artist does not just give the viewer the “facts and knowledge” that are his ultimate goal is indicative of

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88 According to Habermas, crises in a political system of advanced capitalism can take the form of either a rationality crisis or a legitimation crisis. The latter occurs when “the legitimizing system does not succeed in maintaining the requisite level of mass loyalty while the steering imperatives taken over from the economic system are carried through.” See: Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*, 45-46.
an underlying philosophy of education. He suggests that people need to be given the tools necessary to recognize the complexity of the situation for themselves—tools which develop the users into critically minded individuals—so that they can live critically, and ultimately so that the tools can be transferred across topics. Alternatively, if he simply gave the viewer a single (albeit critical) fact, her criticality would be limited to that one situation. Wodiczko's project had broader parameters; he was molding a future society of critical citizens.

The last half of Wodiczko's general project statement is indicative of the post-modern outlook from which he begins his project. First, buildings are never just a sum of the materials from which they are made. Rather, they assume complex meanings as “celebratory structures”; they are anthropomorphized as “uncritical grand suspects”; and finally they are implicated as historical actors as “witnesses of the glorious past.” Along with the assertion that the building is not a stable concrete object, but is rather substantively meaningful actor, is the implication that the structure itself is a body of power that can change depending on how it is used and how it is incorporated into the daily actions of the people who use it—both the people who use it on the inside, and those who use it on the outside. In other words, the meaning (and therefore the substance) of the building, which appears fundamentally stable, is in fact not fixed at all. And the substance depends largely on the stories that are told about the structure. For example, a monument built in commemoration of a historical event is often intended as a celebratory reminder of a moment of pride and accomplishment for a group of people. However, as Wodiczko's *Homeless Projection* reveals, that same monument can become implicated in
historical circumstances completely unforeseen by its creators. In “The Homeless Projection: A Proposal for the City of New York,” Wodiczko describes an ultimately unrealized public art project for Union Square. He proposed to project onto the Square's historical monuments, turning the figures of Abraham Lincoln, George Washington and others into representations of homeless people—a common sight in the park's recent years. In doing so, Wodiczko articulated the way in which the homeless, who must—in order to secure the handouts necessary for survival—present themselves in particular ways, to conform to the role expected of them: “The homeless must become THE HOMELESS.” The homeless people who inhabit Union Square are revealed as monuments themselves—assuming poses as mythic as the historical men whose victories are commemorated and with whom the homeless share the public space. Both are witness to—and become implicated in—the soon-to-be historical events that continuously shape the societal present. Thus, the projection reveals the way in which histories are by nature more complex than the intended significance of a monument or building. Wodiczko shows the other side of story—the side whose concealment is necessary for the official representation's continued existence.

Here Wodiczko clearly takes his Foucauldian motto to heart:

It's not a matter of emancipating truth from every system of power (which would be a chimera, for truth is already power) but of detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic and cultural, within which it operates at the present time.

Wodiczko's projections appear to follow Foucault's guidelines to a tee. The architecture

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89 Wodiczko, “Krzysztof Wodiczko / Public Projections,” 12-17.
90 Ibid., 16.
of the city—the historically, politically and culturally significant buildings and
monuments with which citizens share the public realm—are in this case the forms of
social, cultural and economic hegemony within which the power of truth operates.
Through altering Union Square's monument to Washington, for example, and turning him
into a homeless person, the (seemingly inherent) truth of the sculpture would change,
truth would no longer be TRUTH, and the power of truth would be detached from the
architectural form of hegemony.

While the AT&T projection does not involve a historical, commemorative
monument, it does implicate a monolithic structure—both the building and the AT&T
corporation. Up until a few years preceding the projection, AT&T had a monopoly on the
telecommunications system in the United States, and this sense of complete control was
replicated in the impenetrable appearance of this building. Yet, not only had the history
of the company recently changed, but it also had changed because of the change in
government. As Wodiczko's projection brought to light, Reagan was effectively lending a
helping hand to corporations such as AT&T. This concern with the malleability of
historical, political and even architectural meaning and with the structures of power that
are inherent within architectural constructions, clearly reinforces the artist's appropriation
of Foucauldian theoretical methodology for his aesthetic and political practice.

The four key components of Wodiczko's practice alluded to in the quote under
consideration (the identification of a moment of crisis, his educative aims, the post-
structuralist underpinnings of his practice and his avant-garde strategies) are further
supported by the medium he chooses to work with. First, the projections are temporary,
ephemeral works of art. They last minutes, maybe in some cases hours, but not longer. They are invisible once the sun comes up. This ephemerality indicates that each projection addresses a contemporary moment of crisis, emphasizing the immediacy of the issue addressed, and thus the necessity of the presentation of the projection at the very moment in which it is presented.

Second, the projection of light is conceptually connected to the notion of education. The mode of projection is illuminating by nature, and is indicative of an underlying concern with visibility inherent in Wodiczko's work. Light is historically connected to the notion of knowledge, so illumination, or the focused projection of light, is conceptually connected to the notion of education, or the passing on of knowledge. Plato knew this. He knew that all we usually see are the shadows, and only when we can see real objects under real light can we understand and have true knowledge. For Wodiczko, all we usually see are the architectural façades constructed by those in power. Thus, through illuminating the building—and more importantly what lies hidden underneath the façade—Wodiczko enlightens the viewers to their current situation, the moment of crisis in which they find themselves. In 1983, he wrote of his urban projections:

The attack must be unexpected, frontal, and must come with the night when the building, undisturbed by its daily functions, is

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92 In *The Republic*, Socrates used the allegory of the cave to explain the education of the soul. Socrates describes a group of people who live in a cave and are tied down such that they are seated and looking at a wall, unable to move their heads to look anywhere other than this wall. Behind them is a fire, and between the prisoners and the fire is a wall. Other people walk along the wall, carrying items, the shadows of which are projected onto the wall in front of the prisoners. Until a prisoner is actually taken out of the cave, so that he can see real objects (rather than just their shadows) in the light of the sun, he will necessarily mistake the shadows to which his experience is limited for the real objects themselves. See: Plato, *The Republic*, book VII, sections 514a-517c, trans. G.M.A. Grube, revised by C.D. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1992), 186-189.
asleep and when its body dreams of itself, when the architecture has its nightmares. This will be a symbol-attack, a public psychoanalytical séance, unmasking and revealing the unconscious of the building, its body, the ‘medium’ of power. By introducing the technique of an outdoor slide montage and the immediately recognizable language of popular imagery, the Public Projection can become a communal, aesthetic counter-ritual. It can become an urban night festival, an architectural ‘epic theatre,’ inviting both reflection and relaxation, where the street public follows the narrative forms with an emotional engagement and a critical detachment.93

His expressed concern with the use of popular imagery is further indicative of educative aims and a popular effect. At least in theory, Wodiczko's projections are designed to have a wide reach and a deep impact.

However, Wodiczko is not purely platonic. Rather, as already discussed, he found himself in an age coloured more by Foucauldian theory than pure platonism (although, of course, if one cares to look, one finds Plato everywhere—even in Foucault). Just as Wodiczko would have learned from Plato that light is necessary for knowledge, he would have learned from Foucault that light is necessary for surveillance and that visibility is key to the maintenance of power and control.94 In urban areas, lights are used to illuminate the streets, parks and dark corners, deterring illegal activity that can be safeguarded under the dark of night. Wodiczko appropriates this method of police surveillance and state control, turning it onto itself—revealing not the actions of thieves and drug users, but the perhaps more sinister workings of the capitalist state.

Finally, his renegade attacks on the city's buildings is an avant-garde strategy at

94 Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1977), 200. In Foucault’s words, the Panopticon functions to “induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power.” In other words, the panoptic is a modality of power by which visibility becomes a trap and a means of control.
base. The very notion of going ahead, alone at night to attack the enemy in order to make way for the others to forge ahead is clearly in line with the literal military understanding of the avant-garde. Wodiczko's method and medium represent the artist as an enlightened individual who risks himself to save us all.

However, there is an inherent conflict between Wodiczko's avant-garde impulses, and his post-modern sensibilities. Rather than assuming an attitude of complacency and accepting the fact that it simply is the case that meaning is in flux and that buildings assume a certain level of social power, or rather than simply trying to detach the power of truth from architecture as a social form of hegemony (as Foucault advocates), Wodiczko wants to increase the criticality of individual citizens; he wants to see a society that progresses towards the goal of critical awareness and increased truth. Wodiczko may begin his “Public Projections” essay with a “motto” appropriated from Foucault's “Truth and Power,” but what Wodiczko's reader does not see—at least not unless one returns to the original—is the line or two that precede it in Foucault's text:

The essential problem for the intellectual is not to criticise the ideological contents supposedly linked to science, or to ensure that his own scientific practice is accompanied by a correct ideology, but that of ascertaining the possibility of constituting a new politics of truth. The problem is not changing people's consciousnesses—or what's in their head—but the political, economic, institutional régime of the production of truth.95

On the one hand, Wodiczko attempts to change the institutional regime of the production of truth by altering the architectural structures that participate in the process of social and institutional truth production. However, Wodiczko's projections also seem to do precisely what Foucault's intellectual is not supposed to do, i.e. criticize the ideological contents of

95 Michel Foucault, “Truth and Power,” 133.
architecture, and to assure that his own architectural/artistic practice is accompanied by a correct ideology. Wodiczko invokes a level of restraint, of course; he always retains a level of ambiguity, never explicitly spelling out his criticism for the viewer. Nonetheless, one understands that his juxtaposition of the symbolism of corporate America with the symbolism of the President's Pledge of Allegiance suggests a particular ideology with substantive content—at very least one that is inherently critical of the relationship between the American government and large corporations, a relationship that functions to the detriment of the everyday lives of people who are denied information about that relationship, as indicated by the impenetrable nature of the AT&T building.

His drive to educate is further suggestive of a modernist view of the world characteristic of the linear narrative of the Hegel-Marx tradition. The AT&T projection in particular suggests that there is a historical dialectic, and in 1984 the citizens were being oppressed (or at least duped by) those in power, who include not only the government but also the corporate body of America. The aesthetics of that specifically chosen building suggests the impenetrability of the relationship between the government and the corporations and reminds the viewer of the tight control over the information that the public receives regarding this relationship. Wodiczko's avant-garde move to create a critical citizenry is rooted in a revolutionary base. It may not involve physically violent weapons and the takeover of space or the means of production, but it does involve the ideological take-down of the oppressive governmental/corporate regime. It involves a re-appropriation not of the means of production but of the ability to criticize the government—an ability which is integral to the process of democracy (another hinge pin
of modernity). Yet, Wodiczko's revolution, however intellectual, is literally happening in the street. Wodiczko is responding to the crisis that he has identified in a way that is more suited to a Habermasian than a Foucauldian. He is not simply trying to overturn the power of the urban geography, but rather, by presenting the projection days before the presidential election, he is attempting to work within the system of democracy to strengthen it through creating a critical citizenry who can identify an illegitimate leader and effectively (and democratically) replace him with a legitimate one.

The AT&T projection can easily be described as leveling a critique against the contemporary era of Reaganomics. Wodiczko’s practice, generally speaking, fits snugly into the history of contestation art—from the Zurich Dada of Hugo Ball and Tristan Tzara, to the Situationist International, to contemporary artists such as Alfredo Jaar and Barbara Kruger. Each was involved in activities that were intellectual, artistic and that launched a critique at the current order of things. Furthermore, each was acting at a moment of felt urgency, whether it was during the first world war, the aftermath of World War II and the heavy-handed de Gaulle presidency in France, or the contemporary crisis in the US brought on by Reaganomics. Having begun his artistic career (and his life) in Eastern Europe, he had both enough familiarity with European political history and intellectual culture, and enough distance from it, to apply the resultant understanding to his new, adopted North American culture. In other words, he was sufficiently alienated

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96 Reagan’s economic policies included a call for widespread tax cuts, decreased social spending, increased military spending, and the deregulation of domestic markets. See: Busch, 25-46.

from both his previous and his current cultural contexts to be able to study them and
critique them with a certain level of clarity and insight. Clearly with the AT&T
projection, Wodiczko’s critique was aimed at his new, specifically American, politically
conservative and culturally capitalist context. And like those who came before him,
Wodiczko was interested not only at suggesting change, but in making change, or at least
testing the extent to which an artist could affect change in a dire moment. Of course, if
the results of the election are the litmus test for change, Wodiczko failed.
CHAPTER 3—Talking Back: Jenny Holzer’s *Sign on a Truck*

*Welcome to the Sign on a Truck. Here today you will see a program by artists and many other people who will offer their thoughts, hopes and concerns about the presidential election and about the issues that come alive at this time. I hope you will enjoy the show.*

– Jenny Holzer, *Sign on a Truck*

Like Krzysztof Wodiczko, in the days leading up to the 1984 election, artist Jenny Holzer organized her collaborative project *Sign on a Truck*. Sponsored by the ambiguously named Public Art Fund, Holzer invited other artists – Vito Acconci, Keith Haring, Barbara Kruger and Mark Stahl among others – to contribute pre-recorded videos to be played on a 13-by-18-foot screen on the side of an 18-wheeler truck, parked all day at two different sites in Manhattan: on Saturday, November 3rd in Grand Army Plaza at the edge of Central Park and on Monday, November 5th at Bowling Green Plaza near Wall Street. Over the course of the two days, passers-by were invited to contribute their own “thoughts, hopes and concerns” about election issues, with the responses broadcast live on the Diamond Vision Mobile 2000 video screen (figure 11). While the contributing artists presented work that was overtly critical of Reagan or against positions associated with his platform, the program also featured pre-recorded and live interviews with people who supported the President and his performance over the previous four years.  

98 The Public Art Fund is a privately funded, non-profit arts organization that presents the work of contemporary artists in New York's public spaces. In addition to sponsorship from the PAF, *Sign on a Truck* relied on cooperation from the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, production assistance from Fashion Moda, and funding from Collaborative Projects, the New York State Council on the Arts and private sources. See: “Public Address: ‘Sign on a Truck,’” *Art in America* 73 (January 1985): 89.


Contrasted with most signs associated with the presidential race, Holzer’s *Sign on a Truck* presented the viewer with multiple positions, asking him or her to assess and take a stance.

By 1984, Holzer had an established art practice that made use of public spaces. Originally from Ohio—the heart of the Mid-Western United States—Holzer trained in painting and printmaking at the Rhode Island School of Design. She moved to New York to participate in the Whitney Museum’s Independent Study Program in 1976-77, during which time she began the practice she is now known for: presenting text-based works in public spaces. From 1979 to 1982 Holzer’s *Inflammatory Essays* appeared as unsigned, commercially printed posters, wheat-pasted on buildings and walls around Manhattan (figure 12). Here, Holzer appropriated, reinterpreted and supplemented texts from major political figures such as Emma Goldman, Adolf Hitler, Vladimir Lenin and Mao Tse-Tung. At the same time, Holzer began presenting the *Truisms*, in the streets of New York City. Likely her most well-known work, the *Truisms* were based on the reading list from the Whitney program. She took various ideas therein down to the bare-bones, until they were reduced to accessible, near-cliché one-liners that could be easily read by passers-by as they wait for the bus, exit a shop, or wait to cross the street. The result was a series of seemingly authorless lines such as “Abuse of Power Comes as No Surprise” and “Money Creates Taste,” presented on posters, on t-shirts (figure 13) and, in 1982, on the Spectacolor board in Times Square, a myriad of popular forms that suggests,

on the one hand, a camaraderie with popular modes of commercial display, but on the other hand, a desire to infiltrate and overturn the infrastructure that supports it.

Similarly, with its jumbo screen—the kind used to show instant replays and display advertisements at sports events—the *Sign on a Truck* used media associated with popular culture and consumerism, offering the participants (both artists and others) the opportunity to have their views presented on the same level as billboards or premium television spots reserved for high-cost advertising. The artists' shorts assumed the role of campaign ads while the interviewees took on the role of the candidates themselves presenting positions and opinions as in a televised debate. The medium of the *Sign* also referred back to the big screen of the cinema, a reference one couldn't help but associate with the actor-cum-president.

If Wodiczko's projection from the same week cryptically exposed an anxiety that lay beneath the surface of society's everyday exterior, Holzer's video collaboration made that anxiety explicit. Both the artists and the interviewees addressed the fear that they experienced in relation to the election—some more directly than others. Barbara Kruger's contribution to the *Sign* included the following statement directed at President Reagan: “I would like to meet you / so that I could tell you / that your actions scare me.” One member of the public, when asked about his concerns for the upcoming election stated quite simply “I'm afraid of war.” Holzer's own contribution included the *Truisms*:

“People who are fearful carry guns / Enlightened leaders are not afraid.” The former two comments each express a personal fear on the part of the speakers—a fear in connection to the actions of the current government. The anonymous speaker's anxiety over war
suggests a belief that the President had put the country in a position where war is a serious threat and a strong possibility. Kruger's statement does not specify which of the President's actions caused her fear; it could be as specific as his foreign policy or as broad as anything stemming from the arrogance that coloured all of his decision-making. Holzer's expression of anxiety is of a slightly different order. Rather than a personal fear, hers is an identification of a fear within others—specifically the government. She suggests that the US government's armament program is a result of its fear, and more pointedly, its collective ignorance. And continuously the video reveals the way in which this anxiety has permeated various levels of society.

Unlike Holzer's other work from this time, such as the Truisms and the Inflammatory Essays, the Sign on a Truck has not been widely written about. Numerous brief descriptions have appeared since the Sign was presented in 1984, but sustained treatments are rare. The one exception is the lengthy treatment by Benjamin Buchloh in his 1985 essay “From Gadget Video to Agit Video: Some Notes on Four Recent Video Works,” where he offers an account of the development of video art from the early examples of the late sixties and early seventies to the mid-1980s, locating the developments within the context of post-Minimal and post-Conceptual art. Buchloh uses each of the four examples to consider the role of video art in the changing “affiliations of...
art practice with other discourses,...the conditions of its institutional containment...as well as its audience relationship,” with his discussion of Holzer's *Sign on a Truck* focusing primarily on the latter issue.\(^{103}\) While he credits Holzer with successfully confronting the timely questions of audience address, audience specificity and the broadening of the audience for video art, he argues that the work also demonstrates that one cannot accurately represent the political views of the public through a quest for direct self-representation (i.e. by polling people in the streets).\(^{104}\) Rather, this method is limited to revealing “the voices of the ideological state apparatuses as they have been internalized, the synthesis of prejudice and propaganda, of aggressive ignorance and repression, of cowardice and opportunism that determine the mind of the so-called public (especially the white middle-class public, as Holzer's tapes showed abundantly).”\(^{105}\) Like the treatments of Wodiczko's projections that have dominated the understanding of his work, Buchloh's treatment of Holzer's *Sign on a Truck* is also characteristic of the theoretical trends within art criticism in the 1980s. His invocation of the “ideological state apparatuses” signals a commitment to the postmodernism of Louis Althusser. In contrast to the Marxist “state apparatus,” (i.e. the Government, the Administration, the Army, the Police, the Courts, the Prisons, etc.), which Althusser identifies as the Repressive State Apparatus based on their violent nature, the ideological state apparatuses constitute specialized, primarily private institutions including, but not limited to: the system of churches, of public and private schools, the family, the realm of media and


\(^{104}\) *Ibid.*, 223.

communication (press, radio, television) and the cultural realm (the arts, literature, sports). A clear influence on Foucault's understanding of the power relationships that are at work (although usually hidden) within society, Althusser's theory of ideological state apparatuses clearly provided a frame for Buchloh's analysis of Holzer's work.

Buchloh, of course, is correct in his assertion that unmediated self-expression is not as direct as one might assume; however, it is not clear that the *Sign on the Truck* was intended to reveal a mythical unmediated public opinion. First, *Sign on a Truck* does not imply that an unmediated public opinion is even possible. Rather, the nature of the medium and its reference to the formative effects of the consumption of popular culture suggest that public opinion is overtly shaped by external influences such as the all-pervasive media of popular culture—ideological state apparatus or otherwise. Second, this is not strictly speaking a video work exclusively by Jenny Holzer. To frame the work in this way is misleading and sets it up for an inaccurate interpretation from the outset. Holzer herself acknowledged the anti-artistic-genius nature of this project: “I would classify *Sign on a Truck* as half art and half a general public project. The culture part was that a number of artists, such as Justen Ladda and Vito Acconci, made very interesting video tapes that were the backbone of the program. The people on the street provided the other interesting part, both by their individual statements on various political topics and by their arguments with each other.” Holzer intended the art/public service work as a catalyst in the creation of dialogue and in providing citizens with an opportunity to

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107 Ferguson, 75.
express themselves through a previously inaccessible medium. Thus, while Buchloh is correct in his assertion, this does not exclude the possibility that the work was successful in its intended function, as stated by Holzer, of providing a vehicle for self-expression—regardless of how the views expressed were formed—and the frame with which Buchloh analyzes the work does not allow room for such acknowledgments.

Buchloh does not, at any point, consider the specific content of the video, neither the artists' shorts nor the interviewees' statements, perhaps because a discussion of the conceptual functioning of the work is enough for the stated purpose of his analysis. Or perhaps if Buchloh was to take seriously the content of the video, he would have to contend with various fears and anxieties that presented themselves during the moment of the election that are not necessarily in line with the “ideological state apparatuses” of such concern to Buchloh. On the one hand, there are participants who are fervent supporters of Reagan because they believe that he will protect the country from the perceived nuclear threat presented by the Soviet Union. On the other hand, there are participants who express deep fear over the possibility of Reagan personally provoking the nuclear action that will result in a third world war. On the one hand, there are interviewees who are elated at the fact that Reagan has boosted the economy and cut unemployment rates. On the other hand there are interviewees who testify to the increase in poverty among the poor since Reagan's election four years earlier. These concerns are symptomatic of a particular moment in American political, military, economic and social history, and they reflect various societal influences comparable to the way in which Buchloh's theoretical approach also reflects societal influences of the same moment.
although of a more theoretical order.

What is abundantly clear from the content of the Sign's video are the foci of individuals' specific fears of the moment. Whereas Wodiczko's projection ambiguously addressed the uneasiness surrounding Reagan's economic policy and his underlying (and often under-cover) support of corporate capitalism at the expense of the needs of the citizens, the content of Holzer's project clearly states a broad range of specific issues that fueled the anxiety of the times.

The stated concerns of the participants— including both artists and interviewees, both Reagan supporters and Mondale supporters — fit within two general categories: economics and war. Comments on the economy featured various declamations of support from those who had benefitted from Reagan's first four years in office — including two individuals who used Reagan's own pitch to express their support; when they asked themselves if they were better off today than they were four years ago, the answer was unquestioningly “yes.”

This unapologetic display of a sense of

108 No previous considerations of Holzer's Sign on a Truck include any discussion of the content of the video beyond describing it in very general terms, for example as an expression of the public's “thoughts, hopes and concerns” — a description taken directly from the video itself. Nowhere in the literature is there any mention of what those concerns are. Thus, it will prove fruitful to outline the content of the video here, however briefly, not only for the purposes of this paper, but also for the general record.

109 Exceptions to this include expressions of concern regarding Reagan's religious fundamentalism, the place of religion in schools, and the need to have female representation in government (i.e. an expression of support for Geraldine Ferraro, Mondale's running-mate).

110 A middle-aged white man wearing what appears to be a drivers cap stated: “I'm voting for Reagan, and like he says...I'm better off today that I was four years ago.” A young black man in a Wall Street suit similarly remarked: “I asked myself what the President asked all Americans to ask themselves four years ago: Am I better off now than I was four years ago? And I'd have to say resoundingly yes. And I think all of America is better off now than they were four years ago, so I am supportive of the President.” During a 1980 debate between candidates Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan, the latter famously asked the audience: “Are you better off today than you were four years ago?” In 1984, the sentiment of the question was reversed as he repeatedly asked the constituents along his campaign trail the same question. See: Lou Cannon, President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 453; and Kurt Andersen, “The Magic and the Message,” Time Magazine, August 27, 1984.
entitlement, which goes hand-in-hand with the ideology of American individualism upon which Reagan’s platform was built, sits in contrast to comments from those who were unsupportive of Reagan, who commonly expressed that they had personally witnessed a decrease in the well-being of citizens—particularly among the poor, seniors and non-whites—in the last four years. Particularly poignant was the strategic juxtaposition of two clips. First, “I'm voting for Reagan, and like he says...I'm better off today than I was four years ago. You just saw Reaganomics in action right here. People getting food, people who need it. People are getting it.” This cuts immediately to what appears to be a group of people lined up to receive handouts of boxes of powdered milk, loaves of bread and sacks of flour or sugar. When a woman in the queue is asked about her concerns over the upcoming election she states: “Do you ever hear any politician talking about kids? Do you ever hear them talking about how much food is on the table?” One can't help but question, here, the strategic nature of the video editing. While Holzer repeatedly presents one particular *Truism*, so that the viewer is constantly reminded that “We are United in the Tolerance of our Differences,” the juxtaposition of these two scenes makes the former interviewee look nothing but ignorant, and although a diversity of perspectives are presented, this particular slice of the video presents the *Sign on a Truck* as verging on

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111 For example, a middle-aged African-American woman on her way to church stated her concern regarding Reagan's ignorance of the plight of the poor in America: “Well, I don't think Reagan is really for poor people. We have too many homeless, too many people out of work, and really we have an awful lot of poor, poor people that other people are unaware that it is existing in America. It really shouldn't be that way.” One woman offers the perspective of a non-white senior citizen on social assistance during the Reagan era: “I don't like Reagan. I don't think he's for the poor people, and I can't stand him. I really don't like him because I'm a senior citizen and he says that we are living better now than we ever lived before in these four years that he's been the president and I know that's a lie because the cost of living in the black and Puerto Rican neighbourhoods went up and he didn't want to give us an increase on our social security this year. We have to wait until 1985... If he had to live the way I have to live then he could understand compassion, but he has no compassion, and I am deadly against him being in term for another four years.”
propaganda—propaganda of dissent perhaps, but propaganda nonetheless.

In this light, the strategic presentation of statements of concern over a pending war appears to be of a similar propagandistic order. The vast majority of comments regarding a possible war were anti-Reagan, expressing fear over his propensity towards a nuclear war with the Soviets. One artist's segment presented two middle-school aged children talking to the viewer:

Child #1: The most ridiculous joke I ever heard was when Mr. Reagan said we will begin bombing in five minutes.
Child #2: It wouldn't have been a joke if the Russians had taken it seriously.
Child #1: And that would've just been the end.

This exchange refers to an incident that occurred on August 11, 1984, as the President was preparing for his National Public Radio weekly Saturday address. While the President was conducting a sound check, he recited a mock public address, stating “My fellow Americans, I'm pleased to tell you today that I've signed legislation that will outlaw Russia forever. We begin bombing in five minutes.” Although the joke was not broadcast over the air, it was later leaked to the public. A more general expression of fear over the possibility of a war with the Soviet Union was offered by an interviewee who, when asked about her hopes and concerns over the upcoming election, stated in an exasperated tone: “I would like for there not to be a nuclear war for the whole world.”

The video's multiple comments on the fear of a nuclear war exposes this as a key issue in the 1984 election and a key motivator for citizens to vote in favour of change.

There is one lone interviewee whose opinion differed, who stated: “I think Reagan

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is a strong president...I think that he scares the Russians into not doing anything foolish.” The overwhelmingly common fear of war at the hands of the President should not be interpreted as a representation of the opinion of the majority of citizens. Not because, following Buchloh, an unmediated direct expression of public opinion is essentially impossible, but because it is possible that Reagan's supporters were more concerned with commenting on economic issues rather than Cold War issues. What the commonality of the fear does indicate is that the primary reason for the pro-Reagan constituency's support of the President is economic issues, whereas the opposition to Reagan is rooted in the fear of war. Of course, one cannot help but wonder what was included and what was edited out by the video's anti-Reagan artist/producer.

The two primary foci of the content of the Sign on a Truck are illustrative of that mid-1980s moment in America. As indicated by the dichotomy of perspectives regarding economic issues, it was a moment when the economy was doing neither wholly well nor wholly poorly. Rather, the dichotomy reflects the fact that the Reagan administration had, in the previous four years, made substantial changes to an economic system that had been moving in a single direction since Roosevelt's presidency in the 1930s and 40s. Through a reversal of the trend towards regulation and government involvement, Reagan managed to decrease the rate of inflation, and lower both taxes and unemployment. However, the benefits of these measures were to be felt largely by the middle and upper classes. As

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113 This participant's full statement as presented on the Sign is: “I think Reagan is a strong president. He has the old beliefs. He's seventy-three years old. I don't know how senile he is yet, but you know I think that he scares the Russians into not doing anything foolish. But maybe he's been rich a little too long, so he doesn't really care about poor people or understands them.”

114 A more detailed account of the changes to economic policy during Reagan's first term is offered in Chapter 1 of this thesis.
witnessed by a number of the Sign's interviewees, the situation of those who were already poor was only made worse. As one resident of New York's housing projects stated: “The rich are getting richer and the blacks lower.”

Second to his concern with reviving the economy was Reagan's focus on US-Soviet relations. During his first term in office, a key initiative regarding US foreign policy was the willingness to assert American power. Compared to the Carter administration's emphasis on negotiation rather than confrontation, Reagan's focus on the acquisition of military strength indicated an attempt to re-establish America's standing in the world by sheer force and the invocation of fear.\textsuperscript{115} The major target of Reagan's posturing and display of American muscle, of course, was the Soviet Union. In 1983, the Reagan Administration adopted the National Security Defense Directive 75, which articulated US policy towards the USSR in the 1980s: “U.S. Policy toward the Soviet Union will consist of three elements: external resistance to Soviet imperialism; internal pressure on the USSR to weaken the sources of Soviet imperialism; and negotiations to eliminate, on the basis of strict reciprocity, outstanding disagreements.”\textsuperscript{116} In other words, Reagan sought to find weaknesses in the Soviet system, in order to undermine it as a whole, with the ultimate goal of a US victory in the Cold War.

A significant component of the American government's strategy was a buildup of nuclear arms, evident in the near-doubling of the defense budget during the Reagan


The public opposition to the government's fierce rearmament program was fueled by the Euromissile crisis. In fall 1983, when the US began deploying Pershing II intermediate-range ballistic missiles and ground-launched cruise missiles in Europe, to counter the Soviet's SS-20 missiles, the Soviets responded by walking out on continued negotiations on the limitation of intermediate-range weapons. The threat of a nuclear war with the Soviet Union had suddenly become more immediate and seemingly more real to the American voters, than it had been in recent years. In Reagan's hands the Cold War was heating up.

However, while the Sign on a Truck, like Wodiczko's AT&T projection, indicated a moment of crisis not only over the presidential election, but also over the issue of survival (both due to the fear of war and the fear of starving), the crisis as represented by the Sign, is not a Habermasian legitimation crisis. It cannot be for two reasons: first, because at least half of the interviewees were staunch supporters of the incumbent president, and second, because a Habermasian legitimation crisis within a democratic society depends on a breakdown of the democratic system, and Holzer was both working within and promoting that very system, in creating a platform from which people could voice their opinions in an attempt to create dialogue surrounding the issues of the election. Moreover, one of the key artistic contributions was the repetitive flashing of the words: “Stop / Go / Think. / Now / Look / Listen / Vote” (figure 14).

While the Sign does not turn on a Habermasian notion of crisis, one finds

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117 Over the course of Reagan's two terms the yearly defense budget went from $159 to $304 billion. See: Robert M. Collins, Transforming America: Politics and Culture in the Reagan Years (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 197.

118 Collins, 197-200.

119 Mark Stahl's contribution to the Sign on a Truck.
Habermasian theoretical underpinnings of another order, namely, that of “communicative action.” Habermas’ general advocating of an ideal public realm of communication was clear already in his early contributions to *New German Critique*, years before his *Theory of Communicative Action* was translated for an English audience in 1984. In this seminal text, Habermas describes the ideal of a social realm for communication that could be possible within a capitalist economy. Communicative rationality is defined as communication that is “oriented to achieving, sustaining and reviewing consensus – and indeed a consensus that rests on the intersubjective recognition of criticisable validity claims.” Communicative action is contrasted with purposive rational action. Habermas identifies purposive rational action, which is closely linked to instrumental rationality, as action orientated to profit and power rather than understanding, and with the rise of entrepreneurial capitalism, this has been the mode of action promoted in all spheres. Communicative action, on the other hand, is socially oriented: “The concept of communicative action presupposes the use of language as a medium for a kind of reaching understanding, in the course of which participants, through relating to the world, reciprocally raise validity claims that can be accepted or contested.” Thus, within communicative action, contested validity claims are thematised and attempts are then made to validate or criticize them in a systematic and rigorous way. While I am not suggesting that Holzer was intentionally attempting to create a Habermasian space for communicative action, Habermas' ideas were certainly circulating in the place and at the

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121 *Ibid.*, 221-244.
time that Holzer's *Sign on the Truck* was produced, and the result has an undeniable affinity to Habermas' modernist prescriptive theory.

Like Wodiczko's projection, Holzer's *Sign on a Truck* also has an essential educative component. However, unlike the former, the educative aspect of Holzer's *Sign* can clearly be identified as didactic in nature. Whereas Wodiczko is more concerned with a holistic approach to education (emphasizing the development of the individual citizen), Holzer's video (*qua* educative object) delivers particular messages to its viewers. This comes primarily in the form of the artists' short videos. Each has a point to convey to the audience regarding Reagan and his policies. Some of these have already been mentioned. For example, Barbara Kruger's comment on fear was directed specifically at the President: “A message to Mr. Reagan. / I have never met you / I have only seen you / joking on the T.V. / Why do you insult me? / Why do you pretend / you're acting in the movies? / I would like to meet you / so that I could tell you / that your actions scare me / Why don't you retire now / go back to your ranch and / forget about the world.” Keith Haring's contribution is one of the few that relies more on images than on text. His video presents the viewer with the artist working in real time, drawing a dancing elephant (a traditional symbol for the Republican Party) trampling people underfoot. One line of contextual text is added at the very end as Haring writes “Reagan 84” on the body of the elephant (figure 15). Holzer's own contribution of selected *Truisms* is also specifically didactic. Unlike the original incarnation of the *Truisms*, which were presented as a whole and thus “are a fairly accurate portrait of the way things are in the world because all these
conflicting opinions exist simultaneously,” once required to edit the statements down, she chose to focus on those which she thought “either deserved support or needed to be pointed out.”

Holzer might object to the characterization of the Sign on the Truck as didactic. As she has reaffirmed, the work is intended to create an opportunity for street-level political dialogue among citizens. Yet this authorial characterization is as limiting as Buchloh's, for it too neither accounts for, nor even allows for, the central educative component of the project. Just as Buchloh's Althusserian theoretical underpinnings do not allow room for Holzer's idealism, so too do Holzer's idealistic Habermasian underpinnings conceal the essential didactic aspect of the work.

The Sign's didactic nature is evident not only in its content, but also in its direction of those messages towards a particular audience. Holzer did not choose to position the trucks near one of the many housing projects in Harlem or the Bronx, for example. Rather, the trucks were strategically placed in Manhattan: downtown, with its high concentration of white-collar workers, and midtown, a commercial centre with high-priced real estate. Thus, the Sign addressed a very specific audience, intentionally exposing this sector of the population—the majority of whom were supporters of Reagan—to (more or less coherent) arguments that disparaged their great leader.

One could further argue that the inclusion of expressions of pro-Reagan opinions was itself a tactic in the producer's educative aims. If the typical audience member—white, male, Republican, stockbroker-type—was confronted exclusively with messages

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123 Ferguson, 68.  
124 Ibid., 70.  
125 Siegel, 64; Ferguson, 75.
that berated the political position with which he identified, it is unlikely that he would continue watching for long. Most people are not likely to passively stand by while being implicated in the destitution of the poor. Thus, by mixing the viewpoints of the interviewees and presenting what at least appears to be a sincere debate between the two opposing sides, Holzer was more likely to successfully entice passers-by to participate.

Finally, perhaps the most persistent didactic element appears in Mark Stahl’s message which flashes repeatedly throughout the course of the video: “Stop / Go / Think. / Now / Look / Listen / Vote.” Stahl's message resonated with Holzer enough to make it a dominant feature of the video: critical thought and critical engagement with one's environment should inform one's vote. And above all, voting is necessary. This message is just as illustrative of the times as are the messages that address the content of the President's platform. It is a reaction to a prevalent sentiment of desperation with the democratic process and a time when abstaining from that process was seen as an act of dissent. The woman waiting in line to collect grocery handouts who stated “Do you ever hear any politician talking about kids? Do you ever hear them talking about how much food is on the table?” followed this with “Well, since I'm not voting and whatnot, a lot of us is going to suffer.” One can only presume that the “us” who will suffer are those whose primary concerns involve getting food on the table—those who, the interviewee implies, do not appear on the President's radar. Her prediction that many people will suffer because she is not voting is indicative of a mode of protest that extends beyond this one citizen. We see it too in a young man who declares that if Jesse Jackson is not in the running, then he is not voting. For these protestors, the only vote that adequately reflects
their position is the non-vote: a protest to the system as a whole. It is in these non-voters that we, in fact, find manifest any persistent element of a Habermasian legitimation crisis.

However, Holzer's work shows that the true revolutionary impulse ends with these few. She and her collaborators were clearly working towards a re-education of those who were “better off” in 1984 than they were in 1980. Whether they were trying to affect the results of the upcoming election is not so clear, although it would have been foolish to think that they could. While the audience reach of the *Sign on a Truck* went well beyond the gallery-going public that was usually exposed to the artist-participants' work, its reach was not wide enough to mark a majority of voters in New York City, not to mention the rest of the country. Does this mean that the *Sign* was just a self-centred, gratuitous act? Perhaps. But more likely, Holzer was committed to the democratic ideals of freedom for open dialogue and debate (an aim of the work to which she would admit), as well as the belief that the ignorance of the rich on the issues of the poor needed to be eradicated (an aim she might not so readily reaffirm). Holzer commented that the *Sign on the Truck* was “community service with a dose of art in it.”126 But whether or not this work can be called “art” or not is not particularly relevant today. Rather, what this work exposes is a moment of sincere idealism and the timely sentiment that anything is possible. The pre-packaged American dream consisted of great wealth, big homes, fancy cars and glistening pools—a dream that started on Wall Street and was realized in the mall where happiness was within one's (buying) power. The *Sign* revealed that, while the content of the dream is different, politically-minded artists were just as influenced by this anything-

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126 Siegel, 65.
is-possible idealism. The precise message that Holzer attempted to convey through her *Sign* is somewhat ambiguous. The dominant message may be anti-Reagan, but it is far from exclusive. The *Sign*’s message is evasive by nature: think and vote. *Stop / Go / Think. / Now / Look / Listen / Vote.*
CONCLUSION

I have argued that the dominant reading of Jenny Holzer’s Sign on a Truck and Krzysztof Wodiczko’s AT&T projection, which emphasized a post-structuralist interpretation, has precluded a comprehensive interpretation of them as well as the larger movement in New York public art in the 1980s. Holzer and Wodiczko were both clearly influenced by the post-structuralist theories circulating at the time, and thus the critics have articulated important aspects of the artists’ respective practices. However, equally worthy of consideration are the educative aspects of both works; while Holzer’s sign sought a utopian democratic dialogue, Wodiczko’s projection reluctantly championed a modernist notion of the enlightened citizen. By shedding the post-structuralist lens that has coloured the art historical understanding of these works until now, I have opened these works to an analysis that can account for their inherent educative nature as well as a broader understanding not only of these two artists and their respective projects, but also of the defense being mounted by New York’s public artists against the “Reagan Revolution.” Furthermore, the thesis not only expands the critical scholarship of these two specific works but also expands the works themselves. Given their ephemeral nature, the AT&T projection and Sign on a Truck now exist only through memory, documentation and critical writing; once a new interpretation is offered, previously existent yet unacknowledged aspects of the works are made manifest.

The artists’ urge to educate the masses on the basis of perceived personal profound knowledge is suggestive of avant-garde tendencies, as was Wodiczko’s
renegade mode of presenting projections under the cover of the night. In line with strategies of the traditional military avant-garde, Wodiczko went out ahead, risking himself, perhaps sacrificing himself, for the sake of the masses of soldiers who would then be able to advance much farther than him because he cleared the way for their advancement. Wodiczko forged ahead, clearing a path for the citizens to move freely towards the goal of a better society, by providing the means to find their way to that society for themselves. The “means” are the critical tools needed to combat the current situation and forge through to the other side of the legitimation crisis, to a better society (and, by implication, better citizens).  

Like Wodiczko's AT&T projection, Holzer's collaborative work projects a viewer who will be enlightened by her participation in viewing. Although Sign on a Truck’s rejection of the meta-narrative is a defining characteristic of postmodernism, upon close consideration, we also see in the work, a commitment to the Enlightenment ideal of education that characterized not only this particular sign, but also the guise within which the contributing artists were working at that moment in the history of political art.

While a revisiting of the Enlightenment ideal of education brings with it, of course, the danger of paternalism, both Holzer and Wodiczko take measures to withstand this threat by avoiding a singular authoritative message: Holzer’s method is to allow room for multiple voices, while Wodiczko’s silence sets up a situation that prompts a critical questioning from his audience. At the same time, however, neither artist can avoid

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127 Oddly, Wodiczko never goes so far as to criticize the citizens in their current state. This, perhaps, could be explained by his past experience. Perhaps he sees citizens as blind, but at no fault of their own. They are manipulated by those in power. Perhaps this mirrors his observations in Soviet Poland, as well as his reflections on the situation his parents faced in Nazi-occupied Poland.
it entirely. One could argue that any move to educate will be necessarily accompanied by a certain level of paternalism. Even if the actor setting up the educative moment does not have a singular message intended to be bestowed on the subject, the very attitude that motivates an educative project—the belief that one “knows better” and is thus in a privileged position in relation to the subject—presumes paternalism. The question then becomes: which is less undesirable: a general lack of critical engagement or a paternalistic guidance towards critical thinking?

In the week preceding the 1984 presidential election, Holzer and Wodiczko presented public art works that addressed the election and were highly critical of President Reagan. While it is unlikely that either artist believed that he or she could affect the outcome of the election, this recognition of a limited impact was not an admission of impotency. They did not denounce the electoral system and they did not seek a political coup. Rather, they sought a modest revolution in critical public thought.
Figures

Figure 1
Krzysztof Wodiczko, AT&T projection, 33 Thomas Street, New York, NY, 1984. Figure 1 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It was a photograph documenting Krzysztof Wodiczko’s projection of Ronald Reagan’s hand, posed for the Pledge of Allegiance, on the side of the AT&T Long Lines Building in Manhattan. Original source: Hal Foster, Recodings: Art Spectacle, Cultural Politics (New York: Bay Press, 1985), front cover.
Figure 2
Jenny Holzer, *Sign on a Truck*, Grand Army Plaza, New York, NY, 1984. Figure 2 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It was a photograph documenting the installation of Jenny Holzer’s *Sign on a Truck*. It showed a Diamond Vision Mobile 2000 video screen mounted on the side of an 18-wheeler truck. The screen displayed the words “You Want to Live.” Original source: Jeanne Siegel, “Jenny Holzer’s Language Games,” *Arts Magazine* 60 (December 1985): 67.

Figure 3
Jenny Holzer, from *Truisms*, 1 Times Square, New York, NY, 1982. Figure 3 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It was a photograph documenting Jenny Holzer’s contribution to *Messages to the Public*. It showed the Spectacolor board on the front of the building at 1 Times Square. The screen displayed the words “Private Property Created Crime.” Original source: University of Minnesota Libraries, Digital Content Library, http://dcl.umn.edu/search/show_details?search_string=Jenny%20Holzer&per_page=60&&page=40
Figure 4
Alfredo Jaar, *Logo for America*, 1 Times Square, New York, NY, 1987. Figure 4 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It was a photograph documenting Alfredo Jaar’s contribution to *Messages to the Public*. It showed the Spectacolor board on the front of the building at 1 Times Square. The screen displayed an outline of the continental United States of America, overwritten with the words “This is Not America.” Original source: Alfredo Jaar Studio Digital Archives, http://www.alfredojaar.net/download/images/ios/zips/logoforamerica/logo004.tif.zip
Figure 5
CBS advertisement on New York City subway train, 1984. Figure 5 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It was a photograph of the interior of a New York City subway car, featuring an advertising poster for the CBS News. It pictured a head-shot of an anchorwoman, with overwritten text stating “If it concerns you, it concerns us.” Original source: Alfredo Jaar Studio Digital Archives, http://www.alfredojaar.net/downloadimages/ios/zips/you_us/yous001.tif.zip

Figure 6
Alfredo Jaar, You and Us, New York, NY, 1984. Figure 6 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It was a photograph documenting the installation of Alfredo Jaar’s You and Us. It pictured a poster installed by Jaar in a New York City subway car, featuring a head-shot of a CBS news anchor, with overwritten text stating “If it concerns us, it concerns you.” Original source: Alfredo Jaar Studio Digital Archives, http://www.alfredojaar.net/downloadimages/ios/zips/you_us/yous003.tif.zip
Figure 7
Figure 8
Hans Haacke, *MOMA Poll*, 1970. Figure 8 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It was a photograph documenting the installation of Hans Haacke’s MOMA Poll at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. It showed two Plexiglas ballot boxes with a sign posted above, stating, “Question: Would the fact that Governor Rockefeller has not denounced President Nixon’s Indochina policy be a reason for you not to vote for him in November? Answer: If ‘yes’ please cast your ballot into the left box; if ‘no’ into the right box.” A woman is pictured depositing a ballot into the left box, which contains approximately twice as many ballots as the left. Original source: Columbia University, Mnemosyne: Visual Culture Database, http://www.mcah.columbia.edu/dbcourses/publicportfolio.cgi?view=245#
Figure 9
AT&T advertisement, *New York Times Magazine*, June 3, 1984. Figure 9 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It was a reproduction of an AT&T advertisement. The ad’s banner read “Some of the masterpieces of tomorrow are on exhibit today. ‘An International Survey of Recent Painting and Sculpture’ May 17-August 7. AT&T is sponsoring the exhibition that will open the newly expanded Museum of Modern Art. The works on display for this modern art event, most produced within the last five years, have been selected from 16 countries around the world. Among them may be some of tomorrow’s classics. Come judge for yourself. This exhibition is part of AT&T’s continuing commitment to bring you great art and great artists.” Original source: Douglas Crimp, “The Art of Exhibition,” *October* 30 (Autumn 1984): 77.
Figure 10
Figure 11
Jenny Holzer, *Sign on a Truck*, 1984. Figure 11 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It was a photograph documenting the installation of Jenny Holzer’s *Sign on a Truck*. It showed a Diamond Vision Mobile 2000 video screen mounted on the side of an 18-wheeler truck. In the foreground a man was being interviewed, as the interview was projected live on the screen in the background. Original source: “Public Address: ‘Sign on a Truck,’” *Art in America* 73 (January 1985): 90.
Figure 12
Jenny Holzer, from *Inflammatory Essays*, 1979-1982. Figure 12 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It was a reproduction of a poster of one section of Jenny Holzer’s *Inflammatory Essays*, stating “Don’t talk to me. Don’t be polite to me. Don’t try to make me feel nice. Don’t relax. I’ll cut the smile off your face. You think I don’t know what’s going on. You think I’m afraid to react. The joke’s on you. I’m biding my time, looking for the spot. You think no one can reach you, no one can have what you have. I’ve been planning while you’re playing. I’ve been saving while you’re spending. The game is almost over so it’s time you acknowledge me. Do you want to fall not ever knowing who took you?” Original source: University of Minnesota Libraries, Digital Content Library, http://dcl.umn.edu/search/search_results?search_string=Jenny%20Holzer&per_page=60&&&page=2
Figure 13
Jenny Holzer, from Truisms, 1982. Figure 13 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It was a photograph documenting one version of Jenny Holzer’s Truisms series. It depicted graffiti artist Lady Pink wearing a t-shirt with the words “Abuse of power comes as no surprise.” Original source: Jeanne Siegel, “Jenny Holzer’s Language Games,” Arts Magazine 60 (December 1985): 67.
Figure 14
From Mark Stahl’s contribution to: Jenny Holzer, *Sign on a Truck*, 1984. Figure 14 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It was a photograph documenting the screen from Jenny Holzer’s *Sign on a Truck*, displaying the word “Vote.” Original source: University of Minnesota Libraries, Digital Content Library, http://dcl.umn.edu/search/search_results?search_string=Jenny%20Holzer&per_page=60

Figure 15
From Keith Haring’s contribution to: Jenny Holzer, *Sign on a Truck*, 1984. Figure 15 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It was a photograph documenting the screen from Jenny Holzer’s *Sign on a Truck*, displaying a cartoon drawing of an elephant, with “Reagan 84” written on his body, trampling people underfoot. Original source: University of Minnesota Libraries, Digital Content Library, http://dcl.umn.edu/search/search_results?search_string=Jenny%20Holzer&per_page=60
Works Cited


