

The Abolition of War by Krzysztof Wodiczko (excerpt)

THE ABOLITION OF WAR

What are the ways in which art can play an analytical, critical, visionary, and proactive part in the process of post-war recovery and reconstruction, in disarmament and the transformation of our war-bound traditions and cultures? Can artists contribute to the practical work of conflict resolution and other peace-building projects? In seeking a positive response to these and other questions, the following text is my further elaboration on the Culture of War—its serious role in perpetuating wars, the need to publically deconstruct and dismantle it, the potential role of art and artists in such a task, and my own specific focus on war memorials as one of many contributions to the proposed larger cultural un-war agenda.

NOTE

1. Claske Dijkema, referencing John Galtung, *Peace by Peaceful Means: Peace and Conflict, Development and Civilization* (London: Sage, 1996). See <http://www.irenees.net/en/fiches/notions/fiche-notions-186.html> (accessed 30 January 2012).

THE CULTURE OF WAR

THE CULTURE OF WAR

War has generated a distinctive culture. Processes of preparing for, waging, and commemorating war are seen as “essential elements of history, rooted in psychology”, admired and joined in as a martial cultural tradition that with the intensity of its emotions remains central to the lives of those who participate in it.¹ The motivation to fight and die in war is perpetuated by a Culture of War that manifests itself through uniforms, war games, parades, military decorations, and war memorials (including statues and shrines, triumphal arches, cenotaphs, victory columns, and other commemorations of the dead); the creation of war art and military art, martial music, and war museums; and the popular fascination with weapons, war toys, violent video and computer games, battle reenactments, collectibles, and military history and literature.

The Culture of War make men and women face death willingly, even enthusiastically. War is a destructive, self-destructive, and masochistic mass operation, and the Culture of War reinforces its social pathology and its function as “an end in itself”.² The Culture of War helps to orchestrate war as collective madness. Through culture and art, war is understood, perceived, and felt as not what it is—that is, a psychotic, grandiose, paranoid mass behavior—but as a just, admirable, and noble mission and destiny. It is in many

ways through culture and art that 'we' (and our leaders) are seen and heard, imagined, and idealized as 'good', even superhuman, while 'they'—others, the enemy (and their leaders)—are depicted as 'evil', demonized and deprived of humanity, and regarded as animals or 'subhuman'.

It is with the indispensable help of the art of the Culture of War that "our psychotic parts are merged into group identity, and we do not feel mad since our views are sanctioned by the group", and we "can free ourselves of guilt by allowing the group to sanction aggression which in an individual would be unforgivable".³ The workings of the art of the Culture of War permit, endorse, and encourage us to act "in a way which in an individual would be called mad".⁴ The Culture of War splits our souls, as its manifestations are "despised and regularly denigrated as atavistic and irrational", while secretly or openly embraced and celebrated.⁵ Art, as an essential part of such a culture, tends to reinforce this split by positioning itself on one side or another.

Some facts are so large that we do not see them. The largest such fact is that war poses a mortal danger to our civilization. This situation is the result of our tolerance, passivity, and silence in the face of the continuing international legality and popular acceptance of the Culture of War. Such silence and passivity is closely related to our denial, blaming of others, and inadequate effort in taking deconstructive and constructive actions toward war. It all leads us to the point of nuclear war annihilation. Public attitudes are a symptom of the split condition in which we claim a critical stand against war while paying taxes that

support war and enjoying war parades and war films, with their necro-orgiastic war spectacles.

The struggle between two human instincts: one proactive that bonds us, called "eros", and an aggressive, destructive instinct, is close to being mortally resolved by giving victory to our self-destructive side—our "death wish". Our collective cultural superego, of which Freud wrote in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, has been reinforced for too long by misguided nationalistic 'high conscience,' a religious-military-nationalistic duty to offer our lives to "just" war. The Culture of War is a dangerous weapon in an armory of such a collective cultural superego.

THE UN-WAR

I prefer the terms "un-war" and "peacemaking" to the word "peace," because peace is not a simple matter. In making it, one must first confront the social and cultural phenomenon of war and recognize how war is entrenched in our singular and collective minds. Un-war is the new state of mind that enables the process of understanding, uncovering, and undoing war. It implies that the war exists as something hidden within us that should be brought symbolically and culturally to our singular consciousness before it erupts outward as bloody conflict. The other implication of the term un-war is that war is an old state of mind and a mental condition installed in us from without, through the Culture of War.

In this context, the primary task in transforming a war-bound world into a war-free civilization is to create a new

consciousness and a new culture—the consciousness of war and the Culture of Un-War. In other words, if we wish to challenge the drive toward war that seems hidden in our unconscious (a matter of mostly the id)—imposed on us through the Culture of War (as part of the workings of the collective cultural superego)—the un-war must aim at the creation of a new civilized consciousness and cultural practice (a matter of the ego) as a project that enforces our critical self-guard against the psychosocial pressures of war ideology. In this way, the war desires, psychological war projections, soul splitting, and our destructive and self-destructive impulses and instincts will no longer be easily unleashed.

Unfortunately, the dismantling of the Culture of War is not included in most global and regional peace proposals. Most proposals are based on technical, political, diplomatic, and economic approaches to a step-by-step reduction of the possibility of armed conflict, without emphasizing the need to develop a similar step-by-step methodology for larger cultural transformative work, without which war will never end. Peacekeeping forces cannot be effective in transforming cultures. Efforts toward mediation, peace enforcement, collective security, global governance, world security (Grenville Clark's and Louis Sohn's proposal for world law, and Richard Falk's plan for radical change), a reduction in military deployments, and general and complete disarmament have barely mentioned art and pedagogy, neglecting the need for cultural and educational work in re-examining national histories, rewriting misleading textbooks, and critically re-interpreting nationalist and chauvinistic literature, films, music, visual arts, and theater.⁶ In challenging the 'ready-

to-die-in-war-against-others' notion of one's national identity, such work should also examine and counter the continuing impact of national monuments, war memorials, and related commemorative ceremonies.

All previous plans to end war—not merely curtail particular conflicts—including the most informed, complex, and articulate ones, have failed to be adopted. We must act despite such failure, and do so even more urgently because of it. There is no time for waiting. Scientists cannot wait for support and coordinated actions from politicians. Social organizations and social movements cannot easily be synchronized. Legal work toward un-war and the International Court of Justice cannot wait for each other to move on. Artists also cannot wait for actions by others. We must all act now, even if 'out of sync'. This may become our strength. Developing a new way of imagining the un-war may lead to new perceptions and new actions and new experiences. This is our task.

Putting an end to war is a bloodless form of revolution involving various theoretical and practical disciplines such as technology, media, law, politics, socio-psychology, psychoanalysis, anthropology, philosophy, and cultural and artistic production, but we all must act in 'out of sync' mode. Our potential for making change, our capacity for critical intuition and thought, our proactive imagination, our experience in effecting cultures, our skills in working with people on socio-aesthetic projects—these strengths need no central plan to be unleashed. As artists we may, however, inspire others to act.

The practice of civil disobedience, whether in an international context or within one country, has been more

effective than any tightly coordinated plans, as shown in Indian efforts to obtain liberation from British rule, and in U.S. draft resistance and the popular anti-Vietnam War movement and Civil Rights culture of the 1960s. These events helped spread the non-violent ideas of Buddha, Thoreau, Tolstoy, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King. To survive, our civilization needs every possible assistance from such activists and philosophers, as well as artists, and a willingness to think beyond what has previously been possible. It needs to support our collective eros, develop a means of open and bloodless communication of human disagreement to counter the continuing challenge of war that comes from human aggressive instincts, and overcome fear to confront the real danger—the danger of the end of our living world.

ARTISTS AND THE CULTURE OF WAR

War must be abolished. It must be made illegal and treated as a criminal act. As war is ignited and maintained by the present-day operation and tradition of the Culture of War, such a culture must be challenged by analytical and proactive counter-practices—disrupted and questioned and kept at a critical distance, especially from young people. How can art contribute to undoing the Culture of War and transforming it into a new un-war culture? How could it contribute to the development of creative conflict and bloodless, agonistic democratic discourse rather

than repressed and managed “peace” that is always loaded with the potential for renewed explosions of war aggression? It may well be said that the matter cannot be addressed by acting within any one field, much less by cultural and artistic engagement alone. For war to be abolished, political scientists and war and peace analysts say, many steps will need to be taken, and they admit that there is no agreement as to which ones would be most effective—and so none are implemented.

Not unlike the abolition of slavery (which took 300 years of difficult work to accomplish), the abolition of war is a complex project—political and judicial, as well as cultural and artistic. It must become the great challenge to the Culture of War. Yet for many ‘intuitive’ artists, driven by the pleasure principle, the building of consciousness goes against their artistic mindset and tradition. Consciousness-building or consciousness transformation and art making is for many artists a difficult if not impossible marriage. Mixing social consciousness and artistic intuition seems a contradiction to some, but the most challenging art, the art that has contributed to social and cultural change, has always come from such a marriage and such a mixture. In fact, consciousness and art is potentially a revolutionary mixture and an essential part of a revolutionary process. As with social, political, racial, and sexual inequality, repression for some while freedom for others—such as man’s domination over women and the long-held right to treat others as personal property—was seen for centuries as something natural, a part of human nature. Like the eighteenth century democratic revolutions, the eighteenth