



CITY OF REFUGE

A 9/11 MEMORIAL

KRZYSZTOF
WODICZKO

EDITED BY

MARK JARZOMBK
MECHTILD WIDRICH

black dog
publishing

MARK JARZOMBEK

THE CIVILIAN AND THE CRISIS OF THE UTOPIAN MONUMENT

I would like to raise two questions regarding Krzysztof Wodiczko's *City of Refuge*. Who are the inhabitants of this city, and what is the theoretical status of that population? I will try to address these questions by pointing to what I believe is a subtext of Wodiczko's urban vision—the distinction between a 'citizen' and a 'civilian'.¹

The word "civilian" underwent several revisions in the past centuries. In its original meaning it referred to the lawyers who specialized in civil law. During the English colonialization of India, it came to refer to the English-born administrative personnel and their families. In the nineteenth century, with the development of the armed forces into self-contained military entities, the word was expanded to embrace non-military people in a more general sense.² Following the Second World War, the word became a type of cultural imaginary. Civilians were seen as society's constitutive fabric, existing ideally in a natural state of peacefulness. This redefinition was a consequence of the Fourth Geneva Convention, 1949–1950, whose aim was to set forth protocols that could save lives during times of war. The implicit hypothesis was that after hostilities had ceased, civilians were to be the essential component of a return to normalcy.³ Military conflict represented disruption, whereas the civilian world represented continuity.

The new concept of a 'civilian' challenges the traditional concept of the 'citizen' that arose

during the Napoleonic era when citizenship, nationalism, and warfare came to be fused into a potent mix. A citizen in that sense was more than just a legal personage with voting privileges; it was assumed that he possessed a positive relationship to the state. Since he had to be willing to die for his country, he was accorded a different type of death than his predecessor. Tombstones were no longer decorated with skull and bones—indicating the immanent and perhaps not all too pleasant reckoning—but with smiling angels and historical references to Egypt, and set in tranquil wooded parks. Even though the industrialization of war and the advancements in chemistry made the slaughter of humans all the easier, the basic equation of citizenship, heroism and death—and, of course, the monument as a site of positive national reflection—remained intact. It is still, globally, the dominant component of national politics.

Nonetheless, the post-Second World War conceptualization of the 'civilian' introduced a new term into global political equations. Whereas the 'citizen' is by definition guilty by association, the 'civilian' is assumed to be disengaged from a body politic and perhaps even a victim of it. The line between a civilian and a refugee is all too thin. In this scenario, the civilian is not only a non-combatant but a non-citizen as well. The Convention insists that people in internment camps receive regular mail, get care packages, and be given adequate clothing. But nowhere does it say that they have any political or

representational rights. There is one world of perpetrators, another of innocents, and a third of United Nations observers. Because of the negative images associated with refugees, the post-Second World War definition of 'civilian' does not threaten the embedded structures of citizenship. It brings to mind images of crowds of people clogging bridges, abandoned children crying on the roadside, and the elderly hugging blankets and huddling in hastily erected tents. In short, what we often see is humanity torn from its moorings. Such images make it difficult to extend the principle of the 'civilian' into a utopian project, for—unlike citizens who are assumed to be fully enabled members of society carrying guns and legally entrusted with the task of killing the enemy—the civilian is projected into the role of an apolitical entity with no implicit powers except perhaps survival.

Krzysztof Wodiczko's City of Refuge asks us, so I argue, to go past this negative image. The city is not merely protected from the structured arbitrariness of violence—any Red Cross shelter can do that—but is a locality where a new type of urban civility can take root. People will talk to each other not as members of the UN, not as ambassadors speaking ostensibly for the rights of their constituents, not as 'protectors' of the innocent, not as desperate refugees, and especially not as 'citizens', but as individuals addressing each other in the context of agonistically-framed discussions that aim to optimize the opportunity for people to express their disagreement.

There is a hidden complexity in this urban encounter that needs to be factored into the discussion. It stems from the fact that civilians—despite the attempt to construe them as innocents—are not neutral entities. The Convention seems to address this issue by acknowledging the potential presence of spies and saboteurs. "Such persons shall, in those cases where absolute military security so requires, be regarded as having forfeited rights of communication under the present Convention."⁴ This is the least of the problems with the designation 'civilian'.

Along with the leftovers of their lives—the Convention allows all refugees to have 25 kilograms of baggage—civilians carry with them the concealed weight of psychological trauma.⁵ Initially, in the 1980s, it was thought that trauma affected only the combatants. And indeed, most of the early post-Vietnam research into the impact of war on the human psyche focused on men in uniform. But recently, there has been a growing amount of research with respect to the traumatic impact of war episodes on the civilian population. These studies were so belated in the history of psychoanalysis—given that terror is so obviously embedded in modern life—that one researcher has accused psychoanalysis of having had a type of 'amnesia' in dealing with the phenomenon.⁶ He pointed out that it took three horrific wars—the First World War, the Second World War and the Vietnam War—and numerous holocausts, mass murders, forced migrations, and civilian

transgressions, before the psychological impact of terror on civilian populations was recognized by the scientific community.⁷ In fact, even when post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was first defined in the early 1980s, it was still thought to be something "outside the range of usual human experience", reserved for war veterans or sexual abuse victims. In other words, if we think of the millennia of human aggression, it is only in the last ten years or so that 'the civilian' has come to be seen as psychologically as well as physically abused! Even the Geneva Convention, which took place before the era of PTSD, makes no mention of people's psychological needs. The reason for the amnesia had a lot to do with the fact that non-combatants were not expected to be traumatized. Women and children—as 'innocents' and as thus conceptually removed from the guilt of war—could not possibly be psychologically burdened by the events around them. That was reserved for those who put their lives on the line. Today we see the world differently. In fact, PTSD is now ranked along with cancer and heart disease as the third most serious and debilitating problem in the US.⁸ A recent article in *The Boston Globe*, entitled "Battling a Different Kind of War", discussed decommissioned soldiers (and thus civilians) who bring their emotional battles into the domestic sphere.⁹ The family unit has become a sleeper cell disguising and magnifying traumatic memory. This means that the 'civilian' has expanded from being the site of post-military, social stability—as the utopian subtext of

during the Napoleonic era when citizenship, nationalism, and warfare came to be fused into a potent mix. A citizen in that sense was more than just a legal personage with voting privileges; it was assumed that he possessed a positive relationship to the state. Since he had to be willing to die for his country, he was accorded a different type of death than his predecessor. Tombstones were no longer decorated with skull and bones—indicating the immanent and perhaps not all too pleasant reckoning—but with smiling angels and historical references to Egypt, and set in tranquil wooded parks. Even though the industrialization of war and the advancements in chemistry made the slaughter of humans all the easier, the basic equation of citizenship, heroism and death—and, of course, the monument as a site of positive national reflection—remained intact. It is still, globally, the dominant component of national politics.

Nonetheless, the post-Second World War conceptualization of the 'civilian' introduced a new term into global political equations. Whereas the 'citizen' is by definition guilty by association, the 'civilian' is assumed to be disengaged from a body politic and perhaps even a victim of it. The line between a civilian and a refugee is all too thin. In this scenario, the civilian is not only a non-combatant but a non-citizen as well. The Convention insists that people in internment camps receive regular mail, get care packages, and be given adequate clothing. But nowhere does it say that they have any political or

representational rights. There is one world of perpetrators, another of innocents, and a third of United Nations observers. Because of the negative images associated with refugees, the post-Second World War definition of 'civilian' does not threaten the embedded structures of citizenship. It brings to mind images of crowds of people clogging bridges, abandoned children crying on the roadside, and the elderly hugging blankets and huddling in hastily erected tents. In short, what we often see is humanity torn from its moorings. Such images make it difficult to extend the principle of the 'civilian' into a utopian project, for—unlike citizens who are assumed to be fully enabled members of society carrying guns and legally entrusted with the task of killing the enemy—the civilian is projected into the role of an apolitical entity with no implicit powers except perhaps survival.

Krzysztof Wodiczko's City of Refuge asks us, so I argue, to go past this negative image. The city is not merely protected from the structured arbitrariness of violence—any Red Cross shelter can do that—but is a locality where a new type of urban civility can take root. People will talk to each other not as members of the UN, not as ambassadors speaking ostensibly for the rights of their constituents, not as 'protectors' of the innocent, not as desperate refugees, and especially not as 'citizens', but as individuals addressing each other in the context of agonistically-framed discussions that aim to optimize the opportunity for people to express their disagreement.

There is a hidden complexity in this urban encounter that needs to be factored into the discussion. It stems from the fact that civilians—despite the attempt to construe them as innocents—are not neutral entities. The Convention seems to address this issue by acknowledging the potential presence of spies and saboteurs. “Such persons shall, in those cases where absolute military security so requires, be regarded as having forfeited rights of communication under the present Convention.”⁴ This is the least of the problems with the designation ‘civilian’.

Along with the leftovers of their lives—the Convention allows all refugees to have 25 kilograms of baggage—civilians carry with them the concealed weight of psychological trauma.⁵ Initially, in the 1980s, it was thought that trauma affected only the combatants. And indeed, most of the early post-Vietnam research into the impact of war on the human psyche focused on men in uniform. But recently, there has been a growing amount of research with respect to the traumatic impact of war episodes on the civilian population. These studies were so belated in the history of psychoanalysis—given that terror is so obviously embedded in modern life—that one researcher has accused psychoanalysis of having had a type of ‘amnesia’ in dealing with the phenomenon.⁶ He pointed out that it took three horrific wars—the First World War, the Second World War and the Vietnam War—and numerous holocausts, mass murders, forced migrations, and civilian

transgressions, before the psychological impact of terror on civilian populations was recognized by the scientific community.⁷ In fact, even when post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was first defined in the early 1980s, it was still thought to be something “outside the range of usual human experience”, reserved for war veterans or sexual abuse victims. In other words, if we think of the millennia of human aggression, it is only in the last ten years or so that ‘the civilian’ has come to be seen as psychologically as well as physically abused! Even the Geneva Convention, which took place before the era of PTSD, makes no mention of people’s psychological needs. The reason for the amnesia had a lot to do with the fact that non-combatants were not expected to be traumatized. Women and children—as ‘innocents’ and as thus conceptually removed from the guilt of war—could not possibly be psychologically burdened by the events around them. That was reserved for those who put their lives on the line. Today we see the world differently. In fact, PTSD is now ranked along with cancer and heart disease as the third most serious and debilitating problem in the US.⁸ A recent article in *The Boston Globe*, entitled “Battling a Different Kind of War”, discussed decommissioned soldiers (and thus civilians) who bring their emotional battles into the domestic sphere.⁹ The family unit has become a sleeper cell disguising and magnifying traumatic memory. This means that the ‘civilian’ has expanded from being the site of post-military, social stability—as the utopian subtext of

civilizational resiliency—into an ambiguous project of social contamination, creating a new class of people composed of citizens/civilians who live with the threat that—though ‘non-combatants’—they could easily become combatants of a sort, fighting not men and machines, but the elusive ghosts that accompany the shockwaves of history. Thus the term “civilian” contains in its meaning, on the one hand, a society presumed to be in a natural state of peacefulness, and, on the other hand, a society that is irrevocably at the mercy of the brutal aftereffects of modern warfare. Unlike the citizen who lives at peace or at war, the civilian is a negative dialectical construction, a non-combatant irrevocably tied to the realities of combat. The civilian is sucked into the core traumas of our shared history, inflecting and infecting citizenship itself. And at any moment, the civilian in this equation can bring into the open what the citizen by definition must deny: the gruesome legacy of war.

The result is a sociopolitical territory with its own economy of production and its own politics of identification, in other words, its own culture, redefining the everyday ebb and flow of life, death and memory. But whereas the citizen is represented on the world stage by the UN, the civilian—apart from the remote and simplistic ambitions of the Fourth Geneva Convention—has no representation. Whereas the first is honored by monuments that identify the centrality of patriotic sacrifice, the latter has nothing, except where slaughtered by

thousands or millions; civilians get recognition only if their murder figures into a nationalist purpose, in other words where the history of their events can be exploited to quicken the pulse of citizenship. Some societies have acknowledged their guilt and complicity in the death and traumatization of civilians, but others have not done so and never will. The reason is the tendency to prefer a radical reduction of meaning and to see terror through the language of aggressor and victim, of action and repair, and of evil and good. But if we look to the further reaches of brutality’s shockwave, we encounter a different and more diffuse cultural landscape where violence is more insidious, where ‘civilianness’ and its surging traumatic impulses appear and disappear underneath the enforced civilizational certainties of citizenship.

Krzysztof Wodiczko’s City of Refuge—in the form of a giant sphere floating in the Hudson River—addresses this cultural transformation. In that sense, it looks not so much to the past—to the shock of 9/11—but to a future. It is not a floating artwork or a counterculture community of fellowship and love, but a place where one leaves the romance and the hardened and failed world of citizenship for the ambiguous and novel world filled with ghost-like uncertainties. One could contrast this sphere with the giant golden sphere of Auroville, India, in which one is expected to meditate and seek personal tranquility. Auroville was founded in 1968 with the support of UNESCO in order “to realize human unity—

in diversity".¹⁰ According to its promotional brochure it is a place where "men and women of all countries are able to live in peace and progressive harmony above all creeds, all politics and all nationalities".¹¹ The Auroville sphere is designed to assist individuals in this. It serves as a place where residents can sit and meditate in silence. But this does not remove the 'citizen' from the ontology of its inhabitants. In fact, regardless of the inner humanity that can be perhaps found inside the sphere, outside of it, in the city, individuals are assumed to implicitly 'represent' their country. This activity is magnified by the fact that there are no urban institutions in the conventional sense. Anyone can build any kind of house he wants, anywhere.

The City of Refuge asks for something more difficult, namely that citizenship be removed long enough to expose not the much longed-for universal subject of 'humanity', but a world in which the impossibility of pure civilianship is acknowledged and expressed. It critiques both the ideology of the citizen and the ideology of the pure civilian. In the process it acknowledges that civilians will bring with them their various traumas and combats. Instead of suppressing institutions, as in Auroville, trauma in the City of Refuge is tempered by a range of institutions, a 'situation room', an agora, and a broadcast center—placed on top of each other in the sphere and held together by facilities for historical, philosophical and cross-disciplinary study of the conditions and forms of terrorism

and terror. The globe is fully modern (verging on the postmodern), accepting the interplay of combatant and non-combatant realities as well as free and processed speech.

The City of Refuge is not accusatory in the traditional, avant-gardist sense. Its 'apoliticalness' could strike one, in fact, as all too passive. But seen through the lens of the citizen/civilian dialectic, the city pulses with productive impossibility. Its inhabitants constitute a conundrum. On the one hand, they embody a mode of freedom. On the other hand, they have survived where others did not. The city is not a place of 'healing' but rather a place that challenges forth—despite its idealism—the telling, recording and broadcasting of tragedy. It forces the dual genealogies of trauma and history into the open. Trauma, which had been set adrift into the common culture by the instruments of the state—by its citizens/combatants—is brought back to its finitude by non-citizens/civilians (combatants) in the moment at which its limits seem to disappear. For this to work itself out, it needs its own place—its own utopia.

1. See also Mark Jarzombek, "The Post-Traumatic Turn and the Art of Walid Ra'ad and Krzysztof Wodiczko: From Theory to Trope and Beyond", *Trauma and Visuality in Modernity*, Lisa Saltzman and Eric Rosenberg eds, Lebanon: Dartmouth College Press/University Press of New England, 2006, pp. 249–260.

2. For a discussion of the emergence of the modern war see David A Bell, *The First Total War*,

Napoleon's Europe and the Birth of Warfare as We Know It, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2007. In the 1830s, the term "civilian" had become, as the famous English author Thomas De Quincey put it, "fashionable". See for example, Thomas De Quincey, "Richard Bentley", *The Works of Thomas De Quincey*, Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1863.

3. This should not be confused with the better-known Third Geneva Convention, which deals with the treatment of prisoners of war.
4. Part I, Article 5, the Fourth Geneva Convention, August 12, 1949.
5. Chapter X, Article 128.
6. See Bessel A van der Kolk, Lars Weisaeth, and Onno van der Hart, "History of Trauma in Psychiatry", in *Traumatic Stress*, Bessel A van Kolk, Alexander C McFarlane, and Lars Weisaeth eds, New York: Guilford Press, 1996, p. 67.
7. Even when the need to come to terms with civilian trauma was recognized, the scientific community still proceeded cautiously. American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Psychiatric Disorders*, vol. 3 (DSM-III), Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 1980, p. 236. This manual is one of the earliest attempts to codify the diagnostic criteria of post-traumatic stress disorder. An important book regarding Vietnam veterans is *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: A Handbook for Clinicians*, Tom Williams ed., Cincinnati: Disabled American Veterans, 1987.
8. According to Ronald Kessler, a Professor of Health Care Policy at Harvard Medical School, research in the US suggests that 38 percent of people with PTSD are in treatment in a given year. The majority of these patients (28 percent of cases and 75 percent of those in treatment) are cared for in the medical sector of the treatment system, while the rest are in the human services sector (i.e. seen by spiritual counselors or social workers) or the self-help sector. Approximately 22 percent of those with PTSD (58 percent of those in treatment) are in treatment with a psychiatrist, clinical psychologist, or other mental health professional. See Ronald C Kessler, "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: The Burden to the Individual and to Society", in www.lawandpsychiatry.com. Furthermore, it is estimated that 20 million adults in the US suffer from depression each year, and up to 25 percent of all women and up to 12 percent of all men in the US experience an episode of major depression at some time in their lives.
9. Peter Schworm, "Battling a Different Kind of War", *The Boston Globe*, Saturday, May 2, 2009.
10. http://www.auroville.org/av_brief.htm, May 2009.
11. <http://www.auroville.org>, May 2009.