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Projection art project will have everyone looking up at Montreal's homeless

BY MARIAN SCOTT, MONTREAL GAZETTE OCTOBER 6, 2014



Artists Isabelle Hayeur and Krzysztof Wodiczko at the Musée d'Art Contemporain de Montréal on Monday, Oct. 6, 2014. Wodiczko, along with homeless people at St. Michael's Mission, has created a multimedia project where the voices and images of the homeless who frequent downtown Montreal will be projected on Theatre Maisonneuve at Place des Arts every evening for more than a month starting Wednesday, Oct. 8, 2014.

Photograph by: Vincenzo D'Alto , THE GAZETTE

We usually look down at them. Or through them, as if they were invisible.

But for once, artist Krzysztof Wodiczko wants us to look up at the homeless individuals who people our downtown streets.

For the next six weeks, Montrealers will be able to view Wodiczko's latest creation: video images of 21 itinerant Montrealers projected on the tiered roof of Théâtre Maisonneuve in Place des Arts.

The public art project — part of the Montreal Biennale art festival — will be launched Wednesday at 6:30 p.m.

Wodiczko, an internationally renowned contemporary artist based in New York, Boston and Warsaw, Poland, has produced more than 80 projections on architectural landmarks from Australia to Germany to Mexico. He hopes the projection will inspire citizens to see the homeless differently and influence governments to implement new policies that harness the power of art to reach out to those living on society's margins.

WHO:

Born in Warsaw during the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, the gray-haired, pony-tailed Wodiczko, 71, immigrated to Canada in 1977, a year after he became an artist-in-residence at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. He moved to New York in 1983. His practice, known as Interrogative Design, combines art and technology to deliver hard-hitting political and social messages.

In 1980, he started producing the pioneering, large-scale projections that have earned him international fame. In 1985, he projected a swastika onto the façade of South Africa House in Trafalgar Square in London during the apartheid debate. Days before the 1984 United States election, he projected an image of Ronald Reagan's hand and cuff linked wrist in New York's financial district.

Some of his works explore the trauma of war by incorporating the voices of veterans and civilians along with images including candles, weapons and corporate logos.

Wodiczko is currently a professor-in-residence at the Harvard Graduate School of Design.

WHAT:

To produce Homeless Projection: Place des Arts, Wodiczko worked in close cooperation with homeless people and staff at St. Michael's Mission, a community organization based in St. John the Evangelist Church, the Anglican church with the red roof near Place des Arts.

The work was co-produced by the Musée d'art contemporain and management of the Quartier des Spectacles as a highlight of the Biennale, a major contemporary-art festival that will present 150 works by 50 artists and collectives from Canada and around the world.

While the 14-minute video is projected on Théâtre Maisonneuve, speakers will play audio from the 21 participants, who talk about their lives and perceptions.

A second work — Murs aveugles (blind walls) by artist Isabelle Hayeur, will project images of graffiti and the 2011 Occupy movement onto a wall next to St-Laurent métro station

WHEN:

The two projections will be launched Wednesday at 6:30 p.m., rain or shine, and will be displayed Wednesday through Sunday, starting at nightfall, until Nov. 22.

Wednesday's launch will start in front of the Théâtre Maisonneuve, and move to St-Laurent Blvd. to view Murs Aveugles.

The Biennale de Montréal runs from Oct. 22 to Jan. 4.

WHERE:

Homeless Projection outside Théâtre Maisonneuve, 175 Ste-Catherine St. W., will be visible from the south side of Place des Arts.

The Biennale will take place at the Musée d'art contemporain, 185 Ste-Catherine St. W., and at 12 participating galleries and artist-run cooperatives. For more information, visit bnlmtl2014.org and macm.org

WHY:

Wodiczko said he got the idea for Homeless Projection after interviewing illegal immigrants in Switzerland, Italy and Poland. Like illegal immigrants, the homeless inhabit the same space as other city-dwellers "but we don't really see them," he said at a press briefing at the contemporary art museum on Monday.

"The issue here is to recognize people as human beings, especially ones who seem to be invisible, of whom we don't ask questions," he said.

While tourists and local residents throng the Quartier des Spectacles, few spare a thought for the itinerants who are its most regular denizens, he said.

"Just for a moment to give the possibility to be visible, to be heard, it's important," said Wodiczko, who quoted German-American political theorist Hannah Arendt as saying that without visibility, equality is impossible.

Taking part in the video project was a kind of art therapy for participants — and it will also be a form of therapy for the supposedly healthy people who view it, he said.

"We are like students, people who should learn," he said.

Wodiczko said working on the project gave him an entirely different view of Montreal "because I see it through the eyes and experiences of those who chose to be part of the project."