



Review: Street Performance: The Homeless Vehicle Project

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# Exhibition Review

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## Street Performance; The Homeless Vehicle Project

Visitors to New York are shocked at the number of beggars and homeless people living on the streets. In 1988 it was estimated that there were 70,000 people (the population of a small American town) on the streets in the winter, the hard season with sub-zero weather which shrinks the ranks of the homeless and drives them underground from their shanties on vacant lots into the subways. The pedestrian approach to tunnels and great concourses of railway stations can be completely covered with the sleeping bodies of the urban poor on a Sunday morning, when the absence of commuters and police allows a lie-in (the Metropolitan Transit Authority is revising its regulations to prevent this unexpected use of station floors). Meanwhile a Congressional Committee in Washington has shown that the Department of Housing and Urban Development diverted millions of dollars in the 1980's from designated public low cost housing projects to private use in speculative developments, in exchange for bribes and kick-backs from well connected friends, including one Senator from New York and his family.

Poor people living on the streets summons up the image of the Third World, Calcutta or Bombay, not one of the most advanced capitalist nations, a global force in high technology, a leader in the Space Race. It is hard for Europeans from countries with efficient social welfare systems to imagine the reality of the New York Streets. From its liberal past New York City has an enormous stock of public housing, the largest such program in America, with a stable population and administration (and an enormous waiting list). Research on low-income infill housing and low-rise high density solutions still continues in academic circles (such as work on Ghislaine Hermanuz, Richard Plunz and Martha Gutman, published by the New York State Council on the Arts in *Reweaving the Urban Fabric* (Princeton Architectural Press 1988) or Jim Tice's work on show at Columbia in the fall of 1989). The Architectural League also sponsored the *Vacant Lots* Competition of 1988 (published 1989).

This interesting academic work presumes

the existence of a social welfare system which has been cut to shreds in the America of the 1980's. Luxury housing was the priority of the period. There is currently a glut of one bedroom, speculative luxury apartments (costing \$200,000) in mid-town high-rise towers, the product of international investment, tax breaks and incentive zoning by the City. Meanwhile people are sleeping in cardboard boxes in the streets.

Wodiczko and Luria's Homeless Vehicle (exhibited at the Clock Tower Gallery in 1988 and later at the Beaubourg, Paris) is tailored to the needs of the nomadic homeless who scavenge for bottles and cans for their living. Their improvised supermarket carts, baby carriages and small mail carts were developed into the prototype Vehicle with their assistance and advice. In this process Wodiczko treated the homeless as the consumers of a product parodying the activities of corporate consumer research and development which has totally neglected the poor and homeless. He and his associates attempted to highlight the needs and desires of the homeless way of life in a manner which was readily understood in a consumer society.

The Vehicle has large compartments for the storage of recycled cans and bottles, collected for recycling and their 5¢ deposits redeemable at supermarkets. The Vehicle also can serve as a sleeping platform, with a transparent cover so that City Refuse Collectors do not throw the cart and its occupant in the Refuse Collection Truck (a fate feared by the homeless sleeping amongst the garbage in street at night). It has a high pennant on a thin mast, like a bicycle, to mark the vehicle when moving in traffic, to protect the hand cart driver from automobiles. It has a fold down seat for resting on the sidewalk, It has a small fold down basin for washing and preparing food. There is the future possibility of a built-in chemical toilet and curtains to give privacy. One drawing showed the vehicle plugged into electricity at the base of a lamp post, with a flashing light to mark its presence on the sidewalk at night.

It is not hard to imagine other simple support systems which might aid the homeless. Charities, churches and synagogues already

provide 3,000 soup kitchens in Manhattan, where only 300 existed before the Reagan presidency. Food is provided in part from federal stockpiles created by farm subsidies. Some of these private charities also provide temporary beds. The "We Can" Project uses empty lots as can and bottle redemption centers organized by the Homeless in New York. Another project, in Cincinnati, provides storage rooms for the possessions of the homeless and a bathhouse, so they can keep clean. The bathhouse also included a mail room, where the homeless could have an address and receive mail, including Welfare Checks to which they are entitled and electoral material (so that they could vote in elections and enjoy their rights as citizens). Another project in Atlanta, by the Mad Hatters, a group of artists, carpenters and construction workers, built modular shanties on their pick-up trucks, which they delivered at night and rapidly assembled as temporary housing under highway intersections and on vacant lots. An architect in San Francisco designed a packing crate size Homeless Housing Module for mass production.

## The Background of the Homeless Vehicle Project.

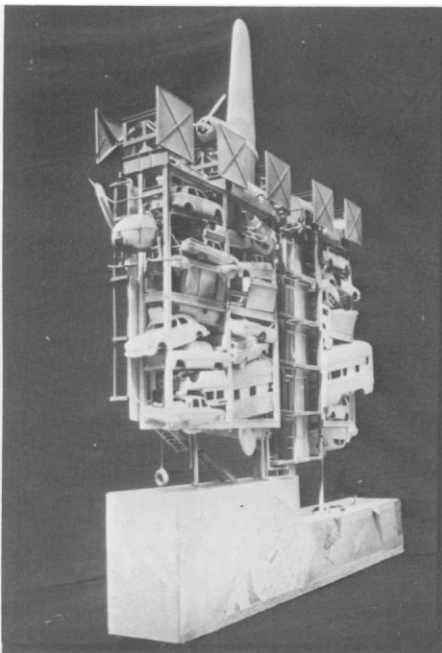
The Homeless Vehicle Project grew out of the larger culture of artists concerned with the Homeless Competition and the Homeless Project, organized by Glenn Weiss and the Storefront Gallery in New York in 1985. Weiss sent 120 artists to spray paint images of the homeless on the sidewalks throughout the city in an action which drew media attention to the issue for the first time. Storefront also hosted an exhibition of projects addressing the plight of the homeless, using vacant lots in the city for temporary housing. Projects varied from enormous utopian schemes, to infill housing, the existing work for the homeless of Conrad Levenson and a array of sidewalk projects. Earlier versions of the Cart were included in the exhibition, which was covered in the professional press (a forthcoming publication was funded by National Endowment of the Arts to be edited by David Hannawhat). Another project in the exhibition by Peter Phau and Wesley Jones proposed using abandoned car bodies, stacked in a metal framework, as tempo-



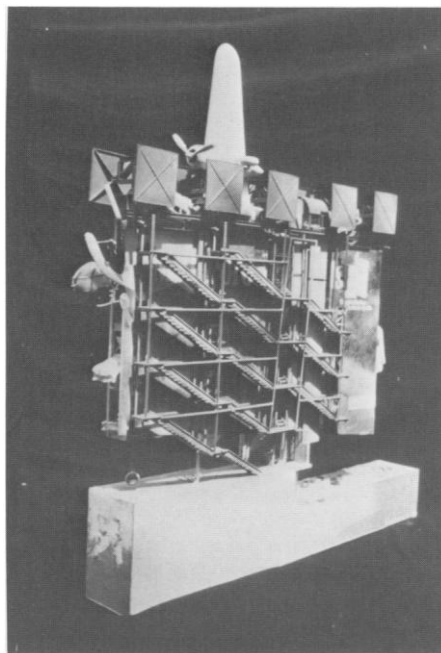
1 Frederick Douglass Building between 114th and 115th Streets in Harlem, with St. Luke's Hospital to the rear. These are abandoned buildings whose ownership has passed to the city. (photo courtesy C. Vergara)



2 Family of homeless at the Lincoln Motel, New York. (photo courtesy C. Vergara)



3 "Homeless at Home," exhibit at the Storefront Gallery in New York, 1986. Project by Peter Phau and Wesley Jones (photos courtesy Phau and Jones)

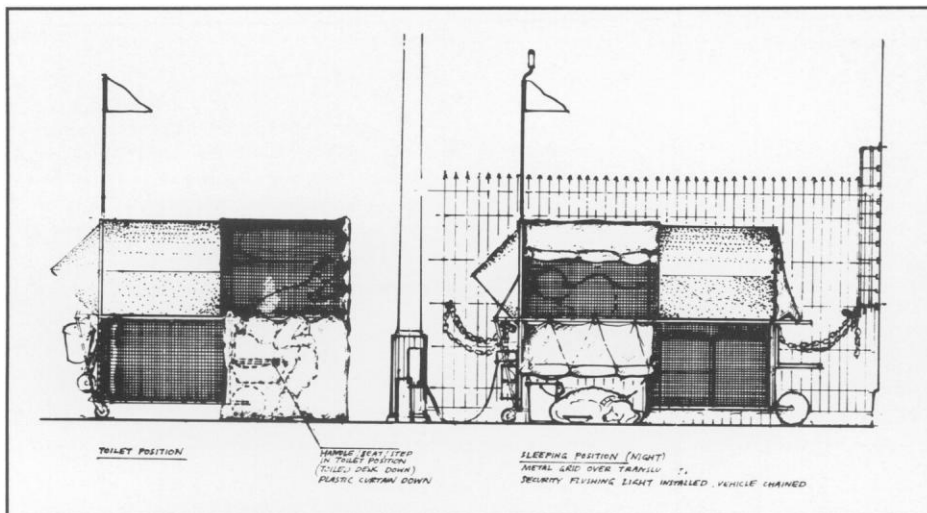


4 "Homeless at Home," exhibit at the Storefront Gallery in New York, 1986. Project by Peter Phau and Wesley Jones (photos courtesy Phau and Jones)

rary housing. This reflected homeless people's inhabitation of abandoned cars on the street and the T.V. revelation of homeless white middle class families living in cars on the freeway ramps, after the collapse of oil prices in Texas.

The Homeless Vehicle was part of a panoply of Street Theater, Performance Art, Publicity Campaigns, Projects and Exhibitions which have all centered on creating an image of a new life on the street, protesting the bureaucratic oppression of the homeless. Weiss's work for the homeless and his vision of a better street life, a Performance Piece entitled "Home Street Home", has received recognition in the Young Architects Forum of 1989 of the New York Architectural League. The Homeless Vehicle Project also imagines a new form of street life in which residents of the streets and their small mobile homes would be provided services and given support and succor, until the fundamentals of their plight can be addressed.

Like Mike Webb's Cushicle or Suitaloon projects of the Archigram Group in the late 1960's, the mobility of Wodiczko's Cart emphasizes the existential and nomadic condition of the concept of home, which



5 Krzysztof Wodiczko and Rudolph Luria: Homeless Vehicle Project, 1988 (photo courtesy K. Wodiczko)

becomes attached to only a few treasured belongings, in the Global Village of the Information Age. Webb's work was an outgrowth of the Space Program, Space Capsules and the mobile home of the high-tech Space Suit and Lunar Vehicles. In the low-tech street life of the homeless fashionable notions of rootlessness of the information society are accelerated and given a terrifying dimension. These people live on the knife edge of a future which awaits everyone. It is not hard to imagine the unemployed executive of the future, deprived of his office, home and car, turning the Homeless Vehicle into the perfect street office with the addition of a cocktail bar, T.V., mobile fax machine and telephone (all removed from a corporate stretch Limousine).

The Homeless Vehicle Project of Wodiczko takes the commentary further. It recognizes that the plight of the homeless in New York is in part the product of mobility. Its pedestrian power mirrors the power of the automobile. Since the Second World War one third of the American population has been rehoused in an enormous Federally guaranteed housing program of suburban, single family dwellings. Inner city jobs have moved with the population and the federally subsidized highways to the suburbs. These American suburban families are accustomed to moving. They move house on average

every seven years, following jobs and career from suburb to suburb, region to region. Rural, small town and suburban developments now house two thirds of the American population. This leaves the residual third of the population in the inner city as an unimportant national minority, in terms of jobs, education, housing, politics and media coverage, as well as polarized along lines of race and wealth.

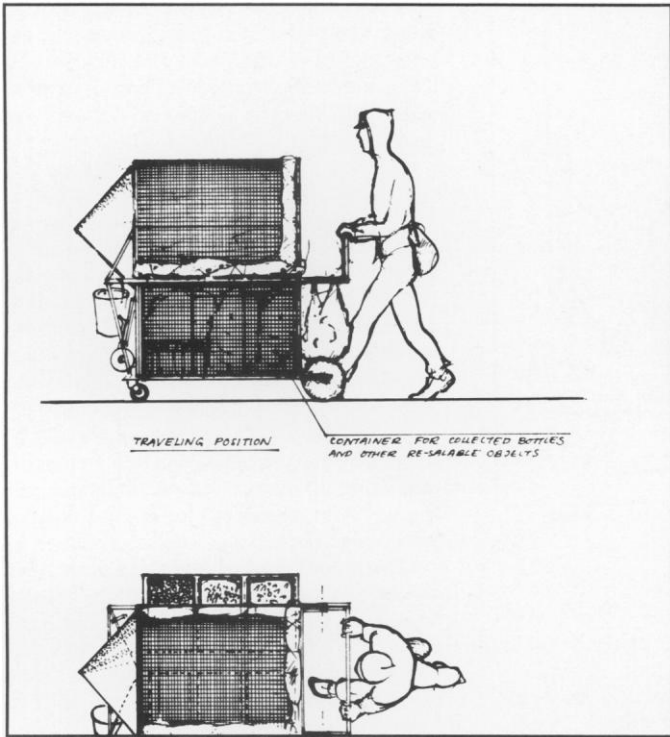
### The Nomadic Homeless and the City

The City's attitude to this nomadic existence and polarization of wealth has been repressive. The City Government would prefer its problems to stand still and be solved or taxed. The City already taxes anyone who works in New York, no matter where they or their families live in the Greater Metropolitan suburban area of New Jersey, Long Island, Connecticut or Westchester. The Mayor has advised citizens not to give to homeless street beggars, who he thought should collect Welfare. He was annoyed when the homeless built a shanty town in front of City Hall and called the media. A riot broke out when police tried to remove a shanty town from Thompkins Square on the Lower East Side. The subsequent police brutality was recorded for T.V. by a media artist whose home happened to overlook the Square.

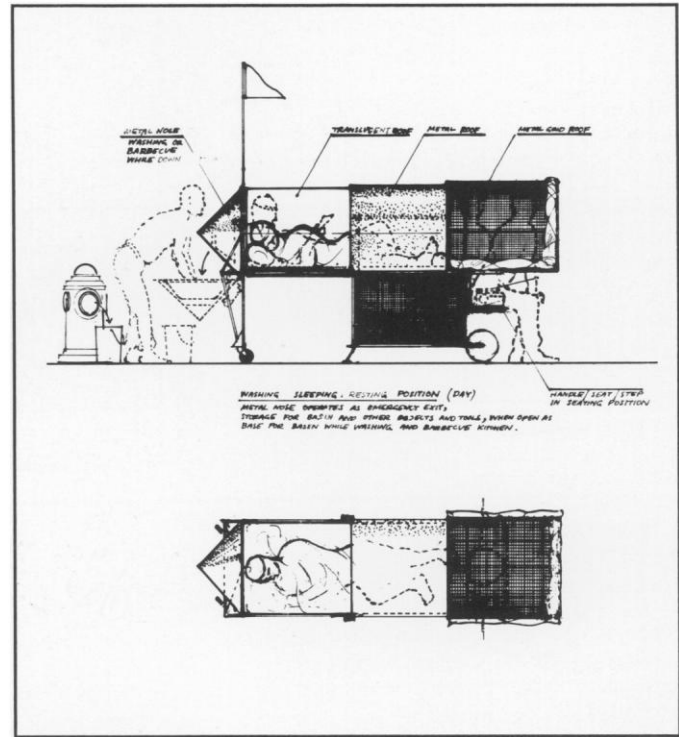
The City lost its case in Court when it argued that a homeless old lady (previously the occupant of a residential home closed by state and federal cutbacks) was insane to live on the street in winter and not seek the protection of a City Shelter. She feared the Shelter for its violence, degradation and theft. In another decision a court ruled for the public advocacy lawyer representing a homeless person housed for a long period in a church shelter in Brooklyn. The homeless person had the protection of standard Tenants Rights applying to residential property. Tenants Rights lawyers were not popular with the City, developers or organized crime (the decapitated corpse of a prominent New York Tenants Rights lawyer was recently found cut into pieces in a South American style gangland execution). A homeless person as Tenant could not be evicted without reason and due process, vastly complicating the City's housing problem and causing the closure of shelters. The City has also helped close many cheap Single Residential Occupancy Hotels spread throughout the city neighborhoods, which had been the traditional refuge of the poor (often in terrible conditions).

In response to the Artists media activities in 1985 which highlighted and raised the issue of homelessness, the City has developed a media campaign of its own. In 1988 the City allocated on paper \$5.1 billion for a 10 year capital plan to create 84,000 new housing units and rehabilitate 160,000 city owned units. Developers of luxury high rise apartments must now include low income housing on their sites or build units elsewhere in the city. The City has established a vast capital fund for low income housing by selling land at the Auverne Site in Coney Island for middle income low-rise development. It has also issued housing bonds guaranteed by the income of the Battery Park City Commission. A belated recognition of the earlier diversion of Federal and State funding and tax breaks intended for low income housing at Battery Park City which were legally applied to subsidize the luxury high-rise apartment enclave, a new and separate inner City (fully documented along with the Homeless Vehicle Project by Rosalyn Deutsche in *October* 47)

These vast new financial resources were first targeted at the homeless in a city wide



6 Krzysztof Wodiczko and Rudolph Luria: Homeless Vehicle Project, 1988 (photo courtesy K. Wodiczko)



7 Krzysztof Wodiczko and Rudolph Luria: Homeless Vehicle Project, 1988 (photo courtesy K. Wodiczko)

system of shelters. A prototype hostel was designed by Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, but its harsh, prison like conditions with cells and wardens, along with the protests of the target neighborhoods, led to the abandonment of the scheme. The City now houses the homeless from the temporary Welfare Hotels and Shelters in rehabilitated City owned apartment buildings in peripheral areas, like Crotona Park in the notorious South Bronx. Here 563 clustered apartments for the homeless and low income families were opened by Mayor Koch before the Primary Elections in 1989 with much media fanfare.

**The Plight of the Homeless; fundamental conditions.**

The buildings of Crotona Park were abandoned by their previous owners in the general shift to the new suburbs. They were seized by the City for their outstanding taxes and rehabilitated with the funds from Battery

Park City. Here in isolation, amidst the ruins of the South Bronx, streets of temporarily housed homeless people stand and wait, with no subway stop, no jobs, few stores, overcrowded day care, poor schools, no hospitals, few services and no parks. In neighborhoods where the median income is \$7,200 and single women head more than half the families, the arrival of the homeless has reinforced the classical inner city poverty trap created by the earlier mass migration.

The flight of jobs and population to the high rise towers of the center and low rise developments of the peripheral suburbs has created an inner city street culture of massive unemployment (especially among minority youths and school drop outs). The risk of incarceration or death for young African-American males in the inner city is statistically higher than the corresponding rates under Apartheid in South Africa. Gang warfare, violence, drugs, prostitution and diseases

like Aids, have fuelled the suburban fear of the inner city poor. Countless T.V. and media police shows have exploited this suburban fear (as did President Bush's successful racist media campaign about paroled prisoners in the U.S. Election). The media neglected to mention that this violent street culture and its rich rewards existed partly to serve the needs of the white middle class suburbanites (the T.V. audience), whose cars cruise the streets of the city in search of pleasures denied at home or at work.

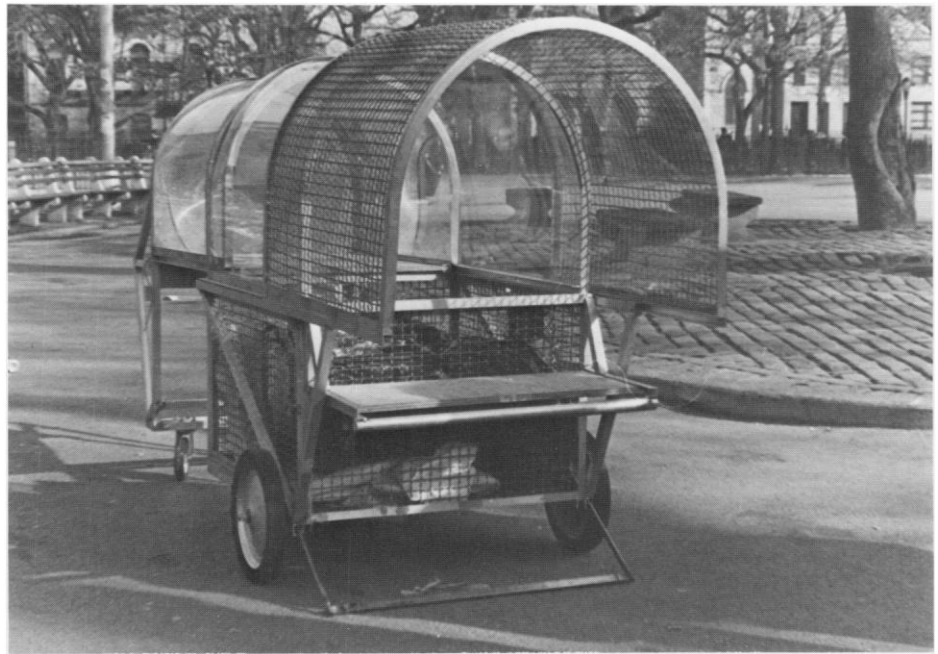
**The Homeless Vehicle Project as a media phenomenon.**

The critical limitation of the homeless Vehicle Project was its inability to control the response of City, which replied to the Artists media campaign with a repressive media campaign of its own. Public Relations images can be "doctored" and "spun" in what Umberto Eco has called the realm of the

"Hyper Real", without any necessary feedback to the urgent reality of the homeless on the streets. The strategies and numbers of the City, like the Cart itself, were aimed at the media audience not at the fundamental problems of the poor (mobility, a lack of employment, education or support services). In the late 1960's after the Watts Riots in Los Angeles had sparked a nation wide wave of ghetto riots, the City Council of L.A. organized a subsidized small bus and taxi service to carry the poor residents of Watts to suitable skilled or unskilled jobs at suburban locations. Mobility was used to address the problem of the poverty trap created by the mass migration to the peripheral city of the automobile. New York has no such plans.

The power of the Homeless Vehicle Project was its ability to address and highlight the abandonment of the inner city poor on the streets of New York. It plays on the edge of an intolerable and very real human tragedy and derives energy from the confrontation. Wodiczko is clear about the repugnance of the present situation, that the project "should only reinforce understanding that this is something that should not exist." His Project tries generously to create a positive media image for the dispossessed and homeless of the streets, to counter the daily barrage of negative media information and suburban hysteria about the inner city. The homeless and their carts are as much refugees from the violent street culture of organized crime as from the collapse of the Welfare delivery system of the City, or from the inaccessibility of the media based corporate culture of the suburbs. The Cart presumed a solution within a small scale local pedestrian neighborhood, questioning the automobile basis of mobility. The project was positive and upbeat despite the desperate situation. It dared to present to public view an image of a new form of street life, an image which was sensitive to and supportive of the homeless, opening a range of new possibilities for the inner city.

Graham Shane  
New York City



8 Krzysztof Wodiczko and Rudolph Luria: Homeless Vehicle Project, 1988 (photo courtesy K. Wodiczko)



9 Krzysztof Wodiczko and Rudolph Luria: Homeless Vehicle Project, 1988 (photo courtesy K. Wodiczko)



10 Krzysztof Wodiczko and Rudolph Luria: Homeless Vehicle  
Project 1988 (photo courtesy K. Wodiczko)