

# **Contours of a Spatialized Politics: Homeless Vehicles and the Production of Geographical Scale**

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The Homeless Vehicle is a jarring intervention in the landscapes of the evicted. Designed by Krzysztof Wodiczko, a New York artist, the vehicle was first exhibited in 1988. The prototype was constructed in consultation with homeless men and subsequently women; it was first tested in the streets of New York's Lower East Side, then elsewhere in the city and in Philadelphia. An ongoing project, it has undergone continual revision and modification, and there are now four variants. Its design and development has been funded by several art galleries and public art councils as well as by the artist himself, but it is more than simply a critical artwork heavy with symbolic irony; the Homeless Vehicle is deliberately practical. Indeed it works as critical art only to the extent that it is simultaneously functional.<sup>1</sup> In this symbiosis of the functional and symbolic object, the Homeless Vehicle reveals a vital dimension of a spatialized politics, namely the importance of scale.

Wodiczko's Homeless Vehicle and the Poliscar that followed it vividly express this politics of scale, and I begin with a discussion of these projects. There follows a brief discussion arguing more broadly that we lack any sophisticated language of spatial differentiation, and this theoretical project is taken up in the third section where I elaborate upon a schematic theory of the production of scale.

## **Homeless Vehicles**

The Homeless Vehicle builds on the vernacular architecture of the supermarket trolley, and provides the space and means to facilitate some basic needs: transportation, sitting, sleeping, shelter, washing. Spatial mobility in particular is a central problem for people evicted from the private spaces of the real-estate market. Without a home or other place to store possessions, it is difficult to move around the city because you have to carry all your belongings with you. In the late 1980s in New York City, with homelessness estimated at between 70,000 and 100,000 people—between 1 percent and 1.4 percent of the city's population—many evictees took to using supermarket trolleys or canvas postal carts for ferrying their belongings around, and for scavenging cans and bottles that could be redeemed for their nickel deposit.<sup>2</sup> Wodiczko elaborates on this



Krzysztof Wodiczko, Homeless Vehicle, 1988. Photo by John Renard.



Krzysztof Wodiczko, *Poliscar*, 1991. Photo by John Ranard.

appropriation. The lower compartment of the vehicle is designed to carry belongings—bags, clothes, blankets, food, water, empty cans.

Finding a place to sleep is also a major problem, and so the top compartment, which can be used to carry things by day, can also be pulled out into its three sections. Each section is draped with heavy plastic tarpaulin, and when expanded this upper compartment forms a sleeping space. Thus Wodiczko has also referred to it as a “shelter vehicle.”<sup>3</sup> Daily ablutions too are a problem for the evicted: the vehicle’s aluminum nose cone, satirically redolent of a rocket or some other high-tech military device, folds down to become a washbasin. In one model, Wodiczko tried to design a biochemical toilet on the rear of the vehicle, but this proved impractical.

An appropriately extreme response to mass social eviction, the Homeless Vehicle neither is, nor is meant to be, a solution. It “is not a home but illegal



Krzysztof Wodiczko, *Poliscar*, 1991. Photo by John Ranard.

real estate,” according to Papo Colo, an “architecture provoked by poverty, a missile, the indication of flight, of retreat, or invasion and attack.”<sup>4</sup> With the appearance of a high-precision military-industrial instrument, it expresses the social absurdity and obscenity of widespread homelessness in the capitalist heartland, but it does so only to the extent that the vehicle is rigorously functional. The prosaic usefulness of the nose cone for everyday needs contrasts abruptly with the pathological waste of a \$300 billion defense budget, as if to point out that there is more social use in a single washbasin than in the entire national armory of high-tech junk. The supermarket trolley, a softer symbol, but nevertheless an icon of expansive consumerism, becomes a means of production as well as consumption, a basic technology for conducting daily life. The vehicle’s absurdity depends on its practicality. It expresses and exposes the relations of empowerment and disempowerment defining homelessness.

Evicted from the private spaces of the real-estate market, homeless people occupy the public spaces, but their consequent presence in the urban landscape is fiercely contested. Their visibility is consistently erased by institutional efforts to move them elsewhere—to shelters, out of buildings and parks, to poor neighborhoods, out of the city, to other marginal spaces. Evicted people are also erased by the desperate personal campaigns of the housed to see no homeless, even as they step over bodies in the street. This ongoing erasure from the public gaze is reinforced by media stereotypes that either blame the victims and thereby justify their studied invisibility or else drown them in such lugubrious sentimentality that they are rendered helpless, social gummies, the pathetic Other, excused from active civic responsibility and denied personhood.

The Homeless Vehicle is an impertinent invention that empowers the evicted to erase their own erasure. It “retaliates” by making homeless people visible and enhancing their identities, and it “dramatizes the right of the poor not to be isolated and excluded.” Disrupting the ruling coherence of the urban landscape, it perpetrates a “socially created scandal”; it becomes “a vehicle for organizing the interests of the dominated classes into a group expression, employs design to illuminate social reality, supporting the right of these groups to refuse marginalization.”<sup>5</sup> The Homeless Vehicle provides a potential means by which evictees can challenge and in part overcome the social dislocation imposed on them by homelessness. Emphatically not a solution, it works only partly and unevenly; it addresses most explicitly the needs of single male evictees and is less responsive to women’s security needs or the needs of homeless families.

The tension between absurdity and functionality is expressed not simply through the vehicle’s design, but through its practical revelation of the politics of daily life as inherently spatial. The Homeless Vehicle expresses a strategic political geography of the city. Evictees’ immobility traps them in space, or rather traps them in the interstices of an urban geography produced and reproduced in such a way as to exclude them.<sup>6</sup> The Homeless Vehicle, by contrast, is simultaneously a means of production and reproduction allowing evictees to make and remake space in a way that enhances their means of survival. It is a means to carve a more sympathetic geographical politics in a city of exclusionary spaces. By allowing wider spatial mobility it opens up the possibilities for scavenging and panhandling, puts more distant can and bottle redemption centers within reach, makes new places accessible for sleeping, enables speedier and more effective escape in the face of police harassment and assaults, and in general streamlines the routine of daily life. “It facilitates the seizing of space by homeless subjects rather than containing them in prescribed locations.” Operators of the Homeless Vehicle “possess space by their obligation to invent it.” And enhanced mobility enhances the possibilities for public gathering and public organizing; it renders “the homeless” more dangerous to

the brittle coherence of the ruling political geographies of the city. The Homeless Vehicle specializes in what Don Mitchell calls the “subversiveness of mobility.”<sup>7</sup>

Responding in part to criticisms and comments, Wodiczko has followed the Homeless Vehicle with a new vehicle for the evicted: the Poliscar. A startling hybrid between a Dalek from BBC’s time-traveling *Doctor Who* and a World War I “cubist” tank, the Poliscar furthers the reconquest of urban space. Introduced in 1991, this vehicle takes much more seriously homeless people’s need for security and privacy; the vehicle operator is wholly inside and there is room for more than one person. But more than anything else, the Poliscar enhances communication. For homeless people, Wodiczko says, the “contradiction of their existence . . . is that while they are physically confined to public spaces they are politically excluded from public space constituted as a space for communication.”<sup>8</sup> Fitted with a CB radio, external camera, TV monitor, and a portable Microwave Link for transmitting visual images to other vehicles and receivers, the Poliscar also reverses the traditional direction of public surveillance. It conceals “the normally all-too-visible homeless person from view while at the same time using its cameras to submit respectable passers-by to surveillance of a kind that the state might normally apply to its own helpless outcasts.”<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the Poliscar is intended as a democratization of urban space, giving evictees their own police powers while simultaneously invoking the possibility of freedom and democracy in a remade polis. Wodiczko envisages a network of Poliscars electronically connected across the city as the backbone of a “Homeless Communication Network” that would enhance the security, the economic and social opportunities, and political organizing of evictees.

The Homeless Vehicle and Poliscar were developed in the heat of antigentrification and homeless rights struggles in New York’s Lower East Side. The focus of the struggles was Tompkins Square Park, where in August 1988 four hundred police rioted against evictees, squatters, local people, punks, housing activists, anarchists, and other park users demonstrating to prevent the imposition of a curfew. For the next three years Tompkins Square Park was the node of housing and homeless struggles in the city. As many as three hundred evictees used the park as a place to live, erecting tents, shanties, and other shelters, while the squatters movement expanded throughout the Lower East Side. There were continual demonstrations in defense of what had become a liberated space, and the police and the city responded with periodic sweeps of the park. This phase of the contest over space for the evicted ended in June 1991 when the city cleared the park, erected an eight-foot fence around it, and began a fourteen-month physical rehabilitation and redesign of Tompkins Square. Several shanty and tent encampments—dubbed “Dinkinsvilles” after the mayor—emerged on derelict blocks near the park, but they too were cleared several months later.<sup>10</sup>

The Homeless Vehicle and Poliscar appropriate and express the political ambition of these struggles from the perspective of many homeless people, and they express the central realization that political liberation requires spatial access. They provide oppositional means for reinscribing and reorganizing the urban geography of the city, but they do so in a very specific way. They open new spaces of interaction but not randomly. Rather they stretch the urban space of productive and reproductive activity, fracture previous boundaries of daily intercourse, and establish new ones. They convert spaces of exclusion into the known, the made, the constructed. In short, they redefine the scale of everyday life for homeless people. The liberatory intent of the Homeless Vehicle and the Poliscar, the political empowerment they facilitate, the sharpness of the contradiction between absurdity and functionality, these all hinge on this reinscription of geographical scale. They unselfconsciously seek to expand the scale of self-centered control and at the same time contract the scale of official control. They promise not just the production of space in the abstract, but the concrete *production and reproduction of geographical scale* as a political strategy of resistance. As instruments of political empowerment, Wodiczko's vehicles work precisely to the extent that, symbolically and practically, they enable evicted people to "jump scales"—to organize the production and reproduction of daily life and to resist oppression and exploitation at a higher scale—over a wider geographical field. The chants of Tompkins Square expressed the same ambition. From the immediate retort—"Whose park is it? It's our fucking park!"—the chant changed in the first days of defending the park to: "Tompkins Square Everywhere." The struggle was defeated precisely at the point where it failed to mobilize tenants, housing activists, and homeless people citywide. Put differently, jumping scales allows evictees to dissolve spatial boundaries that are largely imposed from above and that contain rather than facilitate their production and reproduction of everyday life.

### **Space, Difference, and Metaphor**

I have chosen to interpret the Homeless Vehicle and Poliscar in a way that retrieves from a habitual invisibility the spatiality of local politics and especially the constitutive role of geographical scale. The contemporary reassertion of space in social discourse is by now well documented and widely discussed, and emanates from various sources: geographers whose traditional concern with material space was dramatically enlivened and rendered social in the wake of the political uprisings of the 1960s and the spatial restructurings at all geographical scales that followed; social theorists of the 1970s and 1980s for whom, in the context of the rigorously historicist tradition that has dominated social thought arguably since the eighteenth century, space is being rediscovered as a neglected world of potentially novel and unexplored concepts; and literary and cultural theorists, especially but not exclusively feminists, for