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# Commemoration, Public Art, and the Changing Meaning of the Bunker Hill Monument

SARAH J. PURCELL

The controversy over a 1998 public art project by Krzysztof Wodiczko at the Bunker Hill Monument dramatizes how the meanings of monuments are subject to constant renegotiation. Reaction to Wodiczko's art, which used the monument to comment on crime in Charlestown, Massachusetts, demonstrated both changes and continuities in the understandings of monuments since the Bunker Hill Monument was first designed in the 1820s. Both Wodiczko and the monument's original planners defined it as a tool capable of providing "eternal" recognition of heroism and sacrifice. Experimental projects may have great power to teach the public about the changing meaning of the past.

On three evenings in September 1998, the Polish-born artist Krzysztof Wodiczko added the Bunker Hill Monument in Charlestown, Massachu-

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setts, to the list of public buildings and monuments he has transformed through his public art. Wodiczko repeatedly projected a sixteen-minute videotape onto the 221-foot high obelisk, which seemed to come to life with the huge faces and voices of Charlestown residents as they told grueling personal stories about their murdered children and siblings. The Bunker Hill monument, designed to remind all who saw it of the violent sacrifice of American lives in the Revolutionary War, now took on an added dimension, as it seemed to speak of sacrifice within the more recent context of urban violence and murder.

Wodiczko projected the faces and hands of Charlestown residents, the mothers and brothers of murdered young men, onto the face of the monument, as loudspeakers played their voices, so that the obelisk seemed to have a talking head atop its high granite structure. The monument, seemingly transformed into a very tall person, spoke of murder and drew on memories of the American Revolution to relate stories about modern social problems. One mother, Sandy, blinked back tears as she said:

When my son, Chris, was murdered, I was devastated. I was lucky if I could get up in the morning and get dressed, but when Jay was murdered it was the murder that was heard round the world. I will never stop, never. I will fight my community. I will fight the criminal justice system and anybody else who stands in the way of the prosecution of the murderer of Jay King.<sup>1</sup>

Another mother in the projection, Pam, said that the murder of her son had made her rethink “freedom and how I took it for granted, [it] was earned by other people and I just always expected it to be here.”<sup>2</sup> By transforming the appearance of the Bunker Hill monument, Wodiczko used the monument’s traditional meaning as a symbol of the freedom won in the Revolutionary War to make viewers question the meaning of freedom in modern Charlestown.

Wodiczko’s projection on the Bunker Hill monument fused public history and public art in an unusually strong form of civic communication. The monument, designed in the nineteenth century to pay tribute to fallen Revolutionary War soldiers, captured an eternal message of heroism in a smooth, granite surface that would rise above Charlestown on Bunker Hill. Then, in the twentieth century, it made a message about local social problems, drug abuse, and murder visible from all over Boston.<sup>3</sup> Even as much of the original intended meaning of the monument had become

1. Krzysztof Wodiczko, *Bunker Hill Monument Projection*, 24–26 September 1998, transcript.

2. *Bunker Hill Monument Projection*, transcript.

3. Although the Battle of Bunker Hill actually took place on a smaller hill, called Breed’s Hill, the hill has been known as Bunker Hill ever since. Some residents considered Breed’s Hill to be just a smaller peak of the taller Bunker Hill nearby; E. H. Cameron, *Of Yankee Granite: An Account of the Building of the Bunker Hill Monument* (Boston: Bunker Hill Monument Association, 1953), 6.

muted over the years, the Bunker Hill monument had remained a strong physical marker of Charlestownians local pride when the National Park Service allowed Wodiczko's art work. His art shows that, as Lucy Lippard has written, monuments can "recall the dead in order to make the survivors responsible to the living."<sup>4</sup>

The Wodiczko project at Bunker Hill raises questions about the use of public space for history and memory. His artistic reinterpretation of the Bunker Hill Monument dramatized the fact that even one of the seemingly most staid and conservative institutions of public history, a major Revolutionary War monument, might be open to on-going politicization and reinterpretation more than two hundred years after the event it was built to commemorate and more than a hundred after it was constructed. Wodiczko's artistic vision, and the controversy it caused, should move us to reexamine the Bunker Hill Monument itself and the process through which monuments like it both became and continue to be meaningful to Americans.

This article will contrast reactions to the original plans for the Bunker Hill monument with the reactions to Krzysztof Wodiczko's artwork to show how public monuments are renegotiated, even as they continue to be perceived as stable repositories of public memory. The meaning of a monument is never fixed, but rather is always determined by an intersection of architectural intentions, viewer reactions, and historical interpretation. The Bunker Hill Monument has been a site of dialogue between past and present, local and national, male and female, partisanship and impartiality almost since its inception. Far from only being cold piles of stone, monuments have the potential to teach us how the process of commemoration has created a history of its own. Wodiczko's work challenges public historians to think of new ways to bring the present and the multiple pasts together to re-examine and reinvigorate monuments and other historical sites.

Charlestown, Massachusetts, provides an excellent setting for an examination of the dynamic nature of public commemoration, because many different periods of history and memory overlap in its everyday existence. The small town is home to the Bunker Hill Monument, the Charlestown Navy Yard National Park, the USS *Constitution*, and the USS *Cassin Young*. The sheer variety and volume of public history sites that sit side by side in Charlestown testifies to the complexity of public commemoration. Which story stands out the most to the thousands of visitors who visit Charlestown and the national park each year: the Revolutionary history on Bunker Hill, the memory of the USS *Constitution* engaged in majestic sea battles in the nineteenth century, the story of Charlestown's 174 years as a successful navy yard, or the story of the World War II destroyer, the USS *Cassin Young*? The National Park Service devotes space and attention to all of these, and it is

4. Lucy Lippard, *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* (New York: The New Press, 1997), 107.

possible for a visitor to span hundreds of years of American history in just a few hours wandering the docks and streets of Charlestown.<sup>5</sup> Although each visitor likely takes away her own impressions of which historical era speaks loudest, no visitor or resident can completely ignore history in Charlestown.

Even beyond the extent of its historic properties, Charlestown is a complicated community. Although the streets of Charlestown are increasingly dotted with gentrified, refurbished townhouses, the community is still dominated mostly by working-class Irish Americans, who are intensely proud of their heritage and the town they have built up since the late nineteenth century, despite a serious record of violence in the late twentieth century.<sup>6</sup> The one-mile district of 15,000 people was home to at least three murders a year between 1975 and 1996, and what some have referred to as the Charlestown "code of silence" left 74 percent of the homicide cases unsolved.<sup>7</sup> Families of the murder victims frequently claimed that local inhabitants refused to come forward with information that might solve their cases, and many murder victims seemed to be enmeshed in a local network of crime and gang activity.

Charlestown neighborhoods and housing developments are known in other parts of Boston for being hotbeds of drugs, crime, and despair. In general, inhabitants of Charlestown resent its violent reputation. The nationally released 1998 independent film, *Monument Avenue*, which violently depicted the rough-and-tumble life of Charlestown street gangs, stirred community protest and anger at its portrayal of local desolation.<sup>8</sup> Modern-day Charlestown faces something of an identity crisis as gentrification, poverty, crime, and public history all rub shoulders in close quarters.

Despite community resentment against the crime-ridden reputation of Charlestown, murder is a real local problem. The pain of the high local homicide rate is faced particularly clearly by the women who belong to Charlestown After Murder, a support group for mothers of murdered children. The group, fairly remarkable in a town that prides itself on ethnic solidarity and silence, was originally intended as a private place for mothers to share their pain and sadness. But in 1998, the women of Charlestown After Murder, along with two of their sons, went decidedly public when they joined forces with Krzysztof Wodiczko, the outspoken Polish artist.

The women, most of them proudly defiant members of the Charlestown community themselves, decided to break the local silence about violence in

5. *Charlestown Navy Yard: Boston National Historic Park, Massachusetts* (Washington, D.C.: National Park Service, Division of Publications, 1995).

6. See Michael Musuraca, "The 'Celebration Begins at Midnight': Irish Immigrants and the Celebration of Bunker Hill Day," *Labor's Heritage* 2 (1990): 54-57; Robert A. Woods and Albert Kennedy, *The Zone of Emergence: Observations on the Lower Middle Class and Upper Working Class Communities of Boston, 1905-1914* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1964).

7. Statistics in Ken Shulman, "A Monument to Mothers and Lost Children," *New York Times*, 20 September 1998.

8. Judy Rakowsky, "Charlestown Not Silent on New Movie, Art Project," *Boston Globe*, 26 September 1998.

an unconventional way. When Wodiczko met with the women to propose telling their stories in a monumental public art installation, they agreed only after carefully considering the matter and being impressed by tapes of his previous work. Although recent signs indicate that the culture of silence that has protected murderers in Charlestown for several decades is coming to an end—more witnesses are speaking out and district attorneys are prosecuting cases using new forms of evidence—the women of Charlestown After Murder still took a risk by helping the artist to splash their pain publicly across one of Boston's most famous landmarks.<sup>9</sup> Wodiczko found that once the mothers of Charlestown overcame their reticence and stress, they understood that participation in his art project held the potential for healing because “they were aware how important this monument is for justice.”<sup>10</sup>

It is not surprising that Krzysztof Wodiczko would have turned his attentions to the pain of crime in Charlestown and to the Bunker Hill Monument—the monument and the town fit into his artistic vision very clearly. Wodiczko, winner of the international Hiroshima prize for art that promotes peace, is most famous for transforming the meaning of public buildings and structures in a way that challenges both his viewers and the meaning of public space. Wodiczko, who was born during the Warsaw ghetto uprising in 1943, now lives in Boston and New York and is on the faculty at MIT. His previous projects include the 1984 projection of a swastika on the South African embassy in Trafalgar Square in London to protest apartheid, the projection of a series of human eyes onto the Bundeshaus and several banks in Bern, Switzerland, that seemed to blink nervously at the Swiss gold reserves stored under the Bundesplatz, and the projection of images of homeless people on the Boston Soldiers and Sailors Civil War Memorial. One of Wodiczko's most famous works, and the one which most impressed the mothers of Charlestown, was a display of abused women's hands on the City Hall in Krakow, Poland. The hands moved or held candles as the women's voices told of their domestic torment.<sup>11</sup>

All of Wodiczko's projects draw together the conventional and the unconventional to produce socially challenging juxtapositions of meaning. By playing upon our recognition of the supposedly “inherent” meaning in public buildings and monuments, Wodiczko gives voice to social problems that usually defy commemoration. Krakow City Hall demands official attention and commands respect from the viewer, as the disembodied hands and voices of the abused women imply official disregard for women's pain and simultaneously undermine the “authority” of the structure. The images of homeless people projected on the Boston Civil War monument instantly

9. To compare recent murder prosecutions in Charlestown, see *Boston Herald*, 16 February 2000; *Boston Globe*, 5 January 1995.

10. Krzysztof Wodiczko, telephone interview by author, Grinnell, Iowa, 28 November 2000.

11. The *New York Times* article has a good summary of these works. On Wodiczko's work see Anna Novakov (ed.), *Veiled Histories: The Body, Place, and Public Art* (New York: San Francisco Art Institute Critical Press, 1997).

draw together the individuals seemingly most revered and most reviled by society (Civil War veterans and the homeless), simultaneously suggesting that they are somehow equal.

In fact, the projections may call into question the utility of the monumental form they rest upon by suggesting that public monies would be better spent for food and housing, rather than on monuments or their upkeep. At the same time, Wodiczko's art would not work if it were projected on just any monument or building, because his images challenge the established sacralized meanings of public landmarks. The works rely on a fixed idea of history while introducing a changing view of the present. Wodiczko's works are not mocking, but they are certainly thought provoking, and they challenge viewers to reexamine their attitudes towards the past and the present, the permanent and the temporary, the official and the unofficial.

By projecting the mourning mothers of Charlestown onto the Bunker Hill monument, Wodiczko hoped to bring attention to the women's heroism, heroism that he claimed matched that of the Revolutionaries who died in the American defeat at Bunker Hill in 1775. In a sense, Wodiczko transformed the gendered nature of the monument, which was intended to mark a very masculine wartime concept of sacrifice. He used the monument to mark private family pain in the civic battle of crime. He told the *New York Times*: "Those who fought [the battle of Bunker Hill] are the heroes of the Revolution. In the same way, these Charlestown mothers have lost their battle. Their lives are in a sense ruined. But because they are organized, because they have the courage to come forward and speak, the meaning of their lives is saved. These women are the heroines of the democratic process."<sup>12</sup>

If Wodiczko's projections managed to call attention to the role of these "heroines" in the "democratic process," his work succeeded as a part of the series which sponsored it. The video projections on the Bunker Hill monument were part of a series of public art installations called "Let Freedom Ring," organized by Jill Medvedow of the Institute for Contemporary Art in Boston. The ICA established "Let Freedom Ring" as a part of their *Vita Brevis* program, an experiment in temporary public art, meant in this case to cast new meanings on sites of Boston's Freedom Trail. The installations by several contemporary artists at Old South Meeting House, Boston Common, Old North Church, and the Bunker Hill Monument were intended to direct new public attention to familiar landmarks of Boston's Revolutionary history and challenge the public to reexamine their commitment to democracy.<sup>13</sup>

In fact, Wodiczko's transformation of the solid marble monument into an animated object that spoke predominantly in women's voices raises ques-

12. "A Monument," *New York Times*, 20 September 1998.

13. Christine Ternin, "Art in the Frame of History," *Boston Globe*, 11 September 1998; "Let Freedom Ring," *Tab: The Weekly* [1998].

tions about heroism, public art, democracy, and the nature of commemoration that monuments provide. How does a monument's appearance mark it as either masculine or feminine? Are some kinds of sacrifices easier to commemorate than others? Does the meaning of a monument change along with the community that houses it? Can public art successfully transform a sanctified public historic site, even when members of the local community object?

Monuments like those at Bunker Hill are intended to set aside public space to memorialize dead heroes and to mark their sacrifice in the public minds forever. Because of this "eternal" function, some historians have called monuments the most conservative form of public commemoration.<sup>14</sup> But Wodiczko's work makes it clear that even if the pile of stone remains over the years, aspects of its meaning are constantly being renegotiated by those who observe and use it. Wodiczko does not reject the commemorative purpose of the monument, but rather he layers a contemporary purpose on top of the marble meant to entomb the heroes of the Revolution.

Even as the monument's original meaning was challenged by Wodiczko's twentieth-century art, its overall function of preserving the heroism of Charlestown remained unchanged. In Wodiczko's hands, the definition of heroism expanded to include mothers of those murdered, whom the monument's early nineteenth-century founders never could have imagined as "heroic" figures. Wodiczko claims that the battle at Bunker Hill continues today, just with a "different set of heroes and heroines."<sup>15</sup> Even though Wodiczko used the monument in an unconventional manner to make a very modern point, the monument's function as a reminder of sacrifice held remarkably stable.

That commemorative function was carefully planned by the founders of the monument itself. The Bunker Hill Monument was first conceived of by a group of Massachusetts notables, including Daniel Webster and Edward Everett, in the early 1820s, as a way to preserve the memory of the Battle of Bunker Hill and particularly to mark the contribution of Massachusetts to the American Revolution. Starting in the 1770s the Battle of Bunker Hill, where untrained American militia troops had twice repelled forces of the British Army before retreating in June of 1775, had become a symbol of American military perseverance and heroism. In 1797, Boston Masons erected on the hill a wooden monument to Joseph Warren, the greatest hero of the battle and one of the best-respected public martyrs of the Revolutionary War, and in the first years of the nineteenth century, Bunker Hill

14. Kirk Savage, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monument in Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 4; See also William Kidd, "Memory, Memorials and Commemoration of War Memorials in Lorraine, 1908–1988." In Martin Evans and Ken Lunn (eds.), *War and Memory in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 143–62; Pierre Nora (ed.), *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past* (Vol. 1), trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

15. Wodiczko, author interview.



became a popular stop for patriotic travelers and nascent tourists. When President James Monroe declared on a pilgrimage in 1817 to Bunker Hill that “the blood spilt here roused the whole American people, and united them in a common cause in defense of their rights,” he inspired some of the “great men” of Massachusetts to consider preserving the battlefield more formally.<sup>16</sup>

They founded the Bunker Hill Monument Association, raised money, purchased land on the hill where the battle had taken place in Charlestown, and prepared to hold a cornerstone-laying ceremony for a massive marble monument, timed to coincide with the visit to Boston in 1825 by the Revolutionary War hero, the Marquis de Lafayette.<sup>17</sup> The founders of the monument association dedicated themselves to “erecting such a monument as shall endure to future ages, and be a permanent memorial, consecrated by the gratitude of the present generation, to the memory of those statesmen and soldiers who led the way in the American Revolution.”<sup>18</sup> In these men’s minds, the blood of the Revolutionary patriots had first sanctified Bunker Hill, and they hoped to create a monument that would rise above Boston to remind Americans forever of the meaning of that sacrifice.

The consideration of Wodiczko’s art work directs our attention particularly to the form and appearance of the monument. Much of the supposed meaning of the monument was determined in the public contest over what it should look like. The appearance and bearing of the monument were supposed to represent specific patriotic sentiments which were expected to remain stable over time. With such an important purpose in mind, the Monument Association was concerned to get the design just right.

The Bunker Hill Monument Association wanted a specific monumental form to communicate the eternal message of heroism, and they turned to classical and Egyptian sources for inspiration. Since the directors of the Monument Association wanted to build something bigger and more grandiose than any other monument in the country to show their own proper patriotism and to distinguish New England in the eyes of the nation, they considered the language of symbolic architecture carefully.<sup>19</sup>

The association’s directors initially favored the shape of a triumphal column, like the Baltimore Washington Monument erected in 1812 and the recently completed Nelson’s Column in London. A column seemed to adhere to a widely recognized language of public heroism, but they decided

16. “The Battle of Bunker’s Hill,” *Analectic Magazine* 11 (1818): 155.

17. See Sarah J. Purcell, *Sealed with Blood*, chap. 5.

18. Agreement of the Bunker Hill Monument Association, quoted in George Washington Warren, *The History of the Bunker Hill Monument Association* (Boston: James R. Osgood and Co., 1877), 40; Warren’s work is mainly an anthology of official documents of the Monument Association, many of which are now lost.

19. See Pamela Scott, “Robert Mills and American Monuments.” In John M. Bryan (ed.), *Robert Mills, Architect* (Washington, D.C.: The American Institute of Architects Press, 1989), 144; Alison Yarrington, *The Commemoration of the Hero, 1800–1864: Monuments to the British Victors of the Napoleonic Wars* (New York: Garland, 1988).

to consider other shapes when they advertised in January 1825 for artists' proposals.<sup>20</sup> Robert Mills, architect of the Baltimore Washington monument and of the subsequent Washington Monument in Washington, D.C., had written in the *Analectic Magazine* in 1820 that arches, columns, and obelisks symbolized respectively triumph, victory, and death; he seemed to agree with the directors that a monument's shape must be chosen to communicate just the right message. Mills suggested that the choice of shape was important, because "where time or accident has often destroyed the records of written history, the imperishable monument of stone remains uninjured."<sup>21</sup> In order to establish their own "monument of stone," the Bunker Hill Monument Association would have to weigh the commemorative meanings of these various shapes very carefully. The choice of shape was essential because the directors of the association hoped the monument would long outlive them.

To advise them on the monumental proposals, the directors appointed a "Board of Artists" that included Daniel Webster, Gilbert Stuart, Washington Allston, Loammi Baldwin, and George Ticknor.<sup>22</sup> Robert Mills, who later designed the Washington Monument in Washington, D.C., submitted a design for an obelisk because it was "peculiarly adapted to commemorate *great transactions*, from its lofty character, great strength, and furnishing a fine surface for inscriptions—There is a degree of lightness and beauty in it that affords a finer relief to the eye than can be obtained in the regular proportioned column."<sup>23</sup> Mills thought the obelisk would make a good blank slate upon which images and inscriptions could be placed to enhance the monument's commemorative effect, an idea which Krzysztof Wodiczko later shared.

Other artists also submitted designs for obelisks, which aroused public discussion over whether a column or an obelisk would better mark the spot of the battle. The fact that obelisks based upon Egyptian models were usually reserved for sepulchral monuments that marked the graves of military heroes caused some to prefer the more triumphal columnar form. "P.B.P." worried in the *Columbian Centinel* newspaper that the committee would choose a tower, instead of the much more durable and heroic "solitary column of one piece of granite." But the anonymous author also recognized that an obelisk might "excite emotion of love of country, or of sorrow, or of gratitude, over the relics of fallen heroes."<sup>24</sup> He proposed that the most

20. See Warren, *History of the Bunker Hill Monument Association*, 156.

21. "M" [Robert Mills], "Essay on Architectural Monuments," *Analectic Magazine* 13 (1820):288; Marc H. Miller, "The Farewell Tour and American Art," in *Lafayette, Hero of Two Worlds: The Art and Pageantry of His Farewell Tour of America, 1824–25* (Hanover: The Queens Museum, 1989), 139.

22. "Resolutions, 5 April 1825," in Warren, *History of the Bunker Hill Monument Association*, 154–55.

23. Robert Mills to the Bunker Hill Monument Association, quoted in Rhodri Windsor Liscombe, *Altogether American: Robert Mills, Architect and Engineer, 1781–1855* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 140; Mills got this idea from Athanasius Kircher's *Obeliscus Pamphilius* (1650); see Scott, "Robert Mills," 154.

24. *Boston Columbian Centinel*, 23 April 1825.

effective monument would unite the best features of column and of obelisk into a new and distinctly American form of marble tribute. Another anonymous newspaper commentator (possibly Horatio Greenough himself) cautioned the directors of the Monument Association that “the American people will not be altogether pleased with their adopting a Monumental column,” modeled after Trajan’s Column, “the memorial of the tyrannical age of the Roman Emperors.”<sup>25</sup> Even a highly decorated column might be too easily “forgotten” by a public which demanded a long-lasting commemoration.<sup>26</sup> Public opinion helped to shape private opinion on the monument’s form, and the directors took note, since the public capacity to offer voluntary praise for the memory of the Revolutionary War was itself one of the things they sought to commemorate.

Horatio Greenough, then a student at Harvard University who would become one of America’s best-known nineteenth-century sculptors, submitted the winning design for a very tall obelisk. Greenough cut through the disagreement over the monument’s shape. He wrote in his memoirs: “The obelisk has to my eye a singular aptitude in its form and character to call attention to a spot memorable in history. It says but one word, but it speaks loud. If I understand its voice, it says, Here! It says no more.”<sup>27</sup> The board of directors eventually chose the obelisk design “as the most simple, appropriate, imposing, and as most congenial to republican institutions.”<sup>28</sup> The obelisk, first used by the Egyptians to mark heroes’ graves, now was transformed in the public mind into a particular form of American commemoration.<sup>29</sup>

Originally, the monument association planned to inscribe names and dates on the face of the monument, much as Robert Mills had suggested, as a tribute to individual men who had died on the hill, but they soon decided that any outward decoration would make the monument too “personal or individual” and reduce its power as a universal symbol of sacrifice.<sup>30</sup> Solomon Willard, the official architect of the monument during its later construction, called the obelisk form “a specimen of art... highly creditable to the taste of the age” as well as a tribute to Egyptian simplicity.<sup>31</sup> These men took the appearance of the monument extremely seriously.

25. “Monumental Miscellany,” *Boston Columbian Centinel*, 28 May 1825.

26. *Ibid.*

27. Horatio Greenough, *The Travels, Observations, and Experience of a Yankee Stonecutter* (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1852), reprint ed. (Gainesville: Scholars’ Facsimiles & Reprints, 1958), 37.

28. “Monument on Bunker Hill,” *Boston Columbian Centinel*, 11 June 1825; “Bunker Hill Obelisk,” *Boston Columbian Centinel*, 25 June 1825; Solomon Willard was appointed architect of the monument, and he is sometimes attributed as the monument’s designer, due to changes he made in Greenough’s plan.

29. The success of this transformation can be seen, for example, in the fact that Robert Mills chose the obelisk form for his most famous monument, the Washington Monument in Washington, D.C.

30. William Wheildon, *Memoir of Solomon Willard* (Boston: The Monument Association, 1865), 33.

31. *Ibid.*, 79.

The monument had to look just a certain way to properly remind the public of heroic sacrifice. Public gratitude for the sacrifice of heroes like Joseph Warren, and even, by the 1820s, of more humble men of the American armed forces, was one of the most important themes present in all of Revolutionary War commemoration. Proper remembrance of heroic sacrifice seemed to constitute a test of the nation's willingness to continually re-confirm the values of the American Revolution. Revolutionary War monuments were supposed to embody one vision of the idealized past, which could stand as a perpetual link between generations of American patriots. One ceremonial toast at a dinner in support of the monument in Watertown, Massachusetts claimed that "The Bunker Hill Monument [shows] the gratitude of this generation to that which is past, and *its* claim to the gratitude of generations which are to come."<sup>32</sup>

Of course, once the monument got out of the planning stages, the Monument Association had no monopoly on its meaning. The 100,000 people who turned out for the cornerstone-laying ceremony in 1825 did not all agree about the preeminence of Massachusetts in Revolutionary memory or the power of elites like Everett and Webster to control it. Even some of the prominent men whom the association invited to become charter members objected to the elitism of their enterprise. New Hampshire veteran Caleb Stark wrote to Edward Everett that he had "powerful national objections to the adoption of this project."<sup>33</sup> Stark claimed that most of the men who had fought at Bunker Hill had already died unappreciated and uncompensated by their national government. Although common veterans had struggled to be paid pensions for years, only some of them received compensation even after the passage of the 1818 Federal Pension Act.<sup>34</sup> Stark could not accept that veterans had never been given "the rewards that were so solemnly promised in the hour of the most critical danger. . . . And now, sir, in room of giving them the bread that was solemnly promised, the debt is to be paid by a stone!"<sup>35</sup>

If the directors of the Monument Association were not entirely in control of the monument's meaning, nor were they able to raise money as quickly as they had originally hoped. In February 1825, Governor William Eustis proposed that the State of Massachusetts should officially sponsor the monument "to consecrate the field in Massachusetts, on which, in the war, our heroes and statesmen sealed with their blood the principles they had

32. *Boston Columbian Centinel*, 1 June 1825.

33. Caleb Stark to Edward Everett, 10 April 1825, in Warren, *History of the Bunker Hill Monument Association*, 65; R. H. Osgood reported to Edward Everett that the New Englanders in Baltimore received the call for contributions "in so cold a manner that I hardly knew in what way to answer it." But he felt they were mainly discouraged for financial reasons. R. H. Osgood to Edward Everett, 25 April 1825, in Warren, *History of the Bunker Hill Monument Association*, 69.

34. John Resch, *Suffering Soldiers: Revolutionary War Veterans, Moral Sentiment, and Political Culture in the Early Republic* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999).

35. Stark to Everett, in Warren, *The History of the Bunker Hill Monument Association*, 65.

sworn to maintain,” but his plan never caught on with state legislators.<sup>36</sup> The Monument Association collected money from schoolchildren around New England, and men and women around the region proclaimed their patriotism by donating five dollars to join the association, but the directors were still tens of thousands of dollars short of their goal even at the time of the cornerstone ceremony in 1825.

Financial problems in the late 1820s and 1830s almost caused the monument not to get finished, a fact which indicates that the project was always more complicated than simply constructing a self-evident and permanent marker for Revolutionary heroes. Public art and public commemoration both require funding. The monument was not completed until 1842, perhaps because the public had grown tired of contributing money and never seeing the “pile of stone” finished. The Bunker Hill Monument Association had been joined in fundraising efforts by the Massachusetts Charitable Mechanics Association, a much more working-class fraternal organization, but even the two groups together were unable to raise enough money until the women of New England stepped forward en masse.

Female fundraising made the monument possible. The decisive fundraising success that finally launched the monument came from the Ladies’ Fair organized in 1840 largely at the behest of Sarah Josepha Hale, the editor of *Godey’s Ladies Book*. Whereas the male Mechanics Association donated \$800 and some real estate to the monument project in the 1840s, the Ladies’ Fair at Boston’s Quincy Market, which sold handicrafts, food, and books produced and collected by women all over Massachusetts, raised \$30,000, without which the monument would never have been built.<sup>37</sup> The Bunker Hill Monument Association claimed that the Ladies’ Fair was “successful beyond expectations. . . . Thousands flocked to the scene; and the abundance, variety, and beauty of the articles exhibited, as well as the arrangements, were credible to the highest degree to the industry, taste, skill, and spirit of the Ladies of New England.”<sup>38</sup> When the monument was dedicated on June 17, 1843, the sixty-eighth anniversary of the battle, Daniel Webster claimed that it stood for eternal American principles of “patriotism and courage; civil and religious liberty; free government; [and] the moral improvement of mankind.”<sup>39</sup> It also stood for the commitment of men (wealthy, middle, and working class), and more especially women, to the ideal of civic commemoration.

36. William Eustis, “Address to the Legislature, 24 January 1825,” in Warren, *History of the Bunker Hill Monument Association*, 58.

37. “Receipts and Expenditures of the Bunker Hill Monument Association, 1823–1846,” in Charles W. Snell, *Documents Relating to the Organization and Purpose of the Bunker Hill Monument Association and to the Construction of the Bunker Hill Monument, 1823–1846*, Vol. II (Denver: National Park Service, United States Department of the Interior, 1982), 128.

38. Bunker Hill Monument Association 1843 Records quoted in Sherbrooke Rogers, *Sarah Josepha Hale: A New England Pioneer, 1788–1879* (Grantham, N.H.: Tompson & Rutter, 1985), 51.

39. Daniel Webster, quoted in Musuraca, “The Celebration,” 52.

Even after the monument was constructed, its meaning never remained static, especially as the Charlestown neighborhood changed. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the monument became a symbol of working-class immigrant pride in Charlestown. Following the massive celebration for the Bunker Hill centennial in 1875, the annual June 17 celebrations put on at the monument by the Bunker Hill Monument Association and later by the 17th of June Association became increasingly enmeshed with the ethnic politics of Irish immigrants who were gaining new prominence in the town and were fighting against the town's older, native-born elite citizens. State and local politicians, mostly Democrats, used the annual celebrations as a way to consolidate their local ties and as an opportunity to give speeches to the community, a tradition that continues to this day. Historian Michael Musuraca has argued that Irish Americans claimed the day as their own and used it to celebrate "the neighborhood called Charlestown, its people and their heritage, as well as the glory of their adopted nation."<sup>40</sup>

The Bunker Hill Monument was meant to mark an eternal theme at a sacred historical location, but, in some ways, the monument could not remain immune to changes in the community around it. In 1919, when the town of Charlestown was quite depressed, the Bunker Hill Monument Association deeded the monument and the surrounding battlefield property to the state of Massachusetts, and subsequently they became part of Boston National Historical Park and the end-point of Boston's Freedom Trail.<sup>41</sup> As the fates of Charlestown rose and fell over the course of the twentieth century with the Charlestown Navy Yard, the monument stood as a reminder of what most residents, both immigrants and native born, could claim as a glorious local past.

A mixture of civic pride and the memory of the Revolutionary past caused controversy over Wodiczko's reinterpretation of the monument at the end of the twentieth century. Local pride continues to run high in Charlestown, where many local residents would rather not have the "glorious" history of their town tarnished by close scrutiny of current urban problems. James Conway, owner of the *Charlestown Patriot* newspaper and official of the current Bunker Hill Monument Association, criticized Wodiczko and the Institute of Contemporary Art in the *Boston Globe* for focusing on murder and portraying a negative image of Charlestown in the work of art. Local real estate broker William Galvin questioned the appropriateness of airing the town's dirty laundry on a lofty public monument: "You tell me how the Charlestown code of silence is a universal theme?"<sup>42</sup>

Galvin's angry words ironically demonstrate exactly how Wodiczko managed to remain faithful to the original intent of the monument's builders

40. Musuraca, "The Celebration," 60.

41. "Quitclaim Deed," in Snell, *Documents*, 136.

42. Rakowsky, "Charlestown Not Silent," *Boston Globe*, 26 September 1998.

while at the same time challenging its meaning. We still expect our monuments to represent “universal themes” as much as the monument committee in the 1820s did, but Wodiczko transformed the “universal theme” of heroism from its focus on masculine sacrifice in war to the more feminine loss of murdered children.<sup>43</sup> Just as Horatio Greenough maintained that the obelisk form would shout “Here!” to announce its commemorative purpose to the public, one of the mothers depicted in Wodiczko’s tape proclaims of the pain of her loss: “If I have to shout from the top of this monument . . . you *will* hear me.”<sup>44</sup> In public art, through the women’s testimony and Wodiczko’s personal creativity, the monument’s meaning was opened up to include the commemoration of personal loss and the civic pain of murder.

If Greenough anthropomorphized the monumental form to some extent by imagining that the obelisk could shout “Here!,” Wodiczko took the idea one step further and viewed the monument not as a static object with universal meaning, but more as a living being that might be capable of challenging the community around it. Wodiczko maintains that in the midst of social chaos, such as the urban crime in Charlestown, “the old memorial has no choice but to accept its new role and meaning as a revolutionary site . . . the crafty monument must welcome and accommodate” new ideas.<sup>45</sup> Interestingly, Wodiczko does not view it as the responsibility of the artist to make the monument speak, even though it is his projection which literally puts words in the mouth of the structure. Instead, Wodiczko posits that the monument projection should challenge the complacency of the community towards its already-living monument.<sup>46</sup> The ICA pamphlet which invited the public to attend Wodiczko’s projections asserted that “for three evenings the Bunker Hill Monument will assert its First Amendment right and will speak freely of what it has seen and what it has heard.”<sup>47</sup> In reality, the monument “speaks” to the community every day, but Wodiczko used art to focus its message in a new and radically specific way. For Wodiczko, the role of the artist is not just to “design” the monument, a role which the “founding fathers” of the monument would have recognized, but also to reenvision the way that the memorial, and perhaps even the past itself, should be confronted by the community at large.

Wodiczko saw the Bunker Hill monument not only as a commemoration of past valor at the Battle of Bunker Hill, but also as a “living organism” which bears “silent witness” to the recent past in Charlestown.<sup>48</sup> By adding the women’s voices to his projection, Wodiczko hoped to challenge the on-

43. The obelisk is also a very “masculine,” even “phallic,” shape. The image of a 221-foot high phallus speaking in a female voice provides another level of challenge to Wodiczko’s viewers.

44. Christine Temin, “Monument Message is Searing,” *Boston Globe*, 25 September 1998.

45. Wodiczko, “Memorial Projection,” *October* 38 (1986), reprinted in Krzysztof Wodiczko, *Critical Vehicles: Writings, Projects, Interviews* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 49.

46. *Ibid.*, 51–52.

47. “Let the Monument Speak! Let Freedom Ring!,” *Tab: The Weekly* [1998].

48. Wodiczko, author interview.

lookers not only to think about the mothers' suffering, but to view the monument full-time in more flexible, dynamic terms. To Wodiczko, urban communities in crisis, such as Charlestown, *already* project their problems onto the massive commemorative structures in their midst.<sup>49</sup> The monument, thus, bears witness to the violence committed at its feet, and it only requires a short step to claim that this "silent witness" should speak its mind.<sup>50</sup>

By carefully designing the monument projection, Wodiczko ensured that his vision of a "speaking" monument was not just a well-developed metaphor. When Wodiczko taped the members of Charlestown After Murder who participated in his project, he actually placed them on a pedestal and filmed them from the perspective of a viewer looking up at the stone memorial. That way, when the images were enlarged and projected onto the monument, the obelisk literally appeared to come to life as a giant, well-proportioned person. Wodiczko thought that placing his subjects on pedestals also allowed them to "displace" some of the trauma of recounting the effects of violence on their families. For example, he noticed that several women cried less when they were on the pedestal, which enabled them to tell their stories more fluidly. Wodiczko felt that by getting his subjects to imagine themselves as the monument, they were better able to accomplish the public "struggle for justice," since "they were aware how important this monument is for justice."<sup>51</sup>

Although Wodiczko does admit that the Bunker Hill Monument contains *some* level of inherent meaning as "a fundamental monument about rights: political rights and human rights," his work simultaneously challenged viewers to see new meanings in the stone obelisk beyond those suggested by its association with a Revolutionary past.<sup>52</sup> Wodiczko wanted to fix a new message of community openness onto the monument—to add contemporary social problems to the universal message of freedom and rights.

In reality, as Wodiczko understood, on-lookers project their own ideas and thoughts onto the monument every day. Despite all the nineteenth-century theories about the "inherent" meanings of monumental forms, there is nothing about the stone obelisk which necessitates a particular association with the past. The obelisk on its own doesn't "mean" anything, especially as viewers become farther removed from the past theories of representation that assigned specific meanings to specific monumental forms. Nevertheless, generations of Americans have come to view the monument as an essential symbol of the Revolution and of freedom. Still, the process of commemoration necessitates a constant reinterpretation by each viewer of the monument, one which can be influenced by a variety of

49. Wodiczko, "Speaking through Monuments," *Krzysztof Wodiczko: Works* (Washington, D.C.: Hirshorn Museum and Sculpture Gardens, 1989), reprinted in *Critical Vehicles*, 62.

50. Wodiczko, author interview.

51. *Ibid.*

52. *Ibid.*



factors: the individual's knowledge of history, the presence of National Park Service interpreters, the weather on the day of the visit to Bunker Hill, or the intervention of an artist like Wodiczko.

The form of the monument—a high, stone obelisk—remains important to the process of commemoration, even if its meaning in Wodiczko's art is not the same meaning assigned by the monument's designers in the nineteenth century or even by the current local community officials. Wodiczko told Roger Gilroy in a 1989 interview that one of the challenges in his projection artworks is the fact that he must “compete with the power, drama, and authority of the structure I address and confront.”<sup>53</sup> The monumental size and proportions of the memorials Wodiczko transforms lend significance and public importance to his work, but they may also threaten to dwarf the artist himself. But Wodiczko cannot be lost as long as he sees it as his duty to “reanimate” monumental structures and to bring the private conflicts of the present to bear on the markers of the past. As he put it in a 1992 interview: “I’m a historical artist, a little like Courbet when he said it’s necessary to take history into account as long as it has something to do with the present.”<sup>54</sup>

Wodiczko's work, then, serves to highlight the fact that the monument is the product of many different perspectives and ideas all operating simultaneously to impose multiple levels of meaning on the process of commemoration. Wodiczko's monument projection spoke not only in the voices of the mothers of murdered Charlestown residents, but also in his voice as an artist, in the voice of the Revolutionary past, and perhaps even in the voices of the onlookers themselves who could choose either to accept or reject Wodiczko's reinterpretation of history.

These multiple voices and multiple perspectives show us something important about the process of commemoration, in general. Even as they come to stand for long-lasting social values, monuments, not just in Boston, but everywhere, are constantly being reinterpreted by both individuals and communities. Wodiczko's projection merely brought to the surface the same factors faced by public historians at public history sites every day, whether they realize it or not.

The drama of Wodiczko's work and some of the community reaction against it also demonstrate that commemoration can never be entirely neutral. Wodiczko's art is political, not only because it uses the past to confront current social issues, but also because it views public space as a site of contest and power-struggle.<sup>55</sup> Wodiczko himself sometimes denies the political content of his art, by claiming that he is rather seeking to demystify

53. “Projection as Intervention,” *New Art Examiner* 16 (1989), reprinted as “An Interview with Roger Gilroy,” in *Critical Vehicles*, 172.

54. “An Interview by Jean-Christophe Royoux,” *Creative Camera* (Manchester) 323 (1993), reprinted in *Critical Vehicles*, 176.

55. “Response to Maria Morzuch” (Lyon: Musée d’art contemporain et Espace lyonnais d’art contemporain, 1992) reprinted in *Critical Vehicles*, 142.

the assumed political or historical meaning of the public monuments themselves, but his work surely reveals how commemoration itself is an act of on-going political importance.<sup>56</sup>

Although the original monument planners wanted the obelisk's message of heroism to be general, not personal, Wodiczko dramatically transformed the monument through the use of light and the women's voices to make it a symbol of *both* personal and universal heroism and loss. The founders of the Bunker Hill Monument Association could not have envisioned the modern-day Charlestown community or Krzysztof Wodiczko's comment upon it, but their desire to build "a structure, intended to last for ages" is still being borne out in new ways, for new heroes, as Revolutionary sacrifice is enhanced by its changing context.<sup>57</sup>

Despite some local controversy, or perhaps even because of it, Wodiczko's temporary transformation of the Bunker Hill Monument emerged as a searing commentary on the relationship between modern crime and the sacrosanct Revolutionary past. Public historians and historic site managers who are willing to push the limits of the sites under their care might learn a lesson from this experiment about acknowledging the ever-changing meanings of monuments and other public commemorations. Wodiczko's artistic interaction with the Bunker Hill Monument merely dramatizes the fact that all monuments change some aspects of their meanings all the time.

56. "A Conversation with Krzysztof Wodiczko." In *Krzysztof Wodiczko: Instruments, Projections, Vehicles* (Barcelona: Fundació Antoni Tàpies, 1992), reprinted as "An Interview by Bruce W. Ferguson," in *Critical Vehicles*, 192.

57. "Monument on Bunker Hill," *Boston Columbian Centinel*, 11 June 1825.