

BARBARA GLADSTONE GALLERY

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# Art That Gives Meaning To Bits of This and That

By MICHAEL RUSH

**F**AR from the palatial drawing rooms-turned-galleries in the Fridericianum, the epicenter of this summer's Documenta megashow in Kassel, Germany, one of the invited artists could be found building what looked like shacks. Using duct tape, wood scraps, plastic wrapping and whatever else the neighborhood streets yielded, Thomas Hirschhorn was making "Bataille Monument," a temporary "display" (he doesn't like the word "installation") into which he invited inhabitants of the largely immigrant neighborhood to collaborate with him on an interactive artwork.

For the duration of the exhibition (from June through mid-September) Mr. Hirschhorn remained at the site, creating a daily beehive of activity, with people of all ages paging through the writings of the French philosopher Georges Bataille and filming their comments in a jury-rigged television studio inside the temporary structures. To some visitors, "Bataille Monument" was an ugly intrusion into an already marginal part of the city; to others, like the New York Times critic Michael Kimmelman, the project was among the best offerings in an otherwise "claustrophobic" show.

Mr. Hirschhorn's art has been seen in New York, too, most notably at the former Guggenheim SoHo in the 1998-99 exhibition "Premises: Invested Spaces in Visual Arts, Architecture and Design from France, 1958-1998."

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**Exalting the ordinary, Thomas Hirschhorn somehow makes aluminum foil, plastic wrap and magazine cutouts aesthetic.**

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He was given some prime real estate to play with: the museum's street-level windows on the corner of Prince Street and Broadway. Displacing the usual array of designer clocks and flatware, he filled the display areas with his customary low-down constructions made of aluminum foil, packing tape, plastic wrap, cut-outs from magazines and so forth. In the center was a garish, critical nod to the land of his birth, Switzerland: an oversize Rolex made from cardboard and gold tinfoil. For Mr. Hirschhorn, the poetic and the political are not polar opposites.

"I am not a political artist," he insisted in a phone interview from Kassel last month. "But I try to do my work politically." In fact, he did not set out to be an artist at all. Reared in Bern, the adopted son of an accountant and a homemaker, Mr. Hirschhorn, 45, spent five years at the Schule für Gestaltung, or School of Graphic Design, a Bauhaus-type educational institution in Zurich that had no art department per se. His goal was to be a graphic designer, "not for hire," he said, "but my own kind of graphic designer."

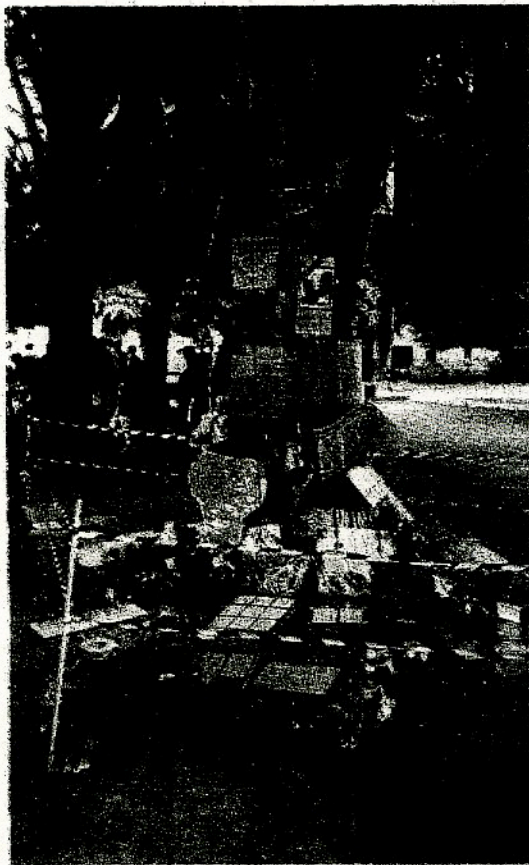


Annette Koch/Courtesy Barbara Gladstone

*The artist Thomas Hirschhorn.*



# Art That Gives Meaning to Bits and Pieces



Barbara Gladstone

Thomas Hirschhorn's "Deleuze Monument," a shrine on and around a tree in Avignon, France.

## Thomas Hirschhorn

Barbara Gladstone Gallery, 515 West 24th Street.  
Saturday through Dec. 21.

He moved to Paris in the mid-1980's to study at the now defunct Grapus workshop, described by Mr. Hirschhorn as a "Communist atelier." Supporting himself as a house painter, moving-company laborer and health aide to the elderly, he began to make small collages relating to his graphic designs. "My work, even now, begins originally in two dimensions, not three," he said. "I make collages instead of drawings."

Mr. Hirschhorn's art is an art of engagement in which the idea propelling it and the activity surrounding it are more important than the object that is created. Though his works are classified as sculpture, he prefers to call them displays or monuments. His public projects, like the shrines to the dead that spring up spontaneously at the sites of car accidents or murders, have an improvised feel. "Deleuze Monument," for example, erected on and around a large tree in Avignon, France, in 2000, or "Otto Freundlich Altar," with burning candles and posters installed on a cement floor in Basel, Switzerland, in 1998, could be mistaken for any other street shrine, except for one essential thing: each was meticulously mapped and "collaged" in two dimensions before being built in its intended space.

He sees no contradictions in exhibiting in a variety of places; in fact, he seems to enjoy the tensions between the street and the museum. "I think my work has to thrive in any space," he said, "but the spirit of the work must remain intact." As he becomes more of a commodity on the international art scene, Mr. Hirschhorn has grown adamant that what he creates for the street not end up in a museum. A current commission from the Pompidou Center in Paris, for example, is bound by a contract stating that the completed piece must be physically disconnected from the museum.

Artists have been using everyday materials (rope,

Continued on Page 38

newspapers, scraps of metal) for many years, but rarely have the commonplace and the exalted been so successfully integrated by a single artist. Mr. Hirschhorn's constructions are at once bold, politically and intellectually challenging, fun, mysterious, and inviting. His forebears include Claes Oldenburg, Ben Vautier, Ed Kienholz, Allan Kaprow and

Joseph Beuys, whom Mr. Hirschhorn considers one of his "professors," along with Andy Warhol. "Beuys introduced a new energy into art," Mr. Hirschhorn said, "opening the possibility of art for everybody."

Like Beuys, Mr. Hirschhorn, though deeply populist in his thinking, is meticulous and adept. He brings an immensely cultivated aesthetic even to his street works. "He believes sculptural truth can be found in nonhierarchical, ordinary materials," said Barbara Gladstone,

at whose Chelsea gallery Mr. Hirschhorn will open his first New York solo exhibition on Saturday.

Warhol, Mr. Hirschhorn said, was skeptical about art: "His honesty, his cruelty, especially in the car and airplane crash series, made me feel that art can involve me. He understood society and criticized society; he was very clear."

For his New York gallery debut, Mr. Hirschhorn is presenting a display he calls "Cavemanman." He envisions the exhibition space as a

cave or a tunnel into which a man has retreated from the world because of his distress over the enormous inequities he experiences in life. Covering every inch of the gallery with books (hundreds of them, on religion, politics, philosophy, feminist theory, race) and, as we would

expect, duct tape, plastic and cut-outs, Mr. Hirschhorn wants to give visitors a sense not only of this man's isolation but also his commitment to ideas. "He may be mentally unstable," Mr. Hirschhorn said, "but he is deeply preoccupied with equality among human beings," a recurrent theme in Mr. Hirschhorn's work. "It will be a very strange atmosphere," he said, "with chambers as in real caves. Though you won't see this man, you will feel his presence."

Like this unnamed recluse, Mr. Hirschhorn steepes himself in human struggles. Unlike him, he does it artfully, publicly, communally, determinedly. □