

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Glenn Ligon, Diedrich Diederichsen, and Julian Rose, "Monumental Endeavor," *Artforum*, November 2013, p. 226.

Monumental Endeavor

GLENN LIGON, DIEDRICH DIEDERICHSEN, AND JULIAN ROSE ON THOMAS HIRSCHHORN

THIS PAST JUNE, a sprawling, jerry-built plywood protrusion sprang up in the middle of a South Bronx housing project with the suddenness of a mushroom patch after a spring rain. Residents of the Forest Houses must surely have wondered where this "monument" to Italian Communist philosopher Antonio Gramsci had come from, what it was doing in their neighborhood, what to think of the profusion of philosophy lectures, poetry readings, performances, radio shows, and art workshops the structure would host from its opening on July 1 to its closing on September 15, and, most of all, what exactly to make of its creator, the cartoonishly bespectacled, internationally renowned Swiss artist THOMAS HIRSCHHORN, who had descended on the Forest Houses as if from outer space and remained

a daily presence throughout this artwork-cum-community-center's ephemeral existence, only to vanish with the same abruptness with which he had first appeared.

With a mind to addressing such inquiries, artist GLENN LIGON and architectural critic and *Artforum* senior editor JULIAN ROSE visited the *Gramsci Monument* and took its cockeyed measure, while critic DIEDRICH DIEDERICHSEN perused the artist's collected writings, published in English this past August, in hopes that they, too, might shed light on the urgent questions the last and most ambitious of Hirschhorn's four tributes to Continental thinkers raised—about the role of the artist, the function of art, and the very viability of public space today.



Thomas Hirschhorn, *Gramsci Monument*, 2013, Forest Houses, Bronx, New York. Photo: Romain Lopez.

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Above: Thomas Hirschhorn leading "Art School: Energy=Yes! Quality=No!" at his Gramsci Monument, 2013, Forest Houses, Bronx, New York, August 16, 2013. Photo: Romain Lopez.

Left: Construction detail of Thomas Hirschhorn's Gramsci Monument, 2013, Forest Houses, Bronx, New York. Photo: Chandra Glick.

Right: Copies of the Gramsci Monument Newspaper in the "ambassador's office" at Thomas Hirschhorn's Gramsci Monument, 2013, Forest Houses, Bronx, New York. Photo: Chandra Glick.



Above: The Internet Corner at Thomas Hirschhorn's Gramsci Monument, 2013, Forest Houses, Bronx, New York, July 1, 2013. Photo: Romain Lopez.

Right: DJ Baby Dee and Romain Lopez in the radio studio at Thomas Hirschhorn's Gramsci Monument, 2013, Forest Houses, Bronx, New York, September 11, 2013. Photo: Chandra Glick.



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Thomas Is a Trip

GLENN LIGON

AT A CONFERENCE ON MULTICULTURALISM a long time ago and far, far away, the critic bell hooks declared, "Love will take you places you might not ordinarily go," and, indeed, it was Love that propelled Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn to locate his *Gramsci Monument*, 2013—the fourth and final iteration of a series of artworks dedicated to major writers and philosophers—at the Forest Houses in the South Bronx, a New York City Housing Authority complex of fifteen high-rise buildings encircling a vast, albeit ill-maintained, green space. It was not love of the projects per se, however, that led Hirschhorn to get down uptown, but his love for what he has called the "non-exclusive audience," one that might be encountered in urban areas outside the confines of galleries and museums, such as those operated by the Dia Art Foundation, which sponsored his installation. Perched atop a large platform, the *Gramsci Monument* consisted of a cluster of

shack-like plywood pavilions that contained a radio broadcast station, a library, an exhibition space, an art workshop, a café, and an Internet room, as well as a stage for lectures and performances. The compound operated seven days a week under the full-time supervision of the artist and curator Yasmil Raymond (as Dia's "ambassador") until mid-September, when it was dismantled and its parts given away by lottery. I visited a few times before then, but it was admittedly hard to just "visit" the *Monument* the way one might visit, say, Dia:Beacon, for the site brought home the fact that we live within radically unequal zones of privilege and access in relationship to art. While Hirschhorn must have situated the *Monument* outside the art centers of Manhattan in part to make precisely this point, I hoped that he had come correct to the Forest Houses. I hoped, that is, that the *Gramsci Monument* was not just one more example of an art project, exhibition, or biennial trading on

the frisson, if not the love, of encountering the "Other" in a troubled urban space.

If I felt uneasy about Hirschhorn's choice of site, it was because it was almost too perfect. Located in the poorest congressional district in the nation and devastated by high unemployment rates, drugs, arson, and failed urban policies, the South Bronx in the 1970s and '80s became a global symbol of inner-city decay, visited by no fewer than three US presidents looking for a suitable backdrop to express their concern for the plight of poor and working-class people. Although the neighborhood's fortunes have changed somewhat since those grim days, the area continues to struggle with the challenges brought on by poverty, pollution, high rates of incarceration, and the ongoing effects of the AIDS crisis. And although the residents of the Forest Houses would certainly be able to tell if someone was pissing on them and calling it rain (to borrow Reverend Al Sharpton's memorable phrase), I could not help but think that the more utopian aspects of Hirschhorn's project were directly colored by considerations that went largely unnoted in the press release and manifestos I found on the *Monument's* website. Hirschhorn's desire to "encounter the Other through an Idea"—to use art as a catalyst for interaction and cooperation—was certainly made all the more vivid by his choice of the setting in which that encounter occurred.

"But does the community even want this?" a friend asked when I told him about the *Gramsci Monument*. Based on the fact that Hirschhorn had been invited to build it in their midst, my answer had to be yes—especially given that the artist had met with the residents of dozens of other housing projects before he received an invitation from Erik Farmer, a long-term tenant of the Forest Houses and president of its residents' association. In Farmer, Hirschhorn found a charismatic, engaged, and respected community figure, one willing to give him the benefit of the doubt. "Thomas is a trip," Farmer replied with obvious affection and amusement when asked about his first impressions of the artist. It was Farmer's embrace of



New York City Housing Authority rendering, ca. 1960. Center: McKinley Houses (formerly Forest South Houses). Top left: Forest Houses.

Opposite page: Thomas Hirschhorn, *Gramsci Monument*, 2013, Forest Houses, Bronx, New York. Photo: Chandra Glick.

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Hirschhorn's evangelical zeal and his own curiosity about Gramsci's life and writings that led to the decisive offer to host the project. Along with two leaders from the Southeast Bronx Neighborhood Centers (headquartered at the Forest Houses)—Clyde Thompson, director of community affairs, training, and employment, and Diane Herbert, executive director—Farmer helped secure the Housing Authority's approval for the artwork and encouraged the residents to work with Hirschhorn, despite the fact that most of them had never heard of the artist, or of Gramsci, for that matter.

As much as this spirit of openness and cooperation was a response to Hirschhorn's passion, it also had to do with the character of the neighborhood. Although the South Bronx was brought to the brink of destruction during the late '70s and early '80s, a strong tradition of community pride and cultural innovation exists there, one that made the residents of the Forest Houses willing to go on this "trip" with Hirschhorn. My uncle Tossy remembers seeing Billie Holiday and Thelonious Monk perform in nightclubs in the neighborhood in the '40s and '50s. The rapper Fat Joe, who grew up in the Forest Houses, recalls watching Grandmaster Flash, one of the pioneers of hip-hop, doing DJ sets in the parking lot across the street from his building in the mid-'70s. Besides the musical

genius, the neighborhood has produced a MacArthur Fellow, a former four-star general and secretary of state, and a current Supreme Court justice. When Hirschhorn stepped into the projects, he tapped directly into the estimable cultural, emotional, and intellectual resources—vastly underutilized ones, I might add—that the community already possessed.

He also—let's be real—tapped into a "want" closer to the one my friend had asked me about, a want that had little to do with art. "No romance without finance" is the chorus of Gwen Guthrie's 1986 hit "Ain't Nothin' Goin' On but the Rent," and the Forest Houses residents' calculation to welcome Hirschhorn was inevitably based in part on concrete considerations that were just as important as the intangible benefits of having the *Gramsci Monument* located in the hood. One of those was the jobs (albeit temporary ones) that the *Monument* would bring to a neighborhood with an unemployment rate of 21 percent and an overall poverty rate of 43 percent. Other factors included free Internet access (the projects aren't wired), increased maintenance of public spaces ("they mowed the grass for the art," one resident told me), heightened security (in the form of guards hired by Dia), and the promise of children's workshops and field trips that would keep local kids from running the streets. So, in addition to offering



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Besides all that brown plastic packing tape, what held the *Gramsci Monument* together were human encounters. And, to be sure, Hirschhorn gives good encounter.



Performance at the Gramsci Theater at Thomas Hirschhorn's *Gramsci Monument*, 2013, Forest Houses, Bronx, New York, July 1, 2013. Photo: Romain Lopez.



Erik Farmer and Thomas Hirschhorn in the Forest Community Center, Forest Houses, Bronx, New York, March 2013. Photo: Kelly Kivland.

a library and an exhibition devoted to a communist philosopher, the *Gramsci Monument* also delivered considerable financial and institutional resources that the residents strategically used to their advantage. That these benefits were attached to an artwork was likely immaterial to their recipients, but they certainly spoke to the complicated ways in which they saw Hirschhorn as having more to offer than passionate words to make the art happen.

Reflecting on my friend's question, I cannot help but think that as an artist of color I was expected to be particularly in touch with the community's needs, just as most would expect Hirschhorn to be ignorant of them. And the fact is that I was positioned differently in relation to the questions that the *Gramsci Monument* posed about audience and agency. At our first meeting, Farmer had asked if I would give a lecture on one of the days when the residents programmed the *Monument's* activities, explaining that because I am a black artist, my words would be important for the residents to hear. While I was flattered to be asked and accepted the invitation (noting that there were, at the time, no other visual artists listed on the impressive roster of scholars and poets scheduled on the *Monument's* website), doing so implicated me in Hirschhorn's project in a way that I had not expected, and I was unsure how to navigate this transition from audience member to participant. In fact, the invitation to write about the *Monument* for this magazine had already complicated my relationship to it, provoking in me some notion of journalistic rigor at odds with the desire to just hang out. But, in truth, I was implicated long before either of those entanglements arose, and this is likely what prompted my friend's question about the community

members and occasioned Farmer's invitation for me to address them: I'd grown up in the Forest Houses.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?" asked a white artist best known for the painted plaster body casts of black and brown residents of the South Bronx that he affixes to exterior walls in the neighborhood. "I'm here because Thomas asked me to come see the *Monument*," I replied. "Also, I grew up in the Forest Houses." "Well," he said, glancing disdainfully at my white shirt and designer shoes, "you don't dress like you're from here." Setting aside his essentialist and mildly racist notions of what colored people from the South Bronx do and do not look like, I realized he was asking a question I had certainly asked myself: What *am* I doing here, back on the block for the first time in more than three decades?

Although I spent my formative years in the Forest Houses—my family moved there in 1959, the year before I was born—we relocated to a smaller, less chaotic housing project in the northeast Bronx in the mid-'70s, returning to the neighborhood only occasionally, to visit elderly relatives or to attend a funeral. But even when I lived in the Forest Houses, I was often elsewhere. After a kindergarten teacher at the public school across the street told my mother, "Your child might be smart here, but at a *real* school he'd probably just be average," my mother promptly found a private school on the Upper West Side of Manhattan that was willing to give me a scholarship, concluding that a three-hour commute was a small price to pay for a future not bounded by such low expectations. Like many poor and working-class parents of her generation, she believed that education was the ladder to a better life, even while worrying about what I

might leave behind on that upward journey. She was anxious that sending me to a predominantly white school might cause me to lose my connection to the black community, a community that had shaped and nurtured her. It's not that she feared I would forget that I was black; she feared I would forget that white people weren't everything. It was an act of love to send me off every morning, her concern for my psychic well-being balanced by her faith that my teachers wouldn't steer me too far off course and her trust in my ability to differentiate piss from rain.

From a very early age I was shy and bookish and knew that the life I wanted might exist elsewhere. Books became a means of travel. Later I turned to making art. Although my mother didn't fully understand my artistic ambitions, she encouraged them by sending me to pottery classes in Greenwich Village and drawing classes at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. She imagined that knowledge of art might make me a well-rounded citizen if not necessarily a living. Only well into my twenties did I "come out" as an artist, leaving my job as a proofreader at a midtown law firm for the uncertainty of a full-time studio practice. And only later still did I recognize the ways that the books my mother brought by the boxful to our apartment in the Forest Houses had laid the foundation of an artistic career filled with so much text.

Given my childhood history and my long absence from the neighborhood, what was it, exactly, that compelled me to come to the projects again after all these years, when nostalgia, a sense of obligation, or a desire to "show the projects love" had not? It was *art* that brought me back to the Forest Houses—not my own but Hirschhorn's. This irony was not lost on

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Jeniece Jenkins (far left) and Lex Brown (far right) leading an art class in the workshop at Thomas Hirschhorn's Gramsci Monument, 2013, Forest Houses, Bronx, New York, August 14, 2013. Photo: Romain Lopez.



The Gramsci Archive at Thomas Hirschhorn's Gramsci Monument, 2013, Forest Houses, Bronx, New York, August 6, 2013. Photo: Romain Lopez.



The Gramsci Bar at Thomas Hirschhorn's Gramsci Monument, 2013, Forest Houses, Bronx, New York, July 1, 2013. Photo: Romain Lopez.

me as I took the subway north from Manhattan to see the *Gramsci Monument* one oppressively hot, overcast afternoon in July.

"I LEARN[ED] that you can make anything out of art," proclaimed a handwritten note by Malika S., penned after a field trip to Dia:Beacon and reproduced in the July 7 issue of the *Gramsci Monument Newspaper*. Given her exposure to the work of Fred Sandback, Robert Smithson, and Dan Flavin, I suspect that Malika meant to say that you can make art out of anything, but nevertheless the point is well taken: The multivalent, porous, and ambiguous nature of Hirschhorn's project produced numerous points of entry and trajectories that did not lead to predetermined outcomes. To address a "non-exclusive" audience," Hirschhorn has written, "means to face reality, failure, unsuccessfulness, the cruelty of disinterest, and the incommensurability of a complex situation." Indeed, it was this openness and unpredictability, and even the risk of failure, that gave the *Gramsci Monument* its vitality. Anything could be made out of it. While that has become a cliché that many artists use to mask a lack of rigor in their thinking, in Hirschhorn's case, this mutability was directly linked to his conception of art's function in the world.

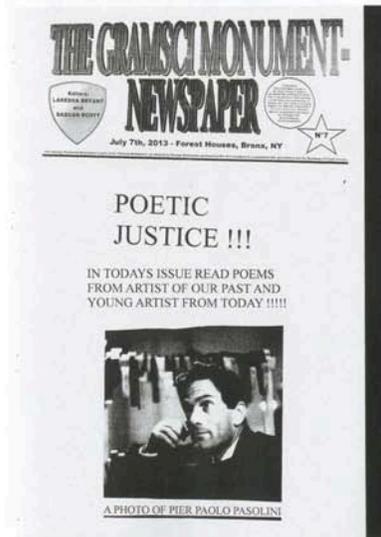
Besides all that brown plastic packing tape, what held the *Gramsci Monument* together were human encounters. And, to be sure, Hirschhorn gives good encounter. These interchanges were the catalyst that led to the invitation to work with the residents, and it was my interactions with them that made each trip to the Forest Houses worthwhile. "It is a platform for their yearning to share," one artist friend said of the *Monument*, and it was clear to me when talking

to Farmer; Saquan Scott, a coeditor of the newspaper; DJ Baby Dee, the project's MC; or Marcella Paradise, the aptly named project librarian, that the residents of the Forest Houses thought of the *Monument* as an opportunity to share their skills, lives, and experiences with others. Were such interactions, in fact, the art? Not clear. That said, probably the most interesting thing about Hirschhorn's project was its continual renegotiation and deconstruction of the ever-supple line between art and non-art. In the end, however, it was art that somehow always won out, and this at times left a bitter taste in my mouth.

"I have always seen my mission," Hirschhorn has written, "as taking over responsibility. Responsibility for everything touching my work, but also responsibility for what I am not responsible for." That's a tall order—a standard to which no one should be held—and yet it proves unexpectedly revealing, pointing to the inevitable chasm between the expectations such ambitious work engenders and the more modest reality of what it could deliver. To be sure, Hirschhorn did take responsibility for many things touching his work, as his full-time presence at the *Monument* attested. However, it was in small interactions where missed opportunities continually cropped up. Hirschhorn may have thought such exchanges fell outside the realm of what he was ultimately responsible for, but they showed where his priorities were at odds with what could have been—and needed to be—done.

For example, as much as I was touched by Malika's and her friends' conclusions about the nature of art in the *Gramsci Monument Newspaper*, when I finished reading them I thought to myself, "The word *metal* is spelled with a *t*, not a *d*." While it didn't surprise me that the children's handwritten testimonies

Below: Cover of the Gramsci Monument Newspaper, July 7, 2013.



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were offered as authentic, unmediated documents of a "non-exclusive" audience's encounters with art, what did surprise me was that no one had helped them with their spelling and grammar. This might seem a trivial point to some, but in a neighborhood where fewer than 12 percent of the children at the public school I attended passed the state's 2013 English Language Arts test, this disregard spoke to a privileging of the encounter with art—the children's, Hirschhorn's, my own—over the more mundane problems of literacy and writing skills, just as it spoke to what the British writer Alan Bennett has called the "gap between our social position and our social obligations."

Hirschhorn is very clear that the *Gramsci Monument* is art, not social work, and he resists the idea that he has an ongoing responsibility for what happens in the neighborhood after the *Monument's* departure. Even so, I could not help feeling time and again during my visits that there was something admirable yet unsettling about the intellectual rigor with which the *Monument* was constructed—a rigor that seemed to provide an answer for every critique and seemed to disconnect the work on some fundamental level from the community in which it was located. As multivalent and porous as the *Monument* was and as stimulating as my interactions with the residents were, ultimately a trip there was a trip inside Hirschhorn's mind. And fine mind though it may be, I felt a limit to the kinds of experiences one could have and struggled with moments when needs were ignored in favor of theories and positions. Just as my mother hoped that my teachers would take responsibility for me while I was in their care, I couldn't help but wish that Malika and her friends—while symbolically if not physically in Hirschhorn's care—would have had more of their needs engaged beyond the need to be exposed to art. They learned that "anything could be made of art," but they didn't learn that the proper expression of that idea was as important as the idea itself. In the context of the *Monument*, where the boundaries of art were constantly being challenged, couldn't the simple act of an adult helping a child with her writing skills be considered art too?

What if instead of building the *Gramsci Monument*, Hirschhorn had proposed building the *Gramsci*

Charter School? This school could contain a radio broadcast station, a library, an exhibition space, an art workshop, a café, and an Internet room, as well as a stage for lectures and performances by a stellar list of visiting academics and poets. Its motto, "Every human being is an intellectual," would be emblazoned on a banner stretched over the front door of a building purchased and maintained in perpetuity by Dia, just as the institution oversees long-term installations like Dan Flavin's in the Hamptons. Far-fetched, I know, but one of many possible projects that might have resulted in a deeper collaboration between Hirschhorn and the residents of the Forest Houses, one that would have implicated both the artist and the sponsoring institution in a vastly different dialogue around the nature of art. Perhaps this isn't the dialogue Hirschhorn wished to engage in, but it is one his project inevitably suggests.

And while I am imagining the far-fetched, what if the *Gramsci Monument* had landed in the Forest Houses in 1973 instead of 2013? What would I as a child have made of this manifestation of a distant, largely segregated but not unfamiliar art world, one I was just beginning to learn about from books and magazines (for example, reading about the work of Gordon Matta-Clark, whose *Bronx Floors*, 1972–73, was cut out of a tenement building just blocks from my house)? Would I have sat through long scholarly lectures and poetry readings or lingered in the library, flipping through books published in Italian and German as well as English? Would I have participated in the Gramsci Theater or attended the art workshops, grateful they were free and located around the corner instead of miles away? When all was said and done, that is, would the *Monument* have seemed a blessing to me or merely a supplement to what was already present in the neighborhood, where outside my bedroom window DJs were on the brink of inventing a musical genre that would circle the globe and daily I rode graffiti-covered subway cars that would provide a model for the use of text as art? The monument would have certainly been quite something in 1973, but in the context of a neighborhood filled with such rich cultural innovation, it might not have been *all that*.

In fact, had this fanciful scenario actually transpired in 1973, I wonder whether today, in the distant year 2013, I would remember my encounters at the *Gramsci Monument* with fondness or indifference. Would my encounter with the work have fundamentally changed the way I thought about art or would it have been one more stop on a path I was already on? Not sure. But I do know that art is based on "a yearning to share," and that that impassioned desire is at the ever-shifting center of Thomas Hirschhorn's art. □

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Above: Lex Brown leading an art class in the workshop at Thomas Hirschhorn's Gramsci Monument, 2013, Forest Houses, Bronx, New York, July 1, 2013. Photo: Romain Lopez.

Below: Lecture table at Thomas Hirschhorn's Gramsci Monument, 2013, Forest Houses, Bronx, New York. Photo: Chandra Glick.



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DIEDRICH DIEDERICHSEN

ON THE WRITINGS OF THOMAS HIRSCHHORN

Critical Laboratory: The Writings of Thomas Hirschhorn, edited by Lisa Lee and Hal Foster. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013. 417 pages.

STRONG ASSERTIONS are the most prominent feature of Thomas Hirschhorn's art. He always acts with great decisiveness. This raises many questions, some of which—one might hope—could be answered by the publication of his writings. It turns out, however, that he took the same approach to the texts collected here. Eschewing argument, Hirschhorn aggressively condemns all relativism, claiming that art does not need to be "put in context." Rationalizations, qualifications, and other civilian affectations are almost entirely absent from these texts. Instead, there are assertions, proclamations, manifestos, and other very masculine gestures of impatience, as well as, of course, *intensity*: Hirschhorn's most prized value.

If the lack of explanation in the book's first chapter, titled "Statements and Letters," can be chalked up to the artist's intimacy with his correspondents, the same style characterizes a later section titled "Projects." In reference to one of his first shows, at a squat in Paris called the Hôpital Éphémère, Hirschhorn writes: "This exhibition shows that everything is possible; that was its purpose. I said to myself: With my work I do what I want. I have no doubt that it's possible, *but is it really good?* I want my work to be good without any possible misunderstanding (I don't care if it is understood or not)." In his discussion of later works, the contradictions are no longer so obvious, but they are equally inescapable—as the necessary result of the discourse of intensity that comes from his self-positioning as tortured artist. At times he seems to notice that he is contradicting himself and adds a claim along the lines of "art can do anything," without offering any further comment on what this art that can do anything is, or whence it derives this wondrous power.

Not until the fourth chapter, which focuses on interviews, is the difficulty the reader faces in trying to understand Hirschhorn's rationale partly alleviated. For example, why are all four of Hirschhorn's Monuments, 1999–2013, devoted to big names in philosophy? He

seems to have chosen Spinoza, Deleuze, Bataille, and Gramsci simply because he finds them impressive; any further reasons are left implicit. Wouldn't the *Bataille Monument*, installed for the 2002 Documenta in a deprived part of Kassel, maybe have served its purpose better as a "Mother Teresa Monument," if the primary objective of its creation was indeed to achieve, as Hirschhorn claims, "friendship and social interaction"? The artist comments: "There was not a single book in the library by or about Georges Bataille, but [rather] books on the themes of Georges Bataille, because I wanted it to go beyond him. And ultimately I never talked to the youngsters I worked with about Georges Bataille. . . . It is possible that, in the end, Georges Bataille's name and his work could be replaced by others." So it is just as one always suspected: The names honored by the monuments are like rock-star posters in a teenager's bedroom—private documents of veneration, or assertions of cultural sophistication. It is on such fundamental points that the interviews are helpful.

At least to some degree, these conversations also expose the kernels of argument lurking in Hirschhorn's truculent rhetoric. In an exchange with Jacques Rancière, the artist describes his project as "the simultaneous

Below: Thomas Hirschhorn, *I Will Win*, 1995, video, black-and-white, sound, 4 minutes 30 seconds.

Right: Page from *Point d'Ironie*, no. 23 (October 2001), Thomas Hirschhorn, *Spinoza Monument: A Document*.



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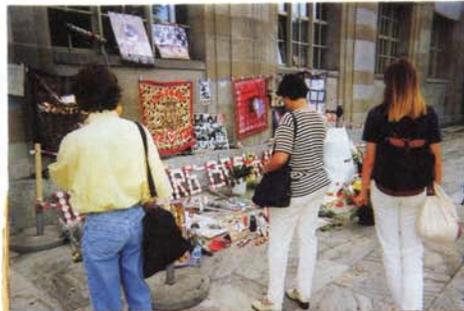
affirmation of the autonomy and the universality of the work and the 'non-exclusive' audience for which the production of the work is intended." This sounds more interesting and plausible than the usual intellectually impoverished opposition between autonomous and social art: What Hirschhorn proposes is giving up neither, in fact even strengthening the concept of autonomy, but without sacrificing the social meaning of the work made under such conditions. But how aesthetic autonomy and a nonexclusive audience came to be opposed in the first place, and why this is a political and not a conceptual history, is not to be learned from Hirschhorn's statements. Moreover, one cannot produce such an audience simply by wishing it into existence, even if Hirschhorn believes that "nothing is impossible with art," as he confides to Benjamin H. D. Buchloh in a 2003 interview. And if one steers the existing art world into the everyday surroundings of those it excludes—as was the case in Kassel—the latter are inevitably objectified into exhibits that encourage the viewing habits instilled by reality television.

And yet, as a whole, the book does make Hirschhorn's position discernible. He wishes to campaign for art and artists with all the privilege accorded these categories,

while also inscribing his work in the traditions of form and content proper to critical art. But we cannot spare him from the most important relativization, the historical: In the 1980s in Europe, strong assertions, apodictic certainty, and art shamanism were the order of the day. These were the key characteristics of the punk resistance against the art of the '70s, which was seen as having become bogged down in relativism, too bureaucratic and complicit with the dominant politics of social democracy. During the course of the '80s, however, this mind-set lapsed into one of machismo and vacuousness, and was soon afterward called into question by the emergence of neo-Conceptual and feminist political art in Europe. Hirschhorn, however, combines the '80s machismo of intensity—and the associated romantic notion of the artist—with later struggles to engage with the public sphere and the everyday. To come to some kind of synthesis, it would be necessary to reflect the historical nature of this antagonism, instead of retreating to the magic of art, or even trying to reinvent it. □

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Translated from German by Elizabeth Tucker.



Above from top: Thomas Hirschhorn, *Deleuze Monument*, 2000, Cité Champfleury, Avignon, France. Thomas Hirschhorn, *Bataille Monument*, 2002, Friedrich-Wöhler housing complex, Kassel. From Documenta 11. Photo: Werner Maschmann.

Left: Page from Thomas Hirschhorn's *33 Ausstellungen im Öffentlichen Raum, 1989-1998* (33 Exhibitions in Public Space, 1989-1998), 1999, booklet, 8 1/2 x 11 1/2".

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affirmation of the autonomy and the universality of the work and the 'non-exclusive' audience for which the production of the work is intended." This sounds more interesting and plausible than the usual intellectually impoverished opposition between autonomous and social art: What Hirschhorn proposes is giving up neither, in fact even strengthening the concept of autonomy, but without sacrificing the social meaning of the work made under such conditions. But how aesthetic autonomy and a nonexclusive audience came to be opposed in the first place, and why this is a political and not a conceptual history, is not to be learned from Hirschhorn's statements. Moreover, one cannot produce such an audience simply by wishing it into existence, even if Hirschhorn believes that "nothing is impossible with art," as he confides to Benjamin H. D. Buchloh in a 2003 interview. And if one steers the existing art world into the everyday surroundings of those it excludes—as was the case in Kassel—the latter are inevitably objectified into exhibits that encourage the viewing habits instilled by reality television.

And yet, as a whole, the book does make Hirschhorn's position discernible. He wishes to campaign for art and artists with all the privilege accorded these categories,

while also inscribing his work in the traditions of form and content proper to critical art. But we cannot spare him from the most important relativization, the historical: In the 1980s in Europe, strong assertions, apodictic certainty, and art shamanism were the order of the day. These were the key characteristics of the punk resistance against the art of the '70s, which was seen as having become bogged down in relativism, too bureaucratic and complicit with the dominant politics of social democracy. During the course of the '80s, however, this mind-set lapsed into one of machismo and vacuousness, and was soon afterward called into question by the emergence of neo-Conceptual and feminist political art in Europe. Hirschhorn, however, combines the '80s machismo of intensity—and the associated romantic notion of the artist—with later struggles to engage with the public sphere and the everyday. To come to some kind of synthesis, it would be necessary to reflect the historical nature of this antagonism, instead of retreating to the magic of art, or even trying to reinvent it. □

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Translated from German by Elizabeth Tucker.



Above from top: Thomas Hirschhorn, *Deleuze Monument*, 2000, Cité Champfleury, Avignon, France. Thomas Hirschhorn, *Bataille Monument*, 2002, Friedrich-Wöhler housing complex, Kassel. From Documenta 11. Photo: Werner Maschmann.

Left: Page from Thomas Hirschhorn's *33 Ausstellungen im Öffentlichen Raum, 1989-1998* (33 Exhibitions in Public Space, 1989-1998), 1999, booklet, 8 1/2 x 11 1/2".

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Glenn Ligon, Diedrich Diederichsen, and Julian Rose, "Monumental Endeavor," *Artforum*, November 2013, p. 226.

Building Complex

JULIAN ROSE

THIS PAST MAY, the New York City Department of Buildings issued work permit number 220288230-01-EW-OT to Thomas Hirschhorn's *Gramsci Monument*. The project, located in the central courtyard of the Forest Houses, a New York City Housing Authority-administered complex in the South Bronx, was constructed over the following six weeks out of some forty-five hundred shipping pallets, two hundred sheets of plywood, ten thousand linear feet of lumber, and fifteen miles of PVC tape. A sprawling compound of enclosed pavilions atop a raised platform, the temporary structure was undeniably architectonic. Ask the artist to describe his piece, however, and he will tell you that it was "pure art."

For Hirschhorn, categorizing something as art means that it exists in a state of exception. "Art is something that reaches beyond habits." From this perspective, then, it's easy to see architecture as the polar opposite: In both its ubiquity and its role as the public face of institutional power, it is a manifestation of the status quo, of habit. And yet *Gramsci Monument* presents a paradox. While clearly out of the ordinary, disrupting the everyday realities of site and display, it is also Hirschhorn's most architectural work to date. To join the artist in denying this quality would be to miss the ways in which *Gramsci Monument* bucks the laws of public space and aesthetic experience alike, operating

simultaneously as architecture and art, exception and rule.

Gramsci Monument is the culmination of Hirschhorn's series of four homages to great thinkers. The evolution of these projects represents a remarkable effort to resurrect both public space and that which has historically defined it: the monument, whether hieratic statue or symbolic space. Hirschhorn's first such piece, *Spinoza Monument*, 1999, hewed to the form of the classical, monolithic memorial. It was cheekily located in the red-light district of Amsterdam and constructed from cardboard, garbage bags, and packing tape, but its primary element was a representational sculpture of Spinoza himself; Hirschhorn's interaction with the surrounding community was limited to borrowing electrical power from a nearby sex shop. The next year, Hirschhorn chose to locate *Deleuze Monument* in a public housing development in Avignon, France, and to build it in cooperation with local residents. A figurative sculpture—an enormous cardboard bust of the philosopher, again covered with tape and plastic—anchored this project, too, but Hirschhorn added a low rectangular shed to serve as a provisional library for Deleuze-related material. The structure was vandalized soon after its completion. As if in response, Hirschhorn decided that for *Bataille Monument*, 2002, made for Documenta 11 and sited in the Friedrich-Wöhler-

Siedlung, a housing complex in Kassel, he would not only build the project in collaboration with the community but would also remain present for its duration. There was still a major sculptural component, only now it was abstract—a looming, misshapen, organic form—and the accompanying spaces multiplied to include a library, a snack bar, and a workshop.

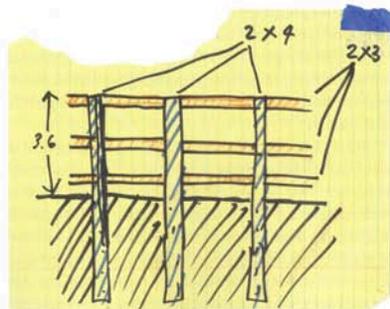
Hirschhorn felt in retrospect that *Bataille Monument*'s abstract sculpture was a distraction for visitors, who mistook it for the entire monument, when the project's real focus was the complex pattern of use and interaction in the surrounding spaces. And so, as he says, when he began planning the *Gramsci Monument* almost a decade later, "I realized there was no more need for a sculpture." It was replaced by an increasingly architectural scale and complexity. *Gramsci Monument* was by far the largest of the four monuments, occupying a footprint of six thousand square feet, with the widest range of functional spaces: a newspaper office, a radio station, a computer lab, a café, an open-air theater, a workshop/art studio, a library, and a gallery.

By now, this narrative of the sculptural object ceding to some form of social space is a familiar one: It's the story, not least, of Conceptual art, relational aesthetics, and participatory art over the past five decades. And the monument is the ultimate representation of this contest between the categories of public

Below: Audience members at an event at the Gramsci Theater at Thomas Hirschhorn's *Gramsci Monument*, 2013, Forest Houses, Bronx, New York, August 2, 2013. Photo: Romain Lopez.



Below: Construction drawing for Thomas Hirschhorn's *Gramsci Monument*, 2013.



Below: Deinstallation of Thomas Hirschhorn's *Gramsci Monument*, 2013, Forest Houses, Bronx, New York, September 16, 2013. Photo: Romain Lopez.



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Herbert and Clyde Thompson of the Southeast Bronx Neighborhood Centers. But their decision may also, understandably, have had as much to do with recognition of the material benefits associated with the project as with enthusiasm for the monument itself. Hirschhorn (through Dia) paid the residents involved in constructing and operating the monument, creating almost fifty jobs, many of them full-time.

The economic disadvantages faced by Forest Houses residents, combined with Hirschhorn's universalist bent and the highly personal and idiosyncratic nature of the project—a monument dedicated to a philosopher of whom Hirschhorn is a self-professed "fan"—might suggest an artist (at best oblivious, at worst patronizing) imposing his own eccentric vision on the community, beginning with the appearance of the monument itself. *Gramsci Monument's* rough materiality and ad hoc construction clearly recalled the aesthetic of Hirschhorn's previous work, guided by an approach he likes to sum up as: "Energy=Yes! Quality=No!" But critics were quick to label *Gramsci Monument* a shantytown or an eyesore, questioning the ethics and appropriateness of its placement in an already underserved community—as if the ramshackle style implied that the residents did not deserve quality, and emblemized a vast disconnect between the author of this bizarre scheme and those subjected to it.

YET WHEN CONFRONTED with the scale and complexity of *Gramsci Monument*, Hirschhorn's signature approach became a kind of extraordinary experiment in communally built architecture. Evincing a canniness born of limited time and scarcity of specialized materials, tools, and training, the monument's collaborative construction was democratic in its very simplicity: It rejected expectations of what designed space is supposed to look like in favor of a radically pragmatic functionalism. To create the project's raised platform, Hirschhorn and his crew simply stacked shipping pallets into a superstructure that they then covered on the sides and top with a layer of plywood. The walls were assembled in sections of four feet by eight feet to match the dimensions of an off-the-shelf plywood sheet and to minimize cutting on-site. Windows were just holes haphazardly sawed in the plywood walls, overlaid with acrylic sheets affixed with staples, screws, and packing tape. Roofs were blue tarps thrown over rudimentary wooden frames.

Such a minimally scripted approach meant a continual process of exchange and improvisation. When the initial method of attaching plywood siding to the stacked pallets with screws proved too time-consuming, one resident-builder suggested that the plywood could be much more quickly attached with plastic zip



ties, thus inventing one of the project's more expedient and arresting construction details. In this sense, the monument existed not just as a functional space but as an index of interaction, embodying a kind of spirited collective innovation. And this extemporaneous rigging lent the structure a surreal, almost oneiric quality—perhaps most of all where the platform was penetrated by trees already existing on the building site—that reinforced its status as a place apart, unmoored from the rational spaces of the surrounding complex. One of the residents told Hirschhorn that every time she climbed onto the platform, she felt like she was on a ship.

The structure also evolved to meet specific needs. For example, as the theater was being built, everyone realized that it was too small; the stage would be on the elevated platform, with the audience seated on the ground below. This arrangement created an obvious spatial (and inevitably social) hierarchy, so the artist simply ordered more pallets and extended the stage, keeping the audience level with performers. Perhaps most important, though, was Hirschhorn's activation of these spaces. He programmed a frenetic array of events, some recurring daily (happy hours, children's art classes, radio shows, philosophy lectures) and others once a week (poetry readings, open mikes, lectures by Gramsci scholars, a community-curated visiting-artist series), all adding up to what Thompson approvingly described as "constant activity, capable of getting the whole community involved." Indeed, this

Above: Internet Corner windows at Thomas Hirschhorn's Gramsci Monument, 2013, Forest Houses, Bronx, New York. Photo: Chandra Glick.

Below: Interior of the Gramsci Library at Thomas Hirschhorn's Gramsci Monument, 2013, Forest Houses, Bronx, New York. Photo: Chandra Glick.



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incessant activity seemed to ensure the engagement not only of the local residents but of the multiple publics who visited the monument throughout the summer, helping to lessen, even if it could never erase, the divisions between visitor and resident.

Gramsci Monument was at its most successful when these experiences exceeded the artist's control. One day, shortly before the beginning of the school year, a local charity helped to organize the donation of free school supplies to resident children, co-opting the monument unannounced. Asked why the event took place there rather than at the neighborhood community center, one of the organizers simply said: "This is where all the people are." A week later, a visitor from Occupy Wall Street showed up to talk to Hirschhorn about offering classes in civil disobedience. The artist declined, somewhat quixotically refusing to dictate an involvement in local politics. But that same afternoon, a local activist dropped by the radio station and publicized an event where residents could meet candidates for the upcoming mayoral election at a nearby church, encouraging them to turn the discussion to the New York Police Department's highly controversial stop-and-frisk tactics, which are rampant in the precinct encompassing the Forest Houses. Such casual and fluid intersections of the practical and critical were redoubled for residents and visitors alike through the constant background activity of the café, the newspaper offices, and the computer lab, not to mention through the steady stream of visitors and residents exploring the monument's less formal spaces, lingering on stairs or plastic-taped couches.

Far more important than the implementation of any one activity, then, was Hirschhorn's fundamental insight that public space cannot simply be engineered. After all, *Gramsci Monument* is located in what is essentially a failed public space: the courtyard of a city housing complex. Both the cruciform brown-brick towers of the Forest Houses and the large green spaces in which they sit are the legacy of a modernist attempt to find a single architectural solution to a complex social challenge, as if housing the urban poor were a problem that could be isolated and resolved simply by finding the right ratio of windows per apartment, units per floor, or tower footprint to surrounding park. But this architecture imploded both symbolically and functionally, to the point that "the projects" has become shorthand for an entire range of social and political problems. It is precisely in opening up a radical alternative to architecture-as-usual, while simultaneously emphasizing architecture's fundamental capacity to develop social interaction—triggering fluid and interwoven processes of construction, inhabitation, and interaction—that *Gramsci Monument* reaffirms the possibility of public space.

And yet this affirmation remains elusive. Officially, the work permit for *Gramsci Monument* belonged to the class "Alteration Type II," typically granted to repair or refinish jobs in existing spaces, which the Department of Buildings emphasizes must result in "no change in use, egress, or occupancy." Given the temporary nature of the project, this was the path of least resistance to getting all-important city approval for construction, and the fleeting, sly solution was perfectly in keeping with the transience and flexibility of

the work. At the same time, for anyone who witnessed the astonishing range of transformations in use and occupancy that *Gramsci Monument* brought to the Forest Houses courtyard over the course of the summer, the deadpan certainty of this bureaucratic language is bound to be deflating. As Hirschhorn's public projects become more spatially and socially complex—more architectural—they will also have to interface more directly with the powers that regulate the spaces they enter. After all, the closest real-life parallel to the spontaneous, community-built model of the *Gramsci Monument* might just be the shantytown that critics invoked. And even if the freewheeling favela may be bottom-up to the housing projects' top-down infrastructure, both are, of course, products of the same fundamental structural inequalities. In setting up a framework for unbridled escape, Hirschhorn risks only reinscribing an analogous structure of underlying control. Future works may need to present a challenge that cannot be so easily dismantled. □

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