

Art and design

## Things fall apart: the beautiful Marxist bomb that's hit south London

### South London Gallery

Artist Thomas Hirschhorn plays on our manic pleasure at seeing ruins by making a whole building collapse in on itself



A choreographed implosion ... In-Between at the South London Gallery. Photograph: Mark Blower

Adrian Searle

@SearleAdrian

Thursday 2 July 2015 07.26 EDT

The [South London Gallery](#) is a ruin. The walls have collapsed, slabs of concrete have tumbled into heaps of fallen joists and slumped plasterboard, all festooned with exposed wiring and mangled pipes. Whole rooms have been undone, and the roof is shot full of holes. Rubble litters the floor, silver air-conditioning ducts flop from the walls, and various rooms – with missing walls, and floors slanted precariously – are exposed. Toilets, tables and chairs could crash at any time. How flimsy solidity is. It is always an illusion.

## GLADSTONE GALLERY

[Thomas Hirschhorn](#) goes about the world putting things together and tearing them apart. His art is one of wreckage and jokes, utopian dreams, philosophical proclamations and possibilities. For an art that consumes tons of recycled cardboard, dump-loads of old tyres, screeds of hand-written, printed, sprayed and recycled texts, and enough gaffer tape to package the entire solar system, Hirschhorn is fairly frugal. He makes art out of the commonplace, whether it is a cave, a hotel, an airport, a school, [a launderette](#) or a monument to a dead philosopher.

Building and demolishing, making and breaking are consistent tropes in Hirschhorn's work. At the back of the precarious scene of destruction at the SLG hangs a quote, sprayed like graffiti on a torn cotton sheet: "Destruction is difficult; indeed, it is as difficult as creation." To get close, you have to duck, weave and watch your head and your feet to get to the rear of a gallery transformed into a disaster. Taken from the sixth prison notebook of [Italian Marxist thinker and politician Antonio Gramsci](#), imprisoned by Mussolini in 1926 until his death in 1937, the statement looks as prescriptive as it is descriptive of the wreckage that surrounds us.

"Though he uses tons of cardboard and enough gaffer tape to package the entire solar system, Hirschhorn is fairly frugal"

"To create destruction is an aesthetic challenge," Hirschhorn says. Neither a simulacra or a replica of a ruin, In-Between is a model. Where real objects are used – furniture and bathroom ceramics – they are presented ironically, as stand-ins for themselves (rather than as Duchampian readymades). Somehow, the painted cardboard seems more real.

The walls and roof of the space are defiantly intact, the skylights visible beyond the torn scrim. Demolition and disaster here have an almost cubist sense of rightness, even though Hirschhorn's clarion call is always for "Energy Not Quality". Qualities are a different matter: the visual quote, the material comic gag, the rhythms of our passage through the space, the varieties of the disaster – these show an artist who is sensitive to drama, absurdity and pathos. He is good at the pathetic, the failed aspiration, the inability of art to act. People, not artworks, are the real agents here.

## GLADSTONE GALLERY



In-Between at the South London Gallery. Photograph: Mark Blower

“As every child knows, destruction can be a kind of ecstasy”

Swiss-born, Paris-based artist wants to give a form to destruction and the destructive impulse.

What stops Hirschhorn’s work becoming theatre, a play on destruction? After all, the rubble, the concrete, the I-beams (which are taped together, like amateurish field bandages) are false, weightless, made of cardboard. The rubble is also hollow, made from folded and glued card. The forms have visual weight, but no substance.

There is pleasure, even a kind of manic glee or joy, in ruins, especially if they are not our ruins – and sometimes even if they are. The atavistic thrill of destruction, as a retort to impotence, is all about us. Every child knows its allure, and that destruction can be a kind of ecstasy, even if it is only

the collapse of a tower of wooden bricks.

Ruins, says Hirschhorn, always mean something: “A ruin stands for a structural, an economical, a cultural, a political or a human failure.” The



## GLADSTONE GALLERY

What he presents in south London is a choreographed implosion, a building falling in on itself. Of course it is all fake. Some of it is laughable and sketchy, even though the whole thing is based on photographs of actual scenes of destruction. It is like standing in a world where violence is reversible and can be swept away. But still I gawp. His In-Between, then, is a kind of sketch. He prefers the word sculpture to installation. This is just as much a kind of painting – except that if you really found yourself in a building wrecked by a bomb or an earthquake, shoddy construction or some unforeseen disaster, art is the last thing you would think about.

[“My picture is a sum of destructions,”](#) Picasso told Christian Zervos in 1935. Destruction in art has a long and venerable tradition. Whether it’s [Gustav Metzger’s auto-destructive art performances](#), or fellow Swiss artist [Jean Tinguely’s machines \(that were meant to destroy themselves\)](#) or [the late Chris Burden’s Samson – a sculpture with a turnstile](#) which, attached to a geared ratchet, pushed great wooden beams into the walls of a gallery. The more people passed through the turnstile, the more likely it was the walls would collapse. Whenever I have seen it, the gearing has always been disengaged. For Burden, Samson was as much image as actuality. The idea and the potential were the thing.

Ideas and potentials are at the heart, too, of Hirschhorn’s art, often produced in relation to philosophical ideas. He has built monuments to philosophers, including Gramsci ([famously, in a housing project in south Bronx, New York](#)), [Georges Bataille](#) and Spinoza. His “platforms” to [Kurt Schwitters](#) (constructed on the exact spot where Schwitters built his [Hanover Merzbau](#)), and to other artists, writers and thinkers, mix a ramshackle joyousness and sometimes melancholic sense of the past, while looking at what potentials remain in their thought. Lately, Hirschhorn has been building (or unbuilding) ruins. The last I saw was a huge, fake side of a building collapsing in the inner courtyard of the new extension to the Hermitage museum in St Petersburg last year, as part of Manifesta 10.

We know that the real catastrophe – the collapse of a tower, neighbourhoods bombed and gutted, the earthquake and the bombing – is elsewhere, although this corner of Peckham has seen plenty of its own disasters, from the blitz to

## GLADSTONE GALLERY

the disastrous fire that engulfed a nearby housing estate in 2009. With the one simple yet complex statement by Gramsci, Hirschhorn gives me pause to think about the very things this ruin can do no more than point to, however inadequately. What is being staged is not a ruin, but a thought.

- [In-Between](#) is at South London Gallery until 13 September.