

GLADSTONE GALLERY

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THE ART WORLD

HOUSE PHILOSOPHER

Thomas Hirschhorn and the "Gramsci Monument."

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL



Visitors to the installation at the Forest Houses, in the South Bronx.

This year's most captivating new art work—Thomas Hirschhorn's summerlong "Gramsci Monument," an installation at a city housing project in the South Bronx—excites so many thoughts that you may, as I did, want help thinking them. Start with the artist. Hirschhorn, fifty-six, a rangy and intense Swiss, is on hand all day, every day, at his tree-house-like village of purpose-built shacks, set on open land amid the brick towers of the Forest Houses, which are home to thirty-four hundred people. The sprawling construction bridges a walkway and is shaded by sycamores that poke up through its raised plazas. It incorporates a library and a museum of memorabilia commemorating the humanist Italian Communist Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), a theatre for daily lectures and performances, an office for a photocopied free daily newspaper, a micro radio station, an art classroom, an Internet center, a food kiosk, and a children's wading pool. Residents were hired to build the facilities—of cheap lumber, Plexiglas, tarpaulins, and the

signature stuff of works by Hirschhorn, shiny brown packing tape—and to staff most of them. The sponsoring Dia Art Foundation foots the costs. This is the last of four constructions in poor and working-class neighborhoods dedicated to Hirschhorn's favorite philosophers. The others celebrated Baruch Spinoza in Amsterdam, in 1999; Gilles Deleuze in Avignon, France, in 2000; and Georges Bataille in Kassel, Germany, in 2002. The materials and the equipment of the "Gramsci Monument" will be distributed to the residents via a lottery, once the installation has been dismantled, a week after the closing date of September 15th.

Sitting at a plywood table in the installation one recent steamy day, Hirschhorn drew a circle on a piece of paper and quartered it. He labelled the segments "love," "philosophy," "aesthetics," and "politics" and located his heroes at the radius points: Spinoza, love/philosophy; Deleuze, philosophy/aesthetics; Bataille, aesthetics/politics; and Gramsci, politics/love. Gramsci, who died after nearly a decade in prison

under Mussolini, and whose "Prison Notebooks" are classics of political thought, qualifies as a revolutionary with a heart. He veered from Marxist economic determinism to describe class conflict in terms of culture—the "hegemony" of dominant ideas and forms requiring a growth of contrary ideas and forms from below. "All men are intellectuals," Gramsci wrote.

Hirschhorn shrugs off the political failure of Gramsci's hopes. His allegiance to the charismatic Italian seems a personal faith, thrown open to the world. The world, as we spoke, was peopled largely by running and playing children. On a subsequent day, tracks from Jay-Z's "Magna Carta . . . Holy Grail" pulsed from the radio station, and local poets read in the theatre. The newspaper reprinted an interview with the blaxploitation diva Pam Grier. With Hirschhorn's consent, the monument's raw wooden architecture had been graced with gorgeous murals by the graffiti crew of a community organization called Xmental, one of them showing a black youth and a white youth slapping hands, with the nearby elevated No. 5 train in the background. The artist's often stated ideal, a "non-exclusive audience," was making the place its own.

Hirschhorn emphasizes that the monument is no social-work experiment, but "pure art." This rings true. On three visits, my cynical antennae scanned in vain for hints of do-good condescension. Hirschhorn had solicited coöperation from forty-six projects of the New York City Housing Authority before forming a warm if sometimes bumpy partnership with Erik Farmer, the president of the tenants' association at the Forest Houses. Farmer, who is forty-four and has used a wheelchair to get around since he was injured in a car crash, while a college student, is an impressively sage politician, committed to the interests of his community. He was the only one of the artist's housing-project contacts who asked to read texts by Gramsci, Hirschhorn said. Farmer selected the monument's construction crew of fifteen residents, and calmed local skeptics. (He told me that while the work was under construction "some old women said it looked like club-

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houses, and they'd had enough of clubhouses.") He considers the monument a "boost" to family life at the complex. Hirschhorn, for his part, carefully eschews any agenda. He cradles a hope that some people's experience of the work might enhance their lives, but he makes clear that that's out of his hands. His contributions to the program of public events brook no concession to popular appetites: the sparsely attended lectures by a young philosopher from Berlin, Marcus Steinweg, included one, the other day, entitled "Ontological Narcissism."

The monument is art in the mind rather than of the eye. Hirschhorn has a slogan: "Energy = Yes! Quality = No!" His penchant for wrapping things in miles of irredeemably ugly packing tape neatly exemplifies both principles. Beauty has no evangelist in Hirschhorn. Nor does humor, as distinct from intellectual agility and a showman's flair. In the course of a career that began in the late nineteen-eighties, when he was rebuffed by a left-wing graphics co-operative in Paris, for wanting to work on his own projects, he has consented to show in galleries and museums and at biennials and art fairs—and to sell collages that relate to his installations—but always with disregard for the habits of the market and of institutions. His past exhibition works have run to labyrinthine environments on themes including war and peace and consumer culture. An unforgettable one at the Gladstone Gallery, "Superficial Engagement" (2006), intermingled images of ethereal abstract art with crudely Xeroxed photographs of human bodies blown apart in terrorist bombings. The point was elusive, but the dramatization of the peaks and abysses of human behavior profoundly moved many viewers, including me.

Hirschhorn can be heavy-handed, as in an enormous rendition, last year at Gladstone, with real and simulated furniture and fixings, of the submerged casino in the Costa Concordia, the cruise ship that capsized off the coast of Tuscany in 2012. Géricault's Romantic vision of doomed shipwreck survivors, "The Raft of the Medusa" (1819), was reproduced on one wall. The forced irony thudded. Worse, a satiri-

cal emphasis on the casino's kitschy décor had the unfortunate effect of seeming to memorialize the disaster's victims chiefly for their bad taste. But, even when his work misfires, Hirschhorn remains the most meaningfully independent of contemporary artists. At the monument, I felt safely remote from the current art world's baleful pressures of ravening money and pandering institutions. The democracy of the place, levelling the artist with the kids asplash in the wading pool, brought tones of Walt Whitman to mind.

Hirschhorn has said, "I'm interested in the 'too much,' doing too much, giving too much, putting too much of an effort into something. Wastefulness as a tool or a weapon." He cites the potlatch rituals of Northwest Native Americans, in which leading members of the tribe both affirmed and atoned for their standing by spectacularly splurging their wealth. The French renegade philosopher Georges Bataille made much of the potlatch, as a model for economics based on gift-giving rather than on exchange; and Hirschhorn follows suit, in the coin of gratuitous service and toil.

Artistically, his method of principled generosity recalls the career and the aura of Joseph Beuys, whose assurance that "everyone is an artist" established the zone of participatory art events that Hirschhorn advances. Hirschhorn pays declared homage to Beuys—and to Andy Warhol, for collapsing high culture into popular culture with iconic imagery that is universally understood at a glance. There's a Warholian tang to a grisaille painting on plywood of a photograph of the handsome young Gramsci, which fronts the monument. Only, unlike a Warhol Marilyn or Elvis, the image doesn't float free of its historical moorings but invites a dive into the legacy of an exemplary thinker. The divers may be few, but there's sorcery in the simple gesture of folding philosophy into daily life. Politically, the work steers hard toward realms of academic leftist theory, but in ways—both peculiarly sacramental and a lot of fun—that are as likely to humble tenured theorists as to exalt their profession. Nobody counts as special at the monument, except everybody. ♦