



login | register ADVERTISE BACK ISSUES CONTACT US SUBSCRIBE

follow us [social media icons] search

ARTGUIDE IN PRINT 500 WORDS PREVIOUS BOOKFORUM 中文版
DIARY PICKS NEWS VIDEO FILM SLANT A & E

SCENE & HERD

RECENT ARCHIVE

Kaelen Wilson-Goldie on Thomas Hirschhorn's Gramsci Monument
Sarah Nicole Prickett at Jay-Z's Picasso Baby
Michael Wilson at the launch of the Saint Louis Art Museum's new wing
Nicolas Trembley on Sturtevant and the Serpentine Summer Party
Alese Thomson at Haim Steinbach and Helen Marten's openings at Bard
Travis Diehl on a Center for Land Use Interpretation tour of LA office trailers

Art House

NEW YORK 07.15.13



Left: Joe Budda, Erik Farmer, Thomas Hirschhorn, and Susie Farmer. Right: Phil Beder of the Gramsci Monument radio station. (All photos: Kaelen Wilson-Goldie)

"I NEED SOMEONE who understands art to come down here and tell me how this is art," Phil Beder says as I step into his radio studio on the damp opening day of Thomas Hirschhorn's majestic Gramsci Monument. "I understand books, sculptures, and paintings," Beder adds. "Less so the ephemeral stuff." His bashfulness only just covers up his mischief. A former schoolteacher, Beder is a veteran of the storied New York radio station WBAI. I am sure he knows very well how Hirschhorn's work is art and, moreover, why the arguments employed to elucidate and defend it are interesting, urgent, and even critical to the times and circumstances we are living. However faux his naïveté, Beder is casting around for opinions with an openness that sets an admirable tone for the project. This matters in no small part because, like so much of Hirschhorn's work, the monument not only flirts with false notes but also runs the very real and deliberate risk of blowing up in everyone's face.

The fourth and final installment in his continental philosophy quartet, Hirschhorn's makeshift monument is a temporary structure set against the grassy hills of an incongruously green South Bronx housing project, Forest Houses. In keeping with the artist's unmistakable style, the piece looks like it was cobbled together from an explosion of plywood, Plexiglas, and packing tape. In addition to the radio station, Gramsci Monument includes a bar, a lounge, an Internet café, a library, a workshop for kids' art classes, and an editorial office producing a daily microcommunity newspaper. A maze of stairs and elevated walkways link all of the different spaces together. If you ever made fortresses as a kid from imagination and whatever materials you had at hand, then you will love spending time here. And for seventy-seven days this summer, you will have ample reason to do so, as Hirschhorn and his band of makers and doers have sketched out an exhaustively ambitious schedule of talks, plays, poetry readings, and related programs to animate the ideas of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, and then some.

Beder is in charge of the radio station, which, from now through September 15, is broadcasting to a one-mile range on 91.9 FM, and to the world online. On opening day, July 1, he seemed genuinely daunted by the prospect of filling up seven hours of airtime, every day, for the next two and a half months. "We're trying to get as much royalty-free, public domain music as we can manage," Beder says. Two DJs from the neighborhood, Gucci and Baby Dee, were already on board with a deep reserve of songs and talent, including rappers, beat-boxers, and poets, and the "what makes it art" question seemed guaranteed to generate countless hours of debate, drawing everyone into a meaningful conversation and, at the same time, creating a readymade audio archive.



NEWS PICKS FILM SLANT

Newest Headlines

Doryun Chong Named Chief Curator of M+
Brooke Kamin Rapaport Named Senior Curator of Madison Square Art
Art Institute of Chicago Receives Major Gift
Museum Directors Demand Reinstatement of LA Times Art Reporter
New Chief Curator for DeCordova Museum
Norman Parish (1937-2013)
2013 FOCA Fellowship Winners Announced
John B. Hightower (1933-2013)
Richard Phillips Playboy Sculpture Deemed Illegal
Elizabeth Smith Named Executive Director of Helen Frankenthaler Foundation

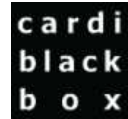
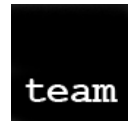


Left: Philosopher Marcus Steinweg. Right: Opening day performance of Marcus Steinweg's Gramsci Theater.

I duck out of the radio studio and wander over to the newspaper, where I find the first of many potential answers to Beder's question. The front page of the first issue of the Gramsci Monument Newspaper, edited by Lakesha Bryant and Saquan Scott, features an interview with Erik Farmer, charismatic president of the Forest Houses tenants' association and, according to Hirschhorn, the man who made the monument happen here rather than elsewhere. "We have seventy-seven days to teach the basic and



links



fundamental of art to Forest Houses," says Farmer, "because art is so much bigger than a painting, drawing, or portrait. It's our everyday life."

A cacophony of voices erupts from the Antonio Lounge, where a dozen actors are running through *Gramsci Theater*, a play written by the philosopher Marcus Steinweg, who has been collaborating with Hirschhorn for fifteen years. The cast is mostly women. They stand in front of cardboard placards adorned with the names of their characters, among them Gramsci, Heidegger, Derrida, Nietzsche, Deleuze, Badiou, and Brecht. I see someone named "Second Marxist" but can't find the first. Someone hands me a photocopy of the script. There are lines of dialogue for "Anyone." The characters begin shouting all at once and on top of one another, as if bombarding the audience with intellectual dissonance and an edge of Bronx attitude. At regular intervals, a young man saunters on stage with a basketball and takes an easy layup into one of two hoops, labeled LOVE and POLITICS on their respective backboards. Plucked at random, the lines are hilarious. I swoon for Marguerite Duras, who says: "Pull yourself together, not even your grave is for free."

Gramsci Theater is being performed every Monday afternoon. "I love not recognizing what I wrote," says Steinweg. "You hear two different registers. Strong voices and chaos. There's too much meaning, too much sense. That's why I like this swarm of meaning, the overproduction of sense is a new kind of normality." For his part, Steinweg is giving a lecture every day. The topics are set on the schedule—from "What Is Art," "What Is a Problem," and "What Is Sex" to "Romantic Shit" and "Beautiful Souls"—but Steinweg is improvising all of them. "I don't like to be too prepared," he says, as I wonder if his T-shirt is soaked through with rain, sweat, or a spilled drink. "It must take a lot of energy to give seventy-seven lectures in a row," I offer. "Most people work eight hours a day," he replies. "I just work forty minutes. In fact I am lazy." Note to self.



Left: Dia Art Foundation curator and *Gramsci Monument* ambassador Yasnil Raymond. Right: Dia Art Foundation director Philippe Vergne.

During Steinweg's first lecture, "What Is Philosophy," the opening crowd begins to appear, a combination of cops, security guards, the curious and palpably skeptical residents of Forest Houses, forty-five people who are officially on staff (and paid a decent hourly wage), beloved editors, a handful of critics, a documentary film crew, Hal Foster and Barbara Gladstone (each resplendent in red *Gramsci Monument* ball caps), and a small but serious contingent of the city's luminous museum curators, including Sheena Wagstaff and Nicholas Cullinan from the Met, Peter Eleey from MoMA PS1, and Thomas Lax from the Studio Museum in Harlem. Philippe Vergne, director of the Dia Art Foundation, hangs out at the back, looking amused in a bright yellow raincoat.

Somewhat maligned in recent years, Dia is the institution now hurling itself back into the art world's limelight. *Gramsci Monument* is the only Hirschhorn monument realized in the United States, and the first public art project funded by Dia since 1996, when Joseph Beuys's *7000 Oaks* was restaged in Chelsea. Vergne calls it a defining moment. Yasnil Raymond, meanwhile, tells me: "I am no longer the curator of Dia. For the next seventy-seven days I am the ambassador of *Gramsci Monument*." Indeed, if you want more than easy platitudes and pat quotes, if you want to dig into the substance of Gramsci's thought, and if you want to start peeling back the layers of how the monument was made and why it is art, then tag along with Raymond for a little while.



Left: Dealer Barbara Gladstone. Right: *Gramsci Monument* librarians Freddy Velez and Marcella Paridise.

She'll tell you about the five hundred books that Anthony Tamburri, dean of the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute at Queens College, loaned to Forest Houses, from a five thousand-strong collection donated by John Cammett, who was the first person to write a book about Gramsci in English, in 1967. She'll walk you through "the incredible cultural objects" borrowed from the Casa Museo di Antonio Gramsci in Sardinia and the Fondazione Istituto Gramsci in Rome. And she'll make lucid connections between a wallet housed in a glass vitrine and an extended passage on money in Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*. She posts a note of her own, every day, on the monument's website. (Questions from the community she's fielded of late: "What is fascism?" and "Why are all contemporary artists Marxists?") Ambassador of what and to whom, I have no idea. Why intimations of statecraft and diplomacy over the care of curatorship, same. ("The home country is art," Raymond says. "The foreign country is Thomas Hirschhorn's *Gramsci Monument*.") But of anyone, Raymond is most likely to make you fulfill one of the monument's key missions, which is to read and think Gramsci in the present, and out of love.



A year ago, Hirschhorn told the *New York Times*' Randy Kennedy that in *Forest Houses*, "some people think I am a priest or an eccentric rich man." One of the tensions running through his work—through his commitment to "doing art politically," his insistence on touching the hardcore of the (Lacanian) real, and his self-representation as an artist-worker-soldier—is the quasi-missionary, pseudoreligious element that seems to lurk in the corners of his oeuvre. Another is the fact that all but three of the subjects of Hirschhorn's four altars, eight kiosks, and four monuments are men, with few women to be found in his constellation of influential writers and thinkers. Paradoxically, another still is the sense that Hirschhorn's choice of subjects is somehow arbitrary—the work "attends to Antonio Gramsci by paying no attention to him," says Steinweg—while his choice of location is anything but. (In Hirschhorn's *Establishing a Critical Corpus*, the philosopher Sebastian Egenhofer makes a compelling argument about the sites of social tension that the artist seeks to "explore, but also exploit").



Left: MoMA PS1 curator Peter Eley with Studio Museum in Harlem curator Thomas Lax. Right: Sheena Wagstaff, chairman of the Department of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Forest Houses, in Morrisania, is no more than fifteen blocks east of the traffic triangle at 169th Street and Jerome Avenue where, as part of a public art project in 1991, the artist John Ahearn installed three bronze sculptures made from casts he had taken of three people he knew from the neighborhood. An excruciating controversy ensued, with accusations of racism slung everywhere. Dejected and disheartened, Ahearn took the sculptures down. They moved to PS1, and then to the Socrates Sculpture Park. As Glenn O'Brien wrote in a forceful, moving piece for *Artforum* at the time, Ahearn wasn't being critical or judgmental. He considered his artworks a loving tribute to his subjects. In that sense, he wasn't far from where Hirschhorn stands now, using art as a tool to know the world and confront reality. Ahearn told the writer Jane Kramer, in the *New Yorker*, that he wasn't trying to change the South Bronx. He was trying to change the art world, "giving rich white people a bridge to the life there, and to a different kind of vitality." To compare the two projects now is an interesting measure of how much the politics of race and class have changed in New York in the past twenty years.

To be fair, Hirschhorn has weathered similar strife. In 2010, his *Théâtre Precaire*, in the French city of Rennes, was vandalized twice and destroyed by fire, prompting an impassioned letter from the artist to area residents. The strength of his rhetoric is enough to win over anyone. On opening day, he gestured to the fifteen buildings of *Forest Houses* and said: "This is only the beginning. Will the people on the fifth floor there, on the eighth floor there, will they come down and enjoy this and be implicated in it? This is the challenge. In Erik Farmer, I found a key figure," he explains. "This is why *Gramsci Monument* is here. Not because of the urban situation or the architecture but because Erik Farmer said, 'Do it here.' This is how it works. This is how an artist's fieldwork makes the conditions for an encounter possible. The first phase was meeting. The second phase was construction." The third phase is to constitute the monument as art, and as memory. "This is very important," he says. "What I want is to create a common memory of this summer. To create a new kind of monument, we have to build it every day. The third phase starts tomorrow," he adds. From then on, the monument will lodge itself "into the heart of the people here, and the heart of me."

— Kaelen Wilson-Goldie



Left: Anthony Tamburri of the John D Calandra Italian American Institute at Queens College. Right: DJ Baby Dee.

SHARE PERMALINK COMMENTS (0 COMMENTS)

DIARY | PICKS | NEWS | VIDEO | FILM | SLANT | A & E | ARTGUIDE | IN PRINT | 500 WORDS | PREVIEWS | BOOKFORUM | 中文版

All rights reserved. artforum.com is a registered trademark of Artforum International Magazine, New York, NY