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Italian American Monuments, Gramsci-style

Laura E. Ruberto (July 30, 2013)



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Inside the Archive room of the Gramsci Monument, Forest Houses, Bronx, New York City

Upon visiting Thomas Hirschhorn's Gramsci Monument in the Bronx, passing reflections on impermanence, aesthetics, and what makes something Italian American.

“In the convulsions of the commodity economy we begin to recognize the monuments of the bourgeoisie as ruins even before they have crumbled.”

- Walter Benjamin

Thomas Hirschhorn's temporary Gramsci Monument, constructed mainly out of plywood in the middle of Forest Houses [4], a public housing development in the Bronx, seems to be in the press almost daily this summer. New Yorker art critic Peter Schjeldal wildly praises it as “art in the mind [5],” whereas the New York Times's Ken Johnson characterizes it as “dismally decrepit.” [6]

- [7]

My concern, instead, is in imagining the monument as part of a larger fabric of Italian Americanness in New York City and to reflect on its redefinition of what a monument is or what a “work in public space” (as Hirschhorn has called it) means.

The entire concept of the monument—a temporary structure built in an unusual location, in the name of an influential thinker, with the stated goal of rethinking dominant philosophical ideas and incite dialogue—intrigues and energizes.



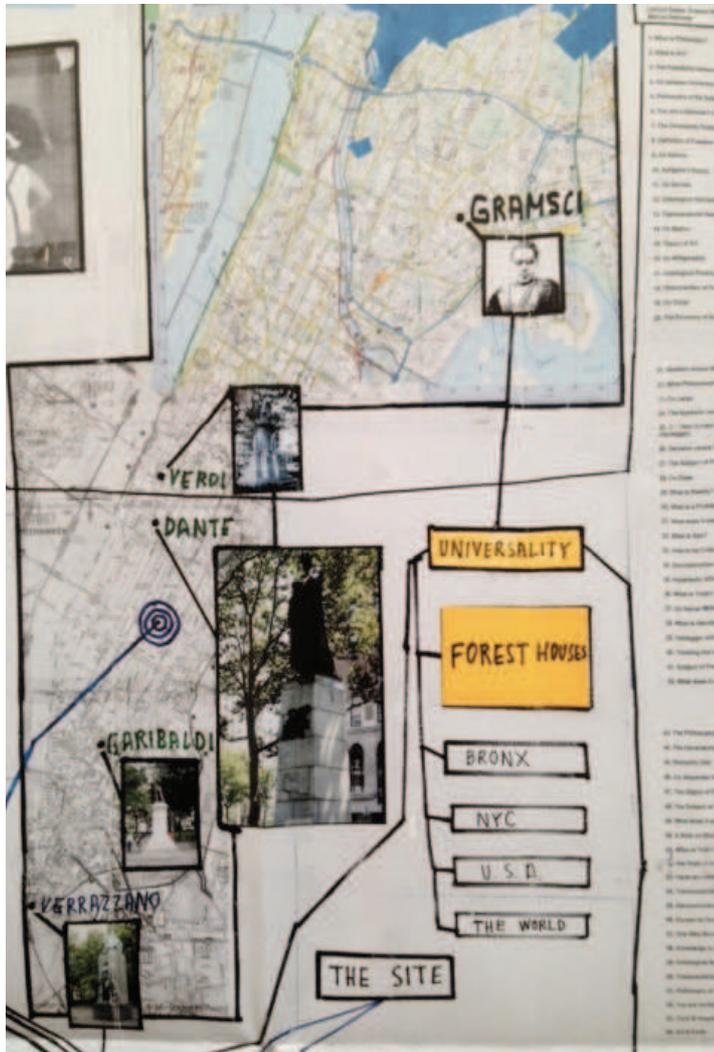
Outside one of the Forest Houses buildings

On the monument's website [8], reprinted mainly in stark red and green into a

neatly folded pamphlet available on site, Hirschhorn has created a criss-crossing tagged map of its inspirations and development. The result is a dizzying, text-heavy connect-the-dots of places, people, and ideas.

When I read through the pamphlet-map I am inevitably drawn to the parts that read Italian—and I don't just mean the fact that he calls the lottery that will be held when the monument comes down *tombola*. Instead, there is a subtle way that for me Hirschhorn has marked his “presence and production artwork” (another way he has described the space) as part of a larger Italian diasporic cultural manifestation in the city.

In one corner of the map, marked in green capital letters are other monuments (all variations on the standard statue variety) in New York City made to Italians: Verdi, Garibaldi, Dante, and Verrazzano. He's added Gramsci to the map, constructing both a novel parallel between these other Italian figures and Gramsci and countering the drastically different ways they have been memorialized in the States. Adding Gramsci in this context certainly reads as a politicized gesture.



Detail of The Gramsci Monument Map/Pamphlet

Hirschhorn, though, leaves off of his map a number of other Italian monuments to be found throughout the five boroughs (i.e., there are at least three permanent monuments to Antonio Meucci to be found in the city*). And I find it particularly revealing that Hirschhorn did not tag New York City's Christopher Columbus statue on his map (a space recently reshaped by an artist which received comparable media attention [9]).

Less surprisingly, Hirschhorn also left off of his map a number of other kinds of Italian American monuments found throughout the city, sites that are, like the Gramsci Monument, similarly impermanent or otherwise not conventionally read as monuments (i.e., the yearly chalked memorials to the victims of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire [10], the Our Lady of Mount Carmel Grotto in Staten Island [11], or the

yearly, temporary tower built for the Festa del Giglio in Williamsburg, Brooklyn [12]).

All of these monuments and spaces (those on or off Hirschhorn's map) representing in different ways Italians in New York were constructed with at least some support from Italian American individuals or organizations.

And here lies another way, then, that the Gramsci Monument is woven into a pre-existing Italian American cultural narrative. Near the other side of the map/pamphlet lies a bubble describing the separate constructed details of the monument (archive, library, bar, Internet corner, etc.). The first, the archive, is tied via a blue line to a copy of a business card, for Dr. Anthony Julian Tamburri [13], Dean of the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute of CUNY Queens College [14]. In fact, Calandra supplied some significant portion of the books on loan to Forest Houses as well as some of the other ephemera at the monument.



Part of the Gramsci Archive and Library

Calandra's involvement both supports the institutional structure behind the monument (along with the Dia Art Foundation [15]—who footed the bill, the Gladstone Gallery [16], the Casa Museo di Antonio Gramsci [17] in Sardegna, etc.) and, for me, further strengthens its connection to an Italian American notion of identity, aesthetics, and history. That it boosts Calandra's leftist cred and connects it to the international art world shouldn't go unnoticed as it counters the staid position of far too many Italian American organizations as solely invested in retrograde identity politics rather than serious and engaged cultural work such as that which Calandra supports.

(That Dia has its own historical connection to Italian Americans vis-à-vis former chairman Leonard Riggio [18] goes unmentioned here although it'd be a stretch to connect that history with this current project.)



"Antonio Lounge" at the Gramsci Monument



**Gramsci's slippers on display in the Bronx
(on loan from the Casa Museo di Antonio Gramsci)**

And the idea that the monument is cultural work and that Hirschhorn is an artist, not an activist, brings me to the significant Gramscian angle in this *new way of being a monument* (to riff off of Pier Paolo Pasolini's line, "a new way of being Gramscian").

The Forest Houses Gramsci Monument is impermanent. In September it will be dismantled, becoming a physical unraveling of the hegemonic need for “durable admiration” (a la David Hume). Instead Hirschhorn has created a monument to Gramsci that is alive and thus fleeting.

The site asks us to experience it in the here and now. It asks us to make of it what we want, pulling most profoundly from the Sardinian thinker’s discussions on the potential within the routine of everyday life and within every individual to reposition the dynamics of power and resistance.

I visited the monument on a weekday in July.



Pleasantly surprised author upon finding herself in *The Gramsci Monument Newspaper* (no.22, July 22, 2013)

It was hot and muggy—a thunderstorm was on its way—but there was a buzz in the air beyond the cicadas. It was not crowded but a woman was sitting at the small Gramsci Bar, kids filled the Workshop Space, teenagers were clicking away in the Internet Corner, hip hop was bumping from the radio station, a few other visitors were roaming about, noshing on fresh apples picked up from the basket left in the library, snapping photos of the banners and the like.

I ran into Hirschhorn outside of the library and we chatted a bit. “It’s a different kind of monument,” he began. In his artist statement he clarifies:

I try to make a new kind of monument. A precarious monument. A monument for a limited time. I make monuments for philosophers because they have something to say today. Philosophy can give the courage to think, the pleasure to reflect.

When I asked him the question that many are asking: “So what do the locals think of this? What’s the reaction been?” he refused to speak for others, encouraging me to ask them myself. But I knew that the answers could not be found so simply.

This problematic was one I was personally familiar with as it had played out for me in a project I was a part of in Southern Italy in 2010 [19] with other academics and artists in the small, rural village of Cairano (province, Avellino). (See Raffaele Maglione's photographs of the *Carro Migrante, Migrant's Cart* [20], and other happenings from Cairano 7x.)

The effect of Thomas Hirschhorn’s Gramsci Monument will not be visible in any singular way. It matters not at all that in the initial building of the monument only one Forest House resident, Erik Farmer, it seems even picked up Gramsci’s books to read.

In fact, the desire to think, create, or act because of the Gramsci Monument in the end has very little to do with Gramsci’s words from prison. But rather it lies in the day-to-day witnessing of the physical transformation of a city landscape—created by Hirschhorn and the residents of Forest Houses who have together momentarily placed a humanitarian thinker who died in prison at the hands of a Fascist dictator at the center of a major U.S. inner-city neighborhood. The Southern Question has emigrated to the South Bronx.

It is an improbable juxtaposition. It is an aesthetics of hope.

~ **Many thanks to Mike Henry.** ~

* Information for the three sites memorializing Meucci can be found at the following three websites: <http://nysosia.org/museum.html> [21], <http://www.nycgovparks.org/parks/B242/history> [22], and http://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Meucci_Triangle_monument_jeh.JPG [23].

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