

## Thomas Hirschhorn

### Forrest Houses

'The Bronx: There's Land if You Want It!' Posters lining a few sleepy blocks along Tinton Avenue encouraged local residents to take possession of unused lots through community organizing and – ideally – a successful navigation of municipal bureaucracy. Just a few blocks north, the Jane Addams High School – named for a celebrated settlement social worker – awaits shuttering in 2015, portending yet another empty lot. Across the street, on the central lawn of the Forrest Houses project, a crude wooden structure hosted a less familiar likeness this past summer, spray-painted black and white.

It was here that the Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn built his *Gramsci Monument* (2013), the latest in a series of public works, all centred upon modern European intellectuals and erected in working-class communities. Following comparable tributes to Georges Bataille, Gilles Deleuze and Baruch Spinoza in Germany, France and the Netherlands, the Bronx installation saw Hirschhorn venture his first major work this side of the Atlantic – one subsequently dismantled following its 77-day duration. Humble in scale, this monument was hardly monumental. It bore the same homespun, agglutinative materiality that typifies Hirschhorn's previous work: plywood walls, Perspex windows and plastic tarp roofing; second-hand couches covered in masking tape; and banners quoting the writings of Antonio Gramsci – the Italian Communist politician imprisoned by Mussolini's regime, and author of some of the last century's most incisive and progressive cultural theory.

Examples of those writings were available for consultation, alongside a few artefacts on loan from the Gramsci Museum in Ghilarza, the writer's hometown on the island of Sardinia. Whether a slipper or a spoon retrieved from his long incarceration – the circumstance behind his famed, posthumously published *Prison Notebooks* – these humble objects attested to how much Gramsci resonates as an individual as much as a thinker, far more than most 20th-century intellectuals. Indeed, many in the neighbourhood found the Italian's biography as compelling as his intellectual achievements. 'What he was able to achieve while

### About this review

Published on 18/10/13

By Ara H. Merjian



Thomas Hirschhorn, *Gramsci Monument*, 2013, installation views, Forrest Houses, New York

[Back to the main site](#)

incarcerated': thus one young man summed up what most struck him, possibly echoing the sentiments of other residents who know someone currently in prison. Rather than simply articulate truisms about disenfranchisement or underemployment, the Gramsci Monument set about redressing them, at least on a modest and temporary scale. A thick folder available to visitors detailed various New York community centres and social services and how to contact them. Backed by Dia Art Foundation, Hirschhorn pitched his plan to the director of the Forrest Houses, many of whose residents were hired for their summer-long work as construction assistants, guides and, in the case of DJ Baby-D, an on-site MC.

In spite of its low-tech appearance, the site hummed with daily activity, from Radio Gramsci, free Internet stations and a bustling press room, where workers assembled the daily Gramsci Monument Newspaper, featuring everything from excerpts of Gramsci's writings, to pieces on Glenn Ligon (a Forrest Houses son) and a 'Resident of the Day'. With a kind of festive, summer-camp verve, the staff bustled about serving up hot dogs and coffee at the 'Antonio Lounge', leading children's art projects in a small studio that flanked the site's main stage, or tending to visitors – whether curious Bronx denizens or those from farther afield. No less present was the wiry and tireless Hirschhorn, who lived at the Forrest Houses with his wife and child for the work's duration, leading art workshops, fielding press inquiries, running open-mic sessions and responding attentively to lectures. These latter featured a range of Gramsci scholars, as well as Hirschhorn's long-time collaborator, the philosopher Marcus Steinweg, who delivered daily presentations on everything from 'What is a Collective', to reflections on the aesthetic imperatives of Theodor Adorno and Jacques Rancière, to musings on the 'ontological inconsistencies' of love – challenging topics for even the most philosophically inclined.

Despite their relative accessibility, Gramsci's own theories of 'hegemony' and the 'organic intellectual' are hardly transparent. Taken out of context, his most profound (and quotable) axiom – 'Every human being is an intellectual' – risks a kind of epigrammatic messianism, redolent of some self-actualizing Twitter feed. Yet Gramsci's rigorous body of writings – thousands of pages, filling dozens of volumes – cannot be distilled to facile sound-bites. Hirschhorn thus (once again) posed for himself the challenge of evoking in three dimensions the work of a prominent and complex thinker. Fortunately for him, Gramsci's writing circles around the question of a popular, working-class culture and its potential autonomy from elitist imposition. 'In Italy,' Gramsci writes in one of his numerous essays on the concept of a

‘National-Popular Culture’, ‘the intellectuals are distant from the people.’ It is that very distance which he aimed to shore up, first as a socialist activist, later as a founding member of Italy’s Communist party, and finally as its most prominent martyr. Given Gramsci’s profound respect for religious culture, such a secular sainthood is not entirely out of place. His writings campaign for a lay spiritualism that would replace the specious transcendence of Catholic dogma; he hoped for redemption to come from the people themselves.

As hostile to the paternalist ministrations of welfare capitalism as he was to fascism’s nationalist spectacle, Gramsci aimed to broaden the aegis of working-class culture. Some of his earliest writings praise the efforts of the Italian Futurists – in spite of their suspect ideological orientation – for having insisted upon new forms of culture drawn from contemporary life, at a time when ‘the Socialists were not even vaguely interested in such a question’. Even in texts from more than a decade later, we find him praising the possibilities of rationalist architecture as a rallying point for collectivist sensibilities, over and against the decorative excess of bourgeois aestheticism. In each instance, it is not some formula imposed from on high, but forms of culture initiated by and incubated among the people. For Gramsci, a new political hegemony – and all the heady notions of revolutionary change it entailed – would only come about through a gradual, deliberative shift in cultural life, realized through the most humble of increments. Hirschhorn’s rough and ready pavilions provided a glimpse of such increments. It was perhaps their less scripted activities – groups taking to the stage to play hiphop, tributes to Trayvon Martin (the young black man killed by police in Florida) – that resonated as genuinely popular gestures, suggestive of the ‘multiple singularities’ Hirschhorn’s work aims to evince.

‘Asserting form’, he writes in a pedagogical text distributed in the Gramsci Monument Newspaper, ‘is the most important thing in art.’ Hirschhorn’s aesthetic intentions are perhaps as unimpeachable as his political bona fides. Nevertheless, this Monument begs the question: how, precisely, did it function as artistic form? Was it participatory? Relational? Was it an installation? Site-specific? Does it really matter? For it not to matter, we need to ignore the ‘post-medium condition’ to which an artist like Hirschhorn willingly submits. Part storyboard, part outline, part stream of consciousness, his preparatory ‘map’ of the project – more a flow chart than a topography – dispensed with aesthetic formalities in favour of a quixotic mix of images, lists and key words like ‘presence’, ‘production’, ‘autonomy’, ‘resistance’. Hirschhorn has long inveighed against the reduction of art to any moniker – ‘piece’, ‘show’ or ‘installation’ – that might ossify its necessary, vital

precariousness. Gramsci Monument was no exception. The physical site formed a locus for exchanges in real time, which at every turn shrugged off the descriptive labels we might ascribe to them, especially those wafting uptown from the insular dominion of the Manhattan art world.

This is not to say that Hirschhorn's work is impervious to that world, to its financial clout or imprimatur. And, for all its resistance to aesthetic commonplaces, Gramsci Monument risked another predictability: that of a white, European intellectual touching down in the Bronx to enlighten people (of colour, in the main) about another white, European intellectual. The 'non-exclusive' audience Hirschhorn insists upon involving in his projects became, it must be said, decidedly more exclusive during the academic lectures, with a predominately white public routinely in attendance. Rather than a function of Gramsci Monument's accessibility, that fact instead underscores larger issues of inclusion and education – questions Hirschhorn's work tackled head on. As the scholar Frank Wilderson has argued, Gramsci's ostensibly universal humanism ignored important matters of race. But Wilderson was in attendance here himself, pushing an already inclusive theory of culture to even more generous dimensions. Again and again, Hirschhorn, Steinweg and other guests refused to patronize their diverse and fluctuating public, taking Gramsci's messages – whatever their difficulties and deficiencies – as the project's unwavering touchstone.

Tacked up on a window next to a makeshift shrine to Gramsci appeared a photocopied image of Pier Paolo Pasolini, his head bowed before Gramsci's tomb in Rome's non-Catholic cemetery – the setting of Pasolini's own famous book of postwar poems, *The Ashes of Gramsci* (1957). 'And you feel – like those distant / beings, who in life shout and laugh / in those vehicles of theirs, in those bleak / tenements where the untrustworthy expansive / gift of existence is consumed ...' Outside, kids played and fought on the lawn; teenagers smoked the occasional joint; folks came and went. But glimpsed through the blurred Perspex of this makeshift monument, those day-to-day doings took on a poetry worthy of Pasolini's lines, their civic spontaneity. Those lines are as filled with melancholy as they are with hope – a dawning sense that Gramsci's ideas did not stand a chance against the swelling tide of neo-capitalism. In this vein, the greatest upshot of Hirschhorn's monument is, alas, an ironic one: that late American capitalist culture has managed to smother class consciousness far more effectively than Italian Fascism ever did – smothering through gadgets and goods that obviate any deeper sense of solidarity; a conformism based upon a myth of unmitigated, individual freedom, in which every Facebook

wall looks as eerily similar as it is ostensibly singular.

'In history, in social life,' Gramsci wrote in *Cultural Writings*, 'nothing is fixed, rigid or definitive. And nothing ever will be.' Neither will the Gramsci Monument. Its pavilions have since been dismantled. And yet, in its wake, something else perhaps endures. A more metaphorical architecture of community and collectivity may still occupy that sprawling lawn.

**Ara H. Merjian**

---

**Frieze**

3-4 Hardwick Street, London EC1R 4RB, 020 7833 7270