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Not on the High Line: Scenes from the Gramsci Monument

by Becky Brown

The Gramsci Monument was located on the grounds of Forest Houses, off Tinton Avenue between 163rd and 165th Streets, Bronx, New York

July 1 to September 15, 2013



Thomas Hirschhorn, Gramsci Monument, 2013, Art School : Energy=Yes! Quality=No!, Forest Houses, Bronx, New York. Courtesy Dia Art Foundation.

Photo: Romain Lopez

The occasion of my first visit to the Gramsci Monument was a three and a half hour “Art School” led by its creator, the Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn. I had read his brief text introducing “Energy: Yes! Quality: No!”—the title and doctrine of the workshop—so I knew that each participant would present a work to be judged by this criteria. Skeptical, I stuffed a few loose drawings into a manila folder and set off. I located Forest Houses with the help of my smartphone’s GPS device, first mistakenly wandering around the adjacent McKinley development. I realized at this point that in my thirty years of nearly-continuous residence in New York City, I had walked hurriedly through housing projects only by accident. As I entered Forest Houses not scanning for the nearest exit but intending to stay, I experienced my first sensation that something brand new was happening. And in, of all places, the domain of contemporary art.

Taking my seat in a circle of plastic patio chairs scrawled with the words “Gramsci Monument” in Hirschhorn’s signature thick black Sharpie, I observed my surroundings: a group of mostly 25-35 year-old art types, like myself, and a handful of older folks. Three of the roughly 15 were residents of Forest Houses, and Hirschhorn addressed them familiarly because among the group, only they had participated in the Art School before. After releasing us for 45 minutes so that people who had not brought a work with them could generate one on-site, Hirschhorn began a critique more organized and truly democratic than any I endured while earning my MFA. A work was placed in the center of the circle, and each person answered “Yes” or “No” (with a few phrases of explanation) to the question of whether it contained Energy. By the end, I learned a number of things: 1. I

am lot more generous in the assessment of Energy than Thomas Hirschhorn. 2. Judgment is always personal but a sum of judgments can approach the Universal (in other words, Democracy Works!). 3. The condition of Energy is complicated. 4. Judgment is always preceded by assumption. 5. Structural precision, when sustained, can be very productive.

In the following weeks, I attended a number of other events, activities and informal gatherings at the Gramsci Monument: three daily philosophy lectures (with Marcus Steinweg); three weekly Gramsci Seminars (visiting scholars speaking about his work and legacy); one Running Event with Jamar Foster; one Field Trip to Walter's de Maria's Earth Room and Broken Kilometer; and one Open Microphone. Events I was sad to miss: the weekly Gramsci Theater (local high school students performing an Absurdist script with philosophers as characters), Fields Trips to Dia: Beacon, Yankee Stadium, the United Nations and Socrates Sculpture Park; and the weekly Poetry Session (Reading and Workshop). To utilize this Monument in its entirety was impossible for any one individual.



Thomas Hirschhorn, Gramsci Monument, 2013, Children's Class run by Lex Brown, Forest Houses, Bronx, New York. Courtesy Dia Art Foundation. Photo: Romain Lopez.

Totality and (near) excess characterize the project in a number of aspects: presence, transparency, sincerity and documentation. There are copious photos archived on its extensive website (gramsci-monument.com) including every artwork presented in every Art School over 11 weeks and high-resolution images as part of a "Press Kit" downloadable by anyone. These gestures are in stark contrast with fellow "Relational" artist Tino Sehgal, who famously forbids the circulation of images of his work. Total presence is not just that of the artist, but of a large crew of staff and collaborators (residents and non-residents) whose activities seem to fluctuate between and around these roles. I never once visited the Monument and did not see Hirschhorn himself; Ambassador (and Dia curator) Yasmil Raymond, Art Workshop leader Lex Brown, emcee DJ Baby Dee, a young man relentlessly taking photos, at least one librarian, at least one cook, and various others assisting and/or participating. In addition, there were always residents, visitors, and children utilizing the facility in a range of ways (sometimes a crowd, sometimes a handful; depending on the day): listening to a lecture or performance, reading in the library, painting in the Art Workshop, using the Internet, having lunch, inspecting Gramsci's slippers, exploring, chatting with friends, playing chess, climbing on jungle-gyms or running through sprinklers. The Monument was a truly multi-use space for a truly multilateral public.

Hirschhorn's total transparency is manifest in his willingness to talk to whomever will listen about his values and goals in this Monument and beyond, and his wide release of texts which make explicit every aspect of the project's origins, operations, conceptual framework and philosophical implications. Words that recur in these texts as values and aspirations include: Form, Equality, Resistance, Positiveness, Universality, Energy, Belief. Words that recur as adversaries: Quality, Culture, Tradition, Exclusivity, Identity, Particularism. As well as (surprise!): Collaboration and Participation. (These words, Hirschhorn writes, have a way of diffusing responsibility, which he, as an artist, wishes to fully assume.) His texts match classic manifestos of the 20th century avant-garde in their rhetoric, grandiosity, theatrics, redundancy and revolutionary zeal. He diverges from this tradition (pardon the word), and from most of contemporary art, in his total sincerity. While the classic manifesto is always hyperbolic for dramatic effect, even humorous (recall Hugo Ball performing the Dada

Manifesto in his cardboard hat and cape), Hirschhorn, I believe, is dead serious. There is no sideways smirk—irony, satire—when he writes "I believe in Universality, and in the universal power of art to transform each human being."

With its inevitable clashes of race, ethnicity, class and culture, the Gramsci Monument is a land mine of potential problems. But isn't it better to confront these clashes, however difficult, than to pretend they don't exist? The novelty and discomfort of visiting a housing project for many of the art- and philosophy-minded is proof that we live in "a tale of two cities," the oft-repeated credo of likely mayor-to-be Bill de Blasio (who I saw in the audience with his son Dante at a Gramsci Monument lecture). Hirschhorn has written: "To address a 'non-exclusive' audience means to face reality, failure, unsuccessfulness, the cruelty of disinterest and the incommensurability of a complex situation." He found a catalyst in his personal hero Antonio Gramsci, whose Marxist philosophy is worth reinvestigating as class divisions in New York City, and around the world, worsen.



Thomas Hirschhorn, Gramsci Monument, 2013, Gramsci Archive and Library, Forest Houses, Bronx, New York. Courtesy Dia Art Foundation. Photo: Romain Lopez.

Gramsci's assertion that "All human beings are intellectuals," a prominent slogan of the Monument, serves to introduce his theory of "organic intellectuals"—the kind not determined by class or profession, but through thought and activity in one's own community. This is an empowering notion, but access to it (like most advanced philosophy and art) is usually gained through higher education, where the target audience will not likely be. While the Monument may not get every participant (resident or visitor) reading Gramsci, it does bring these ideas into a new kind of circulation—library books, banners, brochures, web and radio—in the unique context of a NYCHA development. Robert Smithson also extrapolates the Monument-form, albeit in a different direction. For him, it expands (or contracts) to include a barren sandbox and other such "ruins in reverse." While Hirschhorn is a soldier of Energy (Yes!), Smithson celebrates entropy or "energy-drain" as reflected in the works of Dan Flavin, Robert Morris, Donald Judd, and the landscape of Passaic, New Jersey. Earning the title by ironic pronouncement, these "monuments" have very little to offer, and Smithson means to critique the systemic failures that created them. Hirschhorn takes the opposite approach: injecting the Monument with more giving-power than its ever had before.

I have seen and heard firsthand what this project has offered to Forest Houses. For me personally, benefits gained from the Gramsci Monument include: discovering the work of "Afro-Pessimist" scholar Frank Wilderson; bumping into all kinds of old friends; re-reading Gramsci for the first time since college; finding the perfect birthday gift for my boyfriend at a Conway department store on the advice of a Forest Houses resident; sitting beside my Dad at a lecture called "For the Love of Philosophy," and many more. It made me proud to be an artist and a New Yorker—because this is what art can do, and it can still happen here. William H. Gass wrote, "The successful monument has offspring." In the sense of ongoing activity, dialogue and friendship born of the Gramsci Monument, I have no doubt. In the sense of future projects that approach its monumental ambition—here's hoping.



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