

Thomas Hirschhorn's "Gramsci Monument" Transcends Its Own Conceit

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(Courtesy Dia Art Foundation / Photo: Romain Lopez)



Gramsci Archive and Library

I came prepared to dislike [Gramsci Monument](#), [Thomas Hirschhorn](#)'s Dia Foundation-funded monument-cum-pop-up community center-cum-play structure, sited in the Bronx among the Forest Houses Projects. In the abstract, it seems to evince the same kind of vampiric impulse as [the recent Venice Biennial](#)—that is, that contemporary art is so enervated that it needs a blood infusion from non-art communities in order to achieve the semblance of life.

But the truism that you have actually to visit Hirschhorn's odd participatory installations—this is the fourth in a series of works dedicated to voguish European philosophers (previously, Bataille, Spinoza, and Deleuze)—in order to appreciate them proves true. Such public projects really are

of a different order than the famed Swiss artist's gallery works. In traditional art spaces, his signature rough-and-ready, fucked-up aesthetic reads like big-budget professional art in self-taught art drag. Here, the unevenly planed surfaces and slightly rickety construction come across as an invitation to use.

The tale of the *Monument* is [by now familiar](#). Hirschhorn visited dozens of housing projects, finally settling on Forest Houses when he met the enthusiastic President of the Resident Association, Erik Farmer, who helped advocate for it. The artist built it with a team of locals. The finished structure houses an art studio where classes are taught, a radio station, a daily newspaper produced by volunteers, a community-run food stand, and a regular program of open mics and lectures by thinkers from Stanley Aronowitz to Gayatri Spivak. There's an always-bustling computer lab where kids sit, supervised, playing games and sharing YouTube videos.

Compared to these activities, the library of books and artifacts dedicated to the Italian Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci comes across as an incongruous afterthought—though the structure and housing blocks around it are studded with such Gramscian bon mots as “Destruction is difficult; it is as difficult as creation,” spray-painted on white sheets. The philosopher's presence is important to Hirschhorn's artistic project of “rethinking the monument,” and it is part of what makes this a pilgrimage site for white art worlders in a way that a straight community center would not be—but Gramsci is essentially just a pretext for what makes *Gramsci Monument* lovable.

Few thinkers of the 20th century have been as distorted and abused. A revolutionary anti-fascist who died in prison, a victim of Mussolini, Gramsci penned his *Prison Notebooks* as an attempt to theorize the cultural component of anti-capitalist strategy. Written essentially in code because of censors (“Marxism” is rendered “the philosophy of praxis,” and so on), they were vulnerable to creative misreadings. In the '80s they became totemic in cultural studies departments, and thereafter this Marxist somehow became a key influence on post-Marxism; a thinker whose project was linking the political struggle for economic justice to culture morphed into a thinker for whom struggle was purely cultural, intellectual, abstract. With regard to its fundamental themes of art and community uplift, Hirschhorn's *Gramsci Monument* seems by and large to pay homage to this latter soft-focus Gramsci, not the steely Machiavellian of the *Notebooks*. Without connection to a sustained activist organization with a concrete program and political goals, cultural intervention would have

been only an idle concern for the author of “The Modern Prince.” And while the *Monument* is many wholesome things, it will not be sustained.

That’s no reason to dismiss the whole thing. When Will Brand and Whitney Kimball [did the invaluable work](#) of actually interviewing area residents about what they thought of the project, they found that everyone was at the very least bemused by it. It has offered something for the kids to do and a bit of summer distraction in a community that is starved for resources. That, in my book, is a very cool thing. As for the nagging concern that the *Monument* turns a down-trodden neighborhood into a kind of novel spectacle for art tourists, well, you can view residents as using Hirschhorn and his art world resources as much as you can view him as using them for his career and credibility.

“A lot of people up there have said they’re gonna cry when it’s down,” Erik Farmer’s mother said, when asked about the meaning of the work. In the end, I’d think of the *Gramsci Monument* as neither a finished project nor a neat feel-good story. It is and can only be a monument to an absence—to institutions, organizations, and movements that still need to be built.

[Thomas Hirschhorn](#)'s *The Gramsci Monument* is at the Forest Houses, off Tinton Avenue between 163 and 165 Streets, through September 15.