



ART REVIEW

A Summer Place in the South Bronx

By Ken Johnson

July 25, 2013

On last Sunday's lovely, warm afternoon I visited Thomas Hirschhorn's "Gramsci Monument," a sprawling, participatory sculpture built on the grass outside a group of brick apartment buildings in the South Bronx. I left feeling irritable and depressed.

Mr. Hirschhorn is a Swiss artist internationally celebrated for his politically charged installations, which typically involve large quantities of quotidian materials like brown plastic packing tape and aluminum foil, as well as books and photocopies of social theory texts, pornography, images of war and copies of artworks he admires. His works look as if they were made by a brilliant, crazily paranoid, autodidactic outsider.

Mr. Hirschhorn is not crazy. Rather, he's a canny conceptualist operator and an artist whose extravagant immodesty calls to mind the performance-art diva Marina Abramovic and Christo and Jeanne-Claude, the creators of grandiose, temporary outdoor sculptures. In recent years Mr. Hirschhorn has produced three major works that he calls monuments, each in a different European city and each dedicated to an admired philosophical writer: Baruch Spinoza, Georges Bataille and Gilles Deleuze. He has built them in poor and working-class neighborhoods and he has enlisted local residents to help build them.

For this, the fourth and, he promises, last in the series, he scouted the Bronx and settled on the Forest Houses in the Morissania section, where residents were paid to help him build a scruffy, ramshackle complex out of plywood, two-by-fours, blue tarps, brown tape and plexiglass. Resembling a home for postapocalyptic survivors, it has a library stocked with books on political and social theory; a radio station; a space for producing a daily newspaper; a snack bar; and a stage for musical and theatrical performances. There's a room equipped with computers and another with a small exhibition of the personal effects of Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), including a comb, slippers and a wallet.



Thomas Hirschhorn's "Gramsci Monument" was built on the grounds of the Forest Houses with the help of its residents. Ángel Franco/The New York Times

There are also spray-painted banners and photocopied texts everywhere that present quotations from Gramsci's writings, like "Every human being is an intellectual" and "Reality exists independently of the thinking individual."

Gramsci was a leader of the Italian Communist Party in the 1920s and an influential journalist and writer of Marxist theory. From 1926 to the end of his life he was imprisoned by Mussolini's Fascist government. While incarcerated, however, he produced an extraordinary quantity of letters and essays that have influenced generations of leftist thinkers up to the present.

The key Gramscian idea is hegemony. More than just the political power wielded by a dominant group, hegemony for Gramsci was the worldview of a whole society. Internalized through and through by rich and poor and powerful and powerless, hegemony keeps everyone in their place. It finds expression not only in relations between workers and employers but in all kinds of cultural products, including art and the system by which art is produced and circulated.

Gramsci thought that the overthrow of capitalist hegemony should come not by violent revolution but through the rise of "counter-hegemonies" — alternative cultures developed by disenfranchised groups. Through self-education, self-organization and the creation of its own institutions, a proletarian culture might someday become powerful enough to displace the bourgeois culture of modern, industrial society.

In certain respects, then, Mr. Hirschhorn's project is a Gramscian action. He has planted seeds from which might grow an underclass culture whose participants might achieve a self-empowerment denied them by the present hegemonic state of affairs. He insists, however, that what he has created is a work of art — a variation on the form of the monument.

He sees himself as a kind of formalist. "As a warrior for Form," he declares in one of his numerous texts printed in a colorful broadside for the monument, "Art — because it's Art — is resistance as such. Resistance to aesthetical cultural, political habits."

Thus Mr. Hirschhorn aligns himself with avant-garde traditions ranging from Dada to the utopian populism of Joseph Beuys. In so doing, he pre-empts conventional criticism, which will always be seen as partial and conservatively blinkered compared with his expansive vision. (It shouldn't go unnoted, however, that Mr. Hirschhorn is represented by the blue-chip capitalist gallery Gladstone and that he created "Gramsci Monument" in fulfillment of a commission by the Dia Foundation, a pillar of the American art establishment.)

All I can say is that I was not inspired by his monument. The day I visited there wasn't much going on. On the stage an audience of about a dozen sitting in ugly white plastic chairs listened to a band playing Latin music, after which a man tried without much success to get folks to step up for an open-mike session.

The busiest spot was the computer room, where children were engaged by digital games and not, as far I as could tell, reading up on Gramscian theory. I found one young man perusing a book in the otherwise vacant library. The whole architectural structure was looking dismally decrepit after three weeks of variable summer weather.

A bulletin board showed that seminars, lectures and field trips are scheduled every day in the coming weeks. So it's possible I happened along when there was a lull in an otherwise terrifically energetic evolution of a new hegemony. As it was, it all made me sad: I had a vision of the great man descending upon the benighted residents of Forest Houses to spread his manna and impregnate the community with an embryo of hope, but one that was doomed to fade after the construction is dismantled at the end of the summer.

It's too soon to know whether Mr. Hirschhorn's work will be remembered in the South Bronx as a more or less amusing diversion or as something more Gramscian. Ultimately, I suspect, it will be preserved in memory mainly by the high-end art world as just a work by Mr. Hirschhorn, another monument to his monumental ego.

Thomas Hirschhorn's "Gramsci Monument" is on view through Sept. 15 at the Forest Houses, Tinton Avenue between 163rd and 165th Streets, the Morissania section of the Bronx; Gramsci-monument.com.

A version of this article appears in print on July 26, 2013, Section C, Page 19 of the New York edition with the headline: A Summer Place in the South Bronx