What I learned from the Gramsci Monument

Thomas Hirschhorn with afterthoughts on the “Gramsci Monument”, an installation at a city housing project in the South Bronx from 2013. This was the fourth and last in Hirschhorn’s series of “monuments” dedicated to major writers and thinkers

A single artwork / Thomas Hirschhorn November 9, 2015

In this text about the “Gramsci Monument” I decided to write down what I have learned from this incredible, beautiful, difficult, and complex experience. I want to add my own words to the critiques, information, interpretations and opinions written about my work. To me the Gramsci Monument was a kind of Paradise – not Paradise where everything was nice, beautiful, comfortable, resolved, and accomplished, not at all, but one where the questions about art, its meaning, its power of transformation, its impact, the question of audience and the question of the form of art were posed and were engaging me at every minute, every hour, every day. One can perhaps understand that for an artist, the constant and immediate contact with these questions is a kind of Paradise. It was Paradise because I have learned so much. I learned a lot about Antonio Gramsci from the Gramsci Scholars Series weekly lectures and seminars. The invited Gramsci scholars put me in touch with Antonio Gramsci’s thinking and with his ideas in an incredibly extensive manner. Through examination of his thinking I have learned that art can resist simplified idealism and simplified realism. In rejecting aestheticism, but also in rejecting polarization, the figure of Antonio Gramsci is exemplary. He can, of course, be replaced by other heroes, like Malcom X, for example. Finally, by insisting on viewing Gramsci’s thinking as pure political thinking, rather than good will, socialization, or political engagement, the Gramsci Scholars Series pushed away narcissism, passivity, and self-neutralization. I will describe here what I have learned from the Gramsci Monument, as my contribution to raising a new thematic and discussing the problems I confronted at Forest Houses. I will describe my understanding through experience, without taking refuge in theoretical terms or reporting related facts or anecdotes. My words are not more or less important or truthful than other texts about my work, but they are the artist’s testimony and they fulfill one of the reasons for writing about my work: to give my own testimony. I will do this in nine points:

Thomas Hirschhorn, “Gramsci Monument”, 2013



[1]Thomas Hirschhorn, “Gramsci Monument"
2013. Photo: Romain Lopez. Courtesy of the Dia Art Foundation

I have learned what working within a community means.

I have learned something new from the Gramsci Monument: I learned that the word community is a sacred cow and in order to take it seriously, and avoid the trap of its political abuse and semantic superficiality, I have to really touch it, get in close contact with it, and join the inner fight – this is what community substantially means. If a work of art is made in contact with a community, its understanding becomes a community-understanding. This means that someone understands the work in a certain way, someone else in a different way, and a third sees it in yet another way. I have learned that there is no common (shared) way of understanding art. One of the things I have understood – every day – was that what we shared was more important than our differences. Because difference, all differences, can be shared, all together, in one dynamic: the dynamic of implication and examination as an outcome of a work of art. And all of these different, particular, partial understandings, added and combined, are what make a community-understanding. I have learned that working with and within a community of residents was less about reaching out for common ground and much more about trying to connect all the differences and make them a community. This is what some residents are trying to work out at Forest Houses: an idea of community as a never-completed construction of individuals, rather than a specific homogeneity within a group. Because here, something is being realized by the community of residents – and the Gramsci Monument was just one example – which resists cultural, social, and economical representations. The unfinished community is the dream – and therefore I speak of the Gramsci Monument as Paradise – where members of this community, with realizing, without knowing each

other, both together and alone – share the space of their lives, their happiness, and their failures, thereby creating and exploring new forms of living, new forms of thinking, and a different form of reality.

I have learned why being present is so important.

I have learned that being present is crucial. Being present: not as the "artist," but simply being present. To be present as a human being, as an equal, to be present as the one who is responsible, as the one who takes care of everything. This isn't new to me; the new thing that I have learned from the Gramsci Monument experience is that presence is really something which makes things equal. My presence is not independent of the existing social, economic, and cultural reality at Forest Houses or elsewhere. This presence is not independent of the universe of facts in which I live. There is no escape through presence; the artist is not the Creator or the little God. I am not independent of others and my presence is not self-sufficient. Therefore it is essential to understand the dependence of each one of us. We all struggle with the world's chaos in all its forms. Neither I nor the other can bring order into this chaos. The only thing I can do, and must do, which I believe can reach the other, is to give form to our struggle with chaos. My presence at the Gramsci Monument showed the residents and the visitors that presence is a necessary form that fights full on with reality. Presence is an absolute necessity. Only when present I can credibly be in contact with the other; only when present I can share my time with the other; only when present I can understand that the presence of the other is as important as my own. There is at least one thing I have learned from the Occupy movement: in today's age of the disasters of representative democracy, the presence of my body, of our bodies, can make sense as such! At last, there is nothing exceptional about being present – as in many cases or circumstances – and therefore (being) simply present becomes an act which distinguishes presence from non-presence. At Forest Houses nobody needs your presence; you are the only one defining its necessity. That is what I have learned: my presence or non-presence – or the presence or non-presence of someone else – is never an exception and never a way of including or excluding.

Thomas Hirschhorn, "Gramsci Monument", 2013 **[2]**



[3]Thomas Hirschhorn, “Gramsci Monument”
2013. Photo: Romain Lopez. Courtesy of the Dia Art Foundation

I have learned what it means, today, to be critical, to be skeptical, to have doubts

I heard a lot of comments from visitors at Forest Houses which started with the words: “In the beginning I was skeptical . . . “, or “I had doubts in the beginning . . . “. It astounded me how the right attitude today is to be critical, to have doubts, and to be skeptical. No one wants to be non-critical; no one wants to be without skepticism. Being critical sounds good. No one wants to confront an experience with an uncertain outcome openly, with sovereignty and confidence. No one wants to confront an affirmation without the shield and self-protection of a critical attitude. Such criticism is a testimony of today’s tendency to protect ourselves, because nobody wants to be the dumb one, nobody wants to be the believer, the one who just has faith. We need to show that we “know,” that we are aware and smart enough not to lose our outlook on what had happened through skepticism and its protective attitude. It’s the expression of the fear to confront something new at our own risk. I learned something contrary with the Gramsci Monument: that – when creating an artwork – there is a limit to criticism and to its good consciousness. The limit is to understand that making art is a risky and a necessarily affirmative practice, which excludes self-skepticism. A skeptical attitude is a kind of cynicism, the cynicism of those who don’t believe in the power of art to transform each human being who comes in contact with it. This skeptic attitude is also an expression of those who can still maintain a wait-and-see position, waiting to be convinced. This, as opposed to those who have no choice, is an exclusive and self-indulgent argumentation. To remain unconvinced is a luxury because finally it is a justification given by those unwilling to change, who don’t want to be touched by reality and don’t want to experience reality. I want to be critical too and ask myself, what am I in this world?

What kind of position do I want to take in this world? What kind of work am I doing in this world? And what form can I propose to answer these questions?

I have learned not to be disappointed by reality

I have learned not to be the disappointed one. As an artist I have no right to be disappointed by the reception of my work, and I have no right to accept this kind of discourse, which isn't forceful. There are so many reasons to be disappointed that it's obviously and definitely too easy. Reality is far more unexpected, unpredictable, and surprising - there should never be disappointment facing it. My daily contact with the residents of Forest Houses taught me a lesson: to feel disappointed is an attitude which, in its self-indulgence and selfishness, only serves the purpose of self-excuse and the evasion of responsibility. One cannot be disappointed since there isn't, there cannot be, control in facing reality. In accepting this non-control of reality – something the residents of Forest House confront daily – the first step towards non-disappointment is taken. I have learned that being disappointed is a narcissistic gesture to avoid the real disappointment, the disappointment in myself – in case I am not giving everything I should give – which is the risk when confronting reality. Therefore disappointment is the last refuge of the marvelous soul disconnected from reality. Realizing the Gramsci Monument together with the residents of Forest Houses was indeed not disappointing, it had its share of fun, its share of craziness, and its share of beauty. After the Gramsci Monument experience, not only there is no reason, there is no right to be disappointed! The Gramsci Monument experience has allowed me to confront reality, to confront it just as it is, instead of moralizing about how it should be.

Thomas Hirschhorn, "Gramsci Monument", 2013 **[4]**



[5]Thomas Hirschhorn, “Gramsci Monument”
2013. Photo: Romain Lopez. Courtesy of the Dia Art Foundation

I have learned what fieldwork in a certain loneliness means and consequently what dignity means

A work like the Gramsci Monument is necessarily a communal work. A work that can only be done because a huge number of people is involved, committed to it, supporting, helping and enjoying it. It’s something an artist can’t do alone – something that’s possible only because so many people are standing together. I want to mention here the warm and frank welcome of Diane Herbert and Clyde Thompson at Forest Houses, the incredible agreeability and fantastic help of Erik Farmer; the key figure, the joyful presence and thoughtful suggestions of the Forest Houses residents; the indispensable attendance of the NYCHA administration and of course the magnificent support of Dia Art Foundation. Nevertheless or perhaps even as opposed to this, certain loneliness is essential to such a work of art. I learned from the Gramsci Monument fieldwork how important – even crucial – the preparation and research work are. The locus of such a monument is essential to the task of provoking encounters and making co-operation between residents and my project possible. The most challenging part is to encounter the residents – alone – in finding a possible location. I also learned why – contrary to what is often pointed out as the good way – certain loneliness in fieldwork is coherent and understandable to everybody. It made sense to hold on to my own singular idea, in its fragility, vulnerability, uncertainty, and precariousness. Doing fieldwork alone as much as possible is a form which can contribute to a possible bridge, because it is based on what art can do: establish a one-on-one dialogue or a confrontation. On my fieldwork trips I have learned how important it is to base a contact on the evidence: one equals one. A demagogic argument, an opportunistic one, or a

patronizing attitude cannot succeed when facing a person who confronts the truth daily. Therefore, certain loneliness, such as the loneliness of an artist with a mission – far from romanticism or particularism – is credible and truly helpful. During the year and a half of my research in the NYCHA projects I was overwhelmed by the dignity of the residents. I have learned through fieldwork – but also through all of my work at Forest Houses - that dignity is another notion which stands for simplicity, generosity, lucidity, solidarity, and openness towards the other. I understood the will to open up as a need to go from identity to difference, as well as an uncompromising resistance toward injustice and aesthetical corruptness, an absence of jealousy, absence of narcissism, absence of idealism, and absence of ideology. Dignity is also another word for the ability to see the world as it is, while also seeing the non-necessity of the world as it is. In other words: it is unnecessary to wear sunglasses in a NYCHA Project.

Thomas Hirschhorn, “Gramsci Monument”, 2013 **[6]**



[7]Thomas Hirschhorn, “Gramsci Monument”
2013. Photo: Romain Lopez. Courtesy of the Dia Art Foundation

I have learned how to accept the accumulation of failures and to hold off the NEGATIVE

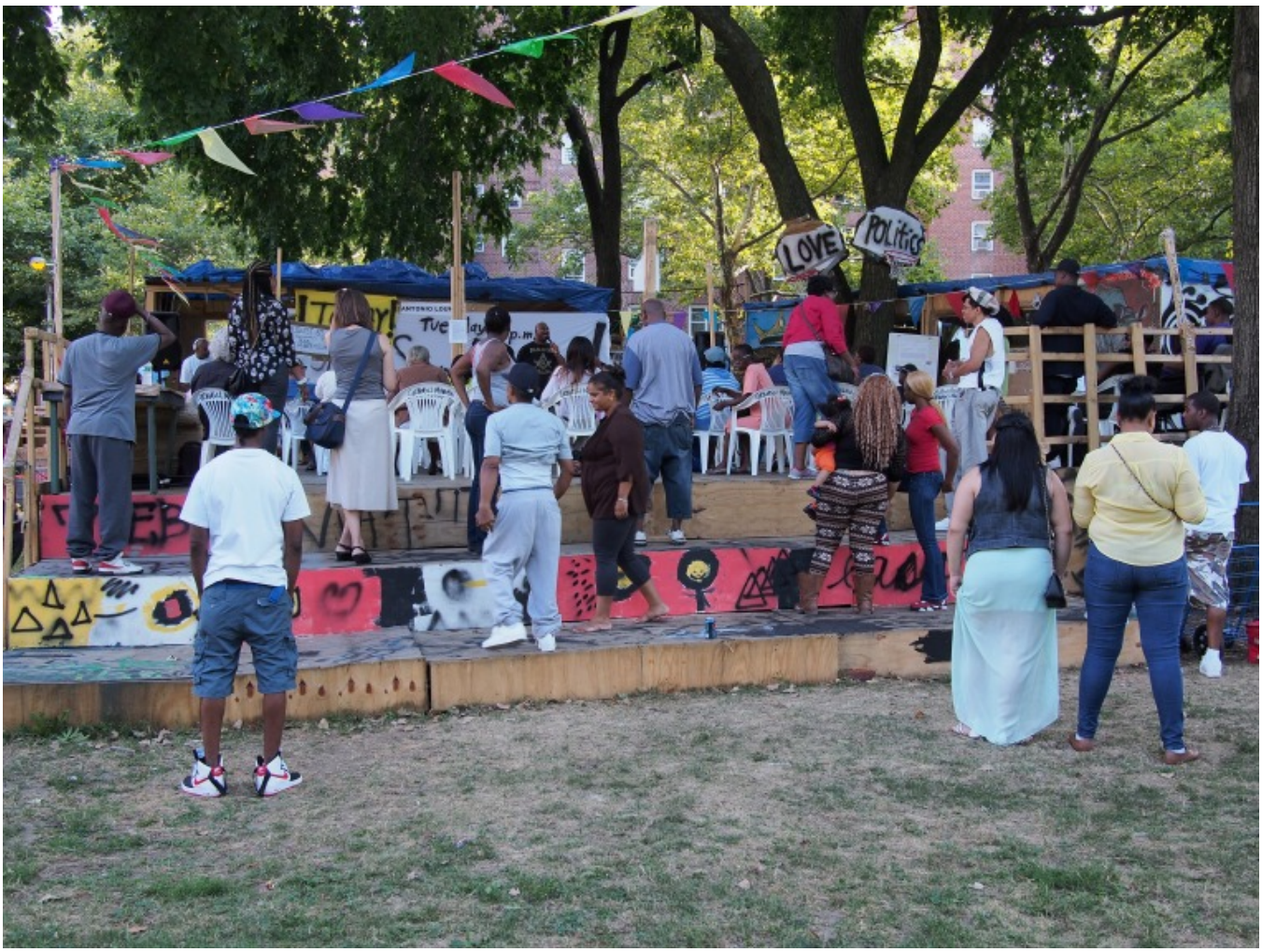
The Gramsci Monument was an accumulation of failures. I mean real, countable, visible failures, not today’s widespread negativity, always interested in what does not work, in what is disappointing, in

the failure, There is nothing new about this, apart from its dimension. I think it has to do with today's need to comment on everything, to have an opinion about everything, and to be informed about everything. Actually, even if this kind of negativity can be entertaining, you can't learn anything from it. But I want to learn from my failures in making the Gramsci Monument. I will just mention some of them: my direction of the Gramsci Theater, the banners which were reduced to only five because I had no more energy, my lack of energy to re-tape the sofas and the armchairs, several running events that lacked strength and pertinence, accepting the Gramsci Monument T-shirts for the staff members, the staff members who didn't show up, the projector which was stolen, the photocopier that broke down and hasn't been repaired for two weeks, my confusing of Ernst Thälman with Karl Liebknecht at a panel discussion during the Bronx sculptures running event, and many more failures. Each day I had to confront them, since a new failure appeared every day. At the beginning of the Gramsci Monument I tried to stop them from accumulating. Nevertheless, I was overwhelmed by the fact that they arose almost every day. I learned with time, that – of course – I must do everything to avoid failures, but, essentially and decisively, the most important thing is to continue the work and to keep producing. With time, failures literarily became less and less important. I have learned that the accumulation of failures and lacks is the condition for a possible success. Failures were still failures, but something else took on greater importance than not making, reducing, or avoiding them: The will to do something that reaches beyond deficiencies, the will to touch instead of to be stopped by failures and deficiencies. To get through, to move forward and go beyond is what makes the difference, and this capacity of "beyond" is success as such. There is no failure and no success in a work of art – in general – but even more so with a work of art in a public space, and furthermore when it involves the residents. I learned to confront and to hold off the negative.

I have learned that art is not a science

I have learned at Forest Houses that all temptations to explain art as a science are condemned to theories and wishful thinking. Art is an opening towards reality, an opening without borders and limits. I have learned that there is absolutely no research, no study, which can replace the experience of confronting a problem, a problem with no solution, of facing a cul-de-sac, with no exit, like the Gramsci Monument experience. With art I have to confront and assert reality without necessarily agreeing with it. I can only confront this dilemma blindly, with no guarantee, with no assurance, with no idealism, but also with no realism. Science cannot replace the necessity of this mindless gesture which asserts art as art. I have learned at Forest Houses that art is not science because art is the tool for confronting my future– without control and without results. Making a work of art at Forest Houses necessarily involved being self-destabilized, at all times. I had to reinvent the Gramsci Monument every single day from the bottom up, again and again, first in my own mind, and then in the minds of the residents and the visitors. I was ready to pay the price because I knew this was the condition of art, philosophy, and poetry, but for sure, this cannot be the condition of science. Understanding art as a science – today – is often a reactionary way to legitimize being self-neutralized by reality and context. In art – in real art – what counts is affirmation; the affirmation of form –not scientific argumentation – argumentation is out!

Thomas Hirschhorn, "Gramsci Monument", 2013 **[8]**



[9]Thomas Hirschhorn, “Gramsci Monument”
2013. Photo: Romain Lopez. Courtesy of the Dia Art Foundation

I have learned how important it is to insist on non-sense

I have learned how important it is to insist on the dimension of non-sense in the creation of a work of art, because non-sense is what the existing order of reality wants to exclude, and because non-sense questions the meaning of reality-order. The Gramsci-Monument wanted to confront reality in the first place. Creating an artwork today means addressing “non-sense”, to give form to the fact that sense must be invented, and because, today, there is a deficiency of sense. But the question and the problem are not about replacing non-sense with sense, or sense with non-sense – the real question, the real problem is to insist on the questioning of sense while opening it toward non-sense. The Gramsci Monument is a form combining sense and non-sense. I have learned that I must invent and insist on what makes non-sense bound to sense. In realizing the Gramsci Monument I learned– every single day – to get in touch with Non-Sense. I have touched the core of art, the non-sense, the emptiness and the abyss – the abyss over which art and art history stand.

Thomas Hirschhorn, “Gramsci Monument”, 2013 **[10]**



[11]Thomas Hirschhorn, “Gramsci Monument”
2013. Photo: Romain Lopez. Courtesy of the Dia Art Foundation

I have learned that belief in absolute equality makes sense not only to me

I wanted to realize the Gramsci Monument – like every work of art –with a complete conviction of equality. Art, because it is art, calls for equality. Equality means and stands for other terms such as justice, the other, the one world, universality. I have learned in making the Gramsci Monument at Forest Houses that the understanding of art can function as an expression of constitutive and ontological equality. Art is the tool; art is the weapon to build equality with. Art must function and is functioning. There is no other fundamental, there is no other mission. The absolute affirmation of equality is the link, the hidden and invisible connection which holds the work together. Equality doesn’t exist as a fact, because the amount of factual inequalities is immense – I am aware of it. But I won’t limit myself to the position of commentator or observer, who doesn’t take each chance and each opportunity to affirm equality. I want to struggle with the reality which affects me, resist the tendency to understand and reduce myself – and us all – to objects in our unequal surrounding world. On the contrary, I am not powerless in facing the given context and existing circumstances. I have tools or weapons, I can give form. Precisely because pure equality is not a fact it needs to be fought for, at every moment. I have learned that these fights at every moment can make sense – and – this is what counts – not only to me. To reach equality, inequality must be presupposed. I have learned that art, by existing through an affirmation in contact with the core of un-factual equality, can become a precious credibility for the other. I learned this at Forest Houses and took it as a gift, as a hope – from the residents, from the visitors – but also as a commitment towards myself.

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