

is to participate in the pain and joy of others, to "feel compassion." Only those ignorant of suffering, such as small children with "no experience of great pain or death among those close to them," can therefore know true happiness, if only for a time. The same must apply to God: "If He is not indifferent, but subject to emotion like us, He must live in a constant state of sorrow when He witnesses human suffering." Jesus Christ—for Christians, the son of God—"was not happy in any recognizable sense. He was embodied and suffered pain, he shared the suffering of his fellow men, and he died on the cross."

The religious may accuse Kołakowski of impiety, of presuming to know the designs of God, but the issue is more complicated. For decades, Kołakowski had been writing that all human lives end in failure or tragedy. When he looked to the Poles of his generation, he saw many with gifts like his own whose lives had been cut short. The cream of the Polish intelligentsia died in Warsaw in 1943 and '44, and if Kołakowski had been spared this fate, it was due to the good advice of communist partisans. One always enjoys fortune (*szczęście*) adumbrated by others' misfortune (*nieszczęście*). To the extent that we are fully human, our sense of fortune is always partial, compromised, unsatisfying—everything true happiness, however fleeting, is not supposed to be. Thus he wonders: If God is at all like us (we are created in His image), can He be happy? Kołakowski's answer, again perhaps impiously, is yes—but only if the universe is one in which everybody is saved, and hell and purgatory do not exist, and there is bliss for all. We can imagine such a situation, but "it has never been seen. It has never been seen."

Such bleak theism is hardly the opiate that Kołakowski once equated with religion. But the idea of a world abandoned by God, one where History is simply "history," a series of accidents whose meaning cannot be ascertained, was even more unsettling than a meager faith to Kołakowski, who once helped to build utopia, and witnessed genocide and totalitarianism firsthand. We have put the "cosy world of Enlightenment atheism" far behind us, he writes, and have seen modern thinkers and politicians who acted as "unconstrained legislators on questions of good and evil" transform the world into a "place of endless anxiety and suffering." For Kołakowski, the failures of the dictatorship of idealism he once served proved that no political or intellectual system could explain or soften the bitter complexity and contradictions of human experience. In such a world, the problems of the modern papacy faded into insignificance for the old jester, and the church

remained above all a bulwark against nihilistic viciousness. And yet we remain haunted by ultimate questions, Kołakowski insists, "intensely aware of God's absence." The "Absolute can never be forgotten," for God is "present even in our rejection of Him." If

anything is certain about Kołakowski, it is that the life he devoted to critically examining elementary truths turned his thought into just the sort of unnerving intellectual paradox that he could accept on faith, but never bring himself to explain. ■



Gramsci Archive and Library, part of *Gramsci Monument* (2013), by Thomas Hirschhorn, at Forest Houses, the Bronx, New York

ROMAIN LOPEZ/DIA ART FOUNDATION

## More of Less

by BARRY SCHWABSKY

**T**he last big work by Thomas Hirschhorn that I saw was *Crystal of Resistance*, displayed two years ago at the Swiss Pavilion of the Venice Biennale. Hirschhorn created an immersive environment in which, as I wrote at the time, "information overload becomes a concrete corporeal sensation, yet individual details never stop arresting your gaze." His latest effort, *Gramsci Monument*—either "commissioned" by the Dia Art Foundation, according to the organization's website, or "produced" by it, according to the Gramsci Monument website, whatever the distinction signifies—is very different, and has been created for a radically different context. Although I haven't yet been able to go to this year's Venice Biennale, I've been there much more often than I have to the South Bronx, which is where Hirschhorn's new piece has been constructed on the grounds of Forest Houses, a high-rise project that since the 1950s has been home to more than 3,000 people. *Gramsci Monument* will be there through September 15, after which the used materials it was built from will

be redistributed locally.

Among the things art can do is change perception by changing the context in which perception takes place. Think of Marcel Duchamp's gesture, made nearly 100 years ago, of transporting a porcelain urinal from a plumbing supply store to an art exhibition and signing it "R. Mutt." But perception can be altered by more than seeing familiar objects in new contexts; transporting the perceiver beyond the walls of the museum or the gallery can work just as well. And so for myself (though this might not be true for other visitors to *Gramsci Monument*), taking the No. 5 train to Forest Houses was significant. I don't want to make too much of this, and I certainly don't intend to claim that giving people who would normally never set foot in a housing project a reason to find their way to one is a big deal, or even Hirschhorn's primary intention. But the trek is at least as consequential as heading to the Great Salt Lake in Utah or the plateau in New Mexico where famous earthworks by Robert Smithson and Walter de Maria

are located. And at a time when New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg is proposing that the best way to protect the residents of such projects is to fingerprint them all, it just might be a civic responsibility to see for oneself what it's like. For the residents themselves, suddenly seeing their home being seen through the eyes of strangers might be enlightening, too. As the philosopher Gayatri Spivak put it in a talk on Gramsci given at the *Monument*, "Nothing will last if a collectivity looks only at itself."

Hirschhorn's monument to Antonio Gramsci, the great writer, political theorist and co-founder of the Italian Communist Party, is the fourth and last in a sequence of works situated in housing projects. The series began with a *Spinoza Monument* in Amsterdam in 1999 and continued with a *Deleuze Monument* in Avignon in 2000 and a *Bataille Monument* in Kassel, Germany, in 2002, part of Documenta 11. Though not exactly a site-specific work, *Gramsci Monument* seems to have been made as a piece of art whose primary audience is not assumed to be the art world or its acolytes. It hasn't been located in a housing project the way artworks are housed in museums, private homes or public plazas. Even so, it's not exclusively for the residents of Forest Houses either, but rather potentially for anyone—no prequalification necessary. Most good artworks are created on the same egalitarian basis, but *Gramsci Monument* is different in making a special point of the potential equality of all viewers. As Hirschhorn once said of his work, "The production must be able to address an uninterested audience."

That *Gramsci Monument* is far from Chelsea or MoMA is only one of the signs of Hirschhorn's egalitarian ethos. Simply by building his work in "the projects," he reminds us of how the very word "project" has become fetishized in the art world—no museum can lack a project room, and every artist wants his or her work recognized, not simply as an assortment of mere things but as the expression of a genuine project—as well as maligned when it comes to designing places for people to live in common. As a culture, we don't really believe that housing is or should be a "project," or that living in common qualifies as one; for most of us, a housing project can only be imagined as a last resort.

In response to *Gramsci Monument*, Fred Moten has written a poem that begins,

if the projects become a project  
from outside  
then the projects been a project

forever. held in  
the projects we're the project they  
stole. we steal  
the project back and try to give it  
back to them.

The poem ends:

let's do this one more time. the  
project repeats me. I am replete  
with the project. your difference  
folds me in cadillac arms.  
my oracle with sweets, be my  
confection engine. tell me  
how to choose. tell me how to  
choose the project I have chosen.  
are you the projects I choose? you  
are the project I choose.

Knowingly or not, Moten is extending the Romantic writer Friedrich von Schlegel's observation that projects are "fragments of the future."

A curmudgeon might say that Hirschhorn built *Gramsci Monument* in order to make a high-rise housing project look better by comparison. Yet Forest Houses looks pretty good already—it's well maintained, from what I could see from the grounds, with plenty of green space. And then all of a sudden one sees a little shantytown in the middle of it, as if shantytowns could just come down from the sky like UFOs: a set of unpretty, jerry-built plywood rooms clustered together with walkways and bridges between and around them. It's a self-evidently anti-monumental monument, and not just because of its seemingly ramshackle (or, as Hirschhorn himself likes to say, precarious) appearance, which doesn't let you get comfortable with the monument. The materials do seem to be nailed down tight; Hirschhorn is not Swiss for nothing.

I can imagine someone standing right in the middle of the structure and asking, "Where's the monument?" Instead, there is a series of plywood rooms—"impressively unimpressive," as an artist friend of mine put it—fitted out with pieces of old furniture that have been wrapped with brown packing tape (one of Hirschhorn's signature materials), both to keep the stuffing inside them and to render them more uniform and less visible. And instead of the overload of collaged imagery in *Crystal of Resistance*, there is very little to "look at" but a lot to read, or at least to think about reading: from banners spray-painted with quotations from Gramsci's notebooks—his most influential work, written during his imprisonment by Mussolini from 1926 until shortly before his death in 1937—to an exten-

sive library of writings by and about Gramsci (including Italian originals) and related topics by way of all sorts of photocopied documents affixed directly to the walls of the monument and a daily newspaper edited by two residents of the housing project. The monument is also a place for the spoken word, with a program of daily lectures, readings, discussions and open-mic sessions, as well as activities such as art workshops for kids and an "art school" for adults led by Hirschhorn himself. There is a "bar"—more of a luncheonette, really, with no alcohol but soda, coffee and water, as well as burgers and hot dogs—and a radio station and Internet corner, among other things.

The truly anti-monumental aspect of the piece is the absence of any point of iconic focus. For Hirschhorn, "the tendency to 'iconism' is the tendency to 'highlight'; it's the old, classical procedure of favoring and imposing, in an authoritarian way, a hierarchy." But he would rather be a leveler. At no point does *Gramsci Monument* seek to present an impressive form or assert a symbolically charged presence. Early in his career, Hirschhorn countered Mies van der Rohe by proclaiming, "Less is less, more is more"; but at Forest Houses, he's asserting more of less.

In effect, *Gramsci Monument* is more a place than a thing, closer to architecture



You've been warned.

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than sculpture, a ground rather than a figure. In *Crystal of Resistance*, it was hard to stop looking—and often in horror, because much of the imagery included in it was intensely violent. But with *Gramsci Monument*, you're more likely to find yourself looking for something to look at, and most of the time you won't find it. The peculiar and rather perverse artistic success of the piece is the way it keeps suggesting that something beautiful *could* be seen—but only if you, meaning we, make it. Perhaps that's why Gramsci is an apt namesake for such a project: because of his insistence on collective agency and, of course, the famous edge he gave to optimism of the will over pessimism of the intellect.

**H**is four “monuments” aside, Hirschhorn has often dedicated works to people he admires. There have been “kiosks” for the writers Robert Walser, Ingeborg Bachmann and Emmanuel Bove, and for the artists Otto Freundlich, Mérét Oppenheim, Fernand Léger, Emile Nolde and Liubov Popova, for instance. There have also been “altars” for Piet Mondrian, Raymond Carver and, again, Bachmann (the great Austrian poet and novelist) and Freundlich, the German-Jewish artist, a proponent of Dada and abstraction, who died in a concentration camp in Poland after having been deported from France in 1943.

The tendency to append another person's name to one's art, to create a work in homage, is surprisingly rare among artists. It's often an emotional gesture, poignant yet almost mute, and the artists who are given to making it seem by that token to have something important in common. I can't help but think of an observation made by Roland Barthes in an essay about the American painter Cy Twombly, some of whose works consist solely of an inscribed dedication: “since it bears only the inscription of the dedication, the canvas, so to speak, disappears, and only the act of giving remains—and this modicum of writing necessary to express it. These canvases are at the boundaries of painting not because they include no painting at all (other painters have explored this limit) but because the very idea of a work is destroyed—but not the relation of the painter to someone he loves.” Dan Flavin was another artist who was particularly given to the gesture of dedication. Among his otherwise typically untitled neon-light icons are dedications to Henri Matisse, William of Ockham and, also, Otto Freundlich; most memorably, perhaps, there is one “(to a man, George McGovern).” At first, Flavin's art can seem cool and undemonstrative; the dedications point to the passion that lights

up the work. They remind us that Flavin is a kind of Romantic.

As for Hirschhorn, one critic has nodded in approval at the way he “updates the argument” of Walter Benjamin's essay “Author as Producer.” Another has said that the imagery in one of his installations suggests “an empirical study of the subjects currently favored by the mass media.” Hirschhorn is certainly fascinated with the workings of the media, but not in a cerebral or academic fashion. In the nearly 400 pages of his hefty new publication, *Critical Laboratory: The Writings of Thomas Hirschhorn*, edited by Lisa Lee and Hal Foster (MIT; \$40), there is scarcely a single sentence of any philosophical bearing. And while the book is a slog, it is not because Hirschhorn is trying to turn intellectual cartwheels like the theory-addled artists of the 1980s, with their endless invocations of the mirror stage and the simulacrum. He is neither analytical nor reflective—he is inarticulate, more so than many a distinguished artist. His blustery verbal awkwardness can be excruciating, but if taken in small doses, one does eventually get used to it. If you're wondering which arguments of Spinoza seem particularly convincing to him, forget it; what you'll learn is, simply, “I am a fan of Spinoza.” Likewise, if you're looking for his precise view of Bataille's philosophy of transgression, you'll be disappointed: “I am a fan of Georges Bataille.” His art is driven by enthusiasm, not intellect. For all his love of philosophy and his political fervor, and despite often being characterized as a theoretically astute artist, Hirschhorn, too, is a Romantic.

**H**irschhorn often calls his way of doing art “headless.” But “headless” does not mean stupid, silly, or without intelligence,” he insists; “headless” does not mean being ignorant.” It sounds more to me like what I'd call “headlong” or “headstrong.” Headlessness, he goes on, “stands for doing my work in a rush and precipitously. Other words for headlessness are restlessness, insisting and insisting again heavily, acceleration, generosity, expenditure, energy (energy = yes! quality = no!), self-transgression, blindness, and excess.” All the Bataillean keywords are there, but coming from Hirschhorn, they don't sound secondhand, and it's impossible not to cheer him on when he continues:

I never want to economize myself and I know that—as the artist—I sometimes look stupid facing my own work, but I have to stand for this ridiculousness. I want to rush through the wall head-first; I want to make a

breakthrough; I want to cut a hole, or a window, into the reality of today.

Every art school class includes an intense, self-absorbed, overly earnest young man who makes these kinds of pronouncements; but at least some of the time, Hirschhorn really does seem to cut a hole into reality, and therein lies the difference.

Whereas Twombly and Flavin disclosed to the public their private and impossible offerings to Paul Valéry and William of Ockham, Hirschhorn has placed more emphasis on the public manifestation of his passion than its inner force. Yet at a time when many artists are proposing to do collaborative works in marginalized communities—to intervene in real life, as if art were a species of social work—Hirschhorn also insists that his art is autonomous, even when he makes it in the midst of a housing project. When he approaches a community to propose a project, he makes this clear: “I don't want to help you or ask you how I can help. Instead, as the artist I am asking, Can you and do you want to help me complete my project?” The artist's generosity becomes manifest not in an attempt to help others realize their needs, but as he reveals his vulnerability by asking others for help in realizing his own.

There's a contradiction lurking here. Even as he invites others to help him accomplish his project, Hirschhorn would like to think his work is autonomous. “In my works in public space the context is never the issue,” he writes. “I want to show my work everywhere, without making any distinction between important and unimportant places, just as I don't want to distinguish between important and unimportant people.” Why, then, point to Gramsci as an important person? Just as he calls himself a fan of Bataille, Hirschhorn would probably call himself a fan of Gramsci; and to be a fan means raising your hero above the common herd. It's to make a person—or your inner image of the person—into an icon, and a monument of their name.

This contradiction is not a weak spot in Hirschhorn's art but its animating tension, the source of its power—and also, as he well knows, the source of its precariousness. There is a tension, a passionate indecision, between his desire to find the equivalence or equality in everything and everyone, and his love of individuals—precisely the individuals who have helped him by showing the moral foundations of his project of leveling. This tension is what leads him to erect a monument that leaves out every trace of anything that would have made it a monument. The urgency of the contradiction is the form of the art. ■