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LA STAMPA

GRAMSCI IN THE 'HOOD - WHY ITALY'S MARXIST ICON IS BEING HONORED IN THE BRONX



Thomas Hirschhorn, Gramsci Monument, 2013 - (Andrew Russeth) By Francesco Bonami

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NEW YORK - In the art world, auctions and mega galleries dominate. There are departed graffiti artists like Jean-Michel Basquiat who sell for tens of millions of dollars. Venice's biennial tips its hat to 'outsider' artists, such as Antonio Ligabue, and mixes them with 'insiders', such as Richard Serra.

Enter Thomas Hirschhorn, a creator of installations, spaces, meeting places similar to bidonvilles or [Brazilian favelas](#) – a real outsider. He is the last survivor of social art which aims to change not so much the history of art as the art of history -- and of life.

Invited by the visionary director of the New York DIA Foundation, Frenchman Philippe Vergne, Hirschhorn visited 46 of New York's 334 public housing units in search of the perfect place to build a monument to [Antonio Gramsci](#), the revolutionary philosopher and founder of the Italian Communist Party.

In the end, he chose Forest Houses, an urban complex in the South Bronx which, until a few years ago, suffered from extremely high crime rates. Today the situation has improved a little. Once he had found the location, Hirschhorn moved there with his wife and child and started to work with the people of the neighborhood to create his idea for the monument. "A precarious monument, a short-term monument," he tells us, shirtless and lanky with glasses which make him look like a cartoon character from the 1960s. Hirschhorn has already built three monuments in this series dedicated to intellectuals he admires. One in Amsterdam in 1999 dedicated to [Baruch Spinoza](#); another in 2000 in Avignon to honour [Gilles Deleuze](#); and a third in Kassel in 2002 to celebrate [Georges Bataille](#).



Spinoza monument in Amsterdam - Photo: [FaceMePLS](#)

"I dedicated monuments to these philosophers because they are thinkers who help us to believe in our capacity for reflection, they give strength to our thoughts, they encourage us to be active," he explained. "I like the idea of full-time thought. I like philosophy."

Gramsci's will be the last. Anyone expecting a traditional style monument – a sculpture of Gramsci seated, maybe on a stool, with a [book](#) in his hand – will be surprised.

Instead, the treehouse-like plywood and plexiglass construction is a moving makeshift open space that will host cultural events through the summer. Hirschhorn's monuments don't celebrate memories, the past or death, but life.

They are a type of pop-up story; places which appear for a few months and then disappear, consigning history itself to stories, to experiences, to anecdotes, and to the disappointment of those who not only admired the monument but who lived it, as the people of the neighborhood have done and will continue to do -- a neighbourhood where Gramsci's name may have never even been mentioned before.

We spoke at length with the artist...

La Stampa: Why the Bronx, and not Turin or Sardinia?

Hirschhorn: I never choose a context that has anything to do with the philosopher in question. I look for places that can be in some way 'universal'. Forest Houses is, for me, a

universal location that contains the reality, beauty, complexity, chaos and contradictions of our times.

Why Gramsci and what does he represent for the people of the Bronx?

Because his texts are a toolbox that even today everyone can use to consider real life. Because he wrote that art is interesting for its own sake and satisfies one of our many needs in life. Because he wrote that the only justifiable enthusiasm is that which accompanies activity and [intelligent concrete initiatives](#), which can change the reality we live in. Because reading his writing is extremely encouraging. Encouragement can be shared by everyone, and therefore also by those here at Forest Houses.

You are more interested in the concept of “energy” than of “quality”. Why is this?

Energy is something that can be shared, and is universal. It is needed for all our activities, for our thoughts. The term *energy* is a positive term because it includes others; it goes beyond good and bad, beyond culture, politics and our aesthetic conventions. I am against the idea of quality everywhere, including in art of course. Quality is the unconditional reflection of [luxury](#), it distances us from everything that is not ‘quality’. The idea of quality is an attempt to establish a scale of values from high quality to low quality. Quality always excludes someone or something, energy does not.

When talking about the film director Godard, you said that you don’t do political art but you produce art politically. Can you explain what this means?

To produce art politically means to take a risk, to enjoy your work, to be positive which means also knowing how to face the negative sides of things and reality. It also means making a decision, risking a statement, taking up a position that goes further than just [simple criticism](#). It also means working for others. Making art politically means being a warrior.

When your monument will be dismantled what do you hope to leave behind for all these people who you have gotten so involved?

I hope that I will have been able to create a memory. My mission is to create a new idea of a monument, something that provokes encounters, which creates events and which makes us think about Gramsci today.

What preparation does a visitor need in order to understand your work?

No visitor needs any preparation to experience my work, or in general for any piece of art. Art can, exactly because it is art, initiate dialogue and [personal interaction](#) with anyone, directly.

Read the article in the [original language](#).

Photo by - [Andrew Russeth](#)

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