

THE GRAMSCI MONUMENT

NEWSPAPER

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and
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www.gramsci-monument.com

"A periodical, like a newspaper, a book, or any other medium of didactic expression that is aimed at a certain level of the reading or listening public, cannot satisfy everyone equally; not everyone will find it useful to the same degree. The important thing is that it serve as a stimulus for everyone; after all, no publication can replace the thinking mind."
Antonio Gramsci
(Prison Notebook 8)



August 2nd, 2013 - Forest Houses, Bronx, NY

The Gramsci Monument-Newspaper is part of the "Gramsci Monument", an artwork by Thomas Hirschhorn, produced by Dia Art Foundation in co-operation with Erik Farmer and the Residents of Forest Houses

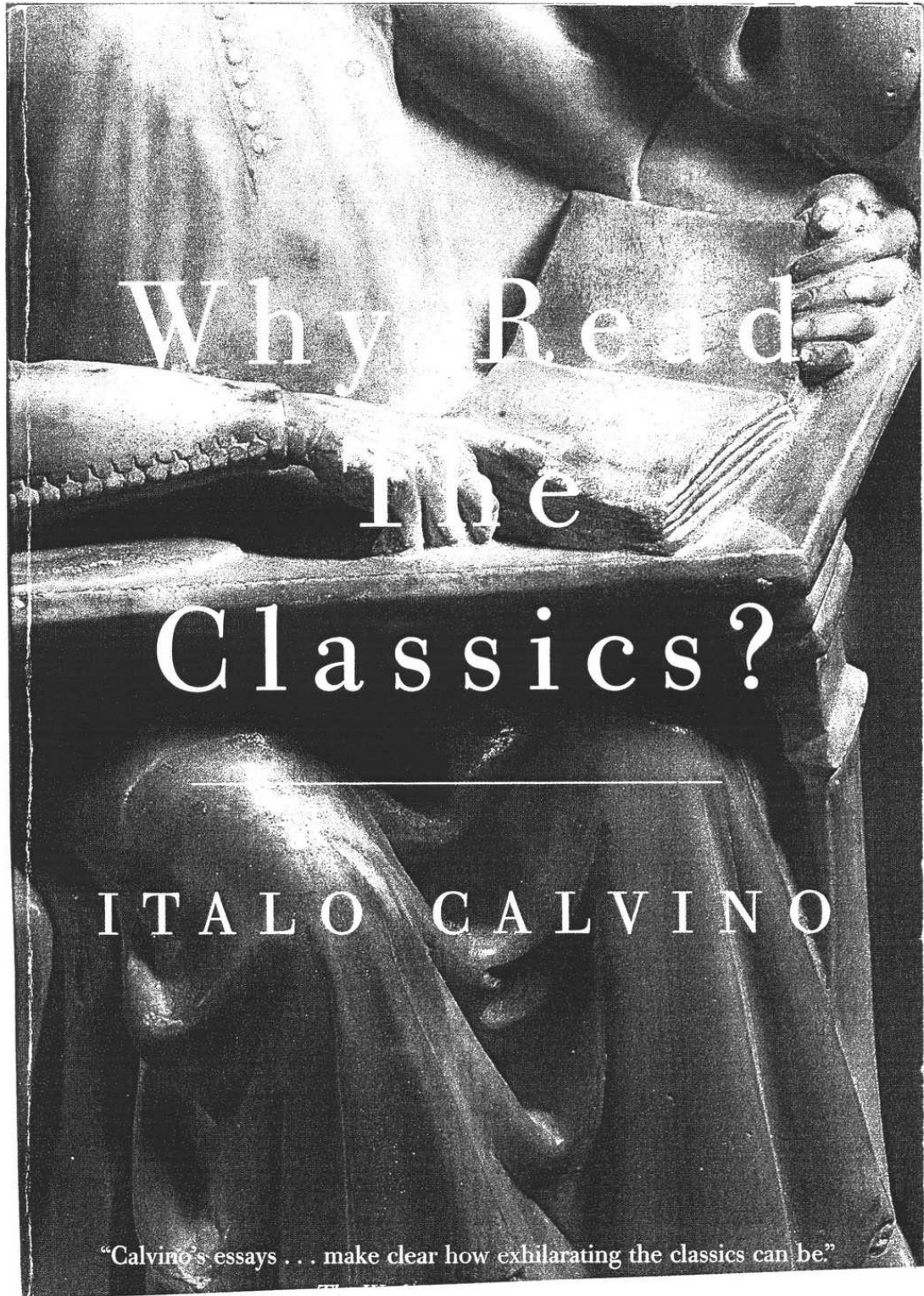


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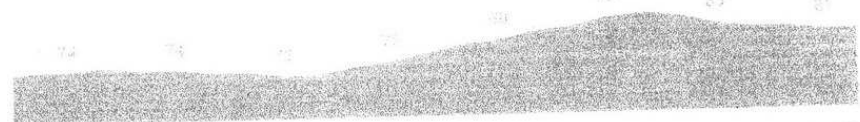
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Bronx, NY 10456
Friday
Clear

 **88** °F | °C

Precipitation: 10%
Humidity: 50%
Wind: 14 mph

Temperature	Precipitation	Wind
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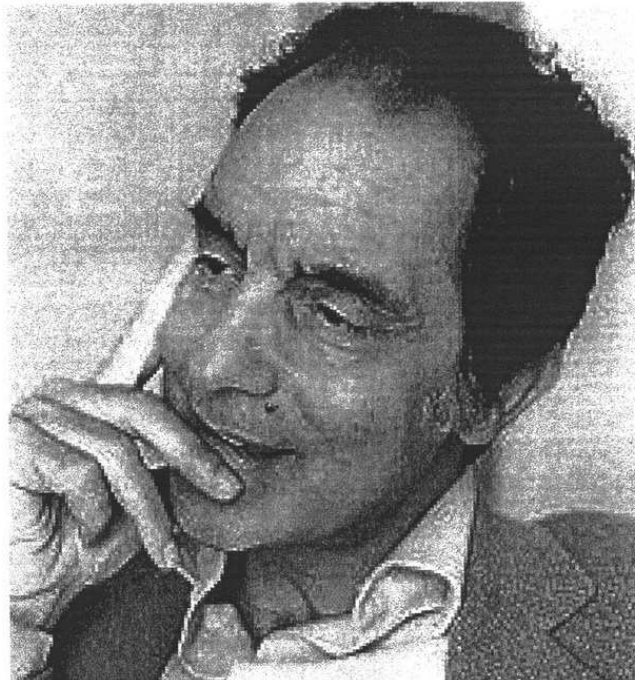
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Jorge Luis Borges

Jorge Luis Borges' critical acclaim in Italy goes back some thirty years now: it began in 1955, the date of the first Italian translation of *Ficciones* (*Fictions*), which appeared under the title of *La biblioteca di Babele* (*The Library of Babel*), published by Einaudi, and culminates today with the publication of the collected works in Mondadori's Meridiani series. If I remember correctly, it was Sergio Solmi who, after reading Borges' stories in French, spoke enthusiastically about them to Elio Vittorini, who immediately suggested doing an Italian edition and found an enthusiastic and congenial translator in Franco Lucentini. Since then Italian publishers have been competing with each other to publish the Argentine writer's works in translations which now Mondadori has gathered together along with several other texts which have never been translated before. This will be the most comprehensive edition of his *Opera omnia* to date: the first volume, edited by Borges' faithful friend Domenico Porzio, is published this very week.

This popularity with publishers has been accompanied by a literary-critical acclaim which is both the cause and the effect of the former. I am thinking of the admiration for Borges expressed by even those Italian writers who are furthest from him in terms of their poetics; of the in-depth analyses that have been carried out in order to reach a critical definition of his world; and also, especially, of the influence he has had on creative literature in Italian, on literary taste and even on the very idea of literature: we can say that many of those who have been writing in the last twenty years, starting with those who belong to my own generation, have been profoundly shaped by him.

EXCERPT FROM "WHY READ THE CLASSICS"



ITALO CALVINO

How can we explain this close encounter between our culture and an oeuvre which embraces a wide range of literary and philosophical legacies, some familiar to us, others very unfamiliar, and which modulates them into a key which is definitely as remote as could be from our own cultural inheritance? (Remote, at least in those days, from the paths trodden by Italian culture in the 1950s.)

I can only reply by relying on my memory, trying to reconstruct what the Borges experience has meant for me from the beginning down to today. The starting point, indeed the fulcrum, of this experience was a pair of books, *Fictions* and *The Aleph*, in other words that particular genre which is the Borgesian short story, before I moved on to Borges the essayist, who is not easily distinguishable from the narrator, and then Borges the poet, who often contains the nucleus of narrative, or at least a nucleus of thought, a pattern of ideas.

I will start with the major reason for my affinity with him, that is to say my recognising in Borges of an idea of literature as a world constructed and governed by the intellect. This is an idea that goes against the grain of the main run of world literature in this century, which leans instead in the opposite direction, aiming in other words to provide us with the equivalent of the chaotic flow of existence, in language, in the texture of the events narrated, in the exploration of the subconscious. But there is also a tendency in twentieth-century literature, a minority tendency admittedly, which had its greatest supporter in Paul Valéry – and I am thinking in particular of Valéry the prosewriter and thinker – and which champions the victory of mental order over the chaos of the world. I could try to trace the outlines of an Italian vocation in this direction, from the thirteenth century through the Renaissance and seventeenth century down to the twentieth century, in order to explain that the discovery of Borges was for me like seeing a potentiality that had always only been toyed with now being realised: seeing a world being formed in the image and shape of the spaces of the intellect, and inhabited by a constellation of signs that obey a rigorous geometry.

But perhaps to explain the consensus that an author arouses in each of us, we should start, rather than from grand classifications by category, from motives more precisely connected with the art of writing. Amongst these I would put in first place his economy of expression: Borges is a master of concision. He manages to condense into texts which are always just a few pages long an extraordinary richness of ideas and poetic attraction: events

which are narrated or hinted at, dizzying glimpses of the infinite, and ideas, ideas, ideas. How this density is conveyed without any sense of congestion, in his limpidly clear, unadorned and open sentences; how this style of brief, tangential narration leads to the precision and concreteness of his language, whose originality is reflected in the variety of rhythm, of syntactic movement, of always unexpected and surprising adjectives; all this is a stylistic miracle, which is without equal in the Spanish language, and for which only Borges knows the secret recipe.

Reading Borges, I have often been tempted to draw up a poetics of concise writing, proclaiming its superiority over prolixity, and contrasting the two mentalities that are reflected in the favouring of one tendency over the other, in terms of temperament, idea of form and tangibility of content. For the moment I will simply say that the true vocation of Italian literature, just like any literature that values the poetic line in which each word is irreplaceable, is more recognisable in brevity than in prolixity.

In order to write briefly, Borges' crucial invention, which was also what allowed him to invent himself as a writer, was something that in retrospect was rather simple. What helped him overcome the block that had prevented him, almost until he was forty, from moving from essays to narrative prose was to pretend that the book he wanted to write had already been written, written by someone else, by an unknown invented author, an author from another language, another culture, and then to describe, summarise or review that hypothetical book. Part of the legend that surrounds Borges is the anecdote that the first, extraordinary, story that he wrote using this formula, 'The Approach to Almotasim', when it first appeared in the journal *Sur*, convinced readers that it was a genuine review of a book by an Indian author. Similarly, all Borges' critics regularly point out that each text of his doubles or multiplies its own space through other books cited from an imaginary or real library, works that are either classical or erudite or simply invented. What I am most interested in stressing here is that with Borges we see the birth of literature raised to the second degree, as it were, and at the same time literature as derived from the square root of itself: a 'potential literature', to borrow a term that would later be fashionable in France, but whose forerunners can all be found in *Fictions* in the ideas and formulae for those works which could have been written by Borges' own hypothetical Herbert Quain.

It has been said many times that for Borges only the written word has a full ontological reality and that the things of this world exist for him only

inasmuch as they refer back to things which have been written. What I want to underline here is the circuit of values that characterises this relationship between the world of literature and that of experience. Lived experience is only valued for what it can inspire in literature or for what it in turn repeats from literary archetypes: for instance, there is a reciprocity between a heroic or daring enterprise in an epic poem and a similar deed actually happening in ancient or contemporary history which makes one want to identify or compare episodes and values from the written event with those from the real event. This is the context in which the moral problem resides, which is always present in Borges like a solid nucleus in the fluidity and interchangeability of his metaphysical scenarios. For this sceptic, who seems to sample philosophies and theologies impartially, only for their value in terms of spectacle or aesthetics, the moral problem is constantly restated in exactly the same terms from one universe to the next, in its elementary alternatives of courage or cowardice, violence caused or suffered, and the search for truth. In Borges' perspective, which excludes any psychological depths, the moral problem surfaces reduced almost to the terms of a theorem from geometry, in which individual destinies form an overall pattern which everyone has to recognise first before choosing. Yet it is in the rapid instant of real life, not in the fluctuating time of dreams, nor in the cyclical or eternal time of myths, that one's fate is decided.

At this point we should remember that Borges' epic is made up not only of what he read in the classics, but also of Argentine history, which in some episodes overlaps with his family history, with the daring deeds of military ancestors in the wars of the emerging nation. In 'Poema conjectural' ('Conjectural Poem'), Borges imagines in Dantesque style the thoughts of one of his ancestors on his mother's side, Francisco Laprida, as he lies in a marsh, wounded after a battle, hunted down by the tyrant Rosas' gauchos: Laprida recognises his own fate in that of Buonconte da Montefeltro, as Dante portrays him in *Purgatorio* canto 5. Roberto Paoli has pointed out, in a detailed analysis of this poem, that more than Buonconte's death, which is explicitly cited, it is the preceding episode in the same canto that Borges draws on, the demise of Jacopo del Cassero. There could be no better exemplification than this, of the osmosis between what happens in literature and what happens in real life: the ideal source is not some mythical event that took place before the verbal expression, but a text which is a tissue of words and images and meanings, a harmonisation of

motifs which find echoes in each other, a musical space in which a theme develops its own variations.

There is another poem which is even more significant for defining this Borgesian continuity between historical events, literary epics, poetic transformation of events, the power of literary motifs, and their influence on the collective imagination. And this too is a poem which concerns us closely, because it mentions the other Italian epic which Borges knows in detail, Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*. The poem is entitled 'Ariosto and the Arabs'. In it Borges runs through the Carolingian and Arthurian epics which merge in Ariosto's poem, which skims over these elements of the tradition as though on the hippogriff. In other words it transforms them into a fantasy which is both ironic and yet full of pathos. The popularity of the *Orlando Furioso* ensured that the dreams of medieval heroic legends were transmitted to European culture (Borges cites Milton as a reader of Ariosto), right down to the moment when what had been the dreams of Charlemagne's enemies, that is to say the dreams of the Arab world, supersede them. *The Arabian Nights* conquer the imagination of European readers, taking the place that had once been held by the *Orlando Furioso* in the collective imagination. There is thus a war between the fantasy worlds of the West and the East which prolongs the historic war between Charlemagne and the Saracens, and it is in this later war that the Orient gains its revenge.

The power of the written word is, then, linked to lived experience both as the source and the end of that experience. As a source, because it becomes the equivalent of an event which otherwise would not have taken place, as it were; as an end, because for Borges the written word that counts is the one that makes a strong impact on the collective imagination, as an emblematic or conceptual figure, made to be remembered and recognised whenever it appears, whether in the past or in the future.

These mythical or archetypal motifs, which are probably finite in number, stand out against the infinite backdrop of metaphysical themes of which Borges is so fond. In every text he writes, in any way he can, Borges manages to talk about the infinite, the uncountable, time, eternity or rather the eternal presence or cyclical nature of time. And here I go back to what was said previously about his maximum concentration of meanings in the brevity of his texts. Take a classic example of Borges' art: his most famous story, 'The Garden of Forking Paths'. The surface plot is a conventional spy thriller, a tale of intrigue condensed into a dozen pages, which is then

manipulated somewhat in order to reach the surprise conclusion. (The epics exploited by Borges can also take the form of popular fiction.) This spy-story also includes another tale, whose suspense is more to do with logic and metaphysics, and which has a Chinese setting: it is the quest for a labyrinth. Inside this second story in turn there is the description of an endless Chinese novel. But what counts most in this complex narrative tangle is the philosophical reflection on time it contains, or rather the definitions of the conceptions of time which are articulated one after another. At the end we realise that, underneath the appearance of a thriller, what we have read is a philosophical tale, or rather an essay on the idea of time.

The hypotheses about time which are put forward in 'The Garden of Forking Paths' are each contained (and almost hidden) in just a few lines. First there is an idea of constant time, a kind of subjective, absolute present ('I reflected that everything happens to a man in this very moment of now. Centuries and centuries, but events happen only in the present; countless men in the air, on land and sea, and everything that really happens, happens to me . . .'). Then an idea of time determined by will, the time of an action decided on once and for all, in which the future would present itself as irrevocable as the past. Lastly the story's central idea: a multiple, ramified time in which every present instant splits into two futures, so as to form 'an expanding, dizzying web of divergent, convergent and parallel times'. This idea of an infinity of contemporary universes, in which all possibilities are realised in all possible combinations, is not a digression from the story, but the very condition which is required so that the protagonist can feel authorised to commit the absurd and abominable crime which his spying mission imposes on him, certain that this will happen only in one of the universes but not in the others, or rather by committing the crime here and now, he and his victim can recognise each other as friends and brothers in other universes.

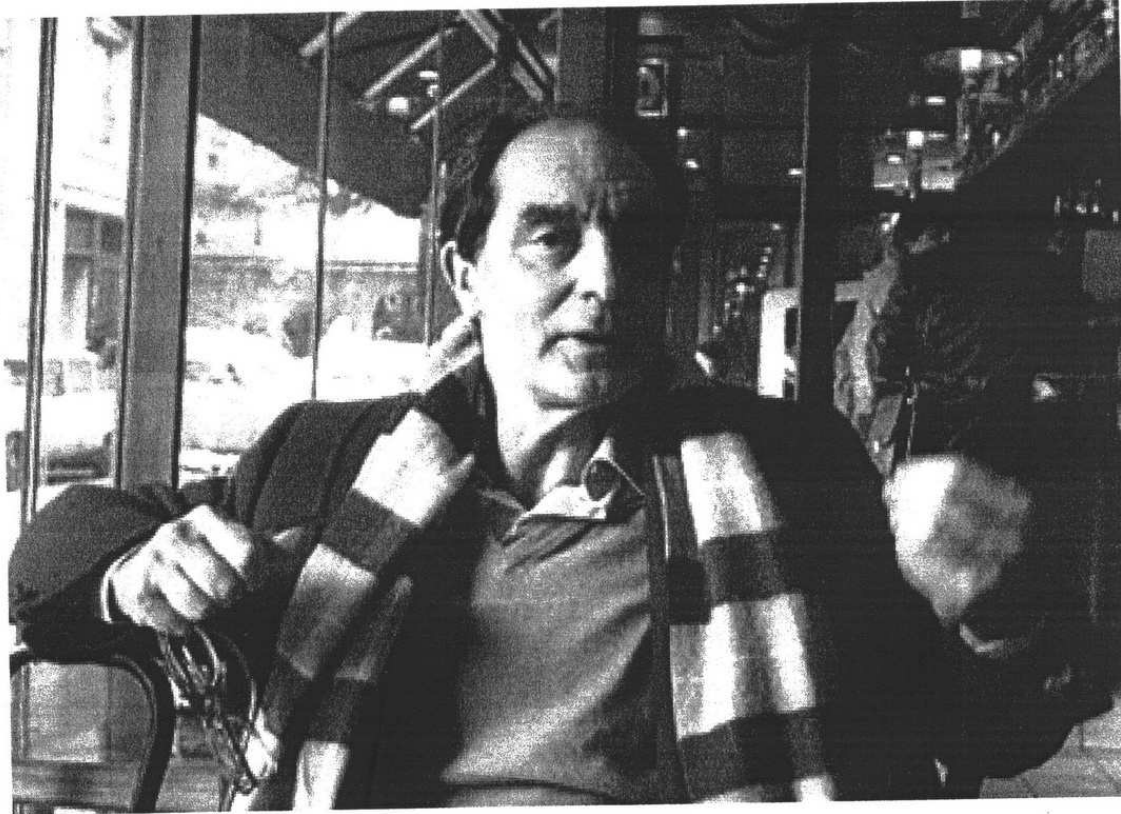
Such a conception of ramified time is dear to Borges because it is the one which dominates in literature: in fact, it is the condition which makes literature possible. The example I am about to quote takes us back again to Dante, and it is an essay by Borges on Ugolino della Gherardesca, to be precise on the line 'Poscia, piú che il dolor poté il digiuno' (Then what grief could not manage hunger did), and on what was described as a 'pointless controversy' on the possibility that Conte Ugolino committed cannibalism. Having examined the views of many critics, Borges agrees with the

majority of them, who say the line must mean that Ugolino died through starvation. However, he adds that Dante without wanting us to believe it was true, certainly wanted us to suspect 'albeit with uncertainty and hesitation' that Ugolino could have eaten his own children. And Borges then lists all the hints of cannibalism in *Inferno* canto 33, starting with the opening image of Ugolino gnawing the skull of Archbishop Ruggieri.

This essay is significant for the general considerations on which it closes. In particular the idea (which is one of Borges' statements that comes closest to coinciding with structuralist methods) that a literary text consists solely of the succession of words of which it is composed, so 'on Ugolino we have to say that he is a textual construct, comprising about thirty *terzine*'. Then there is the idea that links with the notions maintained by Borges on many occasions, about the impersonality of literature, concluding that 'Dante did not know much more about Ugolino than what his *terzine* tell us'. And lastly the idea I really wanted to stress, the idea of ramified time: 'In real time, in history, whenever a man finds himself facing different alternatives, he opts for one, eliminating the others for ever; not so in the ambiguous time of art, which resembles that of hope and oblivion. Hamlet, in this literary time, is both sane and mad. In the darkness of the Tower of Hunger Ugolino devours and does not devour the bodies of his beloved children, and this wavering imprecision, this uncertainty is the strange matter of which he is made up. This was how Dante imagined him, in two possible death scenes, and how future generations imagine him.'

This essay is contained in a volume published in Madrid two years ago, and not yet translated into Italian, which collects Borges' essays and lectures on Dante: *Nueve ensayos dantescos* (*Further Essays on Dante*). His constant and passionate study of the founding text of Italian literature, his congenial appreciation of the poem, which has allowed him to make what he has inherited from Dante bear fruit both in his critical reflections and in his creative works, is one of the reasons, certainly not the least, why we celebrate Borges here and express once more with emotion and affection our gratitude for the intellectual nourishment he continues to give us.

[1984]



Italo Calvino, one of Italy's finest postwar writers, has delighted readers around the world with his deceptively simple, fable-like stories. The son of traveling botanists, Calvino was born in Cuba in 1923 and raised in San Remo, Italy; he fought for the Italian Resistance from 1943-45. After taking a degree in literature from the University of Turin in 1947, Calvino supported himself by contributing to a number of Communist papers and by working on the editorial staff of the publishing house Einaudi, which he remained associated with for 35 years. He first became well known in Italy for editing Einaudi's monumental collection of Italian folk tales. In 1957, deeply disappointed by events in Eastern Europe, Calvino left the Communist party; in the years that followed, his writing gradually diverged from the dominant neorealist style and assumed its own peculiar and distinctive voice. His major works include *Cosmicomics* (1968), *Invisible Cities* (1972), and *If on a winter's night a traveler* (1979). During his later years, Calvino became an avid film enthusiast and renowned lecturer, traveling widely to satisfy both pursuits. He died in Siena on Sept. 19, 1985, of a brain hemorrhage.



Jorge Luis Borges (1899 – 1986) was an Argentine writer who is considered one of the foremost literary figures of the 20th century. Most famous in the English speaking world for his short stories and fictive essays, Borges was also a poet, critic, translator and man of letters.

1. Let us define philosophy by two aspects: profection and critique.
2. Profective is philosophy as a headlong dynamic aimed at the inconsistency value of its certainties.
3. Thinking involves precipitancy and breathlessness.
4. One could describe the self-defusing of philosophy in academia as a deceleration ritual dedicated to ensuring the development of something that one believes rightfully exists.
5. However, explication and exegesis are only *one* aspect of philosophical practice.¹
6. Genuine thinking begins with the subject choosing to extend itself to the inconsistency of self-explanatory facts, which implies questioning the idea of legitimacy.
7. Thinking means leaving the territory of good reasons to risk, in suspending a scientifically legitimated factual romanticism together with its correlative logic of avoiding mistakes, the experience of moments of inconsistency.
8. Thinking involves a progressive aspect.
9. Since in thinking, the subject rushes towards the unknown, Badiou can claim that "making *decisions of thought* without turning back"² is a key element in philosophical practice.
10. The faintheartedness of all academicisms neutralised in a despondent belief in facts is characterised by weighing up consequences, the fearful look to the side, and a self-assurance based on the historical.
11. However, philosophy marks the break with a dependence on facts.³
12. It is clear that this break is realised as a critique of established reality.
13. Philosophy's move to critique reality implies a turning away from reality.
14. Turning away from and towards cooperate.
15. Philosophy is neither realistic nor idealistic where it unmaskes realism as factual obscurantism and idealism as a love of consistency (what is more durable, more eternal than ideas?).
16. Philosophy as critique is directed against the temptation of choosing to confine thought in ('critical') pseudo-consistencies.
17. It opens up the space of a universal inconsistency which indicates the contingency of the structure of being.
18. For this reason, the critique of the existent involves affirming its contingency and transformability.
19. This is the affirmationism inherent in philosophical critiques: not affirming the world as it is, but acknowledging that it is – as it is: ontologically inconsistent.

¹ On thinking as 'creating' in contrast to 'reading' and 'interpretation', see Cornelius Castoriadis, *Durchs Labyrinth. Seele, Vernunft, Gesellschaft*, Frankfurt a. M. 1981, pp. 18-19.

A DAILY LECTURE BY MARCUS STEINWEG

WHAT'S GOING ON? FEED BACK

Writing the City

Thomas Hirschhorn's Precious and Precarious Bronx

by Steven Thomson

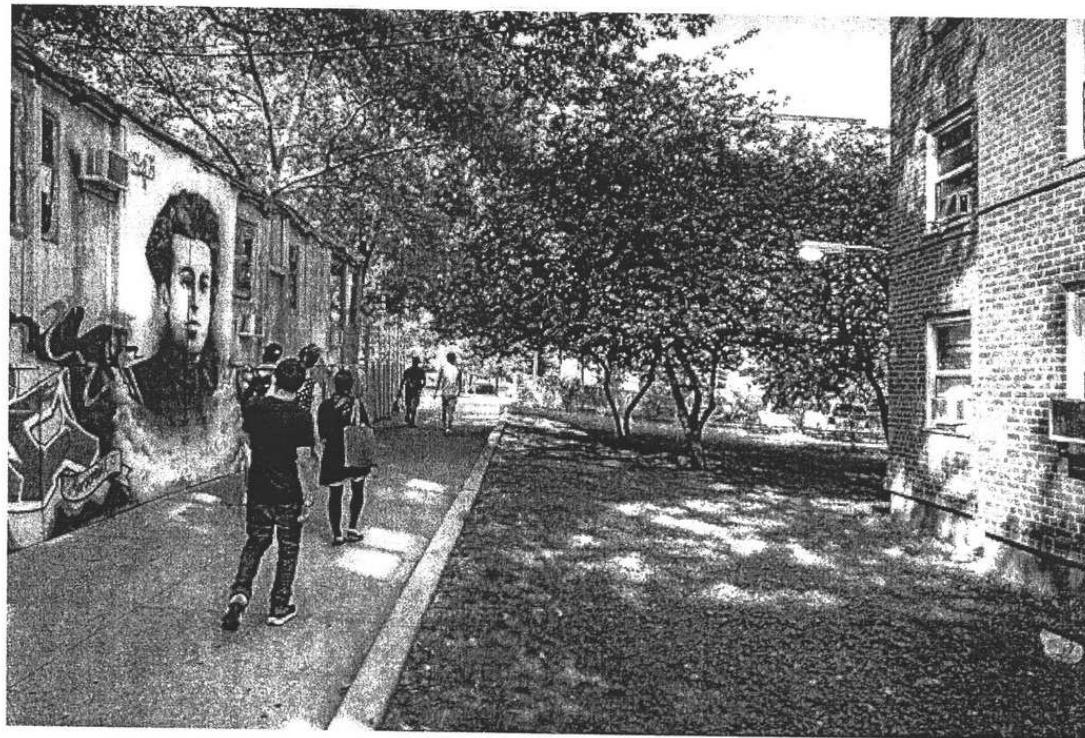
July 31st, 2013 • no comments

Bronx, memorials, public art, public housing, towers in the park, visual art

While memorials can take many forms, from spontaneous vigils to objects or environments like coins, plaques, or parks, monuments are typically characterized by their formal grandeur and permanence on the landscape. Swiss-born, Paris-based artist **Thomas Hirschhorn** has defied both of these characteristics in his *Gramsci Monument*, a sprawling, interactive, and ephemeral environment intended to commemorate Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci, whose writings contributed to the development of Western Marxism by theorizing the role of culture (in addition to the means of production and administration) in maintaining the hegemony of the ruling class. In other words, taking over the factories and the state isn't enough to make the revolution stick, you also have to reinvent the aesthetics and social mores that pervade society's everyday consciousness. Hirschhorn's means of memorializing and reactivating Gramsci's thought, however, goes beyond the theoretical; it's a physical, inhabitable space made of accessible, lo-fi materials installed in Forest Houses, a New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) complex located in Morrisania, Bronx.

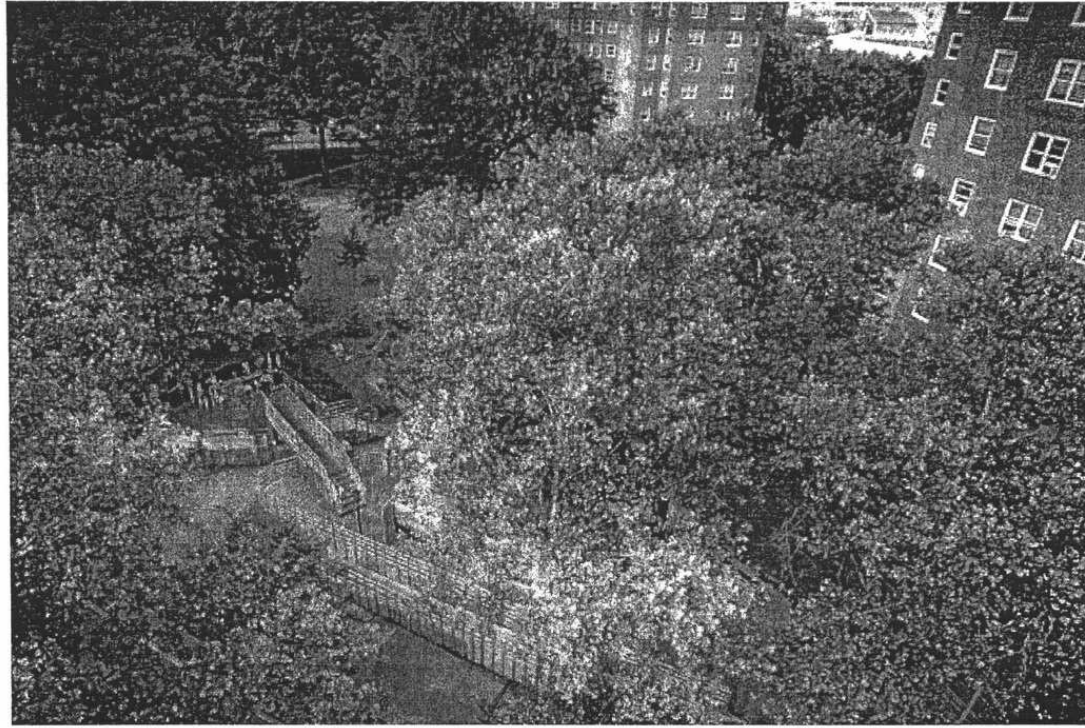
Over the past few weeks, writer **Steven Thomson** and photographer **Cameron Blaylock** have been visiting this intricate, living artwork, speaking with the artist, some of the project's organizers, and the residents who have participated in its construction and ongoing live programming (which includes lectures, classes, field trips, a radio station, and even a daily newspaper). The depth and scale of this collaboration, Thomson argues, contributes to the piece's ultimate meaning as an active exercise in engaging a participatory audience far removed — geographically and too often culturally as well — from the formal public spaces of traditional monuments or the typical centers of artistic production and consumption. Visit the *Gramsci Monument* before it is deinstalled on September 15th, but first, read on for insights into and images of how this ambitious project challenges some basic assumptions about commemoration, public art, public space, and community engagement.

-C.S.



It's a ten-minute walk from the Prospect Ave. subway station to Forest Houses, an almost 20-acre complex of New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) buildings. As you make this walk, traversing the broad South Bronx' boulevards in order to experience artist Thomas Hirschhorn's participatory *Gramsci Monument*, it's wise to revoke any preconception of what form a monument should take. There will be no marble entablature, no triumphal arch before a reflecting pool. Think of an ad hoc treehouse sprawling on the ground, constructed primarily of plywood and brown shipping tape, around which Hirschhorn, residents, and art spectators

The joyful collaboration at first seems surprising for either a conceptual sculpture or a public housing art program, yet the combination of the two environments generates an atmosphere that transcends any expectations of monumental commemoration. After multiple afternoons rambling through the monument in conversation with its participants, I find Hirschhorn's effort a successful intervention. By activating a community's grassroots sensibility and introducing new modes of learning, both a foreigner and acclaimed contemporary artist can brilliantly engage a specific and often overlooked community as both audience and collaborators in creating the piece's ultimate meaning and collective experience.



The monument makes its presence known at the first glimpse of wooden beams jutting out in all directions, projecting in sharp contrast to the strict 90-degree geometry of the surrounding high-rise housing structures: the Forest Houses complex is punctuated by 15 mostly cruciform residential buildings, varying between 9, 10, and 14-stories high. The 1,349 units house approximately 3,400 residents. And this summer, Thomas Hirschhorn is among them, living in one of the apartments for the 77 days that *Gramsci Monument* is on display.

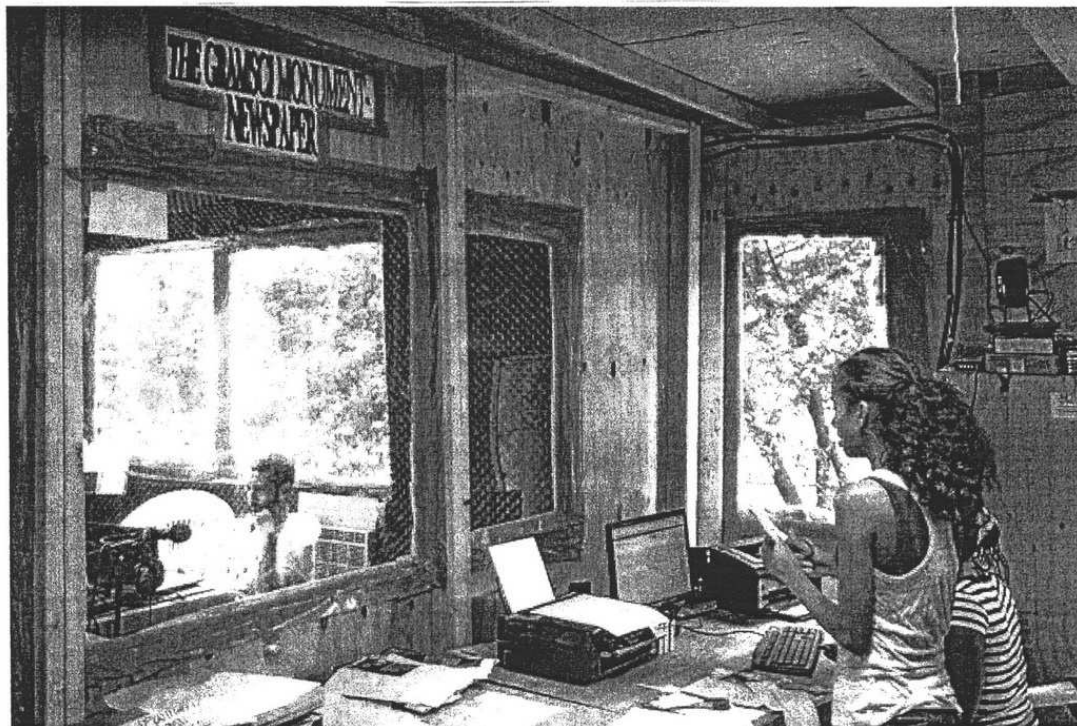
At first, Forest Houses does not stand out from the multiple surrounding social infrastructure and public housing developments in the Morrisania section of the southeast Bronx. You will likely pass Dunbar Playground, Basil Behagen Playground, the Southeast Bronx Neighborhood Center Blondell Joyner Day Care, and several optimistically named public schools: Success Academy, School for Excellence High School, and Jane Adams High School For Academic Careers. Immediately to the south of Forest Houses is the Mitchell-Lama subsidized development Woodstock Terrace, abutting the five 16-story rectangular towers of NYCHA's McKinley Houses. All dating from the same five-year span in the late 1950s and early '60s, the three developments appear seamless for their consistent deployment of brown brick. They embody the towers-in-the-park typology that characterizes much public housing in the Bronx, a legacy of Le Corbusier's high modernism in which multistory, multifamily buildings are set off from the street grid and placed amid open green space. This type of open space, frequently perceived as either desolate or dangerous, is often maligned in contemporary urban thought, yet Hirschhorn has seized this grassy terrain to construct his temporary, interactive monument to the ideas of early 20th-century Marxist philosopher, Antonio Gramsci.

Gramsci Monument is the final iteration of a series of four temporary monuments to Hirschhorn's favorite thinkers. The first, dedicated to Baruch Spinoza, appeared in Amsterdam in 1999; Hirschhorn constructed another, for Gilles Deleuze, in Avignon, France, in 2000; in 2002, he built a third, examining Georges Bataille, in Kassel, Germany, as part of *documenta 11*. Each monument was erected in nontraditional public spaces (in Amsterdam's red light district, and in suburban immigrant social housing in Avignon and Kassel), and all four thinkers share two cornerstones of the four "force fields" that Hirschhorn aims to interrogate: love, philosophy, politics, and aesthetics. "There are artists who work with nature, some with gender, others with the human body. I work with these force fields," he explains, arguing that Gramsci connects politics and love.



Gramsci was an inclusionary theorist who believed that “every human is an intellectual.” He analyzed recent history – the unification of Italy, the First World War, the proliferation of systematized labor – through a Marxist lens. And his leftist politics, centered on self-education among the proletariat and the need to challenge the cultural hegemony maintained by a rarefied set of institutions, led to his imprisonment under Mussolini.

Hirschhorn was committed to creating this final monument near public housing, so, armed with his deep love of Gramsci, a commission from the Dia Art Foundation, and a map of New York City Housing Authority developments in all five boroughs, he visited 47 communities before narrowing the future monument’s destination to the Bronx. We frequently consider public art projects in low-income communities as limited to murals or embellished fences. Hirschhorn’s piece differs radically from this assumption. Banners and posters, scrawled with quotations from the philosopher’s published works and prison notebooks, hang throughout the adjacent towers’ exteriors and the labyrinthine monument. With its odd-angled architecture of thin plywood walls and taped plexiglass windows, the monument’s seemingly haphazard volumes and aesthetic of makeshift encampment bring to mind something in between Dadaist Swiss artist Kurt Schwitters’ *Merzbau* and a campus of the Occupy movement.

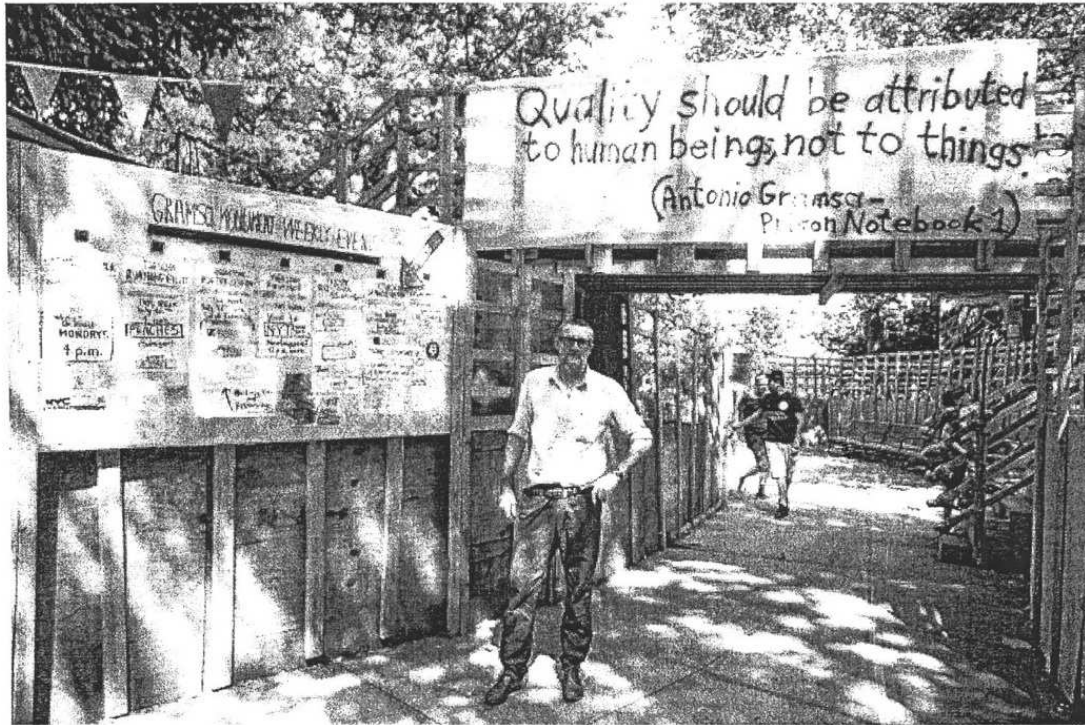


Construction began in March, when Hirschhorn enlisted 42 residents, paid \$12 an hour, to help him to build the monument. The structure, sprawling the approximate footprint of a single family home, is raised several feet high on a wooden platform centered in a 200-foot-wide green space between a cluster of Forest Houses towers. It is composed of two distinct areas accessible by four ramps and two staircases on each side, so there is no official entry or façade. Uncovered wooden paths connect functional rooms with open-air spaces, signaling that this is a monument to be entered and experienced rather than simply viewed. In the southern section, which Hirschhorn terms “the diamond,” specific, single bedroom-sized pavilions house a computer room, local radio station, daily newspaper print room, and an office for the onsite “ambassador” (an approachable curator, Yasmil Raymond of the commissioning Dia Art Foundation). There’s also a library where hands-on display cases and encyclopedic references to Gramsci’s avant-garde thought are placed side by side with sofas coated in packing tape and a table of *Us Weekly* issues. By leveling the field between

A bridge connects the diamond to “green grass,” where a refreshment kiosk, provisional splash pool, and art workshop surround a seating area and stage utilized for all manner of public events, including daily lectures by visiting scholars, open-mic nights, dancing, and poetry readings. From the back of the audience area, populated with white plastic lawn chairs, large plywood steps drop down a yard into an open space surrounded by Forest Houses highrises. These painted, oversized stairs are perhaps the most overtly monumental form in the sculpture’s design, clearly signaling an invitation to residents in the towers above to engage with what Hirschhorn calls his “platform of production.”

placement of a monument in a city center. “Forest Houses is not Park Avenue, or the High Line; it’s not Rockefeller Center,” says the artist, adding, “The monument must be where people are *living*.” Rather than a nondescript, harried civic plaza, the exclusively residential quality of Forest Houses’ environs would provide an atmosphere for both producing a sprawling sculpture and engaging a distinctly available audience. Notably, Hirschhorn himself chooses to live in Paris’ closest analogue to the Bronx’s public housing landscape: the immigrant-heavy *banlieues*. With an intermediate identity between vertically urban and leafily suburban, Forest Houses and Hirschhorn’s chosen *banlieue* of Aubervilliers are what the artist envisions as a potential future hotbed of creativity.

Until he arrived at Forest Houses, Hirschhorn’s pitch was rebuked by every skeptical NYCHA community board he visited in the Bronx. But the *Gramsci Monument* proposal resonated with Diana Herbert and Clyde Thompson, who work at the Forest Houses Community Center, and Erik Farmer, the president of the development’s residents’ association. “I tried to hear him out because no one at the other projects would for some reason,” says Farmer, 44, who has resided at Forest Houses since he was one year old. Indeed, Hirschhorn recounts how several NYCHA leaders viewed public programming as a results-based system and were not as receptive to the idea as leaders from Forest Houses were. Recalling his first meeting with Hirschhorn, in which the artist laid out a map of the proposed monument across an entire office floor along with a detailed construction timeline, Farmer remarks, “You didn’t have to be a rocket scientist to know this was big. I had an open mind about it, and see what we got — something real, something huge.”



Thomas Hirschhorn

From its inception, *Gramsci Monument* has been informed by its ephemerality. The artwork will stand for 77 days before being dismantled by the original construction crew in





Erik Farmer, president of the Forest Houses residents' association

For Hirschhorn, the definition of a monument is four-fold: location, duration, dedication, and production. Regarding location, the artist prefers a liminal space rather than the typical

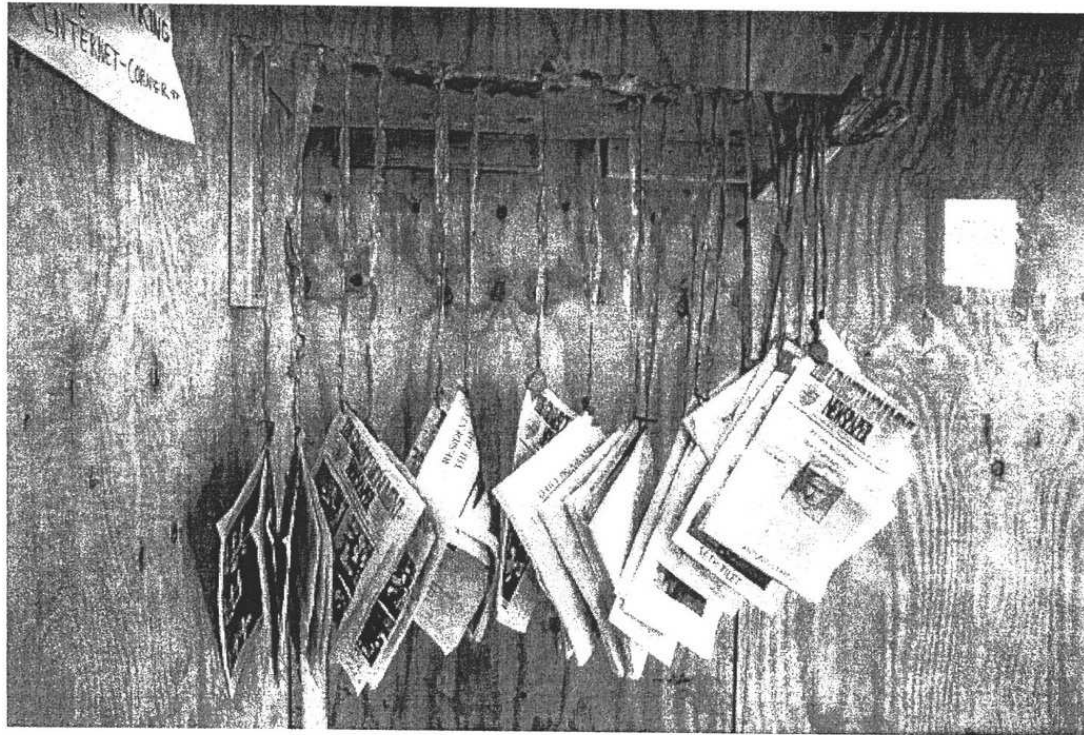
September. This schedule brings to mind the second element of Hirschhorn's definition of a monument: duration. While the installation is on view, Hirschhorn lives in a Forest Houses apartment, suggesting that the exchange of experiences with the community is not meant to be pedagogical, but reciprocal. He emphasizes that the short duration underscores the temporal project's "precious and precarious" quality. An eternal monument in a formal park can be dismissed as mere ornament and can serve to foster apathy towards a lionized figure. Yet, when confronted with a complex and temporary environment for understanding a complex philosophical thinker, the challenge of pursuing meaningful interpretation becomes unexpectedly alluring.



Critics and theorists concerned with participatory, community-based work, such as Hal Foster and Claire Bishop, group Hirschhorn in the category of "relational aesthetics," alongside artists like Suzanne Lacy or Mark Dion, both of whom have made artwork out of organizing groups of citizens to discuss issues of concern. For *The Roof on Fire*, Lacy organized 220 public high school students in 100 cars parked on a rooftop garage in Oakland, California, to discuss family, sexuality, drugs, and their futures while spectators and camera crews wandered through, listening. For *Tate Thames Dig*, which preceded the opening of the Tate Modern in the former Bankside Power Station in London, Mark Dion led local residents in archaeological digs of their surrounding neighborhood. Hirschhorn's monument differs from this type of artwork in a significant way. While these artists entered an alien community with the intention of infusing its residents with a sense of its past or present-day self-worth,^[1] Hirschhorn aims to do quite the opposite, leaving participants responsible for building, experiencing, and collaboratively contributing to the monument. Furthermore, Hirschhorn is not superimposing presumed relationships among pre-existing social, physical, or historical characteristics; he's foisting a personal hero of his onto his audience in order to create a platform for reactions. In interviews and in the monument's daily newspaper, Hirschhorn persists in directing the programmed discussions, radio broadcast and library

offerings around the figure of Gramsci rather than, say, ruminating on public housing stereotypes or attempting to create a community archive with the pretense of empowering the residents of Forest Houses.

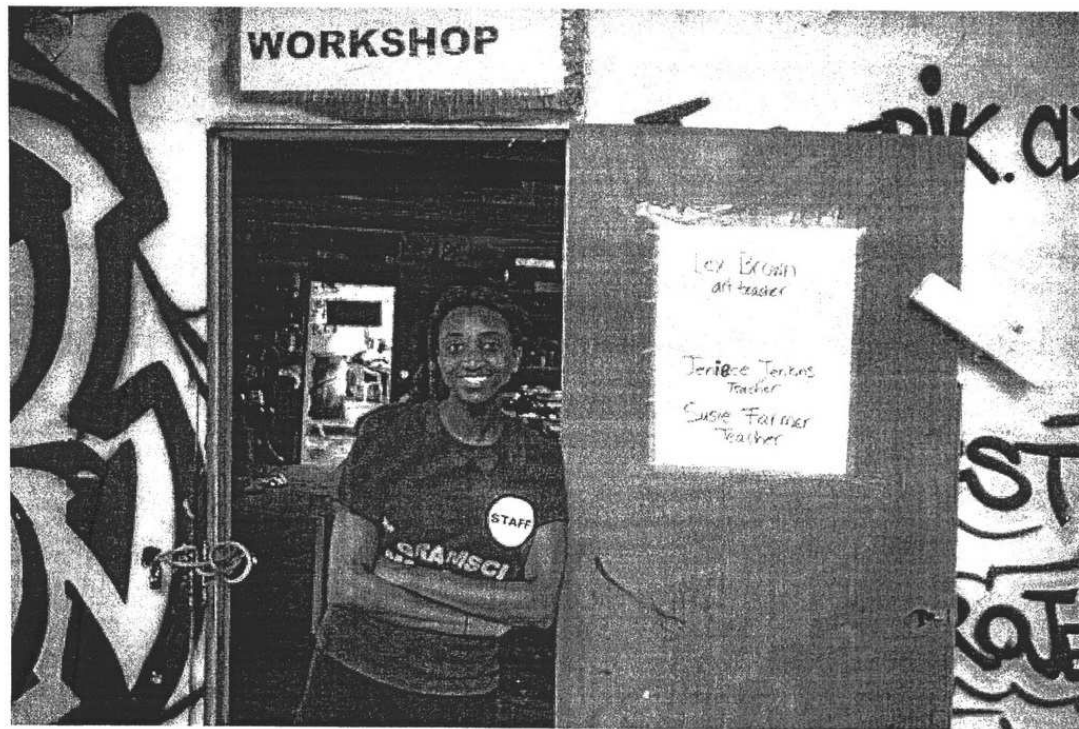
“I have to create the context,” he says. “It’s not a social work, or a research work, or an anthropological work.” Rather than an artist-as-scholar, he explains that he is a “fan” of Gramsci’s philosophical position that daily human experience can be transformed through new conceptions of self-education and creative collaboration.



The use of quotidian materials of tape and plywood indicates the ways in which Hirschhorn valorizes the forgotten, offering residents a physical alternative to the surrounding architecture’s anonymity. Resembling an analog social media of sorts, in which abstract bonds and crowd-sourced affirmations become visible, the sculpture’s grassroots mentality serves as kind of foil to a monumental memorial on the opposite side of New York City: the National September 11 Memorial and Museum. With its overpowering security apparatus, the stone memorial contrasts sharply with the bottom-up *Gramsci Monument*, where Hirschhorn’s design allows entrance from multiple angles. Rather than a literal chasm, it is uplifting, possessed of utopian possibility.



“I didn’t know nothing about Antonio Gramsci until this monument came here,” explains resident emcee, DJ Baby Dee, following a Saturday seminar led by CUNY Graduate School professor Stanley Aronowitz on Gramsci’s theory of education, which attracted a mix of downtown intellectuals and a handful of Forest Houses residents. “And it’s true what that banner on my building says — every human being is an intellectual, if they know how to use their mind the right way. The talk today actually really makes you think about your life, where you want to go. It fulfilled me. It’s nourishment.” My conversations with other visitors to the monument echoed Baby Dee’s enthusiasm.

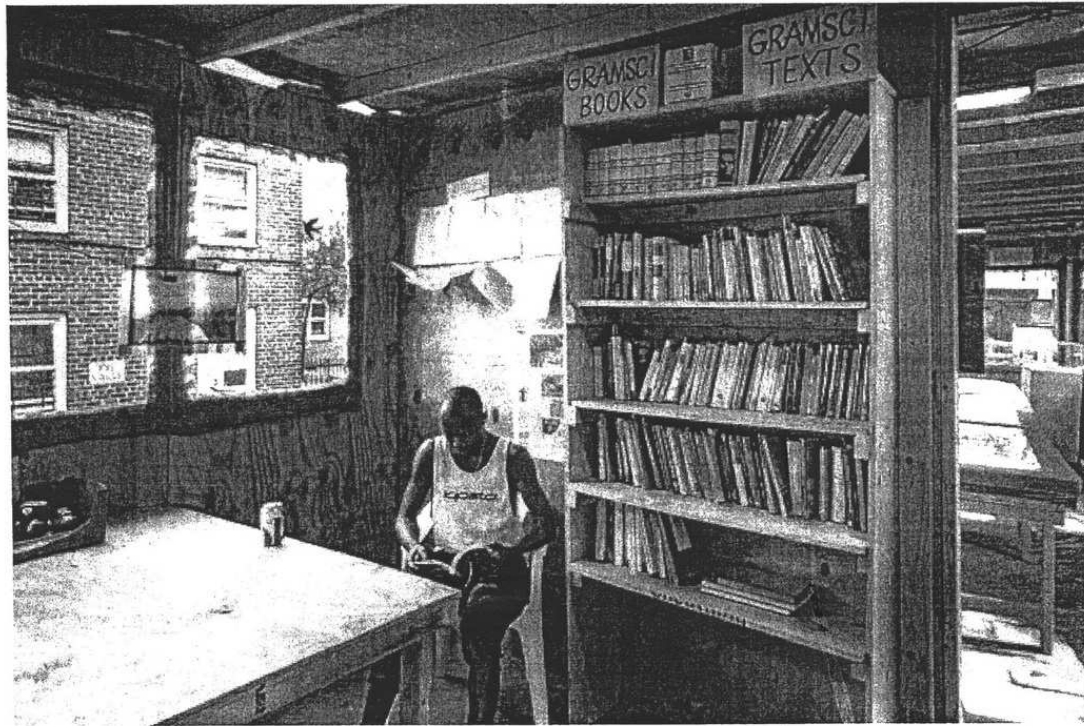


Lex Brown, art teacher

Such talks are a part of a robust set of public programs, both on and off the site, that include taking children from Forest Houses to places of mechanical and cultural production (like a

taxi yard, the *New York Times* newsroom, independent bookshops and Dia:Beacon), or the constant presence of interlocutors like Ambassador Raymond who is at all times available to answer queries about what qualifies the monument as a valuable contemporary artwork in plain language: "Look around; this is great art!" Other examples of live programming include the lessons of children's art workshop leader Lex Brown, who incorporates Gramsci's egalitarianism by setting "inclusivity and flexibility" as the basis of projects that champion the "reckless energy of childhood and intentionality of art making," such as wood block constructions, dioramas of cardboard cityscapes, ink drawings, and graffiti. At night, adults congregate around the Gramsci Bar for a convivial happy hour. Scholar Marcus Steinweg presents daily lectures that are rigorous while offering disarming, approachable titles such as "What is Art?," "Knowledge is Nothing but Knowledge," and "Romantic Shit." In effect, the monument pays tribute to Gramsci by opening up participants to new intellectual realms.

The notion of personal dedication represents the third pillar of his definition of monument. "My goal is not to be the accountant of my own work," clarifying that the artwork is the insertion of information about Gramsci into Forest Houses. "Nobody asked me to do a monument," he says. "It's only me and my love for Gramsci." Perhaps Hirschhorn's choice to honor the thinker through active conversation in a dedicated temporary environment can inspire both Forest Houses residents as well as the art establishment.



Undoubtedly, Gramsci's message resonates with some, and the monument's uncanny aura impacts many. "We are going through the same things as what Gramsci saw," says Forest Houses resident and retired public school teacher Marcella Paradise, citing the communities' shared obstacles, from pruned pensions to relatives' prolonged prison sentences. Social challenges can seem interminable in the South Bronx, where the mammoth NYCHA blocks, set apart from the ever-changing face of the city's grid, project an uneasy permanence. In comparison, time is of the essence in Hirschhorn's autonomous sculpture. Out of this dichotomy, we find the fourth element of Hirschhorn's definition of monument: production. The monument's ceaseless output of children's art, newspapers, performances, structured philosophical conversations, and chance encounters have presented a window of opportunity among the community's forest of towers. "It's not temporary to us," says Farmer. "When Hirschhorn's gone, it'll always be in our memory, and you can never take that away. The monument is more than the monument."

Gramsci Monument is open seven days a week from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. until Sept. 15.

Steven Thomson is an urbanist focused on the intersection of art and architecture. He studied architecture and art history at Pratt, University of Houston, and Elisava, and recently completed a master's degree in urban studies at University College London. His writing has appeared in *The Atlantic Cities*, *The Phaidon World Atlas of Contemporary Architecture*, *Cite*, and *Architizer*, where he is the social media manager.

All photos © Cameron Blaylock, an architecture, fine art and environmental portrait photographer based in Brooklyn. Cameron's recent projects include *Typecast*, an investigation into the "towers-in-the-parks" typology that was first presented at 2013 *IDEAS CITY StreetFest*; *Visions for Storefront for Art and Architecture*, a collaboration with writer Dolan Morgan; and *AirBnB Neighborhoods*, a feature on AirBnB which offers pictorial and editorial perspectives on New York City neighborhoods. In 2010, Cameron received a European diploma in fine arts from Bauhaus University.

The views expressed here are those of the author only and do not reflect the position of Urban Omnibus editorial staff or the Architectural League of New York.