THE GRAMSCI MONUMENT-NEWSPAPER

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and
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"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)

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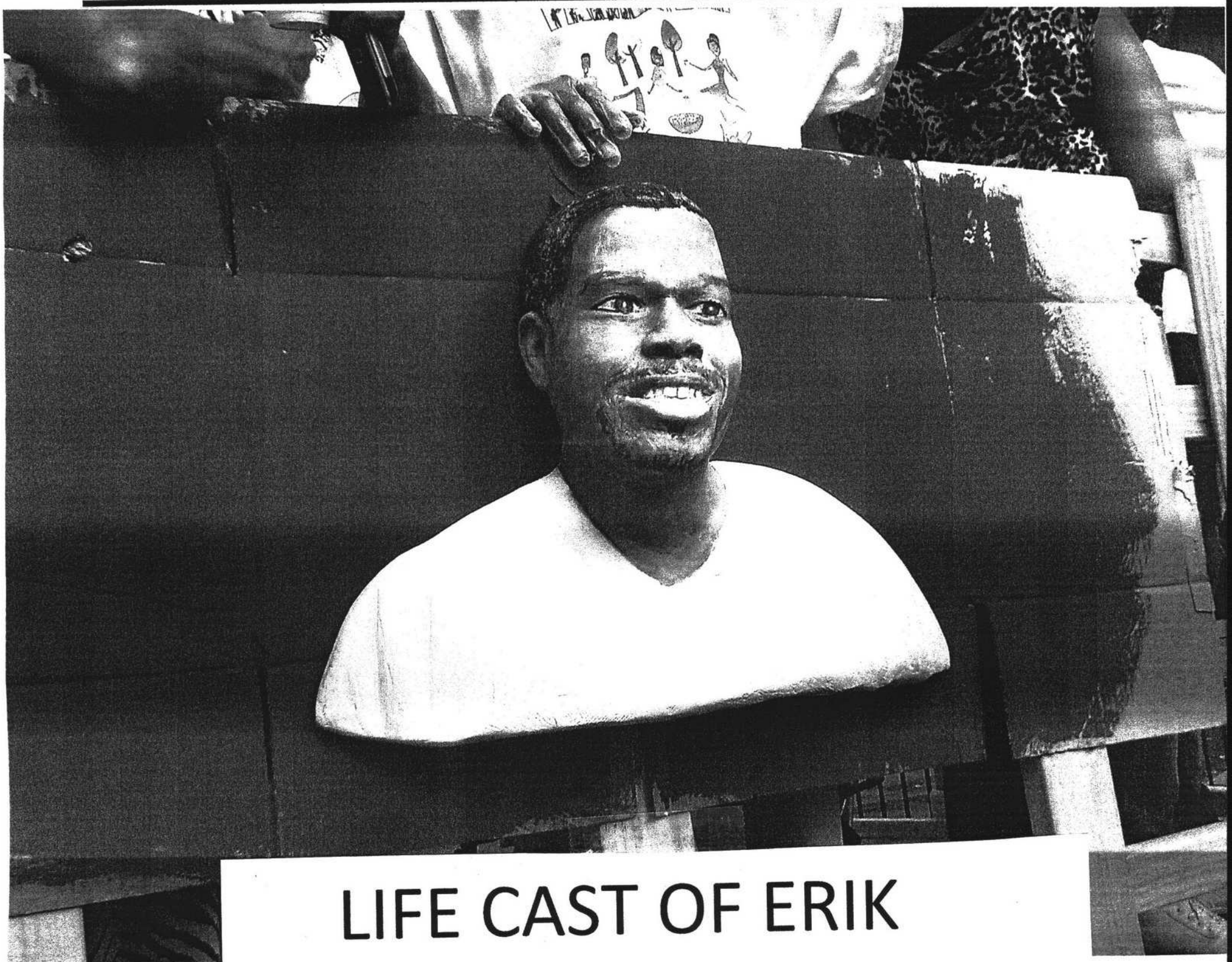

LIFE CAST OF ERIK FARMER BY JOHN AHEARN (EXHIBITED AT THE "FAMILY DAY" AT FOREST HOUSES)

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Bronx, NY 10456
Thursday
Clear

79 °F | °C

Precipitation: 0%
Humidity: 41%
Wind: 7 mph

Temperature	Precipitation	Wind

Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed
77° 55°	79° 61°	79° 66°	79° 63°	81° 66°	81° 68°	82° 68°	86° 66°

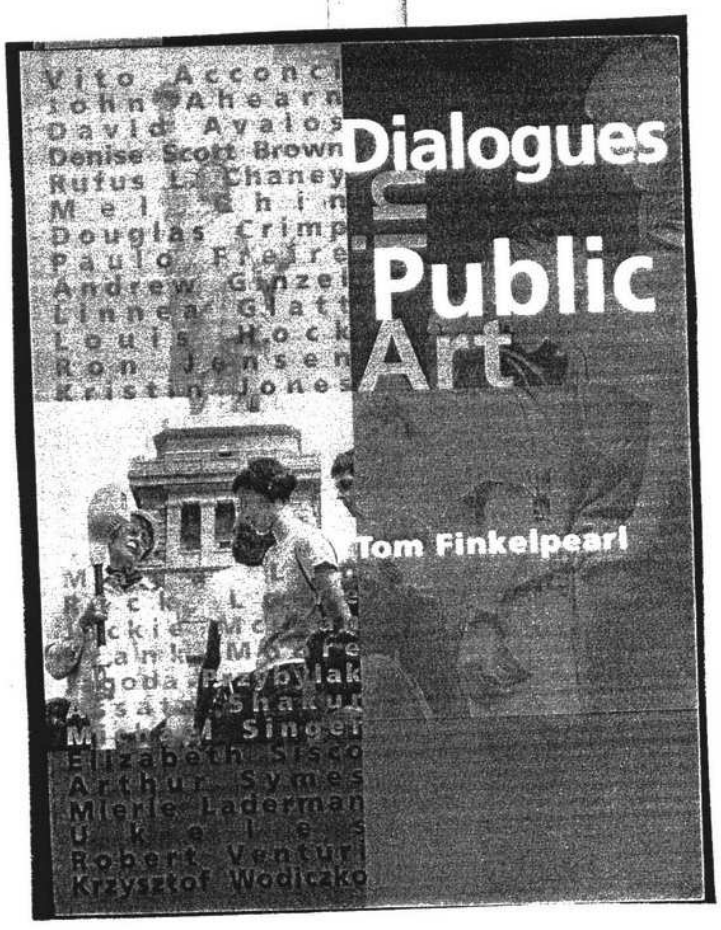
Interview: ***John Ahearn*** *on the Bronx Bronzes and Happier Tales*

Introduction

In September of 1991, John Ahearn installed three bronze sculptures on a plaza that he had designed in front of the Forty-fourth Police Precinct House in the Bronx. Although this might be difficult to imagine to those who are familiar with the events that followed, the installation of the bronzes was eagerly awaited by everyone involved. It was the culmination of years of work including numerous bureaucratic and construction delays,[1] and this was *John Ahearn,* a widely respected artist, one who had considerable community support. We were all aware of the popular public projects that Ahearn had completed within several blocks of the Forty-fourth Precinct. The public "review process," from the Art Commission to the Community Board, had led us to believe that there would be no significant problems. Nobody was quite certain that the police would love the work, but we all felt that the community would embrace the sculptures which, after all, depicted Raymond, Daleesha, and Corey, "neighborhood residents" well known to the artist. But the installation of these bronzes triggered a full-blown controversy. When the controversy broke, discussion of the issue moved from the daily papers and local television into the art magazines, and to a lengthy article on the controversy in the *New Yorker,* which was later published as a book.[2] How could this project blow up after all of the changes that had been made since the *Tilted Arc* controversy? What about the mechanisms for community review?

In the Spring of 1986, less than two years after the hearings over *Tilted Arc,* a Percent for Art selection panel convened to choose an artist for the Forty-fourth Precinct. In accordance with the new standard procedures in public art, the selection panel included not only arts professionals but also representatives from the Police Department, the Department of General Services, which would be building the station, a curator from the nearby Bronx Museum of Art, as well as an artist and a representative from the Department of Cultural Affairs. Local politicians and community leaders were also invited to sit in on the proceedings. The panel quickly came to a decision to award the $99,000 commission to John Ahearn. He was an obvious choice because he lived close to the station, enjoyed a good critical reputation, and had already spent many years interacting with the community. The panel agreed on several recommendations for the artist: the work should be "colorful," the artist should "work with the community," and should "consider amenities within his or her design, such as seating."[3] These suggestions could not have been further from *Tilted Arc,* and Ahearn fit the mold for the "post-Serra" artist perfectly. He was well acquainted with the specific nature of the community within which the commission was sited, and worked in a figurative style that is considered accessible. In fact, despite the rejection of the work, this assessment was accurate to a certain degree. Ahearn's artistic *style* was popular, although this made it no more popular than *Tilted Arc.*

Soon after being selected, Ahearn proposed to redesign a traffic triangle in front of the Precinct House as an open plaza, featuring a number of sculptural figures—to create a new public space as a "bridge" between the precinct and the community. This idea was discussed between four city agencies: the Department of General Services (DGS), which manages the city's capital construction; the Department of Transportation (DOT), which controlled the traffic triangle; the Department of Cultural Affairs (DCA); and, of course, the Police Department. In mid-1988, DOT agreed to put up the money for the renovation of the traffic triangle in exchange for the design services of DGS.[4] While Ahearn's project had a budget of $99,000, the construction budget for the plaza, with benches and pedestals, was added through this interagency agreement.[5]



In August of 1989, Ahearn signed a contract to create cast bronze figures for the site. He proposed to cast three sculptures in bronze: *Raymond and Tobey* (a boy with his pit bull), *Daleesha* (a young woman on roller skates) and *Corey* (a young man with a basketball under his arm and his foot up on a boombox). His proposal subsequently received approval from the Art Commission[6] and Community Board #4. Perhaps because of his previous work in the community, there was very little discussion of the new project at the Community Board. People remembered the positive public response to his relief murals, how they depicted local life, and how Ahearn had created them on the streets. The only note of criticism at the meeting came from a police representative who suggested that the work should include an image of a policeman. Needless to say, Ahearn chose not to add a cop to the set of figures.

On the basis of the approvals, Ahearn was given notice to proceed with the fabrication of his bronzes. Soon after I began working at Percent for Art, I traveled with other city officials to inspect the bronzes at the foundry. Although Ahearn had not finished painting the sculptures, we took some snapshots to document the work—as backup for our files to verify that the work was fabricated, and that the artist was due his next payment. Just before the installation of the sculptures, we began to hear rumblings of discontent over the nature of the works. I was pulled aside by a DGS staff member, who told me that the snapshots of the bronzes that we had taken at the foundry were circulating among the senior staff at DGS, and there was *serious* trouble. Around the same time in mid-September of 1991, DGS Commissioner Kenneth Knuckles called Charmaine Jefferson, the acting commissioner of Cultural Affairs. He expressed his opinion on the basis of our snapshots that the sculptures were racist. Both Knuckles and Jefferson are African American. In this conversation and throughout the controversy, Jefferson defended the artist's right to express himself, and argued that seeing the works as racist was a misinterpretation. To her, these sculptures represented people she knew in the African American community—perhaps not the cream of the crop, but recognizable, "real" people. This position was backed up by all the voices of the Department of Cultural Affairs, particularly Linda Blumberg, the (white) assistant commissioner for Public Affairs.

Blumberg and I quickly arranged a meeting with DGS, and found that two of the most active detractors were Arthur Symes, architect and assistant commissioner of DGS, and Claudette LaMelle, the executive assistant to the commissioner. At our meeting, the two reiterated their opinion that the work was insensitive to African Americans; the images were stereotyped, and the figures were not involved in pro-

John Ahearn, view of South Bronx Sculpture Park (at 44th Precinct Police Station), with sculptures of Raymond and Tobey, Daleesha, and Corey, on day of installation, 1991. (© Ari Marcopoulos; courtesy Alexander and Bonin Gallery, New York.)

ductive activity. They felt that Raymond, the young man with his dog, looked like a drug dealer, and that this would be clear to *anyone* in an inner-city neighborhood. These were not "positive role models" for youth. LaMelle and Symes did not question the selection of Ahearn or the quality of his work. They simply felt that the specific people he chose to represent were not appropriate as public monuments.

As soon as the works were installed on September 26, local opposition began to surface and the exact opinions that Symes and LaMelle expressed were voiced by community activists and passersby in the street: these were not positive images of the community, and they must be removed. We received outraged telephone calls at the Department of Cultural Affairs, and the Community Board district manager called to tell us he was receiving negative calls as well. It is impossible to gauge the breadth of popular opinion from a series of telephone conversations. The calls could well have been coming from a small number of people. However, it was easy to judge the depth of the opposition. These callers were clearly angry. I vividly recall talking to an elderly woman. She tearfully told me that she felt like a prisoner in her home in the South Bronx, that she could not go outside at night because of "people like the ones you put in front of the police station."

Very upset, John Ahearn immediately called us, and had a series of lengthy conversations with a range of city officials. After assessing the situation, Ahearn came to the conclusion that the work needed to be removed immediately. On the morning of October 1, the sculptures were removed from the triangle by a company hired by Ahearn, and moved to a warehouse. Ahearn predicted that if they were not removed, the works would be the center of a very damaging controversy in which he would be cast as a racist. He thought that things were about to get out of hand.

The Forty-fourth Precinct is a site that taps into two of the community's most intense issues: the relationship with the police, and the role of Yankee Stadium in attracting outsiders to the community. The sculptures managed to inflame both issues simultaneously. We heard some version of this complaint repeatedly: "A lot of the traffic on Jerome Avenue is outsiders driving up to Yankee Stadium. These sculptures will simply reinforce those people's prejudices about the South Bronx. We are not all criminals!" *Raymond, Corey,* and *Daleesha* played on the community's worries about its public face, its feeling that the rest of the city thinks of South Bronx residents as drug runners and no-good, unproductive criminals. The "bridge" between the community and the police that the artist and the selection panel had hoped for certainly

did not materialize, or if it did, it was in their mutual attack on the art. Here was something that community members and the police could agree upon: The sculptures had to go.

Since *Tilted Arc* was installed the United States had seen the growth of identity politics, often painted along the most predictable lines of race. Despite the fact that Ahearn had lived and worked in the neighborhood for twelve years, he was repeatedly referred to as *not* being a member of the community. Arthur Symes, who lived in Battery Park City, said, "He's not of the community because he's not black—it's as simple as that."[7] But the neighborhood is not even primarily African American. In fact, like Harlem and Watts, this traditionally black part of the South Bronx is becoming increasingly Latino. Between 1980 and 1990, the black population declined by 13 percent to 48,000 people, while the Latino population increased 31 percent to 64,000. The white, non-Hispanic population fell 60 percent in the same period to fewer than 3,000 people,[8] including Ahearn, of course. During this same period, David Dinkins, an African American, had taken office, and the power structure of the city was becoming increasingly black. Symes, though living in an affluent white enclave and working as an assistant commissioner of a powerful agency, felt comfortable speaking for the black community in the South Bronx, while Ahearn, living in the South Bronx, was an "outsider." The popular press, like Symes, saw the issue in black and white. A headline in the *New York Post* read: "CITY PAYS 100G FOR ART BLASTED AS ANTI-BLACK."[9] For most people, this was a race issue, pure and simple. The identity of the artist and the figures held center stage. It was hardly mentioned in the press that Raymond, the model for one of the three sculptures, is, in fact, Latino. The reasons for this are complex, including the specific politics of New York at the time, but perhaps the controversy boiled down to black and white because, as bell hooks argues (drawing on James Cone), blackness is "the quintessential signifier of what oppression means in the United States."[10] The word "black" in the *New York Post* headline stood for the oppressed in general, or at least people of color. And the headline was literally true. Even though the sculptures did not depict only African Americans, and they were not in an African American community, they *were* being blasted as "anti-black."

The notion that the sculptures were "sinister and criminal" fails to consider the figure of *Daleesha,* the girl on roller skates. There were two photographs of the sculptures in the *New York Post* article. The caption under *Raymond and Tobey* read:

"IN THE HOOD: This statue of a hooded youth kneeling beside a pit bull sparked strong objections." And the caption under *Corey* read: "STEREOTYPE: This image of a basketball player with a boom box has South Bronx residents and cops up in arms." There was no photograph of *Daleesha.* It is predictable that the discussion became a discussion of the black male, while the female was rendered invisible for the most part.

In the same *New York Post* article, a police officer commented on the sculptures, "We were stunned. We spend so much time trying to work with the community, and that artwork is so clearly racial stereotyping. The message the art would have sent was at the least, insensitive. At most it could have caused a riot. The pieces were unbelievable." This statement reveals another aspect of the work that we came in contact with: The sculptures were seen by some people as representing the Police Department's vision of the community, and everyone knew how fraught that issue was.

Prior to the Forty-fourth Precinct commission, the public murals Ahearn had created in the South Bronx were gifts to the community. They were self-funded on the whole, and they were *not* associated with any police stations. When confronted with a public commission, Ahearn felt compelled to make it clear that he was not acting on behalf of the police—to clarify his independence. Like Richard Serra, Ahearn wanted to have a voice independent of the institution that was the funding source and physical site for his project. In the South Bronx, with the division of the community and the police, it seemed possible to speak *with* the community, while not speaking for the police, just as Serra had sought, however obliquely, to speak with the workers against the space created by the government.

John Ahearn was born in Binghamton, New York, in 1951. He received a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree at Cornell University in 1973. Starting in 1977, Ahearn worked with Collaborative Projects, Inc., (a.k.a. Collab) on a number of projects, including documentary films, a cable television show, and the "Times Square Show" (1980), which brought scores of contemporary artists into New York's seediest neighborhood. He started showing his work extensively in the early 1980s both in outdoor projects and in galleries and museums. Many of his projects have been created in collaboration with Rigoberto Torres since the early 1980s. While Ahearn is best known for his outdoor, community-oriented projects, he has had numerous one-person exhibitions at commercial galleries, and his work is in public collections ranging from

the Hirshorn Museum, to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. In this interview, conducted in February 1995, John Ahearn describes the ordeal of the commission at the Forty-fourth precinct. Following a discussion of the South Bronx bronzes is a description of subsequent projects that Ahearn undertook in Ireland. The projects in Ireland exemplify his normal process and the degree of community interaction and dialogue that he routinely engages in.

Tom Finkelpearl: I would like to discuss the difficulties that surrounded the sculptures at the Forty-fourth Precinct. One of the problems that we encountered was a basic discrepancy in interpretation. Many of the people who objected saw the sculptures as symbols, *while people who defended them saw them more as* individuals.

John Ahearn: They are both. They did represent individuals, but the problems that people saw in the work were not invented or imaginary. I made some errors in judgment along the way. The work that was created was powerful as it was set up, maybe stronger than the murals that were done previously. But the issues were too hot for dialogue. The critics said that the people in the community have a right to positive images that their children can look up to. I agree that the installation did not serve that purpose.

TF: Were they symbols of the community?

JA: One could say that, but, as much as I agree with the critics, I do not agree that the boy with the hooded sweatshirt needs to be a drug dealer, even with the pit bull. All the kids in the neighborhood seemed to dress like that.

TF: So it's a common look in the neighborhood.

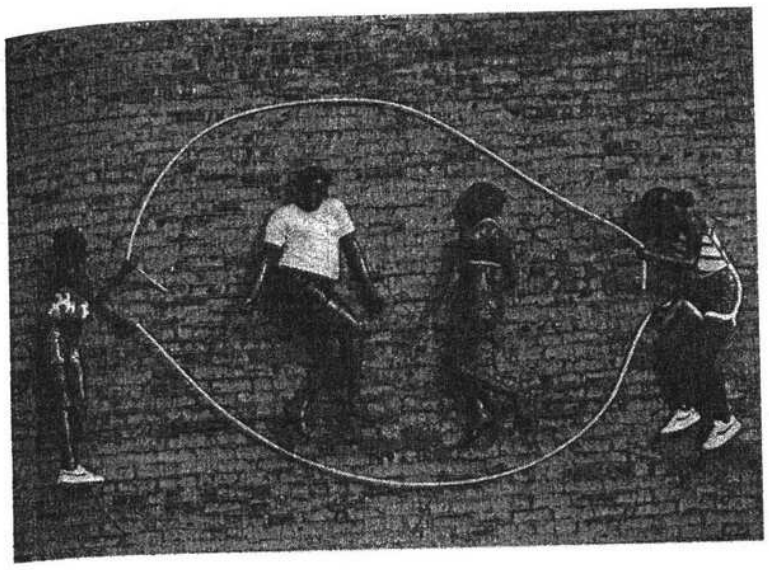
JA: But I did not pick three images that I thought would represent kids on the block. The way it started out was that I had a long-standing relationship with Raymond. I am still in contact. I saw his family yesterday. I have always been inspired by knowing him. We worked out this idea to do a sculpture that included his dog. This preceded this commission.

TF: *So the project involves your private interaction with Raymond. Then there's the relationship that evolves around the actual casting (sometimes done in public), how you carve and paint the sculpture, and then the public display of the image—first at a gallery, in various collections, in front of the police station, later in a museum in Ireland—how do all of these relate?*

JA: *Let me answer by tracing the steps. That project was doomed in its conclusion by so many steps that led us down this path. Let me go back. There was a point between 1979 and 1983 when there was some kind of unity between needs of the art world, needs of the community, my private needs. For me, everything seemed to be in balance. Those first three Bronx murals were done in that spirit, particularly the first two, where I felt that there was a balance between a harsh reality of life that the art world could respect and relate to as a real, an honest portrayal of life that was shocking to them, and interesting. But there was also presented a kind of high-spirited, idealistic, community life at the same time—in balance. First was* We are Family, *then* Double Dutch, *then* Life on Dawson Street.

I felt, the day that the first two went up, like Martin Luther tacking his proclamation on the cathedral door. This was my statement to the art world—here is where I put my work. This is what I believe in. By the time the third mural went up it was already getting a little mottled—a continuation of a statement rather than the statement itself. I got confused, and did a couple of side projects to get back into it. Then I said, "Let's do a project for the neighborhood." For the Back to School *mural I said, "Forget the art world." This time I felt I would deal with the community itself. The mural was designed to face the school. We put it up and had a big block party.*

*I tried to force those [*Back to School*] images on the art world at the time, including a show at Brooke Alexander Gallery. But the whole thing seemed "off." It was too nice in a way and it lacked an edge. What had been put together very carefully had pulled apart—that unity of speaking to all sides simultaneously, which is a hard thing to maintain, right? In a way I was following a vision that Rigoberto had—the ideal. A "positive image" street scene. But I like the mural a lot. Every day I got up and it sung to me when I went to get coffee. It was a good vibration for me, very nice.*



John Ahearn and Rigoberto Torres, Double Dutch, 1981–1982, Bronx, New York. Photograph courtesy of Alexander and Bonin Gallery.

A part of me felt that maybe I had to dig deeper into the life that I was living in the community to find a contact with the art world—something more difficult. It is too simple to say "negative imagery." It has to do with dealing with emotions and feelings that were darker . . . I am a little at a loss to describe it. My own personality in the neighborhood had other sides to it. I had needs as an artist in terms of contact with the people that were maybe more obsessive than what I was displaying in this Back to School *image. What brought this out was my long-running relationship with Raymond. It brought out things that were better and also darker and stranger—more complex. I always found him fascinating as a person. I decided that I would work with him.*

Raymond was part of the Latino community. Then I started working with Corey. The neighborhood where I was working was split down the middle, and one-half was very Puerto Rican (now going more Dominican) while the other half was black. They got along, but were divided. I was living on the Puerto Rican side so I decided that I was going to throw myself into

the other part of the neighborhood as a way to extend my understanding of what was going on.

At that time I started to do life casting on the block more, not so much with Rigoberto but on my own. I would set up the casting process on the north end of the block. I pushed it up 50 feet, and suddenly got it into a different community.

TF: The black end of the block?

JA: Yes. At the same time I was thinking that I wanted to do freestanding figures. Raymond was the best and the first. What I had not foreseen, when I showed the freestanding work, was that the art world went to Raymond like bees to honey. For some reason he touched on something that people really liked. Strange.

At the same time the Police Precinct commission was getting set up. Originally they had asked me to do faces on the outside of the building. I did not like such a close connection with the Police Precinct, and the architect did not want me touching his building. So I suggested that we work with this traffic triangle across the street—a site for freestanding figures.

TF: The traffic triangle was not part of the original capital project?

JA: No. Jennifer McGregor Cutting [then the director of Percent for Art] fought hard to get the triangle into the project, although everyone said that it would be impossible. We spent years working on this, and finally things flipped and the city started supporting the idea. My idea all along was that I wanted to do a group project in the community out of concrete. Freestanding concrete figures using wire mesh. I thought that it would be really great to do all the work in the neighborhood. All the money would have been spent there. [The commission was $99,000.] A group community project. But the city was against using poured concrete. They said that it doesn't last. Bad idea. They wanted bronze.

I had gotten a letter awarding me the commission from Bess Meyerson in 1986, and year after year there was no contract. The advice I was given all around was: do not start this project until you get your contract because we

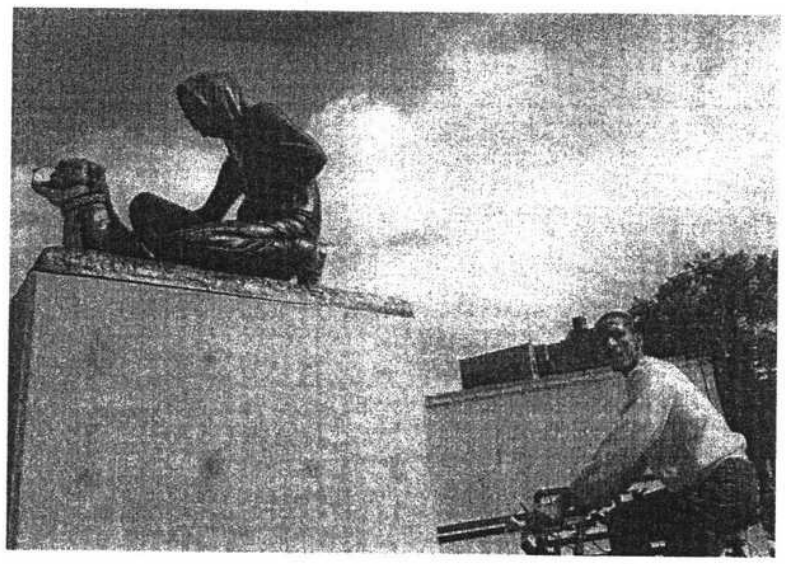
cannot promise anything. So all of the time that I was going to these meetings fighting for the traffic triangle, I was not developing the artwork for the project. I kept holding back. All of a sudden there was an announcement that I was going to receive the contract (this was four years later) and there was a request—could I have a proposal ready two months later for review by the Art Commission. It went from "do nothing" to "have it all done." Generally one of my weak points as an artist is design—I do not tend to be very good at making designs in advance.

By that time, I already had finished Raymond. Corey was halfway done. So I started thinking, "If I am going to make bronzes, these would be beautiful." From the beginning, Corey was designed to look sort of like a Greek athlete, like the discus thrower or something. Meanwhile, what I felt all along about Raymond—this is very ironic—I felt guilty that these pieces were going into collections and there was nothing for the community. I felt like I owed it to the community to give them the image of Raymond, that everyone would love it. It never occurred to me that this would be a negative image. It was so popular in the art world. I figured that the community deserved to have this image.

What happened to the bronzes was a part of a long process that had negative aspects to it. I can not help but think that the bronzes represented a message to the art world more than to the local community. The Back to School *image was overly sweet and idealistic. But the art world kind of liked these bronzes at the Police Precinct.*

TF: What about the reaction to the bronzes?

JA: The moment of the installation reflected the problems with the process. For example, in previous times when we installed the wall murals a supportive community would all come out in strength to view their friends being hoisted up on the wall. It was a family situation. Whereas the installation of the bronzes was a little bit removed from the neighborhood that I lived in, even though it was only four blocks away. It was just far enough away that it only got a stray group of onlookers that I recognized. Unlike earlier days, the few friends of mine from downtown that showed up outnumbered the local community, which made me a bit uneasy. There was a disquiet to the day. Al-



John Ahearn, Raymond and Toby (with Raymond on bicycle), 1991, Bronx, New York. Commissioned by the New York City Department of General Services, the New York City Police Department, and the New York City Percent for Art Program. Photograph: Ari Marcopoulos.

ready as the pieces were unveiled, there were arguments at the site as to the purpose of the work. That had never happened with the murals. In earlier times, the murals were seen as a private thing within the community, but this was instantly understood to be of a citywide, public nature. This was perceived to be a city site.

TF: And it was—a public *commission.*

JA: People could tell the difference. People felt that this had to do with the city, not with their community.

TF: The reaction then in the tabloids was to paint you as insensitive to race matters.

JA: There was a little twist. They could have targeted the artist, but that was not so interesting as to target the city [government] for foisting this racist art on the public.

TF: That's true actually. And this is almost always true in these controversies—attacking the city for misusing taxpayer money.

I find it interesting to hear how you, as an artist, are being pulled in different directions by the art world, the community, personal concerns, etc. This is a great problem for the public artist.

JA: What gave me a feeling of confidence at the time of the original work was a faith that all of these things could be done at once, that they were not distant things. I believed that answering the needs of the community, answering your own private problems that you are working out, dealing with art historical problems, that these things could all be made in one piece. That this was interesting art—trying to focus on the unity of all of those things rather than the opposition—that it was possible to make a single image that could speak to someone on the street and also the art world—that this could inform the style that you work in to create something fresh and different.

TF: Do you still believe that this is possible?

JA: To say it is possible—that is easy. To say you are doing it is more difficult. I believed that I was doing it.

TF: Can you tell me about what you have been doing since?

[Ahearn brings out a set of photographs.]

*JA: This was the installation at the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin, the last week that I was there. This [*Raymond and Tobey*] was something that they borrowed for the show. I had forgotten that it just happens to relate to our project, by coincidence. But I thought it was kind of cool because he is a Bronx youth, and these casts are sort of the "bad boys" of Dublin.*

TF: Can you take a step back? So you were invited by [museum director] Declan McGonagle for a show?

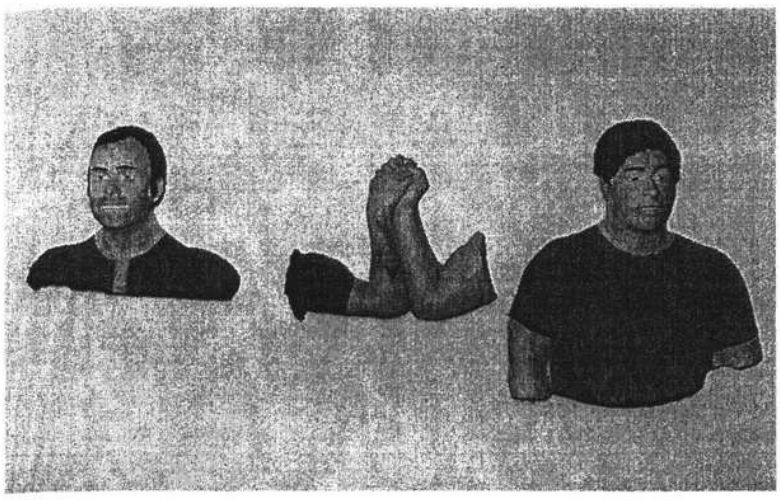
JA: Really I was asked to be "artist-in-residence." I was invited by Brenda McPartland of the curatorial department. When I got there they passed me over to the community and education department. The education department at the museum already had a relationship with a men's group: the Men's Group Family Resource Center. The men were mostly older than I am—retired or unemployed workers, not artists. Not a women's art group, but a men's art group, which is unusual. I dropped by last summer for four days and met with the men and we did a cast. We discussed future possibilities so that when I came back, I was ready to do the project. Here's a picture of the early meeting. Aren't they great guys? I was so into it. I would advise them, give them council or technical help to fabricate, but they make the work from beginning to end, and they have their name on it.

The curatorial department treats artists like princes. In the education and community department, you are more like a worker—to help people in the area. I like that idea, but I've also had the experience where it can be antagonistic. I think in some ways the curatorial department represents an upper class and the community and education department represents a working class. And when the group saw me, I was the artist invited by the curatorial department and passed over to them.

TF: You made a statement in a publication issued by the museum that you surrendered control of the project to the men's group, and that the final product could serve as a mural in the center. So you were not only relocating the power into their hands but also saying that the final product would not be for the museum, but for the center. Did this happen?

JA: Yes, they were planning to install the work after I left.

The men's center was set up with the idea of group decisions. If someone suggested something, they'd say, "Let's wait until all the guys come tomorrow and then we will sit and talk about it." They regarded themselves as a collective and thought that individual efforts without the support of the group were divisive. I did play the devil's advocate, encouraging individual



John Ahearn, life casts at the Men's Group Family Resource Center, 1995, Dublin, Ireland. Commissioned by the Irish Museum of Modern Art.

men to work with me after class. I told them that they had twenty-four-hour access because I was living over the workshop. But I felt constrained by the dynamic within the men's group.

I said to the museum, "I want to work on an additional project where I can be the author of the work. Let me loose with some people, and I will do everything I can." So they said "Great, we've got a school that we are already working with: the Christian Brothers School, a boys' school."

TF: A single-sex public school?

JA: Single-sex, yes, with Catholic Brothers teaching there. I went over there with Liz McMahon from the museum's Education and Community Department. We met [Una Keeley] the art teacher and "Brother Joe," the principal. I showed them a catalogue from the South Bronx work. As we were talking I was saying, "I would be happy to make work and we could put it on the walls of the school." I was promising everything. I was brought into a class with twenty-five kids, around eleven years old. They are tough, Irish "ghetto" kids.

I went to a mostly Irish American parochial school when I was growing up. The Dublin boys looked familiar. Boy for boy, each kid in my own school seemed to have a counterpart in this group. Brother Joe said, "If you do one kid you have to do them all to be fair." I said, "Let's go for it and see what happens." I give the school and the community lots of credit for the way they set up this program. We met three times a week for two-and-one-half-hour sessions. This was intensive. We met for six weeks. It was late in the school day, so, as the kids came out of the mold, it was time to get on the bus. I was left with all of the molds. At the end of each day my assistant, Danny Pico, and I would start our work. They left us to work, not the way I was guiding the men's group, saying, "Now you pour the plaster. Now you mix up the paint." I got to do my work, and if I wanted to stay up until 1:00 in the morning to work on it, beautiful. Often that is what it was. Twice in the week we would work and they would come the very next day. With art, I like the product to feed into the process. So when they would come the next day, I would want everything sculpted, finished, ready, and on the wall. So I was getting my work done but also inspiring them. The project had a kind of growth and high-spirited energy.

TF: This was happening at the same time as the project with the men's center?

JA: Yes. Often we would meet with the men's group in the morning and then the boys would come in the afternoon. We did about forty-five workshops when I was there in Ireland.

I felt that I was not getting enough of my own vision into the project with the men's center. It seemed better just to let the men have it to themselves. We had a show at the end of the project at the museum. As I said, after the show is taken down, the work will go back to the community center. What we devised as a final answer with the children—the school had given so much and the museum had given so much, and I gave a lot—I agreed to donate my part in the project to the museum, with the agreement that, after being shown at the museum, the work would go to the school. Still, the museum would be the final owner of the piece, not the school. The school could have it as long as it wanted, and it could go back and forth. The museum was the caretaker of the piece.

John Ahearn, life casts at the Christian Brothers School, 1995, Dublin, Ireland. Commissioned by the Irish Museum of Modern Art.

TF: I wanted to ask you about individual expression in terms of the private/public axis. In a way what happened in Ireland is that the project that represented your individual expression ends up with a home in the museum . . .

JA: Possibly, yes.

TF: Whereas the collective project ends up having a home in the community. What are the class implications of that?

JA: The class implications are obvious, but I always like my art to function in both situations.

TF: The project in which control was given to the community members may have been therapeutic for them—the process was very positive for them. With the boys, you said that you struggled over pieces—carving an eye ten times. There the product was more the focus?

JA: The product and the process work together.

TF: Your artwork necessitates engagement with a group of individuals.

JA: Yes. There is a dependence. [Ahearn brings out some photographs of the early castings at Fashion Moda.]

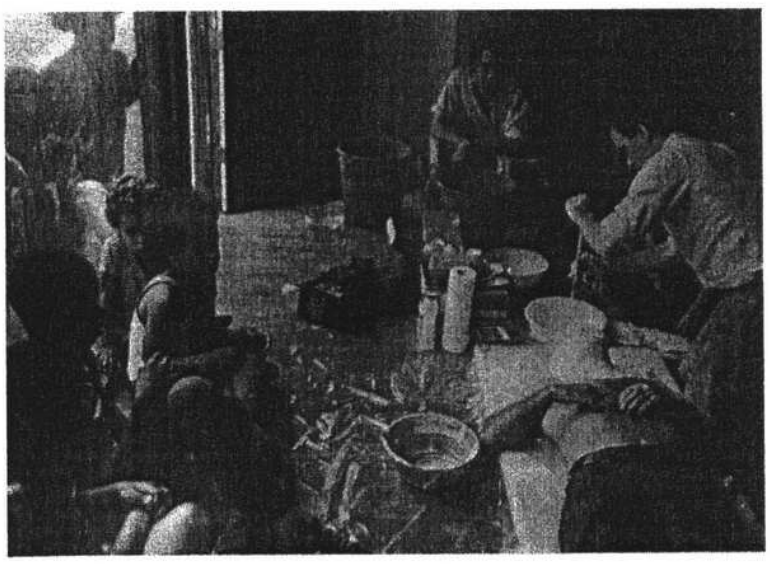
These photographs are from 1979. My recent project in Ireland is almost like this project at Fashion Moda, fifteen years ago. When we started casting in the Bronx, it attracted crowds. It was like an accident scene. Everyone would be saying, "Who did it? What happened?" And then people would linger at the doorway and they would look in and feel that it was okay, and would come inside and sit down, and start hanging out. There was nothing organized about it.

There is this core thing, a repetition. But it seems that every time I go back to the very core thing, that is when I do the best work. It is a contradiction because you are always trying to grow and change, but you find that the only way to really be yourself is when you are at your most repetitive. It is a dilemma for me.

TF: In your work, there is a sense of the psychological identity of the person who is being depicted, and a clear sense of you as an artist. Somehow the sense that it is life cast is very strong, almost like the way people believe that photography is "real."

JA: I think these works fail when they breathe too much on the level of life. They should look like art. I like them to become frozen into something iconic, something that is very clear that you could describe. You can do that by simplifying the colors or the shapes. Sometimes Polaroids that I have taken of the person help me clarify the image. I love the idea of the art, and I also love that it is sculpture and that it is painting—not that it is an embodiment of that person. But the life of that person inspires the art and enriches the art. It is not just a print, but there is something of them there.

TF: In Ireland, you felt the project with the men's group was too slanted toward the community side to produce a set of works that were wholly satisfactory to you, but the project at the school, it seems to me, represents an interweaving of those



John Ahearn creating life casts at Fashion Moda, 1979, Bronx, New York. Photograph: Christof Kohlhofer.

concerns. The work will travel back and forth between the school and the museum, and other museums. It's free to travel in a lot of different contexts. Moving back and forth.

JA: Yes, that is ideal.

TF: Some of these projects that you felt somehow dissatisfied with were stuck on one side or the other. While the bronzes from the Forty-fourth Precinct traveled back into the art world, they were not exactly a failure . . .

JA: Oh, come on. If works are removed, they are a failure. We've talked about the idea that artworks can occupy multiple positions, in balance. When this works, the art world begins looking to you for guidance. I can remember standing in the Bronx on Walton Avenue, feeling that the world was turning around Walton Avenue—that everything was judged in terms of its distance from this spot.

Notes

1. See the following interview with John Ahearn for a full discussion of the genesis of the work.

2. Jane Kramer, *Whose Art Is It?* (Durham, North Carolina, and London: Duke University Press, 1994).

3. From unpublished minutes of Department of Cultural Affairs artist selection panel meeting.

4. This bureaucratic process points to two essential aspects of public art. Public art administrators spend much of their time creating an atmosphere of cooperation between the artist, architect, and public agencies, and, if the right atmosphere is created, budget issues become secondary.

5. This sort of manipulation of budgets is very common in Percent for Art commissions. Funds from the construction budget of the site are often transferred to the art project when the artist is providing elements that are functional and/or architectural.

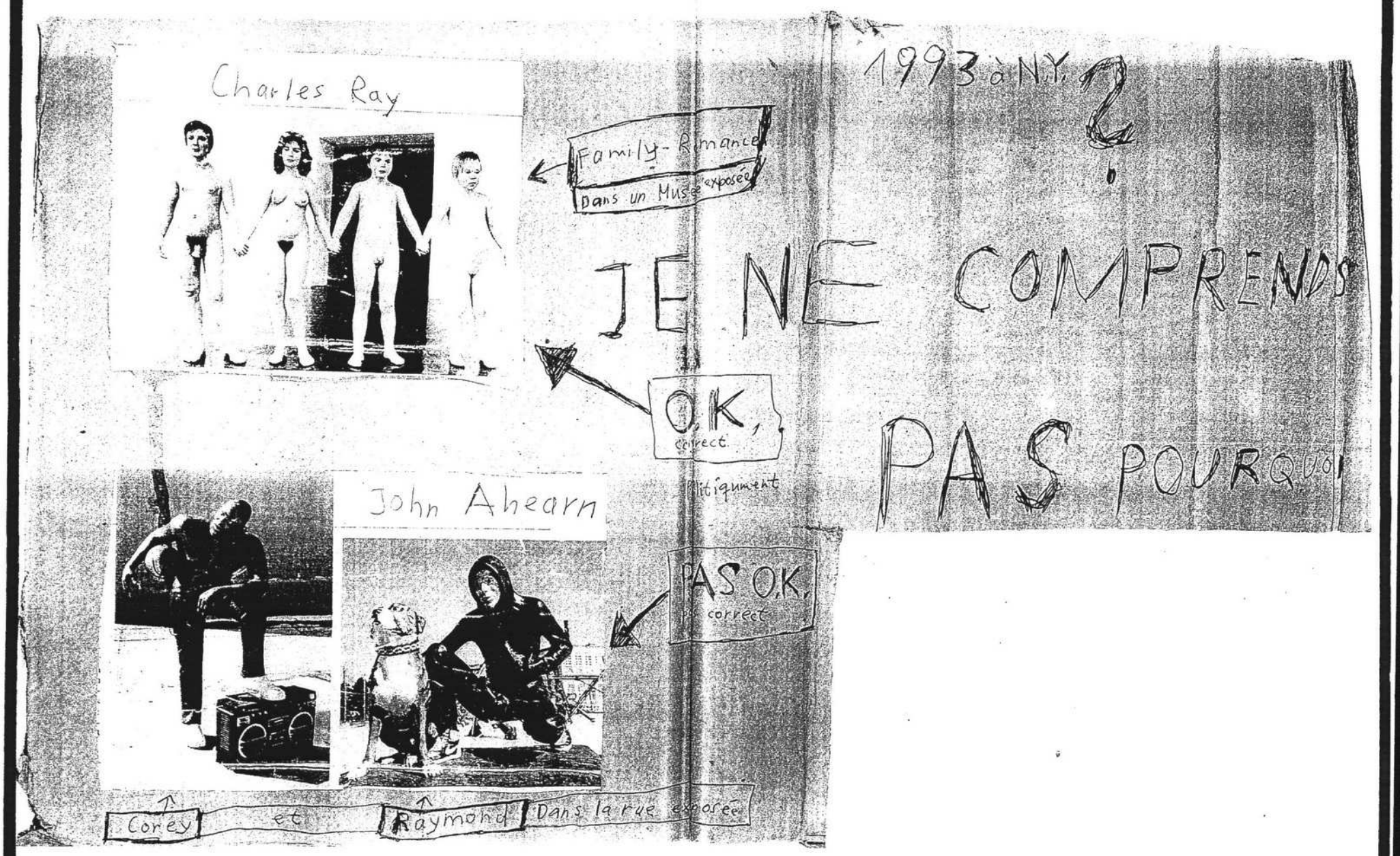
6. The New York City Art Commission, formed in the late nineteenth century, is an independent review body for all publicly funded art and architecture.

7. Kramer, *Whose Art?,* p. 94.

8. Source: Community District Needs, Fiscal Year 1994, City of New York Office of Management and Budget and Department of City Planning, Spring 1993. NYC DCP, 92–93.

9. Peter Moss, *New York Post,* April 23, 1992, p. 3.

10. bell hooks, *Black Looks* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), p. 11.



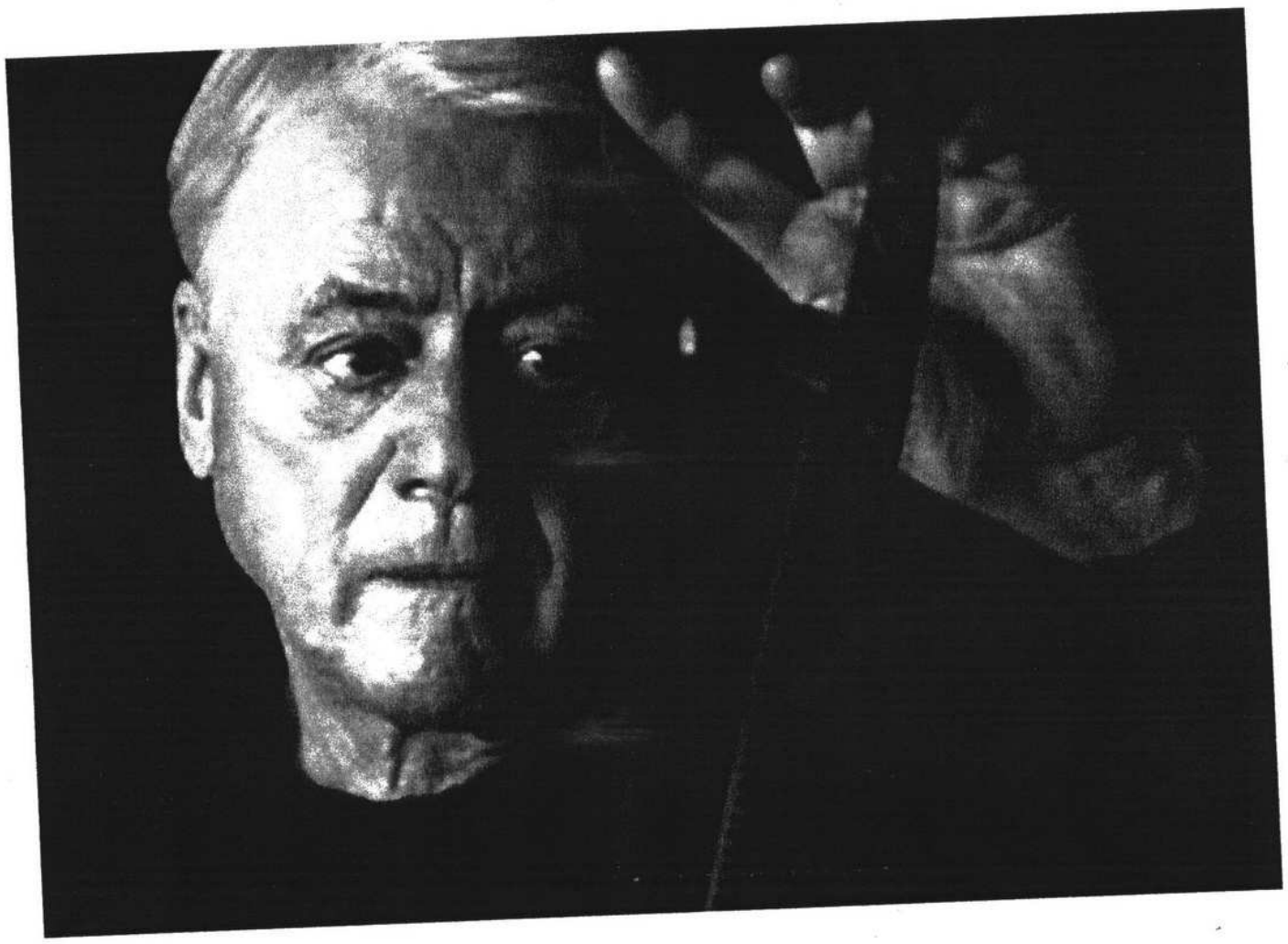
Thomas Hirschhorn
Excerpt from the publication: "Les plaintifs, les bêtes, les politiques", 1995
Published by: Centre Genevois de Gravure Contemporaine, Geneva, Switzerland

A DAILY LECTURE BY MARCUS STEINWEG

46th Lecture at the Gramsci Monument, The Bronx, NYC: 15th August 2013
ON ALEXANDER KLUGE
Marcus Steinweg

<<...Human beings are not interested in reality. They can't be; it's the human essence. They have wishes. These wishes are strictly opposed to any ugly form of reality. They prefer to lie than to become divorced from their wishes...[they] forget everything and can give up everything except this principle of misunderstanding reality, the subjective... If this is real, then the media industry is realistic in telling fiction, and the construction of reality founded on this basis can only lie. This is one of the reasons why history isn't realistic: it's not documentary, it's not genuine, and it's not necessary.>>

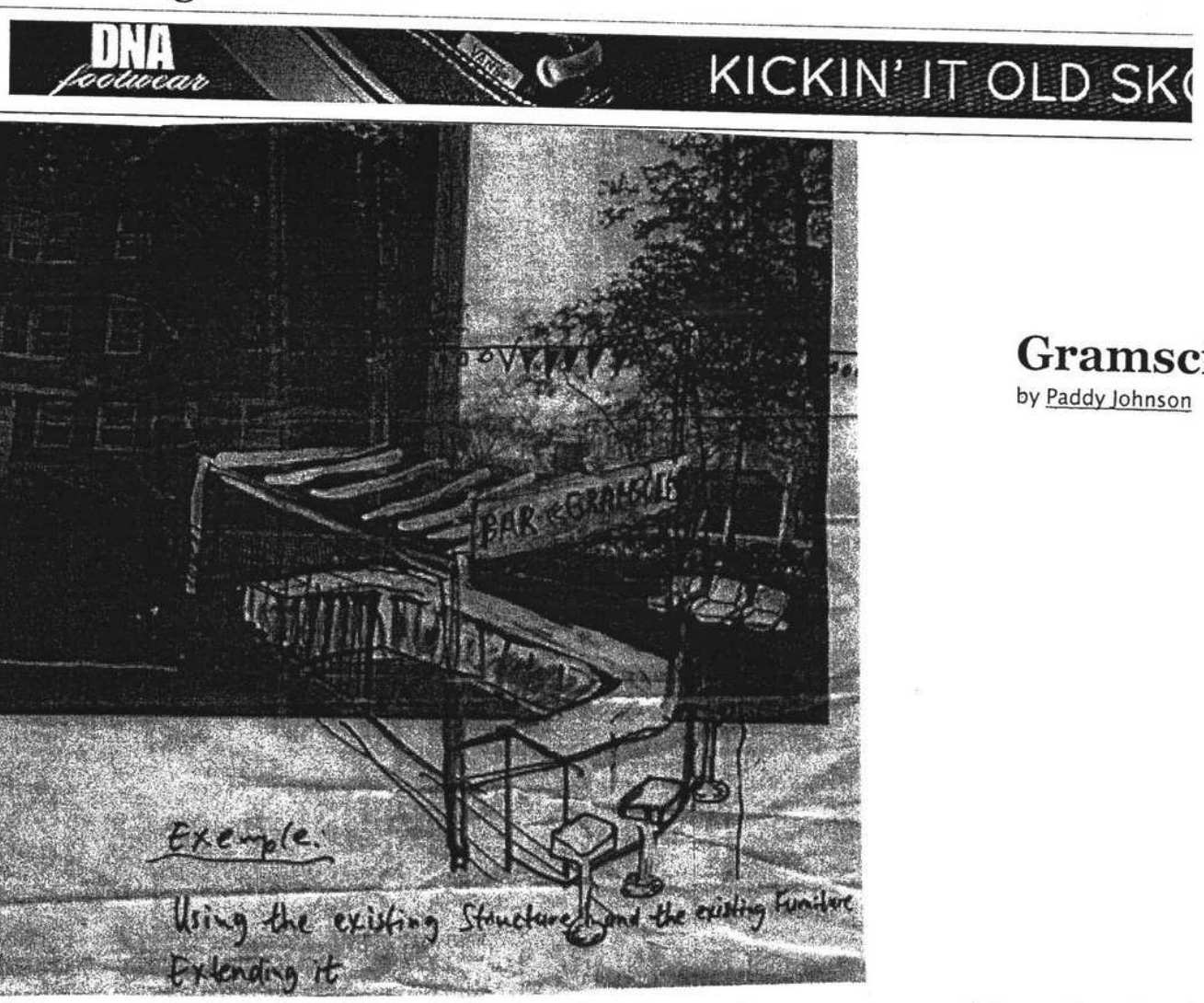
ALEXANDER KLUGE



WHAT'S GOING ON?

FEED BACK

The L Magazine



Gramsci Project(s)

by Paddy Johnson

To form an opinion about Thomas Hirschhorn's GRAMSCI MONUMENT, you only have to hear about it. In my first significant conversation about the project, a curator friend lit up as she excitedly told me Hirschhorn would host a daily lecture by philosopher Marcus Steinweg for the residents of Forest Houses, a housing project in the Bronx. Whatever the rest of the work was about, I instantly had concerns. The value of imposing scholarship on a group that would likely have few means of interpreting it seemed limited at best. After all, wouldn't such alienating lectures do more to discourage people from self-education than encourage it?

Even after I visited, that question lingered, but the monument itself, commissioned by DIA, does a good job of bringing diverse communities together. In early May, the President of the Resident Association of Forest Houses, Erik Farmer, approved the public work and residents began construction. A staff member told me that Forest Houses was the only housing project in the city to approve it.

The temporary structure (up through September 15) is basically a taped together community center that resembles a sprawling tree house. It's situated in the courtyard and includes a library, education center, stage, (dry) bar, newspaper room, and radio station, almost all of which were in use when I visited. For art's part, the stairs, couches, and shelves were covered with brown packing tape, a Hirschhorn trademark; he has famously transformed galleries with the material for years. And of course, Hirschhorn's longstanding interest in philosophy and Gramsci show up, taking the form of plaques, quotes on banners, and his frequent collaborator, the philsopher Marcus Steinweg. Even Gramsci's personal affects from prison—a hairbrush and a pair of shoes among them—are given vitrines.

I suspect the sense of ownership that comes with community construction has something to do with the general vibe of the monument; there wasn't a soul who didn't want to chat, whether or not I invited it. "I'm Stan the Man!" one friendly staff member told me, introducing himself as I walked by. He worked the bar, which was a particularly active site for conversation. A bunch of us spent a while talking about where we were from and how cheap the food they were serving was. (Three bucks for a plate of rice and fried fish is a good deal!)

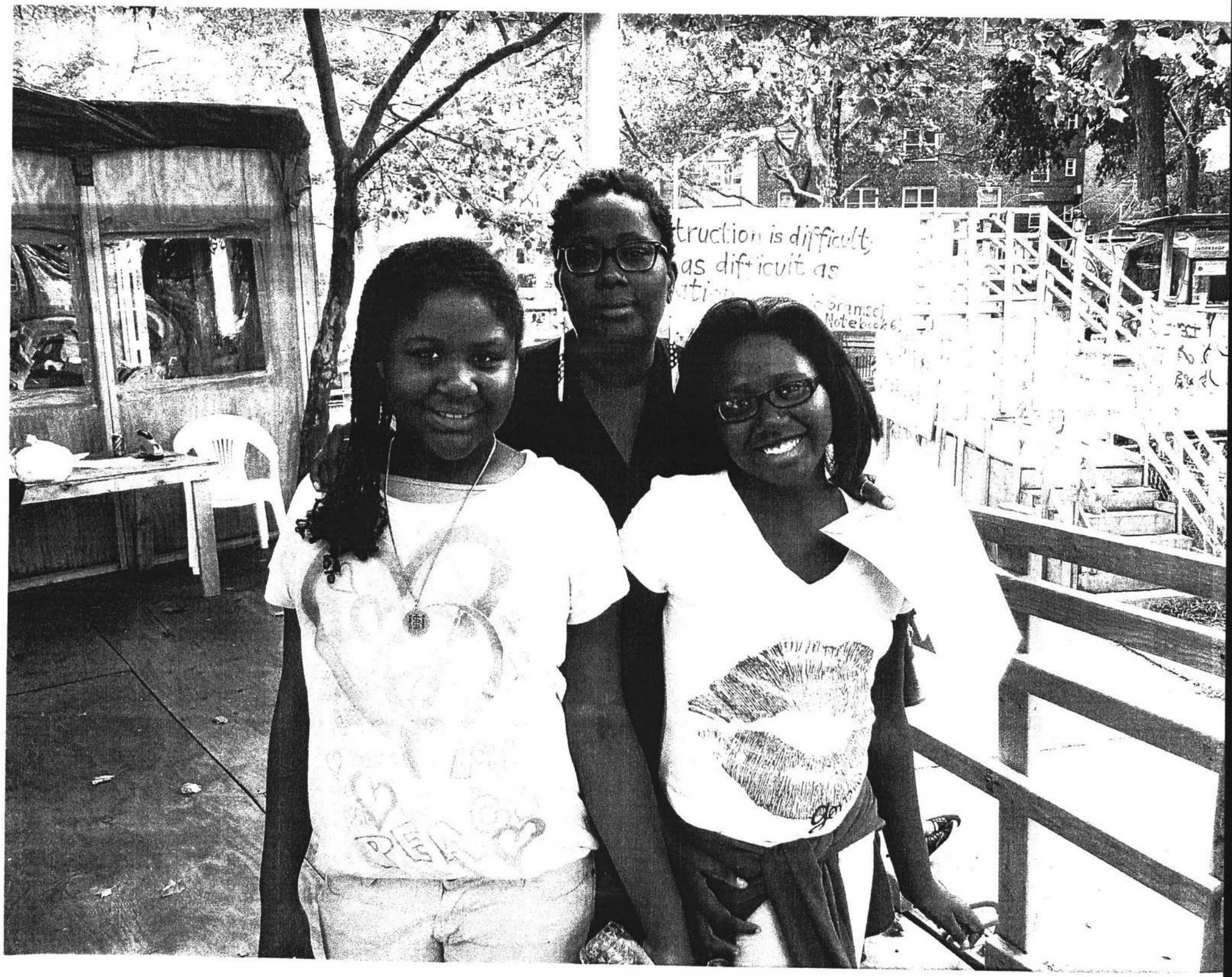
There's probably no good way to say this, but the reason I enjoyed this conversation (and countless others) was simply because I was having it. I've lived across from Lafayette Gardens in Brooklyn for 11 years, and it takes quite a bit to get the white people to talk to the black people. I harbor a reasonable amount of white liberal shame for this, so it was a relief to spend some time in a place where some of that racial tension was eased, even if the guilt isn't.

This would probably make Antonio Gramsci happy. The philosopher and onetime leader of the Italian Communist Community in the 1920s believed that while hegemony may be impossible to escape, we could foster counter-hegemonies. Anyone can improve his or her quality of life through self-organization and self-education. It's impossible to say if Hirschhorn achieved this, but there was at least more activity on the site than there was before.

Whether that has anything to with philosophy, though, is questionable. The library was empty, and a worker running a lawn mower nearby the lecture I attended made it difficult to hear Steinweg's already impenetrable talk about criticism. Hirschhorn has to know that these lectures, which take place outside and by nature aren't easily accessible, wouldn't be absorbed well by many in the audience.

Still, as I left the site, I turned back to get a last look at a hand-painted banner hung across a constructed overpass: "Destruction is difficult. It is as difficult as creation." (Antonio Gramsci, Prison Notebooks). I assumed the quote spoke to hegemony and the difficulty it takes to dismantle it, but whatever the case, it seemed unlikely many people would interpret it that way. Mostly I thought of the

RESIDENTS OF THE DAY



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