

# Linnea West

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## Public Art Done Awesome: Thomas Hirschhorn's Gramsci Monument

Posted on August 14, 2013



When I stopped in New York on my way home, I headed uptown to see Thomas Hirschhorn's Gramsci Monument, a public art work Forest Houses, a housing complex in the Bronx. The structure started to be built July 1, and the project, now housed, will continue until September 15. This is the fourth of a series of "monuments" Hirschhorn has done that relate to philosophers he loves, but it is not the

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traditional monument, i.e. some grandiose sculpture.



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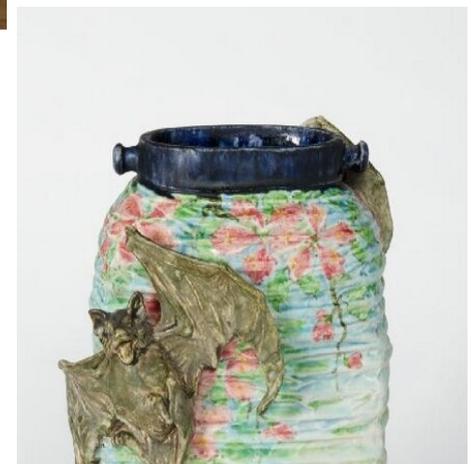
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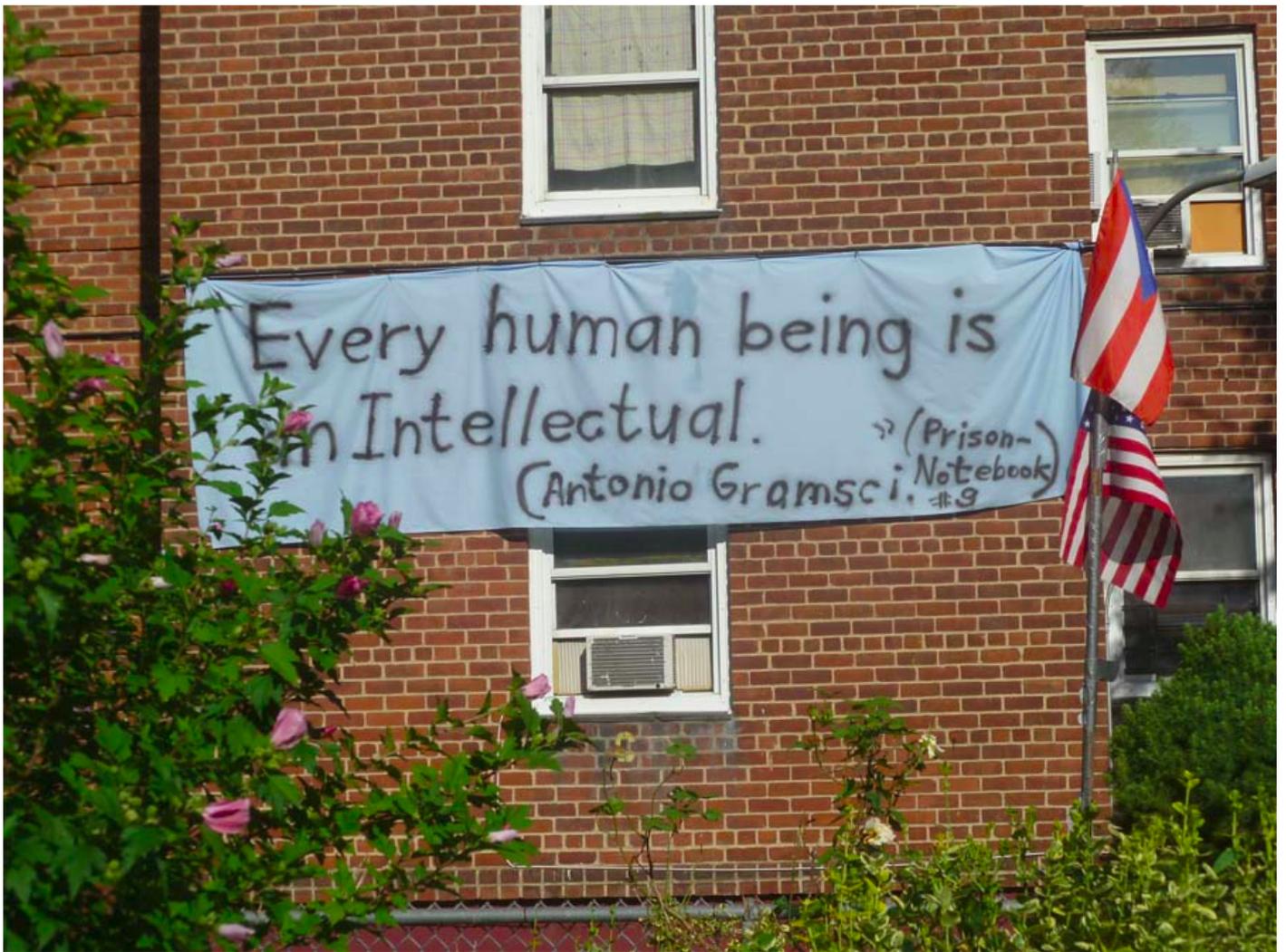
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STAFF PICK: Bat vase! [ow.ly/o3idJ](https://ow.ly/o3idJ)



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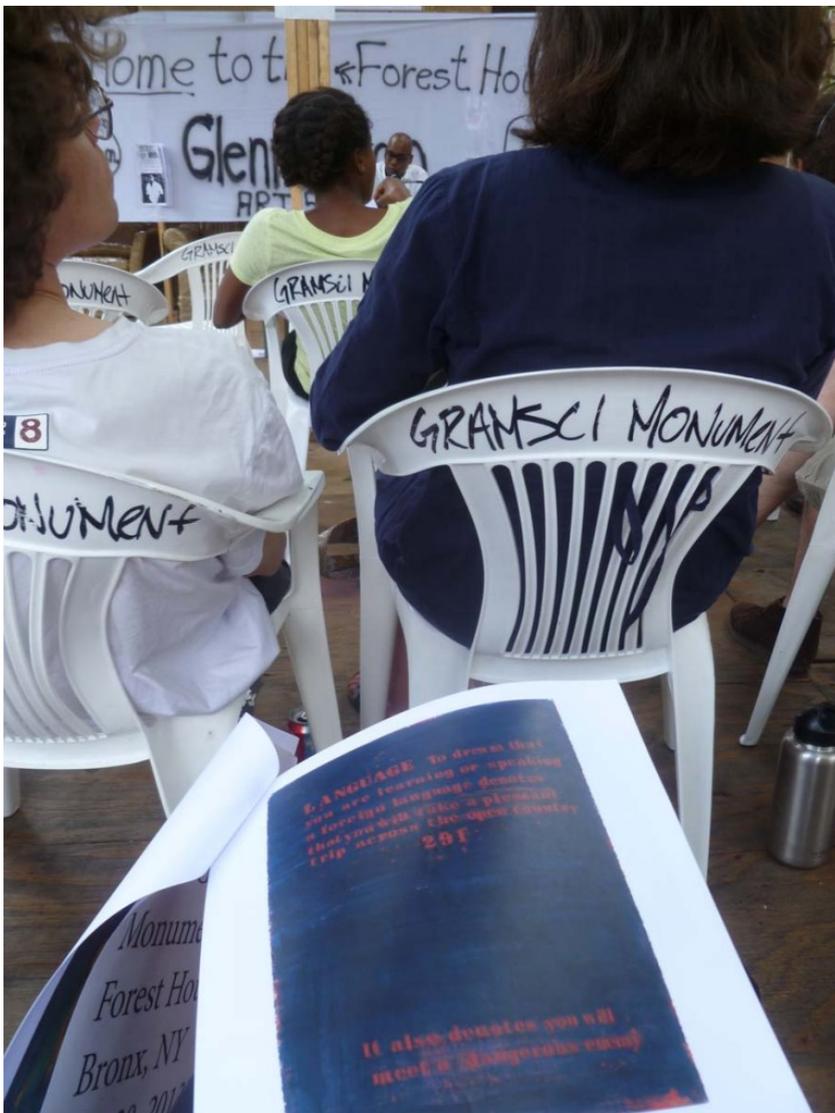
Rather, the Gramsci Monument is a series of plywood pavilions he built with the help of local residents he hired to create to community spaces. Hirschhorn created different areas for a stage, an arts and crafts room, a bar serving \$2 cheeseburgers, a computer room, a radio station, a newspaper, and a Gramsci library and museum.



Antonio Gramsci was an Italian leftist philosopher imprisoned by the Fascist government. During his incarceration, he wrote the Prison Notebooks. Quotes from it can be seen scattered across the pavilion and also on signs from facing nearby buildings. In all this, Hirschhorn wants to redefine “monument.” What makes the project come to life is Hirschhorn’s continued presence at the Gramsci Monument for the duration of the project, working with staff, talking to visitors, and supporting the daily programming. A typical day could include art classes for kids and a philosophy lecture followed by happy hour. Meanwhile, residents can use the space for its intended purpose or just hang out.



So for example, I showed up one sunny afternoon and wandered around, reading the daily newspaper and staring at Gramsci's prison hairbrush in the museum. As I wandered out toward the stage, I joined a group gathering for the beginning of the day's talk. It turned out to be Glen Ligon presenting his work, aided by a thick color print out of images and some handfans he had made in case the day was hot. I sat with some people from DIA (sponsors of the work), Hirschhorn and the Forest Hills community president, who made the introductions, and local residents. Children and dogs also joined or ran past, creating an informal, fun atmosphere.



I especially like that Hirschhorn will continue to be present at the Monument until the end, when the plywood structure will be dismantled, the computers raffled off locally, and the ephemeral project will be gone. As a platform for Hirschhorn, it is certainly an opportunity for him to educate about Gramsci and the nature of art and to participate in a community. But interestingly he writes about the responsibility of interacting with the Other on a one-to-one level through presence and production, without any focus on outcome.



Unlike many participatory projects, I think his attitude takes control and responsibility more into his own hands even as it turns the goals away from anything practical or concrete. It resides in a belief in the transformative power of art, and the importance to himself of making a gesture of love like this regardless of its reception.





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