

"Gramsci Monument" at Forest Houses, The Bronx, NYC

The decision to do the "Gramsci Monument" at Forest Houses, The Bronx, NYC is an essential decision. Such an important decision can only be taken after a long process of fieldwork, it cannot be taken by an institution or an administration, it's an artistic decision and as such, has to be the outcome of a process. This process is fieldwork. The fieldwork for the "Gramsci Monument" consisted in visits to Public Housing sites all around the City: to begin with, I visited forty six projects in the five boroughs, then reduced the visits to fifteen sites in three boroughs where I met with residents, presented my project and tried to find out if a co-operation might be possible. I finally focused on seven sites, all in The Bronx: Castle Hill, Soundview, Monroe Houses, Patterson, Bronx River, Claremont and Butler Houses and Forest Houses. There, I had several encounters with residents who are actively involved in their neighborhood. To discuss with all of them was instructive, fun and truly helpful. I admired their commitment, their implication and their thoughts toward and for the neighborhood, which reinforced my conviction that the question of the site is a question of human encounter. Therefore the decision to do the "Gramsci Monument" at Forest Houses was taken in common - by Erik Farmer, the President of the Resident Association of Forest Houses - and myself. It was him who invited me to do the "Gramsci Monument" at Forest Houses together with his neighbors in the spirit of co-existence and co-operation. The encounter with Erik Farmer was decisive also, because he was the one who asked me to give him a book of Gramsci to read. I met Erik Farmer thanks to Clyde Thompson, the Director of Community Affairs/Training and Employment Southeast Bronx - which is located at Forest Houses -, it was Clyde Thompson who sent me to him. The Encounter and Discussions with Clyde Thompson were very important to me and I remember it as a beautiful moment when I met him for the first time in the office of Diane Herbert, the Director of the Southeast Bronx Neighborhood Center at Forest Houses. It was in August 2012, when Diane Herbert and Clyde Thompson welcomed me, listened and questioned me about the "Gramsci Monument". I realized immediately that I was making a real encounter. I remember this moment as a moment of happiness - the happiness of an artist creating the conditions of a dialogue and a confrontation throughout Art, his Artwork! Therefore to do the "Gramsci Monument" at Forest Houses is a decision taken in happiness.

I love to do fieldwork, I love to do it alone, I love to encounter the Other through an Idea, I love to do it through a mission I give myself and I love to do it through Art. It's the questioning of the Universality and Autonomy of Art in a simple and direct gesture.

The angle-stone of my fieldwork is always to ask for help because I cannot do a "Presence and Production" project alone in Public Space. Help can come from residents, from visitors or from someone around who sees me present, fighting for my work and committed to producing something. Co-operation may occur as a gift of the residents. It is not me - the artist - who has the pretence to bring help, on the contrary it's me - the artist - who is asking for help! My proposal is: "Can you and do you agree - as residents of this neighborhood - to help me - the artist - do the "Gramsci Monument"? Can we do it together in co-operation and co-existence ? With this in mind, it is clear that I'm not the one who 'selected' or who 'found' the location for the "Gramsci Monument", deciding about location obviously comes from the residents, it can't come from me, nor from architectural purposes or geographical reasons. The residents are the ones who invite me, who agree with me and accept to help me do my work, here, in their neighborhood, on their grounds. My mission consists in creating the conditions for an encounter, discussing and finally convincing the Other of the sense and seriousness of the "Gramsci Monument". This part of the work is the most difficult but also one of the most beautiful. It's the moment when, alone with my idea, I am meeting the Other, discussing art and an artwork today. It's the moment of grace when I understand - again - that there is a possibility to talk about art with everybody, with each and every Other. I am full of gratitude toward the residents of Forest Houses, toward Diane Herbert, Clyde Thompson and Erik Farmer, whom I met once, twice, several times and with whom I always found a welcome. I feel happy - Art has given me the tool to establish a contact - beyond the questions of "interest" and "profit". Diane Herbert, Clyde Thompson and Erik Farmer

understood, that my competence to do the “Gramsci Monument” at Forest Houses, The Bronx, NYC doesn't come from my understanding of Gramsci but from my understanding of Art. They offered me their time to speak about my project and explain the “Gramsci Monument”. I was challenged and taken seriously. These were the real encounters between me and the Other – and one can easily understand that without these encounters, no decision regarding a possible location can be taken. This is why the “Gramsci Monument” will take place at Forest Houses.

“Presence and Production”

The guideline for the “Gramsci Monument” is Presence and Production: I call it a “Presence and Production” project. “Presence and Production” is a term I use for specific artworks which require my presence on site and where my production takes place during a given time on a specific location with the co-operation of others. I think it is important, to use your own terms, terms you invent as an artist, and agree with.

As I once said, I never use the term “participatory art” in referring my work, because someone looking at an Ingres painting for instance, is participating, even without anyone noticing. I never use the terms “educational art”, “community art”, and my work has never had anything to do with “relational aesthetics.” The Other has no specific ties with aesthetics. To address a “non-exclusive” audience means to face reality, failure, unsuccessfulness, the cruelty of disinterest, and the incommensurability of a complex situation. Participation cannot be a goal, participation cannot be an aim, participation can only be a lucky outcome.

To be present and to produce means to make a physical statement here and now. I believe that only through presence – my presence – and only through production – my production – can my work have an impact in Public Space or at a public location. To be present all the time at the “Gramsci Monument” means to understand full-time presence as a noble task, as the task of taking responsibility. The artist is not present because he is the artist (the creator of the work)—he is present because being present is the most important. To give his time, to share his time, there is nothing more important elsewhere. That is the commitment and the meaning of my presence.

The issue is not “The artist is present” as announced on exhibition opening cards. The terms ‘charismatic’, ‘artist-leader-pedagogue’ are inappropriate, they convey something unknown, distorted or cynical. I am not complaining, I am not crying, I have always seen my mission - as an artist - as taking over responsibility. Responsibility for everything touching my work, but also responsibility for what I am not responsible for. To work out “Presence and Production”-projects demands my absolute responsibility. This is sometimes misunderstood, but that's what I mean by: “I am an artist, not a social worker”. When doing art in Public Space, there is nothing more beautiful and more persuasive than to proceed from Art as Art. And by insisting on the notion of Art, doors are open for the other, open to encounter what the other does not know and does not want. Precisely because Art can achieve something which one does not want. This is what is unique about art, and philosophy. Therefore I do not distinguish between a person who could be a ‘receptive participant’ and the person ‘hanging around’. Not making a difference can only be justified in regard to the principle of Equality – which demands making no difference in regard to all differences. It is not always easy to insist upon this, but if I resolutely keep to it, this assertion can lead to miraculous and enchanting moments, which - to me - are the most sublime and beautiful moments in my work. The “Gramsci Monument” will remain an affirmation of an autonomous art work that is made in a gesture of love, this gesture doesn't necessarily call for an answer, it's both utopian and concrete. I want to create a new form, based on love for a “non-exclusive audience.” My love for Antonio Gramsci is the love of philosophy, the love of the infinitude of thought. It is a question of sharing this, affirming it, defending it, and giving it form.

Thomas Hirschhorn, February, 2013