

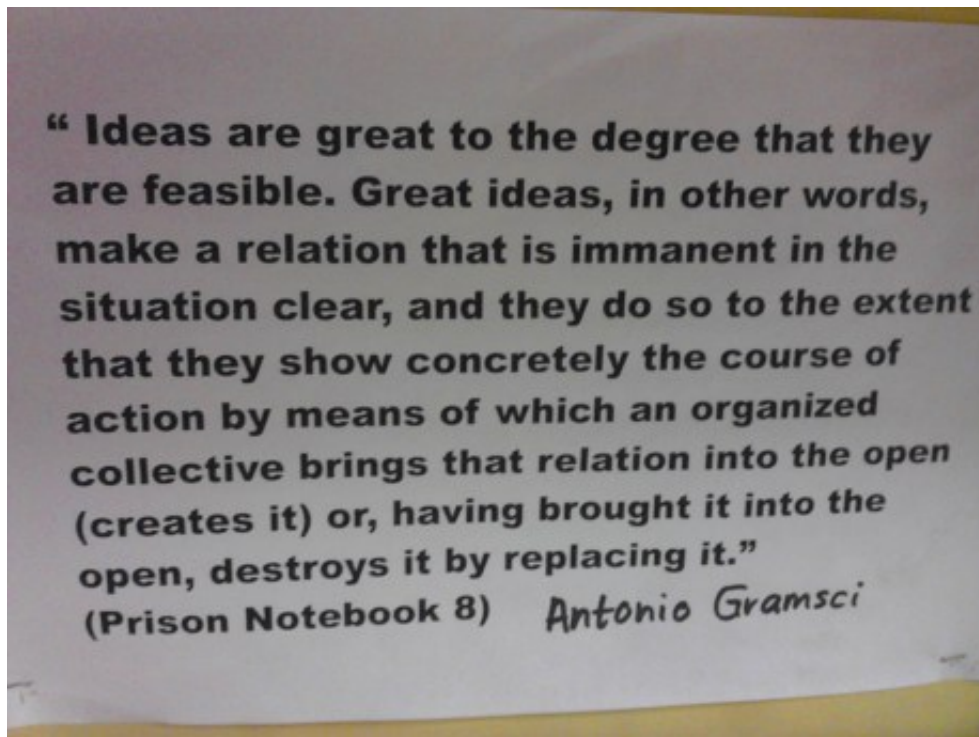
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Philosophy as Living Art: Thomas Hirschhorn's Gramsci Monument

September 2, 2013 by [rachel](#)



In the five years I've been a New Yorker, I can count the times I've been to the Bronx: they've generally been work-related, as in the charter schools I worked in as a substitute teacher or the event I volunteered for at the Botanical Gardens. Though I've only been in the city for five years, I know from local folklore and literature like Colum McCann's *Let the Great World Spin* about the days when "the Bronx was burning"—when the borough was rife with drug addiction, crime, gang violence, and prostitution, and fires spread through rioting neighborhoods. People without means lived in tall public housing projects, stacked atop each other and with no opportunities beckoning, no place to escape from or deal with family and social problems.

All of which is to say that your average, middle-class New Yorkers probably don't go often to the Bronx, although most know that it's no longer burning and not quite as infamous, though having worked at schools there I can say that it is still mostly working-class.

This summer, however, German artist Thomas Hirschhorn (<http://www.diaart.org/exhibitions/main/125>) gave New Yorkers reason to flock to their northern borough in droves, to have public seminars on various topics pertaining to contemporary philosophy, sip cocktails in the late afternoon sun, and behold a community-built and community-run monument to the 20th-century Italian Marxist thinker, and imprisoned Communist, Antonio Gramsci. Hirschhorn spent seven years preparing for this project, which is literally in the projects: the monument stands in the main courtyard of Forest Houses and in a strange way seems to fold into the environs so aptly you wouldn't guess at first glance that an outsider designed it.

A visit to the monument this weekend, on a warm Saturday afternoon, found the monument alive with locals running operations and visitors taking in the scene: a mostly wooden, raised structure with several sections, including a library-museum, Internet cafe, bar, children's workshop, newspaper press, seminar stage and more. It was decorated with graffitied or typed quotes by Gramsci and poems by Forest residents, as well as a beautiful spray-painted mural, basketball hoops with spray-painted slogans "love" and "politics." It was living poetry, living philosophy.

Every Saturday afternoon there is a lecture by a prominent thinker, usually an academic of high-standing like Gayatri Spivak (who remembers reading "Can the Subaltern Speak" (http://www.mcgill.ca/files/crclaw-discourse/Can_the_subaltern_speak.pdf)? in grad school, and hardly being able to speak about it?), but we arrived too late for that; instead we caught the daily 5pm talk by a German philosopher of the Italian Marxist strain associated most famously with Antonio Negri, named Marcus Steinweg. This was part of Steinweg's ongoing lecture series at the monument; every single day he gives an hour-long talk. Looking around, most of the attendees would easily be seen on the street smoking a cigarette outside the new billion-dollar New School building in Lower Manhattan: they wore thick-framed glasses and torn jeans, held Moleskines and iPhones, and stroked their goatees thoughtfully as Steinweg offered eloquent observations on the concept of "the normal." But there were also Forest residences in the audience—some who attend daily, and ask questions to get the most out of the sessions. Aside from the lectures, there are art workshops, radio broadcasts, children's classes, and other activities that engage the local residents.

After the talk, we strolled around on the monument platforms. Teenage boys were engrossed in online game-world in the Internet cafe. A woman was selling jewelry on the sidewalk and another woman, standing nearby, was smoking a cigarette; from the platform one of the residents started telling her that she couldn't smoke that close to the monument. Strong words were exchanged, things seemed to escalate, but then the woman on the platform gave up and the other woman kept on smoking. Later, I saw another quarrel ensue on the grounds around the monument; I also saw children playing and running, people socializing, and teenagers lounging. Life, in other words.

Is it an intrusion into their lives, this strange monument? Definitely. But it also brings outsiders to Forest in a completely new context; they are not social workers or police officers, but rather they are more or less tourists, coming to visit a specific attraction and inevitably in the process gaining just a little bit of perspective on its surroundings.

A very good blog post (<http://artfny.com/2013/08/16/how-do-people-feel-about-the-gramsci-monument/>) on ArtFNY details some of the Forest residents' thoughts about the Gramsci monument. Ultimately, Hirschhorn has erected a very well-done experiment, one which has

controversial aspects but also one that bears incredible potential for having a positive influence on all involved; ultimately the goal of philosophy is to make us critical thinkers, and the Gramsci monument succeeds in provoking such deliberations. For one cannot help but ask questions after a visit to the monument: questions like, What role does thinking or questioning play in contemporary society? How much do I know about the people living in my own city? What are the commonalities that we as humans, or as New Yorkers, share despite apparent differences? What is dissent?

For me, an important question is: What might be the long-term impact of surrounding youth by art, books, live discussion, and the legacy of a man who went to jail not for gang-related violence or drugs but for his political beliefs? It's one that can never be answered, and that is itself part of the monument's existence. The monument is in fact a standing, living question, one that interrogates humanity and our abilities to challenge the status quo and mold it with our own ideas and strength.

The monument (<http://gramsci-monument.com/>) will be up until September 15.

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