

## Thomas Hirschhorn's Lively Gramsci Monument Brings Intellectual Gobbledygook to the Masses (with video)

July 31, 2013 by CultureGrrl



Gramsci Monument (with portrait of philosopher Antonio Gramsci)  
Photo by Lee Rosenbaum

Swiss artist **Thomas Hirschhorn's** [Gramsci Monument](#), presented by the Dia Art Foundation (to Sept. 15), is a ramshackle, purpose-built philosophers' lair that works admirably as a vibrant community center, but not so well as an incubator of public intellectuals.

The joint was jumping on the balmy Saturday afternoon when I visited: It was Family Day—a celebratory community event accompanied by lively dance grooves and abundant barbecued food. Gramsci's target audience is the population of Forest Houses, the public housing complex on Tinton Avenue in the down-at-the-heels Morrisania section of the South Bronx on whose grounds Dia's temporary "monument" is situated.



Photo by Lee Rosenbaum

Named for **Antonio Gramsci** (1891-1937), the activist journalist, Marxist philosopher and head of Italy's Communist Party (who opposed Mussolini and went to prison for it), this \$500,000 project functions more successfully as a social, recreational gathering place than as a vehicle for

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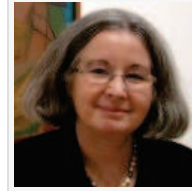


Photo © by Jill Kremenz

**CULTUREGRRRL** (Lee Rosenbaum) is the artworld's award-winning "best blog."

I'm a veteran cultural journalist and lecturer with many pieces in the *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times* and major art magazines. I've been a cultural contributor on New York Public Radio (WNYC and WQXR) and provided arts commentary on NPR [\[Read More ...\]](#)

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“mak[ing] the philosopher’s work accessible to the public”—the artist’s stated intention.

For that, Hirschhorn should have picked a more accessible scholar-in-residence than Berlin-based philosopher **Marcus Steinweg**, whose daily impenetrable lectures (77 orations in total) are poorly attended ordeals. Don’t just take my word for this: You can hear his opaque take on “Transcendental Headlessness” at the end of my video, below. The only way this blather works is as parody, but I don’t think that’s how it was intended.

Had I known that the celebrated artist **Glenn Ligon** was to be a guest speaker yesterday (July 30), I probably would have returned to hear him. According to the banner behind him at the evidently well attended talk, this was a homecoming for Ligon:



Photo from Gramsci Monument’s website

On the July 13 afternoon when I perambulated Gramsci, Hirschhorn was a mostly silent, impassive observer of the scene he had orchestrated:



Thomas Hirschhorn  
Photo by Lee Rosenbaum

The multitasking frontman for the day’s activities and events was **DJ Baby Dee** (whom you’ll see in the video below). He did double duty as a dynamic master of the dance floor and a master of ceremonies for speaker introductions.

Before the dance club morphed into a philosophy classroom, **Erik Farmer**, president of the Forest Houses Resident Association (who partnered with Hirschhorn to realize this project), took the microphone and briefly alluded to a “man who passed last week.”

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Both @rpogrebin and @ArchRecord say Barry Bergdoll will step down as MOMA architecture and design curator.  
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Retweeted by Lee Rosenbaum  
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**Lee Rosenbaum** @CultureGrrl 4h  
[@the\\_candelabra](#) [@ArtsDisciple](#) Thanks. I see next [@whitneymuseum](#) stroller tour is Hopper Drawings. Might be too subtle for CultureGrandson!

**Lee Rosenbaum** @CultureGrrl 4h  
Do NYC-area museums have stroller tours like [@ClevelandArt](#), where opinions expressed in “a coo or a cry” are welcome?  
[clevelandart.org/learn/in-the-g...](http://clevelandart.org/learn/in-the-g...)

**CAA** @collegeart 6h  
Major budget cut for the National Endowment for the Arts is frozen until fall: [bit.ly/1edZ2o0](http://bit.ly/1edZ2o0)  
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The Complete Guide to Collecting Art (Knopf)

### MAINSTREAM MEDIA

#### NY TIMES ARTS & LEISURE

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(Caravaggio/Hals)

#### NY TIMES OP-EDS:

[For Sale: Our Permanent Collection](#) (museum deaccessions)

[Fashion Victim](#) (Chanel at the Met)

[Destroying the Museum to Save It](#) (Barnes Foundation)

[Reassembling Sundered Antiquities](#)  
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(designed by Rick Mather)

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Erik Farmer (in the wheelchair), with microphone  
Photo by Lee Rosenbaum

A Dia spokesperson later told me that Farmer had been referring to **Jamal Davis**, a young community resident who was known to many of those who had worked to develop Gramsci Monument. Fatally shot on the sidewalk just outside the complex, he was honored with a makeshift memorial there:



Photo by Lee Rosenbaum

As it happened, a few hours after I returned home from my visit on July 13, the **George Zimmerman verdict** came down. That highly controversial acquittal “was the main topic of Sunday’s Open Mic. A poetry workshop focused on this topic too,” **Melissa Parsoff**, the Dia’s spokesperson, told me later.

**Marcus Green**, a guest scholar of a more populist bent, preceded Steinweg on the day when I visited. The author of a book on Gramsci and an assistant professor of history and political science at Otterbein University in Westerville, OH, Green did a better job than Steinweg in relating to a general audience. “Everyone is a philosopher,” he assured us. “We all think about the world; we all engage with the world....The idea of knowing thyself is to know that you are an intellectual, that you’re no different than the professional intellectual.” That seems to me a stretch, but at least Green was welcoming, not off-putting.

If Hirschhorn was truly interested in cultivating what he calls a “non-exclusive audience,” engaging Steinweg was a misstep. Far from bringing philosophy’s power to the people, his discombobulated discourse could only alienate the few Forest Houses residence who showed up to hear him.

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- [Extreme Makeover: Smithsonian Edition \(American Art and Portrait Gallery renovation\)](#)
- [This Museum’s Expansion is Simply Effective \(Minneapolis Institute\)](#)
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- [A Betrayal of Trust \(NY Public Library’s art sales\)](#)
- [The Lost Museum \(MoMA’s art sales\)](#)
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- PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER**
- [Her Art Came First: Anne d’Harnoncourt’s Labor of Love](#)
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The Philosopher Is In  
Photo by Lee Rosenbaum

By contrast, Green's talk (snippets of which you'll also hear in the video) may have had a fittingly Gramscian effect—inspiring the downtrodden to tell truth to power. Bringing the [now convicted](#) leaker of government secrets, **Bradley Manning**, into the discussion, Green provocatively interpreted his actions as consistent with Gramsci's belief that "the truth is revolutionary."

For alternate views on Gramsci Monument, read [Andrew Russeth](#) of the **NY Observer** ("Easily the most energetic public artwork the city has seen in years."); [Ken Johnson](#) of the **NY Times**, who misspelled the Morrisania neighborhood as "Morissania" ("I left feeling irritable and depressed."); and [Peter Schjeldahl](#) of the **New Yorker** ("This year's most captivating new art work.") I come down somewhere in the middle.

Now come down with me to the Bronx, my own native borough, to see Hirschhorn's convoluted creation for yourself—the dancing, the murals, the children's artworks, the computer room, the cameramen from the **PBS** "Art21" series, and even a campaigning Mayoral candidate (guess who), distributing flyers. (You may, at times, have to adjust the volume on your computer to hear my narration over the din of the dance music.)

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