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Bringing Art and Change to Bronx

By **RANDY KENNEDY**

Last year a tall man in a dark suit with thick black-frame glasses — something like a combination of Morrissey and Samuel Beckett — began showing up at housing projects all over New York City. He attended residents' meetings and spoke rapturously in a heavy Germanic accent about an improbable dream: finding people to help him build a monument to the Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci, who died in Rome in 1937.

“Believe it or not, people have come to us with stranger ideas before,” said Erik Farmer, the president of the residents' association at Forest Houses project in the Morrisania section of the South Bronx.

Neither Mr. Farmer nor many of the people who attended these meetings had ever heard of the man, **Thomas Hirschhorn**, a 56-year-old Swiss artist with a huge international following. But Mr. Hirschhorn wasn't interested in trading on his reputation.

“Some people think I am a priest or an eccentric rich man, and some people just think I'm a loser,” he said late last year in an interview, as he was making his visits. “But that is O.K. as long as they understand that I am serious.”

For the last two decades, few contemporary artists have been serious in quite the same way as Mr. Hirschhorn. His deeply political work — usually made with cheap materials assembled to look like totems of a postapocalyptic garbage cult — has long forced art lovers to face some very uncomfortable issues: oppression, poverty, abuse of power, the atrocities of war, and a culture of easy pleasure that makes it easy to ignore all those things.

On Monday, with the help of the Dia Art Foundation and Mr. Farmer, Mr. Hirschhorn will realize his vision of honoring Gramsci, unveiling a monument on the grounds of Forest Houses. It will exist in a parallel universe from the rest of the city's big-money summer exhibitions, daring viewers to veer far off the beaten museum-and-gallery path and question their ideas about the value and purpose of art.

Handmade from plywood, plexiglass and miles of beige packing tape — one of Mr. Hirschhorn's signature art supplies — the **Gramsci Monument** bears no resemblance whatsoever to the cenotaphs and glowering statues that dot the rest of New York. And it doesn't look much like an artwork, either. It looks more, in fact, like an adult treehouse or a makeshift beach cabana or a chunk of set hijacked from the Kevin Costner film “Waterworld.”

Though it might serve to memorialize Mr. Hirschhorn's tenacity as much, if not more, than the philosopher it is named for, the monument epitomizes the broadly humanist vision of Gramsci, who spent most of his adult life in prison under Mussolini and envisioned a working-class revolution that would begin as much in culture as in political practice.



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Throughout the summer, the monument will function as a kind of village festival, a city intellectual Woodstock, with lectures, concerts, recitals and art programs on the stages and pavilions that Mr. Hirschhorn and a paid crew of workers chosen from the Forest Houses have built over the last several weeks.

The project is the first that Mr. Hirschhorn has built in the United States and will be the fourth and final such work in a series he began many years ago dedicated to his favorite philosophers, following a monument dedicated to Spinoza in Amsterdam in 1999, one to Gilles Deleuze in Avignon, France, in 2000 and a third to [Georges Bataille](#) in Kassel, Germany, in 2002. From the beginning, the monuments have been planned and constructed in housing projects occupied mostly by the poor and working class, with their agreement and help. Mr. Hirschhorn's motivations in choosing the sites, however, are never straightforwardly benevolent.

"I tell them, 'This is not to serve your community, per se, but it is to serve art, and my reasons for wanting to do these things are purely personal artistic reasons,'" Mr. Hirschhorn said. "My goal or my dream is not so much about changing the situation of the people who help me, but about showing the power of art to make people think about issues they otherwise wouldn't have thought about."

These days, as the commercial art world feels increasingly like a branch of high finance, Mr. Hirschhorn is the rare artist who seems to move in and out of it with a nondenominational fluidity. He is represented by the prestigious Gladstone Gallery, and his work regularly shows up at important international art fairs, where it sometimes functions as the obnoxious party guest. But he has long spoken about the importance of seeking a "nonexclusive audience" for art. Such an audience includes those who go to museums and galleries, he says, though they are only a small part of the potential public for art.

And so when he began flying to New York from his home in Paris last year to plan the Gramsci monument, he came carrying an obsessively annotated New York City Housing Authority map; he eventually visited 46 of the 334 projects on that map, trying to find residents who would embrace his idea.

"I decided — O.K., almost for political reasons — that I wasn't going to do it in Manhattan," he said. "It has to be outside the center."

After narrowing down the possibilities to seven projects in the Bronx, he chose Forest Houses — a cluster of high-rise buildings completed in 1956, housing 3,376 people — largely

because of the enthusiasm of Mr. Farmer, 43, who has lived there almost his entire life and functions as the nerve center for the development. In constant motion around its grounds in a motorized wheelchair (he lost the use of his legs in a car accident when he was in college), Mr. Farmer seems to know everyone who lives in its buildings and to command, if not authority, at least respect.

He was one of the only people to ask Mr. Hirschhorn for [Gramsci's writings](#) while considering the monument proposal. And when he and Clyde Thompson, the complex's director of community affairs, embraced the idea, Mr. Hirschhorn said, he felt that he had found partners — in the cosmology of his art work, he calls them “key figures” — who would be able to help him see the monument through.

Mr. Farmer said he decided to make a persuasive case for Forest Houses not only because the monument would provide temporary construction and security jobs for residents, but because he hoped that it could mean more for the development.

“There's nothing cultural here at all,” he said one afternoon in early June as he watched Mr. Hirschhorn and several residents hard at work on the monument's plywood foundation. “It's like we're in a box here, in this neighborhood. We need to get out and find out some things about the world. This is kind of like the world coming to us for a little while.”

(At the project's end, the monument will not be packed up and reconstituted as an artwork to sell or show elsewhere; the materials will be given to Forest Houses residents in a lottery.)

Over the last two months, I spent several days watching Mr. Hirschhorn as he plotted out the monument in consultation with Mr. Farmer, whose job, among others, was to hire residents as temporary employees of the Dia Art Foundation, which is financing the project. (Those helping to build and staff the monument are being paid \$12 an hour; the state's minimum wage is currently \$7.25 an hour.)

It was not the first time I had visited the project. As a city reporter for The New York Times, I spent several days at [Forest Houses in 1993](#) when it was roiled by violence in the aftermath of the city's crack epidemic, and I accompanied a team of police officers on what was called a “vertical patrol” of several buildings. The officers, walking with their guns drawn, would ride the elevators to buildings' roofs, then walk down the stairs, fanning out on every floor in a show of force.

Forest Houses is a different place today, with a dramatically lower crime rate, but violence is still a fact of life. One day as Mr. Hirschhorn and the workers took a break during the heat of the afternoon, a young man sprinted by, followed by others shouting that he had robbed a man in one of the project's buildings. Two of the men chasing the accused thief caught him near a plywood walkway for the monument, tackled him and punched and kicked him for several minutes until his face was bloodied. He staggered away, to shouted threats.

Mr. Hirschhorn looked on in grim silence, and as soon as the incident was over he grabbed a sheet of plywood and immediately went back to work. Mr. Farmer, watching from his wheelchair, shrugged.

“I’m sorry you had to see that, but it’s self-policing, and that’s how that should work,” he said. “That guy doesn’t live here. He’s not going to come back here and try to rob anybody anymore.”

Once the monument begins its programming on Monday, it will be open free to the public seven days a week through Sept. 15, with lectures from scholars like the philosophers Simon Critchley and Marcus Steinweg; a daily newspaper published by residents; a radio station; and food provided by residents chosen by Mr. Farmer.

Whether summer tourists and other art patrons will drive up or walk the few blocks from the Prospect Avenue subway stop (on the Nos. 2 and 5 lines) is very much an open question. “We all hope that many people find their way there,” said Philippe Vergne, the director of the Dia Art Foundation, which took on the project as its first public-art commission in more than 15 years. “Thomas proceeds from the belief that art really can change something, and not just a living room.”

At Forest Houses, Mr. Hirschhorn pursues that belief with a messianic fervor, his wiry, energetic frame seeming to be everywhere at once — working, sweating, recruiting, philosophizing. And you get the distinct feeling that visitors are less important to him than the participation and acceptance of Forest Houses residents, many of whom have progressed from suspicious bemusement to grudging recognition to near-wholesale emotional ownership of the project, even older residents who initially complained that it looked like a shanty rising in their yard.

“You work on something like this, and after a while it’s not like a job,” said Dannion Jordan, 42, who is helping build the monument. “You start thinking it’s your thing, too. I mean, I’m no artist, but I’m making a work of art here.”

As in any ambitious creative endeavor, tensions have sometimes flared. One day Mr. Hirschhorn pushed the workers to keep at it in a steady rain, and they balked. “And somebody said to Thomas, ‘You just care about your work; you don’t love us,’ ” said Yasmil Raymond, Dia’s curator, who will spend the summer at the monument, as will Mr. Hirschhorn, who is living in a nearby apartment with his wife and toddler son.

“Thomas said: ‘It’s true. I do care very much about my work, but I care about you, too. I am not the boss, and you are not my employees. I am the artist, and you are helping me,’ ” Ms. Raymond recalled. “Things kind of gelled after that.”

Mr. Farmer said a reason the tide turned was that Mr. Hirschhorn “works harder than

anyone else out here.”

“For him this is a work of art,” he added. “For me, it’s a man-made community center. And if it changes something here, even slightly, well, you know, that’s going in the right direction.”

Mr. Vergne added, “People ask what will remain after the monument comes down in three months, and I think what will remain will be a certain way to think of the world — if only an urban legend of a Swiss artist who came from Paris to tell New Yorkers about a dead Italian philosopher, and people came to hear, and maybe they learned something that matters.”