

Opinion /

## The Giver, the Guest and the Ghost

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BY HARRY THORNE  
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Thoughts on the difficulties of introducing art into the public realm, following a recent symposium organized by Oslo Pilot



That art in public often inspires a different reaction to art shown in galleries is no revelation. Think, for example, of how the intentional vulgarity of Paul McCarthy is for the most part celebrated within the liberal workings of the art gallery setting. Offerings like *Train*, *Mechanical* (2003–09), an animatronic sculpture of George W. Bush sodomizing a pair of silicon pigs, or *Cultural Gothic* (1992–93), an elevated tableau in which a father proudly watches his son ‘surprise’ a goat from behind: while perhaps worthy of a momentary grimace, it's all par for the ‘white cube’ course. Contrast this reaction to the enraged Parisians who in 2014 marched on the Place Vendôme to vandalize McCarthy’s inflatable Christmas tree-cum-sex toy (glibly titled *Tree*).



Richard Serra, *Tilted Arc*, 1981, Federal Plaza, New York

Less intentionally provocative artists are also not immune from the public's scorn. In 1981, Richard Serra, often referred to as 'America's greatest living sculptor', was commissioned to produce a site-specific installation for the Federal Plaza in New York. The work, *Tilted Arc*, comprised a 12-foot tall, 120-foot long wall of sloped, unfinished steel that cleanly sliced the plaza in two. Within months of its installation, more than 1,300 local office workers, angered at having to circumnavigate the monolith each day, extending their commute by about 40 seconds, had signed a petition for its removal (it eventually was removed, in 1989).

Our changing taste in memorials – that most common of state-funded artistic offerings – is also worth considering. Long ago, when patriotism's dangerous connection to nationalism wasn't as closely scrutinized as it is today, the dead were immortalized by grand monuments – take as an example the 52 metre-high colossus-femme, erected in Volgograd to commemorate the Battle of Stalingrad. Nowadays, however, such bold (kitsch) gestures are off the cards. Instead, the 21st century monuments men, wherever they may reside, aim to be one thing and one thing only: inoffensive. The goal now seems to be seamless, unnoticed assimilation: secular, neutral, mundane repetitions of concrete stelae, aspiring to be more meditative than explicitly referential.

How, then, is contemporary art supposed to directly interact with today's general public? Should it attempt to brazenly unload itself into the milieu, with confidence in its own existential worth? Or – and this appears to be the popular approach – should it simply keep to its tried and trusted, albeit much smaller, audiences and continue to preach to the converted?



Thomas Hirschhorn, *Gramsci Monument*, 2013, 'Round Table Discussion about John Ahearn's *Bronx Bronzes Issue*', Forest Houses, Bronx, New York. Courtesy Dia Art Foundation; photograph: Romain Lopez

In 2013, Thomas Hirschhorn began a project at Forest Houses housing complex in the Bronx called the *Gramsci Monument*, the fourth in a series of projects dedicated to the Swiss artist's favourite philosophers. Assembled with the quotidian materials that Hirschhorn has long been associated with, the micro-occupation comprised a library, an internet café, a radio station, and an *al fresco* lecture space, that welcomed speakers including Glenn Ligon and Fred Moten, was erected to discuss and promote Antonio Gramsci's own strain of radical Marxism, one that revolves around the notion of hegemony. For Gramsci, hegemony means more than its base definition (the power held by the preponderant group over the state). Rather, it represents an internalized feeling of (in-) security that assures the prevailing power structures will always remain as is, *ad infinitum*, *ad nauseam*.

There are a number of issues here, many of which were brought to the fore by Hirschhorn himself when he recently spoke at 'The Giver, The Guest & The Host', a symposium on the presence of art in the public realm that was organized by Oslo Pilot in order to lay the groundwork for a future biennale in the city, and revolved around four works by Mette Edvardsen, Dora García, Hirschhorn, and Rahraw Omarzad. The first problem is that the Bronx didn't choose Hirschhorn's project – he chose the Bronx. With the backing of Dia Art Foundation, Hirschhorn spent two years conducting what he calls 'field work' across each of the public housing authority developments in New York, mapping, planning, and surveying in order to discern the most accommodating host locale. 'I have to choose the space', he said, 'the artist has to have the possibility to choose'. After two years of research, Hirschhorn settled on Forest Houses. There, amongst the **89 public housing developments** <<https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/nycha/downloads/pdf/factsheet.pdf>> , the 30.5% of individuals living **below the poverty line** <<http://nyscommunityaction.org/PovReport/2015/Bronx.pdf>> , with a 35% average proficiency in both reading and maths, and a one in 92 chance of becoming the victim of a violent crime, was where Hirschhorn found his 'non-exclusive audience'. These statistics, when read with a prior knowledge of Hirschhorn's status as a white European artist who has long been represented by one of *Forbes* magazine's 'Top Ten Art Dealers' <<http://http://www.forbes.com/pictures/mgg45egd/9-barbara-gladstone-77/#7a32d226371c>> , may make you shift in your seat, and they should.



Thomas Hirschhorn, *Gramsci Monument*, 2013, 'Poetry Session : Tonya Foster', Forest Houses, Bronx, New York. Courtesy Dia Art Foundation; photograph: Romain Lopez

The second problem here, and that which I find the most unsettling about Hirschhorn's ongoing practice, is the artist's continued reluctance to classify the individual 'monuments' works as examples of, for want of a better catch-all phrase, 'social practice'. As Hirschhorn put it: 'It's not a social art project, not a community art project, it's about presence production.' He continued: 'I am not a social worker', 'I work for art. I need to do it for art.'

That last sentence, for me, is damning. It's a contradiction that Hal Foster picked up eloquently in a panel discussion with Hirschhorn and Lisa Lee at Artists Space, New York in 2013, where they discussed *Gramsci Monument*. Foster's point was rebuffed time and time again by Hirschhorn's **reluctance to confront the issue** <<http://artistspace.org/programs/critical-laboratory>> . ('It's not a contradiction. [...] There is no contradiction.') For me this sounds suspiciously like an artist using the (real) impoverishment of the Bronx to satisfy his own (conceptual) interest in social philosophy, and in turn leveraging genuine social problems for his own artistic ends. It looks like an artist playing, to lift Kari Rittenbach's phrase, '**a sort of liberal-messianic role**' <[https://www.afterall.org/online/the-gulch-between-knowledge-and-experience\\_thomas-hirschhorn\\_s-gramsci-monument#.WEIF33d0fVo](https://www.afterall.org/online/the-gulch-between-knowledge-and-experience_thomas-hirschhorn_s-gramsci-monument#.WEIF33d0fVo)> , emerging from the mist only to dissipate once more when the funding runs dry (three months, on this occasion).

It seems ludicrous to have to clarify this, but I will: *Gramsci Monument* couldn't have happened in a setting like Forest Houses without the local community bringing it to life. Yet, despite this, Hirschhorn continues to deny that this community was ever the focus of the work – 'the question of "need" is a trap that I refuse to go in'. As he put it to Foster in the Artists Space discussion: 'I'm a warrior for something. For my form, my terms, for my understanding of art, for what I want to do.' In Oslo, this 'I'-centric philosophy was underscored by Erik Farmer, the president of the Forest Houses Tenants Association and a key facilitator of the Gramsci Monument: 'We haven't seen Thomas for a while now – the kids miss you, man.'



Artist Lex Brown, art historian Molly Nesbit and president of the Forest Houses Tenants Association Erik Farmer speaking at Oslo Pilot, 2016

Farmer, however, who, alongside *Gramsci Monument* collaborator and artist Lex Brown and art historian Molly Nesbit, participated in a plenary session on the project following Hirschhorn's exit, problematized my early scepticism. If Hirschhorn was the liberal messiah, then Farmer represented the congregation, and introduced to proceedings a very human voice that up until this point had been obscured. '[*Gramsci Monument*] changed a lot of people's lives', he said, adding that Hirschhorn had 'made people look at things differently.' Farmer was not blind to the tensions at play, acknowledging that an extension of the defined three-month period would have been beneficial but, staying loyal to Hirschhorn, he was quick to counter: while the project was in operation, the community rallied, crime rates dropped, local residents found employment, and the area welcomed visitors from parts of New York who would ordinarily be wary of the Bronx.

Farmer admitted that he hadn't initially understood the project, adding that discussion of Gramsci himself had been non-existent since it had ceased. Yet he, like a number of other residents attending the conference, repeatedly echoed the same refrain: the project had, however momentarily, allowed the local citizens to take pride in themselves and their community, and that while it had not left them with something tangible, they would always have a lasting memory, a legacy.

I still hold my earlier opinions on this work close. I still think Hirschhorn's particular brand of relational aesthetics has the potential to do more harm than good and (in a quite anti-Gramscian move) reassert the prevailing cultural hegemony of today. But, having heard from those involved, I now have a counter-argument that I will carry forward into my deliberations of similar projects. It was limited, it was insufficient, it was contradictory, and no, there will be no counter-hegemonic call to arms here. However, it prompted discussion and collaboration and, whether or not Hirschhorn views/viewed this as a significant outcome, it actually changed the lives of a select few for the better. In such dark times, when art can often feel disarmed, so very weak, that is something to cling on to.



Rahraw Omarzad, *Every Tiger Needs a Horse*, 2016, model

Similar take-away considerations could be traced through each of the other works that Oslo Pilot was forcing under the microscope for this symposium. Collective memory, for instance, or the lack thereof, lies at the heart of Afghan-born, Oslo-based artist Rahraw Omarzad's proposed sculpture, *Every Tiger Needs a Horse*. Oslo is, perhaps surprisingly, known locally as the *Tigerstaden* (tiger city'), a phrase lifted from Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson's 1870 poem 'Sidste Sang' (The Last Song) that describes a battle between a tiger (representative of the hostility of the city) and a horse (the serendipity of the countryside). In 2000, to mark the city's 1,000th anniversary, a bronze materialization of the tiger was installed in the plaza in front of the central station. Alas, there was no horse.

For Omarzad, who was born in Kabul, a city that since the First Anglo-Afghan War in the 1800s has struggled to settle amidst countless invasions and military uprisings, the symbolic presence of the horse should be celebrated. Thus, with *Every Tiger Needs a Horse*, he is proposing that the beast finally be reunited with its counterpart, a reminder to the citizens of the completed metaphor from which their city takes its unofficial name, and a tribute of the power of peace in the face of aggression. As Omarzad indicates through his orchestrating of the translations of Bjørnson's poem into Pashto, Persian and Arabic, this would be a localized version of a universal message. (Whether or not Omarzad's project will come to fruition is still to be seen. It's worth mentioning that when bronze horse was offered to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as a gift, it was rejected.)



Edvardsen Mette, *Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine*, 2010-ongoing

Memory is, to put it romantically, the primary medium of Mette Edvardsen's *Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine*, a sprawling collaborative project that has been taking place organically, and on a global scale, since 2010. Taking its starting point from Ray Bradbury's dystopic *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), within which books are outlawed and 'firemen' are employed to burn any that remain, the work sees volunteers commit vast amounts of time to memorizing a complete text of their own choosing. Together, they form a library of, at the time of writing, 68 books written in multiple languages, continuously roving around the globe. (Having spoken to several while in Oslo, I can confirm that it is an uncomfortable experience to have someone look you in the eye and proclaim: 'I am a book.')

During performances, the first of which took place within the Bibliothek Tweebronnen in Leuven, Belgium, readers come, select a text, walk with it to a set place, and have it read to them. 'Memory', Edvardsen says, 'is radical in our time. Forgetting has become a virtue.' It's poetic, probably sickeningly so for some (actually, a little sickeningly so for me), but a little indulgence never hurt anyone. Bradbury did it, after all: 'Stuff your eyes with wonder [...] See the world. It's more fantastic than any dream made or paid for in factories.'



Dora García, *Exile*, 2012–ongoing, installation view, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 2013

These notions of a self-generating artwork and an elongated process of fractal authorship are part and parcel of Spanish artist Dora García's practice. *Exile* (2012–ongoing), for example, a project formulated as an homage to the Italian artist Aldo Pironelli, is a slow accumulation over time of letters penned by writers and artist on the titular subject. An ever-growing archive, it builds upon a desk or a shelf a fraternity of strangers who are unknowingly linked by their common feeling of banishment. 'What I need from people is clear', said García, discussing an abstract future project (*Second Time Around*) during one of the many enlightening break-out sessions that ran throughout the conference, this one led by *frieze* contributing editor Barbara Casavecchia. 'The question', she continued, 'is what can I do for them?' Enacting a welcome about-turn from Hirschhorn's 'need = trap' position, García stated that, while her practice requires participation and attention in order to function, the gesture is always reciprocated in some way. Ordinarily, this comes in the form of what she terms 'poetic justice', but could be called the facilitating of emotional closure or, simply, the creation of comfort. For the *Nokdu bookstore for the living and the dead* (2016), for instance, which was shown at the Gwangju Biennale earlier this year, García restaged one of the key sites of Gwangju's democratic uprising in 1980, stocking it with donated books and using the space for a series of lectures that continued throughout the biennale. In 2014, for *The Hearing Voices Café*, she created a safe space in Hamburg's Traumzeit Café, in which those who experience the phenomenon of hearing voices could congregate, leaving scepticism and stigma at the door. When García's earlier consideration of what she can do for those that she works with was turned back on her, she answered in a way that again reasserted the ability of art to affect the real world in a positive manner: 'By placing themselves in a contemporary art context, they get away from the therapeutic context.' This slight alteration in routine might, I suppose, to repeat Erik Farmer's conclusions, help them to see things differently.

The use of the word 'realm' in the subtitle of the symposium is interesting, when 'space' or 'sphere' would have sufficed. With 'realm' comes a connotation of medieval times: of kingdoms, bloody campaigns, and battles over birth rites. Its etymology takes us to *realme*, to *rēgālimen*, to *rēgalis* – 'royal'. To position oneself within that space, that controlled domain, sounds a little like an invasion and, when you break it down, that's essentially what we're talking about with public art.

Let's extend this admittedly extravagant metaphor a little further: Look back over the (few) 'successful' military occupations that have taken place throughout history and you will see that the common factors are a continuous dialogue that is open to the possibility of compromise,



the devotion of the occupying force to the cause in question for an extended period of time and, most importantly, a mutual recognition of a need for change. The same logic can be applied to art that enters into the public realm. If one is to introduce art to the wider world, to the public world, as Oslo Pilot is currently drawing up the plans to do, then it is that public who preside over the soon-to-be invaded territory, who must take centre stage. That does not mean neutrality; it means careful consideration of wants and needs. Art can, in certain scenarios, be of benefit, as each of these four projects demonstrates in its own particular way – it can inspire pride, resurrect forgotten memories, provoke conversation, and heal. But for that to happen, the art must be wanted. It's hard for art to be loved; it's much easier for it to offend. All it takes is an inconvenience of 40 seconds, and then its gone – the given, the unwelcome guest and its ghost.

*Main image: Thomas Hirschhorn, Gramsci Monument, 2013, Gramsci Bar, Forest Houses, Bronx, New York. Courtesy Dia Art Foundation; photograph: Romain Lopez*

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#### **HARRY THORNE**

Harry Thorne is associate editor of *frieze* and a contributing editor of *The White Review*. He is based in Berlin, Germany.

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