Thomas Hirschhorn’s Monuments and the Politics of Public Space

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Over the summer of 2013, the Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn realised the Gramsci Monument, the last in a series of four monuments dedicated to great philosophers. In a statement explaining the concept behind his work, Hirschhorn wrote that “my critique of the monument comes from the fact that the idea of the monument is imposed from above. A monument is determined, produced, and situated by decisions from above, from power.”

This paper defines and positions Hirschhorn’s recently-completed series in relation to prevailing models of monumentality, which tend to speak the voice of authority and objectify the past. Most importantly, this paper offers ways of understanding these works as part of Hirschhorn’s critique of public space. In fact, Hirschhorn’s work provides a productive model for socially- and spatially-engaged practices. For one thing, Hirschhorn conceives of his monuments as events, as spaces where public discussion and reflection are encouraged. In addition, Hirschhorn encourages the free production of encounters, emphasising the collaborative aspect of his work without enforcing participation. This paper considers these and other means used by Hirschhorn to support his conception of the public role of art: to critique our current use of public space as a mere space of transit, a space that becomes purely instrumental to our fulfilling everyday tasks.

I argue that it is by opening up a radical alternative to architecture-as-usual, while emphasising architecture’s capacity to develop social interaction – triggering interwoven processes of construction, inhabitation, and interaction – that Hirschhorn’s series of Monuments reaffirms the possibility of productive public spaces. Located at the intersection of art, architecture, and urban design, Hirschhorn’s model activates the constructive rather than the destructive potential of social tensions.

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