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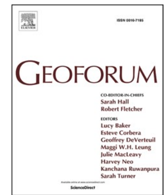

A monument to whom? Artist positionality in community art-based projects

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ABSTRACT

Artistic interventions in the public domain are often legitimized as opportunities for the empowerment of local communities. However, the nature of such interventions is complex and cannot be inferred from stated intentions. The interaction between agents of cultural and artistic interventions and local communities is shaped by power relationships that are seldom made explicit, let alone negotiated. Here, we analyze *The Gramsci Monument*, a site-specific project by Thomas Hirschhorn that took place in the Forest House neighborhood (Bronx, New York) in 2013. The project has been celebrated as an example of an emancipatory practice that involved a disenfranchised local community. We show that it could be rather taken as an example of how art-driven space domestication may lead to forms of alienation and paternalism without actual sharing of creative responsibility and negotiation with the local community. We analyze the implications of this practice through a conceptual framework of artist positionality and deontological responsibility of artistic agency.

1. Introduction

Artistic community-based interventions are often advocated as opportunities for cultural expression, inclusion, connectivity, and participation. However, they may also function as legitimizers of practices of space hegemony and exclusionary urban redevelopment, thickening the gap between those who decide and those who bear the consequences of such decisions (Sacco et al., 2019b). Verbally questioning the ruling socio-economic order does not guarantee that a project truly affirms the voice and interests of the weaker social constituencies. In fact, it may also de facto reaffirm such order, and serve its underlying vested interests. This can be typically accomplished through ingenious forms of obversion of the actual meaning and purpose of the social critique that apparently motivates the intervention, turning it into a sophisticated, manipulative form of pretend play. Urban art projects that do not intentionally and effectively overcome such potential contradictions may undermine public trust in the transformational potential of art practices and may exacerbate existing inequalities rather than addressing them.

Public art projects may have major political consequences because urban space is, in essence, a nexus of power relations. Concepts such as networked urbanization (Castells, 1996), the generic city (Koolhaas and Mau, 1995), the edge city (Gerreau, 1991) and the endless city (Burdett and Sudjic, 2007), all of which conceptualize cities as centers of economic and financial power shaped by the logic of neoliberal economies, seem to imply that the power asymmetries that drive urban growth are nothing but the flip side of socio-economic development. It would then follow that the limited scope left to mitigate them is a cost that we have to pay to celebrate the ‘triumph of the city’ and its promise of making ‘us’ richer, smarter, greener, healthier, and happier (Glaeser, 2012). But who is this ‘us’, and who draws the line between ‘us’ and ‘them’? This ambiguity has paved the way to a parallel, emerging discourse on urban uncertainty (Latour, 2005) that rather draws attention toward the in-between fringes of peripheral zones, and the fragmentation of urbanized landscapes, whose fault lines often reflect with stunning clarity the actual spatial borders between ‘us’ and ‘them’, and their implications in terms of socio-economic deprivation, environmental risks, violence, and insecurity. The evident, emerging criticalities of the urban spaces of neoliberal cities, and especially of megacities, have called for an agenda of new policies for social inclusion and environmentally sustainable innovation (Brenner & Keil, 2014; Marcuse & Van Kempen, 2011). However, the neoliberal logic of space production pays little more than lip service to such instances, and still reflects the interests of the cosmopolitan elites. Of course, we must eschew easy generalization in

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Geoforum 131 (2022) 173–184

the analysis of global urban trends, in particular in the case of the complex cultural ecologies of megacities (Colucci and Sacco, 2020). A fair strategy of understanding should rather reconnect to geographically-rooted thinking, and to an epistemology of complexity, taking into account the historical processes of space transformation that have led to the current elitist, hegemonic logic of space production and reproduction, as Lefebvre (1974) puts it. The third wave of 21st-century urbanization (Scott, 2011) stems from the industrial city spaces' shift toward deindustrialization and delocalization of production, from national and local contexts to globalized, super-territorial networks (Castells, 1996), as conceptually summarized by the circularity in the relation between abstract and empty space when the dynamics of gentrification and hegemonic space appropriation take over (Trimarchi, 2019). Forms of urbanization, the relationship between subjectivity and spaces of daily dwelling such as warehouses, skyscrapers, malls and infrastructures of connectivity (Harvey, 2012) is shaped into a form of heterotopic alienation, subordinated to the logic of capital growth, accumulation and planification (Lefebvre, 1974) that naturally matches the top-down logic of space production that best represents the interests of the elites, and that Lefebvre addresses as representational space.

In the built environment of the city, autonomic art practices can play multiple roles in stabilizing and uplifting the civic quality of neighborhoods (Markusen, 2006), but they can be easily swayed into instrumental agents of hegemonic space domestication if they lack political self-awareness and subtlety. The culture-led renaissance narrative is indeed scattered with widely heralded artistic projects in public space, aimed at disenfranchised local communities but actually cultivating practices of exclusion, peripheralization and atomization (Brenner and Keil, 2014; Sassen, 2015). We have to accept that, ontologically, the artistic agency naturally resides in some form of heterotopia, but it makes a big difference what kind of heterotopia prevails: a Foucaultian or a Lefebvrian one (Sacco et al., 2019a).

Critically distinguishing between two different notions of heterotopia could sound like a typical academic exercise. However, such distinction has important political consequences, as the related practices bring about very different consequences in terms of the negotiation of agency for disenfranchised communities. The main contribution of this paper is that of analyzing in detail the implications and impact of a specific Foucaultian heterotopia, under the form of a public art project, in a marginal urban space, and of discussing its limitations and its untapped alternative unfolding in terms of a possible (denied) Lefebvrian heterotopia of anti-hegemonic artistic agency. This allows us to demonstrate the potential of such conceptual dyad in guiding not only further analysis of existing practices, but also the design and critical scrutiny of future public art interventions. In particular, the Foucaultian heterotopic public art intervention we consider is one of the most iconic examples of art-based community engagement: Thomas Hirschhorn's *Gramsci Monument* (South Bronx, 2013).

The interest of the case study stems from a significant combination of factors: its relevance and visibility in the art-world, and the artist's apparent lack of awareness of (and responsibility for) the project's social consequences, as documented by both the secondary sources we analyzed and by his own Manifesto. Such a combination, in its peculiarity, is highly telling of the complex, controversial implications of certain forms of community-based artistic interventions in the public space. In this perspective, our study contributes to the critical geography literature that considers how star-artists belonging to a transnational, global jet-set may, intentionally or not, behave like colonizers in their occasional engagement with local communities, while uncritically appropriating their cultural assets and identities (Luger, 2017), with no real concern for dialogue (Ley, 2004) and for connection to the community's life perspectives, experiences, and goals (Söderström, 2006), let alone to negotiate and agree with the community the rules of the interaction and the meanings behind them. Such unreflective, self-serving interventions denounce, among other things, a lack of specific skills about, and experience with, real community-based work, and of the deontological self-awareness needed to avoid their inadvertent transformation into amateurish social experiments for which the artist takes no responsibility, raising expectations that are not meant to be fulfilled, and leaving all consequences on the shoulders of the community. The persistence of such apparent contradictions in established and even acclaimed artistic practice testifies to the need of taking a deeper critical look, and to develop sharper analytical categories to assess them and their consequences beyond purely formal aesthetic criteria. Putting such conceptual system at test on a highly representative case study, to inspire future, more self-critical, informed, and responsible interventions with a real empowering and counter-hegemonic impact on fragile, marginal urban communities is the ultimate purpose of our paper.

2. Literature review

Our paper moves from a radical human geography approach. In particular, we refer to intellectual activism approaches that analyze the spatial dimension of power relations from a critical stance. We focus our attention on theories of social movements, activism and social justice praxis, and build upon the idea that representation (and art itself, as a privileged arena for space representation) may be a means of domination as well as of resistance (Blomley, 2006). As Evans (2019) puts it, the crux of the issue is whether or not public art interventions enable effective acts of citizenship, that is, counter-hegemonic affirmations of democratic pluralism and social justice. In our analytical perspective of the case study, we bear in mind the fundamental superstructural lens, borrowed from social geography, of intersectionality: forms of social oppression in social space are complex and 'multi-layered and routinized forms of domination' (Crenshaw, 1991). In particular, with this paper, we aim at contributing to existing cultural geographical studies by applying a new theoretical perspective and taxonomic scheme (Sacco et al., 2019b) to the debate on power relations established by public art in socio-economically fragile, disenfranchised urban contexts. It is crucial to emphasize that we assume the Gramscian concept of hegemony not just as a consequence of the thematic focus of the project we analyze, but because of its essential, foundational role in the theoretical perspective established by the disciplinary structure to which we refer. Although a full discussion of the Gramscian notion of counter-hegemony is beyond the scope and the space limitations of this paper, it is important to stress how such notion is central to our argument. Gramsci characterizes hegemony in terms of an organization of consent, that is, of a dominance relationship built upon its implicit acceptance by the dominated, obtained through a specific ideological representation (Carroll and Ratner, 1994). Overturning such representation by making the dominated aware of their potential agency in building an alternative, more socially equitable representation, is the essence of counter-hegemonic practice. Involving a marginalized community into a public art intervention that seeks legitimization from their own cultural identity and capital while denying them any real agency or negotiation power is conceivably one of the most transparent illustrations of hegemony at work.

Martin Zebracki, on the current debate in geographies of public art, recently affirmed: "Geographers have been increasingly engaging public art" (2019), intertwining with the realms of digital space and questioning norms and hegemonic discourses around critical pedagogy, queer and minorities studies and space (Zebracki 2018; 2019). Geographic literature that wishes to deeply understand the social justice dynamics and the ensuing impacts upon urban spaces of public artistic practices (see Sharp et al., 2005; Cameron and Coaffee, 2005; Matthews, 2010; Hawkins, 2015; Souzis, 2015) has often assumed this interdisciplinary perspective to inquire about "how processes of social inclusion and exclusion operate and are linked to public-art making and community engagement" (Cartiere & Zebracki, 2016).

Along these lines of analysis, that further expand our reading of the dynamics of space production, we built the theoretical framework of the

present paper by further elaborating on the critical comparison between two notions of heterotopia: Foucaultian vs. Lefebvrian (Sacco et al., 2019a), and by applying it to the analysis of a specific artistic practice. Different heterotopias imply very different outcomes of related artistic practices. In our case study, as we shall see, the top-down perspective of the artist's institutionalized privilege of setting and enforcing the rules of creation of shared symbols and imaginaries, which reflects the Foucaultian epistemology, reveals its inadequacy as its plainly contradicts the very premises of meaning of an intervention inspired by the Gramscian principles. To fix this inconsistency, it is indispensable to revert the participatory logic of the intervention in terms of pervasive connection to material and symbolic community practices, at the crossroads of community empowerment, inclusion and legitimization, promoting more inclusive, authentic and sustainable forms of space re-appropriation through horizontal cooperation, symbolic exchange, negotiation and cultural interaction (Sacco et al., 2019a), in accordance with the Lefebvrian notion.

According to Lefebvre (1974), empty spaces symbolize a parenthesis in intersubjective relationality, awaiting to be inhabited and lived, circulated, occupied and organized in their ontological relations and socio-cultural identity (Shields, 1989). This happens either with the empty, abandoned areas of the city marked by displaced social formations of ethnic and socio-economic marginalities and outcasts (Shields, 1991), or in the case of historical settlements by ethnic minorities who have been allocated to peripheral zones in the early stages of urban settlements, as for South Bronx. All these settlers, excluded from the mainstream consumption game due to their low disposable income, and from participation in communal city life due to subtle forms of exclusion from the public domain, are consequently identified as the cause of a real or perceived urban decay. Such decay, in turn, epitomizes their irreparable distance from the values and lifestyles of the more privileged classes, and fuels a less-and-less-undercover social conflict. Actually, peripheral neighborhoods inhabited by marginalized communities may nevertheless become vibrant urban environments (Ferilli et al., 2017), where processes of social aggregation and sense of territorial belonging may function as socio-cultural antidotes to marginalization, deprivation, impoverishment, exclusion and segregation (Hubbard, 2017). These spaces of enacted practice are built on social interactions and deep embedding within the human habitat of the urban space and thrive on the spontaneous community building initiatives flourishing in the lived environment as forms of spatial engagement and organic collective action (Loh and Agyeman, 2019).

The problem is on the contrary represented by those external interventions that either ignore or instrumentalize neighborhood cultures, through the paternalistic imposition of bourgeois neoliberal ethics of social docility to 'sanitize' undomesticated spaces (Shields, 1989; Bromley & Matthews, 2007). Art-based urban regeneration nominally pursuing social cohesion and effective integration (as opposed to forced assimilation) of marginalized communities is often shaped by elites with unchecked agenda-setting powers. Despite their stated goals of community engagement and empowerment, such projects sanction in fact the political irrelevance of the constituencies they pretend to engage with as to the concrete negotiations that drive actual processes of urban transformation (Freundschuh, 2006). As a result, the urban, as reshaped by hegemonic logics of economic power, turns into a Foucaultian heterotopia, namely a form of urban abstraction and alienation. Forms of resistance by marginalized communities, sometimes stigmatized as violent or anti-social according to convenient hegemonic double standards, are the consequential and yet condemned result of this reiterated exclusion (Uysal 2012, Mathers et al., 2008). These are rather a rebellion toward exclusionary forms of domestication (Sacco et al., 2019b), spatial commodification, privatization, instrumental culturalization, that aim at reaffirming class identity (Fuchs et al., 2005), by confining the artistic pretend play into a remote heterotopic space (Sacco et al., 2019a), lacking actual political edge but wrapped up in radical posing.

Art-based hegemonic practices of domestication instantiate the epistemology of heterotopia as expressed by Foucault (1967), by reaffirming its structural relationship with top-down planning processes of space appropriation enacted by the elites (Sacco et al., 2019a). Such practices bring about forms of space alienation and displacement that disrupt any oppositional social, cultural and aesthetic order on behalf of the hyper-economized neoliberal paradigm of the planetary urban (Palladino and Miller, 2015). The logic of re-transforming the peripheries – once empty spaces now turned into politically problematic places – back into abstract spaces, 'blank slates' for profitable real estate redevelopment, is well known and occurs in forms that often invoke culture-driven urban development and regeneration (Ferilli et al., 2015). This may follow two prevailing, only apparently alternative paradigms: a top-down strategy of violent urban redevelopment, often pursued in alliance with parts of the creative sector (Pratt, 2009), or a bottom-up but hetero-directed harnessing of cultural capital to refurbish and colonize cheap residential and studio spaces to pave the way to future gentrification (Matthews, 2010).

Although in this paper we critically and polemically pit the top-down and bottom-up perspectives against each other, we are not implying that top-down is intrinsically hegemonic and bottom-up intrinsically counter-hegemonic. The governance of complex societies must inevitably rely upon a smart mix of top-down and bottom-up elements (Homsy et al., 2019). However, in the specific case of artistic agency, questioning the top-down perspective in favor of a bottom-up stance is important in terms of the implied negotiation of power between the artist and the community. No act of citizenship in the sense of Evans (2019) is really possible without such negotiation. Likewise, thinking by definition of the community as a cohesive, harmonic block with no internal tensions or contradictions is clearly improper and unrealistic (Yassi et al., 2016). Nevertheless, for the sake of the specific argument developed here, considering the community as a compact social entity with a potential agency of its own is a convenient approximation, in that, as it will be explained below, in the case study we analyze the social dynamics were clearly shaped, and mutually perceived, in terms of an artist/community dialectics. This aspect needs however to be further problematized and more closely analyzed in future research.

Artistic practices need not be natural allies of hegemonic forces and interests. An important strand of literature (Cameron and Coaffee, 2005) especially focusing on the public space framework, recognizes the central and often leading (though possibly unsuspecting) role of artists in urban change processes, as in a sort of living lab of how arts and culture may powerfully create new collective dramaturgies that reshape relationships and feelings, social behaviors and even interactions. Artists are much more effective agents of change than commonly recognized (Sommer, 2013), and their practices in the public domain may become a powerful source of production of new relational goods, of re-purposing of problematic and even contested spaces, and of creation of new urban hotspots – especially when their commitment to the place and their dialogue with the community are not occasional but constitutive of the artistic practice (Reinhardt, 2015). At the cultural level, artists produce meanings; at the social level, they combine and confront diversity; at the economic level, they point at alternative modes of production and exchange through the exploration of new participative practices. In this vein, artists are potential generators of social innovation that in their best-resolved forms may really contribute to community empowerment (Nuccio and Pedrini, 2014). As anticipated, art practices may assume a hegemonic or counter-hegemonic character according to cases, also as a reflex of how the inherent tension faced today by many artists – who rely on commissioning from elites to secure a living, or to become part of their social milieu, through direct patronage or grants from specialized institutions – is actually solved. Artists are often vocal against the value ideology of the elites, both in aesthetic and political terms, but not all of them are ready to bear the consequences of a truly radical contraposition. Leveraging upon this inherent contradiction, the elites can often easily hijack artistic opposition, turning art commissioning into a celebration of their own social and political dominance. They are often more

than willing to support and exhibit the artworks that directly confront them, by strategically inscribing such critical statements into suitable institutional spaces that are materially and symbolically owned by them, with the subtly ironic (and politically devastating) effect of commodifying the protest against themselves into an asset that further contributes to their own wealth. If artists want to express a credible opposition to an inequality-based, exclusive societal status quo and become a dynamic force for social change, they have to successfully overcome this dilemma by eschewing compromise and ambiguity.

3. Materials and method

3.1. The case study

The methodology we use in this paper is the case study approach, as we are investigating a complex contemporary phenomenon by focusing upon a particularly meaningful case (Yin, 2009), an art project in the public domain that has received vast attention and acclaim in the artworld. We chose this case as an example of the contradiction we highlighted in the literature review section, for two reasons. First, because it is often heralded as an accomplished form of art-based community engagement, and moreover because it is built on the symbolic exploitation of one of the noble fathers of the very idea of community engagement and empowerment through culture: Antonio Gramsci. Thomas Hirschhorn's *Gramsci Monument*, a temporary public art installation that, in the summer of 2013, sat in the courtyard of a low-income housing area of the South Bronx, has sparked controversy and discussion across its whole life cycle as to the impacts and legacy that the 'monument' had on the everyday life of the Forest Houses community.

We see our analysis as a first step of a research program of critical inquiry into art-based projects in the public domain, to spur more articulate debates on the potential benefits and pitfalls of these practices in the exercise of the right to the city by disenfranchised communities. Our analysis is based upon secondary sources, with an awareness of the limitations and possible biases of such a knowledge base.

We have carefully gathered and thoroughly analyzed the most reliable sources on the selected case study, drawing from academic journals, the most influential media and their reports (Ligon, 2013; Schjeldahl, 2013; Johnson, 2013; Wickstrom, 2014; Valle, 2015) and from the documentary film directed by Angelo L. Ludin "Thomas Hirschhorn. Gramsci Monument" (2015). We then carefully read and analyzed The *Form and Forcefield schema,* the artist's theoretical manifesto (Hirschhorn, 2015) included in the article "Gramsci monument", published in *Rethinking Marxism*. Subsequently, we developed our analysis through the already mentioned conceptual lens, recently introduced by Sacco et al. (2019a), of the comparison between Foucaultian and Lefebvrian heterotopias as theoretical alternatives for the interpretation of cities as social and participatory spaces.

In this framework, our analysis of the case study builds on the conceptual taxonomy originally introduced by Sacco et al. (2019b) with reference to another case study of a public art program deeply related to ongoing processes of gentrification in another NYC neighborhood. Such taxonomy is based upon three key dimensions as to the impact of art practices in the public space: the commitment to the place, the role of negotiation, and the community empowerment/entitlement. This approach is especially useful to assess the impacts of artistic practices in contexts of culture-driven urban regeneration addressing fragile local communities, in which the hyper-diverse (Tasan-Kok et al., 2014) identity of the local social fabric can be easily subverted. In that case, the theoretical framework helped to show how artistic practices may function as domesticating forces when particular interests of key economic stakeholders are prioritized over the local community's strives to preserve its capacity to maintain and pursue meaningful collective goals, and ultimately to defend its own right to the city (Fraser, 2004).

Sacco et al. (2019b) characterize domestication, which is a hegemonic practice of exercising control by means other than coercive forces (Gregory et al., 2011) in urban contexts, such as the turning of the landscapes of production into landscapes of consumption (Zukin, 1993), in terms of three key dimensions of special relevance for the characterization of the impact of art practices on public space. The first dimension is commitment to the place, namely the capacity to reflexively acknowledge local identities and cultural codes in the context of an active social exchange with the residents, with the consequent creation of new, project-specific social assets of trust, sense of belonging, and mutual recognition. The second dimension is role negotiation, a measure of democratic deployment of the interaction rules that guarantees fair representation and pluralism in opposition to the imbalance in negotiation power and manipulation which affects weak social constituencies. The third is community empowerment/entitlement, a dimension that organizes the community as a collective agent to cohesively affirm the right to the city (Gregory et al., 2011) by giving voice to the members of a local community with common interests and historical memory.

The project's contradictions with reference to these dimensions would already become apparent from a basic review of the main literature. When in the summer of 2013 the *New York Times* (Johnson, 2013) and the *New Yorker* (Schjeldahl, 2013) published their reviews of the project, the public opinion was probably already polarized. On the one side, the artworld quickly endorsed the project as exemplary in its own right. Not only the most important magazines of contemporary art like *Mousse*[1], *Flash Art* (#292 October 2013), *ArtReview* (Neil, 2013), *Artforum* (Wilson-Goldie, 2013) lauded Hischhorn's project, but also did Italy's Fondazione Gramsci itself[2]. On the other hand, dissenting voices such as Jonson (2013) expressed their perplexity, caustically and lucidly pointing out the main questions: "I left feeling irritable and depressed." (…) "I happened along when there was a lull in an otherwise terrifically energetic evolution of a new hegemony. As it was, it all made me sad: I had a vision of the great man descending upon the benighted residents of Forest Houses to spread his manna and impregnate the community with an embryo of hope, but one that was doomed to fade after the construction is dismantled at the end of the summer." "I suspect, it will be preserved in memory mainly by the high-end artworld as just a work by Mr. Hirschhorn, another monument to his monumental ego.".

Schjeldahl (2013) sympathized with the obstinacy of a work resulting as contradictory as the artistic path of its creator is: "Hirschhorn emphasizes that the monument is no social-work experiment, but "pure art." This rings true. On three visits, my cynical antennae scanned in vain for hints of do-good condescension." Hirschhorn "cradles a hope that some people's experience of the work might enhance their lives, but he makes clear that that's out of his hands. His contributions to the program of public events brought no concession to popular appetites: the sparsely attended lectures by a young philosopher from Berlin, Marcus Steinweg, included one, the other day, entitled "Ontological Narcissism". The artist Glenn Ligon (2013) who spent his youth as an actual member of the Forest Houses community, with an eye open on the complexity of that context and with a full entitlement to jump into the debate, wrote in turn an essay for *Artforum* and shed light on the urgent questions the Gramsci Monument raised about the role of the artist and the very viability of public space, calling into question Hirschhorn on the kind of lasting effects that would have truly served the community.

In 2014, Wickstrom, in the article "The Infinitude of Thought in Precarious Form", also provided a forceful synthesis of the project's main limitations: "It is difficult to understand and be generous towards him when (…) he refuses to address directly why it is that he chooses to court specifically poor and marginalized people of color and their living spaces when he is looking for a place and help to do a monument. It is at first maddening that he refuses to explain anything except in his own

[1] Available at: https://moussemagazine.it/thomas-hirschhorn-gramsci-monument/.

[2] Available at: https://www.fondazionegramsci.org/mostre-spettacoli/gramsci-monument/.

lexicon", she analytically observes, deconstructing and reorganizing every layer of the artistic performances that took place in the Forest Houses in search of a meaningful connection to the very existence of the human beings involved, only to find evidence for the self-affirmation of the author's ego. What is particularly striking is the total lack of concern about the class and ethnicity issues raised by the project, implicitly removing the history of the neighborhood and of the community.

In a nutshell, despite that the project has been acclaimed as a celebration of Gramsci as a hero of the cultural redemption of the disenfranchised (Ligon, 2013; Davis, 2013; Simpson, 2017), it is better described as the artist's misappropriation of the neighborhood's common space, from an entirely top-down perspective built on the institutionalized imposition of an artist-demiurge role that precludes any form of real negotiation or even dialogue with the community. As we shall see, Hirschhorn's dysfunctional mode of involvement of the community, beyond the reference to the rhetorical *topoi* of participatory practice, goes further than taking advantage of it as cheap workforce, and of its public spaces as a convenient theatre for revolutionary posing. Due to the relevant commercial and economic interests that are inherently related to such practices, which also profit from the misappropriation of the economic surplus generated by the cultural capital that typically flourishes in art-led regenerations, the concerned communities can experience dramatic consequences in terms of loss of decisional power, displacement and loss of place identity, being systematically excluded from any benefits. The irony of the situation is that the entire stipulation of meaning of the project rhetorically alludes, despite Hischhorn's apparent denial, to a promise of community empowerment – why choosing a derelict place like Forest Houses otherwise? – but without any form of accountability, however vague. Marginal urban public spaces are at the same time potentially very responsive to meaningful forms of engagement, but also, and for the same reasons, easily exploitable.

Moving from these critical remarks by early commentators, we now develop a more systematic analysis that allows to understand in more depth in what sense Hirschhorn's *Gramsci Monument* can be considered as an inherently contradictory and actually dangerous approach to art practice in the public space, with potentially disruptive consequences for fragile communities which may be brought to regard participative art projects as threatening hegemonic practices, and not, as it could and should be, as real opportunities of effective civic and political agency. Meaningful, accountable art practices in the public domain could provide an antidote to the hyper-commodification of art and could become the elective field of practice for artists interested in working on the contradictions of contemporary neoliberal societies (Deutsche, 1992), exploring new forms of art-driven civic constituency and fostering social change (Thompson, 2012). The same context, however, may easily function as a pedestal for personal exposure at the expense of the community, depending on the artist's positional choices. To better explain this point, we now have to discuss the concept of positionality.

3.2. Intersectionality and positionality

Artistic agency naturally resides within some form of heterotopia, with far-fetched consequences. Foucaultian heterotopias are highly functional to the hegemonic appropriation not only of urban space, but also of the urban cultures that inhabit it, as they are a direct expression of top-down processes of re-territorialization of 'urban voids'. In Lefebvre's view, heterotopias are instead created by spontaneous practices of collaborative, collective action. They express a romantic idea of urban revolution that is conducive to the re-appropriation of the right to the city (Butler, 2012; Purcell, 2002). To this purpose, the top-down perspective of the artists' institutionalized privilege of setting and enforcing their own rules of creation of shared symbols and imaginaries, should be transformed by a participatory logic of inclusive, collective enactment of material and symbolic collective practices, pursuing community empowerment and legitimization, and promoting more authentic and sustainable forms of space re-appropriation through horizontal cooperation, symbolic exchange, and fair negotiation (Sacco et al., 2019a). To understand the rationale and necessity of anti-hegemonic artistic agency in marginal urban spaces, we make use of the concept of positionality as a gateway to a constructive reorientation of the artist's gaze, subjectivity and localization in the context of community-based practices.

Positionality is employed in human geography as a methodological tool for researchers to interrogate how their subjectivity, ethics and politics shape the research and potentially inhibit the relationship with people, places and the material of the research itself (England, 1994). Shifting the interpretation from the research fieldwork to art practices, here we repurpose the concept in terms of the responsibility of artistic agency towards society and space. As a representative of an elitist social milieu that has legitimized the production of socially relevant meanings by means of a top-down epistemology of the *representation of space* (Lefebvre, 1974), the artist has a unique chance to act as a creator of Foucaultian heterotopias which normatively redefine space and prescribe the appropriate ways to relate to it through appropriate visual and conceptual strategies, and even newly minted rituals. But artists can also choose, to the contrary, to reverse their positionality to commit to a deontologically transparent goal of horizontal, open-ended, peer-based community empowerment. Here, the contribution of feminist geographers' scholarship comes at the forefront of our discourse, shedding light on a conceptual understanding of positionality and reflexivity by shifting from the "god-trick" top-down view (Haraway, 1991) towards a scopic regime (Rose, 1997), probing and reflecting on reality through self-interpretation and observation (Cloke et al., 2000) and inclusive critical discourse. Adopting a feminine geographical thinking and visualization need not mean embracing a feminist interpretative framework, but rather engendering the artist's gaze to assume the viewpoint of the historically dispossessed, to question the representation of space as space per se (Bondi & Domosh, 1992), and with it, its underlying power relationships. As clarified by Lefebvre in the Spatial Triad, space is constantly produced and reproduced at the intersection of social agents – in our case, of the artists themselves and the community they refer to (Rose, 2017). Rather than an epistemically masculine, positivist practice of spatial entanglement (Kwan, 2002) building on abstract, supposedly universal laws of space production (Harvey, 1969; Cosgrove, 1985) that reflect the commodified logic of planetary urbanization, we advocate for a critical, self-reflexive positionality in artistic practice, embedded and territorially localized into the relational interactions superseding to the social production of space through spatial practices in the Lefebvrian sense (1974), and guided by the unravelling of close personal and cultural exchanges as in feminist epistemology (Rose, 1997). In addressing this need, we argue that the artist acting at the crossroads of positionality and reflexivity, namely moving from a dominant elitist gaze to its ethic reversal, should indeed shift from the ethnographer as a role (Foster, 1995) to auto-ethnography as a method (Ellis & Bochner, 2000), in order to subvert ideological patronage and cultural arrogance, and to self-critically inquire about his own motivations, intentions, and agency. Auto-ethnography as a method practiced in both human geography and cultural studies after the ethnographic turn (Lees, 2004; Low, 2016) advocates for embodied practices of connection, where the personal, the conscious, the affective find a way to intersect the cultural and build an intersubjective relation. The call for auto-ethnography represents the means by which cultural and intersubjective relations should be constructed to evolve from a notion of community as an amorphous mass of undistinguished parts to the notion of community as a multivocal collective of voices and singularities (Lapadat 2017). The specific empirical case, as illuminated by the representation Ludin offers in the documentary, evidently depicts the neglection of this intersubjective dimension. The stories unveiled by Ludin's camera moving across the neighborhood in the attempt to narrate the community and its inhabitants through personal recollections and individual experiences clash with the artist's patronizing

approach, which undermines, through cultural arrogance and ideological reductio ad nihilo, the opportunity to construct a dialogue by understanding and merging with the collective (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) in all its variegations. When we call upon auto-ethnography as the embodied practice of intersubjective connection – in contrast to Hirschhorn's disembodiment – we shift the accent toward the vulnerability and intimacy of the artistic body reciprocally encountering the community's bodies. When these two aspects are made transparent and visible by being endorsed in the first place by the artist, the intersubjective relation comes into place, and the specific terrains of mutual representation, exchange and recognition (being them gender, education, class, ethnicity) become the enriched platform upon which to dialogically co-construct sense and space. Moreover, this notion, deeply entwined with the concept of practice expressed in the aforementioned Lefebvrian notion, implies embodiment as the truthful place where the artist commits himself to the material (Foster, 1995; Lefebvre, 2004): the body is indeed "the most grounded research instrument" (Zebracki, 2016) through which the artist can engage with alterity repressing the exclusionary self-othering (Rutten et al., 2013), and embed himself as research participant (Shaw, 2013). As we will show in the course of this analysis, our case study represents a subversion of this concept, where the artist's disembodiment and lack of auto-reflexive positionality towards community and space generate a narcissistic work projecting self-absorption, self-fashioning, and self-refurbishment in the artistic practice (Foster, 1995). For this reason, in the taxonomy we refer to (Sacco et al., 2019b), one of the dimensions is indeed the commitment to the place. Our secondary sources, despite their limitations, provide a rich documentation in this regard. The project's press releases, Ludin's documentary and Hirschhorn's Manifesto all concur in providing evidence of a disembodied artistic practice and, as a consequence, question auto-ethnography as a missed opportunity that could have led to (self) reflectively think about space productions and reproductions. As authors, given the temporal misalignment between the time of our writing and the time the artwork was produced and staged, this methodology is the one we suggest to overcome the risk we ourselves face to critically comment and reason about the work through a disembodied perspective. In acknowledging this impossibility as an inherent gap, we assess the importance of the above-mentioned material as precious sources to enable autobiographical engagements between the self and the other, highlighting the nature and mode of the interactions between the artist and the community.

4. A case of hegemonic positionality: *The Gramsci Monument* by Thomas Hirschhorn

In the summer of 2013, thanks to the (undisclosed) funding of the DIA Art Foundation, Thomas Hirschhorn designed and directed the construction of a plywood and packaging tape-made pavilion in the South Bronx Forest Houses neighborhood, with an explicit precarious and non-monumental character (Valle, 2015), that bridged a walkway and other common spaces of the community. It incorporated a series of different areas with predicted functionalities such as a library and a museum commemorating Antonio Gramsci, a theatre for daily lectures and performances, an office with a micro radio station and an internet point, areas for art classrooms and a food kiosk. Residents were temporarily hired to build the facilities and to staff most of them. The building was the fourth in a series of works located in poor and working-class neighborhoods, celebrating the thought of Hirschhorn's personal pantheon of Western philosophers: Spinoza, Deleuze, Bataille, and Gramsci. He elaborated The *Form and Forcefield Schema,* a theoretical manifesto (Hirschhorn, 2015) in which he places the four philosophers at the intersection between four 'forces' (art, love, politics and aesthetics), an ideal *quadrivium* that serves as a foundation of his monument-building practice. In the scheme, Gramsci sits at the crossroads of love + politics – but then it is inevitable to ask, as Gramsci himself would have probably asked: love by/of whom, and politics by/about whom? Who's entitled to act here, and why? And who bestows the entitlement? To what extent has the 'monument', with its occupation of communal space, brought about functional forms of participation and empowerment of the community, instead of appropriating the community's resources while unilaterally upending decision power and agency?

Here, we argue that the artist's choice has been the un-reflexive deployment of ideological and economic power structures that failed to acknowledge, let alone appreciate, any competence and experience value from the community, reducing its involvement to cheap material executors of the artist's predetermined Plan. This choice institutionalizes precariousness as a structural condition of the disenfranchised, while fully harnessing the neoliberal patriarchal subjectivation devices, embodied by an uncritical, un-mediated physical appropriation of space, made possible by the financial capacity of art institutions whose stakeholders are largely representative of the top 1% of the global wealth pyramid.

Hirschhorn simply positioned himself as a *demiurge*, and thoroughly carried out a hegemonic process of spatial domestication (Sacco et al., 2019b), tweaking the community-based project grammar in a self-serving way, with no concern for the particularly difficult social and economic conditions of the residents – actually, exploiting them to further affirm his autocratic leadership. Within the predictive logic of Foucaultian heterotopia, the narrative arc is easily anticipated: the demiurge artist moves the pawns on the board according to his enlightened vision, and condescendingly infuses his wisdom from above, with the collaboration of a select group of invited elite guests, whose cultural exchange with the residents is minimal if any.

In the context of real estate urban development, aesthetically charged practices are commonly and widely used to cater social consensus (Walks, 2006). As Ghertner clearly illustrates in *Rule by Aesthetics* (2015) with reference to the Indian slums, democratic procedures can be easily subverted once the subjects of democracy are seen as visually out of place. In this perspective, aesthetic regimes are settled by translating hegemonic aesthetic codes into a governing lens. The ambiguity of these practices thrives on the promise of turning resettlement into a "geography of hope", of access to better welfare and improved services, as epitomized by world-class aesthetic norms. The possibility of an escape from marginality and need is thus symbolically linked to the necessity of a 'cultural reset' – an abandonment of any vernacular identity and local memory, and the request of an unconditional allegiance to a new, pre-packaged developmental ideology; that is, a literal example of Gramscian hegemony at work. In the global political arena, as pointed out by Gassner (2020), such neo-hegemonic practices have been widely adopted by conservative and even more by authoritarian public administrations willing to exploit the normative potential of urban aesthetics, often in the guise of the preservation of civic decorum, as a form of social control and as a cognitive code for the naturalization of inequalities and discrimination. Such a radical non-negotiability of urban aesthetic principles, with all that it implies in political, social and economic terms, is a clear instance of what Dalaqua (2020) calls aesthetic injustice, that is, the denial of the community's rightful aspiration to operate as an aesthetic collective being. Counter to the intrinsically dialogic and pluralistic nature of aesthetic discourse, aesthetic injustice introduces an artificial divide between alternative aesthetic perspectives, so that some are sanctioned to be relevant and entitled to voice, and some others are not. Relevance and voice, in turn, unsurprisingly reflect power relationships and vested interests in urban developmental trajectories (Gassner, 2021). All that is needed to close the circle is complacent artistic agency that, in exchange for generous patronage, more appropriately packaged as a market transaction, effectively translates these political goals into convenient, finely polished aesthetic norms. Therefore, hegemonic practices in marginal urban spaces are not futile exercises – they are high-stakes political proofs of concept.

As explained above in the *Materials and method* section, the

methodological tool we use to deconstruct Hirschhorn's practice and his implied notion of artistic agency are the three critical dimensions of integrity of art practices in the public space (Sacco et al., 2019b) that we have already briefly introduced above. The first is the artist's *commitment to the place*, and actually Hirschhorn's attitude is a sort of mirror image of this principle. In the manifesto he published in 2015, he clearly states his unwillingness "to choose specific cities, specific contexts, or specific community places for my monuments. Because I am looking for universal places." This logic results in an artwork, the *Monument*, which is the result of two years of search for a convenient 'location' across the five boroughs of NYC. Hirschhorn went looking for a host community that could offer free space and cheap labor force. The very fact that some candidate communities asked questions such as 'what is the benefit for the community?' was enough to put him off (Child, 2019). He doesn't make any commitment to the place and maintains its relation with it only insofar as this remains instrumental to achieve his artistic plans. As a result, the Forest Houses environment functions as a front stage (Goffman, 1959) for the artist's expectations and ambitions, but is relentlessly abandoned once the game is over, without taking any responsibility to meet, and even know about, the community expectations inevitably aroused by such a display of resourcefulness grandeur (Kimball, 2014). The space is a mere cartographic physical area, open to a docile re-engineering as enacted through the "god-trick" gaze. As reported in Angelo Ludin's documentary on the project (2015), the artist openly behaves like an authoritarian foreman who has turned the community's communal spaces into his personal canvas, treating residents accordingly. The aspiration of the *Gramsci Monument* to a condition of universality amounts in practice to an orchestration of the symbolic 'evaporation' of Forest Houses as a meaningless physical support, merely functional to the incarnation of 'the One World' (Hirschhorn, 2015): undoubtedly not a geographical, but an axiomatic perspective (Wickstrom, 2014).

Hirschhorn's public art project misses on the possibility of re-enchanting (Federici & Linebaugh, 2018) fragile, dis-empowered common spaces, and misses on the concept of the public sphere as a site of struggle that gives voice to counter-hegemony (Clements, 2008), possibly the most conceivable way of deploying the project's poetical potential in a Gramscian spirit. This failed commitment amounts to a denial of place identity (Shaw & Hagemans, 2015), and a consequent domino of negative, alienating impacts, such as marginalization, lack of sense of belonging, and self-estrangement as a defensive measure enacted through disenchanted detachment, hopelessness, and social fragmentation, with an ensuing sense of powerlessness stemming from the dispossession of any meaningful agency (Blauner, 1964). Once the pretend-communal project reveals itself for what it was meant to be from the beginning, namely the artist's 'own' artwork that can be conveniently re-packaged and relocated anytime and anywhere, that is, wherever it best serves Hirschhorn's artistic strategy and personal interests, the promise of place-making and its tenuous 'geography of hope' suddenly dissolve. The place returns to be a site, the evoked affects and emotion become commodities, lusciously packaged as pricey collector items, and the communal memory decays into dull chronicle.

Redesigning the common spaces and their identity through a top-down approach, Hirschhorn isolates the *Gramsci Monument* in an artistic and philosophical alterity separated from the dynamics and practices of daily use of the neighborhood. A textbook Foucaultian heterotopia with its exogenous, impersonal rules. In this regard, the second dimension of integrity we consider is *role negotiation.*

Hirschhorn burst into Forest Houses with a full-blown project and with little time to carry it out. The public meetings and workshops were purely formal, as it typically happens in participatory pretend-play of urban regeneration projects (Tang et al., 2011). Only few members of the community were actually involved, and the consultation turned out to be a moment of training of the workforce and of narration of the predetermined artistic project. The community did not have any active role in the decision-making process, nor any way to form an opinion or express dissent on what was going on. A scene from Ludin's film shows a group of residents threatening to call the police to report the excessive noise caused by the work in progress: "I wasn't too happy about this idea, but I had no choice", a resident said, after a strange installation grew next to her garden, overshadowing her little yard. Some of them tried to express the frustration and sense of helplessness that, almost inevitably, accompanies a non-context-sensitive community-based work (Garaicoa, 2011), but the artist literally scolded those who tried to complain as 'saboteurs' of his artistic plan. Hirschhorn, as a *deus-ex-machina,* exploited his superior cultural capital to overcome any instance of democratic pluralism (i.e. of act of citizenship in the sense of Evans, 2019) in the name of what he calls *unshared authorship*: "I, the artist, am the author of the Gramsci Monument; I am entirely and completely the author, regarding everything about my work" (Hirschhorn, 2015). The unwillingness to negotiate is reclaimed as an aesthetic tenet of his practice, as he insists on the necessity of convincing *the Other* to passively accept the sense and rationale of the Gramsci Monument as apodictically stated by the artist: "I don't share my own understanding of it" (Hirschhorn, 2015).

Hirschhorn then maintains an ontological, hierarchical separation between his own nuclear being and the others, *methodologically* preventing the possibility of a dialogical process. His major tool of domain is the use of language as an exercise of power, inventing terms and imposing personal conceptual structures and prescriptive categories of interpretation and representation. This position is noticeably reflected both in his theoretical articles and in the series of panel discussions and lectures held by highly recognized philosophers, writers, artists and political theorists who joined him in discussing Gramsci's life and work. Who was, then, the real counterpart whom these lectures were addressing? Hirschhorn uses language to domesticate the community through the sense of awe and inadequacy that comes with the implicit exclusion from a ritual use of language that residents cannot master nor just merely decipher. The relationship between language and power in negotiation processes is well-known (Fairclough, 2001), and the institutional power device of Gramscian literary exegesis as reiterated by Hirschhorn and his invitees through the various public talks, not unlike the exegesis of sacred texts, reaffirms its exclusionary character, leveraging on the preexisting fragilities related to the residents' frequently poor and troubled educational background. As Derrida (1996) puts it: "master does not possess exclusively, and naturally, what he calls his language, because, whatever he wants or does, he cannot maintain any relations of property or identity that are natural, national, congenital, or ontological, with it…[And] because language is not his natural possession, he can, thanks to that very fact, pretend historically, through the rape of a cultural usurpation, which means always essentially colonial, to appropriate it in order to impose it as 'his own'". As Hirschhorn does not negotiate physical spaces and roles, as we will later argue addressing the concept of auto-ethnography, he does not mediate the contents and the forms of verbal production. His project suffers from a lack of communicability and accessibility, concerning which he declares to avail of "universality and the universal power of art to transform each human being. Other words for 'universality' are 'equality'" (Hirschhorn, 2015).

The artist clearly states the assumption that the community he communicates with, "the others", is an amorphous mass of equals who need to be organized into prescribed roles while playing 'his' game. It is telling that Hirschhorn insists on equality instead of equity, with clearly different implications in terms of agency and citizenship. Equality amounts to homogeneization of treatment independently of context and circumstances, and therefore stabilizes preexisting disparities, inequalities, or injustices. Equity is instead literally about addressing such preexisting conditions, in order to ensure substantially, and not formally fair treatment. Equality as a policy principle pays little more than lip service to social justice and inclusion goals, while factually perpetuating discrimination and injustice (Farrell, 1991; Espinoza, 2007). Real equality of opportunity in an unequal world inevitably calls for

inequality of treatment in favor of the least advantaged (Parthasarathy et al., 2019). In the context of the *Gramsci monument* production process, the lack of recognition of the objective inequality in financial, social and cultural capital between the artist and the Forest Houses community allows the artist to transform the peer exchange that is congenital to community-based projects into a sort of messianic monologue. Applying a perspective of equity to the project would have meant leaving at least some space for negotiation of the project script with the community as an act of citizenship. Acknowledging 'otherness' from a perspective of equity would have meant taking the time to understand and value the community's existential challenges, expectations and aspirations as an essential precondition of the artwork, and to remain open to their potential to inform and energize the whole project as previously latent abilities, ideas, and aesthetic possibilities would emerge – ironically, a profoundly Gramscian idea. Hirschhorn's practice rather reflects a strong propensity to adopt schematic and reductive models of thought based on totally centralized, authoritarian control. It simply shuns the responsibility that comes with the introduction of contemporary art devices into the life of a community that is not experienced enough to decode and appreciate them in their subtle implications, being consequently amenable to manipulation. Without doubt, to abdicate any responsibility and, at the same time, to refrain from any possibility of negotiation, staging an apparent space of dialogue that remains conceptually inaccessible to the local community, as justified by the loophole of *unshared authorship* theory, serves the purpose rather well. Despite this artistic self-referentiality, the residents would have liked to continue the experiment, because with all its limitations, what they appreciated was that it brought their derelict neighborhood at the center of a new network of social exchanges with other parts of the city, paving the way to new opportunities and possibilities (Kimball, 2014), and offering them an opportunity for voice (Evans, 2009). But hearing the point of view of the community had never been part of the plan at any of its stages. What would have Gramsci said, seeing his motto "everyone is an intellectual" turned upside down into a hegemonic artistic expedient to grant oneself immunity and exemption of responsibility from the consequences of his own practice?

As a result, the already fragile social condition of the Forest Houses community has been further exacerbated. To see why, we consider a third dimension: *community empowerment/entitlement*. Hirschhorn's *Monument* raised residents' hopes of seeing their communal spaces flourish thanks to a rich program of activities, the overflow of decoration, banners and placards, the animation around the public talks, their streets finally well-lit and safe, all of which fully funded by DIA. But this unprecedented display of possibility, and the money that made it possible, were never meant to address the community's needs in the first place. They only served the reputation building of the artist and of his institutional supporters, reaffirming once more the art establishment's self-legitimation discourse (Rittenbach, 2014). The artist entirely disregarded the community's legitimate hope to improve their living conditions, giving the neighborhood and its inhabitants a real chance of a better life, and instead reduced the public space to a fungible canvas to be conveniently remodeled according to his priorities and goals (Sacco et al., 2019b). All this, in the name of Antonio Gramsci. If the community had a fair chance to realize who Antonio Gramsci was and what he thought of community empowerment through culture, their delusion would have likely been even more bitter. The available documentation on the participation processes related to the project unambiguously shows that the artist's main concern was engaging the residents only to the extent that they could be instrumental to catalyze the participation of the external audience, the one coming from the artworld, and the only one whose opinion mattered in terms of the project's reputational payoff for the artist.

Rather than a community-based art project, it would be more appropriate to speak here of a temporary public event, a sounding board for his self-referential artistic vision: "I try to make a new kind of monument. A precarious monument. A monument for a limited time." (Hirschhorn, 2015). The event as a formal practice is a perfect breeding ground for the development of a Foucaultian heterotopia, a sort of social hurricane that hits a neighborhood, liberates its energy, and then goes away without any concern for what is left behind. The project is a display of financial, social and cultural power that creates a "hypertrophy of the law" (Agamben, 2012) that runs out quickly after the 'monument' is over. What better way to reinforce the community's sense of helplessness and to incite diffidence and suspicion toward possible future initiatives? The project's legacy is therefore ambiguous and ephemeral, and consequently very different from what one should expect from community-based works (Thompson, 2012). The project's aesthetics of precariousness looks comfortable from the artist's point of view, as he experiments with building a monument made of perishable materials and engaging short-term, cheap local workforce. But for the residents, precariousness is not a mental experiment, but a painful existential condition, and understandably they may be less willing to play with it. The implicit judgmental side of Hirschhorn's aesthetic choices should also not be overlooked: Alienation, in the form a domestication process, aims at dis-empowering a target community in order to curb its capacity to resist or oppose the hegemonic forces' takeover (Beazley et al., 2018), and to de-structure its ability to operate as a cohesive social subject with common visions and goals. The most moving lesson we learn from Ludin's documentary is the residents' retrospective effort to give meaning and re-interpret all the complex social dynamics that took place during the project's whole cycle, using their own culture and knowledge to the best of their capacity, and building their own ecology of meaning as an involuntary legacy of the project – and in so doing, enacting the only truly Gramscian moment of the whole operation. They read the leftover Gramsci quotes painted on hanging sheets, and try to make them their own, to find their own story in these fascinating, finally un-mediated statements. This is how they tried to resist and free themselves from heterotopy, re-appropriating their own space and culture, and likely with some new disenchantment toward art, artists, and the artworld.

5. Positionality, again: A path toward community empowerment

If artistic practices in the public domain may be an expression of hegemonic agency, is there a real alternative if any? To answer this question, we call upon the concepts of positionality and reflexivity to shed light on a different perspective and approach to art-based projects, looking at the experiential and material dimension of collective reckoning built in a dialogical process between the community and the artist, where the latter does not silence the former while speaking on its behalf (Bourke, 2014), thereby operating as a counter-liberator (Freire, 2000). In order to act as an ally and advocate of the community, artists reflecting the voices of those who participate in their work have the duty to stay clear of two different threats. On the one hand, the temptation of ideological patronage, culturally situated in familiar schemes of colonialist oppression and capitalist exploitation, and on the other, the temptation of reflecting the Other as a radical yet idealized alterity, possibly nurtured by naïve primitivistic fantasies (Foster, 1995). To stand in a balance between the two – what we have called the feminine gaze as opposed to the masculine eye, embedded in a geographical approach of enlightened humanism (Bondi & Domosh 1992) – is needed to re-orientate subjectivities towards an artistic positionality that renounces to the Cartesian, vertical vantage point of the artists who 'elevate' the masses with their superior vision, and reconnects to the core values and concerns of human livelihood (Kwan, 2002). In so doing, the emergence of the personal (Moser, 2008) and of subjectivity as not neutral (Guelke, 1974), not all-seeing and not all-knowing (Rose, 1997), provides insightful perspectives on the deontological dilemmas of the artist as an agent of social change (Battilana & Kimsey, 2017), and incites a new relation with the public and with communities, no longer framed within the subject-object dichotomy and the sexist methodology of exclusionary knowledge creation, but rather in an interaction geared

toward co-production and co-creation (England, 1994). As assumed by Lefebvre (1974), the social production of space affects the practices and the perceptions of space itself, but to produce urban imaginaries and meanings that enable a participated and collective practice of the urban, the process of space representation pursued by the artist should be built as a dialogically open, multi-layered intersection of positionality and intentionality (Luger, 2017).

Artists must critically reflect on their position towards the community and the public domain into which they are invited. For this reason and as opposed to the ethnographer as a role, we call upon auto-ethnography as a method to foster this shift. This is a crucial step for the credibility of community-based artistic interventions in the public space. Posing as a demiurgic agent, disregarding the implications of the self and of the body as the embedded stance co-creating narratives with community and space, and taking a position of institutionally sanctioned superiority and power, the artist facilitates the emotional alienation and the political disenchantment of the community from the very spaces they inhabit, as they are invited to think of themselves as a socially passive subject, whose agency is precluded in that it is insignificant. Failing to acknowledge this fatal criticality, amounts to the inevitable self-marginalization of artistic practices as irrelevant or even counter-productive, in a moment where cultural policy is rather increasingly recognizing the active involvement of local communities in bottom-up collaborative and co-creative practices as a primary goal (Tomka, 2013). Simply referring to participation to justify community-based interventions, without a meaningful experience and awareness on how to make them socially sustainable and effective *from the community's viewpoint* is poetically naïve and politically questionable, as the term has long ceased to be a consensus-making buzzword, and the risks of manipulation and instrumentalization that it entails have become evident to all kinds of constituencies (Leal, 2007). If 'participation' is moreover coupled to the sister notion of 'audience engagement', with its prescriptive, paternalistic implications, heavily borrowing from marketing concepts and techniques to ensure 'fidelization' of 'target' audiences, the issue becomes even more evident. In terms of artist positionality, the concept of audience or community engagement pulls toward the worst direction possible, in its proposition of vertical role models and role playing, encouraging conformity and compliance to preset aesthetic social standards rather than mature self-expression. But once the promise of participation and engagement is eventually reckoned with in its actual implications, communities realize that formally being given voice is way different than having a real chance to formulate a viewpoint that is being heard (Carpentier, 2009).

Examples of the abuse of participation abound, from promotion of hidden agendas (White, 1996), to deceptive participation (Arnstein, 1969; Pretty, 1995), to instrumental involvement of minorities (Bailey, 2012). Communities and cultural audiences should not be engaged, developed or 'reached'. A participative art project is a two-way exchange, with different degrees of involvement: access, interaction, participation (Carpentier, 2011). The former two are preliminary steps that cannot be merely called "participation", as the dimension of power lays at the center of any sensible meaning of 'participation', and we can only properly invoke the term if a certain share of power is effectively decentralized to the community, enabling the pursuit of its own goals and the affirmation of its own cultural orientations (Tomka, 2013), while building knowledge and expertise through real entitlement in decision-making processes (Saxena, 1998). Participation without power is just exploitation. And also meaningful 'participation' contemplates a range of possibilities, different forms and practices, and different spheres of meaning (Cornwall, 2008).

In the case of artistic practices in the public domain, the artist's role must involve some form of empowerment, mediation or facilitation of the citizens' re-appropriation of public space. The artists have to renegotiate their aesthetic intention through the participatory practice, cooperating with the local community to make the project *mutually* meaningful. By giving up the demiurgic privilege associated to the institutionalized role of the artist as the monopolist of sense-making, the artist makes space for an explicit discourse of positionality, integration and negotiation, that draws upon the moral emotions and collective intelligence of group building, transferring to the community a sense of entitlement to, and ownership of, the product of co-creation – that is, what was conceptually ruled out from the very beginning in our case study. When relationally and dialectically meant as a cooperative construction of meaning through collective intention and shared agency (Luger, 2017), placemaking and sensemaking operate at the intersection between self and other, between different but complementary forms of artistic agency. If artists are not able to learn anything from the community they are being invited into, the project is, ultimately, not only politically but aesthetically failed, whatever the external consensus it commands. As Kester (2012) puts it, the artist should not conceptualize and actualize a transformation through assimilation, but rather through acceptance of, and dependence upon, intersubjectivity, built upon a practice of understanding and negotiation. Again, for artists, the means to operate this engagement can rely on auto-ethnography as a way to deconstruct the ivory tower of top-down hegemonic authority, embracing fieldwork as a form of shared insight, self-reshaping artistic understanding not only of the community, but of artistic practice itself (Butz & Besio, 2009). Adopting an auto-ethnographic attitude paves the way to building a rich network of sensorial and physical intimate relations (Low, 2016) aimed at a multivocal output of non-exploitative collective agency (Lapadat, 2017) made of all kinds of sources – stories, photographic essays, journals and in principle all forms of personal narratives that are able to craft a way to understand space and culture exceeding the individual experience and merging with the collective (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

The consequences of this kind of narrative-based personal experience through reflexivity, are not only witnessed by the material traces produced as a record of that interaction, and not solely with regard to the centrality of the body – of the artist as well as of the marginalized (Kinkaid, 2020), but also reflect and extend to the way space is ultimately produced and reproduced within the artistic intervention, namely returning to the Lefebvrian notion we started from (Lefebvre, 1974). Whereas in the case of the *Gramsci Monument* the neighborhood and its residents were, respectively, an empty stage and a pool of cheap labor force at the service of an authoritarian monologue, the very idea of taking Gramsci seriously invites to consider community projects as a way to rethink, reconfigure and reframe (Olsen, 2019) the public domain. Consequently, artist positionality should commit to a specific social constituency and territorial scale, taking and sharing responsibility with the community. Artist positionality in the public domain is a void statement if it does not imply any form of real commitment toward that domain. Without commitment, there cannot be any meaningful relationship, and consequently no mutual trust and fair social exchange (Moser and Stein 2011). And commitment, in turn, means spending time with the community, to share and populate the rituality of the welcoming of the new visitor: "for the arts to exercise a counter-hegemonic force in the Gramscian sense, they need to share his patience with process in continued, physically close dialogue with partner communities" (Sommer & Sacco, 2019). The space produced through these first-person, embodied encounters implies that the meaning, the time and the action generated stem from intersubjective phenomenological relations, namely from the centrality of the body (Johnson, 2008). What Lefebvre (1974) addresses as the project of a different space, or differential space, indeed proliferates within experience, perception, performance beyond the abstraction of disembodiment and into the terrain of everyday life (Wilson 2013). To make the artwork really transformative for the space and their inhabitants, it is crucial that the artist engages with the practices of everyday life as a performative body, placing use-value over exchange value, differentiation over homogenization (Trimarchi, 2019), space and community participation over accidental tourism, geographical localization over globetrotter cosmopolitanism.

6. Conclusions

Participatory artistic and cultural practices in the public domain derive their aesthetic force from the strength of the affirmative action of the community's social and individual right to the city, in the form of trust-building (Aitken, 2012), creation of community assets (Cornelius & Wallace, 2010) and individual capabilities (Saxena, 1998). If these elements are not just missing but not even contemplated, marginalized communities are put at risk of facing all consequences of aesthetic injustice, typical of real estate-driven urban development processes. This lack of recognition of a fundamental aesthetic right has profound practical consequences. As Harvey (2012) points out, a different sense of place can be articulated and experienced by the inhabitants through collective negotiation and dialectic practices. The participatory practices of art and culture can, therefore, become an important source of active citizenship and re-appropriation of the right to the city. By giving up this possibility, the artist deliberately turns into a hegemonic agent, who capitalizes the appropriation of the community's cultural assets into a collectible, expensive symbolic trophy that can only be accessible to the mega-rich who are entitled to buy from the exclusive powerhouse gallery that represents the artist. This is exactly what has happened in the case study we have investigated in this paper.

Judging a project like *Monument to Gramsci* from a proper theoretical angle, it is apparent that it misses the basic premises of how a community-based art project should be conceived and realized, and that the artist's intentional lack of responsibility is motivated by self-serving reasons. In this paper, we have shown that, by analyzing the project in terms of its underlying heterotopic orientation and by characterizing it with respect to three basic criteria for the evaluation of art-based community interventions in the public space, *Monument to Gramsci* stands out for its systematic denial of any of the basic conditions that would make it participatory and inclusive in a meaningful sense. This is all the more perplexing when thinking that the project claims to celebrate the legacy of Antonio Gramsci, whose thinking epitomizes like few others cultural participation as a driver of counter-hegemonic community empowerment. Hirschhorn's intervention completely instrumentalized the role of the community in the conceptual and practical economy of the project, whose only urge is to address and please the opinion makers of the artworld. Unsurprisingly, one of the richest repositories of uncritically applauding commentary on the project is Hirschhorn's blue-chip gallery website. What is surprising, however, is the lack of discernment that a significant (and powerful) portion of the artworld demonstrates in failing to appreciate even the most obvious conceptual inconsistencies of the project, and its methodologically amateurish attitude toward community participation. If artists with big budget allowances would work on a project involving, say, solar power, it would be natural for them to hire a team of physicists and engineers, to analyze the technical feasibility of the project in detail, to avoid allegations of lack of professionalism. However, if the project is about community participation in socio-economically deprived contexts, with all of the obvious complexities that this entails in political, anthropological, sociological and socio-psychological terms, artists are literally free to improvise in their approach to such delicate social dimensions, banking on cheap conceptual tricks such as symbolic lip service to a currently fashionable hero of art radicalism like Antonio Gramsci. Insofar as community-based art projects can get away with total absence of any form of accountability, without losing the respect of the art community, improvisational artistic psycho-sociologism becomes legitimate, and disenfranchised communities may be cynically treated as art-lab mice. At least, this position lifts any ambiguity as to choosing sides between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forces. This is of course not true of all practices and of all artists. But in the times to come, artists and some parts of the artworld will have to face tough choices, and what will make the difference will not be stated intentions. A responsible artistic agency can become a transformational social force in a counter-hegemonic strategy of mass flourishing and empowerment. But to this purpose, it would be advisable to go beyond lip service and take Gramsci's legacy much more seriously.

The limitations of our study are mainly found in our extensive reliance upon secondary sources, whose use can lead to bias as it does not include a field analysis and direct observation of the phenomena by the researchers themselves. This is somewhat inevitable as we are analyzing a case study which is no longer amenable to direct observation. However, our analysis is built on a comprehensive survey of first-hand reports and commentaries, drawn from peer-reviewed journals and major specialized media, plus the materials produced by the artist himself. These secondary data allow us to address a new research challenge to contribute to the discussion of public art in urban contexts. Indeed, the study provides a new theoretical perspective to address power relationships between artistic agency and local communities in contemporary urban spaces. Our method and results may therefore be of interest for various stakeholder groups: researchers, urban planners, artists, and civil society activists, to lay a foundation for more articulate debates and further studies in the field of social geography that investigate the spatial dimension of power relations implied by art-based community engagement projects.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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