

# ArtReview



UK £6.50



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vol 68 no 9

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The Body and the City in Brazil

The ~~Artists~~ Room

## Thomas Hirschhorn *Stand-alone*

*The Mistake Room, Los Angeles* 7 October – 17 December

At the Mistake Room, several armchairs, covered entirely in brown packing tape, stand against a wall, and multiple monitors are fixed above them. Nearly every centimetre of the gallery is emblazoned with graffitied phrases such as 'Predatory Lending' and 'Corporate Agriculture', and a fireplace, exploding with piles of cardboard masquerading as firewood, is crowned by a heaving heap of critical-theory books by Derrida, Adorno and Deleuze, among others. Similar arrangements of objects, texts and materials are repeated through four consecutive rooms.

In each, a cardboard tree trunk crashing through the centre of the spaces is punctuated by photocopied images documenting the grisly aftermath of some unknown violence, affronting the viewer with gruesome items such as bloody limbs and mutilated penises. Undeniably affecting though this appalling spectacle is, it also raises the question: why show such imagery? Through the constructed scenario of the exhibition, Hirschhorn interpellates (as Althusser would have it) the gallery visitor as witness to a crime, thereby suggesting that the viewer must bear some ethical responsibility to take action. Yet, as we are assailed constantly by media representations of war and suffering,

what power can such photographs have within a contemporary-art context?

While Hirschhorn's projects appear more chaotic than do most exhibitions, they are more carefully calculated than they appear. Everyday materials are chosen for their 'non-intimidating' qualities, in the sense that these are materials that anyone could deploy, just as Hirschhorn has, and that no special skill is needed, only 'energy', a favourite term of the artist. The fragmentary wall texts are all gleaned from the artist's collection of newspaper headlines, what he calls 'news poetry'. Even the seemingly random nature of their application is authored, with multiple taggers employed to create the illusion of several voices.

Indeed, it is this emphasis on appearances that is most troubling about Hirschhorn's work. Artists can (and should) invoke Marxist theory all they like, but not if their working methods (let alone their exhibition titles) are less than communal. Rather than actually inviting the contributions of others, Hirschhorn appears more interested in retaining authorial control. His *Gramsci Monument* (2013), a summer-long public art project located in a working-class neighbourhood in the Bronx, New York, drew

criticism from art critics for dropping the ideals of a privileged white man from Switzerland into the heart of a predominantly black and Hispanic community. The artist claims to create a space in which political ideas and philosophical propositions can be discussed, but the subjects of those conversations are decided by the artist, rather than his would-be interlocutors.

Here in Los Angeles, this seems like a missed opportunity, with the exhibition taking place in Boyle Heights, a neighbourhood at the centre of conflicts over gentrification and race. None of that is alluded to here; in fact *Stand-alone* was first exhibited at the artist's commercial gallery in Berlin in 2007 and has been borrowed for this exhibition from the Coppel Collection in Mexico City. The irony of a cheaply made, Marxist-influenced installation that has been purchased by an art collector and then shipped at considerable expense to a disadvantaged neighbourhood in East Los Angeles should not be lost on visitors. *Stand-alone's* own history of circulation and acquisition tells more of a story about capitalist reality than Hirschhorn ever could. But that's the way today's artworld works, and sadly no amount of sticky tape can mask this.

Ciara Moloney



*Stand-alone*, 2016 (installation view).  
Courtesy the Mistake Room, Los Angeles,  
and Colección Isabel y Agustín Coppel, Mexico City