

## “Radical Democracy”

### Thomas Hirschhorn & Santiago Sierra

21 July - 21 August, 2016

Curated by Asakusa and Dr. Masaru Araki, Okayama University

Reference material by Sanya Labour Welfare Hall Action Committee; Supported by Swiss Embassy in Tokyo

Asakusa is delighted to announce the exhibition “Radical Democracy” with artists Thomas Hirschhorn and Santiago Sierra, whose renowned art practices critically engage with selected social groups often facing ethical questions. The exhibited works articulate divisive fissures of political and economic disparities beyond sanctioned consensus, and provoke the agonistic practice of valuing and sustaining the dissent – democratic dialectics advocated by art critic Claire Bishop.<sup>1</sup> These endeavours seek a critical position to comment on Tokyo’s political landscape, suggesting art’s expansive potential while also acknowledging its limitations. The exhibition includes distribution materials by Sanya Labor Union Action Committee, a local support group for the largest day-labour camp in Tokyo.

Using materials such as tinfoil, Xerox copies, adhesive tape, and cardboard, **Thomas Hirschhorn** gives form to cultural critique and composes questions about consumerism, media spectacle, aesthetic value and moral responsibility. Since 1999, Hirschhorn has dedicated four monuments to his most admired philosophers – Spinoza, Bataille, Deleuze, and Gramsci. Paid residents of Forest Houses, in the South Bronx, New York built his last endeavor, Gramsci Monument (2013). In this work, the artist pays homage to Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) by following his cultural strategy of a ‘war of position’<sup>2</sup>, which describes a process of building strength in social foundations by creating alternative institutions and intellectual resources of a civil society. The temporary monument, now demolished, appeared as an outdoor cluster of plywood shelters comprised of a community library, bar, lecture platform, rooms for children’s workshops, and an onsite radio station running daily programs which promote leaning, discursive and other expressive practices to generate an autonomous culture. The structure constituted a critique against urban consumerism, which deprives the fundamental freedom to think and voice as individuals. The exhibition includes the artist’s lecture slides, interview, and texts, as well as a selection of publications by and about the four philosophers.

Marked by sensations of unease and discomfort, **Santiago Sierra**’s work captures body politics exhumed by the conditions of market capitalism. Tattooing a continuous line across the backs of four prostitutes for the price of a Heroin shot, having paid workers sit inside cardboard boxes or confining a man behind a brick wall for 15 days within a museum; his judiciary-based instructions make power structures visible, as marginalized individuals in adverse circumstances are often displayed as spectacles in material dimensions of their contracts. In 133 Persons Who Dyed Their Hair (2001), Sierra called illegal street vendors – mostly immigrants from China, Bangladesh, Senegal and South Italian – to congregate at the warehouse and have their hair dyed blond within the site of Venice Biennale. The action highlights the vendors’ parasitical presence at the very intersection of art and tourism, and inscribes a situation inescapable for visitors to confront. The hour-long video documents an assembly of the stateless immigrants or refugees – as described by Hannah Arendt<sup>3</sup> – who gather to receive 50 euros in hand. The scene foregrounds the socio-economic hegemony and examines the conditions of racial bias at the heart of a cultural Olympiad.

According to Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau<sup>4</sup>, “Radical Democracy” does not only accepts dissent and antagonisms but also depends on it, and argues that there are oppressive power relations in society that must be made visible, re-negotiated, and altered. It urges a crucial importance to seek borders of difference, even in a seemingly homogeneous society. The following questions may be contested: How is it possible to effectively negotiate between social imagination and social reality? What provokes ethical defence, and what instigates desire to move beyond consensual inertia?

“Radical Democracy” is curated by Asakusa and Dr. Masaru Araki, vice-president of Okayama University. Asakusa would like to thank Sanya Labour Welfare Action Committee for providing their distribution materials, and Swiss Embassy in Tokyo for their support to realize this exhibition.



From Thomas Hirschhorn: Gramsci Monument (2013). Courtesy of the artist.



Santiago Sierra: 133 Persons Paid to Have Their Hair Dyed Blond (2001).

## Artists:

**Thomas Hirschhorn** (b.1957, Bern) studied at the Schule für Gestaltung in Zürich, and moved to Paris in 1984 where he began his collaboration with Grapus, a group of politically committed graphic artists. Today he is widely known for his energetic installations using common materials such as cardboard, foil, duct tape, and plastic wrap as capitalist revolt against consumer culture. He has been participated in Documenta11 (Kassel, 2002), the Carnegie International (Pittsburgh, 2008), and Manifesta 10 (St. Petersburg, 2014); and represented the Swiss Pavillion at the 54th Venice Biennale (2014). His work is in the collection of MoMA (New York), Musée National d'Art Moderne (Paris), and Tate Modern (London), amongst others. Hirschhorn received the Marcel Duchamp Prize (2000), Joseph Beuys Preis für Forschung (2004), and the Kurt Schwitters Prize (2011).

**Santiago Sierra** (b.1966, Madrid) studied at the Academy of San Carlos, the National Autonomous University of Mexico, Mexico City after graduated from Complutense University of Madrid. Sierra addresses structures of power that operate in our everyday existence. His work intervenes into theoretical structures exposing situations of exploitation and marginalization, famously hiring underprivileged individuals who, in exchange for money, are willing to undertake pointless or unpleasant tasks. Sierra represented the Spanish Pavillion at the 55th Venice Biennale, 2003. His solo exhibitions include CAC Malaga 2006; Reykjavik Art Museum, 2012; Kunsthalle Tübingen, 2013; Labor, Mexico City, 2015. His work is included in the collection of Tate Britain, Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki, Daimler Contemporary, Berlin amongst others.

## Curators:

**Asakusa** is a 40-square-meter exhibition venue for contemporary art programmes committed to advancing curatorial collaborations and practices. Since its inauguration in October 2015, the gallery has worked with Mikhail Karikis, Héctor Zamora, and Oliver Beer. Asakusa held the archival exhibition "1923" tracing the footsteps of early Japanese avant-garde in the 1920s, with a particular focus on the influence of Dada in Tokyo, which paved way to the Proletariat Art in the 1930s. The exhibition with Thomas Hirschhorn & Santiago Sierra marks its fourth exhibition.

## Supported by:

Swiss Embassy in Tokyo

## Exhibition Facts:

Title: "Radical Democracy"  
Artists: Thomas Hirschhorn & Santiago Sierra  
Curated by: Asakusa and Dr. Masaru Araki, Okayama University  
Supported by Swiss Embassy in Tokyo

Dates: 21 July - 21 August, 2016  
Venue: Asakusa  
Location: 1-6-16 Nishi-Asakusa, Taito, Tokyo  
Opening hours: Thur. 19:00 - 22:00,  
Sat.& Sun. 12:00 - 19:00

URL: www.asakusa-o.com  
Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/asakusa.o/>  
Twitter: @asakusa\_o, #asakusa-o  
Instagram: asakusa.o

For press info and images:  
Noriko Yamakoshi  
+81 (0)90 4673 2745 / info@asakusa-o.com

