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Theaster Gates, front view of his house on Dorchester Avenue, Chicago, and site of 'Dorchester Projects' (2009—ongoing), 2010

Previous spread: *Cosmology of Yard*, 2010, installation with reclaimed ware boards. Installation view, Whitney Biennial, New York. Both images courtesy the artist and Kavi Gupta Chicago/Berlin

## Theaster Gates: Radical Reform with Everyday Tools

— Hesse McGraw

Theaster Gates is viral. In 2011 — the year Gates 'broke' — the ground for socially engaged work shifted in the US. One critic lauded Gates for providing contemporary art with sorely lacking purpose, and Jeffrey Deitch, contemporary art's greatest pitchman, got to talking with him about art and real life on Mercedes-Benz TV.<sup>1</sup> The ground-shift followed a year in which Gates was seemingly everywhere, with unabashed earnestness, re-framing conversations regarding 'potent' exchanges involving the market, arts institutions and disadvantaged communities with everyone he spoke to — curators, dealers, collectors,

and exhibitions across the international art world, with major upcoming projects at both dOCUMENTA (13) and the cavernous new White Cube space in the London area of Bermondsey. Perhaps not fully at home, and certainly not contained, in either sphere, Gates's work could hold import for the future of both worlds.

Gates is uncannily open about the relationship of his work to the market, and about his strategies to translate the work's market value into impact on places beyond the art world. His efforts to reanimate abandoned properties for new cultural uses came first, the sale of objects followed. Their relationship is now fully cyclical and celebrated. As he, in characteristically self-reflexive ebullience, puts it: his 'loaded, racialised, enigmatic, fetishistic, seductive objects, for sale!' will fund the renovation and programming of buildings in Chicago, St Louis and Omaha.<sup>2</sup> For the multiple directions of his work, the thrust is the regeneration of the ethical, social and economic realities of black neighbourhoods in the United States. But what can an artist actually catalyse and put at stake in the world today, following Robert Rauschenberg and Gordon Matta-Clark, and following civil rights, relational aesthetics and institutionalised social practice? In the midst of continuing debate surrounding the critical utility and leftist-activist ethic of social practice, Gates's particular strategies offer a novel case for being in the market and leveraging cultural institutions, while engaging local communities through scalable and replicable cultural planning.

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### Hesse McGraw discusses the transformation of art's symbolic and real capital through Theaster Gates's regenerative interventions into deprived US neighbourhoods.

art students, architects, city planners, cultural philanthropists, gospel choirs and so many others in earshot. It's become difficult to find a place he isn't.

It is hard not to be consumed by the heat surrounding Gates's practice, or to anticipate some inevitable backlash due to the pace of his international ascension. In person, his sincerity and brashness are disarming; Gates is possessed with an emphatic charisma. His particular magnetism moves fluidly between the seemingly polar spheres of his practice: African-American neighbourhoods and communities in the Midwestern United States, where he is deeply invested in site-specific cultural transformations,

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1 Christian Viveros-Fauné, 'Theaster Gates', *ArtReview*, issue 56, January/February 2012, pp.66—71. See also Mercedes Benz TV, 'Jeffrey Deitch and Theaster Gates: I Believe in Places', available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m34aIZG-JM> (last accessed on 26 January 2012).

2 See Theaster Gates, 'Clay in My Veins and Other Thoughts', lecture at the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts, Omaha, 31 March 2011, available at <http://vimeo.com/23493473> (last accessed on 26 January 2012). See also Rebuild Foundation's mission statement: 'Rebuild Foundation activates creative community resources to build vibrant neighbourhoods. We act as a catalyst in local economies by integrating small business incubation, creative architectural rehabilitation, hands-on education and artistic intervention.' Available at <http://rebuild-foundation.org/about.html> (last accessed on 26 January 2012).

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## A Residency of One

The Alliance of Artists Communities, an international association of residency programmes, hosted its annual conference in Seattle in the autumn of 2008. I listened as directors and staff from artist-in-residence programmes throughout the United States debated questions about the roles of residencies and of artists — should the programmes provide a retreat or a laboratory, require community service or fees? Should artists unsettle or affirm culture? A conservative tenor pervaded the discussion: in tones that might be described as constipated, various residency managers and institutional representatives fretted about artists' tendency to engage with politically delicate issues, worried about the timidity of their funders, and pondered means to prepare local audiences for the culture wars that would surely trail artists into their towns. There were days of this, and few voices broke through.

Theaster Gates was also there — he had founded a residency programme in his house in Chicago that summer, for one artist at a time — and at the conference he insisted on a different set of roles for artists and institutions. Participating in the panel discussion 'Artists' Residencies in Support of Social Change', his tone was urgent. Artists should move the poles of our culture, he argued, and challenge the social and economic dynamics of arts institutions. His approach advocated driving forward controversial wedge issues, directly engaging race and class divisions and the art world's economic complicity in those hierarchies, and he insisted institutions take socially proactive roles in their communities. The scenario he depicted was one of benevolent and compelling danger, and someone putting forth counterarguments from the audience wound up crying!<sup>3</sup>

I wanted to know more about how Gates's ideas were actualised, yet it was difficult to pin him down. His answers conformed to who was asking. He might say, 'I host dinners in my house', or 'I make soul food wares', or 'I'm a planner', or 'I'm making some shoeshine stands' or 'I have a band called the Black Monks of Mississippi'. It became apparent that

in the last three years he had been doing each of these, often simultaneously and with a kind of abiding rigour, and working through their possibilities and points of connection.

That same autumn Gates and his band performed in the Netherlands as part of the 'Heartland' exhibition organised by the University of Chicago's Smart Museum and the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven. That exhibition traced strains of artistic production in the central United States and their broader implications for 'heartland' culture. Another artist in the show, Seth Johnson, said of the Black Monks of Mississippi: 'It was the kind of thing that could go wrong, really fast. I loved it.'<sup>4</sup> Johnson keenly identified Gates's ability to balance an earnestness that might seem cloying and burdensome with an authenticity and openness that ultimately erodes cynicism. The Black Monks' music is rooted in gospel and slave spirituals, which they strip down to core rhythms that mix part-blues, propulsive chug and meditative chants. When Gates shouts 'Lord, Jesus!', it is without irony, and aims to cross faiths.

## Mac-and-Cheese Maki Rolls

Gates's first solo exhibition, 'Plate Convergence', at the Hyde Park Art Center in Chicago in 2007, connected the ritualised traditions of ceramics and shared meals. He produced fifty plates upon which curated dinners of 'Japanese Soul Food' — traditional sushi and sashimi combined with new ingredients, such as hand rolls made with stuffed black-eyed peas — were served. The plates and video documentation of the dinners were presented at Hyde Park, and the entire project was said to extend the social engagement of the Yamaguchi Institute, a fictional ceramics producer and civil rights activist organisation. The off-kilter narrative, Gates says, 'duped a lot of people'.<sup>5</sup> Its grand narrative afforded gravitas to his emerging social practice, a ground for his trickster inclinations, but also did the real thing — it loaded his ceramic wares with art-world value. At the same time the Yamaguchi Institute initiated conversations around race, inequity, cultural production and the role of the art institution. Under Gates's

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3 This episode reminded me of Joe Scanlan's lament of the timidity of relational aesthetics and its inability to cultivate charged social space: 'By contrast, art should be a place where we can "kill Grandma" and, rather than call an ambulance or the moral authorities, stand around and talk about what it means.' J. Scanlan, 'Traffic Control: Joe Scanlan on Social Space and Relational Aesthetics', *Artforum*, vol. 43, no. 10, June 2005, p. 123.

4 Conversation with the author, 21 January 2012.



Theaster Gates, 'Plate Convergence', 2007. Installation view, Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago. Courtesy the artist and Hyde Park Art Center

framework, cultural institutions are part of the problem — they adhere to systemic inequities — and one must either remake them from within or invent new forms. If the art world has long seemed content to merely gesture at issues of race, class and power, Gates's theatrical candour comes with a throw of grace, allowing one to swallow the hard conversation with a good meal.

#### From Rat Shit to the Whitney Biennial

I visited Gates's studio and home in Chicago over Thanksgiving in 2009. Gates had just learned he would be in the 2010 Whitney Biennial — his first major opportunity to show work on the national stage — and he was buzzing with ideas, thinking about the museum's courtyard, which had tripped up so many artists previously, and planning to remake it as a kind of Buddhist-modernist shoeshine

temple that would host performances, educational events and informal exchanges.<sup>6</sup>

Gates had recently begun referring to his home at 69th Street and Dorchester Avenue in Chicago as 'Dorchester Projects' (2009—ongoing), providing a loose frame for a set of renovation, reuse and programming efforts, but also signalling the ambition emerging from the project. After starting a position at the University of Chicago in 2006, where he is now Director of Arts and Public Life, Gates sought a home he could afford. He bought a former candy store for \$130,000, in the South Side's Grand Crossing neighbourhood, which, though only two miles from President Obama's house, is a culturally neglected area where boarded windows are common and economic disadvantage is entrenched. Gates slowly renovated the single-story structure, driven by

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- 5 According to Gates, 'I created a story centred on a fictive pottery commune in Mississippi founded in the 1960s by an also-fictive Japanese ceramicist, Yamaguchi, who had fled Hiroshima, married a black civil rights activist and instituted a ritual called Plate Convergences, or conversations where people came from all over to discuss issues of race, political difference and inequity. Yamaguchi is supposed to have made ceramic plates specifically for the "black food" served at the dinners, and this dinnerware went into the Yamaguchi Institute Collection as part of the story. [...] We gave a huge Japanese soul food dinner, made by a Japanese chef and my sister, in honour of the Yamaguchis and their dinners. A young mixed-race artist enacted the role of their son and thanked everyone for coming.' 'Theaster Gates: In the Studio with Lilly Wei', *Art in America*, December 2011, no.11, pp.121—27.
- 6 'Cosmology of Yard' was hailed for bringing 'real nervousness and some bliss to the uptight *uptownness* of being at the Whitney'. C. Viveros-Fauné, 'Welcome to the Mixed-Up, Dialed Down 2010 Whitney Biennial', *The Village Voice*, 2 March 2010, available at <http://www.villagevoice.com/2010-03-02/art/welcome-to-the-mixed-up-dialed-down-2010-whitney-biennial/> (last accessed on 26 January 2012).



pragmatism and an aesthetic that favours intensely ad hoc processes, carefully rendering salvaged materials into stunning tableaux. The house grew to combine a ceramics studio, a design lab, a rehearsal space, a residency and a communal kitchen for the expanding numbers of artists, performers and designers that Gates invited. Eighteenth-century hand-carved Chinese doors abutted bowling-lane floors, and ‘ware boards’ — salvaged from the nearby Wrigley factory, where they were once used to dry chewing gum during its manufacturing process — served as panelling, shelving or stools. The ware boards would later serve as the dominant material for *Cosmology of Yard* (2010), his Whitney installation.

Gates’s house felt charged, and exuberantly irrational. A year after the housing crisis of 2008, he was trying to refinance the property — he had been saddled with an extortionate ‘ghetto loan’, with a fourteen per cent interest rate — and balance the financial stability of his household with his growing plans for the block.<sup>7</sup> Real estate values in his neighbourhood had collapsed during

the crisis, and the adjacent three-story house became available in mid-2009 for \$16,000.

Gates and a small team of artists and builders immediately set forth on a renovation, for what he thought would be a ‘soul food pavilion’ — part-restaurant, part-performance space. After fully gutting the building, Gates received an offer from the University of Chicago’s Department of Art History to provide a home to 80,000 glass slides, encompassing the Western art historical canon. He reinforced the structure to support the weight of the slides, and reconceived the building as a home to ‘bodies of knowledge’ that would be made public as a neighbourhood research centre. He subsequently bought 14,000 art and architecture volumes from the famed Prairie Avenue Bookshop and 8,000 LPs from a beloved local record shop called Dr Wax when the stores closed. The day I visited, Gates spoke intensely of neighbourhood transformation through cultural programming and the reanimation of forgotten spaces to create places of ‘urban ecstasy’. By rehousing the collections in his neighbour-

Theaster Gates, *Soul Food Pavilion*, 2012, series of dinners held at ‘Dorchester Projects’ with menu designed by the artist in tandem with local chefs; food served on handmade ceramics. Photograph: Sara Pooley. Courtesy the artist, Smart Museum of Art, Chicago and Kavi Gupta Gallery, Chicago/Berlin

7 For more information on banks’ lending policies to African-Americans during those years, see Michael Powell, ‘Bank Accused of Pushing Mortgage Deals on Blacks’, *The New York Times*, 6 June 2009, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/07/us/07baltimore.html?pagewanted=all> (last accessed on 26 January 2012).

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hood, Gates upended value hierarchies represented by the objects and the locations where one would expect them to be stored. As much as artists have always been responsible for the gentrification of devalued neighbourhoods, Gates claimed agency in his 'right to re-imagine place [...] not just as an art project, but as a way of living'.<sup>8</sup>

'Dorchester Projects' was active throughout 2010 and 2011. Artists were working in studios housed in the two properties, several young art historians and curators began hosting events and the buildings were quietly becoming heralded destinations outside the traditional Chicago cultural circuit. Soul food dinners extending from the 'Plate Convergence' project, performances by the Black Monks and jazz musicians such as David Boykin, a film festival presented in partnership with the Chicago Film Archives and events centred around the buildings' collections lured audiences to a neighbourhood they

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***Gates makes exchange more transparent: he openly discusses the flow of capital from one work to the next, proclaiming these figures and costs in his lectures.***

likely thought unsafe, and certainly not a place where contemporary art culture flourished.<sup>9</sup>

Referring back to the Whitney Biennial, Gates has said 'what was beautiful about this is that it gave me the opportunity to see [my] material fully redeemed in the cultural sphere'. The Wrigley ware boards 'went from rat shit to the Whitney Biennial in about three and a half years. That felt like redemption. And I went with them. I went from an artist that had no footing in the cultural sphere to being one [who] could start to negotiate things [...] But I had this other burden.'<sup>10</sup> Gates's 'burden' soon attached itself to invitations made by organisations in

Midwestern cities like St Louis and Detroit, and he began strategically leveraging institutional resources to initiate cultural planning projects in black neighbourhoods.

### **Housing and the American Dream**

Following September 11, President George W. Bush bound up US national security with home ownership, and the American Dream. Bush's American Dream Down-payment Initiative provided federal funds to low-income individuals with the goal of 'adding five and half million new minority home-owners'.<sup>11</sup> Bush proclaimed, 'right here in America, if you own your own home, you're realising the American Dream'. Further, Bush's new ownership society would 'change people's hearts, which will help change their lives'. This federal attitude, alongside an extraordinary cocktail of overleveraged households, reckless lending practices and financial deregulation, resulted in the greatest economic collapse in eighty years. Americans bought it all, toxic credit flowed and the American Dream burst. Foreclosures following the 2008 collapse were disproportionately concentrated in minority neighbourhoods, which had been targeted by predatory lenders and were the least equipped to stage recovery efforts.

Alongside the clear precedent of Rick Lowe's 'Project Row Houses' in Houston (1993—ongoing), and contemporaries such as Edgar Arceneaux's 'Watts House Project' (2007—ongoing) and Gina Reichert and Mitch Cope's 'Power House Productions' in Detroit (2008—ongoing), Gates's model actively recalls Donald Judd's and Gordon Matta-Clark's formal architectural interventions. He is also extending George Maciunas's and others' development activity, yet with a critical eye toward the ecologies of his community and the welfare of his neighbour.<sup>12</sup> These artists are forging new ways out of the housing crisis, which expand the self-interest of previous generations of artist-developers, and actively position the work as a social and sculptural hybrid. His description of material and social transformation,

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8 Conversation with the author, November 2009.

9 See Rachel Cromidas, 'In Grand Crossing, A House Becomes a Home for Art', *The New York Times*, 7 April 2011, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/08/us/08cnculture.html> (last accessed on 26 January 2012).

10 See T. Gates, 'Clay in My Veins', *op. cit.*

11 See President George W. Bush's public address, 17 May 2002, available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kNqQx7sjoS8> (last accessed on 20 March 2012).

12 George Maciunas was instrumental in the development of artist cooperative loft developments in SoHo, New York City. See Richard Kostelanetz, *SoHo: The Rise and Fall of an Artist's Colony*, London and New York, Routledge, 2003.

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notably, begins with his ceramics-based education:

*My training is in ceramics. It feels really important to say [...] for a person who really jumps into clay, you start to think differently, you start to think that you have the capacity to transform everything. [...] Clay and its metaphor of transformation allowed me to imagine cities differently, [that I] as an artist had the capacity to change zoning policies, building codes that hadn't been looked at in a hundred years, change the psyche of a city around what a neighbourhood represented. In a place that had been crack-filled, and where people imagined that there was only violence, I was really excited [...] to transform people's ideas about what happened in spaces.<sup>13</sup>*

Gates recognised the work he was engaged in couldn't end with the renovation of a house or a building; it needed to extend to public programming in the buildings, and indeed restructure the political and symbolic conditions of neighbourhoods.

### **People Always Take Stuff from Our Neighbourhood**

The Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts invited Gates in 2009 to participate in 'Transformation', a programme of community engagement that was part of the larger exhibition cycle 'Urban Alchemy/Gordon Matta-Clark'. The show asked artists to respond to Matta-Clark's sculptural and spatial reuse legacies within the specific urban context surrounding the Pulitzer's pristine Tadao Ando-designed sanctuary for art in St Louis. Gates said of the invitation, 'I [went] to the north side of St Louis and I saw these buildings, and I thought, I could take the whole building, slice that motherfucker off, put it in the Pulitzer and be good! Then I was teaching a class to seventh graders and I told them

about this great opportunity – the kids were like, that's cool, because people always take stuff from our neighbourhood!' <sup>14</sup> They were referring to the practice of 'brickeaters', or thieves who would sneak into the neighbourhood at night and steal bricks from houses, selling them to companies who would then resell them for historic restorations in richer neighbourhoods.

The class Gates, along with artist Juan William Chávez, Jane Ellen Ibur and Stewart Halperin taught for the Holy Trinity Academy in St Louis in conjunction with the Pulitzer exhibition was structured as an urban planning think tank through which Gates empowered the students to consider the things they wanted for their neighbourhood. His conversations with the students quickly shifted from physical and spatial needs to the importance of humanity, citizenship and respect.

In the wake of the Pulitzer project, Gates founded the non-profit Rebuild Foundation as a formal organisation to enact redevelopment efforts beyond 'Dorchester Projects'. In the latter half of 2010, Rebuild Foundation acquired three properties in direct proximity to Holy Trinity. Artist Dayna Kriz moved to St Louis to serve as the programme coordinator, and other Chicago-based Rebuild employees, such as architect Charles Vinz, have spent significant time on-site. In the summer of 2011, Gates partnered with the architecture programme at Washington University, also in St Louis, to lead 'Somethingness', a three-week intensive design/build studio that transformed a dilapidated nineteenth-century house into an arts centre hosting programmes and classes for Holy Trinity students. Alongside the centre, additional spaces are being renovated to serve as a design lab for students at Washington University, artist-in-residence studios and a neighbourhood bar.

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13 Seattle Channel Video, 'Cultural Space Seattle', 6 December 2011, available at [Seattle.gov](http://www.seattle.gov/arts/space/cultural_space.asp). [http://www.seattle.gov/arts/space/cultural\\_space.asp](http://www.seattle.gov/arts/space/cultural_space.asp) (last accessed on 26 January 2012). Here Gates also expanded on the community implications of his engagement with institutions: 'The \$75k or 100k that was available to do a project in a museum seemed really wasteful, and it seemed like a bad use of my time. If I could leverage \$150,000, why not actually have real transformative impact on a place? So I would ask museums and [organisations] if they would partner with me to think about parts of cities like St Louis and Omaha that had been forgotten about, think about the organisations that are real organisations doing real work already in those cities and could we think with those organisations about spatial needs? Could my "exhibition" be about connecting the museum to these other places? So this idea that artists could leverage cultural institutions [...] to think about other parts of the city became a really important part of my practice.'

14 See T. Gates, 'Clay in My Veins', *op. cit.* The video 'We Demand' was produced as a document of Gates's interaction with the students, who ranged from fourth to eighth graders. Available at <http://vimeo.com/10633699> (last accessed on 26 January 2012).



Theaster Gates in Hyde Park, St Louis, Missouri, 2010. Part of 'Transformation', a series of community projects for the exhibition 'Urban Alchemy/Gordon Matta-Clark', the Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts, St Louis. Photograph: Sara Levin. Courtesy the artist and the Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts

### Poetic Capitalism in the Age of Cultural Production

Gates's poetry is in connecting economic and physical material flows between his sculptural work and the 'Dorchester Projects' and Rebuild renovations. The buildings' demolition generates huge quantities of wood lath, moulding, mantelpieces and floorboards – materials Gates transforms into sculptures, which sell quickly, and produce funds that are reinvested in buildings. He refers to this cycle as a set of 'gestural moves', at the beginning of a connection between the sculptures and his passion for the restoration of 'poor black communities in Chicago, St Louis and Omaha'.<sup>15</sup>

Gates has become reflective lately about the structures and support necessary to realise work at his scale. 'I'm in the middle of creating the model [...] The existing model is exploitive. When you work at this level of production, you need help, but you can be intentional about where the help comes from.'<sup>16</sup> Gates has thus prioritised workforce training and mentorship structures within both his

studio and fabrication shop and the Rebuild Foundation. He is clear that the structure doesn't aspire to social work; rather he claims his 'cultural intentionality' provides opportunities to individuals about whom 'the art world might not [otherwise] be concerned'.<sup>17</sup>

Where so much social practice appears flattened by the market – offering collectors a two-dimensional vestige of an experience they missed – Gates has been keen to build context around the market for his work, effectively coaxing a social mission out of his collectors. As patrons began to ask to support his work on Dorchester Avenue, Gates would defer them to his gallerist, suggesting funds from the sale of his artwork would be 'invested on the block' anyway.<sup>18</sup> Gates's strategy here appears in contrast to other artists with community practices. For instance, referring to Marjetica Potrč's work, Joshua Decter has written that 'the collector who acquires a Potrč drawing at a New York gallery may have no apparent links with the owner of a home in New Orleans who utilises one of Potrč's functional

<sup>15</sup> Seattle Channel Video, 'Cultural Space Seattle', *op. cit.*

<sup>16</sup> Conversation with the author, 23 January 2012.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Conversation with the author, April 2011.



Theaster Gates, *A Good Whitewashing*, 2010, performance view, 'Gestures of Resistance', Museum of Contemporary Craft, Portland, Oregon. Photograph: Heather Zinger. Courtesy the artist and Museum of Contemporary Craft

rain-gathering works, yet we can imagine the material and symbolic interconnections between the two (for instance, in terms of how Potrc may redirect capital from one situation into another).<sup>19</sup> Gates makes this exchange more transparent: he openly discusses the flow of capital from one work to the next, proclaiming these figures and costs in his lectures.

In this regard his hubris provides openness to the opaque, unregulated terrain of the art world, and brings critical distinction to his practice amongst

the field of social activist artists. Gates's attitude toward capital and the market must be understood in relationship to his understanding of value. The capital afforded his work through the market is strategically deployed to redistribute or assign value, in a tactical embrace of the market to reveal gaps between capital and value. His places of 'urban ecstasy' are locations long abandoned by flows of capital.

19 Joshua Decter, 'Art and the Cultural Contradictions of Urban Regeneration, Social Justice and Sustainability: Transforma Projects and Prospect.1 in post-Katrina New Orleans', *Afterall*, issue 22, Autumn/Winter 2009, p.20.



Theaster Gates and the Black Monks of Mississippi performing at the opening reception for 'Feast', Smart Museum of Art, Chicago. Photograph: Jeremy Lawson. Courtesy the artist, Smart Museum of Art, Chicago and Kavi Gupta Gallery, Chicago/Berlin

### Politics of Staying

Gates's work in Midwestern cities hinges on the histories of segregation and civil rights, and their urban scars. 'I probably know more about the way the city works than about blackness, or in equal parts. I wasn't alive for civil rights. I get to understand it by viewing the economic and cultural landscape second-hand [...] I have the luxury of reflection.'<sup>20</sup> The urban terrain for Gates's reflection is severe. Omaha, Nebraska, for instance, has among the highest concentrations of millionaires per capita in the United States, yet is also home to the highest percentage of black children living in poverty.<sup>21</sup> Many Midwestern cities still possess a segregation line, a vestige of real estate redlining, a practice that enforced geographic segregation. Though it legally ended in the late 1960s, redlining persisted through subsequent generations via the denial of access to certain services — banks, insurance, good jobs, health care, chain (and therefore cheaper) supermarkets — in poor and most often black neighbour-

hoods. Into this context Gates suggests the necessity of a 'politics of staying' in disinvested neighbourhoods to reverse the urban conditions segregation cultivated.<sup>22</sup> Given that upward mobility in the urban US has involved a moving away from poverty, Gates's demobilisation offers a needed complication.

He could have an outsize role in the messy flow of gentrification, particularly in Grand Crossing, where 'Dorchester Projects' has now fully renovated two properties; he is currently hosting soul food dinners as part of the Smart Museum's exhibition 'Feast: Radical Hospitality in Contemporary Art' (2011); and he is nearing completion of a third renovation, the Black Cinema House, a formerly abandoned two-story house that will offer an archive of black, rare or local films to its community. As he puts it, the 'positive popularity' of his work on Dorchester — that is, the press, the events and the non-local audience — brought a new set of problems to the area. Confronted with his neighbours' prosaic concerns — one

<sup>20</sup> Conversation with the author, 23 January 2012.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Bob Frick, 'Best Value Cities 2011: 1. Omaha, Neb', *Kiplinger's Personal Financial Magazine*, Kiplinger, 2011, available at <http://www.kiplinger.com/magazine/archives/best-value-cities-2011-omaha.html> and Henry Cordes, Cindy Gonzales and Erin Grace, 'Omaha in Black and White: Poverty amid Prosperity', *Omaha World-Herald*, 2009, available at <http://www.omaha.com/article/20110106/SPECIALPROJECTS/706179826> (both last accessed on 22 March 2012).

<sup>22</sup> Conversation with the author, 23 January 2012.



neighbour had parked his car in the same place for twenty years but that space was now being occupied by cultural tourists — Gates and the Rebuild Foundation team began hosting Sunday brunch listening parties, inviting their neighbours into the house to listen to the Dr Wax records over frank conversations now that the ‘world’s best gentrifier had moved to the block’.<sup>23</sup>

### Ecstatic Arrivals

To thoughtfully trespass is to both give up the self and open oneself to the other. Derrida’s ‘let us say yes to *who* or *what* turns up’ espoused a radical hospitality that both dispenses ego and unfixes a place, opening up to foreign possibilities.<sup>24</sup> Gates demands both:

*What I’m after is how do we take a place from being imagined as a space where nothing happens — how do you shift that nothing into the idea of potency? [...] In ‘Dorchester’ what we’re trying to do is take the everyday activity of this neighbourhood, and present it. In this case it was an abandoned building,*

*we put some stuff in it. The space shares books, or you know, invites friends over for music, or has a big dinner [...] maybe it feels like a more special place than before.*<sup>25</sup>

I arrived at Gates’s ‘Somethingness’ celebration on a gorgeous clear night in August of 2011. The house on Mallinkrodt Street, in the Hyde Park neighbourhood of St Louis, backed up onto dozens of vacant lots, but the site had been brilliantly redesigned to claim that view. The rear of the house had morphed into a performance stage and ad hoc amphitheatre, so that viewers across the vacant lots could see the stage and its performances. A neighbourhood chef was serving up barbecued shrimp, the architecture professors who had been invited to the event seemed truly stunned and Emily Pulitzer looked ecstatic, sitting on a limestone bench as the Black Monks played full tilt and neighbourhood kids ran through the house and yard. Gates was chanting, ‘I demand the value of my labour. We demand the value of our labours.’

Dr Wax records in Theaster Gates’s ‘Dorchester Projects’ (2009—ongoing), Chicago, 2010. Courtesy the artist and Kavi Gupta Gallery, Chicago/Berlin

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond* (trans. Rachel Bowlby), Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007.

<sup>25</sup> ‘Try a Little Tenderness’, *Life + Times* [blog], 15 December 2011, available at <http://lifeandtimes.com/try-a-little-tenderness#.T3r9eKDYQmw> (last accessed on 26 January 2012).



The dozen students who had worked fourteen hours a day on the house came from art, architecture and social work schools; each knew every child from the Holy Trinity School by name. The evening was both staged and utterly unmannered, and achieved an enthralling imbalance. Although imperfect, and certainly in progress, hemmed in by vacant lots, collapsed homes and Holy Trinity church, one experienced the weight of the place, and the value of its pending transformation. In a moment, I found myself both entranced by the setting and deep in conversation with two MFA students, who had travelled significant distances to work with the project team. The students were intent on puzzling out the relationships of the community project to Gates's sculptural objects, philanthropy, the market, the neighbourhood, planning, activism and community.

### **Belief**

Gates's perhaps most ambitious effort is proceeding two blocks from the 'Dorchester Projects' in Chicago. Dante Harper is a 36-unit public housing project that has been vacant for five years and was slated for demolition. Gates commissioned a local architect, Landon Bone Baker, to produce a schematic design for artist housing. In

partnership with Brinshore Development, a for-profit development corporation, Gates was awarded a contract to redevelop the property as mixed-income and affordable housing for artists. The \$10 million project will be funded primarily through new market and state tax credits. Rebuild Foundation will be the anchor tenant and programmer, and Gates's fabrication shop will create the millwork and cabinetry.

An artist with everything at his disposal — metaphor, hyperbole, tricksterism, the black church, altruism, capitalism, tax credits and salvaged trash — Gates is a master of synthesis. His local enactment of discursive bodies of knowledge and ability to bring them to elegant form is singular in the art world. Although it may be difficult for one to resolve the volume and scalability of Gates's practice with the pace of his trajectory, it seems in no part premature to suggest his transformational work will proceed, pragmatic yet spirited.

To acknowledge Gates's frame — 'Art isn't the word that I lead with. Belief is the word that I lead with. I believe in places, I believe in people' — is to sink into the inescapable presence of his work.<sup>26</sup> Yes, it takes belief, but here belief affords large places. Gates is building radical form with everyday tools.

26 Mercedes Benz TV, 'Jeffrey Deitch and Theaster Gates', *op. cit.*