Graduate Symposium Compendium

2018

Nasher Prize
Nasher Sculpture Center

COVER:
Theaster Gates, *Tar Baby II*, 2016, Styrofoam, Bondo, tar coloring, vinyl foil and fabric, 78¾ x 314$^{15}/_{16}$ x 472$^{7}/_{16}$ in. (200 x 800 x 1200 cm) © Theaster Gates. Photo © Kunsthaus Bregenz (Markus Tretter)

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The 2018 Nasher Prize Graduate Symposium Compendium is published on the occasion of the symposium of the same name organized by the Nasher Sculpture Center, presented at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas, Texas, April 5, 2018, as part of the Nasher Prize Dialogues series.

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Nasher Sculpture Center

Nasher Sculpture Center is home to the Raymond and Patsy Nasher Collection, one of the finest collections of modern and contemporary sculpture in the world, featuring more than 300 masterpieces by the likes of Calder, Giacometti, Matisse, Picasso, Rodin and Hepworth. In addition to highlighting the permanent collection in the Renzo Piano-designed museum, the Nasher is host to rotating installations by celebrated modern masters, as well as leading contemporary artists. In dialogue with these exhibitions and other sculptural themes, the Nasher hosts lectures and symposia which enrich the museum experience and highlight the Center as a catalyst for the study, installation, conservation, and appreciation of modern and contemporary sculpture.

Nasher Prize

In April 2015, the Nasher Sculpture Center announced the creation of the Nasher Prize, the most significant award in the world dedicated exclusively to contemporary sculpture. It is presented annually to a living artist who has had an extraordinary impact on the understanding of the art form. Each winner is chosen by a jury of renowned museum directors, curators, artists, and art historians who have an expertise in the field, and varying perspectives on the subject, and receives a $100,000 prize, conferred in April of each year. In addition, each winner receives an award object designed by the architect of the Nasher Sculpture Center, Renzo Piano. The Nasher Sculpture Center is one of a few institutions worldwide dedicated exclusively to the exhibition and study of modern and contemporary sculpture. As such, the prize is an apt extension of the museum's mission and its commitment to advancing developments in the field.

Attendant with the award aspect of the Nasher Prize is a series of public programs called Nasher Prize Dialogues. These panel

discussions, lectures, and symposia are intended to foster international awareness of sculpture and to stimulate discussion and debate. Nasher Prize Dialogues are held yearly in cities around the world, offering engagement with various audiences, and providing myriad perspectives and insight into the ever-expanding field of sculpture.

The inaugural winner of the Nasher Prize was Colombian artist Doris Salcedo. The 2017 Nasher Prize Laureate was French artist Pierre Huyghe.

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Foreword

Last year, the Nasher Sculpture Center hosted its first ever Nasher Prize Graduate Symposium, dedicated to exploring the 2017 Nasher Prize Laureate Pierre Huyghe. The symposium garnered a collection of new research and scholarship about the artist by a group of students from around the world—from Germany, London, Australia, and the United States—as well as by the keynote speaker, French curator and critic Nicolas Bourriaud, which we proudly published in a beautifully designed compendium. One of the chief aims of the Nasher Prize is to further scholarship on contemporary sculpture, both through a careful look at the work of each laureate, as well as through conversations held around the world about sculptural practice in general, and the Graduate Symposium is a major way we are holding fast to that mission.

For the third year of the Nasher Prize and the selection of the 2018 laureate, our jury's deliberations led inexorably to Chicago-based artist Theaster Gates. Like our 2017 Laureate Pierre Huyghe, Theaster Gates is inclusive, even expansive in his approach, effecting poetic interventions and transformations while, like our inaugural Laureate Doris Salcedo, being willing to look unflinchingly at the sometimes harsh and unjust truths of history and the present moment. Nasher Prize juror Hou Hanru noted that the 2018 jury felt it important to select a laureate who "reflects the agenda of today's artistic production in terms of its originality, in terms of its relevance, and in terms of its interaction with how society needs an aesthetic dimension in its social life." Gates's work makes manifest, on scales both large and small—from the humblest of materials, like clay, to the incredibly complex, like architecture—the conviction that beauty, that sculpture, has the power to shift whole ecosystems toward a more thriving and hopeful future. Once asked what good

beauty does in the face of poverty and injustice—the need for basic services for the disadvantaged—Gates responded: "I believe beauty is a basic service."

Theaster Gates's work embodies not only an embrace of possibility—in material, in place, and in people—but a steadfast commitment to the belief that art has the power to change the course of history, and we were so thrilled to be able to celebrate his unfaltering creative energy and enthusiasm over the past year. We are equally delighted to extend the appreciation of his varied practice through this new edition of the Nasher Prize Graduate Symposium Compendium dedicated to his work. The compendium features essays by the five students who presented new research on Gates at the Nasher Sculpture Center on April 5, 2018, as well as by the 2018 keynote speaker, art critic, and Associate Professor of Art History at the University of Chicago, Matthew Jesse Jackson, and Southern Methodist University's Pollock Gallery Curatorial Fellow, Sofia Bastidas, who skillfully moderated the symposium conversations that day.

I also want to offer many thanks to the Nasher Prize sponsors who made the Nasher Prize Graduate Symposium possible, especially: JPMorgan Chase & Co., The Eugene McDermott Foundation, Nancy A. Nasher and David J. Haemisegger, The National Endowment for the Arts, and The Donna Wilhelm Family Fund.

Finally, our sincere thanks and best wishes to each of the students who presented papers this year—we look forward to your continued success—as well as to Nasher Assistant Curator Leigh Arnold for steering the program, with the invaluable support of Anna Smith, Curator of Education.

Jeremy Strick
Director, Nasher Sculpture Center

On Theaster Gates: Opening Remarks

Sofia Bastidas

SMU Meadows School of the Arts Curatorial Fellow and Pollock Gallery Director
Nasher Prize Graduate Symposium Moderator

In his book *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth*, Buckminster Fuller describes humanity's descent into specialization as a form of slavery.[1] Our entire conception of what an artist is has been constrained by art's inherent connotation as a form of specialization. But to immerse oneself in the work of Theaster Gates is to feel the concept expand again. It is to feel a shift in what we mean or understand as "material"; in his hands, the political and the social, the personal and historical, the raw, traumatized, abandoned, and charged come forward in spaces, objects, and sculptures that have systemic consequences in our current sociopolitical climate.

Gates navigates the world—or as Fuller calls it, Spaceship Earth—with what he knows most immediately, his own corporeality—his blackness—dealing with a constant remembrance of what his body means to Earthians. And within this framework, his work has been able to achieve shifts that balance the territory he inhabits. In today's papers, we'll hear how Zoma Wallace approaches Gates's sculptural and interdisciplinary practice as a form of poetry. Here we can read the poetic as that language that straddles the personal and universal. Gates has an ability to support his own desires and imagination as he restores and re-channels the object/project into motion by essence of grace. In the Dorchester Projects established in 2008, he navigates between the many sensitivities of territory, ownership, and communal responsibility, and in his fire hose sculptures he reconnects the past to the present in discarded and often forgotten materials. Gates's practice might be installed into the substantive intercultural record, but what remains—the marginal, the overlooked, the devalued forms of labor and practice—gets dissipated as it meets institutional assimilation.

1 R. Buckminster Fuller, *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth* (Baden, Switzerland: Lars Müller Publishers, 2008), 77.

In his work as a potter, Gates describes the nature of the medium as something moldable, humble, and raw, waiting for the potter, and yet, simultaneously he understands that the potter is at the mercy of the material. His is a practice that is deeply aware of the intricacies of what an artist can accomplish in relation to the complex nature of the machine. The constant investigation and reintroduction of the possibility of struggle within his role as both artist and citizen molds the various aspects of his work. He moves back and forth, within the ability of a potter, able to make and unmake; creating sculptures that have inherent virtues and challenges in presentation: They can stand on their own or mutate between layers of historical pretenses.

Gates's achievements are present in many sculptural forms, for example, his *Soul Manufacturing Corp* (2013), where he re-creates a space for pottery production, but also transforms that same energy of working with clay to new forms of economy and cohabitation. Symposium participant Patricia J. Stout reflects on what Gates refers to as "heat"—the energy that is a result of his community engagement and the shaping of materials—whether those materials be human relationships or architectural interventions. Gates's work is concerned with the aesthetic representation of history as well as the materiality of mediums, something that Kimberly Jacobs's paper explores in Gates's work made in 2011, titled *Glass Pavilion*. Composed of wooden floors, linoleum, carpet, crown molding, vinyl siding, and a collection of glass lantern slides that display examples of art and architecture throughout history, these materials altogether represent a variety of scenarios of Gates's experience as a black man. But, as Jacobs will argue, the sculpture more specifically considers the broader subjects of forced migration, appropriation, and the value of a sensitive practice.

From clay to abandoned spaces and everything in between, Gates has also been known as a collector of sorts. Allison Vanouse's paper will examine the black canonical instances in which Gates's work creates new and alternative forms of archiving. With an eye on the distinct spheres through which these archives may be organized, Gates weaves a thread into Spaceship Earth to recuperate the many layers of what we mean by collection. Numerous critical, ethical, and political questions evolve from the various forms of his non-specialized archival practice, this new practice, which becomes a new form of accountability.

Around the ideas of hospitality and inclusion, Gates's work might be overlooked by the term social practice. Victoria Sung's paper delves into the aesthetic and material considerations that allow the molding of things to be more inherently charged: that the high and low arts are in fact one in the same, and by admiring the different layers—physical or ethereal—we will find the aesthetic values that our visual culture has created as a way to specialize a practice have no tangible place in the world of specialized things.

Today's celebration and reflection on Gates's work is not intended to idealize or constrain another definition of what art is, but to consider his accomplishments as an Earthian concerned with the universe. His meditation on the embedded history of materials is an acknowledgment of his responsibility to Spaceship Earth. As Fuller says, "Every time man makes a new experiment, he always learns more. He cannot learn less."[2] Gates's work continues a critique first made in the Civil Rights era that is just as urgent in our current state of affairs. In our reflection on his work we can only learn more. As an audience, I hope we can engage in Gates's work and continue to navigate the universe as concerned Earthians

2 Fuller, *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth*, 106.

taking care of, and with consideration for, our mechanical vehicle. Art is a form to keep Earthians questioning, collaborating, and initiating new conversations about the things that haven't changed, or that don't change. A way of reminding ourselves that there is a universe outside the system.

With this said, I want to thank the Nasher Sculpture Center for allowing a space for considering sculpture and its many forms vital to our understanding of Spaceship Earth.

We now turn to our first paper, presented remotely by Kimberly Jacobs, who speaks to us from Cape Town, South Africa on her paper titled *Practicing the Poetics of Space: Theaster Gates's Glass Pavilion*.

Practicing the Poetics of Space: Theaster Gates's *Glass Pavilion*

Kimberly Jacobs

Virginia Commonwealth University

> The ongoing attempt at meaning-making through place-making, and the friendship generated by doing and feeling, are all forms of accumulating. Restoring the buildings is important, but that is the beginning of the work. Some larger transaction needs to continue to occur between the structures that have been reactivated and the ether. I want karmic consequence and ineffable results, not just sound, but things that start with "trans–."
>
> Theaster Gates, "Occupy" in *12 Ballads for Huguenot House*, 2012.
>
> Diasporan communities are uniquely situated to experience transcendence as prophetic distance from their nations of residence, and as a summons to "come out… lest you take part" in national sins and plagues. Not as summons to retreat or withdraw from society, but instead to adapt and "update" the prophetic transformations of their past, African Americans and others may find themselves improvising a biblical vision and version of Diaspora.
>
> Theophus Smith, *Conjuring Culture*, 1994.

"In a perfect world there would be no need for an artist, curator, or writer to respond to others' essentializing gazes and preconceptions, to become caught up in a world of [critics] intent on defining the fabric of one's own consciousness."[1] And yet, to analyze Theaster

1 Franklin Sirmans, "An American Art Job," in *Double Consciousness: Black Conceptual Art Since 1970* (Houston: Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, 2005), 12.

Figure 1.1.
Theaster Gates, *Glass Pavilion*, 2011, wood, hose, metal, glass lantern slides. Gift of Pamela K. and William A. Royall, Jr. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. Photo: Travis Fullerton

Gates's 2011 sculpture *Glass Pavilion* (fig. 1.1), one must elicit practically the entire lexicon of theoretical criticism. Considering that his work speaks for itself, Shannon Jackson writes, "Gates' heteroglossic speech gives form and structure to what is already visible." She adds, "His works are a representation of society's double-voicedness that will never achieve a Hegelian resolution," but instead lives in perpetual dialogic tension.[2] Thus, when entering *Glass Pavilion*, one can sense the poetry in its constructed yet enigmatic form. Its shelter-like frame is made from imbricated pieces of salvaged wood and flooring material, which balance overhead a softly illuminated constellation of glass lantern slides (fig. 1.2). Inside, there is a neatly structured assemblage of repurposed objects, including a tightly coiled decommissioned fire hose framed inside a shadowbox covered by chicken wire, along with four elegantly designed teacups,

2 Shannon Jackson, "Utopian Operating System," in *The Vera List Center Field Guide on Art and Social Justice*, no. 1 (New York: Vera List Center, 2015), 200.

Fig. 1.2.
Theaster Gates, *Glass Pavilion* (detail), 2011, wood, hose, metal, glass lantern slides. Gift of Pamela K. and William A. Royall, Jr. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. Photo: Travis Fullerton

each finished with a luminous gold rim. While standing inside, small rectangular windows enhance its spatial dimension and provide the viewer just enough light for aesthetic contemplation.

There are less formal qualities also at play in *Glass Pavilion*, such as its sheer carpentry. While Gates's three-dimensional sculpture fits most of the ontological aspects one would expect to find in a conceptual work of art, its handsome construction reminds us that Gates is foremost a craftsman. His transformative process of becoming a conceptual artist began twofold: pottery and urban planning. After being introduced to both subjects in college, he received a degree in the latter from Iowa State University. Continuing his studies, Gates traveled to South Africa to attend the University of Cape Town, where he obtained an MA in fine

arts and religious studies in 2000.[3] His pursuits of cultural and spiritual immersion led him farther east to Tokoname, Japan, where he studied the history of Japanese pottery and Shinto rituals. These early experiences in Japan and South Africa have since been absorbed and synthesized into Gates's individuated style of making. Because of this, it is apparent that his works of art are inextricably linked to his personhood—presenting signs of his combined interests in urban planning, craft, and material culture—which call into question both the aesthetic and axiological elements of his art.

The materials used to construct *Glass Pavilion* (floors with leftover fragments of linoleum and carpet, crown molding, vinyl siding, etc.) have evidently been recycled into Gates's work. Scratches and other signs of wear show their character and potential age, which give *Glass Pavilion* a unique sensibility. Its constructed nature appears organic, but also performative. Its stature implies value and sophistication, yet the unfinished qualities give it a worldly texture inclusive of the artist's aesthetic and ethical concerns. Therefore, by working in concert with these concerns, my essay intends to demonstrate how *Glass Pavilion*'s material composition metonymically signifies different human experiences, evinces the appropriation of architecture, and magnifies the cross-cultural qualities in Gates's artistic practice.

Similar to a clay vessel, Gates's architectural sculptures respond to environmental changes. He describes this metamorphic process as "acts of transformation," which re-convey the intrinsic meanings of form and craftsmanship seen in his work. Conceptually, he is interested in positing new ideas in preexisting objects, making them appear more "important" or sensational. Aesthetically, his

3 Lisa Farrington, "Post-Black Art and the New Millennium," in *African-American Art: A Visual and Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 388-389.

works articulate the visual language of assemblage, seen also in works by artists Robert Rauschenberg and Marcel Duchamp. Lisa Yun Lee has noted:

> Gates belongs to this tradition of [Duchamp and Rauschenberg] and is influenced by it, but no more than the traditions of Dadaism, and Cubism, and European avant-garde movements were influenced by the so-called 'darker-nations'. The African-American emphasis on improvisation, performance, and cast-off materials can be understood to have influenced much of what has occurred in art history in the past century.[4]

True indeed, although his praxis speaks not only for the conceptual Readymade, but also explicitly for the 'man', as in the man-made. Because first and foremost, Gates believes that things have life, and by repurposing used man-made materials into works of art he is "celebrating the people." This generous quality, along with the symbiotic relationship Gates has with his Chicago community, is often misinterpreted in his works.[5] Based on my observations and knowledge of his work, I would suggest that his poetic "acts of transformation" in urban environments are invitations for us to conceive new ideas regarding community values and cultural identity.

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4 Lisa Yun Lee, *Theaster Gates* (London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 2015), 68.

5 Theaster Gates, "In the Studio." In this interview with Tim Marlow, Gates discusses his wide-reaching practice, which focuses on "acts of transformation" – whether it is the reactivation of abandoned spaces, the transformation of disused objects, or the production of objects out of clay. Gates talks about social responsibility, the manipulation of raw material, and the influence of the Bauhaus on his ambitious and unconventional approach to art-making. Filmed in Chicago, July 2012.

While Gates's pragmatic method of making enacts the labor of a roofer (with regards to his father's lifelong occupation) and the skill of an architect, he pays close attention to line, texture, mass, and scale, to the point of near perfection—although, his works embody flaws and contradictions. Depending on how one encounters *Glass Pavilion*, the piece may appear passive, or rather arresting. For example, its ambiguous spatial dimension creates a conflict between the surface and interior; its curious surface texture and shelter-like form is inviting, but betwixt and between the assemblage of materials, their symbolic affiliation serves as a punctum causing the viewer to feel either perplexed or intrigued. This affective tension between space, time, and symbolism is consistent throughout Gates's work, acknowledging both curiosity and human intellect. Further, in *Glass Pavilion* we see Gates aesthetically improvising with used building materials to create a generative space for the viewer, image, and material objects to reference one another at once. I speculate that in due time we will see *Glass Pavilion* as, perhaps, a phenomenological archive, a spatial framework to see history being seen, or in other words: signified, giving birth to an infinite number of meanings.[6]

Gates's clever syntheses of theoretical dichotomies—signs and images, form and content, space and volume—subvert essentialist ideology. And rightly so, because one might argue that Gates's critical art is *about critical theory itself*. But I find it interesting that most critics writing about Gates's work label him as "the ultimate trickster figure"[7] and co-opt the terms "tricks" or "magic" to describe his artistic complexity. With respect to Henry Louis

6 Henri Focillion, *The Life and Forms of Art* (Brooklyn, New York: Zone Books, 1989), 26.

7 Kathleen Reinhardt, "Theaster Gates's Dorchester Projects in Chicago," *Journal of Urban History* 41, no. 2 (2015): 7. Accessed January 31, 2016. DOI:10.1177/0096144214563507.

Gates, Jr., who prescribed the term "trickster" in his 1988 scholarly opus *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism*, I must note that *The Signifying Monkey* is significant also to this, my critical perspective, because, like H.L. Gates, I would much rather "allow the black tradition to speak for itself about its nature and various functions, [...] than read it, or analyze it..."[8] Further, to iterate that using "trickster" as an analytic device oversimplifies the artists' creativity, as well as implicates a connection with spiritual philosophies that stem from Africa, when there may be no connection at all. As H.L. Gates reminds us:

> These trickster figures, all aspects or topoi of Esu, are fundamental, divine terms of meditation: as tricksters they are mediators, and their mediations are tricks.[9]

On this score, the works that emerge from Theaster Gates's studio are, indeed, analogous to Esu's eloquent and polymorphic being. As his pieces form new spatial and social interactions, cross-cultural convergences, they also encompass shared desires and utopian hopes.[10] Gates's combined aesthetic interests, as well as humanism, traffics his work into a separate paradigm altogether, a paradigm whose primary concepts address the timelessness of human intervention.[11] There are few pieces in Gates's oeuvre like *Glass Pavilion*, which speak more openly and critically about materiality and human sensibilities, in general. Last, taking pause to consider

8 Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), x.

9 Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey*, 6.

10 Yun Lee, *Theaster Gates*, 44.

11 Brandon Kralik, "The Post Contemporary Paradigm," August 29, 2014, accessed originally on February 16, 2016. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/brandon-kralik/the-post-contemporary-par_b_5731594.html

how Gates's generative reuse of redundant materials always circles back to his humble beginnings in Mississippi and later the South Side of Chicago, then to his first building project on Dorchester Avenue, which his close friend and curator Hamza Walker describes as the "artisanal ghetto—a beautiful one, but a ghetto."[12]

Glass Pavilion causes one to look closely and question critically the ways in which we encounter materials in time and space. Its organic form and open structure beckon the viewer inside. Rectangular windows are cut into three sides of the pavilion's frame. These openings strategically catch light from the outside gallery and provide *Glass Pavilion* with an extended sense of volume and accessibility. Light is also important for viewing this piece as a solid form, as it makes visible the aesthetic texture and materiality, while adding drama and poetically illuminating its historical tropes.[13] The atmospheric dispersal of light, space, and time forms an interstice that elicits contemplation. This affective use of form and light is a mixture of "pragmatism and poetry," according to Gates, who invites the viewer to remain still and focus on the *materiality of signs*, as well as their social implications. These qualities combined formulate its organic nature and make *Glass Pavilion* aesthetically pleasing, yet arresting — as it seems alienated among the other works of art inside the gallery.

Architecture Activism

Glass Pavilion is Gates's individuated reinterpretation of a *shotgun* house—a vernacular form of architecture specific to people of African descent living in the antebellum South—combined with a Japanese

12 John Colapinto, "The Real-Estate Artist: High-concept renewal on the South Side", *The New Yorker*, January 20, 2014, 7.

13 Jacques Rancierè, *The Future of the Image*, trans. Gregory Elliot (New York: Verso, 2007), 26.

sukiya style of architecture designed specifically for teahouses.[14] This style convergence is not new to Gates's work—he repeats this style often, which can be seen in some of his earlier works. But *Glass Pavilion*'s title suggests another unexpected connection.

In 1914, German Expressionist architect Bruno Taut fabricated a stylized pavilion made of glass for *Deutscher Werkbund Exhibition* in Cologne, naming it the "Glass House" or *Glashaus*. Taut collaborated with his longtime friend and poet/architect Paul Scheerbert to create *Glashaus*, deeming it a "model for new architecture in the age of the spirit," according to biographer Iain Boyd Whyte.[15] In his monograph, *Bruno Taut and the Architecture of Activism*, Whyte describes Taut's *Glashaus* as a "dreamlike prismatic dome structure" covered with luxfer prisms and multicolored glass.[16] He notes also that its natural lighting effects were heightened by the inclusion of a mechanical kaleidoscope built into the back of the pavilion.[17]

Although his description leaves much to the imagination, I find this piece somehow correlated to Gates's *Glass Pavilion*. Allow me to elaborate, slightly: It is not unlikely that Gates is aware of Taut's *Glashaus*, since he frequently cites Bauhaus, a contemporary of Taut, as an influence on his aesthetic ideas. Also, this could be seen as an encrypted reference to African architecture by the way in which German Expressionists (like Dada and Surrealists) were among the first European artists to incorporate African cosmology

14 My interpretation of Japanese architecture was gleaned loosely from Christian Tschumi's *Mirei Shigemori: Rebel in the Garden* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2007) Accessed April 16, 2016. ProQuest ebrary.

15 Iain Boyd Whyte, *Bruno Taut and the Architecture of Activism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 37.

16 ibid.

17 ibid.

into their works. Furthermore, when compared to images of West African architecture, Taut's ornamental features such as the canonical dome and *luxfer* pattern mimic a particular style of Cameroonian *Musgum* clay dwellings.[18] Therefore, *Glashaus* not only requires a more critical analysis than that given by Whyte, but also one can speculate that this fascinating correlation between African, Japanese, and German (vis-à-vis *Musgum*) architecture presents a multiethnic genealogical line of aesthetics, which Gates has re-appropriated inadvertently, and synthesized into his 21st-century *Glass Pavilion*. Its tactful convergence of vernacular styles speaks to and about the history of architecture in relation to cross-culturality. In many ways, Gates's work embodies the radical creativity and activist nature that Taut and Scheerbert were seeking to convey in their rendering.

One must consider also the *de-materializing* power of cross-appropriation and signification, especially with regards to Gates's use of object/image signifiers, such as the decommissioned fire hose framed inside *Glass Pavilion*. The fire hose has become the artist's individual form of iconography; it is a covert method to confront the viewer with political issues that urge us to revisit the past. By doing so, Gates is metonymically expressing the racialized violence against people of color in the American South during the 1950s Civil Rights Movement. Gates comments on his symbolism by saying:

18 Compared to West African domestic structures, one could easily speculate that Taut may have been privy to their canonical style of architecture built by the Musgum people living in Cameroon, by keeping in mind that Cameroon was in fact colonized by Germany between 1884 and 1916, before being sacked by France, and once more by the British. Noting also that German Expressionists, Dadaists, and Surrealists all borrowed generously from African cultures for many of their aesthetic ideas.

> My fire hose can't stand in the place of an eighty-year-old woman who was there [in Alabama] when those fire hoses were being used [on peaceful protestors]. And while sometimes it is important to operate at the level of the symbolic, sometimes it is equally important to operate at the level of the real.[19]

This "level of the real" implies that symbols are multi-temporal.[20] Use of politically charged iconography causes discrete disruptions in the linear progress narrative, according to queer theorist Elizabeth Freeman. She notes that historical signifiers "maximize the utility of time" by usefully pulling our attention backward. This pulling, or *lag*, is significant because it places a "necessary pressure" on the present.[21]

Perhaps the most ambiguous and enigmatic component of *Glass Pavilion* is the set of four decorative teacups shelved inside an open window (fig. 1.3). The teacups appear delicate and seemingly peaceful inside a small space adjacent to the fire hose. And yet, their suggestive placement seems also a bit conflated. Next to the politically charged fire hose, the teacups appear radical. Perhaps they are testament to labor and cross-cultural miscegenation—as fine "china" or *Chinoiserie* ceramics, which were a highly coveted commodity in Europe. Or they may be referencing the lesser-known history of a massive migration of Chinese industrial workers to Mississippi in the late 1880s.[22]

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19 Quoted in Mark Godfrey's article on Gates: "Designs for Life," *Frieze*, September 2, 2012, accessed March 20, 2016, http://friezenewyork.com/issues/frieze-magazine/issue-149.

20 Partha Mitter, "Decentering Modernism: Art History and Avant-Garde Art from the Periphery," *The Art Bulletin* Vol. 90, No. 4 (Dec., 2008), 531-548.

21 Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 62-64.

22 James W. Loewen's *The Mississippi Chinese: Between Black and White* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, Inc., 1988) provides further insight on this topic.

Figure 1.3.
Theaster Gates, *Glass Pavilion*, 2011, wood, hose, metal, glass lantern slides. Gift of Pamela K. and William A. Royall, Jr. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. Photo: Travis Fullerton

Or could the teacups simply refer to *Glass Pavilion*'s structural adaptation of a teahouse? Perhaps, since the teacups' decorum reinforces the pavilion's ornamental texture and intimate design—the teacups beg to be seen for their beauty. Yet they become overwhelmed by the political power of the fire hose, and their gilded beauty is de-materialized. For recourse, one could look to René Magritte's *The Treachery of Images* (*This is not a pipe*/*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*) (1928-29), which urges one to keep in mind: Artifice and reality play off each other, always.

(Dis)Location

Thinking through Martin Heidegger's *Being in Time*, and the notion of culturally specific objects being thrust into the realm of history via representation, makes culture itself seem existential—a process even. As Heidegger's theory distinguishes two modes of identity: One is ontic, that is *being* signified or represented mimetically. The second mode is ontologically, that is *Being* the signifier. The

way *Glass Pavilion* situates objects (or *things* in Heidegger's terms), they appear unfixed, or (dis)located, in time. In this organic framework the objects re-manifest through a synthesis—creating a multiplicity of meanings and formulation of ideas. Adding to this notion, cultural theorist Stuart Hall describes this synthesis as "a matter of *becoming* as well as *being*," and further:

> [Culture] belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere 'recovery' of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.[23]

Therefore, one could view *Glass Pavilion* as a contextual time-lapse, by the ways in which objects, such as the teacups and fire hose, transform over time and space. Gates's generative reuse of materials implies that *Glass Pavilion* is a fragment of history—from someplace else, and perhaps trying to lead us there. Fred Moten echoes Hall by implying that Gates's critical practice is "everywhere and nowhere."[24]

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23 Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, Issue 32 (2012), 257.

24 Fred Moten, "Everywhere and nowhere," in *Theaster Gates: My Labor Is My Protest*. ed. Honey Luard, exhibit cat. (London: White Cube, 2012), 63.

My analysis relates to Moten's ambiguity by and large because, as I mentioned earlier, *Glass Pavilion* seems to direct our attention elsewhere, yet locks us inside with its images.

In contrast to being nowhere, *Glass Pavilion*'s construction does show traces of locational specificity. On the topic of site-specificity, Miwon Kwon's understandings are insightful and thorough, as she notes that "the site is now structured (inter) textually rather than spatially, and its model is not a map but an itinerary, a fragmentary sequence of events and actions through spaces, that is, a nomadic narrative whose path is articulated by the passage of the artist."[25] Gates's strategic use of materials from his building projects causes one to consider each community, one by one. And this is good, being that his projects focus specifically on blighted spaces that need and require our critical attention.

This is one of the ways in which Gates applies the Japanese principle of *wabi sabi*, by his responding to "the beauty of things imperfect, impermanent and incomplete, and the beauty of things unconventional. The poetic rebuilding process..."[26] The ongoingness of urbanization.

But where is it going?

The Return to Form and Function

Gates's intimacy with material culture and vestiges of urban blight is perhaps symptomatic of his experience in disparate parts of the world. And it seems his awareness and use of rituals expands time

25 Miwon Kwon, "One Place After Another," in *Space, Site, Intervention: Situating Installation Art*, ed. Erika Suderburg, 38-63 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

26 Yun Lee, *Theaster Gates*, 88.

and space to address contemporary issues and function *within* society. Art historian Horace Ballard Jr. notes that Gates's works epitomize current ideas in the humanities, as well as signal a "new formalism" in American art. He writes:

> I am intrigued by the return of materiality and the form in the work of contemporary visual and literary artists. Attention to the surface of the object has re-surfaced at the same time the [sonnet] and villanelle have returned as categories we might give to layout of the poem on the page. This new formalism intrigues me as it reminds us that in times of great cultural upheaval, humans often return to the past for sanctuary; the past becomes purposeful again as we begin to consider small things.[27]

By embracing the timelessness of form, Gates maintains the spirit and function of art. His works radicalize the *fundamental* principles of aesthetics; in fact, they *embody* these principles, giving them a new life (an afterlife) extended from their original purpose. As architecture historian Mabel O. Wilson explains, the repurposed materials Gates uses to construct new spaces also "tell stories of other places," other lives, and other ways of *being*. *Glass Pavilion* is a "practiced space," which we can tell from its imperfections. And this piece, like any material organism, responds to changes in the natural world. Creating a dialogue between its surface and core, Gates brings our awareness to the historical significance of architecture and icons, condensing our actions and habits into one space.[28]

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27 Horace D. Ballard, Jr., "Dorchester Projects: Neither 'Black Church' nor 'White Cube'," in *The Vera List Center Field Guide on Art and Social Justice*, no. 1., (New York: Vera List Center, 2015), 250-251.

28 Mabel O. Wilson, "Collecting Publics," ibid., 238.

On this note, it is useful to recall G.W. F. Hegel's highly influential writings on the logic of aesthetics because, for Hegel, architecture fit within the top tier of his aesthetic hierarchy. His third chapter proscriptively conveys the impression that *spirit* is independent from subjectivity in relation to "the sphere of absolute religious truth."[29] Hegel's resounding thoughts on "dividing the subject" from its formal artifice illuminates a thread running throughout history, tying it to W.E.B. Du Bois's magnum opus *The Souls of Black Folks*, which described the "double consciousness" or "second sight" that, as some might argue, has "mutated and multiplied" throughout time and space.[30] Thinking through Du Bois and Hegel, respectively, I would like to build on their implication since *spirit* is a global *Being*.[31] And since the spirit is highest-mode being, according to Hegel, it desires nothing beyond that, simply freedom. Further, this spiritually intuitive "displacement of desire" is the mode in which diaspora figures travel freely on a "transhistorical trajectory," forming new communities of sense in multiple spaces. Adding to this notion, Theophus Smith's prescient text *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America* suggests: "In each instance Diaspora replaces the desire for a temporal homeland with an orientation and yearning toward a world-transcending citizenship."[32]

In an attempt to conclude here by pointing out that Theaster Gates's work is all-inclusive as well as allusive, complex, and yet relatable, I believe the words mentioned above describe the ways

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29 G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, vol. 1, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 528-529.

30 Valerie Cassel Oliver, "Through the Conceptual Lens: The Rise, Fall, and Resurrection of Blackness" in *Double Consciousness: Black Conceptual Art Since 1970* (Houston: Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, 2005), 17.

31 I borrow this from art historian Dr. Alvia Wardlaw; she noted it in an essay regarding African American art and globalization.

32 Theophus H. Smith, *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 252-253.

in which Gates is able to make works of art that appear in the now and then, everywhere and nowhere, to remind us that "space is a practiced place."[33]

33 In the words of Michel deCerteau.

Theaster Gates and the Archival Imperative

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The library is a useful point of entry for Theaster Gates's œuvre, because it refers to both a place and a body of information. The earliest, 14th-century uses of the term refer to the room that houses books; but *library* gradually comes to be associated with the room's contents until, in the 18th century, it is for Dr. Johnson "a large collection of books, public or private"; later, by analogy, it can be used to refer to almost any collection of information or protocols. This complex of historical meanings seems especially germane to Gates's practice because his acts of creative space-making and collections management form branches that are both distinct and intertwined: The "archival imperative" as I present it here involves this collocation.

Media collections automatically partake of an extra-spatial potential even when, as in Marcel Broodthaers's *Pense-Bête* (*Memory aid*) (1964),[1] they have been distorted or frozen in metamorphosis to art. A library activates even an inexperienced reader's perception of multiple modes of engagement with objects by triggering her function as a simple processor of written information, so that even if I will not read the entire contents of your library, I can spatially acknowledge that it might include the content of my next epiphany, or records of yours. Publishing (and the related enterprise of creating archives) forms a nexus for the performative and memorializing impulses in cultural production. Perhaps this is why, for Borges, "paradise will be a kind of library".[2]

In this context I want to raise both saccharine-nostalgic and grand-innovative forms of 21st-century media fetish. The digital information

1 Marcel Broodthaers, *Pense-Bête* (*Memory aid*), 1964, books, paper, plaster, and plastic balls on wood base. 11⅘ × 33⅜₀ × 16⅞₀ in. (30 × 84.5 × 43 cm). Collection Flemish Community, long-term loan S.M.A.K.

2 This quotation contrasts with Borges's more apocalyptic vision of "The Library of Babel". In *Collected Fictions* tr. Andrew Hurley. New York: Penguin, 1998. Originally published in Borges's collection *El Jardin de senderos que se bifurcan* [*The Garden of Forking Paths*], 1941.

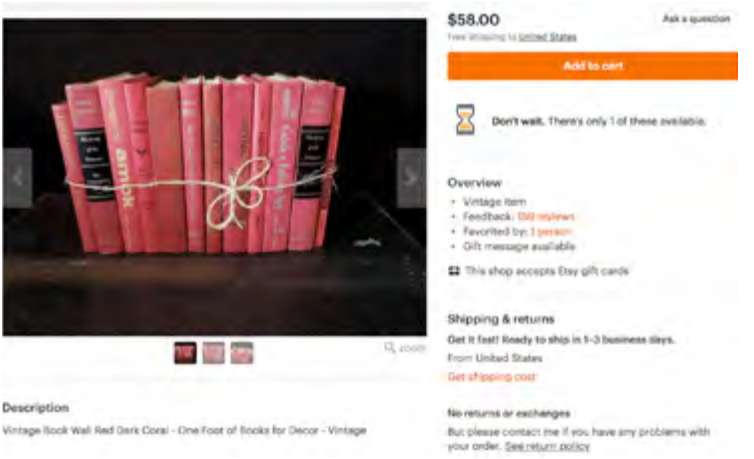

Figure 2.1.
Screenshot from InkandPaperVintage Etsy shop. Accessed online, 23 April 2018. [https://www.etsy.com/listing/586977596/red-books-for-home-staging-vintage-books]

era has brought books into vogue as staging props in themed weddings and interior decorating. One-foot-long sets of cloth- and leather-bound books are sold by color, to fill spaces with instant gradient-spine effects, ready to complement a bride's desired color scheme or create quirky alternative furniture. "Think Creatively About Your Table Options", urges Dallas interior stylist Hilary Walker.[3] "There are so many more options than you might expect [. . .] Even a stack of old books can be used to hold a drink or snack!" (fig. 2.1).

But in other book news of our century, the library of Alexandria has been rebuilt. The Bibliotheca Alexandrina was "reborn in October 2002 to reclaim the mantle of its ancient namesake," according to

3 Hilary Walker, introduced by Kelli Kehler. "10 Trusted Decorating Tips from a Prop Stylist That You Can Use at Home". Design Sponge. Accessed online, 23 April 2018. www.designsponge.com/2017/03/10-trusted-decorating-tips-from-a-prop-stylist-that-you-can-use-at-home.html.

the library's website—though a still more poetic paean is by Snøhetta, the Norwegian architecture firm responsible for the structure:

> The 11-story library can contain up to 4 million volumes of books, and can be expanded up to 8 million by the use of compact storage [. . .] Conceived as a revival of the ancient library in the city founded by Alexander the Great [. . . the]design of the new library is both timeless and bold. Its vast circular form alongside the circular Alexandrian harbor recalls the cyclical nature of knowledge, fluid throughout time (fig. 2.2).

The library features an enormous reading room—the largest ever constructed at 20,000 m^2—capable of accommodating 2,000 readers and occupying more than half the library by volume. The exterior wall is gray Aswan granite quarried from the regions in northern Egypt preferred by pharaohs of the 12th century BCE, inscribed with hundreds of languages from around the world. Yet I was disappointed to learn that these inscriptions have no specific meaning apart from their diversity. Asked to explain the significance, their Oslo-based designer Jorunn Sannes gave this reply:

> There is no meaning in itself but a "collage" of what humans have left throughout history. Some languages are pictograms, like Chinese and the old hieroglyphs. Then I used them as words -- words like: poetry, mountain, river, art ....except of these words there is only letters and symbols.
> The wall identifies the building as a library.

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Figure 2.2.
Snøhetta. Company website. Accessed online, 23 April 2018. https://snohetta.com/project/5-bibliotheca-alexandrina.

Architecture is the true expression of postmodernism, for the critic Frederic Jameson, because it is the art form *par excellence* that interacts with the world of commerce and work, and changes how people live. To use his words:

> It is in the realm of architecture, [] that modifications in aesthetic production are most dramatically visible, and that their theoretical problems have been most centrally raised and articulated [. . .] More decisively than in the other arts or media, postmodernist positions in architecture have been inseparable from an implacable critique of architectural high modernism [. . .] where formal criticism and analysis [] are at one with reconsiderations

> on the level of urbanism and of the aesthetic institution. High modernism is [] credited with the destruction of the fabric of the traditional city and its older neighborhood culture (by way of the radical disjunction of the new Utopian high-modernist building from its surrounding context), while the prophetic elitism and authoritarianism of the modern movement are remorselessly identified in the imperious gesture of the charismatic Master. Postmodernism in architecture will then logically enough stage itself as a kind of aesthetic populism.[4]

The idiosyncratic observation I make with this passage is that postmodern critiques of modernism, according to Jameson, are a fairly accurate reflection of the ways in which what we might call "subject-based" librarianship relates to craft decorating with books. Though the scale and cultural weight that we bring to bear in each case will be different, it is easy to see that these critiques follow essentially the same lines. There is a basic position from which high modernist architecture, like old-book interior-decorating, can be criticized for:

> 1. artifice, shallowness or detached aestheticism, dictated by visual choices made in the absence of community use-value questions
> 2. a separation in kind between the product of the work in question and its local context, manifesting itself in an implied or explicit status division between "high" and "low" art—or the rhetoric of "upcycling"

4 Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 2-3.

Figure 2.3.
Theaster Gates, *Raising Goliath*, 2012, 1967 Ford fire truck, magazines, tar bucket, mop, steel and wire. Images courtesy of White Cube, London.

used materials

3. assumptions about the relative value of what is mass-produced, against the products of the "Master", the genius, or the DIY craft artist.

Theaster Gates is, among his many titles, an architect and an urban planner. The intersection of this branch of his practice with his practice as a steward of collections situates us again in this nexus of the library—public space as published content. What becomes apparent, in approaching Gates by way of architecture and book crafts, is that dispositions of space share with dispositions of books the controversial charge of handling material with a history.

Gates creates sculptural forms to represent historical trauma in neatly

actualized metaphors, using reclaimed or documentary materials. In *Raising Goliath* (fig. 2.3), the metaphor of weight-as-significance is brought back to its physical roots in weights and measures to show a new balance between traumatic events (the fire engine alludes to fire hoses used against peaceful Civil Rights protestors in Birmingham, Alabama, May 1963) and expression in cultural forms (the bound volumes of black-canonical magazines *Ebony* and *Jet*). To extend the metaphor of the title, we know each flimsy magazine is physically insignificant to an individual fire truck, but this most basic relationship changes as the archive grows and develops group identity. Gates's *Goliath*'s dominance in space comes to be equalized by the physical record of culture and personal expression that constitutes his *David*: We come to see black culture triumphant, in alignment with a transparent glorification of the creative worker and his values even as weight (the source of dynamism in this sculpture) dramatizes the relation of the material to the conceptual, and casts the suspending "slingshot" as the balance of history.

Though Gates has been jokingly criticized for the "naiveté" of his sculptures with reclaimed objects,[5] there is a deliberate gesture of reification in these works that is utterly his own—both bracing and original in relation to earnestness or sentimental transparency. His minting of a kind of art currency from urinal tiles in the Stony Island Savings Bank, complete with the inscription "IN ART WE TRUST", seems to place Gates more solidly in the Duchamp camp than Duchamp, despite the social-justice function of revenue generated by their sale.[6] The same

5 Namely by his University of Chicago colleague (and sometime roommate) Hazma Walker. Quoted in John Colapinto, "The Real-Estate Artist," *The New Yorker*, 20 Jan 2014.

6 The bank has since been reimagined (partly thanks to the sale of these $5,000-a-piece tiles at the 2015 Basel art fair) as the Stony Island Arts Bank, "a hybrid gallery, media archive, library and community center", and home of Gates's Rebuild Foundation.

is true of many of his titles. His series of encased fire hoses In Case of Race Riot is in one sense a memorializing of Civil Rights tragedies, in particular Selma and Birmingham, but it also suggests the signage that would appear on a public utility fire hose. The title is both reverent and irreverent, enshrining Birmingham even as it oddly collapses the charge of its references to the position of municipal signage. Memory or meaning, Gates seems to imply, is partly a public utility in case of emergency, like water from a fire plug. Whether institutional memory can be equally misdirected is not a question he needs to ask: His art crafts a currency of social meditation—and the utilitarian humility inherent in his position has analogues in the role of a socially committed archivist.

For Verne Harris, who acted as liaison between the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and National Archives in post-apartheid South Africa from 1995 to 2001, many challenges that arise in archives with social-justice imperatives would be familiar to all managers of collections: the poor "management of electronic records, the inconsistent documentation of records transfers, and removal of what staff considered 'personal' records"—with systems of political dispute arising around some of these removals.[7] But in the context of TRC's larger mission, which aims at nothing short of healing a population in the aftermath of national trauma, this assessment of the bland logistics of archival processing seems to ignore the specific challenges inherent in the public access aspect of what Harris calls the "imaginative feeding of records into social memory." Even the language of this system for public accessibility has an odd ring to it, reminiscent of the idiom for being misled—one is "fed a line." Though it isn't clear whether Harris speaks for himself

7 Qtd. in Kathryn Michaelis and Nicole Milano, eds. *Social Justice Sampler* (Society of American Archivists, 2017), Online PDF, 2.

or borrows institutional language from the TRC and the NA, his description suggests that access to community memory, a human factor contingent not only on information but modes of presentation, hasn't been significantly addressed, or not with sufficient creativity.

Because Gates's work, conversely, can be viewed as a system of separable parts—both shelved material for consultation in elegant space like the Johnson Editorial Library, and painstakingly re-presented installation objects with instant visual affect, like *Raising Goliath*—he creates a system that approaches the status of an important work of municipal architecture piecemeal, the way multiple images combine to form a 3D object in a Viewmaster. As the Bibliotheca Alexandrina invites awe with its exterior structure, while offering community use-value, Gates's gallery-bound use of archival materials feeds into the human-scale wealth of accessible resource in the Dorchester Projects houses, which are themselves works of "real estate art."[8] What would Theaster Gates make of the "imaginative feeding" of apartheid South African records to a changing public? What he seems to understand about intersections of spatial with archival expression of power relates to the possibilities they afford for instant communication: translation of community memory.

Gates is not only a steward of physical buildings and a designer of real spaces, but an architect across dimensions in the sense that any curator of collections becomes an architect—capable of transposing libraries from simple, physical locations into a complex of intellectual ones. By defining sets of objects as collections, Gates stakes claims on "space" in the time capsule of human attention—the act of collection is a work of information. We might consider, for example, that a collection like the

8 See Colapinto for *New Yorker*. Op. cit.

Figure 2.4.
Theaster Gates, Installation view of *True Value* at the Fondazione Prada, July 7 - September 25, 2016. Photo by Delfino Sisto Legnani Studio. Photo courtesy of Regen Projects © Theaster Gates

contents of a hardware store doesn't have any purchase on this kind of informational space before it's catalogued, reclaimed, and publicized as an archive—and, to push this a step further, it may be still more important when reframed as the focus of an artist (fig. 2.4).

I'd like to suggest that this transposition of archives into intellectual space relates to the act of reframing urban environments, and reconfiguring the map. In his TED talk, Gates presents a series of maps of Chicago that show this process at work, in the form of a development plan based on the transformation of vacant buildings in underserved, underutilized sections of his city into community "hubs".[9] He shows a map of Chicago; then zeroes in on the South Side; and finally projects a new version of this neighborhood in full color with articulated spheres of influence.

9 Theaster Gates, "How to revive a neighborhood: with imagination, beauty and art," TED2015, March 2015.

This future Chicago is related to Gates's interest in archival preservation of a South Side hardware store: The city development project uses the archival principle in reverse. In this case, rather than transposing real historical objects into intellectual space by making them the focus of an archive, Gates shows the power of the opposite gesture: He alters the information in a geographical record by a process of archival reframing. By moving us through these maps, changing borders, colors and sizes of icons from one frame to the next, Gates changes the city as he changes our archive of the city's image: Where are the centers of culture? What is the mode of our focus? If place is defined by perception, these aren't just cosmetic changes. Instead, this succession of slides shows Gates actively finessing the record to define the nature of a change he's creating. His Chicago becomes a viable Chicago because, as Derrida describes it:

> [...] the technical structure of the archiving archive also determines the structure of the archivable content even as it comes into existence in its relationship to the future. The archivization produces as much as it records the event.[10]

This practice is not only a persuasive political rhetoric: It functions as a work of performance. The differences in Gates's maps aren't subtle but emphatic, transparently interested in manipulations of perspective while continuing to pursue their objects with total earnestness; they seem to invite the kind of objection I'm raising. Theaster Gates-as-speaker is able to offer new ways of viewing the interrelatedness of memory-work and

10 Jacques Derrida, "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression," *Diacritics* 25, no. 2 (1995): 9-63, 10.

Figure 2.5.
Thomas Hirschhorn, *Too Too-Much Much*. Museum Dhont-Dhaenens. Deurle, Belgium. Installed 10 March 2010 - 12 May 2010. Images courtesy of Contemporary Art Daily. © 2018 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris

community development because he shows the mechanics of the rhetorical form in a more visible format than any municipal exercise of these powers, moving as they must through the opaque depths of city bureaucracy, is typically able to convey.

On the other hand, it's possible to describe someone like Thomas Hirschhorn as an artist working with archival methods. His 2010 installation *Too Too-Much Much* for Dhont-Daenens Museum in Deurle, Belgium, serves as an example (fig. 2.5).

If Gates's archives are places to experience moments of serenity and beauty, Hirschhorn's represent a different approach: algebraic meditations on the perversity of the archival impulse. By using cheap materials in high-entropy arrangements, Hirschhorn

encourages his viewers to acknowledge the conceptual poverty of acts of collection—even politically reverent ones, like his makeshift shrine to Nelson Mandela. *Too Too-Much Much* is not a functional archive, but a suggestive representation of the practice of making one. We might experience the giddiness of discovering that heaps of cheap stuff don't deter the culture-consumer: We still want to go to the exhibit when an artwork resists commodification. Archival art operates in five dimensions: all dimensions of space, plus time—and a fifth: social utility. It's in this fifth dimension that Gates contrasts most dramatically with Hirschhorn. Only the former takes us emphatically into the realm of macro-relational aesthetics by working with and through the structures of a capitalist system.

Another point of contrast in archival methods has to do with acts of choice. The Berlin-based Peruvian artist Fernando Bryce's *Book of Needs*[11] can be taken as a representative example of this type of practice. The piece is a selective reconstruction of pages from early issues of the *UNESCO Courier*, a publication that has focused on issues in culture, education, race, human rights violations, and world politics since 1948. Eighty-one drawings of varying sizes, representing full pages of the magazine reproduced in ink applied with watercolor brushes, are installed in glass tables and adjacent walls. They're intended to be experienced as a single work. By enclosing visitors within the magazine's archives, Bryce invites a viewer's envelopment within the publication, both by physically surrounding her with images of postwar political reality—and providing more text-based content than a museumgoer is likely to read word-for-word. The piece depends on the viewer's experience

11 Exhibition: Fernando Bryce, *The Book of Needs*, University Research Gallery, Harvard Art Museums, January 20 - May 6, 2018, https://www.harvardartmuseums.org/visit/exhibitions/5635/fernando-bryce-the-book-of-needs (accessed July 6, 2018).

of being overwhelmed by content, and the artist's act of selection drawing critical focus to aspects of the publication mired in nationalism and racism, or couched in outdated political rhetoric.

Theaster Gates, by contrast, is interested in whole collections. His work with the Johnson Publishing Company magazines *Ebony* and *Jet* depends on the completeness of representation: He does not select from traditional archives without addressing the tendentiousness of his act of selection.[12] In this respect, as well as his devotion to original printed matter and careful preservation and binding, the principles that guide Gates are closer to those of traditional librarians or collections managers than those of an artist like Bryce. This means Gates can be considered in the context of individuals operating under a different set of organic limitations: professional archivists, working within existing institutions rather than creating their grassroots alternatives under the aegis of creative expression.

For Mark A. Greene, late president of the Society of American Archivists, one of the problems in taking social justice as an archival imperative, as South African practitioner Verne Harris advocated following his work with the TRC, is that this type of requirement for practicing archivists may prevent the collection manager from actively seeking to maintain records of groups that he or she may personally oppose. This, as Greene observes in his paper "A Critique of Social Justice as an Archival Imperative: What Is It We're Doing That's All That Important?", is a practice that could have unforeseeable negative repercussions, especially if we harbor

12 Insofar as his work with the Johnson Publishing Company magazines represents an act of radical inclusion of contextual material, the bound volumes of these magazines as a work of art may be contrasted with Dana Schutz's depiction of Emmett Till (and surrounding controversy at the 2017 Whitney Biennial). The original photo of Till's body, on which Schutz's painting is based, appears in *Jet*, August 1955.

the ambition to create archives capable of maintaining accurate records through unforeseeable shifts in political fortunes. "[The] same set of records," Greene observes, "often serves at once to maintain a repressive regime and hold that regime accountable." He then quotes a "provocative example" from Australian State Archivist Chris Hurley:

> "We cannot comfortably design a better system for documenting the number of heads processed through the gas chambers as if good recordkeeping (in a technical sense) can be divorced from the uses to which it is put." [Greene replies that] such a divorce is both possible and necessary, because the records of evil deeds do not sustain evil perpetually.

To put it another way, it's only by having the names of the oppressed that will ever be able to offer the survivors reparations.

How do independent projects like those of Theaster Gates relate to the more well-channeled methods of preservation and access? Do his archives lose any of their relevance as artworks by skirting the complicated territory of devoting physical space to an ideological opposition, which is so central to the debate in any traditional institution worth its salt? Though the answer to this last question must be distinctly negative, Gates's practice as a "business artist" may open new consideration of the complexities of public institutions as fresh territory for archival art. Frederick Wiseman's 2017 film *EX LIBRIS* takes the New York Public Library as a focus to raise questions about the nature of other hard institutional decisions, and the problems of institutional transparency. What are we to do, for example, about the growing presence of homeless patrons in libraries? While Wiseman's practice as a filmmaker may be the right medium for

opening our eyes to such disillusioning complications of large institutions, Gates's work is capable of transforming perspectives on the possibilities for privately managed archives with the fresh optimism of a newly ground lens.

In addition, waste, as an alternative to action, may be the most powerful argument for any decision in favor of archival development. We can only be delighted, for example, that the deaccessioning of a collection of glass slides from the University of Chicago's Art History department found a new home as a complete collection in one of the Dorchester Projects buildings, rather than being split into non-representative selections. When the rhetoric of individual-versus-institution creates nothing but gridlock, Gates reminds us that it is possible to simply become your own institution. And sometimes this means, as it did for Booker T. Washington, that one first needs to dig a clay pit, to mold and fire the bricks that will be used to build the university library.[13]

13 Washington was criticized by the likes of W. E. B. DuBois for requiring Tuskegee Institute students to undertake brickmaking as an adjunct to academic pursuits. The foundation of the brick-manufacture facility, from which Institute buildings were constructed while it also acted as a financially viable business serving surrounding communities, is described in his memoir *Up From Slavery*.

Saving Grace: Considering the Poetics Within Theaster Gates's Abstracted Reclamations as Acts of Grace

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On the winter stage of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Carrie Mae Weems presented a multidisciplinary, multimedia work titled *Grace Notes: Reflections for Now*, asking herself and her audience, "What is grace?" Questioning the meaning of grace, and moving through its manifold definitions, she pushed the inquiry forward to contemplate, "What role does grace play in the pursuit of democracy?" She asked these questions as she reflected on the incongruence of the promise of equality and justice with the consistent erasure of innocent Black lives at the hands of law enforcement without recourse. If democracy's fundamental objective is to acknowledge equal value in each voice, each life, and each body represented within its state, then its pursuit, a drastically unfinished and imperfect project, is often nullified when it comes to Black bodies.

Feared for the fact of their Blackness and positioned as a potential threat to law and order, "othered" bodies are too often subjected to what Giorgio Agamben terms a "state of exception"[1] and what Christina Sharpe describes as the condition of "non-being".[2] It is in this state of exception, certain rights typically protected under law are selectively suspended indefinitely. Designation as an antagonist, or at the very least, to be perceived as potentially oppositional, rationalizes calculated measures taken to consolidate and maintain absolute authority over specific bodies and territories. Those bodies and geographic spaces remain vulnerable within a declared state of emergency. (An example of this is martial law.[3]) This acute consolidation of supreme and unconditional authority translates to the installation of sovereignty. In an essay titled *Necropolitics*,

1 Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, translated by Kevin Attel (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005).

2 Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

3 Agamben, *State of Exception*, 4.

Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembé writes: "Sovereignty resides...in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die...Sovereignty means the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not."[4] But Mbembé also presents the more romantic qualities expressed in relation to sovereignty, particularly for the individual. "Self-institution and self-limitation (fixing one's own limits for oneself)" is included under this concept.[5] Circling back to Weems's underlying question, how then do castoff bodies (the individual body and collective bodies of individuals) transcend systematic and strategic devaluation into non-being, which unjustly marks them for death (condemns them to death) and discards their former presence with indifference? How is individual sovereignty, or self-institution, restored? She offered *grace*.

Theaster Gates asks somewhat similar questions. Why do some bodies matter over others? (In relation to his work, bodies can be read simultaneously as the human frame, objects, and/or ideas composed of cumulative aspects, and finite volumes of space). How do bodies (people/places/things) that once mattered to someone, no longer matter, to the point where their material presence, their physical matter, is allowed to dissolve and disappear? And how—after being allowed to lose their existence—can those bodies regain their energies through a transference of their matter into new, actively contributing presence? How can they re-become *beings* that matter? In his artwork, Gates facilitates this process of re-becoming through grace.

The type of grace I refer to, as defined by the poet Friedrich Schiller, has two main components: "beauty of movement guided

4 Achille Mbembé, "Necropolitics," *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 27.

5 Ibid.

by moral disposition" and "beauty of frame under the influence of freedom".[6] To Schiller, the word grace is grossly overused to describe things that do not deserve inclusion in the category. He considers grace to be a conditional beauty that is attributed to movement, or constructive, transformative activity, that is driven by an internal motivation to convey a positive force into the world. Beautiful movement without moral intention exists only for beauty's sake; therefore, it is not to be considered graceful. Furthermore, he considers grace as a quality of frame, frame meaning form, which is formed by movement under the influence of creative imagination. Imagination is freedom. Imagination, unique to the human intellect, is the capacity to project *what can be* onto *what is*. I propose that Gates exerts *grace* as both an aesthetic and ideological methodology that performs a restorative, reenergizing process for what Gates himself describes as "making Black matter matter".[7] But his graceful work does not conclude with the restoration of status. Gates does not merely engage in recombining castoff materials to remind us of the value embedded in their pasts, and he certainly does not seek to make valuable material objects for the sole purpose of beholding beauty. Rather, Gates puts formal beauty to work and sets materials/objects/spaces into a graceful motion that negates death literally and figuratively.

To discuss this motion, I will focus on five sculptural examples within one particular body of work, *The Minor Arts*, exhibited at the National Gallery of Art in the late summer of 2017. With Schiller's conception of grace as my point of departure, I will describe how these fusions of formal and conceptual abstraction

6 Friedrich Schiller, *On Grace and Dignity*, vol. II, in *Friedrich Schiller: Poet of Freedom* 349-354 (Washington, D.C.: Schiller Institute Inc., 1992).

7 Theaster Gates, interview by Rosemary M. Magee, *Are Artists Activists?* (Atlanta, September 9, 2016).

have undergone a process that embodies grace in each creative and morally inclined movement made toward beauty, sovereignty, and/or service. Shown together, the works achieve an experience that John Dewey would describe as having a "*unity*...constituted by a single quality that pervades the entire experience in spite of the variation of constituent parts".[8] Grace, as that unifying quality of *The Minor Arts*, encompasses all aspects of each created object: material memory, original function, new function, metaphor, process, collaboration, and ongoing assignments of community service. I will touch on how experience of his objects in an art context stimulates a sense of co-responsibility, inverting Hannah Arendt's take on collective responsibility.[9] Shared concern for the continuance of Gates's artworks is an essential ingredient to building the cultural value that Gates is able to then convert into rising exchange values to produce a surplus to be shared. Ultimately, it is my thought that Gates has tinkered with the theory of money in such a way that his ethos of sharing has successfully inserted an economy of grace into art world commerce, overriding desire with a desire that reverses alienation with invitation.

There is something to be said about Gates's ethos of sharing. In a panel discussion on art and social activism at Emory University, Gates spoke of his compulsion to share, as something modeled by his mother. Describing his family, he says:

> We didn't subscribe to an activist agenda...so for my family spirituality, religion, and the political was grounded in the actions of the everyday and the actions of the everyday had the potential to be quite

8 John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1980), 38.

9 Hannah Arendt, "Collective Responsibility," in *Responsibility and Judgement*, 147-158 (New York: Schocken Books, 2003).

> radical… I often talk about my mom cooking extra food so that other people on the block could eat and a byproduct of her cooking would mean there would be this excess. That felt like a small action that could qualify as something beyond the political. It wasn't positionality but a belief of heart.[10]

Sharing, as a belief of heart, is central to Gates's practice. His mother's large collard green pot is the equivalent of his having access to an excess of resources. With access to monetary, material, and human resources, Gates is able to share access to agency. Therefore, instead of allowing the othered bodies, for whom he advocates, to be consumed or immobilized by impositions of economic and political sovereignty, his work invites the under-considered to assert sovereignty as authors in their own forthcoming.

What is forthcoming? Forthcoming is to have not yet arrived; to be absent yet approaching; to be possible and awaited. Forthcoming is the possible future. Gates makes space for the past and the possible to convene in a work titled *Slate Corridor for Possibility of Speaking in Tongues and Depositing Ghetto Reliquary* (fig. 3.1). To view the work in close proximity is to be granted a vantage point that none but a roofer would have had otherwise. This monument is central to *The Minor Arts* exhibition, and assumes the right to its own self-definition by commanding spatial authority.

Standing before this wall of overlapping slate tile salvaged from the decommissioned St. Laurence Catholic Church, one stands witness to the survival and revival of a body ushered toward death by an orchestrated agenda. According to *Chicago Patterns*, a newsletter

10 Gates, interview by Rosemary M. Magee, *Are Artists Activists?* (Atlanta, September 9, 2016).

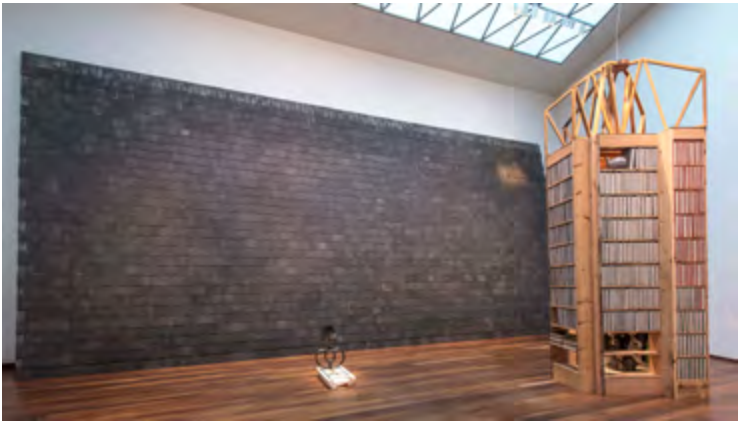

Figure 3.1.
Theaster Gates, Installation view of Theaster Gates: *The Minor Arts at National Gallery of Art*, Washington. March 5 – September 4, 2017. Photo: Rob Shelley. Courtesy of the artist; National Gallery of Art, Washington; Regen Projects, Los Angeles; and White Cube, London and Hong Kong

dedicated to "architecture, preservation, and hidden history," the former church, built in 1911, fell into debt and disrepair, and the property was purchased by a development company with plans to replace it with another facility within 10 years of the transaction.[11] Due to its architectural and historical significance, St. Laurence had received a rating by the Chicago Historic Resources Survey that warranted a 90-day Demolition Delay Ordinance so that potential reuses or opportunities for preservation could be assessed. It is written that the developers quietly "waited out the clock" and under "neglectful watch, virtually no maintenance was performed, while efforts to secure the premises" seemed intentionally inadequate.[12] After a fire in 2010, the dissolution of

11 Eric Allix Rogers, "St. Laurence Under Demolition," *Chicago Patterns*, April 25, 2014. http://chicagopatterns.com/st-laurence-under-demolition/ (accessed March 30, 2018).

12 Ibid.

the structure was permitted to worsen, making way for justifiable demolition due to "unsafe conditions." This scenario begs for a return to Mbembé's essay. Necropolitics, meaning literally the politics of death, enforces dominion by implementing procedures to intimidate or terminate life as needed. St. Laurence Parish fell prey to those politics, but only partially.

Owing its second life to the process of art-making that Gates has honed, the St. Laurence community has been offered the possibility to remain ever-present and vital. Thus, the souls that prayed and fellowshipped under the protection of the slate still have a voice in the narrative that will remain with the art object in perpetuity. The accumulation of the parishioners' lives that remains soaked in the slate exists as spiritual residue that still announces the presence of the congregational body. As the roof enters museum and gallery spaces of fine art institutions, the congregation is given platform to actively advocate for future St. Laurence communities to be seen, to be counted, and to receive the supportive encouragement to cultivate self-affirming and self-reliant skills; in other words, they are given space to "matter" as they become givers in the act of grace. What once sacrificed itself to provide protection against wind and rain *for* the sacred, is now, as an art object, protected *as* sacred in and of itself. The memory held within it will become only *more* sacred as its past life moves further and further into history.

Adding another layer of vitality to the church's continuation of being is the provision of income and workforce training that the creative process provided for the demolition crew. Carrying out their daily livelihood work, each worker received an additional fee for his or her labor to reclaim the roofing material, made possible by the commissioning of the sculpture, thus sharing in Gates's economy. Of this particular sculptural intervention, Gates says:

> ...even in its failure as sacred space or an architectural structure, St. Laurence is ready to offer us something... it is still offering alms...the alms are the dispersion and the great dispensation that allows for those materials to continue to function and continue to serve. So then, my question is never a question about recycling as much as it is the great dispensation of materials. That in fact these things that had been sacred or had been used to house the sacred could in fact continue to deliver great things. They are not bankrupt because they cease to function as the thing they were principally made for... in fact it is on me to see the sacred, to re-sacralize the thing that is now debris or demolition units and to invest in those things.[13]

The making of this sculpture served as an investment in the preservation of memory, the acknowledgment of a community, and the stimulation of local economy. The making also invested attention into underappreciated *forms* of making. As one discerns the individual personalities of each tile, workmanship of roofing as an artistic proficiency is given immediacy in the prominent galleries held exclusively for "high art" forms, short-circuiting the canonical hierarchy that relegates craft and trade to the "minor arts". The intentional inclusion of bronze as a bona fide fine art material within the work was meant by the artist to undeniably certify *Slate Corridor*'s fine art credentials, making roofer and sculptor equal partners in his "major art" endeavor. The grace in the artwork is the beauty of the roof's movement; its transformation from a functional architectural component into

13 Theaster Gates, *The Minor Arts* exhibition press preview, *The Washington Post*, February 28, 2017.

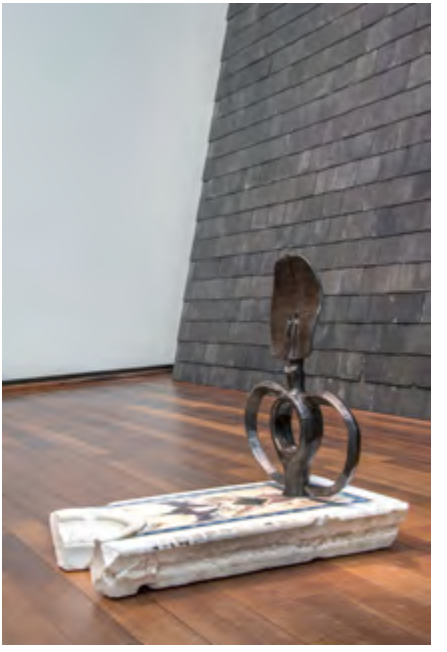

Figure 3.2.
Theaster Gates, *Something About Modernism and Death*, 2017, bronze, marble. As part of *Theaster Gates: The Minor Arts*, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., March 5 – September 4, 2017. Photo: Rob Shelley. Courtesy of the artist; National Gallery of Art, Washington; Regen Projects, Los Angeles; and White Cube, London and Hong Kong

a symbol that attracts concern and care toward the St. Laurence community. This transformative beauty is guided by Gates's own moral disposition—his character. To this point, Friedrich Schiller in an essay titled "On Grace and Dignity" writes: "In respect of the form of man...we expect from his form, that it reveal to us ... how far he is come in his freedom... that is, that it bespeak his character."[14] Character therefore is a reflection of free will, and movement, expressed through forms that manifest as a result of an individual's deeds, which speak to the makeup of their soulful core.

At the foot of *Slate Corridor* stand two relatively small sentinels, guarding the wall and making their presence conspicuously known to those bold enough to approach. The first, titled *Something About*

14 Schiller, "On Grace and Dignity," 356.

Modernism and Death (fig. 3.2), is composed of only bronze and marble, both materials having historied pasts and cachet in the high-art canon. The title is intriguing and hints at the combination of a bronze form on top, seeming to echo the distinctive stance of West African Senufo figures, and a marble base that was once the classical material of choice in Western sculpture and architecture. The term Senufo "refers to a group of more than thirty interrelated languages and the people who speak those languages in a region that spans the present-day national boundaries of Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, and Burkina Faso."[15] Modernists including Pablo Picasso, Amedeo Modigliani, and Fernand Leger found Senufo sculpture particularly inspirational for their avant-garde explorations. Further speculation could also lead to the consideration of the Akua'ba fertility doll of the Ashanti peoples of Ghana as a formal influence and a metaphor for the rebirth of found materials and the potent productivity of the Gates studio. The wide, flat head, shaped as if fashioned out of a shovel, could signal a marriage between modern tools of labor with traditions of labor and artisanship of ancient ancestries. Since the figure does not reflect an exact one-to-one match to any one specific form, my references remain conjecture. Accuracy aside, the aesthetic is unmistakably of West African origin. The second sculpture guarding the slate, titled *Elegua in Winter* (fig. 3.3), leaves no room to doubt its influences. Elegua, also known as Elegba or Elegbara, is a deity in the Yoruba religion of Nigeria, West Africa that was retained through the Atlantic Slave Trade and syncretized with Catholic saints in Latin American religions of Santeria and Candomble. Elegua is the keeper of the crossroads, representing the beginning and end of

15 Susan Elizabeth Gagliardi, "Senufo Sculpture from West Africa: An Influential Exhibition at the Museum of Primitive Art, New York, 1963," metmuseum.org, March 2016. http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/smpa/hd_smpa.htm (originally published January 2010, last revised March 2016; accessed April 1, 2018).

Figure 3.3.
Theaster Gates, *Elegua in Winter*, 2017, wood-fired clay, stain, pelts. As part of *Theaster Gates: The Minor Arts*, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., March 5 – September 4, 2017. Photo: Rob Shelley. Courtesy of the artist; National Gallery of Art, Washington; Regen Projects, Los Angeles; and White Cube, London and Hong Kong

Figure 3.4.
Theaster Gates, *New Egypt Sanctuary of the Holy Word and Image*, 2017, wood, marble, bound Ebony magazines, cast-iron teapot, electric light. As part of *Theaster Gates: The Minor Arts*, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., March 5 – September 4, 2017. Photo: Rob Shelley. Courtesy of the artist; National Gallery of Art, Washington; Regen Projects, Los Angeles; and White Cube, London and Hong Kong

life, and the opening and closing of paths in life. It is believed that his help is needed in the accomplishment of things.
It is entirely possible that the crossroads in the *Minor Arts* is the site of a graceful collision. The two small sculptures in the round especially indicate cultural collisions. Those types of collisions have been essential in the evolutionary process of art history as influences are sought after, studied, and inserted into fresh contexts. The title, *Something About Modernism and Death*, is similar to that of Alan Warren Friedman's publication *Fictional Death and the Modernist Enterprise*, where he writes:

> Why modernist death? ... I acknowledge the difficulty (even arbitrariness) of dating cultural trends; of defining when dominant attitudes or practices end or begin...I acknowledge that conflicting paradigms may coexist peacefully...They overlap: new ones begin before earlier ones end; trends continue even as they are superseded.[16]

In the *Minor Arts*, conflicting paradigms coexist peacefully by way of grace. The grace at work is certainly the beauty of frame under the influence of creative freedom and Gates's creative freedom, like those modernists who looked to new horizons for new ideas, wards off the death of art characterized by stagnation of ideas and shallowness of intention.

Gates's abstractions also ward off the death of knowledge. *New Egypt Sanctuary of the Holy Word and Image* (fig. 3.4) houses and protects Black knowledge. Decades of rescued *Ebony* magazines bound as encyclopedic volumes are kept on its shelves. The outer

16 Alan Warren Friedman, *Fictional Death and the Modernist Enterprise* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 3.

faces of the towering shelving unit reveal rhythmic grids of pages interrupted by the lips of the hardcover bindings. To peek inside the small library almost seems to violate a sacred space, which is warmly lit by a single light bulb. The interior is a color field painting composed of three main bookbinding colors: red, black, and green, which are also the colors of the Pan-African flag, also known as the Black Liberation Flag adopted in 1920 by the UNIA-ACL (the Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League). UNIA founder Marcus Garvey is quoted as saying, "Show me the race or the nation without a flag, and I will show you a race of people without any pride."[17] Upon its adoption, the colors of this self-affirming flag were established as follows: "Red is the color of the blood which men must shed for their redemption and liberty; black is the color of the noble and distinguished race to which we belong; green is the color of the luxuriant vegetation of our Motherland."[18] The tricolor flag colors that symbolize Black pride and "worldwide liberation of peoples of African origin"[19] now protect the Black pride documented within the pages of *Ebony* magazine. *Ebony* was created by John H. Johnson and published by his Chicago-based Johnson Publishing Corporation. Since 1945 until very recently, the company was family owned, and following Mr. Johnson's personal philosophy to underscore aspects of Black lives that reflected "respect, dignity, pride, understanding, and inspiration," the magazine celebrated Black accomplishment while discussing ways to increase opportunities for personal success.

17 UNIA-ACL, theunia-acl.com: http://www.theunia-acl.com/index.php/history-red-black-green (accessed April 3, 2018).

18 George Alexander McGuire, *Universal Negro Catechism: A Course of Instruction in Religious and Historical Knowledge Pertaining to the Race* (New York: Universal Negro Improvement Association, 1921).

19 Ibid.

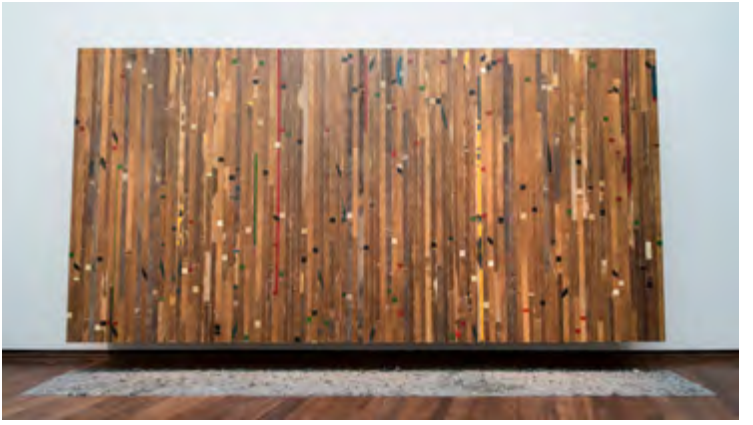

Figure 3.5.
Theaster Gates, *A Game of My Own*, 2017, wood, paint, black stain, Alabama ball clay. As part of *Theaster Gates: The Minor Arts*, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., March 5 – September 4, 2017. Photo: Rob Shelley. Courtesy of the artist; National Gallery of Art, Washington; Regen Projects, Los Angeles; and White Cube, London and Hong Kong

When Johnson Publishing Corporation donated volumes of historical *Ebony* magazines to Gates, he saw to it that they were bound under the meticulous care of The Conservation Center in Chicago. Repairs were done to torn pages, loose pages were reattached, and the hardcover bindings in red, black, and green protect the original covers and spines for historical reference and documentation.[20] The conserved volumes are made available for public reading at The Stony Island Arts Bank as part of Gates's not-for-profit Rebuild Foundation.

New Egypt Sanctuary of the Holy Word and Image clearly encases photographic images of people, places, and things significant to

20 The Conservation Center, theconservationcenter.com, September 16, 2016: http://www.theconservationcenter.com/article/2016/9/14/ebony-books-a-theaster-gates-collection (accessed April 1, 2018).

Black American experiences documented over seven decades. One can flip through the pages to observe diverse people, doing exceptional *things*, in meaningful *places*. But can images take on another form? Can a meaningful place become an exceptional thing that serves as an image of diverse people? *A Game of My Own* (fig. 3.5) seems to qualify as such an image. Gates once referenced his interest in the writings of Hans Belting, who wrote about images:

> Images traditionally live from the body's absence, which is either temporary (that is, spatial) or, in the case of death, final. This absence does not mean that images revoke absent bodies and make them return. Rather, they replace the body's absence with a different kind of presence. *Iconic presence* still maintains a body's absence and turns it into what must be called *visible absence*. Images live from the paradox that they perform the presence of an absence... This paradox in turn is rooted in our experience to relate presence to visibility...When absent bodies become visible in images, they use a vicarious visibility.[21]

A Game of My Own is an image that conveys iconic presence. In this work, the image has been painted with the passage of time. The wooden slats of a former gymnasium floor of a closed school have been rearranged into a new cosmos that is aesthetically awe-inspiring. Awe draws the viewer in close where every scuff left by running tennis shoes and bouncing basketballs is layered upon the layers of urethane, now peeling to provide beautiful textures and tones. Reading the scuffs is to imagine all the games where this

21 Hans Belting, "Image, Medium, Body: A New Approach to Iconology", *Critical Inquiry* 31 (2005): 312.

geometric puzzle lay underfoot, to hear the referee's whistle and the cheering crowds, and to vicariously "see" bodies in play and in motion. But this floor is available only for us to see what it used to be because a school building has closed. Somewhere, this cosmos of teamwork and sportsmanship is absent. Its absence from the original community of users is now a movable presence that speaks silently for lost schools, lost communities, but found opportunity.

In *A Game of My Own* as in other works, Gates defies death by replacing absence with a special kind of presence. He claims sovereignty as self-defining power on behalf of forgotten labor and lives bound up in the material he saves. Ideologically, he overcomes the death of ideas by making his forms purposive in the improvement of the human condition. Death no longer commands a permanent end to something. Death becomes instead a threshold to be exceeded. The sovereignty that Gates claims for the forgotten is described by Georges Bataille as "the refusal to accept the limits that the fear of death would have us respect... the sovereign world is the world in which the limit of death is done away with...The sovereign is he who *is*, as if death were *not*. Indeed...he dies only to be reborn."[22]

To witness this rebirth through the poetics of Gates's abstractions reveals the beauty in transgression. The refusal to fear limits (or accept them) comes across in his inventiveness. His refusal also burrows new corridors into the artistic canon for excluded makers to enter. In this vein, the artist is quoted as saying that he is "trying to create a new order, with its own rules and cohesion... in a subtle way, trying to ask what it means to no longer have rules and what

22 Fred Botting and Scott Wilson, ed. *The Bataille Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1997), 319.

it means to forge ahead".[23] The lasting impression inscribed by his movements guided by moral intention, and his frames formed under the influence of freedom, are experiences that initiate communities that become bound together by an emotional connection *to* and collective sense of responsibility *for* the material/the object/the space/the ideal at its center. This dynamic of care galvanizes cultural value, and market value, and establishes grounds and means for self-sustaining economic ecosystems to take root. Gates's mark-making is executed within and without a studio setting. Whether broom-sweeping his Dorchester Avenue studio, convening a town hall meeting, or reframing what can newly become allowable under existing zoning codes, his marks qualify as graceful movements that are simultaneously spatial, intellectual, financial, administrative, and metaphoric. To quote Schiller yet again, "grace is but one such beautiful expression of the soul in willful movement. Where grace appears, the soul is the moving principle."[24] Gates's movements are gestures that are also maneuvers, formulating a practice that aligns the notion of sovereignty as self-determination, or self-institution, with what Martin Heidegger describes as *saving*. Heidegger acknowledges that we typically consider the term saving to mean rescuing, "to seize hold of a thing threatened by ruin in order to secure it in its former continuance".[25] Gates certainly accomplishes this in his collecting of discarded objects, taking responsibility for their continuance in the form of his raw materials. But Heidegger expands upon the possibilities inside of saving, offering that "'to save' is to fetch something home into its essence, in order to bring the essence for the first time into its proper appearing".[26]

23 Theaster Gates, interview by Curator Sarah Newman, *The Minor Arts* (2017).

24 Schiller, "On Grace and Dignity", 341.

25 Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology."

26 Ibid.

I read this *proper appearing* as a higher calling. To return, to go back to fetch, to look back at the past to create a new future in the Akan language of Ghana, is termed Sankofa. Saving therefore is "Sankofa". What was once just a roof is now an archive of spirit. What was once a collection of magazines is now a library of Black lifestyle, Black labor, Black beauty, Black family values, and Black entrepreneurship. Gates, in his own words, channeled this same implication of a higher calling, asking: "How do we start to reorder the world, [so] that it can start to say new things, or *powerful* things... more powerful things than maybe the world that it had existed in before?"[27] *The Minor Arts* presents declarations of presence that have endured a trajectory, or progression characterized by grace, that moves forsaken items/energies/skill sets/and locations from a place of non-being or non-status[28] to one of renewed and amplified value, positioned to then be leveraged for acquisition of capital intended for redistribution as resources and opportunities into communities where there is a dearth of both. For example, as a consequence of his artistic connection to the St. Laurence Parish properties, Gates purchased St. Laurence Catholic Elementary School when the opportunity presented itself in 2014. The site is being proposed as a forthcoming maker space, where job training and apprenticeships in art and design will be offered for neighbors to develop new areas of prospective employment. Leverage in Gates's hands ultimately equates to rebirth begotten through grace, whereby memory becomes a life-giving source in a new state of being; it is Sakofa in service of the forthcoming.

27 Gates, *The Minor Arts* exhibition press preview, February 28, 2017.

28 Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

Art as an Ongoing Relationship: Theaster Gates's Architectural Projects

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In a recent interview for *The New York Times*, Theaster Gates stated, "I need to live as the artist and the contractor, the dreamer and the builder...I can't afford to just be the dreamer in this moment, as much as I would love to."[1] This quote eloquently alludes to the way in which we frequently conceptualize the idea of time and space as it relates to art. Often, the artist is thought of as working on a highly conceptual level, creatively addressing ideas within the mind. While the artist is frequently consigned to conceptual space, the builder or contractor occupies a concrete space and serves a practical, real-life purpose. Within the past three decades, both social practice art and community art have flourished, chipping away at this divide between conceptuality and practicality. Gates's quote further demonstrates the line that is being blurred between what we have traditionally thought of as "art" and the emergence of communal art projects within the city. Gates, who began his work as a potter, is also expressing his belief that at this point in time he needs to do more than just create works of art—he needs to be simultaneously the conceptual dreamer and practical builder.

One characteristic of community-based art is that it focuses on the importance of building relationships. In this paper, I propose that the relationships present in community art can be characterized by three distinct types. The first type exists between the artist and the community: the artist either belongs to the community or ventures into the community from the outside. Whichever situation occurs, the initial relationship that exists between the artist and the community serves as a guiding force in the development of the community art project. The second type exists between individuals as they experience and

1 Hilarie M. Sheets, "Using Discards to Build Art (and Rebuild a City)," *The New York Times*, March 14, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/14/arts/design/theaster-gates-national-gallery-of-art-chicago.html.

participate in the art project collaboratively. This relationship is often considered to be the main component of community art projects. The third, and ultimate, relationship exists between the viewer and the work of art. Most community art projects contain some type of art object that creates a potential for other outside relationships to build, as individuals who did not necessarily participate in the project may be exposed to the project or work of art. In this paper, I explore the connection between the importance of beauty, dialogue, and these three different types of relationships as they apply to Gates's ongoing architectural projects. In addition, I touch on the recent trend among artists working in communities to incorporate an element of education into the art experience, which prolongs the existence of the work of art as the relationships formed between the artist, the community, and the work of art takes on a life of its own.

As a potter turned social practice artist, Gates emphasizes the ability of the artist to shape "nothing material into something."[2] He has created works of art out of a variety of different materials, first working with clay, then turning to tar, and later using found materials from his architectural projects to create individual works of art. In 2006, after being offered a position at the University of Chicago, Gates decided to purchase a building on South Dorchester Avenue and moved to the Greater Grand Crossing neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago.[3] During this time, he began thinking of how to address the growing

2 Theaster Gates, "How to revive a neighborhood: with imagination, beauty and art," presentation at TED conference, March 2015, TED video, 16:53, https://www.ted.com/talks/theaster_gates_how_to_revive_a_neighborhood_with_imagination_beauty_and_art.

3 Art21, "Theaster Gates in 'Chicago,'" *Art in the Twenty-First Century: Season 8*, September 16, 2016, Video, 14:44. https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s8/theaster-gates-in-chicago-segment/.

issue of abandoned and vacant buildings within the Grand Crossing neighborhood. In the episode that focuses on Chicago during Season 8 of the television series *Art in the Twenty-First Century*, Gates explains that he grew up with an anxiety that his neighborhood was being torn down around him.[4] This feeling, or what I describe as his relationship with the community, influences his architectural projects and works of art, both of which are deeply connected to a sense of place. Thus, Gates's relationship with his community forms the initial spark from which his works of art stem.

In a 2015 TED Talk, Gates explains that he began to ask himself the following question: "Is there a way that I could start to think about these buildings as an extension or an expansion of my artistic practice?"[5] This question would lead to the development of his two ongoing community-based architectural works: Dorchester Projects and the Stony Island Arts Bank (fig. 4.1-4.2). After acquiring the first building on Dorchester Avenue, Gates purchased the building next to it two years later, extracting the raw materials from within the newly acquired run-down building and reusing them in the restoration process as a means of creating new individual works of art.[6] These two buildings were designated the Listening House and the Archive House, and thus marked the beginning of Dorchester Projects (fig. 4.1). Since then, new buildings have continued to be added to the ongoing project, allowing for these architectural spaces to became cultural hubs within the community. The buildings house a variety of archive

4 Art21, "Theaster Gates in 'Chicago.'"

5 Theaster Gates, "How to revive a neighborhood: with imagination, beauty and art," presentation at TED conference, March 2015, TED video, 16:53, https://www.ted.com/talks/theaster_gates_how_to_revive_a_neighborhood_with_imagination_beauty_and_art.

6 Art21, "Theaster Gates in 'Chicago.'"

Figure 4.1.
Theaster Gates, The Listening House and the Archive House located on Dorchester Street in the neighborhood of Greater Grand Crossing on the South Side of Chicago. White Cube/Sara Pooley © Theaster Gates and White Cube, London, courtesy of the artist

Figure 4.2.
Theaster Gates, Stony Island Arts Bank in the neighborhood of Greater Grand Crossing on the South Side of Chicago. Photo by Tom Harris and the Rebuild Foundation. White Cube/Sara Pooley © Theaster Gates and White Cube, London, courtesy of the artist

Figure 4.3.
Theaster Gates, Stony Island Arts Bank, 2015–ongoing. Photography: Sara Pooley, Courtesy of the artist and the Rebuild Foundation, Chicago.

Figure 4.4.
Theaster Gates, Main Hall of Stony Island Arts Bank, 2015–ongoing, with the Johnson Publishing Library above. Photo by Nance, Kevin. "Stony Island Arts Bank: One Year Later." *Chicago Gallery News*, 26 Aug. 2016, www.chicagogallerynews.com. Accessed 2 April 2018.

collections that are important to the history of the community. In addition to this, there is studio space and mixed-income housing for artists, as well as a building that has been turned into a cinema.[7]

Due to the success of Dorchester Projects, and the need and desire among the community to establish additional artistic spaces, Gates became interested in expanding the project to a dilapidated former bank building that was slated for demolition. In 2013, he purchased the building for one dollar under the condition that he would take on the renovation project himself, which required raising the funds necessary to restore the building (fig. 4.3).[8] Once the renovation was completed, the building reopened in 2015 as the Stony Island Arts Bank. It currently houses the John H. Johnson publishing library (fig. 4.4), the University of Chicago Glass Lantern Slides, the Edward J. Williams Collection, and the Frankie Knuckles Collection of Vinyl Records.[9]

In his seminal work first published in 1998, entitled *Relational Aesthetics*, art theorist, curator, and writer Nicolas Bourriaud asserted that since the Enlightenment, modern political thinking has been centered on the desire to promote individual freedom and to improve one's society.[10] Thus, intertwined within modern-day life is an underlying notion of activism. In his analysis of art made in the 1990s, Bourriaud identified an artistic tendency toward what

7 Art21, "Theaster Gates in 'Chicago,'" *Art in the Twenty-First Century: Season 8*, September 16, 2016, Video, 14:44. https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s8/theaster-gates-in-chicago-segment/.

8 Hilarie M. Sheets, "Using Discards to Build Art (and Rebuild a City)," *The New York Times*, March 14, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/14/arts/design/theaster-gates-national-gallery-of-art-chicago.html.

9 Rebuild Foundation, "Stony Island Arts Bank," *Rebuild*, 2018, https://rebuild-foundation.org/site/stony-island-arts-bank/.

10 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 1998, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2009), 11.

he coined "relational" art that exists within the space created in human interactions. For Bourriaud, this unique space is one in which dialogue among humans can take place.[11] He builds upon the idea of continuous interactions by writing: "Each particular artwork is a proposal to live in a shared world, and the work of every artist is a bundle of relations with the world, giving rise to other relations, and so on and so forth, ad infinitum."[12]

Gates's community-based architectural projects consist of various layers, including the three different types of relationships I describe as being found in community art and the sculptural end product. Dorchester Projects and the Stony Island Arts Bank allow for multiple relationships, or art experiences, to occur. Individuals are influenced by others within the space, as well as the architectural work, or art object. Following Bourriaud's train of thought, Gates's architectural projects create a space in which dialogue can flourish. These projects serve not only as a place where members of the community can visit, but also where those outside the community can come to learn more about the neighborhood and interact with the historical materials and ephemera in the archives. Thus, it serves as a space where people from within and outside the community can come together.

In her 2004 article "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," Claire Bishop reminds us that just because a work creates dialogue, our analysis should not end there; we must analyze the relationships that the work creates, or rather, question what type of democracy these relationships establish.[13] In response to Bourriaud's analysis of art made in the 1990s, Bishop critiques artist Rirkrit Tiravanija's

11 Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 16.

12 Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 22.

13 Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October* 110 (Fall 2004): 65.

exhibition at 303 Gallery in New York, where he cooked curry in the gallery in an effort to create dialogue among diverse visitors who might happen by and be interested in partaking of the meal. Bishop notes that while the work did create dialogue, it was a closed dialogue among similar-minded people in the art world.[14] Likewise, in Tiravanija's 1996 exhibition *Untitled* (*Tomorrow Is Another Day*), in which he re-created his New York apartment out of a wooden construction in the gallery space made available to the public, the audience comprised traditional artgoers interacting with one another in the fabricated apartment. Here, Bishop brings up an interesting point when she states: "It is tempting to consider what might have happened if Tiravanija's space had been invaded by those seeking genuine 'asylum.'"[15] Thus, for Bishop, it is important that art stimulates both new dialogue and dialogue among new people.

Gates's community-based architectural projects tackle this challenge in two distinct ways: first, by creating a space that brings together a diverse group of people—from artists and educators to local community members and city leaders; and, second, by focusing the dialogue on material matter. It is important to note that while Gates's spaces become a place for new dialogue, they do so without taking the space away from the community; the beauty in each new space is that it highlights what came before it.

In his 2017 exhibition *The Minor of Arts* at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., Gates used found materials from within his community in South Chicago to create works of art that make one notice the power within everyday, abandoned material to create beauty. One such work titled *A Game of My Own* is a

14 Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," 67.

15 Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," 68.

20-foot-by-10-foot wall-mounted sculpture that Gates created by reconfiguring pieces of a gym floor, which were discarded after a school within his neighborhood was shut down, into a cohesive, if abstract, composition.[16] Gates created another work within the exhibition from a portion of a slate roof that was gathered from the demolished St. Laurence Church in Chicago.[17] Portions of the profits from Gates's works are reinvested back into the Rebuild Foundation, which manages the Dorchester Projects *and the* Stony Island Arts Bank.[18]

In *The Work of Art in the World*, Doris Sommer notes: "Claire Bishop worries that inclusiveness blunts art's provocative edge when consensus building matters more than aesthetic results [because]...either artists stay fixed on personal projects and merely use the collective to fill in the design; or artistic vision is lost in negotiations."[19] But Sommer counters this claim by stating: "But many distinguished artists hold out for a third possibility: participants are creative whether they stay with the collective project or ripple out into new works."[20] In Gates's ongoing architectural projects, he refers to the shaping of material as establishing "heat" within a neighborhood; this "heat" ultimately creates dialogue. Throughout the renovation process, Gates works alongside contractors, builders, and other community members to transform these derelict and abandoned spaces into beautiful works of art. In this way, he brings beauty back into a space that

16 Hilarie M. Sheets, "Using Discards to Build Art (and Rebuild a City)," *The New York Times*, March 14, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/14/arts/design/theaster-gates-national-gallery-of-art-chicago.html.

17 Sheets, "Using Discards to Build Art (and Rebuild a City)."

18 Sheets, "Using Discards to Build Art (and Rebuild a City)."

19 Doris Sommer, *The Work of Art in the World: Civic Agency and Public Humanities* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 30.

20 Sommer, *The Work of Art in the World*, 30.

has otherwise been overlooked by the city and its government officials, creating architectural projects that serve both as works of art and as cultural spaces for members in the community.

As the director of the Cultural Agents Initiative at Harvard University, a space that brings together artists, academics, and organizations to promote civic engagement, Sommer argues for the practicality of art, which she thinks has the power to heal and to educate.[21] This brings to mind a recent trend among community-based artists today, who implement an educational element into their projects. This educational component is often overlooked when discussing community-based art projects. Nonetheless, I suggest that this incorporation of an educational element is crucial to prolonging the relationships created within community-based art.

Similar to Gates's architectural and community-engaged work in Chicago, Dutch artists Jeroen Koolhaas and Dre Urhahn, also known as Haas&Hahn, started the *Favela Painting Project*, in which they create large-scale artworks on the exterior walls of houses in favela communities—low-income, historically informal urban areas in Brazil. With members of the community, they often restore elements of the buildings prior to painting the exteriors in bright, colorful patterns. Like Gates, Haas&Hahn straddle the line between the artist and the contractor. Vik Muniz's *Pictures of Garbage* portrait series also shares ties to Gates's focus on material matter and can be explained as the art-object portion of Muniz's larger community art project that is documented in the film *Waste Land* by Lucy Walker, Karen Harley, and João Jardim. Within Muniz's large-scale pictures, individual pieces of recyclable materials work together to create a larger image, forming in a sense a framed work in which the internal parts make up the whole. The recyclable materials from the

21 Sommer, *The Work of Art in the World*, 47.

landfill come from even the wealthiest parts of the city. Thus, there is a simultaneous connection to the world outside of the space in which the art was created, which is essential to the meaning of the work of art. This transfer of materiality and space is similar to Gates's works of art that are created from objects found within the South Side of Chicago.

In the *Art in the Twenty-First Century* television series episode dedicated to Chicago, Gates admits that he "wants to make the thing that makes the thing."[22] This is exactly where community artists are turning to education. The artists I mentioned above have all incorporated an element of education into their process. Gates's Dorchester Projects *and* Stony Island Arts Bank have created spaces in which people can learn about the history of the place and community. Likewise, Haas&Hahn have created the Favela Painting Academy, which holds workshops that bring artists, scholars, and community members together to learn from each other. Vik Muniz's community art project funded a library and learning center within the Jardim Garmacho community in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.[23]

Gates's two architectural projects, Dorchester Projects *and* Stony Island Arts Bank, Haas&Hahn's *Favela Painting Project*, and Vik Muniz's community art project at Jardim Garmacho have all led to the establishment of cultural hubs that serve as spaces within the city in which community members can gather to converse about social issues and/or create additional works of art. Likewise, these artists have all employed a similar means for funding these cultural

22 Art21, "Theaster Gates in 'Chicago,'" *Art in the Twenty-First Century: Season 8*, September 16, 2016, Video, 14:44. https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s8/theaster-gates-in-chicago-segment/.

23 *Waste Land*, directed by Lucy Walker and Karen Harley, performances by Vik Muniz (2010; Rio de Janeiro, Brazil: Almega Projects and O2 Filmes, 2011), DVD.

hubs, in which they either take materials gathered from within the community or materials inspired by the larger community art project to create works of art that are exhibited in a gallery space. The profits from these works are then allocated back into funding these new centers within the city, creating a circular economy.

Gates states: "When art and culture are present, other kinds of things want to be present. Schools want to be better, neighbors want more for themselves, government is willing to do more to advance the built environment in those places."[24] Therefore, the need to incorporate an educational component into community-based art projects, such as the architectural works of Gates, allows the relationships developed by these projects to continue to grow in new and powerful ways.

24 Theaster Gates, "How to revive a neighborhood: with imagination, beauty and art," presentation at TED conference, March 2015, TED video, 16:53, https://www.ted.com/talks/theaster_gates_how_to_revive_a_neighborhood_with_imagination_beauty_and_art.

“Anecdote of the Jar”: Theaster Gates’s *Black Vessel for a Saint*

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"Anecdote of the Jar"

I placed a jar in Tennessee,
And round it was, upon a hill.
It made the slovenly wilderness
Surround that hill.

The wilderness rose up to it,
And sprawled around, no longer wild.
The jar was round upon the ground
And tall and of a port in air.

It took dominion everywhere.
The jar was gray and bare.
It did not give of bird or bush,
Like nothing else in Tennessee.

—Wallace Stevens

In Wallace Stevens's "Anecdote of the Jar," the poem's narrator recounts how he placed a jar in Tennessee "and round it was, upon a hill."[1] He observes, "It made the slovenly wilderness/ Surround that hill." In other words, the jar, by virtue of its presence, created place ("a hill" in the second line of the first stanza becomes "that hill" in the fourth, identifying the once unmarked terrain). By the third stanza, the jar has "[taken] dominion everywhere," yet, as soon as these words are uttered, we are told that "the jar was gray and bare." The once majestic port ("tall and of a port in air") has been reduced to a prosaic clay pot.

1 Wallace Stevens, "Anecdote of the Jar," in Helen Vendler, ed., *Poems, Poets, Poetry: An Introduction and Anthology* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2002).

Figure 5.1.
Theaster Gates, *Black Vessel for a Saint*, 2017, brick, granite, Cor-Ten steel, concrete statue of St. Laurence covered with roofing membrane. Commissioned with funds provided by the Frederick R. Weisman Collection of Art, the Martin and Brown Foundation, the Butler Family Fund, and the Justin Smith Purchase Fund, 2017. Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. Photo by Gene Pittman, courtesy Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.

I begin with Stevens's poem because I'd like to talk today about another jar of sorts, that is Theaster Gates's *Black Vessel for a Saint* (2017) (fig. 5.1). The jar (alternately the jug, the receptacle, or the vessel) is a familiar trope in poetic, literary, and philosophical texts. I could just as easily have started with a verse in the 6th century B.C.E. Daoist philosopher Laozi's *Daodejing*, wherein he identifies the void of the vessel as central to its value, or, as I will explore in the following paper, the 20th-century German philosopher Martin Heidegger's "Das Ding," or "The Thing," wherein he calls upon a jug to give shape to his discussion of being in relation to the physical world of things. I should note that Gates trained as a potter, first as an undergraduate student at Iowa State University and then as a graduate student at the University of Cape Town, and many of his

works are infused with this sensibility of shaping, forming, making, and building things out of raw materials. I'd like to posit *Black Vessel for a Saint*, then, as the artist's largest pot to date.

Gates's practice has been widely discussed in the context of relational aesthetics, social practice art, urban renewal, and creative placemaking—terms that connote abstract systems, ephemeral situations, and what the artist has called "circular economies."[2] Nevertheless, I'd argue that Gates is first and foremost an object-maker, or more accurately, a maker of *things*. I'll briefly note here that Heidegger argued that one should conceive of the jug as "a thing and never a mere object," making the distinction between a thing—which can be felt either imaginatively or experientially, and exists in relation to human use—and an object, which exists as an abstract artifact or a detached commodity. To go back to the concept of Gates as place-maker, to make place, as Stevens's "Anecdote of the Jar" suggests, the artist first makes *things*. Heidegger wrote:

> The locale is not already there before the bridge is. Before the bridge stands, there are of course many spots along the stream that can be occupied by something. One of them proves to be a locale, and does so because of the bridge. Thus the bridge does not come first to a locale to stand in it; rather, a locale comes into existence only by virtue of the bridge.[3]

2 See *Theaster Gates: 12 Ballads for Huguenot House* (Cologne: Walther König, 2012).

3 Martin Heidegger, "Building Dwelling Thinking," in David Farrell Krell, ed., *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1993), 356; For an in-depth discussion of Heidegger's "The Thing" and "Building Dwelling Thinking" as seen through the lens of architecture, see Adam Sharr, *Heidegger for Architects* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

Heidegger's bridge makes place, just as Stevens's jar makes place. In what follows, I propose to map the philosophical framework introduced in Heidegger's "The Thing" (1950) onto Gates's *Black Vessel for a Saint*. In doing so, I hope to show how the artist's vessel things, and by thinging (I say this in reference to Heidegger's assertion that "the thing things") makes place.

Before I jump into Heidegger, I should provide a brief overview of Gates's installation. *Black Vessel for a Saint* represents the artist's first permanent outdoor sculpture that was commissioned for the reopening of the Walker Art Center Campus and Minneapolis Sculpture Garden last year. Though today I talk about it as a jar, Gates's project was no small feat—working with an architectural firm in Chicago, a brick manufacturer in North Carolina, the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board, and a whole host of contractors and subcontractors, including civil engineers, structural engineers, experts who laid a sophisticated system of micro-piles beneath the surface to support the structure's weight, and the Walker, Gates and his studio skillfully saw through the successful completion, from conception to construction, of the 16-foot-tall sanctuary. I mention the numerous parties involved because the complex nature of this project provides a closer look at how the artist activates entire networks of individuals and institutions around a single idea.

And the effects don't stop there: Engaging in Gates's concept of circular economies, the Walker sent five semi-truckloads of salvaged granite, byproducts from the sculpture garden reconstruction project, to the artist's studio in Chicago, and I anticipate this granite will be used in future projects, if it hasn't been already. Moreover, Gates has been endeavoring to establish a brickmaking facility near his studio. Starting with the possibilities of a single black brick, the artist has transformed this into the

potential of thousands of black bricks, ultimately seeing this as an employment opportunity for the South Side of Chicago. "The idea of the brick could lead to the possibility of a changed neighborhood, of an increased middle class," he said.[4]

But now back to the jar. In Heidegger's "The Thing," first presented as a lecture to a largely academic audience at the Bavarian Academy of Fine Arts in Munich in 1950, the philosopher sought to ground metaphysical questions of being in our everyday realities. The radical nature of Heidegger's proposal lies in the fact that he argued for the importance of the imaginative and the experiential, as opposed to the abstract or rational, when contemplating such fundamental questions as what it means to exist in this world. In contrast to the prevailing tradition in Western philosophy of separating intellectual thought from the daily immediacies of one's surroundings, Heidegger argued that one could attempt to understand the world only from where he was standing—that is, as a human being immersed in the everyday world of things. To this end, he referenced the hypothetical jug to provide his audience with a concrete visualization of his abstract philosophy: We can easily imagine handling a jug, picking it up, pouring out its contents, and so on. This jug, then, though it may be just "gray and bare" as in Stevens's poem, powerfully serves to anchor and center its human interlocutor in space.

Though Gates's vessel cannot physically be picked up, it similarly allows those who come across it to understand questions of ontology, what it means *to be*, from a phenomenological point of view: Are we near or are we far from the vessel? Are we inside or are we outside? When we get close enough, we can feel the rough

4 Theaster Gates, conversation with the author, April 13, 2017.

edges of the brick as we run our hands against the exterior, or we can imagine the weight of one of the bricks if we were to hold it in our hands. In other words, at a very fundamental level, *Black Vessel for a Saint* allows us to measure our place in the world in relation to it.

But, to follow Heidegger's argument one step further, the jug is a thing because it brings together what the philosopher called "the fourfold"—earth, sky, divinities, and mortals. The jug is made of clay, of earth. "The jug's jug-character consists in the poured gift," the "poured gift" referring to water, whose source, Heidegger imagines, is a natural spring.[5] The spring "receives the rain and dew of the sky," and thus, the jug connects earth and sky. But what of divinities and mortals?

> The gift of the pouring out is drink for mortals. It quenches their thirst. It refreshes their leisure. It enlivens their conviviality. But the jug's gift is at times also given for consecration. If the pouring is for consecration, then it does not still a thirst... The gift of the pouring now is neither given in an inn nor is the poured gift a drink for mortals. The outpouring is the libation poured out for the immortal gods.[6]

To summarize, the earthen jug pours water from the sky, and this outpouring is at times for the purpose of quenching the thirst of mortals, and at others, in the service of divinities. In the circuitous prose of Heidegger, he writes, "The thing things. In its

5 Heidegger, "The Thing," in Albert Hofstader, trans., *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 170.

6 Ibid.

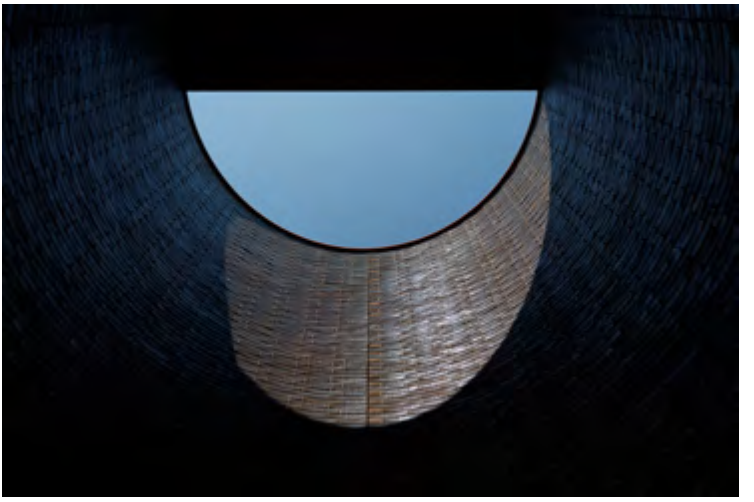

Figure 5.2.
Theaster Gates, *Black Vessel for a Saint* (detail), 2017, brick, granite, Cor-Ten steel, concrete statue of St. Laurence covered with roofing membrane. Commissioned with funds provided by the Frederick R. Weisman Collection of Art, the Martin and Brown Foundation, the Butler Family Fund, and the Justin Smith Purchase Fund, 2017. Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. Photo by Gene Pittman, courtesy Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.

thinging, it stays earth and sky, divinities and mortals. Staying, the thing brings the four, in their remoteness, near to one another." Being, according to Heidegger, occurs when we coexist with earth, sky, divinities, and mortals, and things, such as the jug, are essential precisely because they gather, and in so doing remind us of this fourfold.

I spend time unpacking Heidegger's concept of the fourfold because I see it as a useful framework for understanding Gates's *Black Vessel for a Saint*, especially in regard to how this thing creates place. Starting with earth, then, Gates's bricks, like Heidegger's jug, were made from clay-bearing soil. The top of the vessel opens onto the sky, allowing for rain (as in Heidegger's

Figure 5.3.
Theaster Gates, *Black Vessel for a Saint* (detail), 2017, brick, granite, Cor-Ten steel, concrete statue of St. Laurence covered with roofing membrane. Commissioned with funds provided by the Frederick R. Weisman Collection of Art, the Martin and Brown Foundation, the Butler Family Fund, and the Justin Smith Purchase Fund, 2017. Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. Photo by Peter VonDeLinde, courtesy Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.

example of the "poured gift") to enter, along with the sun, wind, and snow (fig. 5.2). With its base on the ground and its mouth exposed to the sky above, Gates's jug, too, brings earth and sky in relation to each other.

I'd like to spend some more time on the following two elements of the fourfold (divinities and mortals) as I think the undertone of the sacred, the sincere in Gates's work is unique in contemporary art practice. *Black Vessel for a Saint*, as the latter half of its title suggests, is a sacred space. A salvaged statue of St. Laurence, from the now demolished church of the same name on the South Side of Chicago, has taken up residence inside the vessel (fig. 5.3). The patron saint of librarians and archivists, St. Laurence gestures to Gates's persistent practice of recycling, restoring, reviving abandoned libraries and archives in his

Dorchester Projects, a row of once-abandoned buildings that the artist has renovated into art and culture spaces. See, for example, the 14,000 volumes he purchased from the Prairie Avenue Bookshop when it shuttered in 2009, or the 8,000 records from the Dr. Wax record store nearby, or the 60,000 glass slides no longer in use by the University of Chicago art history department. Similar to St. Laurence, Gates has found permanent houses for these collections that, more likely than not, would have fallen to disuse.

Furthermore, Gates's vessel engages in dialogue with other sacred spaces, both secular and religious, within the context of the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden as well as the surrounding neighborhood. One could point to James Turrell's *Sky Pesher* (2005), the subterranean installation that has been carved into the hillside next to the Walker, or St. Mark's Cathedral, or the Basilica of St. Mary, both of which you can see from Gates's sculpture (fig. 5.4). Though the structure itself has been hollowed out, the atmosphere held within, and again this can be a spirituality of a secular or religious nature, gives *Black Vessel for a Saint* its particular resonance. As verse 11 in Laozi's *Daodejing* reads, "One hollows the clay and shapes it into pots./ In its nothingness consists the pot's effectiveness."[7]

And finally, mortals. From the first brick to the last, *Black Vessel for a Saint* relied on the labor of brickmakers and bricklayers (a craft that Gates has referred to as being part of "the minor arts").[8] In other words, the hands of mortals are evident in the very

7 Laozi, as quoted in Katrin Froese, *Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Daoist Thought: Crossing Paths In-Between* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 154.

8 See the exhibition: *Theaster Gates: The Minor Arts* at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., March 5–September 4, 2017.

Fig. 5.4.
Theaster Gates, *Black Vessel for a Saint*, 2017, brick, granite, Cor-Ten steel, concrete statue of St. Laurence covered with roofing membrane. Commissioned with funds provided by the Frederick R. Weisman Collection of Art, the Martin and Brown Foundation, the Butler Family Fund, and the Justin Smith Purchase Fund, 2017. Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. Photo by Peter VonDeLinde, courtesy Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.

materiality and making of the structure. Moreover, this human presence resounds day in and day out through the hundreds of thousands of people who have already circumnavigated, entered, and inhabited the space of the vessel. And it is precisely this, the act of gathering, that constitutes what Heidegger called "the jug's presencing." Perhaps the martyrdom of St. Laurence figures here—according to existing accounts, when Roman authorities demanded that the church hand over its riches to the state, the saint hastily distributed the church's property to the poor. When ordered to show up with the wealth, St. Laurence instead arrived with the sick, the suffering, and the poor, declaring that they were the real riches of the church.[9] This act of gathering, of temporary assembly, has been at the core of Gates's practice—from his first *Plate Convergence* (2007), wherein the artist crafted ceramic ware and used the dinner table as a meeting ground, in a sense using plates to create place, to his most recent architectural projects that literally create space for convergence.

In mapping Heidegger's concept of the fourfold onto Gates's *Black Vessel for a Saint*, I hoped to show how Gates's vessel is a thing, just as Heidegger's bridge is a thing, or Stevens's jar is a thing. And by virtue of being a thing, the structure makes place. But I want to move on briefly from Heidegger's "The Thing" to conclude with his lecture "Bauen Wohnen Denken" or "Building Dwelling Thinking," which he first presented at the Darmstadt symposium Man and Space to an audience of architects and philosophers in 1951. I mention this lecture because although Gates's vessel, as I've explored, is very much a thing, a sculptural object, it is also an architectural structure, or what Heidegger called "built things." In this lecture, which also sought to establish what it means to be in space, Heidegger proposed that building does not precede dwelling,

9 Gates, conversation with the author, April 13, 2017.

but rather that to build is to dwell ("For building is not merely a means and a way toward dwelling—to build is in itself already to dwell").[10] In an inversion of the Cartesian construction "I think, therefore I am," building and dwelling, Heidegger argued, or being ("wohnen," or dwelling, can alternately be defined as residing, staying, or feeling at home), are necessary precursors to thinking.[11]

This framework of building, dwelling, and thinking can be extended to Gates's practice as epitomized by his architectural projects in Chicago and elsewhere. For Gates, whose father was a professional roofer, building is not just a means toward dwelling, but to build is to dwell. In other words, the structures that we build are so imbued with the particularities of human presence—the philosopher argued that architectural spaces, like other things, not only shape the activities and experiences of their human inhabitants, but are in turn shaped by their human participants—that it is impossible to separate one from the other. And it is this refusal to see an object merely as an object, or a building as a building, that drives Gates's singular and visionary practice. Through the making of things, or built things, Gates builds—whether working alone to throw a ceramic bowl or with a group of artisans to construct a house—because it is the act of building that allows for dwelling and, finally, thinking.

10 Heidegger, "Building Dwelling Thinking," 348.

11 Ibid., 345.

Keynote Address: Theaster Gates and Everything-ism

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This text has been adapted from the transcript of Jackson's keynote address presented at the Nasher Sculpture Center on April 5, 2018.

You could say, if you were generalizing, that the history of modern art is more or less about how you get from point A to point B. So the question is, what happened?

Well, among many other things, what happened, I think, was the abandonment of the fundamental, almost intuitive agreement between maker and viewer that an artwork would refer back to some mutually recognizable shared reality. In the art historical vernacular, we might say that the most advanced Euro-American art between 1815 and 1915 became less and less realistic. And one can say that the movement from Turner's *Crossing the Brook* to Malevich's *Black Square* also speaks to a much larger phenomenon: the sense that art and the modern era were establishing, in Malevich's words, art's own values, and living according to its own laws.

But this kind of making and thinking, I think we can agree, reached its apogee a bit later in the 1950s with the writings of Clement Greenberg. For most people, Greenberg was the one who codified the idea that modern art was first and foremost dedicated to discovering the specific effects that make a work in any given artistic medium distinctive. So, to summarize extremely rapidly, the whole history of modernism, a sculpture by Brancusi should draw the viewer's attention to the crucial characteristics that define the achievement of any work at any time in the medium of sculpture. That is, Brancusi's art emphasizes what we contrast and contradictions between volumes, shapes, textures, sizes, and colors. All rendered in three dimensions. Or similarly in the paintings of Jackson Pollock, the artwork should not depict an imaginary projection of our shared earthly world. Instead, it should force the viewer to confront the inherent flatness of the canvas and the blunt interaction of hand, gesture, paint, and surface.

So according to Greenberg, the worst thing that could ever happen to a work of modern art would be for it to tell a story. Because then it would be reduced, in Greenberg's quotable and quite memorable words, to being a ghost or stooge of literature. Greenberg's big point here is that even the most advanced humans are, at the end of the day, rather weak individuals: prone, if given the chance, to seek the low-budget solace of reassuring, typically sentimental stories that allow us to make the world cohere into more comforting, more familiar, more reassuring forms. It's quite understandable. Such stories from this Greenbergian point of view are a way of sanding down the social world so that the psychological sharp edges of Euro-American middle-class existence, its inevitable moral conundrums, its ethical blind spots, all of that can be tucked away in our psychic corners, obscured behind the decorative drapery of edifying tales of cultural uplift. On this score, Greenberg contended that visual art must never serve up a diet of uncritical or even critical fables to the viewer. Greenberg obviously had no time for propaganda.

Instead, what art must do, is it must perpetually challenge the viewer's sensibilities because challenged sensibilities require of the viewer a state of sustained and heightened awareness, of greater interpretive acuity. And a willingness to rethink what one already believes one knows. To be blunt, from this point of view, looking at good art in an intelligent way will make you a better human being. And how does it do this? Well, it does this primarily by making you think again about things you probably thought you were confident you already knew, such as what a painting is or what a sculpture might be. This is why true art from a Greenbergian perspective usually produces an intellectual gag reflex in the refined viewer. Because true art makes you think in a way that does not appear to be thinking at all. If anything, you probably call it un-thinking. And as such, the kind of thinking that you have to do is rarely pleasant

because it provokes a certain sense of personal failure, to be honest with you. A sense that, as a spectator, you're getting this high-voltage jolt of hermeneutic incapacity. So that is, in a Greenbergian vein, you could say, thinking new thoughts about new things is always the home of artistic mediocrity. And on the other hand, thinking anew about the already thoroughly known is a most often unnecessary, and one might say usually difficult, precursor to any real cultural achievement.

Of course, in certain crucial aspects, a progressive democratic political universe resembles this Greenbergian process as well. That is, the range of what may be thought what one might describe as a kind of aesthetic version of the Overton window expands through the viewing of challenging art. And as that circle of artistic challenge expands, unthought thinking arrives unbidden again and again and again at what had seemed unimaginable, impossible, or improbable, suddenly starts to seem not only reasonable, it seems entirely obvious and elementary. Politically, we've seen this process occur very recently in the struggle for LGBTQ rights, and on the global stage I think we're seeing it begin to happen on the question of refugee rights.

So from this angle, we might even say that the challenge of a Brancusi or a Pollock is quite explicitly akin to the challenge of political responsibility facing any progressive citizen in a healthy democratic society. In both cases, citizens must be alive to the very real possibility that their own sense of progressiveness may no longer be progressive enough to respond most productively to the demands of a new artwork or, let's say, a new social movement. To greatly simplify the argument, one could say, as very roughly speaking, that a lover of painting confronting a Jackson Pollock in the 1940s might have a feeling that is similar to a lover of human rights confronting a Black Lives Matter protest in our own decade

Fig. 6.1.
Matthew Jesse Jackson, keynote lecture, Nasher Prize Graduate Symposium, Nasher Sculpture Center, April 5, 2018. Photo: Bret Redman.

(fig. 6.1). In both cases, my guess is that there's probably going to be a tense confrontation with one's own accustomed senses of propriety, of possibility, and of progress.

So, if you're with me so far, we accept these descriptions as a portrait of a certain kind of thinking about the relationship between art and life that allow us to move onto an examination of the actual environment in which modern art appeared in Europe and North America. And how radically that environment has changed – or has not – over the past hundred years. For example, a hundred years ago, if one sought out information about contemporary art, it would be possible, if you were lucky, to encounter a grainy black-and-white photo of a gallery display or perhaps a few paragraphs about the very existence of an artist or an artwork in a newspaper or a journal or a limited-edition catalogue, and I am aware that there is a fetishization within

art history of those few exceptional but famous moments when writers spent a great deal of time publicly criticizing and discussing contemporaneous art production. If you know Tom Crow's *Painters and Public Life*, or T.J. Clark's writings on mid-19th-century Paris, those are the kinds of things that art history very much loves, for good reasons.

Nevertheless, I would argue, generally speaking, concrete substantive information about visual art in the early 19th – in the early 20th century – about artists, about artworks, about galleries, about museums, about the art industry and all of its inner workings, all of that traveled through a haphazard circuitry, of word of mouth, censure, publicity, and criticism. Most important of all, the original encounters with early-20th-century modern art generally took place with little sustained preamble from the larger social world. What do I mean by that? What I would contend is that the works of modern art that we think of (the Jackson Pollocks, the Maleviches, the Brancusis) were originally surrounded by a largely indifferent world. A world that could not say all that much about an artwork, or an artist, simply because there weren't that many opportunities to say anything at all. What would you have? A few hundred words in a newspaper, an article or two in a magazine or a journal, maybe a few sentences spoken on a radio broadcast program. In sum, modern art could be described as having first appeared in an effective environment minimally colonized by what we might describe as discursive intensity. Now a hundred years later, in the wake of massive technological transformations in our modes of communicating our thoughts about art and artists, a potential art viewer has, at least in the Euro-American first world, immediate access to a functionally infinite amount of information about representation and about virtually anything that happens in the art world at any given moment. Thus I think we can all agree

that the fluid super high-octane, internet-driven dictatorship of information that Hirschhorn talks about, this world in which we have everything, we fear everything, and we want everything – the world of YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest, Instagram – has transformed our access to visual art, and our access to opinions about visual art in utterly unimaginable ways. Simply put, the differences between the information worlds of 1918 and 2018 are absolutely unfathomable.

With all of that said, it would be entirely logical that the art on offer today would also have been transformed in similarly unimaginably complex ways. And that the art would look virtually unrecognizable in the same way that the Turner was to the Malevich. But here we see two more or less randomly selected contemporary artworks that have been recently celebrated at biennials, art fairs, and in the art press. Now, if we compare these works to the works from 70 or 100 years ago, it would seem that our conceptions of three-dimensional and/or two-dimensional art may not have actually changed all that much except to have become much more consonant with our everyday experience. In fact, it would not be a stretch to say in terms of formal and conceptual vocabulary the works from 70, 80, or 100 years ago actually still seem stranger and more otherworldly than the works that dominate our biennials, our art fairs, and our art journals today. So one inevitably wonders why has much visual art not been transformed in unimaginably complex ways that would be roughly analogous to the transformations in the ways that we encounter information about art? Or in ways that would be analogous to the transformation symbolized by the change from the Turner to the Malevich? Moreover, one wonders what makes these more recent artworks seem important to curators, critics, dealers, historians, gallerists, trustees, collectors, despite what appears to be a relative dearth of formal or conceptual innovation?

Fig. 6.2.
Matthew Jesse Jackson, keynote lecture, Nasher Prize Graduate Symposium, Nasher Sculpture Center, April 5, 2018. Photo: Bret Redman.

I'll try to see if I can explain what I think is in play. In the broadest possible sense, I think what is happening in the arena of contemporary art can best be described through a passing reference to the film world. What we seem to be witnessing in contemporary art today is a generalized Kuleshov effect within the visual arts. That is, in the film editing process, the Soviet filmmaker Lev Kuleshov argued that it wasn't necessarily the content of any given filmic image that was potentially most important to filmic experience but rather the ways images are combined together. The same reaction shot of the very same actor could be read by audiences as signifying radically different emotions if skillfully edited. The very same face can be seen to enact the feeling of hunger, of incredible sadness, or the feeling of being beguiled simply through juxtaposition (fig. 6.2). I would argue that something very much like this has happened with contemporary artwork more generally. Today, very often artworks

function in roughly the same way that the actor's face functions in the Kuleshov effect. Since most artworks generally accrue meaning in our information environment, not so much through their formal, conceptual, or technical innovations but due to the challenges that they place on the viewer's aesthetic sensibilities. Instead, what happens almost automatically due to the all-over character of our current technological environment is that works are juxtaposed very much like the actor's face in the Kuleshov effect to stories about the creator. Or invocations of progressive political narratives drawn from society at large. Such as the awareness of sexual harassment, awareness of ecological catastrophe, awareness of structural racism. And let me be absolutely emphatic, those are all absolutely pressing problems that are on the verge of destroying our society. One might say that the work of art becomes, often against its will, a memorable face that is profitably edited within maximally compelling metanarratives produced within society at large.

I would further describe the typical range of these narratives that emerge in the contemporary art industry as being variations of what might be called romantic administrativism. For example, the chair, according to the artist gallery, prompts a deeper consideration of how surface and design read as social and cultural indicators. One wonders, wouldn't that same interpretive process probably kick in if I paid attention to virtually anything in the room? Other works that follow in this tendency, as you see here, explicitly aim to manage the semiotics of social control and racist violence (fig. 6.3). Often by deploring something that is obviously deplorable in a reasonably accessible language. Or somewhat more creatively and/or destructively you have the art of, say, Santiago Sierra, in which one might intentionally create something obviously deplorable, and then you can say, "Look at how deplorable society is; it forced me to do this deplorable thing."

Fig. 6.3.
Matthew Jesse Jackson, keynote lecture, Nasher Prize Graduate Symposium, Nasher Sculpture Center, April 5, 2018. Photo: Bret Redman.

So, if we have reached this point, I'd like to narrate in absolutely practical terms what I think has happened over the past 200 years in Euro-American visual art, and how the process seems to work. So we went in the first hundred years from Turner to Malevich and in the century after that, we went from Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square* to Theaster Gates's *Tar Painting*. Now, there might be a knee-jerk reaction of say, well, obviously there's not been much formal, conceptual, or technical innovation here. Look at this: This new painting by Gates looks and feels a lot like the thing from a century ago, fair enough. Fair enough. If we take away questions of facture, size, and the appeal to senses beyond sight, that is the smell of the pieces, one could agree. Fair enough. The display of Theaster Gates's painting on a gallery's white wall creates a visual effect fairly consistent with the appeal of Kazimir Malevich's canvas. But for me, this is precisely where the concept of everythingism comes in. I would argue that the 24-7 global art

information avalanche and its accompanying flood of romantic administrativism almost automatically covers everything in its path in the sort of language that we witness here. It's a discursive environment that at the same time is dedicated to suggesting how unique, exciting, and original an artwork is, but at the same time rather blatantly reducing the art to repetitions of the past. So my big point here would be that formal, conceptual, and technical innovations are happening all of the time today. They just are generally not happening within individual artworks themselves.

Actually, when you get down to it, I would argue that the principal medium of the most innovative art today is in fact the art industry's voracious, perpetually moving, extremely fashion-conscious information flow. As a result of this situation, functionally artworks and artists achieve relevance today primarily due to the ways they emerge in the public's consciousness. In other words, it would be most accurate to say that the primary medium of all art today is not canvas, mixed media, photography, drawing, performance, or video. It would probably be the elastic psychovisual interval in which social media platforms interact with the art industry and with art institutions' diverse modes of customer experience management. Perhaps. Now, shoot for the customers' hearts. Engagement and emotional connection will make the customer relationship the driving force for loyalty and differentiation. Move from customer friendliness to customer charisma. A business with charisma gives the customer something very special, and they're going to want to tell others about it.

Now, I am absolutely certain that Theaster Gates is quite aware of this way of approaching entrepreneurship. Now, I'd argue that whether we are aware of it or not, we are constantly choosing which information we most highly value about what art is, about where art will be, about what art can do. And so this ongoing process of

information selection, a process that ostensibly has little or nothing to do with the aesthetic charge of a single artwork, nonetheless very much guides where we go and what we see and how we talk about it. As well as which books we would have read, if we were still reading books, and which websites we go to, and which articles we might get a chance to see. In this sense I would argue that the artwork and the environment around the artwork begin to be interpreted and experienced perhaps only vaguely and inchoately long before one necessarily sees an artwork. Not to mention the fact that it's quite common today for viewers to have very strong opinions about works of art that they have never actually seen in person. And I don't think there's anything wrong with that, that's totally logical.

Today, any work of art or artist is potentially surrounded by millions of bits of tangy and saucy information. And the way the viewer negotiates this information obviously guides the character of one's art experience. In fact, we might go so far as to say that the negotiation of this information is really the main experience on offer today with most art. That is, today's significant artist – and I'm using Greenberg's terms, not my own – and I certainly consider Theaster Gates to be among the most significant artists of our time – the significant artist must confront the disruptive demands of social media opinion and institutional publicity in exactly the same way that Brancusi had to deal with the resistance of stone, bronze, and wood, or the way that Pollock had to reimagine the body's engagement with paint and canvas. Today the art must find a way to articulate and disarticulate the conditions of art-making to such an extent that what eventually emerges does not seem to be a something; instead, it always appears to be an everything. We move from sculpture to social sculpture to the sculpting of sociality. And so I would argue that the contemporary artist is now confronted with two basic options: The artist can produce artworks that are sucked immediately into the vortex of social mediatized opinion-

giving, and then try to ride the waves. Or alternatively, one can seize upon the informational density and intensity this massive sociality as the crucial medium of your art practice, and then you make your art out of that. And this approach is what I'm suggesting might be called everythingism. In other words, as an artist today, you can either become something that gets mentioned, marketed, managed, and memorialized by a generally benevolent art public. Or conversely, you employ the art public's mentioning, marketing, managing, and memorializing as your medium. And you produce something that cannot be easily mentioned, marketed, managed, or memorialized out of that.

If Theaster Gates – in Theaster Gates's case, if Gates made only pungent, tar-covered, rectangular paintings that hang very beautifully on a gallery's walls, he would not be the artist that we know today. It is absolutely crucial, I would argue, that Gates deploys such a painting within an unresolving everythingism. I would argue that it should be as unthinkable to see this painting in isolation as it would be to say, "Watch two minutes of *Breathless* and then leave the theater." So, to actually see this painting, you must see this as only one part, a discrete element within a kind of meta artwork in which Gates is supervising and curating the Arts + Public Life Program at the University of Chicago. He's making and potentially marketing different lines of ceramics. He's pursuing public outreach initiatives, running educational programs, and raising truly stupendous amounts of capital, and in this case he's at Davos, at the World Economic Forum. He produces many public works, which we've already heard about today, including the Johnson Publishing Collection that's in the Stony Island Arts Bank. He also makes works that are conventional and compelling, as we've already seen today many times – sculptures. But he doesn't do any of that without a certain sense of irony about the work. And at the same time, he creates performance art in many places, frequently

places that are not designated for performance art, and he performs with his band The Black Monks of Mississippi. And most recently, we've heard several times, we've even seen the slide, he's turned multiple buildings on the South Side of Chicago into creative spaces, archival spaces, libraries, places for cinema, for study. And we know that the list that I'm suggesting really goes on and on.

So I would argue that the social media world of dense and intense information distribution becomes the crucial ground against which a work such as *Tar Painting* actually accrues meaning. In other words, the internet is as important to Theaster Gates's practice as space was to Brancusi or light was to Pollock. Thus I would further argue that Theaster Gates is actually performing whatever might be today's embodiment of a challenging Greenbergian formalism. He is forcing us to confront forms that speak directly to our current world in which we have everything, we fear everything, we want everything. As viewers, we are constantly forced to ask, like the Miranda July situation, what her whole deal is. But we're also asking ourselves what *our* whole deal is while we deal with it. And Gates is far from alone. And on this point, I don't think it's in any way denigrates Gates's achievement to describe his work's family resemblance to other crucial contemporary practices of a kind of everythingism. In fact, I would even argue that everythingism and the everythingist work seem to inevitably demand a kind of comparison from the art historian instead of a sort of intellectualized product placement. In other words, the art historian begins to compare and contrast the formal maneuvers of an art practice rather than the formal maneuvers of an artwork. And the comparisons that the art historian will typically make now will not be judgments so much as convoluted attempts at narrative.

And on this score, among the artist whose work I might suggest, I'm very gratified that Thomas Hirschhorn came up because I think

Hirschhorn operates in precisely the same way. His pedagogical spaces are moving somewhat like that. Irena Haiduk: She refuses to disclose any biographical information about herself and then practices forms of industrial self-sabotaging witchcraft maybe in the service of global capitalism. I suggest the name because you can Google it. You'll use the information well. Walid Raad, we probably know. He created these remarkable performative lectures, and now he has performative exhibitions in which he travels through the exhibition with you and helps you to understand it. A little-known artist, Jonathan Hartshorn, let me just read this: He orchestrates nonstandard absurd and/or bizarre conditions for the viewing of his art. So, for example, he'll have a gallery show, and it will be absolutely, perfectly curated, and then half of the show will go to the gallery in Switzerland, and half of the show goes to a rest stop outside Albuquerque and just gets abandoned. So logically, 50 years from now, they're going to be great – if he's successful – there will be great Hartshorns out there in the hands of people who just happen to find them. So it's thinking about the space, the place, and the time of art in creative ways. Tania Bruguera: She creates political protest, but you're not really sure frequently where the protest starts and stops, and she sometimes has public events in which she creates her own audiences that have actors in them. So you're not dealing with a legitimate Q & A or legitimate reactions. It makes you question all of those things that you kind of take for granted about those kinds of experiences. Or Sharon Hayes, who has a way of, I almost feel like her genre is "what is her deal". That is what she does. What is her deal? It's just a constant demand that she makes of the public. Or Tino Sehgal, in this case the givens of the architecture, the museum staff, everything that's behind the scenes becomes significant and there are no art objects. There is no artwork. The situation becomes the art.

So from my point of view, Theaster Gates turns the art industry's

routinized customer experience management into his own critical artistic medium. Rather than allowing his surroundings to overwhelm his art and reduce it to a footnote, something that will be liked or unliked, or something that will be a product that would be placed in its appropriate place or something that will be a freeze-dried form of activism or critique. Gates attempts to use everything he can get his hands on to create situations that cannot be readily paraphrased. Or easily described. Or I would argue sometimes, even culturally deciphered in any readily available way. For me, Theaster Gates's achievements might be stated something like this. If according to Greenberg the very worst thing that could ever happen to a work of art would be for it to narrate a story, Theaster Gates's art operates in exactly the opposite way. It strives precisely to produce a never-ending stream of new stories, new rumors, new criticisms, new ambiguities, new inconsistencies, new angry outbursts, new plaintive entreaties, new bafflements, new forms of censure, new legends, new interpretations, new reinterpretations. It shouldn't stop. And these experiences can never be adequately explained with a single image or a single narrative or a single authoritative, critical judgment.

Gates's art insists that it must be bigger than the public opinions, administrative apparatuses, or cultural institutions that would seek to frame, explain, tame, encourage, celebrate, or control it. So from this point of view, one might say that Gates's everythingism coyly resists the embrace of romantic administrativism. Or, if you were to push the narrative a bit further and put in one brief statement, if you cannot jpeg it, and you cannot write a wall text for it, then you may be encountering important art. And it's frequently true for Theaster Gates. I might even extrapolate by arguing that the everythingist situation that Gates has created is more or less true not only for artists today but for anyone working in virtually any field. I'd almost argue that when you get down to it, all of us are somethingists or everythingists today. Either you go out and you do

Fig. 6.4.
Matthew Jesse Jackson, keynote lecture, Nasher Prize Graduate Symposium, Nasher Sculpture Center, April 5, 2018. Photo: Bret Redman.

something, and you hope it gets marketed and promoted effectively within whichever administrative normativity you inhabit. That might be the academic world, the business world, the art world, the technological world. Or else, you market the fact that you are going to be doing everything now. And you take a flying leap into a world whose attention and rewards will remain in constant, at best, and nonexistent, at worst. And I do believe that Theaster Gates was the first artist to really take a running leap in this direction. And one hopes, though, that he won't be the last.

In other words, Theaster Gates's art makes clear: Everything is how anything actually becomes something (fig. 6.4).

Biographies

2018 Nasher Prize Laureate Theaster Gates

Born in 1973, Gates grew up in West Chicago. He studied ceramics and urban planning at Iowa State University and earned his master's degree in fine arts and religious studies at the University of Cape Town in 1998. In 2006, he earned his second master's degree in urban planning, ceramics, and religious studies at Iowa State University. That same year, Gates was hired at the University of Chicago as an arts programmer and he purchased the first building that would become part of Dorchester Projects. He has exhibited widely, including such group exhibitions as the Whitney Biennial, New York (2010); dOCUMENTA 13 (2012); *The Spirit of Utopia*, Whitechapel Gallery, London (2013); *When the Stars Begin to Fall: Imagination and the American South*, Studio Museum, New York (2014); *All the World's Futures*, 56th Venice Biennial, Venice (2015); and *The Color Line*, Musée du quai Branly, Paris (2016). Solo exhibitions include *To Speculate Darkly: Theaster Gates and Dave, the Slave Potter*, Milwaukee Art Museum (2010); Seattle Art Museum (2011); MCA Chicago (2013); 'The Black Monastic' residency at Museu Serralves, Porto (2014); *Black Archive*, Kunsthaus Bregenz (2016); *True Value*, Fondazione Prada, Milan (2016); *The Minor Arts*, National Gallery of Art (2017); and *Black Madonna*, Kunstmuseum Basel (2018). Gates was awarded the inaugural Vera List Center Prize for Art and Politics in 2013 and won the Artes Mundi 6 prize in 2015. In 2017, he was awarded the French Legion d'Honneur.

Gates's work is in the collection of many museums and public collections, such as the Brooklyn Museum, New York; Jimenez-Colon Collection, Ponce, Puerto Rico; Milwaukee Art Museum; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; Smart Museum of Art, Chicago; Tate, London; Try-Me, Richmond, Virginia; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

Gates currently serves as the Chairman and Founder of the Rebuild Foundation and as Director of the Arts and Public Life Initiative at the University of Chicago, where he is Professor in the department of visual arts. In 2018, Gates was appointed as the first distinguished visiting artist and director of artist initiatives at the Colby Museum of Art's Lunder Institute for American Art. He lives and works in Chicago.

Keynote Speaker, Matthew Jesse Jackson
Writer, Curator, Critic, and Associate Professor of Art History, Department of Visual Arts at the University of Chicago
Matthew Jesse Jackson is a writer, curator, and critic who teaches modern and contemporary art at the University of Chicago. He is the author of *The Experimental Group: Ilya Kabakov, Moscow Conceptualism, and Soviet Avant-Gardes*—winner of the Robert Motherwell Book Award—as well as co-author of *Vision and Communism*. For the past 12 years, he has been involved with *Our Literal Speed*, a text and art undertaking in Selma, Alabama. His current writing project is called *Vernacular Modernism All Over the Deep South* and he is the editor and co-translator from Russian of the forthcoming *Ilya Kabakov: On Art*.

Moderator, Sofia Bastidas
SMU Meadows School of the Arts Curatorial Fellow and Pollock Gallery Director
Sofia Bastidas's work focuses on research practices in the political and geographical spheres that can advance cultural discourse and diversify present conditions of knowledge production. Bastidas co-founded TVGOV, a think tank and political design company that re-envisions territory in relation to current economic circumstances, recently participating in the 9th Berlin Biennale. Bastidas also co-founded Port to Port in 2015, a nomadic curatorial research program that grounds theories of planetary urbanization and

contemporary capitalism by focusing on maritime logistic cities, collaborating with local institutions to co-produce exhibitions, symposia, and artist residencies. Port to Port has produced work for Bluecoat Contemporary Art Center (Liverpool), Solentiname Archipelago (Nicaragua), CCE Casa del Soldado (Panama), and Places Journal (New York), among other venues. Bastidas was born and raised in Ecuador, and lived in Miami before moving to Dallas in 2016.

Editor, Leigh Arnold, Ph.D.
Assistant Curator, Nasher Sculpture Center
Leigh Arnold organized the inaugural Nasher Prize Graduate Symposium in 2017 and serves as editor for the *Graduate Symposium Compendium*. In addition, at the Nasher she has curated exhibitions with such artists as Piero Golia, Mai-Thu Perret, Kathryn Andrews, Ana Mendieta, Richard Serra, Roni Horn, and Nathan Carter. Dr. Arnold is currently working on the first U.S. presentation of sculpture by Elmgreen + Dragset, as well as a historical reinterpretation of Land art that focuses on women who were involved in the movement. She received her doctoral degree in aesthetic studies from the University of Texas at Dallas, where she wrote on Robert Smithson's unfinished projects in Texas.

Presenter, Kimberly Jacobs
Virginia Commonwealth University
Kimberly Jacobs is Mark Semonian and Dona Garcia Berges Assistant Curator of Performative Practice, Centre for Performative Practice, Zeitz MOCAA, Cape Town, South Africa. Her curatorial research focuses largely on modern and contemporary art and artists working in craft, design, new media, and performance. Jacobs's critical interests explore the intersections of spirituality, African art and philosophy, and urban theory. She is currently a Ph.D. student in the Department of Art

History at Virginia Commonwealth University and received an M.A. in History from Jackson State University in 2014. Jacobs's master's thesis, titled "Approaching Africanisms: An Analysis of Ornamental Ironwork in the American South," provides a close examination of ornamental iron balconies and gates in New Orleans, Louisiana and Charleston, South Carolina.

Presenter, Patricia Stout
University of Texas at Dallas

Patricia Stout is a Ph.D. student in Humanities at the University of Texas at Dallas, where she is specializing in Literary and Aesthetic Studies. She holds an M.A. in Communication from the University of Texas at Tyler and received a B.S. in Journalism and Mass Communication and a B.A. in Spanish and Portuguese Language and Culture from the University of Colorado at Boulder. Patricia is interested in an interdisciplinary approach to critical theory and is currently focusing on issues within cultural studies, aesthetics and politics, and film studies, with specific attention to Latin America. Her current research projects address the emergence of Community Art within Brazil.

Presenter, Victoria Sung
University of Oxford

Victoria Sung is Assistant Curator of Visual Arts at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, where she is currently co-organizing a retrospective on the work of Siah Armajani titled *Siah Armajani: Follow This Line* (2018). Recent projects include organizing the exhibitions *The Way Things Go* (2018) and *Laure Prouvost: They Are Waiting for You* (2017), as well as managing a number of commissions for the reopening of the Walker Art Center Campus and Minneapolis Sculpture Garden (2017), including sculptures by Aaron Spangler, Kinji Akagawa, and Theaster Gates. Prior to joining the Walker, she worked in New York at the Museum of

Modern Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art. Victoria graduated from Harvard College with a bachelor's degree in history, focusing on early American material culture history, and from the University of Oxford with a master's degree in the history of art and visual culture.

Presenter, Allison Vanouse
The Editorial Institute at Boston University
Vanouse is a Ph.D. candidate at Boston University's controversial Editorial Institute, where she works under the advisership of Archie Burnett and Sir Christopher Ricks. Her dissertation will address digital and physical representations of 20th-century texts with multiple authorship, focusing on T. S. Eliot's seminal journal of arts and letters, *The Criterion*. Vanouse is interested in the system of intersections that exists between text and performance; theories of extended mind in relation to archival preservation; book history; and processes of translation involving word, image, and reader response. She is currently working on a poetry translation project, based on her readings of ESL student responses to East Asian literature in English translation, as a Boston University teaching assistant from 2017 to 2018.

Presenter, Zoma Wallace
Institute for Doctoral Studies in the Visual Arts (IDSVA)
Zoma Wallace currently serves the government of the District of Columbia as the city's curator through the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities. A native Washingtonian, Zoma earned an M.F.A. in painting from Howard University and an undergraduate degree in studio art from Spelman College. Since joining the Arts Commission in 2009, Zoma has worked to contemporize the growing collection of more than 2,800 works of fine art, to implement new policies and programs to better serve the local arts community, and to develop diverse and accessible exhibitions for

the District's public galleries. She is currently working toward a doctorate in Art Theory, Aesthetics, and Philosophy at the Institute for Doctoral Studies in the Visual Arts.