

LITTLE
PATUXENT
REVIEW

Theaster Gates: Artist and Citizen

One could attempt to analyze the art of Theaster Gates in terms of trendy theoretical concepts like Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* but that would simplify and cheapen the artist's accomplishment. Gates is a political artist in a new and powerful sense.

In the Western canon, a few notable exceptions apart, political issues have failed to produce significant bodies of visual art. There are several reasons for this, some of which speak to the deficits of our educational system. For one thing, it is always difficult for subsequent generations to decode the political issues in paintings and objects from the past without a proper knowledge of the historical events involved; most viewers can no longer identify the wars "commemorated" in the great anti-war engravings made by Jacques Callot and Francisco Goya, let alone the political figures and their Communard opponents dissected in the lithographs of Honoré Daumier. For another, on both the left and the right, political passions and the deep desire to persuade or arouse the public results in a kind of stylistic blandness and paradoxical visual conservatism that the committed artist only escapes with the greatest difficulty. The official art of German fascism and Russian socialism is notorious in this regard. Even an artist like Picasso, capable of a fierce and innovative political masterpiece like *Guernica*, went on to create bland paintings protesting the Korean War and cloaking peace doves.

How the artist balances aesthetic imperatives with the clarity of his political position often determines the afterlife of his art. In recent decades, with the rise of identity art based on the self-identification of the artist with a chosen community of like-minded individuals, the challenges faced by political art have intensified, including the acceptance of such work by diverse audiences. Theaster Gates, a contemporary conceptual artist, through largeness of soul and community service, has created an art of gentle implication capable of speaking to anyone willing to listen.

§

Gates was born in Chicago in 1973 and obtained an undergraduate degree in urban studies and ceramics at Iowa State University in 1996. He went to the University of Cape Town for his master's in fine arts and religious studies. Was it only a coincidence that he chose to go to South Africa, the home of William Kentridge, that other most subtle practitioner of multivalent political art?¹ Eventually, Gates returned to

Iowa State University and received a second master's in 2006 in urban planning, ceramics and religious studies. His poetically titled and configured thesis, "Space, Memory, and the Constant Pursuit of God: I Built This House," has been the predicate for much of his subsequent work in performance, installation, and urban intervention; no wonder he refers to himself as "artist and cultural planner." Gates has assembled gospel choirs, formed temporary unions, and investigated systems of mass production to reveal essential links between industry and the body. In his zeal for restoring poor neighborhoods, Gates converts abandoned buildings into cultural spaces. In addition to faith and industrial production (*Dry Bones and Other Parables from the North, Holiness in Three Parts*), Gates has devoted installations and performances to the history of Chicago jazz and the collision of cultural communities. An important example of the latter has been his work with The Black Monks of Mississippi, a Baptist-Buddhist performance group that mixes slave spirituals, monastic chants and jazz to create a singular sonic environment. Gates has followed artistic developments in our region with a keen eye;² many of his mentors and slightly older colleagues, Dawoud Bey, Sanford Biggers, Isaac Julien and Fred Wilson, have had important shows in Baltimore museums. These exhibitions were exemplary attempts to link communities and multiple institutions. Often seen as singular events, such efforts are paradigmatic of the *usual* bridge-building artistic practice of Gates.

§

Theaster Gates is not one of those trendy artists who use literary theory to deconstruct architecture; he is that rare artist who reconstructs the built environment and the lived history of entire groups of people, black or white, northern or southern, whether the inner city residents of Chicago or workers in apparently bucolic Kohler, Wisconsin. Within this wide set of interests, the history and struggle of African Americans is central and subtly inscribed.

As with much of contemporary art practice since Bruce Nauman and Gerhard Richter, Gates employs a wide variety of media, primarily object-making and musical performance, but his work is never drily conceptual—a humanistic vision lies at its core. That Gates is African American with a degree in urban studies is not incidental; he urges his art students at the University of Chicago and at Harvard to become expert in more than one field of study, to bring a wider knowledge of the world to their art making.

Emotionally supple and subtle in his thinking, not to mention critically self-critical, Gates nimbly manages to escape the twin traps

of academic thinking and heart-on-sleeve “political” art. Through his profound interest in form and the achievements of form-givers that have gone before him,^{2,3} his poetically expressed objects achieve their goals without denying the lessons learned from minimalism and post-minimalism, extending the primacy of Donald Judd’s cubic structures (like buildings) or Sol LeWitt’s grids, and the flexibility of nontraditional artistic materials (i.e. Eva Hesse). His performance and building strategies are similarly catholic in taste, reaching back to Gordon Matta-Clark’s sliced houses and the relational aesthetics of sharing food, the videos and turntable work of Christian Marclay, and the cultural ethos of hip hop. Out of such influences, Gates has fashioned an interdisciplinary strategy of logical completion: He scavenges the wood and hoses of his best known objects from decrepit buildings in the inner city of Chicago and rehabilitates the very same neighborhoods with the money he makes in the commercial art world. This seemingly inevitable loop of sourcing, making, selling and saving is a remarkable intellectual achievement.

§

A Loeb Fellow at Harvard’s Graduate School of Design, Gates has received awards from the Joyce Foundation, Driehaus Foundation, Artadia and the Graham Foundation. In 2010 alone, he performed and exhibited at the Whitney Biennial and the Armory Show in New York, the Milwaukee Art Museum, the Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts in St. Louis, and the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston. His show in Milwaukee, “To Speculate Darkly: Theaster Gates and Dave, The Slave Potter,” was accompanied by a scholarly catalog about his artistic forbearer in clay that looks more like a religious hymnal.⁴ His interventions at the Milwaukee Art Museum, the infusion of poetry and song and ceramic vessels, served to bring the black church and factory worker into the sacred precincts of a major museum, Western culture’s conception of the secular cathedral. Dave Drake was a slave in antebellum South Carolina who produced stoneware pots adorned with poetic couplets of his own devising; ordinarily, neither his art nor his person would have ever been the subject of an art museum exhibition. The use of installation, performance and research in this context inevitably recalls “Mining The Museum,” Fred Wilson’s reconsideration and rearrangement of the primarily Southern and colonial collection at the Maryland Historical Society, a project spearheaded by the Contemporary Museum in Baltimore. Among his other contemporaries, Gates shares with Sanford Biggers a deep interest in Buddhist practice and the transformation of ordinary,

even psychically threatening, materials into meditative and musical objects. In the cultural collisions celebrated by both artists, Biggers has cast Tibetan prayer bells from melted-down rifle shells and built hip hop dance floors in the shape of mandalas. The participation of Gates in the 2011 Armory Show, largely based on objects created at Kohler, Wisconsin, resulted in his selection as the commissioned artist for the 2012 edition of New York's most important international contemporary art fair.

§

The nature of labor and social identity are subtly entwined in Theaster's artistic practice and reflect in turn his life as a scholar and man of faith. Gates collects resonant objects, out-of-date things discarded by society, and stores them in warehouses. He has available to him piles of decommissioned fire hoses from Chicago, fine dinnerware china once used in the first-class sections of United Airlines flights³, and wood scavenged from abandoned houses. He then transmutes these humble materials into sculptures with symbolic import. His bare-frame shoeshine stands, made from scavenged wood, are redolent with cultural and aesthetic associations: the neighborhood (black) barbershop, the train station, the implicit power relation between the customer seated above in a throne-like structure and the shoeshine "boy" working below.

In a recent interview in the *New York Times*, Gates, who is slight of frame, linked his interest in ladders and tall chairs to his belief that "height is a form of power".⁵ Some of his shoeshine stands, fitted with leather seats and cushions in bright primary colors, inevitably recall modernist icons like Gerrit Rietveld's *Red and Blue Chair* (1917) or early paintings by Ellsworth Kelly in which a wall-hung canvas is extended across the floor.

Gates uses his artistic residencies to research labor and cultural histories. In Kohler, Wisconsin, he explored the history of the labor villages and company stores in which the workers lived as if on plantations and learned how to make their porcelain and metal bathroom fixtures. Gates created a series of shallow sinks with gold-plated circular drains and mounted them on the wall in minimalist grids. In regard to their traditional function, these "luxury" appliances are just as useless as any urinal by Robert Gober or Marcel Duchamp. Conceivably one might fit their gold-plated mouths with speaker cones and play the whispered voices of the cloistered craftsmen.

In works like *Small Stack II* (2011), Gates has taken stacks of white porcelain (ceramic) dinner plates with gilded rims and encased them in

concrete columns with only their edges visible, the potentially mobile and fragile dishware trapped into rigidity. The resulting columns resemble the naked structural elements of abandoned buildings, even the chimneys of crematoria. The collision of rawness and hidden beauty is palpable, a strategy that Doris Salcedo has employed when wrapping wooden chairs in concrete to memorialize “the disappeared” of South American death squads. But the plates, originally used by United Airlines in their first-class sections where blacks would have been unlikely to ever see them, have been sequestered and archived in warehouses controlled by an African-American artist. Gates has given his own special designation to the shallow porcelain sinks that might be used to clean this dinnerware (see caption to Figure Five).

§

Not all of the materials used by Gates are as fragile as pottery and ceramics; the decommissioned fire hoses are almost indestructible. He uses them in many different ways, but his boxed fire hoses, like the one on the cover, are perhaps his most iconic works and encapsulate almost all of his most important themes. From a formal point of view, the intrinsic frame, composed of beaten and distressed wood rescued from abandoned houses in black neighborhoods, is a humble meditation on the Minimalist cube and the white-box ethos of the contemporary art gallery. Wall-mounted and exceptionally thick, it occupies a space somewhere between painting and sculpture and echoes the strategy introduced by Frank Stella in the 1960s. That this work is primarily composed of found and abandoned materials or ready-mades in the Duchampian sense speaks to the artist’s conviction that the poetic inheres in everyday objects of the near past and gives the work as a whole a subtle nostalgia. But the box contains a carefully gathered coil of scavenged (or rescued) fire hose. This enclosed eye turns the interior of the box into a mandala (Sanskrit for “circle”) suitable for meditation; in Hindu and Buddhist sacred art, the classic mandala consists of a circle centered in a square. This is the primary spiritual reference in the sculpture. The coiled fire hose extends our associations by also recalling the *ouroboros*, that ancient image of the snake with its tail in its mouth, perhaps a symbol of self-destruction.

Obviously, Gates does not mean for our meditation to be entirely peaceful. It is only when we look at the work’s title—for Gates it is a title unusually “in your face”—that a more explicit cultural reference becomes apparent, the use of fire hoses for crowd control during the race riots and civil rights demonstrations of the 1960s. The title’s somewhat snarky tone, the politesse of *In the Event of Race Riot*

IV (2011), not *in case of*, with its implicit recommendation to break the glass and get on with it, only increases the discordant nature of the sculpture's formal references and its cultural import. Formally accomplished, aesthetically appealing and emotionally disturbing, *In the Event of Race Riot* shares some of the territory pioneered by the dream world of boxes made by Joseph Cornell, of which many examples reside in Chicago's excellent surrealist collections.

The disturbing history of the fire hoses is more oblique in *Civil Tapestries* (2011), a work that directly references modernist stripe paintings like those of Washingtonian Gene Davis. But Gates' titles frequently upset the equipoise between his formalist explorations and his passionate beliefs; his current show at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles (LA MoCA), his first on the West Coast, is called *An Epitaph for Civil Rights*. You can be sure it will feel like a meditation—on race, on the city, on the museum and the community.

~Michael Salcman

1. Michael Salcman: "Video As Poetry: Felix In Exile (1994) by William Kentridge (b.1955)," *Neurosurgery* 69, No. 6 (2011): 1157-1161.
2. Theaster Gates, conversation with the author, New York, March 5, 2011.
3. Kavi Gupta, conversation with the author, Chicago, November 5, 2011.
4. Theaster Gates, *My Name Is Dave, A Hymnal*, Milwaukee Art Museum, 2010.
5. David Colman, "Finding the Poetry in the Industrial Past," *New York Times*, October 9, 2011.

Works by **Theaster Gates**



Low Back (Brown and Black)

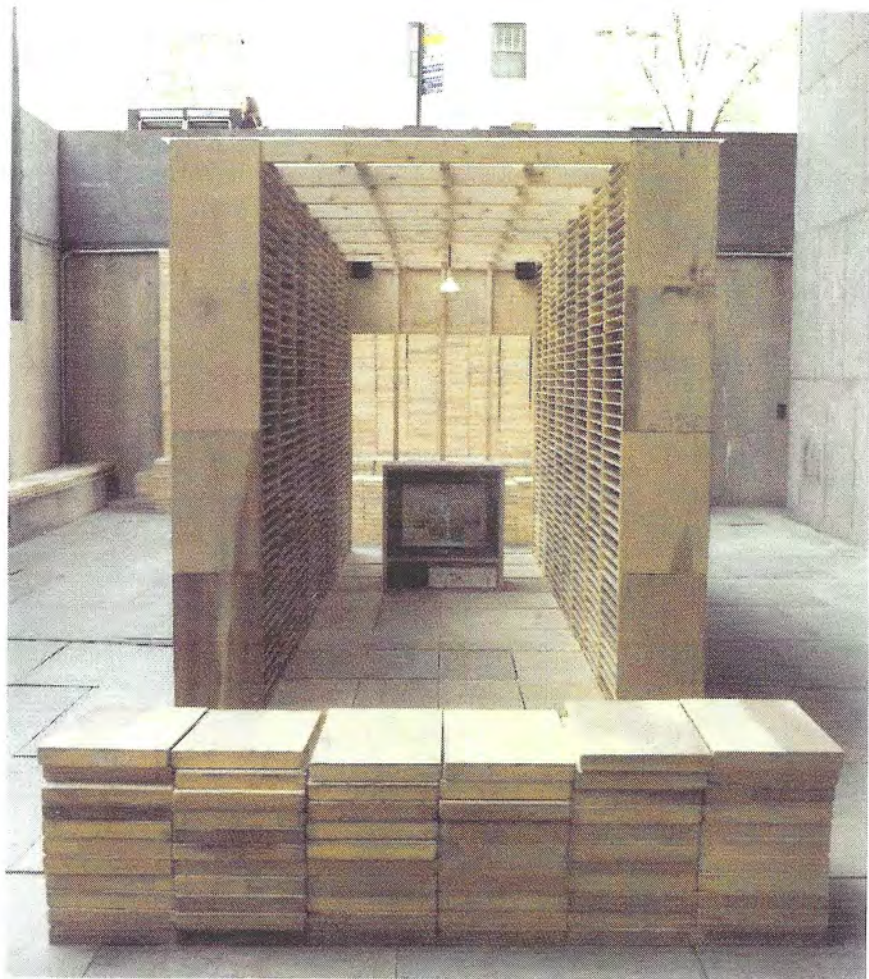
Wood and metal, 2010

Two chairs—47 x 34 x 23 in. each

Collection of Edward Tyler Nahem, New York



View of "Cosmology of the Yard" Shoe Shine
Whitney Biennial 2010
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York
Private collection



View of "Cosmology of the Yard"
Whitney Biennial 2010
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York



Small Stack II

White cement, glass and plates, 2011

18 x 12 x 12 in.

Private collection

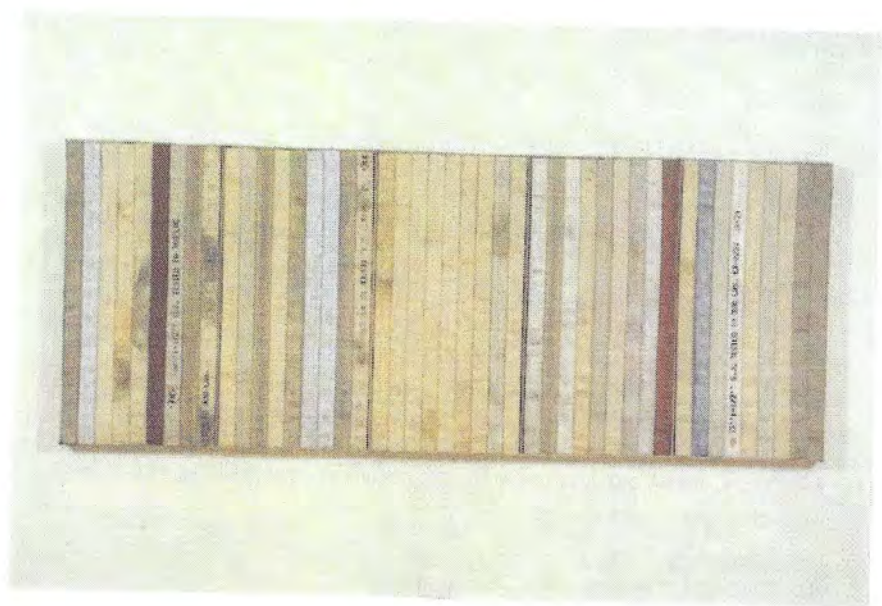


Whyte Painting (NGGRWR 0003)

Porcelain, composite gold, wood, 2010

26 x 32 x 5 in.

Private collection



Civil Tapestries

Decommissioned hoses and wood, 2011

48 x 123 x 4 in.

Private collection