SETTING THE STAGE:

THEASTER GATES THROUGH THE LENS OF PERFORMANCE

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INTRODUCTION

Since 2006, Theaster Gates has been renovating and repurposing abandoned buildings in the poor and predominately African American community of Grand Crossing on Chicago's South Side. Gates's spaces, now collectively known as the Dorchester Projects after their location on Dorchester Avenue (fig. 1), act as cultural centers in an area that, since the 1960s, has experienced a long history of disinvestment especially in terms of cultural resources. Today, the Dorchester includes a library, slide archive and soul food kitchen and is host to vast archives of art history glass lanternslides, vinyl records, and art and architecture books. Gates, who is also a visual artist exhibiting in museums and galleries, enlists artists and members of the local community to collaborate in the creation of these revitalized spaces. Their programming and design are guided both by the artist's vision and the needs of the local community.

Several scholars have analyzed the work of Theaster Gates, and although by and large responses to the Dorchester have been favorable, more critical perspectives have recently been offered. Daonne Huff has criticized Gates's work on the South Side for its lack of site-specificity and inability to maintain strong enough ties to the local community of Grand Crossing. Huff argues that the Dorchester lacks strength because its spaces are designed and programmed moreso according to the artist's creative vision as opposed to the needs of the local community.[1] In addition, Huff as well as Larne Abse Gogarty have recently likened Gates's role to that of a savvy real-estate developer irresponsibly advancing the wholesale gentrification (in addition to the revitalization) of Grand Crossing.[2]

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[1] Daonne Huff, "The Space is the Place: Theaster Gates, Rick Lowe and Site-Sensitive Art Interventions" (master's thesis, New York University, 2013).
[2] Larne Abse Gogarty, "Art & Gentrification," *Art Monthly*, no. 373 (February 2014): 7-10.

It is difficult to calculate the effects of Gates's project. To my knowledge, no one has attempted to accurately measure the positive impact the Dorchester has had on its local community. Regardless, it would seem that no amount of headcounts or visitor surveys would accurately describe the true power of the Dorchester Projects and Gates's mission to revitalize communities through creative enterprise. The artist may not adhere to specific enough goals in order to be labeled a true community activist or social reformer, but Gates does not claim either title. The more open-ended qualities of his practice may actually be what keep it in the realm of art as opposed to activism – at least for the moment.[3]

During my own visits to the Dorchester, I quickly realized that the events that took place there were kept purposefully organic and adaptable to the site's shifting resources and the less easily quantifiable artistic and communal needs of the local neighborhood. I would argue that much of the criticisms outlined above rely too heavily on predictions of a future that is not yet set for both Gates and the Dorchester. We cannot know how history will look upon Gates's achievements ten or twenty years from now, and only time will tell the consequences of gentrification and/or true community enrichment. Therefore, my approach in this paper will be to consider Gates's practice more from an art historical perspective. My intention is to place Gates's work within the context of his earlier exhibitions and the history of performance art,

[3] In 2014, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation gave the University of Chicago $3.5 million to further Gates's projects on the South Side through the development of The Place Project, which plans to eventually support the revitalization of poor neighborhoods in places like Akron, Ohio; Detroit Michigan; and Gary, Indiana through the support of arts and culture. With the help of artists, designers, urban planners and policy experts, The Place Project will train and mentor partners in each city to localize their efforts to support revitalization through cultural enterprise. The project intends to expand upon Gates's success in Chicago, Omaha, and St. Louis, as part of a larger process to develop a model that can be spread across the country. Given this recent windfall, it will be interesting to monitor any changes in the scope and effect of Gates's practice in the coming years.

specifically relating his goals that of Allan Kaprow (1927-2006) and Joseph Beuys (1921-1986), figures closely associated with the international Fluxus art movement of the 1960s and 70s.

My hope is that by approaching Gates's work in this fashion, we will arrive at a better means to describe and assess the Dorchester Projects in art historical terms. I intend to argue that the strength of the Dorchester as an artwork and arts-oriented project resides in its adaptability and attention to the artist's vision. I believe that Gates's primary goal with the Dorchester is to provide an experimental arena that enables audiences to create and participate in transformative and largely un-choreographed arts-oriented experiences that enrich the local community while improving their relationships with one another and empowering them to realize their ability to affect society at large. The Dorchester offers a wide variety of programming ranging from artist residencies to community service days, youth art-making workshops, and backyard barbecues. Whether through the cultivation of a community garden, the sharing of a meal (fig. 2), or the making of an artwork, visitors to the Dorchester take an active role in the creation of cultural space for arts-related and community-building activities in Grand Crossing.

These activities draw participants' attention to the critical exchanges that occur in everyday life and the lasting impact that may be achieved through collective action. Under Gates's direction, audiences interact with each other and the Dorchester collections. In a way that recalls certain aspects of performance art, I believe the artist uses these interactions as a medium to empower audiences through their own cultural enrichment. Thus, the Dorchester Projects operate much like a stage upon which audiences become actors in a series of operations, which Gates himself calls "happenings."[4]

[4] Theaster Gates, "The Candy Store and Other Dorchester Thoughts," *Theaster Gates*, accessed February 25, 2015,

The framing of events at the Dorchester is reminiscent of writings by Allan Kaprow on his creation of happenings in the late 1950s and early 60s. Much like Gates's projects, Kaprow's planned but loosely scripted events left room for improvisation while eliminating the boundary between the audience and the artwork. Gates's work also compares well to that of Joseph Beuys, whom Gates names as a primary influence and who coined the term "social sculpture" to describe art's potential to positively change the world through human interaction. In his early exhibitions, including for instance his 2007 installation at the Hyde Park Art Center entitled "Plate Convergence" and his 2010 exhibition, "To Speculate Darkly: Theaster Gates and Dave the Potter," Gates began using elements of performance as a means to fabricate, reframe, and eventually make history through carefully calibrated opportunities for cultural exchange. He created false histories, appropriated identities, and initiated unlikely collaborations in hopes of achieving critical moments of understanding and exchange across divergent populations.

These projects may also be classified as a form of "Relational Aesthetics" as defined by curator, Nicolas Bourriaud, who argued that such works should be judged according to "the inter-human relations, which they represent, produce or prompt."[5] Central to Gates's early exhibitions, therefore, was not so much the presentation of objects, but the creation of relationships through shared experiences. Following Bourriaud's theory, these projects "display and explore the process that leads to objects and meanings. . . . The object does not represent the logical end of the work, but an event."[6] An analysis of Gates's early works as they relate to this statement and the history of performance art prepares us to better discern Gates's

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http://theastergates.com/section/31729_The_Candy_Store_and_Other_Dorchester.html. See also Theaster Gates,
"Message from Rebuild Foundation Founder, Theaster Gates," *Rebuild Foundation*, October 28, 2011, http://rebuild-foundation.squarespace.com/blog-2/454.

[5] Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2002), 112.

[6] Ibid., 54.

accomplishments with the Dorchester Projects. Blurring the boundary between art and life, Gates's work, like Kaprow's, utilizes performance and the transformative power of shared experience to deeply affect his audience and promote social change.

CHAPTER ONE

Allan Kaprow's Happenings

Allan Kaprow (fig. 3) first became involved with the Fluxus movement in New York City where he was later acknowledged as the father of the happenings of the 1960s. Kaprow distinguished happenings from "theatrical performance" that took the form of things like plays, football games, and marriage ceremonies, events held in a certain place, attended by a loose crowd of individuals for a preconceived period of time. He described happenings and Fluxus events as forms of "nontheatrical performance," which by the early sixties had done away with "actors, roles, plots, rehearsals, and repeats but also audiences, the single staging area, and the customary time block of an hour or so."[7]

At first, the goals of these loosely scripted events seemed inconsequential and mostly engaged participants from within the art world. Tom Finkelpearl, former president and executive director of the Queens Museum and recently named cultural affairs commissioner for the city of New York, addresses this in his book, *What We Made: Conversations on Art and Social Cooperation*. In the introduction, which attempts to chart the emergence of collaborative and participatory art practice in America, Finkelpearl suggests that it was the "continuity of taste and culture" that supported the early happenings. The events were as he puts it, "not designed to

[7] Allan Kaprow, "Nontheatrical Performance, 1976," in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, ed. Jeff Kelley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 173.

cross boundaries."[8] Eventually, however, Kaprow's happenings attempted to capture what he termed a more "lifelike art" that engaged a diverse group of participants who also completely replaced the idea of a theatrical audience. Kaprow surmised "artlike art holds that art is separate from life and everything else, whereas lifelike art holds that art is connected to life and everything else. In other words, there is art at the service of art and art at the service of life."[9]

Kaprow welcomed a broad array of participants to investigate the meaning and creative potential that could be found through performing such mundane activities as handshakes and tooth brushing. He argued that the "open and fluid" form of these events determined their success. The course of a happening depended as much on participants as it did on the orchestrating artists who performed these events that were left largely open to chance. Audiences were invited formally to these events, but they were also advertised on posters, and at times, small entrance fees were charged. Kaprow argued that this kind of work must be allowed to succeed on some days even as it failed on others. He hoped that in attempting to evaluate the work, critics might come to "disregard the enduring and stable and to place an emphasis upon the fragile and impermanent" aspects of the event.[10]

In 1967, Kaprow gathered non-artists and artists alike in the creation of a happening titled *Fluids* (fig. 4). The event called for the cooperative construction of nine-foot tall rectangular structures made entirely of ice. One hundred people collaborated to produce similar structures in twenty locations across Los Angeles over three days. The event drew a wide array of participants, many with little or no affiliation with the art world. Kaprow later recalled that he

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[8] Tom Finkelpearl, *What We Made: Conversations on Art and Social Cooperation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 21.
[9] Allan Kaprow, "The Real Experiment, 1983," in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, ed. Jeff Kelley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 201.
[10] Allan Kaprow, "Notes on the Creation of a Total Art, 1958," in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, ed. Jeff Kelley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 12.

was most interested in the unpredictable experiences the happening provoked. "What remains vivid in my memory is not so much the aesthetics of the event as its social interactions … and the possibility that my quasi-art could be planned to disappear like a piece of used Kleenex."[11]

In 1969, Kaprow collaborated on an educational project titled *Project Other Ways* with Herbert Kohl, a professor at UC Berkeley. Hoping to address the educational system's failures to meet the needs of inner city school children, the project launched a series of pedagogical programs that brought art into the Berkeley Unified School District. In the process of completing a collaborative art project with a group of the district's sixth graders, Kaprow and Kohl realized that although the group was identified as functionally illiterate, they were in fact very interested in writing, albeit in the form of graffiti. Consequently, Kaprow and Kohl arranged for the students to express themselves through a fully sanctioned graffiti-style art project.

Tom Finkelpearl suggests that Kohl's and Kaprow's method for helping these students realize their creative potential may have led to future investigations into the role of collaborative art projects in educational reform. Unfortunately, however, Kaprow and Kohl diverged in terms of their activist and artistic agendas. Finkelpearl suggests that Kaprow was more interested in the artistic play of the project emphasizing the open-endedness of the collaborative process. Kohl, a prominent social activist and advocate of the open school movement, had politics rather than art in mind when considering the goals of the program.[12]

After a year spent working with *Project Other Ways*, Kaprow went on to teach at the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts). His influence as a professor both at CalArts and later at UC San Diego was deeply felt. Many of his students wondered whether Kaprow's happenings

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[11] Allan Kaprow quoted in Susan Leibovitz Steinman, "Directional Signs: A Compendium of Artists' Works," in *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*, ed. Suzanne Lacy (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995), 248.
[12] Finkelpearl, *What We Made: Conversations on Art and Social Cooperation*, 23.

had the potential to change society if scaled to meet contemporary problems. Scholar Jeff Kelley recalls that his students "would often raise questions and issue challenges about the social efficacy and political purpose of Kaprow's art. They wanted to change the world; Kaprow wanted to play with it."[13] Though his students questioned the social value of the happenings, Kaprow contended that these performances did in fact have the potential to generate a form of "self-consciousness." As participants collaborated in seemingly routine activities, they would, as Kaprow put it, "watch each other watch each other" and observe their surroundings with a renewed sense of awareness. He argued that as a participant, "you experience directly what you already know in theory: that consciousness alters the world, that natural things seem unnatural once you attend to them."[14]

Although happenings may have seemed socially inconsequential and apolitical on the surface, Kaprow later contended that lifelike art "was therapeutic [and meant] to reintegrate the piecemeal reality we take for granted."[15] Kaprow even went so far as to say that such a restoration may result in an "existential comprehension that [could] slowly turn a person's life around."[16] For him, such a seemingly simple action as brushing his teeth more attentively "was an eye opener to my privacy and to my humanity. An unremarkable picture of myself was beginning to surface, an image I'd created but never examined. It colored the images I made of the world and influenced how I dealt with my images of others."[17] Kaprow contended that lifelike art had the potential to promote "healing and meditation" and that if these events were

[13] Jeff Kelley, *Childsplay: The Art of Allan Kaprow* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 154.
[14] Allan Kaprow, "Participation Performance, 1977," in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, ed. Jeff Kelley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 190.
[15] Kaprow, "The Real Experiment, 1983," 206.
[16] Ibid., 217.
[17] Allan Kaprow, "Art Which Can't Be Art, 1986," in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, ed. Jeff Kelley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 221.

developed "more intentionally," they could profoundly change the meaning of art, "from being an end to being a means, from holding out a promise of perfection in some other realm to demonstrating a way of living meaningfully in this one."[18]

Parallels to Allan Kaprow in the Work of Theaster Gates

Much can be drawn from the work of Allan Kaprow when attempting to interpret the work of Theaster Gates. Gates's work, like Kaprow's, draws upon human interaction and collaboration. By placing an emphasis on human connection, both artists seem to be resisting the isolating technologies that increasingly pervade the modern world. Thus, they are deeply invested in collaborative projects that not only encourage self-awareness, but awareness of one's relationship to community and fellow human beings. Much like Kaprow, Gates seeks to discover new publics for his artworks. Unconventional audiences and participants who exist outside the contemporary art world are constantly engaged in the creation of the Dorchester Projects and his earlier artworks. Similarly, Kaprow welcomes anyone to participate in the creation of a happening.

Gates's intention to bring his practice closer to life is also reminiscent of Kaprow's emphasis on lifelike as opposed to artlike art. Both artists insist that engaging in seemingly mundane activities has the potential to change one's frame of mind. Although they each identify everyday actions as art, they do so to strikingly different ends. Kaprow describes lifelike art as potentially a form of "therapy and meditation," enabling the participant to live more meaningfully and self-consciously.[19] At the Dorchester, Gates engages visitors in ostensibly mundane activities like cooking, gardening, and listening to music. These tasks prompt participants to consider both the importance of cultural space in their community and their role in

[18] Kaprow, "The Real Experiment, 1983," 218.
[19] Ibid., 218.

the creation of that space for themselves. Whereas Kaprow seeks to draw his participants toward greater self-consciousness and subjective rewards, Gates aims for a mental and spiritual empowerment that might breed concrete effects within the local community including employment, good neighborliness, and the beautification and revitalization of public space.

Both Gates and Kaprow are also deeply invested in the open-ended process of their collaborative projects. Their projects are artist-led and guided for the most part by their own creative visions; they seem less concerned with establishing fixed goals for their work and more interested in the unpredictable relationships and shared experiences their projects create. The element of "play" that keeps Kaprow's work from being construed as political action seems strikingly similar to the level of poetic gesture and experimentation that keeps Gates's work from becoming social service. Like Kaprow, Gates is careful not to associate his work with political action. Although the social benefits of improving a predominately poor African American community are undeniable, Gates refuses to acknowledge himself as an activist.[20] And yet like Kaprow's commitment to pedagogy, Gates's activities as a teacher and dynamic leader in the arts have the potential to effect positive change.

Joseph Beuys and the Theory of Social Sculpture

Like Allan Kaprow, Joseph Beuys can loosely be categorized as a performance artist with a social agenda, which is, in Beuys's case, explicitly political. After refusing to visit during the country's participation in the Vietnam conflict, Joseph Beuys finally arrived in the United States for the first time in 1974. With the end of the war in sight, Beuys embarked on a national tour including stops in three US cities: Chicago, Minneapolis, and New York. The trip included

[20] Rachel Furnari, "High Spirits: Artist Theaster Gates Can't Stop Reaching New Heights," *New City Art*, March 30, 2010, http://art.newcity.com/2010/03/30/high-spirits-artist-theaster-gates-cant-stop-reaching-new-heights/#more-5245.

lectures (fig. 5) and a series of performances or "Actions" as Beuys called them. Throughout, Beuys would tout his "Energy Plan for the Western Man," which articulated his theory of social sculpture as a means to shape the world and promote social change. According to Beuys, if all human beings were given the opportunity to realize their creative potential, then the world would be a better place.

Through his involvement with the international Fluxus movement during the 1960s, Joseph Beuys began engaging in public and politicized art forms, which he felt departed from the more apolitical and institution-oriented tendencies of the established art world. His subsequent "Actions" were intended to convey the ideals of his theory of social sculpture and his greater mission to educate individuals on their creative capacity and responsibility to shape his or her world. Beuys began to stress the idea of the artist as everyman. This "expanded concept of art" encompassed all human creative activity and envisioned a world "where every single person experiences and recognizes himself as a creative, world-determining being. . . ."[21] Beuys proposed a total democracy where everyone would be empowered through social cooperation to participate in the shaping of history.

Beuys's theory of sculpture also maintained that materials contained energies that were constantly in flux. Beuys used commonplace materials like fat, felt, blood, and honey in his performances, but ultimately aimed to alchemically transform these materials through creative action in order to convey meaning. That is to say, Beuys's actions upon his materials infused them with renewed significance. By liberating them from their more common associations and giving them new life in the artist's creative framework, Beuys demonstrated human creativity's capacity to alter meaning and shape the world.

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[21] Joseph Beuys, "Talking about One's Own Country: Germany," in *In Memoriam Joseph Beuys: Obituaries, Essays, Speeches*, ed. Wilfried Wiegrand et al. (Bonn: Inter Nationes, 1986), 38-39.

Beuys reinforced the significance of his materials by fabricating elements of his own personal history. He contended that as a pilot in the Luftwaffe, the German air force, after crashing his plane in Crimea during World War II, he was saved by Tartars who bound him in animal fat and fur to raise his body temperature. Donald Kuspit proposes that Beuys's personal mythology highlighted the fragility of his own nature by suggesting that the artist's survival required the aid of strangers. Kuspit argues that the story was designed to induce spiritual healing, effectively proposing a strong counter to the idea of the Nazi *Übermensch*, literally meaning "Super Man," a term used by the Nazis to describe those they believed belonged to a biologically superior Germanic race.[22] Beuys's story attempted to distance the artist from this disturbing concept, an otherwise undeniable part of his cultural heritage as a German citizen. The fabrication infused his life experience with a new sort of significance that expressed his guilt for having fought alongside the Nazis in the war.[23] It also demonstrated a primary tenet to Beuys's theory of social sculpture, mainly every man's capacity to create meaning and shape the world through creative action.

Beuys's actions, like Kaprow's happenings, were not finalized to produce specific results. Like Kaprow, Beuys chose the tools for these events ahead of time following a loose prescriptive plan, but left their course and general outcome open to chance and interpretation. Beuys maintained that this open-ended quality was essential to his working process: "If it were not a new experiment . . . it would have nothing to do with art." Therefore, his actions should be

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[22] Donald Kuspit, "Joseph Beuys: Between Showman and Shaman," in *Joseph Beuys: Diverging Critiques*, ed. David Thistlewood (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1995), 27-49.

[23] Especially following World War II, many German artists began to tackle the idea of *kollektivschuld* or collective guilt in their work. Coming to terms with feelings of guilt, anxiety and existential crisis as a result of atrocities committed by the German forces during the war, especially the Holocaust, continued to inform the content of many artworks by German artists well into the 1980s. This legacy was carried forth not only in the work of Joseph Beuys, but also Georg Baselitz, Jörg Immendorff, Anselm Keifer, and Arnulf Rainer among others.

considered investigations, for if Beuys had a "clear concept of solving the problem," he would rather "speak about the concept and it wouldn't be necessary to make an action." Beuys added that "every artwork for me . . . brings a new element in the whole, an unknown area, and unknown world."[24]

In a sense Beuys's mission was to empower all human beings to realize their creative potential. He described this process as an attempt to reconnect every man to

> a moment of origin . . . where the human being experiences himself primarily as a spiritual being, where his supreme achievements (work of art), his active thinking, his active feeling, his active will, and their higher forms, can be apprehended as sculptural generative means, . . . and are then recognized as flowing in the direction that is shaping the content of the world right through into the future.[25]

It is important to recognize the resemblance of this language to political rhetoric. Beuys fully acknowledged the political import of his project and contended that it could not be complete until "every living person becomes a creator, a sculptor, or architect of the social organism. Only then would the insistence on participation of the action art of Fluxus and Happening be fulfilled; only then would democracy be fully realized."[26]

Beuys maintained that only a concept of art expanded to this ultimate degree of total participation had the potential to shape society. In order for every person to realize his or her creative potential and become an artist with the capacity to change the world, the first step would be to ensure equal access to an "educational system" that guaranteed the "opportunity for self-realization." Beuys observed that in the current "capitalistic systems" of "the Western world,"

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[24] Joseph Beuys, "Interview with Kate Horsefield, 1980," in *Joseph Beuys in America*, ed. Carin Kuoni (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1990), 71.
[25] Joseph Beuys, "I Am Searching for Field Character, 1973," in *Joseph Beuys in America*, ed. Carin Kuoni (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1990), 22.
[26] Ibid., 21.

this was not guaranteed.[27] He wanted to "break through the borders of isolation"[28] and enable human beings to establish a "consciousness of the whole problem . . . looking not only at the artist's problems, but everybody's needs." Reshaping the future would require "cooperation with all people together."[29]

Beuys's attention to the issue of education here is not surprising. He would later maintain that his greatest work of art was his teaching.[30] He also believed that communication should always reflect the rule of reciprocity and that education should "never be a one-way flow from the teacher to the taught. The teacher takes equally from the taught."[31] By the 1970s, Beuys believed his most important role was "as a teacher, as an informer, and an organizer . . . to inform the people about possibilities, to organize the resistance against the system, and to organize elections." In fact, by this point Beuys had even run for a position in the West German parliament.[32] He envisioned the architecture of social sculpture as quite manifold, "corresponding to the varying gifts of individuals and groups." It would require organizational methods unfamiliar to most artists and seek to launch "work groups or information centers," ultimately a new system of institutions that would strive towards "worldwide cooperation."[33]

Regardless of his disillusionment with capitalism, Beuys still felt he had no choice but to engage the system's institutions until his vision of a total democracy was fully realized. He

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[27] Joseph Beuys, "A Public Dialogue, New York City, 1974," in *Joseph Beuys in America*, ed. Carin Kuoni (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1990), 26.
[28] Joseph Beuys, "Speech upon Receiving an Honorary Doctorate Degree from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax, 1976," in *Joseph Beuys in America*, ed. Carin Kuoni (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1990), 53.
[29] Ibid., 55.
[30] Joseph Beuys, "Interview with Willoughby Sharp, 1969," in *Joseph Beuys in America*, ed. Carin Kuoni (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1990), 85.
[31] Beuys, "I Am Searching for Field Character, 1973," 22.
[32] Joseph Beuys, "I Put Me on this Train!: Interview with Art Papier, 1979," in *Joseph Beuys in America*, ed. Carin Kuoni (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1990), 50.
[33] Beuys, "I Am Searching for Field Character, 1973," 23.

contended that in order to change the system one must work from within, especially at first. Therefore, he continued to sell artworks as a means to fund the organizations he founded, such as the Organization for Direct Democracy and the Free International University.[34] Beuys used the profits of his art practice to fund his "struggle against the profit system."[35] His profitability enabled his operations as a political leader and itinerant teacher of his newfound mission.

Beuys admitted that his financial success and art world stardom were at odds with his philosophical mission, but he believed that he was nevertheless putting his position to good use.[36] Acknowledging that the world operated exclusively through its established institutions, Beuys felt that in order to effect change, one had no choice but to engage with those institutions head on. Speaking of his retrospective exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum in New York in 1979, Beuys admitted that allowing the museum to show his work enhanced the museum's profits and institutional clout. In the process, however, he believed he was feeding the institution new ideas that would benefit his larger project. Beuys maintained that the exhibition catalogue expressed ideas that were "against the established position of the institution" and that "because the world [consists] only of institutions . . . one can only work with institutions and bring other ideas [into] this institutional structure."[37]

Parallels to Joseph Beuys in the Work of Theaster Gates

Beuys believed that all human beings must realize their abilities as artists in order to positively shape the world through creative action. He's not merely concerned with performing mundane activities, but with the entire scope of human interaction. With an emphasis on total participation and worldwide cooperation, Joseph Beuys's theory of social sculpture, like

[34] Beuys, "I Put Me on this Train!: Interview with Art Papier, 1979," 41.
[35] Ibid., 46.
[36] Ibid., 44.
[37] Ibid., 47.

Kaprow's work on the happenings, seems to once again resist the alienation and isolation that increasingly pervades modern society. Beuys calls for collaborative action to empower every person as an artist in order to change the world. Empowerment can also be seen in the more pragmatic practices of the Dorchester Projects, where Gates aims to build community through cultural exchange and enrichment.

Like Beuys, Gates has also created a personal mythology in order to inscribe his artistic practice with deeper cultural meaning. By creating artworks through the figures of Shoji Yamaguchi and Dave Drake, Gates infuses his work with historic and economic value and encourages audiences to question their own relationship to history and race. Like Beuys's own fabricated history, Gates's narrative instructs his audience on the creation of meaning and the ability to shape the world through creative action. Just as Beuys's apocryphal narrative imbues his materials with deeper significance, Gates's use of history, real or fabricated, instills his work with new meaning. A central part of Gates's practice is also the recycling of salvaged materials into art. At the Dorchester, Gates instructs others in this process of reclamation and revitalization that restores value and meaning to things like abandoned building materials, properties, and collections through their continued use and reactivation. Beuys also leaves the outcome of his projects open to chance with a keen eye toward the value of an open-ended social experiment. Gates's work at the Dorchester draws on this as well, maintaining a cultural space that shifts constantly according to the artist's vision, the needs of the local community, and the scale of the artist's financial and creative resources.

All three figures (Beuys, Kaprow, and Gates) maintain roles as educators, and it would seem that their commitment to pedagogy underscores their work's emphasis on collaborative action. Beuys especially thought of teaching as a two-way process. Similarly, Gates not only

leads through instruction, but also hopes to learn from each community member he engages. He is in a sense a master orchestrator helping people to establish relationships and realize their own potential to spur change through creative action. With similar projects to the Dorchester now being developed in Omaha and St. Louis, Gates continues to enlist local artists, architects, developers, educators, and community activists to promote community-driven neighborhood transformation.[38] His operations at the Dorchester and these other sites are committed to realizing what can be gained through collaboration and exchange.

Rather than refuting the identification of his art practice with political action, Beuys engaged the proposition head-on, even going so far as to run for political office. His "Energy Plan" carries political import and challenges the failures of capitalist society. Although Gates is careful not to commit his work to any particular agenda, like Beuys he does engage in a conscious leveraging of cultural and financial resources in order to meet his needs. Hoping to expand his mission to better the South Side through creative enterprise, Gates engages such institutions as city government, the art museum, and private philanthropy. Like Beuys, he also strategically directs funds from the sale of his artworks in order to fund his renovations on the South Side. In addition, Gates's collaborations with art institutions often reflect an impulse to engage in institutional critique or the use of established art institutions as platforms to criticize the exclusivity of collection building and high culture. Like Beuys, Gates often collaborates with these institutions in a way that instigates their improvement from within.

[38] Theaster Gates, Kadist Linden, and Christina Linden, "Theaster Gates: Dorchester Project," Vimeo video, 25:02, produced for the exhibition "Living As Form" organized by Creative Time and distributed by Independent Curators International, posted by Kadist Art Foundation, 2013, accessed February 25, 2015, https://vimeo.com/43004580.

Furthermore, Gates's itinerant status and commitment to spreading his mission of revitalization through creative enterprise seems strikingly similar to Beuys's travels to raise awareness for his "Energy Plan." It is striking how similar they appear in photos posturing in front of chalkboards at various institutions (figs. 5 & 6), attempting to convey their elaborate ideals. One might say that Gates's mission to use art as a regenerative force in underprivileged communities worldwide bares striking resemblance to the tenets of the "Energy Plan," but in acknowledging Beuys as a primary influence, Gates is careful to point out that

> even though he [Beuys] was claiming a seemingly aggressive platform, it didn't seem to be impactful beyond the theory of a certain kind of protest, a symbolic protest. I think I'm just a little bit too flat-footed to keep it at ideals. So, I have this ideal, and it was consecrated by people who were doing things before me. But I want to be a little more impactful, if I can be. The work is not the ideal – I want to demonstrate these ideals.[39]

Gates's work may thus be recognized as an attempt to physically manifest Beuys's dream to positively change the world through access, collaboration, and creative activity.

CHAPTER TWO

***Plate Convergences*: Inventing Yamaguchi**

As mentioned earlier, Joseph Beuys's theory of sculpture maintains that all artistic materials contain energies that are constantly in flux. Through performance and the creation of his own personal mythology, Beuys sought to alchemically transform his materials in order to create meaning and imbue them with renewed significance. By liberating materials from their more common associations and giving them new life in his creative framework, Beuys demonstrated a central tenet to the theory of social sculpture: human creativity's capacity to alter meaning and shape the world. Semblance of these strategies can be seen in the work of Theater

[39] Theaster Gates, interview by Sky Goodden, "Interview: Theaster Gates on His Strange Position of Power," *Blouin Art Info*, November 23, 2013, http://castage.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/988516/interview-theaster-gates-on-his-strange-position-of-power.

Gates who, for his 2007 exhibition entitled "Plate Convergence," claimed to be presenting the work of a fictional mentor, Japanese ceramicist, Shoji Yamaguchi. Through the exhibition, Gates informed visitors that Yamaguchi fled Japan after surviving the bombings of Hiroshima.[40] Yamaguchi then moved to Itawamba County, Mississippi, in 1962, a southern town Gates claimed was known in the east for its legendary black clay.[41] There, Yamaguchi married a black civil rights activist, started a pottery commune, and created a new body of work, ceramic wares specially designed for "the foods of Black people."[42]

According to Gates's story, during the late 1960s Yamaguchi initiated a ritual called *Plate Convergences*, or conversations in which people came from all over to openly discuss issues of race and inequality at mealtime.[43] Then upon the death of Shoji and May Yamaguchi in a car accident in 1991, their son and heir founded the Yamaguchi Institute to carry on his parents' legacy and to continue fostering social transformations at mealtime. According to Gates's story, Shoji's son, John Person Yamaguchi, was now convening dinners in cities worldwide with extreme racial and social tensions.[44]

Gates wrote himself into this fictional narrative by claiming to have first met the Yamaguchi's in the 1980s while visiting family in Mississippi.[45] These early encounters, he claimed, had instilled in him a passion for clay; later, John Person Yamaguchi approached the artist about convening a dinner himself and showing his father's work in Chicago. Gates was

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[40] John Colapinto, "The Real-Estate Artist," *The New Yorker*, January 20, 2014, 24-31, http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2014/01/20/140120fa_fact_colapinto.
[41] "Tea Shack Songs, Yamaguchi and the Black Monks of Mississippi," *Chicago Arts District*, last modified April 27, 2008, http://chicagoartsdistrict.org/event_detail.asp?eventid=472.
[42] Betty Nobue Kano, "Theaster Gates: Cultural Collisions for a New Public Space," *The International Review of African American Art* 23, no. 2 (2010): 16.
[43] Theaster Gates, interview by Lilly Wei, "Theaster Gates: In the Studio with Lilly Wei," *Art in America* 99, no. 11 (December 2011): 122.
[44] "Tea Shack Songs, Yamaguchi and the Black Monks of Mississippi," *Chicago Arts District*.
[45] Kano, "Theaster Gates: Cultural Collisions for a New Public Space," 16.

named Executive Convener of the dinners that took place at the Hyde Park Art Center (HPAC) in 2007 under the auspices of an exhibition titled "*Plate Convergence.*"[46]

For the exhibition, Gates created 50 plank-shaped clay plates, which he presented as original artworks by his fictional mentor. Prior to their installation, the plates were used in large "Japanese Soul Food" dinners at the HPAC, which Gates videotaped and claimed he held in honor of Yamaguchi's artistic vision. For the exhibition, Gates hung the plates like sculptural pieces on the wall (fig. 7) and showed the recording of the dinner on a nearby screen. On another wall, he displayed an 85-foot vinyl timeline that charted the history of the Ming dynasty alongside slavery in the Americas. Also included in the timeline were Yamaguchi's and Gates's birthdays.[47]

The dinners at the HPAC offered traditional menu items like sushi and sashimi combined with new ingredients, like maki rolls made with mac-and-cheese and hand rolls made with black-eyed peas.[48] The meal was a collaboration between Japanese chef, Yamada San, and Gates's sister, Robin, whom he acknowledges as "the most amazing soul-food chef in his life."[49] Hoping to instigate conversations and "convergences" of difference, Gates invited people from all backgrounds to attend the dinners. He even hired a young mixed-race artist to play the role of Yamaguchi's son who further legitimized Gates's efforts and thanked everyone for coming.[50]

Gates's approach recalls that of Rikrit Tiravanija, who in the 1990s began hosting a series of pad thai meals in the gallery context (fig. 8). As opposed to presenting exhibition visitors with

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[46] Kano, "Theaster Gates: Cultural Collisions for a New Public Space," 16.
[47] Gary Younge, "Theaster Gates, the Artist Whose Latest Project is Regenerating Chicago," *The Guardian*, October 6, 2014, http://www.theguardian.com/society/2014/oct/06/theaster-gates-artist-latest-project-is-regenerating-chicago-artes-mundi.
[48] Hesse McGraw, "Theaster Gates: Radical Reform with Everyday Tools," *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context, & Enquiry* 30, no. 1 (Summer 2012): 90.
[49] Theaster Gates, "The End of Clay Fiction," *Studio Potter* 40, no. 2 (June 2012): 30.
[50] Gates, interview by Lilly Wei, "Theaster Gates: In the Studio with Lilly Wei," 122.

objects, Tiravanija cooked and served them dinner. Nicolas Bourriaud would later argue that the purpose of these projects could be found in the product of their "conviviality,"[51] namely new relationships, acquaintances, and the formation of spontaneous communities through interaction and exchange. An earlier precedent for Gates's performance may also be found in the work of seminal Fluxus artist, Allison Knowles, who began making performances of communal meals in the early 60s. By 1968, Knowles conceived of *The Identical Lunch* (fig. 9) with her friend and fellow Fluxus artist Philip Corner, who noticed that Knowles ate the same lunch every day around noon at Riss Diner in New York City. Recognizing the ritual's potential as a performance, Knowles began inviting friends to try the same lunch in her company and write about their experiences.

Knowles eventually published an "event score" for the performance, which reads: "The Identical Lunch: a tuna fish sandwich on wheat toast with lettuce and butter, no mayo, and a large glass of buttermilk or a cup of soup was and is eaten many days of each week at the same place and at about the same time."[52] Much like a musical score, Knowles's instructions have guided countless performances of *Identical Lunch* in a variety of locations over the years. Knowles also gathered photographs and participants' descriptions into books, which recount the performance's many nuances. In essence, no two *Identical Lunches* are the same. Like Allan Kaprow, Knowles is concerned with promoting human interaction and blurring the boundary

[51] Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 83.
[52] Tejal Rao, "Lunch as Performance: The Artistic Side of Tunafish," *The Atlantic*, January 28, 2011, http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2011/01/lunch-as-performance-the-artistic-side-of-tunafish/70374/.

between art and life. Of *Identical Lunch*, she states, "It was about having an excuse to get to talk to people, to notice everything that happened, to pay attention."[53]

These works eliminated the boundary between the audience and the artwork much like each diner becoming a performer in Gates's *Plate Convergence* happening. The artist provided the tools and directions for everyone to participate in this uniquely transformative dining experience. Guests were fascinated by the *Yamaguchi Wares* (fig. 10) and their supposed lore. Collectors became entranced with Gates's apocryphal narrative and purchased the ceramics. Gates eventually revealed the truth of their origins, and critics seemed all the more enamored with his constructed history.[54] Gates had successfully ritualized and elevated the meal in a way that enabled the diners to closely observe the power of something so strikingly ordinary as supper.

> When you take the time to make a ritual, then people value the experience. . . . They value the utensils of that experience, and they value the people they meet. So over the years, I've become really sensitive to who's coming to dinner and why they're coming. My hope is that these different folk who meet each other could be friends. And friendship builds a radical encounter. I understood from an early age that dinner could do work besides feeding people.[55]

Six years later, Gates was invited to continue his *Plate Convergences* for an exhibition with the University of Chicago's Smart Museum of Art entitled "Feast: Radical Hospitality in Contemporary Art." For the exhibition, he held another series of coordinated soul food dinners

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[53] Alison Knowles quoted in Randy Kennedy, "Art at MoMA: Tuna on Wheat (Hold the Mayo)," *The New York Times* (New York, NY), February 2, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/03/arts/design/03lunch.html.
[54] Colapinto, "The Real-Estate Artist," 24-31.
[55] Theaster Gates quoted in Diane Solway, "The Change Agent," *W* 42, no. 6 (June-July 2013): 22, 97-101, http://www.wmagazine.com/culture/art-and-design/2013/06/theaster-gates-chicago-artist/.

and named the project *Soul Food Pavilion* (fig. 11).[56] This time, Gates did away with the Yamaguchi story, and as opposed to hosting the dinners in the sanctioned confines of the art institution, Gates opted to host the dinners in the renovated space of the Dorchester Projects. Like the meal hosted at the Hyde Park Art Center, the guest list was very diverse and encouraged unforeseen exchanges across racial and cultural divides. Gates later said,

> The dinners in some way give me an opportunity to leverage ritual and leverage space and to ask hard questions in ways that people don't normally talk about in Chicago, with groups of people who don't normally get together . . . If someone says as part of dinner, "you have to talk about this topic," it gives us all an excuse to be more open, more transparent, more vulnerable than we might be normally.[57]

This time, Gates's *Plate Convergence* drew billionaire developers, European curators, and of course, his own neighbors in Grand Crossing to his dinner table. There was food, lively conversation, and music performed by Gates's musical ensemble, the Black Monks of Mississippi. Once while Gates was greeting guests at the door a drive-by-shooting erupted, but dinner went on. Gates's art dealer at the time, Kavi Gupta, later commented that Gates "knows some people feel odd coming to the South Side. But that's the reality of life on his street, and he plays with that."[58] Though headlines rage about the continued gun violence on Chicago's South Side, few witness the effects firsthand. Gates's dinner brought unlikely visitors to an area of the

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[56] Hosted by Gates in collaboration with Erika Dudley, "soul food expert" and Senior Program Manager for the University of Chicago's Civic Knowledge Project, along with chefs, Michael Kornick and Erick Williams, these dinners offered specific discussion and menu themes. For example, one meal themed "The Politics of Soul" aimed to showcase "the scraps that people have transformed into main dishes and sought-after delicacies. The conversation will center on who has access to food and water, and how cultural icons in America are determined in part by pride, creativity, and privilege." See Lisa Chu, "Ritual Soul Food Dinner," *Movable Feast: Chicago* (blog), *WBEZ91.5*, March 1, 2012, http://www.wbez.org/blog/louisa-chu/2012-02-29/ritual-soul-food-dinner-96859.

[57] Theaster Gates, interview by Smart Museum of Art, "Interview," in *Feast: Radical Hospitality in Contemporary Art*, ed. Stephanie Smith (Chicago: Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, 2013), 194.

[58] Kavi Gupta quoted in Diane Solway, "The Change Agent," 22, 97-101.

city they'd sooner avoid and placed them in direct contact with members of the local community. The intervention was meant to combat the stigma that characterized the South Side and drew attention to the creative potential and need for cultural space in a part of the city that seems written off by outsiders and intentionally forgotten by city government.

The art of ceramics is an unusual pathway to social critique, but its use in Gates's mythological narrative opens the medium up to more potent influence. Gates began studying ceramics in the mid 1990s as an undergraduate at Iowa State University. He further refined his craft during a 1999 residency in Tokoname, Japan, where Gates served as an apprentice to master ceramicists. Gates was the only African American in his class at art school and the only black potter in residence in Tokoname.[59] Originally, although Gates made wares inspired by ceramicists like Peter Voulkos and Paul Soldner who had gained credibility in the fine-art world, he had trouble finding a gallery to show his pots. In a lecture at the Milwaukee Art Museum in 2010, he described twelve years "of struggling to find a way in a world filled with white craft potters.''[60] Yamaguchi served as a powerful bridge between Gates's life as a potter and society's inability to recognize a black male artist in the field.

As critic Hesse McGraw would later remark, Gates's "grand narrative afforded gravitas to his emerging social practice . . . but also did the real thing – it loaded his ceramic wares with art-world value."[61] The story fooled a lot of people, and in the end, there were many issues to consider including how the Japanese provenance added value to Gates's ceremonial dinner and ceramic wares. In the 1950s, Peter Voulkos "discovered" Japanese ceramics and began absorbing

[59] Ethan W. Lasser, "Scaling up: Theaster Gates, Jr. and His Toolkit," *Journal of Modern Craft* 6, no. 1 (March 2013): 83.
[60] Theaster Gates, "To Speculate Darkly: Opening Night Lecture," (presentation, Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee, WI, April 29, 2010).
[61] McGraw, "Theaster Gates: Radical Reform with Everyday Tools," 90.

elements of their design into his own practice. From then on, the Japanese clay tradition became recognized as the most prestigious and influential in the United States. Art historian, Claire Butcher, points out that Gates's project investigated, "national stereotypes and notions of cultural authenticity and was consciously devised to bring people into confrontation with those issues, as well as with each other."[62]

Gates used the exhibition and dinner as an opportunity to insert himself into a historical narrative that would enable him as an African American male to claim cultural ties to Japanese history. These fabricated connections engaged Gates in a sort of role-play not unlike artist Andrea Fraser's performance as museum docent, Jane Castleton, which enabled Fraser to stage a critique of the offerings and operations of the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1989 (fig. 12). Fraser led visitors on tours of the museum's galleries, but also its restrooms, gift shop, coatroom and cafeteria. While mimicking the familiar role of the museum docent, she shockingly applied exaggerated praise to both artworks and water fountains and unabashedly discussed taboo organizational topics like corporate and private sponsorship. Although at points her tour seemed improvised, it was thoroughly scripted drawing research from museum publications and other historical resources. Intended to reveal the museum's structural biases, social prejudices, and economic underpinnings, Dr. Meredith Malone, curator of the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, points out that "Fraser's tour exists not only as an ironic re-presentation of institutional discourse, but also as a strategic move away from the work of art and towards the social relations that surround art objects."[63]

Gates's experiment similarly raised discussions about the role of the art institution in

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[62] Claire Butcher, "Poetic Governance," *Cityscapes*, no. 3 (Summer 2013), http://www.cityscapesdigital.net/2013/05/12/poetic-governance/.
[63] Meredith Malone, *Andrea Fraser: "What Do I, As an Artist, Provide?"* (St. Louis: Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, 2007), 12.

validating cultural production. In an extensive reflection on his decision to use Yamaguchi as a creative vehicle he states:

> I invented Yamaguchi as an amalgam that would help me reshape the conversation about how history-making changes the way people perceive objects and object makers. The character was imbued with my real experiences of Japan and Mississippi, except I wanted my Japanese character to leave Japan and come to Mississippi, the reverse of my leaving the States and going to Japan. I wanted Shoji to help the world see the beauty inherent in places and underscore the real clay traditions located in the South.[64]

Plate Convergence enabled Gates to explore the unexpected ways he felt "African American culture rubs gently against the East."[65] Gates himself feels a deep connection with African American culture of the South. As a youth, he spent nearly every summer working on his uncle's farm in rural Mississippi. This experience informs his practice as much as his time spent in Japan. Blending the centuries long history of Japanese ceramics with the ritual of Sunday Soul Food, he invited diners to consider "what happens when you combine animism and black gospel, soul food and sashimi, dignified productivity with a history of slavery, cultural esteem and cultural obscurity."[66] The experience of this unlikely cultural synthesis educated Gates's diners on the production of historical meaning and cultural value. Gates had made his vision a reality, and in the process had enabled guests to consider issues of racial inequality and the power of suggestion.

As part of his work on the "Feast" exhibition at the Smart Museum of Art, Gates also created a series of what he calls *Soul-Food Kits* (Fig. 13).[67] In order to fully appreciate these

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[64] Gates, "The End of Clay Fiction," 26.
[65] Ibid., 30.
[66] Ibid., 30.
[67] A likely precedent for Gates's *Soul Food Kit* may be *Fluxus boxes* or *Fluxkits* (1965–6). These small editioned boxes or attaché cases were designed to encapsulate a collection of multiples and printed items by Fluxus artists. Designed and assembled by George Maciunas, the *Fluxkits* were intended as unlimited editions with contents varying significantly from copy to copy. The collections were meant to be inexpensive and portable containing only small handheld items that

neatly compact collections of clay wares, the owner is welcome to activate them through the creation of his or her own soul food dinner. Gates describes each kit as "part fancy bento box, and part big country pantry. It would have everything you need to have the perfect soul food meal wherever you are."[68] Thus the mission of the first *Plate Convergence* continues through these meals, which are also elevated through the use of ceremony, Japanese-inspired wares, and perhaps a few non-traditional cross-cultural ingredients. Gates hopes that the kits will "allow people to ask questions about their own cultural values, cultural utensils, ways of eating, and ways of making meaning." Much like Gates's *Plate Convergences*, these kits invite visitors to enact their own alternative narrative in which African American traditions are easily appreciated alongside and fused to Japanese history and culture. This alternative outlook also complicates and diversifies our understanding of the black male artist. It allows the viewer or participant to, in a sense, re-imagine "blackness," a goal, which Director and Chief Curator of The Studio Museum in Harlem, Thelma Golden, argues many black artists seek to achieve.[69]

"To Speculate Darkly": Performing Dave the Potter

In another exhibition, entitled "To Speculate Darkly: Theaster Gates and Dave the Potter," Gates explored the history and legacy of real life potter, Dave Drake, a slave who lived in antebellum South Carolina and produced stoneware pottery famously adorned with poetic couplets at a time when it was illegal for slaves to know how to read and write. Gates's

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could be easily read and manipulated. A miniature museum of sorts, the design of the *Fluxkit* was intended to diminish the more typically exalted experience of viewing fine art.

[68] Theaster Gates, "Theaster Gates: Soul Food Starter Kit," Vimeo video, 2:20, produced for the exhibition "Feast: Radical Hospitality in Contemporary Art" organized by Smart Museum of Art, posted by Smart Museum of Art, 2012, accessed February 25, 2015, https://vimeo.com/36719143.

[69] Thelma Golden, *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1994), 24. See also Thelma Golden, *Freestyle* (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 2001), 14.

installation at the Milwaukee Art Museum revolved around a 40-gallon pot by Dave Drake (fig. 14), which bares its own inscription that reads, "When you fill this jar with Pork or Beef Scot will be there to get a Peace. Dave."[70] This container was shown alongside a series of contemporary vessels (fig. 15) and ink drawings (fig. 16) of pots created by Gates.

The contemporary vessels were stamped with messages like "Heir to an estate. On sand I wait. These sink." The ink drawings were emblazoned with gold lettering much like the cursive script on Drake's pots and conveyed messages like "my name goes here:" and "my freedom, like the contents of this jar." These were designed to recall other vessels by Drake that seem to impart critiques of slavery's many injustices. For example, scholar Aaron De Groft notes that many of Drake's poems, like one that reads "I made this jar all of cross/If you don't repent you will be lost," should be read as a "voice of protest."[71]

Next door, a videotaped performance showed a gospel choir singing the enigmatic and emotional words of poetry found on Drake's pots (fig. 17). Gates set these works to music with the help of Chicago- and Milwaukee-based musicians. Joining African American choir singers with the museum's docents, Gates managed to assemble a 250-person gospel choir to parade through the museum's galleries and sing his hymns on opening night.[72] The exhibition's curator, Ethan W. Lasser, later said that "this motley crew came together to present a spectacular concert (fig. 18). For a fleeting evening, the white-supported museum and the black-supported Southern Baptist church coalesced."[73] Lasser contended that the event joined parts of Milwaukee that rarely interacted and broke barriers that once "excluded the culture of the black church from the

[70] Ethan W. Lasser, "An Unlikely Match: On the Curator's Role in the Social Work of the Museum." *Museum Management and Curatorship* 27, no. 3 (August 2012): 206.
[71] Aaron De Groft, "Eloquent Vessels/Poetics of Power: The Heroic Stoneware of 'Dave the Potter'," *Winterthur Portfolio* 33, no. 4 (Winter 1998): 249.
[72] Christian Viveros-Faune, "Theaster Gates," *Art Review,* no. 56 (January-February 2012): 69.
[73] Lasser, "Scaling up: Theaster Gates, Jr. and His Toolkit," 82.

Western canon presented in the museum."[74]

Through this collaboration, Gates redefined what could be offered in America's hallowed art institutions. Considering this melding of the museum and the black church a form of "temple-swapping." Gates successfully instilled black culture into a high art context more commonly guided by white norms and western ideals.[75] Performances like these draw from Gates's early relationship with the black church and his belief in the emotional and spiritual power of music. At the age of twelve, Gates began singing in the New Cedar Grove Missionary Baptist Church gospel choir in Chicago. By the time he was fourteen, he was the choir's director, but Gates eventually felt that the "conversation" offered by the choir was too limited and that he "wanted the choir to be able to make and sing songs that addressed social injustices, and not only in religious ways but in practical and sometimes assertive ways."[76] Gates's gesture of assembling a choir within the Milwaukee Art Museum seemed to operate in just this fashion.

His use of the museum as a venue to host nontraditional audiences and unlikely collaborators issues a critique as it simultaneously offers a solution to museums that continually struggle to draw a diverse audience. It encourages museums to actively engage their local communities in developing their programming. All of Gates's collaborators received free memberships to the Milwaukee Art Museum.[77] It would seem that due to his project, the museum was spurred to acknowledge and remedy its rarefied status. The memberships broadened the museum's audience for a time, and hopefully, Gates's collaboration with the local community will continue to inspire the diversification of the museum's audience and offerings

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[74] Lasser, "Scaling up: Theaster Gates, Jr. and His Toolkit," 83.
[75] Gates, "To Speculate Darkly: Opening Night Lecture."
[76] Theaster Gates quoted in Rachel Furnari, "High Spirits: Artist Theaster Gates Can't Stop Reaching New Heights."
[77] Rafael Salas, "Review: Theaster Gates at the Milwaukee Art Museum," *Art City* (blog), *Journal Sentinel*, May 6, 2010, http://www.jsonline.com/blogs/entertainment/92792319.html.

for years to come.

Also encouraging is the recent scholarship authored by the museum's curator, Ethan W. Lasser, which suggests that Gates's collaborative project inspired ideological shifts in the museum that will continue to diversify the museum's offerings. In a recent article titled, "An Unlikely Match: On the Curator's Role in the Social Work of the Museum," Lasser comments on the museum's potential to function as an agent for social change.[78] After Gates's exhibition, Lasser was inspired to keep the theme of community engagement going with a continued interest in the museum's long-term loan of Dave Drake's 40-gallon vessel. With the help of his colleagues, Lasser launched a mobile museum that brought the story of Dave the Potter to the impoverished inner city of Milwaukee.

With the help of local educators who believed that Drake's story might resonate in the city's poor African American neighborhoods, staff at the museum brought two-hour workshops to inner city schools, churches, community centers, and a halfway house that encouraged participants to interpret Dave's work for themselves through both conversation and poetry.[79] As expected, the story of an enslaved man who overcame sizeable barriers to gain an education and use his intellect to protest injustice deeply resonated with the local community. In Milwaukee, Drake's story was inspiring to impoverished African Americans, "young men and women [who] faced challenged schools, a lack of positive male role models and dim prospects for the future."[80] Lasser has since voiced his support for curators who act as "collection-community matchmakers" and use their specialized knowledge to create connections between museum objects and the

[78] Lasser, "An Unlikely Match," 205.
[79] Ibid., 208.
[80] Ibid.

social challenges faced by contemporary visitors.[81]

In the context of the exhibition, recordings from Gates's musical collaboration reverberated from the drains of white ceramic speakers in the form of sinks that were attached to the wall in a grid-like formation (fig. 19). Gates made the sinks with the help of workers from the nearby Kohler Manufacturing Company in Sheboygan, Wisconsin.[82] A 150-year old producer of sinks and toilets, the company served as a perfect microcosm through which Gates could explore ideas about craft labor and its relationship to the world of fine art. Gates spent two months at Kohler preparing for the exhibition as part of the company's Arts/Industry artist residency program. Since 1974, the program has given emerging and established artists access to Kohler's production facilities to create new work exploring "forms and concepts not possible in their own studios as well as new ways of thinking and working."[83] For his part, Gates enlisted a group of Kohler's predominantly white male union workers to produce a body of work in response to Dave Drake and introduced these men to an African American artist and the history of "an enslaved potter whose experience seemed to parallel their own in unexpected ways."[84]

Gates's collaboration helped to break stereotypes and lent a creative voice to a group of craftsmen who constantly feared that their own jobs were at risk. One white laborer shockingly commented to Gates, "I am a nigger, too . . . I, too, am owned by a family."[85] Gates might have easily felt offended by such a remark, but he later saw that it came from a place of empathy and courage. The worker felt trapped by his skill set as the labor he performs for Kohler is fast being

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[81] Ibid., 209.
[82] Salas, "Review: Theaster Gates at the Milwaukee Art Museum."
[83] "Art/Industry Residency Program," *John Michael Kohler Arts Center*, accessed February 25, 2015, http://www.jmkac.org/index.php/artsindustry-residency.
[84] Lasser, "Scaling up: Theaster Gates, Jr. and His Toolkit," 83.
[85] Laborer anonymously quoted in Garth Clark, "Exhibition | Flashback 2010: Double Triumph for Theaster Gates in Milwaukee," *CFile Foundation: The Weekly*, March 25, 2014. https://cfileonline.org/exhibition-flashback-2010-double-triumph-theaster-gates-milwaukee/.

exported to Asia. Most likely acknowledging this unexpected reaction, Gates titled each of the sinks, *NGGRWR*, intended to be read "nigger ware."

Gates's commitment to community interaction associates his work with what curator Nicolas Bourriaud terms "Relational Aesthetics" or works that should be judged according to the "inter-human relations, which they represent, produce, or prompt."[86] When asked if Gates considers his work a form of relational aesthetics, he is quick to point out that he thinks less about what sort of artist he is and more about relationships.[87] Gates's work is so diverse that it resists easy categorization, but in turning to this exhibition in particular, it seems that overriding the artist's concern for the display of objects, is his attention to the experiences that develop throughout the course of an exhibition. These relationships have the potential to produce lasting effects within the local community. The collaborations that produced "To Speculate Darkly" eased racial divides between the museum, the local black church, and white laborers from Kohler. As one critic notes, in the guise of an artist-curator-activist, Gates has become an expert at creating a sort of artistic "bridge" between such communities.[88]

When it comes to addressing history in his work, Gates admits that he is less concerned with presenting factual information, and more interested in making the experience of history relevant for a contemporary audience through poetic nuance.[89] Truthfully, Gates had no choice but to present Drake's history with some poetic license. We know little more about Dave Drake than what he inscribed on his pots, and yet the material value of these simple wares has skyrocketed. Originally used to store meats, grains, or water in the nineteenth century, his vessels are now garnering steep prices at auction. Of course, this is only after being elevated and

[86] Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 112.
[87] Lasser, "Scaling up: Theaster Gates, Jr. and His Toolkit," 82.
[88] Viveros-Faune, "Theaster Gates," 68.
[89] Lasser, "Scaling up: Theaster Gates, Jr. and His Toolkit," 84.

sanctioned by institutions like the Milwaukee Art Museum. In "To Speculate Darkly," Gates addresses this racially charged value system head on.

Due to his own experience as an African American potter, Gates felt he had something in common with Dave Drake and could draw the audience closer to the historical figure. In a lecture that kicked off the show, Gates proclaimed that if a white man like Todd Leonard, historian and heir to Drake's home plantation, could "speculate darkly" and author suppositions on the life and times of Dave the Potter, then he could too.[90] The exhibition not only amplified the life and work of Dave Drake, but also enabled Gates to present this historical figure more fully by embodying his work through performance. In recordings from the planning stages of the exhibition, one can sense Gates striving to become Dave the Potter. He vigorously labors at a potter's wheel while simultaneously singing Drake's poetry. With emotional force and gospel-style intonation, Gates attempts to channel the life of Dave Drake and make his presence deeply felt in the twenty-first century.

In an interview with curator and critic Lilly Wei, Gates once noted that he's "interested in reconstructing histories and intervening in futures."[91] This undoubtedly prompted Gates to wonder, "What if Kohler hired Dave to work on an industrial process? What would he do for his people and community? How would he shift the function of the ceramics in the same way that his (originally functional) ceramics have been shifted as collected objects?"[92] Gates speculated that Dave Drake would have produced ceramic speakers that quite literally proclaimed his status as an artist. With a bit of poetic license, Gates made his speculation a reality for Milwaukee's museum audience, and his use of local industry spurred a vital conversation about the value of

[90] Gates, "To Speculate Darkly: Opening Night Lecture."
[91] Gates, interview by Lilly Wei, "Theaster Gates: In the Studio with Lilly Wei," 126.
[92] Gates quoted in Rachel Furnari, "High Spirits."

craft labor in society today.

Gates's exhibition called upon audiences to envision a utopian future in which craft labor would be elevated and made sustainable again as a profession. A relief sculpture on the back wall (fig. 20) imagined a seal for a fictional organization called "The Association of Named Negro American Potters." Gates seemed to suggest that collective action might make the playing field fairer for black craftsmen whose skills are increasingly outsourced to machines and ever-cheaper foreign manufactories. Thus, his goal for the exhibition was not simply to redefine his audience's understanding of history but to envision a better future, to give the exhibition a contemporary purpose.

Gates also produced a hymnal to accompany the exhibition that gathered the poetic works of Dave Drake alongside his own reflections and musical stylings. Because slaves like Drake were forbidden to read and write, Drake's poetry may be understood as a vital act of protest. In turn, Gates's exhibition and publication may also be interpreted as a forceful act of revision. Through the powers of gospel music, collaboration, and an unconventional installation that merged historical and contemporary artworks, Gates lent a creative voice to a figure more commonly silenced in today's history books, the African American slave. Previously known only through the short bursts of poetry he left on his pots, Gates's presentation made Drake's trials and tribulations deeply felt in the present moment and prompted visitors to question their understanding of history and cultural memory.

Gates's creative presentation of history here is undoubtedly related to the work of other artists like Fred Wilson and Glenn Ligon who also found creative ways to present the history of slavery to contemporary audiences. In 1992, Wilson organized an installation entitled "Mining the Museum" at the Maryland Historical Society (fig. 21). His radical presentation of the

historical society's collection of nineteenth-century material culture showed implements of slavery alongside upper-class decorative arts of the same time period, e.g. fancy dinnerware alongside slave manacles. Wilson's presentation disturbed much of the historical society's regular attendees, but it publicized the irrefutable notion that nineteenth-century leisure went hand in hand with forced labor.

Wilson's intervention relates closely to the work of Theater Gates, but so too does Glenn Ligon's installation *To Disembark*, which was shown at the Whitney Museum in 1993 (fig. 22). Here the artist arranged human-sized wooden shipping crates supplied with audio recordings that included the voice of Ligon himself reading from the narrative of a storied runaway slave, Henry "Box" Brown, who escaped slavery by literally mailing his body to freedom. Ligon's recording is heard among recordings of black musicians like rapper KRS-One performing "Sound of da Police" and Billie Holiday singing "Strange Fruit," a haunting anti-lynching song.[93] Ligon surrounded the crates with framed frontispieces from fictive slave narratives and offset lithographs that reproduced the format of nineteenth-century runaway handbills according to real posters the artist had collected.[94] Like Gates's project in Milwaukee, both Wilson and Ligon were successful in jarringly bringing the discussion of slavery into the present.

CHAPTER THREE

"My Labor is My Protest": Relocation of the John H. Johnson Library

The impulse to creatively use an established cultural institution as a platform to criticize the exclusivity of collection building and the construction of high culture, also known as institutional critique, carries through many of Gates's projects. For his 2012 exhibition entitled

[93] Huey Copeland, "Glenn Ligon and Other Runaway Subjects," *Representations* 113, no. 1 (Winter 2011): 82.
[94] Phyllis Rosenzweig, *Glenn Ligon: To Disembark* (Washington: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, 1993).

"My Labor Is My Protest," Gates created another multimedia event, this time at Jay Jopling's London contemporary art gallery, White Cube. He displayed tar paintings created with the help of his father (fig. 23) alongside a selection of his *Civil Tapestries*, stripe-patterned works made from decommissioned fire hoses (fig. 24), and two vintage fire trucks (figs. 25 & 26) that recall methods used to suppress protests during the Civil Rights Movement. Most notably, the installation included an expansive collection of periodicals taken from the John H. Johnson library (fig. 27), which had recently been given to Gates by Linda Johnson Rice, current chair of the Johnson Publishing Company.

Rice's father established Johnson Publishing Company in Chicago in 1942. The company later became the publisher of *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines and the owner of Fashion Fair Cosmetics, an international cosmetics line for people of color. The magazines were popular disseminators of black culture throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. In his article addressing Gates's installation, Huey Copeland writes that the magazines "visualized models of black aspiration and bourgeois achievement. . . . These periodicals, along with the company's cosmetics and hair-care lines, provided sources of employment as well as safe havens for black cultural producers forced to navigate a segregated world in an even more segregated city."[95]

Thus the John H. Johnson library presents a dynamic collection of Civil Rights era literature that was essential to the establishment of black cultural production and creative expression in a world of high racial tensions. At White Cube, the John H. Johnson library, which includes magazines and books on black history and culture, most written by black authors, was presented with wheeled ladders and reading tables that made the collection easily accessible to the public, "establishing it not as a monument to be mourned or a cipher to be commoditized but

[95] Huey Copeland, "Dark Mirrors: Huey Copeland on Theaster Gates and *Ebony*," *Artforum* 52, no. 2 (October 2013): 223.

as a capacious resource to be engaged."[96] Gates's presentation strategically elevated attendees' research and casual perusing of the collection into performative action. The experience of such a resource would not likely have surfaced in London by other means. Gates's presentation critically eyed the audience's awareness of American black cultural production, even as it called into question the exclusion of black cultural production from high art institutions.

Gates considered the collection within the context of London more broadly. His intervention was an attempt to question the assumption that London had a class problem rather than a race problem. Gates later said that the exhibition forces participants to "reckon with this body of knowledge and to think in part about the black American experience and how that's had an effect and impact on the world."[97] One critic later noted that by transporting the collection, Gates proposed, "issues of race, class, and culture are just as pertinent on this side of the pond as on the other."[98]

The library's inclusion in the prestigious space of White Cube, which represents such blue-chip contemporary artists as Damien Hirst and Chuck Close, is certainly a context worth analyzing. The intervention occurs in a cultural space that performs the sort of taste-making many would argue deeply influences the production and market of contemporary art worldwide. Gates's curatorial gesture thus questions the lack of cultural acknowledgment given to black cultural producers within the dominant culture and is itself a form of institutional critique.

Gates is certainly self-conscious of his relationship to a high cultural sanctuary like White Cube. In joining the gallery, he was most interested in how international exposure could benefit

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[96] Copeland, "Dark Mirrors," 224.
[97] Theaster Gates quoted in Helen Stoilas, "Inside the House that Theaster Built: Rising Art Star and Activist Theaster Gates Is Transforming His Neighborhood, One Building at a Time," *Art Newspaper,* no. 238 (September 2012): 18-19, http://www.theartnewspaper.com/articles/Inside-the-house-that-Theaster-built/27156.
[98] Richard Parry, "Theaster Gates," *Modern Painters* 24, no. 10 (December 2012): 99.

his expanded practice and ability to fund his projects in impoverished communities. Commenting on the installation Gates asked of himself "Could I exploit the exploiter? Could I leverage this 30,000-square-foot commercial gallery and offer nothing for sale in 20,000 square feet of it?"[99] In another interview Gates was quoted saying, "White Cube is a gigantic reinforcement. . . . Jay [Jopling, the owner] needs me for his soul – and I need him for his financial possibilities in order to make my vision a reality."[100]

In fact, Gates has bigger plans for the John H. Johnson library than a temporary installation at White Cube. He intends to make the collection permanently accessible and to properly house it as a cornerstone of another cultural center he's developing on Chicago's South Side. The newly renovated Stony Island State Savings Bank building (fig. 28), which dates to 1923, is located just four blocks from Gates's original interventions on Dorchester Avenue. The scope of the finished project is uncertain at this time, but Gates has stated that he hoped the 20,000-square-foot Art Deco building would eventually house a culinary training institute, a soul food restaurant, exhibition and performance spaces, artist studios, office spaces for local organizations, and the entirety of John H. Johnson's 18,000-volume library collection.[101]

Gates plans to transform the bank into another cultural institution that exists beyond the grasp of the legitimizing forces that pervade museums and galleries. In reality, the best use for this collection is not merely to exist as an exhibition tool, but as a means to empower Gates's audience on the South Side fulltime. He says " . . . the idea that an artist might also be able to think about a new kind of museum or place where historical objects land – and do it better than

[99] Gates quoted in Diane Solway, "The Change Agent," 22, 97-101.
[100] Theaster Gates quoted in Oliver Koerner Von Gustorf, "Theaster Gates: Inner City Blues," *ArtMag by Deutsche Bank*, no. 76 (June 2013), http://db-artmag.com/en/76/feature/theaster-gates-inner-city-blues/.
[101] Solway, "The Change Agent," 22, 97-101.

people who think about historical objects all the time – is exciting to me."[102] He seems fully aware that his attention and willingness to act upon the need for cultural space within his community is radical in itself. His private enterprise acknowledges the cultural disinvestment that has plagued the area for years, and it rightly questions those in power who once, and still, write off the South Side as socially and culturally irrevocable. Ultimately, Gates hopes that the resource will spur additional interaction and artistic collaborations. Additionally, his adoption of the archive and ability to put it to good use within the community serves as a strong metaphor for his overall project, the rehabilitation and reinvigoration of the South Side.

Part of what helps to elevate the transfer of the John H. Johnson library into the realm of art is Gates's incorporation of ladders, reading tables, and chairs to facilitate the audience's interaction with the collection. Interacting with the furniture elevates the experience in a way that is not unlike the prospect of eating Japanese Soul Food off of one of Gates's Japanese-inspired ceramic wares. These objects support the performative actions that Gates requests of his visitors. It elevates their experience into the realm of art and thus alerts them to their environment and the decisions that went into the setting of their experience. Ultimately, visitors question why they're being prompted to engage in such actions in this context and wonder what meanings may be drawn from such close observation and elevation of the mundane?

When were our voices radical? : Creating the "Listening Room"

Similar methods were used when in 2011 Gates decided to transplant a portion of the vast record collection he normally houses on Dorchester Avenue to the Seattle Art Museum for an exhibition entitled "The Listening Room." For the installation, not only did Gates create a shelf that physically embedded the records into the gallery walls for easy access (fig. 29), he also

[102] Gates quoted in Diane Solway, "The Change Agent," 22, 97-101.

incorporated specially designed listening stations and a DJ booth. The DJ booth (figs. 30 & 31) was designed to resemble a sort of quasi-church pulpit and the listening stations (fig. 32) were also thronelike with many of their design elements recalling church architecture.

The exhibition's curator, Sandra Jackson-Dumont, said, "The DJ is the minister of music; the albums are the choir. He speaks with the voice of history."[103] As one can see from this observation, Gates's structural methods for presenting the collection elevated the simple action of playing and listening to music and made clear associations to the experience of going to church. Playing a record in "The Listening Room" was not exactly like playing one at home and provided strong connotations to spiritual worship and more ritualized gatherings. The installation clearly drew attendees' attention to the cultural meaning that could be drawn from such a seemingly mundane activity.

Attendees were welcome to listen to records solo or to host listening parties, selections of which were streamed online. Visitors were also invited to mix records and participate in the official archiving of the collection. The invitation to contribute to the archiving of the collection indoctrinates visitors into the care and conservation of a vital historical record. Part of what makes Gates's presentation so special is its status as a rare collection of music that is very valuable in terms of its preservation of American history, jazz, blues, spoken word, hip hop, and R&B culture. The collection in total includes some 4,000 records with rare recordings of Martin Luther King, Jr., James Brown, the Isley Brothers, and vaudeville comedienne "Moms" Mabley. Gates understands these records enable listeners to examine African American politics throughout history. He's previously commented that this collection of records especially prompts the African American listener to consider questions like, "When were our voices radical, when

[103] Sandra Jackson-Dumont quoted in Helen Stoilas, "Theaster Gates Has a Dream," *Art Newspaper*, no. 230 (December 2011): 73.

were they pacifist? Do we sing about things we can't scream about?"[104] Thus, Gates's gesture draws attention to the role of music in cultural dissemination and political protest.

Rather than keeping his record collection at home on Dorchester, Gates generously decided to take it on the road in order to allow others to engage with a cultural archive that he believes is at risk of being lost. By offering this rare gift in the context of the museum, not only is Gates addressing the preservation of vinyl records as a curatorial priority, he is also suggesting that these records are essential to the understanding of African American experience; as such they are an essential part of the telling of American history. Gates's radical act of sharing acknowledges how such activities contribute to the construction of cultural memory. Without access to such a collection, things inevitably will be forgotten or remembered poorly and incompletely. If Gates were not there to draw the museum's attention to these issues, would they simply fade into oblivion?

Gates's presentation of the collection represents another infusion of black culture within the high art institution and thus, as a critique of the museum's regular offerings. High art institutions like the Seattle Art Museum do not typically preserve and disseminate black cultural production, and Gates is keenly aware that this point radicalizes his presentation. In an interview about the installation Gates said,

> It's also about the reinvention of the museum as a space for multiple forms of contemplation. I want to continue to suggest that culture is never irrelevant, but not everyone can access it. I want to create opportunities where more of the things that are important to me, like making music, dancing, talking shit and remembering are things that more of the world has access to.[105]

Also significant to interpreting Gates's intervention at the Seattle Art Museum is an acknowledgment of what sort of discoveries were made when the audience listened to the music

[104] Ibid.
[105] Gates, interview by Lilly Wei, "Theaster Gates: In the Studio with Lilly Wei," 126.

in groups. Gates succeeded in creating a space within the museum that promoted community and shared experience. It would be one thing to access the collection through one's iPod, but it is quite another to sit in a circle of thrones Gates designed for the act of collective listening. In a world where we are increasingly weary of being separated from our fellow man through mediating technologies like social media, advertising, and text messaging, it's easy to forget that the act of listening and playing music is ultimately a social affair. With every record we play, we make connections to other human beings and find resonance with their experience.

I've heard stories of people from my and my parent's generation who have fond memories of once plugging oversized high-fidelity headphones directly into record players to listen to whole albums in one sitting, often repeatedly. In these moments, they were not only engaging with a high-fidelity recording that marvels in comparison to today's compressed digital download, they were also essentially tied to the record player. They were stopped and engaged in an intimate listening experience that seemed to connect them to the time and place of the musician whose music they were hearing. Since their inception, record players brought people together. They created a shared space that is recalled through Gates's installation. Whether solo or as a group, ultimately Gates's audience becomes more self-aware as they listen to music that connects them with both history and culture.

The Performance of Labor: *Soul Manufacturing Corporation*

In a fashion that called upon the themes of his earlier exhibitions, "Plate Convergence" and "To Speculate Darkly," Gates began another project, entitled *Soul Manufacturing Corporation* or *SMC*, in 2011 that is currently ongoing. The *SMC* involves the transplanting of people, specifically potters, along with their resources and knowledge, into alternative spaces that for a time support the production of ceramic wares. The project has taken form at Locust

Projects in Miami Beach in 2011, Philadelphia's Fabric Workshop and Museum in 2013, and also at Whitechapel Art Gallery in London in 2013 where it was part of a larger exhibition entitled "The Spirit of Utopia." The exhibition, "The Spirit of Utopia," featured the work of nine other contemporary artists and collectives who like Gates used their work as a means to speculate on alternative futures and the role of art in imagining and realizing a better world and social order.

For *SMC*'s first iteration at Locust Projects (fig. 33), Gates invited both American and Japanese potters to collaborate on the production of ceramic objects. As with his earlier exhibition projects, less focus was placed on the presentation of objects than on the process of production and the relationships this process entailed. In a fashion that recalled Nicolas Bourriaud's treatise on relational artworks that "display and explore the process that leads to objects and meanings,"[106] Gates explained that "Maybe [the objects] won't actually be things you can use so much, but it'll just be the energy and acts of production [that produce the work]."[107] He hoped that as a consequence of this project people might share knowledge and exchange skills, but these aspects were decidedly unplanned.[108]

Much like Allan Kaprow in his creation of happenings, Gates was less concerned with a final outcome. With the provision of space, materials, and a set of rough directives, Gates hoped to create moments of exchange that would allow unexpected happenings to unfold. He did not have very specific goals for the project and treated it more like an experiment knowing that it would continue to evolve and vary across each participating venue. Gates hoped that he and his

[106] Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 54.
[107] Gates quoted in Helen Stoilas, "Inside the House that Theaster Built," 18-19.
[108] Theaster Gates, interview by Diana Nawi, "Theaster Gates," *The Miami Rail* (Winter 2012), http://miamirail.org/visual-arts/theaster-gates/.

collaborators might learn something from their experiences. These lessons might then inform the next iteration of the project or produce unanticipated effects within the local community.

The first rendition of *SMC* was largely experimental in form. Gates provided his artists with the space and means of production. He also gave them a very public platform. Visitors were invited to the gallery to observe this "performance of labor," as Gates called it.[109] During the production process, Gates and Locust Projects also planned a suite of activities for the potters. The artists received frequent "visitations" from a DJ, a yoga instructor, and a reader to keep them entertained. The general public was welcome to participate and witness these activities as well. They were free to ask questions, and if they had time Gates encouraged them to "stop by and read from a book, maybe some poetry, to keep the crafts people entertained."[110]

Gates defined the *Soul Manufacturing Corporation* as an "experiment with both the mechanisms of production and how structures are organized to support creative production."[111] In a later reflection on this first iteration of the project, he said that it was an attempt to create new and innovative arts-based economies modeled after the cottage industry or means of artistic production that take place in one's home.[112] It's not too far of a jump to imagine that in creating projects like the *Soul Manufacturing Corporation* Gates is responding to the clarion call issued by Joseph Beuys in the 1970s. Much like Beuys's suggestion that art had the potential to positively change the world through human interaction, artists and art making play a central role in Gates's production model and urban revitalization process.

Both the Dorchester and the *SMC* foster the sort of knowledge sharing and making of relationships that Beuys suggested had the ability to effect social change. In an interview with

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[109] Gates, interview by Diana Nawi, "Theaster Gates."
[110] Anne Tschida, "Kicking It Up a Notch," *The Miami Herald* (Miami, FL), December 1, 2012.
[111] Gates, interview by Diana Nawi, "Theaster Gates."
[112] Gates, "The End of Clay Fiction," 31.

Diana Nawi, then curator of the Miami Art Museum, Gates predicted that "The performance of labor will become real employment. The project grows out of a desire to understand the conditions under which cultural production and hand production thrive."[113] Here too, it becomes evident that Gates aims to draw his artistic practice closer to life in order to impress real effects upon society at large. By testing his labor model as an artist, he hopes to change the world.

This performance of production therefore becomes a healing apparatus that enables collaborators to envision a world that values creative labor while making these creative activities more accessible to a broader public. By bringing the methods of clay production into the museum, *SMC* extends the possibility of being a creator to people who would not normally engage in creative action. Gates insists "the museum should be an open space that questions modes of production, systems of power, and access to the imagination for everyone."[114]

Through the *Soul Manufacturing Corporation*, Gates hoped to develop a sustainable business model that he could export to other cities. Under the auspices of an exhibition title like "The Spirit of Utopia," Gates's project can easily be interpreted in terms of its positivist overtones. The exhibition investigated the ability of art to envision a better world, and for its iteration of the *SMC* (figs. 33 & 34), the audience was once again invited to observe the production of three skilled potters who, over the course of the exhibition, would train three apprentices. In this case too, Gates invited local poet, Zena Edwards, to perform readings on craft and labor once a week as "gifts to the makers."[115] Interestingly enough, in this case, the utilitarian pots and bricks (fig. 34) created throughout the course of the exhibition were destined

[113] Gates, interview by Diana Nawi, "Theaster Gates."
[114] Theaster Gates quoted in Sofia Victorino Daskalopoulos, "Clay Cosmology," *Ceramic Review*, no. 263 (September/October 2013): 19.
[115] "The Spirit of Utopia: Online Catalogue," *Whitechapel Gallery*, September 30, 2013, http://thespiritofutopia.org.

for use in another of Gates's revitalization projects on the South Side of Chicago.[116] Most likely the objects will go to the renovation of the Stony Island Savings Bank, which will eventually a restaurant, arts education resources, and spaces where community groups can meet.

Diana Nawi acknowledged that in his collaborative gestures, Gates was calling upon the tradition of craft-based towns where citizens are part of a traditional craft-based economy, which exports the products of its labor. At Whitechapel, these questions were particularly directed towards local history. In developing the project Gates researched Stoke-on-Trent, an important site of the pottery industry in the United Kingdom since the seventeenth century, hosting such companies as Royal Doulton and Wedgwood. Gates was also highly influenced by the emergence of studio potters in the UK like Bernard Leach and Lucie Rie in the twentieth century.[117] The *SMC*'s making of bricks at Whitechapel also recalls the local brick making that went on in Brick Lane just behind the gallery.[118]

By drawing upon these early production models, Gates suggests that we might have lost sight of the importance and value of creative labor to society. His model proposes that the sharing of creative enterprise has the potential to build communities and support local economies. Gates unabashedly contends that although people write off clay as useless and nonessential, "this humble material is the root of modernism, can rebuild our cities, can revolutionize the art world."[119] Gates's project reconnects his audience and collaborators with

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[116] Daskalopoulos, "Clay Cosmology," 19.
[117] Ibid.
[118] Jane Ure-Smith, "The Spirit of Utopia, Whitechapel Gallery, London – Review," *Financial Times*, July 3, 2013, http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/2/4194cfd4-e3cc-11e2-91a3-00144feabdc0.html.
[119] Theaster Gates quoted in Jessie Aufiery, "Theaster Gates | Soul Manufacturing Corporation | Locust Projects," *Art Is About* (blog), November 19, 2012, http://artisabout.com/2012/11/19/theaster-gates-soul-manufacturing-corporation-locust-projects-2/.

centuries-old ideals, as it proposes that his micro-utopia modeled after old potters' towns might actually pose real benefits to contemporary life. Through the performance and display of craft labor, Gates suggests that much can be gained in the sharing of creative resources. Craft labor has the ability to uplift and by staging this utopian ideal, Gates demonstrates that its benefits are easily achieved.

CHAPTER FOUR

An Organic Evolution: The Creation of the Dorchester Projects

Gates's work on the buildings that would later collectively be known as the Dorchester Projects began in 2006, but the inspiration for their renewal stemmed from the artist's experience growing up in some of Chicago's toughest neighborhoods. Born in 1973, Gates was raised in East Garfield Park, a neighborhood on the West Side of Chicago, historically plagued by decades of poverty and urban decay. One of the harshest blows the area sustained was just after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., when in 1968 race riots erupted on the city's streets, leaving behind torched buildings and vacant lots, many of which remain undeveloped to this day.[120] Following the tumult, Gates grew up observing the effects of steady disinvestment and middle class flight from the neighborhood. By the time he was a teenager, the community's concentration of drug dens, prostitution, squatters, and gang violence led to the systematic demolition of otherwise abandoned buildings.[121] The increase in empty space in his community inspired Gates to think critically about his environment and his ability to effect change in these areas of untapped potential.

[120] Colapinto, "The Real-Estate Artist," 24-31.
[121] Ibid.

In the fifth grade, Gates was bussed north to Reilly elementary school, which was located in a semi-affluent, mixed white and Hispanic neighborhood.[122] The drive between his home and this new school helped him realize at a young age that the poor condition of his own neighborhood was not only an exception, but also a result of social conventions and historic precedents one couldn't perceive from the area's dilapidated appearance. An extraordinary youth, Gates became a choir director of his local Baptist Church at the age of fourteen and spent weekends tarring roofs with his father. Then at the age of fifteen, he began renting an apartment from his parents in the four-unit apartment building they owned.[123] Through these experiences, Gates began to understand the significance of personal and creative place-making.

By the time he was a high-school senior, Gates knew he might one day be able to change the circumstances of his neighborhood for the better. He decided to study urban planning at Iowa State University, focusing his studies on zoning and property law.[124] Afterwards, he earned his Master's degree in fine arts and religious studies at the University of Cape Town. He then studied for one year in Tokoname, Japan, as an apprentice to master ceramicists. In 1999, he returned to Chicago where he was offered a job working for the Chicago Transit Authority (CTA), organizing public art for the city's subway system.[125] With the CTA, Gates learned the bureaucratic skills necessary to fund public art in Chicago and hoped to use this job as a means to direct financial and creative resources to underprivileged communities.[126] In spite of his best

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[122] Colapinto, "The Real-Estate Artist," 24-31.
[123] Solway, "The Change Agent," 22, 97-101.
[124] Colapinto, "The Real-Estate Artist," 24-31.
[125] Gates also previously worked for a Christian mission in Seattle that ran a housing program in low-income neighborhoods. Prior to this, he also managed a nonprofit arts education center called the Little Black Pearl, which to this day serves youths living in the predominately African American neighborhoods of Kenwood-Oakland, Woodlawn, and Bronzeville on Chicago's south side.
[126] Colapinto, "The Real-Estate Artist," 24-31.

efforts, the city's long-term planning strategies seemed to have little effect on the continued struggles of African Americans living in impoverished neighborhoods. After six years, Gates left the CTA to return to graduate school at Iowa State where he earned an interdisciplinary degree in urban planning, religion, and ceramics.

Upon returning to Chicago, Gates was hired at the age of thirty-three by the University of Chicago as an arts programmer. The university is located in the South Side's Hyde Park neighborhood. His desire for affordable housing and the convenience of living close to his new job led him to consider establishing residence in the nearby neighborhood of Grand Crossing.[127] It was a dangerous move considering that at that time Grand Crossing averaged one fatal shooting per week.[128] Nevertheless, Gates was inspired by the number of poor people living in these communities who had stayed for decades while black working and middle-class families fled by the tens of thousands.[129] He wondered what it would mean to lay down roots and truly invest in the community. So in 2006, Gates purchased an abandoned candy store located on the 6900 block of Dorchester Avenue for $130,000.00 with the help of a subprime mortgage and a loan from his mother.

At the height of the housing crisis in 2008, Gates purchased the clapboard bungalow next door for $16,000, this time with the help of his friends and a former boss. While living in the former candy store, Gates began renovating the bungalow hoping to eventually "make [both] the properties beautiful.[130] At the same time, he started salvaging different media collections from the area; to begin with, he had no specific intentions for these materials. At a steep discount, he

[127] Ibid.
[128] Ibid.
[129] Ben Austen, "Chicago's Opportunity Artist," *New York Times Magazine,* December 22, 2013, 2.
[130] Theaster Gates quoted in Ibid.

purchased a 14,000-volume collection of art and architecture books from the Prairie Avenue Bookstore, which was going out of business. He also claimed a collection of 60,000 glass lanternslides, recently unloaded by the art history department at the University of Chicago. He then salvaged a collection of 8,000 vinyl records from the now shuttered Dr. Wax Records store, a cornerstone of cultural life on the South Side formerly located in the nearby neighborhood of Hyde Park.[131] Gates used recycled scrap wood from the bungalow's renovation to rebuild its interior. He fashioned raw wood shelves to accommodate his book collection (fig. 35), installed a soul food kitchen in which to host dinner parties, and later, he outfitted one room to hold floor-to-ceiling shelving for his slides (fig. 36). He clad the outside of the bungalow in vertical strips of weathered barn wood and named it the *Archive House*.[132]

After signing with Kavi Gupta Gallery in Chicago in 2009, Gates used the leftover scrap wood from the *Archive House* renovation to build his first shoeshine stands (fig. 37). Gates modeled these towering wooden thrones after those at Shine King, a storied West Side shoeshine shop where everyone from preachers to NBA all-stars went to have their shoes shined.[133] Kavi Gupta brought the shoeshine stands to sell at NADA Miami during Art Basel Miami Beach. In addition to their powerful reference to this class-oriented and racially charged ritual, Gates activated the sculptures onsite through performance. He invited wealthy patrons to the fair to take a seat and allow him to shine their shoes.

The vision of the artist kneeling at the feet of wealthy patrons to shine their shoes was probably striking in its ability to draw associations to the classism and social hierarchies that pervade exchanges (both intellectual and monetary) that characterize institutions like

[131] Colapinto, "The Real-Estate Artist," 24-31.
[132] Ibid.
[133] Solway, "The Change Agent," 22, 97-101.

international contemporary art fairs. Another ramification of the performance was the display of a "black body" at work. As Dr. Harvey Young, professor of Theatre, Performance Studies, and African American Studies at Northwestern University, points out "The black body, whether on the auction block, the American plantation, hanged from a lightpole as part of a lynching ritual, attacked by police dogs within the Civil Rights era, or staged as a 'criminal body' by contemporary law enforcement and judicial systems, is a body that has been forced into the public spotlight and given a compulsory visibility. It has been *made to be given to be seen*."[134] Inevitably, Gates's performance draws connotations to a long history of cultural oppression and slave labor. Crowds formed to watch, and collectors quickly learned his name. The chairs sold out, going for as much as $12,000 a piece.[135]

As his art began selling for steep prices to major collectors, Gates immediately began directing a large portion of the proceeds toward his renovations on the South Side. Gates used much of the profits from the shoeshine stands to renovate his candy store. He replaced its floors with burnished wood lanes from a defunct bowling alley and its walls with green chalkboards from a closed elementary school. He later filled this space with the Dr. Wax records he'd acquired and named it the *Listening House* (fig. 38).[136] Thus began the art world ecology that would come to define Gates's practice: buying and renovating properties, fashioning the refuse from that process into art, and then selling that art in order to direct proceeds to the purchase and renovation of more properties. Similar to how Joseph Beuys funded his interest in social sculpture through his art sales, Gates would continually leverage his artistic resources in order to

[134] Harvey Young, *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 12.
[135] Solway, "The Change Agent," 22, 97-101.
[136] Ibid.

achieve cultural and economic recovery in Grand Crossing. Gates now owns nine properties in his local community.

A Site for Happenings and Social Sculpture

Gates eventually invited his friends and neighbors to experience the spaces he'd created. Offering up his collections of books, slides, and records for their enjoyment and research, Gates framed these spaces as cultural institutions designed to inspire his neighbors.[137] Then after opening these spaces to the public at appointed hours, what started as a project that primarily benefited the local community, also became a gathering place for artists, collectors, gallery owners, students, curators, and critics from around the world.[138] Gates began hosting dinners, performances, listening parties, and classes in these spaces, and in 2011, he set up a nonprofit called the Rebuild Foundation, to oversee their official programming eventually hiring Jeffreen Hayes, former curator of the Birmingham Museum of Art, to lead these initiatives.[139]

Gates now describes himself in terms of fifteen corporations. As chairman of the Rebuild Foundation, he leads a 501(c)(3), which due to its charitable and educational nature is exempt from federal income taxes. This legal framework allows Gates to be "generous but without ever having to put yourself on the front line. A corporation allows me to buy one house with one corporation, and another house with another corporation, and so on, and so I become fifteen Theasters plus Theaster Gates Studio."[140] In addition to a tax shelter, the non-profit organization also affords the Dorchester a generous amount of creative freedom. At present, the space has no board of directors to answer to or quotas to meet in terms of programming. Gates describes the

[137] Colapinto, "The Real-Estate Artist," 24-31.
[138] Ibid.
[139] Ibid.
[140] Theaster Gates, "The Artist Corporation and Collective," *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, no. 34 (Spring 2014): 78.

Dorchester as a space "where we do what we can when we can afford it."[141] He's also unabashedly stated that the Dorchester in essence "had to be privately owned space so that people couldn't tell us what the fuck we could do."[142]

The Dorchester now offers multi-generational community programming ranging from youth art-making activities and community service days to backyard gardening and communal neighborhood dinners. With the help of his collaborators Gates also hires and trains local laborers almost exclusively to work on his renovation projects as opposed to hiring crews from outside the area.[143] Many of these men, including one ex-convict, were rescued from unemployment.[144] As stewards of Gates's cultural projects, they've found new purpose in the artist's revitalizing mission. In much the same fashion described by Joseph Beuys in his theory of social sculpture, Gates provides them an opportunity to realize their creative potential.

Gates also orchestrates interactions at the Dorchester in ways that recall his early exhibitions. As in a *Plate Convergence*, communal meals at the Dorchester draw a diverse array of diners fostering spontaneous social interaction. Meals are often served using Gates's Japanese-style wares, and their hosting within the elevated space of the Dorchester enables attendees to think carefully about critical exchanges and what can be achieved at mealtime. This provision of materials that draws participants' attention to the potential of a seemingly mundane daily ritual clearly recalls the work of Allan Kaprow in his creation of happenings.

Much like Allan Kaprow's use of carefully considered but loosely prescribed instructions in his creation of happenings, Gates has been very intentional about organizing the framework through which a great variety of artful events might occur at the Dorchester. For his *18*

[141] Gates, Linden, and Linden, "Theaster Gates: Dorchester Project."
[142] Gates, "The Artist Corporation and Collective," 79.
[143] Copeland, "Dark Mirrors," 227.
[144] Viveros-Faune, "Theaster Gates," 71.

Happenings in 6 Parts, performed in 1959, Kaprow once gave precise instructions to participants, hoping that this would enable them to carry out actions of "a strict nature, where the freedoms were carefully limited to certain parameters of time and space."[145] Eventually, however, Kaprow came to value more open-ended results preferring to establish "a continually active field whose outlines are very, very uncertain so that they blend in and out of daily life."[146] Similarly, Gates admitted that he and his collaborators have experimented with ways to alert visitors to a certain "expectation of how they are to be in the house."[147] Ultimately, however, his primary goal is setting up "a structure so that immersion can happen."[148]

Additionally, the spaces of the Dorchester are configured according to Gates's artistic vision. Recalling the unconventional elements of design that went into his early installations, the interior of the *Archive House* draws little influence from surrounding architecture, but shows the influence of Japanese design, which reflects Gates's interest in animism. Animist belief holds that non-human entities like trees and stone contain a spiritual essence, and much like how Beuys sought to instill materials with new meaning, Gates hopes that by nurturing salvaged building materials, he can enable them to embody new value and purpose at the Dorchester. He says that "I can care for this wood, the care I imbed is way more valuable than my ability to buy wood."[149] This is also an intentional demonstration of investment that counteracts the culture of demolition that attempts to solve problems like drug dens with razed buildings on the South Side.[150]

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[145] Allan Kaprow, "Richard Kostelanetz in Conversation with Allan Kaprow" in *The Theatre of Mixed Means: An Introduction to Happenings, Kinetic Environments, and Other Mixed-Means Performances*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (New York: Dial Press, 1968), 109-110.
[146] Ibid., 109.
[147] Theaster Gates, interview by Jacqueline Stewart, "Embedded," in *Immersive Life Practices*, ed. Daniel Tucker (Chicago: The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 2014), 150.
[148] Ibid., 152.
[149] Gates, Linden, and Linden, "Theaster Gates: Dorchester Project."
[150] Ibid.

The Dorchester also offers collections that are in reality curated and arranged by Gates himself. The assembly of records, books, and glass lanternslides are his to offer, and Gates invites artists and members of the local community to collaborate in responding to these collections in the creation of new artworks. In speaking of his adoption and application of the John H. Johnson library, Gates admitted that he "had to figure out how to make meaning with these things, these books."[151] He also describes the *Archive House* as a space dedicated "to the study of obsolete images."[152] It would seem that Gates's offering of these collections as creative material for future projects demonstrates his mission to find potential in rescued and repurposed resources recalling his greater charge, to reinvigorate Grand Crossing through cultural activity.

The Dorchester's collection of artful gestures educates audiences on the construction of cultural space in their community and their ability to affect society at large. Gates's visitors find hope and creative energy in an otherwise underestimated situation. According to Gates's website, "by relocating these resources into a restored local space, a diverse audience is encouraged to access and use them for research, contemplation and performance material – enhancing both the edifying and creative function of a library while enabling an empowered sense of ownership for the community."[153] Recalling Kaprow's argument that lifelike art had the potential to reconnect participants with the "piecemeal reality" they so often took for granted,[154] Gates hopes visitors to the Dorchester will come away feeling a sense of ownership and identification with the space thereby reconnecting them with their community.

Gates's gift of creative resources recalls Beuys vision to provide all human beings with

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[151] Gates, "The Artist Corporation and Collective," 78.
[152] Theaster Gates quoted in Christian Viveros-Faune, "Theaster Gates," 71.
[153] Theaster Gates, "Dorchester Projects Library and Archive," *Theaster Gates*, accessed February 25, 2015, http://theastergates.com/section/193928_Dorchester_Projects_Library_and_Archive.html.
[154] Kaprow, "The Real Experiment, 1983," 206, 218.

access to opportunities that realize their creative potential. As Gates's website explains, the "Dorchester provides its neighbors and local youth the opportunity to perceive built and living environments as spaces worth constructing, exploring and critiquing. It empowers community members to engage in the movement of radical hospitality by physically transforming their surroundings and filling them with beautiful objects, diverse people and innovative ideas."[155] Gates provides the mechanism that sustains culturally edifying experiences, which will hopefully inspire renewal elsewhere. The Dorchester provides a space for interactions that leave the visitor feeling empowered to inhabit creative space and create it for themselves.

Gates may in a sense be creating what Carol Becker, scholar and Dean of Columbia University School of the Arts, calls a "microutopia." In her 2012 essay titled "Microutopias: Public Practice in the Public Sphere," Becker proposes that such experiments, "attempt to create physical manifestations of an ideal 'humanity' in an inhumane world."[156] In this case, the word utopia does not necessarily signify the qualities of Thomas More's fictional island society of "Utopia" from his 1516 book of the same title. Instead, Becker's utopia is any community intentionally organized by artists to foster ideal manifestations of humanity and thus a reasonable alternative to contemporary society.

Gates describes the Dorchester as a "utopian enterprise"[157] that lets things emerge from a

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[155] Theaster Gates, "Dorchester Projects," *Theaster Gates*, accessed February 25, 2015, http://theastergates.com/section/117693_Dorchester_Projects.html.
[156] Carol Becker, "Microutopias: Public Practice in the Public Sphere," in *Living As Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011*, ed. Nato Thompson (New York: Creative Time, 2012), 68.
[157] Chasing utopias has long been a theme in the history of modern art. Beginning in the nineteenth century when artists sought alternatives to society's increasing industrialization but also in the twentieth century and especially after World War I, artists pursued ideal harmony through abstraction and the possibility of social renewal through art and design. The pursuit of utopia in twentieth century avant-garde painting is particularly evident in the work of Wassily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian, and Paul Klee.

belief that "beautiful things can happen anywhere." As an artist and master provocateur, Gates fashions environments and circumstances under which these happenings take place. In reality, Gates considers much of what he does to be quite practical, tantamount to "planting flowers in dirt, which is often better than just dirt."[158] Though he denies being a "utopic individual," he admits that his practice creates moments of "utopic enterprise."[159] Thus, gathering people around his revitalizing mission and engaging them in his creative process allows Gates to exist as an "expanded individual . . . that both wants for himself and wants for the world."[160] In actuality Gates admits his decision to collectivize as once again pragmatic saying, "I just don't want to be alone on Dorchester."[161]

By establishing the Dorchester Projects, Gates may have intended to provide an alternative art space that counters many of the negative effects outlined by Dave Hickey in his critique of what he calls the "therapeutic institution." In his essay titled, "After the Great Tsunami: On Beauty and the Therapeutic Institution," Hickey compares the experience of a therapeutic institution to a sadomasochistic fantasy in which we, the viewer or participant

> . . . play a minor role in the master's narrative – the artist's tale – and celebrate his autonomous acts even as we are offhandedly victimized by the work's philosophical power and ruthless authority . . . What ever we get, we deserve – and what we get most prominently is ignored, disenfranchised, and instructed. Then we are told that it is "good" for us.[162]

The Dorchester seems to be pulling away from this "master's narrative" of art and culture and instead, offers programming that deeply engages the participant and keeps the needs of the local community in mind. By prompting visitors to consider both the importance of cultural

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[158] Gates, interview by Lilly Wei, "Theaster Gates: In the Studio with Lilly Wei," 126.
[159] Gates, "The Artist Corporation and Collective," 78.
[160] Ibid.
[161] Ibid.
[162] Dave Hickey, *The Invisible Dragon: Essays on Beauty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 66.

space in their community and their role in the creation of that space for themselves, the Dorchester may be characterized as "therapeutic" more along the lines of Kaprow's use of the term to describe lifelike art's ability "to reintegrate the piecemeal reality we take for granted. Not just intellectually, but directly, as experience. . . ."[163]

Gates's version of the therapeutic institution stages a critique of both the lack of cultural institutions on the South Side and the inability of its closest institutions to serve his community with what he believes they need, namely: self-empowerment through their own cultural material. By preserving and making accessible cultural artifacts that specifically speak to African American experience, i.e. the full run of both *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines and a record collection that predominately highlights the work of African American jazz, soul, R&B, and gospel musicians, Gates proposes that these items are culturally valuable and essential to his community's self-identification, empowerment, and enlightenment. As was highlighted in his early exhibitions, these elements of black culture do not normally figure as highlights in the "therapeutic institutions" that Hickey so heavily criticizes for their capacity to neuter the art object until its true meaning(s) speaks to no one.

Gates's transformation of the South Side shows no sign of slowing down anytime soon. A logical concern may be the wholesale gentrification of this once culturally underrepresented neighborhood. To this Gates responds, "It would even be fine [with me] if in five years, maybe because of me, the whole thing is lily white . . . gentrification won't need my approval or disapproval."[164] Though he believes that Chicago has an abundance of more profitable real estate to keep his neighborhood from being gentrified anytime soon, Gates's lack of concern is still a

[163] Kaprow, "The Real Experiment, 1983," 206.
[164] Gates, interview by Lilly Wei, "Theaster Gates: In the Studio with Lilly Wei," 126.

bit disconcerting. If the Dorchester Projects can no longer serve the community for which it was intended, how do we assess the project in social and critical terms?

Gates feels that it's important to remember that it was due to the forces of gentrification that he was able to begin work at 6901 and 6916 Dorchester in the first place. Poor banking policies had effectively moved people out and other people in.[165] He also acknowledges that many of the buildings he's recently purchased weren't even owned by locals. Wealthy outsiders were in a sense holding these buildings hostage, waiting sometimes years for a profitable moment to sell or invest in their development.[166] Through his practice, Gates proposes an alternative to the sort of renewal that develops according to outside interests and maintains the accumulation of profit as its highest priority. Instead, he's created a model for reinvestment that enlists the neighborhood in its own reactivation.[167]

Although the Dorchester engages Gates in a sort of "politics of staying," he admits that he wasn't born there and so his position in Grand Crossing is somewhat arbitrary.[168] Though he doesn't have plans to leave anytime soon, he could pick up and go at any time. If in a few years he finds himself surrounded with new neighbors, he might consider leaving. In this case, he thinks, "There will be nothing left for me to do here if everyone is lily-white and everyone's garden is as pretty as mine."[169] At that point he may move on, or work with the neighborhood to "invite black people back. You force what's new to deal with what's old."[170]

The fact remains that at the height of the housing crisis in 2008, nearly 40% of the houses in Gates's neighborhood were vacated. Tenants and owners either moved away or were evicted

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[165] Ibid.
[166] Gates, Linden, and Linden, "Theaster Gates: Dorchester Project."
[167] Ibid.
[168] Gates, interview by Lilly Wei, "Theaster Gates: In the Studio with Lilly Wei," 126.
[169] Gates, interview by Lilly Wei, "Theaster Gates: In the Studio with Lilly Wei," 126.
[170] Ibid.

because they could no longer pay their mortgages.[171] Rather than be faced with the still deadness of another abandoned building or empty lot, the community of Grand Crossing is now welcome to enter the Dorchester, a culturally vibrant space that is full of possibility. The Dorchester is an anchor of prosperity and growth in an otherwise downtrodden area. It offers culturally rich space with the intention to empower attendees to think critically about their experience within its curated spaces as well as the circumstances of their built environment.

Although the Dorchester has the capability to impart concrete effects within the local community, its greatest resonance may be as a symbolic gesture and artwork that both manifests and communicates Gates's mission to spur neighborhood revitalization through creative enterprise. Gates's website admits that "the aesthetic of Gates' Dorchester Projects is both practical and poetic. . . . Within this multi-functional and growing space, community-driven initiatives and experiences foster neighborhood revitalization and serve as a model for greater cultural and socioeconomic renewal."[172]

Gates's communal space fosters practical application, but the results are poetic and open-ended. The Dorchester aims to empower its audiences through community building and cultural enrichment, but the space is not rigidly programmed. The Dorchester's greatest success is its existence as the most extensive physical manifestation of Gates's model for renewal through cultural enterprise. Although he believes that the Dorchester has had a measurable effect on the surrounding neighborhood, Gates also admits that his intervention's true impact has been largely symbolic.[173] The success of the Dorchester proves the viability of Gates's revitalizing mission, but the artist also acknowledges that greater manifestations may be developed elsewhere. Gates

[171] Gustorf, "Theaster Gates: Inner City Blues."
[172] Gates, "Dorchester Projects."
[173] Colapinto, "The Real-Estate Artist," 24-31.

is hopeful that people will do it better in their own neighborhoods.[174]

CONCLUSION

Gates's primary goal with the Dorchester is to provide an experimental space that enables audiences to create and participate in transformative and mostly un-choreographed arts-oriented experiences that enrich the local community while improving their relationships with one another and empowering them to realize their ability to affect society at large. Activities at the Dorchester recall the writings of Allan Kaprow and his creation of happenings in the late 1950s and early 60s. Much like Gates's projects, Kaprow's planned but loosely scripted events left room for improvisation while eliminating the boundary between the audience and the artwork. Gates's work also aligns well with that of Joseph Beuys, who coined the term "social sculpture" to describe art's potential to positively change the world through human interaction.

Recalling the work of these seminal figures, Gates first used elements of performance in his early exhibitions in order to fabricate, reframe, and eventually make history through carefully calibrated opportunities for cultural exchange. He now uses similar methods at the Dorchester, where activities draw participants' attention to the critical exchanges that occur in everyday life and the lasting impact that may be achieved through collective action. Whether through the cultivation of a community garden, the sharing of a meal, or the making of an artwork, visitors to the Dorchester learn to take an active role in the creation of culturally enriched space. Blurring the boundary between art and life, Gates's work utilizes performance and the transformative power of shared experience to deeply affect his audience and promote social change.

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[174] Theaster Gates, "Holding Court, 2012, part 3," Youtube video, 54:06, performance recorded for the exhibition "Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art" organized by The Studio Museum in Harlem, posted by The Studio Museum in Harlem, April 8, 2014, accessed February 25, 2015. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S1XzvcuPmCc.

Figure 1
Theaster Gates, *Dorchester Projects: Archive House* and *Listening House*, Chicago, IL, 2012
Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Sarah Poole
Reproduced from http://rebuild-foundation.org/chicago/

Figure 2
Theaster Gates, *Potluck Dinner at the Dorchester Projects*, Chicago, IL, 2011
Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Mike St. John
Reproduced from http://blogs.colum.edu/marginalia/2011/12/26/critical-encounters-potluck-part-3-dorchester-project-and-conclusions/

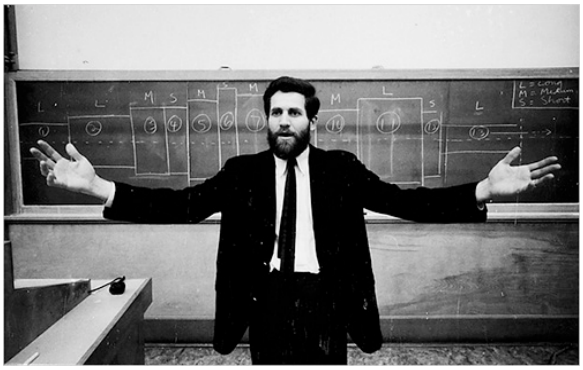

Figure 3
Allan Kaprow explaining *Household* (detail), photographer unknown
Courtesy of the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, CA
Reproduced from http://visarts.ucsd.edu/faculty/allan-kaprow

Figure 4
Allan Kaprow, *Fluids*, Beverly Hills, CA, 1963
Courtesy of Tony Shafrezi Gallery, New York, NY. Photo: Dennis Hopper
Reproduced from http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/blogs/performance-art-101-happening-allan-kaprow

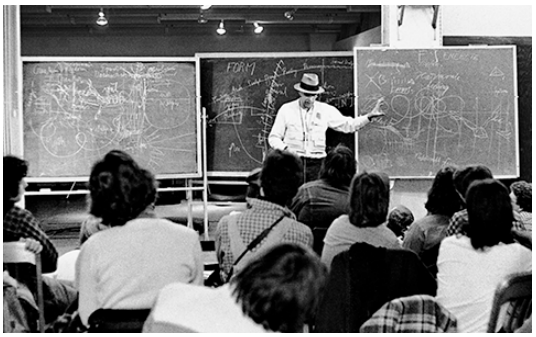

Figure 5
Joseph Beuys lecturing at the School of the Art Institute, Chicago, IL, 1974
Courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago. Photo: Klaus Staeck and Gerhard Steidl
Reproduced from http://www.artic.edu/exhibition/joseph-beuys-untitled-sun-state

Figure 6
Theaster Gates, *See, Sit, Sup, Sing: Holding Court*, performance, Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, Houston, TX, 2012
Courtesy of the artist and Contemporary Arts Museum Houston. Photo: Max Fields
Reproduced from http://www.studiomuseum.org/event-calendar/event/theaster-gates-2014-01-16

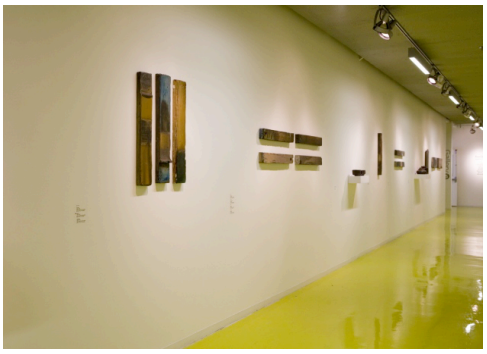

Figure 7
Theaster Gates, “Plate Convergence,” installation view, Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago, IL, 2007
Courtesy of the artist
Reproduced from http://theastergates.com/artwork/215612_Yamaguchi_Slabs.html

Figure 8
Rikrit Tiravanija, *Pad Thai*, performance, 303 Gallery, New York, NY, 1992
Courtesy of Gavin Brown’s Enterprise, New York, NY
Reproduced from http://www.columbia.edu/cu/news/04/11/hugo_boss.html

Figure 9
Alison Knowles, *Identical Lunch*, performance, Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, 2011
Courtesy of the artist and the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photo: Yi-Chun Wu
Reproduced from http://www.moma.org/visit/calendar/exhibitions/1126

Figure 10
Theaster Gates, *Yamaguchi Wares*, "Plate Convergence," installation view, Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago, IL, 2007
Clay, wood fire, and oxides
Photo: Joan (?)
Reproduced from https://www.flickr.com/photos/mojosmom/1431149258/

Figure 11
Theaster Gates, *Soul Food Pavilion*, Dorchester Projects, Chicago, IL, 2012
Courtesy of the Smart Museum of Art, Chicago, IL
Reproduced from https://vimeo.com/37407879

Figure 12
Andrea Fraser, still from *Museum Highlights: A Gallery Talk*, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, PA, 1989
Video, approximately 29 minutes
Collection the artist. Courtesy the artist and the Museum of Modern Art, New York
Reproduced from
http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/1999/muse/artist_pages/fraser_highlights1.html

Figure 13
Theaster Gates, *Soul Food Starter Kit for Five*, 2012
Oak, brass, cedar, stoneware and glazes, 60 x 30 x 20 in.
Courtesy of the artist and Kavi Gupta Gallery, Berlin | Chicago
Reproduced from http://kavigupta.com/artist/theastergates

Figure 14
Dave Drake, Storage jar, 1858
Made at the Lewis J. Miles Factory, Edgefield District, South Carolina
Stoneware with alkaline (ash) glaze
25 5/8 in. (height)
Collection of Arthur F. and Ester Goldberg. Photo: Gavin Ashworth
Reproduced from http://blog.mam.org/2010/11/02/if-you-had-15-words-to-last-forever-what-would-you%C2%A0say/

Figure 15
Theaster Gates, *Apostle II*, 2010
Composite gold on plaster, 48 x 20 in.
Courtesy of the artist and Kavi Gupta Gallery, Berlin | Chicago
Reproduced from http://kavigupta.com/exhibition/107/summer/works

Figure 16
Theaster Gates, “To Speculate Darkly: Theaster Gates and Dave the Potter,” installation view, Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee, WI, 2010
Courtesy of the Chipstone Foundation. Photo: Jim Wildman
Reproduced from
http://www.chipstone.org/html/SpecialProjects/SpecDarkly/Pages/07SpecDarkly.html

Figure 17
Theaster Gates, “To Speculate Darkly: Theaster Gates and Dave the Potter,” installation view, Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee, WI, 2010
Courtesy of the artist and Kavi Gupta Gallery, Berlin | Chicago
Reproduced from http://www.uchicago.edu/features/20111025_gates/

Figure 18
Theaster Gates, “To Speculate Darkly,” performance, Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee, WI, 2010
Courtesy of the artist and Kavi Gupta Gallery, Berlin | Chicago
Reproduced from http://www.artslant.com/ny/articles/show/16732

Figure 19
Theaster Gates, “To Speculate Darkly: Theaster Gates and Dave the Potter,” installation view, Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee, WI, 2010
Courtesy of the Chipstone Foundation. Photo: Jim Wildman
Reproduced from
http://www.chipstone.org/html/SpecialProjects/SpecDarkly/Pages/10SpecDarkly.html

Figure 20
Theaster Gates, “To Speculate Darkly: Theaster Gates and Dave the Potter,” installation view, Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee, WI, 2010
Courtesy of the Chipstone Foundation. Photo: Jim Wildman
Reproduced from
http://www.chipstone.org/html/SpecialProjects/SpecDarkly/Pages/06SpecDarklyA.html

Figure 21
Fred Wilson, “Mining the Museum,” installation view, Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore, MD, 1992
Courtesy of the Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore, MD
Reproduced from http://www.mdhs.org/digitalimage/installation-view-metalwork

Figure 22
Glenn Ligon, *To Disembark*, 1993, "AMERICA," installation view, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY, 2011
Courtesy of NPR
Reproduced from http://www.wbur.org/npr/136022514/glenn-ligon-reframes-history-in-the-art-of-america

Figure 23
Theaster Gates, "My Labor Is My Protest," installation view, White Cube Gallery, London, UK, 2012
Courtesy of the artist and White Cube Gallery, London. Photo: Ben Westoby
Reproduced from
http://whitecube.com/exhibitions/theaster_gates_my_labor_is_my_protest_bermondsey_2012/

Figure 24
Theaster Gates, *Gees American*, 2012
Decommissioned fire hoses, 60 x 95 x 3 1/2 in.
Courtesy of the artist and White Cube Gallery, London. Photo: Ben Westoby
Reproduced from
http://whitecube.com/exhibitions/theaster_gates_my_labor_is_my_protest_bermondsey_2012/

Figure 25
Theaster Gates, “My Labor Is My Protest,” installation view, White Cube Gallery, London, UK, 2012
Courtesy of the artist and White Cube Gallery, London. Photo: Ben Westoby
Reproduced from
http://whitecube.com/exhibitions/theaster_gates_my_labor_is_my_protest_bermondsey_2012/

Figure 26
Theaster Gates, “My Labor Is My Protest,” installation view, White Cube Gallery, London, UK, 2012
Courtesy of the artist and White Cube Gallery, London. Photo: Ben Westoby
Reproduced from
http://whitecube.com/exhibitions/theaster_gates_my_labor_is_my_protest_bermondsey_2012/

Figure 27
Theaster Gates, “My Labor Is My Protest,” installation view, White Cube Gallery, London, UK, 2012
Courtesy of the artist and White Cube Gallery, London. Photo: Ben Westoby
Reproduced from http://theastergates.com/artwork/2819857_South_Gallery_I.html

Figure 28
Theaster Gates, exterior of former Stony Island State Savings Bank, Chicago, IL, 2012
Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Sara Pooley
Reproduced from
http://theastergates.com/artwork/3368896_Stony_Island_Arts_Bank_Exterior_January.html

Figure 29
Theaster Gates, "Theaster Gates: The Listening Room," installation view, Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, WA, 2012
Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Robert Wade
Reproduced from
http://theastergates.com/section/382229_Listening_House_Chicago_Listening_Room.html

Figure 30
Theaster Gates, "Theaster Gates: The Listening Room," installation view, Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, WA, 2012
Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Robert Wade
Reproduced from
http://theastergates.com/section/382229_Listening_House_Chicago_Listening_Room.html

Figure 31
Theaster Gates, “Theaster Gates: The Listening Room,” installation view, Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, WA, 2012
Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Robert Wade
Reproduced from
http://theastergates.com/section/382229_Listening_House_Chicago_Listening_Room.html

Figure 32
Theaster Gates, “Theaster Gates: The Listening Room,” installation view, Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, WA, 2012
Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Robert Wade
Reproduced from
http://theastergates.com/section/382229_Listening_House_Chicago_Listening_Room.html

Figure 33
Theaster Gate, “Soul Manufacturing Corporation,” installation view, Locust Projects, Miami, FL, 2012
Reproduced from http://www.e-flux.com/journal/“mimesis-of-the-hardened-and-alienated”-social-practice-as-business-model/

Figure 34
Theaster Gates, “Soul Manufacturing Corporation,” installation view, Whitechapel Gallery, London, UK, 2013
Courtesy of the artist and White Cube Gallery, London. Photo: Ben Westoby
Reproduced from http://www.thespiritofutopia.org/theaster-gates

Figure 35
Theaster Gates, “Soul Manufacturing Corporation,” installation view, Whitechapel Gallery, London, UK, 2013
Courtesy of the artist and Whitechapel Gallery, London. Photo: Dan Weill
Reproduced from http://www.thespiritofutopia.org/theaster-gates

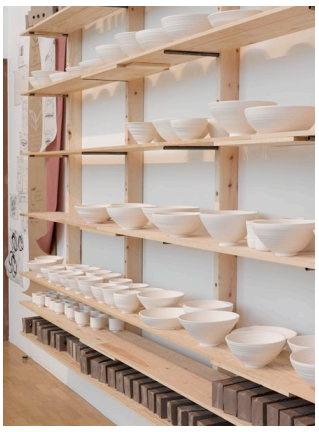

Figure 36
Theaster Gates, “Soul Manufacturing Corporation,” installation view, Whitechapel Gallery, London, UK, 2013
Courtesy of the artist and White Cube Gallery, London. Photo: Ben Westoby
Reproduced from http://www.thespiritofutopia.org/theaster-gates

Figure 37
Theaster Gates, *Dorchester Projects: Archive House* (Library), Chicago, IL, 2006-ongoing
Courtesy of *Bloomberg Business*. Photo: James S. Russell
Reproduced from http://www.bloomberg.com/slideshow/2012-12-17/theaster-gates.html#slide6

Figure 38
Theaster Gates, *Dorchester Projects: Archive House* (Slide Library), Chicago, IL, 2006-ongoing
Courtesy of the artist and Kavi Gupta Gallery, Berlin | Chicago
Reproduced in Lilly Wei, "Theaster Gates: In the Studio with Lilly Wei," *Art in America* 99, no. 11 (December 2011): 122.

Figure 38
Theaster Gates, *Shoeshine Stands*, 2010
Wood, upholstery and metal
Courtesy of the artist and Kavi Gupta Gallery, Berlin | Chicago
Reproduced from http://kavigupta.com/exhibition/72/thearmoryshow2010/works

Figure 39
Theaster Gates, *Dorchester Projects: Listening House,* Chicago, IL, 2008-ongoing
Reproduced from https://www.frieze.com/issue/article/designs-for-life/

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VITA

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Education	Bachelor of Fine Arts, Emphasis in Art History, Theory, and Criticism, The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 2009
	Master of Arts, Art History, Texas Christian University, 2015
Fellowships and Awards	Tuition Stipend Award, Texas Christian University, 2013-2015
	Kimbell Fellowship, Texas Christian University 2013-2015
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Professional Experience	Graduate Student Lectureship, Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Fall 2014
	ArtTable Graduate Curatorial Internship, Bass Museum of Art, Summer 2014
	Curatorial Administrative Assistant, Dallas Museum of Art, May 2010-August 2013
	Gallery Internship, Dunn and Brown Contemporary, September 2009-May 2010
	Curatorial Internship, Pollock Gallery, Meadows School of the Arts, Southern Methodist University, August 2009-May 2010
	Curatorial Internship, Contemporary Art and Special Projects, Museum of Fine Arts Houston, Summer 2009
	Curatorial Internship, American Art, Art Institute of Chicago, Spring 2009
	Administrative Internship and Education Coordinator, Chicago Artists Coalition, May-October 2008

Curatorial Internship, Department of Cultural Affairs,
City of Chicago, January-August 2008

Microscopy and Art Authentication Internship,
McCrone Associates, Summer 2006

Volunteer Experience

Gallery Committee Member,
Texas Christian University, the Art Galleries at TCU,
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Exhibition/Exhibition Studies Committee Member,
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Abstract

Since 2006, Theaster Gates has been renovating and repurposing abandoned buildings in the poor and predominately African American community of Grand Crossing on Chicago's South Side. Gates's spaces, now collectively known as the Dorchester Projects, act as cultural centers in an area that, since the 1960s, has experienced a long history of disinvestment especially in terms of cultural resources. Today, the Dorchester includes a library, slide archive and soul food kitchen and is host to vast archives of art history glass lanternslides, vinyl records, and art and architecture books. Gates enlists artists and members of the local community to collaborate in the creation of these revitalized spaces. Their programming and design are guided both by the artist's vision and the needs of the local community.

The Dorchester offers a variety of programming ranging from artist residencies, to community service days, art-making workshops, and backyard barbecues. Whether through the cultivation of a community garden, the sharing of a meal, or the making of an artwork, visitors learn to take an active role in the creation of cultural space in Grand Crossing. The framing of events at the Dorchester is reminiscent of writings by Allan Kaprow on his creation of Happenings in the late 1950s and early 60s. Much like Gates's projects, Kaprow's planned but loosely scripted events left room for improvisation while eliminating the boundary between the audience and the artwork. Gates's work also compares well to that of Joseph Beuys who first coined the term "social sculpture," to describe art's potential to positively change the world through human interaction.

In his early exhibitions, Gates began using elements of performance as a means to promote cultural exchange through shared experiences. An analysis of these early works as they relate to the history of performance art prepares us to discern Gates's accomplishments with the

Dorchester Projects. I intend to argue that Gates's primary goal is to provide an experimental arena that enables audiences to create and participate in transformative and largely un-choreographed arts-oriented experiences that enrich the local community and empower them to realize their effect upon society at large.