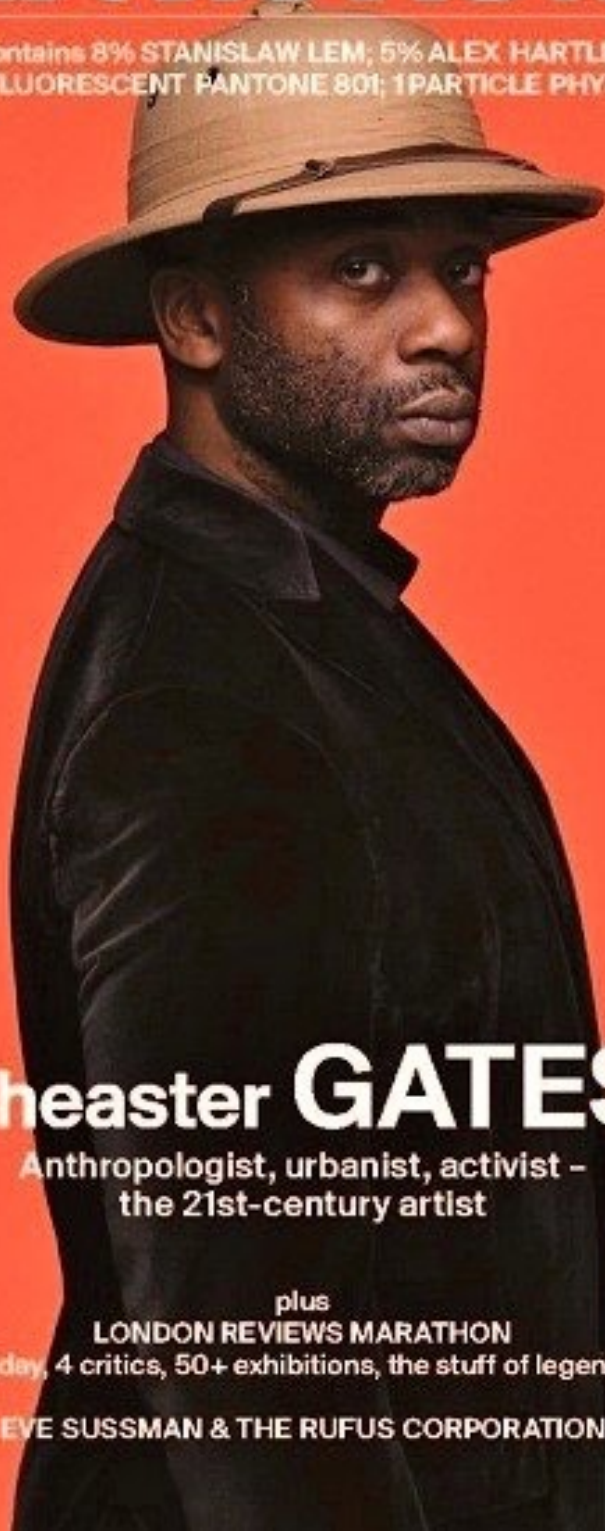


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Theaster GATES

Anthropologist, urbanist, activist -
the 21st-century artist

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EVE SUSSMAN & THE RUFUS CORPORATION

Theaster Gates

By Christian Viveros-Fauné



Theaster Gates. Photo: Tim Gutt

‘I’M NOT A SOCIAL WORKER. I DID STUDY URBAN PLANNING BECAUSE I KNEW THAT CITIES HAD PROBLEMS, AND BLACK PEOPLE IN CITIES WERE CONSIDERED THE PROBLEM’

he told one reporter. ‘I had as much zeal for the political and social as I did for God and the choir.’ In 1996 he graduated with a degree in ceramics and urban planning. A decade later – in a

Great art, according to the American poet Emily Dickinson, is what makes the hair on the back of your neck stand up. So it is with the relentlessly civic-minded performance, sculpture, installation and urban reclamation work of Theaster Gates. An artist whose unabashedly utopian yet eminently pragmatic activities make the word ‘radical’ sound as quaint as, say, ‘cultural studies’, Gates has laid daring zip lines across the canyonlike divide currently separating life and art. Today his regenerative practice is to art’s newfound idealism as Dylan’s Fender Telecaster was once to acoustic blues – it channels an electrifying new message about aesthetics, ethics and social change. Feel the stubble on your nape rising now?

Gates’s creative approach takes as much from the privileged precincts of contemporary art as it does from his own biography. Raised in rural Mississippi and Illinois, he joined the choir of Chicago’s New Cedar Grove Missionary Baptist Church when he was twelve years old. By age fourteen he was its director. In college Gates became immersed in politics: ‘The conversation of the choir seemed too narrow’,

bid to burrow deeper into his spirituality – Gates augmented his academic work with another interdisciplinary degree that also included religious studies.

Jobs followed that at once expanded and concentrated Gates’s eclectic resumé. He worked as an urbanist in Seattle for a Christian mission that ran a housing programme in poor neighbourhoods. He ran an arts education nonprofit centre, Little Black Pearl, in Chicago’s black community. He slogged as an arts planner for the Chicago Transit Authority, a position he found bureaucratic and limiting. Eventually Gates settled into a job at the University of Chicago as a coordinator of arts programming – all the while developing a wide-ranging practice that lassoed his disparate interests into what Republican hacks might call, in keeping with the bigoted derision aimed at America’s 44th President, ‘community organising’.



Cosmology of the Yard, 2010 (installation view, Whitney Biennial 2010, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York). Photo: Bill Orcutt

‘I’m not a social worker,’ Gates has said. ‘I did study urban planning because I knew that cities had problems, and black people in cities were considered the problem.’ Knowing full well that the principal ‘problem’ affecting black people is poverty, Gates immediately embraced artmaking with a rare and savvy sense of social responsibility. But an important question loomed: how to reflect on pressing social issues while avoiding what one US historian called ‘the

burden of representation'? For Gates – who is more concerned with what it means to be an artist in the world than what it signifies to be a black artist in America – the answer was clear. He would, in the guise of an artist-curator-activist, serve different kinds of communities as an artistic 'bridge'. Of the many bridges Gates has laid over the years, few prove as nervy or as emblematic as those he has spanned between the black church and the contemporary museum.

'No people come into possession of a culture without having paid a heavy price for it,' James Baldwin wrote. Over the course of a brief but important career, Gates has raised virtual cathedrals from this sentiment. Take, for example, his 2010 one-man exhibition at the Milwaukee Art Museum. There, Gates processioned a 250-person gospel choir he assembled from local churches through its galleries; they sang hymns the artist had scored as a response to poems written by a slave-era potter named Dave Drake. For his Whitney Biennial turn of the same year, Gates built a space that was part Buddhist temple and part minimalist hangout space – it hosted, among other collaborations, the artist's house band, the Black Monks of Mississippi, whose musical outpourings combine black spirituals with Zen chants. In a third instance, the artist gathered some 200 musicians and dancers to perform for 150 white academics at the University of Chicago. The performance was followed by a lecture the artist delivered himself. It was corrosively titled 'You Need Niggers?' It's fun to imagine the audience's strained eyeballs and lumpy throats.

Activities like these, however, pale before the achievements of the mother-of-all Theaster Gates enterprises, which the artist calls simply The Dorchester Projects. Begun in late 2006,

when Gates purchased and rehabbed an abandoned building on 69th and Dorchester Avenue, on Chicago's legendarily rough South Side, The Dorchester Projects was formulated as an evolving structure for a set of far-reaching artistic visions. Its chief mission, as defined by Gates and a team of architects and designers, was not merely to integrate life and art – after all, that claim has been made by Detroit car manufacturers for years – but to do so at a juncture where creativity might, for once, get a jump on commercial interests. That crossroads, Gates judged, exists in America's inner city, a place not just looked down on by real-estate developers and city planners, but also by the culture at large. Economically, socially, culturally and spiritually – if we understand art as spirituality in paint-spattered jeans – Gates instinctively knew that places

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that need but can't possibly afford culture today provide contemporary art with something it's been sorely lacking: purpose.



The Dorchester Projects, 2006–, interior, Prairie Avenue Bookstore Archive. Photos: Peter Skvara. Courtesy the artist and Kavi Gupta, Chicago & Berlin

Predictably, Gates turned the building on Dorchester Avenue into a haven for cultural activity. Dinners, conversations, performances, concerts and meetings followed – these included, among other happenings, choreographed meals the artist has called Plate Convergences – peopled with folks from every walk of life. The success of this first experiment in ‘real-estate art’ led, in quick order, to the renovation of two more structures on the block. Largely financed by the sale of artworks Gates made from materials repurposed from the buildings’ demolitions – these include framed bits of cord that invoke the baptism by firehose of civil rights protesters in the 1960s, as well as thronelike shoeshine chairs the artist deploys in abrasive performances about race relations – a template emerged for what is clearly an expandable model of entrepreneurial, socially conscious art. Capacious and mobile enough to encompass other neighbourhoods and cities, Gates’s signature artwork is easily imagined being meaningfully dropped down inside one of Europe’s major biennials.

In creating an artist's redevelopment scheme fed by an entrepreneur's moxie, Gates has successfully finessed both the business of real estate and what Andy Warhol once called, in an age far more innocent than ours, 'business art'. A powerful argument for taking advantage of market conditions as well as municipal and federal housing grants – and further still, the art world's reptilian guilt towards all things racially charged – Gates has found a breach in the system that allows him (and, therefore, others) to use art's freedom and leverage to break through haute culture's social cliquishness and runaway commodification. Where money will not go in Chicago's blighted inner city, Gates's project has boldly ventured. Revitalisation –

artistic, commercial and psychic – has, in this fundamentally replicable case, trumped the usual capitalist calculus of risk and return.

'When I first moved to 69th and Dorchester, people were like, "You need a dog and a gun,"' Gates has said. 'There was such a stigma. And I began to wonder, "What can I do to destigmatise the place?'" Besides

GATES MAKES A POWERFUL ARGUMENT FOR TAKING ADVANTAGE OF MARKET CONDITIONS AS WELL AS MUNICIPAL AND FEDERAL HOUSING GRANTS – AND FURTHER STILL, THE ARTWORLD'S REPTILIAN GUILT TOWARDS ALL THINGS RACIALLY CHARGED

buying up buildings and converting them into miniature cultural institutions (he filled one building with 14,000 volumes on architecture and design from a nearby bookshop that went out of business, and plans to turn another into a centre dedicated 'to the study of obsolete images'), Gates has trained and employed local folk to do the construction once executed by crews from outside the area. Today they constitute his main artistic workforce: a group made up of five men, including an ex-convict, who assist on the artist's proliferating projects. Rescued from unemployment and made stewards of new cultural treasure, these individuals are a testament to the power of contemporary art reimagined from the ground up. Their persons, as much as Theaster Gates's bold new mission, signal the way out from a commercial blueprint of dead-end streets.

[Read Theaster Gates's Power 100 profile.](#)

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