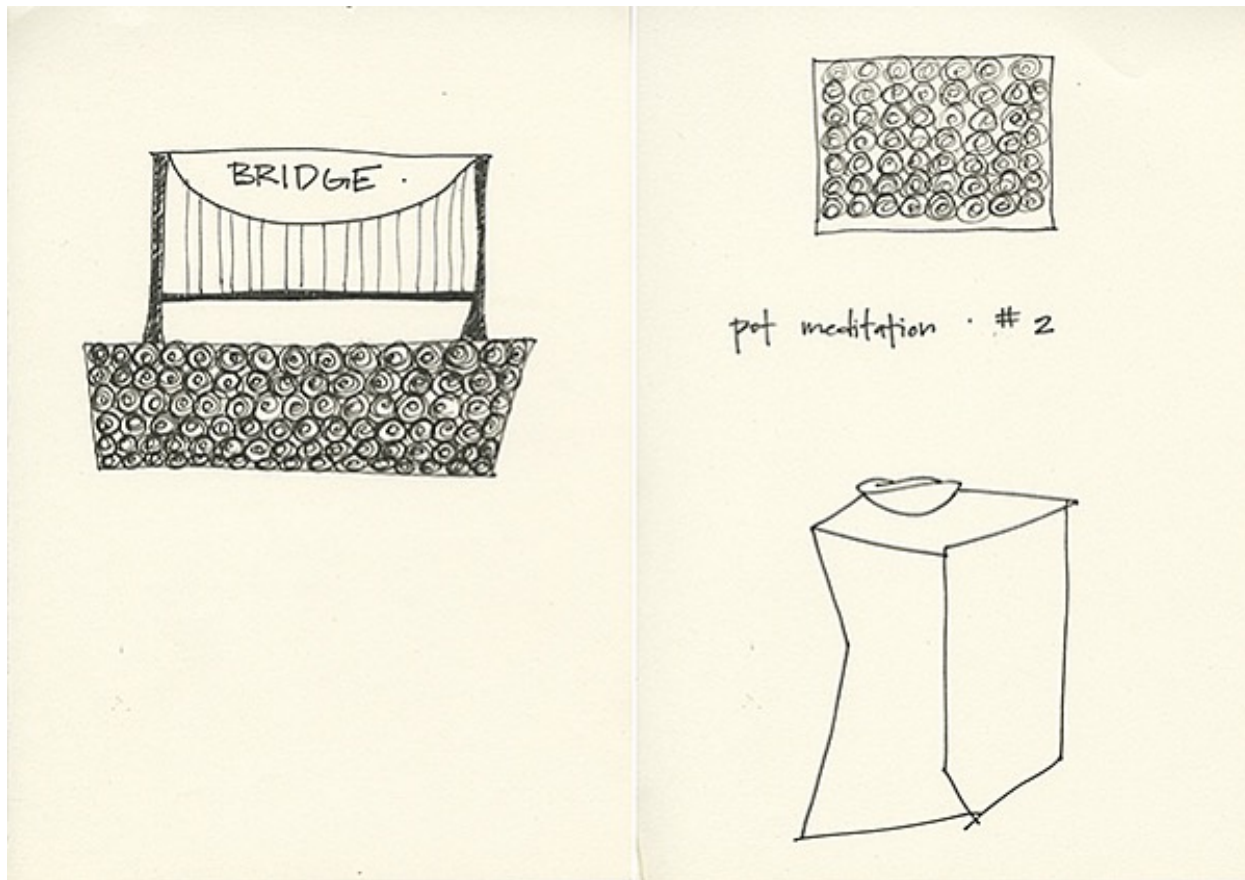


ARTFORUM

Theaster Gates

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Pages from Theaster Gates's notebooks, 2016.

Known for his performances, his sculptures, and his large-scale, site-specific building reclamation projects in Chicago—such as the ambitious Stony Island Arts Bank, which serves to bolster culture in an underinvested neighborhood—Theaster Gates has also sustained a drawing practice throughout his career. Powerful works in their own right, his drawings are profoundly connected to every facet of Gates's practice. He discusses that work here, as well as his way of conceiving exhibitions and his vision for a future art school. "Black Archive," a solo exhibition of Gates's work, is on view at Kunsthaus Bregenz in Austria through June 26, 2016. He will also have two more solo exhibitions open this summer: at the Fondazione Prada in Milan, from July 8 through September 26, 2016, and at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto, from July 21 through October 30, 2016.

I OFTEN HAVE a clear idea of the shape or structure of an artwork. I didn't learn how to sketch; I didn't learn how to draw. In a way, my notebook is just the place where I'm trying to communicate ideas to myself, almost recording them so I can remember that thought and can go back to it in three dimensions. What happens is a definitive stroke.

For instance, I initially saw the Stony Island Arts Bank as a drawing. Other people could see only the detritus and the water in the basement. But I can simply erase that stuff. Once it's a drawing I can erase the detritus, erase the massing, because I feel like I have such a good sense of the three-dimensional. I am not overwhelmed by scale.

The blank page is a kind of metaphysics—a site where I can see whether I can reduce a project to the size of my page and whether it makes sense there. In a drawing I can work out the kinks of a work in micromaneuvers, and then it feels possible, in a way. I'm engaged in this process often; sometimes it takes a long time for me to work out something like the approach of a building or its facade or a six-thousand-square-foot gallery. Once I have that sense, then I can say to myself: Oh, if I put a line here, that divides the room in half. If I put a wall there, it divides it into one third and two thirds. If I put these two walls, it can create the eighths of a room, and then seven eighths of the room, and then I divide the seven eighths in half. Then all of a sudden I'm able to really create a world on the page. On paper I am already worlding. The page sets the parameters of the world, but one needs to decide the world's scale, so as I am loading content into the page, I can visualize a block, or think about a building, or design a plinth, and they can all have the same amount of space on the page. Through drawing, one can imagine a city. I like that. Working it out on paper first makes me believe that I can do it.

I find it so interesting that painters use the phrase “mark-making” and world leaders ask what mark will you make on the world. Mark-making in both senses brings up the question of the relationship between one's individual intentionality, and the context—say, a canvas and a brush—or a political office wherein one could make a mark on the world. An industrialist might make a mark on the world. Or a graffiti artist might make a mark on the world. So it depends on what kind of marks you're invested in—what kind of mark-making you're trying to do.

My future of art is different from what art is today. When I build my school, I'm going to teach people that whatever is taught at the MFA level is akin to elementary school. In elementary school students will learn replica, mise-en-scène, and representation. In middle school, they will learn about reflexivity, reproducibility, reaction, and reflection. In high school, students will learn to see the invisible, to understand the philosophies of the invisible, will learn physics and religion. As undergraduates, my future pupils will learn transgression, systems of power, how to be a system of power, and how to harness systems of power. They will learn how to mine for gold, dig for diamonds. They learn how to fish. In graduate school, students will learn how to levitate. Until we're willing to think about the complexities, until we're willing to think about the human capacity to understand complex symbols and thought forms and the invisible, we will think that murals alone can solve social problems. I would never make a mural to solve a social problem. It takes money to solve social problems; it takes hard conversations and political power—artists should also sculpt those things.

— As told to Zachary Cahill