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Chicago's Opportunity Artist

By BEN AUSTEN DEC. 20, 2013



Theaster Gates with employees and artists in his pottery studio, inside a converted beer warehouse in Chicago. Credit Stephen Wilkes for The New York Times

Six blocks from where I grew up, on Chicago's South Side, the artist Theaster Gates showed me a neo-Classical ruin, a Prohibition-era bank shuttered for 33 years that I only ever registered vaguely as a part of the area's enduring blight. "That's my bank," he announced with a flourish, pointing proudly to its glazed terra cotta and its ornamental eaves. Maybe it requires an artist to picture the possibilities in such a wreck, or a real estate developer to envision its promise. Gates,

40, is both at the same time, an enormous dreamer canny enough to make his outlandish ideas for the neighborhood a reality. When the bank was days from demolition, Gates spoke with Mayor Rahm Emanuel, whose brother, Ari, owns several Gates pieces; the city agreed to sell the abandoned building to Gates for \$1, with the stipulation that he come up with the \$3.7 million necessary for its renovation. A portion of that money, Gates devised, would be made from the bank's original marble, which he cut into individual "bond certificates" engraved with an image of the building, his signature and the words "In ART We Trust." He created 100 tablet-size bonds, selling them for \$5,000 apiece; larger slabs, as weighty as tombstones, went for \$50,000. Because they're works of art, Gates told me, the marble will actually increase in value, functioning like real bonds. "So, yeah, it's a bank! The bank should continue to make currency. I want it to have a banking function."

Gates was trained as a potter, but his artistic practice includes, among many things, sculpture, musical performance, installation and something that has been called large-scale urban intervention. Around the corner from the bank, on the 6900 block of South Dorchester Avenue, he bought and restored a half-dozen other vacant properties as part of what has become his Dorchester Projects. He filled one building with 14,000 volumes of art and architecture books from a closed city bookstore and 60,000 19th- and early-20th-century glass lantern slides that the University of Chicago no longer wanted. He refitted the building with wood from a former North Side bowling alley, the varying grains and textures of the exterior boards composing a dramatic tapestry. Inside the house next door, he put all the vinyl LPs from Dr. Wax, a South Side record store that went out of business. Another property became home to the Black Cinema House, a venue Gates dreamed up for movie screenings, discussions and neighborhood film classes. Young, creative people and longtime inhabitants of the area live in other Dorchester Projects housing; Gates lives on the block as well.

When Gates was growing up on Chicago's West Side, the youngest of nine siblings, the others all girls, his mother wanted him to be a pastor. He'd been directing the choir at their storefront Baptist church since age 13 and displayed the force of personality that inspires devotion in others. Gates is a stocky 5 foot 7, with a cleanly shaved head, an emergent beard fringed in white and large eyes deeply curtained in a way that imparts what seems a fitting mystique. Speaking with him, you get the impression that he is thinking several moves ahead, assessing how someone fits into whatever grand art project he's inventing. But he has the gift to simultaneously engage fully with whomever he is with. Before we left Dorchester to tour the bank, he noticed that a garden in front of one of his buildings was in disarray.

“Hey, Miss Lady! Amira! Amonta!” he shouted. “Have y’all been going in my yard and throwing my pebbles?” An 8-year-old in braided pigtails emerged from the house next door, gaping wide-eyed on her porch.

“That wasn’t me,” she said.

“I believe you, Amira.”

“I know who it was. Those little boys were throwing them rocks.”



Inside the former Stony Island State Savings Bank, which is being renovated by Gates. Credit Stephen Wilkes for The New York Times

Scott Rothkopf, the curator and associate director of programs at the Whitney Museum of American Art, says that the blurring of the line between artwork and more community-based participatory projects is not radically new or even what’s especially fascinating about Gates. “What’s far more interesting,” he says, “is what compels someone known for making art to want to do this and how savvy they have to be to get it done and what sort of difference it makes.” Gates sometimes describes his work as reimagining the possibilities of “black space.” Could a block of decaying two-flats well beyond the city’s cultural and economic hubs be converted to form a new creative cottage industry? Could artistic types be drawn there and made to think of

themselves not as gentrifiers but as entrepreneurs with a stake in the African-American community? When Mayor Emanuel spoke to me about Gates, he called him a civic treasure on par with Chicago's skyline and downtown museums. "Theaster is creating a culture zone, a cultural central point on the South Side," Emanuel said.

The restored bank will become the permanent library of John H. Johnson, the Chicagoan who founded *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines, housing the entire run of Johnson Publishing periodicals, as well as Johnson's personal collection of 10,000 books. It will also feature a restaurant, rooms for exhibitions and performances and spaces where book clubs and community groups can meet. Gates may be performing the archival functions of a major academic institution, the social programming and physical redevelopment of government (his team hired 14 guys from around Dorchester to carry out the gutting of the bank), but he's doing this in a way that satisfies his own aesthetic appetite and follows the peculiar byways of his imagination. Instead of health clinics, say, there are lantern slides; old hip-hop records accompany the affordable housing. Gates imagines that on Sundays, in the bank's atrium, there might be a secular church service. He's been thinking a lot lately about applying for an actual church charter.

The art practice most akin to what Gates is doing, and to which he often refers, is Project Row Houses. In 1993, Rick Lowe and several other African-American artists renovated a string of abandoned shotgun-style homes in Houston's Third Ward, turning them into artist residences, setting up community-arts programming and later opening transitional housing for single mothers. They based the enterprise on the German artist Joseph Beuys's concept of social sculpture, the idea that a work of art could be a practical social action. Their holdings grew over the years, expanding to 70 rental units, and Lowe worried constantly that the project had become less a symbolic gesture — an artwork — than a bona fide housing development. He fretted that the real estate market could turn at any moment. So recently the group sold off all its rental properties. "Theaster is not unlike a wildcat businessman who has 20 kinds of companies going all at once," Lowe told me. "But I'm not an entrepreneur. It's not my nature. It's not how my mind works."

Gates's father, named Theaster as well, tarred roofs for a living, and Gates likes to say that laboring with his dad taught him how to work with his hands. But he may also have picked up his business acumen from his father, who operated a barbecue pit on weekends and owned a four-unit rental property. At Iowa State University, Gates took several ceramics classes. His professor, Ingrid Lilligren — his only formal art teacher — remembers Gates actually jumping up and down with joy whenever he was in the studio. But he majored in urban planning. Gates believes the "cross-training" has helped expand his thinking about what art is. He also was following his mother's rules. If not a pastor, she wanted him to be a pharmacist, but when Gates switched

majors from pre-pharmacy, that, too, conformed to her thinking: His cousin Larry had studied urban planning and landed a good city job. And that's what Gates did. In 2000, he began work at the Chicago Transit Authority as an arts planner. He proved to be an effective bureaucrat, something he also considers vital. "Understanding how bureaucratic systems work and even how to invent and tweak them is a very big part of my practice. I'm not a good perspective drawer, but I can write a really good memo."

In 2006, the University of Chicago hired Gates as an arts programmer. By that time, he'd earned a master's degree in fine arts and religious studies from the University of Cape Town, and he'd returned to Iowa State for an interdisciplinary master's — combining community and regional planning, ceramics and religion. Gates wanted to live close to work, and he also often pondered the dilapidation and crime in the black neighborhoods beyond the university's borders. For decades the number of poor people living in these communities had held steady, while black working- and middle-class families fled by the tens of thousands. What would it mean if he settled there? If he, in effect, stayed? So for \$130,000 he bought a former candy store on South Dorchester. When the vacant house beside it went on the market for \$16,000, he borrowed from friends and a former boss to purchase that too. Gates didn't have a plan; initially he merely wanted to make the properties beautiful.

Six years ago, when he could barely afford his car and house payments, Gates self-financed his first solo art exhibition, holding it at a local community-arts center. Centered on a series of soul-food dinners that he served with the exacting rituals of a Japanese tea ceremony, the show also involved an elaborate ruse about a Japanese potter Gates invented; he even hired an actor to portray the fictional sculptor's son. At that stage in his career, Gates says, he felt the need to construct a fake potter to cope with his own marginality as an artist. But in 2009, the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago picked him for its emerging-artists show, and a year later he was given the sculpture court at the Whitney Biennial. In the courtyard, Gates placed thronelike shoeshine stands and stacked shelving of wood pulled from an old Wrigley's chewing-gum factory in Chicago; his musical troupe, the Black Monks of Mississippi, performed at the museum. Around that time he also began working with decommissioned fire hoses from the 1960s. He coiled them like bull's-eyes inside glass vitrines and frames of wood taken from his Dorchester houses (the Brooklyn Museum of Art owns one, titled "In the Event of Race Riot II . . .") or cutting them into strips and laying the material with its faded hues side by side, like an illusive stripe painting (the Whitney is in the process of acquiring one of these). His first major show, at Chicago's Kavi Gupta Gallery, included the fire hoses and other formal objects extracted from the demolitions and rebuilds on Dorchester. Everything sold.

Gates used the earnings to continue to restore one of the Dorchester buildings. Remarkably, he managed to fashion a kind of circular economy whereby his urban interventions were being financed by the sale of artworks created from the materials salvaged from the interventions. Kavi Gupta, whose gallery continues to represent Gates, brought some of the city's wealthiest art collectors to Dorchester, where they fell under Gates's spell. Not only did they buy his work, but they also asked how their foundations could support his larger enterprise. Well, Gates told them, this building does need a new heating-and-cooling system. Gupta says a check was written, the HVAC purchased soon thereafter.



Gates performing "12 Ballads for Huguenot House" in Kassel, Germany, in 2012. Credit Kavi Gupta, Chicago

Gates now owns 12 properties in the vicinity of his home. Rebuild Foundation, the nonprofit he created to run Dorchester Projects, teaches video production at the nearby middle school and sewing and design for local kids. It has begun work in Omaha and St. Louis as well, transforming properties there into community-art spaces. Gates is still full time at the University of Chicago, currently as the director of Arts and Public Life, heading an arts incubator that the university opened this year in the poor black neighborhood outside its traditional western boundary.

Additionally, Gates's nonprofit and a private development company are turning a shuttered public-housing project near Dorchester Projects into a 32-unit mixed-income complex. Starting next year, it will become home both to low-income families and to emerging artists who will do the programming at its on-site art center. Richard Sciortino, one of the development company's owners, believes that this concept of the public-housing artist colony is something that can work elsewhere, and he and Gates are already looking into converting a couple of other housing projects on the East Coast.

If all this weren't enough, Gates is also creating two works of art for a renovated Chicago Transit Authority train station on the South Side. For the bricks he hopes to use in his \$1.3 million project, Gates plans to build an actual brick factory next to his studio. He says he will then bid on other brick contracts and also have this "most useful modular material" on hand for other artworks. Moreover, "the making of the bricks will off-heat, and that heat will be used to dry ash trees I get from the Chicago Park District," he explained. "And we will have a full milling operation. And then the sawdust from the ash trees, we will turn that into a wooden pellet, like a fuel, and then that will feed my wood-fire kiln that makes pots."

It sounds far-fetched. But so did almost everything else he ultimately brought to life. "Theaster offers what the art world is desperate for — vision," says Romi Crawford, a professor of visual and critical studies at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. "That visionary aspect of what he does is wildly appealing." I even heard Gates discussing the idea of erecting a planetarium on Dorchester and reaching out to George Lucas to help finance it.

At Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art this fall, I watched Gates and his Black Monks of Mississippi perform something he calls "Church in Five Acts." Upstairs in the museum, two rooms displayed the objects that Gates and his craftspeople created when they took the guts of a Dorchester house to Kassel, Germany, to revive a house there for the international art show Documenta 13. But in the museum's atrium, Gates created something like a black Baptist church, with rows of pews and an ornate double-barred cross hanging against the far wall. Over the slowly roiling rhythms of a seven-piece band, Gates began to extemporize a song loosely about violence and salvation, his voice deep and full and expressive. The other singers ("the baddest vocalists in the city," Gates boasted) gave his lines back to him with a crowning echo. "If I had a ship! If I had a ship!" Gates shouted, and he stood, running his large hand over his bald head. He sang of bullets, bobbing and weaving, ducking each shot. More than a few of the people filling the pews and lined up along the railings on the upper floors were crying.

I was seated next to Gates's father and two of his sisters, their eyes brimming with tears. Although Gates looked to be utterly entranced, he continued to orchestrate the improvisation,

instructing the cellist to take over for a solo, signaling another singer to continue on with a particular thread. Like everything he does, the performance seemed like a provocation of some sort; watching him, I wondered if he was about to wink or if maybe he already had. Thomas J. Lax, who is curating a Gates performance at the Studio Museum in Harlem, on Jan. 16, considers Gates's shows to be complex responses to what the art world expects from black artists. "Theaster's work is so full of signifying and subterfuge," Lax says, adding, "in his constant role playing, he's pointing to the limits of our own imagination to address issues of poverty, violence and segregation."

Gates began a slow ceremonial march around the pews as the other singers took over. "I'm a vessel, I'm a tool, sometimes a fool," riffed Yaw Agyeman, his voice silky and harmonic. Gates dipped low with each stride, as if what he bore on his shoulder were the holy commandments, God's word itself. But what he carried was a set of *Ebony* magazines from 1971 that Gates had bound in white snakeskin. He began displaying the pages to the audience members, turning each one with a sweeping gesture. His lips were pursed, his face a mask of solemnity as he locked eyes with each witness. Many of the pages he presented contained ads — Rice-A-Roni, Winston cigarettes, Brut by Fabergé.



The Dorchester Projects in Chicago. Credit Sara Pooley/Theaster Gates Studio

When I later discussed the performance with the curator Hamza Walker, who early on lived in a Dorchester house as one of Gates's roommates, he said his friend's playful slipperiness reminds him of a line spoken by the great jazzman Fats Waller: "One never knows, do one?"

Early on a Sunday morning in October, Gates invited me to his studio. Down the road from Dorchester Projects, it's a 28,000-square-foot former Anheuser-Busch distribution warehouse that was fallow for five years before Gates bought it. A series of his recently completed tar paintings covered the floors and walls. Wooden rickshaws built in the studio were parked diagonally in a fleet. Gates told me that he needed the early start because the day looked to be hectic. As part of its Open Sundays, Rebuild Foundation was holding a panel discussion with three international filmmakers at Black Cinema House and a poetry-group meeting and a storytelling workshop at its Archive House. Gates had an appointment with an artist on the North Side and had decided to host a brunch for 25. While we talked, he asked Shirin Shahin, a painter and one of two Iranian artists who live in Dorchester Projects, to pick up his sister Robin, who was going to cook the brunch. He handed Shahin his car keys and a credit card for groceries. Now without a car, he asked me to drive him to the North Side.

There, he met Eric Mirabito, a sculptor who works in ceramics and wood. But Gates was interested in his job at Chicago Flyhouse, where Mirabito builds the metal mechanisms that allow for high-flying stunt work and suspended skyscraper maintenance. Mirabito described the elaborate suspension apparatus he rigged to upgrade the ceiling acoustics at the new Barclays Center in Brooklyn.

Suddenly turning to me, Gates announced the reason for our visit: "I'm going to hire Eric." Gates explained that his woodworkers make beautiful objects, but with an in-house metal fabricator, he would have to contract out far less work. Mirabito would build the John Johnson library, as well as the new kiln and portions of the brick factory it will adjoin. Gates had already calculated that he would quickly earn back what it would take to pay Mirabito's salary and trick out a metal shop. "And that capacity to think faster and to do more, it also means I can expand how I imagine my artistic practice," he said. Gates had acquired a Freemason's apparatus called a bucking goat that he planned to use in a new art installation exploring secret orders and the black fraternity he joined in college. He wanted Mirabito to help figure out the best way to make the goat buck along 40-foot rails.

"That's superexciting," Mirabito said. "There are a million things you could do."

"Yeah, and I don't want to think about it."

“Yeah, and I do!”

With Mirabito’s hiring, Gates added to the astounding number of people he employs directly or who work in some capacity within the expanding universe he’s creating. There are the teenagers on the block paid to clean up, the ex-con who began as a denailer of salvaged wood, Gates’s nephew apprenticing at the workshop. Rebuild Foundation, Gates’s studio and the University of Chicago Arts Incubator together have a full-time staff of 20 — most of them in their own right artists, curators, art historians — and those people manage others.

In August, Gates hosted the Black Artists Retreat, a two-day conference for more than 100 artists, curators and critics of color. “We know it’s Theaster’s gig,” explained Marlease Bushnell, a staff member at Gates’s studio, who, along with the artist Eliza Myrie, put together the retreat. “We know he’ll get the credit. But he gives you agency. ‘Here’s your lane,’ he says. ‘You run with it.’ ” And Gates believes that this is almost the work of art — identifying talented people who can benefit from the “off-heating” of his projects, empowering them, figuring out how they can help maintain and enlarge a community of innovation, enterprise and security. “I’m creating a kind of ecology of opportunity,” he says.

That morning in his studio, Gates told me that he could manage so many distinct personalities along with all his projects and still have so much fun doing it because his mind works like folders on a computer desktop. He can open and close files when needed. And then he opened the file of what was in his head during his performance at the MCA a month before. “If I’m singing ‘Ship of Zion,’ ” he began, “and I’m improvising that, I’m at 69th and Dorchester, and at the lake is a boat. And between Dorchester and the lake is a lot of stuff. That visual cue that I get only when I look at my dad and I hear the musicians, I decide I’m gonna change the song, and I got to imagine if I’m going to get to that boat I need to dodge bullets. I have to holler at Jehovah’s Witnesses. I gotta make sure my nephew is with me, and I got to bring two people with me. I haven’t thought about Noah’s Ark since I was 8. Something about Noah’s Ark and ‘Ship of Zion’ helps me imagine an ark of safety, and an ark as much on this land as beyond. That ark of safety is possible to attain. And maybe if I can get there and get off, get there and get off.”

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