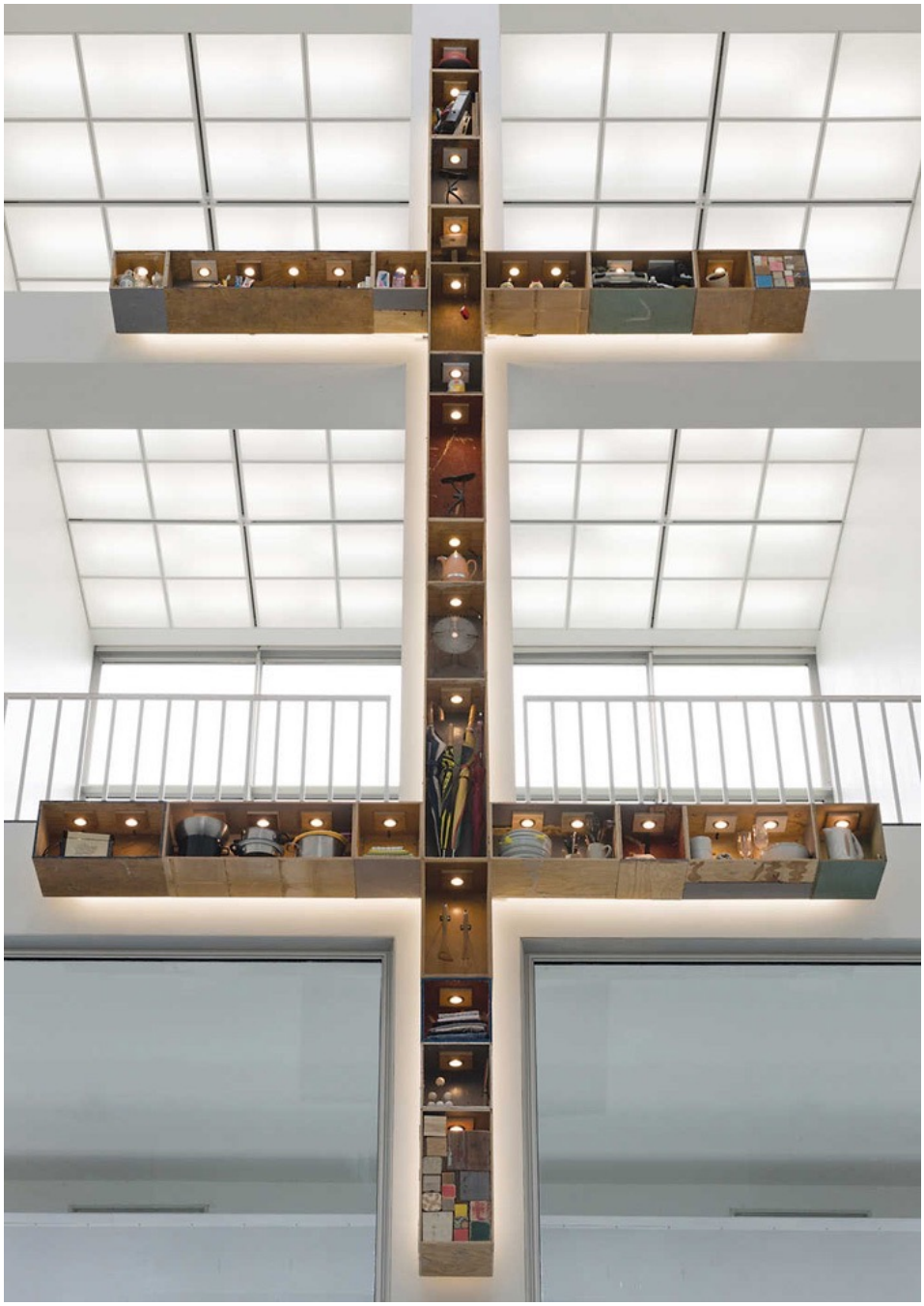
# Theaster Gates
# by Tom McDonough



Theaster Gates, installation view of *Double Cross*, 2013, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. Photo by Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. Images courtesy of the artist.

Art : Interview
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"I like to work very hard," Theaster Gates remarks in the following conversation, which just might be the understatement of the year. Since his inclusion in the 2010 Whitney Biennial—whose Sculpture Court he transformed into an installation that served as a communal gathering space for performances, social engagement, and meditation—Gates has become a near ubiquitous presence in museum exhibitions, biennials, and lecture halls throughout North America, Europe, and beyond, showing his sculpture, channeling African-American musical traditions, and preaching a gospel of ground-up urban revitalization.

He began as a ceramicist, initially learning the craft as an undergraduate at Iowa State University in the mid-1990s. This skill would be transformed a decade later when Gates invented the story of Shoji Yamaguchi, a Japanese ceramicist residing in rural Mississippi who brought together diverse groups of people to share meals of black soul food served on his handcrafted dinnerware and discuss race, politics, and inequality. Gates began staging his own "Plate Convergences" in Chicago in 2007 and their collective, collaborative, ritualistic spirit has remained a core element of his practice—particularly so in his performances with the musical ensemble the Black Monks of Mississippi.

Gates's practice might be described as founded in an openness to the world, an orientation perhaps derived from his second calling, urban planning. Indeed, he was for a time in the early 2000s a planner with the Chicago Transit Authority, assisting artists in navigating the municipal bureaucracy of public art commissions. Now, he's returning to the CTA as the designer of the largest public artwork in the agency's history, part of its renovation of the South Side's 95th Street terminal. But at its core, his practice is one of inhabiting, of retaining and redistributing neighborhood histories, of allowing the past to mark a way forward. The Listening Room, part of Gates's Dorchester Projects, preserves 8,000 LPs purchased from the closeout inventory of the Dr. Wax record store, a Hyde Park institution, and makes them available for DJs and listeners alike. For dOCUMENTA (13) in 2012, Gates restored Kassel's Huguenot House, a historic structure slated for demolition, with materials salvaged from his projects on Chicago's South Side, transforming it into a space for performance and discussion. Currently, he is working to renovate a derelict neoclassical bank into the Stony Island Arts Bank, a cultural hub for his South Side neighborhood and beyond. Throughout, he has acted as catalyst and visionary, but always with a desire for these projects to become self-sufficient. An individual possessed of incredible energy, Gates nevertheless looks beyond himself and, as he explains here, beyond any restricted notion of "art" as well.

— Tom McDonough

Tom McDonough You've been directing the Arts + Public Life initiative at the University of Chicago for three years now, and I am interested in thinking about that in the context of other related histories. On one hand, there is a history of urban sociology at the university from the

early twentieth century—the time of Chicago's industrialization, mass immigration, and the like—that has always seen the city as an urban laboratory.

On the other hand, the Chicago School of Economics—Milton Friedman and the Chicago Boys, with their celebration of a neoliberal faith in the marketplace—saw not just Chicago, but all of society, in a sense, as a lab to experiment in. How might the practice that you've been developing at the university position itself between these two competing models?

Theaster Gates Well, I'm always, in some way, thinking about both schools. When I was asked by the University of Chicago to consider reactivating a building in a predominately African-American community on the West Side of Washington Park—which in many ways separates the university from the rest of the South Side—I could not take that lightheartedly. We are all so aware of our history of the city as laboratory. In some cases, going about research with that ethos can lead to the discovery of amazing new ideas, but in other situations, especially when the players are not equal—in resource, in expectation, and in power, if you will—then it's easy for the researchers to find themselves in a system of hierarchical oppression. One of the advantages that I have, being embedded in this Washington Park community and as an administrator at the University of Chicago, is that I come with a certain amount of cultural, intellectual, and political empathy. This empathy allows me to feel more like an insider, and to experience a win for this community as a win for me too. It's not just a political win, it's also a "way-of-living" win.

With the School of Economics, it's more complicated. Economics without ethics could land you in a very favorable place in the market and a very disfavorable place with people in the world. To the extent that one is always creating purities of thought, it's actually the impure thought that I'm interested in. To me, it's impossible to think about economics without thinking about compassion, or a kind of complicated equity.

TM What do you mean by "complicated equity"?

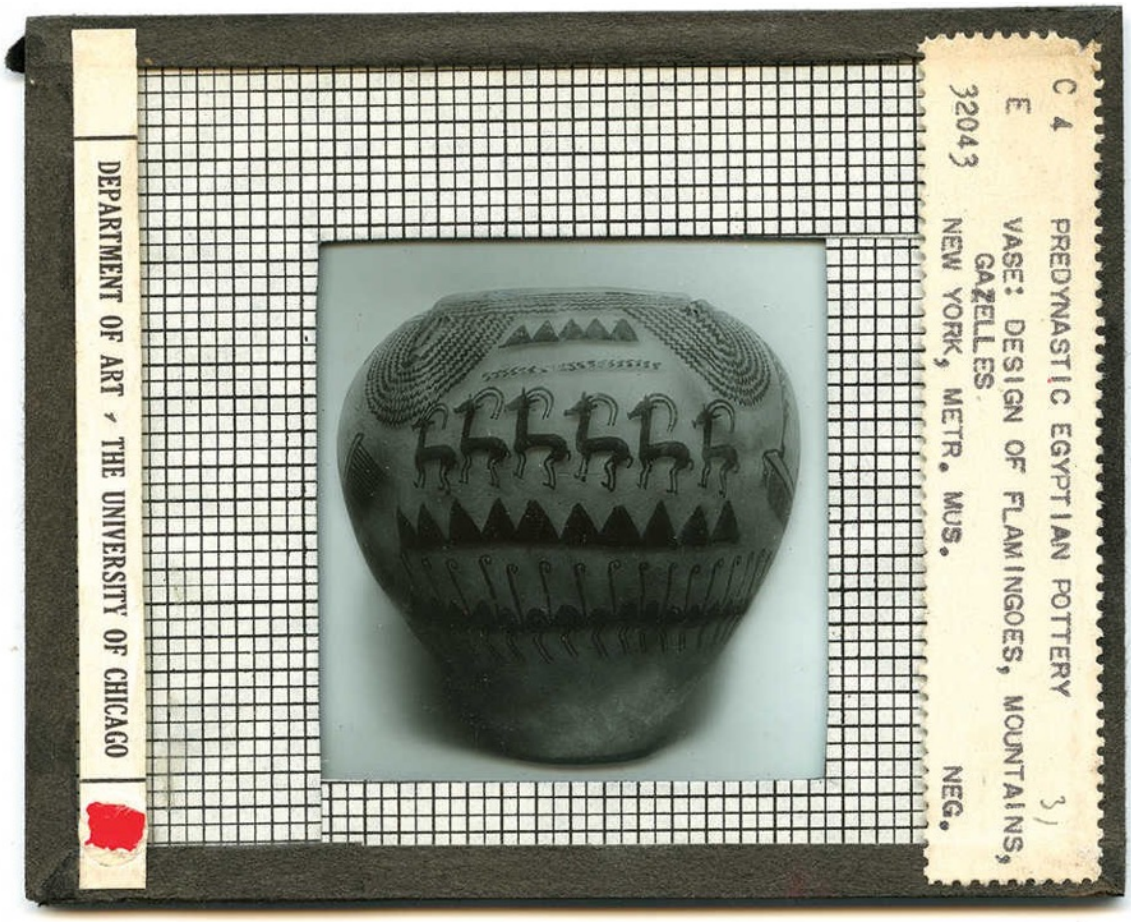
TG Complicated equity is understanding that there's value in generosity, and understanding that the same pretense that makes me work hard could be what makes someone else withdraw from an engagement with the world—that the disparity of wealth and poverty could be enough to depress a person to the point of nihilism or apathy. Like, "If you're only gonna pay me $7.50 an hour cash, I'd be better off on welfare, managing my own time."

I like to work very hard, and, as a result, I'm tired a lot. (laughter) But I've also created excess—minor excess—and there are ways in which there could be a distribution of that excess, not in the form of altruism. It's a distribution that creates another kind of healthy and new magic. Magic and potency and health in the community that I live in are important. They trump, in some cases, other forms of institutional generosity, or at least complement institutional generosity. A measured, politicized, charitable return is not the only form for being generous. More rudimentary forms of direct engagement and exchange have real and consequential value. New magic, in this sense, is the conditional apparatus that makes people want to share. Lots of

things seem to prop this desire in me to be generous or make magic. The most complicated to consider has to do with the sense that there are things that could happen in the world if someone would just make them happen, willing them into existence. I love this idea. Sometimes willing things requires real and varied forms of resourcefulness.

TM Sure. A certain way of channeling surplus is an inevitable outcome of your practice. You talk at times about building a circular ecosystem.

TG It's also a kind of complicated social insurance. My excess may not last always, and your poverty may not last always. I hope that, in that ecosystem, there's room for us to lean on each other when needed. Again, we are talking about lots of different forms of exchange and of resources.




Theaster Gates, *Predynastic Egyptian Pottery*, glass lantern slide, part of the Glass Lantern Slide Collection located at the Archive House, Chicago.

TM You have mentioned new work or new ideas that are floating around in the intersection of the primitive, or the ethnographic, and modernism. This seems to take up and push your earlier

exploration in vernacular form in new directions. Where has this thinking come from, and where do you think it might be heading?

TG It's back to this sense of cultural hierarchy and this battle between rationalism and intuition. At some point, a seemingly rational person or people look at another highly advanced people and say, "Oh wow, their intellectual structure is completely different from ours." This could register in a couple different ways. It can either mean that the culture is sophisticated and deserves the privilege of civility, or that the culture is less self-aware and as a result of their being less than human, less than civil or refined (or whatever those words are), they don't deserve real acknowledgment at all. Their makers don't need names; the geographical, spiritual, or cultural ceremonies don't require translation, research, or intellectual energy of any sort. So the thinking is, "There's something in the rituals, the sculpture, the songs and dress that's really working, but those people must be too naive to see it."

I'm really interested in both the way in which outsiders to a thing view their dominance in relation to it, and by how they might be consciously or unconsciously inspired by it. Maybe they don't even give themselves full permission to acknowledge how inspired they are by, in this case, "the Black naive." The more that I make work, the more I'm finding that there is a depth in certain vernacular forms, a spiritual imperative, different from a Judeo-Christian spiritual imperative, an animist diviner. There's a way of believing in the world that forces the artist and the creative in a culture to think about materials in a loaded way. That predetermines how they will handle things, and then how those things will live in the world after. I'm finding that work more and more compelling. It might involve the reactivation of old synagogues on Chicago's West Side into Baptist churches, having flea markets and converting lofts, or turning the recital of Dan Graham's conceptual number trigrams into Benedictine-like liturgical performances.

TM You're talking both about how a dominant, white European culture viewed objects coming out of black Africa, and you're also speaking about the other direction, about a gaze back upon a white Western culture.

TG Yes. I've always been fascinated and enamored with Brancusi, and have been thinking about people like Josephine Baker and how black folk complicate modernism and the modernist moment, because they were also in Paris, Belgium, Germany, and the Americas. I've been essentially ripping off Brancusi forms—his pedestals, especially. And I've returned to the plastic arts—sculptural clay—to look at African reliquaries, where we don't know where they're from, or exactly when they were made, or by whom. I've been replicating those reliquaries simply to give them a name, so that a thousand years from now people can be like, "Oh, this African mask was made by Theaster Gates in Chicago in 2014." In the same way that the Christ story is also an Egyptian story, and a Confucian story, there should be multiple narratives that at least allow you a series of viewpoints.

This has to do with the racism of modernism, in a way, the kind of intentional denial of saying, "Well, we're always getting things from wherever," instead of acknowledging sources. At the same time, it's denying the deep intellectual regime that traditional carvers, craftsmen, diviners,

and spiritualists had. I want to reload that, in a way. I want to feel like I'm in an artistic tradition for which there's no language, or very little language. Those traditions feel closer when I go to or think about places like Tibet, Ghana, or parts of Nigeria, or when I think about Shintoism. It's not just emotion, but also deep belief practices that inform one's hands.

Performance view of Theaster Gates and The Black Monks of Mississippi at the Serralves Museum in Porto, Portugal, 2014. Photo by Sara Pooley.

TM It's interesting to think of these objects as functional or part of an everyday life, but also as religious objects. Religion was completely continuous with an everyday experience. Is that something that informs how you're using, or talking back to, this kind of modernist appropriation?

TG It's completely reasonable that I am a fanatic of some sort; I just don't know the source of my fanaticism fully. I am fanatical, in that all of the things I do seem to be a working and a re-working toward something that is beyond art. I'm not sure if I love art, if I like art, all the time. I don't know if what I'm making is art at all. Is it more about my relationship with my studio team? Or a conversation that I'm trying to have with history? Is it a way of working through learning to believe? Like the creation of a Buddha over a hundred years by a stone carver; by making Buddha, you learn of Buddha. It's in the erection of the artifice that you actually come to understand why you live on the Earth.

Theaster Gates, Flag, 2014, tar, wood, and roofing materials, 72 × 96 × 6 inches. Photo by Sara Pooley.

My life has been an extremely public one in terms of artistic achievement, which might signal that the world is also hungry for something beyond art. That it is, in fact, out of love with art but in love with artists. The collecting world and the museum world want to know these creative thinkers and makers as much as they want to live with objects and preserve them. The more that makers are interested in making things that won't be preserved, the more necessary it is that we know makers, and by knowing them, we'll know of their objects.

TM So let's say that the objects you've made for some time now exist between anthropology and the avant-garde. They reference crucial moments of the 1960s neo-avant-garde—whether it's minimalism or Arte Povera—while also having an interest in the artifacts of everyday life. I've thought of this aspect of your work as existing between bricolage and montage, to use one term from anthropology and another term from avant-garde aesthetics.

TG I think that's reasonable. I'm also trying to make sense of this artistic moment. How do I make meaning and make sense of the amassing of literal tons of raw material that is in the world to be reimagined? How do I make sense of multiple cities that are in the process of being reimagined? There are moments where I'm not sure what I'm doing. Am I engaged in pseudo-master plans or pseudo-architecture? Or is this real city planning, because it doesn't have the

burden of a discipline, which entails the acceptance of hierarchies that may work against the communities that I'm interested in working with?

TM Is it that you approach the question of planning through an unaccustomed angle in the recent history of the field?

TG The reason I would call it "pseudo" at all is an admission of my feeling of there being some kind of deep oppression by a power that says what planning and what architecture are. I know that I am not that. I don't think "pseudo" is fake: it's what falls outside the prescribed notions of what so-called real architecture is. I'm not performing "real" architecture; in fact, I may not be performing "real" art. I may not be a "real" artist. I may be a "pseudo-artist," by some standard of the real that has, connected to it, hierarchies of systematic accountability. I'm being coded.

I'll give you an example. Before I started at the University of Chicago, I applied for a job at Chicago State University, a city-based land grant institution on the South Side. For all intents and purposes it's a city college; it used to be a teachers' college. At that time, I was applying to be a teacher in the ceramics program. Even though I had a master's degree that included sculpture, because I didn't have an MFA in ceramics, I was not fit for the job. At the same time, I was applying for an administrator's job at the University of Chicago, for which I was qualified. My art practice wasn't of note back then. Every once in a while I run into the Dean of the College of Art at Chicago State University. She wants to kick herself in the ass every time she sees me. I was, to her, a pseudo-artist—not even because she didn't want to hire me, but because the systems in place would not allow her to do so.

TM But by this point, the "pseudo" status you're claiming has changed from a liability to something that allows you to operate at these very different scales. Presumably it's what allows you to go from working on a building, to working on a neighborhood, to making an object, to performing. Has the "pseudo" become a kind of methodology, in a sense? A place that you want to occupy?

TG Oh, yeah. There's tremendous possibility outside the boundaries of any of these practices. I wouldn't say that all things go for me, I actually have a pretty rigid set of things that I'm interested in; but when it comes to cultural and city development, I don't always think like an artist. There's a flexibility in how I perceive my role and the varying connecting points that inform the practice. On any day, it could be any two or three things mashed together to create a new vocation or way of thinking about a work of art.

TM We've been talking about how you've shaped a set of terms for your practices, but I'd like to look at that from the other side as well. How does the outside world shape a set of definitions for you and how do you negotiate them? I'm curious about the different kinds of capital that your projects address, and how you begin to place yourself in relation to them. For example, what about Fred Moten's idea of the "commodity who speaks" in relation to blackness, about the way he troubles the separation of things and people?

TG There are some things that are worth being self-aware of, and other things that are worth being naive about. I think about capital and value in lots of different ways. I've been a student of value. It could be for those reasons that Fred Moten has already identified that I understood myself to be a commodity from a very, very young age. The more I understood that I was commodified—or commodifiable—the more I would protect myself as a commodity. It's like you want those bananas to have as few dents in them as possible, because you want them to last as long as possible. I avoided dents in my banana, if you will. Understanding yourself in the context of a value-based society could mean a kind of preservation, especially in the '80s, when crack was becoming a real phenomenon on Chicago's West Side, where I grew up. I could either partake, sell marijuana, go to jail, have that letter against me for the rest of my life, and never see certain kinds of opportunities. Or I could recognize that on the unripe fruit, the world is ready to piss, and if they pissed on me soon enough, then they would never have to worry about me fully ripening.

Performance view of Theaster Gates & The Black Monks of Mississippi in St. Laurence Church, Chicago, as it is being demolished, 2014. Photo by Sara Pooley.

It's hard for me to get past value. I have a clear sense of what it means to "be somebody," and that allows me to negotiate varying forms of capital. My body is capital, my brain is capital, my hands are capital, and the by-products of my hands are capital. And once I understand my own value, I think about spatial value, the value of other people, the value of people working together, the possibility of exponential value as a result of certain kinds of bodies rubbing up against each other. Sometimes that leads to tangible capital but sometimes that capital is intangible—I don't even mean cultural capital, I mean like karmic magical powers, a kind of

cultural dispensation unknown except by people who were out to exploit their clarity about self-value. My sense of human capital has everything to do with one's capacity to understand human value. Is that Marxist?

TM I don't know, maybe when you're talking about value, you're also talking about some kind of use.

It makes sense to come back to a term that you've used at times: "appropriation," the way that a space or an object becomes significant, not in its worth or its abstract valuation in a market, but in its concrete use, in the way it's shaped by people and shapes them in turn. That notion seems central to all scales of what you're doing and to the interest in space or architecture that's at the heart of Dorchester Projects and other activities.

TG Yeah. Like, what is blight? What does blight mean? For me, it means a place that has potent or latent value, but which, for whatever reasons, is psychologically disgraced. As a result of that disgrace, or acts of violence, there has been a devaluation. One could either imagine that blight as real or as potential usefulness.

TM Is it in the nature of the project, then, to recognize what lies latent in those spaces or to realize those potentials? I'm curious about what the balance is between the futures and pasts of buildings.

TG You know, Tom, maybe I just like sweeping. It may not have anything to do with the reclamation of a past moment. Maybe sometimes it does, but it's not necessarily the creation of something new out of something old; sometimes it's just the inclination, or compulsion, to make something with what's around you, to tidy up the untidy.

If I were to do the work of Dorchester in an already affluent neighborhood, the result would just be another nice house. One day, when my project is surrounded by equally impressive, if not better houses, then the great work that I've done.… It's the fact that Dorchester is where it is that makes it a feat of the imagination, a feat that, even if it was straight development, has artistic inclination, if not a spiritual calling.

TM That spiritual calling is probably crucial and the hardest factor to pin down, the one that people like myself are least likely to explore or talk about. That would be interesting to think more about, the role of this fundamentally intangible element in all of it.

TG What if I were to say that I've underplayed the fact that I'm actually a Benedictine monk and that I just happen to be the most extroverted and undisciplined of them, and that this work that I've been doing, that we've all called art, was just a by-product of a mandate from on high?

TM I spend a lot of time with Jesuits, so I'm very sympathetic, is all I can say. We all have callings. (laughter)

My own training and inclination makes me tend to ask about objects, commodities, capital—these kinds of things—but you began using the term value in a way that pushed beyond capital and economics into something much broader. You're talking about addressing spirituality, or some larger set of possibilities or needs.

Theaster Gates, Dorchester Projects: Listening House & Archive House, 2014. Photo by Sara Pooley.

TG The project that I just finished, at Serralves, in Porto, was called The Black Monastic. The Black Monks of Mississippi and I were in Portugal for ten days. We used the museum and the estate at Serralves to perform monastic rituals. We didn't know what those rituals were, but we pretended that we knew, and we started to act like monks. We had to ask each other, every day, "What does it mean to act like a monk?" Then, within a couple of days, we were like, "What does it mean to be a monk?" By the end of it, it was like, "Well, since we're monks, we do this." I'm not sure how the appointment of monkhood happens, but there were moments where I was able to get to a new kind of making because I adopted what initially was a false, imagined sense of the monastic, which then turned into an embodied sense, into a kind of knowing. The Black Monastic was not about spirituality; it wasn't even about God—it was about walking and breathing and being in the world in a certain way—and it helped us get somewhere else. By the end, the Monks made better music than ever.

TM This returns us to where you began, with your invention in 2007 of the mythical Japanese potter Yamaguchi and his role as your mentor. That too was a matter of projecting yourself into something that was a fiction and yet had real power.

TG That's exactly right. Part of the disconnect that I've felt between the things that are written about me and the things that I do relates to this quiet, very difficult thing to put a finger on, that I can't and refuse to try to put a finger on—it should remain beyond. It's not just that I grew up going to church, or that I was a choir director. It's not about Christianity as much as it is a discipline that was born through these ways of making meaning and making culture in my youth.

TM I can see the value of how it works for you and the Monks. What's the experience for the viewer, the audience?

TG It's really confusing. In Porto, there were people who were openly agnostic if not non-believers. By our last performance, we were only singing straight gospel music—old hymns, which I love. A woman came up to me afterward, her eyes and nose red. She's obviously still weeping, and she said, "I don't know why I'm crying, but what you guys do is great." Someone else came up and said, "In the twenty-five years I've been coming to Serralves, they've never had a performance, ever, that had this kind of spiritual fervor." There's this interesting moment where it's no longer entertainment, even with the visual work. There are lots of more flashy, more cheeky, more ironic things that can be done, but you don't need to derive or détourne anything, you can actually just sing the song, and it doesn't have to be ironic. Sincerity is my irony.

TM From the performances, to the visual work, and maybe even to the spatial work, is it then about communicating or creating some channel of energy? Is that partly what we're talking about, a conviction on your part that is then demanded from your audience as well?

TG What if I said, Tom, that I don't know?

TM Well, fair enough.

TG What if I said that I was just naively going about what I do? This is where the primitive becomes exciting. There is a lot of knowing, but it may not be directed at some set of outcomes.

TM How do you mean "naively"? I'm not sure I understand the way you're using it.

TG I'm going back to Gauguin's encounter with "the native." The native is generous by nature, kind, loving, beautiful, unadorned and unapologetic, spiritual and child-like, hugely sophisticated but very simple. It's Gauguin who's all-knowing, seemingly—rational, clear, knowing of himself and history. He wants to become like the natives. I don't have to know about what the work does for others, it's effect or whatever, and yet there are things I really need to know—they need to be evident, even if I don't have language for them. So what I'm trying to do, when I moan, is to

allow the moan to be the knowing, not an explanation of the moan. My knowing is embedded in the moan, and it can communicate to others who want or have the capacity to hear it.

TM That's nice.

TG Like with Dorchester or the Stony Island Arts Bank, I really don't feel like I know what the end of it is—there might be some other buildings. I'm not building them going, "Oh, once I do this, then this'll happen, and then this." Now, I may know that because I built the Incubator, somebody else is going to want to build next to the Incubator. From life, I understand this. But why am I doing it, why would I choose that block, or continue to live there when I don't have to live there, or spend my money in a place where there's no direct correlation between my investment and a return? Those ways of not knowing are actually a more sophisticated knowing.

People have stakes, they've wagered bets on me and on my successes or failures, and it's all hinging for me on something quite arbitrary, quite whimsical. Like, do I continue to feel called to do this thing today as I did yesterday? Is the work complete? I'd like to believe that I have the courage to do another work, once one work is complete, to keep it moving. I'm not at all without knowing. I've had to learn a lot of things, but I still give myself permission to not need to know.

*Tom McDonough is a writer and critic based in upstate New York and Toronto. He is widely known for his books on the Situationist International, which include "*The Beautiful Language of My Century*":* Reinventing the Language of Contestation in Postwar France, 1945-1968 *(2007);* Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents (2002)*; and* The Situationists and the City *(2009). McDonough's essays on contemporary art and photography have appeared in journals such as* Afterall, *and* OSMOS*, where he is a contributing editor.*