

# RICHARD GRAY GALLERY

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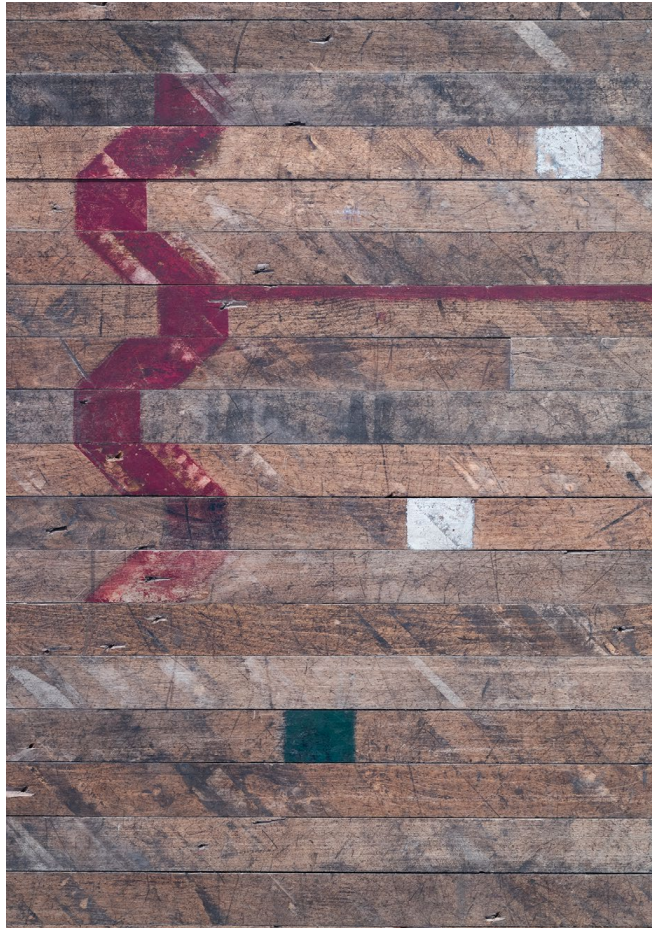
# THEASTER'S WORLD

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Theaster Gates is dedicated to enacting real change. By undertaking an expansive range of simultaneous projects, from art installations to urban planning, this Chicago-based artist advocates for the preservation and presentation of art and life in a socially engaged capacity. Through initiatives such as Rebuild Foundation and the development of Stony Island Art Bank in Chicago, Gates continues to be a leader in cultural production. Alexie Glass-Kantor, Executive Director of Artspace in Sydney, first visited Stony Island Art Bank in January 2019. After attending Gates' exhibition opening of *Every Square Needs a Circle* at Richard Gray Gallery in April, she interviewed the artist about the important role of advocacy and leadership within his socially engaged practice.

FEATURE *by* ALEXIE GLASS-KANTOR *and* NANETTE ORLY





*“I love hard problems, and I’d rather spend my time and my energy invested in big challenges, big ideas and adding value where I can. How can I make the best art possible, and the best art possible for me?”*

**Stony Island Arts Bank is a multifaceted arts centre and varied structure for supporting research, advocacy, education, performance, artists and archives. In 2013, you acquired The Arts Bank for \$1 from the City of Chicago. How do you reflect on the original vision for the entity and how it has evolved in the past six years? What do you think the space represents for the South Side in Chicago and how is it being utilised by local and international communities?**

The Arts Bank has been such an amazing opportunity for me, because it demonstrates that conceptual practices can exist not only within museum spaces, but also in spaces where art isn’t expected. I’ve taken my combined interests in art production, platform making, notions of demonstration and execution, questions around policy and how policy might be used to shape spaces or reshape spaces, and applied them towards an effort that would have an ongoing effect. This durational and iterative process meant that I could experiment and fail in real time, while considering what it meant to take this planning history, art history, and sense of how cities work, and put these ideas into something that would have meaning for others.

There’s nothing about the project that’s altruistic. My decision to invest in the bank was because I really believed in the space that I lived in and the people that lived around me. Ultimately, that would yield something bigger than my imagination, bigger than my investment towards the restitching of a community. That feels like a conceptual practice – it doesn’t feel like some kind of social or artistic conceit alone, but rather the kind of project that is total in its nature. It has been a gift for me to see all of the fruit that has been produced as a result



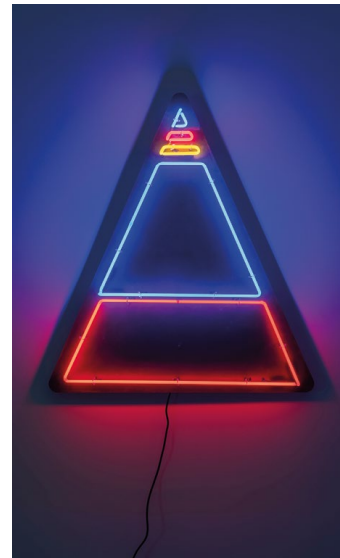
of making the bank. It's important to recognise that I didn't build the bank alone, that there are generations of people that have worked for me and with me – internal and external collaborators who have helped to make the Arts Bank what it is, and I can never thank them enough for their efforts.

**Rebuild Foundation is a non-profit organisation focusing on cultural development and neighbourhood transformation through the South Side of Chicago. What is the overall mission of the Rebuild Foundation and what projects are being managed by this unique organisation?**

Rebuild is essentially an extension of my art studio. It's important to understand that there were projects which needed to happen as a part of the practice that were not driven by the market or museums. There were people in the philanthropic world that wanted to offer support, and we needed a structure whereby those efforts could be managed. Rebuild manages the programming of the Arts Bank – it is not the owner of the Bank. It manages St Laurence, our growing artist-in-residence and incubator space, and some land for which we hope to realise a project called Kenwood Gardens.

I started Rebuild Foundation in 2011 to support the community-development work that I was doing. In some ways, the creation of the not-for-profit, a 501(c)(3) organisation, also felt like the creation of a platform that would allow us to leverage philanthropic and private dollars from organisations that were interested in mission-based work. The mission of the organisation is quite simple: "to demonstrate the impact of innovative, ambitious, and entrepreneurial arts and cultural initiatives.

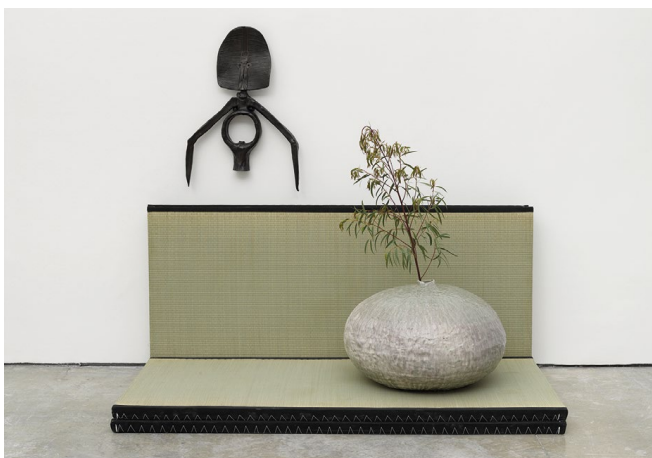
The work is informed by three core values: Black people matter, Black spaces matter, and Black objects matter." My personal mission has more to do with the demonstration of creative projects in Black space and their potential for success. The mission plays out in a nuanced way, with the connectivity that's necessary in order to make a place work. Forming deep relationships amongst people over time and initiating hubs where they might convene or be together is a slow process. Not everyone is invested in the same way, and not everyone chooses to participate, but what's great is that the structure is always there, whether people participate or not. We've been fortunate that more



and more young people are excited by the work. Sometimes they bring their parents, and we try many different kinds of things in spaces through iterating and testing so that it touches all people – neighbourhood first and artistic community next. All of these things operate simultaneously.

**Your work, both in artistic practice and leadership, has been recognised as an interdisciplinary voice in social engagement; this must be both highly demanding and require constant negotiation. How do you balance leadership, advocacy and artistic practice in an effective and sustainable way?**

It's so interesting that you ask about leadership and advocacy in the practice. There are definitely days when the work feels impossible, and the negotiations are challenging, but in some ways, it feels like the debt that must be paid because I've been given so much. I love hard problems, and I'd rather spend my time and my energy invested in big challenges, big ideas and adding value where I can. How can I make the best art possible, and the best art possible for me? [By] listening deeply to my heart, and listening to the ways in which my life is growing and changing, while asking if there are ways that growth could be made



material, public when necessary, and private when appropriate. In this moment, it's really difficult to imagine that I would have the luxury of only committing to my artistic practice. What I've done instead is to allow the artistic practice to be big enough so that I could include significant challenges that exist in the world. Is there a role that aesthetics play? Is there a role that my hands play? I may not be able to maintain the level at which I'm working right now for very long, but while I have the energy, and the sun on my back, I'll do what I can.

**I was very pleased to attend the opening of your show *Every Square Needs a Circle* at Richard Gray Gallery in April and to join with the incredible sense of energy, community and engagement of the Chicago audience. The exhibition synthesised various ideas from broader projects in recent years – how do you work with ideas, objects and materials through time and how important is it to reconsider or posit earlier works into new associations?**

*Every Square Needs a Circle* was intentionally a composite of the last five years of making. Since I hadn't presented an exhibition in Chicago in a very long time, I wanted the show to be a kind of homecoming for a set of ideas that my city hadn't seen, and present a culmination of these big ideas that had been evident at the Kunstmuseum Basel, the Gegenwart, Kunstmuseum Bregenz and Gropius Bau. It was super exciting to see the city turn out, but it also felt good to share a set of codes that felt very important to me – codes about the city, ideas that lent themselves to a narrative of space while landing squarely in a conversation with my sculptural heroes and heroines. This show had a little bit to do with Black Formalism, but a lot to do with sharing a story that's really about spiritual urbanism. It felt really good.

***Amalgam* at the Palais de Tokyo, Paris opened in February 2019 and was your first solo exhibition in France. This show focused on a very particular historical chapter of American interracial history; how do you consider an international audience to ensure the message of your exhibition doesn't get lost in translation?**

Paris seemed like the ideal context to talk about racial mixing: not only because of its colonial past, but also because of the idea of beauty manifested by the French, which often leans towards those of mixed race. I also wanted to tell a very particular and peculiar story about Malaga Island, a small island off the coast of Maine, and demonstrate that it wasn't alone. Palais de Tokyo gave me the freedom and the curatorial permission to dig deep into this idea, and with the support of Colby College, I was able to spend time reflecting on what it means to talk about Black and Brown and include the truth of whiteness within blackness. The film that was produced, which was realised through the tremendous support of choreographer Kyle Abraham, was a chance to forefront the complexity of racial

Top to bottom  
Left to right  
**THEASTER GATES**  
*Alls my life I has  
to fight*, 2019

Theaster Gates portrait  
Photo: Rankin  
Photography Ltd

Opposite  
View from *Theaster  
Gates: Every Square  
Needs a Circle* at Richard  
Gray Gallery, Chicago

**THEASTER GATES**  
*Afro-Ikebana*, 2019  
cast bronze, clay and  
tatami mats  
185 x 200 x 108 cm  
Photo: Theo Christelis  
© White Cube

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**THEASTER GATES**  
*Black Rainbow*, 2019

**THEASTER GATES**  
*Court-ship*, 2019

Page 31  
Installation view  
**THEASTER GATES**  
*Every Square  
Needs a Circle*, 2019

**THEASTER GATES**  
*A Tussle in the  
House of Love*, 2018  
Photo: Jim Prinz

**THEASTER GATES**  
*Land Ownership on  
Conspiracy Blue*, 2018

Page 29  
**THEASTER GATES**  
*Mama's Milk*, 2018  
metal and light  
289.6 x 294.6 x 65.4 cm

Courtesy the artist and  
Richard Gray Gallery,  
Chicago, White Cube  
Gallery, London and  
Gagosian Gallery, New  
York © Theaster Gates



mixing and ethnic identity as we understand it. The French audience was both rigorous in their reflections, and incredibly curious about Black capacity to talk openly about these ideas. It felt like a very necessary exhibition in Paris. I often think first about context: Why would I make this show at all? What are the immediate things on my mind? What is the conversation between the things that are on my mind and the places where I'm exhibiting? In this case, Palais de Tokyo was a sweet spot for the issue of racial mixing.

**Your last show at White Cube Mason's Yard in London, *Afro-Mingei*, brought together two key influences in your work: Black identity and Japanese philosophy. What new aesthetic or perspective are you trying to achieve by merging these two cultural signifiers?**

I've always had a relationship with craft communities throughout Japan, particularly in a small town named Tokoname. *Afro-Mingei* is also a kind of mini-retrospective on ideas around identity and consciousness in relationship to Japanese philosophy and aesthetics. Instead of always imagining some kind of black-white binary, the truth about my life is that there are all of these other cultural idioms that I'm in conversation with – not in an appropriated way, but in a way that deepens my understanding of a Black sensibility. For *Afro-Mingei*, I took my love of making and combined that with histories of American art where Minimalism was affected by Japanese philosophy, or artists were affected by a kind of Japanese philosophy and produced a form of Minimalism. I wanted my reflections on Sol LeWitt to mash up with my reflections on ikebana, to meet the Hammond B3 organ of the Black church.

**Your ability to balance many projects at once, whether redevelopment, historical research or artistic practice, is indefatigable. You have the Tate Liverpool show coming up and many other projects. What future initiatives are most occupying, challenging or exciting you going forward?**

I wouldn't be able to do any of the work that I do without my amazing staff. They are the ones who are indefatigable. They help me manage the parts that are invisible to the public, which keeps all of the work working, and ultimately gives me the time and the headspace that I need to make. There are also moments where it feels like it's a bit much and I should slow down, but I have to admit that I've never been more excited about making art and committing my time to service. There are some larger artistic projects that have come up, and in many ways, I'm committed to managing the projects that I've already created, and making them as strong as they can be. Starting to pull reflective thoughts from these projects feels really healthy. A bigger project that has been on my mind is: what happens when you've accumulated all of these things? Is it now time to start thinking about how to give them away? I'm thinking so much about that work now. ▾

*Theaster Gates: Amalgam* is at Tate Liverpool from December 13, 2019 to May 4, 2020. *Assembly Hall* is at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis from September 5, 2019 to January 12, 2020.

Theaster Gates is represented by Richard Gray Gallery, Chicago, White Cube Gallery, London and Gagosian Gallery, New York.

[richardgraygallery.com](http://richardgraygallery.com)

[whitecube.com](http://whitecube.com)

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