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THE REAL-ESTATE ARTIST

High-concept renewal on the South Side.



By John Colapinto

East Garfield Boulevard, on Chicago's South Side, could serve as a background in a big-city cop drama: driving just a few blocks, you pass empty lots, a discount muffler shop, a "food and liquor" emporium, and a Tax Service establishment. At the corner of Garfield and Prairie, though, the scene changes. Next to a boarded-up Harold's Chicken Shack stands a gleaming two-story terra-cotta building, whose tall windows look into wide, airy rooms with varnished wood floors and paintings on the walls. The building, which opened last March after an ambitious renovation, is the University of Chicago's Arts Incubator. Built in the nineteen-twenties, the structure sat empty for two decades, until Theaster Gates, a Chicago-based conceptual artist whose raw materials include abandoned buildings and houses, persuaded the university to reimagine it as a two-million-dollar complex of galleries and studio spaces.

One morning last November, Gates parked his Volvo behind the Incubator and hopped out. An athletically built African-American man of forty with a shaved head and a cultivated scruff of



"I'm not really an artist," Theaster Gates likes to say. "I'm probably first a hustler." PHOTOGRAPH BY MARK PECKMEZIAN

beard, he dashed up the stairs to a meeting room, where he greeted three young African-American artists selected for a ten-month residency: David Boykin, a saxophonist and composer; Andres Hernandez, an artist who says that his work “deals with space and race”; and Krista Franklin, a poet and visual artist. Taking his place at the head of a long table, where the artists sat with several university administrators, Gates said that, as the Incubator enters its second year, he was learning from mistakes.

“Last year, I talked about it wrong,” he said. “I told the artists, ‘We need to make the building work, because black folk never seen a building like this before.’” The neighborhood, which is ninety-seven per cent black, has few cultural institutions. “That was wrong. We don’t need to make the building work. We need to support you.”

Gates, who has two degrees in urban planning and began his art career as a potter, is reshaping the South Side in his image. The Arts Incubator is one of a long list of projects aimed at reviving a part of the city—plagued by unemployment and gang violence, its streets pocked with abandoned buildings—that he says has been “left to rot” since the sixties. Nearby, on Dorchester Avenue, he has been buying dilapidated houses and turning them into small cultural centers and meeting spaces: “places where moments of beauty can happen,” he says. That work, known as Dorchester Projects, established Gates as one of the fastest-rising artists in the world. His installations and performance pieces have been featured in a dozen international exhibitions, and his individual art works—fragments of the buildings he restores, or fire hoses coiled in glass-fronted cabinets and labelled “In the Event of a Race Riot”—sell for hundreds of thousands of dollars each, and he puts a significant portion of the proceeds into his projects on the South Side. Last fall, when ArtReview ran a list of the hundred most powerful people in the art world, Gates ranked fortieth. Jeffrey Deitch, the former director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, told me, “His special fusion of art and community activism has made him the kind of artist that people are looking for today. It’s not just addressing issues of art about art, and art about self-identity; it’s a new vocabulary, a new approach. The success of his work is measured by its actual impact on the community.”

Chicago’s mayor, Rahm Emanuel, has made Gates a kind of unofficial commissioner of renewal on the South Side. Last year, he sold him the Stony Island State Savings Bank, an abandoned neoclassical pile owned by the city, for a dollar, with the understanding that Gates would raise the funds to refurbish it; he also granted him a shuttered housing development near Dorchester Projects for conversion into thirty-two mixed-income apartments, including artists’ residences, and an art space. Gates is now designing a million-dollar installation for the South Side’s Ninety-fifth Street subway terminal—the largest public-art project in the Chicago Transit Authority’s history. “He won a very competitive process,” Emanuel joked about the C.T.A. job. “The Mayor selected him!” He went on, “He had a vision on the South Side. And since we, as a city and as a country, have tried almost every other form of redevelopment, I said, ‘Why don’t we try the one that’s most obvious—the arts?’ Theaster has a commitment to his art and to the community that’s unique. He didn’t get known here and pack up and leave. He dug deep.”

Emanuel’s support represents a decisive proof-of-concept for Gates’s strategy to rebuild the South Side. It is also an illustration of what Gates refers to frequently as “leverage,” an idea he articulated with special

forcefulness in a recent talk at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. “I couldn’t have imagined that a piece of fire hose or an old piece of wood or the roof of a building would have gotten people so wet that they would want to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on those objects,” he said. The audience, a packed auditorium of mostly white students and professors, looked slightly shocked. Gates told them that he was unperturbed when collectors bought those works purely as an investment: “I realized that the people who were calling me up and asking me if they could have a deal right out of my studio—that they were, in fact, just thinking about the market, and that I would leverage the fuck out of them as they were leveraging me.” For Gates, this mutually exploitative transaction is a way “to fund this struggle.”

Gates’s relationship with the Mayor began in 2011, shortly after Emanuel won the election with crucial support from the black community. The mutual leveraging of that relationship has grown more useful to both men as Emanuel’s poll numbers in African-American neighborhoods have sharply declined—and as Gates’s ambitions for the South Side have grown. As Kate Hadley, Gates’s studio manager, put it to me, “Theaster needs the Mayor. But the Mayor needs Theaster.”

Gates’s contract for the subway-terminal project obliged him to give five public talks about his plans, so one Saturday morning he visited a classroom at Chicago State University, where twenty members of the community had showed up to hear him speak. Gates knew he was facing a tough crowd; his fee for the C.T.A. project is a quarter of a million dollars, and several people grumbled openly about his being handed the job. There was a lectern, but Gates sat in a chair that put him on his audience’s level. “Lately, I’ve been asking myself, ‘What is public art?’ ” he began, quietly. “Because, you know, people have strong opinions about it.”

Gates is possessed of a flexible speaking voice that, to suit his message and the mood of his audience, can embody half a dozen characters: a trash-talking homeboy who grew up on the city’s tough West Side; a rarefied academic, who refers to Derrida and Sontag; an inspirational leader whose voice swells in the Baptist-church cadences he heard as a child; or an opaque modern artist who speaks in koans. At the meeting, he ruminated loftily (“What could we ask of a certain kind of public space that it might be a participant in our need for venue?”), dipped into street talk (“Ain’t no jobs on Seventieth!”), and riffed like a night-club comic on using scavenged materials for the new terminal (“I can get the brothers who do scrapping on the South Side to give me all the aluminum; they can just start by stealing bumpers. They be, like, ‘Oh, you need some aluminum? I got some aluminum’ ”).

In a speech that lasted almost an hour, Gates moved the audience to laughter and applause, winning over even his toughest questioner, a middle-aged woman with dreadlocks. In the Q. & A. period, she told Gates that the C.T.A. was “screwing the whole community,” but she ended up smiling and nodding as Gates politely explained why this wasn’t so, and promised to remain open to ideas from everyone. No one seemed to notice that he had hardly discussed his actual plans for the station.

As we drove away, he said he was thinking about building a live radio-broadcast booth on the subway platform, with d.j.s and open mikes facilitating news reports and community bulletins. The idea is to re-

create the kind of public-spirited dialogue that he associates with the civil-rights movement of the sixties, an era that infuses much of his art — not only his fire-hose sculptures, with their allusions to riot squads breaking up protests, but also the Dorchester Projects houses, which contain vast archives of classic R. & B., soul, and gospel records, and his installations, which have incorporated a library of vintage copies of *Ebony* and *Jet*.

Gates's childhood was steeped in the language and the attitudes of protest. The youngest of nine children and the only boy, he grew up listening to his sisters talk about the achievements of affirmative action and financial aid, which afforded them college educations and professional careers. (His sisters work as nurses, physiotherapists, and home-health-care practitioners.) His father, Theaster, Sr., a roofer, and his late mother, a schoolteacher, were not politically active, but all his sisters, he said, "tried their hand at Black Pantherism." His father, he adds, "lives as if we're in a pre-civil-rights moment. For him, time did not move on."

Gates's mother encouraged her children to read, and by the time he was nine he was being bused to Reilly Elementary, in a middle-class white and Hispanic neighborhood on the North Side. "I've walked two worlds since fifth grade," Gates has said. He listened with envy as classmates talked about summer trips to Paris, and on the way to school he admired the Frank Lloyd Wright buildings. Gates's own neighborhood, East Garfield Park, was a former middle-class area now filled with rubble lots, the legacy of a decade of white flight and the riots that followed the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. By the time Gates was a teen-ager, gangs and crack ruled, and the city addressed the problem by bulldozing historic buildings that were being used as drug dens. "Growing up, I'm watching the West Side get systematically deconstructed," Gates recalls. "I'm watching the destruction of the most beautiful buildings in my neighborhood."

For high school, he attended the prestigious Lane Tech. On Sundays, the family went to the New Cedar Grove Missionary Baptist Church, where Gates, a gifted tenor, became the director of the youth choir at the age of thirteen. In the choir, he began to consider a career as a performer; in the pews, he was taught that he had a philanthropic obligation. "To whom much is given much is required," he told me. "Said another way: The pie gets bigger when you give it away. Those are simple Bible lessons that kids learn."

As early as his senior year of high school, he says, he was wondering how he could improve matters for people in the city's black neighborhoods. "I thought if I understood city politics better I could do something about the situation," he told me. "By the time I left for college, I knew that our city was a machine to be understood, and that if you could understand it you could make it work on your behalf."

He went to Iowa State University, where he majored in urban planning, studying zoning and property law. In one class, he learned about Samuel Mockbee, an architecture professor at Auburn University, who was enlisting students to transform scrap materials into houses for poor black people in rural Alabama. "He became a MacArthur genius and wrote these great books," Gates said. "But it was really Mockbee the charismatic who said, 'You self-righteous, snobby kids, you'll have to touch the real world.'"

In his junior year, he took a pottery class and became entranced, he says, with “the magic of taking the lowliest material on earth—mud—and turning it into something beautiful and useful.” After he graduated, he began looking beyond Chicago; he studied African religions at the University of Cape Town. He also spent a year in Tokoname, Japan, studying pottery. “Everything in my world view was with the metaphor of clay,” he told me. “I’d meet a woman and I’d be, like, ‘Damn, she looks like a Bizen wood-fired fourteen-day kiln burn!’ ”

When he returned to Chicago in 1999, his unusual education helped him get a job at the C.T.A., organizing public art for the subways. “I was a city planner,” he says. “I wore bow ties, and I was learning how to make systems.” In his time off, he made pottery, inspired by ceramicists like Peter Voukos and Paul Soldner, who had gained credibility in the fine-art world. But Gates had trouble finding a gallery to show his pots. In a lecture at the Milwaukee Art Museum in 2010, he described twelve years of “struggling to find a way in a world filled with white craft potters.” He was no less frustrated in his day job. At the C.T.A., he chose and funded artists for the train lines, which he hoped would allow him to channel resources into poorer neighborhoods. That didn’t work out. “Long-range planning seemed like it was not benefitting black people,” he says, “and I wasn’t going to be effective, ever.” After five years, he quit and returned to Iowa State, to study for a multidisciplinary master’s degree in urban planning, religion, and ceramics.

In 2006, he got a job as an arts programmer at the University of Chicago. He was thirty-three and “very confused,” according to his close friend Hamza Walker, a curator at the university. “Pottery was at the center of his artistic life, but there was something else that he wanted to do. Pottery is its own artisanal ghetto—a beautiful one, but a ghetto.” Gates remained determined to break into the fine-art establishment: “I would look at their world and say, ‘Wow, that’s so fascinating! Those people are fascinating.’ Because I knew they didn’t want me in their camp as a potter.”

By the next year, when Gates landed a show at Chicago’s Hyde Park Art Center, he had reinvented himself as a conceptual artist. In an exhibition that he called “Plate Convergence,” he presented his pottery as the work of Shoji Yamaguchi, a Japanese master potter who, after surviving the Hiroshima bombing, moved to Mississippi, married a black civil-rights activist, and formed a commune. According to Gates’s carefully constructed story, Yamaguchi and his wife died in a car accident, and their son founded the Yamaguchi Institute to house his father’s ceramics. At the show, Gates enlisted a mixed-race actor to impersonate Yamaguchi’s son, and presented himself as the potter’s protégé. Gates insists that the ruse was not cynical; the false identity, he says, freed him to make better pots, and at times he “began to believe that the institute was real.” It also forced his audience to see him in a larger context. “Yamaguchi allowed people to read the Japanese part of myself,” he says.

At the opening, Gates held a dinner, serving “Japanese soul food”—sushi made from black-eyed peas. Collectors, beguiled by the fictional artist and charmed by their host, snapped up the ceramics. Gates told me, “People would be so reverent. ‘Oh, my God, these pots are so great!’ ” Not long afterward, Gates,

who has described himself as “a bit of a trickster,” revealed the hoax, which drew only more praise. In an admiring essay, the academics Judith Leemann and Shannon Stratton noted the power of an artistic language “to invoke, to compel, to falsify first, if need be, the thing one wishes into being.”

On a recent Saturday, Gates went with his friend Walker to Chicago’s West Loop neighborhood to tour galleries. Cycling through half a dozen in an hour, he accepted the greetings of gallery owners and patrons with the practiced diffidence of a visiting celebrity, pausing only briefly to ask the price of a hyperrealist painting of a Duncan yo-yo, by an artist named Kyle Surges. Then he and Walker stopped by Gates’s gallery, a white-walled space named for its owner, Kavi Gupta. One of Gates’s shows, “Accumulated Affects of Migration,” occupied a large room. It was an installation of debris from the demolition of one of the Dorchester Projects houses: pieces of kitchen countertops, sections of wall lath, and strips of hardwood flooring, framed and mounted on the walls. In 2012, he shipped the works to Kassel, Germany, for the Documenta 13 art exhibition, where he used them to restore an abandoned building in a piece called “12 Ballads for Huguenot House.” Afterward, Gates made “objects” combining bits of debris from the two houses, and the gallery sold them for as much as a hundred and twenty thousand dollars apiece.

Gupta, an elegant man with floppy black hair and a ready smile, embraced Gates, and the two vanished into an office, closing the door. When they emerged, a few minutes later, Gupta told me about Gates’s ascent from anonymity. In 2009, about a year after the Yamaguchi show, Gates landed an emerging artist’s showcase at Chicago’s Museum of Contemporary Art. The museum is one of the city’s leading venues, but Gates was relegated to an unprepossessing twelve-by-twelve plot in a corner. “He did something that was so off the assumption of what that space should have been,” Gupta told me. “Usually, young artists bring in paintings and put them on the wall, or set up sculptures. He made it into a community performance space.”

For the three weeks of the exhibit, Gates staged “happenings” in his corner. He had salvaged wooden pallets from a Wrigley’s plant that had abandoned the South Side for China, and he stacked them in piles meant to evoke Buddhist pagodas he had visited in Japan. “He wanted to comment on that by finding these materials that at one point had value and no longer did,” Gupta says. “He was going to bring value back to them.” He gathered a group of local musicians, whom he called the Black Monks of Mississippi, and they played droning music while he sang mournful cadences that evoked slave spirituals and Zen chants. “It’s not Buddhism,” Gates says of the songs. “It’s not gospel music. It is those things, but it’s also, like, ‘What are the forms that religious order takes in order to celebrate the divine?’ ” He encouraged visitors to talk and argue about race and spirituality, and at times brought them to a West Side shoe-shine stand called the Shine King, a neighborhood institution that served everyone from limo drivers to preachers to drug dealers. Gates shined shoes and pressed gallery patrons to do so, too. “He brought all of these new people to the Shine King,” Gupta says, “and gave them a new way of looking at a neighborhood.” The show, called “Temple Exercises,” drew packed crowds.

In 2009, Gupta signed Gates to his gallery and went to the nada Art Fair in Miami with a series of oversized shoe-shine stands that Gates had made out of salvaged scrap wood. They sold immediately.

“That’s when his object-based work began to get traction,” Gupta says. That same year, the curator Francesco Bonami came to Chicago, looking for artists to include in the Whitney Biennial, the museum’s prestigious survey of new art. Gates showed him a videotape of “Temple Exercises,” and Bonami immediately invited him to participate. “I was impressed that Theaster’s work was political and social in content, but not preaching,” Bonami says. “It had a strong spiritual element.” Gates used his Wrigley’s pallets to build a mazelike structure that filled the Whitney Museum’s unwieldy courtyard space, placed shoe-shine stands around like gaunt sentries, and again enlisted the Black Monks of Mississippi. He was quickly booked to show at major exhibition spaces around the country and abroad.

As he performed in larger venues, he made increasingly provocative observations about race, but in a way that seemed calibrated not to alienate his largely white audiences. At a 2010 exhibition at the Milwaukee Art Museum, he presented “To Speculate Darkly,” a multimedia show in which he sat spinning pots at a wheel, emulating a slave-era potter and poet known only as Dave. Gates had read about him in a book by Leonard Todd, a descendant of the South Carolina plantation family that had owned Dave. At the opening-night lecture, Gates spoke pointedly about Todd’s efforts to re-create Dave’s inner life. “He would say, ‘I imagine that Dave felt really bad on this hot South Carolinian day,’” Gates said. “‘I imagine the conditions of slavery to have been thus and so.’” Gates snorted. “I was, like, Well, this man is doing a whole hell of a lot of imagining!” He added, “I feel like I’m probably a little bit closer to Dave than Leonard Todd is. And if Leonard Todd can speculate darkly, then God knows I’m gonna.”

The audience gave an uneasy chuckle, a common reaction at Gates’s performances and lectures, where he plays with the awkward dynamic between him and his audiences—confronting them with references to historical racism and also flattering them by implying that attending his exhibition exempts them from criticism. At a 2012 lecture in Baltimore, Gates stopped in mid-thought and said, “You know, black people, we call white people the devil. White people ain’t the devil.” Wary laughter rippled through the crowd. Gates waited a moment and said, impishly, “That’s all I got to say about that.” There was another wave of laughter, this one propelled by a gust of relief.

Gates told me, “Black anger is one of the things that white people have always used against us. So I’ve learned to fight it. I can express anger, but, like, reflexively.” In performances, he often projects a teasing, elusive persona that puts an oblique spin on his social critiques. At one performance, he led a gospel choir onstage, then stepped forward to sing, in a precise tenor, a verse of charged but inscrutable lyrics: “Stars, moons, and Tater Tots / porcelain, stoneware, and astronauts / catfish fresh while nigger rots / Afro-candied lollipops / Bill Clinton sporting a Hottentot.” Intoning spirituals, mystically reëmbodiment Dave the slave potter, Gates invites his audiences to see him as an icon of suffering. For a show at Los Angeles’s Museum of Contemporary Art, in 2012, as the Black Monks of Mississippi sang a gospel number, he walked out into the gallery, took hold of one of his heavy shoe-shine sculptures, and dragged it across the floor on his back. “It was like Christ carrying the cross,” Jeffrey Deitch, then the director of the museum, says. “It was astonishing—one of the most transporting images I’ve ever seen or heard or experienced.”

Susan May, the artistic director of the White Cube gallery, in London (known for displaying the works of Damien Hirst), says she was aware that the growing fascination with Gates represented a kind of “cultural tourism,” with rich white collectors delightedly converging on his studio in the ghetto. May told me, “I was a little, you know, kind of, sort of, concerned that then ‘Oh, how exotic that we can go to these places.’” Nevertheless, in late 2011 she got Gates signed to White Cube.

The galvanizing piece in Gates’s first show there, in the fall of 2012, was an installation called “Raising Goliath,” built around a full-size fire engine, made in Peel, Arkansas, in 1967. The engine was suspended several feet off the ground and attached by a pulley system to a six-ton counterweight, made of a cabinet filled with thousands of books and magazines donated by the publisher of *Ebony* and *Jet*—Gates’s way of suggesting that the burdens of history can be lightened by acknowledging African-Americans’ rich culture.

Hamza Walker, who leads a painting seminar at the University of Chicago, admits that at first he was nonplussed by the directness of Gates’s fire-hose sculptures and racially themed installations. “There is an earnestness that almost comes from a naïve vantage point,” Walker says. “Some of the moves I would look at and say, ‘I can’t believe you would do that—or anybody.’” He has since come to appreciate Gates’s approach, which he describes as free of the willed cynicism and self-referential ironies typical of academic artists. “It turns out he is much better off for not going through the system,” Walker said. “Because there’s something else on his mind that didn’t get beat down.”

According to Gates, his most celebrated work, *Dorchester Projects*, began haphazardly, almost unconsciously. In 2006, a year before he launched himself as a conceptual artist, he moved to the South Side neighborhood of Grand Crossing. Despite the neighborhood’s dangers (it averaged one fatal shooting a week), he chose Grand Crossing, he says, “because I’m a hood rat,” and because it was a short jog across Hyde Park from his job at the university. He wanted to build a pottery studio, and the South Side offered real estate that was affordable on a modest university salary. He found a former candy store at 6918 South Dorchester Avenue—a one-story brick building in the middle of a tree-lined block of shabby bungalows—and bought it for a hundred and thirty thousand dollars, with a subprime mortgage and a loan from his mother.

Gates recently drove me around the South Side, through streets of scarred buildings where there was almost no one out in the middle of the day. “To a person who lives in a very affluent neighborhood, it probably seems pretty blighted,” he said. “For a person who lives here, it just probably feels like home. There are businesses here, there are places of faith, there are creative people, there is a black middle class—but you have to look for it. It’s not on the main street, not on the surface.”

For the first two years, Gates’s candy store was anything but a beacon of hope for the neighborhood’s poor. When Walker’s marriage broke up, Gates took him in, and they jokily called the house the Home for Wayward Men. In 2009, Gates began collecting cast-off cultural artifacts from the South Side: fourteen thousand books on art and architecture from the failed *Prairie Avenue Bookshop*, eight thousand vinyl

records from the defunct Dr. Wax music store, sixty thousand glass slides from the university's art-history department. Gates had no specific plan for the collections. "I was concerned with the creative reuse of materials," he told me. "Maybe I was having some kind of eco-response and trying to make a narrative about the signs of the hood—like, 'signs,' as in Derrida. Or some shit."

Then he read about Rick Lowe, an African-American artist who, in the early nineties, had bought a row of abandoned shotgun shacks on Houston's downtown fringe, and enjoined local artists to fix them up for low-income families. Calling the development Project Row Houses, Lowe framed the act not as urban renewal but as an art installation, which drew "symbolic and poetic" attention to the problems of homelessness and racial discrimination. "What makes anything art, really, is how the artist positions it," Lowe told me recently. "It's all about the contextualization." Lowe was inspired by the German artist Joseph Beuys, whose concept of art as "social sculpture" informed a movement, in the nineteen-seventies, to create works that erupted out of gallery spaces: Christo's experiments in wrapping islands; Gordon Matta-Clark's *Food*, a restaurant run by artists in a disused storefront in SoHo. Lowe was the first to use a housing project as his medium, and it drew attention: he was written up in the *Times*, and Project Row Houses was the subject of a PBS documentary.

Gates recognized a parallel between Lowe's work and Mockbee's housing developments in rural Alabama*, and he wondered if something similar was possible in Chicago. "What would it take to change how people imagine what happens in an all-black, seemingly violent neighborhood?" he says. "To change the hearts and minds around where I live?" When Lowe came to Chicago, Gates sought him out. Lowe told me, "He was asking the very basic question that he's become a master of: How do you get the resources? I said, 'You leverage on the resources that you have.'"

Gates had no political power and little money to buy real estate. But in the fall of 2008 the subprime-mortgage bubble burst, and a two-story clapboard bungalow next door to the candy store went on the market for sixteen thousand dollars. He bought it, gutted it, and, with the help of the artist John Preus, used the recycled scrap to rebuild the interior, fashioning raw wood shelves to accommodate his huge book collection. He installed a "soul-food kitchen" for dinner parties, and a room to hold floor-to-ceiling shelves of glass slides. The outside he clad in vertical strips of weathered barn wood, creating what looks like an elegant Swiss ski chalet, with windows in an asymmetric arrangement that evokes Mondrian. He called it the Archive House. He used the leftover scrap wood to build his first shoe-shine stands, and with the proceeds from their sale he funded further development on Dorchester. He soon gutted the candy store and rebuilt it, replacing the floors with varnished lanes from a defunct bowling alley and the walls with green chalkboards from a closed elementary school, then filled it with the Dr. Wax records and renamed it the Listening House. It was the start of a pattern he has repeated in his neighborhood: buying and gutting properties, fashioning the refuse into art, selling it, and buying more property.

Unlike Lowe's work in Houston, the Dorchester Projects were not housing. Instead, Gates framed them as cultural institutions, meant to inspire his neighbors, who could visit at set times to peruse the books and slides and listen to the records. (In 2011, he set up a nonprofit, Rebuild, to provide programming for

Dorchester Projects, and later hired Jeffreen Hayes, a curator from the Birmingham Museum of Art, to run it.) As Gates's standing in the art world grew, the neighbors were joined by collectors, gallery owners, and critics from around the world, who arrived at Dorchester in tour buses and limousines, finding easy parking on the empty streets. Gates held dinners, Black Monks performances, and "listening parties," creating an atmosphere a bit like Warhol's Factory, but with a socially conscious edge. Gupta promoted the project to the city's collectors and philanthropists—who were often the same people. "All of the affluent philanthropists in Chicago collect art," Gupta told me. "I remember taking, one by one, every affluent philanthropist in Chicago down to Dorchester, and the minute they saw Theaster they were, like, 'How can we help?'"

Gates snatched up four bungalows, which he refurbished to house artists who, along with working on their own projects, archive his vast collections, lead tours, and help with parties. He bought six apartment buildings, and allowed the tenants to stay at below-market rent. In 2011, he acquired the handsome red brick building diagonally across the street from the original two properties on Dorchester. It was the debris from that gut-demolition that Gates shipped to Kassel for Documenta 13. Living in the patched Huguenot House with his builders and staging performances with the Black Monks—as part of an installation he described as a "conversation" about "displaced peoples"—Gates emerged as the star of the exhibition, praised for his "poetic cross-fertilization of materials and ideals," and written up in the Times and the Wall Street Journal. With the proceeds from the debris, Gates converted the upper floor into a loft-like apartment for himself. He turned the ground floor into the Black Cinema House, where he screens movies from the city's black film archives and holds weekly filmmaking classes for middle-school children.

In 2011, the University of Chicago made Gates its director of Arts and Public Life, charged with extending the university's reach beyond its Hyde Park neighborhood. Gates says that his affiliation with the university has complicated his reception in the South Side's black community. But it also helped him create the Arts Incubator and, recently, to persuade the university to rent him the abandoned building next door, which he wants to convert into various businesses, including an upscale café.

His most ambitious project is the transformation of the Stony Island State Savings Bank. "The bank he wanted from Day One," Walker told me. "The bank is beyond impulse. Way back, he was, like, 'I'm going to get that bank.'" Gates says that the bank, whose four gigantic columns support a pediment with carved lion heads, stands in for every historic building he saw bulldozed during Chicago's drug wars—"a symbol of everything I couldn't control." It was condemned as unsafe in 2012, but a few days before the demolition was scheduled Emanuel visited Dorchester Projects with his wife and children. Impressed with Gates's efforts to revitalize the South Side, he asked if there was anything he could do to help. Gates jumped: "I said, 'Well, there is this building that you guys are tearing down.'"

Emanuel agreed to halt the demolition, if Gates could present a viable financial plan for restoring the property. Gates says that developers had tried to get control of the abandoned bank for twenty-five years, but couldn't make the numbers work. "It was one of these moments where the imaginary becomes so

important, and having vision beyond a kind of practical response,” he said. “I think artists can grapple with problems in that way.” Thieves had removed the building’s valuable copper wiring, but he salvaged fragments of marble from the urinal partitions and wainscoting, cut them into small rectangles, and applied an acid-etched design resembling a bank bond, with scrollwork, a motto (“in ART we trust”), and Gates’s signature. He brought a hundred “bonds” to the Art Basel fair in Switzerland and sold them for five thousand dollars each, raising half a million for the rehab, and building awareness of the project among the world’s richest collectors.

Such ingenious schemes, which play openly on collectors’ desire to contribute to worthy projects in the ghetto, are partly what lie behind the boast Gates made at his C.T.A. talk: “I’m not really an artist. I’m something else. I’m probably first a hustler.” When I later asked him to expand on this, he said that he was alluding to the art world as a whole. “I’m actually implicating everyone,” he said. “I’m the hustler who’s just willing to admit this is all a fucking hustle—like, you think that Basel Miami isn’t a fucking hustle? For a hundred and twenty-five square feet we got to pay seventy-five thousand dollars. It’s five-day real estate!” We were sitting in the hushed bar of a hotel in Amherst, after Gates’s lecture, and heads turned when he started yelling, “That’s a fucking hustle! But what we will talk about, instead of the hustle, is”—he adopted a smarmy voice—“ ‘It’s so exciting that we have an opportunity where galleries from around the world can interact with one another. Here, in Basel, Switzerland, we bring people together.’ ” He resumed his normal voice and said, “But it’s a fucking real-estate scandal!”

Selling urinal scraps to fund culture in a neglected ghetto is, Gates suggests, beating the art world at its own hustle. Indeed, according to Susan May, of White Cube, he persuaded the gallery to sell a set of “bonds” to international collectors—and to waive its usual percentage. When I expressed stupefaction that a gallery would give up its cut, May said, “That’s exactly how it should be. It’s great to go to the bank, or Dorchester, and feel a sense of what he’s doing and the kind of impact on that neighborhood.”

Gates hopes that the refurbished bank—with a bookstore, a Japanese tea shop, an art-advising company, and an investment firm to support emerging businesses—will become the anchor for a thriving new South Side. He is untroubled by the thought of wholesale gentrification. “It would even be fine if in five years, maybe because of me, the whole thing is lily white,” he told *Art in America* in 2011, adding, “Gentrification won’t need my approval or disapproval.” Now, he says, Chicago has too much available real estate to allow his neighborhood to be gentrified anytime soon. “There are too many places to get to before you get to me,” he said. At times, Gates can seem less like an artist who works in buildings than like a developer. At the former public-housing buildings that the city granted him, a sprawling complex on Seventieth Street, he is collaborating with the Brinshore development company on an eleven-million-dollar renovation.

With the purchase, in 2012, of a twenty-five-thousand-square-foot former Anheuser-Busch distribution plant, where he houses his art studio, Gates is now a significant landowner on Chicago’s South Side. His presence there is crucial for the philanthropists, politicians, collectors, investors, and development companies that work with him; it is primarily his force of personality that pulls in money and public

attention. But as Tony Whitfield, the director of social engagement at Parsons The New School for Design, points out, “There’s nothing nailing Gates’s foot to Dorchester Projects. We’re so personality-driven and so dependent on creating heroes that we forget that a hero can be hit by a truck and disappear—or just leave.” He adds, “What’s sustainable about that?”

When I first talked to Gates, in late October, he said, “I am not moving. I have not moved. That staying becomes a political act. The most radical thing I could do—as my class changes, as more opportunities grow—is to simply stay where I am.” But when I met him in Chicago he voiced another possibility. On a Sunday in early November, Gates was hosting a friend, a porcelain-skinned, fine-featured young woman who was visiting from out of town. As he drove to brunch, the conversation turned to Gates’s future. If he had a wife and children, he allowed, his decision about whether to stay in a neighborhood plagued by crime and devoid of good schools “would be very, very different.” He thought, and added, “But maybe that’s part of the reason I’m not married with kids.”

“Right,” the young woman said.

“At some point, I might have to decide . . .” He paused. “I might decide that I want something different.”

For the time being, Gates is invested in the South Side. But the area remains one of the most dangerous and poverty-riddled in the city, and Gates admits that the impact of Dorchester Projects has been largely symbolic. Emanuel agreed, telling me, “Do I think it’s reached its potential? I think he would tell you no. O.K.? Do I think it’s had an effect? You take an abandoned building and now there’s movies shown in it? Absolutely.” Kavi Gupta says that measurable change has been mostly on Gates’s own block, where his neighbors have a new pride of place. “I’m not saying it’s a beautiful suburban neighborhood,” Gupta says. “But it’s cleaned up, it’s proper, the lawns are mowed, there’s no more thrown trash everywhere, there’s no cars stalled on the grass.” One morning, I talked to a neighbor of Gates’s outside his apartment. A middle-aged man in paint-spattered work boots, he warily denied any knowledge of Gates’s activities, but began to open up when Gates emerged onto the street. Last summer, two of the man’s five children—teen-age boys—had arrived at one of Gates’s renovation jobs and asked for work. Gates hired them, paying the younger one in pizza because he was underage, and then enlisted them as gardeners at the Listening House. “At the end of the day, they would make poems about working on the garden,” Gates told me. “When they’re twenty to twenty-five, they will not forget that.” The man nodded.

One night, Gates threw a party at the Black Cinema House, downstairs from his apartment, to show movies of the Black Monks of Mississippi performing at Documenta 13. Before the screening, some forty revellers—mostly stylish young members of the city’s black bohemia—roamed around, drinking wine and cocktails, and eating catered chicken and crab cakes. Gates hugged and air-kissed guests. After a full circuit of the room, he stood on a bench, clinked his glass, and toasted the Monks. Then he arrived at his point. He wanted permission to “canonize” the Monks’ work by compiling the music they had made together in a twelve-volume album. He had paid them for their performances, but, he said, “It was not money that gives me the right to reproduce this music.” He said he owed each musician five thousand

dollars. “I need to say that publicly, because that represents a hundred and fifteen thousand dollars. I got to figure out where that shit comes from before I can release this thing!”

“Canonize, brother!” one of the Monks cried, to a roar of laughter from the crowd. “Come on, canonize!”

Walker was at the party, and I asked what it was about Gates that made people clamor to realize his dreams. “There’s a charisma, enthusiasm, where you’re willing to forgive—” He stopped himself and started again. “Is it about the sculptural object? Is it about a sense of doing good within a given community? What are you buying into? Part of it might be a bet with yourself—to think, Who is this guy across from me pitching this idea? Do I believe him? What is he up to? Is there a sense of gambling that goes on in the art world that’s, like, ‘This stuff all sounds interesting. I don’t know how much of it is real, I don’t know how much of it is half-baked, but I’m willing to play this’? And the more it pans out in terms of tangible projects the more people are, like, ‘O.K.! All right! I’ll keep on playing!’ Meanwhile, what’s being generated along the way is this.” He gestured at the people drinking and eating, in what had been an abandoned building.

“So,” Walker went on, “a social space around which a whole tier of musicians, artists, writers, makers, people who just need a job, hangers-on, art historians, interns from England, his studio manager, whoever—it becomes a platform for all these people, a stage for all of them to come onto. If you’re going to talk about ‘social practices,’ it hasn’t panned out in terms of reaching thousands of children, getting them to lay down their arms. It could—eventually. And I think the hope and desire to fix and repair is part of it. This might not do those things, but I think part of the rhetoric is a collective wish or desire for something that would. That’s what we’re buying into. We all know these neighborhoods all across America, so we’re asking ourselves, ‘Well, how is it going to get fixed? And who is going to do it?’ There’s a will, but there’s not a way. He represents a way.” ♦

* An earlier version of this article incorrectly referred to housing developments in rural Arkansas; they are in rural Alabama.

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