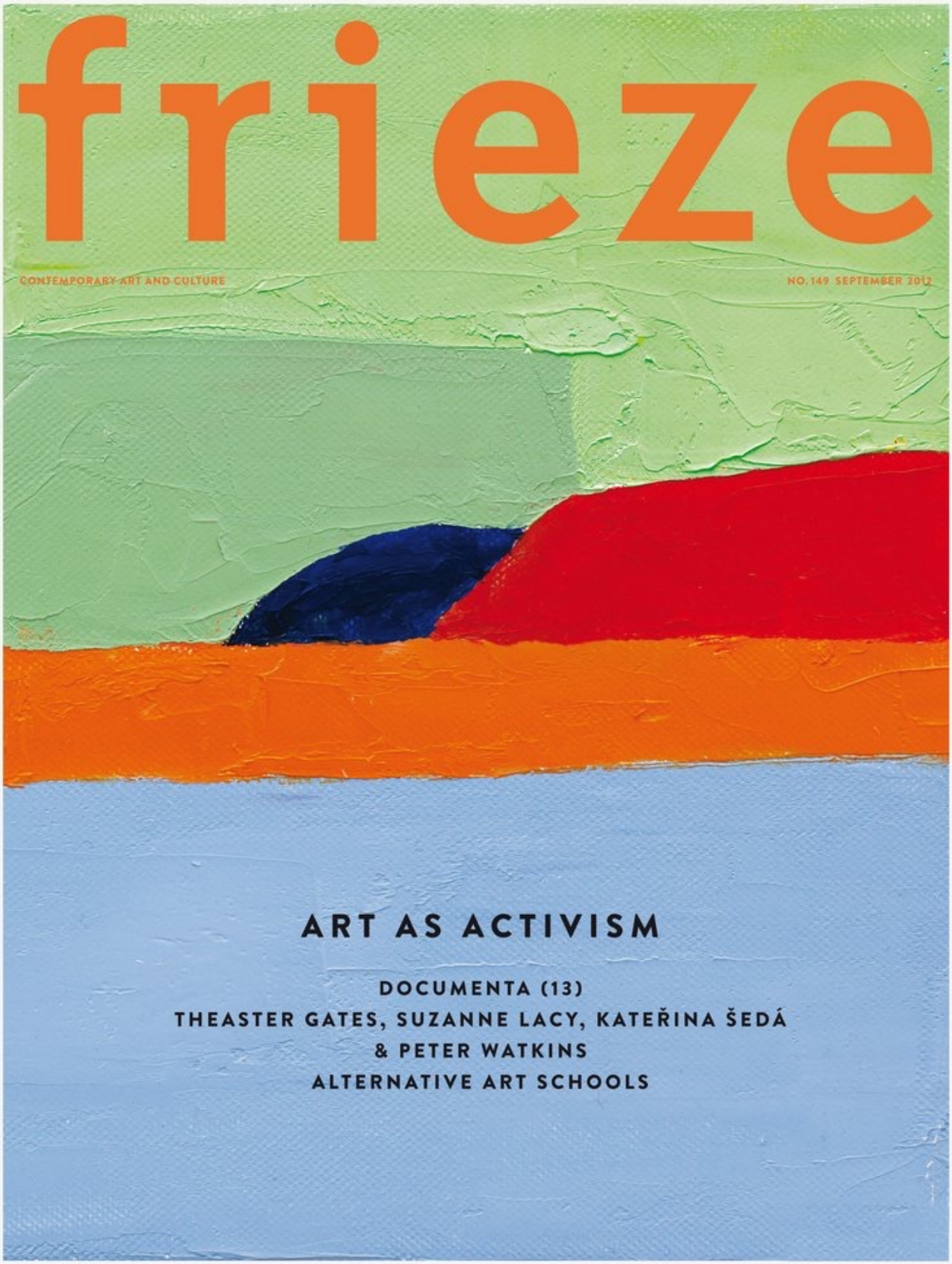

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FEATURE - 01 SEP 2012

Designs for Life

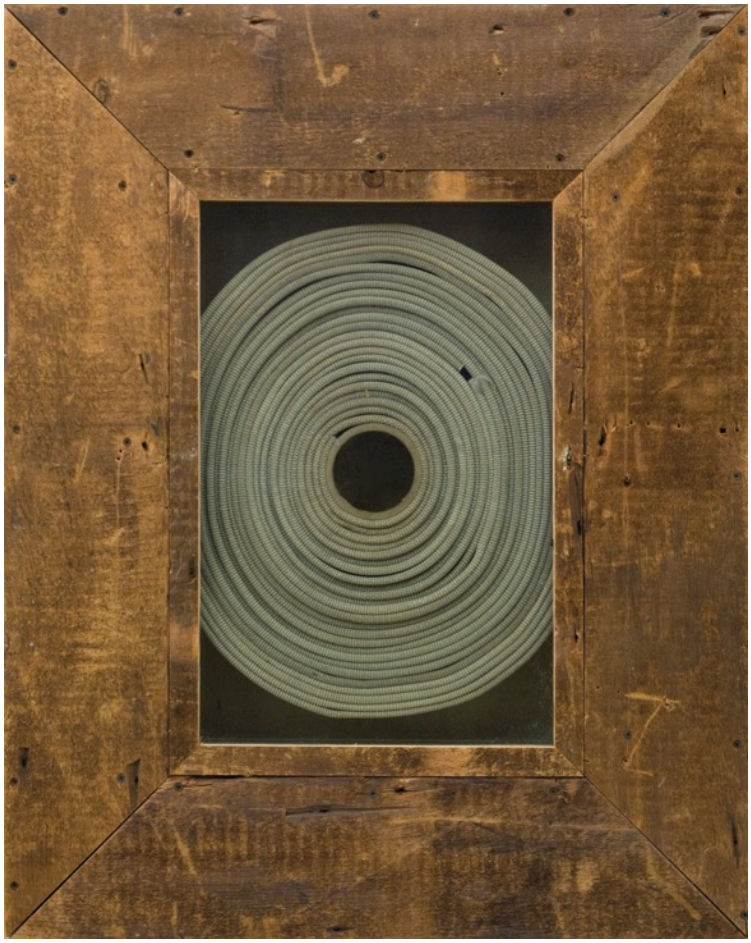
BY MARK GODFREY

Mark Godfrey travelled to four cities to gain a deeper understanding of Theaster Gates's intermingling of art with urban regeneration

LA, November 2011

In November 2011, I saw Theaster Gates's work for the first time at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, in his exhibition 'An Epitaph for Civil Rights'. Gates populated a large space with quite distinct kinds of objects, the first being wall-hung works made with decommissioned fire hoses ('In the Event of Race Riot', 2011). Two very long hoses were coiled in a tight circle and hung side by side, whilst shorter ones were looped and placed behind glass and thick frames of reclaimed wood. In the most monumental of these works, the hoses were flattened and arranged in two-metre-high strips along a six-metre expanse as a kind of giant non-painted painting (Civil Tapestries, 2011).

In the context of a Los Angeles art museum, it was hard not to think of American abstraction in the early 1960s, particularly of the stripe paintings of Frank Stella, and the targets of Jasper



In the Event of Race Riot, XXVIII, 2011, wood, hoses and glass, 86 x 67 x 18 cm. All images courtesy Kavi Gupta, Chicago/Berlin

Johns and, slightly later, Kenneth Noland. But Gates's title and material indicated his wish to trouble these safe art-historical allusions with very different kinds of references to the early 1960s, namely to the civil rights marches that took place in 1963 in Birmingham, Alabama. The Alabama police had used German shepherd dogs against African-American protestors (images of which were used by Andy Warhol and, more recently, Kelley Walker) but they also turned fire hoses against crowds of peaceful black school children with spray powerful enough to strip paint from a wall.

It seemed to me very troubling (in a good way) that Gates could use materials in works that at first appeared as near-decorative returns to 1960s formalism but that gradually recalled a history of violent oppression; a similar double movement animated the two wooden structures in the installation, which Gates terms 'Thrones' (2009–12). Made from reclaimed strips of wood, they tower over viewers. One of them does actually look like a throne; perhaps the kind that Gates became familiar with when he studied the history of African religion in Cape Town, South Africa, after his first degree in urban planning at Iowa State University. The other, with its stepped structure, brought to mind shoeshine stands. I imagined white businessmen sitting like capitalist kings, and black men kneeling before them, buffing up their shoes.

Arranged across the main expanse of the floor were a series of oblong concrete blocks ('Stack 6901', 2011). Their grid formation recalled Carl Andre or Sol LeWitt but they were not pristine forms – some blocks encased stacks of ceramic plates whose edges were visible; others had slats of wood or carpet embedded in their sides. It would take me some time to figure out why the ceramics were there, though the detritus of old buildings immediately brought to mind the work of Gordon Matta-Clark who showed fragments taken from his cuts in galleries to

represent the work he did on the buildings. Gates calls his oblongs 'stand-ins', and in a related way to Matta-Clark they are surrogates for the places where these materials are resourced.

The installation impressed me first because of the subtle ways in which Gates moves beyond formalism and commemoration. Rather than simply memorializing the period of the civil rights struggle or redeeming materials that were once used against black people to create aesthetic objects, Gates was suggesting that the history of 1963 should not be understood as a resolved story with Obama's 2008 election as its closing, triumphant chapter. The works pointed to the persistence of race and class inequality across American cities. The fire hose pieces tempted me to imagine under what circumstances the glass will be broken, and the hoses used again, and by whom this time, and against which targets? It seemed to me that this gallery of objects in Los Angeles was thronged with imagined people – Stella and Noland, Andre and Matta-Clark, shoe shiners and businessmen, the Alabama police and the school children, the residents of the houses from where the wooden fragments had been taken and the people who had made the ceramics. Gates had animated the gallery space in a physical way, to be sure (dispersing objects across the space so viewers had to weave their way through the installation) but these imagined presences made for an unsettled space, despite the decorum of the installation. Was he haunting the room? Was he invoking 'spirits'? These questions would return.

Soul Food Starter Kit, 2012, reclaimed wood, paint and ceramic soul food wares, 150 x 76 x 56 cm

Chicago, March 2012

Earlier this year, I was in Chicago and decided to visit Gates. I confess that in the ante rvening three months I had done no research into his practice whatsoever, not even so much as a Google search, but my ignorance of everything other than the objects I'd seen in Los Angeles

made my day with him all the more enthralling. I met Gates briefly at the University of Chicago where I had given a lecture and was about to do some studio crits, and arranged to join him afterwards at his house on Dorchester Street some miles south of the campus. A student drove me to the address, through streets which looked pretty deserted and run down – to my British eyes not quite like Avon Barksdale's Baltimore territory in The Wire, but not too far off. The student left me on the street outside the address, and I had to clamber over a small wall to get to the front door. I entered to find Gates sitting at the centre of a long wooden table with some 20 people congregated around it, all of them eating from lunch boxes. I was given one and told to sit, eat and follow the proceedings. The people were from different housing organizations across Chicago and Illinois, and were there to hear about Gates's projects. Some (I guessed) were there to learn from him; others were potentially funding his projects.

Without cynicism, Gates employs the commercialism of the art world to regenerate deprived neighbourhoods.

Gates explained how he was using funds raised from the sale of his art, as well as loans and grants from other organizations to acquire abandoned properties in rundown areas that had been populated by the black community since Irish and German residents had moved out decades before. His aim was to collaborate with other artists, craftspeople and unemployed workers to gut the properties and rebuild them. In this way he would learn new carpentry and construction skills and teach them to others, while harnessing the building skills that many artists already had but rarely used. Some buildings could become cultural centres, others mixed houses with living spaces and studios – the kind of multipurpose affordable spaces needed by so many young musicians, writers, dancers and artists in Chicago. With the establishment of such cultural sites and the movement of artists to these areas, there was the possibility that new hope could be injected into the neighbourhoods.

Looking up from the table, I realized that I was sitting in the first of these buildings, and that everything around me – the table, the shelves, the steps, the exterior walls – had been built by Gates since he had bought the property some years before. It was also clear that all the materials for the architecture and furniture around me had been recycled from wood taken from the house when it was gutted, or reclaimed from other properties. There was a simple

beauty to the carpentry; no fuss, no ornamentation, hardly any carving. Gates exploited the colours, grains and textures of the raw unvarnished woods and let pattern emerge from the simple juxtaposition of different coloured strips, just as he did with the 'Thrones' I had seen in LA.

Dorchester Projects, 2010, view of Dr. Wax Music Library, Chicago

Soon the talk came to an end and we began a tour of the house. Gates let us wander upstairs to his bedroom on the top floor and explained the presence of two collections of archives arranged on shelves in a back room and in the middle floor. One was a library of books he got from Chicago's legendary Prairie Avenue architectural bookshop when it closed down, and the other a collection of glass slides that the art history department at the University of Chicago had been on the verge of dumping now that their teaching material has been digitized. He had also bought a collection of records from Dr. Wax, a local record shop that was closing down. All of these collections were now at the disposal of the local community, and could be used by people Gates invited to the house from time to time during dinners that he would host.

We were then led on a tour of the neighbourhood. The first stop was 6901 Dorchester, just across the street. We walked into a large red building that had been stripped back to its shell. There were no dividing walls, just beams between the floors, and some struts where the walls had been or could go. I would later discover that all the material from inside it was en route to documenta (13); for the time being, I learned about Gates's plans for its future. This building will become what he calls a 'Black Cinema House': a place for local people to learn filmmaking and editing skills, to screen new work, and (importantly) to screen, study and celebrate films made in Chicago in the early 20th century by black actors and directors – films which have over the years fallen into oblivion. Finally we were taken to a string of houses some blocks away. These red-brick structures, built in the 1960s, had been abandoned since the late '80s. They were boarded up and derelict; Gates had bought the entire row, and it was these properties that he envisaged as future residential and studio spaces for artists.

Dorchester Projects, 2010, Chicago

All this time, the crowd of Chicago housing experts had been asking questions and expressing their admiration, clearly somewhat bowled over by what they saw. These people devoted their careers to addressing problems of deprivation and depression in economically and politically neglected neighbourhoods; it was clear they had never seen an approach like Gates's. What amazed me was the massive ambition of his ideas; it was surprising to meet an

artist who was putting together the insights of his first degree in urban planning with his later training in art. I was transfixed by the effortless way he presented his project to the gathered people, and it seems evident now that this aspect of his personality is entirely relevant to an account of his practice. Likewise, another biographical detail is important: Gates's commitment to the neighbourhood and his decision to stay in Dorchester when he has the economic means to move away.

Most startling was the simple circular logic of the economic model Gates had constructed. Materials taken from run-down houses were being used to make art works. The works were now being sold at art fairs by two galleries (Kavi Gupta and, more recently, White Cube) and the funds derived from the sale of these art works were being used to acquire more properties. The properties would also be transformed and yield more materials for his objects, and so on. Gates knows very well that the objects he showed at moca are now eminently collectible; without cynicism he employs the commercialism of the art world and his recent success to regenerate deprived neighbourhoods. This is not only a new manipulation of the art market but also a compelling reversal of sculptural history – particularly of the practices of Robert Smithson and Matta-Clark. No more entropy, no more transformations of abandoned buildings to create temporary anarchitecture. 'I leverage artistic moments to effect real change,' Gates has written (1).

Later that afternoon, I re-joined Gates in his studio some miles north of Dorchester. The studio – which he calls a 'shop', as in carpentry shop, and which was manned by a crew of assistant-apprentices – was crammed with wood, furniture, carpets, etc. I have never seen so many things in one place. Much of it came from 6901 Dorchester and was about to be shipped to Kassel. There were also tables and chairs from a Chicago school that had been shut down, more wood from other buildings, and an archive of papers and materials from Ebony magazine. Gates knows what he wants to do with some of this stuff, but much of it he collects without an immediate plan of action. It was now that I could ask about the ceramics in the 'stand-in' objects I'd seen in la, because many of these had returned to the studio, and there were also more stacks of bowls and plates.

Gates studied ceramics as his subsidiary during his urban planning degree and continued to use clay for some time after. But more recently he has worked with traditional Japanese ceramicists and the plates are their work. He brought the potters to Chicago because he wanted to cross the rituals of traditional Japanese dining with the customs of black American

soul food. He hosts dinners in his house on Dorchester, bringing together different people from the city to spend an evening together. Many of the guests he hosts know something about Japanese dining and something about soul food, but never really think much about the history of either. When Gates serves soul food in this way (in small handmade bowls, and at a similar pace to a Japanese banquet), both the Japanese and African-American elements of the feast are de-familiarized, and guests can begin to think anew about the histories that underlie both.

Shoe Shine with Old Growth Pedestal (Him), 2012, reclaimed wood and iron, 193 x 56 x 84 cm

London, May 2012

After my day in Chicago, I felt that I had to adjust my basic ideas of what art can do today and what an artistic practice might be. It was at this point that I proposed writing this piece, and in an attempt to get a better hold of Gates's practice, I organized to see him again in London where he was coming – en route to Kassel – to plan his White Cube show in September. Mainly I wanted to ask about an aspect of his practice that I had not witnessed in Los Angeles or Chicago: namely, the role of performance in his work.

As well as his studies in urban planning and ceramics, Gates also brings to his practice vocal skills honed during years of going to church with his mother and, later, of leading its choir. Gates will often sing in his performances, and usually he is accompanied by The Black Monks of Mississippi, a Chicago-

based group of musicians. The Black Monks draw from slave-hood era spirituals, Gospel, blues and free jazz, and the singing, percussion and sax is usually improvised. When I asked him about his own vocal style, Gates, sitting across a table from me, burst into song. He must have known I was slightly uncomfortable but fixed my stare so I couldn't look away. All of this was friendly, but it did make me think that he is a master at testing out well-meaning white curator-critics like myself.

> 'I leverage artistic moments to effect real change.'
> Theaster Gates

Gates uses his singing in different ways. The guests at many of the dinners in Dorchester will hear him performing with The Black Monks, and his songs will sometimes take the discussion of food in different ways. In one, for instance, Gates addresses the crisis of obesity and diabetes in the black community, and the problem of junk food being pushed onto disadvantaged people. I also asked about the performance Gates had made for the Armory Fair, where in March 2012 he had been the 'Armory Artist'. Gates had taken a booth and, in his words, held court – inviting people to 'See, Sit, Sup, Sip, Sing'. 'If the belly of whales and fiery furnaces can render men and women unscathed', he wrote, 'then, surely, I can have a few conversations from within the beast.'2 During his spell in the fair, Gates held a number of meetings at a desk he constructed with furniture from a Chicago elementary school, and made a set of blackboard drawings (think Joseph Beuys) diagraming his Chicago projects and the methods of their funding. But at one point, he was approached by a curator from Birmingham, Alabama, about a show to commemorate the 1963 events. His reaction was to stand on the desk and launch into improvised chanting, confronting this request by singing about the way American museums use black artists, and about the inadequacy of showing his sculptures as a way of addressing Birmingham's history in the city itself. As he explained to me: 'My fire hose can't stand in the place of an 80-year-old woman who was there when those fire hoses were being used. While some times it is important to operate at the level of the symbolic, sometimes it is equally important to operate at the level of the real.'

Watching Gates sing to me, hearing him talk about these performances and listening to his words describing the Armory by referring to Old Testament stories of Jonah and Daniel, another facet of his practice became clear: that Gates's performances bring together two areas of his thought that most people would usually consider incompatible. On the one hand, Gates

The Armory Show, New York, 2012, installation view, left to right: In the Event of Race Riot II, Untitled (vitrine I) and Untitled (Plates) (all 2011). Photograph: Yong Sun Han

is clearly informed by institutional critique, by the ways artists like Andrea Fraser are addressing the compromised situations of art practice today, and also by the ways David Hammons notoriously resists the invitations of the predominantly white population of curators eager to acquire and exhibit his work. His performances are also addressing real questions of economic inequality and political disenfranchisement affecting black people in the States. At the same time, he is genuinely interested in rituals, not just as historical ceremonies, but as ways of bringing people and thoughts together, just as he is sincere in his approach to incantation and religious music, testing even the most secular members of his audience to reconsider their ambivalence about the 'spiritual' in art.

Kassel, June 2012

Within hours of arriving at dOCUMENTA (13), a month or so after our London meeting, I made my way to the Huguenot House on Friedrichstrasse to look at the outcome of the project I'd heard about in Chicago. Huguenot House is a rather drab-looking building from 1826 which was damaged during World War ii, partially inhabited until the 1970s but abandoned ever since with not enough resources or need in Kassel to tear it down and re-develop the site. When invited by artistic director Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev to participate in dOCUMENTA (13), Gates decided to reflect on the

affinities between Kassel and Chicago's south side, both places blighted by difficult histories, and to do so by bringing materials from 6901 Dorchester to rehabilitate the Kassel building.

On walking in, it was strange to realize that the 'stuff' that had been missing from within the shell of 6901 Dorchester during my visit was now holding together this building halfway across the world. Whereas previously I had seen Gates's art objects in a museum space and his architectural work in his Dorchester house, now, in an interesting way, everything was in one place. Some of the wood from Chicago had been used for struts, beams and steps, serving a structural purpose. Some was transformed into practical furniture including wardrobes, stools and a rather wonderful swinging bench. And then there were wall-hung, wood-framed objects made with carpet fragments, torn wallpaper and painted wooden slats decorating the house as art works so often do in domestic settings.

Gates is genuinely interested in rituals, not just as historical ceremonies, but as ways of bringing people and thoughts together.

It must be said I had some instant reservations about the whole project. Gates had told me how important it is to act on the level of the real sometimes, not the symbolic. Yet I wondered whether the work in Kassel wasn't just a symbolic gesture, rather than a concrete regeneration project like those I'd seen in Chicago. Plus, Gates has insisted on remaining on Dorchester and on addressing local concerns by selling his works through the globalized art world. So what happens to Huguenot House once he leaves Kassel and dOCUMENTA (13) is done? The circular economy of his Chicago activities seemed so tight. Was the idea of taking materials from Chicago to Kassel less about sustainability and more about allegory? I was reminded of Simon Starling's work, and pieces such as Shedboatshed (2005) where the artist transformed a shed into a boat and then rebuilt the shed, or One Ton (2004) where Starling transported a tonne of platinum ore mined in South Africa to the UK in order to produce a set of platinum prints of photographs of the mine. Starling's works so often involve an extravagantly wasteful displacement of materials, provoking us to reflect on the global movement of resources: Gates's practice had seemed to me a more directly activist practice. Walking through the house, all of this troubled me. But coming across people I had seen before in Gates's Chicago studio, and 'do not enter' signs, indicating that the rooms behind were the ones they were

living in, I changed my mind. Clearly the process of making this project has been as significant as the result. Gates has written about bringing 'ethnic labour, black labour, to rebuild Huguenot House': for a year, his crew has been working on the transformation, learning building skills that they will use in future projects (whether his or their own). Living in the Huguenot House during construction must have been a challenge at first (their first task was to make the place safe and habitable) but now there seemed to be a real spirit of celebration. Their re-occupation of the abandoned space is lived reality for them and for their neighbours in Kassel.

Mississippi Pavilion (detail), 2011, wood, glass and three porcelain plates, 3.7 x 1.3 x 2.1 m

The re-occupation also had a virtual component. Throughout the building Gates had installed 12 projections of films shot in 6901 Dorchester before the demolition documenting individual performances by various musicians. Gates asked the musicians to perform in the abandoned property to illustrate the need for performance spaces in Chicago (i.e. like those he is creating) and to testify to Dorchester's past, to the lives lived before its imminent transformation. Gates saw the transfer of the recordings to Kassel as a kind of gift from one city to another – a gift of 'the excellence that defines the Chicago gospel, jazz, soul, blues circles'. The projections were a way of animating the Kassel building with song, and the presence of the musicians would

transform his project from one about architectural restoration to something more spiritual. Gates also performed in the space with The Black Monks on the opening nights of dOCUMENTA (13).

It was the first time I'd heard Gates sing with The Black Monks and although there were moments of self-referential humour (Gates singing 'this house is so big for one artist') the overall tenor was one of extreme intensity. There was lots of chanting, closed-eye humming, repeated incantations. Sometimes the band upped and paraded through the house around the audience. 'Clap your hands', sang Gates and The Black Monks, and the audience obliged. As a long-term fan of Pharoah Sanders, Leon Thomas and Alice Coltrane, I am not a stranger to the more spiritual strands in jazz, but in an art context I felt somewhat uneasy at Gates's shamanic performance and the attempt to offer song as a kind of gift to the Kassel house and to pray for its future. But why the discomfort? Do we not all recognize that architecture is more than bricks, metal and wood? When we begin living in an old house we imagine it scarred and marked by the psychic traces of former residents and we project into it our worries and hopes. Gates is certainly sincere in his desire to raise the spirits of this place, which must have felt quite depressed when he first entered it, just as he sincerely wishes to reanimate the Dorchester houses with the pride and creativity of earlier residents. If I had felt in Los Angeles that Gates somehow bought different people to mind with his installation of objects, surely I could accept the rhetoric of this performance in Kassel? And then Gates broke from his singing to introduce his band and welcome a special guest to the performance, and as he welcomed her, he began to cry. The guest was an elderly German woman sitting in the front row. Gates explained that she had lived in the house as a child in the 1930s. She had not been near it for decades but knocked on the door the week before when she saw people working inside. Gates and the woman were separated by language, race, nationality, gender and generation, but his project had connected them, and she was as moved to be back in the house as he was to have her there.

1 Theaster Gates, 'Statement' in Theaster Gates: 12 Ballads for Huguenot House, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago and documenta (13), 2012, p.23
2 Gates quoted in the information package about the project prepared by Kavi Gupta Gallery, Chicago, 2012

Theaster Gates's 12 Ballads for the Huguenot House (2012) is on view as part of dOCUMENTA (13) until 16 September. This year he has had a solo show at MOCA, Los Angeles, USA; has a forthcoming exhibition at White Cube, London, UK (from 7 September); and will be included in

'Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art' at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, USA (from 17 November). In 2013, he has a solo show at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago.

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