

REGEN PROJECTS

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THE RESCUER

Reborn as Art

In the hands of the artist Theaster Gates, castoff objects and vacant buildings take on new, transcendent life.

By HILARIE M. SHEETS

CHICAGO — "It's a super-interesting moment to be at the National Gallery, where the question of what it means to be an American, and what kind of American are you, has a new kind of resonance," said Theaster Gates, the sculptor, installation and performance artist and urban interventionist, whose exhibition "The Minor Arts" opened there this month in Washington.

Mr. Gates has taken materials he salvaged from shuttered African-American businesses, schools and churches on the South Side of Chicago, where he is based, into a tower gallery in the museum's East Building. There, he has reconstituted slate shingles from a roof, wooden planks from a gym floor and bound copies of *Ebony* magazine into monumental structures that echo abstract canvases elsewhere in the institution, but are embedded with unsung stories of black laborers and entrepreneurs.

This highly visible platform at the National Gallery of Art, which attracts more than five million visitors annually, shines a light on Mr. Gates's mushrooming grass-roots revitalization project on Chicago's South Side, which invests in people and places others have written off.

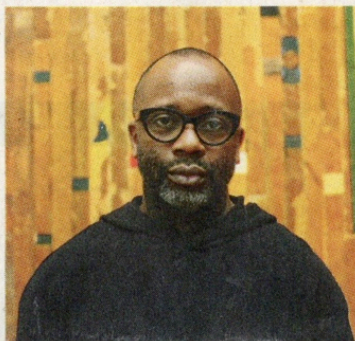
Mr. Gates, a 43-year-old Chicago native, moved to South Dorchester Avenue in that neighborhood in 2006 after taking a job nearby at the University of Chicago (where he is now director of the Arts and Public Life Initiative). He had studied urban planning and ceramics at Iowa State University and earned a master's degree in fine arts and religious studies from the University of Cape Town, in South Africa.



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TOM HARRIS, VIA REBUILD FOUNDATION

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'He's got the whole art world interested in him, and he is pointing everyone's eyes at issues,' a curator says of an artist.

In 2009 he started the Rebuild Foundation, which has worked with the city to transform more than 30 vacant local buildings into aesthetic and affordable living and cultural spaces. These include the Stony Island Arts Bank, open to the public since late 2015, which drew nearly 60,000 visitors in its first year. That hybrid exhibition space and community center is a repository of African-American cultural objects that Mr. Gates is continually gathering.

Through these Rebuild projects, he hires and trains a growing neighborhood work force in demolition, masonry and other construction trades — with an eye toward the Barack Obama Presidential Library that will be built about 10 blocks north of the arts bank. (Mr. Gates was on the selection committee for the library's design and welcomed the president to the arts bank last fall.)

"Theaster's bringing art into a neighborhood where there's not a lot of resources devoted to those sorts of questions, and he's bringing labor and craft traditions into the National Gallery," said Sarah Newman, the curator of the National Gallery exhibition. "It's a kind of circular economy. He's got the whole art world interested in him, and he is pointing everyone's eyes at issues that he's concerned with."

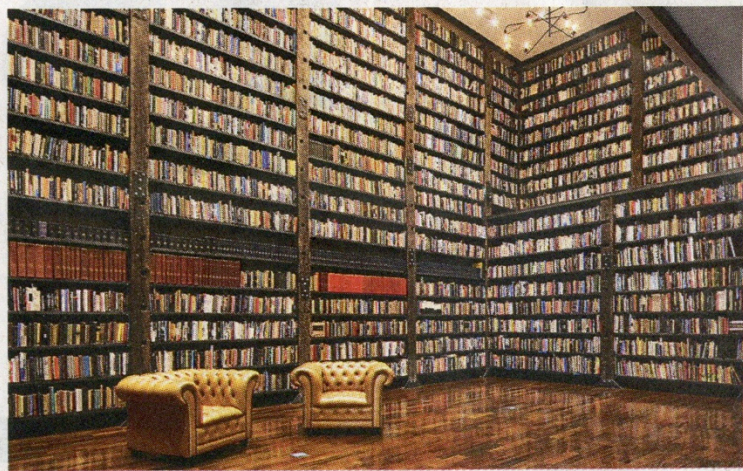
Indeed, Mr. Gates is in high demand in the art world's top tier. He has an exhibition opening on March 21 at White Cube in Hong Kong and recently joined Regen Projects, a contemporary-art gallery in Los Angeles, where his show, which ended last month, had pieces with prices up to \$750,000. The sales of his works, often made with objects resuscitated from his neighborhood, are plowed back into running his studio and the Rebuild Foundation, which together employ about 60 people.

Last year the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington recruited him to join its board specifically to help build a stronger local community around the institution, according to its director, Melissa Chiu. There, he initiated a series of four performances, the first in September in collaboration with the musicians the Black Monks of Mississippi, which drew many residents from Washington. "There were visitors who had never been to the Hirshhorn before," Ms. Chiu said.

His next performance, on June 3, is conceived as a remix of the civil-rights-focused jazz album Max Roach's "Freedom Day," with musicians leading a procession through the museum.

"Theaster has an incredible social intelligence that institutions can learn from," Ms. Chiu said, noting that museums tend to speak with a "monolithic voice."

"When you think of how Theaster operates both on a grass-roots level and in national institutions, each time it's very



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Theaster Gates, above left, and, from top, some of his projects: "Slate Corridor for Possibility of Speaking in Tongues and Depositing Ghetto Reliquary"; "New Egypt Sanctuary of the Holy Word and Image"; the Stony Island Arts Bank; and the Johnson Publishing Archive.

much him, but it's refracted in a different way," she added. "He can speak to people in ways they understand."

That has meant persuading Mayor Rahm Emanuel of Chicago to sell him, for \$1, a bank scheduled for demolition, with the stipulation that Mr. Gates come up with funds to renovate it. (Mr. Gates put \$4.5 million into the Stony Island Arts Bank through a combination of fund-raising, loans, sales of artworks and his own resources, according to Rebuild's director of programs and development, Amy Schachman.) And that has meant persuading Samaria Rice, the mother of Tamir, the 12-year-old boy killed by the police in Cleveland, that the arts bank would be the right place to take the dismantled playground gazebo where the shooting took place. (The City of Cleveland had agreed to transfer the structure to the Tamir Rice Justice Foundation.) Through May, the arts bank will display the gazebo as a kit of parts in its atrium, which has been converted into a green space and memorial, with pews and organs.

"The gazebo could never be rebuilt fully because Tamir will never come back," Mr. Gates said. "It's a reflection space where people can talk together about the challenges they've had in their lives."

The arts bank is the permanent home of collections that might otherwise have been thrown away, like the 50,000-volume library on black culture collected by John H. Johnson, the publisher of *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines. It also hosts temporary exhibitions by prominent artists like Glenn Ligon. At the bank last fall, Mr. Ligon showed his neon text piece "blues, blood, bruise," which resonated more immediately in a neighborhood struggling with police violence than it might have at its debut in 2015 at the Venice Biennale.

"What Theaster's done in Chicago is shift

the center of gravity," Mr. Ligon said. "He's made it clear that art can operate in a variety of different spaces on the same level. In a bank that was abandoned for years, Theaster's project is about saying there's value in these things."

At the National Gallery, Mr. Gates has remade slate shingles from the demolished St. Laurence Church in Chicago into a roof measuring some 50 feet by 20 feet and turned on its side like a fortress. Freed of its function, and visible in a way a roof typically isn't, the beautifully constructed mosaic evokes the serial minimalism of an Ad Reinhardt painting and the language of abstraction. (Mr. Gates's father worked as a roofer.)

"Can craft rise to the level of art?" Ms. Newman said. "Can labor rise to the level of art? What gets canonized? It's something Theaster's dealing with head-on in the context of the National Gallery and what we value as a culture."

Mr. Gates has also reassembled a gym floor removed from a school — one of the many that have been closed in his neighborhood and in other predominantly African-American communities around the country — into a 20-foot-by-10-foot wall piece titled "A Game of My Own." Its basketball court lines are jumbled and now read as abstract bits of color, suggestive of a Mondrian painting.

"It's these schools, these gymnasiums, these coaches that teach the rules and instill a set of values," Mr. Gates said. "You can't talk about violence without talking about the fact that we close schools."

Mr. Gates said he hoped this work could operate as both an interesting art object and as a catalyst to help the restoration of schools. "I need to live as the artist and the contractor, the dreamer and the builder," he said. "I can't afford to just be the dreamer in this moment, as much as I would love to."