

International Sculpture Center Blog

In the Studio | Theaster Gates Holds Court

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This month's studio moves to Harlem – to the Studio Museum – for an audience with Theaster Gates, a potter and social practice artist who recently received the first Vera List Center Prize for Art and Politics. Gates, recently featured in *The New Yorker* and the *New York Times*, is leveraging his stardom to empower new generations of artists at The Dorchester Projects in South Chicago, a cluster of formerly abandoned buildings that he is transforming into a vibrant arts community, and in projects sprouting daily through his comedic gifts and powers of persuasion. Among his positions at the University of Chicago, his studio, and the non-profit Rebuild Foundation, Gates has a staff of twenty that facilitate his ability to build community and to make art; he speaks eloquently about building *platforms for art* in order to drive social change. See theastergates.com for more images and information on subjects discussed below.

At the Studio Museum, Gates held court for, respectively, the staff, special guests, and paying audience members. During my two sessions, directors, curators, and staff from major nearby and New England museums were in the audience, along with luminaries from the arts community, including dancer Bill T. Jones. We filled humble classroom chairs in rows and around two sturdy tables that Gates made (or directed to be made) from industrial materials in Chicago. Below are excerpts from the Studio Museum and Vera List exchanges with audience members followed by my one-on-one conversation with the artist. To begin, Theaster Gates stood on a narrow stagelike area at the front of the room and asked, “Does anyone have a question?”

Bill T. Jones: What's an American today? I'm thinking about James Baldwin a lot...

Theaster Gates writes *Bill → dance*, then *James Baldwin* on one of three large white sheets of paper taped to the wall as he begins, “I don't think of myself as an American. I benefit more today than when I had dreds, wore my pants low...there's a relationship between American and permission, and more security systems all the time... Could American-ness have something to do with geography? To have been born a poor American, ninth of nine, eight sisters, highly effeminate, it was complicated to live that in a context that was often violent.

“American-ness is also associated with adaptation. You make good and bad choices. That America has the right to adapt is awesome. You’re better off knowing that you’re not American and adapting from there. My Mama tried to teach me ‘American.’ America has some rebellion. What does it mean to come into that existing canon intentionally foreign? I’ve got my own code of things that have been important to me for a long time.”



Theaster Gates See, Sit, Sup, Sing: Holding Court (performance still), 2012 The Studio Museum in Harlem, January 16, 2014. Photo: Liz Gwinn

Audience member: Where is home for you?

Gates: You know my friend Marc Bamuthi says something like, ‘Home is where I Skype my kid at night.’ Chicago’s home and that means something. There’s a way an artist can make a work of art... it feels important to be from a place so we can go somewhere else. Or the waves of the need to imagine you’re from Africa – the Marcus Garvey moment and the Amiri Baraka moment. For a while, there wasn’t enough fertile soil in Chicago, and people had to leave. Being from Chicago is both political and a choice. Mississippi is my Africa –where my ancestors are from. I have an excitement about that today that I didn’t have when I was chopping cotton at my uncle’s and looking out for rattlesnakes. I’ve only been an artist for two and a half years. When I was at the Whitney in 2010, I was not on the radar with my lowly ceramic practice.... (Gates takes a moment to bow and kiss the hand of a senior black woman in the front row)...

Bill T. Jones: What is this moment?

Gates: “We don’t need an excuse to self-organize, to imagine new artistic forms and not be apologetic about it. Pressure, suppression, battling ...in 2005-6-7, I was convinced that there was not room for my artistic practice in the world.”

Museum Director: What changed?

Gates: Once I was accepted, I started creating platforms. The one Jay-Z comment I have is ‘Sometimes you have to build the house you rock in.’ ... These systems of power, these mountains, can shift on you in a heartbeat. We all better recognize that there’s an arc... There’s a difference between making a work of art and making a work of art that has a platform.

Question: What role does philanthropy play in the conversation?

Gates: (draws on paper) There are legal structures – the trust, family, land, 501 (c) (3), and private individual. Tax laws favor the rich. When I was an individual, the philanthropic folk, when I asked them to partner with me, would say, ‘Unfortunately, we don’t have a way of giving to individuals.’ I wish the wealthy community would teach people how to keep what they’ve got. There’s a rise in arts foundations in the United States and Europe.

Question: What strategies are necessary to take your ‘all the wayness’ all the way?

Gates: Naming things is important. I named The Dorchester Projects as part of my ongoing conversation with the Department of Planning how buildings are used (in Chicago). My neighbors grew with me. The rumor of Dorchester in the city has improved the psychic imagination of the city.

Question: Tell us where love fits into this for you.

Gates: Love is related to calling. The word is about more than just you. The choice to love, in my case, a woman, is heavy on me now. I also think about Virginess and the Black Monks of Mississippi (his music group) and that the love extended to the world is the duty prescribed, a triangulation of the calling.

Castro: Could you describe your studio in Chicago and your studio practice?

Gates: My studio practice is one that considers space to be my principal disciplinary ally, and the question of space – especially urban space — could be the central theme to why I make. My practice wants not only to solve an art problem but there are cases when I want to have the art look at a real problem in space, a real problem in the city. So the art is doing two things – asking what symbolic work is possible through my practice and asking is there another kind of work — a way the symbolic can point to creating real world solutions. So the studio is a space where I get to consider both the symbolic implications of space and the practical challenges of urban space as my artistic challenge.



Theaster Gates See, Sit, Sup, Sing: Holding Court (performance still), 2012 The Studio Museum in Harlem, January 16, 2014. Photo: Liz Gwinn

Castro: Your Rebuild Foundation is managing social projects on South Dorchester in south Chicago, some Com Ed buildings in Chicago, a house in St. Louis, Omaha, and an art taxi project in New Orleans. What are your objectives in these and other locations?

Gates: Like any artist's studio, we're probably working on ten projects at one time. For some artists, that would be ten, fifteen, twenty sculptures or paintings in the works. For me, there are five cities we're thinking hard about and what kind of art might manifest in those cities, and they include things from thinking about the creation of a temporary taxi or livery service in New Orleans to thinking about ways in which performance and the body can be used to talk about black space, and the adequate care of historical artifacts and how they might be presented in museums in the future. How do I properly care for the archives I have? I spend a lot of time thinking about those things.

My studio, then, in addition to making good old fashioned art, is multiple things. There needs to be an archive repository, a conservation unit, planning and architectural services – consulting companies sometimes, and also a consulting firm on the problems of cities.

Castro: I love how you're combining urban planning and renewal with art. How does your urban arts position (since 2006) at the University of Chicago fit into this?

Gates: In many ways, my work at the University of Chicago extends the capacity of my projects. I'm more embedded than ever in the University because I believe that having an intellectual hub for my practice is important. The University of Chicago gives me a tremendous amount of freedom to explore the question of space in interesting ways. And having a large institutional partner means that for some of these projects of transformation, we can do much more together than apart. That relationship is a very solid one.

Castro. Fabulous. Your framed firehose series *In the Event of Race Riot* (2011) alludes to fire hoses used in race riots in Birmingham in 1963, and one art exhibition at Kavi Gupta (Chicago) was titled “An Epitaph for Civil Rights and Other Domesticated Structures.” How do you decide what histories you need to revisit and how to approach those histories?

Gates: I view history in the context of how historical moments have shaped our cities. I’m as interested in the City Beautiful movement as I am in the Situationist International as I am the Olmstead plans as I am in the impact Civil Rights had on how cities were shaped, the impact urban renewal had on how cities were shaped — the deconstruction of Cabrini Green, how federal policy around housing and urban development shapes the way we live. What you’ll see over time is an emphasis on varying moments in which a policy or a situation has impacted how people live in the city or how philosophy has impacted how we understand our place in the city.

Castro: I love what you’re doing. What current art projects are you most excited about?

Gates: Thank you. I’ll spend much of 2014 restoring the Stony Island Arts bank and making it a repository for the John Johnson Publishing (Company) library and archives; it’s a two-year project.

I’m working on two bodies of work; one is a continued investigation of the idea of roofing and my history with roofing – and how labor turns into a symbolic work, and how histories of labor turn into how it occupies a material space. I’m thinking about how archives are re-presented, and especially black archives –what is the language that we wrap around it and how can we complicate that language.

Castro: Good. I attended both your Vera List Award talk and your Studio Museum holding court talks in New York. What are the roles of giving speeches, having conversations, singing, and dining in your artistic practice?

Gates: I would separate dining from those other categories. For Yamaguchi, the dinner was a platform where I could share a body of work.[\[1\]](#) Giving speeches, having conversations, and singing all point to the necessity of the speech act that is different from another kind of material act. Speech and song have always been raw materials for me that I value as part of my material toolbox. Sometimes speech and song allow me to manifest ideas in ways much better than I can with an object, so I use them when they seem appropriate.

Castro: As part of your background as an urban planner, I’ve heard you advise artists to build platforms and leverage their opportunities. Could you explain these terms in relation, for example, to a still life painter or a sculptor? I.e., could most artists use this approach?

Gates: The notion of a platform is similar in sculpture as it is in a speech act or some socio-administrative capacity. The platform raises an idea or an object; it lifts it off of a normal plane and into a plane that declares that whatever is being platformed is more important. Sometimes, if the ground is rocky or unsettled, a platform can make a thing level and allow it to be its best self. When I use the word platform, I’m using it with a full sense of what that word means. For me, as

a sculptor and for me as an enabler, I'm looking for opportunities to make level, to make distinct, to create opportunities, to create visibility.

In a capitalist system of inequalities, leverage is one mechanism by which a healthy and active response to a system might occur. Leveraging means that with the right kind of fulcrum, something that would normally be very heavy is made very light. If you take that principle and apply it to some of the conditions of urban space, what kind of fulcrum can I create so that artists might engage the very big challenges of the city because they have the ingenuity of the right fulcrum? When I'm doing some projects, I'm leveraging my knowledge of urban planning, leveraging the loopholes that exist in urban government, leveraging my place in the art world for this very moment. I'm trying to do as much as I can with what I've got, and sometimes you need more than you've got. You build a fulcrum so you can do more.

Castro: Perfect. I think artists are going to appreciate your advice. You're still engaged in The Dorchester Project. Are you still working on the Com Ed building?

Gates: Yes. It's in the same neighborhood. I've been trying to work strategically in one place at a time, or making sure that the work I'm doing is clustered and not disparate. What seems to work well is when there are multiple projects happening in one place – and lots of stakeholders who believe the project is important. It's easier to move it further faster when there's a consolidation of activity. The Com Ed building is in and among the Dorchester buildings. It's a modest process but one that points to the other players in the city who own real estate, who could be good neighbors and development partners who might have viable spaces for artists and communities. And retired electrical buildings and other kinds of municipal buildings become amazing opportunities for artists to re-imagine what could happen in those spaces. Com Edison has been an amazing partner in my practice – making this building available, and, potentially, buildings in the future.

Castro: You talked about doing a roofing art work, and that leads me to my last question: how does family influence your artistic practice?

Gates: I hear a bird chirping and want to interpret that. I feel awake, active, and listening. My family, my family's history, my history of working with my dad [roofing and other projects], and my passion about the city, all that is fair game, as is my passion and questions about the non-worldly, and so on.

[i]These conversations took place on September 18, 2013 at the New School, on January 11, 2013 at the Studio Museum in Harlem, and on February 3, 2014 in a Chicago-New York phone conversation.

[ii] See http://theastergates.com/artwork/239815_Yamaguchi_Story.html. Gates created a fictional potter, Yamaguchi, and introduced 'his' ceramics at a dinner party in 2008.