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THEASTER GATES
Phaidon Press, 2015

Carol Becker
Lisa Yun Lee
Achim Borchardt-Hume

Review by Bruce Thorn
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Phaidon Press published "Theaster Gates" in 2015, *the* phenomenal breakout year for Gates during which he participated in the Venice and Istanbul Biennales, presented a motivational TED Talk, had a solo exhibition at London's White Cube, opened his first public project in the UK, won an Artes Mundi Award (Wales) and took center stage at the Hirshorn Museum's 40th anniversary gala. The book is not exactly new, but now that all the hype has died down a little this might be a good time to get a better understanding of what Theaster Gates' is all about.

The book is a beautiful, well-made and oversized paperback with attractive dust jacket. The layout, graphics and photos are excellent throughout. My only complaint is that the gray captions can be difficult to read. The monograph is efficiently organized into sections: an interview with Gates by Carol Becker, essays by Lisa Yun Lee and Achim Borchardt-Hume, followed by a photo collection, writings by the artist and a chronology.

Carol Becker is Dean of Faculty and professor at the Columbia University School of the Arts. Her interview with Gates provides a good general knowledge of the artists' background, work, projects, ideas and theory. The interview touches upon most of Gate's major projects to date, including: Dorchester Projects, Carver Bank and Sandwich Shop, Soul Manufacturing Corporation, Stony Island Arts Bank and Black Cinema House.

Theaster Gates (b 1973) has degrees in Urban Planning, Ceramics and Religious Studies from Iowa State University and the University of Cape Town, SA. His practice has been called "social practice art" and "real estate art." Starting from a love for making ceramics, Gates has re-conceptualized the process of making things out of clay into a model for how to make other kinds of things happen that involve urban planning and architecture.

Through a variety of deals, he acquires almost worthless buildings in un-favored urban areas ("un-real estate") and then refurbishes and repurposes these properties to fit social and archival purposes. He works with an understanding of the significance of symbolism and gesture. "There's nothing special about rehabbing a building. But then to call it something like "the Archive House" and to make a small residential building public-that does something." P 8

Theaster Gates has the charisma, knowledge and familiarity to work with urban officials. He mentions that artists are too separated by individuality to have political influence. Gates' game plan admirably begins at the notion that belief makes things happen. Carol Becker presciently observes: "One of the things that draws people towards you (Theaster Gates) is a joyfulness in your person and in your work, a state that surely would be impossible to sustain in politics." P 27

Gates offers many wise words in Becker's interview. Here's a collection of a few of them, some slightly paraphrased:

“I want artists to understand that in the absence of a gallery or a museum, they have the capacity to invent the platform by which they can express their beliefs.” P 20

“In my studio, 90% of our time is spent working on buildings and working on projects that we can’t monetize. And then 10% of our time is spent making art that makes 90 per cent of the money that’s helping us grow.” P 22

“I have a craftsman’s belief that you should be excellent at something and that there’s a history and a pedagogical approach to a thing. I want to be a good craftsman as much as I want to be a good leader, and I don’t think I have to choose between leadership and craftsmanship.” P 17

“I am constantly making decisions that consider the symbolic effect that I want to ring in the city.” P17

“Do not approach philanthropic community as in need, approach as problem solvers.” P 17

The book’s second section is an essay by Lisa Yun Lee, Director of Art and Art history at the University of Illinois at Chicago. She provides an excellent survey of Gates background, projects and methodology and covers different aspects of some of the ground mentioned in Becker’s interview, and also introduces a few more major projects, such as the Huguenot House project and Gates’ performance work and musical collaborations with the Black Monks of Mississippi.

Yun Lee’s use of language can be a lot more academic than Becker’s or Gates’ and is probably more convoluted than it needs to be, like this example from page 60:

“The works can be seen as attempts to realize the materials ‘in the syntax’ of the work itself. This claim, of course, draws from Michael Fried’s argument that abstraction is the attempt to establish a correlation between constitutive elements (shape) in an autonomous field and the perception that the constitutive

elements fully relate and are purposeful or internally meaningful. They seek meaning from one another and nowhere else.”

Really? Might there be easier ways to get those ideas across, without the dreaded, academic art-speak? Many people would not make sense of this or even want to try. The language serves as a signifier of academia and class. Theaster Gate’s work, projects and goals are easily understood and evocative enough in common language; however, a large component of Gates’ work, especially the “un-real estate” projects, requires the support and cooperation of elected city officials, very wealthy individuals and organizations, architects, artist’s assistants, contractors, zoning offices, corporate officials and permit departments. There’s a lot of creative fund raising involved for the expensive projects. Maybe the academic jargon placates city bureaucrats and donors. A typical Chicagoan might wonder why it is that Theaster Gates can win the support of people like Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel and his brother Ari when most people can’t get a miniscule straight word, promise or zoning variance out of their neighborhood aldermanic office. Gates himself is seemingly comfortable in academia and carries the esoteric title of “Director of Arts and Public Life at the University of Chicago.”

Yun Lee’s “Survey” does a good job of contextualizing Theaster Gates’ art making. Gates clearly states: “I am not interested in making beautiful objects.” His artwork funds the “un-real estate” projects. These artworks are not ready-mades or found objects like Duchamp’s. Though Gates’ works are dependent upon history and context, the act of handwork is an important aspect of his aesthetic. Things might get deconstructed and re-purposed, but the fire hoses, the tar paintings and shoe shine stands all derive their potency from historical implications without which the works would fail. The Gates Show succeeds as a total package. The actual art objects really aren’t that particularly engaging if you divest them of their narrative.

Theaster Gates’ genius and gifts are his broad curiosity, his ability to organize and inspire, his positive attitude and charisma, along with a

personal relationship to the historical implications in the work. Gate's aesthetic successfully melds the organized and planned with a beautiful, authentic funkiness that has been absent for a while in the visual arts.

The book's shorter third section is "Focus, A Maimed King" by Achim Borchardt-Hume, current Head of Exhibitions at Tate Modern in London. Borchardt-Hume's essay focuses on themes found in Gates' work and shines a light on the artist's motivations and his engagement with African-American history, beginning with the example of Gate's artwork called "A Maimed King," which consists of an image of Martin Luther King Jr., which has been caught and crumpled, in the closed locking door of a discarded, institutional glass display case that had been "abandoned, delivered and repurposed."

The book's fourth section offers a collection of photos from Gates' studio and project locations. The last section of the book presents short writings by Gates' presented in extra-large print that mimics sandblasted or engraved marble gravestones, like the "Bank Bonds" that helped to finance the Stony Island Arts Bank. The book ends with a rather promotional chronology of Gates' career.

Phaidon's "Theaster Gates" is an excellent monolith about an interesting and inspiring man who successfully manages, organizes and utilizes his own individual strengths and expertise to make ambitious projects happen. I'm not so sure that the book makes a case for the actual art objects made by Theaster Gates, or that it even attempts to. As Gates says, making art objects is only a small part of the show.