

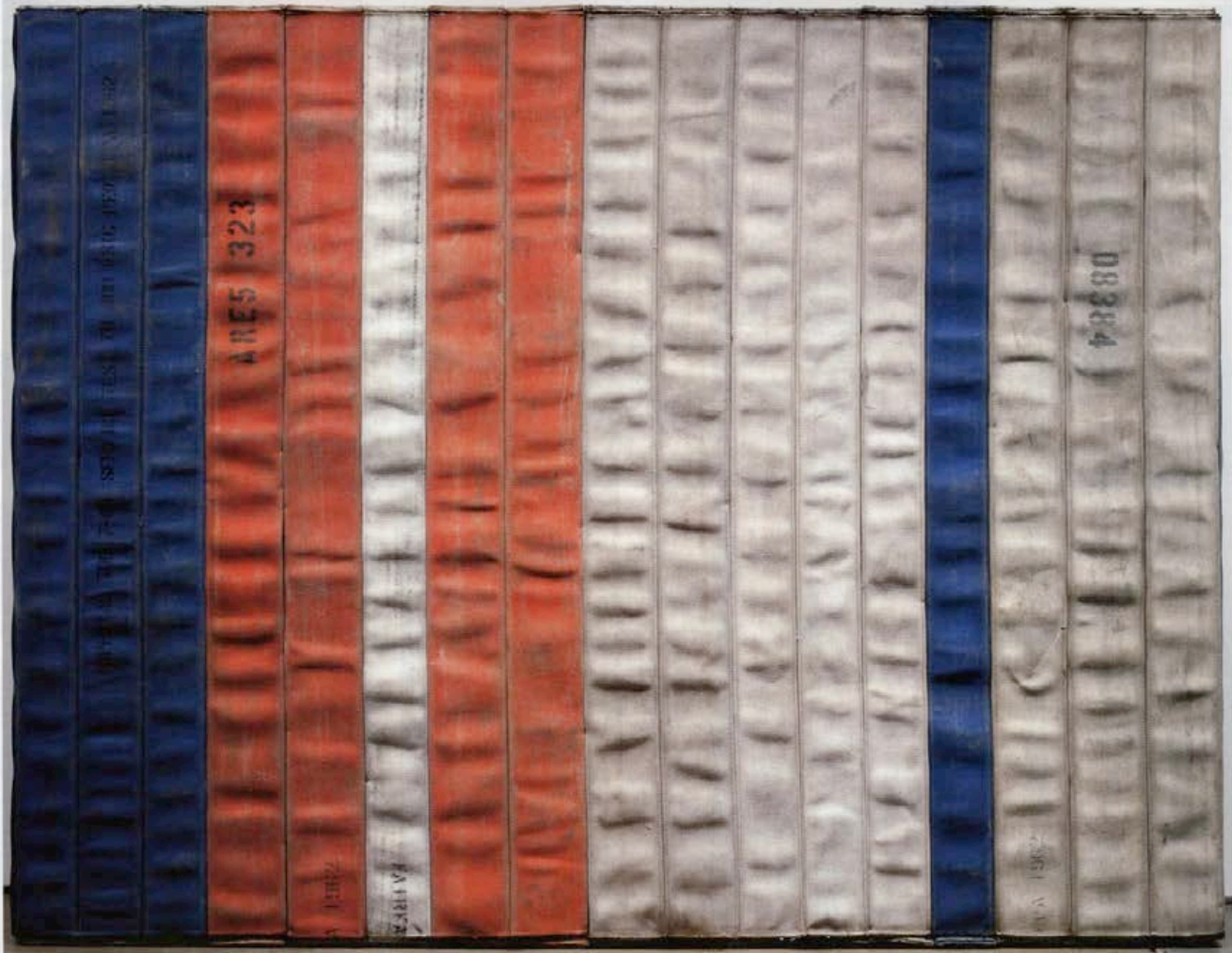
REGEN PROJECTS

Copeland, Huey. "Dark mirrors: Huey Copeland on Theaster Gates and Ebony." *Artforum* (October 2013) pp. 222 – 229 [ill.]

ARTFORUM

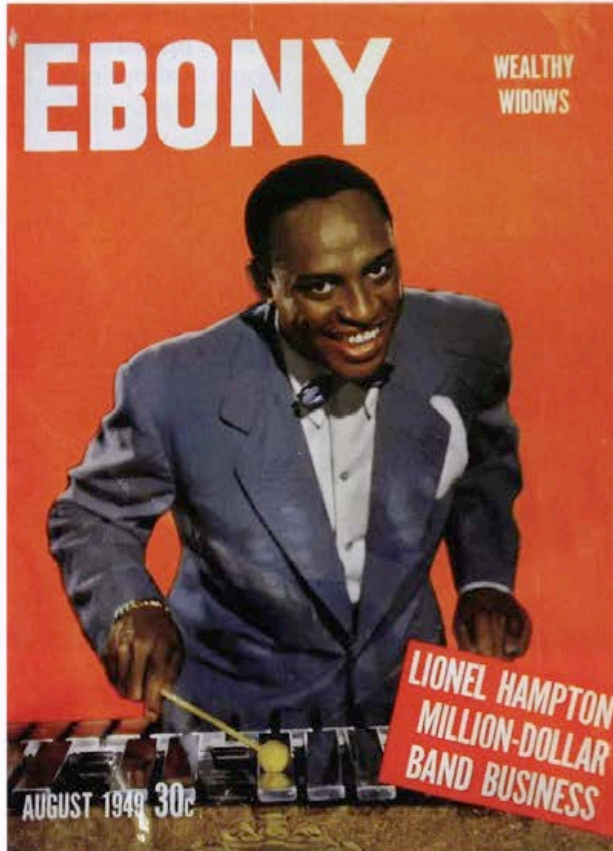
Dark Mirrors

HUEY COPELAND ON THEASTER GATES AND *EBONY*



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Opposite page: Theaster Gates, *Civil Tapestry, Flag Series*, 2012, decommissioned fire hoses, wood, 66 x 84 x 4 1/2". From the series "Civil Tapestries," 2011-.

Above, left: Cover of *Ebony*, August 1949. Lionel Hampton.

Above, right: Cover of *Jet*, June 5, 1958. Lynn Jordan.

SINCE THE MIDDLE OF THE LAST CENTURY, the magazines produced by the Chicago-based Johnson Publishing Company—most famously *Ebony* and *Jet*—have visualized models of black aspiration and bourgeois achievement. At the same time, they have directed their readers' sights toward texts and photographs of transformative import, from Larry Neal's writings on black aesthetics to images of the brutalized body of Emmett Till. These periodicals, along with the company's cosmetics and hair-care lines, provided sources of employment as well as safe havens for black cultural producers forced to navigate a segregated world in an even more segregated city. For decades, visiting dignitaries who would have been turned away from white establishments regardless of

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Like Gates's eclectic art, *Ebony* and *Jet* have consistently played with and against hegemonic assumptions about the realities of life lived black.

David Hartt, Kiosk at the Johnson Publishing Company Headquarters, Chicago, Illinois, 2011, inkjet print, 48 x 64".

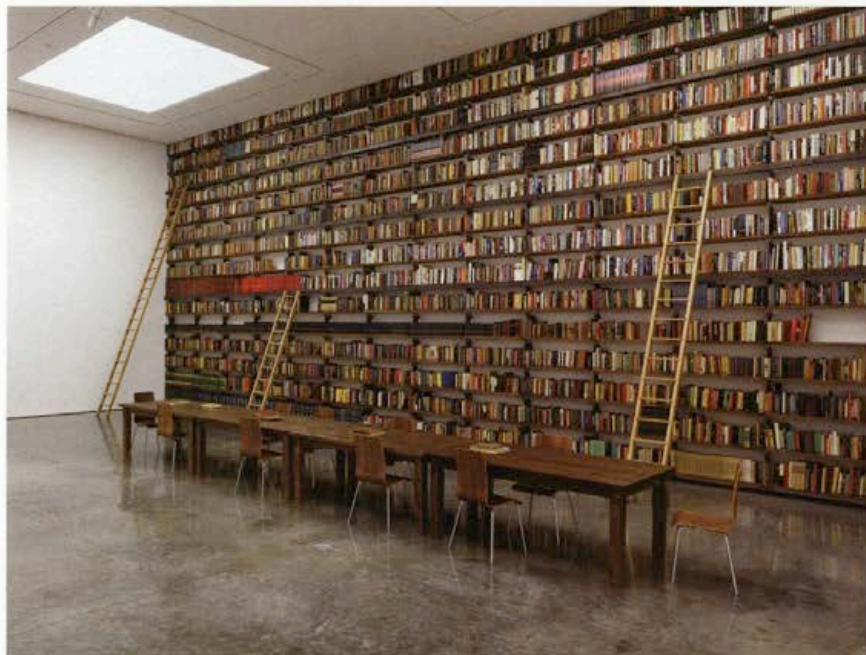
their fame knew that they could find a welcome place of respite at the corporation's headquarters.

With his wife, Eunice Johnson, JPC founder John H. Johnson audaciously imagined and financially supported a modern black world that would become a tendentious model of commercialized uplift, a bulwark against racialized oppression, and an inspiring *Gesamtkunstwerk*. As such, JPC stands as a peculiar mirror to another Chicago-based corporate enterprise: namely, the practice of Theaster Gates. An ensemblic concatenation that includes performance, painting, sculpture, and video, as well as a series of urban-renewal projects, Gates's work has at times specifically evoked or cited the images and infrastructure of JPC. But, more broadly and significantly, Gates's art is animated by the same tensions between social imperatives and economic exigencies that have shaped JPC's shifting fortunes. To consider his practice alongside the company's history is, then, to illuminate the contradictions that mark the lives of black institutions, and to underscore the ongoing necessity of such formations in our own neoliberal moment, in which white supremacy's hold still seems secure even as its means of reproduction take on ever subtler guises.

Certainly, Gates is not the only artist for whom JPC and its magazines have functioned as generative sites. Ellen Gallagher, for example, has been exhibiting modified pages from the company's publications for over a decade, while in a 2010 painting by Hank Willis Thomas, the titles *Ebony* and *Life* are neatly conjoined, underlining the shared visual logic of the two magazines' branding as well as the distance between their coverage and constituencies. In *Stray Light*, 2011, a film by David Hartt that is part of his larger multimedia project of the same title, the sumptuous William Raiser and Arthur Elrod-designed interiors of the JPC's 1972 John Moutoussamy skyscraper on Michigan Avenue become the ethereal stuff of late-modernist fantasia. And in a 2012 collage by Lorna Simpson, a female figure taken from the pages of *Ebony* is crowned with a cutout halo of ink that reads as both stylized coiffure and Rorschach test, its mixed gray color calling attention to and confounding the black/white binary that continues to structure racialization in America. Each of these works insists on the iconicity of its sources—the magazine logos, the company's building, or advertisements that helped fund JPC's operations—and their lasting affective punch.

Gates's own connection to the Johnson brand is considerably more material and far more synergistic. For his 2012 exhibition at London's White Cube gallery, alongside other items redolent of African American progress and protest, the artist displayed John H. Johnson's sprawling office library, which was given to Gates by Linda Johnson Rice, current chair of JPC's board. Wheeled ladders and reading tables installed in the gallery made the library accessible, establishing it not as a monument to be mourned or a cipher to be commoditized but as a capacious resource to be engaged. Other works on view, though, were available for sale; in one of several nods to JPC's array of brands, there was even a Fashion Fair Cosmetics booth open for makeover consultations. The exhibition as a whole, titled "My Labor Is My Protest," brought into focus Gates's characteristic confusion of those boundaries—between work and resistance, art and commerce, radicalism and reform, politics and policy—that black practitioners working within hegemonic frames have sought to at once master and disarticulate in reimagining history and tracking the past's unfolding in the present.

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Above: Theaster Gates, *Johnson Editorial Library*, 2012, books, wood, metal. Installation view, White Cube Bermondsey, London. Photo: Ben Westoby.

Below: Theaster Gates, *12 Ballads for Huguenot House*, 2012. Performance view, Huguenot House, Kassel, June 7, 2012. From Documenta 13.



LIKE GATES'S ECLECTIC LONDON INSTALLATION, *Ebony* and *Jet* have consistently played with and against hegemonic assumptions about the realities of life lived black. But this tack has not always guaranteed financial success. As hardly needs saying, the past ten years have not been easy for the publishing industry, especially for companies that market to "niche" groups, and JPC has weathered its fair share of storms: layoffs, restructuring, and declining subscription rates for its flagship magazine, *Ebony*, which is synonymous in many minds with an older generation's Cosbysque dreams of black success. Of late, the company has regained its footing through outsourcing its circulation department, forging relationships with the likes of JPMorgan Chase, and updating its profile as a lifestyle brand. In addition to magazines and cosmetics, JPC now sells framed historical photographs printed from its negatives, and it plans to develop a line of Hermès-inspired accessories, including bangles and handbags. These ventures have not, however, obviated the need for austerity measures: JPC recently sold its chic headquarters and has quietly dispersed items from its stunning collection of African American art. Of course, it also handed over those books that have now found a home with Gates, who intends to house them in a cultural center to be constructed in a once-condemned bank building on Chicago's South Side.

The irony here is worth lingering over. In order to survive in the digital economy, JPC is expanding its brand by hawking a greater range of lifestyle wares and representations while selectively unburdening itself of physical stuff. By contrast, Gates's acquisition of those very same materials crowns his triumphant emergence within and recasting of contemporary financial economies. By now, the story of Gates's meteoric rise within the art world and in the pages of the *Wall Street Journal* (which selected him as one of its 2012 Innovator of the Year Award winners) is almost as familiar as *Ebony*'s successes in the corporate media, though the basic lineaments bear repeating. Born on the West Side of Chicago in 1973, Gates received a master's degree in ceramics, urban planning, and religious studies from Iowa State University in 2006 before embarking in earnest on a practice that reflected his trio of academic interests. In 2008, for example, he produced the video *The Yamaguchi Story*, which explores the relationship between black and Japanese arts and centers on a fictional meeting between Gates and ceramicist Shoji Yamaguchi; that same year, he staged a performance at Eindhoven's Van Abbemuseum that constituted the international debut of a musical ensemble he founded, the Black Monks of Mississippi, whose members include Chicago-based musicians and monks from various traditions around the world. He participated in the 2010

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Whitney Biennial and in last year's Documenta 13, and has had a number of high-profile solo exhibitions that have been reviewed in the pages of this magazine and seemingly everywhere else.

Gates's best-known work, *Dorchester Projects*, 2009–, is a suite of beautifully restored South Side buildings that collectively function as a hybrid art center, gathering place, and residence; almost from the start its development was intertwined with the economic downturn that affected JPC so adversely. Searching for a house within his means in 2006, Gates selected a property located on South Dorchester Avenue in Chicago's Grand Crossing neighborhood, a predominantly black area whose neglect by the city abetted both the house's decay and its affordability. Within a few years, thanks to the subprime mortgage crisis, he was able to acquire the adjacent building and another property across the street. He used the structures to house his growing collections of cast-off cultural artifacts, many of them—such as the University of Chicago's glass lantern slides and a cache of vinyl records from a neighborhood music store that had gone out of business—casualties of the

digital revolution. As the economy fell, Gates rose up to meet it, at once satisfying and exceeding socio-cultural demand with a vision to rival the Johnsons', albeit one that materially foregrounded rather than wished away the precarious circumstances in which blackness often unfolds.

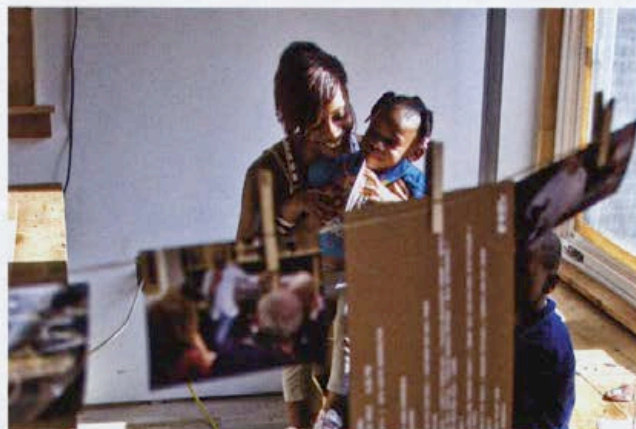
Since then, Gates's production has only grown more expansive and complex, constantly shifting to meet his own outsize ambition as well as the demands and criticisms of the communities within which he operates. Indeed, his practice can be said to work with and against a particular admixture of aesthetics, theories, contexts, and attitudes: white guilt, the archival turn, DIY aesthetics, the uplift impulse, parafiction, actor-network theory, and, perhaps unavoidably, privatization and the concomitant proliferation of nonprofits and NGOs. His endeavors reflect the extent to which nonprofits, rather than government agencies, are now viewed as providers of crucial services and as "agents of change," a term favored by postmillennial plutocrats and policy wonks alike. At Dorchester, such transformation works something like this: Under the aegis of his Rebuild Foundation,



Above: Exterior view of the Archive House at Theaster Gates's *Dorchester Projects*, 2009–, Chicago, 2012. Photo: Sara Pooley.

Gates is a business artist for the new millennium, which is to say a development artist: an entrepreneurial creator of "public-private partnerships."

Below, from left: Interior of the Archive House at Theaster Gates's *Dorchester Projects Library and Archive*, 2009–, Chicago, 2012. Photo: Sara Pooley. Visitors to the slide room at Theaster Gates's *Dorchester Projects*, 2009–, Chicago, 2012. Photo: James W. Toftness.



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Two stills from David Hartt's *Stray Light*, 2011, HD digital video, color, sound, 12 minutes 12 seconds.

Gates and his collaborators hire and train local laborers to refurbish buildings that then serve as cultural hubs—so far there is a Black Cinema House, a Listening House, and an Archive House—all of which are funded by granting organizations and by the transformation of detritus from the sites into salable art objects. These works, which may be derived from floors, sinks, or walls, are squared off and positioned in the gallery as Afro-modernist ripostes to the white past masters of abstract art and civil society.

It is this process, which the artist terms a “circular ecosystem,” that energizes some of his most historically resonant bodies of work, such as the “Civil Tapestries,” 2011–. The “Tapestries,” comprising decommissioned 1960s fire hoses carefully layered to create subtly hued striped patterns, do not merely unite wrapping procedures evocative of Eva Hesse’s sculptures with the deflated weapons used against black civil rights protesters; they also insist upon their belonging together as emanations of the same fractured yet continuous cultural field. This kind of approach to and revision of the recent past is one that art-historical scholarship on the ‘60s and ‘70s, however “expanded,” has frequently failed to countenance, no matter how clear the connections between art and racial politics (whether bluntly spelled out by a text like Alex Gross’s 1967 essay “The Artist as Nigger” or brilliantly conjured up as in the Museum of Modern Art’s 1970 “Information” exhibition catalogue, where photographs of the Black Panthers and a work by Marcel Duchamp were conjoined in a single spread).

In comparison with JPC, which the art historian Darby English once cast as “a kind of black Fort Knox,” Gates is disarmingly open in interviews and lectures about his own manipulation of such apparently discrepant histories, roles, and economies of value as well as the ambition that undergirds them: “I think I’m a full-time artist, a full-time urban planner, and a full-time preacher with an aspiration of no longer needing any of those titles. Rather, I’m trying to do what for some seems a very messy work or a complicated work. I feel we have to give more time and more consideration to the disparity between wealth and poverty in our country.” Viewed from one angle, such transparency would seem to jibe with the vaunted aims of the “new international financial architecture.” That term, popularized by economists in the wake of the ‘90s Asian financial crisis, was coined to describe the International Monetary Fund’s woefully inadequate program of structural readjustments aimed at staving off yet another global economic downturn. It has since been critically recast by Los Angeles-based artist Edgar Arceneaux, cofounder of the Watts House Project, a nonprofit that gathers artists, designers, and residents of the eponymous neighborhood to renovate homes as well as the fabric of the community itself. For Arceneaux, “new financial architecture” serves to connote the types of arrangements that artists now ought to seek out with institutions in making their works and livings.

But even more than Arceneaux, Rick Lowe (founder of Houston’s nonprofit art center—*cum*—artwork Project

Row Houses), or Mark Bradford (in his fund-raising work with the New Orleans neighborhood association L9), Gates has made his name by both perverting and making good on Andy Warhol’s desire to be a “business artist.” He is, in this sense, a business artist for the new millennium, which is to say a development artist: an entrepreneurial creator of “public-private partnerships” who not only invests in his own community but also exports his model to satellites in cities across the Midwest, including Omaha and Saint Louis. Like his predecessors, Gates aims to grab hold of what Clement Greenberg once famously called “the umbilical cord of gold” connecting artists and their patrons, and to redirect it in the service of creating new communities, discursive platforms, and networks that have a tentacular reach (and in which I too have been caught up, not unwillingly: Gates was an intellectual and financial contributor to “Black Collectivities,” a conference I co-organized with Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago curator Naomi Beckwith that productively charted many of the questions posed in these lines).

As cultural critic Romi Crawford has noted, Gates has effectively mobilized and generously shared both his practice and his properties, creating unique spaces for black cultural exchange, arts education, and youth outreach. These spaces in turn resonate with previous models of African American institutionalality in Chicago, from the collectors’ association *Diasporal Rhythms* to the South Side Community Art Center. As the historically attuned artist knows well, such institutions exist in spite of and in opposition to hegemonic

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Three stills from Theaster Gates's *Ballads*, 2011-12, digital video projection, color, sound, 81 minutes 49 seconds. From "Theaster Gates: 13th Ballad," Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 2013.



In both Gates's exhibitions and Johnson Publishing's recent reinvention, the object is set adrift from the economies that produced it in order that black life might thrive elsewhere.

models that would deny their necessity or promise to "integrate" their constituents. In many ways, these organizations are utopian enterprises, counterfactual propositions whose success at dreaming a world without racist injunctions has made them susceptible to obsolescence precisely because those barriers may appear to have been removed, though the work these organizations perform is definitively unfinished.

UNLIKE *EBONY* and other black cultural formations that grew from and catered to a once relatively captive market, Gates's practice has garnered support from "mainstream" audiences, institutions, and discourses. The latter have relatively little to say about the actual works of art he puts on display, those linchpins of his circular ecosystem. When seen in a gallery setting, these objects by themselves can be uneven in quality and effect. "Theaster Gates: 13th Ballad," the artist's summer 2013 exhibition at the MCA Chicago,

for instance, featured an array of sculptures, videos, and performances derived from his 2012 Documenta installation *12 Ballads for Huguenot House*. In that work, the aforementioned building in downtown Kassel served as a residence, yoga studio, and music hall for performances by the Monks and others, while the artist and a team of collaborators from Chicago made over the interiors with materials shipped from another Dorchester house. The videos on view at the MCA tantalizingly documented the affective dimensions of these activities, including Gates's own charismatic singing and signing presence, while the sculptural constructions registered his Kassel sojourn literally and figuratively, as in the case of wheeled carts that evoked both the artist's peripatetic status and larger histories of migration on both sides of the Atlantic.

A few of these sculptures functioned convincingly as discrete objects as well as within the larger context



Theaster Gates, *12 Ballads for Huguenot House*, 2012, mixed media. Installation view, Huguenot House, Kassel. From Documenta 13. Photo: Nils Klingner.



Theaster Gates, *12 Ballads for Huguenot House*, 2012, mixed media. Installation view, Huguenot House, Kassel. From Documenta 13. Photo: Nils Klingner.

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into which they were conscripted. Take *Huguenot Lightbox with Throne Maquette*, 2012, a rough-hewn white cabinet of surrealist pedigree that houses a chair with impossibly long legs reminiscent of the throne sculptures of Wangechi Mutu. The work was illuminated by a spare, unshaded bulb that cut through the darkness, pointedly drawing attention to a sculpture installed not in the white cube but in the black box. While *Huguenot Lightbox* deftly inflected its own conditions of display, other works seemed dead by comparison. The fracture of a roof fragment paired with a truncated shoeshine stand, for example, fit neatly into Gates's overall aesthetic, but it was not clear why it belonged to this particular exhibition. For all their historical weight, without the additional charge of Gates's performative presence or a specifying self-reflexive frame à la Robert Smithson, Gordon Matta-Clark, or Renée Green, the sculptures risk appearing as commodities cynically extruded by the circuitry of the artist's practice, as opposed to activated participants in his ongoing spatial transformations.

Surely, this apparent commodification is part of Gates's point, as implied by literary theorist Bill Brown, who has praised the artist's practice as a mode of "redemptive reification." Collectors and museums are eager to get their hands on manifestations of what the artist has called his "shine" and on the larger social interventions that they represent. But as *Ebony's* fate makes clear, such luster is as fugitive as it is speculative. The exhibition strategy modeled by the "13th Ballad" tends to position the museum as a mere repository or an occasional staging area, just as JPC's buildings, art, and library have been left out of the loop of its attempted reinvention. In both instances, the object is set adrift from the economies that produced it in order that black life might thrive elsewhere. For scholar Fred Moten, this is a key aspect of Gates's sculptural works, since they ask for—even if they do not enact—a reconfiguration of the gallery as the kind of "open institution" that blackness itself is and that the artist has materialized "nowhere, everywhere."

Nowhere, everywhere: This, I think, is an apt characterization of Gates's decentered practice and of JPC's transnational brand, both of which differently pose questions about what constitutes an aesthetic enterprise, where it ought to reside, and how it ought to be considered in light of the deformations of race. It is tempting and perhaps productive to subject both efforts to the trenchant critiques of corporate culture and of socially engaged practice issuing from the left—to lambaste JPC's collusion with American cultural imperialism and to take issue with Gates's art for its alignment with what Beckwith has termed "late-latest capital's capitulations." For unlike other black collaborative projects that assume public faces,

such as South Africa's Chimurenga and Keleketla! Libraries, the American outfits under discussion here have taken as models those forms of private property—the house, the corporation—whose construction within the Western bourgeois public sphere might seem antithetical to the principles undergirding black liberation.

Yet despite their considerable liabilities, such structures are, by definition, also capable of securing opacity, dissemblance, and multiplicity—precisely those qualities historically denied black subjects, whose abjection has been central to the construction of whiteness and its institutions. Any critic seeking to fathom Gates's work would do well to remember that he has said, in regard to his exhibitions, "I am a bit of a trickster. . . . I want to seduce with an object, and I don't even want you to know of my social agenda." While Gates's strategies may read as very much of their moment, they should also be understood as feints and tactics grounded in opposition to a racialized social order that has much deeper roots than our current socioeconomic condition and that must be battled on all fronts, within and beyond artistic discourse. Like two sides of the same coin, Gates and JPC are for-profit purveyors of goods with divergent aims and attitudes—one aesthetically down-home, the other committedly aspirational. But both are also invested, whether primarily or incidentally, in the construction of spaces of black autonomy. Such operations must be seen as transpiring within a world in which blackness is *already* in the red, inhabiting an economy that is always in recession and that requires the constant retooling of time-tested cultural practices and ways of making do.

Given the centrality of the church as a model of collective formation within black communities, it should perhaps come as no surprise that Gates's MCA show also featured a makeshift sanctuary in the museum's atrium, complete with pews and surmounted by *Double Cross*, 2013, a large wooden cabinet bisected twice and filled with items brought back from Kassel. The work's punning title and the economies of exchange, belief, treachery, and freedom it evoked call up the multiple meanings of the word *recession*, which, as artist Paul Chan has pointed out, both suggests an economic condition and describes the hymn sung when the congregation takes its leave, when the service ends and something else begins. It is this spirit that sparks Gates's practice, which calls us in so that we might eventually go out again, with our own entanglements in other histories, practices, and economies in mind, a necessary first step toward transformation, however conceived. Can I get an "Amen"? □

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Above: Theaster Gates, *Huguenot Lightbox with Throne Maquette*, 2012, wood, Plexiglas, 68 x 22 1/2 x 26". From "Theaster Gates: 13th Ballad," Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 2013.

Below: Theaster Gates, *Double Cross*, 2013, wood, neon, objects from Huguenot House. Installation view, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 2013. Photo: Nathan Keay.

