Redemptive Reification
(Theaster Gates, Gathering)
Bill Brown

REDEMPTION. It can sound like a dirty and dangerous word, wielded by that overweight, pasty-white Evangelical at work dividing the saved from the damned. Meanwhile, other folks are at work redeeming food stamps, redeeming miles, redeeming coupons, redeeming glass bottles and aluminium cans. Different realms: different redemptions.

Siegfried Kracauer, for one, found the ‘redemption of reality’ in film, which ‘leads us through the thicket of material life’ and prevents us ‘from shutting our eyes to the “blind drive of things”’. His materialist aesthetics, as Miriam Hansen underscores, have nothing to do with realism, everything to do with the way that film ‘bring[s] the whole material world in to play [...] push[ing] toward the bottom, to gather and carry along even the dregs’—the way that film exposes the contingencies which escape our ‘habits of seeing [...] shaped by language and circulation, by social, cultural, and representational regimes’. How to rescue the dregs from those regimes? It is a question to which art has responded in other media, not least in a variety of refabrication and installation projects, a variety of assemblages, détournements, combines, collages. It’s a question that Theaster Gates has defined his career by answering, in many modes (sculpture and archivism, performance and pottery, architecture and installation) that constitute one simple-manifold practice, meant not to unsettle some existing regime but to inaugurate an altogether new one, buoyed by a system of belief.

So: if you’re asserting that Theaster Gates inhabits a redemptive project—the effort to redeem built space, the urban fabric, discrete objects and subject/object relations—you can’t get away with disavowing the spiritual or the congregational dimensions of the term. Behind the podium at the Craft Forward Symposium (San Francisco, 2011), Gates begins his lecture in song, with a spiritual about the ‘clay in my veins’; he marshals a gospel choir in ‘To Speculate Darkly’ (Milwaukee, 2010), to sing the lines inscribed on the stoneware of Dave Drake, the slave from South Carolina; for ‘Dry Bones and Other Parables from the North’ (St. Louis, 2010) he draws inspiration for (his paintings on discarded board) from what the kids are saying in Hyde Park (St. Louis) and from the Book of Ezekiel. Hey: faith in some New Jerusalem—reimagined as the urban landscape—it’s not to be doubted. Redeeming a neighbourhood (the community, the space, the objects) promises something other than revitalisation-as-usual: not simply turning the valueless into something valuable, but sharing a transvaluation of values, some recognition of the ignored yet integral worth, and the congealed history, that inheres—right there—on this corner, in these bricks, in that strangely stained concrete: the worth that your habits of seeing haven’t let you see. Theaster Gates is the major motion picture ‘Now Appearing’ to prevent you from shutting your eyes.

REIFICATION. However simple the definition of the word might be (from the Latin res—‘thing’—and thus ‘thingification’), it gained a sociological complexity within the Marxist tradition. Marx wrote of the reification (Versachlichung) of persons; more expansively, Georg Lukács (in 1923) elaborated the idea of the pathological reification (Versachlichung) that accompanies the saturation of culture and society with the commodity form. As one recent commentator puts it: persons, feelings, talents, ideas—'these get experienced as thing-like objects as soon as they come to be viewed according to their potential usefulness in economic transactions.' Lukács himself extended the pathology to the object world; the

3. Axel Honneth, Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea (Oxford University Press, New York 2008), p.23. For an additional contemporary account, one which seeks to reformulate and revitalise the concept by extending Lukács’s logic, see Timothy Bewes, Reification, or The Anxiety of Late Capitalism (Verso, London 2002).
whole culture of rationalisation (a result of the commodity form's abstraction of the object) conceals 'above all the immediate – qualitative and material – character of things as things.' Soon thereafter, though, in One-Way Street (1928), Walter Benjamin contended that children, producing 'their own small world of things', exempt themselves from that pathology for they are 'irresistably drawn by the detritus generated by building, gardening, housework, tailoring, or carpentry. In waste products they recognise the face that the world of things turns directly and solely to them'; they bring together, 'in the artifact produced in play, materials of widely differing kinds in a new, intuitive relationship.'

When the world of things turns its face to Theaster Gates, he looks back a little wild-eyed and willing to see – there within the construction site – what can be redeemed by an aesthetic that's both minimalist and historicist, both formal and sociological: old porcelain sinks become 'Whyte Paintings' (from the Black neighbourhood); tinted glass framed by salvaged wood becomes a screen in which, while you stare as though waiting for the movie to start, you're being led through the thicket of material life. The tension between the formal and the sociological reaches a signal intensity in 'The Civil Rights Tapestries' (2012), which extend Gates's use of decommissioned fire hoses meant to evoke their deployment as weapons in the war against Civil Rights protestors ('the fire that won't go out'). They are tapestries not just because they are hanging textiles but because they respond to the narrative and allegorical tradition of tapestry, all the while sustaining a stark minimalism. (It is as though the bands of colour in a work by Agnes Martin had a metonymic, political referent.) But however precise the time and place of the referent (Alabama, 1963), they provide an ascent into the timelessness of formalism. Still, redeemed from the ravages of history, they register history, however dignified, they recall an assault on human dignity.

Implicitly (yet aggressively) Hannah Arendt retrieved the concept of reification back from the Marxist tradition. In The Human Condition (1958) she in fact champions reification as the way that mankind, understood as Homo faber, makes an 'artificial world of things, distinctly different from all natural surroundings', which constitutes the sign of 'human artifact', a world that outlasts the individual, 'bestow[ing] a measure of permanence and durability upon the futility of mortal life and the fleeting character of human time.' She nonetheless recognised that the faculties of 'making, fabricating, and building' – of worlding – were increasingly 'restricted to the abilities of the artist'. And in a final footnote Arendt insists that the 'inherent wordliness of the artist' is unaffected by the non-figurative turn in art that dispenses with the 'representation of things'; 'to mistake this "nonobjectivity" for subjectivity, where the artist feels called upon to "express himself"; his subjective feelings, is the mark of charlatans, not of artists.' The objective of the artist remains "reification": 'The artist, whether painter or sculptor or poet or musician, produces worldly objects.' Yet. Yet when the artist does not produce objects so much as re-produce them (retrieving them, reworking them, reframing them) you can imagine a redemptive reification (Verdinglichung) that interrupts reification-as-usual (Versachlichung), granting the object (die Sache, das Objekt) the status of a thing (ein Ding), disclosing the thingness of the object, some thing about the object that is (all at once) material, formal and historical – enabling it to escape the law of obsolescence and decay. Might be that a Black guy whose genealogy


7. Ibid., p.323
includes lives lived, legally, as things, can grasp things other folks never could.⁸ Just saying.

THEASTER GATES. The guy dramatises how redemptive refilcation is an act that begins and ends with gathering. Gathering the detritus from a re-building site: strips of lath, plywood, a hunk of embroidered sofa, doors, moulding, a ceramic outlet, glass – to be reused or reframed (figuratively or literally), and granted the privileged uselessness of the work of art. Gathering up the outmoded – thousands of LPs from a defunct record shop, hundreds of art and architecture texts from a defunct book shop, thousands of slides from digitising Art History departments – not your 20th-century objets trouvés, and not another fucking ready-made’ (to quote Maurizio Cattelan), but whole fucking inventories, preserved for the audience to come. Gathering people for a performance (of a talk, a ritual meal, a musical event), or for a property negotiation, or for the work of tearing into the tile of a bathroom, the work of rebuilding a staircase, the work of reimagining a neighbourhood. The Rebuild Foundation (St. Louis, Chicago, Detroit, Omaha) that Theaster Gates founded redeems urban space to revive creative talent; the artists are seriously there, man, they just need the space and the company. Somewhere to gather.

Chicago’s South Side can lay claim to environments – the Experimental Station, the Hyde Park Art Center, the Smart Museum of Art – that have made an incubating context for Theaster Gates’ work. And from Dan Peterman to Marie Krane Bergman, there are artists there who clearly share some of his objectives.⁹ But at a glance, much of this work seems to speak to concepts like Joseph Beuys’s ‘social sculpture’ or to Gordon Matta-Clark’s installation of building fragments (e.g. Splitting: Four Corners (1974) and Bingo (1974)). The conversation is tense. For whereas Matta-Clark designated his work as ‘anarchitectural’, fixed as he was on entropy, Theaster Gates is all about increasing energy: the energy to catalyse an object ecology (the transformation of objects into things) that is also an object economy.¹⁰ The project thrives in the market on which it depends. It’s not about subverting the system; it’s about perverting the system, redirecting attention and affection and the aesthetic drive to objects (dregs) at the bottom of the system. It’s about working the system, not just as a charismatic dude but as someone willing to shout and to fight, to bargain, to negotiate with architects and other artists and other carpenters, with loan officers and zoning boards and aldermen. Matta-Clark famously invested in useless property. Theaster Gates is out there looking for useful property – somewhere for folks to gather.

Today’s à la mode theorist of aesthetics and politics, Jacques Rancière, has compellingly argued that the ‘micro-politics’ of critical art today must be ‘grasped through an analysis of the metamorphoses of the [...] politics founded on the play of exchanges and displacements between the art world and that of non-art.’¹¹ Such an analysis, with Theaster Gates as its object of attention, would stumble over the macropolitics of an alternate economy: Ø—AW—O. The art world mediates the exchange from the discarded object to the new object, the salvaged detritus (Ø) from one construction refigured and sold (AW) to fund some other object (O), the next site. The new face of things invites your participation in the project.

If you want to say that Theaster Gates has got his hands all over everything, you should recognise those hands as potter’s hands. In the plastic arts, life began for him as a potter. (He studied ceramics at Iowa State and the University of Cape Town. He’s become president of the Association of Named Negro American Potters; see ANNAP (2010).) And art, as Herbert Read argued, begins with pottery. The insight had its unanticipated origins in the book English Pottery (1924), co-authored by Bernard Rackham. Read was a poet and literary critic who was transferred in 1922, following his military

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⁹ Dan Peterman’s Running Table (1997) consists of a 100-foot long picnic table made from recycled plastic; and his Standard Kiosk (2004) consists of refounded metal dumpsters. Along with Connie Spreen he founded the Experimental Station, where Theaster Gates regularly performs. Peterman held a career-defining dinner performance at the Hyde Park Art Center (Chicago, 2007), which, for the past two summers, has hosted GESF (General Economy, Exquisite Exchange, 2011, 2012), the post-retail barter shop produced by the artist Marie Krane Bergman and the Cream Co. collective. He also held a series of soul food dinners at the Dorchester Projects in collaboration with the Estate Motors, 2012, 2013.

¹⁰ The relation can be seen in ‘Dry Bones and Other Parables from the North’ (installed at the Bruno David Gallery, 2010), which was organized by the Pulitzer Foundation in conjunction with ‘Urban Alchemy/Gordon Matta-Clark’.

service in the war and subsequent service at the Treasury, to the post of Assistant Keeper of Ceramics at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (Rackham was head of the same department). This book on pottery (not ceramics, and not porcelain, but some humbler form) abruptly interrupted the histories that narrated a steady progress in ceramic art from the coarse to the elegant, from ‘mere peasant work’ to the work of Wedgewood, with no ‘account of the nature of pottery’ — which, in the authors’ understanding, had been steadily compromised since the 18th century. Drawing attention to very early work, they pronounced that ‘pottery is, at its best, an abstract art’, which should be recognised as ‘plastic art in its most abstract form’. 12 And for Read, on his way to becoming the century’s first great expositor of modern sculpture (Moore and Hepworth, above all), pottery catalysed (or, say, materialised) a new conceptualisation of art.

‘Pottery is pure art,’ he goes on to write, and in his subsequent historical survey, The Meaning of Art (1931), committed to understanding ‘aesthetic sensibility’ as that which ‘corresponds to the element of form in art’, he singles out both modernist abstraction and pottery: ‘Pottery is at once the simplest and the most difficult of all art. It is the simplest because it is the most elemental; it is the most difficult because it is the most abstract.’ 13 He goes on: ‘[B]efore man could write, before he had a literature or even a religion, he had this art, and the vessels then made can still move us by their expressive form.’ 14 Within the book, Read also refuses to distinguish between the artist and the artisan — ‘The distinction between the “fine” and “applied” arts is a pernicious one’ — and that refusal becomes the argumentative force of Art and Industry (1934).

Theaster Gates learned far more from the belatedly renowned Yamaguchi, the potter who left Japan and founded a ceramics commune in Mississippi, teaching his craft and crafting ‘plate convergences’: gatherings, object events, conversation, soul food, dinnerware — experiments in the ceramic mediation of cross-cultural ecology. Given the impact of Martin Heidegger in Japan (most famously on the thought of Kuki Shuzo), it’s hardly surprising that Yamaguchi was so encouraged by how the philosopher — in his lecture on ‘The Thing’ (Das Ding), troubled by a world in which science has ‘annihilated things as things’, by the fact that the ‘thingness of the thing’ has been ‘forgotten’ — turned his attention to pottery, crafting a little scene in which a potter throws a jug (Krug): ‘From start to finish,’ Heidegger writes, ‘the potter takes hold of the impalpable void’, bringing ‘it forth as the container in the shape of a containing vessel’. 15 Of course, Yamaguchi had to object to any idea of a start to the process that does not originate in matter. At the origin, ‘you gather the clay’, he taught: 粘土をまとめて (Nendo o matomete). With hands held as though poised for prayer, you gently squeeze in and then press down, squeeze and press down, before the thumb finally begins to hollow the ‘void that holds’.

This is a capacity not just to hold, but also to gather and to give. And because the poured gift (the ‘giving of the outpouring’) may be spring water or wine, each dependent on sky and earth, Heidegger is compelled to say that ‘in the jugness of the jug, sky and earth dwell’. 16 Because the gift could serve mortals or it could, as a libation, serve the immortals, he is led to say that ‘in the gift of the outpouring earth and sky, divinities and mortals dwell together all at once’. 17 And because he finds, in his etymological archaeology, that the word Ding (ding, in Old High German) originally meant a gathering for deliberation, Heidegger can say (as a way of re-captioning how the jug makes the ‘simple-manifold’ present) that ‘the thing things’ (Das Ding dingt): 18 a predication that (crucially) does not distribute properties of the thing, but lets it be in its Being, as though we said not that the throne stands in the corner, or the throne is tall, or that the throne is mahogany, but exclusively that the throne thrones. ‘The thing things. In thinging it stays earth and sky, divinities and

14. ibid., p.49
15. ibid., p.41
17. ibid., p.170
18. ibid., p.171
19. ibid., p.175
mortalis. [...] Each thing stays the fourfold into a happening of the simple onefold of the world. 20

Heidegger's tendentious mistake is to have granted the jug independence – to have hastily erased the potter from the scene of giving and gathering. For it is the potter (Yamaguchi or Dave Drake or Theaster Gates inhabiting the role of Yamaguchi or Dave Drake) who, by bringing forth the void that holds, configures this gathering, and that one. And thus the gathering is also a dispersing, what the anthropologist Alfred Gell called the 'distribution of personhood' that enlivens the object with agency: an agency itself dispersed both geographically and temporally, 'an object at no specific time or place, but moving through time and place, like a thunderstorm'. 21 Before a thunderstorm the world can seem serene, however threatening.

Whether or not, like Herbert Read, you grant pottery a priority among all the arts, pottery has the priority of serving as the master trope for the arts of Theaster Gates, whose objects more often originate, now, with the gathering of fragments of lath and plywood – objects brought forth, now, in an altogether new scale. While his oversize Shoe Shine Stands (2010) intimated something like a throne, and thus the relation between sovereign and subject, his Standing Thrones (2012) literalize and monumentalize that gesture. The redeemed lath appears here not just as surfaced dregs, but as the perpetually hidden (within walls) demanding to have its face seen (in the middle of the room, as the centre of attention); this is the drive of things insisting on assuming some other object form. Not the vessel thrown from clay, but the throne thrown from detritus. The form here is, whatever else, an inaccessible seat of power provoking obvious questions: Whose seat? Which empire? What kingdom? What is the nature of this sovereignty? What are the constitutive bounds of its jurisdiction? You can know only that, in relation to these seats of power, you experience yourself as a diminished subject (however certain you are that, were the thrones set up in a park, kids would be all over them). Thrones have been carved out of ivory and crafted out of rosewood. The Pope's sede gestatoria is upholstered in red silk. Rumours were (for a minute) that Beyoncé and Jay-Z had installed a solid-gold throne in their penthouse pad. What Ezekiel (10:1) saw upon the firmament was a throne like a monumental sapphire. Within the poetics of redemptive reification, the gathered lath becomes a thing, a thing that gathers. But the thing (Ding, dinc) isn't just any gathering. It's no party, man. It's an assembly – an assembly summoned to deliberate.

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20. Ibid., p.178
