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## At Town Hall, Nasher Prize Laureate Theaster Gates Pushed Dallas To Build

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By: Jennifer Smart



Theaster Gates spoke with Dallas artists and leaders at a Town Hall Friday.  
*courtesy Phaidon*

**"Art without people is dead," the artist told the crowd.**

Theaster Gates works in many disciplines, as successful artists do in the 21st century. He writes poetry, he performs music, he creates sculpture. Still Gates is chiefly known as a place-maker and a community builder, as if his objectives override the mediums in which he achieves them. Why is social practice considered outside the realm of object-making, when artists like Gates serve one with the other?

Gates— who asserted that “art without people is dead” — engaged in a three-hour conversation with local artists and leaders Friday afternoon at the Wily Theatre, in a town hall appearance made in conjunction with his trip to Dallas to accept the \$100,000 Nasher Prize. The wandering dialogue he had with the Dallas community painted the picture of a man, and an artist, who, despite having spent a great deal of time grappling with his position, continues to search for answers himself to the questions raised by his practice.

Gates is an entertainer and a teacher. Both sides of his persona were on display Friday. Thelma Golden, Director and Chief Curator of the Studio Museum in Harlem and Gates’ interlocutor for the first hour Friday afternoon, asked Gates to define social sculpture. The artist drew laughs with his response.

“Social sculpture is sculpture with an extra word added because art historians needed jobs,” he said.

The note Gates struck turned serious as he seemed to process what the term might actually mean, not just to him, but to the many who use the term in reference to his work. For Gates social sculpture is about community: “making the invisible thing visible.”

Over the course of the afternoon Gates was funny, he was biting, and he was inspirational. But he was also careful— a diplomat, hesitant to assert definitive answers or put down critics and historians quick to label and define his work. Too, he sidestepped criticism of the institutions which harbor those individuals, and from whom he was in town to accept a sizable amount of money.

Gates seemed more interested in acknowledging and affirming questions than resolving them for enthusiastic seekers. Take his response to Dallas artist and community organizer Darryl Ratcliff’s question regarding the label of “social practice artist” and whether it devalues the artist’s work.

“Do you ever think about in the words of the great black businessman Reginald Lewis: ‘Why should white guys have all the fun?,’” he asked.

“There’s a fundamental burden...that has to do with culturally, racially, economically, how do we imagine ourselves in relationship with others, or another ...What I’ve found is, by and large, certain kinds of people feel more duty and others don’t... Does the artistic world expect something of a black artist that maybe they don’t expect of white artists? These are maybe questions I ask myself but maybe they’re more questions that are out there. When I look at my own practice it’s evident that I have a chip on my shoulder, or some points to prove,” Gates said. “Like if we look at the [Stony Island] [arts bank](#). It was something I wanted to do, I didn’t feel any external pressure ... It’s a big building I own that I can do whatever I want with.

“Sometimes that building makes room for others immediately around me, but it doesn’t always have to do all things for all people, even if there’s a part of my personality that’s inclined towards that,” Gates said. “Could that be some kind of genetic defect in the black psyche? That we’ve been doing all things for all people for so long that we don’t know any other way to be?”

As tempered and philosophical as his responses were, Gates did, at several points throughout the conversation, spit fire. A particularly impassioned response came to a question from Giovanni Valderas, an artist, curator and community advocate whose own artistic practice often falls within the realm of social practice.

Valderas [spoke about his recent work](#), which attempts to bring attention to the emotional cost of development in historic but declining neighborhoods. He queried Gates with a yes or no question: Are artists obliged to consider social practice in order to avoid complicity in gentrification?

Instead of responding directly, Gates entered his own experience as an artist who has himself bought and transformed property in downtrodden neighborhoods. Several years ago Gates opened the Stony Island Arts Bank in a previously abandoned neo-classical building in Chicago's South Side, which now serves as part library, part community center, part gallery. He has continued purchasing buildings in the neighborhood although he's ambivalent as to how much credit for combating "blight" should go to him.

"The change that happens in a place, and the lack of consideration that happens in a place, is never the artist's fault. The fact that an artist wants to be a good neighbor...The thing is we have been making our places more beautiful for a long time," he said. "The good stuff was already there. I just saw it."

He challenged the efficacy of art and activism without action.

"If all we have is a petition, a protest, and a prayer— hey. We're dealing with the people that invented those forms. You gotta have a deed. If you want to stop gentrification you got to have a deed. Someone has to have bought something ... How 'bout we put our money together and buy a building? If you want to stop gentrification, stop driving by it. Somebody is going to own brown space and if it's not you it's going to be somebody else. And it's not just going to be a white person, it's going to be a real estate investment trust...We need to own the buildings we socialize in."

When not fielding questions from artists and city planners alike on how to transform neighborhoods responsibly or what art means in the 21st century, Gates was discussing his own experience with the realities of being black in America, the loneliness of the artist, church vs. secular music, and much more. This led to a plainly spoken answer to the question of why he persists, and why, in 2018, so many in attendance at this town hall still believe in art.

"We do this because it's the closest we can get to god ... Since we don't go to church anymore, we don't experience the holy ghost, we don't eat together on Fridays ... All of the things that have been the conventions of a collective emotion, we don't have them anymore. All we have is brunch ... in the absence of the temple, art is all we got."