Theaster Gates's Dorchester Projects and the Craft paradigm

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Theaster Gates is an American artist whose success has been meteoric since he was first included in the Whitney Biennial in 2010. His practice involves the production of sculpture, installation art, performance of various kinds – including a band called 'the Black Monks of Mississippi' – as well as public art. Many artists now explore this kind of multidisciplinary activity, but the core of Gates's practice is distinctive. The sale of his art objects funds the redevelopment of disused buildings into community spaces: this activity is framed as an integral part of his work, as art. Indeed, he uses materials reclaimed from the redevelopment of urban spaces to fabricate the art objects that fund this activity, sometimes refashioning the material into sculpture, at other times simply re-designating objects as art in a kind of 'readymade' strategy. The proceeds from the sale of these works – by now they command prices of up to $250,000 – have funded the redevelopment of vacant buildings located in the South Side of Chicago, the economically deprived neighborhood in which Gates lives and works. Among the first of these redevelopments was Dorchester Projects (2008 -), two buildings located on the same street that have been converted into community spaces and archives. Gates trains and employs local people to work on these projects through his 'Rebuild Foundation', which has been responsible for The Stony Island Arts Bank, a former bank building transformed into a community space and archive, as well as a number of other similar projects. With this virtuous circle of investment, Gates crosses the boundary between engagement with the art market, socially-engaged art and entrepreneurship in ways that are highly original.

In the words of art historian Huey Copeland, Gates is a 'business artist for the new millennium' (Copeland 2013: 227). Copeland invokes here Andy Warhol's deadpan statement 'being good in business is the most fascinating kind of art. Making money is art and working is art and business is the best art'. This point of reference does make sense, but it is important to note that Gates finds in this strategy, which is most obviously one of 'cynical realism' (Foster 1996), an ethical dimension that was explored neither by Warhol nor by his most well known epigones Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst. Gates has become an artist 'brand' in a way comparable to that of Koons and Hirst. Like them he employs others in the fabrication of some of his artwork: indeed, his Soul Manufacturing Corporation, exhibited at the Whitechapel gallery in 2013 is a working studio employing ceramicists and other makers.

As Copeland puts it, Gates is 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.' (Copeland 2013: 208) In this paper, I will approach Gates's work by drawing out the distinctive relationship that it has to craft. Gates's 'public-private' partnerships, in Copeland's terms, tend to emphasise craft of design skills and the experience of labour. This is true of the Soul Manufacturing Corporation but also the obviously crafted spaces of Dorchester Projects as well as many of the titles of his shows: for example My Labour is my Protest at White Cube London in 2012, or My Back, My Wheel and My Will at White Cube Sao Paulo in 2013. He has incorporated the work of the 19th century African-American potter David Drake, also known as 'Dave the Slave', in his installations and community outreach work.

Gates is a ceramicist by training, and there is a sense in which a core group of meanings related to craft provide Gates' practice with gravitas, and with its mood. At the same time, Gates has always experimented with what we might term the 'craft mythos' – the modernist tradition in studio ceramics in particular, in order to turn it to different ends. The work Yamaguchi Story from 2008, for example, involved performances where Gates served 'Soul Food', representing the African-American cultures of the United States, on ware produced by a Japanese ceramicist, Mr Yamaguchi. The stated aim of these performances was to explore resonances between African American and Japanese cultural traditions, but this exploration was complicated by the fact that Yamaguchi and his Yamaguchi Institute were fictions. All of these features of Gates's work make it possible to examine it through what I will term here the 'craft paradigm': the resurgence of interest in craft, and 'making', over the last decade or so. My intention here to show that Gates's work is comprehensible with this frame of reference, but also that it departs from it in a distinctive way.

The Craft Paradigm

Although there have been many different contributing factors in the resurgence of thinking about craft, and a number of authors have contributed to the theorizing of this development, here I will use the work of Richard Sennett to give an account of what I term the 'craft paradigm'. Sennett is an academic who writes across disciplines – a sociologist and anthropologist by training who has come increasingly to view the devaluing of craft by contemporary culture as one of our central problems. This argument was first advanced in the book The Craftsman, published in 2008. Further implications of Sennett's approach to thinking about the tacit skills that are required by craft are developed in his book Together: the Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation where Sennett 'contends that cooperation is a craft' (Sennett 2012) . It is important to note that Sennett's understanding of the problems of divided communities and individual alienation that plague modern societies are formed by his wide-ranging work as a theorist of urbanism (see: Sennett 1994). Like Gates, then, Sennett is interested in relationships between craft and the shaping of urban communities.

An important part of Sennett's project is to question the divide, theorised in the work of Hannah Arendt, between 'Animal laborans', the human being who merely labours, and 'Homo Faber', the human being who participates intelligently in the shared construction of a common world. Sennett insists that in through this distinction, which is implicit in contemporary forms of political thought, the complex intelligence of skilled labour is overlooked. As he puts it: 'we can achieve a more humane material life, if only we understand the making of things' (Sennett 2008:10). In this way Sennett aims to combat the tendency to denigrate craft labour that seems to have been integral to the development of capitalism. Sennett sees in this denigration as symptomatic of the divisions that are formed by capitalist culture; in response to it he develops a theoretical position intended to sensitise the reader to the subtle, and possibly redemptive intelligence that exists within craft.

Sennett draws connections between craft, ritual and urban design in terms of 'technique': the techniques required to master material, to collaborate, or create a sustainable environment. Across these concerns Sennett is interested in how we might learn to accept and deal with resistance and ambiguity. Craft skill plays a key role in his narrative in this respect. He suggests drawing as an example:

> The tactile, the relational, and the incomplete are physical experiences that occur in the act of drawing. Drawing stands for a larger range of experiences, such as the way of writing that embraces editing and rewriting, or of playing music to explore again and again the puzzling qualities of a particular chord. The difficult and the incomplete should be positive events in our understanding; they should stimulate us as simulation and facile manipulation of complete objects cannot. (Sennett 2008: 44)

I will focus here on one concept – a particular understanding of dialogue – that has been important to Sennett's recent work on community, craft and urban design. Sennett argues in Together that dialogue depends on listening. Listening means attending to the gaps in what someone is saying, rather than expecting them to speak in 'well-greased' prose. (Sennett 2012). The inarticulate spaces are important because they represent the complexity that underlies what another person is trying to say. Gaps attest to the difficulty involved in shaping this complexity into words.

Sennett draws a direct connection between dialogics and urban design in his work on what he calls 'the open city'. Sennett suggests that city planning since the twentieth century has privileged 'closed form' – an idea of balanced organisation that looks orderly on a plan, but is removed from the complex tissue of social experience. It is not dialogic, incapable of interaction with the patterns of use that are spontaneously developed by human beings. In order to be dialogic, Sennett suggests that designers must embrace what he calls 'incomplete form' where 'form and function need to be lightly connected if not altogether divorced'. The reason they must do this is that buildings cannot adapt to different kinds of use if form and function are too intimately connected.

In this way, Sennett has elaborated a nuanced and persuasive argument for the importance of craft: first, it is a space within which the community is catalysed, because of the way that skill revolves around the communication of the tacit understandings that are closest to a human sphere of experience. Second, Sennett hopes to provide tools for those who engage with processes of city planning to question their own approaches and to look outside of their disciplinary specialism in order to plan in a way that responds to the intelligence that emerges 'from below'. Sennett's is an attempt to work against, to regulate some of the tendencies within capitalism that destroy or undermine communities. This, of course, is precisely what Theaster Gates has placed at the centre of is art practice. To examine how Gates approaches this task is to see how he exists within, but also calls into question, a 'craft paradigm'.

Theaster Gates, Craft and the Readymade

Gates' first property, a house that would subsequently become an artwork as Dorchester Projects, was bought with one of the subprime mortgages that helped to precipitate the financial crisis of 2007-2008. His decision to designate the house an artwork was partly influenced by his need to service the onerous repayments that were concealed in the mortgage. Gates was given one of these loans, notoriously termed 'ghetto loans' by those who sold them, probably because he was African-American. Part of the scandal of the subprime crisis was its inherent racism. Dorchester Projects is in dialogue, therefore, with the manifest forms of racism in American culture, but also with the abstract forces of the economy that have such an obvious and direct effect on the urban fabric: especially in those communities that are already 'underserved', or economically deprived.

This pragmatism clearly does have an ethical dimension: once he became successful, Gates did not have to stay in the area of South Chicago in which he still lives. However, he points to this as a central part of the message of his practice:

"if I don't constantly reconcile what I have against what other people don't, either I need to leave and be around other people who have what I have, or I'm constantly engaged in this kind of dynamic flow of opportunity and sharing. And that just feels like smart living." (Gates 2014)

It is striking that Gates is working in a way that speaks to the fundamental concerns of the Sennett's comprehension of craft. His art practice models the same ethical concerns and it engages pragmatically with the same contradictions that are formed with capitalist society: the division of communities, the deprivation of some of them caused by unequal distribution of wealth and the debasement of community that comes from deprivation and the erosion of skilled labour as the foundation for social cohesion.

It is powerful because it finds a way to fuel the embeddedness of artisanal labour with the same abstractions that warp and splinter urban communities.

It is the pragmatism of Gates's intervention – the fact that it is a strategy that has clearly emerged by turning contingency into opportunity – that marks its difference from the craft paradigm as it is elaborated by Sennett. This point can be made most succinctly by observing that Gates' art practice depends heavily on the strategy of the readymade. It is the re-designation of reclaimed materials into artworks that makes possible what he calls the 'circular ecosystem' (Copeland 2013: 227) that is at the core of his practice. The cycle is only possible because reclaimed material is designated as art, at which point its value changes. The tension in the relationship to craft exists because the readymade is symptomatic of the *deskilling* of art across the twentieth century.

The skills that are promoted by Gates's work, the emphatically artisanal features of buildings of Dorchester Projects, which are the context for employment and skilling of local people, depend on income generated by artworks that derive from the effects of deskilling upon art.

Deskilling is a term that originates in analyses of changes in labour practices in the twentieth century, most influentially in Harry Braverman's work Labour and Monopoly Capital (Braverman 1998). However, the conceptual artist Ian Burn observed in 1980 that the term could be used to describe tendencies in twentieth century art. This idea has since been developed and expanded by influential art historians and art theorists, especially John Roberts in the United Kingdom. (Roberts 2007)

The readymade, invented by Marcel Duchamp, is clearly the most important and influential gesture of deskilling in the history of twentieth century art. In redesignating an existing object as an artwork, urinal or a bottlerack, Duchamp proposed an artwork that had no basis in his own artisanal labour, unlike drawing, painting or sculpture. It is important to stress that Duchamp did not cause the deskilling of art, although his work has been extremely influential upon current art practice. Rather, Duchamp diagnosed and perhaps exacerbated an existing tendency within the avant-garde. From Edouard Manet in the 1860s to Cubism in the 1910s, there were recurrent challenges to received ideas about skill in painting. These challenges amounted to a fundamental reevaluation of technique within the privileged field of painting. It seems to be related, although not directly, to the deskilling that is symptomatic of capitalism that continue into our own time, when if anything the cycles of technological development and obsolescence that play a key role in deskilling have become more rapid. The readymade can be read as an ambivalent response to the same tendencies that resulted in the devaluing of dexterous manual labour: one of the ways in which modern progress, and contemporary art, came to identify more with the manager or the entrepreneur than with the artisan.

Gates, of course, is a product of this tendency: it is in this sense that he is 'entrepreneurial'. However, his entrepreneurialism looks back to something that has been lost in the domain of craft labour. It is for this reason that Gates seems to try to use the readymade differently, as though to attest to what is lost in the use of this strategy. The connection between material and community is central to the sculptural ecology of his work.

A few examples will serve to make the point. In Gates' recent show at White Cube in London there is one piece, entitled Cabinet Work (2015), that is lifted directly from a bankrupt DIY store in a building acquired by his Rebuild Foundation. This is, of course, a sort of readymade. Yet it has an elegiac quality, recalling the range of skills, practices, and community spirit that can be imagined in a long-established hardware store.

In the same exhibition, there are other objects made from the punctured board reclaimed from the abandoned store. One of them quotes the famous modernist sculpture by Brancusi entitled Freedom of Assembly (2015). Where they cite famous modernist artworks, Gates' works bring into play another range of concerns. They ask a question of the tradition of modernist art that moved away from its location in craft and towards abstraction. This work Ground Rules (scrimmage) 2015 underlines this point. Here the reclaimed material from a school basketball court cites hard-edge abstraction of the early 1960s, but also places it in relationship to community values, with the space on which play was once possible.

The intention seems to be to connect the patina of these objects to questions of community erasure and renewal. The buildings that Gates creates tend to include archives: they foster a sense of community concerned with connection to the past. So, for Gates the readymade is elegiac. It is a strategy that derives from the gradual decline of art's identification with sophisticated hand craft, but it generates money, meaning that skills can be given to those who need them, and through which a community might be rebuilt.

In this way, Gates walks a tight rope of meaning. The danger is that these art objects will collapse into the nostalgia for past community that is part of the current trend for reclaimed and up-cycled objects. One might even argue that Gates plays on that nostalgia in order to create the funds he needs to regenerate a community. The effectiveness and ambiguity of this strategy is perhaps best captured in the phrase 'redemptive reification' suggested by the theorist Bill Brown to describe Gates's work (Brown 2012).

‘Reification’, a term that derives from the work of Georg Lukács, is usually understood to describe the tendency of capitalism to alienate us from authentic experience, to divide us from community while fetishizing an false image of authenticity, in brands and material commodities that promise ‘the real thing’. In Gates’s practice, the vicious cycle is given a virtuous twist. The art objects that memorialize the loss of authentic community are transformed into the money that can fund the regeneration of community.

Conclusion

This brief comparison between Sennett’s theoretical contribution to what I am calling the ‘craft paradigm’ and the work of Theaster Gates is intended to reveal an important point. I will try to clarify this point by reworking a famous distinction introduced by David Pye: between the ‘workmanship of certainty’ and the ‘workmanship of risk’. For Pye, the ‘workmanship of risk’ meant ‘workmanship using any kind of technique or apparatus, in which the quality of the result is not predetermined, but depends on the judgment, dexterity and care which the maker exercises as he works’ (Pye 1995: 20). It means, therefore, the kind of making undertaken by skilled artisans, as opposed to the making that is produced on an industrial scale (although Pye concedes that a ‘workmanship of risk’ is always presupposed at the beginning of any process of industrial manufacture to create the model which is the basis of mass production).

Sennett’s celebration of craft as dialogue is clearly highly significant on many levels, but form the point of view of urbanism it is an attempt to reform the process of urban design so that it is more aware of the processes of change that are driven from the ground up by the actual uses that are made of a city by its various inhabitants. He hopes to make urban designers sensitive to community as a kind of ‘material’: to its affordances and resistances. He wants them to view urban design as something like a ‘workmanship of risk’ that needs to be open to a dialogue with the tacit forms of making that emerge from communities as they adapt the city to their needs.

Gates has developed his art practice as a dialogue of a different kind: a dialogue, I argue here, with the processes of deskilling and gentrification that have warped and distorted the ‘material’ of community under capitalism. The ‘redepmtive reification’ that lies at the core of his practice does not focus on the relationship between urban designers and cities as a way to address the problem of community. It aims instead for a direct dialogue with the irrational forces that seem to dictate the spoliation of community that accompanies the social transformation that is a side-effect of the economic processes of capitalism: of deregulation, competition, monopoly. It is a ‘workmanship of risk’ but with a comprehension of risk that is different to that of Sennett. The reason that Gates’s tone is often so ambiguous is that his works divert income from high net-worth individuals directly into the South Side of Chicago. His wager is that it is necessary to play a cynical game in order to create conditions for the renewal of community. These two practices – one theoretical the other artistic – identify two different, but mutually implicated ways of understanding relationship the between craft, community and urban space. Between them they locate, perhaps, the potential and the risk involved in this relationship.

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