In some people’s book, I’m sure that half a century of friendship, admiration, and gratitude adds up to love or something very similar. I haven’t thought about this complex salad until this opportunity.

The gratitude part is because—something irrelevant here—I was one of the beneficiaries. Of complete relevance, Lucy opened doors that were normally closed to outsiders, which is one of the big reasons they were outsiders. This defined her as a great and memorable doorwoman. It has been one of her many missions and it has had a big cultural impact.

This is the point where admiration starts. Lucy proved that it is possible to be a gate-crushing gatekeeper. Some may call that treason, but others may have the enlightening realization that her actions actually improve and refresh what is becoming stale behind the gate. Art criticism is often a self-absorbing and ambition-driven activity, muted by jargon and oblivious to real life. Gatekeepers of this kind, usually stand behind the gate, and keep it closed while looking at and fighting off the philistine hordes. Lucy always was, and is, in front of the gate in an effort to ensure access. Amazingly, she does this without losing intellectual standing or rigor—forcing respect among those she fights.

So far, gratitude and admiration do not necessarily lead to friendship. U.S. art critics occasionally landed in Latin America. Juries, symposia, and other intellectual activities encouraged quick intellectual tourism. This helped to internationalize ceremonial activities on one hand, and allowed visitors to claim homeopathic erudition on the other. Lucy was claimless, though certainly not clueless. She grasped political situations on the activities on one hand, and allowed visitors to claim homeopathic erudition on the other. This may be a sign of her successful demagoguery, of my own isolation, or—more probably the truth—her phenomenal intellectual stature combined with the absence of any (visible) ego. I think that after so many decades of this, that is where love starts.

REDEMPTION. It can sound like a dirty, 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, miles, coupons, glass bottles and aluminum cans. Different realms: different redemptions.

When the world of things turns its face to Theaster Gates, he looks back a little wild-eyed and willing to see—within the construction site—what can be redeemed by an aesthetic that’s minimalist and historicist, formal and sociological; old porcelain sinks become ‘Whyte Paintings’ (from the Black neighborhood); 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.

THEASTER GATES. The guy dramatizes how redemptive reification is an act that begins and ends with gathering. Gathering the detritus from a re-building site to be reused or reframed 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 digitizing Art History departments—not your 20th-century objets trouvés, and not ‘another fucking ready-made’ (to quote Maurizio Cattelan). Gathering people for a performance; a property negotiation; the work of tearing into the tile of a bathroom, rebuilding a staircase, reimagining a neighborhood. The Rebuild Foundation founded by Theaster Gates redeems urban space to revive creative talent; the artists are seriously there, they just need the space. Somewhere to gather.

Theaster Gates is about increasing energy: the energy to catalyze an object ecology that is also an object economy. 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, bargain, and negotiate with architects and other artists and other carpenters, with loan officers and zoning boards and aldermen.

Redeeming a neighborhood promises something other than revitalization—as-usual: not simply turning the valueless into something valuable, but sharing a transvaluation of values, some recognition of the ignored yet integral worth 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.

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BY LUIS CAMNITZER F’14

THEASTER GATES

Skowhegan Medal for Sculpture in the Expanded Field

BY BILL BROWN