

ART MATTERS

Three Artists Who Think Outside the Box

By Nikil Saval
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AS A YOUNG ARTIST getting started in Houston, Rick Lowe sought to address in his paintings the violence and poverty he saw in the city where he lived, especially in those historically black neighborhoods like the Third Ward that had been buffeted by decades of policy neglect. But in 1990, during a visit to his studio by high school students, a young man approached Lowe. He wanted to know why, rather than making work that represented the daily reality of the inhabitants of the Third Ward, Lowe didn't try to instead affect that reality.

The question spoke to the fundamental problem of political art, which had traditionally stayed inside the studio or gallery rather than becoming an active presence in the lives of the people it was meant to champion. For Lowe, now 54, it was also the question that led him to embark on a new way of creating art. And it would ultimately — though Lowe didn't know it at the time — inspire two fellow artists and eventual friends, Theaster Gates and Mark Bradford, to think more expansively about their own art: what its purpose was, how it should be seen, even where it should live.



From left: Lowe; an art installation by Harold Mendez and Ronny Quevedo in one of the wooden houses that Lowe has been renovating in Houston's Third Ward since 1994 as part of Project Row Houses. Stefan Ruiz

Lowe had long been preoccupied with the German artist Joseph Beuys, who in the 1970s proposed the concept of “social sculpture,” a more engaged form of political art in which the spectators themselves were the participants. He had also been spending time with Deloyd T. Parker, the director of a local organization called Self-Help for African People Through Education. In 1993, this conjunction of people and ideas led Lowe to purchase — with his artist-comrades including James Bettison, Jesse Lott, Bert Samples and George Smith — a series of 22 abandoned wooden shotgun houses in the Third Ward, tenant farmer shacks built in the 1930s and typical of the African-American housing then found in the South. With money from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Elizabeth Firestone Graham Foundation, and using volunteers from a number of institutions including the Menil Foundation, Lowe soon mobilized people across the city to restore the neighborhood.

Today, these homes form the core of Project Row Houses, one of the most original and ambitious works of art of the past century. Eight of the shacks are designated studio and exhibition spaces, while seven others are devoted to the Young Mothers Residential Program, which hosts single women trying to finish school. Crucial to Lowe's design is that no one group of inhabitants is separate from the other: The young mothers in residence are encouraged, as much as the artists, to find a vision for themselves. And along with the surrounding community, they form the audience for the visiting artists' work. Since the project's inception, art has become a presence in the everyday lives of the very individuals whose concerns Lowe had been challenged long ago to meet — and a model for a kind of 21st-century artistic activism.

Lowe's achievements resonated well beyond Houston. Gates and Bradford, who both cite him as an influence, are Lowe's co-conspirators in a mode of political or "social practice" art that actively involves them in underserved neighborhoods. Now old friends who have over the years spoken on many panels together and called each other regularly for advice, the three artists have also assisted each other on their large-scale, community-based artworks: Lowe sits on the board of Bradford's Art + Practice Foundation in Leimert Park in L.A., and Theaster Gates's Dorchester Projects on Chicago's South Side has hosted Bradford, who has, in turn, helped to fund Lowe's Project Row Houses. Initiating projects such as theirs requires the very practical skills of a policymaker, a preservationist or an organizer. Not so different, Gates reminds me, from those of an earlier generation of site-specific artists such as Donald Judd, Robert Rauschenberg or Gordon Matta-Clark (who, among other projects, co-established in 1971 the legendary SoHo restaurant FOOD, which was staffed and run by artists and turned every meal into a communal artwork). When working with neighbors, homes and livelihoods, however, practicality prevails. A bigger difference between "social practice" and its conceptual precedents is the trio's focus on the urban community — and, for Lowe and Gates, the old, culturally rich black neighborhood whose heritage is imperiled.

Around 2007, Gates, a sculptor born and raised in Chicago, met with Lowe to ask for advice. Gates had recently moved into a former candy store in the Grand Crossing neighborhood of the city's South Side, an area devastated by waves of unemployment and internal violence yet situated just blocks away from coveted property, including the pre-White House residence of the Obamas. He'd trained in a variety of disciplines, studied ceramics in Japan and worked as a public art coordinator for the Chicago Transit Authority — and by the time he got in touch with Lowe, his artwork was on the brink of migrating from the gallery.

That same year, he started to host soul-food dinners in honor of his ceramics mentor Shoji Yamaguchi, who had escaped Hiroshima for Mississippi, where he began fusing African-American and Asian pottery techniques. Arts patrons underwrote the dinners and people paid hundreds for Yamaguchi's wares — only to discover they had been punked. Yamaguchi never existed; the pieces had actually been designed by Gates himself. Until he created the Yamaguchi fiction, Gates had been unable to sell them for more than \$25. By mimicking the art world, he had slyly exposed the profound racial fault lines beneath it.

Gates soon realized he could extend what he calls his "hustler" ways beyond the social niceties of the art world's dining rooms. During the financial crisis, many in his long-suffering neighborhood found themselves unemployed and looking for ways to leave the city. "I started to recognize that if there was not direct intervention by normal people, black space in the United States would not be saved," Gates says. "It would simply spiral down, without a whole lot of investment from outside." Gates began to use the proceeds from the sales of his artwork to buy up properties. In 2009, he acquired the empty house next door to his home, turning it into a library and stocking it with the 14,000 volumes he bought from the nearby Prairie Avenue Bookshop, which was closing. When the neighboring Dr. Wax record store shuttered as well, he bought out its crates and turned it into a collection in the former candy store, renaming it the Listening House. He also created a screening room for black cinema in a red-brick building across the street, which he bought in 2011. (The Black Cinema has since moved to a larger venue.) Together these buildings are at the center of Dorchester Projects, a conglomeration as ambitious in its way as the Project Row Houses that inspired it, although more clearly focused on the creation of black arts institutions than on residences.

Like Lowe, Gates, who is 42, wants to mimic the kinds of power structures that have the capacity to transform a community. But, as ever, his method is playful. In 2012 he struck a deal with the city, which agreed to sell him a moldering, neo-Classical ruin that had once been a bank for the unbeatable price of \$1; one of the conditions of the sale was that Gates had to raise money for its restoration himself. So he took marble slabs that had once been part of the building and imprinted them with the motto “IN ART WE TRUST.” He then sold some of them for \$50,000 each as “bonds” to fund the renovation of the building. Signed by Gates, they are part of his artistic oeuvre — and, as such, he has noted wryly, will increase in value over time, just like bonds. The building, dubbed the Stony Island Arts Bank, opened this fall and hosts, among others, the company collection of the late John H. Johnson, publisher of the seminal African-American magazines *Ebony* and *Jet*.

The L.A. artist Mark Bradford’s foray into social practice began, like Gates’s, with the community where he grew up, in Leimert Park, an area only seven miles from downtown Los Angeles but asphyxiated by the 10 and 110 freeways. Bradford told me how the geographic separation of art and life gets played out early for people who grew up where he did: “You get on a bus. You go to a museum. You see art. And I felt it had little to do with my day to day, or anything that was going on in my head.” As he began to achieve success — a MacArthur “genius grant” in 2009; a residency at the Wexner Center for the Arts in Ohio in 2010 — and move in the more rarefied circles of the art world, he became preoccupied with the distance between his old neighborhood and these modern art institutions. What if an art center didn’t require a bus trip? What if art was of the neighborhood, and not outside it?

Bradford — 54 years old and, unforgettably, almost 6 feet 8 inches tall — is chiefly known for his extraordinary abstract paintings: This year’s “Scorched Earth,” for example, was an exhibition of dazzling, large-scale, maplike images — criss-crossed by blood-red lines that resemble streets and freeways — that bring to mind South Central Los Angeles, where he was living when the 1992 riots erupted. Bradford’s solution to the question of how to bring art to the neighborhood is the recently opened Art + Practice Foundation, which he co-founded with art collector and philanthropist Eileen Harris Norton and neighborhood activist (and his partner) Allan DiCastro, and which is located in several local buildings. Superficially, Art + Practice’s 4,000-square-foot exhibition space at the center of the campus resembles any gallery designed for museum-quality art exhibitions (the James Irvine Foundation has contributed funding for Art + Practice’s partnership with the Hammer Museum). But it is also a center that, through an affiliation with the RightWay Foundation, offers job training and mental health services to the neighborhood’s foster youth. Unlike Lowe and Gates, however, Bradford delineates his social practice from his own artistic output.

Chatty as only an expert in the art of small talk can be (he worked for many years as a hairdresser in his mother’s salon before he became a successful artist), Bradford talks about how he imagines people going from the barbershop to a show at Art + Practice and then to the bookstore. He is, he said, just “very comfortable” in the small-business world. “If I walk into a new business, I instantly know what’s going on.”

For Bradford, bringing art to Leimert Park means he’s “not just preaching to the converted.” Indeed, perhaps the most striking thing about these three artists’ projects is their ability to see both art and community afresh — to apply their artistic vision to social structures themselves. “I simply named something that I had already been doing,” Gates says about Dorchester Projects. “All my life I’ve been asking questions about how spaces can be better than they are, and what individuals can do alongside systems, governmental systems or whatever, to have an impact in a place.” The combination of ambition and modesty remains a unique aspect of social practice art; interestingly, the artists are wary of describing themselves as part of a unified movement, an idea they find at once too grand and too simplifying. “The big stuff always makes me tired,” Bradford says when asked whether he’s part of a greater shift in the art world. The change only happens, he explains, with individuals taking a practical attitude to their work. “If you look at the civil rights movement, they were just moving and grooving, just — workers.” The important thing, he adds, isn’t trying to figure out the theory behind what was going on, but to multiply the number of people taking art back to their neighborhoods. “What if there were 400 of these small spaces all around the world?” he said. “Or 4,000? It’s just a matter of deciding what we’re doing with our time here, that’s all.”