Breathing
November 7, 2020–May 16, 2021

Theaster Gates
b. 1973, Chicago; lives in Chicago

Breathing, 2010
Digital color video, with sound, 6 min., 58 sec.
Collection Pérez Art Museum Miami, gift of Deborah and Larry Hoffman

Theaster Gates is one of the most highly regarded artists active in the United States today. His innovative, multidimensional practice is deeply rooted in questions of social justice, centering on novel ways of marrying art, urban planning, and community participation to address systemic racism and economic inequity.

Gates is known for creating sculptures that touch on African American identity and history by utilizing materials culled from derelict buildings scattered throughout Chicago’s South Side, an underserved, predominantly Black neighborhood that has long struggled with the effects of urban blight. Throughout his career, he has used his artistic production to finance major urban revitalization projects in this neighborhood. Under the auspices of his nonprofit organization the Rebuild Foundation, Gates and his collaborators have transformed numerous abandoned structures into affordable housing, art studios, and work space. They have also established several public venues that offer rich and vigorous cultural programming, presenting art exhibitions, cinema, theater, dance, and music; housing libraries, special collections, and archives; hosting job-training initiatives and other hands-on workshops; and serving as platforms for civic discussion and community engagement.

Breathing (2010) was inspired by the artist’s avid interest in Eastern Buddhism as well as his lifelong personal relationship with traditional gospel music, which constituted a formative aspect of his Baptist upbringing. The singers who appear in the video belong to an experimental choir known as the Black Monks (formerly the Black Monks of Mississippi), which Gates has directed since 2008. The ensemble has performed many times in the context of Gates’s rehabilitated venues and in conjunction with his exhibitions in art galleries and museums around the world. The Black Monks merge Black Southern gospel and blues music with the monastic chant traditions of Buddhism. The soothing, beautiful melodies that result from this unique hybrid testify to the potency of Black spiritual musical legacies while alluding to a communal experience that transcends geographic, cultural, and linguistic boundaries.

René Morales
Director of Curatorial Affairs and Chief Curator

Biography
Theaster Gates (b. 1973, Chicago) studied at Iowa State University and at the University of Cape Town in South Africa. Currently, he is a Professor and Director of the Center for Arts and Public Life at the University of Chicago. Gates has been exhibited widely nationally and internationally. Solo exhibitions of his work have been presented at numerous institutions including Palais de Tokyo, Paris; Kunstmuseum, Basel, Switzerland; the Seattle Art Museum; the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago; the Milwaukee Art Museum; and the Museu Serralves, Porto. His work has been included in group exhibitions presented at the Whitney Museum, New York; Documenta, Kassel; Whitechapel, London; and The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; among many others. In 2015, he was the recipient of the prestigious Artes Mundi Prize. Also, Gates was awarded the Kurt Schwitters Prize in 2016. His work can be found in several important collections such as The Studio Museum in Harlem; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; and the Brooklyn Museum.