The Artist's Museum as Reversed Cultural Space: Theaster Gates' *Black Chapel* at the Haus der Kunst (Munich)

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Abstract

During 2019-20, visitors to the Haus der Kunst (HDK), a non-collecting museum for contemporary art in Munich, could view *Black Chapel,* created by the Chicago-based artist Theaster Gates. *Black Chapel* was a platform for Gates' 'museum within a museum', or an artist's museum, composed of Gates' sculptures, collections of images, and artifacts - including Jesse Owens' music album collection. This article examines how Gates' project deployed the historical signifiers and artifacts of Black urban experience in order to challenge the historical space of the Haus der Kunst. I argue that *Black Chapel* not only contributes to artistic experiments in museum making, it also created a reversed cultural space and counter-narratives within the architectural space of the HDK - a museum which was originally commissioned by Adolf Hitler as a platform for National Socialist art and cultural politics.

Key words: Theaster Gates; Haus der Kunst; artist's museum

Introduction

Grant Wood's painting, *American Gothic* (1930), of a stoic farmer and his daughter standing in front of a rural farmhouse in Eldon, Iowa has evoked myriad interpretations and responses as one of the most well-known twentieth-century artworks in the US (Figure 1). Thomas Hoving, director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (1967-77) referred to the kaleidoscopic range of interpretations of the work as a sort of 'Rorschach test'.[1] Unlike Wood's initial vision of the work as a positive portrayal of midwestern, small-town life, which he compared to 'tintypes from my old family album',[2] *American Gothic* ultimately became an ironic signifier of the rural, white US, which was branded, merchandized, and extensively recirculated in the iconography of popular culture, including numerous parodies and pastiches by contemporary artists.[3] The Gothic window that features prominently between the two figures standing in front of the actual farmhouse was reportedly purchased from the Sears, Roebuck & Co. mail-order catalog in Chicago as a decorative enhancement[4] - reflecting the mass marketing of the 1880's Carpenter Gothic architectural style, and Gothic Revival Style (1830-60), that was replicated in rural chapels. Thus, a contemporary interpretation of *American Gothic* as a 'cultural Rorschach' not only suggests the secularization of 'the Gothic', but also visually reinforces the image of the house and home as a locus of rural identity and community.

The notion of a secularized chapel, and the house, as a cultural commonplace is referenced by the Chicago-based artist Theaster Gates in the title of his work *Black Chapel*, which was installed at the Haus der Kunst (HDK) in Munich (25 October 2019 - 19 July 2020). Gates' *Black Chapel* was a conceptual space and platform for his own 'house' - a collection of images, sculptures, videos, record albums, furniture, and artifacts that he assembled into a secularized 'chapel'.[5] The title of the project suggests the pivotal role of the church and chapel in Black communities, while also implicitly evoking associations with the history of music and performance.[6] Gates' secular chapel repurposed more generalized notions of a chapel in order to provide a conceptual framework for the installation of his collections and artwork at the HDK. In this regard, he comments that 'for me, *Black Chapel* constitutes the everyday Black experience. So, the "chapel" is the Haus der Kunst atrium. The "Black" part is

my things' (Gates and Walker 2021: 25, 26).[7] In *Black Chapel,* images of fashion models from *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines, glittering *Houseberg* sculptures reminiscent of disco balls in the abstract form of icebergs that pay tribute to house music, and a curated collection of Olympic athlete Jesse Owens' record albums not only created Gates' own artist's museum, but also a reversed cultural space that stood in contrast to the surrounding architectural space and history of the HDK. Thus, Gates' understanding of 'a space for his things' within the HDK is a capacious one that, I will argue, reflects his own inflection of an artist's museum.

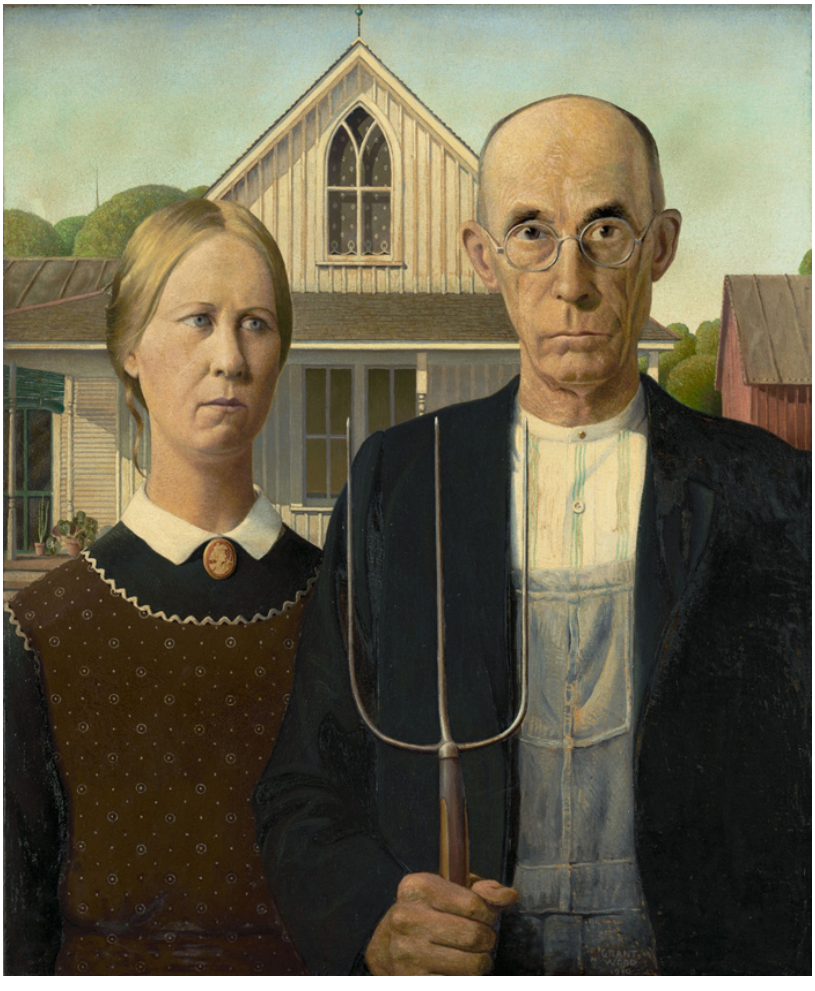

Figure 1: Grant Wood, American Gothic *(1930). Photo: Google Art Project.*

While *American Gothic* and *Black Chapel* may suggest notions of a secularized chapel as cultural touchstones, this article does not aim to explore their potential intersections and disjunctures. However, in this context it is important to note that Gates' video montage of Jesse Owens at the 1936 Berlin Olympics (see below) - as a critique of racism in Germany and the US - intersects with Gordon Parks' widely received photo, *American Gothic, Washington D.C.* (1942). Parks' photo portrays a Black woman, Ella Watson, who cleaned offices for the US Farm Security Administration, standing before a US flag with a broom and a mop - ironically echoing Wood's image.[8] At the outset, I reference Wood's *American Gothic* not only

to underscore the cultural and geographic distance between Wood's work and Gates' *Black Chapel* and their respective origins within the US - rural Iowa of the 1930s and urban Chicago of the 1970s and 1980s - but to also question how Gates' project of a Black chapel could be realized within the historically contested space of an art museum in Munich.

This article approaches *Black Chapel* as a case study, which is informed by my prior research in three areas: the spatial politics of the post-WWII HDK (Rectanus 2020: 57-78), the notion of the artist's museum (Rectanus 2020: 217-8, 223-7, 240-3), and the concept of a 'reversed cultural space', which was utilized by Chilean artist Voluspa Jarpa in the project *Altered Views* at the 2019 Venice Biennale (Rectanus 2024a). I argue that *Black Chapel* not only reflects the ongoing significance of artists' museums as museum experiments within and beyond museums, it also demonstrates how an artist's museum may intervene in the architectural space of a museum, and in doing so assert counter-narratives that create a reversed cultural space. In particular, I examine the ways in which Gates mobilized his artworks and collections, as historical signifiers of Black urban experience, in order to explicitly and implicitly challenge the historical space of the Middle Hall of the HDK, which was originally named the 'Hall of Honor' *(Ehrenhalle).* Thus, *Black Chapel* operated as a form of contestation and as an intervention that unfolded in opposing historical force fields.

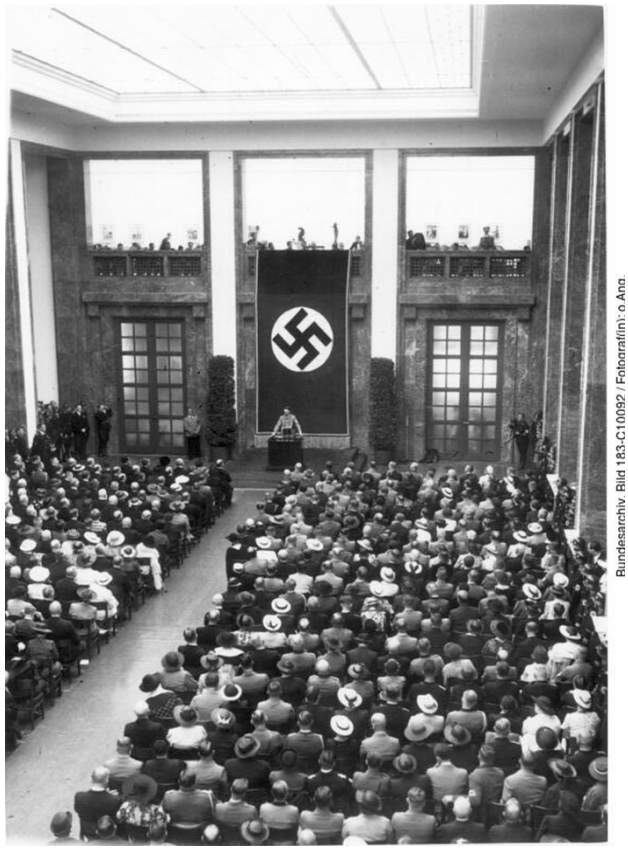

Figure 2: Opening of the Haus der Deutschen Kunst (House of German Art) on 18 July 1937. View of the Ehrenhalle *(Hall of Honor), subsequently renamed 'Middle Hall'. German Federal Picture Archives, Image 183-C10092.*

The HDK is a non-collecting museum of contemporary art, which was originally commissioned by Adolf Hitler and opened in 1937 as the Haus der Deutschen Kunst (House of German Art). The building was not only constructed as an exhibition space for National Socialist (NS) art but also as a platform for promulgating NS cultural politics (e.g., in Hitler's speeches, see Figure 2). The word *Deutschen* was removed in 1946 by the US military government (Brantl and Wilmes 2017: 257) and this initial renaming also signaled efforts by successive HDK directors to create a more cosmopolitan orientation for the museum (see below). As noted above, Gates' museum within a museum, curated from his collections of artifacts, images, and artworks in Chicago, unfolded within the historical space of the NS 'Hall of Honor'. *Black Chapel* occupied this space in order to assert the significance of Black experience in the late 1970s and early 1980s, while also reaching back in time to Jesse Owens and the 1936 Berlin Olympics - one year before the HDK opened. As will be discussed below, it is this latter dimension that more visibly and explicitly evoked challenges to the history of the HDK, as a platform for NS cultural politics. Gates' montage of documentary film clips of Jesse Owens at the 1936 Olympics foregrounded the images of racism in Nazi Germany but also gestured towards racism in the US by integrating scenes of Black life in the 1930s. The significance of Owens' life following Berlin is suggested in the installation of Gates' collection of Owens' record albums, in the adjacent Archive in Residence (a designated space, within the HDK's Archive Gallery, for exhibiting (artists') archival projects). Yet, I will also argue that the installation of the LP albums in *Black Chapel* did not fully engage Owens' relations to the 1936 Olympics, and his appearance at subsequent games in Mexico (1968) and Munich (1972), nor did it offer visitors to *Black Chapel* additional insights that might have provided an aperture for a deeper understanding of the racism that Owens encountered following the 1936 Olympics and throughout his later life. While *Black Chapel* presented interwoven documentary narratives and aesthetic representations (in Gates' artworks), which underscored the significance of the 1936 Olympics, it could only suggest traces of the complex trajectories of Owens' subsequent life experience.

More generally, the installations in *Black Chapel* are aligned with approaches to curating and exhibition making that register 'spatio-temporal shifts' (Smith 2012: 242-44) or nonlinear notions of history that suggest 'pluritemporalities' (Morat 2024: 70-3). In their book, *Histories in Conflict* (2017), HDK curators Sabine Brantl and Ulrich Wilmes examined the post-WWII historiographies, debates, and controversies regarding the institutional status of the HDK. While *Black Chapel* can be read as Gates' metaphorical time capsule from Chicago that was transported, unsealed, installed, and launched into a museum space in Munich, Gates' installations also unfolded as spatio-temporal shifts - from Black urban experience in the US of the 1970s (in the main installations) reaching back to the Berlin Olympics in 1936 (in the adjoining Archive in Residence). The images, signs, furniture, vitrines, and artworks within *Black Chapel* flowed into one another, and the spaces that they occupied were not bounded by walls or borders - creating micro-spaces and trace images that were reminiscent of a fashionable 1970s disco or dance club. These spaces included a large, red-leather sofa from the reception area of the Johnson Publishing Company (Chicago); fashion photos, montages, and assemblages from *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines (from Gates' extensive collections of images from Johnson Publishing); music reminiscent of the club experience and visual references to house music (in Gates' *Houseberg* sculptures); a large neon sign of Rothschild Liquors and a lightbox advertisement of Harold's, the Fried Chicken King, that referenced everyday spaces of urban life; vitrines that contained recreated African masks; black vessels and vases presented on platforms (pavilions); and Gates' collection of Jesse Owens' record albums, which extended *Black Chapel* into the Archive in Residence (see Figures 3-7).

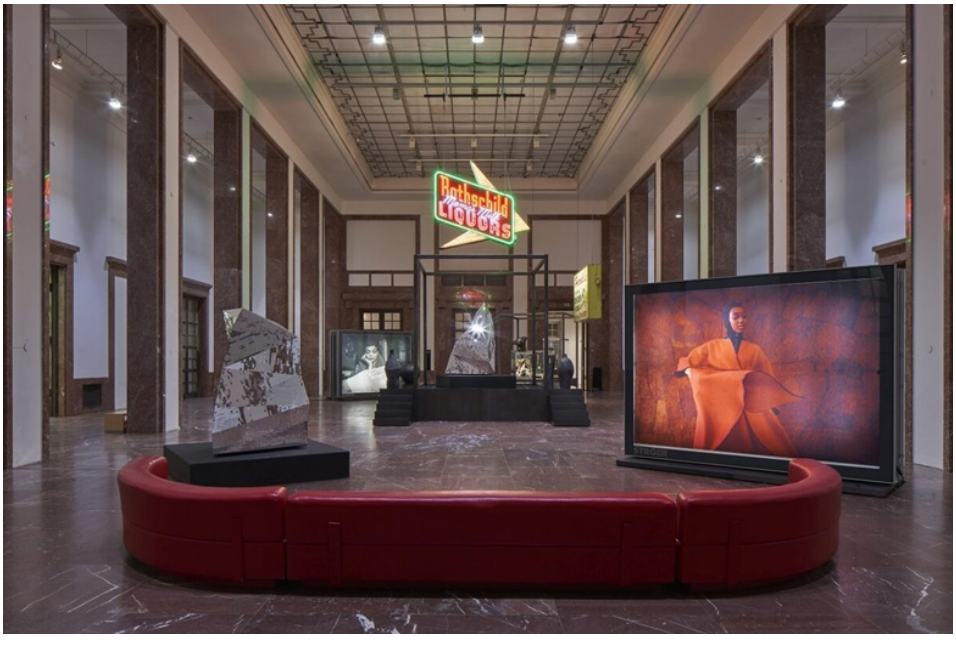

Figure 3: Theaster Gates, Black Chapel *(2019), installation view. Haus der Kunst, Munich, 2019. Photo: Jens Weber, Munich*

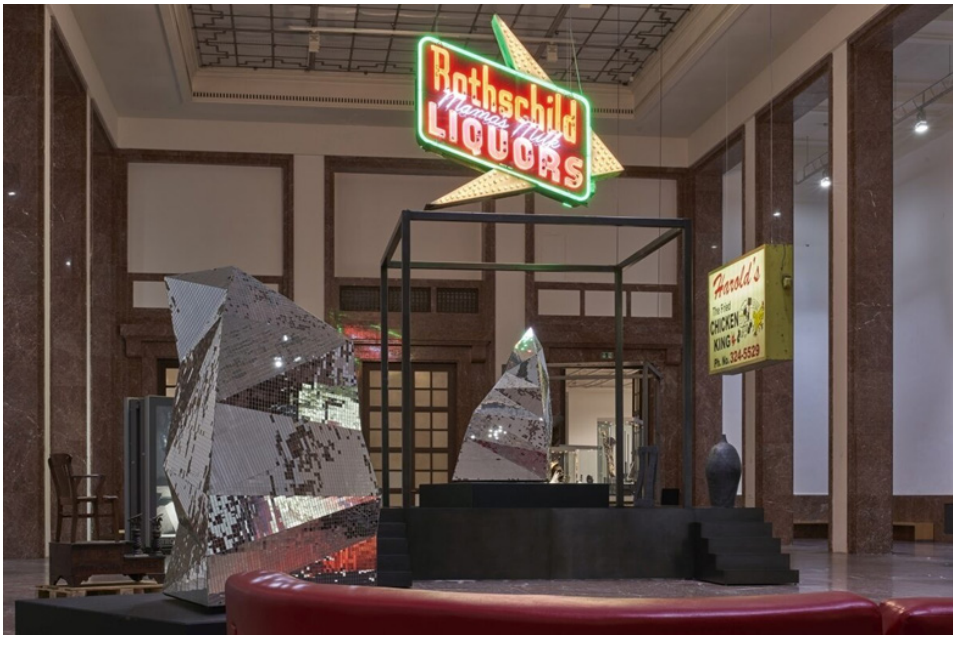

Figure 4: Theaster Gates, Black Chapel *(2019), installation view. Haus der Kunst, Munich, 2019. Photo: Jens Weber, Munich*

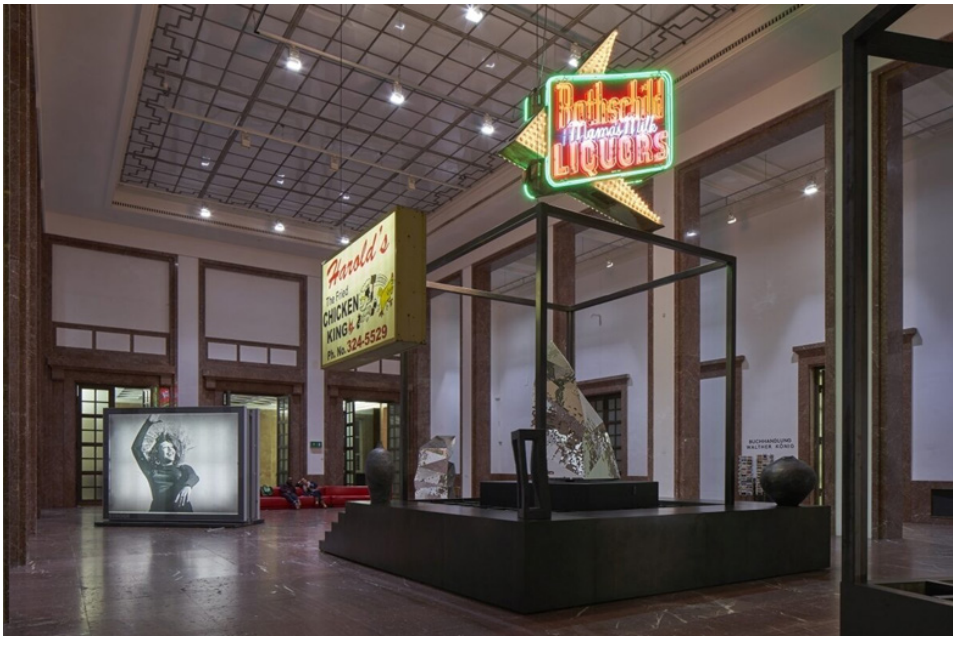

Figure 5: Theaster Gates, Black Chapel *(2019), installation view. Haus der Kunst, Munich, 2019. Photo: Jens Weber, Munich*

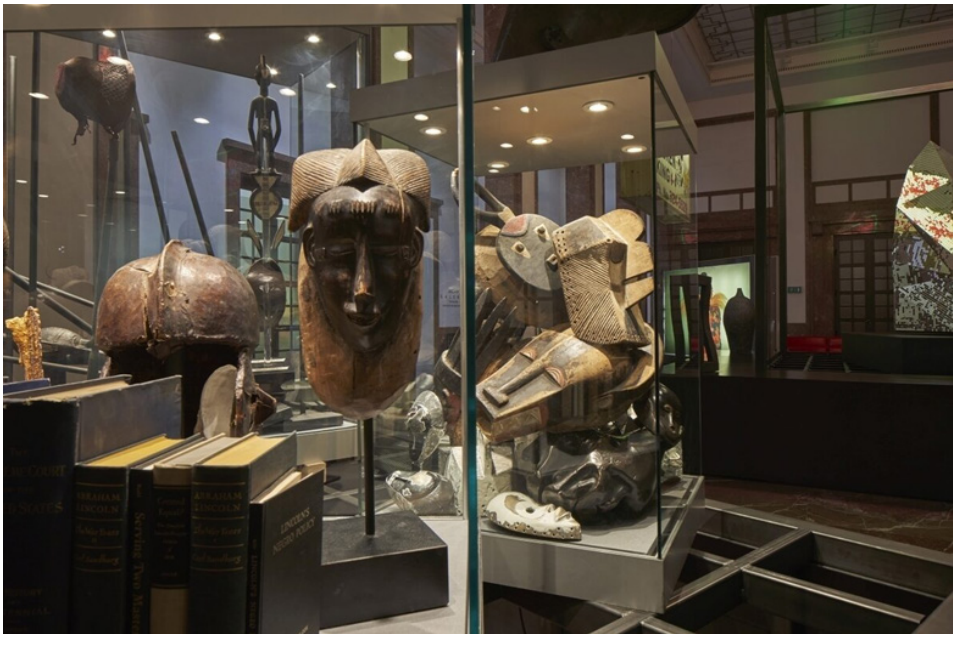

Figure 6: Theaster Gates, Black Chapel *(2019), installation view. Haus der Kunst, Munich, 2019. Photo: Jens Weber, Munich*

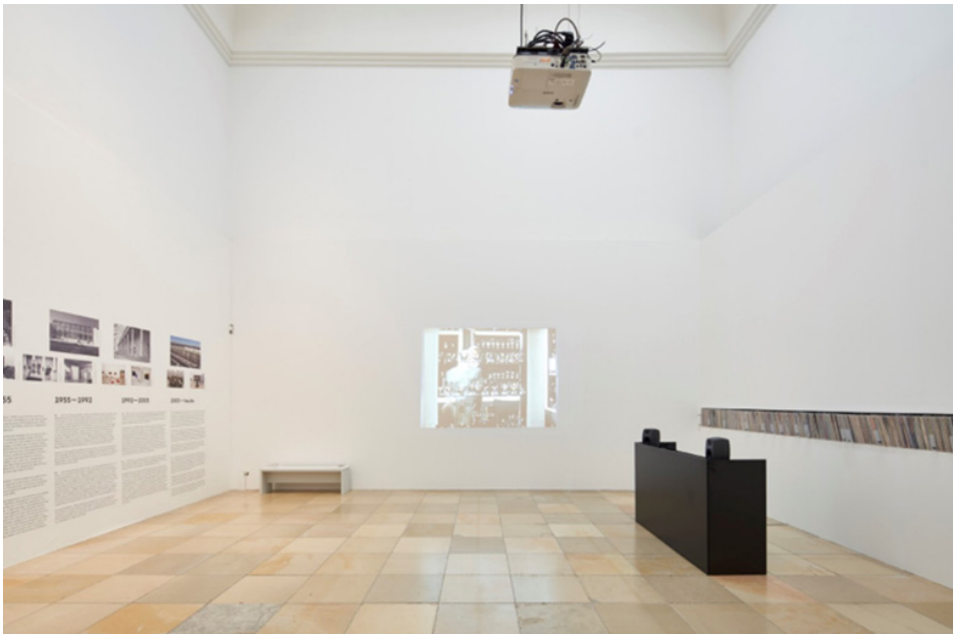

Figure 7: Theaster Gates: Black Chapel *(2019), installation view of Archives in Residence (Archive Gallery), Haus der Kunst, Munich, 2019. Photo: Jens Weber, Munich*

As noted above, Gates is a Chicago-based artist with a background in urban planning who 'contends with the notion of Black space as a formal exercise - one defined by collective desire, artistic agency, and the tactics of a pragmatist'.[9] His engagement in urban spatial politics is manifest in numerous development projects in Chicago that reclaim structures and spaces for Black and under-resourced communities. Gates is the founder and artistic director of the Rebuild Foundation and the Dorchester Projects that transformed vacant buildings into cultural sites that house collections on Chicago's South Side. For example, The Stony Island Arts Bank is a converted Chicago bank that includes archival collections from the Johnson Publishing Company and has presented Gates' exhibitions and artworks that foreground the significance of these collections.[10] The project also includes the record collection of Frankie Knuckles (Francis Warren Nicholls, Jr.), who led and popularized the development of house music in underground clubs during the early 1980s.[11] *Black Chapel* may be understood not only as an extension of Gates' ongoing engagement in issues of architecture and urban spatial politics, but also the politics of collecting, curating, exhibiting, and performing – all of which are highly relevant to the ongoing negotiation of museums and their relations to BIPOC communities. Gates' collections of works reflect the cultural landscapes of Black experience and the pivotal role of music, which includes Gates' performances with the Black Monks, who performed during *Black Chapel* at the HDK (see below).

While I do not wish to overextend the initial reference to Wood's *American Gothic,* as a popular signifier of rural Iowa, an additional biographical note is relevant in this regard. Gates has had significant life experience in Iowa. He attended Iowa State University (ISU) in Ames, Iowa where he received undergraduate (1996) and graduate degrees (2005), an honorary doctor of humane letters (2018), and, most recently, the Christian Petersen Design Award (2024). Gates is likely very familiar with Wood's murals in the University Library at ISU and with the popular iconography of *American Gothic*.[12] Moreover, Gates' participation in an artist residency in 2004 in Tokoname (Aichi Prefecture), Japan, where he studied pottery, is particularly noteworthy in the light of his retrospective exhibition, *Afro-Mingei* (2024), twenty years later at the Mori Art Museum, Japan. Although *Black Chapel* and *Afro-Mingei* reflect two

quite different projects, they suggest Gates' efforts to translocate his artworks and collections from Chicago and mobilize them within diverse cultural and socio-historical contexts.[13]

The following sections on 'Artists' Museums' and 'Reversed Cultural Spaces' provide a conceptual framework and point of departure for the main section of this article, titled *Black Chapel*, which examines key elements that comprise the work and how they create a reversed cultural space. This is followed by a discussion of Gates' installation of Jesse Owens' LP collection in the Archive in Residence. The concluding section briefly discusses Gates' project as a contribution to the HDK's ongoing reflection of its status as a historically contested space, and the extent to which visitors might engage the images and significations encountered in *Black Chapel* and the spatial histories of the HDK.

Artists' Museums

The genealogies of the artist's museum, which I define as a conceptual or physical space for artists' curatorial and aesthetic experiments, have reflected shifts in the relations among artists, museums, and curators, as well as their approaches to art, everyday objects, museum artifacts, collecting, forms of classification, organization, and representation (Rectanus 2020: 240-3). While the artist's museum is often associated with the sixteenth-century *Wunderkammer* (cabinet of curiosities), it has become a highly adaptable platform for conceptual artworks, exhibitions, and curatorial interventions. For example, art historians and curators frequently reference Marcel Duchamp's *Boîte-en-valise* (1935-41) (a 'box in a suitcase' containing 69 reproductions of Duchamp's work) and curator Harald Szeemann's installation of *Artists' Museums (Museen von Künstlern)* at Documenta 5 (1972), which included works by Claes Oldenburg (*Mouse Museum,* 1965-77), Marcel Broodthaers (*Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles,* 1968-72), and Herbert Distel (*Museum of Drawers,* 1970-77) (Legge 2000: 41, 47-51, 216; Phillips et al. 2018). Artists' experiments in museum making have also included Andy Warhol's *Raid the Icebox I with Andy Warhol* (1969), Martha Rosler's *If You Lived Here…* (1989), Fred Wilson's *Mining the Museum* (1992), Hans Haacke's *AnsichtsSachen / ViewingMatters* (1999), Mark Dion's *The Undisciplined Collector* (2015), and Kader Attia's *The Museum of Emotion* (2019).

Although they are not always designated as museums, these projects (as well as exhibitions such as *The Artist's Museum* at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA), Boston (2016-17)) demonstrate the continued interest in, and recognition of, artists' diverse roles in collecting, archiving, curating, exhibiting, and collaborating (Byers 2016). Martha Buskirk (2012: 83-101) has observed that historical precursors and contemporary artists' projects that create and curate assemblages of objects and artifacts indicate an 'ongoing enthusiasm for artist-generated museum fictions' (see also Buchloh 1983). Claire Bishop (2016: 52) examines how artists have used technology to adapt, reformat, and remix images, objects, and artifacts - reflecting the terrain of digital culture, in which the internet rather than the museum has become 'the muse'. In a discussion of queer and trans artists' museums, Julia Bryan-Wilson concludes that:

> Such insurgent museums require much less money to run than brick-and-mortar outfits and therefore have no need to pander to funding agencies or to supplicate wealthy board members … [and therefore] possess the capacity to make worlds out of fragments – a tactic queer and trans people have become adept at.[14]

More generally, these analyses support an expanded notion of artists as curators, and in multifarious para-curatorial roles across the cultural landscape, as practices that cannot be circumscribed within museums or exhibition spaces (Green 2018: 245).

Reversed Cultural Spaces

The notion of reversed cultural space, as it is used in this article, is informed by Voluspa Jarpa's project *Altered Views* at the Chile Pavilion of the 2019 Venice Biennale. *Altered Views* is composed of three interrelated installations: *The Hegemonic Museum, The Subaltern Portrait Gallery,* and *The Emancipating Opera* (Rubio 2020; Rectanus 2024a). While *The*

Hegemonic Museum documents the historical role of European museums in the universalization of hegemonic discourses and power, *The Subaltern Portrait Gallery* and *The Emancipating Opera* assert counter-narratives, images, and voices that create a reversed cultural space to the museum - supporting the potential for altered views when considered in the context of the three installations. Although artists' museums have interrogated the collecting policies and practices of museums - which also underscore debates regarding repatriation of stolen or looted works - Jarpa's project exposes the ideological infrastructure of museums, which were frequently aligned with, or supported, colonial politics. In this regard, Jarpa has referred to *Altered Views* as 'an exercise in decolonization'.[15]

Many artists' museums, such as Fred Wilson's *Mining the Museum* are also frequently cited as forms of institutional critique (Buskirk 1994).[16] Gates' *Black Chapel* intervened in the spatial politics of the HDK as a museum originally designed as a platform for the hegemonic ideology and cultural politics of National Socialism. In this regard, Anna Schneider and Dimona Stöckle (2021: 21) have referred to *Black Chapel* as a 'counterspace', arguing that 'Gates simultaneously subverts the power structures inscribed in the building's architecture and reveals the potential of critical, independent thought within public space and discourse'. Thus, notions of reversed cultural space or counterspace, that seize upon the architectural narratives of the HDK (see below), provided an aperture for Gates to launch reversals and subversions by creating his own counter-museum that turned the tables on the NS legacy of the HDK by asserting the power of Black histories, heritage, and cultures.

As noted at the outset, the HDK functioned as a stage for Hitler's speeches and as a platform for NS cultural politics, including the *Great German Art Exhibition,* when the museum opened in 1937. The neo-classical architecture designed by Paul Ludwig Troost as a monument to Hitler's 'Third Reich', not only reinforces the naming of the central space of the HDK, as the 'Hall of Honor' (Figure 2), it is also manifest in the granite travertine used in the exterior colonnade walkways and in the infrastructure of the original building.[17] The neo-classical monumentality of the NS architecture also integrated the functionality of a Fascist state at war.[18] As such, architectural historian Mark Wigley has commented that the HDK may be 'the least innocent of all museums' (Rectanus 2020: 59). In the decades following WWII, numerous debates focused on the status of the HDK within the urban landscape of Munich, including suggestions that it be destroyed or that the architecture be significantly altered (Rectanus 2020: 57-78; Wigley 2017: 236-41; Rosenfeld 2000: 94-6, 204-09). These discussions continued well into the twenty-first century as successive directors of the HDK, including Christoph Vitali, Chris Dercon, and Okwui Enwezor, commissioned projects that would interrogate the historical role of the museum or create interventions designed to deconstruct or 'critically reconstruct' some aspects of the architecture and interior rather than painting over them or literally 'whitewashing' the past (Rectanus 2020: 58, 62-3).

Thus, *Black Chapel* should also be understood within the context of successive interventions in the architecture, inside and on the façade of the HDK, including works by Alexander Kluge, Christian Boltanski, Mel Bochner, Gustav Metzger, El Anatsui, and many others who have also critically engaged with the ideological spaces of the HDK (Rectanus 2020: 63, 69). While Gates' *Black Chapel* may also be seen as continuing a conversation that previous artists have contributed to, *Black Chapel* makes a distinctive contribution by creating an artist's museum that confronts the genealogies of the museum's Middle Hall, while also foregrounding Gates' own work in curating, collecting, art making, exhibiting, and performing. In an interview with Hamza Walker, Gates comments on the relations of *Black Chapel* to the historical space of the HDK, which is reflected implicitly in many of the work's micro-spaces and installations, but also more explicitly in the significance of Jesse Owens as an iconic figure:

> I had the idea that the Haus der Kunst could become not just a 'house for art', but a 'house for my things'. I brought all of my things …. There were moments when I felt I had to fight with Hitler, or the theater of a historic regime that I know very little about. I didn't want to fight with a historic regime, or Modernism. There were definitely cues that the building itself gave me. The structural columns in the space gave me cues that would inform my pavilions. Then there is the 1936 Olympics,

> for which two Black men, including Jesse Owens, won four gold medals. … I felt that I was taking cues from an immediate history of this place and then trying to figure out how my art objects—and non-art objects—could be in conversation with that history to make a new future (Gates and Walker 2021: 25).[19]

Black Chapel

This section turns to a closer analysis of the installations in *Black Chapel* and the ways in which they collectively created an artist's museum as a reversed cultural space within the HDK. Following the museum's main entrance and ticketing foyer, visitors entered the Middle Hall (atrium) of the HDK and the first installation space of *Black Chapel.* Here, they encountered a large red-leather couch - designed by Arthur Elrod - that once greeted visitors in the reception area of the Johnson Publishing Company in Chicago (Figure 3). In *Black Chapel,* the couch was repurposed as an icon of club culture, which also alludes to the contemporary spaces of the HDK and other museums that are often 'repurposed' for sponsored events (receptions, gala dinners, 'date nights'), performances, or films. While the couch metaphorically moves from the corporate context of the publishing house to the space of the museum, museums have increasingly moved in the opposite direction - blurring the boundaries between cultural space and promotional space. In part, the iconic Elrod couch, and the images of Black fashion models, in *Black Chapel* referenced this merger of cultural and corporate spaces of 'high culture' and promotional 'popular culture' that increasingly shaped everyday life beginning in the late 1960s. Yet, *Black Chapel's* sculptures, artifacts, and images not only signified the ascendancy of media and popular culture across Black communities in the US, but also Gates' recognition that the objects and images from Johnson Publishing's *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines played a pivotal role in creating and empowering Black identities and communities (see below).

A series of raised platforms, or 'pavilions' (Gates and Walker 2021: 25) created islands within the open plan of *Black Chapel* or micro-spaces that ranged from club culture, fashion, and street life, to museum artifacts. As noted above, Gates has transformed the glittering disco balls associated with club culture[20] into small sparkling icebergs with sharp edges, i.e., *Housebergs* (Figure 4). The sculptures reflect Gates' passion for house music, including his collections of records and ephemera from the 'godfather of House', DJ Frankie Knuckles.[21] House is generally defined as a form of electronic dance music (EDM) that emerged in underground clubs in Chicago during the 1980s.[22] The significance of the venues for house music is referenced in historical accounts of house and Frankie Knuckles, who compared the Warehouse club in Chicago to a 'church for people who have fallen from grace', or record-producer Marshall Jefferson who compared house music to an 'old-time religion in the way that people just get happy and screamin' (Reynolds 1998: 27–31). Here, the experiential dimensions of Black churches and music are also realized in the secularized venue of *Black Chapel,* which foregrounds house music. While the red-leather couch, the *Houseberg* sculptures, and music (that emanated from the adjacent Archive in Residence, where record albums from Jesse Owens' LP collection were played), may have evoked the atmosphere of a club, Gates was not aiming to reconstruct or recreate a venue for house music. Rather, this micro-space within *Black Chapel* was a deconstructed club and assemblage of artworks and artifacts from Gates' collections that invited associations across the cultural terrain of Black communities.

Black Chapel suggests the increasingly porous borders of popular culture during the 1970s and 1980s that were registered in *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines and Black media's role in shaping and reflecting the ascendancy of a self-confident style and fashion. On several large, rotating billboards (manufactured by the German media company Ströer), images of Black fashion models from *Ebony* and *Jet* referenced the role of Black women in the aesthetics of contemporary popular culture and the fashion industry, including their increasing visibility on the performative runways for fashion shows, in advertising, and media coverage of clubs (Figures 3 and 5). Schneider and Stöckle (2021: 9, 10-11) argue that these images not only represented 'a new consciousness that was ambitious, proud, and self-assertive', but also reinforced the emergence of Black economic power within the labor market and the aspirations of economic empowerment of the Black middle class in the US. The signification of the historical emergence and potentialities of Black empowerment within popular culture

and Black politics[23] contributes to the function of *Black Chapel* as a reversed cultural space that has its origins within everyday life of Black communities. In this regard, Gates notes that *Black Chapel* instantiates the collective political 'weight' not of the individual objects, but of a meta-collection:

> Anything that signifies the possibility of liberation or freedom, let's throw it in and see what happens. The installation, in that sense, is less about formalism and having a reconciled work. I'm interested in a weight that can exist, more than I am interested in a practice of reconciliation through objects (Gates and Walker 2021: 27).

The landscapes of everyday life were also referenced in a lightbox sign Harold's - The Fried Chicken King and the neon sign Rothschild Liquors (with the insert Mama's Milk), both of which were suspended from the ceiling (Schneider 2021: 171), (Figure 5). In an interview with Gates, Walker asks about the extent to which some of the images in *Black Chapel,* such as the 'Harold's' sign, might be perceived as 'tropes of Blackness'. In response, Gates comments that:

> My relationship to them isn't so much tropic as much as these are the spoils, or the losses, of a formerly thriving commercial area. In fact, they signify the challenges of maintaining a Black hegemony, the challenges of maintaining Black businesses in an all-Black space, as much as they might point to what could be perceived to an outside world as material buffoonery (Gates and Walker 2021: 28).

From this perspective, the signage accomplished significant work not only by visually foregrounding the material and socio-economic infrastructures of the Black community, but also by reclaiming their historical, financial, and experiential status as a process of writing Black heritage into the present-future. In doing so, this pavilion, and the other micro-spaces in *Black Chapel,* created and reflected historical force fields that contested the historical space of the HDK.

In some respects, the installations in *Black Chapel* may be viewed as a postmodern project. That is, they seized upon the aesthetics of popular culture and media, which are frequently positioned as complicit and coextensive with promotional culture and capitalism and engaged them through aesthetic and formal interventions, as a form of (social) critique (Hutcheon 1991: 11). As the preceding discussion of the pavilions within *Black Chapel* indicates, the project assembled the objects, artifacts, and music of Black communities to create discursive interventions on popular culture as a distinctly emancipatory force, rather than as merely ironic signifiers of commercial manipulation. Gates foregrounded the experiential terrain of Black life that was often 'invisible' in mainstream white media and in cultural institutions, such as museums. Schneider and Stöckle (2021:11) argue that Gates's reinterpretation and recontextualization of 'Black signifiers' or 'Black tropes' constitute 'a deliberate inversion of traditional power structures that manifest themselves in a particular visual system'. As noted above, I would also argue that Gates created a reversed cultural space by mobilizing the collective power of the works installed in *Black Chapel* - which have gained iconic status within Black communities, and more generally within US media at large - as historical force fields, in order to challenge the historical space of the HDK (i.e., as a form of contestation that unfolded in opposing historical force fields).

Another micro-space within *Black Chapel* was composed of several oversized vitrines - mounted on stages - that contained African masks, artifacts, and books (Figure 6). The vitrines emulate historical displays in Western ethnographic museums - shifting the visual narrative of the installations in *Black Chapel* from club culture, house music, and media images of Black women, to the colonial and postcolonial legacies of BIPOC cultures.[24] The latter also gestures toward debates regarding museum repatriations and restitution of cultural artifacts. The vitrines foregrounded the cultural histories and legacies of Western museums, implicitly referencing notions of a hegemonic museum, e.g., as deployed in Jarpa's project *Altered Views* (see above). Although the significations of house music and Black models may have appeared to be dissimilar to the 'ethnographic' restaging in the vitrines, these installations raised issues regarding the ways in which the (visual and musical) histories of Black communities, and the futures of Black heritage, may be represented and redefined

against the historical experience of Western museums (Schorch 2020; Proctor 2021). An old outdoor loudspeaker or megaphone on top of one vitrine with masks, including Gates' own creations of African masks in white, amplified this micro-space, which was aptly titled 'Amplify Africa', while also indicating the complexity of Black heritage and Black diasporas (Schneider and Stöckle 2021: 13-14).[25] In this regard, *Black Chapel* did not provide answers but rather created multiple apertures that invited reflection and engagement. Moreover, this process also underscores the challenges that visitors may encounter in deciphering or metaphorically traveling the cultural and historical distances referenced in *Black Chapel* and the historical context of the HDK (Gates and Walker 2021: 27).

Jesse Owens

Jesse Owens is widely recognized in sports history as one of the leading track and field athletes of the twentieth century, who won four gold medals when he represented the USA at the 1936 Berlin Olympics. As an African American athlete, Owens' achievement at the Olympics is frequently cited as a challenge to the Berlin Olympics as a platform for National Socialist cultural politics. Andrew D. Linden and Lindsay Parks Pieper have observed that the signification of Owens at the 1936 Olympics has played a pivotal role within museum narratives of Black history and Olympic athletes (e.g., at the National Museum of African American History and Culture [NMAAHC] in Washington, DC in the USA and at Le Musée Olympique [LMO] in Lausanne, Switzerland). However, as the authors point out, the focus on Owens' iconic status at the 1936 Olympics often presents an abbreviated and less nuanced view of his life following the Olympics (Linden and Pieper 2022: 29).[26] *Black Chapel* underscored the significance of the Olympics in Owens' life, however Gates aimed to expand the scope of Owens' narrative by installing a curated selection of Owens' collection of classic jazz, soul, rhythm and blues, and rock LP music albums in the Archive in Residence, located across from the main installations of *Black Chapel* (Figure 7).

Gates' 'meta-collection' of Owens' LPs was mounted on a wall behind a listening station. On the opposite wall, facing the albums, images from the HDK's Archive Gallery (a small exhibition of the HDK's past) documented the history of the HDK during National Socialism - providing additional context to the space in which *Black Chapel* unfolded. On a third wall, which faced visitors as they entered the space of the Archive in Residence, Gates projected a video montage of documentary footage of Owens at the 1936 Olympics and additional segments that referenced racism in the USA during the 1930s.[27] The juxtaposition of the LP collection, the documentary texts contextualizing the history of the HDK on the opposite wall, and Gates' video on the center wall, created sonic, narrative, and visual fields within the Archive in Residence that indicated a multi-perspectival design. This part of *Black Chapel* also suggested the notion of a reversed cultural space by underscoring the counter-narratives to the museum's NS histories, which emerged in Gates' video and were signified by Owens' record collection from later life. As noted above, the critique of racism in Germany and the US in Gates' video montage also intersects with Gordon Parks' photo *American Gothic, Washington D.C.,* (1942), which portrays a Black woman, Ella Watson, who cleaned US government offices standing in front of a US flag with a mop and broom. While Parks' work was not presented in *Black Chapel,* Gates' video and Parks' photo suggested 'reversals' by foregrounding the entwinement of myth making (i.e., Owens' portrayal in Leni Riefenstahl's film *Olympia*) and the institutional racism of everyday life, which was documented in both works.

Historical representations of Owens' narrative at the 1936 Olympics are closely linked to Riefenstahl's *Olympia* (1938). While Riefenstahl is perhaps best known for her direction of the Nazi propaganda film *Triumph of the Will* (1935), the impact of *Olympia,* and the aesthetics and politics of Riefenstahl's filmmaking, including her films made in Africa during the 1970s, remain objects of critical interrogation and debate (Majer-O'Sickey et al. 2008).[28] Gates used excerpts of Riefenstahl's *Olympia*, to link the aesthetic and political signification of Owens at the 1936 Olympics with the subsequent framing of his life experience. As Alexandra Sommer observes:

> The paths of Jesse Owens and Leni Riefenstahl crossed again in 1972, when both traveled to the Olympic Games in Munich. For Haus der Kunst, Gates montaged

> heroic scenes of Owens running past a white competitor, filmed by Riefenstahl and commissioned by the Nazis, with scenes from the everyday lives of Black people in the 1930s.[29]

Drawing on research by Mike Milford (2012: 489), Linden and Pieper (2022: 29) note that:

> Because remembrances about Owens emphasize his athletic victories in Berlin, he is flattened in most public commemorations. In other words, Owens has become a 'rhetorical fossil, frozen in time in Berlin to the point that his individual identity [has] all but vanished [Milford]'.

Linden and Pieper (2022: 29) further argue that 'by highlighting one moment of his life, and ignoring historical and contemporary contextual issues, commemorations of Owens tend to paint an uncomplicated image of him, the Olympics, and racism in the United States'. Schneider and Stöckle (2021: 8) observe that there was an 'extreme ambivalence that characterizes Jesse Owens's biography' which 'stands at the center of Gates's site-specific intervention…' This not only relates to the racism which Owens confronted in Germany and the US. As Kay Schiller and Christopher Young (2010: 71-4) discuss in their book, *The 1972 Munich Olympics and the Making of Modern Germany*, Owens' own relations to the 1936 Olympics and his subsequent views regarding race and the cultural politics of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) during the 1960s and early 1970s were complex and fraught. In addition to the allegations related to the 'Hitler Snub' directed toward Owens and other athletes at the 1936 Olympics, Schiller and Young examine how Owens' views on the Olympics in Mexico (1968) became problematically aligned with positions of IOC president Avery Brundage - who initially opposed movements to boycott Rhodesia and South Africa's participation in the Olympics.[30]

In some respects, the cultural politics of the IOC, the rebranding of the HDK as an exhibition venue for world art (in preparation for the 1972 Olympics), and Owens' attempts to negotiate that terrain is ironically foregrounded in a photo of Owens with Riefenstahl at the 1972 Olympics (Schneider and Stöckle 2021: 21; Schiller and Young 2010: 83-4; Rectanus 2020: 65-7). Here, it is also important to differentiate among the images of Owens that have become part of the historiography of the 1936 Olympics, the uses of Owens' biography as a discursive intervention, and in the context of this discussion, how Owens' image is represented as a historical narrative within *Black Chapel.* With regard to the latter, it is not only the discursive lens of Owens' relations to the Olympics, but also the material foregrounding of Owens' collection of albums and their presentation in the Archive in Residence that invited visitors to consider music as a critical dimension of Owens' life. Yet, Gates' installation of Owens' record collection did not provide a more complex understanding of Owens' ambivalent relations to the Olympics. In this regard, additional documentation or materials regarding Owens' relations to the IOC's cultural politics, his presence at subsequent Olympics in Mexico (1968) and Munich (1972), or his responses to protests by Black athletes and the Olympic Project for Human Rights (OPHR) at the 1968 Olympics, would have provided a sense of this complexity (Schiller and Young 2010: 73). Gates' Archive in Residence at the HDK shares this lacuna with other museums, such as the LMO and NMAAHC. As Linden and Pieper (2022: 44) observe, neither the LMO nor the NMAAHC successfully present a more complex perspective regarding Owens' relations to the Olympics and politics. However, unlike these museums, the mediation of Owens' life experience in an artwork and as part of the artist's museum *Black Chapel*, modulated between documentary material and an aesthetic experience – aiming to offer a metaphorical portal to Owens's life experience from a different perspective.

Gates' selections from Owens' LP collection functioned as an aesthetic and affective link to the pivotal role of music in everyday life. However, the collection can only gesture toward Owens' life experience following the 1936 Olympics, such as when he occasionally worked as a DJ (Ramsey 2021: 72).[31] The installation of Owens' LP collection not only underscored the notion of *Black Chapel* as an artist's museum (i.e., processes of curating and collecting) it created a bridge to Gates' personal history of engagement in music and the performative aspects of the project. The latter was reflected in a performance, which Gates organized during *Black Chapel,* titled 'Theaster Gates and the Black Monks: The Church of Funk'.[32] Gates mobilized *Black Chapel* as 'a museum within a museum' that highlighted his interest in, and

performance of, music while implicitly referencing the notion of a secularized *Black Chapel* to signify the socio-cultural significance of Black churches and communities as a launching pad for Black musicians. Gates engaged music as an experiential nexus, which loosely linked multilayered significations of disco and house music and club culture to the media culture of *Ebony* and *Jet,* and then to Owens' music albums. The LP collection opened up a relatively unknown dimension of Owens' engagement in music, suggesting another narrative layer to Owens' life experience - a sonic lens that complicated the historical documentation projected onto the wall of the Archive in Residence. However, the aesthetic experience of jazz and blues music, which was represented in some of the album covers, was not fully contextualized within the larger narrative of Owens' own biography and its signification in *Black Chapel.* While this juxtaposition of Owens at the 1936 Olympics and jazz (signified in the LPs) may allude to National Socialism's denouncement of jazz as 'degenerate art', the counter-narrative represented in the LPs did little to explicate Owens' life experience beyond the Olympics. In some respects, this reflected an ambivalence in the biographies and narratives of Owens' life experience, which was also registered in Gates' installation, as noted by Schneider and Stöckle (see above).

Conclusion

Black Chapel invited visitors to explore a range of narratives that presented Gates' own artist's museum. The project reflected a cumulative process of collecting, curating, creating, and exhibiting artifacts and artworks of contemporary culture, many of which Gates collected in Chicago's Black communities. As such, *Black Chapel* demonstrates Gates' ongoing commitment to collecting and preserving Black heritage (e.g., from the Johnson Publishing Company and collections of house music). In many respects, the project extends and redefines Gates' curated collections of artifacts by installing assemblages of non-art objects *and* Gates's own artwork – underscoring the interplay of art and objects in an artist's museum.

While Gates is mindful that the majority of visitors to *Black Chapel* at the HDK would be white Europeans, he also hoped that the project would become a 'calling card' that would resonate with Black visitors and communities (Gates and Walker 2021: 27). In this regard, future studies of *Black Chapel* might investigate the extent to which, and how, Gates' project was received by Black Germans and BIPOC visitors to the HDK.[33] The narratives instantiated in *Black Chapel* not only invited visitors to reflect upon their own historical knowledge and cultural memory but also challenged them to negotiate the experience of visiting *Black Chapel* within the historical and site-specific context of the HDK (Hanks et al. 2012; Rectanus 2024b). While the installation and video dealing with Jesse Owens at the 1936 Olympics may have been the most recognizable component of *Black Chapel* for a large number of visitors, the architectural narratives and histories of the HDK that surrounded *Black Chapel* may have been less familiar to many visitors, despite the inclusion of a brief chronology of the HDK on one wall of the Archive in Residence.

Boris Groys (2013: 51) has argued that curating involves a process of telling 'contradictory stories'. However, in this instance, the contradictions are not a part of the narrative threads of the installations *within Black Chapel,* but rather challenge the socio-historical and architectural space that they occupy. As noted, *Black Chapel's* installations contribute to what the curators at the HDK referred to as *Histories in Conflict* (Brantl and Wilmes 2017). Gates's project deployed the historical signifiers and artifacts of urban Black experience in order to challenge the historical space of the NS 'Hall of Honor'. In doing so, however, *Black Chapel* offered a different inflection of the notion of 'histories in conflict'. Here, the reversed cultural space that was created in *Black Chapel* was based on a dialectical or agonistic relationship with the HDK, rather than a documentation or historiography of the contested narratives as told by the historians and curators of the HDK (Brantl and Wilmes 2017). Visitors who were aware of the NS narratives embedded in the historical and architectural spaces of the HDK (see Figure 2) may have found the counter-narratives asserting the power of Black histories in *Black Chapel* to be visually striking. These installations created a reversed cultural space that went beyond the notion of a 'conversation' with the history of the HDK, suggested by Gates (Gates and Walker 2021: 25). However, the extent to which the popular images and significations in Gates' artist's museum risked their own elision as tropes (Gates and Walker 2021: 28) or might become artifacts of musealization, much like the representation of Owens in history museums (Linden and Pieper 2022; Milford 2012), remains an open question. Yet, the experience of viewing *Black Chapel* may also be informed by the interplay of art and

non-art objects that goes beyond, and complicates, a documentary presentation associated with historical museums. As a metaphorical and experiential time capsule, transported from Chicago to the HDK in Munich and as a site-specific artwork, *Black Chapel* not only reflects the spatio-temporal distance among diverse experiential sites, it also signals the ongoing potential of artists' museums to create spaces (including those within museums) that invite visitors to consider geographic, historical, and cultural distances, or disjunctures, and how they are traversed by artists, museums, and visitors.

Notes

1 Daniel Immerwahr, 'Beyond the Myth of Rural America', *The New Yorker,* 16 October 2023. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/10/23/beyond-the-myth-of-rural-america, accessed 10 March 2024.

2 'American Gothic (1930)', Art Institute of Chicago. https://www.artic.edu/artworks/6565/american-gothic, accessed 25 March 2024.

3 Sarah Rose Sharp, 'How Grant Wood's "American Gothic" Continues to Inspire Artists', *Hyperallergic,* 30 March 2022. https://hyperallergic.com/719745/how-grant-woods-american-gothic-continues-to-inspire-artists/, accessed 10 March 2024.

4 'History of the *American Gothic* House', American Gothic House Center. https://americangothichouse.org/house, accessed 2 August 2024.

5 Gates created a subsequent installation titled *Black Chapel* for the Serpentine Pavilion in 2022, which was fundamentally different than the installation at HDK. See 'Serpentine Pavilion 2022 - Black Chapel by Theaster Gates', Serpentine Galleries. https://www.serpentinegalleries.org/whats-on/serpentine-pavilion-2022-black-chapel-by-theaster-gates/, accessed 10 March 2024.

6 For example, see the projects supported by the Interdisciplinary Program in Music and the Black Church at Yale University: 'Music and the Black Church', Yale University. https://ism.yale.edu/initiatives/music-and-the-black-church, accessed 6 April 2025.

7 Gates refers to the completion of *Black Chapel* at the HDK as a time when he was ready to 'turn a chapter' (Gates and Walker 2021: 26) and move on to new projects. For an overview of the project, including Gates's comments regarding preliminary discussions with HDK director Okwui Enwezor, see 'Theaster Gates: Black Chapel', Haus der Kunst, YouTube, 4:33 minutes, 9 November 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ob-C2Sd2tAs&t=84s, accessed 19 July 2024.

8 See 'Washington, D.C. and Ella Watson, 1942', The Gordon Parks Foundation. https://www.gordonparksfoundation.org/gordon-parks/photography-archive/washington-d-c-and-ella-watson-1942, accessed 26 November 2024.

9 'Theaster Gates: About', Theaster Gates (website). https://www.theastergates.com/about, accessed 10 March 2024.

10 'Theaster Gates: When Clouds Roll Away: Reflection and Restoration from the Johnson Archive,' Stony Island Arts Bank, 13 September 2024 – 16 March 2025. https://www.rebuild-foundation.org/exhibitions, accessed 2 November 2024.

11 'Theaster Gates: Projects', Theaster Gates (website). https://www.theastergates.com/projects, accessed 10 March 2024.

12 I did not know Gates during his studies and while I was a faculty member at Iowa State University, however I was aware of his subsequent community-based projects and artistic practice in Chicago.

[13] See *Theaster Gates: Afro-Mingei*, Mori Art Museum (April - September 2024). https://www.mori.art.museum/en/exhibitions/theastergates/, accessed 17 November 2024.

[14] Julia Bryan-Wilson, 'Impermanent Collections: Julia Bryan-Wilson on Queer and Trans Artists' Museums', *Artforum,* September 2021. https://www.artforum.com/features/julia-bryan-wilson-on-queer-and-trans-artists-museums-250430/, accessed 11 March 2024.

[15] Voluspa Jarpa, 'The Venice Questionnaire: Voluspa Jarpa', *Art Review*, 3 May 2019. https://artreview.com/2019-venice-questionnaire-voluspa-jarpa-chile/, accessed 11 March 2024.

[16] For artists' statements and source materials dealing with institutional critique see Alberro and Stimson (2011).

[17] For an analysis of NS architecture in Munich and the role of the Haus der Kunst see Rosenfeld (2000: 94-6, 206-08, 310).

[18] The original air raid shelter *(Luftschutzkeller)* in the basement, which has been repurposed and renamed as the *LSK-Galerie,* includes spaces for video art.

[19] Gates generally uses the term 'non-art objects' rather than 'artifacts'.

[20] The balls first appeared in the 1920s, e.g., in the German silent film *Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Großstadt* (Berlin: Symphony of a Metropolis) (1927). Regarding the *Houseberg* sculptures see Schneider (2021: 171).

[21] Ron Trent, 'Social Works: The Archives Of Frankie Knuckles Organized By Theaster Gates', *Gagosian Quarterly,* Summer 2021. https://gagosian.com/quarterly/2021/06/30/essay-social-works-archives-frankie-knuckles-organized-theaster-gates/, accessed 11 March 2024.

[22] Lynnée Denise, 'House Music Is Back. Let's Remember Its Roots', *Harper's Bazaar,* 30 June 2022. https://www.harpersbazaar.com/culture/art-books-music/a40473664/house-music-is-back-lets-remember-its-roots/, accessed 5 November 2024.

[23] With regard to the editorial policy and potential political impact of *Ebony* magazine see Ziane (2023).

[24] See Alexandra Sommer, 'Theaster Gates's Emotional Confrontation With Racism', *Hyperallergic,* 30 May 2020. https://hyperallergic.com/567148/theaster-gates-black-chapel-at-haus-der-kunst/, accessed 11 March 2024. Regarding the use of vitrines as ironic references to ethnographic displays, see Bishop (2013: 56-9) and Welter (2019: 187-8).

[25] Also see Sommer, 30 May 2020.

[26] Linden and Pieper argue that the NMAAHC presents a more differentiated narrative of Owens' life than the LMO (2022: 44).

[27] Theaster Gates, *Track and Field or Run, Nigger, Run* (single-channel video and sound 8:46 minutes). A short version is available as Theaster Gates, *Track + Field or Run, Nigger, Run,* Haus der Kunst, 2020. https://www.hausderkunst.de/en/eintauchen/theaster-gates-2 and YouTube https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VWuDX00njsw&t=7s, accessed 12 March 2024.

[28] Also see the documentary film *Riefenstahl* (2024) directed by Andres Veiel.

[29] Sommer, 30 May 2020.

[30] See Schiller and Young's discussion of Owens' account of the 'Hitler snub' following

Owens' victories (2010: 72-3) and Milford's analysis of 'The Snub' (2012: 494-5). Regarding Owens' ambivalent responses to Black athletes' protest at the 1968 Olympics and source materials related to their reception, see Rhonda Evans, 'Jesse Owens & Athletes Who Protest (or Don't)' (blog), New York Public Library, 12 September 2017. https://www.nypl.org/blog/2017/09/12/jesse-owens-protest, accessed 12 March 2024.

[31] This aspect is obliquely referenced in the title of a parallel event at the HDK during *Black Chapel:* 'Listening Session Jesse Owens' Record Collection mit DJ Jay Scarlett'. https://www.facebook.com/events/412242016106391/412242019439724/?locale=he_IL, accessed 12 March 2024.

[32] See Jörg Häntzschel, 'Haus der Kunst: Autonomie in der Kapelle' (Haus der Kunst: Autonomy in the Chapel), *Süddeutsche Zeitung,* 28 October 2019. https://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/theaster-gates-black-chapel-haus-der-kunst-1.4657933, accessed 12 March 2024.

[33] For a discussion of Black German experience and memory culture see Priscilla Layne and Eric Langenbacher, 'An Expanding German Memory Culture', American-German Institute, podcast 123, 12 March 2025. https://americangerman.institute/podcast/episode-123-an-expanding-german-memory-culture/, accessed 14 March 2025.

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