

UNTO
THEE

THEASTER
GATES

Theaster Gates: Unto Thee

edited by Galina Mardilovich and Vanja Malloy

with contributions by Richard J. Powell, Honey Crawford, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev,
Mohsen Mostafavi, David J. Levin, Christina Sharpe, and Theaster Gates

Smart Museum of Art
The University of Chicago

Preface and Acknowledgements
Vanja Malloy and Galina Mardilovich
7

GLASS LANTERN SLIDES FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF ART HISTORY
13

Black Broad Shoulders
Richard J. Powell
29

LIBRARY FROM PROFESSOR ROBERT BIRD
41

One Wants a Teller: Theaster Gates's Poetics of Critical Accumulation
Honey Crawford
57

VITRINES FROM THE ORIENTAL INSTITUTE
69

Looking at Theaster Gates through Arte Povera: Che fare?
Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev
77

CONCRETE SLABS FROM LORADO TAFT MIDWAY STUDIOS
89

GRANITE FROM THE REVA AND DAVID LOGAN
CENTER FOR THE ARTS
97

Theaster Gates, Japan, and the Color Black
Mohsen Mostafavi
105

SLATE FROM THE ROOF OF ROCKEFELLER MEMORIAL CHAPEL
113

Looking at Theaster Gates through Arte Povera: Che fare?

Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev

Theaster Gates is a transdisciplinary social practice artist who has used art as a medium for urban and social renewal. He explores and practices the role arts and culture play in neighborhood development and evolving community in ways that do not replace local inhabitants through gentrification, but rather renew both the physical and social worlds of those communities and neighborhoods. Joining ethical, artistic, and entrepreneurial practices in synergy with public policy makers and local foundations, governments, and more, Gates has developed a model of artistic praxis in which contracts, legal systems, and investment opportunities are materials in his oeuvre.

In many ways, then, his work has nothing to do with Arte Povera, an artistic current that emerged in Italy in the mid-1960s, which explores the energetic transformations of humble materials and the phenomenological reduction of the experience of the real.¹ Arte Povera artists, or *poveristi*, rejected the polished surfaces and commercial logic of postwar consumerism. They turned instead to what was close at hand: a raincoat or a bottle and neon tubing (Mario Merz); burlap, raw wool, fire, and coal (Jannis Kounellis); stone (Giovanni Anselmo); dry clay and copper wire (Marisa Merz); sheets of lead (Emilio Prini, Pier Paolo Calzolari, Gilberto Zorio); cement and sulfur (Zorio); live animals (Kounellis, Calzolari); trees, potatoes, and bread (Giuseppe Penone). This interest in materials was not simply a return to the “natural” but a political and poetic gesture of freedom—the freedom to make art outside the museum, the art market, and the technocratic ideology of progress that was dominant at the time in Italy and the West. Arte Povera in some ways developed as a form of cultural anti-production based on the idea of creating *minus objects*² and works based on liberating flows of energy rushing through materials themselves, able to de-alienate viewers and make them

1 For more on Arte Povera, see Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, ed. *Arte Povera* (Phaidon, 1999), especially 14–47.

2 A term used by Michelangelo Pistoletto. See Michelangelo Pistoletto “The Minus Objects” (1966) as translated and reprinted in *Arte Povera*, ed. Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev (Phaidon, 1999), 269–270.

active participants in the artists' exhibitions. In contrast to practitioners of Pop Art, Color Field painting, and Minimalism, Arte Povera artists placed the living human being at the center of their works and celebrated complexity, contradiction, uncertainty, and the poetry embedded in simple experiences of elementary things. Although they were politically radical in their private lives, they did not refer explicitly to politics in their work, which celebrated poverty not in the sense of not having enough means to live a dignified life, but rather in the Franciscan monastic sense of *altissima povertà* (the highest poverty)—the freedom of *not owning*, of not accumulating wealth, in order to pursue a simpler life in relation to materials and place, where *ownership* of things is substituted by the *use* of things. It is here that I see a throughline to Gates's work.

In Gates's oeuvre, we encounter not simply a practice, but a *poiesis*—a making that is also a mending. His materials, drawn from the ruins of social systems, are not "poor" in the sense of lack but in the sense of latency and potential. Like the humble substances of Arte Povera—cloth, wood, lead—they are transmuted not through spectacle but through care. For the *poveristi*, the return to elemental matter was a refusal of industrial rationality and the spectacle of modernity—a way to reclaim time, to inhabit duration. Gates's practice, although born from a different geopolitical matrix—the Black experience in the United States, specifically the South Side of Chicago—is similarly committed to slowness, the ethics of reuse, what survives.

What is important in Gates's work is his folding of the social into the aesthetic. His work is not just a critique of capital; it is a ritual, a spatial choreography of healing. Like Michelangelo Pistoletto's (b. 1933) *Terzo Paradiso* (Third paradise) project, begun in 2004, Gates's Dorchester Projects or his Black Library installations propose a cosmology of cohabitation—of reading, gathering, and sustaining. There is a spiritual economy at play, where the archive is not dead but breathing, where the past is not past but composted into the future. I am drawn to how Gates, like Arte Povera, disavows the monumental in favor of the ephemeral, the local, the performative. His ceramic vessels recall the tactile knowledge of hands—craft as cosmopolitical gesture.³ In this way, Gates is deeply historical, situated within a lineage that includes Arte Povera and refuses linearity. To see Gates through the lens of Arte Povera is not to collapse their differences but to trace some commonalities; to unmake the modern subject and reimagine agency from the ground up—from the ground, literally, of salvaged bricks, and commonplace objects and materials.

In 1986, when Gates was thirteen years old, Greek-Italian Arte Povera artist Jannis Kounellis (1936–2017) held his largest exhibition in the United States at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago.⁴ Gates himself would exhibit at MCA Chicago in 2013, a year after his participation in dOCUMENTA(13), of which I was the artistic director.⁵ I did not know for sure whether the 1986 exhibition had any indirect impact on Gates as an artist, but I do know that I, an Italian-American art critic and curator steeped in Arte Povera, found a deep resonance between Gates's oeuvre and Kounellis's work when I first visited

3 Isabelle Stengers, "The Cosmopolitical Proposal" in *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, ed. by Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (MIT Press, 2005), 994–1003.

4 *Jannis Kounellis: A Retrospective*, exhibition organized by Mary Jane Jacob, MCA Chicago, October 18, 1986–January 4 1987. Mary Jane Jacob, ed. *Jannis Kounellis* (Museum of Contemporary Art, 1986).

Gates in Chicago in 2009.⁶ In recent conversations with Gates, I learned that his first knowledge of Arte Povera came later, toward the end of his undergraduate studies at Iowa State University in the mid 1990s.⁷ “When I was doing my undergrad studies, I was thinking a lot about ceramics, but I was often in a library where you could browse shelves,” he shared. “There was a section that was about art and social thought, and that’s where I came to understand Fluxus and Dada and where I was introduced to Bauhaus. For the first time I saw a book that had the term Arte Povera, a big, square book. Knowing no Italian, I thought it was about art and poverty, and that immediately felt resonant to me. Intellectual thought conflated on these library shelves.”⁸ The book he saw was likely Germano Celant’s foundational volume *Arte Povera*, published in 1969 in Italian and English.⁹

At the time I met him, Gates was seamlessly moving between creating installation spaces and creating situations for gathering and “performing” in congregated manners.¹⁰ There were echoes then of the transdisciplinary practice of Arte Povera. I understood the attempt by Gates to avoid either shipwrecking onto the Scylla of purely material embodied artwork or falling for the Charybdis-like temptation of making purely dematerialized work. I understood this because I had learned from Arte Povera artists that the world and life itself manifest as appearances and disappearances in a constant flow of condensing and dissolving, material and immaterial, and that capturing that alchemical movement, or moving with it, has the potential to revolutionize art, and consequently, society as a whole. There is something sacred in this ability to move in and out of matter—or rather to explore its thinner sides, such as sound, and its denser and heavier ones, like when one is before an old, found plank of wood.

The Question of Materials

Michelangelo Pistoletto grew up the son of an art restorer, who taught him the craft of repairing and cleaning artworks from the past. In postwar Italy, people recycled clothes; rags meant warmth and survival. In 1967, at the height of the *Miracolo Italiano* economic boom that represented capitalist growth and wealth, Pistoletto created the artwork *Venere degli stracci* (Venus of the Rags; Fig. 1). From a garden supplier, he purchased a valueless copy of Bertel Thorvaldsen’s version of the

5 I invited Gates to take part in dOCUMENTA(13) in late 2009, and he ultimately created the monumental *12 Ballads for Huguenot House* in 2012, renovating a dilapidated building formerly lived in by persecuted Huguenots who had fled France in the late 1600s, using materials from dilapidated houses shipped to Germany from South Side Chicago. This space/philosophical house/installation became a place of meeting, living, sharing, and making music with his choral group The Black Monks of Mississippi (later called The Black Monks).

6 I met Gates on the suggestion of artist Michael Rakowitz while I was doing preliminary research for dOCUMENTA(13).

7 He graduated in 1996 with a degree in ceramics and urban planning.

8 Gates in conversation with the author, December 7, 2024.

9 Germano Celant, *Arte Povera* (Gabriele Mazzotta Editore, 1969).

10 Between 2006 and 2009, Gates renovated two houses that would become Dorchester Projects, and in 2010 he founded Rebuild Foundation.



Fig. 1. Michelangelo Pistoletto, *Venere degli stracci* (Venus of the Rags), 1967

Aphrodite of Knidos, the long-lost fourth-century BC sculpture by Praxiteles, covered it with a mica-based paint, and placed it against a heap of rags that he was using in the studio to polish his *Quadri Specchianti* (Mirror paintings; 1962–ongoing). The rags represent the vibrant multiplicity and changing nature of society. Objects from the mundane world, whether found or bought, thus became materials for the artists of Arte Povera as if they were laden with the memory of ancient and traditional Mediterranean craft, of long-gone terra-seafarers. This attribution of dignity to humble materials and simple techniques is a belief shared by Theaster Gates.

Pistoletto and Gates, although they emerged from different continents and historical contexts, share a conviction that the artist is not merely a maker of objects but a catalyst for social (and for Pistoletto, ecological) transformation. Their practices, rooted in performance, architecture, ritual, and urban intervention, reimagine the relationship between art and life. Pistoletto has articulated the artist's civic role most powerfully through his concept of the “third paradise”—a symbolic space where nature and culture are reconciled, where ecological awareness and spiritual reorientation coalesce. This is not utopian fantasy for Pistoletto; it is an ethic of relationality. Pistoletto's mirrors, actions, and urban experiments are attempts to integrate the everyday into the aesthetic, to transform viewers into participants, and to reshape collective futures. Gates, on the other hand, has carried this lineage into a specifically Black American context. His Dorchester Projects (founded 2009) and Rebuild Foundation (founded 2010) have activated abandoned buildings, repurposed discarded materials, and continuously cultivated infrastructures of care. Gates, like Pistoletto, understands artwork as a living system—one that includes people, archives, bricks, rituals, and the land beneath them.

Both artists reject the separation between art and the everyday world. Both use humble materials, not to aestheticize poverty but to reevaluate the overlooked. Both mobilize art as a social force, not through spectacle but through sustained, embedded practice, through real, operational systems. Through them, we glimpse a model of art as civic ecology: one grounded in repair, responsibility, and the labor of world-making. Both have based their practice of care, simplicity, elementary materials and techniques, the phenomenological experience of the real, dignity, the sacred or epiphanic nature of art, and the measure of things, as opposed to decoration, excess, fictional representation,

or exaggeration.¹¹ They believe in authenticity and a revolutionary sense of individual and collective freedom. There is thus a profound kinship between Gates and some of the artists of Arte Povera not merely in their use of humble, raw, and everyday materials but in their shared belief in the transformative potential of the artist as a civic (Gates) and ecological (Arte Povera) agent.

Gates, emerging from the specificities of the Black urban experience, uses materials—roofing tar, salvaged wood, decommissioned bricks, discarded books, old glass slides—that are not symbols of poverty but instruments of agency. They are presented in acts of ritual, repair, and rebuilding. Like the Arte Povera artists, he treats material as a site of resistance and reinvention, refusing to separate the aesthetic from the ethical. At the core of both Gates's practice and that of the *poveristi* is a deep respect for the autonomy of materials—not as symbolic stand-ins or conceptual placeholders, but as entities in their own right, charged with their own temporalities and agencies. This is where a profound affinity between Gates and Arte Povera becomes clear: neither Gates nor the artists of Arte Povera subordinate matter to idea. Instead, matter *is* the idea—unstable, affective, wounded, generous.

In Arte Povera, artists such as Mario Merz, Giuseppe Penone, and Marisa Merz worked with raw, elemental materials not to signify “poverty” but to emphasize a relational, alchemical materiality, one that resists commodification and celebrates process over product. Materials here are not inert; they *do* something. They age, shift, absorb. Gates, likewise, approaches material with reverence, but where Arte Povera often frames materials within a metaphysical or existential schema, he roots them in the realities of social history and Black spatial experience. The reclaimed wood from a demolished church is not simply wood; it holds the echo of sermons, sweat, struggle. His materials are thick with use, saturated with stories. Yet like the *poveristi*, he allows these materials to speak on their own terms—not polished, not cleaned, not aestheticized beyond recognition. The crack in the vessel remains; the nail hole is left visible.

This commitment to material presence places both Gates and Arte Povera in opposition to a certain legacy of high modernist abstraction and also to a later turn toward the purely conceptual. They refuse to dematerialize. Instead, they *rematerialize*, re-embed, re-inscribe. For both, the work of art is a site where matter and time entangle—a felt duration, a lived process, a political ecology. Materials are never merely means. They are interlocutors and agents of transformation.

Jane Bennett's concept of the assemblage, challenging purely anthropocentric notions of human causality and incorporating the agency of things and materials themselves, is pertinent here.¹² In Gates's Dorchester Projects, the work is not just the building or the archive; it is an entire ecosystem—the reclaimed materials, the books, the people who gather, the atmosphere that circulates. Likewise, Arte Povera was never about the object in isolation but the conditions of emergence—the processual, performative coming-together of things and forces. The coal does not stand in for labor; it *is* labor, combusted and condensed.

11 Gates has stated, “I would like to imagine that, most of the time, most of my work is operating in the real. . . . I would like to say the symbolism you are seeing is pragmatism.” Gates quoted in Andrew M. Goldstein, “Theaster Gates on Using Art (and the Art World) to Remake Chicago’s South Side,” *Artspace*, September 24, 2015, https://www.artspace.com/magazine/interviews_features/qa/theaster-gates-interview-53126.

12 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Duke University Press, 2010).

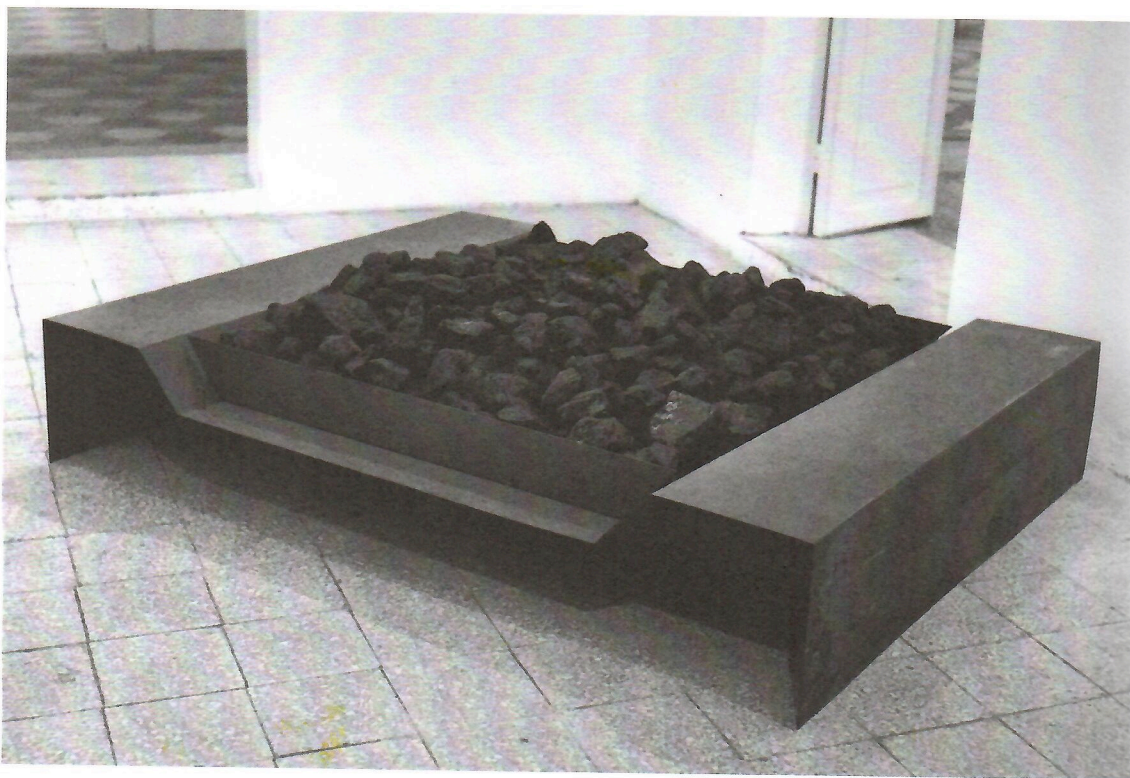


Fig. 2. Jannis Kounellis, *Untitled*, 1967

The tar is not a metaphor for Blackness; it *is* Blackness, as material—sticky, heavy, real. This is matter with agency. In a world overwhelmed by abstraction, both Arte Povera and Gates offer a counter-practice: one of attunement to matter's force, its ethical demand, its capacity to unmake and remake the social fabric.

Is Blackness in Itself a Material?

I cannot speak on Blackness in Gates's work without speaking of coal in the work of Kounellis. For his *Untitled (Carboniera)*, of 1967, Kounellis laid a pile of black coal on the floor, encircled by a white line, as homage both to the past labors of invisible workers and to the 1915 revolutionary painting *Black Square* (1915; Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow) by Kazimir Malevich (1879–1935). Shortly thereafter, at a small gallery in Genoa, in the first exhibition titled *Arte Povera*, Kounellis placed his black coal into an iron structure. This second untitled work engaged with industrialization, modernity, humility, form, texture, fire, and the geological transformation of trees into carbon fossil fuel (Fig. 2). For Kounellis, coal is a primordial material of fire and industry, the compressed remains of organic life. His use of coal is not aesthetic; it is existential. Black is the trace of labor, the residue of production, the ghost of revolution. Kounellis heaped black.

For Gates, black is the color of both Blackness and black material—racial identity and the material conditions that have shaped it. His roofing tar works—viscous, almost unreadable—form a cosmology of compression. Tar is a sealing agent, a skin. It holds things together, literally, but it also suffocates, darkens, obscures. Gates uses it to create monochromes that might recall modernist black paintings, but with the spiritual and infrastructural violence of Black life embedded within. Black becomes simultaneously the surface of accumulated neglect and the site of ritual repair.

So the color black—both as pigment and as political/mystical force—is a crucial axis along which Gates and Kounellis speak to each other. Both artists work with black not to signal absence but to intensify



Fig. 3. Theaster Gates, documentation of *The Garden Wall*, 2023–24

presence. The color black in the work of both artists is not applied; it is constitutive. It is not metaphor but material fact. Black is mass, volume, weight—a sculptural condition, not a chromatic effect.

Gates was trained as a potter, one of the oldest craft forms. While his materials are mundane, they are also universal, just as the technique of making bricks in order to build a home or a refuge is ancient. Gates first referenced George Black, the African American North Carolina brickmaker, in his 2016 installation *The George Black House*.¹³ He shortly thereafter refurbished bricks found in his South Side neighborhood to make new black ones. Through his reduction firing process, in kilns at very high temperatures, the material darkens even more. He uses them to build structures, walls, and foundations, often from reclaimed clay bricks and industrial residue. Like Kounellis's coal, Gates's bricks carry social and geologic time (Fig. 3). They also carry Black time: the time of building and rebuilding under conditions of systemic neglect. A year later, Gates used his black bricks to build the cylindrical outdoor shrine *Black Vessel for a Saint* (2017) in the frame of the Walker Art Center's Sculpture Garden as an homage to St. Laurence, the patron saint of the poor, archives, and libraries, among other things.

Gates's bricks speak to labor and building, and how the leftovers of unmeasure can transform chemically through fire from embodied injustice to embodied justice. What connects Gates to the *poveristi* is a refusal to treat black as a signifier detached from its origins. Coal is not symbolic of darkness; it is carbon, pressed into matter. Bricks are not "about" race; they are fired Blackness, historical and literal. These artists use black not to comment on something but to instantiate a condition. It is a condition of endurance, of foundation and burden, of weight that must be borne.

Arte Povera (and its strong philosophical adjacents)

In 2024, I invited Theaster Gates to contribute to a section titled "After Arte Povera" in an exhibition in which I explored the ancient roots of the practice as well as its ongoing relevance to artists today.¹⁴ Gates exhibited a Black brick, photographic images of construction with black bricks, and a handwritten letter addressed "To: The original members of Arte Povera (and its strong philosophical adjacents)" (Fig. 4). In the letter, Gates notes how he is struck by "the subjectivity" of Kounellis's and Mario Merz's work, "but also in the object's ability to speak to the reconditioning of the artistic project." Indeed, everything Mario Merz (1925–2003) produced since his 1940s expressionistic drawings was a consequence of his subjectivity. His artworks flowed into existence through commonplace objects around him. For example, his piece *Che fare?* (1968; Fig. 5) is composed of a simple metal pot that the artist filled with beeswax and placed within neon fluorescent tubing spelling out "che fare?" (What is to be done?).¹⁵ When lit, the heat of the light ever so slightly melts the wax. In his letter, Gates referenced other

13 *Theaster Gates: How To Build a House Museum*, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, July 21–October 30, 2016.

14 *Arte Povera*, Bourse de Commerce–Pinault Collection, October 8, 2024–January 20, 2025.

15 Merz references Vladimir Lenin's pamphlet "What Is to Be Done?" which was originally published in 1902.

To: The original members of Arte Povera -
(and its strong philosophical adjacents)

July 15, 2024
Chicago.
South Chicago

Thank you for this opportunity to talk about the ways in which contemporary artists feel in some fashion, connected to the origins of Arte Povera, and ways in which Arte Povera seems extremely connected to other revolutionary social structural strategies; structures + movements that were manifesting around the same time as the formation of Arte Povera.

When I consider the work of Mario Merz and Jannis Kounellis, I'm struck by how aligned my practice is to these great makers. Not only in the subjectivity of the work, but also the object's ability to speak to the reconditioning of the artistic project. AP is not about a fiscal proposition of the poverty within making, but rather, the ways the we make ambitious Sincerity or irony happen despite the economic conditions. Kounellis is preaching through sculpture, a sermon that recognizes the value of demonstrating the dignity inherent in materials, locations, ideologies and ways of being, even if they reside in the margins and peripheries of culture.

(p.1)

Fig. 4. Theaster Gates's letter "To the Original Members of Arte Povera (and its strong philosophical adjacents)," 2024

While the conditions that shaped my practice are not exactly the same with regard to origin, the outcomes are especially aligned; pride in the wake of political and economic disparity, generational know-how as it relates to certain mechanical capacities because of my parents and grandparents' farm-to-factory vocations; knowledge of a world parallel to the world I lived in that required translation capacities, navigational astuteness and hard work. Several important movements shaped my interest in art and determined ^{circumstances} my position in life. The Black Arts Movement comes to mind along side the work of outsider artists in the U.S. and non-conventional makers in Europe, western Africa and Japan. Through the Black Arts Movement and Black Is Beautiful movement, I gained deep appreciation for the materials, subjects and challenges around me as a beginning of production. Seeing the work of Bayo and Bill T. Jones, I learned of the importance of narrative, non-conventional inspiration and my capacity to harness inner power to load my objects. Arte Povera was parallel to these moments of transmission, making me realize how important the commonplace could be to my practice.

P 2

The result of the influences have made me who I am —
of course, there are others — Eva Hesse, the Situationist,
Herbert Read and Sam Ra — all these spirits and
disparate schools of thought have shaped me like
the Bauhaus courses of Weimar. I want so badly
to share all these ways of making and believing but
I'm afraid I'm losing belief in the system that
made me. These days, I might enjoy making a
brick for the wall much more than for the
gallery — I'd enjoy making bricks for my neighbor
who I know than for the property-flipping
collectors who sometimes look at the auction
houses waiting for great deals and untimely dips
in popularity.

I've decided that tar, wood, clay and the
discarded world anchor me and that a future
world land me squarely in a conundrum of
artistic ambiguity allowing my father's
tar kettle to be my anchor, my religion
and my paper weight.

In Solidarity
that gets yr.

(P. 3)



Fig. 5. Mario Merz, *Che fare?*, 1968

important precedents to his work, such as Joseph Beuys and the Bauhaus, as well as his own local Chicago context, such as the Black Arts Movement, the musician and cosmic philosopher Sun Ra, and the choreographer Bill T. Jones. His letter points to how he sees his work as it stands at a unique historical hinge: on the one hand, the revolutionary Black artists and organizers of 1960s Chicago, including AfriCOBRA, OBAC (Organization of Black American Culture), and the Black Panthers, who turned art into communal uplift; on the other, the early twentieth-century artists who merged art and life, postwar Italian artists like Kounellis and Mario Merz, and their successors like Joseph Beuys, who turned material into a vibrant critique of contemporary society while pointing to possible new social, cultural, and political worlds.¹⁶

In “To: The original members of Arte Povera,” Gates wrote a sentiment that continues to resonate with me beyond the exhibition. He wrote, “I want so badly to save all these ways of making and believing, but I’m afraid I’m losing belief in the system that made me.” As I write this text, we are a few years into the applications of new generative AI programs, attempting to convince me they know me more than I do and can produce more intelligent thoughts and texts than I can. As an experiment, I asked ChatGPT to speak from my perspective to generate a text comparing Kounellis’s and Gates’s sense of the sacred in their art. While the resulting text sounded akin to ideas I have had, it gave the sense of fake marble, or fake wood—it felt inauthentic. I want so badly to save the craft of writing texts, but like Gates, I am afraid I am losing belief in the system that made me. Perhaps we need artists like Theaster Gates to show us how. Or perhaps Arte Povera, while not denying the energies of flowing data, would suggest we follow incoherence, contradiction, poetic leaps, nonsense, hallucination, poor editing, and embodied, old words to make new writings with.

16 While Beuys had already been active in Fluxus events and actions, he began making installations after visiting the *poveristi* in Italy.

Che fare?