

Media Release

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Intention to Know: The Thought Forms of Annie Besant

December 29, 2015–March 1, 2016

Preview: Monday December 28, 6 – 8 pm

Stony Island Arts Bank

6760 S. Stony Island Ave.

Chicago, IL 60649

Press Contact: Amy Schachman 847.436.2500 | amy@rebuild-foundation.org

Drafted by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev in alliance with Theaster Gates

Participants: Anonymous; Annie Besant (1847-1933); Erin Hayden (b. 1990); Charles Leadbeater (1854-1934); Lady MacFarlane; Lea Porsager (b. 1981), Mr Prince; Cauleen Smith (b. 1967); Mr John Varley.

Intention to Know: The Thought Forms of Annie Besant is a new exhibition that opens in Chicago at **Stony Island Arts Bank**. It will be open to the public from December 29th 2015 through March 1, 2016 (**Preview: Monday December 28th, 6-8 pm**). The Stony Island Arts Bank is a hybrid gallery, media archive, library, and community center and home to the Rebuild Foundation. It is a platform for exhibitions, artist and scholar residencies, and is dedicated to the preservation and activation of archival collections.

The exhibition is being organized by **Rebuild Foundation** under the artistic curatorship of Northwestern University’s Edith Kreeger Wolf Distinguished Visiting Professor in Art Theory and Practice, **Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev**, who is also the Director of the Galleria Civica d’Arte Moderna and of the Castello di Rivoli Museum of Contemporary Art in Turin, Italy. This exhibition follows her successful curatorship of this year’s 14th **Istanbul Biennial, “Saltwater: A Theory of Thought Forms”**. For this new Chicago project, she works in alliance with artist **Theaster Gates**, founder of the Rebuild Foundation whose artwork was also featured in Istanbul Biennial.

This exhibition is organized on the occasion of the recent **discovery in October of this year, of 21 original gouaches** painted between 1896 and 1904 by four unknown artists of Annie Besant’s time (including **Lady MacFarlane, Mr Prince and Mr John Varley**) as illustrations for Theosophists and visionaries Annie Besant and Charles Leadbeater’s book *Thought Forms*, which was published by The Theosophical Publishing Society, London and Benares in 1905. Following the presentation of *Thought Forms* prints and Danish artist **Lea Porsager**’s watercolors at the 14th Istanbul Biennial earlier this year, this exhibition provides Chicago audiences with insights into the ground-breaking visions of **Annie Besant** (1847-1933) and develops some of the ideas that Christov-Bakargiev finds particularly topical and relevant to our times. It also presents new works by **Erin Hayden** and **Cauleen Smith** and rare documents and books related to Besant, both as a political activist and as a researcher into the invisible vibrations and patterns on the world.

Christov-Bakargiev states, *“British Theosophist, writer and activist Annie Besant divorced from her husband in the mid-1800s and went on to a life of travels, writings and revolutionary activities. She was a leader in the radical Free Thinking movements since the 1870s and then became a member of the Socialist Fabian Society in 1885. She was a feminist who supported birth control and went to jail for that. She fought in favour of Irish home rule and for the rights of the urban poor, including limiting working hours and fighting unemployment. Besant felt something fundamental was missing in the materialistic economic and social theories of her time, so she joined the Theosophists around 1889. She first visited India in 1898 and later lived in Adyar, on the outskirts of today’s Chennai, where she became president of The Theosophical Society in 1907 and was the first woman accepted into the Indian National Congress, leading it in 1917. Highly influential in the development of anti-colonial movements in India, against British rule, she died in Adyar in 1933. The early Theosophists were spiritualists who understood the fundamental continuity between matter and spirit and studied religions comparatively; they believed in*

the equality of all people, irrespective of race, religion and ethnicity. They also believed in the need to study science for the purpose of understanding and caring for nature, and they were amongst the first modern environmentalists. Besant focused on the power of thoughts. These abstract embodied forms affect our lives and life on the planet. Her theories of Thought Forms were first

*published in an 1896 article for the theosophical review Lucifer, and later published in 1905 in a volume co-authored with Charles W. Leadbeater. **They constitute the first example of modern abstract art theory.** According to Besant, thought has practical effects on life. Thought Forms are embodied entities of both the real world and the imaginal realm, visible and vibrating manifestations of the mental and astral planes that are generally invisible but that are perceivable in intense moments of awareness. Art cannot represent these thought forms adequately, she explains in her book, and it is this failure of the adherence between the experience of them and their representation that lies at the core of modern art. After a prolonged two-year search for the original pictures providing 58 illustrations in the book, including the gouaches that four artists painted for 35 pages of her book, twenty-one were located in Varanasi, India in October 2015, and this small but focused exhibition in Chicago at the Stony Island Arts Bank focuses on their importance. The gouaches are currently being restored in India and will be visible in Adyar soon, for those who wish to see them in person. Founded by artist Theaster Gates, whose dedication to the preservation and activation of archival artifacts partakes of a vision of social and aesthetic progress based on the care of our material culture and heritage, this is the best location I can think of for this announcement. I welcome these pictures back into the world and wish them all the best on their new journey.”*

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Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev is an author, an organizer of events and exhibitions, and a researcher of artistic practices, the histories of art and the politics of aesthetics. She is the Edith Kreeger Wolf Distinguished Visiting Professor in Art Theory and Practice at Northwestern University (2013–15), Getty Visiting Scholar (2015) and incoming Director as of 2016 of the Castello di Rivoli Museum of Contemporary Art and GAM / Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna and the in Turin, Italy. She drafted the 14th edition of the Istanbul Biennial in 2015 (*SALTWATER: A Theory of Thought Forms*) and was the artistic director of dOCUMENTA (13) which took place in 2012 in Kassel, Germany as well as in Kabul, Afghanistan; Alexandria and Cairo, Egypt; and Banff, Canada.

Theaster Gates is a Chicago-based artist who has developed an expanded practice that includes space development, object making, performance and critical engagement with many publics. Founder of the non-profit Rebuild Foundation, Gates is currently a Professor in the Department of Visual Art and Director of Arts and Public Life at the University of Chicago. Gates has exhibited and performed at the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; Whitechapel Gallery, London; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; Santa Barbara Museum of Art; as well as at dOCUMENTA (13), Kassel, Germany and the 14th Istanbul Biennial (2015). Recent winner of Artes Mundi 6, Gates has also received awards and grants from Creative Time, the Vera List Center for Art and Politics, United States Artists, Creative Capital, the Joyce Foundation, Graham Foundation, Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts, and Artadia.

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The conceptual framework of **Intention to Know: The Thought Forms of Annie Besant** will be announced at the exhibition opening Monday, December 28th, 2015, 6 – 8 pm. The opening will be followed by an after-party featuring a concert by **Cherisse Scott**

For further media information:

Press Relations: Rhiannon Pickles (rhiannon@picklespr.com)

Press Office – Rebuild Foundation: Amy Schachman (amy@rebuild-foundation.org | 847.436.2500)

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