

This paper examines the social and artistic value of public art. Spontaneous public art, while physically impermanent, has the power to prompt lasting social change. Tyree Guyton's *Heidelberg Project* has been controversial since its inception in 1986. Many of his neighbors on Heidelberg Street, as well as many in city government in Detroit, considered the *Project* to be an eyesore and wanted it torn down. Others, locally, nationally, and internationally, considered the *Project* to be a work of art and believed that it should remain intact. For Guyton, his art is political and spiritual.¹ Guyton has stated that his work "was always as much about social protest as pure art."² The first house he painted was to reclaim a house that sold crack cocaine and by its very presence had overpowered the neighborhood.

The *Heidelberg Project* is an installation of environmental art on Heidelberg Street on the east side of Detroit, Michigan. It is located in an area called "Black Bottom," one of the oldest African American communities in the city. Many of the inhabitants of Heidelberg Street were immigrants from the South who migrated in the early 1900s seeking work in the automobile industry, and because of segregation laws, Black Bottom was one of the few places they could live.³ But the thriving community changed after the riot of 1967 when a large portion of the population fled the city for the suburbs which affected the economic health of the city.

Guyton's spiritual connection to the *Heidelberg Project* began in 1986. His neighborhood had become "a war zone of drugs, crime, prostitution, homelessness, hopelessness, and abandonment ..."⁴ One day, Guyton looked at the devastation around him and thought, "This is crazy. This is madness."⁵ Guyton wondered what he could do to change it. He wanted "to tell the truth. To make people take a look at what's happening."⁶ Soon after Guyton was outside painting and cleaned his paintbrush on the vacant house next door that was being used to sell drugs and Guyton states, "the house began to speak to me."⁷

¹ Gary Turla, "Tyree Guyton: The Heidelberg Project, Exhibition from 26 October - 27 November, 1996," Detroit, Mich.

² Turla.

³ Turla.

⁴ Jenenne Whitfield, "Thoughts on Tyree Guyton's Heidelberg Project." *The Southern Quarterly* (Fall-Winter 2000/2001): 188.

⁵ Whitfield, 188.

⁶ *The Voodoo Man of Heidelberg Street*, prod. Harvey Ovshinsky, dir. Kevin Hewitt, 28 min., WTVS-TV (Television Station: Detroit, Mich.), WDIV (Television station: Detroit, Mich.), 1989, videocassette.

⁷ *Come Unto Me: The Faces of Tyree Guyton*, Prod. And Dir. Nicole Cattell, 30 min., Naked Eye Productions, 1998, videocassette.

He then began to paint the house and to gather discarded objects from the streets, what some might call junk, painted them, and affixed them to the house to reclaim it. Shortly thereafter, the drug dealers and their customers had abandoned the house.

Because of his success, Guyton began to decorate the outside of other abandoned, drug-infested houses on Heidelberg Street, transforming them into urban art. This area became the *Heidelberg Project*, and it attracted so much attention that many of the other drug dealers and prostitutes using these vacant houses and lots in the area were frightened off. After transforming Heidelberg Street, Guyton's art took over two more blocks.⁸ Visitors began to come from New York City, Canada, and as far away as Japan and Africa.

Because Guyton created a contrast to the bleakness of everyday living, many in the neighborhood looked at Guyton as a local hero. The community as a whole began to be proud of and take ownership of their community. According to the *Project's* guest book, there are "signatures of over 275,000 visitors annually from all fifty states and more than eighty-five countries."⁹

Despite all the accolades, some of the neighborhood residents found the decorated houses and lots disturbing and viewed them as eyesores (Fig. 1). But the neighbors had to live in this environment 24 hours a day and some argued that art should be in a museum. One neighbor characterized it as a hazard that attracted rats.¹⁰ In 1991 Conrad Herndon of the McDougal-Hunt Citizens District Council stated, "That's not an artist. That's a junk man. There are boundaries. When you go out of the boundary, you should be punished."¹¹ Guyton was ticketed many times for littering.¹²

Many felt the art was degrading to African American people. They claimed visitors gawked and this made them feel they were on display and exploited.¹³ In November of 1991, after many complaints by neighborhood residents, Detroit's mayor, Coleman Young, visited the site, declared Guyton's work not art,

⁸ Alison Carb Sussman, *Contemporary Black Biography*, Vol. 9. Available [online]: www.heidelberg.org [10 October 2001]

⁹ Whitfield, 191.

¹⁰ *Voodoo Man*.

¹¹ *Voodoo Man*.

¹² *Voodoo Man*.

¹³ Whitfield, 194.

and issued an order to dismantle the *Heidelberg Project*.¹⁴ In 1992, after receiving the Michigan Artist Award from the Governor, Guyton began to rebuild the *Heidelberg Project* using the vacant lots cleared in the demolition, although they were city-owned. He obtained permission from private owners of vacant lots, and abandoned houses and was able to use their property.¹⁵

Although Guyton transforms the environment, I believe he doesn't transform the objects he recovers, he resuscitates them. These painted objects retain their spirit and are reborn. According to Gary Turla, "He takes the detritus of the urban scene: objects that were once utilitarian are now expendable, unnoticed and not remarked upon. The inner city becomes an urban combat zone where 'Good' (art) overtakes 'Evil' (drugs and petty crime)."¹⁶

Guyton utilized children's dolls, bicycles, tires, toilets, and tombstones. Several elements play a significant role in his work; polka dots, faces, shoes, and cars. To Guyton, the polka dot represents "the common unifying spirit among us."¹⁷ he has covered the exterior of "The Dottie Wottie House," (Fig 2) the house where he grew up, with them. He also painted polka dots all over the city to highlight disrepair.

Faces (Fig. 3) represent the people who give the city its character and they fill the length of the street. Some are small, and some as large as five-feet tall and are painted many colors reflecting Guyton's universal theme. Shoes (Fig. 4) are significant to him because "shoes come from my soul and my soul is on Heidelberg Street."¹⁸ His family shopped at rummage sales and the children wore hand-me-down clothes and shoes. Often when the sole of the shoes wore out, they padded the soles with cardboard.

There is a vacant lot devoted to cars (Fig. 5) with images painted on pieces of wood, doors, and wooden panels. There are names on many of the cars, i.e. New York and Taxi, and they are painted a variety of colors including the traditional "taxi yellow." Do these cars represent the many visitors to the Project, or do they represent Detroit being the "Motor City," or do they represent a neighborhood of people not able to buy the shiny, new cars for which the city is so famous?

¹⁴ Whitfield, 190.

¹⁵ Whitfield, 190.

¹⁶ Turla.

¹⁷ The Dottie Wottie House," postcard.

¹⁸ Tyree Guyton, "Tyree Guyton: Hot, Raw and Funky," Exhibition Catalog, Detroit, Michigan, Scarab Club, February 2 – 28, 2000.

Guyton's objects are representative of the people who populate the area. People in our society that are often looked at as cast-offs or valueless according to their economic status, or viewed as voiceless and passive, because they are not politically conversant. "When an object is discarded it is perceived as being no longer of value to the person or society that once possessed it."¹⁹

Today, Black Bottom is still blighted and struggling economically, but there are also homes painted with bright, cheerful colors that reflect the bright color scheme of Heidelberg Street. There is less crime, and the area is alive with activity, all elements of a community that has not given up. The *Heidelberg Project* is a joyous artscape of color and beauty. Although time will tell if the *Heidelberg Project* will remain intact, it is currently an ongoing project. The *Heidelberg Project* has been a catalyst for transforming and empowering a community because it utilizes cast-off objects and gives them new life. I believe that its power lies in being recreated. It has invigorated many who were ambivalent in their commitment to the city. Spiritually, the people of this community have been exposed to a world that many of them never knew existed. They now know they have a voice, and that voice will be heard.

Tyree Guyton has stated, "The work I do is revolutionary. I believe custom and tradition is failing our society. ... I believe that it will take a vision to resurrect people from the negative conditions that plague our society. I use art as a catalyst for social change."²⁰

¹⁹ *Recycled, re-seen: Folk Art From the Global Scrap Heap*, edited by Charlene Cerny and Suzanne Seriff, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1996), 10.

²⁰ Whitfield, 195.



Fig. 1 Photograph. Photographer and date unknown.

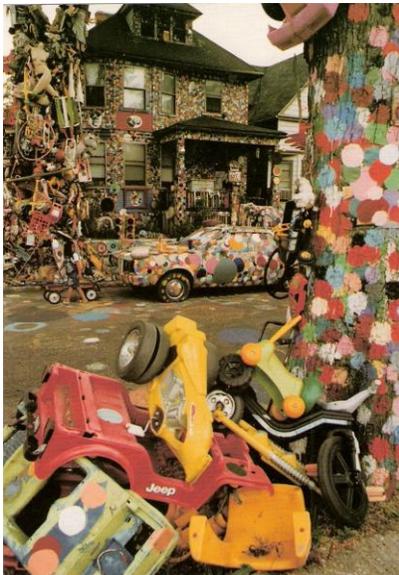


Fig. 2 "The Dottie Wottie House"



Fig. 3 Faces.
gehadhaddi.com/files/gimms/



Fig. 4. Image of a shoe.
Mary Stebbins Taitt
detroitd.blogspot.com/2009/11/art-heidelberg February 10, 2010



Fig. 5. Image of a car.
Cult Case: Culture & Art Online Magazine, 4/1/08-5/1/08.
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