Turning the Neighborhood Inside Out

Imaging a New Detroit in Tyree Guyton’s Heidelberg Project

Wendy S. Walters

In some senses, the city is like a stage, and the individual is an actor in a drama. By being such an actor, the individual gets a better sense of what the drama is about.

—City of Detroit, Planning Department (1985:2)

Let the future begin.

—Detroit Mayor Dennis Archer (in DeHaven 1998)

it’s just tyree & grandpop out there
on Heidelberg Street
in the middle of the night
turning their neighborhood inside out

—John Sinclair (1990:14)

Artist Tyree Guyton has said of the rapidly deteriorating houses on Heidelberg Street: “You’ll think I’m crazy [...] but the houses began speaking to me. [...] Things were going down. You know, we’re taught in school to look at problems and think of solutions. This was my solution” (in Beardsley 1999:5). Guyton claims that his painting and decorating of abandoned houses on the 3600 block of Heidelberg Street initially began as “protest art” against the decline of his eastside Detroit neighborhood. In its 13 controversial years of existence, the Heidelberg Project has also become a performance of history—a didactic representation of past public events and human affairs that makes material the intricacies of human experience typically not accounted for in conventional history or folklore. The Project visually captures the history of a residential community coming undone. Guyton’s houses:

literally vomit forth the physical elements of domestic history; furniture, dolls, television sets, signs, toilets, enema bottles, beds, tires, baby buggies come cascading out doors and windows and through holes in the roof,
Tyree Guyton

flowing down the outside walls and collecting in great heaps on the lawn, so that the whole world looks like some kind of man-made lava flow. The magma of discarded lives: these visible tokens of a humiliated history. (Herron 1993:199)

This spewing forth is not just about discarding the past; it is a reclamation of Detroit’s recent history and a transformation of it into something that has value in the current world.

As an arena in which debates about the proper path to Detroit’s next renaissance have been waged, the Heidelberg Project raises questions about what the city’s future should look like:

Heidelberg is, among other things, a spectacle, something that says, “look at me.” It is a celebration that can be “heard” for miles in every direction (as evidenced by the attention of tourists, media, and the city council). On the most fundamental level, it seems to be saying, “we are here; we exist” and thus serves as an answer to those who construct Detroit as a culturally empty space, as presently meaningless and worthless. (Sheridan 1999:346)

The “spectacle” of the Heidelberg Project is more than an acknowledgment that people still live in the city. While it serves as a visual record of the city’s recent painful past, the Heidelberg Project illustrates the transformational power that is present in the community in both a real and imaginary sense.

While much of the city lacks a strong sense of place, other than that which is defined by industry, the Heidelberg Project is as distinct a place as the city could hope to have. It is a neighborhood block with vacant lots and abandoned houses that are highly visible—they are painted in bright colors and adorned with sculpture. On Heidelberg Street, discarded objects embody optimism, memory, and hope for the area. Instead of ignoring the abandoned buildings, as is done in so many parts of the city, the Heidelberg Project marks their significance through Guyton’s site-specific craftsmanship. The Project acts out the process of community regenesis in a blighted area of the city that offers few discernable signs of social and economic growth.

In this essay I explore Guyton’s vision for the future of the Heidelberg neighborhood where making art acts as the primary method for asserting the community’s survival. Guyton’s Heidelberg Project recognizes the importance of “marking down” events in people’s lives that otherwise might go unrecorded, in order to prevent gaps in the communal knowledge of the past. The Heidelberg Project reclaims the power of telling history by interpreting death, in this case the death of objects, as a means of transformation.

Guyton’s affection for the detritus that is the raw material of his art has brought criticism from both neighbors and city officials. His neighbors have “complained that it was trash and petitioned the city to have it cleaned up” (Miro 1993:9D). It has been called an eyesore and a health hazard; the traffic it generates has been cited as a public nuisance. To put these contentions and other controversies that surround the Project in a broader context, I will consider how the tension surrounding the Heidelberg Project exemplifies a larger conflict between art and the state. By focusing on how the Heidelberg Project dramatizes a community’s redevelopment, I will show that the Project is an exercise in initial authorship, or the creation of identity and history during a performance.

For this study, the Heidelberg community is defined by its location. There is a great deal of racial and economic homogeneity within the neighborhood: it is largely African American and most residents live below the poverty line.
The Heidelberg area encompasses people of several generations who have very different opinions about whether the community’s moral and cultural values could be represented by the Project. In spite of the profound discrepancies in ideology that surround the Project, it portends to be a prophetic enactment of the neighborhood’s empowerment, development, and continuity of its community values—its community sovereignty. While it must be acknowledged from the onset that the Heidelberg Project does not fully achieve community sovereignty, it does aim to inspire similar “acts” of collaboration, not just in the Heidelberg neighborhood but throughout the city.

To understand the significance of the Heidelberg Project in relation to the city of Detroit, it is important to grasp some particularities of the city’s recent history. A drive through Detroit’s residential neighborhoods reveals that many of the city’s vacant lots are reverting back to their natural state. In the summer, these fields burgeon with flowering weeds that stretch tall and spindly—clumps of wiry maple and poplar saplings obscure piles of discarded tires and rusted bedsprings from mattresses used as trampolines by neighborhood children. Stray dogs wander in and out of fenceless yards. An occasional possum or raccoon will scurry across a road late at night, looking for open or overflowing trash bins. This unintentional “greening” of the city is a strikingly peaceful backdrop to the rickety and menacing abandoned houses also abundant in Detroit. The torching of these abandoned structures during more than a decade of Halloween eve “Devil’s Nights” brought Detroit to the attention of the national news media throughout the 1980s and early 1990s.

These thousands of abandoned buildings figure in numerous discussions about the city’s failure to renovate its image along with its recently jump-started economy. Detroit’s long-vacant houses, factories, and storefronts are dramatic artifacts of civic neglect that upstage new developments. Even though significant financial investments in the city are growing, Detroit still looks like a dingy, soot-faced Cinderella. Though hope is strong for the future, the city has not yet acquired the shimmer and glitter promised by two new sports arenas, 100 million dollars in Federal Empowerment Zone grants, General Motors’ renovation of the Renaissance Center into its international headquarters, and three glitzy Las Vegas–style casinos.

But even while immersed in the overwhelming evidence of three decades of hard times, most Detroiters believe the city to be a place with great potential to become something other than it is. David M. Sheridan convincingly chronicles the city’s obsession with its recent past and its longing for a more optimistic future in his article “Making Sense of Detroit” (1999). Through an investigation of Detroit discourse, he discovers various utopian representations of the city. Sheridan explains how a dystopian vision of Detroit has allowed it to be characterized like a frontier—wild, lawless, and chaotic. He shows, through the work of various Detroit writers, how Detroit has been represented as a “blank slate” or “a culturally empty space waiting to be inscribed with the future.”

Perhaps it is this dystopic vision of Detroit that has spurred the city’s belief in demolition as a first step toward urban renewal. Demolition is, after all, a way of creating a “blank slate.” There is a strong push to destroy landmark structures that have deteriorated, as if the removal of these buildings might inspire quicker redevelopment. Jerry Herron, a Detroit cultural historian, describes the thinking behind this predilection for demolition:

If we’re to have a new Detroit, first we’ll have to get rid of the old one, and those with their sights fixed forever backward will never have a “vision” of what could or should be. In the name of the common good, then, civic, corporate, and critical entrepreneurs all urge the same thing: the dangerous antiquation of history and all those places associated with
Herron describes this way of thinking in relation to changes taking place in the downtown area. In Detroit, decrepit buildings of previous prominence have become a visible metaphor for the city’s failures and embarrassments. Many feel that the physical remnants of the old city cannot exist alongside the new Detroit, and that the monuments of the city’s hard times should be razed in order to allow for the future. This drive toward demolition, as opposed to renovation, has allowed much of Detroit’s downtown to disappear without a trace.

Loyal Detroiter’s have not forgotten the thriving and efficient city Detroit was from the 1920s through the early 1960s, although that city is long gone. According to U.S. census estimates, Detroit and Philadelphia are the only two of the nation’s ten largest cities that have decreased in size since 1980. After 1967, when 43 people were killed during one of the country’s worst civil uprisings, Detroit grew significantly less diverse. During the 1970s the city became blacker, older, and poorer. Current census estimates show the city to be around 81.2 percent African American (Hill 2001). While a once-segregated Detroit offered African Americans limited access to jobs, housing, hotels, clubs, businesses, and restaurants, it is now easily characterized as what George Clinton, the founder of the musical groups Parliament and Funkadelic, and a fellow Detroiter, calls a “chocolate city” in his album by the same name (1975).

Other significant changes came with the decline of the auto industry during the late 1970s and early 1980s. The 1998 implosion of J.L. Hudson’s, a former downtown department store, symbolized a most dramatic initiative to revitalize Detroit’s downtown shopping district. However, at this writing, there are currently numerous other vacant buildings on that same block that have yet to be blown into the future. Historic structures like Hudson’s have been stripped away first, while thousands of houses and small manufacturing plants, which can be found in predominantly residential areas, are left to a slower ruin and a more uncertain relationship with the future. It is in the neighborhoods like the one surrounding the Heidelberg Project that the most significant changes are needed. The building decay affects the everyday quality of life for neighborhood residents.

But the strategy for bringing the future to Detroit has not proved fruitful for its residential communities.

But the future of Detroit’s neighborhoods is being imagined in the artscape on Heidelberg Street. Like other works by local artists, the Project draws attention to a transformational power that emanates from the city’s streets. This kind of imaginative action is performed by the Heidelberg Project, where:

> fantasy becomes a strategy for survival. Just as extreme suffering can cause a mind to “snap” and retreat to an inner fantasy world, one feels that Detroit has produced the wonderland of Heidelberg as the result of having been pressed beyond its limits. (Sheridan 1999:343)

Since its inception in 1986, the “wonderland” on Heidelberg Street has taken over the entire block and has converted it into an overwhelming world of color. Polka dots and brightly colored faces of “people in the hood” are painted on the rusty steel canvases scrapped from Detroit’s best-known export. The Kids of Heidelberg, the Project’s official neighborhood youth arts program, and other student artists from the area occasionally have assisted Guyton by adding their work to the Project. Perhaps, as Sheridan suggests,
the Heidelberg Project performs a self-fulfilling act—that is, a community’s visual resurrection through its representation in art.

Although Guyton’s use of Heidelberg Street as a canvas has been widely acclaimed by scholars, art critics, journalists, tourists from around the world, and some city residents, the Project has endured three demolitions, all of which were carried out by the city. Most recently, in February of 1999, several freestanding sculptures, tree installations, and an adorned abandoned house were destroyed. The city completed the removal of Guyton’s artwork from city property in April of that same year (leaving only those on private property). Sheridan suggests that the final demolition occurred because the Project, in the midst of Detroit’s economic optimism, was a reminder of a history no one wanted to remember:

Perhaps some feel that Heidelberg is already an anachronism, a fossil left over from a painful period in Detroit’s history, in which the city, as a strategy for survival, attempted to become accustomed to its sores. As a better future dawns, many feel it is best to erase the signs of a past sickness. (1999:352)

His point raises many questions about what the history of the Heidelberg Project tells about the city of Detroit. If, prior to the most recent demolition, the Project was anachronistic, then the circumstances that inspired Guyton to develop it in 1986 must have ceased to exist. Perhaps these difficult conditions have been torn down by the same economic optimism that has been leveling the downtown area. And if the city has no further need to be “accustomed to its sores,” then it must either be in a process of healing, or possibly dismemberment, when sores are found in parts of the city that are no longer considered vital to the city’s future. That is quite possible for those living on the 3600 block of Heidelberg Street where, according to the 1990 census, the median family income hovers around $12,939 a year.

In order to examine how recent history and the future are represented by the Project, it is important to understand the Project’s aesthetic and narrative impulses. As the Project has been a work-in-progress for several years, many of its most noteworthy pieces have been significantly altered or have disappeared in the evolutionary process—not to mention those that have been demolished. Instead of attempting to chronicle the entire history of artworks in the Project, I will focus on the main objects displayed just prior to the site’s demolition in early February 1999. There are three reasons for describing the Project in its previous state. First, the work created up until this point reflected the longest period of building on the Project without a demolition by the city (previous demolitions also took place in 1989 and 1991). Second, even though there are new objects under construction at the site, they do not yet reveal as many levels of signification as were evident in the earlier works. It is arguable that the artwork missing from Heidelberg is more important than those objects currently on display because they were taken away. Finally, this approach allows the discussion to address the performance of history at the Heidelberg Project as an ongoing event with a definable past. The significance of the 1999 demolition will be discussed later, but to better understand what the Project has been, let’s imagine momentarily that it still stands.

The spirit of industriousness that characterized Detroit’s more thriving days can be seen in the Project’s density and detail, which emulates a hard-core work ethic that still predominates among the people in the city:

Everywhere people are holding desperation at bay with an improvisational “can do” vitality evidenced by the small, well-tended gardens
throughout Detroit’s east side and the attention that merchants and householders pay to their embattled holdings. [...] Guyton began listening to these higher aspirations of the neighborhood. (Jackson 1990:5)

This “can do’ vitality” is evident in one’s first vision of Heidelberg Street when it is approached from Mt. Elliot Street. A white sign with stenciled black letters announces the entrance to the Project (plate 1). At first glance, it appears that the Heidelberg Project is an attempt to regrow a neighborhood out of the objects that remain from its past (this is still true). Each of the artworks that make up the Project—the houses, trees, and freestanding structures—bear scars of being discarded, neglected, and undervalued. Yet in this landscape they also appear to be cultivated blooms. The Project stretches across the northern and southern sides of the street. On a busy day, visitors’ cars line both sides, and people mill about in small groups, pointing and looking over their heads into tree branches whose foliage partially conceals unexpected articles—telephones, stuffed animals, polyester pants. Painted symbols are repeated throughout the block: a cross, a polka dot, the word “GOD.” Together they create a pictorial Morse code that is a Mayday, a proclamation of change, and an exuberant shout at life. There are household objects on display—toys, shoes, tires, clocks, and toilets—which are strewn across the vacant lots, suspended from telephone poles, and nailed to the roofs of houses. An ecstatic mayhem seeps from the ground and fills the air with an energy not apparent in the neighboring blocks.

One encounters Guyton’s first adorned and abandoned house near the northeast corner of Heidelberg and Mt. Elliot. All along the Project, the street and sidewalks are painted in bright splotches of color, crosses, and a few words that have been well worn by numerous visitors. The ground paintings act as a kind of connective tissue between Guyton’s works and the other houses on the block that are not part of the Project. As people walk and drive through this artscape, it is transformed into a performance of history; the visitors become the visible community that performs this spectacle. The Shoe House, near the corner of Mt. Elliot and Heidelberg, otherwise called Happy Feet (plate 2), features roughly drawn images of shoes nailed into its paneless window frames. Its doors are boarded up and larger shoes are painted right onto the house’s wooden siding. In the front yard, a telephone pole is marked

1. A sign at the entrance to The Heidelberg Project welcomes visitors and asks for volunteers and donations. (Photo by Wendy S. Walters)
with colorful crosses and small, whimsical abstractions of people’s faces. In the lot next to the house, the freestanding sculpture Noah’s Ark (plate 3) has run aground. This paint-spattered powerboat displays polka dots, crosses, and the words “GOD,” “Hell,” and “Jesus” on its hull in overlapping capital letters. The boat overflows with stuffed animals that are discolored, ratty, and frayed from several seasons of being out-of-doors. Plastic hobbyhorses top the ark, which, in late summer, sails only in a sea of ragweed and crabgrass. While the ark’s allusion to the biblical flood is obvious, perhaps it also plays on the irony that so far, plans for the city’s resurrection have only brought the fire—individual house going up by individual house. These conflagrations have not removed the blight, crime, or desolation found in the abandoned structures surrounding the Project.

Along much of the sidewalk, worn cloth, leather, and vinyl shoes line the edge of the grass. This piece, simply called A Lot of Shoes (plate 4), symbolizes those who stand in the unemployment lines; it eventually leads to “the souls of the wandering homeless” (The Heidelberg Project n.d.). Guyton plays on the homonyms “soles” and “souls,” tipping his hat to oral culture and history. Not far down from A Lot of Shoes is a pile of shoes over 15 feet in diameter. Slumped at the peak, it gives the impression that it is slowly seeping into the grass. While the other objects on Heidelberg Street are vibrant and colorful, this piece looks surprisingly dingy and faded. The shoes are unadorned, thoroughly bleached by the elements, and have an anonymous quality. They look as though they have been carelessly discarded, but the depth of the pile reveals a careful artistic practice, and the number of shoes scattered around the pile’s periphery makes it difficult to approach. There are men’s and women’s styles, separated from their mates and varying in size. Except for the sense of wasted usefulness signified by the shoes, there is no consistency in how they look except for the fact that they appear worn and weathered. This freestanding sculpture is called The Oven (plate 5), and it represents those who suffered in the Holocaust. It acknowledges those people who, when forced to enter the concentration camps, had to leave everything behind. This included their clothes, jewelry, and shoes. For those who did not survive, sometimes such piles of objects provided the only evidence of their presence at the camps. This pile of shoes reminds Heidelberg visitors that the most mundane objects can testify to a buried history.

2. The Shoe House or Happy Feet sports paintings of footwear. (Photo by Wendy S. Walters)
On the other side of the street, worn shoes serve a similar function for a different history. A tree sculpture called *The Soles of the Most High*—inspired by the recollections of Guyton’s grandfather, the artist Grandpa Mackey, of those who were lynched in the South—features pairs of shoes that dangle from the highest tree branches. Mackey had said, “all that could be seen were the souls of the shoes” (The Heidelberg Project n.d.). The shoes hang suspended in eerie stillness from the canopy of tree leaves. A heaviness and a weighty sense of “the body” is implied by the horizontal positioning of the soles. The work is effective if only for the anticipated specter of violence it never delivers. It is also a reflection on and an anticipation of another crime against humanity.

Radiating a far more optimistic energy still potent with history, a polka-dotted bus stands at the far end of the north side of the block at Ellery. No longer in service, it was placed there in recognition of the courage of Rosa Parks, a long-time Detroit resident. The bus was manufactured in 1955, the year that Parks refused to give up her seat on a Montgomery, Alabama, bus—and, ironically, the year Guyton was born. It is not hard to imagine that Parks’s defiant spirit is brought to life by the Project’s refusal to move. The polka dots give the old bus a pulse and a vivacity that is obvious in many other parts of the Project. Their prominence on Heidelberg Street can be traced back to Grandpa Mackey. His love of the jelly bean is what originally inspired Guyton to start using colorful splotches throughout the Project.

Following the polka dots to the southern corner of Heidelberg and Ellery, one encounters several tree sculptures. Like *The Soles of the Most High, Changing Time* and *Non-Stop* use the trees as highly symbolic centerpieces to the sculptures. But unlike *The Soles of the Most High*, these works suggest messages of uplift and transformation. The trees act as conduits between the historical roots of Heidelberg Street and the imaginary world that the Project creates. The trunk and branches of *Changing Time* are covered in clocks. They indi-
cate the imminence of the neighborhood’s transformation and the relentless, ticking rhythm that will bring it on. The title of the sculpture plays on the present moment in the neighborhood’s history, suggesting that as long as there is the Heidelberg Project, it is “time” for a “change.” The vehicles bringing this change can be found on the tree sculpture Non-Stop (plate 6), which features bicycles and car parts suspended as if they are climbing upward in a frenzy. As with The Oven, it is difficult to approach the work because bicycles are densely piled around its base. Their representation of upward motion is relentless, ecstatic, and clumsily poised, perhaps mirroring stages in a person’s journey away from a life on the streets (The Heidelberg Project n.d.).

On the southwest side of Heidelberg Street, at The Numbers House, number signs are nailed and directly painted onto its exterior. Though less intensely decorated than many of Guyton’s other works, it is a source of constant fascination for visitors. Perhaps this attention is due to the fact that Guyton’s neighbors live in it. They participate in Heidelberg’s performance of history by conducting their daily rituals in the work of art. Their presence reminds visitors that Heidelberg is still a real neighborhood, no matter how much Guyton’s artwork appears to define it. The Numbers House represents the “numbers” game, a kind of privately organized, local lottery that has habitually been run on Detroit streets. It epitomizes hope Detroit-style—looking forward to the big break, to be chosen by luck, and to suddenly cashing in big-time.

Just down from The Numbers House stands The Of House (plate 6) whose name references the defendant in the infamous 1995 trial. It actually refers to an “Obstruction of Justice,” which was the spectacular attention the O.J. Simpson trial captured while acts of violence committed on lesser-known victims in poor neighborhoods went unacknowledged every day. The house features “symbols of the chase, faces of the jury, and mocking, chaotic references to how the media has showcased this trial; it addresses the absurdity of such a focus when atrocities and injustices abound all around us every day” (The Heidelberg Project n.d.). Another obstruction of justice this house might depict is the city’s repeated destruction of the Project. It could be argued that the demolitions were intended to distract attention away from the city’s failure to address more material concerns within the Heidelberg neighborhood. The former tenants of The Of House turned over their keys to Guyton to prevent “looting and other dangerous activities for the neighborhood” (The Heidelberg Project n.d.), perhaps in recognition of this fact. Instead of leaving it to ruin, the Heidelberg Project has used the house for lectures, studio projects, children’s exhibitions, a gift shop, and business meetings (The Heidelberg Project n.d.). Community art classes for children are also held in this building, for which the Project is seeking the title.

Next to The Of House is the house in which Guyton was raised and where his mother, Betty, still resides. The Dotty Wotty House (plate 7) is the centerpiece of the Heidelberg Project. It is elaborately decorated with small, carefully placed polka dots. This house is spangled and sequined in exuberant color, suggesting rhythm. Occasional larger polka dots interrupt the meticulously painted pattern: “Guyton frequently combines dots and stripes and uses unexpected
color combinations to create a visual syncopation, a sort of visual analogue to the musical improvisations of jazz” (Jackson 1990:6). Unlike the frustrated and furious protrusions of broken toy jeeps, police cars, and broken dolls adhered to the roof of The Of House, The Dotty Wotty House conveys a much more peaceful message. Guyton says that the house was inspired in part by Dr. King’s words, “We are all the same color on the inside” as well as Grandpa Mackey’s aforementioned love for jelly beans (The Heidelberg Project n.d.).

Demolitions of the Project in 1989 and 1991 resulted in the loss of other works of great symbolic significance. Among these, The Baby Doll House was one of Guyton’s most controversial pieces, which: “through its use of broken, naked dolls, dealt directly with the issues of child abuse, abortion, and prostitution” (Sussman 1994). Guyton believes that it was the strength of these images that led to the destruction of the house in 1989, without any forewarning:

Ironically, this demolition occurred within weeks of the Detroit City Council’s awarding Tyree and Karen Guyton the “Spirit of Detroit Award” for “their outstanding contribution to the community,” naming the Heidelberg Project as a city landmark. (Jackson 1990:7)

In November 1991, Fun House, Truck Stop, and two other houses were bulldozed and cleared away. Fun House was the first of Guyton’s house sculptures, and it also served as his studio. Guyton claims that at the time of the demolition, over $250,000 of his artwork was housed inside. The demolition in 1999 saw the collapse of one of Guyton’s decorated houses off-site from the Project, at 577 Canfield near Chene (plate 8). This house served as a part-time studio for Guyton and as storage for works rescued from previous demolitions. Although this house was not located on Heidelberg Street, it was the first site to be demolished in February 1999 (Siwak 1999).
Aside from two houses left standing, the north side of Heidelberg up to Ellery is now completely razed, but the painted sidewalks and street bear evidence of Guyton’s creative vision. The lots on which houses once stood are deep, and grass has started to grow back in place of his free-standing sculptures. The lawns of these vacant lots are still meticulously mowed, but I wonder if it is a result of the city’s continued concern for the residents of Heidelberg Street or the as-yet-unrecognized labor of Guyton, who claims to have worn out 10 lawnmowers during the life of the Project (The Heidelberg Project 1996a). On the south side of Heidelberg and Ellery, a harbinger appears. A sky-blue polka dot is painted on the window of a white, single-family house. Whether the dot signifies that the house is now abandoned or that its tenants support Guyton is not clear. Perhaps it is evidence that either way, the whole block will slowly embrace the transformational spirit of the Project. Scrap wood, possibly salvaged from the most recent demolition, has already been painted and installed in rough sculptures on the empty lots. In late November of 1999, Guyton still could be found working outside in the yard adjacent to The Dotty Wotty House. Near the southern corner of Mt. Elliot and Heidelberg, where the welcoming sign to the Project once stood, a sculpture made of wooden American flags sits far back from the road. Where Rosa Parks’s bus had idled, another wooden flag, this one upside down, is nailed to a tree. Guyton began installing the flags on curbside trees before the trucks came to take away more of the Project in the spring of 1999. Guyton said that turning the flags upside down made them a symbol of distress. “I wanted to show that the city government is confused. [...] If the city destroys them, they’ll be desecrating the flag” (in Colby 1999). Perhaps Guyton’s flags also suggest his desire to exercise his freedom of speech in the only arena that is still owned by Detroit’s public.

Guyton’s work can also be seen one block north of Heidelberg, on the 3700 block of Elba. No longer obscured by the previous installations, the painted

6. Bicycles and car parts scramble up a tree Non-Stop in front of The OJ House. (Photo by Wendy S. Walters)
back of an empty house is revealed—decorated with turquoise, lavender, and sky-blue fighter planes. At the corner of Mt. Elliot and Preston, two blocks north of the Project, a firebombed house, one of two charred structures still standing on that street, bears an indignant splotch of pink paint in polka-dot fashion. Signs from the city were placed on other vacant buildings to indicate that they were being watched for Halloween arson activity. One of the houses touting such a sign was already blackened by fire damage. At the corner of Preston and Ellery, an abandoned storefront where the Project hoped to put a welcoming center, also displays such a sign. There is little visible beauty in the streets surrounding the Project. Though some homes are assiduously tended to, one hulking, fire-blackened structure tends to diminish the look of the entire block. In spite of the prolific decay in the area, many of Guyton’s critics have chided the Project as an aesthetic abomination.

While Guyton’s artwork has been called hideous by some neighbors, urban scholars and art critics have compared it to the work of Marcel Duchamp, Robert Rauchenberg, Ed Kienholz, and David Hammons (Jackson 1990:8–9; Robertson 1997:52). The term “outsider artist” is nonetheless frequently used to account for Guyton’s lack of a fine arts degree. The deliberateness of his artistic vision is, however, evident in the repeated subjects and styles found on the immense artscape of Heidelberg. Perhaps because Guyton’s images are abstract, roughly defined, and highly symbolic, the Heidelberg Project has been known to elicit dismissal of his aesthetics. The most vocal opposition to the Project has come from people who believe it is not art. However, Guyton’s work embraces traditions within African American art. His use of collage and found objects can also be seen in the work of Romare Bearden, Benny Andrews, and Betye Saar. His blunt use of color is comparable to the work of Jacob Lawrence and Ben Thompson. The Project also embodies some of the ideas found in southern “bottle tree art,” which is derived from a Kongo tradition where trees are “garlanded with bottles, vessels, and other objects for pro-
tecting the household through the invocation of the dead” (Thompson 1983:142). Versions of bottle trees are commonly found in parts of Texas, South Carolina, Arkansas, Mississippi, and Alabama and are used to ward off or block out evil. The houses of the Heidelberg Project were likewise fashioned to block out the kind of evil that can come with economic hardship and the disillusionment that follows. While aspects of the Project invoke the dead, they more intentionally call forth the presence of those who are the future of this neighborhood—whether they are the children of Heidelberg or those who have not yet come to visit it is not clear. In either case, Guyton’s Project en-acts a vision of what a safe, peaceful, and harmonious community could be.

The demolitions at Heidelberg have been justified by citing the complaints from those who do not enjoy having the work of an obsessive artist in their midst. Detroit newspapers have played up this tension by featuring comments such as:

“It’s crap. It’s disgusting,” said Elba Street resident Cynthia Holloway. Her brother, Anthony Dicus, who lives on Heidelberg next to an abandoned house that was decorated by Guyton, said the art project has pro-
duced unwanted tourist traffic “24 hours a day, seven days a week.” “I’ve had people sitting on my porch that I didn’t know,” Dicus said. “We’re not saying that we don’t want (Guyton) to succeed as an artist. We’re saying it doesn’t belong here.” (Wowk 1997:S12)

Achievements of the Project, such as its status as the third-most popular tourist attraction in the city, have not impressed Guyton’s critics. Another rarely acknowledged benefit the Project has brought to the neighborhood is a reduction in crime. Since the Project’s inception, not a single serious incident has been committed on the project site. The Heidelberg Project brags that it has become a safe haven in the seventh precinct, the area of the city with the
third-highest serious crime rate.” These obvious accomplishments have not spared the artwork from a barrage of well-publicized criticism.

In 1996, current Mayor Dennis Archer responded to the Heidelberg Project neighbors’ complaints by ordering an investigation of possible health violations, encumbered traffic patterns, and other issues of concern. In February of 1998, Guyton determined the Project to be a success, citing the attention the Project’s neighbors received from the mayor and city council as a positive result, and he agreed to take it down (McConnell 1998:2A). He hoped that the city would help him locate another site for a planned jazz café and welcoming center, for which the Project had received a $47,500 state grant. There was even talk of installing a version of the Project near the city’s Cultural Center where the Detroit Institute of Arts, the Charles W. Wright Museum of African American History, the Detroit Science Center, and Wayne State University all reside. This pleased the Gratiot-McDougall United Community Development Corporation, which had feared that the Project and its accompanying controversy would deter investors from developing this area of the city’s Empowerment Zone. But by the summer of 1998, Guyton had changed his mind, citing the city’s failure to find an appropriate site for relocation. In early September of that year, the Detroit City Council ordered the Project to be removed, and Mayor Archer gave Guyton two weeks to take it down (Lyman and McConnell 1999). While the Project’s lawyers attempted to gain a restraining order to hold back city crews, supporters gathered on 21 September 1998 to block the demolition with their bodies. Guyton obtained a temporary restraining order a day later (The Heidelberg Project 1996c). However, the judge who issued that order, Claudia House Morcom, lost her bid for reelection in November, and on 4 February 1999, the writ was lifted. Crews arrived at the Project in less than an hour (Siwak 1999).

Even after this setback, the Heidelberg Project continues. Executive director of the Project, Jenene Whitfield, boasts: “We are down but by no means out! Thirty-five percent of the project still stands.” Guyton proclaims that “art will not die and Heidelberg refuses to not exist” (in The Heidelberg Project 1996d). Guyton’s statement suggests that he sees the Project as having a will of its own; that it is, in essence, prepared to demand its survival by withstanding not only the harsh elements of 12 Midwestern winters but also the tractors, dump trucks, and backhoes representing municipal disfavor. It is possible to infer that the Project’s “refusal to not exist” mirrors the neighborhood’s refusal to not exist. Clearly Guyton believes that the conditions that initially inspired the Project are still present on its surrounding streets, and this is a position that is difficult to dispute.” To prove to the city that there is a continuing need for the Project, Guyton is filling up the empty space the demolition crews left behind with new art.

Guyton’s persistence demands that as the city makes plans for a new Detroit, the many residential communities that have survived the lean years with little support from the city should not be forgotten, cut off, or excluded from a vision of the city’s future. The Project represents the refusal of those once-thriving communities to disappear house by house until only nameless, faceless plots of land remain.
One wonders, although the question has been asked by the Project’s supporters many times before, in a city that has had over 11,000 abandoned houses for the last 15 years, why do the houses on Heidelberg Street always receive priority status for demolition (McWhirter 1999)?

Though Mayor Archer has promised to seriously consider development opportunities for the Heidelberg area, little has resulted from its inclusion in the city’s Federal Empowerment Zone, designated as such in 1994. The prospect of development, however, brings up some additional concerns. If investment does come, will it be the kind that will maintain the integrity of the community while improving the quality of life for its residents? The answer is not clear; industrial development could mean the razing of the Heidelberg area. Detroit has had little guilt about demolishing entire historic neighborhoods for the sake of putting up large industrial buildings; General Motors’ Poletown plant is probably the most infamous example. The many “blank slates” around the city wait with bated breath for financial investment. But the reality of present-day Detroit means that most lots will sit undeveloped for years, possibly even decades. So there has to be something else that has inspired two mayors to support three separate demolitions of the Heidelberg Project, despite widespread public outcry and criticism from many of the city’s major news organizations, city residents, suburbanites, and out-of-town visitors (see Newman 1998; and DeRamus 1999).

For more than 14 years, Mayors Archer and Young have been largely responsible for the opposition to the Project. Their allegiance with a few disapproving Heidelberg Street residents has been focused on tearing down the Project. In many ways, the opposition to the Heidelberg Project appears to be the result of a classic conflict between a community’s desire to improve itself and an artist’s desire to express himself. Further investigation reveals that the Heidelberg Project was demolished because of the mayors’, not the neighbors’, discomfort with it. Young and Archer, though politically very different, both supported the razing of the Project no matter what the cost—to the city or their political approval ratings. In my estimation, there is one reason for their shared stance. It is the fact that the Project, more acutely than any of the city’s falling architecture, is an ostentatious and unapologetic reminder of the fact that Detroit has been unable to evolve in an organic fashion. The Project reminds everyone of Detroit’s “uniqueness” as a failed city. But while opponents to the Project have succeeded in dismantling specific structures, they have never succeeded in eradicating it altogether. I believe that it has not just been the legal boundaries of Guyton’s properties on Heidelberg Street that have protected the remaining works; it is the fact that so many other landscapes in the city, including the blocks surrounding the Project, tell similar stories. The current condition of Detroit proclaims the futility of destroying the Project while so many other potential “canvases” are within Guyton’s reach. Each time there is a demolition there is also the increased possibility that the Project will expand beyond its current boundaries.

We should take a moment to consider how the Project has portrayed Detroit’s history in order to assess what it predicts for the city’s future. Guyton’s art connects human experiences that are not often considered in relation to each other. An obvious example is the thematic link between The Oven and The Soles of the Most High. But instead of suggesting a comparison between the Holocaust and lynching that would allow the severity of both events to be weighed against each other, Guyton invites Heidelberg visitors to think of the human absences created by both events. An underlying theme in both works is the value of those who acknowledge this history, which includes the visitors to Heidelberg. As they walk up and down the block, they are forced to remember that such devastating acts of violence do not occur in
historical isolation. For visitors standing on Heidelberg Street, both sculptures almost beg the question: Now that you have been reminded of these crimes against humanity that were a result of apathy and neglect, will you fight apathy and neglect? On Heidelberg, history inspires survival—not just of the old houses, but of all the life that was once contained in them.

Guyton’s work also brings attention to the kinds of death—intellectual, spiritual, emotional, and physical—that can result from a failure to recognize the humanity of the people in neighborhoods like Heidelberg. Though there is exuberance in much of Guyton’s work, there is also a real sense of underlying violence. As has already been mentioned, broken objects can be found on each of the artworks. As Guyton’s creative vision raises these objects from junkyards and garbage dumps, they are infused with a new vitality and purpose. The mangled and torn state of many of the objects leaves an audience aware of the violence that once visited them. This underlying sense of violation is the emotional core of the Project; it is what the polka dots and painted, smiling faces attempt to assuage. Whether the violation has occurred as a result of racial, religious, gender, or economic prejudice is not essential—all have a hearty presence in the city’s past. Making art from things that are broken is a way of acknowledging this violence and moving on. Instead of being emblems of decimation, these objects become tactile reminders of community resurrection and survival.

Although the Heidelberg Project is less concerned with marking its objects as examples of African American history (in many cases that fact is obvious or easily presumed), it does make a priority of keeping a record of the history of the community. The much-marked artscape of Heidelberg Street testifies to the importance of recording history, although it focuses on a much more immediate sense of it. A Lot of Shoes symbolized the long wait of those in the unemployment lines, which was the way thousands of Detroiters spent their days during the long recession of the 1980s. The effects of unemployment were compounded by the loss of governmental social services. The work also reflected on the closing of state-supported mental hospitals in the 1980s and again in the early 1990s, which resulted in sudden increases in the city’s homeless and incarcerated populations. Although the history Guyton has recorded is not a triumphant one, it is extremely important to any residential neighborhood within the city.

Then there is The OJ House, still standing. The media’s fascination with the trial reinforced the idea of the violent African American male as a threat to white womanhood. A long-standing belief in that stereotype has had violent repercussions for African American Detroiters. Besides the inscriptions “OJ” and “LA” is the acronym “CNN” painted many times, which inspires reflection on the relationship between black masculine identity and media spectacle. Although the Project is not explicit in its opinion on the trial itself, the televised coverage of Simpson’s capture was akin to the kind of mob attacks that have historically pursued black men. A “pedestrian crossing” sign is affixed to the side of the house and has “OJ” written in small white letters as if to warn: “Beware of black men walking.” By highlighting this fear of black males, Guyton draws attention to a possible reason for the neglect and disregard of this community.

While Detroit city officials and corporate higher-ups are obsessed with demolishing evidence of Detroit’s recent hardships, Guyton pays attention to these difficulties by celebrating those who have survived them. But the Project is not only concerned with the past. Its colorful melee is also an enactment of a future filled with joy, peace, and prosperity. The Project portrays a brighter future for the neighborhood after its virtual “death.” Where houses once were stripped and abandoned, the intricate external adornment of the Project’s
houses has made them appear full of life. A street that once greeted few visitors now teems with the life of those souls whose shoes have brought them here. There are also the living visitors to Heidelberg who provide another kind of energy—in addition to the inconvenience—for this insular community.

With tourists, suburbanites, and city residents passing through the artscape, Heidelberg appears to be a thriving community. At times, the Project has the bustling feel of a commercial street, with people walking, strolling, and stopping to talk with each other. With each of Guyton’s new installations, the newest rendition of the Project grows denser. The thick layers of paint on fresh “faces in the hood” give the impression of increased populace. The bright colors on almost everything else suggest the burgeoning energy of spring.

The Seventh Street Environment, a 1967 performance in New York City that documented the self-consciousness of a Lower East Side neighborhood that was undergoing significant racial, economic, and social changes, offers a point of reference for this accomplishment. In Richard Schechner’s interview with Environment founder and artist Bud Wirtschafter, the various “stages” created by this performance are acknowledged:

One was the visiting area where people came down to the block—like you—because you knew the Environment was going on. The other was the block itself, the people who came downstairs to participate. And then there was that third audience, hanging from their windows, sitting on the fire escapes. (1968:139)

These stages are akin to the spaces the Heidelberg Project creates. There is the first space—where spectators, attracted to the Project by the hoopla and controversy, observe the complex relationship between Guyton and his neighbors. Second, there is a stage where those who are both an integral part of Heidelberg Street and the Project, such as the residents of The Numbers House, interact with and inform the performance. Finally, there is a stage that serves as a counterpoint to the spectacle the polka dot makes: the stage where those who live on Heidelberg Street conduct their lives independent of the Project. The Environment did, in much the same way that the Heidelberg Project does, transform a transitional, noncohesive group of people into a temporary “community” through performance, and, in the temporal space of that performance, become a resolute and unified neighborhood. As the Environment artists and residents recorded the experience of being a community through performances and on film, a “new” neighborhood was born. As a film shot of the Environment was projected onto sheets hanging on many of the neighborhood buildings, the Environment also became subject to historical interpretation. We might think of the Heidelberg Project as a comparable performance of history, one that allows a loosely constructed community to “focus in on itself” and record its “reactions [...] to its own self-image” (140).

While it makes sense that some of Guyton’s neighbors wish the Project would disappear because of all the inconveniences it causes, it is less clear why the city has been so opposed to it. Perhaps the controversy between the Project and the city of Detroit can be considered as a philosophical conflict between art and the state. Ngugi wa Thiong’o asserts that, “the war between art and the state is really a struggle between the power of performance in the arts and the performance of power by the state—in short, enactments of power” (1997:12). If the arts and the state are represented, in this case, by the Heidelberg Project and the city government, respectively, then it is possible that the Project’s previous and continued performances of recent history challenge the authority of the city in this localized environment. In the Heidelberg community, or in the performance space of the artscape, Guyton and the city government have
battled to attract the support of an audience—supporters of a future vision of Detroit.\textsuperscript{9} Ngūgĩ suggests that while the state performs power—in this case, through demolition—the power of the artist is located solely in the performance, which is the making and remaking of the Heidelberg neighborhood. While many articles about the Project have focused on the legitimacy of the city’s right to censor Guyton, Ngūgĩ\textsuperscript{5} reminds us that, in such matters, there is a greater issue at stake: “The main arena of the struggle is the performance space: its definition, delimitation, and regulation” (12). If this is true, then the conflict is located in the city’s unwillingness to relinquish the right to name a neighborhood as a performance site, to set the boundaries that constitute its space, and to assume control over what vision of community it represents.

In the case of the Heidelberg Project, it is important to think about the significance of the performance space and not just the right to representation. The Heidelberg Project is not a performance affected by a stage or even walls. It is not a self-contained field of internal relationships that allows for an exchange between actors, lights, and mise-en-scène. Second, aside from Guyton, and possibly the residents of The Numbers House, there is little consistency in the performers. The Project allows its “actors” to be both the changing population of the neighborhood and those who visit. This mobile “cast” evokes numerous external relationships that help to define the Project in relationship to other redevelopment initiatives within the city, urban development issues around the country, and public art issues around the world.

These indicate the reasons for having the Project in a genuine neighborhood.\textsuperscript{9} “The real politics of the performance may well lie in the field of its external relations; in its actual or potential conflictual engagement with all the other shrines of power, and in particular, with the forces that hold the keys to those shrines” (Ngūgĩ\textsuperscript{5} 1997:13). The shrines of power within the city of Detroit are markers such as Manoogian Mansion (the mayoral residence), City Hall, or the Wayne County Court Building. But power in Detroit is not located in these sites of civic authority. They alone cannot provide the vision and means for creating a new Detroit. The large corporations such as General Motors, Detroit Medical Center, Olympia Entertainment, DaimlerChrysler, Comerica Bank, and other businesses hold the keys to these shrines of power. But while it is obvious that the city must secure economic investments to support its regenesis, Guyton’s performance on Heidelberg Street generates a kind of longing in many residents that can’t be satisfied by the money of big business and industry. The Heidelberg Project is a plea to open up the entire city, not just those areas earmarked for strategic development. Instead of directing renovation efforts toward sections of downtown, Guyton proposes a greater, more inclusive vision of the city’s future—one that embraces regions that offer little to the corporations whose self-interests superceded the authority of the neighborhoods long ago:

The performance space of the artist stands for openness; that of the state, for confinement. Art breaks down barriers between peoples; the state erects them. Art arose out of the human struggle to break free from confinement. These confinements could be natural. But they can also be economic, political, social, and spiritual. Art yearns for a maximum of physical, social, and spiritual space for human action. The state tries to demarcate, limit, and control. (Ngūgĩ\textsuperscript{5} 1997:28)

The city curries the favor of its corporate residents. But maybe the city plays up to the corporations because the civic leaders have no vision of their own. Perhaps the amount of vacant land available has less to do with attracting investors than with a lack of imagination about how to re-create the city. Does Guyton’s
Heidelberg Project perform more optimism than the city can deal with? Does the Project threaten the city’s faltering control of all that empty space?

To this point, I offer the example of another maverick artwork realized on city property. John Beardsley cites an ark built by Kea Tawana in Newark, New Jersey, during the 1980s. Tawana constructed the large wooden ark on vacant, city-owned land in Newark’s Central Ward. Like the Heidelberg Project, Tawana’s ship was made of found objects and represented an obvious effort to rebuild a fractured community:

Tawana’s ark was an emblem of resilience and survival in desperate circumstances. But city officials wanted her gone. Though she offered her creation to the city as a community facility and museum of shipbuilding techniques, they made her move and dismantle the ark, citing it with many safety and zoning violations. (1999:9)

Ironically, the city of Newark claimed that safety and zoning violations made Tawana’s art unfit for the public. Yet instead of allowing her to repair the ark so that it met those criteria or to relocate it to another place where it would not be in violation, she was forced to tear it down. Perhaps the conflict between the city government and Tawana arose because the city did not appreciate the aesthetic attributes of Tawana’s ark, as is the case with Guyton’s Heidelberg Project. Beardsley suggests, however, that in both the cases of Tawana and Guyton, the real issue for the cities has been the vision of community the artworks promote. Although around the country, public arts programs have been known to be extremely successful in helping to unify and revitalize urban communities, Guyton’s and Tawana’s art were not welcomed as sites of positive change. Perhaps this was because the art effectively excluded the city from performing its power over the communities in which these works were situated.¹⁰

Guyton and Tawana both created “emblems of resurrection, of the capacity of individuals—arguably even of communities—to re-create themselves from ruins” (Beardsley 1999:9). Instead of waiting for the municipal authorities to change, Guyton and Tawana transformed their communities through art. They asserted vision as a material presence in the community, and their works sounded a call for other visions to be enacted on the landscape of the city.
Guyton has also given his vision materiality by painting his trademark polka dot on other residential and commercial sites throughout Detroit. Since negotiations with the City Council started to falter in 1998, the polka dot has begun appearing on empty buildings throughout the city. It is a symbolic reminder of how little effort it actually takes to start transforming a living environment. As there are numerous abandoned homes around the city, a lavender polka dot reclains the structure from invisibility. Whether on a burnt-out building, an old car, or broken playground equipment, the polka dot draws attention to the wasted object. On behalf of people in the neighborhoods, who are struggling to reinvent themselves, the polka dots pulsate, saying to city officials, “We can change this, why can’t you?” As you drive through Detroit, you can connect the dots. The borders of the community grow larger. Suddenly, there is evidence of a shared history in disparate parts of the city. Heidelberg Street appears to have stretched its boundaries to embrace other areas that also have been neglected.

As the city becomes plastered with polka dots and Guyton prepares for what may be another lengthy legal battle over the latest demolition, I wonder, what if he never gives up? What if his vision of the Heidelberg Project prevails? What if its disgruntled neighbors give in to the idea that they can change their neighborhood as simply as Guyton lobs polka dots—that they too can exercise their vision of the city’s future on the street canvas?

If we acknowledge that the Heidelberg neighborhood has been transformed through Guyton’s work, then we must recognize the significant relationship between self-representation and community survival. If we can imagine the Heidelberg Project to be a work that encompasses the moral and cultural values of the majority of the people in the neighborhood, then it becomes an example of community sovereignty. We might imagine that in spite of his critics, Guyton aspires to inspire a democratic vision of community empowerment. As an autonomous effort generated from within the community, the Heidelberg Project promotes the Detroit-style values of a “can do” vitality.

Postscript

I returned to Heidelberg, after living in Los Angeles for almost a year, on a bright, cloudless day, late in December 2000. The air was extremely cold and the snow squeaked under my tires. While Mt. Elliot and other main streets were plowed from highway I-94 all the way down to the city’s busier riverfront, Heidelberg Street received little attention. At the familiar Mt. Elliot entrance to Heidelberg Street, the Project’s welcome sign was noticeably absent. A lone sculpture crowned with a painted television set rose seven feet in the otherwise vacant lot. There were no crowds of curious admirers. Most of the faces in the hood were gone. The houses that still belonged to Guyton had not changed much, save for the repositioning and addition of a few freestanding works. But the lots across from The Dotty Wotty House were full of new works. Made from scrap wood, possibly salvaged from the demolition of some of Guyton’s other works, including The Shoe House, these were much rougher than the sculptures that once adorned the fields. Much of the ground was too deeply covered with snow to reveal if there was any new art underneath. The narrow street was vast, flat, and quiet except for the crunching of my tires in the narrow trenches of the untended roadway. The work that now occupied the landscape was made of objects that had been discarded and appeared to be ready to be thrown away again. The Project no longer exhibited elaborate artifice. The works that were there awaited disassembling.

Maybe it’s all over. Guyton has, after all, recently enjoyed more celebrated venues that have lauded his art and his instincts. In April of 2000, he created an
installation for the architecture school at Harvard. In August, he was invited to represent the U.S.A. in the State Department’s Art in Embassies Program.

Detroit, on the other hand, has not fared as well. In the spring of 2001, Mayor Archer, facing growing disapproval, announced that he was not seeking reelection. In the autumn of 2000, DaimlerChrysler announced job cuts and layoffs that sparked a familiar and foreboding feeling about the city’s future. A new Detroit is as elusive now as it ever was. What remains of Heidelberg embodies a stubbornness that is Detroit, unable to completely disassemble or make itself whole. The Project, both broken and rebuilding itself, lingers as the city waits for another “new” vision of Detroit to appear.

Notes

1. Guyton’s fascination with the canvas of Heidelberg goes back to his childhood. Born in Detroit in 1955, he was raised on Heidelberg Street along with his nine brothers and sisters. Staying in the city, he studied art education at the Franklin Adult Education Program, the prestigious Center for Creative Studies, Wayne Community College, and Marygrove College. He has been an inspector for the Ford Motor Company and a firefighter for the Detroit Fire Department, where he undoubtedly witnessed the frequency with which arson was committed on abandoned houses. In 1986, Guyton started the Project along with his then-wife, Karen, and grandfather, artist Sam Mackey. Since the Project began, Guyton’s work has been exhibited at the Detroit Artists’ Market; Ledis Flam Gallery, NY; Fotouhri Cramer Gallery, NY; The Detroit Institute of Arts; Cranbrook Museum, MI; ©POP! Gallery, MI; Glaskasten Edition & Verlag GMBH, Leonberg, Germany; and Site de la Creation, Begles, France; among others. Locally, Guyton has received awards such as the Spirit of Detroit in 1989, Michiganian of the Year in 1991, and Michigan Artist of the Year in 1992.

2. In 1993, Mayor Young said of the Project, “Most of those who thought it was art weren’t neighbors. They came from above 8 Mile Road. If they like it so well, build something next door to their own dwellings!” (in Miro 1993:90). Eight Mile Road is the northern border of the city of Detroit.

3. According to Ngô Tho Thiong’o, while the state performs power, in this case through repeated demolitions of the Project, the power of the artist is located solely in the performance—the making and remaking of the neighborhood. Ngô Tho Thiong’o suggests that what is at stake is control of the performance space and whose vision of community is entitled to be staged there (1997).

4. Previous discussions of initial authorship have dealt with an individual character’s ar-
5. Some communities such as Corktown (near the original Tiger Stadium), Boston Edison (close to the State Fair Grounds), Lafayette Park (adjacent to the tourist area of Greektown and close to downtown businesses), the University District (near the University of Detroit-Mercy), and Indian Village (near the Detroit River and the city’s largest park, Belle Isle) have managed to keep the decay of houses in their midst to a minimum—in part due to neighborhood organizations. Other areas such as Cass Corridor (once a thriving arts community adjacent to Wayne State University and the Cultural Center) and McDougall-Hunt (where Heidelberg Street is located) have suffered enormous losses in population and housing units (City of Detroit 1993:26).

6. Through Mayor Archer’s “Angel’s Night” initiative, members of the Detroit metropolitan community patrol the city’s streets for the nights that precede and immediately follow Halloween. Youth curfews have been imposed and are enforced by police.

7. According to current estimates, Detroit loses approximately 5,000 housing units each year to neglect and abandonment (McWhirter 1999). Previous estimates have shown the rate to be as high as 6,000 homes per year (Wyhe 1999:35). Although this statement was written in 1987, it is, unfortunately, still applicable today:

   In vast stretches of the city of Detroit, residential decay has prevailed. Entire streets have lost over half their houses to fires, abandonment, and demolition. After the loss of the first few houses, the process becomes a vicious circle. Remaining residents find that their homes are no longer marketable. They then abandon them, which leads to more blight and more abandonment. (Darden et al. 1987:182)

8. In *The New American Ghetto* (1995), Camilo José Vergara reveals the totality with which this building neglect has infected Detroit. The structure he believes best epitomizes the city’s profound decline is the vast and desolate Central Station. Its neoclassical style, which once represented the city’s wealth and aesthetic inclinations, is humbled by its more than 10 stories of broken windows and its fenced exterior. While the station’s interior still possesses some of its original grandeur, the time when social commotion was its heartbeat is long gone:

   I enter the station dwarfed by its enormous entrance and find myself dazzled, surrounded by patches of illumination and darkness. Returning to this cavernous space many times, I am always awed by its silence. […] Nothing is for sale in Detroit’s former station, and its interior is lit by the sun, the moon, and the occasional squatter’s fire. (1999:72)

   Standing on the bank of the Detroit River at the U.S./Canadian border, the station is a loud declaration to anyone coming across the Ambassador Bridge that Detroit is still far from the renaissance city that it aspired to become in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Built in 1913 by Warren and Wetmore, the designers of New York’s Grand Central Station, Detroit’s Central Station has been closed to the public for more than two decades. This hulking figure in the city’s skyline is also a favorite subject of local photographers, who have been known to sneak through holes in its fence for terrifying interior close-ups of the monstrous structure’s decay. The Central Station exemplifies the magnitude of building ruin found all over the city. In areas that were once prestigious addresses for lumber barons and piano makers, the tattered roofs of brick Victorian mansions appear to be wrestling with the branches of trees, which have grown right up through their centers. Such visions of the city are haunting, disquieting, and painfully familiar to Detroiter but often horrifying to new visitors to the city. The city lacks the financial means and developer interest to restore thousands of architectural gems, not to mention less elaborate vacant homes. In the meanwhile, billboards along the major highways and publicity mailings from the Detroit Institute of Arts proclaim: “It’s a great time in Detroit.” But this optimism is not as visible on those residential streets where abandoned houses outnumber occupied ones.

   During the 1980s, a group of local photographers:

   entered boarded-up, landmark buildings in Detroit to photograph the rotting interiors; the building owners had been receiving tax breaks for the
properties in exchange for their preservation, but in fact had only maintained the facades. They followed up their spy work by posting photo blowups of these interiors on the outsides of the buildings, stenciled over with the words “Demolished by Neglect.” (Maksymowicz 1992:155)

City officials, embarrassed by the artwork, promptly demolished many of these buildings, but Detroit’s Central Station still stands.

Unlike many other cities with recent financial difficulties, high crime, and a thriving drug economy—including Denver, Baltimore, and New Orleans—Detroit has failed to recognize the importance of historic preservation in rebuilding its economy (Gallagher 1999:44).

9. Some of the city’s “failures” and “embarrassments” might include: a significant loss of population; a floundering economy; a poor image, or worse, no image at all in the minds of people around the country; a struggling public school system; and other challenges described below.

10. Nondescript and empty plots of land have been left in its place:

Nowhere else in the country does demolition occur to clear sites downtown before new construction is planned, especially when there is already plenty of vacant land available. [...] There are currently at least eleven large cleared parcels where full-scale office or residential towers could be constructed within five blocks of Woodward Avenue, all south of Grand Circus Park. Each one of these parcels could accommodate a building almost as large as the Madden building at 150 W. Jefferson or larger (approximately eleven 600,000 sq. ft. structures). [...] All in all, over 7.6 million square feet of grade-A office or residential space could be constructed on these sites immediately. That is equivalent to nearly four GM-Renaissance Center World Headquarters buildings. These identified sites are vacant or have only small non-historic structures on them, and construction could begin on them almost immediately. (Richardson 1996:89)

Although a cursory drive through any area of Detroit will reveal massive parcels of land ready for development, the city’s enthusiasm for demolition has not diminished. Instead of attempting to sell what infrastructure already exists in the city, Detroit offers a selection of freshly hewn “blank slates” as a gesture perhaps, to help “unremember” those places where once wildness, chaos, and lawlessness reigned.

11. Detroit waged a public relations initiative to help bring the number of city residents to one million for the 2000 census count. Because it didn’t meet the mark, the city could now lose millions of dollars in federal funding.

12. Detroiters are proud of the fact that they have had an African American mayor since 1973 when Coleman A. Young was elected.

13. Union and worker relationships with the auto companies are no longer widely romanticized; thousands of layoffs during the recession of the late 1970s and 1980s ended the myth of job security. During this time, the automakers fled to the suburbs, taking with them white-collar workers; many were eventually bought out, laid off, or forced into early retirement during the late 1980s and early 1990s. The profound economic impact of the fall of the auto industry is the subject of many studies including Detroit, I Do Mind Dying by Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin (1998) and Poletown by Jeannie Wylie (1989). Although the auto industry was not the only industry in the city, its decline affected all aspects of life in the metropolitan area. Wylie cites some brief facts: In 1980, unemployment was at 15 percent as a result of more than 100,000 auto-related workers being out of a job (1989:29). Between 1970 and 1980, the number of tax returns filed by businesses in the city dropped by one-third; by 1980 the city had lost more than 25 percent of its tax-paying residents (30, 33). And in 1980, 690 police officers were laid off (33). In the wake of all this turmoil, the neighborhoods started to fall apart: “The city’s homes—and there was a time when Detroit boasted that it had the largest percentage of family-owned housing units in the country—fell increasingly into disrepair” (34–35).

14. On Saturday 24 October 1998 at 5:45 P.M., the value of demolition to the city’s public relations campaign was revealed in dramatic fashion as people from around the metropolitan area gathered downtown to watch the implosion of the once well-patronized department store, J.L. Hudson’s. Champagne toasts atop the Detroit Athletic Club and parties on the top floors of other buildings around the city reflected an area-wide feeling of optimism about the change to come. Crowds were thick around the perimeter of the demolition
site as police held people at a safe distance. The ABC, NBC, and Fox news affiliates broadcast simultaneous coverage of the mayoral fanfare leading up to the implosion as well as multi-camera shots of the building’s dusty demise. After standing at the corner of Woodward and Monroe Avenues for 77 years, the landmark department store was being removed to make way for a new office and shopping development. For generations, the 23-story department store had been the center of the downtown shopping area, much like Macy’s in New York or Marshall Field’s in Chicago. But for 15 years, it had been empty and abandoned. Then, in an instant, over 2,700 pounds of dynamite reduced it to a vast black cloud of soot and a pile of debris. Mayor Dennis Archer was quoted as saying, “Today we say goodbye to years of frustration. Let the future begin” (in DeHaven 1998).

15. The decline of many of Detroit’s residential neighborhoods did not happen suddenly or without warning. While city planners recognized the importance of neighborhood development alongside commercial development for some time, they did not have adequate resources to pursue both. In the meantime, dwindling resources within the city government rendered urban renewal efforts only moderately successful. Conflicting objectives added to the confusion:

Overall, urban renewal in Detroit involved administrative ineffectiveness, long delays, and painful relocation of former residents. The effort was supposed to stimulate the rise and expansion of crucial institutions and industries and the revitalization of residential neighborhoods. Urban renewal, however, allowed the city to make only limited progress in these areas. A part of the problem was a conflict of goals and means: Who was supposed to benefit from urban renewal? Although the city used the program to clear slums, the beneficiaries of the rebuilding process were not slum dwellers. (Darden et al. 1987:174)

16. In recognition of the dire conditions in some of the neighborhoods, the Detroit Planning Commission envisions its development priorities to include the elimination of neighborhood blight through support for neighborhoods and community-based, self-help organizations involved in construction, conservation, and rehabilitation efforts (City of Detroit 1999:12). Although the city encourages partnerships between nonprofits, community development corporations, businesses, and philanthropists, it does not acknowledge, sanction, or give support to initiatives that transpire solely on a neighborhood level. Currently, there is no official forum for city residents to articulate what their vision of the city is, or more specifically, what their neighborhoods should look like in the future. Likewise, the city has not encouraged Town Hall or citywide visioning meetings to discuss residents’ plans for their communities. Ironically, such meetings have been called to discuss issues such as the importation of casino gambling to the city, the reform of the Detroit School Board, financial crises in public works and education, the construction of a new baseball stadium, Devil’s Night arson, and the rash of schoolgirl rapes that began in 1999. These meetings have been well-attended and resulted in municipal action that was, at least, informed by resident opinion (if not influenced).

17. David Sheridan offers up Albert Michael Ward’s poem “If Grand River Were a River” as an example of a local artist’s work that has this transformational power:

Mt. Kilimanjaro bigger than/ the Fisher Building/ with snow like crystal,/ silver at its crest./ The sun sleeps there/ when the moon is round and full./ East or West of Woodward/ I am home./ If Grand River were a river,/ elephants could drink from it/ and I would wash my clothes/ among its stones. (1989:54)

If Grand River were a river and not a major street that runs northwest from the heart of the city to its western suburbs, then possibly Ward’s vision of Detroit might not seem to offer the city such a magical chance for transformation. The Fisher Building, the city’s penultimate pinnacle, is dwarfed by Mt. Kilimanjaro, which represents the awesome magnitude of the world man does not create (something unlikely to be celebrated in Detroit). Likewise elephants, potent with lumbering strength, tower over the speaker toiling at the river. He is made small by his task, and the natural world is easily sated by what the city provides. The images in Ward’s poem contrast with the clanging and smoky presence of large industry typically associated with Detroit. Of the poem, Sheridan writes: "It seems more accurate to say that the poem is a self-fulfilling speech act. The act of transforming the city through poetic imagination is itself the point, without reference to any further action” (1999:345).
Aesthetic comparisons can be easily made between Duchamp. While all of the artworks represented in plates...Jay has been a resident of Detroit since the late...

Guyton had a filed a lawsuit against the city for damages resulting from the loss of his...Guyton hopes to convert...

On the Project website...—...Aesthetic comparisons can be easily made between Duchamp’s “readymades,” (e.g., Chocolate Grinder, No. 1 [1913] and Bicycle Wheel [1913]), which were common manufactured objects that were given the status of art: “It was a tribute to the power of his wit and ironic intelligence that Duchamp was able to make publicly acceptable such outrageous appropriations of commonplace items from the cycle of used and disused products” (Hunter 1992:170). Rauchenberg’s “combine” paintings—which included elements of collage such as fabrics, newspaper clippings, comics, and other found materials—reflected his idea that: “Painting relates to both art and life. Neither can be made. (I try to act in the gap between the two)” (in Hunter 1992:301). Bed (1955), which was made of his sheets, pillow, and quilt when he was short on canvas, epitomized this belief. Eventually Rauchenberg’s work came to include “Coke bottles, stuffed animals, rubber tires, and miscellaneous deteriorating debris” (301)—so does Guyton’s.

In 1990 James E. Hart, former deputy director of the Detroit Council for the Arts was quoted as saying: “The only way Tyree is an ‘outsider’ is that he works outside” (in Carducci 1990:64). Indeed Guyton has been known to work out-of-doors while painting and installing sculpture, not only in Detroit but also in St. Paul, Minnesota, where he created The Shoe House, an off-site exhibit for a 1993 show at the Minnesota Museum of American Art. For this work, Guyton nailed thousands of shoes onto Tracy Moo’s St. Paul home (Minneapolis Star Tribune 1998:2A). Mayor Archer made it a point to dig up a pair of his old sneakers to donate to the Minnesota exhibit, which demonstrated Detroit’s schizophrenic relationship with Guyton once again (Stodghill 1997:4).

Although the term “outsider art” is generally used with much more caution than it was during the art world’s frenzy over it during early 1990s, its pejorative implications still need to be pointed out. In the late 1890s, the term referred to the art brut or “raw art” of the mentally insane. In the 1920s, artists such as Jean Dubuffet, Paul Klee, and Max Ernst imitated and innovated on the aesthetic ideas found in that work. In the term “outsider art” there is the implication that there is also an “insider art,” or art made within a canon and with regards to its established standards (Zolberg and Cherbo 1997:3). Another characteristic of outsider art has been described as “an oracular rapport with the unconscious and an unusually strong power of imagination and fantasy” (Johnson 1993:87). In essence, the imagination is given materiality through the work. Many artists who are called “outsider artists” are often contemporary folk artists who exercise technical innovation as an imperative to design. Many of those recently cel-
embraced as outsider artists—including Thornton Dial, Bill Traylor, Frank Maresca, Roger Rocco, and Sam Mackey—have also been called folk artists (Lovell 1993:50–52). In the Heidelberg Project, there is the assumption that the imagination can be made real and that is the strategy by which Guyton transforms the neighborhood environment.

28. According to the number of names listed in the Project’s guest book, visitors from over 85 countries have visited the site since its inception, and over 30 percent of its visitors come from within the city of Detroit (The Heidelberg Project 1996b).

29. The 1996 Detroit Police Department Report notes that out of 13 precincts in the city of Detroit, the seventh precinct had the third-highest rate of murders and assaults and the second-highest rate of robberies and burglaries (see McKinnon 1996).


31. Concern over the effect of abandoned houses on the general safety of residential neighborhoods is growing. Though the number of Devil’s Night arson incidents has decreased in recent years, firebombings of abandoned structures are still a frequent occurrence. In the fall of 1999, a barrage of early-morning sexual assaults on schoolgirls inside or behind abandoned houses reawakened residents’ concern over the dangers of such places.

32. According to Jerry Herron, there were over 15,000 abandoned houses still standing in 1989 (1993:200). Camilo José Vergara cites possibly the same informal survey that was conducted by the Detroit Free Press in 1989—reporters went block-to-block counting structures (1995:208). While the current estimate of the number of vacant houses is slightly lower, the city also has the responsibility of managing 47,000 to 50,000 vacant lots the city has acquired through foreclosures (McWhirter 1999).

33. Detroit’s Empowerment Zone weaves throughout and stretches across 18 square miles of the southern part of the city and includes six areas targeted for development. Federal funding for the zone occurs over 10 years and is paid in the form of tax breaks and social service grants. The zone is supposed to entice employers to the area, encourage worker training, and assist with local job placement. Although additional private financial investments in the zone have been steady, actual figures on the number of new businesses and filled positions are not yet available. Development within the zone has been uneven and overall benefits to the city are currently unclear (see Puls 1999).

34. Industrial development poses some concerns to residential communities because of the environmental conditions they create:

   In an urban setting such as Detroit, the factory and house are sometimes required or forced to be next door neighbors. This is not generally a desirable situation, but nonetheless it is one that cannot be ignored. Residents of nearby areas often complain about the odors, soot, noise, traffic congestion, or appearance of adjacent industrial facilities. (City of Detroit 1985:7–8)

   Taking this into account, one must ask how the Heidelberg Project’s traffic, noise, and appearance could be considered to be worse than having an industrial facility in the neighborhood?

35. In Hamtramck, a city within Detroit, social reformers, religious leaders, and activists joined together to try to prevent the construction of an auto assembly plant that was eventually built on top of a residential community. The neighborhood was primarily Polish American and African American and represented one of the best-integrated communities within the otherwise racially tense city. Mayor Coleman Young supported GM, believing that the city could afford to lose a neighborhood if it meant the possibility of more jobs. People were moved, one of the strongest Catholic churches in the city was razed, and the new plant opened in 1980. In the end, the state-of-the-art facility was a model of robotic assembly techniques, and the number of jobs that actually became available to city residents was significantly reduced from the original estimates. Strong downward trends for the entire auto industry resulted in severe layoffs at the Poletown plant just a few years after it opened. For an excellent account of these events, see Wylie (1989).

36. Another important fact must be taken in consideration when considering the opposition to the Project. To my knowledge, there have been no physical confrontations between those opposed to the Project and Guyton or visitors to this odd street. There have been no vigilante-style acts of dismantlement at the site. While arson continues to be a problem for the area, the numerous artworks at the Project have not burned under mysterious or malicious circumstances. In spite of the great controversy the Project has
engendered, it still commands a certain degree of respect from those who challenge its value vigorously. This suggests that perhaps more than anything, those opposed to the Project support only the formal undoing of the Project by city agencies.

37. By using the shoe as the common unit in both works, the connection between the two histories is apparent.

38. The “resurrection” of these objects acknowledges the death embodied in them.

39. This audience includes people from the city and its surrounding suburbs, but only in recent years has there been the possibility of finding common interests between the two areas. School desegregation battles during the 1970s and racial politics during the Coleman Young era (1974–1994) created a great rift between the mostly African American city and its mostly white suburbs. The main issue facing Mayor Young at the beginning of his tenure was racism perpetuated through the police department’s STRESS (Stop the Robberies, Enjoy Safe Streets) program and decoy system, which resulted in the deaths of 22 African Americans during its first two-and-a-half years (Boggs 1998:178). In 1971, the Detroit Police Department was killing civilians at a rate of 7.17 persons per 1,000 officers (Georgakas and Surkin 1998:168). Racist attitudes held by white suburbanites, even former residents, kept the city predominantly black as new white arrivals to the area were instructed not to move into Detroit (Darden et al. 1987:258). Polarization has also been exacerbated by the emergence and consolidation of black political power in the city during the last 25 years (259). Mayor Archer’s major challenge has been to reunite the city with its suburbs. Dire predictions about the future of the city outline a need for middle-income whites and blacks to return if it is to regain the tax base on which it so significantly relies.

40. The points of signification the Project addresses can be found within its mission statement:

The Heidelberg Project is an outdoor art environment in the heart of Detroit, a playground for the imagination, a bridge, a seed, and a beacon for the people of Heidelberg Street, the city of Detroit, and beyond. It is a demonstration of the power of creativity to transform all those whose lives it touches.

Its declaration of purpose attests:

The Heidelberg Project is a nonprofit community arts project organized to educate and bring about universal awareness and appreciation of oneself and the community. The site uses art in novel new ways as a means to halt the decline and despair of a broken and depressed African-American community. (The Heidelberg Project n.d.)

Note that neither the mission statement nor the declaration of purpose addresses issues of economic development.

41. There are many examples of public arts programs that have been successful in helping to stabilize and improve disadvantaged communities. Some examples include: the McArthur Park experiment in Los Angeles (1984–1987); the La Lucha Murals on New York’s Lower East Side (1985); and the Guadalupe Mural Project in Guadalupe, California (1990) (see Bingler 1992; Cockcroft 1989; Doss 1995). Each of these efforts was supported by community and municipal agencies and was successful in developing youth arts education programs as well as sparking increased community involvement in neighborhood improvement.

References


Black Public Sphere Collective, eds. 1995 The Black Public Sphere. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Carducci, Vincent  

Cattrell, Nicole, dir.  

City of Detroit  


Cockroft, Eva Sperling  

Colby, Joy Hakanson  

Darden, Joe T., et al.  

DeHaven, Judy  

DeRamus, Betty  

Doss, Erika  

Espinosa, Santiago  


Gallagher, John  

Georgakas, Dan, and Marvin Surkin  

The Heidelberg Project  


Herron, Jerry  

Hill, James G.  
Hunter, Sam

Jackson, Marion
1990  *Tyree Guyton.* Detroit, MI: Detroit Institute of Arts.

Johnson, Ken

Larsen, Ernest

Lovell, Amanda

Lyman, David, and Darci McConnell

Larsen, Ernest

Lovell, Amanda

Lyman, David, and Darci McConnell

Maksymowicz, Virginia

McConnell, Darci
1998  “Artist Agrees to End Heidelberg Project.” *Detroit Free Press,* 24 February:2A.

McKinnon, Isaiah

McWhirter, Cameron

Minneapolis Star Tribune
1998  “Q & A on the News.” 13 February:2A.

Miro, Marsha
1993  “For Grandpa: A New Beginning on Heidelberg Street.” *Detroit Free Press,* 30 July:1D, 9D.

Newman, Heather

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o

Puls, Mark

Richardson, D.

Robertson, Jean

Schechner, Richard

Sheridan, David
Sinclair, John
1990 “monk’s dream.” In Tyree Guyton. Detroit, MI: Detroit Institute of Arts.

Siwak, Greg
1999 Interview with author. Detroit, MI, 16 March.

Stodghill, Ron

Sussman, Alison Carb

Thompson, Robert Farris

Vergara, Camilo José

Ward, Albert Michael

Williams, Brett

Wowk, Mike

Wylie, Jeanie

Zolberg, Vera, and Joni Maya Cherbo, eds.

Wendy S. Walters received her MFA and PhD from the Department of English at Cornell University. She is a scholar, poet, lyricist, and librettist. Her research areas include emerging technologies, urban history, and African American theatre, music, performance, and literature. Walters teaches at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, CA.