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The Heidelberg Project — Detroit, Michigan

Tyree Guyton

First, let's talk about shoes.

As a kid in a broken family, Detroit artist Tyree Guyton wore old shoes. When the soles wore out, he had to mend them with cardboard. However, this was not the only association that opened his eyes to the iconic power of shoes.

His grandfather, Sam Mackey, was also an artist, and gave Guyton his first paintbrush. He also told Guyton stories of his ancestors who had been sold into slavery and never seen again. And he told him about lynchings from the trees.

"You couldn't see the people," Guyton remembers his grandfather saying. "But you could see the soles of their shoes."

Today such troubled meaning pervades "Soles of the Most High," one of the most powerful elements of the Heidelberg Project, Guyton's evolving environment of art installations on the street where he grew up and still lives. To make it, the artist threw hundreds of pairs of shoes into the branches, where they hang, symbols of the lynchings.

Once again, you can only see the soles.

New Life Amid Devastation

When Guyton was a child, Detroit burned; he still remembers the city on fire. Now, as the camera pans along streets of abandoned buildings and overgrown lots in *Come Unto Me*, an award-winning film by Nicole Cattell about the Heidelberg Project, he narrates: "It looks like a bomb was dropped . . . a reflection of the people. That's crazy, this is madness."

It was his grandfather, a commercial painter, who also encouraged Guyton to study art at the College for Creative Studies in Detroit. But afterwards, instead of moving to New York or Los Angeles, Guyton returned to Heidelberg Street.

Over the next five years, as neighbors watched in amazement, the street became a showplace for installations such as "Soles of the Most High." His artistic method was based on weird juxtapositions and transformations of found objects. Along with paint and imagination, he used discarded car hoods, barrels, chairs, sinks, clothing and dolls to decorate the houses, vacant lots, trees and street. He explained it as his way, as an artist, of reclaiming a neighborhood forgotten by civil society.

Guyton's work made powerful use of myth and symbol, building on traditions of African American art. But it did so in a way that often looked harsh and uncompromising. In particular, it targeted the many serviceable wood-frame houses that had been abandoned since Guyton's youth. Not only were these sites of drug dealing and prostitution, but they spoke of the forces of racism, neglect, and social



pathology that had overrun inner-city Detroit and many other once-viable urban neighborhoods.

Such confrontational work did not make him popular with certain community groups and local political leaders. In particular, in the early 1990s it pointed out the ineffectiveness of then-Mayor Coleman Young in stemming the tide of urban decay. One day in 1991, Young sent in the bulldozers. By the end of the week the houses and the installations they supported had been carted off to the dump.

Above: The impact of art on the lives of children has long been a concern of Guyton's Heidelberg Project. Photo by Larry Peplin.

Right: The Project makes use of all manner of discarded items to call attention to place. The tree at left is part of the work Guyton has called "Soles of the Most High." Photo by James R. Cliff.



Reborn, and Reborn Again

In a *Detroit Free Press* article in September 2003 Guyton acknowledged how the Heidelberg Project has been fueled by an underlying anger and determination to dramatize the unsupportable conditions of the city around him. But it is also intended to generate discussion and a voice for the community. Moreover, Guyton has repeatedly stressed its importance as a beacon of hope for local children — who he frequently recruits to help work on it.

After the 1991 demolition, these principles, and the untimely death of his grandfather, and sometime collaborator, Mackey, only strengthened Guyton's resolution, and he set about rebuilding the project in a newly barren landscape. In his own words, he set out to turn vacant lots into "lots of art." He also began his now-famous campaign of polka dots.

"Grandpa introduced the polka dots," Mr. Guyton says in *Come Unto Me*. First, Guyton brought in a 1955-era bus — the type Rosa Parks might have ridden — and decorated it with dots. Then he started polka-dotting abandoned houses throughout the neighborhood. The implied

challenge was obvious: How could the mayor's office tear down the Heidelberg Project while doing nothing about 30,000 abandoned houses throughout the city?

As might have been expected, the city (which technically owned the houses but was doing nothing about them) fought back. It brought a criminal case against Guyton for trespassing. But Guyton's lawyer successfully argued that polka dots were no different than the political advertising the city allowed on the buildings. As a result, polka-dotting has today become a staple strategy among activists city-wide, who joke that it is the surest way to get the city to demolish problem structures.

By the mid-1990s the art world was also beginning to take notice of Guyton's work. Not only were tourists flocking to his installations on Heidelberg Street, but he was being invited to contribute pieces to neighborhoods and shows in other cities.

By the mid-1990s a new mayor was also elected in Detroit. At first, Dennis Archer happily hailed Guyton as "Detroit's native son." He even contributed a pair of shoes to "Sole People," a commissioned project in St. Paul, Min-



nesota. Nevertheless, in 1999 when it came to protecting the Heidelberg Project from a second round of demolitions (this time ordered by two longtime foes on the city council), Archer remained silent.

Once again, the bulldozers and dump trucks returned. But, once again, the project has now been reborn.

“The project has now had three different metamorphoses, and each time it comes back stronger,” says Jenenne Whitfield, who now serves as executive director of the Heidelberg Project. Furthermore, she explains how the most recent addition — an archive, visiting-artist residence, and center for children’s art — also indicates a maturing of Guyton’s vision.

The present installation is being made by completely covering a building, previously devoted to the injustices of the O.J. Simpson prosecution, with pennies. According to the *Free Press*, this new work has even received the guarded approval of a previously opposed community group. Whitfield says she and Guyton are also hopeful about the commitment of a new mayor, Kwame Kilpatrick, to the Heidelberg Project.

Recently, Guyton has also turned his attention to international collaborations, and in October 2004 he was invited to Sydney, Australia, to play a major role in a project called “Singing for that Country.” An outdoor multimedia art event that took place in several city parks, it made use of several Heidelberg-inspired elements, including painted polka dots throughout the park and on donated shoes. As part of his contribution Guyton also encouraged children from Australia and the United States to paint their

shoes and include a note inside as part of an exhibit entitled “If my shoes could talk. . . .”

Conflict of Values

In reviewing the project, several jurors expressed concern with its impact on the lives of other residents of the area. Indeed, over the years some have made no secret of their belief that it is little more than a disturbing eyesore.

Several jurors questioned whether the titillation afforded the out-of-town visitor might be far different from the day-to-day experience of living in such a public art environment. But the jury was eventually won over by the provocative power of the work and by testimony of those such as Whitfield. She was a banker with a well-paying job when she first encountered the work.

“When I first drove down Heidelberg Street, I said, ‘What the hell is all this?’” At the time, Guyton was sitting on the curb. She remembers rolling down the window and asking him: “What would make you take polka dots and put it all over a house?”

“Why do commercial painters come and paint a house one color?” Guyton answered.

Above: Polka-dotting became an important strategy to call attention to the effect of abandoned buildings. According to statistics gathered in support of Guyton’s lawsuit against the city, the Heidelberg Street area has lost 71 percent of its housing since 1960. Photo courtesy of Heidelberg Project Archive.

Right: City officials have twice ordered in bulldozers and dump trucks to demolish the Heidelberg Project. But each time it has been reborn in new forms. Photo of 1999 demolition courtesy of Heidelberg Project Archive.



“Because it’s supposed to be one color,” she said.
“Is it?” he asked.

Soon after, Whitfield quit her job at the bank to become executive director of the project.

Clearly, this work is not only about what you see. It’s about the dialog it engenders. In this regard, Guyton uses the material world as a front to an underlying spiritual message.

The Heidelberg Project offers an alternative vision to young children in one of America’s most blighted urban areas; it broadens community awareness of the power of art; and it brings a new sense for important social realities to the consciousness of visitors.

Guyton’s work is art that makes a difference.

—*Jack Nasar and David Moffat*

JURY COMMENTS

NASAR I can tell you a little about the presentation separate from the movie. This has been a brilliant extension of art into the community. When he rebuilt the project [after 1991] he attracted 275,000 visitors a year. Now, West Philadelphia and other places around the world have picked up this idea. Also, in the movie, you can actually see him talking with people who say “you’re destroying the neighborhood.” But it turns out that afterwards some of these same people have come to appreciate it.

GRATZ He also makes the point that he’s not bothered by this because it has provoked them to talk. And it’s not just that he took all these found items from the dump and assembled them. Some of the individual artworks he has crafted could stand on their own.

TIMBERLAKE This is important because it cuts across grassroots politics, art, education, taking community action, pushing back against authority. Arts and Humanity in Philadelphia is a little like this, trying to take over abandoned buildings and regenerate the community. But, arguably, this does more for inner-city Detroit because it’s a provocation.

MISS It also bears out the argument that artists have another way of looking at things. They bring another kind of definition to place. It’s so wonderful to see this kind of interior life brought forward to the public domain.

SMITH You could get an army of professionals and a bucket-load of federal money and it wouldn’t be nearly as good.

GRATZ It celebrates the idea of one person making a difference . . . a community person changing the place in which he lives, and changing the perception of that place to the outside.

SMITH You go to places and hear people complaining that their city isn’t good, that if only they had the answer. “Oh, we’ve got to plan for this, but it’s never happened.” And this is the most hopeless place there is, and this guy just did it himself.

MISS But it’s important to recognize that this isn’t just an outside artist. He did go to art school. He’s taking what he learned there and coming back. People are never willing to give artists credit for being experts at something.

GRATZ As a tourist place it brings people into a reality they would never see anywhere else. They have to drive through the worst of urban America to see this. And so from the inside it is using art to articulate a common tradition. But it is also drawing people from outside to see an art object, and they are going out with a different view.

MISS Without imagination we’re doomed. That’s what defines us as human. It’s being capable of feeling our lives and our difficulties and expressing that in a potent way.

GRATZ Ironically, if I were a neighbor I would probably welcome all the people and attention. It’s a lot better than the attention they would get from the drug dealers and drive-by shooters.