

Difficult Geography: The Heidelberg Project by Mark Laliberte

Tyree Guyton's *Heidelberg Project* is an impressive and often difficult public environment that offers its visitors a grand spectacle: swarms of brightly coloured, painted polka dots meet tons of found/salvaged materials, applied directly to the surfaces of houses; car hoods used as industrial canvases, sporting pop-inspired faces and clustered in abandoned lots; grouped collections of household objects and abandoned toys, forced into abstract sculptural forms — all undertaken in an attempt to transform a decaying neighbourhood into an outdoor art arena worthy of being treated with pride and care. Built from junk over a twenty-year period, the project has weathered its share of political controversies, has proven resilient in the face of adversity, and has continued to transform & terraform its surroundings over time.

If you haven't been paying attention, here are a few things you need to know: the *Heidelberg Project* was started in 1986 by Guyton (b. 1955) with help from his grandfather, Sam Mackey. Located on Detroit's eastside — in an area sometimes referred to as "Black Bottom" — Heidelberg Street is Guyton's childhood neighbourhood, which, as the story goes, began to deteriorate after the 1967 Detroit riots. By the 1980s, it was in pretty sad shape: a scattering of occupied homes surrounded by damaged, sometimes burnt-out houses under city control and, although ready for demolition, largely ignored. Streets like this exist in strange patches throughout the city of Detroit; a block or two where things suddenly get bleak: crumbling houses with lawns covered with waist-high weeds, rubble and rubbish, with no people in sight. Hardcore, inner city neighbourhoods where people are afraid to walk, even in the daytime.

Guyton wanted something different for his block. With the drive and intuition of an artist at the beginning of something, he took to the streets, collecting materials from the trashcans and alleys of an aging city. Using the discards of life as a source of inspiration and creation, the *Heidelberg Project* was born.

In the early days, Guyton did not play by the rules, appropriating empty lots and abandoned houses without permission, absorbing them into his big picture. It was a ravenous approach, and the thing grew quickly. The constantly evolving work transformed this small bit of geography into something that people couldn't help but notice.

The art practice that Guyton has developed and nurtured since then is dually loved and hated. Heidelberg Street certainly has changed in mood and tone since his artwork became its defining feature: visitors now come out to enjoy the scene, making special trips into an area of the city that they might never enter ordinarily, and the project is a great attraction for neighbourhood children, who have always been encouraged to participate in its development — but not all of the neighbours have been happy with the end results or the predominantly suburban foot traffic. There have been many periods of local protest.

Guyton's project is recognized today as a key attraction for Detroit tourists interested in taking in something a little different, though the city has never embraced it as an official icon — indeed, they went so far as to demolish sections of the large-scale work on two different occasions, 1991 and 1999, when political pressures on the site were high. After the second demolition, Guyton and his supporters brought a civil lawsuit against the City of Detroit, wherein the Wayne County Circuit Court ruled that the *Heidelberg Project* was protected “political speech” under the 1st Amendment as an outdoor art environment.

As far as statistics go, the *Heidelberg Project* is said to attract close to 275,000 visitors a year, though to be



frank, I find this figure hard to believe. I've been to the site at least a dozen times over the years, and its a rare day to find more than a handful of other visitors wandering around on the block.

Growing up in the area, I've witnessed the project go through many different phases. As a teenager, I was attracted to the novelty of Guyton's peculiar environment, especially in the summertime. We would often go record shopping in Royal Oak, MI and if time permitted, we'd sometimes swing east and park it on Heidelberg Street. Tyree was often there, and most times he was friendly, though not always. As I recall, he was open to visitors coming to check out the state of the project, but was noticeably cautious of anyone entering his domain with a camera. With a sense of territoriality, Guyton would grill whomever he caught snapping pictures about their intentions; in retrospect, it is obvious that even early on he viewed

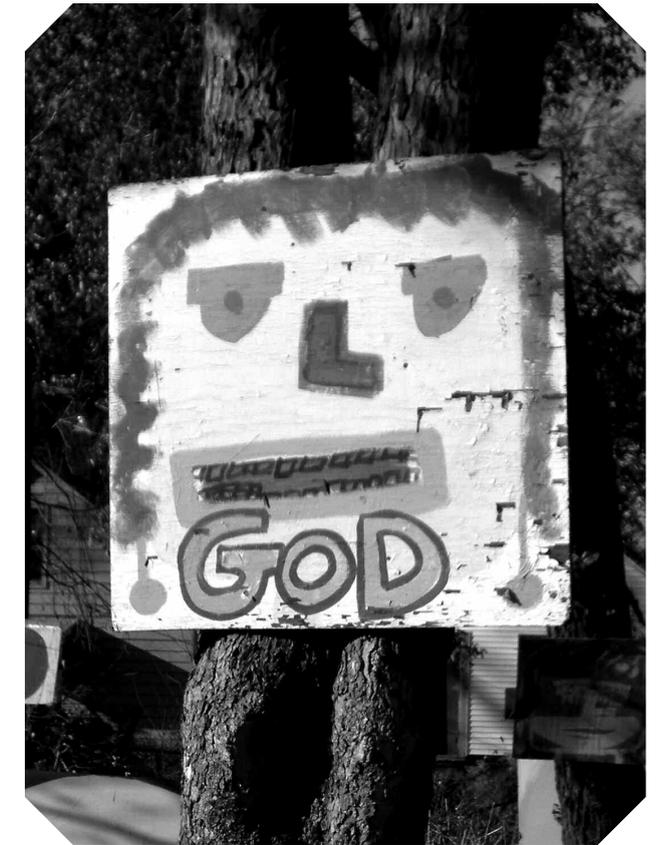
this work with an awareness of capital worth and a pride of creative ownership.

And why not? There is a joke in art school that anyone who picks up a camera attempting to make “art” for the first time inevitably heads for a graveyard with a roll of fresh film, attracted to the gothic possibility of all that granite. In Windsor/Detroit, a second option would certainly have been to head to the *Heidelberg Project* in search of capturing this same kind of atmospheric, urban surreal. Indeed, images of Guyton's work on Heidelberg Street have appeared in more than a few local exhibitions over the years, sometimes credited as documentation of the site, sometimes bearing no information about their source.

And in the early days, the project had a more ominous edge to it that was extremely seductive to the camera eye: more play with decay, countless works focused around dismembered mannequins and doll parts — a kind of dark core that reflected its hard beginnings. Today, you still see the occasional mannequin, and vast oceans of weathered stuffed animals remain, but for someone who has been continually watching, it's hard not to notice that the emphasis has certainly shifted.

The website that the organization, which has developed around the project, has maintained over the past few years does a poor job, in my opinion, of representing the wild roots of Guyton's project — its rebellious and difficult spirit — instead putting the focus on its current existence as a self-defined community service group. One of the key purposes they advocate today is their youth programming. The project seems to exist, at least on paper, primarily for the purpose of “providing hope and inspiration to local children through art and education programs and hands-on workshops.” Is this a long-term survival strategy for a project that has never seen its fair share of public funding, despite its ability to survive and thrive?

Current projects emphasize this youth-driven emphasis.



For “The House that Makes Sense”, which is a major effort still in the research and development stage, the outside of a current Guyton-house will be stripped of its artwork and covered in about 800,000 pennies, and the inside will be built up so that it can be used by kids to make and show their art — a literal community treasure. There's even an infomercial related to the project aimed at kids and their schools!

Tyree Guyton and current project director, Jenenne Whitfield, now give lectures and workshops around the country. These days, Guyton's CV resembles that of many other successful contemporary artists: he's well-travelled, with special projects taking him out of Detroit to places as far away as Australia. In a twenty year period, it cannot be disputed that the *Heidelberg Project* has transformed the geography it sits on, and it has also transformed the lives of those who surround it and service it. Things change. ⚡



... WANT TO KNOW MORE?

Look for **Connecting the Dots**, a very thorough hardcover publication about Tyree Guyton and the Heidelberg Project, released last year by the **Wayne State University Press** via their **Painted Turtle Book** imprint.

(ISBN-13: 978-0-8143-3320-4)

The 132-page book presents a range of insightful opinions about, and reflections on, Tyree Guyton's controversial life project. The eight essays included here consider the work from a number of different angles — including aesthetic, legal, personal and political — though, unfortunately, no one really tackles the project head-on singularly on its merits as a large-scale artwork situated on the contemporary world stage. It would have been nice to see an entire essay dedicated to analyzing Guyton's actions within the context of other large-scale outsider gestures strewn across America (and there seem to be many of them) or positioned within a creative, art historical context. In the text "Art or Eyesore?", John Beardsley gives this notion the briefest attention, citing a few examples of Outsider action, and thankfully mentioning German artist Kurt Schwitters, whose early 20th century collage-architectural Merzbau project in many ways



parallels Guyton's long-term undertaking. However, exploring this creative lineage deserves far more attention than it ever receives in this publication.

Despite this blind spot, **Connecting the Dots** nevertheless does an adequate job of fleshing out the history and circumstances that help define two decades of Guyton's practice, looking at it first and foremost from a community perspective. For those already familiar with the major arcs in the Heidelberg timeline, the most revealing text in the book certainly has to be Daniel S. Hoops "Defending the Heidelberg Project", which reveals the legal machinations that the project functions within — since 1988, it has enjoyed an existence as a nonprofit, tax-exempt, charitable foundation and now owns much of the land it sits upon.

The full-colour photographs included throughout this publication present a variety of site-specific images, including a spectacular bird's eye view of the Heidelberg block that makes the neighbourhood seem lush and green, despite its reality as an urban environment in constant struggle. ↘