

Detroit authorities force dismantling of art work

The last days of the Heidelberg Project

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Walking along blocks on the east side of Detroit, one sees the decay and devastation of poverty, closed factories, abandoned buildings. In 1986 on two blocks of this blighted area, artist Tyree Guyton began an art project to transform them into a 'living canvas.'

The city administration is seeking to dismantle the Heidelberg Project, named for the street on which it began. They have given the artist until August 24 to remove his art. While much of Guyton's work will still be there when the deadline passes--his supporters say that at least six more weeks of work will be required--these are the last days for viewing the innovative work.

Guyton's art uses old shoes, dolls, cars, televisions sets, and other common objects, all abandoned on the city's streets, collected, splashed with color and arranged to convey his message. His art is an art of protest, a statement of opposition to the terrible decay of the urban environment, as well as of sympathy for those afflicted.



Bus commemorating the 1955 Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott

He has painted houses, trees, and abandoned buildings with colorful polka dots to represent the unity of people of all color. Following Guyton's meeting with civil rights pioneer Rosa Parks at the Underground Railroad Museum in Canada, he found and decorated a school bus manufactured in 1955, the year of the Montgomery bus boycott.

A display of old shoes' soles was inspired by Guyton's grandfather's recollections of lynchings in the South. When his grandfather gazed up at the victims, 'all that could be seen were the soles of the shoes.'

Another display of shoes lining the sidewalk represents those standing in unemployment lines; an oven, the suffering of those who died in the Holocaust.

Not everything represents suffering and oppression. Scattered throughout the project are brightly colored faces painted on car hoods--the artist's pun as he populates the abandoned street with neighbors.



Polka dots decorate an occupied house on Heidelberg street.

A 37-year resident, her house decorated with polka dots, described the neighborhood before the project. 'There were prostitutes on the corner, the lot was filled with weeds and drug pushers,' she said. 'Tyree keeps the area clean. He cuts the weeds, which the city never did. He teaches the children about art.'

Politicians who presented Guyton awards when it suited their political purposes, like the Spirit of Detroit Award and the Michigan Governor's Arts Award, now call the art garbage.

Speaking to reporters for the WSWs, Tyree Guyton explained his motivation for the project: 'I'm going to challenge the system, challenge the government. Don't tell me it's an eyesore. Have those awards expired? They want to take it down because they don't believe in truth and they don't want to see. We educate the kids, they learn about art and meet people from all over the world. This project is working.'

'Look at that burned out building,' Guyton continued, as he walked over to the next street to a structure the city has not torn down. 'That's an eyesore. My solution was to decorate this street, take what was bad and make it good.'

Guyton created the project to make people think. The Heidelberg Project web site describes Guyton's intentions: 'He wants to activate thoughts and feelings inside of people about issues and problems that have been too long ignored, written off, put on hold, discarded and given up on.'

Obviously, this is something the city's political establishment doesn't want. Guyton's message definitely conflicts with their attempts to market Detroit to business as a 'world class city.' In 1991 the late Mayor Coleman Young first attacked the project by sending in city work crews to bulldoze four of its houses, destroying thousands of dollars worth of Guyton's original works.

That effort backfired, triggering protests from artists in many parts of the world and drawing such attention to Guyton that the Heidelberg Project became the third most popular tourist attraction in the city.

This time around the attack has been more systematic and effective, but less well advertised. In February the Detroit City Council set the August 24 deadline. Meanwhile thousands of abandoned structures remain throughout the city, unrepaired and undemolished, blights on the city which are ignored because, unlike the Heidelberg Project, they do not attract public attention.

As the deadline approached, the statements of city officials have become more hostile and more openly political. When the city council adjourned for a month in early August, without taking action on an appeal to extend the deadline, councilwoman Kay Everett declared, 'I'm not in favor of an extension. I want it gone. I'd put on a hard hat and drive the bulldozer myself if the project is still up when we come back from recess.'

When WSWS reporters visited the project, Guyton pointed to a campaign button left by Everett when she made an appearance on Heidelberg Street during the elections. 'See that button, see it,' he said. 'Kay Everett put that there herself.' What does she say now about the project? 'She says it's trash.'

'The Heidelberg Project fits the description of an

illegal dump site and will be handled in (that) manner,' public works Director Clyde D. Dowell wrote in a recent memo to Marsha Bruhn, director of the City Planning Commission.

Other city officials admit that the project is art but defend the demolition anyway. 'What he has done is art,' said councilwoman Sheila Cockrel, 'that spoke to realities at a time that it happened, and that has changed.'

A *Detroit Free Press* columnist commented after the council vote to set a deadline for destruction: 'It is not really its artistic merit--or lack of it--that has undone the Heidelberg Project. It is its politics.'

Workers have already packed up sculptures displayed on four streets near Heidelberg. The city has parked a dumpster nearby, ready to dispose of whatever remains after the deadline.

Information about the Heidelberg Project and its artist can be found at <http://www.heidelberg.org/>

A screening of Ann Arbor filmmaker Nicole Cattell's documentary, 'Come Unto Me: The Faces of Tyree Guyton,' is scheduled for the Detroit Institute of Arts on August 27 at 6 p.m. to benefit the project. The screening is free, but tickets are necessary. For information call 1-313-537-8037.



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