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Art to Bring About Change: The Work of Tyree Guyton

BY MELANIE L. BUFFINGTON

Recommended for grades 5-9

Public art takes many forms including commemorative sculptures, site-specific works, and collaborative murals. Additionally, public art can beautify an urban environment (Riley, 2005) or raise awareness of social issues in a manner similar to the AIDS quilt (Russell, 2004). Another possibility is that public works of art are a form of discourse and open conversations and dialogue. Such works of art can help communities work toward unity and empowerment (Hall, 1989; The Heidelberg Project, n.d.; Senie, 2006). As noted by Russell (2004) and Argiro (2004), studying public works of art can be an important part of art education. Tyree Guyton creates public art that is compelling, challenging, and ripe with possibilities for study in school.

Above: *Obstruction of Justice*, 1995-2001.
Adorned house and sculptures on Heidelberg Street.

About the Artist

Tyree Guyton, an African-American, was born in Detroit, Michigan in 1955. He notes that this was the same year that Rosa Parks sat down in the front rather than the back of a city bus, in an event that symbolized the start of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. Guyton grew up on Heidelberg Street, a residential neighborhood on Detroit's east side, which impacted him significantly throughout his life. As one of 10 children raised by a single mother, few family members were supportive of Guyton's dream to be an artist. When he was 8 years old, his grandfather, Sam Mackey, put a paintbrush in his grandson's hand. Guyton remembers that it felt like he was holding a magic wand. He credits his grandfather with encouraging his artistic endeavors and helping Guyton to see art as a way to bring about positive change (Thomas, 2000).

As a child, Guyton frequently visited the Detroit Institute of Arts with his grandfather. Another prominent childhood memory is the riots in Detroit in 1967. Guyton recalls thinking that the entire city was on fire (Cattell, 1999). After completing high school and time in the Army, and with encouragement from his grandfather, Tyree Guyton pursued his dream of being an artist. Guyton took night classes with a well-known Detroit artist, Charles McGee, at the College of Creative Studies. Guyton cites McGee's influence in helping him move to abstraction and begin working with found objects (Thomas, 2000).

Later, while working as an inspector at Ford Motor Company and a firefighter for the city of Detroit, Tyree Guyton painted in his free time. He developed the habit of cleaning the excess paint off his brushes by painting on an abandoned house on Heidelberg Street. Guyton claims that one day the house spoke to him. This inspired Guyton to continue painting the abandoned house and to start attaching objects to its exterior (Cattell, 1999). These actions led to the beginning of Guyton's best-known work, the Heidelberg Project; a large urban public artwork built on and around vacant lots and abandoned houses on Heidelberg Street.

Begun in 1986 with the help of his former wife Karen and his grandfather, Guyton created the Heidelberg Project. This vast artwork consists of numerous decorated and adorned houses, large outdoor sculptures, colorful polka dots painted on the street and throughout the neighborhood, trees filled with stuffed animals and sculptures, and countless other works made with found objects (Hedges, 1998). The name "Heidelberg Project" refers to the artworks on Heidelberg Street and throughout the neighborhood as well as the nonprofit organization that Guyton later created to further his community building efforts. A crucial aspect of the Heidelberg Project is the hope and inspiration it gives to people in the local community. Guyton conceives of his work as both the physical art objects and the ongoing arts-based community building and neighborhood revitalization projects (The Heidelberg Project, n.d.; Wilkerson, 1990).

An important aspect of Guyton's work is that it encourages people to talk about difficult issues including politics, racism, religion, poverty, homelessness, and consumption. According to Guyton, this work is about hope for the future, freedom, and working toward solutions to contemporary problems (The Heidelberg Project, n.d.). Guyton reflects, "The Heidelberg Project is very political. It not only speaks to politics, but also religion and life in general. I set out to

change the world and that change starts with me ... and by changing me, I'm changing the world" (<http://www.heidelberg.org/Pages/Artists/guyton/heidelberg.html>). In effect, Guyton believes that before solutions can be reached, conversations must be started.

This Instructional Resource uses Tyree Guyton's art to explore concepts of art, community, change, and renewal. It focuses on four of Guyton's works including parts of the Heidelberg Project and one of his mixed media pieces.

Objectives

As they engage with the lessons outlined here, students will:

- Understand that there are multiple interpretations of and reactions to works of art.
- Discuss how laws affect public works of art.
- Explain and defend their views of the Heidelberg Project or other public works of art.
- Create works of art using found objects that communicate their ideas about a contemporary subject.

Dotty Wotty House, 1993–2001

Tyree Guyton
House Sculpture
The Heidelberg Project

In 1991, the Heidelberg Project suffered the first of two major setbacks in the form of a partial demolition by the city of Detroit. Ironically, the city destroyed four of the vacant houses in the Heidelberg Project that Guyton had painted and adorned at a time when there were approximately 30,000 other vacant houses in Detroit (Cattell, 1999). Guyton was not deterred by the demolition and continued to construct the project by painting other abandoned houses and creating additional sculptures. As he rebuilt the artworks that the city destroyed, the polka-dot theme emerged. The *Dotty Wotty House* (right), a house Guyton began to paint and adorn after the initial destruction by the city, is the current home of Guyton's mother. Guyton credits two sources of inspiration for the polka dot theme: his grandfather's love of jellybeans and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s statement that, "We are all the same color on the inside" (The Heidelberg Project, n.d.). Tyree Guyton speaks of the visual pleasure of looking at the multi-colored candies in a jar. He uses polka dots throughout his work as a symbol of the many diverse people in our world.

In 1999, Detroit again demolished some of the works in the Heidelberg Project. Both times that the Project was partially destroyed, the local community was divided and actively fought for and against the destruction of the project. Supporters of the project note that the colors and vibrancy of Heidelberg Street are rays of hope in a blighted area of the city (Cattell, 1999). Other supporters note Guyton's work with local children through the many children's arts programs he coordinates. By contrast, in *Come Unto Me*, a video documentary about the Heidelberg Project, one resident says, "Art is not good when it is outside. Art belongs in a museum, caged in, in a museum" (Cattell, 1999). Other residents express similar feelings that the Project is not safe, that they do not understand it, and that many people who enjoy it live far away and do not have to see it every day.



Dotty Wotty House, 1993–2001.



Faces in the Hood. 1994–present.

Discussion

Show students images of the *Dotty Wotty House* and other views of Heidelberg Street. If possible, bring in photographs of public art from your local area. After students have seen images of the Heidelberg Project including the *Dotty Wotty House*, discuss the concept of public art and the viewpoints of the different people involved.

- Would you want to live on Heidelberg Street? Why or why not?
- Why do you think the city of Detroit chose to demolish the abandoned houses on Heidelberg Street when there were, and still are, tens of thousands of other abandoned houses throughout the city?
- Who should have the right to decide where it is appropriate to make a work of art, an individual, a neighborhood, a city, or an artist?
- Tyree Guyton plans to expand the Heidelberg Project to include a museum, more activities for children, and more artworks on the houses and in the neighborhood. If you were a resident of the area, would you support this expansion? Why or why not? What do you think about turning abandoned houses into artworks? Should the other neighbors have a say in what the Heidelberg Project looks like? What could Tyree Guyton do if some of the neighbors do not like what he is doing to the houses on the block?
- Though many people believe that Guyton's work is art, others feel that it is not. What is your view of his work? What are your personal criteria for determining if something is a work of art? If Guyton's work is not art, what would you change that would make it a work of art?

Soles of the Most High, 1993–present

Tyree Guyton
Tree sculpture
The Heidelberg Project

Tyree Guyton's grandfather was born in 1897 in the South and came to Detroit during the Great Migration that lasted from about 1910-1930. Guyton recalls his grandfather telling stories about his childhood, how his brother was sold into slavery, and his memories of seeing the bodies of lynched African-Americans hanging in trees. As a child, Guyton asked his grandfather about what he could see on the lynched people. His grandfather replied that all he could see was the soles of their shoes.

In *Soles of the Most High* (right), Guyton commemorates those who were lynched in the South. To create this piece, he collected discarded shoes and changed their meaning by placing them in the tree. Though some characterize him as an "outsider" artist, Guyton studied art and is aware of past artists whose work also challenged the limits of art, including Marcel Duchamp and Robert Rauschenberg. Like these artists, Guyton also pushes the definitions of art, how objects come to have meaning, and the meanings of objects (*The Heidelberg Project*, n.d.).



Soles of the Most High. 1993–present.



Move to the Rear.
1994–2000,
current view.



Artmaking Activity: Creating New Meanings

After seeing images of Guyton's work, including *Soles of the Most High*, students can work in groups of three or four, and brainstorm ideas for how they can take a discarded everyday object, change its meaning, and make it into a work of art that promotes a change—social, political, environmental, cultural, etc. Once the groups have come up with several ideas, they should make a series of thumbnail sketches. Ask groups to share their ideas with the class and keep a list of the students' ideas on the board. Students can use one of the ideas generated by the class, or come up with a new idea, for a sculpture that involves changing the meaning of a ready-made object. After creating their sculptures, have students write a descriptive statement explaining their sculpture and how they changed the meaning of the original object.

Move to the Rear, 1994–2000

Tyree Guyton
Bus sculpture
The Heidelberg Project

A year after meeting Rosa Parks in 1994, Tyree Guyton dreamed that he would make an artwork with a bus. Just one week later, the Heidelberg Project received a donation of a 1955 passenger bus. When explaining *Move to the Rear*, Guyton mentions his desire to say something about Rosa Parks and to pay tribute to what she did to further the Civil Rights Movement (Cattell, 1999). During the next few years, Guyton painted and attached objects to the bus. Again, Guyton used polka dots to comment on the diversity in our world.

After Guyton completed the bus, it suffered a few tumultuous years. The city of Detroit attempted to tow it during the 1999 partial destruction of the Heidelberg Project. The bus was given temporary shelter at a local ice rink until it could be relocated to a lot owned by the Heidelberg Project. In 2000, the city again tried to tow the bus from private property, but was deterred by a restraining order. In 2001, the bus was stolen and later recovered by the FBI. Currently,

the bus is part of the Heidelberg Project and is located a few blocks from Heidelberg Street. According to Tyree Guyton, since the death of Ms. Parks on October 25, 2005, people have stripped many parts off the bus, perhaps as souvenirs of this important woman (Personal Communication, May 16, 2006). Images of what the bus currently looks like are presented here. Compare these images with those online at <http://www.heidelberg.org/> depicting the bus as Guyton created it.

Discussion

Working in small groups, have students discuss these questions and share their ideas with the class:

- Who has influenced your life?
- How could you use your art to show others how this person has influenced you?
- What might you make to commemorate or pay tribute to these people?
- Where would your artwork be placed to heighten awareness and to initiate discussions about how this person influenced you?

Calling All Cars, 2002

Tyree Guyton
Mixed media
84 inches x 38 inches
Collection of the artist

In addition to the Heidelberg Project, Guyton creates paintings and sculptures that often relate to his life. In describing *Calling All Cars*, Guyton states that he called the police because of a situation on Heidelberg Street. He was told that the police did not have enough officers to respond. Guyton also explains that he made *Calling All Cars* cartoon-like because it was almost silly to even try to call the police to help the citizens on his street (*Tyree Guyton: An American Show*, 2006). In this work, Guyton is also commenting that individuals must empower themselves to make changes. The backward



Calling All Cars. 2002.

American flag behind the police car may be a further reference to how the lack of police to care for the residents of the city symbolizes the opposite of what people are told to expect from their government.

Questions for Discussion

- Why might an artist comment on events from his or her local environment?
- What artistic techniques does Tyree Guyton use to heighten the meaning of his artwork?
- What events from your local environment would you like to make a commentary about through art?

Artmaking Activity

As a class, generate a list of local events that students would like to make a commentary about through art. Once students have an idea for their artwork, have them consider how their artistic style can heighten their message. After making thumbnail sketches and discussing their artistic intent, allow students to select from a few materials to find the ones that will best communicate their message. While students work on their projects, have them stop periodically and record their thoughts in their sketchbook or journal. When the students finish, have them review what they wrote during the artmaking process. Based upon these notes, have students write a statement about the meaning of their work, the successful aspects of it, what they would change if they could, and how they used a particular art technique to further the meaning of their work.

Assessment

The teacher should assess the students during the lessons by observing their participation in discussions, artmaking, and other activities. The teacher should observe how students react to opposing viewpoints and if they are able to understand that multiple, possibly conflicting, interpretations of artworks exist. Additionally, the teacher should use a rubric to assess the students' artworks. The assessment criteria could include: the use of materials and techniques to communicate the students' ideas, the visual communication of the meaning of the artworks, and how an aspect of change was incorporated into the artwork. The teacher will also assess the students' written statements about their artworks for content and clarity. This combination of formative and summative assessments will provide the student and teacher with substantive feedback about these lessons.

Conclusion

Tyree Guyton is motivated by his desire to change the world, starting with himself and his neighborhood. With the Heidelberg Project and other artworks, Guyton challenges viewers to think about the status quo, the situation in blighted areas, what art can do to change the world, and how one person can make a difference. An ancillary but important idea is the relationship of public works of art to the public and local governments. As students learn more about

the ways in which governments function, relating this information to a real situation with a work of contemporary art is an excellent way to bring these ideas to life. The artmaking activities and discussions explained in this Instructional Resource encourage students to create works of art from found objects, to expand their notions of art, and to see art as a vehicle for positive change.

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ENDNOTE

- ¹The term "outsider artists" refers to artists who are not trained in a formal manner and who often do not participate with the art world.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Both Jenenne Whitfield and Tyree Guyton kindly answered questions and spent time with me to help with the writing of this article. If not for their time and willingness to help, this Instructional Resource would not have been possible.