PLAYING THE CITY

The Heidelberg Project in Detroit

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Dieser Artikel widmet sich dem Heidelberg Project, einer seit 1986 von Tyree Guyton in einer vornehmlich afroamerikanischen Gegend in Detroit angesiedelten Freilicht-Installation aus Fundstücken, verlassenen Häusern und leeren Grundstücken. Das Heidelberg Project ist ein prominentes Beispiel für das Spiel in und mit der Stadt; es ist ein Versuch, eine trostlose Gegend in einen kreativen Ort zu verwandeln, der sich dominanten Vorstellungen des städtischen Verfalls und urbaner Desillusion widersetzt. Der Artikel nutzt verschiedene Ansätze aus der Spieltheorie – u.a. aus Huizingas *Homo Ludens*, Neumann und Morgensterns *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior* und Sutton-Smiths *Ambiguity of Play* – um zu belegen, dass die im Heidelberg Project realisierte spielerische Transformation weggeworfener Gegenstände des alltäglichen Lebens in kulturell signifikante Artefakte auf eine Umdeutung weit verbreiteter Diskurse über das Scheitern der postindustriellen amerikanischen Stadt abzielt.

ABSTRACT

This article reads the Heidelberg Project, an outdoor art installation created from found objects, abandoned houses, and empty lots in a primarily African American neighborhood in Detroit that was started by artist Tyree Guyton in 1986, as a prominent example of playing in and with the city: as an attempt to transform a bleak environment into a creative space that challenges dominant conceptions of urban decay and disillusion. The article uses various approaches from play theory – drawn, among others, from Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*, von Neumann and Morgenstern's *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior*, and Sutton-Smith's *Ambiguity of Play* – to suggest that the project's playful transformation of castoff everyday items into culturally meaningful artifacts aims to redefine popular discourses about the failing American postindustrial city.

1. MAGICAL PATHS, IMPROVISING PLAYGROUNDS

It's hard to fathom if you haven't been there. And even if you have, it might have already changed its appearance because it is a work in constant progress, always evolving, always changing form. When you encounter this massive and multifaceted artwork, you will most likely be overwhelmed by its scale and the ways in which it completely envelops its environment – houses, trees, the street –

with found objects: castoff items from daily life, such as stuffed animals, vacuum cleaners, shoes, and TVs, as well as other kinds of »urban detritus,«[1] such as street signs, car hoods, and old window frames. Variously described as »giant works of assemblage art« and a »one-man adaptive reuse program,«[2] an »interactive sculpture park«[3] and a provocative example of »outsider art,«[4] a »fantasyland of twentieth-century detritus,«[5] a place of »multisensual visual, aural, and tactile stimulation,«[6] and a »cacophonous outpouring of colors, shapes, and forms and surprising juxtapositions of discarded objects,«[7] Tyree Guyton's Heidelberg Project is truly a sight to behold. It is perhaps »Detroit's most acclaimed – and most maligned – installation of art.«[8]

And yet, it is more than that. As Jerry Herron suggests in his introduction to *Connecting the Dots: Tyree Guyton's Heidelberg Project*, »what you see is not all of the project;«[9] as Richard Marback notes, the Heidelberg Project is »[m]ore than the sum of its material parts.«[10] Indeed, the Heidelberg Project you see when you visit the site is only the physical manifestation of its originator Tyree Guyton's artistic vision, his »mission to change [his] environment« through art and to »tell […] a story – my story, your story – about life and what I see in the world.«[11] Since 1986, the Heidelberg Project has been »an example of place making […] where meaningfulness is achieved through multiple objects, actions, and discourses« as well as »a physical space that exerts force on those discourses.«[12] As a form of neighborhood assemblage art that draws inspiration from a range of sources, including street art (especially graffiti), African American folk art, objet trouvé, and Pop Art, the Heidelberg Project has served, and continues to do so, a

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1   Stryker: »New Tyree Guyton Exhibit Explodes with Optimism.«

2   Beardsley: »Art or Eyesore,« 40.

3   Allen: »Arson Investigators on Scene after Heidelberg Project's ›Doll House‹ Burns.«

4   Wheaton: »Heidelberg and the City,« 81.

5   Kadogo: »Heidelberg Art and About,« 102.

6   Jackson: »Trickster in the City,« 35.

7   Ibid, 24.

8   Wasacz/Krieger: »Heidelberg Turns 21.« My views about the Heidelberg Project have been shaped by my personal impression of the project and through my reading of the available secondary literature. I visited the project twice, for the first time in the summer of 2002, and then again in the summer of 2011. I want to thank Sara Talpos for introducing me to the project. I also thank the members of the Literatur- und kulturwissenschaftliches Kolloquium at the University of Siegen for their critical feedback and many useful suggestions, as well as Lukas Etter for his comments.

9   Herron: *Connecting the Dots*, 1.

10   Marback: »Speaking of the City and Literacies of Place Making in Composition Studies,« 148.

11   Guyton: »From the Artist,« vi, vii.

12   Marback, 147-48.

crucial function for negotiations of Detroit as a city in decline, indeed as perhaps the paradigmatic case of American postindustrial urban failure.[13]

Located in Detroit's East Side in a neighborhood predominantly inhabited by low-income African Americans and characterized by a high density of abandoned homes, the Heidelberg Project constitutes »a microcosm of managing change that is forced upon you.«[14] The project receives the name from its location, Heidelberg Street, a street name that foregrounds the area's changing ethnic makeup from a traditionally heavily German to an African American neighborhood. This »street [turned] into a project«[15] seeks to reconceive and reconstruct the neighborhood's status as an urban near-wasteland into what Jenenne Whitfield, the executive director of the Heidelberg Foundation, describes as an »outdoor art environment«[16] that comes nothing short of being »a magical place.«[17] It is this view of the Heidelberg Project as a magical place, a view that Guyton himself has often encouraged and that has seeped into the popular and academic discourses about the project, that resides at the center of the following investigation.[18]

I am particularly interested in the nexus between the alleged magic of this long-term art project and the notion of playing the city: of the Heidelberg Project as a powerful example of the playful urban arts evoked in the title of this special issue. Surprisingly, the terms play and playfulness seldom enter the public discourse about the Heidelberg Project.[19] Marion E. Jackson, for instance, characterizes the first forays into remaking the run-down street into an assemblage of castoff items by Guyton, his grandfather Sam Mackey, and then-wife Karen in the 1980s as »creat[ing] magical paths of crushed rock […] and improvi[sing] playgrounds,«[20] while *Detroit Free Press* writer Mark Stryker calls the project »two blocks of reclaimed abandoned homes […] turned into a joyous urban playground of wit and whimsy with paint, urban detritus and [Guyton's] signature

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13   Walters: »Turning the Neighborhood Inside Out,« 78.

14   Gabriel: »Tyree Guyton Has Coined a New Word.«

15   Marback, 149.

16   Whitfield: »A Letter from Jenenne Whitfield Executive Director.«

17   Whitfield: »Inside View,« 109.

18   Cf. Guyton's recollection of his childhood epiphany that his art has »revealed to me […] true magic beyond my human intellect« (»From the Artist,« vi) and that beginning to paint when he was nine years old »was like magic« (qtd. in Shine, 16). Hodges maintains that the Heidelberg »project works its most remarkable […] magic, in its uncanny ability to melt suburban apprehension about down-at-the-heels black neighborhoods« (59). See also Shapiro and Brantley-Newton's children's book *Magic Trash: A Story of Tyree Guyton and His Art.*

19   The term does appear in contemporary discussions of urban »protest events« that use »spatial tactics,« »playful maneuvers,« Situationist practices, and a generally carnivalesque approach as means of contesting public policies (Hind). Hind discusses anti-globalization and anti-capitalist protests in Seattle (1999), Prague (2000), and other places in these terms.

20   Jackson, 26.

polka dot motif.«[21] Magical paths and joyous playgrounds readily suggest a notion of play, or playfulness, as they reference a realm of childhood (painting on pavement) and a mode of child-like creation unbound by conventional rules and decorum (painting polka dots on the walls and roofs of buildings). Perhaps not surprisingly, then, Linda McLean, author of the picture book *Heidelberg Project: A Street of Dreams*, states that she »saw a children's book in this place.«[22] Indeed, Guyton attributes the polka dot-motif to his grandfather's love of jellybeans, and thus to candy we would usually associate with children. Moreover, Mackey's encouragement to the young Guyton to »paint the world«[23] evokes a sense of child-like innocence and expectation. At the same time, however, the polka dots connect such youthful innocence and expectation with the racial antagonisms that Guyton witnessed as he was growing up on Heidelberg Street – Guyton explicitly connects the dots and jellybeans with the struggle for civil rights, evoking Martin Luther King Jr.'s sentiment that »[w]e are all the same color on the inside.«[24] Yet the question remains why this motif and the use of discarded everyday items (often viewed as trash) as a three-dimensional canvas would unfold a specific magic that can be usefully conceived through conceptions of play and playfulness.[25]

2. PLAYING THE CITY

I want to begin to answer this question by connecting Jackson's phrases »creat[ing] magical paths« and »improv[ising] play-grounds«[26] with Johan Huizinga's observations about what he calls the »magic circle« in his classic study *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*:

> All play moves and has its being within a play-ground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course. Just as there is no formal difference between play and ritual, so the »consecrated spot« cannot be formally distinguished from the play-ground. The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are

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21 Stryker.

22 McLean: *Heidelberg Project*, v.

23 Guyton, vi.

24 Qtd. in Buffington: »Art to Bring about Change,« 26.

25 Guyton frequently describes the whole neighborhood around Heidelberg Street as his canvas, such as when he speaks of his creative transformation of »the detritus, or discards,« as a means of »giv[ing] life back to the canvas« (»From the Artist,« vi). Critics have embraced this term as well (Walters, 68).

26 Jackson, 26.

temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart.[27]

As should be obvious from this quotation, the magic circle is not a full-fledged theoretical concept for Huizinga but only one among many places that can become a playground, defined as a temporally limited world of play within the larger world of everyday life.[28] Nonetheless, the notion of the magic circle can serve as an entry point for my discussion of the Heidelberg Project as a prominent example of playing the city. For one, it resonates with the project's mission to turn the otherwise bleak ordinariness of a run-down neighborhood into a temporary world of magic: into an »act apart« that is grounded in a specific materiality and locale but also communicates specific ideas and »ideals« about urban life. This act apart may not make the ordinary world disappear. Many visitors will eventually leave the project to resume their regular lives, and not all of the Heidelberg Street residents are necessarily better off economically because of the project, even though the case can be made that the project has had a positive influence on the development of the neighborhood.[29] But Andrew Herscher has a point when he discerns a »shift [of] attention« away from the Heidelberg Project as merely an *art* installation to its »status as [an] *urban intervention* […] that assume[s] a certain urban condition and propose[s] a certain urban transformation.«[30]

Huizinga's point that any place can potentially function as a playground, as a magic circle that players may enter in order to enjoy the temporary transformation from everyday life experience into a play experience, resonates with the Heidelberg Project. Consider, for instance, the fact that this formerly dreary street, lined with abandoned houses and neglected by former residents, has evolved into an excessively colorful and vibrant space, transitioning from an urban problem zone into a space to which thousands of visitors from all over the world flock each year. Moreover, we certainly encounter a space »within which special rules obtain,« a place where ostensibly useless castoff domestic items are displayed on the outside of houses and gain new value as part of Guyton's art installation, as well as a place that may be »hallowed«[31] precisely because it suspends conventional logic and offers itself as »a sacred battleground« for competing ideas

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27   Huizinga: *Homo Ludens*, 10.

28   For a more elaborate treatment of the magic circle, see Salen and Zimmerman, *Rules of Play*. An alternative to the magic circle would be to conceive of the Heidelberg Project as a heterotopian space in the Foucauldian sense.

29   The benefits and drawbacks of the Heidelberg Project for the neighborhood have been debated for almost as long as the project exists. Initially, many residents objected to the display of found items, which many deemed to be trash, as well as to the growing stream of visitors, often from affluent suburban areas. For coverage of this debate, see Beardsley; Hodges; Walters.

30   Herscher: »Detroit Art City,« 67-68.

31   Huizinga, 10.

about the city.[32] However, the project is not so much »isolated« and »hedged round« as it is loosely framed by permeable borders between the artwork and the surrounding streets and properties. Bradley L. Taylor rightly notes that it is »difficult […] to distinguish where the Project proper begins and ends« because there is »no entrance point, no visitor center, no way-finding materials, no suggested route, no exhibit labels or other didactic materials.«[33] The project seeps out into the neighborhood at large, absenting clear demarcation lines between itself and its surroundings, serving as a nexus, or node, that draws attention to the failure of politicians and city planners to sustain a livable environment for Detroit's underprivileged citizens. As such, it also invites visitors to enter this playground and find personally and perhaps politically meaningful ways of navigating both its material manifestations (its signifiers, so to speak) and its conceptual, indeed spiritual, implications (its signifieds).

Thus, the Heidelberg Project foregrounds its double dimension as a street subject to urban policies and municipal regulations and as a hallowed space, a potential magic circle, an act apart from its dismal surroundings as a playground for the artistic imagination. It does so by collecting, arranging, and displaying everyday items thrown out or abandoned by those who left the city in search for a better life, transforming and reframing the items from meaningless trash into meaningful remnants of a past that many would rather forget.[34] Following Michael Thompson's »rubbish theory,« we may note here that Guyton's project transposes originally transient objects, for instance toys, shoes, or television sets, into durable objects, (re)moving them from discarded object-state (and thus trash, or rubbish) to the realm of regarded (or displayed) object-state and thereby enacts a transvaluation of the surrounding community that no longer appears as a social outcast but regains a sense of social worth. Of course, many of the Heidelberg Project's installations are only durable in a limited sense, being exposed to the weather and

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32 Whitfield, »A Letter«; cf. Guyton's statements about the suspension of logic as a prerequisite for the creation of his art: »There was nothing logical about the Heidelberg project«; »I'm making lemonade with no lemons«; »Two plus two equals eight« (*Annual Report* 2013/14). I cannot go into detail about Guyton religious rhetoric, which appears in statements such as, »I believe that I was called by the Heavenly Father to go beyond and explore the unseen« (»From the Artist,« vi), and in his characterization of his childhood decision to »paint the world« as a »divine vision« (qtd. in Wheaton, 72). Yet I do want to point out that such statements underscore a self-understanding of the Heidelberg Project as a hallowed spot. Cf. also Guyton's recollection of the moment in which he first conceived of the project: »I had a vision, a greater power talked to me […]. I stepped out of that house, across the street on Heidelberg, and heard God calling to me. I thought I'd lost it. But I saw the project unfolding before my eyes« (qtd. in Wasscz and Krieger).

33 Taylor: »Negotiating the Power of Art,« 51.

34 Many critics have discussed this transformation; see, for instance, Jackson, 25; Marback, 148-50. Walters argues that the project displays »mundane objects [that] can testify to a buried history« (70); Herron reads the arrangement of castoff items as »the magma of discarded lives« and »visible tokens of a humiliated history« (*Afterculture*, 199).

subject to razing by Detroit authorities and recent fires caused by an unknown arsonist. But as Neal Shine paraphrases Sam Mackey: »the problem with people was that when they looked at an old, broken-down house, all they saw was an old, broken-down house.«[35] What Mackey laments here is essentially a lack of the urban imagination – an inability to see the houses as more than architectural structures, and an attending unwillingness to see struggling urban neighborhoods as more than a case of urban decay.[36]

3.   FRAMING, UNFRAMING, AND PLAYING THE GAME

The Heidelberg Project is framed by the surrounding neighborhood, by city politics, and, at the same time, unframed, because it resists confinement to mere art status as well as to being simply a collection of abandoned buildings. As such, it reminds visitors of the art objects' socially determined former meanings as first consumer goods and then trash and thus of Guyton's attempt to revalidate them as part of his creative community uplift program. Perhaps the project even playfully reframes what we think of as the postindustrial city. If, as Brian Sutton-Smith claims, »play [is] contained by frames and playful [is] disruptive of frames,«[37] then we might argue that the Heidelberg Project as a form of playing the city continuously extends itself into the mode of the playful, seeking to disrupt its public framing as a pile of trash, an eyesore, a partially illegal appropriation of city-owned properties, or a nuisance for neoliberal conceptions of gentrification and urban renewal.

Indeed, the issue of frames and framing is central to the project (and also to the notion of play within the magic circle), as it raises questions about its status as a particular type of urban art that resists easy confinement within the conventional framework of the museum as a physical place as well as an ideologically charged site of cultural remembrance and aesthetic canonization.[38] In the Heidelberg Pro-

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35   Shine: »Remembering Sam Mackey,« 14.

36   Note also the distinction between »city« (here: architectural structures) and »urban« (here: life on Heidelberg Street) as proposed by Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau. As Bruce McComiskey and Cynthia Ryan note, »both describe cities not as ›places‹ that contain people, but as ›situations‹ in which people act. […] Lefebvre makes an important distinction between ›the *city*, [as] a present and immediate reality, a practico-material and architectural fact, and the *urban*, a social reality made up of relations which are to be conceived of, constructed, or reconstructed by thought‹« (McComiskey/Ryan, »Introduction,« 1. The authors cite from Lefebvre's *Writings on Cities*).

37   Sutton-Smith: *The Ambiguity of Play*, 196.

38   This is not to say that Guyton or the Heidelberg Project are antithetical to logic of museums and exhibitions. Guyton has repeatedly displayed his work in museums, most recently at the University of Michigan Museum of Art as part of the exhibition »The Art of Tyree Guyton: A Thirty-Year Journey« (Aug. 22, 2015 – Jan. 3, 2016; see also MaryAnn Wilkinson's introduction to the exhibition and statements by Guyton and Whitefield at www.youtube.com/watch?v=TP3z49T3nZs). Taylor even suggests that the Heidelberg Project is »closely aligned« with the »institutional model« of the museum (53).

ject, frames certainly exist, but they emerge from the urban environment itself (Guyton's three-dimensional canvas): the walls, roofs, porches, and yard spaces of individual houses and lots serve as frames for Guyton's exploration of specific themes; streets and pavement frame these lots but also serve as navigable »connective tissue«[39] between them, being subjected to profuse polka-dotting and other artistic transformations; trees work as natural sculptural frames for discarded objects like shoes, stuffed animals, or shopping carts.

Spinning this argument even further, we may cite Paola de Sanctis Ricciardone's assertion that »the question of the frame is central in the study of collecting. Inside the ›magic circle‹ of a collection something happens to the objects. Even the most mundane and trivial ones become different from what they were in their original context and enhance their value.«[40] Drawing on the work of philosopher and historian Krzysztof Pomian, Ricciardone observes about collections: »objects become semiophores, […] that is to say ›meaning carriers.‹ They cease to be useful and mere ›things‹ and become material words of special discourses and esthetic constructs.«[41] Take the Tree of Toys and the Party Animal House (fig. 1a/b and fig. 2), both of which use collections of stuffed animals as a means of foregrounding the devastating effects that neighborhood dissolution has on the lives of children but also remind onlookers of what may have been happy childhoods experienced in these now-abandoned houses.[42] After all, toys (and arguably stuffed animals) are »play equipment,«[43] and as semiophores, they transcend confinement to an ideologically and physically predetermined space. They travel through culture, becoming »immutable mobiles« in the Latourian sense (in addition to the Thompsonian rubbish-oriented sense): objects that can be playfully reassembled as part of Guyton's installations in order to maximize their effect on the viewer.[44]

Moreover, the installations suggest not only a playful approach on the part of the artist but also the physical traces of pre-abandonment moments of children's play (the shopping carts on the tree top referencing the negative impact of

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39 Walters, 69.

40 Ricciardone: »Collecting as a Form of Play,« 286.

41 Ibid, 286.

42 About the Baby Doll House, which was bulldozed in 1989, Siebers suggests: It »attracted such violence because […] the broken, naked dolls hanging out of windows and off the roof addressed too directly the issues of child abuse, abortion, and prostitution plaguing the urban poor in Detroit neighborhoods« (»What Can Disability Learn from the Culture Wars?« 198).

43 Sutton-Smith: *The Ambiguity of Play*, 6.

44 See Latour, »Visualisation and Cognition« for further details on »immutable mobiles«; see also Schüttpelz, »Die medientechnische Überlegenheit.«

Fig. 1a and b. The Party Animal House, full image and detail, Heidelberg Project, © Heidelberg Foundation (photos by Daniel Stein, 2011). Used with permission.

capitalism and consumerism on the neighborhood).[45] Pinning down any singular meaning to these and other installations is problematic, as several critics have pointed out, and it makes more sense to recognize the palimpsestic nature and the playful exuberance[46] that characterize these artworks as incitements to reconsider, and ideally reassess, stereotypical notions of urban poverty and blight.[47]

Of course, the Heidelberg Project hardly constitutes a collection in the conventional sense. Guyton displays these stuffed animals and other discarded items systematically and chaotically at the same time, giving them meaning precisely because they do not cater to the key values of collecting (completeness, pristine condition of the items) but rather to the creative logic of artistic reuse and bricolage.[48] Yet I believe that the connection between play, the magic circle, and the

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45 Children are, in fact, a crucial part of the project, as kids from the neighborhood frequently help with the artwork and participate in art programs organized by Guyton and his associates.

46 Walters, 79.

47 Herron refers to the project as a palimpsest (»Introduction,« 8); Jackson calls the project »a fluid and contested arena of knowledge« (30); according to Whitfield, »the Heidelberg Project cannot be squeezed into a single definition« (»Inside View,« 109). Cf. also Marback, 148-49; Taylor, 50; Herscher, 73.

48 Guyton emphasizes that »order is needed in the world« but also insists that the project (at least initially) had »no plan and no blueprint, just the will and determination to see beauty in the refuse« (»From the Artist,« v, vii). Whitfield describes a typical scene at the project as »[c]hildren are playful and delighted at the array of objects brightly colored and systematically arranged« (»Inside View,« 109), while Kadogo discerns »beautiful, chaotic order« (102). Guyton further defines the project as »a new creation out of chaos« (qtd. in Marback, 152), endorsing an understanding of African American art that recalls the philosophy of Ralph Ellison. On Guyton's connections with various African American artistic traditions, see Walters, 75-76.

transformation of discarded objects into meaning carriers aptly describes the project's creative recycling of urban trash as an intervention into Detroit politics. Moreover, following Brian Sutton-Smith, if a game consists of a potentially unlimited »series of plays […] and a series of playful alternatives,«[49] then the Heidelberg Project emerges as a powerful and widely recognized instance of playing the city and an endeavor to produce playful – imaginative, magic – alternatives to postindustrial decay and neoliberal urban renewal. In other words: The Heidelberg Project ceases to be confined to the magic circle, in which play is generally played for play's sake, disseminating its message into other neighborhoods, throughout the city, the country, and indeed the world.

Fig. 2. The Tree of Toys, with the Obstruction of Justice House in background, Heidelberg Project, © Heidelberg Foundation (photo by Daniel Stein, 2011). Used with permission.

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49 Sutton-Smith: *The Ambiguity of Play*, 196; more on the distinction between game and play below.

Huizinga's notion of the »play-ground« as the space in which a temporary world can emerge that will allow those who enter it as players to transcend, if only temporarily, the conundrums of ordinary life, connects with Sutton-Smith's play theory, according to which

> play as we know it is primarily a fortification against the disabilities of life. It transcends life's distresses and boredoms and, in general, allows the individual or the group to substitute their own enjoyable, fun-filled, theatrics for other representations of reality in a tacit attempt to feel that life is worth living. [...] In many cases as well, play lets us exercise physical or mental or social adaptations that translate – directly or indirectly – into ordinary life adjustments.[50]

Here, then, the applicability of play theory to the Heidelberg Project becomes fully apparent. The disabilities and distresses for the members of the surrounding Black Bottom neighborhood in Detroit, where the project is located – as well as for Guyton, his grandfather, and his then-wife as they were beginning to transform the neighborhood in 1986 – were effects of Detroit's decline from a metropolitan area with over 1.5 million inhabitants and a flourishing automobile industry to a shrinking city ravaged by growing unemployment and poverty, white flight to the suburbs, the 1967 race riots as an indicator of racial tensions, and searing crime rates.[51] Whether the Heidelberg Project can be justly described as »enjoyable, fun-filled, theatrics« and whether it is capable of initiating »physical or mental or social adaptations that translate [...] into ordinary life adjustments« remains to be seen.[52] Marion Jackson's suggestion that »the Heidelberg Project creates a liminal space in which daily life and the normal roles and obligations of the visitor are momentarily forgotten«[53] certainly heads in this direction.

4.   PLAYFUL POLITICS, POLITICAL PLAYFULNESS

Central to my argument is the distinction between play and game, which I take from John von Neumann and Oskar Morgenstern's classic study *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior* (1944). The authors write: »The *game* is simply the totality of the rules which describe it. Every particular instance at which the game is played – in a particular way – from beginning to end, is a *play*.«[54] As Paola De Sanctis Ricciardone notes about this distinction, »the game is an ›abstract concept‹

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50   Sutton-Smith: »Play Theory,« 116.

51   For more information on Detroit's decline and its connection to art, see Herscher, »Detroit Art City«; on the American city as a transforming as well as transformative space, see Sattler, *Urban Transformations in the USA*.

52   Sutton-Smith: »Play Theory,« 116.

53   Jackson, 35-36.

54   Neumann/Morgenstern: *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior*, 49.

and play is one of the endless concrete, indexical reifications generated by the rules of such a game.«[55] If we wish to make this distinction productive for a reading of the Heidelberg Project, we could view the rules and regulations that determine life in a neighborhood like the surrounding Black Bottom area and the politics through which such rules and regulations are debated, contested, and often modified, as an urban game that the Heidelberg Project and those involved with or contesting it – the players: neighbors, city residents, government officials, and (mostly) suburban visitors[56] – have to play in order to produce or destroy art and promote or prevent certain kinds of urban change. Playing the urban game can mean having to deal with the city's repeated decisions to bulldoze several of the houses and installments or with the federal laws, state laws, and county and city ordinances that impinge on the project's ability to exist.[57]

So far, so good. One may wonder, however, whether the concept of playing the city really rings true for what the Heidelberg Project represents (or claims to represent), how it creates its art, and how the public reacts to this art. Indeed, associating the project with a sense of playfulness might come across as too lighthearted, as perhaps sounding too much like a self-gratuitous exercise of pleasure disinvested from the harsh realities of urban life or like a form of escapism into a magic circle that does not change anything outside of its bounds. As I have already pointed out, and as publications like Jane McGonigal's *Reality is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World* (2011) and Judith Ackermann and Ilaria Mariani's »Re-Thinking the Environment through Games« (2015) underscore, such an understanding of play is reductive. Sutton-Smith accordingly views »play as emotional survival« and argues that »[p]lay's positive pleasure typically transfers to our feelings about the rest of our everyday existence and makes it possible to live more fully in the world,« with »the play experience transfer[ring] to other social relationships.«[58]

Moreover, there is another element of the Heidelberg Project, exemplified by the notion that Guyton »ha[s] not played by the rules,«[59] as Marilyn Wheaton characterizes Detroit then-mayor Dennis Archer's assessment of the Heidelberg Project in the late 1990s.[60] Guyton had installed parts of the project on properties either owned by the city or abandoned by owners who had ceased paying

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55   Ricciardone, 280.

56   Herron: »Introduction,« 2.

57   For an account of the legal questions concerning the project, see Hoops: »Defending the Heidelberg Project.« For a different conceptualization of the play/game distinction, see George Herbert Mead's theories of role play and the generalized other.

58   Sutton-Smith: »Play Theory,« 111, 95, 100.

59   Wheaton, 74.

60   The city bulldozed parts of the project in 1981, 1991, 1999; repeated acts of arson destroyed several houses between 2013 and 2015.

taxes, to which the city also held claim.[61] John Beardsley speaks of »unsanctioned creations […] of dubious legality« and »an instance of artistic ›squatting,‹ or occupation of condemned property,«[62] while Michael H. Hodges notes the resulting perennially precarious nature of the project as art that is »always under the threat of extinction.«[63] In that sense, intervening in the urban game entails more than simply playing along with its rules and restrictions: It entails an effort to bend, circumvent, and break, even at the risk of ultimate destruction, those rules deemed detrimental to the community's interests.

To conclude that the Heidelberg Project has always been a highly politicized space and that its tendency to play with the rules has turned it into »a political football«[64] and »political hot potato«[65] may be stating the obvious. Yet what kind of an urban political player is the Heidelberg Project, and how does it make its political moves? First, we may note that, according to a Wayne County Circuit Court decision, »Guyton's artwork is ›political speech‹ and […] the display of his artwork […] is not subject to the city's regulation if it is displayed on private property.«[66] On that view, we could characterize the project as an artistic speech act aimed at changing the discourse about the neighborhood, about Detroit, and perhaps even about the postindustrial American city after abandonment.[67] Richard Marback makes the case for such a reading of the project:

> To the extent that the Heidelberg Project has generated a search for a new language of place making, to the extent that it has fostered among Detroit-area residents a discussion about the meanings of urban renewal, Guyton has transformed rhetorics with which we speak for and about inner cities. Making his street in particular into a different place, he has reconnected the experience of inner city life with the material conditions of life under late capitalism, disorganizing the spatial relationship between objects of consumption and acts of living in and around a postindustrial city.[68]

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61   Wheaton, 74-75.

62   Beardsley, 42.

63   Hodges: »Heidelberg and the Community,« 68.

64   Wheaton, 73.

65   Whitfield: »Inside View,« 120.

66   Hoops, 97.

67   I take the phrase »city after abandonment« from Dewar and Thomas's similarly titled essay collection. Note that »play consist[s] of ideas, not just of actions« (Sutton-Smith, »Play Theory,« 82) in the same way that speech can convey an idea as well as constitute an action.

68   Marback, 150.

Examples of such transformed rhetorics are the already mentioned recalibration of Heidelberg Street from a problem zone to an art installation and the redefinition of urban detritus as outdoor art, both of which also transform the neighborhood from a hopeless case of urban blight into a hopeful case of creative renewal (a story that is deeply ingrained in various American mythologies).

Second, the Heidelberg Project appears as a prominent example of »the city as a repository of disparate and small-scale enclaves of cultural production,« as Andrew Herscher maintains.[69] The project does not only provoke the city and its residents to reconsider the status quo and search for unconventional ways to remake itself into a more livable and sustainable environment, but it does so by insisting on the significance of specific neighborhood histories, including a racialized history that witnessed the destruction of many homes during the 1967 race riots and the white flight patterns in their wake. Such insistence stands in stark opposition to neoliberal approaches, characterized by a »drive toward demolition, as opposed to renovation,«[70] that tend to obliterate or at least disregard those histories and that have caused substantial parts of old downtown Detroit to disappear. What is more, many of Guyton's artworks indicate a profound sense of African American history as it bears on the present and future of the neighborhood as well as of Detroit: The polka dot-covered People's House pays tribute to Martin Luther King, Jr.'s civil rights activism (fig. 3), the shoes hanging high up in a tree recall American histories of lynching in the Soles of the Most High installment, the polka-dot covered 1955 bus gestures toward the Montgomery Bus Boycott of the same year in the Move to the Rear installment, and the House of Soul with its walls covered by musical records celebrates the heights of Motown fame.

Third, and finally, the fact that the Heidelberg Project claims the »freedom to make the world contrary« and pits »originality against conventional commonsense and righteousness«[71] constitutes its greatest political move. If play indeed enables the emergence of »shared subjective worlds« within the »play frame,«[72] then the project's stated goal of being a catalyst for change and a source of medicine for its creators and visitors alike[73] comes close to what may be designated as the »healing function« of play.[74]

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69   Herscher, 73. Other renegade art projects in Detroit are Object Orange, the Motor City Blight Busters' Artist Village, and Mitch Cope and Gina Reichert's Power House. For further analysis, see Herscher, 74-82.

70   Walters, 67.

71   Sutton-Smith: »Play Theory,« 94.

72   Greta Fein qtd. in ibid, 118.

73   Whitfield: »An Inside View,« 13.

74   Sutton-Smith: »Play Theory,« 122.

Fig. 3. The People's House aka »Dotty Wotty,« with Tree of Toys in foreground, Heidelberg Project, © Heidelberg Foundation (photo by Daniel Stein, 2011). Used with permission.

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