FOR TYREE GUYTON

I see art as a way of saying, seeing, and feeling all the things I never had a chance to do when I was coming up....It's the kind of magic I dreamed about as a boy, but am only now able to express creatively. — Tyree Guyton

For five years Tyree Guyton — assisted by his wife Karen and his grandfather, Sam Mackey — has transformed the flotsam and jetsam of America’s urban nightmare into the stuff that dreams of a better life can be made of.

In the spirit of collective improvisation and potlatch, these African-American artists turn abandoned houses into marvelous assemblages, resonant with wild humor. The basic materials of their art are the broken parts of a broken-down society, the odd pieces left behind by a civilization in decay: old toys, bicycles, shoes, a telephone booth, discarded tires, tin cans, a football helmet, dolls, mousetraps, street signs, birdcages, playing cards.

Built with things that others have thrown away, their colorful collages-in-the-form-of-funhouses challenge the mounting misery of these times. Not surprisingly, they aroused interest that soon became international. Heidelberg Street on Detroit’s East Side — the street where Guyton grew up, and the site of his constructions — was recognized as one of the few outstanding attractions in a city that has long suffered the ravages of economic decline.

For his services Guyton was officially rewarded with court appearances, insults from politicians and the daily press, and the destruction of his work. On November 23, 1991, without prior notification, bulldozers and wrecking crews demolished the last four houses that he and his co-workers had so painstakingly transformed.

Applauding this inexcusable devastation, the Detroit News labeled Guyton’s houses “eyesores,” and cited neoconservative critic Hilton Kramer’s old chestnut that art is too fragile to be burdened with solving society’s problems. There are words for such posturing, and for those who adopt it: stupid, hypocritical, cowardly and loathsome are a few that come to mind. Is it not as plain as day that the real “eyesores” in Detroit are precisely the buildings that Tyree Guyton has not touched?

It is further alleged that Guyton’s neighbors objected to his art. If true, this would be one of the strongest reasons not only for letting his works stand, but for protecting them as well. Are neighbors to stand as judges, juries and executioners of art? Add up all the artists in history who enjoyed the approval of their neighbors, and the total would not suffice to fill a drugstore. It is virtually an axiom: In matters of poetry, freedom and love, ninety-nine out of a hundred neighbors are wrong.

However — and this is only one of many ironies in the Heidelberg Street affair — the charge that Guyton’s neighbors are hostile to his art may well be unfounded. In transforming their neighborhood, Guyton and his collaborators have also done much to transform their neighbors — or at least have helped several of them to liberate themselves from conventional fears and prejudices. Some, who contributed objects to be added to the assemblages, have made no secret of the pleasure and pride the “Heidelberg Project” has given them. Since the infamous Day of the Bulldozers, others have come out strongly in Guyton’s defense.

Indeed, Guyton’s organic relation to the other residents of the Heidelberg Street area — as well as to Detroit’s large homeless population, and, more particularly, to the growing homeless movement — is almost certainly what provoked the authorities to take such extreme punitive measures against him. In an exploitative society, the barriers between art and community — between the practice of poetry and daily life — are indispensable to those who hold the power. Anyone who helps break down these barriers — anyone who aids and abets the free expression of an oppressed minority — helps subvert the existing power structure.

At a time when the “official art” of the U.S. is mired in ludicrous irrelevance, Tyree Guyton has hurled a bright red sackful of monkeywrenches into the repressive machinery of white racist America’s politico-cultural vapidity.

His first houses have been reduced to rubble. But every day more houses are abandoned!
And what are all the bulldozers in the world against the unfettered imagination?

We salute the exemplary courage of Tyree Guyton, who, in the face of bureaucratic harassment and threats, admirably refuses to cease and desist.

We declare our total solidarity with him in his struggle against the corrupt and venal officialdom of Detroit.

We protest the destruction of his houses as a particularly glaring example of government censorship — censorship in its most brutal form, and absolutely without justification.

For the Surrealist Movement in the United States,
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