Aesthetic Geographies: Art, Crises, Urban Imaginaries

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The Graduate Center, City University of New York
AESTHETIC GEOGRAPHIES:
ART, CRISES, URBAN IMAGINARIES

by

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ABSTRACT

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Advisor: Patricia Ticineto Clough

Performance art, with its origins in Dada, Futurism, and Surrealism, has long been a political, politicized, and transgressive form of art, posing challenges to art world institutions, political and social norms, and the nature of art itself through practitioners’ unconventional uses of the body, space, and audience/viewer participation. Much of the power of performed art comes from its performative and transitory nature: it does not simply express, represent, or communicate information. Rather, performative art forms such as installation or performance are productive of political aesthetics. Art may not necessarily intervene directly with political, legal, and legislative decisions or acts, but art is political: images are aesthetic, sensory input and experience that offer visions of worlds—our own, others’, or worlds that do not exist (yet).

Thus this dissertation takes seriously the sociological and spatial relationships between artistic practices, aesthetic regimes, method, and urban change. The Heidelberg Project, a site-specific installation in Detroit by artist Tyree Guyton, and Paul Chan’s 2007 piece, Waiting for Godot in New Orleans, ground my analysis of the dynamic ways in which aesthetic capitalism and racial atmospheres operate through, against, and around artists, artistic objects, locations, and media discourses and imaginaries. Artists are subject to the socio-political atmospheres in
which they exist, and therefore embody or reflect aspects of their milieu even as they might be critical of its organization, laws, culture, and economy. Complicity with the dynamics of capital, colonialism or appropriation through, for example, processes of gentrification, exclusion, or history-making, even when resistance is the intent, may often be unavoidable. Thus the form that art takes matters in relation to the forms of value and wealth production in that moment: art is at once of a context and at the same time an agent of creation. Indeed, herein lies one of art’s greatest potentials: to envision and materialize a range of possible futures/worlds—for better or for worse—that may become directly emergent in our present.

This conflict between art’s radical potential and ability to critique, on the one hand, and its embeddedness in social processes that may at once fully absorb it, on the other, requires the insight of aesthetic, art historical and sociological analysis to tease apart. I would like to suggest that it is in part through examinations of collective productions of place, memory, and narrative it is possible to gain insight into what might be an aesthetic politics of social change, on the one hand, and its correlative resonances with capital, on the other. What then constitutes a radical aesthetic for socially-engaged or participatory art? How does one reconcile and imagine such a political position for works of art in a world of globalized racial and aesthetic capitalism? Using visual and discursive data, largely from the news media but also official city and tourism websites, and historical context, interviews, and theoretical and aesthetic analysis, I describe the aesthetic phenomena that surround art and that art contributes to, and what impact these resonances might have in processes of “redevelopment” or “renewal”—or their interruption—in Detroit and New Orleans.
To my Patricia Siodmak,

Miranda Ganzer,

and all of the students who keep me going.
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# Table of Contents

Abstract

Acknowledgments

List of Figures

List of Photos

List of Tables

1 Art, Aesthetics and the Social  

1.1 Site and Social Engagement: Two Cases  

1.1.1 Origins of Contemporary Performed and Site-Based Art  

1.1.2 What Does Art Do? (Or, What Is Art To Do?)  

1.1.3 Artists, Projects and Cities  

1.2 Sociological Approaches to Art  

1.2.1 What Sociology Adds  

1.3 Performance, Installation, Politics  

1.3.1 Participation – Activation  

1.3.2 Space – Performance  

1.4 Aesthetics and the Social  

1.4.1 Art, Power, Politics  

1.4.2 Institutionalization, Ephemerality, Affect  

1.5 Cities, Art, and Aesthetics  

1.5.1 Landscapes, Culture, and Capital  

1.6 Conclusion
## 1.7 A NOTE ON METHOD

---

### 2 THE HEIDELBERG PROJECT, DETROIT (TYREE GUYTON, 1986-ONGOING)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>SAY NICE THINGS ABOUT DETROIT</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>ARRIVAL</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>LOOKING FOR THE HEIDELBERG PROJECT</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>FINDING THE HEIDELBERG PROJECT</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>BRICK AND STEEL DON’T BURN</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5.1</td>
<td>CAPITAL, RACE AND THE “NATURAL”</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5.2</td>
<td>TRANSGRESSIVE ECOSYSTEM: POSTINDUSTRIAL SITES AS “AESTHETICALLY SUBLIME”</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5.3</td>
<td>PLACE-MAKING AGENTS: THE SOCIOHISTORICAL FACTORS</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>SPERAMUS MELIORA; RESURGET CINERIBUS</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 3 WAITING FOR GODOT IN NEW ORLEANS (PAUL CHAN, 2007)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>THE CITY THAT CARE FORGOT</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1.1</td>
<td>A HAUNTED CITY</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>WHEN THE LEVEES BROKE</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2.1</td>
<td>THE MAKING OF A STORM</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2.2</td>
<td>IF GOD IS WILLING AND DA CREEK DON’T RISE</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2.3</td>
<td>“KATRINA’S SILVER LINING”</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2.4</td>
<td>TEN YEARS LATER</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>WAITING.</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3.1</td>
<td>TRADITION VERSUS ART</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3.2</td>
<td>READING GODOT: THE PLAY AS TEXT</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.3.3  The play as performance: Chan’s Godot  141

3.4  Laissez les bon temps rouler  149

3.4.1  Human and nonhuman nature, plausible deniability  149

3.4.2  Godot’s place  151

4  Conclusion  160

4.1  Art and the politics of affective space  160

4.1.1  Art is dead.  160

4.2  Aesthetic productions of place  162

4.2.1  Landscapes without history  162

4.2.2  Cities remade in crisis  164

4.2.3  Nature, race, accumulation  165

4.3  The picture of the city: aesthetics, race, disaster  170

4.3.1  Art lives.  176

Bibliography  179
LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE 1 – MY ROUTE ACROSS THE CITY ..............................................................60
FIGURE 2 – GREATER DOWNTOWN DETROIT .....................................................65
FIGURE 3 – GREATER DOWNTOWN DETROIT DETAIL ........................................66
FIGURE 4 – THE DOWNTOWN CORE ..................................................................67
FIGURE 5 – SITES OF 2013-2014 FIRES .................................................................81
FIGURE 6 – 2011 AD FOR THE CHRYSLER 200 ...................................................104
FIGURE 7 - POPULATION CHANGE BY RACE .......................................................105
FIGURE 8 – POPULATION FIGURES .....................................................................106
FIGURE 9 - Screenshot from Galapagos home page .............................................118
FIGURE 10 – NOLA FOR SALE ............................................................................122
FIGURE 11 – THE CITY THAT CARE FORGOT .......................................................123
FIGURE 12 – ADVERTISEMENTS FOR THE ST. CHARLES HOTEL ....................123
FIGURE 13 – Screenshot, Goldman Sachs website ................................................132
FIGURE 14 – RESIDENTIAL SEGREGATION IN NEW YORK CITY BY RACE AND BY POVERTY ..........168
LIST OF PHOTOS

Photo 1 – The charred rear of the Obstruction of Justice House ........................................... 74

Photo 2 - The dot I painted ........................................................................................................ 85

Photo 3 – House of Soul, 2013 ................................................................................................. 90

Photo 4 – House of Soul, 2015 ................................................................................................. 90

Photo 5 – Jane Cooper Elementary ............................................................................................ 108

Photo 6 – Saint Charles Avenue in the Central Business District, 2012 ......................... 139

Photo 7 – Baghdad graffiti in New Orleans, 2006 ................................................................. 145

Photo 8 – A boat on the street; mowed lawn; corner where Godot was staged ........... 147

Photo 9 – You belong here ....................................................................................................... 156
LIST OF TABLES

TABLE 1 – TIMELINE OF FIRES AT THE HEIDELBERG PROJECT AND ON HEIDELBERG STREET ........90

TABLE 2 – NEW ORLEANS POPULATION CHANGE..............................134
1 Art, aesthetics and the social

The Vieja Wall might be the choice of a revolutionary and therefore crazy sociologist, for there it is easy to foresee that today’s black and impoverished ghetto will be claimed tomorrow as the most desirable (‘colonial’) site of somebody else’s development.

– Aleksandra Wagner, “The Nature of Demand” in Radical Reconstruction (1997, 10)

I spent many hours at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in the spring of 2010. The “godmother of performance art,” Marina Abramović, was performing her durational piece, The Artist Is Present, in the atrium of the museum. For almost three months, during all of the museum’s open hours, Abramović sat in a chair in the center of a large, taped-off square that, as the weeks passed, came to be marked by scores of watchers and hopeful participants. Visitors (and groupies) waited for hours for the chance to sit in a second chair that faced Abramović. People started showing up at the MoMA an hour before it opened, then two hours, then four, in order to sit silently for as long as they wanted while holding the artist’s gaze. When the museum closed on the penultimate day of the performance, several visitors who, after waiting all day did not get to sit, exited the museum and sat down against the wall outside of the gated entrance to wait. When I joined them around midnight, I was the thirty-third person in line.

1. And sometimes longer. There were days, particularly toward the end of the performance, that would start earlier or end later so that Abramović could accommodate celebrity visitors, friends, or museum employees.
2. During the first several weeks of the performance there was a square table between the sitter and the artist. Its removal created a greater sense of intimacy; the table had worked as a kind of crutch, a barrier that hid the bottom halves of the sitters’ bodies to one another. Without the table, the gap between the sitters seemed larger but each person was more exposed.
3. From my notes, May 31, 2010: “We spent the night on 53rd street in midtown Manhattan. We were a line of people along building walls, stretching west from the entrance of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). Our group of three decided that just before midnight Sunday would be a reasonable time to get there; we didn’t want to be the first ones to show up for the line. We were not the first. Someone had written numbers on slips of paper and handed them out as people arrived. We were 31, 32, and 33. The first two people in line had been at the museum all day Sunday and then went outside to wait again. Strange: to sit and wait all day for a chance to sit.”
The days I spent at the museum—waiting, watching and sitting—allowed me to imagine and decide on this project. At the time, I planned to continue the work I had already started at a nature reserve in Nicaragua, looking at the politics and significance of a place created and collectively run by farmers who had fought in the Revolution that overthrew the Somoza dictatorship in 1979, or against the CIA-backed Contras in the 1980s. I still hope to return to this project; through visits, volunteering, and conducting interviews there I began to think about methodology more seriously and critically. Beyond the issue of ethics, one I already took seriously, I started to question the efficacy, or inherent ethical problems, in producing scholarly work of this kind at all; where neither taking the spoken word at face value nor interpreting it would suffice to communicate or demonstrate the sense of history and feeling of being in that place, one that I believe would take years to access more deeply. These hesitations and political-ethical concerns are intimately bound up with the aesthetics of knowledge production and the production of site-based aesthetics. The mode of the presentation of data, including the written form, creates images in the mind of the reader, images that may or may not be what the writer intended. Thus I began to consider what methodological approaches, and forms of display or dissemination, might quell my political and ethical concerns but also avoid dulling the sensory experience of research work and the depth I want to communicate. I find that the most extraordinary potential for sociological work is the opportunity to produce something that falls between—or blends together—the work of fiction writers and journalists: to create, on the one hand, a world of feeling and experience and, on the other, a political acuity and sharpness that shapes (or modulates) the images (or the affective experience of reading and seeing).

While sitting on the hard, grey tile floor at the MoMA, I started to see the performance itself as a method by which social learning occurred. Direct participation through sitting in the
chair was a form of communication, observation and spatial experience. I often sat at the edge of the taped square, watching two people, and sometimes the same two people, for eight hours; I developed an eye for slight changes in facial expression, affective (anticipatory) or emotional shifts, and tiny muscle twitches that variously indicated emotional or physical discomfort. People described their experiences to me in a variety of ways: it was like meditating; everything felt quiet, the people faded away; they were shocked at how long they had sat or that it had felt much longer than it was; it was like having a conversation; I knew when it was time to get up. All of this was happening at a museum that was in the midst of receiving record numbers of visitors; a photographer captured an image of every person who sat; and tall, diffused movie set lights stood at each corner of the square. Such a method, however, does not lend itself to clear, articulable results or bits of quantifiable information. I could make observations about the participants, relay my experience and analysis of the piece, and interview people about their time sitting, watching and waiting. But I became more interested in developing a social-aesthetic analysis, one that brings together the artistic and experiential elements of the work of art with the threads of the work’s more immediately visible or discoverable discursive, spatial and economic effects as well as the traces of its “afterlife.”

* * * * *

Though I initially thought it would be, this dissertation is not about the Abramović performance. While I am indebted to the piece and the time I spent at the museum over those months for forcing me to struggle with questions of sociological method, what it means to produce knowledge and to reproduce the discipline itself, I looked from Abramović to something beyond the museum and into the everyday lives of cities. I turned my focus to two works of art that exist (or existed) outside of institutionalized art spaces: Waiting for Godot in New Orleans
(2007, New Orleans), by Paul Chan; and The Heidelberg Project (1986-ongoing, Detroit), by Tyree Guyton. These two pieces are as much about the neighborhoods in which they are located and the people who live there as they are about art and aesthetic creativity. Therefore I begin this chapter with a brief introduction both to the origins and significance of performance, site-specific and socially-engaged art, and the two pieces I examine in detail in Chapters 2 and 3. I also take up those who read art as political in order to address what it means for art to be political (or to say that it is political) and that it might not be possible to control what political means or in what direction its effects go. I conclude with a brief note on methodology and what empirical work means in relation to aesthetics. Thus this dissertation takes seriously the sociological relationship between artistic practices, aesthetic regimes, method, and urban change.

1.1 Site and social engagement: two cases

1.1.1 Origins of contemporary performed and site-based art

Performance art, with origins in Dada, Futurism, and Surrealism, has long been a political, politicized, and transgressive form of art, posing challenges to art world institutions, political and social norms, and the nature of art itself through practitioners’ unconventional uses of the body, space, and audience/viewer participation (Wiegmink 2011). Much of the power of performed art

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4. According to the organization’s website, the project was officially incorporated in 1988, though Guyton began work on it in 1986.
5. I will sometimes use performed art instead of performance art, depending on context and reference, in order to extend the meaning of performance art to other performative work that might not typically fall into that category (such as installation or site-specific theatre). By performed art I do not mean traditional forms of theatre or opera, but rather performative challenges to visual arts, those that traditionally encompass painting, sculpture, fresco, drawing, etc. Performed art suggests a shift in the use of a medium and often the mode of engagement with context, audience, and the work itself.
6. Roselee Goldberg (1988) places the roots of performance art in the modernist avant-garde; Robyn Brentano (1994) critiques the suggestions that performance art signified the postmodern break from the modern by pointing out the characteristics shared by performance and Dada: both are/were anti-institutional, non-hierarchical, often
comes from its performative and transitory nature: it does not simply express, represent, or communicate information. Performance art resists presentation within the spatial and temporal confines of an exhibition. Performers and audience, objects, the performance space, and participants’ relationship to that space, change through the experience of the work. Dada artists questioned the artistic status quo and the notion of the artist as genius and hence, in undermining artistic originality and authenticity, succeeded in reversing the function of art-as-object by positing art-as-ideas. Surrealism was an aesthetic means of resistance to and intervention into the social, political; the Futurists sought to pull audience out of contemplation and into active participation.

These earlier philosophies influenced the subsequent theorization and use of Situations, Fluxus Happenings, and participatory art that have sought to “activate” the viewer through her proximity to a potentially transformative event. Gary Sangster (1994) summarizes the potential of performance thus:

Because of its indeterminate and immediate nature, performance has lent itself well to both aesthetic experimentation and social and cultural criticism. It is an open form that can accommodate a wide range of sensibilities and adapt to almost any setting—physical, conceptual, or virtual. As an interactive medium, performance has contributed to a shift from artists’ adversarial posture toward the public in the early decades of the century to a more inclusive, more democratic stance, so that today whole communities embrace performance as a vehicle for confronting the more painful realities and celebrating the strengths of the human spirit. (56)

It was clear by the time of the first Happening at Black Mountain College in 1952 that, “The strategies of simultaneity and the restructuring of space to involve the audience more directly were aspects of a broader philosophical shift that was occurring at the time” (37). The "reperuation of the ordinary" (Sangster 1994) was a part of the political atmosphere of the period.

7. Adrian George, in the exhibition catalog for Art, Lies and Videotape: Exposing Performance (2003), suggests that the show “presents the history of performance or live art as a complex construction between fact and fiction.”
manifested in attention to populism, issues of accessibility, and equality. Audience participation was a means to performatively enact egalitarian ideals and to, at the same time, undermine the voyeuristic tendencies of theater by getting rid of the gap between audience and performer.

That art would be considered political at all was a radical idea in the late 1960s because, according to Jayne Wark (2006), “the art world was still dominated by the belief that the purpose of art was either to transcend or to provide an alternative to the crude exigencies of social struggle and political strife” (5). The alignment of art and politics found in the early twentieth century had disappeared with the avant-gardes; feminists once again pushed the connection between art and everyday life as an explicit mode of politics (Wark 2006, 3-4; Vergine 2000).

However, the consolidation of performance, performed and installation art, as fields, largely coincided with the formation of critical, theoretical positions in the academy, such as feminist, queer, postcolonial and critical race theories. The movements of the 1960s and 1970s, coupled with the influence of these new departments and epistemological standpoints, affected the way academic research was done; the researcher has, over several decades, stopped being thought of as an objective, outside, expert observer and is now known to be a person who intervenes and effects changes through their presence. Research is not a neutral or purely scientific process of discovery, analysis and conclusion that occurs in a lab or behind a desk, removed from the “subjects” about whom one plans to make claims. Similar questions arose for artists around the same time, pushing artists and their work out of gallery spaces and into the public in attempts to affect change in the world at large. The social-political changes to which art and scholarship are connected inform the perspective and theoretical analysis of this work.

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8. Not entirely, of course, but radical epistemological interventions have at least made this ‘frontiersman’ tendency fall somewhat out of fashion.
1.1.2 What does art do? (or, what is art to do?)

Art does not directly intervene with political, legal, and legislative decisions or acts. But art is political: images are aesthetic, sensory input and experience that offer visions of worlds—our own, others’, or worlds that do not exist (yet). Artists are subject to the socio-political climates in which they exist, and so often embody or reflect aspects of their milieu even as they might be critical of its organization, laws, culture etc. The form that art takes matters in relation to the forms of value and wealth production in that moment. Indeed, herein lies one of art’s greatest potentials: to envision and materialize a range of possible futures/worlds—for better or for worse—that may become directly emergent in our present. The vision or ethos of “learning to inhabit the world in a better way” (Bourriaud 2002, 13; emphasis in original) is one example of art’s potential for worse, and one that is indicative of and amenable to the continued withdrawal of the state and an increased strain on communities struggling with all forms of precarity. Such work is often marked by self-congratulatory moments of privileged DIY-ers doing it for themselves. But, despite the vision Bourriaud offers, that suggests we make the best with what we’ve got, this immediacy and responsiveness to context is the locus of art’s critical capacities. If one artist’s work exemplifies the former by creating moments and places for acts of conviviality that do little to interrogate, for example, the neoliberal corporate context of team-building and company retreats, then that of another demonstrates the latter by laying bare exploitative practices that exist in the art world, in the name of art.9

What then constitutes a radical aesthetic for socially-engaged or participatory art? How does one reconcile and imagine such a political position for works of art in a world of globalized capital? Art can be critical of dominant social and political arrangements; it can also produce

9. From Claire Bishop, the work of Rikrit Tiravanija represents the former, and that of Santiago Sierra the latter.
new modes of communication and social relation. But complicity with the dynamics of capital, colonialism or appropriation through, for example, processes of gentrification, exclusion, or history-making, even when resistance is the intent, may often be unavoidable. This conflict between art’s radical potential and ability to critique, on the one hand, and its embeddedness in social processes that may at once fully absorb it, on the other, requires the insight of aesthetic, art historical and sociological analysis to tease apart. I would like to suggest that it is in part through examinations of collective productions of place, memory, and narrative it is possible to gain insight into what might be an aesthetic politics of social change, on the one hand, and its correlative resonances with capital, on the other.

_Socially-engaged_ is a term meant to denote art that, using social relations as a medium, intends to create communities (whether momentary or lasting) and collective experiences through participatory or collaborative involvement of an audience. Claire Bishop’s work on contemporary participatory and socially-engaged art provides much of the basis for my framework of analysis. While any art may broadly be considered socially-engaged or participatory (a painter engages with her context, and a viewer—or viewers—engages with the painting in its context), participation—collaboration, audience involvement, and/or inception—requires spatialized duration that, ideally, produces changes (for the location, participants or artist) over time. The space of the performance or installation is a created, curated environment that asks viewers into its constitutive space; indeed, the viewer-cum-participant is the very thing that completes the work and acts as a mark of its success or failure. Hence, in order to engage with a ‘public’—a notional, pre-existing one, or one brought into being—a work must open up to intervention by individual experience, sociohistorical context and site-based duration. But, Bishop reminds us, we cannot just laud artists for their working processes or intentions; there _can_
be failed works of socially-engaged art and we must be attentive to and determine the criteria for failure and success relevant to a work’s social-historical context as social engagement and participation alone do not make such art critical or ethical.

1.1.3 Artists, projects and cities

The works of art that I will be discussing in Chapters 2 and 3 are performative in their relationship to audience and space: both are site-specific, performed and/or installation based pieces. Each renders ephemeral and shifting collectivities that pose a challenge to traditional understandings of the public sphere, public space and community. They also disturb current trends of art-as-consumption and experience-as-art by echoing back to performance’s history of art-as-politics; however, neither exists in a vacuum and therefore neither is immune to the effects of, or an effect on, capital investment and disinvestment, gentrification and abandonment, or political and media discourses.

TYREE GUYTON, THE HEIDELBERG PROJECT (1986-ONGOING)

Detroit lost one quarter of its population between the 2000 and 2010 censuses, leaving a city of 139 square miles with little more than 713,000 residents. Detroit has been heavily affected by the recession that started in 2008: the jobless rate in the city was 17.6 percent in November 2012. Despite the dramatic decline in population, some contend that Detroit is

10. I will refer to the art variously as performance, installation, performative art, and theatre.
11. Wisely and Spangler, “Motor City population declines,” 3/24/2011. For comparison, after Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans lost 29% of its population, or almost 140,000 residents. Numerically, Detroit lost over 237,000.
13. Up from 12.2 percent in April 2008 and 17.2 percent six months earlier in April 2012, but down from 24.2 percent in July 2011. In April 2017, the total employment rate was 8.4 percent. Michigan Department of Technology, Management and Budget, “Local Area Unemployment Statistics,” Detroit city.
currently experiencing a "renaissance." Detroit has seen an influx of young newcomers to the city, a cohort interested in the artistic, urban-agricultural and entrepreneurial opportunities the city has to offer to those with resources at the ready.

A vision of Detroit remade through art, gardens and technology firms relies heavily on an urban mythos of the “frontier”: predominantly white artists or “creatives” from other cities create pockets of excitement and success that will in turn draw others (and investment) to the city. Since 2011, Detroit has become home to two different art festivals, one of which, “hopes to capitalize on Detroit's increasingly vibrant international reputation as a center for art, while shining a spotlight on the transformation of Midtown, which has been growing with new businesses and residents.” Surrounding counties also contribute to the image of Detroit as a destination for art. In 2012, a property tax increase was voted in that allows free admission to the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA). The hope: art will save the city. When the 2013 bankruptcy plan initially demanded that the DIA collection be made available to sell as part of the recovery—though a claim that as a public-private partnership its holdings were city property and therefore assets available to settle the city’s debts—the institution that the public had agreed to support through taxation only a year prior was saved by reverting to its pre-1919 status as a not-for-profit organization managed by a private board.

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15. The images of artists working in Detroit are heavily skewed toward white artists coming to Detroit from elsewhere. The influx of artists, while probably racially diverse, is generally of a middle-class background with access to capital to invest. The media images rely on visible whiteness to convey a sense of safety, promise, and (perhaps most significantly and insidiously) change. See: Richard Florida, The Rise of the Creative Class (New York: Basic Books, 2012).
17. Stryker, “Attendance more than triples at DIA,” 8/15/2012b. Attendance (8,000) was more than three times what it was for the same week in August 2011 (2,600).
In contrast to development projects (or bankruptcy budgets) that position art as an effective engine of gentrification or revenue generation, the sculptures and houses that make up the Heidelberg Project confront visitors with an aesthetic revisioning of confusion, decay, and community. Self-described on the project’s website: “The Heidelberg Project is art, energy, and community. It’s an open-air art environment in the heart of an urban community on Detroit’s East Side. Tyree Guyton, founder and artistic director, uses everyday, discarded objects to create a two-block area full of color, symbolism, and intrigue. Now in its 26th year [in 2012], the Heidelberg Project is recognized around the world as a demonstration of the power of creativity to transform lives.”

Guyton’s installation—sprawled along the blocks immediately adjacent to Heidelberg Street, and stretching in all directions through the city—differs from the type of work that consumes most of the news media’s attention in Detroit. While many articles have focused on Detroit’s landscape and infrastructure (and the idea of the city itself) as a “blank canvas” for incoming artists, The Heidelberg Project has created a specific and historically rooted aesthetic that works to beautify and repair the city’s crumbling buildings instead of voyeuristically exploiting them. Guyton’s artistic vision draws 50,000 visitors annually (Binelli 2012). Despite such success, the installation drew the scorn of city officials who had parts of the project demolished in 1991 and in 1999; since 2013, several houses have been lost to arson. Even with such setbacks, Guyton, with the aid of community members, continued his work on Heidelberg Street.

22. As of August 2016, the Heidelberg Project began to change form, shifting into “something the organization is calling Heidelberg 3.0—an ‘arts-infused community’ rather than an installation driven by one man.” Guyton has been slowly dismantling some of the installations in order to accommodate his new vision for the project. “After 30 years, I’ve decided to take it apart piece-by-piece in a very methodical way, creating new realities as it comes apart.” Stryker, “The end, and a new beginning,” 8/14/2016. In August 2017, the project started a petition in order to gain
In 2007, in collaboration with Creative Time in New York and community groups in New Orleans, a group of actors from The Classical Theatre of Harlem performed Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (*Godot*) on the street in New Orleans' Lower Ninth Ward and Gentilly neighborhoods for audiences totaling over 1,000. Paul Chan conceived of the performance as a spatial and ideological intervention into the imagination of post-Katrina New Orleans, a place and time marked by absence and waiting: for assistance, recognition, and return. Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in August 2005, and was arguably the worst disaster\(^\text{23}\) the city has ever faced. Between all of the states affected, the storm resulted in $81$ to $135$ billion in damages,\(^\text{24}\) and over 1,800 deaths.\(^\text{25}\) Levee breaches around New Orleans left eighty percent of the city flooded with a mixture of the contents of canals, the river, the lake and sewers.\(^\text{26}\) Thousands of New Orleanians were forced from their homes: the city’s 2006 population estimate was 208,548, just over forty-five percent of its 2005 pre-Katrina estimate of 455,188. Five years after the storm, the census showed a population of 343,829, over 110,000 fewer residents than in early 2005. But even before the storm the city had been struggling to retain its population: between 2000 and 2005, New Orleans lost nearly 30,000 residents. In 2016, the number remained below 400,000.\(^\text{27}\)

\(^\text{23}\) Neither Hurricane Betsy in 1965 nor the Great Flood in 1927 resulted in as much damage to the city or loss of life, though each had similar outcomes related to the destruction of communities and out-migration. Both also led to feelings of distrust of and abandonment by city government in black communities. A disaster of a different nature occurred in 2010 with the BP gulf coast oil spill. In its long-term and far-reaching effects (particularly economic and health-related) it is can be considered a disaster on par with most hurricanes.


\(^\text{25}\) Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals, “Reports of Missing and Deceased,” 8/2/2006. These numbers are not definitive [see 4.2.2, note 32].

\(^\text{26}\) Plyer, “Facts for Features.”

New Orleans after Katrina was not a city ready or excited to receive artists. In order to make his project possible, Chan spent months in 2007 doing art and activist work, teaching free art and theatre workshops, and figuring out what people wanted. One concern Chan heard repeatedly asked if he planned to come for a while, do his play, get some media attention and then vanish without a trace, taking the attention and resources with him as others had done before. After speaking with Ronald Lewis, a resident of the Lower Ninth Ward, Chan established what he called a “shadow fund” to raise money for community groups and organizations so that something material would remain after the performances ended. Chan's piece transformed the street corners of the Gentilly and the Lower Ninth Ward: neighborhoods that had been nearly empty, with homes left decaying since the storm, and only a slow trickle of residents able to return, became sites of collective remembering, mourning, drawing many New Orleans residents from wealthier parts of the city into largely black neighborhoods they had never visited before the storm.

By staging Godot in neighborhoods devastated by Hurricane Katrina, Chan re-scripted those sites against dominant media narratives that marked neighborhoods like the Lower Ninth Ward and Gentilly as places beyond and not worth saving, and their residents undeserving and/or helpless victims who should have gotten out when they were told to leave, or who were to blame for the devastation itself. Barbara Bush went so far as to suggest for that people housed in the shelter of the Superdome, enjoying their free meals, the storm was “working out very well for them” since they “were underprivileged anyway.” Just one week after the storm, in an op-ed cynically titled “Katrina’s Silver Lining,” New York Times columnist David Brooks suggested that residents who lacked “middle class skills” should not be at the center of the city’s rebuilding efforts because, “If we just put up new buildings and allow the same people to move back into

their old neighborhoods, then urban New Orleans will become just as rundown and dysfunctional as before.” Commentary and reports like this, mired in cultural explanations for the disaster and death toll on the one hand, and liberal discourses of black victimhood and lack of agency on the other, painted a picture of a city that stood to benefit from the disaster and crises Katrina wrought: the slate was wiped clean of poverty, corruption, dysfunction and disinvestment.

But in the context of the play, no assumptions of who deserved to return or what defined a ‘successful’ city existed. Instead, the experience of always waiting—for funds, for return and to rebuild—was enacted as a sign of strength and conviction through the particular staging of the performance on streets, a small moment of reclamation and return. When read through Godot, the ‘disaster sites’ became neighborhoods not just with pasts, but also with futures that would be realized irrespective of time spent waiting or a lack of municipal support. This staging highlighted the perseverance of those who continued to wait rather than focusing on the futility of waiting. The play became a part of, as well as a means to, memory, storytelling and collective place re-making.

In order to further analyze Godot, the Heidelberg Project, and their contexts, a project that necessarily is inter/transdisciplinary, I want to outline the theoretical literatures and conversations from which I will draw. I bring together aspects of affect and aesthetic theory, art theory and criticism, and urban sociology and geography—in order to think about art, method and contested sites in cities. I draw on a sociological approach that analyzes art institutions, communities and the art market, and utilize art theory and criticism to build an aesthetic frame of analysis that grapples with and takes seriously individuals’ experiences of the works of art. Additionally, I incorporate urban and geographic theories of space and culture in order to assess the complex relationship between art and processes of gentrification as an expression of aesthetic

capitalism and place-making. In this way I can account for the artistic, political, and temporal/spatial practices artists use, explicitly or not, to engage with audience and participants; how viewers or participants experience the work, and what makes these experiences powerful; and how to judge a work of art in relation to an artist’s production ethics, self-commodification and market status or their aesthetic vision.

1.2 Sociological approaches to art

Art is aesthetic, the result of a creative act thought to express, represent, communicate (or do nothing at all). It is also social and historical. A work of art can be studied as the product of an author; a piece of property—intellectual or material—to be owned or possessed; a communicative tool; and as a promoter of public good, or of deviance. In each of these ways, art can serve to demonstrate and produce collective identity, beliefs and belonging (Anderson 1991; DiMaggio 1982; Taylor 2016). Put another way, art acts on the social-political, aesthetically envisioning and bringing into being a world as well as a way of being in the world (Rancière 2004, 2006). It is here that I understand sociology to hold valuable insights into art’s circulation in the world. But, sociological skepticism regarding the claim that artistic works are driven and produced solely by an aesthetic impulse (Zangwill 2002), or the notion of an intrinsic aesthetic experience (Bourdieu 1968; Eagleton 1984), has traditionally led art historians to ignore sociology for its tendency to “vulgarize” the artistic process and the uniqueness of the artist, believing that sociology—and quantitative analysis especially—reduces all works and events to the same level, and interprets all artistic phenomena equally, ignoring distinctions (Bourdieu 1993). Because sociology is largely devoted to the study of groups, and most sociologists work to achieve some kind of distance or objectivity from their subjects, there is little place for either
the sociologist’s analysis of a work of art, beyond its political economic importance or history, or
the largely unobservable aesthetic experience of any individual. Accordingly, sociology of art
tends to fall into one of three paradigms that attends to art’s various social implications: first,
art’s use-value, function, and meaning for the group(s) involved in its collective production
(Becker 1974, 1982); second, art institutions and the political economy of art, exchange-value,
and the art market (Wolff 1984); and third, art’s relationship with social class formation,
stratification and capital (Morris 1958; Bourdieu 1968; DiMaggio 1982). This skepticism toward
the notion of a total theory of art rooted in aesthetics (or a total theory tied to any one
explanatory phenomenon for that matter) is, in my view, an important complement to art history,
philosophy and theory, and criticism when they propose to have a total theory.

In order to think and study art in this way, sociology assumes a broad definition of art and
its objects, even if they are not traditionally defined as such. Media are included here, as well as
popular song, anthems and national monuments. Furthermore, the collective actions that
constitute the production of art and determine artistic contexts, as well as discarding the value-
laden divisions between high, low, popular, mass, or folk art, are a central concern (Becker 1974,
1982). For example, the study of art worlds (Becker 1982) traces the networks that art can
produce and that make its production possible in the first place. These networks can be political-
economic, material, social (groups of people and individuals), political and institutional
(Dimaggio 1986, 1987; Blau 1988). How individuals or groups use and respond to art is of more
importance than the aesthetic experience, definition, or creator’s stated impetus for making a
particular work. Art, so understood, is an important point of access into the symbolic lifeworld of
a community and how groups produce, interpret, assimilate and emit meaning. Thus, art can
function as a means of representation, and a stand-in for how a group or community sees itself.
The response a group has to a work of art (for example, conservative response to the 1999 “Sensation” exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum of Art) may be of interest, but only as such a response reaffirms and articulates group identity and membership.

Art can be a source or repository of meaning and expression (Deinhard 1974), iconographic and semiotic, the bearer and producer of connotative and denotative meanings and encodings. Its objects and events can express or invoke (or evoke) memory and historical silences, and so exist beyond their moment of creation but also show the mark of their context. In this sense, because it is symbolic and a form of meaning creation, a work of art may reflect or serve the hegemonic interests of the dominant class or ruling group, but it is also protest, resistance, and dissent. Art is part of a historical and political context from which it cannot (and should not) be divorced (Berger 1977; Wolff 1984). Thus art can serve multiple agendas—conservative, regressive, reactionary; or progressive, visionary, affirming—often concurrently as these frames change across time and place in processes of appropriation, refusal and disidentification (Muñoz 1999). Hence art may variously affirm (or deny) belonging, bolster nationalism (or dissent and ennui), and promote (or challenge) values and ideals through its symbolic meanings and ability to confer status, making art a relevant part of sociological study.\textsuperscript{30}

The development of taste and aesthetic judgment (“literacy”), and how individuals are variously socialized to understand, read and appreciate the arts (“high” or “low”), were central to critical and scholarly work of the mid-twentieth century (Greenberg 1963; Howe 1963; Horkheimer and Adorno 2002; Lazarsfeld and Merton 1963). The specific importance of mass media and popular (industrial/ized) culture is in their ability or role to sell or be sold, level and proliferate, and/or appease, tranquilize, or produce anxiety. For example, attempts (often with

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\textsuperscript{30} See Morris (1958) on the meaning of art for sociology, and Lazarsfeld and Merton (1948) on art’s role in conferring status, or Bourdieu (1968, 1996) on art, taste, and cultural capital.
success) to use advertising as a means to influence popular opinion\textsuperscript{31} continued in the post-war period, though concern over the aesthetic force of fascism drew the attention of scholars.\textsuperscript{32} Other forms of art, even if their products can be bought and sold, exist in an imagined outside-space where the experience of such work is thought to be active rather than mindless (though it can be solitary); equalizing and democratic (a work of art cannot be owned by everyone but can be viewed by many if exhibited in a museum), and non-commodified (the intention of art is not its sale). Of course, viewing art or access to the means of its production is a necessary precondition for interaction with or creation of art. This is, indeed, a class issue: proximity to cultural institutions, the ability to pay for materials, and the time required to visit museums or to make art are not equally available to all. Yet, even as a sociological perspective may claim that art institutions, historians, and critics reproduce class divisions and elitism, sociologists too have aided in the reproduction of the assumed division between those who can understand or appreciate fine art and those who cannot by claiming that art functions as a mark of class distinction, hence ignoring the role of the aesthetic and intersubjective (or interobjective) experience that cannot be explained away by or reduced to class origin or status alone. Both the Heidelberg Project and \textit{Godot} are declawed and rendered nearly meaningless when read through the functions of class alone, a perspective that cannot account for official backlash against the Heidelberg Project or the community involvement in the production of \textit{Godot}.

\textsuperscript{31} For example, to influence support for the First World War, sell cigarettes, get people to buy cars, or convince women that their place was in the home.

\textsuperscript{32} Wilhelm Reich published \textit{The Mass Psychology of Fascism} in 1993. In it he links fascism (and specifically Nazism) to sexual repression. A link between sexual repression (or fantasy and drive) and consumer behavior was also made and exploited by Edward Bernays in service of advertising.
1.2.1 *What sociology adds*

Sociological analyses and theories of art have served to counter a dehistoricized definition of the artist as the lone, individual genius and the work of art as transcendent (or unbounded by time and place) by a) contextualizing the work of art and the artist, b) by saying that measures and standards of art are also produced by collective action (rather than emanating from the genius of the work), and c) through tracing art’s role in reproducing class distinctions.

Pierre Bourdieu’s focus on cultural capital and production centers habitus, post and field—concepts that address social status—in a definition of art and its sociological study. He claims that art is a type of cultural capital that solidifies social class (ideals, norms, membership) despite—and as a means to undermine—the existence of universal, egalitarian education, and political participation. For Bourdieu, the idea that art may be democratic by awakening in anyone the possibility of aesthetic enlightenment is only a mask over its true function as marker of class status. ‘Correct’ appreciation of art reflects one’s education and hence one’s class status. Bourdieu (1968) writes, “Since the work of art only exists as such to the extent that it is perceived, or in other words, deciphered, it goes without saying that the satisfactions attached to this perception are only accessible to those who are disposed to appropriate them…” (170). Aesthetic (sensorial) appreciation or response to a work of art does not necessarily translate to the “correct” understanding of it, something only accessible to those with the requisite amount of cultural capital. This conceit serves only to conceal its real function: to maintain—and, consequently, naturalize—social stratification and class inequality, a pernicious agenda made especially apparent in the museum’s tendency to reify and de-historicize the work of art held within. Museums are the gatekeepers of art and also the providers of institutionalized definitions.

33. Bourdieu assumes that such participation and education are possible and intended, not that they are themselves structured toward inequality. The effects of cultural capital on maintaining social class are real, but are the primary mode of class conflict, inequality or differentiation.
of art, the importance of the work, and the proper context for contemplation and interpretation. The way that art is judged and consumed is already made to mark status distinctions because of the long-term investment in the work that is required; therefore, cultural competence in art derives from one’s class position and functions as capital. Because there are multiple levels of signification the viewer must be aware of, understand, and then perceive in order to decipher a work of art, the museum in turn functions to alienate and further exclude those without cultivated and cultured tastes in art from public participation and discourse. Thus, according to the perspective of cultural capital, the museum is reduced to a function of class.

Art does not, however, exist in museums alone; even when it is shown in museums, social processes produced it, brought it there and continue to affect its reception. Howard Becker offers a means to account for a work of art’s production and afterlife, an approach that takes into account the human social relations that art mediates and makes possible (and that make art possible) while also providing a more object-oriented means of analysis. During a 2003 lecture, Howard Becker explained the evolution in his thought since the publication of *Art Worlds* in 1982. In *Art Worlds*, Becker explained, he had suggested looking at a work of art in an “upstream” manner: “how some artistic phenomenon… comes into being, step by step; all the things that are done, in the order they are done by the people who do them, in the course of the object of study…coming to be what it is” (2003). For example, conventions in production assist artists in that they can refer to these and spend more time making the art rather than always coming up with them (materials, colors, surfaces) anew (Becker 1974, 90). By going upstream, sociological study of art worlds can explore and demystify their effect on production and consumption of art by exposing how art worlds come into being (Becker 1982, 1). But going “downstream” from a work of art entails exploring everything that came after the work was
“done” (a difficult and somewhat arbitrary moment and condition to be determined by the artist or researcher). The downstream life of a work of art is marked by the point at which an artist has let the work out of their control and put it in the world to be viewed and judged. Becker (2003) suggests several points of entrance into downstream analysis of art: a history of ownership; the development of genres, changes in audience and related moral judgments (for example, related to the question of “authenticity”); and the disposal, storage or destruction of a work of art and, relatedly, the fate of an artist’s reputation or longevity. For Becker, whether attempting an upstream or downstream analysis, art is processual: any work of art involves choices, editing and influence by individuals other than the artist, and is constantly changing even after it is “done.”

Some art forms, such as performance or music, are not done in the same sense as painting. A performance might be bound by time as a discrete event, but an artist may leave the work open for future performances, reperformances, or other uses; the same is true for a song that can be played many times by the same artist (or by other artists) and each time become something else. However, each instance of “doneness” is marked by the work’s entrance into the world of experience and judgment, and it is from here—either upstream or downstream—that Becker directs the sociological study of art. 34

To summarize, the sociology of art addresses how individuals interact with art as an artifact or social process more than as an aesthetic experience (there is no aesthetic judgment made). However, because sociology shies away from analysis of the aesthetic dimension of art, or how aesthetics (and aesthetic judgment and valuation) drive the history of art and the creation of works of art, 35 the affective existence of a work of art and its transformative potential—

34. Becker’s attention to objects and tracing their relations bears a similarity to Bruno Latour’s actor-network approach.
35. Nick Zangwill calls this production skepticism: “[P]roduction skepticism denies both that the aesthetic plays an efficacious role in art production in the mind of the artist and also in the mind of the audience.” 2002, 208.
progressive or reactionary—is missed in the focus on production and use. Philosopher Nick Zangwill (2002) names this the some-all fallacy: “The fact that some features of a work of art are determined by social factors does not mean that they all are” (209). For example, even if aesthetic judgment is a marker of class and status (i.e. elitism that reproduces the social class structure; Bourdieu) and not an affective or visceral response to the qualities of a work of art, those aesthetic judgments have determined and continue to drive how the history of art is told (and also to influence the success or failure of individual artists) through their impact on the contemporary art market via the choices made by gallery owners, critics, buyers and patrons regarding who to show, review, purchase or support. Hence, while art can have a potential, those potentials—regardless of an artist’s intent—have these various kinds of realizations, sometimes that align with capital or sometimes are distant from capital. Theories of urban space, geography, affect and aesthetic capitalism provide a means to connect art aesthetics with urban planning and redevelopment, particularly regarding the notion of the ‘creative city’ and the complicated relationship between art, artists and, for example, gentrification. Art criticism and theory supplement and expand my analysis of the Heidelberg Project and Godot by taking into account the role of the aesthetic and the histories of performance, installation and socially-engaged art.

1.3 Performance, installation, politics

1.3.1 Participation – Activation

Participatory, relational and collaborative art, particularly in such art’s refusal to be attentive only to aesthetic values and concerns, viewed as elitist and individualizing, have been unable to reconcile the apparent divide between life and art, including what the role of art institutions is or should be when one does not wish to rarefy the art or access to it. The
skepticism toward an emphasis on individual authorship reflects the distrust of profit-driven production and consumption of art that commodify and reify. In order to resist commodification and create art in or through a politics, art has to be used as a tool and artists have to resist creation of objects and/or deny authorship. In addition to the creation of explicitly political art, in the form of political posters or interventions like those of The Yes Men, attempts to challenge commodification of art objects and their absorption into the market has led to increased interest in performance and participatory forms of art. According to Claire Bishop (2006a), it is the social dimension of participation in art—not the activation of the viewer—that matters. Interaction with art is not the same as participation (all art requires some amount of interaction), even as a tactile interaction with art may produce a more democratic feeling toward art. Following Walter Benjamin, Bishop looks beyond the individual artist’s sympathies or intentions to read art as a type of work that is both a product of work and a representation of that work, occupying a position in the relations of production of its time. Art is work in a variety of ways, and as life becomes increasing financially precarious (Kosmala and Imas 2016) for growing numbers of people, the work that artists do for other artists has received more attention. Once thought of as “paying dues” or an opportunity to gain knowledge and experience, working for other artists has become a labor issue, one that demands attention be paid to the political and economic force relations that keep most artists poor even as they make such an ecosystem possible. However, participatory claims or calls in works art often employ agendas that disregard all context: the goals of ‘activation’ assume an already existing, emancipated subject able to determine their social and political reality, guided by the artist’s hand.

In the exhibition catalogue for The Art of Participation: 1950 to Now, a 2008-09 exhibit at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, museum director Neal Benezra, explaining the
exhibit’s theoretical and aesthetic engagement, uses Umberto Eco’s concept of the *open work*: “situations created by artists that involve members of the audience as participants or even partners in the art-making process” (10). For Eco, openness is not about being open to interpretation but rather opening up the production process, whereby authorial privilege is diminished in each re/production or instantiation of the text. There are multiple (and perhaps infinite) manifestations or doings of a work, but all are always prefigured by what has been provided by the artist, thus keeping the work in the domain of art and the artist in the position of originary producer. The show featured artworks and archival footage along with “historic restagings” and “new commissions that invite your direct participation...[T]he exhibition will change in form and content as you and other visitors contribute—either at the museum or online.”

But a question the show raises is, what occurs when participatory art is relocated out of community centers and alternative spaces and into galleries and—especially—museums? In an essay for the same catalogue, Boris Groys writes: “collaborative practices of this type are geared toward the goal of motivating the public to join in, to activate the social milieu in which these practices unfold” (19). A clearly defined author and work, however, are often missing from works of relational art. Openness alone, or the accompanying mode of participation or activation it offers, is not inherently a political good.

The show’s curator, Rudolf Frieling, suggests that participatory art, particularly presented in a museum-curated show, can never achieve its promise: “truly participatory art—that which goes beyond symbolic gestures—is a utopian idea rather than an artistic or political reality” (12). This assertion depends on a narrow definition of ‘production’ that requires participation and collaboration throughout the creation of a work of art, from conception to realization. Though

openness for Eco is tied to production, a perhaps utopian goal, *every* work is still potentially open since it may produce an unlimited number of readings, each reading serving as a new production of a kind even if a conscious or clearly visible instance or “activation” is absent (or imperceptible). Frieling uses *kairos* (v. tyche or techne) to talk about the “moment of rupture and suddenness, suggesting an unexpected presence and an opening of the senses” (33) that is a result of the open work. This occurs more outside of the museum context when art is in the streets. In this sense, it is the Happening, with its embrace of “serendipity”, that is the root of the relational aesthetics theorized by Nicolas Bourriaud more so than the work of the Situationists, Eco or Dadaists. Bourriaud (2002) defines relational aesthetics as “a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space” (113). For Bourriaud, relational art is not just a theory of interactive art but also represents a response to broader economic and cultural shifts toward a more service-based and a virtual, digital—i.e. alienated—society; in the new economic order, art creates a place of conviviality where people can come together and share in a common experience. In Happenings, something *happens* and then, with the relinquishing of control, new things occur. Similarly, Bourriaud attaches the notion of openness to a particular type of work and artistic intentionality rather than to audience reception or ethical, aesthetic, political outcomes. However, though the ideals of Happenings are also the dream of relational aesthetics, relational artists exist and address the social world in the context of a post-1980s art market, globalized neoliberal order, and economic restructuring. When read through the contemporary context, the resonance that many of the claims of relational art have with neoliberal capital is thrown into sharp relief. Instead of offering critical visions of the world, the role of art, in Bourriaud’s words, “is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to
actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real, whatever scale chosen by the artist” (13). Rather than the artwork being an encounter between a viewer and an object, relational art produces intersubjective encounters. Through these encounters, meaning is elaborated collectively, rather than in the space of individual consumption. Thus, artists don’t try to change the world, but instead present models by which to inhabit it in a better way.

A problem facing relational artists is the loss of accountability and any need to address one’s own privilege. It is still the artist who confers artistic license and permission audience. It is also unclear how people are being “activated” by the work and in what direction or for what purpose beyond inhabiting the world better. Furthermore, when social relations and the intent of the artist are what matter, the art, and much relational work is left open-ended (not open in Eco’s sense), pinning down what—and how—to judge becomes difficult as the processual nature of the art makes its object opaque. According to Claire Bishop (2004), the “laboratory” paradigm in museum curatorial decisions positions these works as “work-in-progress” based on viewer participation and production. But this misreads poststructuralist theory and Eco: “…rather than the interpretations of a work of art being open to continual reassessment, the work of art itself is argued to be in perpetual flux” (52; emphasis in original). This makes discerning (and judging) the work difficult as it is always unstable. Judgment criteria, contextual and relational meaning, and reception are not static and will always change but there must be a defined something to judge. Contrary to claims that relational, socially-engaged, or participatory art will “rehumanize—or at least de-alienate—a society rendered numb and fragmented by the repressive instrumentality of capitalism” (Bishop 2006b, 180), Bishop emphasizes that socially-engaged art has not received adequate critical attention. Artistic discourse has been overly attuned to artists’ working processes and intentions, or a work’s potential to function as a social salve, instead of
addressing a work's aesthetic significance and impact: “Artists are increasingly judged by their working process—the degree to which they supply good or bad models of collaboration... There can be no failed, unsuccessful, unresolved, or boring works of collaborative art because all are equally essential to the task of strengthening the social bond.” She continues. “While I am broadly sympathetic to that ambition, I would argue that it is also crucial to discuss, analyze, and compare such work critically as art” (180). The result is that relational work becomes part of the “experience economy” that revolves around the production of monetary value in the experience itself, and indeed falls beyond the pail of critical examination.

1.3.2 Space – Performance

Following the November 2015 attacks in Paris and Saint-Denis, a slip of paper inserted into the program for a dance performance titled 7 Pleasures explained why they had decided to go forward with the event: in order to “allow the theater to take up its social function of being a place to gather” (quoted in Lepecki 2016, 1). According to André Lepecki, this pronouncement “made clear what it means to be a dancer in today’s world: to insist on the social function of the theater as a gathering place; and to acknowledge that a dancer’s labor is inseparable from the conditions of the world,” and that performances resonate with and are informed by those conditions. Only the “fiction of representation could turn [dance] into something ‘external’” (2). It was likely impossible, in that instantiation of the performance, not to see and dance and feel the time and moment and movements through and with the violence and events of the preceding days (and ongoing). The moment of performance is always a specificity informed by a hundred individuals’ positionalities—of spectators and dancers—but rarely are all individuals informed and “collectivized” by one event.
The above example demonstrates the significance of spatially bound collective experience and, perhaps most importantly, the potential relationship between performance, performativity, site and memory. Art is, in part, a result of its context, a response and insight into it, and is an actor upon it. Many artists of the historical avant-garde were concerned with the artistic object and aesthetics. Artists of what is often termed the neo-avant-garde (Foster 1994) were interested in taking the form of art to its furthest points (not to be confused with ‘art for art’s sake’) and considering the space in which art was displayed and the role of institutions of art. The art of the work of art is not only within the art object but also resides in and around the environmental experience of the work. These interventions were leveled at art institutions and the space of the gallery; but the politics of taking art to its furthest point within the space of the gallery did not translate directly or necessarily to public spaces outside of the art galleries.

Groups such as the Situationist International sought to erase the division between art and life by making the way we live more artistic through site-based art actions. According to Nick Kaye (2006), site is defined in two ways. The first is substantive: “The place or position occupied by some specified thing, frequently implying original or fixed position.” The second is active: it can be transitive: “to locate, to place”; or intransitive: “To be situated or placed” (from The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary 1973, quoted in Kaye 2006, 1). Site-specific work may make claims on an originary signifier for a location/space, assuming that the space is read/located as a sign in a system where the signifier can then be located; it may also disrupt dominant systems of signification in that space by questioning that there are signifiers/signs at all. But we cannot assume that the work will be read “properly” in the space. For example, Richard Serra, upon the removal of his work Tilted Arc, said that to remove it was to destroy it. If it is re-placed it becomes something else. Site-specific work tries to trouble the opposition
between site and work, blurring those boundaries or questioning if they were there to begin with; the site-based performance, which approaches “the real city as palimpsest,” attempts “to define itself in the very sites it is caught in the process of erasing” (11). For Kaye, “it is performance which returns to define site-specificity, not only as a set of critical terms and as a mode of work, but as a way of characterizing the place these various site-specific practices reflect upon” (12, emphasis in original). Baz Kershaw, quoted in Wiegmink (2011), characterizes performance as “an effective radical force articulated to other kinds of political processes” (84). For Kaye, performance acts on space, itself a dynamic process, in this way. The transformative power of an aesthetic, affective experience relies heavily on site and what Frampton (1983) calls “the tactility of place.” The work, “can only be decoded in terms of experience itself: it cannot be reduced to mere information, to representation or to the simple evocation of a simulacrum” (28, emphasis in original). Thus, to repeat, performance is not representation, expression, or message, but instead a form of participation in social and spatial arrangements and change.

Installation art is, broadly defined, “any arrangement of objects in any given space, to the point where it can happily be applied even to conventional display of paintings on a wall” (Bishop 2012, 6). Bishop’s more detailed and nuanced definition contends that, “…installation art presupposes a viewing subject who physically enters into the work to experience it” and that these works can be understood by “the type of experience that they structure for the viewer” (10). This is not the same as installed art in a gallery show where each piece is discrete, as in the “artist-work” to “art-viewer” relationship. The installation artist breaks apart this paradigm by bringing the viewer into direct relation of production with the work; the work is, in a sense, completed by the viewer via the viewer’s experience with the work. Bishop’s definition of installation art suggests the performative and even performance-like aspects of installation. The
art is performed by those who interact with it, who ‘complete’ the work (even as the work can stand on its own as an object to assess). According to Roland Barthes (1978), with the birth of the reader comes the death of the author. The significance, or social aesthetic, of a work of art that exists in, for example, city streets, is a composite of individuals’ experiences with the piece (and at times the artist), the political-economic climate in which it is produced (and, in one case, continues to exist), and the observable material changes that occur not because of, but in relation to or alongside the work. For the purposes of my analysis, I read the Heidelberg Project as performative, site-specific installation art, and Godot as a site-specific, theatrical performance piece; I read both pieces as reliant on others for their full realization.

1.4 Aesthetics and the social

1.4.1 Art, power, politics

For philosopher Jacques Rancière (2004), art changes the social and spatial relations through which new collectivities or publics may emerge in ways that institution-aimed political action, rooted in fixed subjectivities, reason, and rights-based discourses cannot. Through affect—understood as the capacity to affect and be affected (Massumi 1987), and not an action but a capacity for activation (Clough 2009)—we can think of aesthetic experience as a potential for activation. Activation of an audience or viewer relies on the modulation of affect, something pre-conscious and unpredictable in the resulting action that can possibly serve the interests of, for example, capital. What activation does or might do, apart from an artistic impact or goal, is important to consider in relation to the social and political context precisely because it is unclear how people are being “activated” by the work or to what end. When social relations are utilized as medium, as aesthetic fodder, the implications of affective potentialities and modulation come
into clearer focus; as discussed above [1.3.1], artistic forms, such as relational art, resonate with dominant political-economic paradigms. The watered-down DIY ethic of “inhabiting the world better” that stems from Bourriaud’s analysis of the work he deems relational aligns with contemporary neoliberal politics and policies. While collective productions of art and shared experiences may have served as an intimate means to negate the alienating nature of capitalist social relations, neoliberal adherents and beneficiaries are only too happy to see people doing things for themselves, repairing the social bond, or feeding each other. Overestimating the social and/or political impact of such work lets the state and corporate business off the hook and skirts the possibility that social responsibility lies somewhere other than with citizens and individuals.

Yet intensive police repression and social control is a tacit acknowledgment that masses of people do have power while it also acts as a reminder that “we” do not retain the use of violent force against the state. Rancière (2004) argues that politics is aesthetic because the image of society is always about inclusion and exclusion, and the related issues of inequality and access are linked to the politics of aesthetics. Bishop reads Rancière’s notion of the aesthetic as being the “ability to think contradiction” (Bishop 2006b, 183). Furthermore, “[f]or Rancière the aesthetic doesn't need to be sacrificed at the altar of social change, as it already inherently contains this ameliorative promise” (183). Is there a point at which mutual aid and relations of necessity become so powerful and extended that true political opposition to state/capital could be realized? And could art aid in this change? Perhaps; but even if the answers to these questions are yes, I would suggest, following Bishop, that the function of art cannot and should not be to “repair the social bond” that serves the status quo. Art’s potential lies in its critical capacity and ability to evoke discomfort, self-examination and, again, the ability to think contradiction. The
ameliorative promise is not one reduced to inhabiting the world better; it is fraught with tensions that carry the potential to resolve those very social tensions.

Rancière (2006) contends that aesthetics is not a discipline as it is usually defined but rather a particular ‘regime of identification of art’, a particular way in which, in a given historical or social context, art is identified as art. The aesthetic regime of art has the ability to break down hierarchies in other social regimes (as well as in art) by asserting art’s autonomy while maintaining the significance of (and its embeddedness in) everyday life. John Berger’s (1977) near axiomatic claim, that “Seeing comes before words” (7), links the act of seeing to socio-historical contexts and their respective technologies, particularly as they become embedded in and wedded to everyday life. This aspect of social experience is never absent from a work of art, but attempts to obscure it are frequent. So while seeing a work of art is an individual experience, how one sees the work reflects one’s socio-economic position in an historical moment. What one looks at is similarly revealing: “We only see what we look at. To look is an act of choice... We never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves” (8-9). Moreover, an additional “layer” of socio-historical seeing is that of the artist who herself sees in a particular way that does not escape the influence of one’s relation to context. The “art of any period tends to serve the ideological interests of the ruling class” (86), but the painter paints from his position.37 Language, however, fails to explain or express what we see: “The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled” (7). It is in this gap that art “works” on us, affectively and aesthetically, and offers the possibility of transformation.

37. Berger draws an analogy between possessing and a way of seeing that he ties to the popularity of oil painting: “Oil paintings often depict things. Things which in reality are buyable (83), i.e. showed the viewer “sights of what he may possess” (85). “Oil painting did to appearances what capital did to social relations. It reduced everything to the equality of objects. Everything became exchangeable because everything became a commodity... Oil painting conveyed a vision of total exteriority” (87).
Before reproduction was possible, the religiosity afforded a work of art emanated from its uniqueness; it was inaccessible to most due to existing only in one location at any given time, and thus viewing it was a reflection of status and power. In the age of mechanical reproduction, aura and mystical status must emanate from somewhere other than the content of a work of art (now accessible to almost anyone in the marketplace) and its unique position in space and time.

“It is no longer what [the work’s] image shows that strikes one as unique,” thus aura becomes attached to value, and value is a result of the original work’s status as the original of the copy, its rarity, made material in the money equivalent—“its market price is said to be a reflection of its material value” (21). Expertise and “art appreciation,” or a focus on knowledge and the “human condition,” are in the age of mechanical reproduction what exclusive dominion was in the past. It is through this rarefication of understanding the work of art that a society is alienated from its art and therefore its history. It is through “disinterested ‘art appreciation’ [that all] conflict disappears” (13). Seeing comes before words, but words change what is seen and how one sees it. Installation and performance art, as “objects” or mediums, refuse easy reproduction, but still allow for the aura-mystification of their artifacts and captured images.

Art should not be something, according to Guy Debord (1994), that one has to go and see or contemplate, but rather something that is all around and lived. The radical pursuit of art/life was the furthest thing from l’art pour l’art, an idea that asserted art’s autonomy from religion, politics, and the social. Another problem that comes with granting art autonomy is that this is understood to mean that artists are themselves autonomous, somehow separate from and not accountable to the same critical and sociological perspective or ethics that academics are held to and have spent decades debating and considering (though sometimes—or often—they fail to

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38. Because spiritual ownership (and indication of one’s superior status) of a work of art is now known through one’s understanding (knowledge-ownership) of art instead of one’s experience of it. Art becomes social in a dramatically different and more pervasive way.
provide better ethical standards for conducting fieldwork). There are important critiques to consider in the history of art and the philosophical (and political) question of art’s autonomy from, for example, the social; but while *art for art’s sake* was seen as a regressive and elitist doctrine at the time of the 1960s, art’s current collapse into life (see, for example, “experience economy” and “aesthetic capitalism”) requires that we rethink what the autonomy of art provides. It is through sociology that I place lived experience, social impact, and political-economic implications at the center of my analysis.

1.4.2 *Institutionalization, ephemerality, affect*

The incorporation of nontraditional forms of art into the collections and exhibitions of major art institutions represents a recent shift in attention. Even by 1994, Gary Sangster, then-director of the Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art, observed that:

> The recent history of performance art in the USA has received less attention in the realm of exhibition research and presentation than many other contemporary art forms. The dynamic range of the theatrical and improvisational strategies of performance art has tended to place it within a marginal or peripheral category of interest and concern to art museums, where static art forms may often enjoy certain advantages of archival simplicity. (10)

The ephemeral quality of most performance and installation has been used as a means to resist capital and commodification, but, as more institutional attention has been paid to performance, performed and installation art, the ephemera left behind following such works (furniture, images, documentation) are themselves potential commodities (and regularly become so). Whether they end up in a museum or in the gallery market, these items have become sources of and imbued with value, both as immediate moments of exchange between artist-gallerist-buyer, and as future potential value as they continue to circulate through the art world as artifact. The artist becomes another site where value can congeal. Within capitalism, everything has, or can be understood,
through market value. The significance of value, and what constitutes value, has shifted since Marx posited that it was the amount of socially necessary labor time that gave value its substance and “amount.” But art and experience (and art-as-experience or experience-art) circulate through capital without, now, requiring an object of congealed labor time in the same way as in the past. The “fetish” of a commodity produces and is value in the current political-economic milieu, just as the site of the work, too, comes to be imbued with value. The affective traces left after the performance or installation have altered the space and its meaning.

With interest and legitimacy of “post-studio” artistic practices growing especially since the 1990s, it becomes important to consider the social, political, and economic climates in which such work is created and received. Bishop notes the difference in style and criticality between North American and European artists in regard to socially-engaged or participatory work, and suggests that American artists are more sociologically engaged in the political and historical contexts in which they produce work. They maintain a level of criticality and self-reflection that many European artists, focused primarily on formal interventions and arrangements, do not. US sociology has historically been a more practical and applied discipline, focusing on methods, data collection, and policy, while our European and British counterparts have been more deeply attuned to the theoretical and philosophical. The social sciences, particularly practitioners engaged in field research, have been forced to confront bias, privilege, and the role of the “objective” researcher since at least the 1980s when post-colonial, feminist, queer, and intersectional and critical race theories made their way into areas of the academy beyond the humanities. Artists working with society and social relations as a medium can avoid this type of self-examination because of the presumed autonomy of art. But, as Bishop reminds us, the problem is how to judge such art. We are not judging it as art if we judge it on ethical terms; but
at the same time, there is a sociological and methodological element to which we must attend. The bigger question is, therefore, how to judge it as art when it considers itself more than art (or positions itself as something more/else, or the viewer experiences it as something else) and incomplete or a process, but does not want to be judged as activism or research. Art, for Bishop, does have autonomy—and must—so that we have the opportunity to judge it as art, so it does not have to be subject to the same guidelines as, for example, academic research.

Performance, or the experience of performance, has in common with the “feels-economy”—an informational and aesthetic/haptic experience—the ephemeral what-is-it quality that was once tied to performative confrontation and proximity but that is now a diffused or networked call and response, the difference between presence and presenting, or the always on-ness of the digital environment in which we now exist. If, in the age of digital and aesthetic capitalism, we fail to be attentive to the implications of works of art using the social as medium, we risk losing art’s critical edge and radical potential to the all-consuming time-place of experience and information. Developing a sociologically informed mode of aesthetic analysis modeled on Bishop’s, and incorporating audience and viewer experience, avoids neglecting the social and aestheticizing social relations. Such an analysis must be attuned to the social relations embodied in the work, and those produced or affected by its reception. For example, the ubiquity of collaborations between contemporary artists and art institutions, and various social, political, or commercial entities, sheds light on one of the ways that artistic production is implicit in the dynamics of capitalism and urban development. In what ways, then, can art function as critique, refusal or alternative to, for example, capital? The question is sensitive to the current mode of capitalist accumulation and circulation as itself aesthetic (Jameson 1999; Shaviro 2007; Harold

39. For example, artist-chef collaborations at Park Ave, “The Festival of Ideas for the New City” based out of the New Museum, and Rirkrit Tiravanija’s designs for the Gap.
2009; Clough 2015), making necessary an analysis of collective productions of space, history, and value that can disentangle the relationship of art, capital, development, and urban change.

1.5 Cities, art, and aesthetics

In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre wrote, “The fact of viewing from afar, of contemplating what has been torn apart, of arranging 'viewpoints' and 'perspectives', can (in the most favourable [sic] cases) change the effects of a strategy into aesthetic objects” (1991, 318, emphasis in original). Tracing the impact of art on urban space, while not directly causal at an institutional scale, contributes to a knowledge of how art and aesthetic experience impact social phenomena to produce politics and narratives of the relationship of art, place, community and capital. This is of no small concern for the presents and futures of these urban areas and their residents in an era of aesthetic capitalism. Aesthetic capitalism, as defined by Christine Harold (2009), requires that capital, “…‘go deep,’ developing commodities that are imbued with value not through their production but through the various models of their use” (611). This post-Fordist “age of aesthetics” (Shaviro, 2007), must take into account the changing nature of value and commodities where commodities are not just representation or expression of status, but objects with agency and affect, designed to, in the words Patricia Clough (2013), “…sensually transmit a creative juice that will be transformative for its user such that the aura and value of the commodity is its transmission of affective capacity” (258). The place where something occurred is a site of (often invisible) commodifiable value that capital (as well as artists working with transitory and ephemeral mediums) works to fix as a source of value production and/or wealth accumulation. This tension between value, wealth production and ephemerality make the
relationship between art and politics fraught with complexity, complicity and contradiction. Art and capital deal in aesthetics, engagement and “activation”, and both regularly present visions for or examples of change in urban spaces. The intimate relationships between developers, city officials, policy and artists articulate and intersect with the movements and moments of change, value, deterioration and revitalization.

A city is not merely a location where human activities take place. According to Setha Low (1996),

Theorizing the city is a necessary part of understanding the changing postindustrial, advanced capitalist, postmodern moment in which we live. The city as a site of everyday practice provides valuable insights into the linkages of macroprocesses with the texture and fabric of human experience. (384)

Cities are social, relational, historical sites that, furthermore, produce and are constituted by human and nonhuman actors. Cities have been negatively characterized as atomizing and alienating symbols of modernity, characterized by the cultivation of a blasé attitude and superficial relationships (Simmel 1950; Wirth 1938); the planned city’s creativity-undermining legibility and spatial determination (Lefebvre 1995); and increased technological innovation and intervention into everyday life (Mumford 1995). From this perspective, the city is a place where nearly everything comes to be calculable in terms of cost, a market-driven or market-like ways of assessing relationships with others. Early sociological theories about the city, beginning especially with the Chicago School, looked closely at the kinds of individuals that cities produced, and treated urban environments as laboratories and the city itself as an ecological system with stable, social laws that could be learned through scientific study. Other urban scholars have attended to the dynamic effects of planning and organization on the lives in city dwellers, in effect assigning the blasé, calculating attitude to planners and officials instead of the public. In Henri Lefebvre’s (1995) account of the “new town,” a place marked by legibility,
signals, and intelligible signs directing one this way or that, it is the loss of creative possibility and site/place production that Lefebvre laments most. The old town is characterized by a certain boredom, familiarity, history, and lack of explicit legibility. It is like a seashell, excreted over time by the living organism. The boredom that comes with the new town is a lack of creativity due to the legibility and explicit use for everything. Everything is signal.

Many writers, including Lefebvre, also conceptualize cities as places that make possible new ways of being in the world. For Lewis Mumford, the culture of cities is one of communication, collectivity, and exchange; it should not be one of profit, alienation, and exploitation. Jane Jacobs (1961) famously argued that city life is full of significant relationships that circulate through neighborhood streets via the secondary social relationships that earlier scholars had deemed alienating and fragmented. Similarly, Samuel Delaney (2003) argues that the city produces communities that do not rely on familial or primary contacts. Relationships, even fleeting, that emerge from spontaneous moments of contact and exchange are socially and emotionally valuable; they aid cross-class contact and are an essential part of queer life in cities. In Lefebvre’s words, “[the urban] would imply the freedom to produce differences... The urban consolidates... transforms what it brings together …creates difference where no awareness of difference existed” (2003, 174).

But urban space is also a point for the accumulation of capital. The post-war period of deindustrialization forced a change in the form of urban capital accumulation; exchange-value must still be extracted despite the diminished use-values of industrial infrastructure. David Harvey (1985), building off of Lefebvre, divides the economy of cities into three sectors of accumulation: industry, the built environment, and knowledge production in the form of medical and educational institutions. Whereas Lefebvre believes that urbanization itself is a speculative
spatial production and that it would eventually become the main circuit of capitalism, Harvey emphasizes that the primary circuit of capitalism is still production. The speculative nature of real estate consolidation and development, and its reliance on urban aesthetics or race, culture, and economy, among other things, is of greater interest to me for the purposes of this research. Labor—in contemporary forms that may be affective, immaterial, or nonhuman, for example—is a significant engine of value and wealth production, but labor and industry alone, particularly in the production of physical commodities, are not the only sources of capital accumulation in an aesthetic and/or digital economy that source or mine culture and data for value. A basic principle of neoliberal philosophy and policy is to cut back on social spending while seeking new sources of revenue in cooperation with the private sector. New York City serves as an example of these social-economic shifts. The near-bankruptcy, implementation of neoliberal austerity, top-down gentrification, and use of art and culture form one path by which to trace the history of New York City and, specifically, the Lower East Side.

In 1975, following years of budget deficits, New York City was faced with a potential credit ratings downgrade and likely bankruptcy. In order to convince federal underwriters to extend credit to the city, Mayor Beame and his administration had to agree to several measures meant to decrease public spending and increase revenue, including: increased rates for public transit and fees for city universities; investment of city pensions in Municipal Assistance Committee securities; and tax increases. In addition, the white flight of the 1950s-1970s, immense disinvestment by both the city and landlords, and speculation in the East Village led to increased market property values, even as properties were officially assessed at lower values.

40. The federal government eventually agreed to extend credit to the city, despite what the infamous “Ford to city: Drop dead” headline from the Daily News suggests.
41. “East Village” is a neologism invented by real estate agents. The intention was to rebrand a section of the Lower East Side with a name that echoed and evoked the more affluent and quaint-sounding West Village.
(Bowler and McBurney 1991; see also Neil Smith’s rent gap theory). The working classes were steadily priced out of neighborhoods. Middle class whites returning to the city from the suburbs to be nearer to financial jobs were a partial force in gentrification, but, as Neil Smith (1996b) and Christopher Mele (1994) have shown, students and artists became the main drivers of gentrification on the Lower East Side. Along with the fiscal plan that kept the city solvent, a marketing campaign, anchored by the “I love NY” graphic slogan, aimed to change the cultural image of New York City. The new image branded the city as a center of arts, leisure, and consumption, as well as finance, as a means to aid the city’s recovery and spur investment.

The “renaissance” of the Lower East Side in the 1980s was largely orchestrated by state involvement with private development in an attempt to make it an artist district. Once the real estate speculation boom of the 1970s and early 1980s subsided, it was the media images and real presence of the artists in the area that continued to push the now slowed gentrification of the neighborhood (Deutsche and Ryan 1984). Artists who moved into the area, in search of low rent and little landlord oversight, aided in making the East Village an imaginary site seen as accessible to and safe for white newcomers and intrepid urban “pioneers” (Smith 1996b). The New York City branding campaign informed Richard Florida’s (2002) theory of the “creative class.” Florida suggests that urban planners should redevelop flailing downtowns by working to attract creatives—artists, engineers, programmers, educators, and people who work in finance and healthcare—who will in turn attract greater investment. As Martha Rosler (2011a) points out in her critique of Florida’s concept, it is only important that art be made somewhere nearby or that one believes that to be the case. And though critics have claimed that this creative class does not have a direct effect on urban growth, and that education level is a major determining factor, Rosler argues that
[w]hat matters, then, is not whether Florida’s bohemian index is good or bad for urban growth but that the gospel of creativity offers something for mayors and urban planners to hang onto—a new episteme, if you will. But Florida’s thesis also finds enthusiastic support in management sectors in the art world that seek support from municipal and foundation sources while pretending that the creative class refers to the arts. (10)

And, indeed, artists themselves aid in the dynamics of development and gentrification: “I have also alluded... to the relatively easy co-optation of artists as an urban group in cities that simply allow us to live and work in ways we find conducive to our concerns—a pacification made easier by the expansion of the definition of the artist and the advancing professionalization of the field” (2011b, 15).

1.5.1 Landscapes, culture, and capital

Landscape is a physical place, a social and cultural formation, and a “way of seeing.” A “way of seeing” reflects the historical, social, political, economic, and aesthetic/cultural context of a given point in time. Perhaps most significantly, technology alters the actual form through which things are seen and captured. Assembly line production, for example, does not allow any one worker to see the production of a commodity from beginning to end, therefore, in Marxian terms, alienating the worker from the product of her labor. Painting, photography, and film all capture and produce different ways of seeing. What and how we see can never be fully separated from the mode of production, technology, and socio-political contexts. Sharon Zukin (1991) argues that urban landscapes are products of the “creative destruction” wrought by market-driven culture. Culture, once vernacular and public, begins to conform more to the demands of privatization and the market, often through and in the form of business improvement districts, for example.
When one “experiences” a landscape it is as an observer rather than a participant (Cosgrove 1984, 18), though that does not mean one is not a player in producing the landscape (i.e. giving it meaning). A landscape is not a stable, static thing, even as its existence in the world seems fairly permanent and reliable. Representations of landscapes and their symbolic dimensions (in their physical form or in representations) change, often overdetermining the meaning of any one place. Thus landscapes and their representations can be analyzed for implicit class assumptions and relations. But, as Denis Cosgrove (1984) argues, symbolic productions must also be in some sense transhistorical and transcultural, able to communicate (or be the embodiment of) “unalienated human experiences and concerns” (57). I believe that these two positions together provide a framework for understanding that what is transhistorical and transcultural about landscapes and their symbolic representations is the changing and differentiated human relations to land and environment: the significance of images of the land—as landscape—vary across time and place, but these relations are also lived, in everyday life, with ideological influences swirling around, within, and through the places of everyday life.

Landscapes as urban, cultural products sometimes utilize images and ideas of “natural” landscapes. Joern Langhorst (2015) argues there is a manifest danger in the development of nature as image, an aesthetic, to only be looked upon. Lost is the immersed and engaged experience (the production of space), along with the history of place. Erasure of history occurs when design is elevated over preservation, the past, and the embedded nature/ecology of, in Langhorst’s example, the Highline and New York City’s postindustrial landscape. The Highline’s design attempts to control users’ experiences of the space by the production of intended use: “This aestheticizes and reduces complex lived experience, producing a narrow range of acceptable meanings and behaviors that replaces the aesthetics of performance
(aesthetic experience of processes and their resultant physical-material expressions) with a

*performance of aesthetics* (the experience of a constructed, “finished” spatial-physical

condition—a product and its attendant aesthetics)” (6).

## 1.6 Conclusion

Aestheticization has been viewed as politically problematic in the history of critical theory: the aesthetic is understood to be an investment in making bad things look good. Aesthetics and aestheticization are tied to capital accumulation, the notion of the creative class, and the ways that art/artists are utilized as a form of value-added and spatialized imaginary capable of speculative value production. There is also the link between aesthetics and politics related to narrating/narration and ways of telling history—what is, what was, what could be. A social-aesthetic is another way of thinking of sociality, a way of being in the world, in relation. Aesthetics has a politics, but the political is also aesthetic; aesthetics and politics are both, at the core, about a vision of what the world is or how it could or should be. I understand aesthetics to be a defining element of any object, event, or idea that seeks to determine or affect action or how actions, objects, or subjects are read or experienced. The idea of aesthetics in art is one that is both universal and particular. I can look at a work of art and experience it very personally but also believe that I am part of something larger that allows me to relate to others through that shared experience. When the notion of the aesthetic is applied beyond the world of art it becomes a means of universalizing something understood to be right or good or true. The aesthetic takes the place of the grand narrative. Instead of trying to produce knowledge about the world, an epistemology, the world makes itself known to us. Works of art, art practices, the art market, places marked by art (neighborhoods, streets, galleries, cities), and artists themselves matter. In
the most expansive understanding of “art”—one that includes all cultural production (material or non-material), that acts at least in some way, aesthetically—we are given a nearly endless number of ways through which to think, see, feel and imagine the world (places, relationships, identities, the self, the body). Beyond the ideological, emotional, affective, interpretive and imaginative effects of art are also the economic, social and political.

Art is a place where political praxis, theory or ideology, and the aesthetic meet, specifically in performative mediums that can exist outside of traditional art institutions. I use the term ‘performatively’ to describe art that accesses affective and emotional registers in ways that differ from, for example, those one may experience when looking at a painting or reading a book (Taussig 2011; Berger 1977). A static work of art requires individual contemplation and is a one-way interaction; performance is more immediately engaging. By this I specifically mean that the radical potential of performative art, such as performance and installation, manifests through the production of new and dynamic forms of collectivity that emerge through sensorial experiences that occur in a shared relationship to place and time. These collectivities move through social and geographic spaces with fluidity and a potentiality capable of producing change or transformation at several scales, including the scale of individual, the street corner, the neighborhood, and the city. While they are not anonymous, these collectivities are ephemeral and heterogeneous. The power of these audience collectivities lies in part on not requiring individuals to share biographies or self-same identities while, as opposed to traditional theatre, the audience is involved in the performance and “completes it.”

42. A work of art, including a painting or sculpture, is never truly static or ‘dead’ because the world/context around it—literal/physical and conceptual—are constantly changing. It, too, changes: works of art experience time and wear, their significance and value fluctuate. But a work of art that uses paint or clay as a medium is more static than one that has social interactions and the space (place-making) in which the work occurs as its medium. Specifically, in socially engaged art or relational art, the intent is typically to immediately affect the viewer/participant through social interaction; the artist is physically present (not always, but often with performance). Painting does not require this artist’s presence (and the intent of the artist is of little consequence to the critic, namely).
Art creates affective and relational spaces in and between the work and the larger (urban) context. The Heidelberg Project and *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans* are performative and productive in relation to the spaces they occupy/occupied; each project/piece changes the spatial and affective relations of viewers and/or participants as well as the sites in which they are located. Both of these artists accomplish this through an engagement with audience and environment: Guyton builds community and historical memory through artistic, site-based practice; Chan offers memorialization, outreach and healing through storytelling and temporarily remaking place. Both produce and engage in conversations, arguments and local tensions that surface through local skepticism, response to their work, and their presence. Such tensions and fraught relationships carry the potential to open up discursive, political and collective possibilities by creating different and new publics and places for interactions to occur. The next two chapters situate the artists and their work in relation to each context: Detroit following the revelation of the 2010 census and the 2013 bankruptcy plan (Chapter 2); and post-Katrina New Orleans and the recovery plans and demographic changes that occurred (Chapter 3). Each chapter addresses the historical contexts and significance of investment, dis-investment, privatization, return, absence, (re)development and resistance on the aesthetic, demographic and political-economic changes in each city, as well as on the production of exclusion, marginalization and discourses of disposability.\footnote{See: Allison Goodman, *Renewal and Disposability* (unpublished PhD dissertation, 2013).}

Art can go beyond capturing and expressing feelings and move toward producing new ways of thinking and acting, or relating and communicating. In the following chapters, I ask: What kind of space is the artist creating? What is the relationship between the work and the environment? How does this space affect the reception of the work (i.e. how significant is the location)? I examine the relationships between art, urban space, and media narratives as they are
historically situated within and against capitalism's multiple processes of domination, such as coercive force, hegemonic consent and biopolitical or biotechnical control. Spatialized, artistic, and media aesthetics exist in moments of concert and collision that offer up ephemeral yet seemingly naturalized histories and locations that in turn function as sites of deep and/or expansive capital development, disinvestment, mobility/immobility, and invisibility, hypervisibility or erasure.
1.7 A note on method

Theoretical paradigms and epistemologies are not static; they are always in process and never complete. A discursive regime serves to order even scientific paradigms, though practitioners are unlikely to accept or notice such discursive power in their drive toward objectivity and empirical truths. Thus it is impossible to talk about method without also talking about power. As methodologies function through their attachments to and embeddedness in disciplinary/disciplined institutions of knowledge, the hierarchical power arrangements of those institutions imbue methods and method practitioners with institutional authority. But that is a simple characterization of power that assumes only that power come through the researcher by way of explicit or implicit institutional authority. Such power works at the same time with power-in-relation in the moment of interaction. The “rules” of authority that grant institutional power to the researcher assume recognition of (and respect for) what is really a paradigmatic power. The experience of researcher-power, however, happens in the interaction. Approach, recruitment strategy, survey design, interview questions and format all force a reckoning with power and the possibility of rejection by the (potential or enrolled) “participant” or “subject.” Institutional power, then, is only successful, or only has a reach, so far as a potential is willing to submit to such authority. Refusals and rejections make power-as-process invisible (Agamben 2009).

In order to think through some of the limitations and implications of academic research, I turn to the George Steinmetz’s (2005) notion of the “epistemological unconscious.” Steinmetz argues that, following World War II, positivism resurfaced in sociology. Positivism requires that assumptions be made about the nature of social reality by employing particular epistemological precepts about how facts can be known. Positivists rely only on scientific method, discounting
the validity of metaphysical claims or forms of analysis and knowing (111). Steinmetz explains the persistence of positivist sociology by pointing to its resonance (125) with Fordism and postwar fear of fascism. Critiques of science, and adherence to non-scientism and other modes of knowing and knowledge production, were seen as pro-fascist and therefore suspect. Both Fordism and positivism sought to demonstrate that social phenomena were repeated and invariant across time and space, that they were rational, acultural, predictable, and controllable (129). Thus Steinmetz argues that the epistemological unconscious of the Fordist era contributed to the proliferation of positivist sociology.

When I seek to understand and ameliorate the effects of, for example, neoliberal policies on gentrification, I may reproduce or contribute means for the state or capital to order, manipulate, or intervene in urban space. The epistemological unconscious of neoliberalism, like Fordism before it, relies on positivistic science and data. Similarly, Clough (2010) uses the notion of an “affective background” to explain how sociological methods and scholarship become resonant with the preemptive logic and securitization employed by neoliberalism through the modulation of the affect of populations in such a way as to be amenable to such processes.

Clough (2010), quoting Laurent Berlant, writes that “sociologists take the case to be ‘crucial to the reproduction of qualitative disciplinary knowledge’ as it points to ‘how, why, and when certain things become imperative for fresh study and fresh narrative re-mediation’” (Berlant 2007, quoted in Clough, 627). Clough continues:

[1]n sociology, the case, like other qualitative methods—ethnography for example—while commonly thought to open up new ways of knowing or to propose new objects for analysis, is nonetheless often suspected of not meeting the standards of empirical social science research and is therefore expected to submit findings to further study, typically large N, quantitative empirical study. (27)
Ethnography, however, does not simply function as the humanizing counterpoint to disembodied statistical analysis: “Structural analysis and small N studies such as ethnography and case study are deployed as supplemental elaborations of statistical populations, framing or embedding the latter in a humanistic practice of representation” (631). The statistical population is not a collection of individual subjects, and the population cannot be disaggregated back down to the case: it has specific aggregate effects deployed in the form of prediction and patterning. The present governmentality is about the calculation of risk in relation to populations, a discourse in which sociology often finds itself. The case serves to individualize the collective phenomenon by bringing the individual case into the aggregate, functioning at times as “proof” of the prediction or as an exception or outlier.

Karen Barad (1998) uses the term “intra-action” to suggest a sense of totality in a total action. Our observational apparatuses are inseparable from the matter/object they produce knowledge about (just as discourse cannot be separated from matter). What she terms “agential realism” is an approach that takes into account intra-active specificities in order to understand the ways that matter matters differently. The apparatuses of research and study are implicated in these iterative processes and practices. To return to Clough (2010), “as individuation and affective activation become more relevant than the interplay between individual and structure, there is a change in measure, reading, writing, or computing. There is a transvaluation of value affecting realism, empiricism, and scientificity” (641).

* * * * *

Critiques of reason, logic, and the social sciences are not new. Such critiques aim to upend the illusion that empirical, scientific inquiry and rigor can show us something about what the world really is and how various phenomena—racism, inequality, conflict, solidarity—look,
feel, and operate in the social world. But the sociality of, for example, pain and loss, cannot be reduced to a series of interview questions, statistical regressions, or participant-observation field notes. This type of thought and analysis is cognitive, but how can one impose a cognitive, conscious process on experiences that may be pre-cognitive (and therefore pre-linguistic) in their effects? The reliance on fact, empiricism, or typology is grounded in the existence and experience of a subject that moves outward toward an object, rather than the possibility of an aesthetic object that moves inward toward the subject (Barad 2003). Empirical research can at best hope to access some aspect of the modulation of the affects of experience, but should not pretend to have privileged insight into some notion of “the real.”

In studying art, I take such critiques seriously in two ways. First, I do not assume I can understand an individual’s experience of art, but I believe that I can appeal to someone’s memories or sense of how something felt, looked, or what might have changed or happened afterward, either to or in a place, or to themselves. This includes taking seriously my own analysis and aesthetic experience. Second, I grant art a place outside of sociological inquiry, allowing it a possibility or agency in the world that facts, data, and information do not have.

Clough (1998) suggests that it is impossible to be “in the writing as a fully intending subject” (xviii). We must consider our writing technologies, as researchers and academics and theorists, just as much as we have to think about the methods themselves. The subject, the work, and the technologies cannot be separated (xxi). Ethnography relies on narrativity, but narrativity is not the only, or even primary, mode of knowledge production and dissemination. A problem of rewriting the past (or of resignifying spaces) is that it takes away the site of what Avery Gordon (2008) describes as ghostly existence; if the historical space the ghosts inhabit becomes unrecognizable, the ghosts cease to haunt.
I employ methodological means in my research while at the same time remaining conscious of the fact that methods produce just as much as they seek to understand. I take an approach that assesses the affective, aesthetic, and discursive environment that exist in relation to particular socio-structural arrangements and aesthetic atmospheres. This is not merely a metaphorical environment; it is spatialized and locatable. It is also a temporal atmosphere (Anderson 2009) that exists in relation to an affective background determined by logics, deployments, and modulations of race, value, and aesthetics in and through urban space and digital or social media.

I have approached each place and piece differently, by necessity and by choice. These works, artists, and cities are spectacularly different but share things in common, and each work is experienced differently and in different contexts, and each artist intends and contributes something different. My relationship to each work and city has also been different, adding to the complexity and complicated nature of interviewing and observing.

My writing and methodology are iterative: I approach the same questions, problems, theories and ideas, and works repeatedly. Sometimes I approach from the same or similar perspective and other times I approach differently (in the case of coming at a work through multiple theoretical or aesthetic positions).

Aesthetic perception is not cognitive or conscious. It comes from without into the subject, producing the subject. The subject is always being created anew through the experience of external data; this does not, however, negate the feeling of continuity we feel (Shaviro 2007). For ethnography, then, what is captured or observed are fleeting momentary data about experiences of seemingly singular subjects. Theoretical approaches to affect can inform sociological approaches to the aesthetic. Paraphrasing Massumi, Clough (2009) explains affect as the,
“…excess of conscious states of perception, a pre-conscious ‘visceral perception’ that is the
condition of possibility of conscious perception” (48). There is always a remainder, folding back
on itself, not to be captured. It is this remainder that is the aesthetic experience produces. Hansen
(2004) suggests that moments are not constituted by memory, but by affect’s capacity to activate
in the present, producing the consciousness that perceives the moment. Thus, we do not have to
rely only on a collective shared memory of a past for meaning, and instead we can look to
aesthetic modes of producing community.

Art does not change the world and it does not act directly on politics. But art changes
people by making our ordered worlds disorganized. Art can reflect or manifest something of the
socio-historical context in which it is produced (and of the artist); it also acts upon that context
and its objects, human and nonhuman, by challenging or reframing a taken-for-granted
understanding of, for my purposes, an event and/or place. Art offers what the best sociological
methodology aspires to capture: the familiar becomes strange, and the strange familiar.
2 The Heidelberg Project, Detroit (Tyree Guyton, 1986-ongoing)

2.1 Say Nice Things About Detroit


At least since 1943, Detroit has had an image problem tied to racial discourses and discriminatory policies. The cause and effect of such discourses and policies, though not singular in either case, stretch back to at least as early as the riot of the summer of 1943, when a fist fight between and white man and a black man escalated and spread over Belle Isle and then to the city streets across the bridge. By the time of the riot, the seeds of racial tension had been sown and taking root for years, leading to decades of confrontations, protests, and eventual white flight to the suburbs and lost revenues in the city. For the white, middle class, and ethnically assimilated population, Detroit was a city on the decline: no longer white, no longer a nice place to make a home and live a middle class life. Not long after, the black middle class followed. The remaining residents—unable or unwilling to leave—were the convenient scapegoats (or victims) heaped with blame for (or suffering under) many of the city’s problems, including crime and blight. Unlike New York City, Detroit experienced no rebound following nationwide urban decline in the 1970s, and little attention was paid to what happened to the city or its residents in the years that followed. However, beginning after the 2007-2008 mortgage and financial crisis, and after

1. Phrase coined by Detroit businesswoman Emily Gail in the 1970s as an attempt to boost the city’s image—much in the way of the “I Love NY” campaign, though Gail’s had arguably less success. Though Gail has sold t-shirts and bumper stickers with the slogan, from others who want to brand items with it she asks only that she be credited by name. Similarly, Milton Glaser who coined the “I Love NY” slogan never received royalties or trademarked the phrase. For more information about Gail, see: http://www.emilys.org.
decades of willful ignorance and not-so-benign neglect, eyes finally fell back upon Detroit, resulting in a relative landslide of journalistic reporting on the 2010 census population data, rock-bottom real estate, and other portents of decline and bankruptcy, including the countless “ruin porn” photographs that flooded the internet, showing the world just how “returned to nature” and lost to neglect Detroit was. Though not the whole story, the negative images of Detroit are not without foundation in reality: in 2015, the murder rate was 44 per one hundred thousand residents;² by comparison, the national rate was 4.5 and the rate for New York City was 3.9 per one hundred thousand.³ In the same year, over 60,000 properties were facing foreclosure and possible sale at auction.⁴ Though yearly loss has slowed, the population has continued to fall, reaching an estimated low of 672,795 in 2016.⁵ How does a city once deemed the *Paris of the Midwest* and the *Arsenal of Democracy* become the *Murder City*, home to the largest municipal bankruptcy in United States history?

The present realities of Detroit are mired in a history of discrimination, exclusion, structural inequalities and corporate malfeasance. One particularly predominant image that has been perpetuated for decades is of a once-invading and now undeserving black population, still discursively active today but typically coded in us/them terms instead of racial language. This persistent image and narrative of Detroit, of a neglectful, criminal, and culturally poor—or entirely invisible—population, stretches back with relative continuity to the migration of southern Blacks to the city in the early decades of the twentieth century. The introduction of

². Hunter, “Dec. surge dims hopes,” 12/28/2015. The homicide rate peaked in 1974 with 714 per 100,000 and again in 1991 with 615. Following national trends, though still one of the highest, the rate steadily declined in the 1990s.
⁴. Harpaz, “Buyer beware,” 3/6/2015; Cwiek, “2015 Wayne County tax foreclosure,” 10/23/2015. After protests and massive intervention by various organizations, the number, which included renter and owner occupied homes, fell to 28,000 for the county. The majority of those 28,000 homes that went to auction were located inside Detroit. It is unknown exactly how many were still occupied.
Ford’s famous $5-a-day wage\(^6\) in 1914, and his policy of hiring African Americans (especially after World War I), attracted tens of thousands of hopeful workers to Detroit. By 1940, while the black population of Detroit was less than ten percent, twelve percent of Ford workers were black (Sugrue 2005; Maloney and Whatley 1995).\(^7\) Jobs and the promise of homeownership—particularly significant for African Americans—resulted in the Great Migration of southern blacks to Detroit as well as the formation of a completely racialized residential geography in the city by the 1940s. To the chagrin of whites, the new arrivals refused to abide by the tacit rules of racism—that expected black residents to know their place—by continually pushing against and across the boundaries of the black/white divide. In a swap of cause for effect, whites blamed decreasing property values on what they characterized as the criminal and culturally out-of-step African Americans they saw moving ever closer to their white neighborhoods, and toward what they feared would end in the eventual theft of their entire city, thus justifying their racism and discriminatory practices. These were the foundations of the narrative of black irresponsibility, dependency and deficiency that today lurks behind the ruin porn photographs, disinvestment plans, and media reports on crime, abandonment and joblessness. This is the Detroit that is left to vanish into history as it—or its image—continues to destroy itself.

There is a related though markedly different way to tell the story of post-2007/08 crash and post-2010-population-crisis Detroit that seems to let go of this version of history. It is, however, no less insidious than the discrimination and racism-fuelled story that paints Detroit as a modern-day Gomorrah. Instead, this is the version that ignores Detroit’s status as the most

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6. Worstall, “Henry Ford’s $5 a Day Wages,” 3/4/2012. Five dollars doubled the standard pay of the time. Though Ford is often credited with creating the middle class and expanding the consumer market, he did not increase employee pay in order to allow workers to purchase cars (though that was in many cases what happened). The increase was an effort to attract and retain the best workers in order to keep productivity and efficiency high.

7. Half of the city’s black male population was working at Ford in 1940. Though Ford was less likely to discriminate according to race in hiring, black workers were still typically assigned the most dangerous jobs. It has also been suggested that Ford hired black workers because he began to fear unionization of his other immigrant workers. See also: Bates, 2012, *The Making of Black Detroit in the Age of Henry Ford.*
populous US city ever to declare bankruptcy and, in one case, reframes Detroit’s bankruptcy as a check in the plus column for giving the city a chance to fix itself up. This is the Detroit where the $100 home isn’t considered a foreboding omen but rather an open door to potential. It’s the version that admires Detroit’s Midwestern work ethic, authenticity, and perseverance against the odds. The Detroit of 2015 is showcased in the New York Times as a go-to travel destination for the budget conscious and art-minded foodie. It’s the city that will rebound just as sections of cities like New York and San Francisco did in decades past. It will be different, but it will survive. And, most notably, after being written off as a relic of the long-gone golden age of US industrialism, it is now a place of possibility and opportunity for technology companies, entrepreneurs and makers, and ambitious, eco-minded urban planners and designers. Though recognized by a few as anything but a “blank slate,” most articles about Detroit remind readers only of the city’s vast emptiness and potential for big returns on small investments, especially in land. In this new Detroit, artists and creative-types drive the city’s resurrection as a new haven for art, culture, and young entrepreneurialism while aiding a rise in real estate values. Dubbed the “Midwestern TriBeCa” in 2011 by the New York Times, this is the Detroit where young, mostly white and upwardly mobile newcomers to the city are its great hope to create and attract investment, businesses, and more residents. In 2012, journalist and Detroit-area native Mark Binelli wryly noted, “It had taken the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression to do the unthinkable: Detroit had suddenly become trendy” (14). Thus the media’s schizophrenic depictions present a Detroit that might be dangerous, hopeless, and a waste of time and

8. Austen, “The Post-Post-Apocalyptic Detroit,” 7/11/2014. There is considerable resonance between such comments about Detroit’s bankruptcy and statements made after Hurricane Katrina that suggested the storm had cleaned up public housing, for example.
resources; or cool, hip, and edgy, anything-goes; or full of opportunity for growth, capitalization, and profit.

No one image of Detroit is necessarily more accurate or inaccurate, correct or incorrect than another; Detroit can be any of those things from a given perspective, and any of those images has affective and strange causal power in the world, albeit problematically in most cases. Any image may contribute or be linked to an urban imaginary, thus able to represent or produce a truth about Detroit and therefore have material effects. What most of these common media tropes share, though, is the general absence of Detroiters who live outside of the downtown bubble or one of its historically affluent neighborhoods. Common media pronouncements such as the following erase the history and lives of many Detroit residents and neighborhoods: “To anyone with aspirations in this area, it is Detroit that offers the greatest opportunity to make your mark. It is the ultimate blank canvas” (Renn 2009); or “In a way, a strange, new American dream can be found here, amid the crumbling, semi-majestic ruins of a half-century’s industrial decline. The good news is that, almost magically, dreamers are already showing up.”11 The deluge of reporters, buzz-makers, and cool-watchers have forced an uptick in Detroit’s hip factor: after the Midwestern Tribeca, Detroit became the “last stop on the L train”12 in 2015, perhaps a more accurate geographic collapse, particularly given the postindustrial, ruin porn playground fantasy idea that both Bushwick, Brooklyn and Detroit deliver, remade as “Rust Belt Chic.”13 While not west like California is “the West,” Detroit may be just far enough to conjure notions of westward romanticism in the minds of young east-coasters looking to discover themselves in the city “just west of Bushwick.”14 Artists are attracted to Detroit for the same reasons they were attracted to

14. Ibid.
their imagined version of New York, and as a result of the *new* New York failing to deliver the goods: affordable space, little surveillance, and a community of like-minded people. Many Detroit newcomers are well intentioned15 and hope that their art and community projects challenge, slow, or at least don’t contribute to gentrification; but nothing can take away what young, white faces mean when they show up in a majority black city on its many abandoned streets, bringing with them galleries, street art, cafes, and handmade leather goods shops. An alternative, less cynical view of Detroit’s newcomer artists and entrepreneurs may be hard to swallow, but there is a difference between the art that helps sell condos or appreciates property values in a neighborhood, and the art that (just maybe) doesn’t, art that challenges and contests narratives of destruction, ruin, and renewal; art that *provokes* response in equal measure to which it has *responded to* its surroundings. Responses to contentious and contested art, highlighted by Detroit’s landscape of abandonment and destruction, are just as often negative or destructive as they are participatory and supportive. Such is the story of the Heidelberg Project.

### 2.2 Arrival

The Motor City is burning, babe, there ain’t a thing in the world that I can do

Don't you know, don't you know, the big D is burning

Ain't a thing in the world lil' Johnny can do

My hometown burning down to the ground, worse than Vietnam

...Takin’ my wife and my family, and lil’ Johnny Lee is clearin’ out

– John Lee Hooker, “The Motor City is Burning” (1968)

My first research trip to Detroit was also the first time I stepped foot anywhere in Michigan, but already I had ideas about what Michigan and Detroit were like. I imagined Detroit

as the “black sheep” of a big, happy (white) Midwestern state. In a certain respect, I wasn’t wrong—for many in Michigan, Detroit is a geographically and culturally delimited place marked by irresponsibility, crime, ruin, corruption, and the underserving poor. Always implicit—and often explicit—is racial and/or racist ideology that lays a history of responsibility for “destroying the city” at the doorsteps of the black Detroiter still living within its boundaries.

![Figure 1](image1.png)

Figure 1 – My route across the city. Created using Google Maps.

I arrived at Detroit-Wayne County Airport on the afternoon of Tuesday June 11, 2013. The airport is west and south of the city, but it took less than thirty minutes to get from the airport, across Detroit, and to a Trader Joe’s\(^\text{16}\) in Grosse Pointe to the northeast almost thirty-six miles away [Fig. 1]. For a city that sat in my imagination as a vast prairie dotted with occasional homes and burned out buildings stretching to the horizon in every direction, I had not expected it

\(^{16}\) There are few grocery store options in Detroit and as a newcomer I did not yet know the names of the local markets I could have shopped at. Unbeknownst to me, a Whole Foods—the first national grocery chain to open in Detroit in decades—had opened just over a week earlier.
to feel so small. The entire city is navigable via a grid-like network of multi-lane freeways, making travel by surface roads unnecessary—a good thing since, according to some, even stopping to get gas is unsafe in many areas of the city, especially at night.\textsuperscript{17} The freeways, many sunken below street level rather than raised above it, make it possible to miss Detroit completely, and I have a feeling that’s how a lot of people, even those who live or spend time there, experience it—as a series of safe places connected by highways that provide a shield from the ruins and suggestions of inequality that force reckoning and dampen a good mood.

I was nervous about Detroit when I got there. Coverage of the dramatic population decline between the 2000 and 2010 Censuses, the then only looming threat of bankruptcy, and seemingly unceasing violent crime rate leant narrative framing to the slew of images by news outlets, artists, and amateur photographers that emanated out from the city.\textsuperscript{18} The majority of images returned by my various media and Google image searches showed a ruin-porn fantasy playground full of burned out houses and buildings, fallen-down houses and buildings (and burned out or scrapped for metals), or large “urban prairies” that for years have been growing over any signs of human-made interventions. There were blocks that felt similar to the Lower Ninth Ward in New Orleans that had been nearly leveled by Hurricane Katrina; if you didn’t know that there had been homes there, you could easily have assumed the semi-rural environment had always been that way. In many ways, the landscape of Detroit was far more desolate and crumbling that I had imagined. I am not sure it is possible to imagine a city built for two million people feeling or looking like Detroit did to me then. Yet there were also images of

\textsuperscript{17} In 2015, Police Chief James Craig told a reporter that he would only pump gas in Detroit at night if he had to. Two years earlier, the news blog Deadline Detroit addressed the criminal activity that goes on at gas stations around the city, including car theft and drug dealing. Jackman, “Chief Craig ‘wouldn’t’ pump gas in Detroit,” 5/26/2015.

\textsuperscript{18} Of course, many images of Detroit are made by visitors to the city, but the effect is one of leveling and overshadowing; counter-images are ignored or seen as exceptional, and subtle differences between how Detroiter view the city or want it seen swirl amid the perhaps greater number of images produced by outsiders. Detroiter, too, have widely varied ideas about the past, present, and future of the city, but few residents of any city want outsiders capitalizing on their traumas, embarrassments, hardships, communities, or (rarely acknowledged) successes.
farms and gardens, and though they were overwhelmed by the other more catastrophic images that make better news, I knew they existed somewhere. Thus just as—or more—surprising than the abandonment were the numerous lived-in and architecturally beautiful neighborhoods I drove through. The life in these areas was not the result of the recent influx of young people and new technology companies. They are older, established neighborhoods comprised of residents who never left, or who, at the very least, arrived before the now ubiquitous “Detroit-as-opportunity” stories appeared in the pages of the New York Times.

The “opportunity” stories constituted the other images that dominated media attention. These were the stories of the “heroic artist,” urban farmer, or “frontiersman” brave enough to venture out into the nether regions of the city in search of affordable space, great photo ops, and an anything-goes environment. The requisite New York Times lifestyle/arts/travel/real estate features followed creatives’ journeys to Detroit, often focusing on artists and other adventure seekers or entrepreneurs from New York and sometimes, more specifically, “L train” Brooklyn, thus producing a geographical collapse that brings together grit and privilege to form a fantasy of creative possibility and authenticity. Basing one’s judgment on the great majority of media stories (or current films) about Detroit, one would assume that there was nothing but emptiness and a few (white) artists running amok in the Wild West, land-of-opportunity of what is left of Detroit. And why not move to Detroit? With New York’s real estate prices, Los Angeles’ sprawl...
and car culture, and New Orleans’ threat of hurricanes and flooding, Detroit makes sense: real estate is cheap and space is plentiful; there is a growing entrepreneurial culture; arts organizations want to fund creative projects in the city; and it is just a short flight from New York City. There is a common refrain, one I have heard often from people outside of Detroit and from those who have recently arrived: shouldn’t people be happy that anyone is going there and doing something positive? Newcomers bring energy, idealism, and the greater access to resources that comes with the presence of privilege. But often they also carry with them, intentionally or not, a savior complex. The problem of hailing young, mostly white artists and creative types (Dan Gilbert included) as the saviors of a majority black city seems to go largely unnoticed in the media. However, the conflation of race with crime and abandonment (and responsibility for it), or the elision of race entirely (except in media coverage crime), permeates coverage of Detroit as a land of opportunity. The focus on Detroit’s “rebirth” produces a geography of value that can be mapped onto just a few of the spokes that jut out from the central business district near the Renaissance Center downtown, in effect forming a central core that defines a new Detroit, as if the other 130 square miles did not exist [Fig. 2 and 3].

The geography of Detroit is dramatically racialized and segregated. I had forgotten that Detroit is nearly eighty-three percent black until someone (white) I met reminded me. It was a statistic I knew, but had quickly forgotten in my first days in the city. Somehow, in a majority

22. Dan Gilbert, the founder and CEO of Quicken Loans, has taken a large role in the redevelopment and changing landscape in downtown Detroit.
23. According to the 2010 Census. That percentage grew steadily after 1920, but climbed rapidly as the number of whites in the city started to decrease after 1950.
24. This is how—there were few places to stay in Detroit. There are downtown hotels, a hostel near Corktown, and little else. There is a relatively small (but growing) number of Airbnb options, most located near the downtown core. I chose to stay with an Airbnb host with easy access to Wayne State, downtown, the DIA, and the Heidelberg Project. These areas are home to many of the white newcomers to the city; I was able to access them all easily and seamlessly. I like to stay with Airbnb hosts so at least one local person is able to help me with questions, concerns, and in case of an emergency. One of my hosts was able to help me when my rental car was stolen. My host then was part of the neighborhood’s call network and within hours someone had located my car, on blocks, wheels missing,
black city, I had managed to go several days in mostly white establishments, talking with white people, in areas of the city where many of the I saw people walking, shopping, eating, driving, and living were white. In the Midtown area, a neighborhood within what I call the Downtown core [Fig. 4], one sees more diversity than in other areas, due in part to the presence of Wayne State University students. Midtown is also a landing zone for newcomers, enticed by tax abatements on affordable condos. The diverse, middle-class, creative feel of the neighborhood lends urban credibility and “authenticity” to white newcomers’ Detroit status. This is, for whites, the “post-race” fiction and fantasy: mutual integration. This is not altogether a bad thing, and indeed is not an easy thing to decry. Increased business and sidewalk traffic by newcomers and natives, black or white, are positive signs of life in a city. The tax base increases. Once-desolate streets become populated. Black-owned businesses are frequented by new residents, and new residents open more businesses.

None of this happens in isolation, though. Real estate speculators and developers watch and wait. Eventually the new businesses are five-star restaurants and art galleries, businesses that do little to serve the greater Detroit area or its economically starved residents. The rest of the city, outside of this central bubble, is radically different. It holds most of the city’s population but the least density. It is also less racially diverse than the central hub or the neighborhoods along the river that include Mexicantown. Moving through a city where I was in the twelve percent minority was something very new to me, particularly where that split is largely along black/white lines. Strange to me was being in a city where white was a small minority while not

only a few streets away. The police, who shocked me by arriving about twenty minutes after I placed my initial call, were less efficient when it came to locating and then processing the car.

25. “Downtown core” is what I use to refer to an area that includes the Central Business District, Midtown/Cass Corridor, Wayne State, Brush Park, Lafayette Park, Corktown, Woodbridge, and parts of nearby neighborhoods [see Fig. 4]. These areas comprise those into which the city has invested and continues to invest (sports facilities, a light rail), and that have seen some of the largest demographic shifts and numbers of newcomers to the city. Downtown is the only place in the city many suburban residents will venture, typically to attend sporting events.
actually feeling that it was. Having already driven across the city from the eastern border at Grosse Pointe Park, I knew that there were black folks in Detroit, and more of them than whites, but within the Downtown core, the demography is not so lopsided as it is immediately outside of it. Detroit, with its suburbs, is a city of ever-changing rings, visible on demographic, real estate, and economic maps of the city. Numerous scholars (Smith 1996; Harvey 1985; Zukin 1991; Hackworth 2007) have pointed to the city center as a new site of capital investment and value/profit-production in the post-industrial city. After decade long periods of disinvestment, corporate and white flight, corruption, and in some cases bankruptcy (Detroit joined that list in the top slot for both city size and debt owed), a new urban core is now part of a marketing campaign and design aesthetic intended to bring the young, upward-mobility hopefuls looking for adventure and authenticity back into the city center (cf Zukin 2010).

Figure 2 – Greater Downtown Detroit, from *7.2 SQ Mi*[^26]

[^26]: Fig. 2 and 3 from the 2013/2015 report, *7.2 SQ Mi: A Report on Greater Downtown Detroit*. My outline is based on my experience in these areas of the city; the Hudson-Webber outline is based on statistical areas/census tracts.
My research was informed by these first thoughts I had as I drove into, across, out, and back to Detroit on that Tuesday afternoon in June, thoughts that became layered with ever-greater complexity over the days that followed. The grey sky melded into the faded factories and empty streets, but also gave sharp contrast to the sudden bursts of green lawns, tree-lined streets, and impeccable homes in neighborhoods outside the Downtown core that refuse to be labeled “dead” or even “dying.” Even the lone houses on empty blocks, well maintained and surrounded...
by neat yards and empty lots of mowed grass on all sides, defied most of what I had seen of Detroit in the media. I had to be there, in the city, to feel and see the city in a different way.

Figure 4 – The Downtown core

Detroit has the same problem of any other city where a few images or narratives dominate all others, eliding complexity. Amid the images and preconceptions I had about Detroit was emerging an impression of a landscape that both supported and contradicted those images; Detroit is a place that holds the violence, poverty, abandonment, gentrification, development, perseverance, job loss, urban prairie and urban farm, failing schools, ruin porn, remarkable architecture, and strong-willed population together. Any city is full of such images and characterizations, but few have any so stark, notorious, or lauded as those about Detroit’s have been since 2008. The swirl of history, narrative, image, and everyday life is not easily decoded through straightforward analysis or fact-based telling. It is in the Heidelberg Project, and through
Tyree Guyton, that the complexities of Detroit’s story are made manifest and visible in the form of art that refuses stasis.

2.3 Looking for The Heidelberg Project

The Heidelberg Project is, in the simplest terms, an ongoing, found-material, public art installation by artist Tyree Guyton. Guyton uses abandoned homes and the belongings of their former inhabitants to reinvent blight and decay, and to retell history as and through art. The project is located in what was once a part of the Black Bottom and Paradise Valley neighborhoods, just over two miles from downtown. During the first half of the twentieth century, most black Detroiter lived in the Black Bottom neighborhood, the oldest and poorest section of Detroit, or in nearby Paradise Valley, the sixty-square block business and cultural center of black Detroit until it was razed due to poor housing conditions and to build the I-75 freeway, in the name of “urban renewal.” The Great Migration of southern blacks changed the character of neighborhoods radically; once heterogeneous areas became increasingly racially homogenous. By the 1940s, the city’s residential geography was completely racialized along white/black lines. White “ethnics,” previously likely to segregate based on culture, custom, and language, assimilated with one another and into white society at large. Slowly, class and race became more important than ethnic or national identities; what emerged was a subjectivity linked to whiteness and a White racial identity (Rubin 1994). White identification and community cohesion served to maintain strict racial boundaries as the black population steadily increased; at the start of World War II, the black population made up less than ten percent of the total population, but by 1960 it had increased to almost 29 percent, even as the white population had continued to grow (Gibson and Jung 2005). Aided by restrictive covenants and banks’ redlining
practices, white neighborhood associations fought to keep their blocks white. Exclusion from white areas of the city meant that landlords were free to charge inflated rents in the few areas that would rent to blacks. Further, because blacks couldn’t get loans to improve properties they did own, the housing stock deteriorated. Thus, blacks had to expend more resources on worse housing while earning lower incomes than whites.

Urban redevelopment plans funded by the Federal Housing (or Urban Renewal) Act of 1949 seemed to present a solution to the housing problem. The city condemned many (black) areas as blighted and slated them for demolition in order to build housing projects, highways, and other public works projects, such as the Brewster-Douglass Housing Project. In 1946, Black Bottom was slated to lose 129 acres to urban renewal projects. Mayor Edward Jeffries uprooted almost 2,000 black families from the area in the name of “slum clearance” and progress. The area would eventually have the I-75 freeway built through it, destroying Hastings Street, described by Thomas Sugrue (2005) as “the vibrant center of working-class African American life in Detroit” (94). What was left of the area was christened Lafayette Park, now home to the park-like enclave of Mies van der Rohe townhouses, population in 2014: fewer than 3,000 residents for the entire Census tract. In some cases, displaced residents were to be relocated to the new housing developments in the future, but instead the demolitions immediately reduced the number of available units; over five thousand buildings were demolished between the construction of the Edsel Ford and John C. Lodge freeways alone. The eventual and only partial occupancy of public housing by blacks only served to deepen patterns of residential segregation while also allowing the undeserving and overly-entitled welfare-recipient stereotype to emerge. Unlike New York, Detroit had almost no public housing following the events of the 1940s.

27. Sugrue also points out: “From the 1920s through the 1940s, the majority of Detroit’s black population was confined to a densely populated, sixty-square-block section of the city’s Lower East Side which migrants named, perhaps with more than a tinge of irony, Paradise Valley.” 23-24.
Between 1937 and 1955, only 8,155 units were built. In 1949, new elected mayor Albert Cobo put an end to the public housing controversy by vetoing eight of the twelve proposed projects, leaving the only remaining public housing within predominantly black areas of the city. Because of the urban renewal projects of the 1950s and their placement in inner city areas, most of those relocated were black, yet the policies designed to exclude blacks from public housing remained in place. It was not until the NAACP won a lawsuit in the city that all public housing became open to blacks, but integration was slow: even by the early 1960s, four projects housed almost entirely white residents, while two were all black. Persistent inequality and segregation fed a white imaginary that reinscribed racial geographies and such stereotypes. Sugrue points out:

> [T]he decaying neighborhoods offered seemingly convincing evidence to white homeowners that blacks were feckless and irresponsible and fueled white fears that blacks would ruin any white neighborhood that they moved into... [N]eighborhood deterioration seemed definitive proof to bankers that blacks were indeed a poor credit risk, and justified disinvestment in predominantly black neighborhoods. (36)

Such circumstances wedded racial and economic inequality in the white imagination, establishing a correlative relationship with a legacy that remains intact to this day.

By the late 1960s, the borders and frontiers created by the city’s shifting racial geography became the loci of the conflict that had stemmed from increasing black mobility during World War II. As a result, on July 23, 1967, Detroit became home to one of the worst riots in U.S. history. Though riots are often described as spontaneous, they are better understood as the result of long-simmering animosity, anger and tension; about the 1943 riot, Sugrue writes, “The violence that whites unleashed against blacks was not simply a manifestation of lawlessness and disorder. It was not random, nor was it irrational... [C]lashes between whites and blacks...were political acts, the consequence of perceptions of homeownership, community, gender, and race deeply held by white Detroiters” (233). The memory of 1943 was surely present and contributed
to fuelling the events of 1967. At around 3:00 am, during a summer heat wave, tensions came to a head when the police raided an illegal after-hours bar on Twelfth Street in the center of one of Detroit’s largest black neighborhoods. Rather than arrest the customary token handful, the police arrested all 85 people who were in the bar and then detained them on the street outside instead of taking them to jail. After an hour without police reinforcements, those arrested were hot and angry, and a crowd of almost 200 had gathered in the street; by 8:00 am, there were over 3,000 people on Twelfth Street, throwing bottles and yelling angry insults at the police. The riot did not end that morning; instead, the number of rioters grew and the conflict raged on. After five long, hot days, and 17,000 law enforcement officers, National Guardsmen, and federal troops later, 43 people were dead (30 by law enforcement) and 7,231 had been arrested.

Though the raid may have been the spark of the riot, the fuel had been spilling for years, something the 1967 event shared with the 1943 riot. However, there were significant differences that contributed to the 1967 riot: the majority of rioters were black (rather than nearly evenly split in 1943); by 1967, over a third of Detroit residents were black, and whites lived nowhere near the area of the riot; and though housing was still an issue in 1967, white residential flight and industrial flight from the city had contributed to disinvestment and a chronically unemployed young, male population. The national Civil Rights movement added to the anger, outrage, and drive to act against discrimination; young Detroiters had never known the city in its more prosperous days, so racism and lack of opportunity weren’t tempered by hope tied to memories of a more prosperous past.

Continued political and civil unrest—along with rapid deindustrialization of what little industry was left, the gas crisis, and mass unemployment—left an indelible mark on the city’s landscape, solidifying race and class boundaries, while also making Detroit the biggest fallen
giant of the postwar American empire. Since the 1980s, job growth has been largely confined to part-time and contingent work that provides little security and almost no path toward upward mobility (Sugrue 2005, 268; Zukin 1991, 103-33; Darden 1987, 11-65). The white population continued its unabated flight. Arson and murder rates soared, with Devil’s Night fires reaching their peak in 1984 with over 800 blazes during the Halloween tradition. It is in this context, the Detroit of the 1980s, before the ruin porn and urban prairies, that a young artist began painting and transforming abandoned homes on Heidelberg Street into sculptural works of art.

* * * * *

Tyree Guyton grew up on Heidelberg Street in what is now the Dotty Wotty House (and where his mother still lives). After time spent in the military during Vietnam, and then getting an art degree at the College for Creative Studies in Detroit, Guyton returned to the neighborhood with a desire to apply his talents to reimagining the blight-scarred block. In 1986, with the encouragement and mentorship of his grandfather, Sam Mackey, Guyton began what has become a nearly thirty-year (and counting) project that has reached far beyond the scope of a local art installation to become a dynamic, socially- and politically-engaged vision for transforming and maintaining not only a neighborhood but also the city of Detroit.

Since Guyton started his artistic intervention in 1986, the Heidelberg Project has grown into an internationally recognized and community-based art installation that both highlights and subverts Detroit’s epidemic of blight and abandonment. Of Guyton’s work, Binelli (2012) writes:

In many ways, the Heidelberg Project is the ultimate manifestation of a Boggsian vision of Detroit’s future – a working-class African American artist, through a stubborn, solitary

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29. Grace Lee Boggs was an activist and writer who lived in Detroit for more than six decades. Boggs was involved in a variety of racial and social justice movements in the city and had a significant community organizing impact. Boggs died October 5, 2015.
act of imagination, crafting a better world out of his blighted surroundings. Heidelberg Street, once left for dead, has become a regular stop for tourists from all over the world, and you never hear about anyone being robbed or hassled or about Guyton’s work being stolen or vandalized. (66)

Unfortunately, Binelli, spoke too soon. That Guyton has been “crafting a better world” is a subjective and highly contested characterization of the project. The Heidelberg Project has not been without its critics or controversies. On May 3, 2013, just weeks before my first visit to Detroit, one of the oldest houses on the block—the Obstruction of Justice (or O.J.) House [Photo 1], begun in 1994 after the family moved out and gave Guyton their blessing to “Turn it into a work of art”30—became the first victim in what was to become a long string of arson fires. When I read the news, I was devastated and saddened: devastated, selfishly, that some integral part of an imagined aesthetic whole was gone; and saddened at the destruction of art that embodied a lifetime of community engagement work and blight intervention and reclamation. Notably, I did not know exactly how many structures made up the artistic whole I envisioned; yet due to my experience with art, I felt that the loss of any part of the project must disrupt the integrity of the work. The May 2013 fire, however, was not the first time the project had been the victim of destruction following praise and affirmation. In 1989, the year after the project was incorporated as a non-profit, Guyton won the Spirit of Detroit Award for his work on Heidelberg Street, and then in 1991 he was invited to appear on the Oprah Winfrey show. The appearance did not go as Guyton and his family had expected. Oprah derided the project, deeming it a “nuisance” on national television.31 Likely embarrassed to see his city’s blight showcased on television, Mayor Coleman Young was quick to respond: two months later, on November 21, bulldozers razed four

31. Otila Bell (whose yellow house is mentioned below), then a critic and staunch opponent to the project, was also featured on the show.
of the houses. Guyton, however, struggling through personal and artistic losses, continued to build and create. But now he was no longer alone: in June 1993, Jenenne Whitfield made a wrong turn and ended up on Heidelberg Street. Whitfield spoke with Guyton that day, and continued to visit the project in the following months. Though initially skeptical, by November she had accepted Guyton’s request for help answering letters that were coming in from around the world. Whitfield would soon leave her fourteen-year career in banking to become the Executive Director of the project.

The future of the Heidelberg Project continued to brighten in 1997 when the project received a $47,500 grant from the City of Detroit to fund construction of a welcome center. In 1992, Sam Mackey, Guyton’s grandfather and mentor whose encouragement prompted Guyton to pursue art, died; in 1993, Guyton lost a brother to AIDS; in 1994, a nephew was fatally shot; and soon after, Guyton and his wife divorced. Neavling, “Polka Dot Rebellion,” 3/23/2014.


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1998, the project was recognized as the third most visited destination in the city, but neighborhood opposition received the attention of two “prominent City Councilors” who “wage[d] a campaign against the Heidelberg Project.”34 In April of 1999, after months of community protest against the city’s demolition threats—protests that succeeded in the placement of a restraining order—Mayor Dennis Archer successfully bulldozed three more houses, after a judge lifted the restraining order.35 The mayor’s intention was to demolish all the homes on city property, but Guyton’s privately-owned studio (and storage space for his work) was also razed. Guyton, however, with an ever-growing base of supporters, rebuilt again, and eventually the city began to retreat from its attacks on the project. Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick, elected in 2002, granted Guyton and the project control over nearby city-owned properties in order to expand.36 A shift had occurred in neighborhood and official relationships to the project: in the 1990s, notoriety and neighborhood outcry resulted in city-ordered demolitions of Heidelberg Project houses,37 shrinking the project’s geographic footprint; in the 2010s, project expansion and the support of the city seem to have sparked community backlash. Beginning with the May 2013 fire, there have been numerous arson attacks against the project, resulting in the loss of several structures. Interviews with project employees suggest that the motivations for community-based attacks on the project have changed since the 1990s when residents saw Guyton’s work as an ugly embarrassment that highlighted blight and abandonment and the city’s struggles. Now, the increase in visitors and outsiders, the slow influx of new (white) residents in

36. Shibley, et al, Reinventing Downtown. The Heidelberg Project lost the lawsuit it filed against the demolition of private property. But in 2005, the project was one of five recipients of the Rudy Bruner Award silver medal.
37. The following are the houses that were demolished by the city: in November 1991, The Baby Boy House, Fun House, Truck Stop, and one other; and in April 1999, Your World, Happy Feet, and The Canfield House.
38. I am not suggesting that one person was acting for, through, or as a representative of the community or neighborhood. Interview participants informed me that they knew who had started the fire and that he was someone “from the community.” However, an individual’s actions cannot be taken as an indication of the views of a “community”, though it is of course possible that others encouraged or knew about the individual’s intentions.
nearby areas, and development and wealth that do not seem to reach or benefit long-time residents may be a source of anger. Thus, at the same time that there has been an increase in the attention paid to the Heidelberg Project as a city asset, there has also circulated a new image of Detroit as a haven for artists looking for freedom and space. The city’s recent embrace of the project, particularly when read in relation to the media attention paid to the growing number of young, predominantly white artists moving to Detroit, framed my interviews with project staff and Guyton.

2.4 Finding the Heidelberg Project

With this history in mind, and after having developed some geographic understanding of the city, I went to find the Heidelberg Project. However, “finding” the Heidelberg Project refuses to be easy. It is not due to an obscure location or a lack of information (the project’s website provides clear directions). It is because, after even a cursory exploration, where exactly Guyton’s self-described “outdoor art environment” begins and ends is unclear. The project has a particular location in Detroit: namely, on Heidelberg Street, abutting on its southwestern edges, one of the city’s large “prairies” that lies just east of the famed Eastern Market district. While seeming to remain largely unknown (or at least unvisited) to many Detroit and Michigan natives, the Heidelberg Project has legs that take it beyond the borders of the neighborhood, city, state, and even the country. Countless news media representations of the project have highlighted official and neighborhood ambivalence, local support, and international response and tourist visits. But, even having all of this information, and after months of research—news articles, images, reviews and comments—I did not have a clear image of the Heidelberg Project in my mind. I knew there were houses spotted with brightly colored polka dots; houses covered in stuffed animals; painted
streets; and a lot of shoes. And I knew that just weeks before I arrived there had been a fire that destroyed one of the houses. What I did not know was that the scope of the project extended far beyond Heidelberg Street via Guyton’s constellation of large painted dots, faces, and shoes that connect or pull small sites in the city back to Heidelberg Street; or, conversely, extend Heidelberg Street out across the city.

According to the project’s website, “The Heidelberg Project is a Detroit-based community organization designed to improve the lives of people and neighborhoods through art. Our mission is to inspire people to appreciate and use artistic expression to enrich their lives and to improve the social and economic health of their greater community” (emphasis in original). The Heidelberg Project, both as art and as a community organization, is focused on three goals: art and education, especially for youth; community development through the continued creation of a “Cultural Village” to serve as a community anchor; and to bring tourists to the city and neighborhood. By not limiting the work to Heidelberg Street, Guyton paints his mission all over Detroit, his art waiting to be deciphered and spread while also producing the city he envisions. Significantly, the community-centered aspects of the project are highlighted over the artistic, though Guyton considers himself an artist first. A more aesthetic description is only found in the FAQ section of the website:

The Heidelberg Project is an outdoor community art environment. The elements of the canvas contain recycled materials and found objects, most of which were salvaged from the streets of Detroit. Each work of art is carefully devised to tell a story about current issues plaguing society. As a whole, the HP is symbolic of how many communities in Detroit have become discarded. It asks questions and causes the viewer to think.

The description ends with an invitation for visitors to consider what they see and to ask questions about the art’s intention, value, and meaning, thus keeping with the message of community.


77
participation. There is no mention of the dots and other images with which Guyton marks Detroit. For that information, one has to read through news articles about the project to find a mention, or make a visit to Detroit. That the experience of the Heidelberg Project almost requires one to work for it—by finding it, exploring its boundaries (and lack of), and taking time to think about what it actually is—makes the project a kind of performance that demands the visitor’s active participation. In order to comprehend the detail and scope of the work, I had to always watch for the dots and other installations Guyton has painted or created around the city; it begins to feel like a puzzle that keeps adding pieces. When I first turned off Gratiot Avenue, one of Detroit’s main “spokes,” and onto Mount Elliot Street, I did not know that part of the puzzle would include spending a lot more than an afternoon at the site; nor that walking, driving, painting, and a lot of rain-soaked ash and rubble would constitute the performance.

Adding to the (ironic) difficulty in pinning down a large, colorful, site-specific installation is the ever-changing landscape of the project even just on Heidelberg Street. Guyton, as well as visiting artists and neighborhood kids, are regularly adding to the project’s ongoing evolution and production. Moreover, Guyton’s is not the only creative project on the block. Tim Burke, another Detroit artist, owns a home (that doubles as his studio and gallery) on Heidelberg Street. Since 2000, Burke has turned his house into a sculptural work of art, adding to the environment established by Guyton. The house now functions as The Detroit Industrial Gallery. Otila Bell, a long-time resident of Heidelberg Street, was one of Guyton’s and the project’s fiercest critics, but in 2012 she became a convert and started embracing the unique street she lives on. Today, Bell’s yellow house is covered in signatures from visitors around the world. The

40. Detroit Industrial Gallery website: http://www.detroitindustrialgallery.com/home
one-dollar donations given by passersby to sign the 124-year-old house have allowed her to do much-needed rehab work.\footnote{Susman, “Detroit resident finally feels at home,” 3/19/2015.}

When I finally began to find the Heidelberg Project, what I saw was not a mash-up of paint, houses, and junk repurposed into art, nor was it a “lesser” version because of the recent fire;\footnote{In May 2013.} what I saw were the artifacts and effects of people’s everyday lives. I did not see art posing as activism, nor activism posing as art. I saw a vision of art and community that refused to ignore and disown the past. Instead, by using the dwellings, significant objects, and artifacts of people’s lives, Guyton has created something new that still retains the old. The use of found objects in art is not uncommon; but in the story of Detroit, the objects are former homes, personal belongings, and bits of the industrial wreckage left behind when manufacturers abandoned the city. To find a work of art—aesthetically, politically, ecologically, and sociologically—is what the Heidelberg Project has given me a means to do, and I continue working to find the project as it changes and evolves. Though, admittedly, I have just scratched the surface of the complex relations just mentioned, what follows is my story of the Heidelberg Project and its place in Detroit, told through interviews, media accounts, history, observation, and theoretical insights.

* * * *

I met Tyree Guyton in June 2013. Though only a number of weeks had passed since the O.J. house was lost to arson, Guyton was serene and optimistic. I had interviewed three of the project’s staff members a couple of days earlier at the Heidelberg Project offices in Brush Park, a historic neighborhood of nineteenth century mansions quickly being subsumed into the innocuously-named “Midtown” area of the city. The three staff members I interviewed had all
initially responded to the fire with shock, sadness, and anger. In contrast to Guyton, they did not have years of experience battling the city and its demolitions in their memories; they had not been forced to accept the ephemeral nature of the work or the living and dynamic nature of the neighborhood in which it sits. But Guyton was able to communicate to share with them a feeling of acceptance and even excitement. The fires [Fig. 5] were not an end but instead an opportunity to start something new. I was prepared, then, to meet a man who wasn’t angry about the fire (even if I was), who had years of reflection on his work and vision that made him to see his work as dynamic and always in relation to—not apart from—the neighborhood and city.

Guyton and I met on Heidelberg Street on a warm and breezy June afternoon. I had not been able to schedule an interview with Tyree specifically so I was happy to be able to meet with him. Sirens, gusts of summer wind, and an ice cream truck gave our discussion its ambient soundtrack, each sound inadvertently punctuating and emphasizing certain moments in our conversation. We sat in chairs just off the sidewalk in one of the large lawns where houses used to stand, in full view of the remains of the O.J. house across the street. From straight on, the damage was nearly invisible; but from the side, I could see that two-thirds of the house sat charred and crumbling or in a pile of ash. For a moment, I thought of what the Disneyland version of Heidelberg Street would be: a row of brightly colored facades, any sign of politics and symbolism erased, without context and without substance. I wanted to know how this artist was dealing with the loss of this work and if he had concerns about change or development in the neighborhood, but I started to worry that Tyree wouldn’t have time to talk to me about much at all. There was a nonstop, ambling line of visitors who almost all greeted Tyree familiarly, and those who didn’t seem to know him still followed the crowd. Many of the tourists, after saying

43. When referencing our interview, I will also refer to Guyton by his first name, Tyree. All participant quotes in this chapter are from interviews conducted by the author in June 2013 unless otherwise noted. Real names have been used with permission.
hello to the man in the chair, would ask who the artist was. Tyree would smile and acknowledge his role while never forgetting to mention the children in the neighborhood who often help with the work.

Figure 5 – Sites of 2013-2014 fires. By Louis Aguilar, *The Detroit News*, 2/20/2015.

When Tyree finished greeting guests, he turned back to me and asked about my work. I told him I was interested in art, community, and urban space, and especially the relationship art and artists have to neighborhood change (positive or negative), development, and displacement. I wanted to communicate that I was taking into account the layered history of Detroit and the
changes currently going on: the speculation, the growing gallery scene, the gentrification. But Tyree had an answer to my either/or, better/worse positioning. “Both [art for community and art for development] are needed,” Tyree answered. “[I]t doesn’t just play out here; it’s all over the world. If it couldn’t be used, what’s the point of doing it? You do it because you hope that it’s going to be used some kind of way, good and bad.” Such a holistic, symbiotic view characterizes and informs Guyton’s art and community work, and can only come from a lifetime of experience and thought. Ultimately he hopes his work has a transformative effect:

I see the Heidelberg Project as a medicine. I don’t think you can heal the land first without healing the minds of people… [The Heidelberg Project is] my way of transforming people. It’s my way of getting people to come some place, that if it [the Heidelberg Project] wasn’t here, they wouldn’t come. It’s my way of understanding and taking the time out to listen to my neighbors, taking into consideration that they were waiting for government to come in here and save them. That’s not going to happen; you have to save yourself… I see the power of art and what it can do, what it has done, and I think art is one of those tools that’s going to help transform the city here. It’s going to take the city to a new… it’s a new beginning. [emphasis added]

Guyton believes that both the good and the bad have a place in the world, complicating any simple, moral split, and that they are necessary complements and driving forces for change. He does not, though, shy away from making judgments about artists and work that lacks intention or integrity. A group of artists had just visited the Heidelberg Project and spoke to Tyree about their art project on 7 Mile Road:

They came and they’re saying they’re going to fix this, they’re going to fix that. And I’m listening like, ‘Okay. I hear you.’ First of all, it might not be broken. That’s the number one. And because you do something doesn’t mean it’s the magic pill for all of the problems that exist in the world… How are you going to fix what you don’t understand? …So then we kind of label, we’re going to use art… It’s not going to fix the problem. We’re still going to have homelessness and drugs and unemployment and all of that, in the real world.

Artists must examine and understand their intentions and projected outcomes, as well as the limitations of what art can do. Art may always bring the good and the bad—however one defines
it—but Guyton’s vision for art’s potential for change lies in the belief in the potential for individual transformation through the experience of and interaction with art. This is what the Heidelberg Project strives to do and be: transform and be that transformation.

In the context of our discussion about transformation I asked Tyree about the previous month’s fire that consumed the O.J. house. As soon as it made the news, people from Detroit and around the world immediately began asking questions, wanting to get interviews; Tyree refused and instead remained silent in order to take time to think about the fire, what it meant, and where to go next. Though he kept hearing that he should build it again, bigger and better, Guyton saw the fire as an opportunity to “redefine art for [him]self.” He decided to “listen” to the house, and listen to what the person who started the fire was saying through his actions.

Guyton works to avoid immediate response and staid models when he makes decisions about his work. The result is that his work is an artistic conversation or dialogue, whether with the city, time, neighbors, or visitors. Guyton’s grounded response is also his suggestion for the thousands of blight demolitions the city promises to complete:

There are some buildings [that] need to come down, and there are some that should stay... [These homes are] my way of giving new life. It’s my way of saying I’m going to try something different... [If] we tear it down, then what do we replace it with? Do we have a plan? Well if you don’t, I do.

Demolition of blighted buildings is needed in order to deter arson and remove dangerous hazards from neighborhoods, but when all that remains after demolition is a vacant lot soon to become overgrown, the clear public good of demolition becomes fuzzier. For Guyton, an underlying problem with any proposals for the future direction of the city—from demolition to

44. There were two separate attempts on consecutive nights to burn the house. The first one was unsuccessful; the second destroyed the entire back half.
development—rarely address anything but superficial and immediate concerns. Through the contemplative and processual nature of art there is the opportunity to go deeper:

Looking at it from a spiritual point of view, I think that people here and all over the world, I think a lot of us are brain dead. We are still touching or still trying to fix the surface and we refuse to go deeper because we don’t understand that we must go deeper. So we get away from that. We deal with the surface stuff. “Let’s bring some jobs here. Let’s do this, let’s do that.” It’s kind of like people are saying now, “let’s go green.” Well it’s been green. We’re just catching up.

While art alone will not fix the city’s problems, as Guyton was quick to point, it does have a particular capacity for producing, informing, challenging and illuminating social, historical, ecological and affective relations. Guyton’s view is that “something bigger than [him]self” caused or “orchestrated” the O.J. house fire. This perspective informs his aesthetic decision regarding the importance of working some elements of the destroyed house into any future work on the site. Even the person who caused the fire becomes part of the work: “the person who did this, he was just being used to help me to create this, to see it from a different point of view.”

When I asked Tyree if there was a difference, then, between a work of art and community involvement, he answered with a definitive no, because:

...it’s all connected, because we’re talking about energy. The energy it takes to do this, it takes that same energy to put together Family Day and make it happen. And to have a team of folks who are on the same page, and who can work together collectively, and all of a sudden, there it is. It’s happening. It’s all the same. If you listen, there’s a lawnmower in the background, grass being cut. Guys are sweeping up, getting it ready for them to do what they’re going to do. It’s all the same. Everything is connected. That’s why I fool around with the polka dots. They’re part of my trademark. It’s my way of saying to the world that I believe that it’s all connected.

Unlike the aestheticization of social relations that results from the use of social relations as medium, Guyton’s analysis is suggestive instead of the potentiality of an aesthetic causality [see 4.1.2] to bring about change and effects in the world. The fire was set by someone responding to the project; the person mowing the lawn and the sound of the lawnmower become embedded in
the experience of the project at a particular moment in time; the grass will continue to grow and need to be cut again; a dot miles away from Heidelberg Street prompts a Google search. At the end of the interview, Tyree asked if I would do something for him. He handed me a can of white paint and a brush, and asked me to paint a dot on the street [Photo 2].

![Photo 2 - The dot I painted. Photo by Erin Siodmak.](image)

Though Guyton is clear about his artistic intention and adaptive response to destruction, those around him were slower to adopt his point of view on the May 2013 fire and the future of the project. Katie, the project’s marketing coordinator, and Emily, the special projects coordinator, were two of the staff I spoke with at the Heidelberg Project office in Brush Park a couple of days before I met Guyton. Katie’s family is from Detroit and she grew up in the nearby suburbs. By the time she was in high school, Katie knew that she didn’t want to leave the metro area and planned to move into the city to be a part of Detroit’s art and culture. She started at the project as an intern for the project, drawn to apply after seeing an ad that asked applicants to
“bring paint cans.” Emily, on the other hand, grew up and went to college in Indiana. She was interested in getting outside of her comfort zone, so during her time in college she traveled to New Orleans to do volunteer work after Hurricane Katrina. When her senior year internship requirement came up, rather than stay local to complete her hours, Emily moved to Detroit to work for the Heidelberg Project (something for which she says her parents expressed greater concern than when she announced her plans to spend time in a post-hurricane disaster zone).

Both Emily and Katie found in Detroit a place to be artistically and socially involved and do work that could matter to them and others, so when a beloved part of the project was burned down, they initially felt loss and anger. Guyton’s perspective enabled them to channel their anger and loss into productivity and accept the change as fundamental to the work. But, in addition to the feelings they directed at the arsonist, they also had to sort through the mixed reactions they saw through online media. Almost immediately after the fire, there was press; it was even a trending topic on Twitter. Support, outcries, and donations came in from all over the world, but the media responses that stuck out to them were those from Michigan residents who expressed their feelings about the “pile of trash” that should all be burned down: “Too bad they only got one house,” one commentator posted. Though such comments represent the more extreme end of negative backlash—usually coming from individuals who have never visited the project, Katie and Emily speculate—the “Is it art?” tone some critics take is equally frustrating. For Katie, one of the most important aspects of the Heidelberg Project is its openness: “For someone to be like, ‘if you want art you should go to the [Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA)]…’ That’s not the point. We’re trying to show people that you don’t have to be one of those people who feels comfortable in the DIA to enjoy art.” The issue of accessibility is double-edged. Because it is located in the place from which it draws inspiration, assumptions about the project’s purpose are common:
those who see the project as nothing more than a reminder of blight don’t consider the aesthetic and community-organizing value, and those who think art can only be found in museums miss it all. This is the gap that exists between what people assume about the project, and what they see once they’ve been there. When people ask why Guyton insists on “constantly reminding everyone of how bad the city is,” Katie tried to shift their view:

The fact of the matter is what happened in the city was part of our history and we all know the saying that you can’t know where you’re going if you don’t know where you’re coming from. So if we don’t want to make the same mistakes, and we want to hold ourselves more accountable going forward, we need reminders. And the very basic foundation of the project is, if you need a break, if you are feeling like you’re swallowed up by your routine or whatever, you need something different, you need something stirred inside you… you know where you can go.

The purpose of art is, in this sense, not about simple admiration and absorption into the work; rather, it is about response—negative or positive—and perhaps absorption of the work into oneself.

The third project employee I interviewed, Amanda, was not aware of the Heidelberg Project even though she went to art school just outside of Detroit. At the time of our interview, she was working as the director of the Emerging Artist Program and as Executive Assistant for the project. I asked Amanda how an art student going to school just outside of the city could remain unaware of the project:

I think it’s probably because it wasn’t something that was accepted, so there was no promotion of it from others. If there is a major event going on in the city, usually your city is supporting it, is publicizing and touting you, and that never ever happened until recently.

45. The Emerging Artist Program was dissolved in October 2013, likely due to budgetary constraints. The organization’s operating budget has fluctuated widely and brought with it scrutiny and criticism regarding staff expenditures.
According to Amanda, it was not until around 2008 that city residents started paying attention to and embracing the project, and the collapse of the auto industry that year had something to do with it:

Because people were looking elsewhere. For anything, for jobs, for everything really – what else does the city have to offer? [The auto industry] is not this massive force that it once was. [Now people] are coming here for arts and culture and so my fear is that the arts and culture end up like the auto industry has, this predominant being or thing that is running our city. I want that obviously, because I think arts and culture don’t get enough credit and that they’re always the things that are lacking.

Amanda noticed a change in the amount of attention paid to art and culture as elements of the city’s development, and recognized a tension between her desire to see that happen and her fear that the city will focus too much on art and culture as a means to save the city, resulting in one vision of the city dictated by cultural and artistic capitalists. There is a difference between art-as-industry and what the Heidelberg Project is, as the slow warming-up of residents indicates:

There were not a ton of supporters in the very beginning of the project. I’ve actually seen some of the really die-hard, staunch haters change. It’s teaching by way of showing and it’s beautiful to see someone take such hatred and such negativity and start to transform and think more positively and act according to that positivity. It’s a pleasure now to be like, “hey” or “hi, how are you?” and they share, “oh there was so and so in the project,” so excited about the visitors that are coming in, and engaging the visitors, and learning from all these people that come from all over the world. So they get to have those experiences. [Residents] see this man who looks like them, speaks like them, talks like them, and it clicks that, “I can do something like this.” Or I can do what I want to do, and that instills this amount of hope in people.

The Heidelberg Project challenges; it is not immediately appealing to everyone. Response to the project is visceral and affective in such a way that it produces a new way of imagining an abandoned house: as history and art instead of a site wiped clean of anything other than investment potential.

Though Guyton and his team came to terms with the fires, I could do little but gasp at the violence each time I read a news story about another house reduced to brick and ash. The
despair, horror and refusal to deny either inform the work and come through in the new pieces
Guyton has produced since the fires. In all, five houses were burned to the ground and a sixth
was damaged in a total of eight fires in 2013. In 2014, four fires destroyed two more Heidelberg
houses, the studio of artist Tim Burke (located on Heidelberg Street across from the Dotty Wotty
house), and what was known as the Birthday Cake house (not a part of the project, but located
nearby on Heidelberg Street). All of the fires have been the result of arson [Table 1]. Guyton and
others close to the project know the different people who started some of the fires, but believe all
were set by residents of the neighborhood or, in some cases, individuals “inspired” by nearby
residents’ actions. 46 One person came forward and claimed responsibility for one of the October
2013 fires but denied setting those that followed soon after, leaving everyone involved to ask
“Why?” to someone—or several “someones”—they are unlikely to ever find. But the individual
“why” matters little to Guyton who finds meanings and answers for himself through interpreting
these fires as parts of a dialogue through and with the project, as well as the neighborhood and
city more generally. When a house is burned, it has generally not been replaced with a structure
meant to stand in for the old. The remains are sometimes used to create a new work that
memorializes the old but it is important that the new work also stands on its own as something
else. For example, before the fire that burned it down, the House of Soul [see Photos 3 and 4]
was a two-story house covered from top to bottom in old LPs. Guyton told me he wanted to do a
piece that would be a nod to Detroit’s musical history, but wasn’t sure how we would get the
records. He said that within days of conceiving the piece, people began showing up on
Heidelberg Street albums to donate. They all melted in the fire. The new piece is an architectural
frame, one story high with an off-kilter, peaked roof. Instead of hundreds, a more modest number

46. I asked Katie and Emily if they knew who started the May 2013 fire. Katie told me it was someone from the
neighborhood, but she did not want to reveal any details about this person. Amanda and Tyree acknowledged only
that it was someone from the area but did not want to provide any details.
of LPs adorn the wooden frame. However, if the fire was bad, before any new work can be started, months are spent clearing debris and digging out basements (an arduous task after the ash has been rained on).

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Structure affected</th>
<th>Result</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
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<td>badly damaged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/6/2013</td>
<td>Obstruction of Justice House</td>
<td>total loss</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/9/2013</td>
<td>Numbers House</td>
<td>smoke damage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/10/2013</td>
<td>Penny House</td>
<td>damaged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/12/2013</td>
<td>House of Soul</td>
<td>total loss</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/21/2013</td>
<td>Penny House</td>
<td>total loss</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/28/2013</td>
<td>The War Room</td>
<td>total loss</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12/8/2013</td>
<td>The Clock House</td>
<td>total loss</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/7/2014</td>
<td>Party Animal House</td>
<td>total loss</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9/18/2014</td>
<td>Detroit Industrial Gallery (studio of artist Tim Burke)</td>
<td>total loss</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9/30/2014</td>
<td>Birthday Cake House (not part of the Heidelberg Project)</td>
<td>total loss</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/23/2014</td>
<td>Taxi House</td>
<td>total loss</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 – Timeline of fires at the Heidelberg Project and on Heidelberg Street.

Photo 3 – House of Soul, 2013
Photo 4 – In 2015, after a fire destroyed the original. Both photos by Erin Siodmak.
The day I spent cleaning up one of the foundations, a large group of young guys from a fraternity showed up (seemingly unannounced) to help out. They made fast work of the basement mess. The young woman who was heading up the volunteer cleanup efforts didn’t seem to know they were coming, but said it was pretty normal for groups to come by on weekends. I had brought a friend’s fifteen-year-old daughter with me; she was happy the group showed up so we could get out of that basement sooner. She liked the helping part, but not how messy the work turned out to be. Cleanup can also be dangerous: structures can collapse, and there could be toxins in the rubble and dust (making the recent rain a blessing). I do not know the effect the digging and difficult breathing and black soot had on the other volunteers that day—except my young friend who thought it was cool but too gross—but I know those things stuck with me. Rarely am I tasked with doing such physical work. I can still imagine how hot the sun was that day, how hard I tried to keep my mint green shoes clean, and how Sisyphean the work felt before the large group showed up. This was not my New York City experience of art in museums, or even the experience of any performances I had participated in. This was work, though not the kind I had come to associate with any idea of community engaged or participatory art. I was not making art that had community building as its intention, and neither was I acting as part of a performance piece. I cannot call it community service exactly because the work was primarily in the service of one artist. Maybe it was a small act of beautification or cleanup, but it was also not only that. I was not planting trees, picking up trash in a park, or cleaning out a flooded basement; I was throwing shovelfuls of charred art into a dumpster, art that in a previous life been a home. I am not sure when or where I will be reminded of that day, or what traces it really left on me, but I know that I cannot escape the excess of that experience and the urgency of its need to transgress and transform.
2.5 Brick and steel don’t burn

Love in my heart
The night to exploit
Twenty-five stories over Detroit
And there's more up there

The transformation of waste is perhaps the oldest pre-occupation of man
Man being the chosen alloy, he must be reconnected via shit, at all cost

All must not be art
Some art we must disintegrate
Positive anarchy must exist

– Patti Smith, “25th Floor” (1978)

Before I arrived in Detroit, and before I had seen anything other than some scattered, seemingly placeless images of the Heidelberg Project in a Google image search or in various news articles, I imagined that it was an artistic means of community engagement that wore its meaning on its sleeve, an art project more about community engagement than art itself; in other words, I thought the Heidelberg Project was a kind of community-based organization using art as a tool to get residents—and especially young people—involved in their neighborhood. My story was: to create the project, Tyree Guyton, starting in 1986, took the trash people left behind when they left their homes, brought it outside, and displayed it for anyone who cared to see. This overly simplistic expectation I held meshed with the history of post-1970s Detroit. The long slide from economic powerhouse and the Arsenal of Democracy to the Detroit of the 2010 Census, marked by abandoned houses, a flailing economy, and a steadily declining population, is easily symbolized by the refuse of those who fled or simply got out. The images I saw seemed to say, “everyone has left, the city is trashed, and adding some paint is amusingly ironic—get it?”
In fact, when I got to Detroit, everything looked exceedingly more complex than I had imagined in spite of the reductive accounts I had read. For one thing, the city wasn’t empty, and felt less and less so each time I visited. I was surprised to find the Heidelberg Project sitting in a fairly populated neighborhood of habitable—and inhabited—homes. The vast prairie to the west affirmed the images of abandonment and demolition, but around the Heidelberg Project and extending to the east were homes. The city, at least here, was not trashed or abandoned or left to die. Even what I had thought to be trash adorning the project houses was something else when I was able to see the houses in person and up close. Large panoramas or bird’s eye view photographs show some of the project’s extension through the area, but zoomed-in images allow the viewer to see the detail of what adorns the houses, empty lots, trees, and sidewalks on and around Heidelberg Street. However, there is no way to fully see the project, or feel its breadth, through photographs. As with any work of art, an in-person viewing will be different (and often preferable) to a reproduced image, but that may be especially true with large-scale, site-specific work such as the Heidelberg Project, and perhaps more so because of its striking location and contrasting image in a city mired in bleak, post-industrial photographs of urban ruin and decay.

The Heidelberg Project does not fetishize or capitalize on blight as blight, or transform the remains of people’s homes into an aestheticized, voyeuristic, post-industrial (read: apocalyptic) experience; nor does Guyton create a museum mired in nostalgia. Instead, blight and abandonment are made visible and humanized by teddy bears and old shoes transformed into art. I found it impossible to ignore the past lives of these objects, the stuff of everyday life; I

47. Detroit even has a demolition tracker website: http://www.detroitmi.gov/demolition; a 2016 Huffpost story used Google Street View to show the decay of homes over time: https://perma.cc/YVQ4-XHDS (Abbey-Lambertz, 3/26/2016); and a Detroit Free Press article celebrated the 10,000th house demolished under Mayor Duggan’s plan (Helms, 7/19/2016). Detroit also has the largest land bank in the country (seven times over). The land bank manages nearly 100,000 properties, or about ten percent of the city. They have demolished homes and sold others that were salvageable. Trickey, “Detroit’s DIY cure,” 5/18/2017.
began to imagine the stories and events that led to the placement of a broken toy car on the frame of a burned out house. The project asks us to consider these objects, but also gives visitors large lawns to enjoy as public space. There is art to enjoy and ponder, and space to take up; and people do, and in doing so, they make the block safer. Though fine-grain crime statistics are difficult to find, project staff say that they and residents feel safer because of the project and the traffic it draws to the area (the acts of arson being an attack on the project itself). Of course, crime—violent and property crime—in Detroit is notoriously high, and the project’s impact on the root causes of crime, if any, is hard to calculate. But foot traffic, diminished blight, and lighting make Heidelberg Street less attractive to anyone seeking a place to conduct illicit activity. The Heidelberg Project itself is, in its materials and histories of those materials, imbued with the objects and realities of everyday life, including arson and disinvestment, in the history of Detroit.

2.5.1 Capital, race and the “natural”

The history of Detroit, in the version that provides insight into the roots of crime and poverty, is one of industrial domination of human labor, time, space and environment, and more recently, of time and the natural environment pushing its way back against the hubris of man. The so-called decline of Detroit, like the development of capitalism itself, has often been deemed a natural and inevitable occurrence (much like Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans), attributed to the perceived irresponsibility, carelessness, and corruption of black residents or officials, therefore negating the possibility of institutional accountability. As the story goes: “Nature, not human history, is made responsible... Capitalism is natural; to fight it is to fight human nature” (Smith 2010, 16); and in this case specifically, the presumed nature of black Americans. In Detroit, even if the purported causes for its failures have ceased to be coded as black, anyone

48. I use the masculine intentionally.
clinging to or advocating for a revival of the industrial past would be by association an enemy of the environment and natural progress. Photographer Camilo Jose Vergara even made the suggestion—offensive and insulting to many—that Detroit be preserved as an American Acropolis,⁴⁹ that the ruins of former factories, skyscrapers, and once-grand homes be made into what would amount to a city-sized museum.⁵⁰ In concert with the “ruin porn” images, devoid of people, that have flooded the Internet and media, I question the foundations of such an idea in a country that prefers to ignore history. Indeed, Detroit-as-art-museum is likely to trump Detroit-as-history-museum. Detroit-as-natural-history-museum, too, seems a more likely candidate for this wild proposition than the version that reminds us here in the US of the racial history of capitalism, the environmental devastation of industry, and the lack of accountability companies are held to in the places they locate. So long as pleasure and aesthetics are at the forefront, letting Detroit “die” and become a beautiful mask over the evils of industrial production and its impact on the water, air, and land has its appeal as a means to ignore the social and human factors of industrial history. Loss of jobs, a decreased tax base, and population flight are then positioned as just symptoms of a progressive and positive move away from a past rife with damaging, urban manufacturing. In this way, urban nature and the environment become sites of accumulation for capital in a new way.

The logic of “blaming the victim” (Katz 1998; Harvey 1974) that follows the shift toward nature as an accumulation strategy deepens class-race divisions as it naturalizes under- and unemployment among low-income and poor black residents of Detroit. Many generations of blacks in Detroit pushed back against racism and discrimination in housing, government, and

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⁵⁰. Anecdotally, this is something numerous people have said to me after I tell them I am doing work on Detroit. One artist friend, who has spent time in the city, thought it best to stop trying to save Detroit and just let it go.
employment only to have those fights and struggles be wiped from the slate after capital moved on to greener pastures and leaving abandoned large factories and swaths of land that have since become fixtures in Detroit’s prairies and ruin porn fodder. In cities across the United States, deindustrialization in the 1960s and 1970s, combined with intense black-white strife and ongoing riots and confrontations, contributed to the popularization of the image of the inner-city black population as jobless, violent, and demanding (namely, on the social welfare system). The solution many adhered to, originated by Senator Daniel Moynihan in his now notorious 1965 report, was to “fix” the crisis in the black family caused by out-of-sync ethical, cultural, and social norms; and, in the 1980s and 1990s, to increase policing in black (and other minority) neighborhoods using the “broken windows” and War on Drugs models of law enforcement. The result has been mass-incarceration (especially of young black men), dismantled communities and families, and little to no change in the structural factors contributing to low employment, poverty, and drug dealing or use.51

Culture of poverty arguments and the neoliberal tenets of the naturalness of financial markets have for decades worked in concert to produce the Detroit of the twenty-first century. Now, arguments in favor of an ecological naturalism and “return to nature” ethic ignore the unnaturalness of any landscape, as well as the inverse naturalness of human activity. The politics of ecological restoration described by Alexander Wilson, assumes that “landscape is a social activity, a social text” (quoted in Katz 1998, 55). I take the same as given in my analysis of the Heidelberg Project and its surroundings. The Packard plant, for example, may appear to have been “taken back by” or “returned to” nature, but in fact human neglect tied to global economies,

51. See Alexander 2010; Gilmore 2007; Fullilove 2001, 2005. From Wilson and Kelling (1982): “…foot patrol had not reduced crime rates. But residents of the foot patrolled neighborhoods seemed to feel more secure than persons in other areas, tended to believe that crime had been reduced, and seemed to take fewer steps to protect themselves from crime” (29).
changing sites of production, racial divides, and numerous other social factors are also what have made the Packard plant what it is today (and built it in the first place): a disintegrating structure that has been more useful to trees, metal scrappers, artists, and others needing materials than for capital. The Packard Plant is in a process that is decay and destruction through neglect and (mis)use of its materials; however it is also a source of a value-laden, affective background that sources invisible capital in the form of imaginaries and potentialities: in a photograph of the Packard Plant, one person sees a beautiful record of decay; another sees a demolition site that needs to be cleared; one sees a place where dangerous activity goes on; another sees real estate.

Though Wilson was speaking directly to the concerns and approaches of environmentalists, his suggestion to focus on “‘repairing’ ruptures in the landscape and ‘reconnecting’ its parts [recognizes] that landscapes are by definition disturbed” by, among other things, human impacts and presence (Wilson 1992, 17, 56). A politics of restoration is posed as an alternative to a politics of preservation that seeks only to save what is left. When applied to an urban landscape, restoration offers a politics of rebuilding neighborhoods and communities along with the very landscapes such neighborhoods were built on top of in the first place. However, according to Cindi Katz (1998), there are limits to restoration ecology: a tendency toward romanticism, the privileging of certain practices and outcomes, and applicability only at the local scale. If the potential pitfalls are taken seriously, the problem of locality (instead of “jumping scales”) is in some ways solved in the case of Detroit. Detroit is representative of many postindustrial US cities, and though what may work in Detroit is not necessarily what may work

52. Until recently—the Packard plant is an oft-visited tourist site and is now finally in the hands of a new owner. Spanish developer Fernando Palazuelo and his company Arte Express, won the plant as the third-highest bidder at city auction in 2013 after the first and second highest bidders missed payment deadlines. The city offered it to Palazuelo for $405,000 after the $6 million and $1 million offers fell through. Palazuelo plans a mixed-use development on the site to be completed over ten to fifteen years. Muller, “Detroit’s Packard Plant owner,” 6/26/2014; Pinho, “Developing a strategy,” 6/7/2017.
elsewhere, the potential for developing a framework for rethinking the connections between history, environment, landscape, and production is something that could be applied in various cities, eventually affecting other scales (such as smaller towns, neighborhoods, or entire states). The Heidelberg Project does not leave room for abandonment to ever truly become decay, nor to be reclaimed by (non-human) nature or further human destruction or neglect (including illicit activities such as dumping, drug dealing), even as the project speaks to these transgressions and transformations. Thus the project provides one vision of connection between history, culture, the social and environment that is not organized around a capitalist venture.

2.5.2 Transgressive ecology: Postindustrial sites as “aesthetically sublime”

Joern Langhorst, in his analysis of the High Line park in New York City, defines transgressive ecologies as “nature’s ‘spatial tactics’ [in DeCerteau 1984] and acts of resistance, occupying space (both marginal and marginalized) that are uncontrolled or less controlled by dominant processes of development and capital accumulation” (Langhorst 2015, 2). Transgressive ecologies are emergent ecologies that challenge the notion of human domination of and control over the non-human environment by showing just how tenuous a hold humans have. Images of Detroit’s abandoned factories are images of transgressive ecologies that have intervened back into human processes once humans stopped directly intervening into the environment. Such images of Detroit, in my view, are hardly transgressive in a political sense; they serve rather as aesthetic fodder for many photographers and news outlets, and reinforce images of Detroit as empty and hopelessly “returned to nature.” Langhorst warns of this danger:

As urban nature is produced (or is allowed to produce itself) on post-industrial sites, questions of the types and distribution of nature, and how they impact the life of people in their proximity become a concern. This is underlined by the fact that most post-industrial sites occur in neighborhoods that are characterized by a lack of parks and other
open space, below-average environmental quality, and are frequently inhabited by communities that are affected by the very processes of industrialization and deindustrialization that created such sites in the first place. In this context, the main agency of post-industrial sites, whether in their redeveloped / redesigned or abandoned state, might not lie primarily in their actual and potential ecological functions and performances, but more in their aesthetic and representational function. (2-3)

In Detroit, these transgressive ecologies contribute to the representation of Detroit as a wasteland and beyond human intervention or repair, as if the return to “nature” signals the end of human life in the city. Officials are therefore more easily able to justify non-intervention, non-action and in some cases disinvestment, citing loss and irresponsibility. At the same time, as Langhorst suggests, there is value in the aesthetic and representational function of these images: real estate speculation and land grabs are excused while the mystical and fetishized wildness of the city further contributes to its allure. In the case of the High Line, the result is a carefully designed, artificial ecology devoid of the emergent and transgressive ecologies captured in the photographs that garnered support for the project in the first place. Langhorst characterizes this displacement as a performance of aesthetics (a finished, aesthetic product) supplanting the transgressive aesthetics of performance (a relational and material process).

The Heidelberg Project offers a third option, one akin to what William Kornblum has called an urban land ethic (2013). While the Heidelberg Project is a constructed and produced environment, it is also a performance of sociohistorical and material urban phenomena. The Heidelberg Project’s neighborhood is home to an urban prairie, one example of a transgressive ecology. The project, while not engaging directly with post-industrial decay (i.e. factories and warehouses), intervenes in the “natural” decay of a neighborhood ravaged by residential flight and the loss of industry from Detroit. In this sense, while he does not overly highlight the encroachment of “nature” (a contentious and ambivalent term for many Detroiter) into the built environment, Guyton manages to show us the work required to maintain habitable place while
refusing to mask the agential force of the non-human on the built environment. Thus, transgressive ecologies are not utilized or capitalized on, but nor are they rendered invisible. The Heidelberg Project captures the spirit of what Lefebvre describes as the “old town,” a place where uses and aesthetics are not determined by the drive for capital accumulation or efficiency, but instead result as the artifacts and materialization of everyday life. Due to Guyton’s view of the project’s often contentious and precarious position among neighbors and the city, the HP is always changing, in concert with the space and the city. Guyton adds his aesthetic and artistic vision to produce an environment that demonstrates the decay that comes with lack of use and the ways that art is productive of and intervenes in everyday life to provide us with a new image of the city that is responsive to both the dynamism and rootedness of everyday life.

* * * * *

In 2007, Rebecca Solnit deemed Detroit and its landscape “post-American,” suggesting that Detroit’s mere decades-long decline is the harbinger of the end of the era of American global dominance and the unwavering belief in American Exceptionalism. She points out that when in Detroit’s now trademark “prairies,” you are not glimpsing the return of an edenic version of purity and nature; rather, it is of the future of US cities that one gets a glimpse. Not even the dead will remain to oversee this future: 300 bodies are exhumed and relocated each year from the city’s cemeteries. Solnit, like many others, sees Detroit as a city that grants us the possibility to do things differently. Rather than cling to an industrial legacy that uprooted itself more than two generations ago, Detroiters have to—not necessarily want to—create new forms of urban life. At the time of Solnit’s article, there were already urban farms and gardens in several areas of the

city. Since 2007, that number has grown tremendously. Solnit is aware of the unfairness and irony of black Detroiter turning to the agricultural life that earlier generations of sharecroppers left the south to escape. But for Detroiter—and Detroit—to survive, self-sufficiency, ecological sustainability, and communities of mutual aid are one of the few and possibly best options.

Of course, none of this happens in a vacuum. In 2007, the severity of Detroit’s population decline was unknown (Solnit puts the city’s population at around 900,000). Solnit’s piece predates the slew of coverage that followed the 2010 census data, and most of the articles on young artists moving to the city, $100 houses, Dan Gilbert, Hantz Farms, and Detroit’s entrepreneurial potential. The gentrification of Detroit—if it can be labeled as such, given the scale of abandonment and amount of available space—has largely taken place since the publication of Solnit’s piece and has been fairly contained in the downtown core and its (growing) radii, and parts of Hamtramck and Highland Park. Nearest to the downtown area has seen what most closely resembles a typical, if oversimplified and ahistorical, trajectory of gentrification that has resulted in dislocation, demolition, and rapidly increasing living costs.

2.5.3 Place-making agents: the sociohistorical factors

After the 1943 riot and the establishment of the Mayor’s Interracial Committee, the contentious issues of housing and employment “remained unaddressed... The city’s future was up for grabs” (Sugrue 2002, 31). More than seventy years later, Detroit’s future again seems to be available for the taking. The reasons for Detroit’s uncertainty are different now (not the result

54. According to the Greening of Detroit, an urban agriculture organization, the group has supported or created 1,617 gardens since 2003 [see: http://www.greeningofdetroit.com/what-we-do/urban-agriculture; retrieved 7/7/2016]. Another article reported that Detroit has more than 1,300 community, market, family, and school gardens. Royte, “Urban Farming Is Booming” 4/27/15.

of apparent racial tensions), the roots lie in the events and context of the 1940s. As then, the city’s future is again up for grabs, not only materially but also ideologically. The vision for the city and its material realization are deeply entwined. It remains to be seen whether Detroit will become a city that chooses to recognize its past, where the history of corporate responsibility and discriminatory policies is acknowledged and rendered visible in the landscape, a place where Detroiters are able to determine the course of the city’s growth; or a city where corporate investment, land speculation, historical erasure, and blame placed on the city’s longtime residents prevails.

One of the shocking aspects of Detroit for a first-time visitor is the extent of the abandonment and destruction. No images depict the scale of the emptiness, not even the bird’s eye screen captures from Google maps. One cannot imagine the devastation; the city’s infrastructure has, quite literally, fallen apart in thousands of places. It is extensive and seemingly endless. You can drive for blocks in Detroit and not see a person on the street. If you really get up close and see the devastation, contributing to an atmosphere of cool that capitalizes on that abandonment and loss becomes decidedly less innocent. But the story told so infrequently is that there are neighborhoods and blocks throughout the city—outside of the Downtown core—that look like any other neighborhood in any city in the country. Some are black, some are white or Latino, some are mixed; but all are inhabited and maintained by those who live there. In other cases, one or two houses occupied by a family may be all that remain on a block of abandoned structures—or, if they’re lucky, post-demolition empty lots. The story of a deserving Detroit population is not the one that sells papers, but neither does the story of hopelessness and worthless decay. In order to sell a “new” Detroit, what one sees of Detroit has to be modulated in a way that avoids making the viewer think, ‘oh my god, another block is gone’ and also away
from guilt about one’s relation to the history or present that has allowed that block to be lost. The story that gets told, that supports a geography of investment and disinvestment, is that good, industrious people have come and taken advantage of the blight; the imagined good (white and/or middle-class) people make something from what (black and/or poor) others destroyed.

What all of these stories miss is that the destruction continues, though in different forms. The shocking revelation of Detroit’s population drop from 951,307 in 2000 to 713,777 in 2010 (a loss of nearly twenty-five percent), the fate of the city—and its place in the history books—seemed to be sealed, the crisis a crisis no longer. However, since 2010, investment interest in Detroit has grown, most notably through the purchase of dozens of downtown properties by Dan Gilbert, founder and CEO of Quicken Loans. The center city and downtown areas historically characterized by “ghetto” and “slum” neighborhood are exactly the sites of rapid gentrification, (re)development, and capital investment by private interests as well as public-private partnerships (Molotch 1976; Harvey 1985; Smith 1996b; Zukin 2010). As Neil Smith has shown, these processes are not the start of displacement and capital accumulation, but rather the symptom and result of the disinvestment, legal and informal segregation, job market exclusion, and other forms of discrimination of decades past. Thus, no single force caused the so-called decline of Detroit. Sugrue (2005) argues that the “roots [of the urban crisis in Detroit are] deeper, more tangled, and perhaps more intractable” (5) than social scientists have believed. Specifically, Detroit’s postwar problems were the result of capitalism’s generation of inequality and the disproportionate rate at which African Americans bear the weight of that inequality. He names three primary factors working in concert: the postwar flight of (especially) well-paying, unionized jobs from the city; continued workplace discrimination; and housing-related discrimination and the resulting residential discrimination and “uneven distribution of power and

resources…, leaving some places behind while others thrived” (xviii). Sugrue challenges the popular view of Detroit’s decline as inevitable by exposing the “largely hidden, forgotten history of actions by policymakers, large corporations, small businesses (particularly realtors), and ordinary citizens that created and reinforced racial and class inequalities and perpetuated the political marginalization of African Americans in modern American life” (xvii). Those same actors continue to determine the course of Detroit’s future while still claiming inevitability and denying alternatives, as in the case of the auto industry bailouts of 2009. GM and Chrysler begged for help but there was little sympathy for these corporations after the banking bailout.

![Image of Chrysler cars with text: Imported from Detroit](image)

Figure 6 – Big profits mean big exploitation. Detroit is now (but not for the first time) reimagined as foreign, outside the US, and “third world.” 2011 ad for the Chrysler 200.

The bailout that came in 2009 forced changes in the industry and the Big Three automotive companies (including Ford, though it did not take money) posted profits for the first time in years [Fig. 6]. In 2010, according to Binelli (2012), “Ford and General Motors had earned $6.6 billion and $4.7 billion respectively. These numbers represented the highest annual profit for
either company in more than a decade, and improvement by Ford of 141 percent from the dark days of 2009” (163-164).

While white flight is an extensively covered and frequently cited issue that cities faced in by the 1970s, black flight has generally received less attention. By 2010, middle-class black flight had been happening for decades, and given the 200,000-person loss in an 85 percent black city of less than one million, it is safe to say that many of those who left Detroit between 2000 and 2010 were black residents [Fig. 7]. What was perhaps most surprising about the 2010 census data, after the number of people who had left, was where they ended up. Historically, most black flight had been to Southfield, but the pattern seemed to have changed to include other suburban areas. Binelli observed, “By 2010, Southfield was 70 percent black; the number of black
residents in Warren jumped from 4,000 to 18,000; in Macomb County, the black population tripled to become 9 percent of the overall demographic makeup” (2012, 133-34). In Detroit, the white population grew for the first time in sixty years [Fig. 8]. Percentages can be deceiving; some rise when others fall. If the black population as a percentage decreased, the remaining white population would increase relatively, even if the real number remained the same. The rise is also attributable to a rise in the real number of whites in the city, but the significance of black flight is rarely given attention in the media.

Figure 8 – Population figures and image from Aguilar and MacDonald, The Detroit News, 9/17/2015.

Regardless, the artists, makers and creatives are moving to Detroit. People have often said to me, especially when I tell them I’m from New York, that New York—and specifically Brooklyn—is now in Detroit. Housing prices have risen quickly in some neighborhoods near the downtown core and what used to be the Cass Corridor (now generically referred to as
“Midtown”). Before Richard Florida (2002) wrote about the importance of creatives in urban economies, and with less optimism, Sugrue had already noted the attention paid to the role of creatives and non-industrial sectors in urban development: “In recent years, many Rustbelt cities, including Detroit, have turned to arts and culture, entertainment, and tourism to revitalize their economies. They have spent hundreds of millions of dollars in subsidies and tax abatements for entertainment venues, conference centers, and hotels in an attempt to lure free-spending out-of-town visitors to their downtowns” (xxiii). Detroit invited casinos developers into downtown in the late 1990s, resulting in the opening of three casinos between 1999 and 2000; replaced the old Tiger Stadium with Comerica Park in 2000; and opened Ford Field in 2002 as a home for the Detroit Lions (who had played in Pontiac) in the hope that such investment would bring new money and interests to downtown Detroit. Joe Louis arena, opened in 1979, will be replaced with Little Caesar’s Arena in 2017 and later demolished as part of the city’s plan for a new entertainment district downtown.57 Rather than utilize or highlight existing resources or interesting sites in the city [Photo 5], money was spent on new development. Such expenditure felt ironic and tainted with resentment when media outlets and even the governor58 began suggesting that the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA) sell off its collection in response to the city’s declaration of bankruptcy in 2013, one of the very institutions that attracts young, college-educated, middle-class residents to the city.

How can we call the entée of the so-called “creative class” into post-industrial cities a revival? A “revival” of what? Surely not of the living standards of those left jobless by the flight of industry. There is no revival or renewal, only removal and replacement. Revitalization efforts in cities such as Cleveland and Philadelphia, visible in the growing number of small businesses,

57. Muller, “$650 million Detroit Red Wings area project,” 7/24/2013.
“creative class” residents, and consumption-based amenities, benefit small numbers of people and do little in the way of maintaining a population with any long-term interests in the community, instead attracting a highly mobile demographic that may feel less need to form communities around political interests. Gentrification, public-private partnerships, and the

Photo 5 – “At the end of the 2007 school year, Jane Cooper Elementary (built in 1920) was left unsecured in the middle of the wasteland where a middle-class neighborhood once stood. It took “scrapers” only a few months to strip the building of every last ounce of metal and leave it looking as though it hadn’t been occupied for decades” (Photo and quote by James Griffioen, 2009). The school was finally demolished in 2010 as a continuation of the city’s I-94 Industrial Park project begun in the late 1990s. Most of the 200 residents in the area have been bought out and their houses, along with any abandoned structures, razed. Since 1999, after nearly $20 million in city expenditure, only one new tenant has moved into the development. In March 2015, a Manuel Maroun affiliate purchased a development site for $2.24 million, and in December 2015, Lear Corporation was reported to have plans to locate on the site.

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availability of loft apartments do not signal the end of the “urban crisis”, nor a realization of the
demands of the Civil Rights Movement or the needs of the long-term un- or underemployed and
poorly housed who have suffered (and continue to suffer) most under individual and
institutionalized forms of racism and postwar industrial decline. As Sugrue points out, “There
has been very little ‘trickle down’ from downtown revitalization and neighborhood gentrification
to the long-term poor, the urban working class, and minorities” (xxv). News coverage of the
2016 Republican and Democratic National Conventions highlights the very problem of selective
development and its effects in the conventions’ host cities, Cleveland and Philadelphia.

In Detroit, the most newly developed and “gentrified” or historically wealthier areas are
Midtown, formerly referred to as the Cass Corridor; Corktown, just west of downtown; and
Lafayette Park east of downtown, where one finds the highly coveted townhomes designed by
Mies van der Rohe. It is now possible to move through the Downtown core of Detroit and forget
that white is the minority, and a very small one at that. Midtown, in the center of the Downtown
core, is home to the first national grocery chain to open in the city since the 1970s: Whole
Foods. Yet still, even with the growing number of white faces in several areas of the city, most
white people who come to the city are there only for sports games, shows, or some other form of
entertainment. Even those who work in Detroit rarely live in the city, so their money follows
them home to the suburbs. With people moving into the downtown core there is more money
coming in and staying, but the deep tax breaks and incentives for buying in Midtown deflate

62. It is important to point out that though Whole Foods was the first national grocery chain to open in Detroit
(encouraged by $4.2 in combined incentives) in decades, it is far from the only grocery store in the city. Detroit has
a number of independently owned stores and smaller regional chains. In addition, Detroit has Eastern Market, the
largest permanent farmer’s market in the country. The attention given to the presence of national retailers (see
Beshouri, “We’re LIVE,” 6/5/2013), and the assumption that they may be signs of progress and growth, ignores the
importance—and perhaps impacts the well-being—of smaller stores. Quality of course varies, and in a city with
limited transportation options, it is likely that some residents have a harder time accessing good options. However,
challenging the “food desert” image of Detroit also offers up an opportunity to de-flatten the experiences of the
city’s residents, a worthwhile challenge when food choices are often thought to reflect moral choices.
some of the potential revenue, shifting the tax burden away from new residents—who, without a doubt, are much-needed additions to the city’s population—and back to residents whose homes outside the Downtown core stand little chance of appreciating in value. Property values in Midtown, Corktown and Lafayette Park are high relative to the rest of Detroit. For example, in 2013, $200,000 could buy a beautiful new loft condo in Midtown, or at least two detached homes in Boston-Edison, a historic neighborhood to the north of Midtown, and the city’s property auctions made it possible to purchase a foreclosed house for $500 or vacant land for $200. Property is becoming less abundant and more consolidated, and areas continue to be unevenly developed, but the effects—benefit or harm—on employment, foreclosure, service availability, schools and any of the many other issues the city faces remain to be seen.

2.6 Speramus meliora; resurget cineribus

The big three killed my baby
No money in my hand again
The big three killed my baby
Nobody's coming home again


This chapter presents one story of the Heidelberg Project and, by extension, Detroit—a story of houses, burning, abandonment, destruction, and creation. There are few places in the

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63. See Beshouri, “For Sale in Boston-Edison,” 6/6/2013 for seven homes in Boston-Edison all under $100,000. 64. I’ve had to edit this a few times due to the rapid changes in the Detroit housing market. In 2014, $357,000 bought a 6,000 square foot Tudor mansion in Indian Village (Cox, “Beastly 113-year-old,” 10/8/2014), and $65,000 bought a 5,000 square foot foreclosure in Arden Park near Boston-Edison. Curbed Detroit showed a 70% increase in the prices of the most expensive sales in Midtown between 2012 and 2016 (as of July). Beshouri, “Someone Just Paid $65K,” 2/21/2014. In 2016, a 4,400 square foot home in Boston-Edison sold for $240,000. Runyan, “House Sells for Below Asking,” 7/25/2016. In August 2016, a Mies van der Rohe townhouse sold for the asking price of $345,000. Runyan, “Mies van der Rohe townhouse,” 8/8/2016. Another sold earlier in the year for $560,000. Runyan, How much they sold for,” 7/19/2016. But the sale of a townhouse in 2014 for $165,000 grabbed attention. Just two years earlier, sales ranged from $80-90,000.
65. “We hope for better things; it will arise from the ashes.” Detroit’s motto, by priest Gabriel Richard in 1805.
city, the Heidelberg Project’s neighborhood included, unmarked by some amount of
abandonment or destruction; things burn, crumble, or get torn apart almost everywhere in
Detroit. Sometimes, the places are hard to spot with the untrained eye now that empty lots and
overgrown fields are all that remain. Sometimes, in place of the shadows of homes and factories
is the shade created by stands of new-growth trees. Thus has the landscape and architectural
topography of Detroit changed, leaving only traces and fading collective memories. If you didn’t
know what had been before, you could never imagine what was.

I had not expected the Heidelberg Project to be as artistically and aesthetically
compelling as I found it to be. Because of its expansion into the city and ever-changing structure,
the Heidelberg Project is not just one thing, nor is it a specific totality of things; and certainly it
was not destroyed by any fire. This realization was not something that I arrived at immediately
however. While I had accepted the fact of the city-ordered demolitions in the 1990s as part of the
Heidelberg Project’s long history, I initially believed I would see the project in its whole, as it
had evolved following the 1999 demolition. Guyton had been angry at the city and his neighbors
after each of the city’s demolitions; the community and the city (and even Oprah) refused to see
and validate his artistic vision or his notion of protest and beautification. His defiant response
was to rebuild in the face of what he viewed as attacks against himself and his art. Guyton’s
angry artistic reply to the city’s disavowal of the project was what I expected to see, not the
conspicuous absence produced by the fire. I was angry with the person who started the O.J. fire,
someone who appeared to be perpetuating the destruction that the city had started years earlier,
even after the city had begun to embrace the project, and in the process denying me the
opportunity to see the Heidelberg Project as I believed it was meant to be seen.
Though Guyton and, to varying degrees, his team came to terms with the May 2013 fire and those that followed, I could do little but gasp at the violence each time I read a news story about another house reduced to brick and ash. But each of those absences, the closer and longer I looked, became filled in. When I looked at the remains of O.J. house, what the house—and the project—might represent or signify to the person who burned it down began to take up the space left vacant. The recent institutional and official support of the project might leave some community members feeling wary. For me, showcasing the city’s decaying housing stock as art presents outsiders with a critical image of the ineptitude of city governance and the city’s inability to retain and support its population, or to deal with the crumbling infrastructure people left behind. But showing official support for a project that brings thousands of outsiders and tourists to one of the poorest neighborhoods in the country might strike a chord of fear and anger with residents who have never embraced Guyton or his work, or who at the very least worry about their precarious residential status. In a city with a high foreclosure rate, high property tax rate, and thousands of properties sitting abandoned, residents may wonder where their neighborhood support is. Even more troubling is the growth of land speculation tied to the city’s vacant property auctions.

The more time I spent with the project, and with each visit, the more I saw in the voids. I tried to remember the house that was there, where each record or stuffed animal was, but I couldn’t. I tried to fill in the “why” and the why now. I added to the void by digging rubble from a basement, but I also added my time, and no doubt the chemicals and soot added to me. But initially, before my first trip to Detroit, I had imagined the Heidelberg Project to be “just”

66. The poverty rate for census tract 5168 was 64.8% (605 people) in 2012. The poverty rate for Wayne County, where Detroit is located, was 26.3% (465,744 people). Census tract data from the 2008-2012 American Community Survey. See: “Mapping Poverty in America” interactive map from the New York Times, 1/4/2014.
community art,67 utilized by organizers or community members as a tool to reach a goal, but it is more aesthetically and politically complicated than that. Going there and seeing it, like with a lot of art, is a significant part of the experience. But unlike a painting that can be viewed in nearly any gallery to similar effect, being with the street and city is part of the art of The Heidelberg Project, for artist and viewer. No photo I have seen or taken has been able to show with any completeness what the project is and how I understand it now that I have been there. Images of the houses or other structures make the project appear as an isolated, decontextualized mess; images of the whole block lack detail; and close-ups of a single house fail to reveal the whole. Being there, seeing the project, and spending time on the street is part of the aesthetic and political power of the work. The project, without giving itself away by the presence of any labels or signs, is also composed of each of the dots and the shoes and the faces painted all across the city. Being extensive throughout the city defines the art. The project exists in and comes from a real neighborhood where people with a history and a present still live, and from where others have long gone.

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Since Detroit filed for bankruptcy in 2013 (due to $18 billion in municipal debts), various solutions to refinance the city and plans for a post-bankruptcy future have been posed. One idea that received considerable media attention—and plenty of angry backlash from Detroiter and other Michigan residents—suggested that the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA), home of Diego Rivera’s famous Detroit Industrial Murals, sell off part of its collection in order to service some

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67. I in no way mean to denigrate community art or organizations that use art as a tool for their work. Art is a powerful and necessary tool, often therapeutic, particularly in difficult conversions and around sensitive issues. Rather, here I am differentiating between art as primarily means to an end and art as an aesthetic object. That line is somewhat arbitrary; Guyton suggests that his art is a medicine. Art that is solely intended as a tool is not necessarily subject to the same aesthetic critical scrutiny as art that defines itself as art.
of the city’s debt. In September 2013, Kevyn Orr, the city’s state-appointed emergency manager, spent $200,000 to have Christie’s auction house appraise the collection. Unhappy with the initial assessment of $454-867 million, several of the city’s creditors had the collection assessed; the result was a range of valuations between $454 million and over $8 billion.\(^68\) The question that followed was whether or not the city had the authority to make a decision to sell any part of the museum’s collection. While the museum had been managed by the Founders Society, an independent, incorporated nonprofit that took over operations in 1998 (as The Detroit Institute of Arts, Inc), the collection has been owned by the city and held in public trust since 1919, an indication (and tacit promise) to many residents that it belongs to them as residents and not The City as bankrupt entity. Only one year before the bankruptcy, residents in Wayne, Macomb and Oakland counties voted to levy a ten-year millage tax to support the DIA. Homeowners in those countries pay 0.2 mill each year, or approximately $15 for every $150,000 of the market value of their home. The result is a yearly influx of $23 million, an amount that covers almost two-thirds of the museum’s annual operating budget.\(^69\) In exchange, apart from nearly guaranteeing the security of the DIA’s future, residents of the three counties receive free admission to the museum.\(^70\)

Residents of Detroit and the surrounding counties, joined by voices from the art world within and outside the city, were not going to let the museum go without a fight, particularly not those who view the museum as one of the things the city needs in order to attract visitors and remain at all competitive in appealing to prospective residents. Opinion pieces circulated that made the case for saving the museum, but among them were some that supported the sale. One

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68. Each assessment took into account a different portion of the collection. Collins, “Pensions or Paintings?”
69. *The Detroit News* reported that the (then) museum director and the COO received bonuses and salary increases that boosted their respective compensation by 13% and 36% from the year before. Salaries come out of the operating budget, not the museum’s endowment. Chambers, “Top 2 at DIA,” 10/9/2014.
such opinion, in a July 2013 issue of The New Yorker, pointed out that art works “are hardly altered by inhabiting one building rather than another... The relationship of art to the institutions that house and display it is a marriage of convenience, with self-interest on both sides.” While a museum could “maim itself” by selling off pieces, the art itself cares little where it goes. The point made by opponents of the sale, though, was not that the art works would be harmed but that the city itself would suffer an inestimable loss with the sale of its art. Critic Roberta Smith said that the sale “would be a betrayal of public trust and donors’ bequests and a violation of the museum’s nonprofit status. It also makes no economic sense. The [DIA] is one of the few remaining jewels in Detroit’s tattered identity, and is essential to the city’s recovery” because art training produces the designers and inventors who produce the things that will reduce US dependence on imports. John Patrick Leary, in a response to Smith, points out Smith’s misguided assumption of “art as an instrument of economic development” that does little to address the history of industrial job loss in the US. More importantly, Leary argues, is that Smith is providing us with “an awfully impoverished notion of art: we need Van Gogh today if we are to have an all-new Chevy Malibu in 2033.” Toward the end of her piece, Smith goes on to characterize the city’s creditors attitude and presumption that “Merely considered a priceless collection as an ‘asset’” as “pernicious and predatory.” Ironically, Smith’s equation of the DIA and its collection with the city’s recovery is only marginally less cynical than the view taken by the creditors. The creditors attached a monetary value to the art objects that could be sold in the present, while Smith suggests that the museum is a vital source of potential (monetary) value in

71. Schjeldahl, “Should Detroit Sell Its Art?” 7/24/2013. Schjeldahl also points out the importance of preserving the collection weighed against fulfilling pension obligations. Pensioners, he is right to point out, should not lose just so the museum can be saved.
72. Executive vice president, Annmare Erickson, stated, “You cannot untangle the museum and the collection. They are one and the same... We are the collection.” Guillen and Snavely, “Museum is crucial,” 9/18/2014.
the future. Smith does acknowledge the value of art as art, as something invaluable that must not be sacrificed at the altar of balanced budgets. But the realizable, financial value—however incalculable—Smith attaches to the museum is symptomatic of the financialization of everything and anything. Leary counters Smith’s lamentation over the separation of economics and (arts) education in the US by begging the opposition: “If only we separated education and economics in the United States... We do pretty much the opposite – measure the ‘value’ of educational institutions like schools and museums in terms of whatever financial value they can realize for creditors or consumers (today and those yet unborn).” The future of the DIA was being debated on hallowed intellectual grounds—that looked a lot like the well-manicured lawns of wealthy suburbanites, and never like any of the city’s underfunded parks or schoolyards.

* * * * *

In December 2014, Galapagos Art Space, a performing arts venue and bar that opened in 1995 in Brooklyn, New York, announced their intention to move to Detroit. The reason stated on the Galapagos website’s “Why?” page sums up the culmination of New York City’s post-crisis, real estate-driven recovery: “Simply put, New York City has become too expensive to continue incubating young artists. The white-hot real estate market burning through affordable habit is no longer a crisis, it’s a conclusion.”74 The move to Detroit is not the first relocation for Galapagos; in 2008 the space moved from Williamsburg to the DUMBO75 neighborhood after a $10,000 a month rent increase in 2005, followed by an additional 30 percent increase in June 2007.76 Robert Elmes, the executive director, has purchased several properties in Detroit’s Corktown neighborhood and in Highland Park. Owning that kind of physical space grants Galapagos a

75. DUMBO is an acronym for Down Under Manhattan Bridge Overpass.
security and permanence it never had in Brooklyn. However, the irony of achieving such an established presence in its new location becomes clear when the history of the art venue is examined: Galapagos was one catalyst of its own demise in both Williamsburg and in DUMBO. When the venue opened in 1995, Williamsburg was on the verge of widespread and rapid gentrification and redevelopment. Galapagos was an early venue that marked and solidified the image of the neighborhood as a creative and artistic hotbed. Similarly, DUMBO, an old warehouse district, quickly shifted from being a home to artists and creative spaces to its current role as a neighborhood of high-end converted loft condos.

While the impact that Galapagos’ move to Detroit will have is unknown for now, Elmes has the support of the governor, Rick Snyder, the Michigan Economic Development Corporation, and the Detroit Economic Growth Corporation. There are plans to start a Detroit Biennial “soon.” On the website page promising a biennial, Galapagos creates its own geographic (and in this case historical) collapse with a city to which Brooklyn has often been compared:

For almost fifteen years, post-wall Berlin, Germany, lost population as people voted with their feet and moved west. Only after art and culture made the city interesting to curators and collectors did the city begin gaining population. This outcome was aided by efforts of the German government to attract business and industry to the city, and in turn art and culture helped attract these industrial and business interests.

Detroit is not Brooklyn of course, and it is definitely not Berlin; though in the 1990s a move to Brooklyn might have elicited some of the “whys” that a move to Detroit does now. As with the choice to open in Williamsburg and later DUMBO, Galapagos is only following the artists who have already left New York to seek space, affordability, and community in Detroit; but what follows artists and venues like Galapagos does not always come with community integrity in

What is clear is Elmes’ contribution to Detroit’s image as an entirely abandoned, anything-goes frontier town with little apparent knowledge of the city’s history or present-day needs. The Galapagos website urges its readers to “Move to Detroit... [Y]ou can buy a bank...for $60,000... [Y]ou have a choice so you can find the one that suits you best. I’m serious, there’s that much opportunity in Detroit – it’s unreal.”

Detroit needs revenue and a larger tax base, certainly, but to view the city solely as a real estate opportunity ripe for exploitation is to irresponsibly insert oneself into a place upon which one’s impact is likely to go beyond what one intends.

Figure 9 - Screenshot from Galapagos home page, saved July 25, 2016 (appeared the same on 8/30/2017)

Most important to note is that much of the property Galapagos purchased lies in the city of Highland Park, a small independent municipality that lies within the city of Detroit. Highland Park’s postindustrial decline has rivaled, and in many respects surpassed, Detroit’s: Chrysler left in 1992; the city was under the purview of a financial manager from 2001 until 2009; the police department was disbanded from 2001 until 2007; the public library has been closed since 2002; in 2011, more than two-thirds of the city’s streetlights were turned off and removed; the population declined almost 30 percent between 2000 and 2010, and is estimated to have declined nearly another eight percent between 2010 and 2016; in 2015, Highland Park’s high school closed due to low enrollment; the city stands to lose water due to the $20 million it owes the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department; and once again the city faces the threat of being turned over to an emergency financial manager; or being dissolved and absorbed into the city of Detroit.80

All of this is to say that Highland Park, like Detroit, is in trouble and has been for a long time. But Highland Park is not Detroit, and collapsing the two elides their differences, current problems, and financial needs, and contributes to a one-dimensional image of “Detroit” as a vast, undifferentiated wasteland awaiting reclamation and salvation by incoming creative entrepreneurs and artists. This is a cynical and critical view meant to provide an alternative narrative to the dominant media tropes that highlight and laud newcomers—many from Brooklyn—to the city. Many Detroiter feel that any investment in the city is a good thing, and I have to agree, to a point. But given the model of urban redevelopment that capitalizes on “artistic-ness,” modern aesthetics, and ideas about what “creatives” want, arts-based investment

will likely have latent consequences that individuals like Robert Elmes don’t foresee and that excite real estate speculation and land-grabbing.

* * * * *

In the end, the city did not sell off its art. In a legal decision that reverted the museum back to its pre-1919 status, ownership of the DIA’s collection was transferred from the city to a private trust supported by millions of dollars of corporate and philanthropic sponsorship. Part of the bankruptcy agreement known as “The Grand Bargain” gave full ownership and management of the collection to Detroit Institute of Arts, Inc., a move that ensured the art could not be leveraged as a city-owned asset in the case of financial crisis in the future. When the agreement that would shift $100 million of the debt burden to the DIA was signed, Detroit emerged from bankruptcy with a clean slate of possibility. Pensions were cut; the collection was saved. But at what turned into a celebratory gala just a few days after the settlement was reached, as one commentator wryly observed, museum-goers “wander[ed] the Riviera Court, looking at the frescoes of their city’s bygone era, a vision of worker’s solidarity, in the museum that had been saved by the people, but which no longer belonged to them.”

3 Waiting for Godot in New Orleans (Paul Chan, 2007)

I missed you . . . and at the same time I was happy. Isn't that a strange thing?
– Vladimir

You see my memory is defective.
– Pozzo

3.1 The city that care forgot

Like Detroit, New Orleans has many names: The Paris of America, Storyville, The Big Easy, The Crescent City, The Metropolis of the South. Most recently, “NOLA,” a sobriquet that originated in the early 1900s, has made a comeback. In the fashion of New York City neighborhood acronyms, NOLA¹ is an abbreviation derived from New Orleans, LA. A 2015 Public Radio International (PRI) program addressed the rising popularity of NOLA by asking what might be lost when New Orleans becomes NOLA.² Prior to 2005, NOLA was in use but not as widespread, and it was generally employed in practical applications. According to historian Richard Campanella, interviewed for the program, its usage grew in the 1960s with the increased use of zip codes; NOLA was a way to shorten the cumbersome process of addressing letters that required a zip code. In the 1990s, The Times Picayune took nola.com for its website url, but use of NOLA was still limited to business names or use as a convenient shorthand. Following Hurricane Katrina, the term was taken up and popularized by marketing campaigns, businesses, and in the popular press. In 2015, when the PRI program aired, 1,750 businesses had “NOLA” in their names; just 134 of those businesses were registered before Katrina. Mark Romig, the president of the New Orleans Tourism and Marketing Corporation (NOTMC), pushes the NOLA

¹ It is also at times written as “Nola.”
name as a branding tool that appeals to a younger demographic: “It’s like that best friend you create when you come here. You’re dancing with NOLA in the middle of the night, you’re enjoying café au lait and beignets with NOLA.” Campanella himself is not immune to the NOLA bug: his Twitter handle is @nolacampanella. Yet even the prolific NOLA [Fig. 10], with all of its marketing appeal, may not be forever. In 2014, a year before the PRI program, one marketing firm described the name thus: “Nola sounds friendly; it could be the name of a youngish, hip woman with one of those fleur-de-lis tattoos. Nola is the name for a modern, resurgent New Orleans, but it’s already somewhat overused and has been known to annoy crotchety long-time residents.”

Despite criticism and its overuse (and if “I Heart NY” is any indication), NOLA seems to have stuck for now, offering tourists and new residents the chance to “follow your NOLA.”

![Figure 10 – NOLA for sale.](image)

There is, however, one name of the many with which the city has been anointed that rings true and feels more significant, and present, in the background of devastation. “The City that Care Forgot”—though lacking the succinct, cute marketing power of NOLA—first appeared in

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4. Images found using Google by searching “follow your nola” and “defend nola.” The Defend NOLA shirt was found on zazzle.com; all others were found on redbubble.com.
hotel print advertisements [Fig. 11] and in reference to Mardi Gras in the early decades of the twentieth-century [Fig. 12]. The phrase initially intended to convey the carefree and liberal cultural attitude of New Orleans, but its double meaning highlights the man-made\(^5\) and social dimensions of many of the disasters the city has faced.

Figure 11 – Early use of the phrase “The city that care forgot” (*The Bridgeport Evening Farmer* 2/4/1913)

Figure 12 – Advertisements for the St. Charles Hotel that ran in *The Washington Herald*, Dec 18, 1910, Nov 16, 2014, and Oct 26, 1922, respectively.\(^6\)

\(^{5}\) I use “man-made” intentionally as it is unlikely there were many, if any, female engineers, urban planners, elected officials, or business owners involved in, or whom were in line to benefit from, the construction of the levees.

\(^{6}\) I found the reference to the article in Fig. 11 at https://paulvargas1.wordpress.com/the-city-that-care-forgot. I found the images in Fig. 12 on the same website. The image of the news article in Fig. 11 is sourced from the *Bridgeport Evening News* archive; I added the box that highlights the phrase.
This chapter takes a close look at media discourses and images of New Orleans since Hurricane Katrina in 2005. These images or imaginaries produce and are produced by ideological investments—or disinvestments—in place. They may appear to reveal material facts about a place, but they are also productive of new truths. In addition to the tourism campaigns by city agencies and private business, attention brought to New Orleans by and filtered through art-world centers like New York contributed to the image of post-Katrina New Orleans as a safe and opportunity-filled site in (and on) which to produce work. At the same time, much the way the mayor of New York City told people to come back and spend money after September 11, 2001, local media discourses encouraged tourists to return to the city, asserting that it was back, better than ever, and safe. My analysis situates Paul Chan’s 2007 production Waiting for Godot in New Orleans in relation to post-Katrina discourses, landscapes, and swells of investment and disinvestment. These discourses and the resulting images of New Orleans as ripe for investment, or that painted it as a place to be mined for inspiration, followed in the wake of Chan’s production. Neither Chan’s presence in the city, nor the performances of the play itself, caused these discourses, and I do not suggest that either directly resulted in an increase in private investment, the chartering of the school system, or gentrification (if it can be called that). Rather, Chan’s work signaled a new kind of atmosphere that gave investors a sense of security and a potential for future returns.

The intimate relationships between developers, artists, and city officials and regulations contribute to changes in urban space; increases and decreases in real estate value; and in determinations of deterioration and revitalization. New Orleans has experienced the impact of austerity, neoliberalism, and political corruption, and is also characterized by a long history of

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7. Gentrification is not an entirely accurate term for the demographic changes and skyrocketing housing costs, particularly in the rental market, that followed Katrina.
political struggle, strong arts-based communities, and racial strife. Strategies of recovery employed in New Orleans point to its unique history but also locate it in a neoliberal-multicultural (Melamed 2011), post-1970s creative economy (Florida 2012; Harold 2009; Rosler 2010, 2011) that sources value from art and tradition while at the same time all but erasing the very foundations of the culture. The presence of artists (especially white) opens the door to the middle-class and the patterns of consumption that follow them (Zukin 1982). In addition, Julia Rothenberg and William Kornblum (2005), in an analysis of the post-September 11th art world in New York City, have pointed out that

[A]rtists bring their relatively high educational levels, middle-class backgrounds, and high degree of cultural capital to their search for flexible but not intellectually demanding sources of income, thus providing a ready labor force for the city’s high-end service industry. (247)

The desirable “creative class” that investment and wealth are believed to follow is the same imagined yet materially and affectively impactful group that David Brooks and others named as the rightful heirs to the post-storm city. In other words, to market to artists—or to market artists—is also to market to a middle-class that, according to early, alarmist reporting, did not yet exist in New Orleans. Hence such discursive renderings produce a new geography that redraws the boundaries of belonging and transforms a city with one of the highest nativity rates in the country into a consumable place where visitors can, according to Mark Romig, “claim New Orleans for themselves.” Given that many New York City artists found themselves in precarious financial situations after 9/11 (Rothenberg and Kornblum 2005), it is highly probable that some made their way to New Orleans (or Detroit) in the years that followed.

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3.1.1 A haunted city

The first time I visited New Orleans, I was seventeen and at the tail end of a family road trip across the country. Even though we only left the historic French Quarter to see Tulane, my father immediately disliked the city. He hated Bourbon Street, the filth, the sticky heat, and the creepy vibe he said it gave him. Everything about it that made my dad want to leave lured me in. I wanted to tour every swamp, cemetery, and haunted place that the flyer rack at the hotel tried to sell. New Orleans was unlike any city I had ever seen. I have often heard people describe it as the least American city in the country. It feels foreign in part because of the Spanish, French, Native American, Caribbean, and African influences of its founders and inhabitants that have informed the city’s cultures and traditions. But it feels foreign for other reasons. The cultural attitude that led New Orleans to be described as the city that care forgot is a result of the blending of those influences. It is also a defensive position marked by mutual aid, self-reliance, and apathetic disdain for an absent—or, when present, corrupt—city government. As a person born and raised in the northeast United States—in New Hampshire, a state where the unofficial greeting is, “Welcome to NH, now go home”—the characteristic, non-cynical friendliness of New Orleanians, coupled with an air of skepticism toward a white outsider like me, has taken me years to get accustomed to and I cannot claim to access or fully understand this cultural affect often described as “foreign.” It may be a cliché, but there is truth in the idea—and feeling—that New Orleans is an old, haunted city, a place difficult for an outsider to understand. New Orleans feels strange and old because it looks old, its architecture and design a reflection of its European, colonial, and Caribbean roots. Whereas New York City is known for and characterized by ceaseless change and progressively skyward feats of engineering, many of the residential and commercial structures still standing in New Orleans were built before the Civil War ended. The
city’s architectural landscape remained fairly unchanged for decades, well into the twentieth century and even into the twenty-first.

The land itself, however, is a different matter. New Orleans, and the whole of southern Louisiana, is losing land at an astonishing rate: every 30 minutes, the region loses a football field worth of land to rising sea levels and subsidence (Couvillion et al. 2011). Look beyond “NOLA,” beyond the marketing, and beyond *Treme*, and one finds that New Orleans is an “accidental city” (Powell 2013) built atop a swampy marsh. Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne de Bienville, who had land contracts in the area, chose the site that would eventually give New Orleans its “Crescent City” name. After several years spent arguing with French officials over the location, the new city was officially established in 1718 by the Company of the West. New Orleans is three hundred years old, but twelve miles downriver is a bend that started to form just three hundred years before Bienville stepped foot along the Mississippi. According to Lawrence N. Powell (2013), New Orleans is located on a deltaic floodplain no more than 7,200 years old. The city itself sits on even newer land, consolidated just 4,000 years ago; or, for perspective, five hundred years after the Sphinx of Giza was built (4). Powell points out several other important characteristics of this “old” city:

Younger still is the high ground by the French Quarter, whose crust dates to the Mississippi’s last shift in course, at its juncture with Bayou Lafourche, around 1400 C.E., during the dawn of the European Renaissance. There is no Precambrian schist in these parts, no basement rock of any kind—in fact, no hard minerals whatsoever except find gravel... Because it is embryonic terra firma, its surface dynamism has constrained where and when human settlement could find purchase. (4)

That dynamism, however, did not constrain the vicissitudes of the capitalist quest for an ever-greater extraction of value and accumulation of wealth, regardless of the potential consequences.

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9. Also commonly known as the Mississippi Company due to its extensive investments along the river.
Ongoing development and expansion, shrinking wetlands,\textsuperscript{10} and subsidence caused by drainage and the diversion of the river over the last two centuries set the table for what happened in 2005.

\section*{3.2 When the levees broke}

\subsection*{3.2.1 The making of a storm}

The next time I saw New Orleans was in 2003. I was again at the end of a road trip but I had just graduated from college and was with my former roommate. She had never been to New Orleans and I was excited to go back without a familial or age-restricted leash. We drove into the city in the evening as the sun was starting to set. There was heavy rain that day, but it had stopped before we arrived, and well before we exited Interstate 10 to find our hotel in the Quarter. I was not prepared—and neither was my Ford Escort—for the flooded streets that seemed to bar every route toward the river. People had pulled onto the neutral ground\textsuperscript{11} and left their cars. Murky rain-street water seeped into the car at the base of the doors. When, an hour later, we made it to the hotel, I cursed the poor drainage in this city below sea level.

While the statement makes for a nice quip, New Orleans is not a city that sits entirely below sea level. In fact, two hundred years ago, no part of the city was below sea level. The early settlements were built on the high ground nearest the Mississippi. Advancements in technology in the late nineteenth century made draining the swampland between the city and Lake Pontchartrain possible; new construction followed and the city’s footprint grew. Because of the levee system already in place, installed to prevent flooding farmlands further north, the river had not deposited the silt that the delta region was built on in decades. In addition, an unintended

\footnotesize\textsuperscript{10} The wetlands in southern Louisiana are disappearing due to development as well as loss of sediment and silt from the Mississippi River caused by levee building and redirection of the river.

\footnotesize\textsuperscript{11} Median.
effect of the drainage system was the creation of air pockets where water had once been. Parts of the city began to sink, and by the 1930s, one-third of the city had fallen below sea level; by the time Hurricane Katrina made landfall in Louisiana, at least half of the city was. Thus the great irony: in a city that has been repeatedly inundated with deadly floods over the past century, what it really needs is the water it lost.

Along with increasingly severe storms and subsidence, the city has also faced inadequate structural protections. The Flood Control Act of 1965 (FCA 1965) was never fully executed, and the levee effect—that living near the levees made people feel safe—led to increased settlement in lower-lying parts of city. Thus the set of conditions that made Katrina’s devastation possible were established—and exacerbated—long before 2005.

3.2.2 If God is willing and da creek don’t rise

Spike Lee’s 2006 documentary, When the Levees Broke, places the responsibility for the damages and lives lost in the flooding squarely on the shoulders of state officials and the Army Corps of Engineers. After the catastrophic Great Mississippi Flood of 1927, congress passed the Flood Control Act of 1928 (FCA 1928). The FCA 1928 was a federally organized attempt to manage floods along the Mississippi River. A provision of the act, one that came under scrutiny after Katrina, removed any responsibility for damages caused by future floods from the Army Corps of Engineers, regardless of whether the flooding was a result of the failure of the Corp’s protective measures, or due to the absence of protection in areas where it was deemed unnecessary or impractical. In 1965, Hurricane Betsy demonstrated the weaknesses of man-made

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12. The refrain of a poem by Phyllis Montana LeBlanc, a resident of New Orleans and survivor of the storm. She was featured in both of Spike Lee’s documentaries about Katrina; the second film took its title from her poem. http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/08/30/unnatural-disasters and the poem performed by Montana LeBlanc: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SmzTjmtJ4lo
walls against the force of water, as well as how deadly human hubris and the desire for industrial efficiency can be. Betsy’s storm surge caused the water levels to rise in Lake Pontchartrain and in the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet (MR-GO). The MR-GO is a seventy-six mile long shipping channel, designed to accommodate the increasingly large ships used in transport and shorten the route between the Gulf of Mexico and the Port of New Orleans, that had just been completed when Betsy hit.\textsuperscript{13} The levees meant to protect the Lower Ninth Ward from the MR-GO failed against the storm surge Betsy forced into the channel. The resulting floodwaters topped the roofs of some one-story homes in the neighborhood. Of the seventy-five people killed in the storm, more than fifty died in New Orleans.\textsuperscript{14} The updated Flood Control Act enacted in October 1965 was a direct response to the damages caused by Hurricane Betsy. The new mandated plan was to be completed in thirteen years, but by August 2005, the project was still not finished.\textsuperscript{15} So again, the people of New Orleans were left with to bear the consequences of broken promises and the failures of engineering.

However, Hurricane Katrina did not become a disaster due to infrastructural failures alone. Preparedness in the form of an evacuation plan is the most effective means to prevent deaths in the event of a hurricane. But in the United States, “preparedness [in contrast to Cuba’s] emphasizes huge engineering and capital investment programs, from river canalization and levee construction to sea walls and building infrastructure” (Smith 2007, 781). These efforts are profitable for government contractors, but do little in the long-term to prevent loss of life and destruction of communities. The intensely segregated racial and economic geography of the city

\footnotesize{\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{13} The MR-GO continued on its path of disaster and failure long after Betsy. By 1989, erosion had caused the channel to nearly triple in width, going from its original size of about six hundred feet to an average width of 1,500 feet. By 2006, the MR-GO was as much as 2,000 feet wide in some places. The channel was permanently closed to shipping traffic, and a surge barrier completed, in 2009 (Carter and Stern 2006).
\item \textsuperscript{14} “Hurricane Betsy,” 9/12/1965.
\item \textsuperscript{15} Schwartz, “Autopsy of Katrina,” 5/30/2006.
\end{itemize}}
also contributed to the making of the disaster. As Neil Smith (2006) pointed out, “[a]t all phases, up to and including reconstruction, disasters don’t simply flatten landscapes, washing them smooth. Rather they deepen and erode the ruts of social difference they encounter... [And] far from flattening the social differences, disaster reconstruction invariably cuts deeper the ruts and grooves of social oppression and exploitation.”

3.2.3 “Katrina’s Silver Lining”

Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans on the morning of August 29, 2005, setting in motion a storm surge that would result in a series of levee breaches—an event many had foreseen—that damaged or destroyed eighty percent of the city of New Orleans, including much of its residential housing stock and parts of neighboring parishes as well, arguably making it the worst disaster the city has ever faced. Dozens of levee breaches released floodwaters in low-lying areas across New Orleans, while multiple failures of the MR-GO flooded Saint Bernard Parish and Plaquemines Parish. The damages from the storm were assessed in the billions, nearly 1,500 people were thought to have died in New Orleans alone, and tens of thousands of people without left homes, belongings, or their communities and neighborhoods. In 2006, the city still had less than half of the population recorded in the 2000 Census, dropping to a low of just over 208,000 estimated residents a few months after the storm. The 2015 population was estimated at 389,617, just eighty percent of what it was in 2000. However, newcomers to the city and not just returning, pre-Katrina residents are driving at least some of the increase. Some of the new

16. Parishes are equivalent to counties.
17. Neither Hurricane Betsy in 1965 nor the Great Flood in 1927 resulted in as much damage to the city or as great a loss of life, though each had similar outcomes related to the destruction of communities and out-migration. Both also led to feelings of distrust of and abandonment by city government in black communities. A disaster of a different nature occurred in 2010 with the BP gulf coast oil spill. In its long-term and far-reaching effects (particularly economic and health-related) be considered a disaster on par with most hurricanes.
18. Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals, 8/2/2006. These numbers remain unclear [see 4.2.2, note 32].
residents include an influx of laborers from nearby states as well as Mexico, but, and especially since 2008, it is also includes young, largely white artists, musicians, punks, and entrepreneurs looking for opportunity [Fig. 13].

Figure 13 – Screenshot, Goldman Sachs website, July 22, 2017.

The financialization of disaster (Smith 2007; Klein 2007) works alongside an ideological sleight of hand to figure New Orleans as a “blank slate” of opportunity and accumulation potential. David Brooks, writing for the New York Times just days after the storm, saw that opportunity could come from this tragedy so long as “the same people” didn’t move back into “their old neighborhoods” and make “urban New Orleans…just as rundown and dysfunctional as
before.”

The speed of capital (and the lack of sympathy of its couriers) was impressive: Neil Smith (2007) noted that even before the water had completely subsided, speculators, real estate agents, and developers were already seeking opportunity and dollar signs where bodies were still being removed from homes. For insurance companies, Katrina turned out to be exceedingly profitable due to subsequent premium increases and sales of policies. “Private flood insurance has become more available recently, with government subsidies, but its premiums are prohibitive for most people” (777). Insurance companies relied on a definition of the disaster as natural in order to avoid paying out claims on policies that excluded damages caused by natural events. The companies lost the case brought against them when the judge ruled that, since “man-made” disasters were not explicitly excluded from the policies, the insurers were liable for the damages caused by the failure of the levees. The ironic result of increased flood insurance—coupled with increases in levee heights and other forms of flood protection—is the potential for even greater loss of life and property in the future. Levees and insurance provide a false sense of security, development proliferates, and thus greater numbers of people live in potential flood zones.

3.2.4 Ten years later

The tears of the world are a constant quantity. For each one who begins to weep, somewhere else another stops. The same is true of the laugh.

– Pozzo

What does New Orleans look like more than ten years after Hurricane Katrina? Were any of the projections accurate? Did the city “return to normal” as prophesied by the Unified New Orleans Plan in 2007? Questions such as “Is New Orleans back?” are frequently asked, even of

I am not the person to judge whether or not New Orleans is “back.” However, I’m not sure my non-native status matters because the question is actually asking something else. What the asker more likely wants to know is how “messed up” the city still is (tongues click at the visions of tragedy) or that it’s great and open for business and visitors. The dueling (or, better, battling) narratives of place, and visions for what “rebuilding” means, are informed by politically and economically motivated ideas of who should be included and who the city is for.

The population of New Orleans peaked in 1960 at 627,525; at the time, it was a majority white city. The 2000 Census recorded the population at 484,674 [Table 2]. During the preceding decades, the city’s racial demographics had inverted, making New Orleans a majority black city. By July 2005, the last estimate before the storm, the population had declined to 437,186. In mid-2006, the population was estimated to be just over 223,000 with a racial breakdown of 47 percent black and 42.7 percent white. As of 2015, ten years after Katrina, the black population of New Orleans has increased back to a majority at 58.5 percent (31.3 percent white) in a city that is still smaller than it was pre-storm though there has been continued growth since the storm and a return to pre-storm growth projections.

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<td>(in %)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>627,525</td>
<td>233,514</td>
<td>392,594</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(37.2%)</td>
<td>(62.6%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>484,674</td>
<td>323,392</td>
<td>128,871</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(66.7%)</td>
<td>(26.6%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>437,186</td>
<td>292,240</td>
<td>114,312</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>223,388</td>
<td>130,232</td>
<td>76,061</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>(47%)</td>
<td>(42.7%)</td>
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Table 2 – New Orleans population change. US Census Bureau.
The dominant narrative of the city is one of “renewal,” promoted cynically by elite insiders, business opportunists, and anyone who sees New Orleans’ pre-Katrina history of crime and poverty worth erasing. This narrative is not tied only to profit motives; the young artists, students, teachers, and non-profit “do-gooders” drawn to the city for (somewhat) more idealistic reasons are also what Allison Goodman (2014) calls “Renewers. Unlike the city’s poor, largely black population—deemed “Disposable” both discursively and institutionally—the largely white Renewers are not negatively affected by increased privatization and the erosion of public housing, schools, or medical services (Goodman 2014). Renewers benefit from new creative and commercial corridors of consumption, culture, and community. Their children will attend the city’s (best) charter schools, and they will get jobs at the new hospital, in the budding tech industry, or fashion a life of part-time work to support their artistic pursuits. Native and non-native, they are New Orleans’ future.

3.3 Waiting.

Recognize! What is there to recognize? All my lousy life I've crawled about in the mud!
And you talk to me about scenery! (Looking wildly about him.)
Look at this muckheap! I've never stirred from it!
– Estragon

3.3.1 Tradition versus art

It was 2006 and Paul Chan, a light projection artist from New York, visited New Orleans for the first time. Chan had been invited by Miami-based art patrons Dennis and Debra Scholl to give a lecture at Tulane University. Just over a year had passed since Hurricane Katrina ravaged the Gulf Coast. When Chan arrived in October of 2006, even while the French Quarter was said
to be “back,” many areas of the city remained almost vacant, empty of people yet full of
decaying houses still waiting to be gutted or demolished.

Anne Pasternak, then the president and artistic director of Creative Time, had also
recently been to New Orleans and felt a need to do something about what she had seen. She put
Chan in touch with a couple of artists who showed him around what was left of the city. Chan
had recently spent time in Iraq doing activist work and was shocked to see similarities in the
landscapes of Baghdad and New Orleans. Struck by the barren landscape and empty streets,
particularly in the Lower Ninth Ward, Chan knew immediately what the scene reminded him of:
A country road. A tree. Evening. Chan saw the minimalist stage directions for Samuel Beckett’s
*Waiting for Godot* actualized by Katrina in the streets of New Orleans. It was not only the stage
image that resonated with Chan; the waiting was something he sensed the people of New Orleans
understood too well. For more than a year the residents of the Lower Ninth Ward had been
waiting for money and the means or a reason to return to their homes. They had waited for the
Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), for insurance checks, to reunite with their
families and friends now scattered across the country, and to return. They waited for justice,
recognition, and ways to communicate their traumas and experiences on their own terms, free of
the skewed lens of the media. Chan decided that he wanted to do something in New Orleans that
would be both artistic and make a contribution to residents, and especially artists, who were
struggling to get back on their feet since the storm.

During my early research into Chan’s project, I was skeptical. Why was an artist from
New York doing a Beckett play in New Orleans? After I began taking trips to the city and
interviewing people for this project, my initial skepticism wore off and I observed two distinct
ways that art in New Orleans since Katrina was talked about. First, the outsider or non-native
artist is described as a carpet-bagging opportunist who will leave nothing behind except perhaps a place newly imbued with potential value on which developers and investors can capitalize. The artist, too, has probably accrued value that can be harnessed for a future funding proposal. Or, on the other hand, the artist is seen to create work with such enormous and welcomed impact that positively benefits New Orleanians that the work and artist are accepted and embraced. The first description goes hand in hand with widespread acclaim from art world centers like New York.

The production of discourses and narratives that turn a neighborhood into merely a staging platform for a well-known artist’s work is harmful as well as ignorant of the processes of gentrification and displacement and the role that artists sometimes play in those processes. The effects of place-based art making can be particularly insidious in places already viewed as “blank slates,” as in many areas of New Orleans. But the second, more benevolent characterization can also result in a blind spot regarding the role an artist can play, regardless of intention or even successful outcomes, in furthering displacement and exclusionary development, particularly in “blank slate” cities susceptible to investment by disaster capital [Photo 6].

The “economy of affect” and what has been called “the experience economy” help illuminate the impact that ephemeral events have on place-value and investment potential. Even when an outsider is highly regarded by community members, he may still be harnessed by marketing campaigns as a harbinger of development opportunities to come. The work’s success may also be seen as a sign that more art is just what the city needs. There is a deep chasm that divides most of the non-native artists from local artists who are often viewed as creators of culture or stewards of tradition rather than as “real” artists. Both types of artist bring money and tourists to the city but only one is seen as requiring originality and commanding respect, whereas the other is seen as “merely” one who carries on a tradition. But the emotional or affective
investments that art can foster are not the same as political resistance to capital expansion into new territory or against displacement. Cultural, emotional, and material investments in place are what produce the value that developers, marketers, and speculators seek to capitalize on. Like “quality of life” code enforcement or “desirable” police presence that guards the “urban pioneers” against those whose neighborhoods they have “discovered,” most investment and infrastructural improvement are intended for the newcomers who wanted to be a part of the vague “something” that made the area desirable to them in the first place. Even when such improvements or enforcement of noises ordinances, for example, do not displace older residents, one cannot help but wonder how it feels to live in a neighborhood that is no longer yours and that has only been “improved” in the hope that you get out.

3.3.2  Reading Godot: the play as text

For anyone familiar with Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, there are clear resonances between the play and sites of disaster. In a play where, famously, nothing happens—twice—a metaphor for government and bureaucratic inefficiency is easy to find. Considering the text in relation post-Katrina New Orleans yields deeper connections, making it possible to imagine the play was somehow written for the city—not as a eulogy, but as a paean. There is something about the speed, or rather the slowness and *fullness of time*, through which the play functions—the silences, the rapid-fire volleys of dialogue, the going and not going—that *feels* like something of New Orleans. It is not resignation or blather. It is the life that fills the time, the life and time between all of the imagined importance of going on each day. We are all passing the time in one way or another, each way as absurd, or not, as any other. *Godot* is time laid bare. And where else are time and life laid bare if not in times of disaster and crisis? Those are the
times when we will not go on living as we had before—in days of revolution, when, according to Lefebvre, we enter into history, or perhaps because history has entered into us.

The stage notes for the second act indicate that the play takes place the next day at the same time and place. As a reader, I assume therefore that the action will occur at the same time and place as it did the day before. But as a viewer, however, there is no clear indication that that is the case. Given the characters’ confusion regarding days, times, names, and faces, I am left feeling that the stage directions I read must contain a vague lie meant to confuse the reader. Maybe the reader is supposed to know something the characters seem unable to grasp. Perhaps they do in fact know what day it is, where they are, and that indeed they live the same day over
and over, all the while refusing to acknowledge the sameness of each passing day. Maybe

Estragon (Gogo) does not remember, and for Vladimir (Didi) the remembering is too much to bear. Didi always remembers, and because Gogo is always forgetting, Didi carries the burden of memory for them both. But Gogo is the more pessimistic, beaten. Gogo and Didi are tied Godot and to one another, though Didi denies the very suggestion. Pozzo and Lucky, too, are tied to one another. Lucky, according to Pozzo, is “wicked…with strangers.” Lucky carries Pozzo’s things as he wanders the roads; by Act II, he is blind. Each character is one half of a whole.

ESTRAGON: (giving up again). Nothing to be done.
VLADIMIR: (advancing with short, stiff strides, legs wide apart). I'm beginning to come round to that opinion. All my life I've tried to put it from me, saying Vladimir, be reasonable, you haven't yet tried everything. And I resumed the struggle.

They wait, because there is nothing else to do—but live. To Chan, Beckett made waiting heroic. But they decide not to do anything because it is safer to wait and see what Godot has to say.

About what? What is it that needs remedying? Estragon, who in one moment asks Vladimir what they expect from Godot, offers that he will bring them “a kind of prayer.”

ESTRAGON: A vague supplication.
VLADIMIR: Exactly.
ESTRAGON: And what did he reply?
VLADIMIR: That he'd see.
ESTRAGON: That he couldn't promise anything.
VLADIMIR: That he'd have to think it over.
ESTRAGON: In the quiet of his home.
VLADIMIR: Consult his family.
ESTRAGON: His friends.
VLADIMIR: His agents.
ESTRAGON: His correspondents.
VLADIMIR: His books.
ESTRAGON: His bank account.
VLADIMIR: Before taking a decision.
ESTRAGON: It's the normal thing.
VLADIMIR: Is it not?
ESTRAGON: I think it is.
VLADIMIR: I think so too.
They wait with humor but for the realization minutes later that laughing is prohibited; they have lost their rights because they “got rid of them.” Vladimir says, “I get used to the muck as I go along.” It is a question of “temperament” or “character”—there isn’t a point to struggling, “one is what one is” and “the essential doesn’t change.” More than once, a character avows that he is leaving and then does not move. Only Pozzo acknowledges that, even after announcing that he will leave, he doesn’t “seem to be able… (long hesitation)… to depart.” As he turns to leave, Vladimir tells him that he is going the wrong way. Pozzo decides he needs a running start if he is to make a departure from a place he is inexplicably tied to (though what he is in fact tied to is a rope attached to Lucky). While there may be something noble or brave in waiting, there is an undeniable and sublime, melancholic sadness that permeates their wait.

3.3.3 The play as performance: Chan’s Godot

Chan’s production in 2007 was not the first to be staged on a nontraditional site or in a politically fraught location. Waiting for Godot has been performed in contested [and something else] places such as Luttringhausen Prison in Germany (1953), San Quentin prison (1957), Cape Town (1980), Sarajevo (1993), and Ramallah (2011). Godot is both political and therapeutic, as performance often is; a strange—or at least unforeseen—turn for a play variously labeled as absurdist, existentialist, modernist, and meaningless. Godot seems a play more aligned with Brechtian A-effect (but without the politics) or existentialist dread than with a politics at all. The political potential of Godot lies in its prescient and likely unintended characterization of what Agamben (1998) calls ‘bare life,’ the absence or denial of citizenship and its accompanying rights, and, therefore, personhood, and representability.

I did not see Paul Chan’s production of Waiting for Godot in New Orleans in 2007 so I
could not develop an understanding of the performance from first-hand experience. There are, however, a number of artifacts and materials, along with interviews I conducted that get nearer to the play, the events surrounding and leading up to the performances, and the environment of the city during that time. There is broken video footage, missing what amounts to nearly a quarter of the 165-page text, of one of the Lower 9 performances. I watched the video several times, initially taking notes on the differences between the play (including stage directions) as written and the performance. Several small yet significant liberties were taken, including in the interpretation of stage directions and delivery. But even without the changes made to address the location and context, the text of the play itself already speaks to a post-storm audience—in ways that neither I nor any other outsider or stranger will fully feel and understand. Chan and Creative Time also created a book, *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans: A Field Guide*, itself an artwork to be considered apart from the performances of the play. The book is a record of artifacts, ideas, responses, and essays that define an intention and politics more than a play. In that way, the text is performative: it requires the reader to fill in the gaps and respond to the absence of the play itself. The book therefore is an additional performance, not an extension of or proxy for the play’s performances. In Chan’s *Godot*, small changes and adaptations were made to address various contexts: the street as stage, for New Orleans broadly and in the Ninth Ward specifically, and for the post-Katrina landscape (though little had to be done for the play to appear properly situated on a barren street).

I approached Chan at a talk he gave in December 2011 hoping to get his email but nervous that he would not be interested in yet another interview about *Godot*. I was surprised by how open he was. He and I exchanged several emails and eventually met for an interview in April 2012, just a few days before I was leaving for New Orleans to begin interviews and

21. I did not see a video of the Gentilly performances.
research. He invited me to his studio in Brooklyn where, when I arrived on a Friday afternoon, I found him eating a salad that he then apologized for eating. After we talked about sociology and my project for a few minutes, Chan offered me some contacts for my upcoming trip to New Orleans. He gave me names and emails for five of the people he had worked closely with during the months leading up to the performances. I ended up interviewing four of the five individuals and they became an important part of my entrance into some of the theatre, performance, and activism communities in New Orleans.

I would come to know some of the details that led to the initiation of the project, what drew Chan to the city, and how Chan and Creative Time managed to make it happen from reading the follow-up book, *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans: A Field Guide*, released in 2010. From late 2002 until early 2003, Chan was in Iraq with the organization Voices in the Wilderness as part of the anti-war movement. It was during his activist work in Iraq that he started thinking about landscapes in relation to remembrance, genealogy, and myth-making. However, when Chan visited New Orleans for the first time in 2006 to give a talk, he did not have any intention of doing artistic work in the city. Chan’s work at the time was on digital video projections and animations, decidedly not on public performance or theatre. As he said to me: “I planned on going there to give a lecture, to work with some grad students, to see what the city is about, to visit my lawyer, and call it a day. To say I’ve done what I can. Things turned out differently.” In his artist statement for *The Field Guide*, written in June 2007, five months before the performances, Chan wrote:

I have seen landscapes scarred by disasters of all sorts. In Baghdad, I saw kids playing soccer barefoot around the concrete rubble that came from U.S. troops shelling the buildings near the Tigris River. They seemed like the same kids I had seen playing on a ghostly Detroit side street during an enormous labor demonstration in 1999... Life wants to live, even if it’s on broken concrete. New Orleans was different. The streets were still, as if time had been swept away along with the houses. (26)
Chan echoed these images when we spoke, saying that parts of the city almost looked like a warzone but lacked even the people one would see in places of war [Photo 7]. In 2005, anyone with television or access to the Internet saw the photos and videos. The streets were empty. Houses were empty. And the places where houses should have been were empty, sometimes with a front (or back?) concrete stoop left suggesting where a door had been. In some places, there was too much: the insides of a house turned out onto the street or in a dumpster, a motorboat on a sidewalk, or parts of the house that had slid from its foundation in a neighboring yard. For every absence there was also excess. Ghosts, traces of inundation. Chan recalled that he didn’t hear a single bird. But the streets of the Lower Ninth Ward did not “look like a movie”—they felt like Waiting for Godot:

I think the first surprise was, it was not TV. I think we all saw those images on TV and all those images give us a sense, but not certainly of the whole picture. And then we also know that we take in things more than with our eyes and that experience is a full body experience... And I think it’s realizing that this place was more real than what I had seen on TV. As real as that looked. As horrifying and real as it looked, I think that was the main surprise. You know, you can smell, you can touch. You can feel the place. And that feelingness of it became imprinted on me in a way I would have never have gotten just watching TV.

Even once people started to return, to rebuild their homes or search for belongings, the silence, absence, and the year gone by waiting haunted the landscape in the form of debris, a FEMA trailer, and the newly mowed lawns alongside the marshy lots rumored to have an alligator in them. The city as palimpsest: under the mold or the FEMA X was a paint color as some point chosen by someone. Under that coat, perhaps lead. Some things have been written over; others washed away. But the traces often remain, exposed. The stoop that leads to no door. Why did someone build a set of steps without building the house? The absurd and the ghostly or uncanny are rarely far from one another [Photo 8].
And nostalgia. The word is applied to New Orleans with some frequency, typically in order to imply backwardness. I spoke with several newcomers to New Orleans who deemed the city “nostalgic.” I have also seen the city described that way in the media. Nostalgia seemed to be just fine as a (limited and narrow) lens through which to view the city when the tourism industry peddled nostalgia by the ton. When I asked Chan about encountering cultural nostalgia (or a culture of nostalgia) in New Orleans, he said that, “you could say it’s nostalgia, but you only say that in so far as you believe there is an alternative, and in a way there is no alternative. Because it [culture] will go if people don’t remember. And with it, basically the majority of people who live in New Orleans, given how starkly segregated it is.” After the storm, nostalgia is a hindrance. One should not dwell nostalgically on the past for too long when there is so much opportunity to remake the city (profitably) anew. We venerate culture and tradition from afar, or

when we can participate in a watered-down version on Bourbon Street, but dismiss it as nostalgia when it impedes growth. The nostalgia will still be sold but without anyone to tell its story. Because nostalgia is memory, and it is only possible at the scale of a neighborhood or city when there is an abundance of shared history and memory. An individual might “wax nostalgic” about a memory to a stranger or a grandchild, but nostalgia within and between communities is history. Thus, it is not nostalgia; it is keeping history living so the present never forgets. It is taking the best of the past to imagine and materialize the making of the present. Should all memory have to speak of pain and hardship when we can feel it in and on our bodies? The assumption that “nostalgia” contributes to an uncomplicated version of the past belies other means of telling, knowing, and remembering the mistakes, injustices, or horrors of the past. Of course, not all things “nostalgic” are worth holding onto (an argument could be made for letting go of—or at least rewriting—“The Star Spangled Banner,” and not all Lower 9 homes should or need to be rebuilt as before—they can be built better), and the stories beneath or enmeshed with the stories told should be continually sought for the complexities they bring to “nostalgia.”

A close relative of nostalgia is myth. Where nostalgia may present a rose-tinted past, myth outright invents it while at the same time (if successful) naturalizing the mythic version of events. Chan used the language of myth to explain his observations of racial and ethnic geography of New Orleans:

[There are] reasons behind where let’s say most African-Americans live as opposed to where white people live. The reason where the Vietnamese live, the reasons why Latinos after Katrina live in a certain place. It’s definitely not natural. It’s ‘natural’ only in the sense that it feels mythic, which is that it seems natural. It’s really just a general idea of the feeling that things just are the way they are. That’s one way of calling it natural. And sometimes people call it mythic because mythic forces in our lives feel natural, as if that’s just the way that it is. Destined. And I think the trick and the challenge is to always imagine otherwise, to see it as not natural, as non-mythic. Because if that happens it means that it’s historical and that we can trace it, and that we can see what went right and what went wrong. And to at least be aware.
A genealogical understanding of place, something long-time residents possess, can undermine mythic constructions of place that are used to naturalize and collapse residents and landscape or geography.

Photo 8 – (Clockwise from left) A boat on the street at the former Desire Housing Project, 2012; mowed lawn around a piece of foundation in the Lower Ninth Ward, 2013; street corner where *Godot* was staged, Lower Ninth Ward, 2013. Photos by Erin Siodmak.

There are many reasons why doing a high modernist play in the middle of a New Orleans street in 2007 was an impossible or, to some, even reprehensible idea, on that seemed to elide all knowledge of history and context. Given that the occasion of the talk in 2006 was Chan’s first time in the city, I wanted to know why Chan, as an outsider and an artist, was drawn back to city after that first trip, and what he thought of New Orleans as a city based on his time there.
It’s one of the most divisive cities I’ve lived in. It’s also the city where I realized culture is at its most starkest. Because we tend to think of culture as a form of expression. Knowing that there’s an element of remembrance to it. But in New Orleans, what is the most powerful tends to be remembrance, because if the culture does not remember, no one else will. And I think that makes it very stark. Not a lot of play. I don’t mean to suggest that it’s not playful. There’s just not a lot of room for things that don’t try to remember something for fear of being lost... I think that was one of the reasons, one of the many reasons, that was most attractive about being there. Because it’s so complicated.

The “wholesale contradictions” (Chan 2007, 26) and complicated nature of the city brought Chan back again and again. Just as areas like Lakeview, Gentilly, New Orleans East, and the Lower Ninth Ward were in a matter of hours made almost unrecognizable, some areas of the city seemed untouched by the storm, and were untouched by the floodwaters. The geographic divisiveness of New Orleans, in the form of racialized and class-based residential segregation, was manifested in a new and often overlapping way by the degree of devastation, response, and speed of recovery.

Aside from the internal lines, New Orleans has other boundaries that determine an outsider’s admission. Chan, with help from people at Creative Time, made trips to New Orleans to ask questions, get feedback, and gauge whether or not this project was possible. On the first trip with Creative Time, in March 2007, Chan reached out to people he had met the year before in order to cast a net that would include community organizers, artists, teachers and more. As an outsider, especially one planning to stage a rarefied piece of existential theatre in a neighborhood still reeling from the emotional and material havoc cause by Katrina, Chan knew he would need to work with local communities. As Lower 9 resident, Ronald Lewis, put it, “If you want to do this, you got to spend the dime and you got to spend the time.” Responses ran the gamut, and more than a few people let Chan know they were not going to roll over and support his project:

23. Ronald Lewis runs The House of Dance and Feathers, a small museum and cultural center located behind his home in the Lower Ninth Ward, and dedicated to the history of the Mardi Gras Indians.
I mean you can imagine [what the responses were]. It was like, what the fuck are you doing here? You’re from New York, you have no relationship to New Orleans: what do you think you’re doing? Or, oh that’s a great idea, I have a space for you. Or, what are you going to do for the kids? Or how are you going to get security? Or, who is Samuel Beckett? Or, who are you?

But, for Chan, the difficulty and complications are what brought him back, because they are what made it interesting.

3.4 **Laissez les bon temps rouler**

Considering the current state of New Orleans, all we’ve come through together, all the jitterbug nights and the complexity we have seen over the last seven years, wouldn’t it be remarkable? If not us, who? I mean, who knows better how to turn problems into parades?


3.4.1 **Human and nonhuman nature, plausible deniability**

Bruce Braun (2005) writes, “[I]t is often unclear what nonhuman nature *adds* to...accounts [of the city] except the presence of a static stock of ‘things’ that are necessarily mobilized in the urbanization process” (645). For example, much is written about water but little is said about the properties of water and how it affects the sociospatial development of cities. To the people of New Orleans, water is more than a thing, and more than an accumulated value or means of capital mobility. In New Orleans, water *accumulates*. In “The Site of Memory,” Toni Morrison discusses the relationship between truth and what we call fiction. For Morrison, fiction and its truths are always bound up with memory. She uses water as an illustration: “You know, they straightened out the Mississippi River in places, to make room for houses and livable acreage. Occasionally the river floods these places. ‘Floods’ is the word they use, but in fact it is

24. “Let the good times roll,” a New Orleans motto.
not flooding; it is remembering. Remembering where it used to be. All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was” (1995, 98-99). The fact that we know where the Mississippi River is and can follow it on a map does not tell the whole truth about where else the river is. The river—and all water—has memory and agency and will forever be pushing back against human interventions.

The use of “the natural” as a justification for action or inaction provides a means to shift accountability from social, human actors to the natural or supernatural. Though the philosophical arguments critiquing the conceptual divide between nature and culture or society are well rehearsed (see Katz 1998; Smith 2007a), such a distinction still holds political and ideological sway. As Neil Smith (2007a) puts it, “What gets to count as natural is one of the most deeply political questions in any society, precisely because nature is not a wholly external presence in the cosmos but the world itself” (771). Nature conceptualized as external to the human or social allows the label of “unnatural” to be affixed to, for example, non-normative sexual identities, death with dignity advocates, or abortion providers and their clients. Control over and domination of nature have also served as legitimating rationales to justify slavery and colonialism by placing Africans “closer to nature” and therefore subject to the “human” forces of civilizations and its oppressive processes.

After Katrina, the slate of New Orleans was wiped clean, so to speak (a sentiment echoed by more than one journalist or politician). New Orleans has operated for decades with a willful ignorance or not-so-benign neglect of its residents, most often leaving the most structurally vulnerable without services, protection, care, or—literally—without structures. Residents of New Orleans have long prided themselves on a keen ability to survive and thrive even in dire—and just plain everyday—circumstances that many outsiders would probably find unlivable (though
problematic, “Third World” has been used to describe New Orleans more than once). In press about the post-storm city, New Orleans is regularly described as “Third World.” The descriptor usually refers to the conditions people had to endure for weeks after the storm, and the general treatment and neglect by various levels of government. But one cannot help to imagine that some people had been thinking of New Orleans and many New Orleanians as Third World long before Katrina hit and the levees broke. To be “Third World” is to be rendered available for takeover by external entities and private investment—“colonizable,” “resource extractable,” and, thus, organized necropolitically (Mbembe 2003): according to death.

3.4.2 Godot’s place

Positive and negative impacts emerge from the production and reproduction of place, a fact to which Chan was keenly aware. Before I went to New Orleans for my first research trip, Paul gave me the names of several people to contact, including a few who were intensely critical of Chan and Creative Time, and fiercely protective of their city. But for many who experienced Chan’s Waiting for Godot—and the free gumbo and second line that opened each night—the play captured and expressed a needed catharsis around the shared experience of waiting, loss, and embeddedness. Natalie Rinehart, a teacher and New Orleans native, initially felt some skepticism toward Chan but was quickly won over. She met Chan while attending his lectures and became involved with the play’s production process as a volunteer. For Natalie, the experience of seeing the play was powerful:

At the time I remember feeling like it was one of the first times after Katrina that everyone had a really wonderful reason to get together and sit next to each other, and it was really cathartic. I remember being there when they were going through their lines and rehearsing and they specifically made a lot of references to New Orleans and the situation we were going through. Paul would send us out on errands and one of the errands was to find one of the bulletins that they city had put in houses they were going to
demolish if people did not return within a certain matter of days. And which was really horrible because a lot of these were elderly people who had no way of getting back to the city and no way of knowing that there was a notice put on their house... At one point there’s a line in the play like, “this is inhuman, this is outrageous,” and the actor points to the bulletin. And there were a lot of moments like that throughout the play. (April 2012)

She was also inspired by Paul to, along with other local artists, found a collectively run gallery called The Front in 2008. The Front is located in the far northeast end of what has since been dubbed the Saint Claude Art’s District, just across the Industrial Canal from the Holy Cross section of the Lower Ninth Ward. According to their website,

The Front, an artist-run collective and 501c3 nonprofit gallery, fosters the development of contemporary art in the city of New Orleans through innovative exhibitions, lectures, screenings, performances, and other arts programming, all of which are free and open to the public. Founded by artists in 2008 amidst the post-Katrina resurgence of New Orleans and committed to a spirit of grassroots DIY determinism, The Front cultivates new and experimental work, in particular from emerging artists, but also from nationally and internationally known artists.

When The Front opened, there were only a couple of galleries along the one and a half mile stretch of Saint Claude Avenue where the gallery is located. Now, there are at least nine on Saint Claude alone, and another six within two blocks above or below Saint Claude in the Bywater, Marigny, and Saint Roch neighborhoods. After Katrina, The Front provided New Orleans artists with much-needed space and support.

The Front is symbolic of the tensions between art and development, and the web of effects that one artist (Chan in this case) can have on a place even once after he is gone. From others, the criticism focused on the fact that Chan did leave, painting him as an opportunistic carpetbagger just like so many others. But for many local artists, particularly performers and theatre artists, the criticism came from the experience of feeling slighted. Several artists I spoke with felt ignored and insulted by the attention paid to Chan and the Classical Theatre of Harlem

while their work went unseen and un/underfunded. Why should an outsider be able to tell a story about New Orleans? And what effect would such attention have on their work? This might seem self-interested, but accessing the means to live as a working and paid artist in New Orleans has always been difficult, particularly for artist’s whose work falls outside of the cultural traditions that support and impact tourism more directly.

New Orleans native Kathy Randels, founder and artistic director of ArtSpot, a nonprofit theatre production company, had an emotional response to the play because of a personal connection to the actors, and also gave Chan credit for the care he took during his time in New Orleans, but she voiced concern as well:

I think of Paul as an art star who stumbled into a big community art project. And community arts are becoming a field in and of itself now. There are rules and codes of conduct. Paul followed many of those rules. He did well for a novice. And several people, the majority of New Orleans audiences who experienced the work saw it, were proud. I don't think that I am saying that people who are not from a place cannot make art about that place... But there is an extra sensitivity that is required of artists who come into places that are not their own and make work in and about that place for a short amount of time... I was PROUD of Mark McLaughlin for being the only truly New Orleans-based actor to be given a feature role. He played Lucky so painfully well. I know him. I've performed with him. I know the struggles he has had in his life. Seeing him yoked at that time took the piece far beyond the play for me... I was even PROUD of Paul for getting the NY art scene to pay attention to New Orleans. But...he didn't get them to pay attention to New Orleans art or artists... It was complicated. It was great and it was bad... The work was good. A strong, solid, professional, very well done piece of site-specific theatre... But [Chan and Creative Time] pissed me off. They were taking the precious dollars, the precious airtime, the precious space that I have fought for as a New Orleans based artist for 17 years. It's hard to make theatre in this town. I have created spectacles as large as Godot that I've had to work my ass off to get funded and publicized. It was very hard for me to be gracious when from where I sat, Paul was given so much to make the kind of work I've spent my life making. (June 2012)

Kathy’s conflicted perspective—that, on the one hand, Chan had brought attention to New Orleans but, on the other, drew potential funding and support away from local artists—was echoed by performer and artist Nick Slie, a southern Louisiana native who has worked with Kathy and ArtSpot:
When he first started coming down...I remembered being like, “dope.” To my mind, people doing work in this city is dope. It’s good... So three front-page articles about Paul’s work in the *New York Times*, fuck yeah. It says, New Orleans New Orleans New Orleans New Orleans. (Feb 2013)

Nick characterized Chan’s project as a piece of “nice, community engaged work,” but chose not to get involved or see the play because he thought that a project of that magnitude, with so much funding and support behind it, was the wrong kind of work to prioritize and that, in the end, Chan would be the biggest beneficiary.

Paul was representing New Orleans at the quadrennial [Prospect], he’s represented New Orleans in presentations at the [Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York]. He’s got a book out now that’s basically outlines what’s happening in New Orleans from his perspective. Paul has gone on and become a figurehead for New Orleans...

Nick, like Natalie, mentioned the significance for people of returning to their neighborhood; but Nick’s position was more critical and cynical:

I think the people who witnessed it will probably never forget it. If for nothing else then someone gathered them back in their neighborhood and allowed them to come home and sit in chairs in their neighborhood. Everyone was like, it’s the context, it’s the context that’s going to make the play mean something more. Dude, I could put the cat in the hat in the lower Ninth Ward right now and it’s going to mean something different, any play in the world is going to mean something different down there right now. I think people just really responded to it. It was free, a thousand people came, there was free gumbo, there were second lines. Imagine never having been able to come back to your home and the first time you can someone puts on an event for you. You don’t have time to think about whether that event was good for you or not.

Intentionally or not, Chan benefited from the desire and need people had to go home. His local support, something he needed in order to make the play happen, came from those who wanted a way to heal, find community, or get home. But Chan’s performance and its success were also only possible because the city as a whole, and the Lower 9 and Gentilly specifically, were pre-figured as “blank slates” open to discursive and spatial reinvention and production. These “embodied spaces” that had been created and lived in for decades overnight became fodder for artistic and economic intervention. Had media discourses instead focused on rebuilding and
“placefulness” (had this been the reality, of course), Chan’s project would likely have been impossible and unnecessary (if it was at all)—along with those of many others.

Even acknowledging that there was a reality connected to abandonment or at least non-active rebuilding, framing these neighborhoods as “waiting to come back” or imminently about to return, or on the cusp of something new or old, would have changed our perceptions of the city and its “opportunities” for outsiders. While I am not claiming that Chan and his piece had a direct impact on development in New Orleans, media coverage of his work, and subsequent coverage of the Prospect I art fair in 2008/2009, began a new wave of images of New Orleans that presented a different city than had been seen earlier, either before Katrina or since [Photo 9].

I do not mean to suggest that art and artists, including visitors or recent transplants, have only a direct, negative impact on the culture of New Orleans; instead I argue that art—or the idea of “creativity” and Creatives—is harnessed as a means of value production. Chan’s project was just one event in a series of many, but he was one of the first artists to come from outside of New Orleans, while relief work was still going on, and mount a large-scale, multi-sited, multi-day art installation and performance in heavily damaged neighborhoods. While post-Katrina New Orleans had already been advertised as a city ready for business investment, it became a place of greater cultural investment, of a certain kind, soon after as well. Nick offered this insight into the uneven distribution and access to arts funding:

I think what is happening here is imbued with a sense of home and place and belonging and what is going on to us. And I don’t think that the powers that be that support work in this country really are looking to support some shit that is critiquing the infrastructure that makes what they do possible. So yeah, I do think we are overlooked. I do think people don’t know about our work. I do think people ignore our work.

Godot was a powerful piece when staged in the Lower Ninth Ward (even if anything would have resonated more given that context). Waiting-made-heroic and the small instances of critique
embedded in the play matter; but *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans* remains a well-respected piece of theatre organized by a New York artist with the help of a well-connected arts organization.

I believe that Chan’s project had an impact on media discourses both in and out of New Orleans, and that the attention paid by the media to new artists in New Orleans, representations of the city shifted toward defining New Orleans as a place of opportunity rather than as a site of disaster. Spatialized aggregations of experience transform subsequent movements of images and discourses through a space. Place is made and remade through such experiences and collective or individual productions, with collective means of place-making more often yielding productions with long-lasting effects. When art makes a space in the artists’ visions it does so only so long as
that vision is shared. We cannot give an artist too much agency or credit in the making of place, even though we have to interrogate and consider the artist’s role. However, even negative responses to a work will result in new productions of place that stand in opposition or relation to others. This may result in the over-determination of a site and leave it open to leveling or co-optation. A number of individuals I spoke with or interviewed moved to New Orleans after 2009 because they had heard from friends that the rent was affordable, space was available, and that there was a large community of artists and a growing number of galleries. Similar to Detroit in the past ten years, to and New York in the 1970s and 1980s, New Orleans appears as a “frontier” or a place of lawlessness where you can “do whatever you want.”

While art is of course socially and historically contingent, it also retains relevance beyond its own moment of creation. Art is expressive not of an essential identity but of a socially, historically, and politically contingent subjectivity. Where Chan deals with community, neighborhood, memory, trauma, and institutional deficiencies, artists like Nick Slie and Kathy Randels do what Nick calls “site responsive” work that addresses the material foundations of southern Louisiana, from which culture and history cannot be disentangled or understood discretely. Work that addresses a specific place outside of a gallery, as Chan's does, can still be antagonistic instead of just "feel good." While work is constrained by site, in Chan's case, it is because of the site, one haunted by death and loss, that the work is happening at all. Chan engages with audience and environment differently: through memorialization, outreach, and healing through place-based storytelling, Chan produced and engaged conversations, arguments, and tensions, and opened up discursive, political, and collective possibilities. Art can go beyond capturing and expressing feelings and move toward producing new ways of thinking and acting, or relating and communicating.
Chan insisted on maintaining a division between the activist work he did in New Orleans and the piece itself. The social relationships Chan built and fostered, and the process of producing the play, were not the art, and thus not open to aesthetic analysis or use as artifact. Theatre, particularly when tied to crisis and trauma, can have the tendency to ameliorate pain, serve as therapy or an outlet for anger, or incite or elicit undirected emotional response. I believe that most performances are more complicated and nuanced that what I have just characterized, and Chan’s is no exception. Two years after the storm, seeing the play served as therapy, as return to neighborhoods (or first experiences in them), but also a renewed energy and anger directed at the agencies that had failed the city’s residents. There was also a realization of progress that had been made, how far everyone had come, and it was a reminder of just how much New Orleans perseveres. Chan, well-versed in cultural and social theory and an Adorno scholar, believes in the capacity for art to affect and effect individuals and society. Art must retain a certain autonomy in order to have critical, affective, and aesthetic power.

Before Chan arrived, the Lower Ninth Ward had already been put on the map through the media’s focus on the devastation in the neighborhood. One of the worst flooded and also poorest areas of the city, the Lower 9 was an area few white Uptowners had ever been to (to say nothing about the rest of the country who had probably never heard of it). Chan’s piece contributed to a new construction of place and new geography of discourse and community for the area. However, the attention brought to the Lower Ninth Ward and the surrounding areas has also prompted new types of private investment. The Holy Cross section of the Lower Ninth, located closer to the river where the land slopes upward and is guarded by an enormous natural levee, has experienced a far greater influx of new residents and resources than the section of the neighborhood northwest of St Claude Avenue. Holy Cross, even before Katrina, has been a
middle-class, relatively racially diverse neighborhood designated historic district. The area received little attention in the media, but has seen a recent uptick in renovation or new construction as people are priced out the Bywater neighborhood, on the other side of the Industrial Canal, that their presence had helped gentrify just a few years earlier.

I place Chan in the context of the shifting media discourses shaping (and shaped by) place, crime, culture, and broad political motivations regarding recovery that narrated and imaged New Orleans after Katrina, paying special attention to those that followed the performances in late 2007. Localized discourses produced by Chan, New Orleans natives and residents, and others outside of the mainstream news media vary from the discourses circulating through mainstream, and particularly national media, outlets. But the two are not isolated from one another; they move through each other and the places each works to understand and create. They inform one another, and are even produced across their own boundaries: a local blog or comment online may become part of a larger media discourse, or a member of the media can become part of local processes of place construction. Through staging Godot in devastated neighborhoods, Chan rescripted the narrative or frame of understanding, for better or for worse. These places become something new when read through Godot.
4 Conclusion

“...‘[P]rogress and democracy.’ These words, now, on American lips, have become a kind of universal obscenity: for this most unhappy people, strong believers in arithmetic, never expected to be confronted with the algebra of their history.”

– James Baldwin, November 19, 1970
An open letter to my sister, Miss Angela Davis

4.1 Art and the politics of affective space

4.1.1 Art is dead.

In 1975, New York City was on the verge of bankruptcy. Just hours before the default deadline, the teacher’s union agreed to back the city’s debts with teacher’s pensions through the Teacher’s Retirement Service. Though default by New York City would likely have destroyed dozens of banks and affected the strength of the dollar around the world, President Ford’s Press Secretary, Ron Nessen, declared that “[t]his is not a natural disaster or an act of God. It is a self-inflicted act by the people who have been running the city.”26 The result was fiscal austerity, reallocation of public monies, and disinvestment in the form of “planned shrinkage.”

But financial and political maneuvering were not the only factors in New York’s slow recovery. To boost the city’s recovery from the near-collapse of the first half of the 1970s, Mayor Beame, the New York State Department of Commerce, and the Association for a Better New York (ABNY) worked together to manufacture and deploy a new image for the city. They needed something that would encourage new investment, attract tourists, and draw new residents

26. Quoted by Thomas Hillstrom for UPI, in the Wilmington Morning Star, 10/18/75
to the city. Thus began the campaign to promote New York City as a center of arts, finance, leisure, and consumption. The iconic “I heart NY” graphic, designed by Milton Glaser in 1977, became a symbol of the campaign. New York City’s path to recovery from the crisis, aided by a media machine, has become a model for what is variously termed revitalization, development, redevelopment, and urban renewal by city boosters and officials, urban planners, and potential investors. On the Lower East Side, the visible sign of gentrification—and point in ABNY’s success column—was the influx of artists and galleries in the early 1980s; a rise in property values eventually followed. Artists unwittingly helped turn the neighborhood into an imaginary site fully accessible to urban pioneers and middle-class consumption, an exciting blank slate with available space and cutting-edge art (Zukin 1982; Smith 1996b; Deutsche and Ryan 1984).

But artists, too, are subject to these larger shifts in economy and culture that push gentrification and inform these discourses: forty years later, art in New York has been pronounced dead. Or more accurately, dead for young artists. David Byrne and Zadie Smith said it, while Patti Smith advised young people to leave it behind and consider a move to Detroit:

New York has closed itself off to the young and the struggling. But there’s always other cities. I don’t know—Detroit, Poughkeepsie, Newark. You have to find the new place because New York City has been taken away from you. It’s still a great city, but it has closed itself off from the poor and creative burgeoning society. So my advice is: Find a new city.

If art is dead, it is due in part to the problem of housing in a city that has seen a large part of its recent development cater to the wealthy. Rising rents have killed, or at least destabilized, art communities, but every generation believes it has been witness to the death of art. So perhaps art is alive. But to refute the “art is not dead” claim with examples of renegade performances and

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27. The ABNY was founded in 1971 in order to begin promoting tourism in the city. Until then, marketing had not played a large role in the city’s economic development or planning (see Greenberg 2008).
installations that constitute a uniquely New York aesthetic is to miss the point. Art is nowhere near dead in a city that is home to some of the most important art institutions in the world. It lives on as a marketing tool and aesthetic influence on the urban landscape, as art—and artists—continue to contribute to the dynamics of gentrification and development. Claims of injustice leveled at New York City’s obscene real estate market, made in the name of starving artists, is a criticism just as well made—or better made—in the name of immigrants, low and middle income earners, and a host of other groups whose members feel the effects of longer commutes, familial displacement, community breakdown, and the burden of spending a disproportionate amount of one’s income on housing. Holding onto and continuing to attract artists and other young “creatives” continued to be a significant issue for the Bloomberg administration’s development agenda. The same government institutions and authorities outside of which Patti Smith’s generation lived, and against which they protested or were seen to pose a threat, are now “studying the lives of all the mini-Patti Smiths of New York today, and trying to figure out how to make them stay.”

4.2 Aesthetic productions of place

4.2.1 Landscapes without history

Erasure of history occurs when design is elevated over preservation, the past, and the embedded nature/ecology of the highline in NYC’s post-industrial landscape. Questions and assumptions arise around privileging rationality or the “wild” (Braun 2005, 637). While challenging rational design (see Lefebvre 1995) is worthwhile and aids efforts to usurp (western) instrumentalism and determinism in design, the romanticism of a “pure” or “wild” nature often

permeates such visions (Braun 2005, 638). Langhorst (2015), in his analysis of the role of the “picturesque” in the production of The High Line, suggests that ‘wild’ emergent and transgressive ecologies are eschewed in favor of something beautiful rather than sublime; but I have been pointing to the role that the ‘wild’ and transgressive can play in the early days of gentrification and eventual “urban renewal.” The gritty has been profitable, or value-productive, before. The discourse and imagined/imaginary space of the “frontier” (Smith 1996b) attracted young artists, students, and other suburban escapees to the dirt, danger, and outlaw atmosphere of 1980s downtown New York City.

When historicity is excised from understandings of the environment or nature, discourses rooted in naturalness inevitability surface to make claims about what causes the abandonment of a place. A corollary assumption is that the emptiness indicates a lack of need or want. Following the ideological transformation of nature from something to be dominated into an accumulation strategy, and a purity fetish to be experienced, nature has morphed into something else: something with the power and permission to, for example, “take back” the failed city of Detroit and, in the process, erase all of the mistakes of the past. “Nature” has also been a social and political tool, used to conjure an idyllic image or evocation of terror. Nature does not only define or become defined by place; it functions aesthetically, the weight of its multiple images affecting place in ways that are not merely representational or categorical. Instead of serving as justification for or explanation of African enslavement, women’s weakness, or social engineering, nature is a causal mechanism that brings the futures of New Orleans and Detroit into being by suggesting that it has all worked out for the best, by natural design or against human hubris and failure.
4.2.2  Cities remade in crisis

New Orleans and Detroit are places that have been defined by disaster and crisis: in New Orleans, the failure of the levees following Hurricane Katrina in August 2005 resulted in flooding across eighty percent of the city; and Detroit has had a precipitous drop in population over several decades and filed for bankruptcy in 2013. These two specific events are not natural disasters, blips, or anomalous outliers; indeed, they are not even over. The historical roots of the crises in New Orleans and Detroit grow deep within the United States.

But Detroit and New Orleans are not the same, and discussing these cities together proves both problematic and useful. Detroit is a postindustrial “Rustbelt” city that has suffered through decades of disinvestment and resource drains. New Orleans, on the other hand, experienced a singular event that, in a matter of hours, destroyed homes that had been passed through generations, and left at least 1,000 people dead.31 In describing each city, words and phrases such as “blank slate,” “opportunity,” and “downsizing” are frequently used by the media, elected officials, potential investors, and people with whom I spoke. Much like the New York Times enjoys peddling the geographic equating of Brooklyn with Berlin (or, indeed, Detroit), a number of people I spoke with during my research, usually young artists, regularly compared New Orleans and Detroit. Several of them split their time between New Orleans, Detroit, and New York or Los Angeles; Detroit and New Orleans were places to live cheaply and make art, and New York and Los Angeles were places to show art. The news media noticed these migrations, at times lauding the possibilities for new art worlds in cities with what they saw as low costs of living and an (over) abundance of space. Detroit was the new Brooklyn, or the new New Orleans. New Orleans itself was the new New Orleans.

31. Bialik, “We Still Don’t Know How Many People Died,” 8/26/2015. The exact number of deaths caused by Katrina remains unknown but generally seems estimated to be less than the numbers initially cited.
Collapsing these distinct geographies, histories, and cultures for the sake of pithy comparison does a disservice to those places (and I acknowledge the sensitivity and protectiveness many residents feel toward their respective cities being used in such a framework), but a productive and meaningful comparison can be made using what Cindi Katz calls “countertopography” (2001, 2011). Countertopographies are a way to draw figurative contour lines across time and space in order to trace flows of capital, political struggles, demographic shifts, housing or employment trends and more in order to follow the ways that seemingly disparate locations may be subject to similar global, national or local processes or development or exploitation. What New Orleans and Detroit share is a recent interest in and potential for radical redevelopment from within and outside each city. They have both been the subject of media attention and investment surges following, in the case of New Orleans, a hurricane that flooded four-fifths of the city resulting in loss of property and population, and in the case of Detroit, a population and (blighted) housing/vacancy crisis resulting from decades of loss of industry and jobs. Through discourses, both performative and aesthetic, and the mechanisms of disaster capitalism (Klein 2007), New Orleans and Detroit each cease to be a place and instead become only sites for the intensification of capital accumulation.

4.2.3 Nature, race, accumulation

Beginning near the time Tyree Guyton began work on what would become the Heidelberg Project, the concept of “nature” came under increasing epistemological and ontological scrutiny in the field of geography. Braun (2005) uses the term socionature to describe “a world in which social life is always ‘more-than-human’” (635). In this dissertation I have understood “nature” to include or operate through biopower, populations (made ‘natural’ by
statistical normations), and those spaces read as failures of infrastructure and development, i.e. “returned to nature” or “dying” (such as most of the city of Detroit or the areas of New Orleans below sea level). Nature or natural death reconfigure place as nonplace; a nonplace is a blank slate, a resource, ripe for (re) accumulation.

Nature works as an accumulation strategy in a variety of ways. Nature itself can be accumulated as land, minerals, metals, and on. Nature is accumulated as an idea in the form of preservation and conservation areas. Nature as human labor power is also relentlessly accumulated under capitalism. More recently (since the 1990s), in an intensive rather than extensive, technological way, nature is accumulated for profit and as value (itself a source of value in its fetishized form) through, for example, the carbon credits market (intensive and extensive), patenting of genetic materials, medical and stem cell research, and more (Katz 1998). Similarly, Patricia Clough et al. (2007) have proposed the idea of affect-itself to think through the relationship between productivity, governance, and value in the current context. According to the theory of affect-itself,

> [a]s reproduction becomes a matter of market exchange, the reproduction of labor becomes a force of production. There is the resulting collapse of the distinction between production and consumption and an intensification of capital circulation... There is increased investment in the capital-intensive industries of technoscience and communication technologies which necessitate and make possible the transfer of surplus value extracted from the low-investment sector of the service industry to the high-investment sector of the service industry to the high-investment sector, for example the capital-intensive industries of information and communication. Under these conditions, usually analyzed as effects of the break-up of the Fordist-Keynesian regime of capital accumulation, laboring is more readily described as affective, a matter of linguistic, communicative, or intellectual capacities. (71)

Even while investment in post-disaster, crisis economies of real estate and spatial control continues, the production of value and the productive power of labor now manifest and inhere in less tangible commodity forms such as intellectual property. This new affective economy is
characterized by a change in governance away from “consciously calculated intentionality” toward pre-emption and what the authors call radical neoliberalism: “a radical neoliberal governmentality now subordinates its activities to the logic of a market economy and a rationality of affectivity” (74). Now, not only does pre-emption indicate capital’s desire to “anticipate and control the emergent”; the intention is also to “precipitate emergence and thereby act on a future that has not and may not ever arrive” (63). In the case of genetic information, value is locatable in potential future mutations, the unknown, instead of what actually is or is believed to be possible. Financial markets have operated according to a similar logic, a fact that became clear during the 2008 financial crisis. Potential and promise for a future that did not come (or, from another perspective, did in fact arrive) was coupled with an aesthetic of security that gave the appearance that these financial institutions were, naturally, “too big to fail.”

Property value, too, changes in relation to radical neoliberalism through what I have been referring to as affective, aesthetic atmospheres that circulate or are momentarily affixed to a place. Race plays an important part in the creation of atmospheres. As atmosphere, it functions as another modality of nature-as-accumulation strategy. Racialization is a historically contingent, aesthetic-political, atmospheric, and material set of processes that constrains participation in the public sphere. Public space does not just surface pre-given behaviors but is indeed an active medium through which identities are created, reproduced, or contested.

According to Thomas Sugrue (2005), “Urban inequality…is the result of the mapping of understandings of racial differences onto the geography of a city—and of the power of categories of racial difference to create racial hierarchies that shaped housing patterns, workplace practices, private investment, and the public policies that reinforced them” (xx). In other words, race-based inequality and geographic segregation are in part the result of perceptions of racial difference.
and, at the same time, serve to reinforce those very perceptions by allowing an essential, deterministic, causal link to be made between race, culture, and status. Furthermore, “[d]espite more than half a century of civil rights activism and changing racial attitudes, American cities (particularly the old industrial centers of the Northeast and Midwest) remain deeply divided by race” (xvii). Even New York City, despite (or because of) its great diversity, is one of the most residentially segregated cities in the United States, by race and by poverty [Fig. 14]. Not even rapid gentrification and development projects have managed to tip the spatial demography toward greater integration.  

Figure 14 – Left, Residential segregation in New York City by race (Key: blue, African American; green, white; teal, Native Hawaiian and other API; purple, Native American or Alaska Native; maroon, Asian alone) and (right) by poverty (darker shade indicates increased concentration of families below the poverty level). Total Population and Families, 2015. ACS. Prepared by Social Explorer.

32. Gentrification, of course, is not a viable—or justifiable—means to promote integration.
Neoliberalism is also “the extension of an economic rationality to all aspects of society, including life-itself, where…the state legitimizes itself by behaving ‘like a market actor’” (Clough et al. 2007, 72-3). But the rationality that turns from neoliberalism to the radical version is affective. The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the redevelopment plans are examples of the way this radical neoliberalism works via “crises of governing capitalist productivity.” There is regulation that pressures downward on the “productivity of life” and then sovereign command that governs and moves in during crisis (or not in the case of Katrina). But the sovereign is there to “provoke life, urging it to intensify its own productivity” (72).

Much of the thinking on the future of cities has been symptomatic (and productive) of changes in governmentality (and perhaps sociality) away from enclosure and toward control. But prediction and pre-emption are also characteristic of the new urban governance. The new city is one that manages subjects, crises, and resources through flows and networks of distribution; it is also one that envisions a future that justifies downsizing (or “rightsizing”) in the present, thus bringing that future’s effects into being. This current “dispositif” is bound up with technologies, statistical populations, and “human-nature”, by which “human-nature” is not an assumption about the presumed naturalness of certain human behaviors, nor is it the simple domination of an external nature. “Human-nature” assumes a naturalness to a mode of ordering societies and their relationships with nature, serving to reinforce ideological presuppositions about varying degrees of “proximity” to nature.

The modern notion of racial difference, once thought to be a biological truth reflective of supposedly natural divisions, was replaced in the latter half of the twentieth century by an explanation rooted in culture and the intergenerational reproduction of a subversive, impoverished moral system. These two distinct yet almost equally essentializing understandings
of race and racial difference—as a fact of nature—still operate through media and political discourses; the racial body allows for the language of both nature and culture to operate through it. But while attention to the discursive utilizations of racial categories remains necessary, race is now an aesthetic matter.

4.3 The picture of the city: aesthetics, race, disaster

One of the foremost tasks of art has always been the creation of a demand which could be fully satisfied only later.

- Walter Benjamin, 1936

I have examined the ways that these two pieces, Paul Chan’s Waiting for Godot in New Orleans and Tyree Guyton’s Heidelberg Project, resonate with the histories and environments of New Orleans and Detroit respectively. I used interviews, observation and demographic data; read countless news and media articles, and urban planning and bankruptcy documents; and took a visual, aesthetic and affective approach to reading the Heidelberg Project and Godot in relation to their locations and to one another. To compare New Orleans and Detroit, The Heidelberg Project and Godot, or Tyree Guyton and Paul Chan shows what they have in common are experiences of the flows of capital and the attendant rebranding that comes with and means to encourage new investment, tourism, and media attention. In other words, the connections between these two cities constitute a countertopography.

Relatedly, my intention was not to determine which artist did “better” work or to claim that New Orleans and Detroit can be collapsed according to an imagined set of similarities. My questions have been: In what ways does each piece resonate with its time and place? In what
ways does each respond to an environment? What does each do in its world? These are aesthetic questions, to be sure, but without seeking to judge the aesthetic of each piece in relation to its art historical significance. Aesthetics, for art historians or theorists, signifies an affective, visual, and often sensuous encounter with a work of art. It is an individual experience yet one that can be held in common or in collective in and across space and time. Both the Heidelberg Project and Godot, though differently, entail this type of collective encounter, but they also, I argue are and do more. The material, affective, and atmospheric ripples that emanate from either work have produced specific actions, evoked responses and discursive and material engagement, and brought attention to both artists and to these cities. However I cannot—and do not want to—claim that either resulted directly in an increase in development projects or in demographic changes and gentrification. Nor am I claiming that either created a clearly discernable social movement or push for political change.

The Heidelberg Project has been a long-standing neighborhood installation in Detroit and, as far as I have seen, the only one of its kind that existed in 1986. It was not, in its beginnings, funded by grants or supported by the city; on the contrary, the city and community members railed against it and sections were torn down during the 1990s. The project is the predecessor of the numerous art villages, public installations, street art, and found-object art works that exist in the city today. Artist Tyree Guyton is from the neighborhood where the project is located and can regularly be found on Heidelberg Street, greeting visitors or working on his art. Guyton considers himself an artist first, but believes that the community work and his art are intertwined. For Guyton, there exists a great transformative potential in art, as medicine and gathering point. But art located on a street, and therefore part of ongoing dialogues between various actors

33. For example: Shu Harris’ Avalon Village in Highland Park; the glass collages and sculptures at Dabls MBAD African Bead Museum on Grand River; or the Artist Village, funded by Motor City Blight Busters.
(including nonhuman actors, such as fire), necessarily lives in the tension between, as he put it, the good and the bad. If art is going to be used and taken up by developers to sell condos, so be it; but if art is going to be used in other ways, ways that could make some kind of change, that is part of a necessary relationship.

*Waiting for Godot in New Orleans* was certainly not the first or only artistic, theatrical, or performance piece to address Hurricane Katrina and post-storm New Orleans, but it was the first large-scale work by an outsider (non-native/non-resident), and the first to receive extensive art-world attention, funding, and media coverage. Paul Chan, known as a visual and light artist, came to the city as an outsider following Katrina. He did not arrive in the city with the intention to make art but was struck by the areas of the city devoid of houses, people, and birds. *Godot* was a play, a performance and gathering of people on street corners in New Orleans that brought people back to their neighborhoods for the first time since the storm, and brought others who had never before visited those areas of the city. For Chan, the work he did leading up to the production—teaching free classes at nearby universities, starting a fund to benefit local organizations, getting to know people in the communities—was what made doing the play possible, but it was not a part of what he considered his *artistic* project. Thus Chan consciously worked to avoid using social relations as medium for his art.

To aestheticize social relations is to collude with the already-aesthetic mode of capitalism, exploitation, and politics with which we live. Though Chan sought to avoid collapsing the aesthetic and the social, and also tried to avoid categorization as a “socially-engaged” artist, the attention that followed him to New Orleans became a part of, and was central to, the changing media discourses that have produced new images of New Orleans. The involvement of Creative Time, the organization central to the project’s genesis and funding, and
a significant actor in the political art world of New York City, drew scorn from the local theatre community for funding an outsider instead of artists living and working in New Orleans. But Creative Time also contributed to the production of an atmospheric aesthetic that has had just as much, if not more, impact on shaping post-Katrina New Orleans. While, as I state above, the direct and long-term effects a work of art has are difficult to measure, each element present in the earliest moments after Katrina contributed to the spread of images that showed/produced New Orleans as a center for new art and young artists seeking what New York, a city many are priced out of, had once offered. But even with art’s limitations and potential consequences, there is still room for critique and aesthetic-political intervention in the “half second” (Hansen 2013) prior to capture by measure and capital.

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When I began this project, I believed in the inherent, affective power of live performance to transform the viewer or audience, even if in unpredictable ways. And though I still maintain this position, I have also interrogated the impact of ephemeral aesthetic work and its contemporary relation to neoliberal capture, modulation, and redeployment. Here I would like to suggest that the Heidelberg Project, in some significant ways, has had less aesthetic resonance with neoliberal capital than did/has Chan’s *Waiting for Godot*. Both the Heidelberg Project and *Godot* change the spatial and affective relations of viewers and/or participants. The Heidelberg Project, however, presents a vision of the urban landscape that is not easily captured by capital but is indeed transgressive and transformative of space and the viewer’s relationship to spaces deemed marked by decay. *Godot*, on the other hand, was more palatable and appealing to the art world despite the powerful effect of bringing people back to their ruined neighborhoods.
In the way of a conclusion, I would like to ask, following Christina Sharpe (2016): what matters in all this, and why and how does—or has it come—to matter now? What material effects exist now and then, whether in 1986 or 2013 Detroit, or New Orleans in 2005 or 2007? What affective and historical ripples do we feel when we realize that we exist in what Sharpe has called the Wake? What rages are made of place, or places made of rage, in art? What environments show us rage?

Detroit is not a city of abandonment or decay; New Orleans is not a place of neglect and ruin. They are in fact torn down, burned down, flooded, and temporarily discarded. But corpses come back and speak. The burned out buildings of Detroit are symbols of rage and of the refusal to maintain what capitalism left behind when it abandoned the city. City officials, FEMA, and insurance companies did not make returning to the Lower Ninth Ward in New Orleans easy, but it has remained sparsely populated in part because former residents have not gone back to a city that did not make it easy for them to get back, that did not seem to want them back. Their rage is manifested in the refusal of the invitation, if offered at all, to go home. Why should residents of New Orleans return? What reason do they have to rejoice upon seeing the changed landscape permeated by white consumption of not only black culture but also black neighborhoods and places where communities once existed? They did not build the levees or, rather, fail to adequately build and maintain the levees. Nor have most residents reaped the financial benefits of the city’s post-Katrina real estate boom that resulted from the lack of livable housing. In Detroit, why shouldn’t they burn it down? What promise should residents see in the newly rebranded “Midtown”? In Detroit, a city where demolition—not for construction but solely for clearance—is celebrated and the sign of a good, effective mayor, a house has more value as art than as a home, and even more value as a demolition contract that may aid the consolidation of
vacant properties and reduce the tax assessment for speculators. The “ruins” of Detroit did not degrade or decay naturally; they are the rage of those who did not ask to be “rightsized.”

Race is an aesthetic-political process—or set of processes and phenomena—that produces and rearranges atmospheres or climates (Sharpe 2016) of, for example, antiblackness, white superiority and/or racialized fear. Race is produced over and again as a performative, sociohistorical fact supported by ever-changing fictions. It is performatively produced not only by human bodies but also in part by virtual, digital, geographic, and visual means. The modalities and modulations of race and racial performativity are affective; they are also affect itself. Race is not a thing, but it is, becomes, and/or appears as something bodily and ontological. The truth of race is tied not to any discoverable fact just outside of the reach of our current human capacities for knowledge; it is tied to assumptions, ideologies, and affects that produce the ontological and epistemological “facts” of race. In other words, ontologies give ground to productions of knowledge that produce the ontologies of which they seem to offer proof, fact, and truth.

Aesthetic culture, via canonical and hegemonic literatures and art, reiterates and serves the “normalizing knowledges of the liberal state” (Ferguson 2004, 25) through a racialized definition of nation and citizen tied with Enlightenment notions of morality and reason/the rational subject. Because the democratic nation-state is believed to be where humankind experiences it full potential and realization, all aesthetic and intellectual work therefore reflects the success of the nation-state and the spread of democracy (its absorption and assimilation). This tautology is the endless looping of the processes of racialization and the production of the racial body, on the one hand, and the promise and subsequent denial of even provisional inclusion on the other.

34. For an example of the spatialized production of fear, race, and segregation, see Low (2001).
We do not become racist because Detroit is left to die, and it is not because we are racist that Detroit is left to die; we are racist because we do not see its death, and we do not care. Detroit dies because the political economy of race operates through the aesthetic production of blame—city taxes are too high, people too poor, schools and crime are bad, no one has a work ethic, just get a car—and also advances institutional arrangements that most immediately benefit (and harness) whiteness, using and producing whiteness as aspirational futurity and potential. Likewise we are not racist because we watched people suffer in New Orleans. People did not die because we watched or because the president did not respond quickly enough. People died because they were positioned to die. Spatialized racism, instituted through urban planners, developers, and engineers, makes the lives people live less life-like. We imagine that a city dies because the logic of race says that whiteness left and nothing was ever built or created by blackness. We are racist because we accept this as a fact and feat of a nature that in turn opens the door to aesthetic capitalism’s intervention and intensification.

4.3.1 Art lives.

Art matters not just in the form of the physical objects, canvas, paint, metal, bodies, and other tools that artists use. Art also matters as space, politics, ideology, and affect. All art is situated in an historical, political, and economic moment; the artist’s aesthetic (or that of a work of art) affects and is affected, latently or manifestly, by and through social relations. Unlike explicit political ideologies, art operates through and modulates affective, sensuous, and haptic registers to dynamically produce space. A work of art is performative and productive in relation to the space it occupies/occupied, and these affective spaces are physical, metaphorical, and imagined (Anderson 1991). Thus my interest in this work has been drawn first by the art itself,
but also by the potential it offers that is not always seen because this potential does not fit into either political economy or art alone. The political economies of accumulation that surround and mine a city’s art institutions, cultures, and market matter, but I have pointed my attention to something else, something that finds points of value extraction in a pre-actualized, affective idea or atmosphere of potentiality.

In this sense, and to address this potential, I have melded together the perspectives of art, urban and social theory, aesthetics, and theories of race, nature, and accumulation in order to flesh out a new kind of causality and a new way of thinking through connections, dynamism, and objects. This has allowed a critical perspective toward the way that art is made the ground for capital accumulation. Demographic changes in “gritty” or “frontier” neighborhoods (Smith 1996b), public-private collusion in the form of business improvement districts (BIDs) and BID-sponsored artist commissions (Deutsche 1992), and the commodification of, for example, modernist symbols (Deutsche and Ryan 1984) are just a few moments from which to trace the artifacts and relations that haunt and constitute an aesthetic capitalism that exists alongside the continued accumulation of space and time. That this happens is not always (or ever) in the artist’s hands, and yet artists still provide an aesthetic vision for what the world is/can be/was and that the realm of the aesthetic is one of affects and effects.

Art opens up spaces of potential that offer not only critical or alternative visions for the city; it also demonstrates the significance of aesthetic causality of and potentiality in all objects. Timothy Morton’s (2015) argument, from the perspective of an object-oriented ontology, is that “art is far from a superficial and exclusively human-flavoured region of reality”; rather that working only in the realm of appearances or decoration, “human art…is telling us something very deep about the structure of how things are.” For Morton, art is the “fundamental operation
of cause and effect” and thus shows us something about how causality inheres through art’s interference in the realm of causes and effects. Causality is not mechanical, scientific, or perceptible in any empirical sense; rather, appearance and causality are bound together, entangled as in a Mobius strip. From appearance and illusion a weird causality emerges that frees us from the concept of synchronicity or correlation as the only valid (scientific) ways to address causality.

As I have argued, art does not exist outside of any of the social or political relations and conditions in which it is produced, but neither is it reducible to those conditions. For art, weird or aesthetic causality means that art is neither expressive of individual genius or vision, nor of its social, political, and historical context. Art does not express because to express would necessarily mean to represent or emerge from something fixed. But no aesthetic object is static. In every way possible, the object—and every other object, human and nonhuman, that it interacts with—is in flux, becoming, without a determinate future or past. If we consider the aesthetic to be the place of cause and effect (in a sensual, material way), then a potential for change, modulating through a work of art, also belongs to aesthetics.
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