



Karen McCoy

Artist Statement

For over two decades my primary work has been site-specific sculpture. This work is based on a complex web of information I gather through research, site visits, walking the landscape or urbanscape, discussion with community members and my own visual response to site and context. I am involved in the visual interpretation of a kind of deep mapping. My definition of site includes historical, cultural and political features, as well as the physical characteristics of a place. Many works are galvanized by consideration of the environmental plight of the site in question. I am interested in a relationship between the cultural and natural worlds that includes the earth, the body as a sensing being, language, and the artist's potential to construct meaning through a process of participating with and within these systems. My work has to do with *making* in relation to seeing and conversing with the world; with issues of perception, *how* and *what* we see, in relation to understanding the workings of the world. I explore how we experience place and person by amplifying and intensifying ordinary phenomena, things there for everyone to see, but so woven into the fabric of the everyday that they are not usually noticed. I create places for contemplation, human gatherings, listening and observing—places that invite us to slow down and increase our sensory perception. My work is energized by questions like: what characterizes our past, present and future relationships with the spaces where we live and work and with our fellow humans, what will be the quality of our future relationships with place and diverse peoples? In work based on memory, perception, observation and experience with the world I attempt to forge meaningful sculptural sites as places into which other fields of learning may flow, where barriers may be broken and connections made.

My interest is in melding physical materials with other human concerns such as the spiritual, the psychological, the sensual and the intellectual. I have had a continuing

involvement in making work that undergoes, or alludes to, physical change as an echo of the constant flux of the world and its processes; that relates to human memory, history and action; and is informed by a cultural and political consciousness. I would like to be a generative force in a complex conversation about the world. The dialogue often begins with my own feet walking, my own muscles working, my eyes seeing, my lungs breathing and my hands making—myself as a sensing, creating body.

In making work, I meld forms and materials with memory; process with product; accident with intentionality; playfulness with seriousness. I seek to construct my work through intense and meaningful processes in much the same manner as we are all laboring to form our lives into sites of significance and value. Paul Valéry notes that “When nature wishes to turn out a hard article of set shape, a support, a lever, a brace, an armor plate; or when it aims to produce a tree trunk, a femur, a tooth or a tusk, a skull or a sea shell, it works in the same indirect way: it takes the liquids or fluids from which all organic matter is made, and slowly separates out the solid substances it needs.” My process, too, is to slowly separate out the things I need to form my work within the multi-layered context of the world.

Left – **Uprooted**, 1994
Krakamarken, Denmark

Invisible Operations



**Invisible Operations,
1999**

Project for the
South Carolina
Botanical Garden
Clemson,
South Carolina

Invisible Operations asserts my certainty in the ongoing presence of unseen, but nonetheless tangible, processes and their effect on our lives. The phrase “invisible operations” refers to a *London Times* article published in 1870, a time “when scientists were first confronting the universe in microscopic detail previously unimaginable.” Geological formation, for example, takes place every day under

our feet and all around us. Local geology, as it underlies the site, is a generating force in the project.

Indigenous South Carolina red earth, fortified with a small percentage of cement, has been compacted into geometric forms. Ramming red soil in compact successive layers creates solid structures that reference layered geologic formation. Since ramming earth requires no external structure, beyond the molds for construction, the solid red earth blocks appear to have simply emerged from the topography of the site. They serve as a cautionary tale. Everyone has a story about a beloved bit of land—a meadow, a forest, a creek or a ravine—that suddenly has become a shopping mall, a parking lot or blocks of new houses. Geometric form is a metaphor for this human transformation of land—the way we grid, divide and construct as we live on the landscape.

The twenty-eight rammed earth geometric solids range in size from a 1' cube block to a 6.5' x 2' x 6' wall and are situated within a gridded structure on the site. Most of these blocks contain a band of dark earth made from the topsoil removed in the foundation excavation. Rammed earth, a building technique used world wide, since prehistory, has historical links to South Carolina. At Stateburg, South Carolina, there stands today a church built entirely of rammed earth built in 1850. *Invisible Operations* makes use of research published by the Clemson Agricultural College Engineering Experiment Station (Bulletin #3) over a half century ago.

The site is a diverse area, approximately 175 x 225 feet, that includes an open woods, a meandering creek, a wildflower meadow and a deeply cut ravine. In order to construct the project a temporary grid was staked out over the entire location with its major axis parallel to one of the fences. Fragments from this construction grid have now been planted in *Ophi pogon* (Lt.), a fine-bladed Japanese grass. In a year or two, the now barely visible planted grid will grow to re-establish geometric structure as a tangible presence on the site. Purple leaf European Beech trees have been planted near the rammed-earth blocks. The newly



planted trees will grow up to mark the position of the blocks as they slowly erode. They will add new color to the forest and extend the adjacent American Beech grove. Thus the project employs natural processes and indigenous materials in combination with invented processes and imported materials.

Walking, observing and remembering are key to the conception and experience of *Invisible Operations*. To see the whole sculpture one must traverse the site and reconstruct it over time and in memory. The blocks, plants, and site will change over the years as they are continuously shaped and reshaped by processes of weathering, growth, and human interaction.

Island Gridded for Growth



Island Gridded for Growth, 2000

(part of the larger Emily's Pond project at Jackson, Wyoming)

Earth, native willow, stone, grass. Island is 80' x 80' depending on water level

Island Gridded for Growth has been sectioned off into small square plots by low, woven willow fences. All of the island has been claimed in this way, in a manner similar to how we humans divide and mark space for our own uses as fields, streets or building lots. Willow has been chosen in hopes that it will take root, grow and develop the island for animal habitat. In this way the work questions how we might *use*, or inhabit, a place and still share it with other creatures.







Tree in Tree, 2004

Karen McCoy and
Matthew Dehaemers
with members of the
Osage Nation
Forest Park, St. Louis,
Missouri



Tree in Tree honors the ancient Osage Indian presence in Missouri. An Osage Orange sapling was planted within the hollow trunk of an old Red Oak tree. The massive 17' tall Red Oak trunk and all its fallen branches were charred. One branch of the sapling was drawn through a slot carved in the eastern side of the trunk and tethered parallel to the ground. The planting of the sapling symbolizes a “re-rooting” of the Osage in the earth of their ancestral homeland. Indians of North America often manipulated trees by bending branches, or trunks, as the trees were growing. These marker, or guide trees, usually pointed the way to water or sacred places. This tethered branch points eastward. The Osage consider that they are always traveling in an easterly direction on their life paths. This is a conceptual journey they take each day. The orientation towards the rising sun is also a metaphor for a new beginning. It is a gesture of support and hope for the revitalization of Osage culture and language, the growth of more positive relations within and between cultures, and the generation of more positive conditions for the environment we all share.

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