

Three Voices: Reading and Re-reading Breaking Ground

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This paper chronicles three distinct voices: a curator, an architect, and a dance choreographer. Through the curation, commissioning, execution, and evolution of the temporary installation *Breaking Ground*, situated on an urban University campus, the relationships between public space, place, and activity were examined. The collaborators and their work provided a platform to read and re-read the project through 1) ephemerality (of both the temporary installation and live dance performance), 2) a focus on experience over utility (the installation did not serve the same practical functions as a conventional building and the dance experience cannot exist without the installation in the way a conventional dance piece can), 3) a commitment to making art and experiences accessible to the public through its engagement in civic space (a democratized approach) and 4) recreate the experience off-site at the ACSA conference in Marfa.

THE MUSEUM CURATOR:

In 1983, up and coming artist, Keith Haring was invited to paint a mural on the construction fence built in preparation for the ground-breaking of Marquette University's Haggerty Museum of Art. This act of creating art outside of the museum, in the form of 24 4x8 plywood panels forming an 8' high by 96' long canvas, coincided with the general trend towards the democratization of museums.

For Haring, art was a tool for communication with a wide audience, and the site of this particular commission—at the confluence of a major highway interchange—was particularly attractive. The artist spent three days in Milwaukee—under the eyes of a very interested public—painting both sides of the construction fence in his signature graffiti/street art style, sometimes with the help of Marquette University students. The installation was meant to be temporary, and was dismantled once the museum opened. The Haggerty's

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founding director eventually accessioned the work into the museum's collection, and in so doing, raised questions about the kind of art found in a museum, the kinds of functions that art should or could serve, and the ways that the public could engage with it. The traditional hierarchy between what was considered art (plywood and external house paint) and what the container was for it (the museum) was inverted.

Building on this legacy of engaging visitors in participatory aesthetic experiences outside of the confines of the gallery space, the Haggerty, in 2015, invited six regional artists to create site-responsive work for the exhibition *Topography Transformed*. Portions of Keith Haring's *Construction Fence* acted as the conceptual and physical core of the exhibition. The integrated group exhibition explored a set of material, visual, and conceptual affinities that were loosely tied to Haring's practice and to notions of topography – the natural and man-made characteristics or qualities of the land.

Two of the exhibition participants, the architecture firm of *bauenstudio*, led by Mo Zell and Marc Roehrle, and artist Joseph Mougel, created ambitious outdoor projects based on the curatorial premise of site responsiveness. Mougel staged a hole-digging performance (part of an ongoing series) in which he employed a pseudo-scientific, highly systematized process to determine rates of excavation in accordance with the position of the sun. The performance responded to the particular qualities and conditions of his chosen site in the highly visible and well-trafficked Marquette Central Mall. His was an individual and durational pursuit - an exploration of artistic labor that held the audience firmly in the position of spectator and that, through acts of negation and repetition, created a physical barrier (of dirt piles around the hole). Mougel's piles served a similar role to Haring's fence, as the physical barrier to the museum's construction site, although Haring's process of creation was welcoming and participatory.

In juxtaposition to Mougel, who served as the object of the passerby's gaze and literally broke ground to transform the landscape, *Breaking Ground*, by *bauenstudio*, employed an additive process to engage participants in an experiential reframe-ing of the landscape.

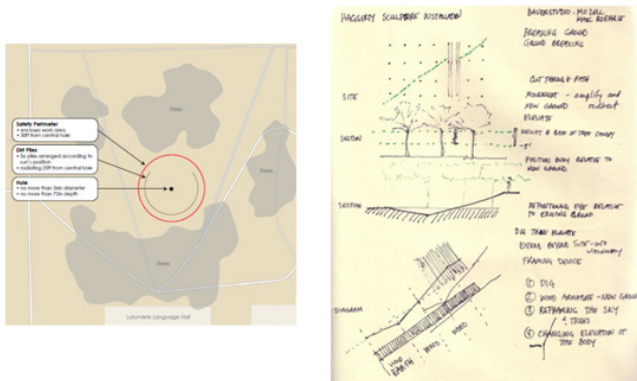


Figure 1: Initial design proposals by Joseph Mougel (on the left) and bauenstudio (on the right)..

The site selected by bauenstudio was a courtyard just north of the museum’s building, which is at the southeast corner of Marquette’s campus, an area of significantly less foot traffic than the central mall. Visitors rarely stop in the garden to engage in any kind of experience. There are several blue granite and bronze Ernest Shaw-designed stationary, functional sculptures, in the form of picnic tables, benches, and planters, that are permanently installed in the sculpture garden. These static objects, with prescribed uses, provided a formal and conceptual point of contrast for bauenstudio. Breaking Ground eschewed the rigid formality of blue granite and bronze and instead employed humble, off the shelf materials (similar to those favored by Haring).

From the outset, Breaking Ground prompted an embodied experience that disrupted the normal conditions of the space and activated the site in new ways. The piece was situated in a way that mimicked the natural foot traffic patterns across the courtyard, so it invited participation; people were encouraged to climb up and on the work in a self-directed way.

While many visual artists (including Haring) address similar spatial and phenomenological concerns in their work, this installation provided an opportunity to invite additional disciplinary voices into the conversation. Once the architectural intervention was installed, and began to achieve the objectives described above, bauenstudio and the Haggerty Museum invited a dance choreographer to initiate a secondary response to the amended site. This kind of collaboration manifests a more metaphorical notion of site-responsiveness, in that the Haggerty Museum is situated on a campus where there is no art or art history program. As such, the museum uses the visual arts as a vehicle to work across the artistic and academic disciplines, as this reading of site (by an architecture firm) and re-reading (vis-a-vis a dance and music performance) suggests.

THE ARCHITECTS:

[With the commission of Breaking Ground, the Haggerty (as it did with Haring’s construction fence) reexamined what constituted art and where it should be. Not simply a sculpture placed just outside the museum’s doors, Breaking Ground suggested a trajectory

through which to investigate the sculpture garden and invited patrons to enter and explore this building/non-building installation, implying a democratic idea of what constitutes art.

The firm bauenstudio employed four frameworks of response to the curatorial prompt: siting (the sculpture garden), form (topography transformed - thus referencing the theme of the group exhibition), embodied experience (Mougel’s digging) and material (Keith Haring’s mural). Drawing from an expanded notion of site written about in Carol Burns and Andrea Kahn’s seminal book *Site Matters*, bauenstudio’s initial response to the site had to address not only the museum visitor and Marquette student but the entire urban campus, which sits adjacent to a highway as well as residential neighborhoods. The immediate site, as described above was used as a shortcut between campus buildings. The existing bosque of trees provided minimal shading in the summer but the health of the trees was in question and limited their appeal as a natural environment to be preserved. Sidewalks that lined the site also served nondescript pathways.

The site conditions, in addition to the theme of the show (topography transformed) and Mougel’s work (about digging) prompted an oppositional response from bauenstudio. By lifting the ground up into the tree canopy the visitor was provided a new perspective on the site, extending the site’s connection to spaces and buildings off site through new and elongated views. As Juhani Pallasmaa implies in his chapter ‘Image in Action’, in the book *The Eyes of the Skin*, there are cues in architecture that imply movement and function and in this case the ramp, the handrail created by the shift in polycarbonate panels, and the undulating wall panels provide the spatial conditions of an embodied experience.

Formally and conceptually the ramp provided a new ground plane in which to control direction, view, and positional relationships to the existing ground and tree canopy. The ramp also combined moments of action and stasis - creating movement along the ramp and concluding on a horizontal surface - dubbed the pulpit in reference to the religious foundations of Marquette, the offsite church in direct alignment with the ramp as well as connections to architectural precedents like Lissitzky’s Lenin Tribune Tower.

Drawing from earlier work in the practice, specifically the vernacular inspired garage + workshop that employed polycarbonate panels, bauenstudio interrogated the ability of polycarbonate to provide visual porosity at specific moments while limiting views in others. A double layer of 8mm polycarbonate revealed and concealed the user as their position relative to the ramp changed.

Two panels of polycarbonate shift in an effort to influence how the body was viewed as it moved along the ramp. Feet became transposed from the ground to eye level while heads disappeared into the tree canopy. This form of compartmentalization accentuated a type of external voyeurism of the human body. The rolling topography around the site provided for additional levels of viewing heights. The view at eye level from a significant cross campus pathway (below grade relative to the bottom of the ramp) accentuated both the

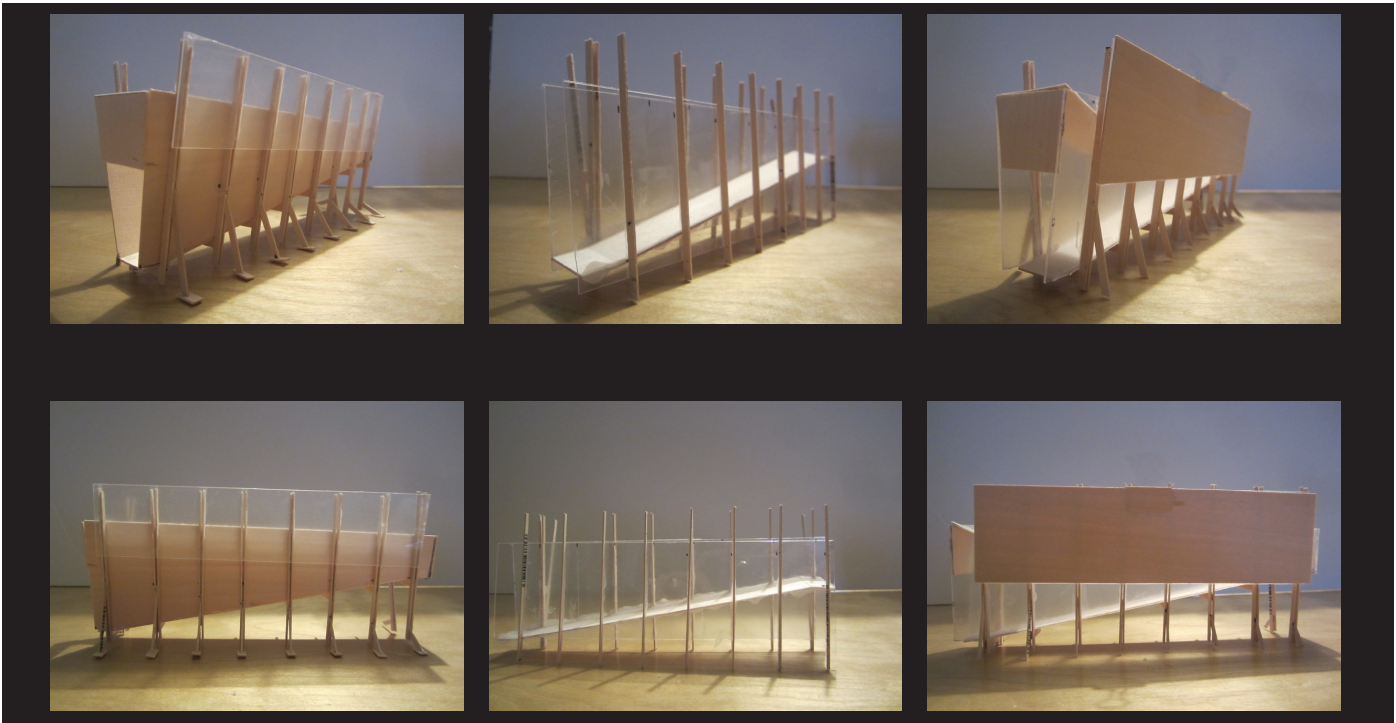


Figure 2: Design evolution models from bauenstudio.

forced perspective and the undulating movement of the panels juxtaposed against a visitor on the ramp.

These materials and details of construction affect the embodied experience of a visitor. The structure compressed and expanded to accentuate the extended views while the ramp narrowed at the pulpit in an attempt to limit the number of people who could occupy the space simultaneously. The undulation of the walls was modulated through simply manipulating off the shelf materials - 4x8 polycarbonate panels and plywood and 2x wood members.

In addition to the formal experience of compression and expansion along the ramp, the polycarbonate offered an opportunity to have a multiplicity of experiences throughout the day. Due to movement of the sun, light reflecting on the surface of the polycarbonate changed; ranging from opaque to transparent and reflecting the canopy and sky. These 4 x 8 polycarbonate sheets were elevated off the ground to accentuate the height. While the focus inside the panels oscillated between expansion and compression, the view from a distance evoked a billboard. Seen from the direction of the main campus, the installation blocked much of the sidewall of the museum - offering a new 'sign' or acknowledgement that art lived in this part of the campus.

After construction, the activation of the piece by daily users inspired the team to re-read the installation as a new site for another type of performative engagement. Due to the size of the piece, the original intent of public access was limited to 1-2 people. However the extent of public engagement was not fully realized until the dance choreographer got involved. Through the improvised dance the multiplicity of lighting conditions of the polycarbonate were further animated.

THE DANCE CHOREOGRAPHER:

Rolling hills, sky, trees.
 Density, crowd, release.
 Incline plane, transparent, divide.
 Around, under, through, in.
 Pulpit, canopy, heavens.

SWITCH

Language became the first entry point for collaboration with performers on the Breaking Ground sculptural project. bauenstudio architects and choreographer/improviser Joelle Worm met at the already installed sculpture site and talked through the inspirations for the sculptural piece, the materials chosen and the desired experiences for visitors/viewers. This conversation brought into focus the conceptual ideas for the performance project, the considerations of the specific site (site responsiveness), and the desired outcomes for viewers/visitors. It also developed a shared vocabulary for the collaborating entities.

A group of University student dancers and musicians were invited to perform on the sculpture and rehearsals were held only on site so as to continuously include the experience of being in the environment into the final performance piece. It was determined that improvisation would be the best choreographic method for the piece because it would allow for the inclusion of the embodied experience of the audience and an improvised "score" (set of instructions) was created for performers to follow. Movers and musicians found ways of interpreting the descriptive language of bauenstudio as well as their personal experiences of the garden, the sculpture and the area surrounding the sculpture and channelled that through their own media.



Figure 3: Keith Haring construction fence mural at the Haggerty Museum of Art in 1983.

Similar to Keith Haring's liberation of art from the museum/gallery, the *Breaking Ground* performance piece was grounded historically in the work of Judson Church era dancers of the 1960s and 1970s in New York City who questioned what counted as dance movement (pedestrian v. virtuosic, improvised v. choreographed), who could be considered a dancer (acceptance of a wider range of body types) and finally where dance could take place (non-theater venues, outdoors, etc.). Additionally it referenced theatre director Anne Bogart of the Saratoga International Theater Institute (SITI) Company and Tina Landau who cite architecture as a Viewpoint ("a set of names given to certain principles of movement through time and space; these names constitute a language for talking about what happens on stage"). Movers using the Viewpoint of architecture consider architectural elements in the design, creation and execution of performance.

Dancers began their journey at the *Breaking Ground* performance events at the far south end of the sculpture garden and adjacent walkways. That distance was highlighted by bauenstudio as a point of origin where the sculpture - at a distance - could serve as

a beckoning point or beacon for someone standing there. Dancers moved along the rolling hills of the landscape, through railings and onto cement staircases to criss cross and overtake the audience seated on benches and mingling on the concrete walkways and patios.

Dancers served as guides, leading the audience to the structure, where their further explorations were already taking place. Musicians acted as wandering minstrels to provide individual sound scores for their differing views of the performance event (musicians were at times posited on different sides of the sculpture so that they couldn't necessarily hear or see each other). Performers used their bodies to imitate the inclined plane of the ramp and then turned sculpture into jungle gym as they played a game of under, around, through and finally in.

The audience was brought around the sculpture to view the dancers as they inhabited the pulpit. Musicians came together, this time responding in unison to the dancer's score consisting primarily of arm movements that explored the surface of the sculpture itself and into the canopy of the trees that they had been elevated into. Finally, to finish the performance, the audience was invited to take the place of the performers, reversing the experience of the very beginning of



Figure 4: Improvisational dance and music performance responding to Breaking Ground in the Haggerty sculpture garden.

the dance and from inside the sculpture watched the dancers retreat to the hills where they had begun.

Both performer and audience experience were discussed from the beginning of the process in order to connect the self-guided aspect of the sculptural piece to the performance events and to extend that experience. Rather than simply allowing audience to view from afar the labor of the dancers and musicians, the performance was orchestrated to create an immersive experience for the audience in a similar manner to how the dancers and musicians used the sculptural piece. Audience and performers took turns in the various positions provided by the sculpture so that each experience was as much felt as it was witnessed.

The improvisational aspect of the performance was deemed essential here, since it would allow the opportunity for performers to engage with and react to the audience, whose own experience of

being in and around the sculpture was deemed as important as those of the performers. The performance events therefore, would not minimize the audiences'/spectators' own embodied experience of the work by requiring them to stand outside of the piece and simply witness. Instead, the audience's full engagement with the performance (walking with performers from one area of the garden to the sculpture site, trading places with performers both inside and outside the sculptural piece) was hoped to evoke a much more active stance than the generally passive one taken by audiences who are divided from the stage by a "fourth" wall.

Pedestal, balance, build
 Reverse, return, retreat:
 rolling hills, sky, trees...
 rolling hills, sky, trees...



Figure 5: Re-creating the performance of *Breaking Ground* inside the courthouse in Marfa, TX.

CONCLUSION

In an effort to read, re-read and re-read again the embodied experiences of *Breaking Ground*, the collaborators (who are also the authors of the paper) staged a third experience of the installation in the Courthouse in Marfa, Texas.. Through an interactive dance performance led by the choreographer, audience members inverted roles with the speakers when encouraged, and literally pressed, to stand close to one another in the central aisle of the courthouse chairs. Sweeping hands across the existing wood wall paneling, pushing between seated audience members, and stretching towards the sky while standing on an oak chair characterized the connections being made between the existing space and the experience of *Breaking Ground*. The presentation/performance transformed the passive experience of listening into an active one.

The collaborating voices of the architects, the curator and the choreographer strengthened the public's embodied experiences with a temporary and ephemeral installation on the grounds of the Haggerty Art Museum. Paying homage to the work and participatory audience experiences set up by Keith Haring, the project continues to live on in individual and collective experiences. The strength of the collaboration was in its ability to find opportunities to invert traditional forms of engagement. The museum experience extended beyond its traditional walls into a public forum. The museum, installation and dance were all participatory figures that expanded upon ways to activate public space.

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