



Installation views of Karen McCoy, *And You Must Always Begin From the Ground*, DeKalb, IL, 2002, installation and projection. This page: video projection (photo: Larry Gregory). Opposite page, from above: DeKalb Co. soil pigment colors in suspension in glass containers (photo: Larry Gregory); walls stained with local earth and lettered with text, and earth furrows and rammed earth solids (photo: Karen McCoy).

Beginning from the Ground

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Karen McCoy: The DeKalb County Farmland Project
The Museum Without Walls
 Northern Illinois University
 DeKalb, Illinois
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*And you must always begin from the ground,
 again and again you must begin from the ground ...*

— from Gunnar Ekelof's poem, *Ex Ponto*

As an artist whose work engages social issues, Karen McCoy chose to use the earth, indeed the soil, as a starting point for *The DeKalb County Farmland Project*, commissioned by the Museum Without Walls project of the Northern Illinois University Art Museum and installed in the fall of 2002.

NIU has operated The Museum Without Walls while the University Art Museum has been under review and construction. A variety of artists, among them Patrick Dougherty, have been invited to make work that engages and participates in the community around DeKalb. McCoy, chair of the sculpture department at Kansas City Art Institute, has a keen interest in issues relating

to the environment, and a history of creating site-specific work that engages sense of place. She was invited to participate in this program in the spring of 2001.

DeKalb, Illinois, population 39,000, is located about 30 miles west of the Chicago suburbs, in DeKalb County, population 80,000. It grew up as a farming community in the heart of some of the richest farmland in America, with most of its original businesses established to support the agricultural industry. The original teacher's college has evolved into Northern Illinois University, with an enrollment of 25,000 students.

McCoy began exploring complex issues related to farming through formal research as well as videotaped interviews with farmers and others within the DeKalb County community. During 15 hours of interviews — ultimately

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edited down to one hour — McCoy questioned the farmers about their industry and biggest concerns. All but one of the farmers operated conventional farms, many of them corporate farms, and one, a farmer of 22,000 acres, had a kind of share cropper partnership with a massive developer. There are also interviews with a soil scientist, an agricultural engineer, a student, members of the DeKalb community, as well as a woman farmer and a single organic farmer.

The interviews disclose the reality of economic uncertainty, concern about development in the form of encroaching Chicago suburbs, questions of environmental sustainability, genetic engineering, and organic farming. These conversations serve as a microcosmic portrait of issues being discussed in agrarian communities throughout the world.

In listening to the farmers speak, one also hears an awareness on their part of a changing attitude among the general public: a nebulous negativity toward agriculture coupled with a diminishing empathy toward farm populations. As one lifelong farmer described it, rural areas have gone from being a place *for* farms and farmers, to a place where farmers *have* to be. As he and others described newly minted rural dwellers (owners of "farmettes") — clogging the highways with little patience for farm implements that have no other way to get to the fields but to share the roads; requesting that neighboring farmers not drive their tractors in their fields after dark because it disturbs their sleep; and generally complaining about the sounds and smells that accompany farm life — one is reminded of other cultures that have been pushed aside by "progress and development" throughout the history of this and other countries.

The project was installed in a 2,000-square-foot deserted storefront in downtown DeKalb. Formerly a Woolworth's, and then a Salvation Army, it



was one of many derelict buildings in the small town. While McCoy's video, entitled *Conversations About DeKalb*, gave shape and meaning to the rest of the project, the installation provided an opportunity to further explore issues raised in the interviews.

Component parts of the installation were —

The Research Wall

As one entered the space, half of the 60-foot wall on the left presented research that contributed to the project:

- A bookshelf featuring materials that McCoy read and referenced, among them *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson; *Fatal Harvest: The Tragedy of Industrial Agriculture*, edited by Doug Tompkins and Andrew Kimbell; and works by Aldo Leopold, the noted wildlife ecologist and scholar; as well as books contributed by Mike Konen, the soil scientist from NIU who participated in the project.
- Three core samples from a hill top, a hill side, and the bottom of a hill in DeKalb County. These three very different soil profiles clearly illustrated how topsoil erosion is effected by topographical situation.
- A small shelf that held a clump of soil from the prairie, displayed adjacent to a similar clump from a conventionally farmed field. The prairie soil, apparently rich, organic, and rooty, offered a visual and arguably ethical contrast to that from the conventionally farmed land, sterile and "clean-looking" by comparison.
- A third shelf held small bottles encasing sediment in a suspension medium, to illustrate a variety of soil colors found in the region.

• A photo of the soil pit on the university grounds used by the Soil Science department, along with a book of soil color samples, open to the DeKalb soil colors, and looking very much like a Pantone color chart.

The Soil Pit/Dialogue Walls

The remaining half of the wall and the entire 60-foot span of the opposite wall related to the soil pit on the grounds of NIU, which illustrates the composite of the soil in DeKalb. The structure of these walls was designed to reflect the structure of the soil pit. The top 18" of the wall, from the ceiling down, was painted in a rich black wash, using the topsoil of DeKalb for pigment. The seven to eight foot segment below was washed in yellow ochre pigment from the corresponding stratum in the soil pit. The bottom foot and a half of the wall reflected the red brick wash from the bottom of the pit.

These two walls were also used to interject another side into the dialogue. Stenciled throughout, in contrasting soil pigments, were quotes that presented a questioning of conventional farming methods and voiced environmental concerns — comments extracted from some of the artist's research as well as conversations with others from the community.

The Video Projection

On the 30' far wall, the videotaped interviews were displayed as double projections. Throughout the installation, one could hear the voices of the farmers speaking of their lives, the land, the issues related to their industry, the industry of this community. Their voices spoke in dialogue with the silent text written on the walls.

The Soil

Stretching the length of the room were furrows of soil. The scent of the earth enveloped the room, providing a visceral reminder of the reason for this conversation at all. At periodic intervals among the furrows arose large cubes of rammed earth, imposing intercessions of manmade form.

This project seems to have been generated as an attempt to explore the political issues that place some conventional farming practices in conflict with various environmental concerns. It is apparent when viewing McCoy's thoughtful and sensitive interviews that she came away with a deep and profound respect for the men and women who work the land and the nuance and complexity of the issues their chosen way of life entails.

The DeKalb County Farmland Project has no doubt been a catalyst for serious thought about these matters, an intention that McCoy established in the video's opening interview — between the artist and her art teacher, from the days when McCoy was a student at Northern Illinois University, in the late 1970s. The interest on the part of community members in talking further about these issues has fueled McCoy to apply for a special projects grant from KCAI to expand this project by producing a more comprehensive video and facilitating further discussion in anticipation of reaching a national audience. As with other artists today, McCoy has taken her practice outside of the studio to generate meaningful dialogue about social issues in a real world context. Underlying *The DeKalb County Farmland Project* was a shared appreciation, between the artist and the farmers, for the meaning of place, the importance of the land, and what our stewardship means for future generations.

