

# Learning to Play with the Rules: On the Development of the Bauspielplatz Kunst Kammer's Methodological Play with Variation

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## Biography

Marc Herbst is a co-founder and co-editor of the Journal of Aesthetics & Protest that has been publishing since 2001, a PhD Advisor at Transart Institute a research fellow at ProArt and Commons. He is co-editor of the Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination's We are 'Nature' Defending Itself, co-published by Pluto Press in 2021. He is a co-curator of the Bauspielplatz Kunst Kammer, and here and elsewhere continues researching psycho-social and socio-cultural elements related to eco-feminist transformation in the light of our changing world.

## Abstract

**With social and ecological variation caused by climate change, cities and city residents will need to develop flexibility at the core of their structures and in their relationships to them. Cities' planning codes, design norms and their residents' food and comfort habits are established upon Holocenic stability that has been upended by the Anthropocene. So, in addition to the routine socialization that children must undertake to learn to live together in their established settings, they must now learn to embrace flexible relations to these settings and their habits. European life is now transforming with changes driven**

by climate change and recent refugee waves, and Germany responded to the 2015 wave by generously funding cultural integration projects with loosely defined goals. When properly situated, arts-based learning can provide a playful way for children, refugee or not, to flexibly integrate and relate to each other and to changes in cultural and architectural infrastructure towards heterogeneous conviviality. This practice-based paper describes an artistic researcher's development of an arts-based situation, the Bauspielplatz Kunst Kammer (BKK) museum, intended for such learning. It discusses initial insights into the practice of how a situated institution can ground such learning and looks towards wider questions such a project inspires.

## **Keywords**

adventure playground, climate change, transformational play, play, eco-social play, arts-based research, refugees, integration, childhood learning, urban planning, social variation, institutional variation, play museum, museums. art pedagogy

## Introduction

This essay, built on previous research (Herbst, 2020) on transformational artistic practice, is interested in how communities, impacted by changes in climate, might develop a space and capacity to improvise. Some critical political theory (Tronti, 1972; Virno, 2002) attends to meaningful social innovation that occurs through radical grassroots responses from below to troubling contexts. Other writing (e.g. Virno, 2008; Glowczewski, 2015; Zechner & Rübner Hansen, 2015; Sheikh, 2017) also highlights the role that cultural institutions play in scaffolding and supporting such change. I have come to understand that space for variation can be collaboratively scaffolded between institutional structures that exist and what needs to be socially established for conviviality, rather than created whole-clothed in abstract ideological space against what has been established.

I have been engaging with childhood arts-based learning situations on themes related to social and planing-based transformations in the shadows of the Anthropocene. My understanding about the nature of the Anthropocene can be succinctly understood through Jason W. Moore's (2015) discussion of humanity's capitalist entanglements, and refined through Haraway's (2016) descriptions of the messiness of those entanglements.

As an arts-based educator, cultural practitioner and researcher, I understand my roll to be that of a collaborative, social sculptor. I have been seeking to establish situations that can organize social learning capable of responding to such messy entanglements. I initially had the opportunity to learn through a practice-based situation with refugee children in a situation that was not explicitly intended for research. I began this investigation with a German project supported by generous public funds earmarked for an ill-defined goal of refugee integration via arts and culture. I was specifically working with the population of child refugees, mostly from Syria, living in settlement housing at the edge of Leipzig. It was through an initial creative engagement with this population that my trial-and-error process towards developing a meaningful social practice began.

In addition to the project afforded by these general funds, I was also invited to work with an adult-learning platform, the Nachbarschaftsakademie in Berlin, that also informs this interrogation. The Nachbarschaftsakademie is situated in an experimental garden, and utilizes innovative educational practices to collaboratively establish an eco-feminist pedagogy for learning through the coming hundred years of climate change.

Based on these two experiences, I developed and co-designed The Bauspielplatz Kunst Kammer (BKK) with kids at an adventure playground in Leipzig Germany. At present, the Bauspielplatz Kunst Kammer seems like an adequate platform where children can engage in structured play with an institution and its contents. This essay discusses the eventual conceptual and practical development of the BKK and its initial practice, and ends with a wider discussion around social sculpture and social play in the context of urbanity and climate change.

## Presentation of the Cases

### 1. A Well-funded Integration Project

I began working in the Leipzig Pandechion refugee settlement house through a weekly encounter with the home's then-mostly Syrian children aged 4 to 14. I joined the project after it was established and did not contribute to its conceptualization. It was a loose, arts-based integration project afforded by the German Ministry for Families, Seniors, Woman and Youth in the welcoming atmosphere following the 2015 wave of wave of refugees from Syria to Germany (Karakayali, 2018). The encounters were situated in the house's "Creative Room"; our interactions with the children were mostly mediated through small drawing and crafting projects. Because there was no other populations for them to interact and integrate with, there would likely be no meaningful integration despite the Ministry's funding goals.

After getting to know the homes children, I co-conceptualized an intensive comic drawing workshop for them over the 2018 Easter holiday. I hoped that we could achieve something through this more focused workshop, hosted off-site within a neighborhood contemporary art space. The project would have a fully articulated pedagogical structure with hourly learning goals that introduced concepts like plot, narrative, character, and ultimately developing stories around social inclusion. Further, we planned to engage the children with aesthetic questions drawn from the fine arts context that our contemporary art space suggested; around questions of abstraction, autonomy and beauty. We assumed that as a secondary effect, the children might have some integration experiences because of the workshop's setting in a more diverse neighborhood.

On the first workshop day, I learned quickly what a more experienced art teachers would easily point out; most kids have little attention for a day of drawing and lectures. They like to play with rules. Our breakfast-time lecture using characters on breakfast cereal boxes was sidelined by spilled milk and discussions about who was served the most food. It was a disaster from the start, my workshop co-leader and I were bereft of a plan. I witnessed how quickly a bunch of kids could generate and toss aside drawings without giving their doodles a second thought (figure 1). We had a classroom, ample budget, but no actionable plan. Our unreflected reliance on art's institutions and their normative standards left us in a crisis and with little to do.

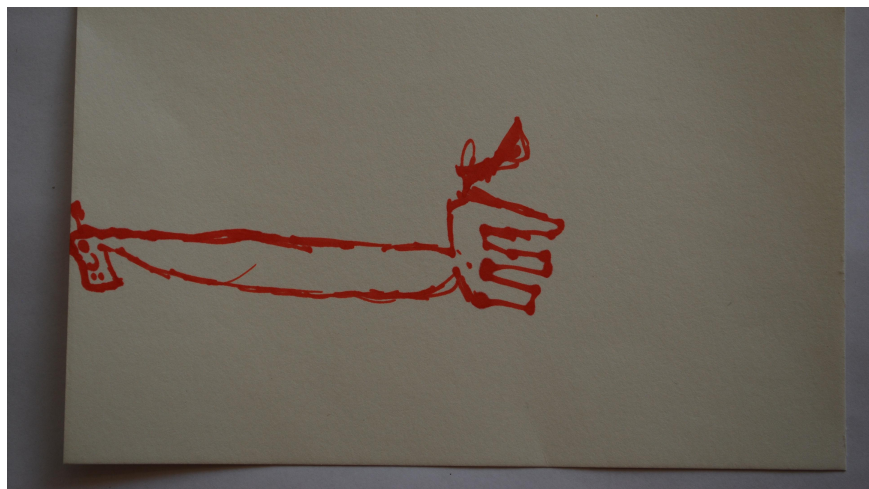


Figure 1. One of many drawings made and quickly forgotten at the Pandechion comic drawing workshop in Leipzig. Photograph by Luise Wonneberger, 2018.

Bored kids scanned the room for something better to occupy their time. They were attracted to the tape and cardboard swords that a previous group of children had left there. Suddenly and under their own initiative, they set the terms for the rest of the workshop week. In play-based situations, they quickly applied their creative and innovative capacities to make their own swords and shields. They established complex-but-ethically-horizontal social hierarchies that facilitated the rapid design and production of crafted items. Sword fighting was fun way to utilize the time we had together (figure 2). Still trying to maintain our pedagogical goals, I occasionally charged the kids of one sword drawing in exchange for helping them cut a shield out from the cardboard (figure 3).

Faced with a crisis, the children themselves developed an institutional framework and standards, one formalized through sword-play and characterized by innovation and exchange. Our educational goals proved pointless; insisting on the goals in the exchange between sword and drawing demonstrated that at best, they would just reproduce a capitalist exchange system of symbolic payments (in drawings) for labor. Upon reflection, I recognized that we'd chosen a learning structure and outcomes that were ill-defined and not child-appropriate. Art for itself would not suffice. In an essay I authored (Forthcoming) reflecting on the workshop and it being hosted in DDR era utopian housing, I reflected; "The gamble of radical social art practices' attempts to make inclusive space for displaced and marginal youth is that its ethical play may be more consequential than the force of the governing systems these practices must participate in.... (Radical institutional art may) have some benefits to the youth participants. Generally, though, the systemic accounting that makes art stand autonomously to the world mirrors the Socialist ideal of East Germany- not explicitly for its Marxism, but rather for its placing a better world beyond the here and now, that sits on the horizon as some kind of eventual social utopia." I learned through the arch of this engagement that a project with goals oriented towards social betterment needed a method that facilitates its overall goals, and goals that match its population's capacities and interests.



Figure 2. The construction of swords and shields quickly became a meaningful craft activity. Photograph by Luise Wonneberger, 2018.

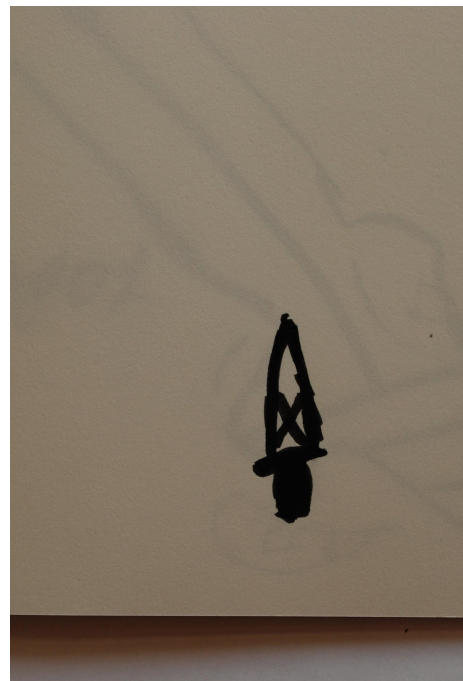


Figure 3. Becoming an item for play, the topic of swords and knives could easily be thematized... "I will give you cardboard for a sword in exchange for a drawing of one". Photograph by Luise Wonneberger, 2018.

## 2. Experimental Garden

Around the time of this workshop, I was invited by artist/activist/educators Åsa Sonjasdotter and Marco Clausen to collaborate with artistic researcher Michelle Teran and co-facilitate the 2019 Berlin Nachbarschaftsakademie. The Nachbarschaftsakademie is an adult learning platform hosted in the Prinzessinnengarten in Berlin's fashionable Kreuzberg district. Sonjasdotter, Clausen and others had begun the Nachbarschaftsakademie project as a tool for the Prinzessinnengarten to consciously study eco-socialist and eco-feminist questions that emerge through managing their open, experimental garden (figure 4).

Our 2019 Nachbarschaftsakademie sessions investigated the management of the garden and its attendant social relations over time. After winning assurance from the city that the land upon which the garden sat would be public and open green-space for 100 years, our aim was to consider ways to pedagogically establish a speculative syllabus that would function as an ethical compass for those coming hundred years– years characterized by changing social and ecological climates. Among other responsibilities, Teran and I were tasked with conceptualizing and authoring a book about the syllabus. In reflecting on our task, questions around the malleability and play that facilitate institutional longevity came to the fore.

The forward that Michelle Teran and I co-authored states:

Here, collectively, it is as though we have allowed ourselves to be suspended in time. And the ether that affords and organizes this suspension is that mix of our individual personal economies, the organizations we are staggering to put in place and our collective political desires for many different things to come to pass. The Prinzessinnengarten's occupation is one of these things. It is also that time-traveling geographic fact that manages to contain all this suspension. This book, focusing on the garden, was intended to be written in stone and be authored between time." (Herbst & Teran, 2020, p.11)

The Nachbarschaftsakademie utilized arts-based funding from the German Ministry for Culture to host a variety of situated learning practices that dealt with questions of cultural variation over time and place. No singular learning project that we hosted over our 2019 program addressed the full range of questions related to possible changes, but cumulatively we observed how a site and its institution could be a host for so many of the possible questions we imagine the site would encounter over time. In relation to my desire to develop a place where children might engage with questions around social variation, the 2019 Nachbarschaftsakademie demonstrated how pluralistic and open institutions allow for a variety of relations– they can act as a petri dish for any number of relations that occur within them.



Figure 4. The Laube at the Prinzessinnengarten where the adult-oriented situated learning 2019 Nachbarschaftsakademie occurred. Photograph by Common Ground, 2017.

### 3. The BKK

Initially under the same funding that had supported the arts-based workshops in Leipzig's Pandechnion, I began doing arts-based workshops in the Bauspielplatz Wild Westen with my colleague Luise Wonneberger. Bauspielplatz is the German word for "adventure playgrounds"; they are guided play spaces where children are given a bucket full of nails, hammer and saw and allowed to play and build onto pre-existing structures (figure 5). Adventure playgrounds came into their own as an arena for childhood development in bombed-out London at the end of World War Two. Adventure playgrounds first came to Germany through Berlin's British occupation; an apocryphal British occupation official recognized that the play model might fill a similar niche in Berlin. Since then, they have evolved into spaces where progressive, inclusive and ecologically oriented social values are part-and-parcel of the play opportunities and open modes of access to the space. Shier (1984) describes many of the historical and social elements contingent to the adventure playground movement, while Cranwell (2003) discusses how it is the guided play inherent to such playgrounds that has made them a site for progressively oriented social development. Further, Kozlovsky (2008) draws parallels between their early development in bombed-out cities and their capacities to act as forums for social innovation, while Russel (2015) brings critical and schizo-analytic theory to the sort of exchanges possible at such sites.

The Bauspielplatz Wild Westen is located near another refugee settlement house with mostly Syrian refugees. In collaboration with this house, we were able to access the same project funds we had utilized for work described above. These house's children frequented the Bauspielplatz. Thematically, we could initially work with the concept of integration. Overall, the playground's neighborhood is much more diverse than the other Pandechnion house. Our experience there confirmed observations by Horton and Kraftl (2017) that wider contexts for play greatly effects play's content, and Visscher and Bouverne-De Bie (2008) and McGregor and Ragab's (2016) observation that efforts towards social integration function best in contexts where intercultural exchange is actually possible. Thus, it was clear to me that here all children could have direct experience with forming new ways of relating to one another— unlike in the situation at Pandechnion where we could only conceptually thematize integration through, for example, comic book writing. The Bauspielplatz' open-access nature where kids could come as they please and engage at their desired depth also differed from the working environment with Pandechnion. Based on my observations there and the experiences with the Nachbarschaftsakademie, it was clear that the Bauspielplatz provided a superior context for all forms of play. It had a culture of guided play that benefited from open cross-generational dialog with playground staff and parents of other children.

I recognized that we needed a vessel, an institution, through which to focus the creative and educational possibilities inherent to this context. A museum seemed like a natural fit; it could motivate creativity and children are already used to putting artwork on their schoolroom walls. They appreciate the cultural cachet suggested by a museum. I saw how a museological institution could provide a focused site to socially sculpt play around future-oriented social and cultural flexibility in relationship to our changing ecologies and cities.



Figure 5. Bauspielplatz Wild Westin in Leipzig, a kid-built structure based on progressive educational and play models. Photograph by unknown. 2018.

In developing our museological method, I was inspired by the work of conceptual artist Michael Asher who organized a long-term exchange between teenagers and the Los Angeles Contemporary Museum of Art (LACMA) where the students curated an exhibition at LACMA. (See Ulke & Asher 2003). I was also inspired by art and activist projects like Park Fiction and City From Below that opened up specialist urban planning and design practices to common people. This strategy would inherently play with hierarchies around whose voice matters. So, our museum would be a collaboration between the playground youth and our adult BKK team. On the playground over the 2020 summer, we hosted an architectural charrette with the kids to design a museum that we promised to build together. Fifteen museum models were constructed. When the children grasped that there would be a vote on the models, interest in the design process soared. One eight-year-old girl with a refugee background began heavily campaigning for her model of a gallery wing... and won. The second-place model was dome-shaped. We decided to combine both models for the construction plan when we realized that by constructing both we would have space for both two- and three-dimensional artwork (figure 6). All that we needed was an actual way to build the dome structure.



Figure 6. The two winning architectural models for the museum, installed now in BKK Museum's 2D hall for display purposes. Photograph by Marc Herbst. 2021.



Figure 7. The BKK museum, with ticket-booth entrance to the left behind the green flag. The booth abuts and enters into the 2D artwork hall. The hall leads to the sculpture atrium, a half-dome painted white. Photograph by Marc Herbst. 2021.

Brazilian sculptor Chico Togni, stranded in Leipzig during the Covid lockdown, was helpful here. He had experience building fabulous architectures with the sort of left-over material available on the playground. So throughout the autumn of 2020, Chico and I worked onsite with the kids; sourcing material, digging, sawing, hammering, and drilling our museum. At first, few kids grasped the project's overall vision, but piece by piece, and in improvisation with our plans, the building took form (figure 7). There was a lot of enthusiasm for the project now, and, rather than boredom, having too many helpers became a problem. At moments when there was a lot of available kids to work but little for them to do, we planned that several museum walls would be constructed using small planks perfect for kids to bang nails into. We would also use their energy to paint the walls; one wall would be multi-colored while the rest had to be kept white. Keeping the walls white was an ongoing task— playground kids have access to colored paint on site and were continually entering the museum and painting its sections in a rainbow of colors and forms.





Figure 8. Access to the employee-only area, "nur für mitarbeiter (employees-only)" written three times. Photograph by Marc Herbst. 2021.

As autumn turned toward winter, the museum really took shape. There were several kids who consistently participated and their interests helped refine design and construction. One girl insisted that a museum needed a ticket booth and set out to build it. Her construction assistants insisted that we also needed an employee-only area behind, and they built it. The kids were so excited about the employee-only area, they hand-lettered "Employees Only" onto the door three times! (figure 8). One boy became very efficient with the power tools we had, and when bored with our slow pace of construction, would run around the entire playground using the drill in areas that were otherwise not intended for power tool use. To utilize his skills, we asked him to design and build the museum's bar (figure 9).

Figure 9. Kid-designed and built bar. "Make it look slick" we instructed. Photograph by Marc Herbst. 2021.



On the successful completion of the museum structure, in the spring of 2021 we applied for and received specific funds from the German Museum Association with the support of the Bauspielplatz and a local contemporary art museum, Halle 14. Halle 14 was curating an exhibit on the theme of incorporating social, architectural and logistical flexibility into ongoing urban development. Over the course of the museum's design and construction, Chico noted that though the kids expressed little interest in the museum, they were very interested in spaces that allowed them to play with the rules and access that adulthood afford. The ticket booth and its ability to control access, an emergency exit, the bar and the employee-only area were all child-generated architectures through which rules might come into play. So, in echo of the Halle 14 theme and our own experiences building the structure, we conceived of our first curatorial concept, "Playing with the rules."

One basic rule of play we established was that all but one of our walls should be painted white- this was a museum after all. But, because it is an open play space as well as a museum, I have made sure to celebrate and document the copious graffiti and autonomously generated artwork that appears on the wall when our adult museum staff is gone (figure 10). I have heard that children who have an interest in the museum's operation have been debating the extent to which the white walls rule is meant to be enforced, and to what extent it is just a flexible rule intended to be bent. Among themselves, they are debating the intention of this rule- a debate that I see as directly relating to questions of the role of public space in a changing city.

Upon the museum's completion and over the course of our curatorial season, I have been curious to find out how such a play-based institution for kids could be utilized as a research platform to collectively play with the flexibility of and within institutions, in relation to our changing world.



Figure 10. Photo of the BKK Museum's 2D hall. We are continually having to paint over graffiti that appears when museum staff is not present. Photograph by Marc Herbst. 2021.

## Findings, Social Sculpture at Play

Though early in our museum's season, we have developed at least two other methods for how we might utilize a play museum to play with institutional variation.

The first relates to the ticket booth (figure 11). Our first project under "Playing with the rules" involved drawing entry tickets and "optional" membership cards with the kids. So much energy has already come into play at the booth, it is difficult to recount all the games that these tickets and membership cards have inspired. Kids argue over who has the right to staff the booth so that they can regulate others' entrance into the museum. Access to space is an important theme in relationship to institutions and our changing world. In response, we instituted the museum's second rule- the employees at the entrance were not allowed to deny access. They were asked to not say "no" to anyone who wanted to enter, even if they had no ticket. Instead, we instructed them to follow the improvisational theatre guideline of responding to all situations with the words, "yes, and...". This rule means that kids working behind the desk should not say "no" but can say "yes" while adding other conditions, thus keeping a goal of access to the museum in play.

Another method for rule-based artistic play involves utilizing the structure's boundaries between outside and in. We aimed to use the fact of the building itself in order to explore rule-play around the material fact of the institution's physical presence. Over a weekend with individual kids, we explored the large gaps in the walls of our jerry-rigged building. At each gap, we asked the kids what they might imagine beyond the hole in the wall. The ridiculous question was made meaningful by the sincerity of our question. I saw that there were three basic answer-types, the ridiculous (a monster, candy), socially oriented responses (thieves, happy families), and answers that related to natural forces (powerful flows of water, storms, comets). We then asked children to draw pictures of the inside/outside that they imagined (figure 12). On the following weekend, we asked children to develop art projects that mediated the transition between the inside and the outside, taking into consideration the rainy early summer we had been experiencing (figure 13).



Figure 11. View of the BKK'S ticket-booth, and into the 2D hall. The sculpture atrium is at the end of the hall to the right. Note the current (weekly) exhibition poster and exhibition calendar located next to the booth. Photograph by Marc Herbst. 2021.

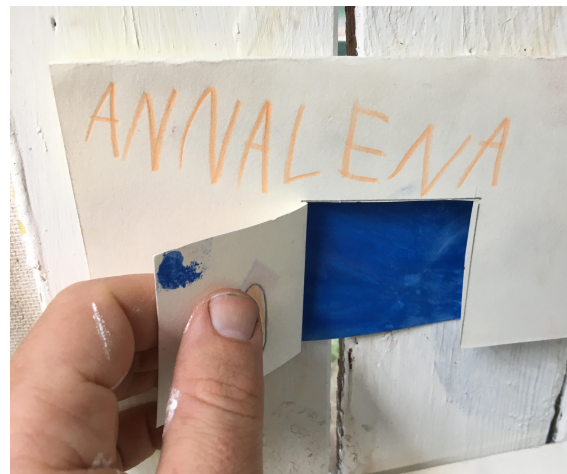


Figure 12. When asked to draw what is outside the museum, one of our child co-researchers drew a picture of a very powerful stream of water. Photograph by Marc Herbst. 2021.

## Conclusion

Within the BKK neighborhood, word is spreading that there is a museum built and run by kids. We are curious to see how the concept of flexible play with rules will formally and institutionally develop there. Tsiolkovsky (2008) argues that the range of play within adventure playgrounds is overdetermined by both the structures for playing and their attending play workers. He claims that they do little more than press children "into subjects." (p. 187) rather than create competent improvisors.

But my experience has shown that a situated institution whose operating rules and *raison d'être* is to be capable of hosting meaningful children's play that can facilitate a skill of social variation, one conceptually attendant to climate change. So, our experience is more in line with Russel (2015) who describes how by playing with rules, adventure playground can be understood as a collaborative process of improvisation. In our case, ours is a collaboration between the museum's structure and concepts and individual children's development and creativity. Russel argues that play is not a cognitively fixed thing but is rather a melange of transversal psychosocial developments. Play, she proposes, is not a fixed process of individual subject formation. Nevertheless, as how Visscher and Bouverne-De Bie (2008) and McGregor and Ragab (2016) argue, I do appreciate how context serves a great determinant for its varying outcomes, so I continue to playing with the contextual possibilities of of the museum and what it hosts, in order to keep overall context at play.

Regarding how urban institutions might build play to their structure in order to better greet changes attendant to climactic transformations, it would seem that projects like Aksu, J., Karjevsky, G., and Quack, S. (2014)'s Playful Commons makes a valuable contribution. Playful Commons seeks to redefine urban planning and zoning under the open concept of how public space acts to hosts possibilities for urban life. That is, hosting against normative regulatory language that delimits space to particular predetermined uses. This idea of acting as host is in parallel with Russel's descriptions and our experiences with how children benefits from more open, though guided, play rather than via pedagogical interaction conceptually aimed toward progressive ideals.



Figure 13. A child made this felt and feather installation to mediate the transition between inside and outside and to dry the rain soaked backs of those traveling across this boundary. Photograph by Marc Herbst. 2021.

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