



Not In Another Place, But This Place...(Happiness)

Drawings by Kirsten Leenaars
Essay by Lori Waxman



Spinning Hula Hoops with My Dad, and Other Ways to Make Happiness

By Lori Waxman

Art historians don't usually write about happiness. It isn't considered a serious approach to art these days, not in terms of what a painting might be illustrating for a viewer nor what an installation might lead a participant to experience.

Philosophers, however, have never really stopped writing about it, not since Aristotle first opined about "Eudaimonia," the classical Greek word commonly translated as "happiness," in 350 BCE. Of course Herodotus, Cicero, Locke, Rousseau, Darwin, Marx, Freud, etc. hardly all agreed on what constituted happiness or on how it was best attained. I like Aristotle's formulation: Happiness, he believed, was the "activity of the soul expressing virtue." It was neither an emotion nor a state, not about feeling good but doing good. (Never mind that he understood doing good in terms of leading a radically rational and intellectual life, contemplating truth rather than seeking it in any practical sense.)

Two thousand years into the present, Aristotle's definition of happiness as action echoes in the final seconds of Kirsten Leenaars' video *Not in Another Place, But This Place... (Happiness)*. After sixteen minutes of Dan Bitney's spare musical score, which pings heartstrings while teetering on some emotional brink between joy, tenderness, possibility, pain and loss, the noise fades to silence and the screen dims to black. Then, a moment after it seems like it's all over, the artist's voice calls out: "Action." She's just saying what film directors say, but she's also offering a concise, Aristotelian explanation for what happiness is and how to pursue it.

Not in Another Place also begins with a word, the titular one, HAPPINESS, spelled out in six-foot-tall cardboard letters cooperatively assembled by a handful of the random, regular people who populate Leenaars' video. They work together to get the letters in the right order and to keep them from flopping down; it's a work-in-progress involving negotiation and constant upkeep. The result is a shoddy cousin to the Hollywood sign, but a far more legitimate beacon for making dreams come true. Watching Not in Another Place on a loop brings these linguistic cues together such that one becomes an illustration for the other.

Most of the folks in the video live in Edgewater, a residential neighborhood on Chicago's north side that is walking distance to the lakefront. There is one children's music teacher, a dancer, an architect, lots of high school

students, an art teacher, a political candidate, and plenty of others. There are two cops holding cacti, in portraits of unfathomable kindness and sympathy. There is also me and my young daughter, since this is our neighborhood too.

Back in the spring of 2012, forty-eight of us found ourselves, mostly through communal word of mouth, being interviewed by Kirsten Leenaars in a storefront on Thorndale Avenue that had recently been used as an election office. She questioned our sense of happiness and its connection to responsibility, community and local politics. It felt good to have this conversation at the time, not least because as the mother of a two-and-a-half-year-old I was more invested in someone else's state of being than ever before, and also more involved in our local community. That music teacher? My daughter learned to sing from her. That dancer? Her child and mine go to nursery school together.

Interview answers led to drawings and transcripts which led to making videos with Senn High School students which led to developing performances with a freshman class at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago which led to a two-day film shoot in the Senn auditorium which led finally, after time spent on other projects and in India, to editing down thirty-two hours of footage shot on three cameras and then commissioning a musical score to help pull it all together.

Leenaars' approach was lengthy, generative and social but, unlike in relational or process-based practices, ultimately it is her video that is the final and complete artwork. In it, bracing and consistent aesthetic choices unify a diverse community's notions of happiness. Three channels screening simultaneously affirm this diversity. A simple black box set, constructed of Kraft paper, masking tape, balloons and little else, insists on the constructed nature of the situation and focuses attention instead on what the actors are doing. This has rarely been attempted in film; the Danish director Lars von Trier tried it in his 2003 movie *Dogville*, a parable starring Nicole Kidman that tells of the potential for evil in all people. Leenaars wields vacant scenery to similar effect but opposite ends, producing a reverse-*Dogville*, wherein we learn of the potential for happiness that exists in all people. The black box set allows for this to be about us in Edgewater, but also anyone anywhere who can imagine themselves and their home in place of all that blackness.

So what do we do for happiness? In *Not in Another Place* we:
Play guitar for a plant. Live in the city, where there are surprises on every corner. Push red balloons out the door. Dip cookies in a glass of milk. Carry picket signs. Run for political office. Have breakfast with dad

We also play games, run races, spin hula hoops, dance with each other and sing about women needing to take over the world. Some of these acts are literal, others symbolic. But mostly they are something in between, both more mysterious and more intuitive, hinting at situations so profound and recognizable that the quality of life itself might be said to hinge on our ability to enact them.

Which brings it all back to art historians and their general inability or unwillingness to address artworks as things that can help equip viewers for a more loving, more fruitful, more serene life. The British philosopher Alain de Botton and art theorist John Armstrong recently published a book that offers another way. In *Art as Therapy*, they contend that the greatest purpose of art is to help us psychologically navigate the world. And indeed, in the very broadest sense, it is. Art tries to make sense—and sometimes nonsense—out of every bit of life and death on this planet and beyond. To the extent that we open ourselves up to it, we can absorb or experience these evocations in the safe space of the gallery or museum. And maybe, just maybe, we can learn what it might mean to be happier.

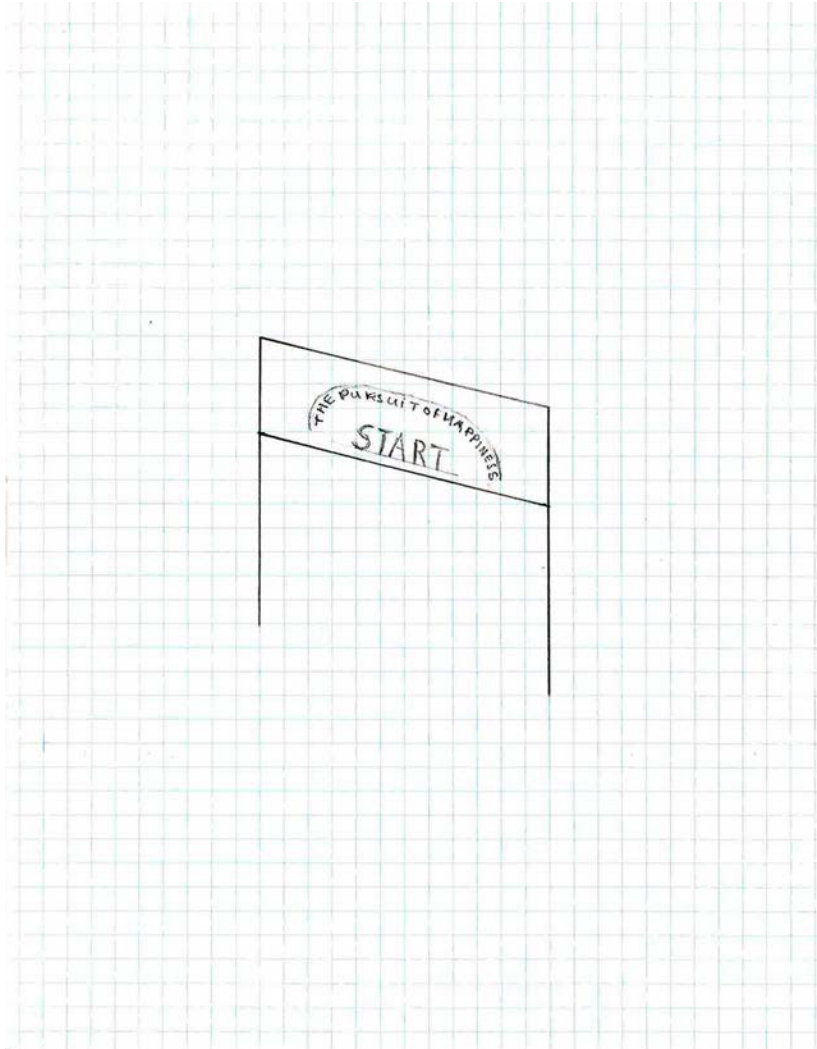


Ed Ruscha, *The Back of Hollywood*, 1977

Drawings for *Not In Another Place, But This Place... (Happiness)*

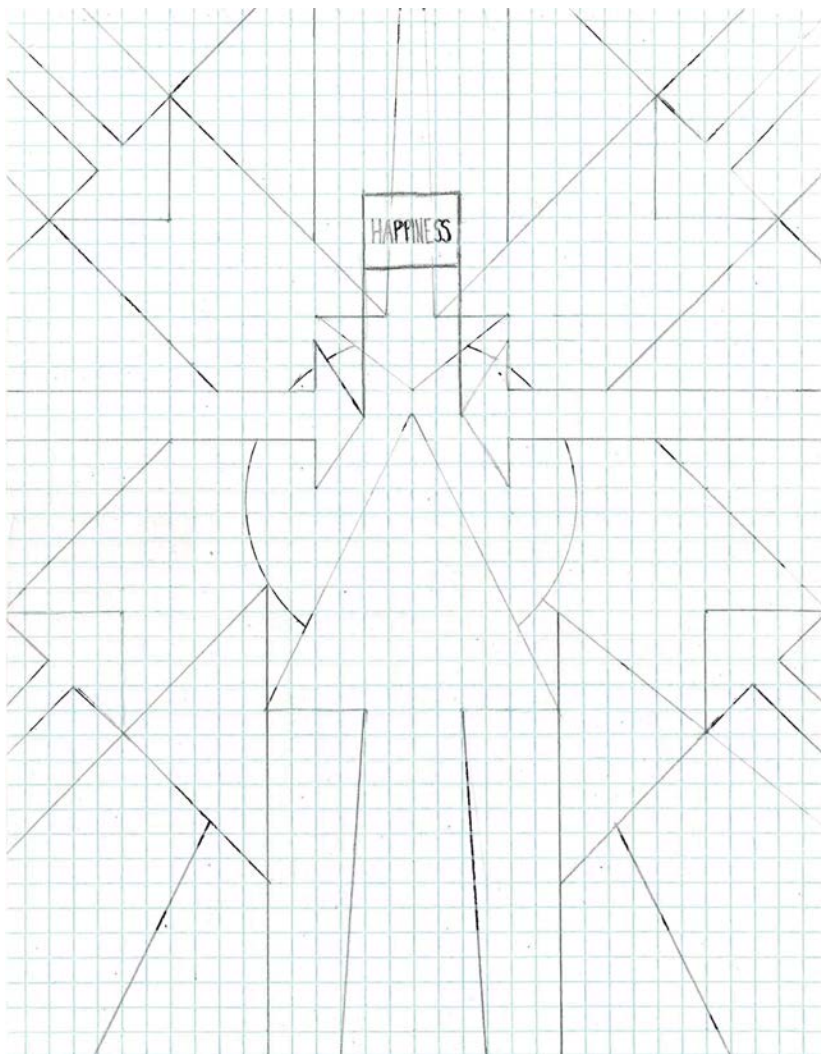


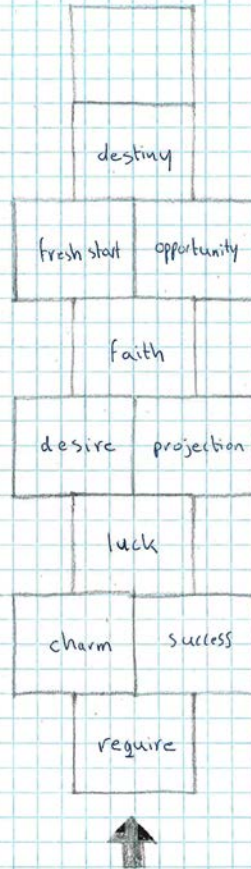


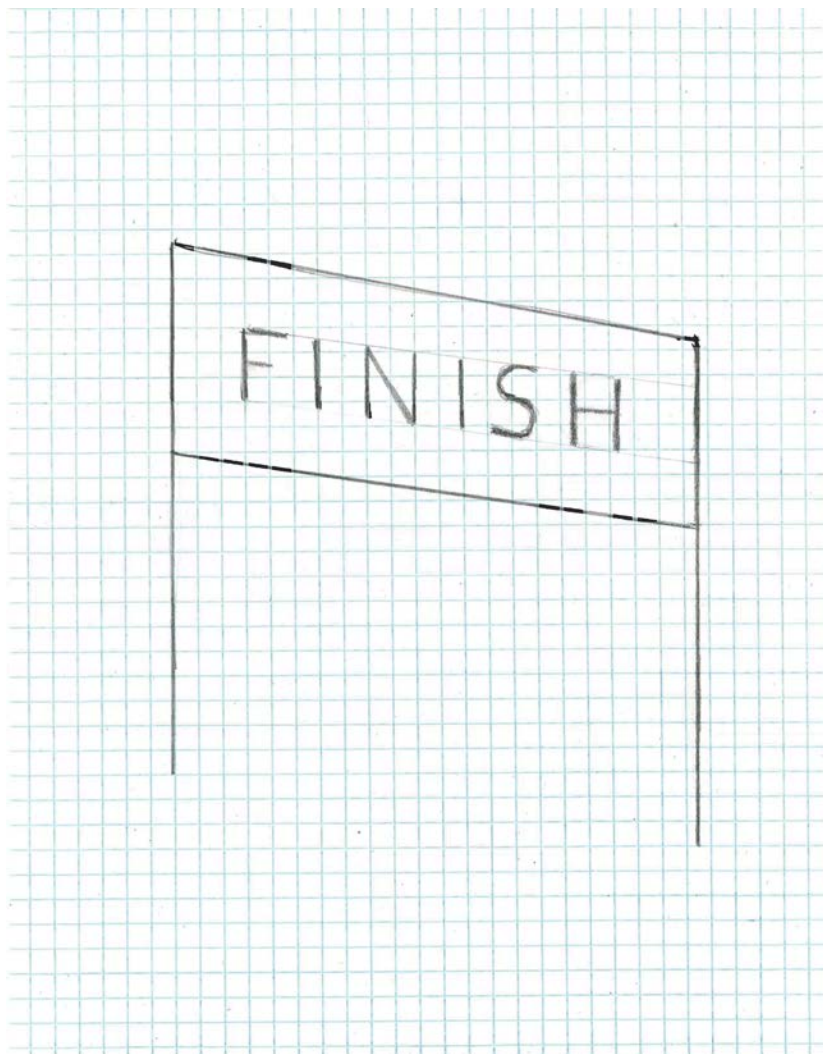


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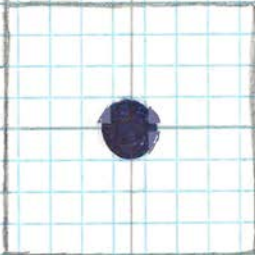
JOIN ANY PLAYER
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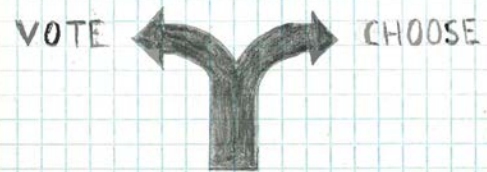
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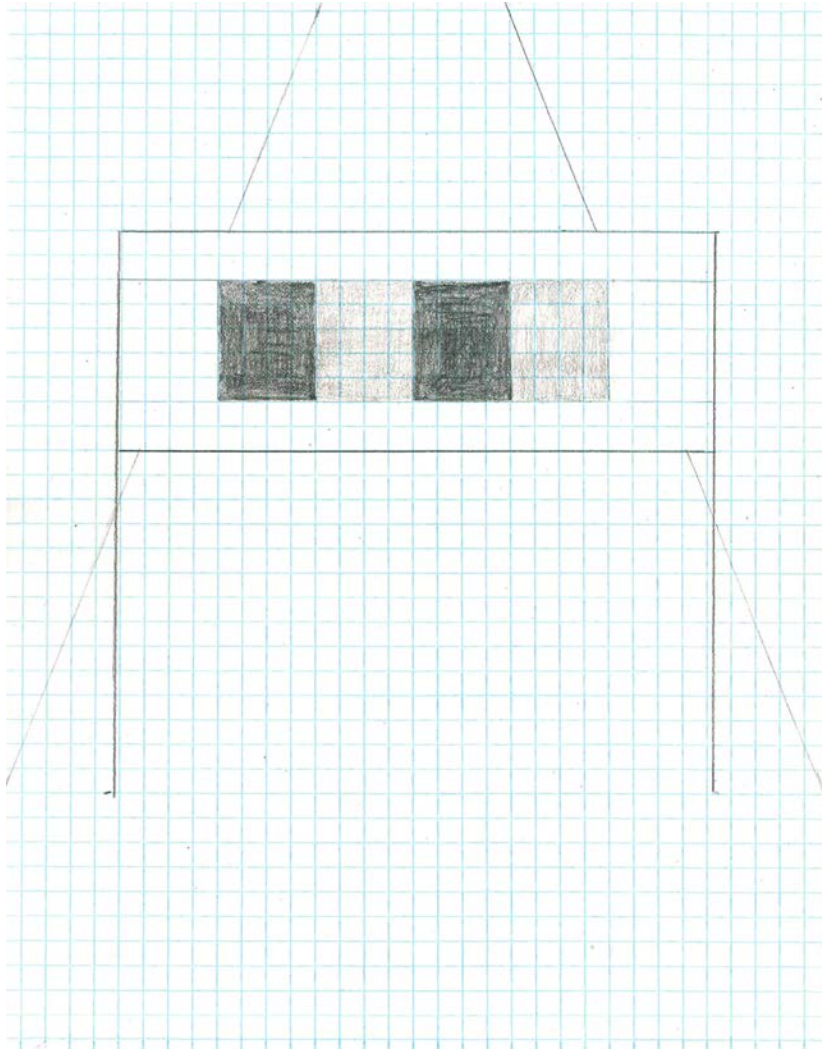
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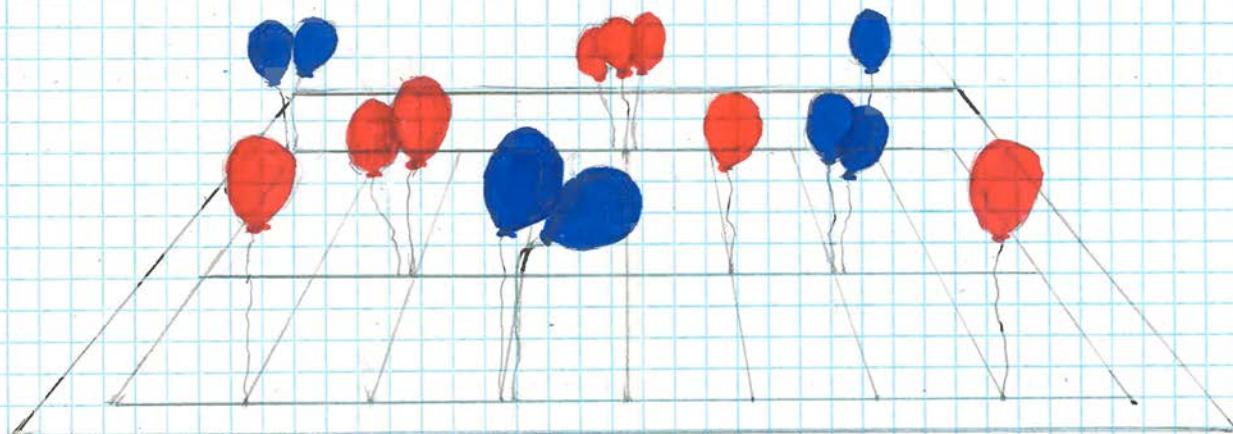




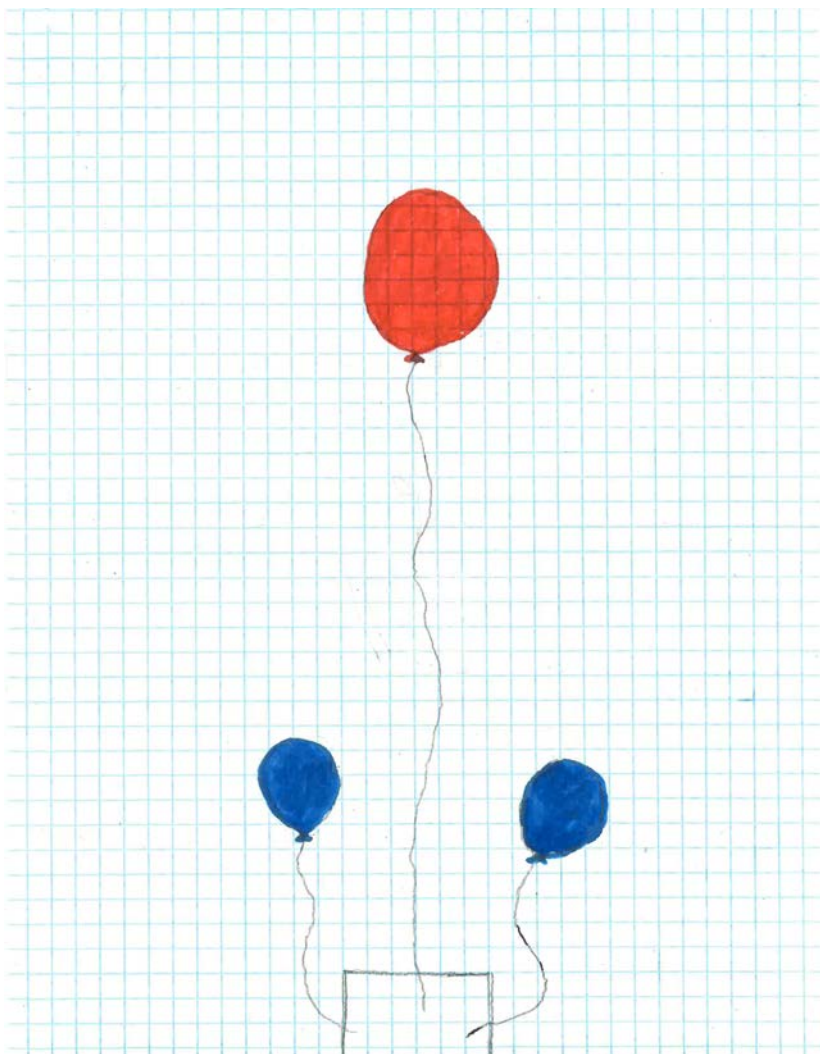


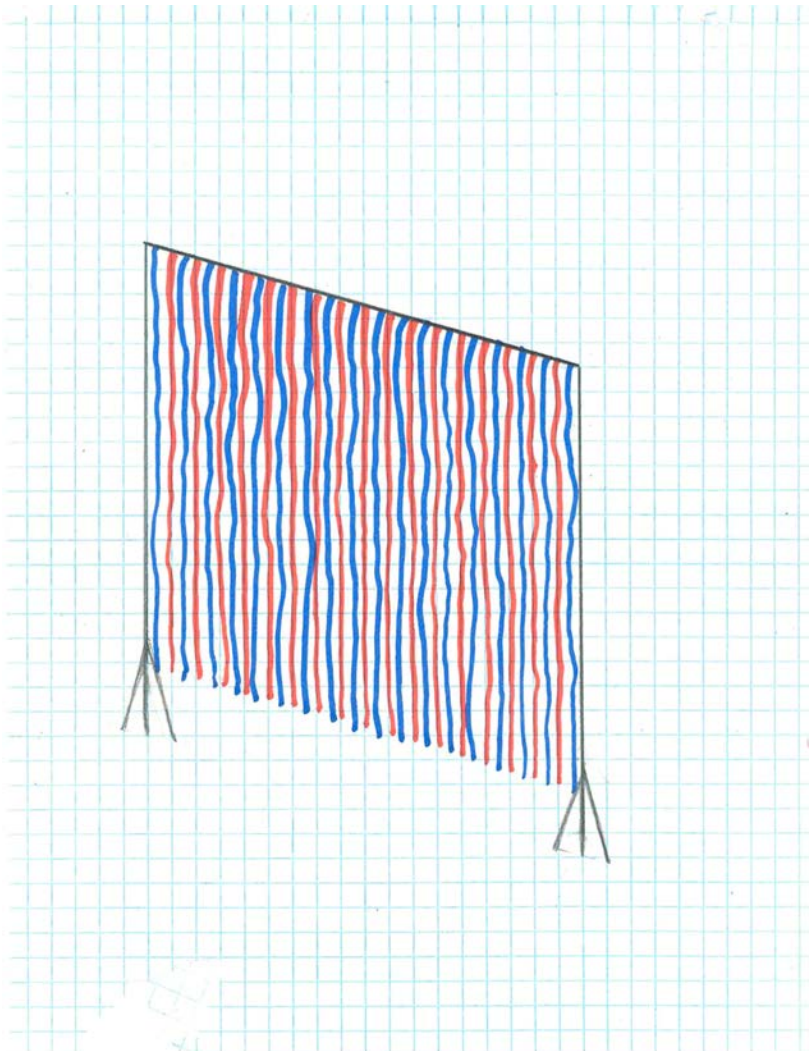
participatory happiness

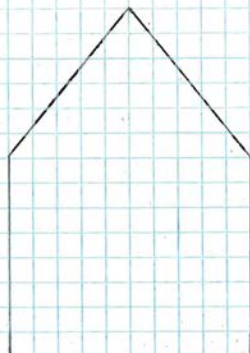




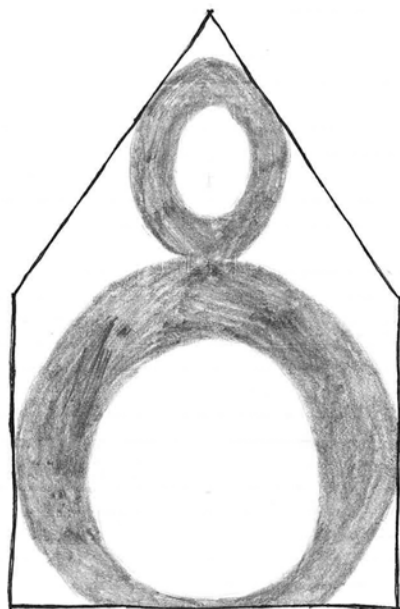
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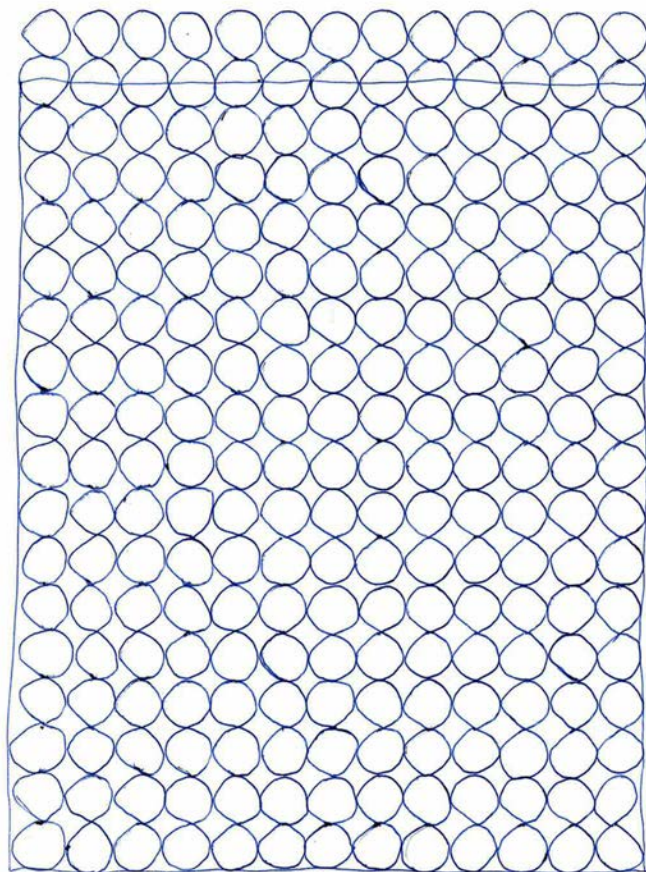


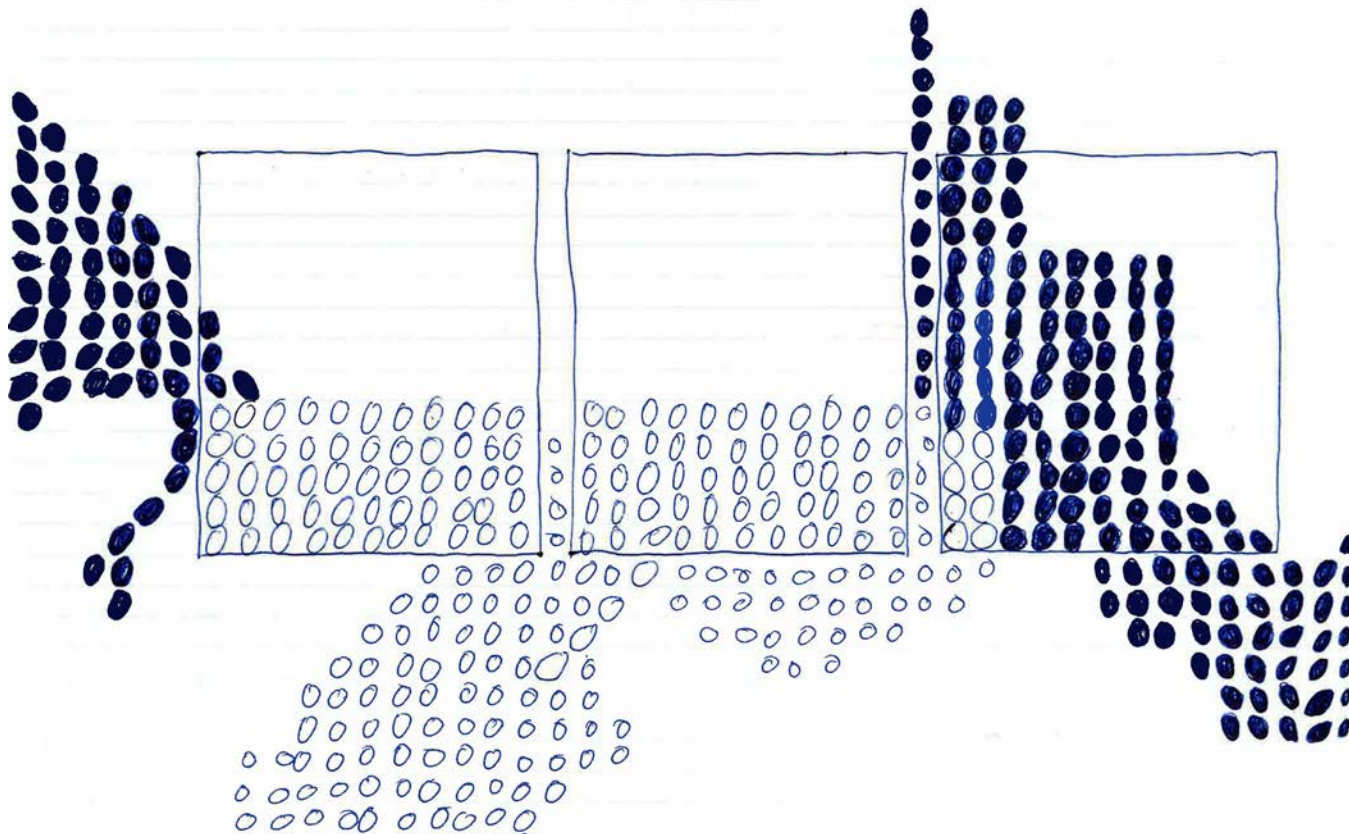


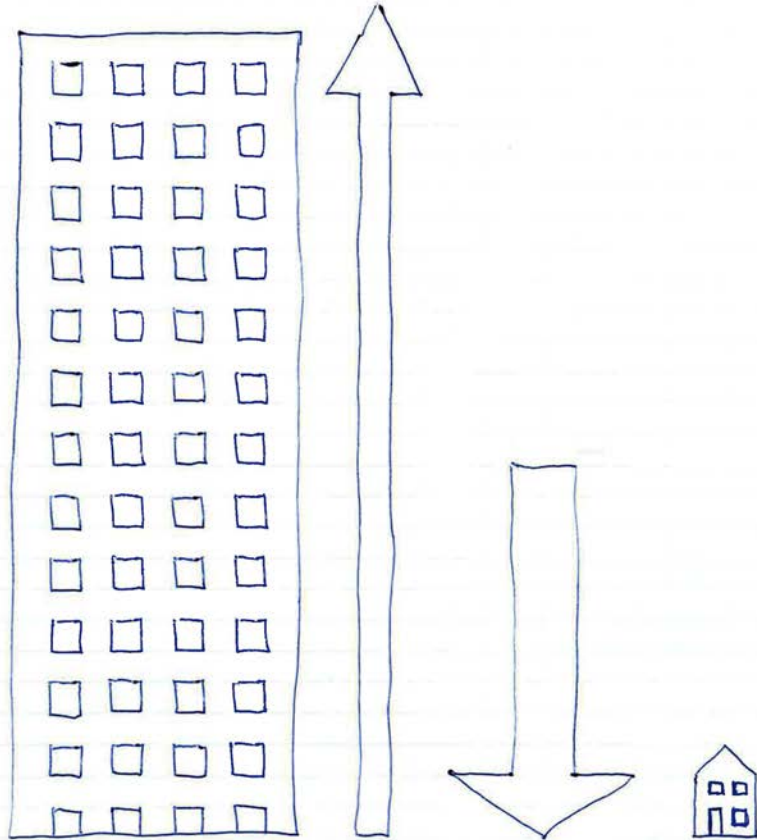


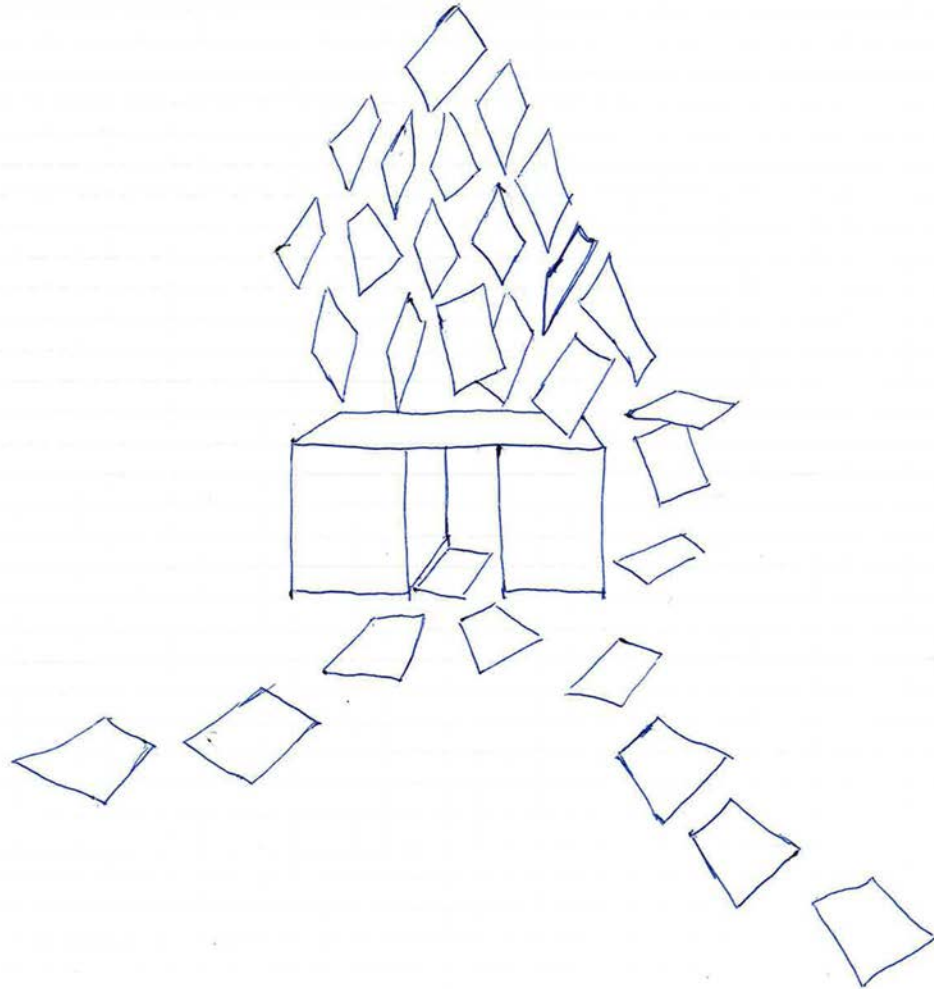
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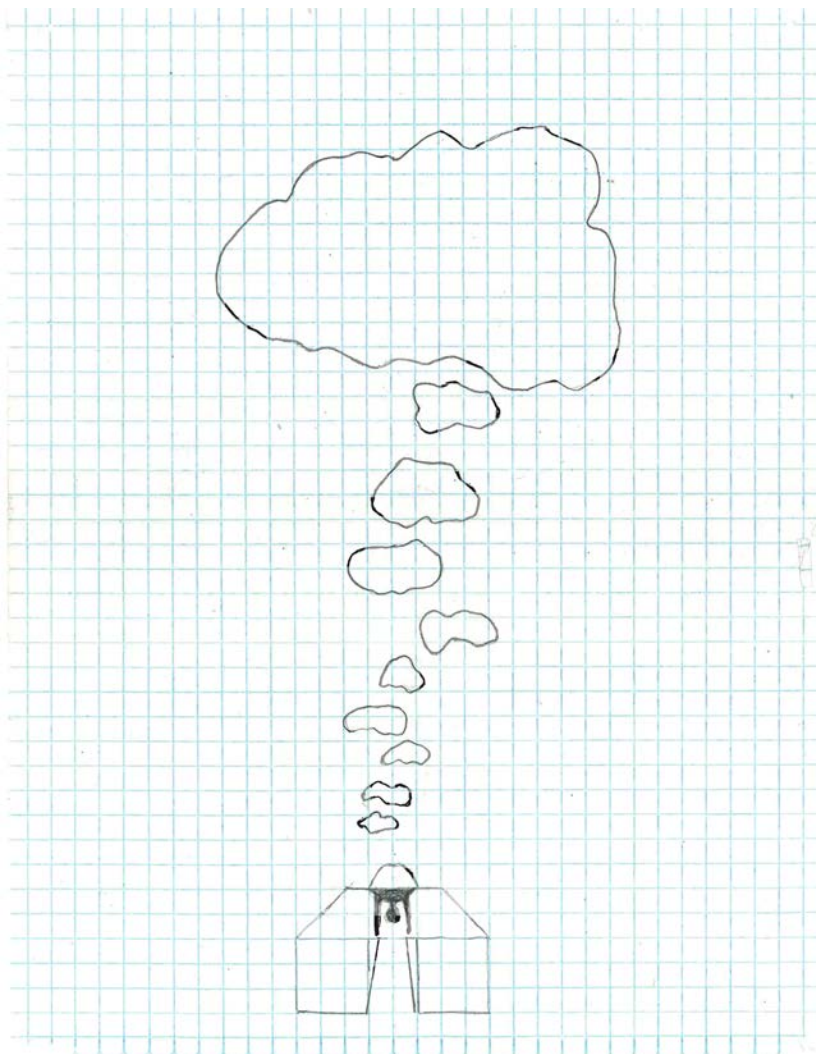


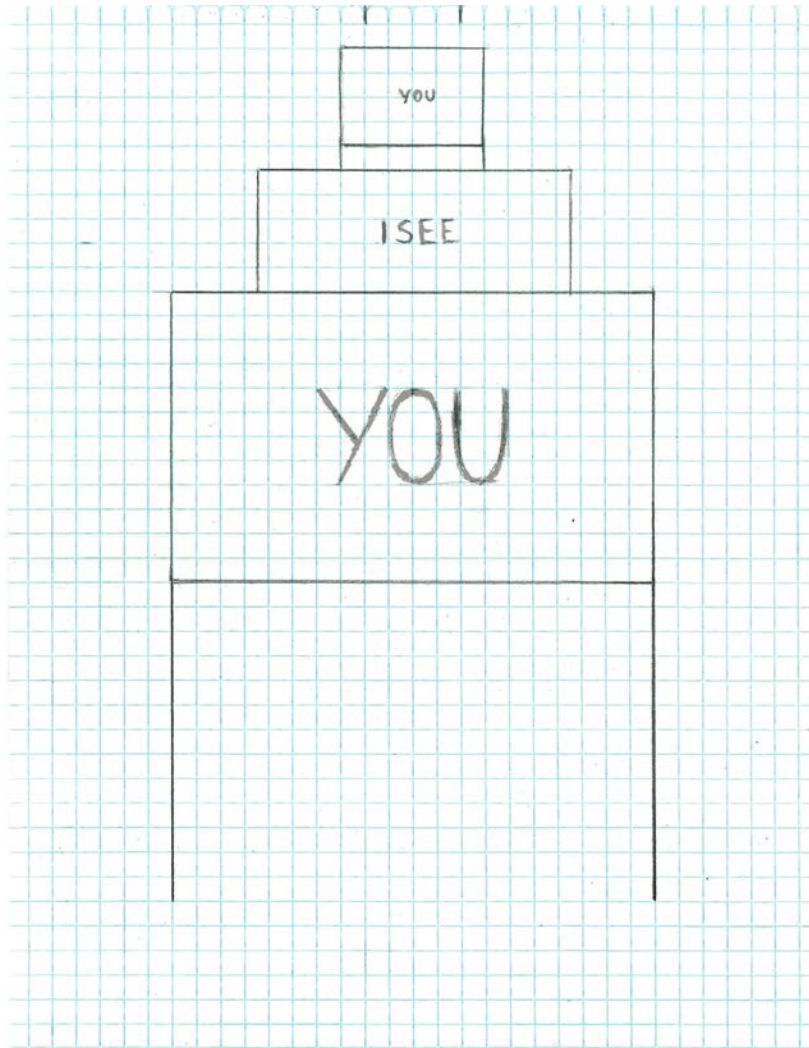












HERE and
NOW

is the only place you can be

Kirsten Leenaars

Kirsten Leenaars, born and raised in the Netherlands, is a Chicago based video artist. Leenaars often works with specific communities, incorporating them into her video and performance work to explore the nature of human interactions. Within a participatory scenario, rooted always in a local reality of a specific site or situation she explores different genres and forms of mediation, collective making and the performative. Her work oscillates between fiction and documentation, reinterprets personal stories and reimagines everyday realities through staging, improvisation and play. She examines the very nature of our own constructed realities, the stories we tell ourselves and identify with and the way we relate to others. In her work she looks for a shared humanity, often through humor and play. Recent projects include a producing a science fiction film: *The Invasion of the Hairy Blobs*, at the Hyde Park Art Center, a video project *Not In Another Place, But This Place... (Happiness)* exploring notions of happiness, responsibility and policy focusing on the Edgewater community. And *On Our Way to Tomorrow*, a soap opera series developed working with staff and visitors of the MCA over a one-month research period and as part of the exhibition *Without You I Am Nothing*. She has shown and developed projects at the MCA, Glass Curtain Gallery, Threewalls, 6018 North, and Gallery 400, Printed Matter NY, and at the Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam, Kunst Fabrik, Munchen and was part of the LOOP Festival in Barcelona and the Traveling Tehran Biennale. Leenaars is an Assistant Professor at the Contemporary Practices department at SAIC. www.kirstenleenaars.nl

Lori Waxman

Lori Waxman (Chicago is a Chicago-based critic and art historian. Her reviews and articles have been published in *Chicago Tribune*, *Artforum*, *Artforum.com*, *Modern Painters*, *Gastronomica*, *Parkett*, *Tema Celeste*, as well as the defunct *Parachute*, *New Art Examiner* and *F&G*. She has written catalogue essays for small and large art spaces, including: Spertus Museum, Chicago; threewalls, Chicago; SPACES Gallery, Cleveland; Institute of Visual Art, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee; Turpentine Gallery, Reykjavik; and Dieu Donné Papermill, New York. She has published essays on Arturo Herrera, Jenny Holzer, William Cordova, Eugenia Alter Propp, Raissa Venables, Gordon Matta-Clark, Joel Sternfeld, Emily Jacir, Taryn Simon, Ranbir Kaleka and Christa Donner. She is co-author of *Girls! Girls! Girls! in contemporary art* (2011). Waxman teaches art history at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and has a PhD from the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, where her doctoral research considered urban walking as a revolutionary aesthetic practice of the 20th century. She received a Creative Capital/Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant (2008) for her project *60 wrd/min art critic*, which is traveling to venues around the United States through 2011. Waxman participated in 2012 in *dOCUMENTA 13* with *60 wrd/min art critic*. <http://60wradmin.org/home.html>

