

# (RE)HOUSING THE AMERICAN DREAM: A MESSAGE FROM THE FUTURE

KIRSTEN LEENAARS

I recently joined museum leaders from across the country in a training session sponsored by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) and led by the Asset-Based Community Development Institute. Everyone in the room had received grants from IMLS' new Community Catalyst program, which aims to explore the evolving role that museums can play in transforming their communities. In introducing a session about asset mapping, one of the presenters asked the group "What is a map? What do we know about them?" The first person to respond was an artist, who jokingly everyone else in a laugh, I reflected on this reminder of why our culture needs artists. Artists reframe our cultural assumptions. They use new languages to address existing questions. They distort, and then reorient,

In my view, no one does this better than our individual and collective perspectives. In the Milwaukee Academy of Chinese Center in the Milwaukee Academy of Chinese Language, who co-created this experience. I'm honored and grateful that those young people and their families have participated in (Re)Housing the American Dream for the past two years. I thank Emilia Layden, the Haggerty Museum of Art's Curator of Collections and Exhibitions, for tirelessly engaging the museum in exploring the role that art museums can, and

## DIRECTOR'S FOREWORD

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Last but absolutely not least, I thank Kirsten Leenaars for her partnership, for her commitment to her young collaborators, and for (re)framing the important questions. Susan Longhenry, Director and Chief Curator Haggerty Museum of Art

iteration of this project. and Urban Planning for contributing the use of its Mobile Design Box to the 2017-2018 Wisconsin-Milwaukee's School of Architecture and Urban Planning for contributing the use of its Mobile Design Box to the 2017-2018 iteration of this project. I thank the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's School of Architecture and Urban Planning for contributing the use of its Mobile Design Box to the 2017-2018 iteration of this project. I thank the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's School of Architecture and Urban Planning for contributing the use of its Mobile Design Box to the 2017-2018 iteration of this project.

Photo: Clare Britt



## CHECKLIST

KIRSTEN LEENAARS  
Dutch, b. 1976

**(Re)Housing the American Dream:  
A Message from the Future**

*Three-channel video, 2017*  
Duration 13:42 min

*The Shape of Things (Come Tomorrow)*  
Video, 2017  
Duration 15:58 min

*Manifesto for the Future*  
Wall text, vinyl lettering, 4.5 ft x 8 ft  
2017

PROJECT WEBSITE:  
[rehousingtheamericandream.wordpress.com](http://rehousingtheamericandream.wordpress.com)

PUBLICATION DESIGN:  
Sonia Yoon

CONCEPT: Kirsten Leenaars  
DIRECTOR/EDITOR: Kirsten Leenaars  
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR: Zachary Hutchinson  
CAMERA: Ellie Hall and Paul Deuth  
SOUND: Brent Walquist  
COMPOSER: Paul Deuth  
ASSISTANT EDITOR: Ellie Hall

PERFORMERS:  
Alanis Aranda-Salgado, Iman Fatmi,  
Hannah Plevin, Nina Jackson, Grace Elaine  
Ohlendorf, Elsa Grace Berner, Javon Amin  
Barker, Coen T. Kriofske Mainella, Vittoria  
Lucchesi, Ju Hta Paw, Paw Htoo Boe, Paw Boe  
Say, Rahma Mohamed, Amina Mohammed,  
Nur Begum, Yusuf Begum, Isa Begum,  
Rokimah Begum, Malachi Moore, Matthew  
Moore, Kaylin Dillard, Hamilton Reinbold,  
Jordan Muhammed, Wayan Muhammed,  
Awais Ali, Nurtho Ali

SPECIAL THANKS TO:  
Emila Layden, curator  
Opel Smittinet, assistant



## THE ARCHITECTURE OF FUTURE MEMORIES

Steven L. Bridges

The American political, social, and cultural landscape has changed dramatically in the past year. With the ascension of now-President Donald Trump, the U.S. has become an emboldened breeding ground for hate mongering, white supremacist rage, and a host of other regressive civil indignities. However, other voices have (re)emerged as well, the voices of those who reject the fear tactics of an administration designed to divide and conquer, and who seek to confront and publicly name perpetrators of injustice. These are troubling times, but there may be a silver lining after all: the (re)surgence of a political Left whose identity is no longer rooted in white, male, middle-class America, but is more emblematic of a pluralistic society, with particular emphasis on the perspectives and experiences of people of color, women, the LGBTQ community, and other formerly marginalized groups.

Conversations centered around the current state of affairs feature strongly in the second installment of artist Kirsten Leenaars's project *(Re)Housing the American Dream* (2015–present), which reconvened in the summer of 2017 in the city of Milwaukee. Remarkably, Leenaars was able to work with the same group of young students who were involved in the first iteration of the project, thereby extending the temporal frame of the process and creating a unique opportunity to build upon the participants' shared experiences. This second iteration of the artist's summer-camp-as-community art project adopted the slightly remixed title *(Re)Housing the American Dream: A Message from the Future*, suggesting a more speculative bent to the camp's proceedings than the first time around. Still, this cumulative process remains open-ended; much like the future, its entirety is hard to define in concrete terms. As Leenaars explained in a recent phone call, it's "not always entirely clear what we are building towards," a statement that is both liberating and haunting—especially in light of our present sociopolitical environment.

As in the first iteration of the project, the artist produced a three-channel video from the vast amount of documentary footage captured over the course of the three-week-long camp, as well as collateral video pieces and microprojects, all of which went on display at the Haggerty Museum of Art at Marquette University in Milwaukee. While many of the discussions throughout the camp continued in the vein of the original project (addressing issues like immigration, violence, racism, religious intolerance, economic inequality, housing, and so forth), Leenaars introduced an important shift when she asked the group of young minds to imagine the United States fifty years from now, and then to look back on the present from that imagined perspective. How will this historical moment be remembered? If you could send a message from your future self to your current self, what would that message be?

This is complex philosophical territory, but the participants took up the challenge with rigor, dedication, and a healthy sense of playfulness. What became apparent early on, though, was just how abstract the future appears when viewed from the present. Yet in a poetic turn of phrase, this very conundrum—abstraction as a form of distortion, of perspectival distance and lack of representational clarity—became the modus operandi for the group, guiding not only many of its intellectual and physical activities, but also the formal, artistic decision-making processes employed by Leenaars in the editing and sequencing of the main three-channel video. To look into the future is to parse the present into its many kaleidoscopic possibilities.

In *(Re)Housing the American Dream: A Message from the Future*, Leenaars takes a significant step away from the more direct documentary approach of the main video in her first installation at the Haggerty Museum in 2016. The new video reveals more of the artist's hand and direction as Leenaars

heavily intervenes in the editing, using different techniques to reinforce conceptual underpinnings. Sequences move both forwards and backwards, manipulating the flow of time and its direction of travel; the mirroring of images within their projected frames produces a kaleidoscope of colors and shapes; the coordination of clips across the three screens produces moments of visual resonance and dissonance; and all of these strategies illustrate how the artist was actively interpreting and responding to her collaborators. For the participants are the main protagonists, the subjects, the drivers of content ... our guides.

We meet them in various ways. In the opening segment of the video installation, we meet them face-to-face. The artist establishes our relationship with the participants through direct filmic encounters in which the youth hold a steady gaze into the camera. In the absence of any specific prompt, they are allowed to just be—in these transitory moments, a range of emotions pours out. As in the photographs of Leenaars's fellow Dutch artist Rineke Dijkstra, these vignettes of youth oscillate between the awkward and self-aware, confidence and vulnerability. These encounters reappear throughout the installation, swirling around footage in which we also get to know the participants through their words, their actions, their moments of play and abandon, and their grappling with big ideas. Together, they perform, they discuss, they reflect, they act and activate.

In one scene we see them reenacting renowned artist and choreographer Simone Forti's performance *Huddle* (1961), their bodies entangled in a singular mass, supporting each other, working together. In another, they perform Lygia Pape's *Divisor* (1968)—using mylar space blankets (perhaps a nod to the science-fiction-like qualities of their adventures)—also an exercise in collectivity urged by Leenaars to explore knowledge production as a somatically bound process. How do we think

and know through the body, not just the mind? Moving from human architectures to the built environment, the participants designed and constructed a monument to the future, spurred on by recent news headlines concerning the removal of Civil War monuments dedicated to Confederate leaders. Their monument was perfectly abstract, incomplete, a communal gesture towards the unknown. As writer and cultural theorist Arthur Danto reminds us, "[w]e erect monuments so that we shall always remember." It seems all the more urgent now that we remember the future in all that we do.

Returning to the importance of signs and language, which featured prominently in the first summer camp, the video installation also includes vignettes of the participants positioned against the radiant blue of the summer sky, writing messages in the air. Each writer sends a message out into the ether, like a note placed in a bottle cast out to sea. Who knows what wandering soul may discover it one day, and what truths it may reveal. For the viewer, the writing is too quick to follow; the messages evaporate as quickly as they are written into the sky and clouds. Like contributions to an ethereal time capsule, these fragile fragments of language, of ideas and feelings, hopes and desires, fears, are etched into the sky, anticipating the moment of their rediscovery to offer a glimpse of the past in the hope it will offer new perspectives on the future present.

As in any act of translation, there is loss. When Leenaars attempts to translate the many happenings and events of the summer camp into an exhibition, there is loss. But, interestingly, there is also gain. Neither the process nor the artistic outcome can adequately encapsulate the other; they are deeply interrelated yet uniquely different. It's a curious relationship, and begs the question: where does one locate the art in all of this? Where do you draw the boundary between the artistic process and the practice of everyday life? How does this quandary register for the participants, who are selves and performers and performers of the self?

One thing is for sure: the participants in *(Re)Housing the American Dream* are the future. They are the architects of future thoughts and memories. It is through their words and their actions, their protests and their performances, that hope maintains. In the face of pure abstraction, these individuals show great resolve. They are not afraid to imagine something other than the current present. Before the future can exist, it must be imagined, and in this project, this catalogue of the eyes of each young participant, one can glimpse the great potential that lies ahead.



# Manifesto for the Future



**all bathrooms are gender neutral and family bathrooms**

**love is love is love is love**

**all people are equal**

**all spaces are safe spaces for the mind and body**

**all kids will learn at least two languages of their choice**

**the right to vote at fourteen**

**all people should learn new things every day**

**grow your own food and stay green**

**money is not the only currency**

**free education**

**equal pay for all**