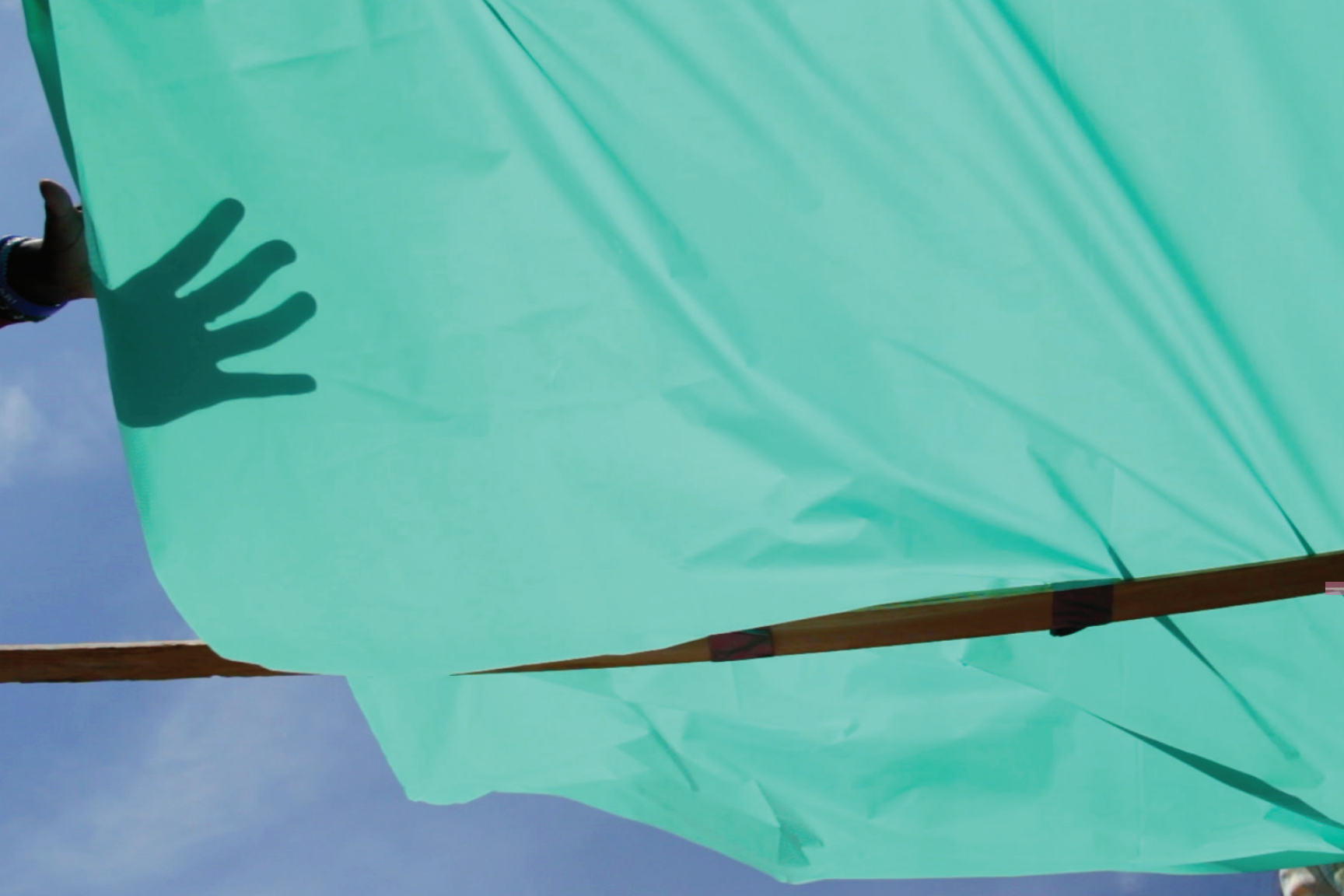


(Re) Housing the American Dream

KIRSTEN LEENAARS



(Re)Housing the American Dream

KIRSTEN LEENAARS
AUGUST 18 - DECEMBER 23, 2016
HAGGERTY MUSEUM OF ART
ESSAY BY STEVEN L. BRIDGES



Documentation of the
creative process for the project
(Re)Housing the American Dream

Director's Foreward

#THERIGHTTOHAVEAHOME

#EQUALCONSEQUENCES

#IMMIGRANTSTOHAVEAMERICANRIGHTS

Excerpts from *(Re)Constitution, #12yearolds*, 2016
a wall drawing in the exhibition *Kirsten Leenaars:*
(Re)Housing the American Dream

These hashtagged phrases, concrete poetry from the social media age, telegraph what guest essayist Steven L. Bridges characterizes as the “raw, uninhibited power of youth to engage socially, politically, culturally.” The clarity of that powerful voice drives the exhibition *Kirsten Leenaars: (Re)Housing the American Dream*.

In late 2015 curator Emilia Layden proposed that the Haggerty Museum of Art work with artist Kirsten Leenaars on a project exploring the relationship between home, happiness, and community in Milwaukee. At that point the Haggerty was actively reaffirming its commitment to Marquette University's Jesuit mission and strategic priorities, particularly its charge to advance social justice through active engagement with our community. Marquette had recently joined with other institutions and businesses to form Near West Side Partners,

Inc., an organization committed to making Milwaukee's Near West Side a better place to live, work, and play. Given Leenaars's social practice and her interest in working with Near West Side neighborhoods, the partnership between the artist and the museum seemed to be a perfect fit.

Little did we know how much this artist residency would resonate with local, regional, and national issues. In March 2016 Matthew Desmond published *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*. Using Milwaukee as a case study, Desmond captured the devastating financial, psychological, and spiritual effects of eviction on our communities. Around the same time, the social discourse fueling our nation's presidential campaign exposed painful realities in a country once inspired by Emma Lazarus's verse, “Give me your tired, your poor,

Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.” And then, just days before *Kirsten Leenaars: (Re) Housing the American Dream* opened at the Haggerty, a police shooting within five miles of the museum triggered demonstrations of pain and rage—and calls for justice—mirroring similar protests throughout our nation.

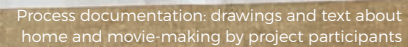
Leenaars brought to her residency a general intent to work with people living in Milwaukee’s Near West Side. Her collaborative practice eventually led her to focus on students from two Near West Side schools: Highland Community School and the International Newcomer Center in the Milwaukee Academy of Chinese Language. As I experience the project now, I can’t imagine it any other way. These brave young people see and hear more than we know. And they’re willing to give voice to the ideals of the society that they want to create.

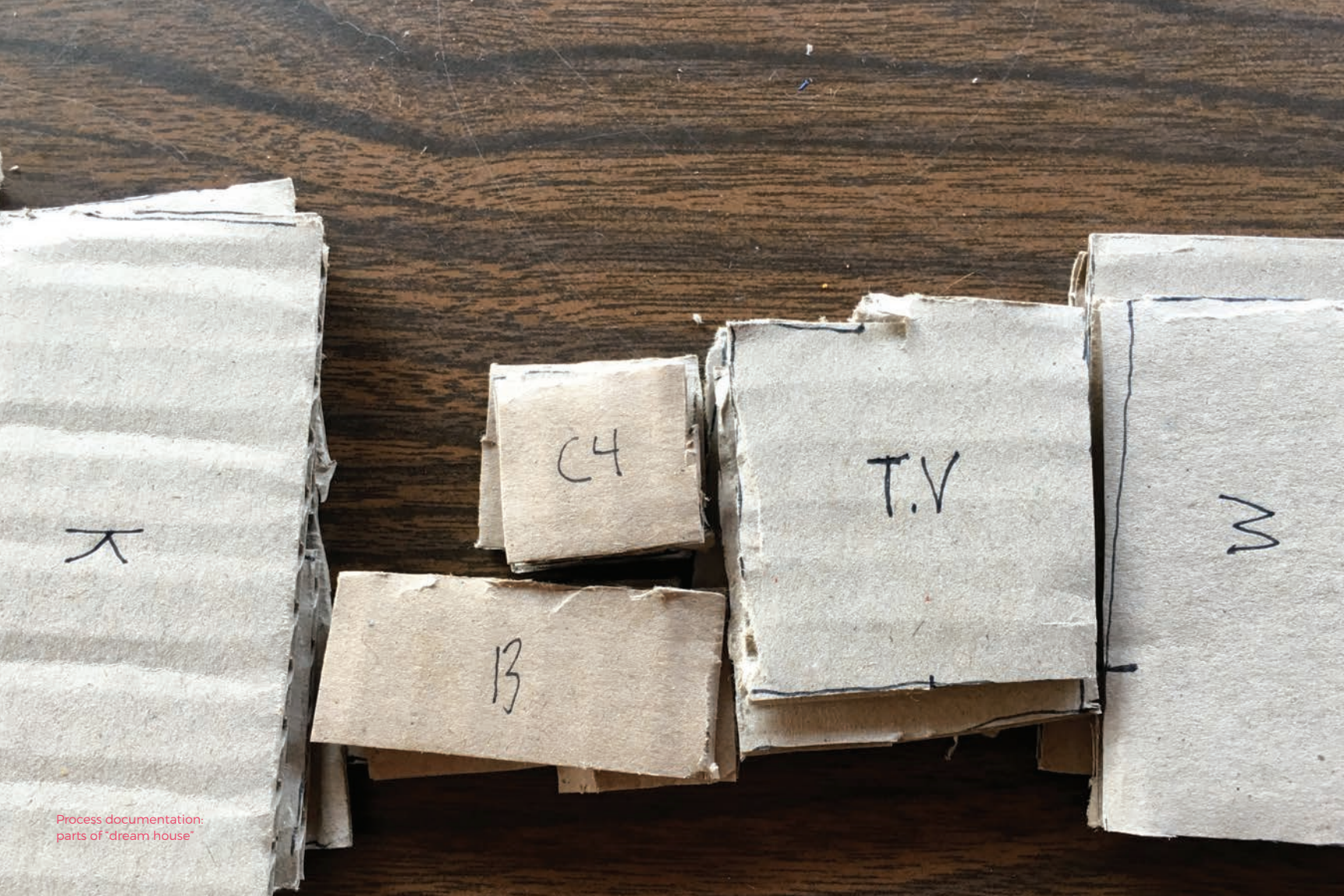
I’m deeply grateful to Kirsten Leenaars and her young collaborators for the dialogue that they’ve created. I thank Emilia Layden for seeing the potential in this project, and for bringing it to the Haggerty. I’m grateful to the generous supporters whose donations made the project possible, especially the Milwaukee Arts Board Public Art New Work Fund, the Wisconsin Arts Board with funds from the State of Wisconsin, and the Marquette University Helen Way Klingler College of Arts and Sciences Mellon Fund. Finally, I thank all of you for joining us in contemplating the contemporary meaning of the American Dream in our beautifully complex world.

Susan Longhenry
Director and Chief Curator
Haggerty Museum of Art









Process documentation:
parts of "dream house"

Sign Language: (Re)Articulating the American Dream

STEVEN L. BRIDGES

The American Dream is a malleable construct. As political winds change direction, it can be used to invoke romantic idealism or ironic cynicism, each with a sense of fervor. Historically, the notion of the American Dream was the ideological lynchpin for a burgeoning nation that intended to differentiate itself from its colonial past. Its very essence is written into the foundational documents of the United States of America, most notably the Declaration of Independence, which asserts that "all men are created equal" with the right to "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." The phrase itself grew in popularity in large thanks to historian James Truslow Adams and his book *The Epic of America* (1931), which proclaimed that "the American dream is that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement." However, there is an

inherent contradiction in these assertions: the sense of opportunity and self-betterment that underscores the American Dream was never equally portioned across society—nor is it today. Understanding this, we must ask ourselves, who are these elevated notions truly for? Who has access to this upward mobility, to this great potential? While the idea is sure to upset some, the reality is that the American Dream has always been steeped in inequality, white supremacy,¹ and patriarchy.

**"I am listening, I am there to hear
their stories, feelings, thoughts.
They matter to me. I care."²**

In light of these observations, the American Dream proves to be complex territory, especially as a subject for a community-based art project

whose primary participants are between the ages of seven and thirteen. Nevertheless, over the course of six months, Chicago-based artist Kirsten Leenaars worked with a diverse group of young people from the Near West Side in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, to produce a multifaceted exhibition for the Haggerty Museum of Art at Marquette University.³ Titled *Kirsten Leenaars: (Re)Housing the American Dream*, the exhibition grew out of collaborations with a select group of local youth, and was framed around core issues that responded directly to the context (psychological, geographical) in which the project took place. These issues included the American Dream, urban housing, segregation, gentrification, immigration, and what it means to belong, to identify with a specific place.

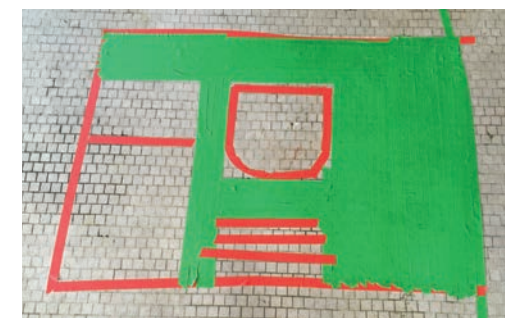
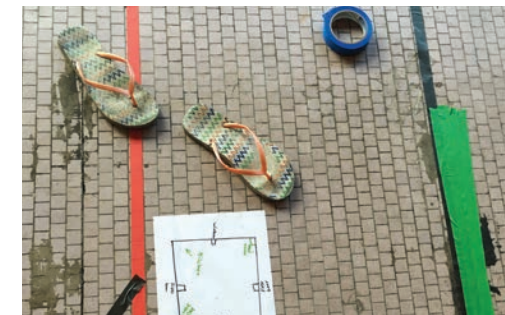
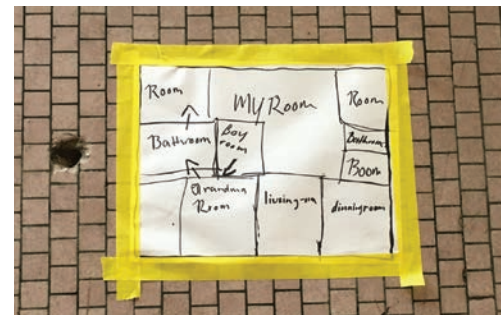
The lived experiences and identities of the participants were critical to the shaping of the project. To a significant degree, these young people share the responsibility of authorship for the works developed throughout; their conversations, ideas, dreams, and questions

all contributed to the project's direction and content. The group consisted of individuals born and raised in the surrounding area, as well as recent immigrants to the city, many of whom had lived there for less than a year. The Near West Side is not a homogenous neighborhood; it is composed of many different communities, many of which do not necessarily interact, despite their relative proximity. A microcosm of American society at large, the project created a premise around which individuals from these different communities were brought together towards a common goal. Importantly, and to the credit of Leenaars, it was critical to the success of the project that the different processes of teaching, learning, listening, and understanding were reciprocal among all of the participants—the artist included. Leenaars created a porous framework within which her collaborators were afforded their own sense of agency. Collaboration is, after all, an elongated process of negotiation. As an exhibition, *(Re)Housing the American Dream* is an encapsulation of these complex negotiations and reciprocal processes, underlined with the

reminder of the raw, uninhibited power of youth to engage socially, politically, culturally, as they exercise a profoundly vast knowledge in multiple directions, simultaneously.

“The idea of change is complicated. I never talk about my projects as being able to create change. I am interested in transformation, and raising awareness.”

The main interactions between the artist and participants took place in the form of a two-week summer camp, designed and facilitated by Leenaars. For the artist, running a summer camp was new terrain; however, Leenaars is well known for her use of other ready-made formats in her collaborative productions.⁴ The camp format is key for a number of reasons: it is disarmingly familiar, breaking down barriers to participation; it offers the opportunity for dedicated and prolonged interaction; and its structure is open and flexible, wherein different activities



Process documentation
Rows 1 & 2: taping out floorplans,
visit to the Haggerty Museum of Art
Row 3: interiors of personal “dream houses”





Process documentation: development of choreography

(artistic or otherwise) become expressive moments that all contribute to the project's meaning. Meticulously catalogued, the day-to-day activities are all available on a specially designed project blog, where visitors are offered in-depth access to the different activities and outputs.⁵ This gesture of transparency takes on additional political charge in our current climate of concealment and obfuscation, grasping and shining a light on the importance of learning publicly.

The summer camp occupied different spaces around the Near West Side depending on the activities of the day. This allowed for conversations around the topics of housing, the high rate of evictions in the US (especially Milwaukee),⁶ and gentrification, among others, to take place in the yard of an abandoned home, an empty lot, the street, or similarly charged locations. Beyond discussions, the summer camp also consisted of writing exercises, movement-based choreographies, walking tours, and the building of architectural models—or dream homes.⁷ In

one particularly stirring scene from *(Re)Housing the American Dream*, the participants work together to build large, fort like structures out of cardboard, tape, and other readily available materials. Through this process we glimpse democracy in action, as the youth negotiate with each other on how best to design the structures, how to adorn them, and how to fortify them for posterity. The results may not look like much, but still the sculptural objects are precious. The process of building, together, confirms their value beyond a merely monetary perspective. Through the power of imagination, these cardboard shanties become castles, the most luxurious of homes, full of possibilities.

"The piece consists for the most part of documented staged scenes/performances or happenings, if you like. . . . They are staged, live performed realities, within other realities."

Leenaars is a self-described documentarian, though one who confronts the nature of documentation in a way that parses and critically engages with the strategies involved

in such work. The filming of a subject is always a performance, and Leenaars not only accepts this reality, but pushes and accentuates it to a greater, more expressive degree. Whereas more traditional documentarians are beholden to an objective representation of "facts," Leenaars is more interested in the notion of "ecstatic truth."⁸ This approach is evident in the main, three-channel video projection that makes up the core of the exhibition. The projections spread out across the gallery wall forming a triptych, wherein the different channels alternate between synchronizing, mirroring, inverting, and so forth. The center frame seems to hold particular weight, with the other two channels responding to or framing it in ever-evolving relationships.

The pacing and patterning of the projections contribute to their overall kaleidoscopic nature. The different channels oscillate between staged moments of artistic expression and playful exuberance, each coloring the reading of the other. Moments appear and reappear,

couched in different contexts depending on the videos flagging them. What emerges is a rhizomatic labyrinth of meaning making. In one scene the participants hold up cardboard signs with hashtagged phrases on them⁹—the new economy of political protest language, still bound to the choice materiality of protesters, past and present. Later on, the signs are carried by the youth through the streets of Milwaukee in a public performance of protest. Then, in another scene, the participants thrust the signs into the ground, planting the seeds of their ideas for further cultivation. These kinds of reoccurring references impart a sense of heightened significance, which is further underscored by the techniques employed by the artist in the production and post-production assemblage of the footage.

Also driving the video is the soundtrack, which mixes both recorded onsite interactions and an electronic, musical beat that easily imprints itself on the mind.¹⁰ Laughter, spoken words, snippets of conversations, and mechanical rhythms



create a strangely holistic experience, mindfully blending moments of cacophony and restraint, resonance and dissonance. The participants also create their own mechanical soundtrack within the film, choreographing a sequence that came to be known as the American Dream Machine, with each individual acting out their own sound and motion in a collective performance. While playful in its enactment, the scene offers metaphoric weight as individual actions accumulate to become a collective force.

“I thought about the different ways in which we can engage in a conversation, and language can be embodied. ... Words that move you, literally and figuratively.”

The role of signs and language (and sign language) in the making of *(Re)Housing the American Dream* warrants further consideration. There are many different signs and forms of

language employed in the making of the exhibition. There is the literal spoken language, within which it is important to note that different languages are represented. In another poignant scene from *(Re)Housing the American Dream*, the participants of the summer camp are stationed irregularly throughout a backyard, and the camera moves from one individual to the next, as each participant recites the equivalent of “Welcome Home” in their chosen language.¹¹ Then there are the hashtags developed by

the participants, which together express their collective political imaginings. Released into the world, these hashtags now have lives of their own, and people can (re)contextualize their meanings while simultaneously contributing to the ongoing conversations that began in the summer camp.

But while the protest signs are one way to look at the meaning of “sign language,” there is another important moment involving the actual signing

of language. At one point during the summer camp, one participant revealed that she knew how to sign The Pledge of Allegiance, which the other participants immediately wanted to learn. Initially, Leenaars was not keen on including the Pledge in the aforementioned video—she deemed its overt nationalistic tone counterproductive to the more open-ended nature of their explorations—but the artist nevertheless looked into the history of the Pledge and unearthed an intriguing, complicated



legacy.¹² Taking cue from her collaborators, she reintroduced the original version of the Pledge for discussion with the group, and this version is featured in the final three-channel projection—the participants’ hands shot from below against the sky, a field of hands speaking through each movement.

This embodiment of language and signs is rich in meaning, evocative of the ideals that Americans hold for the democratic process and which are instilled in the American Dream. The participants remind us that political speech is meaningless without political action, and that the potentialities of the American Dream have historically only been afforded to those who have access to specific forms of articulation—voice and visibility. To create a public forum—a summer camp full of discussion, performance, play (i.e., forms of knowledge production)—consisting of young participants who are largely undervalued and unrecognized in the larger political theaters of this country, is a bold statement. The quality of their shared authorship forces us to acknowledge

their authority. For here in these moments of filmic representation are glimpses of the political import of the American Dream, embodied in the ecstatic truth of this nation’s youth.

“And are we not of interest to each other?”¹³

The exhibition on view at the Haggerty Museum of Art is a distillation of a complex and multivalent process, and with such projects there is always the lingering question of temporality and duration. Responsibility is often placed on the artist to determine how and when the process curtails, and where the ethical boundaries for such decisions actually lie. However, the very nature of open-ended processes is that there is no concrete finality. The project continues in both expected and unexpected ways. Programs at the museum and in classrooms at Marquette University continue to add new dimensions to the work. The occasional text or Facebook message between the participants points to the

trust that developed among them, and which sustains these ongoing interactions. But beyond this, might there also be a responsibility on our part, as the receivers of these artistic messages? Is it simply a matter of listening, recognizing, and bearing witness? If the American Dream retains any sense of political, social, or cultural value—as a construct worth fighting for—then it must be stripped of its historical bias and reformulated for a potential future. Thankfully, *Kirsten Leenaars: (Re)Housing the American Dream* gives us hope. More than a simple reminder, this exhibition also embodies a poetic call to action.



Notes

- 1 Many authors have spoken poignantly and at length about this, though some may use different terms to formulate their discourse. One especially pertinent reference is Barack Obama's 2006 memoir, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*, and while he is less overt in his use of language, the very premise of the book confronts the racial biases he has fought his entire political career.
- 2 The quotes that intervene periodically throughout this text are from the artist, Kirsten Leenaars, taken from correspondence with the author from September 5-7, 2016. Her statements are intended to act like floating signifiers, with the hope of offering additional insight and nuance.

- 3 The exhibition is composed of five different, yet interrelated, projects, all from 2016: the main three-channel video projection after which the show takes its title; two additional video works, *We the People* and *New and Definitely Improved*; a wall drawing composed of political slogan hashtags, *(Re)Constitution, #12yearolds*; and a series of drawings addressing Milwaukee's socialist history through reimagined architectural forms, *A House is a House is a House (homes for the working class)*.
- 4 Other projects by the artist have adapted such genres as the television soap opera (*On Our Way to Tomorrow*, 2011) and community-based theater productions (*Not In Another Place, But This Place ... (Happiness)*, 2014).
- 5 For more information, visit <https://rehousingtheamericandream.wordpress.com>.

- 6 See Matthew Desmond, *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City* (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2016).
- 7 The video work *New and Definitively Improved* consists of the infomercial sale pitches made by each participant as they presented their uniquely designed homes.
- 8 The search for "ecstatic truth" is the philosophical and aesthetic impetus for the work of Werner Herzog. In his "Lessons of Darkness," Herzog claims, "There are deeper strata of truth in cinema, and there is such a thing as poetic, ecstatic truth. It is mysterious and elusive, and can be reached only through fabrication and imagination and stylization." "Minnesota Declaration: Truth and Fact in Documentary Cinema" (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, April 30, 1999), <http://www.walkerart.org/magazine/1999/minnesota-declaration-truth-and-fact-in-docum>.

- 9 These hashtags compose the work
(*Re*)*Constitution*, #12yearolds, featured on p. 25.
- 10 Leenaars has worked with composer Paul Deuth on a number of her projects, and his sensitivity to her working style is evident in the relationship of the video projections to the musical accompaniment.
- 11 The languages include English, Spanish, Japanese, Malay, Chinese, Thai, Tamil, Karen Dialect, American Sign Language, Somali, Nkole, Arabic, and Hawaiian.

- 12 To paraphrase from the artist: The Pledge of Allegiance was originally written by a socialist Baptist minister named Francis Bellamy in 1892 for a magazine contest. That magazine, *The Youth's Companion*, created the contest as a way to boost readership and circulation, and so set out to commission a pledge that would become routine in public schools across the country—and thereby promote their image. The original version as submitted by Bellamy read: "I pledge allegiance to my Flag and the Republic for which it stands, one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."
- 13 This is a quote of a quote. Leenaars has commented on the importance of this line from Elizabeth Alexander's poem "Ars Poetica #100: I Believe" (2005), which left a lasting impression on her.

(Re)Housing the American Dream
video still





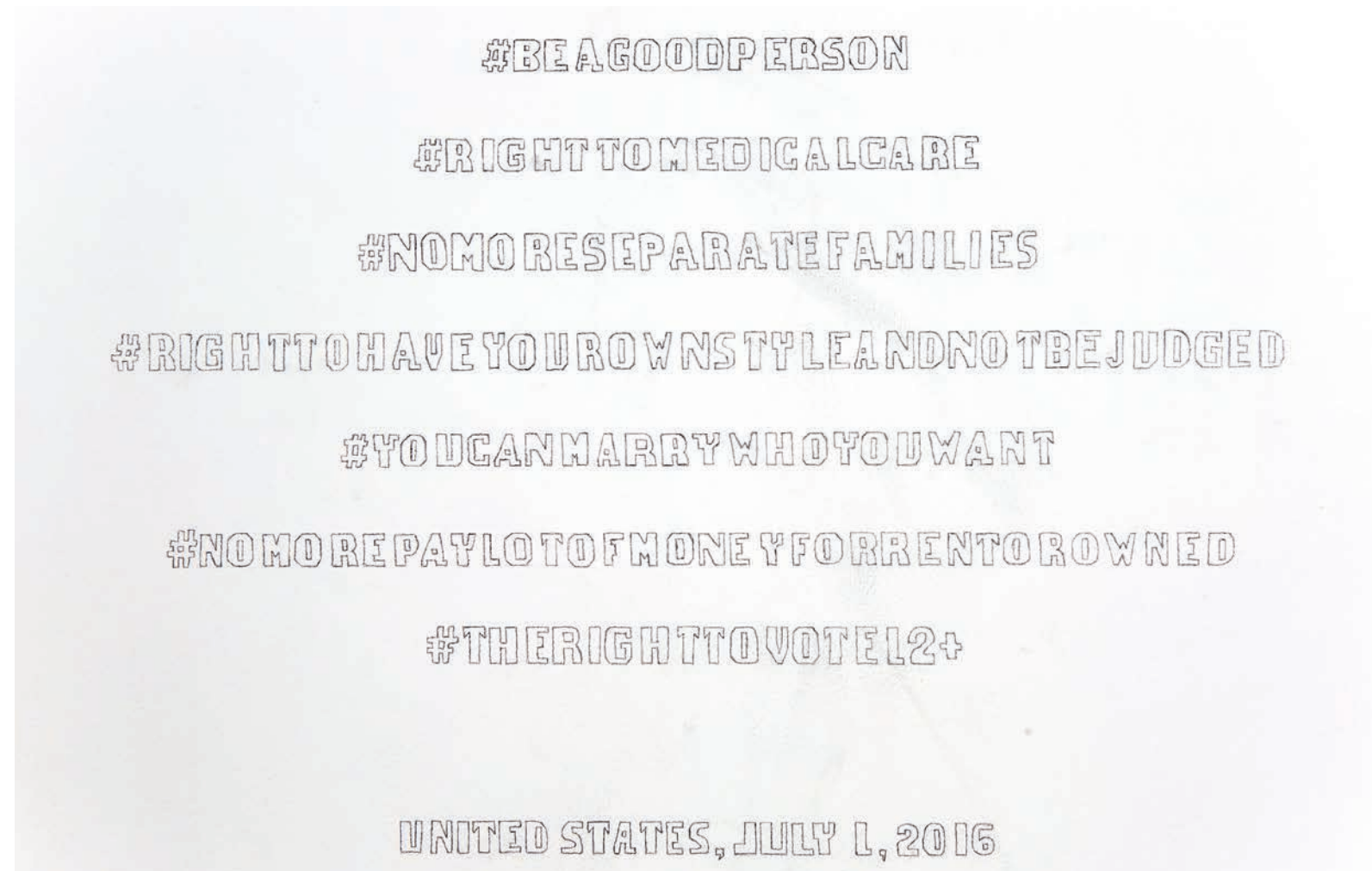
PAGES 22-27:
(Re)Housing the American Dream
Exhibition overview

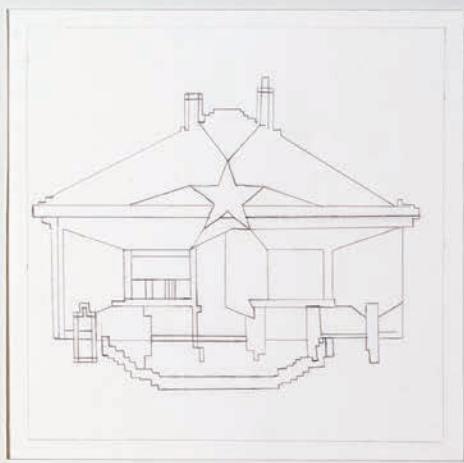
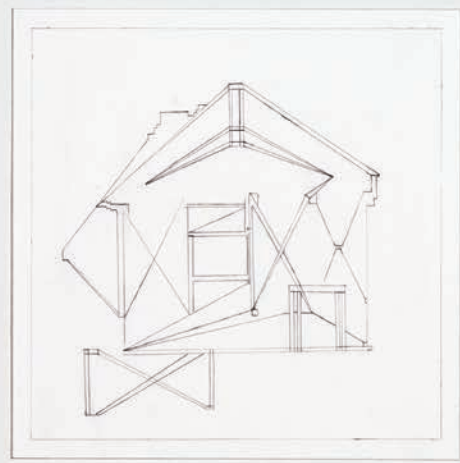
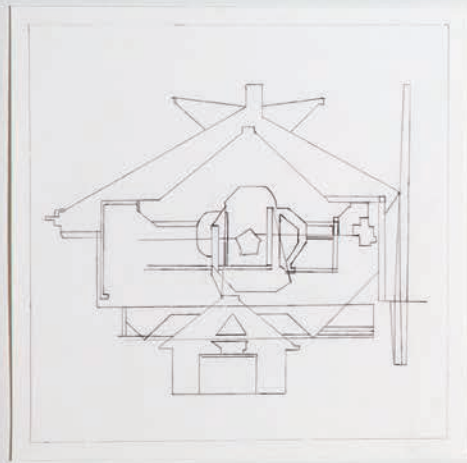




We the People
video

(Re)Constitution, #12yearolds
graphite on wall





A House Is a House Is a House
 (homes for the working class)
 graphite on wall



New and Definitely Improved
video still

Kirsten Leenaars

BIOGRAPHY

Kirsten Leenaars engages with individuals and communities to create participatory video and performance-based work. Her work oscillates between fiction and documentation, reinterprets personal stories and reimagines everyday realities through staging, improvisation, and iteration. Leenaars examines the nature of our constructed realities—the stories we tell ourselves and the stories we identify with—and explores the way we relate to others. In her work she aims to bring to light a shared humanity, often through humor and play. Recent projects include a series of three performances, *Notes on Empty Chairs*, about loss, community, and empathy, produced for the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; the video *#thisistomorrow*, created with performers from Washington, DC, in response to the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner; and the science fiction film *The Invasion of the Hairy Blobs*, currently in editing at the Wexner Center

for the Arts, Columbus, Ohio. Her work has been shown nationally and internationally, at venues including the Museo Universitario del Chopo, Mexico City; the District of Columbia Arts Center, Washington, DC; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; Glass Curtain Gallery, Threewalls, Gallery 400, and 6018North, Chicago; Elaine L. Jacob Gallery, Detroit; Printed Matter, Inc., New York; the Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus; the Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam; Kunst Bunker Tumulka, Munich; and Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin. She has been rewarded grants from the Mondriaan Fund; the Propeller Fund; the Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events; and the Netherlands Consulate General in New York. She currently is an Associate Professor in the department of Contemporary Practices at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

Checklist

Kirsten Leenaars
Dutch, b. 1976
(Re)Housing the American Dream, 2016
3-channel video installation
13:22 min.

**A House Is a House Is a House
(homes for the working class)**, 2016
graphite on paper

(Re)Constitution, #12yearolds, 2016
graphite on wall

We the People, 2016
video, 16:39 min.

New and Definitively Improved, 2016
video, 6:30 min.

(Re)Housing the American Dream project site:
www.rehousingtheamericandream.wordpress.com

Acknowledgments

(Re)Housing the American Dream

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SOUND: Mathew Jinks and Paul Deuth
COMPOSER: Paul Deuth
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ASSISTANT EDITOR: Ellie Hall

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(Re)Housing the American Dream

KIRSTEN LEENAARS AUGUST 18 – DECEMBER 23, 2016



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(Re)Housing the American Dream
video stills



