(RE)HOUSING
THE AMERICAN DREAM:
FREEDOM PRINCIPLES
KIRSTEN LEENAARS

HAGGERTY MUSEUM OF ART
AUGUST 17, 2018 – JANUARY 27, 2019
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When it comes to exhibitions, museum curators can easily slip into thinking in three- or four-month increments. To be sure, much thought is given to identifying the audiences that might be most meaningfully engaged with each exhibition. When community partnerships are initiated through this process, as they often are, every effort is made to continue those relationships after the exhibition closes. But that doesn't always happen.

Enter Kirsten Leenaars, and her three-year (Re)Housing the American Dream creative odyssey.

When I look back on the beginning of the Haggerty Museum of Art’s participation in this project, I’m struck by how much our shared experience has changed since then. Yes, the 2016 presidential election played a role—and our collective response to it has no doubt informed the subsequent cultural shift. But there’s more to it than that. Longstanding, underlying social norms are rapidly changing—as evidenced by everything from the #MeToo movement to art museum initiatives that aim to revise the art historical canon by deaccessioning works of art by “blue chip” artists in order to acquire works by underrepresented artists. The way that we communicate with each other has changed just as quickly, and just as dramatically. The president of the United States communicates with us in real time via Twitter, eschewing and denouncing traditional journalistic media. Our younger generations are more likely to communicate via smartphones than through in-person conversation. Rather than watching television, they watch YouTube. The infrastructure shaping our collective experience has significantly changed.

To me, this means that the medium of the art museum exhibition must change as well. And that has been one of the most potent aspects of (Re)Housing the American Dream. Over the past several years, a powerful web has been woven between the Haggerty Museum of Art, Kirsten Leenaars, her young collaborators, their families, and their communities. The “exhibition” in this case is a shape-shifting entity constructed by fresh voices through multiple narratives, metaphor, compelling visuals, and an underlying structure that steps in where previous conventions have fallen.

I’m grateful to Kirsten Leenaars for leading us on this remarkable journey, and for teaching us how art museums can evolve with their communities. I thank her young collaborators for their bravery, intelligence, imagination, honesty, and trust. They are our hope for the future. I’m grateful to Emilia Layden, Curator of Collections and Exhibitions at the Haggerty Museum of Art, for understanding the importance of this work and for bringing it to the museum. I thank Marquette University’s Helfaer Theatre for the invaluable use of its space during the summer 2018 program. I’m also grateful to Marquette’s Diederich College of Communication for lending the camera and video production equipment used to create (Re) Housing the American Dream: Freedom Principles. This has been, in every sense, a truly collaborative creative experience.

Susan Longhenry
Director and Chief Curator
Haggerty Museum of Art
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Kirsten Leenaars
Dutch, b. 1976

(Re)Housing the American Dream, 2016
three-channel video
13:22 min.

We the People, 2016
video
16:39 min.

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

(Re)Housing the American Dream: A Message from the Future, 2017
three-channel video
13:42 min.

The Shape of Things (Come Tomorrow), 2017
video
15:58 min.

(Re)Housing the American Dream: Freedom Principles, 2018
three-channel video
15:18 min.

What a f what a f what a freedom, 2018
video
43:12 min.

Self Portraits (Face Time), 2018
video
41:11 min.

Freedom Principles, 2018
graphite on wall (7’ x 2’)

(Re)Housing the American Dream project site:
www.rehousingtheamericandream.wordpress.com
On June 2, 2015, the federal government of the United States of America enacted the USA Freedom Act. Originally, its title was conceived as a ten-letter backronym, which stood for Uniting and Strengthening America by Fulfilling Rights and Ending Eavesdropping, Dragnet-collection and Online Monitoring. The act was a reframing of the USA Patriot Act, and—despite its suggested intentions—it did very little to actually rein in the invasive data-collecting and surveillance practices of the government and the many agencies created specifically to shadow police its citizens (and the world at large). In fact, it served more to protect the general erosion (or eradication) of civil rights that its predecessor-in-law initiated in the early 2000s. This move to translate the notion of freedom into an apologia for governmental abuse of power speaks to the many ways that this foundational concept has been bastardized, made a tool of political manipulation.

But, thankfully, the notion of freedom has other translators as well. In a vacant storefront on the Near West Side of Milwaukee, roughly one year after the enactment of the USA Freedom Act, artist Kirsten Leenaars embarked on what would become a multiyear project with a group of young residents, specifically addressing topical issues that intersect with ideas of freedom. The project assumed the form of a summer camp, and the artist and her collaborators engaged with many pressing questions specific to their immediate, local context, but also with those at the forefront of national consciousness, namely questions pertaining to urban housing, segregation, gentrification, immigration, racism, and belief in the American Dream. At the outset, neither Leenaars nor her collaborators could imagine the process they were undertaking as a three-year-long endeavor. Yet that is exactly how the project has developed, with the full commitment of the participants, artist, and host institution alike. Even if they were initially unaware of the scope and generative force of the larger project they were creating in real time, as they went, it is clear now that their many discussions, daily routines, and performative actions were an enactment of a form of freedom, largely self-determined, and unapologetically so.

On this particular occasion, the completion of the third chapter, it seems appropriate to take a step back to consider the full scope and greater implications of the project. Not coincidentally, the title for this most recent iteration is (Re)Housing the American Dream: Freedom Principles. The artist and participants arrived at this topic of inquiry in part due to a general feeling among the group members that they were somehow less free now than in the past—citing increased racial attacks or expressions of homophobia in the aftermath of President Trump’s election—as well as in response to boiling debates around gun rights, control, and activism sparked by the mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. The participants were especially inspired by their peers in Parkland, who were courageous in their calls to action in support of greater gun control legislation in the U.S., and in confronting politicians who enable gun rights lobbyists and groups like the National Rifle Association. Much of the weeklong camp revolved around the discussion of the complexity of freedom,
acknowledging that one person's conception might not be shared by another, it might even stand in direct opposition to another's sense of freedom.

This is difficult terrain to navigate, in both theory and practice. Many philosophers have approached these very same issues, and there is a particular subset of philosophers that seem particularly relevant here—especially with regard to Leenaar's work. The writings of Hannah Arendt immediately come to mind, specifically her formulation of the public realm as a "space of appearance." Swedish filmmaker Petra Bauer writes at length on this idea in her dissertation, Sisters / Making Films, Doing Politics, specifically as it pertains to her own approach to filmmaking. Speaking to Arendt's work, Bauer explains: "When I write that I am interested in the ability of film to act politically I am not primarily referring to the so-called political documentaries that take place in parliament, within political parties or other societal institutions that are responsible for making or changing laws, shaping ideologies and enacting policies. Instead I mean the space that emerges when we relate to one another through speech and action." (Re)Housing the American Dream

It is important to note that speech and action are also forms of practice and are central to one of the most important aspects of Leenaar's work, as well as what is at stake. The growing realisation of the U.S. as a "Firewall Nation", its position as a superpower and its dominance over the Western world, is symptomatic of a failing democratic potential. Many of the participants in Leenaar's work, especially for people of color, women, immigrants, and other disenfranchised groups, is symptomatic of a failing democratic system—or at least one that is incapable of realizing that the capacity for true democratic political action is not limited to a small elite but can be found in a multitude of voices and perspectives. The political philosophy of Chantal Mouffe touches on many of these dialectics. Mouffe's assertion that "critical art practices represent an important intervention in political culture." It is constituted by a manifold of artistic practices aiming at giving a voice to all those who are silenced within the framework of the wider political system. Critical art practices make visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate. It is important to note that speech and action are also forms of practice and are central to one of the most important aspects of Leenaar's work, as well as what is at stake. The growing realisation of the U.S. as a "Firewall Nation", its position as a superpower and its dominance over the Western world, is symptomatic of a failing democratic potential. Many of the participants in Leenaar’s work, especially for people of color, women, immigrants, and other disenfranchised groups, is symptomatic of a failing democratic system—or at least one that is incapable of realizing that the capacity for true democratic political action is not limited to a small elite but can be found in a multitude of voices and perspectives. The political philosophy of Chantal Mouffe touches on many of these dialectics. Mouffe’s assertion that “critical art practices represent an important intervention in political culture.” It is constituted by a manifold of artistic practices aiming at giving a voice to all those who are silenced within the framework of the wider political system. Critical art practices make visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate.

According to Mouffe, “critical art is art that foments dissensus, that not only articulated but amplified, their actions not only recorded and transmitted more widely. It is important to note that speech and action are also forms of practice and are central to one of the most important aspects of Leenaar's work, as well as what is at stake. The growing realisation of the U.S. as a "Firewall Nation", its position as a superpower and its dominance over the Western world, is symptomatic of a failing democratic potential. Many of the participants in Leenaar’s work, especially for people of color, women, immigrants, and other disenfranchised groups, is symptomatic of a failing democratic system—or at least one that is incapable of realizing that the capacity for true democratic political action is not limited to a small elite but can be found in a multitude of voices and perspectives. The political philosophy of Chantal Mouffe touches on many of these dialectics. Mouffe’s assertion that “critical art practices represent an important intervention in political culture.” It is constituted by a manifold of artistic practices aiming at giving a voice to all those who are silenced within the framework of the wider political system. Critical art practices make visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate. It is constituted by a manifold of artistic practices aiming at giving a voice to all those who are silenced within the framework of the wider political system. Critical art practices make visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate. It is constituted by a manifold of artistic practices aiming at giving a voice to all those who are silenced within the framework of the wider political system. Critical art practices make visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate.
desire to see,” the emotive push and pull that underscores the video works is part and parcel of the strategy for making moving images. That is, not only literal moving images, but images that move audiences emotionally, psychically, intellectually. Framed in this way, to see is also to feel. This is part of an empathic process, and it is through the internalization of the images and messages by viewers that the acts of looking and seeing begin to change.

(Re)Housing the American Dream offers us not only an opportunity to see, a desire to see, but also an opportunity to see things differently.

ENDNOTES

1. Each yearly iteration of the project has been supported by and exhibited at the Haggerty Museum of Art at Marquette University in Milwaukee, and Leenaars has worked closely with curator Emilia Layden throughout the multiyear process.

2. Kirsten Leenaars, email correspondence with author, August 2, 2018.


6. Ibid., 4–5.

In (Re)Housing the American Dream, artist Kirsten Leenaars and her youthful collaborators document a series of moments, insights, ideologies, and nuances that unfolded over the course of three years. We might learn from the series of exhibitions by approaching it as anthropologists do: as a cultural artifact, a distinctive and material manifestation of a particular cultural context and moment that provides breathtaking insight into other intersections of space and time. Children and youth are notoriously excluded from our archaeological and cultural histories—this exclusion is often attributed to material realities. Archaeologists lament that youth leave fewer physical traces in the archaeological record than adults. They tend to own fewer things, and in contemporary society, where we rarely allocate valuable materials to the young for their art, play, and work, their experiences seem ephemeral and hard to access. In the documentaries and images of Leenaars’s series of artistic works lie the insights, lamentations, and aspirations of a group of young people. With clarity and playfulness, the participants comment on the political landscape of the U.S. and its import for their personal and communal objectives. When we engage the project as viewers, we have a rare opportunity to center the work that children do as community members, learners, and (re)producers of our future.

DREAMING OVER TIME

As a three-year collaboration, the project gives us the opportunity for a sustained and longitudinal engagement with Leenaars and her young collaborators. Watching these children take their place before the camera over three yearly cycles, we see them transform, physically, creatively, and intellectually, as they respond to and meditate on a swiftly changing political and cultural environment. A jaw appears more chiseled, and a young person grows longer and leaner. Children’s capacity for rapid growth and transformation is a reminder of the potential of our culture and community to change (both dramatically and subtly).

While it is tempting to read the project narrowly as a response to the 2016 presidential election, it transcends that moment. Viewers might ask, instead, how do the children anticipate the future, occupy the present, and reflect on the past? In these regards, no materials are more metaphorically dense than the thermal blankets that appear in the work in 2017 and 2018, presenting a visual contrast with the palette of the 2016 iteration, which features more cardboard in staid colors. The introduction of the blankets announces: something has changed. In the past two years, our association with these reflective and crinkly materials has likely shifted. In the 1970s, scientists developed the plastic and aluminum sheets for use in the space program. A few years later, the blankets became regular features of most emergency and crisis response kits. Images of marathon runners clasping the thermal blankets around their shoulders at the end of races were common. Then, in 2016, we were shaken by images of migrants arriving in Greece, having braved a perilous Mediterranean crossing. In some of these images, the blankets served to warm, and in others, they...
we are Freedom Principles (2018), we can also (2017), and 26 of the young people themselves, as they create their own tones and generated tones and harmonies; and the humming and resonances or are projected onto scenes. capturing the intersections of varying sounds as they emerge from future. The works tie together both landscape and soundscape, up new ways of thinking with children about the past, present, and important as the images we see, and they work together to open the acoustic-image. The sounds we hear in these videos are as appreciate what anthropologists and linguists have come to term the Future videos, by the children and artist, but particularly within the three-channel flexibility of the materials are part of the creative work undertaken over Milwaukee’s streets. The visual appeal, complexity, and fashioning massive floating multi-headed creatures that hover people put them to use building shelters, making flags, and treated to images of the sparkling thermal blankets. The young in many of the works in (ACOUSTIC) IMAGES of children and parents seeking the warmth of the blankets within cavernous concrete enclosures where they are detained after attempting to cross the border. The uses of the blankets by the children and parents, while the sounds of joyous play, laughter, and energetic recreation animate the images of children at play. In a project that asks young people to think about the importance of the voice, it is paramount to think not only about what we say, but how (Re) Housing the American Dream is a multisensory experience. "I DID A GOOD JOB OF BEING A CHILD." Freedom Principles, the 2018 cycle of (Re)Housing the American Dream, takes a deliberate turn towards seeking to understand the transformative labors of childhood and children, their willingness to play earnestly and with purpose, to create, dismantle, and try again, is just one of the lessons in (Re)Housing the American Dream. ENOTES 1 Anthropologists have documented the critical contributions of children in contemporary and past societies, as well as the methodological difficulty of capturing the tremendous labors of children. See, for example, Parvaneh Noory’s 1981 study, Dance, Cloth Child labour in the Jomder Valley.” 2 The term is attributed to Ferdinand de Saussure, first mentioned in Course in General Linguistics (1916). Gregory Bateson later elaborated the schema in his discussion of metacommunication in Knowledge: A Guide for the Perplexed (2000). As a descriptive term referencing the sounds of a particular place and time, soundscapes are easily understood by contemporary and past societies, as well as the methodological difficulty of capturing the tremendous labors of children. See, for example, Parvaneh Noory’s 1981 study, Dance, Cloth Child labour in the Jomder Valley.” 3 Points of View by a Composite Picture of the Culture of a New Guinea Tribe Drawn from Three Naven: A Survey of the Problems Suggested (1936). He takes up the notion that the acoustic-image is the "sound of the future," which is relational in the sense that any number of individuals may interpret the sound and imbue it with meaning in different ways. Soundscape is a descriptive term referencing the sounds of a particular place and time, most notably described by Charles Keil in The Ethical Soundscape: Weaving Sound into a Culture of Relations (2005). Samerena Moala is Associate Professor of Anthropology in the Department of Social and Cultural Sciences at Marquette University, and the 2017 winner of the Margaret Mead Award. She is also the parent of a second grader at Highland Community School and saw many familiar faces among the young people who participated in this project.
Just because I am Karen
Doesn’t mean I am different from everyone
Doesn’t mean I should be judged
And doesn’t mean I should be treated differently

Just because I am Karen
Doesn’t mean I’m uneducated
Doesn’t mean I am forced to do anything
Doesn’t mean I don’t deserve respect

Just because I am Karen
Doesn’t mean I don’t have an opinion
Doesn’t mean I don’t know my rights
And doesn’t mean I am hopeless

Just because I am Karen
What can I do differently moving forward?
Why am I always in such a situation?
What can I learn from this experience?

Just because I am Karen

Who knows that life is not easy, so many people are mean, and change is constant
Who knows how to draw, dance, and play violin
Who has learned how to speak English, make friends, and play the violin
Who likes warm weather, Spring, drawing
Who loves to eat, spend time with family and watch Kpop
Who feels hopeful, stressed, and patient
Who is afraid of a caterpillar, dark and heights
Who hopes to see words full of peace, grandpa’s family, and love in our heart
Who believes in being herself, telling the truth, and nice people

Poems by Paw Boe Say

JUST BECAUSE
FREE TO BE ME
I am from the knife
From bright green bamboo shoots
And river water
I am from house next
to my grandpa’s house
Rainy, windy, it looked beautiful
I am from the Thai Orchid
The Hibiscus, smells peaceful
I am from eating together
And black hair. From Saw Paw
And Naw Mioo and Klo Mioo
I am from finding food
And walking in the forest
From loving people around you:
And respecting old people

I’m from Christian beliefs
In Jesus
I’m from Mea Kee Camp, dry fish
And chicken soup
From the day my grandma died
Because of the war
From my dad getting separated
From Maung Kya Ta
I am from Mu Yu Klo
Concept: Kirsten Leenaars  
Director/Editor: Kirsten Leenaars  
Assistant Director: Lindsey Barlag-Thornton  
Camera: Ellie Hall and Orlando Pinder  
Sound: Jimmy Schauss  
Production Assistants: Li Ming Hu and Zachary Hutchinson  
Composer/Sound Engineer: Paul Deuth  

PERFORMERS:  
Isa Ali Ahmad, Nur Ali Ahmad, Yusof Ali Ahmad,  
Rokimah Ali Ahmad, Alanis Aranda-Salgado,  
Javon Amin Barker, Elsa Grace Berner, Paw Htoo Boe,  
Iman Fatmi, Nina Jackson, Vittoria Patricia Lucchesi,  
Amina Mohamed, Rahma Mohammed, Malachi Moore,  
Matthew Moore, Grace Elaine Ohlendorf, Ju Hta Paw,  
Hannah Plevin, Paw Boe Say and Naw Tha Da  

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