

You are here and somewhere else

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‘We’re about mobilising neighbourhood people on issues that matter to them. Gary can be a fully functioning city like any other city, not that that is necessarily a great comparison to other cities, because I think sometimes we forget how much other cities... are struggling.’ – Kim McGee, Central District Organizing Project, in *Emeraldtown: Gary, Indiana*

You Are Here, the collaborative duo Zanny Begg and Keg de Souza, through their practice, focus on the politics of place. For the exhibition *Emeraldtown: Gary, Indiana*, instead of directly addressing the site of Artspace or the surrounding city of Sydney, they presented a filmic portrait of Gary, Indiana, a small city in Midwest America. The project shared the concerns of this particular community, but also acted as a comparative model for pockets of Sydney, such as Woolloomooloo – the culturally and socio-economically beleaguered neighbourhood within which Artspace is located, but barely visible from the perimetrically situated contemporary art institution. *Emeraldtown* featured sculptural components alongside a documentary video, with all of the elements marking reference to *ReMake Estate*, a previous project the pair developed whilst undertaking a residency in Gary. Creating an edible garden outside, and a public mural upon the exterior wall, of one of the many abandoned houses in the city would seem a modest contribution to make toward the easing of any of their city’s complex social issues, yet the lightness of these interventions respected the existing efforts of organisations in the area. The simplicity of these gestures also meant that the work could be easily translated and disseminated through documentation. Within the *Emeraldtown* documentary, residents articulated many of the challenges facing their city with regard to industry, education, governance and inequality, enabling the work a relevance for Australian audiences despite its obvious dislocation in terms of its context. Playfully employing popular culture by interspersing these interviews with segments of the 1978 film *The Wiz*, You Are Here sought to traverse the local and global, slipping between art and activism to raise questions about the value and meaning of community.

To understand the project You Are Here undertook in Gary, it is useful to know a little background information.¹ Situated twenty-five miles from downtown Chicago, Gary was founded in 1906 by the United States Steel Corporation as a convenient location for their new steel processing plant. The initial prosperity of the city was due to the booming steel industry that it was built around, but by the 1960s, with offshore competitors challenging US domination of the steel market, the city had entered a state of decline. Unemployment in the city grew, and so too did levels of crime. In the subsequent years many affluent and middle-class residents abandoned Gary, relocating to the surrounding cities and towns. In addition to this, the job losses from the downsizing of the plant meant people left Gary for regions that could offer employment, leaving the town with many empty and disused properties. Another important demographic feature of Gary is its predominantly African American population. At eighty-four per cent in the 2000 census, it has the highest percentage of African American residents among small United States cities. The city boasts some momentous milestones: Gary elected one of the nation's first African American mayors, Richard G. Hatcher, in 1968, and hosted the ground-breaking 1972 National Black

Political Convention. Michael Jackson, the infamous king of pop, also grew up in Gary and there is significant celebration of this fact with supporters proposing to erect a museum in his honour, as well as hosting many popular festivities commemorating Jackson each year. However the recent struggling economy has significantly affected Gary and has led to some considerable challenges for the community to tackle.

ReMake Estate was a project made in collaboration with local initiatives that were already seeking avenues of self-empowerment and community control in Gary, such as the Central District Organizing Project and the Higher Art Creative Learning Centre. Arriving with a preconceived idea in mind; to build a community garden and utilise one of the many abandoned houses, You Are Here quickly adapted to suggestions from the community to make it a more freely accessible edible garden and to focus their project upon the exterior of one of the houses, in an effort to enhance what was a desolate site and provide a community endeavour. As both Begg and de Souza have a history of engaging in activism as well as critical art theory, each were particularly conscious of the role that power imbalances can play within this kind of situation and were mindful to incorporate the voices of residents, even though You Are Here would claim the final authorship of the project. Perhaps the now-tedious discussions on Relational Aesthetics and subsequent responses, such as Australian art historian Steven Wright's warning around relational practices that offer superficial experiences and unwanted servicesⁱⁱ, have encouraged a necessity for self-reflexive and responsible community collaboration, participation and collective action. However, rather than distancing themselves from community-engaged practices, You Are Here continue to embrace the radical potential of working in the world, regardless of the warnings and hesitations of certain critics. Indeed, they unapologetically engage in political commentary. In the words of curator Maria Lind:

This should come as no surprise; when politics in principle are completely steered by economics and the economy follows a capitalist logic, then culture tends to become an arena for ideological debate. Culture in general, and art in particular, then functions as an avenue where the political is allowed to be enacted, if sometimes covertly... Today we have reached a point where culture and art are not only used as instruments in the political, but they also produce a potent force, something that is palpable...ⁱⁱⁱ

Jean-Luc Nancy has described community as that which is formed in the wake of society, as what remains as a form of resistance to the immanent power,^{iv} and this is somewhat overt in the case of Gary, with the surviving community filling in the gaps that the once powerful steel industry left behind. You Are Here were interested in those industries that have developed in its absence, such as barber shops, beauty salons, sex work, airbrush art as well as the proliferation of gangs, drugs and bootleg Michael Jackson merchandise—manifestations of community resilience in the face of eroded economic confidence. Residents of Gary openly express their distrust of societal structures, and with such a legacy of corporate behaviour in the city, it is easy to see why.

The intention of You Are Here to make a difference in the community, and to highlight the concerns of Gary through this project, is clear. In doing so, they encountered the challenge of how to make a collaborative project that was responsive and useful, but the difficulty of how to present this in a

meaningful as well as aesthetic way within a gallery context remained. Lind has suggested that political agency and the potential to effect change can exist in the simple act of making art and often elaborates on the benefits of artist-initiated action – as *You Are Here* attempted with the community of Gary – but how can this be translated as an artistic experience engaged in the political? Separating the two projects, *ReMake Estate* and *Emeraldtown* not only acknowledged and avoided the lack of criteria for assessing socially engaged works, but also allowed the Artspace project to function independently from the community-based activities despite being necessarily informed by them.

Emeraldtown consisted of a documentary video and various sculptural elements. The elaborate entrance to the exhibition space, constructed to resemble a safe door made of gold, created an intimate screening space for the video projection, secluding it from the other components of the exhibition. The video did not provide extensive information for those unfamiliar with the city of Gary or its issues, nor did it provide a wider contextual background for each of *You Are Here*'s projects. But rather, it functioned as an entertaining and thoughtful introduction to the work, identifying some of the political issues they sought to negotiate within the series of interviews. The documentary was separated into three parts: *Turning Green*, with its focus on Gary and its African American population; *Into the Red*, which elaborated upon the context of the US steel industry and discussed the impact of the company moving to regions with non-union employment options; and lastly, *Gold Standards*, which elaborated upon some of the industries that remain in Gary. These section titles related to the integrated motif of the project: the 1978 film *The Wiz*, an adaptation of L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* presented in the context of African American culture.

The portrait of Gary was woven together with the interspersing of short interviews with residents and segments from the *The Wiz*. Produced by Motown, the film featured an entirely African American cast, including Diana Ross in the role of Dorothy, offering an obvious contrast to, and critique of, race relations in American society in comparison to the Kansas depicted in the well-known 1939 version *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. Furthermore, while Baum's book *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900) is usually interpreted as an American fairytale about self-confidence, there is also a theory that it was written as a parable for the debate on the introduction of the gold standard in the late-nineteenth century. *The Wiz* accentuates this, making a more direct and contemporary analogy to the capitalist economic structure. In light of the ongoing effects of the 2008 global financial crisis, debates around the legitimacy of such a system still remain critical today.

You Are Here employed *The Wiz* to connect this analogy of society with the complex history of Gary and the relationships between the mainly African American population, the US Steel Corporation and former resident Michael Jackson, teasing out the complicated post-industrial legacy of the city. This contributed elements of entertainment within the project, creating an intricate network of associations between the various characters, the fictional plot and how this representation can be interpreted through its application to the realities of the issues and challenges facing the city of Gary. Michael Jackson was identified as the Scarecrow, kind and generous but apparently lacking in brains; the US Steel

Corporation was represented as the Tin Man – cold, inflexible and desperately in need of a heart; and the residents of Gary were compared to the Lion, only wanting for courage. The emerald sculptures in the exhibition space referenced those featured in the film, creating a contextual relationship, so that those watching the video might contribute their personal narratives to the collective memory.

Through its linkage to this well-known American fairytale and its various iterations, of differing perspectives and from different eras, enabled the project to speak more generally on the act of representation. By way of example, the opening sequence of *The Wiz* features a graffiti mural from which the Munchkin characters come to life when Dorothy unwittingly kills the Wicked Witch of the East. You Are Here's film *Emeraldtown* similarly opens with a mural, in this case commissioned as part of their *ReMake Estate* project in Gary. Both films position the act of representation as vital, in the first example as a limiting constraint, and in the second as a form of empowerment.

The avoidance of copyright clearance for the use of segments from *The Wiz* was fitting, claiming popular culture as a shared community resource rather than pandering to corporate ownership, while the interviewees each shared their own views and stories with minimal editing. Given the current cult of individualism, the act of collaboration would seem to operate hand in hand with activism and alternative ways of producing knowledge. As always, You Are Here started their project from a dialogue with each other that developed into a cacophonous investigation and representation of the community of Gary, its past, present, and potential future.

Building on this collaborative process grounded the project in conversation, sidestepping any authoritarian or directorial role for the artists. The focus was on 'You', inclusive of their collaborators as well as audiences, positioned in the present tense and specific to a place – 'Here', reinforcing that their projects are temporally and spatially contingent while attempting to allow responsive relevancy for the viewer. Working under the name You Are Here also naturally implies future prospects, prompting the question 'where do we go now, now that you are here and have joined us?' It marks a cross on the map from which to chart a course in any direction, offering a perspective on the surrounding terrain, rather than proposing a specific path. Upon stepping out of the little world of Gary ensconced within Artspace, some visitors may have wandered up Forbes Street and noticed the similarity of this brick road, the social fabric connecting *Emeraldtown*, Gary and Woolloomooloo, or any other familiar yet overlooked community. You Are Here seemed to hope *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* message would remain true; that we already possess the ability to resolve our problems, we just need to realise it.

ⁱ The following information is taken from Wikipedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gary, Indiana](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gary,_Indiana), accessed 1 October 2011.

ⁱⁱ Steven Wright, 'The delicate essence of artistic collaboration' in John Roberts and Steven Wright (editors) *Third Text*, number 71, volume 18, issue 6, Routledge, London, 2004, pp. 533-545.

ⁱⁱⁱ Maria Lind, 'Complications: On Collaboration, Agency and Contemporary Art', in Nina Möntmann (editor), *New Communities*, The Power Plant and Public Books, Toronto, Canada, p. 66.

^{iv} Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1991.