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Can an Artist Shift the Gun Debate?

At the Guggenheim, Shaun Leonardo encouraged those on all sides of the gun control issue to find common ground with their opponents, by connecting physically.



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By Meredith Mendelsohn

CRISTIN TIERNEY

As 25 participants filed into the Guggenheim Museum’s rotunda Thursday night to enact the artist Shaun Leonardo’s newest work, called “Primitive Games,” it was anyone’s guess whether their gleaming white uniforms would remain as pristine by the hour’s end.

Mr. Leonardo, who has a reputation for sinking his teeth into contentious social issues — the numbers of black and Latino men in prison, racial inequality, police use of force — had invited the performers to engage in what the museum had mysteriously presented only as a “nonverbal debate” on an urgent social topic.

That quickly revealed itself to be gun violence, and given the verbal blood sport the issue triggers, a debate could have devolved into a full-fledged donnybrook. What’s more, Mr. Leonardo, a former wrestler and college football player (who still has the physique to prove it) announced in advance that the performance would be inspired by one of the roughest sporting traditions to endure in the 21st century, the Italian Renaissance-era game of calcio storico. (Imagine a mix of rugby, soccer, martial arts, wrestling and fist-fighting rolled into one nearly lawless clash.)

But using violence to address violence is not what Mr. Leonardo (or the Guggenheim) had in mind.



CRISTIN TIERNEY

Mr. Leonardo arranged the teams in two lines. When a master of ceremony shouted “Debate!” they approached each other in silent determination. Credit...Vincent Tullo for The New York Times



Participants debating the issue of gun violence without using any words during the piece titled “Primitive Games” by Mr. Leonardo, using the Guggenheim rotunda as an arena. Credit...Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

With the dialogue on guns stalled, Mr. Leonardo suggests that the underlying problem might be words: If people can avoid defensive language and find an alternative way of conversing about gun control, maybe we can actually start communicating, he said. “What we are witnessing as a failure in communication has everything to do with the ways that a person or a side develops an argument before communication is even initiated, based simply on who a person perceives their opponent to be,” he said in an interview recently in his studio in the Dumbo neighborhood of Brooklyn.

Last fall, the Guggenheim Museum commissioned a work from the artist as part of its social practice initiative, a program to bring more socially engaged art to the institution. Mr. Leonardo imagined a nonverbal debate in which people on all sides of the gun control issue tried to open a dialogue.

“The lofty goal is that this performance might move to a moment of interconnectivity,” he said. “If you can exist with someone you once perceived as different,” he added, “then you might be able to listen.”

He invited four potentially adversarial groups to help bring his vision to life: recreational users of firearms, citizens impacted by street violence, police officers and

CRISTIN TIERNEY

military veterans. He hid the subject of the debate from participants and the public, and kept the identities of the groups under wraps.



Mr. Leonardo, a former wrestler and college football player, has a reputation for sinking his teeth into contentious social issues. Credit...Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

Before a rotunda of viewers assembled for his one-night event, the performers — an ethnically diverse mix of men and women around the ages of 18 to 70 — bore no sign of their group affiliation. The terrazzo floor of the Guggenheim had been covered with white plastic to indicate a fighting ring, and in the spirit of calcio storico, four giant heraldic banners were unfurled, emblazoned with a military insignia (for the veterans), a target (for the recreational gun users), a bullet (for the citizens affected by street violence) and a badge (for police officers).

To create the “teams” that would then “debate,” the performers were told to respond to a series of 13 questions. Do you have power? Do you love your home? Do you fear for the safety of your community? Do you own a firearm? Have you ever lost a loved one to gun violence?

Nearly everyone said they had held a bullet. Regardless of their political leanings, the performers may have answered a question the same way. Still, suspicions developed.

CRISTIN TIERNEY

Mr. Leonardo arranged the teams in two lines. When a master of ceremony shouted “Debate!” they approached each other in silent determination — pushing, pulling, trying to connect. Their activities resembled everything from improvisational modern dance and method acting exercises, to group-therapy, wrestling and tai-chi.

While whatever real-world impact he is making is hard to measure, in art-world terms, Mr. Leonardo has become a growing force in the field of social practice. He is the co-founder of [Assembly](#), a community-based arts program run by the nonprofit organization [Recess](#), which is offering an alternative to incarceration. The groups work with the [Center for Court Innovation’s Brooklyn Justice Initiatives](#), which decides which young adults would fit the program. Assembly recently won a \$150,000 grant from the [Art for Justice Fund](#), an initiative launched in June 2017 by Agnes Gund, president emerita of the Museum of Modern Art, to reform the criminal justice system. (Ms. Gund [sold](#) a 1962 painting by Roy Lichtenstein for \$165 million last year to provide the fund’s nest egg.)

Through Assembly, some young adults and juveniles charged with nonviolent crimes can avoid incarceration and a criminal record by completing a course of workshops that include movement and storytelling techniques for reimagining themselves outside the narratives of powerlessness that often follow troubled individuals throughout their lives.



Imani Orilus, right, pretending to arrest Maya Watkis during a storytelling workshop with Mr. Leonardo. The artist is a co-founder of Assembly, a program in Brooklyn that tries to provide an art-related alternative to incarceration for young adults. Credit...Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

CRISTIN TIERNEY



Mr. Leonardo, right, helps stage a scene of an arrest for a workshop at Recess, a Brooklyn arts organization, with some of the young adults in the Assembly program. Credit...Vincent Tullo for The New York Times ORG XMIT: NPX

Mr. Leonardo was born in Queens to a Dominican mother and Guatemalan father — he identifies as Afro-Latino and now lives in Brooklyn with his wife, the artist McKendree Key, and their 2-year-old and 10-year-old daughters. He studied visual art at Bowdoin College in Maine and came to performance somewhat by accident. During a residency at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture he put on a Mexican wrestling mask and began fighting an imaginary opponent. An enthusiastic crowd gathered, and the concept took off. Starting in 2004, he staged dozens of fiercely physical performances as his Mexican wrestler alter ego, El Conquistador, or El C., who battled the fictional “Invisible Man.” This foe is a reference to Ralph Ellison’s groundbreaking 1952 novel, the story of the demons a black man faces growing up in midcentury America. “That book has been a through line in my practice in ways that I’m not even entirely conscious of,” he said.

The goal of the wrestling work, said the artist, was to loosen definitions of manhood. Practically speaking, that work taught him about body language.

After the death of Trayvon Martin, in 2012, his work took a turn toward the political. He immersed himself in drawing, still a significant part of his art. (Two new works, one based on the media imagery of Rodney King and the other on the Central Park Five, are headed to the group show “Walls Turned Sideways: Artists Confront the Justice System,” at the Contemporary Art Museum Houston on Aug. 25.)

CRISTIN TIERNEY



Mr. Leonardo is a multidisciplinary artist. Here, his drawings from a series in 2015 on the death of Michael Brown. Other works have focused on Eric Garner and Trayvon Martin. Credit...Courtesy of the artist

After Eric Garner, an unarmed black man, died in 2014, and a [grand jury](#) decided not to indict the New York City police officer who used a chokehold, “Something shifted,” Mr. Leonardo said. He moved away from purely physical performances and started guiding participants instead as more of an instructor. One, called “I Can’t Breathe” (2016), was a participatory performance that he disguised as a self-defense course.

In “Primitive Games,” his roles included instructor, coach referee and role model. Despite some improvisational freedom, the artist’s hand was evident in every step of the performance. The four groups of participants attended a [series of workshops](#) with Mr. Leonardo, during which he taught them ways to find another person’s body language and gestures “relatable” rather than offensive. “The immediate goal,” he said, “is to get these very divided groups more attuned to one another in the way they react and respond to conflict.”

CRISTIN TIERNEY



Mr. Leonardo's image of Rodney King, charcoal on paper, with mirrored tint on frame, 2017. Credit... Courtesy of the artist

If all that sounds more like therapy, [Nat Trotman](#), the Guggenheim's curator of media and performance, explains what makes it art. "There is always an element of Shaun's vision as a guide," he said before the event. "It's about bringing people together to deal with political issues. It's activist in trying to get people to deal with reality. And that was really compelling to us." (Mr. Trotman organized the project in collaboration with Christina Yang, the museum's director of education and public programs, and Anna Harsanyi, Guggenheim social practice project manager.)

At the Guggenheim, between the opponents, there were moments of tenderness, flirtation, aggression, sadness, camaraderie, and humor. Somebody would fall; someone would help them up, as their bodies found common ground.

Reached Friday by email, a member of the veterans' group who wanted to be identified only as James, called the evening's performance "an intense emotional roller coaster ride encountering fear, strength, vulnerability, machismo, empathy, joy and sorrow." He added that it was a test of courage "against and with a very diverse group of other humans with beliefs and viewpoints much different than mine."