

Resident Faculty Lecture – Shaun Leonardo, June 12, 2023

Steve Locke: [with static slide on screen behind] Good evening, beloved. For the record, my name is Steve Locke, I'm a member of the resident faculty at Skowhegan in the summer of 2023. I am here with the great honor, and privilege, of introducing my friend Shaun Leonardo.

One of the great gifts one receives as a member of the Skowhegan staff is to be present. I was present as dean here in 2004 when Shaun, barely 23, was a participant. He was midway through his MFA program at San Francisco Art Institute. He was diligent, and somewhat removed, working on heroic paintings. But particular one that sticks in my memory is a painting of a Superman cradling a dead Lois Lane. It had the hallmarks of all the elegant technique, and the highest level of painterly skill, and within it were the seeds of things that would occupy Shaun for his entire career: power, masculinity, spectacle, and failure. Shaun presented this work to his peers during open crits, and the discussion was beyond lively. You see, Shaun had not rendered Superman as a white, corn-fed lad from Smallville. He had painted the hero with a palette and likeness similar to himself. He had troubled the idea of Superman, made him a failure instead of a hero. I could not and cannot help but notice the way that he deflected the failure of masculine performance and spectacle onto himself.

Later that summer, at lunch, we were all startled by the frantic ringing of the bell in front of the fresco barn. We emerged from the shadows of what is now the media lab area to find Shaun in the mask of a luchador, running in circles as if preparing for a wrestling match. I will never forget watching Shaun wrestle the invisible man on the lawn at Skowhegan. Moving through space as if being thrown about by a stronger competitor only visible to him. The spectacle of what he did with his body shocked us all into silence that clear summer day. Seeing him flipping through the air or being slammed to the ground was beyond captivating. The match ended with our luchador, El C., as we came to know him, suffering a loss so humiliating that he had to remove his mask and walk, alone, away from us.

Working here I got the distinct honor of watching the transformation in Shaun's work, from depiction to action, from illustration to embodiment, from untouchable to activist. In all of his work from the performances, to the work dealing with violence against Black people, Shaun applies research and a ruthless sense of technical mastery. His kinesthetic skills are only matched by his abilities as a draftsman. He is able to allow us to access how we move, feel, live, and often die, in our bodies. He represents these knowledges in performance that addresses spectacle and masculine presence, knowing that those things alone may not be enough to save us.

In workshops and teaching environments, Shaun has employed this deep and engaged understanding of performance strategies, not just in museums and spaces of art, but in programs that engage young people in navigating our fraught criminal justice system. He's taught people how to survive a police encounter just long enough to breathe.

He has used his pictorial talent to depict victims of anti-Black violence. Shaun's work in community with Assembly and Recess is grounded in a commitment to the people he serves; he does not simply do a project and leave. His social practice work is actually social, not solely for his benefit. He learned that while people do not need superheroes to save them, they need, they mean, they may need an artist to show them how to save themselves. His generosity has not always been welcomed. His work has not always been honored. Despite this, he has suffered fools with grace and intelligence. And when his work was weaponized against him, and used by people with less than honorable intentions, he reached out in care and collaboration, despite misinformation and institutional malpractice.

Shaun was born in 1979 in Queens, New York; lives in Brooklyn, New York. He received his BA in visual arts from Bowdoin College in Maine, and his MFA in painting from San Francisco Art Institute. His multi-disciplinary work ranges from varieties of self-portraiture, video, embodied and structured performance, as well as drawing and painting. Uh, let me see here – he received awards from the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, the New York Studio School, the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, Art Matters, New York Foundation for the Arts, Franklin Furnace, and the Jerome Foundation. (00:05:03) Shaun's work has been featured at the Guggenheim Museum, the Highline, the New Museum; he has been profiled in *The New York Times* and on CNN. His solo exhibition, *The Breath of Empty Space*, was presented at Maryland College, Maryland Institute College of Art, Mass MOCA, and the Bronx Museum. His first major public art commission, *Between Freedoms*, was presented at the Four Freedoms Park Conservancy. He currently serves at Recess as co-director, helping guide the organization's continuous evolution as an engine of social change.

For his exhibition *Primitive Games* at the Guggenheim, Shaun spoke with project manager and independent curator Anna Haranzai, Harsanyi, about his thinking of why better solutions to our current cultural divisions may lie in our body language rather than in our words. This is a quote from the show. "I'll give you an example: there was a young man enrolled in a diversion program, entering the program that I run on behalf of Recess, a nonprofit in Brooklyn. This young man came in with a head full of steam, which is understandable. He's being told to be at this place at this time, and if not, bad things can potentially happen. Of course, I made the mistake, within the first three sentences, of attempting to engage him to tell him that he had already missed two sessions, and that that could be a problem. As soon as he heard that, he heard, 'I have power over you,' and then he just goes off. I make a foolhardy attempt to keep explaining myself and the gravity of the situation. But there was, at some point, a difference in the way I started to read his body language. He was all puffed up, he was approaching the table; then I looked more carefully, I saw a kind of crane in his neck, and an inability for him to focus or engage me with his eyes. As soon as I saw that – and again, I was only able to see that after shutting up – I realized that it was not aggression, it was fear that was playing out. That was something I understood based on my own lived experience. I said, 'He's afraid! He's afraid that something might happen because of the power dynamic.' It's not that I simply interpreted it on his body; cause I knew it in my own body. It quickly de-escalated, and we were able to just look at the schedule together, and it was fine. It was beyond fine. He ended up being

one of the most expressive people in the room. This happens all the time in our relationships, it happens in all of our roles, in all positions with power. We're using words that we feel are accurate, but there is a misrepresentation in the way that we are being perceived and received. But if you look more closely at the person's body, there is a connecting point that you will understand. And this is something I really hope to prove."

Beloved, please welcome my personal superhero, Shaun Leonardo. {applause, cheering}

Shaun Leonardo: I'm so fucking excited to be up here. {laughter} This is tremendous. Absolutely tremendous.

This is a version of me in 2004, just after I had arrived back from my experience at Skowhegan. That much more confidently exploring what I thought was a rather simply question as a starting point to my work, the question being how was I taught to be a man? And I located that question by creating these hybridized hero figures in my likeness that forced me to explore the cultural iconography that I grew up with that excluded people that looked like me. And yet, it also forced me to contend with my admiration for those same heroes, in this case, Superman. And I was able to step into those questions, and welcome the discomfort, but only because I left Skowhegan an entirely different person. I don't know who needs to hear this right now, or whatever time of day it is, I don't even remember what day it is entirely. But you deserve to be here. Give yourself permission to be afraid, to be intimidated, but also give yourself permission to be great. (00:10:01) The truth of the matter is, I was terrified. I was overwhelmed by the sociality, and completely intimidated by the caliber of artistry that I saw myself around. And so I retreated to the studio, to the safe haven of producing the thing that I knew. But I was able to leave just the slightest crack open, to welcome into the critique, to bring in the discomfort, and to step into the unknown, [switches slide] and this happened. As Steve said, unannounced, I put on the mask, the mask that I had been using for my two-dimensional paintings at the time, where I was creating these portraits as heroes, and put it on, arrived one lunch time, and I fought an invisible presence. Unscripted, without knowing where it might take me. Into physical and psychological harm, but also into an immediacy of energetic feedback, a spontaneity that would forever change my life. And I would never look back.

[switches slide] El C. taught me a few things. El C. taught me that you didn't have to have a plan. That the uncertainty could be greeted, and that you could step through that crack, welcome the fear, and produce from that place. And now, I don't want to give the impression that I abandoned two-dimensional work, just the opposite. [switches slide] This is the work that Steve was referring to that I created while at Skowhegan, a superhero in my likeness, though with an invisible Lois Lane. [switches slide] I also explored and continue to explore these failed heroes for the next few years: the sleeping giant, [switches slide], a fallen hulking figure from grace, [switches slide] but also in my own drawings, in this self-deprecating hero, [switches slide] or this [switches slide] or this. And it was in these works that I could more deeply pursue what I felt was the ways in which this construct, this ideal of masculinity, inevitably set someone up, like me, for failure. Whether psychologically, emotionally, physically, socially, there would be a point in which I would

reach my shortcomings, where I could not fulfill that ideal. And so the work in and of itself inherently became about failure. And exploring the limits and the complexities and contradictions inherent to this brand of manhood, machismo, that I only knew. That I was taught to hold onto for my own self-protection. [switches slide] But then also, this continued to happen. This in Warsaw, Poland in front of thousands of people, [switches slide] or here, the final match against the invisible man, in front of my hometown of Corona, Queens, thousands of people crowding the streets, stopping the 7 train, to watch me lose to an invisible opponent. And each step of the way, I upped the ante, and while that might mean to some of you that I continued to physically harm myself – that is true, because my ambition was outsized, and with each match I subconsciously tried to outdo myself, but truthfully, I upped the ante because with each match, I allowed myself to step into this question more deeply, and therefore make myself further and further uncomfortable, to examine myself and to continue to revisit my discomfort with how I could perceive my own sense of self and masculinity.

[switches slide] And then this happened. Six years later, as I was continuing to explore this match against the invisible man, at the invitation of continuing that practice, that performance, in Mexico, I abandoned those plans and instead became, or started training, I should say, as a luchador. (00:15:12) And just a year later, that led me to a welterweight championship match against Sangre a Seca [?], in Mexico City, for the largest Mexican wrestling promotion in the world, for their seventy-fifth anniversary, in front of 1,000 people. And I lost. And never in my wildest dreams did I think that this could ever happen. And I should probably tell you that never in my wildest dreams did I ever think that I would pursue performance to begin with! So I think it's important for me to tell you what the conditions were that led me to the possibility of El C. You see, before Skowhegan, as Steve said, I was in the middle of graduate school years, but right before graduate school, I had witnessed the second plane during 9/11 fly into the towers from my office building. And then also witnessed both of those buildings collapse right before my eyes. I would soon later discover that my football coach died, perished in that crash. And then a few months later, because I was working for the city government, the agency that would ultimately be put in charge of the Ground Zero clean-up, as a twenty-one-year-old kid working for the graphic design department, with no experience in photography, I was sent up in an NYPD helicopter every day to document the clean-up. No one ever asked a question as to whether I was fit, or technically capable, nor did I ever push back, or ask any questions. I did my job. And a few months later, whether I developed a fatalistic attitude or not, I cannot be certain, I decided that if I was going to be an artist, it might as well be now. And so I applied to grad school, late, applied to two schools, got into one, left, packed up my bags, and went to that one school, no research, no understanding of what even grad school entailed. That was the San Francisco Art Institute.

I did not grow up with contemporary art, had no understanding of what the context of being an artist looked like or felt like, but I knew, somehow, in my stubbornness, that it was a space I wanted to occupy, and no one was going to tell me otherwise. I had no idea what Skowhegan was, I was fortunate enough for a faculty member, someone who would become a mentor of mine, who was just simply passing through, Whitfield Lovell, to tell me one day, outside of class, 'Apply to this.' I asked no questions, I did, and I got in. And arrived

here with no expectations, but also no fucking clue as to what I was getting myself into. And yet, I was here, and I was present, and I was able to listen. To others, regardless of how excruciating it felt to receive that information, and more importantly I was able to listen to myself.

[switches slide] And so El C. would dictate a completely different direction for my work, and I understood for myself, from that point on, that while it was performance, stepping into a character was never going to be enough. And so I want to make it clear that when I became a luchador, when that mask was on, I was a Mexican wrestler. And I was damn good at it. And for the sake of my work, I would then become a boxer, mixed martial artist, bullfighter. And in each turn, I stepped into that world, immersed myself into that context, because it was important for me to move closer and closer to those archetypes that I would otherwise only just critique. (00:19:58) I had to become the thing and critique it from the inside out. And so for this performance, really staged as an amateur bout, at El Museo, four rounds, and the fourth and final round, I dropped my hands to allow myself to be knocked out. [switches slide] Or in this performance entitled *Battle Royal*, taken from the first chapter in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, and invisibility being a throughline in everything I've ever created, this *Battle Royal* performance pitting me within a steel cage against nineteen other professional wrestlers, blindfolded, until only one man would be left standing. It was me. [switches slide] Or revisiting my experience in football, having played the sport for eleven years, through college, and even more specifically, revisiting what I would call the nightmare of a drill which I was forced to practice up until college, when it was banned for being too violent. A drill called bull in the ring, where your own teammates will circle you, typically during pre-season, and be elected at random to charge the center player, but at any angle. Essentially allowing the center player to be blindsided, to quote unquote develop their alertness, or keep their head on a swivel. But in effect what it actually did was just isolate the weak, embarrass you, if you were not up to the challenge, if you could prove your prowess, if you could not suffer through rites of passage for a sense of belonging on the team.

[switches slide] Or this performance, staged as a shoot wrestling match of mixed martial arts bout, in Houston, but with a live orchestra. [switches slide] Or finally, a bullfight performance in which I challenged artist Lupe Maravilla, who emerged from the Bronx River. [switches slide] And this same work, of course, found its way into my other practice, my studio practice, and oftentimes, again, exploring how so often in my work, especially in the invisible man piece, what I saw before myself as invisibility was simply myself. Those performances allowed me to manifest a struggle with my own self, and therefore allowing me to envision my form. And it was in those performances, in all these performances, I could grapple with those same questions, but through a methodology of embodiment, physical embodiment, moving those discomforts, moving those questions internally, allowing it to be then expressed through my body.

But then I returned to drawing, capturing that same sentiment. Configuring those same questions into these images, and [switches slide] quite often I would look at myself through the heroism and tragedies of other fighters. These heroes being mirrors for our

own fears and ambitions. Arturo Gatti. [switches slide] Jack Johnson. [switches slide] Sonny Liston. [switches slide] Mike Tyson.

As I always moved toward failure, I was also conscious that certainly in pop culture and in sports there's a fascination with failed heroes, particularly of color. And that all that same energy that would go to uplifting someone like Mike Tyson to championship status would also be the same fuel that would relegate him to a group, and discard him the moment that he would fail. That ultimately was the experience of invisibility that felt true to me. The invisible man wasn't just a fight against this presence, it was a struggle with myself, due to my experience of being hyper-visible. So visible through stereotype, through a projection of who I was, this stereotype that would precede me before any room that I would enter, that I would have to contend with as if it were a real person. A hyper-visibility that rendered me invisible, because people would just see the version that they wished to. (00:25:07) A perception of me that would only confirm what they wanted to see. That is an experience of Blackness, of being a Black and brown citizen, that follows us everywhere we go. [switches slide] And soon, because of that version of ourselves that precedes us, it became hypocritical of me to ask this question of manhood without examining the very narrative, the very story, the very, that same stereotype that precedes us that also leads directly to our deaths, to our killings. And so my work had to take another shift when Trayvon Martin was killed. This came at a time when my wife and I were considering having a child, and all of the fear that I had buried as a young man in Queens, due to that perception of self that preceded me, that version of me that I could always only contend with me – that I could always only contend with, that the fear of authority, of power that could remove me at any turn, all came rushing back. And I knew I had to find a way to look into his eyes differently, away from the media noise, with some patience. With a different type of looking. I needed to provide myself the literal and metaphorical space to grapple with an image and look into Trayvon's eyes so that I could look at myself. To understand what it meant to always exist with fear. And therefore to always, or have to grapple with and contend with the fact that my child might have to do the same. And so it led me on this journey [switches slide] of studying these images, away from the chatter, creating space to find information that would tell me a larger story that might bring some level of humanity to how I remembered and in turn what I provided for you was space for you to see things that you might have missed, or might have chosen to not see. Michael Brown. [switches slide] Walter Scott. [switches slide] Laquan McDonald.

[switches slide] During that time, I understood for myself that it would be fully inadequate for me to continue to center my own personal story, though, my own narratives, and so I started to reach outwards, and decenter myself, and call people into my practice. Which started to move further and further into a somatic philosophy, starting with the body. This, a series of performances following the death, the killing, of Eric Garner, entitled *I Can't Breathe*, in which yes we are invited to what they thought is a self-defense course. And over the course of about thirty to forty-five minutes, instead what I imparted with them were maneuvers that took on the context of police violence, ending with the impossibility of saving oneself from a maneuver that the NYPD still to this day refuses to call a chokehold.

[switches slide] Or this piece, staged as a New Orleans jazz funeral procession, in which I invited attendees to a funeral for those young men of color who had been killed by the hands of the police over the last three or four years at the time, pulling, again, from Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man*, this time the eulogy at the center of that novel in which he is struggling to commemorate his fallen brother, in that case brother Tod Clifton, and each time he uttered Tod Clifton's name I replaced that name with the name of a person of color, a young man of color, who had been killed. (00:30:32) And I think during that eulogy there may be fourteen slots, and it was far too easy to fill. And I wanted to invite individuals to this moment of collective mourning for folks who would otherwise only exist in the headlines. Moving us toward an obligation to remember, to take those names in, and to hopefully breathe life into this history of violence. I should state that both *I Can't Breathe* and this piece, *In Eulogy*, went on for about four years of iterations. [switches slide] And both of those performances led me to this moment at the Guggenheim, a piece entitled *Primitive Games* in which the museum was transformed into a gladiatorial arena. What preceded this moment was about six months of workshops in which I invited four distinct groups, all with a unique relationship to gun violence to attend a series of workshops separately where we would center their experiences of conflict. Those four groups being the NYPD, military veterans, a group that I called Citizens Impacted by Street Violence, most often gang-related violence, and a final group I diplomatically called Recreational Users of Firearms, in other words, gun enthusiasts. And it was in this final staged culminating moment where those four teams were brought together and divided into two, to debate one another about gun violence, but without the use of words. Forcing them, for the first time, [switches slide] to reckon with one another as individuals, allowing those affiliations to dissolve, so that they might just happen to locate some humanity in a body they would otherwise perceive as other, or worse, enemy. [switches slide]

[switches slide] This work, through and with the body, stems from an argument that I still try to make through my work, which is that there are some experiences, there are particular narratives, that can never truthfully be articulated with verbal language, and that instead to locate the truth of these stories, that we needed to find those within our bodies to locate and see how they are housed within our bodies. Those experiences, particularly those clouded or engaged with or contained by trauma, could only be attended to if we might be able to find how our bodies might articulate those things, those experiences that cannot possibly have words to explain, and therefore if we could locate them, that we might get something or find something closer to a thing that resembles healing. About seven years ago, through this methodology that I was developing, I was invited to think about how this work might be located in some real stakes as system intervention, and soon after that first meeting, the Assembly program was founded. In which I would work with young people, at that time, age fifteen, because as many people don't know, New York was one of two remaining states that tried children, I would call them, as adults. (00:35:18) And so this program was founded for court-involved at the time, age fifteen, now eighteen to twenty-six. And after a curricular cycle of performance-based workshops, their cases can be closed, and their records sealed. Allowing them to avoid an adult record that might otherwise follow them for the rest of their lives, interrupting everything from school to employment to housing. Seven years later, I've worked with more than three hundred young people, and closed more than two hundred cases. And I tell you now as I tell everyone who I ever

introduce this work to, the closure of those cases don't mean shit. Because just as I explained, at the heart of my work, this core question, of how we locate truth, how we find and contend with this lack of humanity, this version of ourselves, this idea of criminal that precedes us, these young folks' interaction with law enforcement will continue well after a closure of a single case. And so instead the investment of this program is in restoring some sense of self. Looking at how these experiences, in this case of arrested incarceration, flow through the body, so that we might grapple with them on different terms, find a different language to deal with that, and lead us toward healing, so that we understand we are not defined by those experiences. [switches slide] [switches slide] [switches slide] [switches slide]

As I move – excuse me, as I moved through this work, a compelling thing, a frightening thing started to happen, in which the narratives that were shared also forced me to look at my own upbringing and stories that clearly I had buried, and while I was investigating images of the tragedy of Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, the list goes on and on, I had somehow omitted the fact that my neighbor, someone that I knew, in my own neighborhood, was killed by the police. Just outside my building. And yet, somehow, I could not unlock that memory until I experienced the vulnerability and truth of the young people that surrounded me, the young people that I worked on behalf of. And so this piece, entitled *Federico Pereira, Freddy*, is a void, because there were no cell phones then. There was no visual evidence of that murder. And so instead I was able to look up the medical examiner's report, and therefore locate and create images that explained to me what I believed the medical examiner to be reporting. And as in many of the earlier works, what you see as the void here is actually a mirrored tint, forcing the viewer, forcing you to see your own image within this violence, so that you're implicated in your own seeing. [switches slide] Where is it that you identify? Where in this scene of aggression, of violence, do you see yourself? Or do you? [switches slide] [switches slide to white, leaves it for a few seconds]

[switches slide] As I started moving through this methodology, which really strips down entire narratives into very simple gestures, I started to become really fascinated with the narrative quality and possibilities of hands. (00:40:06) And it was in this project, at Four Freedoms Park, on Roosevelt Island, recently, in which, through a series of workshops with individuals who all self-described as vulnerable to the four freedoms, FDR's speech "Of Four Freedoms," freedom from want, freedom from fear, freedom of worship, and freedom of expression. Individuals who, due to their disability status, citizenship status, incarceration status, socioeconomic status, seemed to have been omitted from the promise of that speech, a speech, ironically, which was shared by FDR to Congress to convince the country to enter World War II. Arguing for the four basic human rights that should be restored and gained globally for a more promising democratic world. And yet, however many years later, those same freedoms are not bestowed onto this country's own citizens. And so the images that you see here were vinyl murals adhered to the façade of the park, about thirty feet tall, these gestures extracted from the workshop process. [switches slide] And then for the first time in any NYC park, or maybe any park nationally, we were able to use QR code technology to unlock these images into animations on visitors' phones. And so as you approached the murals, this might happen. [animated videos play 00:42:07 –

00:43:26] You'll notice that the two images that are emblazoned on the façade may have suggested a gesture of oppression or suffering, but it was important to us, the participants and I, collectively, that that is not what you were left with. So what was otherwise closed moved into something opening, to express that, against all odds, and against the boundaries and containment, the ways in which those four freedoms were stripped away or withheld or actively barred from these citizens, that there was still the possibility that internal strength, to strive toward liberation - and I define liberation differently than I do freedom, liberation being an experience that can never be taken away, whether you are caged, sequestered, thrown away, discarded. That being a joy, a possibility, that is in the well that you can call up for yourself, and for your people.

[switches slide] Now, my most recent body of work, I continue on with this obsession of the narrative quality of hands. I should also explain, cause I haven't been sharing any of the materiality of it, of this, that these are similarly to the earlier drawings, and there's no coincidence that I returned to painting as my second experience with Skowhegan was nearing, I think, you know, that's probably some sort of, in the cosmos. (00:45:12) These are on plywood cutouts, so the wall, the white being the wall on which it is mounted, using a sign paint for a very sort of slick semi-gloss appearance. Cause I enjoy the way that they function as signs, so each one of these pairs of hands being around forty-eight by forty-eight, and those earlier figures, those failed heroic figures, always being larger than life-sized. And I, again, kept studying and looking and looking to see what type of truth might slip out when we allow our body to do the talking. And what type of wisdom might be imparted by these messengers, these other types of heroes that impacted myself, my perception of self, but this time, in positive ways. Toni Morrison. [switches slide] Eric Garner. [switches slide] James Baldwin. [switches slide] Excuse me - [goes back two slides] this was Tupac. [forwards slides] James Baldwin. [switches slide] Eric Garner. [switches slide] And our beloved Dr. David Driscoll. [switches slide to white, leaves it

You know, it's a disservice to my practice to only talk about it, and I, I don't want to disappoint expectations that you're potentially anticipating something performative. So let's do that. However, at this stage of my career, I do less of the performing, and instead, cultivate performance by pulling you into participation. Is it possible to get the house lights a little higher? I'm gonna bring you into this methodology that I was speaking to, to see what it is that our collective bodies tell us today. If you are able and willing, if you wouldn't mind standing. I'm gonna offer you a word. And what I want you to do very simply is see that word written in your mind's eye. Now, for some of you that might require you closing your eyes. And when I tell you this word, I want you to attempt to not replace that text with an image. The word is justice. Now stay solely on the word. For some of you, that text might be white letters on a black background, for other it might be black letters on a white background. What does that word look like, simply look like, devoid of any meaning? What font did your mind choose? Is it bold? See that word written across your mind and simply look at the word. Now when I count down from three, I want you to allow that word to flow through your bodies, and you're going to offer me a single, silent, frozen gesture, a pose, as simple or abstract as it must be, as long as it is your body's truth that conveys that word. Don't overthink it, whatever it is is what it needs to be, in three, two, one. Freeze. Now if you can, without moving too much, try to see what other people have offered you in the

space, maybe only to the left and right of you, or directly in front of you. (00:50:01) I see many gestures of lift, some with closed fists, others with more of an open palm. I see gestures of generosity, of openness, of giving. I see others that are more sheltered toward the heart, embracing or protecting myself, and I see others that are more defensive, creating a shield. Unfreeze. I've done that exercise countless times in incredibly different communities, and each time, there are responses that resemble similar postures. Similar truths. But I've also seen, at other times, in certain communities, where gesture might look something more like this. [strikes pose] Or might look something more like this. [strikes pose] Or this. [strikes pose] Go ahead and sit down. I imagine, I imagine that had I asked you to define the term justice, that many of you may have used very similar words, languages that we've been given, offered to explain a notion of fairness. And yet, when I allowed it to instead flow through your bodies, what you see are many different responses impacted by your own lived experience that could not possibly be captured in words. When you see it through someone's body, you see a myriad of definitions for a single word. How do you explain to me that the word justice was the term utilized to catalyze the Black Lives Matter movement following the tragic murder of six-year-old Trayvon Martin, and yet justice was the same exact word used by his killer George Zimmerman to sell the gun that he used to kill this fuck [?]? Words fail us. So how do we look for, locate, a different type of truth? In each other, and within ourselves? That has always been at the core of my work. Looking, finding the questions, as uncomfortable as that might be, to explain the world to me, and to move through complexity, the challenges, the fucked-upness, to find some semblance of truth.

I'm gonna leave you with this final performance video that was conducted, actually, first started in live workshops, then was halted, and translated into virtual workshops during the pandemic, in which, similar to the *Primitive Games* project, I invited four groups to contend, to struggle with each other, four groups all with unique relationship to incarceration, to criminalization, even more specifically to experiences in and around the notorious Rikers Island complex. These four groups being court-involved youth, formerly incarcerated individuals, corrections officers, and legal practitioners, both in prosecution and defense. [video plays 00:54:48 – 01:00:02]

Thank you. Thank you. Love you guys. {applause, cheering} Thank you. Thank you.

Oooh. I'm glad that's over. Thank you, thank you. Yeah, let's take a few questions. Y'all are gonna see me for eight and a half fucking weeks, okay {laughter} so we'll take a few.

Audience member #1: I know personally in my own investigations of history, working with a lot of people in violence, bringing that home can be really hard, and maybe this is too much of a personal question, but do you have, like, a wind-down system, or something to kind of like take this off for a little while?

Leonardo: I appreciate that, Ryan. What am I speaking into, here? Okay. You know, I used to answer that question a certain way. And I used to say, or really sort of try to offer, some tools, I suppose. I stopped doing that, because I started to realize I was basically lying. I

don't have any tricks. This work messes me up. But I will tell you that my proximity to the trauma, while incredibly debilitating at times, and difficult, and crushing, I also find it to be a gift. And the sheer generosity of the participants and various communities that I work with and on behalf of, that level of generosity, the truth-telling that happens in this work, is the thing that I can return to, is the thing that is always on the horizon, that shows me another possibility of existing in this world. And the reason I continue to move back to, for as long as I possibly can, is because in those spaces, the ways in which we exist offers a different pattern of vulnerability, of mutuality, of truth, and I would rather have that than the opposite, as hard as it might be. And that's all I got.

Audience member #2: What was the emotional transition, for you, from using your body in the performances to taking a step back and having to make a significant shift in your practice –

Leonardo: Yeah.

Audience member #2: -- like, was that, did you feel that loss, did you feel like you needed to continue? What was, what did that shift feel like?

Leonardo: Just so I understand it correctly, from the shift specifically in the, not only in the physicality of the work but the centering of myself in that physical work?

Audience member #2: Both, exactly.

Leonardo: Out, and toward a more collective practice where I was orchestrating amongst participants etcetera, right?

Audience member #2: Correct, yeah, both of those kind of roles.

Leonardo: I will offer you two realities, that, and I can't tell you, I can't really tell you how or when the shift occurred; I do feel it was more gradual than I've portrayed here. But in terms of the very physical, laborious work, which I, I should explain that when I say, like, that, that that excruciatingly physical work, you know, while I had to really grapple with the physical damage, what was by far more difficult was the psychological wear and tear. (01:05:21) In which, as I was saying, I became so immersed in these worlds, and so committed to these archetypes, these quote unquote characters, that once the performance was done, and I had determined that I would move away from that world, it felt paralyzing. Because I had created a whole new sensibility for who I was. The ring was my studio. El C. became my life. And I can recall, after the *Battle Royal* performance, in which, you know, that was in the ring for the three hours, and had to be hooked up to oxygen afterwards. Cause I was dry heaving out of exhaustion and out of, um, um, lack of water. I was in bed for three days. And the second, and, you know, I've knocked myself during performances, I've therefore lost consciousness, I've, I've coughed up blood after performances, and I don't say those things as a badge of honor. They were of course a consequence of the work that I wished to do. But I started to understand for myself that while I could continue to push those limits, I was subconsciously upping the ante and putting myself into extreme danger

with each performance, and even that wasn't enough. What really started to be a factor was the way it was impacting my relationships. And friends like Steve, and other friends that would be witness to these performances, and the woman who would later become my wife, it became painful for them. And ultimately, that really started to transition my thinking. And then, the other reality alongside of that, and I mentioned it in regards to, like, hypocrisy, I felt a sense of almost betrayal, to the young men that I grew up with, when Trayvon Martin was killed, then Eric Garner, then Michael Brown – it could no longer be contained to my story. And while even the superhero work started with the self and these personal experiences, this discomfort, these questions, and branched out, it started to feel like a social obligation to speak outside of myself. And I know that is a loaded term. And yet it is one that I own as part of my work. And I think those things, those two realities, started to collide around that time. And out of necessity, it moved. But I will tell you that those drawings, which preceded the *I Can't Breathe* performance, and the eulogy, and *Primitive Games*, I started that series of drawings with no intention of showing them. It was a, it was a process for me to grapple with those traumatic images in the ways that I was internalizing them. And it taught me something. And that ultimately ended up being something that I needed to share with the world. But it was slow. It was slower than, than you can, than it seems. Thanks.

Audience member #3: Thank you, Shaun, for the lecture. That was amazing. I was just wondering, when you started working with groups and communities, where did you learn the, the sort of skills and the activity that you shared with us, did you sort of learn it throughout, working with them, or did you undergo training, or sort of what histories were you were drawing on, or how did these sort of come about, and did you develop workshops --

Leonardo: Yeah –

Audience member #3: -- and the framework?

Leonardo: -- I appreciate that. You know, I will say that when it was first initiated, meaning from the first conversations that I had, which followed the election of Trump, so in November, at the invitation to really consider higher, deeper stakes for my work, I did blink twice. From that first conversation in November, and identifying a core base partner and the ways in which the mechanics would work, the space was opened, and the first cohort came in through those doors, January. (01:10:04) I had nothing written down. Much of my work at the time was pulling from image, theater, and principals of *Theater of the Oppressed*. And I had a series of exercises, but really what I understood were these sort of points that I needed to hit, the undoing of these messages of criminality that was at the core of the work. But to your point, as I became more and more invested – because I thought that project was going to last three months; it's now been seven years. And I no longer lead those workshops myself. There's brilliant educators and artists that I call into the practice to breathe new life into that methodology. But, to your point, I needed to become a student of the work that we were collaboratively exploring. And so there's a few things that, that are really essential: somatic abolitionism, something called generative somatics, behavioral sciences is a field that I really study closely, even more, more specifically, cognitive

behavioral therapy, cognitive therapy. And I don't, I want to make it clear that as I reach out to these fields, I am incorporating principles, techniques, understandings, so that I can have a larger capacity for the collective trauma that at time emerges in the space. The work, however, is not about, while I call it an undoing, the work is not therapy in, in terms of trying to reach resolution. Instead, what the performance-based curriculum allows for is a collectivity that, where people, through this very minimal gesture work, and image tableau work, what they leave with is an understanding that, one, their stories are not only their own, that there are people that share in those experiences of oppression; and that their story is one of a human being, and not a criminal. And that is the intent purpose, right?

There's other, one other thing I wanted to state, because it came up in a conversation with a participant just I think a day or two ago. That it was the methodology and developing the methodology that I had to sort of critically understand the possibilities of that freeing, of moving toward freedom, toward healing. But I also needed to become a student of the criminal justice system. And there, I, I, I encounter student participants all the time that wish to learn from either the mechanics or methodologies or, or ways in which this program - and I don't really call it a program, I call it an art project - how it moves, and how it was able to do the things that it does. And more often, that conversation revolves around wanting to make some type of impact within mass criminalization. And I hear folks all the time saying, I want to make direct change. And then I ask them, have you ever sat at a public arraignment? Have you ever seen someone get ushered off to Rikers Island? Do you know what a felony charge is? Do you know what a sentence is? Do you know the difference between indictment and, you know, between a charge and a conviction? To undo the systems, or create ruptures from within the systems, you have to know those systems. You have to become a student of the very thing that harms you. And until you're able to put that stake in the ground, the work will always be surface.

That was a large response to that question. Thank you.

Audience member #4: When you did the project at the Guggenheim, with the four groups and their relationships to firearms -

Leonardo: Yeah.

Audience member #4: -- can you name any conclusions that you drew from that, or just any observations that you found interesting? (01:15:03)

Leonardo: I, yes, thank you so much for that question. So, just to clarify the process, so each group was, the workshop process was conducted with each group separately, so the final performance was the first moment in which they understood who their quote unquote competitors would be. It was only first announced in the ritual of the performance. But also, it was the first time throughout the six-month process in which I ever uttered the words gun or violence. So the gravity of what I was asking them to debate was only in that moment of reckoning.

The thing that I took away – well, I'll, I'll give you two things, and then maybe actually we end it there. If that's okay. There is a way in which to hold onto the membership of those affiliations, each one of those groups, and the individuals within those groups, maintain a lie. To preserve a worldview. Because without that world view, their whole understanding of self would be corrupted. And so for the military veterans, it wasn't patriotism which shocked me; it was actually loyal, no, excuse me, it was honor. Honor not to country, ironically; honor to their fellow soldiers. So they could only do good – even amidst all the violence, they could only be good and do good because they were honoring the person next to them. For the NYPD, they kept returning to this idea of duty. I can only do good or be good because I am being dutiful. I am saving other people. And so they could not reckon with the legacy of policing, and the corruption of the system of policing, because they had to be good. Their duty told them so. For those that were navigating the streets, the word that would often emerge was this idea of loyalty. That as a, as a member of a set, I was just upholding the values of our clique, and being loyal to my homie, so therefore whatever I had to do, I had to do. And then for gun enthusiasts, or as I called them, Recreational Users of Firearms, hunters, gun owners, etcetera, etcetera, the justification that they provided was that if I had skill, if I took the time to learn how to safely use and manipulate this weapon, then gun violence was not an issue that was my problem. Mass murders, school massacres, suicide, was someone else's problem, because I earned the right. And so what I was looking for in that piece was how I might start to poke holes at those belief systems. And I can truthfully say, and I say this with evidence, because I called those groups back twice afterwards, to finally meet one another, and I can tell you that across the board, they guessed the membership of other people incorrectly. So those that they assigned as veterans, or, or, you know, citizens, versus this or that, they all got it wrong. And it was in that moment of reckoning that I should also explain that for the way that I created the two teams out of the four groups, was that there was a series of questions in which they had to answer as individuals for the first time. Questions like, are you a good person? Do you feel American? Have you ever held a bullet? Have you ever witnessed someone die? Questions that started to pull them away from their group affiliations, and really started to invite them to grapple with their own identities. And I love sharing this: after the two teams were created, I started lining them up, and two police detectives that were partners for over thirty years found themselves on opposite lines, facing one another. (01:19:56) And so for the first time, as they had to contend with each other and grapple with each other's humanity first, through body language, all of those excuses and justifications started to slip away. And it was only then, and afterwards, that they could start to see one another on different terms. Now I fully recognize that at least two of those groups moved back to more power, over many of the members of those same, of those same performance, of that same performance. And yet, through a very, you know, through this experiment, I was looking for that, that crack. Again, the, a different type of truth that would hopefully outlast the performance and have them face their own realities on different terms, through a different set of eyes. And my only, my only real worry, maybe this is a good note to leave on, my real fear is not that the work doesn't work, cause I deeply feel it works. It just I don't have enough time. I just want more time. I just want to do more. And go deeper. And get angrier. And make work. And produce out of all of those complex feelings that would otherwise tell me to go hide in a corner. And I guess I fi can maintain that fuel, that urgency, then I'll, I'll remain in the game, you know?

Thank you, thank you everyone. {applause, cheering}

END OF RECORDING