Chicago Tribune

If art can't fix problems, what good is it?

By Christopher Borrelli, Contact Reporter
November 11, 2016

Violence in Recent American Art, MCA Chicago. (MCA Chicago)

There are days when Coya Paz wonders why she bothers. If she really wanted to change the world, if she were truly committed to social justice, why is she the artistic director of a small theater company on the third floor of the Pulaski Park field house? "I ask myself all the time if the time I spend making theater and not being out there, actually organizing, is useful. The arts are part of what makes us human, but if I really wanted to, for instance, abolish policing, a theater company is not about to make that happen."

She smiled.

She sat on a bench in the lobby of the Free Street Theater, established in 1969. It was the morning after Halloween, and skeletons and cobwebs from the field house's haunted mansion have yet to go back in storage. She looked at the large photograph that greets you when you reach the third floor, a blown-up black and white of the theater's hippie-ish founders, not long after the founding. "This was the first (theater) in Chicago where a black actor could get an equity card back in the day," she said. "When I came in four years ago, it had grown less multiethnic, less multigenerational. It was youth theater. The

board (of Free Street) wanted me to bring it back to its roots." She nodded at the picture. "The founders, they said they wanted their work to break down 'the artificial barriers' that are dividing us." She winced. "I don't think they're so artificial."

This came up because Free Street, through Dec. 2, has a show called "100 Hauntings"; its title refers to ghosts, but also the legacy of gun violence, police abuse and inequality in Chicago. I wanted to ask a few things about art and social justice, like:

What is the purpose of art?

Can art make a difference?

And, if art can't solve our problems — if, say, every Chicago artist made a piece of art every day for 365 days, and every work was about gun violence in Chicago and there was still gun violence in Chicago on the 366th day — then what good is art anyway?
Small, easy stuff.

But she was game, and after hearing me out, she nodded and told me about a class she teaches at DePaul. "We talk about Brecht, who wanted to change the world through his art, but thought that you couldn't change the world with art if it produced a feeling. To make an audience feel something in a show, you would risk the possibility that feeling would be all that happened. If they came to a resolution about how they felt, then they might feel they did something. 'I felt so bad for the characters, I cried.' Good art, good theater, good journalism, reminds you the world is more complicated than you think."

Complacency, in other words, is not merely the villain of well-meaning art about our social ills — complacency is what happens when you are affected and simply go home.

Reductive as that sounds, elemental as this conversation appears: If the Chicago arts community wants to make art about gun violence in Chicago, if it wants to encourage others to make art about it — and to be relevant, it must — these are not cynical or insignificant questions. These are the fundamentals that good artists store in the back of their minds: Who am I creating this for? What is the context? Do I have a responsibility to weigh in on the problems of the world? Do I owe audiences a solution? Do I have to move the needle of public action or opinion? Is art about persuasion? Or therapy? Is art about explaining how you see the world? And if it does good, does it have to be good?

Art does actual, tangible good, of course: When we discussed this, Janet Harper, a librarian at Columbia College's Center for Black Music Research, reminded me of the quilts that, beyond their aesthetic intricacy, served as coded traffic signals on the Underground Railroad. Chicago artist David Leggett, whose paintings are funny and raunchy and seem like a missing link between art history and stand-up, said: "Art saved my life. I grew up in a bad neighborhood (in New England) and many of the role models were criminals. Art was an escape from the dangers in front of me." Joan Didion, in "The White Album," famously decided that "we tell ourselves stories in order to live."

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— Claudia Rankine, poet

And yet, for every artist who claims art is as vital as water and air, there is a Bob Dylan, who, asked to describe himself, once told reporters: "I think of myself more as a song and dance man." And there's an Auden, who wrote: "If not a poem had been written, not a picture painted, not a bar of music composed, the history of man would remain materially unchanged." He was not saying that making art is ultimately pointless. He was saying, with hyperbole and irony, we make art anyway. Poet Claudia Rankine wrote this to me in an email: "The unexpected beauty of art is you don't know what it will do. On a certain level, it's like the natural world: It moves you or it doesn't. But it still exists."

Paz said it's insane when she hears "how the deeply entrenched systems that have led to the gun violence in Chicago can be reduced through art and simple awareness."

Then she stopped.

This is complicated. After a pause: "The goal should be good work. I find it patronizing when the highest idea in an art work is it was created by young people — it gave young people a voice. I don't like art that is made to 'be good for people.' I'm not interested in anything that doesn't target the people already dealing with what the work is about."

Sometimes you just need to hear in art your life matters. So I preach to the choir, happily. Because the choir needs a preacher.
— Coya Paz, Free Street Theater

She tells me a story: She was gang-raped as a child, at gunpoint. "And my parents, they didn't discuss it. And it affected so much about my sense of myself that I remember reading Lucille Clifton's poems about being sexually abused and how she wasn't saying here's how to deal with this. She was saying there was a girl rising in me, and I was like 'YES! I'm going to earn this. (Expletive) that the fact this happened!' She nailed the hope and possibility nobody had told me existed. Sometimes you just need to hear in art your life matters. So I preach to the choir, happily. Because the choir needs a preacher."

The risk for any work of art about social problems in Chicago — or any art about any problems anywhere — is the risk of succumbing to Very Special Episode Syndrome. Artist Maria Gaspar noted this. Her 96 Acres project, which for four years now has addressed mass incarceration at the Cook County Jail through a range of forms, from video projections to audio installations, is intended to challenge perceptions about inmates. "One of the things I think about is how art is liberation," she said. "But I don't know if what I'm doing is good or bad, because maybe it's not about that." She grew up in Little Village, near the jail. She remembers being walked through as a child, for a Scared Straight program. She remembers having no conversation about what she saw.

Which sounded to me like a bad art intervention.

The trouble with Very Special Episode Syndrome — which takes its name from the 1970s-1980s tradition of a slight TV series getting ambitious and "tackling" drugs or teen pregnancy or alcoholism — is it leaves little room for an interpretation or offers much conversation. Just as an Oscar film becomes a civic obligation, Very Special Episodes confuse addressing problems with action. They feel self-congratulatory, deeply bourgie.

Today, the Very Special Episode is a curio. Instead, we just say "powerful."
"Powerful," exhausted and too easy, has become shorthand for assigning value to art and closing off importance, a way of saying what's before you is not to be undermined. It suggests profundity; it says that the purpose of art is clear, and possibly therapeutic. Which, of course, it can be — in their book "Art as Therapy," authors John Armstrong and Alain de Botton argue all art is a vantage on a world, therefore a form of therapy, and helpful, even if an artist denies it. They're not wrong. Genuinely powerful art is not always so on the nose about its relevance or intent. One of the most important art projects about gun violence in Chicago has nothing outwardly to do with gun violence.

In its vast redeveloping and appreciation of underused spaces on the South Side, artist Theaster Gates' Rebuild Foundation, said British journalist Gary Younge, "might not take on gun violence head-on but it all seems related to it, to the hollowing out of our urban life."

Younge, who lived in Uptown from 2011 to 2015, just published "Another Day in the Death of America: A Chronicle of Ten Short Lives," profiles of 10 children and teens killed by guns. When I asked if he ever considered the purpose of his book, he said the goal was to create empathy, "to bring what seems banal into focus. When I lived in Chicago, on TV, you'd hear 'From the West Side' and 'From the South Side," then 25 seconds and over. I wanted to get at what went on there." But, he added, "just because the message in a work is good doesn't mean the art is good. I've thought about this in the past, it's important: Art has to work as art. A poem can have a powerful message and still be a (expletive) poem. Art should help you see the world differently, and yet that understanding can be subtle, and even uncertain, for an artist. I remember interviewing black British painter Chris Ofili (whose infamous "Holy Virgin Mary" incorporated elephant dung and became a cultural boiling point in 1999). He liked some political art but said he didn't want to embed in (political) art — he'd have to be right all the time."
Cheryl Pope has been working out of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago's new Homan Square offices since late summer. Specifically, the Chicago artist and instructor is in Nichols Tower, the old Sears Tower, built in 1905. She is on the 10th floor. For an artist whose practice is entirely focused on social justice issues, she couldn't have a more poignant perch: She overlooks the West Side, where a great number of the city's shootings have happened; but also, she overlooks the Chicago Police Department's controversial Homan Square station, and a school. Until it ended recently, she could see Freedom Square, an ongoing tent-city protest of Chicago policing, from her windows.

Her litany of in-the-works projects alone is dizzying: A documentary about a young black man, photographed with a police body camera; quilts woven with strips of fabric

conveying advice from local elderly neighbors; banners for a street-basketball tournament in New York; plans for a street-basketball tournament in Chicago; a public percussion park; a work that incorporates software to indicate weakness in your voice; plans for a radio show out of Nichols Tower; a monthly community arts meet-up in the building, where she and other SAIC artists plan projects with local residents and artists.

Not one is about gun violence, not directly.

"I'm more interested in creating platforms for people," she said, echoing Paz. "My fear, with this kind of work (about gun violence) we see, is it becomes a thing for people not daily impacted by gun violence to feel they have done something or seen something."

Powerful?

"Yeah. It's like 'interesting,' which is what people say in art school when they don't like something. I hear 'powerful' and I don't cringe but I feel uncomfortable." Pope doesn't want contemporary art in Chicago to give the impression misery is all some communities have; she wonders if it prompts kids to make only the art that people expect to see in these communities. A cycle of miserabilism, then rote hope. "People here are creating art they want to see. This one young guy, he told me all he does is create. 'We're bored out of our minds, creating stuff is all we have.' So, I keep hearing people talk about putting guns down and putting an opportunity in their hands. No, a gun is an opportunity. But it's not the only thing to grab. If it's respect, they'll take that."

And then she left to teach boxing to some of the neighborhood kids.