

GROWING DIALOGUE: WHAT IS THE EFFECTIVENESS OF SOCIALLY ENGAGED ART?

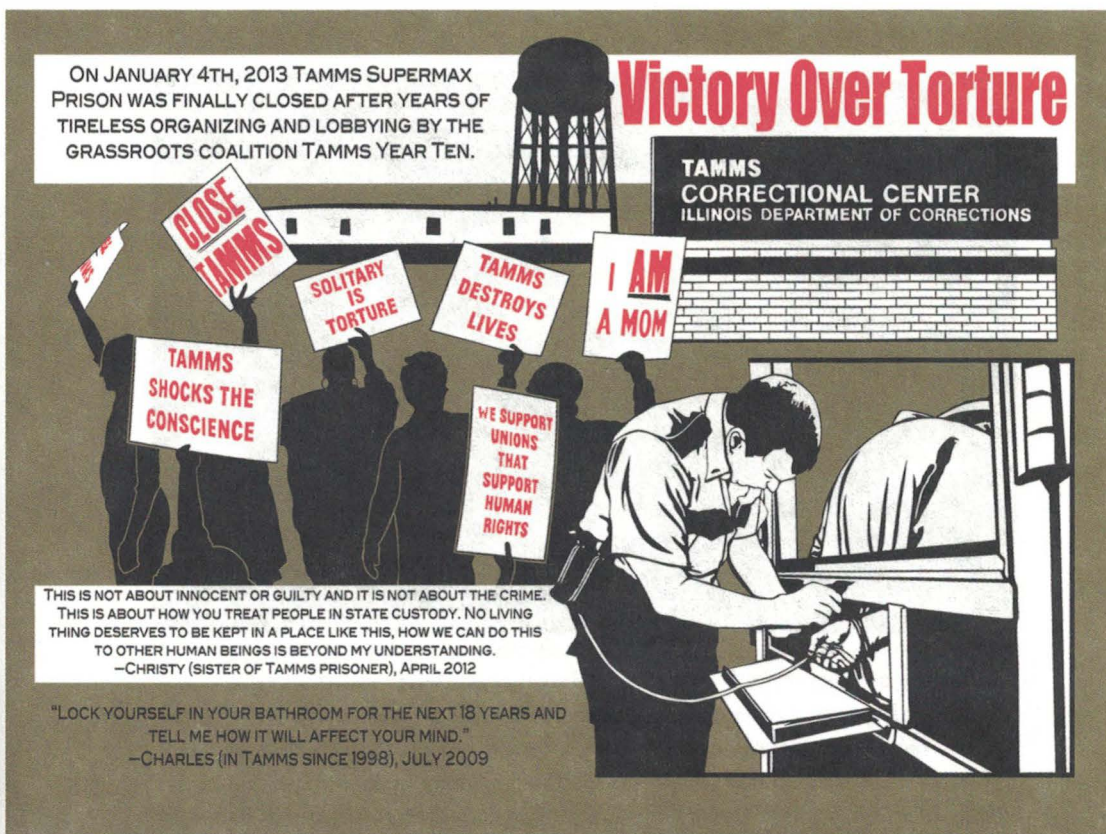
A Belated Conclusion

Ben Davis I'd sum my position up like this: In general, I think artists have a very important part to play in political struggle—but they don't have any particular special access to political wisdom. I respect art enough to grant it its own kind of logic, just as politics has its own particular needs. The demands of these two fields can and do converge, but it is an uneasy relationship, and the emphasis ought to be on that fact (this is, I think, what Pablo Helguera tells us in his *Education for Socially Engaged Art*).¹⁰

For instance, *originality* is something artistic practice puts a lot of stress on. And of course a certain degree of imagination is important—vital even—for sustaining political momentum and inspiring new audiences. When, at the recent Creative Time Summit, Laurie Jo Reynolds presented art projects connected with Tamms Year Ten's years-long work building solidarity with prisoners in solitary confinement, I sent the link to my friends who do criminal justice activism.¹¹ These are some great ideas!

At the same time, while originality *can* be a virtue in activism, it would be easy to overemphasize it as the missing piece of the political puzzle. There are tried and true tactics that work, but that simply aren't very fun. Sometimes you need to be repetitive, unrefined, inelegant, blunt when you are trying to make an urgent point. In general, the dire state of left-wing politics can't be explained by a lack of creative ideas. It is better explained by a lack of sustained organization, coherence, clear goals, and commitment to stick it out through the unpleasant parts—all those tired, old, noncreative things that make social movements possible. The right isn't particularly creatively inspiring, but it is relentless and well organized, and its agenda has dominated official politics for decades.

Paul Kjelland and members of Tamms Year Ten celebrate the closing of Tamms Correctional Center, 2013. Print. Courtesy the artist



When all you have is a hammer, every problem looks like a nail, and when you relate to politics through art, it is easy to look at every problem as an artistic one. But even creative activism, if it is to be effective, entails a lot of old-fashioned nonartistic organizing and outreach. “Real political work involves continuous interpersonal negotiations, meetings that never end, and receiving and responding to hundreds of emails a day,” the filmmaker Astra Taylor wrote recently, reflecting on how her work as part of Strike Debt’s Rolling Jubilee initiative sat uneasily with her more artsy side. “It’s reactive, not contemplative, and I prefer life with more of the latter.”¹² But the tradeoff, she thinks, is worth it in order, possibly, to inspire bigger and better things.



Strike Debt, *PSA - Public Service Analysis: What Is the Rolling Jubilee?*, 2012 (still). Video, sound, color; 1:57 min. Courtesy Strike Debt

Let's be honest: artists are more glamorous figures than activists. All the better if they lend this glamor to good causes, then—but at the same time, this observation means that the discussion always begins with the need for artistic practice to be complemented by, or at least in dialogue with, the wider political scene. And it *also* means having an eye on how well-meaning art projects might detract from less glamorous forms of politics rather than complementing them. “Socially engaged art projects should not be about the education of artists at the expense of the poor,” Ernesto Pujol cautions in a comment on Thompson’s last post.¹³

The actual debate about the hazards of these relationships, which is what my original article was about, is part of taking art’s political role seriously. It is the cultivation process that transforms what Rick Lowe rightly identifies as the art world’s “bullshit” into the “fertilizer” that Fisher hopes can grow something socially meaningful.

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The Name Game

Louisa McCall In this series of blog posts, the term “socially engaged art” is put forward for consideration and debate. Questions and concerns arise quickly: Can a single term actually signify the tremendous breadth of socially engaged practice? Will the term be co-opted by those who seek a quick fix and whose engagement is short-lived and inauthentic? Will the term “socially engaged” require quantifiable outcomes and large-scale endeavors that practices aren’t designed to offer? Does socially engaged art automatically mean an association with political activism?

Perhaps there is an entirely different way of thinking about artists who work beyond the confines of the art world to create the forms that help us think differently and encourage us to inhabit a future that is more just and sustainable. What if we consider artists as researchers who can design, experiment, fail, innovate, and contribute to society’s knowledge production? Nancy Andrews, an artist included in *Artists in Context’s Artists’ Prospectus for the Nation*, has collaborated with medical experts to alter and enrich their scientific understanding of delirium. Through her experimental films and drawings she made visible