

# Time Spent

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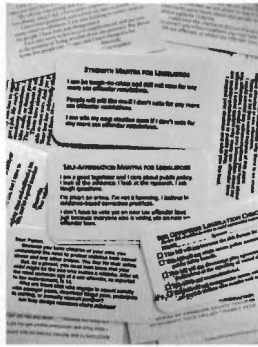
**Five days may not seem like a long enough time to develop a firm grasp of any particular durational project. But that is not the goal of this text. Nor is it the aim of the experimental writing and research project that art historian Grant Kester and curator Lucía Sanromán presented me with.**

For it I flew to Chicago, with my co-researcher Christina Aushana, to research artist Laurie Jo Reynolds and the Tamms Year Ten campaign (TY10). I should start with my own critical stakes. Much of my interest in socially engaged practice has been the critical methodologies with which we assess these practices and the positions we take in their analyses. Rather than attempt to invent a new model of criticism, I've often returned to the tenets of feminist art criticism from the 1970s. The ideas of figures such as

Arlene Raven and Lucy Lippard and the larger feminist social movement, in which the notion of dialogic exchange—what we now call 'dialogical aesthetics'—seem to share a direct relationship to feminist consciousness-raising strategies. Renowned black feminist theorist bell hooks reflected on the process of consciousness-raising, noting that, 'In small groups, individuals do not need to be equally literate or literate at all because the information is primarily shared through conversation, in dialogue which is necessarily a liberatory expression.'<sup>1</sup>

The shared theoretical relationship between feminist consciousness-raising and dialogical processes informs the two elements of Laurie Jo's practice that I reflect on here: the artist

<sup>1</sup> bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (New York: South End Press, 1989), p. 24.



**Fig 5 Laurie Jo Reynolds, Legislative Mantra Cards and Calling Cards, 2009–present**

Rather than implementing policies proven to reduce sexual violence and abuse, our lawmakers can't resist tough-sounding laws that will help them win reelection. Legislators often admit these bills are wrong, but they can't resist voting for them. These mantra cards encourage them to fight this addiction: 'I can be tough-on-crime and still not vote for any more sex offender restrictions. People will still like me if I don't vote for any more sex offender restrictions.' These calling cards, fashioned after those used by deaf people on subways, and in homage to Adrian Piper, were made to prompt dialogue about the stresses of being on a public registry. One starts, 'Dear Friend, I am a sex offender. I know you did not realize that when you...' Another begins, 'Dear Neighbor, I know you recognize me from the sex offender registry...'



**Fig 6 Tamms Year Ten Family Room**

The 2013 closing of Tamms supermax prison in southern Illinois marked a major victory for Tamms Year Ten (TY10), the volunteer grassroots legislative campaign initiated by men in Tamms, their families, and artists. That year, TY10's primary goal was to re-elect Illinois Governor Pat Quinn who closed the Tamms supermax, three other prisons, abolished the state's death penalty, 'banned the box,' and signed several 'Second Chance' bills. Returning to the space in the Sullivan Galleries at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago that housed their TY10 Campaign Office (which served as the hub of the 2012 closure efforts), family members and men formerly incarcerated in Tamms created a living room out of furniture and objects from their home. After the 4 November election, the family members used the gallery as a meeting site to access the past, establish closure for TY10, and make plans for the future.

as facilitator (and its inherent problems) and the dialogical labour of the TY10.

During my first week in Chicago, Laurie Jo was invited by the Family Justice Center at Northwestern University's School of Law Building discuss the 'non-traditional forms of organization' that she has used to pursue prison reform, so that the centre could consider new strategies for their major area of focus: juvenile incarceration issues. While Laurie Jo has a lot of such meetings on her schedule, the centre is doing groundbreaking work to advocate for youth who have been given life sentences, and some of the TY10 mothers fit into this category. So this group is a particular favourite of the campaign. This high level of code-switching is central to the dialogical function of Laurie Jo's work. It is part of what constitutes her reputation as a dynamic and savvy organizer.

Laurie Jo's art practice is primarily dialogical and she is able to navigate various social and political realms, be it talking on the phone to wardens in Illinois area prisons or advising advocacy groups and lobbyists. It is precisely her identification as an artist that makes the large and successful network of TY10 possible. It was apparent to me that while various officials, advocacy groups, and non-profits are restricted to their respective mission statements, board interests, and other institutional and political commitments, Laurie Jo 'the artist' can advance the goals of TY10 by creating allies and supporters among these comparably stagnant organizations and institutions, with which she is affiliated. As an artist, she is independent of the institutional hang-ups experienced by many advocacy groups and can remain responsive with her tactics. This ability is further enhanced



**Fig 7 Mothers of Men in Tamms Supermax at the I AM A MOM March**

Mothers of men in isolation at Tamms supermax protest the guards union AFSCME for supporting a prison condemned by international human rights monitors. Their signs are based on the 'I AM A MAN' placards first used by striking AFSCME sanitation workers, whom Martin Luther King, Jr. supported just before he was assassinated in Memphis in 1968. The mothers said that closing Tamms is about human dignity, not jobs, and reiterated King's message that workers' rights and human rights are inseparable. They marched to AFSCME headquarters on 4 April 2012, the 44th anniversary of King's death, and told the crowd, 'Human suffering cannot be the basis of the southern Illinois economy.' Geneva Mullins, Rose Sifuentes, and Brenda Smith are pictured in the front. Their sons spent nine, eight, and fourteen years respectively in isolation at Tamms before Governor Quinn closed the prison.



**Fig 8 Performance at the Creative Time Summit: Art, Place & Dislocation in the 21st Century City. New York City, October 25, 2013**

In 2013, four TY10 members, Reginald 'Akkeem' Berry, Sr., Darrell Cannon, Laurie Jo Reynolds, and Brenda Townsend accepted the Leonore Annenberg Prize for Art and Social Change at the Creative Time Summit. At the event, the two former Tamms prisoners and a mother of a prisoner performed an unforgettable act of endurance: Darrell and Akkeem stood on stage one minute for each year they were in solitary at Tamms, and Brenda stood for her son. The men walked away after eight and nine minutes; Brenda was on stage for fourteen. In prison, in political struggle, and in performance, the medium is time.

by prevailing notions of the 'neutrality' (or the unthreatening nature) of artists in general, and is central to what enables Laurie Jo to advance the goals of TY10 among its expansive network.

However, we should remember that Laurie Jo herself is an art worker and is subject to the same systems of valuation presently placed on artistic production within the larger schema of opaque economic distribution and precarious labour in art economies. I'd like to consider the break between the 'behind-the-scenes' work (traditionally referred to as 'process') in her practice and the public face of her presence at meetings, lectures, and rallies (or the 'performance' or 'encounter') as an example of a feminized form of labour. After a meeting at Northwestern University, Christina and I sat down with Laurie Jo as she looked at the schedule for the following day. We were

amazed by how often she is in communication with various people throughout the day, and asked her how she keeps track of not only the e-mails and phone calls but also their outcomes, as they come to affect the overall goals of the campaign. On her laptop, she pulled up a meticulously colour-coded spreadsheet document, with various names, dates, and multiple other columns and casually joked, 'My art is spreadsheets.' This spreadsheet and other necessary organizational elements in dialogical practices are seldom recognized as a crucial component. Laurie Jo's labour for TY10 is uncompensated. When she advises other non-profits, she effectively allows her own energies and inspiration to be appropriated by these institutions, at her own expense. This tendency toward 'free consultation' is not entirely dissimilar to the art world's propensity



**Fig 9** Sisters of Men in Tamms Supermax at the I AM A MOM March



**Fig 10** Mud Stencil Campaign

Two people passing by are drawn to look at a mud stencil outside the Modern Wing of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, part of a tactical media project for Tamms Year Ten led by Nicolas Lampert and Jesse Graves to publicize the torture at Tamms. Teams of activists travelled to the city with buckets of mud and tagged walls and sidewalks with the statement 'End Torture in Illinois.' No permission was asked or given for this eco-friendly graffiti. The action brought national and local press attention to the legislative effort.

for artistic labour to be uncompensated in the name of 'exposure.' Perhaps what also leads us to overlook this type of work critically, I wonder, is the failure to recognize its inextricable ties to administrative forms of labour, particularly secretarial and other feminized forms of work within post-war institutional structures.

These forms of feminized labour in socially engaged practices can challenge our own investment in the single, glorified culminating moment of success in a given project—the closure of Tamms Correctional Center in this case—revealing instead an ongoing gradual process that can not be valorized into a single moment. The closure of the prison facility was undoubtedly the goal of the entire campaign and presently, Laurie Jo is working with her collaborators to envision a new set of goals and issues to address going forward. However, it is

unlikely (or perhaps unreasonable to expect) that such a monumental accomplishment is on the horizon again for TY10. What is necessary here, is to not simply move away from the compulsion to only validate practices by paradoxically reducing them to a singular spectacular moment, or that which we perceive of as 'concrete change.' Instead, we need to rethink our own understanding and evaluation of what are typically perceived as banal details, like follow-up phone calls and spreadsheets. It's necessary for us to begin to recognize these minutiae as crucial aspects of a complex mode of cultural production and personal transformation through participation and social progress.

The fact that Laurie Jo's practice can be understood, in part, through the concept of feminized forms of labour is not to suggest that she, as an artist, does not possess art world



**Fig 11 Drawing of Tamms Supermax being destroyed by a wrecking ball with aliens overhead**

This drawing was made by a boy whose father was held in Tamms as he anticipated the closure of the supermax. Once it closed, Tamms Year Ten sent a copy of the drawing as a New Year's Day card, signed by volunteers, to each man transferred from Tamms to other prisons. The response was tremendous.



**Fig 12 Tamms Year Ten Campaign Office**

In 2012, the School of the Art Institute of Chicago exhibition *Tamms Year Ten Campaign Office*, in the Sullivan Galleries, served as the hub for the campaign to close the supermax. The office contained all the files and ephemera from the then five-year-long political battle and was the site of an active campaign. Volunteers met and worked around the clock while gallery visitors stopped by to observe, ask questions, and even sit down and help.

influence. In 2013, she received the Leonore Annenberg Prize for Art and Social Change from Creative Time, in addition to exhibition and residency commitments. I want to emphasize Laurie Jo's leverage of the resources offered to her specifically to further the larger goals of the TY10 campaign. Thus, when offered a show of photographs at the Sullivan Galleries in 2012, she instead organized an exhibition called the *Tamms Year Ten Campaign Office* and essentially became an artist-in-residence. Making the ongoing organizational process of the TY10 campaign indistinguishable from what would otherwise take the form of a stand-alone exhibition-as-archive, Laurie Jo used her position as an artist to expand the exhibition platform and have the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) serve as the hub for the ongoing efforts of the TY10 campaign. This included storing

and exhibiting all the files and ephemera from the then five-year-old project. Most notably, the SAIC site became the organizational meeting space for the campaign volunteers, many of whom were mothers of Tamms inmates and others who were students at SAIC. Making the SAIC the central hub of the project while regular gallery visitation hours were maintained revealed, at least in part, the unremitting nature of the work required to sustain the TY10 campaign for Laurie Jo and her collaborators.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> This 'art site' was such a small part of my visit to Chicago that I do not wish to give it more weight than is necessary despite it seeming most relevant in this context.