

Struggles for Life: Art and Activism Take on Survival

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I don't want to survive, I want to live.

– Solomon Northrup, the freeman captured into slavery played by Chiwetel Ejiofor in Steve McQueen's *12 Years A Slave*

“At least we’re not Flint, Michigan,” Chicago news outlets, government officials, and civically proud residents alike will tell you.¹ But the statistics collected by the *Chicago Tribune* for 2013 had 431 Chicagoans murdered within city limits,² making it the US murder capital.³ Facing other social health-related challenges, including disease and health-care access, homelessness, social isolation, and rising incarceration rates, it is quite clear that this city in particular can kill you.

Inspired in part by the philosophical inquiries of Giorgio Agamben and Judith Butler, the inclusion of the following practices within a shared frame is with the hope that they can be seen as instances that are both symptomatic of and exceeding beyond the conception of “bare life” politics. As Agamben suggests in his study of juridical-political history, bare life is when “...life as such becomes the principle object of the projections and calculations of State power.”⁴ He continues to clarify that what makes this concept the foundation of modern democratic politics is that sovereign entities are defined by their ability to make exceptions to who and what can survive.⁵ The title of Agamben’s book on this

subject, *Homo Sacer*, addresses this exception: *sacer* means any kind of being set apart by being considered hallowed, cursed, or sacred. He explains that *homo sacer*, in legal terms, is a person who cannot be sacrificed and if killed their killer would not be charged as a murderer.⁶ Admittedly the terrain of a city within the United States is a complex democracy and hardly comparable with the totalitarian states killing off residents en masse on which Agamben focuses. The experience of survival here is more uneven, expressed in a social order that exceeds its limited safety net and tolerates some death and exalts some life.

The practices described below, combined together, offer a tangible sense of these challenges and some of their proposed solutions. Divided into a series of scenes spanning nearly twenty-five years, this essay presents examples of recent art and direct-action activism concerned with survival in the city.

Scene 1: Inside Out

On a perfect autumn evening in 2013, the temperature not too hot or cold, inside the third floor of a brick warehouse just west of downtown Chicago, bodies were humming around eye-catching colorful artwork inside a converted warehouse turned gallery space known as Threewalls.⁷ One photograph mounted to the wall showed hand-drawn letters in the pages of a sketchbook reading:

If You
Lived
Here
You'd Be
Dead
By Now

An inmate at Stateville Prison, William Jones, had made the drawing as part of the Prison Neighborhood Arts Project (PNAP)—the group holding the exhibition that night. For the last few years PNAP has been organizing guest lectures and workshops in the prison. Jones, fifty-five, has been incarcerated since 1982.⁸ Born in Memphis, Tennessee, he recounts stories to his art instructors about how he marched with Martin Luther King, Jr. as a child. By all accounts he is a joyful human being. In 2003 Jones's death sentence was commuted to life in prison along with 167 other inmates throughout Illinois by outgoing Governor George Ryan.⁹ He would be eligible for release if a proposed bill addressing the release of elderly

prisoners is passed.¹⁰ When asked why he is always so cheerful, he quickly replies, “because I have my life.”¹¹

A few nights later on October 22, Darrell Cannon sat at the center of Art In These Times Gallery on the Northwest Side. Framed by the exhibition *Reparations on my Soul*, organized by the art-activist collective Chicago Torture Justice Memorials, fifty people hailing from across the city crammed into the small space. The discussion focused on the newly proposed City Council ordinance to award reparations to survivors of torture at the hands of the Chicago Police Department. Cannon first reflected on the brutal violence committed against him in 1983 to coerce a confession, then on the nine years he spent in solitary confinement at the recently shuttered Tamms “supermax” Correctional Center before having his conviction dismissed and being released in 2007. Taking a surprising turn, he then told of his recent vacation to St. Lucia, where he finally did what he had fantasized about in prison and “rode a horse on the beach and into the water.” His eyes and face lit up as he shared the story, until he got to the part where he went to a party that night only to find it being policed with AK-47s and shotguns reminiscent of life inside the prison and outside in Chicago. He solemnly reflected that, “No matter how far I got away, reality always comes back.”

Just four days later in New York, Cannon was joined by former Tamms inmate Reginald “Akkeem” Berry, Sr., along with Brenda Townsend, whose son was incarcerated in Tamms prison, and artist-activist Laurie Jo Reynolds on stage at the New York University Skirball Center to an audience of one thousand, with countless more watching online. This time it was Cannon, and his collaborators from Tamms Year Ten (a campaign group formed for the purpose of closing the prison) who were bringing reality back to the escape. Reynolds had been awarded the prestigious Leonore Annenberg Prize for Art and Social Change at the annual Creative Time Summit for her work using “legislative art” to organize the campaign that brought together a unique community of artists, academics, activists, and leaders who had been formerly incarcerated and their family members and advocates—many of whom are also involved in the Prison Neighborhood Arts Project and the Chicago Torture Justice Memorials.

What started out as a group of friends sending poetry to men in Tamms eventually led to protests at the Thompson Center, music performances at the Hideout, exhibitions at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago’s Sullivan Galleries, lobbying in Springfield, and direct action at the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees prison guard union headquarters, all contributing in large part to Tamms being closed permanently in January 2013.

After receiving the award, Reynolds announced that Cannon, Berry, and Townsend would do a performance from the stage before the audience was

dismissed for lunch. The performance involved both men standing on stage for one minute for every year they were held in solitary at Tamms, with Townsend standing in for her son. The three stood evenly spaced across the stage, the lights dimmed, and the audience fell entirely silent.

After several minutes the audience began to stand out of respect, causing Cannon to breathe deep as he became choked up. Berry and Cannon left the stage when their respective eight and nine minutes were up and for five more minutes all eyes were on Brenda Townsend. The sniffles from the crowd began to intensify as the silence and the respectful stares wrapped her small body from three sides. There is nothing to compare to more than a decade of having your child in solitary confinement, but the gesture made at approximating that experience through a simple form of performance gave reality to what goes on inside those walls where generations have been lost, asserting it back into the social fabric on the outside where the rest of us are living life and attending summits on public art.

In recent years in Chicago a number of hybrid coalitions of artists, activists, and formerly incarcerated men and their families have joined together in projects like Prison Neighborhood Arts Project, Chicago Torture Justice Memorials, and the Tamms Year Ten campaign. They have built on the growing momentum at the grassroots and in legislative halls to reframe, reform, and shut down prisons. Locally these groups have created forums like the one about reparations and the recent performance at the Creative Time Summit beyond Chicago, offering up outlets for sharing and exchanging about life inside and outside the incarceration epidemic.

Scene 2: Outside In

Jim Duignan asked the students at San Miguel School on the Southwest Side about their fears. One student replied that he worried about being shot in the back while walking to school. Duignan asked the student what could make him feel differently and a new project was born. As he explained to the local Public Broadcasting System television Affiliate in 2000 when the workshops were taking place:

The problem here, the kids are being terrorized and often problems are internalized and they have no real way to interpret their experience. And we wanted to use the arts and music to give them that opportunity. We decided that we would build a gang-proof suit. Students started to do these self-portraits with materials based on the size of their body. The pieces [are] quite small, the size of an average sixth-grade suit, and that is what I find terrifying about it.¹²



Tamms Year Ten presentation at the Creative Time Summit, New York, 2013.
Courtesy of Creative Time. Photo: Casey Kelbaugh.

The resulting research would involve students looking into bulletproof materials and a series of models that merged the aesthetic of an armored knight with a backpack-wearing child.¹³ Duignan would later write that the project allowed students to “deliberate on what the work could represent, [not] simply through the moderate descriptions and images that stand in for them, [but through] extended exploration through the many months, remained a conscious examination of that space in between the reality of a community’s troubles and the young persons’ negotiation of home... The conversations regarding the suit continued for two years which shaped a practice of creating work solely in response to our young people’s questions.”¹⁴

Ten years later and about twenty blocks east, standing less than a mile from the University of Chicago (UC) hospital, eighteen-year-old Damian Turner, a leader and co-founder of the activist group Fearless Leading by Youth (FLY), was shot and killed in the crossfire of a drive-by. It was the summer of 2010, more than twenty years since the Trauma Care center at University had been closed.¹⁵ Damian was picked up by an ambulance and taken down Lake Shore Drive, past the UC Hospital to the Northwestern Hospital downtown, where he died. In his work, Turner had been an advocate for health care within the Juvenile Jail and when his fellow FLY members discovered that he had been taken so far away because there were no trauma centers in the area, they decided to mobilize their anger toward a new campaign.¹⁶

Weeks later, on what would have been Damian’s nineteenth birthday,

nearly 100 of his friends and family chanted at the steps of the University's hospital: "How can they ignore? When we're dying at their door!" The chant echoes to this day through an online video produced by teen members of the group backed by their own beats and rhymes.¹⁷

This tragic event and the subsequent actions catalyzed a social movement that continues today, bringing consistent attention to the contradiction in public subsidies supporting that private University's hospital expansion, and laying the groundwork for the citywide actions against public mental health clinic closures that provided the Chicago incarnations of Occupy with their most sustained target.

Scene 3: Acting Up

The terrain of AIDS activism was shifting. Thousands converged from across the country in Chicago for the actions of April 1990, organized by the groups Act Now and ACT UP Chicago under the banner National AIDS Action for Health Care, that signified that shift toward the need for national health care as a solution and a strategy. As ACT UP Chicago member and chronicler of AIDS activism, Deborah Gould, relayed to me, "We were taking on the American Medical Association administration for their opposition to national health insurance and some of their really bad proposals for dealing with AIDS health care. At that point they were supporting mandatory testing and contact trace scans and things like that. We were talking about the private health care system and its problems as a way to suggest why we needed national health care, and we were looking at the public health system and its problems, and why we therefore needed national health insurance. To address the public health system, we used the existence of Cook County Hospital and the ways in which the Cook County board was underfunding the hospital and ways in which the health practitioners there were working really hard but weren't able to provide the care that was necessary in general, but also specifically for people with AIDS."¹⁸

Another member of ACT UP Chicago, Mary Patten, recalls, "This was a moment when women with HIV/AIDS—people like Jeannie Pejko, Novella Dudley, and Ida Greathouse—were taking huge risks by coming out publicly....At the time, there were fifteen empty beds in the AIDS ward at Cook County Hospital because County officials claimed they did not have enough money to install a separate bathroom for women. The culmination of the protests was an action organized by the Women's Caucus of ACT UP. We semi-secretly dragged fifteen mattresses through the alleys of downtown Chicago to block a major intersection in front of City Hall....Our posters and chants proclaimed: 'Women are dying! Fifteen beds!'"¹⁹ She continues:

Although none of the members of the Women's Caucus who were arrested were known to be HIV-positive at the time, we put on hospital gowns and seized these mattresses in solidarity with women with AIDS. In assuming these identities and representations, our intention was not to speak for women rendered "invisible and voiceless," but to create a visual homology of our identification and solidarity with women with AIDS, not unlike Argentine protesters who "became" desaparecidos (the disappeared) by wearing white death masks at demonstrations in the 1970s and 1980s. Two national caucuses—of people of color and people with immune system disorders (PISD)—joined the action, creating crucial diversions which allowed the women to prolong the blockade. This was a pivotal moment of mutual solidarity in the AIDS movement among women, people of color, and people diagnosed with HIV/AIDS and chronic fatigue syndrome, at a demonstration which powerfully focused our demands in the context of a national health care agenda ...²⁰

Protesters at the University of Chicago hospital, 2010. Courtesy of Sarah Jane Rhee.



Gould excitedly recounts that:

Tons of people were arrested; there were probably 1,500 to 2,000 people at the demonstration and probably 150 people got arrested that day. We were brought to 11th and State Street, and I remember they didn't have enough cells for all of us; they didn't have any way to process us. There was this scene with one large holding area and people were making noise, people were kissing, and we were told to stop kissing—there would be no kissing—and we were to sit boy/girl/boy/girl so there would be no same-sex kissing. And this guy who would die soon after, Ortezo Olverson, who was really queeny and campy and had a long political history going back to the 1960s, stood up and would say “there will be nooo kissing in the jail,” and everyone would start kissing! It was really fun. That action was an amazing action.

There was some conflict around it within ACT UP Chicago. There were men who did an action simultaneously, which was very dramatic. They had taken over an office in the Cook County building, and they got out onto the balcony and nailed the windows shut so they couldn't be arrested from inside and they had these banners, “Healthcare for All,” and the media swarmed to them. Some of the women were pissed afterwards, saying, “this was the main action and you all hogged the media spotlight.” So it caused some tension, about whose issues were more important. It was at a moment where there was a real scarcity mentality and desperation, and those kinds of conflicts, which had maybe existed from the beginning about how to fight AIDS in different populations, really exploded at that point.²¹

Patten concludes, “In a particularly swift demonstration of the effectiveness of civil disobedience and direct action, Cook County's AIDS ward was opened to women the very next day.”²²

Scene 4: Acting Out

Chicago-bred public sociologist Eric Klinenberg recalls that, “In one week of July 1995, 739 Chicago residents—the majority of them home alone—died in one of the greatest and least-known American disasters in modern history.”²³ Ten years later, artist Nicole Garneau recognized that the event was still relatively unacknowledged when she initiated a year-long



Protesters (Catherine Gund and Jill Harris) being arrested during ACT UP Women's Caucus "mattress action" in front of City Hall, Chicago, April 1990. Courtesy of Mary Patten. Photo: Genyphyr Novak.

performance series to mark the disaster's anniversary on every single day of 2005. Garneau was still playing with ways of creating subtle and temporary "monuments" to the event and inspired by pictures of bloody protesters from the 1960s, when she decided to use homemade beet juice to create dramatic and drippy embodied imagery. All of her performances involved wearing white, as a way to mark and set apart her own body in the landscape that formed the backdrop of the performances. One such performance took place in the cold early evening of Sunday, January 30th at the Pratt Avenue beachfront of Lake Michigan, on the far North Side.

She took out a bottle of beet juice while standing alone in the snow and sprayed a circle around her feet and then lower half of her body. A passerby noticed and responded by immediately walking away toward a police car that had arrived for a routine cruise of the lakefront park. Garneau recalls hearing the man at a distance approaching the police and saying, "that guy

has a can of gasoline and definitely a lighter.” Startled, the police quickly approached Garneau, walking to the edge of the ice. They began yelling to her, as she recounts in this script:

Cop: What’s going on?

NG: I’m an artist. I’m making kind of an experiment. I wanted to see what the beet juice would look like on the snow. Did that guy tell you I had gasoline?

Cop: He didn’t know what you had. Are you aware that what you’re doing does not look normal?

NG: Yeah, I know.

They went back to their squad car but stayed parked in front of me and I continued spraying and documenting. When I was done I decided to talk to them about it.

NG: Hey. Listen, I wasn’t trying to freak anybody out. I just wanted to see what this would look like.

Cops: Okay. So what have you got in the bottle there?

NG: Beet juice.

Cops: You just squeeze the beets at home and bring it over?

NG: Yeah, I have a juicer and then I strained the juice through a coffee filter so it wouldn’t clog the sprayer.

Cops: Now why did you spray your pants?

NG: Well, I was thinking about what would happen if you stood in a pool of something, you know, and it kind of soaked up from the bottom.

Cops: Oh, so that’s the concept.

NG: Yeah.

Cops: All right, well, we thought maybe you were in trouble.

NG: I understand. Well, have a good night.

Cops: Have a good one.

I almost said see you later, because honestly, I probably will. For a minute I felt a little sorry for myself. How come I’m not performing for anyone besides the cops? But when I thought about it more, it occurred to me that maybe Chicago’s Finest were my most important audience this year. During the 1995 heat wave they were, after all, on the front lines: the first people to be called when someone in an SRO (single-room occupancy housing) suspected their neighbor was dead. They were the ones who found bodies and called paramedics. I need to start talking to them about the heat wave.²⁴

Conclusion: Beyond Bare Survival

In recent decades, survival, the struggle to remain living, has taken on a complex political character. The survivalist impulse that is widespread today is expressed popularly by television programs like *One Man Army*, *Doomsday Preppers*, and the anti-government crusaders of the Right that advocate a dismantling of social safety net and redistributive policies. These individualist approaches reinforce what sociologist Philippe Bourgois described when he observed, “Popular common sense does not recognize that individual suffering is politically structured, [considering it instead] to be a moral failing of the individual.”²⁵ While the Right has positioned itself to defend individual liberty against state power, simultaneously supporting a massive business- and military-oriented state, the Left has also occupied seemingly contradictory and importantly nuanced positions. A prominent historical example that still resonates for many today is the community “survival programs” of the Black Panther Party and the Black Power movement more generally. Starting as early as Robert Williams and Richard Wright in the late 1950s, Stokely Carmichael in the mid 1960s, and The League of Revolutionary Black Workers in the late 1960s. These proposals, along with their artistic corollaries in the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) here in Chicago, practiced self-governance, self-production, and self-help as a part of a self-determination that was in fact much larger than any individual self.²⁶ While the Panthers often positioned themselves as anti-state against the backdrop of a government that had abandoned their people, they were collectivists applying a redistributive pragmatism to their autonomous aspirations. Describing the concept of the Panther’s survival programs, that included health care and breakfast for schoolchildren, founder Huey Newton explained how these were not solutions, but allowed for survival in the absence of revolution, “like the survival kit of a sailor stranded on a raft. It helps him to sustain himself until he can get completely out of that situation.”²⁷ In 1972, the Black Panther Party’s well-known ten-point-plan was amended to include: “Completely Free Health Care for all Black and Oppressed People.” While this turn has been criticized as reformist, it should also be interpreted as potentially expansive. Sociologist Alondra Wilson recently reflected on this turn in saying, “Health was a powerful and elastic lexicon that could signify many ideas simultaneously.”²⁸

Over seventy years ago Abraham Maslow proposed his concept of the hierarchy of needs that spanned from the pre-potent physiological survival to the self-actualized person who could dream of utopia.²⁹ In the context of a celebration of artistic practices, these scenes should remind us that goals of self-actualization and self-expression cannot take place without the

prerequisite of survival. In the context of more general inquiry into the political, they are fundamental expressions of power in conflict. What is more fundamental than conflicts over the right to survive? And set within the shared context of Chicago, the theme of survival ties these disparate practices together, even if the significant differences in their overall situations, organizations, goals, and motivations need to be considered to assess to the ends to which these social and creative practices are mobilized. The examples above include creative projects developed in collaboration with those directly affected by the incarceration epidemic and at times use legislative means to achieve their goals. Others are essentially community organizations, growing out of the health care needs and impulses of their young members and use viral media to disseminate and popularize their concerns. Still others function more conventionally as art, distilling into material form images intended to inspire consciousness to direct participants, and less directly those who experience the work as document or story. These practices exist along a spectrum of community organizing, tactical media, legislative art/theater, and socially engaged art that is not clearcut.

The good life has been contemplated constantly since at least the Ancient Greece of 2,300 years ago. Agamben's study of that history emphasized that while previously a life of political engagement was strived for, but that this is not currently the terrain in which we exist. He concludes in his book, the conflation of biological and political life has taken place and we cannot go back to some form of "classical politics" where *zoe* (bare life) and *bios* (qualified life) return to separate categories—he argues that what is now needed is a form of life where the two are inseparable.³⁰

Importantly, Judith Butler critically addresses gaps in this formulation of "bare life" by exploring the significance of the excluded and dispossessed in a recent speech where she argues, "We cannot within that vocabulary describe the modes of agency and action undertaken by the stateless, the occupied, and the disenfranchised, since even the life stripped of rights is still within the sphere of the political, and is thus not reduced to mere being, but is, more often than not, angered, indignant, rising up, and resisting."³¹

With Agamben and Butler in mind, the examples are offered as scenes in the story of life in a de facto segregated city where the struggle to survive the unevenly distributed trauma and violence of daily life has recurrently preoccupied activist and artistic practices.³² As they illustrate, we do not live in a time or place where that inseparability Agamben describes is the case, because we do not all live in a place or time where that is the case. Torture, gun violence, health care deprivation, and social isolation are unevenly distributed in this killer city. The practices responding to such conditions deserve our attention, not only because they remind us of struggles for life happening all around, but because they manage to exceed the

struggle for bare life through their attention to a solidarity that transforms social relations and inhibitions of the political imagination. Demonstrating what we can do together within present conditions, these practices push beyond the segregation and professional boundaries to reveal what artists can learn from the formerly incarcerated, what factions of the movement responding to AIDS can do for one another, what universities can provide for their surrounding communities, what police and first-responders can teach us about social isolation, and what students can depict about their inner fears. At least on a micro scale, these social transformations can sustain fights to transform the state, as well as support one another in instances of its absence and social neglect. But imagining a political life adequate for our present challenges requires that we move beyond bare life and beyond the survival of Huey Newton's stranded man on a raft. If we can do that, we will live through and enact an evolution of what it means to be human today.

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