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October 10, 2014

“Don’t Retreat. Retweet”: My Twitter Tour of Ai Weiwei’s Installation at Alcatraz



With [@Large: Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz](#), the dissident Chinese artist’s installation (to Apr. 26) at the former high-security prison in San Francisco, Ai Weiwei has expanded his political activism to embrace dissidents throughout the world, including the U.S., whose National Parks Service is hosting the exhibition in partnership with the Golden Gates National Parks Conservancy.

Given the extraordinary demonstrations in Hong Kong, which began shortly after I attended the press preview, his piece has a greater timeliness than he could have known during his long-distance creation of the piece (which he could not install or get to see in person).

To my mind, the show is powerful but its polemics are problematic.

Unable to leave China (which [released him from and 81-day detention](#) in 2011 but still withholds his passport), Ai gave detailed instructions for the sprawling seven-part installation to the show's organizer, **Cheryl Haines**, founder of San Francisco's FOR-SITE Foundation. It was she who brilliantly suggested and facilitated his use of Alcatraz.

The far-reaching installation left me wondering whether Ai has the same in-depth knowledge and understanding of difficult issues in the rest of the world that he undeniably has regarding the situation in his own country. (Research material for this work was provided to him by Amnesty International.)

Most controversially, **Edward Snowden** is included among those commemorated on the show's Lego portraits and also on the monumental, colorful dragon kite on which the exiled American is represented by this quote: "Privacy is a function of liberty." Snowden's is the second quote we encounter on the kite, after one from **Nelson Mandela**.

The question of whether Snowden is a traitor or conscientious objector (*in my view, the latter*) is a complicated one, on which reasonable Americans heatedly disagree. **Martin Luther King** is another American included on both the kite and the Lego piece, and we are essentially being asked to equate him with Snowden. I suspect that there are complicated issues surrounding many of those featured in this installation.

In Ai's powerful intervention in Alcatraz's sprawling dining hall, visitors are encouraged to send postcards that have been pre-addressed to various dissidents and that bear an image of a flower, bird or another beautiful emblem of that dissident's country.

Although this struck me as an ingenious idea, I couldn't in good conscience pen my own note. We knew nothing about the histories of the people to whom we were prompted to send a message of support or encouragement. In participating, we would essentially be ceding our political and moral judgment to Ai Weiwei. This raises some of the same questions of thought control that raised by oppressive regimes that Ai deplors.

As much as I respect and admire Ai's civil disobedience in China, I couldn't unquestioningly follow him to Ethiopia or India.

Here's my compilation of tweeted reactions to "@Large," to be followed eventually by a video that I shot and narrated onsite, which will give you a more vivid sense of the installation. (That may have to await my return from yet another trip next week, which will again interrupt my blogging.)



Lee Rosenbaum

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What I'm doing on my autumn workation. Will the artist be present, if not physically, then virtually?

11:03 AM - 24 Sep 2014

2 FAVORITES



(Sadly, the answer to the above question was no.)



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On our way to The Rock.

11:37 AM - 24 Sep 2014

3 FAVORITES



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The "Indians Welcome" sign alludes to Alcatraz's difficult history with Native Americans

1:07 PM - 24 Sep 2014

2 FAVORITES





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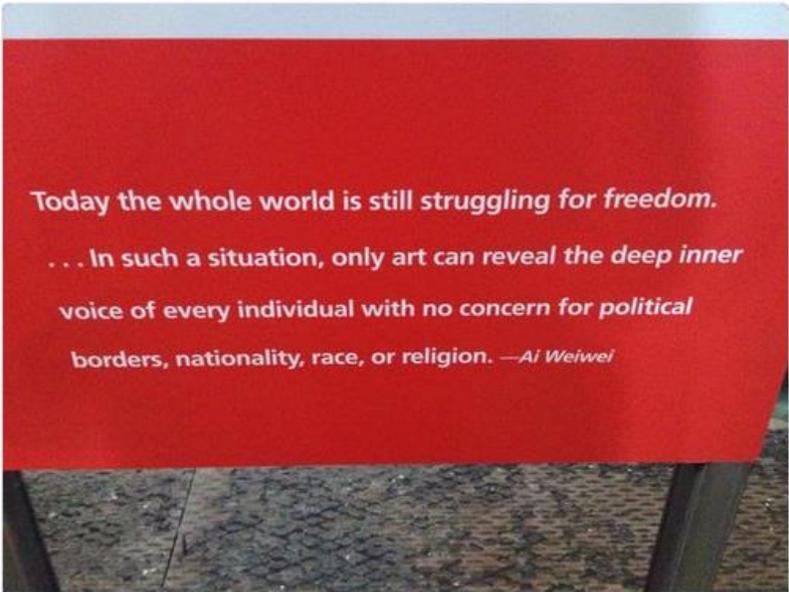
"Don't retreat. Retweet": @aiww's motto. Twitter logo are pupils of eyes in "With Wind" dragon #AiweiweAlcatraz

1:14 PM - 24 Sep 2014

14 RETWEETS 13 FAVORITES



(Actually, it's not exactly the Twitter logo, but probably alludes to it.)



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This could be the motto for @Aiww's installations at Alcatraz. Implicates entire world in political repression.

2:50 PM - 24 Sep 2014

22 RETWEETS 18 FAVORITES



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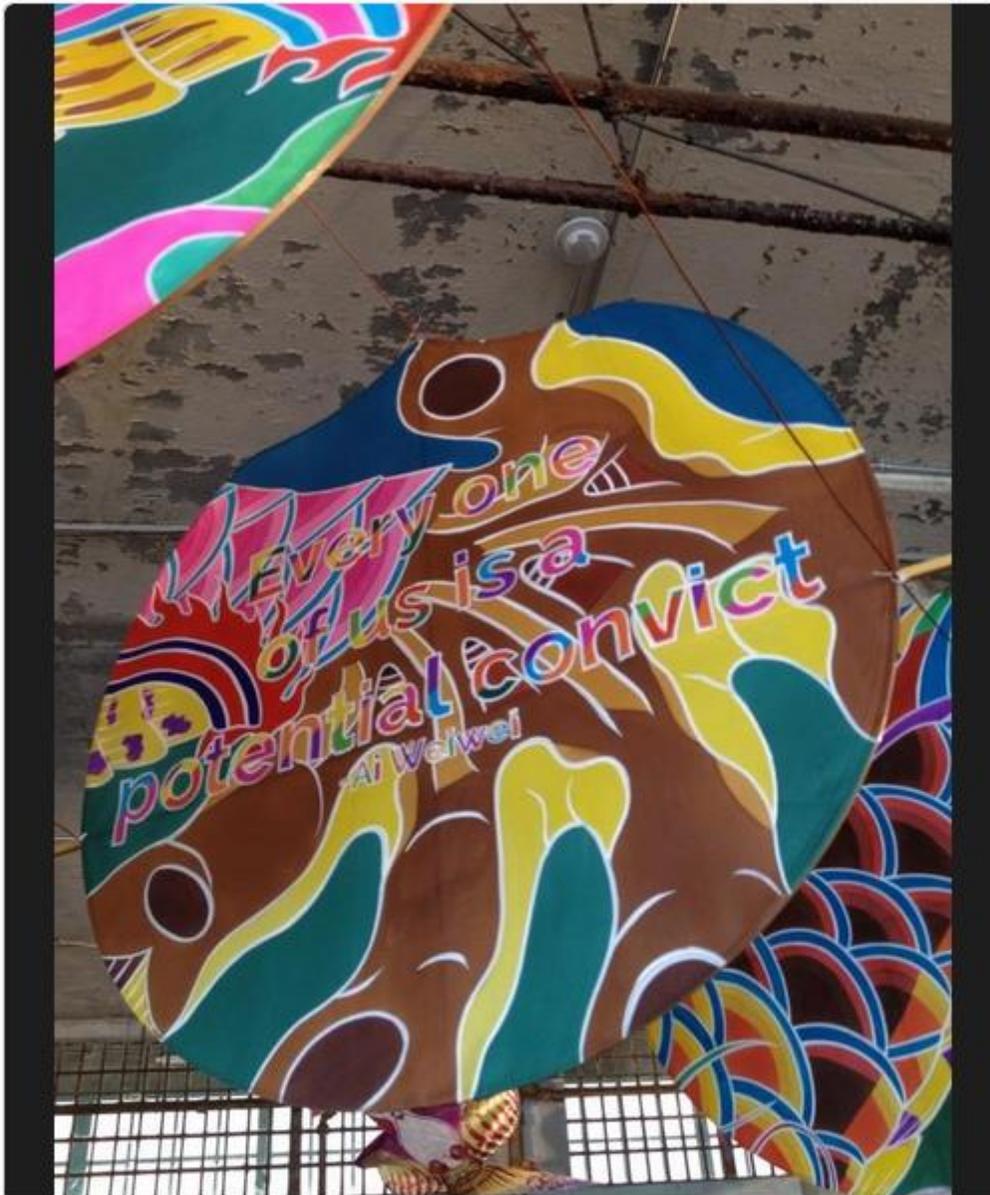
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"With Wind," @Aiww's monumental Dragon kite. Fanciful creation with a solemn message. #AiWeiweiAlcatraz

2:54 PM - 24 Sep 2014

8 RETWEETS 11 FAVORITES





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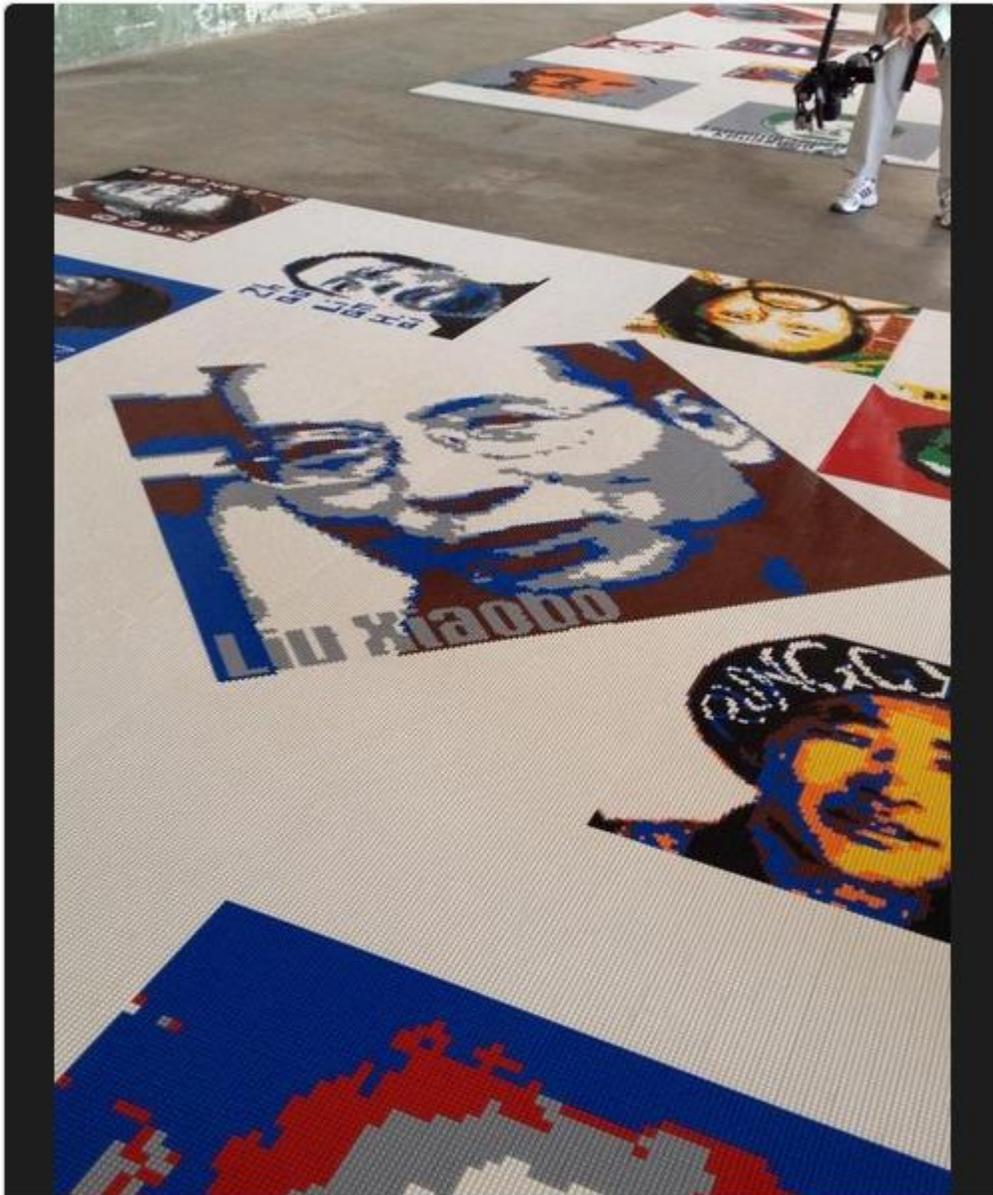
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Here's @aiww's personal message on "With Wind": "Everyone is a potential convict" #AiWeiweiAlcatraz

2:58 PM - 24 Sep 2014

11 RETWEETS 10 FAVORITES





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Among some 150 Lego portraits in "Trace" is China's Liu Xiaobo, in prison when awarded Nobel Prize [#AiWeiweiAlcatraz](#)

3:02 PM - 24 Sep 2014

3 RETWEETS 3 FAVORITES



(My tweet underestimated this. It was actually, it was more like 175 portraits.)



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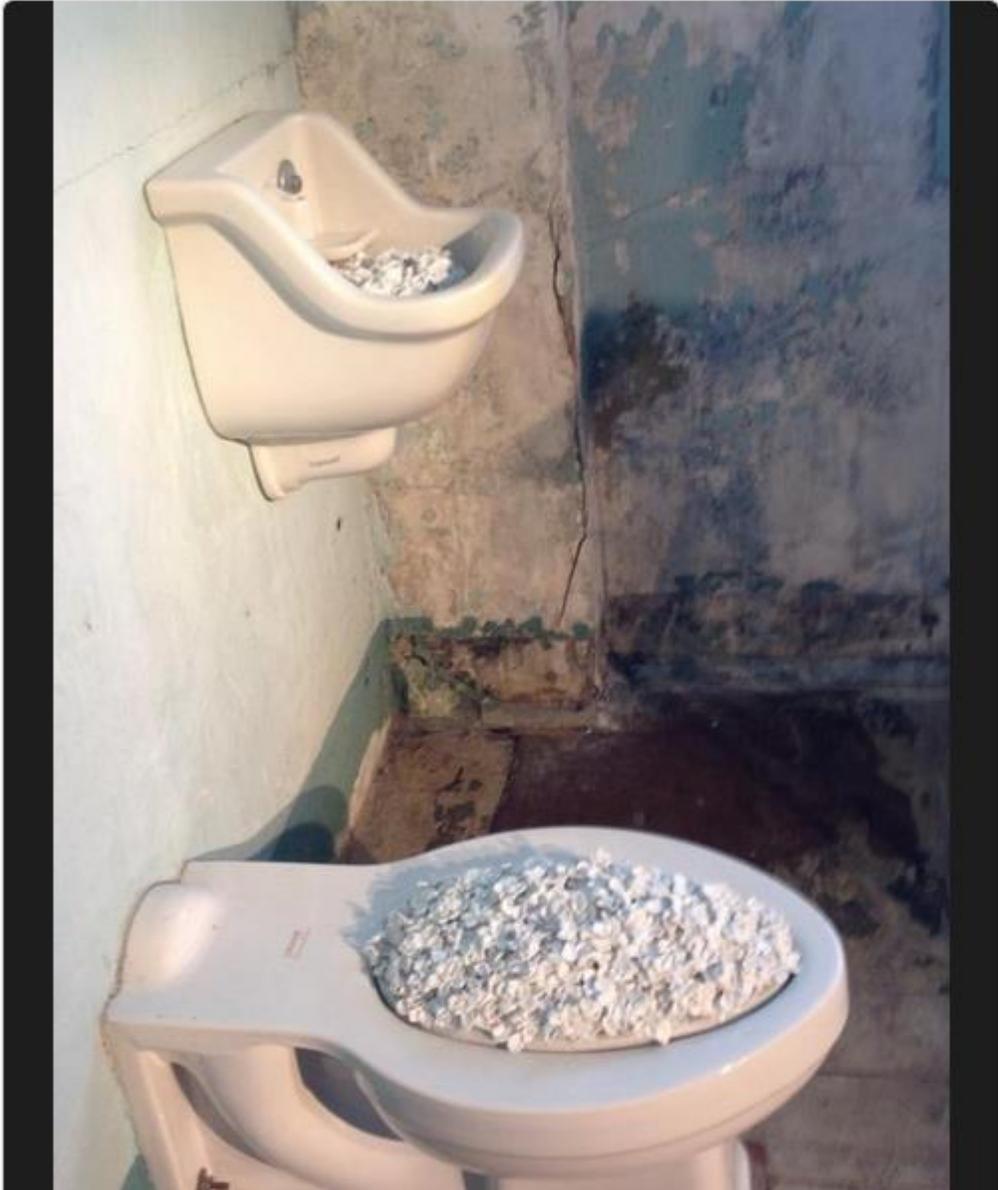
 Follow

China's 1956 Hundred Flowers Campaign...down the prison cell toilet. [#AiWeiweiAlcatraz](#)

3:05 PM - 24 Sep 2014

4 RETWEETS 3 FAVORITES





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.@deborahsolo If you think that Gober sink is forlorn, you should see this one at #AiWeiweiAlcatraz:

1:03 PM - 30 Sep 2014

3 FAVORITES

