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### Thousands write to prison pen pals through Alcatraz art installation

Ai Weiwei's project on the former penal island in San Francisco Bay has resulted in 50,000 postcards to political prisoners

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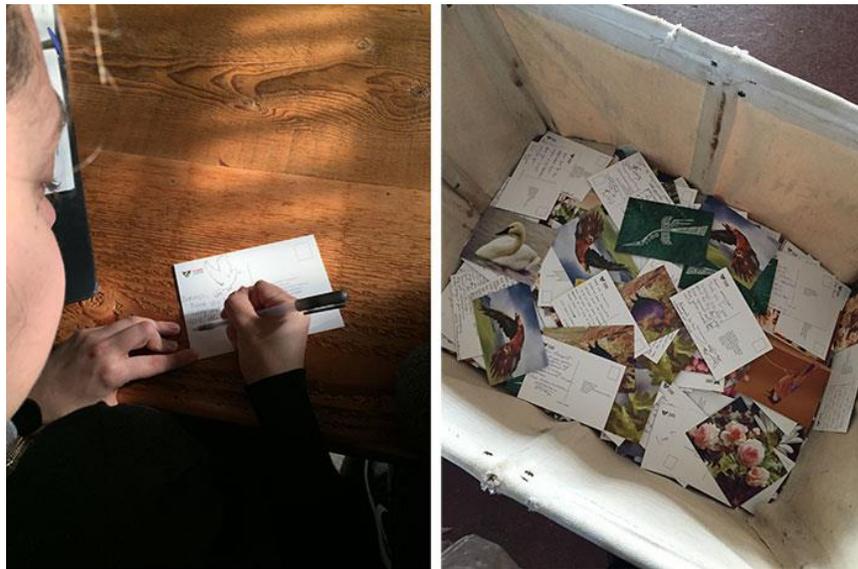


Photo: Julia Halperin

Letter writing may be a lost art, but Ai Weiwei has proven that it can still make a big impact. Visitors to the Chinese artist's exhibition on Alcatraz Island have sent nearly 50,000 postcards to incarcerated political prisoners worldwide since the show “@Large: Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz” opened at the former prison complex in September 2014.

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- [Ai Weiwei, Alcatraz and the radical side of conceptualism](#)
- [Ai Weiwei plans escape to Alcatraz](#)

The interactive work, titled *Yours Truly*, is one of seven site-specific installations Ai created for the small island off the coast of San Francisco, which became a national historic landmark in 1986. The artist drew on his own experience of detainment to create the work, which seeks to address the isolation felt by many political prisoners who fear that their causes have been forgotten while they are behind bars. (Ai has not been able to leave China since his 81-day detention by the Chinese government in 2011; he designed the works and oversaw their installation remotely from his studio in Beijing.)

On Alcatraz, visitors are invited to sit at one of the long tables in the prison's former dining hall, read about more than 100 political prisoners in 20 countries, and send a message of encouragement to the prisoner of their choice. The For-Site Foundation, which co-organised the exhibition with the National Park Service and the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy, is footing the postage bill and mailing the cards with help from Amnesty International. The largest proportion of the cards—more than 12%—has been sent to prisoners in the US, according to For-Site, while 8.7% has gone to India and 8.1% to Vietnam.

The Thai magazine editor Somyot Prueksakasemsuk, who in 2013 was sentenced to 11 years in prison for insulting Thailand's king, has received “thousands” of postcards, according to his wife Sukanya Prueksakasemsuk. “Somyot has passed his regards to all of you who made his days in prison brightening,” she said in a statement. Another eager recipient is the Egyptian demonstrator Ahmed Maher, a co-founder of the April 6 Youth Movement. Although Maher is forbidden access to paper or writing implements in prison, his brother Mostafa has been showing him photographs of the postcards on his cell phone during visits.

Many more postcards are due to be sent before the exhibition closes on 26 April. “@Large: Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz” has received more than half a million visitors to date.