



Letter from Woodstock Rolf Diamant

Fresh Eyes on Alcatraz and Ellis Islands

THE PLAYWRIGHT PETER WEISS ONCE WROTE, “The important thing is to ... turn yourself inside out and see the whole world with fresh eyes.” After attending the George Wright Society biennial conference this April in Oakland, California, I took a trip across the Bay to one the most heavily visited destinations in the national park system, Alcatraz Island, to see the much-talked-about installation by the contemporary Chinese artist and activist Ai Weiwei. To be honest, I had not set foot on Alcatraz for more than a decade despite numerous visits to the San Francisco Bay Area to see and write about new and interesting developments at the Presidio, Crissy Field, and other parts of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area. I assumed nothing much had changed on “The Rock.”

This spring’s visit to Alcatraz literally stopped me in my tracks. Anyone seeing “@ Large: Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz” will never think about Alcatraz and national parks in quite the same way again. Ai Weiwei is an internationally recognized artist who, until very recently, was prevented by the Chinese government from traveling outside of the country. Ai, whose views and artwork are critical of human rights in China, was secretly detained and imprisoned in 2011 for 81 days. In this collaboration with the San Francisco-based For-Site Foundation (<http://www.for-site.org/project/ai-weiwei-alcatraz/>), Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy, and the National Park Service, Ai drew in part on his own experience to use the venue and ethos of the notorious former prison to highlight the plight of 76 prisoners of conscience from around the world.

The elaborate sculptures, audio, and mixed-media works of art were installed in areas on Alcatraz that are usually off-limits to visitors though not far from the normal tour route.¹ In a former industrial space, the faces of each of the 76 prisoners, identified with the help of

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Author's photograph

Amnesty International and other human rights organizations, were displayed in an expansive floor mosaic fabricated out of Legos. These floor images were keyed to a nearby catalogue explaining the circumstances of each prisoner's incarceration. In the A Block, part of the old military prison, you could also sit in individual cells and listen through headphones to songs, poetry, and letters written by these prisoners of conscience. The installation ends in a dining area where you were invited, if you chose, to sit down at a table and write a personal message on a pre-addressed postcard to one of the detainees featured in the exhibition. Almost 90,000 of these cards were written and sent to prisoners of conscience around the world, an impactful example of civic engagement on behalf of people who are denied the most basic form of civic engagement—freedom of expression.

Barley a month after “@Large” closed on Alcatraz, a six-part mural exhibition on American immigration, “Our American Narrative Continues,” was installed on Ellis Island, part of Statue of Liberty National Monument. Created by a group of New York City teenage artists, the murals explore the personal side of the immigrant experience and the efficacy of the “American Dream” today:

Ultimately, viewers of the panels are invited to question how the treasured notion of the American Dream, where once hard work gave the promise of personal achievement and success, has given way to one rife with challenges, obstacles, and barriers to success for new immigrants.²



National Park Service / Kevin Daley

The mural exhibition is a cooperative project of the community arts organization, Groundswell, and the National Park Service with support from numerous foundations and the mayor and city of New York. Groundswell describes itself as being “dedicated to community public art [that] brings together youth, artists, and community partners, to make public art that advances social change, for a more just and equitable world.” The 23 teenage artists who participated in the Ellis Island mural exhibition worked with lead artist Danielle McDonald to create the wall-size acrylic-on-plywood murals. During the course of their eight-month project, the student artists conducted research at the Ellis Island Museum of Immigration History and immersed themselves in the current national debate on immigration reform. “The Groundswell murals provide a valuable opportunity,” observed John Piltzcker, superintendent of Statue of Liberty National Monument and Ellis Island, “that gives voice to the modern immigrant journey.”

In a larger context, both “@Large” and “Our American Narrative Continues” are examining the basic contours of freedom in the 21st century: the vital connection between freedom and human rights, and the equally vital connection between freedom and unrestricted movement and migration. It is hard to think of more thought-provoking venues for this essential dialogue on the meaning of freedom than Alcatraz and Ellis islands. These exhibitions also bring into clearer focus the under-imagined and frequently untapped potential of parks to become venues for global dialogues of great consequence. For these reasons, and before too much time passes and the exhibitions begin to fade from memory, I

would like to conclude this eleventh Letter From Woodstock with a few observations on the success of both of these art installations and what might be learned from them.

Dare to think big. There were many reasons why projects such as these might never get off the ground, particularly given their topical and provocative subject matter. Yet, with both exhibits, strong leadership, capable partners, and good friends, as well as powerful thematic connections to the parks, helped overcome every obstacle. In the case of “@Large,” a substantial private fundraising effort was successfully mounted to pay for the exhibition’s fabrication, shipping, and the painstaking installation.

Leadership matters. Cheryl Haines, executive director of the For-Site Foundation; Frank Dean, Golden Gate National Recreation Area superintendent (who has since moved on to lead the Yosemite Conservancy); and Greg Moore, chief executive officer and president of the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy, all played outsized roles in the success of “@Large.” Piltzecker deserves similar credit for bringing “Our American Narrative Continues” to Ellis Island. They all managed to work through a great deal of administrative and logistical complexity, but most importantly they were able to work with very different partner organizations, getting them to pull in the same direction.

Be open to new perspectives. The Organization of American Historians’ report *Imperiled Promise: The State of History in the National Park Service*³ urges park interpretation to “recognize that meanings change over time and respond to not only new information, but new audiences, new questions, new approaches ... and new perspectives.” For example, art students who served as exhibition guides on Alcatraz contributed to the energy, diversity, and overall knowledge of the staff. This cross-fertilization of interests adds to the depth and vitality of any park.

In the case of Alcatraz, many Bay Area residents, drawn by “@Large,” came out to the island for the first time and many previous visitors returned for the first time in years. Out-of-town visitors on the regular Alcatraz tour also chose to see the Ai Weiwei installation as well. All told, almost 900,000 people bought tickets for the exhibition. People who specifically came out to Alcatraz for the exhibition, like myself, enjoyed features on the island they hadn’t anticipated seeing, including the restored historic gardens and many new exhibits and videos—a reminder to keep Alcatraz on their list of places to keep coming back to. In the course of mounting the exhibition greater attention was also focused on Alcatraz’s own, less-known history of incarcerating prisoners of conscience when it was a military prison. The photograph shows a group of northern Arizona Hopis imprisoned on Alcatraz for “seditious conduct” in 1895 after resisting efforts to “Americanize” their children in government schools. As Frank Dean and Greg Moore eloquently wrote in their preface to the exhibition catalogue:

Take a moment to reflect on those prisoners who have been hidden in the shadows of history, who have not been glamorized by Hollywood or pop culture, and who had their freedoms revoked for beliefs contrary to the political climate of the era.⁴

Ask more from our parks. Parks and protected areas should challenge us physically and intellectually. There will always be those who seek to reduce the role of parks to their lowest



National Park Service

common denominator in the name of some misguided sense of mission purity, fiscal austerity, or deep-seated ideological antagonism to public lands and institutions. But as the Ai Weiwei installation and the Groundswell murals demonstrate, parks can provide unexpected and vital benefits to our cultural life and democratic discourse. In doing so parks will broaden their audiences and become more engaging and relevant places. As we have seen on Alcatraz and Ellis islands, an openness to embrace these exhibitions and other forms of artistic expression and a willingness to “see the world with fresh eyes” enables the parks themselves to once again be seen by the public with “fresh eyes” as well.

Endnotes

1. For a more thorough description of the installation, see www.for-site.org/project/ai-weiwei-alcatraz/.
2. National Park Service, “As nation debates immigration policy, youth artists illustrate nation’s rich immigration history,” news release, May 11, 2015; online at www.nps.gov/elis/learn/news/youth-artists-illustrate-nations-rich-immigration-history.htm.
3. See Letter from Woodstock no. 2, “Keeping on the Path,” *The George Wright Forum*, vol. 29, no. 2 (2012), pp. 201–203.
4. *@Large: Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2014) pp. 9–13.