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These are Strange Times, My Dear: Considering Ai Weiwei's *@Large*

I HAVE BEEN IN A LOT OF PRISONS. I DON'T HAVE ANY ROMANTIC NOTIONS—or even much residual curiosity—about what happens behind bars. In nearly ten years as a public defender, I visited federal prisons and state mental hospitals and county lockups. But when I learned about *@Large*, the installation art exhibit at Alcatraz created by superstar Chinese artist Ai Weiwei and the For-Site Foundation, I immediately bought tickets for myself and my husband, David. I was eager to see Ai Weiwei's work in person, and the description of the show tapped into my increasing fears about repression of dissent and threats to free speech in the United States and around the world:

@Large turns Alcatraz into a space for dialogue about how we define liberty and justice, individual rights and personal responsibility. In artworks that balance political impact with aesthetic grace, the exhibition directly and imaginatively addresses the situation of people around the world who have been deprived of their freedom for speaking out about their beliefs—people like Ai himself.

During the early March weekend we visited, each cool morning was followed by a warm and sunny afternoon. As we flew from the north over the estuary and the newly green spring hills, it was hard not to wonder why everyone doesn't live—or want to live—in San Francisco. The combination of water and sun, the charming architecture, the polite and health-conscious residents, and the tidy streets all contribute to an unpunctured nimbus of well-being. It seems as if San Francisco has it all figured out, as if there must be less suffering there. It's as if all that inconspicuous but ubiquitous wealth has rubbed the jagged edges off urban life and scrubbed the wind of late-winter cold.

And yet, incongruously, one of San Francisco's most popular destinations is the remains of a brutal and notorious prison. The bouncy yellow light and temperate Pacific breezes don't exactly suggest hard labor and isolation, but from 1934 to 1963 Alcatraz was a dreadful and dreaded place. It housed some of the nation's most infamous and violent criminals, including Al Capone and Robert Stroud, remembered as the "Birdman of Alcatraz." In the early years, there was a rule of silence banning almost all talking that drove many of the prisoners nearly mad. In the end, Al Capone was reported to have said, "It looks like Alcatraz has got me licked." Alcatraz also was the site of one of the most well-known and successful Native rights protests in American history. In 1969, American Indian Movement (AIM) activists took over and occupied Alcatraz, triggering

a number of federal reforms, including the official end of tribal terminations. The occupation came to tragic conclusion when a child fell from a third-floor window and the remaining protestors were removed from the property. Now Alcatraz is a national park and bird refuge, hosting 1.5 million visitors every year.

We stayed at Union Square, easy walking distance from some of the city's famously beautiful neighborhoods, including Chinatown, which promised to be good fun that weekend of the Chinese New Year Parade, which—according to the hotel's smilingly helpful valet—is one of the ten best parades in the world.

On the day we were scheduled to visit Alcatraz, we set out on foot toward the ferry terminal. We walked through the gassy dome of the Stockton Street Tunnel and were dumped directly into the heart of a bustling Chinatown. It was barely 9:00 AM, and while the neighborhood around Union Square was sparsely populated with joggers and small groups of sunglasses-clad tourists carrying paper coffee cups, Chinatown was going at full tilt. Stockton Street was packed with people—mostly speaking Chinese—walking in and out of green grocers, chatting on the sidewalks, and hurrying from one place to another. The neon signs were all in Chinese, and—on the second and third floors—windows were flung open to reveal wire hangers of shirts and socks and underthings pushed out into the sun to dry. The sidewalks were lined with bins of dried shrimp and ginseng and rice, and the grocers were overflowing with the gorgeous fruits and vegetables of Northern California. There were heads of cabbage and bok choy and huge globe grapes. There were snake beans and broccoli spears and dusty mauve eggplants. And there were also things I couldn't identify—jagged red tubers that looked like artichokes but weren't, a bright green vegetable that resembled an oversized wrinkled cucumber, and an alluring fruit that suggested “mango” but was not quite.

We jostled our way through the streets, mumbling “excuse me” and taking care not to splash coffee on those we bumped up against. But then, as soon as we crossed the street into North Beach, the sidewalks became sleepy and abandoned again. It was as if we had passed through a bright dream of China on our way to visit one of its dissident sons.

Once we arrived at Pier 33—where the Alcatraz ferry took off—there was no mistaking it for anywhere but the America of capitalism and spectacle. The wharf was crawling with strollers and down vests and breakfast burritos. We plodded alongside other bleary tourists as we carried our pre-printed boarding passes through stanchioned switchbacks. A man in a sharp green polo shirt took our tickets and smiled mellowly: “Have a great time.” Right before we boarded the ferry, we passed through a staging area where a commercial photographer was taking pictures of slightly dazed looking families posing in front of a huge plastic photograph of Alcatraz. “No, thanks,” David quipped as we passed by the photographer. “We don't need to give the NSA a snapshot.”

Most everybody around us was talking about the weather and dinner and plans for the rest of the day. They were decidedly not talking about why they were going to Alcatraz, what they thought about the work of Ai Weiwei, or how

they felt about the government spying program revealed by Edward Snowden. And nobody around us was talking about incarceration rates or surveillance or political repression either. I had recently read that only 40 percent of Americans opposed the program of widespread, suspicionless surveillance. That was consistent with my friends' and students' attitudes. As one of them put it, "I'm not doing anything wrong, so I don't care." On a Saturday morning in a line full of strangers, I couldn't pull myself out of my natural reticence to ask their thoughts on these matters, as much as I was desperate to know. So—ironically—I settled for eavesdropping.

Though you wouldn't detect it from the carnival atmosphere on Pier 33, these are unnerving times. There is a kind of capricious depravity at large that has us looking over our shoulders and wringing our hands. Each time we turn on our televisions or computers, there is ISIS, speaking the Queen's English and beheading people in highly produced infomercials. There are radicals slaughtering cartoonists at their desks and others dragging schoolgirls into the forest. There are unhinged gunmen shooting American students at a dizzying rate. And airline pilots flying planes into mountains and downing others into the sea, not to mention the countless acts of daily violence and cruelty being carried out in our homes and neighborhoods.

And meanwhile those who are commissioned to protect us are enacting their own brutalities. Last year, we read with horror the Senate Intelligence Committee's report that implicated the CIA in using sleep deprivation, waterboarding, and rectal feeding during interrogations, while in the first five months of 2015, 385 Americans were shot and killed by the police in their own communities. Last summer, we watched night after night as demonstrators in Ferguson, Missouri, protested the shooting of an unarmed black teenager by a white police officer. And in addition to the arrest of hundreds of protestors, journalists covering the demonstrations were also threatened, harassed, and arrested by militarized riot police. According to PEN International, in the first half of 2014 alone, 810 writers and journalists were arrested, detained, or killed by authorities around the world. And almost daily, we learn about the ever more sophisticated and intrusive ways that governments monitor and record the activities of the world's citizens. As playwright Tom Stoppard recently wrote in the *Guardian*, "The world of surveillance operated by the people we pay to guard us exceeds the fevered dreams of the Stasi."

I first learned about Ai Weiwei in 2010 when he filled the enormous Turbine Hall of the Tate Modern with a hundred million individually cast and painted porcelain sunflower seeds. The sunflower seeds were made in Jingdezhen, a city that has been celebrated for its porcelain for seventeen hundred years. Sixteen hundred people worked on the project, and each seed went through a thirty-step process before it was painted and fired at thirteen hundred degrees and then poured, with the rest of the hundred million, onto the concrete floor of the Tate Modern. I couldn't help but hear the echo of the famous Allan Ginsberg poem, "Sunflower Sutra":

—We're not our skin of grime, we're not dread bleak dusty imageless locomotives,
we're golden sunflowers inside, blessed by our own seed & hairy naked
accomplishment-bodies growing into mad black formal sunflowers in the sunset,
spied on by our own eyes under the shadow of the mad locomotive riverbank
sunset

Frisco hilly tincan evening sitdown vision.

There must be something about a sunflower, because Ai Weiwei's exhibit also asserted a vision of the "golden sunflowers inside" in the face of a bleak consumerist and repressive culture. As Ai put it: "Seeds grow . . . The crowd will have its way, eventually." Though the metaphor offered by *Sunflower Seeds* was not particularly subtle—Ai himself said he wanted "people who don't understand art to understand what I am doing"—it made the point without reverting to the dissonance or incoherence that often marks conceptual installations. In fact, the seeds themselves were almost sweet.

It turns out that the combination of sweet and unsubtle is Ai Weiwei's signature stance. In November of 2013, he tweeted his intention to place a fresh bouquet of flowers in the front basket of a bicycle parked outside his Beijing studio every morning until his passport is returned by the government. His passport was confiscated in April 2011, and Ai has been unable to leave China since. His floral resistance has generated the #flowersforfreedom hashtag under which people from around the world tweet photographs of flowers in protest of Ai's travel restrictions.

Despite the quietness of that protest, Ai's life has been marked with hardship from the beginning. Though his father—Ai Qing—was a widely read and mostly nonpolitical poet, he ran afoul of Mao Zedong and was branded a "rightist" following a brief period of free expression (called the "Hundred Flowers Campaign," ironically). In 1958, when Ai Weiwei was only a year old, Ai Qing and his family were detained in a labor camp for dissidents. Later, during the Cultural Revolution, the family was sent to "little Siberia" where they lived in an underground cavern and Ai Qing was forced to clean the village's communal toilets.

Ai Weiwei moved to New York to study art in the early 1980s, where he befriended Allen Ginsberg and became acquainted with the art of Marcel Duchamp and other conceptualists whose work influences him to this day. Ai returned to China in 1993 to care for his ailing father and became internationally famous for, among other things, his design work on the Bird's Nest Stadium that was the icon of the 2008 Beijing Olympics. But as he became increasingly critical of the government and more visible in China and abroad, he also became a target for the Communist authorities. In 2009 he had emergency brain surgery following a police beating, and in 2010 the government demolished his newly built studio, arguing that he didn't have the necessary permits.

Then—on April 3, 2011—Ai Weiwei was removed from a flight bound for Hong Kong and detained for eighty-one days, while artists and activists around the world protested his arrest and demanded to know where he had been taken. As he described his detention in the *Guardian*:

During my detention in China I was watched 24 hours a day. The light was always on. There were two guards on two-hour shifts standing next to me—even watching when I swallowed a pill; I had to open my mouth so they could see my throat. You have to take a shower in front of them; they watch you while you brush your teeth, in the name of making sure you're not hurting yourself. They had three surveillance cameras to make sure the guards would not communicate with me.

After almost three months, Ai was released, charged with tax evasion, and stripped of his passport. Despite almost constant surveillance and travel restrictions since then, Ai continues to criticize the Chinese government and to participate in installations in China and abroad. Despite the fact that Ai Weiwei was unable to visit Alcatraz, he eagerly seized the opportunity to exhibit there and designed the installation based on photographs, stories, drawings, and maps of the prison.

Dock to dock, the ferry ride to Alcatraz takes fifteen minutes, so much of the boat time is consumed with loading, safety briefings, and instructions for disembarking. A few minutes from landing, a short prerecorded audio presentation blasts over the loud speakers, briefing sightseers about Alcatraz's history as a federal prison, then as the site of the AIM protest, and now as a national park and bird refuge. After again wishing us a good day, the audio wrapped up: "Alcatraz. It's so much more than just a prison." I laughed loudly and looked around to share the joke, but no one else seemed to have been listening. Mostly, they were taking pictures of one another and themselves in front of the looming island.

In the midst of all the high spirits and flawless helpfulness, as we boarded the ferry I spotted a large sign that read "Your cell is subject to search at any time. Contraband items found in your cell will be confiscated and a disciplinary report will be placed against you for possession of same." I turned to David and mouthed, "What the hell?" and then, just as quickly, realized that the sign was a replica of one that had hung at Alcatraz when it was still a prison. For a split second, I had actually believed that the US Government was reserving the right to search our cell phones as a condition of visiting a national park.

As soon as the ferry docked—even before we began to unload—a barrel-chested ranger wearing a Smokey the Bear hat began welcoming us to Alcatraz over the shore PA system. He bantered with folks as they got off the boat, taking wagers on who had come from farthest away and pointing out the nearest restrooms, which he called "the loo." Once we were all gathered around him on the plaza, he asked people to raise their hands if they were there to see the Ai Weiwei exhibit. About a quarter of us raised our hands, and he pointed us up the hill to the New Industries Building, shooing us away with yet another "have a good time" and a reminder not to eat or drink anywhere except on the dock.

The entrance to the Ai exhibit was, not surprisingly, dramatic. The front door of the New Industries Building—which was the laundry and mending shop for the prison (making me wonder about what made those industries "new" and reminding me of the Robert Hass poem: "All the new thinking is about loss. /

In this it resembles all the old thinking.”)—was filled with the head of a huge paper and bamboo dragon. Its crayon-box colors, curled whiskers, and goggly eyes all signaled friendliness in the vein of Toothless from the *How to Train Your Dragon* children’s film rather than fierceness à la Smaug of *The Hobbit*. I realized later that the pupils that gave the dragon’s eyes their goggliness were replicas of the Twitter logo, Ai Weiwei’s favorite means of communication, despite that it is technically banned in China.

Behind the enormous head—which was shipped to San Francisco suspended in a gigantic crate—wound a body and tail that was at least a hundred yards long, consisting of rainbow-colored circles, joined by bamboo rods. Many of the circles were painted with bright scales and flowers, but intermittently there were circles featuring quotes from individuals from around the globe who have been detained or harassed by their governments, including Edward Snowden and Nelson Mandela, Le Quoc Quan and Irom Sharmila Chanu. Ai Weiwei himself was quoted as saying, “Every one of us is a potential convict,” breaking through our voyeuristic remove and challenging us to suspend our smug certainty that we will never be on the other side of the bars.

But voyeurism is the stock and trade of Alcatraz, and nothing cuts across cultures like the titillating promise of a notorious prison. Despite at least a half-day commitment and a thirty-dollar ticket price, five thousand people a day visit Alcatraz, and the organizers anticipate that five hundred thousand of them will have seen at least part of the Ai Weiwei exhibit during its run. On the day we visited, the crowd was more heterogeneous than the audience of any other art exhibit I’ve ever attended. There were folks of many races, cultures, and—presumably—creeds, small children and senior citizens, gay couples and straight couples, mothers and daughters. People came right up to the dragon, causing it to tremble on its wires. As I watched a family with three young children come within inches of the fragile whiskers and snout, I said to the docent I had been chatting with: “That must be nerve wracking. Those whiskers look like they could break off in a second.”

“Oh, it is,” she replied. “But that’s how he wants it.”

“Ai Weiwei?”

“Yes. He wants the dragon to have a chance to move, even if it is caused by the breath and steps of people walking by.”

I thought back on that conversation later that evening as we watched the dragon dances in the Chinese New Year’s Parade—block after block of dancers running through the streets at full speed, lifting the dragons high above their heads and menacing children and tourists, as the dragons chased after the lead dancers, who were bearing pearls on the end of long sticks. The firecrackers and screeching toddlers and spotlights and drums made me think back to Ai Weiwei’s bright dragon, which must have been—by that time of night—utterly still in the dark laundry at Alcatraz.

It reminded me a bit of the days when I had just begun to work as a criminal defense lawyer. As I was out living my life—going to concerts, hanging out with

friends—I would randomly burst into tears, overcome by the fact that a client whom I had visited earlier in the day was sitting alone in his cell for the night. Or at least that’s what I imagined he was doing. The daily pleasures of my life brought home the realities of incarceration. Though I often spent hours a day in some form of lockup, I could always leave while my client usually couldn’t. And in San Francisco, I could spend the time and money to remember those who are detained by repressive governments, but then I could move on to an overpriced dinner and a raucous parade while the “With Wind” dragon and the people it commemorated remained in their dim cells.

The second large room in the New Industries Building was filled with “Trace,” a massive brightly colored Lego installation composed of 176 portraits of artists, writers, and activists who have been imprisoned or otherwise persecuted by their governments. According to another friendly docent, the panels were built from 1.2 million Lego bricks and were assembled by eighty volunteers in accordance with Ai Weiwei’s designs. The portraits were laid out in five large panels spreading across the peeling concrete floor and covering at least another eighty yards of the laundry. The portraits were varying sizes and colors, with different typefaces identifying each person depicted, including Nelson Mandela and Ta Phong Tan, Eskinder Nega and Lolo, and Gedhun Choeky Nyima, the six-year-old who was abducted by the Chinese government after he was named the Panchen Lama.

To me, the most striking part of “Traces” was the inclusion of Edward Snowden and Chelsea Manning. It was unsettling to see Snowden, who is still in limbo in Russia, and Manning, who is serving a thirty-five-year sentence in Leavenworth for providing classified documents to WikiLeaks, celebrated as free-speech martyrs right under the noses of rangers on the federal government payroll, all of them grinning and reminding us to “have a great time.” It was as if the familiarity of the bright plastic building blocks distracted them from the critique aimed squarely at their employer.

Later, in the cafeteria of the main prison, visitors were invited to write words of encouragement on postcards addressed to the writers and activists who were pictured in “Trace.” The postcards were decorated with birds and plants from the countries where the prisoners were being held. I chose three postcards at random, and ended up with Jamaloddin Khanjani, who is serving a twenty-year sentence for spreading propaganda against Iran; Mohammed al-Ajami, who is serving a fifteen-year sentence for writing and reading a poem critical of the emir in Qatar; and Chelsea Manning. When I sat down to fill them out, all I could think to write was “Keep the faith.” I felt like I was writing a note in an eighth-grade yearbook (“Stay foxy. Don’t ever change.”), and that faith might be the only thing that tied Mohammed al-Ajami and Chelsea Manning and me together.

Despite the scale and flash of “With Wind” and “Trace,” the most affecting parts of the exhibit, those that managed to get beyond broad statements and bright colors, were those that were the most interior, those that invited us

to imagine the experience of incarceration. In “Stay Tuned,” Ai Weiwei and his collaborators took over twelve tiny cells with cracked walls and exposed plumbing, each lit by a single bulb, into which they broadcast the work of artists and activists who had been imprisoned at some point. The works varied from Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Beyond Vietnam” speech to “Virgin Mary, Put Putin Away” by Pussy Riot to “Sorrow Tears and Blood” by Nigerian musician and activist Fela Kuti. Visitors were invited to step inside the cells and sit on a single metal stool facing the wall to listen to a snippet of song or poem or speech piped in through a vent. While it was fun to hear Pussy Riot’s defiance, listening to Iranian poet Ahmad Shamlu read his poem “In This Dead-End Street” was essential and haunting. It was read in Persian, and though I did not understand the language, it was as if I could hear the voice inside his head as he wrote in isolation. In the English translation posted outside the cell, I could read that the poem bears witness to the repression woven into the most intimate of hours. Here is how it begins:

In this dead-end street
They smell your breath
lest, God forbid,
you’ve said I love you.
They sniff at your heart—
these are strange times, my dear
—and they flog love
by the side of the road at the barrier.
Love must be hidden at home in the closet.
In this crooked dead-end street, twisted with cold
they fuel their bonfire
with poems and songs.
Danger! Don’t dare think.
These are strange times, my dear
The knock on the door in the night
is someone who’s come to snuff out the light.

As much as I admired “Stay Tuned,” the piece that moved me most was “Refraction,” also housed in the New Industries Building. “Refraction” is a five-ton model of a wing made from repurposed solar panels and household pots and kettles, all salvaged from the Tibetan plateau. In order to see the sculpture at the center of “Refraction,” visitors had to walk along the “lower gun gallery” where guards once watched over inmates at work in the laundry. I never got an entirely clear view of “Refraction” through the crooked angles of the narrow gun gallery and the cracked wired glass. In many ways, it was that strain to apprehend that made the best use of Alcatraz’s symbol-rich space. The exhibit notes made much of the fact that—similar to “With Wind”—“Refraction” is a flightless wing inside an impenetrable prison. For me, though, the thing that was most affecting about “Refraction” was that it was just glimpsed, that it was nearly out of sight. It might have been imagined. It might have been manufactured by longing. Yes, by the longing for flight, but also by the longing for the comforts of home. From one angle, you could catch a distinct look at a dented aluminum teakettle with a

splash of red paint. It was so homely and out of place that it nearly brought me to my knees. That teakettle belonged to a mother, to a grandmother. It was the teakettle at the center of the daily rituals that make up a life. And its placement there, suspended on the edge of a massive metal wing behind cracked and broken glass, made it feel taunting and hallucinatory, as it must have felt sometimes for the inmates to see laundry fluttering inside the windows of the New Industries Building, reminding them of bright mornings where the windows were thrown open to dry socks and shirts in the warm air.

The other unsettling aspect of “Refraction” was that the narrow hallways of the gun gallery overlooked not only the concrete room that contained the sculpture itself but also the main workspace of the New Industries Building, where hundreds of people were walking through “With Wind” and “Trace.” People were so tender in their unguarded state, moving their lips as they read, pointing out quotes to their children, sending text messages, and taking selfies in front of the dragon. It was a kind of forced watching that put *@Large* visitors in the position of both guard and inmate, both surveyor and surveilled.

Though I found “Stay Tuned” and “Refraction” to be both moving and evocative of the space, *@Large* as a whole was a little haphazard and incoherent. Though the overall message was loud, it wasn’t very clear. It was a scattershot protest of repression in some of its multiple forms. Maybe that just reflects our own ambivalence and confusion about the state of the world, or maybe it was the result of both the venue and the intended audience. Ai Weiwei had the opportunity to reach hundreds of thousands of people and a chance to impress upon casual visitors the widespread practice of arrest and intimidation. Though it is hard to say whether visitors will recall the names or stories of any particular dissidents, they will surely at least remember that they exist and that—at least for some—art has consequences. In the end, *@Large* was a blunt litany of injustice, a kind of wall of the missing.

Meanwhile, while we were wandering the halls of Alcatraz, another litany was being recited. Partway through the day, Twitter started lighting up with praise for President Obama and his speech at the base of the Edmund Pettis Bridge in Selma, Alabama. The President, along with members of Congress and hundreds of other dignitaries, was commemorating the Fiftieth Anniversary of Bloody Sunday and the march to demand voting rights across the South. Leaning on the words of James Baldwin and Walt Whitman, President Obama placed the Selma marchers at the center of the American character. Along with the Tuskegee Airmen and Navajo Code Talkers and police officers and firefighters, the President invoked “storytellers, writers, poets, and artists who abhor unfairness, and despise hypocrisy, and give voice to the voiceless, and tell truths that need to be told.”

It was an inspirational speech, a nuanced speech, one in which the President not only celebrated the past but took a gritty view of the present. He decried ongoing racial injustice while acknowledging how far we’ve come. It was soaring and beautifully delivered. It reminded me of the candidate Barack Obama, with

his inclusive rhetoric and eye on the meta-narrative. And yet, as much as it brought tears to my eyes to see Congressman John Lewis—who was beaten nearly to death that Sunday in 1965—jump up to embrace the nation’s first African American President, I couldn’t join in the applause wholeheartedly. I couldn’t throw off my skepticism and alarm. Because while President Obama was celebrating the leavening function of artists and writers in a free society, he was also overseeing the largest program of mass surveillance the world has ever known. We know that his White House is allowing the National Security Agency and who knows who else to scoop up whatever information they can about whomever they can, sometimes with the rubber stamp of the FISA court, sometimes not. We know that the administration is cozy with Facebook and Google and Yahoo, all of which harvest private, soul-bearing information about virtually every adult (and many children) on the planet, whether through their own online activities or through tools like Google Maps, cell phone trackers, and widespread surveillance cameras.

I fear that while the President is out singing the praises of protest and dissent, he is simultaneously building the infrastructure for totalitarianism. If I am honest with myself, I actually don’t care that much if Barack Obama is perusing my Google searches and reading my texts with my children, tracking my car as it passes through toll booths or viewing my street day by day, but I sure don’t want Ted Cruz or Scott Walker doing it. And those two are certainly not the worst I can imagine. We know—Ai Weiwei and others have shown us—that the way from surveillance to harassment to arrest to torture to death is a well-worn path. And it is a tremendously tempting path for those with power.

It would be easy to settle on “hypocritical” as the last word for President Obama as he both celebrates and violates civil liberties. And yet that isn’t quite right either. In 2009, when President Obama met with civil rights lawyers who were concerned about preventative detention, he is reported to have replied: “We have different roles. You represent clients and you are doing exactly what you should do. I am the President of the United States, with the responsibility to protect the American people. Do we just release them and take the chance they blow you up? There’s only so much a democracy can bear.”

So when the President beckons artists to “tell the truths that need to be told,” perhaps he is not just papering over his own culpability but is calling artists to embrace their role in a pluralistic society. Perhaps he is drawing our eyes toward the work of Ai Weiwei and those activists that he is commemorating in *@Large*. Perhaps the President is issuing a challenge to the half million people who walked through a notorious American prison and saw the faces of world citizens suffering detention and torture. Perhaps, when President Obama reminds us that there are other bridges still to be crossed, he is challenging us to raise our voices in protest, to hold him accountable. Or maybe I just want to believe that if Barack Obama were not the President of the United States he would be sounding the alarm, warning us of creeping authoritarianism.

Ai Weiwei conceives of the role of artists slightly differently than

President Obama does. While he embraces activism, he also elevates the promise of the artist's innermost sensibility: "Today the whole world is still struggling for freedom . . . In such a situation, only art can reveal the deep inner voice of every individual with no concern for political borders, nationality, race, or religion." As a whole, *@Large* only partially fulfilled Ai's own vision. There were mere glimpses of the inner life, of the deep interiority that allows the viewer to sidle up to the consciousness of the artist. But on the other hand, *@Large* did fulfill the externalized civic role that President Obama imagines for art. A Chinese dissident on house arrest reached across the ocean and—with the assistance of the US Park Service—challenged the leaders of the world. Though *@Large* was neither subtle nor entirely clear-headed, it made the call and demanded that we pay attention.