

The Rock and a hard place: In America, art is helping prisoners adapt to life outside
An exhibition on Alcatraz shows how artists can contribute to criminal-justice reform



Alcatraz, known as the Rock, was once among America's most fearsome prisons, cut off from the free world on a windswept island in San Francisco Bay. Today it is a national park, visited by 1.4m tourists a year, who amble around the famous cellblocks and take selfies against the bars. Until October, if they venture to a derelict building on the island's north side, they will also encounter giant images of serving and former prisoners. They are not the faces of notorious criminals such as the "Birdman", "Machine Gun" Kelly or Al Capone; rather they are current and released inmates of Californian institutions who aspire to something more than infamy.

At a recent gala for the unusual exhibition in this gritty space, several contributors stood before self-portraits, each framed as an oversize identity card and depicting a new self they have imagined—a "Future id" to replace their prison incarnation. Guss Lumumba Edwards, aged 61 and softly spoken, sketched a golden trail around his head, left by a shooting star that has the shape of the African continent (pictured). Alongside he has rendered his tools—paintbrushes and spray cans—and a city skyline. After serving 40 years for murder, Mr Edwards was released six months ago from San Quentin state prison. The painting, he says, "brings me back to where I came from," and also points in a new direction: "trying to heal and stop the violence in the community."

In Lily Gonzalez's card, she thrusts a red rose toward the viewer. "It's about shifting how I view my relationship to the world," says the 36-year-old, who served two and a half years for lesser crimes she would rather not discuss. She sees her future not just in terms of employment, "but a way of being, flowers and colours and healing." The rose is "a nod to [the rapper] Tupac's poem about the rose growing from the concrete."

The show is the result of a five-year effort led by Gregory Sale, an artist based in Arizona who focuses on prison in America. Mr Sale works in the growing field of "social-practice" art, in which artists

collaborate with citizens on aesthetic responses to problems. In this case, the goal was to build a bridge between prison and life outside. Working initially with the Anti-Recidivism Coalition, a support network in Los Angeles, Mr Sale and his other partners honed the idea for “Future ids at Alcatraz”.

Those leaving prison face daunting obstacles, from barriers to employment to stigma and isolation. It became evident, Mr Sale says, that achieving acceptance in society is “a cultural problem. So the question became, how can we find cultural solutions to that?” With his help, more than 100 people have done so by illustrating their own transformations—and their determination to make the most of their second chance.

Art “makes you come to your own realisation,” observes Kirn Kim. “It’s not about someone telling you what to think. It opens up different parts of your brain.” As a juvenile, he was convicted for aiding and abetting a murder and served 20 years. He took part in the workshop two years after he got out, while “really struggling” in an Asian-American culture in which he felt shamed. Deciding what to draw helped him see that he no longer had to hide, he says. The image on his new id shows him holding a microphone and addressing a prison yard—a version of the community organiser that, at 43, he has now become.

The art of freedom

Using art to rehabilitate prisoners is not new. But the way policymakers think about the transition to life beyond bars is changing, as is the number of people making that leap. America’s penal system is at a turning point. Across the country, reforms have begun to halt and reverse the effects of decades of mass incarceration. As sentencing and bail laws become less draconian, more people are being released; the disproportionate punishment of ethnic minorities is now widely recognised. California has been in the vanguard of these reforms, after the federal Supreme Court ordered it to reduce prison overcrowding. A quarter of the state’s prison population has been transferred to local jails or parole over the past decade.

Arts organisations are responding to this shift. Players from the Street Symphony in Los Angeles help set former inmates’ poetry to music. In the nearby San Fernando Valley, the Tia Chucha Centro Cultural includes them in its open-mic and theatre performances. Across the country in Chicago, meanwhile, in a programme called Changing Voices, young people who have left the justice system are recasting their experiences as musical theatre for students, judges and legislators.

Many of these projects are supported by the Art for Justice Fund, a philanthropic effort which itself illustrates the power of art. In 2016 Agnes Gund, a New York art collector, was shocked by “13th”, a documentary by Ava DuVernay that traced the links between mass incarceration and the history of racism in America. She sold one of her prized works and put \$100m into the new fund. It has since collaborated with scores of artists and groups advocating criminal-justice reform. “There’s an urgency to begin to see incarcerated people as they really are, as human beings, as husbands and fathers and mothers and daughters,” reckons Helena Huang, the fund’s project director. “At the most fundamental level, art gives people a voice.”

Beyond bars

Individuals who have discharged their debt to society are not the only ones using the arts for transformation. Alcatraz, too, is reconsidering its mission. It is now part of an international coalition of “sites of conscience”, which includes the Nuremberg trials memorial and aims to use difficult memories to inspire action. Art exhibitions—such as “Future ids” and a show by Ai Weiwei in 2014 that focused on the Chinese artist’s own prison experience—have helped turn this grim facility into a place to think as well as gawk.

“We have a giant prison system, the largest in the world, and we are in a unique position to have conversations around incarceration,” says Emily Levine, a park ranger. The habit of asking hard

questions has spread across the Rock. Visitors disembarking from the ferry were recently confronted with some unusual messages from the rangers. One whiteboard reads: "2,300,000 us adults are currently incarcerated. What do you know about the prison, jail or immigration centre nearest to your home?" Another simply asked, "Do prisons make you feel safer?"

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