Ai Weiwei’s artwork in support of Julian Assange rejected by Firstsite UK exhibition

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Globally recognised artist Ai Weiwei has said the decision by British visual arts organisation Firstsite to exclude an artwork invited from him is an attempt to silence his continued support for Julian Assange.

Firstsite had “used my name to promote the so-called ‘biggest exhibition’ in the UK while also deciding against the core values of art, freedom of expression.”

Ai’s *Postcard for Political Prisoners* was explicit in its aim to enlist support for Assange, under conditions in which days before the exhibition was to open Assange had just undergone a show trial in London, with the US government seeking his extradition on Espionage Act charges that could see him locked up forever with a 175 year prison sentence.

Ai said he was “honoured” by the rejection, which “gave a real meaning to my artwork.” He explained, “I think the reason is related to Assange who has been incarcerated in HM Prison Belmarsh in London since his arrest on 11 April 2019, and that they don’t want to touch on a topic like Assange.”

Firstsite’s “Great Big Art Exhibition,” which ran from January 28 to May 9, was billed as “a 100 day celebration of the creativity in each and everyone of us.” It was intended as a means of sharing art in “front windows, gardens, balconies and outdoor spaces.”

Firstsite invited contributions from prominent artists. The idea was that artists would respond to a different theme every two weeks, encouraging the broadest possible creativity and sharing of responses. On January 18, Ai was invited to contribute, and told that “artworks can be made of anything.” Four days later, Firstsite director Sally Shaw rang him. Following Ai’s agreement to participate, he and Firstsite were in constant contact about the content of his contribution.

Ai revisited his work at a 2014 exhibition at the former Alcatraz Federal Penitentiary in San Francisco, where he made postcards printed with the address of a political prisoner. Visitors were encouraged to write on the postcards, which were later sent to the prisoners.

The artwork delivered to Firstsite on April 22 was titled *Postcard for Political Prisoners*. Sending it over, he told Firstsite they were still awaiting an Amnesty International list of political prisoners who would be able and willing to receive mail from the public. Firstsite thanked him “for all you’ve done to get this to us.”

On April 25, Ai advised Firstsite of delays in getting information from Amnesty International. There were so many political prisoners it was proving hard to collate their details. Ai asked about posting details of the project on the Firstsite exhibition website.

They did not reply, nor to follow-up communications on May 13 and 17. Ai’s studio then asked Greg Hilty, director of the Lisson Gallery in London, to continue the inquiries. On May 20, after 27 days of stonewalling, Sally Shaw rejected the work.

Firstsite, she wrote, were “unable to take it forward for two reasons. Sadly, due to the timing of when the idea came through from the studio, it has made it difficult for us to include it... Also, the concept of the project is to encourage people across the nation to make artworks and display them in their windows. The sending of a postcard takes us away from this intention. I must assure you, sincerely, that this is in no way a reflection of our appreciation of the idea itself, which is remarkable and profound, and equally our esteem for Weiwei and his work.”

Ai wrote that Shaw’s message had “exactly the same tone as a rejection letter sent to job applicants,” although she had solicited his involvement in the first place. He dealt with Shaw’s two stated reasons. The question of timing was spurious. He had been given no deadline for his contribution, and it was still in good time for the exhibition’s final theme, “Performance.” Ai said it would have fit well here, “thematically and temporally.”

Regarding the idea that the postcard form “takes us away” from the exhibition’s aims, Ai asked, “Why wouldn’t my conceptual artwork *Postcard for Political Prisoners* inspire people to make artworks in the form of a postcard and engage in art-activism? What could stop participants from sending the postcard to themselves and pasting it on the

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window?"

At issue, he insisted, was the work's content. The reverse of the card featured a sketch from his 2015 work *All Fingers Must Point Down*. The front focused attention on the world's highest profile political prisoner, WikiLeaks co-founder Julian Assange.

In 2016, Ai interviewed Assange who had received asylum at the Ecuadorian Embassy in London. That October, Assange gifted him his treadmill, an image of which is on the front of *Postcard*. Ai has long demanded Assange's freedom, saying, "I am a strong supporter of Assange because I firmly believe in the importance of investigative journalism in a civil society."

He felt "the combination between my encounter with him and my ongoing interest in sending letters to political prisoners was crystallised into *Postcard for Political Prisoners*. It is a project which not only shows care to political prisoners, but it also encourages participants to reflect upon the relationship between the freedom that they enjoy and the price these fighters pay for that freedom."

Ai asked pointedly, "Whom has my postcard with Julian Assange's treadmill offended?"

He noted a general reluctance even to mention Assange, as witnessed in Shaw's clumsy response: "she seemed too afraid to give us a straight answer and too maladroit to round it off."

They are not alone: "Everyone is avoiding it—not just in the mainstream media, but in the circles of art and culture in general."

Ai's statement in *ArtNet News* was intended, he said, "to provoke everyone reading to think about the role that contemporary art plays in daily life."

This incident "unravels… the art world's hypocrisy and corruption to reveal a world that considers art as a decoration and a sedative within our capitalist and consumerist society, a world where cultural activities concern culture alone and nothing more."

He called out the hypocrisy of the exhibition, and its museum backers, for advocating a democratic freedom of expression it actively denied, and which it has transformed into a form of flattering the powerful and wealthy. Firstsite rejected his work, but their website continues to thank Ai for his contribution. "I feel ashamed," he wrote, "that nowadays all art does is whitewash."

Ai (b. 1957, Beijing) is a vocal critic of the Chinese Communist Party's record on democratic rights. When he was detained for 81 days without charge in 2011, it suited many imperialist politicians to use his case as a lever against China. Among them were the very forces now lined up against Assange. It is to Ai's credit that he has not comfortably adapted to these regimes since leaving China in 2015. He spent four years in Germany, of which he said, "I don't like a state or culture that so obeys authority." He moved to a Britain he recognised as "colonial."

Ai has increasingly explained his art as a political response to the world, telling the *Guardian*, "If my art has any meaning, it is as a tool for freedom. If I see people victimised by authoritarianism, I am a soldier in defending their freedom."

He repeated these themes in his response to Firstsite: "Art has become a tool to numb ourselves so that we may avoid introspection. Any reflections through art are undesirable because they evoke pain and suffering and, if we delve into it, we would all be found guilty—and artists are guiltier than others because we have far more opportunities for free expression."

The comments touch not just on the corruption of a corporate art world, but address the question of how artists need to respond to the world today.

Much of Ai's recent work has lived up to his view that "contemporary art should be related to people's lives and concerned with humanitarian ideas; art is, first and foremost, about human beings." Many of his works have shown a genuine sympathy with the oppressed at a personal level, although they have sometimes struggled to go deeper. The WSWS noted that everyone interested in the defence of the rights of immigrants should watch his remarkable documentary *Human Flow*, but "with an understanding that the film lags far behind the times in terms of its political content."

The rapidity of political change may be pushing Ai further. The design of *Postcard* was based on a "personal contact with Assange," but the continued threat to the journalist, and suppression of even a favourable mention of him, are forcing Ai to consider the burning questions, "What is art and what is its purpose". He is right to conclude that Firstsite's "rejection made *Postcard for a Political Prisoner* a truly worthwhile project."

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