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Art and prison

# The Rock and a hard place

As America rethinks incarceration, art is helping prisoners adapt to life outside

ALCATRAZ, KNOWN as the Rock, was once among America's most fearsome prisons, cut off from the free world on a wind-swept island in San Francisco Bay. Today it is a national park, visited by 1.4m tourists a year, who amble around the famous cell-blocks 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