Chinese Artist Ai Weiwei Commissioned to Create New Site-Specific Works on Alcatraz Island

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SAN FRANCISCO.- Chinese artist and rights advocate Ai Weiwei will create a new body of site-specific artwork on Alcatraz Island, the notorious former federal penitentiary in the center of San Francisco Bay, now a national park welcoming more than a million visitors annually. Organized by the San Francisco–based nonprofit FOR-SITE Foundation in partnership with the National Park Service and the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy, Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz will include a series of large-scale installations occupying several buildings on Alcatraz. Funded entirely through individual and foundation donations, the exhibition will be part of the regular Alcatraz admission ticket and accessible to anyone visiting the island.

On view September 27, 2014, through April 26, 2015, Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz will respond to the island and its layered history as a place of detainment and protest. The exhibition will feature
new sculpture, sound, and multimedia works exploring pressing themes that have characterized Ai Weiwei’s art and activism—the right to free expression, the irrepressible nature of creativity, and the role of art, artists, and individuals worldwide in shaping social change. The installations will address these concepts in ways that are both personal to the artist’s experiences and life in China, and resonant with individuals and communities internationally. Responding to the potent history of Alcatraz, the exhibition will examine incarceration as a tool of repressive governments, and creative expression as an act of defiance and individual freedom. Artworks will be installed in four sites throughout Alcatraz.

One of the most prominent artists of the 21st century, Ai Weiwei is an architect, sculptor, photographer, filmmaker, curator, writer, and activist whose work often responds to conditions in China, including the government’s repression of free speech and expression. In the spring of 2011, Ai was detained by the Chinese government for 81 days on charges of tax evasion. After being released on bail in 2011, he was prohibited from leaving Beijing without permission for one year. Although Ai has been allowed to leave Beijing since his bail was lifted in 2012, he is still prohibited from traveling outside of China.

Ai has developed the overall conceptual direction for this exhibition and the individual works from his studio in Beijing in dialogue with FOR-SITE Founder and Executive Director Cheryl Haines, who conceived and will curate Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz.

“At the FOR-SITE Foundation, we’ve seen firsthand how thought provoking and inspiring it is for the general public to experience contemporary art in dialogue with our natural and cultural environment,” said Haines. “Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz will expose broad audiences to new work by one of the great creators and activists of our time in a complex historic setting, inviting them to witness and consider the impact of creative expression even in the face of political repression or physical incarceration.”

Because the artist is currently unable to visit Alcatraz, Haines has made numerous trips to Ai’s studio in Beijing to deliver in-depth information about the site, including maps, archival materials, photographs, and video footage conveying the history of Alcatraz and the particular spaces where the work will be installed. Continuing a strategy regularly employed by the artist, the artworks themselves will be fabricated by others: studio assistants, classical Chinese craftsmen, and volunteer citizens, adding a participatory element to the project that is characteristic of Ai’s work. Consistent with the artist’s active use of the Internet to inspire communication and collective action, Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz will include opportunities for visitors to engage with the show’s content using social media.

In addressing the themes of the exhibition, Ai Weiwei said, “The misconception of totalitarianism is that freedom can be imprisoned. This is not the case. When you constrain freedom, freedom will take flight and land on a windowsill.”

“Artists have always pushed people to see things differently, including parks,” said Golden Gate National Recreation Area Superintendent Frank Dean. “It is thrilling to offer Alcatraz as muse and canvas to such a masterful and courageous artist as Ai Weiwei. We look forward to seeing the ways in which Alcatraz inspires this new body of work, and to inspiring a deeper level of
interpretation and engagement with the island for the thousands of people who will visit during this special exhibition.”

“Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz continues a dynamic history of collaboration between the FOR-SITE Foundation, the National Park Service, and the Parks Conservancy to engage artists in the development of new work responding to historic park sites,” said Greg Moore, president and CEO of the Parks Conservancy. “We are especially proud to realize this ambitious project with the remarkable Ai Weiwei.”