

COMPLEX ART+DESIGN

Ai Weiwei Is Officially Staging an Exhibition at Alcatraz Island

By Leigh Silver
December 3, 2013



Image via New York Times

Ai Weiwei [hinted](#) at his desire to host an exhibition at San Francisco's Alcatraz Island last month, and his [Instagram picture](#) of handcuffs printed with "Alcatraz 2014" made it seem like the show was on. Now, the Chinese artist has won support and approval from the National Park Service, the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy, and the State Department (necessary because of Ai's reputation as a political dissident) to display "Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz."

This is the first time that the former prison in California will host a major arts exhibition. Ai's works have been selected so they will not disrupt the architecture or flow of visitors through the 22-acre site.

In 2011, Ai spent 81 days in a Chinese prison, a traumatic event that has informed much of his [art](#). By putting on an exhibition at Alcatraz, he will be able to directly address themes of imprisonment and institutional power.

“I have too many friends today who are still in jail,” [he told *The New York Times*](#). “The fact that people who are fighting for freedom have lost their freedom being incarcerated is more than ironic.”

San Francisco gallery owner **Cheryl Haines** originally suggested the Alcatraz idea to Ai, and she has been working with the artist to make the show happen. “He was talking about how interested he was in reaching a broad audience, beyond the art world,” [she told *The New York Times*](#). “It was just four months after his release from incarceration, and this thought popped into my mind: ‘What if I brought you a prison?’”

Despite finally gaining approval for his show, it is unlikely that Ai will be able to see the fruits of his labor in person. The Chinese government has stripped him of his right to travel. For this reason, he will also be absent from the opening of [his first major survey at the Perez Museum opening tomorrow in Miami](#).

“Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz” will run from Sept. 27, 2014 to April 26, 2015.