
ART

How S.F. gallerist bagged Ai installation

By Sam Whiting

It took San Francisco gallerist Cheryl Haines three trips to China in the past six months, but she has just finalized what she went for: a site-specific installation on Alcatraz by Ai Weiwei, the prominent Chinese activist-artist.

Ai, who is forbidden from leaving China, has been commissioned by the For-Site Foundation, which will develop pieces for six sites on the Rock, based on information that For-Site Founder Haines has delivered to his studio in Beijing. Haines will curate "At Large: Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz," which will touch on the history of imprisonment on the island, and run from Sept. 27, 2014, through

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Ai Weiwei's pieces will be at six sites on Alcatraz.

Ai Weiwei installation on Alcatraz

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"This is the most important project that I've ever been involved with," says Haines, in a brief phone call from an international art fair in Miami. "I get to work collaboratively with an artist that is not only incredibly important internationally, but someone who is engaged in dialogue around the need to respect basic human rights and freedom of expression."

Ai, 56, is the subject of "Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry," a documentary that won a special jury prize at Sundance in 2012 and showed at the San Francisco International Film Festival. The film introduced the wider world

to Ai's unique outlook on art and protest, something he has come to be known for in his home country.

In 2011, he was detained by the Chinese government and held for 81 days on charges of tax evasion. After his release, he was prohibited from leaving Beijing for one year and is still prohibited from leaving China.

"The misconception of totalitarianism is that freedom can be imprisoned," Ai told Haines during her most recent visit to China. "This is not the case. When you constrain freedom, freedom will take flight and land on a windowsill."

That conversation was in English, which Ai learned while living in New York in the 1980s. There he gave up painting in order to work in objects and installation. The object he is best known for is his work on the conceptual design of the "bird's nest" stadium that hosted opening and closing ceremonies for the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing.

Before the Olympics, Haines met Ai in Beijing, while researching the contemporary Chinese art scene. This project has been germinating since that visit five years ago, and it has taken nearly that long to find the right venue and theme. Haines returned to China to visit Ai just a few months after he was released from custody, in 2011, and asked if he would do a project in San Francisco.

"He said, 'I will do it if you bring me something interesting,'" says Haines, who came up with the idea on the spot. "What if I brought you a prison?"

She had the whole 11-hour flight home to figure out if she could deliver what she promised. It was easier than she expected. Both the National Park Service and the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy have signed on as partners. Due to the political sensitivity of the project, approval by the State Department was also sought, and it arrived the day before Thanks-



Courtesy Ai Weiwei 2009

Activist-artist Ai Weiwei was blocked from leaving China.

giving.

Ai has never been to Alcatraz, so Haines has brought Alcatraz to Ai. She has delivered maps, archival materials, photographs and video footage of the former federal penitentiary in the middle of San Francisco Bay.

Founded in 2003, the For-Site Foundation is a San Francisco nonprofit that promotes the

theme of "art about place." The exhibition will be funded through grants, individual and foundation donations.

For-Site is responsible for the three Andy Goldsworthy installations, "Spire," "Wood Line" and "Tree Fall," now on view in the Presidio of San Francisco. It also sponsored "International Orange," a group show inside the prison walls of Fort Point. It drew 150,000 people to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the Golden Gate Bridge.

"At Large" will add a zero to those numbers, guaranteed, because 1.5 million people visit the island annually, and the art will be free for the viewing.

"We hope that Ai Weiwei's project will add to the visitor experience by illuminating the plight of prisoners of conscience, internationally," Haines says.

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