



@LARGE
AI WEIWEI
ON ALCATRAZ

**Ai Weiwei Explores Human Rights and Freedom of Expression
Through Seven New Site-Specific Installations Inspired by
Alcatraz Island**

@Large: Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz Opens September 27, 2014



Ai Weiwei, *Refraction*, 2014 (studio installation view, Beijing); photo: Eric Gregory Powell, courtesy Ai Weiwei Studio

San Francisco, CA, September 24, 2014 — Featuring seven new sculpture, sound, and mixed-media works by Chinese artist Ai Weiwei, *@Large: Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz* explores human rights and freedom of expression in the context of this iconic historic site. Installed across four locations on Alcatraz and on view from September 27, 2014, through April 26, 2015, the exhibition is inspired by the island's layered history as a 19th-century military fortress, notorious federal penitentiary, significant site of Native American history, and now one of America's most visited national parks. Ai's artworks in *@Large* raise urgent questions about the social implications of incarceration and the definitions of liberty, justice, individual rights, and personal responsibility as interpreted through the lens of the artist's personal experiences. The exhibition is organized by the FOR-SITE Foundation in partnership with the National Park Service and the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy.

The site-specific installations are located in the two-story New Industries Building where "privileged" inmates were permitted to work; the Hospital main ward and psychiatric observation



cells; A Block, the only cellblock not remodeled since the military prison was constructed in the early 20th century; and the Dining Hall. With the exception of the Dining Hall, these spaces are not usually open to visitors, but all will be open to the public throughout the run of the exhibition. The @Large exhibition is included as part of general Alcatraz admission.

For Ai, the inspiration for the exhibition is not simply an exploration of social issues or artistic themes; it is rooted in the reality of his life. In spring 2011, Ai was detained by the Chinese government for 81 days on charges of tax evasion. Following his release, he was prohibited from leaving Beijing for one year, and he is still forbidden to travel outside of China. Because Ai could not visit Alcatraz, he developed the works in his Beijing studio with support from the presenting partners, Bay Area volunteers, and Amnesty International, which provided research material.

“One of the qualities that first struck me about Ai’s practice is how profoundly he explores the confluence of art and the built environment and how aware he is of the impact his work has on the viewer—making our collaboration with him ideal for a project focused on exploring place, history, and the human condition,” said Cheryl Haines, founding executive director of the FOR-SITE Foundation and curator of @Large. “The balance of content and materiality that exists in his works at once awes us with its grace and beauty and challenges and critiques our ways of thinking—in a manner that we hope will catalyze a critical public dialogue about human rights and the many other issues that Ai explores through his art and activism.”

The works in @Large balance political impact with aesthetic elegance, presenting the viewer with objective information and evoking a deeper understanding of underlying themes. Images of birds and wings metaphorically invoke freedom and creativity, while research-based works keep the visitor grounded in specific realities. Several of the installations directly reference the experiences of individuals deprived of their rights for actively expressing their beliefs.

“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,” said Ai Weiwei.

The seven installations commissioned by the FOR-SITE Foundation for @Large include:

- ***With Wind, New Industries Building***: This large-scale installation, located in the building once used for prison labor, features a contemporary version of the traditional Chinese “dragon kite,” a large multipart kite handmade by Chinese artisans in collaboration with Ai’s studio. Scattered around the room are other kites decorated with stylized birds and flowers, which speak to the natural environs of Alcatraz Island—an important bird habitat—and reference 30 nations with serious records of restricting their citizens’ human rights and civil liberties. The position of the kites—trapped inside a building, unable to fly—suggests the powerful contradiction of freedom and restriction.
- ***Trace, New Industries Building***: In this installation, the viewer is confronted with a field of more than 175 colorful portraits laid out across an expanse of the floor. Each portrait—intricately constructed from LEGO® bricks—represents an individual who has been imprisoned or exiled because of his or her beliefs, actions, or affiliations. Fabricated by hand in the artist’s Beijing studio and by a team of volunteers in San Francisco, the installation gives a human face to political detainment.
- ***Refraction, New Industries Building***: Using the imagery of flight to evoke the tension between freedom and confinement, this monumental installation—weighing more than five tons—is modeled after a bird’s wing. The artwork is composed of reflective panels originally used on Tibetan solar cookers. Located on the lower floor and viewed from the

gun gallery above, the installation positions the visitor in the role of the prison guard, implicating the viewer in a complex structure of power and control.

- ***Stay Tuned, A Block***: An intimate and evocative sound installation, *Stay Tuned* invites visitors into 12 individual cells in A Block, where they can sit and listen to spoken words, poetry, and music by people who have been imprisoned for the creative expression of their beliefs—as well as works created under conditions of incarceration. Each cell features a different recording, such as works by the Russian punk band Pussy Riot and the South African anti-apartheid activists Robben Island Singers. The work prompts introspection and understanding of the power of the human voice as a vehicle for connection and communication in a setting of enforced isolation and silence.
- ***Illumination, Hospital (Psychiatric Observation Cells)***: The austere, tiled psychiatric observation cells, used for the isolation and observation of mentally ill inmates, resonate with chanting recorded at a Buddhist monastery and a traditional song of the Hopi tribe. Men from the Hopi tribe were among the first prisoners of conscience held on Alcatraz. The installation of chants in one of the island's most haunting sites raises an unexpected analogy between subjugated peoples and those who have been classified as mentally ill—both often dismissed, deprived of rights, confined, and observed. *Illumination* speaks to the profound role of chanting as a source of comfort, strength, and identity under severe circumstances.
- ***Blossom, Hospital***: With intricately detailed encrustations of ceramic flowers, Ai transforms the utilitarian fixtures (sinks, toilets, and tubs) in several hospital ward cells and medical offices into fantastical, fragile porcelain bouquets. The profusion of flowers rendered in a cool and brittle material could be understood as an ironic reference to China's famous Hundred Flowers Campaign of 1956, a brief period of government tolerance of free expression, immediately followed by a severe crackdown against dissent.
- ***Yours Truly, Dining Hall***: In this interactive work, visitors are encouraged to write postcards addressed to some of the prisoners represented in *Trace*. The cards are adorned with images of birds and plants representing the nations where the prisoners are held. Ai has spoken of the deep feeling of isolation that afflicts incarcerated people and the fear that their causes have been forgotten. *Yours Truly* is a direct response to these concerns—serving as a reminder that their voices and causes have not been forgotten, and as a springboard for visitors to engage in a global conversation about the responsibilities that we all bear as members of the international community.

To support dialogue and interaction on the exhibition's themes, both on site and online, *@Large* features a team of Art Guides positioned at each of the installations. The Art Guides will provide additional background about the creation of the works, the history of the locations, and the themes of the exhibition, and will use social media to communicate about the experience of the exhibition to those who are unable to visit Alcatraz.

"We encourage visitors to delve deeper into the emotional content, human values, and personal stories that have shaped our unique national park landscapes," said Parks Conservancy President and CEO Greg Moore. "*@Large* reflects the multilayered history of Alcatraz as a place of both political and criminal imprisonment, and opens a timely exploration of the meaning of freedom and self-expression in the world today."

About Art in the Parks

@Large: Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz is a presentation of Art in the Parks, a cooperative effort of the National Park Service, the Presidio Trust, the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy, and the Headlands Center for the Arts to work with a variety of community partners to bring the arts to

park settings and provide new ways of experiencing and learning about place. The FOR-SITE Foundation has been a significant contributor to Art in the Parks, with exhibitions in the Presidio and at Fort Point. To learn more, visit parksconservancy.org/visit/art.

“Art played an integral role in the public’s understanding and appreciation of America’s early national parks,” said Frank Dean, general superintendent of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area. “While most early park art extolled the beauty of nature, *@Large* encourages visitors to examine some of the deeper themes of an historic icon—Alcatraz Island. People may take away different messages from *@Large*, but our hope is that the exhibition will give visitors a different way to understand what Alcatraz means as a place of incarceration and isolation.”

Additional information about *@Large*, Art in the Parks, and associated programs and opportunities can be found on the project’s official web page at AiWeiweiAlcatraz.org.

About Ai Weiwei

One of the most prominent cultural figures of the 21st century, Ai Weiwei is a Beijing-based artist and activist whose work encompasses sculpture, installation, photography, film, architecture, and social criticism. His work often responds to conditions in China, including limits placed on free speech and expression, as well as his personal experience of incarceration. Ai’s art has been featured in major solo exhibitions including the touring retrospective *Ai Weiwei: According to What?*, which was organized by the Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, in 2009 and traveled to North American venues in 2013–14; and *Evidence* at the Martin-Gropius-Bau in Berlin, 2014. Ai’s work was previously presented in the Golden Gate National Recreation Area in 2010–11 as part of the FOR-SITE exhibition *Presidio Habitats*, for which artists and designers created animal habitats.

About Alcatraz

Beyond its notoriety as a world-famous former federal penitentiary (1934–63) that once held criminals like Al Capone, Alcatraz has undergone numerous incarnations that have contributed to its unique and deeply layered history. First inhabited by native peoples who arrived more than 10,000 years ago, the island was recognized for its strategic value as a military fortress in the Civil War era, and later catalyzed the Native American Red Power movement with the revolutionary 18-month occupation by the Indians of All Tribes from 1969 to 1971. Today, Alcatraz is part of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area and stands as one of the country’s most popular national park sites and visitor destinations, attracting more than 1.4 million people each year. The island is also the site of the West Coast’s first lighthouse and home to gardens, tide pools, and nesting birds.

Exhibition Catalogues

@Large is accompanied by two richly illustrated, full-color publications: a softcover edition, published by the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy and available now, that documents the exhibition for visitors to the island; and an expanded hardbound publication from Chronicle Books that will be available later this year at bookstores and museum shops worldwide. Bringing together newly commissioned essays, extensive photographic documentation, and an array of archival materials, these catalogues serve as the comprehensive record for this groundbreaking exhibition and provide readers with an expanded historical and political context for the project. The hardcover edition will also include images of the installations, as well as additional material regarding Ai Weiwei and his artistic practice.

Opening Event

On September 26, FOR-SITE will host an unforgettable celebration of the opening of *@Large*. For more information, visit for-site.org/support/donor-events.

Exhibition Organization and Credits

@Large: Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz is presented by the FOR-SITE Foundation in partnership with the National Park Service and the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy.

Support for @Large has been generously provided by:

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About the FOR-SITE Foundation

Established in 2003 by Cheryl Haines, the FOR-SITE Foundation is dedicated to the creation, understanding, and presentation of art about place through commissions, artist residencies, and educational programs. Since 2008, FOR-SITE has broken new ground and provided a model for engaging the public through artistic collaborations on national park land. FOR-SITE's recent projects include *International Orange*, a group show at Fort Point featuring work by leading contemporary artists to mark the 75th anniversary of the Golden Gate Bridge; and a series of installations by Andy Goldsworthy in the Presidio of San Francisco. *Art About Place: FOR-SITE Foundation in the Presidio*, an exhibition of selected works from previous FOR-SITE projects, can be viewed October 2, 2014, through March 8, 2015, in the Presidio at 103 Montgomery Street on the Main Post. For more information, visit for-site.org.

About the National Park Service

The National Park Service (NPS) is a federal agency within the U.S. Department of the Interior charged with managing the preservation and public use of America's most significant natural, scenic, historic, and cultural treasures. The NPS manages the Golden Gate National Parks, as well as 400 other park sites across the United States. For more information, visit nps.gov/goga.

About the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy

The Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy is the nonprofit membership organization that supports the Golden Gate National Parks—the most-visited unit in the U.S. national park system. Since 1981, the Parks Conservancy has provided over \$300 million in aid for site transformations, trail improvements, habitat restoration, research and conservation, volunteer and youth engagement, and interpretive and educational programs. Conservancy-funded projects, in partnership with the National Park Service and Presidio Trust, are visible across the parks' 80,000 acres—including the Presidio, Crissy Field, Muir Woods, Lands End, Alcatraz, and more. The Conservancy's work is made possible through the dedication of its members and donors;

contributions from foundations, businesses, public agencies, and generous individuals; and earned income from the operation of park stores, cafes, and tours. Learn more at parksconservancy.org or call 415.561.3000.

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