

ARTNEWS

September 2014

CELL BLOCK AI

Politically charged installations by Ai Weiwei land on Alcatraz Island

BY BARBARA POLLACK

Since his release from an 81-day detention by Chinese authorities in 2011, Beijing-based artist and activist Ai Weiwei has not kept silent, despite stipulations that prohibited interviews and other activities. In the United States, he was the subject of the traveling retrospective “Ai Weiwei: According to What?” which wound up its tour at the Brooklyn Museum last month. In Brooklyn, the artist added a new work, *S.A.C.R.E.D.*, originally created for the 2013 Venice Biennale: six dioramas realistically depicting him in his jail cell as he ate, slept, paced, showered, went to the bathroom, and sat for interrogation, all under the constant watch of two uniformed guards. It is a harrowing work that brings the Chinese method of breaking individual spirit viscerally to life.

Now, Ai will return to prison, voluntarily, when he sends seven site-specific installations to San Francisco’s Alcatraz Island to be shown throughout the former federal penitentiary—including such generally off-limits areas as the hospital, dining hall, and cell block A. The exhibition, titled “@Large: Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz,” is the result of the efforts of San Francisco dealer Cheryl Haines and her For-Site Foundation, in cooperation with the National Park Service and the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy. It will be open to all who visit the island starting September 27.

Shortly after Ai had been released from prison, Haines went to see him in China. “I said, ‘What small thing can I do to be of support to you?’” she recalls. “And he said, ‘You can bring my art and my ideas to a broader audience.’ And that’s when I said, ‘What if I brought you a prison?’” At the time, For-Site, which regularly arranges exhibitions in unusual locales, was not planning a show

at Alcatraz, and Haines didn’t know if she could get access to the island. To her delight, Frank Dean, superintendent of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, supported the idea, despite the fact that Alcatraz had not previously been used to showcase art.

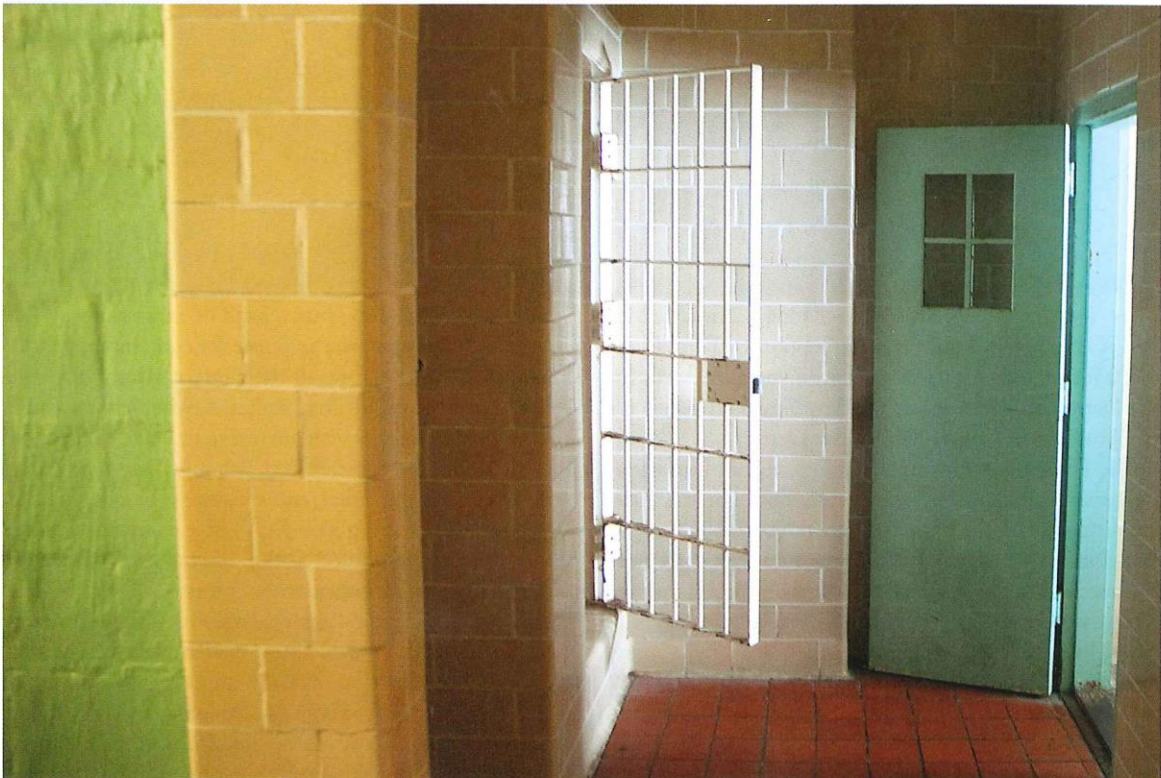
Haines says of the installations, “We are addressing issues of human rights, freedom of expression, the role of creative individuals in addressing these issues, and the role that communication plays in creating a just society.” The works will also have multimedia and interactive components, a first for the artist, though details are being kept under wraps ahead of the opening. Ai cannot travel to Alcatraz because Chinese authorities are holding his passport, so Haines has had to bring the site to him through videos, photographs, books, blueprints, and historical records. With a budget approaching \$4 million, all of the works are being fabricated in Beijing and shipped to San Francisco.

In addressing the themes of the exhibition, Ai has 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.” Fulfilling Haines’s original promise to Ai, “@Large” is sure to introduce his work to a broader audience: each year more than 1.5 million tourists visit Alcatraz, which has a capacity of 5,000 people a day. “If one person who comes to the island and sees this project gains a different understanding of the concept of freedom,” says Haines, “I will feel deeply realized.” ■

Barbara Pollack is a contributing editor of ARTnews and the curator of “My Generation: Young Chinese Artists” at the Tampa Museum of Art.



Ai Weiwei in his Beijing studio.



The psychiatric-observation area of the Alcatraz hospital, one of the sites for Ai's exhibition at the former prison.