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## No Man Is an Island: Ai Weiwei's Life and Art Before Alcatraz

By Christian L. Frock



Chinese contemporary artist Ai Weiwei's prominence in the public eye is largely fueled by his absence. Unable to leave China since 2011 — after being held in detention for 81 days on tax evasion charges, following his extended inquiry into the Chinese government's involvement in poor construction that contributed to the deaths of more than 5,000 schoolchildren in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake — Ai has since advanced his public profile with a number of international exhibitions and projects executed remotely. On September 27, *@Large: Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz*, a series of site-specific commissions within the historic former Alcatraz Federal Penitentiary will debut. Don't expect to see the artist; he remains unable to travel, though his ideas will be everywhere.

It is fitting that Ai should explore the contours of history and personal freedom through a series of artworks in an infamous prison, site-unseen. He spent his childhood living with his family in exile, after his father, the poet Ai Qing, was sent to a labor camp for opposing the Chinese government. Following the Cultural Revolution, his family returned to Beijing and shortly thereafter, Ai began to explore his ideas as an artist.

For more than a decade he lived in New York's East Village, studying at Parsons School of Design and the Art Students League of New York, before returning to China in the early '90s. Mounting tensions around government restrictions began to fuel an underlying anger in his work — *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* 1995, a series of stop-motion photographs of the artist dropping an ancient relic, embody Ai's frustrations with revisionism and censorship in governance.

In 2005 Ai began to experiment with blogging and offered daily doses of cultural criticism online for several years before Chinese authorities shut down his blog, following his outspoken criticism of the

government in the wake of the Beijing Olympics (he was lead artistic consultant on the design of the Bird's Nest stadium) and the Sichuan earthquake. Selected writings from his blog were later compiled into *Ai Weiwei's Blog: Writings, Interviews, and Digital Rants, 2006 – 2009*, published by MIT Press. Since May 2009, he has been active on Twitter, as @aiww, and more recently on Instagram.

Social media, in many respects, has not only enabled Ai to continue his outspoken criticism, it has allowed him to gain further international recognition. In a 2010 video interview with *The Guardian*, he noted, “People often say that I started to become well spoken after a certain period, but it is all because of the Internet. If we didn't have this technology, I would be the same as anybody else: I could not really amplify my voice.”

Following his illegal detention — he was held without charges for six weeks — social media might have also saved his life. Secondary protest strategies initiated by thousands of supporters online are largely credited with creating the sustained international attention that resulted in his release. I wrote about many of these gestures, from online petitions to fliers to videos to public actions, for *Art Practical* in 2011. The plight of Ai Weiwei was covered by news outlets the world over and it was an illuminating early example of social media-fueled globalized protest.

Today the Internet enables Ai to continue to remain connected and to produce ambitious international projects at a remove, even while he is still restricted from travel. “I may not be the best artist,” he said in an interview with Aaron Fox Lerner in *Time Out Shanghai*, but I really am the best remote control artist. I use the Internet, use Skype, and just use communication.”

His output is decidedly political, by version of his mechanisms, but it can also be unexpected and, at times, humorous. In 2012, at the height of the Gangnam Style craze, he released a music video produced with his studio crew. In it, Ai appears to refute authority by enthusiastically dancing handcuffed. In the last year he has also organized major exhibitions in Berlin, Ontario, and Venice; produced a metal music video — no, really — and was featured in a Kickstarter-funded short film that he later renounced via a Google doc that he posted on Twitter. He was also highlighted with his thirty studio cats in the new feline-themed *Puss Puss* magazine, among many other seemingly nonstop activities online and in print media.



It has been noted that the constancy of his efforts to stay publicly visible is in itself a political strategy; he simply cannot afford to be forgotten. As he is one of China's most vocal advocates for human rights and freedom of expression, the stakes around his publicity are high, extending perhaps far beyond his own survival.

For this reason, many artists from wide ranging disciplines have been vocally supportive of him. In April a group of 200 writers gathered at the invitation of PEN America Center to demonstrate solidarity with Ai and other persecuted Chinese artists, on the occasion of Ai's major exhibition opening at the Brooklyn Museum. "Freedom of Expression is to encourage every individual to question authority and to become more creative," Ai said in a message projected onto the museum's exterior. "It will never come as a gift but rather through our artworks."

Later this month, Ai will take over Alcatraz by remote control. What the work will be is anyone's guess — everyone involved is lip-locked so far as I've been able to tell. He has always delivered on visual spectacle, so grand visual gestures are highly anticipated. Surely the space itself will deliver its own impressions and previously unseen rooms are also promised. With these revelations, Ai Weiwei's unique ability to work across the Internet to open doors, within and beyond locked-down facilities, will be on very public display, here and, as is always his goal, at large.

*@Large: Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz opens September 27, 2014; it is organized by FOR-SITE Foundation in partnership with the National Park Service and the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy. For tickets and information visit [for-site.org](http://for-site.org).*