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Alcatraz Will Become an Art Gallery: Ai Weiwei Exhibit

By Emily Wilson



View of San Francisco from Alcatraz Island, site of the exhibition *@Large: Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz* (September 27, 2014–April 26, 2015); photo: Jan Sturmann, courtesy FOR-SITE Foundation

Jan Sturmann Courtesy of FOR SITE Foundation

View of San Francisco from Alcatraz

Chinese artist and activist Ai Weiwei has been a vocal critic of his government, particularly the limits placed on free speech and expression. In 2011, the Chinese authorities detained him for 81 days on charges of tax evasion, and he hasn't been allowed to leave China since. But later this month, the popular national park Alcatraz, the former federal prison which housed Al Capone and was the site of an occupation by Native American activists, presents a show of his work, *@Large: Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz*.

Cheryl Haines, the director of the FOR-SITE Foundation, which presents art about place, visited Ai Weiwei when he got out of prison and curated the exhibit of seven large-scale sculpture, sound and mixed-media works, which will be installed in the dining hall, along with spaces normally closed to the public –the A Block cells, the New Industries Building, where “privileged” inmates were permitted to work, and the main and psychiatric wards of the hospital.

From his Beijing studio, Ai worked with Haines to create the work, along with collaborators from organizations including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. The exhibit will have Art Guides at each of the installations to give background about the creation of the works, the history of the locations, and the themes of the exhibition.



Courtesy of the artist

Ai Weiwei being taken into custody

Haines answered *SF Weekly*'s questions about the significance of having this exhibit at Alcatraz, the importance of place-based art and the challenges of putting together a show on this scale with the artist forcibly absent.

Emily Wilson: What do you most appreciate about Ai Weiwei's work? Why did you go visit him when he got out of prison?

Cheryl Haines: One of the things that first struck me about Ai's practice is how profoundly he explores the confluence of art and the built environment, the balance of content and materiality that exists within his work, and how aware he is about the impact has

on the viewer. His work is profound in its message.

I went to visit him because we had become friends over the course of several preceding years. I first met Ai in 2008, when I was in Beijing doing an investigative trip to further understand the Chinese contemporary art scene.

EW: What made you think of offering him a show at Alcatraz?

CH: A notorious military and federal penitentiary turned national park, Alcatraz is rich with cultural and social meaning and is a profound setting to mount an exhibition that explores themes such as the right to free expression, the irrepressible nature of creativity, the role of art, artists, and individuals in working toward social change, and the importance of communication in creating a just society. During our meeting at his Beijing studio shortly after he was released from detainment, Ai Weiwei mentioned his interest in sharing his work and ideas with a broader audience; and so the idea of potentially exhibiting his work on Alcatraz was born, and he responded that he would like that idea.

EW: Why is what The FOR-SITE Foundation does important? What made you think about doing that?

CH: The idea of FOR-SITE came simply from wanting to both engage with and provide greater opportunity for artists making place-based work.

It began as an artist-in-residency but now has expanded to include an educational program and a rigorous public art program where we facilitate site-specific artist commissions and temporal exhibitions, primarily in the Golden Gate National Parks here in San Francisco.

Art about place creates a unique bridge between the viewer and the physical experience of a moment in time. Though there are countless artists who are articulate and accomplished at creating discrete objects, I think that it gives the viewer a bit more of a personal experience when they can draw their own

conclusions between an artwork and their experience of a place.

EW: What was most challenging/interesting about putting together @Large?

CH: In a project of this scale and import, there are surprises every day. It has been a particularly rewarding challenge to bring a site-specific exhibition together in nine months when the artist is prohibited from visiting the site, it's a complex environment with 1.5 million visitors a year. We are trying to augment the presentation of the island's existing history in new areas of the prison with artworks that address impactful subjects while preserving the traditional visitor experience.



Interior of a cell at Alcatraz, site of the exhibition @Large: Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz (September 27, 2014-April 26, 2015); photo: Jan Sturmann, courtesy FOR SITE Foundation

Jan Sturmann Courtesy of FOR SITE Foundation

Interior of a cell at Alcatraz

EW: After all this work and time, what about @Large are you most excited to share with the public?

CH: I hope and anticipate that people will have very different reactions to the exhibition and that's part of what will make it so interesting. It will be a very personal experience for people. I think the inclusion of the Art Guides at each of the installations will play a vital role in spurring discussion and contemplation of the pressing international issues that Ai's work addresses.

@Large: Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz opens September 27 and runs through April 26, 2015; tickets are \$30.