

Art in America

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SAN FRANCISCO

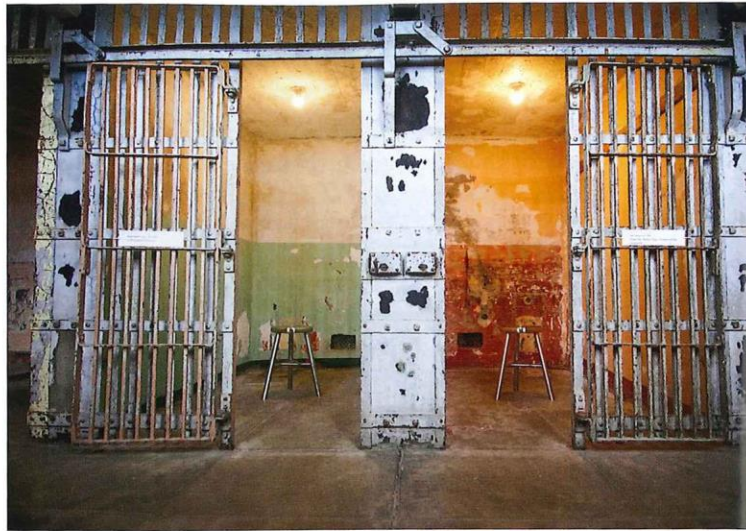
AI WEIWEI

Alcatraz Island

ON VIEW THROUGH APR. 26

The exhibition title “@Large: Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz” suggests a meaningful link between the dissident artist, who spent three months in detention in China in 2011, and the crumbling former federal penitentiary on a 22-acre island in San Francisco Bay. During the 1850s, the first lighthouse and military stockade on the Pacific were constructed there. In 1933, the Rock became a maximum security prison, housing the “worst of the worst” (including Al Capone and Mickey Cohen), and it soon gained notoriety through dozens of books and films. Today the site’s breathtaking views and proximity to San Francisco are poignant reminders of the beauty once out of reach for prisoners, who found the strains of jazz wafting across the water unbearable.

Happily, Ai’s show, which centers on the theme of freedom, was made possible by the National Park Service’s decision to regularly open spaces only occasionally accessible to visitors in the past. The light-drenched, 300-foot-long New Industries Building, where inmates made and laundered army uniforms, provides the picturesquely decrepit setting for nearly half of Ai’s show, which features seven installations (all works 2014).



With Wind is a huge paper dragon made from colorful kites representing 30 countries that commit human rights abuses (with a few additional kites devoted to activist aphorisms). The kites hang in a sinuous pattern from the low ceiling, sometimes interfering with the viewer's physical "progress" through the space, much as such abuses inhibit moral advancement. Evoking dreams of flight, *Refraction* is an abstracted five-ton bird wing crafted from reflective panels for Tibetan solar cookers. Visible only from the guards' elevated "gun gallery" in cramped perspective, it suggests the claustrophobia of every aspect of life on Alcatraz.

The prison hospital houses Ai's sound piece *Illumination*, which comprises recordings of plaintive Hopi and Tibetan chants. Why? Nineteen Hopi Indian elders were imprisoned on the island in 1895 for resisting the federally mandated Americanization of tribal children, an incident referenced by Indian protesters who occupied Alcatraz from 1969 to '71, after the prison was decommissioned. Tibet has been under quasi-occupation by China since 1950. Another sound installation, *Stay Tuned*, is an affecting anthology of songs and speeches by the likes of Fela Kuti, Martin Luther King Jr. and Pussy Riot, experienced one per cell.

Because Ai has never visited Alcatraz and his passport has been confiscated, the complications of presenting the show were legion. The plan was developed in Ai's Beijing studio (with some background research provided by Amnesty International) and produced by San Francisco's FOR-SITE Foundation. Nevertheless, there is—despite the show's title—a fundamental disconnect between Ai and Alcatraz.

First, the former prison is an overwhelmingly dramatic locale, culturally as well as physically. But Ai's work rarely, if ever, responds directly to a site (even his famous sunflower seeds could go almost anywhere). Second, Ai became a thorn in the Chinese government's side not through his art but by blogging about Communist Party corruption. Few of Alcatraz's prisoners, however, were incarcerated for political crimes or asserting their First Amendment rights.

In short, the project smacks of dutiful but distant research, not a close and revealing Hans Haacke-style investigation. There is, consequently, nothing truly abrasive, rebellious or edgy about the work; it could be shown at the U.S. Capitol or the UN with only a few demurs. By contrast, the demonstrations currently roiling in Hong Kong are a reminder that, in political art, biographical resonance is not a substitute for true social relevance.

—Robert Atkins