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Chinese Dissident Ai Weiwei to Take His Art to Alcatraz

By JORI FINKEL

The Chinese artist and political dissident Ai Weiwei was one of the most famous prisoners in recent history. Now he's taking on one of the most infamous prisons of all time, using Alcatraz as the inspiration and site for a series of new artworks to debut next September.

It's an unusual chapter for Alcatraz, the first time the former penitentiary is opening its extra-strength, tool-proof steel doors for a major contemporary artist, according to the National Park Service. It also promises to be a high-profile project for Mr. Ai, who said by phone from Beijing that he has never visited Alcatraz but is interested in exploring conditions in which individuals are stripped of basic human rights: "The idea of loss of freedom as a punishment raises philosophical questions."

"I have too many friends today who are still in jail," he added. "The fact that people who are fighting for freedom have lost their freedom being incarcerated is more than ironic."

Mr. Ai himself was detained for 81 days in 2011 on tax evasion charges, following his lengthy investigation into the Chinese government for shoddy construction that contributed to the deaths of thousands of schoolchildren in their classrooms during the 2008 Sichuan earthquake. Supporters of Mr. Ai said the tax inquiry was a pretext to silence one of the most outspoken critics of China's government. The 56-year-old artist remains subject to travel restrictions. (Do not, for example, expect him at the grand opening of the Pérez Art Museum Miami this week, where his retrospective is the big inaugural show.) "My passport has been in the hands of police for almost three years now," he said. "I've lost my ability to travel."

For the Alcatraz project, he is working closely with Cheryl Haines, a San Francisco gallery owner who founded the nonprofit foundation For-Site to help realize site-specific public-art projects in the Bay Area.

Besides noting the art's use of sculpture and sound, Ms. Haines said it was too early to provide specifics on the works. But she did describe some themes that are likely to emerge. "I think it's a really rich site that allows him to address the most basic human rights, like freedom of expression and its importance in building a culture," she said. "We're also hoping to address parallels between forms of imprisonment and governments that use restrictions in communications to control people."

Mr. Ai said that he is "not thinking about work that will directly connect to my own detention," as he was

recently for a set of six dioramas shown in a church in Venice. (Those sculptural tableaux recreated painfully cramped scenes from his own detainment, like his being interrogated or showering, all under the watch of two guards.)

The plan is to install some artworks in the building that served as a maximum-security penitentiary from 1934 to 1963. Other works are intended for an adjacent laundry building, where inmates like Al Capone were once put to work.

Ms. Haines said she has long been interested in the multilayered history of Alcatraz — as federal prison, a military prison before that, and later as a site of American Indian protests. She said she first mentioned the place to Mr. Ai during a visit two years ago to his studio on the outskirts of Beijing.

“He was talking about how interested he was in reaching a broad audience, beyond the art world,” she said by telephone. “It was just four months after his release from incarceration, and this thought popped into my mind: ‘What if I brought you a prison?’ ”

After the artist expressed interest, Ms. Haines worked to gain support from the National Park Service, which oversees the island, and the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy, which provides funding and programming for it.

Frank Dean, a National Park Service superintendent for the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, said there was serious interest in Mr. Ai’s work from the start but also practical issues his group had to review before issuing approval. The island, which measures only 22 acres, receives 1.5 million visitors annually — up to 5,000 daily during peak season.

“We couldn’t do something like this lightly, because the island is so popular — and small,” Mr. Dean said. “There are also logistical challenges: The island is not connected to the electrical grid, and we have to bring water out on the barge.”

He described a careful selection process for determining the particular sites for artwork, with an eye to not disturbing the architecture, the natural seabird habitat or the standard flow of visitors.

Then there were political concerns. Given the artist’s embattled history with the Chinese government, Mr. Dean said his group didn’t want to give its go-ahead until it heard from the State Department.

“If this were a standard educational exhibition,” he said, “we wouldn’t need Department of State clearance, but considering the situation — that the artist remains under a sort of house arrest — let’s just say we wanted to make sure that nobody was surprised in Washington.”

Mr. Dean said that clearance came from the State Department in the form of an email from a public

diplomacy coordinator the day before Thanksgiving.

The government is not providing any financial support for the project. Rather, For-Site is in the process of raising funds through private donors and foundations and possibly corporations, as it has in the past for works in San Francisco by the artist Andy Goldsworthy and a suite of projects relating to the 75th anniversary of the Golden Gate Bridge.

The foundation declined to disclose its budget for “Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz,” as the show is to be called. It has confirmed, however, that the artist is not receiving any commission and that access to the exhibition will be free to anyone who purchases a regular Alcatraz tour ticket (now \$30, including ferry rides).

Alcatraz tickets generally go on sale three months in advance. It is not yet clear whether the tickets for the time period of Mr. Ai’s show, Sept. 27, 2014, through April 26, 2015, would be made available any earlier than usual.

In the meantime, Ms. Haines is busy sending Mr. Ai resources on Alcatraz Island, the history and the myth. In October, she took him a stack of books and DVDs, including such classics as “Birdman of Alcatraz” and “Escape From Alcatraz.”

Mr. Ai may not be able to escape from China to visit the prison — at least not before the show opens. “I would love to regain my rights to travel before that,” he said, “but I have no idea if it’s possible.”