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Ai Weiwei Designing Installations for Alcatraz
A seven-piece exhibition in the former California prison will open in
September.

By Sara Johnson



The San Francisco skyline seen from Alcatraz Island.

Credit: Jan Stürmann/For-Site Foundation

Opening this fall, seven installations by Chinese artist Ai Weiwei will be displayed on the Bay Area's Alcatraz Island. The "[@Large: Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz](#)" exhibition is a collaboration between For-Site Foundation, the National Park Service, and the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy.

The island, stuck right in the middle of the San Francisco Bay between the city's two major bridges, housed a federal prison in the mid 20th century for roughly 30 years. Now a popular tourist destination and a Golden Gate National Recreation Area, the island still contains the buildings from its former life, and the parallels between artist and exhibition location are not hard to draw. As a press release for the

exhibition explains, "For Ai, the exhibition is not simply an exploration of social issues or artistic themes; it is rooted in the reality of his life."



Ai Weiwei.

Credit: For-Site Foundation

The Chinese government detained Ai in 2011 for 81 days, and he is still barred from leaving China. He will be working on the installations remotely, a process he's not unfamiliar with. Weiwei remotely collaborated with Herzog & de Meuron on the 2012 Serpentine Gallery Pavilion in London. He also worked with the firm on the Bird's Nest Olympic stadium in Beijing.

"I don't have my passport, and there's no explanation why or for how long," Ai explains in a video. "So it gave a tremendous difficulty for the process. But at same time, our show is about freedom, ironically, and human struggle for freedom of speech, for better world, for more civilized world, has always been restricted, also punished, damaged through history. So that is a strong reason and a strong background of why we have to offer this show."

As ARCHITECT columnist Aaron Betsky wrote, "Ai Weiwei's art remains as a reminder of the power to confront the state in form and image."

The exhibition will open several Alcatraz locations to the public. One of these is the New Industries Building, completed in 1941, where prisoners worked in manufacturing or did laundry for local military bases in exchange for reduced sentences and small wages. The A Block section of the 1912 Alcatraz Cellhouse will also open. It included solitary confinement cells as well as ones that contained typewriters and legal reference books. There will also be installations in the hospital and the Dining Hall.



First floor of the New Industries Building.

Credit: Jan Stürmann/For-Site Foundation



The second and third floors of A Block.

Credit: Jan Stürmann/For-Site Foundation



Hallway in the hospital.

Credit: Jan Stürmann/For-Site Foundation

The exhibition, which opens on Sept. 27 and runs through April 26, will also include trained Art Guides sprinkled throughout the island to explain the installations. For-Site Foundation launched a fundraising campaign on the crowd-funding website Kickstarter to pay for these guides. At press time, the campaign had raised more than \$89,000, well surpassing the \$75,000 goal.