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Alcatraz to host Chinese artist Ai Weiwei's exhibit

By *AVITAL ANDREWS*



Chinese artist Ai Weiwei, inset, will have an exhibit on Alcatraz beginning Sept. 27. (Ai Weiwei photo courtesy of the FOR-SITE Foundation; Alcatraz photo by Ben Fash)

 Alcatraz, which gets more than 1 million visitors a year, will be the the setting for an exhibit by Ai Weiwei

Ai Weiwei, arguably China's best-known artist, spent 81 days in prison in 2011, so he knows about incarceration. That's part of the reason he is helming an exhibit opening this month on San Francisco's Alcatraz Island.

He developed the works in the exhibit, part of the National Park Service's "Art in the Parks" program, in his Beijing studio, and they will be delivered by boat and plane.

The details of the installations for "@Large: Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz" aren't public yet, but his seven large pieces will incorporate sound and sculpture and will be themed around captivity and freedom of expression.

Of the content of his Alcatraz creations, Ai, who is not allowed to travel abroad, has said, "When you constrain freedom, freedom will take flight and land on a windowsill."

The Rock, as it's called, is about 1 1/2 miles from the city and attracts about 1.3 million visitors a year. It has been, variously, a bird sanctuary, the site of a lighthouse, a military prison and a federal prison, which was abandoned in 1963.

Among the celebrity prisoners housed at Alcatraz: Robert Stroud, a murderer who became an expert on birds; George Francis Barnes, a.k.a. Machine Gun Kelly, a Prohibition-era gangster and kidnapper; and, of course, Al Capone.

Native Americans occupied the island from November 1969 until June 1971. The island became part of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area the following year.

Seeing the Ai exhibits will be free to anyone visiting the former penitentiary, though getting to the 22-acre island isn't free.

The Ai Weiwei exhibit on Alcatraz runs Sept. 27–April 26. Tickets to Alcatraz cost \$30 per adult, include a 45-minute audio tour and admission to all Ai Weiwei installations and can be purchased up to three months in advance at Alcatraz Cruises, by calling (415) 981-7625 or in person at Pier 33.

Tours operate seven days a week, and night tours (\$37 per adult), happen Thursdays–Mondays.