



Art review: Ai Weiwei installation on Alcatraz: No breakout

By Kenneth Baker

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The highly anticipated “@Large: Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz,” which opens to the public on Saturday, depends too much on the sort of patience and reflection that few people may ever bring to a tourist destination. Tourism banks on the longing to escape, but a very different sense of liberation concerns Ai.

He champions freedom of expression everywhere as a condition and signature of democratic society. The seven installations he has designed for Alcatraz address that issue in a range of media, from sculpture and sound to postcards preaddressed to political prisoners worldwide that visitors are invited to inscribe. No guarantee that they will ever arrive.

The exhibition, organized by the For-Site Foundation, offers people intimate connections with the dissident Chinese conceptual artist’s thinking and creative expression. But many, including some art enthusiasts, will find his new work overwhelmed rather than amplified by the atmosphere of its prison setting.

Like much politically inspired art, “@Large ... ” poses the problem of how to evaluate the work — this is not Ai’s best — without appearing to belittle the cause that animates it.

“Basically, I make decisions,” Ai once told a journalist who asked what medium he considered most his own.

Settings add drama

His decisions sometimes have dramatic physical outcomes, such as the huge construction at Alcatraz titled “Refraction.” Made primarily of found objects — shovel-like reflectors from Tibetan solar cookers and other utensils hung on a steel armature — the piece can be viewed only through the broken windows of the narrow, elevated “gun gallery” from which guards observed prisoners at work in the New Industries Building.

With its wing-like character and paradoxically massive, earthbound presence, “Refraction” announces big time the motif of frustrated flight that recurs in various forms throughout the ensemble.

On the first floor of the same building, the face of a dragon greets the entering visitor, the lead end of a tremendously long traditional Chinese kite — another image of flight constrained, although its incongruity here insinuates thought floating free of physical bounds.

The whole array suggests a scattering of posters such as those protesters or celebrants might carry while demonstrating in furtherance of human rights. A few resemble “wanted” posters. Some of the figures will be familiar — Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, Edward Snowden. Most will not be. Their construction in Legos seems arbitrary until one picks up the feeling they convey of massive interlock, evoking a pervasive, crudely principled system in which all those represented are caught.

Evocative sound

It will surprise those who know Ai’s work that the sound components in “@Large ...” are the most effective because they exploit the psychological pressure of the prison environment better than most of the show’s physical components do.

“Stay Tuned” (2014) — in which sound bleed evokes the loss of acoustic privacy that incarceration entails — occupies a row of 12 cells. In each cell, the music, reading or speech of an individual punished for creative independence seeps out. Nearby wall text provides background and translation where necessary.

In two very confining “psychiatric observation cells” of the prison hospital, Ai has recorded chants playing: Hopi in one case, alluding to American Indian conscientious objectors once imprisoned there, and to the island’s later role in American Indian political protest; Tibetan Buddhist in the other, evoking both China’s merciless annexation of Tibet and Buddhist practices for calming the mind.

“To have a historical prison site serve as a park for tourists is charming,” Ai said in an e-mail. “People have a natural curiosity about crime and punishment. To visit a prison shows that the law is not just an abstract concept but, rather, a concrete reality. I think it helps the public to understand what is on the other side of the wall.”

Curiosity is key

I lack Ai’s confidence in people’s curiosity about justice. If enough Americans were engaged with such questions, the United States might not have the world’s largest prison population.

Ai has been “on the other side of the wall” and, in a sense, remains there.

After arresting him in 2011 on nebulous charges, later “reduced” to tax evasion, Chinese authorities impounded his passport, and he has been under house arrest in Beijing ever since. Unable to visit Alcatraz, Ai based his work for “@Large ...” on extensive documentation of the prison and its history.

A relentless critic of Chinese government Ai, who became an international sensation when he was credited with the idea for the “bird’s nest” stadium of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, was imprisoned for nearly three months. “Even when you’re released,” Ai said to an interviewer of his ordeal, “you are still in this big, unlawful prison. Nothing really to protect you.”

Undoubtedly, had Ai tasted the psychological air and ruined condition of Alcatraz, his work for it might have taken forms that seem more integral to it as a venue than the present ensemble does. He lived in the United States for most of the 1980s, but never visited Alcatraz.

Yet how many people who visit “@Large ...” will feel — before or afterward — implicated in that debate, whether they ought to or not?

Too few, I suspect, to make the conversation mushroom as Ai might wish.

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@Large: Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz: Seven installation works in the Alcatraz prison complex. Opens Saturday. Daily except holidays through April 26. \$30. www.for-site.org/projects/visit.

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