

ARTFORUM

Critics Picks
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San Francisco

Annie Buckley

Ai Weiwei

FOR-SITE FOUNDATION | ALCATRAZ ISLAND
Alcatraz Island
September 27–April 26

The voice of Tibetan singer [Lolo](#), who was imprisoned by Chinese authorities for his pro-Tibetan independence songs, eases through the grate of a tiny, dilapidated cell in the prison's "A Block," which once housed conscientious objectors during World War I and now resounds with the voices of dissident poets and artists imprisoned around the world. The sound installation *Stay Tuned*, 2014, is part of [Ai Weiwei](#)'s staggering feat of public art currently occupying Alcatraz. Spanning multiple locations in the former penitentiary, the show features a multilayered relationship to site—complicated by the fact that China has restricted Ai's travels since his detainment in 2011. (He was unable to journey to Alcatraz and worked from floorplans and photographs.)



Ai Weiwei, *Trace*, 2014, Legos,
dimensions variable.

In *With Wind*, 2014, statements about freedom and its fragility by [Nelson Mandela](#), [Edward Snowden](#), and others are handpainted on a large dragon kite, one of many tethered to the ceiling of a bunker where inmates once worked difficult jobs, which were nevertheless coveted as a reprieve from their usual confinement. This and other compelling works, such as a vast carpet comprising a million Legos that depicts 176 prisoners of conscience around the globe (to whom visitors can send pre-addressed postcards by participating in another of Ai's pieces), educate the audience—many of them unaware they would encounter an art exhibition during a visit to the island—encouraging them to contemplate the state of international human rights. One quote on the dragon is from Ai himself: "Every one of us is a potential convict." The statement hits home in the United States, where the incarceration rate is higher than any other nation on Earth.