

sculpture reviews

April 2015

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at Alcatraz Hospital.

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SAN FRANCISCO

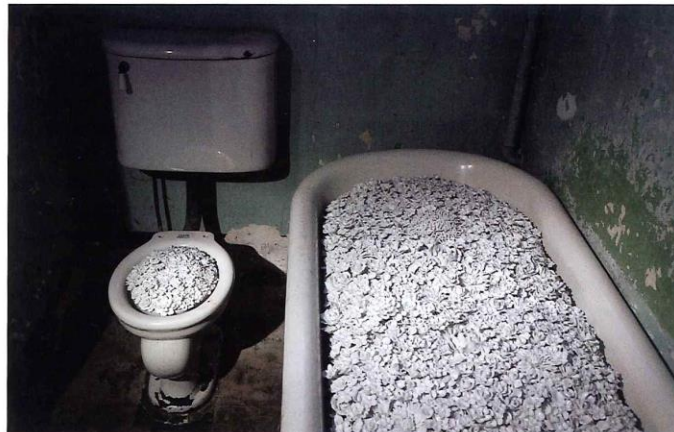
Ai Weiwei

Alcatraz Island

Ai Weiwei's "*@Large*" exhibition (on view through April 26, 2015) features seven new site-specific installations situated in four buildings on Alcatraz Island. A steep and rocky island at the mouth of San Francisco Bay, Alcatraz measures only about 1,575 feet by 590 feet. During its long history, it has served as a military fort during the Civil War, as a maximum-security federal penitentiary from 1934 to 1963, and as a site of Native American protests and occupations from 1964 to 1971. In 1972, it was designated part of the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy, managed by the National Park Service (NPS). This first-ever art

An internationally known artist, activist, and critic of the Chinese government, Ai, who has devoted his career to human rights and freedom of expression, seemed an ideal choice. The exhibition title is an ironic take on his current state: he is technically "at large" but cannot leave China because the government has confiscated his passport. His studio/home in Beijing is monitored by government surveillance cameras, and he is constantly watched. Though not in prison now, in 2011, Ai was arrested, beaten, and incarcerated for 81 days on charges of tax evasion.

Since Ai was not able to visit Alcatraz himself, he relied on Skype, e-mail, and digitally transmitted photos and videos, as well as first-hand accounts from people who could tell him what they saw and felt at the site. Haines visited Ai's studio half a dozen times during the planning stages, each time bringing maps, architectural renderings, photos, and videos, as well as her own impressions. Working with Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, Haines and her staff





Ai Weiwei, *With Wind*, 2014. View of installation at the Alcatraz New Industries Building.

researched political prisoners and secured photos, text, sound recordings, and other information for Ai to use in his installations. This cooperative approach is nothing new for Ai, who also worked with traditional Chinese craftsmen to make components for two of the works: the kites in *With Wind* and the thousands of shiny white porcelain flower petals in *Blossom*, which transforms several cells and offices in the prison's old hospital ward by filling battered toilet bowls, sinks, and a bathtub with masses of petals.

Ai's Alcatraz works make creative use of common materials. *With Wind*, for instance, centers on a very large fabric and bamboo dragon kite that winds through the New Industries Building, where it is so confined that it becomes the embodiment of restriction. Since kites are supposed to symbolize freedom, it is uncomfortable to see this creature trapped between numerous columns and a low ceiling. One can walk into the space to view the kite up close, and one can also peer through the broken windowpanes of the "gun gallery," a separate elevated hallway where armed prison guards used to watch model prisoners working

on mundane tasks in the New Industries Building. The body of the kite is punctuated with quotations from famous political prisoners painted in various languages, as well as with symbols of various countries known for taking such prisoners. The smaller, traditional Chinese kites suspended around the edges of the space seem unnecessary and lessen the impact of the huge dragon.

Visually, the most impressive installation is *Trace*, a huge floor piece made from more than 1.2 million Lego bricks, mostly assembled in San Francisco by volunteers working from Ai's digitized portraits of 176 prisoners of conscience, from Nelson Mandela to Edward Snowden. Identification keys are posted on the walls, and Internet and cell phone links provide more information about the people depicted. In fact, the entire exhibition is so loaded with information that one needs to study beforehand or take a long time to absorb everything—not what tourists expect to do when they come on the ferryboat tour. It can also be difficult to find Ai's works, though this problem is mitigated somewhat by the presence of about 40 art guides, who can answer inquiries.

Refraction is the most powerful sculpture in the show and the one that fits its site best. A massive,

wing-shaped construction made of recycled solar heaters from Tibet adorned with recycled cooking pots, teakettles, and other metal implements, this sculpture offers a subtle reminder of the political situation in Tibet. *Refraction*, which weighs more than five tons, was constructed in Ai's Beijing studio, shipped to California, and then reassembled in a room at Alcatraz, where it can only be seen from the gun gallery. The lighting is dim, and the sculpture barely visible to viewers peering down through the dusty glass and small wooden partitions. One really wants to get closer to examine this intriguing and ironically placed interpretation of a bird's wing.

Alcatraz is a particularly challenging and difficult location in which to install art. One has to wonder what Ai might have done had he been able to come here in person. Some of the works seem to lack a physical connection to their specific spaces. Yet their symbolic and thematic connections to Alcatraz are very strong, and perhaps no other contemporary artist could understand so viscerally the meaning of this site and express so elegantly the struggle for human rights and freedom of expression.

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