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## How Ai Weiwei's Alcatraz Project Changes the Meaning of Prisons as Public Art Sites

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*The New York Times* makes it seem like a match made in heaven: “Ai Weiwei was one of the most famous prisoners in recent history. Now he’s taking on one of the most infamous prisons of all time” — that prison being Alcatraz, the San Francisco facility that was closed down in 1963 and turned into a famous tourist destination. The piece goes on to report that the renowned Chinese dissident artist chose the location because he is “interested in exploring conditions in which individuals are stripped of basic human rights,” but that Ai is “not thinking about work that will directly connect to my own detention” by the Chinese government in 2011.

The combination of Ai and what used to be an infamous prison — one that now hosts up to over a million visitors a year — is an intriguing one. Art on display in a prison isn’t usually meant for public view, because let’s face it, not that many people want to hang around a prison in their

spare time. It's the fact that Alcatraz is now an established tourist destination that makes it a perfect spot for the unique exhibition.

While the site of Ai's project hasn't housed inmates for 50 years, art is still being made inside functioning prisons, most of the time by inmates themselves, through workshops and even programs that encourage prisoners to take up acting in Shakespearean plays. But it's only when they involve a famous outsider, like Ai, that prison-based art projects and performances tend to get the attention they deserve.



The most famous example is Johnny Cash's live recording *At Folsom Prison*, an album that not only breathed new life into the Man in Black's career, but also had its share of imitators — including Cash himself, who followed up the 1968 album's success with *At San Quentin* year later. He and the prisoners that attended the concerts are the seminal example of American public art made in a prison, setting the stage for similar performances, like the far less celebrated performance a decade later by the San Francisco punk band Crime, who made their way into the notorious San Quentin Prison dressed like prison guards.



The Cramps had a similar idea around the same time, only they decided to entertain the inmates at Napa State Mental Hospital in one of the strangest performances you'll ever see.



Yet the biggest difference between Ai creating an art installation for the public in a former prison and Cash or Crime playing for incarcerated men isn't the medium; it's the fact that Ai is putting together his works by proxy, still unable to "escape" his country, according to the *Times* piece. "I would love to regain my rights to travel before that," he said, "but I have no idea if it's possible."