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Art Man of Alcatraz

Ai Weiwei Takes His Work to a Prison

By JORI FINKEL

SAN FRANCISCO — Judging from the large bags of colorful Legos on the floor and dozens of plastic base plates piled on tables, this room could have been the activities station for a well-funded summer camp. And the five women and men drifting in and out, slicing open boxes and rooting around for the right size toy bricks, were young enough to pass as camp counselors.

Only the place where they were working is the opposite of summer camp: Alcatraz, the notoriously bleak military prison turned maximum-security penitentiary turned national park. With its banks of small windows and a “gun gallery” for surveillance, this building is where inmates once laundered military uniforms. It’s usually off limits to tourists.

But starting Sept. 27, visitors will be able to see for themselves, spread across the floor, where so many Legos were heading: an ambitious installation by the Chinese activist-artist [Ai Weiwei](#), featuring 176 portraits of prisoners of conscience and political exiles around the world — from the South African leader Nelson Mandela and the Tibetan pop singer Lolo to the American whistle-blower Edward Snowden — composed of 1.2 million Lego pieces. The work is part of an exhibition running through April 26 called “@Large: Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz,” organized by For-Site, a San Francisco producer of public art, in the prison hospital, A Block cells, dining hall and that former laundry building.



Thor Swift for The New York Times



Ai Weiwei in his
Beijing studio.
Jan Stürmann/For-Site
Foundation

Given Mr. Ai's sharp critiques of the Chinese government and the tireless campaigning for freedom of expression that led to his own imprisonment in 2011, he could have included himself in the group portrait. He did not. But his 81-day detainment, a numbing and mostly solitary confinement, fueled some of the exhibition's themes, and the seizure of his passport at that time — it was never returned — has shaped the making of this show.

“Even now, I am still in a soft detention, my passport withheld by the state and my right to move freely across borders restricted,” he explained in a series of lengthy email exchanges.

His situation makes the “@Large” title seem wishful, if not ironic, and raises questions both practical and philosophical. How exactly did this outspoken artist manage to realize this site-specific exhibition without ever visiting the site and despite an ever-present risk of reincarceration? And to what extent are installations like this — which required more than 100 volunteers in San Francisco and For-Site staffers on Alcatraz Island helping with assembly, as well as Amnesty International contributing research — truly Mr. Ai's work?

Certainly, the monumental Lego installation, “Trace,” has his fingerprints all over it. A few celebrity freedom fighters aside, most of the portraits showcase figures “forgotten by society,” he said. One is Shin Suk-ja, a South Korean prisoner of North Korea who was sent into penal labor with her two daughters in 1987 after her husband defected to Europe. Ms. Shin appears to have died in captivity, according to an information binder provided by For-Site.

The new work recalls Mr. Ai's responses to the Sichuan earthquake of 2008, which provoked him to identify students killed as a result of shoddy school construction and to create perhaps his most powerful installation, “Remembering.” His mural in Munich in 2009 used 9,000 custom-

made children's backpacks to spell out his message: "She lived happily in this world for seven years."

His Lego work likewise provides a visual accounting, creating conceptually a community of prisoners too large to be ignored.

"I think it's a big leap for Weiwei, addressing free speech issues and human rights violations not just in China but globally," said Cheryl Haines, the founder of For-Site. Asked whether his broader focus could help protect him from retaliation or reincarceration by his own government, she responded: "I honestly don't know the answer. The Chinese government is so unpredictable in its responses."

Mr. Ai, long a fan of clay bricks for their simplicity, said the idea of toy bricks came in part from witnessing his 5-year-old son's "endless passion" for Legos. "They are very simple and straightforward, but can also be easily destroyed and taken apart, ready to be remade and reimagined," he wrote. "I like the idea of using this language and material as an expression of human nature and the hand of creation."

He largely managed the assembly process from his Beijing studio. He made several sample Lego portraits before generating digital blueprints for the full suite, breaking down each portrait into four or more templates used by the volunteers. To keep details of the show under wraps until completion, volunteers were never shown images of the full artwork.

He also sent three assistants from his studio to California to coordinate the Lego project, and two others ("different skill sets," he noted) to install near it a massive dragon kite made by Chinese artisans from traditional bamboo and fabric. The body of the kite features emblems of some 30 countries implicated in "Trace."

The kite is "symbolic of freedom," he wrote, even more so within a prison setting. The work also has personal associations, from his boyhood in the 1960s, when he built a kite with his father, the poet Ai Qing, who by then had been banished by Mao's regime to the Gobi Desert and forced to clean toilets.

The family lived in a hole dug in the earth. To build a kite, father and son obtained the bamboo rods from a neighbor's door curtain and "collected string from all families nearby," Mr. Ai wrote.

"All materials were precious," he continued. "I will never forget the first time I saw the kite hanging far from us in the wind, so far out that our eyes had to search for its position in the sky."

Another installation, set in the penitentiary dining hall, allows visitors to send postcards to many of the prisoners in "Trace," a gesture inspired by Mr. Ai's memory of his own acute loneliness when detained. Clusters of tiny porcelain flowers planted in toilets and sinks of the hospital examination rooms reflect his penchant for using this traditional material in unlikely ways.

Though Mr. Ai, 57, is Internet-savvy, with more than 250,000 Twitter followers, he is blocked from visiting certain websites and has slow download times like other Chinese residents. He thus relied on For-Site as his collaborator on one research-intensive, permissions-heavy art work in

particular: a sound installation in Cell Block A. The cells, usually closed to tourists, look decrepit, their paint peeling and plumbing corroded, but 12 will be opened for visitors to enter, sit on a stool and listen to recordings by famous political prisoners, from the music of Fela Kuti of Nigeria and Pussy Riot, the Russian feminist group, to poetry readings by Liao Yiwu of China and Mahjoub Sharif, who died in April in Sudan.

Ms. Haines of For-Site played a critical role in the project, raising \$3.5 million from mainly private sources to cover expenses, including \$460,000 for Legos. No government money was provided, but she worked closely on research and visitor logistics with the National Park Service, which oversees Alcatraz, and the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy, a nonprofit group.

Back in 2011, while Mr. Ai was imprisoned, she was busy organizing an exhibition on the Golden Gate Bridge, tied to its 75th anniversary. It provided a good vantage for looking out at Alcatraz. “I kept thinking this would be a great place to activate with art,” she said.

Visiting Mr. Ai’s studio in Beijing after his release, Ms. Haines planted the seed with him. “I immediately accepted her offer,” he wrote.

On later visits, she brought him at his studio, which she describes as “very calm and well organized,” books and movies exploring the history and legends of Alcatraz, photographs of the prison, and site plans of buildings. In April, she carried in three conspicuous suitcases filled with Legos because his studio was unable to obtain enough for its prototypes. But customs officials never questioned her about them.

“In most cases, the authorities will not interfere with my art practice,” Mr. Ai explained. “Normally, interference only happens after the exhibition has already begun.”

Conveying the physical facts of the prison to him was easy, she said. “What’s harder to communicate is the emotive or sensory content, the feeling you have walking into a room,” she said, describing the oddly calming light of the psychiatric ward, for example. “That’s something I tried more to do with him in person.”

She described her role as facilitator and curator, adding: “It’s Weiwei’s work. It’s his vision through and through.”

Richard Koshalek, who was director of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden when it organized its 2012 Ai Weiwei survey, said he, too, relied heavily on an outside curator — Mami Kataoka of Tokyo — as liaison because of the artist’s travel constraints.

While Mr. Koshalek has not seen the Alcatraz exhibition, he described the concept as “very important for the city of San Francisco” for “going beyond museums and galleries to take universal issues of human rights directly into a public site, a site with a huge history of despair, penance and rage.”

The show is not designed to drive more tourist traffic to Alcatraz Island, which the National Park Service says is already near capacity with 1.4 million to 1.5 million visitors a year. (Standard ferry tickets to Alcatraz, \$30 for adults, include access to the “@Large” exhibition at no extra

charge.) Visitor numbers are capped to protect the site, a seabird habitat as well as a historic landmark.

Initially, Mr. Ai envisioned visitors walking on the Lego portraits, not unlike the way museumgoers at the Tate Modern in London stepped on his carpet of one million hand-painted porcelain “sunflower seeds” in 2010 (until halted by hazardous levels of dust).

This summer, the Alcatraz plans changed: Having 5,000 sightseers daily walking on “Trace” was ruled out, Mr. Ai said, for “technical and safety reasons.”

Then there is the change he would have made to “Trace” given a slightly different timeline — a reminder that any artwork about political dissidents is bound to be a work in progress.

He would have added an image of the Chinese civil rights lawyer Pu Zhiqiang, who represented Mr. Ai during his detention and was himself arrested in June as part of a broader push in China to punish even moderate reformers.

“I did not put him in ‘Trace,’ because I believed he would be released right away,” Mr. Ai wrote. “Time has proven that I was wrong. He has committed no crime and is still in jail. It is a massive shame that an advocate with such a strong voice has been completely silenced.”

Correction: September 18, 2014

An earlier version of this article misstated the surname of Shin Suk-ja. It is Shin, not Suk-ja.

A version of this article appears in print on September 21, 2014, on page AR1 of the New York edition with the headline: Art Man of Alcatraz .

SLIDESHOW:



Starting Saturday, visitors to Alcatraz, the notoriously bleak military prison turned maximum-security penitentiary turned national park in San Francisco, will be able to see an ambitious installation by the Chinese artist and activist Ai Weiwei, featuring 176 portraits of prisoners of conscience and political exiles around the world. Pictured: Memetjan Abdulla, who is Chinese, is an ethnic Uighur editor sentenced to life in prison.

Thor Swift for The New York Times



Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay, which will be the site of the exhibition “@Large: Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz,” which runs through April 26.

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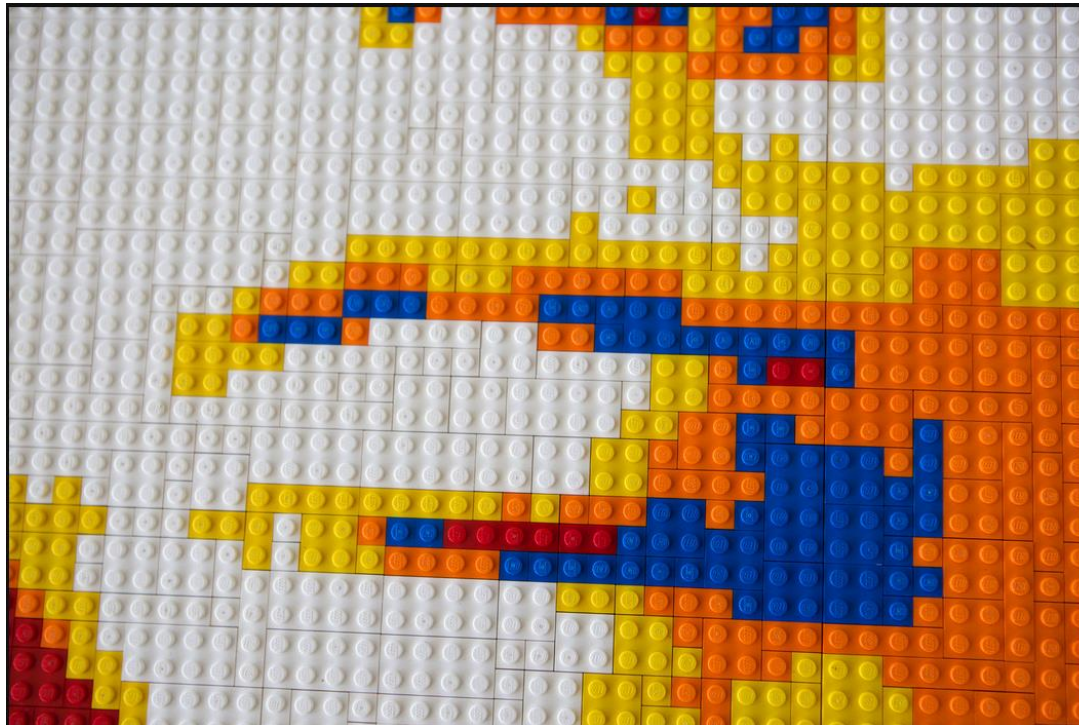
Wu Tun, one of Mr. Ai’s studio assistants, putting the finishing touches on the installation, called “Trace.”

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The work is part of an exhibition organized by For-Site, a San Francisco producer of public art. It will be on display in the prison hospital, A Block cells, dining hall and a former laundry building.

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A detail of the work, which is composed of 1.2 million Lego pieces.

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Ms. Haines with the artist at his Beijing studio in June.
Jan Stürmann, courtesy of For-Site



"Refraction," a winglike sculpture made up of teapots and metal panels from Tibetan solar cookers.

Thor Swift for The New York Times



A teapot detail in "Refraction."

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