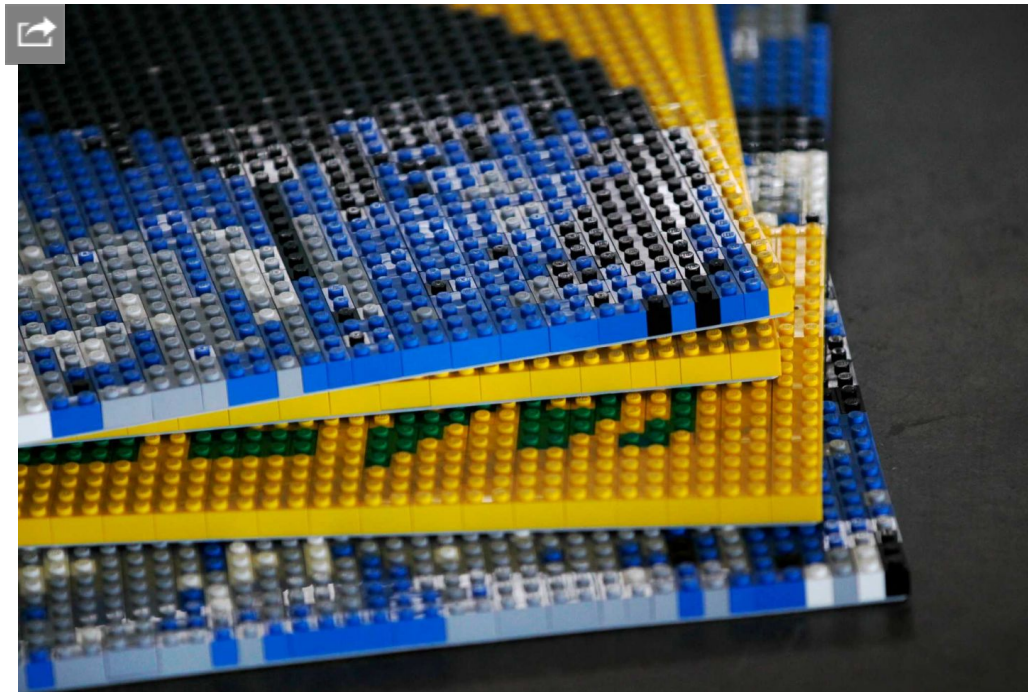




Chinese Dissident Artist Ai Weiwei Hits Alcatraz



By **Sam Whiting**

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In August, a cargo-load of Legos arrived at the Palace of Fine Arts. Box after box of the tiny toy building bricks were unloaded into a workroom at the old Exploratorium

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Leah Millis, Staff / The Chronicle

Lego pallets that make up some of the 176 portraits of prisoners of conscience wait to be assembled as

part of the upcoming show @Large: Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz in the New Industries Building Sept. 11, 2014 on Alcatraz Island in San Francisco, Calif. The @Large: Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz will feature seven pieces and will run September 27, 2014 – April 26, 2015.

where trained volunteers began snapping them into place to form flat human portraits.

Ninety people worked for three weeks on this secret project, then the panels were barged to Alcatraz Island under cover of night, trucked up the hill past the cell blocks to an empty building with an open floor the size of a football field.

The panels were then arranged like the pieces of a puzzle to form 176 faces, in square portraits ranging from two feet to four. Each is a real person with a story of political imprisonment and together they form “Trace,” the signature artwork of “@Large: Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz.”

“I’m overwhelmed by how remarkable it looks,” says exhibition curator Cheryl Haines, as she scans a cold concrete floor now warmed with 1.2 million Legos in all colors.

“Trace” is just one of seven large-scale installations, incorporating sound, sculpture and mixed media in the \$3.6 million project. It opens Saturday, Sept. 27, for seven months, free to anyone who takes a regular \$30 tour of Alcatraz. This means 5,000 people per day, arriving at a rate of 350 per boatload every half-hour, will be exposed to the first large-scale political use of Alcatraz since the Indian occupation of 1969.

The international reputation of Ai Weiwei, a Beijing-based dissident best known for the “bird’s nest” stadium at the 2008 Olympics, combined with the international tourist destination of Alcatraz is projected to make “@Large” the art event of the year. It might also make it the biggest year ever for Alcatraz which already draws 1.6 million visitors annually. @Large is during the off-season; and if it sells out, 60,000 more visitors than in a typical year will visit the Rock.

The only person of importance in the art world who for sure will not see it, is the artist, who is under house arrest in Beijing on charges of tax evasion. For everyone else, the work will present an intense site-specific response to concepts of freedom, captivity and incarceration, from an artist who knows it, from the inside of a Beijing jail.

“They detained me for 81 days but they never killed me,” he wrote in a small handbook called “Weiwei-isms.” “They clearly told me: ‘If we were in the Cultural Revolution, you would have been killed 100 times.’”

Ai, who is 57, has been the subject of two documentary films in the past two years, “Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry,” and “the Fake Case,” covering his art and activism against the restrictive government in his native Beijing.

For-Site foundation

WGBH
Philly



“This entire exhibition is a conversation around freedom of expression and human rights and what is the concept of freedom,” says Haines, 58, who is founder and director of the For-Site Foundation, a San Francisco nonprofit that commissions artworks to be shown anywhere but a museum or gallery.

“@Large” will employ buildings not normally open to tours - the prison hospital and psyche ward, the cell block from the military era, circa 1911, and the New Industries Building where the Legos are. These are historical locations that every tourist will want to see, which means they will see the art of Ai Weiwei whether they want to or not, with any of 40 newly hired art guides standing alongside to answer questions.

They will also be able to Tweet and Instagram what they see because the entire island will have Internet access for the first time, during the course of the show.

“Not only will the Alcatraz visitor get the typical experience, but they will get the added value of a view a world-class art exhibition at no additional charge,” says Nicki Phelps, vice president of visitor programs for the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy, which runs the cell house tours. “Alcatraz can be a fairly stark place so the addition of a beautiful art show is very exciting to us.”

Also exciting to them will be the revenue from a 122-page catalog, and hats and T-shirts bearing quotes from the artist, known as “Weiwei-isms.”

“Creativity is part of human nature. It can only be untaught,” is the Weiwei-ism on the souvenir pen, while an eraser carries the message, “Once again the facts have been erased.”

The Parks Conservancy and the National Park Service are partners in the exhibition but the inspiration and orchestration all came from Haines, who had previously shown Ai's work at her namesake gallery on Geary Street and in an earlier For-Site exhibition in the Presidio of San Francisco.

When Ai was imprisoned, in April, 2011, she joined protests outside the Chinese Consulate here and when he was released from custody, that summer she visited him at his Beijing studio, where he remains under house arrest. During that visit Haines came up with the idea on the spur of the moment to offer him Alcatraz as a conceptual canvas.

"What if I brought you a prison," was her offer. "Yes. I would like that," was his.

Ai has never been to Alcatraz and everything he knows about the place is through books and documents that Haines has delivered to him in seven trips to Beijing.

Due to the political nature of the exhibition and its site in a national park, final permission had to come from the State Department in Washington and that didn't arrive until last December.

It's been a push since then. When Ai has readied a piece for installation, it is shipped by sea container, and then his Beijing studio crew meets it here in San Francisco. The piece is carried by barge from Pier 33 to Alcatraz, in evenings after the tourists have departed. Ai's studio assistants oversee its lay out and build up by professional art installers. Chinese crews have been coming and going, updating Ai at every step.

Some of the pieces are soundworks which require minimal set-up on-site. The more complex sculptural pieces like "Trace," involve crews in Beijing using Lego parts to construct portraits. Then they developed a 2,300-page instruction manual to make sure the San Francisco crew copied the pattern exactly.

The Chinese crew arrived with some of the portraits completed and installation of "Trace" was then overseen by the Beijing crew.

It is a slow process, and 10 days ago only one of the seven pieces was completed, "Refraction," a five-ton bird's wing made of steel, with solar panels as feathers. Located on the lower floor of the New Industries Building, it is viewable only through broken window panes from the gun gallery above it.

One floor above “Refraction,” is “Trace,” where workers were still putting together Legos to form the white backdrop for the portraits.

For the privilege of being part of the crew, volunteers had to commit to a minimum of four days of seven-hour shifts. Among these who answered the call were architecture students, artists, nurses, museum staff and park volunteers.

On the first day of assembly, Haines was in a group working with gray and black. As it progressed the face of a middle-aged Asian woman took shape. Transported to Alcatraz, this one face joined 175 others as “Trace” was assembled in six sections on the floor, with walking paths between them, like a graveyard. Haines walked along she found that first face at the end of the last panel, with the name Shin Suk-ja in red.

She was a South Korean who moved to North Korea in the 1980s when her husband was given a job as an economist. Then he went overseas and never came back. As punishment his wife was imprisoned in 1986, and reportedly died there. Beside her are the portraits of her two daughters, Oh Kyu-won Suk-ja and Oh Hae-won Suk-ja still being held captive.

“This is a particularly sad story of a mother and two daughters,” says Haines who now feels like she knows them. That would seem to be the point. “This is the face of the individual in the fight for freedom, but it’s also a collective statement and to see the density and quantity of people that are incorporated in this work I find deeply moving.”

Sam Whiting is a San Francisco Chronicle staff writer. E-mail: swhiting@sfchronicle.com

Twitter: @samwhitingsf

A print version of this story will be in the Sunday, Sept. 21 newspaper

“@Large: Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz” runs Sept. 27 through April 26, 2015. The exhibition is free, but first you have to get to the island, and that takes a \$30 ferry ticket, which can be purchased at www.alcatrazcruises.com, (415) 981-7625. 200 tickets for opening weekend are still available. Special morning tours are \$50 to \$125 available at www.parksconservancy.org, (415) 561-3021.