



Ai Weiwei exhibition is more than a 'big event'

Caille Millner

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A view of "Refraction" (2014) found objects and steel by Ai Weiwei in "@Large: Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz" Photo: Caille Millner, S. F. Chronicle



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Ai Weiwei's art exhibition on Alcatraz opens to the public today, and by any of the measures we commonly use, it's a big event: an avalanche of international press, two years' worth of organization that spanned two continents, and an art star who is not allowed to leave his home country of China.

Walking around the exhibits at the press preview this

week, I couldn't help but think that nothing had been left to chance: Wi-Fi has been installed, at Ai Weiwei's specific request, so as to ensure a social-media frenzy. (Even if you don't manage to get a ticket to Alcatraz over the next few months, you'll see everything on Instagram.) The big pieces, "With Wind," and "Trace," are bright and poppy; they'll be audience favorites.

The face of the dragon in "With Wind" (the piece is an enormous handmade kite — a politically charged variation on traditional Chinese ones) even has Twitter birds for eyes.

But I didn't go looking for a big event. I should explain: I was born and raised in the Bay Area, but I never went to Alcatraz until this year. Some of that is the local's typical neglect of tourist attractions, but there's something more, too.

My father taught in prisons when I was growing up; as a college student I was a reading tutor for inmates in Massachusetts. I'm too familiar with both criminality and institutional confinement to be impressed with either as a tourist attraction.

Then there's the specific history of Alcatraz, which doesn't really lend itself to the unthinking cheerfulness of its visitors, popping over to the prison for a lark. At the press preview, a National Parks spokesman ran through the list: It's been a military post, a barracks detention and prison, a federal prison, a site of occupation by American Indians fighting for civil rights.

That's a lot of dark history, I thought, as we walked up the hill to view the installations. How does an artist compete with that?

For me, the installations that were most successful were the ones that subverted that history rather than tried to overcome it. "Refraction," for example, isn't likely to be popular on social media because the piece, a 5-ton pterodactyl created out of Tibetan reflective metal panels, is trapped behind the shattered glass panes of Alcatraz's "gun gallery."

Walking down with a National Parks guide, I casually asked how the space got its name. He told me, in a happy voice, that the name came from the inmates themselves. They used to work in the space where "Refraction" is now, doing laundry, while guards paced the narrow hallway behind the glass panes with guns. If things got out of hand, the guide said, the guards would shatter the glass and shoot onto the floor.

I glanced back at the bird that Ai Weiwei built to represent freedom and realized that the visitors are standing in the position of the guards.

If that's not an indictment, I don't know what is.

"Did Ai Weiwei know about the history of the gun gallery when he made that piece?" I asked the exhibition's curator, [Cheryl Haines](#). She smiled at me and nodded slowly.

Then there are the sound pieces, which The Chronicle's art critic, [Kenneth Baker](#), believes are the most successful pieces in this exhibition. Baker is right. We were on a strict schedule to move through the exhibition, but I found myself lingering in the two psychiatric observation rooms where "Illumination" is installed. Ai Weiwei has piped these tiny chambers with Tibetan chants and Hopi Indian singing. The former inhabitants of these rooms were probably screaming, and there's something comforting about

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listening to the installations and imagining that the rooms' ghosts are being soothed.

Of course, I realize that most people who come to see the exhibition won't be interested in these things. Most of them won't even be particularly interested in Ai Weiwei's larger message of freedom and human rights.

They'll want to hike up the hill, take a cool selfie, smile at some bright colors, and feel like they're part of the big event. Ai Weiwei knows these people very well. He's created some of the exhibits for them.

But what he's also done — and what I hope all of the institutions that came together to create this event will continue to do — is offer Alcatraz the opportunity to write a new chapter in its history, a chapter that it may not even realize it needs.

Being a monument to depravity porn has made Alcatraz popular for a long time, but doesn't it deserve to be more? I'd love to see Ai Weiwei be the first in a long line of artists invited to remake the spaces on the island, rewriting history with each piece.

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usfive Rank 13747

I've worked out on Alcatraz, and nothing about the regular Alcatraz tours is exploitative. The actual convicts and guards speak on the audio tour, and rangers are respectful about all aspects of the island, including the Indian Occupation. The "depravity porn" comment is just ignorant.

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Regardless of what you think of the review, go and give Mr. Ai your support. He stands against a repressive gov't that harasses his elderly mother for what he does.

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Caille, get over yourself. You come across as extremely superior and condescending, and it's revolting. You seriously think you're the first person to ever visit Alcatraz who has some sense of its deeper meaning? Grow up, child.

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@fogcitygal -- good lord . . . who pooped in your sandbox?!

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