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Escape to Alcatraz

China's most controversial artist breaks into America's most notorious prison with a historic new show

BY CHRISTINA LARSON *portrait by Jasper James*

ART WORLD AI WEIWEI

A

i Weiwei

has never been to Alcatraz, but he has spent three years constructing the infamous island prison in his mind. Sitting at a long wooden table within his gray brick courtyard studio-home in northern Beijing, he has pored over books, memoirs and photographs of what used to be America's foremost maximum-security penitentiary, a super-bastille in San Francisco Bay.

Ai has studied pictures of the rocky pathways that wind around the island's cliffs, the water tower still covered with graffiti from the Native American occupation of the island, the deceptively calm gray waters that made the prison nearly inescapable. He has formed his own mental map of the three-tiered cellblocks with their tool-proof steel bars, the mess hall equipped with wall-



In the first art exhibition at the penitentiary-turned-park, the famed iconoclast hopes to broaden his politically charged reach.

ART WORLD AI WEIWEI

mounted tear-gas canisters, the austere prison hospital and primitive psychiatric ward, where Al Capone was treated for syphilis and dementia, and the New Industries Building, where inmates once washed Army linens and fashioned rubber mats. From across the Pacific, the artist and provocateur has been at work creating a seven-part art installation and political meditation, *@Large: Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz*, to sit within the prison's historic buildings—several of which have never before been open to the public.

Because his passport remains in the hands of Chinese government authorities, he can't leave the country. So one of the tricks he has learned, like an inmate who can only imagine distant worlds from within his cell, is to conceive exhibits first in his mind,

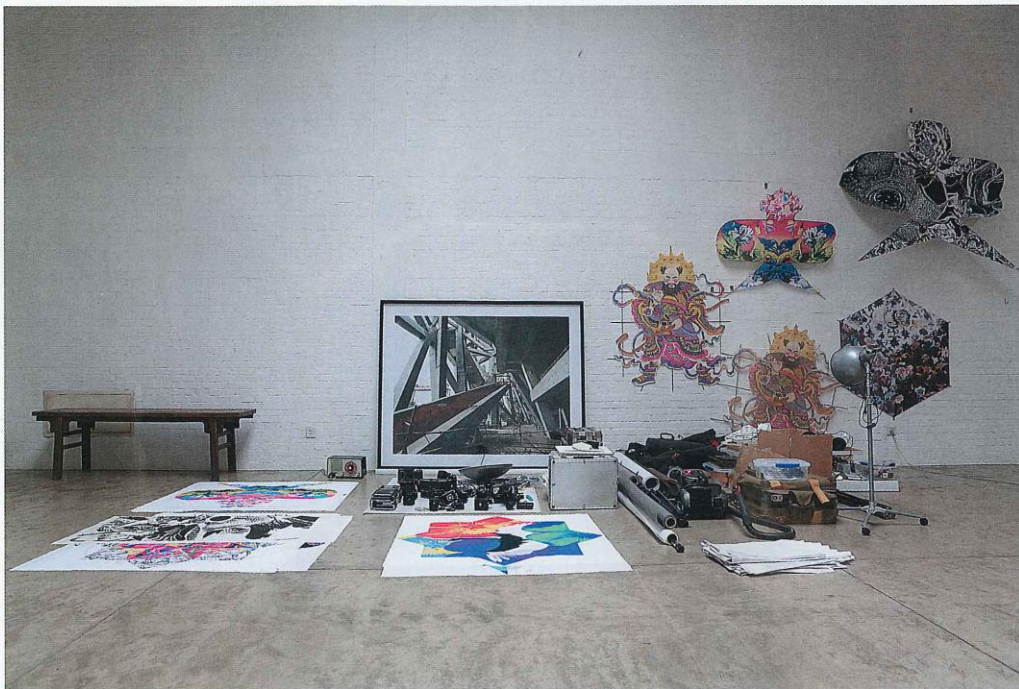
then at his studio in Beijing. For the Alcatraz exhibition, Ai has paid particular attention to exact measurements—the height of cellblock ceilings, the width of staircases and steel doors—and, he told me, he has taken care to use materials that can be shipped innocuously through suspicious Chinese customs services, sent by plane and finally by barge to the island for reassembly, a nearly 6,000-mile journey. There has never been a bridge to Alcatraz.

Ai, who is 57, is China's most controversial, internationally famous and eclectic artist, and his multimedia compositions are perhaps best known for their anti-authoritarian bent. He has spent plenty of time contemplating imprisonment. On April 3, 2011, "I was secretly detained, like a kidnapping," he told me in June at his Beijing studio. At Beijing Capital International Airport, where he'd gone to board a flight to Hong Kong, government agents, he recalled, "pulled a black sheath over my head, shoved me into a car bound

for an unknown location." He was released on June 22, pounds lighter and much wearier, but without his passport—and without being formally charged with an offense. Several of his associates were also detained. "I've seen so many people around me arrested or disappeared in China, often falsely accused."

A few months after his release from prison, Cheryl Haines, executive director of the For-Site Foundation, a San Francisco-based arts group specializing in exhibitions and large-scale works that illuminate significant places, visited Ai in Beijing. "He said he wanted to address what happens when people lose the ability to communicate freely, and also to bring his ideas and artwork to a broader spectrum of people" outside the art world circuit and those interested in Chinese human rights, she told me on a June trip to China. "What if I brought you a prison?" she recalled asking Ai. He nodded.

She had one in mind, but wasn't sure if she could pull it off. Still, she'd



"Maybe I'm just an undercover artist in the disguise of a dissident," Ai wrote recently. Materials in his Beijing studio this year.

previously arranged collaborations with the National Park Service, which now manages Alcatraz, so she knew whom to call.

Frank Dean, general superintendent of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, which runs Alcatraz, first learned the history of the island when he was a young Park Service ranger. His earliest job out of college, nearly four decades ago, was giving tours of the former prison site just after it initially opened to the public. "It's an iconic place that captures people's imagination," he said by phone from San Francisco. That means, he added, laughing, "We get a lot of crazy ideas that come in every year."

Haines' proposal—an installation by Ai Weiwei—"really grabbed us," Dean said. "It's a compelling story, with the artist and the island—putting those two together just seemed to make sense. I thought it was something we should try." But he also worried that it was "a bit of a risk for us. We didn't want to create an international incident." The next step was securing permission from the U.S. State Department, not a precaution that an artist typically has to take.

Ai said he has no standard creative process, and the workings of his mind are a mystery to himself. "It happens through conversation, through discussion, or through my dreams." He's largely a conceptual artist—"more project-oriented than studio-oriented," he said. "I'm not really an artist giving a finished project, but want to develop ideas."

For all his intimate knowledge of Chinese prisons, he'd never given Alcatraz or the U.S. penal system much thought. "I basically knew nothing about it."

The name Alcatraz comes from the Spanish explorer Don Juan Manuel de Ayala, the first European known to navigate San Francisco Bay, in 1775. He called it "La Isla de los Alcatrazes," the island of the pelicans. With no fresh water available, not much other than birds lived on the rocky outcrop for the next 75 years.

In 1850, President Millard Fill-

more designated the island as a fortress to protect San Francisco, then in the grips of the gold rush. But its 111 hulking cannons were never fired offensively, and the island found its purpose in detention, not defense.

During the Civil War, Confederate soldiers and suspected sympathizers were housed there. After the Indian Wars and the Spanish-American War, the prison population swelled with Native American chiefs and with sailors. The prison gained a measure of fame after World War I, when Philip Grosser, one of several conscientious objectors held there, compared it to the infamous French colonial penal colony in his book, *Uncle Sam's Devil's Island*.

The rash of spectacular bank heists that struck the U.S. heartland in the

Prison, designed both the physical layout of Alcatraz and its system of discipline. "What it boiled down to in essence was that Alcatraz would be a prison of maximum-security custody with minimum privileges," he wrote in his 1949 memoir.

Each single-person cell, outfitted with a steel cot, was 5 feet by 9 feet. The wake-up bell sounded at 6:30 a.m., and by 6:55 inmates stepped to the front of their cells for the first of several daily head counts. Guard whistles regulated meal times. Inmates worked eight hours a day, most of them in the concrete-pillared New Industries Building. Inmates who broke the rules were held in solitary confinement in the dreaded D Block.

While the prison's harsh policies drew criticism, what finally closed


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early 1930s, combined with the rise of notorious gangsters in the Prohibition era, turned the island into a different kind of prison. In 1933, the military transferred Alcatraz to the Department of Justice, and a year later, the first armored rail cars arrived by barge carrying high-profile inmates to what federal authorities called "the prison system's prison."

One of those rail cars with barred windows, traveling from the Atlanta federal penitentiary, carried 35-year-old "Scarface" Al Capone—former king of the Chicago underworld, then serving an 11-year sentence for income-tax evasion. Coast Guard cutters and press boats gathered in the harbor to witness the spectacle. Capone was later joined by George "Machine Gun" Kelly, who kidnapped an oil tycoon for \$200,000 ransom; Mickey Cohen, a brutal Los Angeles mafia boss; and Roy Gardner, the great train robber.

Alcatraz's first warden, James Johnston, who had previously reformed San Quentin and Folsom

the facility was its extravagance. The cost of housing a prisoner on Alcatraz, where all supplies, including potable water, arrived by boat, was more than three times higher than at other federal prisons. In 1963, Attorney General Robert Kennedy announced Alcatraz would close.

The island leapt back into headlines when Native American activists, protesting unjust treatment of native peoples, occupied it for 19 months beginning in 1969, eventually prompting President Richard Nixon to rescind, in 1970, the government's "tribal termination policy," which mandated forced integration and urbanization of indigenous peoples. In 1976 Alcatraz became part of the National Park Service, and it now draws more than  1.4 million visitors annually.

ART WORLD AI WEIWEI

Despite the restrictions on Ai's travels, his work has been widely seen outside China. A far-ranging exhibition, *According to What?*, opened in 2012 at the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C. And a collection of photographs he took in Manhattan in the 1980s, shown at the Asia Society in New York in 2011, revealed how the gritty metropolis inspired him as a young man. But planning a series of original installations tailored to a historic site was a novel experiment for Ai, and came with myriad restrictions. He could in no way alter the prison buildings; he could not control the lighting; he could not disrupt the habitat of birds that nest on the island. "Alcatraz has its own history," Ai said. "It's never

been an art space. You have to measure everything. Actually, it's mentally and psychologically interesting to me, because in a way it brings us inside the life of the jail. The inmates in a prison have to follow very clear instructions, have to follow them exactly, and so do we [as site artists]. That's the way we work together," he says of his collaboration with Haines. "The goal is not really to create something beautiful, but something precise."

The installation—which explores ideas of confinement and what it means to be a modern political prisoner—will run from September 27, 2014, through April 26, 2015, and be open to visitors who purchase the normal Alcatraz ticket. Greg Moore, president and chief executive officer of the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy, said he hopes that the show will bring a wider audience to Ai's work—and meanwhile shed new light on Alcatraz. While Alcatraz's

most famous inmates were convicted felons like Capone, in earlier times the facility also held what might be called prisoners of conscience, including, in World War I, conscientious objectors to military service. "I think it's an amazing juxtaposition," Moore said, "to have a site so associated with confinement—a military and federal prison—now embracing creativity and artistic expression."

Cheryl Haines is standing in the large, sparsely decorated dining room of Ai's Beijing compound. Today she wants to get Ai's reaction to an early template of exhibit booklets that will be sold on Alcatraz.

"First of all," says Ai, "don't have me on the cover—pick one of the more recognizable prisoners." With his bushy beard and resplendent belly, Ai himself is an instantly recognizable figure. Today he's in a battered T-shirt and shorts, though sometimes he favors rough denim shirts oddly similar to Alcatraz's prison uniforms.

Looking at page proofs of the exhibition booklet, which contains passages from Martin Luther King Jr. and Vaclav Havel, he offers his critique. "Don't have two portraits from China facing each other—mix up the geography." A plump white cat with blue eyes, one of the many strays that live in his compound, parades over the page proofs.

As Haines tells me later, "Weiwei's ideas are so strong and clear." He has a "real clarity of purpose."

Ai spent much of his own childhood in exile. His father, Ai Qing, a notable poet who once joined Mao Zedong's Communist conclave at Yan'an, later became a target of Mao's ruthless purge of intellectuals. In 1957, Ai Qing and his family were sent to a labor camp in northeastern China, then to the western desert hinterlands of Xinjiang. As a child, Ai became aware of the slipperiness

Ai found that the only pictures of many prisoners were grainy, pixelated images online. Something about them haunted Ai. That led him to an unexpected resource: Lego.



In June, Ai laid out some of his Alcatraz-bound Lego portraits of political prisoners.

ART WORLD AI WEIWEI

of fortune: One day his father was praised as a great poet; another day he was lambasted in party-run newspapers. Ai recalls the hunger in the labor camps, seeing his father's body shrivel along with his reputation: "My father became very skinny. We were all chewing seeds to survive."

Yet the physical hardship, he says, was not the greatest torment. "I think the hardest thing for my father, or for other people in prison, was being cut out from people's minds. I still remember when my father was in exile in Xinjiang, he received an anonymous postcard; it said something about the 30-year anniversary of one of his poems. There was no name or return address because people were scared. But it also meant that someone didn't forget. My father was deeply touched, in the middle of the

desert, where he thought no one remembered him."

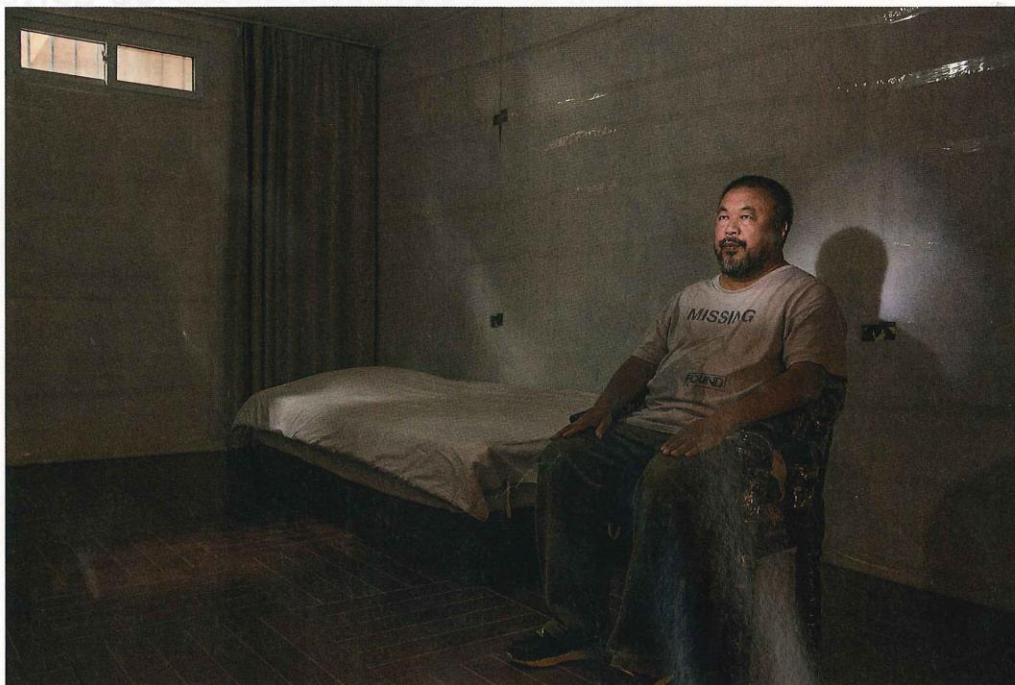
That memory inspired the main ambition of the Alcatraz exhibition: to ensure that today's prisoners of conscience around the world aren't forgotten—and, more challenging, to let them know they are remembered. Ai drew on information from Amnesty International to compile a list of more than 175 contemporary prisoners of conscience and other individuals and the locations of the facilities where they're held. "We looked at who is still in jail," says Ai, "but may be already forgotten by society."

"We decided we are not working with any part of the specific history of Alcatraz, but taking the jail as a metaphor, as a place to have criminals—some with real offenses, some not—serving time," says Ai. "Since I also have the experience of being arrested and accused, and so many in my generation are purged or punished in China, and forced to give up their freedom, I focus on the question of what is freedom, and what freedom

means to political prisoners today, prisoners of conscience."

Among the names are Sergei Udaltsov, a 37-year-old Russian critic of President Vladimir Putin, now under house arrest in Moscow; Ahmed Maher, a 34-year-old Egyptian activist sentenced to three years in prison in 2013 for protesting against the government's new measures to limit public demonstrations; Nguyen Van Hai, a 60-year-old Vietnamese blogger imprisoned for "disseminating anti-state information and materials."

Ai found that the only publicly available pictures of many of the prisoners were grainy, pixelated images of old mug shots. Something about them haunted Ai, like old stained photographs from another century. That led him to an unexpected resource: Lego. Ai decided to build a giant floor installation featuring the faces of the prisoners, all constructed from millions of black, gray, white, blue, yellow, green and brown Lego bricks. It produced an intentionally grainy



Ai sits in a replica of the prison cell in which he was detained in 2011. No one in China, he has said, "has a solid belief or trust in society."

GILLES SABRIE / LIGHTROCKET / GETTY IMAGES

look, “like pixels on computers,” says Ai. What’s more, he could sketch out the designs and assemble the portraits first in Beijing, then easily take the mural apart and ship it overseas.

Ai’s next question was how to let the featured people know that thousands of strangers trekking through Alcatraz would be contemplating their fate and remembering their struggles. Thinking of his father, and inspired by an existing Amnesty International program, he decided on postcards. One room of the installation will have postcards pre-addressed to the facilities where the modern prisoners of conscience are waiting out their sentences. “We want to invite visitors to participate,” Ai says. “Even a blank postcard tells a prisoner he’s not forgotten.”

He hopes hundreds of thousands of postcards may arrive at faraway prisons, jails and other places, in 30 countries, where, even if they never reach the prisoners themselves, their arrival will remind the authorities of international scrutiny. The front of the postcards will feature designs based on the national birds or flowers of the prisoners’ respective countries—designs that will also appear on handcrafted traditional Chinese kites, made from rice paper, bamboo and silk, that will be installed in another room, fluttering “like scraps of hope.”

Outside Ai’s compound in Beijing, which is located in a quiet suburban arts district, two indiscreet cameras keep a constant watch on his front door. Police monitor his movements. “I’m the only Chinese person who’s not on Weixin,” a popular social media service, for “fear of endangering” those who might follow him, he remarks. He lives comfortably enough, enjoying frequent trips to a fast-food joint called Fatburger, but is also always somewhat on edge.

When Ai began researching Alcatraz, what struck him most were the narratives of attempted escape. For inmates, San Francisco was tantalizingly close; on a calm, clear evening they could hear the sounds of parties from across the bay and see the lights

of the Golden Gate Bridge. Over the 29 years that Alcatraz operated as a federal prison, 36 men attempted to flee the island stronghold. Twenty-three were apprehended, six were fatally shot by corrections officers, and two were confirmed drowned. Five men—who escaped and may or may not have made it alive across the cold, fast-moving currents of the Pacific—are officially listed as “missing and presumed drowned.”

The absolute surveillance at Alcatraz confounded escape plots. Guards could see every inch of each cell from corridors and catwalks. There was one guard for every three prisoners—an unusually high ratio. Around the prison buildings, which sat atop a rocky summit, was a small village of guards and their families, who lived

shop clippings. Placing the dummies in their beds to divert the night-shift guards, they climbed through service shafts out of the prison—then pushed off from the island’s shore in a raft made from raincoat material. The three inmates were never found. While the FBI presumes the men drowned, it intends to keep its investigation open until each man’s 100th birthday, in 2026 and 2031.

“Every prison is intended to be a shell, to protect and prevent, but always there is still some possibility to escape,” Ai says. “These men were almost like artists, who made a sculpture with paper and hair clippings, and carved, day after day, through concrete. They disappeared from the island, and did not necessarily survive—but in a way, they are success-

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in government-provided housing. With a post office and a grocery store, it could have been any small town in America, save that “what wasn’t rock was cement,” recalled one guard’s daughter. Civilians on the Rock usually outnumbered prisoners, who lived in an uneasy symbiosis with their watchers.

Ai says he found inspiration in the inmates’ cunning and methodical plots to defy their watchers: In 1945, while working in the prison laundry, train robber John Giles stole, piece by piece, garments of a U.S. Army technical sergeant’s uniform. Wearing it, he boarded a transport boat off the island (only to be caught 20 minutes later when he landed).

Most famously, in 1962, two Georgia bank robbers and brothers, John and Clarence Anglin, aided by inmate Frank Morris (played by Clint Eastwood in the 1979 movie *Escape from Alcatraz*), dug in their cells to enlarge the ventilation grates. Meanwhile, they fashioned dummy heads from wet toilet paper, soap and barber-

ful,” he says. “They got out of Alcatraz. They may be criminals, but they were also men trying to find their way out. The effort itself is very remarkable.”

Ai says that the necessity of working in less than ideal circumstances—from a distance, and with practical constraints—allowed him to channel the psychology of being trapped. “At a prison, you don’t have large doors; all the windows are sealed. You have to bring everything up through narrow staircases. You have to measure everything.”

“To me, art is about how to escape the common daily burden—that’s how I got into art when I was young, how to escape from heavy political realities. Today, ironically, it’s still the same. China has changed a lot, but as a person, I feel I still live in the old times, still trying to escape from control.” **O**