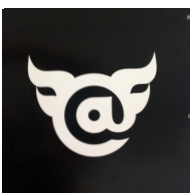




**@ Large: Ai Wei Wei on Alcatraz**



The art of giving and the joy of receiving can often times evoke mixed emotions; however, the brilliant “gift” recently bestowed upon the city of San Francisco in the form of an exhibition on Alcatraz by the Chinese artist Ai Weiwei, is a joy to be shared.

*Bird's Nest Stadium*

A pioneer of Chinese Contemporary Art, Ai Weiwei was born in 1957 in Beijing and is probably best known in the West for his design of the Bird's Nest Stadium for the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing.

China's tumultuous Cultural Revolution, which ended in 1976, ushered in an era of transformation that led to the formation, in 1978, of a group called the “Stars.” It included Ai as one of its founders.<sup>1</sup> This date is also considered the beginning of Contemporary Chinese Art.



As a cultural and social commentator and activist, Ai has found himself at odds with the Chinese government which led to his arrest in 2011 on various charges. Though not currently in prison, his movements are heavily restricted, which made the development and implementation of this project so remarkable; an artist unable to physically be present to see, prepare and install his art.

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<sup>1</sup> Ma Desheng, Wang Keping, Huang Rui, Li Shuang, Zhong Acheng and Qu Leilei, were the other artist/founders of this “avant garde” art group which disbanded in 1983. They employed banned “Western styles” in their art.



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**@Large** is the result of a collaboration begun in 2011 between the artist, the For-Site Foundation<sup>2</sup> and the Golden Gate National Park Conservancy. The works, exhibited in parts of Alcatraz prison usually closed to the public, deal with the tension between freedom and confinement. A more perfect setting could not have been found.

#### *Star Kite*



The visitor is guided through dank, dilapidated, broken-windowed rooms which provide an ideal context for the works. Though the subject matter and place are dark, the art is not.

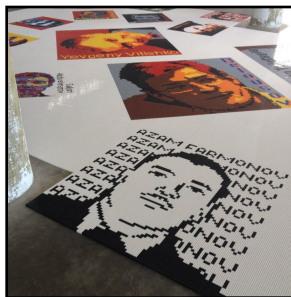
The artist uses the juxtaposition of crumbling gray concrete to signify imposed confinement with images of bold, bright colors and innocent, almost child-like mediums to comment on the distressing certainty that some nations disguise their dismal disregard for human rights through reassuring images. The end-result is powerful.

The viewer is drawn in only to discover that the beauty disguises an uncomfortable reality.

The first object to greet the onlooker is a large, multi-colored flying dragon, eliciting a smile not fear. Its body serpentine in kite-like fashion throughout the vast room and is meant to represent, along with the bird-kites, nations that violate human rights and civil liberties.



In the adjoining room, the discussion becomes more concrete. Here Ai has used a child's toy, Lego® tiles, to depict 175 political prisoners currently incarcerated or detained around the world. These portraits are accompanied by books that tell their individual stories.



<sup>2</sup> Cheryl Haines is the founding executive-director and Ai's longtime friend. The For-Site Foundation is a "San Francisco nonprofit dedicated to contemporary, place-based art."



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Throughout the exhibit Ai makes use of the existing prison structure (prison cells, toilets, windows and sinks) to make us, the observers, conscious participants of what “confinement” and “freedom” signify.

At the end of our journey a selection of pre-addressed postcards are available so one can write a brief message to a political prisoner. The postcards, we are told, will be sent to the addressee.



Leaving the exhibit and Alcatraz by ferry, one looks back at the fog-enshrouded island more cognoscente of how precious human freedom and rights are, here and abroad.



- **Dates:** September 27, 2014 to April 26, 2015
- **Where:** Alcatraz
- **Tickets:** <http://www.parksconservancy.org/events/park-interp/ai-weiwei-alcatraz.html>
- **Ai Weiwei website:** <http://aiweiwei.com/>



The Prison Hospital - *Porcelain Flowers*, Aiweiwei



Aung San Suu Kyi

