

FOR-SITE Foundation Presents

Ai Weiwei: Yours Truly



Directed by Cheryl Haines

78' | USA | 2019 | HD

LANGUAGES
English, Mandarin, Arabic
with English Subtitles

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Synopses

Logline:

Human rights become profoundly personal when dissident artist Ai Weiwei's monumental exhibition on Alcatraz inspires thousands of visitors to connect with prisoners of conscience worldwide.

Long Synopsis:

The revolutionary feature documentary *Ai Weiwei: Yours Truly* expands on the unprecedented exhibition *@Large: Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz*, organized in 2014 by the film's director Cheryl Haines. Following Ai Weiwei's detention by Chinese authorities and while still under house arrest in Beijing, the outspoken artist and activist remotely transformed Alcatraz, a former island penitentiary and current national park, into a remarkable expression of socially engaged art. The multipart work culminated in an expansive display of larger than life size Lego portraits of prisoners of conscience from around the world, seen by over 900,000 visitors. Throughout the film, we discover how personal these issues are for Ai Weiwei and the extent to which he wove his family's experiences into the exhibition. In the late 1950s, his father, a nationally revered poet, was imprisoned in a remote work camp. Ai, his mother and brother recall years of privation on the edge of the Gobi Desert – and the profoundly moving impact of an unexpected postcard expressing support. The final artwork at Alcatraz, *Yours Truly*, consisted of postcards beautifully illustrated with the national birds and flowers of the prisoners' countries. Visitors were invited to write messages of hope to the imprisoned activists featured in the Lego portraits. By the time the exhibition ended, over 90,000 postcards had been sent. Then something even more astonishing happened: prisoners and their families began writing back.

Ai Weiwei: Yours Truly follows these postcards around the globe—from Alcatraz Island to Beijing, Washington, D.C., and Cairo—as former prisoners of conscience and the families of those still detained describe their impossible choices and the comfort they found and still find in messages from people they would never meet. By the film's end, Ai himself is finally free, seeing his own exhibit in public for the first time. He meets with former prisoner Chelsea Manning, while others who have been released, such as Egypt's Arab Spring activist Ahmed Maher, express wonder at the connections Ai has initiated and the many strangers who sent encouraging messages. Ultimately, *Ai Weiwei: Yours Truly* is a call to action, extending the incredible reach of Ai Weiwei's art by asking viewers to take the issue of global human rights to heart and make a simple gesture that would profoundly touch those unjustly imprisoned worlds away.

About the Filmmakers

Director, Cheryl Haines

Director Cheryl Haines is the founding executive director of the FOR-SITE Foundation and principal of Haines Gallery in San Francisco, CA. As the curator of *@Large: Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz*, she was the driving force in securing the location for that landmark exhibition. For over thirty years, Haines has developed exhibitions and site-specific public programs that expose new audiences to contemporary art and advanced the discourse on art about place. Haines's dynamic curatorial stance presents challenging and provocative exhibitions by artists who explore cultural and environmental issues through a wide range of media, as well as public, site-specific commissions on a national scale.



In addition to *@Large: Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz*, Haines has conceived of and produced several other large-scale projects, including *International Orange* (2012), a group exhibition at Fort Point honoring the 75th anniversary of the Golden Gate Bridge; *Presidio Habitats* (2010), which invited artists, designers, and architects to engage with the native flora and fauna of this national park; and a series of monumental, site-specific works by Andy Goldsworthy in the San Francisco Presidio. She has also initiated and produced residency projects with artists such as Richard Long at SFMOMA, Mark Dion at the Oakland Museum of California, and Cornelia Parker at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts; and has commissioned major new works by James Turrell and Andy Goldsworthy for the de Young Museum in San Francisco. In addition, Haines is principal and director of Haines Gallery, San Francisco. Established in 1987, the gallery supports emerging and established artists from the United States, Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. She is a founding advisor for the Asian Contemporary Art Consortium, has served on the Contemporary Advisory Committee at the Asian Art Museum, and is a member of both the Art Dealers Association of America and Art Table. Haines has been featured on KQED Public Radio's Forum with Michael Krasny and has provided her expertise at various speaking engagements, including SFMoMA's "Designing a Legacy: Female Game Changers in Art and Culture" and "Urban Place and Art Making," SXSW Eco's "Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz: Art, Parks + VR" and, most recently, "Out of Place: The Power of Art in Unexpected Spaces" at the University of San Francisco. Her cultural work and curatorial achievements have been recognized by the Asia Society, ArtTable, which honored Haines with their Northern California Chapter's Award of Service to the Visual Arts, and the city of San Francisco, which presented Haines with the Arts and Cultural Leadership Award. *Ai Weiwei: Yours Truly* is her directorial debut.

Cheryl Haines resides in San Francisco and Nevada City, California.

Editor and Co-Director, Gina Leibrecht

Gina Leibrecht's career began in 1998 in collaboration with the late, documentary filmmaker and pioneer of the form, Les Blank, with whom she produced, directed and edited the feature documentary *All In This Tea* (world premiere, 2007 Berlin International Film Festival; Sundance Channel). Gina co-directed Blank's final work, *How to Smell a Rose: A Visit with Ricky Leacock in Normandy* (North American premiere, 2014 Telluride Film Festival). Most recently, Gina edited Kevin White's 2018 documentary *Wilder Than Wild* (Best Bay Area Environmental Documentary at the San Francisco Green Festival) and Owsley Brown's award-winning feature documentary *Serenade for Haiti* (world premiere, DOC NYC, 2016). Past documentary highlights include *On Wayang: My Life with Shadows*, which she co-produced, co-directed and edited with ShadowLight Productions; and *Homegrown Bounty*, which she produced and directed for the KQED series SPARK. Gina also edited Frank Green's *Counting Sheep*, which aired on KQED's Truly California series and won a Northern California Emmy Award for Best Documentary in 2006; Karina Epperlein's *Phoenix Dance*, which won San Francisco International Film Festival's Golden Gate Award for Best Documentary Short and made the short list of Academy Award Nominations for Best Short Subject Documentary in 2006; *Of Wind and Waves: The Life of Woody Brown*, which was nominated for a Northern California Emmy for Best Documentary in 2006; and Kevin White's *A Land Between Rivers* for PBS, which won a CINE Golden Eagle Award for Excellence in Film and Television in 2007.

Gina received her B.A. in Telecommunications and Film from the University of Oregon. She currently works and resides in the San Francisco Bay Area

Producer, Cassandra Jabola

Cassandra is a documentary film and television producer with a background in broadcast journalism. Her work has brought her into collaborations with HBO, PBS, National Geographic, NBC, The Weather Channel, TLC, The Science Channel, The Travel Channel, A&E, and Investigation Discovery. With a passion for cause-based social justice projects, her projects span science and technology, politics and history, art and music. Prior to producing *Ai Weiwei: Yours Truly*, Cassandra's documentary film credits include Vanessa Hope's forthcoming feature documentary *All Hearts and Minds* (producer), James Redford's 2017 documentary *Happening: A Clean Energy Revolution* (post producer, HBO), the 2016 short documentary *Donut Shop* (producer; CAAMFest, Comcast Xfinity Asia), Robin Hauser's 2015 feature documentary *CODE: Debugging the Gender Gap* (co-producer; Tribeca, AFI DOCS), Vanessa Hope's 2015 feature documentary *All Eyes and Ears* (co-producer; Tribeca), Nikolas Ross's 2014 biopic of Elliot Smith *Heaven Adores You* (associate producer; AFI DOCS, IDFA), and James Redford and Kirby Walker's 2013 feature documentary *Toxic Hot Seat* (associate producer; HBO). Cassandra also produces branded content for non-profits, corporations and agencies.

Cassandra is a graduate of New York University and lives in San Francisco.

Producer, Christy McGill

A documentary film producer, creative director, writer and consultant, Christy joined the production of *Ai Weiwei: Yours Truly* in 2018 as the film moved through mid-late creative stages and into preparation for release. Her most recent project was as producer of Owsley Brown's 2016 award-winning documentary feature *Serenade for Haiti* which had its world premiere at DOC NYC, appeared in juried competitions at twenty film festivals and is currently being distributed by GOOD DOCS. Prior, she co-produced Scott Crocker's 2009 feature documentary *Ghost Bird* which premiered at HOT DOCS and went on to an award-winning festival run and critical acclaim in the New York Times, NPR, and the Wall Street Journal and distribution on NETFLIX. Christy has consulted on a wide variety of films, advising during pre-production, story development, field production, release preparation, and distribution and promotion strategies. She has helped secure fiscal sponsorship and contributed to the production and promotion of documentary projects that have won a Peabody award, Emmy nominations and been showcased on PBS, HBO, NETFLIX and other broadcast, theatrical, museum, community, education, and digital platforms.

Christy graduated from Brown University and lives in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Creative Producer, Sharon Wood

A longtime documentary filmmaker, Sharon Wood has collaborated as a writer and producer on landmark projects including serving as writer on Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman's features *The Celluloid Closet*, a 1995 Peabody and Columbia-Dupont award winner and their 2000 work, *Paragraph 175* (HBO). Sharon's recent credits include Jacob Kornbluth and Sari Gilman's 2017 feature *Saving Capitalism* (story consultant), *And the Oscar Goes To...* (writer) for Turner Classic Movies and *The Battle of amfAR*, (producer/writer) for HBO. As staff producer for Lucasfilm's documentary department between 2003-2011, Wood produced, directed and wrote 18 historical documentaries on subjects ranging from Leo Tolstoy to the Ottoman Empire to John Ford, as well as *Manifest Destiny*, a three-part series on U.S. foreign policy, a version of which aired on public television. Her public television writing credits include *Isamu Noguchi: Stones and Paper* for "American Masters," and Oscar nominees *Tell the Truth and Run: George Seldes and the American Press* and *Super Chief: The Life and Legacy of Earl Warren*. Two films she co-produced, *KPFA On the Air* and *Freedom Machines*, aired on POV. Earlier, she produced and directed *Outside In Sight: The Music of United Front* and *Kheturni Bayo: North Indian Farm Women*.

Sharon co-authored with Oscar winners Jeffrey Friedman and Rob Epstein, *The Art of Nonfiction Movie Making* (Praeger-ABC Clio, 2012) which was recently translated to Mandarin.

Creative Producer, David Spalding

David Spalding is an award-winning curator and distinguished critic and book editor. His contribution to the documentary film *Ai Weiwei: Yours Truly* stems from his essential editorial work on two closely related publications: *@Large: Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz* (Chronicle Books, 2014) and *Ai Weiwei: Yours Truly - Art, Human Rights, and the Power of Writing a Letter* (Chronicle Books, 2018). In 2005, Spalding received an Asian Cultural Council grant to conduct research on contemporary art in China. In Beijing, Spalding was appointed curator at the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, the first international art center in China. In addition to his work at UCCA, Spalding has organized a number of independent curatorial projects, often focusing on the ways that history impacts contemporary life. The culmination of this work, an exhibition, catalogue, and series of public events entitled *Ghosts in the Machine*, received an Access to Artistic Excellence award from the National Endowment for the Arts. Spalding has published more than one hundred texts on contemporary art for publications such as *Artforum*, *Flash Art* and *Frieze* magazines, as well as authoring essays for numerous monographs and exhibition catalogues. In 2011, his writing about art was recognized with the Andy Warhol Foundation Art Writing Fellowship. Spalding returned to the US in 2014 to become executive director of Haines Gallery and director of publications for the FOR-SITE Foundation.

Spalding has taught contemporary art and writing to graduate students at Mills College and the California College of the Arts, where he earned an MA in visual and critical studies. He lives and works in San Francisco.

Cinematographer, Jan Stürmann

Jan Stürmann is a photographer and multimedia producer based in Berkeley, CA who served as director of photography for *Ai Weiwei: Yours Truly* on locations outside of the production in Egypt. His publishing credits include The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Boston Globe, Time, Newsweek and Marie Claire. His work is focused on harnessing the story-telling potential of multimedia for editorial, corporate and NGO clients. Clients include The Center for Investigative Reporting, Stanford Design School, UC Berkeley School of Engineering, and the FOR-SITE Foundation.

Cinematographer, Dana Smillie

Dana Smillie is a photographer and videographer based in Cairo, Egypt. She has been a contributing director of photography on documentary film projects including the PBS broadcast *American Pharaoh* (2014) about American soccer coach Bob Bradley and the Egyptian national team's quest to reach the World Cup, and Travel Channel's *Breaking Borders*. She has filmed projects in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, Turkey and other countries in the Middle East and North Africa for CNN, National Geographic, Discovery Communications, Time Video, UNHCR, UNTV and the World Bank Group. She is currently working on a documentary film about jazz music in Egypt.

Composer, Wendy Blackstone

Wendy Blackstone has scored over 130 films, nine of which have been nominated or won Academy Awards and two nominated for Emmy Awards. She has worked with Directors Juan Campanella, Spike Lee, David Frankel, Steven Spielberg, Joe Berlinger, Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy, Alison Ellwood, Alex Gibney, Madeline Sackler. Among the films Wendy has scored are: *Love Walked In*, *New Jersey Drive*, *Paradise Lost 3*, *Girl in the River*, *Dear Diary*, and *Dutch Master*. Eclectic, with a desire to innovate, she considers her studio a laboratory, discovering new techniques and sounds to create small audio revolutions to open up the way we listen, as well as our minds. Her filmography reflects her connection to art, politics and social justice. When not composing, Wendy spends her time in museums and galleries, or traveling to learn from other cultures. She speaks four languages. Wendy was the first female film composer signed to Creative Artists Agency and is a Member of the Academy. Of her score for Oscar-winner *Dear Diary*, director Steven Spielberg said Wendy's music "took the project from a 3 to a 9."

Wendy divides her time between New York, NY and Italy.

Director's Statement

As founding executive director of the FOR-SITE Foundation in San Francisco—a non-profit organization dedicated to the creation, presentation, and understanding of art about place—I have had the privilege of working with dissident Chinese artist and activist Ai Weiwei for over a decade.

During the past decade, Weiwei and I have become friends. In 2011, authorities detained the artist for his public outcries against the Chinese government's disregard for human rights. I traveled to Beijing shortly after his release to offer support. Weiwei was weary, and described the immense sense of solitude he felt during his 81 days of confinement. It was an experience that would deeply inform his artistic practice. He asked me to find a platform that would bring his work to a far broader audience. In that instant, an idea took flight. I answered with a question: "What if I brought you a prison?"

And so we began working on *@Large: Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz*, a monumental exhibition of new artworks addressing the struggle for fundamental human rights. From the outset, Ai Weiwei hoped the exhibition could include a call to action. This desire took form in *Yours Truly*, a project that would invite visitors to reach out to prisoners of conscience from around the world by sending them postcards. It was an effort to abate the sense of isolation that the artist understood so profoundly. At that time, though Weiwei was unable to travel beyond China due to restrictions imposed by his government, he was still envisioning creative new ways to connect and mobilize others on a global scale.

In order to bring Ai Weiwei's call to action to new audiences, I began working on the feature documentary film *Ai Weiwei: Yours Truly*. While the exhibition *@Large* had reached nearly 900,000 visitors, as a first-time director, I was energized by the fact that a film could reach so many more people worldwide via theaters, film festivals, and streaming networks.

Ai Weiwei: Yours Truly tells the stories of several former prisoners of conscience featured in *@Large* who stood up for their beliefs and, by doing so, have inspired others to advocate for social change. These resilient and relatable individuals include John Kiriakou, a former CIA officer who was imprisoned for exposing the use of torture by U.S. intelligence officers; Ahmed Maher, an activist and co-founder of Egypt's April 6 Youth Movement, which ultimately overthrew the government; and the family of Ebrahim Sharif Al Sayed, the former Secretary General of the Bahraini democratic reformist party. Weiwei and his mother, Gao Yang, shed new light on a childhood spent in exile and the genesis of the *Yours Truly* postcards, while interviews with human rights leaders help viewers understand how small acts can lead to significant change. Ultimately, I hope this project will encourage audiences to consider how they might contribute to the ongoing struggle for human rights.

Cheryl Haines
San Francisco, California
March, 2019

Character Spotlights

Ai Weiwei

Ai Weiwei is among the world's most celebrated contemporary artists and an outspoken critic of injustice, both in China and abroad. An ardent human rights activist, Ai was arrested by Chinese authorities on April 3, 2011, and held incommunicado for eighty-one days. For over four years following his release, he was prohibited from traveling abroad and subjected to ongoing government surveillance. Having relocated to Berlin, Ai continues to extend his practice across multiple disciplines, using exhibitions and social media to communicate with a global public. A vocal critic of the world's response to refugees, he has made two documentary films on the subject: *Human Flow* (2017) which addresses the global refugee crisis, and the forthcoming *The Rest* (2019) which focuses on the plight of individual refugees living stateless in Europe.

The family of Ebrahim Sharif Al Sayed

Sharif is a Bahraini politician, businessman, and former Secretary-General of the now-disbanded National Democratic Action Society, a secular, moderate, and peaceful political opposition group advocating for governmental reform. After giving a speech in which he discussed these issues, Sharif was charged with "incitement to overthrow the regime" and imprisoned in Bahrain's Jaw Prison from March 2011 to June 2015. An appeals court upheld his sentence, despite determining that the evidence used against him was extracted through torture. Sharif's wife and children visited the exhibition on Alcatraz and sat for interviews about the personal impact of Sharif's incarceration and the inspiration they gained from Ai Weiwei's exhibition.

Ahmed Maher

Activist and civil engineer Ahmed Maher is a cofounder of Egypt's April 6 Youth Movement, which spearheaded the demonstrations that ultimately led to the overthrowing of President Mubarak's government in February 2011. In November 2013, Egypt adopted a new "Protest Law" designed to severely restrict freedom of assembly. Maher was among the first to be charged with breaching the law in a protest against it. On December 22, 2013, he was sentenced to three years in prison and fined fifty thousand Egyptian pounds. In 2011, Maher was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize for his work toward democratic reform.

Chelsea Manning

Chelsea Manning is an activist and prisoner of conscience. While a U.S. Army intelligence analyst, then Bradley Manning delivered hundreds of thousands of classified documents that pointed to war crimes committed by the United States military to WikiLeaks in 2010. In 2013, Manning was sentenced to 35 years in prison for espionage and theft, but found not guilty of aiding the enemy. In 2014, Manning, who is transgender, was granted the right to be legally recognized as Chelsea Elizabeth Manning. In 2017, President Barack Obama commuted her sentence and she was released from prison. On March 8, 2019, she was arrested again and detained for refusing to testify to a grand jury about WikiLeaks. On the day of her arrest, Manning posted this statement on Twitter: "I will not participate in a secret process that I morally object to, particularly one that has been historically used to entrap and persecute activists for protected political speech."

John Kiriakou

John Kiriakou is an associate fellow with the Washington, D.C. think tank Institute for Policy Studies and an acclaimed author and public speaker, writing and lecturing on topics that include the war on terror, surveillance, and the prison system. A former CIA officer, Kiriakou was imprisoned for revealing information about the U.S. intelligence community's use of torture. In 2007, Kiriakou appeared on ABC News, becoming the first CIA officer to confirm that the CIA had used waterboarding on detainees—a tactic he described as "torture." Kiriakou's interview revealed that this practice was official U.S. policy, approved at the highest levels of the government. As a result, Kiriakou was sentenced to 30 months in a state penitentiary.

Gao Ying

Born in 1933, Ai Weiwei's mother, Gao Ying, spent her youth working in the famed writer Lu Xun's literary work group. In 1955, she became a staff member at the China Writer's Association; she married Ai Weiwei's father, the famed poet Ai Qing, the following year. Just two years later, when her husband was persecuted for being a Rightist, she and her children, including then one-year old Ai Weiwei, were exiled to the Chinese hinterlands, where they were forced to live in deplorable conditions for the next twenty-one years. Here she speaks for the first time about the family's period in exile and its effect on Ai Weiwei during his formative years.

Festivals and Awards

- **San Francisco International Film Festival** (San Francisco, California)
 - World Premiere, April 14, 2019
 - Marquee Presentation
 - Launch Program Selection

- **Mendocino Film Festival** (Mendocino, California)
 - California Premiere, June 2, 2019

- **Nevada City Film Festival** (Nevada City, California)
 - August 25, 2019
 - **Winner, Best Documentary Film*

- **Raindance Film Festival** (London, UK)
 - UK Premiere, September 28, 2019
 - Industry Screening, September 29, 2019

- **Festival Artecinema** (Naples, Italy)
 - Italian Premiere, October 9, 2019
 - Opening Night selection

- **BendFilm Festival** (Bend, Oregon)
 - October 11, 2019
 - In Juried Competition,
 - * *Winner, Best Feature Documentary*

- **United Nations Association Film Festival** (Palo Alto, California)
 - Festival Preview Special Selection Presentation, World Affairs Council, September 17, 2019
 - UNAFF Opening Night Film, October 17, 2019

- **Virginia Film Festival** (Charlottesville, Virginia)
 - October 24-27, 2019

- **DOC NYC** (New York, NY)
 - New York Premiere
 - November 10, 2019

- **Bath Film Festival** (Bath, UK)
 - November 12, 2019

Full Credits

AI WEIWEI: YOURS TRULY

Directed and Produced by
Cheryl Haines

Edited and Co-Directed by
Gina Leibrecht

Producers
Cassandra Jabola
Christy McGill

Directors of Photography
Dana Smillie
Jan Stürmann

Creative Producers
David Spalding
Sharon Wood

Music By
Wendy Blackstone

Executive Producers
Roger Evans & Aey Phanachet

Executive Producers
Neda Nobari Foundation
Robert J. Louie Memorial Fund

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Featuring (In Order of Appearance)

Ai Weiwei

Cheryl Haines

Alexandra Munroe

Marcus Koenen

Gao Ying

Wu Tun

Miles Kaplan

Ai Dan

Steven Hawkins

Yaryoor Al Sayed

Farida Ghulam

Sharif Al Sayed

Aseel Al Sayed

Jackie von Treskow

John Kiriakou

Ahmed Maher

Atteyat Amen Abdel Ghanny

Mostafa Maher

Chelsea Manning

The producers and FOR-SITE Foundation extend a Special Thanks to our interviewees from the @LARGE exhibition, as well as all of the visitors who participated in the postcard campaign of YOURS TRULY.

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Ferhensen Papers
Golden Gate National Recreation Area Park Archives, Jack W. Fleming
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Golden Gate National Recreation Area Park Archives, Betty Waller
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Ai Weiwei

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