

## ‘Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry’ Stands as One of 2012’s Most Important Films

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Rating: **4.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – Every person who was mystified by the meaning of the “Free Ai Weiwei” shirts and petitions that in were vogue last year owe it to themselves to see Alison Klayman’s excellent documentary. Moviegoers will be hard-pressed to find a more riveting and vital film in theaters this year. It may not have a satisfying ending, but that’s because its real-life tale has (thankfully) yet to reach a conclusion.

For 81 days, China’s most celebrated and controversial artist, Ai Weiwei, was held captive in police custody, where he endured psychological torture before reportedly agreeing to tax evasion charges, which he later contested. Klayman’s footage makes an overwhelmingly convincing argument that the artist’s arrest and subsequent fines are politically motivated and designed to punish him for his potent criticisms of the Chinese government.

After he was granted bail in 2011, Ai Weiwei appeared visibly shaken by the incarceration and admitted to reporters that he was forbidden to give interviews or leave the country. This latest attempt at silencing the proudly vocal artist appears to have succeeded, at least for the time being, but the Chinese government has little hope of changing Ai Weiwei’s international status as a muckraking hero. He was a close runner-up for Time Magazine’s Person of 2011, and received impassioned support from various politicians abroad, including Hillary Clinton. It’s impossible to look at Ai Weiwei’s story and not be reminded of the heroic Chinese writer and activist Liu Xiaobo, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize soon after receiving an 11-year prison sentence for “inciting subversion of state power.” Once public figures become this highly regarded, their influence transcends the boundaries of a governmental gag order. Klayman’s film functions not only as a superb night at the movies, but as an invaluable teaching tool for people unfamiliar with its immensely vital human subject. In interviews, Klayman has echoed the exuberantly humanistic spirit of Ai Weiwei, and recently told The Wrap that she wouldn’t mind if her film was pirated in order for its message to spread outside the walls of urban art houses. As a Beijing journalist, Klayman and her crew captured a richly textured portrait of the complicated man behind the larger-than-life persona. He’s more than just an artist or an activist, he’s a force of nature.



Ai Weiwei in Alison Klayman's *Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry*.

*Photo credit: Never Sorry LLC/A Sundance Selects Release*

In the film's opening moments, the camera captures an extraordinary event. One of Ai Weiwei's cats demonstrates its impressive ability to open doors. The nimble feline springs up, jiggles the door handle and succeeds in propelling the door open. "If I had never known this cat, I would have never known this could be possible," Ai Weiwei thoughtfully reflects. It's the knowledge of life's possibilities and his hunger to embrace them that makes Ai Weiwei a fierce opponent of the Chinese Communist Party and its bureaucratic regulations on human rights. Ai Weiwei's photographs depicting the shattering of Han Dynasty vases convey his message of reform and call for democracy. Though he served as the artistic consultant on Beijing's Bird's Nest Olympic Stadium, Ai Weiwei protested the Games after watching migrant workers get forced out of the city prior to the festivities. The Bird's Nest was one of many national monuments that Ai Weiwei photographed while placing his raised middle finger in the foreground of the frame.

Yet it was the government's appalling non-reaction to the Sichuan earthquake of 2008 that raised the artist's blood pressure through the roof. Though the quake claimed thousands of lives, including those of many schoolchildren, the government refused to investigate the faulty construction that may have caused the schools to collapse. When Ai Weiwei learned that the names of the deceased children wouldn't be released, he decided to collect them himself and posted the names on his blog on the one year anniversary of the tragedy. He later asked members of the public to read the names of the children, thus creating a profoundly moving audio collage where the profession of the victims' very existence registers as an act of rebellion.

As a communication tool, the Internet has proven to be utterly essential for outspoken outlaws like Ai Weiwei. Once the government shut down his blog, he opened a Twitter account, and currently has over 158,000 followers. Over a two-year span, he made an assortment of documentaries that he distributed for free online. One of the films chronicles Ai Weiwei's failed attempt to testify at the court hearing of Tan Zuoren, a fellow investigator of the student casualties in the earthquake. Chengdu police broke into his hotel room and beat him, while a camera captured the audio of the violence. The attack led to a cerebral hemorrhage that forced the artist to undergo emergency brain surgery. After his recovery, Ai Weiwei decided to confront the police that had committed the acts of brutality, knowing full well that justice would once again evade his grasp. Like Michael Moore, Ai Weiwei has no qualms with including repeated footage of the police officials asking him to leave the premises while ordering the cameras to be shut off. Asked why he even bothers to make such a futile effort, Ai Weiwei says that one must work through the system in order to make an effective critique.





Ai Weiwei in Alison Klayman's *Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry*.

Photo credit: *Never Sorry LLC/A Sundance Selects Release*

A common criticism launched at Ai Weiwei is that he's blind to the fact that his country has become far more progressive in recent years, and he's chosen to focus solely on the negative aspects of his society. Yet what progress in this world could possibly be made without whistleblowers like him? He's raised the sort of global awareness that provides his country with tangible hope that reform can somehow be achieved. The idea that corruption no longer exists in China is as valid as the claim that racism no longer exists in America. Clocking in at a brisk 91 minutes, the film is a touch too slim to fully satisfy. The most critically underdeveloped aspect of the film is its depiction of Ai Weiwei's relationship with his wife, who conspicuously vanishes from the footage after it's revealed that her husband had a child with another woman. Ai Weiwei is certainly no saint, and he freely admits that he has no desire to be worshipped by the multitudes. It's his messages that he hopes will resonate in the minds and hearts of all who encounter his work. Before the government bulldozes his studio to the ground, Ai Weiwei unveils his latest masterwork: a field of 100 million individually made sunflower seeds representing the diversity of ideas that remain criminally repressed in his society. There is perhaps no greater champion of individuality and its inherent power than Ai Weiwei. Let's hope he re-teams with Klayman for the sequel.

*'Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry' features Ai Weiwei. It was written and directed by Alison Klayman. It opened August 3rd at the Landmark Century Centre Cinema. It is rated R.*



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