

## Sundance 2012: Ai Weiwei screening becomes a political event



The Chinese artist and dissident Ai Weiwei has inspired activist gatherings around the world with his work and his statements about democracy. But on Sunday a new movie about him brought the politics of protest to a different place: a movie theater.

"Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry" premiered at the Sundance Film Festival's Library Center Theatre and inspired a rare standing ovation and a general activist fervor at the Utah film gathering. Members of the audience praised the director and expressed a willingness to get involved as they nosily exited the theater.

Zeitchik, Steven. "Sundance 2012: Ai Weiwei screening becomes a political event", *Los Angeles Times*, January 22, 2012

Directed by newcomer Alison Klayman, a freelance journalist in her 20s who spent years with the artist, the movie is a hybrid talking-head/fly-on-the-wall documentary that draws a portrait of a surprisingly accessible political icon. Ai, the 54-year-old son of poet Ai Qing, has become one of China's most potent symbols of artistic dissent thanks largely to social media. He comes across here as a genial everyman, supervising a team of artists who help carry out his visions and displaying a certain amount of mirth, even as he can get deadly serious toward and about government authority.

#### PHOTOS: The scene at Sundance 2012

Klayman has an unusual amount of access to her subject. She spends time with him as he designs the Bird's Nest stadium for the 2008 Beijing Olympics but then disavows the structure because of the government's policy of displacement. She delves into his personal life, showing his playful relationship with a son he had with a woman who is not his wife.

And of course she shows the creative process behind, and cultural implications of, his politically inflected work: the painting of an historic urn with the Coca-Cola logo, his Tate Modern show in which millions of hand-painted sunflower seeds were scattered across a giant floor, and an installation that featured the names of victims of the massive earthquake in Sichuan province.

The film spends a great amount of time on that last piece and the circumstances surrounding it. Ai created it to protest the government's shoddy construction of schools that he and many other critics believe led to the death of thousands of children. Ai's outspokenness on the issue leads to a confrontation with police in which he is beaten in the head and given a serious brain injury.

We don't see the seemingly unprovoked attack but we hear it, and we later are shown another face-off with government authorities, who as the months go on increasingly follow and pay attention to Ai in all sorts of insidious ways. (In one semi-comical scene, an official begins videotaping a meal Ai is having with his colleagues and other protesters, prompting one of his assistants to begin photographing the government videographer.)

The movie's emotional punch comes in the final 15 minutes, when we learn that Ai has vanished, presumably whisked away by authorities as part of a larger dissident crackdown. Ai spends 81 days being interrogated at an undisclosed location, during which people around the world show their support with protests online and in the streets. "They silence him but his voice grows

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louder and louder," reads one stirring tweet, and other supporters take solemn photographs holding placards bearing his name. (Needless to say, the film is not likely to be screened in China.)

Klayman had already returned to her native New York to begin postproduction during that time, but she goes back to China to offer a jolting epilogue to the film. She chronicles the moment when Ai is released but has now been put under a one-year media and travel ban. His outspokenness transmutes into an unsettling silence, with the previously voluble artist telling cameramen he cannot offer any details about his incarceration or even comment about the nature of the ban.

At the post-screening question-and-answer session, Klayman explained that it was this ban that prevented him from coming to Sundance. "A year ago he would have been here," she said. Even a planned video linkup had to be scuttled because of ban-related fears.

"Things have been changing since [he was detained]. He does have to be more cautious." Klayman said. But she added that since the government hit him with a \$2-million tax bill, he has grown increasingly discontented and willing to speak out a little more freely." He has seen the film, she told the audience, who was given information and exhorted to tweet about it upon leaving the theater.

In one of the film's numerous scenes of defiance, Ai describes his motivation for his art and his statements. "If you don't publicize it, it's like it never happened," he said. There was little danger of that Sunday.

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