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## DOCUMENTING DISSIDENCE

ALISON KLAYMAN DIRECTS  
*AI WEIWEI: NEVER SORRY*



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# DOCUMENTING DISSIDENCE

Alison Klayman Directs  
*Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry*

BY JENNIFER WOLFE



PHOTO BY TED ALCORN

Ai Weiwei in his home



**N**amed by *ArtReview* in 2011 as the most powerful artist in the world, Ai Weiwei is China's most celebrated contemporary artist, and its most outspoken domestic critic. He rose to prominence in 2008, after helping design Beijing's iconic Bird's Nest Olympic Stadium and then publicly denouncing China's embrace of the Games as political propaganda.

Since then, Ai's critiques of China's repressive regime have ranged from "perspective studies"—photographs of his raised middle finger in front of monuments such as Tiananmen Square—to memorials to the more than 5,000 schoolchildren who died in shoddy government construction in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake. Against a backdrop of strict censorship, Ai has become an underground hero and champion of the internet, using his blog and Twitter to organize, inform and inspire.

*Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry* documents the celebrated artist's activities over the past several years, during which time government authorities shut down his blog, beat him, bulldozed his newly built studio and, in 2011, held him in secret detention for 81 days, making him China's most famous missing person.

The feature documentary premiered at Sundance in January prior to its limited North American release in July. While working as a



journalist in Beijing, director and cinematographer Alison Klayman gained an incredible level of access to Ai's family and working life, including his mother and young son and the several dozen cats he shelters at his home and studio. What began in 2008 as a short-term project to promote an upcoming show at a local art gallery became an unprecedented view of the celebrated artist and his inner circle, encompassing his Sunflower Seeds exhibition at the Tate Modern in London and

his Michael Moore-esque attempts to receive due process from Chinese police following his assault and subsequent surgery.

Klayman shadowed Ai in his Beijing studio as the artist worked and met with journalists, and as he traveled within China and abroad, initially capturing footage using a Sony HVR-A1C HDV camcorder (the Chinese-localized version of the HVR-A1U). "It was my first camera," Klayman says, describing the many opportunities to buy



Director Alison Klayman

lightly used digital cameras following the Beijing Olympics in 2008. “It was definitely more of a prosumer choice, but after he saw me using it, Weiwei ended up buying one for his team as well.”

After filming Ai for a year using the Sony A1, Klayman moved up to the Sony HVR-Z5U, but she opted to stick with the HDV format. “In terms of providing a good level of security, there were particular advantages to using tape,” Klayman explains. “Given the conditions we were shooting under, it was great to be able to change tapes frequently. When you’re out in the field, there’s always the chance—and this happened multiple times—someone will come up and demand your tape. It would be so much worse if they took your card.”

Working without a crew, Klayman found the Sony Z5 lightweight enough to use for extended periods of time, but substantial enough to capture high-quality imagery of Ai and his team while they were on the move. “It was just really comfortable for me,” she says of the setup. “The camera’s dual XLR audio functions made it possible to capture audio with just a wireless lavalier mic and provided the best-case scenario for shooting on my own.”

Traveling in China with a dissident artist presents its own set of challenges, but Klayman acknowledges that the Chinese government wasn’t the greatest one.

“The only time I was really nervous about



having material confiscated was while traveling domestically in China after the incident in Chengdu,” Klayman says of the night Ai was beaten by police. “That night I slept in the hotel with the tapes in my bed, wondering if I would be able to get them back to Beijing to be digitized.”

Klayman was also concerned about getting the digitized footage to New York for editing, but in the end it was U.S. customs that presented the largest obstacle. “I had a hard time convincing customs I wasn’t trying to import computers from China,” Klayman laughs. “I told them that was a terrible business plan!”

Back in New York, Klayman teamed with editor Jennifer Fineran (*A Powerful Noise*) to

shape the footage into a narrative. “It was a great collaboration,” Klayman says. “Frankly, I had no perspective anymore on how an American audience thinks, what’s interesting to them, or what people know or don’t know. That was really where I needed input.”

Meanwhile in China, Ai had been arrested at Beijing Airport, held incommunicado for 81 days and then placed under house arrest for a year and charged with “economic crimes.”

“In terms of the timing, I was very lucky,” admits Klayman. “Had I been in China when Weiwei was arrested, I would have been under a great deal of scrutiny and it would have been very difficult to get the footage out of the country.” **dv**