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A Radical Adjustment

For Her Debut Project, a Young Filmmaker Scores the Art Story of the Year

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By **ANDY BATTAGLIA**



Rob Bennett for the Wall Street Journal

Alison Klayman works on 'Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry,' her documentary about the Chinese artist.

When first-time New York filmmaker Alison Klayman began her latest project, she had an intriguing documentary subject in Ai Weiwei. The Chinese artist had earned renown for work of variously probing and politicized kinds, and the access he granted her allowed for an especially close look at his methods and ideas. Then, when the outspoken Mr. Ai was detained by Chinese authorities for a few mysterious months in 2011, Ms. Klayman's intimate human subject transformed into an international cause.

Film Review

'Ai': Conscience, In Powerful Close-Up

memorable material she gathered is footage of a scuffle between a protesting Mr. Ai and Chinese police; the opening of a London show for which the artist laid out 100 million specially made porcelain sunflower seeds; and quiet moments at home in China between

"Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry," which opens in the city on Friday, chronicles the two and a half years that Ms. Klayman, who is 27, spent filming Mr. Ai in China. Among the



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Mr. Ai and his cats.

Ms. Klayman, who moved to China after graduating from Brown University and has since relocated to New York, spoke with the Journal about finding her way East and putting herself in the right place at the right time.

What brought you to China when you moved there in 2006?

I went for no good particular reason at all. My outside goal was to do journalism and maybe try a documentary film, and I really wanted to do it abroad. I applied for a million different fellowships and had some crazy proposals. Everything didn't work out, but a friend of mine was going to see family in Shanghai and at breakfast one morning I just said, "Hey, do you think I could go with you?" Originally the trip was five months, and then five months came

The documentary "Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry" follows Chinese artist and activist Ai Weiwei as he prepares a series of exhibitions and clashes with the Chinese government. Video courtesy of Sundance Selects.

and went and I put her on a plane and stayed.

What were some of your "crazy proposals"?

One was to do a radio piece or a documentary about women jugglers in Germany.

What sort of work did you find initially in China?

The coolest and most formative job was working on a movie set as the personal assistant to the lead actress in a Hollywood/China co-production starring Jackie Chan and Jet Li called "The Forbidden Kingdom." The actress was Liu Yifei. It's funny because you've probably never heard of her, but you've heard of Ai Weiwei. In China, if you stopped a person on the street, it would be the opposite. All my language skills there formed around that, so my early vocabulary included things like "horse-riding stunt doubles" and "wardrobe."



Enlarge Image

Everett Collection

An image of the subject in the film.

How did you coax Ai Weiwei to give you such close access? Do you think he understood what it meant to go all-in on a documentary?

I talked to him on the phone just last week and we were joking about how neither of us had any clue that this movie would be what it is now. Filming in Beijing for two years, it was hard to know what it would mean to finish and figure out where it goes, and he definitely didn't think it would

ever be as big as it has become. He's really pleased, though.

And you?

It was always my dream to do something that is "vérité," to get to observe things as they happen as opposed to having an idea for a story and then knocking it out.

Some scenes in the film involve both visceral and artistically staged scrapes with Chinese authorities. What was it like to shoot there?

There's a scene from a trip to Chengdu of a physical scuffle that happens when they broke a camera and [the camera man] took the glasses off an officer. That was the only time that was actually kind of scary to be filming. As a daily matter, I wasn't particularly concerned about safety. Even when they put [surveillance] cameras up on the door, it just felt like, "Well, who's watching them? I'm not sure there's any consequence because someone sees me on a camera go to Ai Weiwei's house."

What draws you most to Ai Weiwei's work?

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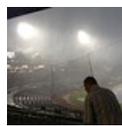
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Sundance Selects/Everett Collection

Ai Weiwei

He's multilingual. What I think his work is about is communication. He believes the role of an artist is to be concerned with communication and also to be engaged with political, historical and current contexts in some way or another. Sometimes he has an idea or something he wants to put it out there and the best way is with a quiet, mysterious, large installation that you can't really pinpoint. It's not "political art"—it's about the way it was made, the material it was made with,

the size it was made in. Then in another context an idea might best be communicated in an interview, or in a Tweet. Then for another idea maybe it's better to have a photo of him giving the finger. He's fluent in high-brow and low-brow and everything in between.

Will the film be shown in China?

Not in any official sanctioned capacity. Certainly in commercial theaters it's not thinkable, and it's really tough for any sort of institution to do it. We haven't had much luck yet in Hong Kong, either. In Taiwan I think we will have a distributor, and it will be in a festival there later this year. We did have distributors who were interested who then changed their minds. In mainland China, they kind of expect to find it online or in a bootleg shop. If the censors up their technological ante, then the people distributing it or the bootleggers are going to find a new way to do it. That's part of what this movie is about.

A version of this article appeared July 27, 2012, on page A20 in the U.S. edition of The Wall Street Journal, with the headline: A Radical Adjustment.

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