



## Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry Discussion Guide

Director: Alison Klayman

Year: 2012

Time: 91 min

### You might know this director from:

AI WEIWEI: NEVER SORRY is Alison Klayman's first feature-length documentary film.

## FILM SUMMARY

AI WEIWEI: NEVER SORRY is a film about Ai Weiwei, a renowned Chinese artist and activist who continually champions the values of democracy and human rights, and thus works in opposition to China's authoritarian government. First-time director, Alison Klayman, spent three years following Weiwei as he prepared for major art museum exhibitions, spent time with friends and family, and faced one clash after another with Chinese authorities. Klayman's unprecedented access to Weiwei results in an honest, intimate portrait of one of China's preeminent contemporary artists, whether he's playing with his son, eating dinner with friends, or installing an exhibition at the Tate Modern in London.

For Ai Weiwei, there is no separation of life and work. The lines between his creative work, political provocations, and private life are so blurred that even the smallest daily events play out like works of art. And if art means anything to Weiwei, it is freedom of expression. When the government shut down his popular blog, Weiwei opened a Twitter account, using the free platform to make his voice heard. For several hours each day, he published snippets of his life as a Chinese artist and dissident, attracting hundreds of thousands of followers. Then, when Weiwei suddenly disappeared from Twitter, the whole world demanded to know why.

AI WEIWEI: NEVER SORRY is the story of an artist who continues to make ripples in the fabric of Chinese society. It is the story about the power of art, the power of internet, and how these two can change it all.

## FILM THEMES

AI WEIWEI: NEVER SORRY is about a man named Ai Weiwei, but fundamentally the film is about communication. It's about not accepting so-called truths that are handed to us. It's about asking questions, encouraging dialogue, and being free to express ourselves.

### THE POWER OF ART

We are quick to talk about the power of art, yet slow to act as if we really believe in its power. Particularly with contemporary art, people are prone to shrug it off because they do not understand its message or purpose, or because it doesn't fit their definition of art. In the political landscape, art is increasingly minimized by government systems that attribute it with little value. And yet these systems often oppose artists, often quite fervently, perhaps because they know that art really does have the capacity to influence the human condition. In the words of Weiwei: "Art is the vehicle for us to develop new ideas... and change the circumstances."

### THE POWER OF INTERNET

"China's censorship can never defeat the internet," Weiwei titled one of his Huffington Post articles. The internet has ushered in an age of connection and transparency like never before. Unbound by traditional media, the internet offers everyone an equal opportunity to express themselves, no matter their social status, ethnicity, level of education, etc. It connects us with people and causes we would have no access to otherwise. So when Ai Weiwei was detained for 81 days, not only did people across the globe demand to know where he was, but over 30,000 people donated money to help cover his \$1.3 million fine.

### DISSIDENCE

The history of dissent can be viewed as the history of freedom. As we evolve, society must be constantly re-examined, and our current ways of thinking and being must be adjusted. This can mean establishing new ideas or returning to old, forgotten ideas. Weiwei said that his political activism has no beginning and no end, because he is fighting the same oppression his father fought. Perhaps the world needs people like Weiwei - people who will not be lulled to sleep and go quietly through life, but who will stand up against abusive power and injustice.

### INDIVIDUALISM

Ai Weiwei said in an interview, "All my father asked for was to have a variety of expressions in literature and art. He said that rather than just one type of flower, there should be a whole garden, because every flower deserves its own identity and has its own beauty. That simple idea is seen as a threat to Communist leadership that wants to inhibit variety of expression." This is arguably true of many countries—even democratic ones. We live in a time of mass production and standardization. Even the basic necessities of life have been separated from human hands, forced by machines to look, feel, taste, and behave exactly the same.

**“Freedom is a pretty strange thing. Once you’ve experienced it, it remains in your heart, and no one can take it away. Then, as an individual, you can be more powerful than a whole country.”**

Ai Weiwei

**“If you don’t speak out because you’re afraid of something happening to you, then they’ve already silenced you.”**

Alison Klayman

## FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. What are your thoughts on the capacity of art, and on the role of artists? Did this film change your perspective at all, and how so?
2. What were your feelings toward Ai Weiwei? Did you relate to him? Sympathize with him? Have any hopes for him?
3. What do you think about your own government? Is there a need for greater transparency?
4. Social media gives everyone a voice. Some say it creates excessive noise, but as in Ai Weiwei's case, it allows for voices that desperately need to be heard. What are your thoughts on the pros and cons of social media?
5. How is the internet continually shaping our world?
6. Someone once referred to Ai Weiwei a "whistleblower," which he did not like because of the negative connotations attached to whistleblowers. What is your perception of this word? Do you think dissidents are necessary for the health of society? Why or why not?
7. Art requires courage. One of the artist's tasks is to reveal things that others are afraid to express, and many say that the measure of a nation's liberty runs in parallel to its support of the arts. Do you think this is true? When we speak of a system that stifles creative practice, are we speaking of a system that seeks more control?
8. Do you think we have come to a place in our society where art is considered optional? Does our society value artists and their work?
9. Why are powerful governments so threatened by strong individuals who refuse to blend into the mass? Consider the strong individuals in your own nation's society - what is their value?
10. Should people have the freedom to express themselves and the truth even if the truth is disruptive? Even if the truth is inconvenient?

## NOTES:

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## FILM FACTS:

- **AI WEIWEI: NEVER SORRY** is Alison Klayman's first feature-length film. She spent three years filming from December 2011 to late 2013.
- *ArtReview* magazine named Ai Weiwei the most powerful artist in the world in 2011.
- In 2011, the Chinese government detained Ai Weiwei. He spent 81 days in a secret prison and was then put on one-year probation and forbidden to leave China.
- As of 2013, Ai Weiwei's passport has still not been returned to him.
- Marcel Duchamp's work has greatly influenced Ai Weiwei. When asked why, he said that Duchamp's work redefines what we are looking at and challenges us to understand the world from varying perspectives.
- Liu Xiaoyuan is a Chinese lawyer who tried to stand up to the government's abusive power. The police would not let Liu Xiaoyuan speak for Ai Weiwei in court. Liu Xiaoyuan was threatened, beaten, and his lawyer's license was revoked.
- Ai Weiwei left for the U.S. in 1981. He spent 12 years in New York and Berkeley, studying English, working odd jobs and making a few pieces of art.
- Ai's father was one of China's most revered poets. He wrote a poem in praise of a culture that celebrated, rather than repressed, multiple voices. For this he was exiled to a labor camp, where he was humiliated, beaten, and forced to clean toilets for nearly two decades. Ai Weiwei spent his early years in this camp.
- On June 4, 1989, student-led protests were held in Beijing's Tiananmen Square. The students were protesting for government accountability, freedom of the press, freedom of speech, and workers' rights. Chinese leaders declared martial law, and military tanks rolled in. Thousands of unarmed civilians were massacred. Since then, the Chinese government called the protest "counter-revolutionary," prohibiting all forms of discussion or remembrance of the event.
- Ai Weiwei has more than 240,000 Twitter followers with whom he illegally communicates an average of 6 hours per day, thanks to hackers who help him circumvent China's great firewall.
- China accused Ai Weiwei of tax evasion and charged him with a bill of ¥970,000 (\$ 1.3 million) without evidence or rationality for such an accusation. He appealed the charges, but lost, leaving him liable for back taxes and fines totaling RMB 15.52 million (\$ 2.4 million).

## WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Share this film. Gives others a chance to be inspired and strengthened by Weiwei's life.
2. Support and encourage creative thinking and practice whenever you can. Act as if you really believe in the power of art.
3. Follow Ai Weiwei on Twitter and Instagram (@aiww). Keep his voice a loud part of the digital conversation.
4. Empower one another to engage, create, and localize Weiwei's global cause. Many of us are fighting similar battles. Let us have the courage to stand against the injustices of our time and place.
5. Never take freedom of expression for granted and never forget that many people have to fight for this right.