Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry

By Alison Klayman
Let's start.
We have a lot of dogs and cats.
Out of the 40 cats,
one knows how to open doors.
Where did this intelligence come from?
All the other cats watch us open the door.
So I was thinking, if I had never
met this cat that can open doors,
I wouldn't know
that cats could open doors.
The biggest difference
between people and cats
is that cats will open the door,
but they will never close it behind them.
Oh, it's right here.
I was looking for this hat.
Here we call it
being an artist within the system.
But he's not. He's...
just himself, you know.
It's too cold in here.
But the light in this room is great.
- Don't you want to connect them?
- Not yet.
I'm getting ready for two shows right now.
One is for the autumn show
at Tate Modern in London.
The other is for the So Paulo Biennale.
At this point, my head is empty.
I don't know what I'm going to do.
I've been asking everyone around me
for good ideas.
Actually, I have very little involvement
in the production of my works.
I mainly make the decisions.
I prefer to have other people
implement my ideas.
Or maybe I just have an idea,
and someone else can use it.
I'm just his hands.
I'm like an assassin.
He says to me, "Here's some money.
Go and kill this person."
I wouldn't ask him,
"Why do you want him killed?"
That's silly.
You just get it done!
We're just hired assassins.
When I eat,
there isn't enough for the rest of you!
He's OK just eating buns.
He always feels art is not a big deal.
He may say, "What the hell is art?"
I think that his role here...
has surpassed that of an artist alone.
Describe yourself.
I consider myself...
more of a...
more of a chess player.
My opponent makes a move,
I make a move.
Now I'm waiting for my opponent
to make the next move.
Every year I do more than 1 00 interviews with the
international press.
The same goes for Chinese media.
Chinese critics are
typically mild but skilful.
They don't directly criticise
the Communist Party or the government.
But Ai Weiwei is different.
He uses the most aggressive words
to point out society's dark side.
Hello?
Are you the Sichuan Post-Quake Reconstruction office?
Yes.
We want to know more details
about the student death toll.
The death toll is confidential.
What do you want this name list for?
Are you some kind of American spy?
At the time, I was at home
taking care of my child.
I was always reading
Ai Weiwei's blog on Sina.com.
That was before it got shut down.
A lot of people were reading it.
One day I saw an entry he wrote
about investigating the student deaths
from the May 12th quake.
He said he was seeking volunteers
to help him do this work.
How many casualties were there?
About 94.
The volunteers went to every town
to ask parents and schools
for the names of the dead.
You couldn't even call it tofu construction,
it's the dregs of the tofu!
A group of parents came together
to have a meal,
but they said it was an illegal assembly!
They detained five of us.
Did the authorities know
you were Ai Weiwei's people?
They suspected it,
but we dodged the question.
We said we were all volunteers,
there on our own.
The way I see it,
we weren't there as anybody's people.
We were just doing the same work.
That's what I've always thought.
It's like we were doing
the same work as Ai Weiwei.
I think it concerns every one of us.
It's not just about art.
It's also about life.
Blogs and the Internet
are great inventions for our time
because they give ordinary people
an opportunity
to change public opinion.
There was a group of people
like him in Beijing...
like Ai Weiwei, long ago,
in the Cultural Revolution.
Their parents were Party members,
very famous ones.
But their fathers
were labelled as Rightists in 1957.
They feared nothing,
and said whatever they felt.
He's like his father, the poet Ai Qing.
He was also an opinionated
and romantic artist.
Artists can easily offend others.
When my father was 18,
he went to Paris to paint.
He came back when he was 20.
He was captured
by Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist Party.
They kept him in prison for many years.
By the time he got out of prison,
he was a famous poet.
After that,
he joined the Communist Revolution.
He went through 40 checkpoints
on his way to Yan'an.
That's idealism.
At any checkpoint, he could
have been thrown in jail, or killed.
During political struggles,
my father was always
the biggest enemy of the people.
There were political actions
in every corner of China.
No one could escape it.
One time during a demonstration,
I remember,
someone used brushes and ink,
the kind we do calligraphy with,
to splatter my dad's face.
His whole face was covered in black ink.
Another time someone used a gun
to beat his back.
Things like that happened many times.
Weiwei saw all of this.
My dad tried to kill himself many times.
These are experiences I cannot erase.
Before that trip to Chengdu,
we'd never met the activist Tan Zuoren.
We just heard he was also investigating
the students' deaths.
If a society, when faced
with such a big natural disaster,
has no one who speaks up...
I think maybe I'd rather not be a part of it.
Where's Lao Na Ti Hua?
By the time we got to Chengdu,
it was already midnight.
They took us to grab a bite.
We had the local snack lao ma ti hua.
Thank you for your hard work.
Then we were followed back to our hotel.
But Weiwei handled this his own way.
He went over to the police car and
just asked them, "Are you following me?"
You looking for me?
You looking for me?
What are you doing?
Nothing, I'm just asking
if you're following me.
- I don't know you. I'll call the police!
- Go ahead, call the police!
Motherfuckers.
They didn't look right to me.
ID cards! Take your ID cards.
At about three o'clock we heard,
"Bang, bang, bang, bang!"
The sound of banging on the door
was incredibly loud and terrifying.
I said, "What the fuck!
Who is fucking knocking at this hour?"
I started to swear like that.
They shouted, "Police!"
So I had to stop.
The police can give you a lot of trouble.
Who's there?
Police.
What police?
From the local station.
Why are local cops
knocking on doors so late?
- Inspection.
- Inspecting what?
Identity papers.
Who allows you to check IDs at this hour?
We'll explain things
after you open the door.
Open the door.
The police kicked the door open.
This young cop wanted to show off.
He went up and punched Ai Weiwei.
- You're hitting me?
- Who saw it?
- Is this how police officers behave?
- Who hit you? Where's the wound?
- How did my clothes get torn?
- You did it yourself!
- I tore my own clothes and beat myself?
- That's right, it's the only explanation.
Because I didn't see anyone hit you.
Officer 7998,
I'm taking your badge number!
Where are my five assistants
that you detained?
I just want to know where they are.
I don't know,
and I'm not sure I can find out.
Where are they being detained?
It's not that they
are being detained, exactly...
You took them away! You can't say
that you don't know where they are.
It hurts so much.
It's like my head is splitting open.
It was like this back in China, too,
but I thought if I waited it would get better.
Fuck you, Notherland.
The End
When he was unexpectedly hit in Sichuan,
I was terrified.
It was something I never imagined.
For us, life and work are mixed together.
That's because our home and our work
are in the same place.
So being together, getting along
for so many years, 16 years...
it's pretty special.
Collecting antiques
was one of our father's hobbies.
This love for antiques eventually
became a part of Weiwei's art.
He started smashing pottery.
Things from our past
often influence our future.
There are reasons behind some things.
Did your family influence you?
I don't really think
my family influenced me very much.
Could we visit your mother
to ask her about you?
That wouldn't be good. She's too old.
How she sees me isn't who I really am.
Here's an idea!
Just find a random person to be my mum.
It'll be fine. Just ask about her own son,
then write my name instead.
I could write a contract.
It'll say, "I authorise you
to interview any random mother."
Then you can say it's an artwork of mine.
- Weiwei?
- Yes?
- Look. We have guests today.
- Hello, hello.
How's your head?
Well, it was treated, and now it's fine.
I'm very lucky.
I almost died.
How does it feel,
seeing all these articles about your son?
I feel very proud.
Because he speaks out
for the average citizen.
I wish he would just be purely an artist.
One person cannot solve
the problems of the whole country.
But if everyone
ignores the country's problems,
what will happen?
Num, let me give you a DVD.
It's about the earthquake investigation
to collect the names.
Watch for a bit and you'll understand.
Over 5,000 students died
and they didn't have to.
So you are searching for the cause?
Yes, think of their families.
You understand, you're a teacher.
They were their parents' only child.
From three-year-olds
to students about to start college.
Their farmer parents put all their hope
and resources into them.
Some very bright kids.
One loud boom and they're gone.
You have to investigate
if there was shoddy tofu construction.
Every night I can't sleep.
- What are you doing? There's no need...
- I'm worried they'll bully you.
If they want to get me, they will.
There's nothing we can do about that.
No, those people...
I'm worried that Nummy
won't see you again.
Don't worry, I'm not afraid.
How can that be? Aren't you human?
We all endure what we can.
I've thought this out clearly.
You say this so lightly.
So what can you do?
- Well, you're my son.
- So what? Come on, this is unnecessary.
This isn't necessary.
You don't need to worry.
There's no need for this.
Many people say that
the government doesn't touch him
because he has so much foreign support.
But didn't they still beat him up?
Didn't they still silence him?
The government isn't afraid of anyone.
If the government was afraid of someone,
it wouldn't be the government anymore.
Liu Xiaobo was not convicted
for his thoughts.
Liu Xiaobo, by doing things
like publishing his essays online,
incited the overthrow
of China's political power and system. This violates Article 105 of the Criminal Law of the People's Republic of China. This is the crime of inciting subversion of state power. After he was punched, we kept writing to the Chengdu Public Security Bureau. But they never gave us a response. Hello. We are here to file a case.
- Oh, you're Ai Weiwei.
- Yes.
- Oh, now I get it.
- Now you get it.
Hand me a DVD of Lao Na Ti Hua. This is for you to watch. It's a film we did about what happened.
- About what happened?
- Yeah.
Your company affiliation? None. I'm an independent artist. Can you state what you are here for? I was assaulted here. I'm here to report... my assault and...
I'm mainly here to report my assault. You don't want to sit?
No.
Today Nr Ai Weiwei came here because he was hit. We hope you will start an investigation soon.
- Does this get mixed in?
- It's for dipping.
I was one of his earliest and most loyal fans. Did you know they call us "Ai fans"?
- Teacher Ai?
- Yes.
I follow you on Twitter.
- Have a seat.
- I'm not staying.
I'm completely content now that I've seen you.
Thank you.
We'll go as soon as we finish eating.
We think Chengdu food is best
when it's eaten outside.
We came all the way from Beijing.
What time do you think
you'll be finished eating?
It'd be good for us to know.
When we finish this, we'll go inside, OK?
How much longer will that be?
Half an hour.
Weiwei has a hooligan side.
So he knows
how to deal with other hooligans.
Because the Communist Party
are just hooligans, really.
So you have to turn yourself
into a hooligan as well.
He didn't say anything.
He didn't take anything when he left either.
He just wanted to leave.
He had hours and hours
of free time every day.
We'd be out and he'd suddenly say,
"Atlantic City is calling me
to go gambling!"
Why did Weiwei and I come to New York?
We came here to have this great collision, so to speak.
He used his camera like it was his diary.
I saw one of his works at Cohen's place.
The profile of a face
he made from a coat hanger.
I really liked it.
I saw him on a hunger strike.
During his hunger strike,
he tied something around his head.
He wrote "Fuck your mother" on it.
He stayed like that
at the UN building for several days.
Sure, he worked hard
during those 12 years in New York,
but he didn't have anything to show for it.
He explained that his dad was old and sick.
He wanted to be at home.
What are those?
These are some of our documentaries.
Here's Lao Na Ti Hua,
also the Sichuan earthquake film,
and my Fairytale piece.
I'll give you four of each,
you can share them
with your colleagues at the magazine.
Great.
In an interview, you once said,
"We became more human after the '80s."
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.
Back then,
people were very depressed.
This is the first issue
It was a very free space.
You could write anything.
Weiwei's three books -
the Black, White and Gray Cover Books -
were very important
for Chinese contemporary art.
All three books have
my poetry and lyrics in them.
In that, his wife held her skirt up
in Tiananmen Square.
We'd stand by art galleries and ask people, "Hey, are you
interested in this book?"
So we'd sell them secretly.
It was very tense.
It was like an adventure.
I always thought of the books
as an exhibition on paper.
They also introduced artists
like Marcel Duchamp,
Joseph Beuys, and Andy Warhol.
The show's Chinese name
was "Uncooperative Attitude".

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Its English name was "FUCK OFF".
To do something like that back then required a lot of courage.
Because in China at that time, a lot of things were illegal.
"FUCK OFF" had a lot of experimental art.
The atmosphere was very good.
A lot of positivity and creativity.
There were also performance art pieces.
Like Yang Zhichao planting grass in his shoulders.
When he made the Black and White Cover Books, and put together the "FUCK OFF" show, he was mainly concerned with issues facing the art world.
But now, China's developing so quickly, and there are too many problems. So he is getting involved in China's broader social issues.
Yanping, how many names do we have now? Pick a name to read and record it. You can use your mobile phone or a computer to record it. Then email it to us.
It's only been one week? That's right, less than one week.
Last Friday night Teacher Ai put the request on Twitter. We are always trying to think of a way... to get everyone involved.
The earthquake anniversary is coming up, so I think that this method is very good. It helps everyone to learn about... using resources, making recordings, and sending messages online.
Have you seen the list of names in his office? Three years of blood and sweat have turned into a few pieces of paper on the wall, covered in tiny names. I think Ai Weiwei's doing work...
that the government should be doing.
This is our country, our government.
What are they doing?
Are they busy divvying up their money?
Daddy's here! Let's go, Daddy's here!
Nummy will carry you.
We have two guests here today.
Grandpa's cousin's daughter.
She worships you.
I don't need people to worship me.
They've been waiting to see you.
It's like they're waiting to see a master.
I don't want to see them.
I refuse to see them.
Beans.
He's so good when you hold him.
Ai Lao is happy when his dad takes him out.
Weiwei is very good to Ai Lao,
he's happy when Ai Lao is happy.
Take a look. Nice, eh?
Who is this? He looks like the devil.
Weiwei, you look terrifying here.
You're like a mafia boss.
Dandan, I told you not to buy ice cream bars. Why don't you listen to me?
It's not like we have them every day.
We only live once, eh?
You eat ice cream every time you come here.
These little ice cream bars are so good.
I got mung bean flavoured ones.
He's so good with you.
He's giving me melon to eat.
Give Dad another piece.
Give Dad a piece.
- All gone.
- He's not fussy at all.
- All gone!
- Don't give him any more.
No more for you.
It's all gone.
Do you think you're an optimist or a pessimist?
Your actions often feel optimistic, but when you speak out about China you seem like a pessimist.
Pessimist? Really?
I think I'm actually an eternal optimist.
I think optimism is whether you are still exhilarated by life, whether you are curious, whether you still believe there are possibilities. From this perspective, I am very much an optimist.
I'll take a look.
This is in response to our inquiry about the Chengdu beating, right? "After an exhaustive re-investigation, "we stand by the original findings of the Chengdu Police."
This has to be posted online. If it's not publicised, it's like it never happened, isn't it?
- Save a copy for our records.
- OK.
This is the report we prepared on his case. It includes the photos he took that night. We've prepared fifteen copies.
Weiwei has a very strong personality. The more you push him, the more he'll resist.
It's not allowed here. No, listen, you tell me where it is allowed.
Leave the courthouse! OK?
This isn't the kind of thing that gets fast results. It's not like things will change after a news report comes out.
Of course, some people have to pay a tragic price. Like Liu Xiaobo. He's in prison. They accepted our materials.
No photography here! Thanks.
He thinks they won't see us today. It can be done.
We must follow standard procedure.
Please turn that off.

Don't touch me.
If you touch me, you'll be in trouble.
- If you touch me, you'll be in trouble!
- What you're doing is illegal!
- I'm acting illegally? You're acting illegally.
- You detained me before, was that legal?
You illegally detained me.
- You're abusing the law.
- No, you're abusing the law!
I recognise you. It's you.
I recognise you!
The police are hitting people!
You should be tweeting.
Be clear about what happened today.
Write more than one line.
If you tweet continuously,
people will understand what's happening.
I took his glasses off
so I could take a photo of his face!
Do you have that tape?
When I took his glasses off?
- How much can they do in a day?
- It's about two rows per day.

When we got here,
they'd already done about half.
So it will be done
in another day and a half.

It's on now.
It's not just a nomination -
he won, didn't he?

Congratulations, Liu Xiaobo!
The honour belongs
to all who love freedom!

You see,
everyone is retweeting what I just posted.
He's smelling them.
For Nr Liu Xiaobo,
and many others who are jailed like him,
or have gone missing,
or have been hurt,
or have no outlet to speak out...
this is a great reward.
- It's nice.
- Good?

I think what he's doing is art,
but other people -
like the Chinese government - don't get it.
He really is making art.
He really has to protect himself,
because he is just so precious.
I know very well that here,
in the end, they will crush you.
Then he would be gone,
and that would be a great loss.
What are your plans?
Are there restrictions on your freedom?
Can you say a few words?
I'm very happy to see my son.