Opening the Door

HOPE WHITE

Sunlight falls upon an orange tabby cat stretched out on a table. Surrounded by several cube-like structures made of slender bamboo sticks, he playfully bats at them while lying on his back. Behind the cat are three men. One of them is renowned Chinese artist Ai Weiwei.

“Let’s start,” Ai softly suggests. “We have a lot of dogs and cats,” he tells his interviewer. “Out of the forty cats, one knows how to open doors.” He continues, “If I’d never met this cat that can open doors, I wouldn’t know cats could open doors.”

The camera shifts from Ai to a stark white door. Beneath it is an orange cat, perhaps the same cat as before. The cat looks up at the handle, prepares himself, and leaps up to pull down on the lever. The door pops open, and the cat slips outside.

All of this takes only two and a half minutes, but the sequence feels much longer as a result of the camera’s slow, deliberate movements. We are already mesmerized by Ai’s world before any of the action begins. Alternating between scenes of gallery installations and Ai’s playful rebellion against China’s harsh government, American filmmaker Alison Klayman’s documentary Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry follows Ai over the course of three years as he rises from a member of China’s cultural elite to an international superstar of art and activism. Under China’s repressive regime, with its strict censorship policies, Ai was forced to turn to the international stage and gain his popularity primarily through his blog and Twitter account. With the help of these social media utilities, Ai conducted a massive investigation into the government cover-up of thousands of children’s deaths in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, petitioned his Internet followers to record themselves reciting the names of the victims, and created several art installations inspired by the events, spreading awareness to millions (Ai and Klayman). The Chinese government began to watch Ai with ever-increasing scrutiny as Klayman filmed the documentary.
Never Sorry treats Ai as an artistic genius. If his work had not first been encountered with prior awareness of the current sociopolitical issues in China, one might easily have written him off as not much of an artist at all. Consider Ai’s exhibit Sunflower Seeds at London’s Tate Modern from 2010 to 2011: to the uninformed visitor it looks as if the artist took a trip to Costco, purchased a bunch of sunflower seeds in bulk, and poured them onto the gallery floor. The one hundred million black-and-white striped husks look real, but they are in fact made of porcelain and hand-painted by 1,600 Chinese workers hired by Ai (“Sunflower Seeds”). While virtually any “Made in China” product could have been used to represent China’s mass production of goods, Ai deliberately chose sunflower seeds for both personal and political reasons. He grew up in a rural area during Mao Zedong’s Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and 70s, where ubiquitous “propaganda images depicted Chairman Mao as the sun and the mass of people of China as sunflowers” beneath him (“Unilever”). But despite the oppression and restriction associated with Mao’s reign, “Ai remembers the sharing of sunflower seeds as a gesture of human compassion” (“Interpretation”). When viewed through the layers of cultural context and personal associations that define it, Sunflower Seeds morphs from intellectual garbage to evocative sculpture. Ai’s predominant goal throughout his entire body of work is to encourage free speech and the sharing of ideas in China, instead of dogmatic belief in one particular ideology. The seeds encourage us to celebrate our individuality and in doing so condemn mass production—not of goods, necessarily—but of the identities of individual citizens.

But what makes this work so compelling (and it is) as evidenced by the multitude of visitors pouring into the museum from all over the world, is that an extensive knowledge of Chinese history is not necessary to appreciate the installation. Klayman demonstrates the approachability and joy of Ai’s artwork when considered apart from its inspiration by first introducing us to Sunflower Seeds in the Tate with little contextual information, the same way many museum visitors would encounter it in real life. There is no barrier between the museum-goers and the work. Sunflower Seeds invites its viewers to interact with it by walking on or lying in the seeds. For these visitors, Ai’s exhibition is more reminiscent of a picnic in Central Park than a trip to the museum. By capturing the variegated nature of the viewing experience, the film shows us how Ai’s installation alters our preconceived notions about how art can be experienced.

Klayman reminds us that despite the sensationalism that surrounds him, Ai is not only China’s top maverick but also China’s most popular artist.
Though Klayman states in an interview with PBS NewsHour’s Jeffrey Brown that she sees Ai as an artist “first and foremost,” Ai responds that he cannot define himself only as an “artist or as a so-called activist,” because he does not know “what [he] will be next.” “But to him,” Klayman later asks Brown, “what is the definition of an artist? It’s someone who is interested in communication, who is interested in engagement, who has to be talking about things that are relevant to the world around him or her.” By this definition, Ai is surely an artist, but this definition of the word “artist” is nearly indistinguishable from that of “activist,” one who “advocates or engages in action” (OED). Ai’s seemingly dual identity makes it difficult to analyze his work as either a product of protest or as a work of art.

But it is important to realize that Klayman and Ai are not in personal conflict. In fact, their disagreement stems from an ideological debate about art that dates as far back as the Renaissance. Various fine arts academies established during that time sought to define art, once and for all: they established “ideologies, rules, [and] procedures” to help pin down the concept (Boime 203). Esteemed art theorist Albert Boime, however, asserts in his essay “The Cultural Politics of the Art Academy” that such institutions aimed to resolve more than traditional “stylistic or practical issues” and “function[ed] as part of a distinct social and political agenda” (203). In the contemporary art world (outside China), the Academy’s definition of art is no longer enforced and has become increasingly malleable. According to artist Marcel Duchamp, whom Ai claims to be his biggest influence, “anything can be turned into an object of art if the artist decides it to be” (qtd. in Dercon and Lorz 7). Duchamp and Ai’s take on art contrasts starkly with the traditional beliefs set forth by the academies of Europe (which regarded painting as the highest medium), as well as the Fine Arts Academy of the People’s Republic of China, which exists, in part, to prevent the vocalization of dissent through art (Boime 211). In Never Sorry, Beijing-based artist Chen Danqing tells Klayman that Ai is “not the kind of person we are familiar with in China. He doesn’t work within the system. He’s just himself.” It is clear from Danqing’s usage of “we” and “he” that Ai is in a category all by himself in the context of Chinese contemporary art—or, perhaps, he is undefinable because he is not simply “just an artist.”

The beauty of Never Sorry is that it presents the information necessary to make an informed decision on where to draw the line between art and activism. The Academy, rather, forces the viewer to believe one view over the other. Many of Ai’s installations selected for the film, like Sunflower Seeds, can be interpreted as either as activist or artistic. Another such example is He Xie,
a pile of 3,200 porcelain crabs on display in the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C. (Ai and Klayman). The inspiration for the piece clearly comes from a moment in Never Sorry when Ai invites his Twitter followers to a feast of 10,000 river crabs following the government’s unexplained announcement that it would demolish Ai’s newly-built studio in Beijing that the authorities had in fact invited him to build there. Why crabs? They are “laced with political satire,” we are told in the interview with Brown. In Mandarin, the word river crab sounds the same as the ubiquitous government slogan “harmonious society.” Ai’s sarcastic pun points out the government’s hypocrisy in calling their highly restricted society “harmonious,” highlighting the fact that this perceived harmony is actually a result of governmental force rather than of free will. With the government’s impending demolition of Ai’s property, the river crab becomes the perfect entree to protest the restriction of individual rights.

He Xie also demonstrates Ai’s obsession with using massive quantities of a given material in his artwork: both He Xie and Sunflower Seeds use a vast number of small symbolic items to create a single installation. In the work of a social and political activist, it seems apt to consider this habit as representative of Ai’s interest in the concept of individual citizens who come together to form a cohesive society. In an interview about Sunflower Seeds, Ai says he feels that the seeds reflect what he is doing on Twitter in that they represent the sharing of information among individuals. Though Ai’s statement is more of a contemplation of the piece itself than a description of his underlying intention, it nevertheless implies that he recognizes the value of social media’s power to disseminate information to people around the world easily and quickly. In fact, the truest expression of Ai’s artistic goals occurs via Twitter because through this medium his clever messages and offbeat images force his followers to pause and reflect not only in a museum or gallery but out in the world where politics and policy truly matter.

And yet Ai’s Tweets, though there are many in the film, are not highlighted as works of art in Klayman’s account. They function only as transitions during moments of conflict and high intensity in the film’s narrative. The structure of Never Sorry has a distinct pattern that repeats itself throughout the film’s length: first, we see Ai in his studio or installing a work in a gallery, then an incident in which he acts out against the Chinese government (often supplemented by footage from his own documentaries), and then the Tweets that Ai posted during or after the event. This habitual sequence unfortunately makes his online statements seem more like afterthoughts or commentaries than integral components of his artistic process. But Klayman
does not completely ignore the power of online media: in the director’s commentary of *Never Sorry*’s DVD, she describes Twitter as a “tool” for change in China and encourages us to think about the possibilities of Twitter in the U.S. (*Never Sorry*). The power of Twitter, she adds, depends on the context in which it is used and how you “curate” your Tweets. What makes Ai’s Tweets so powerful is the large number of supporters they have earned him. His online communication encourages participation in the process of making change and, of most importance, teaches Chinese citizens about “using resources,” as Ai calls it, in order to do so (*Never Sorry*). Klayman does use an artistic vocabulary to explain Ai’s use of Twitter, but the fact that her acknowledgement of the power of Ai’s Tweets is buried in the director’s commentary rather than being highlighted in the movie points to a need for a greater analysis of social media’s role in activism in order to fully understand Ai as an artist.

Popular writer and journalist Malcolm Gladwell examines the effects of social media on activism in his *New Yorker* article “Small Change: Why the Revolution Will Not Be Tweeted.” Gladwell seeks to prepare us for the imminent failures of this social media revolution and to make us critical of activists’ use of Twitter as a tool for change. Gladwell does not outright dismiss the benevolent intentions of today’s activists but rather points out a difference in the amount of change contemporary activism elicits compared to activism of the past. According to Gladwell, radical change has not been produced by Twitter activism because social media activists ask very little of us (3). Mareike Schomerus of the London School of Economics and Political Science agrees with this analysis and deems the social media method of change “slacktivism” because it “implies that by clicking on a link and forwarding something you have done your share” (qtd. in “Kony2012”). The guilt we create through documentaries and other modes of persuasion is relieved too easily through sharing, and the desire to go out in the world and act is thereby eliminated.

Invisible Children, Inc.’s *Kony2012* campaign, which set out to make Ugandan war criminal Joseph Kony infamous for his crimes, exemplifies Gladwell’s claim that large numbers of online supporters do not necessarily produce big change. Jason Russell’s documentary prompted the world to spread awareness on Facebook and Twitter. His message went viral within 24 hours, receiving just shy of one billion views as of this writing (Russell). Though Russell portrays himself as leading a massive movement for change and actually achieving something of merit, he is in reality decidedly not. Despite all the followers, likes, and shares, there has been almost no change
on the ground in Uganda, and “Kony is still at large” and active; the viral sensation that was Kony2012 is now largely forgotten (Barcia).

The big difference between Ai and Russell is that Ai’s use of social media extends well beyond “slacktivism.” Instead of making us feel as if we are making a difference simply by donating or sharing a link as Russell does, Ai makes us critically aware that we are not doing anything to produce change by consuming his Tweets. Rather than trying to get each and every one of his followers to feel as if they are producing change, Ai only seeks to point out that change is necessary; by giving us less, Ai tells us we need to do more. His ability to awaken a deathless desire for revolution in his followers, something Russell’s fading movement has not done, frightens the Chinese government immensely, as is evident in their attempts to silence and censor him. “What can they do to me? None other than deportation, kidnapping, and imprisonment . . . or make me completely vanish,” Ai tweeted in November 2009 (“Top Ten”). In early 2011, Ai did in fact disappear. We later discovered that he had been detained by the government for “tax evasion.” He was released eighty-one days later, and his return home is somberly depicted at the end of Never Sorry. The prescient Tweet served to turn his eventual political oppression into a kind of artistic performance, one that prompted his followers and others to think more carefully about the Chinese government’s censorship.

Until his goals for China are achieved, Ai will not stop. Rather than proposing a simple solution, and telling us how to solve our problems as other activists do, Ai works to show us what needs to be changed. While activism endeavors to persuade us that something needs to be changed, social media only allows these ideas to permeate our personal networks. However, such ideas are not close enough to our hearts for them to incite effective action. This is why art, in any form—whether it is sculpture or Tweets—is necessary. It asks us first to feel, and only after, to think. Ai Weiwei’s art wins our hearts with its wit and its solicitations to contemplate the state of things. For now, we spread ideas through social media; Ai shows us through his artful approaches that we must act on them.

Never Sorry doesn’t have a happy ending, and it doesn’t offer us an opportunity to turn things around as Russell does. When Ai returns from his imprisonment, reporters follow him down the road, their cameras illuminating a remarkably skinnier and wearier Ai than the one we have known throughout the film. He is under strict orders not to speak with them and closes the door in their faces as well as ours; we learn in the next moment, though, that Ai is not defeated even in his temporary silence. Within months he is Tweeting and speaking to the press again.
Like the cat in the opening scene of the film, Ai uses social media as a lever to open the door to China. Just as Ai says he would not have known cats could open doors until he saw one cat do it, much of the world did not know that it is possible to spread the seeds of change within China until Ai made himself a household name through his pioneering art and social media presence.

Klayman’s ending offers us a frustratingly perfect image; there is still more to be accomplished in China. We must see that important doors are still closed and important statements still go unsaid. Ai appears to be a tragic figure in our final glimpse of him. But if *Never Sorry* offered a happy ending, we as viewers would not be inspired to do the hard work of opening our own doors to change.

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**WORKS CITED**


*Tate Modern.* Web. 1 Apr. 2013.