
World-Renowned Chinese Artist Ai Weiwei Keeps on Creating Despite Kidnapping, Show Trial, Surveillance and the Unending Wrath of Bureaucrats

“Andreas Johnsen’s intimate portrait of China’s most internationally celebrated renegade.”
—Neil Young, The Hollywood Reporter

Artist Ai Weiwei has a serious problem with authority: The Chinese government not only abducted and held him captive for nearly three months, but after his release conducted a show trial on baseless charges and kept him under house arrest for a year.

But the Chinese government also has a problem with Ai Weiwei, whose persecution has converted him into one of the world’s best known artists and advocates for free speech and human rights. This world-class contest of wills and philosophies is the subject of Ai Weiwei: The Fake Case, a stunning and stirring documentary airing on POV (Point of View) on Friday, Oct. 2, 2015 at 10 p.m. as a special presentation on PBS, concluding the 28th season of the series. (Check local listings.) American television’s longest-running independent documentary series, POV is the recipient of a 2013 MacArthur Foundation Award for Creative and Effective Institutions.

Filmmaker Andreas Johnsen’s highly engaging film constantly reminds us that hell hath no fury like government functionaries on the warpath. Ai Weiwei’s drama began in April 2011, when Chinese authorities abducted him and placed him in an isolation cell. His whereabouts were unknown to family and friends, and he was denied legal representation. After three months of constant interrogation he was placed under house arrest for a year. He was also tried on trumped-up charges of tax evasion and pornography—the “fake case”—and heavily fined.

The government’s intention was clear: Silence the artist, whose criticism of the state had become too much for the ruling party to bear. Yet that very muzzle became his megaphone.

“Ai Weiwei is a man who does not give up even when his life is in danger,” Johnsen says. “He seems to have an uncontrollable urge to resist and a backbone that gets stronger each time somebody tries to break it. He believes so deeply in openness, transparency and in the importance of expressing yourself that it is the equivalent of the need to breathe. You do not truly live if you do not or cannot express yourself.”

We meet Ai Weiwei just after his release from prison. Though news reports say that detention has made him slimmer, he is still a large and somewhat imposing man. Yet the stress of his ordeal has left a mark: He is a study in weariness, and wariness. Unfortunately for his captors, he is also a study in resistance and he wields a very sharp tongue.
He loudly denounces his “kidnapping” and the kidnappers. “The government can arrest anyone at any time,” he warns. “They have no sense of right or wrong. Everything’s about taking orders.”

But there’s also an impish quality to Ai Weiwei’s resistance. He invites the men who constantly spy on him to parties and promises to introduce them to his friends. He also lectures his tormentors. “You are a big party with 80 million members. Why do you make it like a secret society?” He installs four webcams in his home that broadcast around the clock so the entire world can join the surveillance team. The authorities, he notes, “got annoyed by that.”

And he continues to create, including a dramatic piece of installment art chronicling his detention that premiered in Venice during the 2013 Biennale and had its U.S. premiere in 2014 at the Brooklyn Museum. ArtReview magazine named him the most powerful artist in the world. Financial support from both Chinese and international supporters poured in.

“It is strange they have to turn me into a god,” he muses.

Persecution by the government is a family tradition: Ai Weiwei’s parents were hounded by the state in the late 1950s, though his mother explains that repression isn’t quite what it used to be. “If this was 1957, they would have killed you already,” she tells her son, adding that she nonetheless fears for his safety.

While not fatal, the pettiness that marks his captivity and house arrest is maddening. Daily walks in a park to control blood pressure have to be shifted to a parking lot so he can see if anyone is following him. A visitor points out that his address is no longer present on Google Maps. Meetings with journalists are discouraged, though he speaks his mind anyway. During a drive past the American embassy he observes that 3,000 people a day wait to be admitted. “I guess people just want to escape.”

After an explosive encounter with police outside his studio, Ai Weiwei speculates that all may not necessarily end well. The government has told him, “We can always arrest you again. And we also don’t have to release you.”

Then again, Ai Weiwei may have the last laugh. One day, he envisions, China “will completely collapse. I’m trying to figure out which day.”

“The film started out as a portrait of an artist,” Johnsen concludes, “but has evolved to tell a universal story about a man and his struggle, a man on the horns of a tragic dilemma. It has become an epic tale in which Ai Weiwei is a metaphor expressing human existence in a closed, opaque, mind-controlling society.”

About the Filmmaker:
Andreas Johnsen, Director/Cinematographer
Self-taught Danish filmmaker Andreas Johnsen has a sharp eye and a big heart for subcultures and is always interested in locating what takes place below the surface, where struggles over issues take place or take root and where the “real people” live. Since 2003 he has directed, produced and financed several documentaries, including Kidd Life (2012), about a Danish rapper, A Kind of Paradise (2011), about African artists, and Murder (2009), about the abortion ban in Nicaragua and its effect on women’s lives. He lives in Copenhagen.
Produced by American Documentary, Inc., POV is public television’s premier showcase for nonfiction films. The series airs Mondays at 10 p.m. on PBS from June to September, with primetime specials during the year. Since 1988, POV has been the home for the world’s boldest contemporary filmmakers, celebrating intriguing personal stories that spark conversation and inspire action. Always an innovator, POV discovers fresh new voices and creates interactive experiences that shine a light on social issues and elevate the art of storytelling. With our documentary broadcasts, original online programming and dynamic community engagement campaigns, we are committed to supporting films that capture the imagination and present diverse perspectives.

POV films have won 32 Emmy® Awards, 18 George Foster Peabody Awards, 12 Alfred I. duPont-Columbia University Awards, three Academy Awards®, the first-ever George Polk Documentary Film Award and the Prix Italia. The POV series has been honored with a Special News & Documentary Emmy Award for Excellence in Television Documentary Filmmaking, two IDA Awards for Best Continuing Series and the National Association of Latino Independent Producers (NALIP) Award for Corporate Commitment to Diversity. More information is available at www.pbs.org/pov.

POV Community Engagement and Education (www.pbs.org/pov/engage)
POV’s Community Engagement and Education team works with educators, community organizations and PBS stations to present more than 650 free screenings every year. In addition, we distribute free discussion guides and standards-aligned lesson plans for each of our films. With our community partners, we inspire dialogue around the most important social issues of our time.

POV Digital (www.pbs.org/pov/)
Since 1994, POV Digital has driven new storytelling initiatives and interactive production for POV. The department created PBS’s first program website and its first web-based documentary (POV’s Borders) and has won major awards, including a Webby Award (and six nominations) and an Online News Association Award. POV Digital continues to explore the future of independent nonfiction media through its digital productions and the POV Hackathon lab, where media makers and technologists collaborate to reinvent storytelling forms. @povdocs on Twitter.

American Documentary, Inc. (www.amdoc.org/)
American Documentary, Inc. (AmDoc) is a multimedia company dedicated to creating, identifying and presenting contemporary stories that express opinions and perspectives rarely featured in mainstream media outlets. AmDoc is a catalyst for public culture, developing collaborative strategic engagement activities around socially relevant content on television, online and in community settings. These activities are designed to trigger action, from dialogue and feedback to educational opportunities and community participation.
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