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***Beijing Spring* Documents a Forgotten Struggle for Freedom in China**

Never-Before-Seen Footage Sheds Light on a Generation of Artists and Activists Who Set the Stage for Tiananmen Square



First protest since the revolution. Photo courtesy Wang Rui (1979)

(NEW YORK, NY – September 18, 2017) – **AC Films** is finalizing post-production on a new feature-length documentary, ***Beijing Spring***. In 1978, two years after Mao Zedong’s death, a remarkable shift began in China. The new government under Deng Xiaoping, retreating from the violence of the Cultural Revolution, promised reform, and loosened restrictions on political and artistic speech. Deng experimented with free speech by allowing liberal ideas and avant-garde art to be posted along a wall in central Beijing, a space that became known as the Democracy Wall.

In this moment of newfound freedom, artists and activists (including Wei Jingsheng and a young Ai Weiwei) dared to voice their ideas, until the government cracked down again, shutting the door on this brief moment of reform known as the Beijing Spring. Now, forty years later, *Beijing Spring* tells the story

of the Democracy Wall, and the artists and activists who created it, as has never been possible before: with reams of never-before-seen 16mm footage, hidden from the Chinese authorities for decades.

Beijing Spring marks the directorial debut of Andy Cohen, Executive Producer of artist Ai Weiwei's **Human Flow**, which debuted at both the Venice Film Festival and Telluride this September (to be released by Amazon), and the Oscar short-listed films **Hooligan Sparrow** and **Never Sorry**. *Beijing Spring* is co-directed with longtime collaborator Gaylen Ross, director of the award-winning documentary **Killing Kasztner**.

At the heart of the film is the dramatic protest of the **Stars Art Group**—led by Huang Rui and Ma Desheng—a group of young self-trained “unofficial” painters, sculptors, poets, and photographers who, prohibited from participating in a public exhibition at China’s National Museum, hung their works on the perimeter fence outside.

Beijing residents thronged to the fence to see the new art that dared criticize the Party. The modern and abstract forms were unlike the official propaganda art that propagated under Mao’s strict censorship laws.



Wang Keping, *Silence* (1978). Photo courtesy Helmut Opletal. | *Cameraman Chi Xiaoning* (1979). Photo courtesy Wang Rui.

Wang Keping’s sculpture *Silence* demonstrates how far these artists pushed the boundaries of freedom. “With its plugged mouth and blinded eye,” Cohen says, “*Silence* confronted the cruelty of Mao’s oppression. This courageous, overt criticism threatened the Party. A year or two earlier, people were made to disappear for much milder offences.”

The police soon dismantled the display, igniting the first unauthorized public protest rally since the beginning of Communist rule in 1949, a rally courageously filmed by Chi Xiaoning. Fearing for the safety of those he filmed, Chi hid that 16mm footage. Unfortunately, Chi’s caution was prescient, as the government soon began cracking down again. New prohibitions appeared, not only on art that expressed individual ideas and emotion, but also on dancing and pop music, and even on romantic involvement with foreigners. Stars Artist Li Shuang was arrested and sentenced to two years in a re-education camp for her love affair with a French diplomat.

Beijing Spring draws not only from Chi's footage (which, as Chi's family had continued to keep his secret, even after his death, took Cohen six years to track down), but also interviews with Wei Jingsheng and Xu Wenli, leaders in the Democracy movement who were imprisoned for decades in China before being granted political asylum in the United States. The film also includes never-before-seen images by Wang Rui.

From the Arab Spring to the Euromaidan Revolution in Ukraine, the Green Movement in Iran to the Umbrella movement in Hong Kong to this year's anti-corruption marches across Russia, from Ferguson to Beijing, the power of protest, art, and activism are always on display. *Beijing Spring* is not only a one-of-a-kind window into a crucial, and officially censored, moment in modern Chinese history, but an ode to what protest can accomplish, and a reminder of how fragile our freedoms can be.

ABOUT ANDY COHEN

Andy Cohen is an independent filmmaker and journalist. He uses his brand AC Films to create films that affect social change. Recently, he Executive Produced [Human Flow](#), Ai Weiwei's epic documentary on the international refugee crisis (scheduled release October 2017), as well as the multi award-winning films [Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry](#), [The World Before Her](#), and [Hooligan Sparrow](#). His films have premiered at the Venice Film Festival, Toronto International Film Festival, Berlin Film Festival, Sundance Film Festival, Telluride Film Festival, among others, and been broadcast on PBS, BBC, UK Ch4, Arte, Netflix, and Amazon. As a video and print journalist, Mr. Cohen directed and wrote a series of short films and feature articles on China's leading contemporary artists for *ArtAsiaPacific*.

With Gaylen Ross he produced and co-wrote his first film in 1996: the award-winning [Dealers Among Dealers](#), and later the critically acclaimed [Killing Kasztner: The Jew who Dealt with the Nazis](#).

In its pursuit of stories that highlight the ties between social justice and the importance of free artistic expression, AC Films is also in production on a documentary about **The Village Gate**, the celebrated nightclub at the heart of Greenwich Village, where Miles Davis, Pete Seeger, Judy Collins, Nina Simone, and hundreds more played, sang, danced, performed, and changed the face of American culture.

ABOUT GAYLEN ROSS

Gaylen Ross has produced, directed, and written award-winning documentary films that have received national and international broadcast and exhibition. *Killing Kasztner: The Jew Who Dealt With Nazis* (produced with Andy Cohen) was an official selection of the Toronto International Film Festival, broadcast as part of the BBC's documentary series "Storyville," shown in 11 countries, and received an unprecedented theatrical release in the US, Israel, and France. Her films have premiered at the Berlin International Film Festival, Hamptons International Film festival, received an Emmy award and gold plaque from Chicago Film Festival, and been broadcast on A&E Television and Ch4 in the UK. Her documentary on diamond dealers, *Dealers Among Dealers* (produced with Andy Cohen), which aired on PBS's prestigious documentary series *P.O.V.*, is considered the only inside look into this very cloistered world. Her films have covered such diverse subjects as cabaret and Broadway theater star Laurie Beechman in [Listen to Her Heart](#); Polish Solidarity workers; gambling in America; Russian mail-order brides; and professional boxing at the renowned Gleason's Gym in New York. [Caris' Peace](#), about

an actress who lost her memory, was the featured film for the Rubin Museum of Art's Brainwave series in New York.

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