

THE CHINESE LIVES OF ULI SIGG

BY KEVIN BERLIN

Social Life Magazine presents two exclusive interviews. The first with Michael Schindhelm, director of the new documentary film “The Chinese Lives of Uli Sigg,” and the second with Uli Sigg, Swiss businessman, diplomat and art collector.

• **Michael Schindhelm:** Was born in Eisenach, Germany in 1960 and works as a writer, filmmaker, performing arts expert and cultural advisor to several international organizations. From 1979 to 1984, he studied at the International University of Voronezh (USSR), graduating with a Master of Science in Quantum Chemistry (cum laude). Films include *The Chinese Lives of Uli Sigg*, documentary film (2016), *Bird's Nest – Herzog & De Meuron in China*, co-directed with Christoph Schaub, documentary film (2008), and *Chants of the Steppes*, documentary film (2004). Michael Schindhelm's work, in the past has been presented at Robert Wilson's Watermill Center and The Parrish Art Museum.

• **Uli Sigg:** was born in Lucerne on 29 April 1946. He is a Swiss business journalist, entrepreneur, art collector, patron, castle owner, rower (he was Swiss champion in the eights discipline at the age of 22) and a former Swiss ambassador to Beijing (1995-1998) for the People's Republic of China, North Korea and Mongolia. Uli Sigg began to collect Chinese contemporary art in the 1990s. As a result, he accumulated the world's largest and most significant collection in this field within a few decades. He has recently fulfilled his promise of giving the collection back to China. The M+ museum in Hong Kong, featuring the Uli Sigg collection, is scheduled to open in 2019.

Kevin Berlin: What inspired the film?

Michael Schindhelm: So there are a number of points. First of all, having lived for almost 30 years under communist rule, in East Germany and also the Soviet Union, and actually having moved the same year that Uli Sigg went the first time to China in 1979. The Soviet Union, at the time when the Afghanistan war started was in steep decline and at the same time also China was about to change after a mild step. I have a very great interest in this period because I do think that many things we encounter today, in terms of politics, in terms of social and economic change worldwide have been triggered there during this period. And I think in particular China played an instrumental role.

KB: Your work has also touched on this theme in the past.

MS: This is also the reason why I shot some years ago an-



Michael Schindhelm, photo by Aurore Belkin.

other film on the making of the Olympic Games Stadium, "Birds Nest" in China featuring Ai Weiwei who was the go between architects from Switzerland Herzog & de Meuron and the Chinese authorities and the reason why I shot this film is because I thought that the Birds Nest will be a symbol for this new China. And I would not only focus on architecture but at the same time try to show how this country tries to gear up for the Olympics to make it a platform to show the world how China sees itself in the 21st Century. And Uli Sigg was already part of this film because he was sort of the behind the scenes, arranging contact with Ai Weiwei and the architects. And that's why I got to know him almost 15 years ago and know more about his collection and the way

how he had collected and the way how he had encountered China, how he learned about China. That he spent so much



Uli Sigg with artwork, *Panda Man*, by Zhao Bandi at Mauensee, *The Chinese Lives of Uli Sigg*, film still, Filip Zumbrunn.



Uli Sigg with artwork, *The Newspaper Reader*, by Ai Weiwei, *The Chinese Lives of Uli Sigg*, film still, Filip Zumbrunn.

and a physical environment which has disappeared in the meantime. I remember vividly when I lived in East Germany in the early 90s that suddenly some of these kind of East German public face of the communist time disappeared within just a few years, due to a very rapid modernization and acceleration of things because also there was a lot of money which suddenly available in particular from West Germany in order to modernize the country by all means. That is why I always thought young people, for example of the generation of my children, actually have no idea anymore what Berlin looked like in 1990 or 1980. And in the same way the young generation of Chinese people, and Westerners have no idea what China looked like in 1980 or 1990 or even early 2000s.

KB: I was first in China in 1989 and then again in 2009 and it was a completely different world.

MS: I can imagine. It was really interesting to see that I had a few young Chinese people on the film set shooting in China, and they were traveling with me, and they were totally puzzled.

They had never seen certain things, they had never heard certain things like we were dealing with in the film so you could really see that this young generation, even though they were smart and educated, they didn't know much about the history. So that's why creating a kind of tapestry of the historical development of China over the last 30 or 40 years was the objective. I used the artwork, as a tool of communication, and we were also lucky to find some footage nobody has used before from the early 80s showing public spaces, showing daily life in China in an extraordinary way. All of this helped to create a kind of collage which allowed to reenact a kind of historic past which has kind of disappeared.

KB: You have a very impressive cast including Uli Sigg and many artists, and most of them are noted for being very private. Yet you are able to communicate and bring out a lot. Do you have some thoughts about how to work with such private people?

MS: I think first of all what helps is that I met these artists



The Chinese Lives of Uli Sigg, film still, Filip Zumbunn.



The Chinese Lives of Uli Sigg, film still, Filip Zumbunn.

are slightly older or slightly younger than me. We have to some extent also something in common in terms of political history coming out of the same world system, of course the communists in China were different than within the Soviet Union but we had those things in common. Sometimes I was even able to talk to them in Russian because they would at least understand some phrases if they wouldn't speak English and very often these guys don't speak English and Ai Weiwei is still rather an exception in this generation of the people that are between 50 and 60.

KB: That's an advantage.

MS: Yes, already this helps. Also just speaking about history, if someone like a Chinese person of their age today speaks about the environment of the 70s or 80s before the real new era started they of course if makes a difference if they speak to somebody who has no clear passage coming from their country, or if they speak to somebody who has some idea of what it means under this communist rule. I think this helps to create a kind of intimacy between them and myself and we spent a

lot of time together to not necessarily speak so much about their work, but rather about their life. I found this very intriguing to speak about the life of people who have really undergone this extraordinary change and transformation.

KB: In the film, Ai Weiwei suggests that "Any artwork that is not questioning authority, it's a fake." There are sensitive issues regarding politics. Did you have a special approach in the film to address some of those issues?

MS: Of course you are always in a dilemma if you do something about China, because you want to be sincere, you want to have an autonomous and independent position and at the same time you may want to show it off to people in this country and this is only possible if you find some way to get into the country and I think there is no real sustainable way to do it illegally. On the other hand there is no way to collaborate directly with these authorities as long as censorship is involved. And in the last 40 years historically China was sometimes in a very difficult situation and it needed to be addressed.

Also, you cannot do a film about Uli Sigg starting somewhere



Artist Fang Lijun at his studio (Beijing), *The Chinese Lives of Uli Sigg*, film still, Filip Zumbunn.

Also, you cannot do a film about Uli Sigg starting somewhere in the late 70s at the death of Mao and ending somewhere in the 21st century and not mention Tiananmen Square for example. So in other words you have to address these politically very relevant aspects of world history in particularly Chinese history and this is something very sensitive to Chinese authorities.

KB: And so you did.

MS: We had to do this and we had to address this and I was very glad and even surprised to see sometimes how open the artists themselves spoke about their experiences. There is one artist for example who's speaking intently about the time he was as a student involved in Tiananmen Square, the student protest of 1989 in general, and how extremely frustrated they were afterwards and almost lost and without any perspective. So you can really see that not only oppositional activists but also influential artist open up to these issues in front of a camera knowing that they may also risks things, in particular now that the current situation in China has become even more sensitive and more complicated. I had to show all of this.

KB: Would you consider the film a work of art in itself?

MS: Yes I would consider it this way and I made it also this

way. You may know that I am a writer, a novelist and an artistic writer and that's why even if it is a documentary in many ways I try to sort of tell a story that often has artistic dimension. The way I see it is that this collage of different layers of materials really allow to tell a story where it seems a blur between a documentary and also fiction. Because as I said before I wanted to reenact the time and period or the environment that had disappeared. So I had to reconstruct this and so we shot for example also spaces which looked like the spaces where Uli Sigg lived; factories, karaoke bars, towns, hotel rooms, spaces which seemingly disappeared from the landscape of China today but we still found those spaces. I had a location scout so that's why we really went also to certain spaces to shoot a little bit like in a fiction movie and so it was meant to be a reconstruction of something real. So that's why I think documentary sometimes involves today these type of things.

KB: The film has already been screened in Hong Kong. I understand that there are plans for the film to come to North America?

MS: Absolutely. I mean first of all we are still not selling the film in the market because we want to make it to the film festivals and as long as this is still open we will not be offering it to the market. Because some of the most prestigious film

festivals, let's say Toronto are very instrumental for documentaries, as long as this is not decided we will not sell it because those film festivals accept only films which have not been released publicly. In Hong Kong it was a private event hosted by Art Basel, it was not a public release so that's why we are waiting for a response from some of those festivals and once we have received this response we will also sell or offer the film to distributors in other countries including the United States.

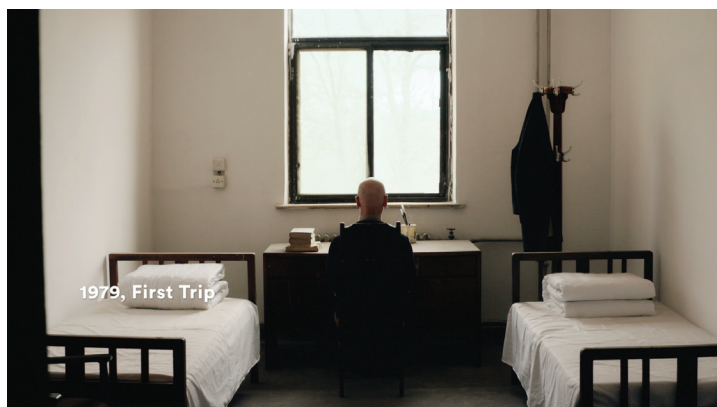
KB: you screened your film "The Bird's Nest" in Long Island at Robert Wilson's Watermill Center.

MS: I made it actually also with my former film "Birds Nest" to even long island I must say and was even in the Hamptons you must know that Robert Wilson. We did a screening of the film in the Parrish Art Museum around the corner. So that was really quite nice that we had the combination where I giving a talk about Dubai at Robert Wilson's Watermill Center and also in the old Parrish Art before Herzog & de Meuron opened the new museum I had a screening of my "Birds Nest" film which was at the time in 2008 And yes, we definitely want to make it to the US with this film too. I think it's very important because there is this kind of particular type of relationship between the US and China, and even more importantly I think and believe that in a global world we have to understand better one another and help sometimes to understand alien cultures. This

is what we always wanted to and art is about.

KB: A bridge motif was important in the film.

MS: You see probably in the film that I have used several times bridges. In the beginning of the film you see that we are walking over the bridge to Uli Sigg's house and in the end of the film you see Uli Sigg walking over a Chinese bridge towards a kind of future. And also in the film you kind of see bridges again and again because Uli Sigg is this kind of builder of bridges. And in my understanding, I think he is this also as an art collector and art is a type of bridge between alien cultures and that's why I think it is very important to show this type of film in America.



The Chinese Lives of Uli Sigg, film still, Filip Zumburn.



Artist Wang Guangyi at his studio in Beijing, The Chinese Lives of Uli Sigg, film still, Filip Zumburn.

Social Life Magazine presents an exclusive interview
with Uli Sigg, Swiss businessman, diplomat and art collector.



Uli Sigg. Photo courtesy of Uli Sigg.

Kevin Berlin: Congratulations on your collection finding a new home at M+ in Hong Kong and the new documentary film.

Uli Sigg: While I may deserve your congrats for the donation, the merits for the film are all with Michael Schindhelm. He had the idea, pulled together the resources and then filmed with great sensitivity what we could restore of my past in China. The film creates all kinds of responses. Basically I am inundated with compliments which ought to go to him. I perceive it to be just as much an interesting document about an important epoch of Chinese history as one about me, and so does the majority of the viewers.

KB: For you personally, what is the importance of the documentary film?

US: Michael forced upon me the discipline to reconstruct my past in China and it is as good a visual document of my past as it can ever get. And of course I enjoy what the artists say about me: how could it otherwise ever have been forced out of them?

KB: At what point along the way did you realize the significant cultural importance of your Collection?

US: Fairly early in my collecting, when I gave myself a new focus - institutional rather than that of a private collector.

I always believed china would become something big and so would its best artists and its art. And so would its artistic testimony be of importance to the nation itself. Yet where could it be found in the future if no one paid attention? So I gave myself the mission to collect it.

KB: You've said that rather than a Collector, you prefer to see yourself as a "researcher of China and Chinese contemporary art." Thoughts?

US: Through Chinese contemporary art I find another access to my ultimate study object which is China itself. I studied it through extensive business experience, through diplomacy and then through this intense interaction with the Chinese artists. They allowed me to see a different Chinese reality, one that for many years resided in the underbelly of China. Yes, I did acquire some of the results of this research which made me a collector, but this was rather a means than an end - at least for much of my collecting time...

KB: What's next?

US: Currently I am busy with digesting the enormous response by media and public to my exhibitions in Hong Kong and Bern and to the film - pleasant yet very time-consuming! Only now I can get started to dream up my next big thing..



Uli Sigg with Chinese President Jiang Zemin, *The Chinese Lives of Uli Sigg*, film still, Filip Zumbrunn.



West Kowloon, Hong Kong, *The Chinese Lives of Uli Sigg*, film still, Filip Zumbrunn.