

Ai Weiwei Still Detained, Rears Heads in NY

by richard vine 05/05/11

While Ai Weiwei continues to be held incommunicado by Chinese authorities, his *Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads* was inaugurated yesterday in the basin of the Pulitzer Fountain, situated in front of the Plaza Hotel at 59th Street and Fifth Avenue in Manhattan. Consisting of 12 cast bronze animal heads, each 4 feet high and ensconced on a 6-foot marble pedestal, the work was realized under the auspices of the AW Asia Foundation, a private organization created in 2007 by New York collector Larry Warsh for the international promotion of contemporary Chinese art.

Braving a steady rain, members of the press and Chinese-art stalwarts such as Danish dealer Jens Faurischou, who has a large branch gallery in Beijing, listened as Mayor Michael Bloomberg introduced a dozen cultural luminaries, including arts patron Agnes Gund; artists Julian Schnabel, Brice Marden and Shirin Neshat; Queens Museum director Tom Finkelpearl; Asia Society museum director Melissa Chiu; and Guggenheim Museum curator of Asian art Alexandra Munroe. The guests took turns reading brief passages from the writings and interview statements of the now-silenced Ai, who had previously planned to attend the ceremony.



PHOTO BY SPENCER TURNER

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The launch took place one day before President Barack Obama's visit to the 9/11 site in Lower Manhattan. Asked about potential diplomatic or economic fallout from presenting Ai's politically fraught installation, Mayor Bloomberg told reporters that freedom of speech is a core U.S. value and "we do what is right for America." In his speech, he noted that Ai once lived in New York for more than a decade [1981–93] and attended the Parsons School of Design.

Ai's enlarged heads, each weighing 800 pounds, were emblems of cultural conflict even before the outspoken artist was detained one month ago. The "fakes," as he would no doubt mischievously call them, mimic spouts that once adorned a fountain in Beijing's 18th-century Summer Palace. (Ai's design studio in Beijing is named Fake, and its Chinese pronunciation (*fah-ke*) sounds very much like a robust English obscenity.) The imperial retreat was ransacked by French and British forces in 1860 during the Second Opium War, fought largely to open Chinese ports to British-manufactured narcotics, a particularly galling episode in China's bitter Century of Humiliations at the hands of Western powers.

The original heads, representing the totem animals of the 12-year Chinese characterological cycle (Year of the Ox, etc.), were looted from the palace grounds and have disappeared. Seven have since been located, but five remain missing. In the last decade, newly rich buyers in the People's Republic have aggressively sought Chinese antiquities on the international market, and China's government has made the repatriation of such objects an implicit cultural policy.

At the Christie's Paris auction of the Yves Saint Laurent holdings in February 2009, well-known buyer Cai Mingchao foiled the sale of two original heads (a rabbit and a rat) by bidding \$18 million for the pair, far over the \$12.8 million high estimate, and then later refusing to pay. Cai, an advisor to the National Treasure Funds of China, said he sabotaged the foreign transaction "on behalf of the Chinese people." The heads were returned to Saint Laurent's partner, Pierre Bergé.

Ai's globalization of the zodiac figures—temporarily mounting his versions (contrary to Chinese government wishes) as public art in a Western setting—may be one more reason for his current official disfavor. The irony, as critic Eleanor Heartney points out in an upcoming piece on Ai in the June/July issue of *Art in America*, is that the original heads were never "Chinese" to begin with. They were designed and made by Europeans at the behest of a Qing dynasty emperor, wielding power for the occupying Manchus, who had conquered China in 1644.

Ai's installation will remain on view in New York through July 15. A two-year world tour, involving a second set of casts, begins May 12 in London, with subsequent stops in Los Angeles, Houston, Pittsburgh, and Washington, D.C.

A book on the project, *Ai Weiwei: Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads*, is forthcoming from Prestel Publishing this fall. For more information on the installation, visit www.zodiacheads.com.

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