

ART

Ai Weiwei: the artist is not present

JAMES ADAMS

The Globe and Mail (includes correction)

Published Tuesday, Jun. 18 2013, 10:42 PM EDT

Last updated Wednesday, Jun. 19 2013, 10:53 AM EDT

Among Canadians, China's Ai Weiwei is likely better known for his dissidence than his art. This country has had little opportunity to see firsthand much of the vast and varied output he's produced in the last 25 years, and every opportunity to hear of his many travails at the hands of China's Communist government, including an 81-day incarceration in 2011 for alleged "economic crimes" and the subsequent confiscation of his passport.

The art deficit, however, began to be remedied Tuesday afternoon in Toronto with the unveiling of Mr. Ai's monumental sculpture installation, *Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads* – 12 bronze heads of animals from the Chinese zodiac, mounted on poles, each about three metres high and weighing an average of 350 kilograms. Arranged in an ellipse inside the perimeter of the reflecting pool in front of City Hall, the 12 will be on public view through Sept. 22, with Toronto as their only Canadian stop.

As impressive as the heads are in their own right, they're also an appetizer of sorts for another Canadian first (and Toronto exclusive), namely *Ai Weiwei: According to What?*, a retrospective of the artist's oeuvre from the early '90s in installations, sculpture, photography, video, audio and design, hosted by the Art Gallery of Ontario. Organized in 2009 by Tokyo's Mori Art Museum, the show already has enjoyed long and successful runs in Washington and Indianapolis, Ind., and will travel to Miami, then Brooklyn, N.Y., after its Aug. 17-Oct. 27 showcase at the AGO.

It's the AGO's hope that Mr. Ai, who turns 56 in August, will be allowed to travel to Toronto during the show's duration but no one's holding their breath. As Elizabeth Smith, the AGO's executive director of curatorial affairs, noted at the unveiling, the artist lives and works "under constant surveillance" by Chinese authorities even as the Internet has allowed him to connect regularly with the outside world and continue to produce art. This week, for instance, at Toronto's Luminato Festival, he participated, via Skype from his home in Beijing, with New York performance artist Laurie Anderson in the live world premiere of *Greetings to the Motherland*.

Mr. Ai got the idea for *Circle of Animals* in 2009 after he heard that the estate of French designer Yves St. Laurent was going to auction two of what had once been a set of 12 zodiac heads, cast in the mid-18th century by two European Jesuits living in China and installed in a fountain at the Chinese emperor's summer palace near Beijing. All 12 were subsequently looted by French and British troops in the mid-19th century, many disappearing from sight. Indeed, today only the whereabouts of seven heads – the monkey, rat, pig, ox, tiger, rabbit and horse – is known. Mr. Ai's heads aren't replicas of the

originals but rather oversized recreations that allude to the issues of originality, fakery and copying, appropriation and repatriation that have informed much of Mr. Ai's work. In fact, several versions of the series, including one in gilded bronze, have been cast over the years and sent touring.

Joining Ms. Smith Tuesday in the ceremonial unveiling of the heads was Toronto Mayor Rob Ford, who, after telling the crowd he was born in 1969 (the year of the rooster), proceeded to pose for pictures with the bronze bird. "So, I love astrology; I've followed it my whole life," he said.

Editor's note: *An earlier version of this story incorrectly stated that the exhibition closes at the AGO on Sept. 27.*