

Ai Weiwei's Zodiac Heads Raise Dizzying Issues in London: Martin Gayford

By Martin Gayford - Jun 7, 2011 12:00 AM GMT+0100

The whole world is changing, the great jazz musician Duke Ellington remarked in 1971. Consequently, he added, no one will be able to retain his or her identity and it becomes hard to tell who's imitating whom.

The sculptural installation "Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads" by the Chinese artist Ai Weiwei currently installed in the courtyard of [Somerset House](#), London, (through June 26, and concurrently in Grand Army Plaza, [New York](#), until July 15) is a perfect demonstration of Duke's point.

This is, like many of Ai's ideas, a deceptively simple notion that sets off a disorientating, even dizzying, chain of thoughts. It's a recreation of 12 bronze heads of beasts, representing the Chinese astrological signs, that once decorated a combined fountain and water clock in the Old Summer Palace outside Beijing.

That might sound straightforward. Ai has learned well the lesson of Marcel Duchamp: how to make the maximum intellectual and aesthetic effect with the minimum means. In this case, the ironies and complexities begin with the origin of the fountain.

It was designed and cast by two Jesuits, Giuseppe Castiglione and Michel Benoist, who were resident in [China](#). Castiglione's work as a painter is an early example of cultural globalization, Eastern and Western in more or less equal measure.

Baroque Globalization

In 1747, Castiglione and Benoist designed a series of pavilions at the Summer Palace in a version of the European Baroque style, a mirror reversal of the European idiom known as Chinoiserie. That was an occidental pastiche of oriental art. These were a Chinese take on the West.

In 1860, the Summer Palace was sacked by British and French troops, a terrible act of cultural vandalism. Among the objects looted were the 12 bronze Zodiac heads. Two of them, the Rat and Rabbit, from the collection of [Yves Saint Laurent](#) and [Pierre Berge](#), came up for sale at Christie's, Paris, in February 2009.



An installation shot of "Circle of Animals / Zodiac Heads" by Ai Weiwei. The work is on view at Somerset House from May 12 through June 26. Photographer: Marcus Ginns/Calum Sutton PR via Bloomberg



"Dragon" (2010) by Chinese artist Ai Weiwei. Photographer: Paul Goguen/Bloomberg



"Rat" (2010) by Chinese artist Ai Weiwei. The sculptures are inspired by the Chinese zodiac animal heads of the 18th-century Yuanming Yuan fountain, and are on view through July 15, 2011. Photographer: Paul Goguen/Bloomberg



"Ox" (2010) by Chinese artist Ai Weiwei. Photographer: Paul Goguen/Bloomberg



"Tiger" (2010) by Chinese artist Ai Weiwei. Photographer: Paul Goguen/Bloomberg



"Rabbit" (2010) by Chinese artist Ai Weiwei. Photographer: Paul Goguen/Bloomberg



"Snake" (2010) by Chinese artist Ai Weiwei. Photographer: Paul Goguen/Bloomberg



"Horse" (2010) by Chinese artist Ai Weiwei. Photographer: Paul Goguen/Bloomberg

The Chinese government, describing the bronzes as "national treasures" tried unsuccessfully to stop the auction. While they each sold for 15 million euros (\$21.4 million), the buyer, Cai Mingchao, then said that he wouldn't pay the money on principle.

Ai's recreated fountain thus raises questions about cultural identity and restitution, originality and reproduction. Characteristically, Ai has questioned whether a work designed by an Italian and made by a Frenchman is truly a Chinese national treasure. The relation between present reality and traditional culture is one of his themes.

Aesthetic Vandalism

Among the pieces in an exhibition of his work at the [Lisson Gallery](#) (52-54 and 29 Bell St., [London](#), through July 16) is an array of 31 Han Dynasty vases coated in industrial paint. It's an act of deliberate vandalism by the artist that echoes the destruction of the Chinese past that took place during the Cultural Revolution, itself partly prompted by a Western ideology -- Marxism. Again, an act that looks simple, yet becomes more complicated the longer you think about it.

The Zodiac heads look splendid in the dignified 18th-century courtyard of Somerset House. Ai wasn't present at the opening of the display because for almost two months he has been held in detention in China. He has been accused of [tax evasion](#), though there's widespread suspicion that Ai's true crime is the advocacy of democracy and freedom of speech.

The whole world is changing. Whether it's turning toward those values -- the tenets of European Enlightenment of which [Somerset House](#) is an architectural embodiment -- isn't yet clear.

(Martin Gayford is chief art critic for [Muse](#), the arts and leisure section of [Bloomberg News](#). The opinions expressed are his own.)

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