

ASIAN ART

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Ai Weiwei's Zodiac Heads Projects: New York & London

AT THE TIME of going to press Ai Weiwei's whereabouts after his detention at the airport in Beijing, when trying to board a plane, are still unknown. Therefore, it is good to know that his *Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads* public sculpture project is still touring the world in 2011 and will hopefully keep the artist, and his situation, in the public eye.

This exhibition was first on display at the São Paulo Biennale in Brazil from September to December 2010. There are a total of six editions and two artist proofs of the bronzes, which will make up several touring exhibitions. The official world tour for *Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads* will be launched in New York at the Pulitzer Fountain at Grand Army Plaza near Central Park and the Plaza Hotel – using the group that was originally on show in São Paulo. They will be on display from 2 May until 15 July 2011, with other international venues in Europe and Asia to follow.

The exhibition opens with another

edition at London's Somerset House on 12 May and runs until 26 June. It will be the first ever contemporary art sculpture to go on display in the historic courtyard of Somerset House and will also be the first outdoor public sculpture installation by the artist in London. Wei Wei says of the London project, 'I am fascinated by making public art. "Public" does not just refer to the museum public; it's for people passing by and using communal spaces. I think the public deserve the best. In the past, only a pope or an emperor had access to the artworks they commissioned. I want my work to be accessible to everyone. As Yuanming Yuan was being built, Somerset House was being constructed and for me this means that the courtyard is the perfect setting for *Circle of Animals*'.

Ai Weiwei has re-interpreted the 12 bronze animal heads representing the traditional Chinese zodiac that once adorned the famed fountain-clock of the Yuanming Yuan, an

imperial retreat and garden in Beijing. *Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads* is the artist's first major public sculpture project. Designed in the 18th century by two European Jesuits serving in the court of the Qing dynasty Emperor Qianlong, the 12 zodiac animal heads originally functioned as a water clock-fountain, which was sited in the magnificent European-style gardens of the Yuanming Yuan. In 1860, the Yuanming Yuan was ransacked by French and British troops, and the heads were pillaged. In re-interpreting these objects on an oversized scale, Ai Weiwei focuses attention on questions of looting and repatriation, while extending his ongoing exploration of the 'fake' and the copy in relation to the original.

An accompanying exhibition catalogue and a book about Ai Weiwei and the zodiac fountain of the Yuanming Yuan are scheduled for publication in 2011. For more information on the project visit www.circleofanimals.com.



Ai Weiwei at the bronze foundry in Chengdu, China (2010) Courtesy: AW Asia © The artist
Dog and Pig Zodiac, installation shot from the 29th Sao Paulo Biennale, Brazil (2010).

Photo: Ding Musa, images Courtesy: AW Asia © The artist