

Michael Bloomberg Speaks Out For Detained Chinese Artist Ai Weiwei, Unafraid Of Business Repercussions



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NEW YORK -- Mayor Michael Bloomberg appeared with a dozen prominent cultural figures in front of New York City's Plaza Hotel Wednesday to open a piece of public art by Ai Weiwei, who was detained last month by the Chinese government.

Calling the unveiling a "bittersweet honor," the mayor took a couple of shots at Chinese authorities, who he suggested "do not value and protect free speech."

At the same time, Bloomberg acknowledged, "There is much to admire about China and the great Chinese people." He pointed to [Beijing's famous Bird's Nest stadium](#), partially designed by Ai, as an example of the country's potential for greatness.

Neglecting to mention Ai's [disgust](#) for the way Chinese officials used the stadium for the 2008 Olympics' extravagant opening ceremony, the mayor argued, "How that stadium is remembered will depend much on how its creator is treated today."

China has remained largely mum on its reasons for detaining the artist, [only claiming](#) it has nothing to do with freedom of

expression. Ai, who has not been allowed to speak to the public, had been increasingly critical of authorities in his country, and many other activists have also been arrested in recent months.

Ai's outdoor sculpture in New York, called "[Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads](#)," dominates the landmarked Pulitzer Fountain, a historic jewelbox of a park across from the Plaza Hotel. The large bronze animal heads which make it up manage to exude Ai's trademark playfulness despite their bulk.

The artist lived in New York for a decade in the 1980s and 1990s, attending Parsons and then working a series of odd jobs. "New York is the first cosmopolitan city I'm familiar with," he said in a statement that accompanied Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads press materials. "It's not one kind of people, it's people [from] everywhere, and a lot of minorities. So I think it's a perfect place [for Circle of Animals]. It's a zodiac city."

Though the sculpture was in the works years before Ai's arrest on April 3, the timing of its public debut offered Bloomberg and a bevy of cultural figures the opportunity to show their support for freedom of expression. "The defense of freedom existed here in New York City long before there was a First Amendment or even a United States of America," the mayor said, echoing sentiments from [his speech last year](#) supporting an Islamic community center near Ground Zero.

Boldfaced names joining Bloomberg at Wednesday's opening included choreographer Bill T. Jones, artist Brice Marden, Iranian-born artist and filmmaker Shirin Neshat and filmmaker Julian Schnabel.

The mayor said he wasn't afraid of any potential business repercussions with China. Officials at his media empire, Bloomberg LP, [have described](#) the country as "an important and fast-growing market."

"I believe what I believe," Bloomberg said, arguing [as he has before](#) that he has no role in his company's day-to-day operations.

Noting that he thought China had nothing to fear from freedom of expression, he added, "They should encourage people to speak out. It would be in the interest of China; it would be in the interest of the world."

Take a look at images of "Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads" from Wednesday's unveiling below.

