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The Culture at Large

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Plaza Hotel Fountain to Be Home for Ai Weiwei Sculpture

By *ROBIN POGREBIN*

A place for dancing, maybe, but for art?

The fountain outside the Plaza Hotel, at 59th Street and Fifth Avenue, will be home to 12 monumental bronze animal heads sculptured by the Chinese artist Ai Weiwei starting May 2 and continuing through July 15.

“It’s a busy area, so it can be seen by ordinary people, but also it’s not exactly an art center,” said Mr. Ai in a telephone interview from China. “I like that people can notice it and at the same time, not to bother them too much.”

The sculpture, “Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads,” was inspired by the famous fountain-clock of the Yuanming Yuan, an 18th-century imperial retreat just outside Beijing. Designed in the 18th century by two European Jesuits at the behest of the Manchu emperor Qianlong, the fountain-clock featured each animal of the Chinese zodiac, spouting water at two-hour intervals. In 1860, French and British troops ransacked the Yuanming Yuan, pillaging the heads. Seven of them — the rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, horse, monkey and boar — have since been located; the other five are still missing.

“It’s very interesting to offer this complete set,” Mr. Ai said. “People can really appreciate public art on different levels.”

A joint effort of AW Asia, a Chinese contemporary art organization, and New York City, the exhibition, in what is formally known as the Pulitzer Fountain, is, according to the organizers, the first to be presented there and the first major outdoor exhibition by a contemporary Chinese artist in the city.

“One point of good public art is to make you rethink environments you may have taken for granted in the past,” said Kate D. Levin, commissioner of the Department of Cultural Affairs for New York City. “Pulitzer Fountain is a beautiful place. People tend to pass it by without really engaging with it.”

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