
'Circle of Animals': Sculptures of a Silenced Artist

by Lizzie Crocker



Though Ai Weiwei has been detained for more than a month, his voice resounded throughout New York yesterday at an unveiling of his first major public art exhibition.

In the Pulitzer fountain in front of New York City's Plaza Hotel, revolutionary Chinese artist Ai Weiwei's *Circle of Animals: Zodiac Heads* was revealed to the public for the first time on Wednesday. Presented by Mayor Michael Bloomberg and a slew of prominent people from New York's art and culture scene, the artist's 800-pound bronze animal heads rose triumphantly from the fountain's shallow pool to the delight of passing spectators and swarms of press.

The artist's forthright criticism of the Chinese government prevented him from attending his own exhibition opening. Ai was detained in China on April 3 amid a government crackdown and has not been seen in public since.

Bloomberg called the unveiling "bittersweet" and spoke on behalf of the "millions of people around the world who are hoping that Ai Weiwei is quickly and safely released." He also condemned China's repression of free speech and vowed to fight for this basic human right both in America and in other countries around the world. Bloomberg hailed freedom of expression as "the most valuable of all New York City's riches," and recalled how Ai himself had been drawn to the city in the '80s and '90s. The artist studied at Parsons School of Design and lived in New York for more than a decade. "Because of New York's energy and amazing diversity, Weiwei told me that he considers New York to be a zodiac city," said Larry Warsh—whose organization, AW Asia, is dedicated to promoting contemporary Chinese art—explaining why New York was the first stop on the exhibition's world tour.

The buoyant figureheads will be on view until July 15, a spectacle for children and tourists to enjoy during the heart of spring and into summer as they stroll Fifth Avenue and picnic in Central Park. "I like that people can notice it and at the same time, not to bother them too much," Ai told The New York Times in March. From the resourceful rat to the fertile pig, the 12 zodiac heads ostensibly represent different periods in the Chinese calendar. But the majestic statues are even further steeped in history.

Ai's 21st-century bronze animals were inspired by 12 zodiac symbols that allegedly crowned an 18th-century imperial fountain-clock until they were stolen by

Europeans during the Second Opium War in 1860.

China has been fighting to recover them ever since, upping the ante on its search in recent years for a few figureheads that remain housed in Western collections. The Chinese government has made salvaging antique artifacts a national priority, but as the country has grown into an economic superpower, Ai would argue, the priorities of its citizens have fallen by the wayside. “ ‘Made-in-China’ goods now fill homes around the world,” he wrote in The Guardian in 2008. “But our giant country has a small problem. We can’t manufacture the happiness of our people.” No doubt the artist’s latest exhibition is in part a sneer at his country’s warped value system, poking fun at the group of lawyers who filed suit in 2009 to reclaim the centuries-old sculptures.

Twelve recognizable faces from New York’s culture community accompanied the mayor at the event and read quotes from Ai’s blog, which have recently been published in a book titled *Ai Weiwei’s Blog: Writings, Interviews, and Digital Rants (2006-2009)*. It was an eclectic crew—from Julian Schnabel to Tony Bechara to Museum of Modern Art president emerita Agnes Gund—clearly chosen to represent New York’s diverse, yet unified, art community.

Bloomberg’s unveiling echoed global cries and petitions to “Free Ai Weiwei.” Museum directors around the world—including those from New York’s Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Brooklyn Museum—have signed a petition for his release.



The sculpture installation, “Circle of Animals / Zodiac Heads,” by detained Chinese artist Ai Weiwei, rising from Pulitzer Fountain at Grand Army Plaza in New York. (Photo: Spencer Tucker, City Hall / AP Photo)

This weekend will mark the end of his 37-day detention, after which Chinese law requires that he be either freed or arrested. Will China’s government honor the artist who helped build its colossal, moneymaking “Bird’s Nest” Olympic stadium? As Bloomberg said on Wednesday, “How that stadium is remembered will depend much on how its creator is treated today.”

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