

# SOMERSET HOUSE PRESS RELEASE

## **Ai Weiwei's *Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads* will be the first ever contemporary art installation to go on display in the historic courtyard of Somerset House**

**12<sup>th</sup> May – 26<sup>th</sup> June 2011**

Somerset House today announced that *Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads* by Chinese artist Ai Weiwei will be the first ever contemporary art installation to go on display in the historic courtyard of Somerset House. It will also be the first outdoor public sculpture installation by the artist in London. The monumental installation will comprise 12 bronze animal heads, re-creations of the traditional Chinese zodiac sculptures which once adorned the fountain of Yuanming Yuan, an imperial retreat in Beijing.

Designed in the 18th century by two European Jesuits at the behest of the Manchu emperor Qianlong, the 12 zodiac animal heads originally functioned as part of a water clock fountain in Yuanming Yuan. In 1860 the retreat was ransacked by French and British troops, and the heads were pillaged. Seven of the original heads – the rat, rabbit, horse, monkey, boar, ox and tiger – have been located. The whereabouts of the other five are unknown. In re-creating these objects in bronze, on an oversized scale and completing the set by creating designs for the missing heads, 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.

The heads will be installed in a U-shape around Somerset House's Edmund J. Safra Fountain Court in a close recreation of how they were originally displayed at Yuanming Yuan. Each of the 12 heads weighs approximately 800 pounds and measures about four feet in height. When installed on its base, each sculpture will be between 10 and 12 feet high.

Ai Weiwei said: *"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"*.

Gwyn Miles, Director of Somerset House Trust, said: *"I am delighted that Ai Weiwei's Circle of Animals will be on display at Somerset House. Our eighteenth-century courtyard is a perfect fit for Ai Weiwei's installation – a contemporary take on eighteenth-century Chinese art works. This is an example of how Somerset House is showcasing cutting-edge work from international contemporary artists working today, set against the backdrop of our historic, neo-classical building"*.

The installation will be accompanied by a display in the Courtyard Rooms to contextualise the installation in the courtyard and provide background information on the history of the original Summer Palace in Beijing.

*Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads* will be presented in collaboration with AW Asia, an organisation whose mission is to support and advance the field of Chinese contemporary art.

Ai Weiwei will also present a survey show of his key sculptural and video works from the past decade at Lisson Gallery, 13 May - 16 July 2011.

–ENDS –

*Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads:*

Courtyard opening hours: daily from 8am – 11pm  
Courtyard Rooms opening hours: daily from 10am – 6pm  
Address: Somerset House, Strand, London WC2R 1LA  
Tel: +44 (0)20 7845 4600  
Admission: free

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Notes to Editors

**The Chinese Zodiac**

In the traditional Chinese Zodiac, every year is represented by one of 12 animals – rotating in 12 year cycles. According to Chinese culture, the animal representing a person's birth year profoundly impacts his or her personality and destiny. Contrary to western astrology which looks to the stars to predict one's fortune, the Chinese Zodiac is influenced by the traditional Chinese concepts of the five elements (earth, fire, water, metal, wood), Yin & Yang, Chi and the Cycles of Time.

Ox (patient, self-sacrificing)

Rabbit (ambitious, confident)

Snake (calm, intelligent)

Sheep (well-mannered, altruistic)

Rooster (resourceful, adventuresome)

Dog (attentive, loyal)

Tiger (lucky, courageous)

Dragon (intuitive, influential)

Horse (entertaining, powerful)

Monkey (independent, enthusiastic)

Rat (hardworking, thrifty)

Pig (sincere, cultured)

**About Ai Weiwei**

Ai Weiwei was born in 1957 in Beijing. The son of acclaimed poet, Ai Qing, Ai spent his childhood in political exile in rural Xinjiang Province following his father's denunciation in the Anti-Rightist Movement.

In 1979, having returned to the capital, Ai became a founder of *The Stars*, one of the first avant-garde art groups in modern China.

After more than a decade in New York, Ai returned to Beijing in 1993 and co-founded the Chinese Art Archive & Warehouse (CAAW), a non-profit loft-gallery in Beijing where he still serves as director. In 1999 Ai established FAKE Design, his art, architecture and design studio.

A highly regarded artist in China and abroad, Ai's recent works includes *Sunflower Seeds* (2010) at London's Tate Modern as well as major solo exhibitions at Tokyo's Mori Art Museum (2009) and Munich's Haus der Kunst (2009). Ai conceived the *Bird's Nest* design of the 2008 National Olympic Stadium in Beijing in close collaboration with Swiss architects Herzog & de Meuron. Ai's life and work provide compelling insight into the complexities of contemporary China. He has become a transcendent cultural figure, a man whose fusion of art and activism resonates not only in China but globally.

### **About AW Asia**

AW Asia is a private organization founded in 2004 to promote the field of Chinese contemporary art. AW Asia's initiatives include institutional loans and museum acquisitions, curatorial projects, publications, and educational programs. AW Asia also hosts various Chinese contemporary art-related events throughout the year, including lectures, seminars and private professional gatherings. These educational opportunities allow for an in-depth investigation into Chinese contemporary art and culture, and encourages a wider dialogue. Please visit [www.awasiany.com](http://www.awasiany.com) for more information.

### **About Somerset House**

Somerset House is a spectacular neo-classical building in the heart of London, sitting between the Strand and the River Thames. Since opening to the public in 2000, Somerset House has produced a distinctive public programme that annually draws over 1.2 million visitors to the site, providing a stimulating environment for exploration and relaxation. The varied, year-round programme includes an open air film and concert season and ice rink, as well as temporary exhibitions focusing on contemporary fashion, design, art and architecture, family workshops and free guided tours. In September 2009, Somerset House became the new home of London Fashion Week.