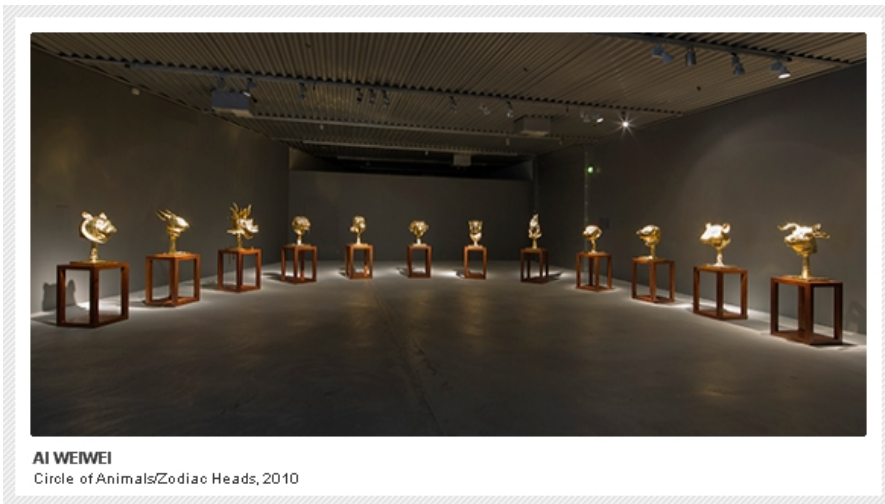


Ai WEIWEI: CIRCLE OF ANIMALS/ZODIAC HEADS

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Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads (2010) is a pivotal work by the Chinese artist Ai Weiwei (b. 1957). The group of sculptures was deposited at ARKEN by the Frahm Collection in June 2013. The work represents the 12 animals of the Chinese zodiac. As calendar signs, these animals have wide-ranging influence on everyday life in China.

[Read more about the animals here](#)

The looting of the animal heads

The work is closely tied to Chinese history. In the 18th century, 12 animal heads were cast in bronze for Yuanming Yuan, an imperial palace in Beijing. The magnificent gardens also included pavilions and fountains in the European style designed by an Italian Jesuit monk serving the emperor. The heads were ornaments on a large fountain. When French and British troops ransacked the palace in 1860, the heads were scattered to the winds. The event became a part of what the Chinese call the "century of national humiliation."

China's self-image

In recent years, the Chinese government has invested great national symbolism in these heads, notably in connection with a number of scandal-ridden auction sales of seven of the heads. The whereabouts of the last five animal heads - the dragon, the snake, the ram, the rooster and the dog - remain unknown.

Artist and activist

In 2010, Ai Weiwei recreated the circle of animals to trigger a discussion about national pride and self-image. Working from the seven existing heads, he added his own reinterpretations of the five missing heads. Ai Weiwei's art revolves around human rights and criticism of Chinese society. His persistent online activism has caused him a great deal of trouble. In 2011, he was arrested and held without trial for 81 days. Today, he is still not free to leave his country.