Ai Weiwei 艾未未
Circle of Animals / Zodiac Heads
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Those born under this sign are charming, clever, and have excellent taste. They are ambitious, hardworking perfectionists and are often wealthy and successful. Family is important to Rats, and they are generous and supportive to the people they love. Those born in the Year of the Rat are compatible with people born in Dragon, Monkey, and Ox years.
Quiet and introverted, the Ox is steadfast, dependable, and a born leader. Those born in Ox years are often good with their hands, and may be outstanding surgeons. They are inclined to have a few deep friendships rather than a wide circle of acquaintances, and though not particularly romantic, their attachments are profound. Those born in the Year of the Ox are compatible with people born in Snake, Rooster, and Rat years.

Tigers are powerful, passionate, and daring. They are self-confident leaders, but can be short-tempered and rebellious. Tigers are often seductive, and are capable of intense romantic attachments. They are compatible with those born in Horse, Dragon, and Dog years.

Ambitious, talented, and even-tempered, Rabbits are often creative and artistic. They are also noted for their good luck, especially in financial matters. They are conservative and conscientious, and good judges of character. Rabbits are compatible with Rams, Boars, and Dogs.

Self-assured and dignified, Dragons are also generous, warm-hearted, and expansive. They are natural leaders, strong and decisive, and excel at tough decisionmaking. They are also often fortunate in their romantic attachments. Dragons are compatible with those born in Rat, Monkey, and Rooster years.
Wisdom, charm, and intuition are the hallmarks of those born in Snake years. They are profound thinkers who tend to rely on their own judgement. Often financially successful, Snakes are generous and sympathetic to others, but can be fickle in their friendships and romantic attachments. The Snake is compatible with the Rooster and the Ox.

Cheerful, quick-witted, and popular, the Horse enjoys a wide circle of friends and acquaintances, and often has an active romantic life. Hardworking and tenacious, the love of socializing is a constant element in the Horse's work and leisure time. Horses are compatible with Tigers, Dogs, and Rams.
Compassionate and wise, the Ram often prefers to be alone, free to contemplate at his or her leisure. The Ram can be highly creative, with innate natural elegance. At times shy or pessimistic, Rams can also be deeply religious. Rams are compatible with Rabbits, Boars, and Horses.

Innovative, inquisitive, and self-assured, the Monkey has a keen intellect, a sharp sense of competition, and an appetite for fun. Monkeys are outstanding problem-solvers, but their need for variety can cause difficulties in long-term relationships. Monkeys are compatible with Dragons and Rats.

Those born in the Year of the Rooster are profound thinkers. Talented and capable, they can also be eccentric and may have difficulties in their relationships with others. Highly observant and analytical, they are strong decision-makers who speak their minds freely. Roosters are compatible with the Ox, Snake, and Dragon.
People born in the Year of the Dog are deeply loyal. They inspire confidence through their honesty, sincerity, and ability to keep secrets. Although they care little for wealth, they always seem to have enough for their needs. Those born in these years can be sharp-tongued and critical, which may lead to difficulties in personal relationships. Dogs are compatible with Horses, Tigers, or Rabbits.

Honesty, loyalty, and fortitude are among the Boar’s leading characteristics. Boars set ambitious goals for themselves, then waste no time in meeting them. They are excellent companions, but hold friends and colleagues to the same high standards they hold themselves. Boars are compatible with Rabbits and Rams.

Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads in process at studios in Chengdu and Beijing, China.
In the first decade of the eighteenth century, the emperor of China began building an imperial retreat outside Beijing. The Yuanming Yuan, or Garden of Perfect Brightness, was enjoyed by several Qing dynasty rulers, including the Kangxi Emperor (r.1661-1722), who first created it, as well as his son, the Yongzheng Emperor (r.1723-1735), and grandson, the Qianlong Emperor (r.1736-1795). It was the Qianlong Emperor who, in the mid-1700s, started the ambitious architectural project for which the Yuanming Yuan is best known: a series of grand European-style fountains, gardens, and palaces designed to house and display imperial treasures, especially those from the West.

Created under the direction of Italian and French Jesuits serving at the emperor’s court, the European-style buildings and grounds occupied only a small fraction of the Yuanming Yuan’s holdings, which totaled over 800 acres. The greater part was filled with Chinese-style gardens and traditional architecture largely constructed of wood. Even so, word of the emperor’s splendid European-style palaces, with their sweeping staircases and ornately carved stone façades, reached the West, largely through letters sent by the Jesuits themselves. Their descriptions, in turn, set off a widespread trend in Europe for Chinese-inspired garden design.

Although the European palaces of the Yuanming Yuan housed a multitude of treasures, one set of objects in particular lies at the heart of this book: twelve bronze heads depicting the animals of the Chinese zodiac. These heads were designed by the Italian Jesuit artist Giuseppe Castiglione (1688-1766), who created them as spouts for an elaborate water-clock fountain. Positioned in front of the largest of the European display halls—the Haiyan Tang, or Palace of the Calm Seas—the bronze heads were the defining element in the fountain, a complex set-piece that combined sculpture, hydraulics, and Chinese and European aesthetics. It was one of the showpieces of the Yuanming Yuan. In fact, the elaborately embellished Palace of the Calm Seas was designed as a backdrop to the fountain, rather than the other way around.

Looted and Burned

In 1860, a century or so after Qianlong began building his European palaces, the Yuanming Yuan was looted and burned by British and French troops in one of the final and decisive acts in the Second Opium War. The actions were taken in part as retaliation for the kidnap and torture of a group of British diplomats, and in part to force the Chinese to comply with the 1858 Treaty of Tientsin—one of a series of trade agreements imposed on China by more powerful nations and collectively referred to as “The Unequal Treaties.” Ironically, it was the carved stone fountains and palaces of the European section that survived, although in ruins. The Yuanming Yuan was destroyed, its treasures carted off by invading forces, its usable fragments scavenged by nearby residents.

In the Garden of Perfect Brightness

Susan Delson
This devastation was merely one episode in an era known in China as the “century of national humiliation.” Beginning with the First Opium War and spanning approximately 1840 to 1945, this period saw the Chinese suffer repeated defeat and domination by other nations. It ended with the expulsion of foreign powers from the mainland after World War II, or according to some sources, with the founding of the People’s Republic in 1949. The century of national humiliation is a defining episode of Chinese history, much like the Civil War in the United States or the Elizabethan Era for the British. A staple of the public school history curriculum, it is common knowledge to virtually all Chinese. And its most potent symbol is a parkland and historic site now located on the northwest side of Beijing: the ruins of the Yuanming Yuan.

As China continues its ascent as a world power and its self-identity undergoes sustained transformation, the drive to rectify past iniquities also gains in strength and intensity. Much of the current fervor centers on the century of national humiliation, and on regaining national treasures lost to invading forces during this period. Over the past two decades they have achieved the status of national treasures, having been transformed into powerful symbols of the cultural achievements of the early Qing era, the losses suffered in 1860, and the humiliations that followed. Their monetary value on the international art market has soared, and despite their hybrid aesthetics they have become touchstones of a fervent and at times contentious nationalism. Today, seven heads are accounted for; the whereabouts of the remaining five are unknown.

A New Interpretation

The zodiac heads of the Yuanming Yuan fountain are the inspiration for Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads, the 2010 sculpture by Ai Weiwei. With Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads, Ai again unites the twelve animals, reinterpreting the surviving heads and re-envisioning those that are missing. In place of the seated human figures, carved of stone, on which the original bronze heads rested, Ai presents each animal head on a slender column of metal, of a piece with the head itself, almost as if it were being buoyed by a jet of water. Ai conceived Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads in two distinct versions: Large, a set of oversized heads intended as outdoor public art, and Gold, a smaller set for museum display, closer in size to the original and gilded to a bright gold finish. In Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads: Gold, a spirit of playfulness extends to the treatment of the bases. Most reference the original Yuanming Yuan fountain with motifs evocative of water—the dragon rising out of a magnificent whirlpool, the tiger emerging from concentric circles that echo the fur of its ruff—with one head, the snake, resting on what could be seen as a column of golden coins. In Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads: Large, the imposing heads are positioned above eye level, inviting viewers to contemplate them from an entirely different perspective.

It is not simply China’s past, but China’s ongoing relationship to its past that engages Ai Weiwei. As contemporary Chinese art historian Karen Smith has noted, art is “the means by which Ai Weiwei gives visual form to his understanding of his own culture and people, not merely from a personal perspective, or from personal experience during the turbulent era of his youth, but now, today. It is through art that he understands society, its ills and woes, the conflations of the cultural framework and history.” With that in mind, Smith wrote that in Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads Ai Weiwei “reconfigures the original forms of the bronze animal heads as a cultural mirror in which the past becomes a reflection of the present.” Or as Ai himself put it in an interview excerpted in this book: “It’s pointing to many different issues—of course to China, to myself, to all the people who would question whether the work is valuable or not valuable, real or not real, or better than real, or not as good as real. And how it’s going to be shown, why it’s been shown, how it’s being sold, and why people are paying for it.”

Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads: Large, the public art version of the work, is now embarked on an international tour that will bring it to New York, London, and several other cities in the U.S., Europe, and Asia in 2011 and 2012. As they make their appearances, Ai Weiwei’s zodiac animals will introduce the emperor’s Garden of Perfect Brightness and its fabled fountain to new audiences. By spotlighting this aspect of China’s history, Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads will also call attention to the issues of looting, value, and authenticity that resonate through Ai Weiwei’s work, and to the complex ways in which the past continues to shape the future.

This introduction was adapted from “Headfirst into History,” the introductory essay in Ai Weiwei, Circle of Animals, and the Garden of Perfect Brightness (Prestel, 2011)
Ai Weiwei: Interview Excerpts

Ai Weiwei's work reflects his profound and wide-ranging interest in China's history and art. Here, he talks about his concept for Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads, the process of making the work, the original zodiac fountain clock that inspired it, and aspects of Chinese history that are reflected in it. His responses have been excerpted from a series of interviews conducted in 2009 and 2010 by filmmaker Alison Klayman, magazine editor and contemporary Chinese art expert Phil Tinari, Larry Warsh of the art organization AW Asia, and Beijing-based New Yorker correspondent Evan Osnos.

On Making a Work of Public Art

Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads is your first public artwork to be shown in a major U.S. city, and a London venue [Somerset House] opens soon after. What's challenging about a project like this? What's interesting?

To make a work as public art interests me because you are confronted with very complicated conditions. “Public” in the real sense is not the museum public. It’s art for people passing by or for having in a children’s playground. How to use public space is always an interesting topic. But I don’t like most public sculptures. Too much ego without much humor. They’re more like landmarks in the city—you know where they are, so you know where you are.

How did the project first come about?

First Larry [Warsh] and I had a long discussion about public sculpture, and I went to see the possible sites [in New York City]. He explained what other artists did, but still no interesting concept. Until one day I thought, this zodiac concept could be interesting. And Larry liked it very much, and Phil [Tinari] too. So we start[ed] to develop it, and I found my friend Li Zhanyang, who [was] happy to make the first mould for me.
What sort of things do you keep in mind when you’re creating a work like this?

You can’t do something that’s completely foreign to people, or they won’t be interested in it. Maybe they won’t like it, or won’t be comfortable with it, or they’ll say it’s too distant from themselves. But it can’t be completely foreign to them. That would become problematic.

How do you hope it will be received by the public?

I want this to be seen as an object that doesn’t have a monumental quality, but rather is a funny piece—a piece people can relate to or interpret on many different levels, because everybody has a zodiac connection.

A sculpture always functions as an object that people would question the meaning and content of. They’re just objects that could suggest something else. No matter [if it’s] ancient or contemporary, it’s 3-D. The only difference is that now people think you shouldn’t touch it.

I think the public deserves the best. Before, only a pope or an emperor could see these kinds of things. Now you can see them in [a public] garden. People don’t have to have too much information [about the work]. They should just look at the objects and see the connection through their own experience. If [the work] can do that, it will already be successful.

You lived in New York City for more than a decade in the 1980s and early 1990s. How does it feel to be bringing Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads to New York?

I think to have a public art installation in New York is a good idea. New York is the first cosmopolitan city I’m familiar with. 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/Zodiac Heads]. It’s a zodiac city.

Visual Thinking: The Ideas Behind Circle of Animals / Zodiac Heads

When you started on this project, how familiar were you with the twelve zodiac animals? How common are they in Chinese culture?

All twelve images are familiar to me, because I was a collector, and in history they appear in different objects—jade, stone carvings and two-dimensional designs, everywhere. [In the process of envisioning the missing dragon head, for instance,] we looked at all kinds of dragons, such as the ones embroidered on fabrics. Every
dynasty has its own way to make dragons, and they all look different. So we have to be very knowledgeable about this.

It’s very common in Tang dynasty art to see the zodiac group, with the body of a man, with a long shirt and with a hat on. It’s very lovely, very intense. The strange thing is, everybody talks about tradition, but every dynasty clearly has a different style to it. In the sense of carving the shape—even materials and textures. Completely different.

How would you describe the design of the original zodiac fountain clock at the Yuanming Yuan? What was it that caught your imagination?

The style is very interesting—Chinese, but mixed. It is a Western understanding of a Chinese way. You can see those things happening during the eighteenth century. The West had Chinese gardens and Chinese pagodas in their parks and houses. And images. It was always about illusions of Oriental-ness, or Chinese-ness.

Five of the original zodiac heads are missing and may never turn up again. But Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads includes all twelve. Why? And what was it like to envision those missing heads?

I think it’s a good idea to have a complete set: these seven that exist and the five that are unknown. Without twelve, it’s not a zodiac. So [the idea was] first, to complete it, and [more important,] to complete the way I think it should be. Then that becomes solid, because I did it. The new event of [my] twelve zodiac [heads] becomes a new factor.

[Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads] relates to some very complicated issues. Who made [the original fountain clock], for what reason? And why were the heads lost? Are they truly lost, or at the auction house? Who is buying and for what reason? [One of the missing zodiac heads] may just show up next season, so we will see how it compares [to our version of it]. You try to imagine the existing zodiac image, but your imagination can’t really “meet” the real one. Of course, we want
[the missing heads] to be seen as part of the same group. But at the same time, we have the liberty to make them what we think they should be, [and will] make more sense. So there’s not much creativity there. It’s about how to interpret [the missing heads] into a similar [visual] language as the existing ones.

In envisioning the animals for Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads, what sorts of sources did you draw on?

My dragon is more early Ming dynasty dragon. Some details are Qing dynasty, so it’s a mixture. The ram [is taken from] a ram I have, a stone ram in my courtyard here. The basic model is from the Ming dynasty. The snake is more of a modern, scientific look—we did a bit of fantasizing there. For the rooster and the dog, we took a more realistic approach. It’s fun to work with the existing models, and to imagine the non-existing possibilities.

Tell us about the process. Where did you start?

First, we cast into plaster. And from that we moved into rubber, then made a bronze model. Then with the first bronze testing piece I saw the problems with the bronze, because there are different problems with the different materials. So we fixed them.

Plaster is the most classic sculpture casting material. Using it as a mold will capture all the details. Before, we used fiberglass, which failed—so harsh, and hard to fix. So plaster is one important part of the process. Clay doesn’t work—it won’t endure, it changes shape when it shrinks, and it cracks as it dries. So it’s not possible.

When I saw the first examples of bronze back from foundry—so beautiful—I was surprised. I never thought it would turn out so well, with all the details. Sculpting feels different from casting. Once you cast, it comes out whole. A very different feeling. I was very satisfied and gave the signal to do all twelve.

In making Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads, you worked with a team of highly accomplished artists and craftsmen. What was that like? How did that enrich the work?

I control the work, but I don’t want it to be exactly my taste. I give the basic structure, then give it space to grow. I always work with my old friend Li Zhanyang. I like his workmanship—that’s my style. I hate to work with someone with no sense of humor, and he has the right kind of humor for me.

It’s strange to work with others, with sculptors—good friends—and have to give them guidance. To tell them to produce something that is a copy of an original, but not an exact copy—something that has its own sensitive layer of languages, which are different, and that bears the mark of our own time. The communication has to be back and forth: if it’s right or not right, will it have a base, what is this base going to be, do we need to gild it, do we need a small one and not large one and why, and factoring in different locations in terms of money, time, craftsmanship. All those issues are mixed together. You have to maintain your presence, so that the people working on it realize that this is important, this is absolutely very fine work. They have to believe in it, otherwise it will change tone and become something different. So how to work with others, and how to make people feel this is something worth doing, it’s always a question.

It’s very much like today’s musicians. You don’t have to write each tune, you just bring in different... You design the space, the beat, and the structures to be designed rather than the craftsmanship. In that way, the process can free me from very much involvement. I can make my choices much more freely. I won’t be limited by specific skills, but can instead make a much more liberal choice.

I think art today is really more like communicating between artists, discussing and talking about who’s doing what and how to put those elements together to create something different. So I have a very good time doing those things with them.

What are some of the challenges you encountered?

With all my projects, even when I work with the most superb craftpersons, it is still difficult because I always have to explain what exactly is in my mind. And that’s hard to explain—even for me, it’s hard to know. I have to go through the process and learn, to find the possibilities, to become familiar with the possible conditions. So we have to make a lot of mistakes, do a lot of testing. I need to find things out. People often
say I'm not certain about what I want, which is true. I know the basic direction, but I
don't know if I'm going to find a mountain or a river there. I know why that situation is
going to be, but I have to go through it, otherwise I'll never experience it. That gives
me the pleasure in doing art. Otherwise, why do it?

**Looking Back: The Zodiac Fountain Clock and the Twelve Bronze Heads**

The zodiac fountain clock was created in the 1700s for the Yuanming Yuan,
an imperial retreat just outside Beijing, where it was part of a separate
section of European-style gardens and buildings. It was designed by
European Jesuits in the court of the Qing dynasty Emperor Qianlong. Why
was the emperor so interested in the West?

I don't know much about the history of the Qing dynasty, but I think [Europe] must
have been very cool to them. At that time, the West was relatively well-developed,
very scientific. They gave the emperor a lot of clocks to make him happy. At that time,
Chinese people still looked at the sun's rays and water to determine the time. So I
guess they yearned for that kind of civilization.

But Chinese people at that time weren't that interested in foreign countries. The
center of their lives had always been China itself. That is to say, if you are a central
empire, the wealth of people all around you is dedicated to you. This kind of thinking
prevailed until the Opium Wars and invasions, which eventually proved this thinking to
be misguided.

The decorative elements of the fountain—including the bronze zodiac heads—were designed by Giuseppe Castiglione, an Italian Jesuit at the
imperial court. His designs for the animal heads—how do they strike you?

I think from the images of the existing seven, they are not exactly Chinese in
appearance. You know, we have all sorts of animals in Chinese painting and sculpture,
but none close to this. This is a more realistic approach. Especially the tiger—you can
see that it looks more like a bear than a tiger. That really shows traces of being made
by a foreigner. It's not really Chinese culture.
Giuseppe Castiglione felt that no one in the Qing court was capable of making these kinds of things. But in reality, China’s sand-casting technology even at the time of the Bronze Age was the best in the world. However, China wasn’t always as good at realistic sculptures—a copy of so-called reality. They were never really interested in it. They thought, Reality is reality and you should never try to understand what reality means. Maybe they felt that what we see is not true reality, or that what we see is actually a limited version of reality. So they just made representations of the world in their hearts. Their hearts interpreted the world, and these artists would just create simple artwork, something personal to them. This kind of detailed feathers, this kind of realistic carving—China wasn’t all that into it.

One thing people talk about in China, in relation to these zodiac fountain sculptures, is how they’re part of a period of national humiliation—that they were taken away by foreign troops in 1860, during the Second Opium War. Did you learn about that in school when you were growing up?

Yes, that’s what we always learned—imperialism, and how China suffered under those pressures from the eight nations. And that’s all we imagined in our textbooks.

Did you realize that it’s already been more than one hundred and fifty years from the day the sculptures were taken in October of 1860?

Wow. That’s amazing. Actually, a hundred fifty years is not too long. China has changed, China has changed so dramatically. And the world has changed. It’s become so different.

Many people in China regard the original zodiac heads as national treasures. What are your thoughts about this?

I don’t think the zodiac heads are a national treasure. They were designed by an Italian, made by a Frenchman for a Qing dynasty emperor who was the ruler of China, but [the Manchus of the Qing dynasty] actually invaded China. So if we talk about national treasure, what nation are we talking about?

The Yuanming Yuan was burned down in 1860 and those objects found their way into the auction market in the West. Then China became a new power, risen in the global landscape. So people are using the zodiac heads to talk about patriotic passionate reasons. This company, Poly Group, which has a lot of money and is government-owned, is buying them back for the Poly Museum.

But they’re not worth that much, and they’re not Chinese, and they’re not national treasure. So under this talk of national treasure and being looted by Westerners, and now buying it back—it’s political hype. Once people start to buy, the price jumps—doubles, triples, crazily high—and even becomes a national affair. First they want to stop the auction [in 2009], which of course they couldn’t. Then they want to buy the
After returning to Beijing in the 1970s, Ai Weiwei would often bike out to the Yuanming Yuan to sketch among the ruins.

Heads back. This is a little wrong, because once you buy from the auction, you admit this is just another art object and you lose your fighting position. So it’s very dramatic and very crazy. There was a guy [at the 2009 auction] who wanted to show that he’s patriotic, so he bought the heads and later refused to pay the money. It was a big controversy in China and in the international auction market.

Maybe after I deal with this matter [through making this artwork], people will re-examine this whole issue. It does bring significance to these old objects. But just as a decorative objects, the original heads stayed quiet for many years. They’re just like a toilet seat, or anything else.

Among the Ruins: Ai Weiwei and the Yuanming Yuan

In the 1970s, you spent a lot of time at the ruins of the Yuanming Yuan.

It’s the first place I went after I came to Beijing from Xinjiang in 1975. I immediately went to study art, and the Yuanming Yuan is a place I would go every week. I’d ride a bicycle from Xidan—it takes a little over thirty minutes if you ride very fast. There was no one there. I have a photo of myself standing right in front of this ruin.

That was post-Cultural Revolution. Probably the ruins are the only physical evidence you have of different elements of Western traditions. So a lot of poets and artists would go there to have a poetry reading or to do some paintings and sketches. In the photo I was standing there, making a drawing. In front of me were people from Western embassies, having a barbeque. It was a really wild, overgrown place, with only a few people going there. A very wild place.

What was it about that attracted you to it?

I don’t like the feeling of ruins, but as a young man I was always wandering in them, because they reflect a lot of things you could never imagine. It’s very easy to understand how beautiful the garden could have been, because the remaining stones are so beautifully carved. Once I bought one piece, like a stool. Later, a collector bought it from me. It was so beautiful, I regret selling it. It was carved as a water lily leaf. I never saw a stone so beautiful. The person who sold it to me said it was from the Yuanming Yuan. Often we would still see stones from there sold in the market—not today, but a few years ago. It’s the most beautiful carving a stone ever can have.

The Yuanming Yuan belongs to the past, to the 1970s. I hate to see how they truly destroyed it again. It should remain untouched. Now, everyone talks about rebuilding it or adding some tourist construction. They are trying to ruin it. It’s really bad—not ruined by foreigners but truly by Chinese. You can see how Western people who looted it had such a high appreciation of those objects—maybe that’s the reason they did the looting. But you’d never see Chinese who would write that sentence. In China, it was either part of the emperor’s family or the uneducated poor, ready to take anything home to use. If a stone was too big, they would just chop it.

But to me, it’s a very strange feeling, because all those things are not really in Chinese taste. It’s really the Manchu Qing dynasty who had this kind of taste, who liked this kind of color and shape. Personally, I don’t like it that much. I think it’s worth a lot of money just because it belonged to emperors. None of the objects reflect ancient Chinese traditions. If you look at Chinese objects from the Ming or Song dynasty, it’s nothing like this, really.

Were the ruins a magnet for artist communities in the 1970s? Or did that come later?

The painters’ gathering in Yuanming Yuan village [near the ruins] was in the early or middle 1980s, not before that. Before that, it was a really rural village, just like a village anywhere. And you’d see those carved stones from the Yuanming Yuan being used by farmers for their pig houses, or some even for the foundations of their homes. You know, the destruction wasn’t that bad in 1860—it was just burned, not completely destroyed. It was really destroyed by the local farmers, because everybody tried to take a piece home and use it for construction.

After returning to Beijing in the 1970s, Ai Weiwei would often bike out to the Yuanming Yuan to sketch among the ruins.
The original zodiac heads were basically decorative objects, but *Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads* is a work of conceptual art. Tell us about that.

The original heads were a functioning part of that fountain in the Yuanming Yuan. To remake that as a piece of art—conceptual art—is to question the whole act of appreciation and collecting, taking artwork and positioning it with you. And talking about the originality and the identity of the work, because it is very confused. It’s pointing to many different issues—of course to China, to myself, to all the people who would question whether the work is valuable or not valuable, real or not real, or better than real, or not as good as real. And how it’s going to be shown, why it’s being shown, how it’s being sold, and why people are paying for it. So it’s a problematic object.

Anybody can make a set of zodiac figures. They actually date from the Tang dynasty. The zodiac fountain heads from the Qing dynasty are only a copy of Tang dynasty ones. We can see earlier ones from over 1,200 years ago. And you know, we never change the subject, we always change the interpretation, we change the platform, the base of the condition. To make *Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads*, I had to first put it into the categories of my concerns, and whoever sees this work will relate it to what I did before. Dealing with fake and real, true value, aesthetics—all those questions concern me. Also, as a contemporary artist, I have the possibility of putting the work in a museum. When that happens, the work itself will carry different meanings, its own experience.

I am always concerned with how we make judgments. And in questioning others’ judgment, and also questioning my judgment. And always saying art is not the end but the beginning. Art is not the end. The product is never the end but should be the beginning. Otherwise art has no life.
The word “readymade” comes up in your work a lot. Do you think it’s appropriate to use it in referring to the original sculptures, the original Yuanming Yuan fountain? In this case, are those “readymades” that you’re dealing with, or is it something else?

My work is always a readymade. It could be cultural, political, or social, and also it could be art—to make people re-look at what we have done, its original position, to create new possibilities. I always want people to be confused, to be shocked or realize something later. But at first it has to be appealing to people.

The original bronze heads are readymades and at same time they are not readymades. Every readymade I touch becomes different, not exactly the same. They always have another shade of lighting and completely different positions. I very much enjoy that game, because it plays with past and present and future, and it questions our own positions and our own judgment. That is very important for me. What I care about is how those things are carried forward, and how that plays an important role in our thinking.

The humor [in an artwork] is when you say something and it means something else. Also when you try to be sincere and it points to something else. It’s hard to grab, but we all can sense it. You can fake the real. And you can fake the fake.

Ai Weiwei and the Chinese Zodiac

When you were growing up, did the Chinese zodiac play much of a role in your daily life? Do you know the signs for other family members, for instance?

I think that my dad was a dog. My mom is a rooster too, like me. But I’m not sure, actually, because when we grew up, nobody talked about the zodiac. It’s just not the kind of thing our family talked about, you know. My father [the acclaimed poet Ai Qing, later sentenced to internal exile] was more of a modern person, and we were a kind of “new culture” family. I never met my grandmother or grandfather when I grew up. We were living (in political exile) in a remote area in Xinjiang, with no relatives. Everything was “new establishment.”

I think today, the Chinese people care about the zodiac for fun. It doesn’t have much impact or symbolic meaning. It’s another way to look at humans as a species—you have a blood type, a Chinese zodiac animal, and a Western one. It doesn’t have any meaning, really.

But because Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads is animal heads, I think it’s something that everyone can have some understanding of, including children and people who are not in the art world. I think it’s more important to show your work to the public. That’s what I really care about. When Andy Warhol painted Mao in the 1960s and 1970s, I don’t think many people understood Mao, either—it was just this image that people knew, like Marilyn Monroe or somebody. So they might see these zodiac animals like that—like Mickey Mouse. They’re just animals. Eleven real animals and one mystic animal.
About the Artist

Ai Weiwei is an internationally acclaimed artist, architectural designer, curator and social and cultural critic. Born in Beijing in 1957, he is the son of Ai Qing (1910-1996), one of the country’s most revered modern poets. Jailed and tortured as a leftist by the Kuomintang in the 1930s, Ai Qing became a key literary figure in the early days of the People’s Republic, only to be swept up in a purge of intellectuals in the late 1950s. When Ai Weiwei was an infant, the family was sent into internal exile in Xinjiang, a remote region in the far west. With the first wave of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, the family was further banished to a camp on the edge of the Gobi Desert, where they lived in a damp, seeping room dug from the earth. There, Ai Qing was forbidden to read or write and was pressed into daily labor cleaning latrines. After five years, the family was permitted to return to Xinjiang. Ai Weiwei was then fourteen years old.

In 1976, after five more years in Xinjiang, Ai Qing and his family were allowed to return to Beijing. Ai Weiwei was then nineteen. Eventually, he enrolled in the Beijing Film Institute, where his classmates included internationally acclaimed Fifth Generation directors Chen Kaige (Yellow Earth, Farewell My Concubine) and Zhang Yimou (Raise the Red Lantern, The Story of Qiu Ju). In 1978, Ai Weiwei became an early member of “The Stars” (Xing Xing), one of the first avant-garde art groups in modern China. In 1981, he moved to New York City, where he absorbed the unconventional thinking of influential twentieth-century artists such as Marcel Duchamp, Jasper Johns, and Andy Warhol. Returning to China in 1993 when his father fell ill, in 1997 Ai Weiwei went on to co-found the Chinese Art Archive & Warehouse (CAAW), a nonprofit loft-gallery in Beijing where he still serves as director. In the mid-1990s, he published a series of books about the emerging contemporary Chinese art scene—Black Cover Book (1994), White Cover Book (1995), and Gray Cover Book (1997)—that solidified his position as a leader of the new Chinese avant-garde. In 2003, he established his architecture firm, FAKE Design, and began a close collaboration with Swiss architects Herzog & de Meuron in designing the 2008 National Olympic Stadium (“the Bird’s Nest”).

Ai Weiwei’s work has been shown in museums and galleries internationally, as well as in the 48th Venice Biennale (1999), Documenta XII (2007), and other international art events. 2009 saw the opening of two solo museum exhibitions: Ai Weiwei: According to What? at the Mori Museum in Tokyo and So Sorry at Munich’s Haus der Kunst. More recently, he made headlines with Sunflower Seeds (2010), an installation in the Turbine Hall at London’s Tate Modern Museum, which consisted of 100 million hand-painted porcelain seeds.

Ai Weiwei received the Chinese Contemporary Art Award for Lifetime Contribution in 2008. Despite his acclaim as an artist, he has often found himself at odds with the Chinese government in his stances on free speech and human rights. He is an avid blogger and micro-blogger, and maintains an active stream of posts on Chinese networking platforms similar to Facebook and Twitter. Ai Weiwei’s Blog—Writings, Interviews and Digital Rants, 2006-2009, edited and translated by Lee Ambrozy, was recently published by MIT Press.
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