

Ai Weiwei's Zodiac Heads/Circle of Animals at the Sao Paulo Biennale

Artist and blogger [Ai Weiwei](#) has unveiled his “[Heads/Circle of Animals](#)” [sculptural installation](#) at the 29th Sao Paulo Biennale in Brazil:



The title of the this years Biennale, “[Há sempre um copo de mar para um homem navegar](#) (There is always a cup of sea to sail in)” was inspired by a line by the poet [Jorge de Lima](#) (1895 – 1953) in his work [Invenção de Orfeu](#) (1952). The concept of this year's [São Paulo Biennial](#) is based on the notion

that it is impossible to separate art from politics... Chinese conceptual artist Ai Weiwei is considered one of the most important contemporary artists and social thought leaders both in China and on the world stage. As his first major public sculpture project Ai Weiwei has re-created the twelve bronze animal heads, representing the traditional Chinese zodiac, that once adorned the fountain of the Yuanming Yuan ([Old Summer Palace](#)) in Beijing.

Designed in the 18th century by two European Jesuits at the behest of the Manchu emperor Qianlong, the twelve animal heads originally functioned as a water clock fountain in the garden of the Old Summer Palace. In 1860, the palace was ransacked by French and British troops and the heads were pillaged.

In re-creating these objects on an oversized scale, 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. In his art, Ai Weiwei has continuously engaged Chinese history as a shifting site rather than a static body of knowledge. His adaptations of objects from the Chinese material canon, such as furniture and ceramics, are known for the subversive wit with which they twist these traditional forms toward new purposes. The re-envisioned zodiac heads address the precarious position of such objects, caught up in a set of cultural power dynamics that are radically in flux and evoke a still-resonant moment in the history of China's relationship with the West.

The looting of these statues has been a recent point of contention, particularly in 2009 when two heads that were [owned by the estate of Yves St. Laurent](#) were to be auctioned by Christie's in Hong Kong. Previously, other looted statuary taken from the same fountain had been [purchased by corporations and wealthy individuals and donated to China](#).

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