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An ox head, part of Chinese artist Ai Weiwei's sculpture series *Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads*, sits in front of a fountain at the installation's unveiling in Toronto on Tuesday June 18, 2013.

By: [Murray Whyte](#) Visual arts, Published on Tue Jun 18 2013

Absence can be a powerful instrument and no one plays it better than [Ai Weiwei](#).

The celebrated Chinese artist-dissident, whose passport was confiscated by Chinese authorities in 2011 when he was imprisoned on trumped-up charges of tax evasion en route from Beijing International Airport to an exhibition in Hong Kong, was once again conspicuously missing Tuesday, when his monumental bronze public sculpture *Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads* was unveiled in the reflecting pool of Nathan Phillips Square, in front of Toronto City Hall.

The installation, which will be in place until Sept. 22, precedes the [Art Gallery of Ontario's](#) presentation of the exhibition *Ai Weiwei: According to What?* which opens Aug. 17. It will be the only Canadian venue on the exhibition's international tour schedule.

In a ceremony next to the pool Tuesday afternoon, Councillor Kristyn Wong-Tam, on whose initiative the sculpture was brought to Toronto, called Ai "the most important contemporary living artist today," in admiration for his ongoing actions for accountability and freedom of expression in his home country.

Ai's significance may be open for debate, but he's surely among the best known artists living today, thanks in no small part to his notorious dissident reputation. The artist, who is also an architect, first ruffled feathers of the ruling Communist regime in China when he decried the 2008 Beijing Olympics as a mass exercise in propaganda for a shadowy regime bent on denying its people basic human rights. Ai had been a collaborating architect on the famous "Bird's Nest" Olympic Stadium in Beijing.

At the same time, Ai used his new-found fame as a launching pad for an ongoing critique. His dissent reached its peak in the aftermath of the devastating Sichuan earthquake of 2008, in which thousands of people, many of them schoolchildren, died. Ai launched a personal inquiry into the numbers of

children who were buried when their shoddily built school buildings collapsed, earning him the ire of Chinese authorities.

On one trip to the region, he was attacked in his hotel room and savagely beaten by a group of plainclothes police. On a subsequent trip to Germany, for one of his many exhibitions, his brain hemorrhaged from the beating and he had to have emergency surgery to save his life.

All this serves as a highly dramatic backdrop to an art career that, on its own, had already gained Ai significant international acclaim. Working principally with objects and symbols from Chinese history and mythology, Ai pinpoints his homeland's disregard for its past in a headlong scramble toward the so-called "economic miracle" of its present.

Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads is a direct reference to the Chinese zodiac, of course, but also to a moment in history where such sculptures were installed at an Imperial retreat just outside Beijing. In the first Opium War of 1860, French and British soldiers pillaged the emperor's retreat; only seven of the 12 sculptures are known to exist and only five have been repatriated to China. Ai recreates all 12, with the idea of exporting them to international exhibitions as a means of questioning the idea of shared cultures and histories.

He remains under constant surveillance by Chinese authorities at his home and studio in Beijing but maintains an active virtual presence, largely through his constantly updated Twitter feed.

The unveiling was also attended by Mayor Rob Ford.

In remarks to a crowd of onlookers, Ford said he was "delighted" to be able to present Ai's sculpture at city hall. "We are so proud to be chosen as the only Canadian city to publicly display this beautiful collection."

Ford went on to trumpet his administration's support of arts and culture in the city, and was loudly booed.

The heads are installed in order according to the Chinese zodiac: Rat, Ox, Tiger, Rabbit, Dragon, Snake, Horse, Goat, Monkey, Rooster, Dog and Pig. Standing three metres high, each sculpture ranges in weight from 680 to 950 kilograms and is supported by a marble base weighing 270 to 450 kilos. The sculptures' combined weight of over 20,000 kilograms required consultation from a structural engineer for installation in the reflecting pool. The *Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads* have been previously exhibited in London, Los Angeles, New York, Sao Paulo, Taipei and Washington, D.C., among other cities.