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Internationally acclaimed Chinese contemporary artist Ai Weiwei has re-interpreted the twelve bronze animal heads representing the traditional Chinese zodiac that once adorned the famed fountain-clock of the Yuanming Yuan, an imperial retreat in Beijing. [Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads](#) is his first major public sculpture project and will be presented in the United States, Europe, and Asia. The tour will start in New York City at the historic Pulitzer Fountain at Grand Army Plaza near Central Park and the Plaza Hotel, on May 2, 2011. The exhibition ends July 15. A few questions and answers posed to Ai Weiwei can be read below.

***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.

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 are you hoping 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.

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.

Do you see your new set as copies of the existing heads and new versions of the missing ones?

No. I don't think even the copies are exactly the same. It's a new understanding of the total project. It's not as if some are cast from the original. It's a new interpretation.

My work is always dealing with real or fake, authenticity, what the value is, and how the value relates to current political and social understandings and misunderstandings. I think there's a strong humorous aspect there. The [Yves Saint-Laurent] zodiac auction [in February 2009] really complicated the issues about art, about the real, about fake, resources, looting, about the appreciation of objects—all these kinds of issues.

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 for 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.

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.

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