

# METROPOLIS

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## At Unveiling of Ai Weiwei Sculptures, Artist Remains a World Away

By Erica Orden



AFP/Getty

"Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads", the first major public sculpture installation by Chinese artist Ai Weiwei, formally opened Wednesday at the Pulitzer Fountain.

As Chinese artist-activist Ai Weiwei's monumental bronze sculptures became the first public art exhibition at Grand Army Plaza, one of the gateways to Central Park, the artist himself remains detained in his homeland—a scenario Mayor Michael Bloomberg described as "bittersweet" in an address Wednesday.

One of China's most famous figures, Ai had been scheduled to attend the opening of "Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads," but he has been in custody and under investigation for "suspected economic crimes"—and out of contact since he was led away by government officials at a Beijing airport on April 3.

As he unveiled the artist's 800-pound bronzes, the mayor criticized what he described as China's disregard for freedom of expression.

"Artists risk everything to create. They risk failure. They risk rejection. They risk public criticism. But artists like Ai Weiwei, who come from places that do not value and protect free speech, risk even more than that," Bloomberg said. "His willingness to take those risks, and face the consequences, speaks not only to his courage, but also to the indomitable desire for

freedom that is inside every human being.”

China's Foreign Ministry has said Ai's case has “nothing to do with human rights or freedom of expression.”

Though he has created works around the world, including the Bird's Nest stadium for the 2008 Beijing Olympics and a recent exhibition in the Turbine Hall at London's Tate Modern Museum, Ai's New York City ties run far beyond the installation of his dozen sculptures around the Pulitzer Fountain at Fifth Avenue and 59th Street.

The artist studied at Parsons The New School for Design in the 1980s and lived in New York for more than a decade. Museum directors, including those from New York institutions such as the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, the Museum of Modern Art and the Brooklyn Museum, have signed a petition calling for his release.

“Beauty and inspiration are irrepressible; they are alive in every human heart – in every nation – and wherever an artist creates Ai Weiwei is there,” Bloomberg said. “And today Ai Weiwei is here. Because even though he could not be here physically, he continues to speak to us, to delight us, and to challenge us through his art.”

Ai Weiwei, China, Mayor Bloomberg