

Art in America

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Ai Weiwei's Gilt

by Xin Wang

On Nov. 17, 12 golden zodiac animal heads mounted on convoluted stems atop simple pedestals provided a glamorous setting for the book launch of *Ai Weiwei: Circle of Animals* at Paul Kasmin's plush new space in Chelsea. The festive event came six months after a larger bronze version of the sculptural group—now on a multi-venue world tour—debuted briefly at the Pulitzer Fountain in front of New York's Plaza Hotel.

Installation view. Ai Weiwei: *Circle of Animals / Zodiac Heads: Gold*, on view through December 23, 2011. Photo by Cari Vuong. Courtesy Paul Kasmin Gallery.



Edited for Prestel by Susan Delson, director of publications for collector Larry Warsh's Chelsea-based AW Asia art-promotion organization, the 222-page volume thoroughly examines Ai's "Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads" project. An interview illuminating the artist's process is followed by texts from eight prominent art writers and historians (Paola Demattè, Colin Jones, Kristina Kleutghen, Lark E. Mason, Charles Merewether, Marco Musillo, Karen Smith and Joe-Hynn Yang). These essays contextualize the "Circle of Animals" in Ai's oeuvre and detail his abiding interest in the interplay of culture and politics. Topics include Ai's ideas on the readymade and the "fake," the history of the 18th-century sculptural group that inspired his new version,

the cultural history of looting, and the interpenetration of European and Chinese artistic styles in the Qing imperial court, evident in the formal synthesis of the original circle.

Ai's heads are exquisitely cast in bronze and coated with gold patina. Measuring just under 30 inches each in height, they approximate the size of their bronze antecedents, allegedly designed by the Italian Jesuit and legendary court artist Giuseppe Castiglione to adorn the water clock fountain at Yuanming Yuan, Emperor Qianlong's summer palace in Beijing.

When the imperial garden was ransacked in 1860 during the Second Opium War, the zodiac heads were pillaged. With five still missing today, Ai and his team had to resort at times to traditional types and their own imaginative power. The result, he says, is "something that is a copy of an original, but not an exact copy—something that has its own sensitive layer of languages, and that bears the mark of our own time."

Like other cultural relics lost during China's tumultuous modern history, the zodiac heads are high on the country's agenda of repatriation. Ai started his project in response to the controversy that erupted when two examples—a rat and a rabbit—resurfaced at the Christie's Paris auction of the Yves Saint Laurent estate in 2009. Acting out of "patriotism," a Chinese bidder won the Qing dynasty pair for nearly \$40 million, then refused to pay—thus removing the pieces at least temporarily from the international market.

Still under close government surveillance in Beijing, the dissident Ai has continued to generate buzz through numerous exhibitions abroad, a *W* magazine photo shoot that he directed remotely via Skype, and provocative "collaborations" with international netizens. After "loaning" the artist money to help pay his punitive tax bill (some \$2.4 million including penalties), online supporters are now flooding the Internet with nude images of themselves to protest a pornography inquiry against the artist. The offending photograph, featuring Ai sitting with four women, all naked and coyly smiling, has become a new source of mass appropriation, in a fashion not entirely unlike Ai's approach to the zodiac heads.