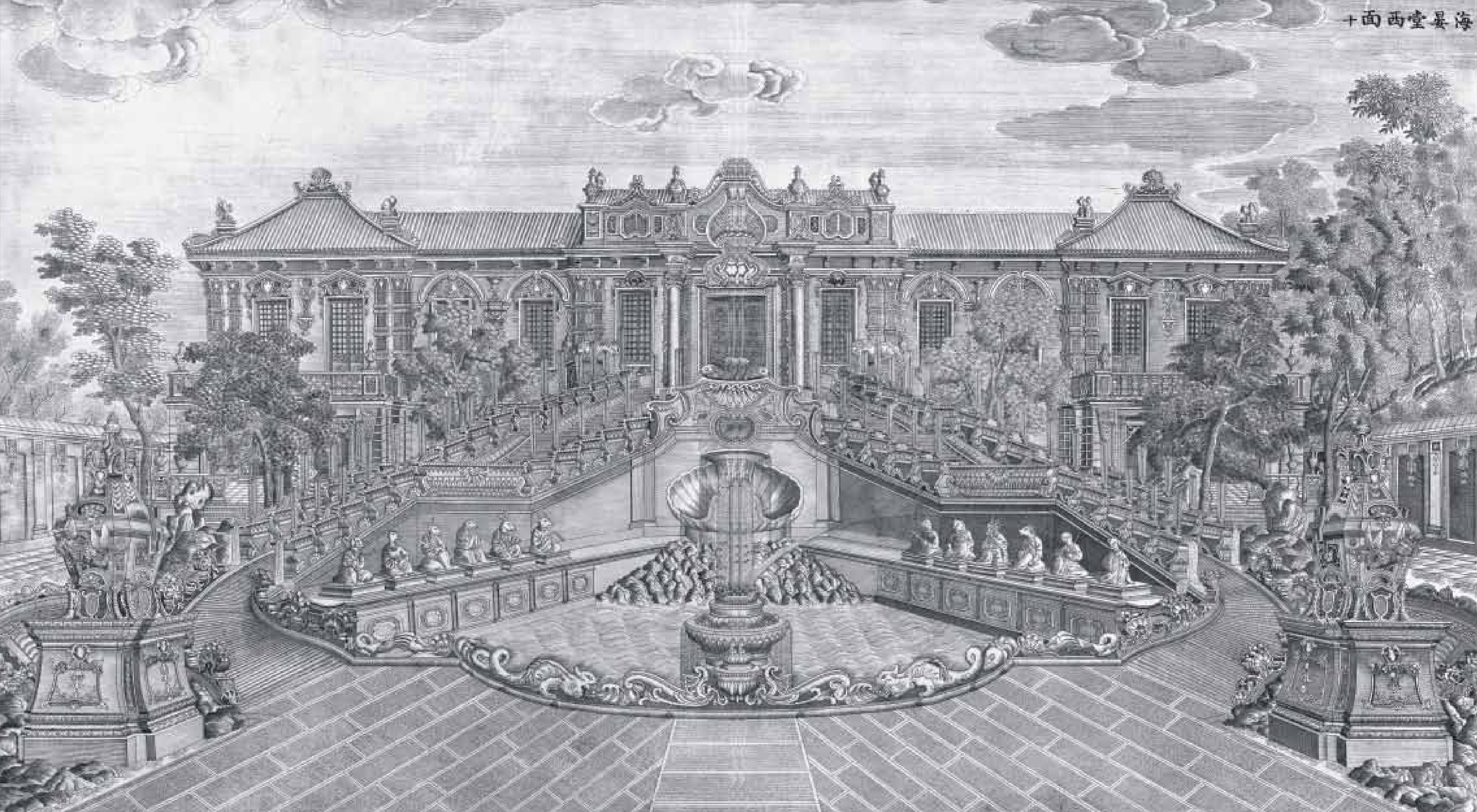


Introduction:
Headlong into
History

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Installation view
of *Circle of Animals/
Zodiac Heads*
at Somerset House,
London, May 2011





THE PAST IS NEVER DEAD. IT'S NOT EVEN PAST.¹

William Faulkner's often-quoted dictum is hardly common parlance in contemporary China, but it might as well be. In recent years, a vivid sense of outrage over the injustices of history—certain injustices in particular—has fueled vehement expressions of nationalism by the Chinese government and many of its citizens. As China continues its ascent as a world power and its self-identity undergoes sustained transformation, the drive to rectify past iniquities gains a parallel strength and intensity.

Much of the fervor centers on a time known in China as the “century of national humiliation.” Spanning approximately 1840 to 1945, this era saw the Chinese suffer repeated defeat and domination by other nations, beginning with the First Opium War (1839–42). It ended with the expulsion of foreign powers from the mainland after World War II, or according to some sources, with the founding of the People's Republic in 1949. The century of national humiliation is a defining episode of Chinese history, akin to the Civil War in the United States or the Elizabethan Era for the British. A staple of the public-school history curriculum, it is common knowledge to virtually all Chinese. Its locus of memory and most potent symbol is a parkland and historic site on the northwest side of Beijing: the Yuanming Yuan, or Garden of Perfect Brightness.

An imperial retreat established in the early eighteenth century by the Kangxi Emperor (r. 1661–1722), the Yuanming Yuan was enjoyed by a succession of Qing dynasty rulers, including Kangxi, his son, the Yongzheng Emperor (r. 1722–35), and his grandson, the Qianlong Emperor (r. 1735–96). It was the Qianlong Emperor who, in the mid-1700s, initiated the ambitious architectural project for which the Yuanming Yuan is best known: a series of grand European-style fountains, gardens, and palaces designed to house and display imperial treasures, especially those from the West. Created under the direction of Italian and French Jesuits serving at the emperor's court, the European-style buildings and grounds occupied only a small fraction of the Yuanming Yuan's vast acreage; the

PAGES 14–15: FIG. 1 Yi Lantai (active 1749–86), *West Facade of the Palace of the Calm Seas (Haiyan Tang ximian)*, plate no. 10 in a suite of twenty engravings entitled *The European Pavilions at the Garden of Perfect Brightness*, 1783–86. Engraving mounted on heavy paper, 19 ¾ x 34 ½ in. (50 x 87.5 cm)

greater part was filled with Chinese-style gardens and traditional architecture constructed largely of wood. In 1860, a century or so after Qianlong began building his European palaces, the Yuanming Yuan was looted and burned by foreign troops in the Second Opium War (1856–60). Ironically, it was the ornately carved stone fountains and palaces of the European section that survived, albeit in ruins. The Yuanming Yuan was destroyed, its treasures carted off by invading forces, its usable fragments scavenged by nearby residents.

Of the many works carried away from the Garden of Perfect Brightness, one set of objects lies at the crux of this volume: twelve bronze heads depicting the animals of the Chinese zodiac, which had been designed as spouts for an elaborate zodiac water-clock fountain. Positioned before the largest of the European Palaces—the Haiyan Tang, or Palace of the Calm Seas—the bronze heads were the defining element in a complex set-piece that combined sculpture, hydraulics, and Chinese and European aesthetics (fig. 1). In an interesting twist of history, the heads have assumed a symbolic burden far beyond their original modest function. Over the past two decades, they have been transformed into a metonymic shorthand for the cultural achievements of the mid-Qing era, the losses suffered in 1860, and the humiliations that followed. Their monetary value on the international art market has soared, and despite their hybrid aesthetics, they have become touchstones of a fervent and at times contentious nationalism. Today, seven heads are accounted for; the whereabouts of the remaining five are unknown.²

The zodiac heads of the Yuanming Yuan fountain are the inspiration for *Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads*, the 2010 sculpture by Ai Weiwei that is the impetus for this book. In *Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads*, Ai Weiwei again unites the twelve animals, reinterpreting the extant heads and re-envisioning those that are missing. In place of the seated human figures, carved of stone, on which the original bronze heads rested, he presents each animal head on a slender column of metal, of a piece with the head itself, almost as if it were being buoyed by a jet of water. He conceived *Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads* in two distinct versions: *Bronze*, a set of oversized heads intended as outdoor public art, and *Gold*, a smaller set for museum display, closer in size to the originals and gilded to a bright gold finish. In *Circle of Animals/Zodiac*

Heads: Gold, a spirit of playfulness extends to the treatment of the bases. Most reference the original Yuanming Yuan fountain with motifs evocative of water—the dragon rising out of a magnificent whirlpool, the tiger emerging from concentric circles that echo the fur of its ruff—with one head, the snake, resting on what could be seen as a column of golden coins. In *Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads: Bronze*, the imposing heads are positioned above eye level, inviting viewers to contemplate them from an entirely different perspective. This public art version debuted at the Bienal de São Paulo in autumn 2010; an international, multi-year tour launched in New York and London in 2011.

A WILLINGNESS TO ENGAGE WITH HISTORY, AND TO examine the uses to which history is often put is characteristic of Ai Weiwei's art. He himself has experienced something of history's vicissitudes. His father, Ai Qing (1910–1996), was one of the country's most revered modern poets. Jailed and tortured as a leftist by the Kuomintang in the 1930s, he became a key literary figure in the early days of the People's Republic, only to be swept up in a purge of intellectuals in the late 1950s. When Ai Weiwei was an infant, the family was sent to Xinjiang, a remote region in the far west that was, in terms of exile, the equivalent of Siberia. With the first wave of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, the family was further banished to a camp on the edge of the Gobi Desert, where they lived in a damp, seeping room dug from the earth. There, Ai Qing was forbidden to read or write and was pressed into daily labor cleaning latrines. After five years, the family was permitted to return to Xinjiang; Ai Weiwei was then a young teenager. In 1975, after five more years in Xinjiang, Ai Qing and his wife and children were allowed to return to Beijing.³ Three years later, Ai Weiwei enrolled in the Beijing Film Academy, where his classmates included internationally acclaimed Fifth Generation directors Chen Kaige (*Yellow Earth*, *Farewell My Concubine*) and Zhang Yimou (*Raise the Red Lantern*, *The Story of Qiu Ju*). Ai Qing was publicly exonerated in 1978; in 1981, Ai Weiwei left for New York, where he remained for more than a decade.

It is not simply China's past, but China's ongoing relationship to its past that engages Ai Weiwei. In his oeuvre, pinballing historical references can invest even the most unassuming objects with layers of meaning, bringing a

richness and unexpected dimension to the work. For viewers unfamiliar with the nuances of Chinese history, such allusions can slip by unnoticed, leaving an at-times unsettled, off-kilter sense of the work—as though something were perhaps missing, not from the art but from the knowledge one brings to it. This volume was conceived in response to that sense of “something missing.” It offers a focused look not only at Ai Weiwei's art but at historical references that resonate powerfully in both versions of *Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads*. In Western countries, China's century of humiliation is not the stuff of history textbooks, and few have heard of the Yuanming Yuan or its zodiac fountain. Fewer still understand the importance of the zodiac and its animals in Chinese cosmology and in the traditional structuring of time in hours, days, months, and years. Yet these historical factors come to bear not only on *Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads* but on contemporary China's concept of itself as it assumes an increasingly prominent role on the world stage. For Western admirers of Ai Weiwei's art, and for those with an interest in contemporary China, the essays in this volume have much to say.

The text of *Ai Weiwei Circle of Animals* is organized in three parts, in a chronological arc that begins from and ultimately returns to the present time. The opening section looks at *Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads* and its place in Ai Weiwei's oeuvre; the final section focuses on the meanings that contemporary culture has assigned to the original zodiac heads, as objects of value circulated on the international art market and as icons of nationalist sentiment. Between them, part two examines three historical topics, commencing with an exploration of the zodiac and its role in Chinese cosmology, progressing to an account of the creation of the Yuanming Yuan in the eighteenth century, and culminating with its looting and destruction in the nineteenth century. With the possible exception of the first topic, it would be inaccurate to assume that any of the essays pertain only to China. Indeed, one of the book's revelations is the extent to which its themes, both historical and contemporary, are international in scope; another is the degree of sophistication that characterized cultural exchanges between China and the West in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. While several of the authors analyze or reference the same historical events, each

does so from a distinct perspective. The result is a multifaceted, overlapping portrayal, somewhat cubist in nature, of Ai Weiwei, his art, his engagement with history, and the historical events at play in *Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads*.

The book opens with a photo gallery of *Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads: Bronze*, a suite of images of the individual heads. This suite is followed by “My Work Is Always a Readymade,” excerpts from a series of interviews with the artist about *Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads*, which were conducted in 2009–10 by Phil Tinari, Larry Warsh, Evan Osnos, and Alison Klayman, and recorded by Klayman for her feature-length documentary *Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry* (2011). In these interviews, Ai Weiwei’s voice comes through clearly: good-natured, at times wry, but intensely focused and articulate about the issues that are touched on by *Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads*, and the history that resonates through the work.

The interview excerpts are followed by Karen Smith’s “Monkey King Makes Havoc: Ai Weiwei Conducts a Carnival of the Animals.” In this essay, Smith approaches core themes of the work through a consideration of nineteenth-century British imperialism and the events leading to the looting and burning of the Yuanming Yuan in 1860. She casts the specifics of Ai Weiwei’s art and life against the broader context of Chinese history, examining the cultural currents that have helped shape his outlook as well as his art. Smith takes a holistic view of Ai Weiwei’s practice, seeing his blogging and micro-blogging as being of a piece with the rest of his art, all of it poised to question China’s relationship to its own history, and the role that art can and should play in contemporary Chinese society.

Charles Merewether’s essay, “The Original and the Copy: Ai Weiwei and the Fate of the Zodiac Heads,” also takes a historical episode as its point of departure—in this case the creation of the Yuanming Yuan under a succession of mid-Qing emperors. Adapted from his book *Ai Weiwei: Under Construction* (published by the University of New South Wales Press in 2008 and now out of print), Merewether’s essay approaches Ai Weiwei’s use of history from a somewhat different perspective, examining in depth the artist’s subtle play with concepts—Duchampian, Warholian, and otherwise—of the original and its reproduction, and the potential for an object’s meaning to be radically transformed in a contemporary context. Following

Merewether’s essay is a suite of images of the individual heads that comprise *Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads: Gold*.

From an initial focus on Ai Weiwei and *Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads*, the book turns to explore the circumstances surrounding the original bronze zodiac heads of the Yuanming Yuan fountain. Stepping far back into history, Paola Demattè opens the second section with an examination of the zodiac and its role in Chinese cosmology. For many Westerners, the Chinese zodiac is little more than a light diversion, something one might encounter in a New Age bookstore or Chinatown restaurant. Demattè’s essay, “*Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads* and the Twelve-Animal Cycle in China,” meticulously restores the animals to their key role in the structuring of time in Chinese tradition, examining their function across multiple chronological cycles. In an added boon, Demattè takes a close look at the engraving of the Haiyan Tang fountain reproduced as fig. 1, analyzing it from a traditional chronological perspective, down to the hour of day that it depicts.

Marco Musillo’s “Mid-Qing Arts and Jesuit Visions: Encounters and Exchanges in 18th-Century Beijing” focuses on the origins of the Yuanming Yuan’s European section in the Jesuit mission at the Beijing court and in the voracious appetites of Qing emperors for knowledge of the West. In chronicling the cultural exchange that, over decades, led to the creation of the European section of the Yuanming Yuan, Musillo draws detailed portraits of three rulers, their personal preferences, and their intellectual pursuits. What emerges is a fascinating account of a sustained cross-cultural collaboration, and an illuminating perspective on the European Palaces and their symbolic importance in the Qing imperial worldview.

Picking up the historical thread, Kristina Kleutghen’s “Heads of State: Looting, Nationalism, and Repatriation of the Zodiac Bronzes” offers a glimpse of the Yuanming Yuan’s European section as a marvel of eighteenth-century innovation and cross-cultural exchange, then examines in detail the events leading to the Yuanming Yuan’s destruction in 1860 and the heads’ subsequent commodification on the open market. She traces their shifting fortunes in the context of China’s century of humiliation and its continued reverberation in contemporary Chinese culture, a national narrative as yet unfinished.

The original zodiac heads and their value, symbolic and monetary, in contemporary global culture are the subject of the book’s third section. It opens with “The Heads at Auction: Two Experts Weigh In,” excerpts from filmed interviews by Alison Klayman and Colin Jones with Chinese art experts Lark E. Mason, who conducted groundbreaking research on the heads at Sotheby’s in the 1980s, and Joe-Hynn Yang, a senior vice president at Christie’s at the time of the sale, in 2009, of the rat and rabbit heads. Both Mason and Yang personally handled individual heads in preparing them for auction, and their insights encompass not only the heads’ histories as art-market prizes, but their characteristics as objects and the craftsmanship that went into their creation. Rounding out this final section, Jones’s “The Zodiac Heads and the Auction Block” recounts the recent sale history of the seven known heads, focusing in detail on the rat and rabbit heads owned by the late fashion designer Yves Saint Laurent, which were at the center of the auction that Yang describes: the highly controversial and ultimately aborted sale by Christie’s in February 2009. Jones’s survey of the heads’ auction histories reveals how their soaring art-market value coincided and is interwoven with their emerging significance as nationalist icons, and with China’s increasing stature as a world power. As he observes, these linked dynamics continue to exert a powerful influence on the global art market, which is likely to grow stronger as the century unfolds.

THE AUTHORS WHO CONTRIBUTED TO THIS VOLUME are not only scholars but by necessity translators, each arriving at English equivalents for the Chinese terms that are commonly cited in these texts. For the ease of Western readers, we have rendered these phrases in a common vocabulary, and have taken up the suggestion by China scholar Geremie Barmé to use the term “Yuanming Yuan” rather than “Yuanmingyuan”—the latter being more consistent with Chinese grammar but more challenging for English-reading eyes. The same is true for “Haiyan Tang,” which is also presented in this text as two words rather than one. Virtually all of the contributors sharply rejected the terms “Summer Palace” or “Old Summer Palace,” which have been used since the nineteenth century in referring to the Yuanming Yuan. Though common in French as well as English, the terms are erroneous. Sited just outside Beijing, the Yuanming Yuan was a year-round imperial retreat, and in some

instances—notably for the Yongzheng Emperor—the primary imperial residence. (As Kristina Kleutghen points out, the true imperial summer retreat was located 250 kilometers north of Beijing.) For these reasons, throughout the book the Yuanming Yuan is called by that name, or by the translation the “Garden of Perfect Brightness.” The terms “Summer Palace” and “Old Summer Palace” appear only in direct citations of Western historical references.

AW ASIA IS PLEASED TO HAVE TAKEN A LEAD ROLE in the development of *Ai Weiwei: Circle of Animals*. As a private organization dedicated to promoting the field of contemporary Chinese art through publications, educational programs, curatorial projects, and institutional loans and acquisitions, AW Asia actively seeks out publishing projects that advance its mission. This volume, with its focus on a major public artwork and its ambitious historical scope, reflects AW Asia’s interest in advancing an understanding of contemporary Chinese art that goes beyond media headlines and art-market dynamics. Like *Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads*, the book looks to draw greater attention not only to the zodiac fountain of the Yuanming Yuan, but to the complex ways in which the past remains with us and continues to shape the future.

1. William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun* (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), 80.

2. The missing animals are the dragon, snake, ram, rooster, and dog.

3. Some sources, including the *New York Times*, have reported the year of the family’s return to Beijing as 1976. In an email to the author dated March 25, 2011, the archivist at Ai Weiwei Studio confirmed the year as 1975.