

Tang Contemporary Art presents:

YEAR OF THE RAT

Artist: Ai Weiwei

Curator: Cui Cancan

Exhibition Dates: 29 Oct - 10 Dec 2020

Venue: Tang Contemporary Art Bangkok

Press Opening: 28 Oct 2020 at 4:00PM

**Email interviews can be requested, but may not be guaranteed. Press and media who wish to request an interview should email: bkk@tanggallery.vip.*

Tang Contemporary Art is proud to announce the opening of "Year of the Rat," the solo exhibition for Ai Weiwei. Curated by Cui Cancan, this is the artist's fourth solo exhibition with Tang Contemporary Art, after his solo exhibitions "Ai Weiwei" in Beijing, as well as "Wooden Ball" and "Refutation" in Hong Kong. "Year of the Rat" also marks Ai Weiwei's first solo exhibition in Thailand.

2020 is the Year of the Rat in the Chinese lunar calendar and the *gengzi* year in this sexagenary cycle. The rat is the first of the twelve zodiac animals.

Historically, *gengzi* years are far from ordinary. 1840 saw the First Opium War; the ensuing conflicts and changes served as a prelude for further transformation. In 1900, the Boxers burned churches and massacred missionaries and ordinary Christians, and Empress Cixi declared war on the United Kingdom, the United States, France, Russia, Germany, Japan, Italy, and Austria. By August, the armies of the Eight Nation Alliance had taken Beijing. In 1960, sixty years ago, China was in the midst of a great famine. In that year, the "Rightist" poet Ai Qing was sent down to the Eighth Division of the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps in Shihezi, and Ai Weiwei lived there with his father for sixteen years.

2020 is another *gengzi* year. On Chinese New Year's Eve, Wuhan announced the closure of the city because of a new coronavirus. Several months later, tens of millions of people around the world had contracted Covid-19. In the expanse of human civilization, 60 years is not a long time, but the vast majority of people will only see one such Year of the Rat in their lifetimes.

The Year of the Rat and the *gengzi* year give Ai Weiwei's exhibition particular meaning. The ambiguity and suggestions associated with the Year of the Rat move in cycles. In one hundred years, there will be a new experience of time, space, context, and history.

"Year of the Rat" begins with twelve zodiac animal heads, serving as a historical backdrop to the entire exhibition. This series fuses animal heads and Legos, two of Ai Weiwei's familiar motifs, which are underpinned by two well-known but decidedly different historical periods. The twelve Lego works are an extension of Ai's *Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads*, which were in turn derived from the twelve zodiac heads that once adorned the Old Summer Palace (Yuanmingyuan). The originals were looted from Yuanmingyuan in 1860 by French and British forces and subsequently scattered around the world. Several of them have been collected and returned to Beijing. For Chinese people, these animal heads symbolize one hundred years of humiliation and they continue to activate nationalistic pride and anger.

How did these sculptures, which were created by European Jesuits and presented to a Manchu emperor, come to be a symbol of China? From their complex origins with Manchu, Han, and European people and their looting in war, how did their return become a patriotic act? Ai Weiwei is keenly aware of the political implications, and in replicating these animal heads, grandly displaying them as public works of art in more than forty Western cities, and modeling and mocking this discomfiting part of history, he offers his commentary on memories of this historical period.

Ai Weiwei cuts through history with new temporal methods, connecting different stories and events. In "Year of the Rat," these twelve animal heads symbolize these 180 years of East and West, provocation and adaptation, advancement and backwardness, glory and humiliation. After several sexagenary cycles, these relationships have continued to infiltrate, change, and percolate with one another, and everything has become complex and murky. However, in 2020, because of the pandemic, this story has become even more complex and unstable; this is a Year of the Rat with the future out of focus.

History always finds a new catalyst in Ai Weiwei. He collects events and stories that have been scattered, polishing them like gems. He made a hard hat out of marble, a replica of the hard hats worn by workers who were trying to rescue people after the 2008 Wenchuan Earthquake. *Shelter*, which employs a geometric interpretation of the common form of an umbrella, was created during the protests in Hong Kong in 2014. He has also made several marble pieces that do not convey a clear message, including an ordinary takeout box and two rolls of toilet paper. They come from different contexts, times, and places. The message may have been removed or magnified, but as a result, they seem both very close to and very far from us, both very obscure and very clear. They activate and accentuate one another in the new order that Ai Weiwei offers us.

Whether the result of a multi-year investigation or a souvenir of a moment, Ai Weiwei creates his own methods and textures in telling stories. Their expression further elevates the subject, and these expressive methods give the story or part of history an extraordinary beauty. They represent keen insights into social consciousness, but they are also perfectly rendered with exquisite craftsmanship. Like Martin Scorsese's New York or Federico Fellini's *8 ½*, the self, reality, and dreams spiral upward and become commingled.

Ring W and Ring M, rings made of pure gold, are displayed in the center of the gallery. These rings are unique and can be worn by men or women. The images on the ring reflect Ai's thoughts about feeling trapped and deprived, and about freedom and the ability to determine one's own existence. The description of the work reads: "The wearable artworks are representative of Ai Weiwei's sensitivity to the duality of human nature, with its capacity for nurture and kindness on one hand, yet destruction and cruelty on the other. In the center of the ring's face, depictions of migrants' stories unfold under a mysterious half-moon: by foot or by sea, some are portrayed travelling together and others alone. Ai Weiwei's signature symbolism, together with iconic images of contemporary society, provide a dramatic context to their journeys. The strength of these jewels lies in the elegance of the lines, in the purity of the details, and in their ability to empathize with humanity."¹

The rings were inspired by two ancient civilizations. The ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs and ancient Greek gold-working techniques were linked to Ai's research into how civilizations change and how people migrate. Distantly linked to the many changes that the animal heads have witnessed in the last century, Ai Weiwei's documentary *Human Flow* records how millions of people became homeless migrants. The project was inspired by his own experience: since his birth, he has moved from the Great Northern Wilderness to Shihezi to Beijing, then on to New York, Berlin, and Cambridge.

The defacing marks on the portrait of Mao Zedong in Tiananmen Square in May 1989 and the route of a migrant rescue vessel in June 2019 seem to have no relationship to aesthetics. These minimalist, abstract lines convey provocative acts and unforeseen consequences. Countless migrants on the ocean are hovering off the coast, entirely isolated and helpless. It is only when we dive below the surface for information, then bring it to the level of conscious thought, that we see the countless lives within the relationships between history and evidence, stories and forms and that we can uncover what truly happened in history and what that meant.

History is always forgotten, and past suffering is always redeemed. Stories from a specific time and place will disappear, but they show that the form of this historical spirit is actually eternal. Regardless of how important a historical event was, it can never be fully represented; instead, it appears in various versions in different contexts. Incomplete information and chance results become partial fragments devoid of subjectivity in the long road of history. For example, the properties and circumstances of Lego bricks, a medium that Ai Weiwei has long employed, have determined that we must use many bricks and a wider range of thinking and tools to precisely assemble a complete event or history. We must ask: What is it? What happened? Why is it the way it is today?

"Year of the Rat" is the beginning of another cycle, and in ancient legends, it wards off evil, helps determine the auspiciousness of a marriage, and summons the spirits. In the modern vocabulary, it symbolizes the spread of filth, theft, and illness. 2020, a *gengzi* year, had a longer-than-usual "fourth intercalary month," so this lunar year had 384 days. In this pandemic, many people have not lived to see the end of the year, and the things they experienced may reverberate in 180 years, turning them into heralds of things to come.

Curator: Cui Cancan

Ai Weiwei

Artist

b.1957 Beijing, China

Ai Weiwei is a Chinese Contemporary artist and activist. Ai collaborated with Swiss architects Herzog & de Meuron as the artistic consultant on the Beijing National Stadium for the 2008 Olympics. As a political activist, he has been highly and openly critical of the Chinese Government's stance on democracy and human rights. He has investigated government corruption and cover-ups, in particular the Sichuan schools corruption scandal following the collapse of so-called "tofu-dreg schools" in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake. In 2011, following his arrest at Beijing Capital International Airport on 3 April, he was held for 81 days without any official charges being filed; officials alluded to their allegations of "economic crimes".

Cui Cancan

Curator

Cui Cancan is an independent curator in China, he has won *Chinese Contemporary Art Award Critic Award*, *Yi Shu Award for Critical Writing* etc., curated main exhibitions like *Hei Qiao Night Way* (2013), *Xiang Cun Xi jian Chui* (2013), *FUCKOFF II* (2013), *Unlived by What is Seen* (2014), *Between the 5th and 6th Ring Road in Beijing* (2015), *The Decameron* (2016), Curated solo exhibitions like Ai Weiwei, Xia Xiaowan, Shen Shaomin, Wang Qingsong, He Yunchang, Xiao Yu, Qin Ca, Xie Nanxing, Shi Jinsong, Li Zhanyang, Xu Zhongmin, Ma Ke, Xia xing, Zhao Zhao, Li Qing, Chen Yufan, Chen Yujun, Li Binyuan, Feng Lin, Zhang Yue, Zong Ning, Jiang Bo etc.

Tang Contemporary Art

Tang Contemporary Art was established in 1997 in Bangkok, later establishing galleries in Beijing and Hong Kong. Tang Contemporary Art is fully committed to producing critical projects and exhibitions to promote Contemporary Chinese art regionally and worldwide, and encourage a dynamic exchange between Chinese artists and those abroad.

Acting as one of the most progressive and critically driven exhibition spaces in China, the gallery strives to initiate dialogue between artists, curators, collectors and institutions working both locally and internationally. A roster of groundbreaking exhibitions has earned Tang Contemporary Art internationally renowned recognition, establishing its status as a pioneer of the contemporary art scene in Asia.

Tang Contemporary Art represents leading figures in Chinese art including Ai Weiwei, Huang Yongping, Shen Yuan, Wang Du, Liu Xiaodong, Yang Jiechang, Xia Xiaowan, Sun Yuan & Peng Yu, Yan Lei, Wang Yin, Wang Yuping, Yangjiang Group, Guo Wei, Zheng Guogu, Lin Yilin, He An, Zhao Zhao, Wang Yuyang, Weng Fen, Yang Yong, Xu Qu, Xu Xiaoguo, Ji Zhou, Cai Lei, Ling Jian, Liu Yujia, Zhu Jinshi, Qin Qi, Chen Yujun, Chen Yufan and Chen Wenbo, and collaborating with international artists such as H.H.Lim, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Sakarin Krue-On, Michelangelo Pistoletto, Adel Abdessemed, Dinh Q.Le, Michael Zelehoski, Jennifer Wen Ma, Rodol Tapaya, Natee Utarit and Heri Dono.

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