

**F Grass, 2014****Ai Weiwei (Beijing, China)**

Iron

13.5 x 13.5 x 0.3 m

**WHO MADE THIS ART INSTALLATION?**

Ai Weiwei is a versatile artist, sculptor, designer, part-time architect and political activist who today lives and works out of Beijing. Over the past twenty years he has gained international attention and recognition for his diverse body of work, often addressing questions of culture, history, politics, tradition, in addition to issues such as freedom of expression, individual and human rights, and the power of digital communication both in China and around the world. Though his work is rooted in his Chinese experience, his art that transcends dualities between East and West. He was named one of the Top 100 People of 2011 in Time magazine and has exhibited worldwide. One of his best known architectural projects is the Bird's Nest stadium for the 2008 Beijing Olympics for which he partnered with architects Herzog & de Meuron for the design. He later distanced himself from the project, having become critical of the spectacle of the Olympics and glossing over human rights injustices in China. When asked why he participated in the designing of the Bird's Nest in the first place, Ai replied "I did it because I love design."



Born in 1957 Ai Weiwei grew up during the Cultural Revolution in China. The Ai family was deeply impacted by the policies of General Mao Zedong who was then head of the state. His father Ai Qing was a renowned poet but was denounced during the Anti Rightist movement in 1958, and as a result the Ai family was sent to labour camp and ultimately exiled for 16 years. The family could finally return to Beijing in 1976 after the end of the Revolution.



In 1978 he studied at Beijing Film Academy but it was between 1981-1993 while living in America that he developed his voice and work as an artist. While living in New York in those years he continued with some art education while drawing street portraits and working odd jobs. It was during this time that he learned about the works of Marcel Duchamp, Andy Warhol and other American artists working with everyday materials and found objects. Ai Weiwei then began to explore these ideas and experiment by making his own works including altering ready-made objects and creating a series of photographs of the streets and life of New York. In the early 1990s he returned to China as his father was ill, and in the years that followed his work grew increasingly more diverse and at times more politically controversial.

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Through his writing and his art, Ai Weiwei has become a controversial and outspoken political artist and activist, critiquing human rights and the government of China, art and architecture, contemporary culture, and actively embracing online platforms like blogs and Twitter to share and spread ideas despite government persecution. Several of his more political works are critical of the Chinese government including researching and creating commemorative works for the 5,000 unnamed children who died in a poorly built school that crumbled during an earthquake in

Sichuan in 2008. He began publishing their names on their birthdays on his blog, and creating works like the Snake Ceiling with children's backpacks. His work on this controversial disaster and his other work about Chinese politics led to searches and confiscation of his property and studio by the state, and his emails hacked. In 2011 he was arrested and jailed for three months, inciting international outcry especially in the art world, and numerous protests and campaigns for his release. He has since made several works about his ordeal in prison, including "S.A.C.R.E.D., which featured black boxes viewers would look inside where they see miniature versions of Ai going about daily activities always with the guards who watched over him 24/7 in his cell. Today he lives and works out of Beijing but is not allowed to leave the city.

Many of his visual works use minimal forms and methods, at times manipulating traditional furniture, ancient pottery, and daily objects in ways that question cultural values and challenge political authority. His work "Bang" features an installation of 886 three-legged stools floating and stacked to fill the gallery space, referencing domestic life and the disappearance of this very common stool in Chinese homes as homelife and



domestic culture in China erodes. His 2010 installation *Sunflower Seeds* at the Tate Modern filled a gallery room with 100 million handmade porcelain sunflower seeds. To make this work he brought together a team of 1600 artisans to help him, highlighting the mass production of goods in China and the way that the people of China were often represented as sunflower seeds under Chairman Mao, with Mao as the sun. Several documentaries have been made about Ai Weiwei's life and work, and he continues to make thought provoking, political work exhibiting worldwide.

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### **WHAT WAS THE INSPIRATION FOR THIS ART INSTALLATION?**



*F Grass* is both a symbolic and metaphorical work, inspired by several social and cultural ideas. The choice to create a field of grass came from the idea that grass could be a metaphor for the meaning and function of society. Grass is a common element in the environment that is both fragile yet still resilient. The form of the installation resembles a barricade of iron blades of grass in repetition, standing strong in resilience that cannot be run over or trampled. All of these elements are also true of the concept of society—society is both fragile but enduring in the face of obstacle or threat. The Chinese character for grass is ‘cao’ (pronounced tsaο), and is seen in words like ‘Caochangdi’, the art district in which Ai Weiwei’s studio is located in Beijing, and ‘caonima’. ‘Caonima’ means alpaca, an animal which has become a popular Chinese internet meme and symbol of defiance, and (not so coincidentally) is pronounced roughly the same way as “f\*ck your mother” in Mandarin. This work is made of iron, and is a unique work created specifically for the 2014-2016 Vancouver Biennale.

### **HOW DOES THIS PIECE OF ART CONNECT TO THE ARTIST’S PREVIOUS WORK?**

At the core of Ai Weiwei’s work are political ideas, questions, and issues. This work also draws from political ideas, but in a conceptual way through the metaphor of blades of grass.

### **HOW WAS THIS ART INSTALLATION MADE/INSTALLED?**

As Ai Weiwei is not permitted to leave Beijing, his work is shipped worldwide and installed by local art organizations. This art installation was managed by Vancouver Biennale in consultation with Ai Weiwei’s studio in Beijing. *F Grass* is made up of 1,328 blades of grass in cast iron using a mold made around a sculpture of a blade of grass larger than life. Each blade of grass weighs approximately 10 kgs combining to weigh over 13 tons. The installation process involved levelling the ground at Harbour Green Park, 1199 West Cordova Street. This was followed by the building of a wooden platform to support the 13 tons of metal grass. The platform was covered with thick metal plates and then each blade was fitted to form the ‘F’ shape, welded to the metal covered platform to ensure the stability and safety of the artwork. Only from a height of 20 ft. or more one can see the “F” and the individual blades of iron grass that make the shape. The installation is open to the public starting December, 2014 for 12 months.



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**ADDITIONAL INFORMATION**

- In China and many other Asian countries, the family name of a person is said before the first name (Ai is his family name, Weiwei is his first name).
- For those interested in seeing more of Ai Weiwei's work in person here in Vancouver, the *Bang* installation of wooden stools is on view at the Vancouver Art Gallery as part of the 'Unscrolled: Reframing Tradition in Chinese Contemporary Art' exhibition from Nov 15, 2014 –Apr 6, 2015.

Artist website [aiweiwei.com](http://aiweiwei.com)

Photo credits <http://bisaartspace.blogspot.ca/2011/04/call-for-release-of-ai-weiwei.html>

<http://www.ohiseered.com/2011/11/huh-wei-wei-who.html>

<http://www.nippertown.com/2013/07/17/review-the-venice-biennale-venice-italy/>

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