

Ai Weiwei's defiance on display in Vancouver

Biennale unveils F Grass, an F-bomb message to Beijing

BY KEVIN GRIFFIN, VANCOUVER SUN DECEMBER 18, 2014



Art installation called F Grass by Chinese artist Ai Weiwei was unveiled at Harbour Green Park in Vancouver on Wednesday.

Photograph by: Jason Payne, PRV

A new sculpture by acclaimed Chinese artist and activist Ai Weiwei unveiled Wednesday for the Vancouver Biennale may initially look underwhelming. But the work has more going for it than at first appearance.

The horizontal sculpture is another defiant gesture by Ai Weiwei against Chinese government officials for the way they continue to treat him and many other ordinary Chinese citizens.

The work is called F Grass. Made from cast iron, it is located in Coal Harbour at the north end of Bute Street in Harbour Green Park.

F Grass is on a plinth 13.5 metres square. It is comprised of hundreds of metal blades of grass arranged in a calligraphic "F". Although they are not sharp, the blades of grass resemble traffic spikes used by police to puncture the tires of wheeled vehicles.

As a sculpture, it plays with our conventions about outdoor public art, most of which tends to be comprised of dramatic vertical objects such as statues that rise into the air from the ground. This work

is just the opposite: It hugs the ground and its orientation is almost entirely horizontal.

If you stand at the south end, and look north at the work, you can make out its key calligraphic element: a stylized letter "F".

Why would a Chinese artist use a letter from the Roman alphabet?

The letter and the form it is expressed in symbolize a complex English-Mandarin homonym that online and human rights activists have begun using as a defiant gesture against Chinese government censorship and restrictions.

The "F" is short for the F-bomb in English. And in Mandarin, the word for "grass" sounds almost identical to the f-word.

The sculpture is, in effect, Ai's way of sending a big "f--- you" to government censors in China.

Ai Weiwei remains under constant surveillance in Beijing and cannot leave the country.

Miriam Blume, the biennale's marketing director, said F Grass is the kind of public art work that requires viewers to engage with.

"Ai Weiwei and a whole movement has emerged on the Internet of using grass as an act of defiance," she said.

F Grass is a temporary installation that will be in place for 12 months.

It's the same location where the Biennale previously erected Device to Root out Evil — the Upside Down Church — by Dennis Oppenheim.

An interview with Ai is on the Vancouver Biennale website. It's conducted by Shengtian Zheng, senior Asian curator at the biennale and editor of Yishu Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art.

F Grass is one of two works by Ai in Vancouver. The other is Bang at the Vancouver Art Gallery. Bang is a massive sculptural work of 866 linked antique and reproduction wooden stools from the Qing dynasty meant to show the link between the individual and the collective in Chinese culture. It's part of the group show Unscrolled: Reframing Tradition in Chinese Contemporary Art.

The Vancouver Biennale is a non-profit organization that celebrates art in public spaces.

Ai Weiwei facts

Five things about the artist and activist (his name is pronounced eye way-way)

He was born in 1957. He's the son of Ai Qing, a revered poet of the Communist party of China. During the Cultural Revolution, Ai Qing and his family were exiled internally to a remote area of northwest China. Ai Qing had to clean toilets for five years.

Ai spent 12 years living in the U.S., mainly New York. He supported himself by gambling, mostly

blackjack. He's considered a very good player.

He collaborated with Swiss architects Herzog & de Meuron (the same company has been chosen to design the new Vancouver Art Gallery) as the artistic consultant on the Bird's Nest, the nickname for the Beijing National Stadium used for the 2008 Summer Olympics. He refused to attend opening ceremonies because he claimed the Olympics were a government-controlled event that ordinary citizens wouldn't benefit from.

After the Sichuan earthquake in 2008, he compiled a list of the 5,385 names of schoolchildren killed when shoddily built schools collapsed. He published them online. In Munich, he exhibited *So Sorry*, a work of art made from about 9,000 children's backpacks that spelled out in Chinese the sentence "She lived happily for seven years in this world." They were the words of a mother whose daughter died in the earthquake.

He lives in his studio complex in Caochangdu, a village in suburban Beijing. He remains under heavy surveillance and cannot travel to other countries. He has a fondness for homeless neighbourhood cats.

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