

Ai Weiwei plants F Grass as part of the Vancouver Biennale

by [Robin Laurence](#) on Dec 23, 2014 at 11:00 am



Yes, the official launch of Ai Weiwei's Vancouver Biennale sculpture, *F Grass*, took place in the Twitter-verse, but the real-world unveiling was pretty nifty, too.

On a recent, rainy morning, a cadre of soggy but determined workers and volunteers removed construction fencing, erected signage, then finally and dramatically rolled away the big blue tarpaulins that had been covering the work. Their labours revealed a large, low platform on which are mounted over a thousand hexagonal "tiles", each tile bearing three "tufts", each tuft composed of five "blades of grass", the entirety creating an outsized, double-barred, calligraphic F. F as in freedom, F as in fortitude, F as in "Fuck you!" to surveillance, censorship, and oppression.

"One of the prime motivations of the Vancouver Biennale is to showcase works of social interaction and stimulate ideas around social change," said Bill MacDonald, who accompanied the *Straight* to the F Grass unveiling at Harbour Green Park. A member of the Biennale board and former director and cofounder of Artists for Kids, MacDonald talked about the many metaphors that are folded into Ai's low-relief, ground-hugging work. He also talked

about Ai's recurring use of multiples and of the geopolitical impact of employing many small, seemingly identical components in the creation of a large single artwork.

Citing the millions of handcrafted porcelain seeds that were exhibited in his Sunflower Seeds installation at the Tate Modern in London in 2010 and the hundreds of three-legged stools in his installation Bang, created for the Venice Biennale 2013 and now on view at the Vancouver Art Gallery, he said: "The nature of the multiple is part of his style signature. I find that very intriguing."

At the same time, MacDonald extolled the artist's political activism, which, despite persecution by the Chinese government and ongoing travel restrictions, is incorporated into many aspects of his multidisciplinary practice, including his creative use of blogging and social media. F Grass, installed in the park that sits at the northern foot of Bute Street, is constructed of rapidly oxidizing iron, in hues ranging from dull brown to bright orange. "I like Ai's organic surface treatment," MacDonald said. "There's the honesty to his materials—and leaving the raw iron to rust adds to the work's symbolic richness."

The work's site, chosen by the Chinese dissident artist from photographs of nine possible locations throughout Vancouver, encompasses stirring views of Coal Harbour, Stanley Park, and the North Shore mountains, wreathed in low clouds on this December day. Seaplanes land and take off again, the dockyards boom and clack, the city emits its subliminal hum—and Ai silently broadcasts his message to passersby.

Both grass and the F-word are recurring motifs in Ai's recent life and work. His studio is located in Cao-changdi, an outlying district of Beijing whose name means "grassy field". In 2000, Ai cocurated an exhibition in Shanghai provocatively titled Fuck Off; coinciding with the third Shanghai Biennale, it drew worldwide attention to the man who is now China's most famous contemporary artist. And since the Chinese slang for fuck is pronounced the same way as the Chinese character for grass, Ai and other social-media users substitute the latter for the former in online communications designed to get around Chinese government censorship programs.

F Grass's play on these homophones is a defiant challenge to and pointed critique of the stifling of free expression in China and many other places in the world. At the same time, the thousands of iron blades of grass (manufactured by workers in China) symbolize not only the social body made up of multitudes of individuals, but also the resiliency of grass itself, which, although it may be trampled upon, mowed down, grazed over, or burned by wildfires, always springs back to life. It's an extraordinary metaphor for the human spirit.

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