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## [Ai Weiwei: Vancouver Biennale to sell \\$50,000 maquettes of F Grass](#)

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Sometime in 2015, the [Vancouver Biennale](#) will be getting a special shipment of art from [Ai Weiwei](#): five maquettes of [F Grass](#), the sculptural work of cast iron in the shape of a calligraphic 'F' in Coal Harbour.

Once in Vancouver, they'll be going on sale for \$50,000 each to raise money for the biennale, said creative director [Barrie Mowatt](#).

He said the contract was signed just before Christmas. Initially, the maquettes were going to be marble but now Mowatt isn't sure what they will be.

"He originally wanted to do them in marble and decided against that," Mowatt said. "It could be marble, it could be rusted iron."

Getting a work by Ai Weiwei is a coup for the [Vancouver Biennale](#). It gives the organization credibility as well as the opportunity to raise close to \$250,000. The Biennale has to cover the costs of production and transportation.

Mowatt said he believes it was the biennale's educational programs and accessibility that convinced Ai Weiwei to participate.

"Our mandate is about learning, community engagement, and social action," he said.

"That distinguishes us from many other biennales which strictly are come and look at the art. We really want to be in the community for the community. We want the art to be a discussion point that leads beyond being a thing that's there."

Vancouver Biennale puts up temporary public art installations around Metro Vancouver through its Open Air Museum. Other initiatives include educational programs for schools and residencies for artists.

Since 2010, almost 6,000 Grade 12 students in Metro Vancouver have benefited from Vancouver Biennale school programs. Educational outreach is expanding in 2015 to include I Have a Dream seed program for community gardens intended to make students aware about the origins of their food.

Mowatt said the biennale's senior curator Zheng Shengtian initially met with Ai Weiwei in Beijing. There was a back and forth negotiation between the biennale which suggested nine specific sites and Ai Weiwei who offered a couple of works.

"He offered us a couple of things. We said no," Mowatt said.

"I think Zheng had to be confident enough to say to him that we wanted something site specific."



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In the end, Ai Weiwei choose the site in Coal Harbour at the north end of Bute in Harbour Green Park.

The spot has a history as a site for temporary Vancouver Biennale sculptures. It was the spot where Dennis Oppenheim's [Device to Root Out Evil](#) was displayed for several years until it was removed in 2008.

Mowatt said because of the way AI Weiwei is being treated by Chinese government officials, the biennale was unsure whether F Grass would arrive.

"There have been communication back and forth daily basically for months," he said.

"Everyone was very cautious and anxious. We didn't know if at the last moment it wasn't going to arrive. We didn't believe ay of it until the crate arrived at the warehouse."

[Dong Yue Su](#), curatorial assistant with the Vancouver Biennale, said F Grass is designed to change over time as the cast iron rusts and changes colour.

While the work looks horizontal, it also has a strong vertical element, Su said.

"You can make out the shape from above that it's an English letter 'F'," he said.

"It is flat, it also has this suggested dimension of verticality because you can see it very clearly what it is about from above."

Su is a former executive editor of the Chinese edition of [Yishu Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art](#).

He described Ai Weiwei not only as a Chinese contemporary artist but an international artist as well. Su described Ai Weiwei's work as being social constructed.

"It is about how the work has been received and how the meaning changes because of spectatorship," he said.

"Everybody who writes about his work contributes to the meaning of his work."

Su said even this blog contributes to the creation of meaning about his art.

What makes F Grass different from other works by Ai Weiwei that have been shown or are being shown Vancouver is that it was specifically made for the [Vancouver Biennale](#). Ai Weiwei's Bang, for example, which is currently on display at the Vancouver Art Gallery, was previously exhibited at the Venice Biennale in 2013.

"F Grass is new. It is made for Vancouver," Su said.

"That means something. We're not bringing Ai Weiwei's work from somewhere else and putting it here. He looked at the physicality, he considered the cultural diversity in Vancouver, he has taken all this into account. It makes this work unique."

[F Grass](#) is on a base 13.5 metres square. Although the 1,3,28 tufts of grass in the work aren't sharp, they do resemble traffic spikes used by police to puncture the tires of wheeled vehicles.

The calligraphic 'F' symbolizes a complex English-Mandarin homonym that online activists have begun using as a defiant gesture against Chinese government censorship and restrictions.

The 'F' is short for Fuck in English. In Mandarin, it sounds similar to part of the phrase 'grass mud horse' which is a play on the phrase 'fuck your mother.'

The sculpture is his way of flippantly giving a big 'fuck' to government officials in China.



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Images, top to bottom: view looking down from 14 stories on F Grass in Harbour Green Park, Photo: Kevin Griffin; Visitors to dOCUMENTA (13) fair for contemporary art in Kassel, Germany in 2012 hold portraits of Ai Weiwei as part of an action called ‘All for Ai Weiwei’ to support the dissident artist, Photo: AFP/Uwe Zucchi; looking down at F Grass from behind the railing on the balcony of the building on the northeast corner of Hastings and Bute, Photo: Kevin Griffin.

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