

FEATURES



# Vancouver Biennale: Perspectives on Public Art

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Ai Weiwei, *F Grass*, 2014. Courtesy of Vancouver Biennale. Photo: roaming-the-planet.

The [Vancouver Biennale](#) has two notable distinguishing factors: it's almost exclusively outdoors, and it lasts for two full years. Now in its third iteration, this unusual take on public art continues eschewing the rapidity that usually marks biennales, searching, instead, for more long-term engagement.

As the 2014–2016 event enters its second year, its wide-ranging programming—which includes [residencies](#), [films](#) and [educational programs](#)—will come to the fore, building on the curatorial theme of “Open Borders/Crossroads Vancouver.” Positioning Vancouver as an international meeting point of cultures and ideas, the exhibition includes work by international artists including [Ai Weiwei](#), [Andy Goldsworthy](#) and [Vik Muniz](#), distributed across Vancouver, New Westminster, North Vancouver, Richmond and Squamish.

Barrie Mowatt, the biennial’s founder and president, and Miriam Blume, the biennial’s director of marketing, spoke with Caoimhe Morgan-Feir about the Vancouver Biennale’s exhibition model, its emphasis on programming and its future.

**CMF: The idea of an entirely open-air biennial (especially one that runs for such a long time), is quite novel. What makes this approach work? Why use this model of exhibition in Vancouver?**

**Miriam Blume:** In regards to our two-year run, we try and accomplish two things: in year one, it’s our installation year. Instead of installing several pieces all at once, we try to install one work every 30 days. That way we can highlight each piece in isolation. In year two, we consider that our engagement year—where people may be familiar with one or two or three individual pieces, now we get the community involved in walking events and various kinds of tours and talks, to engage in the exhibition in its totality.

**Barrie Mowatt:** Other biennials run anywhere from six weeks to six months. Who gets to engage? Who gets to participate in that? It takes time for people to hear about these things, and go out, explore, discover and participate. We want to maintain the calibre of curatorial excellence, and we want it to be accessible.

**MB:** In terms of our strategic intent, we talk a lot about engaging both a breadth and depth of audience. We want to be expansive, so that it can engage as large a critical mass as possible, but we also focus on depth, so you will see through our programming, that it’s not just about experiencing the art in public space.

**BM:** Through our [Big Ideas programs](#)—our educational curricula—we are in 72 schools this year alone. For us, our mandates are learning, community engagement and social action, and the objective is to try and integrate all three of those factors into everything that we do. So the time frame is important for us, because you could not engage the schools and adult learners in a six week time period. There isn’t time.

We chose to be out in public space many years ago, because we wanted something that distinguished Vancouver from the rest of the country. Vancouver is a lifestyle city. You can be outdoors 365 days of a year, so why not go where people are?

**CMF: Obviously, this biennial has some enormously famous artists participating, such as Ai Weiwei, Andy Goldsworthy, Dennis Oppenheim and Vik Muniz. But there are also some lesser-known artists included, particularly through the residency program. How is this balance struck?**

**BM:** This biennial really built seven programs to try and create the whole breadth of the programming we want to see moving forward. Through our residencies this year some really amazing young talents were curated in. Pallavi Paul, Sumakshi Singh and Sahej Rahal are three names alone who are going to be young stars. They're all under 30. Others include Shweta Bhattad, Hasan Hujairi, Chris Landau, Seung Woo Back and Jonathan Luckhurst. We have emerging artists from Brazil, and they have their own pavilion—a young star in that group was Juliana Cerqueira Leite.

These are all young artists who are on their way, and will change contemporary art. It's a platform for young artists, and the senior artists are the stars who catch the attention of the public and build the credibility for the young ones.

**CMF: Curating an exhibition of public art seems to require a certain mindfulness. While the larger, more bombastic works attract a lot of attention, the quieter, more poetic pieces can arguably make more lasting impressions. How does the curatorial approach account for these differing sensibilities?**

**BM:** There are obviously some decisions made where you want high visibility, high impact work, because you are trying to catch people's attention where they live and play and transit. Then there are works that are more thoughtful.

Even those that seem playful and engaging to a larger population always have more depth than might initially appear on the surface. It's up to the searching individual to take time and try to explore and discover that.

**MB:** It's fantastic to watch how the experience of an exhibition unfolds. It's hard to predict.

For example, we were right in the middle of Os Gêmeos (and we knew that was going to be big), right in the middle of this huge media blitz, when we installed, pretty quietly, Cosimo Cavallaro's jelly bean sculpture, and all of a sudden people riding their bikes and jogging along the seawall discovered *Love Your Beans*, and that became this surprise conversation that lasted a couple of weeks.

You never know how it's going to unfold, and that's another reason why you do a two-year exhibition, and you situate your artwork where people are, as opposed to creating a destination where you try and attract people. People do discover these things.

**BM:** We don't always know what is going to generate a groundswell of interest.

**CMF: Now that we're into 2015, what are the plans for the biennial over the next year? And how will the residency, in particular, be proceeding and changing this year?**

**MB:** We will be continuing with our [CineFest Live](#) program, which we launched in 2014 with Oliver Stone. We are just finalizing our programming for 2015, and it will be expansion of that program; you will certainly see films at the biennial in the coming year.

**BM:** Through our residency program we are trying to reach into those countries that are not just in the first economies. We hope, either virtually or physically, to engage and bring these artists from these countries into the biennial.

We have a major Middle Eastern and North African contingent, and we would like to be able to bring them into this biennial, but, because of the challenges right now in that part of the world, the Canadian government has not been very supportive in granting visas to our curated artists. We are now assessing: is virtual communication the way to engage these artists?

**CMF: Would that be happening this coming year, or is it a more long-term goal?**

**BM:** We are trying to do that this year.

**MB:** One of our strategic mandates is also to embrace technology. So, when we think about our curatorial theme of open borders, we are not going to let the politicians and the visa signators of the world stop the dialogue. We are steadfast in our determination to identify some of the great emerging artists in the world, and also to provide them with a platform for expression.

We talk about redefining the experience of art, and I think that's true for our audience, and also how we think of biennials and fine art exhibitions.

We're a young, spirited and visionary organization, so we do think outside of the box, because ultimately we want to make great art accessible in public space, so that it can be a catalyst, and it can be purposeful in us learning about each other as neighbours. Whether that is as

neighbours within a community of Kitsilano, or neighbours within the larger Vancouver community, or neighbours within the global community.

*This interview has been edited and condensed.*

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