

MAGAZINE



Crossing Borders at the 2014–2016 Vancouver Biennale

By **Robyn Jeffrey** on May 22, 2015



Toni Latour, *Let's Heal the Divide* (2015), neon. Photo: Jessa Gilbert

Hung on the façade of a Vancouver Community College building, the words emit a soft yellow glow: “let’s heal the divide.” This site-specific installation, by Canadian artist Toni Latour, is one of the powerful works currently on view in the Vancouver Biennale.

Over the past few years, biennales — from the Canadian Biennial at the National Gallery of Canada, to similar exhibitions in cities such as Montreal and Edmonton — have been gaining in popularity across the country. Launched in the spring of 2014 and running until 2016 in five participating cities — North Vancouver, Squamish, New Westminster, Vancouver and Surrey — the [Vancouver Biennale](#) is known for its “Open Air Museum” and distinctive focus on public art. The theme for the third iteration of this multi-faceted event is “Open Borders / Crossroads Vancouver,” a concept that partly inspired Latour’s own contribution.

“When I was asked to consider the theme, I immediately thought about the marked divide

between Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside and the financial district that butts up against it,” said the Vancouver-based artist in an interview with NGC Magazine. “The work is situated at this kind of borderline that divides one half of the city from the other. It can be shocking for people, when they first come here, to see how very distinct it is in terms of great poverty and great wealth.”

Prompting viewers to question the sometimes arbitrary lines that separate us, *let’s heal the divide* has already generated a number of thoughtful, moving [responses](#). “Text can be so powerful when it is made visual,” adds Latour, who wanted to create a piece that would have a clear message, but also some ambiguity. Indeed, her work leaves room for people to think about different kinds of unnamed divides and the ways in which they could be healed — including through art.



Ai Weiwei, *F Grass* (2014), cast iron. Photo: Roaming the Planet

“In the arts, there is always that push to engage and challenge borders,” Barrie Mowatt, founder and artistic director of the Vancouver Biennale, told NGC Magazine. “Whether they are self-imposed, politically imposed, physical or geographic, borders appear everywhere in our lives. If we are going to get along and communicate as a society, we need to learn how to cross over them.”

It’s in this spirit that the Biennale and its team (including senior curators Marcello Dantes and Shengtian Zheng) have brought together works by an exciting range of artists from across Canada and around the world. They include internationally renowned Chinese artist and activist [Ai Weiwei](#), who — like Latour — has created a public art installation specifically for the exhibition. Called *F Grass*, it consists of some 1,300 tufts of industrial cast-iron “grass” that can be read as a calligraphic “F” when viewed from above. A tribute to individual resilience in the face of oppression, the enigmatic work is also open to [multiple interpretations](#).

Other well-known artists featured in the exhibition include Brazilian land artist and photographer Vik Muniz, whose work was the subject of the celebrated 2010 documentary film [Waste Land](#). Working on a site in Squamish, Muniz created a land mosaic that depicts a timber wolf — an image upon which he decided after consulting with Elders of the Squamish Nation. Comprised of twigs, stones, and other natural materials, the mosaic was made in collaboration with 150

members of the community.



Vik Muniz, *Untitled* (2014), rocks, logs and wood chips. Photo courtesy of the Vancouver Biennale

“It is wonderful to watch how nature is transforming this work,” says Mowatt. “Weeds and plants are starting to grow up, through, and around it, so that the wolf is almost receding into the forest, so to speak.” Because the Vancouver Biennale runs for two years, people have more opportunities to revisit the art and experience how it may change over time, adds Mowatt. By comparison, most biennales usually last a few weeks or months.

Muniz is one of several Brazilian artists included in this iteration of the Biennale, which last year featured an 8,000-square-foot Brazilian art pavilion in North Vancouver. In the Open Air Museum, Muniz is joined by Hugo França — who has sculpted fallen trees into public furniture for selected beaches — and OSGEMEOS (“The Twins”), who have transformed six concrete silos on Granville Island into a colourful series of larger-than-life *Giants*.



Osgemeos, *Giants* (2014), spray paint on concrete. Photo: Roaming the Planet

Such elements of playfulness are also apparent in other works on view, including one by the Canadian artist Cosimo Cavallaro. *Love Your Beans* consists of shiny, irresistible sculptures that look like huge jelly beans. As Cavallaro notes [in a statement](#), the sculptures “break the boundaries that exist between objects and humans. They compel one to touch them, crossing borders when you allow yourself to be led by your senses.”

That kind of interactivity, which allows people to encounter and engage with public art where they “live, work, play and transit,” is just one of the Vancouver Biennale’s many offerings. It also runs a [BIG IDEAS](#) educational program, [residencies](#) for emerging artists, and a film program called [CineFest LIVE](#).



Cosimo Cavallaro, *Love Your Beans* (2014), fiberglass resin. Photo: Steve Chou

But one of its biggest attractions might just be the [BIKEnnale](#) and [self-guided tours](#) that encourage visitors to explore the public art on two wheels. As Mowatt maintains, it’s the best way to experience the Vancouver Biennale’s outdoor offerings. And what other Canadian city lets you do that 365 days of the year?

The Vancouver Biennale is on view until 2016. Information about forthcoming art installations and upcoming events is available [here](#).

About the Author

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