



Photo courtesy of Vancouver Biennale

## An "F" from Ai Weiwei

by DONG YUE SU

Unveiled just before the Christmas holiday, a public sculpture in the shape of an "F", created by the world-renowned Chinese artist and activist Ai Weiwei, sits on a lawn in Harbour Green Park at the north end of Bute Street. The work, enigmatically titled *F Grass*, has left many people guessing at what it means.

Although Vancouver has seen Ai's works before, this is the first artwork he has created specifically for the city, at the request of the Vancouver Biennale.

### Picking his spot

Ai, as a political activist, was under constant surveillance in Bei-

“He picked this controversial site... perhaps Ai wants to generate some kind of controversy.

Barrie Mowatt, president of Vancouver Biennale

jing and cannot leave China. He chose this site through imagery sent to him by the Biennale and came up with this site-specific work, which will stay there for 12 months. This is the same location as the controversial sculpture of an upside down church installed by American artist Dennis Oppenheim from 2005 to 2007.

“We have offered him lots of places to choose from in Vancou-



Photo courtesy of Vancouver Biennale

▲ Detail of *F Grass*.

ver, but he did not look elsewhere. He picked this controversial site where Dennis Oppenheim had started. Perhaps Ai wants to generate some kind of controversy,” explains Barrie Mowatt, founder and president of the Vancouver Biennale.

*F Grass* is comprised of 1328 blades of grass made of cast

iron. Lower than knee height and mounted on a metal platform, the grass is arranged in a stylized “F”, covering an area of 13.5 square metres. Because of its horizontal orientation, it is not easy to make out the beautiful calligraphic “F” shape except from the south side facing the sculpture. Some cast iron has already oxidized and appears to be brown in colour, as intended.

“If it were elevated, the work would have been more eye-catching,” says Mowatt.

### Grass, grassroots or the F word?

Despite its underwhelming appearance, the work has gotten people talking. Mowatt says that spectators are guessing what “F” and “Grass” mean for the artist, what they mean for Vancouver and what the artist wants to say about the city.

According to Shengtian Zheng, the managing director of Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art, the “small and humble” grass represent faceless individuals who, when held together, “bear tremendous power and vitality.” In this notion of the grassroots, *F Grass* can be seen as the continuation of one of Ai's most famous works, *Sunflower Seeds*, exhibited in London in 2010.

Based on the news release from the Biennale, the word “grass” is pronounced as “cao” in Mandarin and it is a homonym for the Chinese character that means “f....” *F Grass* is a catchphrase Ai invented to mean “f... you,” demonstrating a defiant attitude towards the online censorship in China. Using creative homonyms is one of the ways he gets around the keyword censoring on the Internet.

Mowatt is happy that the work has resonated with spectators. He says that some regards “F” as freedom, fortitude or other meanings held dearly to them.

Mowatt is also quite interested in what “grass” means for Vancouver.

“Grass can be associated with marijuana in Vancouver. The blades of grass in the sculpture resemble cannabis plants a little bit. It is very interesting to think that maybe Ai is making reference to the cannabis culture in Vancouver,” says Mowatt.

As part of the official launch of the *F Grass*, Vancouver Biennale started a live Twitter event to get people talking about the sculpture, highlighting the fact that Ai has been using Chinese Twitter for his activism. You can join the conversation by including @van\_biennale, #van\_biennale and @aiww in your tweet.✉

*F Grass*  
Harbor Green Park  
The public sculpture was unveiled on December 17, 2014 and will be in place for 12 months.

# Paying for secrets

by FLORENCE HWANG

Everyone has secrets, and some people have shared theirs anonymously through an online forum as part of a project called *PostSecret*. Three actors based in British Columbia will be telling these secrets on stage: Kahlil Ashanti, Nicolle Natrass and Ming Hudson.

*PostSecret: The Show* aims at engaging the audience through a crowd-sourced narrative of stories around the most sexual, sad, funny, controversial, hopeful and inspiring secrets.

The theatrical performance takes the audience on a visual, auditory and emotional journey of people's deepest fears, ambitions and confessions.

Vancouver-based artists TJ Dawe, Kahlil Ashanti and Justin Sudds teamed up with Frank Warren, creator of the popular website *PostSecret.com* in order to give unheard voices an audience. *PostSecret.com* has grown into a viral phenomenon, with over a half-billion visitors to date and a million anonymous secrets received.

### Strength in vulnerability

Nicolle Natrass, a performer, dramaturge and certified counsellor, says she absolutely loves TJ Dawe's work, particularly his solo shows. She was intrigued by the project. After she read the script and the *PostSecret* books, she felt incredibly moved.

“I feel like right now, this world needs this message,” says Natrass.

She wanted to be involved because she loves the message the show delivers.

“This show really promotes communication, the power of the written word and healing – combined all in one,” says Natrass,

who is keenly interested in each of these elements. She believes this type of show creates transformative possibilities in people's lives.

Natrass notes that even though much of people's online lives are isolated, there can be a strong community in an online forum, which she finds very powerful and moving.

“I think of secrets as being truth telling,” she says.

She will be sharing some of

going through in your life, you can always find a secret that speaks to you.

As an actor in this piece, Hudson feels it's her job to give a voice to these words.

Hudson, who knows TJ Dawe from the University of Victoria, helped in the workshop development phase of the show in 2012. The show premiered in North Carolina in 2014. Hudson has since performed in the show in Cincinnati, Ohio and Saginaw, Michigan.



▲ One of the many secrets revealed.

these secrets in the show, but doesn't want to give them away at the moment.

### Secrets and healing

Ming Hudson, an emerging theatre artist and recent theatre graduate from the University of Victoria thinks there is a universal appeal for the show.

“*PostSecret* is a community of individuals that come together and share a part of themselves. Its strength comes from the bravery of the submitters to be vulnerable, and the support and recognition they receive from those reading their deepest, darkest secrets,” Hudson says.

Hudson believes that one of the reasons *PostSecret* has been such a success is because no matter who you are or what you are

According to feedback from the last performance, having a personal secret read out loud, or hearing a secret close to one's own can give a person the power to make peace and finally release it.

“That is what live theatre gives to the *PostSecret* project, and that is why this production is so important to its community,” Hudson says.

Hudson says being part of *PostSecret* was an absolutely life-changing experience, “It's not every day that theatre artists have the chance to work on a show that moves them in such a personal way.”✉

*PostSecret: The Show* will be playing at the FireHall Arts Centre from January 20 to February 7.

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