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U.S. | NEW YORK | NY CULTURE

At Frieze Art Fair, a Pickpocket Covertly Gives Instead of Takes

Artist David Horvitz has enlisted the thief to 'deliver' small sculptures to unsuspecting visitors



1 of 11

By **ANDY BATTAGLIA**

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Visitors to the Frieze New York art fair might want to watch out for close encounters of the pickpocket kind.

Or not—since failing to elude the perpetrator in the act might lead to scoring a free artwork.

The work will be a small metal sculpture by the artist David Horvitz. And the delivery system, during Frieze’s run this Thursday through Sunday on Randall’s Island, will be a pickpocket hired to covertly circumnavigate the fair, dropping art into unguarded pockets and bags.



Artist David Horvitz at a preview Wednesday for Frieze New York at Randall's Island Park. PHOTO: CLAUDIO PAPAPIETRO FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Ideally, Mr. Horvitz said, recipients won’t even realize their good fortune until they get home.

“You can’t really say it’s a performance, because you can’t see it,” said the 34-year-old artist. “But it’s something that happens in public, in plain sight. I like the idea that, at a fair with so much going on, this artwork happens in the shadows of attention.”

The unusual stunt is part of Frieze Projects, a program of six commissioned happenings designed to provide an interactive complement to the fair’s more conventional displays of art from more than 200 galleries world-wide.

Other projects include a cast of performers, led by Argentine artist Eduardo Navarro, walking the grounds outside while dressed in mirrors to reflect the clouds, and a tribute to a notorious ’80s-era gallery show during which sardonic Italian artist Maurizio Cattelan exhibited a live donkey.

“They’re an important part of the fair because they make it a place where art is commissioned and created as well as bought and sold,” said Victoria Siddall, director of Frieze Fairs in New York and London.

For Mr. Horvitz, the pickpocket idea presented a way to counter an art fair’s more traditional currents.

“Imagine how much money is concentrated there, among collectors and galleries—and then there’s this person walking around who’s basically a trained thief,” he said.

The pickpocket, whose identity is being kept secret for the sake of invisibility, said he learned the sticky-fingered art after a childhood trauma when his mother was robbed.

“I was shocked, scared, sad—and, strangely, also fascinated,” he said in an email to The Wall Street Journal.

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Favored techniques, which include elements of strategic positioning and sleight-of-hand, “could be used for entertainment or criminal purposes,” the pickpocket said, while pledging allegiance to the former for the fair.

Details about the sculptures to be distributed are also a secret. Mr. Horvitz, whose previous works include a “mail art” project involving odd objects stamped and sent to the Museum of Modern Art, said they relate to the theme of stealth distribution and “depict a moment of love.”

As for their mode of delivery, the aim is that it never be fully comprehended.

On meeting the mystery man, Chris Taylor, the Frieze project manager who found him with a query on Craigslist, discovered something dropped in his bag before the “audition” was even complete.

“I don’t understand how he did it,” he said.