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JUNE 26, 2008

David Koren, Figment



*This weekend the **FIGMENT** festival will be inhabiting Governors Island for its 2nd consecutive year. The three day free, non-profit, participatory art celebration is a collaborative effort mainly organized by David Koren and a fleet of volunteers. This week Koren told us about what one can expect on the island this year, the importance of Governors Island, and the mini-golf course they've set up called City of Dreams (named after the Talking Heads song) which he just nearly told David Byrne about.*

How many years has the Figment festival been around for now? 2008 is FIGMENT's second year. We started it in 2007, and thought we'd be able to get 200-500 people to come out to FIGMENT. We had 2,800 people there. This year, we're expecting many more.

Why is it called Figment? The name comes from Andy Warhol. He once commented that he'd like his tombstone to have only one word on it: "Figment." Though Warhol never got his wish (he has a traditional grave marker), we hope that this event can build a bridge between the incredible history of the arts in New York,

while pointing the way to the future, and helping New York to remain the center of the art world.

Can you describe the 3-day affair? I can try, but since FIGMENT is a participatory arts event, I don't actually know what's going to happen. The audience gets involved with the art and it changes. So, anything is possible at FIGMENT. But here's the basic idea: We have over 200 registered art projects all over Governors Island, plus a lot of smaller art projects and interactive activities and experiences that will undoubtedly just show up. Since our focus is on participation, we encourage people to bring projects and activities with them. (We can't give placement or provide any resources for projects that just show up, however.) We'll have a City of Dreams minigolf course, a 9-hole course that has been designed by 9 teams of artists, and it opens on Friday for the public to play for free all summer. Artist Douglas Hart is doing a sound installation in Castle Williams called "Am I the One?" That's just two of the the many events. And there will be many activities for kids, including crafts and costuming, and the Brooklyn Children's Museum and the American Museum of Natural History are participating. There will be lots of interactive sculpture and other activities, and we have a full series of lectures.

One of the panel discussions this year is based around a premise about the "wisdom of the crowds" when it comes to visual arts. Is this also an idea you channel when organizing the event? Well, I think

there's an evolving school of thought that says that, if properly structured, a group of people can work together and create incredible things. This runs counter to the ideas that many of us grew up with, that committees are inefficient and that the only way to make anything happen is through strong, autocratic leadership. James Surowiecki's book *THE WISDOM OF CROWDS* made the case that, if properly channeled, the crowd can aggregate their intelligence and be smarter than any single individual. Another great recent book on this topic is Clay Shirky's *HERE COMES EVERYBODY*, which talks about how the Internet has enabled us to organize ourselves without all the institutional overhead of traditional organizations. We see FIGMENT as falling into this line of evolution. We're a collaborative art project involving thousands of people, and shepherded by a few hundred volunteers. We strive to have an organization that is as open and inclusive as possible to maximize participation and create an event that everyone can have a part in.

What goes in to organizing each year? It's a year-long project involving a team of volunteers that gets larger and larger as the event gets closer. Including artists and volunteers, there are probably something like 500 people with some role in making this event happen at this point. Nine months ago, there were probably 10 or 20 people. The event has the capability to scale up or down based on the interest and contributions of its participants. In addition to the volunteers, there is also, of course, the close coordination with the Governors Island Preservation and Education Corporation (GIPEC) and the National Park Service, who each run a portion of the island. Both have been highly supportive of FIGMENT and have been great to work with. While FIGMENT was put on for very little money last year (and somewhat more, but still very little this year), we also have to focus on fundraising from foundations and individual donations (we don't accept corporate sponsorships) throughout the year.

Are there any particular parts of the festival you are looking forward to this time around? For me personally, making an event like this happen is more about creating an overall feeling, and environment for people to be a part of, than it is about any specific work of art or event. There is so much that's going to be happening on the island, and I'm looking forward to being surprised by what I see out there. As for specific works, there's really too many to name. I think Douglas Hart's "Am I the One?" should be exciting. I always love to see Anakin Koenig's inflatable work. The City of Dreams minigolf is going to be fantastic. And I'm very excited that so many great New York not-for-profit institutions are participating: the American Museum of Natural History, the Brooklyn Children's Museum, the Brooklyn Public Library, and the Moth.

What's the story with the City of Dreams mini golf course; is that part of the fest? Yes! It's a 9-hole mini-golf course designed by nine teams of artists. We actually got the idea from Leslie Koch, the President of GIPEC, who has wanted to see a mini-golf course on the island for some time. We put a call for artists out early this spring and received submissions to design individual holes. Then we applied for a grant from the Black Rock Arts Foundation, who are supporting both City of Dreams and the 9-week long Emergence installation that we have in Building 14 on the Island. Now the course is coming together, and it looks GREAT! It will be open to the public (and free to play) from June 27 until the island closes for the season on October 5.

Is the location of Governors Island an important part of the festival? Absolutely. This event was conceived for Governors Island, and the staff of the Governors Island Preservation and Education Corporation and the National Park Service have been a part of our team in making this year's event happen. I think our mission, to bring the participatory arts to New York and create community around our event, is a perfect dovetail with the mission of the island to create a unique new public place for the people of New York City. I hope to be working with GIPEC and the National Park Service on this event and imagining what Governors Island can be for years to come.

Please share your strangest "only in New York" story. Well, lots of unusual things are possible in a city with so many incredibly creative people. Actually, I think FIGMENT is a pretty incredible "only in New York" story. Where else could you try to have a participatory art event for 200-500 people and have a few thousand show up? Where else could an event like FIGMENT occur? New York has so many creative people who have energy and are looking to make a difference. This event could not exist without their energy, passion, and creativity.

Which New Yorker do you most admire? Just one? Well, I tend to really admire people who make their own rules and who redefine the world around them, and get away with it. So, people like Andy Warhol, Mike Bloomberg, Robert Moses, and Christo and Jean-Claude come to mind. They all, for better or worse (depending on your perspective) have made a significant impact on the arts and culture of New York. Christo and Jean-Claude's Gates project in Central Park was one of the main inspirations for FIGMENT... they were able to have an impact on so many New Yorkers and get so much conversation going around one (albeit large scale) work of public art.

Given the opportunity, how would you change New York? I think that art has the capability to build community and bring people closer together. That's why we're making FIGMENT happen, to provide a forum for creativity and a place for people to connect. I think that New York, as the center of the arts world, needs to invest in the arts and look for ways to build community around creativity.

Under what circumstance have you thought about leaving New York? I've thought about leaving New York hundreds of times. I actually left for a year and a half in the late 90's and studied in Ireland. I came back, because there's a magnetism to New York. There's more energy here than anywhere else, and I really thrive on the intensity. Now that we have a four-month old daughter, Oona, there's more pull to leave the city and adopt some sort of less intense lifestyle. But I'm hoping we can make the urban parenting thing work, and Oona can grow up to be a participant in this city that we love.

Do you have a favorite New York celebrity sighting or encounter? About a month ago I saw David Byrne on the street near the Battery Maritime Building. He must've been down there installing "Playing the Building." I was on my way to Governors Island for a meeting and I thought, "That's David Byrne! I should tell him about FIGMENT!" But, of course, by the time I could have gotten the words out he was gone. I get a bit tongue-tied around celebrities. Hopefully he's heard about FIGMENT from someone else by now. He's an amazing artist and I think he'd really enjoy FIGMENT. In fact, the City of Dreams Mini Golf Course takes its name from a Talking Heads song.

What's your current soundtrack to the city? I've been listening to my Ipod too much lately, and I feel like I play the same 20 songs over and over again, repeating the same mantras over and over again. I've got a FIGMENT playlist of music that inspires me about what the event can be and what Governors Island can become. I like Moby's new album "Last Night" a lot. That's probably the best new music I've heard in a while. And the "New York New York" song that Moby made with Debbie Harry a year or two ago is pretty fantastic, as well.

Best cheap eat in the city. Chinese Mexican food, and by that I mean Mexican food made in the same sort of business model as Chinese takeout. So, quick, cheap, order by number, reliable delivery. In our neighborhood in Hell's Kitchen, there's a place called Fresco Tortilla Taco on 9th Avenue between 39th and 40th. There's also New Taco Express on 9th between 55th and 56th. But there are lots of these places.

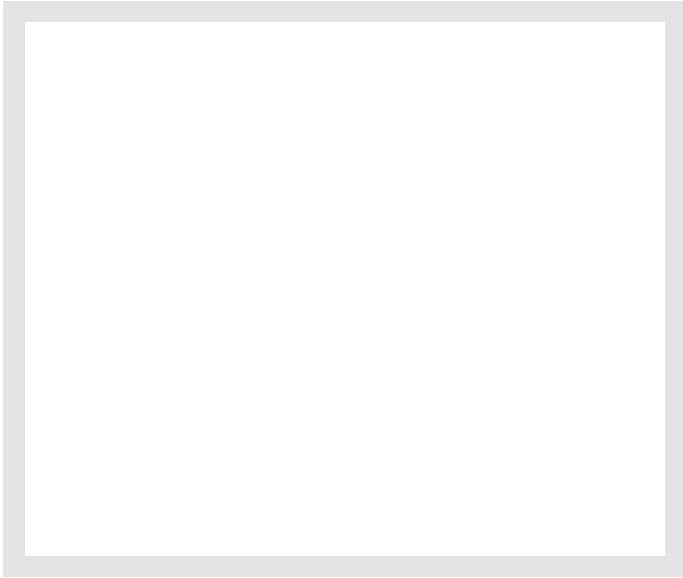
Best venue to see music. I'm not a big fan of concerts... standing for 3 hours and the crush of a celebrity-obsessed mob isn't really my kind of thing. I'm not big on waiting for something to happen, or following celebrities around. So, somewhat ironically, I'll have to say the Brooklyn Academy of Music, although I've seen way more plays there than concerts. It's an incredible institution, that presents a fantastic selection of work. It manages to somehow never get tired or dusty.

Photo by Heather White.

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