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Art You Can Experience, but Not Buy



Urs Jaudas/European Pressphoto Agency

The Swiss conceptual artist and musician Dieter Meier at the Swiss Music Awards in Zurich in 2009. He will sign books during a private event at David Lynch's Silencio club in Paris during the FIAC.

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In the auditorium of the Louvre this week, the artist Matt Mullican will enter a trance-like state and give an impromptu lecture about his 40-year history of performing while under hypnosis. At David Lynch's Parisian club, Silencio, the Swiss conceptualist Dieter Meier will sign books at a private event, while films of his years in the electronic band Yello are projected on the walls. And in the mineral gallery of Paris's natural history museum, two performers placed in a glass booth will read dates from 998,031 B.C. to 1,001,995 A.D., from the artist On Kawara's work "One Million Years."

These works by conceptual performance artists who came to prominence in the 1960s and '70s, are showing as part of the 39th International Contemporary Art Fair in Paris, or FIAC under its French acronym, which is running from Thursday through Sunday. And while their focus on the anti-consumerist side of art (even attendance to see the unsaleable performances is free, but by reservation only) might seem incongruous at one of the world's most opulent art fairs, which is set for millions of euros worth of contemporary art sales, they are an important component of this year's fair, said Jennifer Flay, the FIAC's director.



David Zwirner, New York/London

An installation of On Kawara's "One Million Years" in New York in 2009. A reading of the compendium of dates will take place at the museum of natural history in Paris during the FIAC.



Sheila Burnett

The artist Matt Mullican, shown here performing at the Tate Modern in 2007, will undergo hypnosis during his presentation at the Louvre.

“We’ve got more conceptual works on display this year than ever before,” said Mrs. Flay in a telephone interview. “The fair is at its core — and as its *raison d’être* is — a market event. Obviously that is our primary function. But around that it is important for us to address types of artistic production that fall outside or have fallen outside traditional market practices.”

Since 2005, the FIAC has converted the 1900 Grand Palais into a 72,000-square-meter, or 775,000-square-foot, art emporium designed to attract contemporary art collectors, museum curators and international dealers. This year, the 182 participating galleries include a lineup of the major and rising French and international names, including the Gagosian, Thaddeus Ropac, Marian Goodman, Matthew Marks, Emmanuel Perrotin, White Cube and Bugada & Cargnel.

Meantime, Mrs. Flay has been simultaneously cultivating the Paris fair as a stomping ground for conceptual performance work that can’t be bought or sold. Previous editions of the fair have included live performances by the 1960s American conceptualist Dan Graham, the German meditative-dance duo Prinz Gholam, the video artist Gary Hill and the French multimedia artist Claude Closky.

This year, Mrs. Flay is particularly proud to have secured the Kawara piece and Mr. Mullican’s trance-like lecture, which she says are both classics of the conceptualist genre. Mr. Kawara’s

“One Million Years” is a 20-volume compendium of dates one million years in the past and one million years in the future, originally conceived in 1969 and inspired by world events like Hiroshima, the Vietnam War, Woodstock and the first Moon landing. The longest public reading of the work took place in 2002 at Documenta 11 in Kassel, Germany, and took 100 days. Mr. Mullican comes from what might be thought of as the next generation of conceptual performers; he has been performing, drawing and telling stories while under hypnosis since the end of the ’70s.

“There is a context for this work among artists today, and that’s why historic artists are being revisited,” Mrs. Flay said. “We have a younger generation of performance artists, such as Dora García and Hassan Khan, so we see the continuity.”

Ms. García, a Spanish artist, will present at the FIAC “Where Do Characters Go When the Story is Over? Part III” in which the Lithuanian artist Darius Miksys will have an unscripted conversation with an actor playing the late American comedian and social commentator Lenny Bruce.

Mr. Khan, who is based in Cairo, will give a live show called “Superstructure,” in which he takes music that was once performed by live musicians and routes it through a battery of processors, filters and control units to produce a kind of sound chaos. “In a sense, I sculpt sound and struggle with the inherent chaos produced by feedbacking loops to produce music,” he explained in an e-mail.

These two younger artists do not define themselves as “conceptual,” though Ms. García says she was influenced by Mr. Mullican directly, and Mr. Kawara indirectly. “I love the idea of the artist as first and foremost a visionary and a storyteller,” she said via e-mail, in reference to Mr. Mullican.

Mr. Mullican said that, in general, he “hates art fairs,” but that he was very honored to be asked to perform in the Louvre. “There’s just an element of art fairs that some people might find distasteful because it takes art down to the lowest common denominator as a commercial object — it’s all about buying and selling,” he said. “This kind of thing pushes the art fair up to a different level and makes it a little more palatable.”

In addition to elevating the fair’s purpose, Mrs. Flay sees these pieces as vital to keeping the fair grounded in reality. “In times when there’s economic upheaval, there can be a great deal of questioning the idea of value or the creation of value — as in, asking on very a fundamental level what is something worth,” she said. “It does create a very powerful context for types of artistic creation that escape financial transactions.”

To elaborate upon that point, FIAC has collaborated with the lecture program Something You Should Know to present “La Valeur en Question,” or A Question of Value, a series of three talks exploring the art market’s relationship to commercial concerns. Five guest lecturers including the philosopher Pierre Zaoui, the sociologist Alexandra Bidet and the historian Laurence Fontaine will weigh in on topics that relate to “value and evaluation, credit and money.”

The artists presenting at the fair have strong opinions on the subject as well. “Art has a complicated relationship to value,” said Mr. Khan. “The market always needs to validate itself through a sense of value that is not quantifiable.”

Ms. García doesn’t believe there is any noncommercial part of the art world. “I think everything can be bought and sold, it is just necessary to find out to whom,” she said. “This said, I think an artist would behave like an idiot when trying to produce something made to be sold. An artist acts out of compulsion: something needs to be done, needs to exist. Then someone else will sell it and someone else will buy it.”

Mrs. Flay, however, pointed out that many of the 65,000 visitors who are expected to attend the fair this year won't come with the expectation of buying anything; they will just be there to browse, experience and absorb.

“There are many different kinds of acquisition of art,” she said. “Monetary exchange at the level of acquisition — that is, purchasing works of art — is only one of the forms of exchange that is possible. For most people there are two kinds that are more accessible — emotional and intellectual acquisition.”