

Assisting Versatile Distance

by Ella LEVITT / Frieze Projects' Assistant



Over the years, I've been a working participant in various contemporary art fairs and biennials. While I enjoy these events, I realize the art world can be a self-reflecting bubble, disturbingly removed from politics or society outside of its own closed circuit. This claustrophobia can be particularly palpable inside high-end art fairs like Frieze, so I could relate to Koki Tanaka's ambition for Frieze Projects. For me, introducing the surrounding realities and communities of Randalls Island to the glitzy commercial fair felt gently subversive and appealing. When offered the chance to assist with Versatile Distance, I gladly agreed, understanding it would be an experimental project without a clearly defined outcome.

Day 1

En route to the Frieze temporary staff briefing, I was aware of my own identity as an insider soon after climbing aboard the public MTA bus from Manhattan to the island. The bus was crowded with simple, exhausted and habituated passengers, but I found a seat towards the back beside two excited, stylishly dressed young women who were animatedly discussing current exhibitions in New York. Arriving at the first stop on Randall's Island, I saw the



massive white tent in the distance, and I knew to follow these and what I recognized as other art-workers disembark.

With my Frieze photo ID in hand, I was waved by security through the North Entrance, into a bustling, bright temporary city of expensive contemporary art, some still rolling in to be unpacked and installed. Everyone looked cool, busy, serious and focused. Art handlers, gallerists, and experienced Frieze staff all buzzed around professionally, preparing for the VIP opening the following day.

After the general staff meeting, introducing Frieze departments and essentials like safety procedures, I was sent to my specific assignment with Koki. The space allotted to Versatile Distance was smack in the middle of the fair, between several prominent galleries paying huge sums of money for their booths. I found Koki sitting quietly at one of several slightly battered picnic tables. Visitors could sit and relax here, but unlike the other Frieze lounge areas, the furniture was not freshly painted, crafted by a trendy company or otherwise contemporary. These were untouched-up picnic tables from the public park on Randall's Island, now dislocated within the high-end context of the fair.

Koki introduced himself and the project to me. Each day of the fair, an individual unrelated to Frieze, but intrinsic to the other identities, communities and functions of Randall's Island, would come to perform a subtle action and be available to interact with visitors. Koki mentioned that in the last minute a few elements of Versatile Distance had to be modified, due to objections from Frieze management . For example, the signs presenting each day's guest would move to the floor in order to keep the view of the gallery booths clear. Also, Koki's guests would not be permitted to use a microphone or a saxophone as planned, since it was decided sound might interfere with the primary function of the fair, business. Koki calmly and even happily explained that these changes would make the project more modest, and would not affect the concept of the piece. I realized the public would have to be alert to notice that an artist's project was happening here.

Day 2

The first open day of Frieze was the private VIP preview, featuring established players in the art world such as top collectors and their advisors, major museum curators,



famous artists, random celebrities and their well-connected groupies. Here, in the midst of the crème de le art world, NYC firefighter Michael Gallo stood in his work clothes, ready and able to educate the public about his experience fighting fires and training new FDNY recruits in the Fire Academy on Randall's Island.

For professionals, the first day of Frieze is high pressure, fueled by a burning need to facilitate acquisitions. In Gallo's thirty plus years with the Fire Department, he's entered countless burning buildings, crawled through smoke filled hallways, rescued children and lost colleagues. Here, Gallo struck me as an exceptionally wholesome regular guy, especially compared to the exceptionally wealthy and self-absorbed VIPs.

Some visitors approached Gallo with queries ranging from "is everything ok?" to "is this an art work?" or even "are you a real fireman?" At one point, Gallo put on his full fire-suit, including helmet, coat, overalls and boots. A few people stopped and gawked for a minute, before returning to the parade of typical gallery booths. Some visitors were struck by the incongruence of a fireman standing in an art fair, and several engaged in deeper conversations about Gallo's personal experience as a teacher, mentor and drill sergeant in the Fire Academy as well as fighting fires. Still, the majority of viewers didn't stop and talk. They seemed too busy looking for fabulous art-- or fabulous people to consider the implications of this social intervention. Noticing viewers noticing Gallo, he caught their eye, but I don't believe many realized that Gallo trains thousands of aspiring firefighters on Randall's Island all year round. While Frieze is only open a few days a year, the FDNY is constantly training and on duty to protect and serve the city. Few VIPs seemed to appreciate this.

Day 3

As an Island, Randall's feels gloriously removed from NYC while still accessible and technically part of the metropolis. Throughout the twentieth century and today, Randall's Island has attracted artists, poets, athletes and musicians. It's also the location of a state psychiatric facility where one poet, Samuel Greenberg spent his final years and died in 1917. Greenberg became known only after his death, when another poet, Hart Crane, controversially rewrote Greenberg's poems in 1924 as his own.

With this history in mind, Koki invited a contemporary poet, Jane Lecroy, to rewrite Samuel Greenberg's poems on the first public day of Frieze. An active poet, she sat at the picnic benches, handwriting her own riff on Greenberg's poems by crossing out and adding

words inside an old Greenberg book, seemingly oblivious to the surrounding fair. Sometimes visitors would come and sit beside her, taking a break or catching up on their own work (writing, texting, drawing, eating.) Lecroy looked focused and productive. One visitor actually sat drawing her for a while.

While those with big budgets to spend on contemporary art did come and go, some visitors hope to see art that inspires something more than desire to buy it. I believe seeing a live poet sitting and working may have motivated a few visitors to pause and create their own response to the scene, without knowing the history of Crane and Greenberg being referenced. Inside Frieze, the poet appeared actively engaged in the creative process, altering an existing work and making it hers. Perhaps the poet's presence demonstrated a way to respond to art that is not passive (wandering through a fair like a zombie) or a form of commerce.

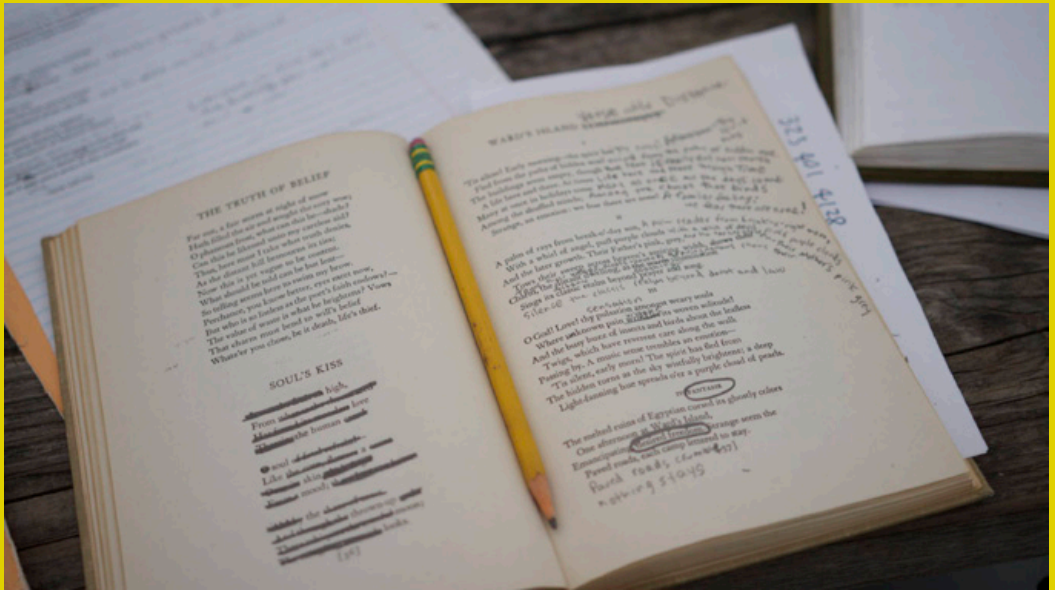
Day 4

To this day, Randalls Island is known for annual music festivals, and the tradition of legendary outdoor concerts here goes back for decades. Pioneering performances were held on Randalls Island, including the first outdoor jazz festival in 1938, the Carnival of Swing, featuring Count Bassie, Duke Ellington and other jazz masters. The National Jazz Museum in Harlem has a recording of this historic event in its collection, and I heard from a visitor that it is regularly broadcast on NYC public radio.

In commemoration, Koki hired a youthful Brooklyn-based saxophone player, Bill Todd, to come to Frieze. Extremely passionate about music, Todd moved here for his career and lives performing in small venues and teaching music lessons in NYC. Since Frieze management was concerned that the sound of the saxophone could interfere with sales, Todd wore the instrument from his neck, and periodically whistled a jazz standard from the concert: Gershwin's "I Got Rhythm." While more restrained than a saxophone, even this turned out to be a provocative gesture. Just holding it also caught visitors' attention. They asked, "Can you play for us?" to which he responded: "No, I'm not allowed. This is an art fair."

While not a dramatic interruption, Todd's skilled whistling had a noticeably calming effect on the crowd. During each whistle performance, viewers whispered and tip toed and the overall vibe of the fair seemed to settle. The energy shifted. Visitors slowed down and smiled.

Whistling, unlike playing an instrument, has its own particular, simple-guy



connotations. We learned how whistling is used for non-verbal communication, both as a low tech way for musicians to share melodies, or in dire situations, a means to convey a secret message. In a performance context, whistling a snippet of a standard can be a friendly nod to other musicians. While more subtle than a blaring saxophone, I think we were all impressed by the noticeable and palpable effect of the whistling intervention, and the thoughts and positive feelings it evoked.

Day 5

Randall's Island is a haven for athletes, and many regularly run across the pedestrian footbridge and around the island for a peaceful break from the usual Manhattan paths. There's also a running stadium here, where track clubs and leagues for adults and students, meet to practice and compete. With this in mind, Koki invited New York Road Runner board member, John Honerkamp, to represent the running community at Frieze.

As Honerkamp is from New York, and has been a competitive runner since he was a kid, Randall's Island has been an important part of his life for decades. For him, Randall's use





as art fair ground is a new and short-lived phenomenon for a place he associates foremost with athletics. While visitors to Frieze came dressed in casual chic city clothes, Honerkamp wore sweaty workout clothes as he typically would for a run here.

Lying on the floor in the middle of the fair performing his warm-up routine, Honerkamp definitely got attention. As spectators were in art viewing mode, they unabashedly—or perhaps unconsciously stopped to stare at him more than they might in a park or a gym. Honerkamp effectively became an uncanny art object by performing his normal, personal practice in the middle of an art fair. Running outside of the Frieze tents, on a gorgeous day gathered less obvious attention, but still served as a visible demonstration of Randall's Island's usual function as a public place to exercise. Honerkamp's presence and action highlighted another important purpose of the Island, unrelated to the art fair.

Day 6

For the final day, Koki brought Eric Peterson, an employee of the NYC Parks Service who oversees Randalls Island to educate the public about the history and contemporary reality of the island. Peterson covered a picnic table with maps and other documents, and stood ready in his Parks uniform to engage with the public. As he was not permitted to use a microphone, Peterson waited for curious visitors to approach him.

One lady, an outdoor music festival producer visiting from California, had dozens of questions about drug overdoses and other challenges of hosting the well known electronic music festival on Randalls Island. She was glad to hear about Peterson experience and perspective, but the majority of visitors didn't seem to want to learn about Randalls Island.

Personally, I was able to hear his stories about the island's history and geology, as well as the state's psychiatric facility, the homeless shelters, the prison on neighboring Riker's Island and more. I now understand that Randalls Island has a long history of housing the city's undesirables, such as lepers, criminals and the insane, which is an ironic and wonderful context for one of the international art world's top fairs. Frieze is chic and glamorous, but it is a world apart from the everyday reality of Randalls Island residents and employees, both historically and today.



The Frieze tent is the largest temporary structure in the world, in terms of footprint, and with this comes massive planning and infrastructure that is packed up and shipped out along with the art after the fair. Visiting Frieze, art and money are in the forefront, while the true power and purpose of the island is far more diverse, albeit hiding in plain sight.

video documentation:

<https://vimeo.com/97587129>

project title: Versatile Distance (Five Days Activities)

date: May 8 - May 13, 2014

form: activity

commissioned by Frieze Art Inc. as Frieze New York Projects

participants: Mike Gallo, Jane Lecroy, Bill Todd, John Honerkamp, Eric Peterson

curator: Cecilia Alemani

project manager: Christopher Taylor

project assistant a.k.a invigilator : Ella Levitt

video documentary: Luke Norby

text:

May 8: A firefighter is talking about fire related stories and the Randall's Island Fire Academy.

May 9: A poet is rewriting Samuel Greenberg's poems, as Hart Crane did in 1924.

May 10: A jazz player is whistling a jazz concert that happened here in May 29, 1938.

May 11: A jogger is spending time inside the fair.

May 12: A historian is giving a lecture about the history of Randall's Island.