

# ARTNEWS

FRIEZE NEW YORK 2015 — NEWS

## NAVIGATING THE FLUXUS LABYRINTH AT FRIEZE NEW YORK

BY *Zöe Lescaze* POSTED 05/13/15 3:56 PM

Between the aisles clogged with collectors drifting along at glacial speeds and the free-wheeling art advisors hurtling about with iPads at the ready, art fairs can feel a lot like obstacle courses. Tribute to Fluxus Labyrinth (1976/2015), a participatory project at Frieze New York, takes it to another level, one that makes sprawling floor sculptures and the Sisyphean struggle to get a cup of coffee look breezy by comparison.

The immersive labyrinth was originally conceived 40 years ago by the ever-playful Fluxus artists, an experimental group known for turning self-serious establishments on their heads. "It's a fun collaborative piece that the Fluxus artists did that's not really known," said curator Cecilia Alemani, who has organized Frieze Projects for the past several years. The original labyrinth, an enclosed maze consisting of various artist-designed challenges, was going to be staged at René Block gallery in New York in 1975, but the plans fell apart and it went up the following year in Berlin instead.

As prospective participants at the Frieze VIP preview today waited to enter the mysterious complex of passageways, a red-haired facilitator walked them through a waiver. "This is just saying parts of the labyrinth are very tight and claustrophobic and a little wobbly," she said, scrolling down through the long document. We caught the phrase "...damage, loss, injury or death resulting from my participation..." before signing away our rights.

"Once you go in, you can't turn around," she added ominously.

The labyrinth involves more than 100 hundred feet of snaking meter-wide hallways, and if you don't want the contents spoiled, dear reader, now's the time to look away.

Upside down forests, balloon pits, and pianos that control portals. The maze is full of puzzles and physical challenges. Doorknobs are rarely what they seem. Entering one section, designed by Amalia Pica, a woman with cropped hair seated behind a high platform handed us a clipboard containing a questionnaire of sorts. We circled some absurd phrases and returned it. She scrutinized the sheet. "You didn't check one of the boxes," she said, handing it back. We sheepishly checked one of about forty boxes forming a grid. The woman reviewed it, and, satisfied, stamped the form twice and promptly fed it through a shredder. We walked through the heaps of stringy paper filling the room.

Tip-toeing on tilting catwalks and plunging bare feet into pools of

beans, it was hard not to go through the whole delightful thing grinning. At least until the last rooms, designed by John Bock. A tangle of wires and medical tubes hung from the ceiling in the penultimate stretch. A small monitor embedded in the snarl showed a bearded man who seemed to be sleeping.

Menacing, but manageable. Pushing past that, Bock served up one final challenge: squeezing through a tunnel lined by large, mostly naked hirsute men, a birth canal of bears. Theseus may have found a minotaur at the center of his labyrinth, but this was just as troubling. We fought our way out as they mutely watched us push past them.

"I'd never walked through a gauntlet of men's bellies before, and that stretched me," said Deborah Fisher, the executive director of the arts nonprofit A Blade of Grass, after popping out of the labyrinth. "Art is meant to stretch you. And there's not a lot else in the fair that's doing that."

The piece, she felt, offered a solid crash course in participatory art, a focus of her organization. "I'm going to send as many board members through there as possible," she said.

For this resurrection, three stretches of the labyrinth are exact replicas of the original components designed by Fluxus members George Maciunas, Ay-O, and Nam June Paik. Two other sections were designed by Alison Knowles and Geoffrey Hendriks back in 1976, but were not incorporated in the original labyrinth. To connect the piece to the present, Alemani commissioned new parts by artists Amalia Pica, John Bock, and Gelatin.

Alemani said she asked the newcomers to devise "obstacles that can be both physical and psychological, keeping in mind the spirit of Fluxus, which was very do-it-yourself."

They rose to the occasion, judging by Maciunas's description of the original labyrinth. "There were doors that, when they opened, a big beach ball hit your face...there was a very sticky floor that had like fly-catching glue on it where we saw all kinds of heels and shoes stuck on it," he said in a 1977 radio interview. "It's like a fun house."



Installation view of 'Flux Labyrinth' at the Walker Art Center in 1993. COURTESY WALKER ART CENTER, MINNEAPOLIS