

A new show at MOCA may prompt you to ask: Why is that considered art



When it comes to Miami art, you'll find no greater mass gathering of people than at Art Basel Miami Beach. Thousands flock from disparate parts of globe each year to buy, sell, and appreciate art. Last year alone the fair attracted roughly 60,000 visitors, with 250 galleries and some 2000 artists participating. The impact of this spreads far beyond the confines of the Miami Beach Convention Center, with dozens of other events orbiting around Basel involving hundreds more galleries and thousands more artists.

"It's a major point of focus in the city," says Ruba Katrib, assistant curator at North Miami's Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA). But Art Basel is only one of many major fairs that have taken the art world by storm in recent years, and they have radically shifted its traditional practices. "I felt there wasn't enough examination of this event and its impact on the city," Katrib continues. "I felt it would be important to address it in some way."

That was her inspiration for creating "Convention," the upcoming show at MOCA, in which more than 15 international artists investigate the significance of art fairs, as well as festivals (art or otherwise), expos, conventions, and other large-scale public events. "The show is really thinking about this sort of mode of gathering," Katrib says. "It's not a show that has such defined parameters." The works, she says, are split between more traditional, object-based works and works that are more situational or participatory in nature. Ultimately, it is an exhibition that explores the nature of human interaction.

The most ambitious participatory project of "Convention" is by Los Angeles artist Fritz Haeg, whose work commonly deals with the social relationships among people. The project has its roots in a previous work titled *Sundown Salon*, in which Haeg, from 2001 to 2006, hosted in his own home a series of events -- performances, improvised happenings -- involving people from his local community.

This time Haeg has selected a Coral Gables couple, Keith Waddington and Mindy Nelson, and will be transforming their living room into a salonlike gathering space in which the couple will host their own events for their own community. According to Haeg, it's completely up to Waddington and Nelson to decide what kind of events they'd like to host. In the meantime, the current contents of the couple's living room are being removed and arranged within the museum by Haeg. As the exhibition unfurls, documentation of the various events at their Coral Gables home will appear in the museum. You'll find a bulletin board with photographs, and a video-screen showing footage of these events, as well as interviews with the couple.

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Written by Victor Barrenechea
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Waddington and Nelson were chosen from a long list of local residents who volunteered to take part in Haeg's project. Waddington is a professor of biology at University of Miami, while Nelson is an ecologist and animal behaviorist currently working on contract with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Neither is significantly involved in the art world, which is how Haeg wanted it. As he puts it, he looked specifically for "people who are creative but are not artists." Their events will be invitation-only affairs, and only as public as the couple chooses to make them.

Most museum visitors will be unable to experience firsthand the situation that Haeg has created in the Coral Gables household. The fact that the project takes place predominantly outside of the confines of the museum serves to raise questions about the role of the institution itself.

New York performance artist Xavier Cha is presenting her work called *Rehearsal Space*, which similarly challenges the conventions of what can be -- or should be -- shown in a museum. Cha's project consists of a 20-foot by 30-foot wooden dance floor that will serve as an active rehearsal space for local choreographers and dance companies to develop and practice their routines.

Already 20 dance companies and choreographers have booked the space (and the museum is still looking for more volunteers to participate in the project). Cha points out the apparent shortage of practice spaces in the Miami area, making this something of an altruistic gesture toward the local dance community. "I'm just basically creating a space for dancers to rehearse," says Cha. "I wanted to open up the museum to people who wouldn't have access to that space."

By creating a situation in which a variety of people utilize the space, Cha calls into question not only the kind of work that can be displayed in a museum, but also the kind of people who have access to such facilities. Another interesting aspect of the work is that, at any given moment, a visitor could step into the museum and find the rehearsal space empty. Cha has created the possibility for an event that the viewer may never experience.

The same concept plays heavily in New York artist Dave McKenzie's work *It's a Date*. This is the fourth time McKenzie has presented *Date*

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. The only object on display is a ballot box. Visitors fill out ballots with their name and contact information and place them in the box. Near the end of the exhibition's run, McKenzie will choose at random a name from the box and take that person to dinner. Says McKenzie: "For me it's about the kind of thing that an artwork could do that we can't maybe do on a normal basis."

Social conventions dictate that you can't (usually) just pick a random person off the streets and invite him or her to dinner. Yet in a museum setting, people line up to place their names in the ballot box for a chance to have dinner with a total stranger. "The dinners are really simple," says McKenzie, who pays for these meals out of his own pocket, not at the expense of the museum. "I don't promise to be the wittiest conversationalist, or that we're going to fall in love, or even that we're going to be best friends." Yet the potential for these scenarios is implicit in the work.

And while McKenzie takes on social interaction at a very involved level, other artists are more detached and direct with their pieces. Corey McCorkle contributes an array of carpet samples from the convention halls of New York City hotels. Sean Raspert creates carnival-style banners with various "clip-art" images printed on them, while local artist Jim Drain makes sculptures that mimic the kind of art-fair booth displays you might come across at an event like Art Basel.

"All the artists," observes curator Ruba Katrib, "are pretty much dealing with the language and aesthetics of these sorts of events. I think the question most people will be asking is: Why is this art?" And though she says the tone of the show is playful and humorous, she also adds, "I think that's an important question to consider."

"Convention" opens May 21 and runs through September 13 at the Museum of Contemporary Art
Miami. For hours and more information call 305-893-6211 or visit
www.mocanomi.org

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