

## FIGMENT, NYC's free Burner art festival, is keeping lit the flames of New York's art world

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Andy Warhol was once asked what he wanted the epitaph on his tombstone to read. At first he said "nothing," but then paused a moment. "No, it should say only one word: *Figment*."

It was this aphorism that David Koren remembered one morning a few years back while standing in the shower contemplating what he would name the new arts festival he had been planning. It seemed appropriate to harken Warhol for a New York arts festival, but it was probably at that moment in the shower that Koren and Warhol shared their last meta-moment together. Warhol made his name reinterpreting pop culture and commercial marketing logos as art, and then selling them back to the same clamoring public. Koren, however, chose an entirely separate path for [FIGMENT](#).



Neal Gran's "Rose Petal Pool" - (c) 2008 Sangram Kachwaha

"In essence, what we created is a space where your relation to other beings is not mediated by commercial transactions, a place where art is designed to be shared, not sold, art that is a catalyst that builds community, completely free, open to the public, and devoid of any corporate sponsorship."

Sound familiar? Of course it does. Yet, Koren chuckles when you bring up Burning Man.

"FIGMENT has been a smash success by any comparison, and yet, amidst all the coverage and accolades, no one ever talks about what is at the heart of this festival, which is the idea, borne of our Burning Man, of *decommodification*."

In its third year, FIGMENT represents a confluence of three different factors at work. The first is their community principle, which began as an idea to help transform Governors Island in New York Harbor into a dynamic public space which provides access to the arts for all. The second is their artistic principle, working to provide as many opportunities for emerging artists as possible, creating an inclusive and participatory alternative to the New York gallery scene in an attempt to keep New York as the

center of the art world. The third is their commercial principle, which grew directly out of the Burning Man ethos of inclusion, volunteerism, self-expression, self-reliance, giving, communal effort, civic responsibility, leave-no-trace, immediacy, and of course, decommodification.

Ironically, most visitors to FIGMENT are not Burners, which can be viewed as their biggest success. It's a daytime event only, open to the general public, where there is no alcohol or any other kind of vending, and none of the more "prurient activity" associated with Burner confabs. The art is meant to be touched, the bands play for free, and forgo the usual barrage of CD and t-shirt sales which often characterize a musical event.

"Basically, its the best opportunity in New York City to teach people about decommodification and expose them to an entirely non-commercial day," Koren says with a measured sense of satisfaction.

The setting, as well, can't be beat. Located in the middle of New Your Harbor with incredible views of Lower Manhattan, Ellis Island, Brooklyn, and Staten Island, Governors Island was decommissioned as a Coast Guard station in 1996 and now sits empty. Because it has served on a front lines of American defense since just after the Revolutionary War, 22 acres filled with historic buildings like the Castle William are now considered a national monument and are administrated by the Federal government. The remaining 150 acres are under the auspices of GIPEC (Governors Island Preservation and Education Corporation), a city/state partnership. GIPEC and the not-for-profit Burning Man-inspired Action Arts League are the official hosts of FIGMENT.

The idea for FIGMENT came about in 2005 after Koren made a trip to Governors Island to attend Muster, a small arts event of about 500 people. The city had begun accepting proposals for the redevelopment of the island, and there was something about the nature of the place--big open spaces, no indigenious population, and an idyllic setting--that got him thinking about taking what he learned from Burning Man and applying it to the New York area.

"I saw immediately that art could help this place be something special. Anyone who has lived in New York (or Chicago or LA or San Francisco) knows that artists are great catalysts for redevelopment. Artists move into older sections of the city, like Soho in the 1980s or Williamsburg in the 1990s, because the rents are cheap and the spaces are big enough for studios. And they bring with them culture. The public picks up on this cultural explosion, and moves in and gentrifies the area."

But instead of creating another gentrification scenario where the same artists who improved an area are then forced out by escalating rents and redevelopment, and because no one lives on Governors Island, Koren instead wanted to create an ephemeral experience that is there one day, and gone the next, just like Black Rock City.

It was after a meeting with O. Alden James, the famed President of the National Arts Club, that he decided to put together a festival. A core organizing group coalesced out of the Burner community in 2007 with a budget of \$1000 and plans for an event of maybe 500 people. What they got instead was a rush of 5,000 people who showed up at the docks wanting ferry passage to the island. 2000 people had to be turned away. The 2007 festival broke all known attendance records on Governors Island at the time.

Building on that success, in 2008 FIGMENT applied for and received two grants from the [Black Rock Arts Foundation](#). That year over 10,000 people showed up, along with participation from some of New York City's biggest theme camps like Disorient,

Kostume Kult, and A Cavallo. For the 2009 festival, FIGMENT has a budget of \$60,000 made up from six different art grants, individual donations, and fundraising. There will be 400 artists and installations, including City of Dreams, a season long art installation of 17 semi-permanent sculptures and an 18 hole mini golf course. And remember, all of this is free.

"People often tell me it's 'weird' for us to give away all this art and performance and not turn a profit on it. I don't know. I think it's weirder that most people agree day in and day out to do something they hate for money."

In a time of economic uncertainty where artists everywhere are feeling the pinch, its up to them to use that same creativity and community to, as Koren puts it, devise new ways to create, share, think, and dream about what is possible. In FIGMENT they have found a model that works, here today, gone tomorrow, endlessly reinventing and inspiring, yet accessible to all.

What are you bringing?

**For more info:** <http://figmentnyc.org>

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