NEW YORK-ART INSPECTION
Watch yourself! You may leave the Frieze Art Fair this weekend with more than you bargained. Art writer William Simmons reflects on that unbridgeable void between artist and viewer, even when the artist has his hands in your pocket.

At the bottom of artist David Horvitz’s website, there is a ubiquitous PayPal button accompanied by the text, “For $1 USD I will think about you for one minute. I will email you the time I start thinking, and the time I stop.” It sounds absurd, of course. Why would anyone pay Horvitz for something so inherently and self-consciously intangible?

And yet, I couldn’t help but feel a strange emotional resonance for that unassuming PayPal button, and the artist’s promise to think about me—not to think lovingly or positively about me—but specifically about me, for one minute. For one minute, I’ll matter in someone else’s mind, and that is definitely worth a dollar. Horvitz continues this nuanced investigation into the relationship between artist and audience with True Courtship Dance, his commission for this year’s Frieze Projects. For his commission, he has hired a professional pickpocket, not to steal from fairgoers, but rather to secretly give them something—a small sculpture silently placed in their bags and pockets—an act he calls “put-pocketing.” The gifting
process will be random and unpredictable, and the details of the sculpture are a secret for the time being.

Horvitz, who has shown internationally in venues like the New Museum of Contemporary Art, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Tate Modern, has always considered the artistic possibilities of connectivity and communication, not unlike his Fluxus predecessors who would send letters with odd instructions and doodles to friends and acquaintances. In this way, True Courtship Dance is not a one-off stunt—it is, rather, a component of a sustained, historically informed inquiry into the nature of art-making, personhood, human connection, and intimacy.

Photos by Balarama Heller.

In the same spirit, perhaps, Horvitz has uploaded all of his artist books as PDFs, so it’s worth doing your research before heading to Frieze. I dare you to look at *Public Sex Acts (2008)* and not laugh riotously at the photographs, or to be swept away by the melancholic undertow. The humping shopping carts, chairs, and mattresses are glamorous, sexy trash that appear more and more human each time you look. They comprise a warbling ode to thrift stores and suburbia—all from a collection of readymade pairs whose romance seems simultaneously debased and chic. The piece echoes Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s iconic pair of ticking clocks in *Perfect Lovers* (1991) that will, by virtue of the batteries powering them, eventually fall out of sync, while Horvitz’s *Public Sex Acts* imply a seedy love that has been used up and discarded.

This kind of makeshift romance can be seen in Horvitz’s other projects, such as *Everything That Can Happen in a Day*, a collection of instructions and photographs intended to help one live more forcefully in the present. They read like love letters, or like a note you might find buried in a trunk, devoid of context but deeply romantic nevertheless. One of my favorites is, “Leave a bouquet of flowers in a taxi for the next person.” In an age when we trade emotional stock via platforms like Tinder, OK Cupid, and Grindr, the experience of coming upon a symbol of desire in a cab of all places would stop most anyone in their tracks.
Horvitz took on another romantic cliché and imbued it with a newfound resonance at Art Basel 2013 with his piece “The Distance of a Day.” The artist showed two iPhones depicting sunrise and sunset shot simultaneously on opposite parts of the globe—near Los Angeles and the Maldives. How many times have you seen a movie where lovers find themselves looking at the same star? It’s a scientific phenomenon, but it speaks to searching for a connection in the vast expanse of space. Even if you don’t have a lover, you still think to yourself, “Did someone else see that shooting star, or was it just for me?”

Horvitz has an uncanny ability to tap into the tragic and erotic underpinnings of mundane imagery. Take *Sad, Depressed, People (2012)*, in which the artist created a stock image of himself with his head in his hands, which he then disseminated online via copyright-free usage.

Horvitz inserts a layer of removal and irony by deploying stock imagery—a gesture that is nevertheless deeply affecting. It’s akin to
Lars von Trier’s precise and biting pastiche in *Melancholia* (2011), the story of two sisters dealing with crippling depression as, unbeknownst to them, a wayward planet comes hurtling toward Earth. Von Trier, like Horvitz, presents a sorrow that is at once trite, saccharine, and moving. Depression is a cliché, which is even sadder for being so unworthy of comment. Melodrama is a stock image, and vice versa, which does not make either less relevant in this age of inevitable ennui. We are one click away from millions of people, but they are strangers, and our digital distance will inherently inflect our interactions.

Horvitz’s commission for Frieze Projects, then, is a logical extension of these previous works, this time using a more performative outlet. He has turned his attention outward to realize his goal of connecting—artistically, physically, and emotionally—with viewers in a way that is unsettling, surprising, and exciting. With this simple intervention, Horvitz taps into a powerful artistic lineage centering on the body, ownership, and sensuality. The piece exists in the same tradition as Gonzalez-Torres’s famous candy piles, made from perpetually refreshed, individually wrapped candies that illustrate the body in a state of simultaneous reanimation and decay. When I first visited New York City at 19, I came upon the pile at the Museum of Modern Art. Knowing nothing about art history, I was
afraid to take one until a guard encouraged me to do so. Each time I come across one of González-Torres’s sugary monuments, I put a piece in my pocket and bring it home, but I have never unwrapped a single one. I expect that, were I lucky enough to be a recipient of Horvitz’s “put-pocket,” I would treat the sculpture with similar reverence.

In Horvitz’s case, we have no choice in whether or not we are recipients—it will simply appear without our knowing—creating a different kind of emotional register. Receiving “a David Horvitz” at Frieze would mean that someone, somewhere, made an intimate connection, if only momentarily, with one’s body. The act of giving rather than stealing suggests the silliness of the whole transaction—a direct counterpoint to the art world’s atmosphere of monetized transaction and the myth of the genius artist. If something were to show up in my pocket, it would be a record of a human interaction—an anonymous connectivity as erotic as a casual fuck—that is quite separate from Horvitz himself. The removal of the artist himself is actually an act of generosity, allowing us to think critically about the ramifications of *True Courtship Dance* apart from the hype, at the level of how we feel individually about this pause in the expected flow of a day at an art fair. Imagine the glee, or terror, or wonder of finding a foreign object in one’s possession after wandering around Frieze. Likely, with time, you will come to treasure this magical little intrusion of your person.
I don’t know if I will ever meet Horvitz, but part of me is reluctant to anyway. The mystery is extremely tantalizing. I doubt that my impression of his work would be deflated were I to see him in person. There is something about the space between us (incidentally the name of an app created by Horvitz) that has made this opportunity to explore his work that much more special. To think that a PayPal button or a piece of clipart could produce such longing, such excitement mixed with dreamy introspection, is, in itself, an incredible feat. Maybe I’m falling prey to a myth. Maybe David Horvitz does not exist, despite there being a contact in my iPhone with that name.