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New York Art World Toasts the Queen at Royal Academy America Gala



On an unseasonably warm and humid evening, Royal Academy America—the U.S. outpost of the storied Royal Academy of Arts in London—honored performance artist Marina Abramović, designer Thomas Heatherwick and Aryeh B. Bourkoff at their third annual stateside gala. Held on September 26 at the sleek, swirling, terrarium-like IAC Building in West Chelsea, the event gathered 320 artists, gallerists, and of course philanthropists, from both sides of the pond and beyond.

"In just three years, it seems like this event has become kind of a 'thing,'" said Declan Kelly chairman of RA America to seated dinner guests while they enjoyed chilled gazpacho and rare hanger steak. Indeed, Kelly—who heads the major New York-based business management and consulting firm, Teneo Holdings, and took up his RA post in 2015—has shaken up the the Academy's U.S. board of trustees, gradually adding more progressive members. The success of RA America's recent fundraising endeavors could also be attributed to what the gala's host, esteemed British comedian, actor, and writer Stephen Fry, identified as the fortuitous marriage of British cultural esteem "with American money and the passion for spending it."

Before dinner, guests including bright young artists like Zoe Buckman, Chloe Wise, and Justin Brice Guariglia were treated to a congenial cocktail reception in the atrium with drinks provided by Moët Hennessy. As more wine flowed, more black-tie clad attendees ventured a go with Abramović's *Rising*, the artist's first foray into virtual reality that poses a call to action on climate change. Viewers encounter Abramović in a glass tank slowly filling with water before she takes you on a global tour of melting ice caps; if you make a commitment to help, her tank water goes down. If not, virtual Marina drowns. The work is one of three VR installations launching this fall from Royal Academicians Abramović, Olafur Eliasson, and Jeff Koons.



A gala guest trying Marina Abramovic's VR experience.

Rising wasn't the only political entreaty of the evening. After Fry opened his host remarks with a champagne toast and a "God save the Queen," he suggested the American National Anthem be played and guests take a knee. And while this was met with laughter and applause, the comedian did make a point to stress the cultural issues both the U.K. and the U.S. currently face. "Culture wars, tribalism, nativism, whatever you want to call it. A culture that equates sameness with safety—we must fight that," which is something art can help do, he said.

Of course, the Royal Academy is not exempt from the hegemony Fry called out. Since its inception in 1768, it has long been an institution comprised of wealthy white men. But academy president, Christopher Le Brun, pointed out in his remarks that the institution is at least aware of the problem and addressing it, noting artist Rebecca Salter's recent appointment as the Academy's Keeper, a post she inherits from painter Eileen Cooper who was the first female to land the role back in 2011. "You wait for 250 years and two lady keepers arrive together," Le Brun said, perhaps a bit too lightly.

But change is a slow slog, as further evidenced by Thomas Heatherwick's announcement that development on his much-anticipated floating Pier 55, slated to finish in 2019, had been put on hold this past week. "The dark forces of the legal and development system here in the U.S. have allowed just one or two people to halt progress on a project that has huge public support," he lamented to guests. His statement comes on the heels of the acclaimed opening of the Zeitz-Mocaa museum in Cape Town last week, the largest art museum devoted to contemporary art in Africa, which Heatherwick and his team designed.

"Sometimes good ideas are hard to make happen in the public world," Heatherwick said. Despite his apparent sadness over the stagnation of his Hudson Yards project, the designer said RA America's honorable recognition was a welcome surprise for him. "It encourages my team as much as myself, and my collaborators," he told Observer. "Things don't always go smoothly, but we try our best. This was certainly a boost."

Along with some of the heavier political themes glossed throughout the evening, RA America's gala effectively underscored the importance of cultural development in America today. Fry, citing an unknown but hopefully accurate statistic, said that more people go to see art in London than go see movies or soccer, with lines out the door of the Royal Academy to see recent exhibitions, like their current show of Jasper Johns's work. At a time when the former reality-TV-personality president of the United States is more concerned with the actions of professional athletes than larger social and cultural issues facing the nation, Americans might care to consider how better to invest in an inclusive cultural heritage.

"The appetite, the curiosity, the need for art has never been greater," Fry said, noting the Academy's impending semiquincentennial anniversary next year, and the developments in art and history the institution has shepherded in that time. "But isn't it maddening just as we're about to reach this milestone, that it's become clear to all of us that there won't be a next year for the human race," he wryly joked, suggesting that guests enjoy more of the free-flowing wine.