Published March 17, 2008 09:18 am - The other day I watched a TV profile of a guy named Wim Hof. In late January, in New York City, Hof, wearing only gym shorts, stood immersed from his feet to his neck in a container filled with ice. . .for 78 minutes!

Stuart: Maniacs and brainiacs

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Guest Columnist

The other day I watched a TV profile of a guy named Wim Hof. In late January, in New York City, Hof, wearing only gym shorts, stood immersed from his feet to his neck in a container filled with ice. . .for 78 minutes! I've got a pretty high tolerance for cold, but nevertheless, I estimate Hof stood smothered in ice for about 78 minutes longer than I would have.

He didn't just do this on a Wim. He was out to beat his own previous world record for maniacal behav—check that, time spent standing in a container of ice. (Apart from Hof, the highest mark is zero minutes; let’s face it, this is not a highly coveted world record.)

The stunt, which Hof says he endures thanks to meditation, also kicked off “Brainwave,” a series of events that its promoters say “could only happen in New York,” thank goodness. Brainwave will consist of art exhibits, science demonstrations, concerts, presentations and films. It runs until mid-June, which is also when scientists predict that Wim’s lower Hof will thaw out.

Brainwave’s purpose is to ask the question “How do art, music and meditation affect the brain, especially the part that governs how much money people will give us to talk about how art, music and meditation affect the brain?”

Overall, the festival features more than 100 public events, including:

n “Bon: The Magic Word”: A lecture about an ancient Tibetan religion called Bon, which existed before Buddhism. One tenet of the Bon belief system calls for “accepting everything, refusing nothing.” This sounds intriguing, but I wonder. . .didn’t that philosophy recently land Eliot Spitzer in a bit of hot water?

n “Optical Illusions and the Brain”: Research scientist Susana Martinez-Conde will lead a discussion about optical illusions and what they can teach us about how to beat your smarty-pants kids at that baseball-cap “shell game” that runs between innings on stadium scoreboards.

Most of the presentation will address questions about how we perceive reality, how we can determine that we’re not just body-less brains in a mad scientist’s lab, and whether Martinez-Conde and her husband, with nice normal names like “Susana” and “Stephen,” really named their son “Iago.” (They did.)
A brief aside: While researching Martinez-Conde’s talk, I stumbled across this quote by a philosopher from Tufts University: “Words are like sheepdogs herding ideas.” I mentioned this to my wife, and suggested that getting a sheepdog might really help me control my ideas, which are about as easily herded as cats. She’s not keen on dogs, however, and blew me off with a “Tufts luck, buddy.”

n “The Geography of Bliss”: Here’s how the Brainwave Web site describes this event: “Luncheon and discussion with Eric Weiner, author of The Geography of Bliss: One Grump’s Search for the Happiest Places in the World and neuroscientist Emma Seppala.”

I’ve heard the book is a good read, with Weiner revealing that he found several really happy nations and societies. Although, try as he might, he never did locate neuroscientist Emma Seppala... Rumor has it she avoided him because he’s such a grump.

Weiner traveled the world researching his book, which includes a report of his visit to the headquarters of the World Database of Happiness in Rotterdam, The Netherlands. Actually, you should check out the database yourself, even if you feel a trip to Rotterdam isn’t worth a... darn; the database is online, at http://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/.

The Database project is led by a guy named Ruut Veenhoven, and it reveals, among other things that Romanians aren’t particularly happy (too many people are ruut), whereas the Dutch are quite jovial, which enabled them to weather a severe challenge to the national mood when that grumpy Eric Weiner visited.

n “Hypnosis-Opuses”: This event features a work of “sound art” called “Psicklops,” an example of a creative endeavor known as “cinema in the dark.” Brainwave’s Web site calls “Psicklops” a movie, except there are no images and it takes place in an utterly dark room. “Psicklops” focuses on themes ranging from surveillance to censorship to totalitarianism, which sound like wonderfully pleasant subjects to ponder in pitch-blackness while surrounded by a bunch of strangers. Fortunately, the audience will be allowed to soothe their nerves by lying down. Unfortunately, they must lie in containers packed with ice from their feet to their necks.

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