

No Soul For SALE

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Why sell anything when the economy's not buying? From July 24–28, the X Initiative hosts "No Soul for Sale," a gathering of 38 not-for-profit centers, alternative institutions, artists' collectives and independent enterprises who get free, undivided space to devise an installation of their choosing. The spaces come from as far and in as many forms as [Trinidad's Studio Film Club](#), Peter Doig and Che Lovelace's blog and Caribbean film screening series, and Artis Contemporary Israeli Art Fund, an art production organization based between New York and Tel Aviv. In *Interview's* commitment to No Soul For Sale, we've focused on three spaces of decreasing distance from our fair city—Kling&Bang, an artist space in Reyjavik; Vox Populi, an elected board of artists; and Dispatch, a commercial space run out of a small artist storefront on the Lower East Side. It's an anthropological survey of spaces with different conditions and mindsets, but all of whom have managed to preserve their souls.



Nick Paparone, Bacchanal-Tootsie Roll Whip. Installation details, 2008. Photos Stefan by Abrams, courtesy of Vox Populi.

Philadelphia's Vox Populi Gallery is an artist-run non-profit space with 25 members who vote collectively on the space's agenda. A consensus might sound like task enough; then consider that Vox (as it's called for short) is actually four rotating spaces with a video lounge and a project space for which outsiders can apply to exhibit. Vox's populist model isn't so much a radical rejection of the ways of seeing art than a practical (more than it seems) intervention into the culture of exclusivity and hierarchies in galleries, says director Andrew Suggs, "Other than that, the space follows, you know, a museum model, its white walls, it looks like sort of most galleries I guess..." Here he explains the gallery's participatory plans for the X Initiative, and why a collective memory isn't always the best one.

ALEX GARTENFELD: I was hoping you could tell me what you are going to bring to the exhibition, how they approached you and how you plan to represent yourself there

ANDREW SUGGS: I think the process for invitation was standard. I do not know exactly how it worked but someone from the exhibition just contacted me to ask if Vox would be interested in participating, and of course it's an incredible opportunity because it's free basically. (LAUGHS)

AG: You're one of a few artist collectives I've spoken to that requires an actual vote to make decisions.

AS: Vox is an artist collector so there are about 25 artist-members. I am the director but all of the decisions, administrative decisions and programming decisions, are made by a majority in the membership. So I brought the invitation to the membership and everyone was very excited and then we began a conversation about how we would participate. It was a really interesting exercise for us to figure out about how to participate because Vox is a collective that shows the work of its members and then that takes up about half of our programming and the remainder of the programming is outside programming that we choose...

AG: Are you all going?

AS: Yes.

AG: How are you all going to get here?

AS: Well, people are on their own, but everyone is participating. It was interesting for us to try to come up with an idea for this because we don't really work collaboratively. Everyone who is a member shows at the gallery once a year, and we are a big community, but we don't collaborate on artwork.

AG: Do you all have solo exhibitions once a year?

AS: Yes.



Nick Paparone, Bacchanal-Tootsie Roll Whip. Installation details, 2008. Courtesy Vox Populi.

AG: How often do the shows turn over?

AS: Every month. The gallery is divided strangely. It's actually four small galleries within the space, so there are usually three Vox artists showing and an outside artist showing in the fourth space.

AG: How many members did you have when you started?

AS: Well, Vox is 21 years old, it was started in 1988, and I am not sure how many members there were originally. I think that there were probably four or five—the history is actually really sketchy, and we are putting out a book at the end of this year that sort of is celebrating 21 years and someone is working on writing the history of Vox for the book but it's really, really hazy.

AG: So what's the tentative understanding?

AS: The tentative understanding is that a small group of recent graduates in Philadelphia wanted to have some place to show their work and weren't happy with the opportunities that existed, so they pitched in together to get a space. Initially it was very loose; anyone who wanted to participate could if you met the obligations of helping out with the responsibilities of running the space and then contributing some money for the rent, there were no sort of qualitative decisions made about new members, from what I understand it was very loose. Then of course over the years it has developed into sort of more a

professionalized non-profit that receives a lot of foundation and grant funding.

AG: What are your requirements now?

AS: We do membership reviews once a year and it's an open call, so the members all get together and look at the applications and decide if we want to take on new members. There is no real set number or real criteria. We look for artistic excellence and then of course a requirement is that you have to live in Philadelphia because you have to be able to contribute to running the space.

AG: Would you describe Vox as specific to Philadelphia?

AS: Definitely, and I think the reason that Vox has been around for 21 years is that it is very tied to how things work in Philadelphia. Philly has an extremely small, almost non-existent, commercial gallery culture. There aren't a ton of collectors in Philadelphia and so the scene here is focused on either alternative or artist-run spaces. People like to say that the Philly art scene is really like a community, and it's really true. It's a small-enough place that there isn't a lot of competition. You can borrow equipment from other institutions.

AG: Was there anything specially that you were interested in bringing to New York? Like any specific themes?

AS: Sure, I mean I can tell you a little about what we are going to do. We had a series of meetings with all the members where we tried to figure out how we would approach it and what we decided in the end was to sort of challenge ourselves with a collaborative installation. During the install period and I think through the opening, we are going to be outfitting our space with a couple of new walls; we will be building that stuff. Over the course of the exhibition, there will be Vox members working in the space and people are going to bring their artwork or their installation materials and react to whatever is already existing in the space. We have set up some rules for ourselves, like you can move things around if you don't like where something is put, but people can leave sort of notes about their work and what they do or don't want done to it.

AG: Are you from Philadelphia originally?

AS: I've been here a little over three years.

AG: How have you seen Vox change in that time?

AS: Vox is growing a lot and has been growing pretty significantly over the past three or four years, I mean we started receiving Andy Warhol Foundation funding, and the reach of our guest programming has extended a lot and we've experienced a lot of increased interest in people from outside wanting to show at Vox. I've also definitely seen Philly change in the three years that I've been here.

AG: For the better?

AS: Yeah, there are more people, there are more artists moving to the city, either directly from school or people sort of migrating from New York, so there is a lot of energy here now. There are new spaces that are popping up all over, like small artist run spaces-just lots of activity.

AG: Are there any sort of models that are member based, that you sort of relate Vox too?

AS: We find that very hard (LAUGHS). We are always looking to other models, to try and sort of figure out how to do what we do best, but it's really hard to find spaces that are run like ours. There is another space in Philadelphia that is a member collective, its called Nexus, but they do not show outside works.

AG: ...And they don't have as interesting of a name.

AS: (LAUGHS) No. But it's hard to find a space that operates in the same way we do. Its pretty singular.

AG: Is there anything that always comes up that you cannot get a majority on?

AS: No, we usually sort of duke it out until someone wins. And it's a good community, and people get along well. I don't think it's always been that way; I think there were probably times in Vox's history where things didn't run so smoothly. But for the past three or four years, it's just been a great group.

AG: Is there a reason that the history of the space is so sort of dubious?

AS: I don't think that any of the people involved in the beginning expected Vox to last so long, so good records weren't kept. There are some people in Philadelphia who were involved with the space very early on and we have been talking to them to try to get information from them, but it's all based on. Over the years Vox has probably been in five or six different locations in Philadelphia, and we don't even know where all the spaces are.

AG: Would you send me some group photos of the 25 people?

AS: I don't think we have one, but maybe I can take one.

Vox Populi is located at 319 North 11th Street, # 3, Philadelphia.