

November 2010, Interview with Andrew Suggs



Kembra Pfahler and the Girls of Karen Black, "Man-o-War," performance at Vox Populi
Performance as part of Dead Flowers, curated by Lia Gangitano, April 4, 2010.
Photo by Greenhouse Media. Courtesy the artists, the photographer and Vox Populi.

Andrew Suggs is director of [Vox Populi](#), Philadelphia, a long-lived artist collective that supports, through its membership scheme, the challenging and experimental work of emerging artists as well as those with an established practice. Here, Becky talks with Andrew about Philadelphia's art scene, including its underground, independent and university-sponsored aspects; Vox's role; and his own evolving art, writing and curatorial practice.

Becky Hunter: What brought you to Philadelphia and to Vox Populi?

Andrew Suggs: I moved to Philadelphia after I graduated from Harvard in 2005. I didn't really have any ties here; I chose Philadelphia because it was an affordable alternative to New York and seemed to

have a thriving and growing artist-run arts scene, in particular a scene that wasn't in intense competition with a commercial scene. I interned briefly at Vox before applying for membership and then applied to become the space's director in 2008.

Hunter: Can you explain a little of how Vox's artist membership program works. Do you think this has something to do with the gallery's longevity, while many artist-run venues without public funding are fleeting?

Suggs: Membership is a peer review process. Anyone who lives in the Philadelphia area and who can help with the logistics of running the space can apply to become a member of Vox. Current members review applications for new membership once a year. The most tangible benefit of becoming an artist-member is an exhibition each season (currently 15 months), with no restriction in terms of content. I think the gallery's longevity – its ability to stay relevant in a growing and changing arts community – has to do with the balance of membership programming and solid guest artist and curator exhibitions. We are able to maintain a good mix of work from Philadelphia and from outside to keep our audience engaged. The collective model also ensures that even in times of economic slump, members can pull through to keep programs running.

Hunter: In 2008/9 you wrote strongly on the position of "alternative" galleries like Vox, and your own predicament in being thirsty for, "an underground... to feel as if my challenge to accepted practices is more subversive, and more tangible." Do you still feel this tension between your work as an artist and as gallery director?

Suggs: Certainly – I hope I always feel this tension. I'll never feel like I'm doing my job if I'm not pushing expected and accepted bounds, both in my artwork and in my role as the facilitator of programs at an art space.



Left: Marti Domination & Beaut performance at Vox Populi as part of *Dead Flowers*, curated by Lia Gangitano, April 10, 2010. Photo by James Johnson. Right: Installation view, *Dead Flowers*, curated by Lia Gangitano, March-April 2010.

Works by Genesis Breyer P-Orridge, Paul Thek, and Alvin Baltrop. Photo by Greenhouse Media. Courtesy the artists, the photographer and Vox Populi.

Hunter: In your work as director, have you tried to push Vox towards the boundaries of the alternative mainstream? If so, can you give an example?

Suggs: I am particularly interested in performance as a medium and have tried to push its representation at the gallery. Performance, in some sense, challenges commercial models inherently and tends to explore content close to the body, identity-based concerns. We are just about to unveil a new performance venue adjacent to the gallery, the first of its kind in Philadelphia. I have also tried to focus our attention in terms of outside programming on voices and themes that I think are under-represented in the scene here (and at large), particularly queer and non-white points of view.

Hunter: Has Philadelphia's underground art scene changed or grown since you began exploring it? Are Philadelphia's queer artists more visible now than when you first arrived in the city?

Suggs: The scene here has expanded to include many more art spaces and many more working artists than when I moved here around 5 years ago. I'm not sure, though, what impact this growth has on the feeling of an "underground." I don't really think of Vox as an "underground" venue. It is an established gallery with solid funding that follows a very professional model, and while I think we can bring voice to certain under-represented endeavors, I don't think we operate against or outside the "art world" in very many ways. I tend to think of "underground" activity as that which is hidden, outside, obscured...and I'm not sure that growth of a more professional art scene necessarily means more underground activity. In fact, it can mean less, as people's energies are taken elsewhere. Basement parties with wild performances, unsanctioned actions, and fringe activity still exist here and I hope will continue alongside the other growth. There was a recent action organized to take place at the PMA called "[Get Art Off Our Backs](#)," in which performers dressed in costume and attended the museum on a pay-what-you-wish day and interacted with artworks. It was a fantastic intervention in which people really took over the "public" space of the museum.

As for the queers – where are they? Seriously, though, I find one of the biggest problems with Philadelphia's art scene is how straight it is. I haven't seen too much change in that respect since I've been here.

Hunter: On a practical note, how do you manage your time between your own practice, art writing and your responsibilities to Vox? What motivates you to keep going?

Suggs: Hmmm... well, my own artistic practice is moving more toward curation – and may be swallowed up by that completely in the future. For my last show, for example, I built a stage in the gallery space and invited people to perform throughout the run of the show. I am more and more enjoying being a facilitator. My duties at Vox are enjoyable and varied, and I am part of a great community here, which certainly helps keep me sane.

Hunter: Vox Populi participated in No Soul for Sale at Tate Modern, London, back in May and I believe some of your own work was exhibited. The Guardian called the festival "soulless", while other publications praised its open and vibrant atmosphere. What was your impression of the event? Did you find it useful?

Suggs: It was a complicated effort. I am ambivalent about it, for sure, but suffice it to say I found some things useful, especially networking with leaders from other spaces and others extremely problematic.

(The economics of the festival, for example.) This deserves much more space than I have here, though...

Hunter: A festival of independents, like that at the Tate, conjures images of a tightly knit, sharing and co-operative global art community. Do Philadelphia's independent galleries collaborate? Does Vox have links outside of the city?

Suggs: Philadelphia has recently been called a “community of generosity,” and I think that's very true. There are many of us here who spend a great deal of time running our own spaces, so collaboration among spaces isn't always a top priority, but there's always a good vibe and willingness to help each other when needed. Vox regularly collaborates with like-minded spaces outside the city, so we try to maintain a network outside our city. Next year, we're organizing an exchange-type exhibition with the curatorial collective Cleopatra's in Brooklyn, for example. We've also worked with spaces in Chicago, Portland Maine, Cincinnati, and are currently trying to plan an exchange with a Berlin space.



Andrew Suggs, "Comus, or Some Man I Once Knew", performance view, 2010.

Photo by Katie Miller. Courtesy the artist, the photographer and Vox Populi.

Hunter: For someone new to the city, looking to grasp the art vibe here and to contribute, which galleries, spaces, groups or artistic projects would you highlight as essential to visit?

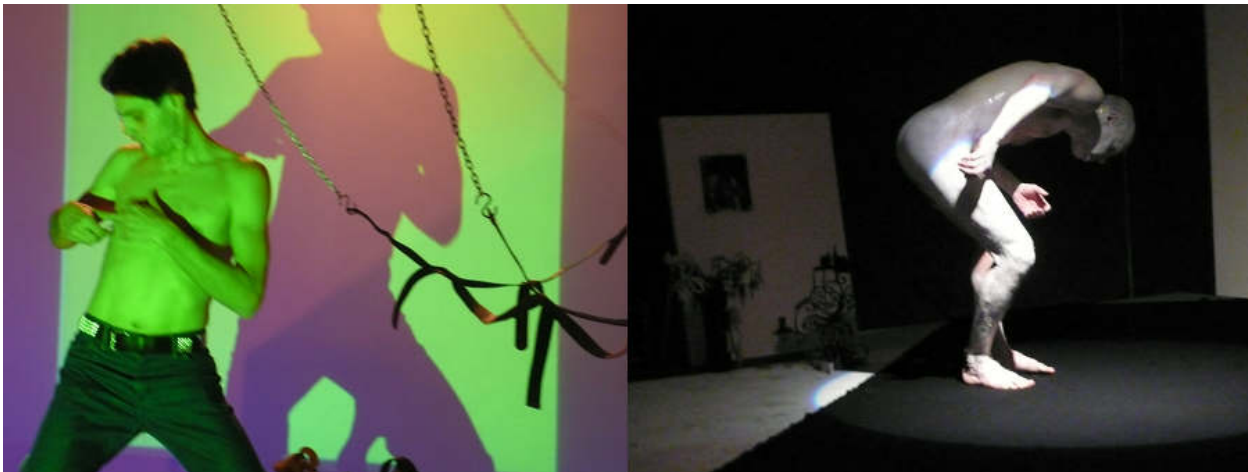
Suggs: There are so many new spaces. I've been excited by the energy of Extra Extra, Bodega, and VWVOFFKA lately. A brand new space and publication comes from Possible Projects. There are also the Penn affiliates: the ICA and the Slought Foundation. Our building at 319 is home to many other spaces, including Tiger Strikes Asteroid, Marginal Utility, and Grizzly Grizzly – all of which are worth a visit. Little Berlin and fluxSpace both have solid programming.

Hunter: You contributed a text to Ingrid Schaffner's catalogue for the Philadelphia ICA's Queer Voice exhibition (April through August, 2010). How would you describe the relationship between the ICA and the city's artistic community?

Suggs: The ICA has always been supportive of Philadelphia's local community of artists and spaces. They regularly feature Philadelphia artists and the curators there follow what's going on in the city with interest and thoughtfulness. It's a great resource to our community.

Hunter: What do you, and Vox, have coming up in the next couple of months that our readers might be interested in?

Suggs: Our next show opens on December 3 and runs through January 30. It's called Quadruple-Consciousness and is curated by Malik Gaines, who is a member of the performance troupe My Barbarian. It features 19 artists, many of whom are people of color, queer or trans-identified and contribute to a discussion about what Malik calls the “potential liberties within the uncertainty of irreconcilable identities.” There are two nights of live performance on December 3 and January 29. It should be an amazing time. I am also working on curating a show in April 2011 at Vox called “Kick in the Eye,” which is centered around recent queer portraiture. It sounds much more quaint than I hope it to be.



Andrew Suggs, performances at part of "Comus, or Some Man I Once Knew", 2010.

Left: Eric Veit, Private Dancer; Right: Imozoku Butoh presents Cat'o'nine-tails with Charles Cohen playing the Buchla Music Easel and David Caskie dancing. Photos by Andrew Suggs. Courtesy the artists and Vox Populi.

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