ARTISTS FOUND THAT SOCIAL INTERACTION ENHANCED THE CREATION AND APPRECIATION OF ART.

—Historic plaque outside the entrance of The Philadelphia Sketch Club (founded 1860)

THE MAIN PROBLEM IS THAT VISUAL ART TENDS TO BE AN INDIVIDUAL ACTIVITY AND INDEPENDENT ART GROUPS ARE BY NECESSITY COLLECTIVE ACTIONS. PROBABLY NO GROUP OF PEOPLE IS HARDER TO ORGANIZE THAN VISUAL ARTISTS.

—Michael Macfeat, co-founder of HEAT, founder of MEAT

IDEALISM CAN ONLY GET YOU SO FAR.

—Nike Desis, co-founder of Fluxspace

The following index of so-called "artist-run spaces" in Philadelphia appears in these pages as a work in progress. Assembled as a volunteer effort with the help and goodwill of many individuals, it is, by necessity, imperfect. Incomplete as it is, this effort is intended as an outline (and perhaps as a springboard for further research) for others who share a belief that there is something at stake by proceeding without one.

Working from the model provided by Julie Ault's Alternative Art New York: 1965-1985 (2002), a history of artist-run spaces in New York, we have attempted to trace a parallel progression in Philadelphia that until now has gone undocumented in any cumulative fashion. Despite arguable omissions and inclusions, we have tried to make it as accurate a record as possible within the given limitations. Entries for federally recognized not-for-profit organizations include a mission statement and year of 501(c)(3) status. Much of the material on the recently-founded spaces has come directly from their websites. Information about those venues and organizations founded and/or dissolved prior to the widespread use of the internet was obtained from interviews, e-mail exchanges, and printed sources. Dates considered relevant to the evolution of artist-based initiatives in Philadelphia are inserted among the entries to place the founding of these organizations within a historical framework and to provide additional reference points for future study.

This index and timeline emerged organically (less by intention than out of an infectious curiosity), to place Vox Populi's 21st anniversary in context. It surfaces at a moment when the proliferation of artist-run spaces has achieved a critical mass that has made a decisive impact on how contemporary art is both made and experienced internationally. Over the past several years we have witnessed the increasing inclusion of artist collectives in exhibitions such as the Whitney Biennial and focused efforts dedicated exclusively to documenting the activities of artist-run spaces on a national level. One noteworthy example is No Soul for Sale, an exhibition of 38 collectives held last year at X-Initative in Chelsea, New York, now on its way to the Tate Modern. These and other analogous endeavors suggest that artist-run spaces and collectives have gone from being what was once thought of as a grass roots movement to nothing less than a new medium for contemporary practice that blurs almost every traditional categorical separation—artist from audience, curator from artist, studio from exhibition space, and finally artists from

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It is both telling and fitting that this index should emerge not from art historians or traditional institutions or presses, but from artists and the spaces themselves. As they have since the initial response to the 19th-century academies, particularly in France, artists have once again taken matters into their own hands "to act as their own mediators."[1] Rather than wait for someone else to do what needs to be done, artists volunteered to do the job themselves.

This index constitutes a local expression of what Hans Ulrich Obrist has called a "protest against forgetting."[2] It emerges from a perceived need to chart this activity as well as a reminder (to those who might assume that they are inventing the wheel) that the road stretches back farther than imagined. Among the aspirations held for this account is that it might be used as a tool for suggesting other projects that could harness the abundance of available energy here and direct it toward other, perhaps unforeseen, activities (other than exhibition-making and publicity). These might include a collective archive, scholarship, publishing (Megawords and Machete are two examples of print as alternative space), or advancing critical discourse.

Any discussion pertaining to the Philadelphia art world inevitably arrives at the inadequacy of critical writing being done here, a situation that local cooperatives have made efforts to change. Members of some of the more recently founded spaces (such as Copy and PIFAS) have developed blogs that include interviews, essays, and critical reviews of exhibitions presented both within and beyond Philadelphia. Raising the bar considerably, they help point the way to a time when the authors of such deeply informed and engaged art writing in Philadelphia might not have to be making work and running exhibition spaces at the same time. While wearing multiple hats has always been an accepted condition of the game, locating an objective platform for critical discourse remains an increasingly important part of the challenge, especially given the exponential increase in the number of exhibitions being generated monthly here. A local critic with whom I spoke during the preparation of this text admitted a personal policy of not covering shows in artist-run galleries except when they presented exhibitions of non-members. This was a sobering disclosure that underscores the specter of cliquish insularity that many artist-run spaces were founded to subvert. While suggesting unavoidable contradictions as well as forms of inadvertent complicity with the problems that beleaguer any arts community, this policy also points to strategies (such as extending opportunities to guest curators, hosting exhibitions of non-members, etc.) that have that helped sustain healthy cooperatives. Attention to basic professional practices associated with managing any small business, such as being scrupulous about opening hours, is also a plus. (The aforementioned critic added that the above policy was not unrelated to the frequent disappointment of arriving at a cooperative space intent on seeing an exhibition only to find the gallery closed despite posted hours.)

The precursor of these pages took the form of an illustrated lecture this past summer at Vox Populi. The need to supply images for this talk served as the premise for asking representatives of these venues for visual material that would accompany a printed draft of an index of artist-run spaces available that evening as a handout. The talk was attended by a mixed audience that included representatives of many of the new DIY spaces, along with some veterans of the community, all of whom helped caption the slides projected.

The day after the lecture, I received close to a dozen emails responding to the material I shared. To my surprise, there were more offers for help than the squawking I had anticipated. Most who wrote noted how surprised they were to learn of the extent of this history and commented on its potential for further exploration. Reviewing the draft list of spaces distributed that evening, there were countless questions about when such a history should begin and what organizations should be included. Why should Nexus, now widely regarded as the first artist-run space in the city, be given this title instead of The Sketch Club, founded 115 years earlier, or the Da Vinci Art Alliance, founded in 1935? Or what about the Pyramid Club, a little-known venue founded in 1941 that served as the site of exhibitions featuring the work of black artists organized by West Philadelphia painter Humbert Howard?[3] Among the many revelations this research held for me was learning about short-lived efforts such as OIC (1973-74), information about which I had never encountered, despite my more than two decades working as a curator in Philadelphia. Talking with Robert Younger (an artist who exhibited at OIC during its single year of programming), among many others, I became aware of other temporary projects and individuals from the early 1970s whose stories are still at risk of being lost. It is my wish then, by making reference to some of these

projects, that others might fill in this account while underscoring the historical link between the emergence of artist-run spaces in the late 1960s with other forms of political and cultural activism emerging at this time.

The following are some of the questions that surfaced while assembling this material that readers might keep in mind and that future chroniclers might want to address:

» How might artist-run spaces distinguish themselves from what we have come to call "alternative spaces?"

» (Or, to what extent is "alternativity" bound to a contemporary sense of artist cooperatives not present prior to the 1970s?)

» To what extent are artist-run spaces a phenomenon intrinsic to youth culture?

» Given the number of commercial and university galleries in Philadelphia run by directors who happen to be artists, what are we to make of venues or organizations run by an individual artist in the absence of a collective?

» Do artist-run spaces, by definition, need to be nonprofit?

» Given the ease with which it is now possible to create the appearance of a gallery, how might we distinguish the efforts of DIY spaces from efforts often disparaged in other cultural fields, such as vanity publishing?

» To what extent does the immediate founding purpose that binds a group together trump the desire of its individual members to exhibit their own artwork?

» How is this activity in Philadelphia different from what has transpired in other cities in the United States or around the world?

» How have the incentives to start an artist-run space and the means to sustain one evolved over time?

» What is the impact of curatorial procedures on the collective activities and goals of these spaces?

» Given the pre-condition that selling art is not a viable goal in a city without a sufficient collecting population, what are the criteria for measuring success in a community with so few platforms for criticism and discourse?

» Recognizing that the exhibition format remains the standard means by which these spaces operate, which shows can we name as having exerted any influence on their audiences?

» What contributions do these spaces make to the overall cultural health of the region independent of familiar gentrification narratives?

» What is the capacity of the community to remain engaged by these venues as opposed to becoming exhausted by them given the abundance of programming that now confronts audiences and the frequency with which viewers are asked to return to these venues?

» Are we approaching a point at which there are more individuals on stage than in the audience?

» What else besides opening new spaces is to be done with the profligate energy of young artists in Philadelphia?

This index is a vivid indication that we may have arrived at a long-wished-for moment in Philadelphia. In August 1988, casting a glance back to the challenges faced by Philadelphia artists seeking to exhibit their work here in the 1960s and early '70s, *Philadelphia Inquirer*'s Stephan Salisbury wrote, "No museum exhibited regional work on a regular basis. The city boasted only a handful of galleries and there were no non-commercial alternative spaces. The city was famous—or infamous—for being invisible. Art journals even spoke of a mysterious Philadelphia Triangle—the city's artists would disappear immediately upon graduating from art school only to reappear later, fully decked out in careers 100 miles to the north."[4] Salisbury goes on to count 6 commercial spaces in Philadelphia in 1965, 15 in 1975, and 40 in 1988. In 1982, there were 74 alternative spaces in New York. In Philadelphia, such venues could be counted on one hand.

There is evidence now to support the fact that increasing numbers of individuals are choosing to stay in Philadelphia after they graduate from one of the many art schools here and that artists from other municipalities, including New York, are choosing to move to Philadelphia to explore opportunities offered by a contemporary art community that has been described as generous, non-competitive, friendly, and small enough to allow participants to know as many of its players as they wish, and even borrow equipment from each other when necessary.[5] The now infamous 2005 *New York Times* article that cast Philadelphia as the "Sixth Borough" may

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have surprised some readers, but other for local artists—especially those who had actually given New York a try and returned south to take advantage of Philadelphia's cheap rents—this was old news.[6]

The following year, Annette Monnier (co-founder of Copy and among six artists from Cincinnati that started Black Floor in 2004) was quoted in the same paper: "I wasn't interested in moving to a city that didn't need more energy."[7] Recently, curators have also have decided to relocate here to participate in the energy and collegiality that could be said to distinguish Philadelphia from other cities. "For artist and visitor alike," concluded *New York Times* author Steven Stern, "Philadelphia offers a respite from overheated scenes, unwelcoming galleries, and the economy of the latest thing."[8]

In the three years since those words were published, nearly 30 artist-run spaces have been started in Philadelphia. This figure comes close to matching the number of venues started by artists in the three decades prior when, in 1976, Nexus opened its doors on Chancellor Street (off Rittenhouse Square). Among these 30 fledgling organizations founded since 2006, Fluxspace (founded in 2007) has already achieved its 501(c)(3) non-profit status and has drafted a five-year plan with a board to whom they must answer. *Megawords*, barely out of the gate, got $20,000 from the Philadelphia Exhibitions Initaitive in 2008. Screening received a PEI planning grant of $5,000 in its first year. Though not all the recent spaces posted on this list have the same level of administrative acumen and ambition, clearly something noteworthy has occurred in the last several years.

One invaluable source of information and perspective on the evolution of artist-run spaces in Philadelphia is the *Philadelphia Arts Exchange*, a short-lived art magazine founded in 1977 by co-editors Joan Horvath and Richard Flood (now chief curator of New York's New Museum). Committed to six, bi-monthly issues annually, it folded in 1981. Among the most valuable articles I found in its pages was a transcription of a panel discussion held in November 1977 co-sponsored by the *Arts Exchange* and the Philadelphia College of Art (PCA, now University of the Arts) which appeared in its first anniversary issue. The panelists included Philadelphia artists Jody Pinto, Phillips Simkin, Larry Day, Frank Bramblette, Edna Andrade, and Janet Kardon (then director of the gallery at PCA before she became director of the Institute of Contemporary Art).

During the course of the conversation, the participants speculate together about the possibilities of creating artist-run spaces, repeatedly invoking New York as the source of models for these initiatives, and the audience in the form of directives, as if those in attendance were waiting for instruction. Here's a charge from then 60-year-old Edna Andrade: "Take over public buildings, City Hall as a starter. There's a gallery up inside Billy Penn; we can have our own Clocktower there."[9] Jody Pinto, then in her 30s, follows, "My idea is to treat this symposium as just a first, then get hold of people who've done work with energy in Philly. Get some people who have set up programs like P.S.1 and work with them to develop our area[...]Within a year, we'd be able to get one of those unused spaces or buildings together. One of the things that is terribly important for Philadelphia is exchange with other cities. Getting to work at P.S.1. is good because of the exchange of ideas with artists from all over the country." The combination of naive optimism and revolutionary spirit expressed by these voices is as striking as it is familiar. The advice to engage with those outside the city is sage.

Looking back at the emergence of artist-run spaces, it seems inevitable that they had to happen as a necessary way to foster new social forces shaping civil liberties, identity, and cultural freedom emerging in the1960s. Licensed by a fusing of feminism and activism, they were manifest in the fertile mix of post-minimal strategies, process art, installation, land art, performance, and conceptualism. Suzanne Horvitz, co-founder of Nexus with Sandra Lerner and Vivian Golden, said that people in the community recognized that what Nexus wanted to do "needed to be done." The urgency was twofold: artists working in isolation needed a means to come together and a place to exhibit experimental work that was not being presented in any reliable manner elsewhere. In 1975, the year Nexus was started, the Philadelphia Museum of Art had not programmed an exhibition featuring local artists since a survey in 1955. The ICA, the only other non-commercial institution programming contemporary art in the city, had only just then initiated its "Made in Philadelphia" series. Begun in 1973, this program of exhibitions for local artists occurred only intermittently, the last of a total of seven opening in 1987. Marian Locks East, a respected space for adventurous, often large-scale experimental work, would not begin its five-year run until 1978. The Painted Bride was still an outpost on South Street that general audiences were not yet comfortable visiting.

Horvitz, Lerner, and Golden created a safe, sustainable

space—a laboratory where experimentation was welcome and risking failure was acceptable. They also knew that the task of creating a gallery that presented non-commercial work and could, for example, accommodate the unprecedented needs of installation artists, was a project for which the time had come but that no one else was going to realize for them.[10] Horvitz admits that the formation of Nexus greeted some representatives from the city's cultural institutions as a form of relief. For many local curators and art administrators, there was a sense of being spared the challenge of organizing a space that could effectively present adventurous work by local talent. While the need for the PMA (as well as the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and the Institute of Contemporary Art) to valorize regional artists may be perennial, it reached a peak in the late 1980s with *Philadelphia Art Now,* a trio of exhibitions showcasing the work of area artists (with a large group exhibition at each venue) funded by $1.1 million from the William Penn Foundation. These long anticipated exhibitions received mixed reviews and demonstrated how out of step the institutions were with the community. Writing in the *New Art Examiner* about the shows, regional editor Don Bohn remarked, "Because these unweidly exhibitions were put together without a coherent sense of the scene they purported to represent, only the work of the most established and familiar artists could claim attention with one or two pieces, and recognizing emerging talent was difficult, if not impossible."[11] *Art at the Armory*, the Salon de Refusés featuring the work of more than 400 artists organized in response to the juried exhibition at the PMA, generated what may perhaps still be regarded as most persuasive demonstration of cooperative, the collective energy we have yet to witness here. Taken by the spirit of the show, the PMA itself contributed financial support to the exhibition.

Some of the earliest funding for Nexus proved easier than anticipated. The Fels Fund, for example, gave money to the group even before they had a physical space. Despite the experimental work it programmed, Nexus's location, a stone's throw from what was then referred to the "Walnut Street gallery district," comprised of a dozen or so commercial spaces, revealed a savvy sensitivity to its target audience.

In the 1970s, Philadelphia was recognized for the installation work of artists such as Italo Scanga, Cynthia Carlson, Ree Morton, Rafael Ferrar, and Jody Pinto. All influential forces here, none could realize the work they wanted to undertake without the opportunity to commandeer large amounts of space. Pinto, who had developed a practice of working in construction sites in Old City, became one of the first artists to exhibit at Nexus. For her debut solo show there, *Personifications*, she filled the rooms with fresh straw and 15 live chickens. Curator Julie Courtney, who remembers the piece as the first work she saw at Nexus, still recalls the uncanny experience of the smell of wet grass and barnyard that greeted her at the door.

The founders of Nexus recognized early on that they did not want to be a "club" or "society" of any kind. These terms were regularly used for the titles of venues and groups organized around media, such as The Sketch Club, The Plastic Club (founded 1897), and The Philadelphia Watercolor Society (founded 1900). It is telling that The Print Center, which was founded 1915 as the Print Club, changed its title in 1996 to mark its commitment to serve both its members and the community.

In an effort to prioritize the quality of the art over inevitable allegiances that are formed in any art community, Horvitz, Lerner, and Golden chose to establish a panel of professional arts personnel to select the first group of Nexus members from submissions from regional artists. This panel included David Pease (then dean of Tyler School of Art), Anne d'Harnoncourt (then curator at the Philadelphia Museum of Art), and Janet Kardon. Horvitz and company soon realized that other restrictions were needed to ensure that Nexus' exhibition programming would remain fresh. In addition to inviting outside curators to organize exhibitions, artist members were restricted to a maximum of three solo shows and then had to leave. Recent art school graduates were not considered eligible to become members until they could demonstrate that they were free of the influence of their instructors. Indeed, the relative maturity of the first generation of Nexus members (most were in their 30s) foregrounds the fact that establishing an artist-run space in the 21st century is generally the work of artists in their 20s and suggests that it is now a rite of passage following the MFA.[12] Tristin Lowe, co-founder of Blohard, referred to participating in a cooperative as "art school without teachers."[13]

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4. Salisbury, Stephen. "F
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5. Andrew Suggs, from a
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6. Pressler, Jessica. "Phila
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7. Stern, Steven. "Liberal
19 Nov. 2006.

8. Ibid.

Despite these and other differences, such details about the origin and administration of Nexus will be familiar to readers who have participated in establishing and sustaining their own spaces. To some extent it has become a classic narrative that each new cooperative interprets in its own way. In the summer of 2008, Amy Adams (then director of Vox Populi) invited members of Copy, Exclamation, Fluxspace, Little Berlin, Nexus, PIFAS, and Screening to participate in a conversation to jump start the text that would eventually appear in these pages. Despite the fact that there were already so many cooperatives in Philadelphia, and mindful of the sacrifices they were making to manage these spaces, these representatives offered compelling explanations for why they still chose to do so. Some insisted that they saw no distinction between running a space and making their own work. Overall, each confirmed that they would not be satisfied until they had made the attempt to discover directly for themselves what it was like take matters into their own hands, whether this meant failing or improving upon what is now is a permanent and critical fixture of our cultural ecology.

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Notes:

1. Cherix, Christophe. Preface. A Brief History of Curating. By Hans Ulrich Obrist. JRP/Ringier & Les Presses du Reel, 2008. 5.

2. Obrist has repeatedly used this phrase as battle cry against the amnesia of the artworld. In the past decade, he has shifted the focus of practice from curating to that of historian of exhibition-making via public interviews with curators and artists and their subsequent publication.

3. Humbert Howard (1905 -1992) was the art director of the Pyramid Club, a popular and respected black cultural center in Philadelphia. His integrationist approach to art broke down traditional boundaries that often had separated black and white artists. As director of the club's art exhibitions, he selected works by both black and white artists for display.

4. Salisbury, Stephen. "Features View." Philadelphia Inquirer. 14 Aug. 1988: F1.

5. Andrew Suggs, from an interview with Alex Gartenfeld, "No Soul for Sale," Interview magazine online, July 2009.

6. Pressler, Jessica. "Philadelphia Story: The Next Borough." The New York Times. 14 Aug. 2005.

7. Stern, Steven. "Liberal Arts in Philadelphia." The New York Times. 19 Nov. 2006.

8. Ibid.

9. The Clocktower, a contemporary art exhibition space situated within an abandoned tower on the top of a New York City Municipal building in Tribeca, was the first initiative of the Institute for Art and Urban Resources organization. It opened in 1973.

10. Conversation with Susanne Horvitz, Sept. 2009. It is interesting to note that Project Room, which began more than two decades after Nexus opened, was inspired by founder Kate Midgett's aspiration to provide a space in Philadelphia that could answer the same need.

11. Bohn, Don. "Philadelphia Stories [Philadelphia Art Now: Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia Museum of Art, and Institute of Contemporary Art]." New Art Examiner. Dec. 1991: 29.

12. One example of a recent artist-run space that contradicts this youth-oriented bias was Orchard. This three-year project (completed in 2008), was a cooperatively organized exhibition and event space in New York's Lower East Side. Orchard's trans-generational mixing of established artists with lesser known artists expressed a commitment to historically-based artistic criteria as opposed to the imperatives of the market.

13. It is interesting to note that Mildred Greenburg, a veteran of several MEAT exhibitions, was in her 80s when she exhibited her work in these group shows. Little Berlin's 2008 solo exhibition for septogenerian Leroy Johnson (guest curated by Theresa Rose) represents a rare example of older artists being invited to exhibit their work in local cooperatives.

In addition to thanking all of those who took the time to talk about their spaces and share valuable information with us, I want to thank the following for their extra efforts on our behalf: Harry Anderson, Penny Balkin Bach, Gerard Brown, Donna Czapiga, Julie Courtney, Roberta Fallon, Terry Fox, Eric Heist, Richard Harrod, Juliet Hoffman, Suzanne Horvitz, Lydia Hunn, Hal Jones, Smokie Kittner, Tristin Lowe, Michael Macfeat, James Mills, Eileen Neff, Jamar Nicholas, John Ollman, Amy Orr, Robin Rice, Theresa Rose, Libby Rosof, Jennie Shanker, Sande Webster, and Robert Younger.

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