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Vox Populi announces James Merle Thomas as its next Executive Director

Vox Populi is pleased to announce and welcome its next Executive Director, James Merle Thomas. Joining the organization after recently moving to Philadelphia, Thomas currently designs and teaches a Global Contemporary Art curriculum at the Tyler School of Art at Temple University, while furthering an already distinguished career of independent and internationally recognized curatorial and publication projects.

Board President Debra Ward shares, "We are very excited that James is taking over as our new director at Vox and I personally look forward to working with him. With his extensive experience as a curator and arts administrator, we are confident James can lead us into our upcoming thirtieth anniversary with a vision that will further expand the collective's emphasis on experimental art and diversity."



Courtesy of Elizabeth Weinberg

"For nearly three decades, Vox Populi has served as a foundation for some of Philadelphia's most innovative artistic production," Thomas said. "At a time when principled commitment to supporting non-commercial and experimental arts is more crucial than ever, I am excited by Vox's rich institutional history and its dedication to visual art, performance, and curatorial practice. I look forward to working closely with the collective's artist members and board as we reaffirm our commitment to artist development and aesthetic experimentation, rearticulate what it means to be a leading arts nonprofit in the Philadelphia region, and continue to increase Vox's profile at national and international levels. I am impressed by the work of the previous and current members of the collective, indebted to the efforts of my immediate predecessor, Bree Pickering, and am inspired by Vox's attention to issues of diversity and inclusivity. I look forward to working with the many members of Philadelphia's diverse community as we collectively reaffirm the importance of the arts as a central aspect of the city's rich cultural landscape."

Formerly based in San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Washington D.C., Thomas is an art historian and curator who brings over a decade of expertise in modern and contemporary art, publications management, and experimental and performing arts to Vox. His doctorate in Art History from Stanford University—a study of the

abstract art, experimental architecture, and radical design of the 1960s and 1970s avant-garde as it related to NASA's aerospace research—has led him to numerous research- and curatorial based fellowships, among them a Chester Dale Predoctoral Fellowship at the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts at the National Gallery of Art, and a Guggenheim Fellowship at the National Air and Space Museum at the Smithsonian Institution. Most recently, Thomas was a Provost's Postdoctoral Scholar in the Humanities at the University of Southern California, where he co-directed, along with the USC School of Cinematic Arts, a restoration and screening project dedicated to the countercultural filmmaker Fred Engelberg. His 2015 exhibition of Robert Rauschenberg's NASA-commissioned artworks of the late 1960s, *Loose In Some Real Tropics*, was produced in collaboration with Stanford University's Cantor Center for the Arts and the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation.

Thomas also brings a long-standing commitment to diversity and non-western art to Philadelphia. Between 2003 and 2013, he worked closely with Okwui Enwezor—current director of the Haus der Kunst Museum in Munich and Artistic Director of the 2015 Venice Biennale—to produce a series of academic symposia, large scale group exhibitions, and major museum programs, many dedicated to postcolonial and contemporary African art. Serving as Assistant Curator for the *Second Biennial of Contemporary Art of Seville* (2005) and the *Seventh Gwangju Biennale* (2007), and as Executive Editor of Publications for the *Third Paris Triennale* (2012), Thomas has collaborated extensively with many visual artists—among them Thomas Hirschhorn, Kerry James Marshall, Zanele Muholi, Isaac Julien, Yto Barrada, Taryn Simon, Deana Lawson, Johanna Billing, and Stephanie Syjuco—to present a wide variety of artistic media to diverse audiences in museums, universities, cultural institutions, and independent art spaces throughout Africa, Asia, Europe, and North America. Thomas's own projects and scholarship have resulted in collaborations with award-winning filmmakers, and have led him to work with organizations ranging from major museums such as the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, to innovative publications such as *Triple Canopy*, and to develop projects across an international network of independent art spaces. His writings on art and culture have appeared in edited academic volumes, exhibition catalogues, and in publications such as *Artforum* and *BOMB*.

Notably a performer himself, Thomas also collaborates regularly with musicians, and currently performs with Mikael Jorgensen of Wilco as the multi-media musical act Quindar. The duo combines historical research with musical performance, and uses archival audio and film to create ambient, electronic, and experimental music and accompanying projections in museum and festival settings.

With his rich background in working with international curators and scholars, organizing publications ranging from smaller scale zines to major biennial survey publications, facilitating artists from the established to the emergent, and performing himself, Thomas will provide Vox Populi with a new network of peers and influences, develop new programming initiatives, and work closely with its membership to reaffirm Vox's recognized commitment to experimental aesthetics and the Philadelphia arts community it serves.

He succeeds Vox Populi's previous Executive Director, Bree Pickering, who was named in October as the new Director of Murray Art Museum Albury in Pickering's native Australia.

About Vox Populi



Kameelah Rasheed, Installation view of "No Instructions for Assembly, Activation VII," 2015

Vox Populi is an alternative contemporary art and performance space and collective based in Philadelphia, PA. The longest running non-profit arts collective in the city, Vox is committed to the presentation of under-represented and experimental arts in all media. Founded in 1988, Vox currently resides in the North Chinatown/Callowhill neighborhood in a vibrant art gallery and studio building on North 11th Street. Its current facilities include four white box galleries, a flexible lobby/project space, as well as a dedicated black box performance and media gallery. In addition to offering a rotating calendar of member-initiated projects and

special programming, Vox Populi has recently organized and hosted a number of nationally recognized projects, including serving in 2014 as the East Coast venue for the traveling Riot Grrl survey exhibition *Alien She*, curated by Astria Suparak and Ceci Moss. Along with the New York-based curatorial collective Cleopatra's, Vox Populi was the co-initiator of the 2013 *Self Organized Spaces* conference of national artist-run spaces, and also participated in *No Soul For Sale*, a major festival of over 70 independent art spaces held in 2009-10 at the Dia Art Foundation and the Tate Modern. In 2013 Vox established the AUX Curatorial Fellowship in Performance Art; the program's alumni include a number of nationally recognized curators and artists, including Marissa Perel, Jamillah James, Whitney Kimball, Anthony Romero, and Katya Grokhovsky. Vox Populi currently encompasses both artist and curatorial members, with approximately 20-25 members at a given time, and boasts a director's board whose members are drawn from Philadelphia's most prominent cultural and philanthropic institutions. Vox Populi alumni are currently among some of the most visible cultural practitioners in Philadelphia and elsewhere. Often the recipients of Pew, Guggenheim, and other prestigious fellowships, they are routinely awarded competitive artist residencies, frequently represented by leading art galleries in New York and Philadelphia, have produced solo exhibitions at local venues such as the Institute of Contemporary Art, and have participated in group exhibitions such as the Whitney Biennial. In addition to the support of many individual donors, Vox Populi has benefitted from the continued support of a number of major philanthropic institutions, among them The William Penn Foundation, Pew Center for the Arts & Heritage, Philadelphia Cultural Fund, Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, Samuel P. Mandell Foundation, Samuel S. Fels Fund, Dolfinger-McMahon Foundation, The Barra Foundation, and the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts.



Miguel Gutierrez performs with poet CA Conrad as part of "Counter Acts," programming organized by Marissa Perel, 2013 AUX Curatorial Fellow

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