

# VOX POPULI

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## Our Year at Vox Populi

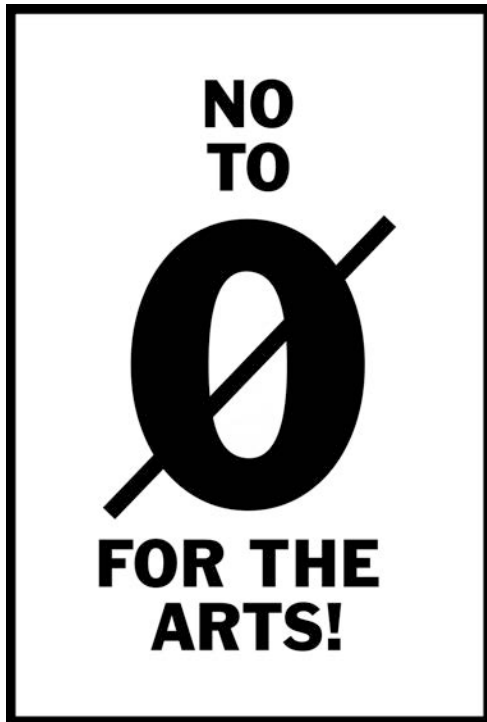
We ushered in 2020 ready to intentionally expand our artist and audience network, launching exhibitions, open call opportunities, and programming partnerships that would bring a new wave of creative energies into our organization. Right at the start, we introduced audiences to the ten artists who most recently joined our collective, opening a large and eclectic group-exhibition of their work, [Asking for a Friend: Vox Populi's New Member Takeover](#), in early January. Simultaneously, our Black Box Committee concluded their search for our [2020 Black Box Curatorial Fellow](#) (artist and curator Sarah Kim, whose forthcoming project focuses on the intersection of sustainable fashion/design and racial/environmental justice that has since received additional support from the [Leeway Foundation](#)). Our Exhibitions Committee prepared our [2020 Juried Exhibition Open Call](#), inviting James Claiborne (Public Programs Manager for The African American Museum in Philadelphia) and Brittany Webb (Curator of 20th Century Art and the John Rhoden Collection at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art) to serve as our guest jurors.

However, with rapidly increasing coronavirus infection rates in the region, we made the call to close to the public in mid-March, just days after opening our second round of 2020 exhibitions (featuring projects by Vox members [Marion Horowitz](#), [Makeba Rainey](#), [Imani Roach](#), and [Kris Rumman](#), among others). A busy [calendar of programs](#), including several partnership presentations with cinéSPEAK, Fire Museum Presents, Velocity Fund, and others, had to be cancelled. Nearly 20 exhibitions, so far, have had to be postponed, cancelled, or re-conceived.

In spite of so much uncertainty, disappointment, and various professional challenges (particularly as so many of our artists teach at local universities), the Vox Populi collective remained connected and committed by quickly pivoting online — meeting on Zoom, sharing information and resources, collectively processing our new realities, and tentatively planning for the unpredictable year that lay ahead.

## **Activism and Advocacy**

In early May, [when the City of Philadelphia initially proposed cutting arts funding as part of its revised budget for 2021](#), the Vox collective committed itself to arts advocacy, with a focus on racial and economic justice. They did so because the importance of our space has, ironically, been made all the more clear to us by the absence of our ability to welcome you there lately. Our conversations led to the launch of the [No To Zero for the Arts](#) online platform ([notozero.art](#)). Including an email and tactical media campaign, digital toolkit, banner-drop, and analysis of the city budget, No To Zero sent up a flare to others beginning to organize in the local creative community and issued a clear message to Philadelphia's City Council that they



needed to develop a better plan, one that included support for arts and culture as part of their economic recovery efforts.

Our work on the No To Zero platform put us in conversation with many other leaders of Philadelphia's arts and culture sector, and we began to coalition-build. Following the police killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, and the ensuing racial justice uprisings in Philadelphia and around the nation, our work urgently coalesced around the need for arts and culture organizations to join the chorus of voices demanding radical and meaningful change within our public institutions.

In collaboration with the Artist Coalition for a Just Philadelphia, Vox collective members helped devise the [Emergency Action to Fund Black Futures](#) demonstration at the steps of the Philadelphia Museum

of Art in early June. Alongside leaders of Asian Arts Initiative and BlackStar Film Festival, Vox Populi's Executive Director, Danny Orendorff, assisted in the research, drafting, and dissemination of the [Philadelphia Arts for Black Lives \(phlartsforblacklives.com\)](#) open letter to local government that has collected over 3,000 signatures to date. These efforts were followed by grassroots fundraisers launched by members of the Vox collective in the spirit of mutual aid, including our [Minute Fest online performance showcases](#) benefitting local housing and bail relief efforts, as well as our online exhibition of [The People's Paper Co-Op's Free Our Mamas! Sisters! Queens!](#) project, which benefited [The Philadelphia Community Bail Fund](#).

We are so proud of these efforts and know that our work made impacts large and small, including helping to convince City Council to maintain funding for the Philadelphia Cultural Fund, of which we are a grantee, for next year - [albeit at a severely reduced percentage](#).

### **Reflecting and Evolving**

Our work confronting economic inequality and institutionalized racism simultaneously turned inward, with the Vox collective initiating an internal review of our policies, procedures, and personnel over the summer. Through this process, we began to interrogate Vox's own organizational biases and histories of exclusion, devised strategies for meaningful change, considered options for how to undo barriers to participation at Vox Populi, and worked to better define our collective values moving forward. This work resulted in the drafting of an internal, long-form Values Statement that will help guide our work for years to come.

The collective also participated in a months-long Member Review, during which we assessed the wants, needs, dreams, and ambitions of our members. This resulted in recommendations

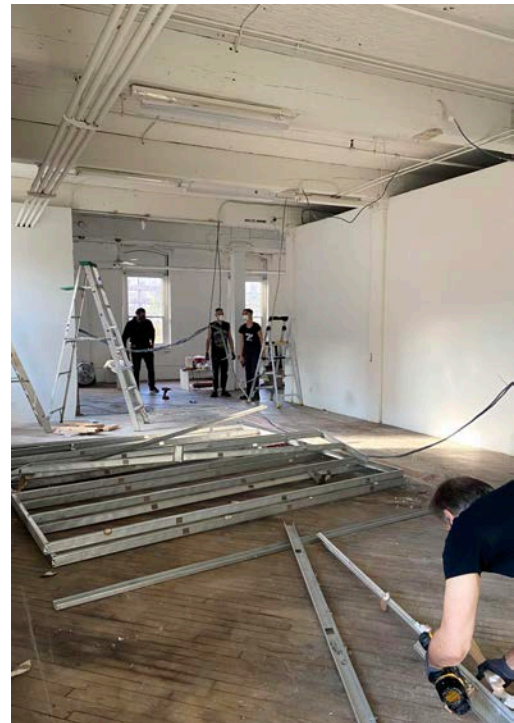
for how to expand or modify existing programs and underscored our need to develop an organization that more adequately represents the demographics of Philadelphia.

Understanding that it is only through turnover at all levels of the organization that Vox Populi can diversify and evolve, our internal review process included an amicable parting of ways with several long standing members of our Board of Directors, who we trust will continue to support our work in new capacities. We are so grateful to these individuals for their years of service to the organization and for their understanding that we must intentionally make space in order for new leadership to emerge.

### **On the Horizon: Committing to Community**

Perhaps the most salient of lessons learned, or re-learned, as a result of all our work this year is that artists can and will endure against tremendous odds and unpredictable conditions. What these artists often need is space to meet and collaborate within, resources to build with, and a community that sustains them.

In this spirit and during the final months of the year, our members are now collaborating to create a new Commons Space within our venue, in which artists can work and strategize together, share skills and resources, and host community-focused events, round-table discussions, and workshops. We have torn down the walls of one of our four galleries to dedicate more space to these efforts, and will soon begin constructing new furniture for the space (work-tables, shelving units, and benches) that can also be used for forthcoming exhibitions that focus on community engagement.



This generous and generative new space epitomizes the spirit with which we are greeting 2021. With so many of our artists confined to their homes or priced out of studio space, we hope this space will be a balm to our artists, who can safely coordinate use of it during the pandemic.

We look forward to sharing new exhibitions and our new space with you in the new year, as well as sharing the results of our work on the 2020 Juried Exhibition (re-imagined as an e-publication) and of our 2020 Black Box Curatorial Fellowship (re-imagined as a series of online workshops and forthcoming exhibition in the Commons Space) in the months to come.

Thank you for reading about our year at Vox Populi. We hope you'll continue to [support us](#) in our work sustaining independent arts and community in Philadelphia as we continue to navigate these challenging, yet transformative, times.