Whatever Works
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Left: Curator Francesco Bonami. Right: Elizabeth Dee director Jayne Drobn, artist Mika Tajima, and dealer Elizabeth Dee. (Photos: Joanne Kim/X Initiative)

AN APOCALYPTIC MONSOON SEASON in Manhattan abated briefly on Tuesday, just in time for the apocalyptic opening of “No Soul For Sale,” a five-day “festival” in Chelsea for thirty-eight nonprofit and independent art spaces and publications from all over the world. The participation-by-invitation event was conceived as an ecstasically rudderless convocation—with taped borders on the floor as its only curatorial affect—by X-Initiative, a yearlong not-for-profit exhibition experiment in the old Dia space on Twenty-second Street. It took the hungry crowd thirty minutes to conjure a Bosch-like hell scene out of this engineered informality. By the time I had pawed to the fourth floor, an amused text came through with the news that Francesco Bonami was squashed between a crowd and a guard at the now-baricaded entrance, and though an envoy was sent to his rescue, one can only wonder when the super-curator last had to wait in a hot throng of haircuts and free-beer enthusiasts. I had just passed Maurizio Cattelan, safely wedged, but just about as stuck, in a stairwell corner.

An international art fair stripped of musty and intractable affiliations, godhead collectors, and daily sales goals, “No Soul” would grow to figure out what it was, live, as the evening unfolded, and for this the X team should be applauded. The fact that most people wanted to go to the roof and hang out there drinking their promotional coconut water for the whole evening, as they did in the hundreds, spoke mostly to the fact that New York hadn’t soaked in a real sunset in what felt like weeks. Yet while watching an absent solo display of grinning and faint staggering from Brian Kerstetter, the unhinged star of Olaf Breuning’s glorious Whitney Biennial contribution last spring, I couldn’t help but wonder whether this idle rooftop scene was quite what the top-class PR firms heavily promoting this event were hired in hopes of providing.

Left: On the roof of X. Right: Critic Jerry Saltz. (Photos: Joanne Kim/X Initiative)

A chopped-up compilation of historical video art care of a group named B’L’ing (pronounced “bootlegging” on the night) was projected behind the Rhizome desk. “They got permission to use this footage from all the artists’ estates,” said the organization’s righteous ambassador, twice, before the inquirer on the other side noted, “That’s not exactly bootlegging, then.” I feared it wouldn’t take many more wags before they struck that line from their pitch, but this was a sweet exchange indicative of the affair: Without the cues, rules, and stakes of explicit commerce—space was supplied to exhibitors free of charge—amateur blunders were there for the making. “This was not supposed to be a performance,” Stefano Cennuschi from Mousie happily confided as we watched Ian Tweedy finish a photorealist self-portrait on the wall. No one from the Milanese magazine saw the point in being too fussed over it.

With the absence of an ante, unheard-of in New York, the majority of locals in attendance took a deliciously whatever stance. X-Initiative advisory-board member Gabrielle Giattino was mentally miles away, markedly...
more concerned with Kai Althoff and Brandon Stosuy’s elaborate show opening at her minuscule DISPATCH space in Chinatown on Sunday than with her “No Soul” display. “The rest of these haven’t come back from Basel yet,” she said, waving vaguely at the incomplete print portfolio leaning against the wall. She scrunched her brow for further explanation but could only manage a going-nowhere “you know” to express exactly how interested she is in the rigmarole of international capitalism. This is not how you hustle a client.


Artists Matt Keegan and Fia Backström buddled up and hugged the walls, sidestepping shrews who were somehow able to see their many friends while at no point doing anything more than “leaving.” Jordan Wolfson, hovering by Barcelona’s Latitudes, took several pros before he could even remember that he was participating in a group show with healthy buzz opening at I-20 Gallery round the corner later in the week. Eventually waking up to the idea that he was a professional artist talking to a writer, Wolfson pointed at a nearby projector. “I lent that to them,” he volunteered with a goofy puff of pride. “That’s my claim to fame.” With competition for the “Who cares?” prize as fierce as this, it took a languidly heroic trifecta from White Columns to take the cake. Director Matthew Higgs was diagonal on a folding chair, an industrial floor fan pointed at him alone, lost in his display of works from Oakland’s Creative Growth Art Center. “This work makes me happy, so I’m happy,” was all the plain Zen the man needed to offer from his seat that night.

Left: Artist Martin Soto Climent. Right: Dealer Daniel Reich.

Left: Not an Alternative’s Jooyoung Oh and Beka Economopoulos. Right: Latitude’s Max Andrews. (Photos: Ryan McNamara)
Left: Curator Miguel Arnado. Right: Juliette Mauduit and Hekla Dogg Jonadottir from Klang&Bang. (Photos: Ryan McNamara)

Left: Marissa Long and Geoffrey Aldridge of Transformer. Right: Joseph DiGiuseppe of Fluxspace. (Photos: Ryan McNamara)

Left: Artis director Yael Reinhart. Right: Ballroom Marfa's Alicia Ritson, Fairfax Dorn, and Jonathan Mergele.

Left: Edoardo Bonaspetti of Mousse. (Photo: William Pym) Right: From the roof of X. (Photo: Joanne KimX Initiative)