THE NEW FACTORY

IN BROOKLYN, AN INDUSTRIAL ARTISTS' COLONY

THE FUTURE OF NEW YORK ART smells like vanilla and resides on the Sunset Park waterfront in sixteen massive buildings called Industry City. The smell is courtesy of Virginia Dare, maker of food-flavor products, which has had a factory there since 1923. The bohemian spirit is from the 57 recently opened artist studios, the vast empty floors ready for avant-garde performance, and Lise Soskolne, a Bard-educated artist who happens to work for the landlord, Industry City Associates. Last year, Soskolne persuaded the landlords to carve out 45 "incubator" studios for emerging artists and twelve market-rate studios for more established ones out of the 6 million square feet of space mostly left vacant by the dwindling maritime trade. If you build it, artists will come, she reasoned—and after them, perhaps, a deluge of new market-rate commercial clients.

The theory has precedent, of course. With miles of light-flooded warehouse space separated by heavy pillars, Industry City looks like a giant indoor version of Soho in the seventies, when artists such as Gordon Matta-Clark, Chuck Close, and Vito Acconci moved into the abandoned factory spaces of bygone manufacturers. Lured by spacious $422-per-month studios, artists are now discovering this neo-Soho on New York Bay. Nearly all of the incubator studios have been rented, and only three of the market-rate ones are available (although there are plans to create more). Incubator tenants include video and performance artist K8 Hardy, sculptor Jarrod Beck, and textile-based artists Travis Boyer and Donnie Cervantes. In the market-rate building (where rents are as low as $685 a month), you'll find Paul Chan, who recently had a solo show at the New Museum; Sharon Hayes, the well-known performance artist; and Doug Ashford, a professor at Cooper Union.

"The really important part is that you are not working in a hotel room where you have a life that is separate from anywhere else," says Beck. "It's great to be invited into people's studios and see what they're doing." Boyer, who recently invited his friends and neighbors to an indigo-dyeing party (45 people showed up), agrees: "There's a community. This is where we're going to work together and create stuff. It's not completely defined yet, but there's definitely a sense of group togetherness." Bands of artists scour the empty floors, foraging for raw material. Every Tuesday, Thomas Beard and Ed Halter host an experimental-film-screening-and-lecture series called "Light Industry," which is as much a loft party as it is a forum for, for instance, the work of avant-garde director James Benning (whose daughter Sadie has a studio here). "It's really affirming about why we're in New York..."
and what it means to be an artist in New York,” says Boyer.

A small committee handpicks the artists who get studios. “All of the artists here are engaged politically and aware of what’s going on in the world,” Soskolne says proudly. She’s set up common spaces for artist interaction and has programmed events in some of the empty floors. (In August, she invited the Theatre of a Two-Headed Calf to perform a queer adaptation of Macbeth.) But for all their similarities, Industry City isn’t likely to go the way of Soho, or even Dumbo. Boxed in by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives on the north and a federal penitentiary to the south, the area isn’t zoned for residential development. That’s fine by Soskolne: “I don’t want to see the artists turfed out.”

JOSHUA DAVID STEIN