

Keith J. Varadi Talks Shop With Bodega



Bodega, "Wax Apple" installation view, 2013. Image courtesy of Bodega.

I first learned about Bodega over three years ago when they were only on their third exhibition—a solo presentation of Nicholas Gottlund, an interdisciplinary artist who runs an exquisite press, Gottlund Verlag, between Los Angeles (where he now lives) and Eastern Pennsylvania (where he started it). The following month, one of my best friends and favorite painters, Michael Kennedy Costa, was asked to participate in a group exhibition there. When Michael came back from the opening in Philadelphia, I remember him telling me that the space and the folks who ran it were incredibly charming.

I finally met Elyse Derosia and Eric Veit, the co-owners of Bodega, in October of 2012 when I was in Philadelphia to give a poetry reading across town. I felt fortunate that the reading was taking place during the run of "Floor Routine," a group show featuring three of my friends—Ethan Cook, John Roebas, and Maria Walker. It was an insightful introduction to the space, as well as the owners' ideas for the space, as the works and how they were arranged felt as if they were meant for the space and the other way around, which is a rare feat for a gallery to achieve.

In March of 2013, I came back to give another reading—this time at Bodega. Like Michael and everyone else I've spoken with who has worked with them, I too have been charmed by Elyse and Eric. They are warm and inviting like small town B & B owners, yet whip-smart and ambitious, which is why I have no doubt they are going to prove to be an invaluable addition to the always-thriving downtown New York art scene. Over the course of their time in Philadelphia, they were regularly exhibiting artists who have come to be some of the hottest names in contemporary art. Some of the folks on this lengthy and

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varied list of rising stars include Joshua Abelow, Sebastian Black, Lucas Blalock, Elaine Cameron-Weir, Paul Cowan, Alex Da Corte, Sam Falls, Andrea Longacre-White, Ben Schumacher, Travess Smalley, Stewart Uoo, and Artie Vierkant.

The lineup for their first New York show confirms that they plan to stay on the upward curve. They will be officially opening their new space on March 9th (6-9 pm) at 167 Rivington St., Lower Level East, New York, NY 10002 with a group exhibition, featuring Tomer Aluf, Sam Anderson, Tova Carlin, Rochelle Goldberg, Carlos Reyes, and Chloe Seibert. The exhibition will run until April 13th.

Below is a recent e-mail exchange between me (from my somewhat new home of Los Angeles) and Elyse and Eric (from their somewhat new home of New York).

Keith J. Varadi: How and when did the gallery start, and how has it evolved?

Bodega: The two of us and three other friends from college opened the gallery in Philadelphia in 2010. We had all recently moved to Philly and were really interested in creating a space that would provide artists with the time and space to make and show new work. During our three years in Philly, we worked with artists from all over the country, and we like to think that we expanded and fostered the art scene while we were there. We didn't start with any preconceptions about what it should or should not be. We just rented a space and began putting together shows. Since then, we've grown to now publishing artist books and editions, as well as participating in group shows and guest-curating at other spaces.

KJV: What inspired the move from Philadelphia to New York?

B: Other projects beckoned the other three founders away from Philly, and the two of us felt ready for a change in location as well. We still felt very committed to Bodega, so we decided to move it to New York with us. It doesn't feel like that big of a change so far, as so many of the artists we've worked with and people interested in what we do are located here.

KJV: What sorts of differences do you see between Philadelphia and New York?

B: There are so many differences. In a way, Philadelphia's strengths are New York's weaknesses and vice-versa. Philly is a very easy place to live and have a studio. Rents are cheap and the city is small, so transportation is easy. But Philadelphia is very much a small pond, in terms of artists, galleries, and critics. Relative to New York, there is not a lot of money in the city that goes to artists, and as a result, most artists have day jobs and there are very few career artists. For these reasons, the DIY and collective art gallery models flourish.

KJV: What is the new physical space like, and how does it compare to the old one?

B: Our old space in Philly had lots of character that was always interesting to contend with: an old elevator shaft, a lofted stage-like area, a trap door, and really gnarly old wood floors. The new space is considerably smaller, but it's still the same shape. It's as if someone just scaled down every dimension.

KJV: The old space was located in a very specific area of Philadelphia (Old City); can you talk about your relationship with that space and that area?

B: If there was a neighborhood considered to be the gallery district in Philadelphia, it would be Old City, but there are interesting contemporary art spaces scattered throughout the city. Although we didn't aim to be located in Old City, it's a pretty neighborhood and centrally located, so it ended up working out really well

KJV: What were you looking for when you were seeking out a new space and location, and how much do you anticipate this new space and location will influence future exhibition planning?

B: Location definitely matters. There is a big difference between a commercial street in a busy neighborhood, a third floor walk-up in a residential area, or a loft in an industrial district. But, at the same time, one could make the argument that location doesn't really matter. I think that a lot of people who are aware of us to date had never been to the Philly location. The Internet enables the visibility of so much that would otherwise be inaccessible and the increasing importance of photography, documentation, and networks for visibility are perhaps the most drastic changes in art over the last decade.

That said, we really value face-to-face interaction and were very pleased to find a spot on the Lower East Side that's so easy for people to get to.

KJV: What sort of programming are you planning for the new space?

B: We plan on continuing to have exhibitions, performances, readings, and other events. Whatever feels interesting at the moment!

KJV: Do you intend to represent artists and do things like participate in art fairs?

B: We find it very important to support the artists we work with and think it's possible to do so without using a representation model. We've considered fairs, though we haven't participated in one to date. We can't talk from experience here, but fairs present a lot of complicated issues for us. We have spent a lot of time promoting art and artists who aren't necessarily part of commercial markets, and because fairs are so expensive, you can't really go to one expecting to lose money. Participating in fairs then, seems like the opposite of what we strive to do otherwise. That said, we don't think it's impossible to participate in interesting and tactful ways.

KJV: In addition to exhibitions, the gallery has also produced books, prints, and performances; what can people expect moving forward?

B: More of it. All of the above. The performances and other temporal programming we've done in the past have been some of our favorites and will definitely continue to play a large role in what we'll be doing in New York. We're working on a few new book projects at the moment, including books with Kayla Guthrie and Dena Yago.

KJV: Given the fact that you're both artists as well as gallerists/curators, how do you balance these two practices, and how do the two affect each other?

B: Running a gallery and curating other artists into shows has definitely broadened our network of artist peers. Doing studio visits and meeting new artists continues to be very inspirational to our personal practices. But, curating shows and maintaining a space takes a lot of time and creative energy, and sometimes takes over the ability to go to the studio.

KJV: What are some of the most impressive shows you've seen recently?

B: The Jason Rhoades show at the ICA in Philly was one of the strongest retrospective-style exhibitions we've seen. Andrew Gbur and Joe Brainard at Know More Games was also great. We were recently in LA for the art book fair and were able to go to Paramount Ranch, which was cool, complicated, and fun.