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Let's Talk

Bodega

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## Let's Talk

This document is part of a larger series of PDFs organized and published by Bodega on the occasion of *First Among Equals*, an exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia that considers the various modes contemporary artists have developed to work with their peers. Contributors to the series offer various perspectives on the social, political, and economic relationships that inform contemporary artistic practice. All PDFs from this series are available at [bodegaphiladelphia.org](http://bodegaphiladelphia.org).

Bodega is directed by Elyse Derosia, Ariela Kuh, Lydia Okrent, James Pettengill, and Eric Veit, with the aim of facilitating, supporting, and presenting new art and ideas.

This text was developed from an outline on a document shared by the directors of Bodega, February, 2012. It has grown out of discussions amongst ourselves, the curators of this exhibition, and the artists who have collaborated with us on our work for *First Among Equals*.

## I. Where We're Coming From

When we founded Bodega in 2010 we wanted to address what we felt to be missing, not only from Philadelphia, but from the way art is made, displayed, and talked about in other circles as well. The art economy in this country is not structured to support young artists, experimental or non-saleable projects, or risk-taking. These types of work do not necessarily fit into commercial galleries or established non-profit cultural institutions. Our aim was to present new exhibitions and performances that were free from commercial concern and serve as a platform for various types of cultural exchange.

It is possible to conceive of our existence as a website, an online gallery, or a PDF library. These are straightforward and cost-effective ways of sharing art and visual ideas. But physical experience is important. Our physical presence allows us to work hands-on with artists to foster relationships and develop communities. Our aim has always been to pursue new ideas and to encourage and facilitate their production and dissemination. We rarely curate works that already exist, preferring to work with artists to enable them to develop new work. Our style is to curate artists: we give them time, space, and support to realize their ideas. These approaches, however, are not always easy to translate into income, and this leads to the question that we are presented with every day: How can a project like this be sustainable?

We've never pursued becoming a 501(c)(3) non-profit for fear of compromising our vision of what we are and the kind of work we can show. We decided to become a sponsored project of Fractured Atlas, an umbrella organization for artists and organizations that use Fractured Atlas's 501(c)(3) status to be grant-eligible and accept tax-deductible donations. They provide support for all the things that can make running an arts organization a drag, in order to "honor individuality and the independent spirit." This has allowed us to maintain our creative freedom while also receiving tax-deductible individual contributions, but it still leaves us paying for the bulk of all programming and operating costs.

## II. *First Among Equals*

We were very excited when the University of Pennsylvania's Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia invited us to be part of a show about, as the curators described it, "the different platforms artists develop to work together." They invited us to propose a unique project that would examine how "contingency, cooperation, community and collaboration might all resonate within our current landscape."

The invitation represented a unique challenge for us as an organization that develops exhibitions, performance and printed matter on a person-by-person, project-by-project basis. Although we produce *under* the name Bodega, we do not produce work *as* Bodega. When we work through Bodega we act as facilitators, not as artists. What does it mean then to stage an idea in another location, in a group show amongst other artists, ostensibly, as The Artist Bodega?

We quickly found it necessary to define the nature of our participation in order to examine more specifically how this project would differ from our regular calendar.

Our initial proposal described a series of performances whose length and number would be determined by fair hourly compensation. We would choose the performers and the ICA's budget for the show would determine how many performances could happen during the run of the show. As a small non-commercial organization that runs almost exclusively on a gift economy, we saw that a major difference when working with an established cultural institution like the ICA was their ability to fairly compensate artists monetarily for their work in a way we are almost never able to do. Though most cultural organizations, including the ICA, depend in some way upon gift economies, we wanted to use our role as curatorial middle-men to distribute the budget in both an ethical and conceptually relevant manner. Our initial proposal outlined this approach as a series of performances, and described an additional discursive component intended to explore our thinking behind the decision (what you're reading right now).

The reality of the ICA's available budget, however, made it clear that any hopes we had of paying performers fairly for their work would not be realized. A budget of \$2500 can not come close to adequately paying all people involved in a project that intends to fill around 500 square feet of space and five months of time in a public forum.

Even if we were to organize a series of performances with one performance per month and nothing else, we would have \$500 per performance. If the money were going to an individual artist and they were to get about \$150 per day to develop and realize the performance, that would only cover about two days of plan-

ning and one day for the performance. This would not even begin to cover costs of materials, transportation or hiring other actors in the performances.

How then do we approach this budget? Do we develop a project that can fit within the budget or do we develop a project based solely on our interests with no regard for the budget whatsoever? What should this budget be expected to cover? It is obviously not intended to pay Bodega for the work the ICA is commissioning. If this is the case, why should we, and why have we continued to participate in this show? There are almost thirty different artists, writers, curators and performers involved in our contribution to *First Among Equals*, and much of our budget has ended up paying for material costs or the costs of hiring actors for the performances. Very little goes to each person involved in our project, none goes to Bodega itself, and we will inevitably cover all costs that go beyond this budget.

At one point we had the idea to ask the ICA for a detailed version of their budget for the fiscal year to trace how their money is spent. After all, public disclosure of fiscal records is a defining characteristic of U.S. tax-exempt organizations. We wanted to use their records to explore the way American artists are systematically under-compensated for their work. We had no intention to claim that the ICA was unique in this regard but simply wanted to show that the U.S. art economy operates on a system that takes for granted the time and work of artists. Needless to say, it was pretty hard for us to convince the curators this was a good idea and it simply was not possible for us to see a detailed budget beyond what is available to the public in UPenn's public fiscal records. Transparency is scary! We understand.

Working on a project for *First Among Equals* raised many questions for us and we decided to address them in a straightforward way, reflecting on the process and experience for ourselves, but also talking with people in similar situations. Participants in *First Among Equals* explore various methods of collaboration that confront historical models of artist-curator, artist-artist, and artist-public relationships. In many ways, this is a show about "young art" and the way in which a generation of millennials have approached art-making. As part of our contribution, we invited others to reflect on their experience negotiating these relationships, hoping to map a constellation of perspectives on what it means to work with others and the ethics involved in doing so. These commissioned texts have proven to be integral in navigating our way through this project.

Included in the series of texts are writings by: Martine Syms and Marco Kane Braunschweiler, co-directors of Golden Age, a five-year project that presented over fifty dynamic, collaborative projects with an international community of artists, designers, writers and other passionate obsessives; Shannon Stratton, founder of threewalls, a not-for-profit committed to supporting contemporary visual arts in Chicago through solo exhibitions for regional artists, residencies, grants to

artists, publications, conferences and commissioning programs; Aaron Levy, a self-described “Philadelphia-based educator and urban curator whose initiatives and collaborations recover and redeploy histories of advocacy and practices of engagement”; Dushko Petrovich, an artist, writer, and editor of the journal *Paper Monument*; and Derek Frech, Daniel Wallace, and Joe Lacina, co-founders of Extra Extra, a gallery which supports the development of artists interpreting our global society through an interdisciplinary lens.

These texts are made available as PDFs on our website and in printed form at the ICA.

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It is important that we define Bodega by the network of relationships we enable, avoiding definitions based solely on the work that we show or the physical space that we occupy. Our work for *First Among Equals* has allowed us to explore this network of relationships, the nature of collaboration and the issues raised by our work as facilitators of exhibitions, performances and printed matter. This work is not “about” collaboration per se, but is the evidence of numerous conversations and collaborations with other artists and thinkers.

Many questions were raised for us by our participation in this show and we have chosen to explore them rather than attempt to provide answers. Many of these questions are not new, and they fundamentally shape our cultural and economic landscape. They are important to talk about and they are important to continue to talk about.

### III. Questions

#### A. Dynamics

As it has developed, our project for *First Among Equals* has come to address explicit aims of the show as well as issues raised by the approach the curators have taken in its development. What does it mean for an organization to curate curators? When we work with others, how does the system that we work within affect the work itself? How do relationships of power affect these collaborations?

To call something collaborative implies that on a certain level decisions have been shared, that collaborators have reached consensus or that relationships between collaborators are equal. But relationships are complex. We work inside a system that credits individuals, one that cannot generate profit from anonymous work. A band always has a front-person.

What does it mean to collaborate in a culture that so heavily values individual agency? This is the question from which *First Among Equals'* title is derived. A first among equals is a member of a group who is looked upon as an authority of special importance by his or her peers: the group's unofficial or hidden leader. The reference to this person being "equal" to the rest is intended to project mutual respect or camaraderie. But is equality in collaboration inherently illusory? Is this the thesis of *First Among Equals*?

#### B. Working In a Gift Economy

Bodega works to encourage relationships, to spur conversation and dialogue between people. We deal in cultural capital more often than in monetary capital, and our work with others is based on an exchange of this cultural capital.

We give artists space, time and visibility to explore an idea; in exchange we are able to share and explore the value of their work. For many people this is a fair trade and Bodega operates almost exclusively on this model. In fact, this is the model upon which most cultural institutions operate, the ICA included. Indeed, the cultural cache granted by established and respected institutions like the ICA, MOMA PS1, The Whitney or the MCA in Chicago represents a huge "amount" of cultural capital, and most artists would love to work with such institutions. Artists commonly work under the assumption that exposure in the present will lead to sales in the future. This can be true, but there are numerous problems with this assumption, the first being that not all work is saleable. Not all work is product-driven and sometimes work is developed to be specifically resistant to monetary valuation. One cannot pay a gas bill with exposure and if a work cannot be translated into monetary capital, an artist could conceivably be endlessly compensated in cultural

capital. Good work is rewarded with new opportunities to do new work which is again rewarded with new opportunities to do new work. Work is paid with more work.

Of course, the choice to work as an artist is one that we, as free actors in the market, make for ourselves. One is not forced to make unsaleable work. Should saleability be treated as something apart from a work or is it an inherent conceptual aspect of any work? Is there always a way to orient one's cultural production towards monetary compensation? What would the world look like if unsaleable art did not exist? Is it even possible that a culture could *only* make products that could be bought and sold?

### C. Modeling Support

How should a cultural organization function? How should it be supported? Would it be okay to operate with a gift economy forever?

Bodega is supported by private donations on a small scale. Five directors share the costs of renting a space and supporting programming, which is supplemented by a modest donor base. We have no paid staff, and rely on the help of unpaid interns. How can an arts organization not driven by sales be sustainable? Larger, more established non-profits are also supported by private donors, but on a bigger scale, in the form of individual support as well as foundational grants.

We would love to have foundational support, and have researched and applied for various grants only to find that these grants are largely off-limits to organizations like Bodega. Most substantial grants require that organizations be 1) classified as 501(c)(3) tax exempt (and often as public charities under 509(a) of that code), 2) have a governing or advisory board, 3) have at least a two year history of programming with a proven track record, 4) have a "master plan", 5) be applying for grants for projects that take place at least six months down the road, 6) provide a completed audit, and/or 7) have an annual operating budget of at least \$50,000 per year.<sup>2</sup>

In a way, being financially un beholden works to our favor; the larger an organization gets, the slower it moves. The fact that Bodega is operated by five individuals who are only accountable to one another—not a board, clients, or annual reports—aids in our independence from external interests and enables our agility as a cultural organization. We are enabled by our structure but restricted by our lack of funding in the same way larger organizations are enabled by their funding but potentially restricted by their structure.

Bodega was never modeled to be a profitable business and we have considered many paths to sustainability, the fundamental question being how to

accept support from others without becoming obliged to their interests. Would it be wise to spend less energy developing our programming and more energy selling to wealthy people at art fairs? Would it be wise to direct Bodega in a way that makes us more grant-eligible? Would it be wise to look for support outside the community that consumes our cultural products?

#### D. Emerging Artists and Compensation

Bodega focuses on a program of artists whose work does not usually fit into the commercial gallery system. These are artists from whose work it is the most difficult to generate money. Good business models for commercial galleries focus on “established-emerging,” mid-career, or canonized artists for whose work there is already a market. These models seek to develop existing markets and control work through representation. The “good” business model aggregates value around individuals. In the same way unregulated markets generate great inequality, unregulated art markets generate great inequality in monetary capital and cultural capital. It’s a winner take all system where those with capital generate more capital.

It is currently the case that in some industries it is virtually impossible to start a career without an unpaid internship. This effectively means that you have to pay to work in a certain field, restricting the field only to those with the privilege to take an unpaid internship. When artists work without monetary compensation they are essentially doing the same thing; they are working under the assumption that their accrual of cultural capital will ultimately translate to monetary capital. Only two percent of artists in the U.S. make a living solely from the commercial sale of their work.<sup>3</sup> There is simply not enough room at the top for everyone. Furthermore, if an artist’s work is not physical, saleable, or collectible, it may never be translated to monetary value.

Do we want to work within a system that privileges artists with privilege? Who does this leave behind? How does this shape future generations of artists?

#### E. Performance and Compensation

Performance can come in many forms and it is often difficult to use the word without qualifying it. Performance describes varieties of theatre, dance and music in all manners and contexts. “Performance Art,” as it has come to be known, has grown out of the trajectories of fine art and critical theory and typically operates in the same white cube in which it developed. While theatre, dance and music have established “pay-per-view” models of funding, gallery-style performance does not use this model. Gallery-style performance can operate on a single owner/

collector model like painting and sculpture, or can be developed to be specifically resistant to markets. After all, how can one own a performance? Does one own a performance by simply experiencing it? This would seem to be how a pay-per-view model defines ownership. If individuals do not pay to see a performance, is it owned by the artist? Is it owned by the venue? If the performance does not generate money, is it still valuable? Who creates value and for whom is it created?

## F Responsible Capitalism

In 2009, Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd spoke of a new economic approach that he termed “social capitalism” which includes “a system of open markets, unambiguously regulated by an activist state, and one in which the state intervenes to reduce the greater inequalities that competitive markets will inevitably generate.”<sup>4</sup>

The classical idea of the free market as described by Adam Smith encourages individual action determined by market forces. Smith’s idea is that the “invisible hand” of the market would regulate the economy and distribute money fairly. Within this idea, unregulated markets define their own morality. Competition is good and greed is good.

This is the foundation of American capitalism. However the ideas behind social capitalism underlie the governmental regulation of free markets. There are obvious dangers in believing in self-regulating markets. Not only do they lead to extreme inequality and generational consolidations of wealth and power, they are responsible for speculation bubbles and huge cycles of boom and bust. Capitalism is designed to produce capital. It is not designed to produce jobs, and it is not designed to produce culture. We do not define responsibility through capitalism, for responsibility lies somewhere outside this system.

How do we approach the ethics of business? Is responsibility defined by an economic system? Is it defined by the regulatory government and the legal system? Or do we define it individually, on the local and community level? By operating a cultural organization or working within one, does an individual assume a moral obligation to behave responsibly independent of larger forces governing the economy?

Would this obligation change based on being for-profit, or not-for-profit? Would it change based on the size of an organization?

To what extent is any cultural organization an activist organization?

notes

<sup>1</sup> These requirements were gathered from the grant eligibility guidelines listed by The National Endowment for the Arts, The William Penn Foundation, The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, and the Philadelphia Cultural Fund.

<sup>2</sup> From Columbia University Research Center for Arts and Culture, "Information on Artists," in "Labor Movement," Nato Thompson Interviews W.A.G.E. *Artforum* March 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Kevin Rudd, The Global Financial Crisis, *The Monthly*, February 2009.