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## KRISTEN DODGE: EXIT INTERVIEW

*Artists come and go, and so do galleries. Last week gallery owner Kristen Dodge announced that DODGEgallery, which has been in operation since 2010 in New York City's bustling Lower East Side arts district, was closing shop. The news took a lot of people, including myself, by surprise.*

- Steven Zevitas, Publisher

The art world is replete with unique characters, and Kristen is one of my favorites. My first encounter with her was in 2004 at the now-closed Judi Rotenberg Gallery in Boston. It was the opening reception for a new exhibition and she had just started working for the gallery. We were introduced and, after telling her that I admired a certain piece in the exhibition, Kristen went into full sales mode and twisted my arm every which way trying to get me to buy it. I think she almost talked me into it. My first impression of her is the one that defines her for me to this day: charismatic, intelligent, intense and aggressive.

It did not take long for Kristen to make herself known in Boston. She quickly figured out that being a successful art dealer requires connections – at the end of the day it is a people business - and it was not long before she had made an indelible impression on most of the movers and shakers in the city's small, but engaged art scene. Within a year of working at Rotenberg, Kristen became the gallery's director, and over the next five years she turned it into one of the most important spaces for contemporary art in Boston. Alas, Boston could not contain her energy.

I remember when Kristen called me to tell me about her plans to open DODGEgallery in New York City. I wasn't surprised as it seemed the next logical step for someone with her ambition and drive. What did surprise me was the scale at which she chose to open with. Doing nothing by halves, Kristen found a large Lower East Side space close to the New Museum and went about doing a first-rate build out. When I first walked into the space I was blown away. It was a space built to make a statement: I am here...I have built it...and you will come.

Over the past four years, I, and a bunch of her numerous Boston fans, have watched Kristen develop at a distance. DODGEgallery found its stride quickly. Since opening, the gallery has had its exhibitions consistently reviewed, appeared in numerous art fairs (including The Armory Show), and developed a respected stable of artists that now includes Cordy Ryman and Jason Middlebrook. Every time I have run into Kristen, she has been the busiest woman in show business, and as ever, intense and aggressive. I am a huge fan of hers, so when the announcement came that the gallery was closing I was saddened.

I reached out to Kristen not long after hearing the news and asked if she wouldn't mind talking about her experiences of setting up shop and operating in New York City...a sort of exit interview. She graciously agreed to answer my questions, and did so in a typically thoughtful way. My sense is that the art world has not seen the last of Kristen Dodge.

**You started your career as a gallerist in Boston, what made you decide to set up shop in New York?**

The decision was a no-brainer. There are more galleries, institutions, and non-profits involved in contemporary art in NYC. There are more collectors, curators, writers, artists, and art enthusiasts, and their level of involvement runs deep and reaches internationally. New York didn't need another art gallery, but we needed NYC. If we were going to build the gallery program, most critically our artists' careers, there was no question that being in the epicenter was the most intelligent and exciting choice to make.

**What were the criteria that a space in New York had to meet?**

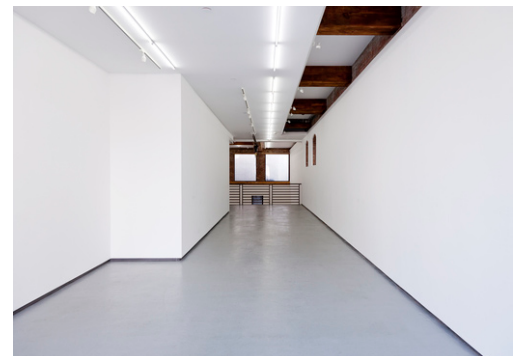
Our ideal space was exactly what I found. The decision to prioritize being in proximity to the New Museum, near other strong galleries, at street-level, and in a large-scale space is what enabled us to grow quickly. People found us easily, were taken in by their surroundings, and would remember being there. Scale enabled us to have ambitious installations and work with artists whose practice required a significant platform. Having the opportunity to mount two exhibitions at once enabled us to showcase artists early in their careers alongside curated group exhibitions that expanded recognition of their work and of the gallery. The number of galleries we consigned work from (100?) in our short run was an integral and rewarding part of our growing reputation.

**Why the Lower East Side?**

Because LES has more life than Chelsea.



Andrew Judd, Kristen Dodge, Patton Hindle. Photo by: Carly Gaebe



DODGEgallery Interior



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**Your gallery currently represents thirteen artists. How did the stable come together?**

We brought seven artists from the program in Boston who were all at a point when their careers were ready for a broader platform. Moving forward with growing the roster, my first priority was to sign more established mid-career artists, which is exactly what we did. We then had the grounding to add a few younger-career artists. The fun that we had working with artists at different career levels and the mutually beneficial relationship between younger and more established artists, made diversity integral to our program. Each artist was able to hold a unique position in the gallery roster wherein there wasn't repetition or overlap (wood aside). The binding elements between the artists were and are their utter commitment to what they do, their excellence, their passion, and their authenticity. Each relationship was demanding, specific, and close, and I will miss every single one of them and the ways that I have known them so far.

**Do you think of the gallery as having an overarching aesthetic? If so, how would you characterize it?**

Labored  
Human  
Nature  
Materiality  
Intention  
Imperfection  
(and wood)

**Which artist were you most excited about bringing on board...what was the courtship like?**

Polygamy!

**What were the challenges of being an out-of-towner in NYC's art world?**

It was tough getting to know other dealers at first, but as I look back, the majority of the relationships we developed were with other galleries. It's an exchange borne out of commiseration and self-preservation. In LES, Hudson was the most gracious and generous of all, followed by Laurel Gitlen and James Fuentes. It was also difficult to decode the mystery of institutional exhibitions and acquisitions. We developed many of our relationships through being involved with the Whitney Museum and the New Museum, most notably; we hosted curators and directors, and grew as far as placing works with collectors who serve those institutions. One of my regrets will be stopping short of contributing to the process of our artists showing in NYC museums.

**In your mind, what is the job of an art dealer?**

The job of an art dealer is to sell art, and to place that art with meaningful collections whenever possible. The job of an art dealer is to grow the careers of artists, build dialog around their practice, and solidify their longevity both practically and historically. The job of an art dealer is to bridge the enormous gaps between artists being unknown, artists being known and artists staying known. Galleries are on the front line, showing work long before it reaches institutions.

**Being a successful art dealer requires both "art" and business skills. What do you think is the optimal mix? Has your opinion on that changed in the past 4 years?**

I agree and have always been comfortable with the intermixing of art and business. However, there came a point when we were looking at The Next Level and from where I was standing, it looked pretty clear to me that the motivation of money (whether out of necessity or ambition) is trumping the integrity of art.

**What do you mean by the Next Level?**

The next level involves more people who are popularly known as speculators...people who buy with the hopeful prospect of eventually selling to make a significant profit. The next level also entails artists developing a secondary market which is created and buoyed by those speculators and which can grossly inflate and then likely deflate the value of an artist's work. The true harm is the impact it has on an artist's practice, creating pressures that influence their motivations, compromising the greatness of their work, and in turn contributing to their own downfall. This is the market that we would have entered as our success grew. I closed the gallery before we got there. Most of the collectors who we were lucky enough to work with - a diverse range - were in it for the right reasons. But the writing was on the wall.

I spoke with a successful art dealer recently who dismissed the notion of a new model, observing that when people set out to do it differently, they wind up doing the same thing as everyone else. This particular person has decided to look the evil (not my word) and fallibility of the art world in the face, embrace it, become it, and use it for financial gain. It's a job at the end of the day, right? I admire this person's tenacity to succeed and survive alternately over the course of changing markets, and their track record of launching artists' careers. But at some point along the way, this person admittedly lost the art part of the equation. All I could think was, what happened and fuck that.

**How do you feel about the role that art fairs currently play in the life of an art dealer?**

Art fairs are a productive and unparalleled means to build an audience, which expands the reach of galleries and the visibility of artists. The challenge is that the convenience of art fairs prioritizes saving time over building scholarship around art. As a result, gallery exhibitions that offer time and space for art to gain dialogue are losing the audience that financially supports them. The point to address is the heavy tipping of the scale towards high risk, sales-driven, short-term showcasing



Jason Middlebrook | Pattern: Follow the Rules at The Eli and Edythe Broad Museum, East Lansing, MI



Cordy Ryman | Windowboxing, 2013, acrylic and enamel on wood, approx. 153 x 328 x 6 inches



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that compromises a richer purpose for creating art, and a more meaningful and inspiring way of engaging art with the public. At the end of the day, I'm not interested villainizing art fairs, or valorizing art galleries; I am, however, interested in looking at the systemic shortcomings of the contemporary art world and identifying new ideas that come forth. On a strictly practical note, I would also like to add that the necessity of participating in art fairs puts an incredible strain on small gallery businesses both in terms of staffing and expenses. The cost of incessantly applying, the cost of participating, the risk of not making significant sales at fairs, and the necessity of maintaining a rigorous exhibitions program simultaneously at the gallery, is high-stakes gambling.

***Are collectors or artists more difficult to please? Why?***

Both. Because they both demand and deserve a lot.

***What is more important these days, an artist's work or resume?***

The work and resume are of equal importance.

***If you could offer advice to someone opening a new gallery what would it be?***

If you need to do it, make sure you have a lot of capital, experience working at a high-level gallery, influential contacts, an interest in doing 5-10 art fairs a year, and a willingness to pursue success when art might be at stake. Talk to as many galleries as you can, build an understanding of the gallery model at different levels, learn about the ways things have been done already, and figure out what isn't working and what is. There are a few galleries that stand-out for both debunking and courting "the system" for lack of a better term: Bureau, Canada, and Ramiken Crucible are three of them.

***You have named three galleries that, although small, have garnered an incredible amount of attention, and, I think it is fair to say, are all critic favorites. I think that Canada is, in many ways, one of the most important spaces to open in NYC since 2000. To what do you attribute their success?***

I'm not sure I have the magic answer for that, and the answer isn't the same for each of these galleries. What I can say is that they have experience in the field, strong connections, a brazen approach, an ability to harness the bullshit, and they're run by good people who seem to have a healthy interest in things that don't involve the gallery, such as making their own art, having kids, or practicing yoga. Somehow they seem to be operating parallel to the system, and it seems to be working.

***Do you collect? What artists – aside from the ones you represent – are of interest to you?***

I collect a bit, though being a Collector is serious Business and/or a dedicated and consuming passion, neither of which are true for me. I love art, I love things, and I create spaces for art to live in my daily life. I love supporting artists whose work moves me, and they support my need to be moved. Aside from the artists I have represented, I have collected work by Josh Abelow, David Adamo, Sarah Cain, Julie Heffernan, Folkert de Jong, Lauren Luloff, Cassie Raihl, Amanda Ross-Ho, Gudmundur Thoroddsen, Allison Schulnik, Dana Schutz, Johannes VanDerBeek, and others.

***What was the gallery's biggest success...your proudest moment?***

My proudest moment was having the privilege to do something I love everyday, and then having the perspective to close when working hard and loving what I do were no longer in sync. And our greatest successes were Patton Hindle and Andrew Judd.

***What was the gallery's biggest failure...anything you would have done differently?***

Mistakes are necessary, and we definitely made them. But I wouldn't have done anything differently.

***What do you think the business of running a gallery will be like in ten years?***

I think there will continue to be a strong emphasis on art fairs: applying to fairs, participating in fairs, and building programming around the fair schedule. I think dealers of smaller galleries will merge, or be subsumed by larger ones. And I think the business of buying and selling contemporary art will continue to be in a bubble.

***Can you tell us about why you decided to close Dodge at this time?***

As this interview hopefully reveals, there is no one reason, there are many reasons that have led to my decision. A convergence of personal and professional realizations made things clear to me. There is no drama and we're in good health. It's no secret that the gallery business is extremely difficult, and running a program on the price-point that we've worked with, and without selling secondary market work, is against the odds. I'm not interested in chasing the business to art fairs all year long, handling secondary market works, and growing the gallery to a place where we are forced to make decisions that contradict my reasons for being in it in the first place. We've had an incredible run. It's emotional to end this chapter, but it is the right decision nonetheless. The important point about timing is that we're not going up in flames (despite the temptation to make Blaze of Glory a theme song), everyone is getting paid, all business is being professionally handled, and our love for art is in tact. We are proud of all that we have accomplished at the gallery, and grateful to those who have supported us.

***What is next for you? Will your professional life continue to be in the art world?***

I'm staying open to possibilities and will relish my freedom for a period of time. I become self-deprecating and start conversing more with our animals when I'm not busy, so we'll see how long the incubation period lasts.

***How did you get to be so fucking cool?***

Don't let my hair and high-tops fool you.