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VARIOUS SMALL FIRES LIGHTS UP HIGHLAND AVE ART / 11.24.14

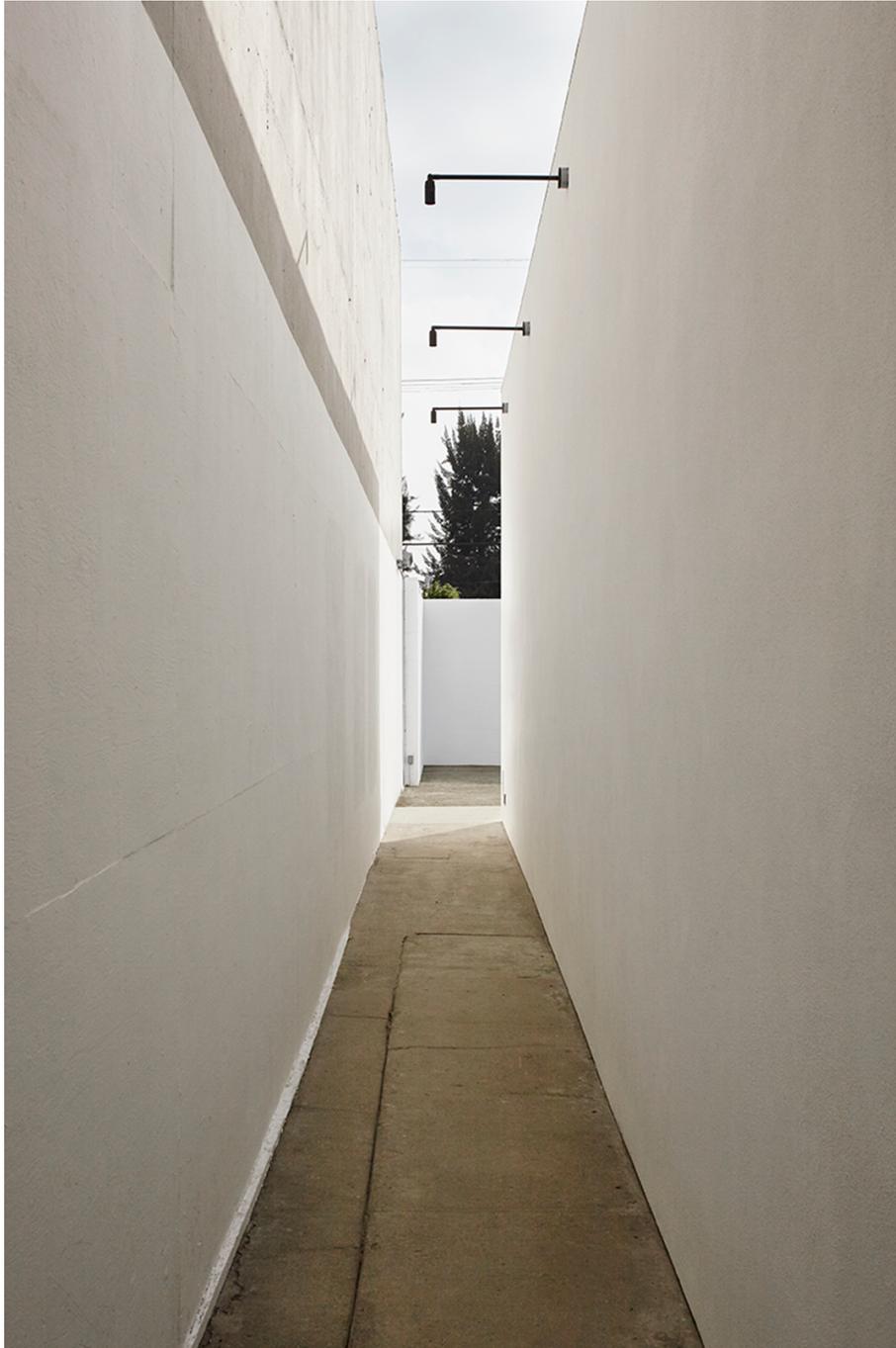
Christina Catherine Martinez

New gallery in town: Esther Kim Varet's Venice art space relocates to bigger Hollywood digs, and debuts second show, "Artificial Complexion."

Ambling the row of dog hotels, lumber yards, and white cube façades on Highland Avenue, one is buzzed into a small side gate attached to a particularly bright cube, passing through an aural gauntlet of zips, tweeps, vibrations, and tones literally bouncing off the walls of the narrow corridor—an interwar sound piece by the infamous father of Dada, Tristan Tzara perhaps, or a snippet of song from contemporary experimental musical duo Lucky Dragons—before stepping out onto a bright, flat courtyard. To your right, an elegant tangle of white pipe and pink plexiglass functions as a front desk.

This is how you enter [Various Small Fires](#).

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Named for Ed Ruscha's 1964 artist book *Various Small Fires and Milk*, Esther Kim Varet's formerly low-key Venice beach art gallery has recently settled into a very serious, very cool, 5000 square foot complex of interconnected indoor and outdoor space. Though VSF is in now decidedly slicker digs, the building is designed to collapse boundaries between the art and the space that houses it. The entrance hall is a Sound Corridor that hosts its own specially curated mix of contemporary and historical sound art via hidden speakers, allowing for a weird and lively listening experience. On recent Saturday evening, visitors sip beer and chat in the stucco'd hallway, the din of voices bobbing and weaving over the tinny beat of Throbbing Gristle's "20 Jass Funk Greats". The desk is a commissioned piece by artist Jim Drain, to be supplanted annually with a new desk by a different artist.

Such features bring a bit of the louche, mid-century avant garde sensibility from VSF's former Venice Beach home to this stretch of Highland Avenue, host to an increasingly dense array of significant contemporary galleries (including Regen Projects, Michael Kohn Gallery, Gavlak Gallery and Hannah Hoffman). "There's been this row of amazing and supportive galleries" Varet says of the move, "and we're honored to be with them. It's synergistic."

It's appropriate that VSF's sophomore exhibition, *Artificial Complexion*, is synergistic in its approach to the found object in art. The group show loosely bundles the work of contemporary artists that evoke the totally badass early twentieth-century surrealist Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven. Born in Germany but settled in New York after a string of disastrous marriages and just before the outbreak of WWI, the baroness was a Greenwich Village legend, composing experimental poetry and stepping out half naked in surrealist get-ups that often got her arrested. Her visual work heavily incorporates found objects, and [recent scholarship](#) argues that it was Elsa herself, not Marcel Duchamp, who infamously turned a urinal on its side, signed it "R. Mutt" and submitted it to the 1917 exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists.





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The humble items folded into the work in VSF's exhibition—from gritty coin "teeth" grinning out of Liz Craft's *Big Mouth* (2013) to plastic flowers and fake eyelashes bundled together in Amy Yao's effigy of dollar-shop beauty, *Support* (2014)—assert the possibilities of found objects beyond the readymade. And in tracing the sprawling influence of von Freytag's work, *Artificial Complexions* might prove a modest but necessary riposte to the misappropriation of one of Modern art's defining gestures.

Artificial Complexions is on view now until December 20th at [VSE](#) 812 North Highland Avenue, Los Angeles, California 90038.