

THE JUDSON GALLERY

In the late 1950s and early 1960s Judson House was the incubator for radically new art forms. At the Judson Gallery, housed in a small basement room, artists such as Claes Oldenburg, Jim Dine, Marc Ratliff, Allan Kaprow, and Tom Wesselmann held early shows of their works. For many, it was their first show ever. The artists had complete freedom to exhibit what they wanted to exhibit. No gallery director acted as judge.

Bud Scott, an associate minister at Judson Church from 1957 to 1960, was actively seeking out artists in the Village who were looking for space to work and to exhibit. At the time, Marc Ratliff was living at Judson House as a student attending Cooper Union. When Jim Dine, like Marc from Cincinnati, came to New York, he looked up Ratliff and the two started hanging out together. Another Cooper Union student from Cincinnati, Tom Wesselmann, joined them, and the three young artists, along with Bud Scott, hit on the idea of opening a gallery in Judson House.

For the first show, they invited Claes Oldenburg, who was working at Cooper Union, to exhibit a set of figurative drawings they had seen at the Cooper Union library. However, when Oldenburg began to work on the exhibit, he changed his mind about hanging his drawings and instead produced much more radical three-dimensional works that incorporated scraps and objects found on the streets of New York.

This show was followed by an exhibit of works by Oldenburg and Jim Dine, who also created three-dimensional works. Later in the season—this was 1959–1960—a larger group show included works by Kaprow, Ratliff, Wesselmann, and others. “Happenings” became an art form promoted especially by Allan Kaprow.

After a year, Oldenburg and Dine moved to different galleries. They had been the primary movers in the Judson Gallery, which lasted another two years and then closed. Bud Scott had also left in 1960, and the interest in Judson Church moved from the visual to the performing arts. Al Carmines had joined the church staff in 1961, fresh out of seminary, as assistant minister. He soon became involved in the Judson Poets Theater, along with Larry Kornfeld. He began composing music, at first as incidental pieces for some of the plays and then entire oratorios. Out of the Judson Poets Theater grew the Judson Dance Theater, which for eight or ten years presented avant-garde performances that changed the history of dance.

It was not until 1967 that the Judson Gallery was revived by Jon Hendricks, a conscientious objector who had come to Judson in 1965 to fulfill his alternative service. An artist himself, Hendricks was interested in art activism and in artists creating works as a group. After working for a while with runaway kids in a storefront run by Judson Church, Hendricks organized an event in the fall of 1967 called "The Twelve Evenings of Manipulation." Each evening a different artist created a happening. Many of these protested the Vietnam War raging at the time. Some of the artists participating in this show were Allan Kaprow, Kate Millett, and Charlotte Moorman.

In the spring of 1968 the gallery organized Destruction in Art events. In the chapters that follow, Jon Hendricks and others tell of the climate at the time—the senseless killings in Vietnam and the riots at home—that caused many artists to question the value of traditional art. The Destruction in Art performances had an influence far beyond Judson and the Village.

As with other programs begun at Judson at a time when no one else was doing them, the church's involvement in the visual arts stopped when other venues became available. The avant-garde scene moved to the East Village, and Judson withdrew from the visual arts—not as a conscious policy but in an organic development.

Judson's great contribution to the arts was the absolute freedom it granted to the artists. The art, and especially the happenings, took many bizarre forms, but short of using fire and water—which might damage the buildings—the artists were free to express themselves in whatever medium and whatever subject they saw fit.