
Claes Oldenburg

Claes Oldenburg was associated with the Judson Gallery in 1959 and 1960.

I came to New York in 1956 from Chicago and started working at Cooper Union. It was a very nice job. I had to spend four hours a day in the library, but I could choose my time. If I did not feel like working in the morning, I would come in in the afternoon. I worked there for a long time.

In 1959 I had an exhibition of drawings in the art school library, which had been arranged by the head of the library. These drawings were figure sketches of Patty, who was not yet my wife. Patty was a figure model, and I was living with her.

One of the students at the school at that time was Tom Wesselmann. Tom had come out from Cincinnati, as had Marc Ratliff and Jim Dine. They had come to New York about the same time. Tom Wesselmann, who was very much attracted to figurative subjects, especially female, liked the drawings very much. He said, "I think it would be wonderful if you could join us. We are going to start a gallery in the Village, in the Judson House." I said, "Fine, that sounds great." I had not had a show anywhere at that point, so this was really my first one-man show. I got to know Tom and also Marc, who was then living at Judson House, and I got to know Dine and his wife Nancy. And, of course, I got to know Bud Scott, who was there. I don't really remember all the chronological details of all this, but in May 1959 I was scheduled to do a show.

FIRST SHOW AT JUDSON

I had intended to do a show with figurative subjects, having started with those that attracted Tom's attention. I was painting a great deal at the time, painting figures. As the spring wore on, I changed my mind, and eventually the show that was put on at Judson was much more radical, consisting of constructions—three-dimensional objects made out of scraps and street stuff. It had quite a different

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Claes Oldenburg outside Judson Gallery, 1960. Copyright © 1966 by Allan Kaprow. Reprinted by permission.

character than a figurative art show. It was really the difference between reality and illusion—the thing that you could hold in your hand versus the painted image. This was all part of the attitude at the time.

I had always done work in three dimensions, but I had focused on painting. At the time there was a kind of figurative movement that I identified with, and I had been going in that direction, but then I realized that it was not radical enough to have a strong show. So I changed my course, and I fell back on the other things I had been doing at that time. There was a small catalog published for that show, with a poem; I still have a copy of it. There was one review of the show, by Hillary Dunstable in the *Village Voice*. It was a friendly review, and that was my first experience with Judson.

Then the summer came along, and we all scattered but resolved to meet again in the fall. I went to Lenox, Massachusetts; I don't know where Jim was. There were some other characters on the

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Jim Dine outside Judson Gallery, 1960. Copyright © 1966 by Allan Kaprow. Reprinted by permission.

scene, Peter Farakis and Phyllis Yampolsky, his wife. We scheduled a show for Tom and perhaps for Marc, I can't remember. We also scheduled a two-man show with Jim Dine and myself, where I did show some figurative paintings. There are posters and documents of all these things. The poster is quite descriptive. By then I was doing figurative work, but I was doing it in a sort of primitive style that I derived from graffiti. I was also influenced by the work of Jean Dubuffet and by *art brut*, mainly because I was becoming inspired by my surroundings. I lived on the Lower East Side and walked every day to my work at Cooper Union.

TWO-MAN SHOWS AND GROUP SHOWS

The new season began after the summer with the two-man show. Then at Christmas, we had an invitational group show. I don't quite remember who all was in it.

Everything was given a poster but not catalogs. There were also announcements. For our show Jim Dine and I covered the front of the gallery with monoprints. To create a monoprint you draw some-

thing on glass, say, and you press it onto absorbent paper. We made all these monoprints and not only plastered the gallery with them but also hung them up on the street surrounding the gallery.

In those days New York was very different in appearance. There was hardly any street advertising and there were hardly any graffiti. When you put up something, it was very visible. The monoprints were in the style of graffiti. You saw some graffiti in the subways then but not above ground. Our graffiti were intended to be a means of expressing ourselves by scrawling and writing. It was more like that than gangs and individuals advertising themselves. These posters made a big impression. They were up there for months and no one defaced them or tore them off. I have one that I peeled off the wall three months later, and it was intact. They were all original drawings; that was kind of amusing. The posters stayed on for the whole season. They were actually hard to get off the walls because of the glue.

The season in 1959 had been relatively conventional in that the gallery had one show after another—Jim and I, Tom Wesselmann, and maybe Phyllis Yampolsky. We decided to become more unconventional when 1960 began. By “we” I mean Jim and myself, Tom Wesselmann, Bud Scott, and Marc Ratliff, the ones that formed the nucleus of the gallery. I think that Tom Wesselmann would have preferred to go on with a more conventional schedule, where he would make paintings and hang them, and Ratliff was not so much of an artist as a designer, and he went on to develop in that direction. Ratliff wanted a show, but that would also have been in a more conventional way. I suppose that it was Jim and I who pressed for more radical art. At that point Allan Kaprow came into the picture, and also Red Grooms. It is a very complicated moment.

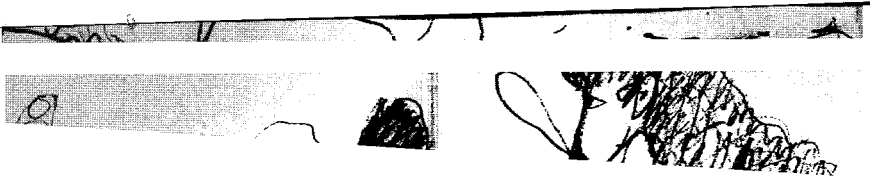
In December 1959, the artists at the Judson Gallery held a panel discussion on “New Uses of the Human Image in Painting.” There were Jim and I, and we invited Allan Kaprow and Lester Johnson, another painter. We all sat around and discussed figuration. That was the issue: abstraction or figuration, metaphysics versus realism. The discussion was very well attended. We were still a little bit into the human image thing, which was hanging on. Soon after that it ceased to be painted images. It became real images—facsimiles of reality rather than illusions. The figurative vanished.

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Four drawings by Claes Oldenburg, 1960. They were originally published in the third issue of Exodus, a magazine edited by Bernard Scott and Daniel Wolf. Copyright © 1960 by Bernard Scott. Reprinted by permission.

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HAPPENINGS

Kaprow had done a performance at the Reuben Gallery, which is a gallery that he had started in late 1959. Red Grooms had also started his own gallery and called it the Delancey Street Museum. He was doing performances there. Grooms was doing performances and Kaprow was doing them, and this was a direction Jim and I wanted to join, I especially. Jim was more drawn into it, let's say. I formulated the concept of a month in which there would be environments by Jim and myself. There would be a period in which we would not only do performances ourselves but would invite others to do performances, such as Red Grooms and Al Hansen and Bob Whitman and Dick Higgins and people that we began now to reach out to.

Jim's work was, and is, extremely autobiographical. To a certain extent, mine is, too. At that time, Jim was very much a product of his experience. It was also one of my principles that art should come out of experience, so that everything I did at the time came out of my experience. Some of my experiences came out of my contact with my surroundings in New York. This even took the form of playing the roles that I had seen, for example, a beggar or a house painter, and so on. It was an attempt to put art and reality together. This was seen as an antithesis to the attitude of the abstract painters, who tried to remove art from reality. Of course, they did not completely succeed. Art is always in some way related to reality.

When I say realistic images, you need to understand that they were transformed by the medium. It was not like the Ashcan School. The images went through a metamorphic process, it was surreal. No one was doing realistic art, though many artists were using real people, such as Al Hansen. When we did later happenings, people were used as objects in a composition. So it is a very complicated aesthetic that was being developed here.

RAY GUN SPECS

We were defining the avant-garde at that moment. Every time we found someone that was interesting we proposed this collective idea of Jim and me, Bud Scott, and whoever else hung out at the gallery, including poets. It was a very nice meeting place. We decided to pull these people together if possible.

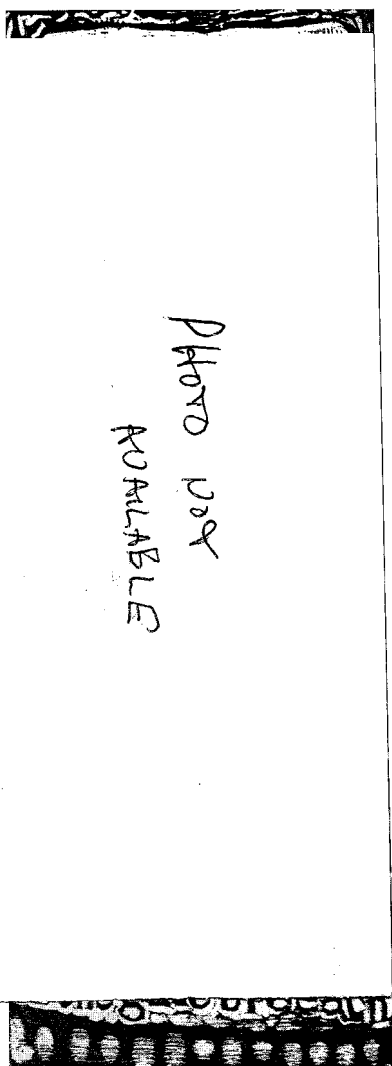
Jim Dine and I built environments in January 1960. The name given to the performances was *Ray Gun Specs*. People have often wondered what the name means. Robert Hayward, a critic, points out that it contains sex and it also contains spectacles. Actually, “specs” is a Swedish term for spectacles. I was born in Sweden, and a lot of Swedish language still circulates around my head. It has also got a suggestion of spectacles as a visual thing—it has all kinds of suggestions. It seemed like a good name. Ray Gun was an invented figure at that time.

In the middle of the month of performances there was a kind of pause, and everyone gathered in the gymnasium at the church, where we auctioned off some of the junk we had gathered on the street. We had printed something called Ray Gun money and given everyone who came a million dollars. They could spend that money on the junk.

RICHARD O. TYLER

At that time, another person was involved in the gallery who does not get enough credit, and that is Dick Tyler. Dick Tyler is the woodcutter who made the woodcuts that are printed in *Exodus* #2. Dick was a very unusual person, someone I knew in Chicago. He was a woodcutter extraordinaire, but he was more than that. He was also trying to develop art based upon all sorts of abnormal sources, let's say, psychotic sources and drug-induced states and hallucinations. He was a precursor of the 1960s. He had a lot of insight into what was to come.

Dick was the janitor of my building on the Lower East Side. He had come to New York a little bit earlier than I and had taken an apartment in the basement, where he had set up a studio of print-making. When I was looking for an apartment, he said, “Why don't you come to my place? I think there is an apartment available.” So we started to live in the same building. Mine was on the top floor and his was on the bottom floor. He had a great deal of influence on my thinking. When I got involved with Judson in 1959, Dick also became involved. It seemed as if he fit in perfectly with—this is very hard to define exactly—the mystical atmosphere that some people connected with this project had created. One has to think a bit about this. From the Judson side there was a desire to establish



some kind of religious feeling in the secular surroundings, as expressed by Bud Scott. On the other hand, there was in the secular a kind of reaching out for the transcendent, which dominated in the 1960s. Dick was one of the people who was most tuned into that. He was perfect for the gallery in that sense. He stayed with the gallery for many years. He had a pushcart from which he sold books and tracts that he printed—a very interesting artist who has received absolutely no attention.

Dick did not participate in the performances, but you could say that Dick's entire life was a performance. Everything about him was a performance. He was a very theatrical person. He lived a fantasy life. He is always left out of accounts of avant-garde art in the 1960s because he was too strange and too individual. However, he fit into Judson and fit in with the poets.

THE MOVE UPTOWN

The Ray Gun Specs show was the culmination of that particular period. Then the action moved elsewhere, although it later returned to Judson. But our activities after that first season moved to the Reuben Gallery, which Allan Kaprow had set up. The Reuben Gallery had a number of interesting artists—Lucas Samaras, Bob Whitman, Al Hansen, Dick Higgins. It was the leading avant-garde gallery downtown, and Allan was the first one who showed his performances. That was followed by a group show called *Below Zero*, which took place in the beginning of the sixties. There was *Red Grooms* with his *Delancey Street Gallery*, there was the Judson, and there was the Reuben, all three running together. We all met with Allan Kaprow and the people at the Reuben, and we decided to do an entire season of performances. The Reuben was relocated to a larger space off Second Avenue where we could do performances. The Gallery was totally independent. It functioned like a co-op, and we all contributed to it.

As the action shifted away from Judson, I lost track of the gallery. Bud Scott left, and that may have had something to do with it. So I only had one season with the Judson, from 1959 to 1960. I had a show at the Reuben Gallery in the spring of 1960 and used some of the materials from the performances at the Judson. I stayed with the Reuben Gallery for two seasons, and again there was a splitting up. Jim Dine went to the Martha Jackson Gallery uptown, and I went to the Green Gallery on 57th Street, an interesting downtown gallery uptown.

Judson became involved with dance and music and theater through Al Carmines, and that was a different period entirely. We were there in the very early, primitive period, the time of the beat poets, and it had a kind of dark character. The Judson Gallery was dormant from about 1962 to 1965, and then reopened under Jon Hen-

dricks. There was Yoko Ono, and Allan Kaprow became involved again.

IMPACT OF JUDSON GALLERY

The Judson Gallery was an absolutely unique experience. We had total independence and freedom, but we also had the feeling of being part of a community. We had theoretical discussions, but I can hardly remember any of them. We all drank a lot of beer at the time, that's why I can't remember much. There was a lot of talk about what art should be—whether it should be part of life, whether it should be outside of life, whether it should be somehow part of the soul or the spirit. Basically, it was still a church, and the church was trying to get in touch with artists.

People came down from uptown. In those days, uptown and downtown were strictly divided and uptown people rarely ventured downtown. And then it was discovered that things were happening downtown. Of course, they had spies to come down to check you out. We were lucky. In New York, no matter how talented you are, success is always a matter of being there at the right moment. The early sixties were a moment of great change in America. The pent-up energies of the fifties were finally turned loose. It was a very important moment in art history, and it took place at Judson House, the beginning anyway.

I do appreciate what Judson did. It is an absolutely unique institution. We were breaking new ground at a time in New York that had a lot more values and principles than now. It is good to recall it.

CLAES OLDENBURG

and his second wife, Coosje van Bruggen, who is also an artist, create large-scale projects commissioned by cities and private individuals throughout the world.