
Tom Wesselmann

Tom Wesselmann was involved in the Judson Gallery in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

I never lived in the Judson Student House; I lived with my wife in Brooklyn. My best friend at the time, Marc Ratliff, did live at the house.

I was an art student at Cooper Union, along with Marc. Bud Scott and Marc hatched the idea, or one of them did—I was not privy to that but that is how it was presented to me—to start an art gallery in the space downstairs at Judson House. It sounded like a good idea. Jimmy Dine and Marc and I are all from Cincinnati. I did not know them there, but they knew each other. So when Jimmy came to New York City directly from Ohio University, he took up with Marc, and I fell into that relationship also. So the gallery was started by Bud Scott, Marc Ratliff, myself, and Jim Dine. I don't think that I had any powerful role in it. It was really Bud Scott who was organizing the stuff. We decided to open a gallery. We had liked the figurative drawings we had seen at Cooper Union by Claes Oldenburg, at the library. We did not know him because he was not Claes Oldenburg yet! We offered him the first show, a show of his drawings. It was a nice show.

Claes got involved in the gallery and started using it as a springboard for some more exciting things he was just beginning to get interested in, getting away from regular, representational paintings and drawings, which he had been doing. He and Jimmy Dine seemed to catch fire, and this was their outlet. There were a lot of advanced ideas coming together. For me, it was just a place to show or not to show. Marc Ratliff and I had a two-man show there well before I was ready to have a show. I was still a student at Cooper Union, not even a third-year student. Marc may still have a copy of the little announcement we did. I was just beginning to get involved in art because I was from another background—I was interested in humor, cartoons. I got that from the army. I hated the army so much I had to make fun of it. The trouble was I could not draw, so I went to

Cooper Union on the G.I. bill to stall for time and to teach myself to draw.

CARTOONS AND COLLAGES

I came to Cooper Union at the urging of my drawing teacher in Cincinnati. I had started taking some courses at the art academy in Cincinnati. Cooper Union was free, it was in New York, and New York was the cartoon market. I used to come to New York from time to time to visit the editors to take my cartoons around. So that seemed to make sense.

I was still early in that process of learning to draw when we had that show. It was strictly student work. Marc was precociously talented in art school and he was well advanced. I don't know the date of that show but it would have been either 1957 or 1958 because we graduated in 1959. Marc and I later had another two-man show at the Judson Gallery of a more serious sort. In this show I exhibited early portrait collages I was just beginning to do. This must have been in 1959 because we had just graduated from Cooper Union, and I began doing these collages after graduation. These were collages mostly of people's faces with the general subject matter of a Hans Memling, who was my inspiration at that point: a seated figure inside of a window next to the face, mostly women. This was when I got my first critical review. A woman from *Art News*, I think, said: "Wesselmann shows weird collages of women." I was pleased to get some kind of mention.

I could have had a one-man show and maybe would have, but I lacked the confidence. I did not really feel I was an artist or could be an artist, so I took the easy way out and had a two-man show. My works were all very small, because my studio was small. I had just separated from my wife and I was living in a tiny place on Bleecker Street in a studio of about 10 feet square. Everything I did was little at that point. I felt I always had to work that way. I could not accept the fact that there were people out there who might buy my work, so I gave away half of the show to friends, even to people I was not very friendly with. And indeed, nobody bought anything. Consequently, I still have a nice collection of those early works and have since bought back and reacquired some works as they have come up at auction. I want to keep them together as a

group. It was a very interesting, successful first attempt to be an artist.

At Judson, I was impressed with Jim Dine and his ferocious energy. He was spewing things out. Dick Tyler seemed crazy but he was an interesting guy. I would chat with him about his anarchist book cart. He was always outside the gallery, especially on Sundays. Claes Oldenburg was interesting. I remember his show at the gallery, although I don't remember what his drawings looked like. Phyllis Yampolsky, another artist hanging around Judson, was a very pretty woman. I found her very attractive.

I WANTED TO PAINT LIKE DE KOONING

There was a group show at the gallery that I thought was important. It was a rather large group. We invited all kinds of artists. That was the first time I ever ran into Red Grooms; he was in it. He had a very amusing piece. He stretched a blue work shirt on a stretcher; it had a tobacco label on the pocket. Jay Milder was in that show and others, whose names I had not heard of before. It was a very lively show, and it was the first time I had the feeling there was something bigger going on in the art world. A lot of people were beginning to loosen up a great deal. I did not feel a part of it because I was going in the opposite direction. I was doing this little tiny work. I so idolized Willem De Kooning, and I wanted to paint like De Kooning, but I could not do it because he was already doing it, so I moved in the exact opposite direction in every respect. Instead of abstract, I did representational; instead of big, I did small; instead of loose, my work was tight. I felt isolated from everybody else.

I remember little about the group show, which was called *Ray Gun Specs*, but I do remember the impact it had. It was extremely interesting, to say the least, Oldenburg's work especially. Dine was more performance oriented. Those two guys were on fire. The Judson Gallery, in a sense, became theirs.

HAPPENINGS

The Judson Gallery, under Allan Kaprow and Jim Dine, started the "happenings." They were a key ingredient in the incredible energy in New York City. Looking back, one realizes that the amount of en-

ergy in the city at that time, in the early 1960s, was phenomenal. The Judson Gallery, one could almost say, was the first public manifestation of this energy; it seemed to precede everything. The gallery played a very important role.

My relationship with the Judson Gallery lasted just about as long as the gallery lasted. When the gallery closed, I moved on to the Greene Gallery uptown.

At Judson Church, support for the gallery was superseded by that for the Judson Dance Theater. That became much more exciting than the gallery. The gallery peaked in the early 1960s. The Dance Theater remained active for eight or ten years. We used to relish going there to see that stuff.

TOM WESSELMANN

works as an artist in New York City.