Founding the Bowery Gallery
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Founding the Bowery Gallery - Opening panel statement and end notes for the show at Westbeth Gallery November 8-29, 2014 - Panel at 4:30, opening at 6

Panel members: Sam Thurston, Barbara Grossman, Howard Kalish, Anthony Santouso

I have greatly enjoyed putting this history of the Bowery Gallery together. I hope to be improving the accuracy and breadth of my statements in time. Comment and input is welcome.

This show exhibits work of 19 of the 23 founding members of the Bowery Gallery, about half showing both recent and past work. The Bowery Gallery was an important part of the vital and rapidly developing figurative, or representational, movement of the ’60’s and ’70’s, along with the Alliance, the Studio School, other coop galleries and a number of commercial uptown galleries. It was a movement without a simple, single name, then or now. It was a movement that often seemed at war with itself- the artists who came to the weekly Alliance meetings tended to think their path was far superior to anyone else's and were often quick to try to get that point across.

It was a time when there were many good shows to see by figurative and representational artists in the galleries, mostly uptown but also downtown. For instance, looking back at the listings and reviews in the old Art News magazines for the 1969-1970 season, which was the Bowery’s first season, I can see listed easily thirty shows I would love to go back and see by the likes of Lennart Anderson, Gabriel Laderman, Gretna Campbell, Lousia Mattaisadottir, Earl Kerkem and many others.

The Bowery Gallery, the first of the figurative coops, opened on October 31, 1969. I think the idea of organizing a coop gallery first sprung up between Howard Kalish and Larry Faden one night when they were working at their job unloading fruit at the truck warehouse on the Hudson dock near Canal Street. That was a job some of the male artists liked because you could earn enough money in just one or two nights to live for a week.

Ten years earlier there had been coops on Tenth Street which we all knew about and which many of us had visited, and there were also galleries where the owner of the gallery was a committed artist, for instance Lucien Day’s Green Mountain Gallery and John Hoffer’s Elizabeth Street Gallery, which were less commercial than uptown, but in 1969 there were no new artist’s coop galleries that that we knew of.

Organizing the gallery was quick and spontaneous. We used a network of friendships: some of us knew each other from the open drawing group on Fourteenth Street, some from the Studio School and some from Visual Arts school. Except for Jack Silberman, who was in his 40’s , we were all in our 20’s. We all worked representationally and knew mostly other representational painters, so it was just taken for granted that it would

be a gallery of representational art. To what degree the Bowery Gallery self consciously formed itself to promote figurative or representational art, or one particular stylistic direction that figurative and representational art was taking then, may be be open to discussion.

We chose a space on the Bowery because there was a gallery across the street, the Star Turtle Gallery, and we thought upper Bowery might become a gallery destination neighborhood. The space we picked cost about $200 a month. The Bowery in those days was really quite awful. People looking more dead than alive sleeping on the sidewalks, sad panhandlers, drunks walking blindly into traffic, etc. The whole city was quite a bit dirtier and more dangerous than than it is now. Rents were cheaper, about a tenth what they are today, even adjusted for inflation. The space we found needed a lot of fixing up and most of us pitched in. The biggest problem was that half the floor needed replacing which was mostly done by Frank McCall. Frank was such a skilled carpenter at this the landlord offered to hire him but he turned him down. Frank was also wiser to the ways of city renovation and told us all to not open the door to any one we did not know but I naively did, and met the city building inspector. So Howie and I went to the municipal building the next day and met a 'facilitator' roaming the corridors who offered his services. After one more day and a payment of about $200 we had our permits. I am pretty sure it would take longer than that today.

Although we may or may not have self consciously thought of ourselves as a gallery or group that was was a member of an artistic 'camp', Paul Georges was in fact a connecting presence to about half the members as a teacher and/or a friend and in many ways set an expressionist tone among many of the first members. But as many did not have a link to Georges as did. This independent side was to grow as the gallery went on.

It is interesting to compare the Bowery Gallery with the First Street Gallery, also a coop, which opened just a month or two after us and was just a half a block north. The First Street space was smaller and in even worse physical condition before they fixed it up than the Bowery Gallery. The First Street was started by Brooklyn College graduate students, which meant they were linked to other artists, notably Philip Pearlstein, that few of us had much connection with. We sometimes said negative things about the First Street Gallery style which some of us considered cold and mechanical. This difference can perhaps be illustrated by the following: Bill Sullivan, when he entered the gallery was working for the American Federation of the Arts and was in the process of putting together a traveling show titled Painterly Realism. He put twelve Bowery painters in this show (out of 47), so we were pretty happy. There were no artists from First Street gallery in the show. The catalogue introduction for the show was written by one Michael Wentworth. First, in a philosophical way, Wentworth said of these painterly artists that "happily, that the human body has given up it's status as an object among objects" (referring to Wentworth's perceived lack of sensuality in some styles of figurative art) but then pushed farther accusing the paintings of Pearlstein and Jack Beal as "bad art and false morals". This caused some First Street artists to storm over demanding we complain, or even leave the show. A heated argument like this over representational style brings up the Alliance, the weekly discussion group for figurative or representational artists that

had started in February 1969 - eight months before the Bowery opened.

The Bowery Gallery should be seen as related to the Alliance. For one thing many of the same people were involved. Larry Faden (along with Paul Georges) was key in getting the Alliance going - they put up the posters and, more than anyone else, told people about the first meeting. According to the history written by Richard Miller less than two years after the Alliance started the four people who formed the Alliance were Faden, Siani, Kalish and myself, four people who had a lot to do with starting the Bowery. I think Miller downplayed the very important role Georges had in starting the Alliance for reasons of tact: Georges represented one of the factions that produced so much argument at the Alliance, while we youngsters did not have so much baggage. Miller, when he wrote his history, very much wanted the Alliance to flourish so he did not want to fan any fires of argument. The arguments are the first thing everyone remembers about the Alliance, and the arguments did alienate a lot of artists. But the glory of the Alliance was precisely in putting together artists with opposed and passionate ideas, artists convinced they knew the the best direction representational art should take. But the Alliance is the subject for another panel.

The Bowery Gallery's loose, anarchistic way of admitting members - in the beginning basically anyone could bring anyone in - obviously could not last. Maybe it is surprising we did not create a structure when we were just beginning but by the time we got to about 23 people we did and decreed all new members would need to show us their work and we would have a regular vote.

We were very gratified by the support the art world gave us and the crowds that came to our openings which were as full and as spilling out onto the street as the old Tenth Street openings or some Brooklyn openings today. When we had an invitational show of drawings and watercolors soon after we opened and asked the older generation to contribute everyone did. We felt we were one part of a new emerging style and in this show you can see both some of our earlier ideas and how they later evolved.

ENDMATTER AND FOOTNOTES

Some Dates:
Studio School founded 1964 (first season '64-'65)
Green Mountain Gallery opens 1968 (month not known)
First Alliance meeting- Feb. 14, 1969 (first meeting at Educational Alliance building March 7)
Bowery Gallery opens - October 31, 1969
Eagle Gallery opens November, 1969
First Street Gallery opens Dec. 1969
55Mercer opens December 1969
Prince Street opens June 1970
SoHo20 opens 1973
Artists' Choice first show December 1976

Shows lasted 3 weeks, usually open Friday and Saturday and Sunday. A total

of 9 days. A few shows were open Thursday, Friday and Saturday.

Bowery Gallery - 1969 - 1970 - First Season

October 31 - ? ’69 Opening Group Show
October - November group show (?)
November 21- December 7, ’69 Tony Siani
December - January  Invitational: drawings and watercolors (by gallery artists and the older generation)
January 23 - Febuary 8, ’70  Nick Colao and Anthony Santouso
February 13 - March 1, ’70 Frank Smullen and Michael Crespo
March 6 - 22, ’70, Sharron Frances
March 27-April 13, ’70  Barbara Grossman, Bill Sullivan, Sam Thurston
April 16 - May 3, ’70  ??
May 8 - 24 ’70 Larry Faden and Howard Kalish
May 29 - June 14, ’70  Charlotte Bunting, Lynda Caspe and Bette Lang

1970-1971 Second Season

October 22 - November 7, ’70  Nancy Beal
November 13 - 29 ’70  Eugene Maise and Jack Silberman
December ’70  Drawings and Watercolors
January ? - 17, ’71  Frank Smullin
January 22 - February 7, ’71  Frank McCall
February 12 - 28 ’71  Tony Siani
March 5 - March 21, ’71 Bette Lang and Temma Bell
March 27 - April 11, ’71 David Campbell
April 16 - May 2, ’71 John Bradford

footnotes

“It was a time when there were a lot of good shows to see.” One person shows of note during  1969-70 : Lennart Anderson, Isser Arronovicci, Leonard Baskin, Jack Beal, Rosemary Beck, Elmer Bischoff, Isabel Bishop, Warren Brandt, Joe Brainard, Rudy  Burckhardt, John Button, Gretna Campbell, Lucien Day, Peter Dean, Richard Diebenorn, Lois Dodd, Jane Freilicher, Red Grooms, John Hoffer, Alex Katz, William King, Earl Kerkam, Marjorie Kramer, Gabriel Laderman, Al Leslie, Richard Lindler, Lousia Mathiasadottir, Raul Middleman, Richard Miller, Philip Pearlstein, Fairfield Porter, Paul Resika, Faith Ringgold, Herman Rose, Sidney Tillim, Neil Welliver, Jeanne Williams

“There were no new artist’s coop galleries that that we knew of”  The gallery Ours was an artists’ co-operative on Grand Street that opened in 1968 and closed in 1970.  Janet Fish was a member of it.  We were not aware of it.  In 1969 the Phoenix gallery, a 10th  st. coop, was still going.

“ Organizing the gallery was quick and spontaneous” I remember the first organizational meeting being at Howard Kalish’s loft; Lynda Caspe remembers one before that with Larry Faden and Myron Heise at one of their apartments on Forsyth Street.

“Paul Georges was in fact a connecting presence”  Georges  and Siani

were close friends, having met when Georges was a instructor and Siani a student in Colorado.  Georges had had Faden, Antony Santouso, Richard Uhlich, Eugene Maiese and Nick Colao as students at Visual Arts and was in ‘’69 an instructor at Cooper from which he recommended John Bradford, Robert Yarber and John Moore to the gallery. Gorges had also been an instructor of Michael Crespo at LSU.  I had become friends with Georges thru Siani. Georges knew Silberman thru Siani and also from our meetings at the Cedar bar, and, while Georges and Silberman were never that close, Georges did put Silberman in Georges’ Return of the Muse painting. Kalish knew Georges from the Cedar Bar.  The rest of the first members had different connections. Many of us knew each other thru the 14th street drawing group (Siani, Kalish, Thurston, Faden, Bunting, Beal, Grossman) and The New York Studio School ( Faden, Lang, Kalish and  Caspe). Richard Miller suggested Frank Smullin. Barbara Grossman, Frank McCall and Sam Thurston also knew each other from Cooper Union where they were all in the same year.
Artists who were unconnected with Georges who entered the gallery after the first year include Isser Arronovicci. Temma Bell, David Campbell, Sue Daykin and Myron Heise.  Some others who joined shortly after and who were connected to Georges were Stephanie Demanuelle,  Mike Eisenman,  Jim Wilson and Steven Grillo.

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My statement at the Alliance Panel  at the National Academy Museum, NYC, in conjunction with the exhibition “See It Loud” on  December 11, 2013
On the panel: Philip Pearlstein, Marjorie Portnow, Sam Thurston, Judd Tully. Robert Godfry, modorator.

statement:

  My involvement in the period was that I helped start the Bowery Gallery and served as its treasurer and helped organize the Alliance, moderating the first meeting, and participating in the first organizational meetings and was on a few panels. I was not so involved in Artist's Choice but my wife Marjorie Kramer was. She helped start it so I got to see its creation and do a few errands.

  A lot of people remember the arguments at the Alliance. Here is what I think about the Alliance arguments. In 1969, at Alfred Leslie's loft, which was the second meeting of the group that was soon to call itself The Alliance, Paul Georges set a mood by by saying something that he had clearly prepared beforehand, and in a statement that was taken as an attack, he said that all the artists in the room were cripples who were painting fragments of paintings, not complete paintings at all and they did not need to be doing fragments.  Now there were a lot of artists in the room who did not like the words 'cripple' and 'fragment' applied to them or their work and many hooted in displeasure. It seemed a blanket attack on still life painters, landscape painters and the depiction of studio nudes.  I focus on his statement because it illustrates a couple of important attitudes of that time. Most obviously it was very critical - both self-critical (I think Georges used the words 'we are all cripples') and also highly critical of the group. But secondly, it is also very optimistic because Georges is also saying that he is seeing a new horizon,

the goal of a new completeness for the diverse representational painters who in those years were coming in contact with each other. Only one year earlier Georges had done a 10 foot by 20 foot painting titled "The Return of the Muse" which depicted his nude elder daughter as the returned muse in New York City and with a row of more that thirty artists and others in the line beside her, with most of them facing outward, towards the viewer, a position which read as their seeing the muse. The painting said 'look at all these artists who can now see the muse! This is a new thing!. ' I think this Return of the Muse painting can stand for a general optimism held by many. Now Georges also left a lot of muse see-ers out. Many of whom were in the audience that night at Al Leslie's. All the more reason for hoots. (By the way The "Return of the Muse" makes the idea of Georges' "Mugging of the Muse" in the show here, which was done six years later, more readable.) Georges' optimism was shared by many of the artists in the room that night, whether included in the Return of the Muse painting or not.

In the late 1960's there were more than half a dozen separate representational style groupings coming into being. These representational styles were moving away from generalized modernist abstraction. They were uninterested in Pop Art, Social Realism or American Modernism. They did not develop together as a group or school and so did not share a common artistic point of view.They were all going in different directions, all optimistic and charged up and ready to say that their way was best. They did not think all artistic directions were equally valid. So how could they not disagree? Also note that at the old 8th Street Club which was just coming to an end at the time the Alliance was starting heated arguments had long been common. Many of the older Alliance goers were old Club members. Also, in mid century political arguing was common (mostly between different positions on the left) and that attitude made it more common for artists to argue I think. But mostly we felt painting and its direction was important - thats why we were arguing.

What is needed is to understand the substance of the arguments - what artistic positions were the different painters defending. But that's outside my five minute intro.

end

On the different points of view of directly experienced and narrative

I think a lot of people laughed when in the '70's when Sidney Tillim said at the Alliance that there was a Hegelian necessity that representational art would turn to narrative or History painting in the grand manner, but it had some truth; It was an impulse that kept showing up - started in the late '60's with Al Leslie's Killing of Frank O'Hara and also with Milet Andrejevic and of course Tillim himself. The meaningful narrative idea reached Lennart Anderson, Georges, Gabriel Lalderman and others soon after.

The coming together and the argument did a lot for us. This opposition of the narrative, constructed image (the history painting direction) with the directly experienced, from-life mode was the problem we had to confront. Many of us continued to develop throughout our careers by exploring the possibilities of narration while keeping the link with the real perceived

world;  Laderman for instance started painting still lives and landscapes that had no figures in them and were done directly from the motif and then introduced  posed figures expressing narrative in the '80's which were a little academic and static then in his late realized narratives where he used models but could distort them and give them motion. He is someone who used the Alliance dialogue to his benefit. He started with a directly experienced representation of the world and expanded and developed using Leslie's and Tillim's ideas of narrative and Georges' ideas of movement and painting mechanics.

And Georges disparaged still lives and later still lives became a great subject for him - a direction opposite  than Laderman’s; one going from directly experienced to narrative the other going from narrative to directly experienced.

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Compare  Club to Alliance

Club: members only with monthly dues.  Alliance: room donated by a non profit cultural institution

Club: non members may only enter as guest  Alliance: anyone can enter by paying nominal fee

Club: Policy of no students or architects  Alliance: stated purpose to be for representational artists but no one barred

Club: Wide spectrum of styles (with ab. ex. largest contingent)
Alliance: Representational painters and sculptors mostly

Club: More of a cohesive club with varied functions ( dances, drinking parties and non art lectures)  Alliance: less social programs; everyone went to a bar after.

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e mail me and I ca send you a link to the video of the ' Founding the Bowery Gallery' panel  samuelthurston@gmail.com