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Philip Taaffe

BRAD GOOCH looks back at the events leading up to Philip Taaffe's breakthrough one-person show at Pat Hearn's East Village gallery in 1984.

PHILIP TAAFFE DIDN'T HAVE A FIRST BREAK. He had a cluster of them. All circa 1982, when he was living and working in a seven-room cold-water flat in the Paulus Hook section of Jersey City, near the old Palmolive Factory, one stop on the PATH train from the Twin Towers.

According to Taaffe, "Moving to Jersey City was my first break." When he was a student at Cooper Union he'd continued to live at home in Elizabeth, New Jersey, while falling under the spell of Hans Haacke, a popular professor and influential theorist who privileged the conceptual and political over the formal. "I couldn't show paintings in Hans's class. That was very passé," says Taaffe. At the time he'd responded to artists like Joseph Kosuth and Haacke's friend Joseph Beuys, who had visited the class; he even built site-specific installations in the subbasement of the Great Hall, then under reconstruction.

After graduating in 1977, Taaffe squatted for a while in the dormitories of the General Theological Seminary in lower Manhattan, where he began to shake off some of the inhibiting hyper-self-consciousness induced, perhaps, by too much critical theory and found room again for painting. He painted with oil stick on cheap paper taped to the wall while speaking his thoughts into a tape recorder. But it was in the eighty-dollar-a-month apartment in Jersey City where he moved in 1980 that Taaffe truly came into his own. There he had

lots of rooms for collecting junk, and he began making linear collages with the colored tape used for securing photographs. When he wasn't executing paste-ups and mechanicals for an ad agency in New York, he'd rouse himself midday to scavenge paper at a waste disposal plant for printers in nearby Newark. By then Taaffe had become friendly with Donald Baechler, the one art-school classmate who had broken through. "Donald really was a painter," Taaffe says. "He wasn't in the Hans Haacke school of elevated discourse. He couldn't stand all that shit."

During this knockabout period in Jersey City, Taaffe sold work to his first collector—Robert Mapplethorpe. This serendipity came about in the spring of 1982 through Taaffe's art school friends Curtis Anderson and Daniel Sachs, who'd opened a framing business on Union Square. At their studio one day Mapplethorpe spotted one of Taaffe's paper-on-paper collages in a lacquer frame. He expressed interest, and Anderson offered to take him on the train to Jersey City to see more. "Robert was pretty leathery that afternoon," Taaffe recalls. "He came upstairs. Didn't say much. He looked around and said, 'Oh I like this one'—a dark green collage I'd just finished titled *Forest Lantern*. 'How much do you want for it?' I said, 'I don't know. Maybe eight hundred dollars?'" Mapplethorpe, who'd just returned from vacation, then produced a wad of traveler's checks: "So he sat there writing out sixteen of these fifty dollar checks to me."

Sachs was also responsible for Taaffe's other "first" that year, introducing him to Roger Litz whose brief-lived SoHo gallery gave Taaffe his first show in October. "My opening was the same day as Keith Haring's first big show at the Tony Shafrazi Gallery on Mercer Street just a few doors south," recalls Taaffe. "He had balloons and CBS News and all these fabulous graffiti kids there." Taaffe shuttled between Haring's and his own much quieter

opening to try and get a few people to stop by. Most memorable was Ross Bleckner, who strayed in at the urging of Baechler. Taaffe was a fan of the enormous black-and-white spiraling Op paintings Bleckner was showing at the time, though the two artists had never met: "Ross was walking his dog, which he brought into the gallery. The dog then proceeded to piss on the wall. Roger Litz was all upset, but since it was Ross Bleckner he didn't dare say anything."

Following the Litz opening, Taaffe soon took a fourth-floor studio in Times Square, at 233 West Forty-second Street, now demolished but then an active comb of studios where Mike Bidlo, Ronnie Cutrone, Kenny Scharf briefly, and Jack Pierson all worked. Here Taaffe shifted from doing the "Picture Binding Series" (1980–82), he'd shown at the Litz Gallery into large-scale optical collages and biomorphic abstractions, which the German dealer Ascan Crone saw in the studio in 1984 and showed in Hamburg that June. Ex-performance artist Pat Hearn, who'd heard about Taaffe from Bleckner and Baechler, also stopped by his studio and invited him to show at her new gallery on the corner of Sixth Street and Avenue B in the then still largely unprospected East Village.

Unlike the obscure opening at the Litz Gallery two years earlier, the Hearn show in October 1984 was a palpable success—even Mapplethorpe dropped by, with then-boyfriend Jack Walls. "With that show, Pat really brought me to the attention of the art world," Taaffe recalled. "I was no longer just floating around Jersey City." By this time, Taaffe had definitively abandoned his painstaking constructivist collages for prints done on large sheets of lightbulb packaging paper and giant wave paintings in the '60s style of Bridget Riley. Appropriation was in, and Taaffe's more painterly, poetic borrowings both tapped into and complicated the genre. The show was much discussed, but it was *New York Times* critic Roberta Smith—then at the *Village Voice*—whose appreciative nod in an article titled "Art and Its Double" at once foregrounded Taaffe's work and Hearn's East Village gallery, marking an important plot point in their crosshatched careers as well as in the rise of a new art neighborhood—and a new generation. □

Brad Gooch is the author of *City Poet: The Life and Times of Frank O'Hara* (Knopf, 1993).

In this monthly column, Artforum talks with renowned artists about the incident or encounter that first brought them public recognition.

Philip Taaffe, Warren Street, Jersey City, 1982. Works on right, top to bottom: *Untitled*, 1981–82, paper collage and gouache on masonite, 26 x 26". *Bloodwalls*, 1981–82, paper collage and gouache on masonite, 38 x 31 1/2". (Works on left were in progress and are unidentifiable.)
Photo: Stephen Barker.