

The Museum of Modern Art

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CLAES OLDENBURG by Barbara Rose, the first comprehensive treatment of Oldenburg's life and art, will be published by The Museum of Modern Art on September 8, 1970. Richly illustrated with 224 illustrations in black-and-white and 52 in color, this monograph, which will retail at \$25, has a highly tactile, flexible binding of vinyl over foam-rubber padding, making it a "soft" book suggestive of the artist's well-known "soft" sculptures.

Oldenburg came to New York from Chicago in 1956 and settled on the Lower East Side, at that time a center for young artists whose rebellion against the dominance of Abstract Expressionism and search for an art more directly related to their urban environment led to Pop Art. Oldenburg himself has been regarded as perhaps the most interesting artist to emerge from that movement -- "interesting because he transcends it," in the words of Hilton Kramer, art critic of the New York Times.

As Miss Rose points out, however, Oldenburg's art cannot be defined by the label of any one movement. His imagination links him with the Surrealists, his pragmatic thought with such American philosophers as Henry James and John Dewey, his handling of paint in his early Store reliefs with the Abstract Expressionists, his subject matter with Pop Art, and some of his severely geometric, serial forms with the Minimalists. Further, his analysis of earlier styles led him to emulate or parody many of them in his own work -- the Baroque art of Lorenzo Bernini providing perhaps the closest analogy. In her Introduction, Miss Rose observes:

"The pleasure-giving qualities of Oldenburg's objects are sufficiently outstanding to command our attention. Beyond that, his work raises virtually every significant critical question involved in a discussion of contemporary art: the interaction of form and content, the relation of representational to abstract art, the nature and importance of formal radicalism in new art. With a thorough knowledge of the art of the past and an extreme consciousness of contemporary relevance, Oldenburg calls into question the very concept of style itself, by proposing a rampantly eclectic style that in essence presupposes all the historical movements preceding it. An understanding of Oldenburg's art, therefore, is absolutely crucial for an understanding of what is at stake in the art of the 'sixties."

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Miss Rose has based her interpretation largely on the facts of Oldenburg's life and his own writings, as well as on her long acquaintance with the artist. She has had free access to his highly revealing notebooks and other personal documents and, besides quoting liberally from them throughout her text, has included a selection from his writings, for the most part unpublished. An Appendix on Oldenburg's happenings and films, a detailed chronology, and a bibliography complete the volume.

The book is divided into two sections. The first part, "Life and Art," is a biographical account that traces Oldenburg's development as an artist. Miss Rose describes in detail the milieu of the "downtown" New York art world in the late 1950s and early 60s, out of which arose new expressions, both in the visual arts and in related theatrical manifestations such as happenings, in which Oldenburg himself played a decisive part.

His first ambitious effort to create an art out of his daily environment was The Store (1960), with figures and signs made of scraps of burlap, cardboard, and other discarded materials picked up from the sidewalks. It marked the debut of Oldenburg's alter ego, Ray Gun, related to the invincible weapons of comic strips. While working in Provincetown (Massachusetts) the following summer, Oldenburg analyzed his own art in relation both to America's historical past and its contemporary society. As he looked at such symbols as the Pilgrim Memorial he resolved, Miss Rose notes, "eventually to replace these monuments to the old culture with contemporary monuments, conceived in his own image and presumably appropriate for a new culture in the making." Several years later, he began to realize this ambition -- from 1965 on in drawings, next in models, and eventually in his first "feasible" monument, the Lipstick erected on Yale University's campus in 1969.

Meanwhile in 1961 he opened The Store, which in contrast to the ideas of death and deprivation that had dominated The Street celebrated the vitality and sensuous qualities of lower-class culture. In The Store, Oldenburg sold food, clothing, and other commodities like those displayed in neighborhood shop windows, but made of cloth soaked in plaster over a wire framework; their surfaces, covered with brightly

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shining dripped paint, resembled those of Abstract Expressionist paintings. The rousing public success of this venture led to his first one-man show at an uptown gallery, featuring objects similar to those in *The Store* but greatly enlarged in scale and made of stuffed cloth. This 1962 show, among the first manifestations of the international success of Pop, firmly established Oldenburg's reputation. Miss Rose traces his subsequent career as in a number of locales he developed a variety of themes -- the Home, the Car (Airflow), and the Colossal Monuments. The two color sections in the book are devoted respectively to Oldenburg's Store objects and his drawings for monuments, in which his consummate draftsmanship is fully displayed.

The second part of the book, "The Metamorphoses of Form," deals with aspects of Oldenburg's stylistic development. Miss Rose links him with several traditions in the history of art as well as comparing and contrasting his formal innovations with those of other contemporary artists. She discusses the significance of Oldenburg's representing the same object in "hard," "ghost," and "soft" versions; his use of gigantic scale; his attitude toward automatism and chance; his grouping of objects by kinship of form rather than by their semantic meaning; his satire; and his adoption of "disguises" to conceal the true content of his art. Regarding Oldenburg as a revolutionary artist both because of his radical formal inventions and his role as social critic, she concludes:

"Despite the degree to which contemporary society has assimilated his art, Oldenburg continues to stand outside that society, and to generate images and forms that criticize its standards and values, either implicitly or overtly. . . . In a context of nihilism, anarchy, and social, cultural and political disintegration . . . Oldenburg . . . continues to confront the moment, taking risks and offering constructive alternatives."

Barbara Rose has taught at Yale University, Sarah Lawrence College, Queens College, the New School for Social Research, and the University of California at Irvine. A graduate of Barnard College with an M.A. in art history from Columbia University, she has also studied abroad as a Fulbright Fellow. A contributing editor of Artforum and art critic of Vogue, she is the author of numerous

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articles and in 1970 received from the College Art Association of America its Frank Jewett Mather award for distinguished criticism. Her previous books include American Art since 1900 (1967) and a companion volume, Readings in American Art since 1900 (1968); The Golden Age of Dutch Painting (1969); and American Painting: 20th Century (1969).

CLAES OLDENBURG, her first book for The Museum of Modern Art, was undertaken in conjunction with the major retrospective of Oldenburg's three-dimensional objects and drawings, shown at the Museum September 25 - November 23, 1969. A modified version of the exhibition circulated abroad under the auspices of the Museum's International Council has been shown at Amsterdam, Düsseldorf, and London.

CLAES OLDENBURG. Introduction, text, and notes by Barbara Rose, supplemented by selections from Oldenburg's writings; chronology, bibliography; index. Designed by Chermayeff & Geismar Associates, New York. 14 x 8 inches; 222 pages; 276 gravure illustrations (52 in color); flexible binding of vinyl over foam-rubber padding, with silk-screened inscription; \$25.

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