Claes Oldenburg
Writing on the Side
1956–1969
Claes Oldenburg
Writing on the Side
1956–1969

Edited by Achim Hochdörfer, Maartje Oldenburg,
and Barbara Schröder

The Museum of Modern Art, New York
INTRODUCTION: NOTES FOR AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY (c. 1970–72)

The justification for an autobiography is that the work always arises out of experience, changes its character in relation to experience, and is always best understood in relation to a particular experience. The other justification is that an artist’s life ought to have structure, or he ought to be able to shape it into a structure in retrospect, as a good (or bad) example. He must account for himself—or that’s how I feel. Every day, in writing notes, in making entries in my diary, or in defending my work and behavior, that is what I do, and a collection of all that, trimmed, will lead to an autobiography, if these scraps are not to remain scraps.

I do not expect that this autobiography will display any consistency, and it will not be done as an attempt at consistency but will be more an accumulation (which might in the end float into a pattern—but that is not known now, at the start).

Songs of Professor Dog.

The Artist, in my thinking, is always another person. I would and do refer to him in the third person—“he.” I am he, but I am also not he, I am also the observer of he, and I am, when I am not he, much more difficult (impossible) to define. The Artist is a helpful simplification of my existence, a helpful role. I was formless until I found this role, and therefore quite unsatisfied. My autobiography is about myself (the unknown) looking at him (my role).

I have no shape, but he will have shape, the fiction of myself, any shape that I can give him. Plastic Man.

I have gone through many changes of attitude, each change involving a substitution of place, people, and circumstances generally. Signs and symbols have always announced the change. Some facts begin to seem more important than others. I watch, fascinated, for a while, until a pattern emerges and from the pattern, a direction. Because the pattern takes a long time to develop, this familiarity and growth makes for a sense of certainty when it does arrive at shape. Art is decision making on a high level (or ought to be).

Seminal circumstances—events that stay in the mind. From one of these to the next, the continuity of a personal story is tied, and they are probably as repetitious as a collection of dreams. An autobiography will repeat how trapped the subject is, but that is also a condition for Art being made. The Artist, Artist Dog, returns again and again to the unsolved problem, in one form or another resolves (or thinks he does) the conflict or engages the conflict, which produces a result—not the solution but a physical result of agitation, mental and gestural. Drawings are for me the battleground of my being.

Professor Clear-head.

Everyone carries around a fiction of what has happened, and in my case that is a visual concept, like a panorama on the allegorical model, wherein many moments in time can be represented simultaneously and in many variations of conditions of nature and states of mind, emotion and fantasy—all combined. This panorama is not finished quickly; it is finished in fragments, and what counts for the artist is the ability to adjust the new to the foregone, improvise relationships that make order of the past (a fictional order, of course), and indicate order for tomorrow. Patches and fragments accumulate, but to begin with I'll sketch in the whole area in light strokes, establish the landscape and areas of interest . . .

INTRODUCTION: NOTES FOR AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY
MoMA publications are available to individual customers in several ways.

MoMA Online
www.MoMAStore.org

MoMA Mail Order
Tel. (toll-free): 800 447 6662
Fax: 212 333 1127

MoMA Stores
The MoMA Design and Book Store
11 West 53 Street, New York, NY 10019
Tel.: 212 708 9400

The MoMA Design Store, SoHo
81 Spring Street, New York, NY 10012
Tel.: 646 613 1367

MoMA Books
The Museum of Modern Art, 2nd Floor

Independent, chain, and online bookstores offer MoMA titles worldwide. Contact your favorite bookstore to inquire about new and recent MoMA titles. If the title you are seeking is unavailable, please inform your bookstore that MoMA titles can be ordered from our trade distributors.

Trade Orders

Most MoMA publications are distributed to the trade in the United States and Canada by ARTBOOK | D.A.P. and outside the United States and Canada by Thames & Hudson, Ltd.

Bookstores, book distributors, and libraries should direct all orders, invoice questions, and title, price, and availability inquiries to:

ARTBOOK | D.A.P.
155 Sixth Avenue, 2nd Floor
New York, NY 10013-1507
Tel.: 800 338 2665
www.artbook.com

Thames & Hudson Distributors, Ltd.
Littlehampton Book Services
Faraday Close, Durnington, Worthing
West Sussex, BN13 2RB
Tel.: +44 (0) 1903 828501
www.thamesandhudson.co.uk