

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

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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 . . .

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