

# Members Newsletter

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## Claes Oldenburg

The exhibition of 116 three-dimensional objects and over 100 drawings by Claes Oldenburg now at the Museum is the first of a series of major one-man shows to be devoted to younger American artists in mid-career. Except for a few early examples, all the works included date from 1959 to the present year. He is so prolific an artist, however, and his oeuvre is so diversified in style, scale, and medium, that making a suitably representative selection for the gallery space available posed particularly difficult problems for the exhibition's director, Alicia Legg, Associate Curator in the Department of Painting and Sculpture.

Oldenburg has always conceived of his work in terms of environments—a concept somewhat refractory to its presentation within a museum. This is true in a double sense. Unusually responsive to whatever locale he is in, Oldenburg draws inspiration from what seems to him to be the particular *genus loci*. Furthermore, the majority of his works, thematically related to others in a series, are meant to be seen in conjunction with them, or in a particular setting.

Thus, the pieces for "The Street" (1959-60) not only represented persons and objects of the Lower East Side slums where Oldenburg lived, but were actually made of discarded materials such as newspaper, cardboard, or burlap garbage bags. For "The Store," opened in 1961 in a former store on East 2nd Street, he made objects like those in neighborhood shops—loaves of bread, tins of anchovies, stockings, shirts; fragments of signs or advertisements for wares ranging from tights to tires; and such objects as a cash register and the "ray gun," an invincible weapon (adapted from the comic strips) that became Oldenburg's personal emblem and alter ego. When a second version of "The Store" was shown uptown at the Green Gallery (1962), Oldenburg greatly enlarged the objects in order to fill the space adequately. Some of the pieces, for example the giant hamburger or the 10-foot-long ice-cream cone, were made of canvas, stuffed like cushions with foam rubber, and executed by his wife Pat, who luckily was an expert seamstress.

The theme of "The Home" was introduced by the *Bedroom Ensemble* (1963), a room-size tableau with bed, chair, dresser, and nightstands constructed of wood and other materials in false perspective. Some of the pieces were upholstered in fake fur, emulating the decor of a motel near Los Angeles in which every suite featured the fur of a different animal—zebra, leopard, etc. The exhibition includes a reconstruction of the *Bedroom Ensemble*, complete even to a rug, lamps, and pseudo-Pollock paintings made of yardgoods. Oldenburg has made many works related to "The Home," as well as numerous electrical and mechanical objects—telephones, light switches, mixers, Juicits. These usually exist in several versions: "hard" objects of wood, cardboard, or formica; "soft" ones of vinyl filled with kapok and usually painted with

Liquitex; and "ghost" versions of canvas or muslin filled with kapok, their matte surfaces impressed with patterns in sprayed enamel. The exhibition presents a complete "soft" bathroom with vinyl tub, washstand, toilet, medicine cabinet, and scale. The "Home" objects vary in materials and also in dimensions, which range from normal to Gargantuan, as in the *Giant Toothpaste Tube*, almost as large as the artist.

In the "Airflow" series, based on the streamlined Chrysler of the 1930s, Oldenburg dissects the car and its parts, rendering them in hard, soft, and ghost versions and in six different scales, the largest being over life-size. He regards the car as a typical American icon and also as an environment in itself. Eight items in the exhibition relate to the "Airflow," beginning in 1965 and culminating in a recently completed multiple, *Profile of Chrysler Airflow*.

Oldenburg's interest in the environment led him to think of modifying whole landscapes or cityscapes by the introduction of monuments. For a long time, these existed only as drawings of imaginary proposals for specific sites; there are some 30 of them among the drawings in the current exhibition, which reveal Oldenburg's incomparable gifts as draftsman. The first of Oldenburg's monuments actually realized (represented in the exhibition by models) is the *Giant Traveling and Telescoping Lipstick with Changeable Parts Showing Three Stages of Extension*. Unveiled in May 1969 on the campus of Yale University (of which Oldenburg himself is a graduate), this object was intended as an antiwar gesture by the artist and the alumni, faculty, and students who contributed to its costs. Lipstick, phallus, and missile all in one, it exemplifies Oldenburg's critical stance toward certain aspects of American life; the erotic content that pervades his work; his constant metamorphosing of one subject into another; and his recent interest in objects fabricated by factory techniques.

By altering the scale or physical properties of the common objects he represents, Oldenburg raises the question of the nature of "reality," as did de Chirico and the Surrealists. But whereas the Surrealists specialized in the juxtaposition of wildly incongruous objects, Oldenburg relates objects by their similarities of form, irrespective of their dictionary meanings. He gives his free associations full play but does not impose his own associations on the viewer, leaving interpretation open. His highly sensuous art appeals to the eye and the sense of touch, and in this respect is the opposite of Minimal Art's reductive statement. "The pleasure-giving qualities of Oldenburg's objects," Barbara Rose points out in her monograph on the artist, which the Museum will issue in November, "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 representation to abstract art, the nature and importance of formal radicalism in new art."

—Helen M. Franc

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*Claes Oldenburg*. Through November 23. Directed by Alicia Legg