

The Museum of Modern Art

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CLAES OLDENBURG Exhibition
September 25 - November 23, 1969

WALL LABEL

*The most important key to my work is probably that it originates in actual experience however far my metamorphic capacities may carry it. A dramatic piece such as *The Street at the Judson* in 1960 or its environmental counterpart (at the Reuben later) had their origin in very specific aspects of NY and Chicago streets.*

I begin with a realistic period and end at the limits of metamorphosis, when fatigue sets in and the preoccupation is broken up. A rest follows during which I may make lyrical pieces.

My work is—in its origins is—not arbitrary, and this necessity forces me to a lot of difficulties. I want to lead my audience deeper into things and I like a point of departure for them.

It is important to me that a work of art be constantly elusive, mean many different things to many different people. My work is always on its way between one point and another. What I care most about is its living possibilities.

The only defense against being trapped in someone's idea of your intention is to keep changing your field and work very hard, so that the fact of your creation, which will always be the most important thing, always overshadows its interpretation.

Claes Oldenburg, notebooks, 1961

Claes Oldenburg wrote these observations in his notebooks in the period between 1959 and 1961 when he was striving to define his own goals as an artist. In 1956, when at the age of twenty-seven he came from Chicago to New York, abstract expressionism was at its zenith. But Oldenburg, living in the slum area of the Lower East Side, shortly came into contact with a group of artists of his own generation who were reacting against that movement, and who were primarily interested in theater and environments rather than in painting. Oldenburg soon concluded that he wished to make a non-abstract kind of art directly reflecting his immediate surroundings. His presentation of *The Store* in the environmental situation of a former store at 107 East Second Street was followed by another version at the Green Gallery on Fifty-seventh Street in September 1962—notable both because it was one of the first one-man shows of Pop Art uptown, and because it included the first of Oldenburg's giant "soft" sculptures.

Oldenburg's art is a challenge to the viewer. Its celebration of the commonplace upsets traditional values. Taking as his subject contemporary products that meet the basic needs of life—food, clothing, and shelter—he endows them with wit and even compassion. His approach, however, goes beyond subject matter. Scale is an original concept in his production. His treatment of a wide range of materials brings out his extraordinary sensitivity to form and surface; his craftsmanship, whether in three-dimensional objects or in his light-filled drawings, commands admiration.

This is one of a series of exhibitions of artists in mid-career planned by The Museum of Modern Art. Oldenburg is forty years old this year. The works in this exhibition, with the exception of a few early drawings, represent a selection from his extraordinary productivity since 1959, when he had his first one-man show in New York. The examples shown here are rich and varied; even so, space has not permitted the inclusion of his graphics nor (with one exception) his multiples.

A.L.