

THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

CLAES OLDENBURG  
AND SOFT SCULPTURE

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO:  
THE FACULTY OF HISTORY OF ART AND DESIGN &  
COMPLEMENTARY STUDIES  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE

FACULTY OF DESIGN  
DEPARTMENT OF VISUAL COMMUNICATION

BY  
BRIAN CRONIN

APRIL 1981

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ILLUSTRATIONS .....	i
INTRODUCTION .....	ii
Chapter:	
I      AN INTRODUCTION TO CLAES OLDENBURG, HIS LIFE AND INFLUENCES	1
II     SELF ANALYSIS	9
III    SOFT SCULPTURE	15
IV     THE INFLUENCE OF CLAES OLDENBURG ON OTHER FIBER ARTISTS	20
V      CONCLUSIONS	24
ILLUSTRATIONS	26
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	35





Fig 1. myself with giant size, piece of type.

## INTRODUCTION

When I was in my third year studying Graphic Design, my class were given a project to promote a type face, for a printers. We were to design a series of posters leaflets and broadsheets, to show the best use of the type face.

When we were finished, we were told that our information sheets were to be put into a folder.

see Figure 1. I took a piece of type and made it into a giant box, with a door and then painted it silver. Inside it I put my information on that particular type face. It was from this point onwards that I became aware and amazed at the work of Claes Oldenburg.

It was at a later stage that I became interested in soft sculpture. If I had to do that project again I probably would make a piece of type into an enormous canvas bag with a zip.



## Chapter One

### AN INTRODUCTION TO CLAES OLDENBURG, HIS LIFE AND INFLUENCES.

Claes Oldenburg was born in Stockholm, Sweden on the twenty-eighth of January 1929. I was born on the twenty-ninth of January 1958 in Dublin, Ireland.

Oldenburg and his family moved from Sweden to Chicago in 1936, so, at the age of seven he spoke no English, making communication with other children extremely difficult. As a result of this communication problem, Oldenburg led an even richer fantasy life than the other children around him. Many of his fantasies centred around the imaginary country "Neubern" an island between Africa and South America and whose language was half English and half Swedish.

His fantasies of "Neubern" became more vivid as a result of a typewriter, which was found in an abandoned office where he and his brother used to play. Oldenburg used the typewriter to make up imaginary newspapers, with illustrations to imitate photographs. It is interesting that his adult illustrations imitate magazines and posters. Even at this early stage his work seemed to be growing in size.

In 1966, Oldenburg said "Everything I do is completely original, I made it up when I was a little kid". The

"Neubern" project was a parody of reality. It paralleled the real world instead of imitating it. The project was encouraged by his parents and private tutor to help him learn English.

Oldenburg had a lucky childhood in that he was encouraged to let his imagination run wild. To me, it still shows in his work today; a freedom, a directness and inventiveness, pulsating with new fresh ideas.

Oldenburg's keen intellect has been apparent to those who knew him. Before leaving school in 1946, Oldenburg edited and illustrated the class year book. In it he was voted "most sophisticated" "funniest" and "most intellectual". And again in H. ARNASON's book Modern Art in the 1960's, Claes Oldenburg is described as "one of the most talented and intelligent artists associated with New York Pop Art".

From an early year Oldenburg had known that he was to be an inventor or creator. Although he had a great talent for drawing, he was not encouraged to become an artist. His decision to pursue a career in art came only after he had considered many other possibilities. Oldenburg was in no rush to make a career out of art. He was willing to take his time and explore other outlets, just like a child, exploring his mind and capabilities.

Oldenburg left Chicago in 1946, to attend Yale. He was selected to participate in the experimental Directed



Studies Programme, which sought to overcome the rigidity of specialization. It did this by introducing the students to a wide range of subjects in both science and the humanities.

While at College he was encouraged to write constantly, although Oldenburg was already well accustomed to writing and has continued to do so ever since. As a result of this continuous writing Oldenburg has accumulated innumerable journals and notebooks, with random impressionistic jottings and theoretical essays. His notebooks like his art are full of contradictions. But they allow him the freedom to express whatever he may feel at that time, reserving judgement until later critical appraisal.

To be critical after one has produced something is far more useful than being critical while doing something.

Oldenburg, writes whatever he feels not worrying about what the content holds. Just like in his earlier notes on "Neubern", he is critical of his work afterwards not during this initial formative stage.

Too many people are scared to work in this way. That is why so much work produced is stale uninteresting and lacks the "so what" attitude of artists like, Andy Warhol. Oldenburg, in my opinion believed in the "so what" attitude towards art. He worked in the way he wanted, not paying attention to what others expected of him.

In his last year at Yale, Oldenburg began his first formal study of Art History and Figure Drawing. After four years at Yale, Oldenburg returned to Chicago to start work as a novice reporter with the 'City News Bureau', covering mainly the police beat. After six months Oldenburg came to the conclusion that, "I could not see myself writing meaningless reports about meaningless events".

In January 1952 Oldenburg was rejected by the army and was therefore no longer trapped. He was now free to channel his interests in any direction. The direction was Art, for he felt that Art would also absorb his interests in literature and theatre.

So from this point in his life (he was now twenty-three) until he was twenty-five, Oldenburg read, drew and learned as much as he could about himself and Art. He did this while supporting himself with a variety of jobs including working as an apprentice in an advertising agency, selling candy and doing illustrations for the magazine "Chicago". He also attended art classes at the Art Institute of Chicago.

Oldenburg's first exhibition, as an artist was in March 1953, at the club 'St. Elmo Restaurant'. In the exhibition he showed a group of satirical drawings in a joint exhibition with a friend. The drawings were studies of everyday life in Chicago, inspired by one of Nelson



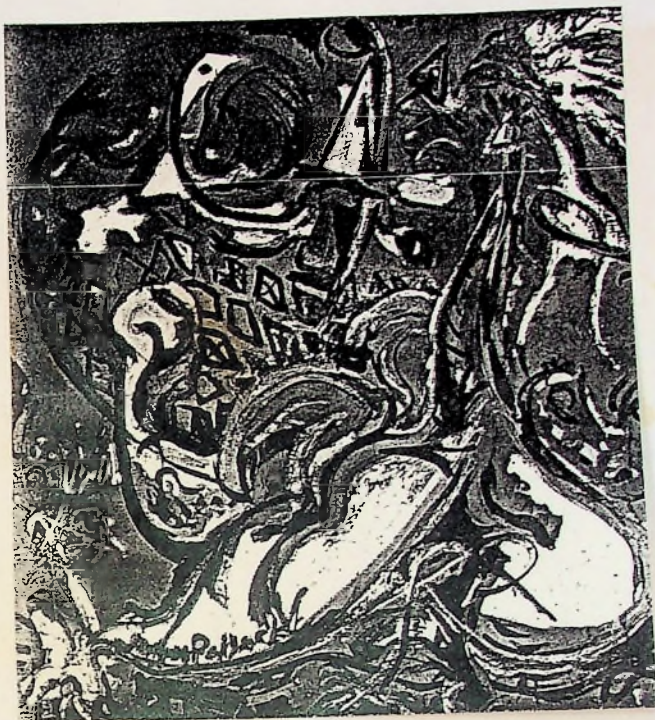


Figure 2



Figure 3

Willem de Kooning  
*Woman I*  
 1950-52; 192.7 × 147.3 cm. (75 × 57 in.)  
 New York, Museum of Modern Art



Algren's short stories. Oldenburg was inspired by Algren's stories because of their frank treatment of the seedy side of Chicago life of which Oldenburg had first-hand knowledge from his reporter days.

While at College, Oldenburg was greatly concerned with directness in his Art. He said "the school system was to have the student choose a favourite French impressionist or post-impressionist to follow. After a few weeks with Cezanne I switched to Pollock i.e. choose the living, which meant trouble. For example, I brought to class a palette of store paints in a cardboard box. I put them on the canvas and they ran off on to the floor, because I didn't know that Pollock painted straight down".

In June 1956, Oldenburg arrived in New York. Two months later, Pollock died in a car crash. On arrival in New York Oldenburg observed the younger artists who imitated the styles of their heroes, the first generation Abstract Expressionists. Although Oldenburg admired the works of Pollock and De Kooning he saw little point in imitating them, so he kept to himself.

See Figures 2,3.

One of the main reasons why he isolated himself was that although, the style that dominated New York at this time (1956) was painterly and expressionist, it was also Abstract, while he and his friends in Chicago continued to paint the figure.



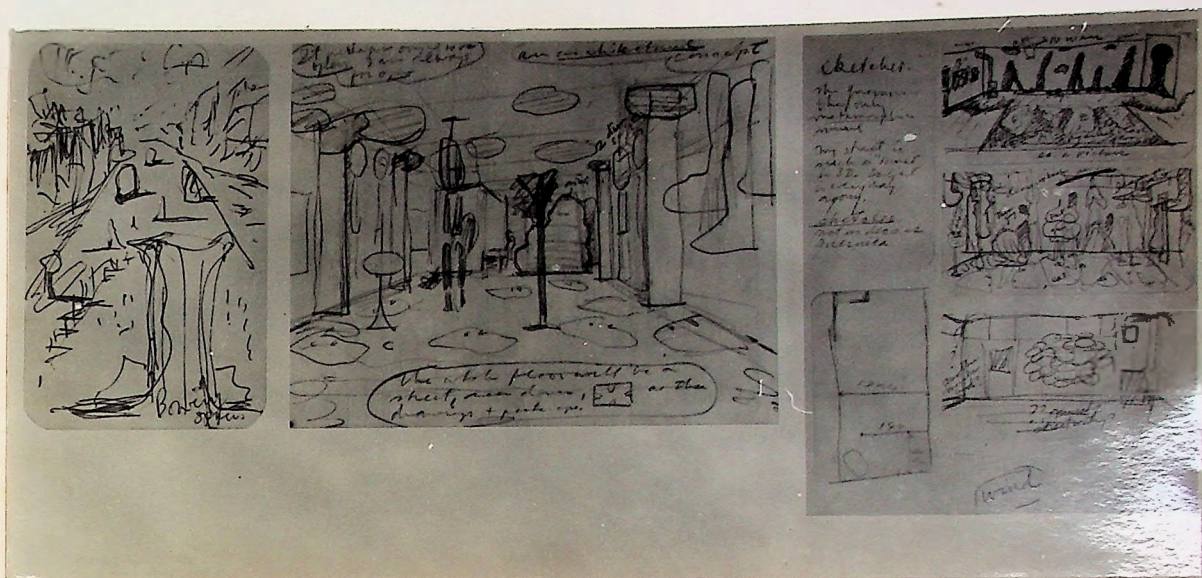


Figure 4

Bowery space  
(note book page)  
view from  
Cooper Union.

study for installation of  
the street 1960

Oldenburg could draw, not only imaginatively but also the everyday things around him. He delighted in figurative drawing and was therefore not interested in abstract shapes and squiggles. In New York he spent a great deal of his time sketching street scenes and street objects such as bottle tops, razor blades, nuts, etc.

Oldenburg found a part time job at the Cooper Union Museum and Art School, shelving books in the libraries of the school. This job gave him the great opportunity to examine and explore the original drawings which the museum had to offer.

On his way to work he would often make quick sketches of the daily life of the slums he passed. Oldenburg found this area (the Bowery) and other lower east side streets full of life, vitality and raw excitement.

see Figure 4

From the time he arrived in New York (June 1956) up until 1957, Oldenburg had few social or professional contacts. But at the close of 1957, he rented an apartment at 330 East Fourth Street, in Greenwich Village. He also used the apartment as a studio up until 1961. The apartment was found for him by friends from Chicago, an excentric printmaker, Dick Tyler and his wife Dorothea Baer, who was also a printmaker.

Oldenburg joined in their many disorganised amateur theatricals with local slum kids and made paper-mache animal masks for the kids to wear.





Figure 5  
self Portrait 1959, oil 68"x47½"



Figure 6  
Girl with fur piece (portrait of Pat)  
1959-60, oil 41"x31"

Oldenburg's interest in theatre brought him into contact with a group of environmental artists who had dropped the flatness of painting in favour of three dimensional form.

see Figure 5,6  
In New York, in 1958, Oldenburg married Pat Muschinski whom he previously met in Sangatuck in 1954, she later became the subject of numerous portraits. These varied from the classical realism to a more abstracted style of drawing. That same year, 1958, Oldenburg started painting large scale nudes, faces and everyday situations. These works emphasised light and tone. Not only did he paint but he also made frequent sketches in his notebooks, sketches from incidents observed in the city as well as imaginative incidents. This work lead to his 1st exhibition in New York at the City Gallery.

A few months after his show, exhibiton, at the City Gallery, Oldenburg had a one man exhibiton at the Cooper Union Art School Library in Grenwich Villege. The exhibition consisted entirely of figure drawings of Pat. After the exhibition, he was asked by two Cooper Union Art Students, Marc Ratliff and Tom Wesselmann, to join a gallery in the basement of the Judson Memorial Gallery, a space that Ratliff had used as a studio.

The gallery attempted to introduce live art into the neighbourhood and concentrate on the creative energy with in the community, showing dance theatre and poetry events,



as well as open exhibitions.

Oldenburg had his first public one man exhibition in New York at the Judson Gallery from May to June, 1959.

The exhibition was to be one of paintings, but at the last minute Oldenburg changed it to an exhibition of his figurative and metamorphic drawings. They were wood and newspaper sculpture, objects painted white and enlarged poems.

When his exhibition at the Judson Gallery was over, Oldenburg left New York, to go to Lenox, Massachusetts. His wife Pat, had a job as a model in a summer school, while he worked as director of the newly found Lenox Art Gallery.



Fig 7

visualization of a giant soft sculpture  
in the form of a shirt and tie.  
1963 - crayon + water colour.



Fig 8

candy.  
(note book page)



## Chapter Two

### SELF ANALYSIS

Oldenburg and his wife returned to New York in December of 1961. On their return, Oldenburg deeply analyzed his work, talents and limitations which he recorded in notebooks. He conducted an analysis of the main lines of American thought and the history of Modern Art. His investigations involved the attempt to isolate the essence of various plastic elements, line, space, volume and colour.

see Fig 7,8

His notebooks took the form of scribbles, jottings, sketches which were mostly done in ballpoint pen, clippings from newspapers and magazines and ideas and notes for other projects.

In the course of this exhaustive self-analysis, Oldenburg pressed himself to reveal as fully and honestly as possible the basis of his intentions and goals as an artist. In his nature he found extremely traditional elements mixed with radical aspirations for a revolutionary art.

The traditional elements in Oldenburg's make-up linked him to such painters as Rembrant, Goya and Picasso, who had made broad universal statements.

Oldenburg also wanted to communicate with a wide public and make statements in his art that the whole





Fig 9 Woman Crying, oil on canvas  $23\frac{1}{2} \times 19\frac{1}{4}$  painted in 1937



world could relate to.

see fig 9.

In this illustration of "Woman Crying" by Pablo Picasso, you can see some of the links with Oldenburg's works. The two artists chose to portray everyday people, experiences or objects. In this painting Picasso is painting violently and with great feeling; he is showing us horror. He is showing us through this painting the pain and suffering which people go through. He is making a universal statement about life and war.

Oldenburg like Picasso is making universal statements but his statements are more light-hearted. There is no message except humour. He is making a statement about his surroundings and laughing at them.

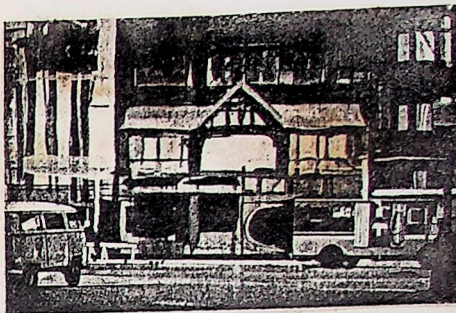
Oldenburg's "procedure" towards his art during this period was: "simply to find everything that meant something to me but the logic of myself- development was to gradually find myself in my surroundings".

Oldenburg became aware of the conflicts within himself, set out to make an art based on oppositions he called his art "the impossible, the discredited, the difficult". Oldenburg's continuing self-analysis led to an acceptance of himself and his gifts and limitations. The only way he felt that he would get to know his art and himself was to be daring and adventurous, not to be scared of making mistakes or taking risks "to slop over".





*In progress*



*In progress*



Fig 10



His self analysis took the form of two stages. Stage one was the consuming of experience, the consuming of his contact with the environment, reading, looking, responding, sketching and note taking.

The second stage in his self-analysis was the analysis of experience and form. He would try and capture his impressions and memories into a single form. In doing this Oldenburg would bring his own idea and the things around him together into one idea. He would combine the two to make up a complete image, an image which in his mind, summed up his experience.

You could make a comparison in a slight way to the American Hyperrealistic painter Richard Estes, in the way Estes approaches a painting. Estes first of all, takes numerous photographic references. From these references Estes takes the elements he needs to make up his over all impression, which may not totally resemble the particular scene.

see Fig 10

Both Estes and Oldenburg take elements from their environments and reshape those elements to make their own personal statement.

Oldenburg has described the three phases of his working process. They are as follows:

1. Inaction, grayness, nothingness, (HATE).
2. Action, outwardness, (LOVE).



Fig 11.

Three views of the street as installed at the  
Judson Gallery, 1960.



3. Reflection, creation, outwardness, (INDIFFERENCE).

While Oldenburg is working he is outward in his work, and to things and people around him. His life is revolving around his work and ideas.

When his creation is completed, he goes into a state of nothingness. His work is finished, a piece of himself is gone. When he is working Oldenburg and his work are one. When his creation is completed it takes a piece out of him; he feels both achievement and loss. Oldenburg continues the cycle by going through the last stage, the stage of nothingness and greyness. When he is not working when he has nowhere to put his creative energies.

Oldenburgs working process can be related to almost everyone, including myself. When he is working he can't be stopped. He is full of life and ideas and both his life and work are worthwhile. On the otherhand, when he is not working he is tense and unable to communicate. Hate is looming. I find comparisons in my own working process, the difference being when I feel greyness or nothingness I have a more negative approach. My hateful energies are wasted, on moods and temperament. I can't work. Oldenburg on the otherhand, channels his hates into His work, on works such as the street.

see Fig 11

The street has human suffering as its subject. It



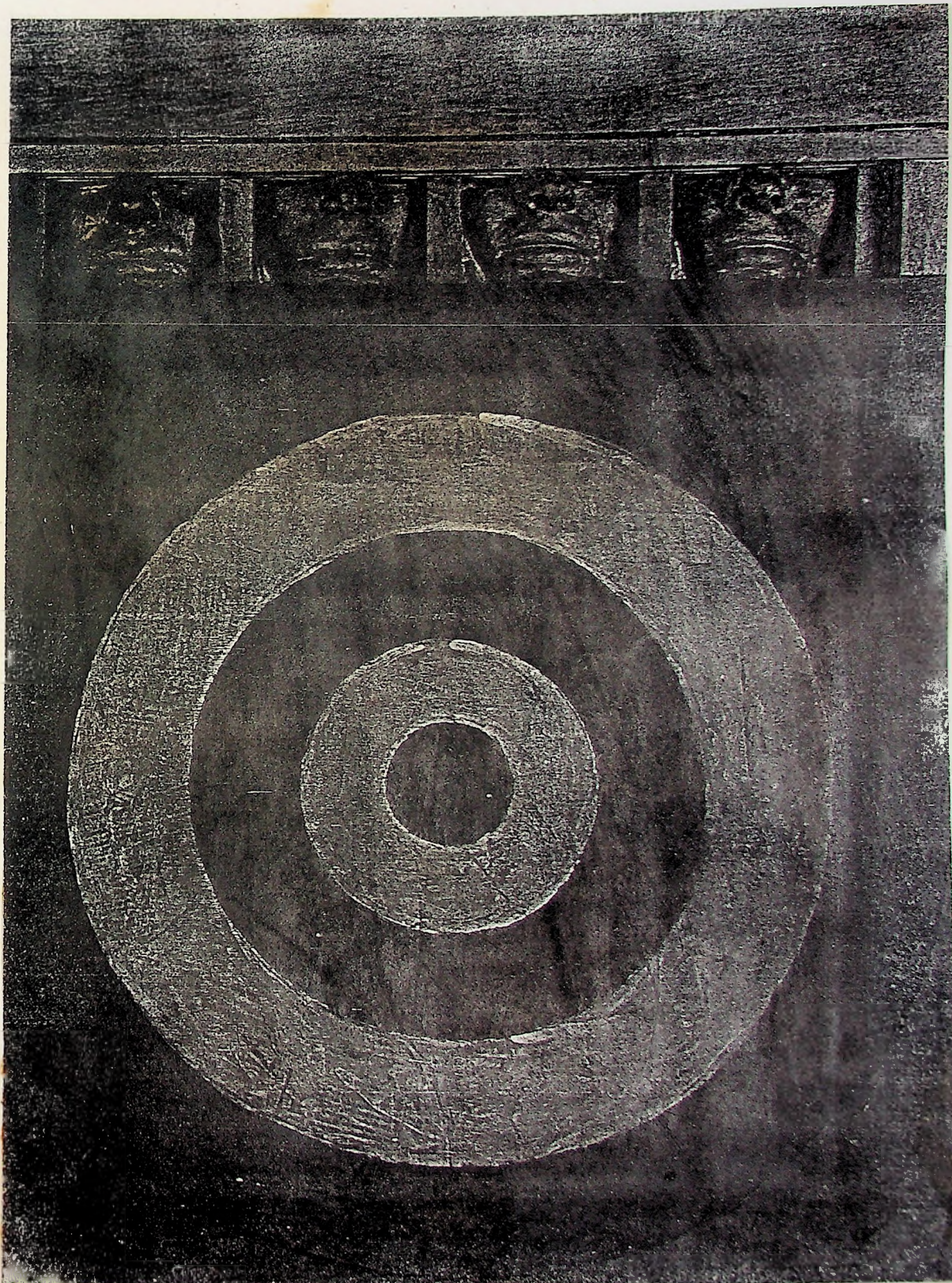


Fig 12 Jasper Johns, Target with four faces. 1958  
29" x 26", New York Museum of Modern Art.



was not meant to commemorate any single event but rather the "everyday agony"; the mundane catastrophe of death in life.

Oldenburgs contribution to the 'Pop Art' movement has been to extend to a wide variety of subjects the concern for the object as object also shown by other artists, like Jasper Johns. One of John's bronze works called "painted bronze" in 1960, consisted of a clutch of paint-stained brushes standing upright in an old coffee tin with the makers name still legible.

See Fig 12.

These Post Abstract Expressionists Artists used common everyday objects as the subjects for their art, just like the traditional still life painters, although they used different, techniques and disgarded all the rules.

Oldenburg disregarded the rules, the more deeply he analyzed himself and his work. During the course of his self-analysis, he rejected the rigid structures of the cardboard and paper-mache sculptures in his Judson Gallery show of May - June, 1959. He felt they were "too generalized and in a sense abstract".

Up to 1959, Oldenburg shared the views of the Abstract Expressionists. Like them he wanted to infuse art with an emotional content. Oldenburg however did not believe as they did that this could be achieved through abstraction.

Oldenburg felt that the Abstract Expressionists saw things and tried to change them, but He saw things for what they are and helped them grow.





Fig 13. Floor-burger (giant Hamburger) canvas filled with foam rubber. 52" high x 84" diameter. Art Gallery of Ontario.



## Chapter Three

### SOFT SCULPTURE

"I have always been facinated by the values attached to size, the enlargement to colossal proporations especially in a milean dominated by skyscrapers".

Oldenburg moved into the three dimensions first working in muslin soaked in plaster and then into the totally soft foam and vinyl medium.

Much of Oldenburg's techniques derived from adverti-  
sing and display procedures and the shop window.

see Fig 13

The Hamburger is totally uneatable, but its effect is to divorce form from function and to enable one to understand each other better.

see Fig 14 (over)  
15 and 16.

In this illustration of Oldenburgs 'Giant Soft Drum Set', he again divorces form from function. The drum set speaks for itself, it will never make any noise, it will just lie there as if asleep. Oldenburg in this piece has used a combination of hard and soft materials. He has also used vinyl material to take the place or quie the illusion of a hard substance. He used painted wood carved into the shape of the foot pedals.

The combination of both hard and soft materials make the overall image very realistic and convincing. If the drum set was not in a gallery and you never heard of Claes Oldenburg, you would probably think it fell to pieces



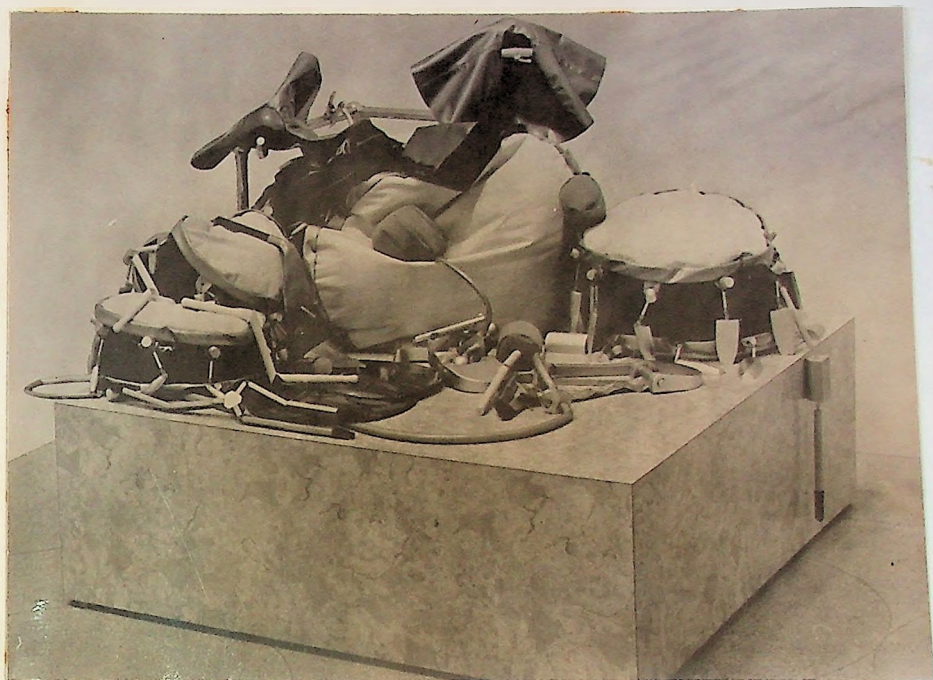


Fig 14. giant soft Drum set vinyl and canvas 1967  
(125 pieces) 84" high X 72" wide X 48" deep.

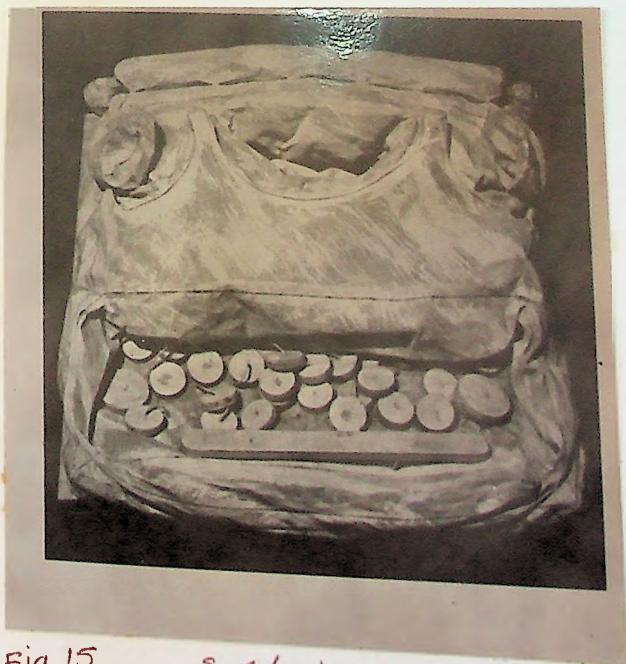


Fig 15. soft type writer (ghost version) 1963.  
9" high X 27½ wide X 20" deep.

under extreme pressure or it had melted in a concert.

Oldenburg used the vinyl material on the symbols to give the metal sheen, in fact they almost look like real ones, that had been beaten out of shape. Not only does the vinyl give off a sheen like metal, it also feels smooth, silky and cold as metal does.

In this piece and indeed in most of his works Oldenburg keeps very much to the original colour.

Oldenburg does not seem to experiment with colour in any of his works. Maybe because of his classical or traditional preferences.

Humour is one of the main characteristics which Oldenburg brings out in his work. At first impression to an on looker his work is humorous and funny. It strikes the viewer as funny because of the subject size, materials used and its sheer boldness. But when the on looker, looks into it more deeply roles are reversed: the work is really laughing at us not us laughing at it.

Oldenburg's Art is a reflection on us for we have created the objects which he uses in his Art.

You don't laugh at the toilet everytime you go into your bathroom, but you do when you see it in a different environment or out of context. The same motivation can be seen in his other sculptures, his plaster work and monuments.



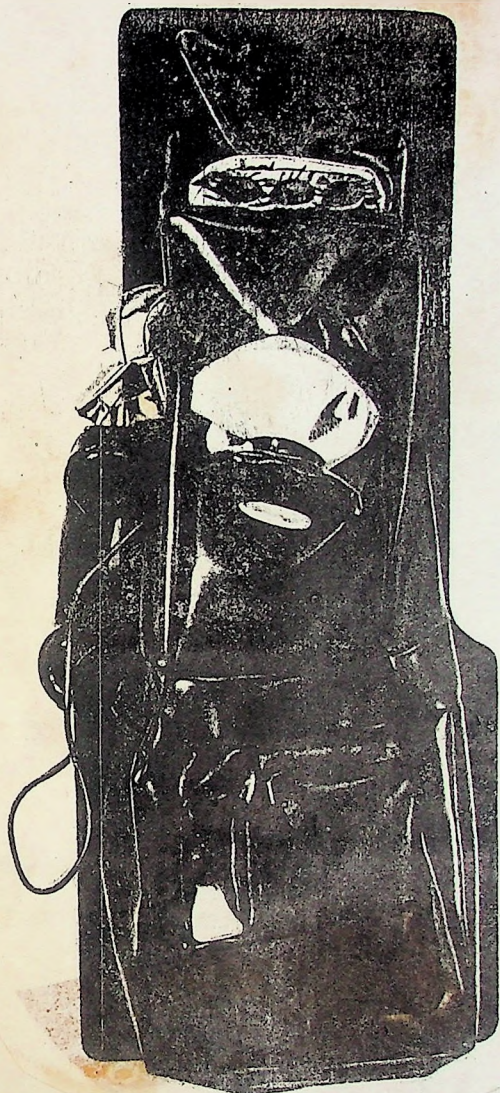


Fig 16 Soft pay telephone, 1963.  
Vinyl filled with kapok  
mounted on a painted wood  
panel  
40½" high x 19" wide x 12" deep.

In 1961, Oldenburg opened an actual store on Second Avenue, in New York filled with objects made of painted plaster and attractively priced for such amounts as \$198. Many of these objects, represented food, ice cream, sundaes, sandwiches or pieces of cake.

see fig 17  
(over)

The objects were made of muslin staked in plaster, roughly modelled and garishly painted. Later on the use of these materials led him ultimately to a translation of hard or rigid objects such as bathroom or kitchen fixtures into soft collapsing versions.

An extension of his divorce of form from function is his designing of monuments for public places e.g. a giant ice lolly for Central Park, an enormous beer barrel blocking the Thames. It would be nice to see a gigantic ironing board monument in Dublin's O'Connell Street. It would make a change from the cold uninteresting monuments that exist there at the moment. Why is it that so many of the modern sculptors in Ireland are content to have their work stand beside office buildings, hidden away and often overpowered by the architecture beside them? I don't think Oldenburg would stand for it. His sculpture would have to be in the centre of life and activity, joining in, not standing still, looking pretty.

Oldenburg: "Only when someone looks at nature does  
mean something. Because my work is  
naturally non-meaningful, the meaning





Fig 17. slice of yellow pie 1901  
muslin soaked in plaster.  
19" high X 17" wide X 7" deep.

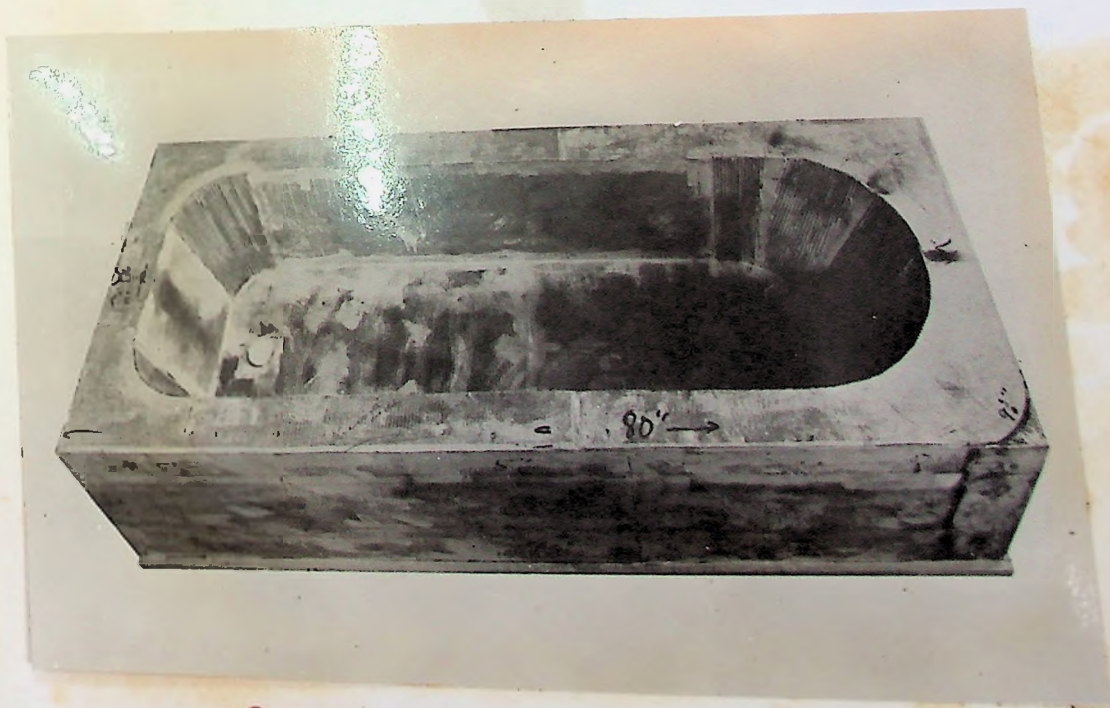


Fig 18. Bath tub; hard version.

found in it will remain doubtful and inconsistent which is the way it should be. All that I care about is that, like any startling piece of nature it should be capable of stimulating meaning".

Oldenburg takes everyday common objects, objects that lie outside the circle of Art and puts them into a situation, traditionally reserved for art. By Oldenburg making an art piece out of these objects it becomes a "happening". It makes his art come alive. His art is not something to look at in a museum. His art jumps out at you, it tells you all about its self in one outburst of shape, colour and form, "I am a bathtub made of vinyl..".

In the next two photographs (see <sup>FIGURE 18, 19</sup> ~~back of text~~), you can see the different stages which Oldenburg brings his Art until it reaches the finished stage. He starts off with the hard version where he studies the overall shape, volume and size. Then he moves on to his ghost version which is the same object in cloth, same size but more detailed. The emphasis in the ghost version is the amount of space the tub takes up and the way in which it hangs. The ghost version is almost like filling a suit on a tailor's dummy, seeing how it hangs and making the necessary alterations. The next and final stage is the completed form, in this case vinyl bathtub. The changes have been made detailed, and have been perfected. For





Fig 19. 1966 Bathtub finished soft version.



Fig 20



example the two taps in the ghost version are just in the shape of two crosses. Where as in the final stage the corners are rounded off although they are both still flat.

See Fig 20.

Another similar example of this working process and theme is "The toilet" which he made in a hard structure then the experimental "Ghost version" and then the final "Soft Sculpture" made of vinyl.

These "soft sculptures" make it possible for Oldenburg to execute sculptures on a large scale at a minimum cost. In 1963 to use vinyl in fashion design was considered daring, where as today "anything goes".

Oldenburg used vinyl in his soft sculpture to solve a problem. The problem was how to make a reasonably durable sculpture yielding and unfixed and also give it the visual properties of other objects. Objects that are made of metal or other hard substances. This modern man made fabric has made it possible for Oldenburg to acquire the visual and tactile qualities he wishes to project in his soft sculpture, the contradiction of hard being soft yet remaining flexible and visually metallic or enameled.



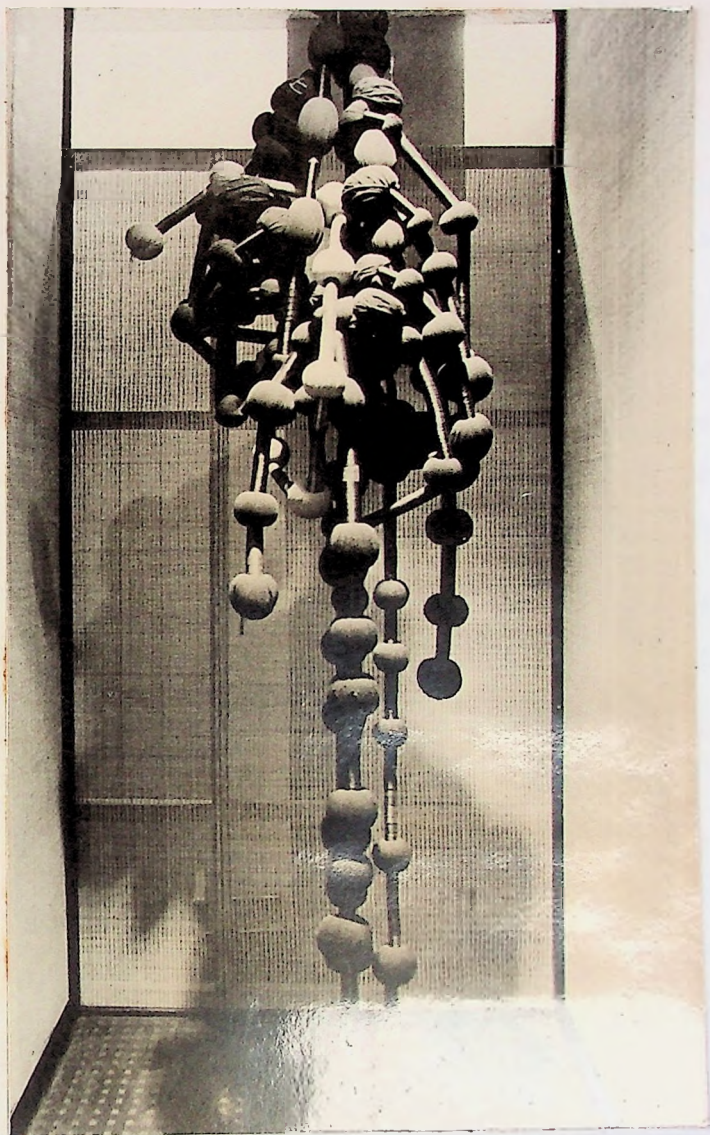


Figure 21. Sculptures in orange and  
purple. Sheila Hicks 1969.  
7' high. Wrapped yarns.

## Chapter Four

### THE INFLUENCE OF CLAES OLDENBURG ON OTHER FIBER ARTISTS.

The decade of the 1960's marked the emergence of soft sculpture. Fiber and fabrics, plastics and the combinations of both soft and hard materials appeared in exhibitions. Among the early 'happenings' were the weavings of Lenore Tawney, Clair Zeisler and Sheila Hicks.

The surfaces and shapes of their woven forms moved beyond the rectangle and two dimensionality into relief surfaces and then into the third dimension. The artists began to explore the quality of the materials and to allow this quality to become the expression of the piece. At the beginning the pieces assumed sculptural dimension but they were for the most part, two-dimensional concepts with the addition of depth.

At the same time as weavers were moving away from the wall, soft stuffed fabrics in sculpture were coming into prominence. While the weavers were exploring textures and tactile qualities, Oldenburg's influence was being felt in many areas. Artists working with soft media began to explore the use of old materials and methods into new statements. Embroiderers began to rethink the flat surface. Fabric collage which was usually worked in flat rectangular presentations began to stress materials that provided relief dimensions.

see Fig 21



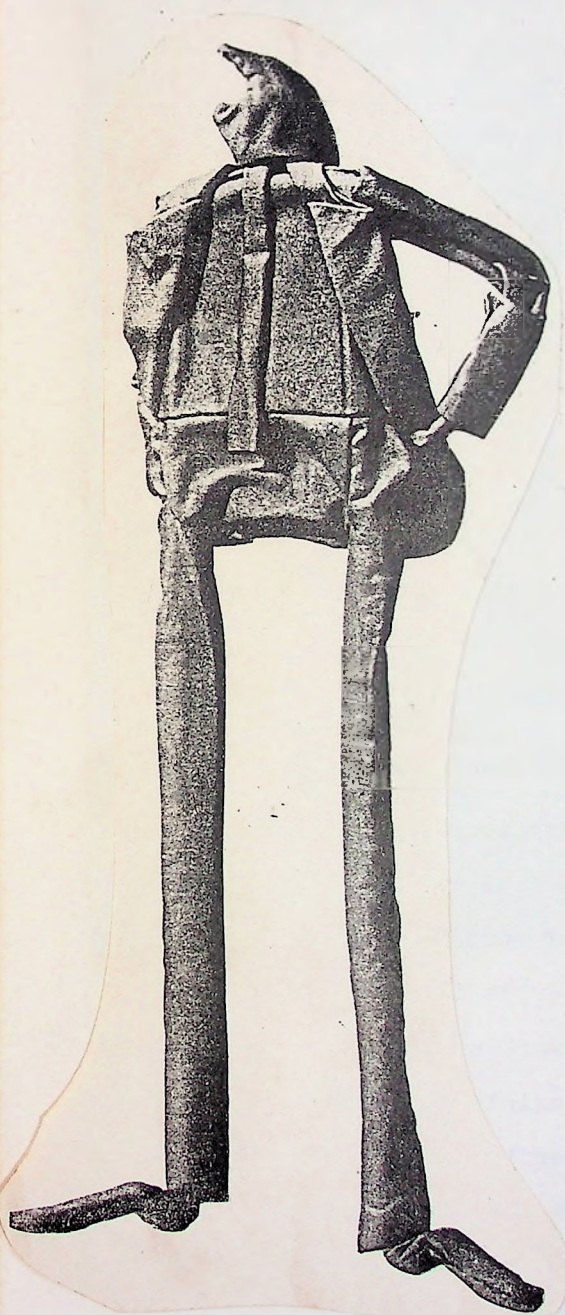


FIG 23. William King, 1972.  
OBSERVER, 33" high.  
Painted canvas.

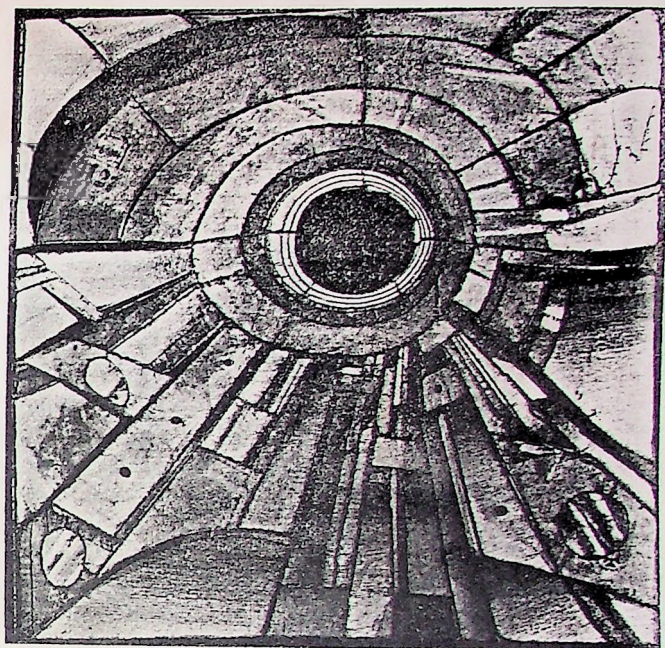


FIG 22. Lee Bortecou, 1964.  
welded steel and canvas.



See Fig. 22.

Lee Bontecou, a renowned sculptress of the sixties, began to make her sculptures using a combination of metal and canvas. These sculptures, although made of metal and canvas gave the illusion of hard metal. Oldenburg as I have said earlier in this paper used vinyl in his sculptures to give the illustration of a harder metal.

See Fig. 23.

Other artists, who also moved from using hard to soft materials, included: William King, who was among the pioneers of using a combination of hard and soft materials.

See Fig. 24.

In the use of soft and hard material the materials are worked soft, become hard, but still retain a soft appearance. An example of this is seen in the illustration of Kenneth Weedman, called "Inside Outside Movement".

In this piece, the materials are formed in a soft or melted state. The mixture of transparent plastic with coloured plastic within, suggests the concept of softness even after the plastic has hardened. The ripples and folds in the plastic gives the illustration of a soft satin folded together at the top and flowing silky and free down to the base of the transparent tube.

In this particular example the Artist has executed his work in quite the opposite way in which Oldenburg worked although the visual impact is the same. It is not until you actually touch the object that the difference



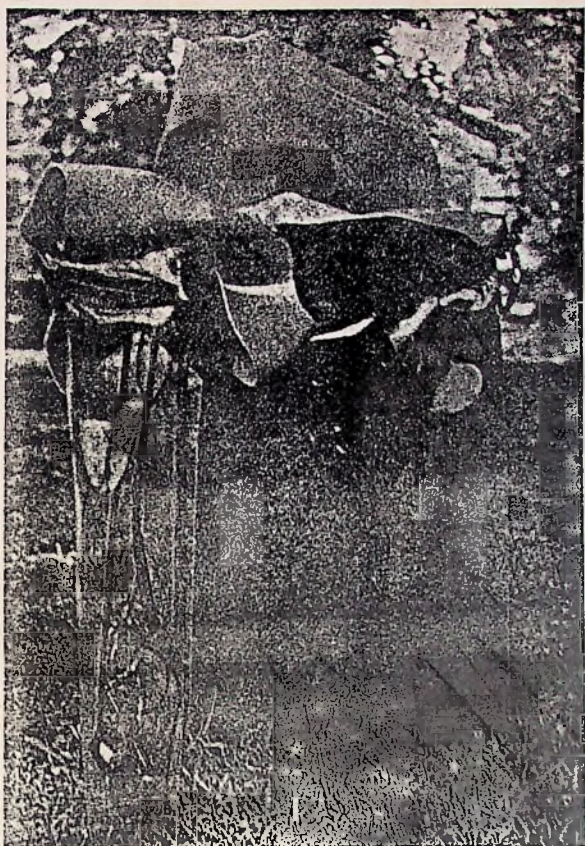


Fig 24. Kenneth Weedman.  
Inside outside movement.  
45" high, 35" wide, 23" deep.  
Acrylic sheet.

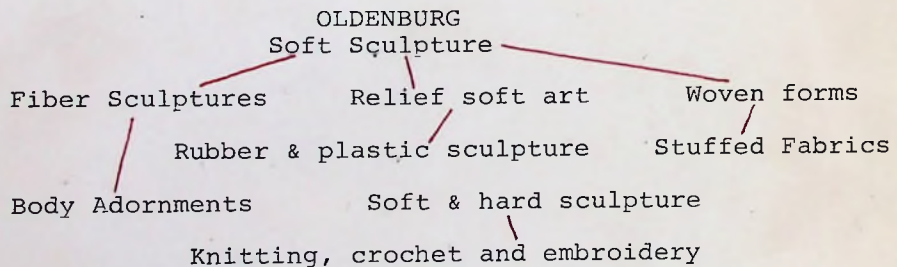
is experienced.

The movement in soft sculpture is one of the most exciting elements, for when you touch it, it responds to you, it moves. In Weedman's work the opposite reaction happens, when you touch it, it is motionless, hard and serious. But on appearance it looks light and full of movement. In a soft sculpture when you touch it you feel like laughing because it is soft and it moves and it seems almost alive, it lives up to its visual impact of being humourous.

Since Oldenburg started the movement of soft sculpture it has progressed along different pathways, travelling in many directions.

From this diagram below, you can see the directions in which soft sculpture has branched off.

Fig, 25.



see Figures 26,  
to 32.

Artists have taken soft sculpture as their starting point and experimented using numerous materials and techniques. There are some examples of each of the variations at the back of this text which I have mentioned above.



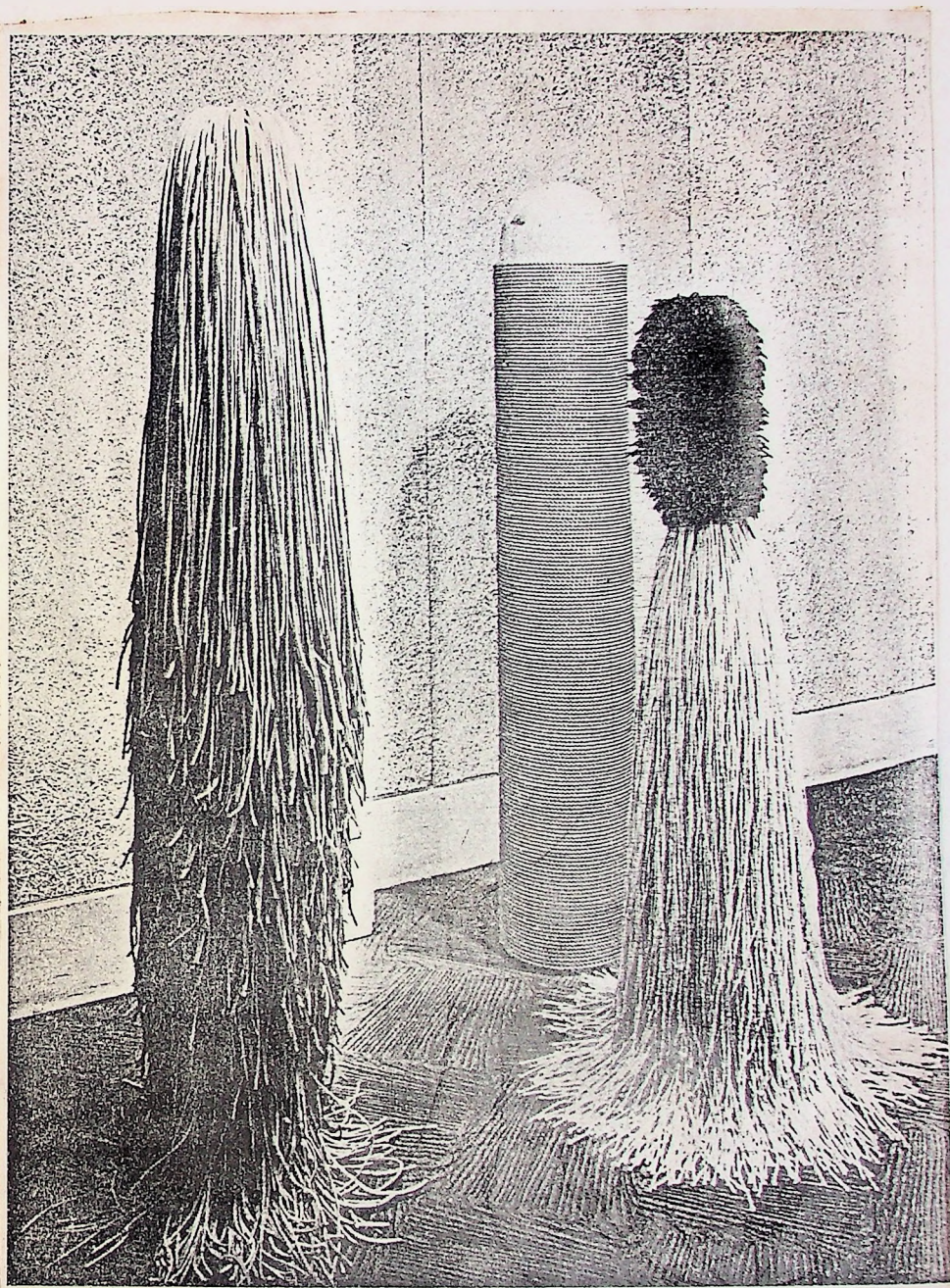


Fig 26, Fiber sculptures non woven.  
Fiber sculptures on exhibit at the Deson  
Gallery, Chicago, Park Chambers, 1972.  
left, Leather Lingham. centre Lip Gloss.  
right, Busdy.



From the examples I have shown of the advancement of soft sculpture, I would now like to focus in on one aspect of soft sculpture; stuffed fabrics.

One of the great advantages of working in the field of soft sculpture is the variety of textures, colours and patterns in which the materials come. Also both natural and synthetic cloths are used and often a combination of both.

Stuffing materials is a bit like modelling or carving except if you make a mistake alterations and revisions are simple, in this medium objects do not have to be perfect. Too much or too little stuffing may even enhance the piece. Like in Oldenburg's and Warhol's work, there were no boundaries or barriers, they did what they wanted to do. It was the end result that was important.

The tactile qualities are an essential property of soft sculpture. The sculptor is aware of the surprise he or she can create by using a texture that suggests cold or heat. The sculptor can continually try fabrics of different weights and qualities until pleased with what ever tactile quality is required.

Oldenburg has opened the doors for much more development. Artists keep discovering new methods of expressing themselves in this soft medium.



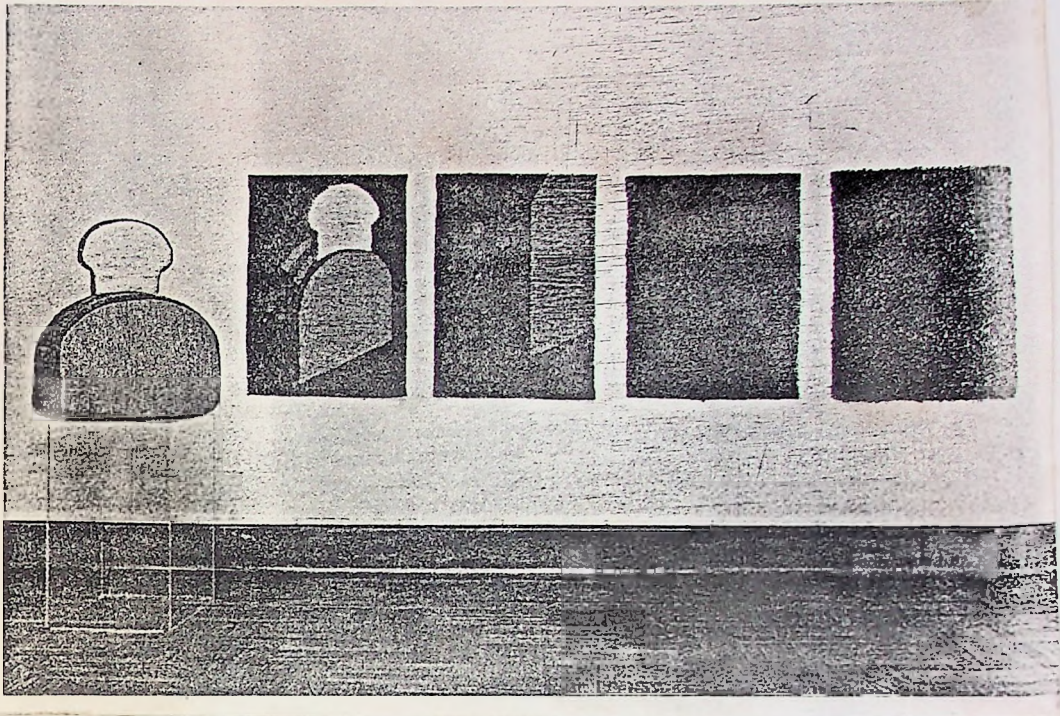


Fig 27, Woven Forms.  
Toaster series. Janet, R. Taylor. 1972.  
Toaster 18" high, 24" wide, 12" deep. Each tapestry,  
40" high, 32" wide. Woven hand-dyed wool, linen,  
rayon, machine-spun yarns, and hand-spun  
roving.

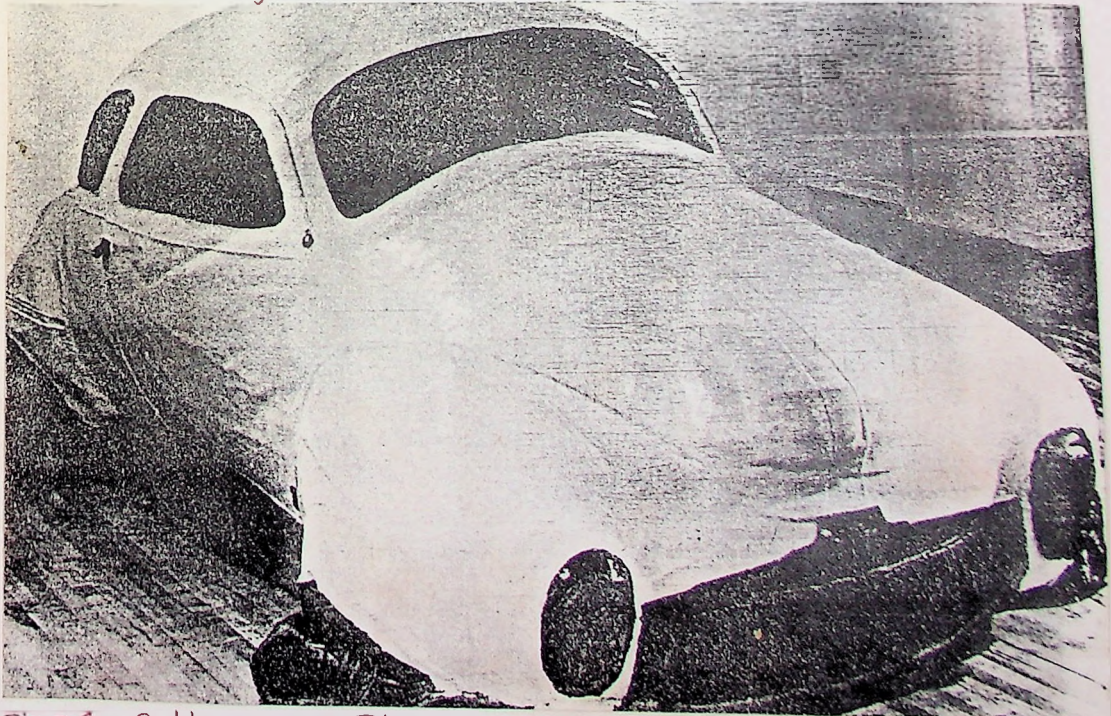


Fig 28, Rubber and Plastic, Yellow '42 Ford. 1972.  
Inflated rubber latex, colored with acrylic.



## Chapter Five

### CONCLUSION:-

Claes Oldenburg, like all contemporary artists is open to wide spread criticism. Critics, artists and the general public ask the inevitable question: "Is it Art?" There is a general agreement that it is humorous just like Andy Warhol's "Brillo paols" or Lichtenstein's comic strips "But his work is nothing in comparison to Leonardo's "Mona Lisa" or Van Gogh's "Stary Night"!"

A point which one must remember about Claes Oldenburg is that he is living in the twentieth century, portraying life as it is today, not as it was or how we would like it to be. His art is being honest and it emphasizes the importance the American consumer society places on common "junk food" and possessions e.g. hamburgers, food nuisers, fans and clothes. This maybe an embarrassing factor but it is reality. Oldenburg leaves his work open to interpretation. He invites the public to come and touch his art, to experience the tactile qualities and sensiousness of his medium and make whatever conclusions they wish. People see his work as humorous, inaquietive, symbolic, phallic, showing the naked truth of the depreivation of life in the slums a major step forward in art, or utter rubbish.

Claes Oldenburg himself has numerous reasons for constructing each piece. He does not rush blindly into



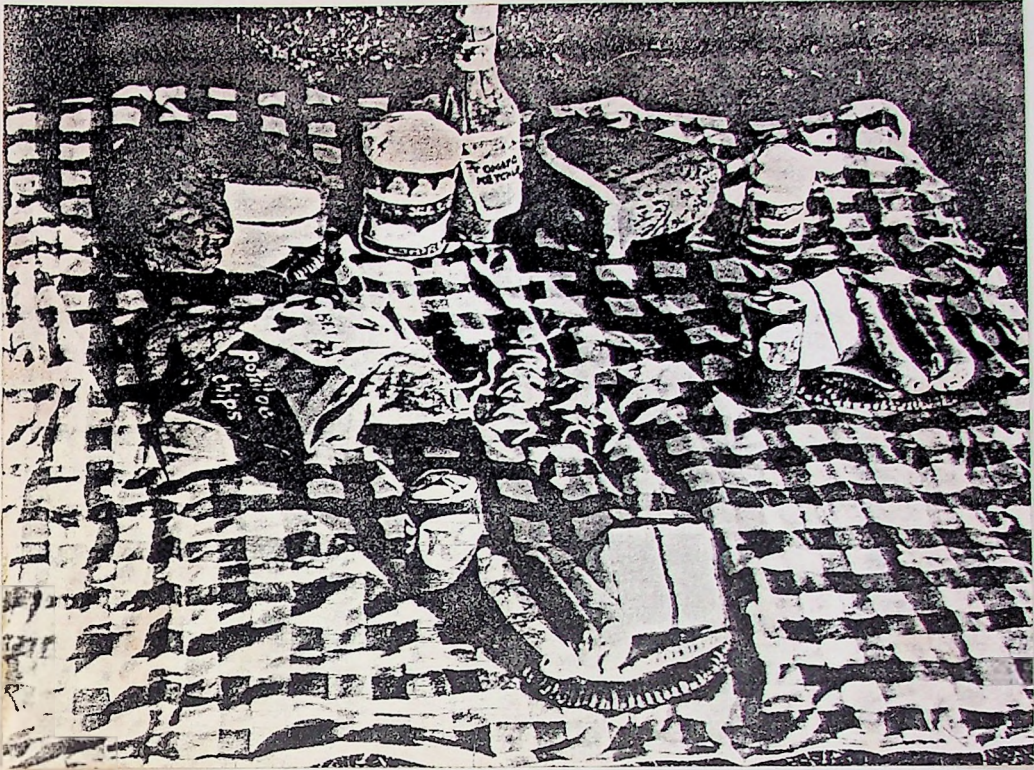


Fig 29, Stuffed Fabrics.  
Picnic Batik, Susanne Mancini. 1973.



Fig 30. Body Adornments,  
collar, Rita Shumaker,  
1972. Finger woven  
wool and mohair, with  
stone wave beads.



his work, when one realizes how much research, imagination, planning, invention, construction and reconstruction occurs in Oldenburg's work routine, you realize that he is not trying to just fool the public.

In fact his work retains closer ties with tradition than most avant-grade sculptors. His work discusses the human body, the country side and objects from still lives.

One can see from his work he can draw very well, he is observant, he experiments in different mediums; pencil water colour, oils, plaster (metal) and fabric. He leaves no stone unturned and chooses the most suitable medium for every individual piece. He combines reality with fantasy creating contradictions e.g. his quaint soft fan, which is blown totally out of proportion and made of black vinyl which gives the impression of metal but is soft and floppy.

I feel the dedication, the hard labour and imaginative resources Oldenburg feeds into his work is enough to prove he is a great modern artist. Soft sculpture is a relatively new movement and by making soft sculpture an accepted art form has brought art a step forward and opened the possibilities for other artists. He has prevented art from slipping backwards and going stagnant. He has given me a more optimistic outlook on art and has made me aware of the great possibilities of leaving the two dimensions and experimenting in the third dimension.



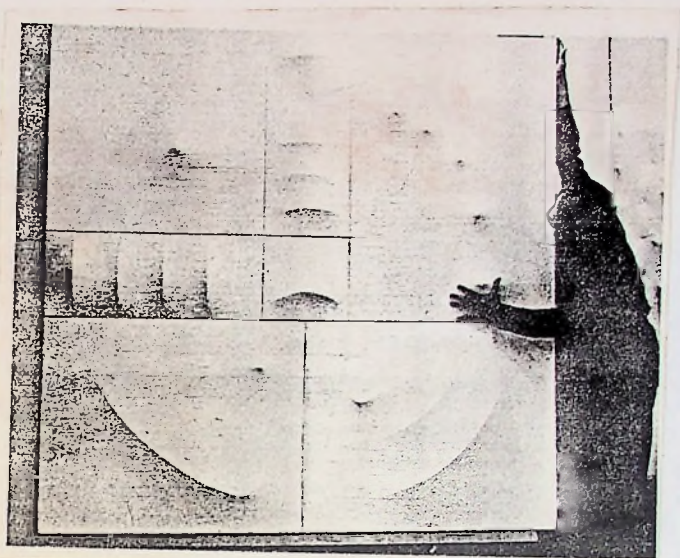


Fig 31, soft and hard,

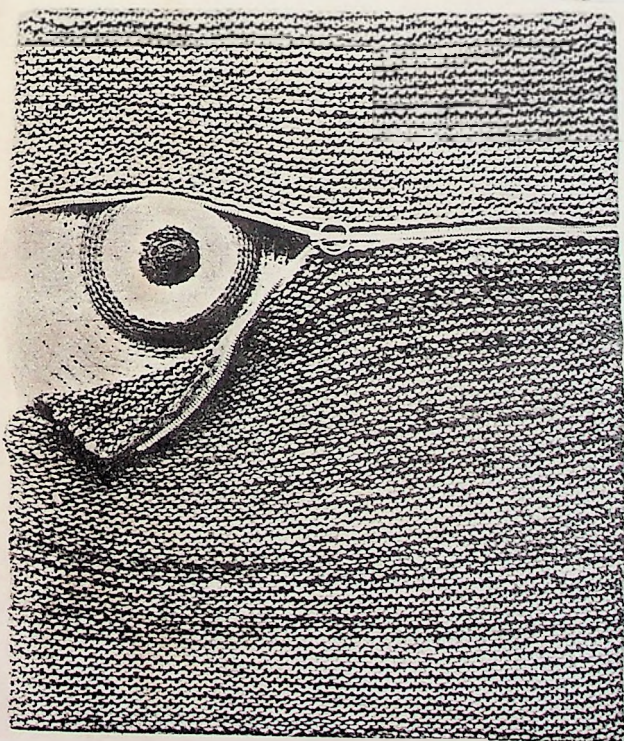


Fig 32, Knitting - Crochet-embroidery.

Bonjour Monsieur Royer Tricotage et Déshabillage  
sont les Deux Mamelles De La France.  
Zizine Bouscaud, 1972. 33" high. Crocheted wood,



ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig 1	page 2.	myself.
2	" 5	Jackson Pollock
3	" "	William De Kooning.
4	" 6	Oldenburgs notebook drawings.
5	" 7	" self Portrait.
6	" "	Girl with fur piece.
7	" 9	Oldenburgs notebook pages.
8	" "	"
9	" 10	Picasso, "Woman crying".
10	" 11	Richard Estes, Down town.
11	" 12	Three views of the street.
12	" 13	Jasper Johns, Target with four faces.
13	" 15	Floor Burger!
14	" 16	Giant Drumset.
15	" "	Soft typewriter.
16	" 17	Pay telephone.
17	" 18	Slice of yellow pie.
18	" "	Bath tub hard version
19	" 19	" soft version.
20	" "	Three stages of soft toilet.
21	" 20	Sheila Hicks.
22	" 21	Lee Bontecou.
23	" "	William King.
24	" 22	Kenneth Weedman.
25	" "	Diagram.
26	" 23	Fiber sculptures non woven.
27	" 24	Woven forms.
28	" "	Rubber and Plastic.
29	" 25	stuffed fabrics.
30	" "	Body adornments.
31	" 26	Soft and hard.
32	" "	Knitting - crochet - Embroidery.



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

This book about the work of Claes Oldenburg was written by Barbara Rose for The Museum of Modern Art.

Modern Art a Collins - Larousse concise Encyclopedia.

A History of Modern Art, painting - sculpture - architecture. H. H. Arnason.

Art without Boundaries: 1950 - 70, Gerald Woods, Philip Thompson, John Williams.

America as Art - Joshua C. Taylor.

Contemporary Artists, editors: Colin Naylor, Genesis P-Orridge. St James Press, London. St Martins Press, New York.

Dan Graham - Articles.

Pengiuin New Art 4, Claes Oldenburg, Ellen H. Johnson.

Soft Sculpture and other Soft Art Forms, Dona 2: Meilach

Richard Estes: The Urban Landscape. Essay by John Canadian.