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Introduction:

The work of Claes Oldenburg presents a maze of contradiction. He thrives on polarities and opposites in both the formal aspects of his work and the many possible interpretations from the use of both verbal and visual metaphor. Although it is certain that the work contains tangible content and sometimes comment, the one thing that he has remained adamant and thoroughly consistent through his everchanging style is his insistence that his work is basically a study of form. The appearance of content is only an arbitrary, ephemeral aspect of the work.

To look at the purely formal aspects carefully one finds a very limited number of basic forms being employed. A single shape can reappear many times in many guises due to his use of what he calls 'visual rhyming'. If he places a drawing of one piece upsidedown or sideways he can relate this new angle to some other commonplace object. The use of commonplace objects is calculated to give an opening to almost any person into the work. By the use of such trivial, mundane subject matter Oldenburg hopes to draw the attention of the viewer towards the purely formal aspects.

With the knowledge of his disinterested attitude towards content, a certain ambivalence becomes apparent. Many of his quotes indicate, at certain times, a sincere interest in giving a very specific content-comment in the work. For example the 'Ray Gun Manufacturing Co'. was contrived originally as a stance from which he would

launch his attack against "the materialist practices and Art". Oldenburg joined an attack against Abstract Expressionism with the 'new' style 'Pop' or the 'new realist' art, which was eventually to succeed in deposing 'Abstract Expressionism', which was succeeded by 'Pop' art as the dominant style. Although Oldenburg had been part of this attack, once he became recognised and welcomed into the establishment, he changed his attitude, back once again to being interested solely in the exploration of form. He immediately dissociated himself from the 'Pop' movement, rejecting it as a mere formula while his work ventured on to new development. It is difficult to determine whether he has, in this example and the many others that could be drawn up, simply jumped on a bandwagon with his own financial and egotistical needs in mind or whether he is just parodying life and art styles. The raising of questions and discussions like this make his art a reflection of the complexity of life itself (another aim of his) and leads me to think that he is a very clever and adept man intent on covering his tracks from all angles while on a journey with no particular end in sight. He seems to derive an almost sinister, yet childish pleasure from giving clues in complex riddles, that can at first appear simple but after some analysis tend to branch off in many different directions of meaning.

This appears to be an underlying megalomaniac fantasy lurking ominously as his objects and ideas grow in leaps and bounds. There is always an appealing childish subversiveness in his work. He places himself in the position of a child with authority personified as an adult. His is a challenge of the instinctual, emotional to that of the intellect and reason. But it is only a challenge in the form of harmless suggestion. "When Ray Gun shoots no one dies".

There appears to be a desire to make a concrete realisation, to the furthest possible extent of the landscape of his personal imagination. The human imagination being fundamental to all races and creeds instinctual and very last refuge of total freedom.

As it stands I can only make suggestions as to what I feel Claes Oldenburg is trying to do. he never settles down long enough to be pinned down in any way. Whether this is just a device to draw and then hold interest from others or it is a form of paranoia is debatable. I personally feel it is the former because he is by no means a quiet or shy man; rather, he loves being present at the installation of his public pieces mingling with the people watching, giving speeches, being the star of the show. What he also appears to have achieved through various useful disguises and charades and the creation of an interesting imaginative art, is the fulfillment of the American Dream.

CHAPTER 1EARLY WORKBackground.

Claes Oldenburg was born in Sweden in 1929. At the age of seven he and his family moved to live in Chicago due to the fact that his father was a member of the Swedish 'Foreign Service'. Unable to speak English, Claes and his younger brother Richard invented a fantasy country which they called 'Neubern'. It was an imaginary Island located halfway between Africa and South America where the language was half-English and half-Swedish. They went into incredible detail fabricating the historical past and the present of their 'Neubern, precise detailed maps, statistics of the climate, industries, transport systems, comics, newspapers (in English, Swedish or both) and even the import-export indexes. Their parents approved and helped as it was helping the children learn English. As we shall see, many aspects of Claes's childhood experiences recur in his later, mature work, as would traces of the scrapbooks made by his mother and aunt. [fig. 1] These scrapbooks contained collages made from carefully cut out magazine illustrations and advertisements. The bizarre juxtaposition of scale provided Claes with a source for much inspiration later.

He attended Yale on an experimental, varied subject programme with literature being his main study. Upon leaving in 1950 he worked the police beat as an apprentice reporter which lasted 1½ years. In 1952 he attended the Chicago Art Institute during which he showed a selection

of satirical drawings in a joint exhibition with Robert Indiana. When he left the Institute his work became a battleground as he fought with himself to resolve his painting style. Many of his drawings from this time depicted strange combinations of plants and machines, another theme which he would explore in his later work. He wrote constantly, a habit he picked up while at Yale preoccupied with his intellectual self-education as an artist. The writing consisted of his investigation of Art History and of many exhaustive studies into relevant natural processes such as the effects of gravity upon various materials.

His move to New York in the summer of 1956, marked a significant step in his development as an artist. It was there that he came into contact with a vital, living art and social scene. He made many new friends including, Jim Dine, George Segal, Red Grooms, Lucas Samaras and Allan Kaprow. Following the example of Kaprow, Oldenburg and the others mentioned developed an interest in theatre. There were many performances to various local audiences in the Lower East side slums where these artists were living. It was here in New York that Oldenburg made his debut as a thoroughly independent talent. His first one man show consisted mainly of white papier maché masks including the 'Elephant mask' which Oldenburg often wore on the streets during the show. [fig. 2]



1. From Mother and Punt's Scrapbook, 1934-35.



2. Elephant Mask with Pat Oidenburg.

There were also some wooden sculptures, figure drawings of his wife, Pat, and writings. The most prominent pieces in the show were the masks, which betray an interest in tribal sculpture with its ceremonial and magical function. The exhibition took the form of an installation/environment as would most of his subsequent shows.

The Street:

After the show Oldenburg found himself disillusioned and lost. He turned to writing and continued his study into art-history, rejecting the work from the previous show as too "generalised" and "abstract". It was around this time that he became acquainted with the writings of Freud, an experience that he described to be "like a curtain going up". (1). He took to using the psychoanalytical technique of 'free association' to probe his mind, in an attempt to discover himself, his deepest thoughts and ideas. He discovered that his thoughts had their roots in his environment and experiences and so in an effort to be true to himself he decided that his art should also have its roots there. Around this time he wrote in his notebook, "I feel my purpose is to say something about my times... for me this involves a recreation of my vision of the times"... He went on to describe himself as a "spectator of myself... every instant is the drama and my art is the record or evidence". (2).

Given his cultured wealthy background and the fact of his living in the Lower East side, a poverty stricken slum area, it was inevitable, that his work would become strongly influenced by his unfamiliar surroundings. He now spent most of his time drawing on the street. He said of these drawings.

"The drawing of this time takes on an "ugliness" which is the mimicry of the scrawls and patterns of street graffiti. It celebrates irrationality, disconnection, violence and the stunted expression- the damaged life forces of the city street".(3). [fig.3]

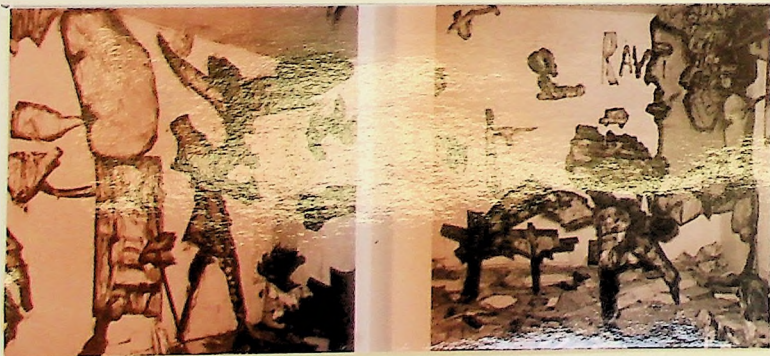
No doubt the now primitive drawing of Dubuffet, Dine and Grooms was having an influence on him as his next major project materialised, an installation with the Street as the theme. [fig.4]

The gallery became transformed into a street with his use of the walls as open space. Large jagged-edged figures and objects formed the foreground while smaller figures gave the illusion of perspective. The subjects, made mainly from cardboard and other materials found around the area, were drawn by tearing the cardboard, and the jagged edges accentuated with black paint giving the appearance of their being torn, violently from their environment. The dominant colour, a somber brown-black, contributed largely to the overall morbidity of the tableaux. Irving Sandler wrote of the show :

"Oldenburg's characters... are humorous and tender but grim. They are as abstract and as real as the human wrecks that inhabit downtown New York. Cut out words 'Orpheum'.



3. Man and woman talking. 1950.



4. The Street at the Judson Gallery. 1950.

'Empire' and 'Tarzan' cover some of the figures to indicate the American dream of glory unfulfilled in the anonymity of city life. Above all it is the drawing that distinguishes the pieces. Line is direct and rough in keeping with the content, but it is also precise and animate-like children's scribbles on tenement walls."(4).

The 'Street', like the 'Neubern' fantasy, was a parody of reality; it was his 'vision of the times' laden with the atmosphere of anger, violence and most importantly, his cynicism about America, official and media rhetoric juxtaposed against the reality of the slums. He wrote of New York:

"I see all the degradation and slavery and terror of production as contrasted with the floating and very finished product on t.v."(5).

He was determined that his 'vision' of the street should be viewed only as an objective, visual statement and... "Not as a challenge to or a development of painting..."(6). He was clearly thinking of Art in terms of the predominant style of the time, i.e. Abstract Expressionism. He could see no relationship existing between his work and this intensely personal and idealistic style. Although there was a link in that the Abstract Expressionists and Oldenburg both wanted to express emotion, their fundamental difference lay in the question of form. Oldenburg saw abstraction as mere decoration and felt that art must come out of the 'concrete' and feedback into life

"I come out of Goya, Rouault, parts of Dubuffet, Bacon, the humourists and existentialist imagists, the Chicago bunch and that's what sets me apart from the whole Hoffman-influenced school".(7).

Oldenburg believed that painting was dead, it had lost the 'power to move':(8) he believed that for him it would be,

"the easiest thing in the world, now, to do the right thing, the slick thing, the thing everybody will agree is "good". Finish and commerce thats what culture fights in America".(9)

He felt that both Art and American society were at the, "empire stage, money, fatness, ease, communication".(10).

He was obviously disgusted with the blatant materialism of the new consumer America which had sucked Art firmly into its grasp. Art had become just another product to be consumed and there were many artists producing frankly derivative Abstract Expressionist style paintings to cater for the fast growing market.

Ray Gun:

With these (aforementioned) thoughts in his mind, he took a break to Provincetown, a holiday resort in Cape Cod by the sea where he dishwashed to earn a living. Interested in the commercialisation of patriotism and history in the resort, he collected the most abundant, free material at hand which happened to be driftwood and he proceeded to make many wood assemblages with the predominant theme being, 'the flag'. [fig. 5]

This stay in Provincetown became very important in the respect that he filled many notebooks with ideas. These notebooks contained the germinal ideas for almost all his subsequent art work. In these notebooks he was also developing a method of being objective about himself, to become the "spectator of meself".¹¹ To achieve this objectivity he devised 'Ray Gun'. Ray Gun, his alter ego,

would be his new art "... made out of anti-art materials".(12), a magical phallus, the talismanic symbol of his aggression and potency which would be used relentlessly, "to attack the materialistic practices and art". (13). [fig. 6]

Ray Gun's purpose is defined as "annihilate/illuminate", (14), an analogy could be drawn to a quote in Freud's 'Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious', (which Oldenburg states is still his favourite of Freud's works) which explains how the effect of a joke comes about through "bewilderment being succeeded by illumination". (15). Oldenburg's intentions being more serious than a joke, merits the 'annihilation' of something within the viewer. (and /or society), being followed by 'illumination'. His new art would use imagery from popular art, but not just to imitate it, but to use it "for something more serious". (16).

To continue the analogy with jokes: along with the introduction of popular imagery came another development-humour. Considering that he was now actively using the 'free association' technique in the conception and execution of his work and that this use of the concept of ones subconscious is also a helpful technique in the conception of jokes as stated by Freud:

"In order to enable this thought to be . turned into a joke, it is clearly necessary, to select from the possible forms of expression, the precise one which brings along with it a yield of verbal pleasure. We know from self-observation that this selection is not made from conscious attention; but it



5. Cemetery Flag (Provincetown) 1960.



6. Empire (Papa) Ros Dun 1960.

will certainly help the selection if the cathexis of the Preconscious thought is reduced to an unconscious one, for, as we have learned from the dream work, the connecting paths which start out from words are in the unconscious treated in the same way as things. An unconscious cathexis offers far more favourable conditions for selecting the expression". (17).

So it is possible that the humour originated due to the technique he was using in the conception of his work. It could also, of course have been a conscious decision. Oldenburg would probably have read the section in 'Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious' entitled "Jokes... in the service of a "Hostile Purpose".

"A joke will allow us to exploit something ridiculous in our enemy which we could not, on account of obstacles in the way, bring forward openly or consciously;... It will further bribe the hearer with its yield of pleasure into taking sides with us without any close investigation... This is brought out with perfect aptitude in the common phrase 'die lacher auf seine seite ziehen' (to bring the laughers over to our side)!" (18).

So humour became an asset to be employed in his attack upon the objects of his frustration. It would also, along with his new choice of popular subject matter serve to win him a wider audience.

The Store.

His 'attack' also underwent a major shift in tone, to a more positive subversive attitude. His new project became the 'Ray Gun Manufacturing Co.' or, "the store". His excited conception of this idea is contained in this excerpt from his notebook at the time;

"actually make a store!
 14 St or 6 Ave
 butchershop, ect.
 the whole store an apotheosis
 a sad, fast, hi(stor)ical store.
 a happy contemporary store too?" (19).

So he opened a 'store' which was presented in much the same manner as many of the other stores in the Lower East side. There were many different commodities available - shoes, clothes, food, etc. - but they were obviously not "real" commodities. They were roughly shaped in plaster and garishly painted with cheap enamel paint. The store was an attempt to subvert bourgeois values by replacing the museum/gallery space with a common store and by replacing 'Art' with representations of commonplace, mundane objects. He wanted... "these pieces to have an unbridled, satanic, vulgarity, unsurpassable, and yet be art". (20). [fig. 7]

The technique being employed with the store is also described by Freud:

"When an unfamiliar thing that is hard to take in, a thing that is abstract and in fact sublime in an intellectual sense, is alleged to tally with something familiar and inferior... then the abstract thing is itself unmasked as something equally inferior". (21).

While making the work for the store he arrived at an important shift in his attitude towards Abstract Expressionism. At first he wrote about how abstract expressionism looked, "as corny as the scratches on a N.Y. wall"; (22) then later he wrote jubilantly that, "by parodying its corn I have (miracle!) come back to its authenticity!" (23).

Now reassured he took a more positive attitude towards developing his work for its own sake. His objects, rather than imitating real objects, copy "the posters and ads". (24). This sense of detachment comes across from the work despite its expressionistic qualities. The viewer is not drawn into the work, rather the opposite; one stands back and sees the pieces in an objective or voyeuristic manner.

This sense of alienation is increased by the fragmented, jagged edges of the objects which, as in the 'street', give them the appearance of being torn from their environment. After two months in existence the 'store' closed, leaving an outstanding debt of \$285 which was taken care of by the upmarket Green Gallery.

The Green Gallery offered Oldenburg an exhibition. He agreed and decided to recreate 'the store' in the gallery space. He soon discovered that his pieces became 'lost' in the large exhibition room, they were too small (the biggest was no more than 3 feet by 3 feet). He solved this problem by making huge (car size) works. These were his first 'soft' sculptures, a giant, hamburger, a cake and an ice cream cone. [fig. 8+9]

The new size, as well as solving a practical problem, was also evidence of his new-found self confidence after successfully entering the established art world to expected critical disapproval and popular success. This increase in size was paralleled by the huge canvases being painted by Frankenthaler, Stella among other contemporaries in



7. The Store - 1961.



8. Light Ice Cream Cone 1962.

in painting. A connection can be drawn with Magritte, whose painting 'the listening chamber', portrays a gigantic apple. Magritte as well as Oldenburg, was concerned with questioning the nature of perception. Both artists refer the viewer back to his/her own perceptions by presenting something in a manner that is unexpected, thus raising the question of the relativity of perception.

The Green Gallery show was very much a portrayal of the American experience and in this way a denial of the 'Europeaness' of previous styles of American art.

"...no English pomposity,
and no Frenchness, none
of this hyperbolic surrealist
prose, theatricality but plain
right on the table there
with the knife beside it". (25).

In the way the original 'store' works, bulky awkward forms and gaudy, splashed colour be a reflection of bad taste and tawdry nature of American consumer culture. The image works by the fact of their size and their being food items reflect and poke fun/satirise, the gluttony of that same culture. Also by the fact of the work being 'Art' it is also a reflection on the consumption of Art. After the exhibition Oldenburg became disillusioned. He wrote in his notes in Summer 1963:

"I experienced a revulsion against
my situation in New York, hating
my store on Second Street, my
apartment, my body, my wife,
everything." (26)

He moved to Los Angeles to sort his ideas out.



9. 'The Stone' at the Green Gallery 1962.

"Footnotes"

- 1 Ellen.H.Johnson, Penguin New Art 4, p.12.
- 2 Barbara Rose, Cloes Oldenburg, p.193.
- 3 Ibid, p.195.
- 4 Ibid, p.40.
- 5 Ibid, p.193.
- 6 Ibid, p.
- 7 Ibid, p.189.
- 8 Ibid, p.52.
- 9 Ibid, p.53.
- 10 Ibid, p.52.
- 11 Ibid, p.193.
- 12 Ibid, p.192.
- 13 Ibid, p.62.
- 14 Ibid, p.192.
- 15 Sigmund Fred, Jokes and their relation to the Unconscious, p.42.
- 16 Rose p.64.
- 17 Freud, p.235.
- 18 Ibid, p.147.
- 19 Johnson, p.17.
- 20 Rose, p.65.
- 21 Freud, p.273.
- 22 Rose, p.65.
- 23 Ibid, p.
- 24 Ibid
- 25 Ibid, p.194.
- 26 Ibid, p.92.

CHAPTER 2THE PLASTIC ENVIRONMENT.

The first 'soft' sculptures which appeared in the Green Gallery exhibition of the store work presented a new medium and an avenue that Oldenburg was intent on exploring. He is a man who gets bored easily, who needs complexity and change to satisfy his impatience. The soft sculpture offered the possibility not only of new forms but also a new theme. Upon searching for new materials in Los Angeles he discovered there, abundant supplies of vinyl and was inspired to pursue the soft sculpture with the new theme of 'the Home'.

With the advent of the soft sculpture came a new emphasis, the sculptural form. Gone were the nervous, fragmented, jagged lines and edges, the vivid sensuous paint and painterliness of the street and store. The surfaces and hard edges were no longer important, as mass, volume and gravity became evidently more suited to the materials that he was using. The vinyl fitted well into his criteria for a good material: he preferred a material that is, "organic seeming and full of surprises, inventive all by itself".(1). The materials dictate and reveal their own potential over a period of time as he experiments. When he has come to terms with his new material the forms "simply demand to be created".(2). Thus his choice of material is a vital aspect to the possible outcome of any one of his pieces, themes and projects. The material is usually chosen primarily on the grounds of availability. "The Street" show

at the Judson Gallery in 1960 was dominated by cardboard, burlap, newspaper and any locally available materials as was his work in Provincetown, made from the most freely available materials, driftwood, etc. Of course for these different separate projects, including 'the Store', besides the fact of easy availability the most important factor was to get the material at little or no expense. These factors presiding over the choice of material had always led to the work to achieve a unity of subject matter, form, location (response to), and material. Now for the first time in his career, as a result of a couple of successful, financially rewarding exhibitions, poised on the verge of 'international recognition', he could afford to choose from a much wider range of materials. So, vinyl was a very conscious choice. He had gone to Los Angeles partly to escape the critics who were trying to pull together a new 'movement' the 'new realism' 'Pop art' in which Oldenburg was being included. He never cherished the thought of being classified, (he once described distinctions and classifications as a "civilised disease"). While in Los Angeles he chopped and changed his style because he believed this to be "The only defense against being trapped in someone's idea of your intention". (3). This "defense" led him, just after beginning 'the Home', to produce the 'Bedroom Ensemble' which in almost all respects represents the antithesis of soft sculpture. This theme, because of its being almost totally opposite in form and content to the 'Home', could have helped greatly in the development of the 'Home'. For the first time

Oldenburg hired professional craftsmen, to manufacture his artwork from the artists technical drawings. The production of the 'Bedroom Ensemble' parallels closely the ideas that the 'Poe' artists had about removing all trace of the artist from the work to achieve maximum impersonality. (Fig 10)

The 'Bedroom Ensemble' was originally based on a motel on the road to Malibu, where Oldenburg had stayed, in 1947. The most striking feature of this Motel was that each suite was decorated with a different wild animal hide, for example zebra, lion, leopard etc.

The 'Bedroom' encapsulates Oldenburg's general attitude to Los Angeles which he described as:

"the paradise of industrialism. L.A. has the atmosphere of the consumer, the home the elegant neat result, like the frankfurter in its non-remembered distance from the slaughterhouse". (4).

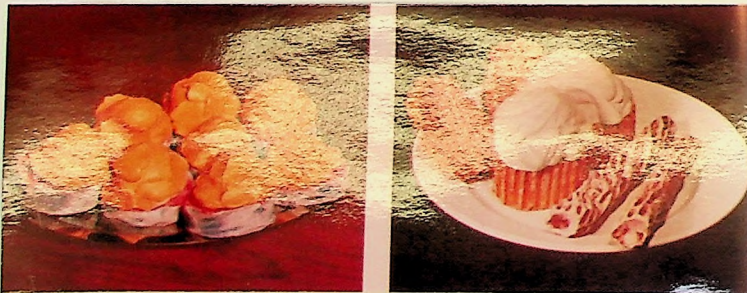
The 'Bedroom' is a harsh, hard, cold room, quite the opposite to what one would expect a bedroom to be. The dwelling of Eros becomes the chamber of death. Oldenburg makes many references to death when speaking of this piece and the area that inspired its creation, for example,

"... all styles on the side of death.
'The Bedroom' was a National tomb,
Pharaoh's or Plato's bedroom". (5)
...and "... the cemeteries of formica strewn in
the opium mists of the western shores". (6).

Gone is the life, colour and fun of the 'store' theme. Only three colours are employed in the 'Bedroom', black, blue and silver. Perspective made literal, the bed and



10. Bedroom Ensemble. 1983.



11. Salmon Avec Mayonnaise and Ouefs "Volcanic". 1964.

the room are actually rhomboidal shapes, geometric, logical, mathematical inhuman shapes with sharp edges and pointed corners. The materials overtly synthetic, false fur, the 'Photographed' (7) false texture of the formica. On the wall some Pollock-like reproductions. Pollock was Oldenburg's symbol of life and any reproduction of his style a symbol of death. 'The Bedroom' combines into being an unnatural environment, a temple of ambiguity, lies, death, sex and alienation. Fig 10

While in Europe at this time, showing some of the 'vinyl pieces at the American stand in the 32nd Venice Biennale he went to Paris and while there he resorted back to an old medium of his, tempera painted plaster. He had a show of this work in Paris, which surprised many who were following his progress (as did the 'Bedroom Ensemble' piece!). The work consisted mainly of food items: cakes, (Fig 11) sweets and various delicacies to be found in the cafe's and restaurants of Paris, all presented behind glass in display cases. They were made with the care and craftsmanship of the "real" objects/sweets, contrasting strongly with the sloppy, gaudiness of his versions of American food, [slice of birthday cake, (Fig 12) and two double cheeseburgers with everything (Fig 13)].

Upon his return home he continued again with his vinyl soft work which by now appeared to transcend any attachment to his immediate local environment, this attachment being an aspect which had been strongly apparent in his previous work.



12. Slice of Birthday cake with pink candle. 1963.

13
Two
cheeseburgers

By virtue of this development, the loss of a certain parochiality the soft sculpture became freer to deal with more universal themes and subjects. This determined its usefulness for the theme of 'the home'. The subjects dealt with within this theme convey many of the experiences and objects that, are fundamental to the majority of the people living in a modern industrial environment. The basic bodily functions of eating, sleeping excreting and the places that these rituals are performed are dealt with, the kitchen, bathroom and the bedroom. By the fact that almost all aspects of modern life including the most vital processes upon which our survival depends can be represented by very specific objects, we are made notice our dependance on such objects.

Although there is a certain 'subliminal' figurativeness in vinyl sculpture, Oldenburg still deals with the figure at one remove. He merely suggests the human presence. The viewer supplies the real presence confronted with an object that he/she is confronted with every day. Yet, by seeing the object in a new context and function (art gallery as art), the viewer is referred back to their own toilet, bath, sink or whatever. The viewer is made look at the objects in a new light. The material used is vinyl, a material with a very 'elastic' surface. Plastic the material of the common mass produced object brings the viewer, closer and dissolves a lot of the 'precious' or 'sacred' notions of a 'unique' art object.

Oldenburg sets out to deliberately blur the distinctions between art and life. He uses the tactility of the soft sculpture in furthering this aim and he invites the viewer to touch and to test the softness.

It's a technique that he is very aware of. He warms up the gallery space with humour and tactility. This tactility can be further emphasised by putting a barrier up to prevent touching, such as the glass of the display cases in his Paris exhibition, and the silver chain across the door of the 'Bedroom Ensemble'. f. 14

The soft pieces, because of their organic, voluptuous nature, relate much more overtly to the human body than the previous work. Almost in the manner of a confession he stated in 1963:

"I have had repeatedly the vision of human form, which is much more than that "trace" spoken of by Bacon. It is the forms that the living human being can take, in all its parts, mental and physical, and this is the subject, in the fullest sense possible, of my expression—the detached examination of human beings through form... I render the human landscape and for me there exists no other". (8).

The most frequent body metaphors are related to the erotic—breasts, genitals and orifices. Beginning with the 'Ray Gun' phallics which were quite overt in their formal representation, he had moved now to a medium which by virtue of its physical properties, regardless of the forms made, would have organic, human qualities. These qualities with the forms he selects for soft sculpture



13. Two Double Cheeseburgers with everything.



14. Pastry Case 1. 1982.

tend to lend themselves to sexual interpretations. The soft 'dormeyer mixer's' and the soft 'drainpipes' can easily be interpreted as male. He has, by means of design and presentation, accentuated the genital forms [see fig's 15, 16, 17, 18.]. The drainpipe here is shown in two positions, one small and contracted and then extended and long. The "Four Soft Domeyer Mixers" hung up at an angle that one would not expect them be as it is only made possible by their softness. The same can be said of his presentation of the 'soft Bathtub' and perhaps the 'Giant Hamburger', as female (though both are not necessarily genital) in form. Much of the work could be described to contain ambisexual metaphors for example see [fig's 19, 20, 21.]. "Freighter and sailboat", "Soft light switch", and "Hamburger, Popsicle, Price".

This use of subliminal erotic metaphor serves to instill a sensuousness into the work which appeals directly to the instinctual. Oldenburg insists that he does not set out to make his work consciously sexual, he does not "mix knowing with doing". (9), but he has said:

If see things sexually, I leave that in the work, because that quality is essential to the organisms survival" (10).

To take another angle on the above quote, I feel that he sounds like a god being interviewed while in the act of creating new forms of life. He could by this quote be drawing an analogy to the manner in which the human race has, and continues to populate the world with its creations which as of recently have been machines and



15. Soft Drainpipe-Blue(Cool) Version. 1967.



16. Four Soft Dormeyer Mixers. 1965.



17. Softy, 1966.



18. FLOORBUNSEN, 1962.



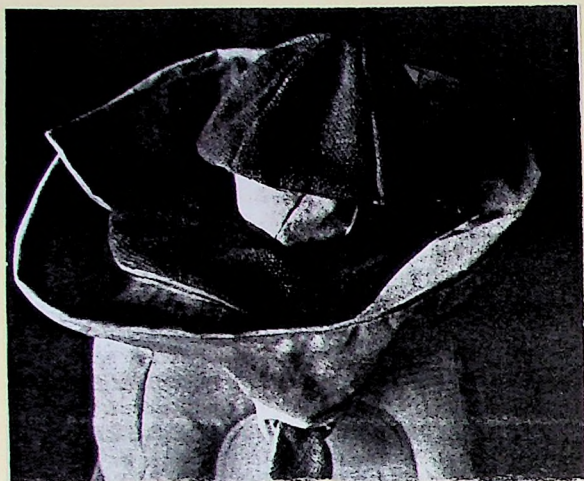
19. Soft Freighter and Sailboat.-1962.



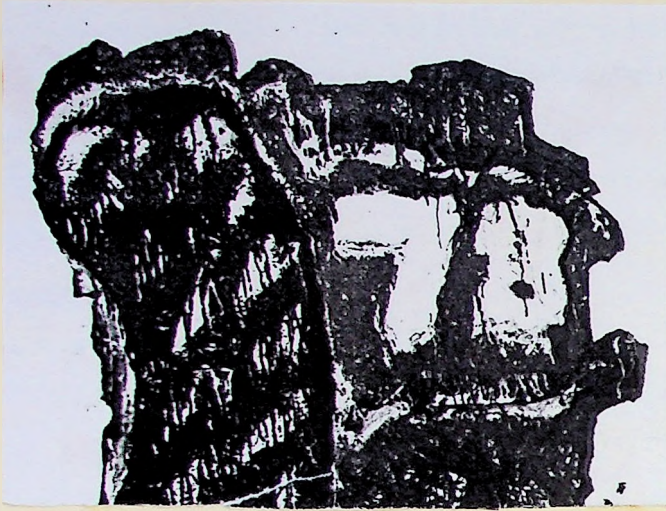
machine made objects. Oldenburg claims that a list of contemporary objects would, at sometime in the future;

"read like a list of deities or things on which our comorary mythological thinking has been projected. We do invest religious emotion into our objects. Look at how beautifully objects are depicted in ads in the Sunday newspapers. Those wonderful, detailed drawings of ironing boards for example, showing the inside of the board flipped back to reveal how its made: its all very emotional. Objects are body images after all, created by humans, filled with human emotion, objects of worship". (11).

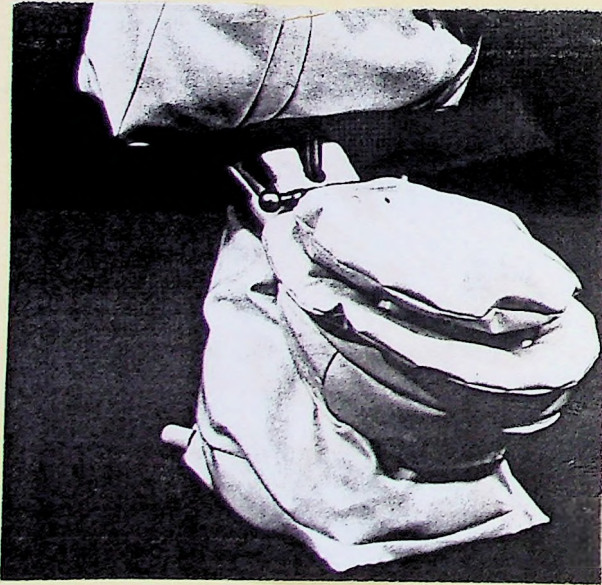
His soft work would seem to make this invested "religious", "human emotion", and his claim that "Objects are body images", literal. His sculptures are contravols of objects as Oldenburg sees them and as he wants them to be seen. He instills humour, life, warmth, character and most importantly a yielding vulnerability into his objects, making the viewer feel relaxed and pleasant, even when surrounded by many of them. This is the concrete realisation of making 'hard' objects and machines more 'natural' and easy to identify with, a theme which he had wrestled with in the late fifties in his combinations of plant and machine drawings. This theme first resurfaced, during the beginings of the 'Home', and could be considered as a metaphorical move from the home to the factory. He began working on a soft car, a machine, our most familiar robot, yet, despite our familiarity, ... still remain as does Oldenburg very consciously aware of "the hardness of its flesh", and "its relative invulnerability", (12) the potential of the car (among



23. Something Soft and Fun.



21. "Hamburger, Popsicle, Price".



22. Soft toilet.

other machines) to kill and maim. In his drawings for the 'Street', the car had been the essence of the streets violence. It had not been long since Jackson Pollock (the only artist who had appeared in Oldenburg's notebooks without rebuke or criticism) had died in a car accident; even the artist was not safe. By making a soft car, Oldenburg was trying to neutralise the danger, taming the beast, to protect himself with talismanic, voodoo powers.

As with many of his subjects he chose an obsolete model, the 1930s Airflow. The main reason for this choice was his wish that after some years the subject matter would be forgotten and the purely formal characteristics would be further emphasised. Perhaps in the way that antiques and curios attract a fairly large interest from the public, purely on formal grounds, the functional capacity (if any) being unapparent, obsolete and thus irrelevant. There were other reasons, one being that he had a toy airflow as a child which was his favourite car and also because he felt,

"A certain pathos is attached to the invention which did not succeed in the sales, while successful and influential as an automotive advance. A parallel to Art- what is important is not usually what sells". (13).

He became very involved in this project, he went to Carl Breen the designer to find more information, and then proceeded to work intensely from the many blue-

prints and drawings he had obtained. This approach led him to speak of "The car as body, flayed, as in an anatomical chart. Cloth as sheet tissue, rope as muscle."

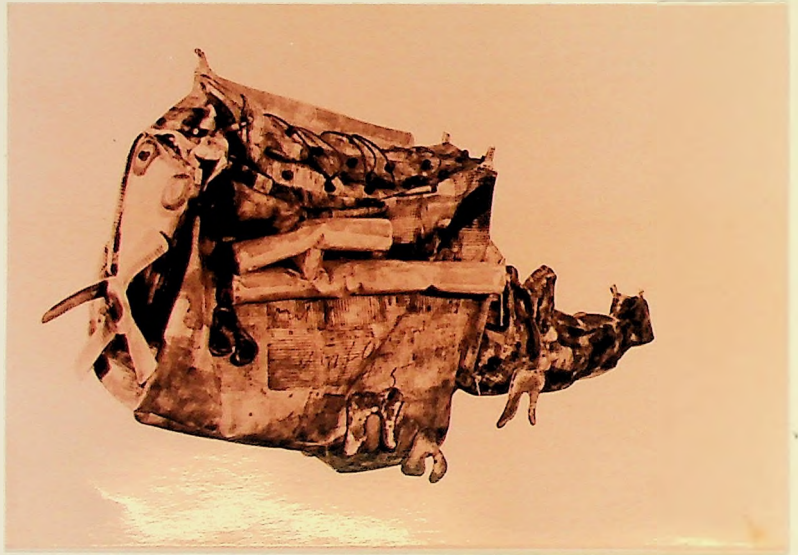
The 'Airflow' became an intense self-portrait, he even went on a diet to become more aware of his internal parts. In parallel with this he became very interested in the internal 'organs' (engine parts) of the car, and made many soft versions of these. [See Figs 24-26]

This investigation, artists, of mans relationship to machines and technology has been undergone by many since, at least the industrial revolution. The Surrealists heightened the sense of alienation by presenting the machine as an unnatural enemy. Oldenburg like Tinguely presents it in a comic fallible, vulnerable and thus humanised form, bringing it closer to people and dissolving the sense of alienation.

A prominent feature of the soft sculpture is the fact of it being constantly in a state of change. There are usually many versions made of each particular objects, some for purely practical purposes, like the 'ghost versions' made from cardboard and then into canvas, and others as different vinyl works of the same subject. These subjects could also be then produced in different 'hard' materials, wood, metal, etc. The fact of the vinyl sculptures being non-rigid lends them a freedom, a mutability. Each piece will respond and settle in a different way every time it changes location depending on who places it in the new location.



24. Soft Airflow.
(model) 1966.



25. Soft Engine for Airflow with fan and transmission



26. Radiator and fan
for Airflow. 1965.
(soft version)



26. Radiator for Airflow
(hard version) 1965.

on who places it in the new location and the force of gravity. His attitude to this quality is contained in this quote:

"The spontaneity is not mine. I design a piece from a conceptual idea and its manufactured in a very simple way. The spontaneity enters when other people come in contact with it... The creation of this piece is not spontaneous, but in the end it is subject to spontaneous use. Someone can come and manipulate or change it". (14).

The different versions of each piece, by means of the material used, colour and subject matter, allow for different interpretations.

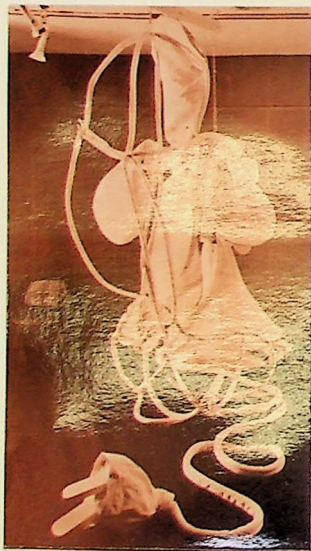
In the case of the 'Giant Soft Fan', the word 'Fan', meaning Satan in Swedish, leads Oldenburg to think of the white 'Ghost' version as compared to the Black vinyl version in terms of

" working of the theme of opposites, in the context of superstition. I have a shiny black form and a dry white form-like the angels those winged victories that walk beside you-the white angel and the black angel. One for the day, one for the night; turn to the left, turn to the right. If people want to find things there probably there". ((15)).

There are usually exhaustive set of different approaches, with varied interrelated thematic and formal results, a literal and a figurative illustration of the flux and complexity of everyday life. One never knows if a subject



27. Giant Soft Fan Black Vinyl 1966-67.



28. Giant Soft Fan white canvas (Ghost) version 1966-67.

or theme has been fully realised. There are no end results. He may refer back across years and resume working on a previous subject or theme as if there had been no interruption other than the acquiring of new skills to help the further development of the particular subject. 'The Home', and the 'Airflow' continue to resurface even up to the present day.

"Footnotes"

- 1 Barbara Rose, *Claes Oldenburg*, p.189.
- 2 Ibid. p.198.
- 3 Ibid. p.193.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid. p.94.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid. p.192.
- 8 Ibid. p.198.
- 9 Martin Friedman, *Six themes*, p.14.
- 10 *Claes Oldenburg, Proposals for Monuments and Buildings*, p.23.
- 11 Rose, p.100.
- 12 Johnson, p.40.
- 13 Rose, p.135.
- 14 Johnson, p.42.
- 15 Ibid.

CHAPTER 3.THE WIDER ENVIRONMENT

"One day I combined landscapes and objects, only I didn't change the scale. I had a drawing of a vacuum cleaner and another of Manhattan and I just superimposed them. The result was automatically a 'giant vacuum cleaner' because the city its scale-it didn't become a miniature city. Somehow it worked and I said to myself 'Well, look what I've got here!' Then I tried another one. It was a way to get into landscape drawing which is one of my favourite vices".(1).

Thus Claes Oldenburg's 'Proposals for Colossal Monuments'. The year was 1965 and he was well on the way to becoming an internationally respected artist with his work on display in galleries and museums in Europe and America. He began to think of himself as a public figure, and as a result he began to project his image beyond the indoor space of the gallery. The world had become a smaller place for him after much air travel, he had seen how small cities appear from the air. 1965 was the year that both Soviet and American astronauts 'walked' in space for the first time which led Oldenburg to refer to the Earth as the "final object"(2) as seen from space. He likened the monument proposals to "composing with a city".(3) mentioning how "London became...a canvas".(4) a surface upon which the artist could work. These, scale-defying notions can be traced back to 'the store' exhibition where he had exhibited huge 'car size' food items alongside 'actual size' objects, and yet further back to the scrapbooks

of his mother and his aunt's collages, from which he recalls, "...whiskey bottles, the size of houses, automobiles the size of your fingernail".(5).

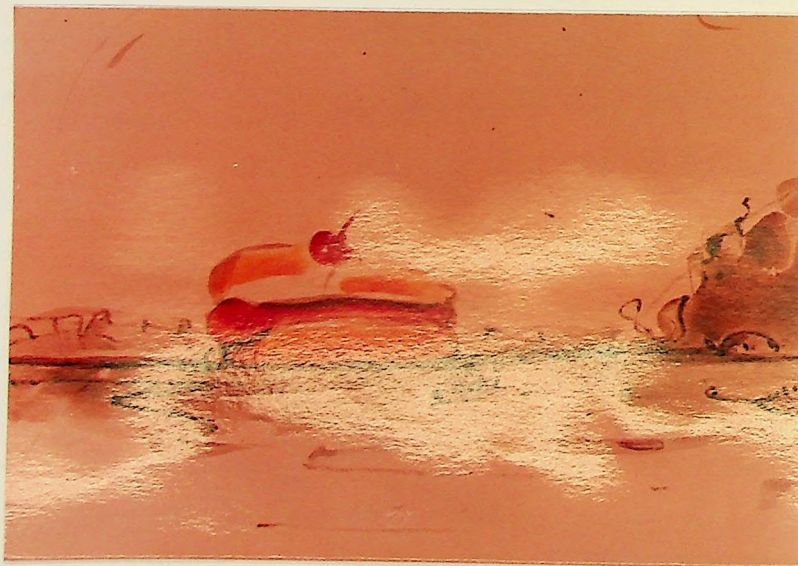
The connection with childhood is strong and manifests itself in some form or another in a lot of his work. Most of his work is larger than the 'actual size's' of his models, perhaps as a child would see these objects. He described New York as his "favourite "room".(6) his "Plaything"(7) for which he made toys. He has a 'young' personality, very much a man of the present, the moment, not of the future and definitely not of the past, he appears to abhor sentimentality. He looks to the past only to learn and select information that is useful to his present. Since his stay in Provincetown he had felt frustrated with the irrelevance of the "gods" and "heroes."(8), the exhausted symbols of the past, with no relevance to the present. His anti-monument proposals use the iconography of the moment, the present.

"I'd like to replace all those statues of Horace Greeley and Garibaldi with objects. What does Horace Greeley mean to the average city dweller today? What does Greeley mean to me?".(9)

His attitude comes across clearly if we compare his 'Proposal for a Colossal Monument', for Ellis Island with, say, the monument proposed by the Architect, Philip Johnston. Johnston's proposal is, from the exterior, a huge grand tree structure with the coldness and austerity



29. Philip Johnson. Proposal for Ellis Island. 1966.



30. Proposed colossal Monument for Ellis Island, New York:
Frankfurter with Tomato and Toothpick. 1965.

of a huge tomb upon which would be carved with the names of the 16 million original settlers who populated America. [fig.29]

A nostalgic monument preserving the sentimental memories of the U.S.A's humble beginnings. Oldenburg made two proposals, the first being a colossal 'Frankfurter' with tomato and toothpick' and the other a colossal 'Shrimp'. He chose these subjects because they reflected the form of passing ships, and because of their apparent relation to the present. [fig.30]

Many of the proposals are actually food items.

Food and eating being one of the most fundamental experiences that can be communicated and thereby fulfilling Oldenburg's desire to communicate to a wide audience. Food is often the departure point for an idea too, for example his 'War Memorial' for canal and Broadway'. The 'Memorial' found its humble beginnings as a "pat of butter placed in the slits of a baked potato". (10) which suggests the formal characteristics of the proposal. [fig.31]

The 'door handle and lock' proposed for the Museet Moderna in Stockholm began as a pyramid of "butter balls"(11), which was served to him in a Swedish restaurant. When he placed the knife into the butter he noticed a "gun shaped angle".(12). This connected with the fact that site was a former Naval base and this led him to the idea of a cannon. A cannon, however would not suit because it was not an object for 'ordinary use' in everyday life, so he looked for something similar in form, but ordinary and eventually decided upon the door handle and locks.



31. Proposed War Memorial for Canal and Broadway.



32. Colossal Teddy Bear for Central Park.

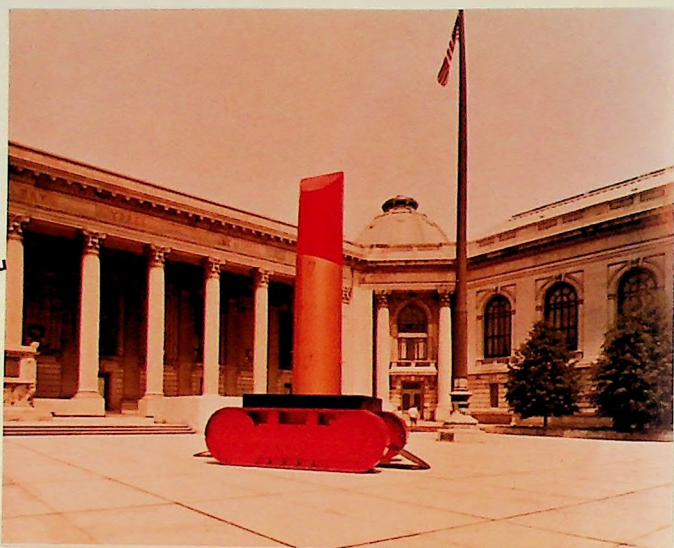
Although rather arbitrary in their conception Oldenburg has "rules". (13) by which an object is selected, it has to fit "the shape, the conditions and associations of the site". (14) For example his "ironing board" proposed for the Lower East side was selected because its shape reflected the shape of Manhattan Island and also commemorates, "the million miles of devoted ironing" (15) that had taken place there. In some cases the content overshadows the formal concerns, for example the 'Giant Teddy Bear' proposed for Central Park New York. The most important formal [fig. 32] characteristic of the 'Bear' were the eyes. He used an object with eyes to fill in the large open space which dominated the view "looking up the park from the south", the bears eyes would be like a "mirror" (16) returning the "huge free glance"...like a tennis ball". (17) Although the 'Bear' would have fulfilled this formal function from either end of the park he chose the Harlem end because he felt it to be the incarnation of white New York's conscience staring accusingly, glassy eyed in desperation, from black, deprived Harlem. The fact of the bear having no hands or feet providing a metaphor for "...the helplessness of the city person and specifically the negro in New York". (18).

The aforementioned "War Memorial for Canal and Broadway" also fits into this category although the content is much more specific and less open to "multiple interpretation". (19). The proposal entails the placement of a huge solid concrete

cube with the names of war heroes carved all over it, on the crossroads of Canal and Broadway, which is the calculated spot where the dropping of a H-Bomb would have most destructive effect upon New York and surrounding areas. The monument would also serve to "reintroduce the idea of the monument as obstacle or disruption in the city".(20), like the Arc de Triomph in Paris acts as an "aggressive obstacle"(21) to the traffic, a metaphor for a "wound"(22) in the workings of a city.

The "Liestick on Caterpillar track" fits in with the 'War Memorial' as another of his more overt 'statements'. [fig.33] It was donated by the Artist and some students to Yale University at a time when America's involvement in Vietnam was attracting much public disapproval. Its message is underlined by the choice of site, under the American Flag and right in front of a war memorial for the Yale graduates who died 'for freedom' in the first world war. The tank-like base supporting a huge missile like liestick commemorates the use of that very 'freedom' of the people to protest against their government involving them in a war that they wanted no part in. The tie of the 'liestick' being inflatable and thus designed to collapse and erect describes American military action as a psychosexual problem, bullyboy machismo on an international level, another example of Oldenburg's 'Play with scale'.

The liestick motif first appeared in 1966 in London. fig.34. It was one of a number of proposals for the city. The



33. Lipstick Monument in site of Wake University. 1969.



34. Lipstick Monument for Piccadilly Circus.

"constant presence of columns"(23) inspired the formal characteristics of most of the proposals, which included "Giant Fogends" for Hyde Park and "Giant Knees" for the Thames. The Lipstick was originally inspired by English movies of the 1940s and 1950s in which the most noticeable characteristic of the women was their strongly coloured lipstick. Oldenburg probably arrived in London with a Lipstick monument in mind because of his seeing these films and then found the ideal site at Picadilly Circus. To use this site he could expand on the phallic metaphor also present in the lipstick.

The old status to Eros replaced by his contemporary monument to the Erotic. The importance of the site and its associations thus becomes apparent.

His 'Giant' Fogends' for Hyde Park were inspired by the many advertisements he saw of "people coughing and smoking"(24) and the already mentioned column shapes of London. This proposal as many others involved the use of an object of 'low' value or worth, an underdog of some sort, to be monumentalised, given dignity. By being 'low' it presents a challenge to make people aware of its inherent dignity and refers the viewer back to their perception of 'value' and 'worth'.

The 'Giant knees present a different angle. They originated in the fact that all the time he spent while in London his knees ached from the cold, a condition that was "aggravated by having to squat in those small English

cars". (25). This was also the year of the mini-skirt: "Oxford Street, was a sea of knees".(26), and the area between the end of the skirt to the top of the high boots became an obsessional fetishistic area. There were two knee proposals. One for the wide end of the river near the sea and a pair on Victoria Embankment which would "echo" the "unended table effect". (27) of Battersea power station.

The "Thames Ball", a toilet float to be placed in the river with it's bar attached to a bridge gives one the idea of a Britain which could no longer be called 'Great', or it could just be a frank use of another fundamental body function. With the "Thames Ball" rising and falling with the tide. Oldenburg got the idea to have the 'Lipstick Monument' in Picadilly Circus rise and fall at the correct times thus bringing the notions of a natural time cycles into the heart of an urban environment. This movement also serves to personify the city as a huge animal or being of some sort these movements being"-like breathing on a large scale".(29)

Movement is employed as a major factor in many the proposals. The "Doorhandle and locks" is designed to move once a day, the handle making an arc and the keys locking the locks "with a crack that can be heard for miles".(30). There is a 'win9out' proposed for Stockholm which is located at the very centre of the city which moves with every day, a giant 'moving' scissors' for to replace the)

Washington Obelisk, a giant 'gearstick' in motion to replace Nelsons Column in London. His 'Bowling Balls' for Park Avenue entails huge (monumental) Bowling Balls which roll down the street. They are designed to emphasise the danger of being on the street, the notion that you could be killed at any time. The 'Balls' don't conform to any (official or) road or traffic laws, one must learn the instinctual, natural rhythm of the city rather than relying on the logical 'calculated' rhythm of the traffic lights and laws etc.

All the proposals for Chicago, his home town and the city where the idea of the skyscraper was originally developed, have been huge phallic type structures, perhaps to reflect the aggressiveness of not only the sky line but of the inhabitants of "this terribly competitive city".(31).

The monument proposals have changed very much over the course of a few years. They began as fantasy's, their absurdity and the impossibility of their construction being the 'raison d'être'. They originally existed only in graphic form, and in this form as drawings being strongly akin to cartoons. The fantastic, the silly and the absurd, easily realised on paper. Oldenburg could allow his imagination fly with absolutely no restraint. In the late sixties he was approached by some practicing architects who felt that the objects he was using were the closest thing to symbols of our time and they expressed interest in taking his proposals quite seriously. Oldenburg was frightened

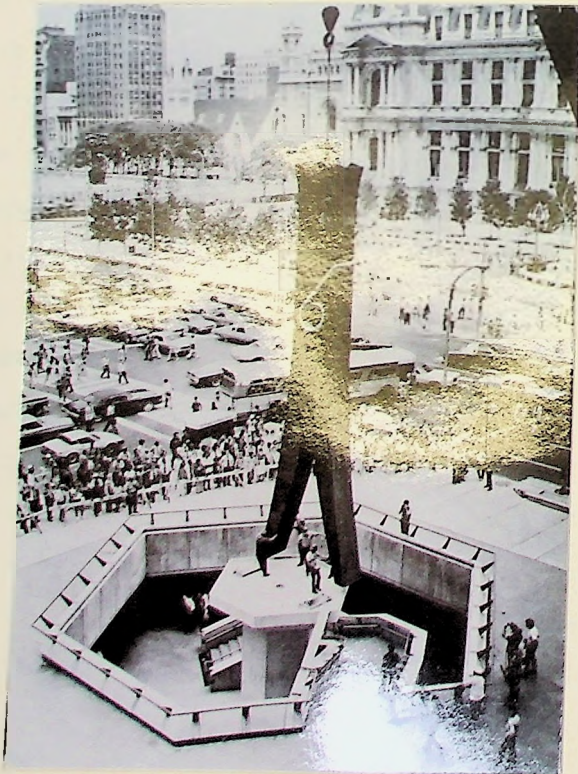
at first by this prospect because he felt that :

"what is lyrical and believable in an imaginary form might be banal and unnecessary in fact....A 50 foot puppy dog or a 650 foot teddy bear might be merely a painful eyesore, very unpoetic."(32).

He had arrived at a new phase in his 'Proposals', he now began to take actual construction into account while trying to retain the poetic, lyrical qualities. The graphic cartoon like quality became more restrained, the anti-architectural became architectural but the anti-monument essence still remained. This development could be compared to the development of 'the store' where he attacked and challenged the existing art style but once accepted into the establishment and as 'abstract expressionism' began to be replaced by 'Pop' and other developments Oldenburg began to concentrate on the development of his own work within the confines of 'Art': Now he has challenged the established architectural style and in doing so has been 'taken on' so to speak to see if he can present viable alternatives. It would certainly be interesting to see his 'Giant Clothespin' skyscraper being built. His [fig. 35] clothespin is actually viable with modern building techniques. This piece is not even that shocking when compared to the "International Competition for a New Administration Building for the Chicago Tribune of 1923" for which the clothespin was a spoof late entry (44 years after the closing date, in fact), there were several proposals for the building in the form of a column, a building in the form of an indian with a tomahawk and another of the comic



35. Late entry for the Chicago Tribune
Architecture Competition of 1922.



36. Installation Clothespin in Philadelphia. 1976.

strip character Skeezix. Although many of Oldenburg's proposals are actually for buildings, he has not of yet had one constructed. He doesn't seem to have been taken seriously enough yet by the architects, despite their interest. However he has been given many public commissions for large outdoor sculptures. His proposals now are executed in a totally different manner to the originals. Although the sensuous 'impressionistic' type watercolours are often the starting point, there is a new emphasis on practical technical drawings which scale the proposal accurately and are used to determine exactly how the piece will be made. Well made and presented architectural type, scale models are made to give a fairly accurate vision as to how the piece will look on location and how it will fit in with the surroundings. Estimates on costs are drawn up and all of this is combined into a package to present to those who will have the say in its being realised.

As a result of the scheme by which 1% of the total cost of a building is allocated to sculpture, a forty five foot steel and bronze version of the 'Clothespin' is now located in the centre of Philadelphia. Located there in [fig. 36] 1976 as a result of the 1% being allowed for artworks from the architects budget scheme. Oldenburg cleverly pointed out in the proposal that the spring could be seen to form the numbers '76' (1976 being the year of the American Bi-centennial year) and that the clothespin had a relation to the Liberty Bell with the fact of them both being symmetrical and the fact that "They both have a crack down the centre". (33). There are other interpretations to be drawn from the piece

of course, one of the more interesting being its relation to 'Brancusi's 'Kiss' the spring doubling as either the lovers' arms and as a possible stylized version of the male genitals.

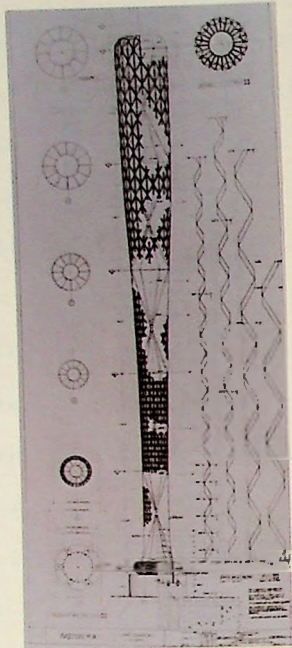
Public opinion from the newspapers at the time gives an interesting insight. I will give a selection of quotes from the Philadelphia Free Times July 16-22-1976:

"Its the biggest clothespin I ever saw. If people began to take it seriously, then I'll get worried. Anyway I like it better than an abstract clothespin".
 "Whether you like it or not isn't important -it's the idea that matters. The clothespin is free-thinking and and full of hope. its great".

"Its abnormal, absolutely abnormal! If one out of a hundred people like that thing: then its abnormal, right?. Only one percent of the same world would think thats art".

"If someone had a big clothesline and a big pair of drawers, it would be perfect. As a piece of art, I think its comical. I pass the other thing (the Jacques Lieschitz sculpture) and it makes no sense to me-this one does. A clothespin is a clothespin its very funny".

It appears from these quotes and the various write-ups



37. Batcolumn.



38. Batcolumn installed Chicago, 1976.

in the newspapers of the day that Oldenburg's method has succeeded. Many people were attracted to the stylised formal qualities of the work as well as the fact of being able to relate to the representational / comic aspects. Most of those who disliked the work did so on the grounds that 'Art' had been 'lowered' to the meagreness of a clothespin and thus missing one of the central points of the work. It is also important that of the number of outdoor sculptures installed at the same time Oldenburg stirs up the most controversy and interest while others including Jean Debuffet's "Milord la chamonne", appear to be dismissed as meaningless and irrelevant. One of the articles makes much of the fact of this discussion and controversy, it makes the writer feel "proud to be American", because it illustrates the freedom of speech and public debate that so many Americans appear to adore taking avail of.

The reaction to the installation of the 'Batcolumn' [fig. 37] a gigantic engineered steel baseball bat, in Chicago also in 1976 was quite similar to the aforementioned Clothespin, except that the people appear much more architecture conscious. This is good for the 'Batcolumn' because it is a very architectural piece and relates quite successfully to the surrounding buildings. fig. 38.

The concrete realisation of these 'Proposals in terms of 'acceptable' public sculpture and not fully on the terms, spirit and size of the original proposals marks a significant shift in the attitude of the artist.

This shift is in keeping with a suggestion of Paul Carroll's in the interview in the 'Proposals for Monuments and Buildings', that Oldenburg's development of the 'Proposals' Project can be seen as documentation of growing up "from a child fantasy":

"The earliest phase was much like the tiny Gulliver among the Brobdingnagians and their quaint objects--ironing board, vacuum cleaner, toilet float? Toy's too, of course, like the teddy bear. Then there's the pubescent phase. Not only are its objects sexual... but their mechanical. Most teenage boys like to fool around with wing-nuts, locks and so . The current phase, then, is 'adult' in the sense its like building in the real world". (34)

He has come to realize the realities of expense and practicality and now designs his proposals to fit within, still keeping his confining priorities of aesthetic form and the representation of commonplace objects. With this new "adult" attitude, Oldenburg introduces his new symbol, a new alter-ego, Geometric Mouse. [fig. 39] / Geometric Mouse embodies this new "adult" phase "a symbol of analysis and intellect". The mouse is also "a skull and refers to mortality". So Does Oldenburg's art has eventually grown to adult awareness and maturity and he makes it quite clear that this is not the end to his art, rather to the contrary it becomes yet another

"area to explore"(35). [fig. 40]



39. Oldenburg in Mouse Mask.



40. Geometric Mouse Steel version, 1979.

"Footnotes"

1. Freitman. p.14.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid. p.20.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid. 11.
6. Eldenburg. Proposals. p.18.
7. Ibid.
8. Freidman. p.18.
9. Ibid.
10. Proposals. p.25.
11. Ibid. p. 17.
12. Ibid.
13. Rose. p.197.
14. Proposals. p.15.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Johnson. p.37.
19. Rose. p.194.
20. Proposals. p.25.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
23. Proposals. p.19.
24. Ibid. p.20
25. Ibid. p.18.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid. p.20.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid. p.22.
30. Ibid. 17.
31. Ibid. p.25.
32. Ibid. p.27.
33. Loc.

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