

Claes Oldenburg

Claes Thure Oldenburg was born January 28, 1929, in Stockholm, Sweden. Because his father was a member of the Swedish foreign service, Claes and his family moved often. From 1930 to 1933 the Oldenburgs resided in New York, and from 1933 to 1936 they lived in Oslo, Norway. In 1936 the family moved to Chicago, where Oldenburg's father served as consul general of Sweden.

Claes Oldenburg graduated from the Latin School in Chicago in 1946 and then enrolled at Yale University, receiving a B.A. degree in 1950. While at Yale, his studies focused on literature and art. In 1950 Oldenburg returned to Chicago, where he remained until 1956. He worked as an apprentice reporter at the City News Bureau and from 1952 to 1954 took classes in painting, figure drawing, and anatomy at the prestigious Art Institute of Chicago. He also attended the Oxbow Summer School of Painting in Saugatuck, Michigan, in 1953.

In 1956 Oldenburg moved to New York City and became an active member of that city's thriving young artistic community. For a time he worked as an assistant in the Cooper Union Museum's library, taking advantage of the opportunity to teach himself more about the history of art. His early years in New York were shaped by his contact with other artists struggling to move beyond the confines of Abstract Expressionism, including Red Grooms, Allan Kaprow, Robert Whitman, Lucas Samaras, George Segal, and Jim Dine. All were interested in art as experience and in pushing to the limit the question "What is art?" They began to stage "happenings" based in part on the European DADA ethos of the 1920s (and a forerunner to the 1980s performance artists). This was the beginning of the Pop Art movement.

Oldenburg's first New York exhibition took place in late 1958, when a selection of his drawings was included in a group show at Red Grooms' City Gallery. In 1959 he had his first public one-man show in New York - an exhibit of drawings and sculpture at the Judson Gallery. In 1962 Oldenburg's work was included in the "New Realists" Exhibition, which defined the Pop Art Movement. That show at the Sidney Janis Gallery largely defined the group of artists with which Oldenburg has since been associated.

Other major exhibitions of Oldenburg's work included a 1964 one-man show at the Sidney Janis Gallery and a 1969 retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art.

Philosophically, Oldenburg saw himself as a realist, not as an abstract artist. He felt art must relate to the realities of everyday life. Yet he took objects from the real world and placed them out of context, making them soft when they should be hard, large when they should be small. This paradox in his art grew out of his own nature, which was a complex mix of traditional and radical elements. "Reversing the expectations of hard sculpture, these huge collapsing objects rely on gravity and chance for their final form," noted the Phaidon Dictionary of Twentieth-Century Art. A writer for *The Economist* pointed out "in the spirit of the surrealists, he has muddled up the usual association of the senses. Things soft, he made hard, or the other way around: a muslin-and plaster roast of beef, a saggy portable typewriter. Things smooth, he has turned furry: ice-cream lollies made of fake-fur and kapok."

Strongly influenced by the writings of Sigmund Freud, Oldenburg underwent an intense period of self-analysis between 1959 and 1961. He carefully recorded his discoveries in notebooks, often including illustrative sketches. This endeavor helped him to shape his approach to art.

Oldenburg's style changed and developed over the years. He worked in a variety of modes, including drawing, painting, film, soft sculpture, and large scale sculpture in steel. After 1959 he was influenced by the theater. His involvement in "happenings" in the early 1960s resulted from his interest in both participatory art and Freudian free association.

Oldenburg often created variations on a theme (for example, Ray Gun of 1959 and Soft Drainpipe of 1967). He pointed to

multiple sources of inspiration and encouraged his viewers to make multiple associations and draw multiple conclusions from the work. Many of his pieces were metaphors for parts of the human body, often having sexual connotations. Both Ray Gun and Soft Drainpipe may be seen as phallic symbols.

Oldenburg's early work, such as *The Street* (1960) and *The Store* (1961-1962), was rough-edged and primitive looking. It was inspired by tribal art, comics, graffiti, children's drawings, and the artwork of Jean Dubuffet. In 1963 his style changed to one of coolness, precision, and industrial polish. This change marked the beginning of his soft sculpture phase, when the materials of his early years - paper, canvas, plaster, and chicken wire - were replaced by vinyl, formica, and plexiglas. Among the well-known examples of his work in this mode were *Soft Light Switches* (1964) in the collection of the William Rockhill Nelson Gallery of Art, Kansas City, and *Giant Soft Fan* (1966-1967), a piece which was displayed in the American Pavilion at Expo '67 and was later in the Museum of Modern Art. Works such as these take objects of modern technology, which were made of rigid materials, and turned them into flexible floppy forms, which took on a variety of different shapes as they are hung, touched, or moved.

In the mid-1960s Oldenburg also began making projects for giant monuments. An exhibition of these proposals was held at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, in 1967. Most of these ideas (like a giant teddy bear for Central Park North) were pure fantasy, but the artist viewed some as feasible. Among those executed were the controversial *Lipstick on Caterpillar Tracks* (1969), which created an uproar when first erected at Yale University; *Giant Icebag* (1969-1970), which was motorized and inflates and deflates; and *Flashlight* (1981), a 38-foot steel monument on the campus of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

By taking mundane objects and presenting them out of context and in such colossal proportions, Oldenburg forced viewers to reassess their daily lives and values. His work was a social commentary on American popular culture and, by association, on contemporary society's approach to life itself. In 1995, a large traveling show of Oldenburg's works was organized by the National Gallery of Art and the Guggenheim Museum. It made stops in Los Angeles, London and Bonn. One work in it, *From the Entropic Library* (1989-90) consisted of a collection of books whose disoriented pell-mell structure fell upon a base that hosted other sheaves of text. Oldenburg's view of this work which people have termed "a monument to a disintegrating, somehow displaced European culture," was simple: "my single-minded aim is to give existence to fantasy."

Copyright Notice: This document was generated on ArtRev.com on 6/21/2021 2:49:32 AM (U.S. Eastern Time Zone) - Copyright 2021 ArtRev.com, Inc. All Rights Reserved. The entire contents of this brochure is the property of ArtRev.com and/or its content suppliers. You may not modify, copy, reproduce, republish, or distribute any portion of this brochure without the prior express written consent of ArtRev.com, Inc.

Authenticity & Price Match Guarantee: Shop with confidence. ArtRev.com is proud to be the first online art retailer to offer a " [lifetime authenticity guarantee](#) " with every limited edition or original work of art. Most limited edition and original artworks ship with a Certificate of Authenticity free of charge. This certificate is an official and valuable document that most insurance companies require in order to insure artworks against damage or theft. ArtRev.com will make every possible attempt to match or beat the advertised price of any major Internet competitor, art gallery, or frame shop; given that they are authorized to sell the item from the publisher or artist, and have the exact item in stock available for immediate sale.

Disclaimer: The biography shown in this brochure is not meant to be a complete and comprehensive exploration of the life of the featured artist and is not guaranteed to be up-to-date. While information provided about each artist is carefully studied and reviewed prior to publishing; ArtRev.com assumes no liability for the content provided on this page. Biography Last Updated on 5/27/2009 6:59:53 PM. Please [let us know](#) if any information is out-of-date or inaccurate.