

“The Object Comes Alive”: A Conversation with Claes Oldenburg*

HAL FOSTER

Hal Foster: Thanks so much for meeting, Claes. With your recent exhibition and book of writings in mind, I wanted to ask you a few questions about your early work.

Claes Oldenburg: That all happened some time ago.

HF: So don't worry if you draw blanks! In your notes from 1959–60 you refer to your early objects, like the ray guns and the flags, as “guises.” Later on, you try out different names or personae, like “Professor Dog,” “Artist Dog,” and “Plastic Man.” The figure of the beggar comes up once or twice and that of the ragman again and again. At one point you write, “I, the awful ragman,” and then speak of civilization as this derelict guy, like an old Bowery bum. (This is all as you're moving toward making *The Street*.) Baudelaire was fascinated by the raggicker and even identified with him as a person who found new things, new values, in cast-off stuff. Was there a similar fascination or identification for you?

CO: I was thinking of the ragman more as a scarecrow.

HF: So the ragman is frightening? He probably was for Baudelaire too.

CO: I'm inclined to behave, or to pretend to behave, in different ways. A guise is a way of transforming yourself into someone or something else, to play a part. I also like the word: *guises*. It's a theatrical thing.

HF: Did you see much theater as a kid in Chicago?

CO: I went to a lot of films, and occasionally there was opera too. I was a supernumerary in an opera once; I was in a little outfit.

HF: So you were drawn to the stage?

CO: Yes, I was. My mother was very interested in opera; in fact, she taught singing. Occasionally she gave performances as well, not big deals, just singing on her own.

* This interview took place in Oldenburg's studio on Broome Street in New York on February 10, 2015, in the wake of two major events in 2012–13: the exhibition *Claes Oldenburg: The Sixties*, curated by Achim Hochdörfer and Ann Temkin, at MUMOK in Vienna and MoMA in New York; and the publication of his *Writings on the Side: 1956–1969*, edited by Achim Hochdörfer, Maartje Oldenburg, and Barbara Schröder. I had begun to work on my Mellon lectures about “brutal aesthetics” at this time, and I knew I wanted to address his early work. On the afternoon of our talk, Oldenburg was, as usual, thoughtful, funny, generous.

HF: So opera more than theater?

CO: There was theater too. In high school I performed in plays.

HF: Did you make props as well?

CO: Yes, but what I remember most are the parts. One was in *Arsenic and Old Lace*. I played the Peter Lorre character, Dr. Einstein, the little friend of the bad guy. I liked that role very much.

HF: Speaking of theater, did you go to church?

CO: By the time we came to Chicago, my parents had taken up Christian Science. So I went to Sunday school and listened to lectures, which were pretty incomprehensible but very well written, by Mary Baker Eddy. Then we'd sit in a circle and talk for an hour. In Christian Science if you get sick or hurt you go to a "practitioner." She'd sit with you and tell you that the key to your health was in the Scriptures, and you were supposed to apply them. At one point I climbed a fence and got a piece of metal stuck in my leg. I came home and showed my parents, but nothing was done because they assumed the practitioner would take care of it. It got worse and worse; my leg swelled up and turned blue. They rushed me to the hospital at the last moment, and I had a major operation. After that experience Christian Science faded out, at least for me. When my father retired, my parents moved to Boston, which is the home of Christian Science, and they tried to work with it, but, finally, they gave it up too.

HF: What effects did it have on you otherwise, do you think?

CO: It's very intellectual, and those Wednesday-night meetings were pretty exciting, with people telling how they were cured of this and that. I don't know if it still has much appeal today, but it was popular in the 1930s and '40s. There are many things about it that didn't seem very religious.

HF: You don't seem very religious either. At one point in your early notes you write, "I am a humanist bastard."

CO: I say a lot of things.

HF: That suggests that you're a humanist but conflicted about it.

CO: That's right.

HF: Did you feel like a bastard for being a humanist, or did you feel like an outlier as a humanist?

CO: Well, I wanted to say I was a humanist but in a tough-guy kind of way. The expression "I'm a bastard" or "you're a bastard" was common then. One likes to say it. So many swear words are wonderful to speak.

HF: You like to play with language, and you're really good at it. It's one of the things that attracted you to Céline, I imagine. Given your interest in word-play, I wonder whether you read Joyce too?

CO: I did as much as I could.

HF: *Finnegans Wake*?

CO: I tried, I tried.

HF: Almost nobody makes it to the end; more make it through *Ulysses*. Did that book—with Bloom wandering through Dublin, picking up scraps of conver-



*Claes Oldenburg. Snapshots from the City,
from the performance series Ray Gun Spex,
held within the exhibition The Street.
February 29, March 1 and 2, 1960.
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Courtesy of Pace Gallery.*

sation, transforming language along the way—have any effect on your thinking, say, about *The Street*?

CO: It might have, I can't remember. I went to Yale at a time when those books were very important. That was the period of the New Criticism; people like Cleanth Brooks were there. We read innumerable Eliot poems; in fact he came and lectured. So I was schooled in Eliot as well as Joyce. However, about halfway through Yale I turned away from it and started in another direction. I'm glad I did, because that modernist stuff was dying off.

HF: You turned in an American direction?

CO: Yes, Walt Whitman and a lot of others. So I got away from Cleanth Brooks. He had a huge classroom, and a little group sat around a table and listened to him for hours. It was hard to take. I wanted poetry that was much freer and wilder. Dylan Thomas came to read along with Eliot, but no one paid any attention to him. They put him in a small classroom while Eliot got a whole auditorium.

HF: When you describe *The Street*, you use phrases that evoke *The Waste Land*.

CO: I did admire *The Waste Land*, its structure and the open spaces that it suggests.

HF: You say somewhere that the best parts of Céline are the ellipses. In terms of American writers, what about contemporaries, like your fellow Chicagoan Saul Bellow?

CO: Yes, but more Nelson Algren. He was very influential on my work.

HF: He's a writer who immerses the reader in down-and-out life. Céline does too, of course. You write early on that you liked Céline's battered people and prose.

CO: Yes. They interested me, but Algren was easier to approach. I used to go to his readings.

HF: What about the Beats, once you came to New York? Were they available to you in the same way?

CO: I was a little late for the Beats. I got to New York as an artist in 1956, and that scene was pretty much formed. Still, I followed them. I read the books, went to the parties, and met them. They certainly had an influence, a verbal influence.

HF: Prose or poetry? Kerouac or Ginsberg?

CO: More Ginsberg, though some of his poems were a little hard to take. He more or less copied "Howl" from Whitman, and I more or less copied "I Am for an Art" from "Howl."

HF: You mean "I Am for an Art" is in part a parody of Ginsberg?

CO: Yes. The Beats influenced my attitudes, but they were mixed with other things. It was a very bubbling situation; a lot was going on. At the same time it was a small scene. If you were here for a week, you could meet most of the interesting people. You don't have that situation anymore. In those days it was pretty clear what everybody was doing, and what they were doing was pretty admirable. Everyone had an approach. That was a great period to come to



*Oldenburg, C-E-L-I-N-E, Backwards. 1959.
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Courtesy of Pace Gallery.*

New York. It needed something new and was just waiting for people to come. Actually, New York is all about when you arrive.

HF: What else comes to mind about New York in 1956?

CO: I spent a lot of time at the Brooklyn Museum looking at tribal objects. I had been taught that modern art had one of its sources in “primitive” art. I believed that, and I wanted to see things from that point of view. I was also interested in tribal art because it was so different from the art I had been brought up on. It took me to other places. So I copied some objects, and I made a number of drawings in a primitive style. It was a part of my development and probably lingers in the work.

HF: You also mention the art of the insane in your notes.

CO: That interested me too, and later on I went to that wonderful museum of art brut in Lausanne. There was a lot of interest in that art in Chicago, so-called psychotic as well as so-called primitive art.

HF: Did you ever see the collection of art brut that Dubuffet put together—in book or exhibition form—before it was transferred to Lausanne?

CO: Yes, I saw a lot of art brut because Dubuffet was extremely popular in Chicago; he had a lot of collectors there. He did a lecture in 1951, but I was out of town so I didn’t hear it. He was a big influence in Chicago, no doubt about it.

HF: Did you ever come across the book on the art of the insane that Hans Prinzhorn assembled from different European institutions? It was very important for Dubuffet as well as for Ernst and Klee.

CO: I may have seen it; the name is certainly familiar. All that stuff was big in Chicago.

HF: Outsider art too? It clearly influenced the “Hairy Who” group of artists later on.

CO: I mean among my contemporaries. In a studio course I painted next to H. C. Westermann, who was a very interesting character. Cliff was capable of very surprising developments that came out of a depth only he had. It was fascinating to see how he operated. There’s a primitive element in his work; it’s usually very simple. The teachers at the Art Institute were involved in making art based on the primitive, so that was part of my development too.

HF: In your early notes, and again here, you use the term “primitive” in a way that’s different from modernist primitivism, that is, it’s not strictly about tribal (mostly African or Oceanic) objects. What does the term mean to you?

CO: I think of it as undeveloped. Something that’s still rough and needs to be shaped or maybe something that resists shaping. But it’s still a type of form. One speaks about doing something in a primitive style.

HF: Meaning what exactly?

CO: Making something that’s simple and rugged, that’s about to become something without quite getting there. Rather ordinary meanings, really.

HF: I’m struck by a note from 1959–60 that reads, “My line is soft, blunt, and I *will not* sharpen it.” And even earlier you use terms like “bare,” “bleak,” and



*Oldenburg. Study of a Soft Fireplug, Inverted. 1969.
© Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen.
Courtesy of Pace Gallery.*

“battered.” I think you say the first thing in relation to de Kooning, but then there are some nice passages about your own drawing.

CO: Line is everything for me. Lines are what defines things, and I fill in between them. It’s not that they’re always flat; I also like three-dimensional effects. Lines are what create the forms I want to use. I go from a very sharp line to a blunt one.

HF: What determines what kind you use?

CO: Well, there are different subjects. You can’t use blunt line if you’re designing a form to be copied or built. Especially for large-scale projects, outdoor pieces, a strict definition is required so others can read it and put it together; you can’t use an impressionistic line and expect it to be realized. You have to be very specific about it, and that’s had some effect on my line over the years. But my drawing is full of variety. I have thousands of notebook pages; you can see all kinds of line there, thick, thin, whatever.

HF: I’m still interested in your early insistence on a blunt line. Keeping it that way allows for formal ambiguity, even formal transformation, for one object looking like another or turning into another, which you make happen all the time. It also seems related to how you invent sculptural signs with simple shapes, as with your ray guns and flags. They begin as right angles and rectangles, very rough-and-ready, and become these complicated signs. The flags came to you during a summer spent in Provincetown in 1960?

CO: Yes. I started to play around with local symbols. The American flag is very interesting, the way it’s conceived and drawn. It’s something I could return to and get all kinds of different effects out of.

HF: You talk about that flag abstractly, as though it didn’t have much to do with this country, but this happened during the height of the Cold War. They also came not long after Johns’s flags, which seem mostly drained of symbolism too.

CO: It’s not a thing I would pursue, patriotism.

HF: What about the ray gun? It seems like the most protean of your guises.

CO: What interested me with the guns as well as the flags was the variety of solutions that an extremely simple shape can produce. How different they are and how similar. To me the gun is an essential form. You know, I had in mind this system whereby I’d be the authority on ray guns. People would find things from the street and bring them to me and ask, “Is this a ray gun?” and I’d say, “No, that’s not a ray gun,” or, “Yes, that’s a ray gun.”

HF: Completely arbitrary judgments?

CO: No, no, always true. I wanted a job in a university; I’d be in charge of identifying ray guns. Ray Gun Scholar.

HF: Well, you did become Ray Gun Curator. If your flags are emptied of patriotism, your guns seem drained of violence. The aggression is withdrawn. You turn the gun into a funny thing.

CO: “When ray gun shoots, no one dies.” That’s its slogan. Another one is “Annihilate, illuminate.” Destroy if you must, but learn in destroying.



*Oldenburg. Kornville Flag. 1960.
© Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van
Bruggen. Courtesy of Pace Gallery.*

HF: Annihilating is a stage toward illuminating?

CO: By annihilating what's bad you illuminate what's good.

HF: But formally too—destroy to create, or at least transform to invent? The ray gun is a magical instrument, a master guise, for you?

CO: But no one dies.

HF: The early notes are full of discussions of objects. You talk about the found object, but not much about the readymade. Is the readymade not transformed enough for you? Is it too inert?

CO: The readymade is a bore to me. I understand it and appreciate it, but it's not very interesting—though I have to say I enjoyed Duchamp, I enjoyed his company a lot. I don't use found objects either. The object is a starting point for me, that's true, but when I make something it goes far beyond the original. Often it doesn't look at all like it. People miss that when they talk about me and Pop art.

HF: They miss the transformation?

CO: Yes. Silk-screening an image the way Andy did is quite different from taking an object and remaking it yourself on your own terms.

HF: Lichtenstein said the same thing: People willfully overlooked all his transformations of his source comics and cartoons.

CO: Roy changed things more than Andy did, but I do much more: I take the object and I explore it. I change it in size and I change it in scale and I change it in use. I experiment with it until I find something that suits me, that I like. That's a big difference. They are more Pop in the sense that they used the material around them without changing it much.

HF: You emerged just before Pop did, and you were important to those artists and others. Can you say more about the differences—and your ambivalence about the term?

CO: The term, like those of most art movements, was made up by somebody else. "Pop art" doesn't really sum it up for me. A related term at the time was "New Realist." I was in Paris in the summer of 1964, and New Realism was very hot. I had a show with Ileana Sonnabend. All my work for it was made in Paris, so I got to know those people. When I got back, similar things were going on here.

HF: Yves Klein? Arman? Christo?

CO: I already knew Christo, but the others, yes, and Pierre Restany. I saw a lot of him; we talked and became good friends. I had that as a background more than Pop.

HF: What about the Independent Group? I know you were good friends with Richard Hamilton. Did you have much interaction with Eduardo Paolozzi?

CO: His work didn't interest me that much; he was pasting up things. So I didn't have much to do with Paolozzi. Richard I knew well. I had seen his famous first collage before meeting him.

HF: *Just what is it that makes today's homes today so different, so appealing?*



*Display case 6 of Oldenburg's Ray Gun Wing, 1965–77.
© Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen.
Courtesy of Pace Gallery.*

CO: Yes. It was hanging in a hotel in Chicago for a while. A collector had it there, and I got to see it. And then I became interested in his work. I was friendly with him, but I'm not sure it had a lot to do with my work. It was just that I liked him: He was a very smart guy who knew his way around the world. I'd go to London frequently in those days, and we had some good times together.

HF: You were close, too, to Red Grooms. There's a way in which he's not seen to be as important as he should be.

CO: I think so too, definitely. He should have much more attention. He did some years ago, but it petered out. I don't quite know what the problem is. He makes incredible things. I suppose he'll be rediscovered at some point. Or maybe it's just too much for people. His stuff is pretty overwhelming.

HF: People go for Ed Kienholz, and that work is out there too.

CO: Ed and I had this arrangement to do tombstones for each other. I made a tombstone for him in the form of a slice of bread with "BREAD" on it. But the "BR" was gone, so it just said "EAD." I had it carved out of marble. I had a lot of fun with it. But Ed buried himself in his car. Now that he's turned into a skeleton we'll probably see him someday drive out of his tomb.

HF: That's an image for you. Were you much interested in what Rauschenberg and Johns were up to when you arrived in New York?

CO: Sure. Bob was so generous; he would help you do whatever. Jasper was nice too, but a bit distant—though he could tell a good joke. They're about the same age as me, but they always seemed a generation before us.

HF: You do seem at a remove not only from them but also from Pop and New Realism.

CO: Yes. I was more interested in taking my surroundings and making something personal out of them.

HF: That's key. The terms you use for your objects are sometimes psychological, sometimes erotic, but almost always personal. "Obsessive" and "obsessional" come up a few times. You almost use them as a declaration: Art must be obsessive or not be.

CO: I say a lot of stuff that might be contradictory, depending on what I'm doing. I don't like to close things off. The point is the object has to change. The subject has to take its own shape; it has to become the thing that *is* that shape—like this drum set [*Oldenburg points to an image of Soft Drum Set*]. That suggests other things too, some of which you can't really formulate, but you know it's more than a drum set. The drum set is the starting point for a form, a structure—that's very important.

HF: Or a form that's pretty aformal, which allows it to call up other forms at the same time. As the object changes, it picks up different associations—different charges that could be psychological or erotic?

CO: The object comes to life. It's alive.

HF: That's essential. You don't redouble reification, which is what a lot of Pop and New Realism does; you animate or reanimate.



Oldenburg, *Soft Drum Set*. 1972.
© Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van
Bruggen. Courtesy of Pace Gallery.

CO: Yes, that's very important too. It's like this knife here [*Oldenburg points to an image of Knife Ship II*]. All its parts seem to be moving; it's almost exploding. There has to be a sense of movement.

HF: Objects that seem animate, even alive: I know you read some Freud in the 1960s. Do you remember which books?

CO: The joke book—that one was fun to read—and probably the dream book too. You can read just a few pages of Freud and the material gets inserted into your mind.

HF: You write about dreaming as a way into the unconscious, as Freud did. Did you ever have any direct encounter with psychoanalysis?

CO: In the late '60s I had a little time on my hands and I decided to go to an analyst, mostly to see how they operated. So a friend who knew a lot of them set me up with this guy. I was quite surprised: The door opened, and he looked exactly like Freud. There were drawings inside the room, and they all looked exactly like Freud's. There was a couch, and the couch was just like Freud's in Vienna. I just lay there and talked, and he never paid any attention to me. An hour would go by, and then he'd say, "Time to go," and you'd have to go. Most of the time he was speaking French on the telephone. After a while I gathered the idea was to infuriate the patient. That was the big step: to reduce the patient. So I began to make up stories; I'd just go on and on and then the time would be up. Finally, I said, "I have a show in Houston, I have to go to Texas." And he said, "No way, you can't leave, you have to come here." And I said, "I think that's the end of it," and so I stopped. But I stayed in touch with all this stuff in other ways, through friends and books, and not only Freud. I was reading . . . well, I wish I could remember all the names. It's not a day for names.

HF: That's a great title for a book. In a note about *The Store* you mention Wilhelm Stekel. Stekel had an interesting take on fetishism that may be more relevant to your work than Freud's. Stekel's fetishism isn't about fixing on an object, like Freud's; it's more mobile in its attachments.

CO: Oh yes, Stekel. He's wonderful. He was the most fun to read. One of his books is about individual cases. I have it downstairs. My wife Coosje and I had different libraries. She didn't want certain of my books in her library, and I didn't want certain of her books in my library. All the things having to do with sex and Freud wound up downstairs.

HF: There was another psychoanalytical writer I wanted to ask you about. At one point, I think in 1961, you make a note about "reading Brown." Was that Norman O. Brown?

CO: Yes, Norman O. Brown. That's one of the names I was searching for.

HF: *Life Against Death* then, and maybe *Love's Body* later?

CO: *Life Against Death*, and maybe the other as well. I read him, yes. I was recommended to read him.

HF: Did other artists around you pick up on Brown, or were you on your own there?



*Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen.
Knife/Ship II. 1986.
© Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van
Bruggen. Courtesy of Pace Gallery.*

CO: I don't think that people were reading Freud much at that time, at least people I knew. It'd be interesting to go back and try to remember all the things I was reading and doing at that time.

HF: Some Minimalists were reading Merleau-Ponty, and some Conceptualists were reading Wittgenstein, but you were reading Brown. I love that.

CO: I was fascinated by the fact that one thing could meet another thing or that one thing could substitute for another thing. This was a big part of my feeling for expanding subjects.

HF: One thing can be a guise for another, or an object can be transformed from one thing into another. That's a psychic event that becomes a physical process in your work. But it's also a linguistic operation for you. You see it in language: You work it out in poems as well as in objects. In your notes you use terms like "metamorphosis" and "correspondence" for it. You didn't have Ovid and Baudelaire in mind, did you? You just wanted to see how objects are like other objects.

CO: I read them, not in the original, but I read them. Yes, it's about transformation and about how what you see is not all there is. Everybody projects out of themselves in ways that alter the appearance of things for them.

HF: Is the engine of transformation more visual or more verbal, or is it both, seeing and thinking and verbalizing and making, or does it depend on the situation?

CO: I just thought of different ways to do things. It wasn't always the same. Almost anything I'd transform I'd test first.

HF: *Strange Eggs* is a good example of how one object can change and change again. They're weirder than Bataille's eggs.

CO: Here's an example in language: "History eats the towers, the bridges, farts snow, seasons go. A carriage with its arms turning is found sleeping in the drained stream. Washed green thyme, uncle dead, laid in the sun of the front room is colonized. Sturdy bridges thrown across his pores is sleeping backwards, wakes up a spade in a country game." There are all these changes in there, words pushing in one direction or another.

HF: Beautiful. It might call to mind Surrealism, but it's not really Surrealist.

CO: No, it's not Surrealist.

HF: Was there a problem for you with the Surrealist transformation of words, images, and objects?

CO: The Surrealists didn't break the forms down enough. They kept them intact and just pushed them together. I do more than push things together. I insisted on calling *Strange Eggs* "cutouts."

HF: Not collages.

CO: People call them collages, but they're not. There's a difference.

HF: Have you seen the show of Matisse cutouts now at MoMA?

CO: I know them from before. The problem with the Matisse cutouts is that the subject matter is so Matisse—this elegant thing. But I also believe in using



*Oldenburg. Untitled (Strange Eggs). 1957–58.
© Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen.
Courtesy of Pace Gallery.*

scissors like a pencil to draw. I do a lot of cutouts as though I were drawing. It's a great pleasure to cut things.

HF: There's an extraordinary film of Matisse treating the paper as a volume as he cuts it. Is that your sense of cutting too—that it's shapely in that way—or do you see it as mostly two-dimensional?

CO: It can be three-dimensional. In advance of a drawing I sometimes do cuttings to build up something that can be used.

HF: As you say, you do more than push things together; you transform them. It seems to me—and this goes all the way back to *Strange Eggs*—that the body is your primary model of how an object can be transformed. At one point you write that *The Store* is “cloaca.” Defecation is a kind of master trope for transformation for you—of an object passing through another object to become, well, another thing. And not just food: *Cash Register* looks like it's been semi-digested. It's like a Freudian joke or maybe a joke on Freudians: “You say money and shit are related; well, here you go.”

CO: Yes, it's one way to get similarities or to make comparisons between one thing and another. The body is so full of stuff. You're sweating, you're blowing your nose, you're taking a leak, you're doing so many things. There's so much interaction between the inside and the outside. Sometimes that's hard to represent. Sometimes it's better in poems than in drawings or objects.

HF: Did the poems ever lead the way? Did you ever think, *I can work this transformation out in language and then test it in drawing or object-making?*

CO: No, they're separate categories.

HF: So one never sparks the other?

CO: No. They seem similar, but I think of writing as its own activity. Art has its own rules too.

HF: How you break up words and move them around—that's not like what you do with objects?

CO: Well, I can use letters freely without having them mean anything. That's ok.

HF: With objects, can you ever get that far away and still have it be legible somehow?

CO: Yes. That's what I do.



*Oldenburg outside Dwan Gallery in Los Angeles, 1963.
© Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen.
Courtesy of Pace Gallery.*