

INTRODUCTION

A **PHOTOGRAPH OF CLAES OLDENBURG** from the mid-1960s neatly illustrates the direction of this study, which focuses on the relationship of his sculpture to architectural symbolism and urban design in the United States during the postwar period (fig. 0.1). The artist stands on a large sign depicting a man striding forward, wearing a suit and hat and carrying an overcoat—the quintessential businessman, an urban archetype of the mid-twentieth century, one from which Oldenburg’s own professional identity diverged. He nonetheless clings to the figure while echoing his stance in order to maintain balance across a considerable span. Oldenburg is beaming as if contented, even amused.

The size of the sign and the parking lot and discount store in the background indicate proximity to a highway. Photographer Ken Heyman recalled that while he and Oldenburg were on a road trip through New Jersey, the artist “jumped out [of the car] and posed by this large billboard,” a confirmation for Heyman of the artist’s spontaneity and humor.¹ I propose that Oldenburg’s

attitude in this photograph—his response to the larger environs—exemplifies his creative methods and artistic strategies. Here we witness recognition of the received stereotypes and clichés in contemporary media and a literal embrace of “the accidental possibilities of the city” that have guided his practice. Oldenburg’s sculptures of familiar subjects have long been understood to draw from the visual imagery of consumer culture, from the found objects and semiotic structures in the built environment of the postwar period. This book asserts Oldenburg’s foundational *and* enduring relationship with the city as *the* critical perspective on his career—his art as a cogent form of urban theory.

Oldenburg was born in Sweden in 1929. His family spent a few early years in New York (1929–32), went back to Europe (to Oslo, Norway), and then settled permanently in Chicago in 1936. Oldenburg moved from there to New York in the summer of 1956 with the goal of becoming a professional artist. He had sought formal training in art intermittently, concentrating on painting and drawing: he took classes at the University of Wisconsin’s summer school in 1948 while attending Yale College (where he majored in English literature and from which he graduated in 1950); at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago between 1951 and 1955 (working as a newspaper reporter and illustrator while living in the city); and at the Ox-Bow School of Art in Saugatuck, Michigan, in 1953. He had started showing his work—mostly figural and landscape compositions—in Chicago galleries.

In New York, Oldenburg rented an apartment in downtown Manhattan and accepted a job at the library at the Cooper Union’s Museum for the Arts of Decoration. As he made his way in a new city, mostly on foot, he turned his attention to his immediate surroundings, then in the midst of a dramatic period of urban renewal. By 1957 he was drawing, photographing, and otherwise collecting images of commercial objects and evidence of urban detritus. The photographic and sculptural practices he developed from these materials, which scholarship on the artist has generally overlooked, offer important insights into his methods at this time and for the remainder of his career.

Oldenburg’s first accounts of New York prioritized symbolic communication, especially as seen on facades and surfaces: “A wall covered with signs. Colors. Black-and-white. Two-dimensionality.”² But his reflections quickly shifted from flatness to volume, in part though his mobile perspective on the streets and keen interest in urban details: “Watching street workers break up asphalt—thought: form. That is the basic thing.”³ Interested in things glimpsed and scavenged, he explored the artistic possibilities in the destruction and reconstitution of the city and established a trajectory toward three-dimensional works and phenomenological experience. The statement that opens this book and provides its title recalls the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s assertion about space: “I do not see it according to its exterior envelope; I live in it from the inside; I am immersed in it. After all, the world is all around me, not in front of me.”⁴ Walking the city remained central to Oldenburg’s practice; his physical presence among urban fragments was crucial. Explaining his approach at the time,

he said, “My procedure was simply to find everything that meant something to me, but the logic of my self-development was to gradually find myself in my surroundings”—words that stress the integral and reciprocal influences of his new home.⁵

Oldenburg witnessed how urban revitalization reconfigured the modern city in the name of more functional and ordered spaces: how aging tenements were cleared for superblock apartments, how local establishments were razed for corporate headquarters, how plans for superhighways were drawn through historic neighborhoods. Jane Jacobs, the Greenwich Village resident-turned-activist, described in an early essay the routines of her neighbors and the function of the streets in terms that reinforced Oldenburg’s practice of walking as a means of assimilating to local mores and gathering information: “The user of downtown is mostly on foot, and to enjoy himself he needs to see plenty of contrast on the streets. He needs assurance that the street is neither interminable nor boring, so he does not get weary just looking down it.” Furthermore: “You’ve got to get out and walk. Walk, and you will see that many of the assumptions on which the [planning] projects depend are visibly wrong.” Her observations of the streets guided her advocacy for downtown neighborhoods and her resistance to local renewal projects. From her perspective, “The architects, planners—and businessmen—are seized with dreams of order, and they have become fascinated with scale models and bird’s-eye views. This is a vicarious way to deal with reality, and it is, unhappily, symptomatic of a design philosophy now dominant: buildings come first, for the goal is to remake the city to fit an abstract concept of what, logically, it should be.”⁶

Such elevated positions constitute ideal, almost impossible perspectives on urban space, ones distanced from the typical encounters with the city and the daily activities of its inhabitants. Jacobs’s decisive and articulate analysis of modern planning, based on her lived experience of the city, was famously elaborated in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961). In this text she included a charge to the reader that parallels Oldenburg’s techniques of orienting himself to New York. Addressing the lack of images in the book, she offered the following suggestion: “The scenes that illustrate this book are all about us. For illustrations, please look closely at real cities. While you are looking, you might as well also listen, linger and think about what you see.”⁷ Jacobs demanded concentration on, engagement with, and immersion in the city, making her text both a physical and an intellectual exercise.

The sign that Oldenburg clutches in Heyman’s photograph represents one mode of transportation (walking) and directs itself to another (driving), implicating attendant shifts in perception. The growth of metropolitan areas and the surge of highway development during the postwar period required a new symbolic language fit for a high-speed audience. As driving supplanted walking in communities across the United States, contemporary cityscapes changed in significant ways, as did experiences on the road. As the authors of *The View from the Road* (1964) maintained, “The modern car interposes a filter between the driver and the world he is moving through. Sounds, smells, sensations of touch and weather are all diluted in comparison with what the

pedestrian experiences.”⁸ The automobile is only one example of the distancing effects of postwar culture. As architects and urbanists sought to investigate and represent perception on the highway, they examined situations like the one Heyman’s photograph captures. The architects Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, with colleague Steven Izenour (and graduate students at the Yale School of Architecture), for instance, got behind the wheel in 1968 to study and represent the commercial symbolism of the Las Vegas Strip from a car, and then shared their evaluations in the seminal book *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972). They proclaimed the similarities between the sign for Caesars Palace and sculptures by Oldenburg, an allusive (and elusive) comparison.⁹ Indeed, this observation by the architects signaled to me the profound significance of Oldenburg’s art for discourses on the postwar US landscape, and their comparison generated the present study.

Heyman’s photograph appeared in John Rublowsky’s *Pop Art* (1965), an early publication on the style with which Oldenburg’s career is most often associated.¹⁰ The commercial roadside signage in Heyman’s photograph risks redoubling Oldenburg’s identification with Pop art, but the sign’s iconography, which implicates mobilized perception and embodied vision, differentiates his approach from those of his peers. This book follows current scholarship on Pop art and seeks to complicate generalized accounts of its subject matter and media-based imagery and to consider the complexities of individual practices. It also extends investigation of Oldenburg’s sculptures beyond the 1960s—the decade on which the majority of the literature on his art focuses—back to the 1950s and on to the 1990s (even into the current decade), touching on his experiments with other artistic media, for instance photography and film, and his involvement with other movements, including happenings, Minimalism, and Conceptual art. Its main argument traces the ways Oldenburg’s art has continuously issued from and intervened in urban developments in the United States, and in the process reframed definitions of public art and architectural symbolism.

Heyman’s photograph corresponds to the trajectory of this text: taken by the side of the highway in New Jersey, it illuminates Oldenburg’s application, by the mid-1960s, of ideas from New York to areas outside Manhattan. Indeed, Heyman’s image and Rublowsky’s publication coincided with a significant shift in Oldenburg’s career. Between 1956 and 1965 he had made a home in New York, lived briefly in Los Angeles, and spent time in Europe. In 1965 he returned to Manhattan, rented a new loft, and began a series of paintings envisioning large-scale objects as monuments in the city. Oldenburg’s earliest and most comprehensive scrutiny of architecture and urban design occurred in New York and Los Angeles, and it is therefore appropriate to begin and end in those two cities. By moving across the country and through several decades, stopping in disparate locations between the coasts, this book tracks the connections of Oldenburg’s sculptures to local geographies and national discourses, providing a way of understanding patterns of postwar (sub)urbanization through the contributions of one of the country’s leading artists.

Chapter 1 analyzes Oldenburg's early projects on the Lower East Side. Few of these photographs and "constructions," as he called them, have been published or received significant scholarly attention, yet they demonstrate the substantial ways in which the artist grappled with the city to cultivate a radical sculptural practice. While his views through the camera's lens offered a mechanical method for translating perceptions into representations, Oldenburg quickly shifted from recording the city's sights to collecting its materials. This chapter uncovers the process through which he invented a creative practice embedded in and emerging from his engagement with the city, one that advanced new models for spatial and social orientation through photography and three-dimensional objects. In this way, his strategies and interventions bridged aesthetic theory and urban studies, as they anticipated many of the approaches to urbanization, especially among those seeking alternatives to modernism, in the 1960s.

Chapter 2 marshals new evidence to establish the connection of *The Store*—Oldenburg's most studied project—to urban developments in New York. Correspondences between his photographs of signage and store windows, demolished buildings and architectural rubble, allow a rereading of his sculptures as formal assimilations of local sites in his residential neighborhood. Unlike most studies of *The Store*, this chapter addresses all three locations where its sculptures were installed: the first and third in commercial galleries, the second in a rented storefront that also served as a studio. The inaugural display at Martha Jackson Gallery demonstrated the unease inherent in the presentation of a downtown aesthetic in an Upper East Side gallery and reinforced distinctions between different areas of the city. The storefront, which faced a construction site, positioned his sculptures within small shops and against a backdrop of architectural debris, characteristic of the neighborhood and affected by urban renewal. This gallery-studio was located in the East Village, a newly named neighborhood becoming a distinct urban district in the early 1960s as a result of urban planning. The final installation in Midtown announced a new chapter in Oldenburg's practice—relatively large soft sculptures, made with his wife, Patty Mucha, that mirrored items displayed in nearby commercial showrooms—and engendered his earliest vision of an object scaled to the city's monumental skyscrapers.

The subject of chapter 3 is *Placid Civic Monument* (1967), a rectangular hole dug and almost immediately refilled in Central Park. It was Oldenburg's contribution to *Sculpture in Environment*, an exhibition of public sculpture organized by New York's Administration of Recreation and Cultural Affairs. While Oldenburg emphasized the work as a literal fulfillment of the exhibition's title, I analyze it as his first *permanent* monument, one related to his proposals for object-monuments in Manhattan two years earlier, especially those that fill or establish holes in the urban fabric as reflections on specific renewal projects. *Placid Civic Monument* commented on recent political and cultural developments. Oldenburg's decision to realize (and efface) a cavity in the park directed attention to the priorities of the city's leadership, which had altered notions of public space, collapsed distinctions between art and leisure, compromised stewardship for