

Claes Oldenburg at MoMA New York

SCULPTURES LEADING VISITORS DOWN MEMORY LANE

When Swedish native Claes Oldenburg first presented 'The Street' in the basement of Washington Square's Judson Memorial Church, Neo-Dada (not yet 'American Pop') was a remarkably gritty affair. Robert Rauschenberg was still slathering paint and detritus over canvases affixed to 3-D armatures and Jasper Johns was dangling tools, cutlery, and cut-out letters over his paintings. And Oldenburg was appropriating the imagery he found scrawled on New York City's lower-east side walls into his cut-out cardboard, 'art brut-ish' creatures and related drawings and mono-prints. Only Andy Warhol's soup-cans and James Rosenquist's billboard paintings flaunted slick veneers back then.

Whether free-standing or suspended, the nearly twenty black and brown flat figures (some as tall as ten feet) inhabiting 'The Street' (1960) conjure unworldly ghosts of Ray Johnson's hand-cut moticos propped up on city sidewalks (1955), Jean Dubuffet's scraggy figures and free-standing black, blue, and red figures populating his 'Hourloupe Cycle' (1962-1974), or the pop-up people and cyclops depicted in Red Grooms' animated films and 'sculpto-pictoramas' (since 1967). Standing nearly six-feet tall, Oldenburg's 'Empire Sign - With M and I Deleted' (1960) distinguishes his approach from that of his Pop accomplices. What 'empire sign' means is anybody's guess: city skyscrapers, corporate America, Madison Avenue, television's dominance, east/west politics? Still, one cannot help but notice Disney's mouse's ears atop this vertical marquee. One ear flashes a negative sign and the other a positive sign, as if to signal political disputes, such as Disneyland's actually denying Nikolai Khrushchev park entrance the year before. With M (Mickey?) and I (Oldenburg?) deleted (only the letters E, P, R, and E remain), this sign suggests that these two are above empire games.

POTENTIALLY REPELLENT ARTWORKS

Despite the scores of tasty, colorful plaster objects and comfy, oversized sewn sculptures permeating 'The Store' (1961), Oldenburg's haptic sculptures belie Pop Art spectacles. Rather than fetishize industrial goods as most Pop artists did, his crudely crafted constructions echo our homemade past. Such resistible objects defy

those by Pop peers such as Warhol, whose celebrity and US-dollar paintings promote fame and wealth; Roy Lichtenstein, whose comic graphics glamorize consumer culture; Rosenquist, whose billboard-scale paintings advertise subconscious desires, or Wayne Thiebaud, whose luscious foodscapes entice hungry publics. Rather than ship large works from the studio, Oldenburg constructed them in situ (his then-wife Patty Mucha sewed many). Among the first to work site-rationally, he preferred local goods, such as 'Tartines' and 'Saumon avec Mayonnaise' (both 1964) made especially for Paris' Ileana Sonnabend Gallery. If most Pop Art inspires audiences to crave ever more stuff, Oldenburg's rough-hewn handiwork, and even the playful public monuments he later co-produced with Coosje van Bruggen, capably hold famished spectators at bay, hindering everybody's participation in empire games. Although this sounds like criticism, I mean it as a compliment. Producing potentially repellent artworks requires great courage.

Despite these objects' coarseness, delight abounds, as numerous sculptures lead visitors down memory lane, inspiring many to laugh aloud. 'Lingerie Counter' (1962) joins the intimacy of underwear drying on clotheslines to the silliness of that era's over-designed girdles. Five red Sundays on a white 'Soft Calendar for the Month of August' (1962) revitalize the Sabbath's specialness. Despite being overtly recognizable, several over-sized objects still instill wonder, such as 'Green Ladies' Shoes' (1962), 'Floor Burger' (1962), 'Giant BLT (Bacon, Lettuce and Tomato Sandwich)' (1963), 'Giant Gym Shoes' (1963), or 'Baked Potato #1' (1963). Particularly wonderful are 'Hamburger' (1962), a modest sketch that makes a burger seem mountainous, a collaged study for 'The Store' poster, and studies for 'New Medias, New Forms 1' and '2' exhibition posters. One clear favorite is 'Candy Counter with Candy' (1961), whose duplicitous candy bars evoke paint tubes.

Unlike Johns' venerable flags (1954-1966), Oldenburg's thirteen designated flags look cobbled-together from wood scraps, paving the way for scrappy wallworks by Tony Cragg and Roger Ackling. Collections presented in 'Mouse Museum' (1965-1977) and 'Ray Gun Wing' (1969-1977) prove rather disparate. In the former, one recovers one's youth, while discovering 385 origi-

nal objects that once captured his fancy. In the latter, one discovers his fanciful ability to see 258 mostly un-Raygun-like objects as rayguns! Warhol's 'Brillo Box' (1965) and his seven other simulated warehouse cartons constructed from painted wood, owe a clear debt to Oldenburg's replicating real items, however unreal their scale. Known for quoting quotidian design, the Postmodern sculptures of Francis Cape, François Curley, Jorge Pardo, Jonathan Seligman, George Stoll, and Gavin Turk descend from Oldenburg's 'Store'. Despite their age, several Oldenburg objects seem quite fresh! His twin burgers 'Two Cheeseburgers, with Everything' (Dual

Hamburgers)' (1962) evoke Felix Gonzalez-Torres' freaky twin clocks, 'Untitled (Perfect Lovers)' (1991). 'Pants Pocket with Pocket Objects' (1964) might be mistaken as a work by Erwin Wurm or B. Wurtz. Richard Hawkins' 'City Underground' (1997) feels sprung from 'Upside Down City' (1962). Even the humorous sculptures of Thomas Schütte, born in Oldenburg (Germany), are born from Oldenburg!

Sue SPAID

Claes Oldenburg, 'The Street and The Store' & 'Mouse Museum/ Ray Gun Wing' until August 15 at the Museum of Modern Art, New York City, USA. www.moma.org



Installation view of 'Claes Oldenburg: The Street and The Store', The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2013, photo Jason Mandella. © 2013 The Museum of Modern Art