

Claes Oldenburg's Monuments and the Tactility of the Body-Object Relationship

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To ignore the importance of the tactile is impermissible when seeking to analyze the works of Claes Oldenburg (1929-) throughout the evolution of his body of work. In this paper, I will seek to evaluate how, through the uniquely human emphasis on the power of touch and the anthropomorphizing of objects, Oldenburg's monuments distort, flip, and confront the established relationship between the human body and the object. In doing so, I must first define what this body-object relationship is. And for the purposes of this paper, I approach this definition from a Western perspective: that is to say, specifically, what the typical relationship is between the body and the common, mass-manufactured, and often disposable commodity. Approaching this description from a broad viewpoint is also critical for the purposes of this paper, as we will see that Oldenburg confronts the discourse between the body and object from a number of different perspectives. It is from this, then, that I describe the body-object relationship as one of exact opposites: life versus lifelessness; feeling versus inertia; the action of using versus being used. Oldenburg confuses, blurs, and equalizes these opposites through use of form, material and scale, through environmental and cultural contexts, and through an inherent suggestion of the erotic in his monuments.

The confrontation of the body-object relationship in Oldenburg's work is not unprecedented. The exploration of the body and the world of objects can be seen in the works of many avant-garde artists of the 20th century (prior to the 1960s), particularly those of Jackson Pollock and Marcel Duchamp.

Of Pollock's drip paintings (Fig. 1), Germano Celant writes: "Through the act of dripping, an impersonal, industrial technique, the difference between the human being and

the object was suddenly and irrevocably obliterated.”¹ This technique erased the humanity of the artist’s hand, for he no longer had control over the final outcome of the painting. Pollock’s participation in the painting became automated: he entered a realm where all skill, talent, and experience were demoted to those same elements imbued within the object: non-existent.² Pollock removed the touch of his hand to the painting, thus removing the will of the artist over his work.

Oldenburg also removes his hand from his works much in the same way as Pollock—yet in his case, it is in the context of subject matter. Oldenburg seeks to depict the already designed and imagined object; he does not invent new forms or images that must be analyzed and deconstructed in order to be comprehensible.³ He borrows from the consumerist world around him, already cluttered with objects. This non-intervention in his works’ subject matter is comparable to Marcel Duchamp’s readymades (Fig. 2). Oldenburg’s monuments are subjectively of the same vein as Duchamp’s: he presents objects as they are.

Duchamp took a passive stance on the presentation of his readymades, simply stating, “There are no solutions because there are no problems.”⁴ And Oldenburg remains passive about the subjectivity of his monuments too: in depicting every day objects, he leaves no question of substance that the viewer must ponder and decide for themselves, thus, as Celant opines, “...opening up a vast area for the *active* intervention of things themselves.”⁵

¹ Germano Celant, “Claes Oldenburg and the Feeling of Things,” in *Claes Oldenburg: An Anthology*, ed. Germano Celant (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 1995), 13.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 18

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 19

It is this active intervention that is inherently at the core of Oldenburg's monuments. An object gains the ability to *actively* do anything only when it is given the means by which to do so: in this case, when it is anthropomorphized and given some aspect or semblance of life. And this life, as I will argue throughout the paper, is supplanted from the viewer's body.

Through form, material, and scale, Oldenburg combines the organic and inorganic—so that a viewer cannot outright detach their bodies as a total “other” from the object they are confronted by. In his rendering of already existing object, Oldenburg adds an alteration to his monuments that are not immediately consciously obvious. Yet the sudden awareness his works brings to our bodies in space is indication enough that this is not the typical experience between body and object—the easy dichotomy of natural versus unnatural. Something about his pieces seems more alive than we're used to, and this is unnerving for us. As Celant writes, “The intertwining of objects and senses produces a suspension of feeling, leading to a neuter terrain where the human body supplants the object...[The object] takes its place alongside human beings with its own personal history.”⁶

In giving a lifelike quality to the object, our own bodies and lives are “annulled.” No longer is the human superior to the object—these two elements are now equaled. And when object becomes monument (a type of distillation of the heroism of life), it looms about the viewer in a prehensile manner. The body is now being watched; being studied; and is at the whim of the object to be used in whatever way it wishes.

This object's imitation of life is what “highlights” the body-object relationship. Oldenburg's work becomes anthropomorphized and we can no longer dismiss it as a static,

⁶ Ibid., 12

incomparably dead thing. Now it feels and moves and acts as we do. We must consider it as an entity capable of feeling and reaction. And in this moment, we find ourselves suspended on a plane in between reality and fiction. This place is not totally real, yet nonetheless not totally dismissible as impossible. This in-between, for us, is uncomfortable. And this discomfort and vulnerability we feel is what gives Oldenburg's objects their mystery and power. As Oldenburg said himself, "My intention is to make an everyday object that eludes definition."⁷

Extrapolating further on the elusive new relationship the viewer finds themselves amongst Oldenburg's objects, Celant writes, "[The object] asserts a new kind of social relationship that is no longer intersubjective; rather it takes place between two *quasi-things*."⁸ "Quasi-things" is a concrete manifestation of confusion. In this setting, there is no subjective conclusion: the viewer cannot confidently say that the object has no anthropomorphic characteristics. And in this vein, the viewer also cannot say that they are *not* made into an object by what they see—if an object can become human, what in the world can prove that a human cannot become an object? After all, objectification of the body exists outside of the specific situation I describe here. A common example would be the objectification of the female body in mass media and advertising. (Fig. 3) We know that to objectify a body is not impossible or unprecedented.

Oldenburg's monuments also gain life through scale. As Julian Rose argues,⁹ Oldenburg's monuments demonstrate his mastery of space and scale: his ability to confuse and agitate a viewer, who feels alienated in the presence of a giant, otherwise mundane

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 15

⁹ Julian Rose, "Objects in the Cluttered Field: Claes Oldenburg's Proposed Monuments," *October* 140, (Spring 2012): 114.

object—a lipstick tube (Fig. 4), a clothespin (Fig. 5), a badminton birdie (Fig. 6) Rose argues that it is through this distortion of space through scale that shows “perception...to be relative,”¹⁰ thereby forcing upon the viewer a sometimes-unwelcome consciousness of their body in public space. They become dehumanized as a disposable object, as the monument is anthropomorphized into the force that will ultimately use and throw them away.

Many articles written about Oldenburg’s body of work reference the inherent sexuality and eroticism in his pieces.^{11 12} Eros—desire; love—in its most common form must inherently involve two entities. In the case of Oldenburg’s works, it is the object and body of the viewer. It is the bridge between opposites; body/object, movement/static; organic/inorganic.¹³ Here, Eros as a point of connection sparks a new awareness of the viewer’s bodily feelings and urges, as it relates to the object. And here, again, do the body and object become equalized.

The sexuality of Oldenburg’s pieces is not without cultural context. In fact, Oldenburg was keenly aware of the commodity fetish that emerged in public consciousness during the 1960s. A fetish is an object of worship. More specifically, it can also be “an inanimate object worshipped for its supposed magical powers or because it is considered to be inhabited by a spirit.”¹⁴ Thus, it contains life. Of the cultural predicament of the Western commodity fetish, Oldenburg writes, “Look at how beautifully objects are

¹⁰ Ibid., 127

¹¹ Germano Celant, “Claes Oldenburg and the Feeling of Things,” in *Claes Oldenburg: An Anthology*, ed. Germano Celant (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 1995), 19.

¹² Dan Graham, “Oldenburg’s Monuments,” *Artforum* 6, no. 5 (January 1968): 34.

¹³ Germano Celant, “Claes Oldenburg and the Feeling of Things,” in *Claes Oldenburg: An Anthology*, ed. Germano Celant (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 1995), 19.

¹⁴ “Define fetish,” *Google*, accessed May 15, 2017, <https://www.google.fr/search?q=define+fetish&oq=define+fetish&aqs=chrome.69i59.5607j0j4&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8>.

depicted in ads in Sunday newspapers...it's all very emotional. Objects are body images, after all, created by humans, filled with human emotion, objects of worship.”¹⁵

To Oldenburg, this modern commodity fetish was not only one that concerned a perverse type of worship, but a sexual fetish—an obsession—as well. In making his works sexually suggestive (sometimes more obvious than not), Oldenburg sought to “jolt the viewer out of his or her disinterested, contemplative posture.”¹⁶ Oldenburg believed that the combination of the common commodity and the fetish concluded in a symbol of 1960s Western culture. And these symbols were preserved, codified, and solidified as monuments.¹⁷

On the concept of monumentalism, Julian Rose argues¹⁸ that through subject matter and design, Oldenburg's works are able to bridge the gap between art and architecture to create a monument. One broad definition of a monument is “an enduring and memorable example of something.”¹⁹ I include this definition because monuments, in a traditional sense, tend to commemorate an important person or event, but here Oldenburg mocks this conception by placing emphasis on cheap, disposable objects in his work. And in doing so, his monuments present a contradiction: they are inherently mocking of traditional monuments, yet still demand to be taken seriously, as they are the dominating physical element in their environments. Oldenburg's monuments create their own space within the

¹⁵ Mark Rosenthal, “‘Unbridled’ Monuments; or, How Claes Oldenburg Set Out to Change the World,” in *Claes Oldenburg: An Anthology*, ed. Germano Celant (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 1995): 259.

¹⁶ Tom Williams, “Lipstick Ascending: Claes Oldenburg in New Haven in 1969,” *Grey Room*, no. 31 (Spring 2008): 127.

¹⁷ Julian Rose, “Objects in the Cluttered Field: Claes Oldenburg's Proposed Monuments,” *October* 140, (Spring 2012): 121.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 114

¹⁹ “Define monument,” *Google*, accessed May 15, 2017, <https://www.google.fr/search?q=define+monument&oq=define+monument&aqs=chrome.0.69i59l3j0l3.2608j0j1&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8>

context they are situated, but also within the bodily space of the viewer. These monuments invade the viewer's space, confront it, and flip it on its head.

Similarly to traditional monuments, Oldenburg's works are site-specific and symbolically relevant to the space they are placed in.²⁰ Extrapolating further upon the element of context, many of Oldenburg's monuments (both proposed and realized) exist within cities—drawing a similarity to the unnatural landscape and the unnatural monument. Both are byproducts of a consumptive lifestyle.²¹

Within the context of public life and spaces in cities, Jo Applin argues that there is always an “us” and “them”²² (tourists, immigrants, etc.). Oldenburg's city monuments bring this subtle, often aversive, relationship to light. Suddenly, when confronted by his monuments, the viewer becomes “them”: foreign, confused, not used to what they see in front of them. It is a bodily displacement that forces awareness of a familiar environment-cum-alien landscape by this massive, imposing, accusatory monument. These feelings, Applin argues, are not universal but rather completely dependent upon time and space.²³ In other words, they are site and context-specific. And the viewer's body is an important aspect of this site and context.

There are two monuments by Oldenburg that I believe clearly demonstrate what I have discussed in this paper. They are *Lipstick (Ascending) on Caterpillar Tracks* (1969; Fig. 4) and *London Knees* (1966; Fig. 7).

²⁰ Mark Rosenthal, “‘Unbridled’ Monuments; or, How Claes Oldenburg Set Out to Change the World,” in *Claes Oldenburg: An Anthology*, ed. Germano Celant (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 1995): 261.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 254

²² Jo Applin, “‘Strange Encounters’: Claes Oldenburg's ‘Proposed Colossal Monuments’ for New York and London,” *Art History* 34, no. 4 (September 2011): 840.

²³ *Ibid.*, 843

Lipstick (Ascending) on Caterpillar Tracks was one of Oldenburg's earliest monuments, commissioned in 1969 by a group of students at the Yale School of Architecture as a protest against the Vietnam War and as a proposed site that would function as a podium for future protests.²⁴

Lipstick was installed at Beinecke Plaza on the university's campus, which had been designed in 1962 and was not well received²⁵ (Fig. 4.1). The plaza was barren, contained very little vegetation, and "...wholly lacked anything to facilitate assembly or association."²⁶ Vincent Scully argues that the plaza included no sense of scale. Because of this, a person could not relate their bodies to this space and comfortably experience the plaza—they could not anchor themselves within it.²⁷ To many, the design of the plaza represented a totalitarian, technocratic, repressive space that did not allow for individualistic thought, expression, or creativity.²⁸

Lipstick penetrated this space: an erotic, satirical metaphor of the contemporary cultural and political predicament that is war (Vietnam) and peace (shopping). Of the relationship between the monument and Beinecke Plaza, Sheldon Nodelman writes, "The flaccid, sagging lumpiness of the soft sculpture [the lipstick tube portion of the statue was originally soft and meant to be inflated; it was later replaced by steel]...with all its reference to the real—as against the ideal—human body, mocks the cold geometries of the enviroing architecture and the brick certainties which they assert."²⁹ These allusions to the body in *Lipstick*, as Tom Williams argues, affected how the monument was received. It

²⁴ Tom Williams, "Lipstick Ascending: Claes Oldenburg in New Haven in 1969," *Grey Room*, no. 31 (Spring 2008): 117.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 130

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 131

²⁹ *Ibid.*

returned the courtyard to a place for bodily encounters of many forms: sitting, writing, and protesting—all with the monument as its centerpiece³⁰ (Fig. 4.2).

Of the monument's sexuality, Germano Celant writes, "*Lipstick*...celebrates neither erotic nudity nor an ideological party; instead, it represents a body-machine in which sex and mechanism are interchangeable."³¹ Here, again, the object is unnerving in its contradictory, half-baked anthropomorphized form. It is a hybrid of creation (beauty through the application of lipstick) and destruction (the tank). It is an object that teasingly alludes to its ability to feel, but by perverse, unnatural mechanisms that do not equal the feelings of the viewer's body. It's meaning, like many of Oldenburg's works, is in the end not fully conclusive—it is enigmatic, and in the same way as a classic *femme fatale*, seems to be keeping some kind of secret.³²

Oldenburg made a number of monument proposals in cities that depicted body parts. One of these is *London Knees* (1966; Fig. 7). These massive, fragmented body parts "brings to the fore issues of tactility and proximity, and a mode of circulation that relates to the life and mobility of the body as well as the city."³³

Oldenburg believed that knees were a motif especially fitting for the city of London.³⁴ While there, he claimed that his knees constantly hurt from the cold. And during the 1960s, it was fashionable—and sexually provocative—for women to wear miniskirts and calf-length boots (Fig. 7.1). These two articles of clothing emphasized the naked knees and is what stood out to Oldenburg when traversing through the public space in London.

³⁰ Ibid., 132.

³¹ Germano Celant, "The Sculptor versus the Architect," in *Claes Oldenburg: An Anthology*, ed. Germano Celant (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 1995), 369.

³² Tom Williams, "Lipstick Ascending: Claes Oldenburg in New Haven in 1969," *Grey Room*, no. 31 (Spring 2008): 118.

³³ Jo Applin, "'Strange Encounters': Claes Oldenburg's 'Proposed Colossal Monuments' for New York and London," *Art History* 34, no. 4 (September 2011): 841.

³⁴ Ibid., 844-845

Oldenburg also believed that a *pair* of knees, as opposed to a single knee, also accurately encapsulated the “doubling” characteristic of London³⁵—a common example of this are the city’s double-decker buses.

With *London Knees* we see a direct encapsulation of the body, which is rare for Oldenburg as his monuments usually indirectly infer to the body via objects. Here, the viewer does not have to think too critically about what it is that anthropomorphizes the object—we have to look no farther than the monument’s subject and form. Yet *London Knees* is also an obvious example of the emphasis that Oldenburg places on context when conceptualizing his monuments: *London Knees* carries symbolic implications of the city in which it is placed. Without the site-specific environment of the city of London, the monument loses all relevancy, purpose, and meaning.

Of his own work, Oldenburg writes, “At the bottom of everything I have done, the most radical effect is the desire to touch and be touched. Each thing is an instrument of sensuous communication.”³⁶ Oldenburg’s legacy as one of the most prominent artists of the 1960s Pop art movement—and as an important contemporary artist today—proves his ability to encapsulate the sense of human bodily touch in his works. Through scale, form, material, and context, Oldenburg anthropomorphizes his monuments as a mechanism of bodily confrontation directed at the viewer. This confrontation confuses, flips, and equalizes the common body-object relationship by giving life to the object, and by objectifying the viewer. The confusion and conflict between body and object can be especially seen with *Lipstick (Ascending) on Caterpillar Tracks* and *London Knees*, whereby Oldenburg addresses the body-object relationship through context, subject matter,

³⁵ Ibid., 845

³⁶ Germano Celant, “Claes Oldenburg and the Feeling of Things,” in *Claes Oldenburg: An Anthology*, ed. Germano Celant (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 1995), 21.

and eroticism. The enduring legacy of his works proves that his artistic pursuits are not solely impactful in a specific time period or place. Oldenburg has been able to expose the universal experience of the body and object in a world that is only becoming more populated, more disposable, and more manipulated—and where the virtual is slowly, but surely, replacing the tactile.

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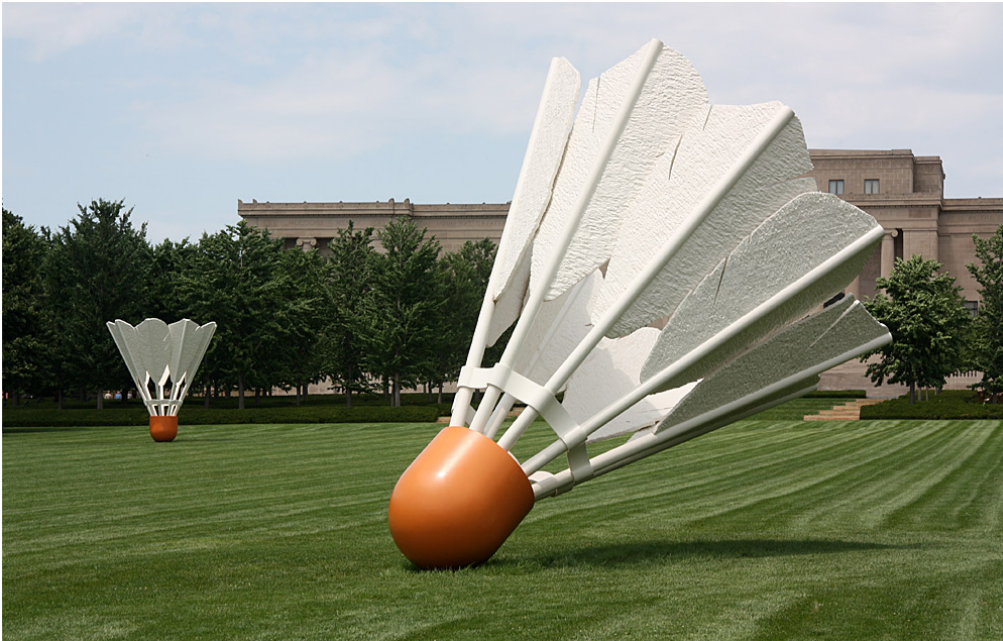


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