

## Claes Oldenburg à Toronto Claes Oldenburg in Toronto

Roger Mesley

Volume 21, Number 84, Fall 1976

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/54980ac>

[See table of contents](#)

### Publisher(s)

La Société La Vie des Arts

### ISSN

0042-5435 (print)

1923-3183 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this document

Mesley, R. (1976). Claes Oldenburg à Toronto / Claes Oldenburg in Toronto. *Vie des arts*, 21(84), 54–94.

Roger Mesley

# Claes Oldenburg à Toronto

En avril et mai derniers, s'est tenue à l'Art Gallery of Ontario, à Toronto, une exposition intitulée *Oldenburg: Six Themes*. Elle comprenait trois cent dix-sept pièces destinées à montrer le processus de la composition des six sujets de l'exposition: la souris géométrique, la fiche électrique à trois prises, les cordages à extrémités libres, l'épingle à linge, la gomme à effacer pour machine à écrire, le gant de base-ball tenant une balle. Oldenburg est resté six jours à Toronto pour surveiller la mise en place de l'exposition, assister à l'ouverture et donner une conférence sur son œuvre. C'était sa première visite à Toronto depuis l'Exposition *Dine-Oldenburg-Segal*, en 1967<sup>1</sup>. A l'époque, il avait proposé d'ériger dans le port, en guise de monument à la gloire de la ville, un gigantesque tuyau de drainage.

Roger Mesley — A quel moment avez-vous appris que la tour érigée par les Chemins de Fer Nationaux du Canada était devenue le monument de prestige de Toronto, et quelle fut votre première réaction?

Claes Oldenburg — J'ai été très surpris. Par une sorte d'intuition, il m'arrive parfois de prévoir certains événements, et souvent cela n'est pas difficile, mais j'ignorais vraiment qu'il fût question d'une tour. Je crois l'avoir vue pour la première fois dans une brochure d'une ligne aérienne ou dans une quelconque annonce sur Toronto, et savez-vous, je me suis dit: «Mon Dieu! ça y est.» En fait, j'ai eu l'impression d'avoir été laissé de côté, le sentiment de n'avoir pas été consulté — comme si j'avais été empêché de présenter ma soumission.

R.M. — Lors de l'Exposition Internationale de 1967, vous avez été à Montréal pour y installer votre *Giant Soft Fan*; fut-il alors question de quelque grand monument pour cette ville?

C.O. — L'éventail constituait ma conception d'un grand monument... Je ne suis pas beaucoup allé en ville — j'étais dans les îles et, passablement occupé. C'était avant l'ouverture, un moment d'attente extraordinaire. Tout était neuf, et on pouvait visiter les pavillons en toute liberté, sans avoir à faire la queue, se promener en train. Le jour de l'ouverture fut l'un de ceux que jamais je n'oublierai, me semble-t-il. Une journée très belle, très lumineuse, et les avions de l'armée canadienne donnèrent une exhibition d'acrobatie aérienne. C'était vraiment sensationnel.

R.M. — Comment a débuté la conception des thèmes de l'exposition actuelle? (Oldenburg m'explique qu'il considère sa rétrospective de New-York, au Musée d'Art Moderne, en 1969, son exposition du Musée de Pasadena, en 1971, et la présente exposition comme une rétrospective continue... une seule et même exposition, mais répondant à des conceptions différentes.)

C.O. — (...), mais je crois que l'exposition ou, plutôt, les expositions marquent des progrès de l'une à l'autre, deviennent plus claires. Celle du Musée d'Art Moderne n'était guère qu'un assortiment de choses diverses et man-

quait un peu de pensée organisatrice... Celle de Pasadena avait comme objectif de montrer comment un objet prend forme de monument et, maintenant, il y a celle-ci. Martin Friedman, qui l'a organisée, est un véritable intellectuel. Il voulait, et moi aussi, une exposition qui fasse réfléchir sur le processus de la conception artistique. C'est ce que j'ai toujours voulu faire. Les sujets deviennent de plus en plus rares et l'attention se porte davantage sur le processus de la pensée créatrice. Je crois que la présente exposition est la meilleure des trois, la plus claire à cet égard.

R.M. — Le Centre Henry-Moore du Musée de l'Ontario, de même, constitue une documentation sur le processus créateur de ce sculpteur. Comment ce rapprochement vous frappe-t-il?

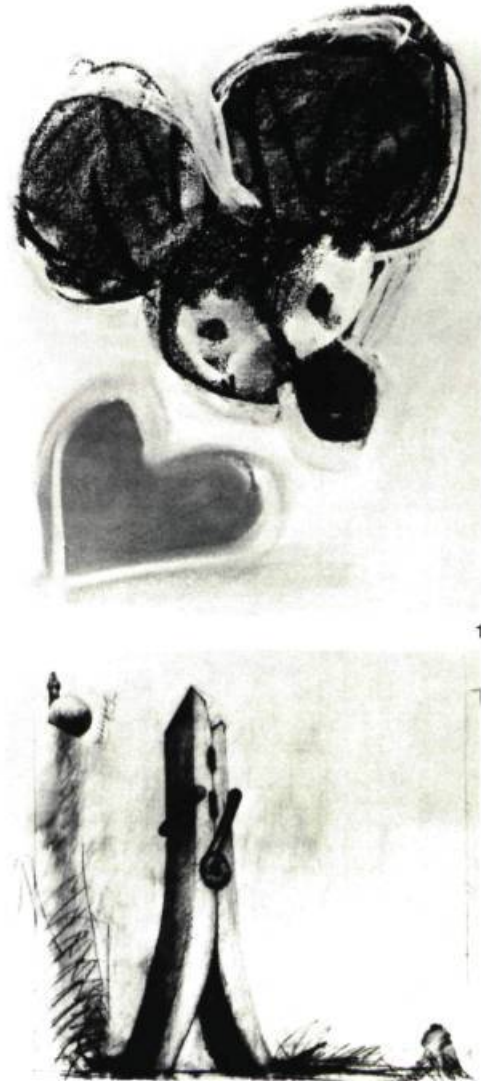
C.O. — Depuis toujours, j'entends parler des pierres que collectionne Moore et j'ai toujours pensé que c'est ainsi que procèdent les sculpteurs — ils possèdent un musée d'objets naturels qui les attirent et qui, par la suite, deviennent la source de leur inspiration. Pour ma part, je prends mes sujets dans la rue et dans les magasins — des sources très urbaines. Lui, il habite la campagne, mais je suis porté à croire qu'il s'agit au fond d'un processus identique. On s'attache à une chose quelconque — il a prétendu, n'est-ce pas qu'il a tout tiré de ces galets et de ces cailloux qu'il aime tant —, et je pourrais prétendre la même chose. Mon musée de la souris renferme presque tout ce qui se rapporte au thème original et à ses métamorphoses.

R.M. — En tant que sculpteur, que signifie pour vous l'œuvre de Moore?

C.O. — J'ai toujours eu conscience de sa présence. Avec Calder et Picasso, il a été le grand sculpteur, et son influence persiste depuis si longtemps qu'il semble faire partie du paysage. Je me réfère beaucoup à d'autres artistes mais je sens que très souvent je reviens à lui inconsciemment, en quelque sorte, à cause de ma sensibilisation à sa conception particulière de la masse.

R.M. — Souhaiteriez-vous la création d'un centre Oldenburg semblable à celui de Moore, de façon à perpétuer le processus d'élaboration des thèmes de l'exposition actuelle?

C.O. — Comment prétendre qu'il ne serait pas agréable d'avoir un endroit où ranger ses affaires? A posséder plus de place qu'à la maison. Je crois que le manque d'espace gêne particulièrement le sculpteur. Chez lui, c'est l'encombrement. Il ne peut pas prendre un soin suffisant de ses affaires. L'idée de consacrer un musée particulier à un artiste me paraît une tradition ancienne mais bien plaisante. Beaucoup d'artistes ont eu des musées. Certains de ces musées ont été bien tenus, d'autres ont périéclité... Je ne m'objecterais pas à un centre Oldenburg de cette sorte. C'est vraiment de cette manière que j'aimerais que l'art soit envisagé. J'aime beaucoup les expositions de dessins parce qu'on peut y voir comment l'artiste élabore son œuvre.



R.M. — Sauf dans vos dessins pornographiques, la forme humaine, traitée pour elle-même, apparaît rarement dans votre œuvre. Pourquoi cela?

C.O. — Je me sers de l'objet parce que c'est un moyen agréable et commode de combler le fossé entre la représentation et la non-représentation. C'est une honte que ces moyens d'expression soient séparés et suivent des voies parallèles. Toujours, je cherche quelque principe d'unification. Si je devais me consacrer à la figure, j'ai l'impression qu'il me faudrait la représenter plutôt fidèlement pour qu'elle prenne sa pleine signification...

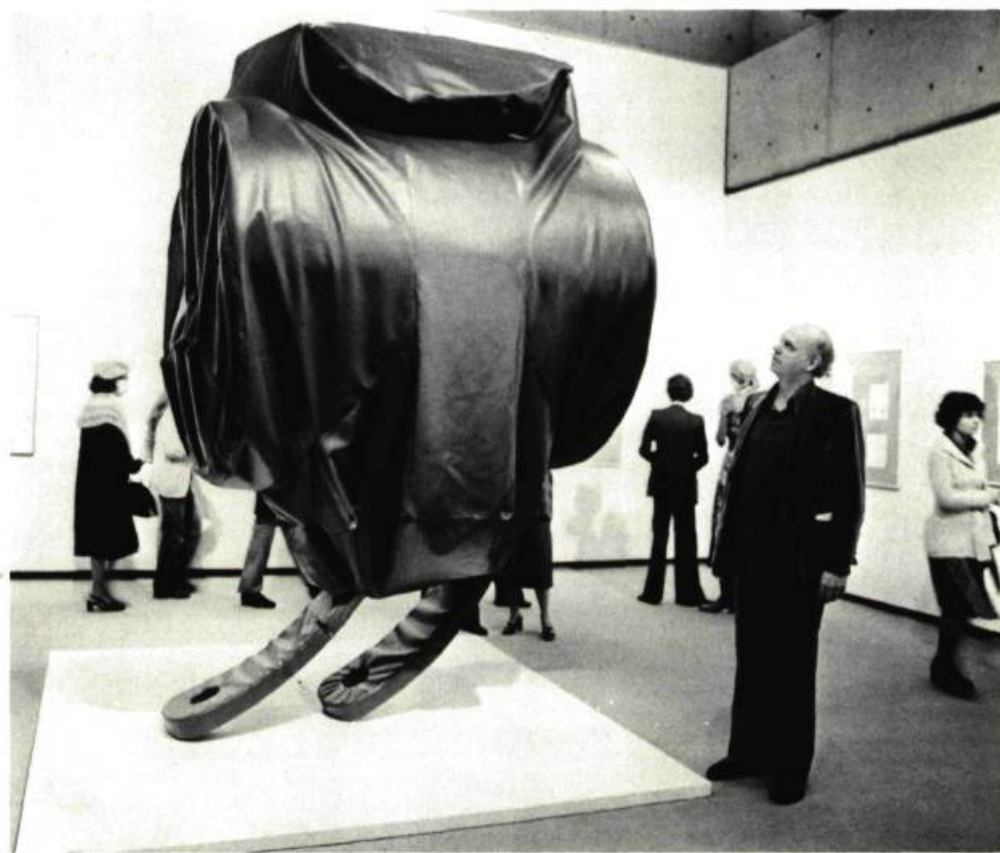
1. *Mouse Head with Heart*, 1972. Craie; 30 cm x 32.

2. *Clothes-pin (Version One)*, 1967. Aquarelle, crayon, fusain; 55 cm x 59. New-Canaan (Conn.) Coll. Philip Johnson.

Nombre d'artistes ont tenté d'allier la figuration à l'abstraction, ce que je trouve choquant — même quand c'est Moore qui le fait. Je l'aime bien mieux lorsqu'il s'en tient à ses galets. S'il s'applique à la figure, cela m'ennuie un petit peu. Avec les objets, je n'éprouve pas cette dualité, je n'ai pas ce problème parce qu'ils sont si faciles d'accès — du moins de la façon dont je les traite. D'une certaine manière, ils se prêtent à une généralisation qui comble le vide. Si je suis capable de dessiner la figure — ce à quoi je parviens de temps à autre — j'en suis aise et je m'exerce à acquérir cette habileté particulière. C'est ainsi qu'une part de mon activité lui est réservée alors que, pour me faire plaisir à moi-même, je me borne à dessiner la figure.

R.M. — Mais comment se fait-il que les dessins de figures réalistes soient presque invariablement érotiques?

C.O. — Bien, ils ont tendance à être chargés d'émotion... Dans mon esprit, le dessin de la figure a toujours été le dessin de la figure plutôt que le portrait. Il a toujours été associé au nu, et j'ai toujours accepté le nu littéralement. Au lieu de dire, comme cela arrive dans les écoles d'art, que le modèle doit être considéré comme une statue, j'ai toujours été d'avis qu'il est une personne vivante qui a enlevé ses vêtements et pose devant nous. Ceci a une signification dont on ne saurait faire abstraction. La réalité du modèle est présente, et j'ai toujours réagi positivement ou négativement devant la personne qui se tient nue devant moi, de sorte que mes figures

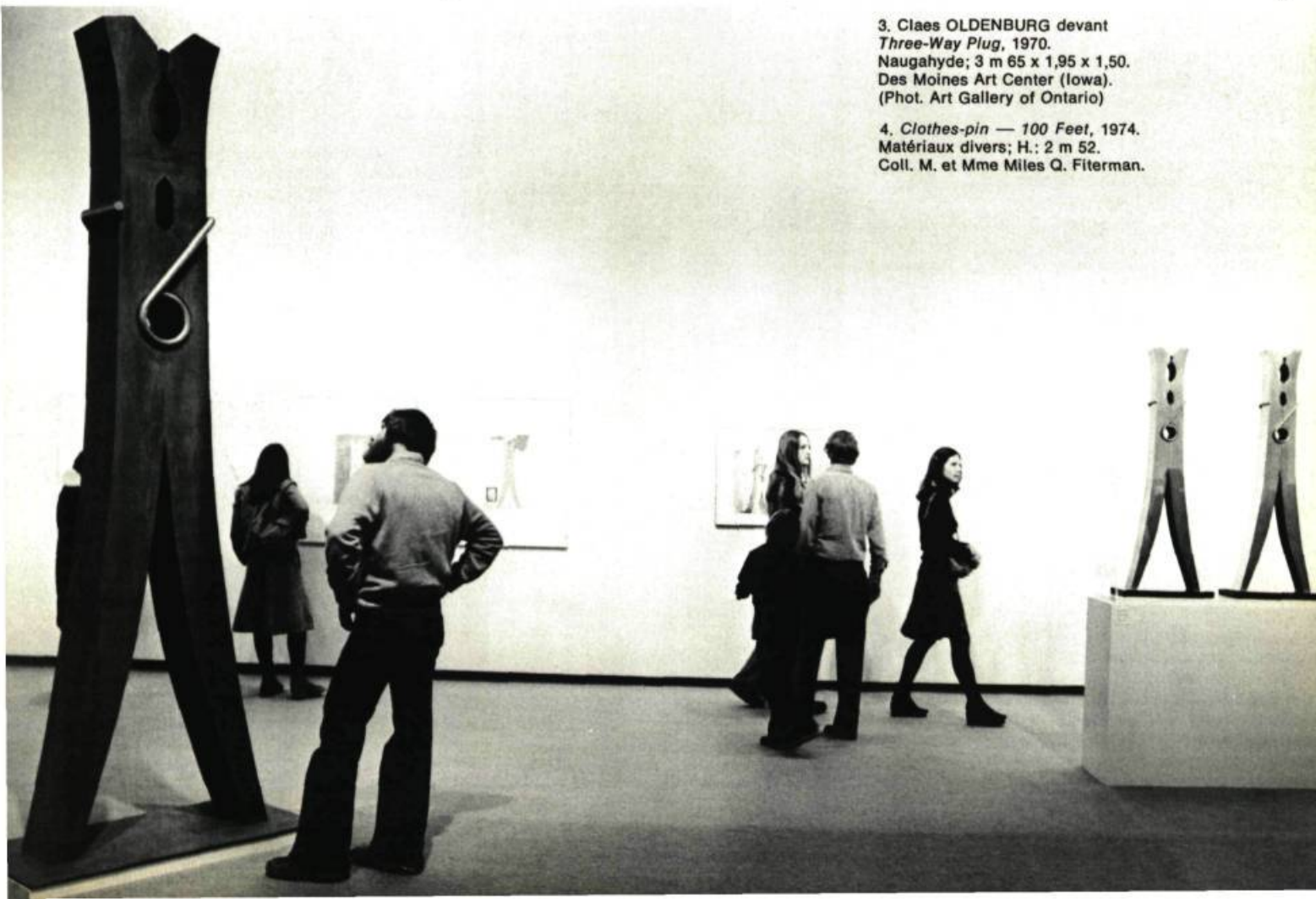


3

4

3. Claes OLDENBURG devant *Three-Way Plug*, 1970. Naugahyde; 3 m 65 x 1,95 x 1,50. Des Moines Art Center (Iowa). (Phot. Art Gallery of Ontario)

4. *Clothes-pin — 100 Feet*, 1974. Matériaux divers; H.: 2 m 52. Coll. M. et Mme Miles Q. Fiterman.



n'ont jamais été de pure forme. Ils tiennent compte de l'humanité, ou de l'érotisme de cette personne... Quand je dessine la figure, c'est pour mon plaisir, et je dessine ce que j'aime à voir. Cela a tendance à être légèrement ou fortement érotique, selon l'impression du moment. Mais, encore une fois, c'est comme les mots: étant donné que ce n'est pas mon occupation principale, je n'ai pas le sentiment que je doive me tenir responsable de ce que je produis. Vous voyez, je fais ce que bon me semble — ce n'est pas mon art officiel. C'est une sorte de produit d'arrière-boutique... L'été dernier, j'ai commencé à dessiner dans les chambres d'hôtel. Je voyageais beaucoup et, quand je me trouvais dans une ville étrangère, je trouvais plus profitable de rester à dessiner dans ma chambre que d'aller m'asseoir au bar. Et je me suis mis à dessiner des figures parce que je me sentais seul. C'est ainsi que cette habitude est devenue une véritable occupation. J'ai commencé par dessiner beaucoup de figures dans une quantité de chambres d'hôtel et, finalement, j'avais assez de dessins pour en faire une exposition, qui a été tenue à Londres, en novembre dernier. Ils étaient très érotiques, ou, du moins, il me le semblait — beaucoup de gens me l'ont reproché parce que l'érotisme est une question de personne. Quoi qu'il en soit, c'était des personnages avec des parties d'eux-mêmes qui se faisaient des choses l'une à l'autre... Je pense qu'il est bon que les gens discutent sur ce qui est érotique. Du point de vue féminin, c'est un sujet particulièrement délicat. Plusieurs femmes ont dit dans leurs critiques que ces dessins n'étaient pas érotiques, qu'ils n'avaient absolument rien à voir avec l'érotisme. Cela a beaucoup à faire avec ce que l'on a dans la tête.

R.M. — Et pourtant, vos ouvrages et vos commentaires semblent beaucoup plus expli-

5. *Standing Mitt With Ball Model*, 1973.  
Matériaux divers; 1 m 6 x 66 cm x 42 cm.

6. *Colossal Ashtray*, 1975.  
Matériaux divers.  
(Phot. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto)



5



6

cites que lors de votre exposition de Toronto, en 1967.

C.O. — Eh bien! j'ai finalement admis publiquement que mes dessins étaient érotiques. Ils le sont sûrement. Bien entendu, j'ai tendance à réviser l'histoire — revoir mon propre travail et dire, vous savez, "je pensais réellement ceci et cela"; et, dans ce cas, on a besoin que quelqu'un vous remette dans le bon chemin en rappelant quelques-unes de vos déclarations antérieures... Il est vrai que ce changement d'avis (sur la forme et sur son analyse) s'est produit, mais cela arrive probablement à la plupart des artistes, et, cela, d'autant plus qu'ils examinent leurs ouvrages et s'arrêtent à y penser.

R.M. — Dans vos dessins et dans vos écrits, il est fait référence à Mondrian. Est-ce que votre recherche d'une forme fondamentale de base constitue une quête spirituelle comme la sienne?

C.O. — J'ai un intérêt réel et très vif pour la forme de base. Avec une disposition pour la métaphysique, j'aimerais ramener les objets à des formes très simples. C'est ma façon de penser... Je suis toujours très heureux d'aller en Hollande parce que c'est un pays où tout se réduit à des verticales et à des horizontales. Cela procure une grande sensation de paix. Il en est de même à Chicago — verticalité et horizontalité. Je me sens une affinité avec ce mode de penser.

R.M. — Cela ne signifie pas, toutefois, que vous êtes théosophe?

C.O. — Non, pas d'une manière formelle. Il s'agit d'un sentiment métaphysique informulé au sujet des choses. J'ai un sentiment, une sorte de notion platonicienne vis-à-vis de la forme comme étant sous-jacente à l'apparence, et cela provient peut-être de ce que j'ai été influencé, à une certaine époque, par mon éducation scientifique chrétienne dont la doctrine suit une même ligne de pensée — c'est-à-dire que les apparences ne sont qu'un masque.

R.M. — Avez-vous un projet pour le Deuxième centenaire (des États-Unis)?

C.O. — Oui, l'*Épingle à linge* sera mon pro-

jet pour cet événement. Elle sera inaugurée à Philadelphie, le premier de juin, avec, je pense, beaucoup d'éclat. Cet objet a une ressemblance marquée avec la Cloche de la Liberté, comme on l'a noté, et son ressort forme le chiffre 76, ce qui n'était pas prévu. Mais des coïncidences semblables se révèlent après le fait, si bien que vous vous demandez s'il ne s'agit pas là d'une chose que vous aviez secrètement gardée au plus profond de votre subconscient... Elle semble se diriger (iconographiquement parlant) vers le bon endroit et au bon moment... J'ai vu une plaque minéralogique du Colorado: elle comportait un 7 et un 6 disposés exactement comme le ressort d'une épingle à linge. Quelqu'un me l'a fait remarquer. Et, en y songeant bien, l'épingle à linge ressemble, dans ses caractéristiques générales, à la Cloche de la Liberté — la courbure, la brisure en plein milieu, et le reste. Elle semble donc très bien convenir.

R.M. — Parmi vos aphorismes, l'un de ceux que je préfère veut que "tous ceux qui écoutent les artistes devraient se faire examiner la vue". Néanmoins, vous avez très généreusement fourni des écrits sur votre art et donné des interviews et des conférences. N'est-ce pas là un plaisir un peu sadique ou, alors, quoi?

C.O. — Je dirais que je suis d'une nature très introspective et que j'apprends beaucoup de choses en parlant avec les gens. C'est ma façon d'apprendre. Donner une conférence comme hier soir, c'est en quelque sorte une manière de s'analyser. Vous parlez et vous découvrez des choses. Le fait que vous les disiez à tous ces auditeurs signifie qu'elles sont probablement vraies. Vous sortez de la conférence avec des idées qui vous surprennent vous-même. Je crois que bien des idées me viennent en parlant et en pensant ensuite à ce que j'ai dit.

1. Cf. L'article d'André Vigeant in *Vie des Arts*, Vol. XII No 47, p. 26-29.

(Traduction de Geneviève Bazir)

English Original Text, p. 93

eral of his most beautiful canvases . . .

Since 1910 modern art has evolved with incredible speed. Does Bellefleur accept being classified among the traditional painters? "Why not? I haven't overthrown anything. On the plastic plan my work is not revolutionary . . . but I have searched the unconscious so thoroughly that it is not impossible that young people will some day follow my lead to go further than I have done . . ."

For now, there is no need to seek young people to carry further certain aspects of Bellefleur's work . . . He is attending to it very well himself. I am eagerly awaiting his next production.

(Translation by Mildred Grand)

---

## CLAES OLDENBURG IN TORONTO

---

By Roger MESLEY

In April and May 1976 the exhibition *Oldenburg: Six Themes* was shown at the Art Gallery of Ontario. The evolution of the geometric mouse, three-way plug, fag ends, clothes-pin, typewriter eraser, and standing mitt with ball themes was documented by the 317 items exhibited. Oldenburg came to Toronto for six days to oversee the exhibition's installation, to give a lecture on his work, and to attend the AGO opening. This was his first visit to Toronto since the 1967 Dine-Oldenburg-Segal exhibition. At that time, he had proposed a colossal drain-pipe monument for Toronto's water-front.

**Roger Mesley** — When did you first realize that the CN tower had become Toronto's colossal monument, and what was your first reaction?

**Claes Oldenburg** — I felt quite surprised. Sometimes I have the feeling that I'm tuned in to certain things that are going to happen, which may not be very difficult to be tuned in to, but I didn't really know there was going to be a tower. I think I saw it first in an airline's magazine, or advertisement of some kind for Toronto, and I said, "My God! There it is!", you know. Actually I felt left out. I felt as if I hadn't been consulted — as if I hadn't had a chance to submit my bid.

**R.M.** — You were in Montreal in 1967 to install your *Giant Soft Fan* for Expo; was there ever a proposed colossal monument for Montreal?

**C.O.** — . . . The fan was my version of a colossal monument . . . I never got into Montreal very much — I was on the island there and kept pretty occupied. It was a terrific time because it was before the opening. Everything was fresh and you could go into all the exhibits just by yourself, without having to stand in line. You could ride those trains all by yourself. I think that one of the most unforgettable days of my life was the opening. It was a very brilliant day, very clear, and the Canadian planes were stunt flying. It was really exciting.

**R.M.** — How did the concept of *Oldenburg: Six Themes* originate? (Oldenburg explained that he viewed the 1969 New York retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, the 1971 Pasadena Art Museum exhibition, and the present show as "a continuous retrospective . . . one show, but different concepts".)

**C.O.** — . . . but I think the show, or shows, have been getting better, clearer. The Modern's show was just a sort of collection of things without much thought behind it . . . The Pasa-

dena show had a point of view, showing how the object developed into the monument, and then came this show. Martin Friedman, who organized it, is quite an intellectual. He wanted to do a thinking show about process, and I did too. That's what I've always wanted to do. The subjects have become more limited and the focus has been more and more on the thinking process. I think this is the best of the shows, the clearest.

**R.M.** — The A.G.O.'s Henry Moore Centre likewise documents his creative process. How struck by the similarities are you?

**C.O.** — I've always heard about these rocks that he collects and I've always felt that that's what sculptors do — they have a museum of things which attract them in nature which become the source of their imagery. I pick mine up on the streets and in the stores — very urban sources. He is in the countryside, but it is basically, I should think, the same kind of process. You get fond of something — he's claimed, hasn't he, that he really has derived everything from those pebbles and rocks that he's so fond of — and I could claim the same. My Mouse Museum contains almost every original object and variations of it.

**R.M.** — Of what significance has Moore's work been to you as a sculptor?

**C.O.** — I've always been aware of Moore . . . He's been the big sculptor, along with Calder and Picasso, and we've been aware of this man for so long; he's part of the landscape, almost. I do a lot of references to other artists and very often I feel that I make references to him — sort of unconsciously, because you've been so aware of his particular type of mass.

**R.M.** — Would you like an Oldenburg centre like the Moore centre in order to perpetuate the concept of process of the present show?

**C.O.** — Who can deny that it would be pleasant to have a place to put all your things? You'd have more room than at home. I think that's a problem with a sculptor, especially. He gets crowded at home. You don't take proper care of your things . . . I think the (one-artist) museum is a funny old tradition that they have. Many artists have had museums. Sometimes they've been kept up well and sometimes they've disintegrated. . . . I wouldn't object to (such an Oldenburg Centre). It's really the way I would like to approach art. I love drawing shows, because you can see the thinking process.

**R.M.** — The human figures as such rarely appears in your work, save in the "pornographic" drawings. Why is that?

**C.O.** — I use the object because it's a nice free way of bridging the gap between representation and non-representation . . . It's a shame that those tendencies are separate and run parallel. I'm always thinking of some sort of unifying principle. If I was to devote myself to the figure, I feel that one has to represent the figure rather precisely for it to be significant . . . There have been so many attempts to combine the figure with abstraction, which I find offensive — even when Moore does it. I like it much better when he sticks to his pebbles. When he goes into figures it bothers me a little bit. With objects I don't feel that, I don't have that problem, because objects are so open — at least the way I treat them. They're so generalized that somehow that bridges the gap. If I'm able to draw the figure — which I can now and then — I like to do it, I exercise that ability. So, I have a separate category, where I just draw figures when I want to please myself.

**R.M.** — But why are the realistic figures drawings almost invariably erotic?

**C.O.** — Well, they tend to be charged with emotion . . . In my mind, figure drawing has always been figure drawing, rather than portrait. It's always been associated with the nude, and I've always accepted the nude literally. In art schools, instead of saying that this is like a statue, I've always said that this is a living person who has taken his or her clothes off and is standing in front of us. It means something: you can't ignore this. The reality of it is there, so I've always felt positively or negatively about this creature standing there naked. So my figures have never really been formalistic. They've been involved with the humanity, or the eroticism of the person . . . When I do figure drawings, I do them to please myself and I draw what I like to see. That's tended to be slightly erotic, or very erotic, or however I feel. But again, it's like words: since it's not my main occupation, I don't feel I have to feel responsible for what I produce. I do whatever I feel like, you see — it's not my "official" art. It's kind of backroom stuff . . . Last summer, I started to draw in hotel rooms. I was travelling a lot, and I would be in a strange town, and rather than go out and sit in a bar, I would find it more productive to sit in a room and draw. And I started to draw figures because I was lonely. So that became a whole activity. I started to draw a lot of figures in a lot of hotel rooms, and finally I had a whole show and I showed it in London last November. They were extremely erotic, or at least I thought so — a lot of people gave me an argument about that, because eroticism is so personal. Nevertheless, they were figures with sexual parts doing things to one another . . . I think it's good that people argue about what's erotic. It's especially sensitive from a woman's point of view. Several female critics said they were not erotic, that they had nothing whatsoever to do with eroticism. It's very much in your own head.

**R.M.** — Yet both your work and your comments seem much more formal and analytical than they were at the time of the 1967 Toronto show . . .

**C.O.** — Well, I finally admitted that publicly. They certainly are. My tendency is, of course, to do a revisionist history — to read back into your own work and say "I was really thinking of this and that," you know; and then, you need someone to straighten you out by remembering some of your earlier statements . . . It's true that that (formal and analytical) development occurred, and it probably occurs for most artists, the more they look at their work and think about it.

**R.M.** — There are references to Mondrian in your drawings and writings. Is your search for the ultimate basic form a spiritual quest like his?

**C.O.** — I'm really very interested in that basic form. I have a metaphysical streak and would like to reduce things to very simple forms. It's in my thinking . . . I feel very happy when I go to Holland, because it's a country where everything really is reduced to vertical and horizontal. It's a very peaceful sensation. Chicago's that way too — the vertical-horizontal. I feel an affinity with that kind of thinking.

**R.M.** — Which is not, however, to admit that you're a Theosophist?

**C.O.** — Not in any formal way. It's a kind of informalized metaphysical feeling about things. I have a feeling, a sort of Platonic notion, about the form underlying appearances, and that may be because I was at one point influenced by being raised as a Christian Scientist, and their thinking runs along that line — that appearances are just a mask.

**R.M.** — Do you have a Bicentennial Project?

**C.O.** — Yes. The *Clothespin* will be my Bicentennial project. It goes up the first of June with, I think, a great deal of fanfare in Philadelphia. There is a distinct resemblance to the Liberty Bell, as someone has pointed out, and the spring does make a 76, which I had never calculated. But these things come afterward, and you wonder whether it was something you secretly harboured in your deepest consciousness... It seems to be headed (iconographically) for the right place at the right time... I saw a Colorado licence-plate: they had a 7 and a 6 just like the spring of the clothespin. That's what somebody pointed out to me. And when you think about it, it does resemble, in general characteristics, the Liberty Bell — the slope, the crack down the middle, and those things. So it seems to be fitting in very well.

**R.M.** — One of my favourite aphorisms of yours is that "anyone who listens to artists should have their eyes examined". None the less, you've been very generous in providing writings about your art and in giving interviews and lectures. Is this perverse delight, or what?

**C.O.** — I'm very introspective. I would say, and I learn things by talking to people. That's mostly when I learn things. Giving a lecture, like last night, is sort of like going into analysis. You say, you discover things. The fact that you say them to all these people means that they're probably true. You come out with things that surprise yourself. I think a lot of things come out in talking, then in thinking afterwards about what I said.

---

## IT'S STILL PRIVILEGED ART

---

By Eric CAMERON

"ART IS BASICALLY A FUNCTION OF THE CLASS IN POWER."

"CULTURE HAS REPLACED BRUTALITY AS A MEANS OF MAINTAINING THE STATUS QUO."

"ART MUST BECOME RESPONSIBLE FOR ITS POLITICS."

The exhibition of recent work by Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge at the Art Gallery of Ontario had the McLean Gallery festooned with protesting banners that might have looked more at home outside than in. Beneath them, on the left as one entered, were photographs showing more placards set up in the streets of New York, in front of the Whitney Museum, outside Toronto City Hall, and even on the steps of the A.G.O. itself. Farther on there were prints depicting the artists in their home. A blank wall behind the figures provides the opportunity to paste on photographs relating to hand printed captions underneath — or a slogan may be daubed right across a whole series as if an act of vandalism against the show itself.

In this smaller scale work the theme diversifies and the mood becomes more questioning (albeit the questions are rhetorical): "ARE HUMAN RELATIONS POLITICAL?"; "IS FEMINITY POLITICAL?"; Eventually it becomes more domestic and also more personal: "WHY DOES THE MAN 'RULE' THE HOUSE?"; "AS A WOMAN WHY DO I LOOK FOR A STRONG MAN?"; "WHY ARE WE JEALOUS OF EACH OTHER'S SUCCESS?"; Across a table with flowers, books, and a tape recorder they attune to the finer points: "RADICAL ART' ORIGINALLY

OPPOSED REPRESSIVE SOCIO-CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS; TODAY 'RADICAL ART' COMPLETELY ACCEPTS THOSE INSTITUTIONS".

A book, in lieu of catalogue, elaborates their concerns on left-hand pages and illustrates their daily routine in drawings opposite.

Their political stance comes through clearly enough — basically an amalgam of Marxism and women's lib with a few extra tid-bits like Canadian nationalism on the side for good measure. It is the standard mixture for the advanced artist these days, and it seems to have become a necessary calling-card to establish his/her credentials. What raises the interest of this show above the level of the cliché is partly that the argument gets locked on the paradox of its own presentation and, beyond that, the way the artists themselves face up to the spiralling implications of a dilemma of which they are quite conscious. Perhaps the most telling slogan is the one that a photograph shows on a placard on the steps of the Art Gallery of Ontario itself: "ANTI-IMPERIALIST CULTURE CAN'T BE BUILT THRU EXISTING INSTITUTIONS." Does that mean the political message of the exhibition must be nullified by the fact of its placement within the existing institution of the A.G.O.? It is inescapable that the artists are aware of that possibility themselves. Elsewhere: "INSTITUTIONS ENJOY CRITICISM AS LONG AS IT DOESN'T THREATEN THEIR BASIC STRUCTURE." Does that mean their own acceptance is a proof of impotence? This may be a possibility, but their anxieties go deeper than that: "We have internalized institutional ways of living and producing: marriage, art as a career, female and male roles. As long as we do this we cannot even begin to conceive of a different world." What concerns them most is not so much that may be brought out of their radical intentions by the hypocritical acclaim of the establishment, rather that the manner and mode of the act of revolt itself may epitomize and endorse the object of their attack.

The poster for the show has the artists' heads screaming out with one voice: "WHY DO WE POLICE OURSELVES THROUGH OUR CULTURE?". By the end of the book the problem has become almost totally introverted with the artists hoping at best to "change a bit here, a bit there... Isn't it time to begin?" Opposite, the drawing shows Carole and Karl looking resolutely but also compassionately into each other's eyes as they sit ever so together in the centre of a long settee. On the table in front, picked out in a single touch of red with its title clearly visible, is a copy of the book: "IT'S STILL PRIVILEGED ART". The irony rings out loud and clear, and it has that peculiar two-edged effect of undermining what they say they are doing, because in the end the art they produce even now can only be for a privileged class, and yet also saving the situation because it demonstrates their own awareness of the contradiction and makes out of that very contradiction another level of subject matter. And again, could it be that, in introverting the revolution, they are doing the very thing that will, at each end, weaken the impact of what they are doing sufficiently to make it acceptable to those very institutions they are supposed to be attacking? In the last drawing but one in the book, they look at the poster again and decide it "seems a bit pretentious, too radical chic. In our society it becomes just another consumer item." Worst of all, is all their political posturing in fact just a way of solving personal problems and of extroverting the aggressions that develop in their private

life? Earlier in the book: "The problem with a 'husband wife' emphasis is that it smacks of the 'togetherness' of McCalls or The Ladies' Home Journal... Publicly it defines some specific and rather nauseating roles."

In the end, the political objectives of the exhibition seem its least interesting aspect. The possibility of political reform through art is almost completely negated by self-questioning between the lines. The negation itself, however, may have much deeper implications.

For my part, I am fully convinced of the reality of the situation epitomized in the show. I do not mean so much that I want to pin my faith on the personal sincerity of the Condé-Beveridges (except on a very low level I am not sure I would know how to distinguish sincerity from its opposite); rather that the subservience of express intentions to the processes and systems through which those intentions must be located has a very familiar ring within the context of art. The effect of the Condé-Beveridge exhibition is to spell out, in a very explicit way, the human basis of a structure of artistic issues that, in various guises, has been with us for a great many years: the pervasiveness of self-reference in Conceptual Art or Joseph Kosuth's theory of the tautologous nature of art statements; beyond that the negations of Ad Reinhardt, the paradoxes of "less is more" and "more is less" and, ultimately, the words locked on the reiteration of their own sound "Art in art is art as art."

The aim of Ad Reinhardt and of a great deal of conceptual art was the separation of art from life. One might argue in denial of Reinhardt's art-as-art dogma that square shapes, black pigments, and brushed-out brushwork are part of real life and establish points of contact between the art and the world at large, but to approach the problem in that way is to gnaw away at the details. It may now appear rather that the act of self-enclosure itself constitutes the most telling metaphor of its real life basis.

Beyond both conceptual art and minimal art is the paradoxical duality of abstract expressionism, which was capable of sustaining the divergent critical positions of Action Painting and Modernism. From one point of view the painting might seem to have become an arena in which the artist claims the ultimate individual freedom to confront the most fundamental questions of existence itself; from the other he is seen to be discovering the dependence of painting on the flatness of the canvas, its rectangular shape and the properties of paint. In retrospect, one might almost draw the moral of a natural consequence of one following from the other: the attempt to demonstrate freedom may in the end only bring us more poignantly up against the limits that restrain it. The principle would be the same whether we refer it to the gravitational forces that cause Pollock's thrown paint to fall downwards onto the surface of his canvas or the institutional forces that cause any work shown in the Art Gallery of Ontario to be a sort of endorsement of its activities.

American art in particular lives with the myth of the pioneering spirit, and that myth is sustained by another, that of the necessary interdependence of artistic quality and revolutionary stance in twentieth century art; it is ironic how often the art itself leads to quite other conclusions.

Heroic acts require a good deal of leg room, and the cultural terrain of the later twentieth century is as lacking in neutral ground as the map of America.