

Pop artist Claes Oldenburg dies at 93

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American sculptor Claes Oldenburg, 93, died at his home and studio in New York on July 18. One of the major figures of Pop Art, he is best known for his monumental public sculptures of everyday objects such as baseball bats and ice cream cones. Oldenburg gained considerable recognition and success during his long career, and his death provides an occasion for a critical evaluation of his work.

The artist was born in Stockholm in 1929: the year of the Wall Street crash. His father Gösta was a Swedish diplomat who was stationed in New York, and his mother Sigrid was a former singer and artist. In 1936, Oldenburg's father was appointed consul general of Sweden and the family moved to Chicago. The sculptor grew up during the Great Depression in a comfortable apartment full of art and antiques, and his parents were known for hosting traditional Swedish Christmas celebrations.

In the first years after World War II, Oldenburg studied literature and art history at Yale University. He later took classes at the Art Institute of Chicago. For a time, he worked as a reporter at the City News Bureau of Chicago, where one of his responsibilities was drawing comic strips. This experience likely influenced his subsequent artistic development.

When Oldenburg moved to New York in 1956, Abstract Expressionism, which had been the dominant artistic style, had effectively exhausted itself. Also called the New York School, Abstract Expressionism arose during and after World War II. Many of its exponents were attracted to the Communist Party, some even becoming members for a time in the 1930s and '40s. But they were profoundly shaken by the wartime atrocities of the Nazis and the Allies and by the brutality and mendacity of Stalinism. Nor could they reconcile themselves to the small-mindedness and conformity that were coming to define postwar American society.

Groping for a way forward, these artists (including Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline, Lee Krasner and Mark Rothko) turned toward primitive cultures, Jungian archetypes, psychoanalysis and religious mysticism for inspiration. They used abstract forms and glyphs or applied paint with vigorous gestures. But by the 1950s, despite self-sacrifice and struggle, this perspective had revealed itself as inadequate to address the challenges of the postwar period. Many of these artists met tragic ends; Pollock died in a car crash, and Rothko by suicide.

Pop Art was beginning to emerge as Oldenburg moved to New York. Transitional figures such as Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns were followed by others like Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein. Reflecting the changed sensibilities of the period, the Pop artists embraced, even celebrated, the consumerism made possible by the postwar boom. Comic books, film magazines and consumer products became their subjects.

As one of the principal Pop artists, Oldenburg expressed the movement's perspective in his Statement of 1961. "I am for Kool art, 7UP art, Pepsi art," he wrote. Such declarations, even if presented as a provocation or a joke, nevertheless gave Oldenburg a license to take an uncritical attitude toward the degradation of culture. To the extent that Pop artists were critical at all, they did not satirize the crassness of the new social order, but rather offered the knowing wink of camp, representing the banal with ironic detachment and refusing all ideological commitments.

By 1961, Oldenburg had begun creating "soft sculptures" from chicken wire, which he covered in plaster-soaked canvas and painted with enamel paint. Splashes and drips on the surface of these sculptures emphasized their informality and physicality (and perhaps took a dig at abstract expressionism). Oldenburg later made soft sculptures out of vinyl

stuffed with foam. These works (e.g., an enormous piece of cake, an ice cream cone) sagged comically, whether they were displayed on the floor or on the wall.

Lipstick (Ascending) on Caterpillar Tracks (1969) was an early work in steel. It was unveiled at Yale University and depicts an oversized tube of lipstick resting vertically on tank treads. Created during the Vietnam War, which spurred mass opposition among workers and students, the sculpture was intended as a platform for antiwar speeches.

Oldenburg argued that the work counterposed color, humor and simplicity to the colorless, solemn and sophisticated Ivy League campus. He pointed out that the work combined the phallic and the feminine. Missing from the work, however, is any analysis of (or even direct reference to) the war that the sculpture ostensibly opposes.

Beginning in the 1970s, the artist began working almost exclusively on public commissions, some of which are among Oldenburg's best-known works. These steel sculptures include the giant Clothespin (1974) in Philadelphia; Batcolumn (1977), a 100-foot-tall baseball bat, in Chicago; and Spoonbridge and Cherry (1988), which rests in a small pond at Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. Although this supersized paraphernalia may provoke momentary wonder, it does not provoke sustained thought. Nor do the sculptures make broader statements or address social themes.

The weaknesses in Oldenburg's work, and that of the Pop artists in general, reflect the climate of the postwar period. The postwar boom would not last longer than 25 years. During this time, it made possible higher living standards, which fostered a culture of what came to be known as consumerism. Pop Art adapted itself to this state of affairs uncritically.

The Pop artists abdicated much of the essential responsibilities of the artist. Art has great power to provide insight about human society. Pop Art, however, sought merely to reflect American society rather than question or illuminate its deeper social foundations. Art also is a powerful means of challenging the prevailing wisdom and of imagining new social possibilities. Oldenburg and his peers, however, celebrated the world as they found it and adapted no critical attitude toward the status quo. Although some of this work may retain formal interest and an ability to amuse, it rejects art's

liberatory power. This is a major consideration that cannot help but influence an evaluation of Oldenburg's work.



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