

Learning through Lacquer: A Conversation with Katherine Smith

25 February 2021, Agnes Scott College

Katherine Smith, Professor of Art History at Agnes Scott College, has been working on her new book for over a decade. Shaped by conversations with students and the title artist alike, *The Accidental Possibilities of the City: Claes Oldenburg's Urbanism in Postwar America* explores the influences of environment on the art of Swedish-American sculptor Claes Oldenburg. Smith, interested in the context which fosters and informs Oldenburg's art, argues that his art is urban theory at work.

I met Smith in the Zoom-verse to learn more. Through the screen, she stood at her kitchen counter, making me feel immediately comfortable, as if we were close friends having coffee. So, I unmuted myself to ask Smith what Oldenburg's work means to her and how she started writing this book in the first place.

LP: How would you describe Oldenburg's sculpture to someone who isn't familiar with his work?

KS: His sculpture is primarily large-scale projects that represent everyday objects, and I want to qualify that it was completed in early days with Patty Mucha and in more recent decades with Coosje van Bruggen. One of the better-known public works is the *Clothespin* in Philadelphia. Lots of people have seen that. I think people know the *Spoonbridge and Cherry* at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. In 1962, he developed soft sculptures. I would say that's what he became known for, even at that point. He has called them *Floor Burger*, *Floor Cone*, and *Floor Cake*. They're human-sized. They're pieces that are made of canvas and stuffed with various things to take on almost the quality of beanbags, but I certainly don't mean to be reducing his work in that comparison. But his hamburger, for instance, is about 4x7 feet in size. And in the first exhibition they were directly on the floor, as the titles suggested. They are meant to be in the viewer's or the audience's way. So, those are some of the ways people might know his work.



Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen, *Clothespin*, 1976. Cor-ten and stainless steels, 45 ft. x 12 ft. 3 in. x 4 ft. 6 in. (13.7 x 3.7 x 1.4 m). Centre Square Plaza, Fifteenth and Market Streets, Philadelphia. Copyright 1976 Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen. Photo by John Vosburgh, via Flickr.



Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen, *Spoonbridge and Cherry*, 1988. Stainless steel and aluminum painted with polyurethane enamel, 29 ft. 6 in x 51 ft. 6 in. x 13 ft. 6 in. (9 x 15.7 x 4.1 m.). Minneapolis Sculpture Garden, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota. Copyright 1988 Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen. Photo by m01229, via Flickr.

LP: I've definitely seen *Spoonbridge and Cherry* and said, 'Oh, I know what that is.' So, you've written articles leading up to this and spent all this time with Oldenburg. What about his art or about his approach really interests you?

KS: To answer the time piece, I'm slow. My process is not linear. And sometimes I get frustrated with the fact that it's not linear. But this book has really made me confront and also get more comfortable with my own creative practice, which is to say that it's been 13 years-ish in the making of this book, and it's been fits and starts, lots of drafts, and lots of revisions. I need things to percolate, and I need to revisit them. I work more like there are puzzle pieces, and intuitively I know they fit together, but it takes lots of trial and error to figure out exactly how they fit. So, that's what I've been doing with the ideas and images in this book for the last almost two decades.

LP: That's a really good thing to learn about your writing.

KS: Yes, and Oldenburg has intrigued me for a long time. There are small pieces of this book in my dissertation, which I finished in 2003. In some ways, this book has been developing since then. My dissertation was on Philadelphia-based architects Robert Venturi and Denise Scott

Brown. I was reading their *Learning from Las Vegas* book two decades ago. They make a statement that the Roman centurions on the Caesars Palace sign are lacquered like Oldenburg hamburgers. And that piqued my curiosity. I thought, well, why? It's a surprising comparison because most people would have talked about the scale of his work—and of course that's implied, these are giant human figures on the sign—but the architects don't talk about scale. They talk about the surface of his hamburgers. I thought, there has got to be more to that story. What's the background? And then I started digging into archives to try to answer that question. It was my interest in that phrase in their book which really started this one.

At the same time, as my ideas developed, I wanted to explore Oldenburg's relationship with architects more generally, which was a prominent discourse in the literature when I started this project. I came to understand not only the playful elements of Oldenburg's projects, which are often discussed, but also the complexities of his investigations and responses, mostly to specific geographical environments and cultural situations, in my view. Oldenburg's work has often been studied in terms of Pop art, addressing its subject matter from popular media and confining attention to projects in the 1960s. That is changing in the current and forthcoming scholarship. In my work, I am telling a longer and broader story, looking beyond New York in that first decade to see the ways that his proposals and their sculptures continued to answer and anticipate changing conditions in the cities in the US, often in dialogue with, and in some cases in advance of, architects and urban designers.



Claes Oldenburg, *Floor Burger*, 1962. Canvas filled with foam rubber and cardboard boxes painted with acrylic paint, 4 ft. 4 in. x 7 ft. 5 in. (132.1 x 226.1 cm). Collection Art Gallery of Ontario. Purchase, 1967. Copyright 1962 Claes Oldenburg. Photo by yigruzelti, via WikiArt Fair Use.

As I've already mentioned, I write—and this is not strategic for academics—based on my own curiosity. I also am archival in my approach, so I really like finding documentation that I can use to back up some of my assertions, and it has been especially important to me that this book will present a lot of images that have not yet been seen even though Oldenburg's work is so well known. Oldenburg has shared with me a lot of archives. [The book] was highly shaped by the

archives and information he shared with me, which helped me tell the story about his relationship to the city and his engagement with architecture. I also think that I'm very guided by serendipitous discoveries along the way. That's also been a piece—it's taken so long to find and cull and refine that material. It just takes time.

LP: Wait so, you said Oldenburg shared the archives with you. Did you mean metaphorically or literally?

KS: Literally. I met him, so literally he shared the archives with me. Everything was in his studio. I spent many, many occasions in [Oldenburg van Bruggen Studio] with research inquiries. Over this period there have been a number of studio managers; they've all been incredibly helpful—as has he. I mean, they changed the book. It would be a different book without them. And I also did a lot of interviews with him over the years. That was a surprise for me. I didn't expect to get to know him in the process of writing this book. How, as a historian, can I know this person, be so fond of him, and also maintain authorial distance and really feel like I'm adequately speaking for the art? That was part of the challenge I was really conscious of as I was doing the research and writing.

The capstone students in our department do gallery talks on works in our Dalton Gallery fall show. They're working with material for which they can't depend on research because they may not be able to find info about the piece, especially if it's just being finished because the artists are contemporary, sometimes emerging artists. Our students almost always have the opportunity to interview them. We have conversations about how you weigh interview material. I think it's really tempting—especially when you're new to a subject—to think that whatever the artist says is what it means. And if that were true, art historians wouldn't have a job because the story would stop there!

Only on one occasion did I talk to [Oldenburg] about an interpretation I was making about one of his pieces. I have tried to stay really clear about asking him questions to get the historical record right, to maintain the highest degree of accuracy I could but not to ask him for the meaning of pieces.

LP: My next questions were going to be about process, which we've talked a lot about. Is there anything else you wanted to say on that?

KS: I'm in a department of art and art history; that's an interdisciplinary department by definition. I work between two fields. I work between art history and architectural history, primarily. Existing in this interstitial space in my research and teaching has, I think, really informed the ways that I've written this book, as have conversations with students over the years. This work on Oldenburg has infused so many of my courses, and I've had the opportunity to really engage this material with students who were learning parts of it. That's an important part of my process: how consistently dialogues with students and colleagues have helped guide this material.

LP: That's really neat that you get all these different perspectives.

KS: Yes, it is! Somebody pointed out to me once that my research has been on artistic partnerships: Venturi and Scott Brown, two architects, or Oldenburg and first Mucha and later van Bruggen, sculptors [van Bruggen was also an art historian]. I like to work in dialogue, and I hadn't individually recognized that I also work on artists who work in dialogue. Collaboration is really significant to me.

LP: What are you reading right now? What's on your nightstand, book-wise?

KS: Parenting books. I wish I could tell you that I'm reading more consistently than I am. And I have a feeling dog training books are about to be added to those! Mostly what I'm reading right now—not on my nightstand, though—are books for my monuments class I'm teaching, which is a class that I developed with Donna Sadler, now Professor Emerita of Art History. In 2010, she and I last co-taught Monuments: Making Meaning and Memory in Public Art. I'm now teaching it for the first time by myself. I think I might find my next book in this topic. It's obviously a very important topic in American culture right now: Confederate monuments, among other things. That's the more academic thing I'm reading.

LP: This is more whimsical, but if you could take an Oldenburg piece and drop it somewhere on [the ASC] campus or in Decatur, which piece would you choose and where would you put it?

KS: That's a really fun question.

I'm trying to think first which one I would want, of the public projects. So many of his pieces, especially those I write about, are so site-specific that I can't really pick any one up and move it because they're so embedded in the place for which they're designed. Every time he does something, it's related to the site. I guess my question is, what would he do for Decatur or for Agnes Scott [College]?

He was part of an Earthworks show in the Dwan Gallery in New York in 1968. Earthworks are pieces done with or in landscapes for various reasons, among them the possibility they couldn't be confined or commodified. Most of them were not originals; they could be circulated in a more democratic way and were arguably more accessible. Oldenburg introduced a few pieces, and a couple of them seemed like works he would install. So, they were like typeset directions or typeset descriptions of works. My immediate answer is, I would acquire those works that were never realized for Agnes Scott [College]'s collection, and then I would think about realizing them with his collaboration.

| CLAES OLDENDURG | |
|--|--------|
| 1. Project for asphalt field 30' x 30' into which a jagged hole will be dug. Hole will then be filled with water to simulate a canyon. Water can be removed and hole gunnited. Gunnite form could then be removed. This is a project in four stages described above. | N.F.S. |
| 2. Project to bury studio-objects in 30' x 30' plot. Intention is that objects decompose. | N.F.S. |
| 3. Film of grave-size hole commissioned and executed on land behind the Metropolitan Museum in October 1967. | N.F.S. |
| 4. Plexiglas box, 1' x 1' x 1' filled with earth and earthworms. | N.F.S. |

1968 *Earth Works* exhibition record, via [Archives of American Art](#).

Or, he had this project, *Placid Civic Monument*. In 1967, he was asked to be part of a show of large, public sculptures organized by the city of New York. He's really playful with language and critical at the same time. He decided he would dig a hole in Central Park. He hired gravediggers to dig the hole and then refill it. I'm a giant fan of that work because it is his first public monument, in his view. I can't move that, though; it's part of Central Park.



Claes Oldenburg, *Placid Civic Monument*, in *Sculpture in Environment*, organized by the New York City Administration of Recreation and Cultural Affairs for the Cultural Showcase Festival, New York, October 1-31, 1967. Photo by Daniel McPartlin. Photo courtesy New York City Parks Photo Archive. Copyright 1967 Claes Oldenburg.

LP: That was the first one I was thinking of for this question!

KS: I've always been so curious about that monument. The question is, does it still exist? I mean, I've been to the site in Central Park. I've photographed the site in Central Park where I think it is, and I talk about that even finding that is such an experience because I had to go with all of these archival images and try to figure out based on the sidewalk and the obelisk and the

slope if I was in the right place. And I think I had it. I'm fascinated with that piece because it was so conceptually challenging for the time on so many levels. I don't think the innovation in that piece has been adequately recognized. It is one of my very favorites. But, again, it's permanent, so I can't bring it to Decatur.

LP: Yeah, it's a paradoxical question.

KS: That work, too, is a complete paradox.

Katherine Smith is Professor of Art History at Agnes Scott College, where she teaches modern and contemporary art and architectural history and theory. Her research focuses on intersections in postwar American art and architecture, with emphases on sculpture and urbanism, from an increasingly global perspective. She has written on the influence of postwar and contemporary art on projects by Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown for *Relearning from Las Vegas* (University of Minnesota Press, 2009) and *Eyes That Saw: Architecture After Las Vegas* (Scheidegger & Spiess, 2020). Her research on Claes Oldenburg has appeared in several journals, including *Archives of American Art Journal* (2009) and *Public Art Dialogue* (2011). Her book [The Accidental Possibilities of the City: Claes Oldenburg's Urbanism in Postwar America](#) is available now.