

“Have Mary Janes Gone Up?” Participation & Disaffiliation in Oldenburg’s *The Store*

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Claes Oldenburg’s 1961 environment *The Store* was a display of brightly-coloured plaster replicas of merchandise displayed and vended from a disused store-front on the Lower East Side of New York City. By inviting the viewer to purchase the “goods” displayed there, and thereby make the activity of shopping an explicit subject of the exhibition, Oldenburg created a crossover between art and life which qualifies as an early example of participatory art. My paper will discuss this work in the light of a contemporary review by the critic Sidney Tillim, who considered Oldenburg’s work alongside that of Allan Kaprow.

This work was one of a series of exhibitions by Oldenburg, including an earlier, 1959 installation titled *The Street*, in which the artist sought to document different aspects of the modern city. Somewhat like Baudelaire’s Parisian flaneur, in preparing these exhibitions Oldenburg had walked the streets of New York, gazing into shop windows, recording his impressions of the display of goods. Walter Benjamin had this to say about the flaneur:

The street becomes a dwelling for the flaneur; he is as much at home among the facades of houses as a citizen in his four walls. To him the shiny enamelled signs of businesses are at least as good a wall ornament as an oil painting is to a bourgeois in his salon.¹

Oldenburg’s *The Store*, which included several enamel-painted, plaster reliefs depicting advertisements, could be aptly described as a series of “shiny enamelled signs of businesses.” Nevertheless, the exhibition was far more than just an exhibition of wall ornaments. Similar to the 1959 installation *The Street*, where Oldenburg put on performances which have been discussed as “happenings”, Oldenburg staged a series of performances known as *Store Days* at the shop-front venue used for *The Store*. All of these latter performances took place after the initial exhibition closed. However, the December 1961 exhibition of *The Store* itself can be considered as a kind of happening or performance. Unlike the aforementioned performance works, which involved the artist and his fellow artist-performers, *The Store* included the visitors to the store itself. People who entered the store were participants, in that they became parties to a transaction which was part of the subject matter of the work itself. It is clear from the eccentric nature of the promotional material for the *The Store* that this was no ordinary shop. Nevertheless, to the degree that visitors, upon entering the exhibition, became physically, socially and economically located consumers of art objects, rather than abstract, autonomous individuals beholding a timeless realm of fine art, I argue that we must see this work as a form of participatory art.

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The ostensible content of *The Store* was a series of painted plaster and muslin reliefs and free-standing objects representing tasteless pastries and cheap garments. Many of the objects in the exhibition represented articles of clothing, however, for the sake of argument, and to conform to the space limitations of this paper, I will focus my analysis here on the items of food. Enamel paint was dribbled and splashed on to imitate the creamy dribbles of icing that oozes from sugar pastries. Take for example a related work, the *Pastry Case 1* (1961-2). Here a number of items of food are presented in a metal and glass case such as you might find in a pastry store. Oldenburg has in fact evoked certain qualities of food. The way the plaster is smeared on the surface of the chocolate cake, along with its solid white gloss enamel coating, mimics the look of a thick sugar icing crust. The part of the cake that is visible where it has been sliced open is an intense brown colour, like the colour of a dense chocolate cake. The enamel paint that has been applied to the objects representing dessert behaves like sauce does; it has been poured unevenly, allowing it to dribble down over the dollops of ice-cream, forming a shiny coating. The toffee apple looks sticky with its sugary coating - and a big bite has been taken out of it. Elsewhere he presents ice cream oozing from where a bite has been taken out of a Good Humor bar, melted cheese bubbling on a freshly cooked hamburger, the juicy red flesh and char-browned skin of a cooked roast.

Oldenburg has savoured certain properties of the way food is presented - - its glossy texture, its fluidity - - and reproduced them fairly faithfully, evoking the way in which such food is displayed in advertisements and especially store windows. Sonya Rudikoff, in her review of a later incarnation of *The Store* at the Green Gallery in New York, which contained several examples from the original *Store*, had this to say about the food items on display there:

Anyone who has observed the windows of Woolworth's with their displays of sodas and sundaes made of coloured mashed potatoes and cold cream, will immediately respond to Oldenburg's strange poetry of the snack bar and diner.... these are not well-executed in the sense of providing an illusion of the real thing that can be ordered at the nearest lunch counter... who ever saw such hideously green salad, such orange-y and brown-y bread, etc? The same question arises about mock-ups of food in shop windows.²

In other words, this is food seen as image; it is a distillation of the image of food, not of food per se. Oldenburg's imitation of the outlandish food display aesthetic is repellent because what one is looking at is not food at all but plaster. It is an appeal to the senses that is not backed up by any promise of real nourishment.

In other words, these works promise a material satisfaction that is not just false but *patently* false. By turning what are essentially display objects, or show food, into things for sale in a store, Oldenburg suggests that what is being vended are not goods themselves but bizarre hallucinations of goods. These are goods with a mythic character which hold out a promise of a real affective relation to the

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objects, an affective relation that Oldenburg often spoke about in his writings of this period. They embody fantasies of satisfaction because they are distillations of desire: objects transformed by the desiring gaze. In so doing Oldenburg drew attention not so much to reality itself but to the hallucinated version of reality that populates our everyday waking lives in the world of advertisements and shop window displays.

It is interesting to note that for many viewers, this exhibition translated as nostalgia either for childhood experience or for the past. In the early 1960s, Pop art was often discussed as appealing to a childish taste. Alan Solomon, for example, in speaking of the rising generation of pop artists, argued that "the new artists have been accused of nostalgia for childish things... but they purposefully appeal to our taste for the simple things, recalling the spirit but not the facts of the child's appetite."³ The trope of childishness or the child-like is a common one in modern art, and it had been recently invoked by art critics to describe a whole generation of neo-dada and happening artists in this period.⁴ Oldenburg's work, however, had a special relation to childhood experience.

In 1965, Mario Amaya referred to the memories of childhood evoked by Oldenburg's work when he argued that the artist's food items were anything but mouth-watering: "the sheer vulgarity and tastelessness of such objects, in direct contradiction to nostalgic associations with childhood or fun-fair eating, makes them repulsive to the eye while they bring to the subconscious salivary memories of the past."⁵ For Amaya, the fond childhood experiences of eating that could be evoked by images of hamburgers and ice-cream sundaes are precluded by the crude presentation of the objects. Nevertheless, the fact that he invokes these childhood memories in this context indicates that a certain nostalgia is present in his viewing of the works, a nostalgia tempered by the viewer's awareness of the object's vulgarity.

Sidney Tillim, the New York critic for *Arts Magazine*, also discussed Oldenburg's work as evoking an earlier historical period. In an article published in 1962, only months after *The Store* had closed, Tillim considered Oldenburg's work alongside that of Robert Indiana, Jasper Johns and Allan Kaprow. Calling them the "New American Dreamers," he argues that such an artist "finds the content that refreshes his visual experience" in the everyday commodities and banal mercantile landscape of modern capitalist society.⁶

In Tillim's view these artists' positive valuation of North American culture was rooted in a nostalgia for a vision of the nation's ideal polity. He sees this incarnated in Kaprow's happenings, which he calls "expressions of a longing for a childlike sense of participation in a total social experience - which is merely a corollary of the innocence projected by the very phrase 'The American Dream.'"⁷ The "American Dream," like the happening - - which often involves the audience as participants in the choreographed events - - is a fantasy of social participation: a dream that everyone will be able to freely partake of what society has to offer. William Safire has recently interpreted the phrase "The American Dream" as connoting "a

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combination of freedom and opportunity with growing overtones of social justice.”⁸ What American society offers, however, is not real participation but rather material abundance, a wealth of consumer goods. Therefore, commodities are especially desirable as they are the means to satisfy material wants and to concretize the idea of an American utopia in which everyone participates, socially and politically, in the society to the maximum degree.

To return once more to Tillim, when he comes to discuss Oldenburg’s *The Store*, the critic once again draws attention to a mood of “longing:”

if its aggravated humor finally settled within an aura of faint melancholy – possibly my own – it was because it was all so hopelessly nostalgic. For each item and finally *The Store* itself embodied a special emotion, one which had compared the way things were (have Mary Janes gone up?) with the way things are, and found the latter a possibly appalling inevitability.⁹

Viewing *The Store* as an evocation of the originary myths of modern American culture, Tillim identifies Oldenburg’s appeal to an innocent fantasy of capitalism in which an aesthetic abundance, and a participatory fullness of experience – similar to that of a child let loose in the “five and dime” store – is promised to all. However, because the promise of that dream of capitalism has been broken, disaffiliation and mockery are the inevitable anaesthetic consequences. Tillim concludes that “the effect is the same as if the dreamer had slipped back into the (old) American Dream, blocking out his nostalgic sentimentality (for what else is it, really?) by taking refuge in his tradition of disaffiliation.”¹⁰ As the most fitting measure against which to judge that state of affairs is the memory of that original promise, the “new American dreamer” is caught in an ambivalent position.

Tillim’s central point is that Oldenburg’s work looks back onto a past when things were better than they are now, a time when the participatory ideal of “The American Dream” was still a living possibility. Tillim reads Oldenburg as reminding us of a certain dream of the commodity that once held sway over us, by evoking the magic promise that it holds out. At the same time, the nostalgia that Tillim talks of is the nostalgia for the dream that commodities promised and which they have failed to deliver, leaving the consumer melancholic.

In this sense, a connection can be drawn between the arguments of Tillim and Mario Amaya. Tillim, in talking about nostalgia, is referring to the child’s experience. The child salivating in the ice-cream parlour is the consumer who is enchanted by the goods on offer in the department store. Indeed, it is the child in Tillim that asks “have Mary Janes gone up?” – Mary Janes being a peanut butter candy produced by the New England Confectionary Company – to find out whether the wished-for commodity is still within reach. Oldenburg brings about an awareness that the goods and advertisements that once enchanted us no longer satisfy and have become the useless garbage of today. Jack Kroll summed up the situation well when, in reviewing an earlier installation of the works in *The Store* at the

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Martha Jackson Gallery, he described Oldenburg as “the Cecil Beaton of the regressive Skid Row of our lost and slightly smelly innocence.”¹¹ Oldenburg dresses up our ragged innocence in fancy clothes and parades it for us, but the odour of disenchantment remains.

Walter Benjamin, in his “Arcades Project,” described the outmoded shopping arcades in Paris as dialectical images that simultaneously brought about an awareness of the transience and fragility of the myths that sold commodities, and of the fact that the commodities themselves were sold on the basis of utopian myths.¹² Products which once promised a world of material abundance and happiness for all sat collecting dust in the arcade windows, living testament to their failure to produce what they promised, and by implication, evidence of the failure of the entire commodity apparatus. However, as objects invested with mythical meaning, the commodities stood in for utopian dreams, and still had the capacity to represent that to anyone who would stumble upon them. Benjamin’s description of the flaneur’s “sensitivity that perceives charm even in damaged and decaying goods” is therefore akin to the “special emotion” that Tillim felt at *The Store*.¹³ When Oldenburg insisted that “the store title is in fact a play on words... the store means for me: my consciousness,” he meant that *The Store* was a storehouse or repository of the artist’s own childhood fantasies of commodities.¹⁴ As he further explained, however, “The aim of putting the store in an actual neighbourhood is to contrast it to the actual object.”¹⁵ The works inside *The Store* were meant to provoke reflection in the viewer’s mind on the disappointment provided by commodities at large.

In conclusion, what Oldenburg enjoyed about the stores on the Lower East Side of New York was not only their native vivacity but also their out-of-date quality, that their merchandising techniques were not the latest but of a more primitive level of display. They were not only cheap, although this was important; they were of another time. This nostalgia, I argue, is a key element of the works. By making the viewer aware of their own relationship to certain objects in the urban environment, and the historical dimension of that relationship, Oldenburg sets in motion an ambivalent reaction. As Amaya argued, in the presence of such food replicas, “the under-privileged could once more feel like the child pressing his nose at the window of the ice-cream parlour.”¹⁶ In other words, these works drew attention to the class divisions within society and the failure of social participation promised by post-war commodity culture.

¹ Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*. (London: New Left Books, 1977), 37.

² Sonya Rudikoff, “New York Letter,” *Art International*, 6(9) 1962, p. 62.

³ Alan R. Solomon, “The New Art,” *Art International*, 7(7) 1963, 40.

⁴ See the excellent discussion of this topic by Thomas Crow, “The Children’s Hour,” *Artforum*, (30)4 1991, 83 – 88, to which I am indebted. I agree in particular with Crow that Oldenburg’s later description of his work in terms of a “mirage of juvenile utopia – a painless childhood guaranteed by mass culture” is an account which “denies the complexity of his project.”

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⁵ Mario Amaya, *Pop Art... and After* (New York: Viking Press, 1972), 92.

⁶ Sidney Tillim, "Month in Review," *Arts Magazine* 36(5) 1962, 34.

⁷ Tillim, "Month in Review," 35.

⁸ William Safire, *Safire's New Political Dictionary: The Definitive Guide to the New Language of Politics* (New York: Random House, 1993), 18.

⁹ Tillim, "Month in Review" 36. "Mary Janes" are an old-fashioned, peanut butter candy produced by the New England Confectionary Company in the USA,

¹⁰ Tillim, "Month in Review," 35.

¹¹ J(ack) K(roll), "Situations and Environments," *Art News* (60)2, 1961, 16.

¹² The discussion in this paragraph is largely based on the 1935 exposé of "The Arcades Project." See Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), esp. 4-5, 13.

¹³ Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1973), 59.

¹⁴ Claes Oldenburg, "Statement" (1962), in *Claes Oldenburg: An Anthology* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1995), 130. Speaking of the 1940s, Oldenburg recently recalled that: "It was a period of very good comic strips and very good consumer goods - - very nicely designed toasters and typewriters and so on - - and there was a great emphasis on commercial object culture. And the point was, as children, we liked it. We really liked it." Claes Oldenburg, quoted in Andrew Graham-Dixon, "Art in the Promised Land." *The Independent Magazine*, 7 September 1991, 32, and cited in Crow, "The Children's Hour," 86.

¹⁵ Oldenburg, "Statement" (1962), 130.

¹⁶ Amaya, *Pop Art*, 92.