



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Claes Oldenburg,
1965 Feb. 19

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Claes Oldenburg on 1965 February 19. The interview was conducted by Bruce Hooten for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose. This is a rough transcription that may include typographical errors.

Interview

CLAES OLDENBURG: I wanted to tape some things by my father, you know. He's getting quite old.

BRUCE HOOTON: Who was your father, was he in—?

MR.OLDENBURG: He wasn't in art, but some of his early days in Sweden, he was a member of a rather large family. He did some rather eccentric things that would be remembered.

MR.HOOTON: Where were you born?

MR.OLDENBURG: In Stockholm.

MR.HOOTON: You come here, when?

MR.OLDENBURG: I came right away because my father was stationed here as a diplomat. It just happened that my mother was at home in Stockholm and my father was here. So I was born in Sweden and she returned shortly after to New York. We lived in New York and Chicago. My father was in the Consular Corps and eventually became Consul General in Chicago and retired from there.

MR.HOOTON: He is still alive?

MR.OLDENBURG: Yeah, living in New York. When we were in New York he was Vice-Consul.

[Audio break.]

MR.OLDENBURG: The fact that the trucks go to the river in the morning starting about three produces great dreams, or is one of the factors in Chelsea that produces dreams. I never had dreams like this'til I moved to Chelsea—every night enormous dreams—torturous, long, extended, very dramatic, very realistic dreams. It has to do with the fact that you're kept on the verge of waking by these trucks and other things, like the heat is kept very high here. Then the plumbing rattles. So when you wake up you're really tired.

MR.HOOTON: I remember a friend of mine once when I went to Ibiza, and he was the shyest, most self-secure fellow in the world, a painter. When he came back he stayed with me for a little while here in New York. He said "I used to wake up in the middle of Ibiza, thinking of skyscrapers."

MR.OLDENBURG: There's a spot in Sparkill, NY, which is quite far up. I went past it yesterday and you see the Empire State building sticking out of mountain, just for a moment. I had a dream about that, before I saw it. However, we're hoping to move into a loft where there'll be no more dreams. I collected my dreams. I have a year's collection of dreams. The hardest thing about that is that you have to get up every morning and it takes you about two hours to write out the dreams. Because you dream so much, you know, that just to translate it into words takes so long.

MR.HOOTON: Did you do this on your own or because of analysis or something?

MR.OLDENBURG: No, I did that as part of the way I studied art. The way I studied art was rather unorthodox. It was my own way of studying art. I tried to find myself, tried to find what was in my consciousness in many different ways. One way was to write out dreams for a period of a year. Another was to keep a diary for a period of a year, a careful diary. I figure that one year of one's life is pretty much like another year's life, so that if I did one year—I listed what I ate and all kinds of trivial details. The diary sort of formed the basis for what I've done in the way of objective poetry, or realistic poetry, and the dreams form the basis for what I've done in fantastic poetry and usually my work is the combination of the two. They meet at certain points and this is true of the "Happenings" and also of the objects.

MR.HOOTON: Where did you go to school?

MR.OLDENBURG: I went school at the Art Institute of Chicago, but not in a regular way, just from time to time. Before that I graduated from Yale with a degree of English and art. Studied some art there but that was pre-Albers. It was a strange place because I studied with a man named [John] Rathbone who's now dead. He taught composition after Raphael. And with a man named Dean Keller who taught drawing, and the most beautiful girls who posed had to wear bathing suits. Only the real pigs posed nude. You had to start off the class by sharpening your pencils until the lead stuck out about three inches and had a little sharp point and the end. It took two weeks to complete a single drawing. And then you added white, you know—at the end—for the highlights.

MR.HOOTON: Do you have those drawings?

MR.OLDENBURG: No. [laughs]

MR.HOOTON: Do they have them?

MR.OLDENBURG: I destroyed all my drawings. I destroyed—I went through my drawings about two years ago and destroyed approximately 75 percent of them because I felt that whatever I had said had been re-said in a better way, you know. There's nothing worse than an imperfect piece, to me. If you can't make up your mind, throw it away and after you throw it away it will come back in another way, in a better way.

MR.HOOTON: After Yale, where did you go?

MR.OLDENBURG: I left Yale in '50, after 4 years, and then I went to Chicago. I was undecided about what to do and took a job with the City News Bureau of Chicago, which was recently in the magazines because Isaac Gershman retired. Did you see that in *Time* magazine? It's a training ground for reporters in Chicago—it goes back many years. Many well-known people have worked there. Front page stuff—you wear your hat in the office. They put you "on the street," as it's called, after a few months in the back room and you cover police stories alongside all the regular reporters and you have a very tough time of it, working with the police but it's a very good thing to do after college. I did that for about a year and a half but it seemed to me that it was a very unidealistic pursuit, you know, and there was no future in it. I didn't want to go into reporting. It didn't really use my capacities. So then, after about a year and a half of that, I resolved to become a professional artist. I started on a sort of a self-education procedure which lasted from about 1951 through—oh, the first time I showed work was in 1959. So it was about eight years of darkness, where I was working. During that time I also attended the Art Institute whenever I felt I was getting too far away on my own. After 1954, I didn't attend any school and in '56 I came to New York and continued working here on my drawings.

MR.HOOTON: Bob Indiana, I think, went to the Art Institute for a while. Was he there when you were there?

MR.OLDENBURG: I met several different generations because I kept dropping back there for a course or two and I met several different generations. I started out by meeting Bob Indiana, won the prize that year, I remember, for making picture much like his mother and father that he painted very recently. Very similar type of composition. I painted next to Cliff Westermann then, who was just beginning to make his objects. The next time I came back I was painting next to Irving Petlin and Bob Barnes—sort of the second or third generation of Chicago painters. I also knew the first generation like Leon Golub and June Leaf and George Cohen. Working in Chicago at this time I simply tried to find everything possible that I could use—or every person. I even went to a lot of trouble to meet very obscure and very unpopular people like Rudolph Weisenborn, Copelenberg—I mean people who exist in the local situation but no one has ever heard of them much. I tried to cover American art going back over periods I hadn't lived through to sort of get the whole thing because I was really looking for the essence of art. I covered a lot of ground, but all on my own, and then I accompanied this with drawing—not so much painting—but drawing.

MR.HOOTON: Here in New York did you go to that Arts Club?

MR.OLDENBURG: No, no. When I hit New York I wanted to be very obscure. I'm naturally sort of shy and so I didn't—in fact, I didn't care to go to The Club. I did go to the Cedar Bar and that was just about the day that [Jackson] Pollock was killed. I remember that—1956. Then I applied for a job there as a waiter, but I got the job just at the same time I got another job at Cooper Union in the library. I took that because I felt it would be a better long-term job. I worked at that job from June '56 to December 1961. Anywhere from three to five hours a day depending on the needs of the Museum Library. This job was kind of nebulous, sometimes I typed, sometimes I shelved books, sometimes I just had conversations with the people there. Not many people come into the Union Museum Library. However, they have very good files and I spent a lot of time hiding out and reading about New York.

MR.HOOTON: Fantastic library.

MR.OLDENBURG: So that was in a way, you see, part of the education, my self education. I got an awful lot of things out of that period. I had a choice of four hours a day. I could go in the morning, I could go in the afternoon

or anytime and then I would paint a home the rest of the day.

MR.HOOTON: You run across Hedy Backlin?

MR.OLDENBURG: Oh, yeah, sure.

MR.HOOTON: Dick Wunder is now the director of the Drawing Society.

MR.OLDENBURG: I never go back to see people because that period was sort of frightening. [Laughs.] And of course, Gerd Muehsam was the librarian. She, in fact, gave me my first show in New York in the Cooper Union School Library. At that time too my wife was modeling there—well, that comes later. I married in '60 but we lived together before that and she used to model at Cooper Union and Art Students League and so on. We were never allowed to admit that we knew each other because that's one of the rules of the organization. [Laughs.]

MR.HOOTON: [Laughs.] Can't date a model. [Laughs.]

MR.OLDENBURG: [Laughs.] I'd meet her in the elevator—oh, and they had some marvelous elevator operators there, too. This one guy named Charlie who was eventually fired. He made the day very bright.

MR.HOOTON: Did you ever go to McSorley's?

MR.OLDENBURG: Yeah, oh yeah. I used to live right across from McSorley's—a little bit down on 7th street—32 East 7th Street on the top floor.

MR.HOOTON: Who were the painters you knew here, you just met in New York?

MR.OLDENBURG: I didn't know anyone from '56 'til about late '58. I was entirely on my own and not looking for painters. I was only looking for experiences in the city. I spent a lot of time walking and drawing on the streets. Just a lot of time alone and when I felt I was ready I made some contacts. I just took my stuff over to the gallery that looked most likely. I didn't go to any conversations as the The Club or anything like that.

MR.HOOTON: Did you have any feeling about the younger generations of Abstract Expressionists who were all kind of famous at the time?

MR.OLDENBURG: Well, I was disinterested.

MR.HOOTON: You didn't go through Abstract Expressionism?

MR.OLDENBURG: I've never been an abstract painter. I tried it, you know, in school, and so on, but I've never been inclined that way. I've a mind of something else. I've always dealt with subject matter and with what you call naturalistic form.

MR.HOOTON: Did you paint it at all before?

MR.OLDENBURG: Oh, yeah, yeah. In '57, '58 and early '59 I thought that the answer lay in a figure style. At that time I was painting mostly figures—nudes, you know—working with my wife and with other people. I have a lot of painting from that period which has never been shown—large canvases—sort of abstract figurative, Abstract Expressionist rendition of a figure. But quite naturalistic. In the end of '58 I made contact with, first of all, with the Phoenix Gallery. At that time they would take you in—they would have meetings and they might accept you. The most interesting person in the gallery at that moment was Ted Joans. He didn't stay very long and I didn't stay very long either. I was voted in on the basis of my sculptures, not my paintings. They thought my paintings were rather backwards, but some of the sculptures I'd been doing all along pleased them and I was voted in. But by then I had found another gallery which interested me more and that was the gallery that Red Grooms had set up on the corner of 25th and 6th Avenue called The City Gallery. Right around the corner.

MR.HOOTON: Oh, I remember, yeah. Max Berry was in that too.

MR.OLDENBURG: Max Berry and Jay Milder—

MR.HOOTON: Jay Milder, that's right.

MR.OLDENBURG: They didn't interest me as much as Jim Dine and Red himself.

MR.HOOTON: He went to Yale too, didn't he?

MR.OLDENBURG: Jim? Red?

MR.HOOTON: Red.

MR.OLDENBURG: I don't know. I don't think so.

MR.HOOTON: Maybe he did. Yeah, later than you. Like at least a year, maybe a year.

MR.OLDENBURG: He never told me that.

MR.HOOTON: I think he did. I'm almost sure of it.

MR.OLDENBURG: I know he comes from Nashville, that's about all I know about him. Anyhow, his style at that time was much more uncommitted and promising because he built things out, you know—he did a lot of experimental things. Now he looks a bit like Florine Stettheimer, I mean, some of the canvases. But he still uses that building out. Jim Dine was somewhat unformed then, too, but he had a great many ideas. There were possibilities there and so I started showing with them in drawing shows first. Then I had my own show in the beginning of '59 at the Cooper Union School Library, school library—a show of drawings of figures. As a result of that show I was asked by Marc Ratliff and Tom Wesselmann, who were going to Cooper at the time, to join a gallery called the Judson Gallery, which was downstairs. It had started out as Marc Ratliff's studio because he was working with the church. He wanted to convert the studio to a gallery and he had lined up Jim Dine and Tom Wesselmann. So I had my first show with sculptures and drawings there in May of 1959. It was to have been a painting show but I decided at the last minute it would be more interesting to show the sculptures. It was an all white show—it was kind of an environmental show. Most of the sculptures were made of paper and there drawings complementing that.

MR.HOOTON: Paper mache?

MR.OLDENBURG: Yeah, what you'd call paper mache, but it's not really balled up paper, it's more a paper dropped into the glue, the wheat paste and put onto a wire frame. After that show I went away for the summer to Lenox, MA where my wife was modeling in sort of a summer school. I don't know, there's a lot of details I don't know if you want to get into.

MR.HOOTON: Go ahead.

MR.OLDENBURG: From 1957 on through '63 I was living at an address on East 4th Street between C and D, on the 5th floor—which was a neighborhood which was very exciting to me. It had a lot to do with what eventually happened to my work, because in '59 I was somewhat, unplugged-in. My work was rather generalized and in a sense abstract; it wasn't, though. I hadn't begun to plug it into my environment, my surroundings. The shapes that occurred then have since occurred within the shapes of, say, 7-Up signs, or hamburgers, and so on. But, I mean, they have a more specific location now.

MR.HOOTON: How did they come about? I know it's a difficult thing to talk about, but I don't really understand it.

MR.OLDENBURG: Well, if you bear in mind that I've always dealt with my surroundings, it's not so far from dealing with a nude to dealing with a hamburger, you know. There's really no mystery about the whole thing—I don't have any program. The only statement I've ever made was carried in the museum bulletin or the catalogue and they cut out what they considered obscenities. That was really just an account of the things that I had discovered for myself—I mean appropriated for myself in walking through the Lower East Side, or living in New York for a certain length of time. My procedure was simply to find everything that meant something to me. The logic of my self-development was to gradually find myself in my surroundings. I don't use any subject, I just use certain subjects which serve to project my consciousness of things. For example, I'm very drawn to flowing matter like ice cream and any heavy waterish material. And that leads to the selection of certain subject matter. It's as simple as that. It isn't that I have any opinions about ice cream cones or hamburgers or that kind of stuff. It just seems that that is what I see. When I was in Paris last year and did my show there, what I saw mostly was meat. And my subject there was mostly tournedos, things of that sort—all the different ways they had treated meat. Also the walls of Paris had a certain kind of quality which was unique and which struck me, so I put together the walls and the meat and I got an object that looked something like this, here. [Shows object.] This piece. Now, this is a rough example, but it came out like that. Now, that's cast negatively inside a mold made of cloth. I have always liked informal things. I'm very fond of paper sculpture and cloth sculpture, anything that moves. Anything that changes it's position. All this is what I feel as a person about—

MR.HOOTON: It has nothing to do with, philosophically, trying to stop the change of things. I mean, something like the Existentialists who say that paper can become meat, meat paper. Remember that morphing ad nauseam by—

MR.OLDENBURG: No, I haven't read that part, but I imagine that, I'm not a writer, but I imagine I could probably say something like that through my work. I'm saying a great deal in my work, but I'm saying it in concrete terms.

MR.HOOTON: There's no attempt to criticize? No attempt at criticizing that these are values—that intellectuals always talk about contemporary objects and contemporary symbols—that they're bad—American culture is bad—like Coca-Cola.

MR.OLDENBURG: No, my procedure is entirely instinctive. It's like poetry, and I don't believe in history very much, or duty. The intellectual abstractions don't concern me. I'm only concerned with the living experience which I consider to be probably similar to what it was two or three hundred years ago. I mean, there's a certain constant. You make yourself naked in front of the objects that present themselves. So I simply try to locate myself in the present, in the sense of what's hitting me. I try to be honest to myself—that's the only way I know how to make something happen in art. I know you don't make things happen by thinking about them in advance. You simply have to keep trying and then suddenly you have something which you can recognize, but you didn't know you were going to get it. You start at one end and come out the other. Of course, I have opinions about America and about life and women and dogs and people and all this stuff. But this is not what I think about. When I start to make my work these opinions may begin the work but by the time I get to something that matters they've just become generalized into something else. The art object is something unique—it doesn't go one way or the other, it goes in many ways all at once.

MR.HOOTON: It's really not, what you would say, it's not Expressionist in the sense of that [Chaim] Soutine story about a big hunk of meat. He had to have it really bloody and it stank up the whole place and they had to make him get rid of it. Remember that story?

MR.OLDENBURG: I know the story, yeah. I'm not an Expressionist in that sense. I treat my feelings objectively. I'm aware of them and I'm aware of how they go into the work and I'm aware of certain symbols that I use to bring my feelings into the work, but I'm not, say, an explosive emotional person most of the time. I'm sort of a self-analytical person and I don't think my work would qualify as Expressionism. Though I wouldn't rule it out the Expressionist feeling.

MR.HOOTON: What they discovered in their technical or aesthetical approach is sort of a—

MR.OLDENBURG: The main thing is that I don't have any kind of a program except my own procedure and experience as it goes along. It's hard to resist having programs forced on you and you don't know really where to begin if you want to answer them. I recently spent a day in Worcester at the opening of a show of New American Realism, known more as Pop. You know people, they talk about Pop and I found it difficult to answer the questions simply, you know. People ask me about why I reached certain conclusions. In general, I like things that change. In the original work, that meant something, around '60, '61 I used static form like plaster and paper, but then I found cloth and I started to make things out of cloth which my wife would sew. I designed them and she sewed them and we did many things with cloth. Which was great because you could actually change it. Then I worked on theatre performances called "Happenings," in that medium, where also there's a great deal of change and action involved.

MR.HOOTON: I miss those. You ever work with [Allan] Kaprow on those?

MR.OLDENBURG: Everyone was working on their own lines. Allan probably did the first thing that was called a "Happening." He supplied the name for it. With me it's a form—personal form. It's something like a living poem or objects in motion. Its composition is unpredictable. I use many techniques from other sources. You'd have to see one to know.

MR.HOOTON: Well, I've seen some but actually I always feel Living Theatre was the first of them.

MR.OLDENBURG: The Living Theatre! I've never heard them do anything. They're a very reactionary group, aren't they?

MR.HOOTON: They weren't in '52 or '53. I was general manager of it and they used to do these things, you know—make up things. They never made up things they had the forms of "Happenings." They did the [Pablo] Picasso play, *Desire Trapped by the Tail*, and in one of the middle scenes Julian Beck had a whole group of wire things dance. It was more a Surrealist theatre—more Dada theatre than the "Happenings." But they were the most official form.

MR.OLDENBURG: But see, the "Happenings" I did have no words. They're more like a visual theatre or a theatre of objects. If you use a spoken thing, if you use something very concrete—a word or a shout or something like that—it's not a literary theatre, it's an anti-literary theatre. Theatre for the eyes, a theatre for the feel, you know—the hands, and so on.

MR.HOOTON: It seems like a very vulnerable position. I mean, sort of like being a poet or whatever experience you're in contact with you express the best you can.

MR.OLDENBURG: You mean my whole position?

MR.HOOTON: What you've seen.

MR.OLDENBURG: I know; I think that's the only honest position you can have.

[Telephone rings.]

MR.OLDENBURG: You can scrape together a position, I guess, for a program.

[Audio break.]

MR.HOOTON: I wondered, did you see the [Marcel] Duchamp show?

MR.OLDENBURG: No. Well, I saw a Duchamp show in Pasadena when I was in California about a year ago which was a pretty complete show. More complete than this. I also saw some things in Milan last summer Schwartz is making a catalogue on. I didn't see this show here, however. I almost never go to shows in New York. I don't consider myself a spectator exactly. I would rather work.

MR.HOOTON: Is it better not to look at it?

MR.OLDENBURG: I feel that at least with Duchamp. I don't need to look at another show of his. I know it pretty well.

MR.HOOTON: You wouldn't consider yourself influenced by Surrealism?

MR.OLDENBURG: Oh, I'm influenced by almost everything. I try to be, anyway. I try to find out just about everything and then use it for myself, use parts of it. That time in Chicago in '54 I was very influenced by Surrealists. I read texts and Chicago is in general influenced by Surrealism—Expressionism. So I have been in contact with that, I think the fantastic element in my work owes a lot to Surrealism. But I try to keep it in a balance, you know. Well—like, you see, those pancakes up there—those could be called Surrealist, I don't know.

MR.HOOTON: Not really. There's a little more—not Surrealist—there's something else, I don't know what it is myself.

MR.OLDENBURG: Well, I mean if the thing has any value it has its own value. You have to decide on the basis of an experience with the object that I made, rather than any program for it. That's why I said at the Artists' Club I was so disappointed—

[Telephone rings.]

MR.OLDENBURG:—because they never had seen my objects. They were just talking about my stuff without having seen it.

MR.HOOTON: They rejected it in the sense that they felt they were the tough guys. I mean, that seems to have been their position—that [Willem] DeKooning, [Franz] Kline and [Jackson] Pollock were not really Surrealists. They were both against it. Their opinion, apparently, according to [Philip] Pavia—we talked the other night—was that when the Surrealists were first around New York they were the poor guys. They were the outsiders, and that the Surrealists were the all aristocrats. They were the big, famous men.

MR.OLDENBURG: Yeah.

MR.HOOTON: Like [Fernand] Léger, who, although not a Surrealist, was very close to it. Duchamp—

MR.OLDENBURG: But they gave them a lot—[André] Masson, for example. At least that's my impression, I don't know too much about the movement.

MR.HOOTON: I mean, they did give them a lot but they all tried to reject it very strongly. They apparently tried to fight it very hard.

MR.OLDENBURG: At least they moved it from the represented literary symbol to a direct statement.

MR.HOOTON: I did a show of Pollock's, which was quite interesting, when he was with [Thomas] Benton which were all of his little regional landscapes. They all had a sort of road going in. It was all going in and, in fact, even then somehow he was trying to get into the thing, as finally later said, he really got himself into it. He really threw himself into the thing by participating in it.

MR.OLDENBURG: My procedure owes something to that, to the idea that to become a painter you find the

pattern—you find your pattern. Analyze yourself or you practice until you find your pattern. It's a self-analytical thing which I associate with people like Pollock and DeKooning. The constant destruction and discovery, and so on.

MR.HOOTON: Generally with a kind of progressive thing, I heard of [Robert] Motherwell. He gave a list of about 25 "nos" for what he wouldn't do and then about five of what he would do. I mean his whole procedure was that "shattering," as he called it. Whatever he couldn't shatter he ended up with. I think that's a Baudelairian philosophy, instead of the progressive—trying to become part of a picture. As you say, to identify with the object. What objects mean something to you, you put them down and if they don't mean anything artistically or to start with, that's not your primary concern. I mean, it's just that you, as far as I can gather, get usage out of it.

MR.OLDENBURG: Yeah, I mean, the hamburger is sort of a natural subject. It's both very simple and very suggestive in that it really has my name in it. It has "burg." I mean. I attach importance to these things—somewhat real trivial things. For example, I'm comforted to look up at the Chelsea and see that my name is contained, if you rearranged the letters in Chelsea. Little things like that, you know. It's kind of normal madness that the mind has. I mean, I take that seriously. I take all the little quirks of the mind seriously and build them up into rules and propositions, and so on, to construct my vision. That comes somewhat from the artists before—the Abstract Expressionists. They would follow themselves to all kinds of conclusions. But I'm also interested in the word and in writing. My stuff in a way is an object form of the word. It's like a language, but it's an object language.

MR.HOOTON: I've never read your poetry. Have you ever published it?

MR.OLDENBURG: No. My poetry isn't very good because what is known as my art work is the poetry, really. What I started in verbal terms I finished in the objects and in the performances so that the so-called verbal part is very incomplete. Just the beginning points. I have masses of material—like the dreams and the diaries and certain poetic things that are just a beginning. I don't consider myself a verbal poet or writer.

MR.HOOTON: Did you write at Yale?

MR.OLDENBURG: Not very much. I had always wanted to be a writer, but I don't think I'm a very good writer. I don't think my education, despite having gone to good schools, is systematic enough to make me a good writer. I found that painting was better—drawing.

MR.HOOTON: More valuable to make the image clear?

MR.OLDENBURG: Take that drawing that's standing against the wall there. It's a drawing of mine from '60 or so. You see it's very much involved with the written. The script kind of becomes the drawing and the drawing becomes the script. I've done a lot of things along that line—drawn poems like that. I like letters very much and use them a lot.

MR.HOOTON: Did you ever read [Allen] Ginsberg or [Gregory] Corso?

MR.OLDENBURG: No, I've never read them. Recently I was asked to do an illustration for a poem for *Art in America*. They wanted me to do something like that. A number of artists for a number of poems. The assumption there was that the painter was terribly interested in poetry or vice-versa. But I'm afraid that has never been true. Besides, who can illustrate a good poem? I mean, it's a thing in itself. I don't know what I'm going to do. I'd like to use a living poet, but I really don't know very many. And I'm not so sure that Ginsberg is the kind of poet I'd be drawn to. I have a feeling that's more a polemic. It's another kind of poetry. I think poetry is more a contemplative and mysterious occupation. Not having so much to do with daily life. [Walt] Whitman is a favorite poet of mine and I think Whitman is a completely mysterious poet. His idea of the world is a mysterious idea.

MR.HOOTON: He wasn't in 1950. Everyone in colleges hated him.

MR.OLDENBURG: Well, I was always on his side. When I went to Yale and studied with Cleanth Brooks and the Southern School and that kind of stuff I was always against them—completely against them. There wasn't much support for the other point of view at that time. Dylan Thomas was considered very erratic and outside and he was about the only one that they could bear. He came up and lectured a couple of times. So it was a very bad preparation for poetry, very limited preparation. The class began every morning with Brooks reading from the criticism in the *Times*. Usually J. Donald Adams would start him off on all kinds of nasty remarks about poetry. Then there would be certain selected poems which would be picked apart. I never enjoyed that very much.

MR.HOOTON: That was part of the New Criticism that was coming out when I was at Harvard. I really hated it. I came up from the South and I was still Romantic and they hated Romanticism with a passion. I mean, anything that was vaguely Romantic.

MR.OLDENBURG: Yeah. But I probably I got a lot of my ideas of poetry from them and it may be why I still feel reluctant about certain modern poets. I feel that it's a little loose, you know. So much is being written called poetry. I guess that's always true. Well, mine are pretty loose, too.

MR.HOOTON: You've never published the, though?

MR.OLDENBURG: Well, no. I thought I might now try publishing some scenarios. I have scenarios from my "Happenings"—they're not complete because the "Happenings" were not written as a script in advance, but when it came time for the players to have entrances and exist I had to supply some kind of description, so I have that. I'm going to go through this stuff. I haven't had time to see if there's anything of value, but I really should submit it to somebody else who can tell me if there's anything valuable in it. It's all notes. In about 1960 I did a lot of things in cardboard and paper and some of them were shown at the Guggenheim. Did you see that show? From the Reuben Gallery? That was pretty typical. And then at the end of '60 I began to work with plaster and color. Along a theme I called "The Store." The theme is articles like in stores—and signs, billboards, and so on. Usually as you read the program notes like at Worcester, and so on, it says—they've got a very neat thing now—it starts with [Robert] Rauschenberg and [Jasper] Johns and then other people who've come along—but, of course, it wasn't like that then. I think that what is called the Pop Art movement is much more a separate, Midwestern kind of influence on the scene with people like [Roy] Lichtenstein and [James] Rosenquist and [Robert] Indiana and myself and Jim Dine and Wesselmann. They all located somewhere around Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois to begin with and not at all in the South like Rauschenberg and Jasper. I mean, they have an entirely different feeling about things. They're not at all sentimental and it's something different. All you have to do is look at two pages—one side, say, Rauschenberg, and the other Lichtenstein, and you see an enormous difference—they don't necessarily relate.

MR.HOOTON: One actually is more interested in the "arriving" and conquering the East, Jasper and Rauschenberg were more interested in that than perhaps just the involvement with materials. The Midwest in a sense has always been more practical—the material things have a spirituality outside of aesthetics, in a way.

MR.OLDENBURG: I've always been aware of the continent very strongly and I've traveled to California and I lived there for six months to make my show—my last show—at Sidney Janis. Everything was made in Venice, CA because I wanted to feel the West and I came back with these enormous simple forms, big forms. A different type of thing—it didn't look right at all in New York. So it's a different kind of whim—what I think became Pop Art. Somebody will eventually point this out, I hope, but right now you get this continuation from Jasper.

MR.HOOTON: I think there is a difference. I mean, I'm slowly becoming aware of it. Although we're perhaps of about the same age, I was never part of that group. I was really part of the figurative group blocking the third-string abstract painters. Now that's over and now I can like—and as I always did—Bill and Marc.

MR.OLDENBURG: Well, there had to be a solution, you see, to this dilemma of the abstract painting on the one hand and the figurative painting on the other hand. I didn't really want to paint abstractly. I wasn't tired of it, I never did it. I felt there was a general tiredness about that and yet the figure painting was also tired in its way—something had to be found which was fresh and yet brought the two together. The beauty of some of the things that are done by, say, Rosenquist is that they're really abstract paintings if you want to have it that way and they can be figurative paintings if you want to have it that way. They're a nice bringing together. I know that Jim thinks of his paintings as abstract paintings. He simply has substituted images for non-images. But he doesn't attach a great deal of meaning to it, I think. Although he says—well, he gives you lectures on what this means and what that means, but I don't really believe it.

MR.HOOTON: No, I think he's searching.

MR.OLDENBURG: The same way with Roy. His things are deliberately very simple and understandable, but his concept is very abstract and he composes. Mine is another thing. I think I come a little earlier—I come in between or something. My work isn't that clear, there are so many motives involved. I think this's also true of Jimmy Dine's work. There are many motives involved and no one clear image, you know. Sometimes something comes out of it, like the hamburger, and it sticks in people's minds and they assume that's all I make—hamburgers. Another thing that came out was The Store—then there was a Soft Typewriter. But I'm always looking ahead, trying to re-locate myself, to get another sensation.

MR.HOOTON: There seems to be again more mystique in Rosenquist and Lichtenstein—a kind of social mystique which I don't really see in yours and Jim Dine's—there's a certain romantic attachment to an object. I don't mean romantic in that way, but it's very, very straight. I mean, there it is. That's a kind of beauty. I only talked to Rosenquist one evening, but he seems to be involved in going further than the painting in a certain way. The object painting itself doesn't seem to be enough to him. He wants to do movies—he's got ideas for movies. Wants to move ahead in that way.

MR.OLDENBURG: Well, I said in an interview in California that my feeling was that these guys came up from a

different direction. Dine and Grooms and Kaprow and myself came through the “Happenings” where we just used everything in the world. Jim and Roy, while in touch with that, came up through painting. Now they’re getting kind of restless about painting. Rosenquist tried to build his paintings out, and so on. But that takes him back a step almost to what was done with plastic structures, and so on. That was done by Kaprow and by Whitman in the Hansa Gallery even—putting things inside plastic objects. But it’s true—[Jim] he’s a dissatisfied guy, which is good. His mind is way off in the sky, you know, skating around. He’s quite a poet—he can speak very beautifully. He can speak almost literature. I mean, relay some of his experiences, written down.

MR.HOOTON: He’s quite intact too, in a funny way, too—he’s often very much one’s conception of a Midwesterner. As opposed to a Southerner. I happen to think that Midwesterners are different from Southerners and Northerners. It’s sort of like in Italy—they would say that very clearly. An Easterner, a Milanese are different from a Sicilian. But in America we have the democratic image that we’re all alike, but we really are not.

MR.OLDENBURG: Of course, I have sort of a mixed heritage, being from Sweden and always being a transplanted person so I have a certain objectivity about where I am and who I am and I never really am part of the group I’m with. I’m not a New York painter, and not a Chicago painter. I’m not a Parisian when I’m in Paris. I’m sort of always in my own country, which is a feeling I like. It’s sort of a separated, lonely feeling which I find very stimulating and I usually try to break up any situations where I find myself “located.” I am somewhere for a certain length of time in order to get results from it, but then I’ll vanish one day and come up as another person and in another place. I like very much, for example, when I worked in Venice, CA. They “discovered” me there as a Venice artist. I was on the radio there as this eccentric Venice artist that did these things. They’d never heard of anything I’d done anywhere else. That makes me feel good.

MR.HOOTON: Did you know Kenneth Rexroth out there?

MR.OLDENBURG: No, I didn’t meet him. No. I know of his work. And he was one of the people writing about the “other” kind of poetry when I was in college. One of the only ones.

MR.HOOTON: He’s very good actually. I think he has a good critical mind.

MR.OLDENBURG: He’s very committed and, well, that makes all the difference.

MR.HOOTON: He has a position about everything. Seems fairly sound in those, though.

MR.OLDENBURG: I’m afraid I’m pretty vague except when I get to work. Which is a condition I maintain. There are periods when I’m not working that I’m so vague I don’t know what I’m doing. I don’t even know I’m an artist. People address me as an artist and refer to my work and it seems very far away and I don’t really know that I did it. But then I put myself into a period of work which builds up and then I find myself and then I have my show and then I disintegrate again. I can really only find myself by reference to things I did at certain times, in certain places.

MR.HOOTON: Seems kind of helpful because a lot of the young painters, got famous suddenly and then got panicky. They became what their show was instead of what they were really working on.

MR.OLDENBURG: Yeah, that’s a danger.

MR.HOOTON: Very, very dangerous.

MR.OLDENBURG: I’ve always felt that’s a great danger. I waited a long time before I had a show—my first show. I wanted to be sure that I had covered a lot of possibilities so I really haven’t developed as much as I have illuminated certain parts of the farm, you know, certain areas I’ve cultivated. There’s a little development in technique and so on but I could have done what I’m doing now some years ago if I had been directed in that direction. I’ve been away from New York for two years deliberately because I wanted to skip all this coming of Pop Art, and going on TV, and the interviews and all that sort of stuff, and I did. Now I find I’m almost obscure. So I’m coming back and trying to set up an entirely new situation in New York and see where that will lead.

MR.HOOTON: And it’s separate from the work. The work’s up there and you’re here doing it.

MR.OLDENBURG: That begins with this new loft I have. A large place where I can construct, eventually will get ready.

MR.HOOTON: I wrote a piece for the *Trib* about the “Happenings,” actually as a matter of fact. I knew what they were like. I’d seen a few but I didn’t see yours and a few of them downtown. When I first came to New York—you came into a loft, hoping it was filled with junk. There was one simplified way for the newspaper audience that I could explain what the “Happenings” meant. It was simple terms. When you move into a loft because you need space and in the loft you’d find objects, kind of around there. These objects would sort of be fascinating because you were not involved with them.

MR.OLDENBURG: Right.

MR.HOOTON: They didn't touch you in the sense that you knew what they were and you saw that they were sort of interesting looking, like a piece of pipe or machinery or whatever it was. I mean, and so many artists, I think, probably learned through that to keep things around.

MR.OLDENBURG: Yeah. Well, the amount of debris in New York is enormous and in the streets when it snows a few days the garbage piles up. You're made aware of all this junk—objects. I think the "Happenings" are definitely a New York phenomenon, because New York does look a "Happening," the end result. The danger is that everyone who has done a "Happening" has done something quite different to their sensibility. There are a lot of people who practice "Happenings" as a theory. They come out with something very cool and uninteresting. I don't mean to say, well, this is a big subject. There are, for example, musicians who do things that are not physical. They're events. They're very cool and that's good. I mean, they succeed. Whereas the "Happenings" done by painters are usually very sticky, but it's also possible to do "Happenings" that are clean. I did a "Happening" in the Green Gallery deliberately to prove that it didn't have to be done in a dirty loft. In the middle of my show in 1962 in October I brought people in, took every object I had in the show out and did a "Happening" and then cleaned it up and put everything back in. It was a matter of four hours and at the end you didn't know that anything had happened in the place. The walls were still white. The floors were still clean. I substituted things—let's say I used a lot of shredded foam rubber which made the place a mess, but which could be cleaned up very simply. That was because Kaprow was going around saying that "Happenings" could only be done in lofts. Under certain—

MR.HOOTON: "Anti-Happenings."

MR.OLDENBURG: When I hear a limitation like that I try to deny it, but always in practice, if possible.

MR.HOOTON: Picasso did it too, apparently, years ago. I mean, he used to pick up "things". Again another thing entirely that I found kind of bourgeois was that it wasn't really discovering—or nothing was really Happening, he was just really consciously picking up objects, apparently and using them.

MR.OLDENBURG: You know, I don't know what he might have done. He might have done a lot of things that no one ever really knew. There's no record of it. He certainly has done almost everything at one time or another whether he knew what he was doing or not.

MR.HOOTON: I hope he knew what he was doing. He seems to have enjoyed it, let's put it that way. Enjoyment is certainly one way of doing it.

MR.OLDENBURG: Well, I think he's a great model for an artist as he's understood. As an instinctive artist. An artist can only depend on so many rules, you know. He maintains the integrity of the instinct. That I like very much. I think it's important to do that in the situation of the city where everything is rationalized and everything is turned into abstractions and words—comings and goings at the right time, and so on.

MR.HOOTON: My feeling is that it's not that rational.

MR.OLDENBURG: Of course, it isn't. In fact, artists are probably much more rational than other people. That's what brother keeps telling me all the time. "You think you have a patent on the irrational—you should see my office and my friends."

MR.HOOTON: It's just that they're going under a different kind of machinery. They're going under one general ideal—that they're here to make a living, make money, and that's all. They seem to be more rational, because if asked what they're doing, they'll say what they're doing but they'll never—

MR.OLDENBURG: Well that I guess is a problem for the artist. If someone asks him what he's doing he has a hard time answering. That's the main difference, I guess.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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