



The Poetry of Scale

In the following interview, Claes Oldenburg discusses the origin and development of his “Proposals for Monuments and Buildings: 1965-69”. The talk was taped on August 22, 1968 in the artist’s room at The Carriage House in Chicago; the interviewer is poet and editor Paul Carroll, who began by asking how the project of drawings of proposed monuments and buildings originated.

OLDENBURG:

Monuments became a significant subject for me in the spring of 1965. After a year of travel in Europe and in the U.S., away from New York, I set up in a new studio on East 14th Street. The new studio was huge—a block long—and that scale, combined with my recollections of traveling, had given me an inclination to landscape representation. I couldn’t adjust this to what I’d been doing before until I hit on the idea of placing my favorite objects in a landscape—a combination of still-life and landscape scales. By rendering atmosphere and the use of perspective, I made the objects seem “colossal.” Some of the first monuments were the Vacuum Cleaner for the Battery (Plates 1 and 2) and the Ironing Board for the Lower East Side (Plate 7) and the War Memorial for Canal and Broadway (Plate 6). The last-named metamorphosed from a pat of butter placed in the slits of a baked potato on the table where we ate. A lot of the monuments were food: pizza (Plate 5), a banana (Plate 8), a good humor bar (Plate 13), a baked potato (Plates 3 and 4), a frankfurter with tomato and toothpick (Plate 10). Then there were several versions of the Colossal Teddy Bear (Plate 12) sitting in the north end of Central Park or thrown there so that it rests on its side (Plate 9).

The Teddy Bear grew out of some hasty sketches of a huge bunny I'd done in 1958, and which could be seen as the beginning of the whole project. That year, returning from the airport, I noticed Manhattan Island from the side for the first time. I'd always thought of the island as a pile of inseparable structures-the way one sees it from the bay. But from the side, the structures detach themselves and one feels the stretch of the island-its great length. One sees a line of towers dominated by the big Empire [State Building] prick. The image of erect rabbit ears popped into my mind. "If two colossal bunny ears suddenly appeared in the Manhattan landscape," I thought, "you'd really look, wondering what in the world they were. What if you lived in Queens and, looking toward Central Park, you saw those ears? You might feel better about living in New York." The bunny was sited in the Grand Army Plaza, in front of the Plaza Hotel and by coincidence near what later became the Playboy Club. But the bunny was abandoned for another stuffed toy, the Teddy Bear, sited at the opposite, north end of the park.

The project began as a play with scale, and that's what it seems to be about-the poetry of scale.

The Colossal Clothespin to replace the Chicago Tribune Tower (Plate 46) is an example. When I flew to Chicago in October 1967, I took along an old-fashioned wooden clothespin because I liked its shape; I also had a postcard of the Empire State Building. I made a sketch, superimposing a clothespin on the postcard; then I stuck the clothespin in a wad of gum I was chewing, and placed it on the little table in front of my seat; and as our plane came over Chicago, I noticed that the buildings down there looked the same size as the clothespin. I made quick sketches. One showed the clothespin building (Plate 46); another, a Great Lakes ore boat in a vertical position (Plate 45); a third, smoke rising from the West Side. All three became proposals for Chicago buildings and monuments.

CARROLL: Did you do any work on the project between 1958 and 1965?

OLDENBURG:

I made some proposals in text form-for example, the Monument to Immigration, proposed in 1961. Plans had been announced for the New York World's Fair, and I and some of my friends-Bob Whitman, Billy Kluver among them-felt we should try to make a big anti- or no-fair. The immigration monument was one of my contributions.

CARROLL: Why a monument to immigration?

OLDENBURG:

Immigration has fascinated me for years-I did a Happening around 1961 called "Fotodeath" which explored the theme. What occurred for most of the immigrants was a disaster: America simply wasn't what they'd expected. Well,

around the same time as the World's Fair, there'd been talk about a competition for a monument to Ellis Island-the architect Philip Johnson eventually made a proposal for such a monument-and I thought I'd propose a "natural" monument in the sense it would create itself. The monument would begin as a reef placed in the bay; a ship would sail in, hit the reef, and sink; soon another would do the same; and after awhile, there'd be this big pile of wrecked, rusting ships which, as it grew, would be visible from quite a distance. The monument was inspired by a collection of World War II Liberty Ships you can see tied up on a spot up the Hudson. They're known as the "moth ball" fleet because the ships are covered by plastic cocoons. The fleet's very impressive, especially when snow covers the ships; and, in fact, the State of New York officially acknowledged that the Liberty Fleet was a monument by placing a sign and an overlook at the site. Monument to Immigration was my first obstacle monument. Later, I did more-such as the War Memorial (Plate 6) and the mini-monument Fallen Hat (for Adlai Stevenson) (Plate 28).

CARROLL: Were there other influences on the project?

OLDENBURG:

There were some photos and drawings I saw in the early 1960s when I was working in the library of the Cooper Union Museum. One group of photos showed the Statue of Liberty when it first came over. Parts of the statue's body were shown lying around Madison Square: the face here, a big foot there, the hand with the torch here. I also saw some photos of those buildings in vogue around 1900 which were made to look like animals. One of these still stood in 1958, south of Atlantic City. It is the shape of an elephant, with windows, painted green and facing out to sea. Also, I came across drawings by the 18th century French architects, Boullée, Ledoux and Lequeu. A few years ago, I realized that Lequeu's building shaped like a cow was probably the model for the Teddy Bear.* (*Lequeu: "Southern View of Cow's Stable on a Cool Meadow" in *Visionary Architects* (University of St. Thomas, Houston, Texas, 1968, 118) Both are structures staring at you with fixed and glassy eyes.

CARROLL: Why did you call your proposals "monuments?"

OLDENBURG:

It was a familiar word to signify something very large. Later when I looked up the definition, I realized that "monument" meant a memorial of some kind. At the beginning, I didn't think of it that way.

CARROLL:

How do you decide on the location where the monument will stand-for example, why a giant frankfurter on Ellis Island or an ironing board on the Lower East Side?

OLDENBURG:

The object is chosen because in some way it fits the shape, the conditions and the associations of the site. The giant frankfurter has a shape like the ships that pass it, going up and down the Hudson. The ironing board over the Lower East echoes the shape of Manhattan island and also “shields” the vanishing ghetto, commemorating the million miles of devoted ironing. In the case of the Teddy Bear, an object with eyes was important. Looking up the park from the south, one casts the eyes a long distance in an area surprisingly empty in the midst of city congestion. The Bear’s eyes are like a mirror of the huge, free glance, returning it like a tennis ball. I also imagined the staring Bear an incarnation of white conscience; as such, it fixes white New York with an accusing glance from Harlem but also one glassy-eyed from desperation. This may also be why I chose a toy with the “amputated” effect of teddy paws-handlessness signifies society’s frustrating lack of tools.

CARROLL:

After you’d finished the first group of New York monuments in 1965, did you think about creating monuments for other cities as well?

OLDENBURG:

Not right away, or not until I began traveling again. New York was my favorite “room,” my main plaything. I made toys for it, my city of cities. Then in 1966 I went to Sweden, Norway and London. In Stockholm I got a lively response to my proposals, which were presented in the papers. Swedes believe in technology. They seemed to think my monuments could actually be built someday. I presented six proposals in photo-enlargements on a billboard rented for me by the Moderna Museet in the center of town.

CARROLL:

In an interview with you in the London International Times (December 1966) you describe the relationship between a monument or group of them and the city in which it’s to stand. What was this relationship like in Stockholm? How did it begin? And how did it evolve?

OLDENBURG:

The daily newspaper has a structure similar to the city landscape. In Stockholm, the big daily, Svenska Daybladet-their New York Times-regularly devotes its front page to ads for nuts and bolts and other small mechanical items. All of the news appears inside the paper, after the obits-it was that way even during World War 11. I was attracted particularly to the illustration of a wingnut. Comparing front page to the city landscape, I placed in the city a wingnut on an enormous scale in an appropriate site, and this became the Wingnut Monument (Plate 14).

The Door Handle and Locks Monument (Plates 15 and 16) was somewhat more

complicated. This monument began as a pyramid of cannon balls seen on the island on which the Moderna Museet stands. (This island is also the former site of the Naval Establishment.) In a restaurant I'd noticed how the butter balls were served in a pyramid; and when I stuck a knife in the pyramid, I got the kind of gun-shaped angle which for some reason always makes me feel good. The gun-shape recalled the cannon. But I felt that an object more ordinary, simple and omnipresent than a cannon would be better. A few days later, I happened to be in a hardware store and I found what I wanted: a door handle with the two locks-very commonplace in Sweden. Cannon metamorphosed into Door Handle and Locks.

CARROLL:

Several monuments are very erotic-for example, the proposed Monument for Oslo Frozen Ejaculation (Ski Jump) (Plate 17). How did that proposal originate?

OLDENBURG:

Do you know Frogner Park, the "Central Park" of Oslo? A famous monstrosity stands in it-some 150 monumental groups of open-air sculpture by Vigeland. He was a prodigious sculptor who'd traded his life's work to Oslo for a lifetime place in which to work, enough materials and all the necessities. Everything he created, in turn, would belong to the city and eventually be placed in Frogner Park.

One Sunday I visited Frogner Park. I was fascinated by Vigeland's huge complex: it's extremely erotic, and culminates in one gigantic shaft, which looks like a penis, composed of writhing figures of men and women fighting, kissing, twisting, fucking. A Swedish critic was with me, and we'd been having some fun by wondering what could be done with the giant shaft; we made a bunch of drawings showing giants squatting on the shaft. At one point, the critic suggested hollowing out the shaft, filling it with hundreds of little, round, pink rubber babies, and then ejecting them to float like balloons all over Oslo, saturating the city. A few days later, I drew the Ski Jump. The sperm drop became a winter palace in which people skate. There is an obvious correlation between winter sports and sex: I mean, the cruelty of the knife action on ice, as well as the ski jump come.

CARROLL: By the time you left Stockholm and Oslo and went to London, was it pretty definite that you'd continue to create monuments?

OLDENBURG:

Yes, I was aware that people were expecting me to give them a monument.

CARROLL: Was that a good feeling, a sense of challenge-or what?

OLDENBURG:

Well, I like to work all the time; and when an artist is traveling, he has the disadvantage that he can't carry his studio along. He needs a portable kind of art, almost a literary art. To make monuments in a new city is to use that city as a studio.

CARROLL:

Would you describe in more detail how you get to know a city in which you plan to draw proposals for monuments or buildings?

OLDENBURG:

During the first two or three weeks in a new city, I try to visit as many places as possible, and be taken around by people who live there and know the city. I listen to what they say about it. Also, I try to read every newspaper and magazine on sale. I sketch a lot. And I observe the food.

Food was most influential in Sweden. When a waiter serves you, he first exhibits the plate of food as if it were sculpture or a painting; then he dishes it up and brings it back ready to eat, so you get two pictures of the dish, as if the piece were created and then taken apart and prepared for you to put in your mouth. One monument for Stockholm began with a pyramid of shrimps I'd seen in one of the restaurants. Later, the pyramid shape was tried upside-down, and helped suggest the Wingnut.

I use my body to feel and come to know a city. In London I constantly felt cold in my knees-they always ached. It was aggravated by having to squat in those small English cars. 1966 was also the time of knee exhibitionism because of the mini-skirt, especially when "framed" by boots. Oxford Street was a sea of knees.

So knees were on my mind; and since knees are doubles, I found myself collecting examples of doubles: salt and pepper shakers, double egg cups, and so on. I frequently seize on a formal idea-in this case doubles-and pursue it obsessively, collecting example after example.

I found doubles on the Thames, too. English tug boats have funnels which don't fit under bridges. Therefore, the funnels have hinges in order to fold in two when the boat sails under a bridge: so you see two funnels. I proposed two knee monuments for the Thames. One to stand at the wide part of the river, near the sea, a single knee (Plate 19); the other is the Colossal Knees on the Victoria Embankment, placed in that spot to echo the four chimneys of the Battersea power plant-an upended table effect, across the river. London became a sort of canvas, you see. Proposing monuments is like composing with a city. For example, in Chicago I feel the Hancock building needs something to balance it; perhaps a heavy fireplug monument at the end of Navy Pier. Restoring esthetic balance like this is an old-fashioned idea; but then, any city is an old-fashioned

painting.

In London there seemed to be an obsession with water. Body moisture was agitated to the point where most people had constant colds. Ads showing people blowing their noses filled the newspapers. I proposed a Giant Ear to be placed in the estuary of the Thames. When the tide rose, the ear would flood; when the tide went out, the ear would empty, to be filled and then emptied by the movements of the next tide-and so on. Another water monument proposal was the Thames Ball (Plates 29, 30, 31).

Still another thing I noticed by being aware of my body was the London preoccupation with the throat, mouth and cigarettes. Lots of ads picture people coughing and smoking. I mated this preoccupation with the constant presence of columns and proposed the Colossal Fag-ends for Hyde Park (Plate 32).

CARROLL:

There seems to be a relationship between a water monument like the Thames Ball (Plates 29, 30, 31) which rises and sinks with the tide, and a mouth monument like the Giant Lipstick (Plate 18) intended to replace the Fountain of Eros in Piccadilly Circus, in that you indicate the lipstick rises out of and then sinks back into the tube.

OLDENBURG:

Yes, the going in and coming out of the tide was always on my mind as I walked the streets of London. My monuments within the city are keyed to this movement, bringing the movement into the city-like breathing on a large scale. When the Thames flows out, the lipstick goes back inside the tube; when the river rises again, so does the lipstick.

And since lipstick is an ordinary object, the Giant Lipstick is a non-idealistic symbol meant to substitute for the old, idealistic symbol of love. By the way, in her note about the monuments in Studio International, Jasia Reichardt criticized my choice of an object because women don't use lipstick any more. What I had in mind was lipstick worn by English women in the 1940s and 50s. Do you remember the English films that came over after the war? Women in them were strange creatures with big hats, long skirts, enormous shoes, and lots and lots of lipstick. That's what I was recalling when I drew the monument. I guess I was memorializing the nostalgia which surrounds World War II.

CARROLL:

How do you feel about a possible indignant response from Londoners who might accuse you of replacing a traditionally cherished landmark like the Fountain of Eros with a vulgar pop art lipstick monument? You also propose to replace the Nelson Column in Trafalgar Square with the colossal Gearshift in Motion (Plate 21).

OLDENBURG:

Most of the grand sites in any city have already been taken by monuments. When I propose publicly to substitute a new monument for a landmark (as I did over the B.B.C.), it generally creates response from the citizens, but not all of it is indignant. In Stockholm it was. When I proposed placing the Wingnut on the site of an existing pool used by kids for wading and sailing boats, a mother sought me out to protest. In London, however, a cab driver told me he thought it was a great idea to put something more contemporary in place of monuments like Nelson Column. Not only would the Gearshift be a modern version of a column but it's also an appropriate monument because of the constant traffic congestion in Trafalgar Square. The Gearshift moves through the positions with a jolt that makes pigeons scatter in the air. I suppose the substitution of a simple industrial object for a landmark might arouse more indignation in London than in Stockholm. Industry in England is not regarded as optimistically as it is in Sweden- as if a sense of coal-colored guilt hung about the place where the Industrial Revolution originated.

CARROLL:

Have you thought about proposing a monument which might embody English guilt over the Industrial Revolution?

OLDENBURG:

No. But I have felt that the Hancock building in Chicago might be such a building- that is, at first, when I tended to get romantic about it. In its incomplete, uninhabited stage, the Hancock building reminded me of graveyard monuments. Like the visionary architecture I've mentioned, it looked awesome, strange. It followed me about.

But once I'd lived across the street from the Hancock building for a week or so, and looked at it a lot and met the architect, Bruce Graham, much of the romantic impression wore off, though I still see it as a remarkable building. When Bruce Graham took me up to the top, it reminded me of a vacant lot 100 stories high.

What really fascinates and strikes me as radical about the Hancock building is that it isn't intended to make Chicagoans feel proud by providing a symbol of the city and its culture. One hears people ask: "Why isn't the Hancock building the tallest in the world? A few more floors and it would be bigger than the Empire State building-the Second City Complex." Nor is it a monument to the architect's vision. Louis Sullivan or Frank Lloyd Wright or Mies van der Rohe made an effort to create inspiring buildings. The radical thing about the Hancock building is that it's machine-made: its height, shape, everything was determined on the basis of how the computer solved the function the building is supposed to provide in the space allotted. Take the slope of the building: it isn't the result of the architect's romantic dream or an attempt to make the structure look like

an obelisk. The Hancock building looks the way it does because its shape is the most practical way the computer solved all the various problems.

CARROLL:

Does your recent interest in architecture mean that the project might be entering a new phase?

OLDEN BURG:

I think so. At first, the monuments were playful, personal fantasies; then the monuments seemed to become more real and public. I remember Gene Baro, the poet, asking me in an interview we did in 1966: Did I have any idea of what type of materials would be used if one of the monuments were actually to be built? I hadn't thought too much about it. Earlier that year, three students of architecture at Cornell made an appraisal of the War Memorial (Plate 6). Their estimates shocked me: they figured that it would weigh 5,000,000 lbs., if concrete were used; and that the memorial would sink through the surface the way a pat of butter melts in a baked potato, crushing the subway. Then they drew up plans for rerouting the subways. It was the artist's reverie imposed on nature with a vengeance-absurd fact, the best kind of all.

I also became aware that practicing architects had taken some interest in the monuments. An invitation came from MIT to talk about projects; I felt honored but rather terrified of being caught out of my element. My monument proposals in relation to tradition began to interest me.

A friend who is a student of architecture at Yale told me that the kind of objects I choose are the closest thing to symbols available in our time. Architects find it difficult to design monuments today, he said, because they can't find appropriate symbols. Didn't Lewis Mumford say that there's no such thing as a monument in the modern world? The old symbol of the hero has disappeared. Also, architects face the problem that whatever is built today is expected to provide some practical civic service—a place to take the baby buggy. My proposals, in keeping with older traditions, do not provide such service.

On the contrary, many of my monuments reintroduce the idea of the monument as obstacle or disruption in the city. Many monuments, of course, are exactly that: the Arc de Triomphe, for one, is an aggressive obstacle in that traffic must be rerouted around it. So is my War Memorial (Plate 6): I wanted it to be like a wound in the city. Studies have indicated, in fact, that the intersection of Canal and Broadway, where the memorial would be, is the perfect spot to drop the H-bomb in order to create maximum damage and fallout throughout the New York area.

CARROLL: Are the Bowling Balls (Plate 37) rolling down Park Avenue such an

obstacle monument?

OLDENBURG:

Absolutely. The balls are an attempt to make tangible my feeling that Park Avenue is a dangerous street where you can get run over and killed very easily. The balls intensify and monumentalize this danger. Imagine you're waiting at a cross street; you want to get across Park Avenue. One ball's just rolled by; another is bearing down not too far behind it; ball after ball keeps coming: they don't respect stop lights. You must be very quick and clever if you want to get across. I feel this about New York in general. To survive you must be fast, clever, and learn the rhythm of how to walk the streets, which has nothing to do with traffic lights.

The Thames Ball is another obstacle monument; it could be a sport for ships and boats to try and dodge it.

CARROLL: How do you feel about the recent architectural phase of the project?

OLDENBURG:

As I said, it's a bit frightening to me to be taken seriously, and I have to decide whether I really want to convert my fantasy to real projects, and on what terms this can be done. One problem is that the shape of my objects makes it harder to build them than if they had abstract forms like cubes or cones. Tony Smith, the sculptor, for example, works in simple geometric forms; the great advantage he's got is that he can enlarge the basically simple form of the cube in much the same way a building's form can be expanded and enlarged.

CARROLL:

In an interview you granted in 1966 which was published in the Austrian magazine *Bau*, you were talking about the earlier phases of the project, and you commented: "The monuments should exist in the imagination. Otherwise, people will pass by one of them and say, 'Oh, that's just a 50 foot puppy dog made of concrete.'" You imply that such monuments would have far greater reality in the imagination than in tangible reality. Apparently, you no longer feel that this applies to more recent architectural monuments or buildings?

OLDENBURG:

I was afraid that what is lyrical and believable in an imaginary form might be banal and unnecessary in fact. A 50 foot puppy dog or a 650 foot teddy bear might be merely a painful eyesore, very unpoetic.

Aside from actual construction in concrete, steel or plastics, I've also thought about realizing or materializing objects by projection. One way might be to project a picture of the object on clouds. Take the teddy bear. Get a very strong light which could project the image in a three-dimensional effect. Such

a night monument would look like a giant watercolor: the lyricism could come across on an enormous scale.

Another possibility might be to create mass hallucination. I'm not exactly sure how this might be done-to hypnotize people into believing they actually saw a huge teddy bear floating in the sky at night.

CARROLL: How does your relationship to the city and your experience of it differ in the third phase of the project as compared to how it would be if you were still working in earlier phases- throwing favorite objects on the city or being involved with factual response to imaginative projection? Do you feel a different response to the city or do you continue to read the newspapers, use your body, and so on, as you did in London?

OLDENBURG:

I go through the same preparations but now I tend to focus on the type of object that seems possible to construct. The Windshield Wiper for Grant Park (Plates 40, 41, 42, 43, 44) is a more architectural shape, for example, than the Teddy Bear. This is also true of the Clothespin (Plate 46).

CARROLL:

As an example of the genesis of one monument, would you describe how the Windshield Wiper evolved?

OLDENBURG:

The Wiper was partly suggested by the tall tapering shape of the Hancock building. If you stand in Grant Park near the Buckingham Fountain where the Wiper is sited and look at the Hancock building, it's as if you're seeing one long rectangle in perspective, which is the effect the Wiper itself would have. Here's an example of the coming together of choice of objects with a technology needed to realize it. Another source is: the Wiper defines the structure of Chicago because it's located on the Congress Expressway axis, which also happens to be the axis of Daniel Burnham's symmetrical plan for the city. Look at a map of Chicago and you'll see that the Wiper stands at the center: if you draw a compass line, it defines a semi-circular arc-the lake cuts off the circle.

CARROLL: But why a windshield wiper?

OLDENBURG:

Chicago is a city of the meeting of water and land-a whole circle of the compass would be half water and half land. A windshield wiper occupies a place where water and "dry land" meet. In Chicago, one is always looking at the wet lake from a dry spot. And there is Burnham's concept of a facade, a "window."

Then there's the sepulchral feeling I get about Chicago, perhaps because it's so

perpendicular-like tombstones. Chicago has a strange metaphysical elegance of death about it. I wanted a symbol of that: so the Grim Reaper became the Giant Wiper—a verbal play. The Wiper is as cruel as death because it comes down into the water where kids are playing. Much like the Bowling Balls careening along Park Avenue, the Wiper can “kill” kids if they don’t learn how to get out of the way. Chicago seems to raise its children that way: everybody’s out to get rid of the other person in this terribly competitive city.

CARROLL:

What would you say to the argument of some city booster who’d claim that a monument of a windshield wiper hardly captures Chicago as powerful, vital, masculine builder —“city of the broad shoulders,” as Sandburg wrote? Or if the booster said: “Are you suggesting that we wipe or clean up the city, huh?”

OLDENBURG:

The objections would be a simple-minded explanation of what the Wiper is all about: my intentions are more poetic. For example, the Wiper also makes the sky tangible in that it treats the sky as if it were glass. Making the intangible tangible has always been one of my fascinations. But “wipe out” is slang for kill, isn’t it? And the “Chicago typewriter,” I realize, is a machine gun. Another famous Chicago typewriter is the one sunk by Leopold and Loeb in the Jackson Park Lagoon. In my Memorial to Clarence Darrow, a typewriter rises out of the water at the spot at certain times of day and night. It recalls an event I covered as a reporter for the City News Bureau in the early 50s. Darrow, who’d defended Leopold and Loeb, had made a “promise” to reappear after death on his birthday at the spot the typewriter was sunk. For years the papers sent reporters to the scene but Darrow never appeared.

Another funeral monument for Chicago is the Pinetop Smith Monument: a wire extending the length of North Avenue, west from Clark Street, along which at intervals runs an electric impulse colored blue so that there’s one blue line as far as the eye can see. Pinetop Smith invented boogie woogie blues at the corner of North and Larrabee, where he finally was murdered: the electric wire is “blue” and dangerous.

CARROLL: How would you answer a critic who pointed out that all of your memorial or sepulchral monuments—the typewriter for Clarence Darrow, the electric wire for Pinetop, the fallen hat for Adlai Stevenson—depict only objects instead of people as in such classical monuments as the statue of Moses which Michaelangelo made for the tomb of Pope Julius II?

OLDENBURG:

I guess that reflects a principle of all my work: I never show a human being or whole body; instead, I depict objects related to the person or a part of the body. You could say the spectator himself supplies the whole body in question.

Usually the object is something the spectator could wear, use, eat or relate his body to.

CARROLL: Didn't you propose a memorial monument to John F. Kennedy/

OLDENBURG :

I've proposed two monuments to Kennedy. One was a construction proposed for Documenta-the art exhibit held in 1963 in Kassel, Germany. I'd come to feel that the scene showing the path of the motorcade and the spot of the assassination had been photographed and dwelt on so often that it had become a monument in itself. So I wanted to literally reconstruct the scene itself-the roadway, the bridge, and the buildings-and then have a real motorcade drive through it twice a day.

CARROLL:

How would you answer criticism which might argue that such an impersonal, coldblooded monument insults the memory of the late President?

OLDENBURG:

No insult intended. The fact is terrible enough-a more traditional monument would seem false.

CARROLL: What is the other Kennedy memorial you mention?

OLDENBURG:

It's an underground monument (Plate 54). The corpse of the public figure is sealed in a plastic shape in the position of a well-known photograph of the subject. This shape is then suspended by a thin wire inside a colossal version of the same shape. The figure hangs upside-down and rotates slightly with the movement of the earth.

CARROLL:

On this visit to Chicago, you have spent two mornings and one afternoon at the Graceland Cemetery and I notice these snapshots of Lorado Taft's memorial sculpture Statue of Death which stands in the Cemetery. How do you propose to use this monument? OLDENBURG: I enlarged a photo of the sculpture and then collaged it in along North Michigan Avenue next to the Hancock building. The monument shows a figure in robes with only nose and feet visible: it would be 100 stories tall-like the Hancock building (Plate 56). I suppose I was comparing the Hancock building to the black marble slab behind the sculpture, or maybe just trying to do to the Hancock building what it has done to the Playboy building-the three of them would make a nice group.

CARROLL:

How would you reply to the question: Is this how Oldenburg sees modern

American life -a world containing only the apotheosis of middle class icons: vacuum cleaner, toys, baseball bats, hats, windshield wipers on our chariot cars- and so on?

OLDENBURG:

A catalogue could be made of all such objects, which would read like a list of the deities or things on which our contemporary mythological thinking has been projected. We do invest religious emotion in our objects. Look at how beautifully objects are depicted in ads in Sunday newspapers. Those wonderful, detailed drawings of ironing boards, for example, showing the inside of the board flipped back to reveal how it's made: it's all very emotional. Objects are body images, after all, created by humans, filled with human emotion, objects of worship.

However, the idea of an object as a magic thing no longer obsesses me as it once did. In the Clothespin building, for example, I guess the object was originally a magic thing to me -like a rabbit's foot or bone or relic-but I became far more interested in the architectural form of the clothespin, which seemed somewhat gothic to me, like the Tribune Tower itself.

When you think about the project as it's grown from phase to phase, in fact, it almost looks like growing up from a child's fantasy.

CARROLL:

Do you suggest something like this: The earliest phase was much like tiny Gulliver among the Brobdingnagians and their giant objects-ironing board, vacuum cleaner, toilet float? Toys, too, of course, like the teddy bear. (The magical reality you invest in such objects reminds me of di Chirico's painting Playtoys of the Prince.) Then there's the pubescent phase. Not only are its objects sexual-such as Ski Jump sperm-but they're mechanical. Most teenage boys like to fool around with wing nuts, locks, and so on. The current phase, then, is "adult" in the sense it's like building in the real world.

OLDENBURG :

I find that a pleasing explanation; but remember, I haven't yet managed to construct anything on the scale of the proposals. The fantasy of scale has not succumbed to reality.

CARROLL:

When will your project be finished? Do you ever feel that you may have created a Frankenstein monster in the sense that you may have to visit every city in the world, including Rangoon, before the project is finished?

OLDENBURG:

I'm not interested in just going from city to city knocking out monument

proposals. Recently, some collectors invited me to visit new cities and create monument fantasies but I had to say “No.” I wanted to concentrate on the possibility of actually getting something constructed.

New York, Chicago and Los Angeles are the American cities I prefer to use because they seem like such typical cities. Going to Seattle or New Orleans or wherever would seem beside the point. If I went to the Orient, I probably would choose to visit what I considered typical cities there-Calcutta, for example.

CARROLL:

Are the monuments you’ve made for Los Angeles part of your current architectural phase?

OLDENBURG:

Some of them. I proposed an alternative design for the new Pasadena Art Museum based on an advertisement showing an open package of cigarettes against half of a tobacco tin. (Plate 52). It didn’t seem far-fetched. In an enlarged version, the package and tin are very building-like and even adapt well to the different functions: a library and restaurant in the extended cigarettes; the exhibits in the package itself; the auditorium in the half tin. From the ground, the structure would appear abstract; it would only look like the original from the air.

The many letter-forms silhouetted against the sky in the Los Angeles basin led to the proposal of colossal block letters scattered across the countryside. These are simple and architectural and, at close hand, also abstract. I further suggested making buildings out of the letters of the word that describes the building’s function. A bank, for example, using B-A-N-K in colossal form, or P-O-L-I-C-E for a police headquarters (Plate 51). Arguments about how a building should look would be reduced to arranging these huge letters. Such structures would blend well with those existing in Los Angeles.

The construction of tunnel entrances on the Los Angeles freeway in the form of noses (Plate 53) recalls the more organic subjects but there is a new element of practicality- the use of a sloping hill for support, for example, and the low profile. The nose entrances could easily be built if the citizens wanted them.

CARROLL:

From what you’ve been saying, it looks as if your project will continue to evolve. Will you explore it until it’s finished?

OLDENBURG:

Certainly. I’d finish it today if I could but I know it’s not done yet. Anyway- it’s been interesting to have entered the world through the door of a little impressionist watercolor. I wonder where it will end.