

OBJECTS AS SUBJECT: WORKS BY
CLAES OLDENBURG, JASPER JOHNS, AND JIM DINE

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The object as subject has been used in many ways. It gained enormous attention in the early Twentieth century with the Dadaist movement, and experienced a change in focus with the movement of Surrealism and once again with Pop Art. I will focus on the work of Claes Oldenburg, Jasper Johns, and Jim Dine, all three of whom have been called Pop artists.

Since there is an abundance of information that has been written relating to the topic of this paper, I had no problems with researching in terms of finding information. The card catalogs, computer searches, and art index provided me with an abundant supply of resource materials. The most difficult aspect of writing this paper has been in sorting and sifting through the huge amount of information available, to find and use that which was most pertinent. I found three books to be particularly valuable sources in containing abundant examples of the works of Oldenburg, Johns, and Dine. These include Claes Oldenburg: Drawings and Prints, Jasper Johns A Print Retrospective, and Jim

Dine Prints 1977-1985. In addition to these books, I used numerous articles and books ranging in topics from general information on Dadaism, Surrealism, and Pop Art, to specific works written about Oldenburg, Johns, and Dine. This paper is a culmination of the thoughts, ideas, and research of many art critics, as well as thoughts and interpretations that I have formed through the ingestion of the large quantity of material available.

The use of objects as subject matter in works of art is not a new phenomenon. Throughout history, many masters have used the still life as a simple means by which the artist relates to his common surroundings. In the early twentieth century, with the art movement of Dadaism and particularly the Ready-Mades of Duchamp, the object as an art form gained particular emphasis. In fact, in presenting the Ready-Mades to the public as works of art, Duchamp single-handedly challenged the public's ideas on art itself. Duchamp wanted to see if there were any limitations that the public put on what it accepted as art, and its acceptance of the Ready-Mades implied that the public would accept absolutely anything. This was devastating because it implied that the public would accept anything as "art."

Through the Surrealist movement, the ordinary object as subject matter was used very differently. Rather than portray the object as a literal form, the Surrealists used imagination to morphologically transform objects into other things. The Surrealists often used the subconscious for the conception of ideas, painting compositions from visual imagery that surfaced in their dreams.

In the 1960's the Pop Art movement once again changed the focus on the object as subject matter. Artists such as Warhol, Lichtenstein, Goodman, and Wesselman used commercialized objects from American society. Their object subjects were common objects taken directly from the mass media. By looking at Dadaism, Surrealism, and Pop Art, one can see that the object as a subject for works of art has been used in many ways.

Claes Oldenburg, Jasper Johns, and Jim Dine are the three artists that I will focus on in this paper. All three use the object as subject matter, and all three have been associated with Pop Art. This association with Pop came about because these artists use objects that can be considered Pop subject matter, and they are contemporary artists. Although they use Pop objects, these three men are more second generation Abstract Expressionists than Pop artists.

Oldenburg's work is essentially a creation of his own world using objects as expressive statements of his relationship with nature and morphologically changing one object into something else. It is because of this morphological changing of objects and his expressive intent of creating his own world that I connect him with Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism rather than Pop Art.

Johns also uses Pop imagery. He can also be called an Expressionist because his work is concerned with an expressive technique meant to call attention to common objects that are not noticed rather than as a social commentary on the state of American society. Johns' work also contains some similarities to Dadaism in that he often attempts to cause the public to question art itself.

Dine, like Oldenburg and Johns, uses common objects, not as social or commercial statements, but as autobiographical means of expression. His tools, hearts, and robes are not chosen at random as subjects, but instead are stand-ins for himself and his wife. His work with objects is seen as his self-expression of his relation to nature and personal experience, and therefore, closely relates him with the ideas of Expressionism.

I will use examples of Oldenburg's drawings and sculptures, Johns' prints and Dine's prints to substantiate their differences from the true Pop artists and explain why they are second generation Abstract Expressionists that have gone far beyond the realm of Pop Art in both conceptual ideas and expressive techniques.

Oldenburg

Of the three artists (Oldenburg, Johns, and Dine), Oldenburg fits into the Pop category most readily although even he has gone beyond the typecast role of Pop artist. Oldenburg works with the common objects of everyday American society and although some of his work does contain social commentary, the bulk of his work is really a creation of his own world. Using common objects, he has transformed them into animate, almost living beings. Although he uses Pop imagery, Oldenburg has more in common with the Expressionist artists than with any of the Pop artists.¹ He is more interested in creating new forms and shapes and allowing chance to play a role in his expressive creations than in rearranging forms that already exist. His philosophy as well as his work links Oldenburg more closely with Abstract Expressionism than with Pop Art.

Although Claes Oldenburg is primarily a sculptor, he also works in the two dimensional media of drawing and printmaking. Drawing came naturally to Oldenburg. No matter where he was, he was always drawing - on scraps of paper, napkins, or anything he could find. Oldenburg is concerned with the meanings of things, and he is constantly morphologically changing the objects that he sees into other things. His drawings "project objects as an entity experienced and his work summarizes a vision of things as they are and as they seem. His reaction is made part of the thing itself."² Oldenburg's vision is volumetric. He uses linear structure and massed tones to create the forms in his drawings. Form in light and space is his central interest. He considers distance, the sense of light and air around objects and the sharpness of small detail to be crucial.³

In 1960, Oldenburg began his period of Street drawings. After looking at works by Jim Dine and Red Grooms, he was influenced to search for techniques more expressive of the subject. Oldenburg began using materials that he found on the street to do a series of drawings about street life. His drawings took on an ugliness that was a mimicry of street graffiti that portrayed a sense of incompleteness. During this period his emphasis was on linear structure. Writing and lettering, as well as signs and messages were important.⁴

Shortly after the Street period drawings, Oldenburg's emphasis shifted from linear to coloristic, beginning his Store period. During this period he created sculptural forms of objects that might be found in any typical store. He rented a gallery space and

actually set up his own "store" of clothing, food, and toys. The objects were made of clay and all were treated with bright, intense colors.⁵

Following the Store period, Oldenburg began a period called the Chrome Home period. It was his intention to create an entire interior of a typical home including furniture and appliances. This period was the beginning of Oldenburg's serious exploration of volume where "the space of a drawing became the space of a gallery, a move toward anonymity of space and a concentration on the objects themselves. Drawing in space required an emphasis on volume."⁶ It was during this period that Oldenburg created his first soft sculptures - Typewriter (1963), Soft Wall Switches (1964), and Dormeyer Mixer (1965). Many of the drawings during this period were architectlike working drawings for his soft sculptures, although he also did drawings of what he envisioned as his finished soft sculptures.

Oldenburg is interested in his relationship with nature and the conditions of nature. He chooses subjects that enable him to demonstrate something about the physical condition of nature, and he maintains a continuous interest in what it feels like to be in nature or be in exchange between the body and nature. The conditions which express his experience of nature are the conditions of hardness, softness, dryness, wetness, smoothness, and texture. He formulates his expression of nature in terms of opposites.⁷ Oldenburg says of his sculpture, "I like to use images which derive

from touch or contact, images you are likely to put your hand on or hit, images that involve touch or action."⁸

Oldenburg, like the Surrealists, loves the idea of one object metamorphosing into another. This is evident in his sculptures in which he takes inanimate objects and gives them human characteristics. His sculptures are actually surrogates for the human body and even almost self-portraits of the artist and his relationship with nature.⁹ His sculptures are based on the structure of the human body with both hard structural designs and soft muscular tissues. He uses informal presentation and the use of gravity in setting up his soft forms allowing gravity to play a role in the final shapes of his sculptures.¹⁰ All of his sculptures have multiple pieces so they can be rearranged and will never be displayed in exactly the same way twice. This adds another dimension of chance to his work. Oldenburg is concerned with the sensual and expressive and sexual connotations appear everywhere in his work. He has said that he "desires every kind of contact sensation for his sculpture."¹¹ The force of gravity causes the interior structure or 'bones' of his pieces to stick out through the softness in some areas, intensifying the figurative qualities present and increasing the desire to touch. Oldenburg uses object forms in his sculpture in such a way that the objects become metamorphosed into figurative forms that are more like man than object.

In 1965, Oldenburg began his work on drawings of proposed colossal monuments and buildings. These drawings involved the placement of objects on real landscape sites with studied reactions to the objects and sites.¹² Through works such as Proposed Colossal Monument for the Lower East Side-Ironing Board (1965), and Proposed Colossal Monument Fan in place of the Statue of Liberty (1967), we can see that the objects chosen are site specific and that it is not just chance that causes Oldenburg to put them there. Oldenburg spends a great amount of time getting to know the geography and the people of a particular region before he attempts to create a monument. While talking about his monument drawings, he said, "I want to create something that would always function and inspire or produce action in people who saw it, not just a piece set out to edify the masses".¹³ In addition to the surprise of seeing a monumental object placed within a familiar landscape, Oldenburg's monument drawings offer the viewer some examples of his volumetric and spatial vision. It is very apparent that he sees everything in the round and these drawings give him a chance to exercise his sense of space on paper by placing an object in an atmospheric and distant setting.¹⁴ These drawings also give the viewer a real sense of Oldenburg's vision of scale portraying giant-sized object monuments that miniaturize their surroundings while still working in unison with them as a visual image.

Oldenburg once admitted that he felt it would be great to control the world by creating all the objects in it.¹⁵ In a sense, this is exactly what he has done through his artwork. A pioneer

in finding new sculptural materials with which to better express his relationship to the world in which he lives, his art objectifies his subjective relationships with the world. "His intent is magic, and his art is creation of the magic object."¹⁶ Humor abounds in his work, yet he is very serious about his work. His drawings are directly and immediately emotional, formal and intellectual, and all of his work is symbolic of his expression of his relationship to nature. Using his incredible gift for seeing morphological translations, and his expressive means of handling various media, his work is more closely related to that of Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism than to that of Pop Art in which the only similarity is that of subject matter.

JASPER JOHNS

Jasper Johns, like Jim Dine, and Claes Oldenburg, has been loosely associated with the movement of Pop Art. Although he used common, everyday objects as well as some symbolic objects as subject matter, his work can not be associated with that of the Pop artists because his philosophy and intent are far removed from any social connotations about mass media and commercialization that were sometimes linked to the works of the Pop artists. Johns' idea was to take common objects that people see everyday but do not really look at and use them in such a way as to attract attention to them. He liked the idea of taking an object and using it in his work to create something other than the thing with which he had

started.¹⁷ In this manner the objects in his works became something different from the objects in reality. Therefore, Johns started with one thing, created something different, and ended with two things.¹⁸ He also felt, unlike the true Pop artists, that it was important for the work to be a subdued message so that people could perceive it in various ways.¹⁹ He found the idea interesting that once he finished a work and people perceived it in individual ways, that the work changed and became something different to each viewer.²⁰ He didn't want to "hit people over the head" with the meanings of his works, but rather create some ambiguity within the work in order to add that 'viewer element' to the piece. Because his ideas concerning the use of objects as subject matter were very different from those of Pop artists, Jasper Johns can not truly be considered a Pop artist.

Although primarily a painter, Johns' interest in the technical possibilities available to him within various media spawned his interest in printmaking. Within the realm of technical experimentation, Johns has done more for the medium of prints than any other contemporary artist, with the possible exception of Jim Dine. He began his work in prints in the early 1960's, utilizing the same compositions of his earlier paintings in his prints. Johns had found earlier that his work was not symbolic of his feelings, so he began to make a conscious attempt not to put himself or his feelings in his work.²¹ Because of this idea of separation of self, his interest in the techniques and manipulations possible within the

print medium became a more important focus than the subject or image ultimately created.²² Technique and change were so exciting that he utilized the same compositions from earlier paintings in his prints in order to play with how the elements in the work changed from one medium to another.²³

The subjects of Johns' early prints were flags, targets, maps, numerals, and circular devices. He used these objects because they were familiar to him and he liked their shapes.²⁴ Often, he worked with single objects in a series to create change. Working in a series allowed him to do one thing to an object and to then do something else to it. This was especially true with his series of numerals.²⁵ He did several series of numerals 0 through 9 and often reworked the same lithographic stone for an entire series. Johns used numerals and letters as if they were three dimensional objects that he could manipulate just as he manipulated actual objects.²⁶ Johns also often used the theme of doubling with the objects of flags, targets, and maps in order to play a visual game of identification. Examples of the use of this theme include Two Flags (Gray) (1972) and Two Maps II (1966). In these works, he repeated the same object side-by-side but changed the structural elements from one object to the other so that upon viewing the piece one object could be taken as a substitute for the other although upon close examination it became clear that one object was not the other. There were actually two things present instead of one repeated.²⁷ Johns used commonplace objects but through manipulation

and change he created fresh visual statements that went far beyond each object's usual symbolic connotations.

While most of Johns' works were attempts at an absence of inclusion of personal feelings, the prints Hatteras (1963, Land's End (1978), Land's End (1979) and Periscope II (1979) can be seen as more personal statements. In these prints Johns has included in the composition prints of his own arms and hands as well as circular devices. The moving arm, placed within a circular format, appears throughout these prints and can be interpreted as a device

at can sweep, indicate a direction or the passage of time and divulge in some subconscious way an impression of helplessness.²⁸

It is interesting that when using figurative elements, Johns has preferred the autographic imprints of his own body parts rather than renderings of such objects. It is this very element that causes these particular works and others similar in nature to be perceived as more personal statements of the artist than works where the emphasis has been on the technical manipulation of object forms as well as an absence of personal feelings.

By his own admission, one of Johns' most important influences was Marcel Duchamp.²⁹ He saw Duchamp's work as very positive artwork because it forced the public not only to question the work but also to question Art itself. Johns has made numerous references to Duchamp in his own work, perhaps no more evident than in his series Fragments-According to What (1971). This series is devoted to the idea of meaning and art versus reality. It can be interpreted as art about art.³⁰ The idea of change, both physical

and psychological, is a key element which both challenges and confuses the viewer. It is within this series that Johns attempts to create an intermingling of the concrete with the conceptual.³¹ The references to Duchamp are frequent in the Fragment series, so much so that one particular work, Fragment-According to What-Hinged Canvas (1971), is interpreted as Johns' homage to Duchamp. In this work Johns has used visual elements taken directly from Duchamp's last painting, Tu m (1918), his farewell to art.³² It is clearly evident that Johns felt a positive influence from Duchamp in his statement about the artist:

"It may be a great work of his to have brought doubt into the air that surrounds art. He seems never to have exaggerated any of the conditions for art, attacking the ideas of object, artist and spectator with equal force and observing their interaction with detachment and some amusement, never with any special show of optimism, and often from conflicting points of view."³³

The work of Jasper Johns has provided us with a fresh interpretation of the common objects that surround us. His work is not intended as social commentary, but rather as an individual way of seeing and exploring the endless possibilities of change. Johns' elaborate mind is concerned with more than just a visual representation of common objects. He is constantly asking questions, making interpretations, and searching for methods to change objects into other things. His works have psychological, philosophical and paradoxical elements, as well as formal, visual and technical elements. Through his methods of manipulation of common forms, he has caused many to look harder, further and differently at the world around them.

JIM DINE

Jim Dine, a painter turned printmaker, is another artist who has been labeled a Pop artist because of his subject matter. Although he uses common objects such as tools, robes, hearts and neckties which have caused critics to associate him with Pop, he is really a second generation Abstract Expressionist who regards his subjects as autobiographical rather than artifacts of consumerism.³⁴ This substitution of tools and other objects as stand-ins for himself seemed only natural since they had become like close friends to him over the years. As a child he grew up playing in his grandfather's hardware store and then later worked in his father's store.³⁵ Because of this familiar association with these objects in his surroundings, Dine used the tools as autobiographical expressions.

Dine's early prints of the 1960's were almost always single objects drawn in the middle of plates. Although each of the tools was seen as self-portraiture, the single paintbrush image was considered his alter ego. Dine has always been interested in the history of the marks of an image, and working with printmaking allowed him to change images from one state to the next, thus creating a history within a single image. An example of this reworking of a single plate occurs within the series Paintbrush (1971). Within the series of this image, Dine reworked his Paintbrush image by adding to the bristles of the brush and then printing Blackbeard (1973) and Redbeard (1973).³⁶ Dine treated his single object forms in such a way that although they were

isolated from their normal functions and habitat, they became very animated and almost figurative. Dine once said, "I'm concerned with interiors when I use objects, I see them as a vocabulary of feelings... I use them as metaphors and receptacles for my marginal thoughts and ideas."³⁷ Not only were tools used as an expressive subject, but the markmaking itself was also expressive. His marks consisted of smudges, brush strokes, crayon marks and blobs of ink. His works contained, "Enough information to barely define the subject matter, but the marks were spare enough and gestural enough to have a character of their own and to appeal to an abstract expressionist aesthetic."³⁸

In the late 1960's, Dine began ranking objects in rows and columns. He still used tools, but in addition he began making images that contained multiple objects.³⁹ This has been interpreted as a time of redefinition for Dine in that he also began his involvement with the figure during this period.⁴⁰ It is interesting, however, that although he began working with the figure he still did not give up his robes, hearts, and tools as subjects. Although he had become confident in the use of the figure he still felt the need to use the tools and robes as symbols of himself and the heart as a symbol of his wife.

It was also during the early 1970's that Dine began pioneering techniques in the print medium. He fell in love with intaglio processes immediately after trying his first prints in the 1960's because he felt that the etched line was very expressive and sensual. He began using electric tools to increase the differences in the

range of markmaking possibilities within the medium.⁴¹ It is because of this nontraditional experimentation that Dine is considered to have had more impact on contemporary printmaking than any other artist. He drove master printers crazy because he made a conscious effort to break the traditional rules of printmaking.

Dine has continued his use of objects as subject matter in his most recent work. In prints such as A Heart at the Opera (1983) and The Hammer (with watercolor marks) (1982) he has combined the autobiographical objects of tools and hearts within a single format, obviously as a symbol of his ongoing relationship with his wife. As further testament to his use of tools as subjects that relate a personal expressive vocabulary, Dine created a series of prints in 1983-84 entitled The New French Tools in which he used multiple plates of multiple tool forms to express his reminiscences of people and places where he had spent time during a three year stay in Paris.⁴² Although these later prints have at first impression the subject at hand, they are still handled in a strongly expressive technical manner, reiterating Dine's self-proclaimed Abstract Expressionist influences.⁴³

Dine has used objects in a highly personal and autobiographical manner. Because of this personal expressive use of common everyday objects, he has gone beyond the role of Pop artist. Interest in tools, robes and hearts as subjects for personal statements, his work is seen as "torrential outpourings of expressionist temperament, portrayed with suggestive sensuality."⁴⁴ Since the objects he uses are personal rather than artifacts of consumerism his work is much

more similar to that of the Abstract Expressionists than the true Pop artists.

As I have shown, the object as subject matter can be used in many different ways. By looking at Dadaism, Surrealism and Pop Art, we can see some of the varying ways in which objects have been used in the past. The object form has been used as a means of expression of self, as a form that can be metamorphisized into things created from imagination, as a technical means of expression, as a social statement on society, and as a means of creating art which questions art itself. Oldenburg has used objects as tools for the creation of his own world. Johns has used common objects to attract attention to the things that go unnoticed as well as to question the basic premises of art itself. Dine has used common everyday objects from his surroundings and his personal objects as an autobiographical visual vocabulary of his feelings and experiences. All three of these artists have been called Pop artists. Even though they use subject matter that can be called Pop imagery, these artists are more closely related to the movement of Abstract Expressionism since all other facets of their work tie in with the Expressionists' ideas. They can be considered "second generation Abstract Expressionists" rather than Pop artists.

ENDNOTES

¹Barbara Rose, "Claes Oldenburg's Soft Machines," Artforum, (Summer 1967), p. 31.

²Paul Bianchini, ed., Claes Oldenburg: Drawings and Prints (London and New York: Chelsea House, 1969), p. 12.

³Ibid., p. 13-14.

⁴Ibid., p. 15.

⁵Ibid., p. 17.

⁶Ibid., p. 18.

⁷Jeanne Siegel, "How to Keep Sculpture Alive In and Out of a Museum," Arts Magazine, (Sept.-Oct. 1969), p.26

⁸John Coplans, "The Artist Speaks: Claes Oldenburg," Art in America, (March-April 1969), p. 73.

⁹Rose, "Soft Machines," p. 32.

¹⁰Coplans, p. 74.

¹¹Harris Rosenstein, "Climbing Mt. Oldenburg," Art News, (Feb. 1966), p. 57.

¹²Bianchini, p. 19.

¹³Siegel, p. 26.

¹⁴Coplans, p. 72.

¹⁵Rosenstein, p. 24.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 57-58

¹⁷G. R. Swenson, "What is Pop Art? Part II" Art News, (Feb. 1984), p. 43, and 67.

¹⁸Riva Castleman, Jasper Johns A Print Retrospective (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1986), p. 16.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 44.

- ²⁰Swenson, "What is Pop, Part II," p. 67.
- ²¹Castleman, p. 18.
- ²²Ibid., p. 35.
- ²³Ibid., p. 36.
- ²⁴Fairfield Porter, "The Education of Jasper Johns," Art News, (Feb. 1964), p. 61.
- ²⁵Richard S. Field, Jasper Johns Prints 1960-1970 (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), nonpaginated.
- ²⁶Castleman, p. 18.
- ²⁷Ibid., p. 20.
- ²⁸Ibid., p. 45.
- ²⁹Ibid., p. 14.
- ³⁰Patricia Kaplan, "On Jasper Johns' According to What," Art Journal, (Spring 1976), p. 247.
- ³¹Ibid., p. 247.
- ³²Ibid., p. 247.
- ³³Jasper Johns, "Thoughts on Duchamp," Art in America, (July-Aug. 1969), p. 31.
- ³⁴G.R. Swenson, "What is Pop Art?" Art News, (Nov. 1963), p. 25.
- ³⁵Ellen G. D'Oench, and Jean E. Feinberg, Jim Dine Prints, 1977-1985 (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, Inc., 1986), p.1.
- ³⁶Williams College Artist-in-Residence Program, Jim Dine Prints: 1970 1977. (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, Inc., 1977), p. 73.
- ³⁷Ibid., p. 37.
- ³⁸Ibid., p. 28.
- ³⁹Ibid., p. 37
- ⁴⁰D'Oench, p. 1.
- ⁴¹Williams College, p. 28.

⁴²D'Oench, p. 148.

⁴³G.R. Swenson, "What is Pop Art?" p. 25.

⁴⁴Williams College, p. 37.

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