

**Claes Oldenburg**  
Born Stockholm, 1929  
Resident New York City

A&T



Walt Disney Productions is a corporation whose participation we hoped from the outset of A & T to enlist, because of their enormous production capacity and their sophisticated research into problems of visual illusion. No more strenuous attempt to contract any company was made than our effort with Disney, or its partner firm, WED Enterprises. In January, 1968, Missy Chandler made the first of numerous calls to Roy O. Disney, Sr. in an attempt to arrange a meeting with MT and him. Eight months after that initial call, a meeting was finally arranged in Glendale between MT, Missy Chandler, Irena Shapira, and WED's Neal E. McClure, Secretary (Legal Counsellor) and Richard F. Irvine, Executive Vice-President. McClure and Irvine were not terribly interested in A & T, but neither were they eager to offend Mrs. Chandler, and they promised to consider the idea in further meetings with their Head of Design and Mr. Disney. On October 2, McClure wrote,

My Dear Mrs. Chandler:

After checking further both here at WED and at the Studio, we must advise you that we are not in a position to participate in your imaginative 'Art and Technology' plan.

As discussed with you last Thursday, there are several reasons persuading against our participation, the two most cogent being our extreme work pressure to complete Walt Disney World in Florida, and the highly confidential nature of much of the work performed here at WED.

Despite this letter, MT urged Missy to continue arguing our case, and she succeeded in arranging a second meeting at Disney on October 31 with the company's Head of Design, John Hench and Executive Vice-President, E. Cardon Walker. MT was in New York on A & T business at the time of this meeting, and received a phone call from the Museum, informing him that WED had committed to the program as a Patron Sponsor. Disney's legal counsellor Neal McClure later requested and obtained an interesting alteration in the contract—one of tenor, rather than substantive legal import—by "reserving the right to the Company to *disapprove* any artist or project."

MT immediately called Claes Oldenburg and went to see him. Oldenburg had been approached by us some time previously, but had not responded favorably to our invitation, primarily because there was no contracted corporation relevant to his needs at the time, but also because of doubts he had about working with company people, engineers and administrators. He was skeptical about the advantages industry could provide in executing his work, and about the necessity for his being at a company in person: "As far as I'm concerned," he said to the *New York Times*, "the Yellow Pages provide enough technology for me." From our point of view, however, to have an artist of Oldenburg's importance and prestige working under the project was critical at this early moment in the development of A & T. Such a collaboration as that between Oldenburg and Disney would, we knew, lend concreteness to the public conception of the program, which was at that time rather vague. It would also, we felt, prompt participation by other corporations and strengthen the preliminary interest we were encountering in discussions with other artists. (We made an effort to involve Dubuffet at around this time for similar reasons.) We persuaded Oldenburg to come to Los Angeles and tour Disney's facilities. He came on November 17, 1968, and was shown various workshops and research areas in Glendale and several rides at Disneyland by John Hench.

Hench and Oldenburg were at first wary of each other, and MT was put in the position of attempting to explain one to the other and somehow alleviate the sense of mutual suspicion. By the time Oldenburg left, he was convinced that Disney *could* be of enormous benefit to him,\* and even displayed a degree of excitement about certain plans he was already envisioning. He said he would draft a schedule for visits to Disney throughout the coming year. Oldenburg remained cautious, however, as he indicated in a letter to MT on December 14, 1968: "John Hench's quote in the Glueck article\*\* certainly makes me pause. I wonder to what extent he will assume the position of spokesman for what might be done. The trouble with WED is that they are ideologically involved as well as technologically, as we know."† Nevertheless, he then sent John Hench and us a proposed schedule:

Set up housing	March 2–16	2 weeks
Describe project		
Main work on project	May	4½ weeks
Additional work on project	June 29–July 12	2 weeks (if necessary)
Additional work on project	Nov. or Dec. (or Feb. '70)	3 weeks (if necessary)

Disney was still worried. Neal McClure called Betty Asher on January 30, and she reported this conversation in a memo to MT:

A Mr. McClure called from WED Enterprises. They would like to see a proposal of just what Claes intends doing at Disney. Also, they have not had the opportunity of approving the artist or the project as per the contract. They would like that opportunity.

He would like to have you call Mr. Hench. They are afraid they might get a Kienholz-type product and, after all they are a family directed-operation.

I assured him that "set up housing" just meant that Claes was planning on taking some time to find his own digs convenient to their facility. He was afraid that he expected them to provide housing there.

\*Much later, Oldenburg told Max Kozloff that he was fascinated with the idea of working at Disney because he "wanted to know what people who have been *making animals without genitalia for thirty years are like.*"

\*\*Grace Glueck, "Los Angeles Museum Plays Matchmaker," *New York Times*, April 17, 1969.

†In another letter written by Oldenburg at this time, but not mailed, he said, "The name of my piece for Disney, Maurice, will be *Leaves of Grass*. Disneyland must have its Whitman section full of homosexual streetcar conductors."

On February 21 Claes wrote John Hench:

I will be detained on projects in NYC until about the first of May—I hope to spend the whole month of May on the coast. At that time I hope to have obtained residence facilities in the Balboa area, in order to commute to the Disneyland workshops. My preference is to have a basic studio at Disneyland and from there visit, whenever necessary, the Glendale workshop. At Disneyland, I'll need an office space to draw in and to make some small models and to write on my typewriter—a place that is relatively private and quiet. It doesn't have to be large.

After getting settled I would expect to continue exploring the facilities for a few more days and then to retire if that's the word to formulate a project on the basis of and arising out of what I've seen. I want to stress this approach—that I won't be arriving with a project ready to go under my arm. I will bring a notebook of possibilities and some preconceptions . . . but I can't say in advance what area of the many offered by WED workshops will be drawn upon.

If you bear with me, by the end of May, something definite should be in the works. If it is, I'll be returning in the summer and late fall to complete it, and in the meantime maybe can direct it from NYC. Maybe it will go by itself the times I'm not there.

On May 1, Oldenburg settled into a motel near the Disney plant in Glendale. He worked daily throughout the month. This was a productive time, and visitors to his workroom at WED found a fertile body of proposals and models being developed by Oldenburg. [1] One writer was impressed by these plans sufficiently to plan a book on "Oldenburg in Disneyland." As Claes prepared to leave at the end of May he drew up two general projects for consideration by WED, which included many separate sections and models he had been preparing. He referred to one project as a *Theatre of Objects* or *Oldenburg's Ride*. The other was the *Giant Icebag*. He explained,

The practical way to approach working with any corporation or any material or technique supplier is to see where their services fit in with your needs. And first of all I had to ask myself what is it in my work that requires technological assistance on the scale that this program will give me. Most of the time I don't use technology very much. There was a class of objects that had been contemplated and suggested in '65, and these were all of a kinetic sort—they moved or they broke or they reconstituted themselves, or they peeled themselves—they went through simple motions. And so knowing that I was going to get into a technological program, I went through all my notes and I selected those things which seemed to fit the program, and those are the notes that I brought out with me, such as the one with the jello mold [2],

which dates from 1965. All of those ideas with breaking things and changing things are all of my notebooks from 1965. When I arrived at Disney, I looked around for the service that would fit me, and they were then engaged in preparing the haunted house which opened later. But in the haunted house they had all these effects where things were metamorphosing and they were using mirrors and stuff, so I went to the library and I got books on simple magic and also books on simple mechanics. I tried to fit my thoughts about what I needed in technology into what services they provided at that moment.

*Oldenburg's Ride* was to be a large series of magical, mechanical sculptures, enclosed in an amphitheatre of the artist's design. [3, on the right] By May 23, when MT made his last visit to Oldenburg's workroom at Disney, Claes was considering designs of the following component sculptures for the theatre:

a giant toothpaste tube [3, center], which rises and falls, and is raised by the paste

a colossal rising and falling screw which releases oil at its top

a large object, as a car or piano, made in soft material, mounted on a machine that would twist, compress and change its shape (the machine was suggested by Disney's materials-testing device)

a large undulating green jello mold [2], with fruits suspended inside

a bowl of cornflakes and banana slices falling from an inverted disk [4]

a cup which would break and then reconstitute itself

a plate, on which eggs are cracked, thrown, scrambled and then reconstituted

a pie case, in which pies would gradually disappear as if they were being eaten, and then be reassembled

a 'chocolate earthquake' made of giant chocolate bars, which would shift precariously, crack open, and settle back (suggested by a magazine advertisement and the then current earthquake scare in California) [1, 5, 6—a small sculpture made of broken Hershey



bars and sealed with resin, 7—an “earthquake segment” of cardboard and fabric]

Several metamorphic pieces, in which metamorphosis would actually occur, including a banana transformed into a fan [Claes labeled it a “fanana”: in this connection Oldenburg recalls Jim Dine’s painting, *The Plant Becomes a Fan*, of 1961-63].

Common to all these proposals were phenomena of disintegration, transmogrification, and reconstitution. Oldenburg speaks eloquently of these projected works as having to do with “the tragedy of brokenness” and the denial of that tragedy—“As in a dream,” he said, “where your teeth fall out, but on awakening you find out they didn’t.” These works relate strongly to both dream

states and to various superstitions (“If you encounter a situation in real life which has occurred to you before, you *do* it”). They also call to mind the curious sense of denial, or temporal negation, suggested by film footage when it is run backward. Oldenburg’s illusionist proposals comment serio-comically on American inclinations toward escapism and unfounded optimism—the “happy-ending” syndrome.

These sculpture designs were to be developed, from their state as sketches and collages, into working models by Disney craftsmen and model builders. Oldenburg was encouraged by the company to make as many proposals as he liked, and he was assured that all his plans for illusionist works in the *Theatre of Objects* were well within the capabilities of Disney’s technology.

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