

chart

Whitney Oldenburg: Perpetually Adaptive

So much stuff. Overwhelming amounts of it. She filled her studio with foam and wire and paint and fabric and string and glue. Every type of glue. There were tubes and bottles and cans of it, Elmer's glue and the industrial types. Bins and heaping bags of found and purchased items were dragged into her studio for the six-week residency. She stockpiled her assigned space with bits and pieces of things that were hard to ascribe. And while there, she ordered more. Plaster and resin arrived daily. All of this stuff was then transfigured and left the Florida studio in the form of sculptures, wall reliefs, paintings, and drawings. Abstractions, large and small, free standing and wall work, crated and shipped back to her Brooklyn studio. It was a transformation on a scale that I have rarely experienced in my three decades of teaching.

This was my first introduction to Whitney Oldenburg's studio practice. It was the summer of 2018 at the Atlantic Center for the Arts. I was the resident critic charged to work alongside a driven and diverse group of visual artists. Invention was Oldenburg's force. And she was honest, curious, and pure in her experimentation and vision. Yet most impressive was her stupendous drive to transform material into new and imaginative forms. Familiar and strange, her works stretched Modernist histories that ranged from Arte Provera, Lee Bontecou's Post War abstractions, to the Neo-Dada work of Robert Rauschenberg.

It may be too self-evident but not inappropriate to ground Oldenburg's work in New Materialism and affect theory; art that is sensory, emotional, and embodied. Yet her work does indeed achieve specific intensities and moods, and it manifestly elicits a broad range of affective responses in her viewers. The work also emphasizes change, becoming, and interconnectivity as fundamental aspects of existence, redefining our understanding of reality as a dynamic process. And it is here, in a studio practice seeped in the condition of allostasis—meaning variable and standing, stability through change—that Oldenburg's work flourishes.

Building dimensional shapes that are often symmetrical but never mathematically precise, Oldenburg arrives at sculptural wholes. These strange wholes are excessively ornamented with surface articulations, textures and color that suggest complex but unknown organisms. In one such sculpture, large fleshy folds are embellished with paper matches, each torn carefully from a matchbook. Their small white sulfur heads are aligned in bands evoking regiments of decorative teeth that dot the edges along the object's irregular concentric pleats. Here the uniquely plaster shapes give the sculpture a headless bivalve reference yet the meaty juxtaposition against a flat plane of patinated sheet metal evokes a technological origin. Another new sculpture is composed of repetitive forms cast from a Dyson air purifier. Here the objects that occupy the negative spaces of the modern appliance design are akin to loafs of rising bread instead of perfect geometric lozenges.

Oldenburg's drawings are quick and contrast the elaborately built and carefully garnished sculptures. Calling the drawings organic abstractions would not be inaccurate and many of her compositions reveal rubbing processes and intuitive linework. While some works on paper display densely layered passages of charcoal, other works dash off series of quirky radial patterns. If one is looking to attribute references, they could be described as observational drawings depicting the organic material growing in the warm confines of a petri dish or as quicker versions of early Ellsworth Kelly drawings. But most simply look like material studies, investigations into basic abstract patterns and motifs and can also look like coral polyps. And, of course, the drawings, humming with invention, are also inspirations for Oldenburg's sculptures.

chart

74 FRANKLIN ST
NEW YORK NY 10013
646 799 9319

CHART-GALLERY.COM

chart

Within environments of stuff, Oldenburg's neuroplasticity is sparked. She is ecstatic with change and always arrives at someplace fantastical and abstract. Adaptive variation is always at work in Oldenburg's studio. Pattern of freezing, unfreezing, and refreezing is how organizational science refers to successful cycles of change. For Oldenburg, the desired condition of too much stuff simply represents the chaotic 'unfreezing' period of this cycle. Yet unlike many of us, this state does not overwhelm her. Instead, it leads to extraordinary sculptures, stable in form but perpetually adaptive and perennially imaginative.

— Michelle Grabner

chart

74 FRANKLIN ST
NEW YORK NY 10013
646 799 9319

CHART-GALLERY.COM