



Shopping

A Century of Art and Consumer Culture
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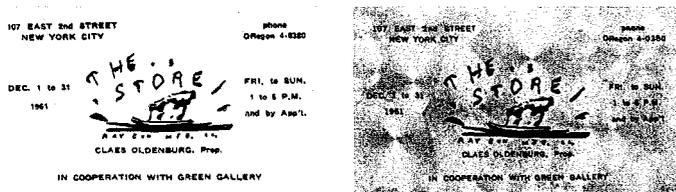
The Consumer Article in the Art World: On the Para-Economy of American Pop Art

Michael Lüthy

In the 1960s art appeared to rid itself in an offensive manner of everything that up until then could have been regarded as part of its concept. Beauty, exclusiveness, individuality, significance, artistry, complexity, depth, originality were at a stroke no longer mandatory categories. It was not the defence of artistic autonomy, which immediately before was still held in esteem by American and European Abstraction, but its abandonment that was promoted to the artistic programme. American Pop Art manifested the radical shift in position in a particularly striking manner. As art in this sphere began to approach its 'other being' – consumption and its banal products – an important taboo seemed to be broken. Both appeared to merge into one another, not only by reason of their choice of subject but also because of the production of pieces in large numbers, as happened in the case of the so-called 'multiples'. Nevertheless, Pop Art was only truly 'popular', as its name suggests, to a limited extent. 'Popular' was an iconographic reference to the everyday phenomena of the modern world of goods; what remained 'unpopular' about it, however, was the fact that the phenomena acted thematically against its own matter-of-factness. Pop Art was in no way a mere reflection of reality, but a transfer operation that took place between thing and likeness – or, as Roy Lichtenstein formulated it, a 'significant interaction'.¹ Something was becoming visible for Pop Art to combine with the contemporaneously emerging conceptual art: artists not only regarded themselves as producers of artefacts, but simultaneously questioned the cultural, institutional and discursive 'frameworks', in which the production and reception of art took place. Thus, the apparent convergence of art and consumer goods in no way caused the old differences between art and non-art – between appearance and

being, the aesthetic and the functional, the 'superficial' and the 'profound' – to disappear, but allowed them to break out anew and in a particularly explosive manner. It was precisely Pop Art, which appeared to strip art of its attributes, that, because of its reflexivity and conceptuality, contributed significantly to the fact that art could assert itself in a period of change and even radically renew itself. But this took place only through a radical shift of paradigms. If Cezanne, according to his famous dictum, worked in parallel with nature, the Pop artists did so in parallel with contemporary consumer culture. At the same time they recognised that the argument with it required not only a new spectrum of themes, but above all a decisive new definition of artistic production, one that transcended the traditional craftsman's trade. To that end, however, they needed to retain a pre-requisite significant for art, the equivalence of what was portrayed and the method of portrayal, content and form.

'I find it quite natural', said Claes Oldenburg, 'to work under the conditions of American technical civilisation. I know every effect, every result of the technical working processes and I believe I can control them.'² However prosaic it may sound, Oldenburg at the same time believed obstinately in the old dream of a reconciliation between art and life. He wished to attain it through the reconciliation of human being and thing. 'This elevation of sensibility above bourgeois values will [hopefully] destroy the notion of art and give the object back its power. Then the magic inherent in the universe will be restored and people will live in sympathetic religious exchange with the objects surrounding them. They will not feel so different from these objects, and the animate/inanimate schism will be mended.'³ Oldenburg criticised the alienation of everyday life in general just as much as the specific alienation of art from everyday life. In exchange he offered a 'shapeless'



Claes Oldenburg, Business Cards for *The Store* 1961

universalism, which placed everything in a relationship with everything else, his ideal picture of an 'erotic-political-mystical' art, as he described it.⁴

In 1961 he opened a shop, *The Store*, in his workshop in New York's Lower East Side, in the wider context of which the 'Lingerie Counter' also came into being.⁵ The shop was not only the point of sale, but also the place of production. Its stock covered the whole spectrum of everyday needs, just like the items in the over-filled shops in the neighbourhood, from foodstuffs through clothes and shoes to writing materials. Everything was made from the same material – plaster-covered muslin – and painted in strong colours, as if in an Expressionist style.⁶ Oldenburg's portrayal of reality worked on several levels. First of all it related to the everyday object itself, but of greater importance to him, however, was the 'imitation' of the different fields of activity, which allowed him to become one with the pastry-cook, tailor, bridal wear designer, butcher, sign-writer and shoe-maker. As salesman it also fell to him to distribute what had been produced. The 'political' dimension, on which he set his sights, consequently lay in a return to the non-alienated craftsman's existence of a pre-capitalist economy in the midst of an American society based on the division of labour. In the art world of *The Store* there was not a single thing that he could not potentially have been able to produce and sell – though at the price of the transference of the things into art, of the individual articles into non-consumable and dysfunctional statues, of the shop as a whole into an 'environment'.

As has already been mentioned, all objects were made from the same material, whether it was a question of an envelope, a sausage or a gym shoe. The surfaces were also exactly the same; everything exhibited

the same fissured surface, smoothed by the glossy paint; everything appeared slightly deformed, melted on and lumpy. Some of the objects depicted Oldenburg in relief. They shared part of an unspecified background, in front of which they presented themselves and appeared as if broken off from a larger, imaginary context. The continuum, which began to evolve between the things, did not originate from the objects themselves – what have gym shoes and sausages in common after all – but from the unchanging three-dimensional treatment. It transformed the variance of the objects and materials into a cosmos 'of the same flesh'. *The Store* was, as Oldenburg said, a 'super texture super-collage', a far-reaching and encroaching, pulsating organism.⁷

Oldenburg's osmotic world of goods loosened the relationship between signs and the designated, in their uniform shapelessness, the individual things were suddenly several things at once. The notices and drawings about *The Store* contain lists of form-analogies, which immediately allow the order that they purport to create, to collapse. According to Oldenburg the following 'equate with each other': 'Hair and Bacon; Earrings, Airplane Wheels, Brassiere and Breasts; Obelisk and Ironing Board; Frankfurter in Bun, Airplane and rolled Newspaper; Hat, Lips, Banana Split and Gun; etc.'⁸ The 'de-formation' of individual objects and the dissolving of their utilisation connections open up novel connection possibilities for totally disparate things. 'The erotic or the sexual is the root of "art", its first impulse', said Oldenburg. 'Today sexuality is more directed, or here where I am in America at this time, toward substitutes, for example, clothing rather than the person, fetishistic stuff, and this gives the object an intensity and this is what I try to project.'⁹ The desire of the mythical sculptor Pygmalion was directed towards his marble sculpture of a young woman; Aphrodite took pity on him, animated her and gave her to Pygmalion as his wife.



Claes Oldenburg, Interior of *The Store*
(Sketch for a Poster, Not Executed), 1961

Oldenburg's desire is directed towards ice-cream cones and micro-phones, towards swimwear and pieces of roast meat. The 'bride', also on sale in *The Store*, was neither more physical nor more desirable than the gym shoe, the same sexual energy being present in everything. Thus, not only did Oldenburg bring about the collapse of the capitalist system in terms of the division of labour but also the pointed fetishisation of the world of goods, which for marketing purposes enhances saleability. His occupation of the object world was as complete as it was consistent in its intensity. 'Store: 1. Eros. 2. Stomach. 3. Memory. Enter my Store', is how he invites us in *Store Days*.¹⁰

Oldenburg approached his goal of the convergence of art and Life by allowing their energies to merge into one another. His 'animism', which gives life to things, follows in the tradition of sculpture, which since time immemorial has worked with the dialectic of inanimate material and Living, 'animated' effect. He coupled this energy, along with the desire structure of the fetishism of goods, to his 'erotic-political-mystical' art. Oldenburg's *Store* neutralised the tradition of plastic art in that he retained it and at the same time liquidated it. The 'anthropomorphising' of the world of things continued the tradition of plastic art, which for centuries had dedicated itself almost exclusively to the human figure. At the same time it was released from this thematic fixation, which, from the point of view of a living world shaped by things, had begun to become outmoded.

Together with other artists in 1964, Oldenburg participated in a New York gallery project, *The American Supermarket*. Like his *Store* it was based on the idea of transferring the irritating closeness between art and goods to a presentation and sales context, but aimed at the cool, hygienic 'Look' of a modern outlet. Here, too, the transfer affected the

room itself, as it oscillated between art and non-art. It was entered through a turnstile built by Richard Artschwager, and the 'wares' of different 'producers' were available from freezers and shelves. On offer, among other things, were Tom Wesselmann's oversized turkey-cock relief made from plastic, a picture by Roy Lichtenstein of the same subject matter, and Robert Watts' chrome steel eggs, wax tomatoes and plaster pumpernickels. Warhol used the situation for if not his best, in the light of the borderline between art and non-art, produced and made problematical by Pop Art, certainly his most pertinent work. Under a silk-screen diptych of two Campbell's cans was a stack built with original cans of soup, signed and declared to be art or 'Warhols', costing many times the normal price. Anyone who decided to buy such a can had – exaggerating slightly – to be schooled in concept art and already to have passed the acid test of endorsing Duchamp's ready-mades. Warhol split the artificial production up into the separate production of a non-artistic object and its subsequent transformation, without alteration, into a work of art. While the signing de-functionalised the can of soup and while, conversely, enjoyment of the soup would have meant 'destruction of art', it was clear that the production of goods and the production of art were counterbalanced. Thus Warhol's transformation affected the thing itself to a lesser extent and the thinking about it to a much greater one – through notions of art, institutions, authorship etc. It was precisely the indistinguishableness of art and non-art that allowed the differences between artworks and goods to be set against each other in such an intransigent manner.

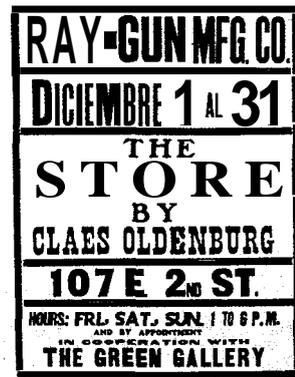
If *The American Supermarket* blurred the boundary between the distribution of art and goods in an amusing and playful manner, Christo's *Store Fronts*, shown in the same year and for the first time in New York, gave rise to another, 'darker' form of functional subversion: an abrupt



Claes Oldenburg **Sketch for a Scene in a Performance** 1961



Claes Oldenburg, Notebook page **Suspended Bi-plane** 1962



Claes Oldenburg, Poster for **The Store** 1961

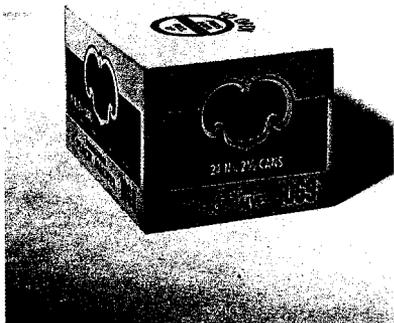
stop to the movement of goods. The first wooden Store Fronts were created from pieces that Christo had found on demolition sites in the Lower East Side, where the old hardware shops had given way to more rational and more profitable sales structures. The new compilations of debris for Store Fronts in gallery rooms led to a complex spatial-functional de- and re-contextualisation. The paradox of the presentation of an architectonic exterior in an inside room was made even more pointed by the fact that the interior of the exterior in question was hung across it – whereby the situation became still more complicated since it was merely a question of façades and the interior did not actually exist. Thus, what was hanging was not something but nothing, and it became less a question of screening than of visualising, in order to produce the seam between what was present and what was absent. The hanging revealed first of all the necessity for the displays of long-vanished shop windows to remain invisible. At least Christo's early work – which decisively oversteps the context of Pop Art, possibly does not even belong to it – has to cross the 'tragic' trend reminiscent of Surrealism, the hiding and burying of things and the desire to see death and Eros.

Not hung of necessity, however, was the shop-window front of the New York department store where Warhol staged his first 'art exhibition' in 1961 – which, nevertheless, remained totally unnoticed. Here he presented five of the first works produced following his decision to give up his successful career as a commercial artist. They were based upon advertisements and comic strips, and provided, since no gallery would show them, the background for clothes dummies. It was a transitional moment in several respects. The art exhibition in the display window marked precisely the interface between Warhol's two lives as a commercial designer and free artist, the precarious intermediate stop between

department store and gallery. The pictures not only stood behind the dummies, which were presenting the latest 'costumes', but themselves revolved around the theme of metamorphosis. In two of them were painted advertisements for nose operations, hair colouring and muscle building, in three the comic figures Superman, Popeye and Little King – fantasy figures, all of which possessed the potential to rise from a humdrum and petit bourgeois persona to an ideal, bursting with vigour.

While Warhol's success as a commercial artist rested upon a pointedly intimate and characteristic trade style, he found his artistic style exactly the reverse and thoroughly paradoxical in its apparently impersonal approach. It led him to the pictorial language of the serialised, reproductive silk-screen pictures. Here Warhol tested the tension between the singular and the mass-produced, repetition and difference. The themes that interested him were things, which no individual had made and yet which possessed individuality, which were 'unique' although they existed in large numbers: Campbell's soup cans, regarded as 'classical' because their label design had remained unchanged for decades, or the flashy boxes in which 'Brillo' pads were packaged. Warhol's first method of dealing pictorially with such phenomena was the elimination of everything handwritten, which the first pictures definitely still showed. It gave way to a method of production that adjusted to the manufacture of the things to such an extent that the printing of a packaging carton only differed from the printing of Warhol's reproduction in that the former was undertaken by a machine while for the latter Warhol was himself the 'machine'. Not only did the object assume a reproductive and serial identity, Warhol's pictures and sculptures matched this.

How essential this parallelism of subject matter and production form was becomes clear when one compares Warhol with, for example,



Andy Warhol **Del Monte** 1964



Andy Warhol **Brillo** 1964

Wayne Thiebaud. Thiebaud, who considered 'painting is more important than art',¹¹ attempted in pictures such as the *Cake Counter* of 1963 to continue a great painting tradition in the light of contemporary aesthetic phenomena – and thus acquired the nickname 'the Chardin of the cake shops'.¹² To call him a Pop artist because of his choice of motif would be to do justice neither to Pop Art nor to Thiebaud, as his pictures would then have to appear as variants of earlier work, though inevitably backward in their handiwork. Down to the individual brush stroke, Thiebaud's reverence for Morandi reveals itself, an artist with whom no one from Pop (or Proto-Pop) wished to speak because of the fact that he painted banal bottles. Like Morandi, Thiebaud created an atmosphere of contemplative peace, which sought to capture the 'quiet life' of things, while the pastose brushwork round the objects served to evoke both their materiality as well as their 'fraternal' togetherness. The contrast with Warhol's diptych on *Campbell's Soup Cans* [Chicken with Rice, Bean with *Bacon*] of 1962 could not be more distinct, not only on account of the absence of the painted object but also from the point of view of composition. The two cans, one on each table, float without any atmospheric embedding on the white primed surface. Even the most minuscule indication of location, which no still life omits, is left out: the horizontal line, which depending upon the picture means a desk or the edge of a room. Whilst every connection relating to situation is missing, there still remains the question as to why the right can is so much smaller than the left one. Without place or time, without reference to the picture surface and the beholder and without making any determinable statement, the simultaneously banal and epiphanic cans remain encapsulated in nothingness.

The ambivalence between singularity and mass-production that Warhol sought has left the argument still unresolved as to whether his view of

the new world of things turned out to be subversive or affirmative, pessimistic or optimistic. The question ought for that reason to be unanswerable, because Warhol in a 'scandalous' manner seemed to find no difference between free choice and necessity, subjectivity and standardisation. 'I'm just the opposite,' said Warhol, 'I don't want it to be essentially the same – I want it to be *exactly* the same.'¹³ The Campbell's cans and the Brillo boxes announced that Warhol wanted it just as it already was and wanted to make it just like it had already been made. That was Warhol's caustic test of subjectivity and, simultaneously, what made him 'American' in such a provocative way.

¹ Bruce Glaser. 'Oldenburg. Lichtenstein. Warhol: A Discussion', *Artforum*, vol.4, Feb. 1966. p.22.

² Friedrich Bach, 'Interview with Claes Oldenburg', *Das Kunstwerk*, vol.28, no.3, 1975, p.13 (translation my own).

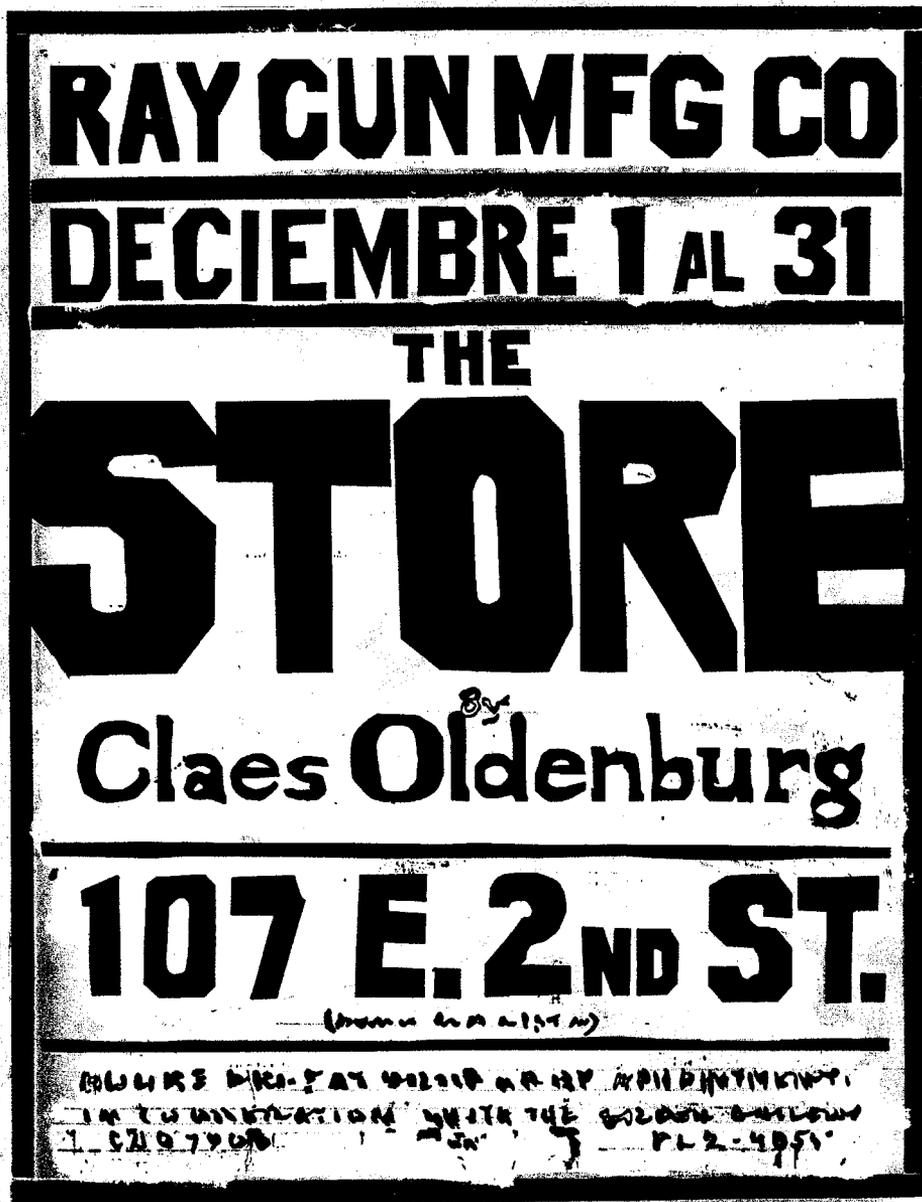
³ Claes Oldenburg, *Store Days, Documents from The Store 119611 and Ray Gun Theatre 119621*, selected by Claes Oldenburg and Emmett Williams. photographs by Robert R. McElroy, New York: Something Else Press 1967, p.60.

⁴ *Ibid.* p.39.

⁵ The 'Lingerie Counter' was created in 1962 as a display window item for the New Realists' exhibition at the Sidney Janis Gallery in New York, the first general display of the nascent Pop Art: see letter from Oldenburg to the Schirn Kunsthalle in Frankfurt, dated 17 April 2002.

⁶ In so doing Oldenburg crossed Abstract Expressionism with Pop Art: 'Lately I have begun to understand action painting, that old thing, in a new, vital and peculiar sense – as corny as the scratches on a New York wall and by parodying its corn I have [miracle] come back to its authenticity. I feel as if Pollock is sitting on my shoulder. or rather crouching in my pants!' *Store Days*, p.13.

⁷ *Ibid.* p.54.



Claes Oldenburg, Poster design for The Store 1961

⁸ Ibid. p.137.

⁹ Ibid. p.62.

¹⁰ Ibid. p.44

¹¹ Wayne Thiebaud, quoted in Adam Gopnik, 'An American Painter', in *Wayne Thiebaud: A Paintings Retrospective*, exh. cat., Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco 2000, p.40.

¹² Paul Richard, 'Luscious Realism: Thiebaud. Making the Mouth Water', *Washington Post*, 16 Dec. 1992, quoted in Steven A. Nash, 'Unbalancing Acts: Wayne Thiebaud Reconsidered', in *Wayne Thiebaud*, p.12.

¹³ Warhol Andy and Pat Hackett, *POPism: The Warhol Sixties*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich 1980, p.50.





Wayne Thiebaud **Cake Counter** 1963



Christo **Four Store Fronts Corner** 1964/65



American Supermarket Bianchini Gallery, New York 1964
 (Foto und © Henry Dauman/Dauman Pictures, NYC, 2002)



American Supermarket Bianchini Gallery, New York 1964
 (Foto und © Henry Dauman/Dauman Pictures, NYC, 2002)