

Note: This reading assignment also includes Hanson, Ugly Americans at the Whitney.

THE REALLY BIG ART OF CLAES OLDENBURG

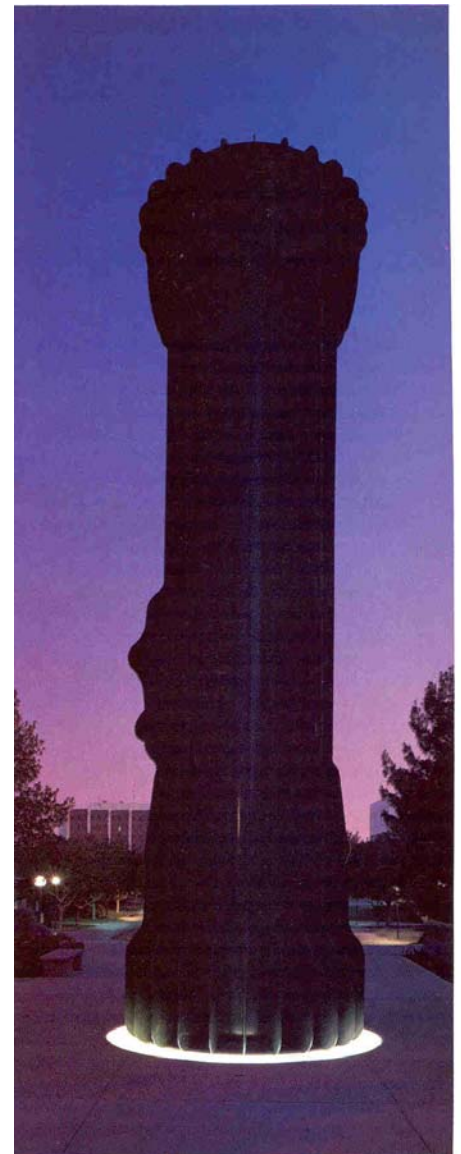
Beth Py-Lieberman, *Smithsonian*, August, 1995

By turning the ordinary flashlight, spoon or clothespin into a colossal monument, this artist chisels away at society's solemnity

Art is a funny thing. It can be at once obvious, obscure, beautiful and bizarre. But in the hands of Pop artist Claes Oldenburg, master of small things made bigger and hard things made softer, it can also be hilarious.



Was Oldenburg looking for laughs back in 1967 when he drew up plans to replace Chicago's Navy Pier with a spoon? Probably not. He's no comedian: "My single-minded aim is to give existence to fantasy," he has said. But never mind; it's pure delight to come upon his humongous spoon in the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden. The 51-foot-long utensil cradles a 1,200-pound maraschino cherry that sprays a cascade of water from its stem.



The 74,000-pound *Flashlight* stands beam-end down on the University of Nevada campus. *Spoonbridge and Cherry* (left) spans a reflecting pool in Minneapolis.



Since 1976, Oldenburg and his wife, art historian and artist Coosje van Bruggen, have conspired to bring really big sculptures of really ordinary things to public places. Their new book, *Large-Scale Projects*

(Monacelli Press), celebrates their collaborative efforts with an extraordinary collection of images, including the ones shown here. Oldenburg has also produced dozens of drawings of what he calls his "non-feasible" sculptures; a selection of these and other works is now on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles.

In a small park in the heart of Cleveland rests the 28-foot-tall *Free Stamp*, which was inaugurated on November 15, 1991, with a free lunch.

One sculpture he actually built is the 38-foot-tall *Flashlight* (above), which rises over the campus of the University of Nevada in Las

Vegas. It caused quite a stir in 1981 on its cross-country trip from the Connecticut foundry where it was made. Truck driver "Red" Morgan constantly fielded the same basic question on his CB radio from fellow drivers: "What the devil are you hauling?"

But for many Oldenburg fans, the question remains: Will he ever find a way to plunk down that huge melting Good Humor bar into the middle of New York's Park Avenue? Back in 1968 radical philosopher Herbert Marcuse predicted such a sculpture might bring on the revolution because, as he said, "then people cannot take anything seriously; neither their President, nor the Cabinet, nor the corporation executives." So far none of Oldenburg's sculptures have brought down the social order, but they have certainly given us all a lift.

By Beth Py-Lieberman

The blue blaze on the 68-foot-high *Mistos* (Match Cover), a work built for the 1992 Summer Olympics in Barcelona, Spain, is a reference to the Olympic Torch.



Towering over a subway exit, the 45-foot-tall *Clothespin* (1976) is a familiar Philadelphia landmark that anchors the plaza in front of City Hall.



At the Kröller-Müller Museum in the Netherlands, the 41-foot-tall *Trowel I* (1976) looks as if it were left behind by an enormous Dutch gardener.

