

Love requires an object,  
But this varies so much,  
Almost, I imagine,  
    Anything will do:  
When I was a child, I  
Loved a pumping-engine,  
Thought it every bit as  
    Beautiful as you.

–W. H. Auden, “Heavy Date”

As a child, Claes Oldenburg’s favorite toy was a maroon scale-model Chrysler Airflow with battery-powered headlights. The Proustian quality of Oldenburg’s imagination imprinted this image, with its rich overlay of childhood memories, with particular vividness. Since Oldenburg’s practice is always to use the chance events and occurrences of his life as material for the content of his art, it is not surprising that he eventually chose the Airflow, an object so charged with personal associations, as one of his major themes. His friendship with the film-maker and sculptor Robert Breer, whose father, Carl Breer, designed the classic 1936 Airflow, reinforced Oldenburg’s earlier associations. Through his friendship with Breer, Oldenburg was able to gain access to original documents and photographs which could serve as a point of departure for his own technological fantasies.

In dealing with the Airflow as a theme, Oldenburg as usual engaged in role playing. Indeed, the choice of an assembly-line creation (which ironically found its ultimate destiny as a mass-produced multiple) was deliberate. It allowed Oldenburg to make the transition from *The Home*, the general environment in which he created the *Bedroom* ensemble and the various domestic objects that accompanied it, to *The Factory*, the imaginary milieu in which he is now creating colossal objects like the *Giant Lipstick* and the *Icebag*, whose scale is so large they must be commercially fabricated. This role-playing aspect of Oldenburg’s career is central to his understanding of art as a kind of process which feeds off real life experience.

In 1961, he set himself up as an ersatz small businessman in *The Store* on Manhattan’s Lower East Side where he impersonated the butcher, the baker, and the tailor. Actually, the theme of the automobile appears in Oldenburg’s first environment which preceded his celebrated store—the *Street*, which was shown at the Judson gallery and reconstructed at the Reuben gallery in 1960. To begin with, Oldenburg saw the *Street* as full of death, and the car as man’s worst enemy. The lopsided misshapen reliefs of cars which appeared in the *Street* were distorted by angry Expressionist drawing. It is interesting to note that Oldenburg’s original conception of the car as a motif was as a graphic theme. The *Street* figures and objects emphasized contour; they were like large drawings whose background had been

cut away. In the Street, Oldenburg brought drawing into real space by hanging silhouetted shapes away from the wall. The Airflow multiple completes the process of making a graphic conception entirely actual; in this sense it is the first three-dimensional drawing. Behind the transparent plastic mold of the body of the Airflow, a photographic blow-up of Oldenburg's original sketch for the Airflow (which was to have been a soft sculpture) can be seen. This drawing, imitating the technological "style" of mechanical drawing, conforms to our traditional ideas of graphic art: it is on a flat surface, has depicted contours, and conventional shading. Yet the clear plastic relief covering is just as much drawing as the sheet of paper visible through the molded shell. Lines, instead of being depicted, are literal—formed by edges of the different parts of the car. Like Oldenburg's graphic work in general, the Airflow multiple is involved with reflections, transparency, tactile sensuousness, scale, depth and mass. The difference, however, is that in the drawings, these qualities are depicted illusionistically, whereas in the multiple, they are literally actual.

One of the reasons Oldenburg was so fascinated by the theme of the Airflow was because he could accept it as a problem with built-in limitations. Since he was consistently interested in the concept of "style" both as an art historical problem and in terms of personal expression, he enjoyed the challenge of a, so to speak, "styleless" motif, whose lines were predetermined by an industrial designer—in this case Carl Breer. Modifying a pre-established design to mass produce it in a new form, as a multiple work of art, Oldenburg sets an admirable example for technology in general: implicit in his feedback of a reprocessed form is a rejection of the waste which accompanies affluence. Once again, one sees parallels with the Street, which was made of second-hand discarded materials. "Everything must be used," Oldenburg wrote in his notebooks.

Because it challenged the concept of "style," Oldenburg found the Airflow congenial. The theme of the car itself interested him because the automobile is the machine closest to man. Serving as an extension of the human body, the car was a particularly appealing theme to Oldenburg, who relates all of his subjects in one way or another to the human body or to nature or to both.

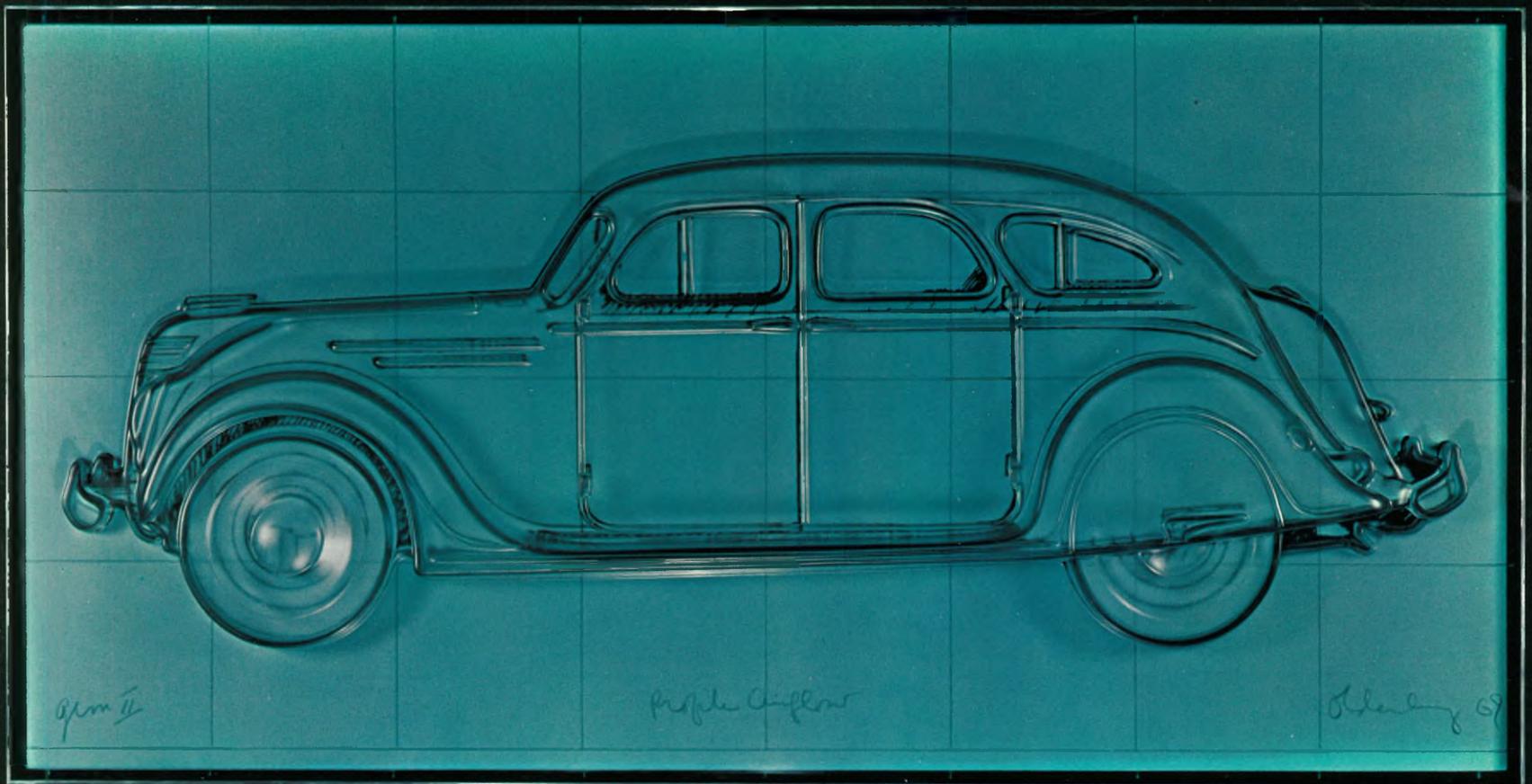
This analogy between automobile and body becomes even more obvious when we consider Oldenburg's soft sculptures relating to the Airflow theme: the muffler, dashboard, motor, etc. Dissecting the car into its component parts, Oldenburg becomes the anatomist of the inanimate, the Dr. Tulp of Detroit. And of course it is no accident that the parts of the Airflow resemble human organs so closely. At first Oldenburg had tried to realize the body of the car as a whole. He had planned to make a giant soft Airflow out of black vinyl stretched over a wooden armature resembling the wooden struts of the model airplanes he made as a child. But disaster plagued the project; and its partially finished hulk still sits gathering dust in Oldenburg's studio, looking like some great primitive beast in hibernation.

The symbolic content of machine imagery obviously also drew Oldenburg to the Airflow as a theme. For many modern artists, the automobile was a highly potent image, a kind of modern equivalent of the centaur. As the centaur had dignified for

the ancients man's gradual differentiation of himself from wild nature, the automobile might be seen as a modern hybrid, half way between man and machine, whose power and speed ideally summed up the modern experience.

In his search for a symbolic image that would most typically embody the spirit of the technological age, Oldenburg must have had as one of his associations the poet Marinetti's original Futurist manifesto, in which Marinetti evoked a Fellini-like image of the confrontation between nature and the machine: "A crowd of fishermen armed with their poles, and some gouty naturalists were already crowding around the wonder. With patient and meticulous care they put up a high framework and enormous iron nets to fish out my automobile like a great beached shark. The machine emerged slowly, shedding at the bottom like scales its heavy body so sound, and its soft upholstery so comfortable." Maximizing associations – with art history, with the immediate environment, with psychological overtones—Oldenburg finally chose as the color of the Airflow multiple a watery blue-green. The choice of this color together with the transparency of the material create a strange nature-machine image recalling not only Marinetti's description but also the swimming pools and beaches of Southern California, with their clear blue-green water and sunny reflections.

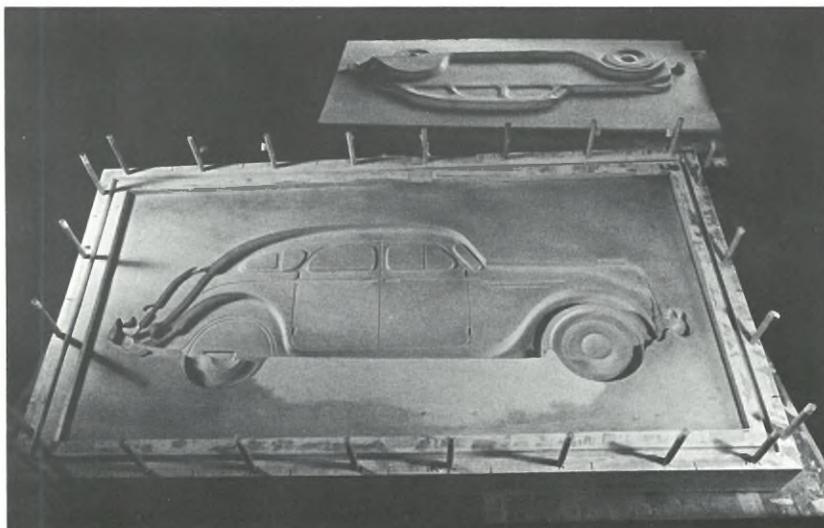
Thus the theme of the Airflow itself was one of the most powerful and association loaded Oldenburg has ever chosen. Deliberately choosing an industrial "classic" and refining its lines still further, Oldenburg wished to create the modern symbol imagined by Marinetti of "a race-automobile which seems . . . more beautiful than the



Victory of Samothrace.” Indeed, in Oldenburg’s mind, the “technological” style he began to use in 1964 to make the original sketches for the Bedroom represented a classical geometric antidote to the baroque quality of the soft sculpture. Proposing to transcend the traditional art historical categories of the “linear” and the “painterly” by oscillating from one to the other, Oldenburg equated the hard contours of mechanical drawings with a linear classicism, and the soft washes and deep spaces of his expressionist drawings with the painterly.

It was essentially the desire to work simultaneously in both styles – the personal subjective and painterly and the impersonal geometric machine style – that led him to reconsider the theme of the Airflow. Working on his first suite of color lithographs, the Notes published by Gemini in 1968, Oldenburg who constantly cultivates (one might even say craves) variety, decided to develop simultaneously another project which would be the opposite of the intimate personal statement of the Notes.

The realization of the Airflow multiple created many technical problems. Oldenburg described the qualities he wished to Ken Tyler – translucent material that would be firm but appear soft, be solid but appear fluid, be rigid but flexible enough to give if pressed. It might have been possible to find the proper mold and material if scale had not been the issue; but Oldenburg also wanted the relief to be quite large so that it would have the proper monumentality and degree of detail. Anything that was soft and pliable enough to have the qualities he wanted would, on the scale he demanded, have been too heavy and have sagged. After two and a half years of tests in a variety of factories and research concerns where eighteen techni-



cians investigated the problem, Oldenburg and Tyler ended up making the Airflow in Tyler's garage, where roughly one "car" a day can be "mass" produced. The casting material which was finally formulated gave both the transparent and elastomeric qualities Oldenburg desired and represents a breakthrough in plastic engineering.

Oldenburg claims that he chose a familiar image to emphasize "execution" as the uniquely personal factor. For this reason he spent over a year refining the wooden relief from which the molds were taken. In "tooling up" his model, he went through several stages including collages made with string, balsa, latex and gesso; a plaster relief simplified with the help of a Disney craftsman, and the final highly refined model for the plaster molds into which liquid plastic is poured and left to harden. Throughout the process, Oldenburg feared the result would be too cold and impersonal—a risk he took by incorporating so many mechanical elements.

If the Airflow multiple proves one thing, however, it is this: no artist of Oldenburg's calibre and powerful originality has anything to worry about the "dehumanizing" or "depersonalizing" aspects of technology. The unpredictable visual impact of the Airflow, in which contour reads as alternately concave and convex depending on how the image is focussed, added to its obvious expressiveness, reveals that the contemporary artist can master technology as his ancestors conquered nature, although probably with as much effort.

BARBARA ROSE  
1970

