FLOOR CAKE

Claes Oldenburg, 1962

Canvas filled with foam, rubber, and cardboard boxes, painted with synthetic polymer paint and latex;
4 ft. 10 in. x 9 ft. 6 ¼ in. x 4 ft. 10 ¾ in. (1.48 x 2.9 x 1.48 m)

OLDENBURG’S EARLY CAREER

The son of a Swedish diplomat, Claes Oldenburg was born in Stockholm, Sweden, in 1929, and lived in the United States and Norway before his family settled in Chicago in 1936. (He would become an American citizen at the age of twenty-four, in 1953.) Oldenburg completed undergraduate study at Yale University in literature and art history in 1950 and subsequently studied art under Paul Wieghardt at the Art Institute of Chicago from 1950 to 1954. During his first two years of art school, he also worked as a reporter at the City News Bureau of Chicago. Oldenburg moved to New York in 1956 and met several artists experimenting with performance art, including George Brecht, Allan Kaprow, George Segal, and Robert Whitman, who would usher him into the avant-garde downtown scene that gave rise to Happenings and hosted experimental dance and music as well.

In 1960, Oldenburg had his first major gallery show at the Judson Gallery, for which he constructed an environment titled The Street. It consisted of silhouettes made from trash that Oldenburg had collected on the streets of New York, set in a landscape of yet more garbage strewn on the floor—all of which became the backdrop for Oldenburg’s first Happening, Snapshots from the City, which culminated in a fake yard sale of the objects in the show. A year later, Oldenburg staged his next project, The Store, first in a gallery show and then in a storefront on New York’s Lower East Side, a working-class neighborhood full of secondhand “dime stores.” For his store, Oldenburg created dozens of plaster sculptures that replicated mundane everyday items, from baked potatoes to t-shirts. To make them, Oldenburg fashioned an armature or skeleton out of chicken wire and then draped the wire with cloth soaked in plaster, a pasty mixture of lime, water, and sand that hardens when it dries. He then painted the dried plaster using commercial enamel paint to give each object a garish, colorful finish, often with visible, drippy brushstrokes that poked fun at AbEx painting. The objects were lumpy and typically exaggerated in scale, making them quite amusing, especially when gathered en masse in a crowded storefront. Humor is a strategy that Oldenburg employed consistently to break down the barriers between “high art” and everyday life; in the case of The Store, the point of stocking a storefront with sculptural objects was to demonstrate, wryly, that there is no significant difference between the commerce of the art world and that of the thrift store, despite the art world’s pretentions otherwise.

In 1963, less than two years after creating The Store, Oldenburg presented for the first time yet another innovation in three-dimensional art, his so-called “soft sculptures.” He continued referencing the stuff of everyday life, but wanted to exaggerate the scale of his objects even further in order to emulate the monumentality of luxury cars and grand pianos, which he had seen in showroom windows not far from his New York gallery. Plaster would be too unwieldy at that size, so he experimented with using sewn fabric, possibly after having seen the work of Yayoi Kusama, whose studio was in the same building as Oldenburg’s and who was covering everyday objects with stuffed fabric protrusions. Expanding on his plaster sculptures of foodstuffs, Oldenburg’s first three soft sculptures were of a hamburger, a slice of cake, and an ice cream cone, and he went on to craft many more, of objects as wide-ranging as a toilet (which dangles pathetically from the ceiling when installed) and a drum
set. He also played with motorizing soft sculptures, creating a number of versions of an inflatable ice pack through a collaboration initiated by Robert Rauschenberg and Billy Klüver’s groundbreaking program Experiments in Art and Technology, which paired artists with engineers to realize technically difficult projects.

FLOOR CAKE: ANALYSIS

Floor Cake was one of Oldenburg’s first three soft sculptures, so named, alongside Floor Burger and Floor Cone, because it sat directly on the floor of the gallery. The decision to forego pedestals, which traditionally elevated sculptures above the ground, allowed Oldenburg to heighten the uncanny experience of objects plucked from ordinary existence and, blown up to sizes larger than life, plunked down in the space of a gallery. (The fact that they were mock foodstuffs made their placement on the floor even a little grotesque.) Oldenburg’s fabric treats sagged and barely held their shape, creating a much different effect than that of the stiff plaster sculptures from The Store. Traditional sculpture, for the majority of the history of Western art, had been hard and durable, made from wood, stone, marble, fired clay, and bronze. Oldenburg upended expectations about sculpture, making it instead soft, pliable, and squishy, with an inviting tactility. Importantly, Oldenburg also invested these works with a sense of parody and humor. Floor Cake should rightfully elicit a chuckle from its viewers—a result almost never desired of traditional sculpture, which had historically possessed a seriousness and austerity that demanded awe and reverence rather than laughter and amusement. The impact of Floor Cake, along with many of Oldenburg’s works, is its ability to make the everyday strange; one might guess that visitors to the early exhibitions of the soft sculptures looked at hamburgers, cakes, and ice cream cones a bit differently thereafter.

Oldenburg did not, in fact, know how to sew, and he relied on his wife, Patty Mucha, a trained seamstress, to assist with every step of the process of making the soft sculptures, from sewing a model out of muslin (a cheap light fabric) to crafting the final work. Unlike Oldenburg’s second wife, Coosje van Bruggen, who has received credit as a collaborator on large-scale monuments and public artworks since they began working together in the 1970s, Mucha was not listed as an artist for the soft sculptures and is usually mentioned only fleetingly in scholarly texts on Oldenburg’s work. The connection between Oldenburg’s turn to soft sculpture and his knowledge of Yayoi Kusama’s contemporaneous explorations with fabric is also rarely discussed. Both omissions are especially interesting given sewing’s typical status as a “feminine” craft and perhaps demonstrate the extent to which the notion of male “artistic genius,” which had dominated the discourse on AbEx painting, was still structuring the discourse of radical art in the 1960s.

Claes Oldenburg, photographed in 1970.

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Civil Rights

Early on, the Warren Court reigned in the anti-communist crusades of local, state, and federal governments, securing the protections of the First Amendment against government investigations of political beliefs, party affiliation, and dissent. In the landmark case of New York Times Co. v. Sullivan in 1964, the Warren Court struck down the paper’s conviction for libel by an Alabama jury, which had found the Times responsible for an advertisement criticizing local officials for their treatment of civil rights activists. This ruling effectively established our modern standards for freedom of the press, which southern authorities had long stifled. Among the many Jim Crow laws that the Supreme Court struck down in the 1960s was a law banning interracial marriage between black and white spouses, effective in sixteen states. Richard and Mildred Loving, a mixed-race couple, had married in Washington, D.C., and returned to their home state of Virginia where the sheriff raided their home in the middle of the night. The Lovings were given the option of serving jail time or leaving their home state. For civil rights supporters, Loving v. Virginia (1967) highlighted the absurdity of racism.

The court pursued a second dimension of civil rights that was particularly important for women. In Griswold v. Connecticut (1965) it established a right to privacy, especially a married couple’s right to privacy in family planning, and overturned state prohibitions against the use of contraceptives. The court would soon guarantee access to contraception for unmarried adults and minors as well.

The Rights of the Accused

The Supreme Court’s “rights revolution” extended to criminal rights, through legal protections for the accused and greater scrutiny of due process in criminal investigations. Court proceedings also assisted people of color against police violence and profiling. The case of Miranda v. Arizona (1966), for example, highlighted abusive police practices against Mexican Americans in the Southwest and established the practice of informing suspects of their constitutional protections, such as the right to remain silent and to counsel. The “Miranda Warning” became a new standard in police practice.

Preserving Democracy

Voting rights cases also reached the Supreme Court in the 1960s. In Baker v. Carr (1962), the court ended the
arbitrary sizing of congressional districts, requiring all voter districts to be equal in population size. Affirming the principle of one-person, one-vote significantly raised the number of representatives of voters in urban counties. Previously, urban areas often had the same electoral weight as rural counties, despite urban areas’ much greater population.

In addition, the court reinforced the separation of church and state in public institutions. In *Engle v. Vitale* (1962) the justices found that prayer was unconstitutional in public education and public institutions.

*Freedom Summer activists sing before leaving training sessions at Western College for Women in Oxford, OH, to travel to Mississippi in June of 1964.*

*Photo Credit: Ted Polumbaum Collection / Newseum*
The American Soldier in Vietnam

For those who did the fighting, Vietnam proved a confusing experience that had little resemblance to the “good war” their fathers had fought in World War II. Many U.S. forces received combat training from superiors whose experience came from the Pacific campaign or the invasion of Europe in World War II. Vietnam, however, was a different type of war. American soldiers were not pushing across territory against a foreign army. Instead, they often found themselves fighting guerilla troops that were difficult to identify and could either blend with the local population or enjoyed their support.

Although the U.S military was technologically superior, American troops nonetheless kept fighting over the same territories over and over, failing to win the local population’s hearts and minds. This was because the U.S. goal was not to secure land against a rival army, but instead to kill enough Viet Cong (and gain enough civilian allies) that the South Vietnamese government could function. Additionally, heat, humidity, sickness, an utterly foreign language and culture,
and American troops own racial stereotypes about Asian people made it difficult for many soldiers to acclimatize and think of Vietnam as a place worth saving. Sent overseas to liberate, they were received—and often acted like—an oppressive invader. Unsure of what they were fighting for, many troops lost faith in the U.S. mission, its military leaders, and even the administration back in Washington.

American soldiers in Vietnam enjoyed better logistical support and infrastructure than any military force in history at the time. While the official “K-rations” (packaged food eaten while out on a mission) were not known for their taste, U.S. infantrymen did not suffer hunger and deprivation like enemy troops or local civilians. On military bases, they enjoyed most comforts familiar from home. However, soldiers were still at risk of injury or death. The U.S. death toll grew from 216 in 1964 to almost 2,000 in 1965 and peaked at 16,899 in 1968. A total of 58,220 American soldiers died in Vietnam. More than 150,000 were wounded, over 700 became prisoners of war, and approximately 1,600 troops’ remains are missing. The war’s toll on the Vietnamese population was even more devastating, however. Estimates for the number of deaths in the Vietnam War on all sides range from 1.45 to 3.6 million, which means that somewhere from over 1 million to over 3 million Vietnamese died during the war.

The Tet Offensive and its Political Fallout

By 1967 the growing death toll among American troops began to trouble many Americans. New technologies in broadcast journalism helped foster public skepticism about the nation’s purpose in the region, as footage of U.S. forces destroying villages and jet fighters dropping napalm bombs flickered on millions of American TV screens. By October of that year, 46 percent of Americans believed that the U.S. presence in Vietnam was a mistake, and only 28 percent approved of President Johnson’s handling of the conflict. The majority of Americans were not so much morally opposed to the war as eager to see progress.

Public opinion was already wavering when, on the Vietnamese New Year of Tet on January 30–31, 1968, the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese launched a powerful attack. The Viet Cong forces struck major U.S. military bases and population centers—including Saigon—the capital of South Vietnam—where American forces battled for six hours to defend the U.S. embassy.

The Tet Offensive stunned the American public. The Johnson administration had reported slow but steady progress toward victory in Vietnam, and with a few exceptions the press had dutifully reported on the hard but worthy efforts of American GIs. Now, heavy combat in Saigon during the Tet Offensive made it clear that the Viet Cong insurgency was not even defeated in South Vietnam’s capital. After years of fighting, thousands of casualties, and billions of dollars spent, the Viet Cong presence in Vietnam seemed to be as robust as ever. As a result of the Tet Offensive, American journalists became doubtful that the Vietnam War was winnable, and American public support dwindled even further. The most respected news anchor of the time, Walter Cronkite of CBS, concluded soberly: “To say that we are mired in stalemate seems the only realistic, yet unsatisfactory conclusion.”

My Lai

The Tet Offensive raised questions about whether the Vietnam War could be won, but new details of the nature of combat also raised doubts about whether Americans should have engaged in this war at all. The many difficulties American soldiers faced in identifying, engaging, and defeating enemy troops bred deep frustrations, resentment, and racism among American soldiers—a trend that only intensified with the unexpected Tet counteroffensive. The burning of villages and killings of noncombatant civilians became more common.

This type of conduct reached a high-point on March 16, 1968 in the village of My Lai. Members of Charlie Company of the 23rd Infantry Division stormed through the hamlet, shooting at everything that moved. Not a single shot was fired at the American soldiers, and in the whole village only three weapons were recovered. Yet, in the hours that followed, members of Lt. William Calley’s platoon conducted
mass executions of women and children, killing as many as 504 unarmed civilians. A helicopter pilot and other members of Charlie Company confronted the killing soldiers, and their stories were eventually picked up in the United States by the nation’s major newspapers. The investigation that followed charged a series of officers in the chain of command with covering up the massacre and Lt. Calley with the murder of twenty-two civilians. Calley was court-martialed and dismissed from the Army, but served only three and a half years under house arrest before having his life sentence commuted. His commanding officer was found not guilty, as were all twenty-two of the soldiers under him.