

## THE MESSAGE OF POP ART: EVERYDAY OBJECTS HAVE WONDER!

By Donita Ellison

Realism found new expression in the 1960s with the advent of Pop Art. Artists such as Andy Warhol, Jasper Johns, and Roy Lichtenstein took popular images from advertising, newspapers, movies, as well as commonplace objects, and saw them as worthy subjects of fine art. In the sculpture of Claes Oldenburg, monumental form is given to everyday objects that we can easily dismiss, even use without really “seeing” them—a light switch or spoon, for example. The artist said he wanted people to recognize “the power of objects.”

Learning about the work of Claes Oldenburg made for a deep change in the students I taught at LaGuardia High School for Music & Art.

I was fortunate to study and use the Aesthetic Realism Teaching Method and this landmark principle stated by Eli Siegel, the great 20th-century educator and founder of Aesthetic Realism: “All beauty is a making one of opposites, and the making one of opposites is what we are going after in ourselves.”

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Unlike Oldenburg, my students could feel that ordinary, domestic objects were boring; they were in a debate between wanting to see things with wonder and summing them up, and this included both objects and people. I told my students what I had learned, that art, in its meaning and technique, has something central to teach us about our lives.

Oldenburg makes hard things soft, small things large, and turns things upside down—all to make us see them with surprise, mystery, and grandeur! My students and I looked at the 1976 sculpture titled *Clothespin*. Oldenburg takes the form of this commonplace, utilitarian object, and makes it soar to a height of 45 feet! And, surprisingly, it takes its place amidst the architecture of downtown Philadelphia. Manufactured of Corten steel, its dark weathered surfaces have mystery. Lit up at night, it has sublimity.

In all its simplicity and monumentality, *Clothespin* possesses a dignity that transcends its domestic usefulness. This sculpture has poise as it stands firmly upright. Almost like a dancer en pointe, it is balanced at the most delicate place, where the two sides at the bottom are most open and thin. My high school students were affected to see how, within the shapes of a mundane clothespin, the artist saw that its two sides in silhou-

ette resemble a couple embracing. Doesn't this have humor and romance? It does! The dark sides of *Clothespin* curve upward with elegant ease and are joined by a bright steel clip. There is just enough tension between its two sides at the base to enable it to open slightly at the top. And, being slightly open, it seems to welcome the infinity of surrounding space. *Clothespin* is a oneness of opposites: the ordinary and the surprising, the matter-of-fact and the grand. My students were thrilled by this sculpture.

Teachers hope to have students see wonder in the facts of the curriculum. But two common and hurtful mistakes made by both students and teachers—and I have made them—is to sum up



the meaning of something or present it in a rote way. In an Aesthetic Realism consultation when I was in my early 20s, I said that I was often bored. “As you are bored,” my consultants asked, “what happens to the world, to all great literature, art, Michelangelo? When nothing seems to interest you, do you feel very important?” I was surprised, but I saw, Yes, I did! This attitude, which we can often meet in students, is, I learned, a form of contempt—the addition to self through the lessening of something else.” And Aesthetic Realism is tremendously important in explaining that contempt is the enemy to both art and education. An artist wants to see the reality of things with more meaning. In his work, that is what Claes Oldenburg does. Art, he said, “should be...made of the ordinary world,” and “from everyday experiences” which he found “perplexing and extraordinary.”

Studying the way art challenges our confined notions of objects, enabled my students to see the familiar—things they use every day, and the people they know—with more wonder and respect. Boredom and the desire to sum up or dismiss was opposed. “I’ll never see objects the same way again,” said Alfredo. And Sylvia, who said she had seen things superficially, wrote “I now look deeper!” The Aesthetic Realism Teaching Method meets the hopes of students and that is why I love it!