‘Strange Encounters’: 
Claes Oldenburg’s ‘Proposed Colossal Monuments’ for New York and London

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While working in the library of the Cooper Union Museum, New York, during the early 1960s, Claes Oldenburg stumbled upon two groups of drawings and photographs that were the starting point for the works that would articulate his later fascination with designing impossible structures – the so-called ‘Proposed Colossal Monuments’ series of works on paper, which feature structures that Oldenburg planned for various international cities between 1965 and 1969. This article focuses on a group of proposals Oldenburg designed for New York and London; designs that offer very different ways of imagining subjects’ encounters with those cities by mobilizing figures of the ‘tourist’ or of subjects who are otherwise displaced. What, I ask, might Oldenburg’s proposed monuments tell us about the ramifications of transatlantic travel and urban experience for contemporary forms of subjectivity in the 1960s?

The first group of images Oldenburg lit upon in the Cooper Union library were drawings by eighteenth-century architects Étienne-Louis Boullée, Jean-Jacques Lequeu and Claude-Nicolas Ledoux, whose fantastical paper architecture – such as Lequeu’s proposed stable shaped like a cow or Boullée’s monumental sphere, the Cenotaph for Newton – captured the young artist’s imagination.1 The second set of images Oldenburg saw recorded the making, shipping and installation of the Statue of Liberty. The photographs documented the construction of the statue in its earliest stages as small wood and plaster maquettes, and in its final form, when it was photographed towering absurdly over its designer Frédéric-Auguste Bartholdi’s Paris workshop, supported by a wooden scaffold (plate 1). Oldenburg recalls how impressed he was by these representations of this iconic, immutable monument as precarious and in transition.2 The Statue of Liberty in the incarnations revealed by these photographs is an object trussed-up as cargo ready for transatlantic travel, an imminent migrant to America.

Oldenburg was particularly taken by photographs he remembers seeing of the statue after its arrival in New York, still in its discrete parts prior to final installation and strewn about as so many part-objects on the ground. Oldenburg recalls them depicting ‘the face here, a big foot there, the hand with the torch here’ (plate 2).3 Retrospectively reading the Statue of Liberty through the lens of these earlier photographers offered Oldenburg more than simply a novel way for thinking about the production and installation of large-scale structures (although such logistical concerns would, a few years later, come to be of real significance to Oldenburg’s practice in the large outdoor objects he and his wife Coosje van Bruggen began to produce in the 1970s). It was also not simply the memorializing aspect of the Statue
Claes Oldenburg’s ‘Proposed Colossal Monuments’ for New York and London


of Liberty reduced to its constituent parts that so struck Oldenburg. Rather, he fixed upon the Statue when it was a sculpture in a state of flux, an open-ended, incomplete travelling object, a symbol in transit.

In these early pre-installation photographs the statue registers not as a monument to posterity but instead as a collection of remnants or a broken-down object. Like Robert Smithson’s observation in 1966 that the ‘minor monuments’ of an empty building site, the cranes and tools of construction, resemble the ruins of the past even as they begin work on building the future, so too for Oldenburg the Statue of Liberty’s existence prior to installation was most potent when represented as a series of ‘minor monuments’, scattered in pieces across Bedloe’s Island.4 The statue is represented in these photographs not as a fixed monument to be admired from afar, but instead as a curiously intimate, materialized and oversized obstacle to be physically navigated. The statue seems deliberately depicted as a strange object that is patently not ‘at home’ in these photographs, that it was, at that moment just prior to its elevation to the status of an immobile monument, rendered a kind of refugee, a stranger or foreign body within the space of the city.

I am interested in Oldenburg’s brand of ‘paper architecture’ which he began to make in 1965 at the height of his success as a Pop artist, at a time when his reputation – and schedule – took him all over America and Europe.5 I will focus on the proposed monuments Oldenburg designed for New York and London, for out of just over ninety proposals Oldenburg produced thirty-five for New York and twenty for London. The two sets of proposals sit alongside one another in a suggestive dialogue, locked together not through similarity but difference. These were two cities Oldenburg spent time getting to know – New York as a resident, London as a visitor – although it appears that being ‘at home’ was not an experience the artist sought. Oldenburg knew well how the metropolis denies the modern subject a clear-cut sense of belonging – a status that carries its own sense of liberation as well as alienation – and he exploited and explored this idea of belonging in surprising and productive ways.

It is the motif of the out-of-place and estranged subject on which I focus in what follows, for it is the central theme of a number of Oldenburg’s ‘Proposed Monuments’ designed for metropolitan cities. Sara Ahmed has usefully pointed out how the distinctions between such terms as the ‘stranger’, the ‘tourist’ and the ‘immigrant’ are often conflated into one overarching concept of ‘otherness’ against which ‘we’ are united in difference.6 Against such universalizing tendencies, Ahmed insists on the particularity of each of these terms. I also want to retain the differences between these terms in my discussion of the ‘foreign’ nature of Oldenburg’s series of international public monuments, for while Oldenburg may be a stranger to
new cities, his status once there is of privilege and access and not of exclusion or of being ‘other’, and there is no requirement that he ‘assimilate’ in any way – quite the opposite. As Ahmed makes clear, any body can be made a stranger, for ‘stranger’ does not describe a specific figure but rather a contingent, fundamentally bodily status subjects may occupy or encounter at any time.7

During the early 1960s ideas of immigration, subjectivity and difference were very much on Oldenburg’s mind. ‘Immigration has fascinated me for years’, Oldenburg claimed in 1968, pointing out that the situation for most immigrants arriving in America ‘was a disaster: America simply wasn’t what they’d expected’ (Oldenburg himself was born in Sweden and lived in America for over twenty years before he became an American citizen in 1953).8 Oldenburg set out to examine this unexpected encounter in his proposed monuments. In his discussion of the works, Oldenburg frequently casts himself as foreign to the cities he makes the monuments for, as an outsider or ‘tourist’ learning to feel his way around a new city, an experience he couched, like Ahmed, in bodily terms. As we shall see, Oldenburg’s focus on over-sized body parts as metonymic stand-ins for public monuments – such as the nose and, more frequently, the knees – brings to the fore issues of tactility and proximity, and a mode of circulation that relates to the life and mobility of the body as well as the city.

The proposed monuments Oldenburg designed for New York and London are remarkable, for while a number of them are situated on a pedestal or other traditional sculptural base, most are imagined as mobile or sited in unusual places.

Claes Oldenburg’s ‘Proposed Colossal Monuments’ for New York and London

The designs for each city are distinct, and it seems Oldenburg has something to say about the specific nature of London and Manhattan that his bespoke proposed monuments set out to articulate. His proposals for New York imagine giant bowling balls rolling down Park Avenue and Central Park (plate 3), while a giant war memorial made of concrete blocks the busy intersection of Broadway and Canal Street (plate 4). In London, a drawing of Nelson’s Column in Trafalgar Square shows this extant monument replaced with a giant gear stick, which is set, Oldenburg noted, to shift every fifteen minutes so as to re-direct the traffic. These proposals for New York and London do not operate according to a logic of towering monumentality that speaks of timelessness or a marker of the past, but of mobility and transit, traffic, flow and transience, of people passing through or moving around, as they are made to navigate the monument as a blockage or interruption which impinges on their movement round the city (plate 5). In London, claes oldenburg, 1965. photo: geoffrey clements, courtesy of the oldenburg van bruggen foundation. digital image: © 2010 the museum of modern art/Scala, Florence.

conditions of London streets did not. While in New York Oldenburg sets out to disrupt and block the city by adding elements to the cityscape – the block of concrete jamming a bustling intersection, or enormous balls sent tumbling down the length of the island – in London he is less destructive; instead, he installs a bobbing ballcock on the Thames, a pair of knees to adorn the riverside, or a giant soft drum kit for Battersea Park. Oldenburg’s proposals cast these two cities as distinct archetypes or models for how to think about the city in the twentieth century, imagined in terms of flow and mobility, as well as a site of obstacles, stoppages and impeded movement. In these monuments for New York and London, Oldenburg offers a way for thinking about bigger issues of exchange and assimilation, of fitting in and being foreign, that, far from being universal, are tied very clearly to a specific time and place. As if to insist upon this, Oldenburg frequently includes the name of the city in the title of the monument, whether in the case of his proposed ‘Giant Banana’ for Times Square, or his pile of squashed oversized cigarette ends for Hyde Park, which he said were inspired by a series of anti-smoking adverts he saw in England, in which full ashtrays of ‘fagends’ were designed to put smokers off (Oldenburg on the contrary found them ‘beautiful’).10

The Tourist
In his influential 1976 study, Dean MacCannell famously described tourism as a ‘universal experience’.11 He wanted to disentangle the term from earlier historical notions of the tourist or ‘traveller’ as an elite individual with privileged access to the ‘other’. Instead, he redefined tourism as an activity open to all, not limited only to travel overseas but also useful to describe the experience of difference and authenticity within one’s own environment. In recent years Marc Augé has tallied the ways that tourists often occupy ‘non-places’ — like hotels, motorways, or airports — as they make their pilgrimages around the world.12 While it is true that monuments come to mean differently when remade as tourist attractions, there is a specific rather than universal aspect to Oldenburg’s choice of location that I want to hold on to. Oldenburg’s articulation of tourism counters Augé’s arguments
Claes Oldenburg’s ‘Proposed Colossal Monuments’ for New York and London

for a ‘supermodernity’ based on a flattening of spaces into one homogenous site. Oldenburg instead posits the touristic encounter in these instances as highly idiosyncratic and tied, physically and conceptually, to the specific locales of New York and London.

Far from the elitist ‘othering’ of the city that MacCannell describes as the condition of the colonial traveller, Oldenburg self-consciously sought to locate a sense of difference and dislocation as a critical problem at the centre of his project. As James Meyer has noted, the status of the artist as ‘nomad’ has in recent years acquired a certain cache, engendered in no small part by the ever-increasing number of international commissions and biennales that have sprung up around the globe. According to Meyer, artists adopt one of two forms of ‘nomadism’. One pays attention to the historical and critical discourses of travel and migration that have taken shape since the eighteenth century, while the other offers a more ‘lyrical’ treatment of the idea of travel, mobility, and the strangeness of the everyday. The latter shares the surrealist notion of the chance encounter more than it offers a critical intervention into the nature and role of tourism, travel and mobility in the contemporary world.13

On the face of it Oldenburg may seem to fit Meyer’s second category more comfortably than his first. Certainly, Oldenburg’s playful and piecemeal approach to the cities he visited chimes more closely with the conventional notion of ‘tourism’ than with the supposed seriousness and ‘superiority’ of the seasoned ‘traveller’ who, as Lucy Lippard notes, sets out to pursue the ‘distant and unexpected’ rather than the route taken by ‘common tourists’ who tread the well-beaten path of thousands of other visitors.14

Oldenburg’s first memory of London is from the window of the aeroplane, looking down on the city. He recalls seeing a pair of large industrial chimneystacks from the window that reminded him of knees and he took a photograph of them when coming in to land as a record of his arrival. There are also a series of photographs of Oldenburg holding up the sawn-off knee of a shop window mannequin and playfully inviting comparison with the forms of large chimney stacks in east London (plate 6). Oldenburg later mounted the pair of knees on a base as a model for a proposed monument to be erected on Victoria Embankment, ‘placed in that spot to echo the four chimneys of the Battersea power plant’15 that he said reminded him of a large cathedral, as well as, he recalled, of his own knock-knees (‘Chicago has its Hancock sky-scraper’ he noted, ‘London has its knees’).16

For Oldenburg London did not only register corporeally, his own body provided a language and a material conduit through which he learned to experience and navigate the urban environment. Since the mid-1960s Oldenburg has commented extensively on his proposed monuments, frequently offering interpretations of them that cast the artist variously as anthropologist, disinterested observer, and naïve visitor. In certain instances Oldenburg admitted that producing a proposed monument came to be expected of him by his various hosts when he travelled, adding that on one level they were an economical way of upping productivity.17

'I use my body to feel and come to know a city’, Oldenburg declared in 1968 when asked about his decision to picture London as a series of body parts.18

‘In London’, he later recalled ‘I constantly felt cold in

my knees – they always ached. It was aggravated by having to squat in those small English cars. 1966 was also the time of knee exhibitionism because of the mini-skirt, especially when “framed” by boots. London’s Oxford Street was a sea of knees. Oldenburg said the idea of doubling continually struck him in London, and the motif of a pair of knees seems to stand for that idea of the double or twinned object. He also described the rise of hemlines on London’s streets as an ‘externalized’ metaphor for the tide (‘My knees take the Greenwich mean’).

A few years later, to mark the opening of his retrospective exhibition at the Tate Gallery, director James Scott made a split-screen film documenting Oldenburg and his companions’ time in the city, with one screen documenting the installation of the show and the other Oldenburg’s travels around the city, in just such a small British car as he complained of, visiting various London tourist sites, including Trafalgar Square, as well as the chimney stacks in east London he first saw when coming in to land. Oldenburg and his friends are seen in classic tourist mode, eating ice-creams, having picnics, and generally goofing around (although there are erotic elements to the film, with images of Oldenburg holding the mannequin’s knees up against the chimney, and moving around the exhibition moulding, shaking, and pressing his trademark soft sculptures into place, while in another scene the artist Hannah Wilke undresses, Benny-Hill style, behind a bush in front of the Tate Gallery). The film ends with Oldenburg and the film crew watching as an ice-cream cart at the bottom of the steps to the Tate Gallery is towed away by the Metropolitan Police, a suitably absurd caper to end this eccentric depiction of Oldenburg’s day as a tourist in the city.

Oldenburg’s Postcard from London

Rather than attend solely to the whimsical aspects of Oldenburg’s ‘tourism’, I want to suggest that Oldenburg’s proposed monuments are the product of an artist who positions himself as out of place, as a stranger. Through formal strategies of enlargement and exaggeration of scale, use of cropped close-ups of oversized body parts, and the placement of the monuments in awkward or impossible geographic locations, Oldenburg articulates the sense of a subject who finds him- or herself physically estranged from the familiar. For Georg Simmel, the term ‘stranger’ does not carry negative connotations; rather, it describes the status of a subject in a privileged relationship to those around, a point glossed by Zygmunt Bauman in his description of the stranger as a ‘reminder of the differences we must celebrate’. Oldenburg’s emphasis is more ambivalent than Simmel’s and Bauman’s. His body is rendered jarred and awkward as it negotiates the cityscape, its awkwardness echoed in the body parts he fills the city with. Just as Ahmed describes the stranger in terms not of distance but of proximity, so too Oldenburg plays up the estrangement of his objects, their refusal to ‘fit in’, by offering his monument as ‘a body that is out of place because it has come too close’. The representation of the human body in Oldenburg’s proposed monuments only ever occurs at the level of discrete parts which stand in for the whole – ‘a principle’ he later claimed ‘of all my work’, and one which helps explain his fascination with those photographs of the Statue of Liberty as a series of fragments. In his London proposals Oldenburg expanded even further the idea of the body part as monument, designing a number of proposals shaped variously as ears and knees, as the city itself becomes a kind of bodily presence: ‘The gearshift’, he later claimed, ‘is nothing but a knee’, and in 1966 he produced a crayon and watercolour proposal depicting a lamp fixture designed for a London taxi that took the form of an ear. By positing these body parts as inanimate ‘monuments’ situated so close to the body of the viewing subject, Oldenburg
establishes an ‘economy of touch’ between the public monument and the individual body through which each is brought into ‘precarious being’ via a tactile ‘fleshy metonymy’.26

Oldenburg presents himself as someone who is looking in from outside; for his monuments make no attempt to ‘fit’ their selected location; in fact rather the opposite. They are instead ungraciously plonked into position; a baked potato hurled against the side of a building in New York; a large squat nose forming a tunnel for cars; a clothes peg sticking up from the main plaza outside an office block. These are not monuments designed to impress so much as jolt and jar, to surprise and make strange the urban landscape. When asked how he went about preparing his proposed monuments, Oldenburg replied: ‘During the first two or three weeks in a new city, I try to visit as many places as possible, and be taken around by people who live there and know the city. I listen to what they say about it. Also, I try to read every newspaper and magazine on sale. I sketch a lot. And I observe the food.’27 While Oldenburg suggests here that, as a visitor to new cities, he performs the dutiful role of the foreign subject working to assimilate, to fit in, the monuments he ultimately comes up with for each city do no such thing.

Oldenburg’s proposed monuments tend to be discussed in relation to his more familiar oversized three-dimensional Pop works of art, and to be seen as playing with similar perversions of scale, size and expectation. There is, however, another aspect to these works, for even at their most ludicrous, unfeasible and playful they force a radical renegotiation of how subjects encounter their urban environment, raising in turn questions of belonging and alienation, of identification and feeling foreign.28 Oldenburg’s proposals for New York and London destabilize the familiar terrain of their respective cities, whether it be those enormous bowling balls thundering down Park Avenue, or the giant gear stick replacing Nelson’s Column. The city is rendered as unknown, or even threatening, to its inhabitants and to visitors new to its streets.
Oldenburg’s monuments offer a visual essay on how we might begin to think about being an alien abroad. This both reflects some of the preoccupations of the 1960s and strikes a chord today as subjects navigate a global terrain where travel, distance, and difference inspire very different responses to the optimism and sense of liberation which air travel and the package holiday originally stirred in those affluent enough to afford them. While Oldenburg was interested in questions of immigration at this time, his status as a travelling artist protects his position as something closer to an honorary ‘stranger’ or guest, who is free to indulge and relax into the status of being ‘foreign’ and out of place with none of the economic, psychological or social consequences that the migrant or displaced subject endures.

While in London Oldenburg bought two colour postcards that he subjected to acts of détournement and in so doing, challenged the usual status of the tourist as passive observer. The first postcard was of the River Thames and the other of Alfred Gilbert’s Eros in Piccadilly Circus, both sightseeing spots on the London tourist itinerary (plate 7). Onto a Technicolor postcard of Eros Oldenburg pasted a cut-out paper image of lipsticks culled from a magazine advertisement, the up and down motion of which Oldenburg thought a suitably titillating response to Gilbert’s statue, while over the postcard of the Thames he painted a large ballcock designed to ‘catch the light like a well-fed Turner galleon and inspire the citizens’ (in another sketch Oldenburg made of this ballcock he drew it in side elevation in a playful nod to Boullée’s proposed cenotaph for Newton) (plate 8). When explaining his choices for London, Oldenburg picked up on what he perceived as the erotic nature of the city, again parsed through the metaphor of the tide, claiming that ‘the going in and coming out of the tide was always on my mind as I walked the streets of London. My monuments within the city are keyed to this movement … When the Thames flows out, the lipstick goes back inside the tube; when the river rises again, so does the lipstick.’

The naked body of Gilbert’s Eros is substituted in the project by lipsticks, and, while the erotic undertones remain, they are made more literal, operating as deliberately puerile references to sex which mark this young artist’s encounter with London as a response to the temper of the times. The ‘swinging sixties’ are embodied here in Oldenburg’s enthusiasm for popular cultural references and in his unreconstructed attitudes toward sexuality and the female body, although Oldenburg also considered the 1960s nostalgic in their references – for him the pillar-box red lipsticks evoked memories of English films seen after the war. These postcards do not claim to be anything other than what they are: things you buy, to send home, depicting iconic and over-familiar sites of interest. Oldenburg does not work straightforwardly with the actual sites or places he ‘replaces’; these works are not about Gilbert and his statue any more than they are ‘about’ Nelson’s Column. Rather they are the mediated images of those sites, reduced to motifs or markers in London’s touristic landscape.

Oldenburg’s postcard collages of lipsticks, ballcocks, and gear sticks, like the body parts of the Statue of Liberty, are out of place in the usual order of things. While it might be held that public monuments should be monumental in scale, they are also typically judged by how well they fit the environment within which they are placed, whether mounted on a purpose-built pedestal, occupying a cleared space within the urban fabric, or at the site of an historically important and symbolically significant encounter. Oldenburg on the contrary dubbed a number of his proposed monuments ‘obstacles’, a description which proposes these monuments as awkward, even homeless – objects that demand attention only in so far as subjects must work out a way of navigating their way around them. One of Oldenburg’s London monuments, Small Monument for a London Street: Fallen Hat (For Adlai Stevenson) made in 1966 (plate 9) does precisely this, placing the obstacle at the work’s centre in a markedly different way from his erotically charged play with the city’s celebrated sites of tourism such as Eros. It is a proposal that by virtue of its sheer ordinariness is one of Oldenburg’s most powerful monuments from his New York and London series. This proposed monument, unlike his other ones, is small and provisional (a ‘mini-monument’ he called it), deliberately resisting any claims to posterity. It also brings together his twin interests in these cities, uniting England and America in one slight, yet significant gesture. Oldenburg produced the monument in honour of the American politician Adlai Stevenson, who had died the previous year aged sixty-five while on a diplomatic visit to London. Stevenson was walking through Grosvenor Square when he had a heart attack, collapsing on the street and dying later that day in hospital. Oldenburg’s monument to mark the death of this famous two-time Democratic candidate for President is an unusually understated affair. The lurch in scale he so frequently employed is inverted here. Instead of a large monolith which one must either circumnavigate or pause and look up at, the work represents a small obstacle – a hat, fallen to the floor – which of course looks a lot like Oldenburg’s familiar headgear. This obstacle is encountered by looking down, not up, and the location is more important than Stevenson, despite the monument’s dedication. Oldenburg said ‘It could be a modest monument for anyone who died on the street’, noting that a year before a friend of his had also died while out for his evening walk. It is precisely the ordinary nature of the monument, the unremarkable character of Stevenson’s death, which Oldenburg felt was in keeping with what he thought of as the ‘English cult of smallness’ that London embodied. In fact a year before the Stevenson memorial, Oldenburg had made a proposal for an underground monument and tomb for the recently assassinated John F. Kennedy, so that, from ground level, it was invisible.
It is striking that these two most monument-like ‘monuments’ in fact work harder than his other proposals – the lipsticks replacing Eros, say, or the giant ballcock plugged into the Thames – to resist expectations, and, in the case of the Kennedy and Stevenson monuments, posterity, through their provisional and ‘invisible’ status. One is easily stepped over (or blown away by a gust of wind) and the other is placed out of sight, below ground and visible only from below or by looking down; the opposite mode of viewing to that usually demanded by public sculptural monuments.

A number of Oldenburg’s monuments for New York City directly impose themselves as obstacles. His proposal for a large Good Humor ice-cream bar propped over Park Avenue, for instance, uses its trademark top corner bite-mark to provide a narrow channel through which traffic must flow. Other proposals included those oversized bowling balls thundering down the length of Manhattan – a monument tinged with an air of menace and redolent of circulation and mobility out of control. In fact, Oldenburg’s monuments for New York are markedly different from those he produced for London precisely because of the different levels of ‘danger’ each city poses to its subjects. While each makes strange the urban environment, Oldenburg’s proposals for London do not place imminent danger at their centre but rather a consideration (at times playful and flirtatious) of how people experience the city’s urban space. What remains crucial to Oldenburg’s monuments for both cities is the extent to which the body figures and continues to matter, even when broken down, rendered oversize, unrecognizable, absent or otherwise under pressure. I want to draw out those differences through a consideration of another kind of monumental encounter, this time the British and American pavilions at Expo ’67, the World’s Fair held in Montreal in 1967. Oldenburg was one of a number of artists selected to represent America, where his Giant Black Fan, one of his famous soft, anthropomorphic objects, was exhibited inside the US Pavilion. During the six-month run of Expo ’67, questions of national identity, difference, and the ‘strange’ body (particularly the knees) came together in a productive, ‘fleshy’ encounter that in turn has much to tell us about the nature of Oldenburg’s investment in foreign cities and his making strange of national habits and customs.
Corporeal Travel and Expo '67

Sixty-two countries participated in Expo '67, at which the motto ‘friendship around the world’ summed up its aim of encouraging international tourism, and publicity advertising the event showed visitors from all over the world, special Expo '67 ‘passports’ in hand, disembarking from aeroplanes. The theme of friendship, of overcoming difference and one’s sense of being a stranger, dominated all official proceedings, and Expo '67 was one of the most successful World’s Fairs of the twentieth century (the theme song of the event which was played every morning as the doors opened, was ‘Hey Friend, Say Friend’).

A number of pavilions were built to showcase cultural artefacts from each nation. The British pavilion offered cups of tea, and the music of the Beatles was pumped through a sound system. Inside there was a ‘Britain today’ display, celebrating the ‘swinging sixties’ with huge blown-up posters of the Beatles and the street sign for Carnaby Street. But the American pavilion was perhaps more cliché-ridden in its way. It was housed inside what the official handbook described as a ‘geodesic skybreak bubble’ – Buckminster Fuller’s then famous twenty-storey dome made of steel piping and covered with acrylic – inside which Oldenburg’s Giant Fan was suspended from the roof, a large soft black stitched vinyl sculpture of an electric rotating desk fan, drooping from the steel framework, its soft electrical cord and plug hanging down ‘like an anchor’ (plate 10).

Each of the national pavilions on the site was staffed by their own ‘hostesses’ who helped to guide the visitors around the site. A trivial, but interesting thing happened about half-way through Expo '67 when other national pavilions became keenly aware of how short the dresses worn by the hostesses at the British pavilion were. The British hostesses wore very short mini-dresses, a style that had been invented a year earlier by the British fashion designer Mary Quant, and, according to Montreal Gazette journalist Bill Bantey, they make you ‘hanker for the King’s Road’ (plate 11). The hostesses’ mini-dresses did not just attract the attention of local journalists, but in fact caused quite a stir internationally, seemingly instigating something close to a transnational crisis in confidence, for by the end of the six months of Expo '67 almost all other pavilions whose hostesses were not in national costume had had the hemlines on their dresses raised by several inches to match those worn by the British hostesses. What is most striking is that the strangeness and desire to assimilate that was so keenly felt at Expo was instigated not by radical difference but rather by the presence or absence of a few inches of fabric. It seems that the strangeness of those British mini-dresses was because of, not in spite of, their similarities to the Canadian, French or American hostess outfits. This sudden access to a previously foreign body part within the public domain perhaps helped to provoke Oldenburg’s memory of London as a ‘leggy city’. Of course, legs and exposed knees were not just erotic objects decorating Oxford Street and Carnaby Street, but stood also, for Oldenburg, as a vivid reminder of the condition of his
own knees during his time in London, perpetually cold, and cramped as a result of his transatlantic journey, a condition he recognized as an inescapable consequence of travel when the body is in awkward transit for hours on end.42

Ahmed terms the ‘strange encounter’ between unfamiliar subjects ‘tactile as well as visual’, as a way of distancing her debate from interpretations that understand the differences between people as primarily visual or conceptual (recognizing racial or ideological differences for example).43 Ahmed suggests that we think of the encounter between strangers not in terms of distance and difference so much as touch and proximity, attending to ‘the permeability of bodily boundaries’ to which all bodies are subject and through which all bodies come to know each other.44 The sociologist John Urry has similarly argued for a rethinking of tourism and travel
Claes Oldenburg’s ‘Proposed Colossal Monuments’ for New York and London

Through specific embodied encounters—he offers ‘corporeal travel’ as a way of focusing on bodily forms of encounter, noting that the ‘tourist gaze always involves relations between bodies that are themselves in at least intermittent movement’.45 Oldenburg knew well the physical travails the body in transit undergoes, recognizing early on the essence of Urry’s claim that tourism ‘always involves corporeal movement’.46 When describing his proposed monuments for London, Oldenburg noted his inclination for ‘working close to edges’,47 which chimes with Ahmed’s observation that ‘if the skin is a border, it is a border that feels’.48

Monument to Immigration

Oldenburg’s interest in the idea of the national monument was first piqued in 1960 during a summer he spent in Provincetown, Massachusetts, where he saw the Pilgrim Memorial every day. He made a drawing at the time that recast the Memorial as an upside-down, collapsible Venetian blind, signalling an early satirical and deflationary response to the idea of monumentality. There is a serious point to Oldenburg’s monuments—even at times a savage form of social commentary—and it was during that summer in Provincetown as a young artist still to make his name that he crafted amongst other things a series of impoverished looking American flags, which figure as broken-down remainders of a key American icon, represented as if found washed up and ruined on the shore. In 1961, the year after Oldenburg returned to New York, there was talk of a competition for a monument to be built for Ellis Island as part of the planned proceedings for New York’s unofficial World’s Fair, which was due to open in 1964, three years before the officially sanctioned one in Montreal. The competition was won by the architect Phillip Johnson’s controversial design for a large, curvilinear building upon which the names of sixteen million immigrants were inscribed.49 A year later in 1965 in response to Johnson’s proposal, Oldenburg, the Pilgrim Memorial in mind, decided to design his own series of ‘proposed monuments’ for Ellis Island. These included a large shrimp placed in the harbour, a huge hotdog complete with tomato and toothpick, and a giant oversized pizza, curling up as if it were a giant incoming wave. Each of these is imagined as a fantasy substitute for incoming ships. In one drawing from 1967 Oldenburg planned a monument not for Ellis Island but to replace the Statue of Liberty, another icon of America and purported symbol of freedom and
liberty for new arrivals. Substituted for the Statue of Liberty is a pencil sketch of a large rotating fan, its electrical cord curling round its base (plate 12). The fan, Oldenburg said, was a reference to Giant Fan hung in the US pavilion of Expo ’67 the same year (with its oversized ‘anchor’ plug).50 Barbara Haskell described Oldenburg’s ‘soft black fan’ from the Expo as an ‘evocative’ bodily substitute, and somewhat surprisingly suggested that Oldenburg selected inanimate substitutes for the body because to represent a ‘crumpled black vinyl figure’ would be too ‘alarming’.51 Oldenburg noted that aside from the formal similarity between the fan and the ‘spiked halo’ of the statue, the fan would guarantee workers on Lower Manhattan ‘a steady breeze’, ‘a monumental version of nature’.52 Instead of hanging this fan limply in the interior of an art exhibition, as Giant Fan had done inside Fuller’s US pavilion, Oldenburg added an unnerving and visceral sense of mobility to this proposed monument; for while it might indeed offer a ‘steady breeze’, at the same time it threatens to function as a different kind of ‘monument to nature’, as a giant wave-machine capable of generating treacherous turbulence to greet arriving visitors to the city, the opposite function to the proposed ballcock monument for the Thames which served instead as a sign of equilibrium.53 Oldenburg said, ‘You can also think of the Fan as a sort of substitute image of America. The suggestion is probably there but I haven’t drawn a conclusion.’54 By substituting one ‘image’ for another, the electric fan might also be read as wiping out the Statue of Liberty (by blowing it away), and in so doing the monumental site is animated and rendered an active participant rather than silent witness to the fate of America’s new arrivals.

One final monument that Oldenburg proposed for Ellis Island was never committed to paper, but came up instead during an interview with the artist in 1968. Oldenburg suggested that for his Monument to Immigration a large reef should be placed in the centre of New York Harbour. This reef would sit, water lapping at its base, waiting to become a fixed monument through the collection of detritus that would accumulate, building up in size and grandeur. Oldenburg described this passive, destructive, and violent monument as an object upon which ‘wreck after wreck would occur until there was a huge pile of rusty and broken ship hulls in the middle of the bay’.55 At Oldenburg’s hand, incomers freshly arriving in New York are not imagined undergoing the bureaucracy of immigration but as broken, damaged or killed in shipwrecks, with ship parts and cargo filling the harbour. Recalling Oldenburg’s description of the Statue of Liberty’s arrival at New York, this monument implies that a damaging experience lies in wait for the onboard passengers as well as the ship, crashing into the water alongside the rusty, broken ship hulls, ‘a hand here, a foot there’.56 Unlike each of Oldenburg’s other ‘Proposed Colossal Monuments’, many of which were as dramatic and unfeasible as his suggestion for the Ellis Island monument, Oldenburg did not make a drawing of this monument. Instead, his Ellis Island proposal remains a dark and unsettling suggestion, too horrific to commit to a drawing or even a brief sketch. This monument is a far cry from the optimism of Expo ’67, and is distanced too from his more playful monuments for London and New York, in which metropolitan space is made strange and dynamic, an obstacle course for residents and the newly arrived alike. Oldenburg’s proposal for an alternative Ellis Island Monument speaks to a different kind of subject and sense of belonging, for the status of the foreigner becoming American, of an American coming home was, for Oldenburg, something fraught and hard-won. ‘Monument to Immigration’, Oldenburg pointed out, ‘was my first obstacle monument.’57

Just as the stranger ‘undermines the spatial ordering of the world’,58 standing between ‘friend and enemy, order and chaos, the inside and the outside’, so too Oldenburg’s monuments offer an ambivalent and potentially subversive remapping of
Claes Oldenburg’s ‘Proposed Colossal Monuments’ for New York and London

their location. Oldenburg’s ‘obstacle’ monuments demand a deliberate renegotiation of one’s relationship to the environment, and far from positioning the stranger as an undesirable subject ‘who hesitates at the border of the nation’, they are on the contrary intimately, dangerously even, embroiled with the establishment of those borders, as active participants. Ahmed’s emphasis in her account of the stranger is on problems of multiculturalism, and in drawing upon her argument here I do not mean to understate the extent to which Oldenburg was clearly in a privileged position as a white, male European working in New York as a successful avant-garde artist. Nonetheless, much is shared by Oldenburg’s project and the mapping of the city imagined by Ahmed. Oldenburg’s emphasis on immigration signals the extent to which his engagement with the ‘monument’ and the Statue of Liberty is not divorced from the historical and social roots of those sites – and of course the history of New York Harbour as one of the busiest ports for the slave trade and later arrival of immigrants to the United States is clearly at stake in Oldenburg’s account: his own family’s journey to the US from Sweden in the 1930s, albeit through a diplomatic route, is something the artist has spoken of often, while a ‘A Proposed Colossal Monument’ of an enormous teddy bear for Central Park was in part imagined as ‘an incarnation of white conscience’ which ‘fixes New York with an accusing glance from Harlem.’

Oldenburg makes cities and their subjects strange by inversions of scale and expectation, by disrupting the routes through the city with various obstacles and blockages, and by rendering inanimate ordinary forms vital, erotic and irreverent. I want to conclude by thinking about Oldenburg’s monuments as an uneven and optimistic, albeit somewhat naïve, process of exchange and narrative of belonging. Whether Oldenburg is thinking about the situation of immigrants arriving in America, tourists sightseeing in London, or Expo ’67’s optimistic motto ‘Hey Friend, Say Friend’, the transatlantic ‘politics of friendship’ in his work remain unresolved. For Oldenburg it was the city itself that remained always strange, or estranged, from its inhabitants. He wanted to draw attention to the sense of danger the city presents to subjects – strangers, aliens, and residents alike (think of Adlai Stevenson, suddenly collapsing in Grosvenor Square). Describing the ‘danger’ of the large bowling balls proposed for New York, Oldenburg said, ‘you must be fast, clever, and learn the rhythm of how to walk the streets.’

Strange Encounters

In 1998 the British artist Rachel Whiteread produced a clear resin cast of the inside of an old water tower which she placed on top of a building in SoHo, New York, a ghosted version of the original cedar wood towers. The tower was visible only at certain times of the day, depending on the Manhattan weather, so that at times it completely disappeared (plate 13). Whiteread’s ‘monument’ for New York shares something with Oldenburg’s selection of sites for his proposed monuments, for he always maintained that ‘the object is chosen because in some way it fits the shape, the conditions and the associations of the site.’ After completing the tower, Whiteread mailed a postcard to London from New York featuring photographs of the Statue of Liberty among other famous sights. On the postcard, Whiteread painted over the Statue of Liberty, replacing it instead with a sketch of her own water tower. This jokey nod to the work’s potential for iconic status was articulated via a slight, playful and mildly iconoclastic gesture, yet it goes some way to articulating something of the ‘seriousness’ of Oldenburg’s own proposed monuments for the city.

The experience Whiteread offered visitors to the water tower was designed to stop them in their tracks, to catch them off-guard. It required viewers to take their
time; they were obliged to stand still and look up – to unlearn those habits Oldenburg spoke of, of the need to be fast and clever and to abide by the rhythm of the streets. Speaking from street level and looking up at her tower amongst other onlookers at the time, Whiteread said she felt like a tourist – suggesting her own sense of transience within the city perhaps, as well as the familiar habit tourists have that so frustrates habitual users of the same streets of looking up and walking slowly. In her essay on Whiteread’s project, ‘The Immigrant’, Molly Nesbit notes how the water tower functioned as a foreign element within the city. Like the tower’s own capacity to flicker in and out of visibility, the public for this work comprised not just a small artworld crowd but an unstable and constantly fluctuating tide of tourists and immigrants, each of whom contributes to the new global economy. They also, Nesbit points out, articulate the precariousness of the city. At the moment when the tower becomes invisible, for Nesbit, ‘New York no longer seems solid.’

For Ahmed and, I would suggest in another context, Oldenburg, ‘differences are not marked on the stranger’s body, but materialize in the relationship of touch between bodies.’ It was this idea of touch — that ‘fleshy metonymy’ — I had in my mind when first thinking about Oldenburg’s London Knees, and which lead me, indirectly, to Whiteread’s Water Tower. The idea of these cities as ‘twinned’ somehow, as ‘sister cities’, came to take up more and more bodily resonance, those knees and ears, like the inanimate but evocative ballcocks and bowling balls, each operate as a series of part objects, as fragments or absent halves missing their other counterpart. Nesbit’s sense of the city as no longer solid speaks to the conditions of modernity to be sure, yet it is about other kinds of identification and belonging too, and I have tried to think about how Oldenburg’s proposed monuments might help us to focus the strange encounters we have with cities, mobilizing the various figures of the stranger, the tourist, the ‘immigrant’, and the friend, which we all occupy at one time or another. These identifications do not ‘resolve’ Oldenburg’s works, but point rather to their mobility, and raise questions of exchange and belonging told from a position, certainly not ‘below’, but resistant, albeit in small ways, to more traditional processes of thinking about the metropolis and travel. For Oldenburg’s monuments are obstacles that keep you on your toes; one must look up as well as down, must dodge and avoid, navigate and obey their demands.

Although Oldenburg drew his ‘Proposed Colossal Monuments’ as sketches while travelling and on the move, he remains an artist committed to the idea of monumentality, at least, albeit from a position — a locale — that is rooted firmly, bodily, and specifically, on the ground. For the ‘nomad artist’ does not simply land ‘anywhere’ but has a ‘specific destination’ in mind.

It matters where Oldenburg’s monuments are, and what work they do, and in situating his largest number of proposals in New York and London he signalled the centrality to contemporary transatlantic travel of these two cities, as commercial as well as tourist centres that offer the subject different kinds of access and mobility (he emphasizes the ‘aggressive’ nature of his New York obstacles in particular, pitched against the ‘small’ scale of England with its ‘little cars’). While the epithet ‘tourist’ appears a better fit for his gaudy, kitsch, over-sized and over-the-top monuments, I hope to have restored a sense of seriousness to Oldenburg’s apparently ‘unserious’ proposals, to understand his re-casting of the built environment as a critical exercise that may at times veer toward the ‘lyrical’ but which at the same time draws back, to reveal something closer to a critical thinking of difference and subjectivity, of belonging, alienation and the condition of being a stranger in the modern city.

**Notes**

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5 Although international travel by artists was far from uncommon during the early 1960s, Oldenburg’s sculptural and drawing practice reflect explicitly this aspect of his professional life, producing ‘proposed monuments’ for a number of the cities he visited between 1964 and 1966, which included Venice, Pisa, Rome, Varese, Stockholm, Paris, and London (he had a solo exhibition at the Robert Fraser Gallery, London, in 1966). From his base in New York he also spent time in American cities including San Francisco, Los Angeles, Chicago and Detroit. Barbara Rose, Claes Oldenburg, New York, 1970, 201–3.
7 Ahmed, Strange Encounters, 6 and 15.
8 Oldenburg in Carroll, ‘The poetry of scale’, 13. In 1965 Oldenburg noted that his 1961 happening Fotodeath was an oblique commentary on the topic of immigration (at one point the young female performer adopts various ‘patriotic poses’, at another a selection of consumer goods are laid out across a table with the letters USA printed on them). See transcript of the performance, Claes Oldenburg, ‘Fotodeath’, Tulane Drama Review, 10: 2, Winter 1965, 84–93.
10 Oldenburg, Object into Monument, Pasadena, CA, 1971, 37.
16 Oldenburg, Object into Monument, 34.
17 Oldenburg in Carroll, ‘The poetry of scale’, 18. Oldenburg said he was aware that ‘people were expecting me to give them a monument’.
20 Oldenburg, Object into Monument, 35.
23 Ahmed, Strange Encounters, 49.
25 Oldenburg, Object into Monument, 35.
26 Ahmed, Strange Encounters, 49.
28 One prominent detractor of Oldenburg’s proposed monuments was Herbert Marcuse, who claimed in an interview from 1968 that should any of the proposals for New York be realized it would mean that ‘society has come to an end. Because then people cannot take anything seriously ... there is a way in which this kind of satire, of humor, can indeed kill. I think it would be one of the most bloodless means to achieve a radical change.’ Herbert Marcuse, Interview with Stuart Wrede, Pneta, 1969, 75. See also Tom Williams, ‘Lipstick ascending: Claes Oldenburg in New Haven in 1969’, Grey Room, 31, Spring 2008, 116–44.
29 Rose describes how ‘frequent plane travel’ gave Oldenburg ‘the idea of representing objects out of scale and from odd perspectives’. Oldenburg told Rose that ‘The first suggestion of a monument came some years ago as I was riding in from the airport. I thought: how nice it would be to have a large rabbit about the size of a skyscraper in midtown. It would cheer people up seeing its ears from the suburbs.’ Rose, Claes Oldenburg, 103.
33 Oldenburg, Object into Monument, 33.
36 Oldenburg, Object into Monument, 51.
37 For a comprehensive account of the debates around Expo ’67 see Rhona Richman Kenneally and Johanne Sloan, eds. Expo 67: Not Just a Souvenir, Toronto, 2010.
40 Bill Bantey, Expo ’67, Montreal Gazette, Montreal, 1967, 18. Bantey’s fascination with the British pavilion (and its hostesses’ mini-dresses) extended to the red London buses that had been shipped over especially to provide transport for visitors around the site: ‘Except for the lack of mini-skirts, huh, you could be in Piccadilly Circus when you ride the London double-decker buses.’
41 Oldenburg in Rose, Claes Oldenburg, 105.
42 See Aurora Wallace, ‘The geography of girl watching in post-war Montreal’, Space and Culture, 10: 3, 2007, 349–68, for an interesting account of the political ecologies of the mini-skirt, ‘girl watching’ and urban space in Montreal during the 1960s.
43 Ahmed, Strange Encounters, 6 and 15.
44 Ahmed, Strange Encounters, 49.
46 Urry, The Tourist Gaze, 52. Urry also cites Ahmed’s work on the embodied nature of travel.
47 Oldenburg, Object into Monument, 55.
48 Ahmed, Strange Encounters, 45.
49 The New York fair was deemed ‘unofficial’ because it was not sanctioned by the official World’s Fair body in France, which meant a large number of countries did not participate as they were already booked for the next official Fair, which was Montreal’s Expo ’67. Barbara Rose notes that Oldenburg in fact rejected an offer to design a commission for the New York Fair in 1961. Rose, Claes Oldenburg, 104.
50 Although Oldenburg had in fact already made a similar crayon and watercolour drawing on the same theme in 1965 as a study for the cover of architectural journal Domus. See the reproduction of this in Rose, Claes Oldenburg, 123.
51 Haskell, in Object into Monument, 8
52 Oldenburg, Object into Monument, 52
53 Oldenburg, Object into Monument, 52
54 Oldenburg, as cited in Lucy Lippard, ‘Oldenburg: Pastry case and Giant Fan’.
60 Ahmed, Strange Encounters, 16.
61 Oldenburg in Rose, Claes Oldenburg, 15.
67 Ahmed, Strange Encounters, 15.
68 Meyer, ‘Nomads’, 17. Meyer here contrasts the somewhat lyrical claims of the self-styled nomadic artist free to drift around the globe with the specifics of their task, of travelling for commissions, for exhibitions, for specific projects.
69 Oldenburg, Object into Monument, 51, 34.