



Washes

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# Washes

CLAES OLDENBURG

Creation of *Washes* followed the procedure established in previous pieces:

1. A period of about two weeks, of priming myself with possibilities—practical and impractical—for a pool piece, recording these in a book, and writing a number of script drafts.
2. Familiarizing myself with the particular place. In this case by signing up for massage etc., at Al Roon's. Noticing the importance of sound in the hall, the impossibility of any rapid action. Details of the normal activity of the Health Club.
3. Recruiting the cast from volunteers, some new and some familiar from past performances. Setting up schedule of rehearsals. First meeting.
4. Purchase of objects and costumes. In this case mostly from Canal Street stores, Avenue C used clothing stores, several "thrift" shops, swimming pool suppliers, and sporting goods stores.
5. First three rehearsals, combining prepared ideas, actual place, individuals in cast, and objects and costumes. Confusion and numerous trials and errors.
6. Final rehearsal: simplification of results of first rehearsals to strongest incidents, discarding of the rest. Imposition of simple time scheme of cues.
7. Four performances before audience in May, 1965, with changes continuing to final performance.

*Washes* depended as usual very much on place. The involvement of the audience was mostly through place conditions: humidity, difficult placement (they had to stand on the narrow edges of the pool), tension of wet and dry. A mass audience swim which had been planned was

called off at the last minute because of management's objections. Audience was asked to wear bathing suits.

The final script of *Washes* contained ten untitled parts. The timing of the parts was done by me and light signals were used to cue beginning and end. White lights were placed over the water and over the shallow and deep ends; turning these on cued action. The intervals between parts were lit by dim blue lights. The length of each part varied for each performance according to my intuition of the pace. I watched the action with my back to the pool through a window reflection.

Al Roon's pool is in the basement of the Riverside Plaza Hotel on Manhattan's West 73rd St. The pool is seventy-five feet by twenty-five feet, and is surrounded by an edge about a foot wide. Back of this edge is a space around the pool on the two long sides and the shallow end varying from two to three feet wide. On one long side, doors open the length of the pool to a gymnasium (which relieved the crowding of audience on that side).

The water is mostly over the head. The shallow portion extends only about ten feet, beyond which one must swim. Numbers mark the edges of the pool every five feet. There are two ladders at both the long ends. At the deep end the space behind the pool edge widens, and this is the area referred to as the deep stage, where the audience was not permitted to stand. At the back of this area are doors leading to a Hot Room and Steam Bath and Solarium, overhung with yellow plastic awnings. To the left facing the deep stage is the locker room and offstage, where players waited and dressed.

The audience waited in the adjoining gym until the pool was ready. The water was calm and a red light was set floating in the water. The light stayed in the water throughout the performance, as did all the objects that were placed in the water, so that the pool—a strong green color—changed from a perfectly still body of water to one in which clothing, furniture, people, pipes, and other debris bobbed as after a flood.

A figure called Lifeguard (so identified by his costume on which the title was printed) and I (wearing oversize overalls dyed a bright yellow) aided the ushers of Theater Rally in positioning the audience around three sides of the pool. I was friendly, shaking hands with people while telling them not to smoke, not to throw things in the pool, etc.—instructions from the management. When the audience was placed I took

a position at my window. On the first three nights I asked the audience to be as quiet as possible so that the small sounds of the piece would not be missed. But as the cast's urging I did not make this announcement the fourth night, which permitted laughter and applause, and which, as it turned out, did not prevent the small sounds from being heard. I suppose I wanted to inhibit the audience.

The situation at the beginning of the piece was as follows: on the deep stage there were a massage table, a phonograph with a record of continuous thunder, two oil drums with a folded giant American flag on top, and a bridge (later to be placed across the center of the pool) on the floor. On the edge of the pool at the deep end, Pat, or a fat Humpty-Dumpty-like figure holding a net at the end of a metal stick, fished for plastic bananas and pears which she threw in. At the edge of the shallow end were a woman, Letty, in a bathing suit, and a man, David, fully clad. These three players were in position as the audience entered.

I signaled the man stationed at the lights, D. Farbman, and the white lights turned blue. I signaled him again and the white lights returned, starting the piece.

### Part One

Marjorie enters, in a white costume like a flier, with a white flier's cap and dark blue sunglasses. She puts on the phonograph record of thunder and commences exercising on the massage table. She counts,  $\frac{1}{8}$ ,  $1\frac{1}{8}$ ,  $2\frac{1}{8}$ , etc., or  $\frac{1}{4}$ ,  $1\frac{1}{4}$ ,  $2\frac{1}{4}$ , etc., while exercising.

Lucas enters in a suit and shirt and hat, all dyed blue, carrying a yellow chair. He crosses the deep stage, walks along the pool edge to a point near the center. He tries the chair on the water several times. Then tries sitting on it and sinks. He repeats the action. After several sittings/sinkings he takes off his clothes and ties them on the chair, jacket over back, pants across, shoes on seat, as a man going to bed might place his clothes. From this point the chair becomes a free piece, floating with its load of clothes this way and that during the remaining composition. Lucas also, in a bathing suit and carrying a stainless steel disk becomes a free piece, or "floater," with instructions to im-

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WASHES: *girl in men's clothing scoops up imitation fruit.*

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provised action until his appearance in Part Eight. Through my glass I see him study himself from the edge in the disk like Narcissus. (Another time he floated on his back like a seal looking up into the disk.)

David, as soon as the part begins, starts walking fully dressed into the water down the shallow ladder, until only his head is above water. He walks out, waits a moment, and then walks in again. To the audience his figure under water appears compressed like a midget's. When the part ends, David becomes a "floaters" or free piece, continuing to improvise around the action of cutting his clothes off with scissors until Part Nine, and also helping Letty tie red balloons to her body with string.

Letty begins putting on her balloons at the start of Part One and continues to do so until Part Nine.

Pat continues to fish, moving around the edges of the pool, intruding herself into other actions, and obscuring the view of the audience, until Part Eight.

*Approximate time: four minutes.*

### **Part Two**

After a blue interval (about  $\frac{1}{4}$  minute), white lights again.

Rudy dives into pool immediately on entering deep stage.

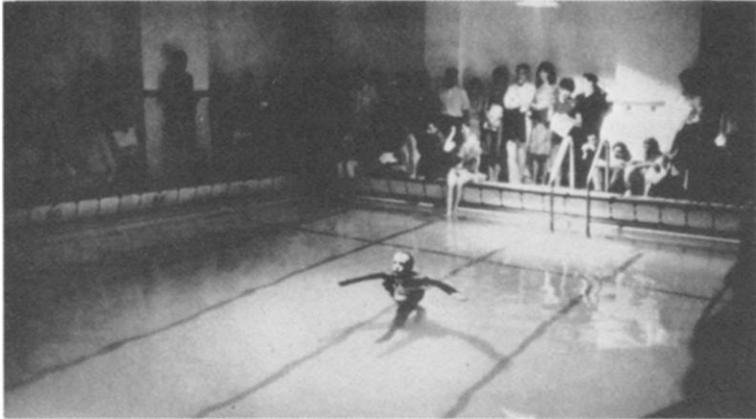
Anina enters, walking along the pool edge, carrying a small silver cup and wearing a leopard skin fur, like water wings. Tied on her ankle is a cow bell which hangs over the pool edge and sounds as she walks. She struts, walks jerkily, stops, runs, and in this variety of gaits makes her way all around the pool. Meanwhile Rudy throws himself against the pool sides trying to grab at her ankles, following her in an irregular pattern through the water, sometimes crossing the pool to return violently. When she reaches the point from which she started, Rudy pulls her into the pool. The part ends and they swim out in blue light; exit.

*Approximate time: two minutes.*

### **Part Three**

Gloria enters carrying a styrofoam and plastic floating chair (white and green with blue trim and plastic drinking glasses sunk in the arms). Also magazine, banana, safety razor, and folding measuring stick (and other objects of her own choosing). Wearing a net cap and one-piece black bathing suit. Launches chair and climbs in. Thereafter she moves

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*WASHES: man in tuxedo walks into pool.*

freely around the edges of the pool, measuring them, sometimes using the stick as a fishing rod, reading the magazine, shaving her legs, eating banana, and saying at intervals: "I lost seventy-eight pounds" or variations thereof, while looking up at the audience or tugging at their ankles. Gloria continues as a "floaters" through as many parts as she wishes.

Dorothea and Max enter. Max launches the two oil drums, throwing them in the water with a great splash. Dorothea takes the folded giant American flag, walks to the center edge and there slips into the water with the flag. She wears gold gloves. Max composes a percussion piece slamming the barrels together with a variety of resonant sounds. Dorothea spreads the giant flag in water. After a while the wet flag is draped over both barrels in a funeral effect. When the part ends, Max and Dorothea remove the flag and let it sink to the pool bottom.

*Approximate time: four minutes.*

#### **Part Four**

Marjorie reenters in same white costume, puts on record of thunder. Exercises as before.

Yvonne walks around the pool in a white costume, to the shallow end. Walks into water, costume floating around her body.

Walter enters with ladder, walks down opposite side, puts ladder into

water, and composes it in relation to the pool edge, also extending it to Yvonne who swims away from it (as if avoiding an attempt at rescue).

Walter slips into pool, continues to manipulate ladder towards Yvonne, raising ladder in water, turning it around. After about a minute and a half, Yvonne leaves the water and strips off the white dress to a black net bathing suit. She returns along the pool edge and Walter, leaving ladder to float in the water, follows her. She waits for him but walks away just as he reaches her. This is repeated until she returns to the point where she entered. As he nears this time, she jumps in the pool. Walter leaves stage. Yvonne swims out. Marjorie turns off record of thunder and leaves deep stage.

*Approximate time: three minutes.*

### **Part Five**

Barbara and Debby enter carrying a parachute dyed red. Each taking one end they walk the length of the pool on opposite edges. The parachute unfurls as they walk and drags in the water. Reaching the shallow end, they let go the parachute, which spreads in the pool. They are wearing summer dresses which they strip off to white underwear and slide into the water. They wrestle in the water entangling themselves in the parachute. As they wrestle, they laugh, pausing from time to time to spread the chute in the green water.

Henry enters on deep stage, carrying a yellow rubber boat with a blue bottom, a "soft" paddle (pipe painted ivory with a red rubber paddle flapping), a newspaper, a folded white plastic sheet and smoking a cigar. He wears sunglasses and a robe. With the aid of the Lifeguard, he climbs into the boat and paddles out with some difficulty to about the center of the pool. He reads his paper and smokes. After a time, he puts down the paper and covers himself entirely with the white plastic sheet.

Barbara appears on the deep stage after Henry has "slept" a while. She wears a bathing suit, harsh red lipstick, and has kept her hair dry. She enters the pool by the ladder and stealthily and slowly swims to Henry's boat, carrying a rope which she attaches to the boat. She swims back pulling the boat and Henry. On reaching the deep end ladder, she ties the boat, leaves the pool and stage.

After a moment, Henry wakes up, takes off the sheet, gathers his possessions, climbs out, leaving the rubber boat tied to the ladder.

The white lights go out and the wrestling girls leave the water and walk out along the edge in blue. The parachute remains in the pool.

*Approximate time: six minutes.*

### **Part Six**

Ellen and Sarah appear on deep stage. Sarah climbs into the water, being careful not to wet her hair. Ellen takes a position at the end of the long edge of the pool. Slowly they proceed the length of the pool, Ellen walking, Sarah swimming in a straight line. Their eyes are fixed on each other. Each anticipates the other's action. If one moves slightly forward, the other immediately makes up the distance, so that they remain perfectly parallel. When they reach the shallow end, Ellen joins Sarah in the water. They stand facing one another absolutely still just to the side of the shallow ladder.

Al and Geoffrey enter with the girls but remain in the background pacing the deep stage until the girls reach the center of the pool. Then they begin to wrestle, slapping one another's flesh so that is resounds in the hall. When the girls reach the shallow end and face each other, Al and Geoffrey pick up short lengths of dry two-by-fours and smack them together. They move down opposite sides the length of the pool, as if their battle continued despite the interposition of the water. They wear aprons of rubber and bathing suits. The sounds are sharp and earsplitting. When the two reach the shallow end, they put the sticks down on the edge and leap in the water, continuing to wrestle. Sarah and Ellen leave the pool at this point and both walk slowly the length of the pool and off stage. Al and Geoffrey swim the pool length vigorously and climb out.

*Approximate time: four minutes.*

### **Part Seven/Part Eight/Part Nine**

Part Seven, Part Eight, and Part Nine are not separated by blue intervals. But the blue light does go on during film projection in Part Eight.

When the wrestlers exit, a bridge which fits over the pool, of reinforced wood, about two feet wide, is lifted from the floor of the deep stage and carried by the Lifeguard and me to a spot about center of pool under a light. The bridge is tested.

Pat, who as a "floater" has moved fishing around the edges, mounts

the bridge and begins removing her fat costume of many garments, laying them as if to dry along the bridge.

Four men, Raymond, Michael, Richard, Jon, in bathing suits enter deep stage with a set of stovepipes joined in different ways through which a clothesline dyed red has been threaded. Two of them enter the pool and tie the end of the line to the bridge. The other two remain on stage pushing the stovepipes down the line into the water. At the same time, four women, Elaine, Martha, Nancy, and Jackie, enter through the audience at the shallow end. They are fully dressed. They walk into the water by the shallow ladder. One of them carries a length of the red clothesline, swims out to the bridge and attaches it. The other end is attached to the shallow ladder. The women remove their clothes, including shoes, and hang them on the red line with clothespins.

The four men interrupt their threading of pipe to grunt and to lie on the edges of the pool breathing very hard. The four women from time to time wash each other with a long brush and sponges and whistle one note.

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*WASHES: performers on bridge. In background, men string fluepipe on a clothesline. Note floating debris accumulated from preceding sections.*

The action of the four men and four women (Part Seven) continues through the dance of Lucas and Pat (Part Eight) and the balloon sequence of Letty and David (Part Nine).

Pat, having removed her fat clothes and laid them out, makes herself up, sitting on the bridge, and puts on white kneesocks and a white short sailorblouse.

Lucas gives up his role as "floaters," mounts the bridge, dries himself and puts on a pair of oversized ivory-colored nylon pajama pants. He "walks" in different ways, putting different parts of his body in the pajamas. At one point, his hand wearing a shoe "walks" one pajama-leg while he holds one of his legs up inside. He attaches small plungers to his body which stick out under the nylon. He stuffs the pajama-bottoms with a rubber green alligator. When he has finished his pajama-bottom dance and Pat has finished making up and redressing, they join in a dance with a sheet. The sheet is first held out horizontally, then shaken, then turned vertically. It catches the white light of a film projector running without film, which projects the silhouettes of the sheet and dancers on the audience and wall at the shallow end. The blue light is on during projection. Pat and Lucas come together, kiss for a moment, fold the sheet once, repeat the horizontal-shake-vertical action. Come together again, kiss, fold twice and so on until the sheet, having been folded several times, is just a bundle and hard to shake. The sheet is loosened, the projector goes off. Lucas covers himself and Pat with the sheet, holds her upside down, and the dance continues with limbs protruding. After a while, Lucas removes the sheet, places it carefully on the surface of the pool, picks Pat up under the arms and drops her toes first into the sheet. She plummets into the water, the sheet closing around her.

Near the climax of this dance, Letty, who is now completely covered with blown-up red balloons, rises from her position seated at the shallow edge and enters the water with the aid of David on the shallow ladder. She floats. She floats out into the water bounded by the bridge and the women's clothesline, perfectly rigid. David, who during the performance has cut his clothes off, walks into the water in his bathing suit and swims up to and around Letty. After a moment of letting her float, he begins biting the balloons, holding them so that they pop with a loud sound that resounds in the hall. He bites one balloon after an-

other until all are bitten and broken and Letty sinks. Then he swims away.

*Approximate time of Parts Seven, Eight, Nine: ten minutes.*

### **Part Ten**

A blue interval, brief. When the white lights come on, all players except Marjorie and Lifeguard enter water and float as if drowned.

Marjorie puts on record of thunder and exercises. After about a minute, the Lifeguard (Alex) blows his whistle. Marjorie leaves the deep stage. The drowned come to life and swim toward deep end.

A record is put on of Brahms Symphony No. 1, Finale, played by David Rose in syncopation.

*Approximate time: two minutes.*

**The piece is over.**

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*WASHES: girl floats covered with balloons.*