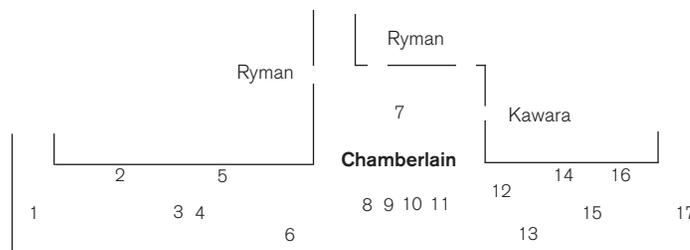


# John Chamberlain

John Chamberlain was born in 1927 in Rochester, Indiana. He grew up in Chicago and, after serving in the United States Navy from 1943 to 1946, he attended the Art Institute of Chicago in the early 1950s. In 1955 and 1956, Chamberlain studied and taught sculpture at Black Mountain College, near Asheville, North Carolina. He moved to New York in 1956 and the following year made *Shortstop*, his first sculpture incorporating scrap metal from cars. Chamberlain's first major solo show was presented at the Martha Jackson Gallery, New York, in 1960. His work was included in the *Art of Assemblage* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1961, and he began showing at Leo Castelli's New York gallery in 1962. Chamberlain had his first retrospective in 1971 at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, held a second retrospective in 1986. In 2012, the Guggenheim Museum presented another retrospective that included seventeen works from Dia's collection. Chamberlain has received numerous honors, including the Skowhegan Medal for Sculpture and the Lifetime Achievement Award in Contemporary Sculpture from the International Sculpture Center, Washington, DC (both 1993); the Gold Medal from the National Arts Club, New York (1997); and the Distinction in Sculpture award from the Sculpture Center, New York (1999). Chamberlain died in 2011 in New York City.

1. *Luftschloss*, 1979  
Painted and chromium-plated steel
2. *The Hot Lady from Bristol*, 1979  
Painted and chromium-plated steel
3. *American Barge*, 1979  
Urethane foam and canvas
4. *Black Cherry-No-Cal*, 1971  
Videotapes transferred to digital files, black-and white, sound  
Courtesy Castelli Gallery, New York
5. *Hit Height Lear*, 1979  
Painted and chromium-plated steel
6. *King King Minor*, 1982  
Painted steel
7. *Dooms Day Flotilla*, 1982  
Painted and chromium-plated steel
8. *Gondola Herman Melville*, 1981  
Painted and chromium-plated steel
9. *Gondola Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*, 1981  
Painted steel
10. *Gondola T. S. Eliot*, 1981  
Painted steel
11. *Gondola W. H. Auden*, 1981  
Painted steel
12. *Daddy in the Dark*, 1988  
Painted and chromium-plated steel  
Collection Louise and Leonard Riggio
13. *Black Satin Custard*, 1980  
Painted and chromium-plated steel
14. *Chickmeat*, 1979  
Painted and chromium-plated steel
15. *Thordis' Barge*, 1980–81  
Urethane foam and canvas
16. *Coup d'Soup*, 1980  
Painted steel
17. *Three-Cornered Desire*, 1979  
Painted and chromium-plated steel



# John Chamberlain

In the late 1950s, John Chamberlain began vigorously shaping the colorful ruins of old cars into billowing forms. As his work matured it seemed to many the quintessential Abstract Expressionist sculpture—the progeny of the gestural marks of Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline. To others who focused on the materials—crushed automobile parts in colors that Donald Judd described as sweet, hard, and redolent of the Detroit cars of the 1950s—Chamberlain's work was more appropriately aligned with Pop art. Judd appreciated Chamberlain's sculptures for their singular shapes, their openness, and their common materials. As he explained, "Reality seems considerably more capacious than any order it holds. The disparity between reality and its order is the most radical and important aspect of Chamberlain's sculpture." In *Luftschloss* (1979) for example, large panels of contorted vans twist energetically around each other into a visually haphazard balance that is, in fact, carefully threaded together with a network of underlying truck chassis welded into an efficient interior armature.

In the wake of a period of material experimentation, Chamberlain began work on a series of large-scale interactive "couches" in the 1970s. *American Barge* (1979) and *Thordis' Barge* (1980–81) are two works from this series. The artist carved undulating seating into these soft forms, inviting viewers to curl up in the enfolding contours. He frequently installed television monitors at either end of the couches, on which he played experimental films (directed by himself or his friends). *American Barge*, for example, was originally displayed with a no-longer-extant series of real and fake commercials. Here the work is shown with Chamberlain's *Black Cherry-No-Cal* (1971), a montage of urban street life. The monitors encourage viewers to spend time on the couches, drawing attention to the role that mundane home furnishings play in our daily lives. As Chamberlain explained, "The couches I feel alter your sitting consciousness—if it has [sic] no other function than that." Viewers are invited to take a seat.

These couches also radically altered the stakes of Chamberlain's sculptural practice, not only by literally incorporating the viewer's body into the work but also, in doing so, restructuring the very conditions through which art is experienced. As Dan Graham explained: "The couches produce a kinesthetic (physical) body sensation, rather than the merely visual, traditional position of the spectator's 'ego' observing artwork."

The Barges initiated a period of lateral expansion in Chamberlain's art in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Shortly after completing *American Barge*, the sculptor moved his studio to a former warehouse in Sarasota, Florida, that encouraged such growth. His first Sarasota sculptures were a group of ground-hugging Gondolas—small planar elements clinging to horizontal linear armatures forged from dismembered truck chassis (leftover from his work on *Luftschloss* and another project). In the Gondolas and the later *Dooms Day Flotilla* (1982), Chamberlain's compositions build incrementally from one element to another along the chassis spines, verging at points on fragmentation. The works require a more leisurely mode of apprehension that relates to the durational experience of the Barges.

Chamberlain's titles from this period (the Barges, the Gondolas, and *Dooms Day Flotilla*) seem to connect the newfound horizontality of his works with maritime themes, perhaps suggestive of his surroundings, living on a boat for a period of time and working in a studio near the bay. Yet for the most part, the titles that he chose were open-ended and generated from found words or expressions. *Hit Height Lear* (1979), *Three-Cornered Desire* (1979), and *Coup d'Soup* (1980) each demonstrate Chamberlain's poetic sensibility and his taste for unlikely associations, as do the Gondolas, which were named for two titans of nineteenth-century American literature (Herman Melville, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow) and two canonical, twentieth-century modernist poets (T. S. Eliot and W. H. Auden).