

Drawings On Site: Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen

On view at the Menil Collection May 9 – October 11, 2009

**Public Program: Conversation: Claes Oldenburg and Bernice Rose, chief curator,
The Menil Drawing Institute and Study Center
Sunday, May 10, 2009, 7 p.m.**

Presented by the Menil Drawing Institute and Study Center

HOUSTON, April 14, 2009 – For more than three decades, artists Claes Oldenburg (b. 1929) and Coosje van Bruggen (1942-2009) created large-scale works that reconfigure our conception of ordinary objects found in our daily environments. Through their highly interactive and multi-tiered creative process, the couple transformed iconic, commonplace items such as rubber stamps and tools into humorous public monuments dedicated to the modern experience. These initial studies reveal a



Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen. *Shuttlecock/Sphinx*, 1996

spontaneity and wit that subvert the solemn and inert character of public monuments.

Drawings On Site: Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen, organized by Bernice Rose, chief curator of the Menil Drawing Institute and Study Center, in cooperation with the artists, will showcase more than a dozen large-scale drawings assembled primarily from the artists' private collection.

The exhibition will be on view at the Menil Collection from May 9th through October 11, 2009.

An innovator of New York's nascent Pop Art movement, Claes Oldenburg gained critical acclaim for his offbeat return to "realism" during the waning years of Abstract Expressionism. Drawing inspiration from his urban surroundings, Oldenburg transformed fragments of the debris found in the streets of his Lower East Side environment into

artworks, creating a new genre of installations in exhibitions such as *The Street* (1960), two and three dimensional objects and figures made of paper; and *The Store* (1961) brightly painted plaster models of consumer goods.

Leaving New York for Los Angeles in 1963, the artist turned to larger, more interior-based installations like *Bedroom Ensemble* – a full-scale recreation of Malibu hotel room based on memory. Domestic themes continued as Oldenburg relocated to Europe the following year, producing works for the Venice Biennale.

Returning to New York in 1965, Oldenburg began drawing ideas for *Proposed Colossal Monuments*, a series of “unfeasible” large sculptures planned for several of the most recognizable spaces in the United States. In 1969 Oldenburg successfully constructed his first colossal monument at Yale University, *Lipstick (Ascending) on Caterpillar Tracks*, a twenty-foot tube of lipstick placed atop a pair of tank treads. Other large commissions followed in the next several years, including *Three-Way Plug* (1970) at Oberlin College and *Giant Ice Bag* (1970) at the U.S. Pavilion of Expo '70 in Japan. Whether visionary or fully realized, monumental public works and large-scale sculptures remained a central focus of the work.

After collaborating with Oldenburg in 1976 on the siting of his 41-foot sculpture *Trowel I* (a work conceived in 1971), Dutch writer and art historian Coosje van Bruggen joined the artist as a creative partner. They married the following year in the Netherlands and returned to New York to focus on the challenges of producing large-scale public works. Each project began with a conversation between the two artists – an exchange of words and images. Once the appropriate object was identified for a specific site, the couple discussed its layers of meaning while Oldenburg captured any spontaneous first thoughts through his sketches and continued to represent the phases of the development of a project in other classes of drawing, through to completion.

Concentrating on drawings for projects developed from the 1980s onward, *Drawings On Site* offers a rare glimpse into work such as Cleveland’s *Free Stamp* (1984) and the Vitra Museum’s *Balancing Tools, Position Study* (1983) from the artists' perspective – a preview before the sculptures reached a public audience. In the large presentation drawings

Oldenburg has recorded his impression of the couple's ever-evolving interpretations of how their sculptural object interacts with its environment. Each shift in medium, from charcoal and pastel to watercolor and pencil, provides a new vision of how a project might affect its viewers. The exhibition takes into account visualizations of both feasible and unfeasible sculptures as they appear (or could appear) *in situ* at various locations around the world. Included will be imagined works such as the colossal *Golfbag Ruin* (1999), a romantic vision of verticality in an imaginary landscape of Scotland, and *Proposed Sculpture in the Form of Asparagus, for the Fireplace of Pavilion Four* (1997). While most works on view serve as presentation drawings for clients, Oldenburg's use of a highly stylized architectural rendering allows them to stand as remarkable pieces in their own right.

From the mid-1970s on, Oldenburg and van Bruggen realized nearly fifty public projects in the United States, Europe, and Asia. All have been conceived in the singular drawing practice that stands as not simply as a creative generator of large-scale sculptures, but as a remarkable testament to the act of drawing.

Coosje van Bruggen died in January of this year after battling a long term illness. ***Drawings On Site*** commemorates one of the most important artistic collaborations of modernist sculpture.

This exhibition is generously supported by David Teiger, Janie C. Lee and David B. Warren, the Susan Vaughan Foundation, The Brown Foundation, Inc./Nancy and Mark Abendshein, Leslie and Shannon Sasser, Beth and Rick Schnieders, and the City of Houston.

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Claes Oldenburg will be joined by Bernice Rose, The Menil Drawing Institute and Study Center's Chief Curator, in a conversation about the drawings.

For further information and images, please contact the press office, 713.525.9469, or press@menil.org

The Menil Collection, located within Houston's Museum District,
is open Wednesday through Sunday, 11 a.m. to 7 p.m.
Admission and parking are free.

Photo Caption: Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen, *Shuttlecock/Sphinx*, 1996
Pencil and pastel on paper 38 x 50 in.
Collection Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen Courtesy the Oldenburg van Bruggen Foundation C. Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen