

WHITNEY

Whitney Museum of American Art
945 Madison Avenue at 75th Street
New York, NY 10021
whitney.org/press

Tel. (212) 570-3633
Fax (212) 570-4169
pressoffice@whitney.org

Press Release

Contact:
Whitney Museum of American Art
Stephen Soba, Leily Soleimani
212-570-3633



Claes Oldenburg (b.1929) and Coosje van Bruggen (1942-2009), *Soft Viola Island*, 2001. Charcoal and pastel on paper. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; gift of Robert J. Hurst and The American Contemporary Art Foundation, Inc. 2002.277
© Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen.

THE WHITNEY TO PRESENT SELECTION OF EARLY SCULPTURES AND DRAWINGS BY OLDENBURG, FILMS OF HIS EARLY HAPPENINGS, AND A SERIES OF WORKS BY OLDENBURG AND VAN BRUGGEN

Claes Oldenburg: Early Sculpture, Drawings, and Happenings Films
Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen: *The Music Room*

Opens May 7, 2009

Press Preview: Wednesday, May 6, 10am-noon

NEW YORK, April 6, 2009 – This spring, the Whitney Museum of American Art presents a selection of early sculpture and drawings by Claes Oldenburg (b. 1929), as well as films of the artist's influential Happenings, together with *The Music Room*, a series of works that Oldenburg made with his wife and artistic collaborator Coosje van Bruggen (1942-2009). The presentation opens on May 7, 2009, and runs through August in the second-floor

Mildred & Herbert Lee Galleries; the films are shown projected in loops on the walls of the Kaufman Astoria Studios Film & Video Gallery, also on the Museum's second floor. Three Whitney curators – Carter Foster, Chrissie Iles, and Dana Miller – are organizing the presentation.

One of the most innovative artists of the postwar period, Claes Oldenburg is best known for sculptures and drawings that disrupt our expectations of how ordinary objects “behave.” In 1976, he began an extraordinary creative partnership with the art historian and curator Coosje van Bruggen that continued for more than thirty years. The Whitney has championed their work for several decades and now possesses one of the world's largest collections. Drawn primarily from the museum's extensive holdings of drawings, sculpture, film, and archival material, this presentation is concentrated around several distinct projects, but illuminates the larger themes of metamorphosis and artistic collaboration that are at the heart of their practice.

Claes Oldenburg: Early Sculpture, Drawings, and Happenings Films

From the start, Oldenburg took an innovative approach to the media he used as well as to the processes of art-making and distribution. In 1961, he opened The Store, a now-legendary event, in which the act of selling objects became a kind of playful critique of the art market; the next year he staged a series of events in downtown Manhattan collectively known as Ray Gun Theater, which influenced the development of performance art during the next several decades. Among the earliest works in the Whitney exhibition are sculptures from The Store, including *Braslette* (1961) and *The Black Girdle* (1961). This presentation of material from The Store will be supplemented by loans from the collection of Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen, including several sculptures, original inventory lists of items for sale, and a study for the poster advertising The Store.

Oldenburg's early interest in environments shifted to discrete sculptural works. Using ordinary, everyday items as his subjects, he developed “soft” sculptures using pliable materials such as canvas and vinyl, which he stuffed with fillers to create malleable, mutable objects. Several iconic examples will be on view at the Whitney including *Giant BLT (Bacon, Lettuce, and Tomato Sandwich)* (1963), *French Fries and Ketchup* (1963), and *Soft Toilet* (1966). These and other early sculptures will be complemented by several dozen of the Whitney's works on paper by Oldenburg and by Oldenburg with van Bruggen. The bulk of the drawings were acquired in 2002 as a gift to the museum from the American

Contemporary Art Foundation, Inc., Leonard A. Lauder, President, and this will be the first time that a large number of them will be shown in concert with the Whitney's sculptural objects. These works range in date from the early 1960s to the late 1990s and include collages, prints, pages of quick notebook sketches, and carefully rendered drawings. Several of these depict proposals for feasible and non-feasible civic monuments and Large-Scale Projects.

One highlight of the exhibition is Oldenburg's *Ice Bag – Scale C* (1971), which has undergone extensive conservation work in preparation for this exhibition. Oldenburg's *Ice Bag* project was first conceived as part of the Art and Technology program for the U.S. Pavilion at the 1970 World's Fair in Osaka, where an eighteen-foot version, powered by hydraulics, appeared. This version was, in the end, produced in collaboration with Gemini G.E.L. and Krofft Enterprises. The Whitney's *Ice Bag – Scale C* was the third version of the subject and is the only one built with a 12-foot diameter (scale B has a four-foot diameter). It too was produced with Gemini G.E.L. and has a motorized system of fans that inflate, deflate, twist, and turn the kinetic sculpture into various positions.

Happenings formed a central strand of Oldenburg's early work in the 1960s. What we know of them has been learned primarily through photographic documentation and published scripts. Here, for the first time, eight rare films of Oldenburg's Happenings will be shown together in the Whitney's Film & Video Gallery, projected in loops around the walls. Two of the films – *Fotodeath* (1961) and *Autobodys* (1967) – have not been seen since they were first screened in the 1960s, and have been restored especially for the exhibition.

Each film reveals the structure and form of Oldenburg's approach. Carefully scripted, the Happenings were performed variously in Dallas, New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, and upstate New York, in old storefronts, a shack, a university hall, or in the open air, using sets incorporating draped muslin, furniture, mirrors, tables, burlap, costumes, large colored sculptural forms, and painted words. Accompanied by soundtracks using vinyl records, drums, the radio, and live sounds, Oldenburg performs with artists and friends including Patty Mucha, Lucas Samaras, Carolee Schneemann, Henry Geldzahler, Claire and Tom Wesselmann, and others, as well as volunteers in different cities.

Seen together, these revelatory films make clear the roots of Oldenburg's interest in collaboration that were to emerge more fully in his collaborative projects with Coosje van

Bruggen. A slide projection of their 1985 performance *Il Corso del Coltello* (*The Course of the Knife*), made in the streets and canals of Venice, Italy, completes the group.

The following will be shown:

Fotodeath, 1961, 16mm, b/w, silent, 12 min. Filmed by Al Kouzel.

This Happening is the second part of *Circus*, which was performed six times in the Reuben Gallery, a store on East 3rd Street, NYC, in February 1961. (restored for the exhibition)

Ray Gun Theater, 1962, 16mm, b/w, silent. 120 min. Filmed by Raymond Saroff.

Ten Happenings performed at the Store, 107 East 2nd Street, New York City, between February and May 1962: *Store Days I and II*, *Nekropolis I and II*, *Injun I and II*, *Voyages I and II*, *World's Fair I and II*.

Injun, 1962, 16mm, b/w, sound, 12 min. Filmed by Roy Fridge.

A daytime dress rehearsal of the Happening, filmed in an abandoned house on the property of the Dallas Museum of Art.

Autobodys, 1963, 16mm, b/w, silent, 20 min.

A film of the Happening *Autobodys*, performed in Los Angeles in the fall of 1963. (restored for the exhibition)

Scarface and Aphrodite, 1963, 16mm, b/w, sound, 13 min. Filmed by Vernon Zimmerman.

Film of the Happening *Gayety*, at Lexington Hall University of Chicago.

Birth of the Flag I and II (1974, from footage shot in June 1965), 16mm, silent, 38 min. Filmed by Stan VanDerBeek, Diane Rochlin, and Sheldon Rochlin, produced by Rudy Wurlitzer, edited by Lana Jokel.

A Happening in two parts, filmed outdoors in upstate New York.

Il Corso del Coltello (*The Course of the Knife*), 1985

A slide projection of a large scale performance by Oldenburg, van Bruggen, and Frank Gehry in the streets and canals of Venice, Italy.

Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen: *The Music Room*

A full room has been dedicated to a series of sculptures of musical instruments by Oldenburg and van Bruggen in a presentation entitled *The Music Room*. In 1992 Oldenburg and van Bruggen developed a body of kindred forms derived from harps, saxophones, and clarinets. A soft saxophone from this series will be included in this presentation. Eight years later the pair was invited to conceive a work for *Encounters: New Art from Old*, an exhibition at the National Gallery in London. The exhibition was composed of works made by contemporary artists in response to the museum's collection. Van Bruggen chose to explore the interiors of the seventeenth-century Dutch painter Johannes Vermeer. More specifically she was inspired by the paintings *A Young Woman Standing at a Virginal* and *A Young Woman Seated at a Virginal*. The pair created *Resonances, after J.V.* (2000) in response, a window box installation of an interior with sculptural elements that will be installed at the

Whitney. *Resonances, after J.V.* became the springboard for Oldenburg and van Bruggen, who expanded the musical theme to create several instruments. *Soft Viola* (2002), given to the Whitney in 2002, was prompted by the viola depicted so prominently in one of the Vermeer compositions. Here it is an instrument deprived of its function, hanging from the wall in a state of suspended animation. Like many works conceived by Oldenburg and van Bruggen, the intrinsically sculptural viola, with its voluptuous contours and art historical associations, is replete with erotic overtones.

The theme and form of musical instruments proved ideal for exploring physical and material transformations and the resulting shifts in meaning. Metamorphosis occurs here through scale and the way soft and hard forms can playfully transform our everyday perceptions of the function or performance of musical instruments. Although these have been concerns of the artists throughout their careers, the Music Room's display brings these ideas to the fore in a particularly focused way. Musical instruments also serve as a particularly apt metaphor for the process of artistic collaboration and their group presentation creates reverberations as the sculptural instruments play off of one another.

As installed at the Whitney, *The Music Room* includes both hard and soft instruments of differing scales that range in date from 1992 to 2006. Among the objects included in the installation are variations on a viola, saxophone, clarinets, French horns, sheet music, and a metronome. A select group of related drawings will hang nearby, including the Whitney's *Soft Viola Island* (2001), in which tiny sailboats circumnavigate the verdant shores of an island in the shape of a recumbent viola.

About the Artists

Claes Oldenburg (b. 1929, Stockholm) grew up in Chicago and attended Yale University (1946-50) before settling in New York City in 1956. Influenced by his environs on the Lower East Side, he created a series of performances and installations such as *The Street* (1960) and *The Store* (1961) that established him as a leading figure of contemporary art. Moving to Los Angeles and shifting his vision to *The Home* (1963), Oldenburg began a series of sewn and fabricated versions of ordinary household objects, including *Bedroom Ensemble*. On his return to New York, he began a series of drawings of objects in fantastic scale called "Proposed Colossal Monuments." In 1976, a 45-foot-tall sculpture in the form of a *Clothespin* was realized in downtown Philadelphia, the first such work in a 'feasible'

scale. From 1976 on, he worked in partnership with Coosje van Bruggen, whom he married in 1977.

Coosje van Bruggen was born in the Netherlands in 1942 and studied ballet as a youth. She received a master's degree in art history with a minor in French literature from the University of Groningen prior to serving as a member of the curatorial staff in the Painting and Sculpture Department at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam from 1961 until 1971. Van Bruggen was co-editor of the catalogue of *Sonsbeek 71*, a multi-sited exhibition of contemporary sculpture throughout the Netherlands. In 1976, Oldenburg and van Bruggen worked together for the first time on the reconstruction and relocation of the 41-foot-tall *Trowel I* (1971–76)—originally shown at *Sonsbeek 71*—to the Kröller-Müller Museum grounds in Otterlo. In 1978 van Bruggen moved to New York where she continued to work with Oldenburg on creating site-specific, large-scale urban works, while also serving as an international independent curator and critic. Van Bruggen was a member of the selection committee for *Documenta 7* in Kassel, Germany (1982); a contributor to *Artforum* (1983–88); and Senior Critic in the Department of Sculpture at Yale University School of Art in New Haven (1996–97). In addition to her extensive writings on Oldenburg's early work and on the collaborative projects, she created the characters for *Il Corso del Coltello* (Venice, 1985), a performance by Oldenburg, van Bruggen, and the architect Frank Gehry. Van Bruggen is the author of essays on Richard Artschwager and Gerhard Richter and books on John Baldessari, Hanne Darboven, Bruce Nauman, and Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum Bilbao.

The artistic team of Oldenburg and van Bruggen executed more than 40 permanently sited sculptures in architectural scale throughout the United States, Europe, and Japan, including *Spoonbridge and Cherry* (1988), Minneapolis; *Mistos (Match Cover)* (1992), Barcelona; *Shuttlecocks* (1994), Kansas City; *Saw, Sawing* (1996), Tokyo; *Ago, Filo e Nodo (Needle, Thread and Knot)* (2000), Milan; and the 40-foot-high *Dropped Cone* (2001) atop the Neumarkt Galerie in Cologne, Germany. Their collaboration also encompassed smaller park and garden sculptures in addition to indoor installations. Until van Bruggen's death on January 10, 2009, Oldenburg and van Bruggen lived and worked in Manhattan, California, and France.

About the Whitney

The Whitney Museum of American Art is the leading advocate of 20th- and 21st-century American art. Founded in 1930, the Museum is regarded as the preeminent collection of American art and includes major works and materials from the estate of Edward Hopper, the largest public collection of works by Alexander Calder, as well as significant works by Jasper Johns, Donald Judd, Agnes Martin, Bruce Nauman, Georgia O'Keeffe, Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen, Kiki Smith, and Andy Warhol, among other artists. With its history of exhibiting the most promising and influential American artists and provoking intense critical and public debate, the Whitney's signature show, the Biennial, has become the most important survey of the state of contemporary art in America today. First housed on West 8th Street, the Whitney relocated in 1954 to West 54th Street and in 1966 inaugurated its present home at 945 Madison Avenue, designed by Marcel Breuer. The Whitney is currently moving ahead with plans to build a second facility, designed by Renzo Piano, located in downtown New York at the entrance to the High Line in the Meatpacking District.

Current and Upcoming Exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art:

Alex Bag	Through April 12, 2009
Synthetic	Through April 19, 2009
Sites	Through May 3, 2009
Artists Making Photographs	Through May 17, 2009
Jenny Holzer: PROTECT PROTECT	Through May 31, 2009
Sadie Benning: Play Pause	Opens April 22, 2009
Oldenburg/van Bruggen	Opens May 7, 2009
Photoconceptualism, 1966-73	Opens May 22, 2009
Dan Graham: Beyond	Opens June 25, 2009
Georgia O'Keeffe: Abstraction	September 17, 2009-January 17, 2010
Roni Horn aka Roni Horn	November 6, 2009-January 24, 2010
Alice Guy Blaché: Cinema Pioneer	November 6, 2009-January 24, 2010

The Whitney Museum is located at 945 Madison Avenue, New York City. Museum hours are: Wednesday, Thursday, Saturday, and Sunday from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m., Friday from 1 p.m. to 9 p.m., closed Monday and Tuesday. Admission is \$15 for adults; Members, children (ages 11 and under), and New York City public high school students free. Senior citizens (62 and over) and students with valid ID: \$10. There is a \$6 admission fee for a pass to the Kaufman Astoria Studios Film & Video Gallery only. Admission is pay-what-you-wish on Fridays, 6-9 pm. For information, please call 212-570-3600 or visit whitney.org