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Pop Sculpture Duo

VAN BRUGGEN
AND OLDENBURG



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Creativity Loves Company

When Pop master Claes Oldenburg met art historian Coosje van Bruggen, collaborative genius was the natural result.

BY REBECCA DIMLING COCHRAN

We first really met when we worked on a piece, 'Trowel I,' which had originally been made for a site at Arnhem," recalls Claes Oldenburg.

"It was in 1971 for the exhibition 'Sonsbeek 71,'" interjects his wife, Coosje van Bruggen. "I was the editor of the catalogue, so that's how we talked about the piece."

"Of course, at that time we were not together," Oldenburg continues. "But in 1976, that particular piece had been re-sited to the Kröller-Müller Museum in a very bad location and was in a state of deterioration. That's when we got together on the piece."


Seated at a long Donald Judd table in their minimally furnished brownstone on the edge of SoHo, the two sit so close to one another that at times their hands almost touch. Listening to the rapport as they continually take over from one another (often before either is finished), it is easy to understand the working process that has developed between them over the past three decades. As they discuss past projects of their signature giant sculptures that depict everyday objects, each brings perspectives still guided by their early training. Oldenburg, who was born in Sweden but raised in the U.S., is a visual artist and tends to approach the work in terms of its formal qualities, its visual characteristics and how it is constructed. Van Bruggen, an art historian and curator born and raised in the Netherlands, looks at the meaning inherent in each piece, placing the work in the

context of its surroundings and in a larger art-historical framework.

Their experience re-siting the Kröller-Müller sculpture set a precedent for future collaborations. Oldenburg sketched and sculpted the model for "Trowel I" for example, but as he recalls, "Coosje had some very good ideas about where to place it because she had worked at the Kröller-Müller. The other thing was that she didn't like the zinc-silver color, which she replaced with a sort of workman's-blue color."

"I thought its iconography [was] too much like a cake shovel and not enough like a tool," van Bruggen explains. Her sensitive and witty placement furthered this clarification. "It's at the transition of the manicured garden into the wilder part, and you can see it from both," she explains. "It looks very beautiful there."

"The whole idea of placing a piece in relation to its setting is Coosje's idea more than mine," continues Oldenburg, who early on established a practice of transforming ordinary objects like a piece of cake or a baseball bat into a work of art by altering its size, density and material. "The sculptures that were done before our partnership could have been realized in any of several situations, because it was a sculpture in itself. Now the large-scale projects grow out of observations of a particular place." The pair have created "Cupid's Span" in San Francisco, a bow and arrow piercing the city



"Ago, Filo e Nod (Needle, Thread and Knot),"
2000, brushed stainless steel and
fiber-reinforced plastic painted with
polyester gelcoat and polyurethane enamel,
in the fashion capital of Milan, Italy.

today's masters

where Tony Bennett left his heart; “Ago, Filo e Nodo (Needle, Thread and Knot)” in Milan, the fashion mecca; and they are working on “Collar and Bow,” a sprung-open shirt collar with black bow tie, to be situated outside the Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles.

As invitations to create these site-specific works continued to come from all over the world, the artists became more and more fluid with their partnership. “We did not set out to work together,” recalls van Bruggen, who married Oldenburg in 1977, “but because we were living together, Claes would ask me things and I would answer. It turned out that I often saw the same subject from a different point of view. It grew more and more rich because always, where one had a blind spot, the other would fill it in.”

While working on “Flashlight” in 1981 for the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, they realized the extent to which their collaboration had grown—the final work was neither his nor hers, but rather a product of the exchange of ideas that flowed back and forth as they discussed color, form, shape and orientation. “I said, ‘Okay, now *we* go on or *we* don’t go on and I will never say a word again,’” van Bruggen recalls. “That was the point that we began to work together.” It was also the first sculpture that bore both of the artists’ signatures.

Twenty-five years later, the artists define their collaboration as “a true unity of opposites.” Oldenburg explains that each piece, whether destined for a gallery or an outdoor site, follows a similar progression. “First you talk about it. Then you have the drawings, which I do but we work out together,” he says. “Then we get into a model and that model goes through several stages. It starts out very simple and it gets more complicated, and the more complicated it gets, the closer it gets to realization.”

“Often it is my vision through Claes’ hand,” van Bruggen says. “But then also it

“Spoonbridge and Cherry,” 1988, stainless steel and aluminum painted with polyurethane enamel, in Minneapolis. “Flashlight” (right), 1981, steel painted with polyurethane enamel, in Las Vegas. “Spring” (far right), 2006, aluminum and cast-aluminum painted with acrylic polyurethane, in Seoul, South Korea.





is sometimes Claes' vision, which is then changed by me in composition or configuration. Each work is different."

In a world where big-name artists usually have massive studios populated by numerous assistants, Oldenburg and van Brugge personally craft their models in the first-floor studio or, more recently, work out their ideas on a computer with the help of a technician. Oldenburg, who embraces technological advances, concedes, "It's reached a point where it is better to do it on [the computer] and then it can be cast into three dimensions out of this image." The fabrication takes place off-site, at one of a number of factories the artists use, depending on the techniques required and the sculpture's final destination.

Between working at home, visiting new sites (a heavily guarded secret), and overseeing production at the factories, the couple keeps a packed schedule. Last year alone, they installed two large-scale projects: "The Big Sweep," a broom caught dynamically in movement outside the new Daniel Libeskind-designed Denver Art Museum, and "Spring," an upright shell reaching 20 meters in downtown Seoul, South Korea, which marks the start of the recently uncovered

Cheonggyecheon stream. In addition, they fabricated several of their soft, life-sized musical instruments, earlier editions of which were originally shown in their exhibition "The Music Room" at PaceWildenstein in 2005. Their biggest achievement, however, was selecting the work and writing the corresponding catalogue entries for "Sculpture by the Way." This monumental exhibition, in the Castello di Rivoli in Turin, Italy, traced Oldenburg and van Brugge's last 20 years of production through drawings, small- and large-scale models, and final works. (The exhibition is at the Joan Miró Foundation in Barcelona through June and is being considered by the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., for its 2008 program.)

The pace is not likely to slow, as demand for their work remains high. But with life and work so entwined, the artists clearly enjoy the time they spend together. Van Brugge sighs and admits, "We travel a lot, but the travel is also a time for us, in the evening, to be together and to talk about projects and new concepts. It is what I call 'solitude for two.'" ☺

ART & ANTIQUES Atlanta correspondent Rebecca Dimling Cochran is an independent curator and critic.



Clockwise, from top, left: "Trowel II," 1976, Cor-Ten steel painted with polyurethane enamel. "Shuttlecocks," 1994, aluminum and fiber-reinforced plastic painted with polyurethane enamel, in Kansas City, Mo. Van Brugge and Oldenburg at the inauguration of the "Bottle of Notes," 1994, in Middlesbrough, England.