

The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao

presents on October 30, 2012

Claes Oldenburg

the sixties



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Under the auspices of the cultural aid program developed by Fundación BBVA, we are pleased to continue our special partnership with the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao by sponsoring the exhibition *Claes Oldenburg: The Sixties*. This transoceanic project, the product of a joint effort by some of the best European and American museums, is now coming to our beloved Bilbao and to a cultural institution as iconic and internationally famed as the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, a city and a museum that symbolize the values of innovation and excellence and to which the BBVA Group has a special connection and commitment.

Claes Oldenburg is best known for his colossal installations for public spaces, many of which were created with his wife, Coosje van Bruggen, who passed away in 2009. However, this show focuses on a pivotal stage of his career that has traditionally received much less attention: his groundbreaking, emblematic output of the 1960s, which helped bring about the renewal of the American art scene. This work might be classified as Pop Art, though perhaps the label is not entirely fitting or broad enough to encompass his multifaceted, heterogeneous art, a critical yet humorous response to the society of consumerism in which it was conceived.

The galleries of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao are the perfect setting for rediscovering the original significance of this oeuvre, revealed by the carefully grouped presentations of his pioneering installations *The Street* and *The Store*, his happenings at the “Ray Gun Theater”, his oversized household items, his early projects for monumental designs, and his *Mouse Museum*. The streets of New York’s Lower East Side and the bubbling energy of a group of young people trying to break free from Abstract Expressionism and find their own artistic style are brilliantly captured by Oldenburg, who reinvents urban art and public sculpture in a visionary way. Oldenburg always explores the “multiple possibilities” that exist on the “road between two points”, and his open work, with its many layers of meaning, can also be read in a wide variety of ways. We are certain that visitors to the show will enjoy discovering the countless possibilities of interpretation that his artwork has to offer.

Francisco González
Chairman of Fundación BBVA

Claes Oldenburg: The Sixties

- Opening and closing dates: from October 30, 2012 to February 17, 2013
- Curated by: Achim Hodchdörfer, Curator of the Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien (mumok)
- Sponsored by: Fundación BBVA
- Venues: mumok Vienna, Museum Ludwig in Cologne, the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis

Co-organized by mumok Vienna and the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, *Claes Oldenburg: The Sixties* is the largest show to date dedicated to the path-breaking, emblematic, early work of the 1960s by Claes Oldenburg (Stockholm, Sweden, 1929), one of the most influential artists since the 1950s. The presentation in Bilbao has been made possible thanks to the generous sponsorship of Fundación BBVA, and with support from the Terra Foundation for American Art.

With his ironic and sharp witted representations of everyday objects from the 1960s, Oldenburg made a huge contribution to renovating the North American art scene, and is a major figure in performance art, installation art and Pop Art. However, his multifaceted body of work goes much further. He has also had a profound influence on art in public spaces with his monumental large-scale projects in numerous major cities worldwide, created in partnership with Coosje van Bruggen.

One central point of reference in Oldenburg's oeuvre is the industrially produced object—the object as commodity, which in ever new metamorphoses of media and form becomes a conveyer of culture and symbol of the imagination, desires, and obsessions of the capitalist world.

The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao will showcase a magnificent selection of nearly 300 works on Museum's second floor galleries. The exhibition will begin with the installation *The Street* and its graffiti-inspired depictions of modern life in the big city, and continue to the famous consumer articles of *The Store* and to the spectacular everyday objects of the "modern home."

The exhibition also dedicates a section to Oldenburg's early designs for public spaces around the world and to his emblematic *Mouse Museum*, a walk-in miniature museum in the form of a *Geometric Mouse*, for which Oldenburg has collected 381 objects since the late 1950s.

Lastly, owing to the Claes Oldenburg's close collaboration on the project, the exhibit will also include a series of works that have rarely or never before been seen: drawings, photographs and films by the artist himself, and especially notebook pages that offer unique insights into the witty thought processes of the artist.

The Street and the Flags

When Claes Oldenburg moved to New York in 1956, he lived on the Lower East Side, one of the economically underprivileged parts of Manhattan, where he observed poverty, traffic, how people worked, the monetary economy, isolation, and a lack of communication. In this environment the artist began to create two-dimensional objects using pieces of old cardboard and wood held together with glue or string. The objects represented cars and passers-by, painted in a rough, graffiti-like style.

Oldenburg's earliest environment, *The Street*, shown for the first time at the Judson Gallery in 1960, laid the foundation for a new art that the artist referred to "city pop." Just as in the original exhibit, the objects hang, sit, lean, or stand nearby, as if on the stage of a theater. Walking through objects such as the 1960 "homeless" figure *Big Man*, or *Street Head I* ("*Big Head*"; "*Gong*"), 1959, visitors imagine the chaotic and effervescent Lower East Side, besieged by capitalism and construction.

In the summer of 1960, Oldenburg left behind the noise, dirt, and dilapidation of the big city for a short stay in Provincetown, in Cape Cod near Boston. There he produced *Provincetown Flags*, a series of works made from pieces of wood that had washed up on the beach which he transformed into images of the American flag—a fetishized emblem and omnipresent symbol in the national conscience.

Oldenburg's art has always reflected the cultural context of the place it was created. It is therefore no coincidence that it was precisely Provincetown in 1620 where the pilgrims, or English immigrants who had crossed the Atlantic aboard the Mayflower in search of religious freedom, signed the Mayflower Compact, considered the first act of American autonomy and for some, the precursor of the Constitution of the United States of America.

The Store

After his return to New York in the fall of 1960 Oldenburg began work on a series of new works, entering into the colorful world of commodities. He no longer placed art on an intellectual pedestal, instead bringing it into the fabric of everyday reality.

In the winter of 1961, the artist began to sell these objects in a studio he opened for two months as if it were a regular store on the Lower East Side. Made of brightly painted and roughly finished layers of plaster-soaked muslin over chicken-wire armatures, the sculptures were crammed into the artist's store window. They represented everyday objects found in the "modern household" and the world of consumerism: food, underwear, tools, household appliances, price labels, such as *Men's Jacket with*

Shirt and Tie (1961) and *Wrist Watch on Blue* (1961). Some of Oldenburg's 1962 sculptures, presented on the Second Show of the Store at the Green Gallery in September, are larger-than-life, such as *Floor Cake* and *French Fries with Ketchup*, showing the ironic tone and humor characteristic of the artist's work at the time, in a constant exploration of the metaphorical potential of everyday objects.

The Home and the Monument

With the series of *Home* objects, which Oldenburg began during a stay in Los Angeles California in 1963, he took the next thematic step from *The Street*, via the semi-public space of *The Store*, into the domestic private sphere of *The Home*. In this phase, the artist began to create objects typical of modern life that generally go unnoticed, such as a telephone, toilet, fan, drainpipe and light switch, creating them in different sizes, colors and "versions"—soft, hard, giant and ghost, showing their constant state of transition or change.

An example of this can be seen in the artist's light switch display: *Giant Soft Swedish Light Switch (Ghost Version)*, 1966; *Soft Light Switches – "Ghost Version" II*, 1964–71; and *Light Switches – Hard Version, Replica (Brown)*, 1964–69.

The large scale and type of materials used—sometimes vinyl, at other times canvas—awakened an entire spectrum of experiences and sensations, sometimes human while others gigantic and even grandiose, were not normally connected with the industrially produced furnishings normally found in the home.

In contrast to the "expressive" vitality of the *Store* objects, the *Home* objects assume a "cooler" appearance due to their material, enormous size or limpness. In this back and forth between recognition and strange independent existence, comical moments occur, and also moments of distance and defamiliarization.

During the idea of the "soft sculptures," Oldenburg had already begun thinking about possibly exhibiting in a public space. In 1965, he began to sketch utopian projects for outdoor spaces in a series of drawings and watercolors. Drawings of public monuments created for New York, London and Los Angeles, can be seen in the exhibition.

"Humor," says Oldenburg "is the only weapon of survival." In Oldenburg's grotesque exaggeration, the solitary monumental teddy bear, clothespin, fan or banana becomes a caricature of everyday social reality.

Oldenburg's *Monuments* make reference to the concrete place and its historical or social meanings and implications. They are not just affirmations of everyday life in America and its politics, but also a satire of its banality, of the absurdity of an urban life, and thus symbols of our time. This is the case of the gigantic lipstick sculpture located at Yale University: *Lipstick (Ascending) on Caterpillar Tracks* (1969) considered an authentic form of protest against the Vietnam War and a symbol of coeducation, since women were not admitted to Yale until 1969.

Home Movies

In addition to clippings from newspaper photographs, a set of Super 8 films from the 1960s demonstrates Oldenburg's constant engagement in the filmic medium, offering fascinating insight into the artist's career in the 1950s and 1960s and showing how his ideas were developed.

The images are often wobbly, sometimes showing artificial things that seem to have become monstrous or to simulate something they are not. They are taken from Oldenburg's personal archive from the 1950s depicting the New York that inspired *The Street* or from his occupation with monuments in the late 1960s documented by film shot in a cemetery. The sculptures and architecture become actors in a single great drama, a "theater," in which pathos formulas and rhetorical gestures of mourning make their appearance.

Mouse Museum and Ray Gun Wing

The exhibition concludes with the *Mouse Museum*, a miniature museum whose first "building" was created in 1972 for Documenta 5 in Kassel. Later, together with Coosje van Bruggen, the building of the *Mouse Museum* was built upon the floor plan of a "Geometric Mouse": two circles as ears, a square as a head, and a phallic form as the nose. Inside, a glass display case contains 381 objects collected by the artist since the 1950s, including small models, found objects, Ray Guns, purchased toys, knick-knacks, joke articles, and kitsch from cheap junk shops and small sculptures he made himself.

At the same time as *Mouse Museum*, Oldenburg also presented *Ray Gun Wing*, a structure built in the shape of a ray gun or right angle. The building housed the various ray guns Oldenburg and other artists had collected or created, interspersed with photographs of ray guns fixed to the ground.

In the *Mouse Museum* and *Ray Gun Wing*, Oldenburg has archived his central concerns of the 1960s as if in his own museum: the inversion of scale, the mutation of form, the conflation of the found, the industrially produced, and the artistically created. At the same time for him the two "museums" also represented a new beginning for future works in public spaces left behind by the museum and the gallery.

Didactic spaces

The didactic spaces of this exhibition show Claes Oldenburg's creative process by focusing on two large-scale works developed in the 80s and 90s with the collaboration of Coosje van Bruggen. The projects have strong bonds with the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation and with Oldenburg's good friend, architect Frank O. Gehry. The first is a large-scale Swiss Army knife. *Knife Ship* (1985) was a key image in a unique performance, "Il Corso del Coltello," staged in Venice in September 1985; Germano Celant took part as curator and producer, and Claes Oldenburg, Coosje van Bruggen, and Frank Gehry as main characters, along with other participants. The second is *Binoculars* (1991), Oldenburg and van Bruggen's sculptural contribution to Gehry's Chiat/Day building in Los Angeles.

Detailed information on those projects will be provided in the didactic space in the way of texts, studio materials, stills and archival film. Two documentaries will also be projected uninterrupted every day showing the artist's trajectory within the context of the 1960s. The first is from the series *National Educational Television Network presents-USA: Artists*, narrated by Jim Dine from 1966 and the second is *Claes Oldenburg: The Formative Years*, directed and produced by Michael Blackwood in 1975. Lastly, the exhibition catalogue and specialized bibliography on the artist will be made available in gallery 201 for visitors to consult.

Catalog

To mark the exhibition, the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao will release an extensive monograph on Claes Oldenburg's groundbreaking work in the Sixties. Designed in close collaboration with the artist and edited by exhibition curator Achim Hochdörfer and Barbara Schröder, the catalogue features previously unpublished materials and essays by Benjamin H.D. Buchloch, Branden W. Joseph, Gregor Stemmerich, Ann Temkin, and Hochdörfer himself, as well as an extensive chronology by Maartje Oldenburg. In all, these writings and the many images of this book offer an extraordinary insight into the artist's witty thought and creative processes.

Other activities

Claes Oldenburg in conversation with curator Achim Hochdörfer

Tuesday, October 30

Focusing on the 1960s and his first installations *The Street* and *The Store*, Claes Oldenburg will talk about social change and his own artistic development leading up to *Mouse Museum*.

Time and place: Museum Auditorium, 6:30pm. Shared ticket (Free with Museum admission).

Shared reflections

Curatorial vision: *Claes Oldenburg: The Sixties*

Wednesday, November 14

Lucía Agirre, Deputy Director of Curatorial and Research

Key concepts: *Claes Oldenburg: The Sixties*

Wednesday, November 21

Marta Arzak, Deputy Director of Education and Interpretation

Information Desk. 6:30 to 7:30 pm

Cover image:

Claes Oldenburg

Floor Cake, 1962

Canvas filled with foam rubber and cardboard boxes, painted with synthetic polymer and latex paint

1.48 x 2.9 x 1.48 cm

Courtesy MoMa, New York; gift of Philip Johnson, 1975

© Claes Oldenburg

For more information:

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At the press area (prensa.guggenheim-bilbao.es/en) you can register and download high resolution images and videos featuring the exhibitions and the building. Sign in to get access. If you are already a user, log in here (you need your username and password).

For further information, please contact the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao Press Department: tel. +34 944 35 90 08 and email: media@guggenheim-bilbao.es

1. Claes Oldenburg

Street Head, I ("Big Head", "Gong"), 1959

Netting wire, newspaper, glue, and color / Maschendraht, Zeitungspapier, Leim und Farbe

153 x 160 cm

mumok museum moderner kunst stiftung ludwig wien

© Claes Oldenburg



2. Claes Oldenburg

Mug, 1960

Cardboard and wood, painted with casein and spray enamel

193 x 127 cm

Courtesy Museum Ludwig, Cologne

© Claes Oldenburg



3. Claes Oldenburg

Big White Shirt with Blue Tie, 1961

Muslin soaked in plaster over wire frame, painted with enamel

119 x 78 x 34 cm

Courtesy Museum Ludwig, Cologne, Germany, Ludwig Donation 1976

© Claes Oldenburg



4. Claes Oldenburg

Pastry Case I, 1961-1962

Painted plaster sculptures on ceramic plates, metal platter and cups in glass-and-metal case

52.7 x 76.5 x 37.3 cm

Courtesy MoMa, New York/The Sidney and Harriet Janis Collection, 1967

© Claes Oldenburg



5. Claes Oldenburg

Floor Cake, 1962

Canvas filled with foam rubber and cardboard boxes, painted with synthetic polymer and latex paint

1.48 x 2.9 x 1.48 m



Collection of The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Philip Johnson, 1975

©1962 Claes Oldenburg

6. Claes Oldenburg

Two Cheeseburgers, with Everything (Dual Hamburgers), 1962

Burlap soaked in plaster, painted with enamel

17.8 x 37.5 x 21.8 cm

Courtesy MoMa, New York

© Claes Oldenburg



7. Claes Oldenburg

Study for Announcement for One-Man Show at Dwan Gallery-Mickey Mouse with Red Heart, 1963

Wax crayon and watercolor on paper

Sheet (Sight): 42.2 x 34.9 cm

Courtesy Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; gift of The American Contemporary Art Foundation, Inc., Leonard A. Lauder, President 2002.11

Photography by Sheldon C. Collins

© Claes Oldenburg



8. Claes Oldenburg

Shoestring Potatoes Spilling from a Bag, 1966

Canvas filled with kapok, stiffened with glue and painted with acrylic

274.3 x 132.1 x 101.6 cm

Collection Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; Gift of the / Schenkung der T. B. Walker Foundation, 1966

© Claes Oldenburg



9. Claes Oldenburg

Proposed Colossal Monument for Central Park North, N.Y.C. - Teddy Bear, 1965

Wax crayon and watercolor on paper

60.6 x 47.9 cm

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

Gift of the American Contemporary Art Foundation, Inc., Leonard A. Lauder, President

© Claes Oldenburg



10. Claes Oldenburg

Mouse Museum, 1977

Installation

263 x 950 x 1020 cm

mumok museum moderner kunst stiftung ludwig wien

© Claes Oldenburg



11. Claes Oldenburg

Mouse Museum, 1977

Installation/detail

263 x 950 x 1020 cm

mumok museum moderner kunst stiftung ludwig wien

© Claes Oldenburg



12. Claes Oldenburg

Ray Gun Wing, 1969-1977

Installation/detail

Wood and corrugated aluminum and plexiglas display cases with 258 objects

263 x 450 x 565 cm

mumok museum moderner kunst stiftung ludwig wien; On loan from the Austrian Ludwig Foundation, since 1981

© Claes Oldenburg

