

National Gallery of Art

NEWS RELEASE

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MAJOR SURVEY OF THE ART OF CLAES OLDENBURG

PRESENTED THROUGHOUT THE NATIONAL GALLERY'S EAST BUILDING

FEBRUARY 12 THROUGH MAY 7, 1995

Washington, D.C. -- The first major exhibition since 1969 surveying the highly original art of Claes Oldenburg will premiere at the National Gallery of Art on February 12, 1995, and continue through May 7, 1995. Co-organized by the National Gallery and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Claes Oldenburg: An Anthology will include approximately 200 of the artist's most important drawings, collages, and sculpture from 1958 to the present. The exhibition curator is Germano Celant, curator of contemporary art, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.

Displayed in the galleries and public spaces on all levels inside the East Building, the exhibition will document the career of this versatile, remarkably prolific artist, who came to prominence as a key figure of pop art in the early 1960s. On view will be examples of Oldenburg's well-known "hard," "soft," and "ghost" sculpture of food and household objects, such as ice cream cones, light switches, and fans--each on a giant scale.

Special highlights of the installation will be two of the artist's works created on a large scale for outdoor sites: the twenty-four-foot-tall Lipstick (Ascending) on Caterpillar Tracks, which was made for Yale University in 1969, and Knife Ship I, a

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forty-foot-long sculpture that was the centerpiece of the performance, Il Corso del Coltello (The Course of the Knife), in Venice in 1985. Taking the form of a gigantic Swiss army knife--complete with moveable blades, oars, and corkscrew--Knife Ship I, now newly restored, and its accompanying performance were created in collaboration with Coosje van Bruggen and architect Frank Gehry. One room of the exhibition will be devoted to Bedroom Ensemble, a full-scale 1960s-style bedroom suite replicating a construction originally shown in New York in 1964.

"Claes Oldenburg's remarkable ingenuity and incredible range of media continue to expand our notion of art and its relationship to our surroundings," said Earl A. Powell III, director of the National Gallery. "His magical ability to transform everyday objects alters forever our comfortable view of the world. We are delighted to inaugurate this lively exhibition revealing the full measure of Oldenburg's artistic alchemy."

After premiering at the National Gallery, Claes Oldenburg: An Anthology will travel to the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (June 18-September 3, 1995), the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (October 7, 1995 - January 21, 1996), Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Bonn (February 15 - May 12, 1996), and the Hayward Gallery, London (June 6 - August 19, 1996).

Throughout his career, Oldenburg has focused on the metamorphic potential of familiar objects to create new forms and infuse the commonplace with life, wit, and alternative meanings. Since its earliest manifestations, Oldenburg's art has been tied to special environments often created for performances. These installations and theatrical events will be documented throughout the show in the form of drawings, film,

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props, and costumes.

The exhibition opens with objects related to Oldenburg's first installation in 1960, The Street, made from common materials such as cardboard and burlap. Also included are works made for his installation of the following year, The Store. The brightly painted plaster sculptures of food, clothing, and household goods are Oldenburg's versions of the merchandise glimpsed through shop windows near his Lower East Side studio in Manhattan.

Also dating from the 1960s are examples of Oldenburg's soft and hard, large and small sculpture based on everyday objects, such as the filled vinyl Soft Pay-Telephone (1963) and painted canvas Giant Loaf of Raisin Bread, Sliced (1966-1967). His soft sculpture--rotund, drooping, or sagging--alludes to organic, often anthropomorphic forms and can be subtly charged with erotic meaning.

Models and drawings document Oldenburg's designs for colossal monuments and later large-scale projects, done in collaboration with Coosje van Bruggen. Studies in the exhibition for his built or "feasible" monuments include models for the forty-five-foot-tall Clothespin, his first large-scale urban sculpture, installed in downtown Philadelphia in 1976. A painted wood model represents the fifty-one-foot Spoonbridge and Cherry built over a pond in the sculpture garden of the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis in 1988.

Another series of drawings presents the artist's fantastic proposals for unbuildable structures. His watercolor of gigantic scissors in motion (1967), intended to replace the Washington Monument, and Proposed Colossal Monument for Park Avenue: Good Humor Bar (1965) subvert traditional notions of civic monuments. The

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soft, or melting, giant "Good Humor Bar," inspired by skyscrapers lining the street, was designed to fill the gap across Park Avenue now occupied by the building formerly known as the Pan Am Building.

The son of a Swedish diplomat, Oldenburg was born in Stockholm, Sweden, on January 28, 1929. His family settled in Chicago in 1936. He received a bachelor's degree in English and art from Yale University in 1952. Before graduating, Oldenburg interrupted his studies to return to Chicago, where he became a reporter for the City News Bureau and attended the Art Institute of Chicago.

In 1956 Oldenburg moved to New York, where he lives today. His first public one-person show took place in 1959 at the Judson Gallery. His soft sculpture was shown for the first time in an exhibition at the Green Gallery in 1962. In 1965, he began making proposals for colossal monuments. Oldenburg's collaboration with his wife Coosje van Bruggen dates from 1976. Since that time, twenty-six large-scale projects have been built in diverse urban locations including Los Angeles, Cleveland, and Rotterdam. Their most recent project of four giant badminton shuttlecocks was installed on the lawn of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City in 1994.

Coordinating the exhibition in Washington is Marla Prather, associate curator of twentieth-century art at the National Gallery. The full-color comprehensive catalogue, published by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, will include essays by Germano Celant; Mark Rosenthal, curator of twentieth-century art, National Gallery; and Dieter Koepplin, head of the department of prints and drawings, Kunstmuseum, Basel.

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