

*The Split Button after its 2017 restoration.*

**Title:** The Split Button

**Date:** 1981

**Medium:** Aluminum

**Size:** a 6.5' by 13'

**Location:** in front of the Van Pelt Library at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA

**Style:** Pop Art

**Artist:** Claes Oldenburg & Coosje van Bruggen

**Lifespan:** Claes Oldenburg - 1/28/29 -

Coosje van Bruggen – 6/6/42 – 1/10/09

Penn commissioned Oldenburg for a sculpture in front of the library in December 1978. After visiting the campus, Oldenburg's wife and partner, Coosje van Bruggen, a sculptor and art historian who passed away in 2009, proposed the idea of a button.

The "Split Button" is made of reinforced aluminum and painted with polyurethane enamel. It weighs 5,000 pounds. The total cost in 1981, when it was installed, including transportation and installation, was \$100,000. The funds were generated by the University, private donors and a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. At the unveiling, the Button created controversy on campus, with critics calling it "a poor addition to College Green." Today, however, it serves as a landmark and a focal point of Penn's campus.

Oldenburg gave an interview to The Philadelphia Inquirer on June 9, 1981, in which he said that the crack in the button represents the Schuylkill River and it divides the button into four regions: a nod to William Penn's original design of the city.

The 36-year old piece has been painted a number of times, but was sanded down and restored in August, 2017.

Originally criticized by many, today it is considered a must-see sculpture in a city known for its outdoor art. People enjoy the humor of the oversized, everyday item, and it can now be found in pop culture. The Split Button was included in an episode of The Simpsons (Season 19, Episode 11), which was written by Matt Selman (Penn C'93).



# Claes Oldenburg

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

**Claes Oldenburg** (born January 28, 1929) is an American sculptor, best known for his public art installations typically featuring very large replicas of everyday objects. Another theme in his work is soft sculpture versions of everyday objects. Many of his works were made in collaboration with his wife, Coosje van Bruggen, who died in 2009 after 32 years of marriage. Oldenburg lives and works in New York.

## Contents

## Early life and education

Claes Oldenburg was born on January 28, 1929 in Stockholm, the son of Gösta Oldenburg<sup>[1]</sup> and his wife Sigrid Elisabeth née Lindfors.<sup>[2]</sup> His father was then a Swedish diplomat stationed in New York and in 1936 was appointed Consul General of Sweden to Chicago where Oldenburg grew up, attending the Latin School of Chicago. He studied literature and art history at Yale University<sup>[3]</sup> from 1946 to 1950, then returned to Chicago where he took classes at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago. While further developing his craft, he worked as a reporter at the City News Bureau of Chicago. He also opened his own studio and, in 1953, became a naturalized citizen of the United States. In 1956, he moved to New York, working part-time in the library of the Cooper Union Museum for the Arts of Decoration.<sup>[4]</sup>

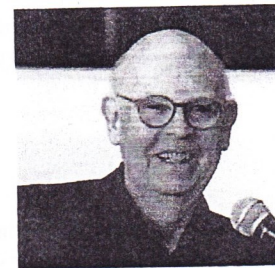
## Work

Oldenburg's first recorded sales of artworks were at the 57th Street Art Fair in Chicago, where he sold 5 items for a total price of \$25.<sup>[5]</sup> He moved back to New York City in 1956. There he met a number of artists, including Jim Dine, Red Grooms, and Allan Kaprow, whose Happenings incorporated theatrical aspects and provided an alternative to the abstract expressionism that had come to dominate much of the art scene. Oldenburg began toying with the idea of soft sculpture in 1957, when he completed a free-hanging piece made from a woman's stocking stuffed with newspaper. (The piece was untitled when he made it but is now referred to as *Sausage*.)<sup>[6]</sup>

In 1959, Oldenburg started to make figures, signs and objects out of papier-mâché, sacking and other rough materials, followed in 1961 by objects in plaster and enamel based on items of food and cheap clothing.<sup>[4]</sup> Oldenburg's first show that included three-dimensional works, in May 1959, was at the Judson Gallery, at Judson Memorial Church on Washington Square.<sup>[7]</sup> During this time, artist Robert Beauchamp described Oldenburg as "brilliant," due to the reaction that the pop artist brought to a "dull" abstract expressionist period.<sup>[8]</sup>

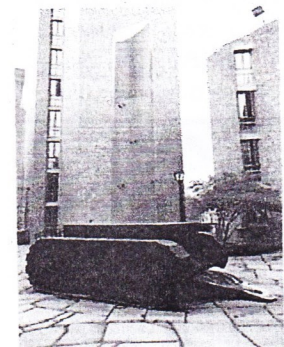
In the 1960s Oldenburg became associated with the Pop Art movement and created many so-called *happenings*, which were performance art related productions of that time. The name he gave to his own productions was "Ray Gun Theater". The cast of colleagues who appeared in his performances of included artists Lucas Samaras, Tom Wesselman, Carolee Schneemann, Oyvind Fahlstrom and Richard Artschwager, dealer Annina Nosei, critic Barbara Rose, and screenwriter Rudy Wurlitzer.<sup>[6]</sup> His first wife (1960–1970) Patty Mucha, who sewed many of his early soft sculptures, was a constant performer in his happenings. This brash, often humorous, approach to art was at great odds with the prevailing sensibility that, by its nature, art dealt with "profound" expressions or ideas. But Oldenburg's spirited art found first a niche then a great popularity that endures to this day. In December 1961, he rented a store on Manhattan's Lower East Side to house "The Store," a month-long installation he had first presented at the Martha Jackson Gallery in New York, stocked with sculptures roughly in the form of consumer goods.<sup>[6]</sup>

**Claes Oldenburg**



Claes Oldenburg 2012

<b>Birth name</b>	Claes Oldenburg
<b>Born</b>	January 28, 1929 Stockholm, Sweden
<b>Nationality</b>	American
<b>Field</b>	Sculpture, Public Art
<b>Training</b>	Latin School of Chicago, Art Institute of Chicago, Yale University
<b>Movement</b>	Pop Art

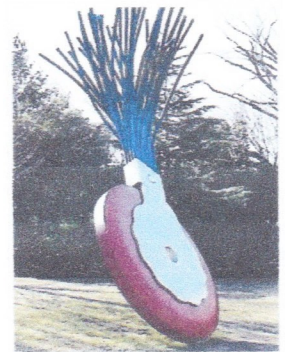


*Lipstick (Ascending) on Caterpillar Tracks*

Oldenburg moved to Los Angeles in 1963 "because it was the most opposite thing to New York I could think of".<sup>[6]</sup> That same year, he conceived *AUT OBO DYS*, performed in the parking lot of the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics in December 1963. In 1965 he turned his attention to drawings and projects for imaginary outdoor monuments. Initially these monuments took the form of small collages such as a crayon image of a fat, fuzzy teddy bear looming over the grassy fields of New York's Central Park (1965)<sup>[9]</sup> and *Lipsticks in Piccadilly Circus, London* (1966).<sup>[10]</sup> In 1967, New York city cultural adviser Sam Green realized Oldenburg's first outdoor public monument; *Placid Civic Monument* took the form of a Conceptual performance/action behind the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, with a crew of gravediggers digging a 6-by-3-foot rectangular hole in the ground.<sup>[3]</sup> In 1969, Oldenburg contributed a drawing to the Moon Museum.

Many of Oldenburg's large-scale sculptures of mundane objects elicited public ridicule before being embraced as whimsical, insightful, and fun additions to public outdoor art.[citation needed] Sculptures, though quite large, often have interactive capabilities. One such interactive early sculpture was a soft sculpture of a tube of lipstick which would deflate unless a participant re-pumped air into it. In 1974, this sculpture, *Lipstick (Ascending) on Caterpillar Tracks*, was redesigned in a sturdier aluminum form, the giant lipstick being placed vertically atop tank treads. Originally installed in Beinecke Plaza at Yale, it now resides in the Morse College courtyard.

From the early 1970s Oldenburg concentrated almost exclusively on public commissions.<sup>[10]</sup> His first public work, "Three-Way Plug" came on commission from Oberlin College with a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.<sup>[11]</sup> His collaboration with Dutch/American writer and art historian Coosje van Bruggen dates from 1976. Their first collaboration came when Oldenburg was commissioned to rework *Trowel I*, a 1971 sculpture of an oversize garden tool, for the grounds of the Kröller-Müller Museum in Otterlo, the Netherlands.<sup>[12]</sup> Oldenburg has officially signed all the work he has done since 1981 with both his own name and van Bruggen's.<sup>[6]</sup> In 1988, the two created the iconic *Spoonbridge and Cherry* sculpture for the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota that remains a staple of the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden as well as a classic image of the city. *Typewriter Eraser*, *Scale X* (1999) is in the National Gallery of Art Sculpture Garden. Another well known construction is the *Free Stamp* in downtown Cleveland, Ohio. This *Free Stamp* has an energetic cult following.<sup>[citation needed]</sup>



Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen, *Typewriter Eraser, Scale X*, 1999, painted stainless steel and fiberglass, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.

In addition to freestanding projects, they occasionally contributed to architectural projects, among them two Los Angeles projects in collaboration with architect Frank O. Gehry: *Toppling Ladder With Spilling Paint*, which was installed at Loyola Law School in 1986, and *Binoculars, Chiat/Day Building*, completed in Venice in 1991.<sup>[6]</sup> The couple's collaboration with Gehry also involved a return to performance for Oldenburg when the trio presented *Il Corso del Coltello*, in Venice, Italy, in 1985; other characters were portrayed by Germano Celant and Pontus Hultén.<sup>[13]</sup> "Coltello" is the source of "Knife Ship," a large-scale sculpture that served as the central prop; it was later seen in Los Angeles in 1988 when Oldenburg, Van Bruggen and Gehry presented *Coltello Recalled: Reflections on a Performance* at the Japanese American Cultural & Community Center and the exhibition *Props, Costumes and Designs for the Performance "Il Corso del Coltello"* at Margo Leavin Gallery.<sup>[6]</sup>

In 2001, Oldenburg and van Bruggen created 'Dropped Cone', a huge inverted ice cream cone, on top of a shopping center in Cologne, Germany.<sup>[14]</sup> Installed at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in 2011, *Paint Torch* is a towering 53-foot-high pop sculpture of a paintbrush, capped with bristles that are illuminated at night. The sculpture is installed at a daring 60-degree angle, as if in the act of painting.<sup>[15]</sup>

## Exhibitions

Oldenburg's first one-man show in 1959, at the Judson Gallery in New York, included figurative drawings and papier-mâché sculptures.<sup>[10]</sup> He was honored with a solo exhibition of his work at the Moderna Museet (organized by Pontus Hultén), in 1966; the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1969; and with a retrospective organized by Germano Celant at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum,<sup>[16]</sup> New York, in 1995 (travelling to the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Bonn; and Hayward Gallery, London). In 2002 the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York held a retrospective of the drawings of Oldenburg and Van Bruggen; the same year, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York exhibited a selection of their sculptures on the roof of the museum.<sup>[3]</sup>



Artists: Coosje van Bruggen

Born: 6/6/42 in Groningen, the Netherlands

Died: 1/10/2009 in Los Angeles, CA

Coosje van Bruggen was born in Groningen, the Netherlands, in 1942. After receiving a master's degree in art history from the Rijksuniversiteit in Groningen, she served as a member of the curatorial staff of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam from 1967 to 1971, a breakthrough period for Conceptual and Earth Art and Arte Povera. She was co-editor of the catalogue for Sonsbeek 71, an exhibition of contemporary sculpture held in Park Sonsbeek, Arnhem, and at other sites throughout the Netherlands. From 1971 to 1976 she taught fine arts and art history at the Academy of Fine Arts in Enschede, the Netherlands.

Van Bruggen worked in partnership with Claes Oldenburg since 1976, when they rebuilt and relocated Trowel I, originally shown at Sonsbeek 71, to the sculpture garden of the Kröller-Müller Museum in Otterlo, the Netherlands. In 1978 van Bruggen moved to New York (becoming an American citizen in 1993) where she continued to work with Oldenburg to establish direct contact with a wider audience by creating site-specific large-scale urban works. Their collaboration eventually extended to smaller-scale park and garden sculptures as well as to indoor installations.

Over the next ten years, Coosje van Bruggen also served as an international independent curator and critic and lectured widely: she was a member of the selection committee for Documenta 7 in Kassel, Germany (1982); a contributor to Artforum (1983-1988); and Senior Critic in the Department of Sculpture at Yale University School of Art in New Haven (1996-1997). In addition to her extensive writings on Oldenburg's early work and on the collaborative projects, she created the characters for the performance Il Corso del Coltello (Venice, 1985). Van Bruggen is the author of essays on Richard Artschwager and Gerhard Richter and books on John Baldessari, Hanne Darboven, Bruce Nauman and Frank O. Gehry's Guggenheim Museum Bilbao

Ms. van Bruggen was married to sculptor Claes Oldenburg. She passed away in Los Angeles, CA in January 2009.



SPLIT BUTTON  
ALTERNATE VIEW

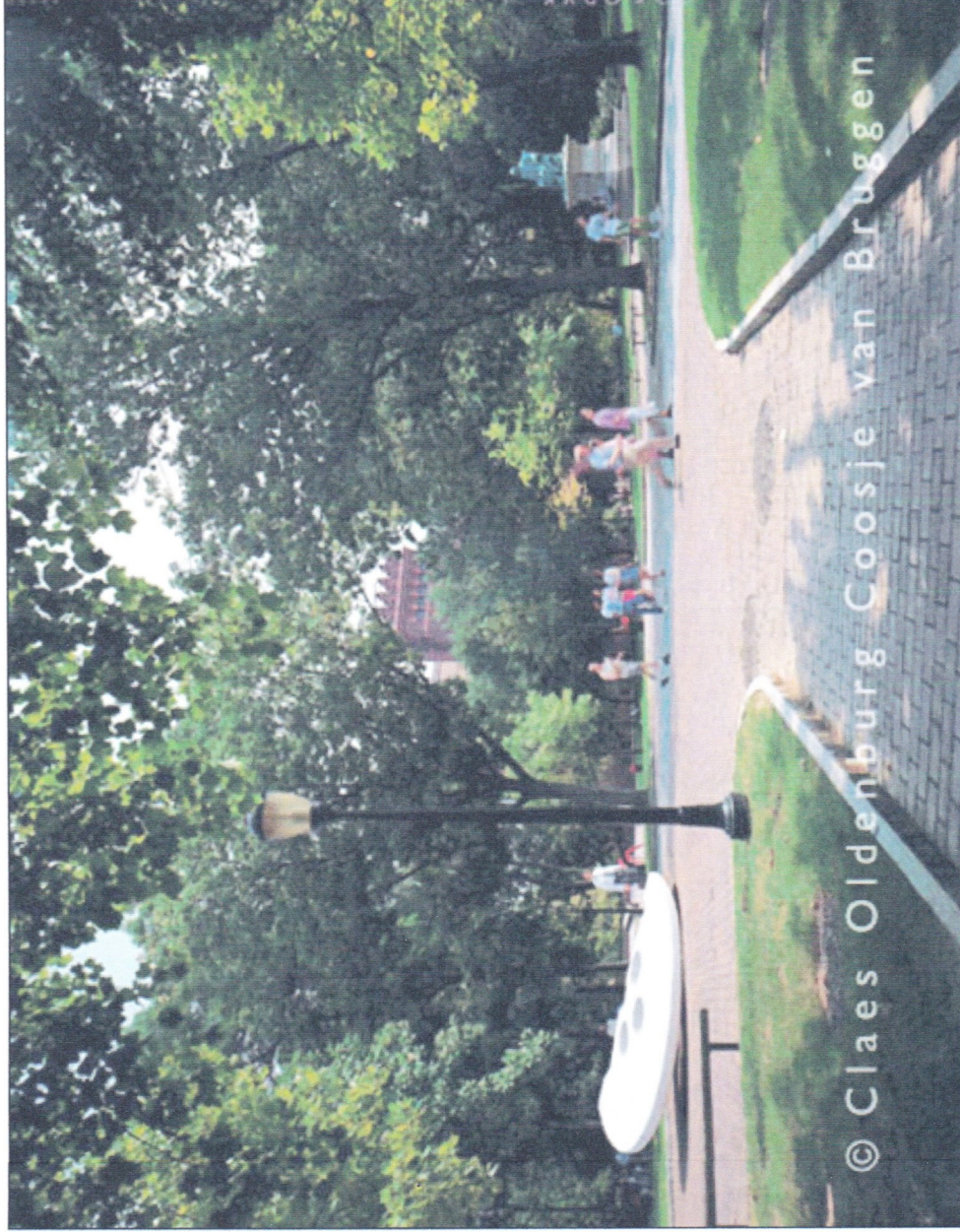
## Split Button

Levy Park, University of Pennsylvania,  
Philadelphia

Aluminum painted with polyurethane enamel  
16 ft. (4.9 m) diameter x 10 in. (0.3 m) thick  
Height from ground when sited: 4 ft. 11 in. (1.5 m)

Commissioned December 1978 by the University  
of Pennsylvania, with a matching grant from the  
National Endowment for the Arts  
Installed June 25, 1981  
Inaugurated November 6, 1981

Photo: Attilio Maranzano



↑  
SPLIT BUTTON  
SCULPTURE

↑  
BEN  
FRANKLIN  
STATUE



BENJAMIN FRANKLIN STATUE ACROSS  
FROM SPLIT BUTTON



CLOTHESPIN,  
CLAES VAN OLDENBURG +  
COOSJE VAN BRUGGEN

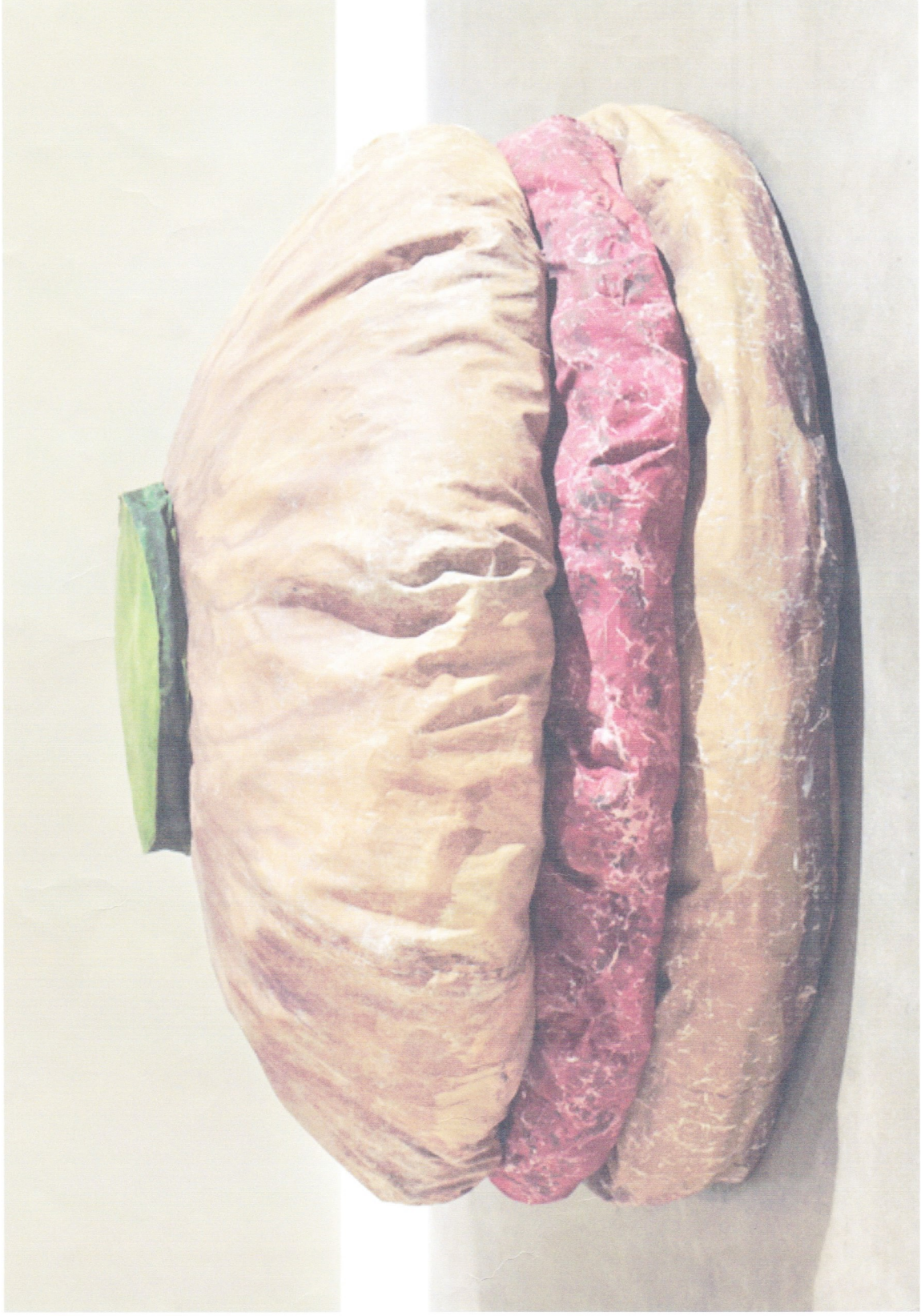




GIANT THREE-WAY PLUG (CUBE TAP) - CLAES OLDENBURG + COOSJE VAN BRUGGEN



PAINT TORCH  
CLAES OLDENBURG + COOSJE VAN BRUGGEN



CLAES OLDENBURG  
GIANT HAMBURGER SOFT  
SCULPTURE, 1962



CLAES OLDENBERG  
GIANT BLT SOFT  
SCULPTURE, 1963