

# AT LAST, THE STAMP OF APPROVAL

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The worst of all art situations for Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen has turned into one of the best, in Cleveland.

The internationally renowned artists are more than happy that their sculpture, "Free Stamp," finally has a permanent home in Willard Park next to City Hall, where the work was dedicated yesterday. They say the new site is even better than Public Square, where the sculpture was meant to go before it was rejected by their patron, BP America Inc.

"It's tempting to see it as a kind of fate," van Bruggen said in an interview at the Stouffer Tower City Plaza Hotel shortly before the dedication ceremony. "We both feel the new site is more effective."

The sculpture, a 48-foot replica of a rubber stamp with the word "Free" on the base, can be seen as a critique of mindless bureaucracy, or as a deliciously ironic statement about how Americans take freedom for granted.

In its new location, the sculpture seems to take on even more meanings. In particular, there's a sense of historical residue from the battle over the sculpture's location. The stamp is installed on a crazy tilt, as if a giant (or a giant corporation) had picked it up and hurled it from Public Square to Willard Park.

"It's better to have two sites for one sculpture, and that's what it has," Oldenburg said. "There's a real site, and an imaginary site."

"Free Stamp" was commissioned in 1985 by Standard Oil Co. (Ohio) to embellish a plaza in front of its new headquarters tower. But when British Petroleum merged with Sohio a year later, a new team of executives rejected the idea.

But BP America also had a handful of art fans who persuaded the company to donate the sculpture to Cleveland, if Oldenburg and van Bruggen could agree on a new site downtown.

The site chosen by the artists was a patch of lawn next to City Hall, at Lakeside Ave. and E. 9th St. They said its form and humor worked just as well next to a government building as it would have next to a multinational corporate headquarters.

In picking the new site, the duo made a collaborative decision that illustrates how they merge egos in a joint enterprise. There is a marriage and an artistic partnership in which both have an equal say - and an equal veto - in aesthetic decisions.

"If one disagrees, we don't proceed," Oldenburg said.

The look of "Free Stamp" also shows how Oldenburg's work has changed since he began collaborating with van Bruggen after their marriage in 1977.

Oldenburg has been famous since the early 1960s as a leader of the pop art movement who made extraordinary images out of commonplace objects. He once proposed replacing the Washington Monument with a giant pair of scissors. He wanted to span a river in Rotterdam with a suspension bridge held up by two giant screws.

But van Bruggen, a Dutch art critic and scholar, came of age intellectually in the late 1960s and early '70s, when conceptual art was in the vanguard. Conceptual artists largely rejected the idea of making objects in favor of making performances, written statements or other products that stressed the importance of ideas.

By working with Oldenburg, van Bruggen has added a literary, political and social complexity to their public art projects. It was van Bruggen's idea to add the word "Free" to the stamp. And it was her idea to install it on an angle at Willard Park rather than upright, as it would have been installed at Public Square.

Oldenburg, 61, was born in Stockholm, Sweden, and grew up in New York, Oslo and Chicago. After graduating from Yale and studying at the Art Institute of Chicago, he established himself in New York in 1956. By the time he met van Bruggen in 1970, he was one of America's foremost artists.

Van Bruggen, then an assistant curator at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, wasn't exactly taken with Oldenburg when she met him. She saw Oldenburg as an artistic imperialist, bent on imposing American ideas on her small country through an exhibition at the Stedelijk.

"I saw the hype around him," she said.

But when she encountered Oldenburg again five years later, she felt different. The two fell in love, and in 1977, Oldenburg persuaded van Bruggen to move to his five-story loft building in New York with Paulus and Maartje, her two children from a previous marriage.

The building has separate floors for the children and for the adults, who work on a variety of projects jointly and separately. Oldenburg still makes small, handmade sculptures, drawings and prints. Van Bruggen writes books about contemporary art and architecture.

Together, they collaborate on large-scale public sculptures, which have been installed in roughly 40 cities worldwide. Oldenburg contributes his sense of abstract form and pop imagery, while van Bruggen contributes ideas. They consider each other's input to be essential, and they have both signed their joint creations, including "Free Stamp."

"Even when I don't touch it, I can suggest a change in appearance that becomes very apparent," she says.

The artists are preparing a book about their public art and readying a retrospective exhibition, which is scheduled for 1994 at the Guggenheim Museum in New York.

"Free Stamp" is one of several works in Northeastern Ohio by Oldenburg, who has a long history in the area. His local involvement began in 1963, when he was invited to show his work at Oberlin College by Ellen H. Johnson, then a professor of art and a pioneering curator at the Allen Memorial Art Museum.

From that first visit flowed commissions including a giant light plug on the Allen Museum grounds, and a large pink replica of a tire, shaped like the letter "Q," at the Akron Art Museum. Oldenburg said he felt indebted to Johnson, now a retired professor emerita, for introducing him to Ohio.

"She spread her interest in my work to many others," he said.

• **Caption: PD/DALE OMORI** Photo 1 The artists and their creation: Coosje van Bruggen and Claes Oldenburg in front of "Free Stamp," a celebrated and controversial work of public art dedicated yesterday in downtown Cleveland. The 48-foot-long sculpture, installed at Willard Park next to City Hall, is a gift to the city from BP America Inc. Photo 2 Artistic collaborators Coosje van Bruggen and Claes Oldenburg ponder a question about "Free Stamp," their contribution to Cleveland's collection of outdoor public art.

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