

PLANTOIR BY CLAES OLDENBURG AND COOSJE VAN BRUGGEN



PHOTO: PAULA FELTNER

ABOUT THE ART AND THE ARTIST

Created in 2001 by artists Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen, *Plantoir* is an example of the oversized versions of everyday objects for which the artists are so well known. The artists's *representation* of a common gardening tool is easily recognized, but they alter it so that we see its form in an entirely new way. The most important change is size: standing at over 23-feet tall and weighing 2300 pounds, *Plantoir* is no longer an ordinary hand-tool, but a monumental sculptural statement. Their use of a manufactured commercial object is associated with Pop Art, a movement of the late 1950s and early 1960s which embraced popular culture. After this transformation by Oldenburg and van Bruggen, we may never again see a garden trowel without thinking of it in a different way; they have changed both our ways of seeing and thinking. The title of the sculpture is a French word (another transformation) for a tool that plants seedlings. *Plantoir* is installed on the grounds of the headquarters of the Meredith Corporation and was acquired in honor of the 100th anniversary of the company. Meredith pioneered in publishing magazines such as *Successful Farming* and *Better Homes and Gardens* and is appropriately commemorated by the appropriated and re-conceptualized garden trowel, *Plantoir*.

ARTIST BIO

Claes Oldenburg (b.1929) and Coosje van Bruggen (1942 – 2009) began their artistic collaboration in the mid-1970s; they married in 1977. The result is over 40 sculptures installed around the world, all based

on ordinary objects they transformed in various ways, mainly by enlarging them to the scale of the landscape. Most of these monumental works of art are placed in public areas where they have drawn delight because of the imaginative way they enliven their environments. Oldenburg was a leader of the Pop Art movement in the 1960s, creating performance art and life-size installations through the early 1970s; these and all of his works are supported by many preparatory drawings. Throughout his career, Oldenburg has insisted on integrating common objects into his art so that the boundaries between art and everyday life overlap. Van Bruggen was an accomplished art historian and curator before committing to making public art with her husband.-

PRE/POST ACTIVITIES

The Art of Everyday Objects: Discussion/Introduction (Grades 6–12) 21st Century Skills

Use the following video from the Museum of Modern Art to introduce the concept of transforming everyday objects into art: [How artists transform everyday objects | Modern Art & Ideas](#). (25 September 2015). The Museum of Modern Art. YouTube video, 4 minutes 07 seconds.

Much art of the 1960s was influenced by the French-American artist, Marcel Duchamp (1887 – 1968) who integrated what he called “ready-mades” into his creations. Ready-mades were mass-produced products which existed in our everyday world, but to which Duchamp gave a new meaning. He believed that art should not just be “retinal” or in the eye, but should be something that is intriguing to the mind as well. Reinforce the ideas of Marcel Duchamp, who wanted to change our assumptions about art by emphasizing how it can alter our ways of thinking as well as being a visual experience; he did that partly by using common objects that were already familiar to us. A follow-up discussion connecting this video to Claes Oldenburg can be weaved in with any of the Internet Resources, leading to the next activity (Inspired Modern Art).

Inspired Modern Art (Grades 3–12) Art, ELA

Students should already be familiar with the concepts of scale and proportion for this activity. Use these free online [Quizlet Flash Cards](#) (one of which features *Plantoir!*) as a warm-up refresher for this activity.

Part of the joy in studying artists like Oldenburg is the whimsy and fun of taking an otherwise ordinary object and A) putting thought behind what might elevate it to become “art”, and B) replicating a small object on a large scale. Offer a variety of art textures and media (clay, ceramics, wire, fabrics, wax) for students to make their own art in the vein of the Oldenburg sculptures. Encourage multimedia art so students can make truly large objects, yet also get a feel for how Oldenburg and van Bruggen worked with a variety of forms with their sculptures. During the brainstorming process, ask students to select an object they will create, followed with a write-up on the inspiration and meaning behind their art. Simplify this for younger students by limiting the expectations for sizing and materials. For older students with wide imaginations, be clear on how large (and how much material!) students can use before beginning.

Living through Pop Art: Timeline Activity (Grades 6–12) Art, ELA

Using the links below, weave together the language arts with the physical and practical arts: allow

students to explore their own learnings about the Pop art movement by providing access to websites and books about key artists. Task small groups with creating a graphic timeline of 10+ events and artists relevant to the movement, making sure they include Oldenburg and van Bruggen. Small groups should individualize their timeline creatively, incorporating recreations of actual art pieces, summaries of key events and ideas, photos, etc. Depending on the age range and focus in your classroom, the following web links will be helpful, as well as those listed in the Internet Resources:

<http://www.theartstory.org/artist-oldenburg-claes.htm>

<http://www.theartstory.org/movement-pop-art.htm>

<https://www.artfund.org/news-pages/popart-timeline/index.php>

http://www.ducksters.com/history/art/pop_art.php (geared towards upper elementary)

<https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/art-1010/pop/a/pop-art> (great for Middle School)

ON-SITE ACTIVITY

Drawing Perspective at *Plantoir* (Grades 9–12) Art

After students have already had a unit on perspective, implement what they have learned: students can select where they would like to sketch *Plantoir* from a distance and viewpoint of their choice. Utilize the public wiki *Art Inspired* to help with drawing objects in perspective:

[Perspective: Frank Curkovic](#)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What is your first impression of this sculpture?

How would you describe this sculpture to someone who cannot see it? Use as many sensory details as possible.

How well does this sculpture fit into its surroundings – would you have placed it anywhere else (in Des Moines? In Iowa? In the world?)

What message was the artist trying to communicate with this sculpture?

What are everyday objects that could be replicated in a large scale which might make a similar impact in this location?

LITERATURE RESOURCES

Osterwold, T. (2015). *Pop art*. Köln: Taschen.

Featured in this book is [Claes Oldenburg](#) alongside other important artists of the Pop Art movement such as Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, and Robert Rauschenberg. Author Tilman Osterwold provides a deep exploration into the approaches, styles, and icons of the Pop Art movement.

Baby Professor. (2017). *Pop Art vs. Abstract Art*. Newark: Speedy Publishing.

This book is specifically geared for children who are interested in learning more about Pop and abstract

art. Highly colorful, this is sure to engage children and light a fire to learn more. Books featuring additional art movements are also available by author Baby Professor.

van Wyk, G. & Stäuble, C. (2013). [Pop art: 50 works of art you should know](#). Munich: Prestel. Art historian and curator Gary van Wyk provides a thorough introduction to 50 of the most important artworks of the Pop Art movement. Illustrations are beautifully printed, with explanations of significance and style highlighted, alongside short artist biographies. Claes Oldenburg's *Floor-Burger/Giant Hamburger* (1963), one of his first soft sculptures, is featured.

Find additional Literature Resources in the Educational Resource for Oldenburg and Van Bruggen's [Crusoe Umbrella](#).

INTERNET RESOURCES

[What is Pop Art? | Tate Kids](#) (29 August, 2016). Tate Kids. YouTube video, 4 minutes, 34 seconds. Short introduction on pop art specifically geared for the elementary child. Heavily features Andy Warhol.

[Claes Oldenburg. The Art of Pop: Soup Cans & Superstars Documentary clip](#). (24 January, 2016). Artandfilm21. YouTube video, 5 minutes, 29 seconds.

The artist is featured in this short clip, while the interviewer gives a timeline of Oldenburg's beginnings and an informative summary of his approach to art. A useful dialogue between the sculptor and interviewer will entrance any viewer.

[Claes Oldenburg – 2011](#). (9 August, 2011). Debra Cole. YouTube video, 12 minutes, 52 seconds. This educational overview of Claes Oldenburg was created by teacher Debra Cole for her 10th Grade Humanities Exploration class. This is a thorough look at the artist, and high school students will enjoy seeing peers their own age involved in "recreations"!

[Representations of Everyday Objects](#). Artsy.net.

This photographic assembly of over 20,000 artworks which include representations of everyday objects will interest students who may be considering creating their own works of art. Students of all ages will enjoy seeing the variety of interesting objects whose images have been integrated into works of art. The website begins with a quotation from Oldenburg. (Many of the works of art shown on the website are for sale.)

[Oldenburgvanbruggen.com](#)

The artists' official website hosts a thorough catalog of every large-scale project created, complete with histories and images. Biographies, selected publications, and writings are also linked on this easy-to-navigate website.

Find additional Internet Resources in the Educational Resource for Oldenburg and Van Bruggen's [Crusoe Umbrella](#).

STAMP YOUR CULTURAL PASSPORT

Local(ish):

Visit a second Oldenburg and van Bruggen sculpture in Des Moines' own Cowles Commons: [Crusoe](#)

Umbrella. Inspired by Daniel Defoe's 1719 novel *Robinson Crusoe*, this piece was installed in 1979 in the city's major civic space.

Another example of *Plantoir* is installed in the Meijer Gardens and Sculpture Park in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Here, the sculpture is in a less manicured, more natural landscape than that of the Des Moines corporate headquarters of Meredith.

The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, Missouri displays the 1994 work **Shuttlecocks**, four large-scale shuttlecocks, installed on the grounds on two sides of the building. Deceptively random placements are actually strategically located to suggest a gigantic fantasy game of badminton, with the classical 1933 museum building acting as a net across which the shuttlecocks have just been hit and have landed on either side. This work captures the landscape scale of much of Oldenburg's and van Bruggen's art as well as its playful, unconventional character.

National: Paint Torch was commissioned by the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia, the oldest art school in the United States. Installed in a pedestrian thoroughfare which leads to the city's "Museum Mile", this towering paint brush (53 feet high) features LED lighting in the "blip" of orange paint at the tip of the brush and the "glob" (to use the artist's words) of paint that appears to have fallen on the ground. The use of the brush symbolizes the importance of traditional painting, as championed by the Academy from its beginning until today, while the torch alludes the Torch of Liberty, a popular symbol in a city proud of its part in the American Revolution." Philadelphia is home to three other works of public art by the Oldenburg and van Bruggen.

<http://oldenburgvanbruggen.com/largescaleprojects/painttorch.htm>. This is here because the quotation is from this website.

International: Deceitfully abstract, **Bicyclette Ensevelie (Buried Bicycle)** appears to be a partially buried bicycle fallen on its side, with only portions of the wheel, handlebars, and seat visible above ground. Installed at the Park de la Villette in Paris, it is a good example of the landscape scale often employed by the artists: at its greatest length, it is 151 feet long. Inspired by the prominence of a bicycle in a 1951 novel written in French by the Irish author, Samuel Beckett (1806 – 1989), it also recalls that bicycles were invented in France and that the Tour de France is a major cultural event in that nation. As in *Bicyclette Ensevelie*, a portion of *Plantoir* (the tip of the tool) is buried in the ground. Two identical sculptures, both based on a trowel design similar to *Plantoir*, were created by Oldenburg and van Bruggen in 1971. The original sculpture, *Trowel I*, was painted blue and is on the grounds of the Kröller-Müller Museum at Otterlo, Holland; the second sculpture, *Trowel II*, was installed in the Kendall Sculpture Garden at the PepsiCo headquarters in Purchase, New York in 1984.

Compiled by Dorit Azoulay
Edited by Lea Rossen DeLong
Design by Connie Wilson Design