

Claes OLDENBURG (Stockholm 1929 - New York 2022)

Giant Balloon in the Shape of a Screw: Sketch for a Poster for an Exhibition in Japan

Watercolour, pencil and charcoal on paper.

Signed, signed again with initials, inscribed and dated *Oldenburg JAPAN CO. '73* at the bottom and lower right.

736 x 584 mm. (29 x 23 in.)

This very large drawing may have been an unused design for a poster for Claes Oldenburg's one-man exhibition at the Minami Gallery in Tokyo in June-July 1973. As the artist has written of this particular motif, 'During the fourteen years since my first use of the screw in 1968 as a kinetic object, it underwent numerous transformations in material, shape, situation, and size before achieving its final form in 1983 as an arch in the garden of the Museum Boymans-van Beuningen in Rotterdam in the Netherlands.'

A related drawing of a Giant Balloon in the Shape of a Screw, Aloft, dated 1972, was exhibited in Paris in 1977, while a related lithograph of a Soft Screw as a Balloon, Ascending was published by Gemini G.E.L. in Los Angeles in 1976.

As has been noted by one scholar, 'Oldenburg's drawings from around 1970 are full of…flights of sculptural fantasy, less actual proposals for public monuments than private ruminations on the potentially comical aspects of monumentality. At this mid-stage in his career, and even more so during the 1960s when no one would dream of fronting the sums necessary to realize such works, the artist could daydream freely without care or consequence…On paper, anything is possible.'

Artist description:

Born in Stockholm in 1929, the American sculptor Claes Thure Oldenburg was the son of a Swedish diplomat and settled with his family in Chicago in 1936. He studied art and literature at Yale University and in 1950 returned to Chicago and enrolled at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. (As he recalled, many years later, 'at twenty-three, I realized that the only thing I might be good at was drawing, and I decided to try and become an artist.' It should be noted, however, that the artist later chose to destroy most of his drawings of this period.) In 1956 Oldenburg moved to New York, where he made drawings of familiar, ordinary objects and began working on the concept of 'soft sculpture'. His first solo exhibition, which included three-dimensional pieces, was held at the Judson Gallery in New York in 1959.

The 1960s saw Oldenburg closely associated with the Pop Art movement, and creating many performance pieces or 'happenings' under the title of Ray Gun Theater. In 1963 he settled in Los Angeles and within a few years had produced the first of his drawings of 'colossal monuments'; giant-sized objects placed in unusual or incongruous settings. From the early 1970s onwards Oldenburg concentrated almost exclusively on monumental public commissions, most of which were done in collaboration with his second wife, the Dutch writer and curator Coosje van Bruggen, whom he married in 1977. Oldenburg remains best known today for his public art installations and outdoor sculptures representing scaled-up versions of everyday objects.

As the critic and curator Gene Baro has noted, 'The role that draughtsmanship has played in the shaping of Oldenburg's artistic intelligence can scarcely be exaggerated. Drawing in all its forms has been of the first importance to the sculpture of this master…But if the drawings serve a purpose, they have also a telling force and integrity on their own. They are the tissue and substance of a vision, brought alive with a technical control, wit, and freedom second to none.' Another writer has pointed out that 'Spontaneity is heightened in [Oldenburg's] drawings by a free use of charcoal, watercolor, colored pencil, and pastel: lines and washes of color join to describe form and call to mind the intuitive shapes of Zen brush paintings.'