

**Claes Oldenburg and
Coosje van Bruggen,
Cleveland's *Free Stamp***

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INTRODUCTION

I tell you it is a great relief to have the opportunity to throw out the stamp and to have it land in such a beautiful place.

—Coosje van Bruggen¹

I always feel that the end result . . . should be apt and all that, and it should set up a witty relation between large and small, but in the end it should also be something that is formally successful and has a certain beauty.

—Claes Oldenburg

Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen were commissioned to design a sculpture for a specific site in front of a new corporate headquarters for Sohio in downtown Cleveland (fig. 1). The contract of July 26, 1985, called for the sculptors' design to integrate sculpture, plaza, and building on Public Square as a cohesive unit. The original rubber stamp project never materialized. After several years' delay, a revised sculpture was dedicated, with a different location and a changed position. The project's commission and rejection, its rescue and revision, bear recounting because a knowledge of the vicissitudes in the installation of the sculpture can lead to a better understanding of the work in its present location.² The account in this book will be informed by a broader consideration of public sculpture in Cleveland, of other projects by Oldenburg and van Bruggen, and by a discussion of the nature and technology of the stamping process, as well as some observations about scale, metaphor in art, and cognitive approaches to creativity.

Figure 1

Architectural rendering of *Free Stamp* in front of Sohio headquarters in Public Square, Cleveland, Ohio [1986], drawing. Courtesy of the Oldenburg van Bruggen Studio



Aristotle considered objects that have a certain mimetic basis in reality to be appealing because they delight the eye and engage the intellect. In this he anticipated Étienne Gilson, who would refer to the easy pleasure of representational art. This would seem to be enough for an audience to appreciate Cleveland's *Free Stamp* sculpture. In the sixteenth century, the painter and artists' biographer Giorgio Vasari wrote of works of art as *piacevoli inganni*, or pleasing deceits, indicating that they were

something other than what they pretended to be. When is a hand stamp not a hand stamp? When it is enlarged and no longer functional. But then is it still a hand stamp? Or is it just a pleasing deceit? Cleveland's *Free Stamp* confirmed the observations of Aristotle and Vasari. It was a late entry in the rich tradition of large-scale sculptures by Oldenburg and van Bruggen placed in major cities throughout the world, from a rescaled matchbook in Barcelona to a pair of walk-in binoculars in Venice, California.

The metamorphosis of the Cleveland sculpture can be traced from the artists' original hand stamp design for Sohio by charting the steps of its installation. The unusual chain of events following the commission of the sculpture, its subsequent rejection, and the timing of these events shaped the outcome. As Oldenburg and van Bruggen assembled the upright stamp in its neutral, painted undercoat, then tipped and tilted it into its nestled location in Willard Park, they transformed a work of totemic stature into a useful and familiar shape from the bureaucratic world (fig. 2).

The outdoor sculptures of Oldenburg and van Bruggen are fanciful works of impressive scale with a foundation in the imagery of daily life. Their clean lines and pure forms demand meticulous craftsmanship. If

Figure 2

Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen, *Free Stamp*, 1991, steel and aluminum painted with polyurethane enamel, lateral view, 28 ft. 10 in. × 26 ft. × 49 ft. (8.8 × 7.9 × 14.9 m). Willard Park, Cleveland, Ohio. Gift of BP America, Inc., to the City of Cleveland. Photo by John T. Seyfried. © ICA-Art Conservation 2015



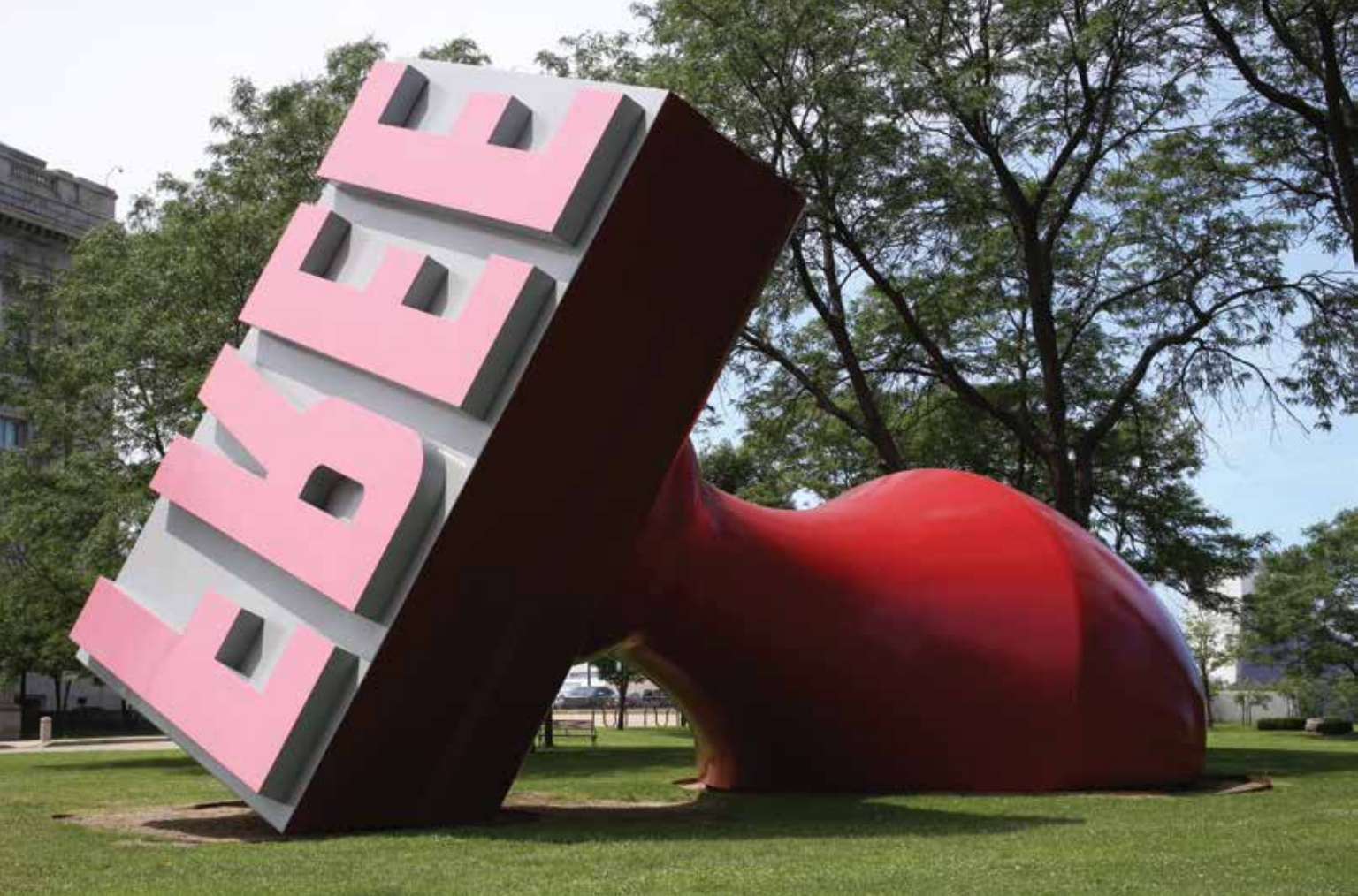


Figure 3

Claes Oldenburg and
Coosje van Bruggen,
Free Stamp, frontal
view. Photo by John T.
Seyfried. © ICA-Art
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Free Stamp is anything, it is an expression of formal compactness. For some, the pleasure of its settled beauty in Willard Park will be enough, as the sensuous rotundity of its handle complements the sharp edges framing the rectangular message, *FREE* (fig. 3). It changes when circled, as the flat statement of its lettering is countered by the rounded handle, where a play of concave against convex also takes place. Its swollen forms, cheerful colors, and tilting position offer a foil to the repetitive rhythms of the classical orders in the adjacent city hall.

Free Stamp adds new shapes and hues to Willard Park's greenery and fountain. In this setting of park and public buildings, *Free Stamp* is immense, flamboyant, and almost vulgar (fig. 4). Its inflated size is entirely appropriate for its architectural setting. Spectators gather around it, like Lilliputians filled with curiosity, to wonder about its dimensions. Invited by its whimsy and friendliness, the viewer is tempted to slap its big, red rump, until overwhelmed by its scale, much as the medieval faithful were by their Gothic cathedrals, the columns of which extended without



fixed proportion as if to confirm that God could not be measured by man. As an oversized stamp, its implications are awe inspiring, causing one to wonder about the race of giants who placed it there.

The forms of the sculpture are clean and simple, free of digressions, non sequiturs, and false starts. It is easy to understand the logic of its morphology. The outlines of the sculpture, neither too flabby nor too taut, are, in their perfect tension, the source of its grace. *Free Stamp* makes a classical statement but not an academic one, because its shape is not an exact enlargement in reproduction of a commercial hand stamp; it has been inflated and cropped with changed proportions. The spectator, on viewing *Free Stamp*, can read it to sense the skills in its making. If the sculpture is so articulate and radiant with conscious thought, how does one explain its initial rejection?

Figure 4

Claes Oldenburg and
Coosje van Bruggen,
Free Stamp, rear view.
Photo by John T.
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