Oberlin Monuments & Outdoor Sculpture: Giant Three-Way Plug (Cube Tap)

Image Courtesy of Allen Memorial Art Museum (eMuseum)

Location: Between Allen Memorial Art Museum and Hall Auditorium of Oberlin College

Artist: Claes Oldenburg

Installed: August 10, 1970

Dedicated: September 14, 1970

Located between the Venturi addition of the Allen Memorial Art Museum (AMAM) and Hall Auditorium, this Cor-Ten steel and polished bronze sculpture of a three-way plug partially submerged in gravel often catches unaware visitors by surprise. It is one of an edition of three, with the other two currently residing at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the Saint Louis Art Museum.

The work was commissioned by the AMAM in January of 1969 after several proposals to bring Claes Oldenburg (1929-) to campus in the early 1960s never came to fruition. In 1963, the artist had been featured in an exhibition at the museum entitled *Three Young Americans* alongside Joan Mitchell and Robert Rauschenberg. This previous contact and friendly relationship with the AMAM allowed Oldenburg to work closely with the college to finalize plans for the sculpture (his first permanent outdoor commission). Several iterations of ideas took place, including the submission of other possible objects, such as a giant ice bag, before the plug in its final form was decided. Oldenburg assisted with the installation, working closely with the museum and students after the object was fabricated by the Lippincott factory in New Haven, Connecticut.

Image Courtesy of Allen Memorial Art Museum, Bulletin vol. 28

Originally, the plug was installed closer to the museum with its prongs facing Tappan Square. In Ellen Johnson's recollection of the process of installing the sculpture, she suggests that this invoked an image of the college being connected to the rest of the town. The expansion of the college's Art

Department buildings in 1976 with the construction of the Venturi Art Building (named for its architect, Robert Venturi who designed the building collaboratively with his partner and wife, Denise Scott Brown), it became clear that the plug would have to be moved. Oldenburg chose the new site himself, now positioning the prongs towards the brand new art building. In honor of the new wing, Oldenburg also produced a tongue-in-cheek work entitled *Alternate Proposal for an Addition to the Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin, Ohio,* which depicted a giant set of interconnected three-way plugs in the place of the building.

In 2008, the plug was once again excavated and removed, this time for conservation purposes. Due to prolonged contact between dissimilar metals (in this case the bronze of the prongs and the steel body) that caused corrosion, the prongs had begun to bow inwards. There were also issues with the drainage of the sculpture, resulting in damage to the body of the object. After its removal, the plug was sent to conservator Mark Erdmann at the Intermuseum Conservation Association in Cleveland. When conservation was complete, it was returned to the same spot in May of 2009.

Image Courtesy of Erdmann et al, Three Way Plug Three Ways

It's probable that Ellen Johnson's involvement was one of the main reasons that the museum was able to commission a piece from an artist early in their career who would go on to achieve great prominence in the art world. Johnson was a professor of modern art at Oberlin College from 1945-1977. She was also made an honorary curator at the AMAM in 1973. After her death in 1992, the museum received not only her extensive collection of modern and contemporary art but also the Weltzheimer/Johnson house, whose architect was Frank Lloyd Wright. Johnson had a huge hand in many important moments in the history of the Allen, including beginning the Art Rental Program with works from her own collection of reproductions in 1940, allowing students to hang them in their dorm rooms for a semester for a nominal fee. Johnson was highly involved in the New York City art scene, allowing for herself and by association the AMAM to have early close relationships with artists who were quickly gaining acclaim, such as Oldenburg.

Image Courtesy of Allen Memorial Art Museum, Flickr

There are many interpretations that can be applied to *Giant Three-Way Plug*. Oldenburg mentioned that it could be considered a monument to Thomas Edison, whose birthplace is a mere

25 miles from Oberlin in Milan, Ohio. The artist was also quoted during the dedication of the object as seeing it as a piece of forgotten artillery or other instrument of war: "It makes me think of something I've never seen but I suppose is a common sight in other parts of the world-- a battlefield after a battle when the grass and trees and things take over and grow over the tanks and war machinery." Much of Oldenburg's work is interested in mundane objects made monumental and how they interact with the landscape. He and his partner Coosje van Bruggen are responsible for other famous landmarks including Cleveland's *Free Stamp, Spoonbridge and Cherry* in Minneapolis and *Paint Torch* in Philadelphia.

Sources:

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