

Collection Close-Up

Claes Oldenburg and the Geometric Mouse



Curated by Kelly Montana, Assistant Curator, Menil Drawing Institute

cover Claes Oldenburg, *M. Mouse (with) 1 Ear (equals) Tea Bag—Blackboard Version (1965)*, 1973. Screenprint and lithograph on black paper with talcum powder, 11 7/8 x 9 inches (30.2 x 22.7 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston, Promised gift from the Collection of Louisa Stude Sarofim. Photo: Paul Hester

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THE MENIL COLLECTION

American artist Claes Oldenburg (b. 1929) established himself as one of the progenitors of Pop Art during the 1950s and 1960s with his soft sculptures of everyday objects and installations that celebrated urban life. Artists then were increasingly taking inspiration from advertising and the media, and Oldenburg became intrigued by the ubiquity of Mickey Mouse in popular culture, first incorporating the image into his work in 1963. *Claes Oldenburg and the Geometric Mouse* presents drawings, prints, and sculptures related to the development of his version of the mouse throughout the 1960s and 1970s.



Claes Oldenburg, *Model for a Geometrically Formed Mouse*, 1975. Steel and paint, $2 \times 23 \frac{3}{8} \times 15 \frac{1}{4}$ inches (5.1 × 60.6 × 38.7 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston, Promised gift from the Collection of Louisa Stude Sarofim. Photo: Paul Hester

Oldenburg frequently uses drawing to generate ideas. As he reduces complex images to simple geometric forms, he discovers visual affinities—“rhymes” he terms them—in the unexpected slippages and mutations of his sketches. *Notebook Page: Mouse Head Variations*, 1966, reveals how the act of putting pen to paper led the artist to find corresponding shapes and structures between the mouse and a film projector. Oldenburg often expressed these formal connections as an equivalency, as seen in the title of the lithograph *M. Mouse (with) 1 Ear (Equals) Tea Bag*, 1973, in which the mouse head is transformed into a square pouch.

The mouse motif proved particularly malleable and open to free association. In *Notebook Page: Metamorphic Studies of Cartoon Mice*, 1968, a popped mouse balloon becomes a kite, and *Notebook Page: “FAT MOUSE,”* 1969, shows the round mouse ears drawn as seat cushions. This visual correspondence inspired Oldenburg to create an actual pillow in the shape of a mouse head. He further experimented with sculptures that convert the same set of shapes into different arrangements in *Geometric Mouse—Position Studies*, 1970, eventually creating *Geometric Mouse, Scale C*, 1971, in which hinges allow the work to be displayed in a variety of postures.



Claes Oldenburg, *Notebook Page: Mouse Kite (Study for Poster)*, 1969. Ink on paper, $8 \frac{1}{2} \times 11$ inches (21.6 × 27.9 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston, Promised gift from the Collection of Louisa Stude Sarofim. Photo: Paul Hester

The geometric mouse is deeply rooted within Oldenburg’s larger practice of engaging metropolitan environments and embedding his art into the fabric of everyday life. For his 1967 exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, the artist submitted a set of drawings and collages that proposed a mouse façade for the building. In 1969, to publicize his retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, Oldenburg made several enormous *Geometric Mouse Banners*, which were hung on the exterior of the museum. He used printmaking to ensure that his art circulated in the public sphere, for example, the lithograph *Geometric Mouse Pyramid as an Image of the Electoral System, Doubled*, 1976, which depicts a range of mouse heads arranged from largest to smallest. In doubling the pyramid and inverting it, Oldenburg seems to suggest that the largest and most permanent of his sculptures is equal in status to the mass-produced tabletop versions. He also created several cardboard replicas of the limited-run, steel *Geometric Mouse, Scale C*. The print run of *Geometric Mouse, Scale D “Home-Made,”* 1971, is unlimited.

Oldenburg strived to take his art outside the walls of the museum, and conversely was interested in making everyday items into art. In 1972, he made his first model of a gallery shaped like mouse ears to exhibit his personal collection of quotidian objects. In his second iteration of plans for the Mouse Museum, the artist included a Ray Gun Wing to display his collection of objects shaped like rudimentary guns, which he had begun collecting years before the mouse appeared in his work. As early as 1965, Oldenburg produced works illustrating the geometric mouse divided in half to resemble two ray guns. In the culmination of this exploration, the Mouse Museum and the Ray Gun Wing were realized at full scale with the artist’s wife and collaborator, Coosje van Bruggen, in 1978 (now in Vienna).



Claes Oldenburg, *Geometric Mouse Pyramid as an Image of the Electoral System, Doubled*, 1976. Color lithograph, 35 × 26 inches (88.9 × 66 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston, Promised gift from the Collection of Louisa Stude Sarofim. Photo: Paul Hester