



Claes Oldenburg's Giant Three-Way Plug's May reinstallation

Oberlin Plugged in Once Again

by Melissa Duffes

Alumni returning to campus this past year may have noticed Oberlin's beloved landmark, Claes Oldenburg's *Giant Three-Way Plug*, missing from the side lawn of the Allen Memorial Art Museum. The plug, presented to Oberlin in 1970, was inspected and removed last fall for restoration, and is now back in place.

Constructed of Cor-Ten steel and brass, the plug was first conserved in the early 1980s. Further pitting and corrosion led to its removal for additional treatment at the not-for-profit Intermuseum Conservation Association (ICA) in Cleveland, work made possible by funds from the Challenge America: Reaching Every Community program of the National Endowment for the Arts and by Oberlin alumna Ellen E. Uhrbrock '51.

"Upon inspection we noticed some blue-green color corrosion on the prongs and corrosion where the brass prongs meet the Cor-Ten steel body of the plug. This caused some cracking," explains Mark Erdmann, associate objects conservator at ICA. "It was then determined that the plug needed to be

removed to inspect the part that was underground. Here we noticed that severe corrosion had taken place."

Intrigued by the plug's conservation, May graduate Katie Mauck researched the corrosion of Cor-Ten steel under the supervision of Oberlin chemistry professor Katie Oertel and ICA conservator Heather Galloway. In her research Mauck exposed slightly weathered Cor-Ten samples to a wet environment over several months and tracked the rate of corrosion. Mauck presented her research to the Oberlin community when the plug was reinstalled.

The sculpture, Oldenburg's first commissioned public work, paved the way for other large-scale public monuments for which he is renowned today.

During the 1970 installation at Oberlin, Oldenburg stated that he wanted the plug to seem to have fallen out of the sky, "like an acorn or an apple or a piece of Russian satellite or a meteor." The object's connection with the ground is also important: "One of the central thoughts about the piece is that it's a mechanical object in a very organic setting—a mechanical object behaving like something natural," he said. Originally situated on the south lawn of the museum, the plug was moved to its present location during renovations to the Venturi addition in 1976. **ATS**