

Re-envisioning Central Park through *The Gates*

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Staff Writer

They surrounded entire islands with hot pink nylon sheets. They wrapped whole buildings and bridges with fabric and rope. After over 25 years of planning, conceptual artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude brought their newest project to New York City.

The Gates in Central Park has everybody talking. Startlingly vibrant saffron-colored fabric panels drape from over 7,500 orange steel frames standing 16 feet tall. Placed at 12-foot intervals, the gates straddle all 23 miles of pathways that run through the park. *The Gates* were completed on Feb. 12, and will remain in Central Park through the end of the month.

"It's absolutely spectacular," said Bunky Devos of Amsterdam, one of thousands of international travelers that came to see *The Gates* during its 16-day run. "It's like flames. It tickles the imagination."

"The fact that the work does not remain creates an urgency to see it," Jeanne-Claude told a reporter for *Eye-Level* art journal. "For instance, if someone were to tell you, 'Oh, look on the right, there is a rainbow,' you will never answer, 'I will look at it tomorrow.'"

"I've got people from all over the world—from Europe, from Jersey, from Oregon," said Adam Delia, a Central Park bicycle taxi driver. "A lot of people get in my cab and say, 'I don't get it. It's just a shower curtain.' I tell them that the fact that there are 7,500 of them makes it artistic. Just like the twin towers: one of them alone is not special."

High art or shower curtains, the ephemeral installation cost the artists \$21 million to realize—every penny from their own pockets. Christo and Jeanne-Claude accept no donations or volunteers; all workers are paid, including the multi-lingual NYPD cops.

Catherine Holly is one of the 300 monitors that peruse the walkways with long metal poles used to correct wind-tossed curtains. A tennis coach living in Hong Kong, she inquired about working for the artists over a decade ago before the project was approved.

"I love that it makes you look up and smile," said Holly. "It doesn't matter what we want to call it. It's

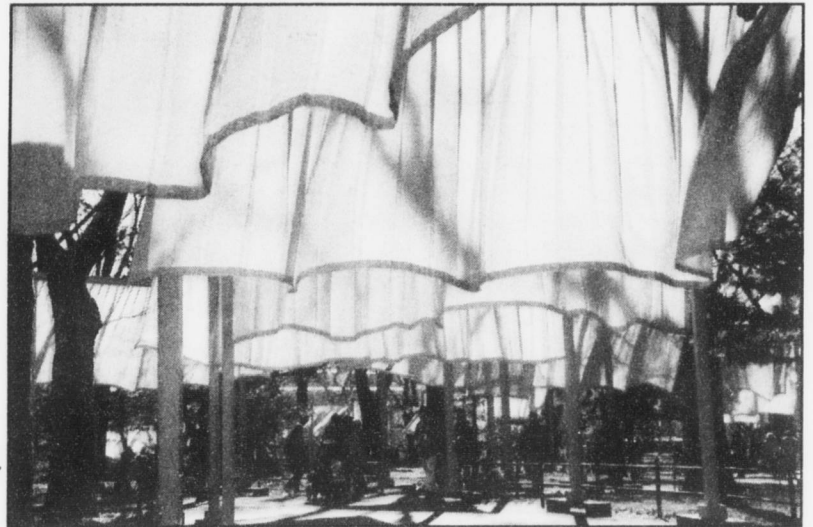
more that people are out here having fun and enjoying themselves."

"It's a happy contrast to the bleak winter," said Bill Christian of New Jersey, walking his dog in the park. "It's like a carnival, like parading a flag."

"It's all-engaging and all-inclusive," said Brad Thomas, a *Gates* visitor and gallery director of Davidson College in N. C. "Everyone is walking around surprised and smiling and happy. Christo has always stuck to the fact that it's just there to be enjoyed. There's no deeper meaning."

For that very reason many critics say the *Gates* is not art. By making only general statements about their projects, such as why they chose a particular color or time of year, Christo and Jeanne-Claude shy from labeling their concept.

They say, for example, that the *Gates* "seem like a golden river" meandering through the park. The rectangular frames reflect "the grid pattern of the city blocks surrounding



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Temporary art exhibit *The Gates* in NYC's Central Park

Central Park."

What results is a discomfiting void of concept that every viewer attempts to fill, almost to the point of analytical overkill. For instance, Julie Lasky writes in *Design Observer*:

"Christo and Jeanne-Claude's Central Park *Gates* lack that magnetic, landscape-transforming power. Could this be owing not just to the way the gates drive viewers to seek greater heights of sensation, but also to the off-putting emergency color, the subtle grid of the rip-stop nylon reminiscent of quick escapes from troubled aircraft?"

An anonymous blogger on an art website wrote: "As someone who's seen large parts of the Indian subcontinent, to me it brings back associations of Tibet and North India; monks and their clothes and monasteries, ceremonial gateways to small hillside towns, ritual and purity, literally peace and Zen."

Even four-year-old Kai of Ottawa, Canada had an opinion: "It feels kind of bumpy."

The Gates and its esoteric art critics have even attracted the ridicule of the *Daily Show* with Jon Stewart. "Senior Conceptual Art Correspondent" Stephen Colbert told Stewart how the project affected him:

"Just today, I saw an installation artist take a sandwich and wrap it in a paper-like substance, almost waxy in texture," Colbert said. "He kept wrapping it until he had visually achieved 'not-sandwich.' Then—and this is the genius part, Jon—at the last minute he cut it in two, in a final act of 're-sandwichment.'"

"So, you had lunch at a deli?" Jon asked.

"Okay, fine," said Colbert. "I was at a 'deli' ordering 'lunch,' if that's how you need to think of it, 'Jon.'"

The Gates, regardless of their status as art, provoke a curiosity implied by their function. As *New York Times* art critic Michael Kimmelman said: "*Gates* are something that beckons you to find out what is beyond them."

The installation is something of an adult playground—a bright, palpable conversation piece that will, at least for its 16-day residence, change the face of New York City. ☞



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