

A Matter of Passion: A Conversation with Christo and Jeanne-Claude

by Jan Garden Castro

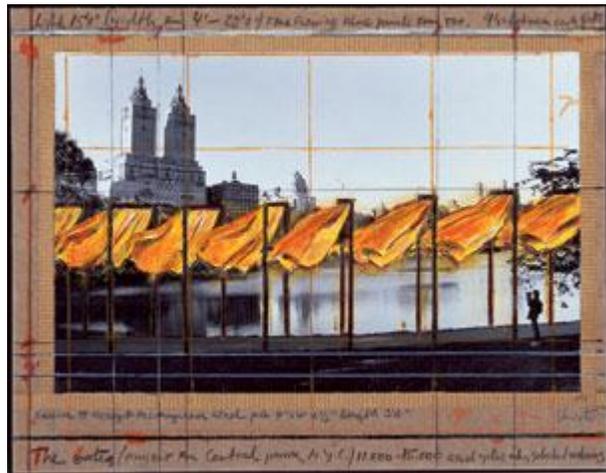
Christo and Jeanne-Claude have created 18 major outdoor projects, which are among the most ambitious, innovative sculptures in the world. In February 2005, *The Gates* will transform New York City's Central Park, the space famously designed, starting in 1858, by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux. In advance of the project, this spring and summer (April 6–July 25, 2004), the Metropolitan Museum of Art will feature an exhibition on *The Gates*. Also in April 2004, Christo and Jeanne-Claude will receive a Lifetime Achievement Award in Sculpture from the International Sculpture Center.

The artists' earlier projects include *Wrapped Coast* (Australia, 1969); *Valley Curtain* (Rifle, Colorado, 1970–72); *Running Fence* (Sonoma and Marin Counties, California, 1972–76); *Surrounded Islands* (Biscayne Bay, Greater Miami, 1980–83); *The Pont Neuf Wrapped* (Paris, 1975–85); *The Umbrellas* (Japan—U.S.A., 1984–91), and *Wrapped Reichstag* (Berlin, 1971–95), which cost 15 million dollars. The artists fund all of their projects themselves and do not benefit financially from photographs, posters, postcards, and book and film sales.

Christo and Jeanne-Claude are critical of those who do not pay attention to the facts on their Web site christojeanneclaude.net and their use of language. Among the publications they approve are the biography *Christo and Jeanne-Claude*, by Burt Chernow with an epilogue by Wolfgang Volz, and the books that Christo designs to document each project. Still photographs and films of each project capture its aesthetic splendor, as well as some living qualities of various fabrics, folds, and configurations. Each project's process, preparatory art, materials, photographs, and documents are carefully preserved for museum exhibitions. Some of Christo's works from the '50s and '60s and many preparatory drawings are sold to pay for each multi-million-dollar outdoor project.

In a radical departure from most art, Christo and Jeanne-Claude's projects require up to a quarter-century to realize, yet they have a life span limited to days or weeks, after which they are deconstructed and the materials recycled. Christo has beautifully described their nomadic quality: "Things in transition...airy...passing through." Their art pays attention to living beauty, mutability, evanescence, and the émigré. This interview took place in the artists' studio in New York City in the spring of 2003.

Jan Garden Castro: *How does your work dialogue with nature and the public?*



The Gates, Project for Central Park, New York City, 1997.

Pencil, enamel paint,

photograph by Wolfgang Volz
wax crayon, and tape, 21.5 x 28 cm.



*The Gates, Project for Central Park,
New York City, 1997*
Pencil, charcoal, pastel, wax crayon, aerial
photograph, and fabric sample, two parts: 224 x
106.6 cm.; 244 x 38 cm.

Christo: Let's take *The Gates* project first. How did *The Gates* project start? We had other proposals for New York City between 1964 and '68, which is a completely different story—they involved buildings. Then we did a lot of projects outside of Manhattan—in Australia, in the Rocky Mountains in Colorado, in California, and Loose Park in Kansas City, Missouri. More and more, our interest in the architecture in Manhattan moved to people walking in the streets. In Manhattan, people walk so much on the sidewalks. At some moments, Jeanne-Claude and I were contemplating using the sidewalk to do a project involving people simply walking.

Jeanne-Claude: We knew we would never get the permits, so we abandoned that idea in a few seconds.

C: And, of course, the only place where people walk leisurely is in the parks. There are many parks in the five boroughs of New York City. But the exceptional one is Central Park, not only because of the design, but also because that park is isolated from any natural forms, absolutely stuck in the middle of a highly condensed urban grid. There are other parks like the West Side Park, but it is diluted by the Hudson River; even Prospect Park is diluted by private homes, gardens, and big trees, not

isolated like Central Park. Vaux and Olmsted designed the park in a ceremonial, Victorian way. Surrounding the park is a stone wall, and the only way to go into the park is through openings called gates. Several gates even have names, like the Gate of the Girls, the Boys, the Artists, the Strangers.

We are trying to invent a module to activate the most banal space between your feet and the first branches of the trees. You usually walk on the walkways of the park, looking at trees, looking at people, but you have a space between your feet and the branches hanging over the walkways or just near the walkways. We are trying to energize that space.

J-C: And now, I am going to interrupt to explain exactly what we say, but visually (shows a video).

C: For each of our projects, we do life-sized tests before the project starts. Vince Davenport, our chief engineer and director of construction, and his wife Jonita Davenport, who is the Project Director of *The Gates*, built 18 gates with different widths of walkways on their meadow in the state of Washington. The width of the gates will vary with the width of each walkway; sometimes they are 18 feet wide; sometimes they are six feet wide. Each gate is 16 feet tall.

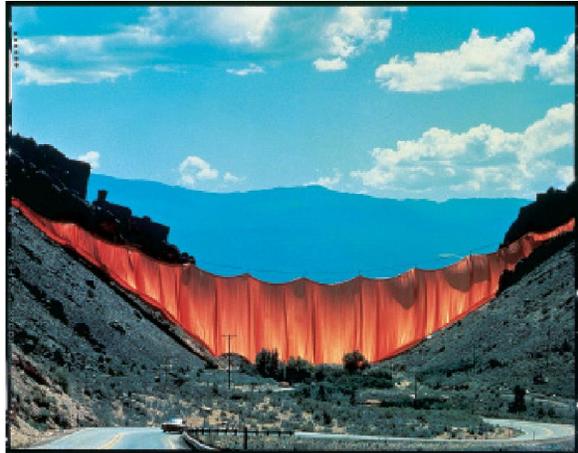
J-C (as the video runs): Immediately you see geometry and very capricious movements. Those gates were built in October 2002. Now, in April [2003], they are still standing. The assembly can be done quickly. The gates are bolted to a 700-pound steel base; then the cocoon is opened and the fabric comes down. There is enough room for ambulances, police cars, and even garbage trucks to drive underneath. In the test, each fabric panel was sewn differently, and in a slightly different hue, so we could make an aesthetic choice. And then Mother Nature sent us some wind, and now you can observe the capricious movement of the fabric, much like the serpentine design of the walkways in Central Park, and you see the geometry of the poles.

C: The rectangular shape of the gates reflects the geometric grid pattern of hundreds of city blocks surrounding

Central Park. This project—and all of our projects—are designed for a specific site. They engage profoundly with the people living in that site.

JGC: *How did you decide on the saffron color?*

C: This is the color of autumn. On a very cold winter day, in a bare, gray park, you have the reminiscence of the foliage of autumn.



*Valley Curtain, Rifle, Colorado, 1970-72.
12,780 square meters of nylon, cables, and rope.*

J-C: We chose February because it is the only month of the year when we could be sure that there would be no leaves on the trees, so that you can see the work of art from far away, through the bare branches.

JGC: *I read in the New York Times that the Sierra Club is still opposed to the project.*

C: We have critics all the time—to the very end, just before the project is realized.

J-C: We are perfectly content with that because in 1980 we hired the services of an ornithologist of the Audubon Society, who said there was no conflict of interest and that he would work with us. He studied *The Gates* and said that there would be absolutely no problem with the birds.

JGC: *What is the latest stage of Over the River, your project for the Arkansas River in Colorado?*

J-C: *Over the River* was started in 1992; the river site involves about 18 villages and towns over 40 miles.

C: It's a very busy river with many people living there, a railroad track...

J-C: ...on one side and a highway on the other side. It's not pristine.

C: All of our projects distinguish between urban environments and rural sites. Central Park is an urban, manmade park; everything was invented by Vaux and Olmsted. It is a manmade structure like the Pont-Neuf in Paris or the Reichstag in Berlin. It is entirely an architectural, landscaped park.

J-C: Some appear in photographs to be set in a pristine setting, like the *Wrapped Coast* (1968–69), in Australia, which was nine miles from the center of Sidney on the grounds of the Prince Henry Hospital. It was used as a garbage dump. *Surrounded Islands* is at the heart of Miami...

C: ...in Dade county. Over 2.5 million people live around Biscayne Bay, which is exactly like a giant water park. All of our projects take place where people live and use the space to build bridges, houses, factories, churches, post offices, and highways.



Running Fence, Sonoma and Marin Counties, California, 1972-76. 200,000 square meters of nylon, steel poles, and steel cables.

J-C: So were The Umbrellas—blue in Japan, yellow in California. In both countries, the umbrellas were in front of temples, churches, gasoline stations, schools, highways, and bridges. *Running Fence* was on the property of 59 ranchers who lived there, who had their ranches there and their cattle guards.

C: It crossed 14 roads and Highway 101, three towns. Anyway, in *Over the River*, there are signs that the place is widely used by humans.

J-C: At the present time, we are in the third year of preparing an environmental impact assessment, which we pay for, but the company

was chosen by the local government in Colorado. It is already the thickness of the New York telephone book. We have spent over \$300,000 for it, and each month we receive more bills, which we promptly pay. They have analyzed every possible situation of humans, animals, and plants. The only animals they haven't yet studied are giraffes and elephants.

C: This is something important. Normally works of art do not have things like that. The first time a work of art had an environmental impact report was in 1975 for the *Running Fence* project in California, which was realized in '76.

Over the River involves leasing or renting federal land along the Arkansas River in Colorado. The Department of the Interior's Bureau of Land Management regulates these lands—and over 20 percent of the land in the United States. The government uses the land around the Arkansas River, but it also rents or leases land to the state of Colorado, two counties, 17 governmental agencies, and two private corporations. Even private people can lease the land. By federal law, all big projects—ours covers a 40-mile-long area—require an environmental impact assessment study to analyze changes in the social structure of that place—everything from traffic to garbage, to visitors, to people living there, the noise, the dust, the birds, the bees. Often the study takes a long time. After that, we will go to public hearings.

J-C: The process is part of the work, as much as a pregnancy is part of having a baby. Of course the process is very important, but it has only one aim—to one day finally realize the project.

JGC: *Do you have a philosophy of art? How has it changed over the years?*

J-C: We don't have a philosophy of art. What is it that Christo and Jeanne-Claude do? We wish to create works of art, works of joy and of beauty. As with every true work of art, it has absolutely no purpose whatsoever: it is not a message, it is not a symbol, it is only a work of art. And like every true artist, we create those works of art for us and our collaborators.

C: This is something very important. The essential part of these projects is that they are decided by us. It is something we want to do, we have the urge to do it, we enjoy doing it. This is one of the reasons we will never, never do commissions. For all of the projects, we have the inexplicable urge to do it.

J-C: No commissions, no sponsors, ever.

C: Over the last 40 years, we have realized 18 projects, and we failed to get permission for 38 projects, and we lost interest.

JGC: *The Mastaba of Abu Dhabi was begun in 1979. What is its current state?*

J-C: It is sleeping. It is not abandoned, and we have not lost interest.

JGC: *Do you want to talk about your earliest passions growing up in Bulgaria? I read that your grandfather was a freedom fighter in the Balkan War.*

C: It's true. On my mother's side, my grandfather was a freedom fighter in the early 20th century, in the part of Macedonia now in Greece, and he was executed during the Balkan war in 1913, and my mother was orphaned. My grandmother escaped to Bulgaria in 1913. I studied and lived in Bulgaria until the age of 21 in 1956. And I have never been back.

J-C: Christo did not escape from Bulgaria. Christo went legally from Bulgaria to another communist country, Czechoslovakia. And from Prague he escaped to Vienna.

JGC: *Woven works are important to you. There was a quote in the Molly Donovan book about Friedrich Engels's notion that textiles are a human invention that separated Homo sapiens from primitive beings.*

C: That is a well-known fact; it was not invented by Engels.

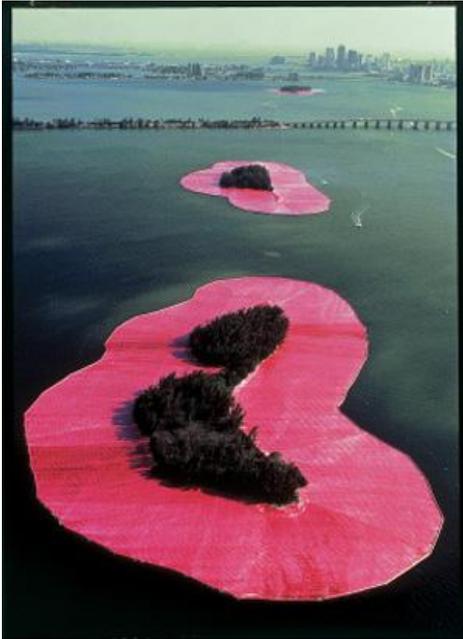
J-C: It's important to remember that for over 5,000 years, artists have been fascinated with folds, pleats, and draperies. The use of fabric can be seen in frescos, wood, marble, paintings, and etchings.

C: Actually, you can recognize the style. For example, in the Gothic period, the folds and draperies are more angular, but in the Baroque period of Bernini, they are rounded, more flamboyant, going in all directions. One perfect example of what fabric does in classic art is the case of the French sculptor Rodin. Rodin did two versions of the figure of Balzac, the French writer. In the first version, Balzac was totally naked—big belly, skinny legs, and many details. In the second version, Rodin took Balzac's cape, put it in liquid plaster, and wrapped or shrouded the figure with that cape. Today we have the famous Balzac in the Museum of Modern Art, and on Boulevard Raspail in Paris. Basically, he hid the anecdotal details to highlight the principal proportions of the figure. With our wrapping projects—not the gates, not the umbrellas—we do the same. For example, the Reichstag is a Victorian building with lots of ornamentation, decoration, and sculptures, and they were all hidden when the Reichstag was wrapped in one million square feet of silver fabric. You see the principal proportions of the building—the height of the tower and the width of the building.



Wrapped Coast, One Million Square Feet, Little Bay, Sydney, Australia, 1968-69.
90,000 square meters of erosion-control fabric and 56.3 kilometers of rope.

J-C: Leaving only the essence.



*Surrounded Islands, Biscayne Bay,
Greater Miami, Florida, 1980-83.
585,00 square meters of fabric
floating around 11 islands*

C: And, of course, all of our projects are living objects. The still photographs don't give a fair understanding, because these projects are in constant motion—the wind is blowing the folds, the pleats. The Reichstag for 14 days was like a living object, breathing, moving in the wind, and, of course, changing the color and the shapes of the shadows of the folds. This project involved a tremendous dynamic quality, and this is a very important part of all of our projects. They're not static, not like wood, stone, and steel. *Running Fence* was always moving—it was showing the extraordinary power of the force of the wind. The *Surrounded Islands* were moving with the surf, with the waves of the ocean. All these projects are very dynamic structures.

JGC: *According to Molly Donovan, your wrapped objects "negotiate a fine line between the literal and the enigmatic," to reveal both "a fascination with the packaging of the West and a critical stance toward the commodification of the objects."*

J-C: First of all, please look behind you at these wrapped cans from 1958 and that package from 1961.

C: These packages have nothing to do with industrial packaging or selling products in the capitalist system. They are very nomadic, humble things in transition, moving somewhere.

J-C: For one exhibition poster, Christo had fun with the packaging idea—just once.

C: The important thing to understand is that all of our projects have a nomadic quality, things in transition, going away, they will be gone forever. And this quality is an essential part of all our work. They are airy—not heavy like stone, steel, or concrete blocks. They are passing through.

J-C: And you understand why we say "nomadic." You have seen images. You see a giant empty plain. Then a nomadic tribe arrives, builds an entire town of fabric, lives there a few weeks, and one day they fold all their fabric tents and are gone. And what remains? A vast empty plain. The nomads are gone.

C: Our projects exist for a very short time, and they disappear after a few days, two weeks.

JGC: *Is there an epiphany about exile?*

J-C: We never talk about generalities, nor about other artists. But you have a point there: indeed, Christo and I are immigrants. By the way, for three years we were illegal aliens in New York. And we will be immigrants our entire lives. Our American passports do not change anything. We are displaced persons.

C: That is a very important quality of late 20th-century and early 21st-century culture. There have never been so many people displaced for political, social, and economic reasons. Of course, thousands, millions of people around the world from different places going to different places are creating a completely different culture. Many writers in the English language are from India. Many French writers were born in Bulgaria or other countries. Of course our work has a tremendous dimension of that process.

JGC: *You are probably aware that an e-mail was going around that you were planning on permanently wrapping the White House with plastic and duct tape in the name of world peace. Do you take it as a compliment that many consider your work an alternative to war?*



Wrapped Cans, 1952.
Fabric, rope, enamel paint, and tin cans,
13 x 10 cm. each.

J-C: (laughs): It's not the only time. They announced in Rio de Janeiro that we were going to wrap the figure of Jesus Christ on top of the mountain. They have announced so many things—usually on April 1st. This one came early.

JGC: *You are careful to separate financially your artwork from the books, films, and postcards about the work. (Christo designs the books but does not profit from them.)*

J-C: Yes. Do you know the difference between the name Christo and the name Christo and Jeanne-Claude?

JGC: *The two of you are responsible for outdoor work starting in '94?*

J-C: Every outdoor work since the first one in 1961, but we changed the name in '94. Everything you see in this room, which obviously belongs indoors, was created by the hand of Christo alone. He never had an assistant in his studio on the fifth floor—no elevator. He even frames his drawings himself. And all the drawings are called preparatory drawings because they are created exclusively *before* the completion of the project, never afterward.

C: The ideas for projects come from both of us. For example, the islands in Florida surrounded with six million square feet of pink fabric was the idea of Jeanne-Claude.

J-C: Of course we kept our mouths shut because we wanted to get the permit. If we had said that it was my idea, forget it. Only our collaborators knew.

JGC: *You have played an important role, and your working relationship is extraordinary. How do you decide what to sell to collectors?*

C: We put them in storage when we don't want to sell them.

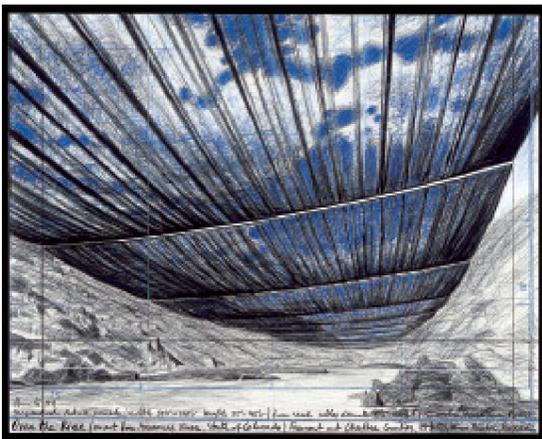
J-C: Each of our big projects has its own documentation exhibition, which varies between 250 and 400 items; they travel only to museums, colleges, and universities. In the exhibition, you can see the evolution of the project long before we had the permits.

C: You can see the drawings, sketches, scale models, technical input from the engineers, the real materials—fabric, anchors, poles, cables—documents, correspondence, court drawings when we're taken to court, and photographs.

J-C: It's a complete story.

JGC: *Do you have any other things planned?*

C: No, we usually work on at least two or three projects simultaneously because we are never sure that we will get permission for one. Once we get the permission, we concentrate our resources and energy on that project, and the other projects will wait. This is why, for example, *Over the River* will wait until *The Gates* project is realized. We have only a few months in front of us.



Over the River, Project for the Arkansas River, Colorado 1999. Pencil, charcoal, and crayon, 55.9 x 71.1 cm.

JGC: *Have you done tests for Over the River?*

C: Yes, very much like *The Gates* tests, we needed to do tests, but not at the site of the Arkansas River. We rented an area northwest of Colorado with a similar topography. Over three years, we did four tests with 18 fabric panels to choose the right fabric, the right way of sewing the fabric, the right way of folding the fabric, and the right colors. We hung our cables over a brook and experimented.

J-C: When you are on the road, you see the fabric from above, and you see waves of fabric moving in the wind.

C: From above, you cannot see the water. When you go down to the river level...

J-C: ...then you can see the clouds and the mountains, the formation of the rocks and trees through the fabric. Just like this collage here. From underneath you can see through the fabric...

C: ...because the fabric is woven very loosely.

JGC: *It sounds heavenly.*

C: It will take six hours to raft the 40 miles of the river.

J-C: We are using 40 miles, but there will be only seven miles of fabric because there are large and small interruptions.

JGC: *For The Gates, Michael Bloomberg is on your team. I guess for the Reichstag you were friends with Willy Brandt.*

J-C: Yes, but the fact that we were friends with Willy Brandt did not help to get permission for the Reichstag, because he died many years before. Do you know how we got permission for the

Reichstag? They didn't invite us; it was imposed on us. Our arch-enemy was the Chancellor of Germany, Helmut Kohl. And he had told the media that as long as he was chancellor, the Reichstag would not be wrapped. And he was absolutely sure that we would lose if it were to come to a roll call vote in parliament—because he had ordered his party to vote against us. After 70 minutes of debate, we defeated him by a majority of 69 votes: 292 in favor, 223 against and 9 abstentions. And that is the only time in history that the creation of a work of art was decided by a debate and a roll call vote in a parliament.

JGC: *Were you there for the debate?*

C: Yes, we were there.

JGC: *That must have been exciting.*

C: Very exciting, and nerve-wracking, and dramatic. You should try to see the film, which includes minutes of the debate. There are films on nine of our projects. We are always eager to see the physicality of the work. And we are very excited that we will be in good health to see the next project.

JGC: *So, 2005.*

C: The last two weeks of February 2005.

J-C: And in our lectures, even two nights ago in a talk at the New York Law School, I told them that we have received letters saying: "We don't want you to wrap Central Park"; "We don't want you to wrap the river." It is a stupid mistake to think that we wrap everything. The last time in our lives we had a wish to wrap something was 1975. And that is when we wanted to wrap the oldest bridge in Paris, the Pont-Neuf. Also, we had already done *Valley Curtain* in '72, which the media called the wrapped curtain, which is idiotic. And we were about to finish *Running Fence*, which was done in '76 but started in '72 and had nothing to do with wrapping.

C: *With Running Fence* and especially with *The Gates*, which started in 1979, our aesthetic moved to an important thing: exploring inner space. You can walk *inside* the gates and *under* the umbrellas. Inner space started to develop with the 1979 proposal of *The Gates*.

J-C: But you will already find it in the 1964 *Store Front*—inner and outer space.

C: The curtains hanging in the storefronts were really the precursors of *Valley Curtain* and *Running Fence*.

J-C: Look at the shape of the fabric in *Store Front* and you see the precursor of *Running Fence*.

JGC: *So The Gates has taken from 1979 to 2005 to be realized.*

J-C: When they ask us how we can have so much patience, I always answer, it's not a matter of patience, it's a matter of passion.

Jan Garden Castro is a *Sculpture* contributing editor.



*Wrapped Reichstag, Berlin, 1971-95.
100,000 square meters of polypropylene fabric
and 15,600 meters of rope.*