

# WRAP STAR

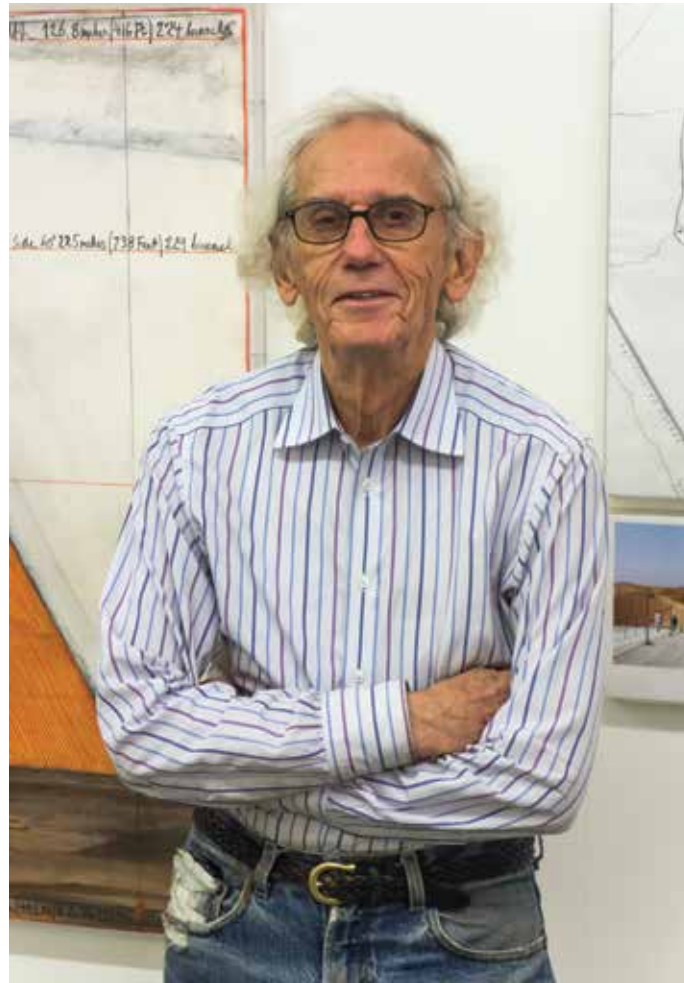
**BEST KNOWN FOR SPRAWLING ARTWORKS** that enshroud nature and buildings in veils of fabric, Christo, at the age of 79, reflects on past triumphs and sets his sights on completing yet another massive project.

by JASON EDWARD KAUFMAN

Photo: Wolfgang Volz © 1998 Christo.

From his loft in SoHo, the environmental artist Christo conceives massive outdoor installations, which often take years to produce and are only up for a matter of days. *Right: Wrapped Trees* covered 178 trees in a park in Riehen, Switzerland, with 592,015 square feet of fabric and 14.3 miles of rope for three weeks in 1998.





**T**he Bulgarian-born, New York-based artist Christo likes to work big. He and his wife, Jeanne-Claude, with whom he collaborated his entire professional life, until her death in 2009, created some of the largest and most significant public artworks in the past half-century: *Running Fence* (1976), an 18-foot-high nylon fence that meandered 24.5 miles through Sonoma and Marin Counties in Northern California; *Surrounded Islands* (1983), a project in Biscayne Bay, Florida, that enclosed 11 islands with a floating border of pink fabric extending 200 feet from the shorelines; “wrapped” monuments, which saw landmarks like the Pont Neuf in Paris (1985) and the Reichstag in Berlin (1995) encased in woven textiles; and perhaps most famously, *The Gates* (2005), which placed 7,503 saffron-colored fabric-draped arches along 23 miles of pathways in New York’s Central Park, a project that took 26 years and \$21 million to realize.

These ambitious undertakings—all temporary, usually lasting no more than two weeks—have made Christo and Jeanne-Claude legendary figures in the annals of postwar art. Now, awaiting appeal from the opposition in federal court after gaining permission from the federal government in 2011 for *Over the River*, a project that would suspend woven panels above stretches of the Arkansas River in Colorado, Christo opens his studio ([christojeanneclaude.net](http://christojeanneclaude.net)) to us for a firsthand look inside the life and mind of one of the most innovative artists of our era.

#### What motivates you to undertake these enormous projects?

These projects are all about freedom. Probably it comes from my time of total oppression in Communist Bulgaria [where I was born in 1935]. Instead of piano lessons, I had drawing, oil painting, and sculpture, and made scale models like an architect. As a little boy I dreamed of visual things. But in that period it was a horror story when a teenager wanted to be an artist. I escaped at 21 years old and I will never, never give one millimeter of my freedom. I have an absolutely foolish attitude to do the things I like to do. These projects are designed by us and we like to build them because we like to see them. If someone else likes them it’s only a bonus. They are totally useless, absolutely irrational, unnecessary. They all are about aesthetics, all about freedom. Every artwork that has a “meaning” is pure propaganda. It can be religious propaganda, economic propaganda, environmental propaganda—it’s all propaganda. That is what I am allergic to.

#### Jeanne-Claude’s upbringing was very different. How did you come to work together?

Jeanne-Claude would say that she became an artist only through love for me. We met in Paris when we were barely 23 years old. I was a political refugee in France and she was a worldly young woman who had traveled all around speaking many languages. I met her while I was making portraits of her mother—I painted

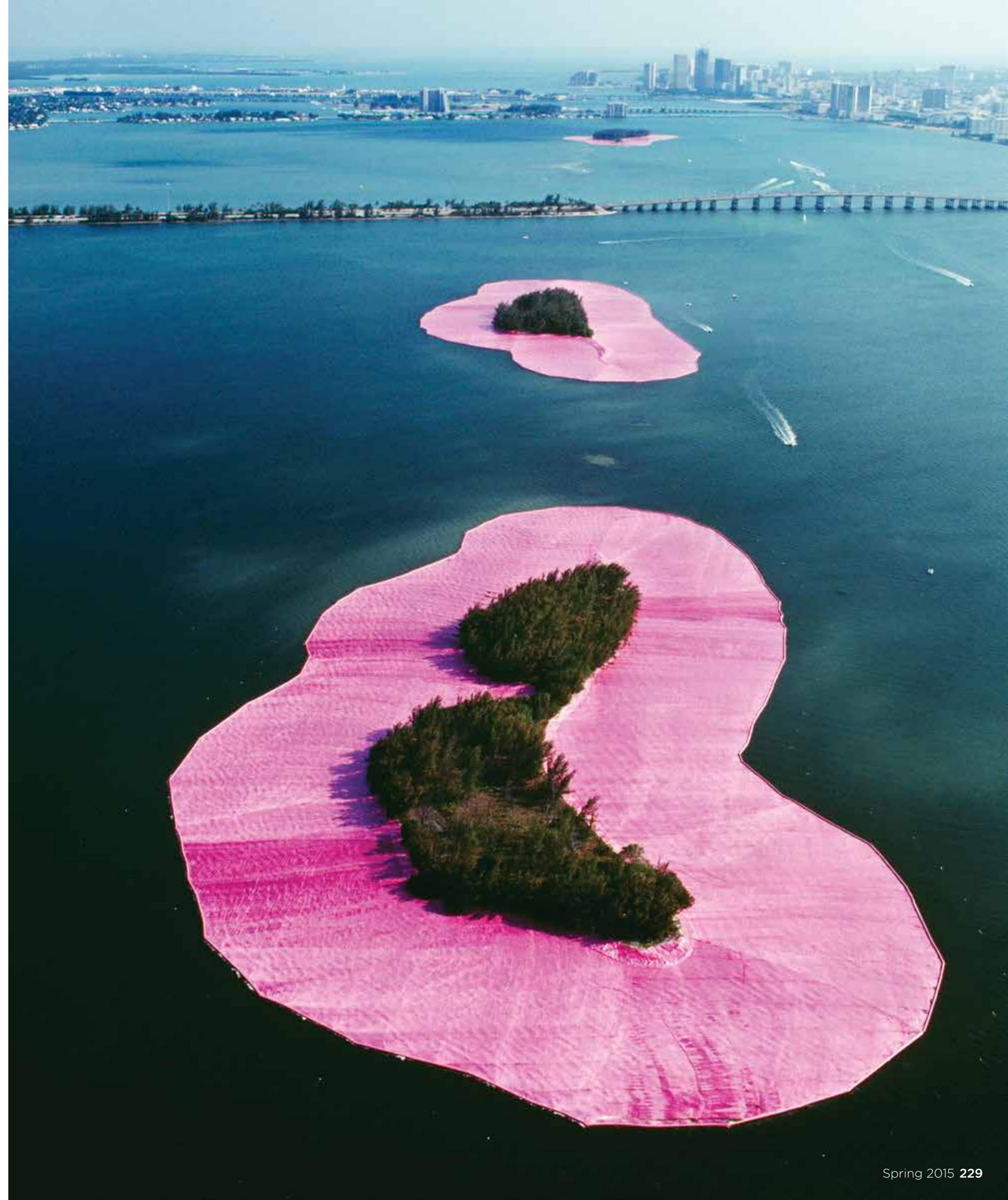
many wealthy people in France. It was a big love affair, really. We were married when our son was 2 years old. Imagine what her family thought of that! But she was an incredible partner.

#### What inspires you to envision a particular project?

I am very open, but I cannot tell you from where inspiration can come. Each project has its own genesis, but they are never the same. I do all of my work from here [a five-story SoHo loft]. It’s the only place I have lived for the last 50 years. We use the building basement-to-the-top, including offices, storage, and this floor where I show my work to collectors and visitors. Only three people work here: Jeanne-Claude’s nephew, Jonathan; my nephew, Vladimir; and myself. All the projects start from ideas, and then I draw on paper, or make scale models, or collages, or photomontages. It’s very much like an architect conveying his vision. In this activity I work alone with no assistant. Not one single work of art is done by somebody else. Even the sculpture and the frames. ▸

*Above: Christo. Right: Both fans and critics likened *Surrounded Islands* in Biscayne Bay, 1983, to a “Giant Pepto-Bismol spill.” The project surrounded 11 islands with 6.5 million square feet of pink fabric.*

Photos: (Top) Jason Edward Kaufman; (Opposite) Wolfgang Volz, © 1983 Christo.





Above: *Running Fence* required the participation and approval of 59 ranchers in Northern California in order to run an 18-foot-high woven nylon fence through 24.5 miles of their private property for 14 days in 1976.

#### How do you decide where to do a project?

Sometimes we know the site, like Central Park, the Reichstag, the Pont Neuf, or the islands in Biscayne Bay. Other times we have only the concept and need to find the location, like the *Running Fence*, *Valley Curtain*, *The Umbrellas*, *Over the River*. We need to scout to find a location, and always try to find a No. 1 and No. 2 site if one is refused. They are either in an urban place or the countryside, but always near where people live. We never do the project in some faraway landscape because in the wilderness you will never recognize the scale of the work. You need to have a telephone pole, a road, a house to see the scale. The projects are dealing with a space that is not the normal space of the art milieu. Twenty-four hours a day we are subject to highly regimented space in which someone has designed the sidewalk, the green light, the crossing. Jeanne-Claude always said we like to borrow that space and create gentle disturbances for a few days.



Photos: (Top) Wolfgang Volz, © 1976 Christo; (right) Wolfgang Volz, © 2005 Christo and Jeanne-Claude.

#### It must be a challenge to “borrow space.” How do you propose a project to a community?

The ideas are very exciting, but making the things is incredibly complicated. Getting permission is often the most difficult part of the process. We start little by little. We hire lawyers, we hire engineers, and with a very low profile, we start moving into the community to find who are the movers and shakers who can help us. With *Running Fence*, in the early '70s, we invited a group of ranchers and their wives and children, like 200 people, to dinner at Sonoma Joe, the huge restaurant near Highway 101. We showed the *Valley Curtain* film [about our previous project, a 200,200-square-foot piece of nylon fabric hung between two Colorado mountains in 1972], then color slides that gave a rough idea of the proposal. We explained that we'd like the fence to move from the ocean, through villages and towns, up hills, and end with one of the most visible parts of California, the highway. Highway 101 was 24 miles from the coast. This is why the project became 24 miles. If the 101 were 10 miles from the coast, probably *Running Fence* would be only 10 miles. This is typical of how a project is introduced to the community.

#### The community approvals, working on government land ... is your work ever not political?

We are probably the only artists who really work exclusively in a political and social system. All other art that is political or social is illustration. Our projects *physically* involve politics, *physically* involve the social system. The Reichstag project decision was done with a full vote of the parliament of the nation. We defeated the prime minister of Germany, Mr. Kohl. This is real politics, the art of real things, not art of reproduction or illustration. All these drawings I make are illustrations of the things I'd like to do, much like all art in the galleries today is illustration.

#### You sell all of your own illustrations yourself. Why not use a dealer?

In the early '60s we worked with some galleries, some private dealers, but little by little we understood that we needed to do it our own way. Starting with *Valley Curtain* and the *Running Fence* we needed to have cash flow, but individual works were selling through galleries for only \$900. It would take years to finance a project! Jeanne-Claude decided we would only sell to collectors and dealers who spend at least \$10,000, and later we increased the minimum.

#### You're able to independently finance your projects through sale of those artworks. Why are you opposed to being subsidized?

We don't accept gifts of money, any grants, or anything. We are totally independent. We cannot have a sponsor tell us, “We cannot give you more money. You should cut here and here.” The visual part, the aesthetical quality, is expensive. It's not something you can cut corners with. And we don't like to thank somebody or have someone say that a project happened because of Mr. Smith. All the works of art are copyrighted and trademarked, so suppliers cannot use them in advertising. We are approached all the time, but basically we don't like to be used.

#### But one of your projects, *The Umbrellas*, cost \$26 million, and *The Gates* cost \$21 million.

##### Do sales cover the expenses?

Through all these years I do a lot of original works and put aside many preparatory studies from each period. And we constantly bid at auction to buy my work back, so we have an enormous amount of important early works, which collectors and museums like to have [and which command the highest prices]. But collectors, dealers, and museums are notoriously slow payers ... and we cannot say to our workers we cannot pay you because Mr. Smith has not paid yet. So we work with banks that give us a line of credit [collateralized with artwork]. Because the projects became more expensive, we tried to have that cushion of cash flow to avoid underselling of the works. We prefer to borrow the money, pay the interest, and keep the price of the work stable. I do sell very many things, but I use the capitalist system to the very end. ▶

Left: Christo's most recently installed project, *The Gates*, comprising 7,503 saffron-colored fabric panels, was seen by more than 4 million people in Central Park during 2005.



**The banks lend you money to make artworks?**

In the late '60s, our lawyer, Scott Hodes in Chicago, decided we needed to have a structure to pay the bills. We established CVJ Corporation [the initials stand for Christo Vladimirov Javacheff, my given name] that engages with the banks as well as the lawyers and different advisors we hire. Harvard Business School did a case study in 2008 that explained why, for example, Bank Leu gave us a credit line of \$6 million for *The Gates*. They showed that our art was valuable and there was ongoing demand, and we have always paid back every loan with interest. But sales were enough so we did not need to use that loan.

**How many preparatory works do you make?**

I do not do drawings once the project is realized. They are done before and reflect the evolution of the project. So the number varies because of the permissions. The Reichstag project was refused three times over 25 years, so that has the biggest amount of original works—over 600 works, from letter-sized sketches to four different large-scale models. For works like *Valley Curtain* and *Surrounded Islands* that take only a few years to realize, there are not as many original works. *The Gates* and *Over the River* have not so many because for long periods there was almost no chance to start permitting, and we did not work. The moment we get permission, the demand for the work becomes much bigger, because people know the project will be realized. This is why we try to not sell too much in advance because after we get permission the price climbs.

**Do you make a profit from the public projects themselves?**

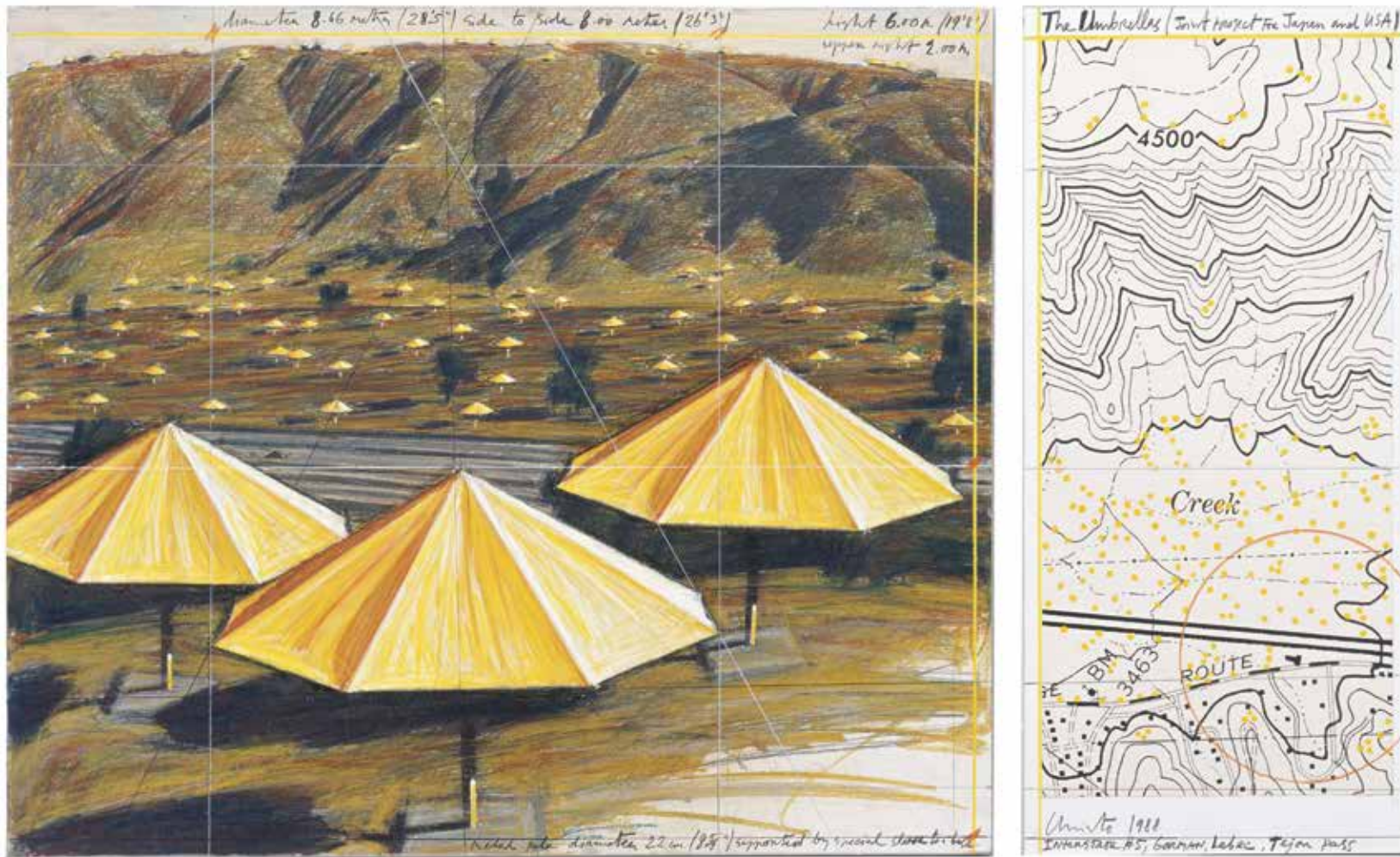
No. We never charge admission and accept no sponsorship. In fact, I pay rent. I paid \$3 million to New York City for *The Gates*. In 2011 the US Department of the Interior gave permission to install *Over the River*, but environmentalists sued to stop it, and lost, and the court just upheld that decision. The State of Colorado also won a case, but it was appealed and that case continues. But we spent \$14 million on that project already. I am paying \$87,000 a year in rent to the US government, and now we need to extend it another three years because permission expires later this year.

**Your works can take decades to realize. Can you describe the process from start to finish?**

All our projects have two distinct periods: the software period and the hardware period. The software period is when the project does not exist, and the hardware period is when we physically engage with the physical reality of the work and site: the dimensions, proportion, materials, the water, wind, sun, the construction, and finally exhibiting the project. All this together is the work of art, not only the 14 days it is on view. >

A Sketch and a photograph of *Valley Curtain* in Rifle, Colorado. The project required a crew of nearly 100 to secure the 27 ropes that held down 200,200 square feet of fabric that ran 1,250 feet between two mountains. The project took 28 months from conceptualization to completion, in August 1972, but 60 mph winds forced it to come down after just 28 hours.

Photos: (Top left) © 1970 Christo; (top) Wolfgang Volz, © 1972 Christo.



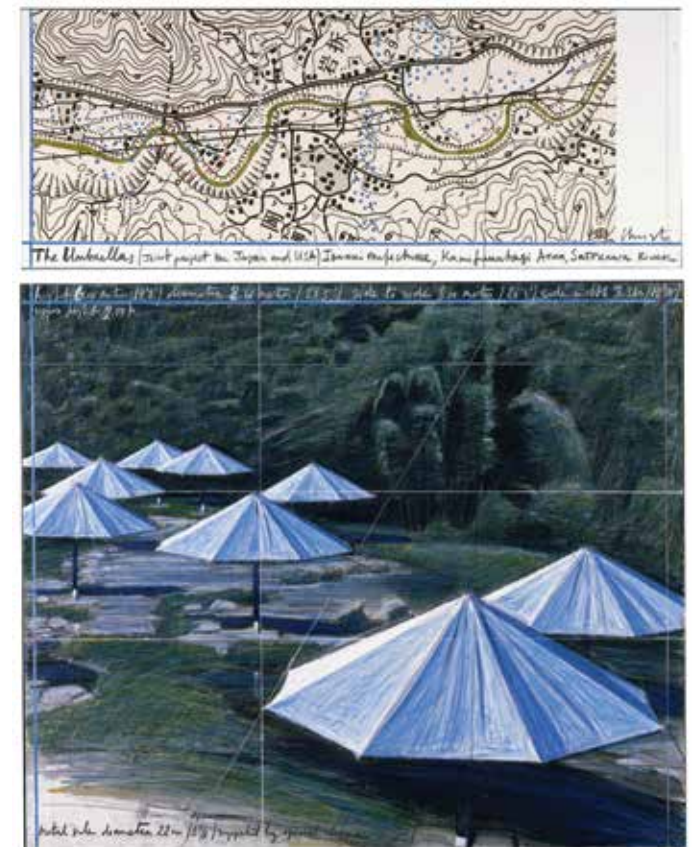
Photos: (Top) Christian Baur © 1988 Christo; (bottom and opposite top) Wolfgang Volz, © 1991 Christo; (opposite bottom) Wolfgang Volz, © 1989 Christo.



Each project has a project director and chief engineer for the technical part. We try to painstakingly prepare everything, but we don't know how smoothly it will go. It's not like building a normal building or bridge. We have to find the right people, suppliers ... a huge amount of things. Time is very restrictive. The project is to be exhibited at a particular time, not like a normal construction job that we can postpone.

We always do life-size tests in some secret place. That's where we argue and scream, "The fabric should be thicker or should be mounted this way, the cable should be like that, the proportion or distance is not right...." Jeanne-Claude was very much part of that, along with advisors and some engineers. That collective phase is so beautiful because that is the moment when you see the work growing from the schematic drawings and scale models and developing the dynamics of the real thing. ▶

Sketches, studies, and photographs of *The Umbrellas* in Southern California (opposite) and Ibaraki, Japan (this page). The project ran concurrently in both locations, featuring a total of 3,100 umbrellas.



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# CHRISTO and JEANNE-CLAUDE by the Numbers

**1935:** Year Christo and Jeanne-Claude were born. Both share the same birthday of June 13.

**1961:** Year they installed their first major piece, *Dockside Packages*, in Cologne, Germany.

**1964:** Year Christo and Jeanne-Claude came to the United States.

**22:** Completed projects.

**37:** Unrealized projects.

**2:** Projects in progress (*Over the River* and *The Mastaba*).

**\$26 million:** Highest cost ever for an installation (*The Umbrellas*, 1984–1991), equal to about \$45 million today.

**\$50,000–\$5,000,000:** Price range for Christo's original works, which he sells himself.

**\$596,343:** Highest price for his work realized at auction, for *Package on a Table*, 1961, a sculpture sold at Christie's Paris on December 2, 2014.

**2:** Years it took to complete *Wrapped Trees*, 1997–1998, in Riehen, Switzerland; the shortest amount of time for a project from conceptualization to opening day.

**26:** Years it took to create *The Gates*, 1979–2005; the longest amount of time for a completed project from conceptualization to opening day.

**1,029:** Pages for the application to the federal government for *Over the River*. (An additional 1,684 pages were required for the application and Environmental Impact Statement.)

**24.5:** Miles for his longest project, *Running Fence*.

**365:** Feet for his tallest project, *Valley Curtain*, in Colorado, 1972.

**6.5 million:** Square feet of woven polypropylene for *Surrounded Islands*, 1980–1983.

**7,503:** Gates in Central Park's *The Gates*.

**5,390:** Tons of steel used in the bases for *The Gates*.

**3,100:** Umbrellas used in *The Umbrellas* (1,760 in Southern California, 1,340 in Ibaraki, Japan).

**2,200:** People required to install *The Umbrellas*.

**2:** Weeks on average an installation is up.

**28:** Hours *Valley Curtain* was up in Colorado during 1972 before winds forced it to be taken down.

**1:** Week on average it takes to both install a work and take it down.

**5 million:** Visitors who viewed the wrapped Reichstag in Berlin over the course of 14 days in 1995.

**4 million:** Visitors who viewed the *The Gates* in New York over the course of 16 days in 2005.

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In 1985, the Pont Neuf, the oldest bridge in Paris, was entirely wrapped by 450,000 square feet of woven polyamide, including street lamps and sidewalks. Visitors were encouraged to walk over the fabric, and the functionality of the river below was never compromised.

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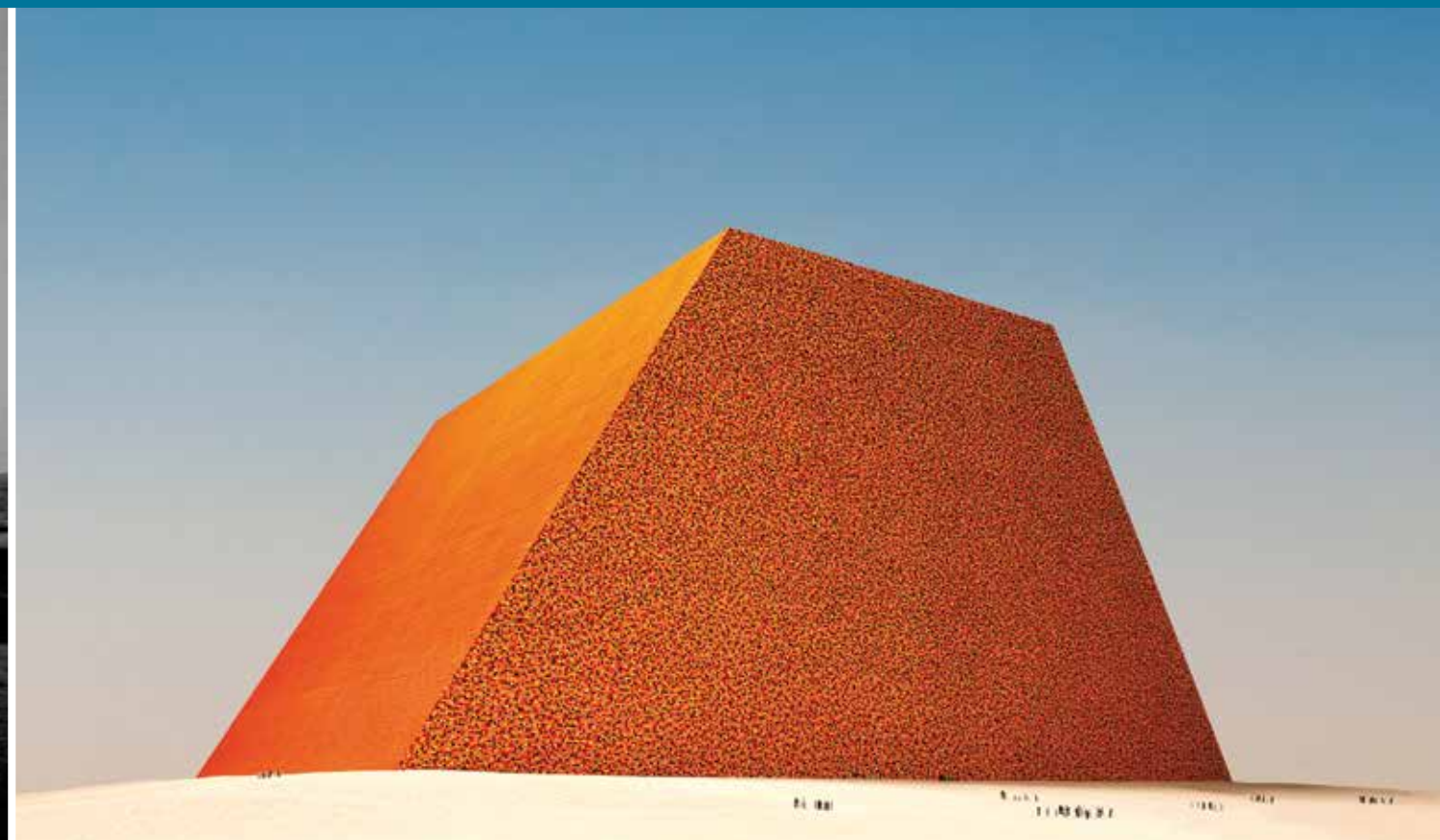
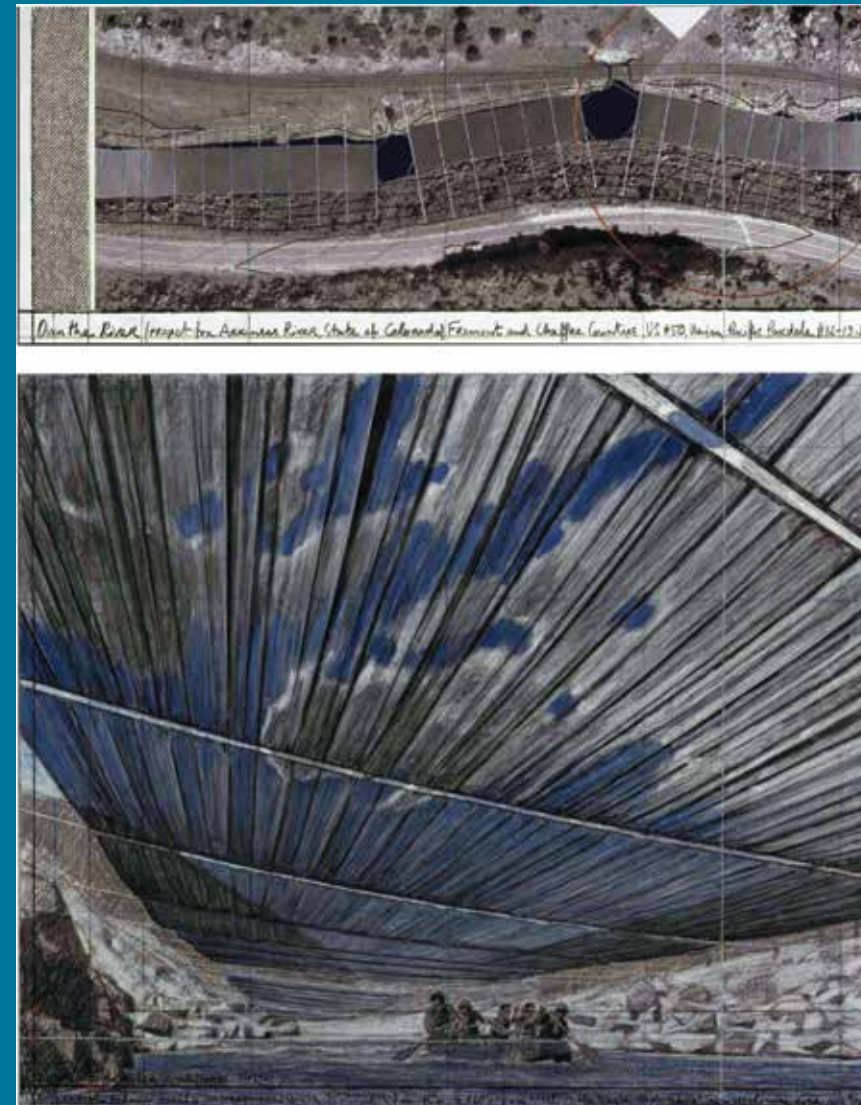
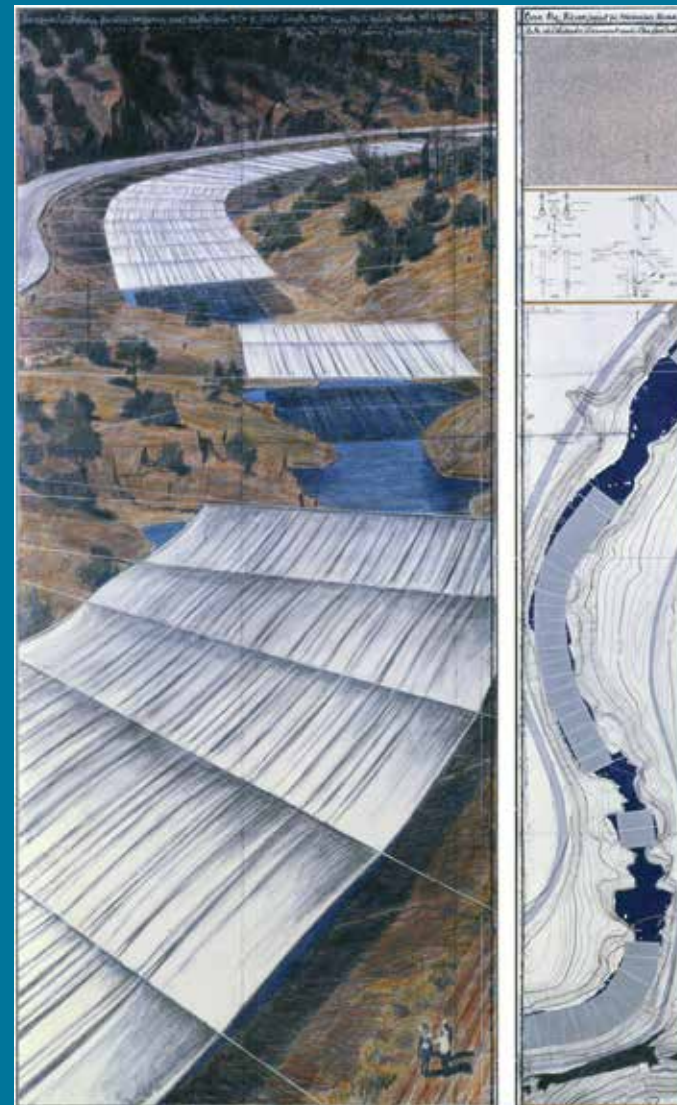


# On Christo's HORIZON

Christo is currently seeking the green light for two projects:

*OVER THE RIVER* would suspend nearly six miles of woven panels over sections of a 42-mile stretch of the Arkansas River in Colorado. The installation will be visible to spectators from an adjacent highway, and to rafters gliding beneath it. The US Bureau of Land Management, which owns the site, and Colorado District Court have granted permission, but environmentalists appealed. In January, a federal district court upheld the BLM's decision, leaving an appeal in state court the remaining obstacle.

*THE MASTABA: PROJECT FOR ABU DHABI, UNITED ARAB EMIRATES* would erect a sculpture so massive it would rival the Pyramids. Christo aims to erect a 500-foot-tall structure made of 410,000 oil drums in the desert of Abu Dhabi. *The Mastaba* would be Christo's only permanent project—and potentially, his last. It also would be the largest sculpture in the history of the world, slightly taller and broader than the Great Pyramid of Giza. After numerous trips, dozens of meetings, thousands of pages of studies, and Christo's expenditure of millions of dollars, the project, first conceived in 1977, remains in limbo awaiting approval from Emirati rulers.



Then comes the challenge of actually installing...

There are two steps: First the professional people come to install the anchors and do the heavy construction work, then at the very end we have nonskilled workers. We need to recruit so many people, and we pay them 25 cents above minimum wage. They volunteer to work, but everyone is paid. Why? Jeanne-Claude said they need to have workmen's compensation because they can be hurt, and secondly, it is real work, not a picnic. If you don't work we fire you, and you cannot fire volunteers. We need to have people who wake up early in the morning and work.

In the years before email, we gave lectures at universities, and the young people would leave their names and contact info. We ask our workers to come two weeks to the site and work. Each of them tries to find a place to sleep, and we help them. They train with professional people to learn what they will do. [For *The Gates* all the training was at a big plant in Maspeth, Queens.] They need to have tags, insurance, labor documents, taxes, all this paperwork. They wear a special uniform to be recognized as part of the project. During the exhibition we need monitors, and some of them like to stay to do that also. We have people distribute fabric samples, explaining the project. And some of them also work on the removal of the project. Everything is recycled, not only the fabric but the steel, the cables ... From training, installation, exhibition, and removal, some can work on a project for months.

Concern about the environment has been rising. Has that influenced your projects?

Jeanne-Claude said that if you have to classify our work it's probably best to say "environmental art," because we do works in urban space and rural places: the "environment." We always have people protesting. I remember a protest that I would wrap the furry penguin in 1969! There was a bomb threat during installation of *Running Fence*! But we commission detailed environmental impact studies. Professor W.A. Weber of the University of Colorado discovered a new lichen at the site of *Valley Curtain*, and he named it *Lecanora christoi*. I have a lichen named for me by a biology professor.

A constant in your work is the use of fabric to wrap or create a barrier. What is behind that?

The principal material is the fabric because it conveys the nomadic quality of the project. They are fabricated off-site and installed like when a nomadic tribe builds their tents. Also there is the sense of fragility. All these projects translate this passing away, for in a few days, like the tents, they will be gone forever. ▷

Above left: Sketches for *Over the River* in Colorado. Far left: Christo and Jeanne-Claude in Abu Dhabi in 1982. Left: A rendering of *The Mastaba*.

Photos: (Top left) André Grossmann, © 2010 Christo; (Top right) André Grossmann, © 2008 Christo; (far left) Wolfgang Volz, © 1982 Christo; (left) Wolfgang Volz, © 1979 Christo.



Soon after arriving in the West you wrapped commercial products such as bottles and even cars, and created life-size renderings of shop windows covered with fabric. Are the larger projects continuations of the same idea?

*Valley Curtain, Running Fence, The Umbrellas* are not wrapping, but they are linked to the early works. In the *Store Fronts* there is a vertical obstruction, a façade with fabric hanging where there is something happening behind. You can feel some genesis of the formal dimension of the *Valley Curtain* and *Running Fence* in the *Store Fronts*. They developed this separation of space. A fence is usually enclosing, but this is a fence that is running very free, totally irrationally. *The Gates* is totally different. It became completely inner space, walking inside the corridor of the gates.



#### How do you choose the colors?

The color always comes late in the development of the project. All our temporary works are designed for a particular season: *Surrounded Islands* for spring before hurricane season; *The Umbrellas* when the trees are leafless so you can see through the branches. We chose saffron for *The Gates* to contrast with the silver of the trees in winter. When we wrapped the Pont Neuf we chose a stone color to meld with the stone buildings of the city. Only when approaching do you see the work of art moving with the wind.

#### How do you consider your audience?

The important thing is that people go about their life and the work is there, woven into their life. For 14 days the projects became part of everyday life, and that particular moment makes them so precious to see, because tomorrow they will be gone forever.

#### How did you and Jeanne-Claude engage with the completed projects?

When a project was exhibited we loved to be with the work. We have only these 14 days, and we are very conscious of the temporary character of the work, which is why we extensively photograph and film, recording



A collection of the artists' earlier works. From left: Christo with *Wrapped Car* (Volkswagen), 1963. Jeanne-Claude, Christo's creative and romantic partner for more than 50 years, in front of *Wall of Oil Barrels*, 1962. *Wrapped Cans*, 1958, made from rope, lacquered canvas and paint.

the entire process. Each of our projects has its own large documentation exhibition to articulate the multifaceted quality of the work.

#### Do you ever look back in amazement at your accomplishments?

I remember the last time Jeanne-Claude and I were in Australia in 2007, we went to the coast and she said, "My god, [in 1969] we wrapped 1.5 miles of coastline with 85-foot-tall cliffs, the wind, the rocks, the South Pacific Ocean with sharks, and I dislocated my shoulder. We had 30 miles of ropes. We have to be totally nuts, crazy to do that!" Each project is like a journey that is absolutely unbelievable, of friendship, drama, relationship, excitement, emotion, all kinds of things.

#### What are reactions to your work like?

I can tell you a lovely story. When the pink fabric of *Surrounded Islands* was installed and exhibited, an

elderly lady came to our headquarters, looking for the artist. She said to Jeanne-Claude, "Ugh, this is terrible. It looks like a giant Pepto-Bismol spill." Jeanne-Claude said, "OK, if that's what you think." Two or three hours later an older man came, again trying to find the artist. He told Jeanne-Claude, "Ahh, this is marvelous. I've never seen anything like it in all my life. I will never forget, it looks like a giant Pepto-Bismol spill." The point is that all interpretations are legitimate.

#### Is there something that's never been told about one of your projects?

Many things. For example, why we built *The Umbrellas*. No one has asked us that. The answer is, we had developed a relationship with Japan. We had exhibitions and lectures; curators and collectors bought our work. It made sense to do a project there, but I wanted to represent the differences and similarities of Japan and the United States, the two richest countries in the world at that time [1984-1991]. It would take place simultaneously in Japan and the United States, like a work of art on two different canvasses, a diptych. At first I thought of building houses, but it needed to be open. So we decided to build a roof of a house without walls: an umbrella, with a floor at the base of the pole. People thought we chose that form because the Japanese like umbrellas. Why yellow and blue? We did the project in autumn when the landscapes of California and Japan are in diametric opposition: California burned by the sun to golden grass, Japan pouring rain. Blue umbrellas were for wet, and yellow for dry.

#### What kind of project would you not do?

The 37 projects that were never realized I will never go back to do again. Like wrapping the trees of the Champs-Élysées or buildings in Lower Manhattan. You need to have this desire to do it, and if you lose the desire then it's pointless. After the refusal of our proposal to wrap MoMA we tried to wrap the Whitney Museum, which had just been completed in the mid-'60s. Some collectors approached me with the idea. I met the architect Marcel Breuer and made a scale model and drawings. We never got permission. Then a year ago, I got a call from Adam [Weinberg, the current director], and he said, you know, we are closing the Breuer building and moving downtown, and if you'd like to wrap the museum...." I said, "You are out of your mind, Adam. That was 40 or 50 years ago." Each project has its own time.

#### Which artists have influenced you? Do you collect?

Art historians can tell you about influences. I am not a collector, but I have a Rietveldt chair (I knew him in Paris), a Miró sculpture, a Carl Andre sculpture. I knew Andy very well; we have a nice original Warhol. I have a Duchamp [the multiple *Box in a Valise*]. He was a very dear friend. He owned a study for *Wrapped Coast*, and he dedicated to Jeanne-Claude a very nice photograph by Ugo Mulas of him sitting in a Max Ernst chair looking at the famous photograph of him playing chess with the naked girl. >

Photos: (From left to right) Charles Wip, © 1963 Christo; Raymond de Seynes, 1962; Eeva-Inkeri, © 1958 Christo.





*Wrapped Coast* in Australia, Christo's longest-standing project, required 1 million square feet of fabric and 35 miles of rope when it was up for 10 weeks in 1969.

**How has your work changed over the years?**

When we were younger, Jeanne-Claude and myself, even if we had difficulty with permits we would say, well, we can take another three or four years and probably we can pull it off. Even though the Reichstag took 25 years, we would say, OK, the government will change. Now I can't think in that order. I will be 80 in June, and I recognize that I don't have the luxury of three or four years. I know that probably I will be gone, or something will happen, and this is very frightening. That is why never in my life have I worked as much as today.

**What are you working on right now, when you are in between projects?**

There is a huge amount of effort keeping up the morale of people supporting the project in Colorado. And we will be going soon to Abu Dhabi to work on getting permission for *The Mastaba* [a nearly 500-foot-tall sculpture made of oil barrels]. But this software period is very enjoyable, like a dream world ... going to Abu Dhabi, going to Colorado. It is not at all boring. We hope very much that the remaining legal challenge to the *Over the River* project will be heard by the state court in the next few months, and the decision will let us proceed with installation, but we don't know for sure. That's what keeps it exciting. ♦

Photo: (Left) Harry Shunk, © 1969 Christo; (right) Wolfgang Volz, © 1995 Christo.



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