

# An “uplifting” diversion in New York’s Central Park

## Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s “The Gates”

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“The Gates,” the temporary installation of saffron-colored nylon fabric panels suspended between more than 7,500 sets of vinyl poles stretched along 23 miles of footpaths in New York’s Central Park, has been treated as a major national event and generally hailed in the media and official circles. The ballyhoo is out of place. The significance of this project is more political and sociological than it is artistic.

When it was first proposed by the Bulgarian-born artist Christo and his wife Jeanne-Claude in 1979, the idea for this massive installation in Central Park was turned down by city authorities. Christo finally won approval about two years ago, in January 2003, under the administration of Michael Bloomberg, the billionaire mayor whom the artist calls a friend.

Christo and Jeanne-Claude (the artists use only their first names) have stressed their long campaign for permission for this installation by entitling it “The Gates, Central Park, New York, 1979-2005,” although the project did not actually begin until two years ago, and the installation will be taken down after 16 days, on February 27.

One critic has called the latest project a “lighthearted civic celebration,” and compared it to the tall ships that sailed into New York harbor to mark the US bicentennial and have returned on several occasions since. Another comparison is to the “CowParade,” the painted cow sculptures that have been installed in various cities around the world as a kind of cheerful tourist attraction. This is art that challenges no one, that demands nothing of its viewers, that bases its appeal on the fact that it is big, that it cost millions to put on, and that it is talked about. As the artists have proudly declared, “The Gates” means absolutely nothing. It’s simply pretty, and all of its viewers will be able to look back and say, years hence, ‘I saw “The Gates.”’

The brightly colored panels are not unpleasant. Vistas from some parts of the park are agreeable, as are the effects of wind and light on the fabric. This is all fairly slight, however. It doesn’t explain the attention this project has received, the decision to stage this “happening,” at a cost (all picked up by the artists themselves, not the city, we have been endlessly informed) of about \$21 million.

There is no denying the effort that has been put into this project. Hundreds of people have been involved in the fabrication and assembly, which has used 5,290 tons of steel, 315,000 linear feet of vinyl tube, and more than 1 million square feet of nylon fabric, among other things. Various technical solutions were found to environmental issues. Perhaps the biggest objection was to the original proposal to drill holes in the park for bases upon which the poles would be assembled. This was unnecessary, in the final version. The complaint of some that there is something wrong with bringing “man made” materials into the sanctuary of Central Park is a false objection. Nor can there be any agreement with those right-wing know-nothings who dominate cable television and have made their own mocking denunciations of this project. There are, however, other reasons to criticize “The Gates.”

Why was the proposal turned down in 1981 and approved 22 years later? There are several interrelated reasons, and environmental concerns were very low on the list. The local establishment, the political and financial elite, welcomed the opportunity to put on a civic celebration today. The elite has much to celebrate. It saw its fortunes skyrocket in the 1990s, and continues to benefit from the tax cuts for the wealthy combined with the slashing of social spending. Manhattan has been spruced up and remade to a great extent over the past two decades. It is now a place where very few working people can afford to live. The neighborhoods around Central Park in particular have seen an influx of millionaires and the upper-middle classes, families that can afford to spend a million or two on a co-op apartment. They had a chance to hold parties for their friends to view “The Gates” from apartments overlooking the park.

Central Park itself has been the focus of a big spending campaign centered on the partial privatization of this “crown jewel” of the city. The Central Park Conservancy was established to raise hundreds of millions of dollars in private donations and employ its own private workforce, while the city’s Parks Department has shrunk to a small fraction of its former size.

A project like “The Gates,” like the privatization of Central

Park itself, allows the aristocracy of the super-rich to claim that it is providing a gift to the people of the city as a whole. It's true that all can benefit from the beautification of the park. "Gates" that literally keep the poor out of the park have not yet been erected—although there is increasing use of park facilities for private functions of the wealthy. But there is a broader price to be paid for these policies. While prominent areas like Central Park are given a face-lift and made more welcoming for tourists, social inequality has deepened. The homeless haven't disappeared—they are simply less visible to those who want to pretend they aren't there. At the same time, millions of New Yorkers struggle to feed their families while meeting the skyrocketing costs of housing, education and health care.

Christo and Jeanne-Claude, who have lived in New York City for more than 40 years, are part of the social layer that has prospered while the vast majority has struggled to make ends meet. In fact, their boast that they have paid the entire cost of installing "The Gates" is itself revealing. Why should the exhibition of supposedly great art be dependent upon the wealth of its own creators? What about artists who have something to say but can't spend \$21 million to buy their own exhibition? Will wealthy artists next offer millions of dollars to have their paintings displayed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art?

If "The Gates" or some other public art project is worth presenting, why shouldn't its cost come out of public revenues? Christo and Jeanne-Claude's "donation" of this installation simply reinforces the ongoing campaign against public spending and subsidies for the arts. Christo and Jeanne-Claude have "bought" Central Park for this 16-day installation in very much the way their friend Bloomberg "bought" the mayoralty by spending more than \$60 million of his own enormous fortune in the 2001 election campaign.

It is also worth examining, even if briefly, the career of this prominent jet-setting couple. They have been engaged in similar art projects for decades, including the wrapping of Paris's Pont Neuf in the 1980s and the wrapping of the Reichstag in Berlin in 1995. Christo's work has always been associated with a certain grandiosity and a flair for publicity and self-promotion.

In his article praising "The Gates" as "a gift package to New York City," *New York Times* art critic Michael Kimmelman made one particularly interesting observation. Noting "Christo's uplifting agenda," Kimmelman wrote, "He was born in Bulgaria in 1935 and escaped the Soviet bloc for Paris in 1958. His philosophy has always been rooted in the utopianism of Socialist Realism, with its belief in art for Everyman."

There is an important grain of truth in this last sentence, although it must be extracted from an enormous distortion. Socialist Realism, the official artistic doctrine of the Stalinist bureaucracy in the USSR and Eastern Europe, *claimed* to represent "art for Everyman." In fact, it was a monstrous perversion of genuine artistic values and the necessary freedom

for the artist. The state, claiming to speak in the name of the working class but in fact representing the privileged bureaucracy, dictated that all art must be "uplifting." The purpose of the "uplift" was not to educate the masses or to tell the truth about social life, but rather to cover up this truth, to inculcate a fraudulent "optimism," obedience and above all nationalism, the antithesis of the genuine ideals of socialism. Socialist Realism, though often confused with an aesthetic of "social realism," was not at all the same. Certainly social realism, naturalism and similar conceptions can and have produced great art and literature. By dictating that its state-approved art be "realistic" and "optimistic," however, the Stalinist doctrine ensured that it was false and reactionary.

This has something to do with Christo's conception of "popular art." He has embraced what might be called a version of "capitalist realism." His uplifting agenda, as Kimmelman terms it, shares with Socialist Realism the aim of a phony optimism that demands nothing from the viewing public, and promises only accessibility and pleasant diversion. Serious art, whatever its immediate content, should strive for social and artistic truth, not "optimism" or "pessimism." Its task, to paraphrase Spinoza, should be neither to weep nor to laugh, but to understand. This doesn't mean, of course that "pessimistic" or "optimistic" conclusions and moods are not to be drawn, but rather that they should emerge out of a serious struggle and investigation, not a shallow and flippant one.

Christo has found a willing audience for his decorative diversion and his message of "uplift." In the narrowest terms, it certainly fits in with Mayor Bloomberg's campaign for reelection later this year. More fundamentally, this is an attempt to generate a "feel-good" atmosphere at a time of war, social and political polarization, and devastating attacks on civil rights and liberties. Three and a half years after the 9-11 terrorist attacks, the smug and complacent layers of the upper middle class can comfort themselves with the notion that the city has "come together."

The business establishment welcomes this effort to improve the local "mood," and it's good for tourism as well. There is something unreal about this exercise, however, while the death and destruction go on in Iraq, the government-sanctioned torture proceeds in Guantanamo and elsewhere around the world, and the other New York, the majority working class and immigrant population, sends its children to war while living on substandard wages and reduced social services.



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