

## **Christo & Jeanne-Claude – the beauty (yours), the money (theirs), the publicity (shared)**

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The artist **Christo and Jeanne-Claude** is physically no more. The 2 bodies of the artist uninstalled themselves from life, just like the numerous projects they did together. Jeanne-Claude passed away on November 18, 2009 and Christo – on May 31, 2020. They proved yet again how ephemeral art and life are... Now we have to figure it all out by ourselves.

In a lecture from December 2010, Christo identified the most important things in their work as: beauty, their own money, and ecology. In other words – the artist's eye, hand and energy; the C.V.J. Corporation; and the use of public space that only leaves traces in the public mind.(1) In short, this is the substance of "The Christo and Jeanne-Claude Effect", (2) their contribution to contemporary art.

### **1. The beauty of the ephemeral – the "15-minute" classics**

The plastic form in the works of Christo and Jeanne-Claude – both at the preparatory stage and in the final realisation – is absolutely classic grandeur and beauty. Both the drawings and the "wrappings" are so flowing, graceful and ideal in terms of execution, proportion, coordination of materials and hierarchy of changing points of view that they look "non-manmade" in their wholeness and harmony. The drawings and collages are based on the academic (some would say repressive) art education that Christo received in Sofia while he was still Hristo Javacheff. The fidelity to the realistic form and the unity of "who, what, when, where and how" are later enhanced by photos (taken by Wolfgang Volz according to the artist's instructions) – precisely selected angles, framing and distance from the object of interest are the visual and informational "canvas" for the utopian visions of running fences, umbrellas, gates, wrapped bridges and public buildings. The photo-based drawings and collages, looking much like architectural studies, are extremely convincing and highly seductive – it is clear what the "thing" will look like in reality and that it will be beautiful.

Before 1956, Hristo Javacheff participated in the construction of the socialist utopia in Bulgaria. They say real utopia is only possible as an illusion – it is symbolically effective, but economically unproductive. In his student years, Christo "masked" the reality in the yards of agricultural cooperatives dotted along the Orient Express route between Sofia and Kalotina, as part of the summer students' brigades organised by the Academy of Arts to support the rural labour. In doing so, he participated in creating an illusion of Bulgaria's prosperity. Working along so many people, he also learned to think "big" (what 1 km of space means). (3) Christo used to create large-scale illusions of utopia, and this stayed with him his whole life. It is not only important that he was born in Bulgaria, but that he grew up in a totalitarian country.

Later, "in the West", Christo and Jeanne-Claude used similar procedures to make radical interventions in reality. There, however, these had the status of temporary utopias that unmask reality as something constructed, rather than something that is forever given – if an artist can change Central Park in Manhattan or the Reichstag in Berlin, then everything else can be changed. In the early 1980s, Christo said: *I carry within me the enormous influence of my country. It seems to be the same with everyone – they carefully preserve the value of their family, education, culture... I believe that 20th-century artists should know the economy, society and politics, because I think that any art today that is less economic, less social and less*

*political, is simply less contemporary.* (4) In later statements by Christo and Jeanne-Claude, beauty came to the fore; politics became a pre-condition they found in the specific site of intervention.

Their *modus operandi* was like this: at first, Christo would give birth to an idea (with three exceptions: a/ Surrounded Islands, 1980-83, a project dedicated to Tsveta, Christo's mother, was conceived by Jeanne-Claude; b/ In August 1971, Christo received a black-and-white Reichstag postcard with a "challenging" question - "how about wrapping this one here", from Michael Cullen, a US architect living in Berlin who became the director and historian of the Wrapped Reichstag project, 1971-95; c/ the idea for the unrealized Over The River, 1992-2017 is shared). Then would come the project (drawings and logistics), which is completely arbitrary as a vision of what would be transformed and how. Then, in a negotiating mode, Christo and Jeanne-Claude would create their "audience" who participated with expectations, prejudices and attitudes. The project would then be realised by the powerful will of the artist, who (although consisting of two people of different sex) acted as a kind of a "leader of the masses". The realized project would then stay in place for 14-21 days, after which it would be dismantled, leaving behind a super-efficient memory.

The pre-existing, supposedly "natural", reality has been transformed. We have a metaphor and a dream (utopia is always a dream in the beginning); technology that substantiates the utopia; and finally, a radically changed reality. Christo and Jeanne-Claude's projects are "temporarily" real utopias. The same turned out to be the case with the "real" communism in Bulgaria. But there are drastic differences in the beauty (compare with the life-work of Lyudmila Zhivkova, the daughter of Bulgaria's pre-1989 dictator and an influential minister of culture); in the type and origin of the resources used (their own vs. people's); in the popularity of the utopia's "realisation" and "documentation" (perfect VS. defective). There are resemblances in duration: 1944-89 for Bulgaria's communist regime; 1971-95 for the Wrapped Reichstag; 1979-2005 for The Gates...

The simulated "avant-garde" work of Hristo Javacheff, the Art Student, became the subversive avant-garde of Christo and Jeanne-Claude in the West. The classic beauty of the (inevitably) disappearing "original" is juxtaposed with the environment. Drawings and collages give a preview (and then remind us) of the beauty of the realised project. But this is not classic art in the sense of "classical" – it is only temporarily such reminding the viewer of the ephemerality of dreams, beauty, life, and order ... Andy Warhol's "15 minutes of fame" became Christo's and Jeanne-Claude's "15 days of classicism" ... – or for however long the "original" was left in place.

The only "thing" Christo could not "warp" was himself – he could not "see" and draw himself (let alone take pictures of himself) as someone who is both inside and outside of the "wrap". The photos where he is "wrapped" in a white shroud standing on a meadow in Central Park are the work of Annie Leibovitz for the Rolling Stone magazine. The drawings and the collages depend on an "epiphany" at the moment of contact, on the convincing visual demonstration of one (Cartesian?) point of view – a superior, optimised unity of artistic mind, eye and hand that has invented, drawn and wished for the utopia instead of us and for us; the artists were even willing to invest their own money to make it real... At this stage, the artist's visual thinking – singular gaze, monocular vision – fits into the so-called Cartesian *perspectivalism*, one of the main scopic (visual) regimes of modernity, coming from the Renaissance and associated with Descartes' philosophy of linear perspective and rational, observable and unified space. (5) Having Jeanne-Claude as a co-author brought binocular vision and viewing into the process, i.e. the act of description – that visual mode (scopic regime) of modernity associated with Bacon's philosophy, with looking at the details constituting the world, with the idea of the geographical map and with 17th century Dutch art. When the project was in the phase of logistics and material implementation on location, the god-like Cartesian view was "duplicated" in the examination of the infinite number of details – Descartes and Bacon, kind of, "working" in tandem...

And once the project is in the physical space of the world, the thing that happened is what Nietzsche describes as the end of the transcendental gaze – everyone has a camera, everyone clicks, everyone “consumes” the beauty of the transient utopia. The disintegration of the artist’s original, unified and total point of view in the carnival experience of the public action marks the baroque visual (scopic) regime of modernity. With the real audience “before”, “in” and “around” the materialized project, the human body comes back too, unifying what is seen and who is watching in the wholeness of the world here and now. This results in a bacchanalia of “appropriations” of utopia, of taking pictures, of multiplying points of view, of individualising the experience in a collective environment, etc. Beauty “saves” the world for a little while... The utopia is built and then disappears. Contemporaneity is an instant “classic” – something like a momentary “selfie” of eternity...

## **2. C.V.J. – the artist as an asset**

In 1969-1970, Scott Hodes, Christo’s and Jeanne-Claude’s lawyer, proposed the following: register a corporation which will sell the drawings, conduct negotiations, sign contracts, pay the bills and implement the projects. In the end, its yearly balance is reset to zero – no profit, no taxes. The first incorporated projects were Valley Curtain (1970-72) and Running Fence (1972-76). Later, they decided to register one main corporation in the US state with the simplest and most flexible corporate legislature. The parent corporation C.V.J. (i.e. “Christo Vladimirov Javacheff”) was founded on 17th August 1982 as a “United States Corporation Company” in Wilmington, Delaware, USA. Its main “branch”, a “Foreign Business Corporation” was founded on 27th September 1982 in New York. (6) For each new project, a third level subsidiary corporation was to be created to deal with everyday work, including contracts with people, institutions and banks, and all else that needed to be done once a project reached an advanced stages.

C.V.J.’s main capital is Christo’s artistic talent. This was something abstract and indivisible – that’s why “shares” in C.V.J. were not traded. The purpose of C.V.J. was to realise the ideas of its main asset and “capital”. Christo and Jeanne-Claude were “employees” of the corporation, even if senior ones. You could not invest in C.V.J., but you could invest in its subsidiaries, i.e. in the project’s implementation by buying a drawing for that project. Thus, each drawing besides being a work of art, was also literally a financial instrument, a material expression of a monetary investment – a share giving you “co-ownership” of the corporation/project. Maybe that was why C.V.J. was registered under the jurisdiction of the US State of Delaware – each drawing or collage sold, i.e. a share in a project, was a *de jure* change in the ownership of the corporation as there would be a new “shareholder”, in other words – a dedicated collector. In any other state, this would require a general shareholders’ meeting to discuss the change in ownership; in many states, it would also necessitate the re-registration of the corporate entity... Not so in Delaware, USA...

In fact, C.V.J. was an instrument to transform the symbolic capital (and main asset) of the corporation – Christo’s talent – into cash, into real money, with the corporation “endowing” each drawing with a dual status: both a work of art and a financial instrument accepted as a “collateral” against bank loans. The loan (in the form of a “revolving credit” line) provided instantly, daily available cash for the current payments and operations of C.V.J., and it was only possible to grant such loans due to the structure/logic of the parent corporation.

This unique scheme for how to “incorporate” and to “cash” on the author, who in this case is all of an artist, an asset and a subcontractor, kick-started the renewal of the NGO sector in the USA after the 1980s.

## **3. “Recycling” public space – limits and use**

Christo and Jeanne-Claude became a benchmark in the “genre” of art in public spaces – the process of negotiating the conditions for their use was mastered to perfection – with transparency, amazing perseverance, consistency, respect, efficiency, etc. The materialization of something that would only last for days or weeks was negotiated for years and even decades. Moreover, it would appear and disappear without leaving physical traces in the environment... The works of Christo and Jeanne-Claude explored and pushed the limits of what was legally possible – each time in a different way and place, and with different people, communities, institutions, authorities and jurisdictions. Physical traces do not remain, but there is a lasting effect of the memory of teamwork, publicity and beauty. Thus, the public space, and not just the “wrapped” object at the project site, was “recycled” for a new life.

The world’s first report on what impact an art project might have on the environment (and presumably on public space) was published in October 1975. The Environmental Impact Report (EIR) for the Running Fence (1972-76) in California was demanded by some farmers. It consists of hundreds of pages, took eight months to compile and cost the artists \$39,000. (7) The most important conclusion is: *The only large-scale and irreversible change will most likely be the change in people’s ideas and attitudes.*

Christo and Jeanne-Claude never realized a project in Bulgaria, his native land. But once upon a time she came here and so did their son Cyril. Christo loved his family very deeply and also his memories of the first 20-21 years of his life, except for those associated with the totalitarian regime... That last part always got in the way during the numerous attempts to bring him back here for at least a short visit after 1989. There was always something happening demonstrating that the so called “transformation process” is not transforming anything all that much. There was also always the in-general lack of public understanding and appreciation for what he and Jeanne-Claude did in/for world culture and art. There was always hate in the yellow media and the tabloids. Apart from his colleagues from the National Art Academy, and those of us who many call “a cult following”, he did not feel there is much appreciation even by the art institutions in his native land, let alone interest in collecting his works (which, you see, would have helped him do what he loved the most...) There is also his notorious dyslexia – he was not really comfortable in any language; but he could never want to be considered a pompous “master” for not speaking fluent Bulgarian if he would come to do a lecture in Bulgaria, you see...

And yet his speech was peppered with Bulgarian words, his body language – with Balkan-isms, his diet – with garlic and yogurt, his dress code with 60ies blue jeans and jackets, and his long, progressively whiter and thinner hair – even when I was growing up in communist Bulgaria years later, those were considered mild but important gestures of rebellion and dissent. And there was always the CV entry for his place of birth, which many artists would much rather put aside. In any event, I do not think he needed to come back for a visit, not after the death of his parents and especially of his mother who died in the 1980ies shortly after the Surrounded Islands.

And now we have to figure it all out by ourselves – a process, part of which is this book and project. It seems that finally the artist’s native land has entered the mode of “acquiring” a large-scale and irreversible change in people’s ideas and attitudes... Not only to the work and art of Christo and Jeanne-Claude but in general. Call it an ongoing process of transformation, if you wish.

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[1] See: <http://www.christojeanneclaude.net/videos/christo-lecturing-about-over-the-river-and-the-mastaba-part-22#.VVX34IKKBOY> – 12:00’-13:30’. For more info: <http://www.christojeanneclaude.net/>

[2] The text is based on my lectures, texts, grants and talks with the artist over the years, but mostly on my statements at the following conferences: 1) “Art, Democracy and Public Space: The Christo and Jeanne-Claude Effect” (The Guggenheim Museum, New York, NY, USA. February 25, 2005), at the time of The Gates (1979-2005). About the conference:

<http://artists.refuseandresist.org/news15/news715.html> (second part of the material); 2) “Beyond Walls and Wars. Art, Politics and Multiculturalism” (25<sup>th</sup> AICA Congress, Santa Monica, CA, USA. October 1991), at the time of The Umbrellas (Japan-USA 1984-1991); 3) “Modern Problems of Power and Culture. The Philosophical Foundations of Post-Modern Culture” (Inter-University Centre, Dubrovnik, Croatia. October 8-19, 1990).

[3] In October 1995, in Sofia, during the shoot of The Limit of Dreams (Director: Georgi Balabanov, 1996, ARTE), one of Hristo Javacheff’s former colleagues from the art school confirmed that such a practice really existed. The late set designer Konstantin Dzhidrov implied that he had kept his student studies of those Potemkin-village interventions in the landscape.

[4] Caldwell, Carol. Whither Christo. Rolling Stone Mag., July 8, 1981 (p. 74). Christo’s famous photo-portrait was published here. It was specially commissioned from Annie Leibovitz for the issue (p. 30-31).

[5] Jay, Martin. Scopic Regimes of Modernity. In: “Vision and Visuality”, Dia Art Foundation–Discussions in Contemporary Culture, Number 2. Ed. Hal Foster. Bay Press, Seattle 1988 (p.p. 3-27)

[6] In 1984, the Wall Street Journal (12<sup>th</sup> July 1984, Vol. CCIV, No. 8) published a profile of the C.V.J. Corporation: Monroe, Anne. “Prime Property – Besides being an artist, Christo is main asset claimed by CVJ Corp.” In 2006, the Harvard Business School published a “Case Study” of C.V.J. concerning The Gates. It describes the subtleties of turning Christo’s and Jeanne-Claude’s drawings and collages into a financial instrument. See: Hardymon, G. Felda; Lerner, Josh; and Leamon, Ann. “Christo and Jeanne-Claude: The Art of the Entrepreneur”, Harvard Business School Case 806-014, Cambridge, MA, USA. August, 2006 <http://www.hbs.edu/faculty/Pages/item.aspx?num=33013>

[7] [http://christo.vaesite.net/\\_data/runningfence\\_eir.2.pdf](http://christo.vaesite.net/_data/runningfence_eir.2.pdf)

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