

An Interview with Christo and Jeanne-Claude

*for Eye Level Magazine
January 4, 2002*

by James Pagliasotti

The artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude were born Gemini-like at the same hour on June 13, 1935, he in Gabrovo, Bulgaria as Christo Javacheff of an industrialist family and she in Casablanca, Morocco as Jeanne-Claude Denat de Guillebon of a French military family. Christo studied at the Fine Arts Academy in Sofia from 1953-56 and escaped from Prague to the West in early 1957.

Jeanne-Claude was educated in France and Switzerland, and earned degrees in philosophy and Latin from the University of Tunis. They met in Paris in 1958 when Christo was commissioned to do a portrait of Jeanne-Claude's mother.

In 1964, they and their son, Cyril (today a noted poet, born 1960) immigrated to New York City, where they have since resided.

Eye-level:

Although you work primarily with fabric, you've used other media, as well. Is there a definition you are comfortable with in describing your art?

Jeanne-Claude:

Christo and I believe that labels are very important, but for bottles of wine, not for artists, and we usually don't like to put a label on our art. If one is absolutely necessary, then it would be environmental artists because we work in both the rural and the urban environment.

Eye-level:

What is the division of labor between the two of you in creating your work?

Christo:

Jeanne-Claude and I have been working together since our first outdoor temporary work: "Dockside Packages, Cologne Harbor, 1961." The decision to use only the name "Christo" was made deliberately when we were young because it is difficult for one artist to get established and we wanted to put all the chances on our side. Therefore, we declared that Christo was the artist and Jeanne-Claude was the manager, the art dealer, the coordinator and the organizer. And, this served us very well for many years.

Of course, all our collaborators always said, "Christo and Jeanne-Claude", but for the public and the media, it was "Christo." By 1994, though, when my hair had turned gray and Jeanne-Claude's hair had turned red (laughter), we decided we were mature enough to tell the truth, so we officially changed the artist name "Christo" into the artists "Christo and Jeanne-Claude."

All works created to be indoors, from 1958 until today, such as Wrapped Objects and Packages, drawings, collages, scale models and lithographs are works by "Christo." All works created to be outdoors, and the large scale indoor temporary installations, are works by "Christo and Jeanne-Claude."

Eye-level:

Most of your work can truly be described as monumental. What inspires you to work on such a large scale?

Christo:

People think our work is monumental because it's art, but human beings do much bigger things: they build giant airports, highways for thousands of miles, much, much bigger than what we create. It appears to be monumental only because it's art. We have created indoor installations inside museums, like the Wrapped Floor at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago in 1968, and not monumental at all by any standards.

Jeanne-Claude:

Even one of our outdoor projects, which was the Wrapped Walkways in Kansas City, Missouri in 1978...Christo likes to say: if some of our works are symphonies, then Wrapped Walkways was chamber music.

Eye-level:

What do you want to provoke in people who view your work?

Jeanne-Claude:

You see, what is it that we do? We want to create works of art of joy and beauty, which we will build because we believe it will be beautiful. The only way to see it is to build it. Like every artist, every true artist, we create them for us.

Christo:

Every true artist does the same. We create those works for ourselves and our friends, and if the public enjoys it, that is only a bonus but that is not created for the public.

Jeanne-Claude:

It is a little bit (like) on a human level...if you compare our work, let's say, a father and a mother are walking down the street and they are holding the hand of their little child, and someone stops them and says, "Oh, what a beautiful child!" Of course, the father and the mother are very happy, but everybody knows that they didn't create that child so that people will enjoy it. Each one of our projects is a child of ours...even though we do have a

homemade child, but he is 41 years old now. His name is Cyril, he has five books published of his poetry, and he signs Cyril Christo.

Eye-level:

Some people say that your work is not “art” but rather engineering. How do you respond?

Christo:

Well, that is simple because, if you try to imagine a human being doing chemistry, mixing pigments, adding an egg, putting a little bit more oil, more of a different pigment. Now, that is pure chemistry? Or is it Leonardo DaVinci or Michelangelo preparing to paint a fresco on the wall? So, you could say that’s chemistry, but it’s definitely art. If you imagine two ironworkers with their hardhats and a forklift, lifting giant slabs of steel, now is that construction work or is Alexander Calder preparing a sculpture?

Eye-level:

You describe the actual installation of your projects as the “hardware” part of your work, the preparation being the “software.” The “hardware” part of your work is very ephemeral. How does the relatively brief duration of your work, from the time it is installed until it is removed, affect its impact?

Jeanne-Claude:

It greatly affects the impact because the temporary character of our works, our large scale works, is an aesthetic decision on our part. Throughout the millenniums, for 5000 years, artists of the past have tried to input into their works of art a variety of different qualities. They have used different materials, marble, stone, bronze, wood, paint. They have created abstract images, figurative images, religious images, profane. They have tried to do bigger, smaller, a lot of different qualities. But there is one quality they have never used, and that is the quality of love and tenderness that we human beings have for what does not last. For instance, we have love and tenderness for childhood because we know it will not last. We have love and tenderness for our own life because we know it will not last. That quality of love and tenderness, we wish to donate it, endow our work with it as an additional aesthetic quality. The fact that the work does not remain creates an urgency to see it. 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.”

Eye-level:

That may answer the next question then. Do you ever contemplate a permanent construction? If so, what would it be? If not, why not?

Christo:

Right now, we have 3 works that we call "in progress." One we started in 1979 is called The Gates, Project for Central Park, New York City. Started in '79, we still don't have the permission. (Note: since the time of this interview, permission to install The Gates has been granted.) The other work we started in 1992, it is called Over the River, Project for the Arkansas River in the state of Colorado, we haven't got the permit yet. And, we are working at both of those, trying to get the permit. Therefore, we do not know which one will be realized next. (Note: See previous note. The Gates will be the next realized work.)

Jeanne-Claude:

But, there is a third one that we have not totally abandoned, which is called the The Mastaba of Abu Dhabi, Project for the United Arab Emirates. We started it in 1978, we went 9 times to the Emirates, 9 times trips of 15 days each. But when the war started between Iran and Iraq, I got scared and I didn't wish to go any longer in that part of the world. So, at the present time, it doesn't seem that the political situation has improved in a way that makes me eager to go to a Muslim country.

Christo:

But that one would last not 14 days, but it would last much longer, because it would be made of oil barrels. That could stay, not forever, because we believe that nothing exists that is forever, not even the dinosaurs, but if well maintained, it could remain for four to five thousand years. And that is definitely not forever.

Eye-level:

But it will undoubtedly outlast the supply of oil in that part of the world.

Christo: Yes, not the supply, maybe, but the need.

Eye-level:

Is it difficult as a woman to work in Muslim countries?

Jeanne-Claude:

Yes, that is why we chose the United Arab Emirates, because in the Gulf region, it is the one country that would accept a woman. When Shaikh Zayed, ruler of the United Arab Emirates, went to welcome Queen Elizabeth at the harbor, he said, "I salute you, Elizabeth, Queen of England." But when she had visited (laughter) Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf countries,

she was welcomed as “Elizabeth, King of England.” (more laughter) And the wife of Zayed in the UAE, Fatima, drives her own car. So that was the only place where I could be working, together with Christo.

Eye-level:

The cost of constructing your work is enormous, yet you accept no sponsorship, no commissions nor any public funds. Nor do you accept volunteers, but rather pay everyone who works with you. All of the cost reportedly is borne by the sales of your drawings for the project. You have said that ensuring your freedom and the integrity of your work are the reason you do things this way, but one nevertheless assumes that artists of your stature could negotiate a sponsorship agreement that was free of constraints. Is your position in this matter polemical, or is the process of financing your work as you do an integral part of your art?

Christo:

There are a few mistakes in your question. First, it is not the drawings of that project that pays for the expenses of that project. We sell everything we have, from the early packages and wrapped objects of 1958 that we have in our storages, and any preparatory drawings for any project that we have available, we sell them and it pays for the expenses of one project. So, it's not only the preparatory works for one project. That wouldn't be possible.

Eye-level:

So all of the software from all of the projects pay for whatever you're working on at the time?

Christo:

No, no, not the software. Because we do not sell photographs, we have no royalties on books, posters, postcards. We don't sell technical drawings except when they are incorporated into a drawing or a collage. We do not sell any part of the software. The preparatory drawings and collages and scale models cannot be called software. They are works of art in their own right.

But, we sell everything we can sell, to museums, private collectors and art dealers, and when we were spending \$13 million to wrap the Reichstag, many, many of the sales were of collages and drawings, preparation work for The Gates, Project for Central Park, preparation work for Over the River, preparation work of older projects, Valley Curtain, Wrapped Coast, Running Fence, everything we still have for sale, as well, and that's where the bigger money is, the early works of the '50s and '60s, the early packages and wrapped objects, which is what museums want.

Jeanne-Claude:

About accepting of sponsorships, we have drawers physically, those steel drawers, fillers, filled with offerings from sponsors and we always refuse, because we do not believe that there can be an offer without strings attached. It doesn't exist. Only Santa Claus, maybe, but we never met him.

Christo:

I often say, "Our work is a scream of freedom."

Jeanne-Claude:

And, about paying everybody who works, that is correct but with some exceptions. One exception is my mother, who worked at almost every project and was never paid. And the only other exception is at the Wrapped Coast in Australia in 1969 where we had hundreds of paid workers, 11 architecture - not art -- architecture students were working.

Christo:

They were the best workers, they arrived earlier than anybody in the morning, left last in the evening, refused to be paid, and 3 of them are today very well known artists in Australia. Not architects. They switched and became artists.

Eye-level:

We should ask if your mother, since you're not paying her, did she ever receive the portrait that Christo was doing of her when you two met?

Jeanne-Claude:

Well, that she paid Christo, that's how he paid the rent. You see, young 23 year old Bulgarian refugee Christo Javacheff in Paris could not sell his early wrapped cans or wrapped objects. In fact, even for free, people wouldn't put things like that in their home. Today it is at least, just the Cans, in 5 museums, the early works are in hundreds of museums. But then he couldn't sell them. He still had to eat and pay his rent, so he found he had three ways to survive. He washed cars in garages, he washed dishes in restaurants, but those were painful work and very little pay. But the third way he found to survive was to paint portraits, oil on canvas, of people who wanted their portrait. And that was big money and really fast, three sittings and its done, and those portraits he would sign "Javacheff" - his family name - but his art he was signing "Christo" to make a difference.

Eye-level:

Are any of those portraits still in your personal collection?

Christo:

In our collection are only two, both are wrapped portraits of Jeanne-Claude. "Wrapped Portrait of Jeanne-Claude," I painted oil on canvas, signed Javacheff, then I wrapped it in transparent polyethelene and ropes, and signed Christo.

Eye-level:

To return to the question of how you finance your work, it's very unusual in the art world and very impressive. Is it done only because you want to avoid any entanglements, or do you see the process of moving from the software to the hardware as an integral part of your art? In other words, if you were independently wealthy, would you just go out and do the installations and not bother with the selling of the drawings?

Christo:

That's a very good question and we have never thought of it, because (laughter) we have never been independently wealthy and so we have no idea. But the drawings are not created only to be sold. The drawings are extremely important to clarify our ideas and to crystallize the idea. And for every project, because it takes years, you can see the early drawings and collages as just a simple, vague idea, and through the years and through the negotiations of getting the permit, you see that every detail is now clarified.

Jeanne-Claude:

We have been working with the engineers, we know the site by heart, and the last drawings, which are done just before completion, because Christo never does preparatory drawings after a project is completed, then you can see that it's unbelievable! It almost looks like we've seen a photo of the project. It's so perfect! And this is how our engineers can build it, because finally, its neat and clear and crystallized, exactly what it will look like.

Eye-level:

Your work by its nature draws the public into the process before it is built. They visualize it in terms of why they support it or why they oppose it. How does that interaction with the public shape your work?

Jeanne-Claude:

It doesn't shape the work. It only shapes whether we get the permit, or not. It doesn't shape the work itself because we have never changed an idea, we have only crystallized it and made it clearer. Our work is not just painting or just sculpture, even though it has elements of painting and

sculpture, but it's also architecture, environmental planning, all these things. Nobody has ever discussed a painting before the painter has painted it. Nobody has ever discussed a sculpture before the sculptor has sculpted it. But everybody discusses a projected new airport, new highway, new bridge, before they are created. Our work encompasses all these elements.

Eye-level:

You are viewed as controversial artists. What do you see as the source of that controversy?

Jeanne-Claude:

This is a great compliment because we are 66 years old and to be still today called controversial makes us feel so young. It's marvelous! (laughter) Imagine, they call us avant garde and controversial after 44 years of work. It's fabulous! Controversial is because we never do twice the same work. We will never wrap a bridge again as we did in 1985 in Paris when we wrapped the Pont Neuf, the 400 years old bridge. We will never wrap a bridge again. We will never build Umbrellas again. We will never wrap a parliament again. We will never do a Valley Curtain or a Running Fence. We will never surround any islands, as we did in Florida in 1983, when we surrounded 11 islands with pink floating fabric in Biscayne Bay, Miami, Florida. We will never do again the same.

Christo:

Therefore, when we arrive in a place and talk to new people about a new image, it is very hard for them to visualize it. That's where the drawings are very important, because at least we can show a projection of what we believe it will look like. We tell them that we believe it will be beautiful because that is our specialty, we only create joy and beauty. We have never done a sad work. Through the drawings, we hope a majority will be able to visualize it.

If, in Colorado today, were we to tell the people: you have a beautiful bridge. May we please wrap it? Look at this book. It's 400 pages, showing you how beautiful the bridge in Paris looked. Probably everybody would say, "Oh! That is magnificent. Yes, you may wrap our bridge." But we have no wish to wrap again a bridge. Therefore we have to go over the fact that all human beings are afraid by what is new. It is our work to convince them that they will enjoy it, and even if they don't, to allow us just for 14 days to create that work of art.

Eye-level:

Although you have never purposely created any works that were sad by their nature, while building *The Umbrellas*, Japan-USA, 1984-91, a worker tragically was killed. Did that accident change your approach to your work in any way?

Jeanne-Claude:

The first part of the question is, unfortunately, there were two accidents and that is quite a spooky thing because *The Umbrellas*, Japan-USA were one work of art in two parts, like a painter might paint a dyptich, one work in two paintings. It was one work in two parts and a few days after a visitor was killed by an umbrella in California, a few days later, we had to fly to Japan, where one of our workers was killed, not by an umbrella but by a very freak accident. He was underneath high tension lines in the wet rice fields and the electricity jumped – he never touched it – it just jumped down to him. It does happen one time in a million, and it electrocuted him.

Christo:

You ask if this has changed our life. No, we were of course devastated, but you have to realize, when you have over 2000 workers, over 3 million visitors, any human endeavor on a large scale, unfortunately, whether it is the Brooklyn Bridge or building skyscrapers, there are casualties. We realize how lucky we have been never to have a problem before. We were devastated, but it did not change at all because there was nothing we could have done. The freak storm that came (in California) left half of the city of Bakersfield, 39 miles away (from *Umbrellas*), in a blackout, tore down pylons, electric pylons down, people were electrocuted 20 miles away from our *Umbrellas*. It was a freak accident; there's nothing we could have done about that.

Eye-level:

Your creative process as artists, from the time you conceive a project, through the financing of it, the permitting, public hearings and so forth, to its construction and dismantling, is unique. Would you take the time to describe the process in detail for a work such as *Wrapped Reichstag*, Berlin, 1971-95?

Jeanne-Claude:

In your question, I would be very happy if you replaced the word “dismantling” by “removing.” Because dismantling is like a dismemberment, it's dislocation and it's horrible. (laughter)

Now, to describe the process of the *Wrapped Reichstag*, which went from 1971 to '95, there is an entire book about that, because each one of

our projects has its own book. The book is not an art book, meaning it's not written by an art historian. It's all the legal papers, they are reproduced exactly and they are readable – there's eight on one page but still they are readable – all the engineering, all the negotiations, photos of the meetings. How soon do you need to write this? Is it urgent? Because I'll be happy to send you a book. It's almost impossible to...you know, from '71 to '95, that's 25 years, almost 26...I would rather you look at the book and write your own...

(At this point, Christo and Jeanne-Claude instruct an assistant to ship a copy of the book, marked "Urgent," to the interviewer, who thanks them for the unexpected bonus.)

You'll have the book and you can figure it out for yourself.

Eye-level:

As environmental artists, your track record for restoring sites to their original condition is well established. Is it getting easier to win over the public and public officials to your projects, or are their concerns pretty much the same each time you begin something new?

Christo:

Right now, in Colorado for the Over The River, and until recently in New York for The Gates, Project for Central Park, we had to suffer the fact that we wrapped the Reichstag in Berlin. Because in Colorado and in New York, they tell us, "We do not want 5 million visitors in 14 days, as you had in Berlin." Now, this is still true in Colorado. It is no longer true in New York. Unfortunately, after September 11th, I am sure that New York will want visitors and needs visitors. But, as always, the fear of the unknown, because it's a new image, no, it's not easier today than it was when we were younger. It is not. Different people, different place, different image, and no precedent. You see an architect can show a skyscraper and say, "Well, I built this one so now I want to build that one." He has a precedent. "I built this bridge, now I want to build another bridge." We can't do that because it's always a new image.

Jeanne-Claude:

We always restore the land to its original condition, with two exceptions. For the Valley Curtain, the owners of the east slope and west slope requested that we please leave the main foundation up there in the mountain as a memento, and we had the contract with them stating that if, within the next 20 years, and that was in 1972, if within the next 20 years, they wish us to remove them, then we will of course do so at our expense.

The 20 years have gone bye, the people of Rifle very proudly show those and would be absolutely sad if we were to remove them. So, we have left them there at the request of the landowners.

Christo:

The other exception where we did not at all restore the place to its original condition is the Surrounded Islands. Before we installed our fabric, we had our workers remove 42 tons of garbage off the beaches of those islands. We never brought the garbage back. (laughter)

Eye-level:

Most of us in the West were introduced to your work by the Valley Curtain at Rifle Gap some 30 years ago. Now, in addition to The Gates, you are developing the Over the River Project for the Arkansas River. What is it about Colorado that has inspired you to work here twice?

Jeanne-Claude:

Well, you see, we did two projects in California. In 1976, we completed the Running Fence that was 24 and 1&Mac218;2 miles long, running up and down the hills of Sonoma and Marin Counties, one extremity was inland and the other extremity into the Pacific Ocean. We went back to California to build The Umbrellas, Japan-USA. The USA part was in California again. We always have a great affection for our sites and we love to return there. Maybe it's a bit corny, but we love to hold hands and look at, in our mind's eye, our work that is no longer there but the site is there. After the Valley Curtain of '72, like all other sites all over the world where we have worked, we have great affection for Colorado.

Christo:

Now, in order to find the site of the Arkansas River, we explored the Rocky Mountains of the United States, not of Canada, and we looked at 89 rivers in 5 states. We found two in Colorado, the Cache la Poudre, which is in the northern part of Colorado and the Arkansas River. But we had found many other rivers, and six of them were suitable for the project. We drove a total of 5,000 miles with only two collaborators. Then we went back together with our engineers and we measured each one of those rivers, measured the width, and there were many considerations. The river had to first have water in it, because we found one in a southern state that was absolutely beautiful but there was no water in there. So it had to have water in it.

Usually when you have a course of water, a river, you have a curtain of trees growing on the side, which means you wouldn't be able to see the

work because the curtain of trees would hide it. We wanted to have a road running all along the river so that, as you drive slowly, you can see the work of art. You can also see it from underneath when you raft, so it had to be a rafting river. It had to have elevated banks right and left so that we can hang the cables on which the fabric will be suspended. So we need high banks, so that the rafting can continue. After all those considerations, and we have measured 6 rivers in 5 different states, we all decided with the engineers that the Arkansas River was the most suitable. It even has a road running all along the side, no curtain of trees, and it has railroad tracks on the other side, which was a great bonus. That is why the Arkansas River was chosen.

Eye-level:

What is the status of the Over the River Project?

Jeanne-Claude:

Right now, an environmental impact report is being prepared. It will be a big book of over 250 pages. It is done by a company in Colorado, which has been chosen by the local government of the Arkansas River, but at our expense. We get the bills. They have been working on it for over two years now and we have already spent more than \$250,000, just for the environmental impact study. When that will be ready as a draft, it will be distributed to all the public places along the route of the project, like the post office, the city halls, the schools, so that the public can look at it. And some of those who are against would say, "Ah, you forgot about the butterflies, what about those butterflies?" Then the engineers who have prepared it will answer, "If you look at page 257, you will see that we are talking about the butterflies." That's just an example. If we have indeed forgotten something, which might happen, since this is only a draft there is time to correct it and say that no alligator will be endangered, for instance. (laughter)

Eye-level:

Is there any way to project at this point when Over the River might be installed?

Christo:

Until a few months ago, we were always saying that it would be 2004 at the very earliest. It's more like 2005. But now, today, we don't know if Over the River is truly the next project to be realized, because something very nice happened to our life in November in New York. We have a new mayor, Mr. Michael Bloomberg, who is a fan of ours and he likes very much

the idea of The Gates. It could very well be out of a wonderful political miracle (laughs) we might do The Gates before Over the River. So, today our life is a question mark.

Eye-level:

Have any of your works meant more to you than others? Do you have favorites among them?

Jeanne-Claude:

We always say that each one of our projects is a child of ours, and a father and mother who have many children will never tell you which one is their favorite. If people insist that we have to have a favorite one, then we say, "Okay, you are right, we do have a favorite one and it's always the next one."

Eye-level:

Are there any new projects in development that you can tell us about?

Christo:

Oh, no! (laughter) You see, we are not machines and we do not have lots of ideas in a drawer. Whenever we have a new idea, we get so excited that we talk about it to everybody, we show the drawings to everybody, we have no secrets. For the moment, it's either The Gates or Over the River. Not the Mastaba of Abu Dhabi at the present time. We're not even thinking about it.

*Originally published in:
Eye-Level
A Quarterly Journal of Contemporary Visual Culture
P.O. Box 40803
Denver, Colorado 80204
Eye-Level is a publication of The Invisible Museum*