An Interrogation of Christo and Jeanne-Claude's *The Gates, Central Park, New York 1979-2005*, or a Spectre of Socialist Realism in the New Economy

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude's recent art installation, The Gates, Central Park, New York, 1979-2005. I argue that the urban political processes that gave rise to The Gates, Central Park, New York, 1979-2005 underscore the event's performative and material attributes. I read Christo and Jeanne-Claude's recent work as both symptomatic and synoptic of the social and spatial politics of the new economy through its display of labour, leisure, the park and the city. Through its discreet visual elements and process of production, The Gates, Central Park, New York, 1979-2005 took on numerous characteristics of the urban imperatives of the new economy, particularly entrepreneurial and creative cities scripts. I dissect the complexities of this event in three chapters. The first chapter examines transitions in artists' mode of production from the 1960's to the present. This chapter emphasizes the different forms of post-industrial labour that the artists have used in their practice since 1969. The second chapter analyzes Christo and Jeanne-Claude's 1980 proposal for, and the City of New York's 1981 rejection of The Gates, Central Park, New York, 1979-2005. I emphasize transitions in urban cultural politics in New York as a means of understanding the city's 1981 rejection and 2005 embrace of the event. The third chapter presents an ethnographic account of the installation in February 2005. I examine how the form of the event effectively smoothed over and reinforced a normative field of contemporary urban social space. These chapters show in different ways, the relationship between Christo and Jeanne Claude's art practices and dramatic changes in urban cultural politics over the past three decades.
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I would like to thank my principal advisor, Geraldine Pratt, and my second thesis reader, Sherry McKay for their invaluable theoretical guidance and insightful editorial comments. I am also grateful to Elvin Wyly, whose insight over the past two years should also be evident in these pages.
Introduction: Christo and Jeanne-Claude, the “New Economy,” and “The Arts Administration.”

The title of this thesis is a direct reference to a comment made by scholar Miran Mohar in a recent issue of the journal *Performance Research*.¹ I had been grappling with the ways present-day political and cultural processes have come to bear on modern and contemporary art practices for a few years, and in particular, I had been playing with notions of “neoliberal” art in conjunction with the historical labels of the 20th century avant-garde, when I came upon Mohar’s extraordinarily simple, but concise conceptualization of contemporary art. In an exchange with a few other scholars and artists, Mohar stated:

I was once asked if I believed that socialist realism as a phenomenon was still possible today. I answered that, in its old guise, it probably wasn’t, however, the so-called politically correct Western art could easily be seen as the socialist realism of neo-liberalism. This is the desired kind of art, the kind of art that gets funding and that offers something that is acceptable to the majority of people; this type of art has found a niche, for it is not a utopian project but rather the art of one-step-at a time politics.²

This conceptualisation of contemporary art could not resonate more clearly with the focus of this thesis: the art practices of Christo and Jeanne-Claude. Mohar’s remark about Socialist Realism as a “phemomenon” is key in my examination of Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s work. Throughout this thesis, the references I make to Socialist Realism are not so much an issue of style, but rather, are focused on the philosophies and principles employed in the execution of artwork. I also distinguish my use of the term Socialist

¹ Marina GrRinic et al., “What Needs to be Conceptualised is a Political Subject,” *Performance Research* 10, 2 (June 2005): 5-19.
² Ibid.
Realism from formulations of 20th century Social Realism.³ While there is certain stylistic and interpretive kinship between these two approaches to art, I extrapolate the philosophies and political ambitions that informed Soviet painting and illustrative style of the 1920’s and 1930’s in my discussion of Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s work. Painters and illustrators in the Soviet Union after the revolution, were forced to assume a style that was harmonious with the state’s political and cultural values. As such, the work of the Soviet Socialist Realists glorified and heroized both the proletariat and dominant Soviet political formations. Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s recent approaches to art are strikingly analogous with some of the core philosophical and interpretive elements of the Socialist Realist approach to art. However, my expansion of this interpretive frame to Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s art production, particularly their recent installation The Gates, Central Park, New York, 1979-2005, theorizes a Socialist Realism of the “new economy.”⁴

I read the ‘new economy’ as contemporary nuances of the service and information economic structures that burgeoned in the 1970’s. Far from a concrete entity, the ‘new economy’ has taken on a number of amorphous characteristics in the past decade. Orvar Lofgren has characterized these as an economic “frenzy” in which “culturalization [becomes] an important part of production.”⁵ Lofgren has identified a number of cultural attributes that accompanied economic formulations of the 1990’s including the ways that culture was “packaged and marketed in new ways...in the production of symbols,

³ Though it is somewhat difficult to distinguish between the two terms, I take Social Realism in 20th Century as an art that either implicitly or explicitly engaged in critique, or protest of prevailing social formations. On the other hand, I take Socialist Realism as an “official,” embraced visual regiment that supposedly depicted “real” life and was inspirational to the masses in the Soviet Union in the first half of the 20th century. Consequently, Socialist Realism (in its Soviet formulation), most often presented works that glorified the prevailing political regime.
⁵ Ibid.
images, auras, experiences and events” through design and performance imperatives. Economists Pine and Gilmore have formed an integral and influential element of the new economy script with their espousal of an “experience economy.” Specifically, they have put forth business and economic models that prioritize “experience,” display and blurred categories of labour and leisure. I investigate Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s work as both appealing to and adhering to the public display, performance, and design imperatives of political economic structures and development scripts that developed from the 1970’s onwards, but with particular emphasis on developmental nuances in the 1990’s. I focus on the characteristics of work and labour in the ‘new economy’, as it has been an increasingly integral element of the visual formulation of Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s work since the late 1960’s. Specifically, their work reverberates with attributes of these social, cultural and economic forms, particularly through its collapse of the spaces of art production and display.

I read their work as both symptomatic and synoptic of the new economy’s social and spatial politics. One place that the spatial politics of the ‘new economy’ have become evident is in the “creative cities” script. The ‘creative cities’ phenomenon is part urban planning formulation, part “call to action” in urban economic development efforts. Increasingly, cities world-wide have adopted supposedly “creative” solutions to confront a myriad of issues from transportation and pollution to housing and homelessness.

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6 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
10 Ibid. The case studies cited capture the global embrace of elements of this approach to urban economic and social development. Cases mentioned include the introduction of hawks into an
According to creative cities “guru” Richard Florida, creative approaches to urban development should be tailored to attract the “creative class.”\textsuperscript{11} Not surprisingly, this formulation of urban restructuring is custom tailored to meet (and create) demands for middle-class consumption. Accordingly, art and cultural production is a fundamental element of the creative cities script. While art and culture have been integral elements of urban restructuring efforts since the late 1970’s, administrative and policy approaches to cultural production in urban space have changed.

At the end of October 2005, the New York Times ran a story entitled “The Arts Administration.” The piece featured a photograph of New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg standing proudly in front of a temporarily sited sculpture by American Pop Artist Roy Lichtenstein at Tweed Courthouse next to City Hall.\textsuperscript{12} The article began: “Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg is not wildly fond of looking at art,” and went on to question his fondness and interest in cultural production:

- Television? Movies? Concerts? Happenings?
- Never, rarely (unless they feature Will Ferrell), reluctantly and not on purpose....But in the most striking paradox of his mayoralty, his administration has done more to promote and support the arts than any in a generation...Under Mr. Bloomberg, public art has flourished in every corner of the city – from “Element E,” a Roy Lichtenstein sculpture in the center of the form Tweed Courthouse, to a classic limestone statue in the Bronx, to “The Gates,” set up by Christo and Jeanne-Claude last winter in Central Park, a project for which he personally lobbied for almost a decade.\textsuperscript{13}

The author described in detail the mayor’s own extensive art collection as well as his private philanthropic activities with respect to various art and cultural institutions in New York.

urban ecosystem to control the pigeon population (labelled “letting nature control pollution”); the regulation and formalisation of scavenging in cities in Brazil and the Philippines; and the use of street children in training police officers in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.


\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
York City. It ends with a broader discussion of the relationship between art and Bloomberg’s policy agenda:

The mayor's arts agenda has infused policy-making throughout the municipal government. The administration has created the first public school arts curriculum in a generation, and created zoning policies to encourage the growth of the art galleries in Chelsea. In the process, it has developed a constituency that is perhaps more enamoured of the mayor than any other special interest group in the city....He has allowed [Cultural] Commissioner [Kate] Levin - who is married to the sculptor Mark di Suvero - to extend her reach to numerous areas of government. She helped to develop a zoning policy that let mid-block building owners in Chelsea transfer their air rights to the corner of blocks, a move that left mid-block galleries insulated against rent inflation. Her development of a mandated arts curriculum for public school students is the first of its kind since the city gutted arts education during the 1970's fiscal crisis. Ms. Levin is also working with the city agency that preserves and develops housing on a program to address the long-standing problem of artists who are being priced out of the neighborhoods they help gentrify.14

By far the largest art event of the Bloomberg administration has been Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s The Gates, Central Park, New York 1979 – 2005. New York Magazine proudly pronounced a week before the installation that it was the largest public art project since the Sphynx.15 While it was installed in February 2005, the artists and their project were featured on every major news network in North America; the event, which took over 26 years to be realized, employed over 2000 people, and had a huge economic impact. During the installation, the Central Park had over 4 million visitors at a time of year commonly cited as having the lowest rates of park attendance.16 The economic benefits of the event were not limited to the park, and according to the City, “...the full economic impact of The Gates was felt not only in areas surrounding Central Park, but in

14 Ibid.
hotels, restaurants, and cultural institutions across the city.”

Restaurant, café and hotel businesses around Manhattan reported up to a 200% increase in sales and occupancy rates typical for the month of February, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art reported attendance increases of 90% and 150% respectively. This thesis examines the installation of Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s 2005 The Gates, Central Park, New York 1979-2005 as one means of understanding the Bloomberg administration’s enthusiasm for art. While these artists’ model of art production is dramatically different from dominant models of public art commissions, this 26-year project nonetheless demonstrates dramatic changes in cultural production and urban governance.

I examine closely policy and governance transformations in New York City as they relate to cultural politics. This thesis also explores the links between the practices and processes of Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s The Gates, Central Park, New York 1979–2005 and specific elements of contemporary urban politics and development scripts. The first chapter looks at Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s art practices through the years. It examines the evolving model of work that Christo and Jeanne-Claude have developed since the late 1950’s, with particular emphasis placed on their practice from 1969 to the present. Specifically, I examine the ways that their mode of production is compatible with integral elements of new economy and creative cities scripts. The second chapter situates the lifespan and installation of their most recent project, The Gates, Central Park, New York, 1979-2005 in processes of urban restructuring. Put another way, the second chapter examines the specific urban imperatives of the larger social, cultural and

17 Ibid.
18 Sternbergh, 26-33.
economic discussion laid out in the first chapter. The third chapter is an ethnographic account of the installation in February 2005. Underlying this section is a concern for Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s interaction with and reliance on specific formulations of post-industrial labour and social processes as they relate to contemporary urban environments. I am particularly intrigued by the fact that while their artistic methodology has remained virtually unchanged since the early 1970’s, the people who work on their projects have tended to change from “blue collar” workers to a combination of “white collar,” “ambassadorial,” and creative workers.

My thesis contributes to critical analyses and politically engaged discussions of public art and art in an urban context. Analyses in this area have typically read public art production and reception in relation to the general movement to the right in hegemonic political culture and policy making.19 Other accounts of art in the urban context such as those of Sharon Zukin and Martha Rosler explore the role of art museum and gallery construction in urban regeneration projects.20 Zukin has further pointed out the significance of the importance of artists, museums and the “culture economy” in the formation of contemporary urban social space.21 Working in a more art historical and less “urban” vein, author Miwon Kwon has discussed the form of public and site specific art practices in the United States over the last thirty years as both aesthetically evocative and structurally dependent on processes of late capitalism.22 These discussions, particularly those of Deutsche and Rosler, have provided invaluable frameworks from

which to critically examine contemporary art and urban cultural politics. *The Gates, Central Park, New York, 1979-2005* provides an extraordinary case study to explore these arguments about transitions in cultural production and urban politics because the time period from conception to execution extends across these changes.

Despite the predictable art world cynicism that accompanied the installation, both the numbers cited above and the City’s sudden and enthusiastic embrace of the event 26 years after it was initially proposed and rejected, and the extraordinary economic circumstances of *The Gates, Central Park, New York 1979-2005* suggest this work of art is worthy of interrogation. Art had become both directly and indirectly involved in the politics and economics of New York City’s social spaces as early as 1977. By the early 1980’s in New York City, many new civic policies related to housing, real estate and business development were in one way or another related to art, artistic production and consumption. But it was also in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s that the proposal and rejection of artists’ Christo and Jeanne-Claude Gates project occurred. This seeming inconsistency is a curious one. Public art commissions popped up all over the city, but Christo’s proposal was adamantly rejected on numerous grounds. Twenty-six years later, this changed dramatically when the artists were contacted by the City and asked to revive their rejected proposal. Given the time span of *The Gates, Central Park, New York, 1979-2005*, this project provides a window into these issues of civic and cultural politics and the production of urban social space.
Chapter 1: Christo and Jeanne-Claude from the 1960's to the Present: Towards a Socialist Realism of the New Economy

There are perhaps no two more controversial figures in contemporary art than Christo and Jeanne-Claude. Since the late 1960's and early 1970's, their dramatic artistic interventions into rural and urban landscapes in the United States, Europe, and Australia have garnered huge amounts of mainstream and art world press. Their recent installation, The Gates, Central Park, New York, 1979-2005 (figures 1-4) was celebrated in the media as one of the most economically successful events in recent New York City history. The sixteen-day installation generated over $254 million in economic activity and was credited for lifting New York out of a particularly bad tourist lull.23 One of the most often mentioned, but least analyzed and theorized, aspects of their artistic practice has been the relationship between the long, complex logistical and bureaucratic processes that accompany their large scale projects, and the politics of contemporary social space and cultural politics. In mainstream media and art world criticism, their work is often dubbed a “logistical exercise” or an “organizational feat,” without sufficient analysis or critical engagement to explain how their practices engage and interact with contemporary political regimes, labour processes and cultural politics. In this chapter, I investigate the ways the development of Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s artistic practices, particularly since 1969, have interacted with dominant economic and social formations, particularly with respect to labour. In order to do so, this chapter interrogates the form of their work as it has developed over the years as it relates to art discourses and the cultural politics of the second half of the twentieth century. Their entrepreneurial approach and flexible ways of organizing production and management appears to both capture and dramatize the

cultural effects of economic transformation over the past three and a half decades. I examine the structural resemblance between the formal and labour attributes of their work in relation to nuances in larger “post-Fordist” or “post-industrial” socio-economic and cultural processes. While my attention to their career is focused specifically from 1969 onwards, I briefly examine their work from the late 1950’s and 1960’s in Paris and New York in order to identify its formal and political lineage.

Christo and Jeanne-Claude began developing a mode of art production in the late 1950’s, and since the late 1960’s, this artistic model has remained surprisingly constant through three and a half decades of dramatic transitions in political economic and cultural processes. Despite this relative constancy, there have been a number of notable changes in their practices over the years. These changes in the developmental process of their career have largely been dictated by the politics of their proposed sites and, while the lineage of their present artistic model belongs to the experimental idealism of Paris and New York in the 1960’s, their work resonates most clearly with current socio-cultural and political formations and the imperatives of the new economy. The new economy is discussed as having distinct performance imperatives, particularly with respect to spectacle production and public display.\(^{24}\) This has become increasingly apparent in Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s artistic enterprise, particularly in its organization of labour. Relatedly, their practices have increasingly welded together the spaces of production and display of art. Significantly, this fusion has accompanied a change in their art events over time from interventionist and confrontational, to more decorative.\(^{25}\)

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\(^{25}\) My use of the term decorative is related to “Decorative art,” as opposed to “decorative arts.” “Decorative art,” is a term that was coined in the 1970’s. Nancy Frazier defines “Decorative art” as a “term employed to describe painting that was pleasing to the senses and focused on pattern
"decorative" in two ways, which are related to its political and visual connotations. The political discourse surrounding Decorative art in the 1970's was preoccupied with an acknowledgement and assertion of artists' skills. Analogously, from the late 1960's through the present, the visual outcomes Christo and Jeanne-Claude's work increasingly prioritized and dramatized a myriad of skill-sets associated with particular nuances in post-industrial social and political economic forms. In its more visual preoccupation, the term Decorative art refers to the production of visual patterns that are supposedly pleasing to look at. As Christo and Jeanne-Claude's work has transitioned through the past three and a half decades, the visual elements of their events could be characterized as much more "pleasing," and far less confrontational or disruptive than their works of the late 1950's and early 1960's.

Throughout my account, I employ as an organizational device and interpretive frame, art historian Caroline Jones's concern with the performative and iconic aspects of art production. Jones focused her account on post-war and 1960's art practices in the United States, and defined the performative as "a mode of production that aspires to, or structurally resembles, an industrial process, and/or a self-presentation on the part of the artists that implies a collaboratively generated technological solution or mechanistic goal.  

She defined the iconic as "an image, figure, or representation that is somehow indexed to technology, to the industrial order, or to the machine." Though Jones remained focused in the post-war "industrial" and 1960's context, I extend this

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27 Ibid.
interpretive frame to more contemporary art by considering the ways that the performative and iconic attributes of Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s art practices have increasingly resembled specific attributes of post-industrial labour and economic processes of the new economy. In her account, Jones was particularly interested in the way artists in the 1960’s “[aligned] their art with models of postwar industrial management,” and how this informed new aesthetic formulations in American art. One of her most astute observations of 1960’s art was artists’ conflation of performative and iconic elements of their work. In the case of Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s art, their conflation of the iconic and performative attributes of their work has accompanied a collapse in critical or resistant strategies in their work. This conflation resonates clearly with the performative and display imperatives of the new economy, particularly with its fusion of labour, leisure and tourism.

The most dramatic shifts in the performative and iconic attributes of Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s work were in 1969 and 1971, when they ceased conceptualizing “wrapped” objects, and began to produce more decorative, non-confrontational, and spatially expansive works of art. This transition was significant for a couple of reasons: firstly, the political connotations of wrapping and veiling in their work were largely supplanted by highly engineered and visually elaborate schemes devoid of political references; and secondly, the scale of their works increased dramatically, and as a result, their labour processes also changed. In particular, the changes in their labour processes included a dramatic increase in the numbers of “hospitality” type workers in their projects. Before accounting the specifics of their career, the next section engages with

28 Ibid.
some of the changes in art production through the 1960's, as these are relevant to contextualize Christo and Jeanne-Claude's artistic practices of the last four decades.

CHRISTO AND JEANNE-CLAUDE'S ARTISTIC LINEAGE

In 1967, author and art critic John Perreault wrote an article entitled "Union-Made: Report on a Phenomenon" in *Arts Magazine.* A commentary on Minimalism, one of the major movements sweeping the New York art world at the time, Perreault observed the dramatic changes in art production with the emergence of "industrial" formal attributes. Specifically, he discussed the work in terms of some of the major preoccupations of art critics of the time: materiality, scale, geometry, shape, and exhibition spaces. He also made a suggestive comment about the "rational" and "conceptional" as opposed to "material" or "intuitive" methods used by minimalist artists such as Donald Judd, Robert Morris, and Carl Andre: "The artist is once removed from the actual execution of the work, so that the automatism of the artist's hand does not interfere with the rationalism of the readymade or manufactured units involved." This statement may seem banal given that the history of modern art had witnessed the Duchampian readymade, the Bauhaus and the Russian Suprematists and Constructivists, all of which had challenged conventions of art making earlier in the 20th century. However, Perreault's commentary also identified something else significant: the artist as a hindrance to the art production process. Specifically, Perreault's declaration of the artist's "interference" with the production of art objects signalled one of the most significant shifts in post war American artistic practices: labour. The rationalism discussed by Perreault spoke to a specifically Fordist sensibility, in which the

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29.
30 Ibid., My italics.
expressionist visual forms that resulted from the supposed unconscious automism of the artist's (presumably Abstract Expressionist's) hand gave way to serially manufactured goods. This movement also reflected major changes in the performative nature of art production and artists' self-presentation. While some artists began to present themselves as workers in a factory setting, others presented themselves as professionals (many of them were art school graduates), who hired assistants or contracted their work out, shifting their own position to a more managerial role in the artistic process. Art in general became more "performance" oriented, particularly since its labour processes (both in its actual production, as well as the artists' self-presentation) became a more integral element of the art work's formal properties.

In her book Work Ethic, art historian Helen Molesworth discussed the ways post war and 1960's art practices were imbued with a "language of work as opposed to that of art." She theorized 1960's art work as "insistent upon the labor of its maker." In the social context of the post war period, particularly in the United States, Molesworth claimed that, in art
sawing and hammering had replaced drawing and composition...America's shift from an industrial to a post-industrial society was to have a profound effect upon art as it had upon the daily lives of all workers. Far from being a timeless and unchanging entity, art of the 1960's reflected the rise of a highly professionalized managerial class and the simultaneous development of a service economy.

These changes often consisted of artists having assistants execute their work for them outside the studio, usually in the industrial or factory settings discussed by Perreault. By

31 Jones, 1996; See also Helen Molesworth, Work Ethic (Baltimore: Baltimore Museum of Art, 2003).
32 Molesworth, 25.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
the 1960's, artists' removal of themselves from the art-making process, and their transfer of production into the factory became commonplace, particularly amongst the Minimalists. Shifts in artistic labour continued through the late 1960's and into the 1970's, and consequently there were dramatic changes in the formal outcome of the artworks produced. These transitions both reflected and challenged the changes in the everyday workforce, especially the increase in white-collar and managerial positions and the beginning decline of Fordist-type production and industrial-oriented labour in the United States. 35

Art critic Lucy Lippard captured another major formal development in 1960's art discourses in the "post-Minimalist" period of the late 1960's. 36 Lippard identified and grappled with the "de-emphasis" of the material aspects of artwork in the late 1960's, which she then termed "ultra-Conceptual art." 37 This "dematerialization" took many forms, one of which she coined "systems art." 38 This was common particularly amongst Environmental or Land artists as well as the Conceptualists, Post-Minimalist or Process artists, many of whom executed work that aimed to expose or explain "biological" or "social" systems. Further, "dematerialized" art was often presented in a textual or instructive manner to viewers (or assistants for that matter), in ways that offered accounts

36 Lucy Lippard and John Chandler, "The Dematerialization of Art," Arts Magazine, 1968. Though Christo's work was not mentioned specifically in Lippard's text, a large photographic reproduction of the artists' Wrapped Kunsthalle appeared in the article.
37 Lippard later published a book in 1972 further pursuing this line of criticism. Unlike the 1968 article, Christo's work was neither mentioned in the text or visually reproduced.
38 It is unclear who actually coined this term, however, artist Hans Haacke was frequently quoted discussing his work as preoccupied with "systems." Haacke often focused on "biological" systems such as in the Condensation Cube (1963-65), where the formation of condensation inside a glass cube was a key element of the work, and "social" systems, such as in Shapolsky et al. (1971) where the artist, using photographs and typed text, documented the property holdings of New York City slum landlord, and then connected his business dealings to the art world.
of artists' ideas. Lippard identified the prominence of the "idea" in Conceptual art, and quoted artist Allan Kaprow at the beginning of her 1972 book on the same topic:

"Conceptual artists are mystics rather than rationalists. They leap to conclusions that logic cannot reach...Illogical judgements lead to new experience." The "rationality" noted by Perreault seven years earlier was challenged by Lewitt's "mysticism," which prioritized and expressed experience and ideas over materiality in art. Both the more "material," and "Fordist" sensibility identified by Perreault and the "dematerialized" and "systems" or "process" characteristics of art identified by Lippard mirrored economic and cultural transformations at the time, particularly those concerning labour. While the more "object" oriented work of the Minimalists employed Fordist notions of labour, whether it was carried out by the artists themselves or assistants, Process and Conceptual art drew attention to labour through either photo-documentation of "dematerialized" works and events, or through the creation of textual instruction sheets which documented the art-making process in a burgeoning "information" based society. Labour became an integral part of the visual attributes of 1960's and 1970's art, whether it was through objects or artists' self-presentation.

The rise of Conceptual practices arose directly from the materially reductive forms of Minimalist sculpture. However, the differences in the performative and iconic elements of Minimalist and Conceptualist art were important given the economic and cultural context in which they occurred. Conceptual art in the 1970's evoked a preoccupation with newly developing labour roles and formations in a new "post-Fordist"

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or "post-Industrial" economic and social order. Further, the 'post-object' characteristics of art forms identified by Lippard were also aligned with economic forms of late capitalism. The professionalization of artistic labour, linked to an increased number of MFA programs in the United States, accompanied the rise of the artists playing the role of "manager" in their production: "Conceptual artists relied heavily upon the language and logic of the instruction, they functioned like managers, producing graphs, charts and diagrams with directions for others on how to perform the labour required to make the object." This reflected what art historian Benjamin Buchloch termed the "aesthetic of administration," in which artworks presented textual information in an inventory-like fashion to assistants and viewers. Christo and Jeanne-Claude's work of the late 1960's and 1970's was no exception to these overarching trends in art. Like many artists of the time, much of their work was produced by the deployment of many different kinds of labour. The following section traces their career in terms of shifts in the performative and iconic attributes of their projects, which were deeply connected to both the types of labour they employed, the politics of their proposed sites, as well as a dramatic increase in the scale of their events.

CHRISTO AND JEANNE-CLAUDE'S CAREER

Christo was trained in the Socialist Realist tradition in Bulgaria, however, he and Jeanne-Claude first became known as an artist in Paris in the late 1950's for their informal association with "Nouveau Réalisme," or the New Realists, a group of artists who were organized and led by Pierre Restany and Yves Klein in Paris. The movement

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40 Molesworth, 42.
41 Kwon, 2002.
42 Molesworth, 42.
included artists such as Jean Tinguely and Niki de Sainte Phalle. They issued a manifesto in early 1960, which evoked both recognition of, and a self-conscious effort to differentiate themselves from typical avant-garde strategies of the early 20th century by "undercutting fundamental tenets of middle class art and its appreciation." Restany expressed the movement's kinship with a post-war imagination in Europe when he described them as: "a new sense of our contemporary industrial, mechanical and urban nature." In particular, the Nouveau Realistes focused on incorporating found objects and real elements of the city and urban life into their work to interrogate urban and consumer culture in post-war Europe. When their work showed in New York for the first time, it was described by critics as: "a situation, an action, an environment, or an event."

Christo and Jeanne-Claude's works that were most closely associated with Nouveau Realisme were their early wrapped objects (figures 5-7) and Iron Curtain – Wall of Oil Barrels, Rue Visconti, Paris, June 1962 (figure 8). For this work, the artists blockaded a Paris street with a wall created out of a large stack of empty oil barrels. This event was clearly akin to the "interventionist," ethos of the avant-garde in Paris at the time, which sought to interrupt the spaces of everyday life in order to criticize bourgeois culture. Iron Curtain – Wall of Oil Barrels, Rue Visconti, Paris, June 1962 was charged with a critical edge, particularly in its use of empty, used oil barrels, which referenced the waste products of consumer culture. At the same time, the performative element of the work was particularly evident, as the barrels were installed illegally on the street, adding to the oppositional sensibility of the installation. This work's performative elements marked

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46 Ibid. 211.
47 Ibid. 205, 211.
the artists' first event that actively disintegrated the spaces of production and display of the artwork.

After moving from Paris to New York in 1964, Christo and Jeanne-Claude became informally associated with the many art movements that took hold of the New York art world in the 1960's. While they were never formally a part of any of these groups, their works referenced many of the visual attributes of Minimalism, Conceptualism and Land Art. By the late 1960's, there was a marked and significant change in the performative elements of their work. They began attempts to incorporate public participation into the physical construction of their artistic events. The formal outcome of these methodological changes was a dramatic increase in the scale of their events. Their first project that attempted public participation was 5,600 Cubicmeter Package (figure 9) for the Documenta exhibition in Kassel in 1968. For this event, they attempted to raise a large air-filled package into the air, which required hiring professional engineers and pilots, as well as art student assistants, to help in the installation process of the work. Despite the professional qualifications of the personnel on site, the project was fraught with logistical and technical difficulties, and the numerous attempts to raise the balloon-like package into the air were only partially successful. Though it was not an outright success, the project became a defining moment in their artistic career:

Christo and Jeanne-Claude learned a great deal in Kassel. The 5,600 Cubicmeter Package clarified a dynamic method of operation, one that would reemerge in subsequent large-scale works: extensive planning with a team of technical advisors, obtaining permission from authorities, selling working drawings and

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models to finance the project completely, temporary installation by a team or motivated workers, site cleanup, and in-depth documentation of the experience.\textsuperscript{49}

The performative elements of this project defined two distinct changes in their art. First, a dramatic increase in the scale of their work resulted in their employment of larger amounts of both professional and unskilled labour. Second, and relatedly, this new mode of production established Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s own new managerial and logistical labour role in their projects. They took this model of working back to New York City and proposed to wrap two buildings in lower Manhattan. Both proposals were rejected and terminated almost immediately. The artists attributed these rejections to the mounting civil unrest of 1968.\textsuperscript{50}

In 1969, the artists executed a project entitled \textit{Wrapped Coast, Little Bay, Australia, One Million Square Feet, 1969} (figure 10) just outside Sydney. This project marked the first inklings of what became their contemporary model of art production. This event consisted of wrapping in fabric a one and a half mile long, eight hundred foot wide, and eighty-five foot high section of coastal area.\textsuperscript{51} This work was installed for considerably longer than their past and future projects, as it remained in place for seven weeks. At this point in the development of their work, the scale of their projects became even larger, and consequently their need for large numbers of unskilled workers also increased. This was their first attempt at coordinating and managing such a large number of workers, most of whom were local art students and manual labourers.\textsuperscript{52} The press

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 184.
\textsuperscript{51} \url{www.christojeanneclaude.net}. Accessed June 14, 2005.
release for the event documented these significant changes in the performative elements of their work by publishing photographs, which pictured Christo instructing workers from a distance (figure 11). This signified his removal from the physical labour of the project, as well as his managerial position, and presented him as a project supervisor and logistical expert. Further, the press release textually detailed the logistics of the labour process: “Fifteen professional mountain climbers, 110 labourers, students from Sydney University and East Sydney Technical College, as well as some Australian artists and teachers put in 17,000 manpower hours over a period of four weeks.”

This clearly expressed the scale and magnitude of the effort from a labour standpoint. Christo’s identity as the creative, artistic and economic force behind the event was also detailed at the end of the press release: “Wrapped Coast was financed by Christo through the sale of his preparatory drawings, collages, studies, and early works.” This expressed the creative and entrepreneurial elements of their work, and presented the artists as project organizers, operators, and spectacle managers, as well as emphasizing their capacities as business-people undertaking a new venture.

The artists’ following project marked a couple of significant changes in their mode of production. Their project, Valley Curtain, Rifle, Colorado, 1970-72 consisted of suspending a three hundred and eighty-one meter wide, and fifty-five and a half meter high orange fabric curtain in a valley. The project took twenty-eight months to complete, due mainly to the increased amount of bureaucracy involved in securing permits from different levels of government, and cost the artists $800,000. The workforce for this

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53 Ibid, 96.
54 Ibid, 96.
55 Fineberg, 31-32. This project was only installed for 28 hours, as it succumbed to a wind storm which forced its removal.
project numbered around one hundred people, who the artists described as “construction workers, highly-skilled union steel workers, and temporary helpers,”56 as well as a lawyer, surveyor, contractor and engineer and specialized trades people.57 In 2003, the artists verbalized the new forms of labour they employed for this event:

Valley Curtain was the first time we really were...involved with American construction workers...people who build things. Before, for the Chicago museum there were workers, but not really these professional workers who build skyscrapers and bridges and things. Since Valley Curtain we always have people who build things, steelworkers, carpenters, and machinists.58

When asked about the workers’ dispositions, and whether or not they were enthusiastic about the project in a 1977 interview, Christo replied:

Not all the workers [were enthusiastic]. The blue-collar workers are more colorful...their enthusiasm didn’t happen right away...Of course there was a lot of difficulties to overcome in these years, scepticism from the workers and not only the workers, all kinds of labor was involved in the project.59

Further, they incorporated the project, and in so doing, became the first artists in the United States to practice art through a corporate business form.60 Their reason for choosing this form of business conduct for their practices was explained by the author of their 2002 authorized biography:

Through that structure, we achieved the ultimate, which was limited liability for the artist. The Valley Curtain Corporation executed all the contracts. In time, other artists copied Christo...We did not incorporate to avoid taxes or to shelter income. It was done to avoid liability. I think that the Christos were the first to recognize that the law could be used to protect their assets in the event of an unpredictable catastrophe.61

57 Chernow, 206.
58 Fineberg, 31-32.
59 Fineberg, 143.
60 Chernow, 202.
61 Ibid.
This was a significant business move on the part of the artists, and signalled another shift in the performative aspects of their work. Specifically, as the artists implemented a corporate business structure and further removed themselves from the material production of the work, their own role became more business and event-planning oriented.

It is arguable that this was also the point that the critical edge of their work began to wane, and their work began a transition from “interventionist” to more decorative. From a more iconic, or formal viewpoint, the material fabric of the work became more brightly coloured, and its patterned folds and pleats took on a much more structured, engineered, and orderly appearance compared to their earlier wrapped works. Significantly, at the same time, the “value” of a Christo event was recognized by local government in Colorado, which identified the project as a generator of employment for communities that had experienced massive job loss as a result of deindustrialization and economic restructuring.62 In a meeting and presentation at a Colorado Chamber of Commerce, the mayor and local officials and business people expressed that the event would “pump up a sagging economy with jobs and an influx of tourists...The financial, if not aesthetic, logic convinced most business leaders.”63 Thus, the artists’ collapse of the space of production and display of artwork through staging engineered visual effects resonated clearly with efforts to rejuvenate depressed economic and social conditions in newly deindustrialized landscapes.

While the 1969 and 1971 projects in Australia and Colorado signalled the first major shifts in their business and labour practices, Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s Running

62 Chernow, 207.
63 Ibid.
Fence, Sonoma and Marin Counties, California, 1972-1976 (figures 12-13) marked another dramatic increase in the geographical expansiveness and economic scale of their work. This project cost the artists $3 million, and consisted of the installation of an eighteen foot high, twenty-four and a half mile long white fabric fence through the private properties of fifty-nine ranchers in California. The bureaucratic process that accompanied this project was even more extensive than previous projects, as it required the permission and coordination of county, state and federal agencies as well as that of local property owners. In order to construct this project, Christo and Jeanne-Claude required an even larger pool of both unskilled and trades labour. Author Burt Chernow commented on the labour processes of the project in March 1976:

Dougherty (a close associate of Christo and Jeanne-Claude) had begun hiring local workers and had subcontracted a San Leandro firm, Underground Construction, to install the cable. “I didn’t want the Christos to pay union wages,” said the veteran contractor. “We were fifty miles from San Francisco, and if the unions moved in on that job, it would have been hell. Instead, we offered to pay the ranchers to build the fence across their own property. Only one agreed, but we did hire lots of grandkids, nieces, nephews, sons, and daughters. We kept the unions out by saying it was a rancher project, building a fence across their own land.”

Despite their need for types of labour that were traditionally unionized, the economic imperatives of their ephemeral, event-like work structure clearly facilitated the exploitation of more flexible, less organized groups of workers. Further, in order for this project to go ahead, the artists had to obtain the permission of the fifty-nine ranchers,

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64 www.christojeanneclaude.net Accessed June 14, 2005. The fabric used for Running Fence was initially woven for the use of air bags in automobiles, however, the Nixon Whitehouse allowed auto manufacturers to delay implementing air-bags for 10 years. Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s website remarks: “that meant there was lots of airbag fabric available at a reasonable price.” Interestingly, this harkens back to the use of “objet trouvé” in 20th century art, however, with a decidedly late-capitalist twist.


66 Chernow, 251.
many of whom, according to the artists' biographer, "had never seen the inside of a museum, let alone examples of vanguard art." In a 1977 interview, Christo discussed the tactics he and Jeanne-Claude developed in order to obtain the approval of the property owners: "The ranchers, a little bit like artists, are people with no unions, a little bit crazy, and they work with the elements. Of course, this was the way to approach them, to present the project in that way." From the logistics of the approval processes of previous projects, the artists had become aware of the importance of developing relationships in order to facilitate the obtaining permission. This was a particularly challenging instance, as the site they proposed for the project was largely private, thus, it required the coordinated approval of many private landowners as well as public administrations, as in the Australia and Colorado projects.

The fence project in California marked another distinct change in their work. In response to a request by the state of California and federal agencies, the artists commissioned an environmental impact study. Christo described the breadth of the effort undertaken in the study:

Running Fence is the first and only work of art with an environmental impact statement. The report was written by fifteen scientists, it took eight months, and cost us $39,000 and was finally produced into a book of 450 pages. Everything was discussed from marine biology to economics and traffic...This gives you an idea of how complex an environmental-impact statement is...Anyway, there was a discussion on several pages in the environmental-impact statement how the Running Fence will affect the counties' management for the people. For example, that the people would drive to see the Running Fence, that they would discover the beautiful hills in Sonoma and Marin Counties, that the next year, or in the next two or three years, they will move to Marin and Sonoma Counties, how they will imbalance the tax in the county, how many new schools, how many new kindergartens, and what else should be built because of the Fence.

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68 Fineberg, 132.
69 Ibid, 128.
70 Ibid, 128.
This impact study marked the first instance of the long, drawn out investigative processes that their events became involved in. This study influenced the way the artists’ confronted future projects, as they began to commission both environmental and social impact studies in the proposal and preparatory stages of their works. Subsequently, as their work became increasingly embedded and involved in intricate bureaucratic and investigative details, they began to represent their projects in terms of their more “quantitative” and bureaucratic elements. Specifically, in press releases and other informational material, the artists began to textually inventory the material and bureaucratic details of their works. Interestingly, this highlighted the 1960’s Minimalist genealogy of their large scale works of the 1970’s, and harkened back to the “systems” aesthetic of Conceptual and Process art.

Through the 1980’s, Christo and Jeanne-Claude undertook a number of projects in urban and non-urban spaces. Despite the City of New York’s denial of their proposal for The Gates, Central Park, New York 1979-2005, they completed two major urban projects in the 1980’s: Surrounded Islands, 1980-1983 (figure 14) in Biscayne Bay, Miami, and Pont Neuf Wrapped, Paris, 1975-85 (figure 15) in Paris. Surrounded Islands, 1980-83 had a workforce of over four hundred people, and required the coordination and permission of eight governmental jurisdictions.71 This event consisted of surrounding eleven islands in Biscayne Bay with bright pink fabric. Given its installation in the water, this event also required the expertise of a number of highly specialized workers, including a marine biologist, ornithologists, a mammal expert, a marine engineer, as well

as contracted and sub-contracted consulting engineers. The expert workforce was accompanied by over four hundred "unskilled" workers who performed the more physical installation tasks, both in and out of the water. Pont Neuf Wrapped, Paris, 1975-1985 was the artists' second large-scale urban project in the 1980's. This project had a workforce numbered close to one thousand, which consisted of three hundred "professional workers," many of whom were climbers, and six hundred "monitors," who were placed on site to answer questions the public had about the project. The 1980's urban projects were characterized by a dramatic increase in the numbers of "unskilled," "monitor" positions in their workforce. These numbers continued to increase dramatically in their large-scale events through the 1990's. As such, these workers became an integral element of both the visual attributes of the events as well as the atmosphere created. In tandem, from a more formal or iconic standpoint, these two projects continued to differ significantly from the artists' earlier wrappings. This wrapping appeared even more highly engineered and orchestrated, largely due to the installation workers' expertise in mountain climbing and diving. Consequently, the technical expertise of their more "physical" labourers and increased numbers of hospitality workers on site accompanied the more painstakingly orchestrated visual qualities of the fabric, as opposed to that of their earlier wrapped objects.

Through the 1990's, the scale of the artists' projects continued to grow, and in 1991, they completed Umbrellas, Japan-USA, 1984-91 (figure 16). This event consisted of erecting thirty-one hundred six foot umbrellas, which were twenty-six and a half feet in diameter in two inland valleys, one in California, the other in Japan. Logistically, this

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72 Ibid.
73 Ibid.
was their most complex project to date. It cost twenty-six million dollars, had a workforce of almost two thousand people, and was installed for eighteen days. This marked the artists’ transition from a focus on fabric and wrapping to a more modular, serial execution which was also deployed in *The Gates, Central Park, New York, 1979-2005*. However, in 1995, the artists re-deployed their preoccupation with fabric and wrapping when they realized *Wrapped Reichstag, Berlin, 1971-95* (figure 17), which, as its title suggested, was initially conceived in 1971. According to the artists, the wrapping, or veiling was conceived to attract attention to the division of East and West.\(^74\) The project’s political overtones were too fraught through the 1970’s and 1980’s for Germany’s parliament to accept; however, after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, new post-socialist political formations were more receptive to this spectacular public event. Despite its formal lineage in the artists’ early wrapped works of the 1960’s, *Wrapped Reichstag, Berlin, 1971-95* displayed a more painstaking aesthetic endeavour, with its perfectly placed silver fabric pleats and contrasting blue rope visually emulating a perfectly packaged commodity.

Two years before the event, the “possibilities” of such a project in Berlin were imparted in a speech given by Dr. Rita Sussmuth, president of the German Bundestag. At the opening of a 1993 museum exhibition of the artists’ work in Berlin, she stated:

> Just as some people are working hard to attract the Olympics to Berlin, I feel it is just as important to ensure that this artistic and cultural event, whose significance, immediate effect, and resonance can reach far beyond Berlin, should take place. To those people who repeatedly said we could wrap the Wall rubble or ugly buildings and hide something unattractive – to those people I say: that is precisely what this is not about. This is not about hiding, it is about setting apart...It will create a Berlin event, a German event, an international event.\(^75\)


\(^75\) Baal-Teshuva, 41.
Sussmuth’s speech evoked the enthusiasm for artistic and cultural production that became common amongst urban administrations in the 1980’s and 1990’s. She signalled realization that through geopolitical circumstances, the city could be marketed to tourists. Indeed, the event attracted five million visitors to the site during its two-week installation. The scale and tourism elements of Wrapped Reichstag, Berlin, 1971-95 marked integral changes to the performative elements of Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s work. These were informed by the very particular politics of the site, which were shaped by the relationship between geopolitical and urban processes, particularly with respect to labour.

Through geopolitical circumstances, the labour politics that had developed in Germany after unification provided a particularly nice fit for the realization of Wrapped Reichstag, Berlin, 1971-95. Even before, but particularly during and after reunification, Germany had experienced the growth of an underemployed, surplus population of workers. Consequently, many of the workers on the project were from East Germany, signalling the project’s exploitation of a cheap Eastern Bloc labour pool. Further, the event displayed two distinctly different types of labour: first, there was the more physical work, which draped the fabric over the building structure, and second, there was the ‘monitoring’ and ‘interpreting’ work, which was hospitality, or service oriented. The more physical, fabric installation work was undertaken by a professional group of ninety

"verticalists," or Vertikalisten in German (figure 18). This highly specialized and physical occupation, which involved performing repairs on smokestacks and high buildings, was particular to East Germany before unification, where the modern, technological equipment needed to elevate workers to the necessary height to perform their tasks was not available. Thus, the skills required for an integral element of the event's visual processes were specialized skills developed in the Communist regime of East Germany. For the more "service," or hospitality labour of the project, the artists hired twelve hundred specially trained monitors, or "interpreters" adding an "international" or "global" aspect of the project. This part of the Reichstag event workforce consisted of both cheap labour from East Germany as well as young art students and Christo and Jeanne-Claude fans. These multilingual workers were placed on-site to answer visitors' questions about the project, the various languages they spoke marked with notes on their sleeves. The project's exploitation and display of an inexpensive labour pool, which combined cheap, but specialized "cast-off" labour from the Eastern Bloc, and multilingual art enthusiasts, was visually integral to the event. It also reflected social realities in a newly unified Germany, and was active in the fashioning of post-socialist urban space in Berlin.

The atmosphere of the Berlin event was often referred to as celebratory, or party-like. The party-like celebratory atmosphere created by the project required the workers and monitors to socialize and interact hospitably with a tourist and visiting public. In this sense, the event actively blurred notions of work and leisure. The event required its

workers became what Lash and Urry have termed “reflexive cultural analysts,” through their multi-lingual hospitality skills and knowledge of art. In this sense, the Berlin event was an exemplary instance of the “new economy” in a unified Germany, which actively combined and aestheticized notions of publicly displayed labour and leisure in the production of a public spectacle. Christo’s move to the city, particularly in the mid-90’s for the Berlin project, was accompanied by both an increased number of “hospitality” and cultural type workers on the one hand, and the cheap “cast off” labour provided by the fallen communist regime on the other. It was the highly orchestrated performance of these workers that signified the work’s relationship to the refashioning of post-socialist urban space in Germany. When asked about the visual elements of the Reichstag event, Christo commented that the project was a culmination of his 1960’s propositions for wrapped public buildings. He thus linked the Reichstag project in the mid-1990’s to his politically radical work of the 1960’s. It is true that the city in the Reichstag project marked interesting points of return to his lineage in both the Socialist Realism of totalitarian Bulgaria and the Nouveau Realisme in 1960’s Paris. The event-like party atmosphere of the event harkened to Happenings of the 1960’s, and at the same tie, the work came to visually symbolize, contretize, and represent the governing political regime.

Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s formulations, as they developed through the 1970’s and 1980’s up to Wrapped Reichstag, Berlin, 1971-1995, and The Gates, Central Park, New York, 1979-2005, have increasingly become instances of what could be termed a spectre of Socialist Realism, particularly in its formulation of propagandistic efforts by an

82 Lash and Urry, 201.
83 Baal-Teshuva, 28.
ideological state apparatus. I refer specifically to the Stalinist formulation of Socialist Realism, in which Christo was originally trained. The works of the Soviet Socialist Realists under Stalin were narrative pictures that were supposedly comprehensible and educational to the masses, particularly working people. Specifically, Socialist Realism represented the official culture of the state through a fusion of agitprop and heroicizing documentary narratives. Kartina, which translates to “picture,” or “pictures” in Russian, were engineered to depict the heroism of the masses, or proletariat, as well as the power of the state. Most significantly, in Socialist Realist discourse, the kartina “[was] understood as a social act,”84 which alluded to the Soviet regime’s belief that cultural production under the auspices of the state had a generative, instructive capacity. As such, Wrapped Reichstag, Berlin, 1971-1995 presented a spectre of Socialist Realism through a highly engineered, spectacular event, which became “comprehensible,” or understood by the masses through the careful placement of flexible, itinerant, underemployed, multilingual “culture analysts” in a highly engineered fusion of peaceful leisure and enjoyment. From the 1970’s through the 1990’s, Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s spectres of the “kartina” actively fused the spaces of production and display in art, and in so doing, was increasingly synoptic and symptomatic of contemporary political processes.

The performative and iconic aspects of their over the past three and a half decades have increasingly ciphered nuanced elements of dominant socioeconomic and cultural forms. The enterprise they have honed through the development of their career has undeniably benefited from specific developments within post-Fordist political economic and social formations, particularly those associated with the new economy. They have

84 Hal Foster et al., Art Since 1900 (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2004) 262.
consistently fused the realities of new post-industrial forms of labour with subject matter that speaks clearly to dominant culture, through their employment of performative, inexpensive, “flexible cultural analysts.” Further, despite the relative constancy of their mode of production over the years, each of their projects has taken on its own specific characteristics, which have been determined largely by the politics of their respective sites. The following chapter investigates the City of New York’s 1981 rejection of and 2003 invitation to the artists’ proposal for the Gates, Central Park, New York, 1979-2005. In particular, it situates, The Gates, Central Park, New York 1979-2005 in the politics of its site and in particular urban imperatives of the new economy.

On January 23, 2003, New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg held a press conference at the Arsenal, Central Park’s administrative headquarters. Announcing the City’s approval of artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s The Gates, Central Park, New York, 1979-2005 installation, Bloomberg stated “during these trying times when our natural instincts are to retreat to the comfortable and familiar we have to reassert the daring and imaginative spirit that really differentiates New York from any other city.”85 Stressing the words “daring” and “imaginative,” he went on: “innovative works of art help us to re-imagine the spaces we live in. The Gates will invite New Yorkers and visitors to re-envision the city.”86 Twenty-six years after it was initially proposed, and almost exactly twenty-four years after it was nearly unanimously rejected with an extensive report from the city, Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s project mysteriously came to the forefront of the city administration’s imagination. Where did this sudden enthusiasm come from? In this chapter, I read the 1981 rejection report against the January 2003 press conference in order to assess the ways in which the city’s embrace of Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s The Gates, Central Park, New York 1979-2005 is indicative of a shift in urban policies and politics over the last three decades. In so doing, this inquiry will focus on both their unique mode of art production and transitions in dominant political processes within contemporary cultural formulations of urbanism. Throughout Chapters two and three, I will interrogate what it means and what it looks like to, in Bloomberg’s

86 Ibid.
words, "reassert the daring and the imaginative" into the socio-spatial conditions of contemporary New York City through an installation such as The Gates, Central Park, New York, 1979-2005.

This account of Christo and Jeanne-Claude's The Gates, Central Park, New York, 1979-2005 situates the event in a discourse of urban restructuring. I argue that the installation resonated with the socio-political and socio-spatial elements of the contemporary city. The performative attributes of much of their recent art practice emulates contemporary urban planning and political discourses with the production of highly organized theatrical spectacles. However, despite the glut of media attention on their recent work, mainstream media did not pick up on what is perhaps the most interesting difference between The Gates and all of their previous large-scale works of the past three and a half decades: the fact that they were invited by the city to realize a project that had previously been vehemently rejected by the city of New York. Networks such as NBC and ABC, as well as The New York Times and New York Magazine, among others, presented the artists as having worked and fought tirelessly for 26 years for the project to be approved when in fact the Mayor's office phoned them personally in March 2002 asking them to revive the project. This invitation not only signals a political embrace of cultural strategies for economic development, but also an enthusiasm for an artistic structure and cultural mode of production that was evidently unacceptable to New York City politics in the early 1980's. In order to articulate this dramatic historical shift, I will examine 1980's and 1990's art and cultural politics in New York, and then move into an ethnographic account of the installation itself in Chapter Three.

Moments after Bloomberg spoke at the Arsenal, Jeanne-Claude took the podium
to explain more details about the project. Beginning her address, she stated:

How fortunate we are, all of us New Yorkers to have a mayor who loves and
encourages art, and demonstrates it through his choice of his commissioners and
his colleagues. Over 200 years ago, the poet, writer and philosopher Johann Von
Goethe wrote ‘the highest function of government is to provide a milieu in which
art can thrive.’

After quoting the famous liberal poet and philosopher, Jeanne-Claude summoned Christo
who was standing behind her to describe the project to the audience. In his heavy
Bulgarian accent, he took the podium and said a few fragmented things about the work in
progress. Seconds later, and seemingly impatient with his rambling, Jeanne-Claude
approached the podium again to make another statement:

Before we answer your questions we need to establish a few points which are not
evident because we are so different from what you are used to and to what is
customary in our society....We want to create works of art of joy and beauty
which as all true works of art have no purpose at all except to be a work of
art...Our mayor explained that we pay for our projects ourselves with our own
money...the money comes from selling works that Christo created in the fifties
and sixties which we still have in our storages and many preparatory works,
drawings and collages of many projects.

Asserting their non-reliance on public funding and their entrepreneurial and philanthropic
approach to art production, Jeanne-Claude reiterated the status of the project as both a
“purposeless” event and business venture. This project, as with their other large-scale
installations since 1976, was to be funded solely by the artists’ own money, generated
from the sale of Christo’s original preparatory drawings, collages and scale models which
range in price from $35,000 to almost $1 million USD. Further, Christo and Jeanne-
Claude do not accept any sponsorship or public funds for their works and since their

90 Ibid.
project *Surrounded Islands, Miami Florida, 1980-83* in 1983, they have often made large donations to the cities or municipalities in which they are granted permission to work. In the case of *The Gates, Central Park, New York, 1979-2005*, the artists donated $3 million to the Department of Parks and Recreation for the development of educational programming.\(^{91}\)

At the end of the press conference, after Parks Commissioner Adrian Benepe, former Parks Commissioner Gordon Davis, Christo and Jeanne-Claude had spoken about funding and other characteristics of the project, Bloomberg took the podium again: “Let me just repeat a couple of things for people who are the least bit uncomfortable. This costs the city nothing. Quite the contrary, Central Park is beneficiary number one."\(^{92}\) Bloomberg then invited former Parks Commissioner Gordon Davis to the podium to aid in fielding questions from the press. Davis was the Parks Commissioner in 1980 who actively opposed and rejected the Christo’s proposal. When asked “why now?” Davis began by stating “I always loved the art of the Christos and I always understood that they were serious artists. Because of the times, I felt it was not the time for the project; one of the virtues of New York is that if you’re around long enough you can change your mind...I can’t imagine a better time to have this than now."\(^{93}\) The contrast between Davis’s opposition in 1980 and his accolades in 2003 couldn’t be more pronounced. Echoing Davis’s sentiments, current Parks Commissioner Adrian Benepe then took the podium and began by stating “We view the parks of New York City as a great outdoor museum...20 years ago, neither Central Park nor the project were the works that they are

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\(^{92}\) Ibid.

\(^{93}\) Ibid.
today...Now though, this is the right time for this work of art, in the right park in the right city." The dramatic change in disposition with respect to this cultural event ciphers urban restructuring processes of the last two and a half decades. In order to explore this transition, the following section will interrogate the artists’ original proposal as well as the city’s extensive rejection document.

THE ARTIST’S PROPOSAL

In January 1980, Christo and Jeanne-Claude submitted a proposal to the Department of Parks and Recreation for their project The Gates, Central Park, New York. They began by writing: “When I arrived in New York City in 1964, I was fascinated by the skyline. However, throughout the 1970’s, I became more aware of the truly important elements of the City: its people and the way in which the City’s space is used.” They went on to describe in detail what the project would look like in situ:

The Gates will be 15 feet high with a width varying from 9 to 28 feet, according to the width of the walkways, creating a series of portals crossing perpendicular to the selected footpaths of Central Park...The Gates will be spaced generally at 9-foot intervals allowing the golden apricot color woven panels to wave horizontally and touch the next gate when there is a light breeze...By involving the entire topography of Central Park, The Gates will be uniquely and equally shared by many different groups, thereby becoming a true Public Work of Art, revealing the rich variety of the people of New York City.

This was the artists’ first proposal for a large-scale project in New York City since they were denied permission to wrap two large buildings in Lower Manhattan in the late 1960’s. While they were still interested in ‘public’ sites, they became fascinated with

94 Ibid.
96 Ibid.
97 Baal-Teshuva, 22; see also Chernow (2000).
the streets and sidewalks of New York City as a possible site for a project. When discussing their original idea for The Gates in 2003, Christo claimed that the idea was basically about inspiration that the city of New York is probably the most walking place in the world...in the late 70’s Jeanne-Claude and myself were contemplating doing project on the sidewalks we will probably never get permission to do anything on the sidewalks...the only place that people walk for leisure is in the parks.98

The more “human” scale of this proposal marked a dramatic departure from the “wrapped” aesthetic of much of his earlier work and, in a supplement to his submitted application, the artists stated:

Central Park was chosen as the site for my Project because of the unique way it is walked by so many people. The Gates: Project for Central Park creates a direct relationship with human height, the time it takes to walk through the Project, and the intimacy experienced in touching the work of art...by involving the entire topography of Central Park, The Gates will be uniquely and equally shared by many different groups, thereby becoming a true Public Work of Art, revealing the rich variety of the people of New York City. Walking through The Gates, following the walkways, The Gates will be a golden ceiling creating warm shadows....the luminous fabric of The Gates will underline the organic design in contrast to the geometric grid pattern of Manhattan and will harmonize with the beauty of Central Park.99

In keeping with the “human” element of their interests for this project, and as part of their long artistic process, the artists attempted to convey sensitivity and concern for environmental and socio-spatial aspects of the park by commissioning two “impact” studies.100 The first study sought to focus on the proposed installation’s possible biological and physical impact upon park flora, fauna and air quality. The second study was a “social” impact study commissioned to Clark, Phipps, Clark and Harris, a team of

99 New York City Department of Parks and Recreation. Appendix 1, Exhibit 7.
100 Ibid.
New York City social scientists in January 1981. Despite the fact that the city’s rejection had been issued in the midst of Clark, Phipps, Clark and Harris’s data collection process, the study continued as the artists decided they would continue to pursue permission for the project. The focus of the study was not specified by the artist, rather it was determined by Dr. Clark of Clark, Phipps, Clark and Harris. The working premise of this social impact study focused on identifying a response from communities surrounding the park to the artists’ mission statement for their proposed project. The firm of decided to specifically focus on minority communities around the park, particularly African Americans in Harlem and Hispanics in Spanish Harlem. The study had a sample size of 660 respondents, who engaged in telephone and face to face interviews, two discussion groups with a “selected sample of opinion makers,” and four Community Board meetings, two in midtown, one in Harlem and one in East Harlem, as well as a series of focus groups and screenings of a film made about the artists’ earlier work, with them in attendance to answer any questions the participants may have had.

The reasons for the Clark, Phipps, Clark and Harris’s decision to focus on the minority population around the park were alluded to in a letter Dr. Kenneth Clark sent to

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101 In December 1980, the artists were informed that a decision about their proposal would be finalized in mid-January 1981. However, just before mid-January, Christo requested that the decision be delayed for a few more weeks to afford him time to prepare a supplement to his application for the project, and the city agreed. This supplement contained a number of reproductions of Christo’s conceptual drawings, an artists’ statement, details of the environmental impact study that was commissioned, and a letter from Clark, Phipps, Clark and Harris introducing and describing the social impact study that the artists had commissioned. The letter from Clark, Phipps, Clark and Harris stated “It was understood in my discussions with them that my staff and I would concentrate on the reactions of black and Hispanic minorities to this unusual approach to art in Central Park.”

102 Telephone conversation with Jeanne-Claude, March 26, 2006.

103 Telephone conversation with Jeanne-Claude, March 26, 2006 during which she stated: “Dr. Clark was an African American man and he wanted to know about the local population.”

the city in order to notify the Parks Department that the firm had undertaken data collection:

...too often, even in a democratic society, art is perceived as an exclusive property, right and concern of the affluent upper classes and upwardly mobile. In New York City, for example, the works of modern sculptures are almost always placed in midtown Park Avenue or in the commercial and financial districts. In the past most artistic and cultural events tended to be concentrated in the Southern more affluent portions of Central Park. The Northern portions of the Park where blacks and Hispanics tend to concentrate seem to have been ignored.\textsuperscript{105}

In citing the quantitative imbalance of cultural sites in the park, Clark expressed concerns over the Northern end of the park being “ignored.” Clark’s citation of the geographic imbalance of art in the park implicitly alluded to a belief that the increased instances of art and culture in the south end of the park somehow reflected white, affluent support and appreciation for art and culture. Due to the fact that the more affluent (and presumably white) people lived near and used the south end of the park, where the majority of the park’s public art was sited, it seems that this faction of the population were imagined to support and enjoy art. The study’s original focus and design seemed to have been predicated on implicit assumptions of support for artistic and cultural events from affluent, white New Yorkers.

The firm’s original intention to focus exclusively on minority black and Hispanic populations was modified in response to criticism from then Parks Commissioner, Gordon Davis. At his suggestion, the firm sampled white subjects, and included some focus on residents at the south end of the park between 59\textsuperscript{th} and 72\textsuperscript{nd} streets, on both the east and west sides.\textsuperscript{106} Despite their agreement to expand the geographical scope of the

\textsuperscript{105} New York City Department of Parks and Recreation. Appendix 1, Exhibit 7.
\textsuperscript{106} Clark, Phipps, Clark & Harris, Inc., 5. This change to the study’s subject make-up occurred after data collection had commenced.
study and include a more affluent cohort, the firm displayed its results in terms of racial and income levels as opposed to neighbourhood or spatial components. It also included a comprehensive breakdown of age variables. Surprisingly, the study concluded that the vast majority of support for Christo’s proposal came from ethnic minorities and those with incomes of $15,000 or less per annum. The relative lack of enthusiasm by white and more affluent respondents was noted frequently throughout the report, but always in comparison with the more positive numbers associated with the low-income and ethnic minority subjects. In a telephone conversation with Jeanne-Claude on March 26, 2006, the artist highlighted the diverse responses from various communities around the park:

The poor were with us. The community boards in Harlem and Spanish Harlem voted yes. The West Side voted for us. The most money voted against us...The richer, the more against us they were. 59th Street, which is one of the wealthiest streets in America was against us. 5th Avenue wouldn’t speak with us.

Jeanne-Claude’s comments highlighted the geographic dimensions of public support. She went on the explain that Dr. Clark was interested in issues of racial segregation and it was he, not she and Christo, who was interested in pursuing the specific reactions of local minority communities to the project.

Positive responses for the event were aligned with an urban rejuvenation or urban reform ethos and cited the “wonderful sense of involvement” and congregation the project would engender:

One of the participants, an artist, was enormously enthusiastic. “I get the feeling:; she stated, “of a kind of ceremonial; walking underneath them (The Gates) you feel as if you are part of a parade; makes one feel that there is something regal, royal. It would make anyone who is up to no good feel better

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107 Ibid., This was also mentioned, unprompted, by Jeanne-Claude Christo during a telephone conversation on March 26, 2006.
108 Telephone conversation with Jeanne-Claude Christo March 26, 2006.
109 Clark, Phipps, Clark & Harris, Inc., Appendix 1, page 2.
about themselves so that they would not attack you...” She said that there was an element of expansion of the human spirit.110

Another comment supportive of Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s project focused on the project’s capacity to enhance Central Park as a public space:

I have a feeling that the original intention of the Park was to give all of us a sense of grandeur. It was originally built during the Victorian time when people walked in the Park. He believed Olmstead and Vaux to have been great artists who had made a great contribution to the community and that “The Gates” is similar in that it perpetuates an image of the Park as a place to congregate.111

Interestingly, these responses in support of the event, presumably from low-income ethnic minority respondents, imagined the event’s “civilizing” potential to promote more democratic and inclusive participation in the park. While the cited comments for the project focused on its potential as an instrument of urban reform or “social remedy,” the theme that emerged in the cited comments against the installation were around “man dominating nature.” More specifically, these responses, which presumably came from the more affluent, white sub-sample of the study, focused more intently on whether or not the project would compromise the “beauty” of the park, or be “out of place.”112 The final report stated: “far more whites thought it would interfere with the beauty of the park” and that whites “were more likely to state the opinion that the Gates would be out of place.”113 They went on to cite a negative response: “An opposing viewpoint was presented by another member of the panel who said: “We will never hear the birds or see

111 Ibid., Appendix 1, page 4.
112 Ibid., 16.
113 Ibid.
the beasts...this is man conquering nature.”\textsuperscript{114} In response to the negative comments, the report highlighted that the artists had consulted environmental and bird specialists to ensure that the park’s topography and bird migration patterns would not be affected if the project was installed. They then went on to cite the positive educational aspects of their focus groups: “A participant who had been somewhat negative prior to the meeting expressed the belief that “unification might take place in terms of universal appeal...even to those who have feelings about ecological damage.”\textsuperscript{115} The firm’s citation of the focus group responses this way allowed them to cite the artists’ thoughtful and ameliorative methods for alleviating the ecological impact while highlighting the project’s supposed positive social and pedagogical effects.

Clark, Phipps, Clark and Harris’s citation of these responses underscored further assumptions implicit in their (and thus, the artists’) approach to the project. The comments cited in favour of the project alluded to a presumed existing social ill, fear, or pathology in the park. The artists’ desire to create a “harmonizing” event was predicated on the belief that their artwork could administer an ameliorative remedy these social problems. The report generated from the Clark, Phipps, Clark and Harris study findings were summarized at the end of the report’s conclusion:

It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that the higher percentage of minorities and low income individuals who express favourable reaction to the proposed installation of “The Gates” in Central Park reflects that they see this artistic event as a democratizing phenomenon. It would not be likely to be so consistently favourable if they saw this as another example of a cultural facility in the Park which either excluded their full participation or was restricted to an area which they ordinarily do not use. This would tend to verify the hypothesis that the very nature of the Christo “Gates”, i.e., the fact that it would be an artistic event that would involve the whole Park would, by virtue of this fact and the way it is

\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., Appendix 1, page 4.
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., Appendix 1, page 3.
perceived by minorities, bring diverse groups of people together. It would be a unifying artistic event.\textsuperscript{116}

The firm’s statement crystallized the particular tone of support for the project, which was focused on the creation of a more democratic, inclusive public space. However, in the end, the more affluent whites, who were imagined to appreciate art, were considerably less supportive of the proposal, largely due to concerns as to whether or not it would “fit.” The ethnic minority participants, who were presumed to be the “unknown” variable in the study, embraced its potential to promote democratic and inclusive notions of public space in Central Park.

The relative lack of enthusiasm on the part of the white, more affluent cohort created a somewhat paradoxical, contradictory relationship with the city’s reasons for rejecting the project. Specifically, this cohort expressed concerns that the project “wouldn’t fit,” or was an instance of “man dominating nature” were aligned with a rhetoric of “common sense” and “appropriateness,” which was integral to the city’s approach to urban restructuring through the 1980’s. At the same time, the nature of the minority support appeared to be compatible with the city’s notion of public space as espoused in the Park’s Department’s and the Central Park Conservancy’s mandate in rebuilding the park. This seeming contradiction will be further discussed in the following section.

\textbf{THE REJECTION}

Less than a year after he submitted the proposal, Christo was presented with an extensive 281-page rejection for the project. Entitled \textit{Report and Determination in the

\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., 25.
matter of Christo: The Gates, the report was prepared by then Department of Parks and Recreation Commissioner, Gordon Davis. Its introductory section outlined the larger context in which Christo’s proposal was considered:

What priority should we give to our public spaces in terms of municipal and private resources; how should these spaces be used; by whom and for what purposes; how should such decisions be reached and who should be involved, after a period of significant retrenchment in municipal services, how should the city and its citizens commence in rebuilding and restoring one of its most vital and democratic resources?  

Accordingly, one of the most prominent themes that ran through the document was the city’s concern with how to categorize the project, and throughout the report, much of the discussion revolved around whether Christo’s proposal was for a “work of art” or an “event.”  

The Parks Commission, no stranger to large crowds for spectacular events in Central Park, such as large rock concerts in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s with artists such as Elton John and the Rolling Stones, claimed to be at a loss as to what to do with the proposal. The commission had different policies regarding events and works of art in the park, and both the massive scale and temporality of the proposal apparently problematized administrative categorizations, making a conclusive decision difficult to achieve. In addition, frequent mention of the overall deteriorated and chaotic state of Central Park through the 1970’s and early 1980’s ran steadily through the rejection report. The report outlined its concerns about the proposal with respect to park policy:

In the brief span between 1973 and 1978, when the department had no less than six Commissioners in five years, the issue had essentially become a question of the Park’s survival in the face of recurring episodes of physical damage, uncontrolled crowds, uncollected garbage, illegal vendors, rampant commercialization, at least on weekends, the absence of anything remotely

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117 New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, 4.  
118 Ibid., 49-50.  
119 Ibid.
resembling the sense of peace or tranquillity which one traditionally associates with a scenic park landscape.120

The report bluntly asked, “What had gone wrong? The question of ‘what is an appropriate park use?’ simply ceased to be asked.”121 Pondering criteria to assess The Gates, Central Park, New York, the report then asked: “Is The Gates, which will be both a work of art and a large scale public event, appropriate and beneficial for the landmark extraordinarily public 840 acres which comprise Central Park?”122 To answer this question, the report was broken down into sections. The first third of the document was preoccupied with a “factual” accounting of the park, and focused on the specific context in which the artists were making their proposal. Following sections on historical conditions, park policy and art in the park from 1970 to 1980, the report concluded with a long section on the legal context in which this proposal was being rejected.

Late in its introductory section, the 1981 rejection report took stock of a number of commissions for contemporary public sculpture in the park from 1970-1980. The report specifically mentioned that for art installations “sites [within the park] were chosen based on various criteria such as esthetics, security, potential damage due to installation, display and dismantling requirements, possible conflict with other uses or users, visibility and so forth.”123 Listed in a methodical manner were past successes and failures. Niki de Saint Phalle and Tinguely’s 1968 installation of Machines and Nanas (figure 19) in the Conservatory Garden lawn off Fifth Avenue was deemed a success because there was “controlled access and viewing conditions. Security and lighting are more easily and

120 Ibid.
121 Ibid.
122 Ibid., 27.
123 Ibid.
appropriately achieved at this location.\textsuperscript{124} Louise Nevelson’s \textit{Night Presences} was installed in a plaza in the park and was described as “paved in asphalt blocks and floodlighted specifically for the exhibition of major art works.”\textsuperscript{125} More problematically, Hans Arp’s \textit{Form}, which belonged to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, was “repeatedly defaced with graffiti requiring careful removal.”\textsuperscript{126} By using these particular examples, the authors of the report highlighted issues specifically around aesthetics and security.

The contrast between the constant tagging of the Arp piece with graffiti and the de Saint Phalle and Nevelson pieces suggested that, although art had become a big part of Central Park and its restoration, issues around vandalism were problems unless particular security measures were taken. The security measures around the de Saint Phalle and Nevelson pieces revolved around the design and “natural security” in the form of controlled access and viewing conditions provided by the particular sites in which they were installed.

After an extensive account of the Park’s “liberal” arts policies, the report turned to Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s proposal, opening with a paragraph reflecting on dominant attitudes towards art and artists in the city during the 1980’s:

No single group of New Yorkers has been more important to the City’s vitality and unique position as a world capital than its visual artists. New Yorkers, both native born and self-declared, from Olmsted and Vaux to Pollock, DeKooning, Steinberg and Nevelson have not only been recognized as great artists, but equally important they have been the avant-garde, the forerunners, leaders in redefining what is and is not art and in reshaping the way we see the world around us. Indeed, since the advent of abstract expressionism New York and New Yorkers have dominated the field of contemporary visual arts and in so doing, have contributed significantly to our City’s economy, invigorated our urban civilizations, rebuilt entire neighbourhoods with their energy, and helped to foster the self-esteem and pride we each feel as New Yorkers.\textsuperscript{127}

\textsuperscript{124} Ibid.\textsuperscript{125} Ibid. 28\textsuperscript{126} Ibid.\textsuperscript{127} Ibid., 36.
Making reference to urban renewal and gentrification, the report credited art and artists with the production of civic pride by “rebuilding neighbourhoods” and contributing to the economy. Clearly, the Parks Department was aware of the connections between art and artists and economic development.

In order to strengthen its case, the city outlined its rebuttal of the Clark, Phipps, Clark and Harris study in a section entitled “Ethnic and social assumptions of Christo’s “human impact” analysis.” It began by stating:

Site inspection meetings with members of the Department’s staff revealed that Christo’s physical knowledge of Central Park was quite limited and general in nature...A similar lack of understanding of how and by whom the Park is used is apparent in the “human impact” study Christo has commissioned. The study is to be based on the assumption that “works of modern sculpture are almost always placed in midtown Park Avenue of in the commercial and financial districts”; that “most artistic and cultural events [tend] to be concentrated in the southern more affluent portions of Central Park”; and that the “northern portions of the Park where Blacks and Hispanics tend to concentrate seem to have been ignored. While all of these assertions sound plausible, they are in fact for the most part either incorrect or are themselves based on uninformed assumptions about the Park.128

The report continued, and stated “Christo does not appear to understand the Park’s design in this respect....the distribution of social and ethnic groups with Central Park is totally different from ethnic distributions in residential communities adjacent to the park.”129 The city contested the specific claims that Clark, Phipps, Clark and Harris had made in their study by providing its own data. While Clark, Phipps, Clark and Harris had stated that the south end of the park was favoured for the siting of art in the park, the city claimed that “roughly one third” of the numerous contemporary sculpture exhibits in the park

128 Ibid., 16-17.
129 Ibid., 20; The report provided its own statistics gathered from a 1973 study that concluded that “Blacks comprised approximately 25% of all Park patrons and Hispanics an additional 8%.”
between 1970 and 1980 were in the northern region of the park.\textsuperscript{130} It cited numerous events and activities that had occurred in the north end of the park such as free concerts and major foot and bike races.\textsuperscript{131} As well, the city cited the north end of the park’s lack of suitable topography compared to the southern half for large-scale events. Most significantly in its rebuttal of Christo’s social impact study was the city’s claim that the contents of Christo’s application supplements had for the first time “hinted at Christo’s views about The Gates role as a palliative to relieve the presumed artistic and cultural deprivation in the Park’s northern sections.”\textsuperscript{132} The city’s reaction to this "palliative" element of Christo’s artistic practice raised a number of interesting points with respect to his model of artistic production as it related to New York City in the early 1980’s. These will be discussed in the following section.

The city presented its own data on Central Park by citing a study it commissioned in 1976 entitled Usage and Users of Central Park by Donald Sexton, Associate Professor in the Graduate School of Business of Columbia University. This study focused on attendance in Central Park, characteristics of park users and their attitudes towards the park. The study had a sample of over 3000 respondents, a combination of personal interviews, which took place in the park, and telephone interviews with residents of New York City.\textsuperscript{133} Drawing on a large sample of park users, the main concerns cited by the respondents were a combination of criticisms relating to park aesthetics and security:

More than one-third of the telephone respondents were dissatisfied with Central Park due mainly to issues of safety, noise, or cleanliness. Among people interviewed at specific areas within the Park, crowdedness was the most

\textsuperscript{130} Ibid., 17-18.
\textsuperscript{131} Ibid., 18.
\textsuperscript{132} Ibid., 17; I assume the city’s use of the word “palliative” is a typo, and the report was meant to read “palliative.”
\textsuperscript{133} Ibid.
frequently sited negative comment, made by 37% of the people. More cops and more flowers were the most popularly given suggestions for changing Central Park.\footnote{Ibid.\textsuperscript{134}}

The vast majority of respondents in this study were white and male, between the ages of 18 and 35, suggesting that this demographic was the most highly represented in public spaces such as Central Park in the 1970's. More than half of the study respondents suggested an increase in police presence in Central Park would make the park a more pleasant place to be.\footnote{Ibid., 2-35.\textsuperscript{135}}

The third part of the city's rejection report outlined its multiple reasons for denying the artist permission to undertake the project. These ranged from tangible and topographical to entirely intangible and transitory in nature. Concerns ranged from the fact that it would be the largest "physical and visual alteration" of the Park since 1873, to its capacity to huge crowds, to worries about "interference with ordinary use and enjoyment of the park by the public," as well as the fact that the event of its approval would have been "inconsistent with present Parks Department permit policies applicable to Central Park and, as a result, such action may establish a precedent requiring approval to be given to other events of similar scale and magnitude."\textsuperscript{136} After ensuring that potential physical and environmental damage due to the installation would not "in and of itself require rejecting Christo's project," the report cited the city's reasons for its rejection:

Rather, it is the less tangible "impact" of The Gates which may well have the more lasting wide spread consequences: because of the project's systematic and complete alteration of a landmark space and the essentially political process by which it would achieve official approval; because of its immense costs and the

\footnote{Ibid., 104.\textsuperscript{136}}
peculiar moment in the park’s history when it would gain government sanction; because it would have been deemed appropriate or reasonable notwithstanding its obvious distance from the design and artistic vision that shaped the park’s creation and the restoration now underway; and because of the precedent all of this creates both legally and in terms of future parks department policies. For all of these reasons one must be concerned about the impact of Christo’s project on how Central Park is understood, appreciated and perceived, on how the Park is used or should be used, on the manner in which it is or is not preserved as a unique historic landscape and the priority given to such efforts...The Gates simply cannot and should not be forced to fit into New York’s greatest public space. 137

This passage in particular, conveyed the Olmstedian notion of public space that was central in the Central Park Conservancy’s mandate in its restoration of the park, which was already underway.138 The privately funded Conservancy, which was founded in 1980, raised the funds for the park’s restoration, and in turn, became influential in guiding park policy.139 Specifically, it was concerned with what it perceived as inconsistent with Olmsted’s “design and artistic vision,” which focused on the creation of socially inclusive, “natural,” accessible landscapes designed for restful contemplation, removed from the stresses of the modern city. Olmsted’s vision was particularly committed to the provision of commons, which would be accessible to all citizens, particularly the working population.

Given the results of the Clark, Phipps, Clark and Harris study, the city’s reasons for rejecting the proposal uncovered a paradox in its own vision of public spaces in New York. While the city’s focus on restoring the park was imbued with an Olmstedian sensibility, it was clearly unresponsive to the supportive cohort’s apparent desire for the creation of a more democratic, inclusive public space. Conversely, the city appealed to a more “common sense” rhetoric in its rejection, citing the pragmatics of the restoration

137 Ibid., 100.
139 Ibid.
effort. Specifically they noted that project should not be “forced to fit into public space,” particularly when extended efforts were underway to restore it to its “proper” original use. The wonderful sense of “congregation” that was cited by support for Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s project seemed to be aligned with an Olmstedian notion of public space, however, the city’s commitment to rebuild the park was much more focused on the strictly visual, or aesthetic, Olmstedian vision of the park. Consequently, the restoration efforts in the park focused on rebuilding and maintaining the aesthetic and physical design, and was based on the more conservative doctrine of “heritage” preservation rather than democratic inclusiveness. Zukin has noted that the park’s rebuilding often restored visual tokens of Olmstedian public space rather than focusing on rebuilding the democratic public spaces that were his original vision: “Most often they beautify the park by restoring its 19th century buildings and bridges or setting up a nature program or skating facilities on one of its landscaped ponds.”

Michael Sorkin has commented on the deployment of history and heritage in urban planning formulations:

In most American cities, the historic has become the only complicit official urban value. The result is that the preservation of the physical remnants of the historical city has superseded attention to the human ecologies that produced and inhabit them...such design is based in the same calculus as advertising, the idea of pure imageability...

The city’s focus on the “physical,” less “social,” attributes of the park were clear in its doctrine to restore the park. Consequently, their rejection of the report was much more aligned with the Clark, Phipps, Clark and Harris more affluent cohort’s reasons for rejecting Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s proposal.

140 Ibid.
The language in the rejection report outlined the ways in which cultural apparatus was deployed in service of change in residential “neighbourhoods,” plazas, parks, and central business districts in 1980s New York. Indeed, this had begun to occur as early as the mid 1970’s under Mayor John Lindsay’s administration.\textsuperscript{142} Though the Gates was rejected, it was clear that Koch administration actively pursued art as a part of their larger policy agenda, and during the 1980’s, the arts became prevalent in the production of “regenerated” social spaces in Manhattan. Given the rejection of the project in 1981, the following will consider the characteristics of 1980’s artistic and cultural practices in New York City. Cultural politics, vision and visuality became dramatically intertwined in the refashioning of urban social space through the 1970’s and 1980’s, and the result was a combination of very specific urban forms, which were, not surprisingly, remarkably different than the space that Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s proposed to create with \textit{The Gates}, Central Park, New York, 1979-2005.

\textbf{THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF FINE ART AND URBAN RESTRUCTURING IN 1980’S NEW YORK}

Significant artistic practices that received both mainstream and art world press in New York City in the 80’s can loosely be categorized in two ways. Firstly, increased numbers of public art commissions began to pop up around the city. These were most often associated with the creation of Percent for Art and Art in Architecture programs in larger American cities throughout the decade. These works were often referred to as ornamental “plop” art, and were more often than not large minimalist sculptures sited around large concentrations of business towers and quasi-public spaces such as office

\textsuperscript{142} Tim Cresswell, \textit{In Place/Out of Place: Geography, Ideology and Transgression} (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press) 31-40.
plazas. These installations were often associated with larger marketing and fiscal strategies in the entrepreneurial city.\textsuperscript{143} Two significant programs were created in order to encourage the production of more public art in the city in the late 1970's and early 1980's. The Public Art fund began in 1977 and its mandate was to provide "institutional support" for artists who wanted to show their work in public spaces usually by aiding them through legal and bureaucratic processes.\textsuperscript{144} The second program was Percent for Art, which was created in 1983.\textsuperscript{145} This program marked changes in urban policy in that Percent for Art legislation required that "one percent of the City's budget for eligible construction projects be directed toward funding public art works."\textsuperscript{146} Legislating art's presence in urban space through law indicated the city's effort to utilize culture as an economic generator.

The second significant art movement in New York in the 1980's was a group of "neo-expressionist" painters who were often associated with the East Village. These artists were also closely connected to the rise of the post-punk and new wave music and nightlife scene in the area. This movement was linked to another move by city government to bring art and artists into urban policy. The Koch administration implemented the Artists Home Ownership Program (AHOP) in 1981 to attract artists to the East Village.\textsuperscript{147} Specifically, the program called on artists to propose ideas to develop

\textsuperscript{143} See in particular, David Harvey, "From Managerialism to Entrepreneurialism," Geografiska Annaler 71 1 (1989): 3-17.
\textsuperscript{146} ibid.
city owned properties into artist-type loft spaces. The goal, according to the city, was “to provide artists with an opportunity for homeownership to meet their special work requirements, to encourage them to continue to live and work in New York City and to stimulate unique alternatives for the reuse and rehabilitation of city-owned property.”

Although AHOP was eventually defeated by a number of protestors, the city’s eagerness to allocate funds in order to house artists as opposed to the poor and working poor people of the East Village and the Lower East Side was demonstrative of the its recognition of the value of art and artists in urban revitalization. In a 1997 commentary on art and social conditions in the East Village and Lower East Side in the 1980’s, author and art critic Lucy Lippard cited some accounts of residents of the area: “There’s a new vibration, putting the neighborhood back. There’s uniformed cops on every corner. It was a shooting gallery, now it’s an art gallery.”

Author Rosalyn Deutsche has also discussed the role of the specific aesthetic discourse of the East Village scene in the gentrification of the Lower East Side and East Village. For Deutsche, the “expressionist” and “primitive” form of the artwork associated with the East Village scene was conducive to a criticism devoid of politics. The return to “tradition” in art by the neo-expressionists of the East Village scene played an integral role in the restructuring of the urban social space of New York City, particularly through the explosion of new art galleries, studio

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148 Ibid.
149 Ibid.
151 Deutsche and Gendel Ryan, 91-111.
152 Ibid.
and loft spaces on the Lower East Side. At the same time, cities began to deploy
"culture" as a tool of economic growth, and in some cases, even an economic base.\footnote{153}

One of the roots of this aesthetic discourse of "primitivism" in 1980's fine art in
New York were related to the increased incidences of graffiti, which became visible all
over the city's public spaces through the 1970's and 1980's. Mainstream media tied the
vast majority of graffiti to a "discourse of disorder" which was prevalent in political and
media discussions in the city at the time.\footnote{154} The negative press for "public," or outdoor
graffiti continued, and took on racial dimensions: "In the case of graffiti, the press and
the city chose to point to the chaotic and anarchic appearance of graffiti and suggest its
ethnic dimensions [particularly Latin American and African American] while the urban
infrastructure of New York was in a state of bankruptcy and disrepair."\footnote{155} However,
while the majority of the graffiti was venomously denigrated by both the press and the
city's administration, the City College of New York held a graffiti demo in which the
artists tagged a large wall which had been pre-covered with paper in 1972.\footnote{156} Graffiti
artists began organizing themselves in groups and were eventually granted a funded
studio in Manhattan where they held exhibitions that sold graffiti art and received
positive press.\footnote{157} This trend continued as more galleries continued to open and two artists
who were an active part of the "outdoor" graffiti scene of the late 1970's and early

\footnote{153} Zukin, 1-15.  
\footnote{154} Cresswell, 36-37.  
\footnote{155} Ibid.  
\footnote{156} Ibid., 35.  
\footnote{157} Ibid., "Artists' Space" movements began in many American cities at this time. Governmental
organizations such as the NEA began focusing on and supporting the development of small,
artist-run exhibition spaces. For a detailed investigation of this, see Grant H. Kester, "Rhetorical
Questions: The Alternative Arts Sector and the Imaginary Public," \textit{Art, Activism, and
103-135.
1980's, Jean Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring, who were known particularly for their "primitive," expressionistic art forms, became two of the most lauded art celebrities of the 1980's New York art scene. Basquiat was “discovered” by an established SoHo dealer, and Haring too, moved his work “inside.” As a result of graffiti’s move “inside” to a more “appropriate” setting, mainstream art criticism celebrated the work’s “unleashed creativity” resulting in both the controlling, domesticating and aestheticizing of difference on the urban landscape.

The point here is not to chronicle the development of the domestication of graffiti in New York City, but rather to demonstrate that the move towards utilizing culture and notions of aestheticization for urban revitalization at this point in New York City’s history was clearly in terms of private, rather than public space. This became most evident in two distinctly visual processes. First, the gentrification of Greenwich Village and SoHo through the promotion of residential loft real estate for an expanding post-industrial workforce. This was evidenced in the Lindsay and Koch administrations’ active, institutional support for the gentrification of SoHo, the East Village and the Lower East Side with programs like AHOP, artists’ space movements and the like. Second, the dramatic (and expensive) measures taken by the city administration in their vehement anti-graffiti campaigns in attempt to “clean up” the city and the synonymous colonization and commodification of graffiti into art gallery spaces and the mainstream art market. These new gallery spaces were often in, or very close to the artists’ East Village homes, and as a result, the production, display, and consumption of art into increasingly close

159 Cresswell, 36.
160 Ibid.
proximity, albeit in private spaces. So while there was fervent governmental support for 
the aesthetic imperatives of urban restructuring, they were very much focused on private 
spaces such as residential lofts and art galleries.\textsuperscript{162} Obviously, this was not akin to 
Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s project, which was focused on making a self-funded 
aesthetic intervention into public space.

Relatedly, Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s assumption of the role of a social 
scientist, or “ethnographer”\textsuperscript{163} in their artistic processes posed very specific challenges to 
both urban and overarching dominant cultural politics, and the Clark Phipps, Clark and 
Harris study raised some interesting points about Christo’s artistic method as it related to 
the cultural politics of the city. As mentioned above, Christo’s conceptualization of the 
Gates as a “unifying artistic event” combined with the firm’s focus on Blacks and 
Hispanics around the park emulated an ethos of urban reform. The firm, Clark, Phipps, 
Clark and Harris, set out to specifically determine the extent to which minority 
communities around the park agreed with Christo’s mission statement for the project. In 
the letter from Clark, Phipps, Clark and Harris to the city in Christo’s application 
Supplement, Dr. Kenneth Clark wrote:

\begin{quote}
I felt it would be important to share with you some of the reasons that led me to a 
positive and enthusiastic decision to accept this commission. It is my personal 
belief – and I have often stated this in my role as Chairman of the Cultural 
Committee of the Board of Regents – that too often, even in a democratic society, 
art is perceived as an exclusive property, right and concern of the affluent upper
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{162} The “loft” movement completely bypassed the East Village because the Lower East Side had 
always been primarily residential. As a result, the East Village became more associated with the 
hundreds of new small art galleries that opened in New York from 1980 through 1985. The 
residential loft movement was more associated with TriBeCa, SoHo and Greenwich Village, 
which was primarily industrial space. Consequently, the art forms that came from the East 
Village studios versus the West Village, SoHo and TriBeCa lofts were much different.

\textsuperscript{163} This is largely inspired by Hal Foster, "The Artist as Ethnographer," \textit{The Return of the Real} 
classes and the upwardly mobile. In New York City...the works of modern sculptures are almost always placed in midtown Park Avenue or in the commercial and financial districts...The Northern portions of the Park where blacks and Hispanics tend to concentrate seem to have been ignored. Given this fact, one could state that in regard to cultural and artistic events there was an invisible but quite effective wall in a public park dividing the white privileged middle classes from minorities. As I understand the proposal of the Christos, the placing of “The Gates” throughout the length of Central Park from north to south could be the use of art as a unifying force. It is my personal belief that this artistic event would not only provide beauty and joy for all of the people of the City, but would be a real and symbolic opportunity for bringing different groups of New Yorkers together. Obviously, this is my personal belief, but as a social scientist I would need to determine the extent to which these beliefs are or are not shared by other minorities. I therefore have agreed to design and conduct a study to determine the response of minorities to this proposed artistic event. My staff and I will seek answers to such questions as: Are “The Gates” likely to be seen by minorities – blacks and Hispanics – as an integrating use of art? If properly promoted are “The Gates” likely to be perceived by these groups as a unifying symbol which includes them with respect and on equal terms with others rather than another elitist wall which excludes them under the guise of art?^{64}

Clark’s (and thus, the artists’) notion of urban reform and “unification” were in terms of producing an event in public space, whereas the city’s discourse of the relationship between art and urban reform and urban regeneration was clearly more focused on private spaces such as residential artist’s lofts and art galleries. Further, the study’s linking of race with the production of public culture, and its rhetoric of “unification” and urban reform was integral to the performative aspects of the artists’ proposal process. Specifically, the methodological combination of Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s desire to creative a “unifying” artistic event and Clark, Phipps, Clark and Harris’s focus on ethnic minorities highlighted a process of urban reform that was based on an active engagement with community and “difference” in the aestheticization of public space. In the end, the artists’ terms of engagement with “difference” in their artistic process was on much more public terms than was the case within dominant cultural politics. The art establishment’s

\[^{64}\text{City of New York Department of Parks and Recreation, Appendix 1, Exhibit 7; typo in original.}\]
engagement with ethnicity remained in the new art galleries that had popped up in the East Village and the Lower East Side. The “other” in Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s artistic process was not confined to the gallery, but rather an active part in the peformative elements of his work’s investigative process.

Dominant sentiments in mainstream art criticism during the 1980’s were also consistent with the rejection of the artists’ proposal. The proposed form of The Gates, Central Park, New York, 1979-2005 harkened back to art practices of the 1960’s in a number of ways that challenged the predominant “traditional” and “primitive” expressionist ethos of New York’s infamous 1980’s art scene. The artists’ proposed visual effects had an undeniable formal lineage with the art practices of 1960’s movements such as Minimalism, Conceptualism and Earthworks with its modular repetitive and geometric forms, employment of industrial materials and intended method of siting. Minimalist and Conceptualist works were in particular contrast with the neo-expressionist work of the East Village scene and were regarded as irrelevant, infantile modes of aesthetic production in dominant 1980’s art criticism. Art historian Hal Foster has suggested that art world “trashings” of 1960’s art forms in the 1980’s were too vehement to be only a matter of art world polemics. Beyond the vested interest of artists and critics pledged to humanist ideals and/or iconographic images in art, these trashings of minimalism were conditioned...in the 1980’s by a general reaction that used a trashing of the 1960’s to justify a return to tradition in art and elsewhere.

The supposedly apolitical, neo-expressionist, “primitive” qualities of East Village Scene artists such as Basquiat and Haring, “for all its apparent freedoms, participated in the

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cultural regressions of the Reagan-Bush era.”\textsuperscript{167} The new culture of art appreciation and return to more traditional, expressionistic formal elements in the 1980’s New York art world clashed vehemently with any evocation of 1960’s art and politics, particularly those of minimalism and conceptualism and their association with movements of Institutional Critique. Consequently, Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s 1981 proposal for The Gates challenged both dominant political persuasions in New York City as well as cultural politics at a broader scale. The proposal challenged the city with its “event” like structure and its aesthetic associations with the 1960’s. As a result, the very structure of their mode of art production and The Gates proposal was at odds with the dominant political sentiments of the time.

The artists’ employment of social science and “ethnographic” methodologies also marked the 1960’s lineage of their work. While artists of the 1960’s did not utilize the specific methodological framework that Christo and Jeanne-Claude did in their work, the minimalist genealogy and its associated visual offshoots (particularly Land Art, Process Art, Conceptual Art) strove to dislodge art from traditional, institutional settings to encompass more of a phenomenological and pedagogical discussion of the political and institutional framing devices of cultural production. Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s commissioned and contracted out human impact study self-consciously situated his proposal in a myriad of sites and; while this proposal was for the public space in New York City, they also actively immersed their processes in less tangible sites and discursive frameworks of social interrogation. In assuming this role, the performative elements of their work’s process structurally resembled an investigative method that

\textsuperscript{167} Ibid.
strove to highlight the contingency and discursivity of the cultural politics of ethnicity in the city. Clearly, the city and Christo situated difference in entirely different institutional frames. The cultural politics of fine arts in the city moved to domesticate and control “difference” by putting it in a gallery, while Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s process attempted to situate difference in a socially scientific, anthropological frame, highlighting the ethnographic elements of his mode of his production. While the city had grasped the performative capacities of residential rejuvenation in loft spaces and art galleries through gentrification and “tamed” graffiti, public spaces as Christo and Jeanne-Claude imagined them, in terms of unification and diversity, were not yet part and parcel of urban restructuring efforts.

A CHANGING URBAN TIDE

Six years later, in 1987, the New York Times art page reviewed a museum show of Christo’s preparatory works in the collection of Joel Mallin. Author William Zimmer briefly detailed the drawings and collages in the show and then went on to state

It is always said that Christo, who collaborates with his wife, sees the persuading of governments to allow him to realize his schemes as an essential part of his work. Nothing regrettable has ever resulted. Instead of bureaucratic blockage, one can imagine the powers that soon be falling over themselves, even competing, to get Christo to work in their territory. But maybe not. He is still unable to realize his walkways in Central Park. Yet one feels that attitudes may have shifted. Perhaps he should gather up a portfolio such as Mr. Mallin’s and try again.

Zimmer’s commentary reflected that Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s artistic events had something to offer the “powers that be.” However, his feeling that “attitudes may have shifted” did not truly become evident until 8 years later, when The New York Times ran a

168 William Zimmer, “State of the Artists, at the Aldrich, Offers a Flattering Mix,” New York Times 5 April 1987: A1. Interestingly, 1987 was the year that the “East Village Scene” was considered over.
front page picture of the artists’ 1995 Wrapped Reichstag project in Berlin. In the photograph’s accompanying article, art critic Paul Goldberger recognized that the Wrapped Reichstag could not have been realized in 1971 due to political circumstances in Germany at the time:

...cold war tensions meant there was little chance of getting the East German Government’s approval, and the project lay dormant until the fall of the Berlin wall and the reunification of Germany...In any event, there could not be a better moment in history to wrap the Reichstag, if only because of the natural symbolism of unwrapping it now, a chrysalis out of which the new Germany may emerge...All of Berlin seems, in a sense, to have responded to this urban transformation.169

Underscoring the national and geopolitical context of the project, Goldberger located the “transformative” capacities of the work in an urban frame. The New York Times continued to document the event closely for the two weeks that it was installed, and two prevalent themes emerged. The first was the “carnival” or party-like atmosphere created by the installation, and relatedly its capacity to evoke feelings of “renewal.” The second was that the project had increased tourism numbers throughout the city. New Yorker columnist Calvin Tomkins noted

over five million people came to see the “Wrapped Reichstag”...They saw the grim and oppressive architectural pile transformed...into a sensuous, dreamlike fantasy, set down in a sea of picnickers, bongo drummers, strollers, and holiday spirited tourists from all over Europe.170

Art critic Michael Kimmelman characterized the event as a “giddy affair” which transformed the site into “Woodstock East.”171 Even academic accounts of the event garnered similar reaction as those of the media; in her very critical account of the work,

author Beatrice Hanssen stated: "It was hard not to get caught up in the euphoria of the celebration and the fair – like atmosphere that had most of Berlin – at least the western part – in its grip."  

In mainstream American media, the political overtones of the Wrapped Reichstag’s national and geopolitical references were supplanted by specific discussions of its urban context. One of the most significant elements of Wrapped Reichstag was the urban bent of the geographical and geopolitical discussions of its media reception. The project was interpreted in terms of Berlin’s urban topography, which was under massive physical and social transformation at the time. In the media, the work was positioned in relation to the city of Berlin, actively engaged in re-working post-socialist urban space in the context of unified Germany.

In picking up on the carnivalesque, transformative and tourist elements of the project, the media identified the key elements of the project’s affinity to the performative city. Specifically, the focus on the carnival, transformative or party-like atmosphere created by the show alluded to a resonance between Christo’s mode of artistic production and the urban imperatives of the “new economy” or “experience economy” that became prevalent in the 1990’s. The project’s structure and mode of production set a stage for people (especially tourists) to ‘experience’ the work of art. Further, author Beatrice Hanssen remarked that the event’s “well-orchestrated media staging” made the “popular fair” available to spectators world-wide. The structure of the project was virtually frictionless with that of an emerging post-socialist, “globalizing” city. The “globalized”

173 Ibid.
175 Hanssen, 351, 362.
element of the project was brought further home by the 150 trained multi-lingual “interpreters” who served to respond to the questions of a diverse tourist public.176 The presence and performance of these multi-lingual, low-paid, “flexible” workers became an integral element of the work’s visual effects. As a result, the visuality of the event was compatible with the social space of post-industrial urbanism.

Even a year after Wrapped Reichstag took place, Christo and Jeanne-Claude continued to receive critical media attention in New York. In 1996, right wing New York Times columnist John Tierney revisited Christo’s original proposal in for The Gates, Central Park, New York in the paper’s “Big City” column:

While Christo was willing to spend at least $6 million up front, the city stood to make money. It would have collected extra taxes from tourists who came to see the exhibit, and it would have had the exclusive right to sell commemorative merchandise with all proceeds going to the parks Department. So here was an acclaimed artist offering to donate a work that would delight throngs of strollers, offer spectacular views, create jobs and provide cash to the city. How dare he!177

Stressing the economic benefits of their work, Tierney went on to quote Jeanne-Claude talking about the Berlin project: “The city of Berlin collected $100 million in additional taxes. Maybe New York will pay attention when it realizes how much money it can make. We still hope to do this project [The Gates] before we die.”178 Tierney continued in his own words:

I share their hope, and not just because the Gates would be such a fine sight. The project could set a valuable example by encouraging further large works of public art. We need to exploit the city as a backdrop, because that seems to be our greatest economic asset these days....We’ve become the world’s premiere urban theme park, a favorite location of television and film producers, a hub for garish tourist restaurants. Suburbanites may not want to live here, but they’ll pay to look

178 Ibid.
at the exotic scenery, and they'll keep visiting as long as we keep offering attractions like the Gates.\textsuperscript{179}

The attention given to Christo and Jeanne-Claude post-\textit{Wrapped Reichstag} in the \textit{New York Times} focused on how a Christo and Jeanne-Claude project would work well to further the "theme-park" qualities of urban development in 1990's New York. Raising the rejected Gates proposal, Tierney suggested that a large-scale art project would stimulate the economy. Further, his call to "exploit" the city as a "backdrop" reflected an urban political and planning preoccupation with culture and public display. In the closing segment of his narrative, he identified Christo and Jeanne-Claude's resonance with dominant urban political philosophies in New York during the 1990's:

Like Christo, any artists who use public space should pay for the privilege and cover the costs of whatever inconvenience or damage they cause. (This would be a good precedent to apply to any user of public space: a pay-your-own-way policy could eliminate the drearier parades and street fairs that now clog the city.)\textsuperscript{180}

Thus, the further privatization of public space through a "user-pay" system would help temper the "low brow" or kitsch elements of theme restaurants and chain stores that Tierney claimed threatened the cultural vitality of New York. For Tierney, any artist using public space should "pay" for the privileges suggesting that while the arts, and particularly those with "high-art" status, should be welcomed in the city.\textsuperscript{181} Tierney's comments also signalled that cities had turned to consider urban development and restructuring in terms of public sites and spaces as opposed to the focus on more private

\textsuperscript{179} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{180} Tierney, SM27.
\textsuperscript{181} Ibid.
spaces in the 1970’s and 1980’s. The promotion of the creative sector in the city also became geared towards public space.

These positive comments about privatization had kinship with the cultural politics of the Giuliani administration, particularly in its relationship to the production of public culture. Under Giuliani, both levels of private security, policing and the privatization of public space intensified to unprecedented levels. Christo’s artistic mode of production preceded the “user-pay” system that had become so common in the “public” spaces of 1990’s New York City, but despite this, the project lay dormant for the rest of Giuliani’s tenure. In a 2004 interview with New Yorker columnist Calvin Tomkins, Jeanne-Claude attributed the approval of the project to the election of Michael Bloomberg:

Without Michael Bloomberg there would be no ‘Gates,’... “We never even approached anyone during the Giuliani administration. Why? Because we don’t enjoy banging our heads against a stone wall. Henry Stern was the Parks Commissioner, and he was solidly against us. Despite continuing the Koch and Dinkins administration’s institutional efforts towards the privatization of public culture in New York, the Giuliani administration was not known for its support of the arts, and “kneecapped” the city’s arts commission as an “elitist irritant.”

The Bloomberg administration has positioned itself much differently in relation to the arts than the Giuliani administration. When Bloomberg was elected in 2001, he displayed the same fiscal austerity as his predecessor, but began showing support for the arts in other ways. In 2001, he cut the budget of the Department of Cultural Affairs;

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however, at the same time, he began instructing “city agencies ... to smooth the path for artists to let weird stuff happen without impediment.” 185 Despite the lack of financial support, “The city’s art commission... has been empowered at the highest level, with a voice in every significant public-works project in the city.” 186 This quasi-formal policy agenda produced the most pronounced difference between Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s Gates project and all of their other previous works: in March, 2002, Deputy Mayor Patricia Harris, the city’s “unofficial curator” 187 phoned the artists and asked them to undertake the defunct project. 188 In order to understand the reasons for a change of this depth, the following chapter will examine the performative attributes of the installation through an ethnographic exploration.

185 Ibid.
186 Ibid.
187 Ibid.
CHAPTER 3: The Gates and New York as Performative Spaces

My decision to interrogate The Gates, Central Park, New York, 1979-2005 through an ethnographic account came in July 2004, when I visited the Metropolitan Museum of Art for an exhibition of Christo’s preparatory drawings and collages for the event. The show at the Met was set up much like many “traditional” painting and sculpture shows; not surprisingly, its narrative-like flow documented Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s project from its initial inception around 1980 to its point in development in 2004. The works that comprised the show were an even split between preparatory drawings and collages and “documentary” photographs that narrated both the bureaucratic and industrial production processes of the work. The artists’ meetings with various community boards around the city in the 1980’s were hung in the same vicinity as photographs of workers in factories around the North Eastern United States producing the material components of The Gates, mixing the artistic and other types of labour that went into the project. At the Met, labour was presented as part and parcel of the form of Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s work. Further, the installation’s marked preoccupation with different types of work highlighted the ways work and labour processes are integral to Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s self-presentation. This element of the show foreshadowed the ways in which the performance elements of its peculiar labour process resonated with contemporary socio-spatial conditions in the city.

Another pointed instance at the Metropolitan suggested that an ethnographic account of the event would provide a particularly fruitful interpretive frame. It was a very quiet Wednesday afternoon in the American Wing of the Museum in July when a large, imposing man stood in the middle of the gallery space in the midst of the last
section of the installation, threw his hands up in the air and blurted out loudly: “hang on a second, who’s paying for this?” A few other people in the same section of the gallery, myself included, laughed at his humourous and somewhat agitated question. A few seconds later, a woman, who was with the man, came through from another section of the installation, obviously having heard his outburst. Visibly embarrassed and almost whispering, she addressed him: “They are, the artist. Remember, it said at the beginning on the wall and in the book. The artist pays.” Evidently appeased, he looked at his companion and those of us around who had laughed at his outburst and lightheartedly retorted: “Oh, that’s ok then. I hope it snows; that might make it beautiful.” After witnessing this vignette, I spent some time trying to assess this viewer’s engagement with representation of Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s artistic process in the gallery. I realized the potential value of interrogating the technologies of performance that saturate Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s artistic production. These two observations at the Metropolitan highlighted the two fundamental elements of the project’s relationship to the city: labour and viewership. These two elements formed the fundamental organizing principle of my on-site, observational account of the event.

My ethnographic research began six months later on the morning of February 7th, 2005 when dozens of people donning oversized grey vests descended on New York City’s Central Park. Architects, town planners, art students, retirees, homemakers, real estate agents, union activists, financiers and corporate lawyers from all over the United States, and in some cases the world, were some of the 2000 plus people who applied to work on the installation of artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s The Gates, Central Park, New York, 1979-2005. The buzz of apprehensiveness and excitement around the Loeb
Boathouse was tempered only by the ominous weather forecast, which was the most common icebreaker amongst the strangers. People mingled with each other, their newfound comraderie, and somewhat ambiguous friendliness apparent as they tried to seek out their assigned fellow team members for the week. Murmurs of concern about the cold by a female worker from Los Angeles were somewhat playfully, somewhat patronizingly responded to by a group of workers from Chicago: “you’ll warm up once you get working, you Angeleno wuss!” A man in his 60’s, an orange grove farmer from Florida, sympathized with the woman, and offered her a set of thermal glove warmers.

These workers, huddled around the Loeb Boathouse, comprised some of the 72 teams of 8 people, who for eight hours per day for the next five days, would assemble and install the 7,503 orange-coloured Gates along the walkways of the park for $6.25 per hour plus one hot meal per day. Of the over 2000 applicants, these were the workers whose provided acceptable responses to the three questions on the on-line job application posted on Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s website, www.christojeanneclaude.net. These questions were “Are you legally permitted to work in the United States?”, “What days can you work?” and “Can you lift 35 pounds?” One more question via email was sent to all successful respondents: “Can you use a ratchet and a leveller?”

Mingling amongst the grey vests were the area supervisors and team leaders in blue vests. Earning $350.00 and $225.00 per day respectively, these workers were recruited largely by the Central Park Conservancy because of their experience in the events planning, movie and marathon industries. Well versed in the rules and regulations of Central Park, as well as the required ‘diplomacy’ of event planning and service sector employment, these

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189 Conversation with installation workers Kevin* and Steve* aged 18 and 45 respectively. *The names of all respondents have been changed.
190 Conversation with “Team Leaders” Greg* and Harold* aged 38 and 32 respectively.
workers reported to the chief engineer of the project. They also coordinated the
distribution of materials from the numerous drop points and holding areas that had been
set up throughout the main thoroughfares of the park, made sure that the groups installing
the work used their time efficiently, at times even putting pressure on them to quicken
their pace. For the week of February 7th to 11th, 2005, while these workers set up for the
event’s grand “unfurling” on February 12th, I circulated the park in order to get a sense of
the installation labour processes. I positioned myself mainly as an “observer as
participant,” favouring observation over participation in my data collection around the
park.\footnote{Keith Hoggart et al., \textit{Researching Human Geography}, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) 257.}

As groups slowly found each other, they moved towards a line of old yellow
school buses, which were ready to transport the workers to their designated section of the
park to commence work. Their task for the next five workdays was to assemble the
material components of the Gates, and then install them on to the meticulously laid out
800 pound steel bases that neatly lined over 23 miles of walkway in the park. Starting at
various designated points in the park, which had been painstakingly partitioned by the
project’s engineers, the workers began by picking up each group’s specially designed
transport cart from their area’s equipment drop point and holding area. After loading
numerous orange fibreglass tubes, specially manufactured steel braces, and nuts and bolts
onto their orange-coloured carts, they precariously maneuvered their wares through the
winding pathways and gently sloping hills of the park to their assigned work area.
Supplied with a map and detailed diagram entitled “How to Install a Gate,” the teams of
workers, spread all over the park, began their task. A Lord of the Flies-like division of
labour quickly emerged. “Who’s good at using a leveller?” “I can do that, no problem.” “What about a ratchet? They showed us this in training, but I’m not good at it.” “I think that we should all split the different tasks,” “Yeah!” Then, after the negotiations were made, the disparately placed teams, sometimes methodically, and sometimes not, commenced their work. I set out to find out who these workers were, as they came to comprise an integral visual element of the event over the next twenty-one days.

As I wandered throughout the park during the event’s 5-day set-up period from February 7th to February 11th, I took an informal poll of between thirty and forty workers. Interestingly, many of the workers I spoke with (over 70%) were formally educated, particularly in the arts, architecture and urban planning. Of the approximately two hundred and forty workers polled, 197 of them were not from New York, New Jersey or Connecticut, and 118 of them had travelled by air to New York City for the specific purpose to work on the installation. Further, the vast majority of the workers I spoke with that week had learned about the project either directly from Christo and Jeanne-Claude, through Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s website or through word of mouth. Eight of the first ten people I spoke with learned about the project directly from Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s website. Frank, an architect from Delaware explained: “Oh, I’m a big supporter of contemporary art. I found out about this on-line. I signed up on

192 Subjects were approached and asked if they would mind answering a few questions about working on The Gates. I asked the following questions: 1) Where are you from? 2) How did you find out about the project? 3) Why have you chosen to work on the project? 4) Do you have a regular profession? If so, what is it?
193 Of the people I chatted with on February 10, 2005 in 14 teams throughout the park, there were 14 architects, 6 landscape architects, 6 urban planners and 8 graphic designers. I asked 3 of the architects why they thought so many people from that profession were involved in the project. All of them responded that they became particularly interested in Christo’s work after he wrapped the Reichstag in 1995; one male architect went as far as saying that he thought that the Wrapped Reichstag was “one of the most architecturally significant events of the twentieth century.”
194 Conversations with project workers, February 2005.
the website.” Zac, a design student from Ryerson in Toronto learned of the event at school: “My prof mentioned it in our contemporary art class. We were studying the Reichstag and she mentioned it, so a few of us checked out the website and signed up.” Sarah, a physician from the Upper West Side first learned of the event at the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s show in June 2005: “Well, they’re from New York, I mean everyone knows who Christo and Jeanne-Claude are. They’re infamous! I didn’t know that they were planning something from New York until the Met show last year. My daughter and I signed up on the website after we saw that show.” None of the few auxiliary parks workers I encountered throughout the park heard of the project through their employer, the Parks Department. Don, a casual stage hand at the park’s summer theatre event program mentioned: “Oh, I heard from another parks worker friend of mine. He’s one of the blue jacket guys. The conservancy advertised those jobs in the Times, but not these ones. He told me about the project, but they didn’t need any more labourers, so his girlfriend signed me up on the Internet, because I didn’t know how. It’s been good. At first I wanted to do the labourer stuff ‘cause it’s more, but I’ve seen a few of those guys got pretty stressed out over the last week.”

When I asked why they chose to work on the project, a full 90% of respondents used the word “experience” to articulate their reasoning. Branden, a 26 year-old landscape architecture student from San Francisco replied: “It’s for the experience of it all; it’s way different from my own art, and it’s a one-time thing y’know, plus, it’s New York City, not some valley in the mid-west or something.” Joseph, a 69 year-old retired high school art teacher from Orlando, Florida echoed similar sentiments: “I wanted to experience New York differently from your average tourist. Every time I’ve come here,
I’ve done the usual theatre, museum and restaurant thing. This time, I wanted a different experience of the city, plus, I love Christo and Jeanne-Claude.” Melissa, an architect in her mid-30’s from Denver, Colorado responded in a similar vein: “I’ve always wanted the experience of working on a Christo project. This one is great, because it’s not out in the bushes somewhere. Here, I can shop and go to restaurants once we’re done at 4:30. Last night my boyfriend and I went to see the Wooster Group’s new show.” Clearly, for these respondents, the experience that accompanied work on this event was tied to their touristic visions of the city as much as it was being apart of a “high-art” event. For the vast majority of workers I spoke with, work on this project was not about paid employment but rather about a novel experience in New York City.195 Despite the incredibly low wage of $6.25 per hour, the outcome of the poll suggested that very few if any of the workers on the project were from particularly marginalized economic backgrounds.

This is not to say that there were not marked differences within the installation workforce. The workers could loosely be lumped into two groups: younger, more local art school types in their twenties and early thirties, and professional people in their forties and fifties.196 While both highlighted the “experience,” many of the younger workers suggested that they never would have done anything else for minimum wage, many of the older workers suggested that they would have “done it for free.”197 Despite obvious

195 Similar sentiments were expressed by people of all ages working on the project. Despite the dramatic age range from 19 to 71 working on the project (the 71-year old landscape architect from Florida admitted to me about lying about his age on the job application), many also expressed the project was a “good excuse” to go to New York.
196 As mentioned above in Don’s account, some auxiliary and under-employed city parks workers were present in the employment group, however, I estimate that this cohort comprised less than 10% of the installation staff.
197 These were the sentiments of Robert, a retired architect and engineer from Washington DC.
social-class affiliation, the two groups identified themselves quite differently in relation to the job. Many of the younger art-workers in the project made a point of distancing themselves from the task at hand, preferring to present themselves as itinerant, flexible cultural workers who were “between” contracts. Shawn, a 23 year-old part-time art history and biology student from Rutgers University made a point of telling me that the photographic studio he normally worked in was closed for the month of February: “I thought this would be a cool experience, normally I work in a digital photo studio, but my bosses closed up for the month so they could go to Barbados.” Kelly, a woman in her late 20’s from Seattle stated clearly that work on the Christo project was of a completely different calibre than her own talent as a professional artist: “Christo’s neat; I appreciate his work because of that. Plus, it’s nice to take this break and come out to New York ‘cause my own work as an illustrator is so demanding.” Married couple Mary and John from Austin, both architects, were there together working on their fourth Christo project. Both in their fifties, John explained: “I would pay them. I love this stuff. We sign up for every Christo project wherever it is.” Mary echoed her husband’s sentiments: “Oh yes, you’ll find that most of us would do this for nothing; it’s all about what you experience when you’re on the project.” Despite their different dispositions, these workers were clearly there for leisure as opposed to work purposes. Their work performance was clearly for their own leisure and individualized “experience” of the city and the event.

This is not to say that some of the workers on the project did not enjoy the monetary reward that came with the work. Isabel, a 24-year old history and sociology graduate from Pennsylvania State University remarked: “Yeah, this is great, it’s only six

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198 On February 10th, 6 installation workers voluntarily mentioned that they were just waiting for a new job contract to start.
bucks an hour, but it’s a job for the moment. I have an internship lined up at a graphic design studio starting in May, so this ties me over for a bit.” Charlene, a photographic assistant in a studio in Chelsea remarked: “Oh, this has been fun; I live in the Park Slope and I never come uptown. Plus, I’m between contracts at the moment. I start a new job as an editorial assistant for a fashion magazine upstart in March.” Many of these workers were clearly aware of the “status” implications of menial, routinized, interactive work and though many professed to be enjoying themselves, they clearly saw their own professional “worth” as something much greater than the installation work. The project’s “labourers,” who earned $225 USD per day, found themselves in a somewhat more precarious employment position. Workers at this rate were more intimately involved with the large-scale logistics of the project, particularly in relation to the coordination installation-related materials to the various supply drop points around the park. Many of these workers were laid off and rehired numerous times throughout the installation.199 Craig, a 37-year old musician from Staten Island expressed concern over losing his “daily rate” numerous times: “yeah, all I wanna do is hang on to my daily. If they don’t need me any more at this rate, they’ll offer me six bucks instead. Screw that. I’m going to Australia next month, so six bucks isn’t going to cut it.” Sarah, a law-school graduate from Atlanta echoed similarly: “Twenty-eight bucks an hour is as low as I’ll go; two guys got laid off up in area seven yesterday. If they lay me off, so it goes, but I’m not going to do this monitoring stuff, it looks annoying and you have to talk to everyone who comes by. I came here to work and shop, that’s it.” Despite the attitudinal nuances of the workers, both Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s installation workers and “labourers” were overwhelmingly from the “creative” middle class.

199 Conversations with Craig, Jonathan, both employed as “labourers” for the project.
The project's generation of large numbers of temporary interactive service-type jobs clearly mirrored the nature of job creation in contemporary urban economies and social space. This was brought home to me in a discussion with Marcus, an installation worker the afternoon of February 7, 2005. The workers had just come back from their lunch and he was open to chatting about his first day on the job. "They [Christo and Jeanne-Claude] called us their ambassadors to the project today at lunch." When I asked Marcus what he thought they meant by "ambassadors" he replied "dunno, I guess that they want us to be diplomats; y'know, to be nice and friendly to people." Indeed, throughout the week at their communal lunchtime pep talks headed by Christo and Jeanne-Claude, the artists encouraged their workers to be friendly and open with park users. Workers were asked to politely and patiently answer any and all questions passers by might have about their activities. This aspect of the performance demands imposed on the installation ambassadors required them to display their own cultural capital. The arts backgrounds of the ambassadors provided cultural capital to entertain park users and passers by as well as be active participants in the city's hospitality and tourist economy. In the context of an interactive event, these workers and their cultural capital became a fundamental component of both the visuality and "experience" of the project. Not only were many of the workers there for the "experience," but their ambassadorial disposition combined with their cultural capital was a key visual and performative element in the project's relationship with the city. Throughout my observations, it became evident that despite the menial and repetitive nature of the actual

200 A fully catered lunch at the Loeb Boathouse was provided to all of the workers for the duration of the installation. Christo and Jeanne-Claude dined with their workers every day and spent time answering workers' questions about their work in an open-forum style interaction.
201 Casual conversation with 38 year-old male "ambassador" who worked as an executive director in an art gallery in Indiana.
installation task, employment on the project required the workers to perform as tourist entertainers, parks ambassadors and cultural workers.

Relatedly, the appearance of the labour process itself warrants scrutiny in its relationship to the production of urban social space. The installation ambassadors were provided with a grey pinafore-like vest with orange lettering identifying them as part of the project workforce. These were designed to fit over the clothing of the workers as opposed to be a constraining uniform. This identified them as part of the project, but did not conceal their own clothing, and allowed their 'individual' style to remain on display. This aspect of the performance was a key visual element in the event as it highlighted the cultural persona and aura of artsy individuality of the workers. Consequently, the pinafores lent themselves to the formation of a visually cohesive and unified, visually organized environment, while the individuality of each ambassador remained clearly visible. In addition to my other questions, I asked 23 workers throughout the week of February 7th to 11th what they thought of the vests. Charlene and Steve indicated that they would be great souvenirs, while Craig joked that he would try to sell his on Ebay once it was autographed by the artists. Anna, a 34 year-old woman who normally worked in acquisitions at the Met replied: “Oh, wearing it this week is ok because there’s not that many people around while we’re setting up. Next week might suck for the

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202 The legal contract between the artists and the city stated that “All employees, servants and contractors of Artists shall at all times wear appropriate identification tags; Christo and Jeanne-Claude autographed these vests for the workers if they wanted.

203 Various material elements of the project began showing up on Ebay as early as February 6th. The red plastic markers that highlighted the steel bases popped up on the auction site with a starting bid of $9.99. To date, numerous fabric samples that were given out over the duration of the installation are also posted on the auction website, some with starting bids of $7.99.
ambassadors who have signed up to monitor. They won’t be able to escape!” The cynicism of some of the younger workers was brought home to me when asking them about the uniform; Kate, a 21 year old remarked: “Yeah, it’s all about being on the same “team,” isn’t it?! Ha! Actually, it’s not that bad; it’s a good souvenir, and I like the colour grey.” Further, the aesthetic of the physical labour processes demanded by the installation design further added to the aura of a coherent and cooperative environment. Assembling and raising required the coordinated energy and bodily movements of at least five out of six of the team members.

Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s own status as an entrepreneurial business people was one of the key elements in the project’s staging, and consequently, fielding questions about the economics of the work became an integral element of the ambassadors’ performance. Art historian Paula Harper commented that public interest in Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s finances were particularly piqued during The Gates:

The fascination with the way that Christo and Jeanne-Claude run the business of their art reached a peak with the installation of their Central Park project, The Gates, perhaps because New York is – symbolically, at least – the center of world capitalism – and home to many individuals and firms whose chief interest in commerce and finance.

This fascination with the financial aspect of the work was clearly evident in the park throughout both the set-up and installation phases of the event. Karol, a union activist from San Diego working on the installation remarked to me: “Deb, everyone who walks

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204 Throughout the entire event, the artists hired monitors (many of whom also worked on the installation part of process) who were stationed all over the park to answer any questions from park users as well as to hand out small fabric samples of the material used on the project.

205 This was the case for all of the groups I observed between February 7th and 11th.

206 More than 85% of passers-by in the park who stopped to talk to the workers mentioned something about the cost of the exhibition.

by, I mean everyone, wants to know how much, how much, how much. I tell them
twenty mill, and most of them laugh, and then of course, some of them are disgusted.
This morning a woman told me to tell Christo that he should donate that money to the
Tsunami relief. I laughed and told her that that’s not what he does, he’s an artist.” The
sentiments of the gallery-goer’s outburst in the Metropolitan Museum of Art six months
earlier were echoed countless times, as the vast majority of people were immediately
appeased when told that the event was funded entirely by the artists. Steve, one of the
installation workers mentioned to me: “well, the public would really have a shit fit if they
were forking over for this, wouldn’t they? I mean, I would, and I’m one of these
bleeding heart liberals!” John, another installation worker from the same team piped in:
“Yeah, that’s why they keep printing it in the papers over and over and over again. It’s
like they need everyone to know, the city’s not paying, the city’s not paying, the city’s
not paying. It makes sense I suppose; everyone would really be up in arms, wouldn’t
they?” A park-user in the north end of the park on February 10th looked bewildered as he
read his newspaper on a bench; he looked up at one of the members of the nearby
installation team and remarked: “He’s spending 20 million on this? Well, better him than
us, right?” Two of the team members laughed and one piped in: “Yeah, better him for
sure; he’s footing the whole bill, not the city.”

Throughout the duration of the event, I also casually polled over 140 park users
and “viewers” for their initial reactions and overall impressions of the installation.208
Interestingly, their sentiments were almost identical to those of the project ambassadors.
Frank, an elderly man from Wisconsin who was visiting his daughter in New York

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208 Between February 10th and 21st, I asked a number of the event’s viewers who were not a part of
Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s workforce what their impression of the event was.
remarked: “Oh, this has been quite the experience. I’ve never seen anything like it. It’s
definitely a New York moment.” Katya, a restaurant consultant from San Francisco
remarked “Only in New York. This has been a crazy experience. They couldn’t do this
in Golden Gate Park, because it’s filthy and teeming with crime.” Darren, her companion
in the park interrupted: “Oh, Golden Gate’s not as bad as it used to be, but this is a
quintessential New York experience. Y’know, when you Canadians say “only in
America” about something? Well, this is sort of like that, only it’s “only in New York.”
Terry, an elderly woman from Brooklyn remarked: “Oh, its quite something. I can’t
believe the scale of it all. But most of all, I’m very happy to hear he’s paying. What a
nice thing to do; I mean, I’ve been in New York my whole life, and I’ve never, ever seen
this many people in the park, especially up North there. Have you been up north yet?
It’s unbelievable.” These sentiments were also clearly evident in a number of
conversations I held with people who I encountered on various organized tours of the
event. Megan, a lab technician from Toronto remarked: “This is just the coolest thing
I’ve ever seen. I’m so glad I got to experience it. I mean, only here would you find some
crazy artist who is willing to spend twenty-six million bucks to make some crazy vision
come true.” Ted, a local man exclaimed “It’s great to experience the park like this. It’s a
nice change. I jog here all the time and I love it, but this is just like a massive infusion of
happiness, and it’s free.”

The performative elements of The Gates, Central Park, New York, 1979-2005
were also shot through other park activities throughout the two weeks of the installation.
On Saturday February 19th, I took a walking tour with the Municipal Art Society. Lisa,
the guide of the tour, a life-long New Yorker was also an artist. A self-professed long-
time Christo fan, she imparted a great deal of information about the artists and this work of “precedent-setting art which brings people together” throughout the ninety-minute tour. Throughout the tour, she encouraged participants to “focus on the experience and the ingenious design.” However, the most pronounced theme in her discussion of the work was how “safe” the work of art was both in relation to both its design and its park location. She enthusiastically showed the crowd pictures of the construction process and imparted that “rigorous” stress and wind tests had been done on the fabric in Germany and another two and a half years of testing was done on the fibreglass and steel structures to ensure their structural safety in various weather conditions. Consequently, the fabric could swing freely from the steel and fibreglass structures due to their “incredible security.” In tandem with this, she remarked on the safety of the site: “the Harlem part of the park has never been safer than it has been this week, the park used to be a horrible place.”

These sentiments were also echoed in another walking tour I took with well-known New York City tour company The Big Onion. In this case, the tour guide was a middle-aged man named Steve from New Jersey who had a doctorate degree in history from NYU. While Steve professed to know absolutely nothing about Christo and Jeanne-Claude, he was quick to note that he was extraordinarily well-versed in the history of Central Park. His initial joking remarks about the installation highlighted how safe he thought the park was compared to two decades ago: “Well call me philistine, but this isn’t art! But that’s another story. I know nothing about this orange thing we have all over the park here, but I’m guessing that it’s here because the park is a safe place now. I never would have done these walking tours twenty years ago, and you never would have seen
this “art” in the park twenty years ago either.” Neither the Big Onion nor the Municipal Art Society tours were specially set up for the installation. Rather, they were tours that were regularly throughout the year as a part of New York City’s tourism economy. Their focus on the history of the park and the historical monuments in the park respectively was accented with a specific focus on the contemporary social conditions visible in the park as part of creating a safe and comfortable tourist experience.

The rhetoric of “safety” and “security” ran through every element of the installation process and consequently imbued its entire visual staging in the park, from the presentation of its workers to its physical materiality. The safety and security preoccupations that imbued the materiality of the work were perhaps the most painstakingly engineered elements of the whole project. The shiny, light-weight fibreglass frames were designed to be instantly disassembled and replaced if vandalized or damaged. The fibreglass frames served the park’s security and policing forces well; a few minor incidences of graffiti and vandalism were reported by the parks department, however, given its vinyl materiality, the “damage” was quickly wiped off. Further, the rip-stop, fire-proof orange nylon fabric suspended from the rectangular frames was hung just high enough above the heads of passers-through to make it difficult to cut pieces of the fabric.

The discourse of safety was further brought home by the dramatic increase of police and private security presence in the park for the duration of the work. The New

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209 Impromptu conversation with Vince Davenport, Chief Project Engineer, February 18, 2005.  
211 Telephone conversation with Commissioner Jack Linn from the New York City Parks Department, Tuesday February 15, 2005.
The problem with protecting public art is, well, it’s public... So “The Gates, Central Park, New York City, 1979-2005,” by the husband and wife team of Christo and Jeanne-Claude, has prompted one of the largest efforts by the New York Police Department to protect a single installation of art - proportional to the attention-grabbing nature of the exhibit, which is expected to draw at least 200,000 tourists to New York...  

Even Steve, the Big Onion tour guide remarked about the dramatic police presence in the park: “Wow, this is a lot of cops, even for New York. There’s as many police officers as there is civilians here right now.” Steve’s remark indicated the performative elements of the display of security and policing during the installation. The New York Times further remarked on the policing efforts:

The department is dispatching helicopters that broadcast live aerial feeds, building a 24-hour command center in the Loeb Boathouse at the park and adding several hundred police officers to the park’s 125-person police force. There will be 20 officers on horseback and 43 on scooter patrol... Raymond W. Kelly, the police commissioner, said the artists would reimburse the city for any costs it incurs...  

The NYPD also took on a more diplomatic, ambassadorial role in the park for the exhibition: “The department has also set up an 87-officer detail to translate in five foreign languages: French, Italian, German, Japanese and Chinese. And it has published a guide to the exhibit.” In addition to the increased numbers of NYPD for the project, the Christo and Jeanne-Claude requested and funded a private policing and security unit in the park from 6pm until 6am every morning, which comprised of 36 private security guards to secure their supply service depots at 102nd Street as well as at other supply drop

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213 Ibid.
214 Ibid.
stations around the park. These private officers remained fixed in place while Parks Department Peace Officers and NYPD performed their usual mobile patrolling services in the park.

PERFORMATIVE URBAN SPACE

The responses and interactions I observed in the park raised integral points about the event’s relationship with contemporary formulations of urban space and cultural politics. Specifically, my observations of the installation revealed the ways in which the structure of this project resonated with contemporary urban political imperatives. In order to decode what I saw and heard in the park, my analysis begins with this premise: through its process of production and discreet visual elements, the installation took on numerous characteristics of experience economy and entrepreneurial and creative cities scripts. Specifically, the event effectively smoothed over and reinforced a normative field of contemporary urban social space in its performance of both the rhythms of everyday life, leisure, labour and the spectacular. While the discreet performative elements of the event were the cornerstone of my ethnographic observations, an understanding of the whole event as a performance provides the most useful interpretive frame in analyzing its relationship with urban space and social processes.

The form of the event was clearly akin to the performance imperatives of the “experience” economy, particularly through its “experientializing” of labour, leisure, the

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215 Telephone conversation with Commissioner Jack Linn from the New York City Parks Department, Tuesday February 15, 2005.
216 Ibid.
park and the city. Even mainstream media conceived of the event as a stage set or theatrical:

The crowd’s many-voiced sound had an indoor intimacy, like the bright murmur in a theatre, during intermission, when the play is good and everybody knows it. That over-all social effect, which was somewhat like that on an electrical blackout or a major blizzard, minus the inconvenience, was weird and terrific.

What became clearest in my ethnographic account were the ways in which the discreet performative elements of the event rendered the city’s space as a stage. The structure of the performance relied heavily on a high volume of “interactive service jobs” in which distinctions “among product, work process and worker are blurred, or nonexistent, since the quality of the interaction itself be part of the service offered.” Its formulation of labour emulated aestheticized rendition of work, and the event as a whole, staged an enactment of “flexible” and “creative” post-industrial labour processes. The event’s combination of human and material elements resonated with the heavily policed and orderly, performative city in which “production process and product present themselves as two inseparable aspects, not as two separable ideas.” Further, Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s resonance with the economic imperatives of the global cities script was evidenced in their evocation of highly specialized consumption: the design of the installation was both literally, physically “custom tailored” and socially engineered to fit the spaces of Central Park.

The most visually integral and apparent element of the event’s kinship with larger cultural and urban socio-economic processes was its production of a large number of

217 Pine and Gilmore, see in particular Chapter 1.
temporary, low-level “interactive-service”-type jobs. In his account of entrepreneurial modes of urban governance, Harvey notes “the kinds of service activities and managerial functions which get consolidated in urban regions tend to be either low-paying jobs or very high paying positions at the top end of the managerial spectrum.” In the case of the Gates project, the workforce literally embodied both extremes of the spectrum. Despite the fact that the installation work itself was low-level, routinized, interactive service employment, the event workforce was overwhelmingly comprised of middle-class “cultural” workers and tourists who found the work to be a novel experience. Given the majority of their educational levels, professional backgrounds and “artsy” individuality, the event’s staff were clearly able, to use Zukin’s words, “adequately represent the cultural capital invested in the project.” Their “word of mouth” and on-line employment and hiring practices reflected the project’s reliance on both local and tourist creative workers. Though the jobs created by the CVJ Corporation were tailored for the low-level service sector, a marginalized and underemployed labour pool was not represented, highlighting the exclusionary element of their business structure and hiring practices. Consequently, the event clearly underscored issues of inequality with respect to access to employment in the contemporary city.

The artists’ characterization of their installation workers as “ambassadors” was also a key element in the project’s indexical relationship to dominant formulations of

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221 I take this definition from Robin Leidner’s “Serving Hamburgers and Selling Insurance: Gender, Work and Identity in Interactive Service Jobs,” Gender and Society 5, 2 (June 1991): 154-177.
urban social space. This label has significant resonance with “theme park” discourses in urban restructuring. Along with their uniform pinafores, the monitoring workers carried an official “wand,” described in one art magazine as “a pole with a tennis ball on the end which can be used to flip the gates back over if they get twisted in the wind.” Thus, their friendly, knowledgeable, ambassadorial positions were also employed to keep the event’s visual effects orderly with the use of a “wand.” The contrast between these apparently unalienated, friendly, hospitable ambassadors and the “unenthusiastic blue-collar workers” the artist spoke of in 1977 couldn’t be more pronounced. Relatedly, the performance and display of the event and its labour also clearly fit into the imperatives of entrepreneurial modes of urban political processes. For Harvey, the entrepreneurial city “has to appear as an innovative, exciting, creative, and safe place to live or to visit, to play and to consume.” Thus this combination of young, “culture workers” and bourgeois tourists served the city particularly well. Through Christo and Jeanne-Claude, the city’s space was, to use Harvey’s words:

> opened for display, fashion and the “presentation of self” in a surrounding of spectacle and play. If everyone, from punks and rap artists to the “yuppies” and the haute bourgeoisie can participate in the production of an urban image through their production of social space, than all can at least feel some sense of belonging to that place.

Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s art business and event structure clearly emulates key contradictory elements of the “creative cities” imperative. Though New York City has

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227 Ibid., 14.
always been considered a capital of arts and culture, Bloomberg’s “arts administration” and the city’s invitation to the artists took after larger trends in urban politics, particularly the intensified focus on culture, creativity and the development of amenities-based growth in cities throughout the United States. Author Richard Florida, pioneer of the “creative cities” thesis and development script, purports that “creativity” is the most important, primary mode and means of production in the new economy. The “creative class” associated with this means of production (and consumption) are the embodiment of a “big morph,” which he conceives of as the melding together of “protestant work ethic” and “bohemian” value systems. Cities, Florida proclaims, should base their development focus on providing attractive amenities for these bourgeois bohemians, or “Bobos.” In this sense, Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s mode of production is an almost idealized embodiment of Florida’s thesis. The event visually dramatized the creative cities imperatives in public terms, putting the productive components of the creative cities thesis on public display.

According to Jamie Peck, the “creative cities” thesis “mixes cosmopolitan elitism and pop universalism, hedonism and responsibility, cultural radicalism and economic conservatism, casual and causal interference, and social libertarianism and business realism.” For The Gates, Central Park, New York, 1979-2005, the artists actively blurred “cosmopolitan elitism and pop universalism” through deploying their own “high art” status with mass spectacle production. Their hybrid avant-garde and populist urban

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229 Ibid.
cultural attraction combined “hedonism and responsibility” by spending over twenty million dollars on a “personal vision” while creating jobs and stimulating economic activity. Further, for the event, they combined “cultural radicalism and economic conservatism” through practicing art in their trademark “uncustomary” manner by the exploitation of a cheap, but eager pool of labour available in an enthusiastic, “experience-seeking” creative-leisure class. The event further served to bolster and energize their workers’ identities as creative and “artsy.” The visuality of the project dramatized and displayed these contradictions through the fashioning of the artwork itself, which was a painstakingly engineered amenity, designed for and catered to a mobile, “creative” class.

In his account “Performing the City,” Paul Makeham states “Contemporary urban planning encompasses not only physical design, but ‘cultural animation’ as well...”232 The Gates, Central Park, New York, 1979-2005 was clearly a site of cultural animation. The project’s combination of physical and social engineering highlighted a combination of material and human elements that could be characterized as the socialist realism of contemporary public culture. The performance presented “real life” as a supposedly inspirational experience, and the city became an integral element of the subject matter. It not only set the city as a stage, but the project itself was an amenity that dramatized the creative city. The event, a pinnacle instance of the symbolic economy, unified practices of entrepreneurial business and finance, labour, art, performance and design to frame a vision of the city. The project quite literally performed the city by enacting and dramatizing dominant socio-economic processes and imperatives in the city. The social

coding inherent in the project's visual process formulated a politics of representation that clearly marked who this project catered to.

Further adding to its aesthetic resonance with the dominant political culture was a curious element of the legal agreement that was drawn up between the City of New York and the artists. Before this work, the artists have never executed a formal exhibition opening. Their previous outdoor exhibits have always opened without spectacular opening ceremonies; rather, their exhibits have begun with their ambassador employees arriving on the job site like any other workday to unfurl or unravel the final components of the exhibition. However, the legal contract between the two parties for The Gates stated:

> On or about the beginning of the Exhibition Period, should an opening event be planned, Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Parks Commissioner Adrian Benepe (or their designees) and a representative of CPC shall be given an opportunity to briefly welcome the audience to the Work of Art and Parks reserves the right to add an additional speaker to any welcome portion of the Work of Art, with the approval of Artists.\(^{233}\)

As a result of this clause, Mayor Bloomberg formally announced the opening of the exhibition on the morning of Saturday February 12\(^{th}\) surrounded by a large group of school children, and Christo and Jeanne-Claude in the southwestern corner of the park. In a dramatic, highly orchestrated photo opportunity, Bloomberg was given the task of unfurling the first Gate from its Velcro cocoon of fabric attached to the top frame of the fibreglass frame. The opening extravaganza placed the city and its administration at the center of the performance, and was covered in every major newspaper in the city. The work's kinship with notions of propagandistic socialist realism also resonated with this

aspect of the performance, as it presented a public opportunity for the glorification of the
“supportive,” innovative, entrepreneurial city government.

THE EVENT IN THE MEDIA

The event’s generation of economic activity was a key element of the news media’s coverage of the installation process. One of the major foci in this stream of coverage was the presentation of various accounts of the economic benefits this event bestowed on working people. *The New York Times* ran an article entitled “For Vendors in Central Park, Saffron Exhibit Proves Green!” The piece began by stating:

Dennis Roman hardly had a moment to look up at the towering orange frames snaking through Central Park, their saffron fabric waving in the Sunday sun. Not that he minded; he had hot dogs to sell. On a typical Sunday in February, Mr. Roman said, he usually makes about $1000. By 3 p.m. yesterday, he had already taken in $1,000.234

The Times continued to chronicle this element of the event with this particular focus:

“All Apricot Fabric Plus Gray Panes Turns Squeegees Into Bits of Gold” (figure 20) told the story of a residential window cleaner:

Patrick Shields, a residential window cleaner in Manhattan, was just settling into his annual winter break in late January when the phone began ringing off the hook. At first he couldn’t account for the volume of calls for his services, but then he spotted a pattern: all the customers, many of them anxious, lived on streets bordering Central Park. It was then that Mr. Shields realized that he was personally reaping the vaunted economic benefits of Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s public art project “The Gates.” And Mr. Shields has been hanging out at high-rise apartments ever since, earning unaccustomed profits by wielding his suddenly in-demand squeegee on more than 200 windows along Central Park West, Fifth Avenue and Central Park South.235

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235 John Freeman Gill, “Apricot Fabric Plus Gray Panes Turns Squeegees Into Bits of Gold,” *New York Times* 20 February 2005: Neighborhood Report, Section 14, Page 6. The article chronicled the increased business for a number of window cleaning companies in the city during the event. One window cleaner on the West Side was quoted stating: “Increases in those locations could be a hundred percent over normal. And there’s an increased urgency: the sooner the better.”
In the article, Shields was quoted:

This is two grand in my pocket that I never make this time of year...And what’s most interesting to me, in terms of the importance people give ‘The Gates,’ is that in a lot of cases I’m cleaning windows that aren’t that dirty and don’t really need it, but they [apartment dwellers who overlook Central Park] want to get a good clean shot at this thing.\textsuperscript{236}

The press’s focus on this element of the project highlighted the ways in which this event could be an instance of socialist realism in the context of contemporary urbanism. The \textit{New York Times} presented the window cleaners’ and hot dog vendors’ experience of the event in their capacity to service it, and of course, highlighted the monetary rewards reaped from doing so. Further, the press’s presentation of the event in largely economic terms harkened back to Bloomberg’s words at January 2003 press conference. Within the first two minutes of his 2003 speech, the mayor stated:

and goodness knows we need this addition to our economy...Tourism as you know is New York’s second largest industry creating fifteen billion dollars a year in direct spending for the local economy. The arts are the backbone of that industry. The fact is that people come here for New York’s arts and culture, then they stay in our hotels and eat in our restaurants. So expanding New York’s position as the world’s pre-eminent home for cutting edge art is crucial to our city’s creative spirit and its chequebook\textsuperscript{237}

These utterances were an exemplary instance of the city’s effectiveness at “promoting commerce on the basis of its association with high culture [rather than] promoting high culture as its base.”\textsuperscript{238} The city and the media appealed to the public through highlighting the economic aspects of the event, citing the capacity of art and artists in jumpstarting economic activity. As with Soviet formulations of Socialist Realism in the first half of

\textsuperscript{236} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{238} Zukin (1995) 150.
the twentieth century, accounts of workers became an obligatory part of dominant visual
culture. This was clear not only in the media’s accounts of “working” people such as hot
dog vendors and window cleaners, but also the installation workers themselves, who were
the more bourgeois component of the workforce, were chronicled daily in local
newspapers. In this sense, the work also resonated with a “new economy” version of
Socialist Realism, as it chronicled, even heroicized the workers who toiled on its behalf.

In this conceptualization of a socialist realism of the new economy, it is only
fitting to investigate some other accounts of bourgeois consumption habits during the
event. On Friday February 11th, 2005, one day before The Gates, Central Park, New
York, 1979-2005 were set to be unfurled, The New York Times ran a story entitled
“Above the Park, When ‘The Gates’ Open.” The article was accompanied by a
photograph of the Rosen family in their apartment, overlooking Central Park (figure
21). It began:

Suddenly, New Yorkers with friends in high places are wondering: Are their
friends in the right high places, that is, overlooking Central Park? And when is
their party? “The Gates,” a $20 million art project by the artist Christo and his
wife, Jeanne-Claude, opens tomorrow in Central Park, and it promises to be a
social event, not just an artistic one. “Everyone I know who lives around the
park is doing parties for ‘The Gates,’ said Annalieses Soros, who is planning two
parties of her own in her apartment on Central Park West. “The Christo events
are happenings, and they attract a lot of enthusiasm. They attract a lot of people.
They do something very special and very different....But some party-givers say
the crowd they are expecting is bigger than they originally planned. The guest
list grew as friends called, and friends of friends and friends of friends.
”... Donna Rosen, who lives on the 43rd floor of a building a couple of
blocks south of Mrs. Soros’s, recalled her conversations with her caterer,
Gretchen Aquanita, as they planned an open house in Mrs. Rosen’s apartment
we might be over 100.’ Then I called, ‘200.’ She said, ‘Ahhggghh.’” As the gates

239 Accounts of the workers’ biographies and “experiences” were frequent in the New York Times
throughout the entire installation.
B2.
241 Ibid.
were being set in place beneath Mrs. Rosen’s floor-to-ceiling windows on Wednesday, the count was up to 240, and she was talking about Ms. Aquanita’s plans for a menu to match the orange color of the fabric-covered gates on the park’s pedestrian paths....Gail May Engelberg, who has invited friends to her apartment on Fifth Avenue, remembered chatting with Christo a couple of years ago at an event for the Guggenheim Museum. “I said, ‘How’s the project coming?’” she recalled. “I wanted to host my friends and be able for them to have a look down on ‘The Gates’ whether there is snow or ice or sunny blue skies.”

These detailed accounts of the elite apartment dwellers plans for the event brings my analysis back to the 1981 Clark, Phipps, Clark, and Harris social impact study, and the more affluent subjects who did not support Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s project. The 2005 *New York Times* account and the results of the 1981 Clark, Phipps, Clark and Harris study crystallized the dramatic attitudinal contrasts between 1981 and 2005 of people in the same community. In 1981, the communities surrounding the park expressed concern over whether Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s event would “fit in” to Central Park. In 2005, the same community strove to “fit” the event into their catered party menus. Their differences could not be more pronounced: the 1981 accounts of “man dominating nature” and the “ill fitting” characteristics of the Gates cited in the 1981 Clark, Phipps, Clark and Harris study had clearly given way to a much more celebratory, accepting approach to the event. *The New York Times* even cited the interiors around Central Park as a “moving cocktail party all day, until it gets dark.” There is also some irony here between the artists history in Nouveau Realisme’s efforts to challenge “fundamental tenets of middle class art and its appreciation.” The geographical paradigm in this juxtaposition is cardinal, as it captures the deep contrast between the attitudes described

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242 Ibid.
243 Ibid.
244 Altshuler, 205.
in the Clark, Phipps, Clark and Harris study in 1981, and the attitudes of current communities around the park towards the event.

While the artists insisted on the “purposelessness” of their work, it had quite a different meaning from the standpoint of New York City’s administration: the city’s press release after the event began with a subheading that stated “Over 4 Million Visitors to Central Park.” The release focused specifically on the economic benefits that the event brought to various elements of the tourist industry in the city such as hotels, restaurants, attendance at cultural organizations and business at park concessions and attractions. Even the *Vancouver Sun* dedicated one third of a page to the installation’s financial outcome in their Saturday arts section: “Christo display boosts New York: 16-day Central Park project provided the Big Apple with $254-million windfall” boasted the effects of the event on the city’s tourist economy. To further bring home the economic impact of the event, *The Vancouver Sun* quoted Mayor Bloomberg’s financial estimation of the event’s impact the day before it was unfurled:

Bloomberg, who on the eve of the display estimated its economic impact at about $80 million, called the project a “daring labour of love.” “In the wake of 9/11, we knew we had to go out for big, bold projects that would set our city apart and continue to draw people into town,...This was not a time to look inward and play it safe.”

As I have tried to argue throughout this paper, Bloomberg’s rhetoric couldn’t be more inaccurate. The city’s invitation to Christo and Jeanne-Claude was quite literally, a dramatic instance of “playing it safe,” which reverberated clearly through the work’s painstaking social engineering and visual processes.

245 http://www.nyc.gov/cgi-bin – Accessed March 5, 2005
CONCLUSION

One month after Jeanne-Claude’s utterances at the city’s press conference announcing the event, people in New York City were denied the right to march through the streets of New York City in opposition to the United States’ invasion of Iraq. Six months before The Gates, Central Park, New York, 1979-2005 were unfurled in Central Park, people in New York were denied the right to gather in the park during the Republican National Convention in opposition to the Bush administration. Yet, Christo and Jeanne-Claude were enthusiastically invited to produce an event that witnessed over four million visits to Central Park in sixteen days.\footnote{www.nyc.gov. Accessed March 8, 2005.} The visual form of The Gates, Central Park, New York, 1979-2005 created a site where this stifling political context was confirmed. Perhaps one of the most troubling characteristics of the event was its dramatic departure from some of the artists’ previous, more political work. In her commentary on Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s early work in the Middle East and their Wrapped Reichstag project in Berlin from 1995, Beatrice Hanssen has remarked on the dwindling political commitment throughout Christo’s long artistic career: “Clearly, then, if at the beginning of his artistic career Christo resorted to oil barrels as the waste product of capitalism and as “found” material most readily at hand, then these more recent transfigurations seem to have lost that critical edge.”\footnote{Hanssen, 350-368.} Art Historian Hal Foster has also commented on the seeming lack of politics in the form of The Gates: “In effect, they turned a semi-Situationist strategy of détournement or the diversion of official sites to
subversive ends, into a semi touristic form of packaging...The Gates...was organizational feat at best, not an institutional critique."  

Hanssen and Foster make pointed remarks about various aspects of the formal transformation of Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s career. What their critical commentaries fail to identify is the political significance of the “depoliticization” or the overt diminishment of political references in the artists’ work. Considering The Gates, Central Park, New York 1979-2005, this diminishment, I have argued, can be tied to profound transformations in urban political aims and social formations, and consequently civic public culture. Indeed, as early as 1989, critic Patricia Phillips commented that public art “has been reduced to making people feel good...a reactionary, unambitious intention.”  

In the case of this event, key transformations in urban political culture, the post-industrial labour force, particularly those related to the “experience economy” and the “creative cities” imperative were an integral part of the city’s invitation to Christo and Jeanne-Claude.

Fig. 12. Christo and Jeanne-Claude. *Running Fence, Sonoma and Marin Counties, 1972-76*. Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s website:
http://www.christojeanneclaude.net/sharedMedia/RunningFence/wolfgangv/RF+ManClassic.jpg
Fig. 13. Christo and Jeanne-Claude. *Running Fence, Sonoma and Marin Counties, 1972-76*. Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s website: http://www.christojeanneclaude.net/sharedMedia/RunningFence/wolfgangv/RF+ManClassic.jpg
Fig. 14. Christo and Jeanne-Claude. *Surrounded Islands, Miami, Florida, 1980-83.*
Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s website:
http://www.christojeanneclaude.net/sharedMedia/SurroundedIslands/si2.jpg
Patrick Shields, a resident window cleaner in Manhattan, settled into his annual winter business late in January when the phone was ringing off the hook. At first he couldn't account for the volume of calls for his services, but he spotted a pattern: all the customers of them anxious, lived on streets bordering Central Park.

It was then that Mr. Shields realized he was personally reaping the vaunted artistic benefits of Christo and Jeanne-Claude's art project "The Gates." And Mr. Shields has been hanging out at high-rise apartment windows wielding his suddenly in-demand squeegee, cleaning more than 200 windows along Central West, Fifth Avenue and Central Park South.

"This is two grand in my pocket this time of year," Mr. Shields said the other day. "And what's interesting to me, in terms of the importance people give 'The Gates,' is that in a lot of cases they're cleaning windows that aren't that dirty, but they want to get a clean shot at this thing."

Other window washers report a surge in business around the park's perimeter.

"We're probably doing at least 50 a day around the park," said Richard Kulzer, owner of Frank's Window Cleaning Co., which specializes in Yorkville and the West Side. "Increases in those locations can be a hundred percent over normal. And there's an increased urgency: the sooner the better."

The unexpected spike in business reminded Mr. Kulzer of the period before the Bicentennial celebrations in 1976, when the trash sailed up the Hudson River, prompting an increased number of calls from Riverside Drive residents.

Elizabeth Bailey, whose family's floor apartment on West 94th Street overlooking the park, is one "Gates" fan who waited until the day before the project's unveiling before summoning a window cleaner.

"We had friends from TriBeCa arrive who spent the night, because they were unable to have a cup of coffee and just look at the window," Ms. Bailey said. Beginning at morning the apricot-colored fabric was unfurled in the park, Ms. Bailey's family's open house that attracted adults as well as many small children. "My windows were crystal clear, so it was like looking at a real painting..."
Above the Park, When ‘The Gates’ Open

BY JAMES BARRON

Suddenly, New Yorkers with friends in high places are wondering: Are their friends in the right high places, that is, overlooking Central Park? And when is their party?

“The Gates,” a $20 million art project by the artist Christo and his wife, Jeanne-Claude, opens tomorrow in Central Park, and it promises to be a social event, not just an artistic one.

“Everybody I know who lives around the park is doing parties for ‘The Gates,’” said Annaliese Soros, who is planning two parties of her own in her apartment on Central Park West. “The Christo events are happenings, and they attract a lot of enthusiasm. They attract a lot of people. They do something very special and very different. Berlin had five million tourists when he draped the Reichstag. We won’t have that many here.”

She meant in the city, not in her apartment. But some party-givers say the crowd they are expecting is bigger than they originally planned.

The 7,500 gates in the project have been installed throughout this week. Tomorrow morning, fabric will be unfurled from atop the gates. The project will be on view for 16 days.

Mrs. Soros said, “Then I called again, ‘I think we might be over 100.’ Then I called, ‘200.’” She said, “Ahhgggh.”

As the gates were being set in place beneath Mrs. Soros’s floor-to-ceiling windows on Wednesday, the count was up to 240, and she was talking about Ms. Aquanita’s plans for a menu to match the orange color of the fabric-covered gates on the park’s pedestrian paths.

“She said, ‘Shall we use saffron?’” Mrs. Soros recalled. “I said, ‘Of course.’” Ms. Aquanita began planning shrimp and saffron salad, Mrs. Rosen said.

Gail May Engelberg, who has invited friends to her apartment on Fifth Avenue, remembered chatting with Christo a couple of years ago at an event for the Guggenheim Museum. “I said, ‘How’s the project coming?’” she recalled. “I wanted to host my friends and be able for them to have a look down on ‘The Gates’ whether there is snow or ice or sunny blue skies.”

For some, just looking out the window was not enough to make sure they had a clear view. “I walked over to the park to make sure that I could see the two windows of my apartment,” said Rosamond Ivey, a trustee of the Art Gallery of Ontario, who is giving a “Gates” cocktail party in her apartment on East 79th Street.

Mr. Moos, the curator of contemporary art at the Ontario museum, will be joined by Jonathan Feinberg, an art historian who wrote a monograph on “The Gates.”

Mr. Moos, whose museum has a Christo exhibition on display, said he is looking forward to seeing “The Gates” from ground level and from Ms. Ivey’s apartment.

“If you think of Central Park as the great democratic American space, Jeffersonian, Whitmanic, in the heart of the metropolis, it is interesting to contemplate who has access to the aerial view,” he said. “It puts into relief this political dimension.”

And then there are the corporate parties. Budget Living magazine, for example, sent invitations for a breakfast-lunch-or-midday-break party that will begin at 8:30 a.m. Tuesday in a 24th-floor apartment with Oscar de la Renta furniture and 10 Christo images on the walls.

“It’s more like a moving cocktail party all day, until it gets dark,” said Donald E. Welsh, the magazine’s founder.

And no, it will not break Budget Living’s budget: the apartment, the furniture and the Christos are all borrowed.

Mrs. Soros, who lives on the ninth floor, will be closer to “The Gates.”

“It will be like watching the Thanksgiving Day parade,” she said.

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