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Remembering Christo's Profound Humanism

The artist, whose massively scaled collaborations with Jeanne-Claude won global acclaim, died last week.

By Jonathan D. Fineberg

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Christo at a book signing in Paris

PHOTO: ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

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Millions of people knew the vast, seemingly impossible public art projects of Christo and Jeanne-Claude. Their “Running Fence” in Northern California (1976), “Surrounded Islands” in Miami (1983), and “The Gates” in New York’s Central Park (2005) are among the most famous artworks of the past 50 years. Jeanne-Claude died in 2009, and Christo died last week on May 31.

For 45 years, I was fortunate to count Christo as a friend, and I had the privilege of being with Christo and Jeanne-Claude on several of their creative journeys. Their work had always been about more than making an object, no matter how beautiful—and their projects were always stunningly beautiful. It was about art as a way into our social and psychic beings on a greater scale and for a more varied public than any artist has ever engaged. The bewildering beauty and ambition of these projects and the powerful sense of community that emerged in realizing them built our capacity for creative and affirmative encounters with each other and the world.

In 1977 Christo explained to me: “I don’t think any of the museum exhibitions have touched so profoundly 300 people (as our ranchers), or 300,000 cars who visited ‘Running Fence,’ in a way that half a million people in Sonoma and Marin counties were engaged in the making of the work of art for 3 1/2 years.” (Christo never lost his Bulgarian accent or grammar.)

I was just one year out of graduate school in 1975 when the critic Harold Rosenberg said to me, “That guy Christo has a good idea, you should call him up!” That was when “Running Fence” was up and all over the news in America.

I did, and within a year I was writing about Christo and Jeanne-Claude and became deeply involved in their lives. In particular I followed the evolution of “Surrounded Islands,” pink floating skirts, 250-foot-wide, around 11 islands in Miami’s Biscayne Bay, from the first sketch in December 1980 until the project was completed in May 1983.



A May 1983 photo of 'Surrounded Islands' in Miami

PHOTO: KATHY WILLENS/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Christo began each project with drawings and collages that helped you visualize the idea. He painted on photographs of a city or landscape, included engineering drawings to show you exactly how to make or install the parts, provided maps and fabric samples. “The work is in the minds of people, before the work exists,” he said. ”And of course that makes the work so dynamic, it gives it this life-blood—absolutely incredible power and energy.” This energy was also how Christo and Jeanne-Claude (husband and wife and co-equal collaborators) funded the projects, through the sale of preparatory drawings, collages and early works, never taking any kind of sponsorship.

With each project there were myriad bureaucratic hurdles, all of which the couple considered as much a part of the artwork as the finished project. I attended the hearings for “Surrounded Islands” (as I would those for many subsequent projects), and despite the skepticism and opposition they always faced on these occasions, they never gave up.

Christo once told me: “When you apply for permission to do these works at City Hall there is no precedent, no rules on the books by which to grant a permit....And this is the exciting part....This is what I enjoy, and I cultivated it for 50 years because I am extremely hooked on the freedom....I do the things in my way....Probably, all these projects are about freedom—total freedom.”



Visitors walking from Sulzano to Monte Isola and to the island of San Paolo on 'The Floating Piers, Lake Iseo, Italy'

PHOTO: ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Four years ago Christo built a nearly two-mile-long floating walkway across a secluded Alpine lake that had never had anything but passage by small boats from one island to another. Christo used a modular docking system for “The Floating Piers, Lake Iseo, Italy,” covering the 220,000 floating cubes with a shimmering gold fabric. During its brief, 16-day existence, “The Floating Piers” attracted over a million people, 65 miles east of Milan, in sweltering heat, to “walk on water,” as Christo described it. He spoke of the acute feeling of immediate reality it gave him, “cold and warm, and the wet and the wind. Not representation of wind, the real wind. Not representation of water, the real wet.” For viewers, this encounter with the real that these bewildering projects evoke in them enables people to look anew at themselves and the reality around them.

At his death, the 84-year-old Christo was working on a new project, “L’Arc de Triomphe, Wrapped,” for September 2021 in Paris. His team will proceed to build it without him. So this week, amid Covid-19 and burning cities, Christo left us with one more journey toward envisioning the profound humanism that we so badly need.

I recently asked Christo what drove him to do these unimaginable projects—unthinkable in scale, cost, complexity, in the overcoming of political obstacles, and in the innovative engineering that they required. It was about “the journey,” he told me. “You know each of our projects is like a slice of our life, myself and Jeanne-Claude. And the journey is so exciting.”

—Mr. Fineberg is university professor and founding director of the Ph.D. in Creativity at University of the Arts in Philadelphia.

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