
Reflections

Christo and Jeanne-Claude: The Negotiation of Art and Vice Versa

*Michael Wheeler**

Negotiating a Vision

Over the past two decades the Program on Negotiation at Harvard Law School (PON) has named thirteen people as Great Negotiators. The project, directed by my colleague Jim Sebenius, has given us the opportunity to commend our honorees' outstanding work and to learn from their experience. The event is not a mere ceremony. It involves a full day of public presentations and small seminars, all supported by months of prior research and planning. This process has generated powerful cases and videos that negotiation teachers everywhere can share with their students. Almost all the recipients have been diplomats, representing five different continents. Two of them are Nobel Peace Prize laureates.¹

For our Great Negotiator program in 2008 our colleague Bob Mnookin had the inspired idea of selecting two people cut from very different cloth, the celebrated artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude.² By that time the couple was famous around the world. They had built Running Fence in 1975, a fabric structure 20 feet high and 24.5 miles long stretching through the hills of Northern California down to the ocean. In 1985 they draped shimmering golden fabric on Pont Neuf, the oldest bridge in Paris. In 1991, they erected long rows of huge umbrellas on both sides

*Corresponding author: Michael Wheeler, Senior Faculty Center, Harvard Business School, Soldiers Field, Boston, MA 02163, USA.

Michael Wheeler is the Class of 1952 Professor of Management at Harvard Business School (ret.) and Senior Fellow at the Program on Negotiation. His e-mail address is mwheeler@hbs.edu.

of the Pacific—1,340 blue ones in Japan, 1,760 yellow ones in the United States. Then, in 2005 they installed 7,503 fabric “gates” in New York’s Central Park. Christo and Jeanne-Claude also did massive installations in Germany, Switzerland, Italy, and Australia (Tomkins 2004).

At our 2008 Great Negotiator program we applauded Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s artistic brilliance, of course, but bestowed the award in recognition of how they brought their bold and controversial ideas to life.

They negotiated in three tightly linked domains. First, they dealt creatively with a network of banks, lawyers, engineers, filmmakers, and museums to secure resources needed to build and promote their work.

Second, starting from scratch, they established their own market for Christo’s drawings and collages. The proceeds funded the construction of their massive installations.³ They didn’t use a gallery to handle their work, rather they sold it themselves. They knew how to haggle and were shrewd about what pieces to market, what to keep in reserve, and (sometimes) what to buy back.⁴ They used lines of credit to get through times when the prices for art dropped.

Harvard Business School Professors Felda Hardymon and Josh Lerner have written that “Christo and Jeanne-Claude had a history of creating collectors. People tended to be attracted to the art for a number of reasons, and the artists made it comfortable for new collectors to purchase their works. Another reason for the attraction was the artists’ complete commitment to and passion for their projects” (Hardymon, Lerner, and Leamon 2006). The late artist Saul Steinberg said of his friend, Christo: “He not only invented himself, he invented his art, and even more amazing, he invented his public” (Grimes 2020).

Third, and our focus here, Christo and Jeanne-Claude negotiated tirelessly with regulatory boards and other stakeholders to win approval for their massive projects. The process was always contentious, often dragging on for years. In spite of all that, they expressed bafflement over why PON selected them. “We don’t negotiate,” Jeanne Claude asserted.

In a narrow sense that was true. For them, two issues were always nonnegotiable. One was that they would never compromise on their aesthetic design or their chosen location for the work. The other was they would not pay a fee for the privilege of using public spaces to construct their installations.⁵ Sometimes their intransigence forced them to abandon their plans. When they succeeded, though, the results were spectacular.

The truth is that Christo and Jeanne-Claude most certainly did negotiate to get citizens, stakeholders, and public officials to embrace their artistic vision. It was not negotiation in the familiar transactional sense of trading one thing for another. Rather it was a relational process, a mix of courtship, alliance-building, and sometimes it seemed, also picking fights.

Some of their encounters were played out in packed meeting rooms. Many others were in private conversations. The Christos' victories and setbacks are in the past, but we can still get a rich understanding of who they were and how they engaged others, thanks to filmmakers who documented six of their major projects.⁶

The films are a valuable resource for analyzing and understanding Christo and Jeanne-Claude's unusual style, which sometimes contradicted standard negotiation precepts. To illustrate their approach, I'll quote snippets of their conversations with officials and the general public. To get a fuller sense of their larger-than-life personalities, readers are encouraged to visit the Christos' own site—<https://christojeanneclaude.net/>—which has videos and other material; to view the Smithsonian American Art Museum's interview with Christo at <https://americanart.si.edu/videos/meet-artist-christo-154353>; and to explore the video clips that are available on YouTube and Vimeo. Real-time footage presents the challenges they faced and how they dealt with them.

By design, their physical art was visible only briefly. The Gates in New York were up for just sixteen days and then, quickly dismantled. In that sense their art was transitory. Yet the genesis of that project was almost three decades earlier, when the pair first approached municipal authorities for permission to install their work in Central Park. Over that period, there were countless public hearings and private meetings with both supporters and opponents. Other projects similarly took years to reach fruition. Ultimately more than twenty installations were approved and built. Twice that number were rejected or abandoned.

Calvin Tomkins, in his *New Yorker* profile of the Christos, observed:

If you had to name one essential quality that underlies Christo and Jeanne-Claude's career, which is unique in contemporary art, it would probably be perseverance—unbending, implacable perseverance. They have been willing to wait for years or decades to realize some of their grandiose, ephemeral, absurdly beautiful spectacles, working on two or more at a time until they get the necessary permits to go ahead with one of them. (Tomkins 2004: 77)

Christo and Jeanne-Claude emphasized—repeatedly—that the arduous process of winning support was itself an integral part of the art. Appearing before county commissioners for the Running Fence project in the 1970s, Christo insisted (in his imperfect English) that:

The work is not only the fabric, the steel poles, and the fence. The art project is right now here. Everybody here is part of my work. If they want. If they don't want. Anyway, they are

part of the work. Instead to have colored and white. They are integral part of making that art It is a very deep political, social, economical experience I live right now with everybody here. And it is nothing involved with the make-believe. That appeal was not staged by me. We have emotion and fear. But that is, of course, part of the project. (Maysles, Maysles, and Zwerin 1978)

The meetings always drew people loudly opposed to their projects, some of whom may have resented being conscripted into the process. These gatherings were like “watering holes for grievances,” as a friend of mine observed. People’s reasons for opposing the projects were varied, but the depth of their hostility was a common element. The presence of reporters and camera crews heightened the drama. The question for the Christos was how to convince, mollify, assuage, neutralize, and/or overcome the opposition.

People’s motivations differed. Some didn’t like Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s work aesthetically. Others didn’t regard it as art. Brian Sewell, a well-known London critic, dismissed their *Wrapped Reichstag* project as “a largely pointless exercise . . . which really has nothing whatsoever to do with art” (Tomkins 2004: 77). When *Running Fence* was proposed in California, among the most fervent naysayers were local artists who felt upstaged by outsiders getting so much attention (Tomkins 2004).

Others challenged particular projects as being the right thing in the wrong place. For them parks, historic buildings, and pristine beaches can have sacred meaning. A woman speaking against installing *The Gates* in Central Park said, “Actually, the Park is a piece of landscape art. To install another piece of landscape art on it, it’s like having Picasso paint *Guernica* on the surface of the *Last Supper*” (Ferrera and Maysles 2007).

Still others professed to admire the projects but raised the issue of precedent. Granting permission to Christo and Jeanne-Claude, they claimed, would lead to horrors perpetrated by other artists. As another person sarcastically said:

After all, why not? Why not introduce the policy into Central Park to let it become a testing ground for the self-expression of an artist? Just let’s think of the monotony of all those green trees and grass and lawns. Would it not be much nicer to paint all of the rocks different colors from shocking pink to submarine yellow? I am bored by seeing birds on the reservoir. Why not create jobs, powerboats pulling bathing beauties? One week Jantzen bathing suits, the next week Gortex. Why not? (Ferrera and Maysles 2007)

And it wasn't just individuals that Christo and Jean-Claude had to grapple with. The *New York Times* editorial board argued against the project, saying, "Central Park needs loving hands of restoration, not of exploitation" (*New York Times* 1980).

Then there was the matter of money. Christo and Jeanne-Claude's projects typically cost millions of dollars, funds that some people believed would be better spent on education, public health, and other social programs. At an early local hearing on The Gates project, a community activist from Harlem north of Central Park said:

You know, I could see ego-trippin' in the art, but I don't see anybody in here looking down and really enjoying this because we don't have no high-rise to look down on to see It seems like some white folks gonna enjoy this and we're not gonna enjoy anything. And you know somebody has to underwrite this. This man is not spending \$5 million out of his own pocket. Who is underwriting this and why? And why? (Ferrera and Maysles 2007)

The fact, though, was that Christo and Jeanne-Claude never sought public funds or accepted commissions.⁷ Instead, they covered the costs themselves, using proceeds from lines of credit and the sale of Christo's sketches and plans. Over the years the success of their public projects enhanced the value of their stock of private work. In turn, the increased value enabled them to fund even more ambitious projects going forward.

Many simply refused to believe that Christo and Jeanne-Claude would do what they claimed—pay all the costs themselves—simply for the joy of doing it. Others, including former New York City Parks Commissioner Henry Stern, challenged their action as self-serving, accusing Christo of "trying to appropriate the glory and history and reputation of Central Park to enhance his own standing in the art world" (Tomkins 2004: 83).

More than once Christo himself said, "The great power of the projects is that they are absolutely irrational. That drives people berserk. First, because they think it's not true. They think we have some hidden resources, that we're lying. Secondly, if it *is* true, that it is almost *imbecile*, stupid, impossible" (Tomkins 2004: 77).

The challenge for Christo and Jeanne-Claude was responding to deeply felt objections coming from different quarters. Given the public nature of their work, they sometimes got drawn into other political battles not at all of their making. Tomkins' *New Yorker* profile quotes Jeanne-Claude as saying:

Probably the most difficult for us, the one we would not want to go through ever again, was the Pont Neuf. Our permit to wrap the Pont Neuf depended on two men who never agreed on anything. One was the President of France, Francois Mitterrand, and the other was the mayor of Paris, Jacques Chirac, who wanted to become President, and later did. There was an election coming up in 1986, and they were playing Ping-Pong with us, and we were the balls. (Tomkins 2004: 77)

The emotionalized, politicized atmosphere might seem challenging enough, but then there were also Christo and Jeanne-Claude themselves. Many people found the artists charming, but others saw them as outsiders, maybe pretentious, maybe threatening. Still others saw both sides of the couple. Antonio Ferrera, who co-directed the film about *The Gates*, described his reaction as being “impassioned, playful, inspired, maddened, enraged, lost, found—everything that happens when you fall in love.” (Correspondence with Antonio Ferrera, August 2020).

The two became American citizens in the 1960s but Christo’s heavy Bulgarian accent stayed with him his whole life. Jeanne-Claude was fluent in English, though she retained her native French inflection. Only twice did they do their art on home ground, New York and Paris, and both of those projects were highly contentious, as well.

The documentaries show that when things went badly at public meetings, Christo and Jeanne-Claude never buckled. He could be outspoken at times but usually he seemed introverted (his audacious art notwithstanding). The footage often shows that when people testified against their projects, he cradled his head, looking down at the floor.

It was just the opposite for Jeanne-Claude, an extrovert to the max. She was the face of the public performance part of their art and wonderfully suited for the role. Her wild and unnaturally orange hair demanded attention. Her approach was both unconventional and brilliant. According to Ferrera, it fell to Jeanne-Claude to be the “bad cop.” It was a tough role, he said, and “she took a lot of heat for it. It’s part of how things work with artists.” (Correspondence with Antonio Ferrera, August 2020).

None of the niceties of active listening for her. I can’t imagine her ever saying anything like “If I heard your concerns correctly” Instead, she gave as good as she got. Her wit was sharp—amusing for bystanders, but caustic for those on the receiving end. At a lecture early in *The Gates* project Jeanne-Claude was asked if she and her husband would consider installing *The Gates* instead in Brooklyn’s Prospect Park. She snapped, “Sir, did you marry the woman you loved, or an alternate woman?” (Tomkins 2004: 78).

She kept this up throughout her career, even after achieving victory. Nearly twenty-five years later, at the press conference announcing that The Gates project was approved, a reporter asked how much it would cost them. Jeanne-Claude said, “Go and ask your mother if she could give an estimate for the cost of raising you” (Tomkins 2004: 78).

Did she succeed in spite of being confrontational or did that somehow help? It’s easy to make a case for the former. There’s ample evidence that some people disliked her. But there may have been an upside. Her attitude toward people she couldn’t win over underscored what was negotiable for her and Christo and what was not. It also was a signal to others not to mess with her.

To the extent she got away with this behavior, the fact that she was speaking up to protect her husband’s work may have softened people’s impressions. In fact, though, Jeanne-Claude was speaking up for both of them as she actively contributed to some of their designs. She was the one who had the ideas for several of them including Surrounded Islands, just off the Florida coast.

The other nonnegotiable issue—paying for access to a site they wanted—came up in that project. They almost always refused to do so, even when their arms were twisted. At a hearing one of the County Commissioners declared, “I can’t overcome my own personal feeling that the project is conceptually offensive. That it’s exploitive of something that I regard as beautiful, as sacrosanct in its natural form” (Maysles, Maysles, and Zwerin 1986). Maybe that sentiment was sincere; maybe it was just intended as a bargaining chip. During a break, he spoke with Jeanne-Claude and her lawyer, asking them to make a “proffer,” a contribution to the county. Jeanne-Claude said no, they never do that. She was so forceful that the Commissioner admitted that he felt uncomfortable making the demand, saying, “There is a sense of blackmail about it” (Maysles, Maysles, and Zwerin 1986). But he persisted with an ask for \$250,000, which Jeanne-Claude flatly rejected.

That exchange didn’t lead to a deadlock, however. Instead, she opened the door to agreement by suggesting that the county could make money selling tote bags and other goods depicting images of their installation. All that revenue would go to the county; none to the artists. She also agreed to cover the cost of removing trash that been washed up on the island—forty tons of it, as it turned out—and she guaranteed a full clean-up when the installation was dismantled (which was always their practice). These proposals opened up an elegant, value-creating solution and preserved the Christos’ principle of not paying for access, at least not directly, and probably saved face for the Commissioner, as well.

Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s hundreds (more likely thousands) of exchanges with people at public meetings were important, but they

were dwarfed in number by the many more conversations that Jeanne-Claude had with people one-on-one. The documentaries clearly show that in that context her tone and approach were very different.

Constructing Running Fence in Northern California required getting permission from each of the landowners, mostly ranchers, over which it would run. At our Great Negotiator event, Jeanne-Claude said that she got off to a bad start by asking someone: What is a heifer field? “They thought I was an idiot.” From that misstep she learned that she “had to try to understand the ranchers because if I don’t know anything about their life, they had no reason to want to work with us. And so, I was over there, and I had at least fifty cups of coffee every day on the couch at the kitchen table, joking with the wife of the rancher to try to explain.”⁸

Forging relationships takes time, especially between people with markedly different backgrounds and aspirations. But through repeated visits Jeanne-Claude came to understand the ranchers as “very pragmatic people, hard workers,” as she called them. “And they understood we are hard workers.”

Jeanne-Claude also was a nimble improviser, quick to see opportunities to create common ground. She described a visit to discuss the design for Running Fence with rancher Lester Bruhn, who asked, “What good is it for, that fence, what does it do?” She replied, “Well, it’s joy and it’s beauty. It’s art. It’s for the pleasure.” He said, “That is, it’s good for nothing.” But she softened him up moments later when he walked her to the door. She spotted a garden by the front steps and had an idea:

“I see something that I pretend I don’t recognize, and I say, ‘Oh, what will come out of those leaves—radishes, potatoes?’”

“Oh, no, no, no,” Bruhn answered. “These are flowers.”

“Flowers?” she said, “What are they good for?”

“Honey, I get the message!”

More conversations followed with the Bruhns and other ranchers. Over many visits, their friendships deepened. Bruhn became a persuasive advocate for Running Fence in the local farming community, far more credible than any professional public relations person could ever be. But it wasn’t that he had become a champion of the arts. The Christos’ cause became his own for a different reason. He told Christo about his own frustration with those who were fighting the project.

I don't know. I come to one conclusion: I don't own this ranch. I just . . . well, I can't do what I want to on it, can I? Here a man comes in here and wants to do this and I can't even have a say in it? That people way away from here do all the talking and say what I can do on my ranch. That's a pile of horse crap. (Maysles, Maysles, and Zwerin 1978)

At the final Commissioners' meeting where they would vote to approve or block the project, he stood up and testified:

I'm Les Bruhn from Valley Ford. I'm just a sheep rancher. That's all I know. I don't know nothing about art. I've talked to an awful lot of ranchers and I haven't found one against it. And they're all getting compensated for putting this up. They're getting the material, plus compensation for it. And I can't see taking that away from the ranchers. Thank you. (Maysles, Maysles, and Zwerin 1978)

Although Christo and Jeanne-Claude would not pay tribute to public officials, they apparently weren't averse to investing materially to forge relationships with constituents who might sway the regulatory boards.

Other local supporters felt kinship with the artists. Following Bruhn to the podium at that same decisive hearing was Mrs. George Michelson from Petaluma, a farmer's wife as she introduced herself, straight from central casting. Speaking in favor of the project, she said:

The fence does go through our property. We welcome it. There was one thing said about art being temporal. Some of the meals I prepare aren't much. The rest of you can all say that, too. But sometimes I go to a lot of work to prepare a meal that I think is art. It's a masterpiece. And what happens? It gets eaten up and disappears, and everybody forgets! (Maysles, Maysles, and Zwerin 1978)

She got loud cheers and laughter. After years of work, Christo and Jeanne-Claude had become part of the community. Calling for a vote, the board chair said:

I am convinced that this project will create, of course, no environmental harm. We have the permission by the ranchers. We have benefits bestowed not only on the local ranchers upon whose land it goes, but much needed jobs for the county. Thank you, gentlemen. Call the roll, please. (Maysles, Maysles, and Zwerin 1978)

One by one the five Commissioners voted:

Aye.

No. (Jeanne-Claude was biting her nails at this point.)

Aye.

Aye.

Aye. Good luck!

The crowd burst into applause. Jeanne-Claude turned to a person next to her, her eyes first full of surprise and then, exaltation. Only then did Christo start to smile, the last person in the room to realize that at long last they had won.

Twenty-five years later the Smithsonian American Art Museum hosted a retrospective that included screening a new documentary capturing how *Running Fence* had come to be remembered. Looking back almost everyone loved the installation and treasured their friendship with Christo and Jeanne-Claude. The controversy was all but forgotten. The only dissenters were some local artists still miffed that outsiders got all the attention (Hissen 2010).⁹

Willingness to Walk Away

Christo and Jeanne-Claude's persistence did not guarantee success. Forty times their efforts were blocked. And once there was a draw. Jeanne-Claude told the story when she and Christo came to PON to receive their award.

We requested from the Lord Mayor of Barcelona, Spain, permission to wrap the tallest monument to Christopher Columbus that is at the harbor of Barcelona. Permission was denied. He was assassinated—but not by us.

Then a new mayor came, and we again applied, and he said no again. So we felt, OK, well, it would have been nice, but no, not interested anymore. The years went by, and one day we received a telegram from Pasqual Maragall, mayor of Barcelona, telling us, please come to Barcelona and wrap the statue. And we looked at each other, and it was no longer in our heart. And we had to send a telegram back saying, "Thank you very much, Mr. Mayor, but no, we don't feel any more like doing it."

The Christos knew their priorities. Something that once looked exciting had lost its luster. As Jeanne-Claude put it, "It's like your parents giving you a tricycle today. One would say when I was eight, I would

have loved it but I'm forty now." (Correspondence with Antonio Ferrera, August 2020).

Christo and Jeanne-Claude always had other fish to fry, pursuing multiple opportunities simultaneously. If every public official had said "yes" to all the projects they proposed, there is no way they could all have been completed. The Christos' walk-away in any particular case (their BATNA) was not "no deal." Rather it simply was making a different deal in another location. Whether or not they were being strategic, their willingness to walk away sent a signal to others not to push too hard.

Timing

The spectacular success of *Running Fence* gave the two artists credibility for subsequent projects. It may also have made it easier for people to visualize what Christo's preliminary sketches might blossom into. Yet opposition remained the rule, not the exception. The debate over *The Gates* in Central Park dragged on for years. "We never even approached anyone during the Giuliani administration," Jeanne-Claude explained. "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" (Tomkins 2004: 77).

But they didn't give up. Approval was finally granted after Michael Bloomberg, a generous supporter of the arts, was elected Mayor of New York City. His support was key, of course, but the table had been set long before.

The Gates includes a lovely and telling segment when a much younger Christo and Jeanne-Claude had a brief meeting with Theodore Kheel, a renowned labor mediator and New York powerbroker (Ferrera and Maysles 2007). The couple entered his office trailed by the camera crew, of course. Kheel was on the phone so the couple sat and waited (nervously, to my eye) for him to finish. When he finally hung up, Christo began his pitch but Kheel was thumbing through a thick book and half-listening at best. The phone rang again and Kheel took the call.

The Christos looked at each other, seemingly unsure of what to do next. When that call was over, Christo tried again. Kheel was still leafing through his book, when Christo said,

"I know the city of New York is so upset by the money problem and especially the Park."

Kheel asked, "You don't want any money?"

"Exactly," said Christo. "You see, that project will cost me between four and five million dollars."¹⁰

“Would cost *us*,” Jeanne-Claude corrected.

“How much?” Kheel asked, his nose still in his book.

“Between four and five million dollars,” Christo answered.

Kheel finally looked up with a quizzical expression.

“You’re paying for this yourself?”

“Yes. I’m paying for this, my own personal money.”

“Why do you do this?” His eyebrows up, now at last he was fully engaged.

“Because I like to do this,” Christo answered. “It’s my work of art. Basically it’s important that all the project will be gift to the city.”

Talk about critical moments. Theodore Kheel and Lester Bruhn were different people in many respects, one in a Manhattan high-rise and the other on a farm on the opposite coast, but both were hooked by Christo and Jeanne-Claude. And like Bruhn, Kheel became a strong advocate from there on. When Mayor Bloomberg announced his support, many others were already on board.

When *The Gates* opened in 2005 it was another triumph. Toward the end of *The Gates* film you can see exuberant crowds ambling through the park in midwinter, passing under fluttering banners (Ferrera and Maysles 2007). A cluster of women recognized Christo and Jeanne-Claude and expressed their gratitude and joy. Ever herself, Jeanne-Claude asked, “Are these the cynical mean New Yorkers?” You can also see a debonair French couple, clearly enjoying the stroll, but unwilling to gush. The gentleman acknowledged the installation was beautiful, while noting that some people think it looks like a carwash, adding “It’s cute.” The woman holding his arm said, “No, a carwash would have fewer gates.”

This wasn’t just a gathering of art aficionados. A street vendor near one of the Park entrances said, “(I)t’s like summertime here with all these people. It’s just amazing. And they wanted to keep this up another week, but the guy wouldn’t let ‘em.” He said that he was impressed by the grand scale of it, but added that you’re not supposed to study it, or fascinate about it, as he put it. He advised, “Just look at it and keep on walking.” (Ferrera and Maysles 2007). No doubt a New Yorker through

and through, he later added, “I like it. Personally, I like the Umbrellas better. But this, this was all right.” (Ferrera and Maysles 2007).

Then poignantly, there was also a smiling man missing some teeth who came up to Christo and Jeanne-Claude.

“I love this Park,” he said. “I know this park so well. Most people don’t even know this park is totally manmade. People think that it is natural. So I know Central Park. I know it, every inch of it. I know it so well. And now for you to do this! I mean, I can’t even give words to how magnificent this is, to be something so big. A lot of people will say that why didn’t you use that money for victims of some disaster? But something like this. The money is well spent. People think that money, that you only give to people by feeding them and everything. But this feeds the soul.” (Ferrera and Maysles 2007)

The Gates in Central Park came and went quickly, just as their other installations. Jeanne-Claude died suddenly in 2009, just a year after she and Christo visited us for the Great Negotiator event. A celebration of her life was held at the Metropolitan Museum in the spring of 2010. Among the speakers was Betsy Broun, then head of the Smithsonian American Art Museum. She described the passion of both artists and the meaning of their work.

The vocabulary of all of their public projects was about fences, and gates, and curtains, and islands, and bridges, and walls. It’s a vocabulary that is resonant with meaning about the kind of personal agency we assert in our lives. Those elements were sometimes concealed and wrapped. Sometimes they were unleashed with great abandon. Sometimes they invited passage.

Legacy

What should we in the negotiation world make of the artful way the Christos brought their vision to fruition? I won’t reach for bromides or simple takeaways. Negotiation was central to their work, but it was so multifaceted, it needs to be understood and appreciated holistically. While they campaigned for regulatory approval, they were also managing their diverse professionals and volunteers—plus running their lucrative art business. Negotiating creatively in each of those domains was essential to their overall success. They were very hands-on. Jeanne-Claude called their installations “our babies,” and Antonio Ferrera described their enterprise as “a mom and pop operation” (to which I

say, “Some Mom. Some Pop!”) (Correspondence with Antonio Ferrera, August 2020).

For many of us who worked on or attended the 2008 PON event honoring Christo and Jeanne-Claude, their achievements stretched our thinking about negotiation. Getting others to embrace a novel idea is challenging, especially if it disrupts the status quo. It’s not about horse-trading, deal-design, or issuing demands. Rather it’s about getting adversaries and skeptics to see things differently. One-size-fits-all approaches won’t work. Recognizing different reasons for opposition and dealing with them accordingly is essential.

Still, we can draw some general lessons. One is that the Christos are Exhibit A for the proposition that bold ideas demand bold advocates. It is hard to imagine somebody else, equally talented but meek and bland, achieving what they did with small sketches and huge presence. The Christos were direct and real. Some of the people who rose to support them may have become entranced by their art. My guess is that even more were entranced by Christo and Jeanne-Claude themselves.

The Christos also accepted the fact that they didn’t need to please everybody. Having opposition made for great theater. They could cast themselves as generous, daring, and valiant, while painting their adversaries as narrow-minded and mean-spirited. That, in turn, enabled them to express themselves even more forcefully. As the documentaries confirm repeatedly, they knew how to perform on the public stage and how to talk, very differently, in private conversations.

How much of shifting styles came naturally to them and how much of it was by design is an intriguing question, but likely unanswerable. In contrast, their remarkable success strongly suggests that they were deliberately strategic in fashioning their careers. Their artistic creativity was essential but not sufficient. With the benefit of hindsight, the integration of their endeavors, the process rules that they established, and the complementary roles that they assumed look just as artfully designed as their physical constructions.

And what of the negotiations between Christo and Jeanne-Claude themselves? These must have been fascinating, especially when no one else was around. Jeanne-Claude said, “When something is turned down, we scream at each other a lot” (Hardymon, Lerner, and Leamon 2006: 3). We don’t know whether those disagreements were over the decision to abandon a project, or if there was second-guessing about who was to blame for the failure. Yet thanks to the films, we do have glimpses of them. In the film about Pont Neuf there’s a segment where the two are in the back seat of a car. Things were going badly. Christo was agitated.

Jeanne-Claude, who had heard enough, turned toward him and commanded, “Take a pill!” (Maysles et al. 1990).

That’s a decided exception, though. Most of what we see from the couple in the documentaries is their abundant love for each other. They claimed to be born on the same day—June 13, 1935—he in Bulgaria, she in Casablanca, far apart but destined to be together. Antonio Ferrera recalled how in meetings with others, Christo tended to speak too fast. With a gentle glance, Jeanne-Claude would signal him to “slow down the pace in a loving and reassuring way.” A smile would “then appear on Christo’s lips as he spoke at slower rhythm.” (Correspondence with Antonio Ferrera, August 2020). Their mystique was part of the show.

They wrapped Pont Neuf, they said, because it was there that they met and immediately fell in love. The fact that she was already married was not a hindrance. At her funeral the story was told that soon after that meeting, Christo paid an afternoon visit to her apartment. Jeanne-Claude called a carpenter to make a repair. When her husband returned from work that evening, he couldn’t open the door. Jeanne-Claude claims that she shouted, “Your key no longer fits in my lock.” The story may be fiction, but the fact that she would tell it—true or not—speaks volumes about their relationship.

Epilogue

Christo’s work continued after Jeanne-Claude died. As before there were successes and failures. In 2016 their Floating Piers in Lake Iseo in Lombardy was a triumph. In 2017 Christo abandoned his plan to cover with fabric the Arkansas River in Colorado.

Christo and Jeanne-Claude are gone now, just as are the magnificent installations that they conjured and constructed. As they intended, those were ephemeral. But the other part of their artistry—how they engaged with and yes, negotiated with people—is still visible, thanks to the documentaries about some of their most important projects. We can fascinate about their approach, as the Central Park vendor might put it, and can learn from it, too. As Betsy Broun, who knew them well, expressed it at the 2010 celebration of Jeanne Claude’s life:

Christo and Jeanne-Claude have shown us what happens, what we can achieve when we let go of the constraints that bind us, and embrace our very best ideas. They show us the power of art to change our lives. They show us what it means to live completely freely, in debt to no patron, no sponsor, no ideology, and really recognizing no authority in our lives beyond our own moral compass and personal vision.

And it turns out we will have one more chance to be wowed by their art. Work is underway to carry out Christo's plan for wrapping the Arc d'Triumph in October 2021 (Nayeri 2020).

Lucky us!

NOTES

1. The roster in chronological order includes: 2000: George Mitchell, former United States senator from Maine; 2001: Charlene Barshefsky, United States trade representative; 2002: Lakhdar Brahimi, Algerian United Nations diplomat; 2003: Stuart Eizenstat, former United States ambassador to the European Union; 2004: Richard Holbrooke, American diplomat; 2005: Sadako Ogata, Japanese diplomat; 2007: Bruce Wasserstein, American investment banker, businessman, and writer; 2008: Christo and Jeanne-Claude, environmental artists; 2010: Martti Ahtisaari, former president of Finland; 2012: James A. Baker, former United States secretary of state; 2014: Tommy Koh, former United Nations representative for Singapore; 2017: Juan Manuel Santos, president of Colombia. Teaching materials for a number of these cases are available from PON: <https://www.pon.harvard.edu/store/>.

2. Jeanne-Claude died in 2009; Christo died earlier this year.

3. Between 1987 and 2003, the Christos' annual revenue averaged \$4,000,000. For more on this aspect of their work, see Hardymon, Lerner, and Leamon (2006).

4. "Typically, a purchaser, whether a collector, a dealer, or a museum, could buy directly from Christo and Jeanne-Claude or at auction. The best selection was at the artists' studio in SoHo, but the prices tended to be higher. Jeanne-Claude said, 'Valley Curtain collages were priced at \$980 back when we were doing that project. One of them came up at auction and we bought it for \$40,000. Then someone came to us and wanted to buy it. We told them the price was \$180,000 because we liked it and they could get something similar at auction for less. But no, they wanted that particular piece and were willing to pay \$180,000 for it'" (Hardymon, Lerner, and Leamon 2006).

5. They buckled in one case. New York City insisted on an upfront payment of three million dollars before The Gates project could go forward. Jeanne-Claude publicly called it "extortion," which didn't help the process. The Christos backed down and paid the fee. (Tomkins 2004)

6. The six films directed by Albert and David Maysels and various codirectors include: *Christo's Valley Curtain* (1974, with Ellen Hovde); *Running Fence* (1978, with Charlotte Zwerin); *Islands* (1986, with Charlotte Zwerin); *Christo in Paris* (1990, with Deborah Dickson and Susan Froemke); *Umbrellas* (1995, with Henry Corra and Grahame Weinbren); and *The Gates* (2007, with Antonio Ferrera). In addition, for a retrospective on the Christos' work, the Smithsonian American Art Museum screened a film entitled *The "Running Fence" Revisited*, directed by Wolfram Hissen from EastWest films.

7. In contrast see the marvelous work of Janet Echelman, who is appropriately paid for her gossamer installations: <https://www.echelman.com/>.

8. Each project meant engaging entirely different sets of people with different needs and concerns. In the three years it took to get approval of The Running Fence, Jeanne-Claude said she learned a lot about heifers, pasteurization, and artificial insemination. At our Great Negotiator event, she noted that those topics were of no use to her years later when she was trying to win over members of the German Parliament to allow wrapping the Reichstag.

9. For the record, *The "Running Fence" Revisited* also shows how the Christos played fast and loose in this case. The formal approval barred them from extending the fence over the beach and into the Pacific, but at the last minute they did exactly that.

10. The ultimate cost for the project was an estimated twenty-one million dollars (Hardymon, Lerner, and Leamon 2006).

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