



Identity, gender and the performative in Christo and Jeanne-Claude's work

Joachim Stark

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Essay from the year 2006 in the subject Art - Installation / Action/Performance Art / Modern Art, grade: good, The Open University (Department of Art History), course: Themes and issues in Contemporary Art History, language: English, abstract: This essay tries to point out that Christo and Jeanne-Claude's work deals with concepts of identity, gender and the performative, ideas which inform a great deal of the art that has been produced since the 1960s. These aspects in the work of the two artists have generally been overlooked due perhaps to the giganticism of many of their projects realized since the end of the 1960s, like "Wrapped Coast" (1968/69, Australia), "Valley Curtain" (1970/72 USA), "Surrounded Islands" (1980-83 USA), "Pont Neuf Wrapped" (1975/85, France), "Wrapped Reichstag" (1971-1995 Germany), or "The Gates" (2005 USA). Questions of identity, gender, and performance have not really been addressed in interpretations of Christo and Jeanne-Claude's work. But at least since 2002 there are statements by Christo himself, which make clear that identity and gender have indeed been on his mind and that there also was quite early a link to Dada and Surrealism. In this respect it is certainly relevant that in 1963 Christo met Marcel Duchamp, who until 1968, the year of Duchamp's death, remained a friend and supporter. Christo's wrappings imply the blurring of identities, they transform male forms into feminine forms, or even try to introduce the impression of the formless, a concept developed by George Bataille. The performative points in the same direction. The concept of performance will have to be modified and enlarged in the case of Christo and Jeanne-Claude, as their performances are not bound to a specific time and location, for instance in a gallery or a theatre. The performances often extend over several years or even decades and imply the presence of the artists at numerous different locations. Here the aspect of politics comes into view. As their environmental installations involve public buildings and /or public spaces and often extend over huge distances, a considerable number of different interests (for instance those of the political authorities, private landowners, pressure groups, the media) have to be taken into account. Thus, political processes serve the aim of realizing a work of art, and not the other way round.

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