

WHY THE GATES OF CHRISTO & JEANNE CLAUDE WERE BEAUTIFUL--BEGINNING WITH SERIOUSNESS AND GRACE

By photographer Vincent DiPietro



I loved Christo and Jeanne Claude's Gates from the moment I entered Central Park . The sheer size of this creative installation of 7,500 metal structures with saffron-colored cloths billowing in the wind like a multitude of flags, and spanning 23 miles of paths within the park's 843 acres, took my breath away.

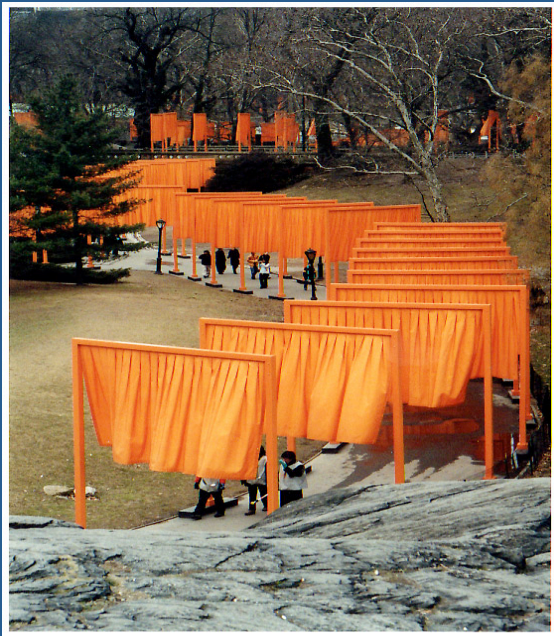


I believe the beauty of the Gates and their stirring effect on millions of people are explained by this principle, stated by Eli Siegel: “All beauty is a making one of opposites, and the making one of opposites is what we are going after in ourselves.” The Gates put together opposites such as grace and dignity, stillness and movement, continuity and discontinuity in ways that are not only striking, but also show us how we hope to be.

I. Grace and Seriousness: The Gates Have Both

In his definitive work, “Is Beauty the Making One of Opposites?,”
Mr. Siegel asks this about Grace and Seriousness:

Is there what is playful, valuably mischievous, unreined and sportive in a work of art? — and is there also what is serious, sincere, thoroughly meaningful, solidly valuable? — and do grace and sportiveness, seriousness and meaningfulness, interplay and meet everywhere in the line, shapes, figures, relations, and final import of a painting?



This is exactly what the Gates had! Careful planning and the mathematically exact here were in behalf of seriousness: each Gate measured 16 feet high and varied in width from 5 feet 6 inches to 18 feet, and each was 12 feet from the next. Each consisted of rigid, double-vertical and single-horizontal, free-standing metal posts.

Draped from the top of each structure was a saffron-colored fabric, hanging down to 7 feet above the ground. The effect was reminiscent of orderly sentinels, emphasizing solidity, something serious and straightforward.



Yet the fabric's color in motion was also playful.



I felt both enlivened by the saffron color, and at the same time I was aware of a sense of peacefulness.

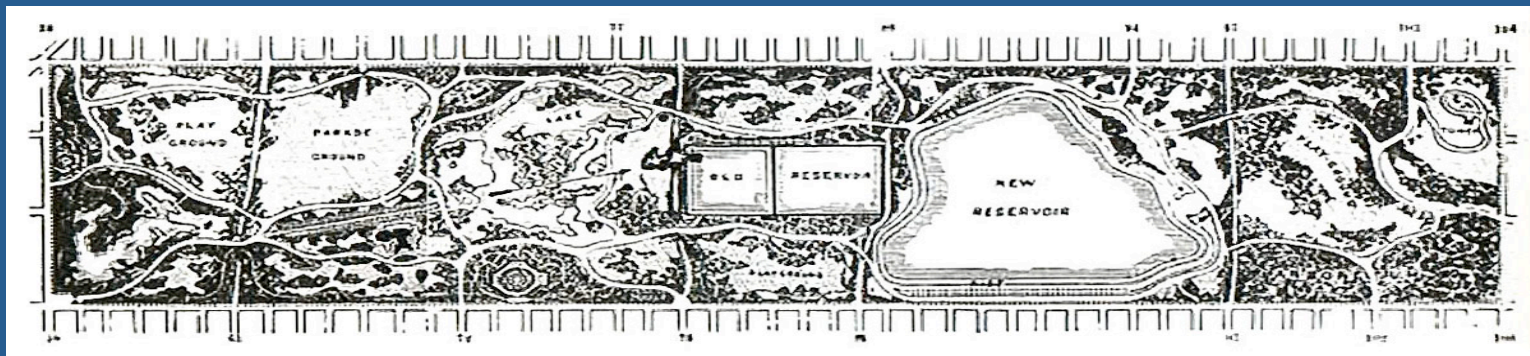


The Gates project was carefully contoured to the park itself. Never did it intrude on the more rustic areas, such as The Ramble or the upper west side of the park.



To quote Christo and Jeanne Claude, “The succession of 7,500 Gates moving capriciously in the wind, projecting on one another at different levels, sometimes hiding the buildings around the park, will reveal the serpentine design of the walkways.”

The fact that the artists kept to park designers Vaux and Olmsted's original Greensward plan of curving pathways is in behalf of respectful seriousness.



Meanwhile, the Gates showed spontaneity too, as if proclaiming, “Look how free we really are--turning and swaying, rising and falling around boulders and trees!

One of the first things that struck me about this installation was how well the Gates are related to their surroundings. They did not compete with Mother Nature or the elements of the park.



I was thrilled to see the subdued colors of winter, the browns, grays, dark greens—and when it snowed, white—added to by that lively saffron color.



Unlike myself of once, when the weather changed they did not want to crawl under the covers, nor did they grumble. In cloudy weather their color stood firm.



In sunny weather, with a deep blue sky as their backdrop, they cast shadows,



were reflected in bodies of water or on glass structures—making for something lovely and mysterious.



Whenever the wind blew they danced as if they were overjoyed to have something outside themselves move them.



(The title "Gates" came from the entrances to the park, to which Olmsted and Vaux gave names such as Women's Gate, Artist's Gate, Scholar's Gate, and Inventor's Gate.)

2. What Can We Learn from the Gates?

Like many people, I once had a large gap between light-heartedness and seriousness. I liked to mock, make light of things, and then I felt ponderously gloomy. I felt like two different people — giddy one moment, sad the next. I learned from Aesthetic Realism that my hope to have contempt for things and my moroseness had a direct correlation. Then, as I began to respect people and objects, and saw there is wonder in reality because of its aesthetic structure of opposites—the same opposites I'm trying to put together—my self-imposed grimness and unkind mockery changed, and I came to have honest lightheartedness and more real seriousness.

The Gates joined grace and seriousness so well that in the very middle of winter an estimated four million men, women, and children came to Central Park and walked under and around the Gates.



It was a once-in-a lifetime event, a happening that lasted only 16 days. When the creators of the Gates were asked why they chose to create works of art that were temporary, they responded, “in order to endow them with a feeling of urgency, and the love and tenderness brought by the fact that they will not last.” I felt this “love and tenderness” as I viewed the Gates.

I saw Gates coming around corners, seeming to rest going up a hill,
having a conversation with one another,



going in different directions helter-skelter, and Gates seeming to move in unison.



As they contrasted with things in the park, they also gracefully and subtly mingled with these very same objects: trees, branches, bushes, people and dogs, water, stone bridges, horses, carriages, ducks and geese, and more.



Occasionally I saw the cloth fabric of a Gate “holding hands” with a tree branch. I felt something like romance was present.



3. Continuity and Discontinuity Are There

In “Is Beauty” Mr. Siegel asks about the opposites of Continuity and Discontinuity:

Is there to be found in every work of art a certain progression, a certain indissoluble presence of relation, a design which makes for continuity?—and is there to be found, also, the discreteness, the individuality, the brokenness of things: the principle of discontinuity?

The idea of a gate as such is a large one: it is a transition between outside and inside. With Christo and Jeanne Claude's Gates you arrived at one, but then there was another beyond that, and another.



The Gates were a beautiful criticism of that attitude we all can have, that we just have to get somewhere in a hurry, without being affected by things along the way. This installation encouraged people to value the process of getting somewhere—it was as if they were saying, “Look, you've arrived—but there are vistas in front of you to see and explore.”



Each Gate had a discreteness, an individuality, like a note in a musical composition. Meanwhile, the many gates seemed to flow along, repeating and changing ever so subtly like a melody, which sweetly encouraged us to see process itself as friendly.



They changed our perception of the park and the objects in it: a new element was added that said, “See, you thought you knew what this tree is? —look again and see more!” And the idea of progression was here as these structures followed each other over slope and glen.



We could enter the park at any point and there they were, waiting for us and ready to take us on their lovely journey. As I walked the length of the park I was especially moved between 100th and 105th Street . There were no Gate attendants nor tourists, just an occasional jogger. I thought to myself: “Here they are as majestic and graceful as they are in the bustle in the southern end of the park.”



4. Sameness and Difference

Opposites related to Continuity and Discontinuity, are Sameness and Difference. In “Is Beauty the Making One of Opposites?” Mr. Siegel asks:

Does every work of art show the kinship to be found in objects and all realities? —and at the same time the subtle and tremendous difference, the drama of otherness, that one can find among the things of the world?

The idea of repeating the same thing 7500 times might seem boring--too much sameness! But here, with every turn, rise, and dip of each structure I felt a sense of discovery and joy, seeing, yes, the “kinship” of these Gates, their sameness, and also “the subtle and tremendous difference, the drama of otherness” among them.



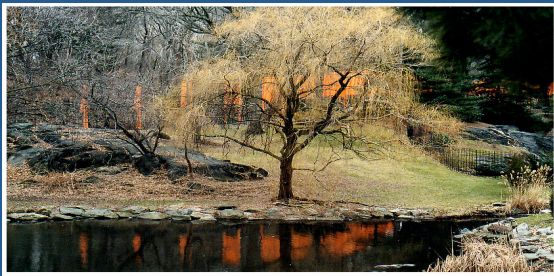
In an early Aesthetic Realism consultation, I was asked about how many ways the table we were seated at could be seen. At that time I saw the things I met in my life, including people, too much as an interference and a source of annoyance. My consultants said: "Aesthetic Realism defines reality as all that can affect one." And they asked, "Is this table reality?" "Yes", I answered. They continued: "Right. This table has the possibility of being seen by you and by us and by many other people. Is that possibility a part of the table--as much a part of it as the grain of wood? How many possibilities does the table have?

VDP: What do you mean?

Consultants: All the ways it can be seen are part of the table.

I began to think about and ask: How many ways could a thing be seen and known! How many possibilities a person has! I was learning to see things more exactly, not in the one dimensional way I had been so used to—and the gloomy sphere I'd created for myself began to let in the sunlight. I'm very grateful for the education I've been receiving these years in classes taught by Ellen Reiss, Class Chairman of Aesthetic Realism, where I've been learning how to see reality, including the reality of other people, in a wider, and much deeper way through the opposites.

When we look at an object from many angles, and also see the things it is related to, that object takes on wonder—and we're affected, changed by it, become more alive ourselves.



This is what happened to me as I looked at the Gates from many different angles — climbed up as high as I could, lay flat on my back, stood and faced many directions, and returned again and again to see them in all kinds of weather. Were they telling us to see the reality we meet every day as exactly as we can, as telling us something ourselves we need to know? Yes. I think that was one of the important messages of those radiant Gates, a message Aesthetic Realism can make conscious for people everywhere in the world. And for this I'm forever grateful!