

Art for the People? Christo and Jeanne-Claude's "The Gates"

HOLY SAFFRON! From February 12 to 27, New York City's Central Park was the site of an exhibition called "The Gates: Central Park New York 1979- 2005," by the artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude (C/J-C). The Gates consisted of 7503 vinyl structures straddling 23 miles of park pathways, each gate 16 feet high, resting on steel bases (the equivalent, the city boasted, of two thirds of the steel used in the Eiffel Tower), with orange drapes (described by C/J-C as "saffron") hanging down from the tops. This thing was ardently and uncritically supported and promoted by the *New York Times*, the local TV stations, NYC Mayor Michael Bloomberg, and a private entity that has taken the Park somewhat out of public control, the Central Park Conservancy (CPC).

As we will see, the CPC offers a local example of the worldwide privatization of the commons. In this "public-private partnership," CPC's "Corporate Partners" include Bloomberg, J.P. Morgan Chase, Citigroup, Consolidated Edison, ABC, Prudential, Goldman Sachs, Martha Stewart Living, NY Stock Exchange Foundation, Pfizer, and others.[1] (The Board of Trustees includes, among others, such right-wing types as Richard Gilder, founder of the Manhattan Institute, and John Stossel of ABC).[2] CPC has taken what should be public decisions out of public hands. And it was the boast of C/J-C that no public money was spent on The Gates: the artists' unexplained calculations indicated that they had laid out from their own pockets 21 million dollars plus 3 million for various expenses (See below for a debunking of this claim.)

For the *New York Times*, The Gates was a mini-WMD moment of uncritically retailing official handouts (with chief art

critic Michael Kimmelman playing Judith Miller). Along with other media, the *Times* was largely unwilling to look beyond official puffery.[3] With a compliant press unwilling to investigate the financial arrangements, it is impossible at this point to know just what scandals lay behind this event.[4]

When asked about the meaning of The Gates (or, often, when not asked), C/J-C repeatedly peddled delphic and opaque statements, for example, "Every true artist does the same. We create . . . works for ourselves and our friends, and if the public enjoys it, that is only a bonus but that is not created for the public." [5] The CPC's FAQ put out similar answers in the third person: "The Gates have no purpose, they are only a work of art . . . As all true artists do, they create their art for themselves, if other people like it, it is only a bonus . . . There was no graffiti problem at previous projects because the visitors are touched by the beauty of the art. Beauty is disarming . . . " (The pomposity of all this was matched in lesser ways, too. C/J-C insisted that The Gates were "saffron," which is in fact a kind of yellow. The *Times* slavishly followed this nomenclature while millions of ordinary empirical folk poured through the park and saw that The Gates were clearly orange.) [6]

A frequent visitor to the park, I was among the first of the millions who would see The Gates, one of 450,000 people the CPC estimates came to the park the first Sunday, February 13. [7] I spent a couple of hours looking at The Gates. I walked my usual route, the better to judge the affect of the installation on familiar scenes: enter at West 72nd Street opposite the Dakota, south to the Sheep Meadow, east to the roller dancing area, northeast past the band shell, down to Bethesda Fountain, and back west along the 72nd Street Transverse. Surprised by the enormous disparity between my experience and the media paeon, I wrote up a short critical account. This was posted on the H-Net American Studies list on

February 14, and on Portside on February 16, and later the same day on Z-Net. In the weeks following, there was much debate, particularly on the American Studies list. Below I present my original critique (I), then parts of the ensuing debate (II), and a short conclusion (III). Throughout, I add later clarification and comments in headnotes and/or in brackets in the text.

I. My Original Critique

Christo/Jeanne-Claude, "The Gates," a critical view (posted on H-Amstdy on February 14; submitted to Portside on February 13, posted there and on Znet on February 16. (All Portside postings are available at www.portside.org; for ZNet see www.zmag.org.)

Media coverage of "The Gates," which opened yesterday in Central Park, has been utterly uncritical. I saw The Gates today and offer below a critical view. I hope you will post it, both to offer a preliminary critique and to kick off discussion: leftists should develop . . . distinctive view[s] of this phenomenon.

Jesse Lemisch

* * *

I've been dismayed by the media's uncritical adoration of Christo and Jeanne-Claude's "The Gates," which I saw in Central Park today. In the arts, as in politics, the media are often content to retail official handouts. This is an attempt to provoke some more critical discussion than I've heard.

I firmly believe in the complex of ideas around art enhancing our perception of reality. To take one related

example: some years back, I [walked through] Red Grooms's subway car, full of wonderful New York stereotypes in three dimensions. After that, you couldn't look at New Yorkers in the street, or in subway cars, without seeing them in some ways through Grooms's lens. [And I enjoyed Jeff Koons's floral "Puppy" (2000) at Rockefeller Center.]

So I have no objection to the general idea, nor do I object to the careful use of Central Park that has been made by this project. (I don't see here any of the kinds of obstruction issues that were raised in the 80s around Richard Serra's "Tilted Arc.") But, as I say, I am concerned about the uncritical adoration. What we have heard from Christo/Jeanne-Claude is contentless claptrap: art is art; we have no purpose; we do this for ourselves and don't care whether other people like it; etc.

One of the justifications offered has been that "The Gates" is not only art, but . . . a great public event. [Much of the praise for The Gates skips over aesthetic matters, leaving the exhibit to stand (or fall) as an event.] Certainly [it looked like a great public event] today. But Central Park is hospitable to some public events and inhospitable to others. It should be kept in mind that Central Park is partly privatized, under the control of the Central Park Conservancy. Readers may recall that the great antiwar demonstration of August 29, 2004 was prevented from going to Central Park by the Conservancy and city government, and the organizer, United for Peace and Justice, yielded. Nonetheless many of us (estimates indicated about 25,000 all told, though at different times) did make our way to the Great Lawn on that day, and it was just glorious. A sixties be-in; warm feelings; clown shows and Billionaires for Bush; pot and nudity; and all over the Great Lawn, political debate. (All this was watched over by the Fuji blimp, which Fuji had graciously given to the New York Police Dept. to facilitate their surveillance.)[8] In short, what does it

mean that the Central Park Conservancy says yes to C/J-C, and no to a great political event?

There was no political debate in Central Park today. Nor, interestingly, was there much discussion of art. Indeed, the snatches of always wonderful New York conversation heard today – "I'm getting more confrontational"; "there aren't many Jews in Vietnam" – rarely included comment about The Gates. I think we all enjoyed them, but they were nowhere near as great as the hype had suggested they would be, and people didn't have much to say about them. Indeed, I spent a large part of my time in the park enjoying the weekly roller dancing, with great music, wonderful exhibitionism, cross-racial and cross-generational participation, and sexual frisson. I like The Gates, but the roller dancing (which has been penned up and restricted over the years) is more compatible with my own ideas of what makes New York great. [Similarly, I think of the great annual Greenwich Village Halloween Parade – a celebration of deviance – as deeply New York, in contrast with the mainstream Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade.]

Then there is the money question. Christo has been working like crazy, grinding out drawings, some of which sell for as much as \$600,000. Much has been made of C/J-C laying out 21-24 million dollars to get this thing done; but they will clearly come out way ahead. And of course the value of the Christos already owned by Mayor Bloomberg will be enhanced. Indeed – not to introduce a vulgar economic determinism – the whole thing reeks of enormous profit and conflict of interest, and the media hasn't even considered the question.

In short: I like The Gates, but it's not the big deal it's been made out to be, and there has been no serious discussion so far. I hope we can have it here.

II. Debate and Discussion

MY ORIGINAL POSTING LED to prolonged debate and discussion. Since much (but not all) of this constituted a discussion within the left, it tells us something about the left, the notion of "art for the people," and, more generally, the left's conflicted relationship to art. There was a variety of responses. There was a significant amount of feel-good mystique: some Gates fans who, in real life, are almost as uptight as I am, nonetheless bizarrely represented themselves as released by The Gates to be happy Free Spirits, frolicking ecstatically from gate to gate in slow motion, as in a shampoo commercial. Others, mainly academics, saw themselves as participants in a kind of authenticity competition: since they saw The Gates as people's art, they sought to demonstrate their own authenticity by getting down with the people, sharing the people's alleged passion for The Gates. And there was a great deal of what I came to think of as faux communalism, an uncritical rejoicing in the outpouring of crowds without regard to the quality or content of the crowds' experience. I present this discussion (through selections) as it evolved in conversation and argument. This sequential discussion gave me a chance to develop my thinking further and also to explore what I have seen as failings in some left views of The Gates as, in effect, art for the people.

Nation columnist Katha Pollitt posted on Portside on February 21:[9]

I went to see The Gates today and found them (it?) quite delightful. There were lots of people in the park, enjoying the art and the day, despite the cold. As my cousin, who has explored The Gates every day, says, "they put a smile on people's faces." I like their whimsicality, the way the orange contrasts with the silvery gray of the bare trees, the way they stir in the wind, the way they alter a very known and loved bit of landscape. I like the way they create a kind of festival feeling – and in February, the bleakest month of

all. I like the fact that they are outdoors, that you don't have to pay to see them, that you can make of them what you will. Close up they look a bit like motel curtains, but when you see them parading up and down the byways and pathways of the park they look like the billowing standards carried by the samurai in Kurosawa's films. There is something mysterious and dreamlike about them. Whatever issues Portsiders may have with the financing, and with the use of the park for this when it was denied the RNC protesters, I would think people on the list would appreciate the art-for-the-people aspect of them and the way they bring people together in a shared aesthetic experience – an experience that is actually kind of challenging, if you choose to get into it, but that can also be appreciated as fun and playful. I'm glad The Gates are here!

Subsequent postings on H-net American Studies list:[10]

February 18 Rebecca Garden: "[The Gates] deeply annoy me from afar, because they're part of the continuous tourist-ization of New York art . . . all I see is a tourist attraction . . . "

February 18: Following the suggestion of another listmember, Pat McDermott, I posted a link for one of the best critiques I have seen: Blake Gopnik's "Christo's Gates: A Little Creaky." [11] I said, "I don't agree with it *in toto*, but it's certainly a far more serious and informative piece than the puff pieces the *New York Times* has published." Here is a sampling:

[The Gates] reminded me of how nice it feels at Christmas time when lighted garlands stretch out across downtown streets. What it didn't remind me of, much, is the kind of puzzling, complex, probing experience we're supposed to get from significant art . . . The project encourages New Yorkers to come out and socialize – but so does any decently sunny

Sunday . . . The truth is, by New York standards the gates are even a touch dull. Watching families promenade, you realized that after a minute or two of oohs and ahs, they switched back to their previous, more compelling subjects of conversation. ("Chloe, I've had about enough of your attitude." "I don't haaaaave an aaaattITUDE.") After decades of living in New York, Christo and Jeanne-Claude should know how much it takes to get a rise out of Manhattanites. It takes more than an orange schmatte or two . . . There is an era in which The Gates seem to belong, but that's three decades back. They remind me of a certain kind of celebratory public sculpture that you could see in the 1970s, and that represented a kind of last gasp moment in grand modernist abstraction . . . Now, with [Park]-view condos going for a few million bucks, the artists' gates just seem like the latest thing in bourgeois beautification. (Crate & Barrel must be due to launch a home-and-garden version any day.) Somehow, despite seemingly unending war and nuclear-armed tyrants and gaping social safety nets, we've decided that it's time to revive the look and feel of America at its most buttoned-down . . . After all, it was New York's corporate mayor, and the gentry that he leads, who decided that the time at last had come to fill the park with elegant day wear.

February 22 Anne Swartz of the Savannah College of Art and Design wrote in part, "What I find surprising is that so far, no one has commented on what I observed on the first day; that is, that the project is incredibly boring from street level unless the wind is blowing. It only really has any impact when one gets a view of the fabric blowing."

February 22 Jesse Lemisch:

After only a week, The Gates are beginning to be seen as kitsch, comedy and a racket. [Click here](#) for a funny example.

The hilarious Somerville (Massachusetts) Gates, by Hargo

(Geoff Hargadon) consist of tiny orange plastic gates, 3.5 inches high, twisting through various part of a house – including the "poopatorium." The site offers comparisons with C/J-C, including: NYC Gates took 26 years to make, Somerville took .002 years; estimated visitors, NYC: 4 million; Somerville 4; estimated visitors (cats): NYC 0; Somerville 1; viewing period NYC 26 days; Somerville "until the cleaning lady comes"; estimated cost, Somerville: \$3.50.

The discussion on this list has been very good. Critical reviews have appeared in The New Republic (Jed Perl), in the Washington Post, and elsewhere. The pattern at the Times is interesting. They published multiple puff pieces, even one by their art critic. But yesterday's "Boldface Names" (2/18/05, B4) was among other things a comical critique of media coverage and of the bullshit and self-promotion coming from Christo and Jeanne-Claude . . . I assume the value is high on eBay, but I think this whole thing will go into memory as an embarrassment to those who promoted it.

And yet to come is serious consideration of the money questions I raised earlier: who is profiting, how much, and what about conflicts of interest involving Bloomberg, the Central Park Conservancy and others?

Paul Lauter, a professor of literature at Trinity College, Hartford, has a long and honorable history as a left activist and academic. In the sixties, he worked with the American Friends Service Committee and the Mississippi Freedom Schools. A PhD in English from Yale, he was a founding member in 1968 of the Modern Language Association Radical Caucus, and, in the same year a founder (with me and others) of a left academic organization, the New University Conference. In 1994-1995, he was president of the American Studies Association. We are old friends, dating back to 1968 and perhaps before. But we were about to collide in strong disagreement about The Gates, as he painted my critique and

those of others as implicitly slanted towards high art attitudes, elitist and disconnected from "ordinary folk," and joyless – as well as insufficiently appreciative of the jobs created by The Gates.

Unlike some who have commented on "The Gates," I've actually been around a good deal of it, a few times now. Here's what I saw:

A huge number of people, New Yorkers and others from everywhere in the world, enjoying Central Park on bitterly cold February days when (as I know because I often run there) there would normally be very few out at this gloomy time of year. More smiles per square foot than I've seen around the City in quite a while. Also more photographs of anything since Ground Zero – Kodak and Fuji stock probably leaped. Lots and lots of people with jobs they would not otherwise have; restaurants and just about anything else in the area you would like to name unusually, wildly busy. (Is it a bad thing that people, many, many of them, are earning a buck? That's what some of the comments sounded like.) Very little overt commercial activity by way of picture and t-shirt sales, and that only at the very periphery of the Park, and to the profit of the CP Conservancy (not one of my favorite charities, but hey, they do work for us all). A good deal of care NOT to have The Gates themselves intrusively placed where, for one reason and another, some people would be unhappy with them (e.g., Strawberry Fields). An occasionally beautiful, sometimes pedestrian, often interesting and fun work that changes from second to second and that engages people in many different ways. Best of all, unlike much of what's designated as "art" in more than one of the City's museums, this one will not outstay its welcome.

Many of the comments, it seems to me, illustrate precisely the disconnect between progressive academics and ordinary folks that haunts American politics. I began to wonder whether this was an American Studies list or a

convention of Malvolios.

On February 24, Frank Couvares of Amherst found "much of the negative commentary silly and reflexive disputatiousness" and agreed with Paul Lauter that "it's hard to think of a crowd bigger, more diverse, and happier." (Later there was to be disagreement on the diversity of the crowd.) On the same date Rebecca Garden found Lauter's language "barbed: 'elitist'! Ouch!"

February 24 Jesse Lemisch response to Lauter:

Those who are too young to have experienced a 60s guilt trip and quest for authenticity via downward mobility should cherish the possibility of reliving these things by studying my friend Paul Lauter's condemnation of critics of The Gates as antipopulists who are out of touch with "ordinary folks." My friend, now Allan K & Gwendolyn Miles Smith Professor of Literature, sees us critics as Malvolios (check out Twelfth Night to see just how insulting this is), while conveying that he has somehow escaped his professorial role and is down with the people. Together with this is an attack on the "art" (his quotation marks) in museums. He all but revives Spiro Agnew's characterizations of intellectuals as "effete snobs" and "nattering nabobs of negativism."

But what about the substance of Paul's charges? First of all, the outburst of uncritical approval of the Gates has come from such sources as the New York Times (including its art critic), the wealthy officers of the Central Park Conservancy, the billionaire Bloomberg, NY TV stations and others – apparently Paul's smiling noble proletarians. The list of those who adore The Gates hardly supports Paul's notion of class difference underlying the response to them. (Indeed, as I suggested, there is a serious conflict of interest problem, with wealthy supporters directly profiting from the display).

Paul approves of The Gates as a kind of a capitalist WPA, providing jobs. And, while he acknowledges that the Central Park Conservancy is not "one of my favorite charities," he says, "but hey, they do work for us all." As I pointed out at the beginning of this discussion, they hardly worked for a lot of us on August 29, when they kept us antiwar protesters from demonstrating in the park. And in fact, they don't work for us all. I would hope for more sensitivity about the Conservancy's role as a NYC manifestation of the [worldwide] privatization of the commons – something that is going on all over the city, always under the guise of doing work for us all.

Other points: [Paul] saw lots of people taking pictures. Of course: American Studies 101 would at least entertain the notion that everybody wanted to be able to claim that they were present at an event that the media had raised to the level of a Great Event. People take pictures of all kinds of things – including, as Paul mentions, Ground Zero. I don't think this is a measure of popular approval, as he suggests it is.

I'd like to add to my earlier critique disagreement with the idea expressed in the media that The Gates will somehow leave the park enhanced when they go away. Like Paul, I go there every chance I get. It is absolutely full of marvelous New York experiences, like the roller dancing I mentioned, plus the Asian weddings, the comedians and musicians, the dogs swimming off the Bethesda Fountain, the Segway riders, the illegal beer vendors [with their side-of-the mouth cries], the scene on a summer day in the Sheep Meadow [where I used to take my dog "Riot," who went to heaven in an ecstasy, thinking he was back in Yorkshire]. All of this – which is quite real – needs no enhancement from the artificial "saffron" display now there. It's in some ways as alien to New York City as would be Bloomberg's football stadium.[12]

February 27 Jesse Lemisch:

1. Naomi Weisstein says [off line]: "If 'The Gates' are people's art, what are we to make of the graffiti accumulating on them?"

[Lemisch:] I would add: if graffiti writers rank higher on our scale of authenticity, does this mean that such extremely authentic people \square approve of The Gates? Or, isn't it more likely that these most authentic of people write on them in disapproval, or criticism? If so, what becomes of the notion that "ordinary folks" love The Gates, regardless of what us Malvolios think?

2. Joanne Landy says [off line]: "Whoever on the American Studies list (I think) wrote about the way the exhibit draws aesthetic attention to the park itself is off the mark, in my experience anyway. The flags just draw attention to themselves, period, and there appears to be no particular relationship to the shapes and colors of the park. That's part of the problem."

[Landy added later]: "Of course a work of art could be so interesting and exciting on its own that it wouldn't have to be related to the park. It could just shine there. But The Gates aren't particularly compelling in and of themselves – and in fact few of their fans venture to claim that they are."

[Lemisch:] There is nothing in The Gates that resonates with, or plays with, themes in the park and thus no enhancement of our perception of it. I guess if it were autumn, there would at least be some color connection between the trees and the orange banners (calling them "saffron" is, I think, allowing ourselves to be taken in.)

3. *One writer saw the crowds in Central Park as "diverse." The fact of the matter is that when I went (on a weekend) there were fewer nonwhites there than usual. Indeed, when I ran into a noted sociologist, a person known for keen observation, the first words out of his mouth were, "All the white people in New York are here!" This voting with the feet (away from the park) by authentic non-whites further undermines the Malvolio thesis.*
4. *I have just read the art critic Jed Perl's review ("Aestheticism Lite," The New Republic On Line, 2/16). He speaks of "the mix of obscurantism and feel-good communalism . . . The acres of saffron cloth that Christo and Jeanne-Claude are unfurling across Central Park are a fashion statement, nothing more. It's public art for the cocooning generation."*

For a later harsh review, see Tony Hendra, "Gated Community: The Christos' Laundry is no longer hanging in Central Park. Good Riddance":

What were they supposed to symbolize, these thousands of dishrags hanging from their thousands of kitchen rails? The rigid banality of the urban fabric, gridding and right-angling the rich asymmetry of life into mathematical oblivion . . . meaningless tacky curtains . . . mindlessly flapping laundry . . . This was art? By whose standards? This was beauty? Where was redemption? Social merit? Universality? What was some hint of humor, or even entertainment – ironic, mischievous, affectionate? Where was fond amusement or delicious regret? What was it about the garish dishrags that made us laugh or cry, or filled us with outrage or longing? What about them moved us to lofty thoughts or nobility of purpose or self-sacrifice? There were no such reactions because this was not, by even the most rubbery of modern

standards, art, just the banal obscenity of self-seekers who'll go to any lengths to thrust their talent-free obsession with laundry into our unwilling faces. Self-seeking this craven makes Damien Hirst look like Duccio.[13]

March 3 Jesse Lemisch:

I appreciate this latest round of interesting postings. Here's an afterthought about what I might call "faux communalism" – not necessarily in today's postings but nonetheless frequently popping up in discussions of The Gates.

People turning out in large numbers and having a good time is fine. I join every crowd I can here in NYC. But the appreciations I've seen of The Gates as great communal event seem to me to ignore the shallowness of the thing. As I said earlier in this discussion, there is a delightful communal feeling at the roller dancing, both among the inter-racial and inter-generational skaters and among people staying, often for a long time, to watch – and smile, and move with the music. To each her/his own, but to me this is a deeper experience than The Gates, and much more fun. (For more info about this NY treasure, see www.centralparkskate.com/faq.shtml and www.cpdsa.org. In season, it starts around two and really gets going by three weekends at the northeastern end of the Sheep Meadow. But they seem to be there during the winter as well.) And the Village Halloween Parade, largely gay in its origins, is a wonderful NY celebration of deviance and comedy.

In addition, the crowd for the Gates is very shallow communalism indeed when compared to the crowds for great political demonstrations in the Park down through the years, including the great August 29 demonstration, which though prohibited by the city and the Central Park Conservancy, nonetheless took place spontaneously and without permission,

and with much comedy and mutuality.

No, everything doesn't have to be political. But it does seem to me a mark of the bad times we are in that large numbers of happy tourists snapping pictures is taken for a Great Communal Event.

March 3 Hal Foster, Townsend Martin Professor of Art, Princeton, "In Central Park," *London Review of Books*," Vol. 27 No. 5, 3 March 2005 [posted on Portside] (excerpts)

If the actual location of The Gates was the park, its effective site was the global media (including the souvenir market online): that is to say, its site was everywhere. But what if we consider the piece, perversely, in terms of the old criteria of colour and line? Christo and Jeanne-Claude chose dead winter to open The Gates so that it might be seen to greatest effect. Yet the hue was off, at least to my eyes: the light orange was too close to both the bleached green of the grass and the smoky grey of the trees to make for a vivid contrast. Sometimes the banners did catch the light or the breeze to flow like veils or shimmer like kites, but often the nylon hung rather dull and limp like big tarps or giant laundry. Red would have been better, or black or white, but all these colours have political associations, and everything about The Gates was dictated by an assiduous avoidance of any such significance . . . Perhaps as a result, the colour, the materials, the very design are bland, stripped of any edge. It was quite a feat to set up so many gates in America today and not prompt any reference to security checks and immigration outrages. But no colour is entirely without association. 'It's the orange of police cones,' my wife said as we entered the park; 'it looks like a Princeton reunion run amok.' . . .

I don't want only to pee on this parade. There was generosity of spirit in The Gates, and pleasure too, and they

did encourage more promenades in this great urban space . . . some of the revenue from the souvenirs will go to the Park Conservancy. Nonetheless, two other problems – one artistic, one political – cannot be skirted.

Christo and Jeanne-Claude emerged with the movement called Nouveau Réalisme more than forty years ago . . . The object was not the thing; the wrapping was – and the wrappers. 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 also played into the bread-and-circus policies of Mayor Bloomberg, a patron of the project (he also bought two drawings, reportedly for \$800,000). Bloomberg wants a new football stadium on the West Side, as part of New York's bid for the 2012 Olympics, and The Gates suits his post-9/11 strain of 'Don't Worry Be Happy' (otherwise known as 'Big Business Don't Leave'). The Gates made for friendly city politics and nice holiday aesthetics, and no one can be against sociability in the park. Yet for what exactly was this festival of the people staged? The Gates prettied up an extraordinary public place, but the fanfare was empty of social consequence: the city blocked a demonstration against the Republican Convention in the park, but gave a green light to Christo. Out of one eye, then, I saw an enjoyable mass art event; out of the other, a telling instance of high kitsch in the Bloomberg-Bush era, a cross between the Yellow Brick Road and a grand opening where the packaging was literally all.

March 5 Jesse Lemisch, Portside (also posted March 7 on H-Amstdy):

Today's New York Times now begins to address a topic ["the money question"] raised in my original posting here . . . the Times carries an article on "Enough about 'Gates' as Art; Let's Talk About that Price Tag." This openly ridicules C/J-

C's dismissiveness and evasion ("the manner of royalty") as regards their repeated failure and refusal to present the basis for the claim that they spent 21 million dollars: "it appears that at least some of the grand price tag for 'The Gates' may be as conceptual as the work itself." [14] This article seems to me a modest beginning to exploring that I called "enormous profit and conflict of interest" all around, including Bloomberg and the Central Park Conservancy. I suppose that those who appreciate The Gates as art or Great Communal Experience will want to separate these issues from the project itself, but I think it will be harder and harder to do so: the thing is tainted by fakery.

March 10 H- Amstody Harold S. Forsythe, Golieb Fellow,
New York University, School of Law:

*I thought that the sharpest short comment on "The Gates" was Peter Schjeldahl's in The New Yorker. He observed, "[t]hose who deplore 'The Gates' as ugly aren't wrong, just poor sports. The work's charm-free synthetic orange hue – saffron? no way – it is something you would wear only in the woods during deer season, in order to avoid being shot. The nylon fabric is sullen to the touch. The proportions of the arches are graceless, and dogs alone esteem the clunky bases."
(02/28/05)*

. . . I, too, noticed the absence of brown and black people in the Park during the event. Apparently American-born whites seemed a little surprised to see my wife and I strolling though the Park – we are black – but not hostile, but rather startled, like encountering us at the Harvard Club or someplace, and not being sure whether we were alums or just "the help." My best bet is that something as contrived as "The Gates" will be forgotten in 3-5 years . . . [By 2009, students in] their college dorms . . . will flub the Jeopardy question about "The Gates" and kick themselves.

III. Conclusion

AS I SEND THIS OFF, the debate is far from over. With the passage of time, perhaps more considered opinions will be offered[15] But, for now, much of the left seems content with the kind of uncritical euphoria that was thought by some to be an adequate response to my critique. The left needs to do better. Art is an important part of the good society, and we won't find our way to the good society without more sophistication about art, and the ability to distinguish the specious from the worthy. Some non-left critics often came closer to making sense about The Gates than did the left. In comparison, left engagement with The Gates and with questions of popular art around them seems shallow. Is The Gates a good instance on which to hang the case for "art for the people"? This is faux populism. There is also MIA in left responses to The Gates an old socialist ideal rarely heard any more: "ordinary folk" have a right to truth and beauty and access to high art. What kind of good society will we build if leftists confuse art for the people with faux populism?[16]

Afterword, May 2, 2005:

Breaking News from Central Park

AS WE HAVE SEEN, writing in the March 28 issue of *The Nation*, Rebecca Brandes Gratz and Stephen A. Goldsmith spoke of Central Park as "democratic public space" and contrasted it with other space where "public assembly . . . can be legally denied." If this failed dismally as a description of reality at that time, it was about to be even more starkly contradicted. On April 18, the NYC Department of Parks took formal action to reduce the size and number of public gatherings that would be permitted in Central Park. (For the Parks Department's "Notice" in *The City Record*, see

www.nycgovparks.org; also see "Keeping Great Crowds off the Great Lawn," *New York Times*, April 27, 2005, B1.) Under these rules, gatherings on the Great Lawn would be limited to 50,000 people, and only six such gatherings would be permitted in any calendar year, four of which would be reserved for the Metropolitan Opera and the New York Philharmonic. As a further limitation, the remaining two permitted public gatherings would be allowed to take place only during a four-week period in August and September. The well-being of the grass ("sound horticultural practice") is the rationale that is offered, and the Department assumes that performances of classical music ("extremely low impact events") are less harmful to the grass than are rallies.

Recall that I had earlier written that "Central Park is hospitable to some public events and inhospitable to others." Concertgoers, the Parks Department says, make only "passive use" of the space. (In addition, the requirements concerning the amount of bond to be posted by those seeking permits seem to be worded so as to allow ample leeway for discrimination against political events.) And the New York Police Department further restricts expression by dividing the crowd into penned-up sections, as was done most recently in the May 1 United for Peace and Justice "No Nukes! No Wars!" rally at Central Park's Heckscher Ballfield. Thus a space-starved Manhattan is about to lose one of the few remaining public spaces that can suitably serve as a *zocolo*, a large public square. (For criticism, see "Making a Not-So-Great Lawn," editorial, *New York Times*, City Section, May 1, 2005, 13: "The lawn . . . is being kept like Aunt Millie's couch under a layer of plastic, protected from being used as it was intended.")

This is very much a part of Bush's repressive America manifesting itself in Bloomberg's increasingly repressive New York. All in all, the Parks Department's regulations and the rationale for them reads like something out of *Pravda*: in

addition to the above, the regulations use the *presence* of "an advanced irrigation or drainage system" as a reason for not permitting large demonstrations on the Great Lawn, and the *absence* of such a system as a reason for not allowing demonstrations in the Sheep Meadow. (Meantime, Allure magazine sells tickets at \$37 plus for a May 21 event in Central Park's Rumsey Playfield: "Allure Beauty Live" will feature "makeovers . . . a fashion show, expert skin care, hair tips and lots of FREE beauty goodies.")

In regard to the Central Park Conservancy, newly found data calls further into question Paul Lauter's characterization of CPC – "not one of my favorite charities, but hey, they do work for us all." A document that I had not previously seen shows that the privatization of Central Park has been, among other things, an instrument for union busting. Indeed, we might speak of the Wal-Martization of Central Park. The document in question appeared in the right-wing Manhattan Institute's *City Journal* under the title "Set the Parks Free" (Winter 1997). It was written by Richard Gilder, founder of the Institute, a member of the board of the Central Park Conservancy, and one of the thinkers behind George Bush's efforts to sabotage Social Security by privatizing it. (And for Gilder's corruption of U.S. history through an exhibit at the New-York Historical Society, see Lemisch, "Are Gilder and Lehrman Tilting American History to the Right? A Case in Point," History News Network, November 8, 2004). Acknowledging – or perhaps we might better say, boasting – that CPC is "the de facto manager of Central Park," Gilder presents a Grand Plan for expansion of CPC's empire:

After years of remarkable cooperation under an informal partnership, the city and the Conservancy owe Central Park and its 15 million annual visitors a further step. The Conservancy should assume full contractual responsibility for managing the park. In exchange for freeing the city from most of its expenses there, the Conservancy would receive, as its

management fee, all of Central Park's concession revenue, and it would oversee all work in the park with a staff entirely its own. The city would pay for essential services like security and maintaining the park's lights.

Today Central Park, tomorrow the world.

What about the rest of the city's parks? . . . Nonprofit groups already connected to a number of parks make excellent candidates for management contracts . . . Over time, the better managers would emerge and win contracts for more parks. The Conservancy, for instance, should take its expertise into the parks of northern Manhattan – Riverside, Morningside, Marcus Garvey – and should eventually manage all the borough's parks.

GILDER'S IMPERIAL VISION also involves an attack on unions. This attack arises out of an attitude of contempt for unions, combined with the triumphalist capitalism that has had a rebirth in Bush's America. Looking back to what he calls the "dark days" of the sixties, Gilder lays the historical foundation for an attack on union labor in Central Park, employing an anti-populist rhetoric that resonates with today's efforts to keep protest out of the park:

[D]istress . . . struck Central Park: it became the scene for a growing number of 'happenings' – concerts and rallies that brought crowds thronging into the park, crushing turf and topsoil. Park workers spent so much time on these events that routine maintenance began to slip. Union-dictated work rules and job titles probably exacerbated the problem.

The solution, as Gilder saw it, would be to banish unions from Central Park, and indeed from all the parks.

The Conservancy's great advantage comes in staffing. It hires and pays its horticulturalists, groundskeepers, and cleanup

crews as any private employer would. If they do well, they advance. If they do poorly, they're fired. Conservancy staffers are flexible enough to do more than one task, so they can be assigned to whatever job needs doing most urgently . . . Parks Department [employees] work under a bureaucratic, seniority-based union system. Rigid job descriptions can create a ready excuse for leaving work undone . . . All of New York's parks would benefit from contracting and outsourcing, for these would bring competition and accountability, the discipline of the marketplace, to the management of the city's parks.

Indeed, the discipline of the marketplace has devastated union employment in the park. Writing in 1997, Gilder said that CPC's "payroll includes 172 of the park's 244 workers." The following year, as Gilder had hoped, CPC signed a contract with the city, "formalizing the Conservancy's role as manager and steward of the Park" (www.citymayors.com/features/central_park.html; see also www.centralparknyc.org/thenandnow/partnership/contract). In 2005, CPC stated "We currently have approximately 110 full-time gardeners, grounds tech[s], maintenance techs and 30 seasonal grounds tech[s] who work in the park . . . None of our employees are unionized." (Sheila Kendall e-mail to Jesse Lemisch, 4/25/05) In contrast, the Parks Department has 74 workers in Central Park, almost all of whom are unionized. (Sami Naim email to JL, 5/24/05 and phone conversation with Naim, 5/25/05.)

But let us not despair. To end on a happy note: at least one wedding took place amidst The Gates, and on April 28 a *New York Review of Books* personals ad presented "smashingly attractive" as desirable because, among other things, she was "charmed by The Gates." (*NYRB*, 4/28/05). For better or for worse, The Gates live on.

Footnotes

1. Corporate partners.

2. Thanks to Andrea Hill of CPC for supplying some of the above information. CPC was founded in 1980 under Mayor Edward Koch. It describes itself as "a private, not-for-profit organization . . . that manages Central Park under a contract with the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation." Without formal conservancies, some other parks in New York City are partly funded privately, including, in my Upper West Side neighborhood, Straus Park (106th Street and Broadway) where I am a contributor to the "Friends of Straus Park." This kind of financial arrangement means that other parks that rely only on public funding are in poorer shape. As Anne Schwartz perceptively writes, "The reliance upon private funding could weaken the government's traditional role in maintaining public space and ultimately reduce the opportunity for all citizens to enjoy it . . . In Bryant Park, for example, private events held in the park temporarily keep much of the public out. The reliance on public funding could leave the city with a two-tier park system . . . corporations are most likely to donate to a park they care about, favoring parks in affluent areas . . . Parks in poor neighborhoods, particularly outside Manhattan could be left to depend on dwindling public dollars." *Gotham Gazette*, July 21, 2003. Compare with the piece published by *The Nation*, below (note 15), which is utterly obtuse to this issue.

3. For a more serious critique than Kimmelman's, see Blake Gopnik, "Christo's Gates: A Little Creaky," *Washington Post*, February 12, 2005 (partly quoted below). See also below for critiques by Jed Perl, Hal Foster, and others.

4. But we can see their outlines and hope that they will become more visible. Christo was hardly accessible in the days leading up to the exhibit, since he was busy 24/7 (it seems) turning out drawings of what The Gates would look like, which

he sold for figures as high as \$600,000 apiece (or, according to one *New York Times* article, as much as a million dollars apiece: 3/3/05). The media failed to see that C/J-C might best be thought of as skilled and persevering entrepreneurs, not exactly like Donald Trump but somehow related. CPC bought many of the drawings, as did Mayor Bloomberg, who was already a Christo collector and would now see his Christos skyrocket in value. So, trumpeting The Gates enhanced the value of Bloomberg's and CPC's investments. There seem multiple clear conflicts of interest in all this. If there were indeed, as is widely thought, a ferocious Spitzer in the New York State Attorney General's office, he would be all over them like a tent. Whether legal or illegal, this is big business. The impact of The Gates on the value of Christo's work was large and immediate. The European Fine Art Fair opened in Maastricht on March 3, less than a week after The Gates closed. By March 6, three of Christo's early works had sold for a total of \$1,211,826. Annelly Juda, his London dealer, commented that The Gates had caused prices for Christo's work to rise: "A lot of people came by to talk about 'The Gates' . . . There is great interest in Christo, and a new realization how important and rare his early works are" ("At the Fair Despite Snow and Weak Dollar," *New York Times*, March 7, 2005, E7).

5. Interview.

6. For a sad coincidence that sheds light on this matter, see "American Jails in Iraq Bursting with Detainees," *New York Times*, March 4, 2005, p. A1. The accompanying color photograph shows five "detainees" dressed in jumpsuits roughly the orange color of The Gates. A sixth wears an identical suit in yellow, closer to the "saffron" that C/J-C claim is the color of The Gates. For discussion of saffron and orange in food, see, "What Color is it, Anyway?" *New York Times*, February 23, 2005, F8)

7. February 16 press release. There is no doubt that The Gates were well attended, and were also a tourism gold mine for New

York. On March 3, Mayor Bloomberg announced that 4 million people (including 1.5 million out-of-towners, of whom 20% were non-U.S.) had attended, and they had generated 254 million dollars for the city's economy (*New York Times*, March 4, 2005, B4; see Bloomberg's full statement). We don't know just how these figures were arrived at. Bloomberg presents a near hysterical listing of hundreds of percentage point increases in all kinds of measures – including Mickey Mantle's Restaurant, up 200% on weekends, and the Parks Department's concession sales, up more than one half million dollars beyond normal, or 448% higher. (The Mayor's statement contradicts itself about attendance: the four million figure has to be compared with the 750,000 which is normal for that period.) Leaving aside for now the escalating value of the CPC's Christo drawings, in addition CPC sold 4 million dollars in Gates merchandise and \$70,000 in other merchandise, with trolley and walking tours bringing CPC another \$158,760. (Many fans saw the display in cold February as an intended stroke of the artists' genius; but I have seen no mention of the negotiations which must have led to this schedule rather than the more obvious but overcrowded warmer weather.)

8. Full disclosure: In various internet postings, presented as from the "Straus Park Brigade," I had attempted to incite "a walk in the park" for August 29. The Brigade is a wholly fictitious organization consisting, so far, of only me.

9. Portside.

10. All H-Amstdy postings are archived and may be located by searching for "Christo".

11. *Washington Post*, February 12.

12. Interestingly, in an interview concerning his project for a stadium, Bloomberg links this project with The Gates as Great Enterprises that ran into small-minded opposition:

Bloomberg was starting to sound suspiciously like any ordinary politician whose grand vision is under attack . . . His ultimate aim, he went on, is to secure New York's future as a place of risk-taking, innovation, and enterprise, the sort of place where people do things that others question, such as putting up iconoclastic buildings, creating new media companies, and covering Central Park with pieces of orange fabric hung from vinyl gates. "Look at the history of The Gates," he said, referring to the lengthy struggle that his friends Christo and Jeanne-Claude had encountered in putting up their recent art installation. 'Why that many people would be that upset about something that goes on for two weeks, once in a lifetime, I don't know, but it was very, very controversial. Now everybody thinks, looking back, that it was the right thing to do. It was great for the spirit of the city, great for the economy.'

*John Cassidy, "Bloomberg's Game,"
The New Yorker, April 4, 2005, 67.*

13. American Prospect

14. Mike McIntire, "Enough About 'Gates' as Art; Let's Talk About That Price Tag," *New York Times*, March 5, 2005, p. A1. Mark Levinson writes in a letter to the editor of the *Wall Street Journal*, March 9, 2005: "how much more than the \$21 million cost of the installation Christo has, or will make from these sales . . . with a single Christo work reportedly going for \$500,000, the potential for profit is high. Has Christo, like Max Bialystock ['The Producers'], sold much more than he needed to underwrite his project? If so, this [would be a] violation of the artist's contract with the city that the project be 'not for any commercial use or commercial gain whatsoever.'"

15. But not in *The Nation*: See Roberta Grandes Gratz and Stephen A. Goldsmith, "In the Park with Christo," cover date 3/28/05. The following is a letter to the editor that I sent

on March 11; *The Nation* published a shortened version in its issue of 4/25/05.

Roberta Brandes Gratz and Steven A. Goldsmith view Christo/Jeanne-Claude's "The Gates" through saffron-colored glasses . . . G & G celebrate Central Park as "dynamic public space" while utterly ignoring its semi-privatization under the Central Park Conservancy (CPC). They celebrate Christo's generosity, without a hint of skepticism about his and Jeanne-Claude's supposed 21 million dollar "gift to New York," and without a hint of awareness of the multiple clear conflicts of interest on the part of such wealthy Christo collectors as Mayor Bloomberg and the CPC, who have a material investment in C/J-C.

*G & G contrast Central Park with the spread of "privatized public space . . . like kudzu across the land," including malls where "public assembly . . . can be legally denied." But that's precisely what happened when the city and CPC prevented the great August 29 anti-war march from going to Central Park. This reality mocks G & G's myopic notion of the park as "democratic public space." It's sad that *The Nation*, which has elsewhere shown awareness of the worldwide privatization of the commons, should be so ecstatically unaware of the same thing, right here in New York City. The CPC, a combine of mega-corporations, is taking what should be public decisions out of public hands, inviting some public events and barring others. Surely, this is something to challenge, not celebrate. Astonishingly, G & G never once mention CPC, nor could they do so while insisting on the Park as democratic and non-privatized space.*

*Even the Times, with all its flacking for *The Gates* – this was for them a mini-WMD moment of retailing official handouts (with art critic Michael Kimmelman playing Judith Miller) – finally could not ignore the holes in C/J-C's claims of a \$21 million dollar gift to the city ("some of [C/J- C's] grand price tag for 'The Gates' may have been as conceptual as the work itself": 3/5/05). In addition, Christo worked 24/7 (it seemed), grinding out Gates drawings selling individually for*

\$600,000 and by one estimate \$1 million. Among the purchasers are CPC and Bloomberg (who had earlier collected Christos, which would now skyrocket in value). Bloomberg/CPC's promotion of "The Gates" enhanced the value of their investments: if there were indeed a Spitzer in the attorney general's office, he would be all over them like a tent. Whether legal or illegal, this is big business. The European Fine Art Fair opened in Maastricht less than a week after "The Gates" closed. By March 6, three of Christo's earlier works had sold there for a total of \$1,211,826. His London dealer attributed this appreciation to the display of "The Gates" in New York.)

*Like most of the adorations of "The Gates," G & G largely pass over aesthetic questions, leaving the display to stand or fall as "populist spectacle" and Great Communal Event. A few have done better: Gopnik in *The Washington Post* ("dull . . . It takes more than an orange schmatte . . . the latest thing in bourgeois beautification . . . elegant daywear"); Hal Foster in the *London Review of Books* ("Red would have been better, or black or white, but all these colours have political associations, and everything about *The Gates* was dictated by an assiduous avoidance of any such significance . . . high kitsch in the Bloomberg-Bush era"); Jed Perl, *New Republic Online* ("mix of obscurantism and feel-good communalism") . . . "The Gates," and the puffery around them, are faux populism, a poor case on which to hang an argument for art for the people.*

*By the way, as anyone with eyes to see through the fiction knows, they were orange. And why did *The Nation* give the article a title which erased Jeanne-Claude?*

Jesse Lemisch

16. For earlier work on the quest for authenticity in the left, and left construction of hierarchies of authenticity, see Lemisch, "Pop Front Culture: I Dreamed I saw MTV Last Night," *The Nation*, October 18, 1986; Lemisch, "The Politics of Left Culture," *The Nation*, December 20, 1986.