

Earthworks

Assignment 2

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Assignment 2

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Contents

Page	Item
1	Prologue
2	Introduction
3	'Surrounded Islands'
3 - 4	Subversive
5	Conclusion
6	References
7 -13	Appendix 1 - Chronology
14	Appendix 2 - Facts Sheet
15	Appendix 3 - Poem

Prologue

Some of the most spectacular art ever made appeared in the 1970's through the 'earth works' movement. Massive interventions in the natural landscape in some cases costing millions of dollars and huge logistical efforts sic[occurred] The 'earthworks' of Christo are probably some of the best known art of the late twentieth century.

Goddard, J. (1999 p. 7)

Tutorial Question Give a detailed account of one of Christo's projects. In doing so concentrate on any contradictions between the intention of his work and it's realization.

Introduction

This paper examines the contradictions between the intent of Javacheff Christo's work, 'Surrounded Islands', completed on May 7th 1983 and the projects realization. It is assumed that the reader is familiar with the historical narrative of Christo's life and has an understanding of the project's chronology (ref. Appendix 1).

When examining texts and historical narrative that elucidate these contradictions, anomalies emerge between the artist's words and his actions. This paper shows that constraint applied to his ambitious projects by various authorities was directly proportionate to Christo's ability to manipulate these politicians, landowners, art collectors and the general public. He sought for them to approve (but not necessarily accept) his intentional 'earthwork' intrusions.

"Much as the media lionized Christo, the art press has treated him with relative restraint. Critical perception has been hampered, one might argue, by his works stubborn refusal to be measured by standards routinely applied to other works of visual art."

Marck, J. (1981, p. 52)

The deliberatness by Christo to create works of grand scale so that "members of the general public could encounter these in the course of everyday travel" needs to be questioned in terms of creating a spectacle as opposed to one of incidental appreciation.

Given that Christo has a politicized background coupled with an overwhelming motive to question what is materially possible, it is of little surprise that with an injection of sufficient funds this led to projects of immense scale and complexity. The costs of these projects have been astronomical in terms of monetary support yet Christo maintains his projects are funded entirely from his own resources, neither sponsored, grant driven nor commissioned.

The 'Surrounded Islands' project intent has deeper ramifications than just a conceptual strategy of garbing existing environmental features with fabric. The attribution made to 'earthworks' as a movement by Christo could as much be 'Pop' when contemplating this projects intent.

'Surrounded Islands'

According to Marck, J. (1981) the governing social reality and quest for the "extra-aesthetic" that Christo seeks in the project 'Surrounded Islands', are two factors easily juxtaposed. These two factors, he believes, are interwoven by the principles of dialectical materialism. The intentional transience and celebration of site embraces this notion of dialectical materialism according to Bourdon, Fineberg & Mulholland (1986) and necessitates deeper investigation into the motive of such an immense artistic expression.

Christo's works have been attributed to the 'earthworks' movement of the late 70's and 80's by Tesch, J & Hollman, E. (1997) due to the apparent simplistic superimposition of cloth in grand scale on an existing landscape. This chain of "lilly pads", has been compared to Monet's pond of lilies in nature by visual comparison and by ensuing notoriety. The project constituted the industrious creation and installation of 6.5 million square feet wrapping of pink polypropylene fabric circling eleven of the islands in Florida's Biscayne Bay, extending 200 feet out from each into the bay (ref. appendix 2).

Christo stated in the video by Maysles, D. (1986), when questioned of the projects symbolic meaning;

"I've wanted an uncomplicated celebration of the beautifulgigantic flowers floating on the water for all to see..."

Fineberg, J. (1984) begs to differ with this conceptual notion of the uncomplicated celebration of the beautiful, by drawing to the readers attention that without helicopter access one did not get even close to comparing the wrapping of an island in pink polypropylene as a gigantic flower. Indeed he points out that unquestionably the best view was on T.V and that was the primary motive for Christo's staging of such an event in the first place. The carefully contrived media image therefore, he states, engages the work as event, event as the persona and artist ultimately as a "style".

The subversive

According to Bourdon, Finberg & Mulholland (1986) one the animating contradictions in this creation of iridescent pink artificial lilly pads of such a scale is the fact that it has a deeply personal content for Christo, manifesting for him in a formal manner.

Christo calls this normalization as subversive because ;

"Each project addresses itself to the many issues of reality.... the visual, the formal aesthetics. But by the very basics, I think the project has some kind of subversive dimension and this is why we have so many problems. Probably all the opposition, all the criticism of the project

is basically that issue. If the project was considered like a movie set for Hollywood and we spend three million dollars on the movie there would be no opposition. They could even burn the islands to be filmed and there would be no problem. The great power of the project is because it is absolutely irrational. This is the idea of the project, that the project puts into doubt all values".

Christo, J as cited in [video] Maysles, D (1986)

The contextual framework or "style" within which 'Surrounded Islands' creates meaning is entertained in this documentary as to be Christo's primary intent. The use of meanings in symbols is seen to have dissipated as the world of television consumes and creates its own and the contradictions between Christo's motive and intent blur and refocus depending upon which one wishes to embrace. The irrational is re-invented to be rational as the depiction of the visual aesthetic is contextualised via the photograph still or television frame

Marck, J.(1981) attests that Christo challenges capitalist economics because he is not producing his epics primarily for profit. There is however a shard of doubt when we examine profit in terms of notoriety and ultimately success in entertaining the manifestation of other projects. The fact that this was a temporary work, Fienberg argues, seems to have no real objective reality other than to generate hype feeding the persona of Christo himself. References are made in Fineberg, J. (1984) that Christo's intent is rather to produce a wonderful apparition as only a mechanism of populism rather than a stand alone object of aesthetic wonderment.

The compromise made by Christo in terms of this project ethic or integrity is given as a classic example of this trade-for-permission in Christo's "donation" of \$100,000 of signed works to Dade County for the Biscayne Bay Preservation Fund. Fineberg (1984) convincingly puts forward that the media coverage whipped up by Christo's controversial application for exclusive right to conduct this project only contributed to his ability to finance this and other projects. The transformation of work via persona into event has an intrinsically political dimension and an inevitable profit generation contrary to Christo's declared intent. The static symbol of the wrapping is seen to be no more than the realization of political, social and environmental imposition. When we consider however, that Christo also sells images of a static nature cast in watercolors, collages and photographs both prior and after such an event, an intrinsic realm of profitability does in fact exist.

Conclusion

Both Christo and the renowned writer Walter Benjamin were cited at differing times in their careers as stating that the initial and intrinsic idea behind any project transcends and supersedes the object as an agent of cultural change. Depending on what format it is presented in and the manner in which it is promoted, the object is used only to materialize the intellectual pursuit of the content (ref. Appendix 3)

Christo's own political convictions, and faith in the importance of the content within his work 'Surrounded Islands' has identified him as an important figure in challenging and consolidating the viewing public's perception of art as a social mirror.

"Art is not a mirror held up to reality, but a hammer with which to shape it"

Boris Arvatov as cited in Marck, J. (1981 p. 56)

This paper has illustrated the contradictions Christo has made not only in aspects of intent for the 'Surrounded Islands' project but also in terms of media persona versus aesthetic object. The use of the media to build up a persona and transpose the conceptual framework to a huge audience via the television has been advantageous in terms of marketing his other projects.

The parallels drawn by Preble S & D (1985) of Christo's work with the Minimalist's, the Constructivist's and so on bear testament to his ability to conceptualize process, event and sculpture as one expression.

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