

# The Gates, Central Park

Jeffrey Wong

When I exit the subway station at 97<sup>th</sup> Street on Central Park West, the sight of “The Gates” is inescapable. An orange tower greets visitors to the park, and it’s just what the name of the project suggests—a gateway. This first “gate” is followed by a multitude of similar sixteen-foot tall standing dominoes, one right after the other, that run through twenty-three miles of pathways through the park. Each one has an identically-colored piece of fabric that hangs from the top crossbar and flows and flutters in the wind. “The Gates,” the brainchild of Christo and his wife, Jean-Claude, is artwork on a grand scale. The mammoth piece of artwork calls for 7,500 of these “gates” at a whopping cost of \$20 million, which was funded by the artists.

I had been eager to see “The Gates” since it first opened. I couldn’t comprehend the sheer magnitude of this massive undertaking and had to see it firsthand. I was not disappointed. My first reaction was that it looked very Japanese. Each tower reminded me of the Japanese gateways that welcome visitors to Buddhist temples, while the fabric made me think of the Japanese curtains that are commonly used for the entrance to kitchens. As I made my way into Central Park and toward the baseball fields, the orange gates suddenly became orange caterpillars in the distance, scurrying along the snow looking for shelter. I climbed up onto a rock in the North Meadow to try to get a higher view and saw a blanket of white with streams of orange that flowed this way and that.

Even on a Tuesday afternoon there were plenty of visitors, many of whom were tourists. “I don’t think I will ever see anything like this in Texas,” I overheard a girl say to her friends. I wondered whether she made the trip to New York just for this exhibit or whether it was just fortunate happenstance. There were also some hometown spectators on what should be a workday. I overheard a man on his cellular phone blaring, “I’ll be back in the office in a bit. I’m in Central Park right now looking at that thing...you know, that orange artwork thingy. Don’t start the meeting without me!”

That this “thingy” made people play hooky from work is a testament to the curious wonderment of Christo’s artwork and should also help to answer the question of whether “The Gates” is considered art. Art, whether it is liked or disliked, inspires thought. It bears discussion and makes us long for inclusion. My roommate went to Central Park on the first day of the exhibit. He told me before he went that he thought it was nothing but hype, yet he went nonetheless. As I

walked through each tower, I felt a sense of awe that I was participating in this experience. It seemed almost surreal that something I watched on television I was now a part of, and it is something that I will keep with me.

“The Gates” wasn’t just artwork on its Central Park canvas. While I was walking through the park, I watched as it transcended the steel and nylon, and practically made artwork out of the workers who took care of the exhibit. I witnessed people taking pictures and talking with the workers. I even spotted someone shaking hands with one as if he had just met Christo himself. At one point, they had to take down one of the towers to replace the fabric. Instantly, a crowd appeared to take pictures. A few of the workers chuckled at their newfound fame, and one even smiled and posed for the camera.

What will become of “The Gates” after February 27<sup>th</sup>? There are many themed sections in Central Park, such as Strawberry Fields and Alice in Wonderland, and perhaps “The Gates” could join them. If it were up to me, I would have a new area dedicated to “The Gates,” so that those who did not experience it would have a chance to have a taste. And for those of us who had the pleasure of having this experience, it would be a pleasant reminder. I envision either a Stonehenge-like circular display or a section of roadway permanently installed with the orange towers. Although some may protest altering the landscape of Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux’s work of genius that is Central Park, I believe the addition would be a beautiful representation of the diverse and ever-changing face of New York.

As I made my way out of the park, I noticed a man standing alone, staring up at the orange drapes as the wind turned them into a fluttering orange commotion. I asked him, “What do you think?” He replied with curled lips and a shrug of his shoulders, as if to say, “What’s the big deal?” As I passed him, two women, with cameras in hand, crossed the street and stepped up onto the curb. One took a quick picture and said to her friend, “Wow, this is so beautiful.” I smiled at this serendipitous event that made my answer to the question of whether this is truly art or not self-evident. It most certainly is.

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