

# ART EDUCATION

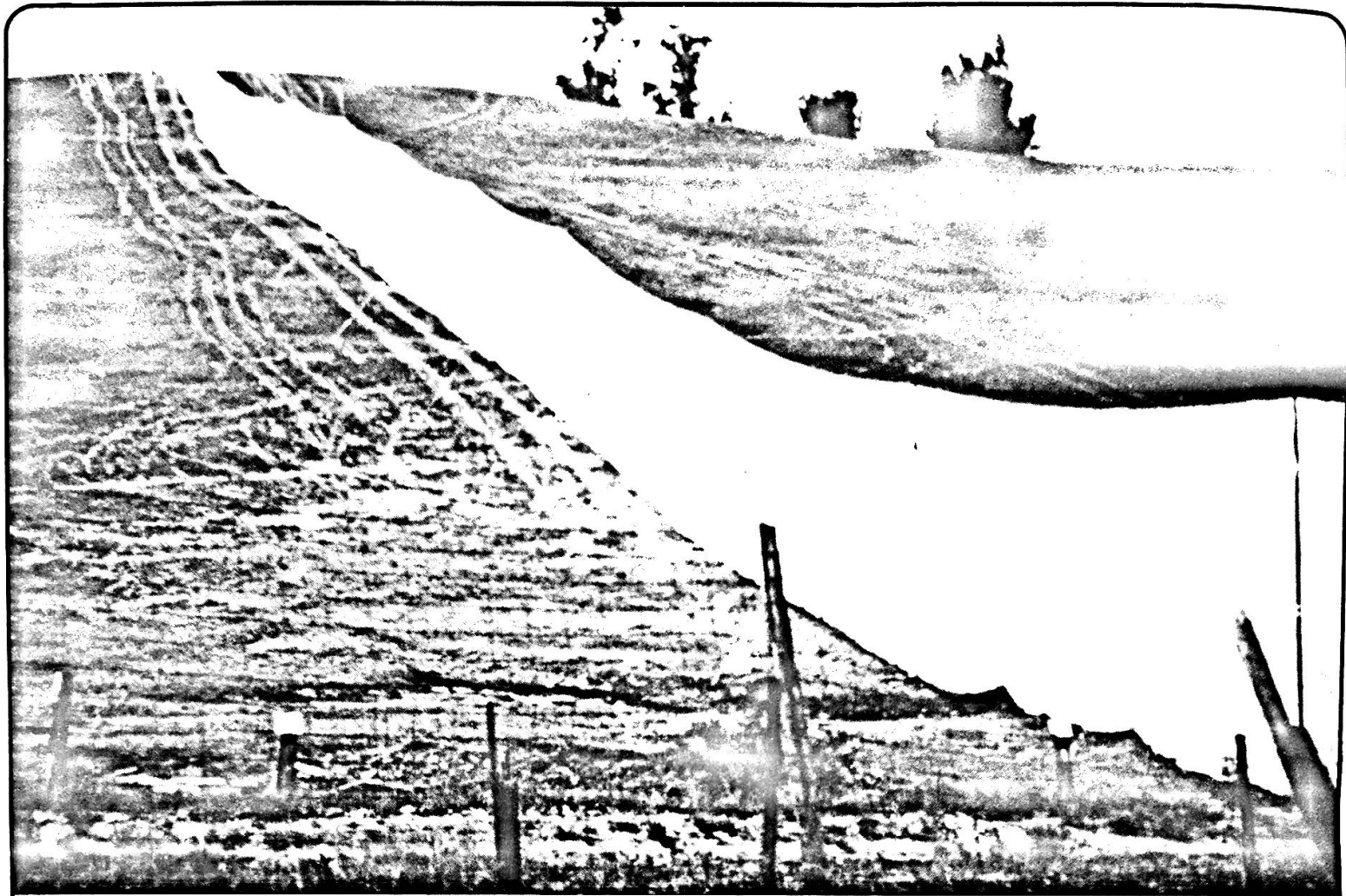
The Journal of the National Art Education Association

February, 1977

Volume 30/Number 2







# CHRISTO: On Art, Education, and the Running Fence

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On September 7, 1976, Christo Javacheff unfolded a running fence which stretched 26 miles from Petaluma, California, and into the Pacific Ocean. The impact of this work is not only important in the art world, but opens new issues for art education.

These issues arise as we contrast the social and artistic character of our classrooms with life and art in the society at large. In most educational settings we tend to disregard the contemporary phenomenon around us and dwell on the nature of life in the past. As classroom teachers we invest our energies in preestablished objectives such as motivation, achievement, and subject matter, and let the dynamic quality of experience in the present slip by. It would seem that some of the formal concerns we have about education could naturally take place if the experience of our classrooms had some resemblance to social reality.

Analogously, Christo dispels the dichotomy which exists between art and life, and provides us with an experience of art within the context of its originating environment. Although his intentions are to create or redefine art, the participants in his projects are able to discover for themselves, along with an aesthetic experience, new conceptions of reality which touch upon the social, economic, and political currents in contemporary society.

Similarly, situations which are analogous to those in the real world need to occur in the art classroom. Ideas, actions, objects, and materials beyond those ordinarily found in an art room need to be considered as materials for expression just as we consider them in the expression of our daily lives. In this sense aesthetic relationships perceived in the natural world can lead toward a conception of art. The opportunity for students to collect, assemble, and present materials and activities from their own environment through personally designed rituals can provide avenues of meaning and expression otherwise neglected or forgotten by conventional art-room approaches. The unveiling of these personal worlds and the discovery of their potential for art arouses in the student a conscious need for learning. This awareness provides for an important balance between content based on personal-social relevance, and form based on the acquisition of technique and artifice. Together they form the conceptual base necessary for artistic inquiry and production.

This need for the redefinition of the art room "palette" can best be illustrated by looking at the environment,

the materials, and the relationships in contemporary art. The complexity of our society has opened to the artist of today a palette which extends into the actual environment. Today's artist considers a range of materials as sophisticated as our economic and technological advancement can provide us. Paint and canvas, as expressive materials, are no longer adequate as the sole means of expressing the nature of life in our age. In a culture as complex and rapidly progressing as ours, media and information about them are exhausted as rapidly as the environment from which they originate.

In recent years conceptual artists have found that the only way to deal with this phenomenon is to act with reality itself. Rather than having materials express and represent a concept or a metaphor, they present a paradoxical situation where the actual and the metaphoric play on each other. As an example, Christo's work does not represent a fence—it *is* a fence, and it illuminates like no other all the metaphoric qualities of "fenceness." The Running Fence then has the actual properties of all fences, and yet possesses a quality which is unique to its existence as art.

In keeping with the character of Christo's work, we hope that the following interview will illuminate the artistic and the educational. The example that Christo sets as an artist is vital to us as educators if our concerns for quality and significant experiences in the classroom are to establish any relationship with art and life.

What follows are excerpts from several hours of conversation with the artist in which he presents thoughts on personal and public expression, his background as an artist, his views on the education of the artist, and on his most recently completed project—the Running Fence.

**Question:** Because we are art teachers, your work has raised some interesting questions in our minds about your training as an artist. Could you begin by describing your educational background?

**Christo:** I literally spent most of my life in Bulgaria and Czechoslovakia. I studied engineering plus academic 19th Century art. In a way it was very complex, and in looking back it was a very strange education—yet helpful in the way things have happened. I studied political science not because I liked to study political science, but because that's all they offered. The art student had to study the same things everyone else did including the medical sciences such as dissection and anatomy. My training was very heavy, like the 19th

Century academies with all the political disciplines of the communist country. But all that was very important—to have gone to school there and worked for the Party on Saturday and Sunday. It was an important thing—that we were sent to the factory to work on different projects—not really decoration work—but a kind of political assignment or visual stimulation for the proletarian revolution. This involvement with propaganda art was called "agit. prop."—agitation propaganda (to give life).

**Question:** Considering that you have had such an intensified background socially and politically, what concerns do you feel artists should keep in mind today?

**Christo:** First, there can be no such thing as a partial artist. Art is a total commitment. The artist today has to be sensitive to the underlying currents in society in order to ask the question: "What is the 20th century image?" For example, few people discussed the intellectual importance of art when many artists were monks like Fra Filippo Lippi in the early Renaissance. They were not artist-monks by any miracle or chance, but because it was a profoundly religious times, and art to be art and good art had to deal with religion. Fra Filippo Lippi was not doing abstract forms of blue, pink, or green, but expressing the religious content of his times, since it was a highly religious century.

Our century today has its own economical, political, and social character, and if the artist does not recognize these characteristics, then he is simply less than a contemporary. In the same way, if Fra Filippo Lippi was not seeped in his time as a religious man, he could not have conceived the image of his period.

Second, the problem of art is a dialectical one. I studied Marxism, and I think in terms of the dialectic—everything works together. We know very well that society is going to be highly socialistic, and we are no longer facing the world of the nineteenth century. The nature of the twentieth century is such that all individuals have an incredible impact on the behavior of each other.

**Question:** Does the dialectic exist at all times?

**Christo:** Yes. The dialectic is the only new source for the living art of the avant-garde. Nothing really changes in the performance of human evolution—established forms always remain the same. It is the dialectic relationship between these forms and the content of a given generation which is in continual flux, that provides new relationships for art. Therefore, the means to

do art changes as the artist's mind is influenced by these new relationships.

**Question:** Could you identify the role of the artist in this dialectic condition?

**Christo:** Working within the system, the artist is able to dialectically arrive at his image from the complex issues of his time. An example of where this does not take place is after the Renaissance when the distinction of artist was divided into painter and sculptor. There the concern for technique and artifice replaced the consciousness of cultural issues as the source of the image. Painters and sculptors began leaning on the standards of the academies for excellence as their art became a commodity for the elite.

**Question:** Is what you are saying that the artist is not a maker of things, but an individual who working within the system expresses the consciousness of that system?

**Christo:** Yes.

**Question:** Then how do you feel that this level of consciousness can be developed in the schools?

**Christo:** The education of the artist is so complex that it is a task I would never consider for myself. To be an artist it is just as vital to study science, politics, and economy as well as the discipline of art. It is not necessary to be an artist to teach art. When artists go to school today, they generally have teachers who are professional artists. But the thing is that art today is much more complex, and the artist who both studies with the professional artist as well as pursues academic studies can learn much more about what art is.

Let me relay a sad story. They are trying to open a museum in Sonoma. For this they have raised a half-million or three-quarters of a million dollars. There is a fantastic misunderstanding here of what art is. Eighty percent of the people are doing folklore things, and this is what gets exhibited. Folklore is not art, but craft. Anything to do with crafts has nothing to do with art. And, of course, art education in the small school or the universities does not really define what art is in order to alleviate this condition. Art is not how to draw or to know how to paint. It is so incredible that we can know what it is only by studying all the different disciplines in life itself, and only in hindsight go back and explain it. Art in the process is inexplicable. I find many people have the wrong idea of art history because they only root the artist in his time in history. The history of art can be such an exciting thing and reveal so much to contemporary man if it is studied dialectically. Only through a dialectic vision can an individual begin explaining what art is by recreating its experience and meaning; otherwise the study of art history can only provide one with facts out of the past. I am afraid that present day art education is only providing piece-meal visions of what art is.

I think this dialectic knowledge of art history is the most important thing to know about art before you do anything—like drawing for a strong foundation. To grasp the real knowledge of art is the most important thing in the school, and to distinguish between art and folklore. And, if the arts in the schools are only going to be concerned with craft then it is almost better to have the restraint to not do art than to do what they are doing which as far as I am concerned is miseducational.

**Question:** Could you elaborate a little further the distinction you made between arts and crafts?

**Christo:** I do not consider crafts or folklore to be art. We will always have to make pots for example, but this is not art. Art is really much more. Creativity, which was the bottom of the German Bauhaus, had nothing to do with folklore. Creativity is only the domain of art. Creativity basically is the soft-ware relation—not the excellency of performance.

**Question:** Could you explain what you mean by "soft-ware relation?"

**Christo:** It is not the tricks of the hand. Creativity is not excellence of technique alone. Creativity is basically a quality of mind. It is a very serene quality. Take Mondrian, for example; he actually didn't discuss his paintings in terms of black bars with yellow and red areas. These are formalistic and factual matters. They are simple yet superior works of art, because they speak in an art language. They are so far from any mannerisms such as technique or the slight of hand. The same case is true in the work of any great artist. The most important thing is that any young artist should try to cultivate this "quality of mind."

**Question:** But is it not also important that he learn how to express this quality of mind?

**Christo:** Now this is something very different. Expression doesn't come by making the imitation of this or that form. Art does not come by some exercise like a runner who runs and runs to run better. But it is exercise on a different level. Technical or physical exercise (*how to express*) is only one aspect of art—it only facilitates. The skill of the hand is only related to the brush or the pencil and the paper. But, if the skill of the hand cannot be brought about visually, it will be related to visuals or objects only—simple attitudes like the things that we possess.

Art is the underlying soul and total behavior of all time. It is not only the behavior of the human hand which reacts when the artist calls up visions, but it is also the harmony with everything. The great artists are those who can put together that harmony of sublime experience\* in their work like Duchamp, Mondrian, and Pollack.

**Question:** Regarding the character of your art—it seems to us that "art"

becomes for the viewer not only a physical object, but a form of experience as well. Individuals discover themselves through an educational experience. In the Valley Curtain, for example, regardless if the participant was a hard-hat foreman, a lawyer behind a desk, or a student volunteer—he went away from the experience having a broader understanding of the universe.

**Christo:** Regarding my own work, there are many people who say it has to do with politics, education, or this or that . . . but the point is that these educational, political, or social implications come after the work is under way.

Let me say that that my work is not done primarily with education as its end. I didn't begin the Valley Curtain thinking it would be educational. In looking at a conventional work of art, such as a painting, the artist gives the work to history in order for others to see the painting. When the artist takes his work to a museum, it is his decision to make it public or knowledgeable, to take it outside of secrecy; but education is something that is not directly related to the work.

When I deal with my artwork, its reality, its physical existence, its time existence is related to the contingencies which help it exist. When the work is constructed, I don't like to think of it as something vocational, or as something collective, or as something public—the work is or is not these things primarily because there is no other way the work can exist.

What an artwork is has to do with the artist's intentions behind the work. The kinetic sculptures of the 60's, for example, were invitations for people to come play with these machines, to be joyful. But later, the museums eviscerated the romantic intentions of the artwork from that of the artist so the piece became something other than what it was originally intended.

**Question:** How important is the term "art" in defining your work?

**Christo:** To understand that what I work on is an art project is very important—not only for the students who help me, but for the contractors and engineers as well. The most important thing is that all of our efforts are going into something arational—and this should be known to all persons from the outset.

Anything an artist does is normal because it is based on an idiosyncratic decision. When lawyers, contractors, engineers learn that what is being constructed is "art," this label helps bring their efforts together. Their rational acts still are valid in the context of art, and in understanding that their efforts are not in vain.

Further the lawyers, engineers, farmers are all necessary helpers in completing the work of art. I can't do a running fence without them. But let me make a distinction: these people are the elements of the artwork, they are



not the subject matter or the public audience.

**Question:** Do you see your fence as a unifying idea in that it travels from the city to the suburbs to the rural areas?

**Christo:** Yes, it is the intention of the project to use different types of land. I wanted to use that area of California where there existed a mixture between urban, suburban, and rural conflict. The location of the fence is not really in a rural area, but is in an area that is threatened by invasion of the city and the threat of suburbia. The land is in direct and total conflict with the ranchers with the suburbia of the little town, with the fence crossing the little town, a city of adults and subdivisions. The subdivision is a very important part of American society, especially in California where everything is subdivided.

The projects must be fitted into the location in which it is to exist. In the running fence, everything is related—the land, the coast, the water . . . The ideas always start with an investigation of the land, the city, or the place. Before the project begins, I know the land and the place. Of course there are many aspects of a project which are not fixed which help to keep the project alive.

**Question:** What sorts of compromises do you encounter in constructing your projects?

**Christo:** There are a lot of necessary things which have to be done—whether it is working with the coastal commission for their approval, or whether it is working with the ranchers in the area. When a rancher says we cannot place the running fence at one location because it separates the cows from their water, we seek another location—but this is not a compromise; it's simply working with the ranchers.

We work with the law all the time; the idea is to find a way legally.

**Question:** In contrast with conventional works of art your work has a time duration. Could you explain how you decide on the number of days a project will remain erected?

**Christo:** The duration of the completed project is completely irrelevant. When the running fence is completed, the project is completed. How much time it stays up for the public is not a crucial question. On the other hand, there are some things which affect our considerations for duration. Maintaining the insurance, guarding the ranchers' land from trespassers—all these things are very expensive. If the wind happens to destroy the fence on the second day, then that's how long it will stay up.

The materials themselves are very temporary and are not designed to remain standing for any considerable length of time. The work on the fence has gone on for years; and when it is finished for the artist, it does not exist anymore.

**Question:** Some people have said that your work conceals and reveals at the same time; that your work creates enig-

matic relationships when placed in the environment. What relationships do you try to create with your work, for example as in the Valley Curtain?

**Christo:** All of my projects create an enigmatic relationship. Behind the Valley Curtain, for example, is the notion of being able to penetrate a membrane.

Some people thought I was hiding the valley. First, nobody ever went to see that valley before—so the valley was already hidden. Second, you could go through and see the other side at any time. At any rate, the people who lived there knew very well what the other side of the curtain was like. The most important aspect of the curtain was the ability to mentally penetrate that membrane, to be able to pass through that obstruction realizing a new relationship has been created.

**Question:** This brings up an important question about the selection of materials: Why fabric?

**Christo:** The materials are closely related to the projects. I love to work with fabric, which incidentally is the oldest man-made material. I use fabric because it can be used to build large physical dimensions in a short period of time. Take, for example, the nomads in the Sahara Desert. They can build their houses (tents) in a few minutes, and they leave overnight and move with their house. There is a very straight physical relation with the material and Curtain project. Because it is fabric, it is manipulatable; it is light; it covers physical dimensions, and is easily removed. And because of its fragility, it has a feeling of suspense. Unlike a more permanent material like steel or wood, fabric is vulnerable and can be penetrated.

**Question:** Is this element of suspense and surprise carried throughout the building of your projects? What preconceptions do you have about your projects?

**Christo:** The element of surprise is always there. The work of art builds its own reality just as a child grows and builds his own identity. In this fence project, everything is beyond anything I can imagine. If I reconstructed a former project, say the Valley Curtain, there would be little surprise. One of the most exciting parts of the project is not knowing how people will react in dealing with the project whether they are observers or actually involved in the process of its erection. In a way, you try to construct the project according to some predetermined guidelines, but after a while the project has a life of its own which grows as the artist follows. Everything which occurs in the building of the project is good since it is seen as part of the elements which help define the project.

The most important part of my projects are that they are so great in complexity that I cannot speculate on what the project means at all times. All of my thinking, for example, revolves

around the environment—not only the landscape or the hills, but the changes in the social and political environment as well.

In Christo's art the experience of the actual and the sublime are discovered by those who participate. For its aesthetic and conceptual appreciation one need not possess a sophisticated set of skills as does a critic or a connoisseur, but instead one simultaneously experiences and learns the meaning of art in the process. The paradox in Christo's work—its actuality and sublimity—its absurdity and beauty, acting on each other stimulates within the viewer an inherent and personal capability of metaphoric processing and connoisseurship related to personal experience.

In conventional works of art the metaphor is literally portrayed to the viewer by the content of the painting or sculpture. The art gives off a message which only exists as a metaphor of the past. For the work to exist as art, one needs to recreate its metaphor. Christo's work ignites the process of metaphoric creation which exists naturally within us. We experience the art as a phenomenon and relate it to our repertoire of past experiences. So the work not only gives off a qualitative experience similar to conventional works of art, but our own experiences in qualifying the phenomenon and meaning of his work take on the processes of art.

Because of these unique characteristics we find Christo's art artistically and intellectually significant to our concerns as art educators, and we feel that its quality of experience is something art teachers need to understand and emulate in their classrooms. Through similar experiences which synthesize the classroom and society, students can simultaneously develop the skills of artifice as well as discover the nature of reality.

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This interview was conducted by Charles Garoian, Roy Quan, and Dan Collins prior to the completion of the Running Fence project.

\*The sublime perceives visual external relationships and combines them with the internal vision of the imagination to create a subsequent quality of experience. This new quality which is the root of art, is brought about metaphorically by contrasting different experiences to elicit a new, whole, and more vivid perception of reality.