

Christo born 1935 & Jeanne-Claude 1935–2009

Wrapped Reichstag, Berlin 1971–95 1971–95

Polypropylene fabric and rope, and steel

52 x 96 x 135 m

Wrapped/ Unwrapped

For two weeks in the summer of 1995 Berlin's Reichstag building – historically the seat of the German parliament and a famous site in Germany's history – was covered with 100,000 square metres of fabric, held in place by steel framing and over fifteen kilometres of blue rope.

The artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude had conceived the project in 1971. Situated in the heart of the divided city of Berlin, during the Cold War the Reichstag was under the jurisdiction of both East and West Berlin authorities. It was scarcely used, but such was the tension between the two governments, and the political sensitivity of the site, that the project to wrap the building was rejected three times. It was only following the reunification of Germany and before the reinstatement of the Reichstag as the seat of the national parliament that the project was accepted, nearly a quarter of a century after it had been first proposed. It lasted only a fortnight but the conceptual audacity and visual impact of *Wrapped Reichstag, Berlin 1971–95* made it one of Christo and Jeanne-Claude's most famous works.

Born in Bulgaria, Christo Javacheff fled the Soviet bloc in 1957, and artistic and political freedom remained a strong guiding principle in his life. He met Jeanne-Claude Denat de Guillebon in Paris the following year, and the couple were soon living and working together. Early projects were attributed solely to Christo but later their partnership was acknowledged in joint attribution. Alongside his activities as a painter, Christo began to make objects, covering familiar items such as barrels, paint cans, cars and furniture with fabric and string. This wrapping made everyday objects seem mysterious, and stimulated a sense of curiosity and surprise in the viewer.

In the early 1960s Christo and Jeanne-Claude began to create temporary public works. On the evening of 27 June 1962 the couple filled Rue Visconti in Paris's Latin Quarter with eighty-nine oil drums, blocking the street for eight hours. The impermanent structure echoed the barriers erected by police elsewhere in Paris to contain protesters against the Algerian War. Its subtitle *The Iron Curtain* – a phrase used to denote the physical and ideological division between East and West Europe after the Second World War – underlined the political message of the work, a message made all the more pertinent by the construction of the Berlin Wall, separating the East and West sections of the city, one year before.

Christo and Jeanne-Claude envisaged covering an entire building in the early 1960s (and even noted that it should be a public site, like a parliament). But it was not until 1968 that they achieved the first of such projects, wrapping the Kunsthalle Bern as part of the museum's fiftieth birthday celebrations. Visitors could still enter the building

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through a slit in the translucent polyethylene in front of the main entrance, but because of the costs of maintaining proper security (insurance companies refused to underwrite the Kunsthalle and its valuable collection during the period the building was wrapped) the museum was unwrapped after only one week. The artists went on to wrap Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art in 1969. The Reichstag was to be their third and final wrapped building. From the late 1960s onwards the artists made increasingly grand and dramatic interventions in public landmarks, including wrapping a stretch of coastline and hanging a curtain across a valley, for short periods of time.

In 1971 Michael Cullen, an American journalist based in Berlin, wrote to Christo and Jeanne-Claude proposing that they consider wrapping the Reichstag, a building of major symbolic importance but then without a public function. As with their other major projects, Christo and Jeanne-Claude set about raising the necessary money through selling drawings, plans and scale models (as a point of principle, they do not accept commercial sponsorship nor government subsidies). The first exhibition of their preparatory work on the project was held at Annely Juda Fine Art, London, in 1977, while they began their long campaign to persuade the German authorities to permit the wrap to take place.

The Reichstag had been constructed in 1894 to house the German parliament, though such were the tensions surrounding this formalisation of democracy that it had taken the German Kaisers two decades to allow the planned pro-democracy inscription 'Dem Deutschen Volke' (To/For the German People). In the interwar period, the building had been seriously damaged in an arson attack in February 1933. Exactly who was responsible remains uncertain, but the Nazis, who had recently come to power, blamed Berlin's communists and used the fire to crack down on the far left and cement their hold on power. Hitler chose not to rebuild or use the Reichstag, preferring to keep the building in its damaged state as a symbol of the threat posed by communism. The building was not restored until the early 1960s. By then, the seat of the West German government had moved to Bonn and the building was only used occasionally as an exhibition venue or concert hall.

The process of getting permission to wrap the Reichstag was complex. Although the building was within the British sector of occupied Berlin, its eastern façade lay within Soviet-controlled air space. There were also both city and national authorities, East and West, to consult. As Christo explained in 1986:

The president of the Bundestag [national parliament] in Bonn is the only one who can give the final permission because the Reichstag is mostly in West Berlin ... but because the Reichstag is located in the British military sector, the West German government is obliged to ask the point of view of the British who automatically pull together the French and the Americans to discuss ... being also in divided Berlin, the British, Americans, and French are obliged to inform, or discuss the east facade of the building with the Soviet army headquarters in East Berlin, and of course, the Soviets will be obliged on their part to discuss the matter with the East German government, whose capital is East Berlin.

Permission to wrap the Reichstag was refused in 1977 and again in 1981. Yet there was continued support for the project, not least from the former Chancellor of West Germany, Willi Brandt. ('He climbed the stairway to my studio on the fifth floor in the early 80s in a moment when we were in despair, we almost gave up the project or resigned. Brandt tried to help us and explained that the project was so important that we should not give up.') In 1984 the artists made detailed scaled models of the *Wrapped Reichstag* with American engineer Vahé Aprahamian. Nonetheless, in 1987, a third application for permission was refused.

Attitudes towards Christo and Jeanne-Claude's project finally changed with the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 and the subsequent reunification of Germany. In 1991 Berlin was chosen as the capital city and plans were set in motion for the German parliament to return to the Reichstag. The president of the German parliament, Rita Süßmuth, made it clear she would support the *Wrapped Reichstag* project, and, with her backing, the artists made a fourth application for official permission in 1994. On 25 February 1994 the German Parliament in Bonn debated the *Wrapped Reichstag* project for seventy minutes in a session attended by 525 members, an unusually high turnout, and watched on television by millions. In his speech to the house, politician Konrad Wei? argued:

The wrapping of the Reichstag ... enables us to see in another light ... this central and ambivalent place in German history ... it will be a cut into the history of this building and, in contrast to the fire of over half a century ago, it will be a peaceful, a productive turning point. The soft material which drapes the Reichstag will remind us of the flames that lashed from these walls and how vulnerable and endangered democracy is.

Despite objections from Chancellor Helmut Kohl, who believed the wrapping would trivialise the building, the proposal was passed with 292 in favour, 223 against.

From April to June 1995 workers installed over 200,000 kilograms of steel frames around the building, allowing the 100,000 square metres of fabric with an aluminium surface to hang in folds from the towers, statues and stone decorations. German manufacturers produced everything from the aluminised polypropylene material to the weights and bright blue ropes used to keep it in place, while a work force of over a thousand people assisted Christo and Jeanne-Claude with the design, installation, and monitoring of the completed *Wrapped Reichstag*. The project cost US \$15,000,000.

Commenting on the piece, the artists' official website draws together the building's historical significance and their aesthetic concerns in the process of wrapping it:

The Reichstag stands up in an open, strangely metaphysical area. The building has experienced its own continuous changes and perturbations: built in 1894, burned in 1933, almost destroyed in 1945, it was restored in the sixties, but the Reichstag always remained the symbol of Democracy.

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Throughout the history of art, the use of fabric has been a fascination for artists. From the most ancient times to the present, fabric forming folds, pleats and draperies is a significant part of paintings, frescoes, reliefs and sculptures made of wood, stone and bronze. The use of fabric on the Reichstag follows the classical tradition. Fabric, like clothing or skin, is fragile; it translates the unique quality of impermanence.

For a period of two weeks, the richness of the silvery fabric, shaped by the blue ropes, created a sumptuous flow of vertical folds highlighting the features and proportions of the imposing structure, revealing the essence of the Reichstag.

In interviews at the time Christo also emphasised his and Jeanne-Claude's hands-on involvement in the design and construction. 'We chose the Reichstag fabric to give this very thick force, almost Medieval, Gothic ... angular pleats.' The work was to be understood not as a conceptual artwork but as sculpture with conscious echoes of past art forms. Every detail was carefully planned but, as the artists acknowledged, the visual complexity and full impact of the work could only be entirely known after its construction. 'We do prototypes, we do a variety of research in advance, but we cannot do secretly the Reichstag for ourselves and hide it from the public. No, we only discover the colours, the volume, the movement of the fabric, the dynamics of the material with the wind, the incredible contrast of the fabric only when the project is realised and this is the marvelously exciting part.'

Completed on 24 June 1995, the *Wrapped Reichstag* was an immediate success with the public, with millions of visitors flocking to the site. 250,000 fabric samples were handed out by paid uniformed monitors as free souvenirs. The Bonn government asked the artists to extend the project but Christo and Jeanne-Claude refused, stating that the temporary nature of the work was important because it challenged people's belief in the immortality of art: 'non-permanent art will be missed', they claimed.

For commentators in Germany and around the world the wrapping and unwrapping of the Reichstag focused attention on Germany's changing status: though conceived in an earlier political era, or, in part because it marked the dogged perseverance of the individuals concerned in the face of almost insurmountable odds, the artwork became an easily grasped symbol for the emergence of a newly reunified Germany. In the *New York Times* Paul Goldberger described the project as 'at once a work of art, a cultural event, a political happening and an ambitious piece of business', and went on to observe:

The wrapped Reichstag makes lightness and softness... into characteristics of the greatest monumental power ... If the architecture of the Reichstag represents a kind of Prussian hardness – Germany as it was – the wrapped version can almost be seen as an ideal symbol of the new Germany.

On 7 July 1995 the building was unwrapped and the materials were recycled. The artists' efforts over twenty-four years, together with the many years of work by the

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small team supporting the project, had culminated in a spectacle lasting a mere two weeks but which had touched the lives of many in the long planning period and the final phase. In an interview Christo declared: 'I and Jeanne-Claude would like our projects to challenge and question people's notion of art. The temporal character of the project challenges the immortality of art. Is art forever?' He went on to compare the temporary nature of the *Wrapped Reichstag* to the tents used by nomadic tribesmen, quickly erected and equally quickly removed, and to the transience of life itself. 'It is a kind of naiveté and arrogance', he commented, 'to think that this thing stays forever, for eternity. All these projects have this strong dimension of missing, of self-effacement ... they will go away, like our childhood, our life. They create a tremendous intensity when they are there for a few days'.

Text—

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