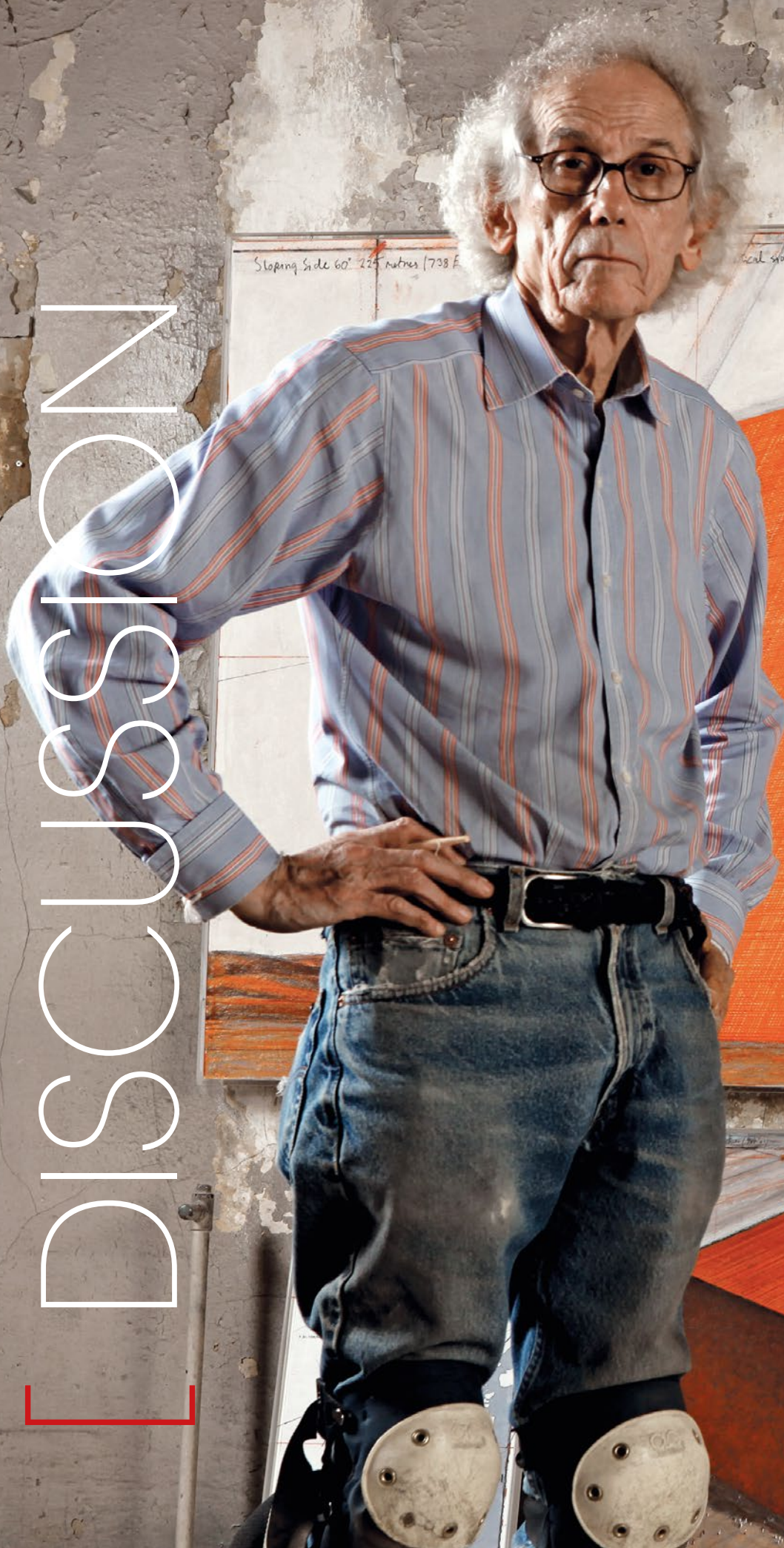


DISCUSSION



Christo in his studio.
Photo Wolfgang Volz. © Christo

CHRISTO, INTIMATE AND MONUMENTAL

Whilst the urban projects of Christo and Jeanne-Claude are on display at the ING Art Center, BRAFA is displaying a piece from the mid-1960s, *Three Store Fronts*. We look back on the history of this installation and look forward to the birth of *Mastaba* coming soon to Abu Dhabi, the largest sculpture in the world.

Born in 1935 in Bulgaria, Christo Vladimiroff Javacheff, known as Christo, worked with his wife and collaborator Jeanne-Claude Guillebon Denat, from the end of the 1950s until her death in 2009. Together, they have created many large-scale, on-site installations such as the packaging of the Pont-Neuf in Paris and the Reichstag in Berlin, or more recently the installation of over 7,000 panels of saffron-coloured cloth in Central Park, New York and a floating bridge on Italy's lake Iseo. Supporting themselves financially through the sale of preparatory drawings, over the years their achievements led to obtaining permission to execute projects in various cities or regions, with an engineering team making them possible. Within a few years, Abu Dhabi is expected to host the largest sculpture ever orchestrated in the world. In the meantime, this year, BRAFA exhibits a historic piece from Christo, never seen before in Belgium.

At BRAFA you are exhibiting a piece of your work from the 1960s called *Three Store Fronts* from the series *Show Windows* and *Show Cases*. Why did you choose this piece for the fair?

To look at its broader historical context, it's a piece of work from the work I did in Paris. From 1962, I worked on the *Show Windows* and *Show Cases* series, which were display cases or old medicine cabinets – and then designed *Three Store Fronts* for my first personal exhibition, which took place in 1966 at the Stedelijk van Abbemuseum Eindhoven. I had a line of display cases made of metal, fabric and glass transported to the Netherlands to be installed in the museum – they were developed in the same Manhattan workshop from where I am speaking to you today. The piece wasn't shown before 2001, when Jeanne-Claude and I had an exhibition of our earlier work – created between 1958 and 1969 – at the Martin-Gropius-Bau in Berlin. It is usually stored in a warehouse in Basel and very few people have seen it, so exhibiting it here in Belgium will be an important moment.

Do you consider showing this piece again for the first time in so long to be a sort of revival?

Ah, no, because it's a sculpture! This isn't something I would produce today, but it's a piece of work from that period (1965-1966) which has proved very important for the continuation of our work and is the genesis of large-scale projects. To exhibit the piece again is in some way a reminiscence, but the piece itself is more a source of inspiration for many later works. Another piece, the *Corridor Store Front*, currently on loan at the Geneva MAMCO, was also a big influence because of how radical it was. It belongs to the collector Daniel Varenne and myself, along with Jeanne-Claude, he and I have the largest collection of our work. Even though we have worked with some, there have never been any appropriate galleries for our work, so after more than 50-year career, we have retained a considerable number of pieces and I like to look back over them.

These pieces show the space that surround them. Could the environment also be considered a subject of the piece? The process of seeing the space around the piece differently as a result of it?

Our work has developed a lot through the idea of separating space, controlling it and preventing the viewer from seeing what is happening on the other side. It's about this idea of space as a barricade, something I had already developed on Rue Visconti in 1961-1962, with *Wall of Oil Barrels – The Iron Curtain*. *Store Fronts* are by definition used to showcase merchandise, but back then, it was customary when changing the window displays to cover up the windows with canvas or paper. Then, the viewer is banned from seeing what's going on behind the scenes; you have to wait...or guess. I started to develop this idea of transition in 1962-1963, with small windows. These pieces of work needed to physically engage the person looking at them – to incite them to move, to walk (or not) and to see how they react to a barricade or a separation. This idea is also present in my installation *Valley Curtain*, made in 1972 in Colorado, or *Running Fence*, designed in 1976 in California.

DISCUSSION

Christo

Some critics have also explored the question of illusion and representation, in connection with the painting...

But these works are all very physical and in this sense there is no illusion! These are real things, with real materials, such as glass, aluminum or fabric... They're closely related to architecture. They involve the space around them, and a room can even influence the sculpture by its size. In fact, this *Three Store Fronts* was determined by the surface of my studio in Manhattan.

You don't like being compared with other artists, but this relationship between the object and everyday life was also developed at the time by the New Realists. Did you cross paths with any when you lived in Paris?

Yes, but I didn't join the group, even though they did later ask me to. Initially, it was a very specific group of artists, chosen selectively by Pierre Restany, whereas later on, New Realism constituted a larger group of visual artists. In 1962, there was even the exhibition "The New Realists" at the Sidney Janis Gallery in New York, where all artists who were part of the group were invited alongside several American and English Pop artists. It was no longer just New Realism, but a wider selection of artists, some of whom, including Roy Lichtenstein, Claes Oldenburg and myself, were not part of the original group.

So what exactly was your relationship with the object – especially when you used windows in your work?

The first pieces of work effectively did refer to the object, but then I changed tack. For example, the Reichstag or Pont Neuf are buildings – my work involves architecture and urban space. If I use barrels, bottles, chairs or cars that I've packaged and transformed into something different, these are not ready-mades. I used a support and a structure to create something additional, which contradicts Pierre Restany's manifesto, which stipulated that nothing was to be handled. I also consider this the reason that the concept of the New Realism has become more vague, because artists struggled to adhere to these strict injunctions and in turn used the object as imagery.

Can we only move forward by hiding the object or building whose use and definition you wish to conceal?

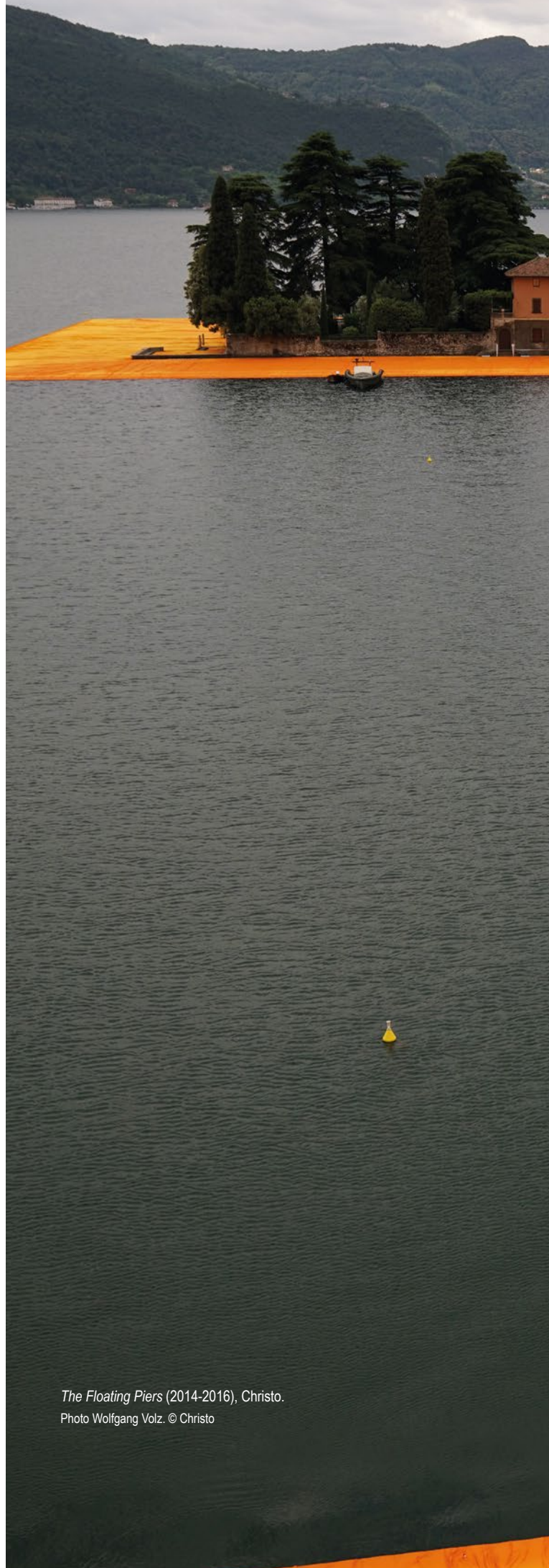
It's more a transition, because I wanted to return to a question of evolution and opening. It is also a reflection relating to the history of these monuments, in terms of our own temporality.

Is that why these projects have to take place outside?

It is the only possible way to carry out this type of work – besides, for the *Wrapped Reichstag*, the only criticism we have received concerned dealing with the architecture of the place, which shows that this work is very physical and that it would be impossible to carry it out in a gallery or museum. We're talking about kilometers of streets, bridges, urban or rural landscapes. Jeanne-Claude and I have always given thought to how a space is dictated by specific rules that we are not necessarily constantly aware of, but which govern our actions. We have borrowed, rented space, sometimes even at a very high price, and have spent a few days "disturbing" it. We try to get to the root of what the place is about – though of course we didn't do for with the Reichstag, which already had its own purpose and policy... and there was the environmental issue in Biscayne Bay, Miami, for *Surrounded Islands*.

Although you won't talk publicly about your political opinions, your work clearly indicates some engagement?

Of course, our work is full of politics, but politics in action, not just an image. We are talking about exposure to the elements: wind, cold, snow... These are tangible things and all our projects evoke a reality, evidenced by photographs, drawings and sketches.



The Floating Piers (2014-2016), Christo.
Photo Wolfgang Volz. © Christo



ZOOM

Urban Projects

Monuments all wrapped up, public places in packaging... The urban projects of Christo and Jeanne-Claude can now be seen at the ING Art Centre, place Royale, Brussels until 25 February. There will be around 80 pieces of work on display by the pair of artists, ranging from the *Wall of Oil Barrels* installation on Paris' Rue Visconti in 1962, to *The Gates*, created in Central Park in 2005. "Urban Projects" is the first retrospective to cover urban art since the 1980s and it is a great opportunity to learn about Christo and Jeanne-Claude's creative processes. The collection of work focuses on drawing, which Christo considers "a way to the real". Drawing is an important stage in the genesis and evolution of each of his urban projects, whether the project comes to fruition or not. An exhibition not to be missed for those wishing to get a better understanding of the creative process, from the first sketches to the final sheets, complex (and often large format) collages, with colour, material and shapes giving the initial impression of the installation in situ. ING Bank has organized exhibitions in Brussels for over 40 years, usually in the Coudenberg Hotel in Place Royale. The cultural policy of the rather active group is also illustrated through events such as the contemporary art fair Art Brussels or the Belgian Art Prize, awarded every two years to a selection of emerging Belgian painters.

"Christo & Jeanne-Claude. Urban Projects"
Until 25 February. ING Art Center. Mont des Arts.
6 place Royale. Brussels. Belgium. about.ing.be





Today, you're mainly focusing your energy on *Mastaba*, in Abu Dhabi, which is expected to be the largest sculpture in the world, standing at 150 metres tall and 300 metres wide. How did this project come about?

We visited Abu Dhabi for the first time in 1979, so it's taken more than 40 years to get here, although it is often necessary to work on projects in parallel because we never know what permission we will get first. Whilst some proposals are created with a very precise location in mind, others are ideas or concepts for which we are yet to find an ideal site. France played a large role in the development of *Mastaba* here in Abu Dhabi. We had initially considered Texas as a site, then we thought about the space outside of the Kröller-Müller Museum in the Netherlands, but we never received the necessary permissions. However, it was Louis de Guiringaud, the then-Ambassador of France to the United Nations, who advised us to look for a younger, more inventive, more desirable place, reminding us that a new nation by the name of the UAE had been founded in 1971... Of course, we had never been, so we did some research and when he became Minister of Foreign Affairs, in 1976, we asked for his help to visit the UAE – at the time visits had to be organised by the Government.

This project will consist of a collection of barrels that you used in your first outdoor installation in 1961, *Dockside Packages*...

Yes, at the time I had my first solo show at a gallery in Cologne, which was small and not far from the port, so I decided to extend it by packaging goods on the docks so that passers-by could see them. The second outdoor installation took place on Rue Visconti in Paris, and as I was a political refugee, frightened by the violence of the cold war and the recent construction of the Berlin wall, I decided, in response, to build my own steel wall formed of barrels of oil.

Is it even more symbolic to use barrels of oil in Abu Dhabi?

I won't be using barrels of oil there, but specially manufactured barrels. They are more than just sculptures, they are like construction modules. The importance lies in the structure and color, because the mastaba is the most ancient geometric shape, which existed long before the construction of the pyramids. It was initially a funeral building originating in the first urban civilization in Mesopotamia, with very specific proportions and angles. The piece will consist of 410,000 barrels designed by a whole team of engineers and will be the largest sculpture in the world – even larger than Cheops' pyramid. As soon as I get all the authorisation that I need, the project will take us about three years to complete.

Looking back over your nearly 60 year career, what characteristics would you consider dominate your work?

The main element I would say is the nomadic aspect of my work, because even if a piece is connected to a bridge or a building, the important thing is what happens at the last minute and is often developed with a sense of urgency. This dynamic is present in the whole piece. Fabric is not a static material, which also makes difficult to photograph works because the fabric is constantly in motion. When fabric is moved by the wind, it's like a boat with the wind in its sail, it's a very sensual movement. In the Reichstag, for example, people came to touch the fabric and push their body against the fabric – you would never ordinarily see people interact with a building in that way. This sensual invitation evokes a certain sentiment – this is the primordial notion that Jeanne-Claude and I sought to include in our work all these years. By creating a physical relationship with the material, treating it like a skin, we have made the projects feel welcoming.

Marie Maertens