

THE CHRISTO PLAYERS

With the artist himself working ten years beyond (*Surrounded Islands*,) his entourage prepares for their spring break in Miami.

Article by M. A. Neff

At every stage of a Christo project — through all the years of imagining, coaxing, drawing, wrangling and financing — hundreds of nameless and known people are drawn into the artist's kingdom and positioned like figures on a chessboard. After awhile, it's apparent that the Christo players have with time become one enormous extended family.

Listen to Harrison Rivera-Terreaux, a New York designer/architect who owns what Christo's wife, Jeanne-Claude, calls "the best Christo collection in Manhattan": "In a way, people collect Christo and Christo collects people. You get caught up in one project, return for the next, and it's like a college reunion. We are his repertoire group."

Harrison, who used to babysit for Christo and Jeanne-Claude's son back in 1964, and has since worked on virtually every one of the artist's projects from preparation through construction, explains, "The work itself is like army maneuvers, but the projects are a lot of fun. There's enthusiasm. There's this common goal. You forget your own ego, or any problems you might have. The 'you' is secondary, because all you care about



Charlotte Zwerin, Christo, Albert and David Maysles

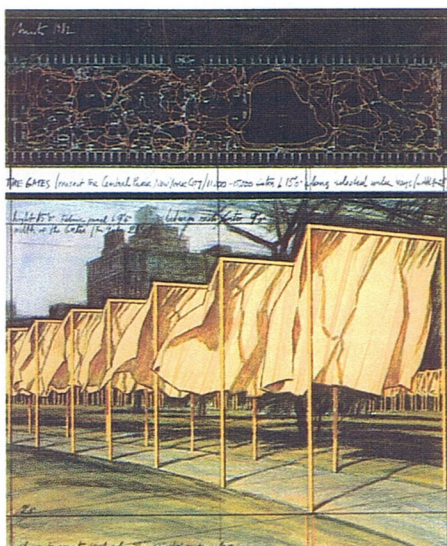
is the project."

After several delays, the Miami project is at last well underway. Builder/contractor Theodore Dougherty, who has been responsible for the actual assembly of Christo projects dating back to the "Running Fence" days in the early

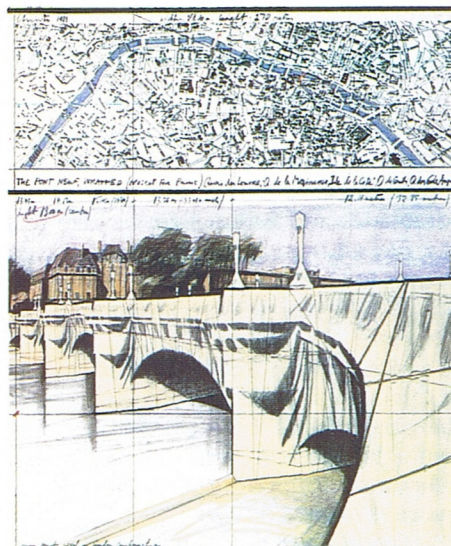
1970s, is in residence at the Cricket Club. Since December, four dozen workers have been stationed in airport hangars in Hialeah and Opa-locka, cutting, sewing and folding the 6.5 million square feet of pink polypropylene with which Christo will triple the size of eleven miniature "spoil" islands in May — creating the "water lilies," as he likes to call them. In January, more than 600 anchors were to have been sunk into the bottom sands of the Miami Intracoastal by another battalion of Christo employees.

The artist himself has been drawing and painting and hibernating in a fifth-floor loft in SoHo. Christo is simultaneously at work on at least four projects that may or may not turn into reality within the next two to seven years, depending on his ability to untie numerous financial and political knots. These include wrapping the Reichstag in Berlin, the Pont Neuf bridge in Paris and the Mastaba (pyramids) of Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates, as well as something called the "banner gates" project in New York's Central Park. All of Christo's projects are funded through the sale of his art; Jeanne-Claude laments that it will

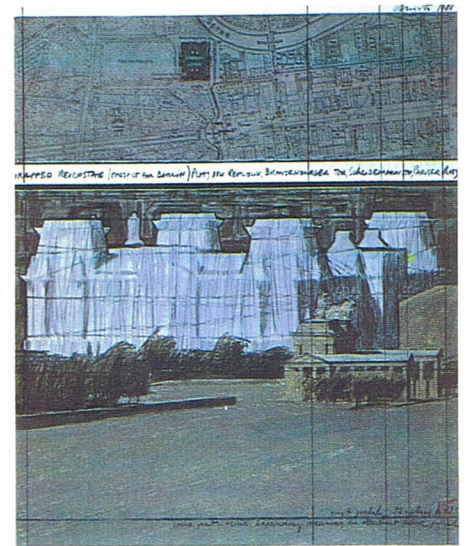
Photograph by Giuseppe Pino



Central Park "Gates," New York



Pont Neuf Bridge, Paris



Reichstag, Berlin

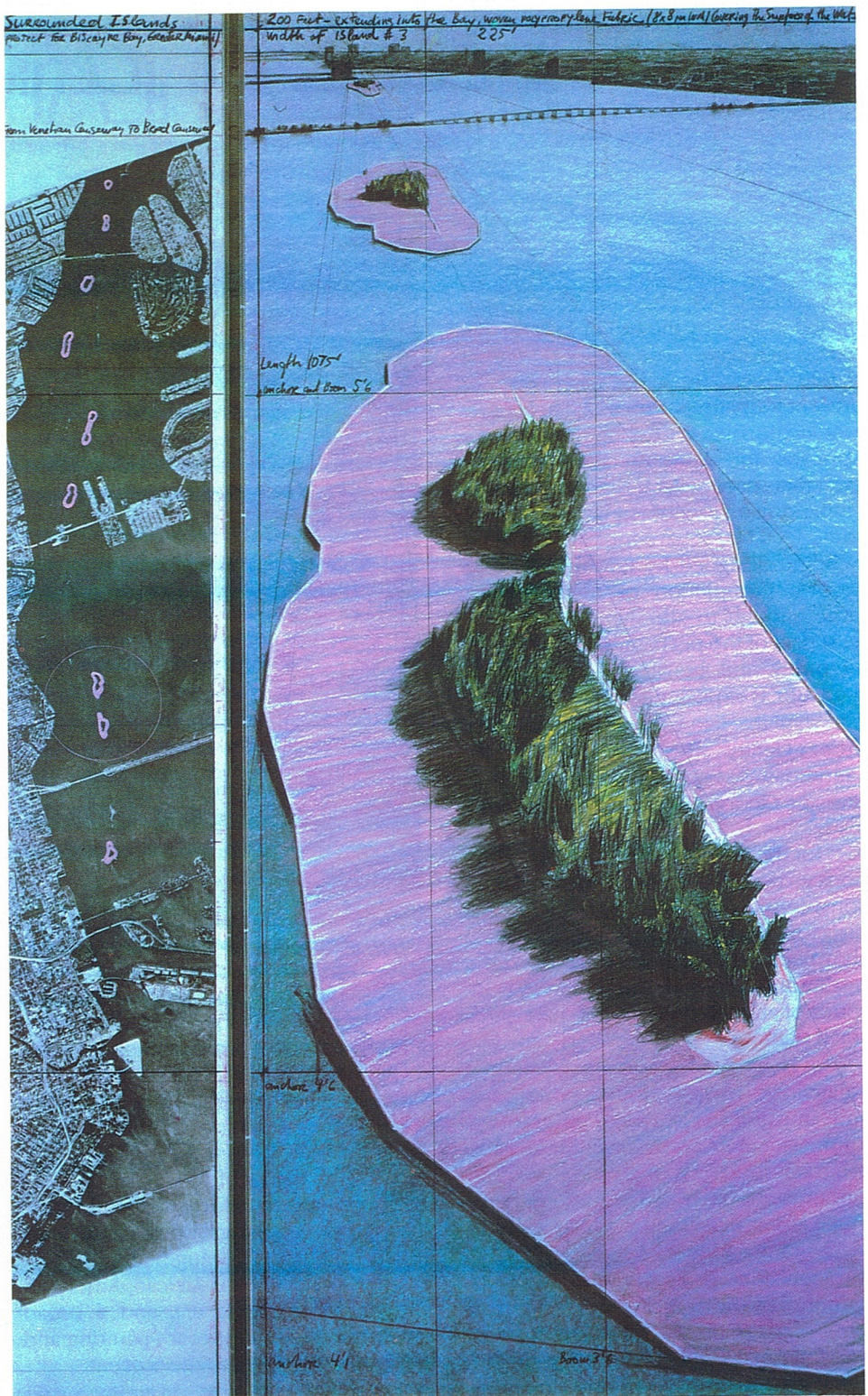
painting is much faster and pays much more than washing dishes," which is what the young artist had been doing to support his travels through Vienna and Geneva.

These days, Jeanne-Claude is Christo's curator, bookkeeper, president of their corporation (Surrounded Islands, Inc.) and resident Big Bad Wolf. She controls the purse strings, economizing where possible, and pays Christo an annual salary of \$25,000. She does all the dickering and leaves all the aesthetic questions to her husband. "It's very important that Christo is Mr. Nice Guy and J.C. is the monster," she laughs.

Immersed in the writing of 1800 postcards urging "friends of the family" to "Come to Miami if you can," Jeanne-Claude looked up to make a point. "All these people out there, they think the Christos are so rich." She sells Christo's drawings at individual prices ranging from \$4,000 to \$36,000. "I'm selling Christo's jewels," she says, "only they're paintings. The difference between us and other artists is the way we spend money. We could buy a house in East Hampton but we don't. We spend all our money on the projects. Christo even does his own framing. People wonder why he does this work for no profit. Really, it's no different than every mother on earth who raises her child and doesn't expect any money back."

The Christos' 22-year-old son, Cyril, a recent liberal arts graduate of Columbia University, will be running, as he puts it, "ten percent" of his father's work force for the Miami project – the gang of college kids who will be paid minimum wages to jump, dive and swim off rubber rafts and actually surround the islands in the pink plastic. Cyril's workers will be responsible for stitching ninety-five miles of seams between 200-foot strips of plastic that have been cut to fit the contours of each island.

Cyril has not been down to Miami yet – "I guess I've just been too lazy" – yet he speaks of the project with intimate knowledge and long-time understanding of his father's work. His first recollection of a Christo project dates back to 1966. That year's "Air Package" in Kassel, Germany, a 280-foot high, hollow, tubular sausage, exploded upon its first inflation, sending bits and pieces of cloth into the



Surrounded Islands, mixed media by Christo

crowd of spectators, and sending Cyril running for cover.

He lives in a loft two floors beneath that which his parents have occupied for the past eighteen years, with walls reading like a SoHo gallery roster: Wesselman, Rosenquist and, of course, Christo. Cyril looks forward to Miami, and to the unfurling. The best part of any Christo project, he says, "is the first five minutes of sublimity, when you begin to

understand." The "Surrounded Islands," he says, "will provoke Miami, open them up to something they've never seen before. It'll probably put them on the map in a very important way."

★

M.A. Neff, at one time a regular columnist for MARQUEE, now lives and writes in New York, a city long on the map in a very important way.



Waterlilies, oil on canvas by Claude Monet

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

take her husband until 1993 to complete enough drawings to finance even the New York City event. In his studio, waiting out the end of a long winter, the artist is busy creating for the future.

Meanwhile, an assemblage of artists, writers, photographers, filmmakers, engineers, builders, friends and family — the Christo players — is gathering in preparation for a quiet insurgence into Miami.

David Maysles, which is pronounced “May-zel,” is one-third of Maysles Films, Inc., and its chief cameraman. The other two thirds are brother Albert, the sound editor, and film editor Charlotte Zwerin. Their credits include the highly successful and critically acclaimed *Gimme Shelter*, with the Rolling Stones in concert at Altamonte, and *Gray Gardens*, a surreal portrait of two eccentric distant cousins of Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis. The Maysles group has also filmed documentary reports on two previous Christo projects, the “Running Fence” in California and “Valley Curtain” in Colorado.

Maysles Films’ current Christo film will deal with all of his in-the-works projects but focus on the “Surrounded Islands.” Intended for distribution through cable television, the documentary — a word that David Maysles does not like, claiming that it’s “too boring” — will cost roughly \$1 million to complete and

has involved frequent visits by the Maysles brothers to South Florida over the past year. David Maysles has not minded these excursions. “I’ve always loved Miami and L.A.,” he says. “The vulgarity — garish, raffish and gaudy.” They will be back for the May 4 “unfurling.”

The new film “is like a flower and Miami is the blossom,” David confides in an animated whisper, as if confiding secrets of the Christo game plan.

The Maysles brothers first met Christo during a Paris film festival in the early 1960s. Christo, then in his early 20s, was impressed by the brothers’ accomplishments in *cinéma vérité* and came to them for advice. The meeting turned into a lifetime friendship based on mutual admiration and also on their similar viewpoint. According to David: “We both trust in real life. While most artists want to invent and change and dramatize and fictionalize, we take reality, *life*, and use it to make film. We are happy to let reality dictate.”

The Maysles’ studio walls in New York are covered with original Christo drawings which David proudly surveys, explaining that they have been acquired as part of their filmwork arrangement with the artist. A small ink drawing of Christo’s “Valley Curtain,” he says, is worth \$7,000.

David Maysles takes a sip from his wine spritzer and reflects. “You know

what’s so incredible about what (Christo) does? Every time he describes one of his projects, they always sound so absurd, so outrageous. And I’m very liberal and open-minded. But I’m always skeptical. You say, why do it? How much is it going to cost? Look at all the obstacles ... why bother? But it’s fantastic working with him.”

“I’ll be a fan of it,” affirms Miralda of the Miami project, warming up over coffee and a half-nibbled pastry inside a TriBeCa restaurant named Riverrun. Miralda, you may recall, is the food-celebrationist who created the duck-tailed sea serpent as a symbol of Miami during the New World Festival — a last-minute substitution for the “Surrounded Islands,” when the process of obtaining the necessary permits stalled Christo’s project for the first time. Christo Javacheff from Bulgaria and Antoni Miralda from Barcelona are both former political refugees who have been friends for the past ten years. Miralda, who is planning to orchestrate some sort of citrus festival for Miami in the coming months, says he would not dare miss the Christo island-wrap.

The mere mention of Christo’s “water lilies” makes Miralda’s dimples dance. He thinks the impact of the project will take the city by surprise. “Miami’s a city that’s moving very fast,” he said, his eyes now twinkling too. “I think Christo’s project is going to change a lot of the visuals of the city, especially for businesses. It will change their motivations and energy.

“Miami doesn’t need Christo as a tourist attraction. It’s always been one and always will be. But, with Christo, so much integration of the landscape will occur for the people to see. This will bring something that will live on, after the project is gone.”

Jeanne-Claude has been with Christo since 1958. They were born on the same day of the same year at the same hour. They met in Paris, where Jeanne-Claude’s father, a five-star general in the French Army, was stationed. Christo had come to their home to paint a portrait of her mother. As Jeanne-Claude explains, “He had found out that