Christo’s Wrapped Reichstag: Globalized Art in a National Context

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WRAPPING A POLITICAL SYMBOL

The wrapping of the Reichstag by artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude in the summer of 1995 was by all standards a monumental mass enterprise—one that opened a new chapter in the history of art insofar as it presented the first truly global media art event.¹ Not only did an estimated half million visitors attend, signaling a mass art tourism that easily rivaled their 1985 wrapping of Paris’s historic Pont Neuf. But intrinsic to the event was its well-orchestrated media staging via news networks and the Internet, making the wrapping virtually accessible to 3 billion spectators worldwide.² Consider, further, the sheer dimensions of the project, underscored only by the massive architectural and political weight of the Reichstag. As the fact sheet handed out by Christo’s 1,200 on-site monitors explained, almost 45,000 miles of yarn went into the vast expanse of silver aluminum-coated polypropylene fabric that weighed more than 135,000 pounds. The glistening fabric itself—meant to mirror the greyness of the skies over Berlin³—was fastened to the steel frame by five miles of blue polypropylene rope. And if the fabric was manufactured in a smallish weaving factory in an even smaller town in the new Eastern German lands, then the on-site workforce included Alpine climbers and unemployed East German Gewerbekletterer. Adding to the extraordinary dimensions of the event was the sheer number of years—24 in total—during which the Christos relentlessly pursued their project, originally conceived in 1971 when they received a postcard from Berlin-based American historian Michael Cullen, suggesting that they consider wrapping the Reichstag. Between 1976 and 1995, the Christos visited Germany no fewer than 54 times, lobbied personally with 352 members of parliament, and managed to involve six presidents of the Bundestag as well as notable politicians such as the late chancellor Willy
Brandt. Yet it took until Germany’s unification for the Bundes tag to approve the project.

As one eyed the gigantic, veiled Reichstag during those few brief weeks in the summer of 1995 (from 17 June to 7 July), it was hard not to get caught up in the euphoria of the celebration and the fair-like atmosphere that had most of Berlin—at least the western part—in its grip. In fact, it even became seductive to invert historical cause and effect and to read the vicissitudes of German history through the fate of the Reichstag project—in other words, to read politics through the veils of the aesthetic. For when it was first planned in 1971, the wrapping was to draw attention to the division between East and West—the Reichstag being not only adjacent to the Wall, but partly located in the Soviet sector. After the unification, however, Christo’s project was transfigured into an aesthetic marker of Germany’s successful reconsolidation as a unified, democratic nation-state. The wrapping transformed the Reichstag from the “shroud” of nineteenth-century parliamentarism, which it still was in 1995, into a postmodern, futuristic phantasmagoria of a parliament for the twenty-first century. Marked by the shortness of the “now” in which the event happened, the wrapping telescoped Germany’s past as well as the future of the new Berlin republic, thus inaugurating a celebration of national renewal. Looking ahead to the move of the German government and parliament from Bonn to the new capital Berlin at the end of the millennium—the largest government move in recent memory—the project prefigured the building’s transformation from a historic monument, museum, or relic into a genuine parliamentary institution.

From the start, it was obvious that Christo’s project dealt with the pressing issue of how aesthetics related to politics; less obvious, however, was how one was to gauge its political significance. It remained an open question whether the project displayed the monumental celebration of a nation-state on a global scale or whether it instead established the first counter-monument in honor of a new, postconventional German identity. Did the wrapped Reichstag transfigure into a patriotic symbol, invested with the pathos of nationalism, as some politicians and cultural critics charged? Or might it function as the inaugural symbol of a new postnational German identity? Sociologist Ansgar Klein, for example, wondered whether the wrapping as political symbol enacted a purification ritual, meant to whitewash and normalize German history, or whether it counted as an artistic attempt to craft a postnational political identity. The term “postnationalism,” of course, has become most familiar through the writings of German political theorist Jürgen Habermas, whose vigilant assessments of postunification Germany have warned that its all too hasty unification risks lapsing into a deplorable new economically oriented nationalism. Using the term “postnationalism” often synonymously with “postconventional identity,” Habermas has maintained that Germany can achieve a true renewal of its national self-conception only once the country embraces a “constitutional patriotism” that bids farewell to the latent nationalism that still inflects civic society and political decisions such as immigration policies. When on 8 May 1945 he spoke at Frankfurt’s historic Saint Paul’s Church on the fiftieth anniversary of Germany’s defeat, Habermas again cau-
tioned that postunification Germany was all too eager to forget the caesura of 1945 in an attempt to normalize its relation to its past. Did the enormous wrapping, then, that enveloped the old Reichstag merely function as a literal cover-up of the building’s bullet-ridden, ruinous facade? Was it ephemeral national art, a globalized art event, or, quite to the contrary, a postmodern, irreverent deconstruction of a political institution? Or perhaps all of those possibilities?

The diversity of critical responses that the project elicited, not only in Germany but also abroad, patently showed that it was far from evident how the wrapping, as political or aesthetic symbol, was to be assessed, even with the benefit of hindsight. Yet, any critico-aesthetic understanding of the project may have to come to terms with the full complexity of Christo’s art event, which was such that it straddled established conceptual and political categories. Both site-specific and mediatised, the wrapping of the Reichstag properly needs to be situated at the intersections between the local and the global, and between a national “memory art” on the one hand and a postmodern, transglobal image culture on the other. But as current critical discourse indicates, the terms “postmodern” and “global” themselves are thoroughly polyvalent, carriers of often uncertain political meanings. Sometimes “globalization” circulates more or less interchangeably with “transnationalism,” a term that denotes communities of postcolonial, postnational resistance that throw into question the dilapidated, defunct borders of imperialistic nation-states. If nineteenth-century manifestations of imperialism and nationalism obsessively manufactured “nationalized” space—even abroad or overseas—then in the late twentieth century the balance has shifted to the counter-cultural production of alternate global, mediatised counter-spaces by minority cultures and displaced peoples. However, in its second, negative sense, globalization still remains an epiphenomenon of late capitalism, which threatens to erase social resistance, difference, and plurality, and is brought on by a homogenous world system that, as Fredric Jameson convincingly has demonstrated, no longer can be encompassed by more conventional aesthetic, political, or social categories. In this sense, globalization still completes the project of postmodernism which, more than just being a stylistic fad, truly amounts to a historico-cultural period that coincides with the expansionism of late capitalism.

When held against this foil, the potentially conflicting political interpretations of the Christo project may seem to mirror the difficulties with which the terms “postmodern” and “global” are fraught. For, first, on a local level, the Reichstag project—whether intended or not—inadvertently participated in a series of important German postunification debates, notably those relating to Berlin’s altered urban topography and to the commemorative function of historic sites, from the discussions surrounding Daniel Libeskind’s Jewish Museum or the political fights over Lea Rosh’s Holocaust Memorial, to the 1993 controversy around Helmut Kohl’s transformation of the Neue Wache into a monument that was to commemorate the victims and perpetrators of the Second World War. Second, on a global level, this postmodern installation drew on an extensive media technology to emit not just anesthetized images of the veiling of an architectural facade
but also a new postunification politics of nation-building. Putting a celebration of local, national renewal on transnational display, the Reichstag project exemplified—and magnified—the many contradictions of a postmodern aesthetic that goes global.

In seeking to chart some of the contradictions that inhabited the project, the analysis I propose will first place the event against the backdrop of Germany's national memory politics. Gradually, the focus of my analysis will slide from the merely local to the global. Passing via a discussion of Christo's nostalgic avant-garde aesthetic, the essay—in a final, yet not conclusive, moment—will suggest that we might need to reconsider the location of postmodern art politics on a newly defined global map.

MEMORY, NATION-BUILDING, AND SYMBOL-FORMATION

It is common to periods of social reconstruction (in German, Wiederaufbau) that they not only lay new political foundations but also are accompanied by concrete architectural demolitions and material construction. Since 1989, massive topographic reconstructions have occurred throughout postcommunist Europe. If nation building involves the crafting of political symbols and a rallying around sites of memory (Pierre Nora), it also often includes the concerted effort to obliterate and forget past manifestations of national violence. With the political and cartographic post–Cold War redrawing of national frontiers has come the demolition of memory loci typical of the former communist regimes, but also the regeneration of old sites.

Today the production of symbols and allegories expressive of the new social and political imaginary is well under way in unified Germany. In retrospect, the jubilant, collective demolition of the Berlin Wall that followed the collapse of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in 1990 now only seems a prelude to other far-reaching urban changes in Berlin. Many, but not all of those changes are the result of the 1991 vote to move the German parliament from Bonn to the new capital, as ratified in the 1990 Einigungsvertrag or unification treaty. The stage of multiple urban transformations, Berlin has since become what the Spiegel at one point proudly called “the largest construction site in Europe.” Projects such as the political Viertel, including the new chancellery and office of the president, or even the construction of new shopping malls in the eastern part of the city are currently well in progress. Berlin once again confronts the dream of urban planning: its ability to reconsider the utopian potential of city-planning, which no one described better than one of its former exiled citizens, Walter Benjamin, albeit through the lens of the city that he by force of history made his own, Paris.

Although to some city dwellers the result may resemble an unsettling postmodern urban topography, several postmodern architects, including Rem Koolhaas or Frank Gehry, have repeatedly raised objections to being shut out of city renovation plans. Public debates have ensued concerning the rehabilitation, resurrection, or demolition of monuments, buildings, and sites, many of them con-
nected to the past that some seek to forget, many located in the newly regained center or Stadtmitte. In the interest of democratic openness and public education, the city of Berlin set up information booths throughout the city center, mostly along Unter den Linden, with scale models of planned urban changes. Several citizens’ initiatives in turn have contested the scheduled renovations, some supported by political parties such as the liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP). Thus, Gehry’s postmodern plan for the renovation of Berlin’s renowned Museumsinsel (Museum Island), located in the Stadtmitte, met with fervent resistance from the local population protesting what they thought resembled a California earthquake. The eastern Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) was successful in galvanizing the voices of former GDR citizens who, afraid that the changes might erase Germany’s other, socialist history, have claimed their right to their own collective national memory. Not only is Berlin’s architectural renaissance being challenged, but so are the changes in street names. In the summer of 1995 the PDS mounted a friendly protest against the imminent return of the Clara Zetkin Street, located next to the Reichstag, to its former imperial glory as Dorotheenstraße. Although this and many other name changes have since been implemented, the western Bezirk Wilmersdorf has refused to name one of its streets after Walter Benjamin, despite his pioneering work on collective memory and urban topography.

One hardly can consider it accidental that, contemporaneous with the Christos’ veiling of the Reichstag, the German boulevard magazine Stern erected five pavilions in Berlin’s city center. Inspired by the late-eighteenth-century art of the city panorama, which Benjamin championed in his unfinished Arcades Project, the Iranian-German artist Yadegar Asisi exhibited five futuristic painted panels depicting Berlin’s cityscape in the year 2005. Luminous, gigantic canvases featured an array of imposing Chicago—or New York—like skyscrapers, punctuated by the reconstructed facades of old buildings. Kitsch and all too patently nostalgic, the rotundas were popularized, mass-cultural attempts to bring an imminent science fiction–like urban future closer to home. At the same time, the panoramic canvases vividly displayed how, on the level of city planning, two dominant architectural concerns interface in the post–Cold War building boom: urban reconstruction and national symbol formation.

Some architectural ventures, such as the Potsdamerplatz or Alexanderplatz, obviously are meant to stamp out the visible wounds of Germany’s recent history, whether the result of its Nazi or GDR past. With the elimination of the east-west city borders, it has now become possible to resurrect the former glory of the Pariserplatz or to rehabilitate buildings such as the New Synagogue in the Oranienburgerstraße. Architecturally, restored buildings like the newly rebuilt hotel Adion are meant to resemble lost sites, not in a postmodern attempt to cite eclectic historic styles on the buildings’ facades, but to retrieve their historic value and mnemonic legacy. As a consequence, some reconstructions seem like uncanny architectural or urban realizations of what Habermas has criticized as the “normalization of Germany’s relation to its past.” Intimately related to the dream of resurrecting Berlin’s prewar glory—whether its imperialistic past or the
aura of the Roaring Twenties, associated with the Friedrichstraße—is the erection of new national icons by politicians who eagerly seize on the unexpected chance for symbol formation in the service of a newfound democratic freedom. Not all former GDR symbols are therefore wiped from public memory; some are cathedared with unexpected historic value. Already in 1987, before the fall of the Wall, Chancellor Kohl caused public controversy with his plans for a grand—some said nationalistic—Historical Museum that was to have been designed by Aldo Rossi and built across from the Reichstag. In 1993, similar commotion arose when Kohl, placing Käthe Kollwitz’s mourning mother in Schinkel’s Neue Wache, profoundly altered that former GDR monument on Unter den Linden. If under the GDR regime the Neue Wache had been dedicated to the victims of National Socialism—premised on the GDR’s foundational national myth that it had successfully overcome Nazism—it now was transformed into a more generic site of mourning, dedicated to all victims of war and totalitarianism. Gesturing toward Germany’s long-standing historians’ debate (Historikerstreit), the Neue Wache no longer was a shrine to Germany’s national culpability for the Holocaust.

The degree to which the nostalgia for Berlin’s old imperial past and former glory could interfere with a more democratic mode of public symbol formation became evident in the summer of 1993, marked by the heated controversy that arose over the former, eighteenth-century Stadtschloß, whose canvas facade was resurrected next to the defunct Palast der Republik (Palace of the Republic). The dispute, it now is clear, merely was a prelude to the opposition that some political factions would mount against the wrapping of the Reichstag. Started in 1716 under the direction of Andreas Schlüter and completed by a succession of distinguished architects, the Stadtschloß historically was linked to the Reichstag, the first being the most pompous architecture of pre–1871 or preunification imperialist Germany, the other the token building of a fledgling parliamentarism. After the Second World War, the ruined Stadtschloß, deprived of its former political value, was converted into museum space when in 1946 Hans Scharoun organized an exhibition about the future reconstruction of Berlin’s ruins. In 1950–51, however, the palace was exploded by GDR party chairman Walter Ulbricht, never again to be recalled in memory as a symbol of Prussian militarism. Considered one of the last vestiges of western imperialism, the castle had to make way for a square for East German parades and for the Palast der Republik, the headquarters of the communist regime, whose awkward social realist architecture disrupted the aesthetic tranquility of the center’s baroque architecture. To this day, the Stadtschloß’s violent demolition for many (West) Germans counts as one of the most barbaric, anticultural acts perpetrated by the GDR regime in the interest of a standardized communist architecture. More, then, than a simple attempt to revive the historic facade of the Spreeinsel and to halt radical modernization, the planned reconstruction of the castle that was on display from June until October 1993 instead was intended to reclaim Berlin’s cultural history and retroactively undo the GDR’s cultural barbarism. However, at the time plans had already been made to demolish the Palast der Republik, officially because of
asbestos contamination. As a result, the erection of a fake, canvas castle next to the ailing people’s palace pitted what was, for some, the untoward claim to historic memory of the east against the historically deeper-lying, more authentic loci memoriae of the west.21

In retrospect, the 1993 canvas Stadt schloβ—aesthetically if not politically flawed—ironically prefigured the veiling of the Reichstag’s facade by the Christos in the summer of 1995. But if the one projected the contours of a demolished building on canvas, the other, for the duration of a few weeks, concealed one of Germany’s most prominent buildings under a veil, until its fantastic revelation on 7 July of that year.22

BETWEEN ARCHITECTURE AND HISTORIC FACADE

Without a doubt, the old, monumental Reichstag is unified Germany’s most significant political symbol to be recharged with new national meaning. To change its architectural carcass into a modern, democratic Bundestag is to demonstrate that the newly established federation is built on more solid democratic ground than was the case during Germany’s first unification under Bismarck. Originally conceived as the site of nation building by Emperor Wilhelm I in 1871, the Reichstag was not erected until the reign of Wilhelm II by the architect Paul Wallot, whose interest in monumentalism already had elicited heated debate.23 Deploring the absence of a national architectural style, Wallot resorted to a neoclassical Renaissance style, embellishing the building with an imposing dome, only to regret later that he had not opted for the truly German Roman technique of the Rhine domes.24 Ironically, Wallot was forced to scale back the height of the parliament’s dome to avoid outdoing the majestic dimensions of the imposing adjacent Stadt schloβ. As the symbol of the unity of the Reich, the Reichstag became the abode of the parliament which until then had been housed on Leipziger street. But its subsequent history would record the vicissitudes and traumas of Germany’s brittle democracy. Setting an end to imperial rule, in 1918 Philipp Scheidemann declared the Weimar Republic from one of its balconies, while on the eve of Hitler’s dictatorship the building was set afire—with historians still debating whether the arson was perpetrated by National Socialists or by the communists Marinus van der Lubbe and Georgi Dimitroff. Bombarded by the allies and memorialized in many news photos as the triumphant setting for the victorious Soviet troops, after the war the ravaged building became the subject of intense disputes over its political future. Should the ruinous Reichstag be completely demolished or rebuilt, and if restored, should it be modernized? Throughout the early 1950s, West Germans saw the Reichstag not only as linked to Germany’s parliamentary history but also as the symbolic promise of Germany’s future reunification, as spelled out in the Federal Republic’s Basic Law. Eventually, in 1954, its dilapidated dome was exploded. Subsequently the location of many peaceful demonstrations against the communist regime, on 21 March 1971, part of the building was turned into a museum when an exhibit on
German history was opened. Not until unification would the building reclaim its political mission.

In the fall of 1995, Helmut Kohl symbolically laid the foundational stone in front of the Reichstag, inaugurating its transformation under the leadership of the British architect Sir Norman Forster. The main challenge facing the architects was to convert the Reichstag from the "shroud" of nineteenth-century parliamentarism into a democratic institution and—as stipulated in the brief of the international competition—to achieve "transparency" and "proximity to the citizen." That meant creating a "symbol for the democratic Germany and her future" while preserving the building's rich history. To make the building partially translucent, Forster decided not to reconstruct the former dome but to replace it with a glass cylinder which, while providing the plenary chamber with indirect daylight, would glow at night like a "lighthouse," offering "a special symbol of the modern German democracy." Leaving the historic facade standing, Forster erased the interior's bombastic ornamentality, replacing it with spacious, open, light-drenched rooms and halls, all in the spirit of supplanting nineteenth-century imperialism with the openness of democracy and the public sphere, epitomized by the massive glass dome—the fusing of the translucence of public democracy with high-tech ecology.

The very same attempt to create democratic openness and transparency also was to define the wrapping of the Reichstag, even though, paradoxically, making democracy visible meant veiling the building's historic facade. That much was clear from the plea that Christo and Jeanne-Claude submitted to the German parliament, which unambiguously evoked democratic renewal through art. Because the Bundestag and its president had jurisdiction over the building, a vote had to be taken on the project, forcing the parliament to confront the tenuous relations between aesthetics and politics head-on. During the heated debate of the 211th session of the Bundestag on 25 February 1994, which preceded the majority vote in favor of the artists, many representatives enthusiastically predicted that the event would regenerate a divided country, overcome its divisions, and express a firm commitment to democratic unity accompanied by public discussion. One of the strategies for getting the artistic project accepted was to schedule it immediately before the building's architectural reconstruction so that the wrapping would inaugurate the building's democratic renewal and memorialize the unification's radical rupture in German history. "Before the transformation of the Reichstag into the Bundestag will take place," Bundestag President Rita Süssmuth of the CDU emphatically underscored, "there lies a great chance in the wrapping, namely to make clear the caesura in the history of Germans." Her speech approvingly cited the artists' aesthetic goals: first, insight through alienation, for a covered-up building would be seen differently; second, the allusion to the long historic tradition of aesthetic and ritual veiling, a practice that grants more luster to what it veils; third, no cost to the taxpayer; and finally, its transitory nature on the one hand and its staying power in cultural memory on the other. Süssmuth concurred with the Christos on all counts, noting that the wrap-
ping "alienates, but at the same time makes clear what until now was blocked from our perception." Peering behind the curtain of parliamentary work, raising democracy to the level of transparent visibility, the installation in the final analysis, she affirmed, would trigger political insight and consciousness raising through defamiliarization. Her reference to such consciousness-lifting alienation thus seemed to read like an interesting reinterpretation—perhaps even instrumentalization—of Brecht's dramaturgic principles. But such Brechtian insights were less in evidence when it came to the emphasis Süßmuth and other politicians placed on the project's proximity to ancient sacred religious rites. The artists' hallowed, sacrosanct gesture of unveiling—Konrad Weiß in particular emphasized—was akin to the Catholic liturgy of Lent, when the veiled cross is revealed on Good Friday, or to the Jewish tradition of covering up the Torah, in which the veil functioned as a commemorative sign of the scroll's value. Moments such as these in the parliamentary debate already seemed to portend that a mythico-theological residue might threaten to return in the field of the political.

Criticizing these hermeneutic strategies vehemently, the mostly Christian-Democratic opposition (which included Helmut Kohl and Schäuble)28 unambiguously placed the realm of the political above the fraudulent currency of aesthetic value. Repeatedly, Schäuble voiced his concern that appropriating national political symbols for artistic purposes would forever desecrate their value. The artists' action would amount to a pernicious tampering with a patriotic symbol, ridiculing German democracy on a global stage, it being inconceivable that anyone would ever wrap the Capitol in Washington. Those in favor countered that positive aesthetic images would diffuse and stamp out of public memory the shameful, negative images of dangerous neo-Nazi violence, thus signaling a radical new beginning for the future Berlin republic. The aesthetic image, they implied, was to replace the images of xenophobic violence that in 1992 and 1993, after the murders of Mölln and Solingen, had been beamed across the globe. In the end, the conservative viewpoint did not prevail. Media politics and the politics of the image coincided, for the wrapped Reichstag eventually became the most export ed cultural icon of Germany's successful regeneration. But how, one might ask, did the project's national export value affect its artistic status?

WRAPPED COMMODITY OR AURATIC VEIL?

Ever since the early sixties, Christo's interventionist aesthetics has been marked if not by wrappings, then by the persistence of fabric, which intrudes in public space, whether it be the vast expanses of the California landscape or the solemn contours of the Chicago art museum. As with so many of Christo's works, the wrapping of the Reichstag materialized an earlier project. Already in 1961, Christo had the idea for an installation titled Projekt für ein verhülltes öffentliches Gebäude, in which he called for the wrapping of a public or administrative building, adding that a parliamentary building would be the most public setting conceivable. The resulting packaged building, Christo underscored in a
1961 collage, could be used either as a parliament or a prison. Along lines reminiscent of the early Foucault, Christo thus confounded received classifications or traditional categories that unambiguously demarcate enclosed, punitive surveillance on the one hand, from transparent, parliamentary democracy on the other.

As it turned out, the wrapping of the Reichstag would only be the third in a series of wrapped public buildings, the first one being the Kunsthalle in Bern, the second one Chicago’s Museum of Contemporary Art. By wrapping or, more precisely, packaging the museum in the early stages of his career, Christo drew attention to the commodity nature of the art institution, while also questioning it, in a tradition that referred back not only to the French avant-garde—Duchamp’s readymades—but also to French New Realists, such as Spoerri or Arman, and to American pop art, most notably Andy Warhol’s “literalist” paintings of soup cans.29

In addition to these early revolutionary aesthetic principles, other remnants from the past—untimely traces of an older, political radicalism—surface in the Reichstag project. During press conferences and interviews, Christo time and again underlined the secret subversive connection that existed between the Reichstag project and his autobiography, that of an American artist of Bulgarian descent who, having fled the communist regime in 1956, settled in Paris, where his conception of public, mass art merged with dadaist, surrealist, and pop art elements. For had not Dimitroff, one of the suspected arsonists of the Reichstag—Christo did not stop repeating—gone on to become Bulgaria’s first president? Despite these alleged links, however, it is clear that over the course of the years the political significance of the Berlin project changed considerably. Initially, before the end of the Cold War, the Reichstag project easily participated in a post-national politics, insofar as it aimed to criticize the East-West division—the Berlin Wall being adjacent to the Reichstag. Further, the original sketch of the Berlin installation conceptually was very similar to an intriguing 1962 construction of oil barrels, called Iron Curtain. Duplicating the obstructive cordonning off of the real-life communist Iron Curtain, Christo’s wall of oil barrels obstructed a Paris street, at the same time offering the artist’s most pronounced response to the 1961 erection of the Berlin Wall. Even one of Christo’s most acclaimed installations, the 1976 Running Fence, a beautiful fabric fence that stretched right through California’s Sonoma and Marin counties, was the belated or displaced version of an earlier project to span a fabric wall along the Berlin Wall—an idea that Christo gave up once he realized it would exclude East Germans from participating.30 Wrapping the Reichstag in post-Iron Curtain Europe now meant that the installation—by force of history—acquired a different unintended, commemorative meaning.

But the project also demonstrated how the Bulgarian artist had pushed to the extreme the function of the found object or objet trouvé. In his early work, Christo concentrated on wrapping the objet trouvé to lay bare the paradoxical commodity structure of so-called found objects. In packaging objects as diverse as furniture, trees, interiors, buildings—but also, questionably, nude women, whereby the artist’s irony or critique of “trafficking in women” was not immediately clear—
Christo transformed them into artifacts or commodities, turning common, mundane, everyday, random objects into fetishlike collectibles. He then went on to construct blocked, veiled store fronts and shopping windows, empty facades that, as it were, even thwarted the art consumer’s desire to engage in window shopping.

In surveying his early designs, one sees that Christo started with the packaging of small objects and with the stacking of oil barrels or drums. Not only did his projects gradually take on larger scale, but they also became more and more interventionist, obstructing public pathways. The walls of oil drums, for example, as Christo explained, stood somewhere between sculpture and architecture, simulating primitive architecture. Having installed a mastaba (or Egyptian tomb) in the Philadelphia Institute of Contemporary Art in 1968, he planned one for Houston, Texas, to be completed the year after. When the Texas project fell through, it was converted into The Mastaba of Abu Dabi, Project for the United Arab Emirates, meant to symbolize “the greatness of Sheikh Zayed,” and “the civilization of oil throughout the world.” The project was to outdo the Cheops pyramid in Cairo and to consist of 400,000 oil barrels, planted at the center of the Gulf. Clearly, then, if at the beginning of his artistic career Christo resorted to oil barrels as the waste product of capitalism and as “found” material most readily at hand, then these more recent transfigurations seem to have lost that critical edge. On the one hand, the Abu Dabi project is an architectural trompe l’oeil in which a gigantic number of oil barrels masquerade as an ancient tomb, imitating the complex mosaic of Arabian culture. On the other hand, it is also a commemorative monument, a national cenotaph or tomb, to the power of oil.

Traces of Christo’s earliest aesthetics return in the Berlin project, as do the later, more conformist strands. There exists an intrinsic duplicity to the Reichstag’s wrap, which functions as a wrapper no less than as a veil. As a (commercial) wrapping, the Reichstag’s cover draws attention to the object, revealing it to be a commodity fetish in Marx’s sense. In the history of modern art, this political-economic principle was implemented by pop art, famously in Andy Warhol’s soup cans, but also in modernist art such as Man Ray’s 1920 Enigma of Isodore Ducasse (a veiled sewing machine). That explains why, in his early works and collages, Christo spoke almost exclusively of packaging, using the French empaqueter, thus foregrounding the commodity nature of his artistically altered objects. But insofar as the Reichstag’s wrapping was also a veil, the covering itself alluded to a sacred ritual tradition that, as observed earlier, went back to Christian (e.g. the veil of Veronica or the covering of icons) and Judaic traditions. Importantly, such veiling rituals construct the aural cult object, while their subsequent, equally ritualized unveiling functions as a cathartic moment of a community’s collective renewal or rebirth. Given these interpretive possibilities, it appears more than interesting that the project’s German title was verhüllter (veiled), not verpackter (wrapped) Reichstag. For the German word Hülle, to which the adjective verhüllt is related, is quite broad, in that it refers not simply to “wrapping” or “cover,” but also carries the whole German idealistic or metaphysical baggage of the aesthetic veil. All in all, the project’s final Enthüllung
thus gestured not simply to a mere uncovering, but almost seemed to take on the aura of mystical revelation. For a moment, it appeared that the specter of theology might return to haunt Christo’s Berlin work, however fleetingly. An ironic city-dweller passing by the Reichstag’s shimmering veil might well have been tempted to alter Marx’s section on the fetishism of commodities in Capital ever so slightly, to speculate that—despite the artists’ best intentions—there is now unwittingly emanated from the project ideas “far more wonderful than ‘table-turning’ ever was.”35

PRIVATE-PUBLIC ART

By veiling the Reichstag, Christo transfigured a public building into an art object. By packaging it, on the other hand, he did nothing less than commodify a singular, irreplaceable historic and political site: Germany’s (past and future) parliament. Finally, by wrapping the (public) parliament-to-be, he called attention to politics and the public sphere, as well as raising the question of the place of public art in that sphere. But as became clear from a visit to the site, the wrapping also demonstrated the contradictions between Christo’s avant-garde conception of artistic freedom and the financial, commercial, and political exploitation of the event. Repeatedly emphasizing the project’s aesthetic value, which held the middle between architecture and sculpture, Christo likened the Reichstag’s veil to the folds of the sculptures on exhibit in the adjacent Pergamon Museum. Mass art, in other words, imitated, even rivaled, the most precious high-cultural treasures of Berlin’s museal center. Ironically, however, as the wrapping went on public display, Christo’s manifesto of artistic freedom sometimes curiously jarring with the project’s subsequent appropriation, indeed mundane commodification by the public. One revealing example of how the limits between private artistic creation and public mass art were artificially held in place was the lawsuit the Christos brought against the rotundas erected by the German magazine Der Stern—a suit through which they managed to protect the area surrounding the Reichstag, creating a space of respectful, aesthetic (Kantian) distance. Public, civic space for the duration of the project became private artistic dominion. And whereas merchants and local companies, such as the beer concern Berliner Kindl, happily copied the wrapping in their advertisements, not all grass-roots groups in Berlin welcomed the event with enthusiasm. While the Reichstag project often took the form of a mass spectacle or popular fair, it also became the site of artistic and political contestation. In general, most East Germans seemed skeptical about the aesthetic significance of the installation, remaining more attentive to the far-reaching historic and social changes that framed the event. Most remarkable that summer was a half-playful, half-serious protest action by a group of disgruntled East German politicians. In a futile attempt to thwart the imminent name change of the adjacent Clara Zetkin Street, mentioned earlier, they rolled up a portable slide projector to the Reichstag and proceeded to project the name of the revolutionary Clara Zetkin on what—for a second—now seemed a huge movie screen.
Even though the police stopped their anarchic intervention almost immediately—at the request of the artists—for one moment their use of the *Reichstag*’s wrapping as a projection screen revealed the tenuous intersections between the project’s alleged aesthetic claims and its practice of political resignification.

**FROM THE LOCAL TO THE GLOBAL: A GLOBAL POSTMODERN CARTOGRAPHY?**

When placed in the context of Christo’s long and distinguished career, the wrapping emerges as a new point or station to be added to the extensive trajectory his art has left across the globe. All of Christo’s installations fulfill the dream of global mapping. All of his projects are global tracings, from Japan to Australia to the United States to Europe and back—all best to be viewed from an aerial or satellite perspective. In the video account of *Surrounded Islands*, there is an exquisite moment when Christo, seated in a helicopter, surveys the newly installed pink strips of canvas that contrast with the coral blue water of Florida’s Biscayne Bay. Utterly exhilarated, he eagerly compares the newly created artificial shapes to the simulated naturalness of flowers painted by the impressionist Monet. In this aesthetic reconnaissance flight, aerial spectatorship emerges as the latest version of the respectful spectatorial distance that defined Kantian aesthetic judgment.

Whether urban or rural, Christo’s recent projects in many ways seem displaced transformations of his early earth art, of early works such as the temporary wrapping of part of Sydney’s coast. Art critic Bourdon has underscored that Christo’s interventions are always temporary and transient, never endangering the environment or a natural site’s frail ecology. Yet, if Christo’s earth art in the sixties and seventies still had the ring of naturalness and environmentalism about it, then in the nineties his work, including the *Reichstag* project, participates in a new global economy. To be sure, in Christo, as some would argue, one encounters the ironic figure of the capitalist entrepreneur—one who self-sufficiently, through his corporation, finances his million-dollar projects by means of the sale of prints and designs, never out to make a profit and always independent of the old patronage system for artists. It is all too easy, of course, to criticize Christo for the very real appropriation—not just simulation—of the techniques and strategies of the art market. More interesting, however, is to note how the new global system has caught up with Christo’s art, much as it has, one might add, with Fredric Jameson’s account of postmodernism, laid out in his epoch-making essay “The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism.” Writing in 1984, Jameson ended this postmodern manifesto with a utopian call. Having described the deficit of modernist utopianism in the phase of late capitalism, he demanded the arrival of an as-yet-to-draft “global aesthetic of cognitive mapping.” Such an altered cartography would enable the new postmodern spectator/subject to inhabit the maze of the postmodern cityscape. Jameson’s manifesto rightly has been received as the most astute post-Marxist reading of our late capitalist predicament. But twelve years after the publication of Jameson’s tract, the term **global** has taken on an eerie
ring, as if he could not fully fathom the effects of a global mapping that would go hand in hand with an expansive information technology, produced precisely by what he himself decried as late capitalism. Left with a postmodernism that had been emptied of all redemptive value, this globalized image culture could only be counterbalanced, Jameson suggested, by a systematic global scanning system that remained painfully aware of its own inscribed inability to encompass fully its sublime object of analysis, that is, the global, "geopolitical unconscious" or world system. A contradictory aesthetico-political imperative followed from this insight. For, although postmodernism simulated this fraught cultural condition, it also still needed to realize modernism's redemptive potential. In line with the genre of the manifesto, Jameson's sometimes bleak cultural diagnosis was followed by a weak utopian call for a future state in which the confounded aesthetic subject might regain full possession of his spatio-temporal coordinates. For that, aesthetic production needed to achieve a "breakthrough to some as yet unimaginable new mode of representing the world space of multinational capital, in which we may again begin to grasp our positioning as individual and collective subjects and regain a capacity to act and struggle which is at present neutralized by our spatial as well as social confusion."

Something of the same uncanny interplay between two conflicting desires also seemed to loom large in Christo's veiled Reichstag. Not only did the Reichstag project indicate that in the new information age the links between the global and the local would have to be rethought and that a globalized postmodernism did not unconditionally or automatically yield a new postnationalism. But in it, the specter of modernism, cloaked in the language of individual, artistic freedom, still sought to tame the unruliness, even disquieting elusiveness, of a monumental postmodernism.

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NOTES

1. This essay was first presented at the 1996 annual convention of the Modern Language Association in Washington D.C. The field research for the study was made possible through a generous Faculty Opportunity Grant from Harvard's Center for European Studies. I benefited greatly from a 1995 press interview with Christo and Jeanne-Claude that took place in the artists' headquarters, ironically located in the recently converted spy outpost of the East German government. Finally, I am grateful to Ruth Notowitz and Lutz Masanetz for the always interesting, unexpected perspectives they offered on the wrapping during the summer of 1995.


4. At the time, national and international press reports showcased diverse, often conflicting appraisals, positions, or aesthetic interpretations. Depending on one's political point of view, the wrapping was either a democratic event that used the historic site of parliamentarism and democracy to engage citizens in a public art event, integrating the surrounding community and people from all
walks of life while employing an impressive number of unemployed and itinerant workers, many from the former eastern lands; or, a capitalistic sellout, financed through Christo’s C.V.I.J. corporation, which, on the basis of the sale of “preparatory drawings, collages, scale models, original lithographs, and early works,” wasted millions of dollars (indeed, this kind of criticism has followed Christo since the start of his career); or, again, a global mass spectacle or televised world fair, to be located somewhere between a media-channeled soccer game, communist rally, or a Michael Jackson pop concert (a reference to the American artist’s famous Berlin concert). See Christo and Jeanne-Claude, Wrapped Reichstag. Berlin 1971–95, 79.

5. As a commemorative wrapping, Christo’s art event was distinguished by at least two distinct moments. Its first moment was a function of the German parliament’s decision to re-inhabit the old building, a move marked both by repetition and a new start, seeking to reconnect to Germany’s democratic past. The second moment, the wrapping’s commemorative practice, was a function of the artistic venture itself, insofar as the Christos temporarily appropriated a majestic site of German history through a temporally defined, indeed transient, action, turning what could become potentially monumental art arguably into a counter-monument.

6. Ansar Klein, Ingo Braun, Christian Schroeder, Kai-Uwe Hellmann, eds., Kunst, Symbolik und Politik: Die Reichstagsverhüllung als Denkanstoß (Opladen: Leske & Budrich, 1995) 22. The latter part of this question may need to be answered in the negative as long as Germany does not undertake any significant political steps to rethink the category of German citizenship and its exclusionary dynamics.


10. As Appadurai puts it: “The nation-state conducts throughout its territories the bizarrely contradictory project of creating a flat, contiguous, and homogeneous space of nationness and simultaneously a set of places and spaces [...] calculated to create the internal distinctions and divisions necessary for state ceremony, surveillance, discipline, and mobilization” (189).

11. In Modernity at Large, Appadurai cautions that “a framework for relating the global, the national, and the local has yet to emerge” (188). To date, he and Homi Bhabha have looked most extensively at the intersections between these terms and the more recent construction of transnational imagined communities that surpass the boundaries of the national.


14. See Annegret Burg and Sebastian Redcke, eds., Chancellery and Office of the President of


19. More on this controversy can be found in the catalog Förderverein Berliner Stadtschloß. Das Schloß? Eine Ausstellung über die Mitte Berlins (Berlin: Ernst & Sohn, 1993).

20. As the architects Ralf Schüler and Ursulina Schüler-Witte stipulated in one of the plans for the reconstruction of the Stadtschloß, the building’s ornamental interiors could never be brought back. Instead, as a warning against and symbol of cultural barbarism, they would be radically modernized. See the folder inserted in the catalog Das Schloß? titled “Studie und Vorschlag für den Wiederaufbau der Fassade des Berliner Schlosses und die Anordnung innerliegender Neubauten.”


22. Again, multiple historic mnemonic layers come together in the project, for the scheduled period of the wrapping also overlapped with a former historic event in the German Democratic Republic: the workers’ resistance of 1957.

23. Here, and in the following remarks on the history of the Reichstag, I rely on Michael Cullen’s extensive scholarship in the field.


27. See, for example, the brochure Deutscher Bundestag: Verhüllter Reichstag–Projekt für Berlin, Auszug aus dem Stenografischen Bericht der 211. Sitzung des Deutschen Bundestages am Freitag, dem 25. Februar 1994 (Bonn: Deutscher Bundestag, Referat Öffentlichkeitsarbeit, 1995).

28. Schäuble, interestingly, agreed with the conservative journalist Schirrmacher that the wrapping covering up the Reichstag’s shroud, as he called it, in the final analysis was merely Selbstzweck. He also warned against engaging in an ironic attitude toward Germany’s history.


32. The filmic reflex or afterimage to this project is Werner Herzog’s recent film, Lektionen in Funsternis, which, made in the aftermath of the Gulf War, with great cinemagraphic pomp studies the dangers of the Gulf fires, showing the technological prowess of Texan oil-workers while they subdue a sea of flames.

33. About this link to Man Ray’s object, see Teshuva, Christo and Jeanne-Claude 23.

34. On this sacred notion of the veil, see the Bundestag debate, as well as Horst Bredekamp, “Das Werk von Christo und Jeanne-Claude als Beitrag zur Zusammenführung von Kunst und Wissenschaft,” in Ansgar Klein et al., Kunst, Symbolik und Politik 133ff.

36. See, for example, David Bourdon, Christo (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1971).


Note added in 1998: The previous analysis is based on Jameson’s main pronouncements on postmodernism that were available at the time this essay was written. Recently, but too late to be incorporated here, Jameson has published “Notes on Globalization as a Philosophical Issue” [in Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi, eds., The Cultures of Globalization (Durham: Duke UP, 1998)], which also recasts postmodernism from the standpoint of the cultural logic of globalization. These notes, however, do not seem to contradict but rather to corroborate what the above analysis has suggested: first, that our understanding of the historical period of postmodernism may need to be rethought from the vantage point of the far-reaching cultural changes brought on by economic globalization; second, that globalization as a category remains polyvalent, insofar as it can signal the productive “cross-fertilization” between cultures, but also the leveling expansionism of late capitalism. Without a doubt, it is clear that the task awaiting critical discourse in the years to come is to analyze further the complexities of the present historicopolitical condition.