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Pont Neuf Wrapped by Christo and Jeanne-Claude: The Art of Aesthetics

Cassandra Jones

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As one of the most exciting art movements of our time, environmental art celebrates our connection to the natural world through beauty, science, and metaphor. The *Le Pont Neuf Wrapped*, 1985, by Christo and Jeanne-Claude expresses the points inherent to this movement, combining an engagement between performance and environmental art. These artists interpose within a chosen environment, and in doing so, cause us to identify with that environment in a new way. Wrapping the Pont-Neuf continued this tradition of successive transfiguration through a new sculptural dimension, transforming it into a work of art. The visual effect of *Le Pont Neuf Wrapped* intervened into the natural state of the bridge. The wrapping process reveals symmetrical shapes and angles that epitomize the very idea of what constitutes a bridge, connecting geographical units and people. The drapery created romanticizes the bridge while the act of draping, as referred to in Hegel's theory of aesthetics, is itself significant. The whole atmosphere around *Le Pont Neuf* changed and brought an understanding to the parallels between the past and present. Christo and Jeanne Claude's goal for their piece was to bring the joy and beauty back to Paris. However, as my paper will address: Why is wrapping a four hundred and eight year old bridge considered beautiful? The *Le Pont Neuf Wrapped* artistic ingenuity creates a sense of balance and proportion; it has the purpose of bringing back nature into an urban environment. Through my essay I am going to explain the beauty of *Le Pont Neuf Wrapped* by exploring the performativity and environmental aspects of its aesthetic value, symmetrical form, and surrounding space.

Today, people simply flash an image of the Eiffel Tower and instantly the thought of Paris, the city of lights, comes to the mind. It is the monument itself that offers immediate proof of Paris, France. However, it was during the 17th century that a bridge played the exact role that the Eiffel Tower plays: the Pont Neuf. Before I present my argument, I want to introduce you to

the Pont Neuf by telling you the history of it. The history of this bridge will also explain the purpose of Christo and Jeanne-Claude's project and their gift to Paris.

In the middle of the 16th century, two bridges crossed the River Seine. They were, however, overcrowded and King Henry II was asked to build a new bridge. He decided against it because of financial reasons. Several years later, in 1577, King Henry III finally did make the decision to construct a new bridge. He laid the first stone in 1578; the foundations and one support were completed later that year. The bridge was finally finished and inaugurated by King Henry IV in 1607. From 1578 to 1890, the bridge had undergone much repair and renovation.¹ However, not only had the bridge gone through repair, but the city and the people went through many wars and political changes as well.

Wrapping the Pont-Neuf continued this tradition of transformation by bringing a new dimension to the architecture. Thus, a work of art emerged from the conversion in its 14 day process. Ropes held down the fabric to the bridge's surface and maintained the principal shapes, which accentuated relief while emphasizing proportions and details of the Pont-Neuf. This allowed a connection of the left and right banks and the Île de la Cité, the heart of Paris, for over 400 years. The bridge, which is over 20 meters wide, has been decorated with over 380 individually sculpted carved masks that line the cornices along the length of the structure.² Aesthetically pleasing in its own way, the artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude had their own take on this landmark. After ten years of negotiations between the artists and French government, the Pont Neuf was wrapped with a golden sandstone fabric and bound with rope.

However, is this really an artwork? How can one simply classify it as a piece of art? After

¹ Rudy Chiappini, *Christo and Jeanne-Claude* (Switzerland: Skira, 2006), 152.

² Christo, *Christo: The Pont Neuf, Wrapped* (New York: Abrams, 1990), 34.

all, anyone can wrap a bridge in fabric. But the passion that both Christo and Jeanne-Claude went through for this project to show what this bridge was before is as important as what it was after its transformation. Grey, rough, and adorned with sinister figures, this stone giant was reduced to a soft and welcoming structure. From the flow of the vertical lines in the fabric that descend into the Siene to the soft golden glow of the fabric, it portrays a very inviting and harmonious feeling. Unfortunately, this was a temporary piece of art for its time. After a mere two weeks, the project was dismantled and the Pont Neuf was returned to its original state. Pictures of this artwork are widely available, but to see it as it was intended must have been a very unique and breathless experience. The bridge portrays the importance of the symbolism of love and happiness that Paris brings to locals and visitors. The art presented fulfilled the desires of the artists to share their own joy and love for each other. Not only did they want to bring the beauty of art to the people, but also the artists wanted to exemplify the city's beauty. They wanted others to see through their eyes the way they see the beauty of the city. We see the same buildings and structures so often every day that it becomes normalized. As beautiful as some architecture can be, it is inevitable to just become used to it when you see it so frequently. A stone cold bridge transformed into a bridge that looks like it was made with golden linen is hard to forget. The *Pont Neuf Wrapped* makes a statement, encouraging viewers to think about art and the space it temporarily inhabits in a new transformative way.

Fabric is something very basic to civilization, not only for its utility, but for its esthetic value.³ According to Historian Anne Hollander, fabric is thought to “decorate and beautify, not only because of its direct appeal but because it has been shown to do so in an incredible variety

³ Anne Hollander, “The Fabric of Vision: The role of Drapery in Art,” *The Georgia Review*, Vol 29, no.2 (1975), 1.

of works of art since its remotest antiquity.”⁴ The way Christo and Jeanne-Claude used and draped their fabric when wrapping the Pont Neuf represents that antiquity. To be able to sculpt marble to look like draped fabric was a mark of extreme skill and craftsmanship in the time of the Greeks and their sculptures. Even hundreds of years after the Greeks, we see drapery in sculptures of the renaissance and beyond. Drapery was not only seen as an expertise, it brought an essence of beauty to the sculpture by the values produced through the folds. In Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s environmental artwork, we see the drapery clearly as the fabric lies in the water of the Seine. From photos and videos, we see the value the drapery brings to the sculpture by the natural light of the sun and moon. The sandstone colored fabric blends harmoniously with the architecture of Paris. When sunrise hit the *Pont Neuf Wrapped*, you were able to see the first hue of the day and then watch the fabric start to change as the day went on. It would start from a sandy color and shine to a gold tint as the afternoon would progress. As the sun started to set, the fabric then would start changing from a dazzling gold to a glowing orange. The hazy glow from the lamplights along the bridge would reflect the water at night and the rise of the moon added to the aura of the wrapped bridge at night. The use of fabric helped the *Pont Neuf Wrapped* represent the aesthetic values of both the bridge and the city. Overall, if you would look at the light and the colors as it changed throughout the day, the *Pont Neuf Wrapped* looked like a painting with nature as its canvas.

According to Hegel, beauty in art is the production of the spirit or truth through an object and it can identify only by a deep form called the ‘ideal’ that transcends it to a special form.⁵

⁴ Ibid, 2.

⁵ G.W.F Hegel, “Philosophy of Fine Art.” *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*. Donald Preziosi, ed. (New York: Oxford, 2009), 80.

However, while Hegel may have talked about beauty in more of a fine art aspect, it was Kant who argued the aesthetics of nature in art. The *Pont Neuf Wrapped* is a form of both fine art and nature in art. Fine art because it represents a symbolic form of the bridge and nature in art due to its environmental engagement. Once the fabric covered the bridge, it turned into a completely new bridge. The wrapping process reveals symmetrical forms and angles that symbolize the idea of a bridge, connecting geographical elements and the city. The process of wrapping and covering the Pont Neuf also seems to act as an effort of conversation and 'healing' through a romanticized form. Now that I have discussed the symbolism of the bridge, I will now discuss the qualities of nature in regards to the *Pont Neuf Wrapped*.

As Kant stated in his essay, *The Critique of Judgment*, nature can be considered materially or formally.⁶ The silk-like material heightens the lines and shape structures of the bridge, presenting a natural beauty. The fabric assembles to emphasize points on the bridge, separating material design with elegant proportions into smoothly wrapped sections that define the shape of the *Pont Neuf Wrapped*. This harmonizes the architectural components of the platform and the arches into a symmetrical structure, bringing out the forms and hiding the blemishes. The fabric enhances the eye-catching quantity of the arches and piers, misleading the eye into seeing an almost tubular shape. The formal elements of the *Pont Neuf's* tubular piers, spherical capitals, and smooth arches give the whole composition a clean and organized look with a liquid metallic outline. The light posts, banisters, and statue wrapped together form a massive, temporary shape. Therefore, the *Pont Neuf Wrapped* represents beauty through a natural and symbolic form heightened by its use of fabric and geometric shapes.

⁶ Immanuel Kant, "The Critique of Judgment." *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*. Donald Prezeiosi, ed. (New York: Oxford, 2009), 63.

Related to natural form but viewed differently, environmental art is an artwork presented in the environment to enhance the visual quality of the space. The ways of using space are routinely explored by artists by taking space and altering it. Wrapping the *Pont Neuf* not only changed the bridge, it changed its surrounding space, including the people of Paris. According to David Fisher, the act of place or performing a work of creative expression in public space alters how the space is seen, and how audiences see the work: if sufficiently noticed and engaging, it may also alter the way in which both artist and audience see themselves and their worlds.⁷ While watching a documentary called *Christo in Paris*, you can see the interaction of both the artist and the people of Paris. The documentary started with the idea and drawings Christo came up with in 1975 for Paris. Then it feels as if Christo is taking you on a journey through the triumphs and hardships of his project. Next, it shows the story of how the project came about and the interaction it gives to Paris, France. As the artist fought for ten years to have their installation shown in France, they had to win over the people of Paris to make it happen. As stated in the movie, the “Parisians don’t like change”, Christo and Jeanne-Claude helped them change their mind by presenting drawings and models and by visiting local cafe’s and bars around Paris.⁸ Since the beginning of 1975, Parisians have been involved in the creation and making of the project. It was the people who decided to invite Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s art to the city of Paris. The surrounding space of the bridge inevitably brought the Parisians together. As Christo was constructing the fabric on the bridge, you can clearly see the attention they brought to the city as thousands of people watched the making of Christo’s work. As a resident and spectator,

⁷ David H. Fischer, “Public Art and Public Space,” *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* Vol. 79, No. 1/2 (1996), 43.

⁸ Christo and Jeanne Claude, *Christo in Paris*, DVD, Albert Maysles (Plexifilm, 2004).

you would have also seen the amount of time its construction took. The *Pont Neuf Wrapped* had drawn attention to an old bridge, but transformed the bridge into something new. It had also changed the space of Paris as well as the people as they also experienced change during this time.

Christo and Jeanne-Claude are an artist pair who have been creating such works since 1961, the beginning of the Environmental Art Movement.⁹ The controversy surrounding their art has many forms. Some criticize the art as a pointless waste of materials, time, and money. Some argue that it is detrimental to the environment. Others claim and praise the art as adding inherent aesthetic and cultural value. The works of the artist duo make a lasting impression. However, if the art they create is a frivolous waste of resources or negatively impacts the environment, we would surely demand a change of their artistic expression.

Kant states:

If we wish to discern whether anything is beautiful or not, we do not refer the representation of it to the object by means of understanding with a view to cognition, but by means of the imagination we refer the representation to the subject and its feeling of pleasure or displeasure.¹⁰

The relevant factor in beauty is not accurately directed to acquiring realistic knowledge about the object. Rather, what is significant is individually balanced, for it initially concerns only how the object's appearance makes us feel. We disengage our interest from the reasoning and knowledge-related subjects of our representation of the object. In judging the object's beauty we

⁹ Jan Greenberg and Sandra Jordon, *Christo and Jeanne-Claude: Through the Gate and Beyond* (New York: Roaring Brook Press, 2008), 21.

¹⁰ Immanuel Kant. "The Critique of Judgment." *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*. Donald Prezeiosi, ed. (New York: Oxford, 2009), 66.

attend only to the pleasing or displeasing feelings that the object's presentation causes through our thoughts of it. Overall, the aesthetics of value, form and space are seen throughout the entire process of the bridge from 1975 to 1985. In the end, the *Pont Neuf Wrapped* has created a memorable monument to the city through its 14 day creation as a new form of aesthetics in art.