

BEYOND FABRIC: THE EARLY BARREL WORKS OF CRISTO  
AND JEANNE-CLAUDE, 1958-1962

by

MEGAN ELIZABETH CEKANDER

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THESIS APPROVAL PAGE

Student: Megan Elizabeth Cekander

Title: Beyond Fabric: The Early Barrel Works of Christo and Jeanne-Claude, 1958-1962

This thesis has been accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in the Department of the History of Art and Architecture by:

|               |             |
|---------------|-------------|
| Albert Narath | Chairperson |
| Kate Mondloch | Member      |
| Jenny Lin     | Member      |

and

|                    |                             |
|--------------------|-----------------------------|
| J. Andrew Berglund | Dean of the Graduate School |
|--------------------|-----------------------------|

Original approval signatures are on file with the University of Oregon Graduate School.

Degree awarded September 2014

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## THESIS ABSTRACT

Megan Elizabeth Cekander

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Title: Beyond Fabric: The Early Barrel Works of Christo and Jeanne-Claude, 1958-1962

My thesis examines how artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude appropriated the oil drum as a charged medium when considering this object's various cultural connotations. As most scholarship have focused on the husband-and-wife team's artwork involving fabric, this project provides an alternate discourse by analyzing their early barrel works from 1958-1962. During these years, Christo's artistic development established his interest in using the barrel as reoccurring medium throughout his oeuvre as well as his desire to create large-scale works of public art with his partner, Jeanne-Claude.

While in Paris, Christo found the oil drum to be a cheap and accessible working material for many of his wrapped sculptures. Yet its inherent volume and ability to stack led to his experimentations with installation, cumulating in he and Jeanne-Claude's first collaboration. Beyond the barrel's economic associations, together they began to examine how it could take on larger cultural contexts, especially the political.

## CURRICULUM VITAE

NAME OF AUTHOR: Megan Elizabeth Cekander

### GRADUATE AND UNDERGRADUATE SCHOOLS ATTENDED:

University of Oregon, Eugene  
Texas Christian University, Fort Worth

### DEGREES AWARDED:

Master of Arts, Art History, 2014, University of Oregon  
Bachelor of Arts, Art History, 2012, Texas Christian University

### AREAS OF SPECIAL INTEREST:

Modern and Contemporary Art

### PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE:

Publicity and Communications Officer, Art History Association, 2013-2014

Preparations Intern, Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art, 2013

Intern, Fort Worth Public Art, 2012

Education Intern, Kimbell Art Museum, 2012

Public Relations and Marketing Intern, Kimbell Art Museum, 2011

### GRANTS, AWARDS, AND HONORS:

Faculty Scholarship, Texas Christian University, 2008-2012

Brachman Summer International Study Grant, Texas Christian University, 2011

Graduate Teaching Fellow, University of Oregon, 2012-2014

Marian C. Donnelly Conference Travel Grant, University of Oregon, 2014

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

This project aims to draw attention to Christo and Jeanne-Claude's early artwork that involves the oil drum, which they have used throughout their career as a husband-and-wife team recognized for their large-scale, temporary works of art.<sup>1</sup> I propose that from 1958-1962, these artists appropriated the barrel as a charged medium when considering this object's various cultural connotations. The post-modern world largely depends on oil to function, as this commodity is essential for a wide range of industries from transportation to plastic, which is used in many industrial and domestic goods.<sup>2</sup> The case studies that I discuss in my thesis also set a precedent for many of Christo and Jeanne-Claude's current practices, such as their artistic collaboration, Christo's use of preparatory collages for larger projects, and their pursuit of ephemeral, large-scale works of art in the public sphere, which contributes to the importance of the barrel works that I examine important to their career as whole.

Conversely, many in the art world associate Christo and Jeanne-Claude with wrapping primarily. This is an incorrect characterization of their work for a number of

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<sup>1</sup> Christo and Jeanne-Claude met in Paris in October 1957 when Jeanne-Claude's mother commissioned the young Bulgarian artist to paint her portrait. After becoming romantically involved, Christo and Jeanne-Claude, a former French socialite, began collaborating on large-scale, temporary works of art in 1961, although Jeanne-Claude's involvement has been overlooked until recently. In my thesis that focuses on their works from 1958-1962, I will refer to Christo as the artist of works created before 1961 in addition to sculptures, installations, and preparatory collages that he created independently of Jeanne-Claude during and after 1961. For the projects that they collaborated on, I will refer to both Christo and Jeanne-Claude as the artists.

<sup>2</sup> Bülent Gökay, "A-Z Glossary" in *Politics of Oil: A Survey*, ed. by Bülent Gökay (London: Routledge, 2006), 180. Today oil or more specifically petroleum, a term derived from the Greek word for "petros" (rock) and "oleum" (oil), is associated with its use to fuel vehicles used for transportation. It had provoked much criticism for its negative effects on the environment from global climate change to oil spills in the ocean. However this product, in its varied forms, is more pervasive in the post-modern world that the average consumer may not realize.

reasons. First, they have only wrapped three buildings over the past fifty years: two museums during the late sixties and the Reichstag in 1995, a project for Germany's parliament building that received much scholarly attention.<sup>3</sup> Before they began to collaborate however, Christo wrapped objects on a much smaller scale, which I believe contributes to this misconception. Second, they often use fabric in their works of art, but not necessarily for wrapping. For example their latest project, titled *The Gates* from 2005, featured a saffron-colored textile attached to vertical and horizontal poles, temporarily forming a series of gate-like structures throughout Central Park in New York City. Third, fabric is not the only common thread that links their body of work together, as it represents but a single mode when considering their continued appropriation of the oil barrel.

Unfortunately Christo and Jeanne-Claude's barrel works have been overlooked in current scholarship aside from brief descriptions in various texts, as there is no publication devoted to this topic yet. Initial critical attention in addition to Christo's early advocate Pierre Restany who wrote an essay for the exhibition catalogue of his first solo show, includes two renowned art critics. David Bourdon's 1972 *Christo* is the first attempt to cover the artwork of Christo, therefore providing the basis for later scholarship. While he briefly discusses the barrel works of Christo's exhibition in Cologne as well as *Wall of Oil Barrels- The Iron Curtain*, his emphasis on Christo's unique treatment of fabric in "Packaging: Revelation through Concealment" helped to establish this material as his signature medium. Likewise, Lawrence Alloway's book

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<sup>3</sup> These first two reasons are used in "Most Common Errors" a text written by Jeanne-Claude in 1998 that can be found on her and Christo's artist website, to refute those who call them "the wrapping artists." I have elaborated upon these and added my interpretation of their use of the oil barrel, which is the subject of this thesis.

titled *Christo* from 1969 focuses on the artist's sculptures involving fabric as well, further solidifying this material over the oil barrel.

In addition to these sources, there are a number of critical essays in exhibition catalogues and books that focus on Christo's fabric works later that are often referenced in different publications over time to accompany varying images. Art historian Albert Elsen's "The Freedom to be Christo," first published in 1990 in association with an exhibition in Australia, provides commentary on the populist nature of Christo's large-scale, temporary works of art, using those involving fabric as his examples.<sup>4</sup> Writings by curator Molly Donovan from the 2000s mention Christo's early barrel works, providing an adequate but brief analysis of *Wall of Oil Barrels-The Iron Curtain*. Of course, both of these art historians' writings reflect the exhibitions they accompany that feature Christo's works involving fabric. This could be partially explained by the fact that most of these early barrel works no longer exist. However, Christo and Jeanne-Claude have made a number of works using oil drums since 1968 that have been better documented; yet these are still largely excluded from scholarship.

The most comprehensive treatment of Christo and Jeanne-Claude's barrel works from 1958-1962 is by two art historians who have worked with them on their writings, Matthias Koddenberg and Burt Chernow. The former's 2009 *Christo and Jeanne-Claude: Early Work 1958-64* details Christo's wide range of art as an emerging young artist in Paris, including information about his artistic output concerning oil drums in addition to limited analysis of them. This stands in contrast to *Christo: The Paris Sculptures 1961* from 2011, which publishes recently discovered photographs documenting Christo's

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<sup>4</sup> Albert Elsen, "The Freedom to be Christo," in *Christo*, ed. Nicholas Baume, (Sydney, Australia: The Art Gallery of New South Wales, in association with Beaver Press, 1990), 13 and 15.

explorations of the oil barrel, but provides no commentary. Chernow, on the other hand, presents an authorized biography from 2002 of Christo and Jeanne-Claude. He gives extensive contextual information about their lives and projects together, but due to its biographical nature it also lacks critical investigations of the artwork itself. Christo and Jeanne-Claude have produced no written work about their works of art, but have conducted many interviews in addition to maintaining a detailed artist website as a way to communicate with the public at large. However, they tend to be ambiguous about the meanings of their works because they do not want to affect the viewer's own interpretations, regardless of authorial intention.

In concordance with scholar and museum administrator Jan van der Marck's observation, I agree that critical perception of Christo and Jeanne-Claude's artwork continues to be hampered by its denial of convention in its unusual material and ephemeral nature, therefore avoiding meaningful examinations often to its detriment.<sup>5</sup> Before I discuss Christo and Jeanne-Claude's early works that appropriate the oil drum, it is important to establish this object and its original use independently from their art. The birth of the modern petroleum industry began in 1853 when a Polish pharmacist discovered how to process crude oil into kerosene, creating a new source of fuel.<sup>6</sup> His invention of the kerosene lamp created a worldwide demand for "rock oil," prompting Edwin Drake of the Seneca Oil Company in 1859 to drill an oil well in Titusville, Pennsylvania and many others to follow him.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Jan van der Marck, "Christo: The Making of an Artist," *Christo, Collection on Loan from the Rothschild Bank AG, Zurich*, (La Jolla, CA: La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, 1981) 49.

<sup>6</sup> Gökay, "Introduction: How Oil Fuels World Politics," 3.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

Their overwhelming success led to the boom of a global industry, which the U.S. more or less monopolized until World War I. With the vast amount of refined oil, which became a cheap source of energy, came the need for a suitable container to store and transport it. Although purveyors tried a number of different receptacles, a wooden barrel typically used for whiskey proved to be the best for its large size and tightness to ensure that its contents could be contained.<sup>8</sup> Yet the industry had not developed common standards so these barrels could vary in size depending on its producer, making dealings between the buyer and seller unregulated. This soon led to the adoption of the forty-two-gallon barrel as the standard unit of volume for oil to be sold on the market.<sup>9</sup> Today the oil barrel has changed in material, with steel or plastic being typical, but the production of petroleum continues to be numerically measured by barrel, making this object's significance in the industry go beyond its physical use as a container.

By appropriating this utilitarian object, Christo and Jeanne-Claude also take on the associations of its contents as a key commodity in a globalized world with economic and political connotations, which their barrel works from 1958-62 begin to engage with. In the following chapter I discuss how Christo first adopted the oil drum as a cheap and accessible object that became the subject of many of his early sculptures in Paris. It begins with a biographical section detailing Christo's arrival to the West, emphasizing his displacement during a time of political instability in Europe that affected his artwork as well as his formal art education. This included his mandatory assistance in beautifying the landscape along the Orient Express, which some scholars have viewed as a precursor

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<sup>8</sup> Robert E. Hardwicke, *The Oilman's Barrel*, (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1958), 59.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 64 and 67.

to he and Jeanne-Claude's temporary works of art in the public sphere that began with oil barrels. I also situate Christo within Paris's contemporary art scene after his arrival in 1958, which was concurrent with the rise of Nouveaux Réalisme. This movement, as well as many others in the post-war period in Europe and the U.S., broke with institutional conventions of the art world by using everyday objects instead of conventional art materials in addition to exhibiting outside the traditional gallery context. While Christo also follows these trends, investigating examples from his series *Packages* and *Wrapped Objects* reveal his own artistic interests in manipulating the physical qualities of fabric and metal containers, including the oil barrel, which was considered to be trash once its contents had been depleted.

In Chapter III, I trace how Christo's use of the oil barrel becomes separate from fabric through his interactions with its inherent volume and ability to stack. By engaging in techniques besides wrapping, Christo created works of art on a larger scale that he began to consider installation both inside and outside the gallery. In 1961 these experimentations cumulated in his first collaboration with Jeanne-Claude with *Dockside Packages* and *Stacked Oil Barrels*, works that directly interact with the oil drum's former economic purpose as a container for petroleum before their artistic appropriation of this object.

Lastly, Chapter IV focuses on a single work of art from 1962 that establishes Christo and Jeanne-Claude's interest in engaging with the oil barrel's various political contexts beyond its formal qualities in addition to its inherent economic associations. *Wall of Oil Barrels-The Iron Curtain* consciously draws attention to ongoing geopolitical tensions by evoking what I characterize as the forms of the wall and the barricade, making this artwork one of the couple's most confrontational pieces that



depended on viewer participation. Although Christo and Jeanne-Claude have not abandoned this premise, their later works of art have become less intrusive to the public, perhaps because of the circumstances surrounding this particular example.

In my conclusion I summarize my argument of how Christo and Jeanne-Claude's use of the oil barrel as a charged medium evokes cultural symbolism, both political and economic. While scholarly attention has focused on their fabric works, they later incorporated metal elements to give this material more volume like the oil drum. Often these works also dealt with issues of containment as a reoccurring theme, initially derived from Christo's experience behind the Iron Curtain, which also plays into the literal function of the barrel that they also used throughout their oeuvre. Lastly I comment upon Christo and Jeanne-Claude's barrel works after 1962 as a point of departure for future scholarship.

The implications of Christo and Jeanne-Claude's appropriation of the oil barrel continues to develop today, as this object is still absorbing ongoing geo-political tensions in a globalized economy. For example one of their latest works in progress, titled *The Mastaba*, is a project for Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates that they began to plan four years after the 1973 Oil Crisis. This event began when the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), made up of mostly Middle Eastern countries including the United Arab Emirates, established an oil embargo that triggered a sharp spike in petroleum prices worldwide.<sup>10</sup> However, this global dependency on petroleum

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<sup>10</sup> Gökay, *Politics of Oil: A Survey*, 177.

had first become apparent in 1956 when Egypt blockaded a key trade route that supplied oil to the British Empire after nationalizing the Suez Canal.<sup>11</sup>

As for Christo and Jeanne-Claude's related project for the capital of the United Arab Emirates, for which they have conducted feasibility studies after their first visit to this nation in 1979, they intend it to be the largest sculpture in the world made from 410,000 multi-colored oil barrels (Fig. 1; see Appendix A for all figures).<sup>12</sup> It is the only permanent work of public art that Christo and Jeanne-Claude have ever planned, which I believe increases the oil drum's importance in their career. *The Mastaba* significantly demonstrates how their continued use of the oil drum further engages with what many have dubbed "oil politics," that the barrel now symbolizes in popular culture, despite that other modes of transporting petroleum have developed such as oil tankers and pipelines.

While I do not refute the dominant contention that fabric is an important part of Christo and Jeanne-Claude's work, this is not the primary focus of my research. With the conviction that art critics and art historians at large have frequently interpreted only a portion of their large body of work, the following chapters probe further consideration of their barrel works from 1958-1962 to provide an alternate discourse that has been neglected. With the continued importance of petroleum into the twenty-first century, I suspect that others will find their unconventional use of this object even more relevant in the years to come with its developing economic, political, and environmental implications.

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<sup>11</sup> Derek Varble, *The Suez Crisis 1956*, (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2003), 11 and 14.

<sup>12</sup> "The Mastaba," *Christo and Jeanne-Claude*, accessed August 24 2014, [http://www.christojeanneclaude.net/projects/the-mastaba?view=info#.U\\_5E-Fx7UwF](http://www.christojeanneclaude.net/projects/the-mastaba?view=info#.U_5E-Fx7UwF).

## CHAPTER II

### BARREL AS SCULPTURE

After coming to Paris in 1958, Christo produced a number of sculptures as part of his series' *Packages* and *Wrapped Objects*, the latter of which incorporated barrels. Before analyzing case studies from each, biographical notes regarding Christo as a refugee from Communist Bulgaria are crucial to understanding his early artworks as a whole, and also how he came to use oil drums. After looking at his developing artistic interests that *Packages* and *Wrapped Objects* demonstrate, I situate Christo within the Parisian art scene during the late 1950s. His work follows a number of contemporary art movements after World War II, namely Nouveau Réalisme, through his appropriation of ordinary objects emerging from new consumerist societies such as the oil barrel, which contributed to his emergence as a fine artist. By establishing these contexts, one can understand Christo's relationship more specifically to his early sculptures that were equally engaged with fabric and repurposed containers as his choice materials. As Christo started to use the oil barrel separately from fabric however, I believe his formal preoccupation with this object gives way to new spatial concerns that eventually return to this object's original economic function.

#### Journey to the West

Christo Vladimirov Yavachev, known today as simply "Christo", was born in Gabrovo, Bulgaria in 1935. Unfortunately he grew up during the turmoil of World War II and its aftermath. While Christo's personal experience of these geo-political events physically displaced him as a young adult, they also psychologically determined the kind of artist he wanted to become, which was only possible by escaping the Iron Curtain.

Saul Steinberg, another Eastern European artist who immigrated to the West, has described about their similar backgrounds:

Christo and I are our own grandfathers in the sense that we made the transition from Eastern to Western men abruptly, in a period that otherwise might take generations. I admire Christo as an artist who invented himself. He not only invented himself; he invented his art, and even more amazing, he invented his public.<sup>13</sup>

In this statement, Steinberg expresses how he and Christo quickly underwent a major cultural shift that included artistic heritage by immigrating due to circumstances beyond their control. As this section will discuss, Christo's artistic training in Soviet-controlled Bulgaria in the post-war era greatly contrasted with his newfound freedom in Western Europe, where he adopted emerging avant-garde practices like the appropriation of the everyday, in capitalist countries whose ideology he had not experienced before.

From the age of six Christo's mother Tzveta encouraged his artistic talent by providing him with drawing and painting lessons.<sup>14</sup> Before marrying Christo's father, she had worked as a secretary to the director of the Sophia Fine Arts Academy where she made many artist friends.<sup>15</sup> After the outbreak of World War II they frequently sought refuge from the pro-Nazi government by staying with the Yavachev family. During their visits, Tzveta often hired them to give her son art lessons and also had lively debates about modern art with their guests. Her extensive collection of books on Russian avant-garde literature and art proved her interest in this subject, but she burned all of them out

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<sup>13</sup> Burt Chernow, *Christo and Jeanne-Claude: A Biography*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2002), 47-48 and 59. The main source of information for this section comes from this source, which has the most detailed and accurate information on the lives of these artists. Therefore, it is my authoritative reference though I have also consulted other sources.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

of fear that they would be seen as Communist propaganda by Nazi troops in 1942.<sup>16</sup> When Bulgaria became part of the Soviet Union after the war, Christo's teachers had him produce propaganda materials like posters and banners related to Marxist ideals because of his recognized artistic abilities. Disconnected from this ideology, Christo instead focused on his dream to become an artist.<sup>17</sup> As a teenager he continued to practice his skills by drawing portraits of those around him including family, friends, factory workers that worked for his father, and peasants in the surrounding area.

In 1953 Christo enrolled at the Sophia Fine Arts Academy. However, the repressive political atmosphere influenced by Stalinist policies discouraged his genuine creativity that he wished to develop. The art academy's curriculum only permitted social realism as the approved style, using a highly traditional learning model by having its students draw from plaster casts and copy paintings.<sup>18</sup> At this point, Christo's only exposure to modern Western art was poor-quality, black-and-white images from publications censored by the government. Although he tried to make the most of his formal art education in Bulgaria, Christo's attempts to fit in with what was expected of him were not always successful. For example, the subject of one of his painted compositions from this period shows laborers in a field at rest instead of working and also includes a figure that is drinking (Fig. 2). While one version used subdued hues,

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 5-6 and 13.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

another portrays the scene in more vibrant and provocative colors, prompting disapproval from Christo's teacher who probed: "Why aren't they resting happily?"<sup>19</sup>

As a part of the academy's mandatory work projects that emphasized social usefulness, Christo was assigned to help beautify the countryside surrounding the Orient Express. To give the impression of a picturesque landscape to Westerners traveling through Bulgaria on the railway, Christo and his fellow art students advised local farmers on how to present an image of economic productivity; effectively this endeavor was a form of agit-prop for the state. It included how to arrange farm equipment at interesting angles on the horizon, neatly stack and arrange hay bales, and also wrapping these items with tarpaulin. Although Christo's experiences of art in Communist Bulgaria were largely negative, some scholars such as Marina Vaizey point to this instance as one that positively affected Christo's later work that involved wrapping objects, intervening in the environment, and engaging with the public in his own projects, which he has realized in both fabric and oil barrels.<sup>20</sup>

Disappointed by the limited opportunities at the art academy in Sofia, Christo obtained permission from the government in the fall of 1956 to visit relatives in Czechoslovakia, a less restrictive nation within the Eastern Bloc. He found this new place to be much more liberating than Bulgaria: "For four years – suppression, brainwashing, and art made as they dictate. Those four years do not compete with the last month here."<sup>21</sup> Not long after Christo's arrival however, a political upheaval in neighboring

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<sup>19</sup> Chernow, *Christo and Jeanne-Claude: A Biography*, 21 and Jacob Baal-Teshuva, *Christo and Jeanne Claude*, (Cologne, Germany: Taschen, 2001), 12.

<sup>20</sup> Marina Vaizey, *Christo*, (New York: Rizzoli New York, 1990), 13.

<sup>21</sup> Chernow, *Christo and Jeanne-Claude: A Biography*, 23.

Hungary unexpectedly changed the course of his life. Student demonstrations in Budapest against Soviet control quickly engulfed the whole nation, resulting in a full-fledged revolution. Fearing brutal militaristic retaliation by the Soviet Union, a mass exodus of Hungarians and even Czechs fled to Austria in the West, including Christo.

Although he had not originally intended to leave Eastern Europe permanently, Christo defected from the U.S.S.R. in January 1957 after illegally boarding a freight car bound for Vienna. There he enrolled at the Vienna Academy of Fine Art to avoid being sent to a refugee camp, but also to finish his formal art education that he had begun in Bulgaria. Fortunately, the Austrian art academy had a small but high-quality museum filled with artworks by the Impressionists, Cubists, and even Cézanne, giving Christo access to see modern art in person.<sup>22</sup> Although it was a time of anxiety and hardship for him as a refugee in a foreign place, but also one of excitement in having the newfound freedom to explore what he could not in Bulgaria. In a letter to his brother Anani from March 1957, Christo stated that his eyes are “directed toward Italy and Paris. After establishing myself financially, I am going. Otherwise I’m still alone and adapting.”<sup>23</sup> To generate more income to visit these key places of Western art history, Christo began to take commissions from wealthy clients, putting to use his more traditional art education by painting realistic portraits, which he continued to do after he saved enough money to travel to Geneva, Switzerland (Fig. 3). During his short time there, Christo visited its different museums, which housed vast collections of modern art that inspired him,

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 46.

especially the highly tactile surfaces of Jean Dubuffet's work.<sup>24</sup> In February 1958 Christo finally purchased a train ticket to Paris after being forced to leave the country as his visa had expired many times.<sup>25</sup>

As this abbreviated account of Christo's immigration from Bulgaria shows, the complex political and economic contexts that shaped Europe after World War II personally shaped this artist during his formative years, including the influence of agit-prop upon his own artistic projects. His displacement also cumulated in his arrival to the current art capital of the world, where he began to truly thrive in its experimental art scene. Though Christo had been practicing art from an early age, leading to his formal arts education in Sophia and Vienna that helped him get artistic commissions, these ventures did not foster his individual sense of aesthetics that he began to develop in Paris. Yet his passage from Eastern Europe to the West exposed him to a variety of influences that made him the artist that he is today. As Christo has explained about his émigré status, "to be a displaced person can be disorienting, but it can also be inspiring," which is most apparent in his early works shortly after arriving to Paris.<sup>26</sup>

### *Wrapped Objects and Packages*

Before discussing various examples of Christo's early sculptures, it is important to mention that his displacement across Europe makes it difficult for scholars to determine a precise, linear evolution of his work from this time period for a number of reasons. Unable to take it with him, Christo left behind most of his art during his many

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<sup>24</sup> Matthias Koddenberg, *Christo and Jeanne-Claude: Early Works 1958-64*, (Bönen, Germany: Kettler, 2009), 20 and Chernow, *Christo and Jeanne-Claude: A Biography*, 49.

<sup>25</sup> Chernow, *Christo and Jeanne-Claude: A Biography*, 51.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.



relocations, in addition to not consistently signing or dating these pieces. He also did not create art in a single style, which Koddenberg has detailed in his book *Christo and Jeanne-Claude: Early Works 1958-64*, rendering this kind of analysis from a temporal approach largely futile.<sup>27</sup> Instead Christo's work in Paris can be better analyzed thematically, as he embarked on a number of projects simultaneously in terms of his personal artistic development, characterizing the period from 1958-1962 as one of artistic experimentation. In this section I will focus on his sculptures from *Wrapped Objects* and *Packages* rather than his paintings, as this body of work is more useful in tracing the emergence of the oil barrel as a charged medium.

Although he continued to take portrait commissions after coming to Paris, Christo began to focus on making artworks that he considered to define himself as a fine artist rather than a commercial one. As a result, Christo began to sign his portraits using his full name, including the Anglicized spelling of his surname, "Javacheff" that sounded less foreign to clients, while exclusively reserving "Christo" for the artwork he wished to be recognized for in the art world.<sup>28</sup> This conscious differentiation between Christo's dual, even competing roles as both commercial and creative artist has continued to the present, as he viewed the former as "prostitution" in following the artistic vision of others.<sup>29</sup> For his own artwork, Christo used common materials that were either free or inexpensive to acquire. In addition to rope and fabric he collected objects like bottles, paint cans, and other types of containers discarded after use at the Paris flea markets.<sup>30</sup> Although he was

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<sup>27</sup> Koddenberg, *Christo and Jeanne-Claude: Early Works 1958-64*, 72.

<sup>28</sup> Chernow, *Christo and Jeanne-Claude: A Biography*, 49.

<sup>29</sup> Koddenberg, *Christo and Jeanne-Claude: Early Works 1958-64*, 24.

<sup>30</sup> Chernow, *Christo and Jeanne-Claude: A Biography*, 51.

a poor, struggling artist, Christo carefully selected what he could afford based on its inherent qualities like texture or color, making formal decisions before completing the works that comprised *Wrapped Objects* and *Packages*.<sup>31</sup>

As an early technique for *Wrapped Objects*, Christo covered the subject of his sculpture with canvas soaked in resin, tied rope around it, then coated it in a mixture of glue, varnish, and sand with a layer of lacquer as a surface texture.<sup>32</sup> This is reminiscent of Dubuffet's incorporation of unconventional materials that made his paintings more sculptural, which Christo noticed when he saw his work in person. Displaced from their original context like the artist himself, these materials are elevated beyond their utilitarian status through Christo's appropriation of the everyday (Fig. 4). He reclaims it for himself by manipulating the pliable fabric into a hardened exterior that he has artistically altered. This approach engages not only the act of wrapping, but also investigates the physical qualities of the object by placing emphasis on the literal surface rather than connotations that possibly lies beneath.

Christo's interest in what Koddenberg calls a "comparative analysis of the three-dimensional qualities of different objects, surfaces and materials" is more apparent when examining his wrapped paint cans, which I consider to be the predecessor of the oil drum.<sup>33</sup> Though paint cans provide a smaller surface area to work with than a barrel, they are similar in their cylindrical shape and ability to stack. These were some of the earliest containers that Christo experimented with since they were often leftover from other

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<sup>31</sup> Molly Donovan, *Christo and Jeanne-Claude in the Vogel Collection*, (New York: Harry J. Abrams, 2002), 41.

<sup>32</sup> Koddenberg, *Christo and Jeanne-Claude: Early Works 1958-64*, 32.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

projects. Once empty, he chose to either manipulate the surface of the manufactured metal form or leave them as so, placing the paint cans together into groupings on the floor without a prescribed arrangement, sometimes with other objects (Fig. 5).<sup>34</sup>

Therefore, Christo often juxtaposed cans that he wrapped with those that were not in order to visually show the difference between the two versions. While the covered cans take on Christo's textured aesthetic, the ones left unaltered remind the viewer of their original status as a commodity, or rather, the trash that results from consumption of industrially produced goods.

Although a can often used for packaging might seem to be a strange object to appropriate for art, some of Christo's contemporaries appropriated this object pervasive in consumer societies as well. Perhaps the prime example that comes to mind is the iconic Campbell soup cans of Andy Warhol, whose painted versions that he exhibited in 1962 made his career (Fig. 6). His Italian counterpart Piero Manzoni, on the other hand, claimed to have packaged his own excrement in this type of container, therefore providing commentary on the art market by selling his allegedly organic commodity in an industrially produced container for the price of gold as art (Fig. 7). Christo's paint cans, which anticipate the shift in his artwork from sculpture to installation with oil barrels, also challenge the commercialization of art as the ephemeral nature of he and Jeanne-Claude's large-scale public artworks mean that they cannot be bought or sold.

Initially, Christo handled the oil drum similar to his paint cans that he used for *Wrapped Objects* of the same time period. He typically salvaged barrels from the scrap heaps, making them a cheap working material with what he saw as an inherent sculptural

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 38.

effect.<sup>35</sup> After cleaning them off, he chose to use the barrels as he found them, or wrap them as part of his artistic investigations. Like his paint cans Christo often juxtaposed plain barrels with wrapped ones, visually showing the beholder how his alterations make the object different. (Fig. 5, Fig.8). Through this technique he did not try to hide the identity of the barrel, maintaining its original economic purpose that has sparked geopolitical conflicts. Yet he intended to transform them into something more aesthetic beyond their quotidian status as a container for a commodity:

I had good models for [this] way of practicing art. Rodin, for example, made two versions of his Balzac statues: one totally nude poet... and then one that he had draped in a dressing gown. Degas dressed the sculpture of a ballerina in a real tutu. Covering in a classical sense.<sup>36</sup>

With his reference to the nineteenth-century French artists Rodin and Degas, Christo emphasizes not only his unusual selection of artistic materials but his conventional interest in plasticity, explaining how he was inspired by Western art history to make different versions of the same sculptural form. Rather than the human body, he was more concerned in altering industrially produced objects for his artistic subjects, however. While everyday items were not considered to be within the realm of art traditionally, Marcel Duchamp challenged this notion with his sculpture composed of a signed urinal that he titled *Fountain* in 1917. Related to this earlier precedent in his appropriation of manufactured objects, curator Nicholas Baume believes that Christo's wrapped oil barrels evidence a clear break with conventional sculpture, despite his "classical" interest in fabric, both through his choice of medium and his unique handling of them.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>37</sup> Baume and et. al., *Christo*, 33 and Chernow, *Christo and Jeanne-Claude: A Biography*, 33.

The almost tortured and grimy appearance of Christo's early *Wrapped Objects* and *Packages* speak of his initial struggle to survive in Paris. These were not works that Christo intended to make a living from, but artistic expressions of his current reality that he experienced. Although he does not provide much analysis to the viewer typically, Christo has said about this body of work: "[It] had a lot of do with that sad dimension. There was a 'miserablism.' *Misérable* also means 'poverty' in French."<sup>38</sup> As nations behind the Iron Curtain suffered shortages after World War II, consumerism flourished in Western Europe and America as part of the latter's plan to rebuild their economies.<sup>39</sup> This new exposure to capitalism in a society "where packaging mean[t] so much" perhaps made Christo more aware of his meager circumstances in addition to his cultural isolation.<sup>40</sup>

As a series, *Wrapped Objects* continued well into the sixties. Gradually Christo loosened his heavily worked technique to one that recalls the realistic drapery of Hellenistic sculpture, creating lines of tension that pull across the object to conceal it without denying its existence.<sup>41</sup> As Anthony Bond points out, there is a difference between the material world and our perception of it, so with these kinds of works Christo implicitly requires the viewer to complete the image of the object in his or her mind, though only parts of it are discernable to reveal this discrepancy.<sup>42</sup> Later Christo also used larger and more recognizable objects of Western capitalism like cars and

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<sup>38</sup> Chernow, *Christo and Jeanne-Claude: A Biography*, 51.

<sup>39</sup> Vaizey, *Christo*, 14.

<sup>40</sup> Chernow, *Christo and Jeanne-Claude: A Biography*, 68.

<sup>41</sup> Baume and et. al., *Christo*, 22 and Chernow, *Christo and Jeanne-Claude: A Biography*, 22.

<sup>42</sup> Baume and et. al., *Christo*, 20 and Chernow, *Christo and Jeanne-Claude: A Biography*, 20.

motorcycles. In a sense covering an item creates a “package” out of it, however he chooses the term “wrapped” to suggest a more involved, personal activity.<sup>43</sup> Although there are differences between *Wrapped Objects* and *Packages*, both aim to re-present existing objects to the viewer by using similar techniques and materials.

While the contents of *Wrapped Objects* are visually suggested and often confirmed by uncovered versions of the same object, *Packages* denies the viewer a clear identification of what they are looking at. Initially Christo used the same technique as he had with his wrapped objects to create a hardened exterior, giving the resulting composition a highly worked appearance that could be mistaken for the surface of a lunar landscape (Fig.9). After 1959, he largely abandoned this approach for a more relaxed effect, though he was still interested in altering the surface of everyday items. Through meticulously crafted folds and knots, Christo created not only a visually interesting surface but also transformed rope and cloth into a sculptural mass (Fig. 10). Rather than applying texture externally as with *Wrapped Objects*, he shows a closer involvement with the original physical quality of the fabric itself, experimenting with its ability to create folds and lumps, though most likely not with this material alone.

Although *Packages* often do not specify that they contain actual objects, well-defined shapes within sculptures from this series suggest that Christo used everyday items, such as the faint outline of a curved bottle or a rectangular container (Fig. 10). In doing so he renders an overall form generic enough to seem familiar, yet at the same time undefined to uphold the fabric’s concealment. This plays into the viewer’s expectation that there is something inside, as the title “package” hinges upon one’s assumption that

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<sup>43</sup> Baume and et. al., *Christo*, 38 and Chernow, *Christo and Jeanne-Claude: A Biography*, 36.

the fabric contains an unknown item. Consequently *Packages* focus not on a specific object as the subject of the work, but rather the expressive quality of the materials that one sees on the surface. As Christo has explained about his wrapped works, it is “how the fabric was arranged, the strings, that was pictorial,” in addition to the idea of transformation that interested him in this artistic pursuit.<sup>44</sup>

Although Christo separates his art from the everyday by using aesthetic means, the parcel-like sculptures occupy the same space and have a similar presence to the viewer as a functional object.<sup>45</sup> Bourdon points out that by virtue of being wrapped, covering an item gives it more value than it might have in an unwrapped state, although Christo does not make this visual information accessible to the viewer.<sup>46</sup> If indeed there was something of value contained within one of Christo’s packages, their coarse, dingy exteriors are not inviting for one to uncover, subverting a natural human curiosity and desire to reveal what is hidden. Since unwrapping the contents of one of Christo’s *Packages* is not an option, the viewer must search for meaning in what he or she can see from the exterior, making this series more about the ornamental surface than the literal object in comparison to *Wrapped Objects*.

For both sets of works, Christo often liberated them from the traditional pedestal. He usually displayed his sculptures from *Packages* directly on the floor, tied to tables, or mounted on a board so that they could be vertically hung like paintings (Fig. 10).<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Koddenberg, *Christo and Jeanne-Claude: Early Works 1958-64*, 38.

<sup>45</sup> David Bourdon, “Packaging: Revelation through Concealment,” in *Christo and Jeanne-Claude: Early Works 1958 – 1969*, (Cologne, Germany: Taschen, 2001), 40.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>47</sup> Donovan, *Christo and Jeanne-Claude in the Vogel Collection*, 18.

Baume interprets this decision as a conscious artistic concern in expanding two-dimensional pictorial space to the third dimension.<sup>48</sup> Yet it also made Christo's works of art more physically relatable to a person in their orientation, such as on a gallery wall *vis-à-vis* with the beholder or sharing the same space as the viewer on the floor without a pedestal. The resulting theatrical quality that engages the human body, which art critic Michael Fried's critiques in his essay "Art and Objecthood" on Minimalist sculpture, shows how Christo was similarly interested in breaking with the traditional bounds of sculpture not only through his use of prefabricated materials but also his treatment of space.<sup>49</sup> This relational analysis of *Packages* to the human body is compounded when one notes that Christo considered his use of fabric to be like a skin or covering to an ordinary object, therefore giving each "package" an organic quality through lumps and bulges resulting from his manipulation of the cloth, making the resulting mass seem almost anthropomorphic to the viewer (Fig 10).

Christo's use of the term "package" is also important when considering this set of works. Though these sculptures were displayed as fine art, their title suggests certain connotations relating to consumerism that scholars have noted. Christo's *Packages* contradict the idea of a sleekly designed commodity with their more humble, even repulsive appearance that does not include text or images to tell us of its contents.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Nicholas Baume and et. al., *Christo*, 34 and Chernow, *Christo and Jeanne-Claude: A Biography*, 34.

<sup>49</sup> Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," in *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub, 2003), 837. Christo's *Storefronts* series that he began in 1964 while in New York, which developed from his earlier *Showcases* in Paris, also have a very similar aesthetic to the Minimalists though having a more overt reference to commercialism.

<sup>50</sup> Koddenberg, *Christo and Jeanne-Claude: Early Works 1958-64*, 78.



Although the viewer visually consumes the item, his or her interest is piqued not by the sculpture's attractive look but rather its coarseness.

Although there have been artistic precedents for wrapping, such as Man Ray's photograph *The Enigma of Isidore Ducasse* from 1920 and Henry Moore's drawing *Crowd Looking at a Tied-Up Object* from 1942, Christo did not discover these works until after he started making his own.<sup>51</sup> His own involvement with fabric began when he helped farmers aestheticize the landscape along the Orient Express by covering bales with tarpaulin, as he came from a background behind the Iron Curtain in which he did not have access to learning about modern art. While some have linked the practice of wrapping to funerary and religious customs or to metaphors for desire, I believe this unique mode of art making that Christo honed in Paris relates more to his working knowledge of this material and its accessibility. Its range of qualities that he manipulated allowed him to explore plasticity in his artwork that he felt free to pursue after coming to the West.

#### Paris, Pierre Restany, and Nouveaux Réalisme

Though many have tried to connect Christo to various art movements throughout his career, his inventive use of the oil barrel makes this artist especially unique both in material and concept, along with his noted handling of fabric. Fortunately, the unusual works that comprise *Wrapped Objects* and *Packages* as discussed grabbed the attention of influential art critic Pierre Restany at a time when it was hard to meet important French artists and dealers in Paris.<sup>52</sup> Restany described being attracted to Christo as an

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<sup>51</sup>Baal-Teshuva, *Christo and Jeanne-Claude*, 22.

<sup>52</sup> Koddenberg, *Christo and Jeanne-Claude: Early Works 1958-64*, 152 and Pierre Restany, "Excerpts from *A Metamorphosis*," in *The New Realists: An Exhibition of Factual Paintings & Sculpture from*

artist “not only because of what he was doing, but by his exact vision” that ultimately differed from Nouveau Réalisme or “New Realism,” which was a relatively short-lived art movement that some have considered Christo to be part of.<sup>53</sup> The two began a long-lasting professional and personal friendship, but the art critic tended to focus on championing Nouveau Réalisme, making Christo peripheral to this interest.<sup>54</sup>

Restany coined the term “Nouveau Réalisme” in 1960 to describe a group of artists who were interested in what they saw as the reality claimed by mass-produced objects in post-war France.<sup>55</sup> As Roland Barthes has analyzed in *Mythologies*, the nation had begun a new era marked by an influx of consumer products that were strategically marketed by using visual and psychological tactics, which he aptly demonstrated in his deconstruction of a Panzani pasta ad in his iconic “Rhetoric of the Image.”<sup>56</sup> Rejecting the painterly expressions of movements that emerged after World War II like Art Informel in Europe and Abstract Expressionism in the U.S., Nouveau Réalisme believed in “the real perceived in itself,” that is, the inherent reality claimed by the everyday object instead of one’s perception of it.<sup>57</sup> This concept affected artists who aspired to

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*France, England, Italy, Sweden and the United States by the Artists, Agostini ... [Et Al.,]* (New York: Sidney Janis Gallery, 1962), 3.

<sup>53</sup> Chernow, *Christo and Jeanne-Claude: A Biography*, 60.

<sup>54</sup> Chernow, *Christo and Jeanne-Claude: A Biography*, 60 and *Christo in Paris*, directed by Deborah Dickson, Susan Froemke, Albert Maysles, and David Maysles (1990; New York: Plexigroup, Inc, 2004), DVD.

<sup>55</sup> David Hopkins, *After Modern Art: 1945-2000*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 76.

<sup>56</sup> Sarah Wilson, “Paris in the 1960’s: Towards the Barricades of the Latin Quarter” in *Paris: Capital of the Arts, 1900-1968*, ed. by Eric De Chassy, (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2002), 330.

<sup>57</sup> Pierre Restany, “The New Realists” in *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, 725.

bridge art and life through their appropriation of common items found in a commodity culture, similar to concurrent movement of Pop art that also began in Europe.

Christo's early artwork in Paris interacted with these same ideas as the Nouveau Réalistes, sharing what Donovan calls "an aesthetic of quotidian urban living" through their appropriation of industrially manufactured items.<sup>58</sup> However, this also contributed to Restany's critical assessment that Christo's work derived its validity from Nouveau Réalisme, ignoring the Bulgarian artist's influences from elsewhere as well as his own intentions.<sup>59</sup> Nouveau Réalisme derived its idea of the readymade as well as its anti-art attitudes from Marcel Duchamp and Dada, which Christo did not have the same exposure to or interest in as a major influence upon his own work.<sup>60</sup>

Out of the Nouveau Réalistes, I believe that Daniel Spoerri is closest to Christo in background and approach to art. Born in Romania in 1942, Spoerri's eventual migration to Paris via Switzerland within a year of Christo's arrival was also marked by hardship. His "snare pictures," resulting from the refuse of everyday life, displayed as unaltered objects vertically on the wall like Christo's early sculptures, having a similar dirty-looking quality (Fig. 11). Meanwhile, Christo's careful selection and manipulation of materials in *Wrapped Objects* and *Packages* changed the very physical reality of the object that Restany and the Nouveau Réalistes valued.

This approach explains why he was never invited to sign the group's manifesto, although he exhibited his artwork with them on a handful of occasions. Due to his repressive years behind the Iron Curtain however, Christo has stated that he never wants

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<sup>58</sup> Donovan, *Christo and Jeanne-Claude in the Vogel Collection*, 17.

<sup>59</sup> *Christo, Collection on Loan from the Rothschild Bank AG, Zurich*, 75.

<sup>60</sup> Koddenberg, *Christo and Jeanne-Claude: Early Works 1958-64*, 44.

to be a part of a collective, which explains his reluctance to be associated with any particular group. Accordingly, he has never considered himself to be a part of Nouveau Réalisme. Rather I would situate Christo within the larger context of post-war trends that dealt with a new reality that included the appropriation of everyday objects, exhibiting outside the traditional gallery, and the adoption of ephemerality as an artistic principle. Although the oil barrel was an integral part of Christo's early wrapped works, this object soon developed independently from fabric to become a charged medium, which Chapter III will trace.

## CHAPTER III

### BARREL AS INSTALLATION

In contrast to the other objects that Christo appropriated for his early sculptures, his utilization of the oil barrel evolved from 1958-62. Although he initially “packaged” them with fabric, “accumulation” develops as his other primary concern.<sup>61</sup> This latter characterization by Restany forms the basis of this chapter. My goal is to demonstrate how *Inventory*, Christo’s “Paris Sculptures” (as referred to by Koddenberg,) and his barrel works in Cologne activate space outside the gallery in new ways compared to his earlier sculptures that exceeded traditional art.

As Christo began to explore the oil drum’s inherent volume instead of focusing on its surface, his barrel works broached installation. Though this form of art is popular with contemporary artists today, it was an experimental practice emerging in Europe and the United States at the time. The term “installation,” traditionally referring to how an exhibition is hung, also describes a medium that emphasizes a broader sensory experience beyond the visual, taking the surrounding context and the viewer’s presence into consideration in a given space.<sup>62</sup>

Through stacking and piling barrels, Christo created artistic environments while continuing to use fabric in order to wrap other objects. Van der Marck describes this

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<sup>61</sup> Van der Marck, “Christo: The Making of an Artist” in *Christo, Collection on Loan from the Rothschild Bank AG, Zurich*, 68 and Pierre Restany and Stefan Wewerka, *Exposition, Galerie Haro Lauhus*, (Cologne, Germany: Galerie Haro Lauhus, 1961), 1.

<sup>62</sup> Nicholas De Oliveira et. al, *Installation Art*, (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), 11 and Mark Rosenthal, *Understand Installation Art*, (London: Prestel, 2003), 26. I believe that this term is most suitable for discussing Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s barrels works in this chapter, although other characterizations like “land art” or “environmental art” might be more appropriate for their artworks located outside the urban context. In *Understanding Installation Art* on page 37, Mark Rosenthal considers Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s large-scale, temporary works of art to be “large-scale site installations” because they are site-specific and time-based.

interest that he explored with the oil drum as shifting in a few short years from “art as product” to “art as production.”<sup>63</sup> Therefore, his artwork’s physical form transformed from a tangible object that one could purchase to an temporary, staged event that incorporated material things, revealing his growing preoccupation with the environment in addition to his investigation of an object’s material qualities. Notably his pursuit of the oil drum became a separate endeavor that eventually shed its cloth covering. By analyzing how and why Christo’s barrels became independent of his early work involving fabric, it is easier to trace how his artwork changed from static sculpture to dynamic installation, which I believe that the oil drum facilitated.

#### *Inventory, 1958-1960*

At first, Christo appropriated the oil drum similar to the other containers that he found and wrapped, as discussed in the previous chapter. Most would consider these empty vessels to be trash since they are depleted of their useful contents. Yet his perception that everyday items have inherent sculptural qualities made them an ideal working material, especially as an impoverished immigrant in Paris. With *Packages* Christo tended to display his sculptures individually, but he often grouped his wrapped objects into small-scale arrangements leading to Restany’s belief that one of his objectives was accumulation (Fig. 12).<sup>64</sup> Although Christo’s juxtaposition of his wrapped objects and unwrapped ones explored their different plastic qualities, these sculptural groupings also occupied more space than a single object on display.

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<sup>63</sup> Van der Marck, “Christo: The Making of an Artist” in *Christo, Collection on Loan from the Rothschild Bank AG, Zurich*, 58.

<sup>64</sup> Restany, *Exposition, Galerie Haro Lauhus*, 1.

Christo titled his arrangements within one of his storage spaces *Inventory*, an installation that existed from 1958-1960. Located in the basement of 4 avenue Raymond Poincaré, he created this artwork by arranging an assortment of his early wrapped sculptures, including many that involved oil barrels. *Inventory* was a larger and constantly evolving piece comprised of these smaller groupings, which Christo and Jeanne-Claude's friend, artist René Bertholo, documented in a few photographs that survive today. Ascending upwards above the rest of the objects, the oil drum dominates the space with its large volume and tall height, which Christo created by stacking them on top of each other as units of sculpture (Fig. 13).

However, this installation could be easily mistaken for someone's personal belongings overflowing in an attic or perhaps a disheveled vault in a museum. Like the sculptures that comprise it, Christo's artificially constructed environment does not seem particularly appealing in its coarse appearance or location in a dark and dingy basement. It submerges the viewer into a claustrophobic environment with a psychological dimension, eliciting anxiety with an overwhelming amount and arrangement of things that were becoming abundant in the West, similar to Kurt Schwitters' collection of objects in his own home beginning in 1923 that he titled the *Merzbau*. Yet Christo's conception of *Inventory* was to be presented in the corner of a room like the contents of a house, perhaps when one is moving.<sup>65</sup> Accordingly this installation implies the stress and uncertainty of moving from one place to another, which Christo had experienced as a refugee.

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<sup>65</sup> Koddenberg, *Christo and Jeanne-Claude: Early Works 1958-64*, 38.

Today most of the pieces that comprised *Inventory* have been dispersed between private collections or destroyed. When Christo and Jeanne-Claude moved to New York City in 1964, the landlord of one of Christo's storerooms threw his work into the trash since they were unable to pay the rent.<sup>66</sup> Luckily parts of *Inventory* have survived because Christo had multiple places where he stored his work that he had access to through family and friends, who held onto some of the art he had to leave behind when relocating.

### Toward New Heights

Christo continued to stack barrels after *Inventory*, yet his focus shifted to interacting with outdoor spaces as he abandoned wrapping the oil drum. I believe this to be a clear indication of this medium's development separate from fabric. With *Inventory*, Christo had placed many wrapped and unwrapped items together within an interior to the effect of "magnify[ing] the medium" of sculpture, though he did succeed in creating an environment from them.<sup>67</sup> However with his barrel stacks, which Koddenberg refers to as his "Paris Sculptures," Christo experimented with his arrangements on a larger scale that a partial view of *Oil Barrels Column* captures (Fig. 15). The oil drum's inherent volume compounded when Christo piled this object gave the semblance of a structure, as he used this material as a building unit similar to stacking bricks. However, Christo reminded the viewer of his own artistic intent, often by turning a single barrel on its side precariously at the top of the stack to indicate that someone had intentionally created its formation (Fig. 13, Fig. 14).

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Rosenthal, *Understanding Installation Art: From Duchamp to Holzer*, 25.



Using the particular example of *Oil Barrels Column*, Christo created this installation at the same studio where he had been wrapping oil drums. As the interior space of the building confined Christo's experimentations with the barrel, he erected a column-like structure, measuring about six to ten feet high, in the courtyard instead (Fig. 15). As the rest of the apartment building shared this area, Christo took the column down shortly after documenting it, making his initial pursuit a temporary intervention in an existing context that he also continued for the rest of his career with Jeanne-Claude. In their future collaborations they challenged the "conventional notion of art from a portable, permanent object" to something that is "public and impermanent, fixed at a location and time for a certain duration" that rejects the commodification of art.<sup>68</sup>

Around this time Christo also gained access to additional storage space next to an industrial yard in the suburbs of Paris, a perfect location for gathering materials to use on-site.<sup>69</sup> There he built many temporary barrel structures, some of which that were documented by a number of photographs including another column-like arrangement that reached approximately sixteen feet high (Fig. 16).<sup>70</sup> Curator Ellen Joosten believes that this access to a large working area permanently affected Christo's work, as he was no longer restricted to an enclosed space cramped with his other pieces of art.<sup>71</sup>

Interestingly Christo and Jeanne-Claude's only permanent sculpture in existence, located at the Kröller- Müller Museum in the Netherlands, harkens back to Christo's early barrel structures. Completed in the late sixties, *56 Oil Barrels* was commissioned by

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<sup>68</sup> Vaizey, *Christo*, 10.

<sup>69</sup> Koddenberg, *Christo and Jeanne-Claude: Early Works 1958-64*, 92.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 92 and 100.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

Martin and Mia Visser after seeing images of their friend's temporary installations in Paris.<sup>72</sup> The resulting work of fifty-six stacked barrels was later reassembled on a concrete plinth (Fig. 17).<sup>73</sup> Elevated off the ground like a traditional work of public art, Christo's pile of oil drums in a museum context contradict the fluid arrangements of his previous artwork. Although this curatorial decision presents something more recognizable to the viewer in format, *56 Oil Barrels* continues to elevate an unexpected, utilitarian container in an array of bright colors as sculpture.

*Dockside Packages and Stacked Oil Barrels, 1961*

In 1961 Christo choose to display a number of barrel arrangements at his first exhibition in addition to his sculptures from *Wrapped Objects* and *Packages*, solidifying this medium in his oeuvre. After seeing Christo's studio in Paris, German gallery owner Haro Lauhus had asked him to show at his newest venue in Cologne.<sup>74</sup> This gallery space consisted of two large rooms, giving Christo ample space to display a large and varied body of work that he had been creating since his arrival to the West.

In the first room, Christo displayed a number of wrapped works that included a Renault and two Nam June Paik pianos, which Lauhus had confiscated after a dispute with the artist.<sup>75</sup> The accumulation of these large objects crowded the gallery space, but Christo remarked that he "liked the difficulty in entering. It looked like a place where a mover had come. You had to make an effort, and adjustment" as a viewer experiencing

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>73</sup> Chernow, *Christo and Jeanne-Claude: A Biography*, 167.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 100.

this manipulated space similar to *Inventory*.<sup>76</sup> Near the entrance of the gallery Christo stacked a number of oil drums to *Oil Barrels Column* and its variants no longer in existence (Fig. 15). However, his inclusion of a wooden barrel harkens back to the oil drum's origin as a container adopted from those used to store whiskey, therefore juxtaposing the old with the new in their different materials. Other barrel arrangements led viewers through a narrow passageway to the back room, where they were confronted with the installation *Wall of Oil Barrels*. This work involved many oil drums stacked on top of one another to give the effect of a wall, filling the interior space as a façade to the actual architecture of the building (Fig. 18, Fig. 19).<sup>77</sup>

In terms of size and number, the works that Christo exhibited at his first show created a cluttered, claustrophobic space similar to *Inventory*, continuing this theme of relocation. At the gallery he heightened one's sense of place in his or her surrounding environment by manipulating everyday objects, which other artists at this time were interested in as well.<sup>78</sup> For example Allan Kaprow's 1961 Happening titled *Yard* involved an enormous pile of used tires, along with other refuse that appears to include an oil barrel (Fig. 20). This work of art uses the detritus of everyday life, more specifically in relation to a growing car culture as households could afford motor vehicles, creating an eventual global dependence on petroleum. Through these installations Kaprow and Christo create different environments that provide an alternative relationship with the viewer. Instead of hanging on the wall or being set on a pedestal, the work of art occupies

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Koddenberg, *Christo and Jeanne-Claude: Early Works 1958-64*, 100.

<sup>78</sup> Robert McDonald, "Introduction" in *Christo, Collection on Loan from the Rothschild Bank AG, Zurich*, 38.

the same physical space as the beholder to create an overall experience in which art and life are merged.

Outside the gallery, Christo created two other works of art titled *Stacked Oil Barrels* and *Dockside Packages* that further blurred the boundaries of his creative vision and reality (Fig. 21). Not originally planned as part of the exhibition, he and Jeanne-Claude noticed a lot of materials lying around the nearby docks of the Cologne Harbor that Christo was used to working with. Upon receiving permission from the Port Authority, they borrowed oil barrels, tarpaulin, rope, and industrial rolls of paper along with the heavy machinery necessary to move these items.

The resulting installations, created by arranging these materials, is reminiscent of Christo's assistance in helping farmers aestheticize the landscape around the Orient Express while at the Sophia Fine Arts Academy. This included stacking hay bales before covering them with tarpaulin, similar to he and Jeanne-Claude's creation of *Dockside Packages*. After stacking the industrial rolls of paper that echo the cylindrical shape of the nearby oil drums, they secured their formation with rope similar to Christo's *Packages* (Fig. 10, Fig. 21).<sup>79</sup> This treatment of the barrels and rolls of paper returns to Christo's interest in the physical qualities of objects, wrapping one work of art while leaving the other unaltered like many of his sculptures, but on a larger scale. Since the specific object used for *Dockside Packages* is unidentifiable as it is covered, one might assume it is also composed of oil drums like *Stacked Oil Barrels*. For this installation, the couple borrowed a large number of oil drums and piled them using cranes and other machinery into a pyramid-like formation at a height that towered over the viewer (Fig.

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<sup>79</sup> "Stacked Oil Barrels and Dockside Packages," *Christo and Jeanne-Claude*, accessed July 17 2014, <http://www.christojeanneclaude.net/projects/stacked-oil-barrels-and-dockside-packages?view=info>.

22).<sup>80</sup> Instead of creating a column, they arranged them into a large mass that appears to be cargo awaiting shipment as scholars have observed, playing upon the economic associations of the oil barrel as a container for petroleum.

As a result of their appearance in material and formation, *Stacked Oil Barrels* and *Dockside Packages* blend into their surroundings of the Cologne Harbor. Christo and Jeanne-Claude have dubbed this effect as a “found situation” since is it not completely apparent that their arrangements are artistic interventions.<sup>81</sup> With this pair of works they return to the connotations of the oil barrel’s original economic purpose before their own artistic appropriation of it. Nonetheless, Bourdon has written about the monumental quality of *Stacked Oil Barrels* and *Dockside Packages*: “They had the large scale and formal purity of Egyptian mastabas or Mycenaean stonework. Christo [and Jeanne-Claude] demonstrated that an artist can elicit mystery and astonishing beauty from the most ungainly materials and by the simplest statement.”<sup>82</sup>

Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s impromptu endeavor outside the Galerie Haro Lauhus marked not only Christo’s first large-scale temporary work of art, but also his first artistic collaboration with Jeanne-Claude, his partner in both life and art. For the exhibition their friend Restany wrote an essay for the catalogue called “Christo et ses alignements.” Through the accumulation of oil drums, he believed that Christo attained a

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<sup>80</sup> Koddenberg, *Christo and Jeanne-Claude: Early Works 1958-64*, 88 and Donovan, *Christo and Jeanne-Claude in the Vogel Collection*, 25.

<sup>81</sup> Donovan, *Christo and Jeanne-Claude in the Vogel Collection*, 25. This self-characterization of Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s work of art as a situation relates to Guy Debord’s ideas of the Situationist Internationalist movement founded in 1957. Though not an SI member himself, their installation in Paris engages many of Debord’s concepts, including of a situation as “a concrete construction of momentary ambiances of life into a superior passional quality.” Guy Debord, “Towards a Situationist International,” in *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. by Ken Knabb, (Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981), 702.

<sup>82</sup> Chernow, *Christo and Jeanne-Claude: A Biography*, 100.

new monumentality: “It is this search for free architecture that Christo became entirely engaged with.”<sup>83</sup> His words note how Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s barrel installations seem to pursue structures through their large scale, yet those of this particular exhibition diverge from utilitarian purpose as to remain art. Restany also describes these barrel works as somewhere in between “the proletarian slum and the barrel of Diogenes,” relating Christo to an ancient Greek philosopher known for sleeping in a barrel because he rejected the material world.<sup>84</sup> Despite the impoverished aesthetic of Christo’s oil barrels, Restany suggests the artist’s intellectualism through this classical reference.

The exhibition catalogue also included a visual poem by Stefan Wewerka, a contemporary German artist known for his deconstruction of appropriated chairs. His cryptic words emphasize the visceral pain that the psyche experiences as it tries to make sense of reality that it witnesses: “We leave the Panopticon, nails in skull, dagger in back...”<sup>85</sup> Wewerka’s language, coupled with his reference to a type of prison architecture that has an all-seeing central tower, suggests the discrepancies of each individual’s perception of reality that Christo’s artwork causes one to question, including his or her own definition of art.

Criticism of the exhibition, whether positive or negative, focused on Christo’s ability to provoke wonder on the part of the viewer. One newspaper article with the headline “Between Art and Imbecility: The Most Controversial Exhibition Cologne Has Ever Seen” included photographs of people staring at Christo’s oil barrels with text warning that readers interested in the exhibition may mistake it for a warehouse or

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<sup>83</sup> Restany, *Exposition, Galerie Haro Lauhus*, 1.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> Wewerka, *Exposition, Galerie Haro Lauhus*, 1.

junkshop.<sup>86</sup> However, other reactions were positive. Art critic Siegfried Bonk described Christo's "massive monuments" as having the ability to astonish viewers with the plastic qualities of the everyday that they never noticed.<sup>87</sup> The German newspaper *Welt am Sonntag* discussed *Wall of Oil Barrels* specifically: "Round canisters with the lids or bottoms facing forward, stacked to the ceiling, in all variations of peeling paint or advanced corrosion. What possibilities! Long ago, Picasso made a bull's head from bike handlebars retrieved from the scrap heap."<sup>88</sup> These words compare Christo to the highly recognized modern artist Picasso, recognizing the creativity of both artists in their reuse of existing materials like Marcel Duchamp.

Whatever criticism Christo received, this exhibition marked a personal achievement for him in a number of ways. As mentioned it was the first time that he publicly showed his artwork and also collaborated with Jeanne-Claude. Despite that most scholarship focuses on Christo's fabric works, he displayed these along side his barrels works at his first exhibition, showcasing his dual interest in both materials. His aestheticization of an industrially designed container in Cologne iterates his smaller barrel sculptures as installation. Although oil drums easily stack, which facilitates the storage and transportation of petroleum, this practical quality also makes them particularly suitable for Christo's growing interest in engaging space. The concept of "a repeatable, mass-produced unit" is part of what makes the oil barrel a significant medium for Christo. He appropriates not only this prefabricated object from a commodity culture,

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<sup>86</sup> Chernow, *Christo and Jeanne-Claude: A Biography*, 100.

<sup>87</sup> Koddenberg, *Christo and Jeanne-Claude: Early Works 1958-64*, 106.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

but also its original design to facilitate his own artistic arrangements that create a tension with architecture.<sup>89</sup>

The shift in scale and location outside the gallery that comes with Christo's adoption of the oil barrel for installation transcends traditional art institutions at a time when many artists wanted to defy them. Christo's barrel projects like *Stacked Oil Barrels* and *Dockside Packages* reject the commodification of the art market, as their ephemeral nature means that they cannot be purchased. For Koddenberg, it was Christo and Jeanne-Claude who helped introduce the element of impermanence "as an aesthetic dimension into the visual arts," becoming one of their artistic principles as a way for everyone to experience their work, rather than being owned by one person.<sup>90</sup>

As I have discussed, the barrel transitions from one of many objects that Christo appropriated for his artwork to become his "other" signature medium. His developing preoccupation with installation as he experimented with stacking oil drums outside the gallery has remained a constant element throughout he and Jeanne-Claude's oeuvre, regardless of material. Though continuing to cover other objects in fabric, Christo became more interested in using the oil barrel to generate connotations beyond how the object appeared and engaged with space. Although Christo and Jeanne-Claude borrowed the economic context of the Cologne Harbor to subtly play with the commodity that an oil barrel contains, their politically emphatic *Wall of Oil Barrels- The Iron Curtain* further explores this object's ability take on cultural meaning beyond its plastic qualities.

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<sup>89</sup> Vaizey, *Christo*, 14.

<sup>90</sup> Koddenberg, *Christo and Jeanne-Claude: Early Works 1958-64*, 140.



## CHAPTER IV

### BARREL AS SYMBOL

Throughout his investigations of the oil barrel, Christo not only examined the object's sculptural qualities but also explored its inherent economic associations as a container for a commodity that became increasingly important after World War II. However in the fall of 1961, his approach changed in response to geo-political tensions across Europe, specifically the erection of the Berlin Wall in Germany as well as the struggle for Algerian independence from France. Although Christo and Jeanne-Claude had used the motif of the wall in Cologne, their construction of one in the streets of Paris pushed further this form by providing commentary upon ongoing political events. Using its strategic arrangement and location to stimulate participatory action, *Wall of Oil Barrels- The Iron Curtain* consciously acted as a metaphor for the conflicts that it reacted to. In their most confrontational artwork, Christo and Jeanne-Claude's preoccupation with context allowed them to further push the limits of their medium in a way that they had never tried before.

#### *Wall of Oil Barrels-The Iron Curtain, 1961-1962*

During the evening of June 27<sup>th</sup> 1962, Christo and Jeanne-Claude closed the Rue Visconti with their temporary installation *Wall of Oil Barrels-The Iron Curtain* for approximately six hours. By turning eighty-nine barrels on their sides in the middle of the street, they created an artistic obstruction that stopped traffic across much of Paris's Left Bank (Fig. 23). Facing outwards, the circular tops and bottoms of the oil drums appeared as "an enlargement of a Pointillist painting" to the viewer, displaying their bright colors

“similar to those used by the Fauves” to heighten experience and visual sensation.<sup>91</sup>

Therefore the Parisian public, who purposely visited this work of art or unwittingly stumbled upon it, was temporarily confronted with an aesthetic arrangement made from trash that acted as a physical barrier within the city.

Although he had carefully selected the barrels’ colors and textures, Christo did not wish to disguise the identity of the oil drum for the sake of formalism. He and Jeanne-Claude intentionally left the original colors unaltered, as different oil companies used distinctive colors, and also retained their trade markings. These commercial indicators that derive from the petroleum industry, in addition to chipped paint and rust, remind the viewer of the commodity that the barrels originally contained before their appropriation for art. With his intention to leave the brand names from around the world visible, the barrels display to the viewer the global extent of the oil industry while simultaneously blocking movement across the city. Although Christo did not pick barrels from any one company, the colors that he did incorporate seem to replicate those of the French flag, red, white, and blue, relating back to the local urban context in Paris. Overall, the seamless effect of multi-colored oil drums stacked into a large mass, forming a barrier within the city, allowed various interpretations beyond any individual barrel to be applied.

In material and scale, *Wall of Oil Barrels-The Iron Curtain* is similar to Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s structures at the Cologne Harbor from the year before that suggested cargo awaiting transport to be consumed elsewhere. Yet in Paris their intention was very different. Rather than blending into the surrounding economic environment, Christo

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<sup>91</sup> Koddenberg, *Christo and Jeanne-Claude: Early Works 1958-64*, 100. and Vaizey, Christo, 10

wanted this politically motivated work of art to call attention to the recent construction of the Berlin Wall, which divided Eastern Europe from the West. In October 1961 he and Jeanne-Claude submitted the following statement to Prefecture of Police of Paris, along with their permit application needed to legally realize the public artwork:

Project for a Temporary Wall of Metal Drums (Rue Visconti, Paris 6)

Rue Visconti is a one-way street, between Rue Bonaparte and Rue de Seine, 140 meters long with an average width of 3 meters. The street ends at number 25 on the left side and at 26 on the right.

It has few shops: a bookstore, a modern art gallery, an antique shop, and electrical supply shop, a grocery store ... "at the angle of Rue Visconti and Rue de Seine, the cabaret du Petit More (or Maure) was opened in 1618. The poet Saint-Amant, an assiduous customer, died there. The art gallery that now stands on the site of the tavern has fortunately retained the façade, the grille and the seventeenth-century sign." (p. 134, Rochegude/Clébert, *Promenades dans les rues de Paris. Rive gauche*, Éditions Denoël)

The wall will be built between numbers 1 and 2, completely closing the street to traffic, and will cut all communication between Rue Bonaparte and Rue de Seine.

Constructed solely with metal barrels used for transporting gasoline and oil (labeled with various brand names: ESSO, AZUR, SHELL, BP, and with a capacity of either 50 or 200 liters), the wall will be 4 meters high and 2.9 meters wide. Eight 50-liter-capacity barrels, or five 200-liter-capacity barrels, laid on their sides, will constitute the base. One hundred and fifty 50-liter-capacity barrels or eighty 200-liter-capacity barrels are necessary for the erection of the wall.

This "iron curtain" can be used as a barricade during a period of public work in the street, or to transform the street into a dead end. Finally its principle can be extended to a whole area or an entire city.<sup>92</sup>

Accompanying this text was a collage that Christo made by cutting and pasting together two different photographs, one of the Rue Visconti in Paris and one of *Wall of Oil*

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<sup>92</sup> "Wall of Oil Barrels-The Iron Curtain," *Christo and Jeanne-Claude*, accessed July 20 2014, <http://www.christojeanne-claude.net/projects/wall-of-oil-barrels---the-iron-curtain?view=info#.U8gVDFx7UwE>. This text is also found in a number of related books.

*Barrels* from his Cologne exhibition.<sup>93</sup> As a whole, the photomontage visually illustrates Christo's idea on the left, while his words verbally describe it on the right (Fig. 24).

The resulting document represents Christo's first preparatory study for a large-scale work of art, or "project" as the text announces. This is a term that Christo and Jeanne- Claude applied to their later works of a similar nature regardless of using fabric or barrels. Though preparatory studies have roots in the Renaissance, Christo's manifesto-like statement and use of mixed media is more akin to the work of modern artists.<sup>94</sup> In subsequent projects, Christo incorporated city maps and fabric samples in addition to making three-dimensional models as part of his artistic process. These kinds of visual information help him to convey his vision to those who may not be able to imagine it, such as bureaucratic organizations, as well as forming the main source of fundraising to realize he and Jeanne-Claude's projects in the public sphere today.

The two never received a response from the Prefect of Police about their proposal for *Wall of Oil Barrels-The Iron Curtain*. After waiting eight months, Jeanne-Claude enlisted the aid of her stepfather who had many political connections to write to the current Prefect, Maurice Papon, as the fate of the artwork loomed. Papon replied that he could not agree to closing a public thoroughfare, but mailed the letter late enough to arrive after the proposed date of the project.<sup>95</sup>

Without official permission for *Wall of Oil Barrels-The Iron Curtain*, Christo and Jeanne-Claude needed to make the decision whether or not to realize it as planned.

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<sup>93</sup> Koddenberg, *Christo and Jeanne-Claude: Early Works 1958-64*, 112.

<sup>94</sup> Donovan, *Christo and Jeanne-Claude in the Vogel Collection*, 23-24, Baume et. al., *Christo*, 35, and Vaizey, *Christo*, 10.

<sup>95</sup> Chernow, *Christo and Jeanne-Claude: A Biography*, 108.

Before they submitted the permit application, Christo had convinced Restany to let him exhibit at the Galerie J, a popular venue for the Nouveaux Réalistes owned by his wife Jeannine de Goldschmidt, in conjunction with the temporary work of art. Accordingly in the weeks leading up to the show, Christo and Jeanne-Claude placed posters in the area surrounding the Rue Visconti to advertise his first solo show in Paris. In addition, invitations that specified a “unique presentation” called *The Iron Curtain*, scheduled to occur from 9:00 to 10:00 p.m. at the opening of exhibition, were sent out (Fig. 25).<sup>96</sup>

The exhibition, which lasted from June 27 to July 3, proved to be a challenge for Christo since he wanted to show a large and varied body of work, like he had in Cologne, but in a significantly smaller space.<sup>97</sup> At the back wall of the gallery, he recreated *Wall of Oil Barrels* as a more permanent reminder of the temporary work scheduled to occur outside (Fig. 26). For this indoor installation Christo had found or purchased oil barrels over the past year, storing them until he needed them on site for the exhibition.<sup>98</sup>

Meanwhile, the remaining works of the show were small and two-dimensional. In the middle of the gallery, Christo posted some of his ink drawings on a pillar. Here, viewers could see how Christo imagined barrel works everywhere- near the highway, in a theater, as a building façade- whimsically demonstrating their wide-ranging possibilities as a recycled material in the everyday environment that could be incorporated into architecture (Fig. 27).<sup>99</sup> His fascination with the oil barrel, leftover once its contents are consumed, suggests to the viewer how pervasive this commodity is in contemporary

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Koddenberg, *Christo and Jeanne-Claude: Early Works 1958-64*, 120-124.

society, the debris of which he economically reincorporates into everyday life. Lastly, Christo exhibited one of his photomontage studies for *Wall of Oil Barrels-The Iron Curtain*, a similar photographic collage for *Project for the Wrapping of the École Militaire*, and another for *Project for a Wrapped Public Building*, which he had created around the same time when he had the idea for the show (Fig. 28).

In this Paris exhibition Christo emphasized the oil drum's ability to stack, which facilitated his large-scale installations. After all, it had originated as an event to complement the temporary construction of one of his barrel structures on the street. But when considering the works of art as a whole exhibited at the Galerie J, the show visually articulated Christo's intention to realize other public artworks beyond *Wall of Oil Barrels-The Iron Curtain*, using both fabric and barrels as his photo collages indicate. This demonstrates a clear shift from Christo's independently created, small-scale sculptures to his ephemeral, large-scale projects with Jeanne-Claude, though the public was unaware of her authorship until much later.

Upon seeing Christo's work in her gallery, de Goldschmidt became frustrated since none of the pieces had price tags, but it excited Restany as Nouveaux Réalisme had recently dissolved.<sup>100</sup> Consequently Restany now perceived Christo's visual language to be a continuation of the group, despite Christo's exclusion while it existed.<sup>101</sup> Other responses to the exhibition were varied as some found the presence of *Wall of Oil Barrels* inside the gallery to be menacing, while others found its coloration to be beautiful.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Chernow, *Christo and Jeanne-Claude: A Biography*, 109.

<sup>101</sup> Koddenberg, *Christo and Jeanne-Claude: Early Works 1958-64*, 124.

<sup>102</sup> Chernow, *Christo and Jeanne-Claude: A Biography*, 108.

As for the temporary *Wall of Oil Barrels-The Iron Curtain* outside the gallery, the work eventually came to fruition as planned. Although Christo and Restany were hesitant to proceed without following proper government regulations, with Jeanne-Claude's determination they decided to go ahead with the project a few hours before the exhibition opened.<sup>103</sup> For the event Christo had rented a large number of barrels beforehand, as it required many more than he could gather and store in a year, which he used for his *Wall of Oil Barrels* inside the gallery. The rental fee also included a truck for the objects' transportation, a driver to operate the vehicle, and another person to assist with handling the bulky cargo to and from its intended destination in Paris's Latin Quarter.<sup>104</sup>

Located in one of the city's historically contentious districts full of students, artists, and bohemians, the Rue Visconti claimed many notable former residents including Eugène Delacroix and Honoré de Balzac.<sup>105</sup> However, Christo principally selected this street for its narrowness so that *Wall of Oil Barrels-The Iron Curtain* could be more logistically feasible. A smaller road required less manual labor and materials while maximizing the effects of a temporary disruption in the urban environment. This aspect is compounded when considering that the Rue Visconti is a one-way street that connects the two main boulevards of the Latin Quarter, St. German des Pres and St. Michel. This area is one in which many civilian protests have historically taken place, such as the May '68 protest led by students against French capitalism who constructed barricades as part of their demonstrations.

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Tom McDonough, *"The Beautiful Language of My Century: Reinventing the Language of Contestation in Postwar France, 1945-1968,"* (Cambridge, M.A: MIT Press, 2007), 87.

With the barrels on site for the project Christo began to construct the base by laying ten drums in the road side-by-side. This immediately created a disturbance, as vehicles could no longer pass.<sup>106</sup> While horns honked and people gathered to watch the spectacle unfold, he continued to place barrels on top of one another as the stack grew taller. With Christo balancing on top, those assisting continued to hand him barrels from the truck as a policeman arrived at the scene. Jeanne-Claude dealt with this developing situation by explaining to him that they were creating a temporary work of art and suggested that he consult with his superiors at the police station. However, he came back with more officers to demand a permit, despite the installation's completion with a crowd gathering around it. Jeanne-Claude's negotiation with the police allowed the existence of *Wall of Oil Barrels-The Iron Curtain* until 1:00 a.m., the time at which they threatened to arrest everyone involved in Christo and Jeanne-Claude's unauthorized artistic act.

Artist René Bértholo, who had photographed Christo's barrel creations as part of *Inventory*, was part of the crowd who came to see his friends' monumental work. He recalled that although visitors were shocked to see that someone would barricade the road, they were mostly amused since it occurred in a neighborhood known for being an artist district. Beyond art criticism however, Christo desired a social reaction to the artwork. Drivers caught in the gridlock resulting from the oil barrel wall as well as the street's residents, who could not escape the commotion below, shouted verbal abuse at those viewing *Wall of Oil Barrels-The Iron Curtain*. As the chaos escalated, some local tenants threw various liquids from their windows onto the bystanders in the street, all of

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<sup>106</sup> The following two paragraphs are paraphrased from the account in Chernow, *Christo and Jeanne-Claude: A Biography*, 109-113.



who unknowingly became part of the work of art.<sup>107</sup> This included one man who flung the contents of his chamber pot and happened to strike Restany, completely soaking his suit that he had recently purchased in Milan.<sup>108</sup>

Normalcy returned sometime between 12 p.m. and 1 a.m. as the crew who had put up the oil barrels quietly loaded them onto the truck to return to Christo's storage space at Gentilly. The next day, Christo and Jeanne-Claude were summoned to the St. Germain police station and reprimanded for the disorder they had created for the sake of art, but no legal action against them was pursued. Nonetheless *Wall of Oil Barrels-The Iron Curtain* marks the first and last time they went ahead with a large-scale temporary project without government permission.

The entire ordeal made such an impression on the couple's friend Allan Kaprow that the American performance artist based his 1968 Happening titled *Transfer (for Christo)* upon it.<sup>109</sup> For his event, organized by the Wesleyan University in Ohio, Kaprow used a truck to transport oil barrels to various sites, painting them different colors at each stage in reference to Christo and Jeanne-Claude's work.<sup>110</sup> Although *Wall of Oil Barrels-Iron Curtain* is similar to Kaprow's idea of a happening with its mimicry of the everyday and involvement of the spectator as performer, this work of art engaged with actual events rather than invented situations that derived from life instead.

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<sup>107</sup> Chernow, *Christo and Jeanne-Claude: A Biography*, 112.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Jan van der Marck, "Christo: The Making of an Artist" in *Christo, Collection on Loan from the Rothschild Bank AG*, 71.

<sup>110</sup> This information was found in the text of one of Kaprow's lithographs, as well as a description of it, found in the online collection of the Walker Art Center. "Transfer," *Walker Art Center*, accessed July 11 2014., <http://www.walkerart.org/collections/artworks/transfer>.

Christo and Jeanne-Claude's disruption of the local urban context was a politically charged act that intended to call attention to current conflicts, which Parisians were not experiencing firsthand although they were affected by, not only through the obstruction's form but also through its social effects.<sup>111</sup> The particular arrangement of their oil drums, similar to a wall or a barricade, reference two political tensions: the erection of the Berlin Wall and the Algerian War. While a number of scholars have briefly mentioned these connections, I seek to substantiate them by delving into these contexts in addition to specifically demonstrating how Christo and Jeanne-Claude's *Wall of Oil Barrels-The Iron Curtain* interacted with them in the following section. Though not completely blatant, this artwork's geo-political connotations are undeniable, especially when taking into account Christo and Jeanne-Claude's personal experiences of these historical events.

### The Wall

As the title suggests, *Wall of Oil Barrels-The Iron Curtain* responded to the Berlin Wall's construction roughly two months before Christo applied for a permit. He and Jeanne-Claude were actually in Germany at the time for his first solo show as the Wall began to go up. These developing events made the latter concerned that Christo would be taken away by the communists, since he was currently a stateless refugee who had defected from the Soviet Union.<sup>112</sup> The U.S.S.R. proved to be more interested in preventing their existing citizens from leaving the Eastern Bloc, however, rather than capturing those who had already left in the aftermath of World War II.

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<sup>111</sup> Vaizey, *Christo*, 9.

<sup>112</sup> *Christo in Paris*, directed by Deborah Dickson, Susan Froemke, Albert Maysles, and David Maysles (1990; New York, N.Y.: Plexigroup, Inc, 2004), DVD.

After the Allied powers dismantled the Nazi regime in 1945, Germany and its capital were divided among the victors. Russia, France, Great Britain, and the U.S. each had its own sector that it was responsible for during the post-war period. This not only kept Germany's power in check, but also humiliated the nation for the global havoc they had wreaked in pursuit of Hitler's concept of *Lebensraum*. Although this system worked well for a time, the Soviet Union disagreed with the other powers over Germany's reconstruction. In addition, millions of Eastern European peoples fled to the West during the 1950s for a number of reasons, including the implementation of Joseph Stalin's restrictive ideological policies that Christo was subject to in Bulgaria.

The wall that *Wall of Oil Barrels-The Iron Curtain* refers to began during the middle of the night on August 13<sup>th</sup> 1961. By the early morning, a hastily devised barbed wire fence suddenly divided East and West Berlin, running along the entire city's parameter. Eastern German border troops and construction workers created a more permanent barrier over the next few days however by pouring a twelve-foot concrete wall (Fig. 29). To explain why it had put up this barrier the German Democratic Republic (GDR), or Soviet-controlled East Germany, cited the continued prevalence of Nazism in West Germany after the war, deeming the wall to be an anti-fascist protective rampart in the event of invasion. However in reality this wall physically separated two different ideologies from each other as a move instigated by communism to remove the influence of Western capitalism, the detritus of which Christo ironically used for his own wall in Paris. Later fortifications added to the Eastern side of the Berlin border as well as the order to shoot anyone who tried to cross the wall focused on the control of those living behind it, contributing to West Germany's denouncement of the structure as a "Wall of Shame."

The social effects of the Wall were immediate because it went up so quickly and without human consideration. Overnight, families and friends living in different parts of the city were cut off from each other, in addition to 60, 000 workers from their jobs.<sup>113</sup> Christo was deeply affected and angered by this move by the Eastern German government, as he was also separated from his family and friends behind the Iron Curtain.<sup>114</sup> In Berlin, human and vehicular traffic circulated “within one half of the city or the other,” a type of disruption that *Wall of Oil Barrels-The Iron Curtain* also created, though its short existence did not allow traffic patterns to permanently change in response to the physical obstruction as the Berlin Wall did.<sup>115</sup>

Although the erection of the Wall in itself cannot be considered a violent act, the social and psychological effects of “cold” warfare caused a different kind of human suffering to those on both sides of the Wall.<sup>116</sup> A prominent East German psychiatrist noted that his patients with increased depression and anxiety after the border closing reacted directly to the Wall’s appearance, which he interpreted as a visual reminder of their restrictions on freedom.<sup>117</sup> Both East and West Germans, as well as the rest of the world, came to see the Wall not just as a physical structure, but a contentious symbol of the ongoing struggle between two different ideologies, capitalism and communism, that has led to subsequent geo-political conflicts beyond Europe.

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<sup>113</sup> Brian Ladd, *The Ghosts of Berlin: Confronting German History in the Urban Landscape*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 12.

<sup>114</sup> Baal-Teshuva, *Christo and Jeanne-Claude*, 18.

<sup>115</sup> Ladd, *The Ghosts of Berlin: Confronting German History in the Urban Landscape*, 12 and 15.

<sup>116</sup> This statement suspends the violence that occurred in the territory on the Eastern side of the Wall known as the death strip. This area between the actual wall and the series of security towers had barbed wire, guard dogs, bright lights, and carefully raked sand to restrict movement across the border.

<sup>117</sup> Ladd, *The Ghosts of Berlin: Confronting German History in the Urban Landscape*, 28.

In their “Iron Curtain” made of metal oil drums, Christo and Jeanne-Claude similarly confronted Parisians with issues of containment, authority, and ideology that their German neighbors were experiencing.<sup>118</sup> By reenacting the erection of the Berlin Wall in Paris on a smaller scale, they had their French counterparts experience this type of ongoing conflict that they most likely only saw the headlines for, which draws a parallel to the Algerian War that affected them more directly. The permit application for *Wall of Oil Barrels-The Iron Curtain* declared that the principle of their project could “be extended to a whole area or an entire city” as a deliberate reference to Berlin. However in the resulting work of art, they used their manipulation of space instead of words to provide commentary, which was perhaps more apparent to the visitors of Christo’s exhibition who were aware of his specific reference to the Berlin Wall for he and Jeanne-Claude’s spectacle on opening night.

As planned, *Wall of Oil Barrels-The Iron Curtain* cut off movement between two parts of the city from each other. Although it closed off a much smaller breadth of space than the Berlin Wall and also had a much simpler construction, Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s installation had the same intended effect in alienating people. Yet as France was one of the Allied powers, it played a role in avoiding confrontation with the Soviet Union about the Wall, perhaps to avoid more bloodshed in the wake of World War II despite its adverse effects related to ideology that Christo experienced firsthand. While a wall in general supports a roof to provide shelter for a building’s inhabitants, the one that *Wall of Oil Barrels-The Iron Curtain* alludes to purposely separated two areas from each other, similar to ancient defensive fortifications such as Hadrian’s Wall or the Great Wall of

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<sup>118</sup> Donovan, *Christo and Jeanne-Claude in the Vogel Collection*, 24.

China. It was not one of domestic use, but warfare as part of a clash between two different civilizations.

Christo became aware of the shifting nature of man-made borders in response to political tides while learning about the changing geography of Bulgaria and its surrounding states as a child.<sup>119</sup> As the Berlin Wall came down in 1989, so did his and Jeanne-Claude's slightly taller interpretation of the Berlin Wall, much to the relief of motorists and residents of the Rue Visconti. Their lives had been temporarily interrupted by this work of art, unlike the more lasting impacts that continue to affect former East and West Germans today.

### The Barricade

Although *Wall of Oil Barrels-The Iron Curtain* establishes this artwork as a wall, Christo and Restany have also referred to it as another form. The original permit application suggests that the work of art could "be used as a barricade," although Christo does not elaborate how.<sup>120</sup> Restany, on the back of the invitation for the exhibition opening, described the barrel structure as a "barricade of alienation."<sup>121</sup> This alternate characterization of the work of art as a barricade is politically charged, especially in the urban context of Paris, when one takes into account not only the recent demonstrations in the city that protested the Algerian War, but also France's own revolutions.

Before examining how *Wall of Oil Barrels-The Iron Curtain* acted as a barricade, a short discussion of this structure's history and nature is needed. A barricade is an

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<sup>119</sup> Chernow, *Christo and Jeanne-Claude: A Biography*, 5.

<sup>120</sup> "Wall of Oil Barrels-The Iron Curtain," *Christo and Jeanne-Claude*, <http://www.christojeanneclaude.net/projects/wall-of-oil-barrels---the-iron-curtain?view=info#.U8gVDFx7UwE>.

<sup>121</sup> Jan van der Marck, "Christo: The Making of an Artist," *Christo, Collection on Loan from the Rothschild Bank AG*, 71-75.

improvised barrier used to physically blockade a street while providing shelter for its defenders.<sup>122</sup> Similar to the Berlin Wall, this tactic of urban warfare prevents movement within a geographic area, although on a smaller scale to restrict access to strategic locations rather than the city as a whole.

In France the barricade became a popular form of protest for political dissidents for centuries. Cossé de Brissac is said to have invented the barricade in 1588 after ordering Parisians to reinforce a chain barrier blocking the movement of King Henri III's royal guards by filling wooden barrels with dirt and paving stones.<sup>123</sup> Therefore the term "barricade" comes from the French word used for barrel at that time, *barrique*, making *Wall of Oil Barrels-The Iron Curtain* a literal return to the barricade's roots to further merge political and economic connotations in this artwork.<sup>124</sup> Insurgents in Paris typically selected narrow streets to barricade as Christo did, so Baron Haussmann's renovation of the city during the mid-nineteenth century planned for wider avenues. This strategic decision in urban planning not only facilitated the movement of troops, but also dissuaded the erection of barricades as a way to control political agitators, though it failed to prevent the Paris Commune of 1871.<sup>125</sup> As a result of this conflict, the barricade has

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<sup>122</sup> G.J. Ashworth, *War and the City*, (London; New York: Routledge, 1991), 107.

<sup>123</sup> Mark Traugott, "Barricades as Repertoire: Continuities and Discontinuities in the History of French Contention," *Social Science History* 17, no. 2 (1993): 313-314. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1171284>.

<sup>124</sup> Traugott, "Barricades as Repertoire: Continuities and Discontinuities in the History of French Contention," 314.

<sup>125</sup> Albert Boime, *Art and the French Commune: Imagining Paris After War and Revolution*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 93.

been transformed into an international symbol of political protest, most notably with socialist movements, in addition to its practical use as a tactic of guerilla warfare.<sup>126</sup>

For those that put up the barricades, typically civilians, these temporary structures symbolized their freedom against a government they disagreed with. One World War II veteran, who had commanded the 1944 uprising against Nazi occupation in the Latin Quarter, walked through this area after the May '68 student demonstrations. He noted that the young men had built several of their barricades in the same places as them, demonstrating the barricade's political resonance.<sup>127</sup> Located in the same neighborhood *Wall of Oil Barrels-The Iron Curtain* interacted with this political symbol ingrained in French history, especially Paris. French psychoanalyst Dominique Laporte suggests that some might even associate the barricade with this city as much as the Arc de Triompe, a more official monument of the capital that maintains instead of resisting traditional institutions.<sup>128</sup>

The erection of a barricade turns the city into a battlefield, including Christo and Jeanne-Claude's barrels that blocked the Rue Visconti that forms the subject of this chapter. As mentioned before, motorists' residents exhibited aggressive actions towards the sudden disturbance. Throwing liquid projectiles onto the crowd surrounding *Wall of Oil Barrels-The Iron Curtain*, though relatively harmless with the exception of Restany's suit as a casualty, is reminiscent of the *pétroleuses* of the Paris Commune. To aid their male counterparts fighting at the barricades, these women notoriously hurled petroleum

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<sup>126</sup> Dennis Bos, "Building Barricades: the Political Transfer of a Contentious Roadblock," *European Review of History* 12, no. 2 (2005): 345.

<sup>127</sup>E.J. Hobsbawm, *Revolutionaries: Contemporary Essays*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1973), 233.

<sup>128</sup> Dominique Laporte, *Christo*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 41.



or kerosene oil onto buildings with the intention of igniting them, infusing Christo's use of the oil barrel with more meaning in regards to its contents.<sup>129</sup> In addition, those in the buildings above the barricades sometimes dropped objects upon invaders or to the men fighting below to help bolster the barricade, making the defensive structure not a formal one but one that often used the debris found in the city, including the object that Christo and Jeanne-Claude use.

These types of responses to *Wall of Oil Barrels-The Curtain* provoked tensions between inhabitants of the city similar to the political conflicts that Christo and Jeanne-Claude wished to draw attention to. One spectator managed to hoist himself on top of *Wall of Oil Barrels-The Iron Curtain* and shout: "I've just come from the Louvre... this is better than [Eugène Delacroix's] *Liberty Leading the People!*"<sup>130</sup> Delacroix, a previous resident of the Rue Visconti whose own artwork often romanticized political events, painted this masterpiece after the revolution of 1830 to dramatically depict the triumphant personification of Liberty. As politically engaged as the work is, it remains a visual representation that tries to draw in the viewer's attention by denying his or her gaze rather than physically engaging the viewer, which *Wall of Oil Barrels-The Iron Curtain* did (Fig. 30).

As for the contemporary Algerian War, one can see graffiti scrawled on both buildings that frame the work of art when viewing photographer Jean-Dominique Lajoux's images of it, which happen to capture both sides of the conflict (Fig. 23). On the right, the phrase "OASS" can be seen on the wall in red paint, though the "O" is cut off in

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<sup>129</sup> Boime, *Art and the French Commune: Imagining Paris After War and Revolution*, 196-197.

<sup>130</sup> Laporte, *Christo*, 41.

this particular image. This phrase refers to right-wing terrorist French group, the Organisation Armée Secrète (OAS), which was against Algeria's independence. The addition of a second "s" however equates this paramilitary organization to Hitler's *Schutzstaffel* or Protection Squadron (SS), especially when comparing that the font used to that of the SS official insignia.<sup>131</sup> On the left, the phrase "le fascisme ne passera pas," which translates to "Fascism shall not pass," is partially visible (Fig. 23). This slogan of the Communist Party criticized the French government's brutal suppression of the National Liberation Front (FLN), the civilian-led, socialist organization for Algeria's independence, as well as violence committed against Algerians living in France.<sup>132</sup> Christo's preparatory photo collage that envisions *Wall of Oil Barrels-The Iron Curtain* also shows on the wall to the right a pro-Algerian independence poster, urging French citizens to vote for the self-determination of France's African colony in a January 1961 referendum (Fig. 24).<sup>133</sup>

What these photographs document besides Christo and Jeanne-Claude's artwork is the continuing tensions in Paris in regards to the Algerian War from the project's genesis to realization over the course of eight months. While *Wall of Oil Barrels-The Iron Curtain* was up, Christo and those who helped him put it up stayed by the artwork to talk to the crowd about it. Interestingly, he related the piece to the OAS attack on the reservoirs of British Petroleum the day before, a coincidental event that made his use of

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<sup>131</sup> McDonough, "The Beautiful Language of My Century:" *Reinventing the Language of Contestation in Postwar France, 1945-1968*, 93.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 89.

the oil barrel even more relevant in the work, though unplanned.<sup>134</sup> Although the Algerian War largely unfolded across the Mediterranean Sea, daily headlines of Paris's newspapers kept Christo and citizens in France up to date on current events abroad as talks of Algeria's future independence continued.<sup>135</sup>

The conflict itself, known as the "War with No Name," began in 1954 when the FLN organized a series of guerilla attacks across Algeria to reclaim their independence from France. United by its socialist politics that the West feared at this time during the Cold War in addition to its nationalist sentiments, the FLN sought to rise up against the French government, which seized the North African nation as a colony in 1830. However, the FLN's demands for sovereignty had earlier roots. When France required the compulsory conscription of Algerian males in 1911, they were forced to fight for their European colonizers during both World Wars while the government refused the largely Muslim population more political, social, and economic integration.<sup>136</sup>

Although France was well accustomed with the threat of political revolution, this fight abroad made the insurrection harder for the government to put down, especially after losing its other territorial holdings in Africa and Asia during the 1950s. However Algeria's production of oil meant that this nation was even more lucrative to hold on to, especially in the twentieth century in which oil came to fuel modern military technology. As a result, Algeria's French-owned oil companies were the last to be nationalized in the early seventies long after the other foreign ones had been ousted, despite gaining political

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<sup>134</sup> Laporte, *Christo*, 40.

<sup>135</sup> McDonough, "The Beautiful Language of My Century:" *Reinventing the Language of Contestation in Postwar France, 1945-1968*, 61.

<sup>136</sup> Jim House and Neil MacMaster, *Paris 1961: Algerians, State Terror, and Memory*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 2.

independence a decade earlier.<sup>137</sup> Therefore *Wall of Oil Barrels-The Iron Curtain* blocked the movement of French vehicles within the city of Paris by using containers that had previously held oil was necessary to fuel them, ironically.

In March 1962, Algeria eventually gained independence after one of the most protracted and bloodiest instances of decolonization associated with political protest and police repression.<sup>138</sup> For instance along the Algerian borders with Tunisia and Morocco, the French military set up electrified barbed wire fences complete with flood lights, minefields, and watchtowers patrolled by police, not unlike the fortifications of the eastern side of the Berlin Wall.<sup>139</sup> However, this war was not simply between the French government and Algerian revolutionaries. During the “Week of Barricades” in January 1960, French civilians in favor of Algeria remaining a European colony set up barricades and took over government buildings across Algiers to protest President Charles de Gaulle’s inclinations towards Algerian sovereignty. Afraid of using violence on their own citizens abroad, the conflict ended with the insurgents’ surrender and mass arrests.

Perhaps the most infamous instance of violence occurred a year later in what became known as the Paris Massacre. The same month that Christo submitted his preparatory photo collage for *Wall of Oil Barrels-The Iron Curtain*, the FLN organized the tens of thousands of Algerians living in Paris to demonstrate against police repression

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<sup>137</sup> Francisco Parra, *Oil Politics: A Modern History of Petroleum*, London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2004), 150 and Gökay, “Introduction: How Oil Fuels World Politics,” 7.

<sup>138</sup> Jim House and Neil MacMaster, *Paris 1961: Algerians, State Terror, and Memory*, 2.

<sup>139</sup> Martin S. Alexander and J.F.V. Keiger. “France and the Algerian War: Strategy, Operations and Diplomacy” in *France and the Algerian War (1954-62): Strategy, Operations and Diplomacy*, ed. by Martin S. Alexander and J. F. V. Keiger, (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2002), 11.

and discriminatory measures perpetrated by the French government.<sup>140</sup> Although these protests were peaceful, the police retaliation was not. As ordered by Maurice Papon, the very official that Jeanne-Claude's stepfather had contacted about *Wall of Oil Barrels-The Iron Curtain*, French police squadrons killed two hundred Algerians and attempted to round up the rest throughout the city including the Latin Quarter, throwing many dead or alive into the Seine River (Fig. 31).

When considering this context, Christo and Jeanne-Claude realized their installation in a city beset by its own political tensions aside from the Cold War that both experienced while in Paris. Not long after fleeing to France, in May 1958 Christo saw armed troops along the Champs-Élysées as well as other key intersections of the city, which reminded him of the totalitarian regime that he had recently left behind.<sup>141</sup> Jeanne-Claude's experience with the conflict in Algeria had roots farther back than Christo, however.

During World War II, her mother Précilda had worked for Charles de Gaulle as his chief of information, propaganda, and press, where she met her future husband and the main father figure in Jeanne-Claude's life, General Jacques de Guillebon.<sup>142</sup> The couple's involvement in the French military meant that Jeanne-Claude spent four years in Tunisia as a teenager until 1958, when the country gained its independence from France.<sup>143</sup> After he became president the next year, de Gaulle regularly summoned Jacques to his office about the conflict in Algeria, consulting with him about the French

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<sup>140</sup> Jim House and Neil MacMaster, *Paris 1961: Algerians, State Terror, and Memory*, 1.

<sup>141</sup> Chernow, *Christo and Jeanne-Claude: A Biography*, 57 and 59.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

military's controversial tactics and unclear goals.<sup>144</sup> The general felt that granting Algerian independence would better serve France, which was still struggling to recover from World War II, since the war could last for decades until it won its own self-rule like its neighbors Tunisia and Morocco.<sup>145</sup>

As Christo and Jeanne-Claude's permit for *Wall of Oil Barrels-The Iron Curtain* was simply ignored in this time of fear, perhaps the government believed the proposed work of art to be another protest to deal with in addition to the demonstrations against the Algerian War.<sup>146</sup> Although they sought government permission for their project, Bourdon makes an insightful point about their resulting work of art:

When Christo [blockades] a street ... the effect is not only aggressively anti-social, but also physically menacing, because of the sheer weight involved and the possibility of a 'barrel slide.' ... Yet if the city had granted permission, it would have deprived the piece of its capacity for social disruption and turned the temporary street blockade into an art-for-art's-sake event.<sup>147</sup>

With officially granted approval, *Wall of Oil Barrels-The Iron Curtain* would not have been as effective in being what art historian Tom McDonough describes as a work of "oppositional public art" that resisted authority and engaged with complicated geopolitical events that also related to global economics.<sup>148</sup> It entailed active participation with the public that yielded the reactions that Christo and Jeanne-Claude desired, that is, a social response to *Wall of Oil Barrels-The Iron Curtain* to provocatively simulate the very conflicts that they responded to.

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 71 and 78.

<sup>146</sup> Baal-Teshuva, *Christo and Jeanne-Claude*, 21.

<sup>147</sup> Koddenberg, *Christo and Jeanne-Claude: Early Works 1958-64*, 112.

<sup>148</sup> McDonough, "The Beautiful Language of My Century:" *Reinventing the Language of Contestation in Postwar France, 1945-1968*, 96.

Rather than simply adopting an everyday item like Christo's previous barrel works, this installation also appropriated ideas. Upon seeing *Wall of Oil Barrels-The Iron Curtain*, American gallery owner Leo Castelli exclaimed "the idea of blocking that street was pure Duchamp."<sup>149</sup> He did not mean that Christo and Jeanne-Claude had appropriated a barricade and called it art, but that they used the oil drum to take on existing forms infused with symbolism to become a work of art.<sup>150</sup> While the image of the barricade has become related the potential for political freedom, the wall (in reference the Berlin Wall) is symbol of political repression. Both of the forms of the barricade and the wall that that *Wall of Oil Barrels-The Iron Curtain* replicates are not simply utilitarian structures, but have connotations from various geopolitical conflicts over time. In their oil barrel blockade, Christo and Jeanne-Claude created a temporary public monument that countered both the glorification of politics and consumerism in the West, interrupting the built environment through ordinary objects to provoke new ways of thinking about the everyday on the part of the viewer.

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

This thesis has demonstrated how Christo and Jeanne-Claude's early barrel works from 1958-1962 appropriated the oil drum as a charged medium that lends itself to various cultural connotations. Christo had begun using the barrel in Paris as the subject of his wrappings that investigated the plasticity of everyday objects. However, he soon experimented with it independently of fabric due to the oil drum's particular ability to engage with space in its inherent volume, stacking it into large-scale formations. For his first solo exhibition in 1961, Christo notably exhibited a number of these barrel installations to the public, including his first collaborations with Jeanne-Claude that referred to the original purpose of the oil drum as a container for a liquid commodity.

Christo and Jeanne-Claude's appropriation of the oil barrel as an artistic medium, in addition to its economic associations, cumulated in their 1962 installation *Wall of Oil Barrels-The Iron Curtain*, one of their most politically motivated works. This artwork goes beyond their earlier focus upon the literal aspects of barrel by taking on a political dimension in response to current events. Therefore, their adoption of the oil barrel became increasingly charged by absorbing associations of related economic and political contexts, and has continued to do so since. Overall, Christo's artistic development from 1958-1962 not only established his interest in using the oil barrel as an alternate visual language to fabric, but also his desire to create large-scale works of public art with his partner Jeanne-Claude for which they are recognized for today.

While Christo and Jeanne-Claude have created many works of art that repurpose both fabric and barrels throughout their joint career, scholarly attention has focused on the former material. As a result, I have sought to add more critical analysis to existing



literature in this project. I have also distinguished Christo's early barrel works from his fabric ones during his career in Paris, and how they become another dominant medium throughout he and Jeanne-Claude's career. What many do not realize is that the practices that they have become recognized for began with the oil barrel as discussed in this thesis, making their early barrel works especially important when examining their oeuvre.

Like fabric, oil barrels provoke interest on the part of the viewer as an unusual artistic medium. Both materials have been used as a protective exterior to contain and conceal, despite their physical differences. This idea of both literal and figurative containment is a theme that Christo and Jeanne-Claude have returned to since *Wall of Oil Barrels- The Iron Curtain* in a number of their fabric works as well, such as *Valley Curtain* or *Running Fence* that also simulate walls in the rural American landscape. As cloth is softer than metal, these artists have either appropriated buildings or created an architectural framework to give this material the same ability as the oil barrel to occupy space. Ultimately, the goal of Christo and Jeanne-Claude in their temporary interventions using both fabric and barrels is to change how one sees a familiar object.

Due to its scope, my project provides a point of access for future scholarship concerning Christo and Jeanne-Claude's endeavors with the oil drum after 1962. The full economic and political implications of using a container for petroleum is a topic that requires further study of Christo and Jeanne-Claude's work, especially when they return to this artistic mode in 1968. After the protests of this year, they introduce a new form to the public that they call the mastaba, which was a flat-topped, rectangular structure with sloped sides dating to ancient Egypt. This form, coupled with many of the locations where Christo and Jeanne-Claude wanted to build this type of structure including Abu Dhabi as discussed in my introduction, has undeniable links to the Middle East.

Historically this region has played a key role in the production of oil as a necessary commodity to the global economy. With the motif of the mastaba, I would hypothesize that Christo and Jeanne-Claude fully merge this medium with its specific connotations as a container for oil together, reflecting upon the economic and political implications of the object's original liquid contents in their artwork.

As a symbol of the oil industry, the barrel is continuing to take on ongoing geopolitical tensions over its economic necessity to industrialized nations around the world. Fears of an oil shortage, in addition to rapidly industrializing nations like China and India entering the global economy, makes the this limited natural resource a worldwide issue. As scholar Bülent Gökay observes, “oil politics represents world politics more than anything else,” arguing that petroleum is at the core of global security.<sup>151</sup> His statement acknowledges that nations must negotiate not only the global economy, but also political relations in order to maintain access to oil, especially if they do not naturally have this resource.

In the twenty-first century oil continues to spark arguments about the negative effects of petroleum on the environment and the potential benefits of renewable energy without resolution. Consequently, Christo and Jeanne-Claude's use of the oil drum from 1958-1962 and afterwards is becoming even more relevant in today's society. This will undoubtedly affect future interpretations of the political, economic, and even environmental implications of their barrel works.

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<sup>151</sup> Gökay, “Introduction: How Oil Fuels World Politics,” in *Politics of Oil: A Survey*, 10.

## APPENDIX A

### FIGURES

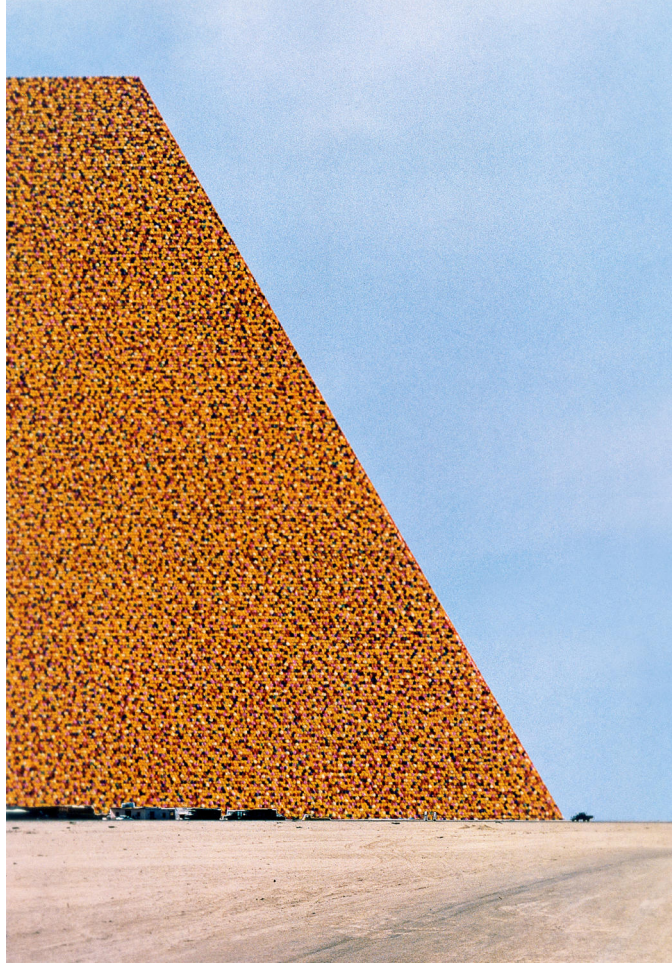


Figure 1. Christo, Detail from *The Mastaba of Abu Dhabi (Project for United Arab Emirates)*, 1979, two collaged photographs and pencil, 22 x 14 in., ([http://www.christojeanneclaude.net/projects/the-mastaba#.U\\_5HVVx7UwE](http://www.christojeanneclaude.net/projects/the-mastaba#.U_5HVVx7UwE)).



Figure 2. Christo, *Farmers at Rest in a Field (study for an oil painting)*, 1954, charcoal on paper, approximately 14 x 20 in., Image reprinted from Jacob Baal-Teshuva, *Christo and Jeanne-Claude*, Cologne: Taschen, 2001, 13.

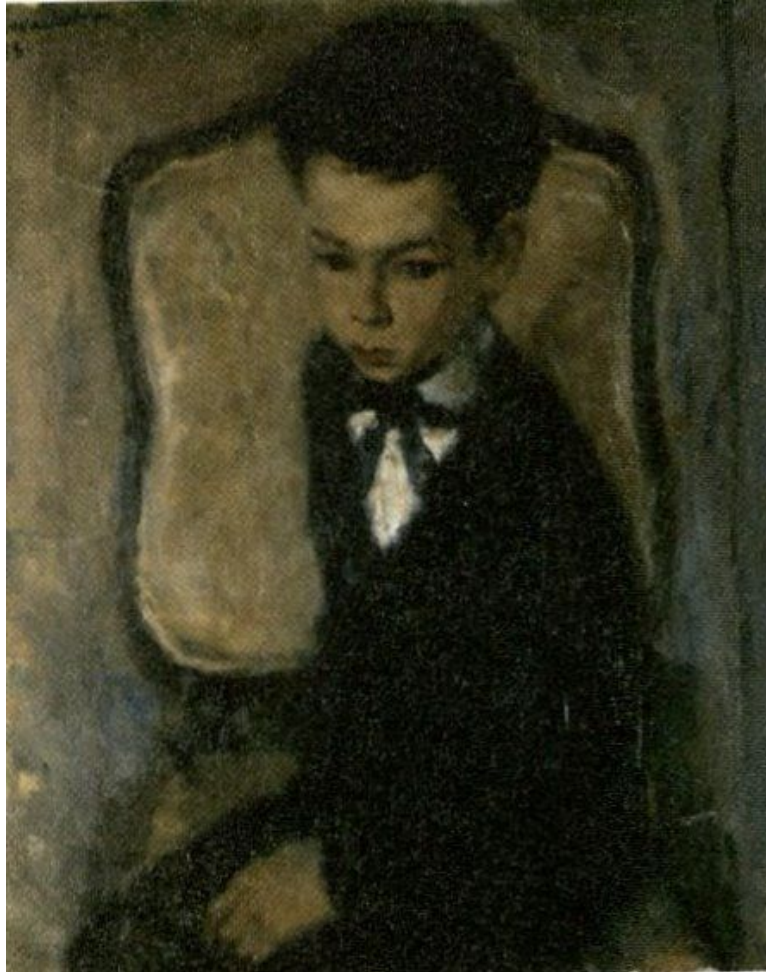


Figure 3. Christo (Javacheff), *Portrait of Dominik Höhn*, 1958, oil on canvas, Image reprinted from Mathias Koddenberg, *Christo and Jeanne-Claude: Early Works 1958-64*, Bönen, Germany: Kettler, 2009, 19.



Figure 4. Christo, *Wrapped Bottle*, 1958, bottle covered with fabric, rope, lacquer, and sand, 8 x 3 in. (20.3 x 7.6 cm), (<http://www.christojeanneclaude.net/projects/wrapped-cans-and-bottles#.U9RkMlx7UwE>).



Figure 5. Christo, *Wrapped Cans*, 1958, five cans (height: of each: 4  $\frac{3}{4}$  to 5  $\frac{1}{2}$ ”; diameter of each: 4  $\frac{1}{8}$ ”), rope, lacquer, paint, and sand, (<http://www.christojeanneclaude.net/projects/wrapped-cans-and-bottles#.U7HS31x7UwF>).

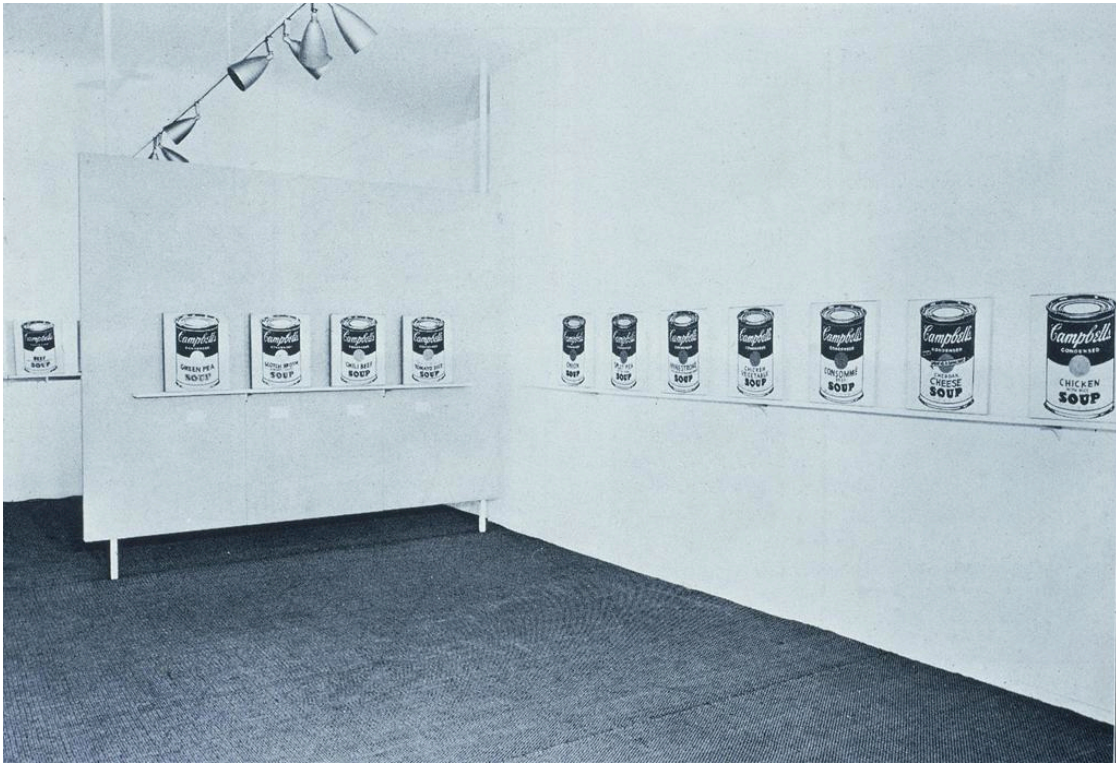


Figure 6. Installation view of Andy Warhol's *Campbell Soup Cans* at the Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles, 1962. Image found on Artstor.





Figure 7. Piero Manzoni, *Artist's Shit*, No. 31, 1961, metal drum and paper, 5 x 6 ½ cm, Grove Art Online, (<[http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T054109?q=piero+manzoni&search=quick&pos=1&\\_start=1#firsthit](http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T054109?q=piero+manzoni&search=quick&pos=1&_start=1#firsthit)>).



Figure 8. Christo, *Wrapped Oil Barrel*, 1958, fabric, steel wire, lacquer, paint, sand, and three barrels: one wrapped (25 ¼ x 14 ¼”), one red (23 ½ x 15 ¼”), one blue (23 ¼ x 15 ¼”), (<http://www.christojeanneclaude.net/projects/barrels#.U677LFx7UwE>).



Figure 9. Christo, *Package*, 1958, fabric, lacquer, and rope, 23 1/2 x 17 3/4 x 7 7/8" (60 x 45 x 20 cm), (< <http://www.christojeanneclaude.net/projects/packages>>).



Figure 10. Christo, *Package*, 1960, fabric, rope, and twine, (<http://www.lajollalight.com/2014/02/04/copley-bequest-brings-artist-christo-to-museum-of-contemporary-art-san-diego-in-la-jolla/>).



Figure 11. Daniel Spoerri, *Trap Picture*, 1968, mixed media assemblage, 71.5 x 70.5 x 41 cm, Image found on Artstor.



Figure 12. Christo, *Wrapped Cans and a Bottle*, 1958, fabric, lacquer, paint, rope, three cans (each  $4 \frac{5}{8}$  to  $5 \frac{1}{4}$ " tall with diameter of 4 to  $4 \frac{1}{4}$ " ), glass bottle with plastic cap and red pigment ( $5 \text{ and } \frac{3}{4} \times 2 \frac{1}{2}$ " ), (<http://christojeanneclaude.net/projects/wrapped-cans-and-bottles>).



Figure 13. Christo, *Inventory* (partial view of Christo's storage room in the basement at 4 avenue Raymond Poincaré in Paris), 1958-1960, wrapped and not wrapped cans, oil barrels, boxes, and crates (no longer in existence), (<http://www.christojeanneclaude.net/projects/barrels#.U9k-f1x7UwE>).



Figure 14. Christo, *Wrapped Oil Barrels*, 1958-59, fabric, steel wire, lacquer, paint, and eight barrels, four wrapped, two: 23 1/2 x 14 3/4" (60 x 37.5 cm), one: 24 3/4 x 14 1/4" (63 x 36 cm), one: 23 1/2 x 15 1/4" (59.5 x 38.5 cm), (<http://www.christojeanneclaude.net/projects/barrels#.U9k-f1x7UwE>).



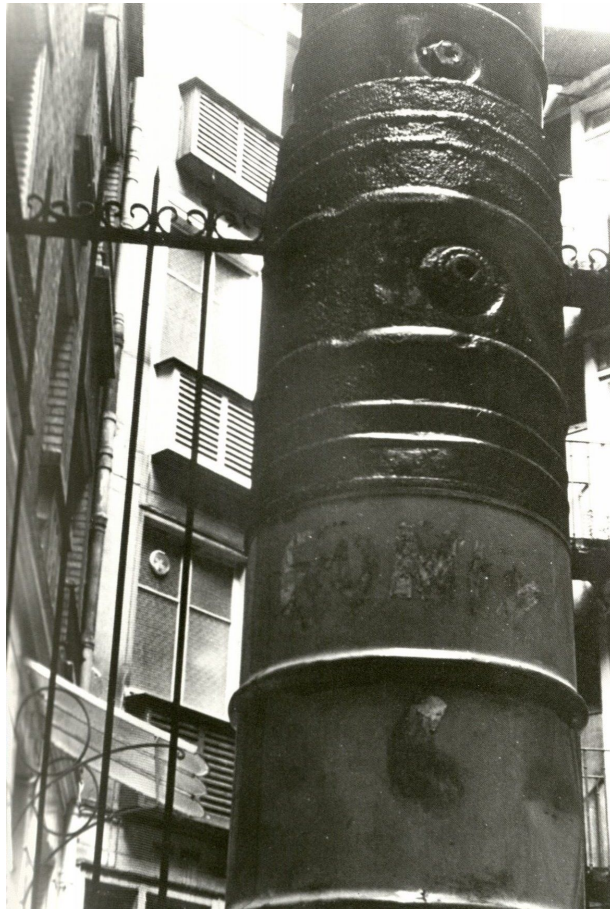


Figure 15. Christo, *Oil Barrels Column*, 1961, oil barrels, Image reprinted from Mathias Koddenberg, *Christo and Jeanne-Claude: Early Works 1958-64*, Bönen, Germany: Kettler 2009, 89.



Figure 16. Christo, *Oil Barrels Column*, 1961, oil barrels, (<http://www.christojeanne-claude.net/projects/barrels#.U6-B2Vx7UwE>).



Figure 17. Christo, *56 Oil Barrels*, 1966-67, painted oil barrels, 183 x 94 1/2 x 94 1/2", (<http://www.christojeanneclaude.net/projects/barrels#.U6-Uelx7UwE>).

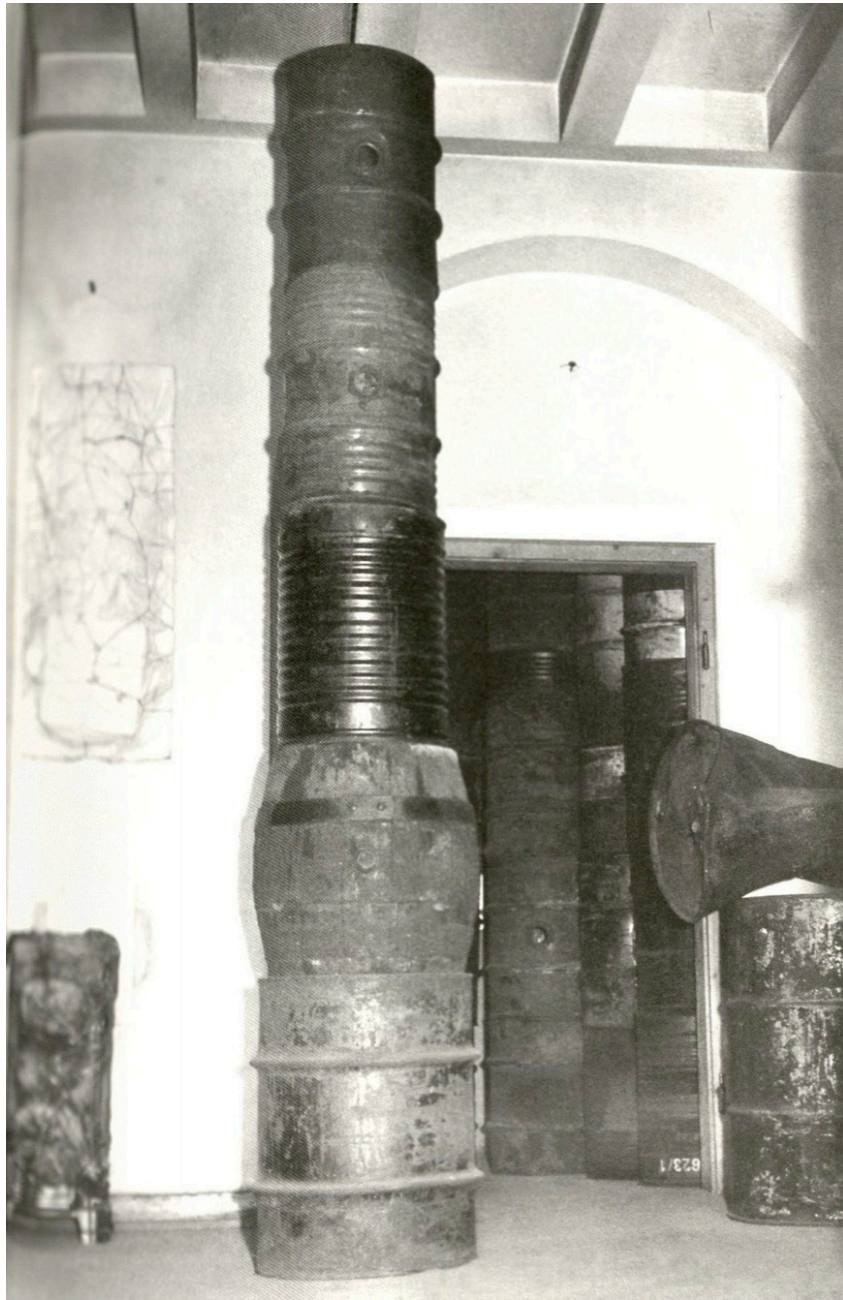


Figure 18. Partial view of Christo's exhibition at the Galerie Haro Lauhus in Cologne, Germany, 1961 (center, *Barrels Column*; left wall, *Package*; left floor, *Wrapped Stovetop*), Image reprinted from Mathias Koddenberg, *Christo and Jeanne-Claude: Early Works 1958-64*, Bönen, Germany: Kettler 2009, 109.

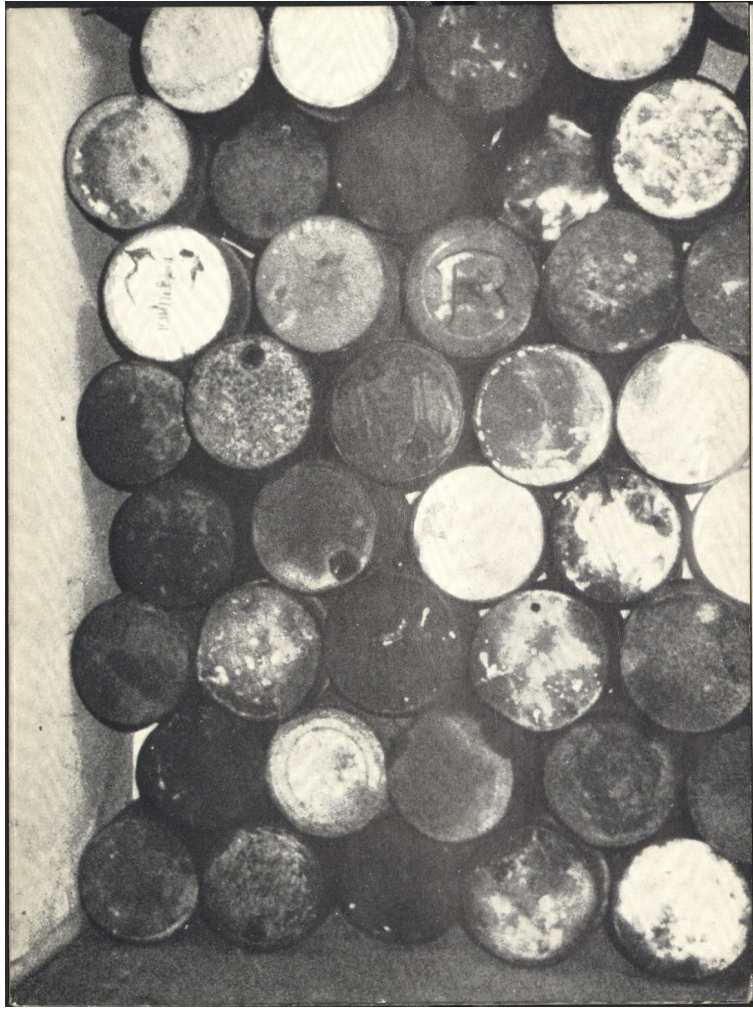


Figure 19. View of *Wall of Oil Barrels* from Christo's first one-man show at the Galerie Lauhus in Cologne, Germany in 1961, Image reprinted from Pierre Restany and Stefan Wewerka, *Exposition, Galerie Haro Lauhus*, (Cologne: Galerie Haro Lauhus, 1961), 3.



Figure 20. Photograph of *Yard* by Allan Kaprow, 1961. Image found on Artstor.



Figure 21. Christo and Jeanne-Claude, *Stacked Oil Barrels and Dockside Packages*, 1961, oil barrels, paper, tarpaulin, rope, each work is approximately 16.4 x 6.5 x 32.8 feet, (<http://www.christojeanneclaude.net/projects/stacked-oil-barrels-and-dockside-packages#.U6x6gVx7UwE>).

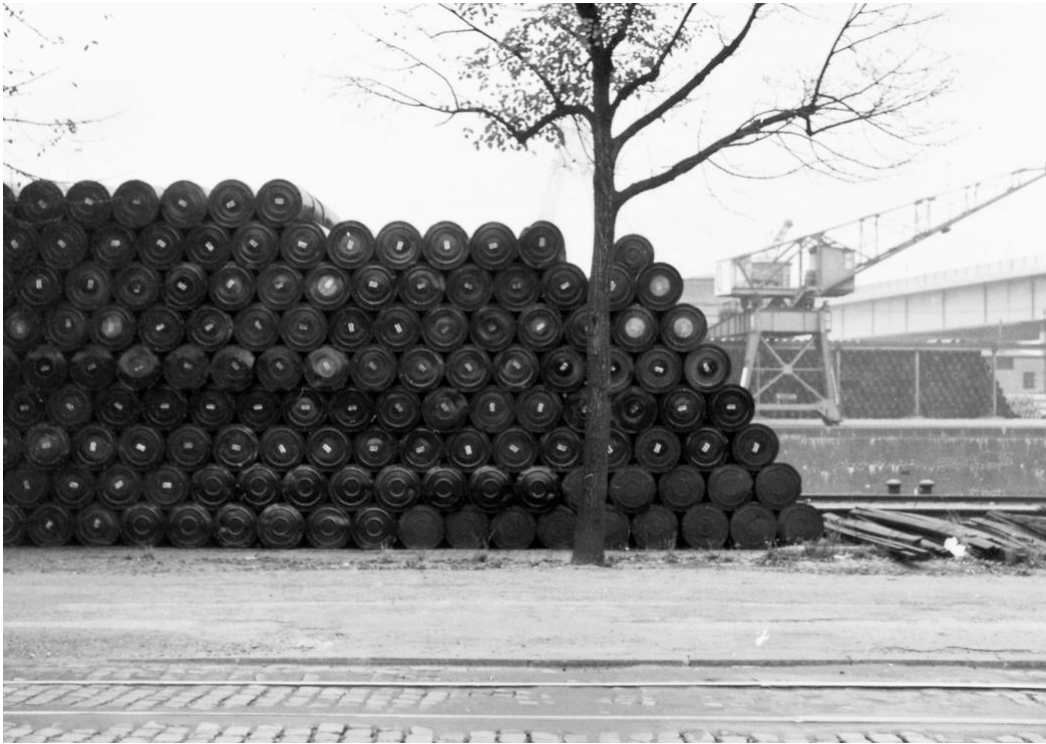


Figure 22. Christo and Jeanne-Claude, *Stacked Oil Barrels* 1961, oil barrels, approximately 16.4 x 6.5 x 32.8 feet, (<<http://www.christojeanneclaude.net/projects/stacked-oil-barrels-and-dockside-packages#.U6x6gVx7UwE>>).





Figure 23. Christo and Jeanne-Claude, *Wall of Oil Barrels- Iron Curtain*, 1961- 1962, eighty-nine oil barrels, 13.7 x 13.2 x 2.7 feet, (<http://www.christojeanneclaude.net/projects/wall-of-oil-barrels---the-iron-curtain#.U8slmFx7UwF>).

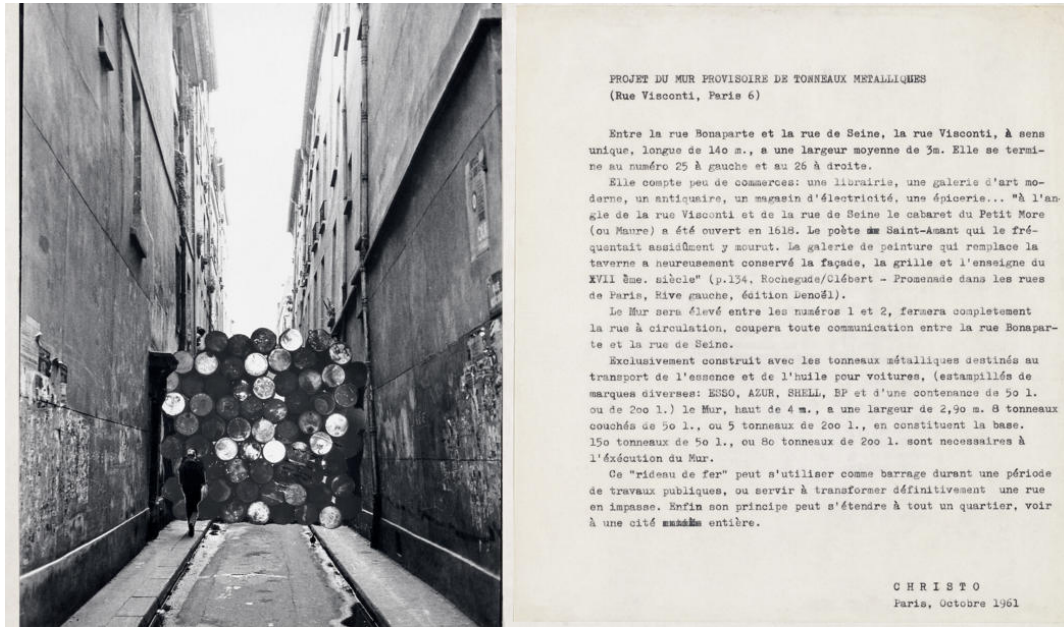


Figure 24. Christo, *Projet du mur provisoire de tonneaux métalliques (Rue Visconti, Paris 6)*, 1961, collage (two photographs and a type-written text), 9 1/2 x 16 in., (<http://www.christo-jeanneclaude.net/projects/wall-of-oil-barrels---the-iron-curtain?images=preparatory#.U7w7bVx7UwE>).



Figure 25. Invitation card for Christo's exhibition at the Galerie J and *Wall of Oil Barrels- The Iron Curtain*, 1962, Image reprinted from Jacob Baal-Teshuva, *Christo and Jeanne-Claude* (Cologne: Taschen, 2001), 15.



Figure 26. Christo, *Wall of Oil Barrels*, 1962, Image reproduced from *Christo and Jeanne-Claude: Early Works 1958-64* (Bönnen, Germany: Kettler, 2009), 118.

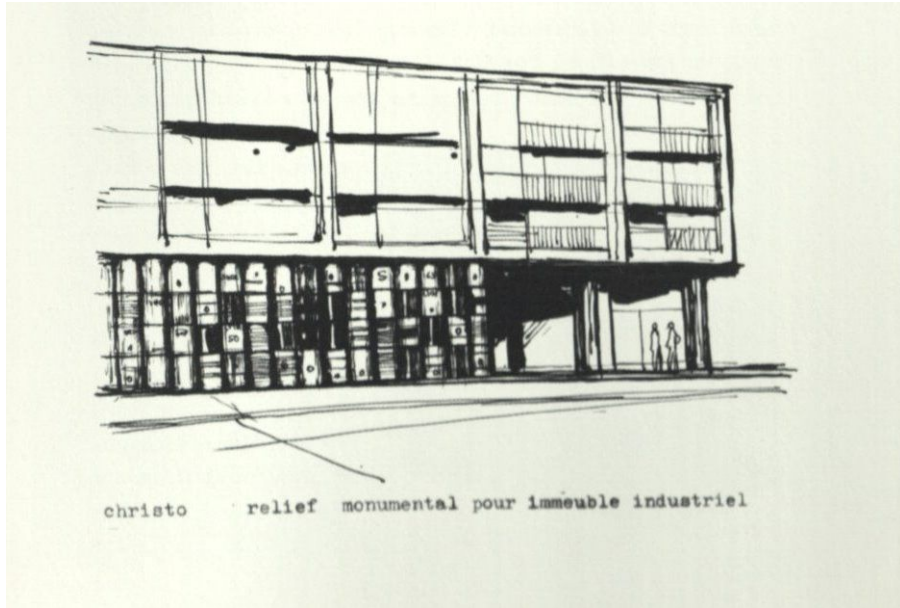


Figure 27. Christo, *Wall of Oil Barrels- Project for an Industrial Building*, ink on paper, 1961, 5.9 by 6.9 in., Image reprinted from *Christo and Jeanne-Claude: Early Works 1958-64*, (Bönen, Germany: Kettler, 2009), 129.

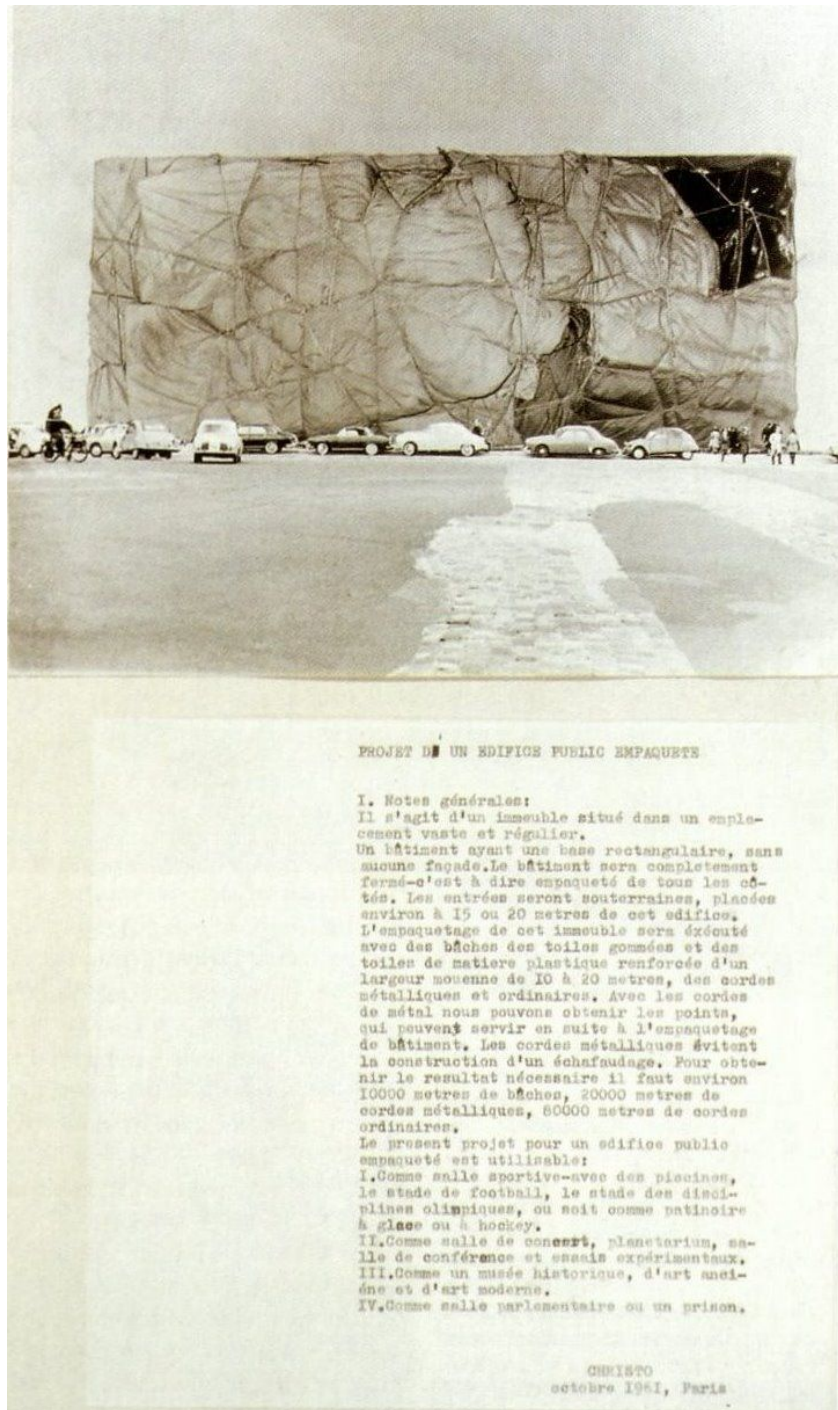


Figure 28. Christo, *Project for a Wrapped Public Building*, 1961, collage (two photographs and a type written text), 16.3 by 9.8 in., Image reprinted from *Christo and Jeanne-Claude* (Cologne: Taschen, 2001), 19.



Figure 29. Photograph showing West Germans watch as the Berlin Wall goes up, 1961, (reprinted from *The Berlin Wall: A World Divided, 1961-1989* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006).



Figure 30. Eugène Delacroix, *Liberty Leading the People*, 1830, oil on canvas, 8.5 x 10.6 ft., Image found on Artstor.





Figure 31. Photograph from November 5<sup>th</sup>, 1961 showing graffiti on the parapet of the Seine River near the Pont des Arts by anti-war activists that reads “Here is where Algerians are being drowned,” before it was cleaned off by the Prefecture of Police. Image reprinted from *France and the Algerian War (1954-62): Strategy, Operations and Diplomacy* (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2002), 232.

## APPENDIX B

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