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Passability and Impassability of Two Gates

Nogin Chung

This paper examines the relationship between spectators and two installation pieces-- Christo and Jeanne-Claude's Gates, Central Park, New York, 1979-2005 and Do Ho Suh's Gate of 2011- and complicated, if not contradictory, meanings that they convey. Both of the works create an environment for viewers to navigate either in New York City's Central Park or in the Seattle Art Museum's gallery, and to feel soft textures and airy movements of fabrics that the gates are made out of. The meaning of a gate plays an important role here, in terms of its visual function as well as its literal definition. And it is this concept of a gate that complicates the relationship with spectators.

A gate is a point of entry to a space enclosed by walls or fence. It prevents or controls the entry or exit of individuals in that space. Sometimes a gate would function purely decoratively yet it still suggests a borderline between outer space and inner space. However, Christo and Jeanne-Claude and Do Ho Suh provide in their installation pieces a different kind that is not about a point of entry, but about a threshold itself. Their gates seem to be passable but spectators who pass through the gates realize that they have never entered a space beyond the gates.

Installed in Central Park of New York City in February 2005, *The Gates* project was initiated by Bulgarian born Christo and Jeanne-Claude of France in 1979. The artist couple had had a desire to create a major art work in New York City which became "their" city for forty years. When they arrived in the city with their four-year-old son in 1964 as immigrants from Europe, they were impressed by the city's skyline which prompted Christo to do a project about New York City. They made their first attempt to create a public art work, which involved wrapping two buildings, but faced rejections from the building owners. They almost succeeded

with the Wrapped Museum of Modern Art project in 1968 but the police and insurance companies did not permit it. Wrapping the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Allied Chemical building in Times Square were not realized either. A decade later, Christo made the first concept drawing, titled *The Thousand Gates*, only to be turned down by Gordon Davis, the commissioner of parks and recreation for New York in 1981 and later approved for construction in 2003 by New York City's Mayor Bloomberg.¹ Contrary to his earlier plans of wrapping buildings, denying people's access, Christo and Jeanne-Claude's Gates is comprised of saffron-hued fabric panels suspended from the gates' horizontal spans that offer an invitation to a sensory world through their wavy, colorful movement. Spread around 23 miles of pathways, the gates provide a ground where spectators, joggers, and bike riders all mingle with the artwork. Many scholars and art critics like Jonathan Fineberg and Jan Castro have noted that the project is about the public, garnering local support through public hearings and placating political concerns through obtaining permits and being financially self-supportive. The core aspect of the Gates project would be invitational. Christo replied to a question at his talk to the CAA in 1982 that he finds a 230-page document written by New York's commissioner of parks and recreation rejecting the project very "inspiring" rather than "intimidating" since it "enriches the project and gives the project all kinds of angles of perception."²

The original inspiration for the title comes from Frederick Law Olmsted who designed Central Park with Calvert Vaux beginning 1858. The continuous stone wall enclosing the entire park periodically opens to create entrances to the green space; Olmsted called these openings

¹ John Russell, "Artist hoping to transform Central Park," *New York Times*, 6 October 1980; Grace Glueck, "Christo's plan for project in park starts fireworks," *New York Times*, 22 January 1981; Glueck, "City rejects Christo plan for Central Park 'gates,'" *New York Times*, 26 February 1981; Glueck, "2nd request planned for park 'gates,'" *New York Times*, 1 March 1981; Christo and Jeanne-Claude, *Three Works in Progress* (London: Annely Juda Fine Art, 1995); Laura Tansini, "Inside the Gates," *Art on Paper* 7, issue. 6 (2003): 40-45; Calvin Tomkins, "The gates to the city: how the Christos plan to transform Central Park," *New Yorker* 80, issue 6 (2004): 74-86.

² Jonathan Fineberg, *On the Way to the Gates* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 11.

gates. Christo recognizes that the two landscape architects "designed the park in a ceremonial and Victorian way. Surrounding the park is a stone wall, and the only way to go into the park is through openings called gates. Several gates even have names, like the Gate of the Girls, the Boys, the Artists, the Strangers." Christo states: "We are trying to invent a module to activate the most banal space between your feet and the first branches of the trees. You have a space between your feet and the branches hanging over the walkways or just near the walkways. We are trying to energize that space."³

Korean artist Do Ho Suh also energized a designated space, in this case, the Seattle Art Museum. Commissioned by the museum, Suh was asked to provide a contemporary response to the 2011 exhibition, "Luminous: The Art of Asia" that showcased the museum's Asian collection ranging from Chinese bronzes to Korean ceramics and to Japanese screen paintings. Intended to be installed as part of the exhibition, his Gate is, therefore, site-specific and event-specific like the Gates in Central Park. Collaborating with the exhibition curator Catherine Roche, Suh studied a range of historical Asian art works that were to be on view and incorporated some in his piece.

Placed in the middle of the room, the installation is comprised of a white rectangular polyester fabric piece suspended from the ceiling with its center forming a gate made to the precise measurements of one of the traditional structures at his family home in Seoul. The fabric panel, first, functions as a canvas as the animation is projected onto the panel, where elements from several paintings displayed in the exhibition are highlighted. The animation begins with a single calligraphic brushstroke, followed by another, featuring the act of painting stroke-by-stroke, capturing the dynamic gestural process, until the entire fabric is rendered completely

³ Jan Garden Castro, "A Matter of Passion: A Conversation with Christo and Jeanne-Claude" *Sculpture* 23, issue 3 (April 2004), 28-35.

black, filled with cacophony of crows, almost menacing. Taken from a pair of six panel screens from Edo period, the flock of crows is broken up by a white stroke which reverses the process. A plum branch from the eight-panel Korean painting *Plum Blossoms in Moonlight* takes shape. Butterflies and dragonflies from a pair of 17th century Japanese paintings flit across the screen and deer trip across the screen and over the threshold.⁴

The transition from dark to light is echoed in the time-lapse videography in the second segment where the sun sets and rises over the walls and part of the artist's family home. The house was built by his father Sae Ok Suh, who is also an artist, copying after a 19th century building, Yeon-kyung-dang, part of one of the palace complexes in Seoul. It was the building that King Jung-Jo of Cho-sun dynasty in the 19th century built in a style of typical upperclass's houses to experience lives of his people. (Thus, Do Ho Suh's house is a copy after a copy—simulacra!). Here, the fabric panel transforms into walls, and the gate that was made after the gate at the artist's house becomes the very gate at the artist's house. This illusion of space seemingly offers spectators an invitation to the artist's childhood memory.

These two installation pieces give a clear invitation to spectators to engage actively with their gates. They allow spectators to experience the visual by being exposed to interactions between natural wind and illuminating fabric in the bleak month of February, or integrations between traditional screen paintings and contemporary animation techniques, between representation of nature and illusion of actual architecture, or simply unity between nature and art. Since viewers are asked to pass the gates, there is no separation between the pictorial world of art and our mundane world of daily existence. The gates deliberately foster the interpenetration of art with "real life" and what they do literally becomes a part of OUR

⁴ Catherine Roche, "Gate," in *Do Ho Suh: Home Within Home* (Seoul: Leeum Museum, 2012), 194-199.

permanent reality. However, I also find in these installations elements of displacement and impassability, despite their invitational outlook.

While Christo and Jeanne-Claude's works follow Russian Constructivist Vladimir Tatlin's motto--"real materials in real space" as Christo has shown his interest in the idea of tying things in plastic or fabric with rope that created an continuum with the everyday world of the spectator, the very material fabric could mean ironically non-matter. According to the artist, "fabric is like a second skin; it is very related to human existence." As Christo migrated from Bulgaria to Czechoslovakia to Austria to France, and Jeanne-Claude moved from Morocco to France, and then together to the US, they seem to focus on nomadic aspects of human existence through their fabric material. Despite its materiality and gargantuan scales, their fabric symbolizes impermanence rather than permanence. None of their wrapping projects last eternally. All of their fabric works are meant to be uninstalled. Like Christo who highlighted instability and ephemerality of fabric material stating that "Fabric will move with the wind, the water, with the natural elements... The fabric is moving like breathing,"⁵ Do Ho Suh have extensively used fabric for his sculptural projects to deal with displacement by focusing on the material's functionality—that fabric can be folded and transported from one point to another. On his earlier installation piece, Seoul Home, New York Home project which is still continuing, Suh explains the reason behind using celadon-hued silk that is hand sewn to the precise measurements of his family home. Whenever he drifts around the world, he would always have this childhood home in his suitcase, folded. Whenever nostalgia hits him, he could always unfold the home and evoke his personal memories. The fabric is moving, in Do Ho Suh's case, with the artist himself.

Because their gates are constructed out of fabric, they are not permanent but rather transient. After February 27, 2005, all the materials that comprised the Gates in Central Park got

⁵ Fineberg, 53.

dismantled, recycled, and the park has retained its original appearance again. After the Luminous exhibition, Do Ho Suh's gate was folded and transported from Seattle to Seoul for another exhibition at the Leeum Museum. When the artists decided to create their gates out of fabric, they all desired to highlight the fact that despite the names' indication of stable architectural structures, the gates are fundamentally nomadic.

Because the gates are nomadic, they do not necessarily designate a point of entry to a space and thus do not prescribe a fixed place for spectators. Christo and Jeanne-Claude's gates are, unlike Olmstead and Vaux's original gates that are openings to the park, already placed inside of the park, marking not the borderlines between the park and the surrounding city but punctuating various passageways in the park. There is no designed space behind the gates for spectators to enter, leaving spectators only to encounter seemingly endless (or 75,000) gates. Do Ho Suh's gate does not lead spectators to the inside of the walls either since the thin fabric panel in the middle of the room features the same projection on both sides. Once a spectator passes through the gate, anticipating a different view on the other side of the gate, the spectator finds the other side of the gate is just identical. There is no space provided for a spectator to enter. The spectator is not allowed to enter the private realm of the artist's childhood home. His memory is protected from spectators' penetration by the impassable gate. The only option left for the spectator is to drift around, just like the nomadic artist.

In both cases, there is no inside or outside. There is no interior or exterior. Only there are markers, thresholds, liminal space. There is only the space in between and no other. The gates do not demarcate the boundaries of the Central Park since they are located in the park. The gate does not delimit the artist's childhood home since there is no physical space behind the illusionary walls.

It is the spectator's role to materialize the idea of liminality. The beholder's share here is not Gombrich's problem of image recognition. It is neither Michael Fried's absorption, a "total enthrallment to the point of self-forgetting," nor Alois Riegl's concept of attention, calling for reciprocal recognition.⁶ The two gates require spectators' corporeal presence and actual promenade: Spectators enter the gate as they just exit the gate, or vice versa, forever oscillating between entering and exiting. Spectators physically perform what Victor Turner would call the liminal phase of *rites de passage*. Do Ho Suh told an interviewer, "Like the moment of enlightenment in Zen Buddhism, passing through a gate takes only a split second, and then it's over. But so many things happen in such a short period of time. With this work, I wanted to extend that moment of passage, to delay it, if only for an instant."⁷ By elongating the moment of the liminal phase, spectators become nomads, like the three artists.

Beyond conventional binary divisions of public and private, art and nature, artist and beholder, permanence and impermanence, the two gates provide a threshold where spectators perform and materialize the idea of impassability. With their access denied to the space behind the gates, spectators are not marginalized but rather take a more important role of performers that highlights the complicated meanings of the gates.

⁶ Margaret Iversen, *Alois Riegl: Art History and Theory* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1993), 133.

⁷ Jason Cruz, "Korean artist creates lit multimedia piece using SAM's historical materials," *Asian Weekly* 30, no. 49 (December 2011).