

The Impact of Christo's Surrounded Islands

Cheryl A. Cullom

Miami, May 1983: Some said Christo was a con-artist instead of a real artist, trying to make money by duping the people of Miami. Others felt it was the best thing that could have happened to the city. Still others said they would have no opinion until they saw the installed work, but whatever the amount of controversy that was stirred up over the *Surrounded Islands Project*, Christo's concept did become a reality and it did give to Miami a boost of positive energy and a new outlook and understanding of twentieth century art (Figure 1, and cover illustration).

Christo has progressed from a student in a Socialist society to one of the most exciting, inventive and futuristic artists of modern time. His style is not easily cast into any certain movement or formal group. Christo's last completed project, the *Surrounded Islands* in Biscayne Bay of Miami, was certainly the most romantic and painterly of all his previous works. This project which surrounded eleven spoil islands with pink plastic falls into the same category of Christo's monumental works which include *The Valley Curtain* and *The Running Fence*. The aim of this paper is to report the impact that the *Surrounded Islands Project* had on South Florida through its extensive media coverage, political ramifications, aesthetic beauty, and as Christo said, "irrational artistic expression."¹

Christo has been completing monumental works since the late 1960s. His first work that involved wrapping water was *Oceanfront* which was completed on a beach coast in Newport, Rhode Island in 1974. He told Sally Yard in an interview that *Oceanfront* was like a giant sketch for an even larger project that included covering large masses of water. This dream was fully expressed in the *Surrounded Islands Project*.²

Christo's own artistic convictions have changed little over the past twenty-five years. He seems to border on major movements like conceptualism, Dadaism, and environmental art, but his personal style puts him in a category of his own. His ability over the years to work within the American and European bureaucratic and administrative systems and his relationship to the public and the media allow him to create the increasingly magnificent works of art that emerge from his genius. The *Surrounded Islands Project* is not only a testament to this growth, but it highlights the individual style of Christo.

The *Surrounded Islands Project* was not quickly executed although the actual work existed for only two weeks. The project began in October of 1980 with a phone call to Christo from Jan van der Marck, the former director of Metro-Dade County's Center for the Fine Arts. He tried to persuade Christo to come to Miami and create a project. Although it was not to happen, in these early negotiations the future project was envisioned as the premier event of the New World Festival of the Arts in June 1982. Robert Herman, the director of the Festival, had asked various

leaders of the arts community to coordinate some exciting cultural events in Miami. He knew that if Christo did a piece in Miami at that time the Festival would be able to draw an international crowd.³

Christo came to Miami on December 27, 1980, with his business manager and wife Jeanne-Claude, to see the city and its atmosphere. He was immediately drawn to Biscayne Bay and to the bridges that connect the mainland to Miami Beach. He returned to New York and worked for three months on a proposal. At a press conference on April 7, 1981, Christo revealed his newest concept to the public. He said that he chose the bay as his site because of its wonderful interaction with the people of South Florida. He likened the bay and its relationships to the community to that of New York's Central Park.⁴

Christo then went into action to see his concept become a physical reality. He hired two attorneys, a marine biologist, two ornithologists, a manatee expert, a marine engineer, four other engineers and a building contractor.⁵ Even with their help there was the seemingly unending task of proceeding through the bureaucratic process to obtain the needed permits, gathering scientific evidence to calm the environmentalists and opening the eyes and minds of the people of South Florida to this work of art.

The political process included a total of ten permits; some of them were simply permits to get permits. Christo and his lawyers filed a joint application with the Department of Environmental Regulation and the Army Corps of Engineers on July 7, 1981. They received an answer from the regulatory Chief of the Corps of Engineers and a letter of intent to issue a permit from the Department of Environmental Regulation. These permits were promised pending the consent of the state government for the use of the lands under their jurisdiction and Department of Natural Resources approval of the project and its components (making sure that everything was under the law).⁶ On June 29, 1982, Christo and his lawyers met with Florida Governor Bob Graham and his Cabinet to present their request for approval to use the state submerged lands around the islands for an allotted time span. At this meeting the environmental safety of the project was stressed along with the financing and insurance provided by Christo. His lawyer pointed out that it is Christo's policy not to accept any volunteer workers, government grants or donations of materials or money. All of the money spent is financed by Christo, who derives income from the sale of his drawings, paintings and photographic collages of the project before its unfurling.⁷ (Figure 2) The financial plan, executed by his wife, is one of the very interesting aspects of Christo's work. As a continuing process, each project finances itself and future works. This plan was one of the most difficult ideas for people of Miami to understand and even to this day many still think that Christo made a financial profit from the

Islands. The Governor and his Cabinet voted favorably on the motion stressing the temporary and artistic nature of the work and recommended to the Division of State Lands to consent to the project.

From this point Christo and his entourage traveled to Miami for a second public hearing before the Dade County Commissioners and the Mayor on July 20, 1982, and they subsequently passed a resolution in favor of Christo's use of the lands. This was a two-part hearing however. In the morning the Commissioners voted down the project because an opponent brought up a preliminary report from the Department of Environmental Regulation showing staff concern over possible environmental damage from the installation. Christo's lawyers immediately called Tallahassee for verification and it was explained that this report was out-of-date and was now modified to support Christo. The donation of 1,000 signed posters that Christo promised over lunch to Commissioner Harry Ruvin to benefit the preservation of Biscayne Bay also seemed to encourage the Commissioners to vote favorably that afternoon.⁸

On July 21, 1982, Christo and his lawyers appeared before the Department of Environmental Regulation for a third public hearing to enable the public to vote its concerns. There was no major opposition and Christo was allotted the time span of March 1 to June 1, 1983, within which he could choose two weeks to execute his project. After the public hearing with the Department of Environmental Regulation, Christo met the Commissioners and Mayors of the City of Miami, the Village of Miami Shores, and the City of North Miami to obtain permission to use the islands within these various municipalities—all unanimously gave him their consent.

With all the necessary permits in hand the final processing of the application to the Army Corps of Engineers could begin. On November 10, 1982, one year and nine months after starting the bureaucratic process, the Army Corps of Engineers sent the notice of consent and authorization to Christo. The *Surrounded Islands Project* had cleared the legal obstacles and could now become a reality. This entire process and documentation is an integral part of Christo's art and expresses his desire to have the public and the government involved in the creation and criticism of his works. This feeling for social involvement seems to be carried over from his days as a student artist in Bulgaria, where the government was in total control of the art system. Large groups of artists were organized with the aesthetic assignment to enhance the farmland and rural areas on either side of the Orient Express.⁹ Presently Christo creates work which requires government involvement serving both as an ironic continuity and almost a role reversal of the system of his youth. These papers and procedure compose the "software" stage of his projects and bring not only the interaction of his art with the people of the community, but more importantly, help him to realize completely his project in "hardware" form.¹⁰

The *Surrounded Islands Project* was completed with 6.4 million square feet of pink polypropylene which was sewn and cut to exact specifications of length, width, and curvature.¹¹ For increased buoyancy each section had a foam-like flotation strip sewn into one of its ends. Anchors were driven into the bay floor approximately 250 feet from the perimeter of the shore. The material radiated about 200 feet away from the shore and was attached to the island by anchors placed near the base of the vegetation. The outer

edge of the fabric was attached to a 12' octagonal boom which was then connected by a cable to the anchors underwater. The booms on the edge of the fabric also had inserted spruce strips for greater buoyancy and navigational lights to inform boaters at night of the location of the cables and the fabric.

The project was completed on May 7th, seven days after work began. There were no environmental mishaps during the project and the Department of Environmental Regulation stated in an article in 1984 that the islands benefited from Christo's work because the workers cleaned up all the debris that had accumulated over the years.¹²

Aesthetically this piece was a definite success. The *Islands* were as Christo said, "the most painterly work I have ever done" and he described them as "his water-lilies."¹³ (Figure 3) It was one of Christo's most colorful works and to many the most beautiful. The way the color changed from a vibrant, hot pink to a soft coral throughout the day was a glorious feature. The defraction of light caused by the water's reaction with the fabric captured and enhanced the tropical beauty of Miami and its blue-green waters. Christo said he chose the color pink because it expressed in his mind the Latin influence in Miami.¹⁴ The exotic color also exemplifies the vivid flowers of South Florida such as the bougainvillea and the hibiscus. Christo knew that pink was an artificial color, one that would not blend in with the natural colors of blue and green; the pink's artificiality lent itself to Miami's Art Deco tendencies in color and style and even to the garish pink plastic flamingos. Pink was the perfect color because it embodied multiple aspects of Miami's sub-tropical personality.

The *Islands* themselves took on a surrealistic, other-worldly effect, yet at the same time, this unnatural addition to the land masses enhanced the environment, and it looked as if the circumscribing panels had always been a part of the Biscayne Bay. There was an exciting harmony that grew among the islands, the water and the pink fabric. Not only did the elements blend, but because of the planar composition of the piece (Christo called it his giant canvas) the image was repeated and continued in the flatness of the landscape of South Florida. The panels extending from the islands accentuated the horizontal surface of the land surrounding Miami and were pleasing contrasts to the city's skyline. This gave the piece a repetitive rhythm, a pulse radiating from the center of each island (Figures 4 and 5).

But what did the residents of Miami think of all of this? Public opinion seemed to have a love-hate relationship with the *Surrounded Islands*. At first nobody could believe, except for a few who knew of Christo's works, that some crazy artist was going to place "pink tutus" around the islands in the bay.¹⁵ The environmentalists stood up to be counted as the major opponents of the *Islands*. They felt that the aquatic ecosystem was too fragile to withstand two weeks of plastic covering. The humanists also took a stance against Christo; they wanted him to spend the 3.5 million dollars on a more worthy social cause. Christo, however, unflinchingly crusaded for his "totally poetic gesture" and its escape from the rational and practical.¹⁶

One could make a long list about what the *Surrounded Islands* gave to Miami. The tourist business was increased with visitors coming from places as far away as Japan. Christo's efforts also enhanced the economy of Miami by providing employment for approximately 400 people, and there was revenue from helicopter and boat rides and

souvenirs as well. The increased visibility that Miami received was evident in Christo's several appearances on national television programs as well as national and international press and magazines.

The people I have interviewed, from artists to bankers, have unanimously given the same response to the question concerning the impact of the island project. Christo's work gave the city of Miami a positive lift and to the local communities an exciting sense of pride that this phenomena was taking place in their city. National and international attention was turned away from Miami's racial, crime and drug problems and focused entirely on the beauty of the area. Miami was also seen as a young and growing cultural center. Even in the long run the *Surrounded Islands Project* will forever hold Miami's beauty in its photographs, films, and books. The local citizens saw and will continue to see

their city in a different light. The project gave them an opportunity to become involved with a living work of art, and the unique experience of discussing and forming opinions on the definitions of modern art. Most of the Miamians who were able to see the *Islands* in person were converted from skeptics to believers in the beauty and power of Christo's work.

As an artist who works in the realm of contemporary man's acceptance of the media, Christo's extravagant projects make him popular as well as controversial. His *Surrounded Island Project* will not only last in photographs and films, but it still exists today in the minds of the people of Miami, and will continue to exist in future generations. Even after the pink fabric was buried,¹⁷ the memories of the brilliant color remain.

Florida State University

- 1 Joe Starita, "Christo Surrounded Miami with Pink Limelight," *The Miami Herald* 18 May 1983: 3CH.
- 2 Sally Yard, *Christo: Oceanfront* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1975) 23.
- 3 Robert Herman, personal interview, 29 January 1985. Antonio Miralda was chosen to be the leading artist of the New World Festival of 1982 because Christo's negotiations with the local and state governments took longer than expected.
- 4 Governor Robert Graham and Cabinet Members, *The Florida Cabinet Transcripts* (Tallahassee: Florida Department of State, 29 June 1982) 28.
- 5 Beth Dunlop, "Christo's Wrapped Islands Will Put Bay in the Pink," *The Miami Herald* 2 January 1983: 11M.
- 6 All knowledge of bureaucratic procedure is from the documents and permits themselves: State of Florida Department of Environmental Regulation and the United States of America Army Corps of Engineers, joint application, 7 July 1981; State of Florida Department of Environmental Regulation, letter of intent to issue a permit, no. 13-45273, 14 June 1982; City of North Miami, letter of approval, 22 June 1982; Dade County Commission, Resolution #R-1011-82, 20 July 1982; City of Miami Commission, Resolution #82-670, 22 July 1982; Village of Miami Shores, Village Council Minutes, 3 August 1982; State of Florida Department of Natural Resources, letter of approval, 24 August 1982; Dade County Department of Environmental Resources Management, Water Management Division, Agreement for Wetland Conservation, no. cc 408, 1982; State of Florida Department of Environmental Regulation, permit no. 13-45273, 27 August 1982; United States of America Army Corps of Engineers, permit no. 81-1103, 10 November 1982.
- 7 *Transcripts* 27-35. Refer also to ATHANOR cover and Figure 2 for examples of artworks utilized in the procedure.
- 8 Beth Dunlop, "Artist Finally Wraps Up Pink Islands OK," *The Miami Herald* 21 July 1982: 1D.
- 9 Jan van der Marck, "Christo: The Making of an Artist," *Christo: Collection on Loan from the Rothschild Bank AG, Zurich*, exhibition catalogue (La Jolla: La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, 21 November 1981-3 January 1982) 53-54.
- 10 Paula Harper, "Island Fever," *The Miami News* 3 May 1983: 1B.
- 11 Christo, *Surrounded Islands, Project for Biscayne Bay, Greater Miami, Florida*. (New York: press release, 1983).
- 12 Lisbet Nilson, "Christo's Blossoms in the Bay," *Art News* 83 (1984): 58.
- 13 Leslie Bennetts, "Christo Wraps 11 Isles in Pink Skirts," *The New York Times* 28 December 1982: 24.
- 14 "Environmentalists See Pink in New Light, Praise Christo," *The Tallahassee Democrat* 14 September 1984: 8C.
- 15 Bill Gjebre and Marilyn Moore, "Christo Gets State OK for Splash of Pink in Bay," *The Miami News* 30 June 1982: 1A.
- 16 Cathy Lee Grossman, "Shocking Pink: Christo Makes Art Waves on the Bay," *The Miami Herald* 1 May 1983: 2L.
- 17 The final resting place of the panels was an ecologically sound land-fill.



Figure 1, Christo, *Surrounded Islands Project for Biscayne Bay*, May 1983, Miami, Florida. Courtesy of John Hackling.

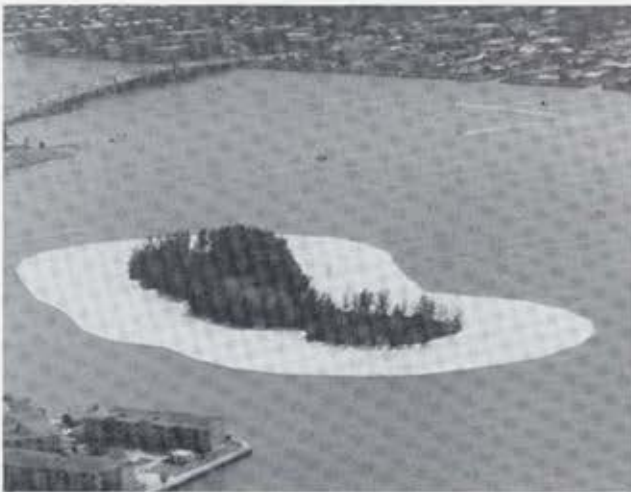


Figure 3, Christo, *Surrounded Islands Project for Biscayne Bay*, May 1983, Miami, Florida. Courtesy of John Hackling.



Figure 4, Christo, *Surrounded Islands Project for Biscayne Bay*, May 1983, Miami, Florida. Courtesy of John Hackling.

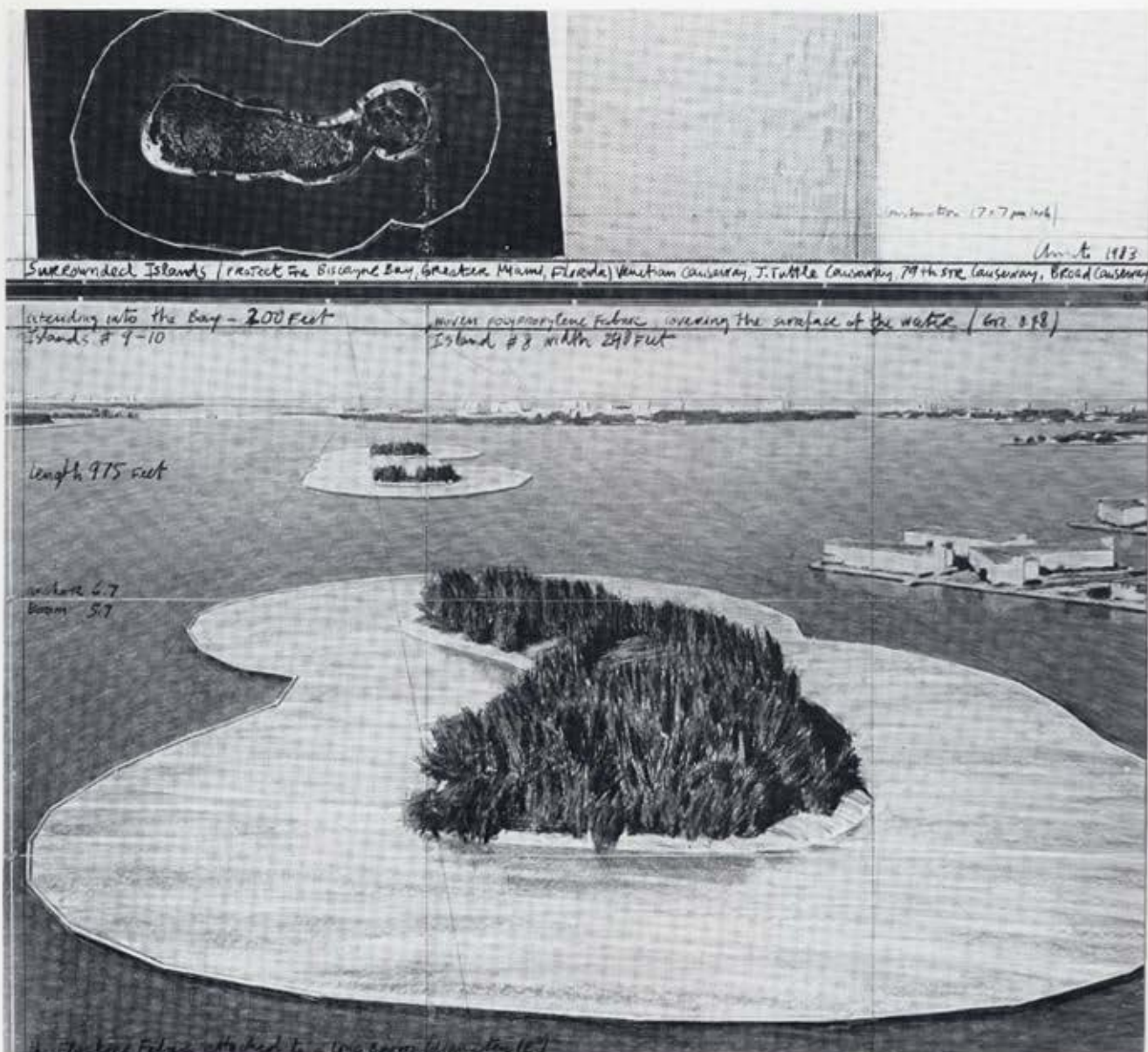


Figure 2, Christo, 1983, *Surrounded Islands*, Project for Biscayne Bay, Greater Miami, Florida, drawing in two parts: 15 × 65" and 42 × 65" (38 × 165 cm and 106.6 cm × 165 cm); pencil, charcoal, pastel, crayon, enamel paint, fabric sample and aerial photograph (Ref. #12). Copyright: Christo/C.V.J. Corp., 1982. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: eva-inkeri.



Figure 5, Christo, *Surrounded Islands* Project for Biscayne Bay, May 1983, Miami, Florida. Courtesy of John Hackling.