Christo’s *Gates* and Gilo’s Wall

W. J. T. Mitchell

Of all the media and genres of imagery, landscape is the one that makes the constitutive blindness and invisibility of the visual process most evident. We notice this even in the most common injunction in the presence of a landscape prospect: “look at the view.” What does that mean? How can one “look at a view”? One looks at objects, figures, faces, bodies, and signs. Our visual system learns to pick out things that have names: this tree, that house, those fence posts. So what are we looking at when we look at the view? Everything and nothing. The view is the totality of the objects in our visual field, the relations among them, the entire system or syntax that underlies the language of vision. Looking at the view is like looking at the grammar of a sentence, while forgetting what it is saying. Or it is like looking at looking, a process that invariably reveals to us the paradoxical invisibility of vision itself. We will never quite see what vision is, no matter how precisely we may describe or depict it.

The paradoxical character of seeing landscape, looking at the view, is materialized for us most vividly in the phenomena of walls and gates, the things we build around ourselves to obstruct the view, and the holes we punch in those obstructions to allow ourselves to pass through, visually and bodily. The wall and the gate (or the window, of course) are what give the fort-da game of now you see it, now you don’t, or peekaboo, a physical field of play. They are the architectural manifestations of the scopic drive as a push-and-pull between what geographer Jay Appleton calls refuge and prospect, the impulse to see and show, on the one hand, and to conceal and hide, on the other.¹

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Consider two recent works of landscape art that dramatize this paradoxical process: Gilo’s wall in Jerusalem and Christo’s *Gates* in New York City’s Central Park. Gilo’s wall was built on a hillside at the outset of the second Palestinian intifada in 2000 to protect the Israeli settlement of Gilo in East Jerusalem from snipers in Beit Jalla, the neighboring Christian Palestinian village on the hillside facing it (figs. 1 and 2). When the wall proved both ineffectual and ugly, blocking the highly prized “oriental landscape” of Beit Jalla, the settlers began defacing it with hostile graffiti. In response, the municipal authorities decided to “soften” the wall by commissioning an “artistic replica of the disappearing view.” A group of recently arrived Russian immigrant artists were hired to paint the wall because it was realized that most established Israeli artists would have refused the commission as a blatantly ideological exercise in kitsch beautification. The rise of walls between Israelis and Palestinians has generally been greeted with critical and deconstructive responses by artists on both sides of the ever-shifting “border” between Israel and Palestine. Artists without Walls, a group of Israeli and Palestinian artists, produced an intervention in April 2005 involving “real-time video projections on both sides of the security wall” at Abu Dis, in which “each side of the wall had the view on the other side projected on it.” This group has also performed an action known as the “Wall of Tears,” during which notes with wishes for peace were inserted into the cracks, a reminder of the ritual practice at the Western or Wailing Wall in Jerusalem.

The Russian artists, impoverished and grateful for the commission, brought with them what they describe as a “sad” style of painting, derived from socialist realism, which they regard as a relic of “the Soviet system . . . of living with lies.” In interviews they expressed considerable ambivalence about the project; the “hiding” of the landscape with a simulacrum struck them as “morally wrong,” yet somehow “they also felt that they were helping
FIGURE 1. Wall at Gilo, close-up. Photo: W. J. T. Mitchell.

FIGURE 2. Wall at Gilo, overview. Photo: W. J. T. Mitchell.
the Gilo residents morally.” This ambivalence has its aesthetic component as well, in the sense that the obviously kitsch character of the painted landscape is somehow overcome in the moment of critical viewing that looks askance at the wall and subjects it to a reframing.

When viewed from above and the side, Gilo’s wall reveals itself as a seam or scar in the landscape, a border that simultaneously divides a lived, social space and overcomes that division by veiling it with an illusion. The wall is precisely an erection of a blind spot in the landscape, but a blind spot (unlike the larger security wall that is being built to protect Israel from the Palestinians) that conceals itself with a veil of illusory transparency and then reveals itself when one moves to the edge of the veil, in the vulnerable open space between the Gilo settlement and Beit Jalla. From this angle one sees immediately the contrast between the real and the depicted Palestinian village. The real village is populous, covering the adjacent hillside with housing. The painted village is a picturesque Arabian pastoral, a depopulated landscape. It shows with remarkable candor the long-standing wish of many Israelis to simply “disappear” the Palestinians along with the signs of their habitation. But not, it should be noted, to disappear them completely. The mosques remain as reminders, a comforting acknowledgment of what and who will have vanished, a kind of melancholy recognition of disappearance that is the central aesthetic emotion of the romantic picturesque.

This is in sharp contrast to the other kind of candor, the destruction wrought by the Israeli security wall (fig. 3), which extends and extrudes the brutal architecture of the settlements for hundreds of miles, slashing into the West Bank, cutting off Palestinian farmers from their fields, splitting families and friends with the naked simplicity that reminds us of the Berlin Wall and (even more ominously) the wall around the Warsaw ghetto. The euphemistically named fence (made of concrete slabs approximately twenty-five feet high) will, when completed, take up much more space in the tiny land of Israel/Palestine than the entire city of Jerusalem. This “separation barrier” comes, of course, with numerous gates, and the West Bank more generally has become a land of (usually blocked) gateways. In January 2004, according to the U.N. Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), there were 59 permanent Israeli checkpoints in the West Bank, 10 partial checkpoints, 479 earth mounds, 75 trenches, 100 roadblocks, and 40 road gates, all designed to disrupt or halt the circulation of Palestinian traffic.6

7. I regard the Warsaw ghetto wall as more sinister than the Berlin Wall because the latter was merely political. The walls currently being erected in Israel are racial, a symptom of ethnic cleansing in the landscape.
The wall is routinely declared to be merely a temporary measure, but it is also widely suspected of being the key tactic in a permanent annexation of Palestinian land that will make the emergence of a viable Palestinian state in a contiguous, sovereign territory an ecosociological impossibility. Which is worse, the Gilo wall that disappears itself at the same time as the Palestinians, securing an illusion of peaceful neighborliness in the landscape, or the brutal frankness of the security wall? The answer, as Slavoj Žižek might put it, is that both are worse, the one for its deceptiveness, the other for its frankness. But, for me, Gilo’s wall takes the prize for the most provocative piece of Israeli landscape art in recent years because it opens a space for critical reflection, an ambivalent zone of concealment and revelation. In a peculiar and unexpected way, this recycling of socialist realism and the picturesque turned out to be an inspiration for the cooperative work of the Palestinian and Israeli Artists Without Walls in their effort to deploy real-time hyperrealism to disappear the security wall from both sides.

Christo’s Gates invite an equally complex and elusive meditation on the dialectics of landscape and vision and the critical potential of kitsch (fig. 4). The Gates drew tourists from around the world, some drawn no doubt by the fame of Christo’s previous landscape installations and the very ephem-
erality of the construction. The Gates, unlike the Israeli security walls, were erected with a strict time limit. They literalized by temporalizing the fort-da game of appearance and disappearance in the landscape. But the initial reaction to the Gates seems to have been one mainly of puzzlement and disappointment. I confess that my own reaction was one of being underwhelmed, feeling that I did not know what to look at or what to make of it. Of course the Gates were pretty. The saffron fabric, when fluttering in the wind, produced a kind of ornamental fringe, adding a surplus enjoyment to what is arguably the single most famous artificial landscape garden in the world. But Central Park was already beautiful. What did the Gates add to it? What could they possibly be saying to us that the park itself had not already said?

Many of the reactions to the Gates were symptomatic of this kind of frustrating elusiveness, the refusal of the Gates to say anything, or even to show anything very surprising. They marked out the winding paths, of course,

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but we already knew that the paths of the park are sinuous, variable in width, snaking picturesquely over the hills and through the woods and across the fields. Did we need Christo to show or tell us this? This elusiveness may have been the reason there were so many comparisons of the Gates to other things, comparisons that often seemed disrespectful. The Gates were seen as giant croquet wickets or as a kind of walk-through equivalent of the curtained tunnels of a car wash. The color of the saffron fabric was objected to as unfortunately similar to the orange fabric that adorns the temporary fences of construction sites. And the larger purpose of the Gates was disturbingly vague, perhaps even vacuous. The Gates seemed to suffer in contrast to Christo’s Wrapped Reichstag, which took a deeply troubled historical monument, the central symbol of Germany’s traumatic role in the twentieth century, and seemed to transfigure it, releasing it from the spell of nationalism and resurgent fascism, delivering it as a kind of gift to be unwrapped for a new stage in German history.

But what message did the Gates have for us? To me, the kind of harmlessness and innocence, even the prettiness, of the Gates, seemed at first glance to render them trivial, a passing sensation whose primary virtue was its ephemerality. It was especially disturbing to me that Central Park, a purportedly public space, had only a few months earlier been declared off limits by the City of New York for a massive political demonstration against the Republican Party during its August 2004 convention. The reason given was the danger of damage to the Great Lawn, which would have been trampled and perhaps torn up by the large crowd if the demonstration had been accompanied by rain. So, I said to myself, it is okay to take over the entirety of Central Park for a harmless art project, a bit of innocuous urban beautification. But it is not okay to use Central Park as a gathering place for political demonstrations. Like many others, I thought that the time for the Gates was past, that it would have made sense when Christo initially proposed it, back in 1979, when it would have helped to transfigure what had become a dangerous jungle, a hideout for muggers and murderers, into a liberated and pacified public space.

But the dialectics of landscape and vision are not always revealed to us at first glance. Sights and sites are memory places that may continue to work on us long after our first—in this case, our only—glimpse of them. And in fact I think that Christo’s Gates will continue to resonate for some time to come, if only because their very elusiveness and vagueness will elicit a continued filling in by the imagination, an interpolation of meaning, and a long incubation of images in memory and the photographic record. Part of this filling in will be prompted, I suspect, by the formal character of the Gates themselves, which mirrors the formal structure of the entire park in its
combination of a rigid, geometrical, rectangular frame with a fluctuating, undulating interior (fig. 5). This formal mirroring of the whole in the part is what simultaneously arrests and entices the beholder, in a single moment urging the walker to stop at each gate, to use it as a frame for a new vista, to pause and reach up to the saffron veil just high enough for an adult to reach on tip-toe, and finally propelling him onward to stride through each gate. Like those minimalists corridors to nowhere designed by Robert Morris in the sixties, the Gates lure us onward and stop us in our tracks at one and the same time (fig. 6). They create open-air corridors that end, not in an inaccessible cul-de-sac (as with Morris), but in the open, in a state of indeterminacy, looking at the view—at everything and nothing at the same time. The uncertainty about how to react is, I think, one of the things that initially struck beholders as a kind of vagueness and pointlessness, as if the park were presenting us with a whole new set of playground equipment designed for a game we have not yet learned how to play.

But the game is only beginning, as Christo’s work (often dismissed and misunderstood before) has demonstrated time and time again. The retrospective is, in Christo’s work, just as important as the immediate prospect, and in fact the ephemeral, temporary prospect is only constructed as a kind of photo op for an open—in principle, endless—series of retrospective takes. We have to ask ourselves what the Gates made visible that was previously hidden from view. What appeared that could not have been seen without them?

I ask these questions, not because I think I have all the answers, but in order to provoke exactly the sort of retrospective assessment that seems constitutive of landscape prospects as such. Here are a few of my own answers, a list that should be seen as necessarily incomplete:

1. The formal dialectic of rectangularity and sinuosity (which may be dismissed as all too obvious) is a provocative for deeper reflection on this feature as a key to the specific character of Central Park (not only its ground plan but its internal ground-level views, with the interplay between foliage and architecture, irregular interior and regular, vertical framing). It also activates an awareness of Central Park’s embeddedness in a deep tradition of landscape aesthetics that is defined by precisely this alternation between the stable structure and the moving, dynamic appearance, between artificiality and naturalness, between design and control and unbounded randomness. This is a tradition that transcends period and national styles of landscape architecture, evoking the neoclassicism of Alexander Pope, whose "Windsor Forest” is predicated on a concordia discors of light and shadow, form and flux:
Here hills and vales, the woodland and the plain
Here earth and water seem to strive again
Not Chaos-like, together crushed and bruised,
But, as the world, harmoniously confused.\(^\text{10}\)

It also reminds us of Robert Smithson’s analysis of picturesque Central Park as a dialectical landscape that brings geological and paleontological forces into conjunction with the inscribed surfaces of modern civilization.\(^\text{11}\)

Christo’s *Gates* make the form of the landscape stand up on two legs, pictorializing it like the empty frame of a Magritte painting in the midst of the view, or a Morris Louis abstraction, veiling it in translucent waves of color and then depictorializing it by inviting us to walk through the frame again and again.

2. One of the original features planned for Central Park (rejected ultimately by Frederick Law Olmsted) was a set of entrance gates that would have been monumental, heavily ornamented, and closed to the public at

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night (Olmsted recognized that the park would turn into a wilderness when the sun went down, and the gates were originally designed as a public safety measure). The notion of democratic openness prevailed, however; as Olmsted put it, “how fine it would be to have no gates.” Christo’s *Gates* are a reminder of this piece of the deep history of the park. They evoke the notion of the gate as a barrier to passage, but as an open invitation to it at the same time. The translucence of the saffron curtains is the coloristic analogue to this double message. Rather than an illusion of transparency (compare the trompe l’oeil on the Gilo wall), translucence allows the passage of sunlight and shadow through a moving surface, an effect that almost every visitor registered as a source of delight, especially when a burst of sunlight would illuminate the fluttering fabric with the tracery of bare winter branches from the trees overhead. Christo reminds us that curtains are not just there for privacy; they are part-objects that simultaneously occlude and illuminate, foregrounding the mediation of visual experience as such. Their resemblance to the orange warning fabric around a temporary construction site is, in this light, not a blemish but a deeply suggestive feature.

The long temporal process (1979–2005) of bringing this work to fruition rendered at least partly visible what the park is as a civic, political, and economic institution. Central Park is a public space, but what exactly does that mean? The coincidence of Christo’s aesthetic appropriation of the entire park with the forbidding of public appropriation of any part of it had the happy effect of deconstructing any simple illusion about the control of this space. While Central Park was originally designed as a free gift to the public, it was also an incredibly complex political institution and was largely designed to provide a magnificent front yard for the newly minted millionaires of Knickerbocker-era New York who rapidly bought up all the surrounding real estate. An Irish shantytown and a well-established African American village (complete with a church) had to be forcibly removed by the police. Like the Palestinian landscape, like all of North America, Central Park is the site of disappeared villages and the ghosts of vanished races. One thing the *Gates* make hypervisible in the landscape of the park is the movement of the air, the necessarily invisible (or translucent) medium through which all spatial perception must travel. In the fluttering saffron draperies one seems to feel the motions of these invisible presences, the specters of visitors and residents, past and present, who have moved along the pathways, passing through Olmsted’s sacred public space in order to purify


13. In fact the rooftop of the Metropolitan museum was wrapped in orange construction sheets during the Christo installation and thus seemed to become an unintended extension of the work.
themselves with an escape into “nature” from the constraints of the city. These invisible presences, felt only in the breezes, are the genii loci, the spirits of the place that reveal themselves passing through the Gates, which can then be seen as something like Native American dreamcatchers. Although the park is now technically public land, it may be rented for private use, and areas may be temporarily fenced off for private functions. Christo rented the entire park, in effect privatizing the whole thing, in order to erect a construction that symbolically evoked the control and fencing of land, proliferating a vast number of the most salient features of walls, borders, and controlled checkpoints, and then transfiguring them into their exact opposites—gates without walls, gates that open up corridors that lead us into infinite space. In a time when commodities and credit circulate more and more freely in a global economy and human bodies are confronted increasingly with walls, borders, checkpoints, and closed gates, one is compelled to admit that the Christo Gates have an uncanny perfection in their sense of timing.

But this timing is not something that can be attributed to the intentions of the artist. It must, rather, be thought of as something like artistic luck, an uncanny coincidence that brings an image into the world at the right historical moment for its specific impact. It is not so much that the Gates would have lacked force if they had been installed at another time but that their force would have been different. If the installation had taken place in the autumn of 2004, the memory of the ban on public assembly would have been fresher and more vivid, but the visual impact of the saffron curtains against the fall colors would have been muted (the Gates had their greatest impact, of course, on those days when snow was on the ground). Or they could have been erected in 1989, when the demolition of the Berlin Wall was underway, in which case their political contemporaneity might have seemed even more obvious. This was a work of time (twenty-seven years to be exact) that could have found other moments (for instance, as I write, there is a debate in the United States Senate on the idea of building a wall along the Mexican border). And the Gates would, at any time, have been seen (and dismissed) as merely ornamental, nothing but a bit of charming excess, a tourist gimmick. That is their eternal charm: their gaiety, harmlessness, and utter frivolity. Eighteenth-century landscapists talked of “binding and dressing nature’s loose tresses,” as if the earth were a female body to be beautified with fine clothes and jewels.14 But that history might have been quite different; sometimes in retrospect a certain cunning seems to reveal itself.

What about the coincidence of Christo’s Gates and Gilo’s wall? In one sense, it is purely a subjective connection, an accident produced by the fact of my traveling in the West Bank in December 2004 and then visiting New York in February 2005. But in another sense it was an accident waiting to happen, a product of (let’s call it) critical luck to go with Christo’s artistic luck. If seeing a landscape or looking at the view is constituted by acts of erasure and blindness (“don’t look at that trash in the foreground”), a critical seeing is always an act of double vision. Either one looks and then looks again at what was hidden or forgotten, or one looks at a view while remembering another view, if only at the level of the most basic recognition: these are hills and vales; those are trees and rivers. It is a repetition that can occur in space (“comparing scene with scene” as Wordsworth put it) or in time:

Once again
Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs
That on a wild secluded scene impress
Thoughts of more deep seclusion; and connect
The landscape with the quiet of the sky.\(^{15}\)

And sometimes this comparative gaze is constructed on contrasts, a coincidence of opposites that brings together scenes because of their radical difference. Christo’s Gates and Gilo’s wall speak to one another across an abyss of difference that makes their voices resonate all the more deeply. The Gates are situated in a harmless, even therapeutic landscape, a pacified urban refuge expressive of open, democratic access and restorative pleasure. Gilo’s wall is the boundary of a dangerous, contested border between enemies sworn (it sometimes seems) to mutual destruction. The Gates seem to ornament and enhance the benevolent genius loci of the park, letting its living and dead presences play together across its vistas and winding paths. Gilo’s wall, by contrast, seeks to pacify the danger zone, projecting a future prospect in which there will be no dangerous, living Palestinians, but only the picturesque ruins left behind by their vanishing. It wants to cleanse the holy landscape of its ghosts and disappear their living descendants.

The futility of Gilo’s desire for disappearance is captured by a third work of landscape art, a Mexican-style mural on the new security “fence” erected around the Palestinian town of Qalqilya (fig. 7).\(^{16}\) Like the Gilo mural, this painting conjures the disappearance of the wall, but in a violent act of splitting rather than picturesque pacification. At the center of the scene, a face

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16. According to the photographer, Maria Nadotti, the mural was painted by a group of Mexican visitors to Qalqilya.
wrapped in a kaffiyeh, the arms (reminiscent of Samson pushing aside the pillars) thrust up and out, toppling the walls which fall toward each side of the figure. A text to the right gives voice to the masked figure: “To exist is to resist.” We know from Robert Frost that there is something in nature that doesn’t love a wall, but this image suggests that there is something within walls themselves that wants to breach them and bring them down. (Perhaps this is just an image of what Marx would call the congealed labor of the Palestinian workers who help build the walls that hem them in.) To this extent, the Israeli and Palestinian murals are saying the same thing, the one by an illusion of pacification, the other with an equally illusory—but all too realistic—vision of violent destruction. Christo’s Gates, like the work of Artists Without Walls, provide critical and utopian breaches in the walls that divide peoples, openings for the welcoming of ghosts and strangers.

17. Actually, a more accurate reading would see these collapsing objects as the olive trees that are routinely destroyed by the construction of the security walls. In this light, the figure pushing aside the trees might be seen as a vengeful dryad that transforms the defensive face of the wall into the baleful gaze of the enemy. I am grateful to Daniel Monk for this suggestion.
FIGURE 7. John Berger and his granddaughter at the security wall in Qalqilya. Photo: Maria Nadotti.