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Oral history interview with Christo, 1973
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Christo on August 28 and 20, 1973. The interview was conducted in the artist's apartment by Paul Cummings for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

PAUL CUMMINGS: It is the 28th of August, 1973; Paul Cummings talking to Christo in his apartment on Harvard Street. You were born in - - - start from the beginning - - - 1935?

CHRISTO: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. In what town., actually?

CHRISTO: Gabravo. It is a small town in the Balkan, in the mountains in the north part of Bulgaria.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, it's a mountain town?

CHRISTO: Yes. You know the Balkan? The name of the Balkanic States came from the range of mountains called Balkan.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I see. So it's not a little valley, it's a

CHRISTO: Yes, it's the mountain. It's about two thousand meters high. It's quite high up.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you have brothers and sisters?

CHRISTO: Two brothers.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Two brothers, who are not in the arts?

CHRISTO: No. I come from a Bulgarian family who had emigrated to Russia and came back to Bulgaria. One of my grandmothers came from Czechoslovakia. One of my brothers is a movie actor, and the other is a scientist.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Which is which?

CHRISTO: The eldest, Anani, is a movie actor and I am the middle one, and the youngest one is Stephan. My first name is Christo, my family name of Ukraine origin is Javacheff. Anani is the actor and Stephan is the scientist.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Where does he act?

CHRISTO: I lived in all these countries until 1957. I lived in Bulgaria, then Czechoslovakia. I left Bulgaria in early 1956, and lived between 1956 and early 1957 in Czechoslovakia because I have parents, family there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did your parents leave too, or did you just...?

CHRISTO: No. They live in Bulgaria actually now.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, they still live there.

CHRISTO: Yes. Everybody lived there in Bulgaria.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But you're the one that traveled around?

CHRISTO: Yes, I escaped during the Hungarian Revolution in early 1957 from Praha. (Prague.)

PAUL CUMMINGS: But you had been going to school there.

CHRISTO: Yes, I studied at the Fine Arts Academy in Sophia. The studies there included many disciplines which are not part of the art schools here, such as political economy, history, cadaver dissection and also architecture and movie sets. I was hanging around a theater in Prague in 1956, in the E.F. Burian Theater. Burian was in Leipzig in 1930 and he did a remarkable play, a Brecht play in 1930. He was a very strong Communist. When the Communists came to power, they gave him his own theater, in Prague, and I hung around at his theater in 1956, early 1957.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Before one gets into all of that activity, did you start drawing as a child? How did you get interested in making things in visual art?

CHRISTO: Yes. My father is a scientist, my grandfather is a very well-known archaeologist, my grandmother was a musician, there was always very much art at our place. We lived with very many people of the science and art. I started to study art at age six, the first year I went to school. Six we go to school. Yes, I was permitted to choose. Generally children study music, piano or violin, I chose art.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Had you made drawings?

CHRISTO: Yes, I drew as a child and my mother gave me a private tutor, an art professor who gave me lessons of art and art history at the age of five. At the regular age we start school. After that I always studied art in different ways, and also architecture and related disciplines.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It was rather natural for you to take up this activity and your family wasn't a problem? They didn't say, "You want to be an artist?" which happens so often.

CHRISTO: No.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did your first teacher have you do?

CHRISTO: That was very academic studies. Most Bulgarian art professors were trained in the schools of Munich and Berlin and some of them in St. Petersburg and Leningrad, before the time of the Bolshevik. But of course, I was very young in 1945 and Bulgaria became a Communist country. I relate very much to the new system of thinking; I was very young and I was impressed by it. My family was very progressive - they had links with the Bolsheviks in the early twenties and thirties in Russia. And through many of these people, I started to know about Russian art, movies, and theater, they also have influenced my moral growth. When I was fifteen, I was very enthusiastic. Of course, at that time, it was already on the pre-academic courses and we were leading same type of small cultural revolution, like China was in 1968. The government used many of the art students in some kind of art called "agit-propagand" - "agits" is agitation. Of course, that is art done and practiced in the streets, in the spirit of co-operative farms, and the factories through a gift spirit of the workers and the people to give a better production, all kinds of...

PAUL CUMMINGS: What was it? Was it very realistic paintings?

CHRISTO: No, they are all some kind of very amusing, but very pragmatic utilization of art services, like very small things we did. Remember, this is the early fifties when Stalin is in power and there was the Cold War and we had the hardest time of the Russian influence. They tried to make everything different from the West, and anything Western was degraded. The only thing passing into Bulgaria, still passing into Bulgaria at this time from the West was the Orient Express. The Orient Express is a big polished train to Istanbul. Of course, this train passed through Bulgarian landscape. I remember the government was very involved to create a landscape that looks very stimulating, like the gravel around the train must be very proper, the stacked hay the farmers place in their fields must be very impressively arranged, the combines and other farm machinery should be well in view, not hidden behind hills, after the work. It was completely different from the Potemkin villages which were only a facade built in about twelve hours, eighteen hours to create a landscape so the little city would look good. With us, advising the farmers, that was done by sending young students and artists to the cooperative farms, helping and showing the farmers. That is one of the things I worked on and all these big decorations for the great parade of May 1, Celebration of October Revolution. All these things, I liked it very much. I was very young, and I was thinking that all art was degraded and that was very good because there was not value consideration. The young people were involved in making something. So they did not question the value, because the revolution thing is more important than art. Art is only something for thought.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you have any material about what was going on at that time, I mean as far as France and Germany went?

CHRISTO: It was very hard. I did not speak any Western language, nor was it permitted at that time because Stalin was only able to speak Russian - his mother language but not French or English, nor any other language.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So there were no magazines?

CHRISTO: No, no. It was very severe then, I don't know how it is now, but until the death of Stalin in 1952 or '53, foreign literature and newspapers were absolutely forbidden. After the Stalin period, things improved slightly, but it was very slow, especially in Bulgaria where the Communist party is very powerful. I grew up and my interest became more and more individualistic.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What prompted that, or how could you do that, given the circumstances? I mean, become

more individual.

CHRISTO: I wanted to do more on my own, to see more, to know new things, to take some chances. And of course, the only chance I had to go out of Bulgaria was to go to Czechoslovakia -- which was also a Communist country, but more liberal. I was on my way. Czechoslovakia owns a good number of original works of art by western artists, but mostly in secret, in private homes. Through E.F. Burian's friends, I was given the opportunity to see original works for the first time. I had seen reproductions before, but never the originals. There in Prague I saw works by Picasso, Klee, Miro and Kandinsky. Burian knew very many old curators and things like that and through him I could see the first originals of western art.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I think it's interesting that you studied not only painting, but theater and architecture, and all of these different things, theater design. Did you have an interest in theater? Did this develop later?

CHRISTO: Well, for the theater and the movies, I will tell you how it happened. In Russia, and all the Soviet-subject countries, they did not usually use the western way of super-production, it is quite different there. I was very interested in the movies and they had an influence on me then. I never met myself people like the film makers and improvisational directors Evgueni Vakhtangov, Vsevolod Meyerhold or Aleksandr Tairov, but I knew of their works made in the twenties and thirties, through the Russian film maker Sergei Vasiliev who was teaching at the Bulgarian Film Studios. Through Vasiliev I became very impressed by movies.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In what way?

CHRISTO: Because, while I was studying at the Art Academy in Sofia, I was making extra money working on song movie productions. In Bulgaria, when they did a movie, they would use mostly locations, instead of movie sets. The young artists and the art students could have a job at finding the precise locations requested by the script, choosing the adequate street corner, hills, landscape, etc. Because almost everything in Bulgaria belongs to the state, the movie production had to give those jobs to artists, it was obligatory, and I enjoyed this kind of work. For me it was a change from the Academy's activity. I mostly dealt with the city and urban things, placing a car there, using that street corner for that shot. This is the system of Soviet movie production. They built very few sets. I really enjoyed doing that kind of work, and my brother, who was an actor, was also working. I was interested in the theater too and I sometimes was hanging around while he was working. He is not a very well known actor but he was just starting when I was there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But you could still talk about him.

CHRISTO: Yes, but no. At that time of the revolution, art was terribly official. Now they started to dig up more on the Russian heritage. Works which had been done in the twenties, during the Civil War, by many directors, one of them was the son of Anton Chekhov, he was a very different kind of theater or movie director - he was mostly interested in "total" spectacle. They had built stages at the front where the soldiers were, they asked poets to perform at the front, they improvised plays. One of those plays is very well known, they used the train station as a set, and part of the cast was the actual thousands of soldiers returning home from the front, by train, and arriving home at the Leningrad station. The arrival of a group of Bolshevik soldiers was an extraordinary spectacle. It was also an effort to make them feel welcomed by the people. All those things I heard about, from the past, were very interesting to me. It was not entertainment because these soldiers actually arrived from the front. They must have people to welcome them. Everything was organized. I learned all about this in the early fifties. Those Russian people are dead now, but when I heard about their work, they were in their sixties and seventies.

PAUL CUMMINGS: During the time that you were studying painting at the Academy, what kind of things did you do there? Did you do drawings, draw from casts, still life, models, academic painting, what kind?

CHRISTO: All, everything. First we did drawings of still life, nudes. Of course, the very old-fashioned system. We do four semesters of anatomy -like dissection of the body- which very few academies are doing today. We did cutting up of the corpse, which I don't think was necessary, but it was interesting.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But do you think that you learned anything about drawing, or anatomy, or structure? (Tape turned off.)

CHRISTO: I don't know if I learned but it was something most important to me today, because I worked so much in plaster before doing all these models for architecture. It is because of my education there that I am able today to do my projects, since my projects are paid by the sale of my drawings. It is important to me that I lived in a very different kind of place until I was twenty-one. One thing, during that time, I love to work with people. That period, perhaps, cultivated my present work. I like to work with people, like with engineers and professional people in different fields. It is very exciting to me, and my early training from that period is most probably what gave me the flavor to work with all kinds of people.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What made you decide to go -- you went to Vienna first, right?

CHRISTO: No, I first went to Prague. In later 1956 was the Hungarian Revolution. It was a terrible time. My stay in Czechoslovakia completely put me off. I did not want to go back to Bulgaria, nor to Leningrad, which would have been my only other choice, if I had gone back to Bulgaria. The final way, and only way then, to the West, was to "buy your own head," This was done by thousands of people, who would give money to one of the train station employees. It was not only me escaping, it was thousands of people, at that time, a thousand a day. It was a gamble because some of those station employees had accepted the bribe money and then would call the police. I was lucky, he was a good person.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But how was this, through the country?

CHRISTO: No, it was in a train, a Red Cross train filled with medicine. There were whole families, almost twenty people hidden in that train, and I was with them. The trains were stopped in Vienna and I was not speaking at all German or French or English -- it was start from scratch. Fortunately, I was a good portraitist, I made my living doing portraits, and some landscapes. I signed with my family name, Javacheff. As soon as I arrived in Vienna, to avoid all these camps of refugees, I enrolled in the Fine Arts Academy with Professor Wotruba, in the class of Professor Anderson. Having papers which stated that I was a registered student made me avoid the refugee camp, and I was lucky because it was very difficult. That is how I was able, later, to leave Vienna, with my student papers. It would not have been possible if I had refugee papers. And it was like that, I'd find some portraits to do. An old Bulgarian professor who was teaching in Vienna, was helping by finding people who wanted portraits and landscapes. I made enough money to survive and even to save enough. And with that money, I went to Geneva, Switzerland.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How long did you spend in Vienna, then?

CHRISTO: Six months, no, five months. Between January 10th and June, 1957. In June 1957, I went to Geneva where I had some other friends and through them I was able to do more portraits around the United Nations people. When I had saved enough, I moved to Paris in 1958.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What other things did you do in Vienna? I mean, were you doing portraits in classes?

CHRISTO: Practically nothing. Oh, I started to do some portraits and paintings and some things, but really nothing important. The things you see behind us, "Packed Cans and Bottles, 1958", are some of the things I started to do in Paris in early 1958. I tried many different things, some abstract drawings. Most of my time was used to know people; it was so important for me to move through Europe and I had the feeling that it was much more necessary to know more people, and to have more professional relations so that it can be helpful for me.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why did you not stay in Vienna? There was just nothing there?

CHRISTO: Nothing there, no. It was completely without interest to me. It was a little better, perhaps, but it was provincial. You know very well. Of course, I could have moved to Germany. During my "sejour" in Germany, in 1958, I could have decided to stay. I lived in Paris between 1958 and 1964, and I was going to Germany very often. My first one-man exhibition was in Germany.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In Cologne, right?

CHRISTO: Yes. I was showing mostly in Germany and we were living like two or three months in Germany, two months in Italy, some months in Paris and some months in Holland. It was almost constant traveling.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, it's easy there, it's not so far. It's kind of difficult in this country to go from two thousand miles, this way. (Laughter.) How was the sculptor you studied with in Vienna?

CHRISTO: Wotruba, he was a post-Cubist professor. There were many other artists, not at all exciting. The only man I met who was very nice, was Arnulf Rainer. I don't know if you're familiar, Arnulf Rainer was then an abstract painter, he later became involved with body art. And Arnulf was then doing works reminiscent of Franz Kline, but all in red. In 1958, in Paris, I met Pierre Restany, the French critic. In the summer of 1958, I met Dieter Rosenkranz. I went to his home in Wupperthal, West Germany. His father was a friend of my father's. Dieter was then married to Edith, you probably know her a cause she later became well known as Mrs. Clifford Irving. In their home I met a lot of interesting people.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was that when they were friendly with Mary Bauermeister?

CHRISTO: I met Mary in 1958, and her boyfriend was the owner of a small gallery, in Cologne, where I exhibited in 1961. I met Karlheinz Stockhausen in 1958, and Nam Jun Paik, Ben Patterson, William, Dick Higgins, and all that crowd from the Fluxus group. Of course, at this time, John Cage, and many other American artists were in

Germany, 1958, 59, there had been the festival of Darmstadt and they stayed in Germany afterwards. So much was going on then in Germany. I also met Alfred Schmela, the great art dealer from Dusseldorf. I had exhibitions with him later. But the first art dealer I met in Germany was Mary Bauermeister's boyfriend, and I had an exhibition at his gallery in Cologne in 1961.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That was your first show then?

CHRISTO: No, that was my first personal exhibition. I had exhibited in group shows before, several in Paris and once at the Gulbenkian Foundation in Lisbon, Portugal. The exhibition in Cologne was the first personal exhibition.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was that successful for you?

CHRISTO: Not at all. (Laughter). The show was destroyed, most of the smaller works were stolen by the dealer, he never gave them back. Now we find that some of the pieces were sold by him, later, here and there, we see them at collectors. The large ones were destroyed because I could not keep them. There was a wrapped 4 Chevaux Renault automobile, and many wrapped oil barrels, and other large works. Even though I lost my works I do not regret having had that exhibition because I did my first temporary work, on the harbor of the River Rhine, Docksides Passages. They were very large works and they were conceived to be temporary.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You know, one thing that intrigues me is, how did you live from having done portraits and everything?

CHRISTO: I still had to do portraits to support myself until 1963. I could not live from my work, nobody would buy them, but the portraits were well paid. I did portraits of many people in France, in Switzerland. I was going to Switzerland for two or three weeks doing any type of portraits, as the people preferred, any style they wanted, impressionist a la Monet, or Cubist, or very academic. My portraits were paid around \$600.00 each, which was very cheap for a portrait, but a lot of fast money for me. I had washed cars in garages and dishes in restaurants, but that was very time consuming, while the portraits were very fast.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I was intrigued by how people find somebody who wants a portrait done.

CHRISTO: Oh, there are many people, I did many children. They love children, grandmothers, always, and I had to have fantastic patience. I have no patience with children usually, but I painted the portraits of hundreds of children. In Geneva, I did the portraits of a family that has fourteen children. It was a nightmare. (Laughter.)

PAUL CUMMINGS: Each one?

CHRISTO: Each one! They were signed, "Javacheff." Of course, I also wrapped some portraits too. But very few, of some friends, collectors, my wife's portrait. The oil on canvas was signed "Javacheff" and the wrapping was signed "Christo."

PAUL CUMMINGS: When did you start wrapping things? What was the impetus for that?

CHRISTO: It started in 1958. I think it was not just wrapping, it was more about manipulating the objects, three-dimensional things. I cannot answer why I wrapped. I don't only wrap, I don't always wrap. You can see it very well in the Valley Curtain, Rifle, Colorado, 1970-72. That is not a wrapping. Even in June, 1962, in Paris, when I closed the Rue Visconti with a wall of oil barrels, that was not a wrapping. But there was always an affinity of my interest in the movie set, theater, architecture. Working with an object, large or small, with a specific space, like the nomads, a kind of half-caste of people, making bundles, building fabric tents. But of course, the wrapping was only some---how would you say it in French---to make some "écriture" and only that; to make some sign writing, to be writing with, draw something, color something. For instance, all the objects which I wrapped were very recognizable. I also wrapped completely scene things like bundles of packages, but when it was a definite object it was always recognizable.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's hard to do, to assure what might be under there, but not necessarily.

CHRISTO: But still there are signs and indications of what is under the wrapping, you can easily recognize a wrapped bicycle, a wrapped canvas.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But what could be the top of a grand canvas, so there's kind of an ambiguity there.

CHRISTO: The title of the first group of works was "Inventory," a check list, perhaps like the movers that move the hardware and the inventory of chairs, tables and things you move.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was that an actual list you made up?

CHRISTO: Yes, the inventory of the works exhibited: five cases, one table, one chair, they are all together.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I couldn't figure out from what I read in the fall about it, if it really was...

CHRISTO: Well, of course, they were usual objects, sometimes oil drums, or boxes, cans, crates, bottles, chairs, tables, all sorts of things.

MRS. CHRISTO: Three bottles, five cans...etc...

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. I see, I see. So really it was exactly what it said.

CHRISTO: Always the title of the work was the object that was there. Just literary not poetical.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about all the very realist people that you got associated with?

CHRISTO: I had met Pierre Restany in 1958. He was the founder, the catalyzer, of the "Nouveaux Realistes" movement, with Yves Klein, Arman, Cesar, Tinguely, Rauschenberg, Spoerri. I was not part of their group and did not exhibit with them except in the last two or three shows. The Nouveaux Realistes movement was a French movement, with mostly French artists. I was included in the exhibition "New Realists" that Sidney Janis organized in 1962. That was the title he gave to the exhibition which included the French "Nouveaux Realistes" and the American and British "Pop artists". Mr. Sidney Janis had chosen himself the two works of mine for his exhibition, even though I was not part of the "Nouveaux Realists." In late 1960 or early 1961, I met Leo Castelli in Paris. He was very encouraging and told me that I should go to the U.S.A. Leo Castelli was very helpful to me then, but even more later, with my legal papers for immigration.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So you had a show with him but not until 1964?

CHRISTO: In 1964, Leo Castelli included me in his group exhibition "Four at Castelli." And in 1966 he gave me my first personal exhibition in the U.S.A. Ileana Sonnabend too had been most helpful, we met a lot of people in her Paris gallery and she also gave us introductions to a lot of people in New York, so we would feel almost at home when we arrived here in 1964.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you meet Leo or Ileana first?

CHRISTO: I met Leo first. Leo was with Ivan Karp when he came back to Paris, for the Jasper Johns exhibition in 1962. We had no money to buy our fare to New York, it took us almost two years to save enough to buy our two tickets on the ship "Franc." We came here for the first time in 1964, in February.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And so Leo helped you with all the documents and papers?

CHRISTO: Yes, the papers for becoming residents. It was very difficult for me, I had no passport, I only had a traveling document stating that I was "stateless", and the quota for Bulgarian refugees was fourteen years of waiting, and waiting in France, not in New York. But meanwhile, between 1958 and 1963, I was staying in Germany, at the Galeria Schnela. I tell you this again because it was very benefactory for my art, much later. I had so many exhibitions in the early sixties, in Germany, Italy, in Holland, Belgium. Those exhibitions were never an economical success, but they were important for the future. It was very helpful for us, much later in the sixties and seventies. Many of these young galleries became important galleries, like Gian Enzo Sperone, Yvon Lambert, Alfred Scrimlela, all these gallery owners were our friends, our old friends, and we all grew in the same time. They had started, like us, with nothing and we have a very good understanding.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why do you think that your work was so, kind of picked up and shown in Germany, more so than France? There seem to be so few exhibitions in France.

CHRISTO: Yes, I had very few exhibitions in France. I don't know. Still, I have many private collectors in France. I sell very much in France, enormously, but mostly directly, not through galleries. Recently I had an exhibition at the Galerie Catherine Issert because even though she is an old friend, she has a very young gallery. Then I came to the U.S.A. in 1964, I had had only one exhibition in France, in Paris in 1962.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But all through Germany and Switzerland?

CHRISTO: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you think that it's the fact of the economy? The fact that the Germans...

CHRISTO: They have money, we sell very well in Germany, they are interested.

MRS. CHRISTO: They come here, they buy here. The French collectors come and buy here.

CHRISTO: There are many private dealers. Of course, often my work became very difficult to be shown in private gallery. Mostly now I show where I have large exhibitions, in Universities, in museums and colleges. I had only two exhibitions in Museums in France.

PAUL CUMMINGS: They don't have the space.

CHRISTO: No, they have the space, but they are not fond of my work -- I don't know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were you interested in coming to this country?

CHRISTO: I wanted to come here, I needed to know more. When I escaped from Czechoslovakia, my only thought was to the west to see anything possible, to make my own judgment and choice. I came to the states like I came to Paris finding that it was very important for my work. It's only my own judgment, and really it is very important, even though I show very little in New York. I cannot show and my big projects are not in New York, for the moment, but it is very important -- a lot of communication. I find it very cheap in a way to live in New York, there is better communication. My projects involve many people around the world -- collectors, the people who buy my work, the engineers and all who work with us. But still, New York is a better place to coordinate efforts, and because I live here I can work in California or in Colorado. In a way, I talk about Manhattan, because once you go out of Manhattan, it is like to live in Paris. (Laughter.) Or any small village in France, because everything becomes difficult, complicated and expensive.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So really, this is really just a place to start from and go elsewhere.

CHRISTO: It's like our headquarters, it is very fast. Living here we met more French, more Swedish, more German people, as when we were living in Paris. All the time we have calls, people constantly coming.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you think that is because there is a tradition of being difficult to approach people in France? Or is there, everybody picks up the telephone?

CHRISTO: Perhaps, maybe.

MRS. CHRISTO: But Paris is not the center of the world anymore.

CHRISTO: For me now the only place where I could live is here, I can not imagine myself living anywhere else. You know I must sell a lot in order to finance my projects, and the irony is that we sell almost eighty per cent to Europe and Japan, only twenty per cent to the U.S.A.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh really? You live here, do it in Colorado, and sell it in Europe. (Laughter.)

CHRISTO: Yes, but this is not just me, it has been the same for most dealers. This is since 1968, I think New York art dealers and the galleries mostly sell in Europe. I don't think it is different from us.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, it's become a much more international market.

CHRISTO: I think so. I think there are many more new collectors, on the international market. There's Belgium...

MRS. CHRISTO: I sell a lot to private dealers who sell much more in Europe than in the States.

CHRISTO: I think Leo tells the same things. They say ninety-five per cent.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, he sells mostly to dealers anyway.

CHRISTO: We sell also very much to many dealers, who have no gallery, just from their home.

PAUL CUMMINGS: One thing that intrigues me, what was it like for you to come to New York in the early sixties, because you had become French by that time?

CHRISTO: No, I speak French -- Jean Claude Killy. (Laughter.) First, I am born Bulgarian. I have no complex about anything. I am amazed to see how any people can be full of complexes because they are Italian, or Puerto Rican, or Jew...

PAUL CUMMINGS: They use the language as...

CHRISTO: No, the background. And for me of course, it's hard. I am different, but I think I am like that. I don't want to pretend I am some other. Of course, I know it's not easy, but it was, not very easy for me in Paris. I was not speaking French, it was equally very hard. The French artists were still very arrogant with me. But of course here it was the same thing. I don't think it was worse, but is equally, it was not very difficult.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you find the artists in America as opposed to, say, France or Austria?

CHRISTO: I don't know, I have no artist friends, I must tell you, neither in Paris nor here. First, I don't think the artists have friends, except in very early youth when they are schoolboys. The life is so competitive. I don't know, perhaps many artists tell you they have very good friends.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Perhaps one or two.

MRS. CHRISTO: We are good friends with everybody.

CHRISTO: We have friends, engineers, like Mitzo Zagaroff, who designed my 5600 Cubicmeter Package for the Documenta IV, in 1968. A marvelous friend, engineer from Boston. We have some friends, journalists, writers, like our very good friend David Bourdon. I don't know if you know him, he's now at the Smithsonian. I have a friend I like very much, the art historian Leo Steinberg, and our builder contractor Ted Dougherty. I have friends, some business people, some who are in industry. For the last five or six years, so much time is taken by my projects. I don't have time. We see many people, friends for dinner, but they are always like a dealer or collector or the surveyor, or the geologist. Of course, they became some kind of very good friends to us because they are very vital for our work. Frankly I have very great time to work with them.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I'm curious about as your projects got larger and larger and larger, how did you go around and find engineers and people who manufacture the products and things you needed?

CHRISTO: It is not easy. First we have so much trouble, all the time we have problems and this is the exciting part. Like, if we know that everything for my next project will be very easy, I will never do it. (Laughter.) Of course, I tell you, we do a new project, it will be my worst headache. Not so much technically, technically it will probably be less tough than the Valley Curtain, but this project, I enjoy it already so much because the resources are so complex. It involves -- it is very big in size, it is about twenty-five miles. It involves many private properties and cities, it will pass through a small town. It involves a huge amount of contracts, permits, liability insurance and I think it will be one of the most exciting parts of the project. But of course, with these things, we create fantastic relations, me going to negotiate with farmers, cowboys, and people of the city.

PAUL CUMMINGS: This is one thing that really intrigued me in looking through the material I could find, was that you end up all the time with books and catalogs and photographs and charts and drawings and documents, and there is an enormous amount of material that is produced. I sometimes wonder if that's almost as much of what one does as producing the ultimate curtain?

CHRISTO: Yes, I consider the whole work of the curtain is from the formulating of the first idea up to the realization. Each step was equally important. Whenever I have failed to treat each step with the same importance, it has created big problems. And of course, the weather. The curtain stayed only twenty eight hours. After that we left, but we had so many problems, those twenty-eight hours, that was so marvelous. It is so complex, it is like life, real life experience. It is like an expedition to New Guinea, or to the Himalaya. It is perhaps, less thrilling, but for me it is very exciting because I learn new things each time. And this is why I enjoy it so much. I consider each step as an integral part of the work of art, our contractor, our permits, all part of the work of art. Our engineer is part of the art. Everything is part of the work. Each time a project is finished, we publish a book, and we make a real, complete file. It is not a pretty book, not an aesthetic book. It's just a completely accurate file containing the story of the project.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You mean the documents and the photographs.

CHRISTO: The "dossier", instead of being in a file it is in book form.

PAUL CUMMINGS: This is what, Abrams?

CHRISTO: Yes. It contains the whole file of the project. The documents are reproduced photographically, the letters are there, reduced in size but with their original appearance.

PAUL CUMMINGS: All the letters and documents.

CHRISTO: Yes. It has no interpretation by a historian. And of course, this will remain the only reference for the future.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What do you feel about that, when you spend months and thousands of hours, and all of these people and all of this and essentially what happens is that you build something that then becomes a book.

CHRISTO: No, it is not just a book, it will stay in the memories. Anyway, on our planet, nothing stays forever, everything is temporary, it is only a matter of a shorter or longer time. We could not own the land, not in Colorado, not in Australia, not in Germany, it would be too expensive to buy. Secondly, the project cannot have

the maintenance to remain longer. All my projects have this tremendous amount of very specific, fragile elements. My projects are thought to be temporary. The temporary quality must be translated, by the fragility, and this causes a feeling of urgency. If people want to see my work, they must hurry, because it might not be there if they take their time. My projects are very precise things. I have complete power to decide that no engineer, no state money, no any kind of subsidizing will make my idea change. If I, personally need to have a curtain, a side curtain invade of fabric, or a wrapped coast, I will try to make that and no other thing. I fight for any inch of my idea to remain in its original state. I had been warned by my Valley Curtain engineers that the curtain should have air holes in it, or it would stay a very short time, and it did stay little. And it will be very dangerous to build, but we should go through that to do it. And of course, this is my privilege. I am happy that the Valley Curtain was exactly as I wanted it. I am not an architect or an engineer who has to work for his client and has to accept to adapt the idea according to the court, the government, the state or the client, and they can oblige him to build that and that and that. I feel very happy that I have absolute power to do it the way I think it should be.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Have you had many projects that haven't been talked about or written about, which you have not been able to do?

CHRISTO: Yes. Until now I have completed only three very large projects. There are a few small, total of perhaps ten or twelve projects -- large scale projects. And of course, we have undertaken almost twenty-five or thirty who are complete failures.

MRS. CHRISTO: For each successful project there are almost twice as many "failures".

CHRISTO: They are really failures because we worked at those as hard as on the others, and even though we spend a lot of time, efforts and money, we failed mostly because we were not intelligent enough, we were not careful enough and again, we did not realize that each step is equally important. If we neglected something, and the project could not be done, it was a failure. I can not blame anybody else other than ourselves, we have the engineers but they can't be blamed. At the end we are the only people responsible to be blamed for the failure to obtain the permit for the project.

PAUL CUMMINGS: One thing that intrigues me, how do you go doing say, the Little Bay Coast in Australia? Where was the first inclination of that idea, doing the sea coast area and then finding one?

CHRISTO: At first it was not the coast, it was more about wrapping the ground. The ground or terrain was of vital importance for me, then. And at the time of the Museum of Modern Art where I had this little show in '68, I proposed to wrap, to cover the Sculpture Garden. There were a few drawings and a scale model, but that was not allowed because the fire department and the insurance company were afraid it would create a danger if people would trip on the fabric. There are some drawings in the Abrams book by David Bourdon. Of course, this was just before I went to Kassel, West Germany, in '68, for that air package. (Tape turned off.) I did some sketches of the wrapping of the long portion of coastline. I called it "Wrapped Coast, Project for the West Coast of the U.S.A." I was fascinated by the place where the ocean meets the land. I wanted a coast because that is where the land starts, zero altitude, and then goes up. The water too was important to me, to have at the same time the color of the water, the color of the part of the coast which is wrapped and then the color of the rest of the land, not wrapped.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was there a big tide there?

CHRISTO: Yes, a very large, huge tide. The wrapping was started at the high tide line. My work is most of the time about making comparisons, even in my early "Packages," a comparison between some wrapped cans and some cans which are not wrapped. In the same way, I wanted to see a "Wrapped Coast" to compare it to the other parts of the coast which are not wrapped. But it was not so simple. I made some sketches for the West Coast, because I wanted to do a project in the United States. But at that time, it was very hard to find any local interest. My projects cannot be done by only one man, they always involve somebody's understanding, locally, some moral support and enthusiasm, so much has to be done and feelings generated. And of course, the West Coast, at that time, nobody was interested in it. I tried to interest the local museums. Not a question of money, but we need some kind of a moral, administrative support. In late 1968, I met John Kaldor, a young business man from Australia, of Hungarian origin. He came to the studio and he bought a work of mine, he already had quite a good collection. And he asked me if I could come to Australia to do a lecture. I told him that my English was not good enough for that, but I have a fantastic project we could do in Australia. It is very dialectic to see that the "Wrapped Coast" found its own place because Australia has one of the longest coastlines in the world. They have forty-four thousand miles of coastline. And they have a coastline culture, they live by the coast. Only fifty million people and half a million miles of land.

PAUL CUMMINGS: They all live right on the edge.

CHRISTO: They have most of their cities by the coast. There the coastline means something. It is very good that

each time, the projects find their own locations. Like the "Valley Curtain" found the Rocky Mountains, not because they were the only mountains, but they were the only mountains within which, in a short diameter, you have an infinite variety of different landscapes. From Aspen, a Swiss Alps type, up to the complete desert type of mountains. While in California, they are always all one type, they are not as varied as the Rocky Mountains where you have a fantastic, very short, two hundred, three hundred miles of constantly changing landscapes. Of course, we worked to find out, like this Australia project. John Kaldor had quite a hard time to find a coast line he could rent for us, and we tried to locate the proper place. We spent a lot of time and researched many, many different places.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Considering the number of people involved, and the time and everything, how do you finance all of these things? I mean, each one is its own corporation?

CHRISTO: Well, we have a corporation, usually named after the project, this way of working here, now, is my reward for the years spent in Bulgaria. I do many drawings, sketches, scale models from the first little drawing on scratch paper to very elaborate drawings and collages. Very similar to what the architects do before building a skyscraper. All these I call preparation works. They are all done before -the project is realized. They are my vision of what I think the project will be. And you see all the time, through the evolution of the project, the vision becomes closer and closer to reality because I work closer and closer to the final work because I work at every detail. We devise the way to do it, the engineers and us, and I become more familiar with the way the project will be built. All of these preparation works, and I make between 180 and 300 of them, depending on the length of the time the preparation of the project will take, and that is not really many works when you knew that it took twenty-eight months for the Valley Curtain or nineteen months for the Wrapped Coast. All those drawings and collages we sell to cover the expenses of the projects. These preparation works are sold to three types of people, galleries, museums, and private collectors. We do not sell the works one by one because that would take too much time. We sell by groups of ten thousand dollars, as in the last project, and now by twenty thousand for the next project.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So they have a whole group...

CHRISTO: This is how we do it. We write a letter of agreement to those collectors, museums and dealers who have purchased in the past and we ask them to deposit their purchase money in advance in the bank account of the corporation. In return for having paid in advance they will get a very good discount when they will come to the studio to make their choice of the work they have purchased. They also will have the exclusivity on the drawings and collages for that specific project. Also they will be listed in the book that will be published about the project. For that they may choose anything they want in the studio about that project or any other past and future project which I have available in my studio, and they may also commission a lithograph or buy some of my early "Packages" which we have in our storage. Between 1958 and 1966 I made a large number of works which I could not sell. We had to keep them and they now are helping each project. Today I very seldom make small packages. Also some collectors ask me to make a special work for their home or their garden, and since they are my very good collectors I am happy to do that. I always keep some of the preparation works as we progress in the project so that they will be part of the documentation exhibition about the project. Each large project has its own traveling exhibition, which includes drawings, documents and photographs. Usually the preparation works for a project cover between seventy to seventy-five per cent of the cost of the project and another twenty-five per cent comes from early works and lithographs. I have many lithographs. But also in the same way I don't make the lithograph unless it is paid ten or twenty thousand dollars in advance. All money is paid to the corporation, never to myself. The money must be deposited in advance. This is the most unusual thing. The legal work is tremendous but we have a great attorney, Scott Hodes, in Chicago.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's real patronage.

CHRISTO: No, it's business. They buy at discount and are happy to be given the opportunity, while it makes it possible for us to do a project. It is simply a purchase contract between me and the client.

END OF INTERVIEW

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