Beyond the Museum:  
An Artistic Blueprint  
for  
Social and Disciplinary Change  

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Jonathan Fineberg is the Gutgsell Professor of Art History (1984– ) and a Visiting Professor of Computer Science (2005– ). A recent recipient of a Dedalus Foundation Senior Research Fellowship, he is an expert in the artwork of Vasily Kandinsky, Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, Jorg Immendorff, and Christo, among others. Fineberg serves on the Board of Trustees for The Phillips Collection in Washington, DC, and is also well-known for “Imagining America,” his two-hour PBS television documentary and Yale University Press book on American art in the twentieth century, both of which were released during fall 2005.

Ringing the walls of Professor Jonathan Fineberg’s dining room are several captivating sketches and collages by Christo (formerly Christo Javacheff), an abridged history of the Bulgarian-born artist’s creativity and a testament to his longtime friendship and intellectual bond with their owner. Fineberg had graciously invited me to his home to see his “Christos,” each an intriguing, enchanting, but precise design for a particular installation, and to speak about the many extraordinary projects with which he is currently involved, some devoting significant attention to artists of eastern European extraction.

Many details of Fineberg’s ongoing work with Christo and his wife and artistic partner, Jeanne-Claude, can be found in his 2004 book, Christo and Jeanne-Claude: On the Way to the Gates (Yale University
Press), which also explores the artists’ celebrated February 2005 installation in New York’s Central Park (The Gates: Project for Central Park, New York City, 1975–2005). He credits the prominent American art critic Harold Rosenberg, who mentored him in his first years as an Illinois professor, with the notion to initially contact Christo. “At one point Harold said, ‘That Christo has a good idea—you should call him up,’” recalled Fineberg. “So I called him, and then went to see him. We hit it off immediately and got to be really good friends. I started spending a lot of time with him and then brought him here to Illinois. He gave a talk, which we recorded, and I started taping, periodically, our interviews. The Yale book has interviews that go back to 1977! To my mind the New York project was the pinnacle for him, because it had been on his mind since 1964 when he arrived in New York. So that book was kind of a culmination for me, too, after having spent thirty years in a friendship with him and really looking at his work closely.”

This close look has revealed Christo’s ability to envelop taken-for-granted structures or topographical features with fabric such that they are suddenly accentuated and perceived differently, often in accordance with a social message or purpose. “It’s all about context with him—social context,” Fineberg explained. “He’s an artist who really engages in social interaction and plays with that. He’s right at that border where art and society meet, and it’s a place that’s really not art, in a way, and that’s what’s so interesting about it; he’s kind of redefining art all the time to include himself. What was so fabulous in New York [was that] he put something up in Central Park and all of a sudden people looked at [that space] in a way that they had never looked at it. People were walking in parts of Central Park that they never walked in. Most New Yorkers never go in the north end of the Park, but it was just filled [with] the largest number of people in any given day in the Park’s history, and the economic implications of this were huge. It filled every hotel in town for three weeks! From the World Trade Center [tragedy] to The Gates there was kind of a pall over New York, and I think this really did kind of turn spirits around in an amazing way. People were just ready for it—it was a celebration of New York.”

Both the tint of the textiles employed and the tactile yet permeable drape of the fabric itself are integral features of a Christo installation and intrinsically connected with the surrounding area. After an intensive study, colors are selected for their visibility but also to harmonize with a site’s environs. Fineberg: “For each of his projects Christo goes to a site, makes photographs of the area, draws on them to try out ideas, and gradually you find him learning the details of the site in a very sub-
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He also changes the project, evolving it more and more in harmony with the place [in which it is situated].” In Miami, for example, where Christo was commissioned to create the *Surrounded Islands* installation in June 1983 for the Festival of Two Worlds, “he kept wanting to drive over the bridges—over the causeways. The woman taking him around was a local reporter and I know she was thinking, ‘he keeps wanting to drive over these bridges—he’s going to wrap a bridge!’ But he was really understanding the horizontality of that landscape, the fact that between the water and the land, it is extremely flat and broad and brilliantly illuminated. Also, Miami is a Latin city, all pastel pinks and greens, and he ended up with a project that was pink, blue, and green; it was really the colors of the city in a very subtle way. If you look at the city’s vegetation—the flowers—and at the art deco hotels, the [installation] blended in in a really natural way and yet it was also a kind of exorbitant exaggeration of what was natural, so that when you first looked at it, it seemed like it didn’t fit there, but then suddenly you realize that you’re not looking at what you thought. And that’s always the way it is with him.”

Fineberg believes that Christo initially selected the luxuriant saffron hue of *The Gates*, which highlighted the winding trajectory of 23 miles of Park walkways, with a late summer exhibit and autumn leaves in mind. However, able only to secure permission for winter, he began thinking about how that season would affect the installation’s visual impact. “He realized that all the leaves would be down, that the Park would be grey, maybe with snow, and that if he put something really visible on the pathways, it would make them show up in a way that they had never been [previously revealed] because [ordinarily] the leaves disguise the paths, so you have no vision of them. So he made the gates orange and so that they would overlap and recede in space—it was like a great Cubist painting. You could see those orange curtains all the way across the Park. The visibility was fantastic! It completely changed your perception: you became aware of the paths, where they went, and the Park’s scale. During the first weekend, when the installation opened, the weather was strangely warm and the grass was green, but in the middle of the project a fabulous snowstorm completely covered the site in white.” Spectators thus experienced the work from two distinctive vantage points.

The porosity and suppleness of the fabric medium impart a dynamism and ephemerality to Christo’s artworks which suggest that he is playing with the borders of phenomena. His *Running Fence, Sonoma and Marin Counties, California, 1972–76*, for which he erected a glis-
tending hedge of white nylon across 24½ miles of northwestern California ranchlands, perhaps provides one example. To me, this installation, as depicted in photographs, called to mind many different kinds of barriers, from the Berlin Wall, to the Great Wall of China, to the Iron Curtain, to the wall that the federal government has recently considered building along the border between the U.S. and Mexico. Yet the plasticity and permeability of the fabric fence as it swelled in the breeze seemed to intimate that borders are porous, that they move and shift, and that they are constructs of our own minds.

Like 7,500 tiger lilies blooming across the stark early spring landscape, The Gates’ vibrant, similarly billowing curtains represented a metaphorical microcosm of organic life amid the city’s inanimate structures—perhaps a joyous signifier of the irrepressible potency of the life force itself. “First of all,” said Fineberg, “the fabric is like skin. It’s very bodily in that way. It’s also moved by the wind, so that it is sort of out of control but at the same time, in control because it is in a frame. If you look at a map of New York what you see from stem to stern is this grid of concrete, and in the middle, a rectangle has been cut out with nature in it. And this is exactly the pattern of those gates. The movement of the fabric is like the contained frame of nature, and so the installation is really all about the interface of nature and culture.”

Born in 1935 in Gabrovo, a Bulgarian town known ironically for its humor, Christo’s personal experiences with the prevailing political regime were so traumatic that, since leaving his homeland in 1957, he has never returned. At the same time, these experiences greatly informed his development as an artist. Fineberg related that after 1944, during Bulgaria’s transition to Communism, Christo’s father, Vladimir, was dispossessed of the chemical plant that he owned and was then rehired to run it. An accident occurred at the plant; he was blamed and sent to jail, and the government appropriated the family home and furniture. Later, in one surreal incident, Christo attended a performance at the local theater in which he spied the family’s possessions onstage, where they were being used as props. Nevertheless, he attended the art academy in Sofia, where his mother, Tsveta, worked as a secretary. “She knew a lot of Bulgarian artists who had been connected to Russian Constructivism,” Fineberg told me. “They came to the house all the time and talked about Tatlin and the great artists of Russia in the 1920s. She had a great library of Constructivist material, but it was of course contraband because it was abstract and not to be discussed.” As the regime became more brutal, however, Christo’s mother “became
scared enough that she burned the library,” an event that left a deep impression on her son.

In 1957, through an art teacher in Sofia who somehow obtained a ticket for him, 22-year-old Christo flew to Prague, where a family friend connected him with a theater director who was closely involved with Marxist theater, Berthold Brecht, and the Russian vanguard. One of Prague’s major connections with the West was its pharmaceutical industry. Red Cross trains transported pharmaceutical exports from Prague to Vienna, where they were shipped to points further west. By bribing a railway worker, Christo arrived in Vienna in a locked boxcar filled with drugs. From Vienna, where he was received by another family friend, a Bulgarian working at the art academy, he moved briefly to Geneva and then to Paris, where his training in the figurative techniques of Socialist Realism allowed him to earn a living as a portrait artist. “He was very skilled,” said Fineberg. “If someone wanted a portrait of their house in the style of Renoir or a family portrait in that of [the French painter, lithographer, and sculptor] Bernard Buffet [1928–99], he could and did do it.” Two people who approached Christo for a series of family portraits were Jeanne-Claude’s mother, Précilda, and step-father, Jacques de Guillbonne, head of the École Polytechnique and the fourth highest ranking general in France. “They started to really like him. Jeanne-Claude’s mother sort of adopted him. Of course, the character of the relationship changed once he became involved with Jeanne-Claude; he was a poor Bulgarian artist and they were aristocracy with different ideas [for their daughter].”

While difficult, there is no question that the circumstances of Christo’s young adult life proved a formative influence on his artwork. “He learned so much from different parts of this,” explained Fineberg. “For one thing, there was the extraordinary idealism of it [Communism, Constructivism, and Socialist Realism], which is definitely present in his works: the sense of a continuity existing between art and life, the notion that art was really interacting with society, that it was a kind of social education. And his work today is like that. It’s really about changing social perspectives or changing society—getting people to engage in a discourse about the reality of their world in a way that is not confined to an art museum. Christo has never had a dealer, and really doesn’t do much in art museums. He does things in public places. When he was in the Bulgarian art academy, the students were trained to be socially useful on the weekends, so they would go out to the rail lines along where the Orient Express ran through Bulgaria from London to Istanbul, which was the only way westerners ever saw Bulgaria
at that time, and the students would organize and stack produce and
farm equipment along the tracks to make the country appear prosper-
ous—like a Potemkin village. And this sense of collectivity, of working
with people, working with groups, building something in the public
space—these are things that feed directly into what he does today.”

“His ability to draw something to make it look real [is another fac-
tor],” Fineberg continued. “That Socialist Realist training was very rig-
orous. As a result, he is able draw something that is a completely bi-
zarre idea, like wrapping the Pont Neuf [Pont Neuf Wrapped, Paris;
1985], or the Reichstag in Berlin [Wrapped Reichstag, Berlin, 1971–
95], or running an eighteen-foot high fence [Running Fence], in such a
way that it has a believable reality. One of the things he learned was
that reality creates its own momentum. So when he presents an idea,
not only does the drawing look so real that you can visualize it happen-
ing, but he also surrounds himself with maps, engineering drawings, ae-
rial photographs—all kinds of things that make his art look like an en-
gineering project. It looks real. People start talking about it; it develops
a kind of public momentum and builds its own reality. And this comes
directly out of the experiences of his Bulgarian past. Also, Christo’s
projects always bring out city processes. The politics, mechanics, and
legal processes surrounding his installations become extremely visible,
so that people learn about their city and its mode of operating in a dif-
ferent way, and this has a profound political impact.”

Beyond Christo, Fineberg’s current scholarship involves two his-
torical compendia: the third edition of his now standard text, Art since
1940—Strategies of Being (Prentice-Hall), which he is in the process of
revising, and a kind of prequel to the same volume, Art in the West,
1880–1940: From Utopia to the End of History, which he is currently
writing. Art in the West will “much more significantly engage east
European material, because of the Russian avant garde,” he told me,
but “there will [also] be east European and Russian artists in [the re-
vised] Art since 1940, more probably than there were before. A major
figure in my mind is Ilya Kabakov, and the more time I spend with him
and looking at his work, the more major he seems.”

In 2005 Fineberg completed a catalogue about Ilya and Emilia Ka-
bakov and their new installation, The House of Dreams, which opened
in October in London. “It’s really fabulous,” Fineberg recounted enthu-
siastically. “He took the whole Serpentine Gallery and built an installa-
tion in it that looks like a hospital when you walk in—everything is ab-
solutely white. It’s based on [the Soviet architect Konstantin] Mel-
nikov’s 1929 Laboratory of Sleep—one of those crazy utopian projects
where the notion was to make Moscow’s workers more efficient by bringing them out to the country for these ‘rest cures,’ so that they would go back to the factory renewed.” Paradoxically, however, in a burst of collectivist zeal, this utopian retreat called for “5000 workers sleeping in a single room on rows of beds fastened to the floor. It was a completely ridiculous idea; they were going to pump in music and special atmosphere and completely mechanize this whole process. And Kabakov thought this was perfect material because he is deeply ironic. So he made this little hospital with these beds that look out into the park. In the middle are these rooms, with different ways of sleeping: in one you sleep very high up, looking out the window, and in another little room he made a lantern whose heat [causes it to] move around and cast fairytale figures on the curtain around the bed. It’s very funny and wonderful. So he will figure in the new edition of Art Since 1940 even more than he does already.”

More, indeed. During summer 2005 Fineberg team-taught a course at the Siebel Center for Computer Science with Kevin Hamilton (School of Art and Design) and Roy Campbell (Sohaib and Sara Abbasi Professor of Computer Science) that challenged students from art history, computer science, and graphic design to collaboratively devise their own, technology-based response to Palace of Projects, a Kabakov installation comprising 65 unfinished works employing an imaginative interplay of figures and text. Exhibited in London, Spain, Germany, and New York, the Palace is now on display in Essen, while the students’ effort, which they named Project 66, was on view this fall and winter in the Krannert Art Museum. He will spearhead a second, similar course, which will likely involve the nature of visualization and virtual reality, during summer 2006 with the New York-based artist Alice Aycock, who also created the large, geometrically complex, white sculpture that sits in front of the College of Education.

Yet another innovative project is When We Were Young: New Perspectives on the Art of the Child, a forthcoming exhibition of children’s drawings with accompanying book (to be published by University of California Press) that is an outgrowth of Fineberg’s earlier exhibit and book, The Innocent Eye: Children’s Art and the Modern Artist (Princeton University Press, 1997). While Innocent Eye established that renowned twentieth-century artists collected and were influenced by children’s drawings, it also made Fineberg realize that scholars had not really examined such drawings as artworks themselves. Rather, the literature looked to childhood art as a means of establishing norms of psychological development. “I also realized that we were asking com-
pletely the wrong questions about giftedness,” Fineberg said, “because people misunderstood it to be correlated to whether a child could render well, which is not at all the point. So I started thinking about this and began to study it. I looked at the childhood drawings of famous artists, and at historical children’s art that no one had ever seen before, including some amazing things that date to the sixteenth and seventeenth century. We make a lot of assumptions about child art based on modern material—we always assume that it is an ahistorical phenomenon.” By combining the juvenilia of famous artists, including that of some major eastern European figures, with historical children’s drawings, When We Were Young examines early visual gifts in a fresh way.

Together with the accompanying book and catalogue (University of California Press), this exhibit (opening at The Phillips June 17 and coming to the Krannert Art Museum in October) will also serve as the opening project of a new Center for the Study of Modern Art at The Phillips Collection. These developments herald a significant new partnership between the University and The Phillips Collection that has resulted directly from Fineberg’s role on the museum’s Board of Trustees, and with the assistance and vision of Chancellor Richard Herman. Founded by Duncan Phillips in the early 1920s, The Phillips Collection is the oldest museum of modern art in the country. For many decades it remained a family museum with a brilliant and ambitious curatorial staff that launched exhibitions similar to those of museums ten times larger. Housed in the Phillips mansion on Dupont Circle, the museum’s “warren of small rooms,” as Fineberg put it, features a roster of famous works by Renoir, Cezanne, Bonnard, Braque, and Klee, among many others. To this, an annex including a roomful of works by the Latvian-born American Abstract Expressionist painter Mark Rothko (1903–70) was added some years ago. In Fineberg’s words, “While everything else is beginning to look like a bank or a bus station, The Phillips has remained a living room in which you can have an intimate encounter with works of the highest possible quality. There is a sense of intimacy about the space that will never and should never change.”

When two townhouses adjoining the mansion came up for sale last year, the museum’s director, Jay Gates, and Trustees decided to expand. Behind the townhouse facades now stand a new building, restaurant, courtyard and a renovated carriage house accommodating a 27-million-dollar state-of-the-art facility that should be fully operational by June. This includes an art and technology laboratory, sculpture garden, 180-seat lecture hall, enlarged library and archive, and the carriage house (the new Study Center), comprising a studio, a seminar room, and Cen-
A full-time Illinois faculty member will be hired to teach a regular lecture course and graduate seminars there, while Phillips staff will also teach seminars, and two half-time artists will be appointed to teach art classes. Thus, starting as soon as fall 2006 Illinois students may take advantage of a full-time semester- or year-long program at the Center. Student internships will also be made available.

Center courses will be designed to take advantage of current exhibits. For those interested in Russian and east European art, fall 2006 will witness two pertinent, temporary exhibitions. The first, *The Société Anonyme: Modernism for America*, will feature 138 rarely displayed works from the Société Anonyme Collection, some of which are owned by the Yale University Art Gallery and some by Phillips. Compiled with the advice of the French Dadaist painter Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968) by a Connecticut collector named Katherine Dreier, the collection boasts vanguard works from all over eastern Europe, including those of Vasily Kandinsky and the Romanian-born French abstract sculptor Constantin Brancusi (1876–1957). In conjunction with this show, 19 prints by the Russian artist El Lissitzky (1890–1941) will comprise a second exhibit, *El Lissitzky: Constructs for a Brave New World*. These prints constitute the contents of two lithographic portfolios, one featuring designs for a futurist opera with libretto by poet Alexei Kruchenykh called *Victory over the Sun* (in one version, set to music by futurist composer Mikhail Matyushin with costumes and stage settings by Malevich), and the other, for the artist’s *Proun* project (Project for the Affirmation of the New), which placed abstract objects in a spherical, utopian, Suprematist space in which the constraints of conventional perspective or orientation are absent. Both shows will run from 14 October 2006 to 21 January 2007.

Just as Christo and Kabakov reach beyond the spatial and social constraints of the conventional museum in creating multidimensional artworks rich in social commentary, so too do Fineberg’s teaching and research bridge disparate disciplines and look beyond the conventional scholarly wisdom to attain novel perspectives—on history, the creative process, and the world around us. For him, the presence of art can powerfully alter the presence and significance of place, including that of our own campus. “We need something on this campus to symbolize how we’re different,” Fineberg explained. “I just met with Harris Lewin, head of the Institute for Genomic Biology, who understands that [there should be] a sculpture in front of his building which is just as stimulating and interesting as the science inside—that this will inspire the campus to begin collecting first-rate public art and mark the place
in a new way. At the moment we have . . . no real respect for what distinguishes the appearance of this university. We have a beautiful place, but don’t really allow ourselves to look at it.” Changing this might begin, Fineberg suggested, with enhancing the visibility of the historic farms and prairie lands surrounding the University, strategically placing high-quality commissioned sculpture around campus, and removing the mediocre works with which it has been littered from the past. One noteworthy aspect of the Illinois–Phillips partnership is that the Krannert Art Museum will be able to borrow from The Phillips Collection, giving the campus access to artworks that the University could never otherwise display. In 2007 this may include twelve panels from the *Migration Series* of the African-American artist Jacob Lawrence (1917–2000), whom Fineberg described as “one of the twentieth century’s greatest history painters.” Or perhaps it might begin with the architecture for the Krannert North facility proposed by Krannert Center for the Performing Arts director Mike Ross. “The Kabakovs did a design for an ideal city, [one] devoted to the encouragement of creativity—it’s all about inspiring people to creativity and cosmic thoughts. This proposal would be perfect for Krannert North—for this notion of building a center which is at the interface of the arts and technical science disciplines on campus.” Noting that other universities such as North Carolina and Wisconsin are currently establishing major art centers, and that this is something that Illinois, too, needs to consider, he added, “I’d love for the University to start acquiring public art and architecture of Ilya Kabakov’s calibre. He would love to come and build the utopian city here. Instead of getting an architect like everyone else has, we would have something really unique.”

Twenty-first century ideas for a twenty-first century university: this is one utopia that we should all hope becomes reality.

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*For further information about study or internships at The Phillips Collection Center for the Study of Modern Art, see:*  
http://www.art.uiuc.edu/projects/phillips/.