

Delegates from around the world tour `The Gates' and meet the artists

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February 17, 2005, 2:51 PM EST

NEW YORK -- Artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude told delegates from around the world who toured "The Gates" on Thursday that they want people to think of their projects as a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

"We love these words: Once upon a time there was `The Gates' in Central Park. Once in a lifetime and never again," Jeanne-Claude said at a reception for "sister city" delegates at the Boathouse in Central Park.

She said the special aesthetic quality flowing through "The Gates" and their other projects is "love and tenderness," borne out of the works' temporary nature.

About 100 delegates from Beijing, Budapest, Cairo, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, London, Madrid, Rome, Santo Domingo and Tokyo made the trip as part of the Sister City Program of the City of New York. Their two-day cultural experience was also to include a visit to the newly expanded Museum of Modern Art on Friday.

They appeared to be charmed by Christo and Jeanne-Claude, whom they peppered with questions during the reception after taking a walk through "The Gates."

The 16-day public art installation, which ends Feb. 27, features 7,500 gates of saffron-colored fabric swaying in the breeze along 23 miles of the park's footpaths.

"It creates a space for your imagination. It really does look like a river of light," said one delegate, Steven Sacks, Johannesburg's director of arts and culture. "It interacts with you."

The artists are known worldwide for their monumental temporary works of art, which include surrounding 11 islands in Miami with pink woven fabric in 1982; wrapping silver fabric around the German Reichstag in 1995; and opening 3,100 umbrellas in Japan and California in 1991.

The delegates, composed of cultural and civic leaders, were amused by Christo's description of how he and Jeanne-Claude scouted out the park for just the right placement of the fabric-draped frames.

"We walked 100 miles and went through three pairs of shoes to pinpoint the place where each gate would be good," Christo told the gathering. "It's a human project. All our

projects are very dynamic. They stir emotion because of the cloth."

Christo said he and Jeanne-Claude have strolled through the park everyday since the exhibit opened, and that the response from the public has been very positive _ with the lone exception of one man who greets them daily with a negative comment.

At the Boathouse, there was no such negativity.

"It enhances its beauty. The color of orange adds something joyful, playful, funny and charming," said Michael Levin, an art and architectural historian from Jerusalem.

"The transformation of the park is amazing," he added.

Nobuhiro Ishihara, an artist and former curator of the Tokyo Wonder Site, a public art space, said he had been eager to see "The Gates" because "I wanted to learn how people perceive public art, the positives and the negatives. I see this work as a new art form because it's in a traditional park ... with the audience participating."

"It is so wonderful for New York," said Veronica Kelly, an officer of the Sister City Program of the City of New York. "It has brought people together and has brought people from around the world here to experience our great city."

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