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## The Gates of Heaven? No--the Park

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“The Gates,” the latest public art exhibition in Central Park, unfurled Saturday, and people from New York City and the world—including Columbia University’s Art Initiative—took notice.

The 16-day exhibit 26 years in the making includes festoons from 59th Street to 110th Street, boasting 7,500 fluttering saffron nylon panels. Artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude are internationally famous for their large-scale temporary public art projects.

“Although 60th and 5th has always been a venue for public art,” said New York City Parks Commissioner Adrian Benepe, “the Park has had a modest history, and never anything encompassing its full 833 acres.”

The installation, while beneficial to the artists, is also expected to benefit the Park and City at large. During the second week of the exhibition, the International Olympic Committee will visit New York to assess the city’s ability to manage a large scale event like the 2012 Summer Olympic Games. “The Gates,” which will attract international and domestic tourists, could be an effective way for the city to showcase its ability to handle a surge of visitors.

According to Benepe, the New York City Economic Development Corporation estimates that visitors coming to the city to see “The Gates” will generate \$2 million in tax income and an overall \$80 million economic benefit to the city. Similarly, NYC & Co., the city’s tourism agency, projected that 50,000 hotel rooms will be booked each night for the next 16 days.

The project comes at no expense to the city. Christo and Jeanne-Claude underwrote the cost of the \$21 million project without sponsorship or donations, and gave \$3 million for the city’s agencies to split between the Central Park Conservancy and the Parks Department. The CPC, a private, not-for-profit organization that manages the park, and an organization called Nurture New York’s Nature will also be awarded all of the proceeds generated from “The Gates” merchandise.

“We’ve been out here since 7:30 a.m., and so far the merchandise has been meeting expectations. We’re already out of a lot of our items,” said Beth Donovan, director of marketing for the CPC, at 9:30 a.m. on Saturday.

Despite efforts to minimize the work’s environmental impact, which was a key factor in the exhibition’s 26-year delay, and to keep the cross-town transverses, drives, and bridal paths gate-free,

Benepe said there are downsides to the project.

“It makes it slightly more challenging for police to get around, but it is an extremely modest inconvenience,” Benepe said. “Our highest priority is safety to park users. Invariably there will be some sort of damage that must be fixed. And that’s something that we and the public sector always worry about and will worry about until it is removed.”

The task of installing and removing of the gates falls to approximately 600 of the 1,000 total paid volunteers employed by the artists. Sixty teams of 10 hoisted and opened the fabric over the weekend.

“The turnout has been big,” said Piero Mannara, a native Italian now living in New York and member of one of the installation crews. “It’s beautiful and it’s been a great experience seeing them go up. You are able to discover the park in a completely different way.”

This historic event is not going unnoticed by Columbia. While “The Gates” are displayed, the Columbia University Arts Initiative is sponsoring free bus trips to Central Park, sometimes guided by Columbia professors.

“It occurred to me that putting up a few buses might draw some attention to the project, which didn’t seem to be on anyone’s radar two weeks ago. People are flying in from all over the world, and I imagine many students will get down on their own,” said, Gregory Mosher, director of the Arts Initiative, a Columbia initiative to promote undergraduate interest in the arts.

“I’m from New Jersey, and we don’t have any public art or anything like this,” Rachel Gerson, BC ’08, said after viewing “The Gates” early Saturday morning. “This is a first for me and I think it’s really beautiful and am really excited to be here.”

A familiar face amid the crowd of visitors in the park was former New York City Parks Commissioner Henry Stern, who served for 15 years under Mayors Edward Koch and Rudolph Giuliani. He opposed “The Gates” project for 20 years due to environmental, seasonal, and internal structural concerns.

Christo and Jeanne-Claude “are much more accomplished now than they were then,” Stern said. “They’ve done a lot of exhibitions all over the world and this is a fitting climax to their career.”

He added, ““The Gates’ are not an ideal use of parkland. It is an encroachment and an intrusion, but it’s an acceptable one. Central Park has been around for 160 years and it can take a lot, including this.”

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