

FEBRUARY 18, 2005

FRIDAY

TEMPO

SECTION 5

CHICAGO TRIBUNE

5

# A diary: New York City just wild about saffron

Leigh Bienen, a senior lecturer at Northwestern University School of Law, was in New York City this week to be a monitor for the installation of Christo and Jeanne-Claude's "The Gates." Here is her diary of her days there.

## Feb. 12: Opening day.

The colors of Central Park in February are dark and dreary, and the saffron orange — of "The Gates" is the opposite of dreary. No other color could have brought so much contrast to the winter hues.

There isn't a straight line in the design, except the design of the frame itself, and that is what makes "The Gates" so arresting. From the top of a rock, or a turn in the path, you can look out and see "The Gates" repeating, marching up and down along with the land. Sometimes they give the illusion of being lined up in a row, forming a flat repeating pattern. That's the charm. Every vista creates a new pattern.

At 8:31 a.m., Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg raised a long metal pole and hooked the loop of saffron fabric, which released the first banner. Much of New York City is out today to see the unfurling, and the word "unfurling" is on everybody's lips. Half the fun of "The Gates" is listening to all the conversations. From, "I just don't get it," to, "It's so beautiful."

The workers are amazingly efficient. Those who lifted the 640-pound bases, those who screwed in place the huge poles and crossbars have accomplished a work worthy to stand alongside the Empire State Building. Workers drive by in rented trucks and pick up the cardboard cylinders and their saffron cocoons. It all gets done. By noon all have been unfurled, backed up against one another.

## Feb. 13: First day as a monitor

We are told to report at 7:30 a.m. to the Central Park Boat House. This is Command Central for the project. Christo and Jeanne-Claude, the directors, and the head of the Central Park Conservancy all tell us about the spirit of the park and our stewardship. Now that the Project is up, our job is to interact with the public, to answer ques-



Leigh Bienen checks out "The Gates" this week in Central Park. Her duties as a monitor include answering visitors' questions.

tions, to unfurl the tangled ones with a long pole with a tennis ball on the end. And to smile. This is a public works project, as well as a public art project. Everything is organized. With more than 640 installation workers and 340 monitors, the Project had better be organized.

The park is divided into areas, and the areas into sections. I am assigned to the top of the park, Area 7, Section 4, at the north end of the park in Harlem, where 110th Street meets 5th Avenue and across to Central Park West. My colleagues and I, a student, an artist, a film production worker, get onto one of the school buses that transports us.

When we arrive in Harlem, the sun is shining, the sky is blue and the intrepid are out. Several of the banners have wrapped themselves around the top bar during the night, and we have to unfurl them. This is

harder than it looks. When we manage to unfurl one and release it back to its proper place, by lifting it over the top with the long pole with the tennis ball, a small crowd gathers and often claps or cheers. This is an interactive work of art, after all.

It is not just the installation itself that is saffron, but ordinary buildings have been decorated with saffron banners. Bright orange hats, saffron pants and boots. Orange scarves are tied around the necks of New Yorkers with this year's characteristic knot — looped in half then threaded through — in keeping with the spirit of "The Gates," which is about looping and threading and winding of orange.

Taking art out of the museum, taking art out of the picture frame, a sculpture that moves and dances, and responds to the viewer. What does that sound like? Millennium Park! Both are

open-to-the-public works that invite people to play and invoke the laughter of delight. This is the art of the present and the future.

The work of art is in our time frame, for us. It breathes with us. The art is the experience of walking through "The Gates." The art is the interaction between the people walking in the park and seeing themselves in the mirror. The art is the vision of rippling saffron banners, echoed in scarves and hats, and everyone's step is a little quicker; everyone's eyes are a little sharper for the gift given to the city of New York. It will only be visible in time and space for less than a month, but it will remain in the mind's eye and as remembered images for a very long time.

## Feb. 14: Now they call it apricot

The weather is cold and damp, and the workers arrive to find

ric samples, one of our jobs is to pick up any trash or litter, and we are vigilant. There is not much, an occasional cigarette butt. None of "The Gates" has been defaced or mistreated.

## Feb. 15: Green mixes with saffron

Today the sun is shining. The banners are waving. Even the grass is shining green. Several banners are wrapped around the poles, requiring the pole with tennis ball maneuver. Jack reports he has disentangled 38.

The ducks and geese are back swimming in the water. People want to talk. They have opinions about "The Gates," especially about the color. Most think it is not saffron. If by saffron we are thinking of the color of Eastern rice. People want to talk about the plan to recycle everything. They want to know how much everything costs, and why the gates aren't red, or multicolored stripes.

"The Gates" has reminded everyone of the intricacy and beauty of Frederick Law Olmsted's original design. The park's ingenuity is accentuated by the superimposition of the marching Gates. Many people are glad that sales of T-shirts and other merchandise will go to benefit the Park Conservancy and other organizations devoted to the environment and the parks of New York.

It's beautiful, says a smartly dressed woman, but I'm not sure it's art. I guess she means art with a capital A. I've heard others say that too. If art is measured by the complexity of its design, by the originality of its plan, the delicacy of execution, by the amount of effort, time and ingenuity required for completion, then "The Gates" meets the degree of difficulty test. So does Central Park.

If art is to amuse, to delight, to educate, to take us from ourselves, to make us dream, to kindle the imagination, "The Gates" passes the smile test. A woman who is a movement therapist tells me she has friends in the same line of work who are coming over the next few days from Germany, England and Spain to watch how others move under the waving banners. She says she can hardly wait until they all get here when they will walk, together, through "The Gates."

Photo for the Tribune by Justin Lane