

The Writer Monika Maron Comments on the Popularity of Christo and Jeanne-Claude's Wrapped Reichstag (July 3, 1995)

Abstract

The East German writer Monika Maron was pleasantly surprised by the effect of Cristo and Jeanne-Claude's wrapped Reichstag. The spectacle attracted hundreds of thousands of visitors and helped the public come to terms with the decision to move the Bundestag into the Reichstag, a restored Wilhelmine structure that stood for the failure of the Weimar Republic.

Source

A Gigantic Plaything

The Berlin writer Monika Maron on life with Christo's wrapped Reichstag

In 1984, when Michael S. Cullen, Christo's deputy in Berlin (of course he was also Jean-Claude's deputy, but nobody talked about it back then), first told me about Christo's plans to wrap the Reichstag, I couldn't – if memory serves me right – find anything odd about it. The absurdity of the Berlin Wall could not be surpassed, only added to, and wrapping an empty parliament building standing in its shadow with sheets of fabric struck me as perfectly logical.

In 1994, when wrapping or not-wrapping the Reichstag had swelled into a question of national identity, one requiring a Bundestag decision, it seemed ridiculous to me that after [wrapping] the Pont Neuf, the Australian coast, and a few islands in the Atlantic, he would now wrap the small Reichstag as well.

When the time had finally come, I found myself more in the skeptics' camp, also because the tone of the discussion – either for Christo or nationalist and philistine – had pushed me there.

Here I am writing as a convert. It's beautiful, it's fun; ever since Christo wrapped the Reichstag, Berlin has been a different city. It needed that.

And it doesn't matter whether the Reichstag is beautiful or ugly, whether it has this or that kind of history, whether or not it's being alienated. If you want to alienate something in downtown Berlin these days, it's best to leave it the way it is. Christo has wrapped the Reichstag, and his message is: Come one, come all.

Berlin suddenly has a market square, says M. It reminds me of a shroud, says C. As though a UFO has landed, says K. A gigantic plaything, I say. Everyone can find what he's looking for and can forget what newspapers and television have drilled into him for weeks in preparation for the coming artistic delight. Only my friend, the painter Nikolai Makarov, says nothing. He's probably wondering why one person is allowed to make an entire parliament building disappear under fabric, while thus far he has been allowed to install his marvelous Venetian-red Makarov room only in the Kröchlendorfer Schloß, even though room for it could be found in any row house, provided that artistically inclined people lived there.

Christo's richly symbolic move was subject to a lot of interpretation as long as it remained only an idea, which was pointless in so far as one meaning could be as easily imputed to it as another. Whether the Reichstag would be elevated or diminished by the wrapping, whether it would finally disappear, at least

temporarily, or in fact become actually visible, was left to the fancy of whoever was doing the talking. That the wrapped Reichstag, once it existed, would itself create meaning was probably least expected.

There it stands in its strange costume, awaiting the ideas of those who look at it, a colossal A that challenges the rest of the alphabet. Some sing, others drum, still others juggle, some kiss, most take pictures. At night you can have the floodlights project you as a giant shadow against the portal, and if you climb onto someone's shoulders, you can easily climb over the roof.

On Sunday, it was announced via radio that hordes of night-time visitors had broken through the barriers in front of the west façade in the early morning hours, and that this had left security personnel fearing the worst. But this storm on the Reichstag had been triggered merely by uncontrollable curiosity. They wanted to touch it, says one member of the security staff. The urge to touch it, just like children want to touch and feel an animal or something unknown, evidently overpowers everyone, including me.

The good mood spread by the thing comes from sheer high spirits. Someone remained faithful to a crazy idea for twenty-four years so that in the end he could put this beautiful and sparkling absurdity on a field for us. If that's possible, a lot of other things must be possible, too.

It would seem that Berlin was eagerly awaiting this message of levity. The city – whose long since eliminated subsidies are still the envy of sheltered suburbanites in the rest of the Republic, who also charged the city with lachrymosity, without having a clue of how people lived outside of their own well-ordered world – is taxed by the obligations of unification like none other. Not only is the PDS headquartered in Berlin but also the Russian and Asian mafias. Whatever is coming from the East gets washed up here, and not much good can be detected among it at this time. Berlin is in the process of losing the rest of its already debated charm.

Suddenly, in the middle of the ill-tempered hustle and bustle, enticing and fleeting like a *fata morgana*, there stands Christo's wrapped Reichstag, and Berliners are doing what the Senate is trying in vain to teach its public sector employees in continuing education courses: they are smiling. Within the precinct around the Reichstag, they are everything they are accused of not being: metropolitan, peaceful, relaxed, even polite, as though they were using the wrapping as a projection surface for everything they miss in their city and in themselves.

Berlin has turned the wrapping of the Reichstag into a party, because it needed a party. Had it needed a scandal, maybe it would have become a scandal. Of course, so much radiating harmony is suspect to some people, and someone like me can find herself accused of philistinism a second time: the first time because I was not a supporter of the wrapping, and now because I like it.

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