

Art

CHRISTO'S UMBRELLA FIELDS

REMEMBER THE ARTIST

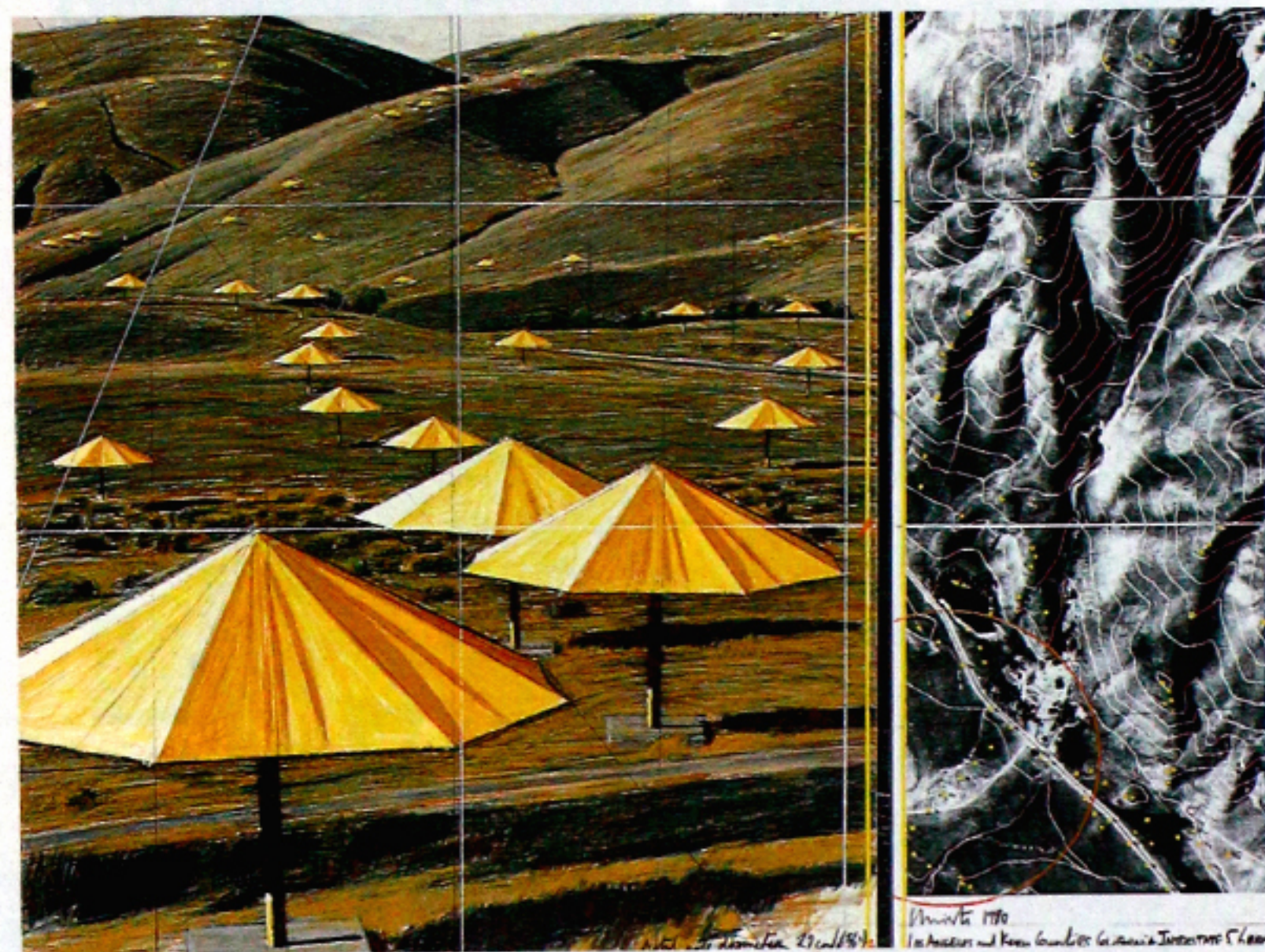
who transformed our coastline to resemble a piece of archaeological gift wrapping?

The Wrapped Coast was perhaps the first time Australians became aware of its creator, Bulgarian-born artist Christo. It may seem like yesterday, but it was 21 years ago that the artist came to Sydney to do this controversial wrap-up, encouraged by an invitation from Sydney textile businessman, John Kaldor.

This year Christo is once again visiting Sydney in response to a Kaldor art project — a retrospective of Christo's work.

I spoke to him from his New York studio, immersed in a project involving the creation and installation of thousands of umbrellas, in Japan and the United States.

As Christo explains, this will find umbrellas — coloured blue in Ibaraki (Japan) and yellow in



California — meandering the landscape simultaneously for 18 kilometres in Japan and 25 kilometres in the United States scheduled to be completed in October 1991.

Christo aims to suggest a comparison between the way people use space in the two countries across the Pacific. "The simultaneous nature of the work is essential to demonstrate the differences of how people move and exist in Japan and the United States.

"Space is dramatically different in the Western world from that in a country where 120 million Japanese live on eight percent of the country's surface — [Japan] being a prohibitively mountainous country.

"For instance in Japan, the umbrellas will be more regulated, controlled and saturated. In California with their immense space, and outdoor life, the umbrellas will go in all directions. They will seem whimsical and

arbitrary, engaging the greatness and availability of space in America."

Like many of his works to date including *Running Fence*, *Surrounded Islands*, *Pont Neuf Wrapped* — this poetic event will have a temporary lifespan, in this



case three weeks. "We will be leasing the land over a period of six weeks, one week for installation, three for exhibition and two for removal."

Christo chose umbrellas as his medium because they are "indépendent and have strong connotations of the man-made structure of rooftops. They are like houses without walls and look like temporary settlements. The poetical colonisation of space has a strong nomadic character. My umbrella opens in less than one minute and is reminiscent of Tibetan tribes who settle overnight. Umbrellas can reflect the availability of space."

For the sites he chose two inland valleys because "They have everyday elements and are not touristic attractions or



golden temples, but life is passing through them casually."

They will be placed near a network of main roads and urban thoroughfares so people may



**LEFT: THE
PONT NEUF
WRAPPED,
PARIS
(1975-85).
RIGHT:
SURROUNDED
ISLANDS,
BISCAYNE BAY,
GREATER
MIAMI, FLORIDA
(1980-83)**

choose to stop their cars to walk amongst or sit under their billowing fabric — they have been designed with an excess of material so that they will move and billow with an energy all of their own,” says the artist.

“People can come into the shelter which is luminous. Shadow and light are passing through the octagonal shape of the umbrella.” Each six-metre-high umbrella (with an 8.7 metre diameter) will be formed from nylon fabric with an aluminium super-structure and steel base which will be anchored onto the soil so there is no interference with the natural landscape, says Christo.

As always, this Christo enterprise is no mean undertaking. Presently a chief engineer and eight advisers are working on finalising the umbrella design. There will be 1700 umbrellas in the United States and 1300 in Japan. The project has involved pursuing an array of government agencies. In L.A. and Kern

counties, nine different government permits are required. In the United States permission has to be granted from 29 and in Japan no less than 437 land owners.

When it comes to categorising his work, Christo says he has many a critic in a quandary. “Some critics discuss my projects as architecture, some as urban planning, others as sculpture. Of course it has elements of all of these. The temporariness is part of its radicality ... One of the most important elements of the work is that it cannot be commer-

cialised, cannot be bought.”

In order to pay for the \$20 million cost of this temporary work, Christo generates money from sales of the preliminary sketches, collages, sculptures and scale-models.

He proudly announces he does not obtain any government assistance — his own corporation rustles up the finances, as well as organising the production line needed for his projects. “Twenty years ago my wife Jeanne-Claude set up a corporation to build projects, and sell works of art. This corporation organises specialist contractors, engineers and lawyers. For instance the umbrellas project has 1200 workers in California and 1000 workers in Japan all organised by Jeanne-Claude.”

He says that all his projects have one major thing in common

— that they appropriate sites that usually do not belong to art. “I am borrowing space not usually considered artist’s space — for instance in *Pont Neuf Wrapped I*

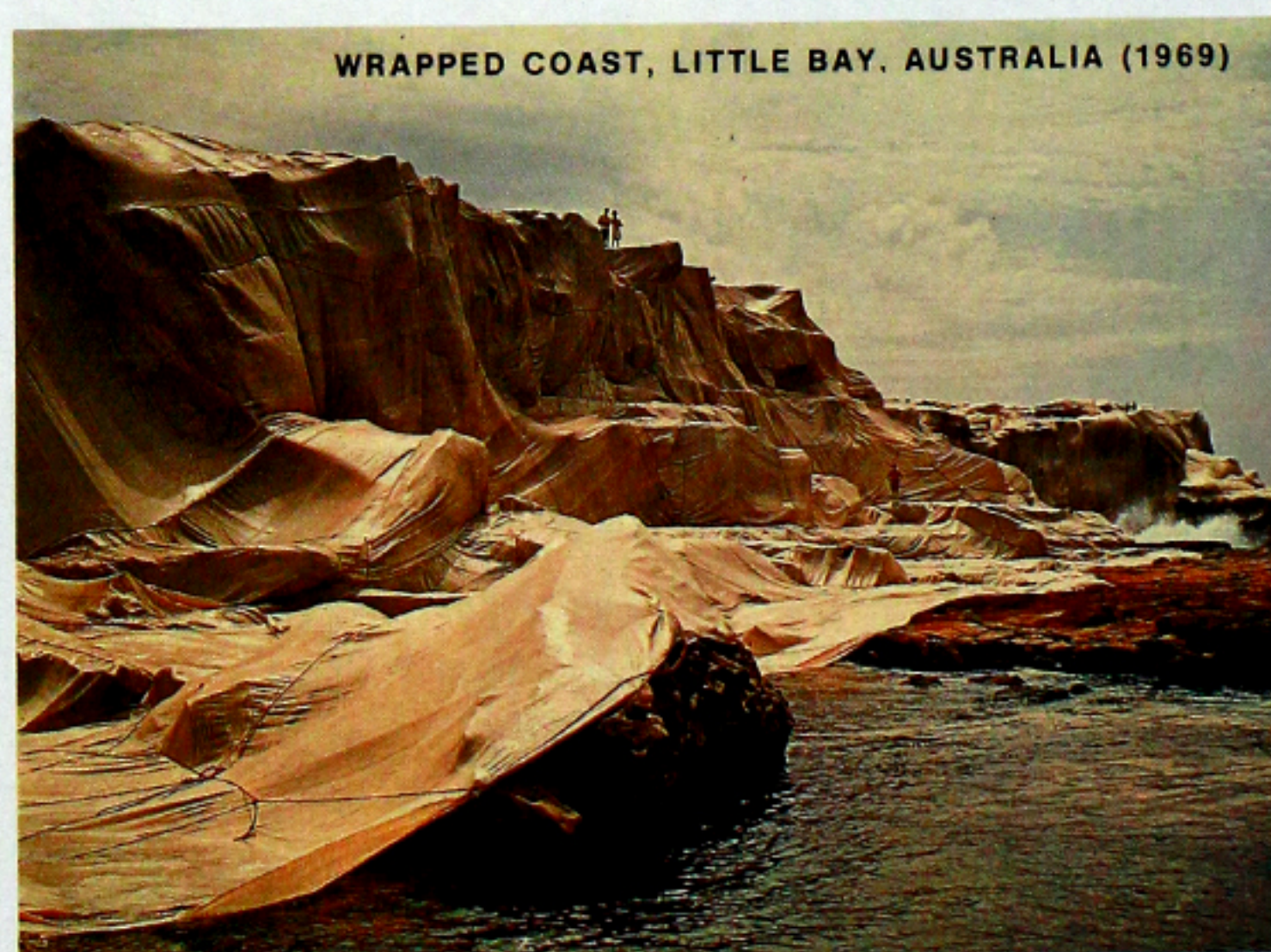


borrowed space from a bridge, and in doing so I am transforming a bridge into a work of art, appropriating all the qualities which belong to the most successful urban design.”

Although Christo has been working along these lines for some time now, he says his projects are not getting any easier. “In 1972 I wanted to wrap the Reichstag, the last refusal from Chancellor Helmut Kohl was three years ago.”

The exhibition *Christo* will be on view at the Art Gallery Of New South Wales from 12 September to 11 November. ●

ANNE HOWELL



WRAPPED COAST, LITTLE BAY, AUSTRALIA (1969)