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“The Territory of the Rest”: Rethinking the Ocean Through Art

Western thought has historically conceptualized the ocean as a secondary space, often defined by what it is not: land. Old maps reveal an evolution of the representation of lands while the oceanic space remains vague, without precise limits. Ocean can therefore be considered as the “territory of the rest”: an undefined zone, hard to limit, master and even represent.

Two pieces of art can be conjured up to shed lights on two opposite visions on the question of limits applied to the ocean: *Litte Bay* by Christo and Jeanne-Claude, 1969 and *Variable depth, shallow water* by Izabela Pluta, 2022.

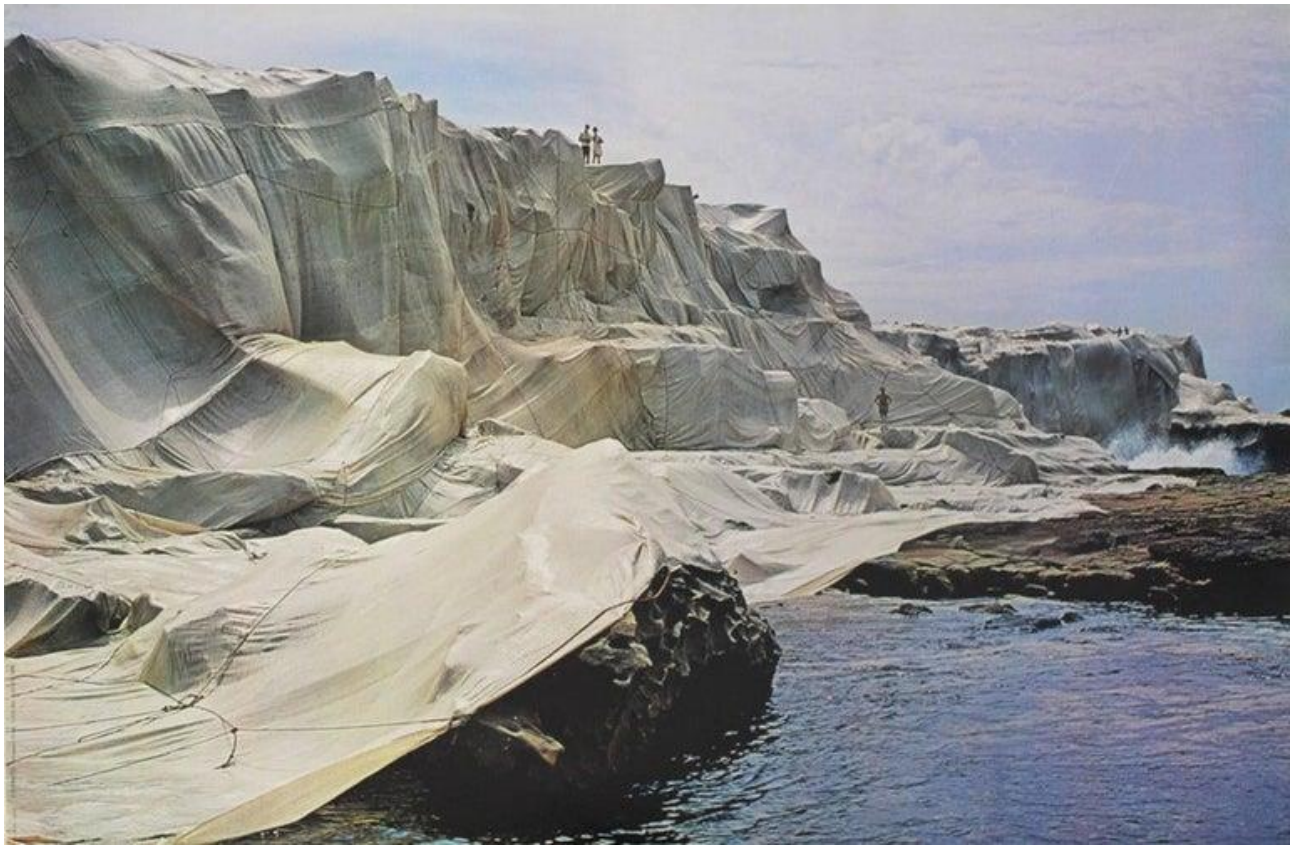
The question of scale in those works is central. Christo and Jeanne-Claud are facing the ocean on its own terms by embracing the landscape monumentality. The physical presence of the spectator is therefore necessary to truly experience rather than seeing the performance. Izabela Pluta, on the other hand, adopts a more analytical method, working with the tools (maps, data, satellite imagery) that Western science developed to reduce the ocean to a measurable surface. By deconstructing these tools, she reveals the ocean as a living, unstable space ecologically jeopardized.

To go further than artistic strategies, those two works can reflect a philosophical framework, especially the traditional opposition between nature and culture. In Enlightenment philosophy, nature is defined as existing independently of humans, while culture encapsulates what humans shape and control. Jean-Jacques Rousseau summarized it with this sentence: “Everything we do not have at our birth, and which we do not need for survival, is the product of education and society.” This quote clearly illustrates a dualistic vision in which culture stands in contrast to the natural world, and where human identity is defined through a distancing from nature.
Both works challenge this discrepancy: *Little Bay*, despite using industrial materials, remains ephemeral and still very small in

comparison to the whole ocean. On the other hand, *Variable depth, shallow water* does not reject culture, but rather tries to redefine it, presenting the ocean as a collective memory and a shared responsibility.

The ocean is far from being an undefined space and it is actually a very complex and political one. Those two works of art invite us to change our perspectives on the ocean and think of it not as a simple margin.

Christo and Jeanne Claude: *Little Bay*, Aus, 1969



Christo 15/30

Pluta, Izabela, Blue Assembly, Oceanic Thinking; *Variable depth, shallow water*, 2022