

RANCHO BODEGA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Christo and Jeanne-Claude: Running Fence at 50 Years

by Pete Golis, *The Press Democrat*, March 15, 2026



Alvin Jornada, Press Democrat

a photograph of the running fence shows where the art installation enters the Pacific Ocean near Bodega Bay

In what it calls “a landmark exhibit,” the Museum of Sonoma County announced that it will celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Running Fence. For people who were not here — or who weren’t born yet — the summertime exhibit will be an opportunity to learn how world-class artists came to town in pursuit of a vision that seemed preposterous — until it wasn’t. Imagine a shining white curtain, 18-feet high, serpentine over the flaxen hills of September — from Meham Hill, near Cotati, to the Pacific Ocean, a distance of 24.5 miles.

The fence disappeared over one hilltop, only to reappear on the next and the next. If you were there, you remember the interplay of light and sound, as the translucent panels flapped in the breeze.

The Running Fence was a feat of engineering as well as a work of art. It was constructed of 240,000 square yards of fabric, 90 miles of steel cable, 2,050 steel poles and 13,000 earth

anchors. “There’s no book to tell you how to build a 24-mile-long nylon fence,” said one project engineer. An 8-by-12 sketch, this was not.

The artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude, partners in art and in marriage, accomplished what seemed impossible to the doubters — and the doubters were legion.

CHRISTO'S FENCE

But few who saw the Running Fence remained in the doubtful category. As the retired Press Democrat columnist and Sonoma County historian Gaye LeBaron wrote, “Those among us who had been, pardon the pun, sitting on the fence about this art form, were captivated.”

They were an unlikely pair, the Bulgarian-born Christo Javacheff and Jeanne-Claude, his Algerian-born wife and collaborator.

They would meet in Paris and then travel the world, producing stunning conceptual art projects — the Valley Curtain in Colorado, the Umbrellas in Japan, the Gates in New York City’s Central Park, the Wrapped Reichstag in Berlin, the Surrounded Islands in Florida, the Wrapped Pont Neuf in Paris ... 24 in all.

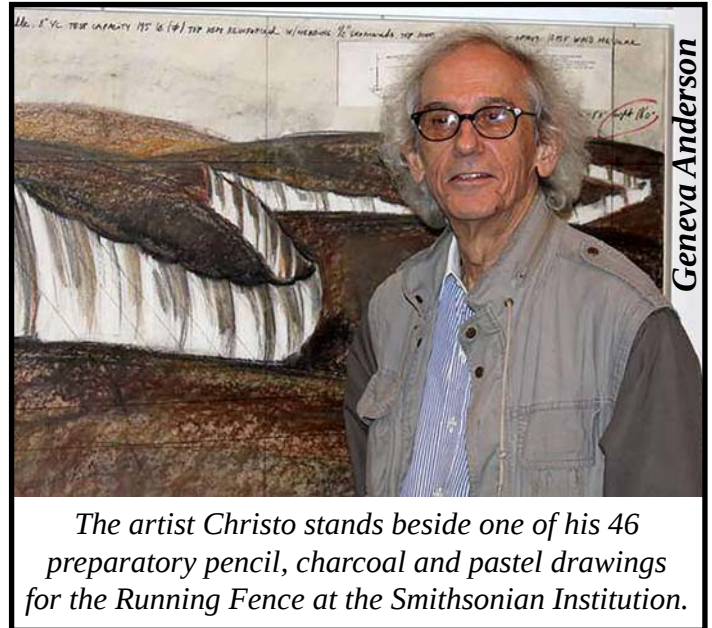
But it’s the Running Fence in Sonoma and Marin counties that occupies a special place in local history.

In its announcement, the museum noted, “The project became world famous, and is an iconic part of North Bay culture and history.”

In 1977, the New Yorker magazine described it as “one of the most ambitious and controversial art projects of the last decade.”

As they sought permission to use the west county landscape, Christo and Jeanne-Claude would charm local ranchers, who began as skeptics but soon became supporters and lifelong friends.

One rancher would tell the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors, “I don’t know anything about art, but I like these folks.” The son of another rancher recalled the day that Christo and Jeanne-Claude came knocking.



The artist Christo stands beside one of his 46 preparatory pencil, charcoal and pastel drawings for the Running Fence at the Smithsonian Institution.

Oh, it’s some hippies who want to build a fence for us,” the rancher later told his family. “I told them, ‘We build our own fences.’”

The rancher would later join other ranchers as champions of the artists (whose project would require agreements from 59 property owners).

More than a year of governmental hearings would follow in a process that would become its own commentary on the bureaucratic nature of California government. Fifteen agencies claimed some jurisdiction.

Environmentalists opposed the project because they said it would interfere with wildlife migration and cause traffic jams.

Christo and Jeanne-Claude would say the support and the opposition, the sketches and engineering, the endless hearings, the project itself, the litigation, the documentary films, the books and museum exhibits — all of it — were part of what they called “the ultimate art project.”

CHRISTO'S FENCE



John LeBaron, Press Democrat

Running Fence crosses Highway 1 at Valley Ford.

CHRISTO'S FENCE

After construction crews erected the fence, it remained in place for only two weeks. But people who saw it will never forget this one-of-a-kind testament to the creative spirit and human ingenuity, not to mention courage and persistence.

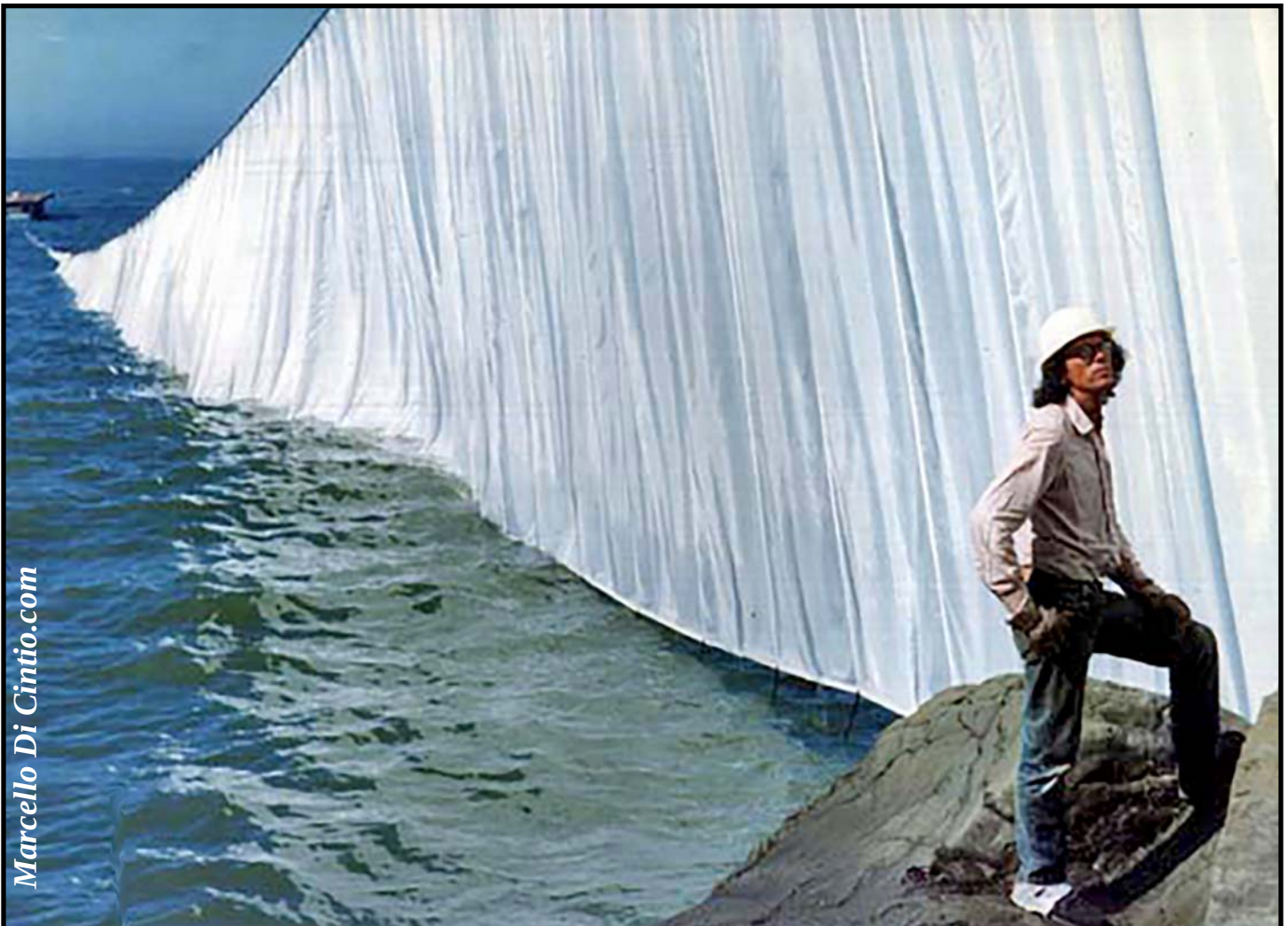
On the 40th anniversary of the project, one worker told a museum audience that she remembered sunrise on the day the Running Fence was extended — without the obligatory Coastal Commission permit — into the ocean. “It makes me cry,” she said. “It was so beautiful.”

“It has a quality of love and tenderness that is reserved for things that do not last,” said Jeanne-

Claude. She died in 2009, and Christo, in 2020. But, as this summer’s museum exhibit reminds us, people who saw their work of art will never forget it. The Running Fence was beautiful and amazing, and we will never see anything like it again.

I shared this story 10 years ago, but it seems worth sharing again.

When Christo made his first visit to The Press Democrat newsroom, he arrived clutching an armload of drawings, blueprints, sketches and legal documents. Word of his fantastic intentions preceded him, leaving people both skeptical and curious.



Marcello Di Cintio.com

CHRISTO'S FENCE



Wolfgang Volz, Courtesy of Christo 1976

You were amazed, stunned or confused by Christo's "Running Fence," a 24.5-mile-long 18-foot tall wall of fabric that ran from Cotati to the ocean.

"I believe art is beyond aesthetic premises," Christo told his interviewer that day. "I believe art is incredible social, political and economic consciousness. We are more and more responsive to our neighbors."

"I root my work under our big society of today," he went on. "That makes many artists uncomfortable, artists with 19th century feelings who like to put art on walls, ivory tower artists. I try to teach young students that art is not a make-believe situation."

Christo showed the reporter a photograph of an old motorcycle wrapped in polyethylene and rope — an artwork that he sold to a New York museum for \$10,000.

"But I could have done that," said the young (and ill-mannered) reporter. "Yes," Christo smiled, "but you didn't." Thus began my instruction in conceptual art.

www.pressdemocrat.com/author/pete-golis/



<https://christojeanneclaude.net/>

CHRISTO'S FENCE



Christo and Jeanne-Claude: Running Fence at 50 Years

June 27 – November 8, 2026

This landmark exhibition celebrates the 50th anniversary of Christo and Jeanne-Claude's monumental Running Fence, the temporary art installation that stretched 24.5 miles through Sonoma and Marin Counties. The project became world famous, and is an iconic part of North Bay culture and history.

Through immersive design, powerful visuals, and firsthand accounts, the exhibit invites visitors to experience the magic and beauty that was the Running Fence – white fabric flowing across fields and cresting over hills to vanish into the Pacific Ocean – and to discover the remarkable 4-year odyssey that brought it to fruition.

Member preview: June 26, 2026, Opening day: June 27, 2026 11:00 AM to 5:00 PM PT
Wrap it up, Baby! Museum Gala: August 1, 2026, Running Fence Reunion: September 12, 2026
Documentary Screening: September 26, 2026

Museum of Sonoma County
(<https://museumsc.org/events/?eid=12890>)
475 Seventh Street
Santa Rosa, CA 95401
(707) 579-1500

Admission for sale at the door.
Adults: \$12.00
Seniors (62+): \$10.00
Students: \$6.00
Children 13 & Under: FREE
Museum Members: FREE



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