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COMMENTARY

The burnt orange gates

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With South by Southwest upon us, our city is awash in recording industry executives with multiple digital devices, layers of flunkies and hot and cold running bar tabs. We are surrounded by college students who are here to catch free shows, snag free CDs, see free screenings — and maybe even drink free beer. You practically have to be a rock star to nab a good parking spot. It's the hottest spring break in the country without an ocean.

Unfortunately for the bars, restaurants and hotels of the city, SXSW is a once-a-year party. Although Austin is a hip tourist destination in the spring and fall, people generally don't visit in the summer. Perhaps we should try installation art. It worked for New York City. As many people know, the Big Apple is still cleaning up and recovering from the February exhibit, "The Gates," by the husband and wife team of Christo and Jeanne-Claude. For the project, 7,500 gates were arranged over 23 miles of Central Park, then draped in saffron fabric.

Christo's stated reason for doing the project in February was it was the only month the leafless trees of the park would provide the right backdrop and color for the project. A side effect was bringing multitudes of visitors into the city during what is traditionally the slowest tourist season of the year. The New York Times reported that "The Gates" drew about one million visitors during the project's 16 days, dropping an estimated \$254 million into New York's economy.

As is often the case with modern art, there was much discussion about whether "The Gates" were actually art. Of course, similar grousing was heard about Christo's earlier projects, such as wrapping the Pont Neuf in Paris in fabric in 1985 or similarly wrapping the Reichstag in Berlin in 1995.

The 5,290 tons of steel that made up "The Gates" will be recycled, and the saffron fabric will to be shredded into carpet padding.

Before the material from "The Gates" is transformed into consumer goods, I hope Christo would create a sister project for Austin. Let's call it "The Burnt Orange Gates." Christo could drape Zilker Park and Barton Springs in vivid burnt orange in July and August, which would guarantee the arrival of tourists who would otherwise never step foot deep into Texas during those miserable months.

Instead of an exhibit for shivering art-lovers who are unprepared for New York snow, Austin would have something entirely different. There would be visitors from cool-weather sanctuaries such as Maine and San Francisco traipsing around Zilker Park in the blazing July sun, gawking in wonder at whatever Christo wrapped our moon tower in. They'd pack the restaurants on Barton Springs Road for a breath of refrigerated air and a mouthful of frozen margaritas. They'd pay the Barton Springs

Pool admission just to dip their steaming toes into the cool water. This being the Live Music Capital of the World, we could even throw a few singer-songwriters into the mix.

The project would be good for Christo, too. He'd get an entirely different backdrop for this project with the particular barrenness and muted color palette of Texas in July.

Think the project sounds far-fetched? Austin is a wonderful city for installation art. At Zilker Park in February we had "Eyes Wide Open," the combat-boot based exhibition on the human costs of the Iraq War.

Now at Auditorium Shores we have "The Coexistence Exhibition," which is comprised of 45 giant posters — of a size likely visible to low-flying aircraft — on display through the end of the month. Installation art is very "now."

Christo fans might already know that while the couple does do variations on projects — such as the repeated wrapping of different buildings — the team doesn't take suggestions. Or, as Christo's Web site explains, the best way to make sure that a project doesn't happen is to propose it to them.

So, no one say a word about this idea. Everyone in the city should just think very, very intensely about the possibility of "The Burnt Orange Gates."

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