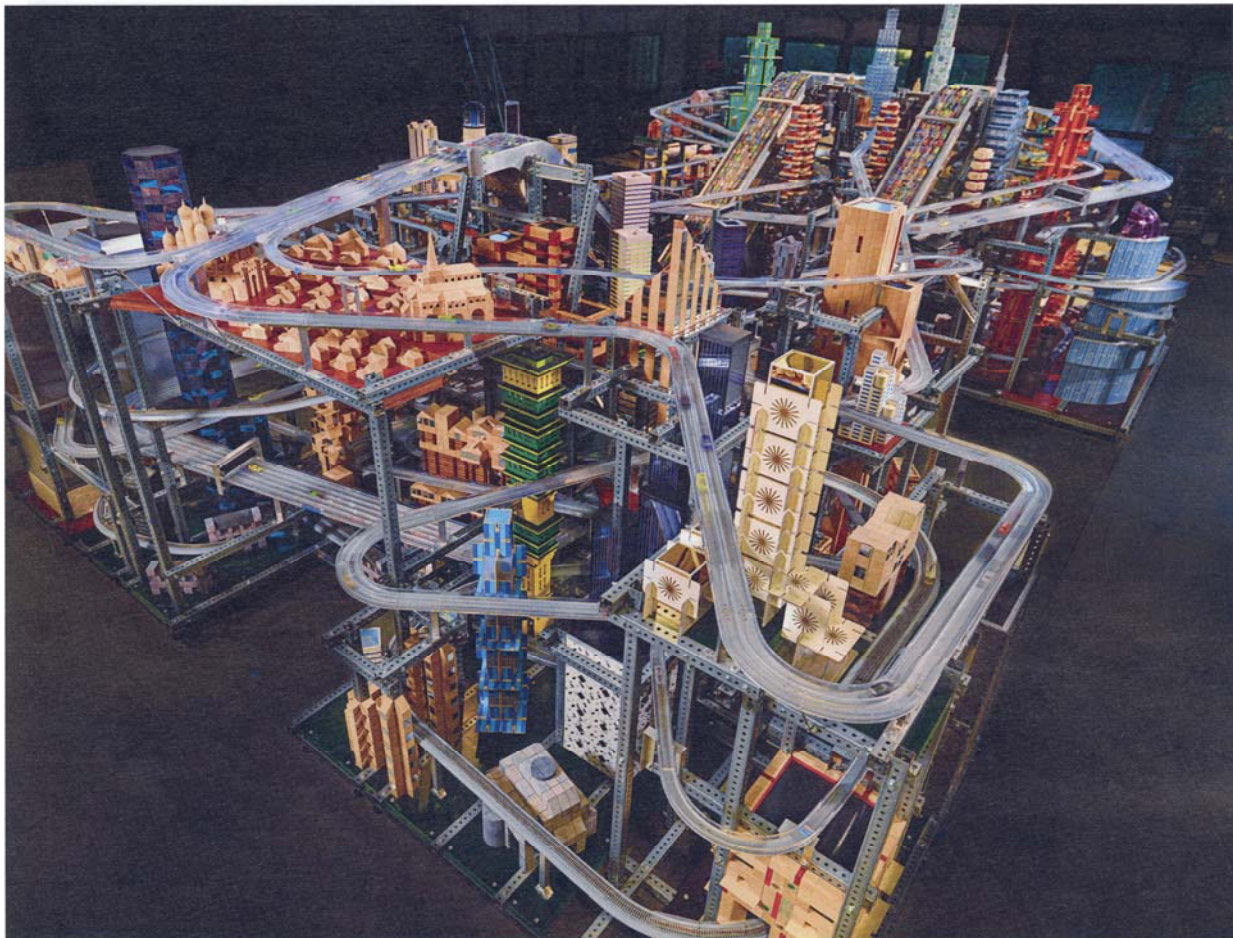# PORTFOLIO

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NEWSMAKER
CHRIS BURDEN

CHRIS BURDEN ROSE to prominence in the 1970s with a series of provocative, often dangerous, and now iconic performance pieces—having himself crucified to the hood of a VW Beetle, for instance, or firing a gun at a passing 747. As that decade came to a close, Burden began sculpting with materials other than his own body. Celebrated pieces such as *The Big Wheel*, 1979, and *Beam Drop*, 1984, soon followed. Over the past 30 years, he has produced a multitude of installations, sculptures, and scientific models that have been exhibited

at the Venice Biennale and the Tate Gallery, in London, as well as in major retrospectives in Vienna and Newport Beach, California.

His latest work, *Metropolis II*, is currently being assembled at the **Los Angeles County Museum of Art** (LACMA), where it will become a semipermanent installation on the ground floor of the Broad Contemporary Art Museum. *Metropolis II* is a massive kinetic sculpture that circulates a thousand-plus toy cars on an interminable loop through a model city. Richard Dewey caught up with Burden to

discuss his endeavor to model the modern megacity before it becomes extinct.

Richard Dewey: *How did you construct* Metropolis II?
Chris Burden: It took more than four years from the time we started until it left the studio back in January. We started by building a prototype of the six-lane up-ramp system that was eventually incorporated into the sculpture. Once that was working, we drew up the floor plan of the structure and settled on a design in the >>

shape of an H that would maximize the outside viewing areas. Once the framework and tracks were in place, we began work on the buildings. At first I thought of the buildings as secondary, but as time went on I realized that they are actually an essential component of the sculpture. The buildings may look arbitrary, but they're not. For every building you see, six or seven versions were considered. We made mock-ups, tested them in different locations, and maintained a photo file of all the options. It took about a year and a half to complete all the buildings, so *Metropolis II* was pretty intensely architected.

RD: *You made the first* Metropolis *in 2004. When did you start thinking about a sequel?*

CB: The original *Metropolis* was sold out of the studio to the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art in Kanazawa, Japan. In building it, we spent a lot of time designing a mechanism that would lift the little cars to the top of the sculpture so that they could run through a series of tracks. Once it went off to Japan, it was only exhibited for about six months before being mothballed. It wasn't long before I began thinking about *Metropolis II* as a way of utilizing all the R&D we did for the first one. You can think of *Metropolis* as a sketch or a working prototype for *Metropolis II*.

RD: *What did you learn from the original?*

CB: In the first sculpture we used Hot Wheels cars that were modified. For *Metropolis II* we decided to make our own cars, for performance and economic reasons. Zak Cook, the chief engineer, used the same basic principle of a magnet drilled into the bottom of a car; however, our custom-built cars have stronger axles so that when they fly off the track, the axles won't bend. The cars travel so fast that they become a blur of color on the track, so we removed a lot of the details found in a typical Hot Wheels car; they were unnecessary for our purposes.

Aside from the performance enhancements, building our own cars was more cost-effective. When you have a $1.29 Hot Wheels car but pay someone to modify it for two or three hours, it quickly becomes a $50 car. So on *Metropolis II* we were able to lower the cost by a factor of 10.

RD: *What other design elements are different in* Metropolis II?

CB: It's a quantum bigger—in other words, a decimal bigger. The first one had 2 tracks; the second has 18. The first had 80 cars; this one has 1,100. One of our big goals for *Metropolis II* was to increase reliability, because in the original *Metropolis* cars were prone to fly off the track. That came down to manufacturing our own purpose-built components, as we did with the cars. We also decided to manufacture our own tracks, machined out of Plexiglas, for *Metropolis II*. This allowed us to do a little trick where we tapered the sidewalls on the straightaways for speed. Essentially the walls look like the cross section of a pyramid. On the corners we left the walls vertical, letting the friction from the wheels act as a brake. So there is this transition from beveled walls for speed to vertical walls for braking, which is kind of neat. We added a system of brushes, which also act as brakes. Accidents still happen on *Metropolis II*— that's why there has to be a human operator— but it's much more reliable than the original.
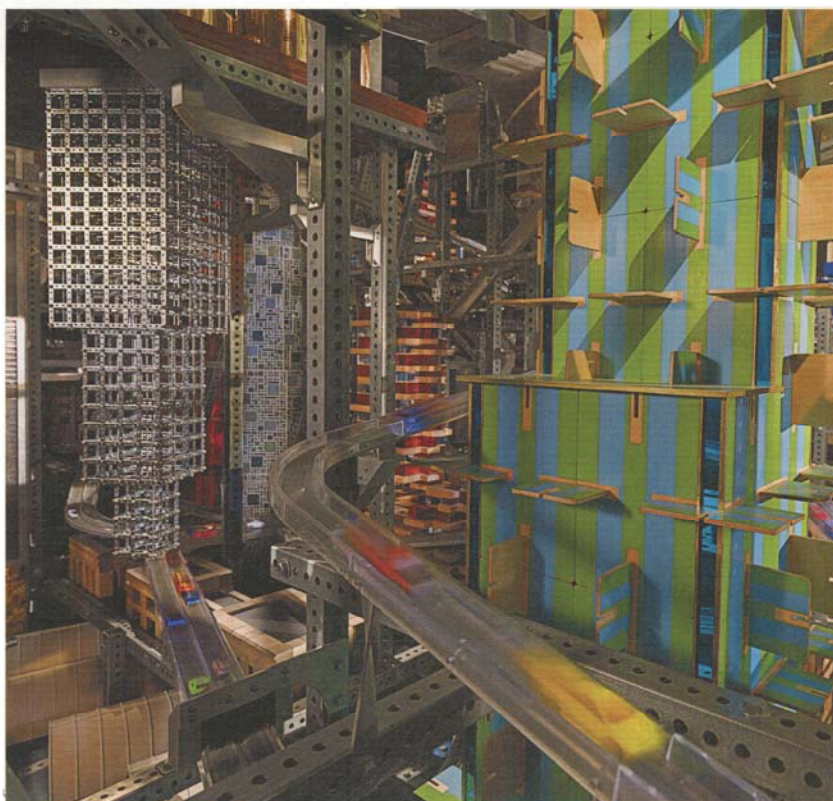
TOP:
Chris Burden in his studio in Topanga, California.

PREVIOUS PAGE AND RIGHT:
Metropolis II, 2006–2010. Three ½-hp DC motors with motor controllers, custom-manufactured die-cast cars, HO-scale train sets, steel, aluminum, shielded copper wire, copper sheet, brass, plastics, wood, Legos, Lincoln Logs, Dado Cubes, glass, ceramic and natural-stone tiles, acrylic and oil-based paints, rubber, sundry adhesives. 10 x 28 x 19 ft.

RD: *The buzz of 1,100 cars running through* Metropolis II *creates a feeling of awe and anxiety. Did you have that in mind at the outset?*
CB: The noise does create this sense of anxiety, but the auditory element wasn't something we anticipated. The first one had some noise, but it wasn't over the top. The amount of noise in *Metropolis II* is staggering.

RD: *What initially inspired you to think about a kinetic model city on this scale?*
CB: I can't really point to an aha moment. If you look at my history, I've made models of different systems. Going back to my performance work, one of the earliest models was *The Citadel*, 1978, which involved hanging 200 to 300 little spaceships from strings against a brick wall while I told a story about the spaceships. Then there were models like *The Reason for the Neutron Bomb*, 1979, or *A Tale of Two Cities*, 1981. I've been using models and cities in my work for a long time, but I guess the difference is that in *Metropolis II* I was able to "kinetify" them in a way that I hadn't previously. Where I got the actual idea from, I don't know.

RD: *Where does this sculpture fit within your larger body of work?*
CB: I think there is a performative element to the cars, in much the same way that *The Big Wheel* is performative. It's also related to *Urban Light*, 2008—that piece is also about an urban landscape and architecture in that the lamps become a metaphorical building with a roof of light. I think *Medusa's Head*, 1990, could be seen as a precedent for *Metropolis II*, because even when the latter is not functioning [it will be operational at LACMA each Friday, Saturday, and Sunday], it can still work for people. It can function in the same way *Medusa's Head* works: Your imagination makes it work. Do the cars need to run? Your imagination can make the cars race down the tracks.

RD: *How does* Metropolis II *relate to your vision for the future?*
CB: It's a model of a city that's becoming obselete, a little bit like a model of Manhattan a hundred years ago with miniature horses and buggies. That is a model of a city that no longer exists.

I think the same thing is true of *Metropolis II*: Once the cars start rolling, they're essentially free agents, and cars do fly off the tracks. That's analogous to putting a person behind the wheel; it's not for sure that it all works out. A car that is able to run freely is soon to be history. And I think it will happen sooner than we think. Google is developing cars right now that are computer controlled. Once they are perfected, I think the societal benefits ensure that they will be adopted pretty fast.

RD: *Any chance for a* Metropolis III?
CB: I don't think so. I might make some train sets or models that are more lyrical, but I don't think I'll make another model city with cars zipping around that is three times bigger than *Metropolis II*. This is it.