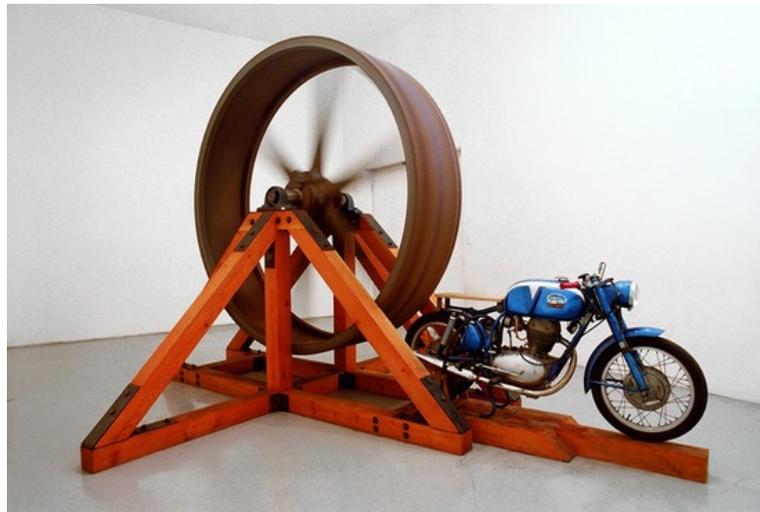


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An Adolescent Adventurer in the Museum

Peter Plagens



'The Big Wheel' (1979) New Museum, New York/ Benoit Pailley

Chris Burden : Extreme Measures
New Museum Through Jan. 12

"This is boy art," my wife whispered to me as we began to stroll very slowly through "Chris Burden: Extreme Measures," the artist's first major museum exhibition in the U.S. in 25 years and his first ever in New York. It sure is, but it's great boy art (and near-great art, period), with all the adolescent adventurousness the term implies.

Mr. Burden was born in Boston in 1946, but he spent much of his childhood in a Swiss boarding school because his parents split up and his mother took the kids off to Europe. He might have missed, early on, those formative, impractical and sometimes dangerous things that boys do because . . . well, just *because*. The artist's early performance pieces—necessarily present only in photos and video in what is otherwise a succinctly handsome show—are the best examples of this Huck-Finn-noir attitude.

"Shoot" (1971), in which the young Mr. Burden had himself shot in the arm with a .22-caliber rifle from a distance of about 15 feet, is an avant-guardedly delinquent version of "playing guns." "Dead Man" (1972)—Mr. Burden lying motionless under a tarp and bracketed by highway flares on La Cienega Boulevard, Los Angeles's gallery row of the time—is a riskier iteration (he was arrested for concocting a false emergency) of "playing dead" in the back yard.

"The Big Wheel" (1979), fortunately present in the exhibition and the hit of the show's opening, has a smallish, 250cc motorcycle with its rear wheel lifted off the floor and making contact with an adjacent 8-foot, 6,000-pound cast-iron flywheel. When the bike is revved for a few minutes, the big wheel can get going at 200rpm and subsequently spin for an hour and a half on its own momentum—a steroidal rendering of clothespinning a playing card to a bicycle sprocket to produce the sound of a motorcycle engine.

Mr. Burden did his undergraduate study in physics, architecture and art at Pomona College in California (a local T-shirt says that Harvard is "the Pomona College of the East"), then switched exclusively to art and earned a master's degree at the University of California at Irvine, studying under that sage of light-and-space art, Robert Irwin, who recognized the kid's maverick intelligence and let him go his own way.

Mr. Burden's thesis work had him living in a locker for five days. After about 50 performances dedicated to self-discipline, endurance and not a little exhibitionism—including pieces in which Mr. Burden was crucified (yes, his hands were pierced by nails) to a Volkswagen Beetle, and had himself kicked down some concrete stairs—he gave up the practice as too arduous.

Which is where "Extreme Measures" gets good as an art exhibition. Mr. Burden's big conceptual objects (he calls them "sculpture") continue to combine a kind of guileless masculinity—he's never macho—with an ingratiating "what if?" outlook on life. Among his 2013 efforts are "Three Arch Dry Stack Bridge, 1/4 Scale" and "Porsche With Meteorite." "Bridge" is simply a model bridge, 4 feet tall and 28 feet long, made from hand-cast concrete blocks and held together by nothing more than balanced pressure on three keystones. What makes it art? It looks good and the New Museum's installation gives it room to breathe. "Porsche," on the other hand, is a cantilevering exercise right out of Design 101: a 1974 Porsche 914 (that hybrid VW that enabled lots of wannabes to say they drove a Porsche) weighing a ton or so making up a giant mobile, with a 365-pound meteorite on the other end, that's stable because the fulcrum is placed just right, much nearer the car.

What makes it boy art? The car is carefully restored, just like the 1964 Ford truck in 2009's "1 Ton Crane Truck" (an iron block of that avoirdupois hangs from the crane). Mr. Burden (who's written the show's label descriptions in a no-nonsense declarative prose that should henceforth be requisite in museums) notes: "The truck's bed and headache rest have been replaced with new oak. Six new tires, new rubber mats, new seat covers, a new headliner, and two new visors have been installed."

Perhaps surprising—to those heretofore unfamiliar with Mr. Burden's work—are his subtly sardonic political pieces. The 625 miniature cardboard submarines, each suspended in midair formation by a piece of monofilament, in "All the Submarines of the United States of America" (1987) are a visceral reminder of just how much the country spends on national defense and how globally lethal the weaponry is. The frieze of "LAPD Uniforms" (1993), tailored for apparent 8-footers, constitutes a deadpan but stinging indictment of the force's conduct in the Rodney King beating. But Mr. Burden, whose politics are hardly party-line PC, can also go against what's presumably the art-world grain: In 1979, he covered the floor of a SoHo gallery with 50,000 neatly ordered nickels, each topped with a wooden match. Every visually witty combination stood for one Soviet tank, and the work was titled "The Reason for the Neutron Bomb." I wish it were in the show.

But a work that does make an appearance on a screen in the corner of one gallery, and which, for me, is an unexpected highlight, is "The Rant" (2006)—a two-minute video excoriation of the Other ("diseased dogs," "invisible snails," and so forth) delivered by Mr. Burden in well-accented French. (The artist is inexplicably up to his chin in water and wearing swimmer's goggles.) Although he insists that he's assumed the "persona of a ranting xenophobic preacher," you can't tell me the people he's really sending up aren't pretentious art theorists who would read even more into a work like this than I do.

Not everything concerning Mr. Burden and his oeuvre, however, is praiseworthy. The two 36-foot-high "Quasi-Legal Skyscrapers" (2003), reconstructed atop the New Museum's facade and allegedly allusive to the Twin Towers, are a misfire. As was—pun intended—his cringe-inducing "747" (1973), in which he stood on a beach and fired real bullets from a small pistol at an airliner that had just taken off from Los Angeles International Airport. (No, the bullets never got close to the plane, but the show's beautiful catalog could have done without that big photo.)

The underlying premise of "Extreme Measures" is that any artist, no matter how radical, can eventually be contained and made politely intelligible by what the art-world naysayer Dave Hickey calls the "therapeutic institution." For better or worse, the New Museum makes that case. The exhibition ends, as it were, with "Pair of Namur Mortars" (2013), two fully functional recreations of squat, antique cannons that fire cannonballs a yard in diameter. In the wrong hands, they could probably bring down the museum. But here, they're cartoonish, almost cuddly and strangely reassuring—just big toys. To tweak the old saying, you can take the artiness out of the boy, but you can't take the boy out of the art.