

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

### The New York Times

#### The Balance of a Career

#### *Chris Burden's Feats of Art Are to Fill the New Museum*

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*Monica Almeida/The New York Times*  
*Feats of Engineering: A look at the work of the artist Chris Burden.*

LOS ANGELES — Of all the things the artist Chris Burden did, and had done to, his body for the sake of art — shot, through the arm, with a .22 rifle; nailed, through the hands; cut, with broken glass; confined, for five days inside a tiny locker — perhaps his most poetic performance piece was the simplest.

In 1973, for “B.C. Mexico,” Mr. Burden paddled a small canvas kayak from a town on the Sea of Cortez in Baja California to an uninhabited beach further south, carrying only water. He spent 11 days on the beach, in 120-degree temperatures, before declaring an end to the performance and paddling back to town. In his Los Angeles gallery, a note describing his absence was the only thing viewers found when they arrived for his scheduled exhibition.

“It was really more about isolation than anything else,” Mr. Burden, now 67, said recently. “It was about being gone.”

For the last three decades, Mr. Burden, who will be the subject of a highly unconventional career survey opening Oct. 2 at the New Museum in Manhattan, has conducted his life like a kind of conceptual experiment in being simultaneously gone and present. He’s remained a part of the art scene, but strictly on terms he has established in a world he has built around himself. That may be

one reason that, among the Los Angeles artists who emerged in the 1960s and '70s and had staying power, Mr. Burden has long remained under the radar, revered in California and in Europe, and a cult figure for many younger artists, but underappreciated in New York and in many American museums.

He long ago gave up the radical performance life that made him one of the most influential underground artists of the '70s, and he has been represented for years by the Gagosian Gallery, the gilded exemplar of the commercial art establishment. But the sculpture that has constituted the bulk of Mr. Burden's work since the 1980s often looks little like salable art. It looks instead like things a maniacally committed hobbyist might labor over for years in his backyard workshop: elaborate scale models of steel bridges; 40-foot skyscrapers made wholly of Erector Set pieces; immense military dioramas; miniature metropolises swarmed by hundreds of speeding toy cars, a vision of urban horror or utopia depending on your perspective.

Since 1981, Mr. Burden and his wife, the sculptor Nancy Rubins, have lived here in Los Angeles but physically removed from it, deep in the hills of Topanga Canyon. Before building a house they spent five years in a tent; they now own 80 acres in the canyon, some of it rugged chaparral. To reach it, and their neighboring studios, which resemble overgrown metal tractor barns, you have to drive up switchback roads so narrow that the curves have been outfitted with convex mirrors to allow you to see if another car is coming. "Just be careful, and you'll probably make it," Mr. Burden said on the phone one recent morning while giving me directions.

When I arrived, he was examining one of two ancient-looking fire trucks he owns, a faded red Ford F6 from the 1940s once used by a small fire department in Montana. He and a studio assistant cranked the truck and it rumbled deafeningly to life, spewing smoke. Mr. Burden bought the trucks in part to have working fire engines at the ready in rain-starved Topanga, where the brushland still shelters more coyotes and rattlesnakes than people. But he allowed that the engines might — like other trucks, cars, motorcycles, boats and steamrollers he has owned — eventually find their way into an artwork.

"Stuff here flows pretty freely between being functional and being elevated to exalted art status," he said dryly, smiling. Spread around him on the rolling property were antique municipal lamp posts (destined to become art), a collection of ornate antique metal planters and benches (probably to become art), a group of cast-iron animal-shape fountains from China (for an artwork that now might not be made), three gleaming towers made from Erector Set parts (art) and a small flyable airplane made from a kit, suspended from the ceiling inside his studio (not art, at least yet, but great to look at).

"One of the reasons Nancy and I have lived up here is so we can just leave lots of junk lying around, and it doesn't bother anyone that much," said Mr. Burden. But looking into the distance at the houses of neighbors, who include the actress Lisa Bonet, he added: "Money has come into this canyon in the last few years. By our standards, it's starting to get a little too crowded."

Over the last five years, his "Urban Light" outside the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, an installation of 202 antique street lamps that looks like a Greek temple dreamed up by Magritte, with light itself as the entablature, has become an unlikely landmark and tourist attraction, giving him a prominent public presence in his hometown. But the last American survey of his career was a quarter-century ago, in 1988, at the Newport Harbor Art Museum (now the Orange County Museum of Art) in Newport Beach, Calif.

“There’s so much of his work that’s not really known,” said Lisa Phillips, director of the New Museum, who is curator of the show, which is one of the most highly anticipated of the fall. It will take over all five floors of the museum’s building and part of its exterior, and will include several new works. “Part of that might be because of his self-imposed isolation. But he was also working in advance of a lot of people and never really fit into any style or movement, though the work now looks prescient, and I think it’s quickly going to become apparent to people when they see it.”

Mr. Burden, for example, was doing what is now called relational aesthetics — art that incorporates the audience as part of the work — well before the name was coined or the practice pervaded the art world. In 1976 in San Francisco, in a deadpan piece called “Garçon!” he served cappuccino and espresso for a week to gallerygoers. A year earlier, at the Ronald Feldman Gallery in New York, a performance involved lying on a raised platform with no food for 22 days, which prefigured a work by Marina Abramovic in 2002, in which she did much the same thing for 12 days, on a larger platform with slightly more comfortable accommodations.

On my visit, Mr. Burden seemed little concerned about how his influence is or is not acknowledged. This may be in part because revisiting his past makes him restless and a little cranky, a position that made the New Museum’s job a tough one. His initial proposal was to leave the interior of the museum almost completely empty and indulge his architectural and engineering fetishes by covering the outside of the museum with found and created sculpture — mostly antique light poles and Erector Set towers — to transform the building, which he dislikes, into a kind of Dada urban fantasia.

“I think he knew it was impossible, which is how he approaches everything,” Ms. Phillips said. “If there’s any kind of certainty, he steers clear of it.”

After months of debate and engineering calculations, the idea was vetoed, and now only two towers and a sailboat will be attached to the exterior. The towers will inevitably evoke the Twin Towers. Mr. Burden’s intentions with the boat, which will be suspended dozens of feet above the street, are in one sense brutally straightforward, post-Hurricane Sandy. “When the next high tide is that high,” he said, “then it’s time to climb in. It’s that simple.”

Though he now wears reading glasses on his nose and a cap with a neck flap to protect him from the sun, Mr. Burden remains almost as solidly built as he appeared in early performance videos, with the same boyish, bowl-cut hairdo. Partly because of the physical extremity of his performances — in “Trans-fixed” (1974), perhaps his most famous work, he was briefly crucified atop a Volkswagen Beetle — he has long had a reputation as a daunting presence, a kind of art-world Evel Knievel. But in person, he is much more like a down-to-business mechanical engineer, with a bone-dry wit and habit of diverting conversations deep into arcana. His approach to the performances was always more about method than shock: a systematic what-if exploration of the limits of the human body, of violence, of authority, of mortality and of a kind of nonreligious transcendence.

Of “Doorway to Heaven,” a 1973 piece in which he touched two live electric wires to his chest, crossing them in time to make them erupt into sparks but not electrocute him, he said it was “about doing this thing that should kill you but isn’t going to, because you figured out how to escape.”

The Los Angeles artist Paul McCarthy, who has known Mr. Burden since the early '70s, said of the performances: "He wasn't someone who gave off a sense of machismo. It was never about: 'Look at me. This is what I'm willing to do.' But he was somebody who you knew would do it." He added, "In a way, I kind of felt like each piece he did was perfect — psychologically, the way it was constructed, in its directness, in the effect it had on the audience."

At times, Mr. Burden has also been one of funniest artists to come out of the politically fraught world of early performance and video, handling humor like a scalpel. He bought television advertising time in California and New York in the '70s in an attempt to infiltrate mainstream culture, and in one brief ad, he detailed his finances as an artist for the year 1977: a gross income of \$17,201 and expenses of \$16,156, leaving him with \$1,045 to live on. (He makes considerably more now, but he and Ms. Rubins, who live in a modest house near their studios, are hardly big-money artists.)

The influence of Mr. Burden's performances has been so powerful, it has tended to overshadow his three decades of sculptural work, whose deep connection to the performances is not always understood. The presence of those performances in the New Museum exhibition will be greatly muted, represented only by books documenting them in text and photographs.

"When I stopped doing the performances, the pieces I was making became the performance — they are almost all performative," he said, walking over to a portion of a scale-model arch bridge that will be in the New Museum show. The bridge, almost four feet tall and made with special white concrete blocks that together weigh two tons, is held together by nothing but gravity, like a minimalist, figurative take on Richard Serra's precariously balanced heavy-metal "Prop" pieces.

"If this little piece, this one piece, breaks," Mr. Burden said, pointing to a negligible-looking round concrete cylinder near the top of one arch, "then you no longer have a bridge. It all comes down. How many people will understand that I have no idea. But it fascinates me."

Mr. Burden, whose father was an engineer and Harvard professor, comes by these fascinations — Robert Storr, dean of the Yale School of Art, has called them "screwball empiricism" — honestly.

"I consider myself," Mr. Burden said, "an amateur engineer and architect who uses those disciplines as materials for my art." In the end, he does not much care whether the results read as art or as something more adulterated. "I don't really think about it," he said.

Before I left, he took me on a hike along a harrowingly narrow path he had carved out of the side of a ridge. Then he led me down to a place near where he and Ms. Rubins had once lived in their tent, to show me something he had been working on for more than 30 years: a fenced pit containing every glass bottle he or his wife or their studio workers had thrown away, tens of thousands of them. It gleamed in the sun like a surrealist industrial ruin.

I asked him what he was going to do with it. "I still don't know," he said, looking it over. "But isn't it beautiful?"