

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

ARTFORUM

PASSAGES

CHRIS BURDEN
1946–2015

LIZ LARNER

IN 1981 (it could have been '82), Chris Burden came to speak at my beginning sculpture class. I was not an art major at the time and was taking the class as an elective. It is significant that I recall so much of his lecture because my memory usually doesn't work that way. I can still see his head tipped down slightly, eyes looking up. He had a chilly, metallic affect that skewed against his cherubic face. He seemed a little mean, but not in the punk-rock way I was used to by then. Thinking back on it, I realize he was just intense, passionate, and succinct—a man on a mission who didn't want to be charming. To say that seeing his work and hearing him talk about it were startling is not sufficient. To a young, uninitiated student, the idea that what he was doing had anything to do with sculpture was mind-expanding. A chasm of possibility was opened.

It was a few years later, this time at art school, that I saw *Beam Drop*, 1984. The film, which captures huge steel I beams dropped more than one hundred feet from a crane into wet cement, brought together the complex

ideas about duration, dependence, and chance (or was it a demand for faith in the inevitability of something happening?) that he had introduced to me in the lecture: the strength and weakness of materials; the relationship of the activity of a material (hardening concrete) in an artwork to how that material exists in the world around us; how a material could become poetic, have meaning, and function. All of this was given to me in a six-minute film, which is also a performance, a record (like the "relics" objects from his performances), and a sculpture.

A few years after I received my BFA, I made sure to drive to Orange County to see Burden's twenty-year survey at the Newport Harbor Art Museum in Newport Beach. The exhibition was prodigious. One piece, *Scale Model of the Solar System*, 1983, was so salient and—in terms of its implications about site-specificity, the body, technology, time, and space—unparalleled. The work presented a model of the solar system, situated in scale across the city (Mercury was just thirty-six feet from the sun, which was at the museum, but Pluto was almost a mile out).

Having already driven more than an hour from Los

Angeles to get behind the Orange Curtain, and having spent another couple of hours in the exhibition, I hesitated before deciding to embrace the map that was provided and to visit the planets located within walking—and then driving—distance around Newport Beach. There were no straight lines, and even with the map I got lost. It took me the rest of the day (and I had arrived at the museum when it opened). But my sense of where I really was, and the scale of this in my head, in my body, in my car, in Newport Beach, in Orange County, in the solar system, was so exaggerated—thanks to Burden's singular combination of lighthearted absurdity, practical logistics, and utter seriousness—that I still draw on the experience to this day. □

LIZ LARNER IS AN ARTIST BASED IN LOS ANGELES. (SEE CONTRIBUTORS.)

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From left: Chris Burden, *I Became a Secret Hippy*, 1971. Performance view, Museum of Conceptual Art, San Francisco, October 3, 1971. Chris Burden, *Beam Drop*, 1984, 16 mm, color, sound, 6 minutes 20 seconds.

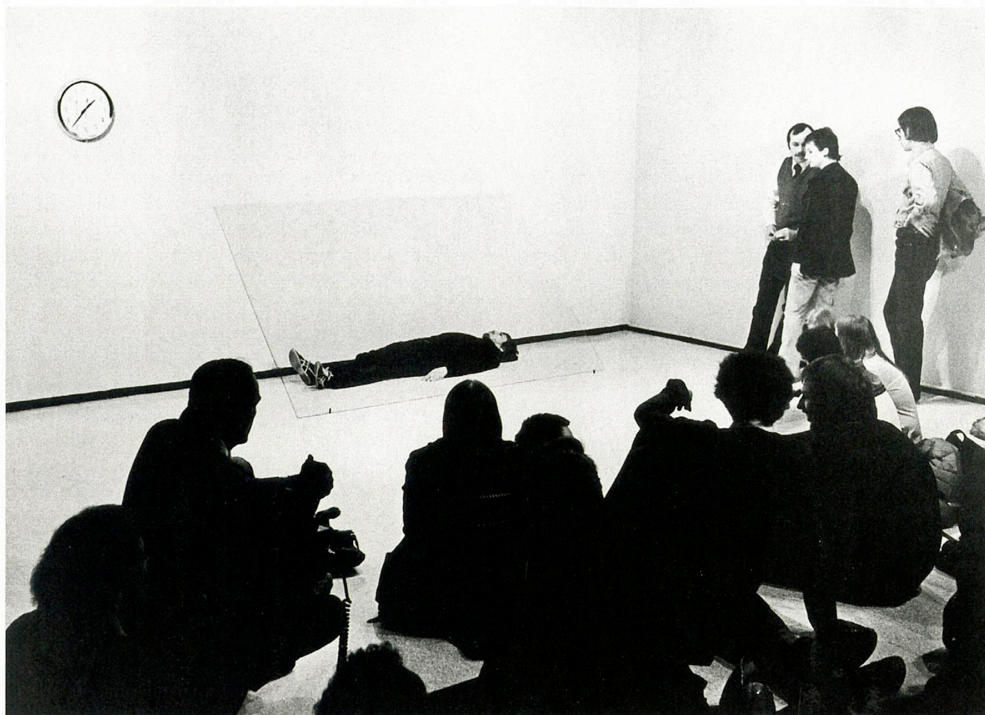


PAUL SCHIMMEL

THROUGHOUT his long and varied career, Chris Burden strove to understand the principles behind how things work. Born the son of an engineer and a biologist in Boston, he used diagrams, models, and engineering to explore the limits of physical, psychological, and social space. Burden spent formative years as a teenager in Europe, where he began to appreciate an art that slipped seamlessly between ideas, science, and theology. Leonardo da Vinci became then—and remained—an influential model. Like Leonardo, Burden will be remembered as a visionary artist to the core.

Fortuitous in his move to Los Angeles, with its burgeoning art scene, Burden began in the early 1970s a series of mature performances realized while still a graduate student at the University of California, Irvine. He understood from the beginning that his access to institutions of higher learning, museums, and galleries offered him the opportunity to reveal power structures and hierarchies. In some way, all art is political, and Burden believed that in every possibility art, like science and engineering, could change the world for the better.

From *Five Day Locker Piece*, 1971, his graduate-thesis work in which he locked himself in a locker for five days, to *Shoot*, 1971, the work for which he became



From left: Chris Burden, *Doomed*, 1975. Performance view, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, April 11, 1975. Liz Larner's copy of the map locating Chris Burden's *Scale Model of the Solar System*, 1983, in Newport Beach, CA, 1988.

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internationally regarded (seemingly overnight), Burden recognized that through simplification, reduction, and clarity he could create an image that was specific, unforgettable, and ultimately iconic. He created performances that tested endurance and physical boundaries, including *White Light/White Heat*, 1975, and *Doomed*, 1975, one of his last, in which he lay on the floor under a sheet of glass leaning against the wall at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, for nearly two days until someone intervened. After *Doomed*, he realized that while he could calculate physics and control certain experiments, human psychology was something he could not bet his own life on. Burden was the opposite of a showman. Never a daredevil or someone who took any pleasure in pain, he was reticent and shy, far more comfortable talking about something in a thoughtful and systematic way than as the center of public attention. As an artist, he wanted to understand the extremes of giving himself over to sculptural activity.

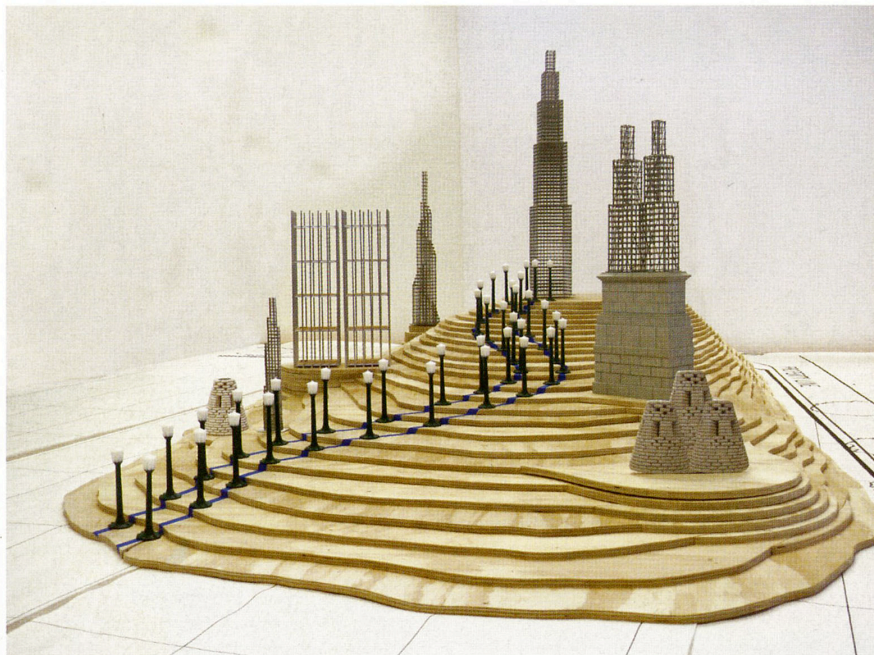
The second half of the '70s saw Burden incorporate some of the time-based and kinetic elements of his performance work into sculptures and installations. In *The Big Wheel*, 1979, a motorcycle powered the large iron wheel to which it was connected; in *Exposing the Foundation of the Museum*, 1986, the artist dug through the floor of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; and in *Samson*, 1985, each visitor to the exhibition space had to enter through a turnstile connected to a hundred-ton jack that pressed two beams against the gallery's walls. Glacier-like in its actions, this created a metaphor that had the potential to be actualized, where the public enabled Burden, like Samson, to slowly push down the walls of institutions.

Burden was fascinated by models, as evidenced by *B-Car*, 1975, a vehicle built in reaction to the energy crisis of the '70s; *C.B.T.V.*, 1977; *C.B. Air Force*, 1980; *Scale Model of the Solar System*, 1983; and *The Speed of Light Machine*, 1983. He was also deeply concerned with the moral bearing of his country, as seen in *The Reason for the Neutron Bomb*, 1979; *All the Submarines of the United States of America*, 1987, featuring 625 miniature submarines representing each sub launched by the US Navy since 1897; and *The Other Vietnam Memorial*, 1991, an installation commemorating three million Vietnamese who died during the Vietnam War. In this vein, he also produced *A Tale of Two Cities*, 1981, an installation of two fictionalized, simultaneously futuristic and backward-looking states, and

Medusa's Head, 1990, with its postindustrial environmental implications.

Burden was always a visionary artist: He wanted to construct a pneumatic subway under Gagosian Gallery in New York, and he created, in *Pizza City*, 1996, an idealized place with the charm of a small European town and the benefits of an industrialized city. *Metropolis II*, 2010, on loan to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, began, as he described it, with a drawing showing how to shrink LA and create a freeway system four to six times faster, using digital slots for high-speed cars, so that one could travel from Santa Monica to Pomona in twenty-eight minutes, a trip that in reality would take at least one hour.

During his last decade, Burden became increasingly known by a wider public for his large-scale installations, most significantly *Urban Light*, 2008. He initially became interested in old streetlamps when, one day, my son Maxwell dragged him to see some. Immediately sensing the community symbolized by these discarded objects, he began collecting hundreds from all over LA. For no exhibition or public-commission purposes, he arranged these lamps around his studio, illuminating that private space. LACMA eventually acquired *Urban Light*, and in a city without landmarks or a center, this work was welcomed with the broadest public appreciation. Burden made the paths inside the grid of streetlamps wide enough to allow two people to pass hand in hand. Through this installation, he was no longer alone.



From left: Preliminary model for Chris Burden's *Xanadu*, 2009–15, plywood, paper, plastic, metal, 48 1/4 × 63 × 120". Chris Burden, *Urban Light*, 2008, 202 restored cast-iron street lamps. Installation view, Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Photo: Howard Pasamanick.

He was with a community he loved and with his wife, the artist Nancy Rubins, for whom he made the paths.

At the time of his passing, Burden had just completed *Ode to Santos Dumont*, an homage to Alberto Santos-Dumont in the form of a model of the Brazilian aviator's 1901 dirigible. While he took a special interest in solving the riddle of the work's physics, much had to be done at the crossing of science and intuition. Thus it represents that very human place where art, poetry, and instinct intersect with hard fact, science, and engineering. That *Ode* floats and moves so elegantly is a reflection of the man who made it.

Burden's final, unrealized work is *Xanadu*, a park-like setting populated with several of his major late models, sculptures, and installations. The most monumental work the artist ever conceptualized, it includes *What My Dad Gave Me*, 2008, a ziggurat-like sculpture originally installed at Rockefeller Center in New York; his response to the empty plinth in Trafalgar Square in London; full-scale models for an illegal five-story apartment building in Los Angeles County; a series of lamps; and *Beehive Bunker*, 2006, an igloo-shaped concrete sculpture, among other works. At the time of his death, he had completed a dramatically detailed three-dimensional topographic map of this imaginative city.

Although Burden is often recognized for the more spectacular aspects of his work, I will always remember him for the equilibrium and even stasis of his experiments: the center of *The Big Wheel*, the invisible cables that hold *Ode to Santos Dumont* in a circle. In one of the few commissions never fully realized, *The Hidden Force*,

1995, he positioned three large pools of water in front of the cellblocks at a penitentiary on McNeil Island in Washington State and created a body-size compass within each pool. For Burden the artist, the scientist, and the deeply moral man, this work was meant to suggest unity among all, who, together, could find their way. For those whom Burden came to touch as a teacher, for those who knew him through his work and what he represented as an artist, and for me as a close friend and brother, he showed the right direction and set us on the right way. □

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VITO ACCONCI

SPRING 1976: This would be my first time on the West Coast, my first time in LA.

Art- and architecture-doers of my generation were seldom asked to go to other places in the US; we were asked to go instead to Western Europe. Dealers there knew they could bring us over on the cheap—we were the young 'uns who could be stored in second- and third-rate hotels, we took whatever we could get, we didn't know any better. (Of course we knew better: We knew that Jasper Johns, e.g., was traveling in a different class than we were . . .)

We were the generation that didn't travel packed with art to sell, we were the ones who made things up on the spot, we did so-called performances and instal-

lations that were thrown away—out with the garbage—once we were through with them: All that the dealers had to pay for were (for them) cheap tricks that got attention and surprise and maybe even some tittering applause before dinner. For us, though, this was what we got up for, this was what we lived for, breathed for, this is what had to save our lives.

This is the context in which Chris Burden and I met; each of us knew that we were meant to meet—each of us had his sights aimed at the other, each of us knew that the other was his rival, each of us was (undercover and under our breath) out to beat the other.

It turned out that both of us lived in Venice, California, down the block from each other.

Chris became obsessed with the fact that I didn't drive, he said no one can live here without driving, people *die* here without driving, they don't know how to sit in a car without driving. I told him a story: I was in my last year in college at Holy Cross, in Worcester, Massachusetts—I was sitting next to the guy who was driving, and the guy said to me, "Take the wheel." OK, so I took the wheel, I did what he told me to do, put my two hands around the wheel—so the car started quickly to veer off the road, swerve off, everybody in the car started shouting, "Look out! Look out! Look out!" What did I do wrong, I thought, what did I do? "What are you doing?" they said—it seemed all of them were talking, no, shouting, screaming, all at once . . . So I started to defend myself, "Look, you told me what to do, so I put my hands on the wheel—but you didn't tell me, *manipulate* the wheel, *steer* the wheel, you didn't

Burden doesn't move for three hours—he's sitting behind a panel that hides his big neck and head . . . All the while, he's wearing a ski mask.

tell me to *drive* the car, I can't do that, I don't know *how* to drive . . . ”

So from that moment on, Chris never once asked me—*nobody* asked me—to ever take the wheel again . . .

These are the Chris Burden projects I'll always have on my mind and maybe even in my hands:

I Became a Secret Hippy, October 3, 1971: He takes off his jeans, his T-shirt, lies down on the floor on his back . . . Another guy hammers a star stud into his sternum . . . He's sitting down, has all his hair cut off . . . Now he's dressed up in FBI clothes . . .

You'll Never See My Face in Kansas City, November 6, 1971: He doesn't move for three hours—he's sitting behind a panel (some piece of wood, I think) that hides his big neck and head . . . All the while he's in Kansas City, he's wearing a ski mask . . .

B-Car, 1975: From August 24 to October 16, 1975, he's thinking up/designing/building a tiny, minuscule maybe, one-passenger auto—an operational four-

wheeled car that goes one hundred miles per hour on one hundred miles per gallon . . . It's like both a bicycle and an airplane . . .

Samson, 1985: He's making a hundred-ton jack connected to a gearbox and a turnstile, it pushes two large timbers against the museum's facing walls; each entrant to the museum goes through the turnstile, each rotation of the turnstile just-a-tiny-bit expands the jack—if one too many visitors enter the museum, *Samson* wrecks the building . . .

Exposing the Foundation of the Museum, 1986: Three diggings, nine feet deep and sixteen wide, made underground to expose the footings that support three steel columns . . . Stairs dug in help visitors go down into and through the earth . . . (For me this is the best show he—or maybe anyone else—ever had.)

Bridges Between Adults & Children: ¼ Ton Bridge, 1997: An arched bridge constructed by Meccano and Erector parts, supporting five hundred pounds . . . Thin diagonal struts attaching deck to arch transfer the load to stop the span from collapsing . . . *Mexican Bridge*, 1998: Serpentine reverse arches (model of a cast-iron bridge designed in the 1860s but unbuilt . . . *Tyne Bridge*, 2002: Another Meccano model . . . *Curved Bridge*, 2003: This gossamer bridge uses the basic Mysto Erector No. 1 parts, it starts with a bulky base but rises up to a narrow, sensitive, refined, overdetailed summit . . .

I never saw him again after that time in Venice, 1976

(I don't think I'm making this up): I went to shows of his in New York, I have no idea if he went to any shows of mine—once between then and now, Nancy Rubins (his second wife) and I spent a short time together, I don't remember where . . . My work turned to architecture, his to a grown-up's alteration of packed miniature cities and bridges in the middle of nowhere, maybe everywhere. (My adjectives in the last paragraph show that I'm losing touch with Chris, I can't stick with him when he's inside a world of miniatures and children and toys—but he's always there with delicacy, always as a grown-up who can't help reliving and re-rehearsing someone else's childhood if not his own—I'm losing him, he's going, he's starting to be gone, but never, never all gone . . . I didn't go to his opening at the New Museum in October 2013; I had to teach. Maria, my wife—she's a poet—went to Chris's opening in my stead: She'd heard stories from me about Chris (maybe some make-believe) and she wanted to know true/false, right/wrong, made-up/real. She found out for herself and on her own: Maria/Chris/Nancy found themselves out for themselves. Then I came in, from the outside, on the phone: for a brief time, on air and over the air, Nancy and I and Chris and Maria came together.

We were sure we'd meet, at least once more, before they left. We didn't. Time passed. Chris died. □

VITO ACCONCI HEADS A DESIGN STUDIO IN NEW YORK, WORKING IN THE US, EUROPE, AND ASIA.

From left: Chris Burden, *Exposing the Foundation of the Museum*, 1986, three excavations of earth. Installation view, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Photo: Squidde & Nunns. Chris Burden, *You'll Never See My Face in Kansas City*, 1971. Performance view, Morgan Gallery, Kansas City, MO, November 6, 1971.

