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ARTNEWS

Chris Burden's Magnificent Flying Machine: The History Behind the Late Artist's Last Work, Hovering Over Unlimited at Art Basel

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Chris Burden, Ode to Santos Dumont, 2015.
COURTESY GAGOSIAN GALLERY / ART BASEL

“It was one of these perfect pieces for Chris,” Paul Schimmel said.

I was speaking to the former director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles about about a day in January 2015, a clear afternoon in Camarillo, California, when the artist Chris Burden showed his latest work to a very small group of close friends, including Schimmel. He called it *Ode to Santos Dumont*.

As Schimmel described seeing it, and described the elegiac qualities of the work, he started to choke up slightly. Just a few months after that unveiling, Burden was dead. *Ode to Santos Dumont* was his last finished work. And his last work turned out to be a strange and soulful white whale he spent a decade building—a re-creation of a curio of early aviation, a 40-foot-long white zeppelin that floats for 15 minutes around a fixed invisible point and then comes back earth.

“Because of his health, because of the gentleness of this...” Schimmel said, again stopping to collect his words. Then he cleared his throat and said, “I was recently in Egypt, and in their culture, there are boats that carry the spirit. And I did see that, with Chris, with him gently walking in front of the flying machine...”

Shortly after Burden's death, Schimmel helped Michael Govan, the director of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, stage a brief show of *Ode to Santos Dumont* in the back of his museum's Resnick Pavilion, but only so many people could see it in the few weeks it was up. Now, the gigantic installation is making its high-profile debut on one of the few stages befitting its outsized ambition and physical girth: today, when VIPs enter the Unlimited sector of Art Basel in Basel, Switzerland, they will see Burden's last work in all its glory, presented here by his longtime gallery, Gagosian.

"With Chris Burden, of course it's amazing, because it's his last work—but it's amazing because it's a typical Chris Burden," said Gianni Jetzer, who has curated Unlimited since 2012, and is also the curator-at-large for the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C. "It stands for all the radicality of his position and his fearlessness of making things happen that seem to be impossible."

In October 1901, the Brazilian aviator Alberto Santos Dumont saw his flying machine complete a trip around the Eiffel Tower after coming from the Parc Saint Cloud, all in under half an hour—the first contraption to do so. It won him a German aviation prize and worldwide fame. But he died shortly thereafter and has mostly been forgotten, lost to history. Burden developed a kinship with the early flier—the mechanical genius, the mysterious hero, the recluse to time. For years, he attempted to find the ancient parts that could be assembled to build Santos Dumont's same engine, to create his own flying machine.

While Santos Dumont used his airship to circle the Eiffel Tower, Burden wanted his own personal floating vessel to round simply the air.

"Now, there's just a void in the middle of the 60-foot space," Jetzer said. "This work is a lot about emptiness and the void. It's an ode to Santos Dumont, and also to the Eiffel Tower, and its missing presence, somehow."

After seven years of working with the master craftsman John Biggs, Burden had an engine that was a quarter-sized to-scale replica of an engine that powered a zeppelin in 1903.

"I saw it in engine form and I saw it evolve in terms of what it would do and how it would function," Schimmel said. "The first time I saw it functioning, Chris had rented a hangar, on his own, not commercial—this was to make it work, and for its final realization."

The work was met with awe when Burden showed it to friends, and he began to make plans with Govan, who himself is a pilot, to present it at LACMA—and perhaps he was rushing the process, hoping see it in an institution before he died. But after having told only a few people he had melanoma, Burden died in Los Angeles on May 10, 2015. The show opened a week later.

"With this work, it was up in the warehouse and it looked so beautiful there, so Chris decided to show it," Schimmel said. "And that led to its first exhibition at LACMA. I think Michael understood with Chris's health that this was... I think he had hoped, we all hoped, that Chris would see it in a museum."

The show at LACMA closed two years ago, but now a much more international crowd gets to experience the work at Unlimited. There was an approval process, where the galleries submit

plans for to show an artist, and await the decision—Jetzer says that Burden was a no brainer to include.

“The whole production part comes from Gagosian,” Jetzer said.

He explained that, apart from the selection process, he and his curatorial staff stay away—“Art Basel just makes the walls,” he said, adding that those walls are 12 feet high, two feet thick, fully plastered primed and painted, and amount to a total of 1 and a half miles of walls. Galleries can’t mess with the color of the walls, but apart from that it’s up to them to do what they want.

“Each show has its own teams—each of the 76 projects brings out their own project,” Jetzer said of the works in Unlimited.

The crazy amount of labor hired by all the galleries involved allows for the entire massive show to be built out in just four days.

Once it was shipped to Basel, *Ode to Santos Dumont* was assembled directly to the left of the main entrance of Unlimited, and then placed in a circle with a 60-foot diameter. The 1,200 cubic feet of helium would normally cause the blimp to fly all over the Unlimited hangar, and then out onto the Messeplatz, and then above Basel, but there are invisible cords that affix the flying object to a focus point at the center on the circle, attached to the roof. Harnessed thusly, physics force the blimp further along the circle, often at a nasty clip as the helium pushes any way it can.

“It’s really kind of a performance sculpture, and it’s a very strange animal, it’s an uncaged animal, it’s this big animal—a whale or an elephant has a similar impact,” Jetzer said. “On one hand, it’s really refined, as it’s to a one-to-four scale, but there’s also the fact that it’s so small that it heats up so fast.”

Hence the timed aspect of the work—because of the overheating engine, it can only perform for 15 minutes, and then cools down for 2 and a half hours. So fairgoers will have to get lucky to show up at the time when it is in propulsive motion.

The fragile state of the polyurethane balloon makes it impossible to show outside, and many spaces don’t have the physical indoor space, which makes Unlimited something of a perfect location for *Ode to Santos Dumont*.

“I would imagine that it’s a wonderful venue for it, as Unlimited has been terrific in displaying the historical and the contemporary,” Schimmel. “It’s an opportunity for a much much wider audience to see the work.”

Schimmel added that, while it could definitely be one of the most-talked-about things at Art Basel, the limited ability to fly might off-putting for those waiting hours and hours to see if lift off.

“It will demand a kind of patience on the part of the audience, as, in some ways, its beauty is it’s slow,” Schimmel said.

(When asked if he was excited to see the work, Schimmel—who shocked the L.A. art scene when it was announced he would be leaving Hauser & Wirth, where he was a vice president and

partner, as well as the L.A. institution that once bore his name, Hauser Wirth & Schimmel—he said, “I’ve seen it in two places and I wasn’t planning on going to Basel this year.”)

But if you arrive at Unlimited in time to see *Ode to Santos Dumont* take flight, it’s worth the whole trip to Basel. When I walked into Unlimited for the VIP preview this afternoon, it had just lifted up from the ground to begin its inaugural journey in the space, and a swoon rippled through the audience as it made its first furious jerk forward, and soared, each person as rapt as the Parisians were when the first ancient dirigible made the miraculous turn around the Eiffel Tower. But here, it just circled nothing, and after 15 minutes, it stopped and hovered, waiting until it could lift off again.