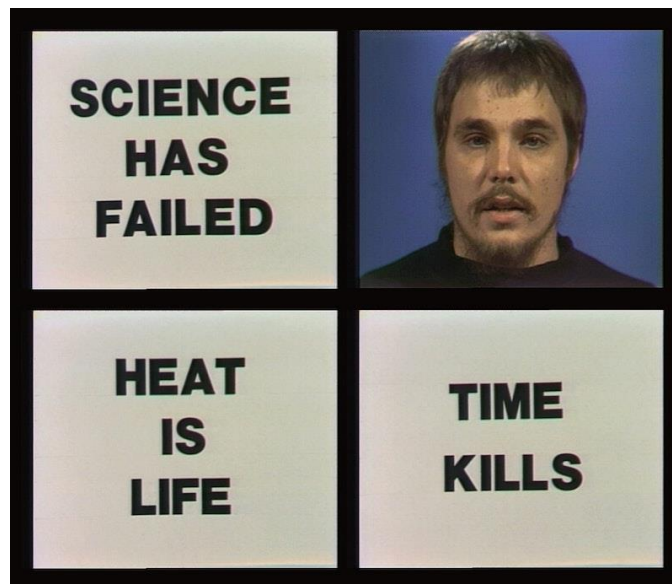


GAGOSIAN



**Chris Burden: *Cross Communication***

Cal Mckeever



*Chris Burden, Poem for LA, 1975. Video, color, sound, 48 seconds, Edition 1/5 + 2 AP. Courtesy the artist and Gagosian, Park & 75.*

The history of performance art is haunted by the conundrum of documentation. How do you preserve a work whose medium is rooted in ephemerality? How does a work retain its performance-ness (as opposed to the video-ness, photograph-ness, object-ness, etc. of standard documentation) fifty years down the road? These questions are on full display in *Chris Burden: Cross Communication*, an exhibition featuring documentation of twenty-two performances from 1971–80, without presuming to contain the answers.

Burden folded into performance the prevailing artistic logics of that decade, the ideas of Conceptual Art, the ghost trails of Minimalism and its emphasis on medium-specificity, the emerging Video Art, etc., while simultaneously eschewing membership in any camp. Rather than a fixed aesthetic style, Burden's irreverent conceptual attitude provides a through line to his work. In the recording of *Deadman* (1972), a performance in which Burden lay down in traffic on La Cienega Boulevard covered in a blanket with flares on either side of him, he recalls justifiably being questioned by the LAPD, and telling them he was “making sculpture.” He was seemingly uninterested in leaving a singular vantage point on his performance work. Rather, he left an abundance of modes of preservation for us to consume. In *Cross Communication*,

these range from short recordings of performances to text descriptions, audio recordings, photographs, or objects and ephemera used in performances. This six-hundred-square-foot show concisely accepts Burden's rejection of categorization through a surprisingly diverse array of documentation.



*Installation view: Chris Burden: Cross Communication, Gagosian, Park & 75, New York, 2023. Courtesy the artist and Gagosian, Park & 75.*

A few works on display are what Burden referred to as “relics,” objects that became stand-in representatives of his fleeting performances. In 1971, Burden vanished for three days, a performance sans audience he titled *Disappearing*. In order to disseminate this performance from out of the void, he crafted a relic: a small velvet-lined vitrine containing nothing but a two-sentence description card reading, “I disappeared for three days without prior notice to anyone. On these three days my whereabouts were unknown.” These descriptions of a performance’s logic invoke what was an in-vogue conceptual aloofness not unlike Sol LeWitt’s wall painting instructions, but the cold grandeur of the empty vitrine of *Relic for Disappearing* (1971) borders on self-parody. These relics are objects that, to Burden, are imbued with the essence of the performance, but are often accompanied by other modes of documentation. This is seen in *Atomic Alphabet* (1979-80), a frantic recitation of a list of words associated with nuclear panic. The bomber jacket worn during the performance is enshrined as the relic, but here it is paired with an audio recording of the original performance, a photograph, and a printed visualization of that “atomic alphabet,” which all together constitute a multipronged attempt to suspend in time a decades-old moment of thirty seconds.



*Chris Burden, Bed Piece, 1972. Video, black and white, sound, 3 minutes, 16 seconds, Edition 1/5 + 2 AP. Courtesy the artist and Gagosian, Park & 75.*

There are ten performance videos on one large monitor, overdubbed by the artist's brief explanations in dulcet tones, showing a few of his better-known performances from the time, such as *Shoot* (1971) or *Through the Night Softly* (1973). Listening to the artist frankly explain the thinking behind these viscerally transgressive performances affords the viewer a new lens to examine the canonical works. In the recording of *Bed Piece* (1972), in which he spent twenty-two uninterrupted days on view in bed in a gallery, Burden explains that the gallery attendants had to take care of his feeding and fluids, and "had to deal with me simultaneously as an object and a person." Traces of this way of thinking about performance can be seen through each work on this monitor.

On view on a separate monitor are video works whose broadcast history on the Los Angeles airwaves afford examination as performance. Echoing through the gallery every two minutes is a recording of a television ad from 1976 titled *Chris Burden Promo* that facetiously and emphatically states "Leonardo da Vinci. Michelangelo. Rembrandt. Vincent Van Gogh. Pablo Picasso. Chris Burden." The gallery is filled with reminders that humor can be an exceptionally generative tool in art, especially in an art historical epoch that was at times weighed down with self-seriousness.