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Chris Burden

April 11, 1946 – May 10, 2015
• an American artist working in performance, sculpture and installation art
• Burden studied for his B.A. in visual arts, physics and architecture at Pomona College and received his MFA at the University of California, Irvine
• he made a series of controversial performances in which the idea of personal danger as artistic expression was central. His first significant performance work, Five Day Locker Piece (1971), was created for his master’s thesis at the University of California, Irvine. His most well-known act from that time is perhaps the 1971 performance piece Shoot, in which he was shot in his left arm by an assistant from a distance of about 16 feet (5 m) with a .22 rifle.
Five Day Locker Piece
University of California, Irvine; April 26-30, 1971

I was locked in locker number 5 for five consecutive days and did not leave the locker during this time. The locker measured two feet high, two feet wide, and three feet deep. I stopped eating several days prior to entry. The locker directly above me contained five gallons of bottled water; the locker below me contained an empty five gallon bottle.
In Burden's own words, "At 7:45 P.M. I was shot in the left arm by a friend. The bullet was a copper jacket .22 long rifle. My friend was standing about fifteen feet from me." Bringing together life and art in a violent way, Burden allowed his body to be sculpted by a bullet. At the time, this quasi-masochistic act was taken as a critique of the Vietnam War, but it also speaks to the role of the artist in society and boundaries between real and fictive experience.
On January 14th, 1972, Chris Burden was interviewed by Phyllis Lutjeans on Channel 3's station in Irvine, California. He brought his own video crew that created documentation on the station's own crew as well. During the interview, Burden asked that the station begin broadcasting live. When asked about pieces that he was thinking of performing, Burden held a knife to Phyllis' throat and threatened to kill her if the station stopped live transmission—demonstrating T.V. Hijack. After verbally threatening the host and finishing the performance, Burden destroyed the show's copy of the tape and offered them his own recording. In curator Irene Hofmann's words, "T.V. Hijack was ultimately about who is in control over what's presented through the media."
Bed Piece, another early work, consisted of Burden moving a single bed into the gallery space, then living in it for 22 days. He did not speak to anyone during the performance, but the curator Josh Young provided Burden with water, food, and toilet facilities without being asked. Bed Piece reorients assumptions about what a performance entails, making the usually-private bed into a very-public stage. As Burden approached the end of his 22-day performance, he became more and more relaxed and comfortable in the bed, while the people around him became more worried, "Bob Irwin came in and asked me not to do anything crazy, not to let the whole thing come down on my head."
In this piece, Burden positioned himself behind the rear wheels of a parked car in front of Mizuno Gallery on La Cienega Boulevard, a busy street in L.A. "At 8 p.m. I lay down on La Cienega Boulevard and was covered completely with a canvas tarpaulin," Burden said after the event. "Two fifteen-minute flares were placed near me to alert cars. Just before the flares extinguished, a police car arrived. I was arrested and booked for causing a false emergency to be reported." Burden's trial was held in Beverly Hills and his case was eventually dismissed when the jury failed to reach a decision.
"At about 8:00 a.m. at a beach near the Los Angeles International Airport, I fired several shots with a pistol at a Boeing 747," Burden said of the performance. In what some critics called "terrorism," Burden opened fire on a passenger airliner—a futile act of aggression. The documentation of this performance embodies the cultural tension and antagonism between ideas of artist and the world, individuality and the state, chance and control.
As Burden describes this performance piece, “At 6 p.m. I stood in the doorway of my studio facing the Venice boardwalk. A few spectators watched as I pushed two live electric wires into my chest. The wires crossed and exploded, burning me but saving me from electrocution.” Similar to Burden's other physical tests, this performance once again tests the artist's endurance, bringing him to the precipice of death. By using electricity, what we rely on to keep our bodies comfortable (with heading, air conditioning, light, etc.), Burden turns this essentially modern element into a dangerous force.

Burden said of this performance, "Inside a small garage on Speedway Avenue, I stood on the rear bumper of a Volkswagen. I lay on my back over the rear section of the car, stretching my arms onto the roof. Nails are driven through my palms onto the roof of the car. The garage door was opened and the car was pushed half way out into the speedway. Screaming for me the engine was run at full speed for two minutes. After two minutes, the engine was turned off and the car pushed back into the garage. The door was closed." Trans-fixed is one of Burden's most cited pieces. The documentation of Burden's performance recalls images of a crucified Jesus, but instead of a cross, Burden is nailed to a Volkswagen—"the car of the people," in Burden's terms. Somewhat humorously using a commercial car to evoke religious imagery of martyrdom, Burden demystifies the sacrificial act.

For an exhibit at Ronald Feldman, Burden constructed a large platform in the southeast corner of the gallery. The artist laid himself on the platform for 22 days, the entire duration of his show. The platform, being only two feet below the ceiling, blocked any possible view of Burden from the gallery below. In Burden's own words, "During the entire piece, I did not eat, talk, or come down, I did not see anyone, and no one saw me." Again, Burden's performance questions the relationship between performer and spectator, artist and audience, by suspending his performance in an empirically unverifiable faith—faith that Burden is really there throughout the unseen act.

SAMSON is an installation with a 100-ton jack connected to a gear box and a turnstile. As each visitor passes through the turnstile to see Burden's work, the 100-ton jack pushes two large blocks against the load-bearing walls of the building. Each visitor knowingly expands the jack, creating an invisible change with a sense of danger, since enough visitors could, in theory, cause SAMSON to destroy the structure.

In 1986, Burden dug through the floor of MOCA's Temporary Contemporary and exposed the foundation piers of the structure. In a concrete form of institutional critique, Burden's exposing of the foundations acts as a literal revealing of the physical boundaries and limits of the museum. Burden and MOCA re-did the piece in 2008 at the Geffen Contemporary, the now-official name of the Temporary Contemporary.
After the Los Angeles riots of 1992, Burden proposed the project L.A.P.D. Uniforms, an edition of thirty Los Angeles Police Department uniforms. Each uniform is equipped with a regulation belt, holster, baton, handcuff, handgun, and copy of an official badge. Burden's uniforms are enlarged, designed to fit an officer that stands over seven feet tall. When installed, the uniforms' arms are outstretched, nearly touching each other, so that the physical presence of these powerful symbols are overwhelming and engulfing, causing the viewer to question what the nature of authority really is.
Since its installation in 2008, Urban Light has become a visual icon of Los Angeles. Standing in front of LACMA, Urban Light consists of 202 restored cast-iron street lamps, most of which used to light the streets of Southern California. Burden began collecting street lamps in 2000 without a specific work in mind. Ranging from 20 to 30 feet tall, there are a total of 17 different lamp styles represented in Burden's sampling. Michael Govan reportedly acquired the piece for LACMA with funds from Andrew M. Gordon's family foundation after a visit to Burden's Topanga Canyon studio not long after he arrived in Los Angeles as the new director of LACMA in 2006.
2010 Metropolis II is an intensely engineered kinetic sculpture with 1,100 miniature cars speeding through an elaborate system of roads, freeways, train tracks, and buildings at a speed of 240 scale m.p.h. Every hour, approximately 100,000 cars circulate through the toy-city's network. It took Burden over four years to build the sculpture. Unlike the piece's predecessor Metropolis I, Metropolis II's cars are specially manufactured in China since off-the-shelf Hot Wheels' axles wear out quickly. The frenetic, dynamic piece models the hustle and bustle of a car-dominated metropolis. Burden's Metropolis II acts like a moving model of Le Corbusier's Ville Radieuse, while acknowledging and highlighting this vision of urban life as nearly extinct, an end of an era.