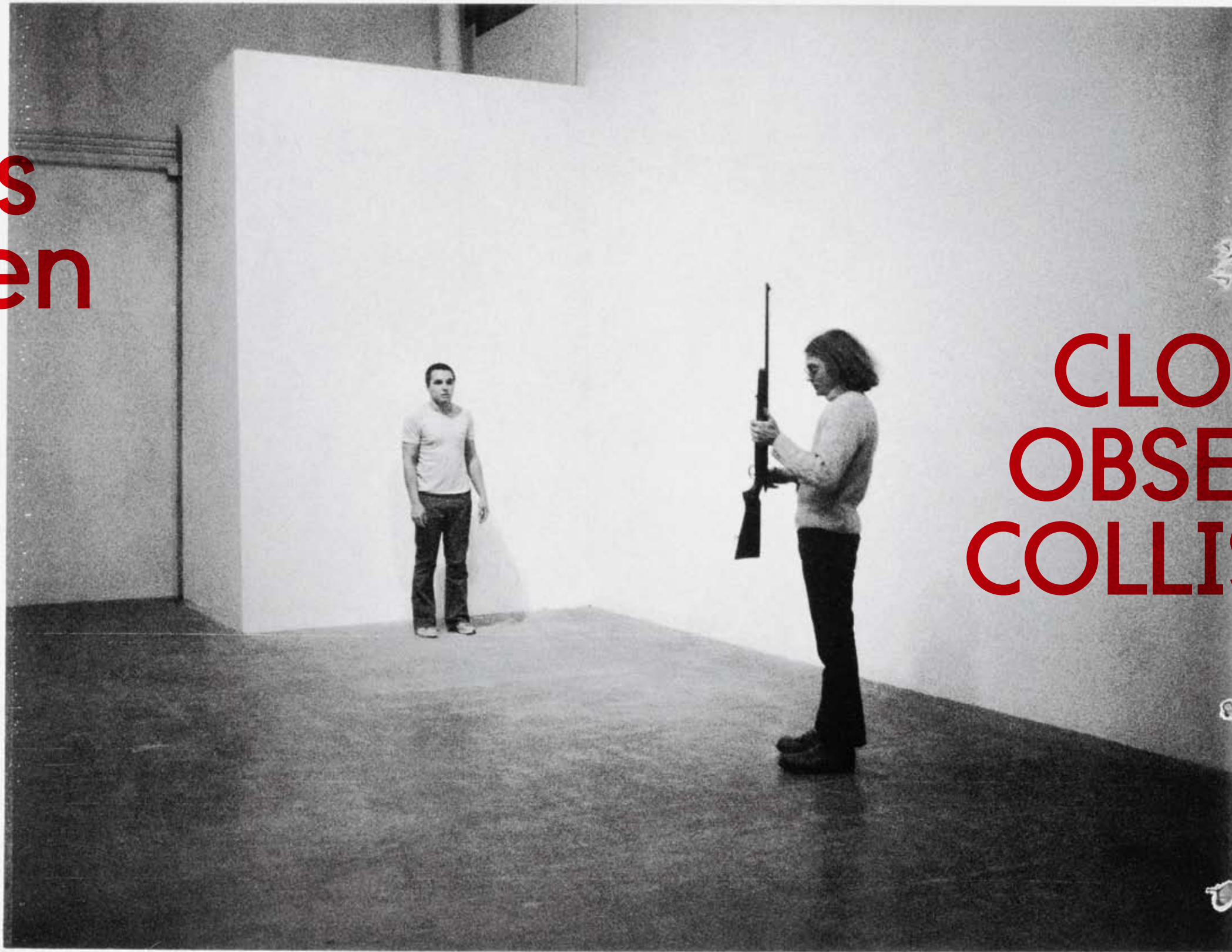


Chris Burden



**CLOSELY
OBSERVED
COLLISIONS**

Text by Katya Tylevich
Photography by Alexei Tylevich



Worlds away from Los Angeles (some 50 km north of downtown), we meet Chris Burden in his Topanga Canyon studio, on a large stretch of land in the Santa Monica Mountains. Given the geography, 'secluded' should be an understatement for the property, but Burden's studio feels quite inhabited, busy with people working on various projects in every corner of the workspace. Skyscrapers, bridges. At one point, he tells me he'd like to build a railroad here, but the Zeppelin he wants to make — to fly around the canyons — might take priority.

Burden saves me the trouble of starting a conversation; we shake hands and he immediately launches into descriptions of his works-in-progress, walking excitedly from one room to the other and speaking quickly, offering few obvious breaks for my questions. Mostly, he speaks of engineering feats and meticulous experimentations. He's not opening his heart up about the meaning of getting shot in the arm, here, ladies and gentleman. It's not going to be that kind of conversation. Still, I can't help but hear what he's not saying — whether or not I hear correctly is a question still to be answered. Several times I venture to say, 'oh, so this means that,' only to have Burden tell me, 'no it doesn't.'

For the record, I didn't go into this meeting expecting Chris Burden to be a black and white, two-dimensional version of himself, bleeding from the palms, crucified to a Volkswagen Beetle [*Trans-fixed*, 1974] — but I'm only human. I've read things, seen pictures. I admit to carrying some art history baggage. After all, Burden is in the Zeus league of art mythology, owing in no small part to his 1970s performance artworks, ephemeral in the sense that they can never really be recreated, but undying in that way explosive moments are undying, especially when documented just-so by evocative photographs that make their way into collective memory (and now the Internet).

I'd like to avoid speaking about Burden's work as if it's separated by the past and present tense; there is no necessary break between the black and white photographs and the ones in colour, between 'performative' and 'sculptural,'

and 'architectural,' for example. Personally, I can't help but hear a similar whisper in most of Burden's works: 'Look, it's a beautiful landmine. Don't step on it.' Burden's project *Samson* [1985], for example — which has every visitor of a museum passing through a turnstile that is connected to a gearbox and a 100 ton jack. Every time a visitor enters, the jack is expanded, adding to the pressure against the walls — which could theoretically push the walls down. Or take *The Flying Steamroller* [1996], a sculpture made of a 12-ton steamroller, attached to a pivoting arm; at maximum speed, the steamroller revolves, lifting off the ground, as if flying. But we'll get to the word 'scary' (and, in the same breath, 'exhilarating') when we talk about the falling beams, and skyscrapers, later. First, I'd like to linger on the word 'tempting'.

In his energetic tour of the studio, Chris Burden enters the central room and motions to a table covered in glass parts.

This piece [*Large Glass Ship*, 1983] went to a show in Barcelona in 1995, and they dropped the whole container on the way back. It belongs to the Orange County Museum of Art. We spent years writing letters, but the museum in Barcelona wouldn't take responsibility for it, and now the museum down in Orange County decided to file an insurance claim. So we're trying to make another one for them. That's our restoration or 're-making' project. But there's no way we can match the original. It doesn't have to be perfect, though. We just need the spirit of it.



Hell Gate, 1998, Metal toy construction parts (Meccano and Erector), and wood
225 x 861 x 102 cm



I open my mouth, ask a question about the spirit of a 're-make,' but we'll have to get back to that later. Burden's attention is already on another piece — a bridge — in the middle of the studio.

This is called the *21 Foot Truss Bridge* [2002]. It's so light you can pick it up. I make the parts myself now, out of stainless steel, but they're copies of original American Meccano from 1913. I did use original Meccano in some of the bridges, like *Hell Gate Bridge* [1998, one of Burden's first bridges], which has parts first made in 1913. But regular steel rusts, and the more Meccano I bought, the more expensive it became, because I was buying up the world's supply. I thought: this is crazy! Now, we use stainless steel. We did a skyscraper in New York City at Rockefeller Plaza [*What My Dad Gave Me*, 2008]: sixty-five feet high, this thing. It was a million parts. It was huge.

Without catching breath, Burden leads us into another room, where a new steel tower is on its side; people are working on it.

You'll be able to walk up this one, using a ladder. But I don't really want people to climb this. Do you know what I'm saying? I want it to be physically possible, but not something I want the public to actually do. All it takes is one young drunk...

— But you've created the temptation. Is it forbidden fruit?

It's not about trying to participate in the work: it's that you see the structure and the material that it's made of. It's thin metal, that's all. We've just braced it in every direction and all of a sudden, it's extremely strong.

— So what's to stop someone from walking on this structure? We'll have something. It would also depend on the situation... is it in somebody's backyard, or in a shopping mall in Vienna?

— Where would you like to see it, ideally?

I made it as part of a series of towers I'm doing for a new city called Xanadu — a city that nobody lives in. It was a proposal I did for L.A. County Art Museum, but I'm not sure it's going to happen because of finances. It could go someplace else. I have the idea of maybe putting some of these up at Larry Gagosian's home in Beverly Hills. [Looking back to the tower on its side.] This looks like child's play. And the basis for it is a toy. But it's not child's play. You really have to be careful. You have to concentrate because this joint is different from that joint. They're all different, so if you make a mistake in there... [Laughs.]

— How much control do you feel you have over your work, once it's 'out there'?

Even the best engineering can fail. Think of the Airbus with the engine that blows up, right? What happened guys? Well, an oil pipe was machined a little off center. That was a super high-tech thing, but it went wrong, for whatever reason. So, I mean, how much control can you really have over something like *Beam Drop*? [*Beam Drop New York*, 1984 / *Beam Drop Inhotim*, 2008 / *Beam Drop Antwerp*, 2009; sculptures created by dropping large steel beams from a crane into wet cement below.] Not much, once you let go of the beam. You lower it close to where you hope it'll land, but at some point you have to let it drop. And if one of those beams hits you, you don't go to the hospital, you go to the morgue.

[I laugh.]

I'm serious. In Antwerp we had some really heavy beams they tried to lift up, and they could only get them so far off the ground before they released them. Everyone just ran for their lives. It's scary. It's powerful stuff. But that's what makes it exhilarating. People like watching because they've never seen anything like it before. I mean, watching two trains or two airplanes collide — that's really fun, but it's a little dangerous, too.

— Almost every project we've discussed so far has an element of danger to it.

It's how you deal with it. [Changing the subject, Burden flips through a portfolio of project proposals.] This is one I've been working on for a long time: a model Zeppelin, that goes around a model of the Eiffel tower. This Zeppelin will be tethered to the tower, so it won't be able to fly away. I got a machinist to make the motor for me. He tested it over the years, very slowly, every single part. That's important for me. I like the idea that we're building this thing from

scratch. This motor's cost me tens of thousands of dollars, which is nuts because, really, you can go down and buy a Honda motor off a motorbike for 150 dollars or something. But that's not what I wanted to do. There's a beauty in making this Zeppelin from scratch. Ideally, we'd even cast our own metal.

Ultimately, this is a sculpture, a memorial — it's like the guy with a sword on a horse. It's memorializing that moment when Alberto Santos-Dumont flew his Zeppelin around the Eiffel Tower in 1901. That was a big deal. It was a big day. In the back of my mind, this piece is about me being able to do what he did. I want to relive that. I would love to actually make a Zeppelin or even a balloon that I could float around in, over the canyons on a calm day. That would be fantastic. The parts are perfectly legal. It's just that the Zeppelin may be illegal. But I don't know what the laws are and I don't think I'll bother to find out. I can tell you now that the police sheriff helicopter will come by and say, 'Land that thing now; we're sending over three squad cars.' Okay, well, I'll only take it out on foggy days when you guys can't catch me.

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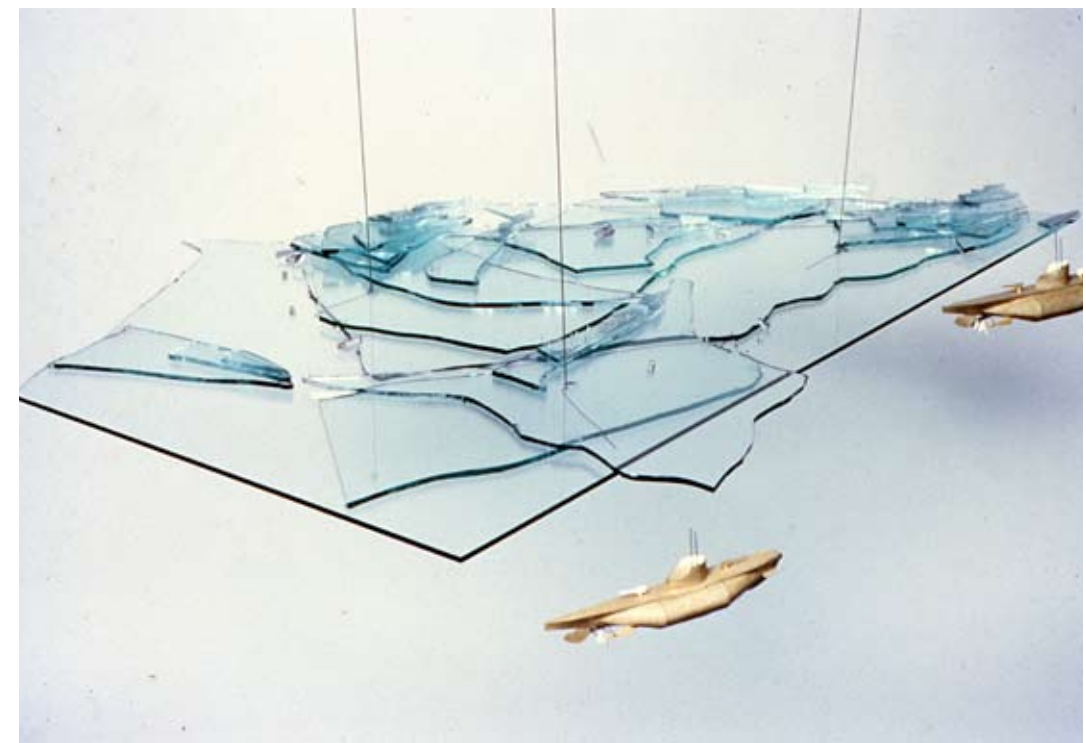
What My Dad Gave Me, 2008, Approximately 1,000,000 stainless steel Mysto Type I Erector parts, nuts and bolts, and stainless steel base plate, Skyscraper: 1,981.2 x 341.4 x 344.4 cm, Base: 15.24 x 341.4 x 344.4 cm tubular steel cover with stainless steel veneer. Plinth: Reinforced concrete, 91.4 cm high.



Beam Drop, 1984, Approximately 60 steel I-beams, concrete, Footprint approximately 1066.8 x 1066.8 cm, Installation at Artpark, Lewiston, New York, 8/2/1984, Dismantled May, 1987.



Trans-fixed, April 23, 1974, Venice, California



Large Glass Ship, 1983, 0.6 cm plate glass, lead toy soldiers, 4 Lucky Subs (cardboard, Duco cement, wire, Each sub: 7 x 21 x 4.5 cm) 7 x 129.5 x 99 cm

— *Were you always quite conscious of the legal boundaries of your work?*

Oh, God. Yeah, in a certain sense. I mean certainly the performances, but even outdoor pieces that I did in college: it was all about getting permission, moving through the bureaucracy of a college to use the soccer field. I mean, I'd like to show *Xanadu* at Larry Gagosian's house, but he may not want to get into that with his neighbours, you know. He may not want to pay off a city council member with a big envelope. [Laughs.]

But I remember my first show, which I had in graduate school in 1971, with Bruce Nauman and Mowry Baden in La Jolla [California]. Five or six of my apparatus pieces were installed, and they had attendants helping old people use them. It was so crazy! That would never happen in this day and age because of lawsuits and liability issues over people getting hurt. But back then you'd see, you know, a 75 year-old woman trying to get into one of these apparatuses and some gallery attendant assisting her. Even then, I knew that was kind of dangerous. There was always that possibility of someone getting hurt — but I'm not into hurting the viewers. That's not it at all, no. I mean, that tower we're building in the other room: I want to climb it. And I do. But if it's out on the lawn at LACMA [Los Angeles County Museum of Art] and anybody can climb it? No. I don't think so. [Laughs.] That's just asking... I was scared that when [*What My Dad Gave Me*] showed in New York, people would try to climb it.

— *Well, did anyone?*

They had 24-hour security and two cops there. They had video cameras everywhere.

— *Again, we come back to the temptation of danger in your work.*

But I really don't want anybody climbing it — for one thing, that would destroy the structure. It would end it all. I mean, it would be a huge job to fix it. The other thing is, something

can suggest function, without being functional. I mean, a lot of people say to me: 'You've got all of these toy bridges, are you ever going to build a real bridge?' Well, these are real bridges. You just can't walk on them.

— *Do you think of your works as experiments?*

Yes.

— *Is part of the experiment, then, seeing how people react to your projects?*

I don't know how to answer that question. Sometimes. A lot of things don't happen as planned... Like that gold sculpture at Gagosian didn't happen. [Referring to *One Ton; One Kilo*, a show scheduled for the Gagosian Gallery in Beverly Hills in 2009.] I bought a one-ton crane truck that had been used for laying pipe in the Central Valley of California, and I made a one-ton block. It actually does weigh exactly one ton. It's so bizarre, just right on the money: bingo. So the idea was, you walk into the gallery and you see this truck with a one-ton block. So okay: one ton. Where's the one kilo? It sounds like a drug deal, right? But then you go upstairs, where you are expecting to see one kilo — instead, you see not one kilo, but 100 kilos. Just this pile of gold upstairs!

I don't know if you heard about this, but the Gagosian bought the gold — wire transferred 3 million 345 thousand dollars. They'd used a company called Stanford Coin and Bullion. Well, Stanford — anything associated with his name got a yellow piece of tape around it. He was a baby Madoff, right? He embezzled 10 billion. So, because the gold was bought through a subsidiary of that company, the people who were supposed to be holding the gold in Texas said they couldn't release it, even though it was paid for in full. Take a ticket and get in line with the other 30,000 litigants. So they stole the gold! It's so weird.

And everyone had been really worried because: oh, if you show this much gold in Beverly Hills, you're asking for the robbers to come from North Hollywood — the Russians

It was the beginning of my trying to understand how sculpture was different from two-dimensional work in how it forced the viewer to move

with their machine guns, right? They had alarms and a special case; the Beverly Hills police had a direct line. But the gold was stolen before it even got to us! It was stolen by the guys with the coat and ties on, you know what I mean? It was this beautiful metaphor for the financial world.

I was really upset. There was no press for the show: it was all about that moment of surprise. It sounds like there's heroin upstairs, but no, it's gold. So, to answer your question: yeah, that was about people's reactions to the surprise of going upstairs. It's too bad about this project because whoever would have bought it, could have made money just on the value of the bullion. Forget the artwork. Oh, God. But that moment of surprise? I can never recreate that.

— *Other than Large Glass Ship, what other works have you recreated?*

With my approval, Pomona College remade an undergraduate work of mine [*Untitled* sculpture, 1967] and installed it in front of the art building. I thought it was kind of nice. The original was Minimalist, really well finished, except that it was made of plywood. So, about a month after I finished it, the finished surface started to crack. I really didn't know what I was doing, then. So they remade the new one out of aluminium with automotive paint. It was an important sculpture for me because it was the beginning of my trying to understand how sculpture was different from two-dimensional work in how it forced the viewer to move. You can't understand this thing physically, if you just stand in one spot. You really have to walk around it to understand that it's trying to trick you. So [the sculpture at Pomona] looks like three columns and, at some points, it looks like two columns. It was a real catalyst for me, when I first made it: I began to understand that just physical activity could be art. You didn't have to have an object. Just doing something could be art. And so it became the basis for performance works that I did years later.

— *These works in your studio now — the bridges, the skyscrapers — do they draw from that same 'breakthrough'?* Yes, because in order to understand this bridge, you need to walk to either end of it. If you just look at it from one spot, you don't really understand it at all. Sculpture is sort of regarded as the stepchild of the two-dimensional. Two-dimensional work is seen as more intellectual, because it's an illusionary plane. Whereas sculpture — even though it's having a renaissance now — in general, you look at art history, and it's always a second cousin because it's too close to clay, it's too close to the earth, and so it becomes suspect.

— *Whoa. Where does architecture fit into that?*

I won't go down that road. Architecture is a different ball game, really. It's a different hierarchy. When I was doing the installation for LACMA [*Urban Light*, 2008], I was treading on some very thin ice with the people who worked for Renzo Piano when I said: 'This building is here to house the fine arts. The architecture has to accommodate the art, not the other way around, and I need X amount of room between my lamps. I'm sorry, but that's the hierarchy.'

— *Judging by your work, surely you've dealt with architects before. [i.e. Wexner Castle, 1990, in which Burden added crenels and merlons to a Peter Eisenman-designed museum building.]*

I knew what the deal was. Piano had the idea of creating a void between the new building and the old building — that would be the breathing spot, the white page in the catalogue — and then I wanted to fill it up with lamps that looked kind of architectural, and had a peaked roof. That was not his idea of the plaza. He had the European vision that a plaza was supposed to be empty so that people would gather there. Of course, in L.A., nobody would gather in an empty plaza. It's L.A. It's only because the lamps are there that people gather. So, now the lamps really are an architecture, in a way. They're like a Parthenon without a roof, and a destination point. In my wildest imagination, I didn't realize they would become so popular. But you realize L.A. doesn't have many icons: There's the Hollywood sign. There's Grauman's Chinese Theatre in Hollywood. Disneyland? The beach?

— *How much did architecture figure into your earlier performance work?*

Architecture is what inspired a lot of it. It was all about response to an architectural situation — *Doorway to Heaven*, for example, is about the doorway [1973; Burden stood in the doorway of his Venice studio facing the boardwalk and pushed two live electric wires into his chest. The wires crossed and exploded, burning the artist.] And architecture would often kick off an idea about doing a performance in a specific part of the building. So, the piece at Ronald Feldman, when I was on the platform, came about because I found something very pure about that corner. [*White Light/White Heat*, 1975, in which, for 22 days, Burden lay flat on a triangular platform that was built in the southeast corner of the gallery, 10 feet above the floor and two feet below the ceiling. Nobody could see the artist, and vice versa.] The platform itself could be a piece of architecture. It could be a piece of minimal art. But it wasn't. It was just support for my body.



— *In that case, did you actually become part of the structure?* Absolutely. I did.

— *So, in the hierarchy we were discussing: where does performance fit in?*

Maybe it's three-dimensional. The performance pieces were essentially sculpture. I certainly don't see them as two-dimensional, although I know they're represented by photographs and a bit of text, now. In that sense, they're a little conceptual, because the photographs are not really satisfying. It's the written text that goes with the photograph that actually enables you to imagine the performance.

— *How do you feel about actually recreating a performance?* I know that when Marina Abramović did *Seven Easy Pieces at the Guggenheim*, she wanted your permission to recreate *Trans-fixed*, and you said *no*.

To me, something like that seems really silly. When you recreate somebody else's performance, it becomes theatre, and that has nothing to do with performance the way I conceived of it in the '70s. You can't do it over. I told her: 'If you're asking me, the answer is "no". But that doesn't mean you can't do it. You don't need my permission.'

— *Having said that, what kind of ownership do you feel you have over your performance work?*

Anybody can do anything over, but it won't have the same meaning anymore. I mean, I could do Joseph Beuys' piece with the hare [*How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*, 1965] over again, but then it isn't a Joseph Beuys' performance anymore — even if it does have all the 'elements' of the original. So I'm not very interested in doing that. I think you become, maybe, an entertainer or something if you do. Laurie Anderson can do things over. I mean, she's a performer and an entertainer in some sense — a high-end entertainer. But I don't see myself in that way; that's not where my interest in art comes from.

— *A performance is ephemeral, in that sense. As well as a skyscraper like What my Dad Gave Me, because it's taken down after a certain amount of time. How do you 'hold on' to your work?*

You know, a lot of 'my energies' are spent writing letters. Making proposals, trying to negotiate, trying to describe things to the person on the other end. But that process makes me think about the work a lot. Putting it into writing is important, because it's a way to preserve the work, even if it's just an idea, a project that never happened. I think that's an integral part of art, really. I spend a lot of my time on it. I'm a desk artist.

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