



CHRIS BURDEN

“When robots rule: the two minute airplane factory”

Tate Britain

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“Chris Burden”

by Fred Hoffman & Lisa Le Feuvre

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(This essay combines the two pieces of writing.)

I was the first person to show Chris Burden's work in the UK, in 1981 (1) There was, as Burden now amiably puts it, a "brouhaha" over the buying of a real diamond required for it. He went straight to Paris and presented a companion piece about gold at the Beaubourg and there was a brouhaha there too. As Burden says: "If I'd asked them to buy 500 dollars' worth of lumber, no problem." But 500 dollars' worth of gold was a problem. Burden is known for giving museums and galleries problems.

For the piece at the Tate, he brought along a little kit plane and said he wanted it to be mass-produced in the gallery: to be made at the rate of one every minute (and given an inaugural flight) all day long for a hundred days. Andy Everett of Studio S in London was then commissioned by the Tate to create the necessary production line. I asked Burden if he would have liked to solve that problem himself, and he said yes, in that it would

have increased his technical knowledge but no, in that it would have taken him three to five years to do it. Even Studio S can only achieve one plane every two minutes. Burden values the miracle of a technology which can save many thousands of "person-hours": normally, you'd need three hours and some dexterity to build each one. It's a plane he particularly likes: it uses simple materials (balsa wood, tissue, rubber band etc.) as efficiently as possible; it's a damn good flier. I think that's an aesthetic he likes: the beauty of the impeccably rightly constructed object. He calls it the "internalised" aesthetic of the engineer. And he enjoys the microcosm of industrial capitalism inherent in the piece. Thinking about it at the planning stage, he was wondering "Suppose the price is wrong? Suppose they don't sell? What's to be done with twenty thousand aeroplanes?" After all, it might be like the Sorcerer's Apprentice in the Disney movie and kind of panicky; planes spiralling upwards like swarming ants into the vastness of the Tate's Duveen Gallery.

Burden talks about people nowadays being "cybersised" - engineers, for example, often have no hands-on experience at all in their training. He's astonished that his fine art students in Los Angeles often have only a hazy notion of, say, what something might weigh just by looking at it. He attaches a lot of importance to physical experience: our bodies and our senses are our best guide to anything. Intuition grows from that physical experience. When Burden famously had someone shoot him through the arm as a performance piece in 1971, it was because that was the only way he could ever truly know what it felt like to be shot.

Burden is very committed to not being committed. Art is about "unfettered enquiry." But art is being subsumed by education: the training of artists is increasingly academic, the presentation of art is increasingly dictated by the need to educate the viewer. We so much want our artists to have opinions, and we want to know their motivations. There are so many taboos (racism, militarism, sexism, rightwingery etc.) and we want to be reassured the artist is steering a safe course amongst these dangerous rocks. In 1979 Burden had 50,000 nickels set out across a gallery floor, each with a matchstick placed on it. Each nickel represented a Soviet tank. He titled the piece *The Reason for the Neutron Bomb* and received a bashing from people convinced he was being gungho or crassly male; that he was naively supporting U.S. militarism. In fact, he wanted to take something which everyone reads in Newsweek but which remains so abstract, and he wanted to make it real. His tactic is confrontational but it isn't propagandist: to advocate pacifism he regards as propagandist as

well. He wants us to make our own decisions. In contrast, for *The Other Vietnam Memorial* - made at the time of the Gulf War, and with that in mind - Burden had twelve sheets of copper inscribed with the names of three million Vietnamese people who died in the war there. He's less happy with that piece, though many people would have fallen eagerly on it to show that yes, Chris is OK, you know - he's on the right side.

Burden is my generation: we "came of age" (as people used to say on reaching 21) around 1968. It doesn't follow, as I've been at pains to point out, that Burden is permanently radical, an ageing revolutionary - but it does mean that he's standing at the gallery window looking out, not standing outside eager to come in. He doesn't make art about art. He's interested in the forces which shape us, in power and money, in the forces we can control if we want to, in the choices we can make. He wants us to get a good feel of these things in our nice white galleries, once in a while. Taking the art outside the museum isn't necessarily progress: Burden is uneasy about "public art" because he feels often there's an undeclared agenda: the art is needed to distract from something, or it's there to decorate. The artist is often meant to be part of a team (his contempt is withering - "I mean, teams, come on, guys!") This brings us back to where we began: Burden gives galleries problems because his instinct (and this is probably generational as much as it's anything) is that institutions need to be challenged. I think he feels an artist has an obligation to be absolutely an individual, to stay free - and, well, to take flight.

This book, published by Thames and Hudson, is particularly interesting for people in the UK, given how few chances we have had to see any of Burden's work here. Most of it is taken up by a detailed and well-illustrated compendium of the artist's output. Chronology is eschewed in favour of grouping work by themes and preoccupations. This approach was favoured by Burden, who was closely involved in the book's production particularly by digging through his own archived materials to assist the editors. Often he adds his own thoughts to accompany images of work, about how and why a piece happened, and what he was aiming to explore or achieve. The early works in the 1970's were often relatively brief performances and Burden chose to release only a single image of them. This added to their somewhat iconic status but in a sense, came back to bite him: there is sometimes the perception that they were melodramatic or attention seeking. In fact they were often done quite quickly and witnessed by few people; photos Burden has now agreed to include here reveal that.

My invitation to Chris to make a piece of work at the Ikon Gallery came during the period of transition away from performance. He had created the Big Wheel (3) and when I visited him, his studio was behung with model warships (4.) His piece for the Centre Pompidou in Paris (5) was a performance he did just before the piece in Birmingham, which was an installation. Performances faded from his practice over 1982/83 but it's surely foolish to fetishise performance (as opposed to "an object-based practice" or whatever jargon you choose.) The connections through a long career are clear.

Accompanying the documentation of work are five essays. There is an overview by Fred Hoffman, who also writes a preface and had a coordinating role in achieving the book. Lisa Le Feuvre recalls Burden's piece in Newcastle (6) and his interest in ships and maritime matters, and Paul Schimmel looks at drawing. Kristine Stiles focuses on the themes of light and fire in Burden's work and also comes out boldly for "the sexual magnetism that energises Burden's art" (7) - but what does British taste make of this, one wonders. Robert Storr's essay tackles gender issues head on, dealing with the artist's preoccupations and the visible sources in his work of (typically) boys' stuff: models, meccano, and the like. Storr rather sweetly owns up to a childhood of pushing cars around and making "vroom" noises, though embedding this in suitably scholarly reflections.

The lack of exposure in the UK of this important artist, now 62, merits some speculation. Burden is perhaps not much "approved of"? He has dealt often with war, and perhaps we don't want guns in our galleries, thank you, unless safely enclosed by a context of disapproval. People begin to babble about testosterone, and perhaps the principal male stance in the art world is apology, or at least avoidance of anything which might bring down that kind of comment. Burden accepts, as any realist must, that war occurs, and that vast resources are committed to it. He examines it, he mocks it, he mourns its consequences (8) but he doesn't ignore it.

And then there are the "planes trains and automobiles" (9) - perhaps the microcosm of the art world reflects wider traditions: our lack of interest in engineering and manufacturing has left the country in deep trouble. It's interesting that uniquely in the UK, the city of Newcastle upon Tyne has rather championed Burden's work: one can see affinities. It was Jon Bewley and Jonty Tarbuck of Newcastle-based Locus+ who initiated this book and stuck with it for a long time.

Burden is pre-eminently a maker and to be a good maker you must first take things apart. He has always been interested in force – or rather forces, in the sense meant by a physicist. Describing a container of materials and instructions needed to build a large object (10) he says “it represents a potential, like water behind a dam.” (11), which is a strange and revealing way to express this. In assuaging his curiosity, he has put himself at considerable risk, whether of physical injury or (and this has continued even if the danger hasn't) of failure.

Anxious not to be seen to be "cybersised" myself, I decided to try and guess the weight of this book: I didn't do that well. It's just over 3 kilos, as a matter of fact, and well worth carrying home. But you'll need a good strong bag.

Hugh Stoddart

- (1) Diamonds are Forever Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, England 1981
- (2) When Robots Rule: The Two-Minute Airplane Factory 1999
- (3) The Big Wheel 1979 Coll: MOCA , Los Angeles
- (4) Materials from Pearl Harbor 1979
- (5) Napoleon d'Or, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris 1981
- (6) Ghost Ship Newcastle 2005
- (7) p 34
- (8) The Other Vietnam Memorial Coll: Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago
- (9) Film written & directed by John Hughes 1987
- (10) Tyne Bridge Kit 2004 Coll: (1 of 2) Damien Hirst, England
- (11) p 116