

Chris Burden interviewed by David Robbins

This previously unpublished interview, recorded in March 1980, is the first interview I attempted. *Interview*, the magazine at which I then worked, was looking for a way to include more art coverage, and I volunteered to give it a try. The interview was conducted in the office of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, at the time on West Broadway in Soho, where Burden was showing *The Big Wheel*. The resulting exchange was deemed by my editors to be too much about art to run in the magazine. Certainly it is a neophyte's interview (I was 23) but Chris Burden's own words add to the literature about him. I publish the interview in that spirit. -- DR

DR: Did you have The Big Wheel fabricated?

CB: No, no, I made it. All I bought was the two halves of the iron cast for the wheel. They were out in this field with grass growing around them. I took a chance that the halves would fit together. Originally I was going to make it out of concrete. My assistant and I had to engineer that axle and the entire trestle work -- literally make all that.



DR: Are people aware of the fact that you made it? Given the memory of so much minimal, fabricated art, I think it'd be great to let people know that it was all made by you. You didn't just buy a wheel and a motorcycle and connect them.

CB: To say that I personally made it, you mean?

DR: Yeah. Nowadays many people assume that a work of this scale and nature is either fabricated or a combination of found objects.

CB: Instead of Donald Judd calling into the shop.... I never even thought about that. The motorcycle in the *Big Wheel* is mine, one that I had used.

DR: The elements in the piece look so impersonal and they're actually decidedly personal.

CB: That's why it relates to the *CBTV* -- the kind of neanderthal TV -- and the *B-Car*. Both of which I made by hand.

DR: What's your aim with those pieces?

CB: Those are a little different than the *Wheel*. The *CBTV* and the *B-Car* are like an education for me. The car and the TV are two of the most successful products of Western industrialism in terms of how many they make and how everybody has one. Making those, my thinking is "Here I am on a desert island, and I know that those things exist, and I want them again. I'm not an engineer but I have a hunch how they work, so let's go to it. I don't have to buy my shit at the factory like you guys." That's kind of the active idea in those pieces.

DR: Self-reliance.

CB: Right.

DR: How do those works differ from the Big Wheel, in your view?

CB: *The Big Wheel* doesn't have a function we can relate to. It's functionless.

DR: Poetic.

CB: Right. I'd never made anything that big. You know, we got it up there...something that big isn't stationary. The first time I tried it, I wasn't certain that it wouldn't wobble off and go whipping through LA!

DR: I recently read an article about the growth of West Coast art. Do you think that just as the world's art center shifted from Europe to New York after World War II, the center is again shifting, to Los Angeles? Does it feel to you like the importance and, well, dogma of New York art is disintegrating and that the art market is becoming more decentralized?

CB: In the last ten years, definitely.

DR: The media machine is still in New York.

CB: The marketplace too. You see some tired work because of the marketplace mindset -- people just cranking it out sometimes.

DR: I've come to think of Soho as a theme park. What attracts you about California?

CB: I grew up in Europe and on the East Coast, and California is so different. I think the openness of California, its feeling of possibility, for me results in a kind of work that would be much different were I to move to New York. I can't see how I could live in a loft in New York and make the *Big Wheel*. It might never have occurred to me to make it. I have a certain mobility in LA. I have a pick-up truck. If I want something, I look it up in the Yellow Pages and I drive there and get it -- get it done or get the people who could answer the question.

DR: LA is more pop. Television seems to be a recurring theme in the work. A baby boomer's theme! Do you actually watch a lot of television?

CB: I've gone through periods where I watch a lot and I go through periods where I don't watch at all.

DR: Do you know why you are drawn to television in your work?

CB: Television is incredibly powerful.

DR: And you use that power by putting your ads on TV?

CB: I go out and buy the time, put the stuff on local stations.

DR: You use the TV system.

CB: People don't quite understand that. They don't realize the significance of the ads, as a systems approach. Nothing along those lines has ever been written about my ads. To me it is real significant. Because I don't have a million dollar production budget, the ads are primarily gestural, I guess, but they still effect very much those people who see them. Especially other artists, people who know me, because I'm breaking that monolithic idea of TV -- that it's this one way street that comes at you and there is always some other guy up there in control.

DR: You personalize the system.

CB: Right. You don't like what you see? Go get your savings book and change it.

DR: Did the ads appear on cable-access television?

CB: No, on local stations. *Saturday Night Live* also ran one.

DR: Were those local stations resistant?

CB: Sure. Absolutely. The first one I did was just a little ten second film clip, in '73, on 16mm film. I walked into the TV station with a little film can. The response was, predictably, "Who are you? What is this?" Like any other advertiser, I wanted to run this ad. The guy at the station viewed it, and saw a black and white of me crawling through this glass. It looked like stars or marshmallows. And that was for about seven seconds. Then my name and title, *Through the Night Softly*. I could have been in outer space or something, it was very abstract. But it's also real crude, so the salesman was looking at me like "What the hell is this?"

DR: As long as you were willing to pay for it, they were open?

CB: I said "I'm an artist, I want people to see my name. It is an ad in that sense." The salesman bought that argument. This ad was to run on Channel 9, a local Los Angeles station, for a month, after the eleven o'clock news. The amount of money I paid was peanuts to them but to me the discovery that I could do this was priceless.

DR: What kind of response did the station get?

CB: It got taken off the air! This happens almost every time I do an ad on TV. Three out of four times, the station manager will be at home watching his own channel on TV and my ad will come on. The ads get cleared to a certain level, and then the guy at the top sees it at home and freaks.

DR: "Surprise!"

CB: I did another one in LA again a year or two later. *Poem for LA* was thirty seconds long and ran on two stations for two or three weeks. In the ad my head appeared and I'd say, "Science has failed," then block letters of those words would come on. Then I'd say "Heat is life," and those words would appear. Then I'd say "Time kills" and again words appeared. It repeated through that cycle three times.

DR: What did the public think of these?

CB: I'd get all kinds of reactions. With that one, people would recognize me in the supermarket or the laundromat for a while afterwards. It was weird. "Hey, I saw you on TV, man, what did you mean by that?" I would answer, "Well, it's just what it said. It's nothing more than what you see."

DR: Did you want to be famous?

CB: I always wanted to be respected. There are people who think I'm totally wacko, because of my work. They're afraid to visit the studio!

DR: I had the impression with, say, The Visitation [1974], that the idea of fame was an element of the work.

CB: You can use fame, include it as a material. I used it in the first performance piece I did in New York, *Back to You*, at 112 Greene Street. I was in an elevator, hidden, you couldn't see me, and volunteers were asked -- this was a month after *Newsweek* dubbed me the "Evel Knievel of the art world" -- "he used to do things to himself, obviously his next step is to use you folks, right?". I was definitely using that -- the piece is called *Back to You!* I told the audience, more or less, "One person gets to stick push pins in me, if you so desire." For a while, there was dead silence, in a room of two or three hundred people, nobody was volunteering. Finally, one person -- the artist Larry Bell -- stepped forward and volunteered. His arm was shaking so bad he dropped the first pushpin.

DR: Most people who might think of an idea that involved physical pain in a piece, would say, "Well, as an idea it's good but I don't think I want to put myself through that."

CB: It was important to do it. It had to be done at the time. It seemed right. When something's right... You have to do it if it feels right. That physical thing is weird though. You have to look at it in context. I mean football players go out there, boxers, race car drivers... People do put themselves at risk.

DR: How do you feel today about early works such as Shoot or Trans-fixed?

CB: I think they're still important pieces. They're strong enough, still, today, that people expect me to repeat them!

I had a funny thing happen to me last month. These people called me up and asked, "Hey, do you want to do a performance at a big rock and roll concert? Ten thousand people. Do you want to perform between sets?" I then made the mistake of telling them what it was I was going to do -- my *Atomic Alphabet*. The stage could be cleared, with a hard spotlight and, BLAM, it could just blast out. It would have been perfect. When I told the organizers my plan, their response was "We were hoping you would do something more physical."

DR: "We were hoping you might hurt yourself more."

CB: Yeah. "You tell me what to do, then!" Incidentally, someone just broke into my studio and stole the rifle that I'd used in *Shoot*.

DR: You never sold that rifle?

CB: No. That wasn't the art. A relic is by definition an object, used in performance. I hadn't decided whether the rifle was a relic. It could have been.

DR: It would be now!

CB: It will be now! For income tax purposes!

DR: Do you think that an artist is responsible for bringing political or social issues to the public's attention?

CB: I think that I have a responsibility to be an artist. I feel that sometimes. It could be construed as a political responsibility but I'm not sure that's really true. Depends on how broad a definition of politics we're using.

DR: Broadly, the freedom to act.

CB: Well, I've been in trouble with the FBI. I've been that free to act, at least!

DR: Was it for 747 [1973], the piece in which you shot at the airplane passing overhead?

CB: Yeah. They came by and asked me a bunch of questions. It was very interesting.

As far as the nature of the piece, the plane wasn't in any danger. I went down to the beach and fired a few shots at a plane flying over head. I wasn't trying to shoot the plane down, it was more a gestural thing, trying to get it photographed -- to make an image. I knew that if I wasn't going to be arrested on the spot that there was no fucking proof that it had happened. But when the FBI came, it was maybe four and a half years later -- long after the fact. The FBI came by the studio and left a little calling card. A meeting was arranged at my lawyer's house. I figured it was better to meet at the lawyer's house so the FBI guy wouldn't be so freaked. I mean, I didn't have any furniture at my place!

The FBI had become aware of the piece because a picture of it had been published in *Oui* magazine or someplace, and some executive had called the FBI and complained. "Who is this Chris Burden? He was shooting at an airplane and he's not in jail? How come?" The FBI guy was dispatched to check it out. He arrived in his beautiful suit. My lawyer had spread out all this information on the table: "This is performance art. Here are the main artists. Here are photos of past performances."

DR: Did the FBI guy get it?

CB: He was getting educated about it, getting a feel for it. He was just there to check it out, not to pin me down or arrest me. I explained to him, it's a performance, it's about the goodness of man -- the idea that you can't regulate everybody. At the airport everybody's being searched for guns, and here I am on the beach and it looks like I'm plucking planes out of the sky. You can't regulate the world.

DR: You are probably one of the few artists to have your name on a dossier at the FBI. Any trouble with the law aside from that piece?

CB: I was arrested while performing an earlier piece, where I lay in the street, on La Cienega Boulevard [*Deadman*, 1972] in Los Angeles. I was next to a parked car, but still in the lane. I was covered with a tarp, and there were two flares around me. The cops came -- but that wasn't part of the piece! The plan was: the flares burn out, I get up, roll up the tarp, and leave.

DR: With the flares dictating the time of the piece...

CB: Right. The flares were the time element.

DR: What was your state of mind, laying there under the tarp?

CB: It's a force of will more than anything else. You're gonna do it, you're gonna follow through. While I was laying under the tarp I was scared I was going to get run over, but after a little while it became pretty evident that wasn't going to happen, that it wasn't too

much of a danger. I also did a piece called *Doomed* where I lay behind a plate of glass in a museum and waited for the museum staff to put an end to it. Although they didn't know that!

DR: You didn't inform them.

CB: No, purposefully. It was up to them to figure out that they had to end it. So I was just hoping they'd end it! I was tired of laying there.

DR: It's such a special situation, that aside from an experience of the will, I would think that there would be kind of a spiritual hum to the work as well...

CB: Certainly in the longer pieces there is. In '75 I spent 22 days on a shelf [*White Light/White Heat*], in the gallery we're in now, Feldman. Didn't see anyone, didn't eat.

DR: How could you not eat for 22 days?

CB: Easy. I had fruit juice, celery juice, stuff like that. I never saw anybody, though. Just bottles getting pushed up over the ledge or taken away by hand. What's weird is that you start to like it there. You feel power, because nobody knows what's going on. I don't just sit up there and meditate. I go to work, psychologically.

DR: Were you ever tempted, while you were laying up there, to address skeptics in the audience by making a small rustling noise or cough?

CB: No. I liked the fact that people went away saying "Ruthie, he's not there. I've seen art shows like this, that Robert Irwin guy. There's just nothing there."

DR: Is magic an interest of yours?

CB: Yeah. It has a certain power, the theater of it.

