

GALLERY VIEW/Roberta Smith

Outrageous Acts Give Way to Eccentric Sculpture

IN THE EARLY 1970'S YOU COULD have bet good money that Chris Burden would not be having a museum retrospective in the late 1980's. At the time, Burden was one of the bad boys of contemporary art, a Conceptual artist specializing in grueling and sometimes gruesome performance works, also known as Body Art.

Burden's pieces were often executed in private with just a few witnesses, lasting a few minutes or extending, without much variation, for days on end. But they were widely known by word of mouth and documentary photographs. His best pieces went off in the mind like flashbulbs when you heard about them, leaving disturbing, indelible impressions.

Most people who were around the early 70's art scene can recite some of the more sensational Burden events. While still a graduate student at the University of California at Irvine in 1971, he locked himself in a school locker measuring 2 by 2 by 3 feet high for five days. In the 1974 "Trans-Fixed," he had himself briefly crucified (hands only) on the back of a Volkswagen; the year before, in "Doorway to Heaven," he stood in front of the door of his Venice, Calif., studio, grasped a live electrical wire in each hand and pushed them into his chest, causing an explosion and burning himself but also short-circuiting the current and avoiding electrocution.

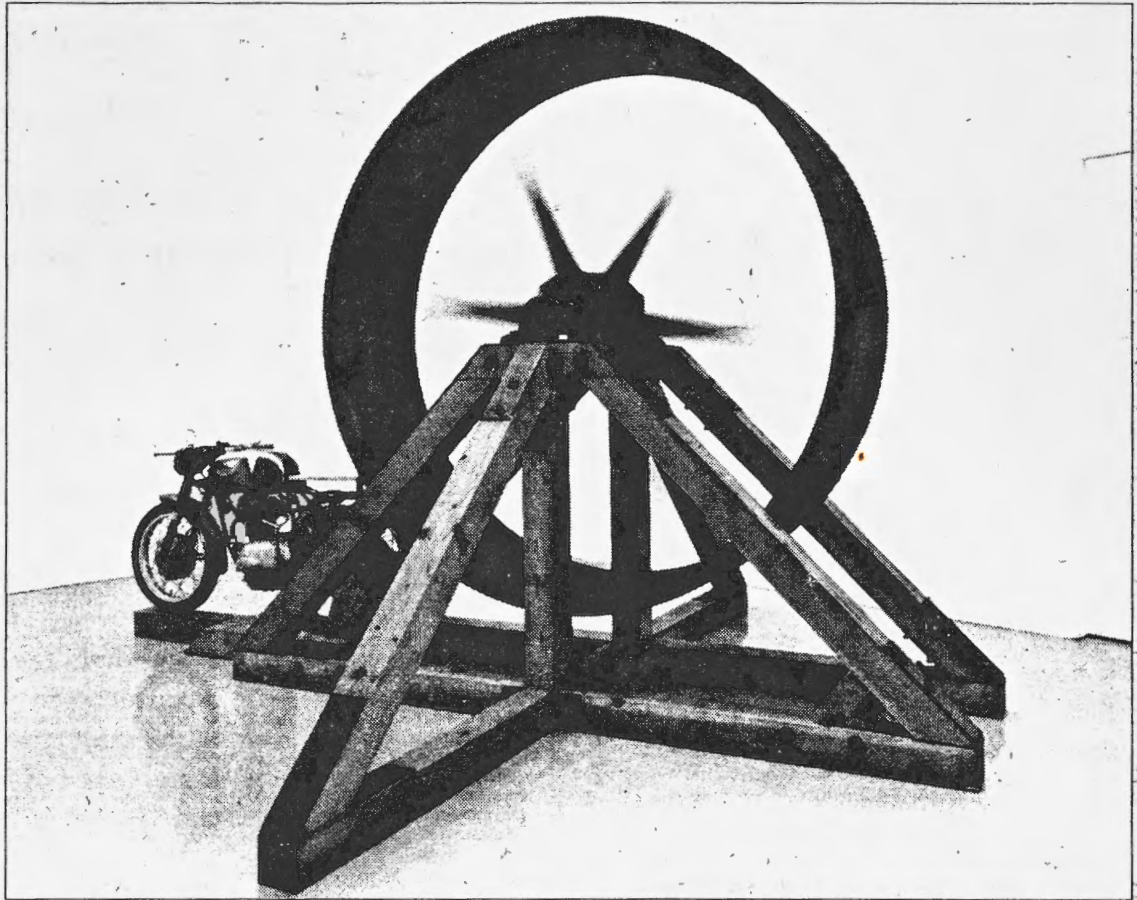
Burden's outrageous acts made him an instant legend, generating much controversy about their status as art in the non-art press and serious respect in many quarters of the art world. They presented an unsettling blend of modernist faith, exhibitionism and martyrlike selflessness, underscored by occasional religious references and the

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eerie resemblance of some of the photographs to Christian icons — "Doorway to Heaven" being a good case in point. Their main achievement (and in the eyes of some critics, chief sin) was to take the underlying ideals of art-making so literally.

Again and again, Burden lived and a couple of times nearly died by the belief that art, and especially modern art, is a matter of risk and confrontation and inherent subversiveness, that it can never stand still, but only move forward, pushing everything to the limit as it goes — the artist, the audience and particularly the definition of art itself. His early work also demonstrated the singularity of the artist in society. As Burden told one interviewer, each piece gave him "a feeling that I possess a special body of knowledge no one else has."

Burden's endurance-tests-as-art were certainly destined for their place in the history of the early 70's, a time when many younger artists — Vito Acconci, Barry LeVa, Gordon Matta-Clark and Mel Bochner among them — were undermining the notion of art as a salable, museum-friendly object. Still, it



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Chris Burden's "Big Wheel"—demonstrating simple principles of motion or mass in breathtakingly sculptural ways

seemed unlikely that Burden would ever have much to show (no pun intended) for his efforts; also, he was working in a terrain so radical and so limited that he would soon run out of things to do — if he didn't kill himself first.

As it turns out, a bet against Burden's longevity would have been a losing one. His art is the subject of a retrospective, organized by Paul Schimmel and Ann Ayers of the

Newport Harbor Art Museum, that can be seen at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston through Oct. 1 and will then travel to the Carnegie-Mellon University Art Gallery in Pittsburgh.

The exhibition proves that Burden has not run out of things to do, that in fact he has a lot to show for his efforts. Furthermore, it offers convincing evidence that Burden has met with unusual success a challenge not always

weathered by several of his similarly iconoclastic colleagues: how to follow the impossibly tough act of his own early work.

Of course, Burden's art was bound to change. By the mid 1970's, the artist turned increasingly to installation pieces and sculpture, albeit of a highly eccentric sort. He lost his aura of sensationalism, going from being an infamous underground artist to a

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From Outrageous To Eccentric

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famous artist who was only intermittently visible. He continued to work and exhibit, but at least from a New York vantage point, it was often difficult to make sense of his enterprise.

This is the first time Burden's installation pieces and sculptures have been brought together and also the first opportunity to consider his work as a whole. It's a piecemeal, ragtag career that turns the I.C.A.'s already gerrymandered, multilevel space, once a police station, into a kind of giant laboratory, with a different idea pursued in every corner.

In one area are the "relics" — the only residue of his early performance work that the artist consistently exhibits — among them the electrical wires used in "Doorway to Heaven." (Photographs of the performance pieces have been widely reproduced in books, magazines and exhibition catalogues but are not generally considered artworks themselves.)

In another area, one can pore over

Burden's art celebrates the power of individual will.

the artist's ship sculptures — funky, endlessly detailed assemblages from the early 80's made of toy weapons and toy soldiers, machine parts and whatnot. Named for Columbus's vessels, these works recapitulate the youthful exuberance and excess of Burden's performance pieces. Visually they resemble sections of Spanish galleons and speak volumes about war and war games, and also suggest homemade computers or models of the human brain. Nearby is a working model of a frictionless sled (1983), a small piece of plexiglass cushioned on air that the viewer can send speeding along a 21-foot aluminum "rail" with the flick of a wrist.

Yet, perhaps unexpectedly, this exciting if somewhat uneven exhibition hangs together, revealing Burden's continuing ability to subvert and disturb and his unflagging desire to stun the viewer, flashbulb-like, with imaginative enactments of facts, both simple and complex, or universal principles. The ideas that fascinate him have moved beyond his own person and have shed their quasi-religious focus, spreading outward with an amazing physical and intellectual versatility. There is much more in this show than can be touched on here, and much more documented in its excellent catalogue than could ever be corralled into a single exhibition. Nonetheless, it is clear that Burden's art continues to celebrate the power of individual thought and will and the inevitability of progress. And as physically present as most of it has become, its strong Conceptual bent is unabated. So is its tendency to look not much like art.

All these attributes are in force in

his 1975 "B-Car" and 1977 "C.B.-T.V." Built by the artist himself, this crude but functioning automobile and television set seem intended to demystify technology and also to critique mass production. (The "B-Car" gets 150 miles to the gallon, although its top speed is only 50 miles per hour.)

Several of his larger works present a characteristic blend of purity, violence and monumentality now aimed at demonstrating simple principles of motion or mass in breathtakingly sculptural ways. In "The Big Wheel," Burden uses a motorcycle's rear wheel to set a three-ton iron flywheel, the survivor of a 19th-century factory, into a fast and furious spin that lasts about three hours. The contrast is wonderful: this old, simple Goliath of a wheel, man's first "machine," powered by a modern David — small, complex and delicate.

"Samson" (1985), located at the museum's entrance, consists of a turnstile connected to a gearbox and a 100-ton jack, the latter pushing against the ends of two giant timbers wedged between the outer walls of the museum. Every visitor to the show, passing through the turnstile, pushes the museum's walls a little farther apart. Describing the work as a comment on the way blockbuster shows may be destroying museums, David Ross, I.C.A.'s director, speculated that an attendance of 500,000 could bring down the roof, quickly pointing out that the figure is so far well below 20,000. "Still, if this were a Renoir show, we might have something to worry about."

Others of Burden's recent works force us to consider military might and the money, inventiveness and potential violence that make it so numbing. "The Reason for the Neutron Bomb" is a field of 50,000 nickels, each with a matchstick glued to it. Each nickel represents one Soviet tank, a force so much larger than the West's that it was cited as justification for a weapon that kills people without destroying property — or other weapons.

Like the Barry LeVa retrospective organized by the Carnegie Mellon University Art Gallery and at the High Museum in Atlanta through Oct. 29, the Burden show validates the early 70's as a hotbed of influential ideas that have played a major role in the art of the 80's. But, also like the LeVa show, it makes a point that may be even more important. It substantiates the early 70's as fertile terrain that has nurtured and sustained even the most extreme, seemingly self-destructive of its own artists, as they proceed to give more tangible form to their art's initial premises.

In a sense, Burden has converted his early "passion plays," as they might be called, into another, equally passionate brinkmanship, making work that questions its own right to be called art, and that implicates the viewer in its very structure. At the moment, in the midst of the Mapplethorpe-N.E.A. controversy, when art's shock value is viewed with such suspicion, his achievement provides an inspiring and indispensable model. □