

ACTION AS AGENCY IN OBJECT :

Chris Burden 1979 -2015

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Introduction

In the late 1960s, Chris Burden (b.1945) began developing his interest in the use of mechanical objects and systems in the undergraduate program at Pomona College, (fig. 1) where he majored in Visual Arts, Physics, and Architecture. He continued the exploration in his graduate program at the University of California at Irvine, and by the time Burden began integrating these components in his minimalist performances in the 1970s, he specifically used mechanical systems and objects that had been used not only in the construction of our physical world but in our social experiences and cultural vernacular, dragging along the multitude of sociological, economic and anthropological baggage accumulated through the previous two centuries, both positive and negative. In Burden's work from this period, there are the obvious and much cited associations to the conflict in Vietnam, gun violence, and the weaponization of institutionalized systems, with the art world being one of them. Burden was also interested in the slow, but steady disconnection of a social awareness and knowledge of the world of classical mechanics¹ and function, once stating in reference to C.B.T.V. (fig. 3) that "...as technology becomes more and more complex, fewer and fewer people have any understanding of how anything really works."

¹ "Classical Mechanics." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 14 Aug. 2020, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Classical_mechanics.

Mechanical systems are part of our cultural DNA. With few exceptions, we are born into a world that relies on mechanized systems to set up, enable and promote civility and prosperity. Both artists and industry use these systems or applications in both human controlled and automated production of objects. This event can include multiple participants when expertise, scale, and size are all a consideration. Between 1971 and 1979, Burden created approx. 43 performances incorporating his body, often dissolving or disappearing into or out of them. In 1975, he created B-car (fig. 2), his first major movement towards an application of mechanical systems in a semi autonomous sculpture. Up until 1978, mechanized or stand-alone sculpture was relatively ancillary to his practice, making up a small portion of his work compared to his immersive physical performances. Although it may look as if Burden completely transformed his practice around 1979, it is interesting that the use of mechanical objects combined with action was always present in Burden's work, even in his iconic performances. Throughout the 1970's, Burden's performances incorporated guns shooting, camera's clicking, planes flying, engines revving, TV sets flickering, ladders soaking up water, wrenches turning, trucks working, bicycles moving, boats floating and radios crackling, just to name a few. In 1979, Burden continued the process of receding physically from his performances, only this time he began the transition from his body being the primary object in the performative-sculpture, to creating independent sculptures that vacillate between static and action, employing many of the Newtonian based mechanical principles and industrial systems that this essay is concerned with.

For this essay, I will discuss specific works developed by Chris Burden between 1979 and 2015, and argue that it is the use of these classical mechanics combined with action that creates an agency in the object. I will focus specifically on the performances and sculptures of *Big Wheel* (1979), *Beam Drop* (1981), *Samson* (1985) and *Ode to Santos Dumont* (2015). I will

consider and present an argument that Burden's implementation of action in these sculptures using mechanical and industrial systems, materials, and applications is with intent to replace his body, enabling the sculpture to exist independently with its own agency. Additionally, I will discuss works chronologically, and address the forms of agency, both unique and similar in the works.

Big Wheel, 1979

Burden's first major move towards transferring emphasis of agency from his body to a sculpture was *Big Wheel* (fig. 4) Typical of a Burden description, the artist lays out the bare essentials, reminiscent of a wrench you would buy at a hardware store or a simple instruction included when purchasing a power tool.

“The *Big Wheel* consisted of a three-ton flywheel mounted in a vertical position and set in motion by the rear tire of a motorcycle. The iron wheel is accelerated to a speed of 200 revolutions per minute. The *Big Wheel* would then spin freely for two and a half hours before it would need to be recharged.”²

Fred Hoffman describes his first encounter with *Big Wheel* in 1979 at the Felsen Gallery in Los Angeles in the 2007 monograph by Thames& Hudson. Upon viewing the static piece, Hoffman describes it as “shock and wonder.” This response seems to be a reaction both to the sculptural nature of the piece vs the body-performance atmosphere usually associated with Burden, as well as the physical presence and scale of the piece in a gallery setting as Felsen gallery was a tidy 350 sq feet. *Big Wheel* carried on the tradition of Burden presenting all the mechanical systems of the ready made object 100% visible. As if to emphasize these objects as a proxy or replacement of Burden's body, Burden made sure that he himself reconditioned the

² Hoffman, Fred, et al. *Chris Burden*. Thames & Hudson, 2007.

large flywheel after finding it in an overgrown southern california field. The 1969 Binnelli was Burden's personal motorcycle.

Everything changes at the introduction of the performance. The starting of the motorcycle, the massive flywheel beginning to revolve after the initiation by a man and a machine. Man revving through all the gears, then the disconnection of the motorcycle from the flywheel and the disappearance of the artist from the performance, leaving the spin of the flywheel. Feldmen introduces themes and descriptions such as "...deafening, reverberation, fascinating, forbidding" during the beginning of the performance, but after disengaging the motorcycle from the flywheel, and turning off the engine, the descriptions change to "overwhelming presence, attraction and repulsion, fantasies, consumed, danger, destruction, peacefulness, sensory experience, visceral response". Definitely a change in description from "shock and wonder". These descriptions seem to enter into the teleological and ontological. Without this action of the sculpture applied, would Hoffman have arrived at any of these latter descriptions? Would he have remained in the "shock and wonder" of the materiality of the work? Would he have traveled into the realm of experience? In his essay on John Dewey's Aesthetics, Tom Leddy describes this as:

"Aesthetic experience involves a drama in which action, feeling, and meaning are one. The result is balance. Such experience would not occur in a world of mere flux in which there was no cumulative change. Nor would it occur in a world that is finished, for then there would be no resolution or fulfillment. It is only possible in a world in which the live being loses and reestablishes equilibrium with its environment."³

³ Leddy, Tom. "Dewey's Aesthetics." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Stanford University, 8 Feb. 2016, plccm.o.stanford.edu/entries/dewey-aesthetics/#ArtCiv.

Does the “object” constitute a “live being”? Or is it Burden in the first act of the performance that is the “live being that loses equilibrium” and the large flywheel that “re-establishes” it through its own agency?

I believe it is the action of the object that enables the viewer to experience a transformation or a transfer of agency. By transfer, I mean that up to this point, Burden’s performances were well known to use his body. I believe *Big Wheel* was the beginning of Burden transferring this agency to the works. With *Big Wheel*, Burden performs in the beginning, then vacates for the second half of the performance, mimicking another trademark of his earlier performances. Disappearing. With *Big Wheel*, he begins to develop sculptures for the next 30 years that will open up considerations of objects with agency. As with most of the works, *Big Wheel* does this with a democratic and transparent connection through the ready made, exposed mechanics and systems, and it marks a definitive second act in Burden's practice.

I have only seen videos and photos of *Big Wheel*. I would say it is a safe bet to say that the experience of seeing the performance live in action instead of on video would be a justification of the virtue of action in object. When I view the performances, either old or current ones that are available in sporadic places on the internet and various institutions around the world, it accelerates and elevates a different experience and consideration every time depending on a multitude of factors. Paul Shimmel states in his essay *Gesture as Object: Liberation as Aktion*.

“We know that the performative work of art, be it Happening, performance art, body or Aktion, is an ephemeral and participatory event. As such it is primarily a direct experience and loses its immediacy upon being realized. Its presence can then only be conveyed by the media, or by representational objects. This does not necessarily imply a dissolution of the art object. It indicates rather a new, expansive and free conception of the artwork and art itself, for eventually in the performative work,

even thought achieves plasticity. It then becomes a gesture that in the conceptual and performative work can not only stand by itself, but can also lead one to reevaluation of the art objects. This then provides the languages of art new contextual possibilities and conceptual variations”²⁴

But what form of agency is at play? Burden described *Big Wheel* as a Neanderthal Atomic bomb that transforms a mixture of small, relatively lightweight hydrocarbons into a massive amount of kinetic energy, that if let loose, has the potential to destroy anything that gets in its path. This eventuality seems like a linear connection to the artist's intent. However, it is only through an action of the sculpture that I am able to view the sublime nature of balance. The variations of sounds and light reminds me of the wind in a forest, and the dissipation of energy reminding me that all things come to an end and there is a cycle in everything. There is simply no way I ponder those questions without the action of the sculpture, and I believe it is through a form of agency developed through this action in the object that I am able to make these connections. And it is exactly what enables me to consider new meanings every time I view a performance. With *Big Wheel*, Burden was beginning to create these industrial and mechanical objects to exist without him. They would perform and challenge the viewer to confront the role of industrialization and its effects on society (political), community (“artworld”), and individual (viewer /artist).

BEAM DROP, 1984

Five years after *Big Wheel* debuted, Burden would participate in what one could possibly consider his last performance that he was at least partially involved in. In *Big Wheel*, Burden performed at least a portion of the piece, revving the motorcycle before disengaging and leaving the sculpture center stage. In *Beam Drop* (fig. 5) in Lewiston, New York, he is again operating

²⁴Gesture as Object: Liberation as Aktion, in Paul Schimmel (ed.) *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object* (London:Thames & Hudson, 1998)

on the periphery, removed even more so than *Big Wheel*, but still connected, if not by more than a thin release cable.(fig. 7) *Beam Drop* is interesting on many points in the discussion of action in objects, but a few that stand out are as follows. First, it is the only sculpture out of the four primary objects considered in this paper that uses raw, readymade materials with no manipulation by Burden. Recycled I beams and the large industrial system (crane) that performed during the first stage (fig. 6,7), result in a final sculpture that would be a static object upon completion, viewed as an implied action, artifact, or echo.

Beam Drop was actually a site specific expansion on a Burden performance from a year earlier in 1983 called *From Neanderthal to the 20th Century*.(fig. 5.A) The piece consisted of a 10' I beam suspended horizontally from the floor with a heavy twine. Again, using common materials and systems of mechanics, Burden created a fire underneath the twine by using the primitive method of using a small bow to turn a shaft, eventually igniting a small pile of straw, which then burned through the twine suspending the I-beam, resulting in the steel crashing to the ground. Why is this event important? I believe it is another example of Burden developing systems and approaches to transferring his agency to objects through mechanical actions, but just as important, I submit that in fact it is the **performance** of *Beam Drop* in 1984 in Lewiston Park that is the primary work, with the resulting sculpture the remnants of the piece. If one does look at finished sculpture as the intended work, this event sets up a discernable and palpable distinction between the performance actions that are present in *Big Wheel*, and the implied action in *Beam Drop*. Is there a quantifiable difference in the agency of *Big Wheel* and that of *Beam Drop*? When viewing the existing images of the original *Beam Drop*, it is clear that Burden is functioning as a facilitator. A tool. In the 1984 performance in New York, Burden continued his retreat that he began with *Big Wheel*, separating himself from the performance, allowing the

beams, and the crane to predominate the physical performance (fig. 7), leaving implied action evident in the final sculpture. The contrast between the industrial scale of influence exerted by both the crane, and the I beams compared to Burden and the human workers and participants is as striking in the performance as it is in the resulting sculpture. By far, the most striking difference is the momentary levity and weightless image the massive I beams strike as they are falling, floating silently for a blink in time before smashing back to earth (fig. 6). When one is looking at the finished work sitting silent and resolute in Lewis Park in 1984, they might have seen a plaque or inscription by Burden himself, describing the sculpture.

“The beams are symbolic of culture and order. Our most dignified structures, like the World Trade Center or Chicago's Sears Tower, are made of them. My idea is to play with these building blocks of order, to be impudent with them. I think people relate to that.”

Or, this one, which seems to be a completely different description by Burden, describing the finished sculpture as:

“self evident to the viewer as the hand of the artist in a conventional abstract expressionist painting.”

The description from Burden seems to indicate that when asked about the physical sculpture, the work seems to elicit a simple PHYSICAL description and interpretation from the artist.

However, if one were present at the construction performance, what would one see? A crane. Lifting the beams. The drop. The smash. The sound. Relentless and unyielding force. What would one think of? I cannot speak for anyone else, but I will tell you what I think of. I think of the slow but ever present machine, a representation of Heinrich von Kleist “marionette of industry”⁵, with the white man pulling the strings. It conjures images of hardened steel I beam that made up the Transcontinental Railroad that transformed the landscape and “tamed” the west with brutal and unforgiving force. Taming being a derogatory, yet prophetic term considering

⁵ “Kleist_on The Marionette Theater.” *Scribd*, Scribd, pt.scribd.com/document/38904360/Kleist-on-the-Marionette-Theater.

that 100 years later, it would be pictures of native American “skywalkers” (fig.. 6.A) in black and white images participating in the construction and industrial trades of that region, having done so starting 1916, when Mohawk men made their way to New York to work on the Hell Gate Bridge and numerous other architectural structures that transformed the region and skyline. Again we see a pattern here, as Burden seems to be using very common, often invisible, everyday materials, machinery, and tools of those industrial systems embedded in our universal daily social experiences. But it also offers a unique before and after. This event is a unique apparatus that Burden seems to be using to create a form of agency in this work. The whole project seems to have a “behind the curtain” or Wizard of Oz process that is again Burden going back to his original performances where the process of the work IS the work. The action/process in the piece represents these industrial and mechanized systems as physical objects, exhibited in the formation of our industrial structures, social systems and national identity, but also represent a historical index of the power and potential to destroy them as well.

SAMSON, 1985

By all accounts, except for C.B.T.V, *Samson* (fig. 8) marked Burden's complete removal of his body from physical participation in his performative sculptures, allowing the work to shed the “Burden of Burden”. By this point in Burden's practice, he had become well known for his performative work pushing the boundaries of sculpture-based performance . The fracas that often surrounded Burden created an expectation of "the extreme". This distraction, as well as an intent to transfer agency, was possibly a catalyst for Burden's move away from his use of his own body in the work and his desire to create “performative sculptures” using mechanical

objects and systems with action. The description of the *Samson* is again bare and simplistic. It consists of a 100 tonne jack connected to a gearbox, two massive sixteen inch thick square timbers with square steel caps' large timbers against the walls of the museum. The gearbox connects to a turnstile so that every time a person enters through the turnstile to view the sculpture, it expands the jack slightly. In the catalog for the show, Burden writes “ It is possible, if enough people visit the exhibition, *Samson* could, theoretically, destroy the building.”⁶ The turnstile is interesting as it is a classic representation of the regulated and methodical control of entrance to any spectacle or service. To view the work up close, the viewer must make a choice to enter the turnstile, thus turning the gearbox, hence pushing out on the timbers and against the wall. A direct parallel and what I would argue is Burden's attempt to continue his quest to replace the role that his body played as the object with more agency in his earlier performances. Notably *Shoot* (1971), and again in *Doomed* (1975), where Burden created a conflict within the audience and viewers to choose to passively observe or participate. To simply observe, the viewer could ingest the event, allowing it to unfold undeterred. Safe from any recriminations. If you participate, either through encouragement, promotion or determent, you face a multitude of possible outcomes, not the least among them destroying or derailing the making of the art, participating in the success of the art, being complicit in harm to artist, or promoting a “meaning” that you may be in dissonance with. This creates what Lisa Phillips describes as a Double Bind⁷. I point out that with *Big Wheel*, Burden was still a partially present participant. With *Beam Drop*, he was still a conductor, but only in the *making* of the sculpture. With *Samson*, Burden, for the first time, is completely absent from the performance, having fully

⁶ Nordenson, Guy. “An Engineer’ View.” *Extreme Measures*, by Lisa Phillips, Pocket Books, 2015, p. 75.

⁷ *Chris Burden: Extreme Measures*, by Lisa Phillips et al., Skira Rizzoli, 2013, p. 18.

transferred his role to the object. His body as a machine. Resisting and destroying. He has done so in the manifestation in both a physical and conceptual model, using mechanical systems, particularly tools and objects that could one day be specimens or artifacts resembling those of prehistoric dinosaurs in a natural history museum, of which the Henry museum, where the work debuted, resembled. No obvious white cube here, but nonetheless an overwhelming institutional critique aimed straight at the “mechanical” commodification of art. A common observation of the piece is through the lens of the religious connotation of the story of *Samson* told in the book of Judges in the Bible, with him pushing out on the pillars and crumbling the temple, killing himself along with the philistines inside⁸. The idea of *Samson* crumbling the museum is of course obvious, but I would argue that the specific use of the industrial sized 100 tonne jack could also be an effort to **resist**. Hydraulic jacks usually prop or lift in order to *repair* machines or structures, not *destroy* them. The amount of push initiated by the person pushing through the turnstile is so finite, that it serves another method of conflict to the participant. How can something so massive create such a small amount of movement? By substituting a human figure, (Burden/Samson), with a mechanized representation, it effectively transfers the agency to object.

For an interesting comparison and contrast, consider Richard Serra’s *Tilted Arc* from 1981 (fig 10). Void of any action in the object, the finished piece was an industrial blockade. Immovable. Unlike *Samson*, you could not go through it, or into it. You had to go around it. The static presence, along with the sculptures site specific location on government land perhaps were uncomfortable collective memory, indicative of sit-in protest during the 1960 civil rights movement and again to a certain degree in the 1970 protest to the Vietnam war. So much so, it

⁸ Kesselman, Shlomo Chaim. “The Story of Samson and Delilah in the Bible - As Told in Judges 13-16 and the Talmud.” *Judaism*, 1 July 2004, www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/112512/jewish/The-Story-of-Samson-and-Delilah-in-the-Bible.htm?gclid=CjwKCAjwzvX7BRAeEiwAsXExo8GhzJLojO4xQXgAaGa_rCQGAakt31r4zinHirw35AOXQPmdIFKv1RoC8lYQAvD_BwE.

ultimately became an object of contention. Forcibly removed and eventually dismantled, it was a different action that brought meaning. It depends on who you ask, but it seems the dismantling of *Tilted Arc* fortified Serra's career, and serves as the primary agency of the piece. The meaning of the work is well documented, however I would argue that it was an unplanned and disputed action of the “unmaking” that opened up the wider discussions that the static sculpture could have never done. It took on a "life of its own" if you will.

Aesthetically, *Samson* and *Tilted Arc* are similar. The residual markings of the process of making left indelible marks on the finished sculptures. But with *Samson*, it is the action of the turnstile, and the crank of the infinitesimal movement of the jack that allows an immersion or experience of the work in a way that creates the agency. Burden described *Samson* as an institutional critique. The power of physical sculpture created is dependent on the action of the sculpture, and its ability to POTENTIALLY destroy the building. Yet, this event exists almost entirely in the mind of the viewer. This is the agency in the piece. The use of extremely common materials and mechanics that confronts the viewer with the teleological question of one's purpose and role in the system as a participant, bystander, or destroyer. The viewer is responsible for initiating the excruciatingly slow destruction of the object and the museum, even if individually they are just “one little click”. Again, the Double Bind. The choice to be a benign viewer and simply move along, or interact and be part of the “art”, but also complicit in the systemization of incremental destruction.

Ode to Santos Dumont, 2015

Ode to Santos Dumont (fig. 11) is a collaborative project that Burden developed with master machinist John Biggs over the course of 10 years. Biggs built a hand-tooled 1/4 scale replica of a 1903 De Dion gasoline motor used by the Brazilian aviator and engineer Alberto Santos-Dumont on his historic flight encircling the Eiffel Tower in 1901. The remainder of the piece consist of aircraft aluminum parts, carbon fiber, fiberglass, nylon, polyurethane and 1200 cubic feet of helium. Dimensions are: 16 foot height, 60 foot circumference. Gondola: 24 inches × 21 feet, 6 inches. Balloon: 8 × 40 feet (needs exhibition space with 18 foot high ceiling and 72 foot circumference).

The piece is a bit of an outlier from the previous three works, having been initiated a full 20 years after *Samson* and completed a full 30 years later. It was the last work by Burden, presented posthumously and performed in front of an audience in May 2015, 5 days after Burden physically left this world. This singular difference in the sculpture is important. If the work does not start up, does not move, is it still considered sculpture? Is it a monument, or possibly a memorial? An “Ode to Chris Burden”. Take away the action and it becomes a symbol of Burden in the past. The formal qualities and technical virtuosity of the object would indeed be impressive, possibly invoking Alfred Gell and his “Enchantment of Technology and Technology of Enchantment.”⁹ Gell argues that:

“an object acts as an agent when the artist’s skill is so great that the viewer simply cannot comprehend it, resulting in the image alone captivating the viewer.”

The work could also cause a conflict as the viewer would be aware that Burden did not physically build the majority of the piece himself. However, it does not sit still. The performance itself consists of Biggs or an attendant starting the motor and lifting the work out of

⁹ Derlon, Brigitte, and Monique Jeudy-Ballini. “The Theory of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Theory: the Art of Alfred Gell.” *Oceania*, vol. 80, no. 2, 2010, pp. 129–142., doi:10.1002/j.1834-4461.2010.tb00076.x.

its cradle, much like a child. The sculpture then begins to propel itself, encircling a 60ft space(fig.12) while tethered by a thin line to the center, both from the ground and the ceiling. A neutral buoyancy in the balloon allows the work to float and the motor turns a propeller that pushes the gondola around the arc. Every nod and bounce seems to both contain Chris Burden and be an independent extension. A child. The representation of a body that was once imperative, now gone. A Parent. This event is a completely different form of agency at play in *OSD* than in the previous works discussed, yet it is still an agency invoked by action.

The collaboration on the piece with Biggs also offers another comparison in the four pieces observed in this paper and speaks to the topic of the role of the industrial aspect of these works. As mentioned, for the purpose of this paper, I am using industrial to imply a method of development that uses systems primarily employed in the manufacturing of large works, works that may be duplicated, and works that require multiple participants to develop, make and deploy. This points to a definitive difference between the other 3 pieces discussed. The other 3 works had a much more raw, ready-made and exposed feeling, enabling the viewer to balance the relation between formal aesthetic and action. With *OSD*, the work is by far the most technically and mechanically complex and “finished”. It displays a level of finish fetish that displays more the hand of Biggs than it does Burden, marking another evolution in the four pieces discussed that is unique to this one, and that is Burden’s willingness to employ a system of team production. In her essay “Industrial Revolution: History of Fabrication”, Michelle Kuo quotes Ed Suman, principal partner at Carlson & Co.

“Artists often want qualities that could previously only have been attained through mass production,” but that “it can be extremely expensive to produce a prototype of something that is designed to be mass-produced, to attain the perfection of mass production.”¹⁰

¹⁰ kuo, michelle. “Industrial Revolution: Michelle Kuo on the History of Fabrication.” *The Free Library*, www.thefreelibrary.com/Industrial+revolution%3a+Michelle+Kuo+on+the+history+of+fabrication.-a0169913081.

Burden used a small team of fabricators and assistants at his studio throughout his latter part of his career. Yet, Burden never employed Carlson & Co. or any of the other large production houses that other artists like Oldenburg, Judd, Koons, and Serra did. Yet with *OSD*, by exhibiting this highly finished and technically superior work, the work seems to be in danger of losing what made his earlier works so compelling. It was Burden in the performance, and it was Burden who built or constructed the piece that would eventually perform. Looking at the images and details of dormant objects, I catch myself caught in these “Gell moments”, admiring the workmanship and technical qualities of *OSD* (fig. 13, 14) . But again, once the action begins, it changes. I go somewhere else. I am not looking at the individual pieces of the work. Absent are any messages of institutional critique. There is no sign of overwhelming force. When watching the performance, it is a mesmerizing experience even if experienced through video documentation. It's the *Little Red Balloon*¹¹. The movement somehow creates a whole greater than its parts. Burden seems to be present in the work. There is an armistice with the issues that he seemed to be investigating throughout his career. In fact it is hard not to imagine *Ode to Santos Dumont* as a *Ghost in the Shell*.¹² When compared to *Flying Steamroller* (fig 15) from 1996 and *Porsche with Meteorite* (fig. 16) from 2013, the action in the works are strikingly similar. They all move around and trace a perfect circle. They all use a form of mechanized systems and basic principles of mechanics. However, as the previous works are creating that agency invoking balance and destruction with *VISIBLE* mechanical methods of counter balance using massive heavy weights and alien rocks, , *Ode to Santos Dumont* seems to create a balance through an invisible levity that seems apropos with where Burden had arrived in his career.

¹¹ “The Red Balloon.” *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 30 Aug. 2020, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Red_Balloon.

¹² “GHOST IN THE SHELL.” *Ghost in the Shell Wiki*, ghostintheshell.fandom.com/wiki/Philosophy.

Agency

The anthropological definition of Agency defines it as the “capacity, condition, or state of action or of exerting power.” It does not differentiate from a person or a thing, and says that the agency lies in the power exerted or an end achieved.¹³ In her response in *The Concept of Agency in Objects*,¹⁴ Claire Russo observes that in Janet Hoskins essay “Agency, Biography and Objects”, she points out Laura Ahern’s understanding that

“agency is ‘the socio-culturally mediated capacity to act’ and is deliberately not restricted to persons, and may include spirits, machines, signs, and collective entities”, continuing to add the objects “indeed possess an innate agency given to them by humans that allows them to affect change”.

In the works of Burden discussed, yes, they are planned and constructed, and when activated, meant to complete a simple task. Turning a large wheel. Pushing walls apart an infinitesimal amount. Floating around a 60-foot radius. To create an autonomous object with a set of simple tasks was the same goal in 18th century Automata created by watchmakers throughout Europe. However, with the Automaton, there was a very distinct ability for these pieces to present an “uncanny” presence of a living thing with a “soul”. From Roland Descartes’ Francine¹⁵ to Jacques de Vaucanson Digesting Duck¹⁶, machines that look like humans or animals and mimic how they behave with action often invoke the ontological discussions of being. The idea that agency can be achieved by something moving or completing a simple task is valid, but seems too simplistic in the discussion of these works. With the exception of *Ode to*

¹³ “Agency.” *Merriam-Webster*, Merriam-Webster, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/agency.

¹⁴ russo, claire. *The Concept of Agency in Objects*, 7 Feb. 2007,

¹⁵ “The Life and Death (and Then ‘Life’ and Then ‘Death’) of Francine Descartes.” *Check Your Facts*, 19 Oct. 2010,

¹⁶ Forster, Jack. “Watches, Automaton, ‘Soul,’ And The Digesting Duck Of Jacques De Vaucanson.” *HODINKEE*, HODINKEE, 21 Feb. 2017,

Santos Dumont, as it was the first work performed AFTER Burden had passed, I would maintain that in these works of Burden, the effect is not an agency that infers a living object or presence, or is meant to simply perform a simple task, but rather a form of agency that not only invokes conversations about the capacity of mechanized and industrial systems to benefit society, but the potential to destroy it. Long time Villiage Voice columnist C.Carr was possibly alluding to this when he concluded in 1989 that “Burden’s work is terrorism”.¹⁷ In her conclusion of her essay *Power Play*, contributing artist Jenny Moore articulately addresses the topic of power in Burden's work.

“One can presume that considerations of power might also entail brute force, and a number of Burden's sculptures do so to the extreme. Beam Drop (first produced in 1984) Samson, Medusa's head, the flying steamroller, Beehive Bunker (2006), 1 Ton Crane Truck (2009), and Porsche with Meteorite (2013) all deploy an extraordinary amount of pressure and weight in their manifestations. Beam Drop relies on the sheer force of gravity to artfully construct an abstract sculpture from steel beams... Samson has the ability to literally collapse the institution exhibiting it, inverting the power of the museum by harnessing the power of the art.”¹⁸

However, it is the following paragraph that Moore does the heavy lifting, addressing where the real agency in the works exists. It is in their ability to enforce a mental game of “what if” that leads us to believe that they not only have the power or potential to destroy the gallery or museum they sit in, but to also destroy the work itself. The last line in the text is a quote from Burden himself, compelling evidence that he had always been interested in a distinction between himself and agency in object.

¹⁷ Burden, Chris, et al. *Chris Burden: Extreme Measures*. Skira Rizzoli, 2013. (Amelia Jones p.136)

¹⁸ “Power Play.” *Chris Burden, Extreme Measures*, by Jenny Moore, Skira Rizzoli, 2013, p. 196.

“The question I am asked the most at the New Museum is “How was it done?” More specifically meaning, how can an institution present a work when it won't fit through the door, when the floor won't support its weight, when the very nature of the work is that it might fail? My answer is always a bit circumspect, for every instance is singular in its complication and ultimate compromise. And while the floors of the Museum will bear the heaviest weight they have ever been tasked to, the walls, at this point, won't fall.”

After all, it was Burden himself who once explained, “**I wasn't the artist who shot himself, and I am not the artist that pushes museums down.**”¹⁹

Replacement

Up to the point of *Big Wheel* in 1979, Burden was always working at creating an agency in objects using mechanical systems, and he was consistently doing it using action, both as a visible participant in the performance as well as a vacant or invisible one. Below is a chronological list of some performances that were specific to this investigation. Each piece was an action performance, with the exception of 747, which he presented as a photograph of an action. Listed is Burden's visibility, the year, the name of the piece and the mechanical and industrial materials used.

HIDDEN	1971	Five Day Locker Piece	Steel institutional locker
VISIBLE	1971	Shoot	Rifle, bullet, camera
HIDDEN	1972	Dead man	Tarp , flares
VISIBLE	1973	Transfixed	VW car, spikes, camera
VISIBLE	1973	747	Gun, Camera, Plane
VISIBLE	1973	Doorway to heaven	Electricity and wires
HIDDEN	1974	Dracula	Canvas, nails
MEDIATED	1974	Velvet Water	Water, sinks, Monitors,
HIDDEN	1975	White light White heat	Plywood, beams

¹⁹ Ward, Frazer. “Gray Zone: Watching ‘Shoot.’” *October*, vol. 95, 2001, pp. 115–130. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/779202. Accessed 11 Nov. 2020.

HIDDEN	1975	Oracle	Large windows, scrim, light
VISIBLE	1975	B car	Engine, steel, gasoline,
VISIBLE	1979	Honest labor	Shovel, wheelbarrow

There seems to be a very distinct connection among Burden's iconic performances, and his ‘shift’ away from physical performances beginning in 1979 with *Big Wheel*, and crystallizing with *Samson* in 1985. Historical reverence has placed a great deal of the conversation around “power” both as a subject and visceral experience of his physical performances such as *Five day Locker Piece*, *Shoot*, *Transfixed*, and *Deadman*, to name only a few. It becomes clear to me that Burden in fact did not pivot to sculpture in 1979. Intentional or not, Burden methodically investigated the power of replacement and the use of a proxy as a form of agency from the very beginning. He consistently used materials and methods he was exposed to, intimately connected with and was curious about, and believed was a form of basic language that carried a broad and universal connection in all cultures. Fred Hoffman²⁰ writes:

“ The Big Wheel announced the artist’s pursuits of the materialization of ideas. Now, some 20 years later, it becomes clear that Burden’s entire career has addressed the nature of force, both bodily and mechanical. Culminating with the Big Wheel, conceptual motivation is resolved through the more traditional manipulation of object and form.”

By “disappearing” or replacing his body in these sculptural works beginning in 1979, using these mechanical systems and objects, it allows the observer to view the work not only framed within the charged cultural and political environment of the late 70s and 80s, but creates forms of agency in the object that provokes both teleological and ontological questions surrounding these objects in action, but does it **without** Burden's physical body, which of course has a finite ability to absorb these levels of infliction, and will eventually not be there one day.

²⁰ Hoffman, Fred, et al. *Chris Burden*. Thames & Hudson, 2007. Pg. 356

Conclusion

Chris Burden was a both a revolutionary and polarizing figure in the beginning of his career. It should not be overlooked that it was this same 45 year span that saw the invention and explosion of microprocessors, miniaturization of electronics among other advances in science and physics. In the 70's, it was microprocessing. The 80s Video, cable tv and commercialism. And of course the digital and internet revolution beginning in the 90s and still traveling at warp speed today. However, with few exceptions for his entire career, and specifically for the pieces in the discussion here between 1979 and 2015, Burden primarily stayed with Newton's classical mechanics in the sculptures. Though Burden claimed that the disconnect in modern society from “how things work” was always a concern, his use of these simple and familiar methods and mechanics to deal with gravity, balance, suspension, forces, compression, and leverage has a way of mainlining into the viewer’s bloodstream, tapping into the primal sense of what connects all of our experiences.

There are 2 primary arguments that I have addressed in this paper. The first states that it is the use of these classical mechanics combined with an action that creates a form of agency outside of a simple function or motion, of which I believe is supported through the examinations of the works. The second is the implementation of these materials and applications that replace Burden's body as mirror of the methods so effective in his iconic works 1971 through 1979. On this point, I would like to end with observations from one art critic and two artists. We started out with a citation of Fred Hoffman, so it seems fitting to end with one. Hoffman writes::

“Driving all these activities and any resulting objects is an underlying commitment to present something (an action, or form) that is credible in terms of daily, lived experience... while we surely have neither the background nor the experience of the artist with his diverse array of interests and subjects, we feel comfortable around his work, sensing that we could have encountered these objects and installations numerous times throughout our lives...while they may depart from common expectation in terms of scale, complexity and choice of materials, objects such as *The Big Wheel* (1979), *Metropolis* (2004), *The Flying steamroller* (1996), *Samson* (1985) and even *Medusa's Head* (1991) **share enough features with the objects we use and confront on a daily basis** to cause us neither fear nor alarm.”²¹

Oscar Tuzon is a Sculptor. A good one. He is a pretty good writer as well. When I read the essay for his contribution to the catalog for *Extreme Measures*, it was one of those “*EXACTLY!*” moments for me. The short expert’s below colorfully describe the idea that the action (agency) of Burden’s body is synonymous with the action of mechanics and objects (body) in the works discussed in this paper.

“Like Chris Burden, I’m a sculptor. In other words, a guy who’s mostly body. That’s the way Burden started out, a young man building a body. A body builder, working nonstop in the body shop. Building a body from scratch, a naked man rising from a prone position, risking peril to his genitals, demanding PLEASE PUSH PINS INTO MY BODY. My body, not entirely mine, formed by objects, contained, deformed, put under pressure. - that’s a sculpture. You work with what you’ve got.”

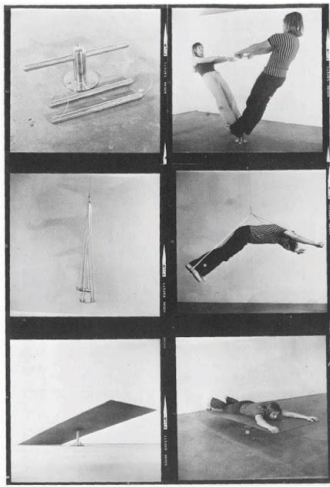
“Let me tell you a secret about being an artist. There's a lot of lives I'd like to live. There's lives I'd like to take. To save. But I can't imagine ever wanting to be an architect. If you can make a sculpture, you can figure out how to build a building. Chris Burden has built a few sculptures that look like buildings, but they are something you can describe in a series of instructions- that's not architecture, that's sculpture. I'm not saying that I don't believe

²¹ Hoffman, Fred. “Chris Burden: Some Reflections.” *Chris Burden*, Thames & Hudson, 2007, p. 360.

Samson was actually capable of destroying the Henry Art Gallery in 1985, maybe it was but either way it's fiction. **A fictional system comes to life, materialized, actual physical, factual, language come to life. A Man's life as an object. A man is an object.**"²²

I am a maker. I make things. I move things. I make things that I move. Sculptures, cars, furniture, motorcycles, paintings. I was shown still images of Burden's *Shoot* and *Big Wheel* in 1989. I distinctly remember thinking there was something I really liked. It was not until I observed the action in the videos almost 9 years later did they hit me on a different register, and nearly 20 years on after that I find myself returning to the work with a renewed interest. Why? Action in the object. Because life is action. Life *changes*. Things that are alive *move*. Dead things do not. Death is inanimate. The action imbued in these objects creates an experience that relates to our lives not only through the lens of the past, but the present and the future. In respect to my history and intimacy with mechanics and tools, I am of course drawn to Burden's work in a formal sense. But it is the **action** combined with these mechanical systems that creates an agency in the work that forces me to look past the formal (body) aspect that are awe inspiring, to the more relevant and pressing questions about the hidden forces of systemic and institutionalized violence and the cause and effect correlation of a hegemonic power structure that is historically and currently responsible for the *construction* and *destruction* of our society.

²² "Self Made Man." *Chris Burden, Extreme Measures*, by Oscar Tuazon, Skira Rizzoli, 2013, p. 184.



Chris Burden, untitled, ca. 1970

Fig 1

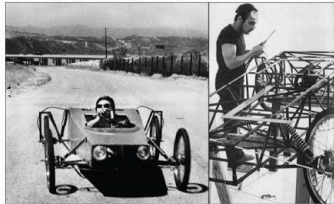


Fig 2

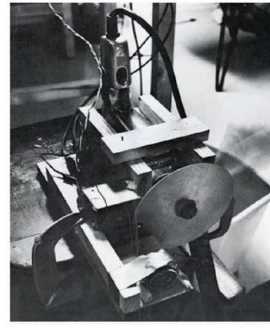


Fig 3

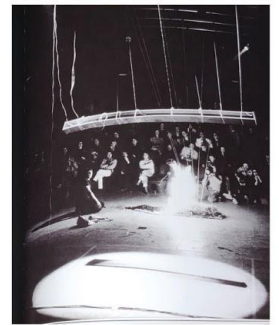


Fig 5.A



Fig 5



Fig 4



Fig 6



Fig 6.A

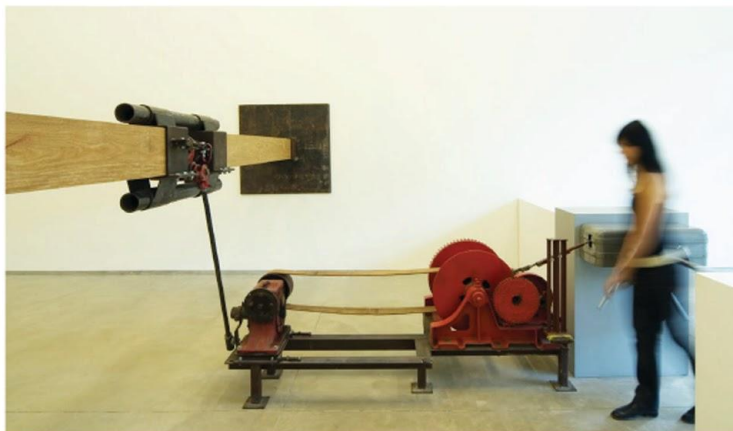


Fig 8



Fig 7

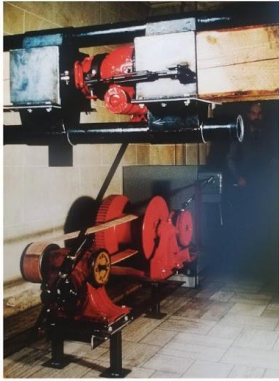


Fig 9

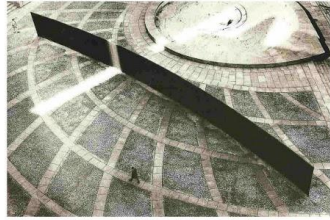


Fig 10



Fig 11

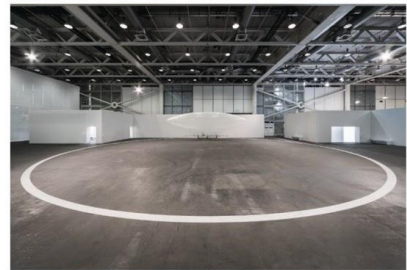


Fig 12



Fig 13



Fig 14



Fig 15



Fig 16

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