

Chris Burden

(Boston, USA, 1946)

One of the first artists to experiment with the possibilities of the body as a tool of new artistic expression, Chris Burden made a name for himself in the early 1970s as the author of a series of performance actions in which violence and exhibitionism are extreme vehicles for testing the boundaries between art, death, and life, and for investigating the respective moral responsibilities of artist and public. Some of his first performances still make an impression, thanks to the critical conditions the artist probed, such as, for example, a 1971 action during which he shot himself in the arm, motivated by a desire to use his own skin to know what it is like to be struck by a bullet—an idea he began to delve into, following a massacre the year before at the University of Ohio, when, during a demonstration, the National Guard opened fire on students. Another performance from 1974 was no less disturbing, during which Burden had himself nailed to the back of a Volkswagen “beetle,” presenting himself as a martyr sacrificed on a product of mass consumption, in the context of the city where he was living, Los Angeles, where the worship of the automobile is an integral part of daily life.

Moving from his own body to a larger political and social body, in subsequent years Burden created large-scale installations where he initiates a dialogue with the forms and proportions of the urban architecture, and then in the 1990s started using materials belonging to the world of childhood, such as Meccano erector sets, toy cars, and model trains and their related electric tracks. Partially modified and assembled with the help of teams specialized in compositions of growing complexity, these elements portray bridges, skyscrapers, highway interchanges, and other metropolitan elements, staging the progressive dehumanization charted by the technological evolution of the North American landscape over the past century.

If the language adopted by Burden has changed over the years, what has remained consistent is his capacity to produce controversial works that can raise disturbing questions, allowing answers and possible interpretations to float in a territory of uncomfortable ambiguity. This also occurs in *The Rant*, 2006. In this brief video, filmed in a stationary shot and conceived for projection on a large scale, Burden appears immersed up to the neck in water and wearing swim goggles. The artist, in a monologue, impersonates a “preacher of the truth.” The nonsensical orator denounces the presence of “extraneous forces” that he identifies in “wild” men, considered capable of infecting “civilized” man, making him, in turn, wild. Spoken in French, the discourse is a concentration of racist and xenophobic anxieties, in the presence of which it is difficult not to feel extremely uncomfortable. (MB)