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**NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN
FINE ART PAINTING**

**Self-mutilation in the performance work of
Chris Burden**

by

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INTRODUCTION

No one could possibly watch the hunger artist continuously, day and night, and so no one could produce first-hand evidence that the fast had really been rigorous and continuous; only the artist himself could know that, he was therefore bound to be the sole completely satisfied spectator of his own fast.

Franz Kafka, *A Hunger Artist*, 1922

This thesis cannot be considered a monograph on the working life of Chris Burden but rather will deal specifically with the performance work that involved elements of risk taking: physical and mental mutilation, endurance and fasting. In order to gain some understanding of Burdens work it is necessary to find some points of entry. Different facets of his responses to Political, Social, Religious and Ritual issues will therefore be examined. Each of these issues will form the basis of the discussion in each chapter and though these issues will be dealt with separately, it is important to note that a particular performance could be considered in more than one chapter. The aim of this thesis is to give us an understanding of why Burden engaged in such extreme acts and how these acts effected himself and others. As part of this introduction I will briefly outline Burden's development towards performance art which will also help to place him in an historical context.

In the 1960's performance and conceptual art, pushed into previously unexplored areas, to a point where art became virtually unrecognizable. The distinction between art and life had become less clear and there was a common belief that this should be the case. Allan Kapron suggested that "the line between art and life should be kept as fluid, and perhaps as indistinct as possible". (Thomas McEvelley, *Art Forum* 21, 1983, p.63)

Detractors of this new direction in art questioned the validity of what was being produced as art. Thomas McEvelley believed that the problem lay not in the content of the work but in our approach to the work. He stated that if our approach was one of "Sympathy and with a broad enough cultural perspective", the art or-not-art question could be by-passed and the work would "reveal its inner seriousness and meaning. (Thomas McEvelley, Art Forum 21, 1983, p.62) Burden believed that art was a "free spot in society where you could do anything", (C. Carr, Art Forum, September 1989, p.119) therefore, a broad approach is necessary in viewing Burdens work.

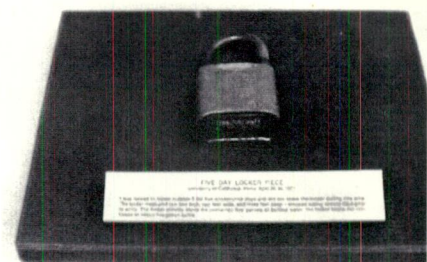
Burden's performance work developed from environmentally based sculpture made whilst still an undergraduate at Pomona College; the most important consisted of a row of steel pipes set at three feet intervals to form a narrow corridor eleven feet high and two hundred feet in length. This structure was stabilized with guy wires and linked with plastic sheeting. There were two unplanned elements which manifested themselves in this piece which were crucial to the genesis of the later work. First, the piece had been vandalized and in order to preserve the piece he had to start living with it. Secondly the wind was creating a type of vacuum causing the plastic cover to be sucked inward and only on rare occasions could you see straight down the corridor. If one ran down the corridor one's body would create an air pocket that would push the plastic open in front and close it again behind. This brought Burden to the realization that what he created was not just a piece of sculpture but something which had to be activated by the body. As a result of this new understanding, Burden's next series of works demanded a physical presence in order to function, these pieces would be best described as resembling some kind of unorthodoxed exercise equipment. The primary

intention of these pieces was that they should be functional a distinct divergence from the norm which would have been to view these objects as autonomous art objects in themselves. Despite the artistic intentions inherent within these pieces, the spectator continued to view these objects as well-crafted pieces of sculpture that made reference to an activity as opposed to an opportunity for the spectator to become actively engaged.

On the 26th of April 1971 Burden enacted his first performance work Five Day Locker Piece (Plate 1) at the University of California, Irvine. He had become aware that custom made objects, like those in the previous pieces, distracted attention from what he considered art, that is, the activity. By engaging in the activity himself, Burden forces us to become aware of the actual experience of the activity as opposed to a reference to this. The use of the ready made, that is, the Locker, also helped in this regard as it meant that all the attention was focused on Burden, the Locker being one of many did not attract much attention:

I was locked in locker number 5 for five consecutive days and did not leave the locker during this time. The locker measured two feet high, two feet wide and three feet deep. I stopped eating several days prior to entry. The locker directly above me contained five gallons of bottled water; the locker below me contained an empty five gallon bottle. (Newport Harbour Art Museum, Chris Burden, 1988, p.48)

This piece, in relation to his latter performances fits into the group of nonaction or endurance which would include pieces like White Light / White Heat, Bed Piece and Doomed. In these pieces Burden did not do anything but wait until it ended. There are three loose groupings into which we can place Burden's work, the one just mentioned, that is, the non-action, the second would cover the instantaneous, type works such as Shoot, Trans-fixed and Doorway to Heaven, in which the performance



Relic from "Five Day Locker Piece", 1971
lock
Case: 6 x 9¼ x 7¼ in.
Collection Gagosian Gallery

Plate 1

Five Day Locker Piece

University of California, Irvine

April 26-30, 1971

lasted but minutes and were seen by very few. The last grouping lies between both of these and would include pieces such as TV Hijack, Through the Night Softly and The Confession. These pieces involved the artist participation on an obvious, verbal or body movement level to function, the artist was not in a passive role. I do not wish to over emphasize these groupings, to make a definitive categorization of Burden's performance work would be impossible. Each of the performances mentioned here will be discussed in detail in the forthcoming chapters.

CHAPTER 1 - ART POLITICS

This chapter will deal with the area of, the relationship between Burdens performances and the political power structure within the art world.

In 1986 Burden stated:

My current artistic research activity concerns investigating and testing the origin of power both physical and bureaucratic and how this power ultimately shapes the world in which we exist. (Newport Harbour Art Museum, Chris Burden, 1988, p.38).

Through a knowledge of some of Burden's post performance work, we gain a certain amount of insight into his performance work enabling, us to interpret some of the more ambiguous elements in his performances, and points to a depth in the work that extends further than mere exhibitionism. There are two pieces from the 1980's Samson (1985) (Plate 2) and Exposing the Foundation of the Museum (Plate 3) (1988) that gives us a clear indication of Burden's stand-point in relation to the Museum / Gallery. Both these installations attacked the institutions of the museum by attacking the structure as a metaphor. Burden describes Samson as:

A museum installation consisting of a 100 ton jack connected to a gear box and turnstile. The 100 ton jack pushes two large timbers against the bearing walls of the museum. Each visitor to the exhibition must pass through the turnstile in order to see the exhibition. Each input on the turnstile ever so slightly expands the jack and ultimately if enough people visit the exhibition Samson could theoretically destroy the building. Like a glacier its powerful movement is imperceptible to the naked eye. This sculptural installation subverts the notion of the sanctity of the museum (the shed that houses the art). (Newport Harbour Art Museum, Chris Burden, 1988, p.146).

This piece forced the visitors to actively participate in the destruction of the museum.

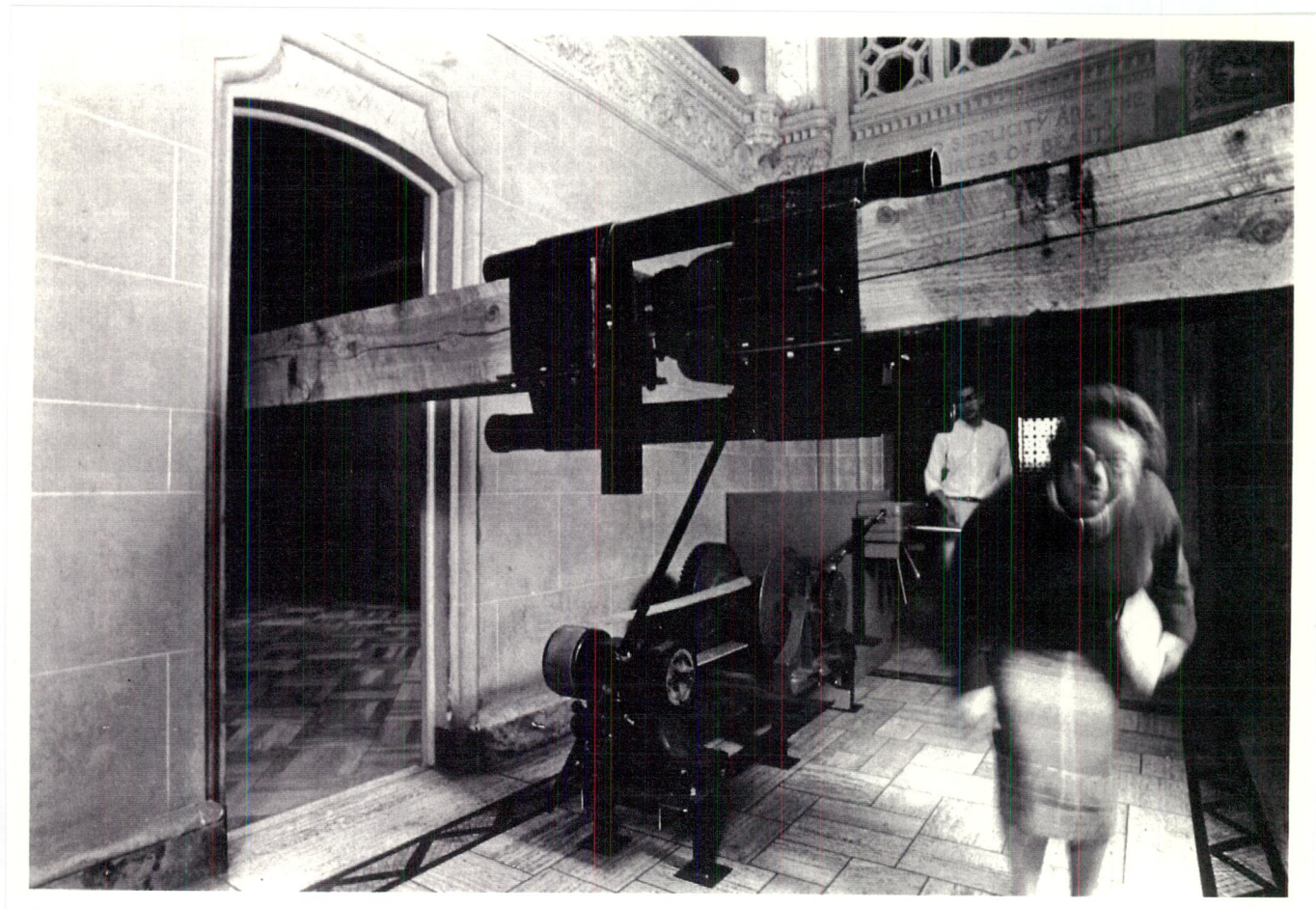


Plate 2

Samson

Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington, Seattle.

1985



Plate 3

Exposing the Foundation of the Museum

Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles

December 10, 1986 - June 19, 1988

The installation itself was constructed in such a way that, it was obvious that its ultimate intentions were destructive; destruction of the temple as the bible suggests. The art is more powerful than the Museum, holding the power to destroy the space it inhabits. This is an interesting reversal as more often than not the gallery controls the art, enforcing a criteria which they wish would be adhered to in the making of art. Exposing the Foundation of the Museum, shares a similar concept. In this piece at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, Burden had a 52 foot by 16 foot section of concrete floor removed. This was then excavated to a depth of 9 feet to expose the concrete footings which supported the walls of the Museum. This area was made accessible to the viewers by stairs to enable them to view close up where the foundations met the earth.

Both Samson and Exposing the Foundation of the Museum deal with the architecture of the Museum, but refer to the Museum as an institution more than a physical structure, also a power structure. In Exposing the Foundation of the Museum we could imagine Burden as a terrorist looking for a weak spot to plant an explosive device and destroy the building. He exposes the foundations perhaps in an attempt to expose the weakness of the Museum as an institution, and also shows the museum for what it is a building the same as any other. Burden believes that the real function of the Museum has been lost, its no longer just a place where you go to show or make art. In an interview he spoke of an incident where a building at the Museum of Modern Art had been renovated and all people talked about was the new building at M.O.C.A. not about the art. (Marc Selwyn, Flash Art, International Ed. Jan/Feb. 1989, p.91). Museums have become a symbol of power and wealth. Its interesting to note that Burden initially studied architecture at college but

changed because he believed that there were no longer any questions left to be asked within architecture.

The first of Burden's performances that deal with the theme of Museum politics and power was Five Day Locker Piece in which, as mentioned earlier he spent five days locked in a storage locker. His decision to use this space for his M.F.A. exhibition at the University of California, Irvine, as opposed to the U.C.I. Gallery, questioned both the value of the gallery as the only exhibition space and the value of his University education. In addition, as this piece lacked any object that could be sold or shown afterwards, it almost overstates just how little this piece depended on the Museum as a forum. This move away from the gallery was not particular to performance artists but permeated other media such as video and environmental works, and was a symptom of the underlying belief that painting had died and with it the gallery object,

Doomed (Plate 4) which took place at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, April 11, 1975, again dealt very specifically with this idea of the Museum controlling the artist / art. Burden describes this piece as:

My performance consisted of three elements: myself an institutional wall clock, and 5' x 8' sheet of plate glass. The sheet of glass was placed horizontally and leaned against the wall at a 45 degree angle; the clock was placed to the left of the glass at eye level. When the performance began, the clock was running at the correct time, I entered the room and reset the clock to twelve midnight. I crawled into the space between the glass and the wall, and lay on my back. I was prepared to lie in this position indefinitely, until one of the three elements was disturbed or altered. The responsibility for ending the piece rested with the Museum staff, but they were unaware of this crucial aspect. The piece ended when Denis O'Shea placed a container of water inside the space between the wall and the glass. 45 hours and 10 minutes after the start of the piece, I immediately got up and smashed the face of the clock with a hammer, recording the exact amount of time which had elapsed from beginning to end. (Newport Harbour Art Museum, Chris Burden, 1988, p.74).

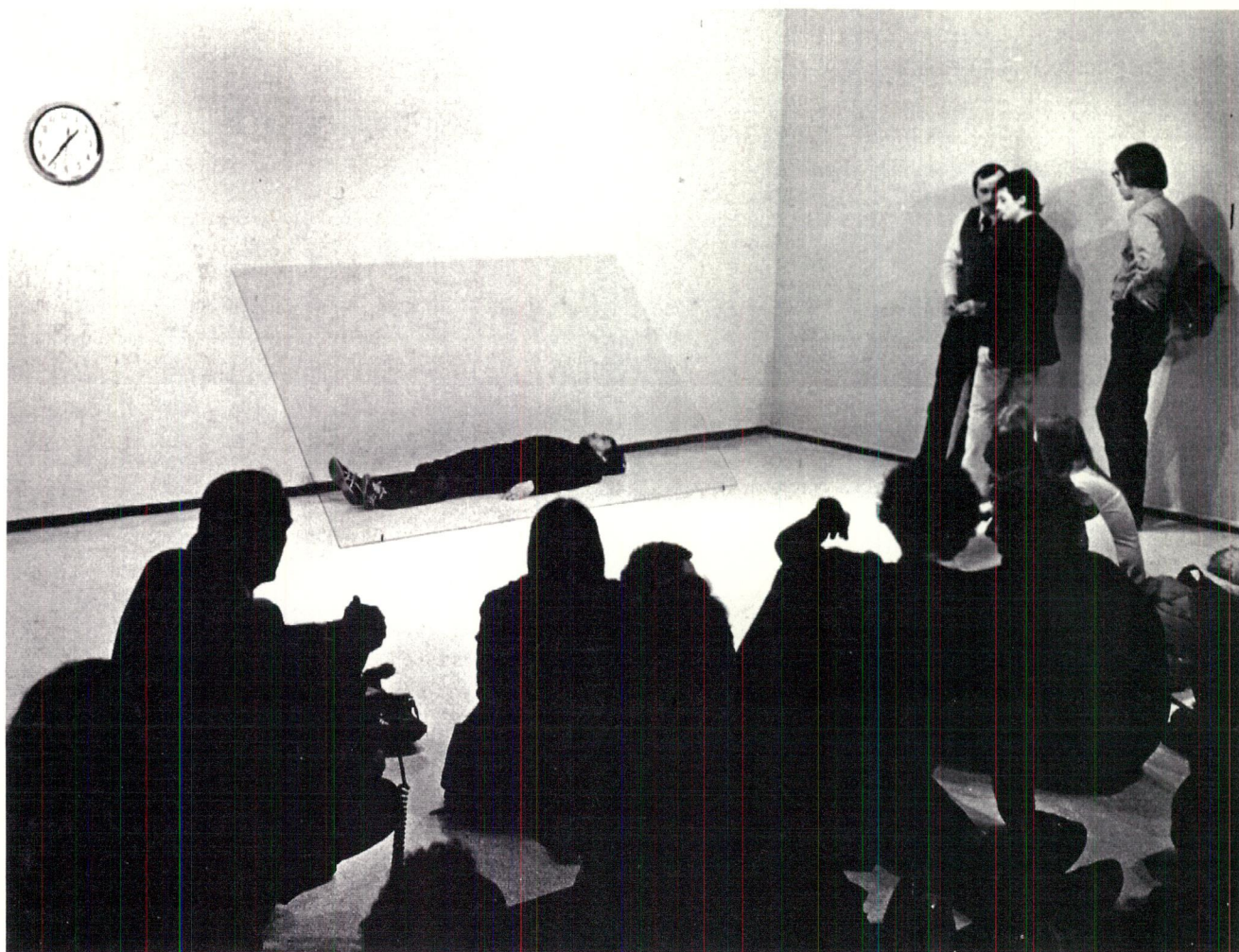


Plate 4

Doomed

Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago

April 11, 1975

The MOCA Chicago had asked Burden to do a short performance as they were expecting large crowds, Burden decided that he would start a piece and leave it up to the Curator to stop it which he believed would happen on the night of the day he started, but as we know this was not the case, and Burden admitted later that he could not have lasted much longer. In discussing this piece after the event he said it was one of the most difficult of all his performances as he never knew how or when it was going to end, (although he did say that he would not have died in order to maintain the integrity of the piece). (View, Chris Burden, 1979, p.2) This was one of Burden's few pieces where the control was very much in the hands of another, in this case the gallery. This piece blatantly exaggerates the idea of the gallery controlling the artist to a point where they have the power whether he lives or dies. One of the reasons for Burden feeling unnerved by this piece may be that the power over his fate was assigned to someone else, indeed to an institution whose primary interest is in capital gain. We are again reminded of Kafka's The Hunger Artist, who became objectified and the importance of what he was doing was forgotten and eventually he was also forgotten, only to be discovered when the cage he was in was required for something else, by which time it was too late. Perhaps Burden's performance Bed Piece (Plate 5) would make an easier comparison with The Hunger Artist. Burden was asked to do a piece for the Market Street Program (February 18 - March 10). He requested a single bed be placed in the gallery. On February 18 Burden removed his clothes, climbed into bed and remained there for twenty two days. On his own initiative Josh Young provided food water and toilet facilities, as Burden had left no instructions. To a certain extent Burden became an object; the very nature of his non-action within the gallery allowed this. Viewers of this piece, looked at it as

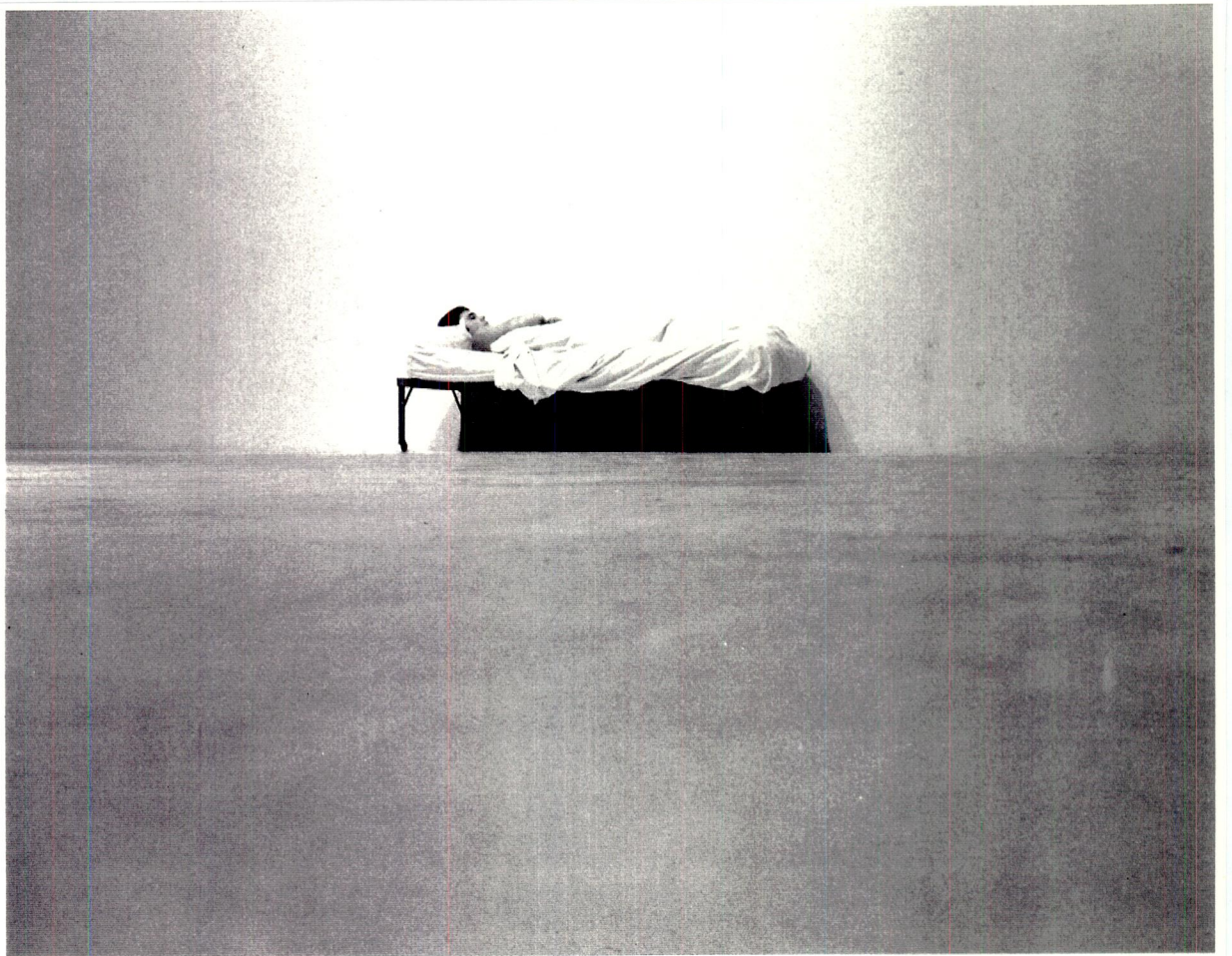


Plate 5

Bed Piece

Market Street, Venice, California

February 18 - March 10, 1972

they would any sculpture (walk around, have a look at all sides). An endurance piece of this nature puts the Artist in an extremely vulnerable position and, therefore, the gallery into the position of responsibility. Burden recalls that sometimes he would not get fed and attributed this to the fact that in their minds he had become an object. (Robert Horvitz, Art Forum (USA), Vol.14, 1976, p.25). The Gallery / Museum structure has of course already assumed a position of responsibility, that is the responsibility for the writing of the History of Art (the history as they see it), also to a certain extent the decision of what can and cannot be termed as art. Bed Piece points to what could be considered ideal - the gallery whose main concern would be art, not buildings, profits or fashion. To question further whether the power within the gallery structure is misplaced, he emphasizes that the power that the gallery have over the artist whilst he is engaged in a piece such as Bed Piece, is temporary and is assigned to the institution by the Artist.

Burden's work most often is not dependent on the gallery as a forum. In fact his work often seems to belong in the realm of experimental science, asking what happens if you stick live electric wires into your chest (Doorway to Heaven) or inhale water (Velvet Water). The gallery is important to Burden's work as the opposition, to which his work can engage in dialogue or debate with. He also likened the function (Ideal Function) of the gallery to that of the Church "the place where you go to do it". (Marc Selwyn, Flash Art [International Ed.] 1989, p.90) Burden's problem is that more often than not this is not the case, that bureaucracy gets in the way. A case in hand would be Samson which was rejected by one gallery (the reason for this was undoubtedly because of fears that the piece would damage the structure of the gallery) before being accepted by the Henry Art Gallery, Seattle. One final use the gallery serves in

relation to Burden and others such as Vito Acconci or Joseph Beuys, is that when the work is enacted in a gallery it automatically becomes art, otherwise it would be considered as some form of insanity and the artist considered a menace to society.

CHAPTER 2 - EXTERNAL POLITICS

This chapter will examine external politics power structures, the idea that elements in his work act as metaphorical commentaries on various things happening in society such as war and famine. This is not something totally separate from what has already been discussed, similarities will be easily noted. It is useful to look at some of Burden's later installation and sculptural work to gain some insights into his view of the role of social power as examined through his performance's. The Reason for the Neutron Bomb (Plate 6) was Burden's first post performance installation that did not require any physical interaction. Burden wrote a short piece which gives us a clear indication into what this piece refers:

Behind the Iron Curtain, along the border between Western and Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union maintains an army of 50,000 highly sophisticated tanks. The United States possesses only 10,000 tanks, and the combined tank strength of all Western European nations, including the N.A.T.O. forces, is estimated to be no more than 20,000. The Western European Forces are outnumbered two to one, this numerical imbalance is the reason given by our military for the existence of the Neutron Bomb. Each nickel and matchstick combination here represents one Russian tank. (Newport Harbour Art Museum, Chris Burden, 1988, p.140).

This piece consisted of 50,000 nickels representing the main body of a tank and matchstick lying across each representing the cannon. Burden does not say whether 50,000 Russian tanks is a good enough reason for having a Neutron Bomb in the United States, instead he asks us the question, or indicates that we should ask the question ourselves. We are also given a visual reference as to what 50,000 of the same thing looks like, and it does look like a lot even if it is as small as a nickel and matchstick. The questions this piece brings to mind are, is the Neutron bomb adequate



Plate 6

The Reason for the Neutron Bomb

Above, Installed at Hirshorn Museum and Sculpture Garden,
Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C.

1979

defence for Western Society? Is it self destructive on a global scale? Is better weaponry the only solution? Is the superiority of weapons a circular argument as may be next the Russians will have 50,000 Neutron Bombs? Burden has given no answers not even an opinion. This piece was created in 1979 and was conceived as a result of various discussions regarding the development of a nuclear arsenal for protection, the absurdity of this speaks for itself.

This is representative of one area of Burden's social investigations, manifested through his performance work in the 1970's, his collage and assemblages to these large scale installations whose scale in some way represents the complexity of the sociopolitical issues he is now addressing. A Tale of Two Cities and Medusa Head are further examples of later work showing similar concerns.

In November 1971, Burden performed the piece he will probably be best remembered for Shoot, (Plate 7)

At 7.45p.m. I was shot in the left arm by a friend. The bullet was a copper jacket 22 long rifle. My friend was standing about fifteen feet from me. (Newport Harbour Art Museum, Chris Burden, 1988, p.53).

This flat description lacks the emotions consistent with a man who has just been shot. The facts only are given, reminding us of a police report. The coldness of his report recognizes our over exposure to violence through media depictions of both fictional and non fictional violence. It is significant that this piece coincides with the Vietnam War. Burden has chosen to play the part of victim and by extension perpetrator. Victims of violence are victims of an external power, by choosing to be a victim he returns his own sense of self control and self power. There also exists

here the possibility that Burden becomes enlightened as a result of this experience and thus, becomes empowered another way. (This will be addressed in the following chapter).

T.V. Hijack (Plate 8) from 1972 is his acknowledgement of the power of the media. He challenges this power by taking control of a T.V. show. Burden was asked to do a piece on a local T.V. station, after a number of proposals were censored he agreed to do an interview. Turning up at the show he brought his own recording crew. He asked that the interview be shown live and the station complied. Burden in the course of the interview demonstrated a T.V. Hijack. Holding a knife to the throat of the interviewer he threatened her life if live transmission was stopped, he told her that he planned to make her perform obscene acts. At the end of the show he asked for the stations recording, which he destroyed. He offered his recording to the station manager, which included the destruction of their recording, the station manager refused. (Newport Harbour Art Museum, Chris Burden, 1988, p.54) As is evident from this description, T.V. Hijack did not involve physical risk taking or endurance on his part, but its inclusion gives us a valuable insight into Burdens feeling towards established power systems such as the mass media, whose power he sought to subvert. T.V. Hijack pre dated a number of real hijackings which leads us to believe that Burden was not the only person who felt disillusioned with the media or alternatively saw the media as a method of speaking to a wider audience without the constraints of censorship. As in Shoot here too the power roles are reversed.

While it may sound like a cliché now, the idea of one or a small group of individuals fighting against a power system had enormous currency in

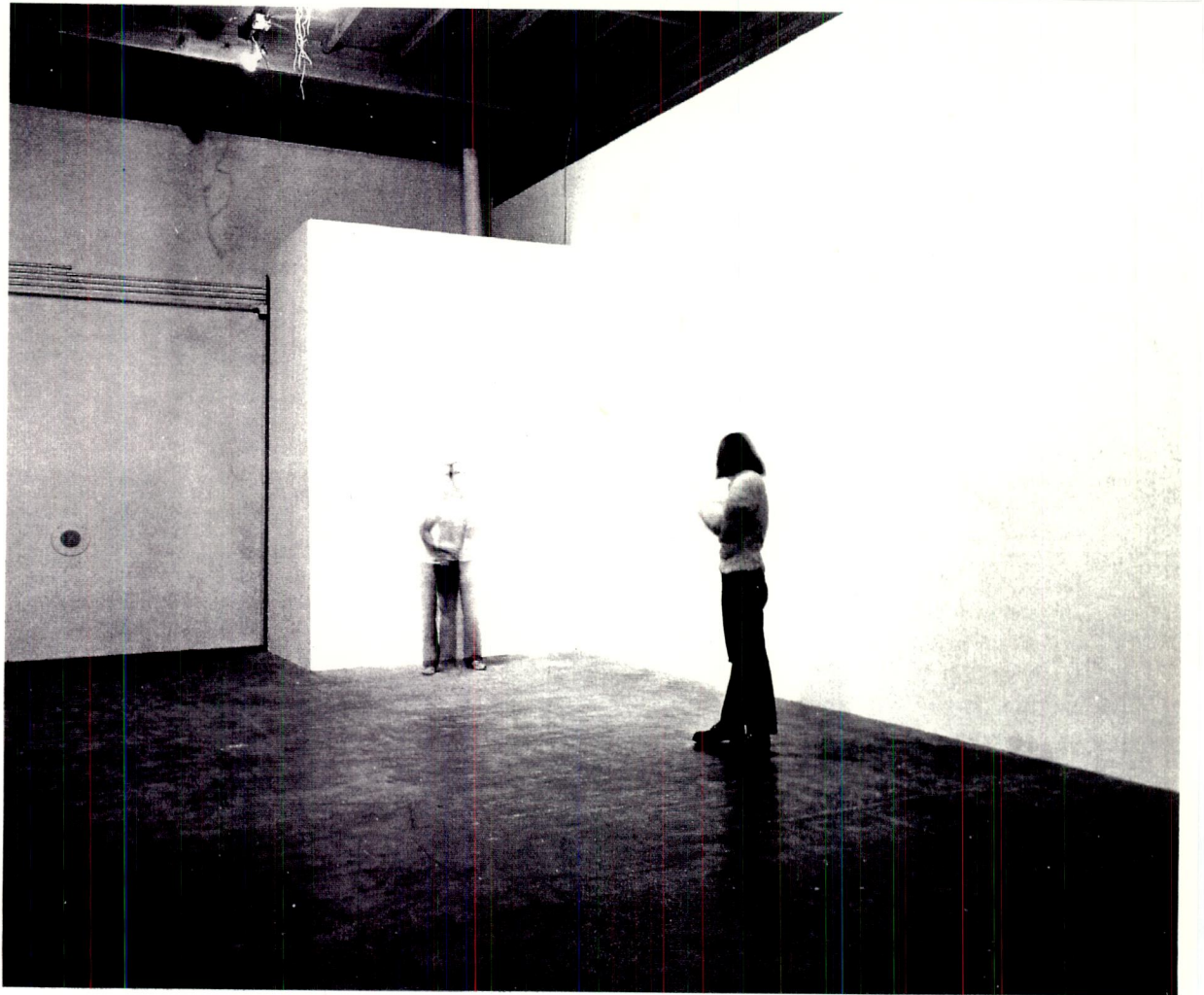
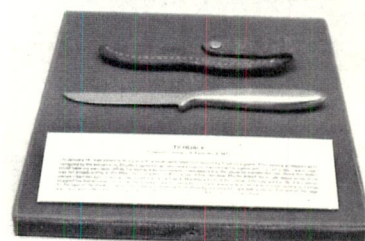


Plate 7

Shoot

F. Space Santa Ana, California

November 19, 1971



Relic from "TV Hijack", 1972
 knife and scabbard
 Case: 7½ × 10 × 6 in.
 Lent by the artist

Plate 8

T.V. Hijack

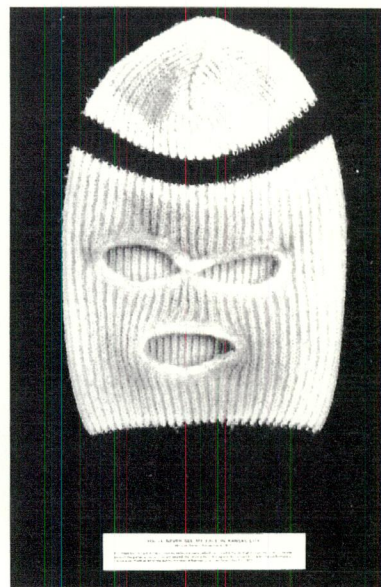
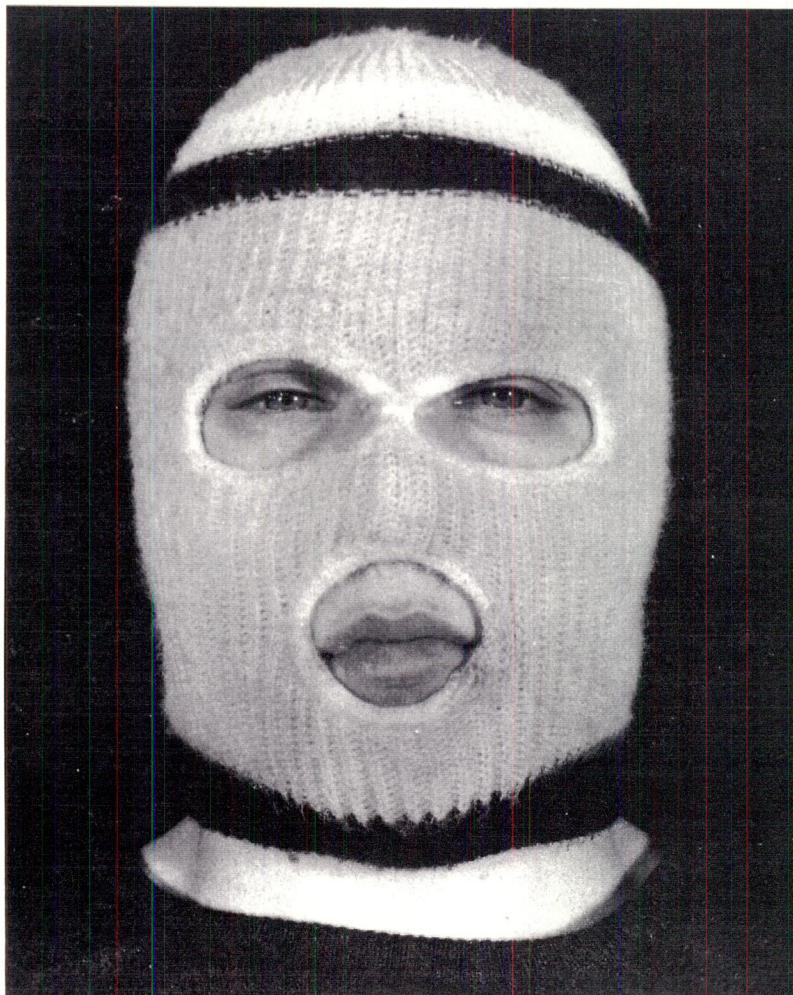
Channel 3 Cable Vision, Irvine, California

February 9, 1972

the late sixties and early seventies when anti establishment movements such as hippies, anti war protests and feminism were common. Acts that are physically self-destructive are frowned upon in society and are generally associated with some kind of mental disorder. In Abnormal Psychology and Modern Life the author discusses a disorder known as Compliance / Submission inhibitions:

Individuals who are fearful of tendencies to comply or submit constitute a significant proportion of the 'rebels' within our own and other cultures. They tend to reject both ready-made solutions to personal problems offered by various professional religious and media figures, and also 'imposed' solutions to world problems on a global scale. Presumably persons with this form of anxiety have learned that reliance on 'established' authority, parental or otherwise, leads to greater disaster than does reliance on the self. Accordingly they become anxious and rebellious when they are required or are motivated, to obey or go along.... Such an individual may display intense inappropriate 'strength' in the form of defiance, no compliance with legitimate authority, inability to accept help in adversity, dangerous risk taking and a wariness about anyone else being in control. (Robert C. Carson, James N. Butcher, James C. Coleman, *Abnormal Psychology and Modern Life*, 1988).

Clearly this description is apt for Burden, although his actions tend to be more focused. It is also clear that someone with these tendencies would not be considered as a valuable member of contemporary western society, thus the "Legitimate authority" has made a great effort to instil the idea of self preservation by making acts of self mutilation and self destruction illegal, suicide is an example of this. As if to reinforce the idea of Burden as a social menace a newspaper article ran the headline "This man was shot for his art" coupled with a photo of Burden wearing a skimask from the performance You'll Never See My Face in Kansas City, (Plate 9) he was portrayed more like a terrorist than an artist.



Relic from "You'll Never See My Face in Kansas City"; 1971
ski mask
Case: 12 x 17 x 1½ in.
Collection Gilbert and Lila Silverman

Plate 9

You'll Never See My Face in Kansas City

Morgan Gallery, Kansas City, Missouri

November 1971

As is often the case in the more instantaneous of Burden's performances, the audience for Shoot was small ten or fifteen people - with no news crews or journalists. Burden claimed that they were:

Private kinds of events and almost religious in a way. I was the artist and I control them. Once you get a bunch of people here, then they start controlling things, you loose control and the control is really important. (Marc Selwyn, *Flash Art*, International Ed., 1989, p.91).

The fact that these events are so private puts the viewer in the compromising position of unwittingly becoming voyeur, and confronts the viewers with their own fantasies. It is similar to the fascination people have with seeing a traffic accident or acts of violence, once they are detached from the actual event themselves. No viewer of Shoot brought a first aid kit, as the belief was that the bullet would just graze his arm, this was the intention but as it happens the bullet went through the fleshy part of his upper arm narrowly missing the bone. We could speculate as to how many of those present, wondered what would happen if something went wrong, may be it would hit him in the chest and do real damage, they wondered about this and were fascinated by the thought, but also afraid for themselves for thinking such a thing. Modern society has no outlet for this type of feeling. Anyone entertaining these type of thoughts is made to feel guilty. Society finds actions or thought that are outside the normal discomfoting and regards them as destructure to the fabric of society. Burden was not the only artist of this period dealing with taboo subjects, Vito Acconci's Seed Bed 1972, involved the audience in the most intimate action of an artist. At the Sonnabend Gallery, Acconci concealed himself under a false floor. The audience could not see Acconci, they could hear his amplified voice talking about "self" while masturbating.

Even for those of us not present at Shoot this voyeuristic feeling is still present when viewing the documentation. (In Burden's case the documentation should not be considered as the work). Burden gives us a three sentence description, coupled with a photograph of a quality such that without the description it would not be clear exactly what had taken place. You get the feeling that you would like to see this piece on video, with a close up of Burden's face as the action was taking place, a full colour close up of the wound, stereo sound of the gun shot and screams of pain from Burden. He does not record these on video because all too often people confuse having seen the video with having seen the performance.

The Confession (1974) (Plate 10) explores psychological rather than physical risk taking. As part of a show at the contemporary Arts Centre Burden invited twenty-five people he had met since his arrival in Cincinnati four days earlier to come to his performance. The guests were seated around a video monitor. Burden's face appeared on the screen and he began to reveal very personal details about his life:

I began to talk about why I was very unhappy, confessing the most intimate details of my personal life. Faced with the need to make a decision concerning a love triangle, and being unable to act, I felt I had lost control of my life. (Newport Harbour Art Museum, Chris Burden, 1988, p.72).

The audience sat in silence and left quickly at the end without discussion. The piece lasted about half an hour as Burden was unable to continue. Again we are confronted with the artist at his most vulnerable, stripped by the truth, the subject of a voyeuristic gaze. In experiencing this piece I would suggest that the audience, felt less of the excitement and gratification inherent in a piece such as Shoot. The audience were forced to consider their own lives in the light of Burden's words. At the end of

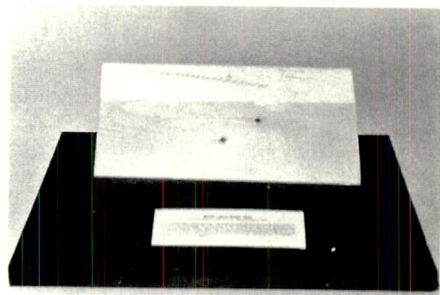
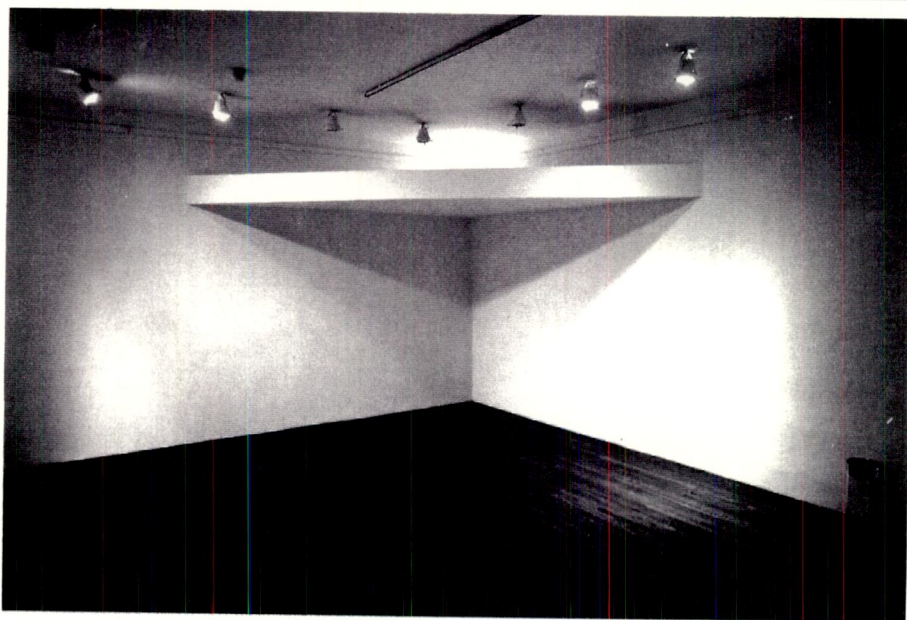


Plate 10

The Confession

Contemporary Arts Centre, Cincinnati, Ohio

December 12, 1974



Relic from "White Light/White Heat", 1975
 section of board
 Case: 7 × 15¼ × 10 in.
 Collection Richard and Noel Frackman

Plate 11

White Light / White Heat

Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

February 8 - March 1, 1975

this piece he tells us that the audience left quickly without discussion, obviously feeling uncomfortable at being Burden's confessor, also hearing things that may have related to themselves.

Less than three months after The Confession, Burden performed White Light / White Heat (Plate 11) This piece was a reinvestigation of ideas, thoughts and experiences generated by Bed Piece. It was the most rigorous of Burdens endurance type pieces:

For my one man show at Ronald Feldman, I requested that a large triangular platform be constructed in the southeast corner of the gallery. The platform was ten feet above the floor and two feet below the ceiling. The size and height of the platform were determined by the requirement that I be able to lie flat without being visible from any point in the gallery. For twenty-two days, the duration of the show, I lay on the platform. During the entire piece, I did not eat, talk or come down. I did not see anyone and no one saw me. (Newport Harbour Art Museum, Chris Burden, 1988, p.73).

The timing of this piece is significant; at the same time in a Belfast prison two members of the Irish Republican Army were in their seventh week of hunger strike, as a protest against British occupation of Northern Ireland; in addition thousands were dying of starvation in East Africa and India. Burden was obviously aware of these events. His internment and fasting were voluntary, he acknowledges that this is different than if the Khmer Rouge for example had been forcing him to stay there. The obvious difference is whose in the position of power. To consider this piece as a metaphor for the aforementioned events is valid, but should not be our only line of enquiry. As a symbolic gesture, the scale of this piece is impressive twenty-two days is a long time. It must have given Burden an experimental insight into, and the viewers a vicarious understanding of African famine and the Belfast Hunger Strike.

The title White Light / White Heat comes from the Velvet Underground song of the same title, written as a reference to cocaine. Research does not indicate the significance of the drug reference to this piece, but Burden is sure to have been aware of it particularly considering the nature of the piece he was engaged in, also in the 1970's the drug issue was very topical. It's widely known among native American Indians that long periods of fasting can produce hallucinogenic effects similar to the taking of drugs, particularly those of a psychedelic nature such as Peyote or its synthetic equivalent, L.S.D. :

....Emotions are intensified, vary widely in content, and may include euphoria, apathy, serenity or anxiety. The intellect is drawn to the analysis of complex realities or transcendental questions. Consciousness expands to include all these responses simultaneously a person may experience a feeling of union with nature associated with a dissolution of personal identity, engendering a state of beatitude or even ecstasy. A dissociate reaction, in which the subject loses contact with immediate reality, may also occur. A subject may experience abandonment of the body, may see elaborate visions or feel the imminence of death.... (Robert M Pirsig, Lila, 1992, p.47)

Because of the legislation imposed over the taking of drugs, we are returned to the question of who is imposing law's over the body. Who has the power to stop an individual taking drugs or engaging in acts of self mutilation. White Light / White Heat is referring to a power struggle more basic than a piece like T.V. Hijack, that is the power to control one's own body. It's interesting to note that the ceremonial taking of drugs as part of the religion of the Native American Indian has been outlawed as well as a number of practices that involved self mutilation. This could be interpreted as persecution of a religious minority. In effect Burden refuses to acknowledge the fact that an outside power has imposed legislation over the body. Indeed, this is something that can be said with regard to any of his mutilation pieces.

By operating on his body, Burden refuses humanism's contract, which assigns to someone else the power to inflict pain on the body, to discipline and examine it, or to place it at risk. (Newport Harbour Art Museum (Howard Singerman), Chris Burden, 1988, p.21)

Burden believed his presence in this piece to be like that of a ghost, a presence that one feels but cannot see.

JAIZU (1972) (Plate 12) actually involved the use of drugs by the spectators, as part of the piece, and as a result put the gallery in a legally compromised position. In this piece Burden dressed in white and wearing sun-glasses that were painted black on the inside so he could not see through them, sat on a chair facing the door. Inside the door were two cushions and a box of marijuana cigarettes. Viewers were only allowed to enter one at a time and were under the impression that he was watching them. Burden did not move or speak during the piece. The piece was performed for five hours each day for two days. In a social context the use of the marijuana allowed the spectator to return their thoughts to the self, seeing an inward reality which mass society appears to ignore. Burden, as said could not see through the glasses which allows thinking to be unconcerned with an external reality. The reefers made the passage to this kind of thought easier for the spectator.

Burden again used drugs in the piece Coals to Newcastle (Plate 13) from 1978, in which he flew a small plane made from tissue paper and balsawood with a marijuana cigarette attached to the bottom like a bomb, over the border of the United States into Mexico. This was flying against huge quantities of the drug coming up from Mexico. This piece involved him in an activity that is drug smuggling, that has very definite legislation to prevent it. He was again involved in an illegal activity,

counterfeiting, in the piece Diecimila (Plate 14) (1977) in which Burden counterfeited an Italian 10,000 lire note. In a way we could say that Burden is putting himself above the law by choosing to challenge it.

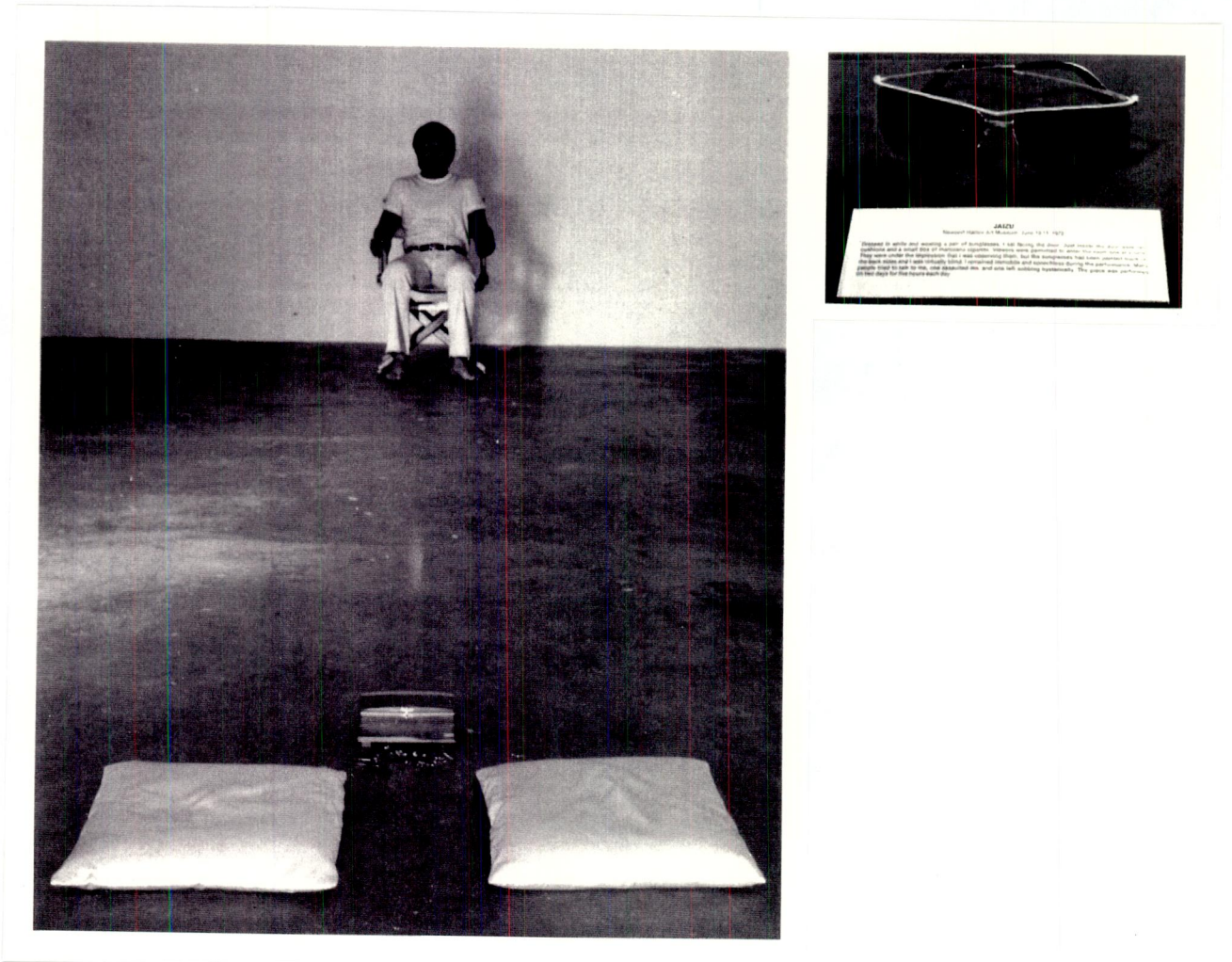


Plate 12

JAIZU

F. Space Santa Ana, California

June 10 - 11, 1972

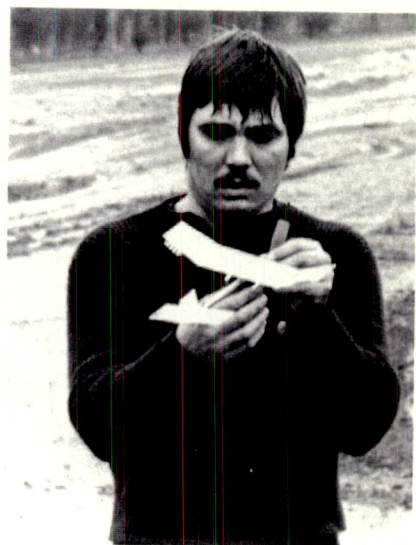
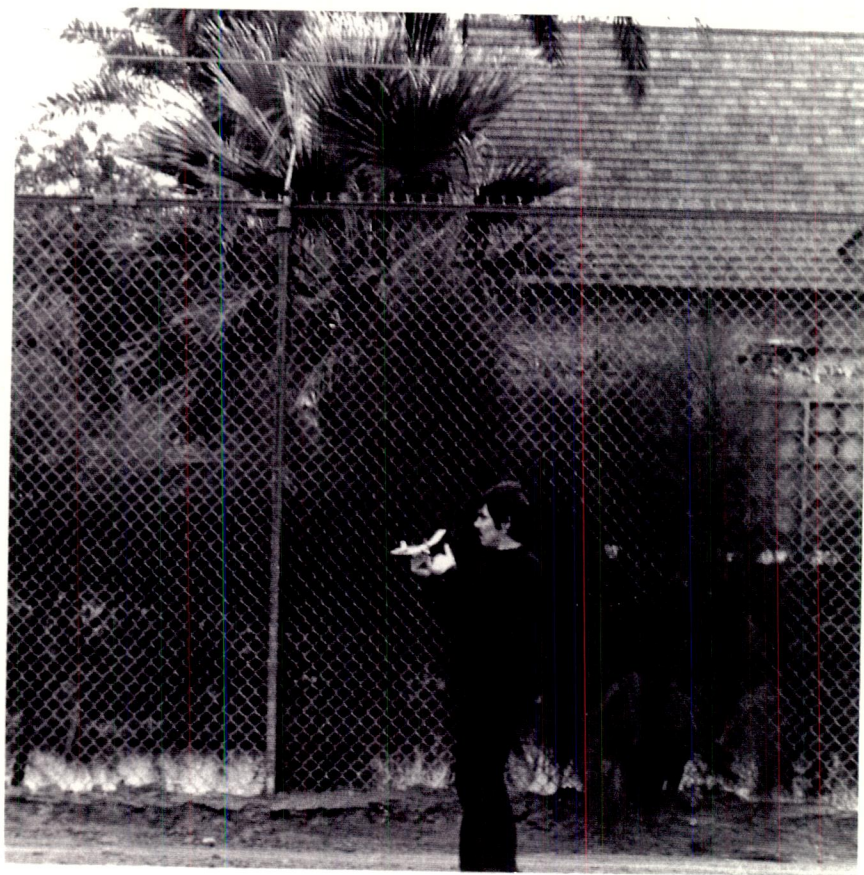


Plate 13
Coals to Newcastle
Calexico, California
December 17, 1978



Plate 14
Diecimila
 1977

CHAPTER 3 - PERFORMANCE AND SELF AWARENESS

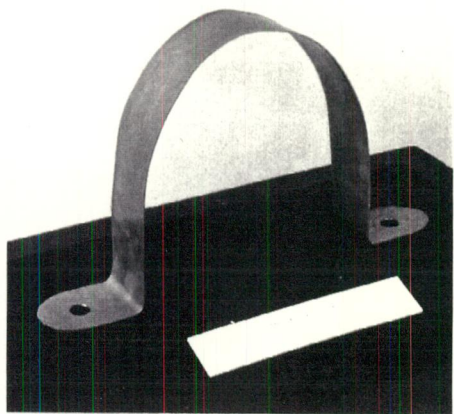
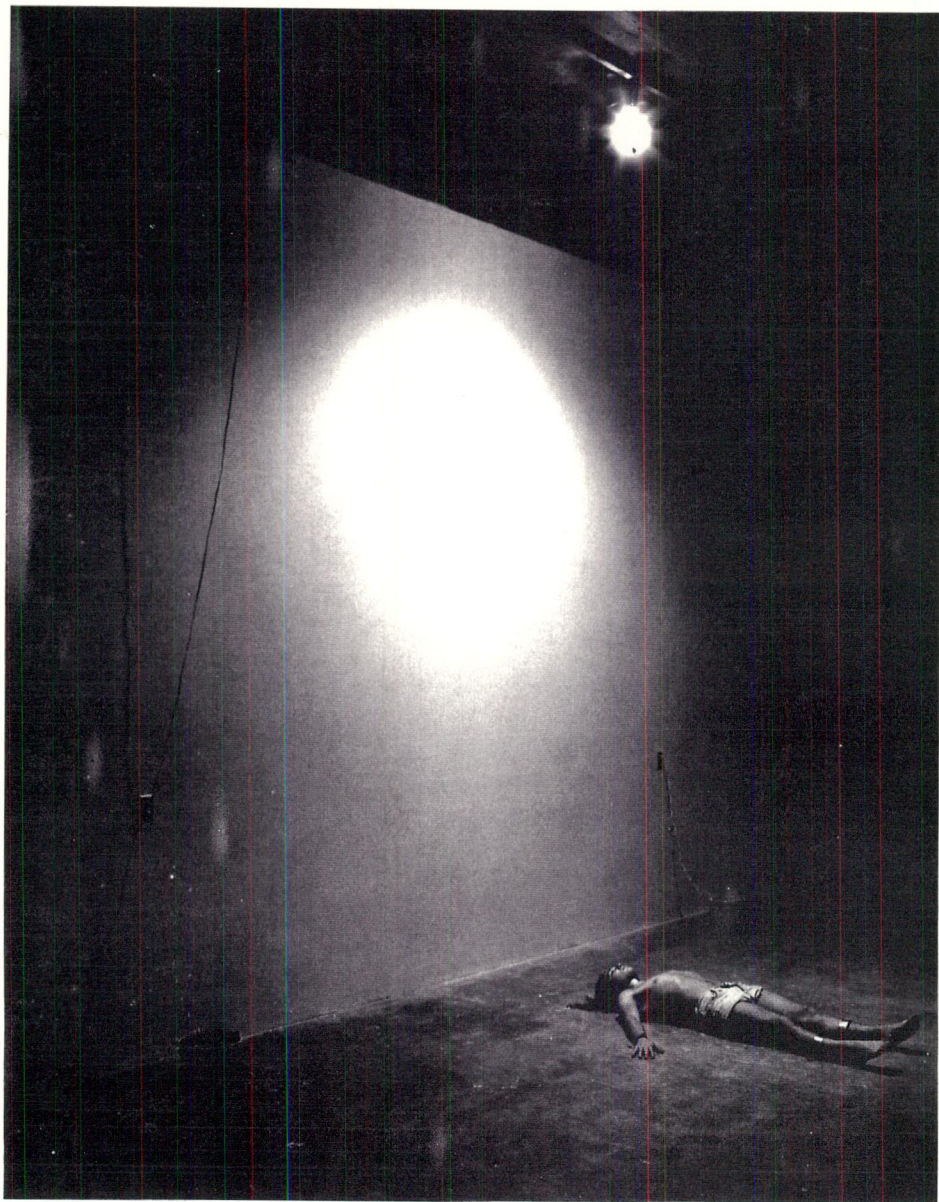
What I wish to discuss in this chapter is the performances as an examination of the self. As Jack Burnham puts it "the self awareness generated in the completion of a specific task", (Newport Harbour Art Museum, Chris Burden, 1988, p.20) the idea that Burden becomes empowered by taking complete control for his own existence. He places himself in a position of power by confronting fears (not just his own), the greatest of these being our mortality. He does not deny his own mortality but instead familiarizes himself with the threats to his existence. The awareness Burnham talks of is two fold. First there is the awareness of the physical self as experienced by an extreme physical challenge, this could be likened to rock climbers who take extreme risks to satisfy a need for knowledge of the limits of the physical self. Secondly, placing himself in a potentially life threatening situation, Burden would become aware of his existence; on a psychological level there is an understanding of the self in relation to what goes through our head before, during and after a performance that involves risk, pain etc.

By knowing pain, risk, violence and vulnerability, Burden can make them familiar, no longer shrouded in the darkness of an unknown future. (Newport Harbour Art Museum [Howard Singerman] 1988, p.21)

The first point I want to look at in this chapter is that of Burden becoming in some way empowered by having important knowledge gained from experience. The performances that have close encounters with death as their basis have their origins in public fears and fantasies. Four performances - Prelude to 220 or 100 (Plate 15) Shoot, Deadman (Plate 16) and Dreamy Nights (Plate 17) deal with death or serious injury. By choosing the instrument of death, to be among the few most common

ways by which we could die, either by accident or otherwise, that is, Electrocution, Shot, Traffic Accident or Burning. (As Prelude to 220 or 110, Deadman or Dreamy Nights have not been mentioned earlier a brief description of each is now necessary. Prelude to 220 or 110 involved Burden being strapped to a concrete floor by copper bands. Beside him were two buckets of water containing live 110 volt wires. In Deadman he created a false emergency by lying under a canvas tarpaulin on La Cienega Boulevard. Two fifteen minute flares were placed beside him to alert cars. He was subsequently arrested. Dreamy Nights involved Burden writhing on the floor of a small recess in the gallery, blowing a police whistle. His body was covered in Vaseline, an assistant splashed burning alcohol from a sink onto his body). We can assume that if we wanted to gain some understanding of how we would deal with being made to face such an event, the person we would choose to ask would be Burden. If his original intent was to de-mystify these things for himself, by extension he de-mystifies them for all humankind. The analogy of the performance being like a lab experiment (something Burden himself suggested) is quite apt here, he like a guinea pig takes the risks so that we can be safe. Without belabouring the religious metaphor, Burden has been projected into a God-like position having knowledge that is not associated with the mere mortal. Psychoanalyst Theodore Reik, suggested that Christ was the "ultimate masochist" who expects to save the world through self sacrifice (Newport Harbour Art Museum [Donald Kuspit], Chris Burden, 1988, p.37).

The masochist always expects victory in the end, at least the victory of widespread recognition that comes with being internalized by others as a symbol of their deepest wishes. (Newport Harbour Art Museum [Donald Kuspit], Chris Burden, 1988, p.7).



Relic from "Prelude to 220, or 110", 1971
copper bands
Case: 11 x 15 x 8½ in.
Collection Ronald and Frayda Feldman



Plate 15

Prelude to 220 or 110

F. Space, Santa Ana, California
September 10 - 12, 1971

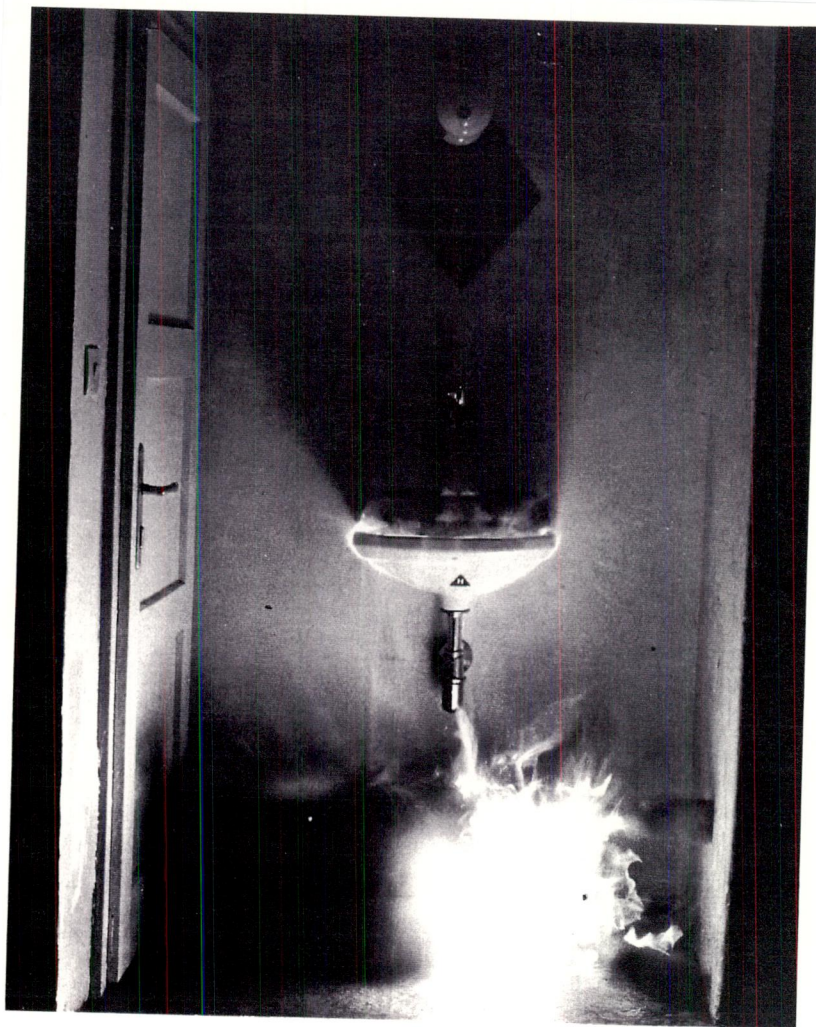


Plate 16

Deadman

Los Angeles, California

November 12, 1972



Relic from "Dreamy Nights", 1974
 corked bottle, spiritus
 Case: 10 x 8¼ x 8¼ in.
 Collection Jasper Johns

Plate 17

Dreamy Nights

Poolerie Gallery, Graz Austria

October, 15, 1974

There's undoubtedly a certain naivety in expecting to be saved in some way by Burden's performance; Burden is the only truly "satisfied spectator" of his performances - as the experience is the crucial element.

He has likened his performances - the physicality and psychological preparation to the training of an astronaut preparing for an outer space mission. The part Burden found most difficult was the psychological preparation which began two and a half months before the event, in which he dealt with his own anxieties and fears about doing a piece.

After White Light / White Heat, he spoke about a mysterious shift from beginning to end in relation to Bed Piece, this is what he was reinvestigating in White Light / White Heat. The shift he spoke of occurred in the transition from beginning to end, in the beginning it was difficult and boring, towards the end he began to enjoy it. For the first few hours of White Light / White Heat he admitted to being scared and unsure of his ability to stay there. Fasting and isolation allowed him to reduce his existence to the "ground state" in order to fully experience this shift. Very obviously this change was on a psychological level and as with physical change or damage, the awareness only exists after the experience. He once made a comment that he had himself shot so he would know what it felt like physically. We could also assume the same would be true for a psychological experience, one must experience it to know what it feels like. If we consider Burden's position in relation to someone whose internment is not by choice, (Burden has acknowledged that his position would have been much different had his internment been against his will), the major difference lies in control. As a prisoner the individual is the site of external action upon him / her. The physical difficulties may be the same (no food, no human contact), but the

individuals attitude is changed. The effects of this are generally adverse for the forced prisoner.

As I mentioned earlier White Light / White Heat followed closely after The Confession in which he disclosed that he was various personal problems, as one would expect the isolation of a piece, such as White Light / White Heat, would enable a great deal of introspective thought and Burden spent most of this time thinking about his disintegrating marriage. When asked about whether or not he gained any insights from this piece or other similar pieces he replied:

I think one of the things I learned is that human beings really need other human beings, I mean, actually the thing I missed most on the platform wasn't food, or anything, it was actually seeing other people, seeing them, seeing other human faces. And so may be thats the thing I think I've learned the most, is that people need people. (View, Chris Burden, 1979, p.7)

Often in Burden's work there is a tension between the strong sense that he is in complete control of his own fate, but then at some point he abdicates control (aware of course that it is his to give) and then his destiny lies in the hands of others, Prelude to 220 or 100 (Fig.15) is one such piece;

I was strapped to the floor with copper bands bolted into the concrete. Two buckets of water with 110 lines submerged in them were placed near me. The piece was performed from 8 - 10 pm for three nights. (Newport Harbour Art Museum, Chris Burden, 1988, p.50)

At any point during this piece a malicious or awkward spectator could have ended his life. It is a piece that no doubt heightened Burdens awareness of how temporary his existence is, and judging by the afore mentioned comments regarding his need for human interaction, Prelude

to 220 or 110 could be interpreted as a metaphor for how much his / our lives depend on human interaction in this era of mass technology and the loss of the individual.

If we consider any of Burden's performance pieces that involved mutilation or risk taking, we become aware of his intense discipline of mind and body. It is understandable that the status of "mythical God like figure" was projected upon him, but it is not a title that rests easy on Burden. He does not deny that he finds these pieces difficult:

....some of the things that you can't believe you can get through, you often can. Because a lot of times, in those pieces I couldn't believe that I could actually make it through those things. I decided I would, so I was going to, but at the beginning they seemed totally gargantuan and -- you know, I had a lot of fear about being able to do them. And then I would adapt somehow to them. (View, Chris Burden, 1979, p.7).

CHAPTER 4 - RELIGION / RITUAL

.....in the age of the over flow the art context is a neutral and open context which has no proper and essential contents of its own. Art then is an open variable which when applied to any culturally bound thing, will liberate it to direct experience. (Thomas McEvilley, *Art in the Dark*, Art Forum, 1983, p.65)

This chapter will deal with religion and ritual in relation to Burden's performance. There are two aspects to this, the first concerns metaphorical references to religion in his work e.g. power etc; the second will examine the appropriation of activities or aspects of religion / ritual as part of the performance, specifically the religion / ritual of the Native American Indian. We should note that some cross-over is likely between both and indeed the previous chapter is relevant here.

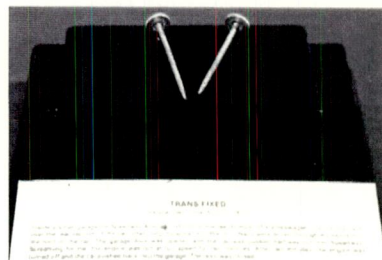
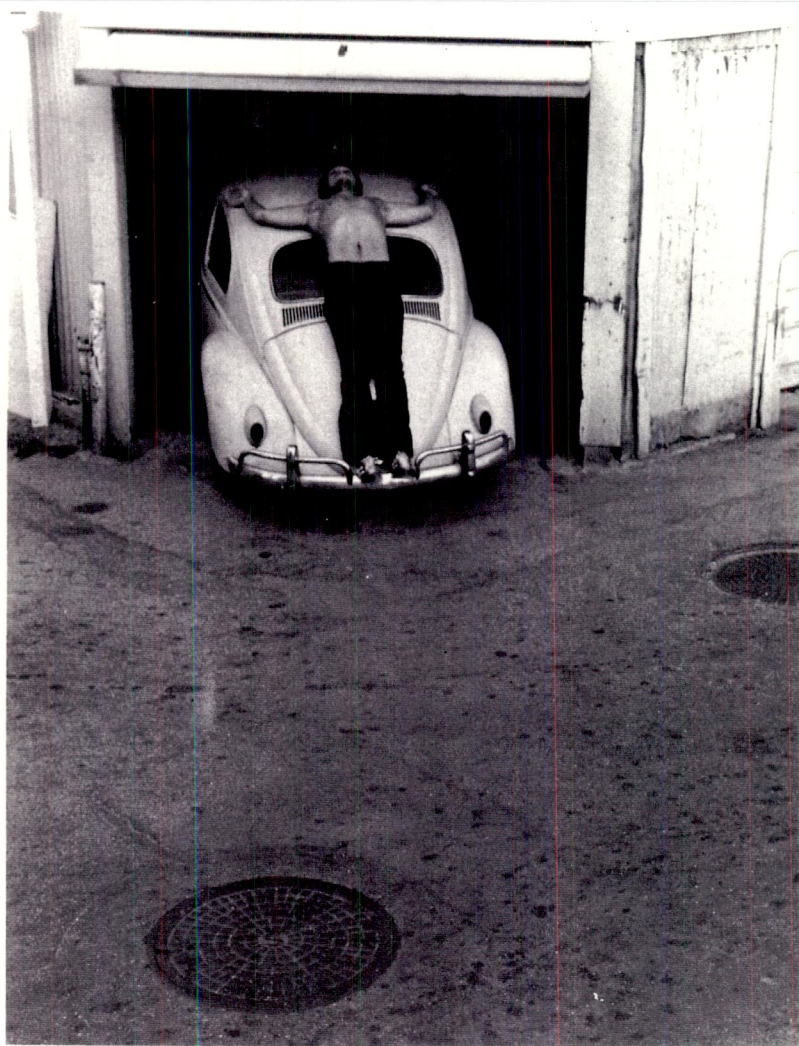
Immediately when we hear of a person engaged in acts of self mutilation or physical endurance we associate it with religious ritual. In general when these acts were practiced in religion the purpose was, to win the favour of the Gods, win forgiveness of the Gods or as in the case of certain Native American Indian tribes, act as a form of mourning. Flagellation practiced by early Christian Monks is one form this mutilation took. We could not definitely say that Burden's reasons for self mutilation are in any way related to those listed above, but a very strong religious / ritual element does exist.

The first area under discussion is that of the religious metaphor. On April 23, 1974 Burden performed the piece Trans-fixed (Plate 18) in which he had himself crucified to a Volkswagen:

Inside a small garage on Speedway Avenue, I stood on the rear bumper of a Volkswagen. I lay on my back over the rear section of the car, stretching my arms onto the roof. Nails were driven through my palms into the roof the car. The garage door was opened and the car was pushed half way out into Speedway. Screaming for me, the engine was run at full speed for two minutes. After two minutes, the engine was turned off and the car pushed back into the garage. The door was closed. (Newport Harbour Art Museum, Chris Burden, 1988, p.66).

Significantly the Volkswagen was blue, probably to represent the sky. It would appear that Burden is attempting to make us rethink our image of the crucifixion which has become virtually a cliché in contemporary western society. Its interesting that Burden chose the Volkswagen the peoples car, we are reminded that Burden might still be trying to save the world through his sacrifice, he is like an oversized dashboard Christ protecting the occupants of the car / the world. He would seem to also question western notions of being saved through blind faith and asks us to question this, by subverting our image of the crucifixion and offering us a bizarre replacement. We could be tempted to interpret this piece as a sneer on the crucifixion until we remind ourselves that the nails went through his hands, he like Christ suffered. The presentation of the relics from this piece also suggest a religious link. The nails are presented in a glass case, which is much like what we would do if we had the nails from Christs crucifixion and millions would travel every year to see them.

In a less direct way White Light / White Heat offers us a similar questioning of widespread beliefs by challenging our acceptance of the existence of God (A God). As spectators entered the gallery to view this piece, gallery staff informed them that the artist was lying on the shelf, but you could neither see or hear him, all that was given was the information without the proof, (about half of those who saw this piece



Relic from "Trans-Fixed", 1974
two nails
Case: 6 7/8 x 6 1/4 x 6 1/4 in.
Collection Jasper Johns

Plate 18

Trans-fixed

Venice, California

April 23, 1974

believed that Burden was there). Is Burden / God there?

.... the unseen witness above whose presence is pervasive but nowhere revealed. (Robert Horvitz, Chris Burden, Art Forum, May 1976, p.24).

Like Christ, we are aware that Burden's pain and suffering can come from society itself. He actively engages with this by offering to allow someone else inflict the pain. The piece I refer to here is Back to You (Plate 19). The title itself suggests putting the responsibility on someone else.

Dressed only in pants, I was lying on a table inside a freight elevator with the door closed. Next to me on the table was a small dish of $\frac{5}{8}$ " steel push pins. Liza Bear requested a volunteer from the audience, and he was escorted to the elevator. As the door opened, a camera framing me from the waist up was turned on and the audience viewed this scene of several monitors placed near the elevator. As the elevator went to the basement and returned, Liza told the audience that a sign in the elevator instructed the volunteer to 'please push pins into my body'. The volunteer stuck four pins into my stomach and one pin into my foot during the elevator trip. When the elevator returned to the floor, the door opened, the volunteer stepped out, and the camera was turned off. The elevator returned to the basement. (Newport Harbour Art Museum, Chris Burden, 1988, p.65).

I do not wish to over emphasize a religious interpretation of this piece, (as it also refers to violence and to a lesser extent voyeurism, sanitized by its occurrence in a cultural framework), it does, however, recall something that is told to Christian children, that is, every time one sins one pushed a thorn into Jesus' body.

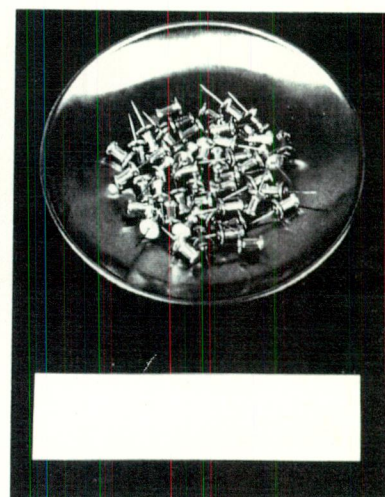
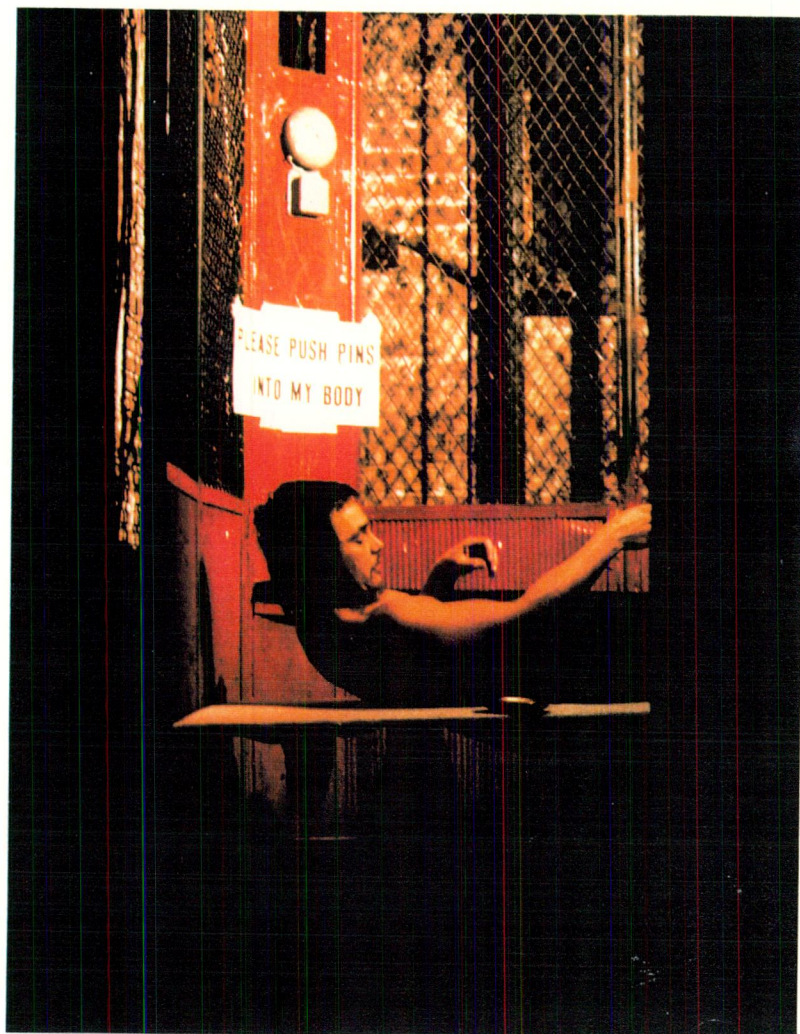
There are two other pieces relevant to this discussion Doorway to Heaven (Plate 20) and Disappearing. Obviously the title Doorway to Heaven suggests a religious link; Burden stood in the doorway of his studio and pushed two live electric wires into his chest. The wires crossed and

exploded saving him from electrocution. This was probably the most dangerous piece in his career. Cynical as the title sounds, it suggests a literal interpretation, if heaven exists Burden is showing us the door. It is as easy as putting two live electric wires on your chest, and ending a mortal existence at that point.

"On the third day he shall rise again", this line from the Bible is the reason I chose to mention the next piece Disappearing; "I disappeared for three days without prior notice to anyone. On these three days my whereabouts were unknown (Newport Harbour Art Museum, Chris Burden, 1988, p.155). This link may sound rather tenuous, as it is difficult to assess if there is any real connection, research has given no definite answer one way or the other and this is something we should be aware of.

The second area for discussion is the appropriation of elements from religion and ritual, with particular reference to the Religion / Ritual of the Native American Indian. My reasons for choosing the Native American Indian are based on a theory put forward by Robert M. Pirsig in Lila.

Pirsig believed that what we have come to recognize as the traits of the American Cowboy movies such as Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid or Hopalong Cassidy, are actually the traits of the Native American Indian. It is irrelevant whether these films were ever accurate portrayals of the American Cowboy, what is important is that these movies confirmed the values of white America;



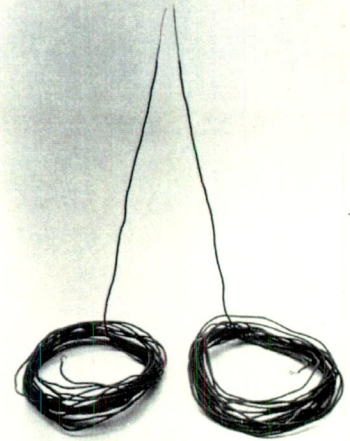
Relic from "Back to You", 1974
 stainless steel bowl and push pins
 Case: 10 x 10 x 10 in
 Lent by the artist

Plate 19

Back to You

112 Greene Street, New York.

January 16, 1974



Relic from "Doorway to Heaven", 1973
two wires
Case: 26 × 26 × 20 in
Lent by the artist

Plate 20

Doorway to Heaven

Venice, California

November 15, 1973

Those movies were rituals, almost religious rituals for transmitting the cultural values of America to the young and reconfirming them in the old. It wasn't a deliberate, conscious process, people were just doing what they liked. It is only when one analyzes what they liked that one sees the assimilation of Indian values. (Robert M. Pirsig, *Lila*, 1992, p.58)

Using the following description by Anthropologist E.A. Hoebel of the "Cheyenne Indian Male" Pirsig illustrated the similarities between the Indian male and William S. Boyd playing "Hopalong Cassidy" disregarding Indian Mysticism:

Reserved and dignified.... [the Cheyenne male] moves with a quiet sense of self-assurance. He speaks fluently but never carelessly. He came full of the sensibilities of others and is kindly and generous. He is slow to anger and strives to suppress his feelings, if aggravated. Vigorous on the hunt, in war he prizes the active life. Towards enemies he feels no merciful compunctions and the more aggressive he is the better. He is well versed in ritual knowledge. He is neither flighty nor dour. Usually quiet he has a lightly displayed sense of humour. He is sexually repressed and masochistic but that masochism is expressed in culturally approved rites. He doesn't show much creative imagination in artistic expression but he has a firm grip on reality. He deals with the problems of life in set ways, while at the same time showing a notable capacity to readjust to new circumstances. His thinking is rationalistic to a high degree and yet coloured with mysticism. His ego is strong and not easily threatened. His superego, as manifest in the strong social conscience and mastery of his basic impulses, is powerful and dominating. He is 'mature', serene and composed, secure in his social position, capable of warm social relations. He has powerful anxieties but these are channelized into institutionalized modes of collective expression with satisfactory results. He exhibits few neurotic tendencies. (Robert M. Pirsig, *Lila*, 1992, p.57).

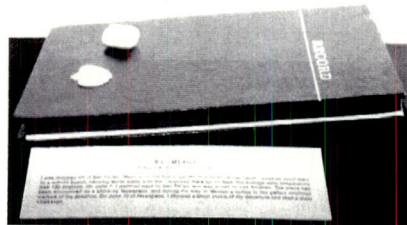
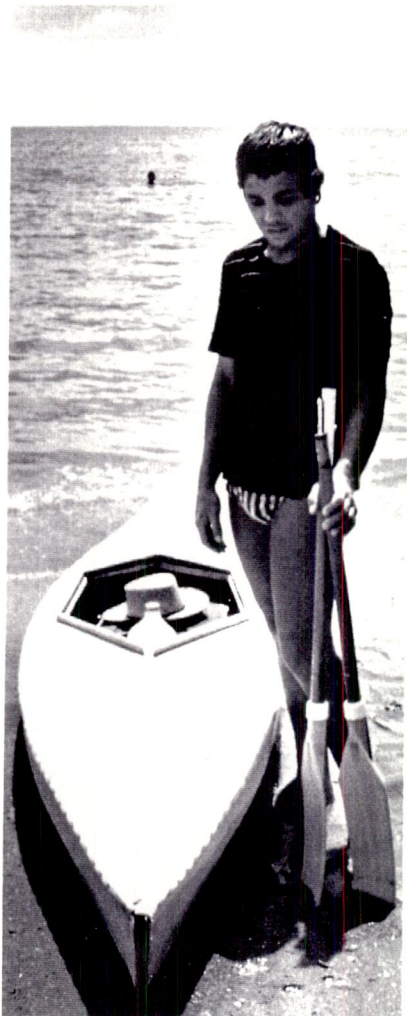
Interestingly, if we recall the extract from Abnormal Psychology and Modern Life, two lines I did not include in the quotation refer to the traits associated with "Compliance / Submission Inhibition; it points to the fact

that these traits were highly valued in American folklore:

Traits of this sort are of course highly valued in American Folklore. For example the heroics of Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid enraptured sophisticated movie audiences of the 1970's. (Robert C. Carson, James N. Butcher, James C. Coleman, *Abnormal Psychology and Modern Life*, 1988).

In the 1960's, it could be argued, we saw a return to the Indian values which manifested themselves in the form of the Hippie Movement. This was a rejection of the over intellectualized and structured society, a sort of "Return to Nature". It is worth noting that Indians have great difficulty in adjusting to organized society if they move from their own society to a city. The Hippie Movement was largely influenced by the use of drugs particularly L.S.D., its organic equivalent Peyote, is used by the Indians in the Vision Quest. In examining Burden's performance in relation to ritual, the importance of the Native American Indian cannot be over emphasized because of its deep roots in American Culture.

Before the Indians began bringing Peyote up from Mexico, the Vision Quest involved an individual spending long periods in isolation praying and fasting. (The Indians discovered that Peyote was a surer way of achieving visions). In his performance B.C. Mexico (Plate 21) Burden engaged in an activity that bears striking resemblance to the original vision quest. In a small Kayak Burden paddled to a remote beach bringing only water and a diary he remained there for eleven days, in isolation. Writing about this experience afterwards Burden does not relate any religious or ritualistic elements in this piece, indeed when questioned on this point Burden diverted the question by talking about



Relic from "B.C. Mexico", 1973
 diary and seashell
 Case: 10¼ × 9¼ × 4¼ in.
 Collection Jasper Johns

Plate 21

B.C. Mexico

New Space, New Port Beach

May 26 - June 10, 1973

how hot it was. It is naive to think that any individual could be involved in an activity such as this and not acquire some insights or understanding. I would suggest that he was actively involved in a ritual with an end goal such as knowledge or inner strength. Much the same can be said about White Light / White Heat - the fasting allowing him to keep his thoughts focused, fasting as mentioned produces similar effects as L.S.D. or Peyote and though most would regard hallucinations as a counter reality and ultimately destructor, Indians regard this new state of mind as the real reality.

Once again Burden is acquiring power. He becomes a modern day shaman. Indians use self mutilation, fasting and other arduous tasks to gain power from the spirits.

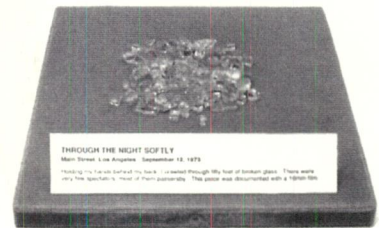
Even the average man prepared for the business of life by gaining the aid of some supernatural being who would be guardian and luck bringer throughout the individuals career. Such help was to be had only through strenuous effort, which might mean fasting, thirsting, purification or even mutilation and torture. (Ruth M. Underhill, Redmans Religion, 1965).

This mutilation took various forms such as laceration of the body, cutting off finger joints, inserting thongs through the flesh of the breasts. In Through the Night Softly (Plate 22) Burden lacerated his body by crawling fifty feet on broken glass strewn across a Los Angeles car park:

Holding my hands behind my back, I crawled through fifty feet of broken glass. There were very few spectators, most of them passers by. This piece was documented with 16mm film. (Newport Harbour Art Museum, Chris Burden, 1988, p.63).

The rigour with which each of Burden's performances are carried out is meticulous, if the intention was purely exhibitionism he would surely invite large crowds and T.V. crews, indeed the documentation for Through the Night Softly does not indicate the difficulty of the task. In ritual there can be no faking of the tasks as a super-natural being, is watching over them. Burden is his own super natural being,unable to fake these performances because the experience is what is so important. Indians believe that the powers gained from these experiences are also important to their fellow man. I want to close this chapter with an Indian quotation which refers to the importance of the ordeal or task to the development of the Native American Indian as a member of their society.

My son, you should be of some benefit to your fellow man, there is only one way in which this can be done and that is to fast. If you thirst yourself to death, the spirits who are in control of wars will bless you.... If you do not obtain a spirit to strengthen you, you will amount to nothing in the estimation of your fellow man. (Ruth M. Underhill, Redmans Religion, 1965).



Relic from "Through the Night Softly", 1973
 glass chips
 Case 5 3/4 x 8 3/4 x 8 1/4 in
 Collection The Ohio State University, Wexner
 Center for the Visual Arts (#1979 009)

Plate 22

Through the Night Softly

Los Angeles, California

September 12, 1973

CONCLUSION

The performances we have looked at spanned a period of roughly seven years during the seventies. Burden stopped performing because ultimately the media had sensationalized his work to the extent that the content was no longer important, their only concern was what shocking death defying act he was next going to perform. Power is his main concern., the testing of power, this was the case through all his work. At the end of the seventies critics refused to acknowledge that any artist had emerged during the seventies which is ironic considering the lengths Burden went to, by way of challenging individuals or institutions having this power. Burden's work questions the distribution of power and the uses / abuses of this power, he does not claim to have the solutions.

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