*Crown Point Press*
*Newsletter*
*Spring 2000*

# Overview

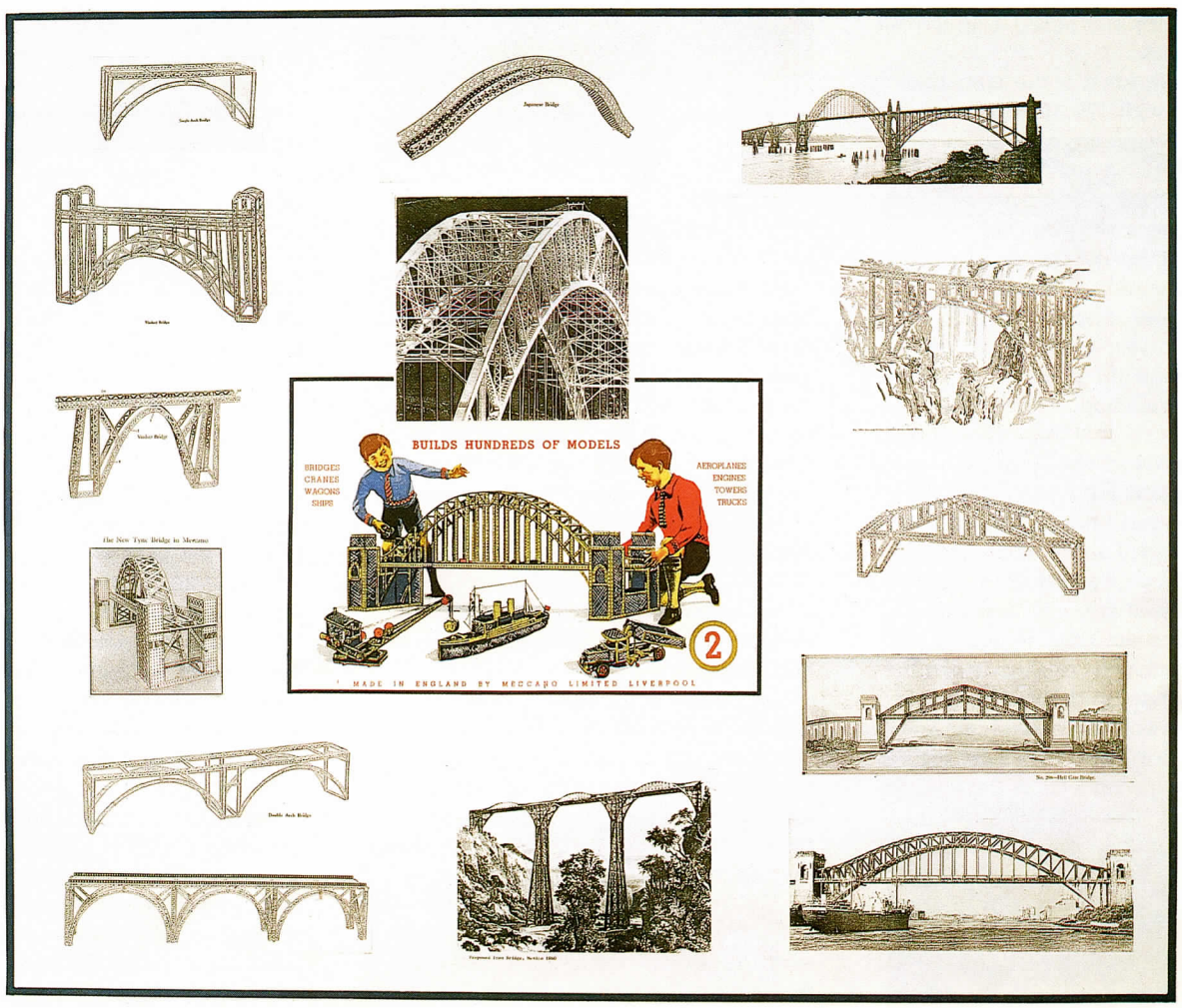
## Chris Burden
### Honest Labor

If you look at the central picture in the bottom row of pictures in Chris Burden's *Arch Bridges*, you'll see a nineteenth century drawing of a three-arch bridge designed, but never built, to span a gorge in Mexico. "I looked at this for five years," Burden said to me, pointing to that image. "It just looked so sensuous, I couldn't resist it. To me it's so beautiful conceptually that it's like art or something. I just kept thinking over and over how great it would be to build that bridge."

Maybe at first it seemed too much like art to an artist known for working at the fringes of real life. Maybe building a bridge seemed, as Burden has written, "daunting," or maybe he was simply occupied with other things. In any case, it was the fall of 1997, five years after first seeing the picture in a book about Mexican railroads, that Burden had, as he says, "an inspiration." He would make the bridge out of Erector sets. He knew he would need a lot of them, and was fortunate to find Joel Perlin, a toy metal construction expert, who located thousands of Meccano and Erector parts for him and reconditioned them so they all look uniformly pristine when they appear in the final artwork.

Through Perlin, Burden entered the world of the Meccano/Erector enthusiast, poring over old construction manuals, delighting in box designs scaled, as a friend pointed out, so that "the world's largest boy is with 'the world's largest bridge.'" Burden, however, was not inclined to be casual about scale.

He built his bridges (there are four of them) by blowing up photos or diagrams, tracing sections onto brown paper, then meticulously assembling the toy parts to match each contour. He created his own plans, always conscious of the necessity




Chris Burden, *Arch Bridges*, 2000. Color photogravure with spit bite aquatint and aquatint. Paper size: 37½ x 44½"; image size: 29¾ x 37¼". Edition 25. Printed by Dena Schuckit.

of stability. "It's amateur engineering construction," he told me. "It's a Chris Burden engineering design!"

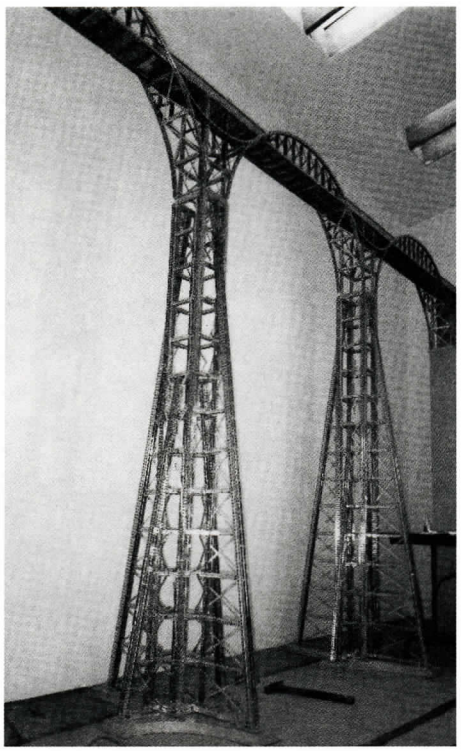
Burden began designing *The Mexican Bridge* in the winter of 1997, and soon decided to build two bridges at once. The second was *Hell Gate*, modeled on a bridge that exists, built in the early 1900's to span the East River in New York. A photo of the actual bridge is shown next to the drawing of the Mexican bridge in Burden's *Arch Bridges* print. Compared to the "lightness and grace" of *The Mexican Bridge*, Burden says, *Hell Gate* is "massive and brutish."

Burden and about half a dozen assistants began serious construction work on both bridges in the spring of 1998, moving the project from his living room to his wife's studio, which is in a steep canyon below their house in Topanga, California. *The Mexican Bridge* is 9-1/2 feet tall and 15 feet long, with three arches. When it was finished in February 1999, they separated it into three pieces and pulled it up the hill to a waiting truck.

*Hell Gate*, finished at the same time and scheduled with *The Mexican Bridge* for a show in Sweden, was a different story. Its single long arch, intricately constructed, resisted any dismantling. And even with eighteen workers they couldn't manage to get it up the hill. So, Burden says, they "manhandled" it onto a huge construction palette, then a helicopter pulled it out. "There it was, all our work, flying past us, the whole thing, all in one piece," he says with satisfaction. It fit into the cargo door of a 747 with only 1/2 inch to spare.

*Hell Gate* is a true scale model which, at 28 feet long and 7-1/2 feet tall, is 1/40th the size of the real bridge. "By using thousands of current and obsolete Meccano and Erector parts, I was able to accurately model the different types of steel girders and X bracings of the actual bridge," Burden wrote in an exhibition catalog. In fact, he added, "the Erector and Meccano parts were so able to accurately match the actual bridge parts that I found myself having the absurd fantasy that Lindenthal, the designer of the Hell Gate Bridge in New York, had actually used Erector parts to design his bridge."

It is this fantasy, this kind of thinking, which lies behind these prints, and much of Burden's other work as well. Burden's projects, in the simple fact of their existence, raise thoughts and questions that could be called philosophic or even moral. How many bridges and homes and home hobby projects have been produced by grown men whose most prized toys as children were Erector Sets? And does it matter that their children's and grandchildren's toys perform because of computer chips, not because of a child's ingenuity or perseverance or handwork? Forty or more years ago when the Erector Set was a focal point of boyhood, much was made philosophically of Man as Builder. People were thought to surpass animals mainly by virtue of our skills as tool-users, and Constructivism, an art movement of the 1920s still important to many artists today, presented artists as engineers.



Chris Burden, *The Mexican Bridge*, 1998-99. 9'4" x 14'9" x 3'. Built from Meccano and Erector sets. 35,000 parts.

Chris Burden's art is enormously influential because he stands astride a chasm that separates artists who think of themselves as engineers from artists who think of themselves as manipulators of emotions, taste, and fashion. The engineers are the great mainstream of modern art, all the way from the Pointillists through Jackson Pollock to the artists who began making earth works and other Conceptual Art in the 1970s. They provide Burden's roots and his main identity.

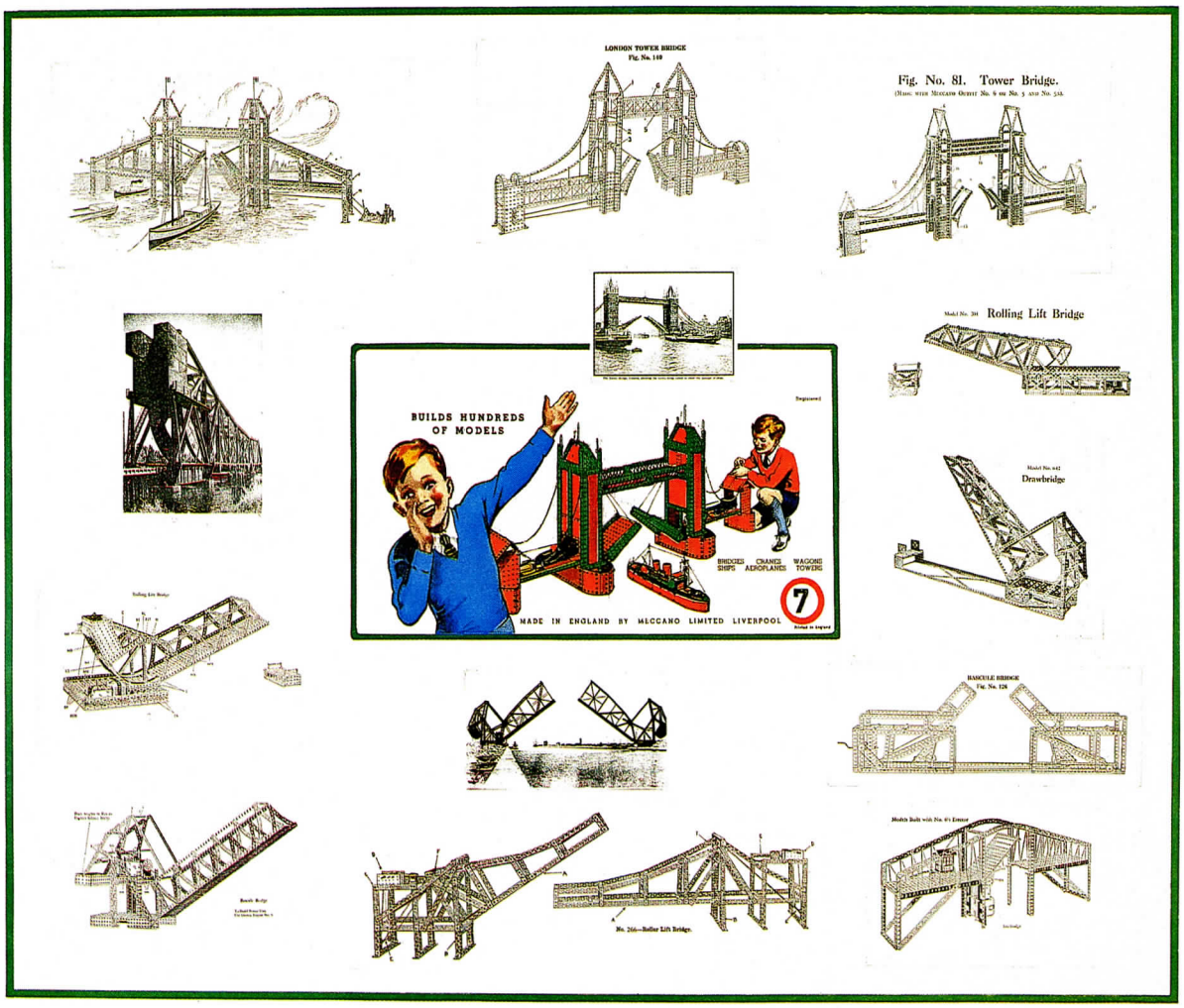
But being very much an artist of his time, he has also manipulated emotions. He has done this directly by using the power of the press and other public media, and obliquely by the startling nature of his projects. This, in some people's minds, places him squarely in the camp of the manipulators—Andy Warhol, to use the American prime example, filtering down through Jeff Koons and Matthew Barney, and others often said to characterize our age. You could say the *Sensation* exhibition that recently caused so much distress in New York revisited ground covered long ago by Chris Burden and a few other artists of the late sixties and early seventies.

The engineers and the manipulators in the art world are generally believed to be diametrically opposed. If the last time you thought about Chris Burden was to discuss his having himself shot in the arm (1971), you may find his Erector set work puzzling. But if you know that he built and engineered a one-passenger car in 1977 and has done many engineering-based artworks in the meantime, this new work won't surprise you. Even so, it might not be so obvious that Burden's *Shoot* piece and his so-called "art and technology" works are related in being about, as he says, "experiencing how things look or feel."

In other words, *Shoot* and Burden's other art actions of the 1970s are actually all engineering works. The questions that underlie them are "How does that work?" and "What is it actually, specifically like?"

I have a way of testing art if it seems at first to be crazy. I try to find something in it that leads me to believe that the artist was learning and testing, looking for experience with transformational value. If I find that, then I will pay attention to the art. But if the art is so derivative of earlier artists or so full of rock-star showmanship that I can't think the artist learned from it, then I am inclined to dismiss it. Chris Burden is a learner. His special contribution to the history of art is his ability to merge without sentiment two attitudes that appear to be opposites: the manipulation of emotions, and what he calls honest labor—a direct and tenacious exploration of how things work.

Right now, through March and April 2000, at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art you can see a work of Chris Burden's in an exhibition called *High Minded: Conceptual Art in Moving-Image Media.* Burden's piece has a monitor of its




Chris Burden, *Draw Bridges*, 2000. Color photogravure with spit bite aquatint and aquatint. Paper size: 37½ x 44½"; image size: 29¼ x 37¼". Edition 25. Printed by Dena Schuckit.

own, and it seems to be playing only kitschy ads. They are actually real TV ads from the mid-1970s, however, and if you don't rivet your attention on them you can easily miss Burden's ten-second purchased ad which ran every evening in the month of November, 1973, on KHJ-Channel 9 in Los Angeles. Burden used the ten seconds to show a portion of *Through the Night Softly*, which he had performed about six weeks earlier on Main Street in Los Angeles. Here is Burden's description of *Through the Night Softly*: "Holding my hands behind my back, I crawled through fifty feet of broken glass. There were very few spectators, most of them passersby. This piece was documented with a 16mm film."

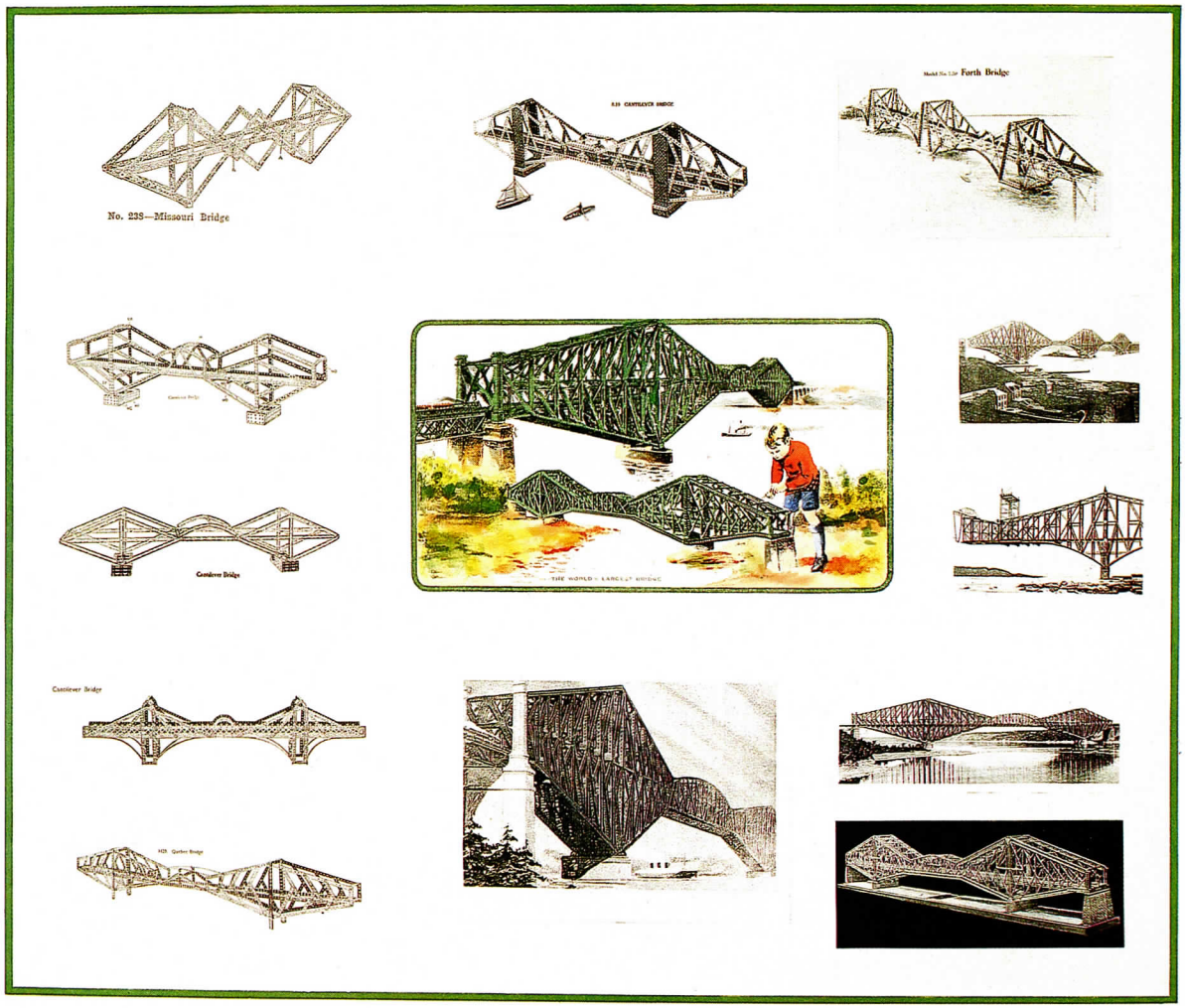
David Ross, the museum's director, has written (in an essay unrelated to this show) that Burden's *TV Ad* created a "wholly new genre: the direct TV action." The ordinary, trivial ads framed the action, which was introduced only by a handwritten title and Burden's name. Burden's piece slipped by very quickly. Viewers must have asked each other, "What was that?"

"And whatever it was," Ross says, "it was hard to erase the image from memory." How was this experience different from seeing distressing images on the News? Ross gives us the answer: this was poetry. He adds that Burden's is a "moral vision in an amoral time, a truly spiritual art produced without sanctimoniousness."

Unlike most images on the News, calculated to produce empathy or outrage, Burden's *TV Ad* provoked complicated emotions. The ad ran every day at the same time. After someone had seen the strange image more than once, "What was that?" gave way to "What does it mean?" And that's where the "moral vision" comes in. For sure, people came up with many different answers, but if they asked the question the door was open to Burden's vision.

Although Burden is a Los Angeles artist, in 1970 he became friendly with a San Francisco group centered at the Museum of Conceptual Art (MOCA), founded that year by artist Tom Marioni. Burden's 1971 exhibition at MOCA, *I Became a Secret Hippy*, was his first show outside a student context.

Writing in an essay for Burden's 1988 retrospective exhibition at the Newport Harbor Art Museum, Tom Marioni characterized Conceptual Art in the 1970s as "a broad international art which was a moral statement against materialism and was not directed at producing objects."




Chris Burden, *Cantilever Bridges*, 2000. Color photogravure with spit bite aquatint and aquatint. Paper size: 37½ x 44½"; image size: 29¾ x 37¼". Edition 25. Printed by Dena Schuckit.

The artists in his circle, Marioni explains, "saw a way to be part of an international art movement without first being accepted by the New York art establishment." They were in touch with the Body Art ideas of European artists Joseph Beuys, Yves Klein, and the Vienna Actionists, none of whom were then taken seriously by mainstream New York galleries.

In New York at that time Minimal Art was giving way to Conceptual Art, mostly involving language or systems though there were a few European-influenced performance artists like Vito Acconci. Minimal Art was very American: direct, to the point, oriented to the engineering approach.

Burden and the San Francisco artists combined their interest in European Performance Art with an interest in the ideas behind Minimalism, and the Minimal Art influence kept their works clean and simple. Their moral statements were delivered without psychological trappings, without any sense that this might be a morality play.

A key characteristic of Conceptual Art, as explained in Marioni's essay, is that it "was not one style or one medium, but reflected each artist's own culture." Burden's culture in Los Angeles, the movie capital of the world, included awareness of the dramatic value of a single focused gesture, and a respect for the persuasiveness of professional photographic documentation. His sensibility was toward something rather polished and finished in appearance.

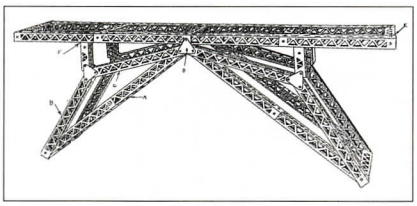
By contrast, the San Francisco sensibility was in favor of grainy photos, soft forms, and tactile materials. And Burden, being from Los Angeles, was unconstrained by the San Francisco bias that there is something unsavory about self-promotion in an artist. He did subscribe, however, to a corollary idea, proclaimed by a sign in MOCA's window, that art is "Private Investigation."

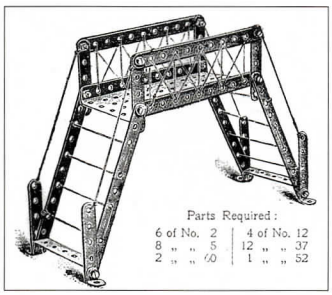
Probably Burden's San Francisco connection helped him to think of drama, itself, as an art material to be used, in a way, for self-improvement. He clearly rejected incorporating illusion into his art. (Illusion was used by Robert Irwin, his teacher in Los Angeles, and many of his friends there.) Instead, he used the idea of dramatic action as if it were a sculpture material like stone or bronze. And he did it for keeps, with risk and devotion. Over the years, in his statements about his art, he has made it clear that every artwork he does is in order to learn something.

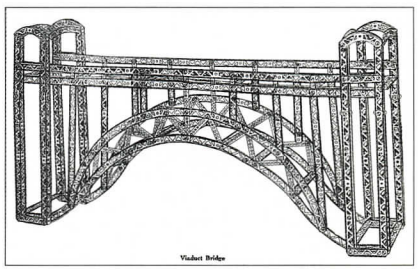
"I am trying to figure out what the initial

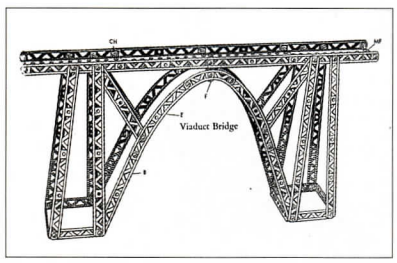
# The Master Builder

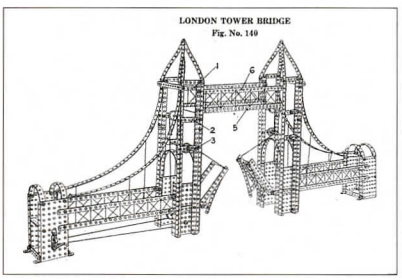

Chris Burden, *The Master Builder,* 2000.
Portfolio of 13 photogravures, one with color aquatint. Paper size: 8 x 12"; image size: varied.
Edition 35. Printed by Dena Schuckit.

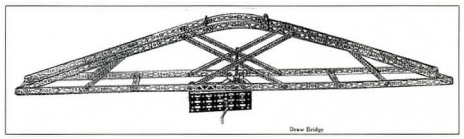


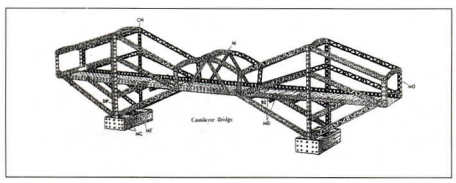


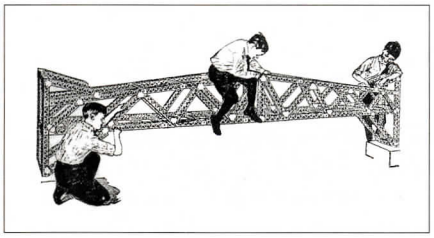



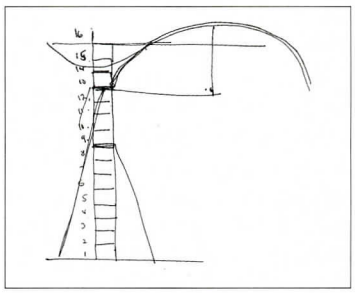



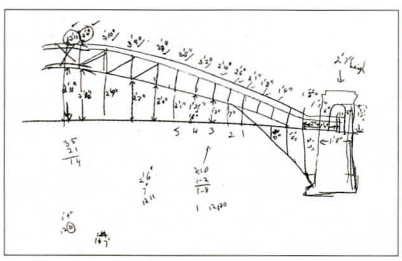



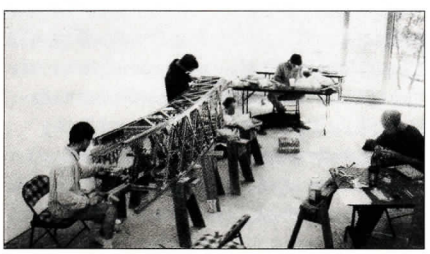



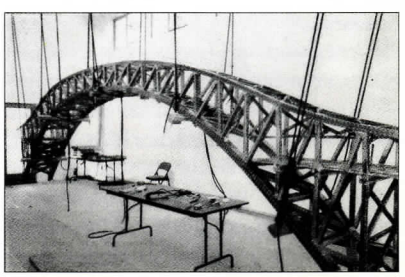











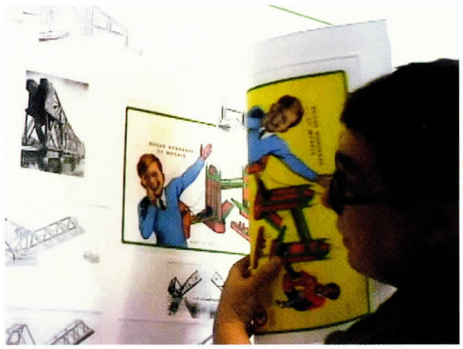
motive for making art was," Burden said in a recent (1999) interview. "I think it's really for some sort of self-knowledge and personal satisfaction. Everybody likes to be stroked and applauded, but really, that's all secondary."

In a 1978 interview for Crown Point's *View*, Burden talked about *White Light/ White Heat*, a work in which he lay for 22 days invisible but present in a gallery on a spotlighted shelf two feet below the ceiling. "The thing I missed most wasn't food or exercise," he said. "It was seeing other people. Seeing them. Seeing their faces. So maybe the thing I learned the most is that people need people."

In 1977, Burden built his *B-Car*, which he describes as "a Utopian vehicle... Like a suit of clothing, it was designed to fit my body and to be so light that I could easily pick it up and carry it. The *B-Car* was conceived by myself as a radical alternative to the products offered by the giant automotive industry." That same year he built a simple working television. "There's something really fascinating about building something that we think is so complicated," he said. "I thought that by going back to the real primitive version, I could sort of see how it worked."

As time has gone on, Burden has investigated the workings of more abstract things like money, power, and military might, continuing his practice, as he says, of "seeing information in a physical way, not in an abstract way." His earlier prints, *Diecimila*, 1977, and *The Atomic Alphabet*, 1980, (both made at Crown Point Press) fall into those kinds of investigations, pushing emotional buttons with factual, direct reporting. These new prints, a series of three *Bridges* and a portfolio called *The Master Builder*, are less strident. Seeing Burden's enthusiasm for his Meccano body of work, I have the feeling it is engineering that he really likes best.

"I don't have to shout so loud because I have a voice now," Burden told Mans Wrange, in a catalog interview for the exhibition at Magasin 3 in Stockholm where his bridge constructions were first shown. "In a sense, I am more free to make something that is quieter," Burden continued. "I have this fantasy of just making work for myself without showing it in a gallery or museum. ...I like the metal constructions of Meccano because it becomes a system in itself. Even though they are toys, they have a certain built-in logic structure that is very clear and satisfying to me."



Chris Burden in the Crown Point studio, January, 2000.

The prints you see here are also very clear and satisfying. Once when asked to work with students for a week, Burden spent the entire time digging an enormous ditch. This activity, which he titled "Honest Labor," was an instructional metaphor and a poetic statement. Like his recent work with bridges it was an extension of his "private investigation" approach to art. I hope you like these prints as much as I do.

—Kathan Brown

## Notes

### In the Crown Point Gallery

Through May 20

***Chris Burden: Structures***

On exhibit with the prints are bridge sculptures and working drawings. Please join us at a reception for the artist on Tuesday, April 11 from 6-8 p.m.

Available in the Crown Point bookstore or by mail:

***Chris Burden*** The catalog from Magasin 3, Stockholm. $26 postage paid.

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