

# Chris Burden in conversation with Thorsten Knaub

CB:	No, it was bought by a museum. I left my studio and I went to Japan, and that's the last time I ever saw it. I didn't see it in Japan. I didn't go. That video that you've seen is in my studio. That's why you see a dog walk by and people standing around and boxes in the background.	TK:	So that was intentional, but also there was a bit of manipulation. ...	TK:	You never did?	CB:	Well, no, not permanently, they put it up sometimes. It's like a big rolodex, but vertical, and it has big copper plates and the names are in six-point type. It's a little bit of a fiction. We don't have the three million names because obviously they didn't keep records of every poor villager that was killed. So, basically we got three million Vietnamese names and we used a computer to scramble them around. It was just the enormity of it and I was trying to talk about the US and that we were responsible directly for killing three million people, and the Nazis killed 12 million, or whatever the figure is.	CB:	I know that you're saying. No. I want to keep them more concentrated. So, it's obvious that they have been taken out of their context. If I install them at another place outside my studio, they may not be as close, but they will be much closer than a normal streetlight, so that even people who don't know anything about art, or care, will know that they're not functioning only as street lamps. Why would they put 20 lamps in a row one metre apart? It doesn't make any sense. So it will be obvious that something else is going on.
TK:	Is this sometimes a disappointment because you would actually like to spend some time with the finished work?	TK:	...and playing with the idea of an iconic image.	TK:	Never?	CB:	And then you take all the legs out. And there are special parts, the plugs that go in to hide where the holes for the legs are. And it's pretty interesting too, because the tracks have to go over the seams, we have to wait until it's hung to fix where it's been separated. Because it's so big that it changes shape. When you hang it it's so heavy that when it's just put together and it's standing on the legs it's one shape, but then when you hang it, it gets longer because it's so big and heavy, it stretches. So, you have to wait until you're hanging it before you start putting all the tracks back together.	TK:	But your ideal place would still be an urban environment, or could it be non-urban, somewhere out in nature, so to speak?
CB:	I would. I felt, yeah, I would have liked to have had that around some more. I may make another one that's similar just for that reason. And also, because we spent so much time and money and energy developing that, it seems, in some sense, wasteful not to use all that research to apply it to a bigger one, and to make even more complex ones. We worked on it for about three or four months and then put it aside for about a year and then came back to it, worked on it another year. It took about a year to make. Nine months, a year, something like that. So, somehow I feel I should use the fruits of that research and use it some more. Which I may do and I may not.	TK:	And maybe that's also why you only had a small audience at your performances, to make it a private event in a way?	CB:	No. I was able to go through art school without making a painting, which I think is a very big accomplishment. We had drawings, but I never made a traditional painting.	TK:	And can you say something about the title, <i>Medusa's Head</i> ? Given that the title of your work <i>Samson</i> also refers to mythology. Is it something you're quite interested in?	CB:	I want to keep them together. An institution with a big park could put them around the institution. That would be okay. I want people to be able to experience them. So that's a good question and I haven't really thought about it. I want them to be displayed in a very certain manner. I wouldn't just say, 'Okay, you buy the lamps and you can install them anywhere you want'.
TK:	Will you do it just so that you have it somewhere on your property?	TK:	And is this also to do with what people say and write about your work as being about danger and risk and the psychology behind it? That you want the people to get this feeling in their own heads, when they look at this image of a the performance, like <i>Shoot</i> .	TK:	Another thing I found interesting was the idea of the smaller performance in terms of it being just for a few people and the question of how to value the work. ...but maybe for you it wasn't an issue, you knew the photograph would go out as the work.	CB:	I was just playing on the idea of this world gone berserk with railroad tracks, which was, as I said, this 19th Century nightmare that was going to happen. And in fact there's places in the UK that do look like that. And there are places in New Jersey and Chicago that do look like that, but the whole world didn't go that way. So, for me, it's about what your fantasy of disaster is and what actually happens. This sounds crazy but I used to say <i>Medusa's Head</i> is about AIDS, and people would look at me as if to say, 'What are you talking about?' Because before AIDS first happened everybody thought that disaster would come from outside; it could be the nuclear bomb, it might be something like an invasion from outer space, I don't know. But something from outside, right? And then all of a sudden it's from inside.	TK:	You want to display them like street lamps, but also like a symbol of themselves?
CB:	No.	CB:	Yeah, that's true too.	CB:	So did the people. They would say, 'I was at this Chris Burden performance and he did this and this'. So it would be like a story. It was an oral story, so it wasn't that other people didn't know about the work, they did, but only through hearing about it. And I knew that would happen. But that's why I picked people that were sympathetic to me who would tell the story as if I would tell the story.	TK:	And he should know.	CB:	Yeah. And also this repetition of form. When you walk through them it's a very strong feeling. It's a little bit like walking through a Greek temple, because they're using the same fluted columns, so they transport you back to classical architecture, in a certain sense.
TK:	So someone would have to come and say, 'Could you do another one for us?'	TK:	Yeah, that's true too.	CB:	Yeah. So, the audience wasn't just limited to those people. Those people became a way of disseminating the information.	CB:	Yeah, he should know if anybody should know.	TK:	But it also condenses it in a way, because it's a bit closer than it would be.
CB:	Well, my gallery in New York wants to do a show and they want to do it in March, and I'm thinking, March, hmmm, that's pretty soon. How am I going to make a new body of work? But with Metropolis, we've already worked out the technical problems, and we could learn from some of the mistakes. I wouldn't use the plastic tracking and we'd make our own track. But it would be a solution to coming up with a new work in a quick way. And also, I've had a desire to use that research, because we spent so long developing it, and then it just left. It was like it was plucked from my nest.	TK:	And I think you once said about <i>Shoot</i> , which is very famous, of course, that it is conceptually a very clean work, and I was just wondering, not so much about the actual performance, but what you went through when the idea first came into your mind. 'Well, maybe I should do that', and then how long after that the work was actually executed, which, I guess, was just the last bit for you when you actually made it?	TK:	And was this myth-making already playing with ideas about art, the art institution, the gallery context?	CB:	Yeah, and it's a bit like this whole controversy with Turkey and Armenia now. It's the number thing again. I've read somewhere that Stalin said, 'If ten people are killed it's a tragedy, but if three million people die it's just a number'.	TK:	Yeah. And also this repetition of form. When you walk through them it's a very strong feeling. It's a little bit like walking through a Greek temple, because they're using the same fluted columns, so they transport you back to classical architecture, in a certain sense.
TK:	What is the question most people ask first?	CB:	Yeah.	CB:	Yeah. So, the audience wasn't just limited to those people. Those people became a way of disseminating the information.	TK:	And he should know.	CB:	Yeah. And also this repetition of form. When you walk through them it's a very strong feeling. It's a little bit like walking through a Greek temple, because they're using the same fluted columns, so they transport you back to classical architecture, in a certain sense.
CB:	What's the question they most ask?	TK:	And it's on your land?	TK:	And was this myth-making already playing with ideas about art, the art institution, the gallery context?	CB:	Yeah, and it's a bit like this whole controversy with Turkey and Armenia now. It's the number thing again. I've read somewhere that Stalin said, 'If ten people are killed it's a tragedy, but if three million people die it's just a number'.	TK:	Yeah. And also this repetition of form. When you walk through them it's a very strong feeling. It's a little bit like walking through a Greek temple, because they're using the same fluted columns, so they transport you back to classical architecture, in a certain sense.
TK:	Just so I don't ask it again.	CB:	Yeah, I live right next door. It's a three-minute walk from my studio. I go back and forth all day long. Oh, I left my glasses at the house. Oh, my phonebook's back there, and run back and forth continually.	CB:	Right.	TK:	And he should know.	CB:	Yeah. And also this repetition of form. When you walk through them it's a very strong feeling. It's a little bit like walking through a Greek temple, because they're using the same fluted columns, so they transport you back to classical architecture, in a certain sense.
CB:	No, that's okay. Go ahead and ask it again.	TK:	And do you go in there in terms of, I have to do this, I have to do that? Or is that really time to think? Just to sit there and to think what kind of work you could do now? Is the studio a place where you come up with new ideas, or do the ideas really happen somewhere else?	CB:	Right.	CB:	Yeah, and it's a bit like this whole controversy with Turkey and Armenia now. It's the number thing again. I've read somewhere that Stalin said, 'If ten people are killed it's a tragedy, but if three million people die it's just a number'.	TK:	Yeah. And also this repetition of form. When you walk through them it's a very strong feeling. It's a little bit like walking through a Greek temple, because they're using the same fluted columns, so they transport you back to classical architecture, in a certain sense.
TK:	I'm quite curious as to what is the first thing they want to know when they look at your work.	CB:	Yeah, they just pop in. I don't go to the studio to come up with new ideas. I go to the studio to work, usually. And as I was saying to the students, most of my work is managerial. Writing proposal letters, you know, writing letters back and forth. Every project ends up with a huge file. I have a computer, but everything gets printed out. I like paper files. And it's all based on dates, and we have tons of file cabinets, and so on.	CB:	Right.	TK:	And he should know.	CB:	Yeah. And also this repetition of form. When you walk through them it's a very strong feeling. It's a little bit like walking through a Greek temple, because they're using the same fluted columns, so they transport you back to classical architecture, in a certain sense.
CB:	Well, that depends on what we're talking about, usually. I'm trying to remember what the students I spoke to earlier today were asking me. I think it was about whether the work that I do with my hands is more personal to me than the work that others build for me. And I said that it isn't because as soon as you put your name on something, then it becomes your work, because people judge you by the fact that you have claimed it.	TK:	And do you go in there in terms of, I have to do this, I have to do that? Or is that really time to think? Just to sit there and to think what kind of work you could do now? Is the studio a place where you come up with new ideas, or do the ideas really happen somewhere else?	CB:	Right.	CB:	Yeah, and it's a bit like this whole controversy with Turkey and Armenia now. It's the number thing again. I've read somewhere that Stalin said, 'If ten people are killed it's a tragedy, but if three million people die it's just a number'.	TK:	Yeah. And also this repetition of form. When you walk through them it's a very strong feeling. It's a little bit like walking through a Greek temple, because they're using the same fluted columns, so they transport you back to classical architecture, in a certain sense.
TK:	So, for you there's no difference if other people produce the work?	CB:	Yeah, they just pop in. I don't go to the studio to come up with new ideas. I go to the studio to work, usually. And as I was saying to the students, most of my work is managerial. Writing proposal letters, you know, writing letters back and forth. Every project ends up with a huge file. I have a computer, but everything gets printed out. I like paper files. And it's all based on dates, and we have tons of file cabinets, and so on.	CB:	Right.	TK:	And he should know.	CB:	Yeah. And also this repetition of form. When you walk through them it's a very strong feeling. It's a little bit like walking through a Greek temple, because they're using the same fluted columns, so they transport you back to classical architecture, in a certain sense.
CB:	It's still my work. It's not possible to do everything yourself, especially on a project like this. I wish I could but I can't. If I had to make all the steamroller parts, I'd still be working at it; do you know what I'm saying?	TK:	When you first started to make art did you expect all that administration?	CB:	Right.	CB:	Yeah, and it's a bit like this whole controversy with Turkey and Armenia now. It's the number thing again. I've read somewhere that Stalin said, 'If ten people are killed it's a tragedy, but if three million people die it's just a number'.	TK:	Yeah. And also this repetition of form. When you walk through them it's a very strong feeling. It's a little bit like walking through a Greek temple, because they're using the same fluted columns, so they transport you back to classical architecture, in a certain sense.
TK:	Sure.	CB:	Yeah, they just pop in. I don't go to the studio to come up with new ideas. I go to the studio to work, usually. And as I was saying to the students, most of my work is managerial. Writing proposal letters, you know, writing letters back and forth. Every project ends up with a huge file. I have a computer, but everything gets printed out. I like paper files. And it's all based on dates, and we have tons of file cabinets, and so on.	CB:	Right.	TK:	And he should know.	CB:	Yeah. And also this repetition of form. When you walk through them it's a very strong feeling. It's a little bit like walking through a Greek temple, because they're using the same fluted columns, so they transport you back to classical architecture, in a certain sense.
CB:	I'd have to learn how to be a welder. It's like the architect is responsible for the building, that doesn't mean he puts every brick in place. And nobody says, 'Well, this is his building and that's yours' because bricklayers built it. In an ideal world all architect would have to build their own buildings, but then there'd be a lot fewer buildings.	TK:	When you first started to make art did you expect all that administration?	CB:	Right.	CB:	Yeah, and it's a bit like this whole controversy with Turkey and Armenia now. It's the number thing again. I've read somewhere that Stalin said, 'If ten people are killed it's a tragedy, but if three million people die it's just a number'.	TK:	Yeah. And also this repetition of form. When you walk through them it's a very strong feeling. It's a little bit like walking through a Greek temple, because they're using the same fluted columns, so they transport you back to classical architecture, in a certain sense.
TK:	People have this misconception that the artist has to do everything by his hand somehow. Maybe it comes from the classical period?	CB:	Yeah, they just pop in. I don't go to the studio to come up with new ideas. I go to the studio to work, usually. And as I was saying to the students, most of my work is managerial. Writing proposal letters, you know, writing letters back and forth. Every project ends up with a huge file. I have a computer, but everything gets printed out. I like paper files. And it's all based on dates, and we have tons of file cabinets, and so on.	CB:	Right.	TK:	And he should know.	CB:	Yeah. And also this repetition of form. When you walk through them it's a very strong feeling. It's a little bit like walking through a Greek temple, because they're using the same fluted columns, so they transport you back to classical architecture, in a certain sense.
CB:	Yeah, I know. You go back in history, and think about the Sistine Chapel for example: I don't know exactly who put the paint on the ceiling there, do you know what I'm saying? And there's a whole group of artists now that have computers that make the art for them.	TK:	When you first started to make art did you expect all that administration?	CB:	Right.	CB:	Yeah, and it's a bit like this whole controversy with Turkey and Armenia now. It's the number thing again. I've read somewhere that Stalin said, 'If ten people are killed it's a tragedy, but if three million people die it's just a number'.	TK:	Yeah. And also this repetition of form. When you walk through them it's a very strong feeling. It's a little bit like walking through a Greek temple, because they're using the same fluted columns, so they transport you back to classical architecture, in a certain sense.
TK:	But obviously the idea is the driving force of the work?	CB:	Yeah, they just pop in. I don't go to the studio to come up with new ideas. I go to the studio to work, usually. And as I was saying to the students, most of my work is managerial. Writing proposal letters, you know, writing letters back and forth. Every project ends up with a huge file. I have a computer, but everything gets printed out. I like paper files. And it's all based on dates, and we have tons of file cabinets, and so on.	CB:	Right.	TK:	And he should know.	CB:	Yeah. And also this repetition of form. When you walk through them it's a very strong feeling. It's a little bit like walking through a Greek temple, because they're using the same fluted columns, so they transport you back to classical architecture, in a certain sense.
CB:	But it's always nice to be able to have your hands on it. Personally, I wish I was out in the studio working with my assistants instead of in the office doing office work. On a lot of the projects, like the bridges, I made them initially, or I designed them, and then I'd pass that information down to the people who worked for me and then they could do it too.	TK:	When you first started to make art did you expect all that administration?	CB:	Right.	CB:	Yeah, and it's a bit like this whole controversy with Turkey and Armenia now. It's the number thing again. I've read somewhere that Stalin said, 'If ten people are killed it's a tragedy, but if three million people die it's just a number'.	TK:	Yeah. And also this repetition of form. When you walk through them it's a very strong feeling. It's a little bit like walking through a Greek temple, because they're using the same fluted columns, so they transport you back to classical architecture, in a certain sense.
TK:	And what is the process, when you say you make them or you design them? I know quite often that you make a really rough initial sketch.	CB:	Yeah, they just pop in. I don't go to the studio to come up with new ideas. I go to the studio to work, usually. And as I was saying to the students, most of my work is managerial. Writing proposal letters, you know, writing letters back and forth. Every project ends up with a huge file. I have a computer, but everything gets printed out. I like paper files. And it's all based on dates, and we have tons of file cabinets, and so on.	CB:	Right.	TK:	And he should know.	CB:	Yeah. And also this repetition of form. When you walk through them it's a very strong feeling. It's a little bit like walking through a Greek temple, because they're using the same fluted columns, so they transport you back to classical architecture, in a certain sense.
CB:	Yeah.	TK:	When you first started to make art did you expect all that administration?	CB:	Right.	CB:	Yeah, and it's a bit like this whole controversy with Turkey and Armenia now. It's the number thing again. I've read somewhere that Stalin said, 'If ten people are killed it's a tragedy, but if three million people die it's just a number'.	TK:	Yeah. And also this repetition of form. When you walk through them it's a very strong feeling. It's a little bit like walking through a Greek temple, because they're using the same fluted columns, so they transport you back to classical architecture, in a certain sense.
TK:	Do you make a smaller model first with your assistants, just to get your head around how you would approach it, or do you just work it out on your own?	CB:	Yeah, they just pop in. I don't go to the studio to come up with new ideas. I go to the studio to work, usually. And as I was saying to the students, most of my work is managerial. Writing proposal letters, you know, writing letters back and forth. Every project ends up with a huge file. I have a computer, but everything gets printed out. I like paper files. And it's all based on dates, and we have tons of file cabinets, and so on.	CB:	Right.	TK:	And he should know.	CB:	Yeah. And also this repetition of form. When you walk through them it's a very strong feeling. It's a little bit like walking through a Greek temple, because they're using the same fluted columns, so they transport you back to classical architecture, in a certain sense.
CB:	It depends. Sometimes I do, sometimes I don't. For example, with the sculpture of Metropolis, I was very much involved with trying to figure out how to make those cars go up the tracks successfully. We tried all kinds of things, and it was my idea to use the magnets. But then the people who worked for me went and looked in the catalogues for the right magnets. But it was definitely my idea.	TK:	When you first started to make art did you expect all that administration?	CB:	Right.	CB:	Yeah, and it's a bit like this whole controversy with Turkey and Armenia now. It's the number thing again. I've read somewhere that Stalin said, 'If ten people are killed it's a tragedy, but if three million people die it's just a number'.	TK:	Yeah. And also this repetition of form. When you walk through them it's a very strong feeling. It's a little bit like walking through a Greek temple, because they're using the same fluted columns, so they transport you back to classical architecture, in a certain sense.
TK:	How long did it take? I saw a picture of it yesterday at your talk at the Tate Modern and it was quite a complex thing. I have never seen it exhibited here in London, but was it shown somewhere else?	CB:	Yeah, they just pop in. I don't go to the studio to come up with new ideas. I go to the studio to work, usually. And as I was saying to the students, most of my work is managerial. Writing proposal letters, you know, writing letters back and forth. Every project ends up with a huge file. I have a computer, but everything gets printed out. I like paper files. And it's all based on dates, and we have tons of file cabinets, and so on.	CB:	Right.	TK:	And he should know.	CB:	Yeah. And also this repetition of form. When you walk through them it's a very strong feeling. It's a little bit like walking through a Greek temple, because they're using the same fluted columns, so they transport you back to classical architecture, in a certain sense.





# COUNTERWEIGHT

CHRIS BURDEN'S  
THE FLYING  
STREAMROLLER

a film by  
Thorsten Knaub