



BURDEN

A CONVERSATION WITH FILMMAKERS TIMOTHY MARRINAN & RICHARD DEWEY

Why did you want to make a documentary on Chris Burden?

Timothy: We had been working with Chris for quite a few years. Initially we interviewed him for a magazine article we were writing. Off the back of that we made a short film following one sculpture he was making. After that, we pitched him the idea of making a feature documentary about his life and work. So it came about gradually. We were both in Los Angeles during the time his piece *Urban Light* was being installed at LACMA. We saw that going up, and had some familiarity with his early performance work. What initially struck us was how different those pieces seemed from each other. His controversial early performance work raised interesting questions about the limits of art and what constitutes performance — he was one of the pioneers in that field. We were also fascinated by the interesting journey he had been on in terms of the larger sculptural works he was doing later in his career.

Richard: It's really one of the great, untold stories of the art world. For whatever reason, his story went untold for a long time. The entire Los Angeles art scene was an untold story until *THE COOL SCHOOL* came out, which Tim and I both watched. The film shined a spotlight on the L.A. art community and it was only a matter of time until someone told Chris's story. Also, the civic monument *Urban Light* brought a new focus on him as well.

Timothy: Getting to know Chris over time was essential in terms of gaining his trust and developing a working relationship with him where we could go back into his archives and look at his early works as well as follow his latest works. In the early part of his career his private life was quite entwined with the artwork. So in a sense he was living his life in public, but as an older artist he moved in a different direction by becoming more private and a bit more reclusive.

Describe the climate Chris Burden came out of in Southern California — and in America in general — that created the space for an artist like him, and a performance like 1971's *Shoot*.

Timothy: There was a lot in the air at the time with the Vietnam War, which was a big issue for people of Chris's age. What's interesting about Chris and how he was able to do some of these extreme and sometimes violent things in Los Angeles at that particular time was the fact that the city wasn't seen as a major art center compared to New York or some European cities. To a large extent, artists were left alone in Los Angeles. They weren't heavily scrutinized. So there was a level of freedom and experimentation on the West Coast in the early 1970s; the art press wasn't focusing on Los Angeles, so artists could push the limits of what people were doing in art. Performance art wasn't exclusively an L.A. thing either, but it flourished on the West Coast due to that sense of freedom.

The University of California Irvine had a lot to do with Chris's freedom at the beginning of his career — it was a new school, in a new city, in a relatively new county...

Timothy: One thing Chris emphasized to us was the notion of headspace — how being in a new city felt like a blank canvas in terms of putting your own stamp on the culture. Chris had a peripatetic childhood in Europe and on the East Coast, and he said he felt the weight of history in those places, particularly in European art cities like Paris and Rome — whereas being in Southern California at the time felt fresh and new. You could do what you wanted and add something new to the culture.

Richard: At UC Irvine, the art department was brand new and so was the faculty — even Orange County was brand new. All of that was liberating for Chris; he had free artistic rein to think and do whatever he wanted. People on the faculty weren't tenured either. People like Robert Irwin, Larry Bell and Ed Moses were only teaching there for a year at a time. That let things like *5-Day Locker* happen more easily.

Marina Abramovic and Vito Acconci appear in the documentary — and the early '70s was a big moment for performance art, endurance art and body art in general. What was Chris's role in performance art during this heady time?

Richard: Performance art was already in the air in 1960s Europe, with the Viennese Actionism artists, which predated Marina and Vito. Chris said that performance art in America partly came out of the inflated art market — artists wanted to take the control back and make art that couldn't be bought or sold. Also Minimalism played a role. Because of the recession in the '70s, a lot of the funding for art dried up in the U.S., especially public funding. So it was a confluence of those events that led to performance art happening in L.A. with Chris's work, but also in New York and Europe. It spread throughout the art community and inspired people for a generation or two after Marina, Vito and Chris.

Timothy: Both Marina and Vito, when we spoke with them, credited Chris with being one of the top people in performance art during the era they began working in. Vito said that Chris's work made him question whether his work was extreme enough. Marina cites Chris as hugely influential in both America and Europe. It's also a mixture of societal things, like the inflated art market, plus the activism of the '60s — taking action with your body, or putting your body where the issue was. For Chris it was also personal factors. He viewed his performances as sculptures, using his body as raw material. As a student graduating from art school he didn't have money for materials or storage of large-scale artwork. There was something practical about using what he had access to, which was his own body, and being able to carry around his body of work in a bag with a bunch of negatives in it.

Richard: One of the reasons Chris's work became so influential to so many people was because his pieces or performances could be described in a sentence or two. So their notoriety spread throughout America and into Europe.

The '70s themselves were very dark — nihilism was in the air. After *Shoot* and *Trans-Fixed*, Chris effectively burned out. What was going on with him during this time?

Timothy: It was a combination of things happening in his personal life and in his career. He had become disillusioned with the way he was being portrayed in the media and how his artwork was being portrayed. By the time he was doing something like *Trans-Fixed*, he already knew how the media would depict it. If he got invited to do a new piece somewhere, sensational articles would suddenly appear — look out, Chris Burden is coming to your town! I think he became frustrated and disillusioned by all this, and ultimately didn't want to become a caricature of himself. There were also personal factors, like the breakdown of his first marriage. When that happened, he went off the rails a little bit. He was less anchored and his work became less specific — in addition to all the drinking and drugging. There was also the struggle of moving away from performance art towards something new. When you've become known for something in particular, it's tough to transition into new areas. The public wants to pigeonhole you in a certain way. I think there was frustration in trying to break away from his image from the '70s. It's something that a lot of artists or creative people feel, but it's maybe more sharply defined with him because he was so much a part of his early work.

Even the underground satirized his work in the 1970s — John Waters poked fun of *Shoot* in *FEMALE TROUBLE*, during Divine's performance art piece in which she asks her audience "Who wants to die for art?" and the spectator who says "I do!" gets shot...

Timothy: When we asked him about performance art *after* he finished doing those early pieces — whether or not he remained interested in it, or kept abreast of the medium — he said there came a point where he had done everything he had set out to do. Performance art was played out for him. He had no interest in re-doing works that were touching on the same ideas as *Shoot*. He wanted to move onto new things. After a while, what's radical becomes institutionalized.

In the 1980s, his art changed dramatically — it became less based on performance and more focused on sculpture and engineered installations. Why was he moving in this direction?

Richard: A number of things happened. He had to move away from doing performances, but even back in the early '70s he was building things like *B-Car*, and his father was an engineer. So all of these things were in the back of his mind. In the early '80s he also started teaching at UCLA, so he probably had more resources to start building things and finding places to store them. He started out as an architecture major and took classes in the hard sciences — it was an inevitable path for him, even though pieces like *The Big Wheel* and *Beam Drop* still incorporated aspects of his early performances. There's a clear bridge between the performances to the later sculptures — Chris always had these ideas in the back of his mind, but didn't to have the resources to pull them off until later.

He was smart to buy that plot of land in Topanga Canyon...

Timothy: Definitely. What he built in Topanga over the years has been so important to his work — it has a strong character of its own, and we tried to bring that out in the film. Even though it's so

close to L.A., Topanga really does have its own unique slower pace. It's very rustic there. Chris started out without the space and resources to make sculptures, but over time that changed. Even with the early performances, architecture and engineering were never far from his mind. He approached *Shoot* and *Trans-Fixed* with an engineer's or scientist's mentality: starting with a blank page, investigating his subject, shooting yourself as being a big part of American society, as he said. He went about experiencing this almost like a scientist might investigate what it means to be shot. How you actually do it. In some ways that translated easily into creating more engineered, architectural and sculptural works. In some ways a big leap but in other ways a natural transition.

At what point during the making of the film did you come to learn that he was dying?

Timothy: Very late in production, actually. We were filming with him in the Topanga studio in late 2014. He had had a doctor's appointment and had some bad news about his prognosis. But he didn't make us aware of that immediately — he kept the information private from the art world in general. Only a handful of close friends and family, in addition to the people working in his studio, knew that he had cancer and that it had spread. Ultimately, his staff told us what was happening with his prognosis and it came as a big shock to us. Once he knew his cancer wasn't going to get better, he wanted to prioritize his work. With the small amount of time he had left, he wanted to complete one final piece without being distracted, while also spending time with his close friends and family.

***Urban Light* has become such a permanent feature of the Los Angeles landscape — how did that piece in particular impact his career?**

Richard: That piece gives a good insight into how Chris worked. He bought all those lamps without knowing what he was going to do with them. He collected them over a period of time before slowly figuring out how to position them in a grid in order to form this new structure of light. There was real craftsmanship and artistry in those old lamps — they served a civic purpose in the city of Los Angeles for decades until many of them were destroyed. There was this notion of saving these great things and repurposing them. It's a good window through which to view his process in general — how he thought about raw materials, how they functioned on different levels and came to be viewed in different ways by different people.

Timothy: That piece is important in terms of the evolution of Chris' career. It became such a huge sensation. I think a whole generation of people who recognize his name and work don't necessarily know about his early performance work. Most people don't connect the dots that he's the same person who had himself shot as a performance piece in 1971. *Urban Light* is also a big piece for him in terms of getting out from under being known as the guy who shot himself. Chris himself says in the film that he likes *Urban Light* because people go see it and enjoy it without knowing or caring who the artist is. And that's fine with him. The piece lives on and remains important to people for a variety of reasons. That's an interesting contrast from his early work, in which he was physically the center of the pieces. *Urban Light* also symbolizes the crazy laboratory for his experiments and thoughts — all the things that were lying around his Topanga studio. Every time we went out there, there would be some interesting piece of sculpture or toy that 15 years down the line might have become the center of another piece. He collected these objects that interested him for a variety of reasons until they became something like *Urban Light*.

Over the course of the film you show a bad boy who becomes "cuddly" and even acceptable to the mainstream. Los Angeles has also changed over the years; now a world-class art city. How does someone like Chris Burden go from being a bad boy to being cuddly?

Timothy: Who doesn't change from his early twenties to even his late twenties, let alone his early twenties to his sixties? Part of it is the natural progression of him as a person and part of it was finding a personal equilibrium and peace with the space he carved out in Topanga, not to mention his lifestyle calming down in middle age. But I think also the times changed. As a young person in the '70s with all that was happening politically, in addition to the violence in society and all the protests — I'm sure he felt close to it all. Then probably his concerns changed slightly and gradually over time. There's still challenging and interesting things about his later works even though they are less overtly violent. They still cause the viewer to question things.

Richard: Even when the performances seemed violent and transgressive he always had a sense of humor about things and a real curiosity about the world. If you knew him like we did for four or five years, the word "cuddly" is a more superficial analysis, which is fine, because everyone changes over the course of their lives. But underneath, the person and the ideas remain the same.

What do you think is Chris Burden's enduring legacy as an artist?

Richard: Part of his legacy will certainly be the performances. I think he was so far ahead of everyone else in the thinking of those pieces and the documentation of them — the descriptions of them let alone the photographs! I think *Urban Light* and *Metropolis II* won't go anywhere in the next 100 years. So the civic monuments will be a legacy. But probably where he fits into the art history books will be more in the performances of the 1970s...

Timothy: Los Angeles has become a global artistic center since Chris began living and working in L.A.; the city has changed beyond all recognition. It went from being not on the map artistically — totally separated from the major artistic powerhouses of New York and Europe — to being an art world epicenter. And Chris is definitely a key part of that transition, from the works that he's made and for the fact that he chose to work and teach in Los Angeles. Helping to put Los Angeles on the map as a major artistic center is one of his legacies. But he's also been influential to a generation of artists not only through the art he's created, whether performances or sculptural works, but through his teaching at UCLA. He'll be remembered as someone who was always pushing the boundaries of what was possible in art, whether through early works that were shocking and violent or with later works that took years to create and install in major museums but left a permanent imprint on the landscape. He was always pushing the edge of what was possible as a sculptor or artist.