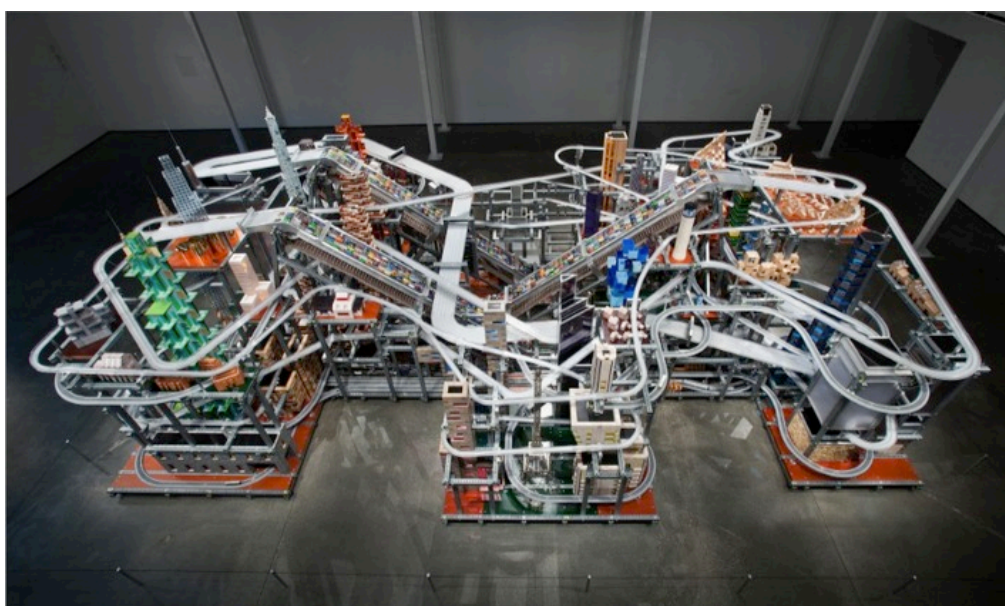


GAGOSIAN GALLERY



Chris Burden's Metropolis

By Catlin Moore



Chris Burden, *Metropolis II*, 2010. Courtesy LACMA.

It's that noise. As I enter the first floor of the Broad Contemporary Art Museum at LACMA and traipse down the dim corridor to the rear gallery, it swells from a muted hum to an urgent whir. The mechanized, tinny, electric drone that sits on my back teeth as I make my thirty-five-mile commute every day, that follows me through three freeway interchanges and unremittingly vibrates outside my office windows, now buzzes at LACMA with the same mechanistic resolve standard to every Angeleno sitting on the 110.

The white noise clutches me—an embrace from an old friend—and I struggle to focus on the swarms of multicolored cars hurtling through metal highways. The vehicles are the pygmy cousins of those inching down Wilshire Boulevard just outside, no bigger than a Hot Wheels toy; only they tear through a similarly scaled cityscape at a speed any L.A. native would find alienating. Looping the diminutive borough in mere seconds, they routinely line up on the split central conveyor belt, ready for another go on a cyclical journey. The piece seems a Ridley Scott-esque model of a time to come, its metallic din singing an aria of the future. Yet it also shares the tired language of a song already sung, an anthem artist Chris Burden has already heard.

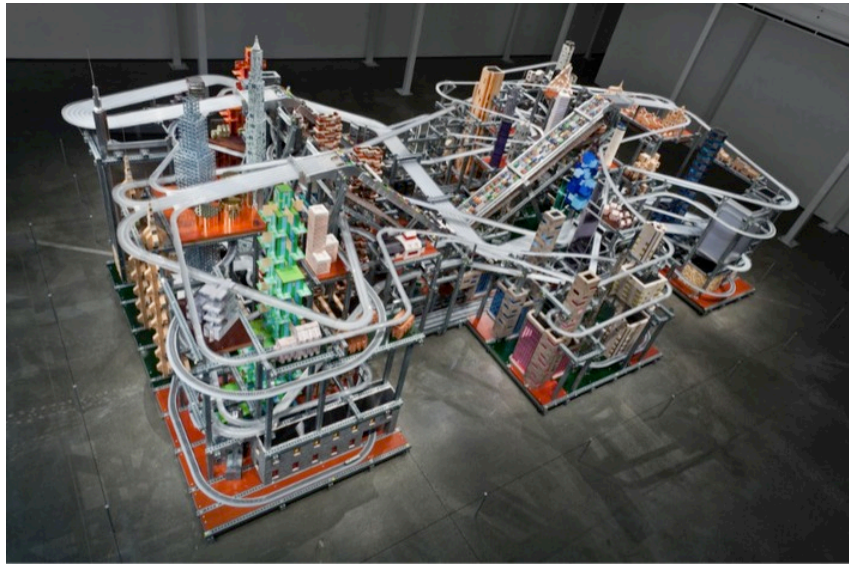


Chris Burden, *Metropolis II*, 2010. Courtesy LACMA.

“I remember being able to go places fast in the early ‘70s,” he says, when reflecting on his decades spent in Southern California. “I remember remodeling a print gallery on La Cienega that belonged to Betty Gold—a trustee at the Newport Harbor Art Museum. I was just out of graduate school at UC Irvine, and got a job remodeling the space. We were up there all day long, and we would pile all the junk in my Toyota truck and be there in forty minutes. That’s been a promise denied; a California promise that has been taken away.”

A concurrent homage to the past and future of the conurbation, *Metropolis II* (2011) alludes to no one specific region. The Eiffel Tower hugs a familiar Gehry-like building, which is adjacent to a geometric tower like those in Singapore or Dubai—but the automotive hub echoes the stressful, frenetic nature of Burden’s own locality. “A Google operated computer car would solve these things,” Burden pontificates from his Topanga Canyon studio. “Motion is always fatiguing, even a train ride, but at least you can read, and do something else and not pose danger to everyone around you. When cars are self-driving, then there will be fewer accidents and less stress. A good 50-60% of our overall stress is the commute. Because of traffic, going out to shows with my wife is a hard call to make, or even to go to LACMA. It changes how the city is and the quality of the city—it makes it really spread out.”

In Burden’s *Metropolis II*, no such reality hinders date night. The 1,100 handmade toy cars whiz through all eighteen roadways at 240 scale-miles per hour, an actuality longed for by both residents who once knew open L.A. interstates, and those who deem them a myth. Four years in the making, the sculptural prototype recalls the anxiety and sensational technology that shapes modern lifestyle. The cars whip through curves and dips with breakneck intensity, riding the brink with forcefulness and abandon as mesmerized visitors feel their nerves subside and transfixion set in. At the center of this teeming nexus, a woman stands guard—occasionally prodding a button, or surveying the progress of her miniature inhabitants. At first peculiar in this otherwise robotic tableau, she eventually wanes from view and simply becomes the invisible hand forging the path.



Chris Burden, *Metropolis II*, 2010. Courtesy LACMA.

Burden notes, “I like the fact that *Metropolis II* has to have a human operator. I was in the museum the other day, and it felt right. Symbolically, it’s a nice touch that at the center of this very thing, there’s a human being. We do create the universe around us and we’re in control of it too.” In the end, the operator determines when today’s race concludes—the flip of a few switches suddenly activates the awareness of her absence, and the subsequent deterioration of the rumble we’d grown accustomed to. The silence we claim to covet feels eerie and charged; the man-made change resonates louder than the perfunctory constant of its product.

“I think what’s interesting is that the scale models of things are engaging because they sometimes uncannily mirror the real,” Burden explained to me. “The noise is the mirror of the freeway buzz—when it’s turned off, you notice it. When you go to Torrance, it stinks when you first get there—but if you live there a day, you don’t notice it anymore. The noise level becomes the constant, and then you’re really cautious when what you’ve been enduring goes silent or goes away; when you’re in it you simply accept it.

“I live in Santa Monica, near LAX, and the planes constantly circle around; they take off over my studio, and descend around Burbank. You can hear the engines and change in pitch like clockwork. I remember after 9/11, there were no planes in the sky, and you were conscious of the silence. There was absence because of the change.”

Chris Burden’s *Metropolis II* is permanently on view at LACMA on Fridays from 12:30–1:30 pm, 2:30–3:30 pm, 4:30–5:30 pm, and 6:30–7:30 pm and on weekends from 11:30 am–12:30 pm, 1:30–2:30 pm, 3:30–4:30 pm, and 5:30–6:30 pm.