

Visual Threads of Boosterism in the Artwork of Chris Burden

By Kaileena Flores-Emnace

Scholarly historic accounts of Los Angeles presumably begin in the 1920s with Anglo developers building the infrastructure of the city we know today. Mike Davis begins his *City of Quartz* introducing Los Angeles' players, starting with these developers known as the "boosters." The boosters are credited with the image of laid back Southern California and are the forefathers of Los Angeles' car culture. In the development of the city, the boosters aimed to create a city of great weather and open spaces easily accessible via cars and freeways. This essay will explore the reimagined images of Los Angeles in two artworks of renowned contemporary artist Chris Burden, which visually embody ideals and failures of boosterism.

Burden, a Los Angeles based performance and installation artist, has unintentionally captured and explored the ideals of past, present and future Los Angeles through his model-scaled cityscape installations: *Pizza City*, 1996 and *Metropolis II*, 2012. These two artworks provoke thoughts of the urban constructs of cities while reflecting the thoughts of the Los Angeles' boosters' promotion of a relaxing beach atmosphere containing multi-lane freeways to easily move around the city.

Pizza City is a Z-scaled (1:220) model city that sits on twenty tables and invites viewers to walk through the installation. The artwork's title refers to the shape of the piece and derives from Burden's desire to present a slice of a city. Burden intended to recreate a model of a typical city with a harbor, downtown and suburban sprawl into a rural inland; however, later realized he had "unwittedly recreated Los Angeles" (Conversation with Chris Burden and Thomas Crow). *Pizza City* was exhibited in the 1997 Whitney Biennial in New York. One of the curators, Liza Phillips called *Pizza City* "part futuristic, part archaic, even medieval in its themes and styles" (Goldberg, "Running the Show"). In recalling *Pizza City*'s similarity to Los Angeles, Burden notes that the installation included all forms of architecture, a characteristic of Los Angeles' downtown (Conversation with Chris Burden and Thomas Crow). The diverse architecture in *Pizza City* also provides the ability to contain the many notions of time within the artwork described by Phillips. Although *Pizza City* is whimsical in nature, the realistic "toy city has a harbour, an airport, highways, an industrial zone, a business centre, [and] wealthy hill-top suburbs" (Searle, "Nowhere to Run"). Burden's creation of *Pizza City* is like that of an urban planner mapping out the

ideals of Los Angeles' boosters that resulted in a downtown business center and suburban sprawl inland.

In contrast, *Metropolis II*, recently donated and currently on view at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) is described by Burden as a "utopia," a city that contains no traffic and "no slums" (Conversation with Chris Burden and Thomas Crow). *Metropolis II* is a large multi-tier hot wheel track including aesthetically designed buildings with trains and cars weaving throughout the structures at speeds that equal 240 mph to scale. Viewers identify Los Angeles within the work, comparing the density of the buildings to the movie *Blade Runner*, the film noir movie most associated with early-perceived images of metropolitan Los Angeles that still to resonate today (Finkel, "Chris Burden's 'Metropolis II': LACMA Visitors Catch a Test Drive"). Burden does not play the role of an urban planner in *Metropolis II* as he does so literally in *Pizza City*. However, Burden's creation of an utopian city with fast moving cars is also reflective of the booster ideals to create an autopia where persons travel quickly by car from one desirable location to another without interactions with poorer areas and residents. With no slums in his *Metropolis II*, Burden presents only what was conceived in the boosters' autopia with the exclusion of the reality of communities that exist out of sight and out of mind when driving on the freeways of Los Angeles.

Further, *Metropolis II*'s apparent lack of infrastructure as a functioning city reveals that a utopian city and the autopia of the boosters cannot and was not achieved. In conversation about the upkeep of *Metropolis II*, Burden identifies the custom-made plexi-glass 18-lane car track as most likely the first to be worn down to the point of repair or replacement (Conversation with Chris Burden and Thomas Crow). It is curious that Burden does not acknowledge the human aspect of the installation that is required for the artwork to function. Due to the need of an operator for the installations, LACMA visitors are only able to see the cars and trains in motion for one-hour increments spread throughout weekend days. During functioning hours one person, the operator, stands in the center of the installation to ensure that the vehicles travel smoothly. Burden does not consider the operator apart of the artwork itself. His disregard for the human aspect of his work reflects another reality of an unattainable utopia that Burden created as *Metropolis II* and that of the autopia ideals of the boosters. A city planned without realistic considerations of persons will not work according to plan. One present day problem in Los Angeles is the long traveling time around the city due to heavy freeway traffic. The boosters clearly did not foresee or

plan for the multitude of people and cars on the freeways responsible for the unbearable freeway traffic characteristic of Los Angeles known today.

When questioned if *Metropolis II* is his reimagined Los Angeles, Burden replied that he “would love to get to the airport in ten minutes” which alludes to such failed ideals of an autopia by the boosters (Conversation with Chris Burden and Thomas Crow). Los Angeles has been referred to as a “future city” that one day all world cities will resemble. Perhaps Burden’s *Metropolis II* foreshadows the future of Los Angeles where the booster ideals could be achieved through multi-tier freeways and dense levels of buildings. Burden’s *Pizza City* and *Metropolis II* are reflections of the history of boosterism in Los Angeles; *Pizza City* a mirror of realized infrastructure and *Metropolis II* a mirror of a booster autopia. Considered together, Burden’s city-models visually thread the booster ideals of past, present and a future Los Angeles.

Kaileena Flores-Emnace, a native Angelino, is pursuing her M.A. in Arts Management and is interested in the art and urban landscapes of Los Angeles. Kai is a crafter and art educator currently working as a gallery educator at LACMA and MOCA.

Works Cited

Conversation with Chris Burden and Thomas Crow." Pomona College Museum of Art, Claremont, CA. 24 Mar. 2012. Lecture.

Davis, Mike. *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*. London: Verso, 1990. Print.

Finkel, Jori. "Chris Burden's 'Metropolis II': LACMA Visitors Catch a Test Drive." *Los Angeles Times*. Los Angeles Times, 04 Jan. 2012. Web. 28 Mar. 2012. <<http://articles.latimes.com/2012/jan/04/entertainment/la-et-chris-burden-20120104>>.

Goldberg, RoseLee. "Running the Show." *Mary Ellen Mark Home Page*. Web. 28 Mar. 2012. <<http://www.maryellenmark.com/text/magazines/mirabella/906K-000-010.html>>.

Searle, Adrian. "Nowhere to Run." *Frieze*. Frieze Magazine, May 1997. Web. 28 Mar. 2012. <http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/nowhere_to_run/>.