Article: Neutralizing the nuclear option
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Source: Objects Specialty Group Postprints, Volume Twenty-Two, 2015
Pages: 59-76
Editors: Emily Hamilton and Kari Dodson, with Sarah Barack and Kate Moomaw, Program Chairs
ISSN (print version) 2169-379X
ISSN (online version) 2169-1290
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www.conservation-us.org

Objects Specialty Group Postprints is published annually by the Objects Specialty Group (OSG) of the American Institute for Conservation of Historic & Artistic Works (AIC). It is a conference proceedings volume consisting of papers presented in the OSG sessions at AIC Annual Meetings.

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This article is published in the Objects Specialty Group Postprints, Volume Twenty-Two, 2015. It has been edited for clarity and content. The article was peer-reviewed by content area specialists and was revised based on this anonymous review. Responsibility for the methods and materials described herein, however, rests solely with the author(s), whose article should not be considered an official statement of the OSG or the AIC.
1. INTRODUCTION

The treatment of *A Tale of Two Cities*, recounted here, could not have occurred without the opportunity for direct interaction between artist and conservator. Over the course of three studio visits and multiple telephone conversations, the developing dialogue between Chris Burden (1946–2015) and the conservator provided the artist an opportunity to observe the conservation process and the conservator to understand the level of the artist's personal engagement in the work (the artwork contained many of Burden's childhood toys). It was this dialogue that permitted the possibilities of conservation and the sensibilities of the artist's intent to converge in a uniquely personal and productive way.

*A Tale of Two Cities*, Burden's first significant post-performance work, is a large-scale installation depicting war between cities of differing scale (fig. 1). The artwork is assembled on a panoramic landscape of 17 cubic yards (26 tons) of sculpted white sand, populated by two tons of assorted rock, ocean coral, bougainvillea, and ball cactus, and approximately 60 specified small to medium live houseplants, with appropriate drip irrigation. Over this, approximately 5,000 model buildings and toys in HO, N, and Z model scales, mounted to cardboard panels, are arranged according to the artist's instructions. Assembled in a variety of venues, Burden's diorama has varied in size from 800 to 1,300 square ft., with an average installation time of approximately 600 hours. Whereas the two city components, with their matrix of street grids, required that they be assembled in a specific pattern, other areas of the installation were more fluid, adapting to different exhibition spaces as per the artist's intent.

1.1 A LINE IN THE SAND

Over the course of three decades of exhibition and storage, the artwork's city areas—composed of model buildings, streets, and cars glued to a substrate of abutting cardboard panels—had become damaged and distorted, their paper foundations warped and delaminated, the undersides encrusted with mold.

Based on its condition, the artist made the decision to deny the New Museum/Orange County Museum of Art (OCMA) request to exhibit this seminal artwork in his upcoming one-man survey show at the New Museum in New York. If exhibited at all, Burden declared, he wished to exercise his right, handwritten into this contract by Burden, to alter the work by blowing it up as a final performance piece—a fitting conclusion to this broad depiction of futuristic warring states. Whether the artwork was exhibited or not, the OCMA was committed to restoration of the artwork.
1.2 SOME ASSEMBLY REQUIRED

Preparation of a treatment plan began with examination of installation components at the OCMA. The artwork was displayed on tables and in boxes throughout the museum storage area. The cardboard substrates were warped with evidence of mold, lifting plastic and paper models, partially detached road surfaces, and missing landscape features. All elements exhibited an uneven layer of surface grime and sand.

The installation was delivered to the studio packed in 18 boxes with dimensions of $24 \times 48 \times 24$ in. The loose items were organized by city size and geographic location within the installation. The OCMA registrar and a preparator spent two days assembling the two city components for review by the artist. The preparator was the only individual at the OCMA who had participated in the last installation of the artwork.
Fig. 2. Detail of the installation in 1988 at the Newport Harbor Art Museum (Courtesy of Chris Burden)

Fig. 3. Before treatment, a partial view of installation components on display in the storage area at the Orange County Museum of Art (Courtesy of Donna Williams)
in 2007—an exhibition purposely not viewed by the artist because of the piece’s poor condition. Although Burden did not issue specific instructions for *A Tale of Two Cities*, photographic documentation from previous installations provided a structure to establish the basic relationships of the artwork’s many elements. During this assembly process, it became clear that the OCMA preparator—the only one with past experience in installing *A Tale of Two Cities*—possessed the institutional memory to not only assemble and direct the level of infill required but also to engage with the installation components as well.

The scale model architectural components define the city installation elements. Big City and Little City have both airport and harbor components. The rest of the installation has geographic locations and sites including but not limited to “shanty town,” a nuclear blast site, and a city dump. These sites are assembled in the surrounding sand and rocks.

The cities are divided by “bullet fencing” (live rounds of .22 caliber and 9-mm ammunition) and toys in respective scale with the architectural components. The toys were partially unpacked and displayed for viewing.

2. THREE STAGES OF DETENTE
2.1 FIRST MEETING WITH THE ARTIST: “THIS PIECE IS DEAD TO ME.”
CONSERVATION STUDIO: JUNE 24, 2013

Attendees at the initial meeting with the artist included the following: the OCMA and New Museum directors, the exhibition curator, the OCMA collection manager and preparator, the artist and
his two assistants, a Gagosian Gallery representative and preparator, conservators Donna Williams and Chris Stavroudis, Williams Art Conservation Inc. (WAC) assistants who would work on the project, and a student intern/note taker.

Upon entering the studio, Burden remarked, “This piece is dead to me. I have more important things to do.” This comment was greeted with impenetrable silence.

Over several hours of discussion, the artist’s response to the displayed components ranged widely over issues related to broken toys and damaged elements—what could be repaired, what should be replaced—as well as addressing numerous missing components: a small foam space shuttle, toys, corals, and sponges. The decision to remove buildings from their substrates and combine three to four existing panels onto a larger honeycomb aluminum panel substrate was approved. Buildings would be adhered in conjunction with new landscaping substrates and light posts. The artist provided photographic documentation from exhibitions at the Newport Harbor Art Museum in 1981 and his favorite installation in 1988. A mock-up of a portion of Little City was to be prepared for review in one week. In addition, representative repairs to damaged toys would be performed.

In conclusion, Burden remarked: “Part of me thinks we should put this in the warehouse somewhere, and redo the whole thing—with parts from the old” (Burden, pers. comm).

Although Burden had initially approved the panel mock-up, he continued to voice reservations about the conservation process. He spent several hours examining Big City components and identifying damaged toys, repeatedly voicing his sense of there not being enough, that a critical volume of toys was missing. Contractually, the OCMA had the right to add new elements to the installation; the subtraction of components was never implied or approved.

Eventually, the decision was made to prepare a full mock-up of Little City, combining several cardboard panels onto sheets of honeycomb aluminum not to exceed $40 \times 40$ in., with buildings conserved and various components added and/or replaced. The new panel dimensions were given an inventory ID and measurements were documented.

With assistance from the OCMA staff, a full count of the installation components was tallied, which included information essential for packing and crating bids. Individual toys were sorted by scale and type; loose components were identified by content, cleaned, and catalogued.

Fig. 6. Four Little City cardboard panels combined onto one honeycomb aluminum panel and approved by the artist (Courtesy Donna Williams)
2.3 FINAL MEETING WITH THE ARTIST. “IT’S A LOT OF WORK. DECISIONS AND WORK. BUT IT’S DOABLE.” CONSERVATION STUDIO: JULY 25, 2013

Burden began the third studio meeting as he had the previous two: “The artwork will not be included in the survey exhibition,” he announced, to the continued consternation from those in attendance, which included the OCMA director, a Gagosian Gallery representative, and WAC staff.

But the conservator asked for clarification: Why had he cut out this seminal piece from his body of work? Was he too far removed from the artwork in its current condition? Did he understand the extent to which conservation could restore it?

To the conservator’s respectful questions, Burden was somewhat taken aback. He paused, considering, then strode over to a full reconstruction of Little City laid out in a sculpted mantle of sand. For a full minute, Burden squatted in silence on the studio floor, examining the mock-up of Little City from every angle, every detail. Eventually he spoke, asking, “How many weeks until it ships?” (Burden, pers. comm).

The OCMA director replied that it would be seven weeks for conservation and one week for crates. Burden followed with inquiring if the OCMA was committed to including the purchase of new toys and the fabrication of appropriate storage and shipping crates, to which WAC replied yes.

Turning the tables, Burden now addressed the conservator directly and memorably. “Is it doable,” he ground the question out of himself, “in the amount of time we have?” “Yes,” the conservator replied. “But we need to go now.”

Affirmative responses in hand, the artist paused again. “There does not seem,” he said slowly, “to be a reason not to proceed” (Burden, pers. comm). Burden seemed a little surprised by his choice. It was
clearly an effort for him to revisit such a major decision. It was also clear that close examination of the Little City mock-up not only had demonstrated that the work could be completed to his satisfaction but also that the opportunity for the artist to experience the reworked piece in context had returned to the artwork a spark of life, reanimating the story to the Tale.

3. TIME AND SPACE

By the time the decision had been made to proceed with a full treatment of A Tale of Two Cities, the timeline for conservation had narrowed from seven to five weeks, plus one week for packing and crating the piece. The OCMA had demonstrated a commitment to restore the artwork regardless, so by the time of Burden’s final decision, some essential work and organization had already taken place. Five thousand toys were inventoried for scale, prioritized for significance as Burden saw it, assessed for condition, and packed, by type, into boxes stacked eight ft. high against the walls of the 1,400-ft. studio.

Individual workstations were set up, assigned to a variety of specific tasks: One conservation technician worked exclusively to vacuum and detach buildings and toys from the artwork’s damaged paper substrate; another cut, shaped, and prepared the artwork’s new interlocking aluminum base panels. At the request of Burden, the preparator from Gagosian, Burden’s gallery, repaired specific elements while scouring local stores and the Internet to locate replacement toys, coral, and sponges. The conservator, with help from a member of the OCMA staff, prepared ground cover for Big City panels, populating the freshly fabricated panels with treated buildings, new road surfaces, and a variety of landscaping.

4. BULLETS AND BALL CACTUS

Although the addition of sympathetic elements to A Tale of Two Cities was deemed appropriate—with Burden’s input and approval—subtraction from the piece was not. The expectation was to replace

Fig. 8. Toys sorted and organized by size city affiliation (Courtesy of Donna Williams)
damaged or missing components to match the original as closely as possible. This acquisition stage of the restoration process proved to be a test of patience, resourcefulness, and luck.

The artwork, for example, included four identical models of an “eagle transporter”—taken from the British 1970’s sci-fi TV series *Space: 1999*—which were intended to be suspended by wires hanging from the ceiling. However, one transporter was missing. Although a variety of similar models were located, only one perfect match could be found and acquired, on eBay, at considerable expense.

Burden’s chosen representative from Gagosian Gallery was tasked with sourcing the many sponges and corals that the artwork required. After much searching, a single dive shop in San Pedro provided all necessary materials. A single section of blue coral, its sale now heavily regulated, was the only piece of original sponge or coral to survive.

Due to both the legal and practical difficulties of shipping live plants across the country, gallery representatives in New York began the task of locating the many flora, much of it common to Southern California, specified for the installation. The artist provided a list of plants, but this eventually required some amendment due to availability problems. Three ball cacti were eventually located. Dried bougainvillea vines with thorns intact would be used to wrap around several lengthy rows of bullets, forming frontline fences in the battle.

Bullets in particular became a singular issue. The OCMA was obligated to exhibit *A Tale of Two Cities* with live ammunition: 9-mm rounds for Big City and .22 caliber for Little City. But Burden was forced to alter his original specifications because the New Museum now operated under a moratorium on live ammunition. This decision was the result of previous problems encountered during a past exhibition that featured a candy bowl filled with live bullets, which visitors were encouraged to handle.

Turning live rounds into blanks proved to be more difficult than expected. The exhibition took place while memories of the Sandy Hook, Connecticut, shooting were still fresh, and ammunition in general was in short supply. Gun shops and bullet makers quoted a price of $3 per blank round, which was an untenable cost given the hundreds of shells required. Eventually the conservator contacted the only gun person in her Rolodex, a veteran and frequent subcontractor to the studio. He placed a call to
his son, a West Point–trained sharpshooter, who agreed to do the work for a nominal fee. Soon a large box of blanks, polished to a bright sheen as Burden required, arrived from Dallas, Texas, to be set down in ruler-straight lines and pasted into the installation.

In the meantime, Burden was busily shopping online and elsewhere for models to repopulate the two expanding cities. Communicating regularly via phone and e-mail, Burden had his assistant bring a series of white canvas pup tents to be arranged on a panel for his approval. Bags of freshly purchased models and toys arrived at the studio to be shipped with the rest of the pieces for installation in New York.

“I might even add a new scale to the piece,” Burden suggested, somewhat impishly, in a private conversation with the conservator (Burden, pers. comm.). “We can handle that,” the conservator replied. But in the gathering momentum of his show, the artist never mentioned this idea again.

5. TRUST AND INTENT

Although repair of Burden’s work was traditionally performed by assistants in his studio, the demands of the New York show had tapped this resource to full capacity. Burden was now involved in other aspects of his show, and after the final mock-up meeting, he was not seen again at the conservation studio but kept in touch by phone calls and email.

Used to evaluating objects in varying conditions of damage and disrepair, the conservator was better able to evaluate what could be done and Burden came to accept this as the relationship developed into a mutual understanding of what mattered and what was possible.

On the one hand, Burden issued little direction about the artwork’s architecture or landfill. He wanted the cities to appear fully populated with trees, mailboxes, light posts, people, cars, and so forth, but beyond that he remained hands-off and conservation became an independent operation.

However, Burden was specific and adamant about certain objects. Rows of white apartment buildings, formed of paper ammunition boxes, looked dirty and dilapidated, and they were carefully reconstructed through a combination of repair and replacement with paper of similar weight and gloss.
Whereas the tarmac runways of the Big City airport were replaced with sections of fresh tarpaper, the original reflective material covering the airport’s rooftop, which was rumpled and deformed, was retained at Burden’s request, requiring careful flattened and re-adhesion to achieve the proper look.

Historically, the many vehicles of *A Tale of Two Cities* had never been permanently attached to the substrate, with Burden preferring instead to include their placement as part of the artwork’s fluid installation process. But time constraints prevailed, and the cars were permanently glued into position. Many of the cities’ light posts required replacement, prompting questions about lighting, as some of the piece’s existing lamps could be electronically lit. Burden first suggested that wires be cut but then, keeping his options open, decided instead to wrap the wires and tuck them inside the honeycomb panels to be hooked up possibly at a later date.

6. PACKING

Packing Burden’s installation took place over the course of four days and required 16 crates. Small items were fit in custom-cut foam shelves layered in boxes, whereas larger items and populated panels were placed into labeled, custom-fitted crates. Along with the new crates, the OCMA now possesses a fully documented list of both the components and the process for the installation of *A Tale of Two Cities*. 
Fig. 12. Before treatment, the white apartment buildings were cardboard bullet boxes. The box material was changed to plastic, and a plastic replacement apartment building was added at some point. (Courtesy of Donna Williams)

Fig. 13. After treatment, the paper buildings were remade with paper closely matching the original box material. The original dividers were cleaned, straightened, and reused. The artist approved the plastic replacement. (Courtesy of Donna Williams)
Fig. 14. Big City panel before treatment (Courtesy of Donna Williams)

Fig. 15. Big City panel after treatment (Courtesy of Donna Williams)
Fig. 16. Toys packed for shipping. Cardboard shipping crates were packed into larger wood crates. Shipping crates also serve as storage containers. (Courtesy of Donna Williams)
Fig. 17. Panel components located in the shipping crate (Courtesy of Donna Williams)
7. POST-TREATMENT ARTIST INTERVIEW

A post-treatment telephone interview was conducted with the artist approximately one year after the exhibition’s opening. The artist then revealed his three main reasons for initially rejecting inclusion of *A Tale of Two Cities* in the survey show:

1. Concern that there was not enough time to complete the work, as Burden had believed at that time that 80% of the work could not be salvaged and that it would need a year to complete the conservation treatment.
2. Concern that a larger space would be necessary to lay out the entire installation prior to conservation, when in fact the process of conservation was undertaken section by section.
3. Concern that the available funding would be insufficient for such a massive conservation and packing effort.

What changed his mind?

1. The mock-ups, invaluable in demonstrating that the work could be restored to Burden’s satisfaction, were completed in a single week.
2. By working section by section, *A Tale of Two Cities* could be restored without the space requirements of a full installation.

Fig. 18. View of packing in progress over four days (Courtesy of Donna Williams)
3. The OCMA demonstrated their commitment to fully fund the building of storage/transportation crates and to provide funding for the purchase of additional installation elements. As far as conservation was concerned, Burden’s issues about the cost were based on his own approach to restoration. A trained conservator was better able to assess and address the piece’s condition needs more accurately and with less emotion.

Contractually, the artwork may be installed to fit a variety of exhibition spaces and new toys may be added. According to Burden, this introduces “chance and change.” A Tale of Two Cities was in his words “alive,” unlike another Burden installation, Pizza City, in which the artist had been contractually required to secure all components, becoming in his words “petrified.”

Although Burden admitted during this telephone conversation that the nuclear option was “somewhat rhetorical,” A Tale of Two Cities appeared to the artist to be “damaged to the point of having to start over.” Had Burden chosen to invoke his contractual option, he said, the artwork would have been installed as a post-apocalyptic pile of rubble. It was never his intention to alter Tale as a nuclear performance piece (Burden, pers. comm.).

8. CONCLUSION

If the definition of communication is an experience in which both parties are changed, the interaction between Chris Burden and the conservator was certainly one of those.
On the one hand, it took an act of faith for the artist to revisit a difficult decision and, through the process of conservation, return a seminal piece to his body of work. On the other, Burden’s repeated lamentations during studio visits over the loss of individual pieces in the installation revealed to the conservator the interconnection and significance of small, specific elements as they related to the whole. After two intense months of treatment, the city of Los Angeles began to look like a model, whereas the tiny streets and buildings of Burden’s *A Tale of Two Cities* became reanimated as its own gigantic world.

**SOURCES OF MATERIALS**

**Honeycomb Aluminum Panels**
*Paneltec Corp.*
11111 E. 53rd Ave., Ste. A
Denver, CO 80239
800-466-3914
Brian Kerr, 303-664-1420, ext. 1

**HXTAL NYL-1 Epoxy**
*Conservation Support Systems*
PO Box 91746
800-482-6299
[www.conservationsupportsystems.com](http://www.conservationsupportsystems.com)

**Landscaping/Scenery Materials**
*Walthers Model Railroading*
Wm. K. Walthers Inc.
5601 W. Florist Ave.
Milwaukee, WI 53218-1622
[http://walthers.com](http://walthers.com)

**Golden Acrylic Paint**
*Golden Artist Colors Inc.*
188 Bell Rd.
New Berlin, NY 13411-9527
800-959-6543
[http://www.goldenpaints.com](http://www.goldenpaints.com)

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