

**play date:
toys by artists**

**September 12 –
October 18, 2026**

**Curated by
Axel Wilhite**

**AMPHI Gallery,
Pasadena**

Joy Ride

Axel Wilhite

I was first made aware of a connection between art and toys in the early 1990s, when I was 7 or 8 years old. My father would take me with him to Topanga Canyon to visit his friend, the artist Chris Burden. There, on the deck behind Burden's studio, under the dappled shade of an oak tree, my father and his friend traded ideas for artworks that escalated in grandeur and absurdity, their voices drifting out of clouds of marijuana smoke. Meanwhile, I wandered inside and surveyed the progress on Burden's monumental work, *Pizza City*.

Pizza City was a marvel to me. Conceived as a slice of utopia, the finished installation spanned 25 folding

tables—built from toy cars, train models, and found objects—with the harbor at the narrow end and an impenetrable wall of mountains forming the “crust.” Burden worked on it for several years so that in my early experience the sculpture was a constantly evolving fixture of his studio. Was this a sculpture? Or a collection of toys? Was this an art studio or a playroom? I understood even then that this meticulous arrangement outpaced simple playing. There was some critical commentary embedded in it that I could sense but barely articulate: something about the absurdity of city life, the culture in which I lived, that seemed both futile and self-aggrandizing. But *Pizza City* also inspired a feeling of omnipotence familiar from playing with my own toys at home. Looking out over it,

I was Godzilla on the doorstep of Tokyo. The city's call to play was irresistible; I desperately wanted to walk around in it, to inhabit it, but I could only look in at it from the edges.

For Burden, toys offered a candid mirror to the heart of a culture's values. "It's always amazing to me how important toys really are," he would say in a lecture at the Pratt Institute in 1997. "They reflect the culture. They're really the tools that children learn to become adults with." Burden later admitted, in that same Pratt lecture, that his utopian ambitions for *Pizza City* had quickly gone awry; the result was a sprawl with an uncanny resemblance to Los Angeles. And indeed: there was the downtown, made of Christmas ornament skyscrapers and shoeboxes; the fancy

suburbs climbing into the foothills; over there, the airport; “El Supremo’s mansion” and his drug factory; and everywhere, traffic.

On the outskirts of *Pizza City*, a little white wedge-shaped car was stuck behind a red Ferrari in a slow-down. I never felt particularly guilty about stealing that little white car. It seemed rather that I had simply taken it for a joyride away from *Pizza City* and into Los Angeles.

As the poet Charles Simic wrote: “A toy is a trap for dreamers.” *Pizza City* had ensnared me completely. Toys absorb us—toy with us. I had fallen into reverie with my toys my whole childhood, but I had no idea art could do the same thing. It was there, in my filching of that Hot Wheels from Burden’s studio in Topanga Canyon,

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that I first began to understand that for some artists toys and art are not different things but extensions of the same impulse, the same invitation: they are doorways into possible worlds.

I found this permeability between the categories of toys and art all around our house: in a model nuclear submarine

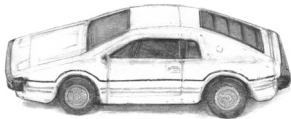


Fig. 1

from Burden's *All the Submarines of the United States of America*, hand-built with varnished cardboard; in an elaborate Japanese tin toy on the top of my bookshelf, designated off-limits; in a children's chair Los Angeles artist Tom Jenkins made for me out of a baseball bat; in Pippa Garner's illustrations that lined our stairwell; in my father's geometrical, abstract props and furniture made for his theatrical collaborations with artist Guy de Cointet; even in the little white car I had brought home with me from *Pizza City*.

I want to be careful not to overemphasize the connection between art and play; not all art is child's play, and this exhibition does not make that claim. But it is telling that when play does appear in contemporary art, it often arrives dis-

guised as “research.” Why should play hide? Art and toys exist on a continuum of symbolic objects, and it is worth being reminded of this from time to time, because the reminder restores dimensions to art that tend to be forgotten in its reaching for profundity, beauty, and provocation.

The psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott, in his seminal book *Playing and Reality*, offers a framework for understanding why toys and art exist on a continuum. Winnicott argued that between inner reality and the external world there exists a third space, what he called “potential space,” where play happens, where imagination operates, and where cultural experience begins. The toy is the first object that opens this space for a child, the first thing a child recognizes as distinct from

themselves and from their mother, and thus as belonging to a wider world beyond. In this way the toy becomes a symbolic tool with two related functions: first, it allows the child to locate themselves distinct from and in relation to a world of objects and other people; and second, it provides the primary means through which they begin the lifelong work of negotiating between inner and outer reality. In childhood, the toy is the first vehicle of reverie, the first doorway into the imagination, a world where anything is possible. Winnicott argued that this same potential space is where cultural experience lives in adults.

To make or encounter art is to re-enter the space first opened by a childhood toy, but in adulthood, the operation has grown more complex. The toy introduc-

es the child to the most fundamental realization: that there is an “I,” and that “I” exists in a world of other objects and other people that are “not I.” Art performs an analogous function for adults, but now the world in question includes the full complexity of cultural life, with all its images, symbols, narratives, and contradictions. Our fantasies and imaginary worlds grow in complexity commensurate with our experience. The more we know of our inner and outer worlds, the more urgent the need to locate ourselves within them becomes. Art is where that work happens.

Jump cut to July of 2023. I was helping my father organize an exhibition honoring Harvey LaTourette, a longtime collector of my father’s work who had recently passed away. We wanted to build

a group show around Harvey's collection and the artists he had befriended in his life, illuminating a corner of the art world constellated by his taste. Harvey had owned several works by Burden, so my father decided to contribute a piece from his own collection: *Spyder Man*, which he had acquired from Burden in a trade during their graduate school years at UC Irvine. This was a piece I'd never seen or even known about. Unlike Chris's submarine, it had lived in a suitcase in storage my entire childhood.

We opened the suitcase, and I was having some trouble discerning what I was looking at: the artwork—some rope and brass hardware—lay coiled in it like a rubber snake. We laid it out on the floor. *Spyder Man* was one of a series of early

sculptures that required audience participation to complete. It consisted of a length of nautical cordage suspended from the ceiling, fitted with stirrups and handles; to activate the sculpture, a person climbed into the stirrups, gripped the handles, and was suspended above the floor. We installed the work, and it hung flaccidly from the rafters of the gallery. I walked over to it, grabbed the handles, and stepped into the stirrups, one by one. The lines snapped taut, and suddenly I was held aloft—spread-eagled, swaying. Was this art? Or was it some kind of sex toy? I was struck by the starkness of it, which in this case amounted to a few lengths of rope, compared with the maximalism of *Pizza City* and the sculptures I had grown up loving. *Spyder Man* touched an entirely

different part of Burden's practice, at the nexus between his minimalist sculpture and his early performances, in which the body itself became the material. Like *Pizza City*, this work demanded play, but here the participation was physical—and strenuous, as writer Robert Horvitz described in his 1976 Artforum article on



Fig. 2

Burden: “The amount of effort required to sustain this [hanging] position is inversely related to the degree of arching: the flatter the arch, the more difficult the task.” With the *Spyder Man* and his other “apparatus” works, you didn’t look in from the edges. You climbed in.

In researching *Spyder Man*, I also discovered that Burden had borrowed the artwork back from my father for an exhibition called “Artists Make Toys” at the Clocktower Gallery in New York in 1975. The show, organized by curator Alanna Heiss, brought together 59 artists, including Burden, Hannah Wilke, Gordon Matta-Clark, and others. Burden, it turned out, had considered *Spyder Man* a toy. Did he consider all his artworks toys? Installation photos of the show depict

the *Spyder Man* hanging limply in the foreground of a room of toys on the floor, tables, and shelves: the exhibition gallery was a playroom. Discovering the show, I felt the jolt of recognition that comes when something gives shape to intuitions you have carried since childhood. As I had once done in the presence of *Pizza City*, I filched the idea for a toy show and put it into my pocket. Years later, when AMPHI Gallery approached me to organize a group exhibition, I thought of the toys at the Clocktower. The *Spyder Man* will hang in this exhibition, a half-century after *Artists Make Toys*, once again extending its invitation.

But why? Why toys by artists? Why dolls? Toy cars? Game boards and trading cards? Rocking horses, tops, balls, and toy

guns? And why toys now? When authoritarianism, supercomputers, ecological collapse, and war seem to be ascendant in the world? After all, against guns, drones, heatwaves, and dictators, what good is making a toy? Or playing with one? For that matter, what good is art?

I'm not sure what Alanna Heiss's answer to this would be, but my answer is this: toys are the vehicles through which we make the childhood discovery that the "world-as-it-is" isn't the only world there is. Toys make plain that other worlds are available through the imagination. It is there that all worlds become possible. Art, at its best, is where that capacity for reverie remains available for us as adults. This show is a reminder of this fundamental utility of toys and art—and in the current

moment, its defense feels urgent.

Winnicott wrote: "It is in playing and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self." That feeling of agency in the world is derived from a capacity to play and is necessary for life to be worth living. So, it is with some personal urgency that I have turned to others to remind me how to play. It is important to know that joy is possible and that it can be found, especially in times of personal and public strife. The current state of the world is not fixed to misery only. This reminder is a lifeline when all hope seems lost, for in play we are able to enter and contemplate new worlds, and to hope. As the poet Rabin-

dranath Tagore wrote: “On the seashore of endless worlds, children play.” Not all play is gentle; children use toys to rehearse all aspects of the adult world, its violence and injustice included, but even the dark toys are proof that the world can be imagined otherwise. There is safety and solace in that potential for change, for endings, and for beginnings. New worlds, and new ways of relating to each other, are possible, but we must dream them into being. Reverie is a precondition of any political change, any new world worth inhabiting.

Toys are invitations to joy, alone or with others. Audre Lorde wrote that shared joy “forms a bridge between the sharers” and is thereby a means for understanding across difference. My hope is that the show’s prompt invites artists to

return joy to the center of their practice, and to share it, across the bridge, with everyone who comes to play.

“Play Date” includes 70 artists, each of whom has contributed a toy (or two) that provides a window into their own inner world and their own sense of joy. The only rule I imposed: each toy must be something you can hold in your hands and play with. I am astonished by the variety of responses resulting from this simple prompt. Some of the toys reflect our darkness, some the light, and many a mix of both, but all are doorways into possible worlds.

You are holding in your hands the catalog for this exhibition: a deck of playing cards, my own contribution to the toy show. The Clocktower catalog was loose-

leaf, one page per artist. I've followed suit: one card, one work. And this is no ordinary deck. In 1941, the Surrealists, while waiting out the war in Marseille, redesigned a deck of playing cards according to their own values, replacing the standard suits with four new ones: Love, Dream, Revolution, and Knowledge. Taking their cue, I've replaced the standard suits and added a fifth: Tops, Rocking Horses, Rubber Ducks, Balls, and Spirals (not a toy, but the shape reverie makes).

I leave it to you to figure out how this new permutation changes the way you play the game, but deal me in—we'll figure out the rules together.

—Axel Wilhite, Los Angeles, July 12, 2026

Notes

Images

Fig. 1 — Axel Wilhite, *Stolen Lotus Esprit*, 2026.

Pencil on paper.

Fig. 2 — Axel Wilhite, *Self-Portrait Suspended in Burden's Spyder Man*, 2026. Pencil on paper.

Texts

Chris Burden, "Pizza City and Related Sculptures," lecture, Architecture Lecture Series, Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, NY, March 13, 1997.

Robert Horvitz, "Chris Burden," *Artforum* 14, no. 9 (May 1976): 24–31. Quotation at p. 26.

Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" (1978), in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984), 53–59.

Charles Simic, "The Truth of Poetry," in *Dime-Store Alchemy: The Art of Joseph Cornell* (1992; repr., New York: New York Review Books, 2011), 46.

Rabindranath Tagore, *Gitanjali* (1912), poem 60.

D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (1971; repr., London: Routledge Classics, 2005), 72–73.

Notes

Artworks

Le Jeu de Marseille, designed collectively by André Breton, Victor Brauner, Oscar Domínguez, Max Ernst, Jacques Hérold, Wifredo Lam, André Masson, and others, Marseille, 1940–41. First published in VVV, nos. 2–3 (New York, 1943).

Chris Burden, *Pizza City*, 1991–96. Toy cars, train models, and found objects on folding tables.

Chris Burden, *Spyder Man*, 1970. Rope, metal, cable. Dimensions variable, 4 in.–6 ft. diameter.

Exhibition

Artists Make Toys, The Clocktower, New York, January 1975. Organized by Alanna Heiss for the Institute for Art and Urban Resources. The exhibition poster lists the run as January 1–February 15, 1975; MoMA's exhibition history records January 1–25. MoMA PS1 Archives, III.A.2, The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.

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toys by artists

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