# A Shot In The Arm

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On November 19, 1971 Chris Burden stood against the wall of a Californian art space, intentionally offering himself as a target to be shot. As part of his by now iconic performance piece titled *Shoot,* Burden's friend stood at about 5 meters distance aiming a 22 rifle at his left arm. One bullet was fired. Initially, that bullet was only meant to nick Burden's arm; Instead, it pierced right through it, just missing the bone and causing a blood-spattering wound.

Now, let us agree to play fair from the start and acknowledge the fact that bullets easily give way to canons. One can straightforwardly argue that what Burden did here was a mere macho act of overweening ambition serving to cement his career. It was namely this extremely radical but simple undertaking that would catapult Burden from a recently graduated sculptor into serious art
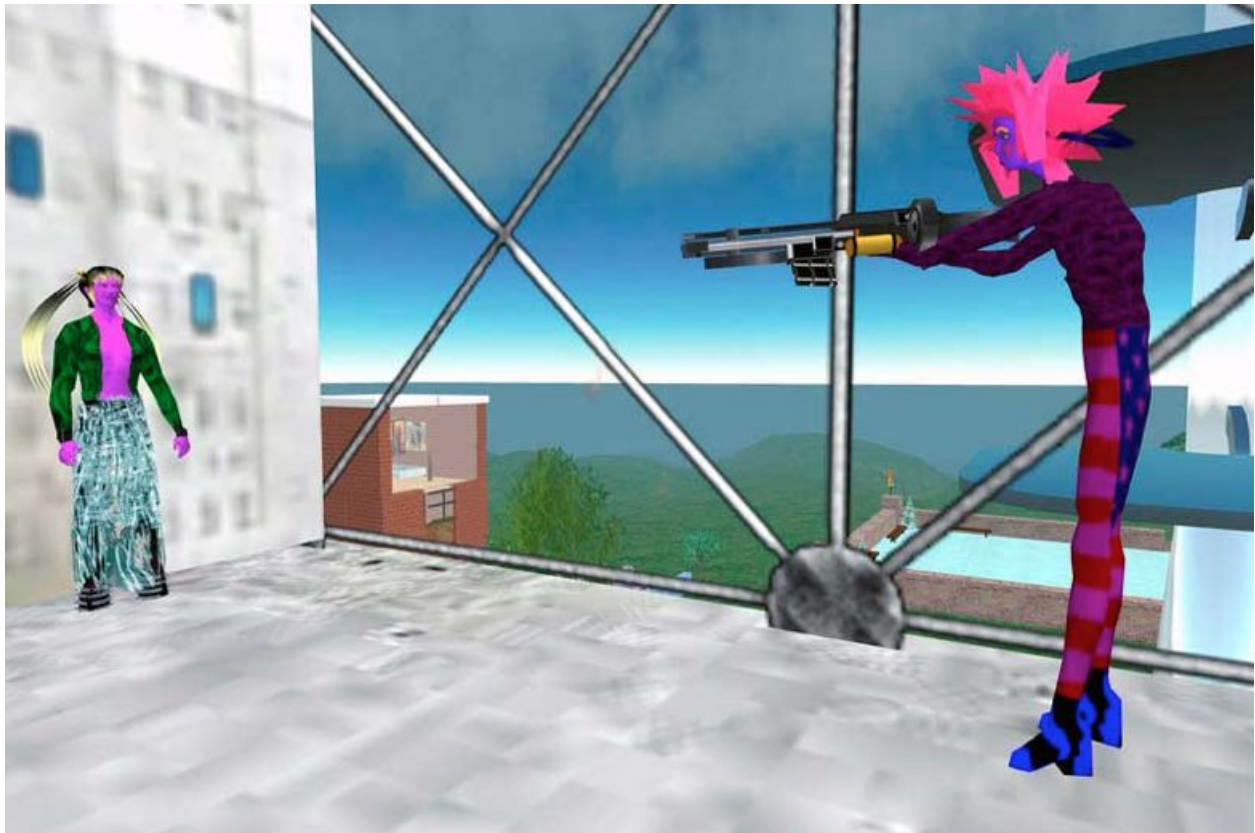
stardom. But my point isn't about Chris here; it is about the burden that galvanized such an action. Regardless whether judged by the scope of 'the canon' or seen through the crosshair of a gun, the reason why I believe it is worth picking up on, why I feel this action is exemplary, is because in many ways it was still a gamble, a game with somewhat of an unknown outcome. Although at that very moment Burden had thought of himself as a sculpture, this wasn't yet another lame artwork, this was serious. The stakes were high.
Shoot seemed more like a scene from a movie, but instead it was real.

To be real is to be in sync and one with life, to supersede representation. This is a struggle traditionally associated with art at the wake of the historical avant-garde at the turn of the 20ᵗʰ century. By revoking artistic autonomy inscribed in the separation of art from life, the avant-gardes heralded a revolutionary potential that was to eliminate the institutional role of artistic autonomy and reclaim its status within life. In their belief, art had to be freed of its role as mere representation and find a more democratic form for it to be commonly practiced by all.

In the very spirit of the avant-garde nothing seemed more effective in minimizing the gap between art and life than the very nature of performance or body art, its quintessential art form. This was supposed to be autonomy to the bone, now in the artist's own hands, unique and unrepeatable. The body is seen as the last threshold in an attempt to break from representation. It hinges on bare life and definite demise, on vigorous victory and full frontal failure.

The human body is a complex system, and so is the economy it creates, the technology it connects to and the world it inhabits. In this world, representation remains something virtually ineludible. As long as representation has to do with our physical senses, our ability to perceive, experience, see, create, inform and be part of this world, it will stay inexorably linked to our existence – it is that which forms and shapes our reality and gives a body to politics.

One could consider these objectives to be at the heart of Burden's action. *Shoot* can be read as a direct attack on the rules and regulations of representation, a desperate attempt to break from reality.

One might still wonder why such a seemingly absurd act of deliberate subjection to the pull of a trigger would even be considered as art?

Burden claimed his piece never aimed at putting the body in full jeopardy by actually piercing through the flesh, but seeing as it did, it exposed both the vulnerability and extraordinary resilience of the human physique. Rather than the frame of art revealing the body, in this moment it was the bullet penetrating the body that revealed the frame of art, demonstrating that much like an affect in motion art has the ability to trigger movement as a vital response – it moves us.

But my aim here however is not to prolong torture with the dreadful task of having to tell art from non-art, so let's just make a jump-start and simply agree that it's art. The other more intriguing question would be: according to what measures was it real?
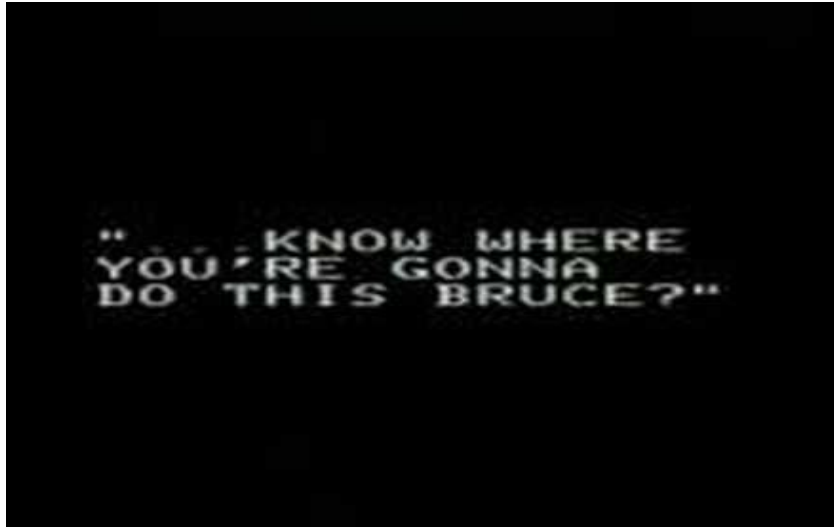
A real is an original, not a fake or a copy. As humans we learn to interpret and relate to our surrounding through representation. Representation is what promises a form to substance, and form today is information embodied largely through images. As we know, images do not only resemble reality, they are active agents that shape our very understanding of it, but if reality is largely understood and processed through vision, then digitization has made it impossible to differentiate between original and fake. With the proliferation of communication technologies, indistinguishable copies are made effortlessly in a blink of an eye, not even the push of a button. The chase for high definition and resolution makes it also increasingly difficult for our eyes to trust what is real. Tiziana Terranova described the digital turnover as a shift from representation to information.[1] This is not to say that forms of representation have disappeared, at the end of the day images have become more mobile and ubiquitous than ever. Rather, their locus shifted from a macro-state of representation to the numerical and molecular aspects carried in their informational flows, making them computable, profitable and imperceptible. Such algorithmic shifts have profound consequences in our effort to actually keep a grip on reality, as they create irrefutable structural imbalances between what used to count as the physical world and now its digital counterpart. As we continuously feed into algorithms through clicks, tracks, traces and likes they become more powerful in actively reshaping what we understand as representation. This world of code is largely cancelled from our direct material environment and as it comes to be more centralized and opaque, it becomes persistently challenging to navigate and make sense of our surroundings. We are left in the dark with unhinged forms of representation that become evermore unaccountable, intractable, nonsensical, distracting, dubious, dangerous, ugly and invisible.

Be it a political kind of representation, a cultural representation or a work of art, the struggle of representation to effectively represent, reflect, inspire and uphold reality is very much felt today. We find ourselves in states of constant digital distractions under permanent pressures to perform a reality of everyday life that is characterized by economic disproportions, asymmetrical conflicts, raging inequalities, fascism on the rise, bigots as leaders, bastards as presidents and bullshit as contemporary art. To cut to the chase: there is a deep and ongoing crisis manifesting in our reality and we cannot seem to rely on representation to carry us out of it. How to move from representation into live action?[2]

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[1] Terranova, Tiziana. *Network Culture - Politics for the Information Age.* London: Pluto Press, 2004. p.35.

[2] Thank you Helena Hunter for this beautiful formulation.

To animate is to move. Today markets move freely, while bodies remain grounded. In metabolic terms, the lack of movement is a fatal condition and is therefore a vital sign of life. Nowadays circulation and mobility are either a trend or privilege enjoyed mostly by white bodies, images and free market economies. Increasingly the perplexing logics of financial markets augment reality and govern movement taking over a great deal of previous political processes. Giving oneself deliberately away as a target is no longer absurd but has become normal. The state of proliferating digital technologies sees the body as a clear target, and static bodies make for easy targets. Bodies are seized by the ubiquity of screens while the processual drive of our digital economy, fueled by automation, accumulates profits through cognitive processes rather than through the force of physical labor. Centralized economies are thus dependent on our fixation on vision, to which end we are being captured by the movement of our images, rather than the other way around. We have all, to a certain extent, become players in an algorithmically governed attention economy where the demand for performance is pertinent yet somehow struggles to fully animate the body. From the perspective of big data it might very well be irrelevant whether one is even dead or alive as long as one keeps on trending. In this respect it seems licit to question if capitalism today even needs the animated, living and laboring body as such.

Real life is said to be nothing like a game. We are taught life is no game because, well you know, #YOLO.
A game is seen as enjoyment and is therefore distinct from work which is usually carried out for
remuneration. Today however, such distinctions between everyday life, work and play are becoming
increasingly equivocal. The transfer of productivity from human labor to machines and code subsumes
the body to pervasive processes of datafication giving rise to a new economy of capture, in which
self-optimization and performance are of principal value. The radical aspirations of pioneering
performance artists are therefore no longer avant-garde, they have rather become absorbed and
appropriated as the norm. The media theorist Alexander Galloway goes as far to say we are now in a
period of "ludic capitalism"– a game economy – whose online interfaces extract value from our labor of
play.[3]

The phenomenon of the quantified self and the gamification of life through software, apps and
dashboards seem to support such a claim. In today's digital economy, perception is organized by the
ubiquity of the game interface and screens where value is extracted through usership and various
protocols of play. Reality itself is becoming more and more like a scene from a video game, only we don't
understand what we are actually fighting here. We seem to be completely clueless where to aim or how to
even prepare for a potential combat. Life might be informed by games, but the burden of reality still
somehow feels painfully real.

On the other hand, reality is always many and never just one. Perhaps there's been no one as
susceptible to this throughout history as the artist, so let us return to our example for some clues.

Although Burden's action took place 45 years ago, there is something disturbing but timelessly compelling
behind the simplicity of such a wicked action. Burden's performance was a materialization of widespread
forms of violence mediated by TV, but it contained many elements of a conventional shooter game as
well. Most commonly, the purpose of shooter games is to shoot opponents and proceed through missions
without the player character being killed or dying. Burden's performance reversed such logics by
intentionally redirecting the target onto himself. What *Shoot* did was to challenge the very understanding
of the body as the ultimate real. Instead, it targeted the body as something replaceable, repeatable,
duplicable – as a kind of stand in. In doing so, it imbued the real with a dimension of play through a
gamble with mortality. Maybe it never managed to break from it, but it did manage to confuse reality by
confronting it with its own violence. Perhaps, what it ultimately demonstrated is that in times of need, even
the most unreasonable acts of play can be a useful tool of deception and transgression.

In today's world characterized by the logics of capture and play, this is a thought worth holding onto.

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[3] Galloway, Alexander R. *The Interface Effect.* Cambridge: Polity, 2012. p.28-9.

The growing codification of life has brought about vast variations of vision today, but what we see is not always what we get. The informational flows that constitute today's data-driven society are forming all kinds of new complex and opaque informational landscapes that prefer movement beyond just the interface or what we get to see on screen. The media theorist Espen Aarseth calls these types of underlying digital topologies "cybertexts". He says to navigate these texts requires a mode of engagement that is far more complex than the sender-receiver model. As he continues to highlight: "the cybertext reader is a player, a gambler, the cybertext is a game-world or world-game; it is possible to explore, get lost, and discover secret paths in these texts, not metaphorically but through the topical structure of their textual machinery".[4] One would assume that through such forms of engagement we could reach an entire reconfiguration of our understanding of time and space, throwing ballistics into a serious curve.
A game-world of 'life on respawn', not a second life.

For all we know, ours could be a world in which revolvers are rendered as nothing but spray-painted bananas while shotguns get stripped to the fierceness of a 50 cent water gun from your local thrift store. A world-game in which economies tower as they collapse while money vanquishes as confetti in thin air. A world with no weighty Blockchains and only one dark Cloud, but one where hierarchies horizontalize to the pizzazz of Gloria Estefan as the blissful beats of the Conga form myriads of human-chains on cloud nine. Revert all targets! Turn the beat around! The rhythm is gonna get ya!

I'll admit, this sounds exaggerated and far from reach, but it really spurs one's imagination to run wild. Instead, what we have is PokémonGo and Face Swap. Bullets still kill, bodies that are in jeopardy are forced to stay put while others are threatened with deportation, markets enjoy unbridled movement and space and time haven't moved much beyond FaceTime.

The type of game that we are playing today is neither entirely virtual nor material. It's not so much of a swap as a strange superimposition of virtuality onto a materiality that is still heavily laced with traces of

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[4] Mitchell, Robert; Thurtle, Phillip. *Embodying Information: Data Made Flesh*. New York: Routledge, 2004. p.10.

the human. Just notice how stampedes of players animated by their screens move in search for the rarest of collectible pocket monsters, only to find themselves in complete deadlock when arriving at the abounding minefields of Bosnia, the radioactive landscapes of Fukushima or Germany's many Holocaust memorials.[5] The only action that we seem to be getting here routes us back to the dreary and horrids of our own past.

The real virtual of today however, is money and markets. Invisible, inconspicuous, insidious yet real like climate change – the financial markets are your AI. They play, we participate. They govern, we perform. They pose demands, we strike all the deals. In such nauseating states of permanent performance, how to play things differently?

The gamification of life is not only evident on screen, but reaches into various aspects of life. Consider for example the way economies are replaced by monopolies. Look at how democracies today are being reduced to a game of strategic chess play, how incompetent leaders bluff their way to the top. We are living in societies and economies defined by a global competitive drive for victory and profit where reason, logics and playing by the rules hardly apply. Nothing alludes more to this reality than some of the most unparalleled and unreal global politics we are witnessing today, one simply wishes to disappear from the

5 https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/jul/26/pokemon-go-players-fukushima-disaster-zone-nuclear
https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/jul/20/pokemon-go-players-in-bosnia-warned-to-steer-clear-of-landmines

face of this planet. How to resist such a reality? Is there a way to counterstrike? Or is there no option but to play along?

In 1977, before even striking a record deal, Laurie Anderson released her very first single *It's Not The Bullet That Kills You — It's The Hole* dedicated to Chris Burden, suggesting that it is never the external force that is the peril but our capacity to absorb its impact.

Well over a century later we might conclude that the leap of art into life, as anticipated by the avant-garde, has in many ways become more than apparent. The increasing gamification of life is only one such example. What is perhaps most striking of all is the overt lack of a supposedly accompanying revolutionary jolt. Instead, what has bounced back into life could rather be summed up as misery on autorepeat. Somewhere between 'respawn' and 'permadeath'[6] what we have reached could best be described as a state of stasis, both in terms of a literal standstill, and in Agamben's terms, as a political paradigm of inexhaustible planetary war and futureless future. The world is moving faster than we can keep up with, yet we seem to have accelerated into an irretrievable inertia.

Be it left, right, stasis or crisis – there is nowhere else to move. However one looks at the situation we are in, any move towards the future is going to be a gamble. Much like *Shoot* was a gamble with mortality indexed on real life and real death, we will have to gamble our way out from notions of real indexed on dubious forms of representation, false fictions, wrecked systems, refractory politics, ripped territories and exhausted forms of life.

We might already be targeted by our systems, paralyzed by our technologies, blinded by our representations, let down by leaders or even wounded by opponents, but how to combat the idea that there is no alternative?

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[6] Respawn is a gaming term used to describe the action of a computer player or human player repeatedly coming back to life after being killed. Permadeath is the permanent and irrevocable death of a player or character.

One game comes to mind that certain mammals, some fish and humankind in particular have always been exceptional at. If everything else fails – close your eyes and play dead!
It's likely the oldest game ever to have existed, but in all its banality, it could now be more relevant than ever before. How exactly?

There is a small, but decisively real difference between being a zombie and playing dead and it has to do with agency. It is that same small difference between work and a twerk, a whistle and a blow, a hack and a rip, a strike and a pose, a shoot and a share, between survival and staying alive. Pick it out and let yourself be guided by it. Activate it and play it through.

If you cannot move, float. Destroy, don't destruct. Leak, don't bleed. Encrypt, don't exclaim. Confuse, don't debate. Play dead, but don't be dead inside. Practice this, stop before it turns fatal, and let us play freely. Let us play madly, foolishly, passionately, dangerously, convincingly – differently.

There is however one requirement: In a world of misleading, permeating and flawed forms of representation we cannot rely on vision to inform us what is real. If we want to play differently today, we will have to do so with our eyes closed.