

# ARTFORUM

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1000 WORDS

## Tom Burr

TALKS ABOUT "ADDICT-LOVE," 2008

**THE WORLD ACCORDING TO TOM BURR** is defined by the beauty of contingent things. Places, identities, bodies, histories, subjectivities, and aesthetic forms are destabilized via processes of construction and reconstruction. Burr problematizes the autonomy of the sculptural object by referring beyond it, yet he returns us to its material substrate as a precondition of meaning. He expands the conjugation of sculptural practice so as to stage a tightly controlled interplay between object-oriented autonomy and situational emplacement, manifesting precariousness with exceptional grace. The object becomes a platform—virtually theatrical, deceptively allegorical—for the display of its own tenuous existence and of the hovering identity, or authorial status, of its maker. Burr's work has evolved organically over the past two decades, with the artist engaging in a lively and erudite reconsideration of the historical conventions of site-specificity; the politics of public and private domains; the architecture of social space; the aesthetics of design and fashion; Minimalist and post-Minimalist legacies; and the paradoxical nature of the postmodernist critique of originality (particularly as it comes into friction with the impulse to make things anew). It seems appropriate to trace that evolution on the occasion of "Addict-Love," the artist's current exhibition at New York's SculptureCenter. A "constellation," as Burr describes it, of interlinked object constructions, the show is the artist's first solo stateside appearance in five years.

My own initial encounter with Burr's approach to tactics of place-specificity occurred in the summer of 1993, when I came upon his contribution to "Project Unité," a group exhibition that examined the social space of a partially inhabited Le Corbusier apartment building in Firminy, France. With *Storage Project*, he

engaged the spare, utilitarian, and somewhat dysfunctional space of a Corbu apartment by constructing a storage system that played with the languages of architectural modernism, Minimalism, and design in a coyly functional gesture of completing, so to speak, Le Corbusier's vacant domestic interior. During that same summer, Burr produced *An American Garden* for the Sonsbeek 93 exhibition in Arnhem, the Netherlands. Installed in a park, Burr's "garden" was in fact a displacement/reconstruction of the Ramble, a zone of New York's Central Park with a complex history as a lover's lane, a gay cruising ground, a bird-watching area, etc.

Throughout the 1990s, Burr rethought the relation between site and non-site as a symbolic extrapolation or reframing of specific urban social territories. In the 1995 project "Forty-second Street Structures," he produced model-like distillations of the built environment of Times Square (e.g., *Video Booths*). A couple of years later, with *Movie Theater Seat in a Box*, he mirrored and reframed the movie seat as ready-made device, a poignant fragment of a constructed environment of spectatorship and mediated interaction characterized by ambiguity between privacy and publicness. Works like *Black Box*, 1998, and *Black Pavilion*, 1999, issued forth an elegantly reductive cross-pollination of non-objective minimal(ist) structures, furniture design, and architectural elements to suggest disturbing and uncanny spatial situations. The cagelike structures that constituted the multicomponent *Put Out*, 2003, were perhaps the most ominous of all, suggesting a nearly carceral, subtly sadomasochistic atmosphere of space "arrested" by regimes of bodily control. More playful and more poignant, *Deep Purple*, 2000, remade Richard Serra's 1981 *Tilted Arc* into a purple mirror of



Opposite page, from left: Tom Burr, *An American Garden*, 1993, wood, soil, stones, plants, and texts, dimensions variable. Tom Burr, *Movie Theater Seat in a Box*, 1997, wood, mirrored Plexiglas, theater chair, chewing gum, and carpet, 42 1/4 x 36 x 36". Tom Burr, *Put Out*, 2003, galvanized steel, wood, and paint, three components, each 90 1/2 x 82 3/4 x 102 3/4". This page, from left: Tom Burr, *Deep Purple*, 2000, wood, steel, and paint, 8' 2 1/2" x 82' x 1' 6". Tom Burr, *Unhinged*, 2005, painted plywood, telephone, hinges, and book, 7' 2 1/4" x 3' 3 3/4" x 11". View of "Tom Burr/Walter Pfeiffer," 2007–2008, Swiss Institute, New York, 2007. Photo: Thomas Muller.

itself (or the idea of itself). An allegorical social sculpture that was presented in multiple contexts—indoor and outdoor, institutional and noninstitutional—*Deep Purple* ironically reinforced strictures of site-specificity as it unpacked them.

Significantly, Burr recently produced a new articulation of *The Storage Project* at New York's Swiss Institute, here filling the storage structures, which resemble closets and armoires, with his own clothing. He also inscribed articles of his Helmut Lang clothing as ready-made artifacts into certain works within his 2007 exhibition "Moods" at the Wiener Secession. Such gestures seem intended to reconstruct and update the tropes of Burr's own history of artistic practice; at the same time, they propose a framework for autobiographical reference, for the display and indexing of desires and tastes.

In these works and others made over the past few years, Burr has been developing a sculptural language wherein abstraction subtly morphs into a figurative condition and infrastructure appears to be on the verge of entropic collapse. It's what might be described as a poetics of dilapidation and incompleteness—qualities evident in his recent "white-railling pieces," in which Home Depot–style decorative balustrades are presented with some of their posts removed: A proverbial design aesthetic is literally and symbolically *derailed*. In other efforts, Burr recovers an assemblage method wherein readymades are appended to sculptural armatures. One can locate the emergence of this new language in the unsentimental yet mournful antimemorial *Black Out Bar*, 2003, which comprises outside Warholian black vinyl flowers strewn among dirty glasses, ashtrays, and topsyturvy bar stools, or in the coolly longing atmosphere of *Worn (For Mr. Capote)*, 2005, a meta-archaeological display of haberdashery—a Panama hat, a fan,

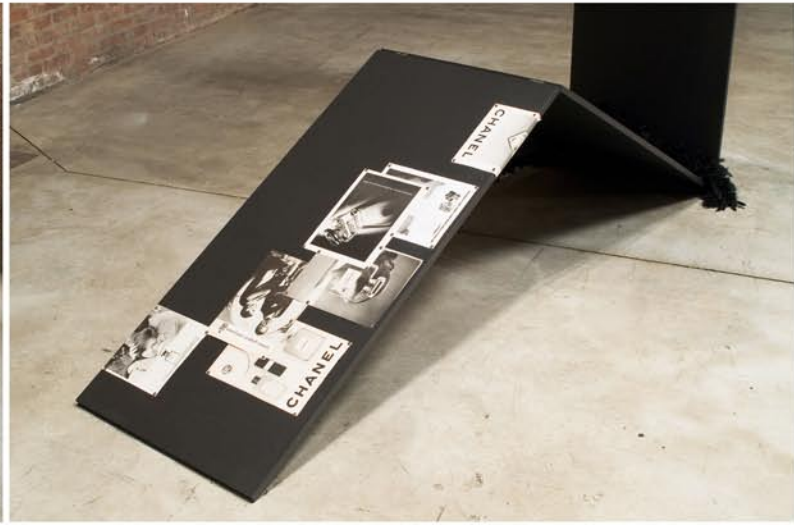
a tie—that proposes the impossibility of biographical portraiture. In related pieces, such as *Christmas Collapse*, 2005, and *Recline II*, 2005, Truman Capote, a fugitive site of preoccupation for Burr, exists as pop-cultural trace or historical reverberation, a media confection, a mere composite of trademark appurtenances. Another work from 2005, *Unhinged*, says everything and nothing about Burr's relationship to this historical figure: It is a sequence of cantilevered white rectangles, their silhouettes suggesting generic lounge chairs as well as reclining figures, on which have been laid a red phone (off the hook) and a copy of the famous 1959 book *Observations* (words by Capote, photos by Richard Avedon, and design by Alexey Brodovitch). What, exactly, has become unhinged here: meaning, history, the subject, the object, authorship? Perhaps Burr's subjectivity ends with the reconstruction of Capote's imaginary presence—which is, paradoxically, where the artist also resurfaces.

The aforementioned interplays abound in "Addict-Love," even as Burr continues to test the limits of sculptural autonomy in relation to the social frame of institutional space. Scenes of interpenetrating biographical, autobiographical, and historical allusions, replete with recontextualized artifacts, are staged by indirection, and we are presented with a compendium of framed moments of vicarious identification—with New York School poet Frank O'Hara (from whom Burr borrowed the show's provocative title) and the obscure yet influential midcentury curator Chick Austin, among others. Within this delicately theatrical, suavely off-kilter tableau of props, surrogates, and decoys, Burr at once discloses and withholds desire for a set of imaginary encounters with other histories, other places, and other incorporeal identities.

—JOSHUA DECTER







Left: View of Tom Burr, "Addict-Love," 2008, SculptureCenter, Long Island City, New York. Foreground: PROPPED PERFUME, 2008. Middle ground, from left: BENT BOOZE, 2008; HINGED HAZE, 2008. Background, from left: Light Cavalry, 2008; Addict-Love, 2008; Constricted Construction, 2008. Photo: Jason Mandella. Right: Tom Burr, PROPPED PERFUME (detail), 2008, plywood, paint, steel hinges, steel thumbtacks, magazine ads, steel cable, and feather boa, 73 x 54 x 100". Photo: Jason Mandella.

THE WORKS IN "ADDICT-LOVE" suggest a push and pull of personae, types, and stylistic movements from throughout the twentieth century, and also my "curatorial" approach to appropriated materials. A number of characters populate the installation. I jump from the 1930s to the '50s, and reference the '70s and '80s, like a rock skipping across the century. *Chicks*, 2008, is a large work comprising six white-railing pieces (as well as a circular smoked Plexiglas mirror, a vintage turntable, a vinyl recording of Virgil Thomson and Gertrude Stein's opera

by a white-hinged sculpture with various artifacts attached, including a white canvas medical-issue straitjacket. It's a surrogate, a means of describing my self through another historical identity, inside and outside a historical script. It's a questioning of the terms of originality, somehow, but with a tear in my eye, an endless impulse to forge something unique from found material.

Earlier in my practice, I explored the parameters of social locations in relation to tropes of place-specificity and began considering the interrelat-

the mid-'90s, I reproduced the architectural structures of Times Square in scaled-down form, examining how that urban terrain was being sanitized by blue laws.

Beyond distinctions between private and public realms, there is a moment in which things are, one might say, put on display and exposed, and privacy becomes part of a public arena and public discourse. It became more compelling, and riskier, for me to think about these conditions through a more antiquated notion: identities. Or, more specifically, iden-

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*Four Saints in Three Acts*, and a '70s Chanel dress) that create an open-form sculptural passage. There are biographical details of particular lives that intrigue me, that draw me, and I exploit these connections. I became very involved with a man named Chick Austin—with the idea of him. He was curator at the Wadsworth Atheneum in the 1920s and '30s, responsible (along with Philip Johnson, Lincoln Kirstein, etc.) for bringing modernism to the US. He also premiered *Four Saints in Three Acts* at the Wadsworth, in 1934. Chick himself is conjured up

ionship between architectural language and an expanded sculptural discourse. I've always been interested in the trappings of constructed aesthetic experiences, the purported neutrality of the white-cube space, and the rhetoric of Minimalism (particularly at that moment when it slid into post-Minimalism); at once attracted to and repulsed by the aesthetics of designed objects and spaces. I also began thinking about the puritanical in relation to architecture and utopian sociopolitical models, specifically regarding the American experience. In

tity as a condition that slips away at the moment of an intense public display. Some of my "figurative" work—the hinged pieces, for instance—is based wryly on the notion that sculpture is always desperately seeking to have some relationship to the figure, to bodies, perhaps to an identity. Here, there is a confluence of different conditions about to fall apart: the integrity of the sculptural construction, and the construction of identity through a vicarious, subjective biographical perspective. Design objects, or pieces of furniture, like individuals, are contingent;



Left: Tom Burr, *Chicks* (detail), 2008, plywood, wood balusters, Chanel dress, turntable, and record album, 3' 4" x 23' x 21". Photo: Jason Mandella.  
 Right: View of Tom Burr, *'Addict-Love,'* 2008, SculptureCenter, Long Island City, New York. Foreground: *Light Cavalry*, 2008. Background, from left: *PROPPED PERFUME*, 2008; *BENT BOOZE*, 2008; *Chicks*, 2008. Photo: Jason Mandella.

they may fall apart, fold into themselves, or collapse gracefully. Or they might fall on one another. There is a beauty to the failed modern design object and the modern subject.

In relation to this, on allegorical and theatrical levels, I've considered moments of physical, psychological, and symbolic breakdown: Truman Capote falling apart as a public figure on television, the idea of a Robert Ryman painting slipping off the wall or of a Richard Serra sculpture on the verge of collapse. To a certain extent, my work indicates the ways in which it is possible to inhabit one's own history, one's own desires, through the vicarious inhabitation of others' languages, styles, and identities. This allows me to operate simultaneously in relation to biography and autobiography, which is often about coincidence, i.e., events *coinciding*. For example, in a 2006 photographic work titled *Burrville*, I produced shots of a defunct town that happens to bear my name and is close to my studio in Connecticut. There's really nothing left of the town except a vacated outdoor movie theater that has long since grown over with vegetation. Of course, the town has nothing to do with me, really, but this coincidence may reveal something—or not: Maybe it's just an empty clue. In my exhibition "Moods" at the Wiener Secession last year, I tested the possibilities of "sincerity" through a gesture

of self-referential "realism," exploring autobiographical connotation by deploying pieces of my own Helmut Lang clothing. I wanted to suggest a paradoxical building and shedding (undressing) of my identity through the codes of neomodernist fashion language, codes just past their prime.

"Addict-Love" consists of distinct pieces, multiple objects, and constellations of works, generating adjacencies. The show elaborates on certain sculptural types that I've been playing with for the past two years, such as the white-railing pieces, the hinged figurative pieces that are bent along the floor or propped against the wall in various stages of collapse, and the long, open framed platforms that resemble both stages and wardrobes or clothing racks. Objects, articles of clothing, and images are layered or collaged onto these armatures, pushing and pulling the forms toward particular identities, maybe narratives. Perhaps the exhibition articulates a range of language types in relation to the idea of a *collaged moment*. In a certain way, these are empty vessels that can be filled, or added onto. They're conveniences, a way of creating my own architecture that describes certain vernaculars, reflects on theatrical conditions of presentation, and plays with codes of domestic architecture. American puritanism is again evoked here with the railing pieces, which dwell somewhere between

standard neoclassical railings and white picket fences. There is a relationship among sculptural object, social space, the literal conditions of a particular institutional location, and the contours of biography and autobiography. I want to indicate the push and pull within objects, to elicit a consciousness about the history of the autonomous thing and how the spatial frame inflects it. Collage and assemblage have been important—the process of tacking things on, whether physical artifacts, texts, images, and so on: found objects imbued with extrinsic meaning and narratives, referencing literary culture and architectural and design histories. This is also where biography and autobiography, both unconsciously and *self-consciously*, are layered onto sculptural armatures.

I often reflect on the social scene of a cocktail party in relation to the construction of an art exhibition; there is an oscillation between moments of intense conversation and chatting, and complete silence. Here, there is both the possibility and the impossibility of a *voiced* object, the scripting of a constructed situation, even the metaphoric notion of a silent musical score that can function descriptively, as background music, or even fall silent. I'm interested in a practice that, ironically, can be at once articulate and inarticulate—that can be talkative or shut up.

—Tom Burr