

Shape shift: Scott Burton's posthumous legacy

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Scott Burton sitting on a granite bench at the College of Architecture Building, University of Houston, in c.1986. Gelatin silver print, 20.3 by 25.4 cm. (© Estate of Scott Burton; Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York; Scala, Florence; Art Resource, New York; photograph Jonathan E. Jareb; exh. Pulitzer Arts Foundation, St Louis).

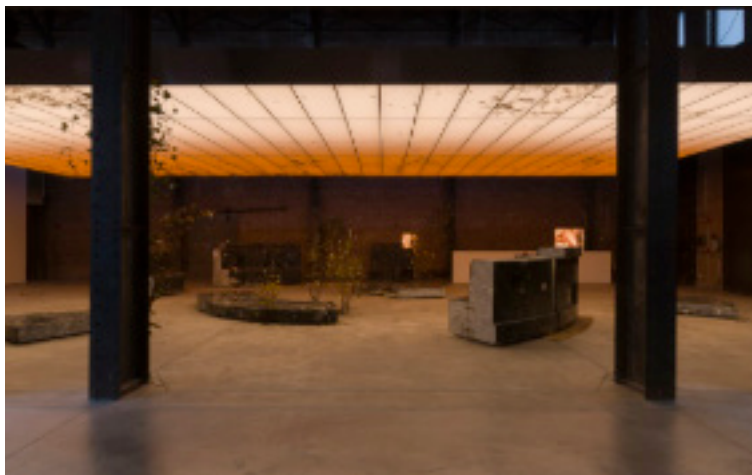
i.

On 29th October 2024 the New York Times published an article on 'one of our leading sculptors' under the headline 'A dying artist left his legacy to MoMA. Today he's almost forgotten'.¹ In 1989, in an unprecedented decision, Scott Burton (1939–89) FIG.1 bequeathed his estate to the Museum of Modern Art, New York (MoMA), in the hope, claimed Julia Halperin, 'of securing his place in art history'.² Halperin directed her in-depth story to a broad cultural readership rather than art world cognoscenti – although many of them, too, may have been unfamiliar with the artist's name. Burton's work itself, however, is probably known to many local readers, albeit unwittingly, as his public-art-as-seating has been prominently featured at Battery City Park and the Equitable Center in mid-Manhattan since the 1980s.

When Burton died from AIDS-related causes at the age of fifty, he was at the height of his career. Shortly before his death, he opened a large-scale touring retrospective in Germany, following gallery exhibitions in Cologne, New York and London; public art projects in Manhattan, Baltimore, Seattle, Liverpool and Rotterdam had generated additional civic and corporate commissions, several still in process; and a show that he curated at MoMA several months earlier, *Burton on Brancusi*, inaugurated the museum's exhibition series *Artist's Choice*.³ The fallout from the will that he signed on his deathbed was immediate: it disabled gallery representation of his sculptures and thereby destroyed his market; it precluded scholarly and critical writing on his work by closeting his archive; and it effectively confined museum presentations to collection displays. In short, by shredding his reputation and undermining his legacy it consigned him, Halperin concluded, to an art-historical footnote.

However, even as she delivered this dismissive judgment, Halperin acknowledged it was premature. Burton's fortunes had taken an unexpected turn, as she went on to detail. Progress had been made in securing gallery representation and threats to remove or alter his in situ public works were under scrutiny from a cohort of art-world professionals dedicated to their protection and conservation. In 2022 David J. Getsy's scholarly monograph devoted to Burton's queer 1970s performance work recuperated his radical, but neglected, contribution to that resurgent art form.⁴ Most recently, the first comprehensive retrospective of the artist in four decades, *Scott Burton: Shape Shift*, opened at the Pulitzer Arts Foundation, St Louis.⁵

Critical to this sea change has been the perceived relevance of Burton's aesthetic and vision in today's globalised art world. As *Shape Shift* revealed, the artist's bridging of art, design, performance and architecture was prescient. Informed by second-wave feminism, behavioural psychology and communications theory, Burton rejected categorical distinctions between art forms in pursuit of a multidisciplinary practice. Equally salient to his new-found visibility are his queer politics. Grounded in lived experience rather than ideologically driven, they honed his overtly queer performance work and, in turn, imbued his sculpture and public art in ways that speak across normative gender lines.



Installation view of Álvaro Urbano: TABLEAU VIVANT at SculptureCenter, New York, 2024–25. (Courtesy the artist and SculptureCenter, New York; photograph Charles Benton).

TABLEAU VIVANT FIG.2, an installation by the Spanish-born artist Álvaro Urbano (b.1983), which is on view at SculptureCenter, New York, vividly attests to the resonance of Burton's queer legacy for younger generations. In 1983, in response to a commission from the Equitable Life Assurance Society, Burton proposed a seating arrangement for the corporation's vast lobby designed by the celebrated architect Edward Larrabee Barnes.⁶ Befitting the client's vaunting self-image, the ornate Atrium Furnishment FIG.3 comprised a curved settee – illuminated with decorative onyx lighting – a low circular table also in sumptuous polished green marble, planters of evergreens and a floor design in granite, marble and bronze.

In TABLEAU VIVANT remnants salvaged from Atrium Furnishment, which was deinstalled and put into storage in 2020, are surrounded by steel-cast, painted plants and half-eaten apples made from concrete FIG.4. A reprise of the semiotics of social interaction that fuel Burton's 'ruin in progress', Urbano's elegiac reanimation evokes the faux-wildness and meandering pathways of the Ramble in Central Park, long a favoured site for cruising. Tellingly, TABLEAU VIVANT also invokes Furniture Landscape FIG.5, a formative installation that Burton staged at the University of Iowa in 1970, through its deft melding of public and private, nature and culture. In a densely wooded part of the campus, he installed a series of discrete 'rooms' furnished with worn vernacular objects – an armoire, desk and chair, bed and sofa patterned with vegetal motifs – and a framed landscape painting and a vase of flowers. Despite the overgrown abandon of the pastoral setting, references to Henry David Thoreau's utopian ideals were unmissable. Yet, Burton also hoped viewers would perceive affinities with Henri Rousseau's *The Dream* (1910; Museum of Modern Art, New York). In *Le Douanier's* beguiling, gendered fantasy, a female nude, reclining on a divan in a tropical rainforest, is watched over by a cohort of wild animals.



Atrium Furnishment, by Scott Burton. 1986. Semi-circular verde larissa marble bench with four onyx lights and inset brass floor element surrounding a verde larissa marble circular table with a fountain (later a planter), diameter 12.1 m. (© Estate of Scott Burton; courtesy Kasmin Gallery, New York).

Installation view of Álvaro Urbano: TABLEAU VIVANT at SculptureCenter, New York, 2024–25. (Courtesy the artist and SculptureCenter, New York; photograph Charles Benton).



Key to Urbano's installation is the suspended ceiling FIG.6, which masks the dark vault of this lofty industrial building. Constellations of small irregular forms – the silhouettes of leaves that appear to have fallen from nearby trees – interrupt the milky white surface of modular glass panes. A golden light, similar in hue to that illuminating Burton's onyx lamps from the dismembered Atrium Furnishment fragments, pans the ceiling, as though in response to the waxing and waning of natural diurnal cycles. Animating his tableau both literally and figuratively, Urbano transforms what might have been an installation that occupied the given gallery into one that makes an architectonic space. A site for reverie, for dallying and dreaming, his theatrical mise-en-scene invests visitors with a performative role.

While much has been made in the reception of Burton's work of its demotic character – 'lunch bag art', as one close friend called it – its psychic charge has been less foregrounded. Manifesting at the nexus of sensuality, artifice, stylisation and pleasure, and encapsulated in Rousseau's *The Dream* – Burton's North Star – it is distilled in individual objects, such as *Inlaid Table* (1977–78) and *Onyx Table* FIG.7. Above all, it is embodied in such environmental projects as the now destroyed *Sheepshead Bay Piers* (1994), the elements of which appear to be culled from an illustrated children's book, or *Garden Court* (1993) in Toronto, where the 'Space Age' lamps self-light at dusk (both projects were completed posthumously). Urbano's *TABLEAU VIVANT* spotlights this understudied legacy



Installation view of Álvaro Urbano: TABLEAU VIVANT at SculptureCenter, New York, 2024–25. (Courtesy the artist and SculptureCenter, New York; photograph Charles Benton).

ii.

Born in Alabama and brought up in Washington by a single mother, Burton was drawn to the visual arts as an adolescent. In his twenties he took up literary studies, graduating first from Columbia University with a Bachelor's degree and then with a Master's from New York University. He made a name for himself in the 1960s as an aspiring playwright and an art critic with a markedly independent voice.⁸ In the 1970s, even as his overtly queer performance practice was hailed in vanguard circuits, he pivoted. Transitioning from works that deployed furniture as performers, he crafted furniture–sculpture premised on situational encounters. By the 1980s he had narrowed his focus to a handful of furniture typologies. Above all of these was the chair – the most anthropological of forms within the standard repertoire. In pursuing an art of active engagement, he drew on his deep knowledge of the history of applied art. Experimenting with novel as well as traditional sculptural materials, he designed objects in a gamut of wildly divergent styles, from regional Americana to canonical modernist and more recondite precedents.

In the mid-1980s, as she began planning Burton's first major retrospective for the Baltimore Museum of Art, the curator Brenda Richardson sought the artist's close involvement.⁹ He urged her to privilege what he termed his 'democratic public art'. Convinced that his history as a gay artist would prove compromising at a time when the AIDS crisis was dominating contemporary cultural discourse, Burton insisted that Richardson omit all reference not only to his early career as a critic but also to his queer performative practice. He argued that to be considered for the prestigious civic, corporate and institutional commissions that he coveted required effacing, masking or otherwise concealing every trace of gender identity and sexual politics from his work.¹⁰

Two-Part Chair (1986), the most recent work in Richardson's exhibition, was completed too late to be photographed for the catalogue; nor was it discussed in her text. Among the other two-part granite chairs Burton made over several years, it is notable for the way in which the pair of geometric blocks depend upon each other for stability. Miming figuratively an act of sexual intercourse, their relationship does not reveal itself to all viewers, but, once seen, cannot be forgotten. In retrospect, Two-Part Chair may be identified as the most explicit work in an oeuvre in which, as Getsy persuasively argues, sculptures do not merely perform as furniture, they solicit engagement with their audiences, supporting and cradling their bodies from behind and underneath. In the escalating climate of fear, prejudice and homophobia that threatened the community with which he closely identified, Burton, who was diagnosed as HIV positive in 1983, began, Getsy contends, to probe the larger lessons implicit in that relationship. Issues involving 'power dynamics, imposition of norms, and the critique of hierarchies were the foundations', he concludes, from which Burton 'developed his ideas about art's potential to be open to all'.¹¹

In accordance with the artist's directive, Richardson's catalogue text laid the groundwork for Burton's anticipated trajectory centred on environmentally scaled public art.¹² The artist's premature death three years later abruptly cut short that vision: the exhibition, with its focus on his vanguard furniture–sculpture, came to be considered paradigmatic. Shape Shift, organised by Jess Wilcox and Heather Alexis Smith, offers a very different reading from that long-definitive formulation. In proposing a reassessment addressed to our time, the curators have shaped a compelling exhibition that refrains from foreclosing debates on Burton's multifaceted practice.

The Pulitzer Arts Foundation, designed by Tadao Ando, is renowned for its elegant, refined architecture. Its variously scaled galleries, built with exacting attention to proportion, detail and surface, complemented Burton's artful use of sensuous materials in service to precise geometries. Given the exigent parcours, the curators dispensed with a chronological hang in favour of groupings selected from a corpus of forty sculptures and seventy works on paper, the majority of which were photographs.¹³ Many of the ensembles were dedicated to one of Burton's preferred typologies; and, with few exceptions, the exhibits were mounted on low platforms. Robbed of their functionality, no longer to be touched – let alone sat upon – the furniture–sculpture was set apart from its audiences.

While conforming to today's institutional protocols, such a presentation initially seems antithetical to Burton's aspirations for a relational art that prioritises direct encounters. To meet that challenge, Wilcox and Smith mimicked a display methodology that Burton conceived when he first substituted found furniture in lieu of human bodies in his performance work. More than props, chairs, settees and tables become agents that, in structuring and vivifying the tableaux, provoke dialogue. In his masterly Pastoral Chair Tableau FIG.8, the furniture, arranged by type into a trio, a couple and a single lone member, is dispersed across a stage. The bucolic allusions are limned by a carpet of artificial grass, and a sky-blue curtain that serves as a backdrop. Animated by the meticulous spacing, amplified by the stylistic codes of the furniture's designs, a psychically charged conversation develops among the protagonists.

The opening gallery of Shape Shift succinctly established those governing terms. With Pastoral Chair Tableau as its prompt, the display initiated an affecting interaction among the miscellaneous exhibits. Foremost among them was Bronze Chair FIG.9, a cast of a beaten-up example of a style the artist described as 'Grand Rapids Queen Anne': a formerly high-end design debased by mass production and aimed at the low end of the market. Inherited from the former tenant of an apartment Burton rented, the dilapidated chair was first deployed in a performative tableau. In 1975 he installed a bronze replica on the street opposite Artists Space in downtown Manhattan, where it integrated seamlessly into the neighbourhood context: a decoy for Burton's first solo exhibition at the gallery, where Pastoral Chair Tableau was staged.

The remaining two exhibits in the entrance gallery FIG.10 expanded the discourse: Two-Part Chaise Longue (1987), svelte and low-slung in pink granite, offered the languid onlooker a perch to observe from a distance. More august, Mahogany Chair (1988) assumed the role of a poised feline guardian. The high-ceilinged principal gallery followed these display conventions, constellating individual chairs and outdoor benches around the unforgettable Onyx Table, illuminated from within by fluorescent light. With the institution's signature Ellsworth Kelly painting at its backdrop FIG.11, the ensemble captured something of Burton's antic spirit.

The heart of the exhibition was the 'bridge' gallery that links the two wings of Ando's building, where the only two works that allowed for visitor interaction were installed. Two-Part Chair was here separated by a glass wall from Rock Settee FIG.12, hunkered down in the serene courtyard beyond. Permanently sited at the edge of an infinity pool that stretches the full length of the parallel wings, Rock Settee encourages visitors to venture outdoors, to detour and dally. Their backs to the gallery, they can rest on the immutable monolith, idly watching the light play over slow flowing water – an ebb and flow of flux and stasis that with time takes on an existential tenor.

Burton sourced the monumental specimens that comprise his beloved series of rock chairs and settees FIG.13 in quarries in North America and Europe, selecting each on account of its specific material and formal qualities. The Pulitzer's fine example is one of a subgroup of 'orphaned' boulders, the profiles of which were smoothed by abrasion over millennia. Weighing thousands of pounds, it, like its peers, was abandoned – left behind by fast-moving glaciers. Its functionality depends on two sharp cuts which, in removing a wedge from the readymade object, elides all reference to anthropomorphic form.¹⁴ Arguably the most abstract of Burton's seating, imbued with a notable gravitas, the rock chairs and settees are unmarked by the sociality that, for many, is the signature feature of his art and aesthetic.¹⁵ In his transformative revision of the co-constitutive nature–culture dialectic central to Furniture Tableau and related works, Burton proposes a non-binary condition: both–and.¹⁶

Wilcox and Smith dedicated one of the two intimately scaled galleries to documentation of Burton's performance work, underscoring its relevance to today. Early examples feature the artist as performer, cross-dressing and anonymous in everyday contexts. Later works include meticulously orchestrated stagings, in which a group, a couple or a solo figure, simply dressed or naked, slowly carry out a series of predetermined gestures and poses FIG.14. Others, as discussed, evoke the eighteenth-century pictorial genre known as the conversation piece. Modest, even cursory by today's standards, this documentation included small black-and-white photographs, contact sheets, diagrams and sketches, sundry notes and rare grainy video footage. Depending heavily on discursive object labels, the works benefitted from reference to the meticulous analyses Getsy provides in his indispensable monograph.¹⁷

Importantly, Wilcox and Smith recognise the role played by artists as well as art historians in recuperating and vivifying a lost or overlooked œuvre. To this end, they commissioned works from a younger generation for presentation within the exhibition spaces. Brendan Fernandes (b.1979) and Gordon Hall (b.1983) probed Burton's legacy from different perspectives. In Fernandes's elusive glancing choreography FIG.15 FIG.16, performers infused their interactions with a tender self-consciousness redolent of a contemporary perspective. In his haunting text-based work, Hall placed the condition of waiting, with its relational dynamic, centre stage in Burton's practice. Read while seated at different vantage points across the gallery, his script addressed its subject through philosophical, anthropological and personal frames.

Burton's rich dialogue with Constantin Brâncuși (1876–1957) was centred in the second of the Pulitzer's two intimate galleries. Pedestal tables, plinths and autonomous works of art came together in an environment that one critic likened to a chapel.¹⁸ Showcasing archival material relating to Burton on Brancusi, which proved controversial when its upstart curator gave form to his singular thesis, this selection places Burton's own pedestal tables alongside two remarkable polished bronze portrait heads by the Romanian sculptor, one on a conventional support, the other installed without a base, directly on the 'ground' it shares with Burton's adjacent furniture sculpture FIG.17. Other, less direct but revealing, affinities align their practices, not least a proclivity to juxtapose unlike materials: highly polished metal and marble in the European artist's *Fish* (1926), galvanized steel with mother of pearl in the American's *Inlaid Table* (1977–78). A salute to Art Deco, a riposte to Minimalist austerity, *Inlaid Table* stands out among the many examples of the occasional tables that Burton would go on to design in a form he relished because it had become 'by [Gerrit] Rietveld's time [...] just about as far from utility as any painting'.¹⁹

Downstairs, two of the artist's more anomalous experiments – a brightly hued asymmetrical ensemble of red, blue, green and yellow cubes FIG.18 that serves as a storage cubicle, and a child's chair and table mounted somewhat unaccountably on wheels – stood apart. Their very singularity attests to the intensity of Burton's commitment to two key furniture typologies (the chair and table); and, by extension, to the fecund role self-imposed constraints played for him, in generating formal, material and technical invention.²⁰

iii.

In 1991 the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, presented an ensemble of Burton's furniture works that has come to be known, posthumously, as *The Last Tableau*. In a brief text written for the accompanying brochure Robert Rosenblum, an art historian and close friend of the artist, described the group as both 'the summa of his career' and the fulfilment of his vision.²¹ Unfinished in Burton's lifetime, the ensemble comprises two statuesque armoires ('ominous guardians') that flank a compact granite chaise longue ('a reclining female goddess') in front of which is placed a spare metal bench ('a humbled prostrate slave'). The identifications of the protagonists in this 'ritual performance' were offered by Rosenblum, who, like most of Burton's inner circle, was unaware of the artist's feverish work to complete the piece during the final months of his life.²²

With the benefit of hindsight, *The Last Tableau* suggests that, when facing imminent death, Burton radically revised the strategy he adopted at the time of Richardson's epoch-making exhibition. He now wanted future audiences to acknowledge his queer identity, stripped of the veils and subterfuges he formerly deployed to dissemble, mask and code-switch. Whether – and if so, in what terms – these autonomous works of art would align with a public practice in which such disclosures were yet to manifest remains unknown. For his part, Rosenblum refrained from speculating on how Burton's multidisciplinary practice might reconcile such questions.

By contrast, *Getsy's Queer Behavior*, based on fifteen years of study, a vast number of interviews and granular archival research, proposes an integrated reading. Cruising, defined as 'the finding of outlaw desire and mutual communication in public', provides the through-line, Getsy argues, in Burton's multidisciplinary art. Premised on the fundamental importance of Burton's study of behavioural psychology and communication studies to his work, Getsy's radical reframing contends that Burton's art was less 'about' sexual and gender issues than 'drawn from his own queer experience of body languages as both defensive camouflage and as signaling a desire for connection'.²³

The materialist arguments put forward in *Shape Shift* are of a different order. As Wilcox and Smith did not conceive their exhibition as a career-defining study that traces an evolutionary arc culminating either in a hypothetical summum or a stable vision, the absence of *The Last Tableau* from their checklist did not compromise the exhibition, however interesting it may have been to see the work contextualised within Burton's larger corpus. Rather, *Shape Shift* recognises the investments of other stakeholders in defining Burton's legacy in our time, making space for the contributors of artists and art historians in a shared endeavour. Positioning itself as but one discursive form among others, it is relieved of the burden of providing definitive conclusions.

Also on the checklist were ‘tangential’ exhibits: ancillary items that helped build context. An abstract painting by Tony Smith, which the artist gave to Burton-the-critic in the 1960s – and which Burton eventually donated to the Baltimore Museum of Art – is a prime example. Smith is the subject of one of Burton’s finest and most impassioned essays, a text that elucidates much about his own ambivalence towards Minimalist art. The printed textile Burton designed for limited edition production by the Philadelphia-based Fabric Workshop is similarly peripheral, but informative. Its pattern, a mullioned window frame giving onto blue sky that pays homage to Duchamp, re-engages a long-standing dialogue with the readymade. Fully in accord with Burton’s maverick spirit, at once incisive and speculative, Shape Shift offers a suggestive model of exhibition-making at a time when axioms, definitive statements and fixed categories no longer serve.