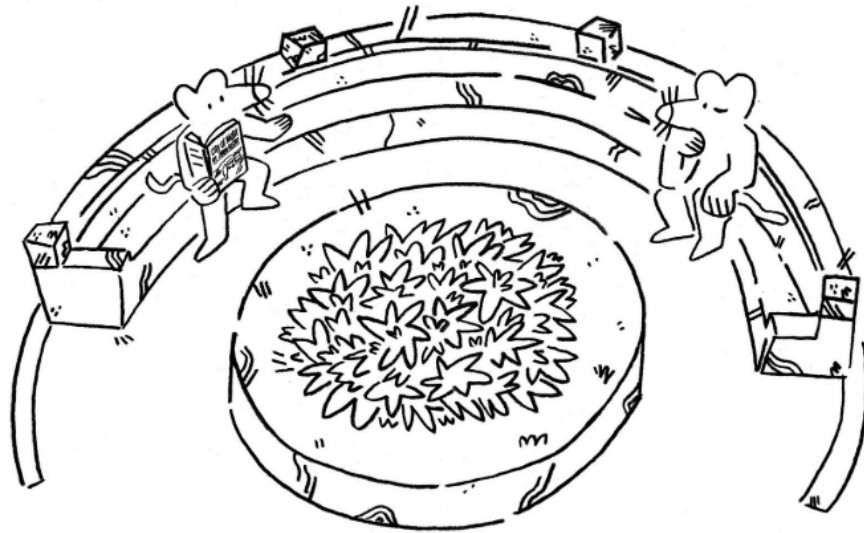


# NEW YORK REVIEW OF ARCHITECTURE

## Marmoreal Service

At SculptureCenter, a furtive piece of POPs art lies in ruins.

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In 1985, the insurance giant Equitable Life expanded its portfolio from the business of death to that other inevitable enterprise, New York real estate—spinning off a subsidiary that used Equitable’s \$20 billion worth of property, including a pharaonic postmodern headquarters by Edward Larrabee Barnes, still under construction, as a springboard to becoming the United States’ largest investor in property assets for pension funds. Decorating the lobby of these Seventh Avenue digs, along with wallfillers by Roy Lichtenstein, Sol LeWitt, and Thomas Hart Benton, was a furtive piece of POPS art by postminimalist phenom Scott Burton. For thirty-five years, the sittable sculpture provided Equitable’s actuaries and underwriters some forty feet of cold comfort in the form of a bow-shaped bench of verde antique marble. From this adamantine perch these company men might have gazed contemplatively upon the work’s circular centerpiece (initially a fountain, later a jardiniere) made from the same polished stone, the ensemble partially rimmed by a sickle of coniferous plantings and arranged to recall a clock marking the workaday passage from nine to five.

When Burton passed away in 1989, he was at the height of his career—a market and museum darling. To this day, he remains the only artist in history to leave his estate to MoMA. The bequest has not served Burton’s legacy. Executed in haste as Burton was dying of AIDS, his gift to the museum entangled his already hard-to-digest oeuvre—editioned sculptures, public commissions, performances, videos—in a legal morass. Marked for demolition during a renovation of the Equitable Tower (now the Axa Equitable Center) lobby in 2020, Atrium Furnishment was salvaged in the nick of time by corporate curator Jeremy Johnston. Today, half of the disassembled sculpture languishes in non-climate-controlled storage, awaiting a permanent institutional home.

The other half is currently on view at SculptureCenter in Long Island City, where, in keeping with Johnston’s preservationist mission, artist Alvaro Urbano presents Burton’s marmoreal fragments as a “ruin in process.” Titled *Tableau Vivant*, Urbano’s exhibition is an indoor memorial garden complete with a modulating overhead light installation and trompe l’oeil re-creations of flora found in Central Park. There is grief and urgency in the air, but the place is perfumed with beauty. The show notes explain that Burton’s deconstructed banquette is in danger of being permanently destroyed. The perma-golden hour contrived by Urbano casts a wistful tone over the assemblage; under these favorable conditions, or manipulations, it’s hard not to take umbrage at the idea that anyone would allow this to disappear.

Blooming magnolias and twisted morning glory vines, painstakingly hand-painted, are nearly camouflaged by the shadow of Burton’s handsome remnants. To the nonbotanist (or reluctant wall-label reader), the cultural meaning of these flora might go overlooked, though a facsimile of a 1988 edition of John Rechy’s *City of Night* (1963) resting on one of the benches offers a clue. Among the locales of Rechy’s foundational queer novel is the Ramble, that purposefully feral corner of Central Park whose boscage has shielded generations of lovers from policing eyes. The sculpture’s broken-clock silhouette lends itself to metaphors about a life cut short. The bitten and deserted apples strewn on the gallery floor seem to be reminders of the epidemic that severed the city’s late avant-garde branches.

There are earlier, more provocative works that deal with the maladministration of cultural legacies, like artist Jill Magid’s proposal to exchange a diamond ring—composed of the late architect Luis Barragán’s compressed remains—for his archive, which the owner of the Swiss furniture manufacturer Vitra bought as an engagement gift for his wife. But Urbano gives *Tableau Vivant* life by entwining the corporate copse of Atrium Furnishment with Central Park’s immortal cruising ground, widening the imaginative landscape of Burton’s reception and coupling a cry for preservation with a question about where cultivation should end and wildness should begin.