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Pulitzer Presents the First Comprehensive Retrospective of the Art of Scott Burton in U.S.

Scott Burton: Shape Shift | Sept 6, 2024 – Feb 2, 2025

ST. LOUIS, MO, July 9, 2024 — This fall the Pulitzer Arts Foundation examines the legacy of Scott Burton (1939–1989), an American original whose wide-ranging practice anticipated many of the strategies of today’s art.

As the most comprehensive exhibition of Burton’s work ever mounted in the United States, *Scott Burton: Shape Shift* underscores the breadth of the artist’s vision. By the time of his death at the age of 50 from an AIDS-related illness, Burton had functioned as sculptor, public artist, performance artist, choreographer, art critic, and exhibition curator.

The survey spans Burton’s career, featuring nearly 40 sculptures, more than 70 photographs, drawings, and ephemera, and the only known extant video of the artist’s performance work. Almost all of the archival photographs, diagrams, drawings, and ephemera are generously on loan from the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) Archives, which maintains the Scott Burton Papers, its largest single-artist holding.



Scott Burton, Installation view of *Furniture Landscape*, July 31, 1970

“During Scott Burton’s lifetime, the intentionality behind his expansive practice and the connecting thread of gay identity in his work were infrequently discussed. And, nowadays, many know him only from his public art,” says Cara Starke, executive director, Pulitzer Arts Foundation. “We aim to present a fuller picture of an artist who developed an original and ever-more-relevant body of artwork over the course of a career that hardly lasted more than 20 years.”

The exhibition is organized by independent curator Jess Wilcox, with Heather Alexis Smith, Assistant Curator, Pulitzer Arts Foundation. “The making of *Shape Shift* has been an exciting process of historical

recovery. We've been able to unpack aspects of Burton's work that are still too little known because of the relative anonymity of his public sculpture," says Wilcox.

She concludes, "We hope the exhibition illustrates that Burton's early performance works are key to understanding the democratic thrust behind the social spaces he created in his public environments."

Setting the Stage

As the visitor enters the Pulitzer, they encounter *Bronze Chair* (1972/75), a Queen Anne-style armchair the artist found in an apartment left by a past tenant, cast in bronze, and left out on a street in Soho in 1975 in one of his first performances. The work is stationed nearby *Two-Part Chair* (1986/2002), a pair of granite polygon slabs sitting one atop the other so that balance depends on mutual support. Although highly abstract, when viewed in profile the sculpture loosely resembles two bodies in a sexual embrace.

Burton's anthropomorphizing of furniture was linked to his study of proxemics, the inquiry into the relational systems and nonverbal cues inherent in social spaces. As he once said, "You could say that people are like furniture. They take different poses and suggest different genders." In *Shape Shift*, this dictum is illuminated in an array of furniture forms, each conveying a distinct character and connotation through material, surface finish, volume, and stylistic lineage.

For Burton, the placement of furniture could also encourage interpretations related to the choreography of everyday life. On the museum's main level a grouping of six chairs is installed to evoke his ideas of community (three steel chairs 1978-1985); intimacy (two curved steel chairs from 1989, installed face-to-face); and exclusion (a minimalist distillation of the wire bistro chair created in the late '80s).



Scott Burton, *Bronze Chair*, 1972



Scott Burton, *Bronze Chair (Street Furniture)* installed outside Artist's Space, Wooster Street, December 1975



Scott Burton, *Rock Settee*, 1988-1990

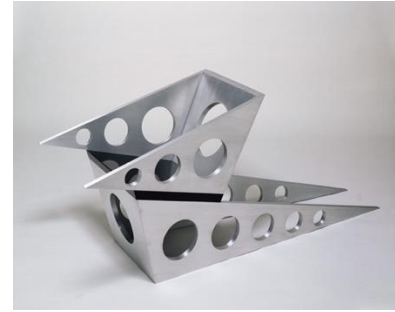
Burton was a master of formal invention as well, as can be seen in a low horizontal sculpture entitled *Two-Part Chaise Longue* (1986-87). Here, four planes of pink Rosa Baveno granite are engineered into stable seating simply by being stacked into inverted V-shapes.

In the interior courtyard adjacent the reflecting pool is one of the inspirations for *Shape Shift*, *Rock Settee* (1988-90), a five-ton granite sculpture that from one side looks like a displaced boulder, but from another reveals a wide seat cut into the solid stone. Visitors to the Pulitzer regularly sit on and enjoy the piece, which is a highlight of the museum's permanent collection.

“As both a sculpture and utilitarian object, *Rock Settee* can be considered a chair camouflaged as a boulder. The idea of simultaneous doubling and concealment—making work that both has multiple meanings, some of which fly under the radar—is, I believe, a central feature of Burton’s work,” says Wilcox.

Odes to the Vernacular

Evidence of Burton’s enduring love for the American vernacular runs throughout *Shape Shift*. In several examples, Burton pays homage to furniture in the Adirondack style while also challenging its function. The most abstract experiments are *Aluminum Chair* (1980-1981), constructed from triangular aluminum plates punctured by large circular apertures and the ash *Slat Chair* (1985-1986). In another grouping, a twig side table cast in bronze (1978) is flanked by a pine Adirondack lawn chair (1976-77) and another Adirondack chair the artist fabricated in Formica, the material’s dark-colored joints emphasizing the chair’s form. The sculptures are accompanied by photographs drawn from Burton’s collection showing variations on the style.



Scott Burton, *Aluminum Chair*, 1980-81

Still another extension of the formal possibilities of an American vernacular icon may be seen in *Onyx Table* (1978-1981), a Parsons-style table so massive and heavy that it morphs from a piece of furniture into a work of art. At once opulent in its fine surface and luminosity and humorous in its mixed functionality, it anticipates the materiality and approach of later public works.

Burton on Brâncuși

In the Pulitzer’s small high-ceilinged Cube Gallery, four of Burton’s pedestal and table forms are juxtaposed with Constantin Brâncuși’s *Mademoiselle Pogany III* (1933) and *Sleeping Muse* (1926). Also here are installation shots of *Artist’s Choice: Burton on Brâncuși* (1989), the first exhibition in MoMA’s signature “Artist’s Choice” series, which generated controversy because Burton displayed some of the Romanian sculptor’s pedestals without sculptures, as objects in themselves worthy of appreciation.



Scott Burton, *Café Table*, 1984-1985

Burton’s sculptures show him re-imagining the design typology of the pedestal as both abstract form and table. Among these are *Café Table* (1984/85), which stacks two heavy, chunks of granite—a pyramid and cube—one on top of the other, with the tabletop formed by the base of the inverted pyramid, and *Inlaid Table* (“*Mother of Pearl Table*”) (1977/78), a steel pedestal inlaid with tiny, mother-of-pearl tesserae creating the illusion of legs. Burton seems to be playing with doubleness here: first by rejecting the typical feature of a table (legs) and then by restoring them via *trompe l’oeil*.

Stage as Tableau

Scott Burton: Shape Shift features an array of little- or never-before-seen video, photographs, Polaroids, sketches, notes, and a poster related to Burton's proscenium performances. These include an oak table found and altered by Burton and repurposed as a performance prop; sketches that diagram movement, directions, and timing for performances; and *Individual Behavior Tableaux* (1980), the only known video of Burton's performance oeuvre, which documents the artist's last performance before he turned to furniture/object making full-time. Shot at the Berkeley Art Museum, the video is a glacially slow enactment of a variety of gestures, poses, and behaviors. The poses stem not only from Burton's study of nonverbal communication, but also allude to the bodily cues that signal sexual availability within gay cruising culture.



Scott Burton, *Section III. Sexual Presentations [alternating aggressive and passive]*, 1980

Wall displays feature documentation of performances, including a series of actions Burton performed as part of the *Street Works IV* exhibition in New York City in 1969, and a site-specific installation in 1970 at the University of Iowa where he brought pieces of furniture outdoors. Staging furniture in the natural environment seems to have been a way for the artist to interrogate the binaries of figure and ground and indoors and outside.

Inside and Out

Scott Burton: Shape Shift transitions between private and public in a number of lesser-known works. The diminutive *Child's Table and Chair* (1978) could be an example of a Bauhaus playroom set, were its stretchers and splats not painted in red, blue, and yellow by the artist. In a nod to Minimalism and the absurd, *Spattered Table* (1974-1977) is a simple wooden table that Burton found, splattered with



Scott Burton, *Five-Part Storage Cubes*, 1982

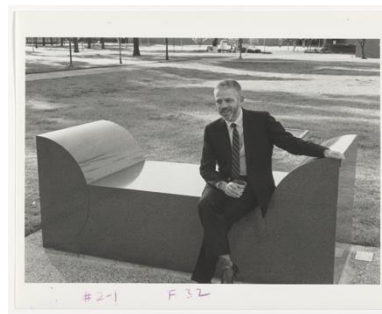
primary colors, and exhibited atop a large horizontal pedestal. The museum will recreate the installation. In this elevated position, the visitor will be able to glimpse the table's white underbelly, which playfully contrasts with its Abstract Expressionist-inspired outer surfaces.

One of the highlights of the exhibition is the spectacularly extroverted *Five-Part Storage Cubes* (1982), a stack of large red, orange, blue, and green cubes perched atop a yellow cube pedestal. One of the cube doors will be left open, inviting a second reading of the work as a site of dual activity—looking inward as well as outward.

Critic, Collector & Public Artist

The breadth and wealth of Scott Burton's aesthetic influences coalesce in a presentation of his art criticism and with art and furniture that he collected. Featured in this gallery are a large-scale abstract painting by Tony Smith, the focus of Burton's first substantial published art criticism, and a portrait of Burton by John Button. Both works hung in the artist's home. Also on view is a small selection of the furniture editions Burton collected and lived with, including Gerrit Rietveld's *Zig Zag Chair* and a coffee table by Sol LeWitt.

Burton developed a new kind of public art that embodied conventional sculpture, furniture design, and performance. For the artist, it became a moral obligation to remove art from galleries and museums, where it might only be encountered by elite audiences. He believed that art should be present in public spaces and should have some kind of social function, responding to the needs of everyday people. The spatial combinations of tables, seating, and lighting reflect Burton's careful attention to pedestrian behavior. In addition to preparatory drawings and three maquettes, this gallery presents an ongoing slideshow of his public art installations, including major works on the grounds of the Des Moines Art Center, Princeton University, the University of Houston, and the Waterfront Plaza at Battery Park City.



Scott Burton sitting on a granite bench at the University of Houston, College of Architecture and Design Building, ca. 1986

Performances and Special Events at Pulitzer

Brendan Fernandes (b. 1979), the Chicago-based, Kenya-born artist, will respond to *Scott Burton: Shape Shift* by choreographing a series of duets engaging with Burton's furniture sculptures and drawing on gestures and signaling within gay cruising culture. Curtains and props created in collaboration with The Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia will be activated by the dancers. (Saturday, September 7, 2024; Friday and Saturday, November 8 & 9, 2024; and Friday and Saturday, January 17 & 18, 2025)

Gordon Hall (b. 1983), the New York-based founder of the Center for Experimental Lectures, will present *1 – 2 pm*, a piece situated somewhere between an academic lecture and a dance. The work will explore Burton's intentions through the concept of waiting and use Burton's sculptures and the architecture and light of the Pulitzer's Tadao Ando building as a stage for movement and text. (Saturday, October 19, 2024)

Public programs will also include a talk by art historian David J. Getsy, author of *Queer Behavior: Scott Burton and Performance Art* (University of Chicago Press, 2022). (Wednesday, November 20, 2024)

Exhibition Tour

Following its presentation at the Pulitzer, in the fall of 2025 *Scott Burton: Shape Shift* will open at Wrightwood 659 in Chicago, a private exhibition space founded in 2018 and designed by Tadao Ando.

Publication

An exhibition catalogue, set to be released summer 2025, will feature essays by David J. Getsy and Jess Wilcox, writing by the artists Brendan Fernandes and Gordon Hall, contributions by Jeremy Johnston and Heather Alexis Smith, and a never-before-published excerpt from the transcript of a 1988 lecture by Burton, co-published by Alphawood Exhibitions.

The Artist

Having once described his art as “sculpture in love with furniture,” Scott Burton is remembered as an artist, critic, and curator. He was born in 1939 in Greensboro, Alabama, spent his formative years in Washington, DC, and received a B.A. degree from Columbia University (1962) and an M.F.A. from New York University (1963). His critical writing appeared regularly in *ARTnews* and *Art in America* and in exhibition catalogues, including that for Harald Szeeman’s landmark Post minimalist exhibition, *Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form* (1969). By the early 1970s, Burton was exhibiting in New York City, first with like-minded artists on the street, then in galleries and museums including the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Guggenheim, P.S. 1, and, in a solo exhibition, Artists Space. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Burton created an array of performances, furniture as sculpture, and public art environments that were inspired by his studies of body language, art history, and design. He also curated the inaugural exhibition in the Museum of Modern Art’s now-lauded Artist’s Choice series. Burton died of an AIDS-related illness in 1989. His work is in dozens of collections, including the Art Institute of Chicago, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Museum of Modern Art, National Gallery of Art, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Princeton University Art Museum, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Tate, and the Walker Art Center.

External Programming Engaging with Scott Burton

The Pulitzer Arts Foundation is pleased to share news of other institutional engagements with the legacy of Scott Burton in the coming year, with particular attention paid to contemporary artists’ perspectives on Burton’s work. From September 19, 2024, to March 24, 2025, SculptureCenter in Long Island City, New York, presents *Álvaro Urbano*. The exhibition, Urbano’s latest solo exhibition, features the artist’s choreographed sculptural interpretation of a rescued public artwork by Scott Burton.

About the Pulitzer Arts Foundation

The Pulitzer Arts Foundation is an art museum devoted to presenting the art of today and works from the past within a global context. Located in the heart of St. Louis for more than 20 years, its home is an architectural landmark designed by celebrated architect Tadao Ando. Open and free to all, the Pulitzer is a cultural and civic asset to the St. Louis community and a popular destination for visitors from around the world.

The Pulitzer campus is located in the Grand Center Arts District of St. Louis, Missouri, and includes the museum, the Park-Like garden, a tree grove, and the Spring Church. The museum is open Thursday through Sunday, 10am–5pm, with evening hours until 8pm on Friday. Admission is free. For more information, visit pulitzerarts.org.

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Also on view in St. Louis this fall:

Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis

Great Rivers Biennial 2024: Saj Issa, Basil Kincaid, Ronald Young

Shinichi Sawada: Agents of Clay

Ad Minoliti: manifestación pluriversal

Charles Atlas: Painting By Numbers

All exhibitions on view September 6, 2024–February 9, 2025

Laumeier Sculpture Park

Monika Weiss: Metamorphosis (Sound Sculpture), August 24–December 15, 2024

Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum

Design Agendas: Modern Architecture in St. Louis, 1930s–1970s, September 13, 2024–January 6, 2025

Saint Louis Art Museum

The Work of Art: The Federal Art Project, 1935–1943, August 2, 2024–April 13, 2025

Narrative Wisdom and African Arts, October 19, 2024–winter 2025

Currents 124: Crystal Z Campbell, October 25, 2024–March 9, 2025

Bolts of Color: Printed Textiles after WWII, November 8, 2024–April 20, 2025

Image Captions

Scott Burton, Installation view of *Furniture Landscape*, July 31, 1970. Scott Burton Papers, V.48, 8 1/16 × 10 inches (20.5 × 25.4 cm). The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York

Scott Burton, *Bronze Chair*, 1972. Bronze, 48 x 18 x 20 inches (121.9 x 45.7 x 50.8 cm). © 2024 Estate of Scott Burton/ Artist Rights Society (ARS), NY. Photo Credit: The Art Institute of Chicago / Art Resource, NY. Gift of Lannan Foundation. 1997.136

Scott Burton, *Bronze Chair (Street Furniture)* installed at Artist's Space, Wooster Street, December 1975; Scott Burton, 1975, 6 5/8 × 10 inches (16.8 × 25.4 cm). Scott Burton Papers, V.35. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY

Scott Burton, *Rock Settee*, 1988-1990. Granite, 35 1/2 x 106 x 62 1/2 inches. © Estate of Scott Burton / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photograph by Robert Pettus

Scott Burton, *Aluminum Chair*, 1980-81. Aluminum, lacquer, 30 × 23 1/2 × 70 inches (76.2 × 59.7 × 177.8 cm). © 2024 Estate of Scott Burton/ Artist Rights Society (ARS), NY. Photo Credit: The Art Institute of Chicago / Art Resource, NY. Gift of the Lannan Foundation

Scott Burton, *Café Table*, 1984-1985. Verde Fontaine granite, 28 × 22 × 22 inches (71.1 × 55.9 × 55.9 cm). Philadelphia Museum of Art: Promised gift of Keith L. and Katherine Sachs, Promised Gift-752. © Estate of Scott Burton / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / DACS, London

Scott Burton, *Section III. Sexual Presentations [alternating aggressive and passive]*, 1980. Gelatin silver print, 7/8 x 1 7/16 inches (2.2 x 3.6 cm). Scott Burton Papers, II.87. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York. © 2024 Estate of Scott Burton/ Artist Rights Society (ARS), NY. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY

Scott Burton, *Five-Part Storage Cubes*, 1982. Painted wood, 53 x 57 x 43 1/2 inches (134.6 x 144.8 x 110.5 cm). Number 1 from the edition of 2. © 2024 Estate of Scott Burton/ Artist Rights Society (ARS), NY. © 2022 Phillips Auctioneers LLC. All Rights reserved, Collection of Ugo Rondinone

Scott Burton sitting on a granite bench at the University of Houston, College of Architecture and Design Building, ca. 1986. Gelatin silver print, 8 × 10 inches (20.3 × 25.4 cm). Scott Burton Papers, V.37. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York. Photo: Jonathan E. Jareb. The Museum of Modern Art/New York, NY/U.S.A. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY