

Scott Burton: Shape Shift

For nearly three decades, American artist Scott Burton shape-shifted between the roles of conceptual artist, performance artist, public sculptor, critic, and curator. Working both inside and outside of the major arts institutions of his day, he created a unique body of work that considered the social nature of spatial relationships among people and objects. This career-spanning exhibition sheds light on Burton's major contributions to new developments in twentieth-century art. His life was cut short at the height of his career when he died of AIDS-related complications in 1989. *Scott Burton: Shape Shift* seeks to uphold his legacy as a committed advocate of accessible, conceptual, and functional art forms that serve people of all types.

Burton was born in 1939 in Greensboro, Alabama, and moved to Washington, DC, as a child. He studied painting as a teenager but earned degrees in literature and focused on writing early in his career. By the mid-1960s, he was a regular contributor to *ARTnews*, and between 1974 and 1976 he was on the editorial board of *Art in America*.

In the late 1960s, Burton began making art professionally. He is best known for the works he described as “sculpture in love with furniture”—tables and chairs that subtly vary from the norm, changing how we perceive or interact with them. By taking these common objects as his subject matter, he sought to make work that everyone could approach and relate to.

Chairs were especially important to Burton because of how they formally resemble the human body and can suggest different relationships, ages, classes, or genders through their design and materials.

Burton also created performances in the late 1960s and 1970s. He used both people and furniture to explore a variety of social dynamics, including interpersonal and group relationships, as well as how spatial and material environments shape people's actions and demeanor. Burton's work was partially informed by his experience as a gay man living in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. He frequently referenced the coded signals that members of queer communities used to communicate with one another while evading broader scrutiny. The artist sought to bring queer imagery into museum galleries and out into the public realm, often with subversive undertones.

By the 1980s, Burton had begun creating what he called "public art environments." His outdoor furniture and landscaping designed for parks, courtyards, and busy streetsides, offered people spaces to rest, regenerate, and socialize. Burton embraced the anonymity this afforded, saying, "I want the work to have some meaning to people who never heard of me, and who are not necessarily museumgoers at all."

This exhibition is organized by Jess Wilcox, Independent Curator, with Heather Alexis Smith, Assistant Curator, Pulitzer Arts Foundation.

Unless otherwise stated, all works were made by Scott Burton.



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Burton's Chairs

Scott Burton: Shape Shift

Burton made dozens of unique chair designs in the 1970s and 1980s. He was drawn to how chairs both support and evoke the body: chairs and humans both have arms, legs, backs, seats, and feet. Through form, design, and material, chairs may also suggest different ages, economic classes, or social conditions. Burton said, "You could say that people are like furniture. They take different poses and suggest different genders."

This gallery includes chairs that Burton made in his favored materials of metal, wood, and stone. Some might resemble the ones in your own home, while others were created for outdoor spaces. You'll also see several performances Burton did with chairs, using them to evoke relationships and subvert our expectations of furniture.

1. ***Bronze Chair***, 1972 (cast 1975)
Bronze
The Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of Lannan Foundation

Bronze Chair was Burton's first sculpture. The artist described it as both a portrait of and a memorial to the previous tenant of his apartment, who left an old wooden chair behind. Burton was captivated by the chair's signs of its former owner: a buckled seat, chipped surfaces, and uneven legs. He explored the relationship between the chair and the human body, at first using it in performances. In 1975, he cast it in bronze, preserving the chair's utility while transforming it into a sculpture.

When Burton first exhibited *Bronze Chair* in 1975, he placed it outside on the street, across from the entrance to his accompanying gallery show (#2). Opportunistic pedestrians, who thought it was being given away, were puzzled by its heaviness when they tried to take it home. Others paid it no attention. Burton was delighted that this work had become both "an image of a chair" and "also a chair." These conflicting qualities allowed it to stand out from and blend into the urban environment.

2. ***Bronze Chair (Street Furniture)*** installed at **Artists Space, Wooster Street**, 1975
Photographic reproduction
Scott Burton Papers, V.35. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York

3. **Two-Part Chaise Longue**, 1986–87
Rosa Baveno granite
Philadelphia Museum of Art, Promised Gift
of Keith L. and Katherine Sachs

Two-Part Chaise Longue looks both abstract and remarkably human. Composed of triangular forms, it resembles a person seated on the ground, knees at an angle, hands propped behind. Burton made many versions of the chaise longue (French for “long chair”). He was fascinated by its frequent appearance in Western painting and sculpture—often as a support for the reclining female nude and with connotations of luxury, leisure, and eroticism. Although the chaise is typically an indoor furnishing topped with soft cushions, here Burton used pink granite. This decision complicates our notions of comfort while also allowing the chaise to be used outdoors.

4. **Mahogany Chair**, 1988
Ebonized mahogany
Courtesy of Lisson Gallery

5. **Pastoral Chair Tableau**, 1975
Color transparency reproduction
Scott Burton Papers, II.78. The Museum
of Modern Art Archives, New York

Pastoral Chair Tableau, pictured here, highlights one of Burton’s unique approaches to performance. He used furniture as performers instead of humans to point out the complexities of social spaces and relationships. At left, a pair of chairs sits so closely that their legs almost touch. At right, three chairs are arranged in a shallow semicircle. A solo chair at center is excluded by the others. It turns longingly toward the pair. Burton related these groupings to social conditions: being part of a group, part of a couple, or alone.

Pastoral Chair Tableau also reveals Burton’s interest in landscape, predicting his creation of seating for outdoor public spaces in the 1980s: he placed the chairs on a faux grass stage and in front of a sky-like blue curtain.

6. **Healing Chair (prototype)**, ca. 1989
Steel
Collection of Eduardo Costa

Healing Chair (prototype) was Burton’s final design. With two shallow shelves for a seat and a narrow strip of steel for its back, this work was made not for comfort but for therapeutic purposes. Burton sought a range of medical treatments as he faced the then-terminal diagnosis of HIV/AIDS. He explored the Alexander Technique, whose advocates believe that chronic pain and illness can be relieved through proper posture. Indeed, *Healing Chair* requires a perfect alignment of the body against the steel plank, or else the sitter will fall. Although it was never mass-produced as Burton had hoped, it is a poignant reminder of furniture’s potential for care and support.

7. **Two-Part Chair**, 1986 (designed 1983)
Granite
Robert T. Webb Sculpture Garden at The
Creative Arts Guild, Dalton, Georgia

Two-Part Chair is a feat of engineering. Its geometric blocks mutually support one another, bound together through form and gravity. At first glance, the sculpture appears abstract. But when viewed from the side, the two shapes seem to resemble a pair of bodies in a sexual embrace. Praised by art historians and critics as a symbol of gay love, *Two-Part Chair* is one of Burton’s most explicitly queer designs. Made against the backdrop of the growing HIV/AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 1990s, which disproportionately affected gay men, this sculpture illustrates how Burton used his work to covertly celebrate queer union in public spaces, despite stigma and prejudice.

8. **Rock Settee**, 1988–90
Granite
Pulitzer Arts Foundation

Viewed from the back, *Rock Settee* appears to be a massive boulder. As you get closer, it reveals itself as a bench. Weighing around 10,000 pounds, *Rock Settee* is among the largest stone works Burton made.

The artist started designing seating out of carefully chosen boulders in 1979. He favored rock for its durability, which made it ideal for outdoor public spaces. Burton also admired the material’s variety of colors and textures, which could resemble upholstery fabric. He relished the “implied confusion between the indoors and out-of-doors, taking the natural and making it artificial or vice versa.” The wedge cutout for the seat draws attention to the contrast between the smooth manmade surface and the ruggedness of the natural stone.

9. **Two-Part Chaise (Enlarged Version)**, 1989
Rosso Granchio granite
Collection of Max Protetch

This object is located in the Pulitzer’s outdoor courtyard.

Furniture Sculpture

Scott Burton: Shape Shift

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Burton created a range of “furniture sculpture” in wood, metal, and stone. Starting with familiar fixtures like tables and chairs, the artist introduced formal shifts and unexpected materials, blurring the boundaries between artwork and functional objects. These strategies demonstrated Burton’s passionate belief that art should “place itself not in front of but around, behind, underneath (literally) the audience.”

This gallery features several works created with outdoor use in mind, underscoring Burton’s commitment to uniting art and the public sphere. Destined for cafés, courtyards, and busy streetsides, Burton’s “furniture sculpture” became sites for activities like resting, waiting, socializing, and lunching. Their arrangements—alone, in pairs, or in groupings—also allowed people to occupy a variety of conditions and relationships such as isolation, seclusion, intimacy, distance, and community.

10-11. *Two-Curve Chairs*, 1989

Lacquered hot-rolled steel
Collection of Linda and George Kurz,
Cincinnati, OH

12. *Café Chair*, designed 1987, fabricated 1989

Stainless steel
Collection of Weisman Art Museum at
the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis.
Gift of Mike and Penny Winton

**13-14. *Steel Furniture: Chair (prototype)*
and *Steel Furniture: Chair*, 1979-85**

Corten steel
Courtesy of Lisson Gallery

Burton liked steel because it can be used both indoors and outdoors and offers a variety of finishes. In #15, Burton added lacquer over hot-rolled steel. This sealed the metal to prevent it from rusting and imparted a flat, matte texture to the surface. He made #13-14 from Corten, a special kind of steel that seals as it weathers. It oxidizes after being exposed to the elements, forming a rich brownish-red hue. Burton made tables, stools, and benches to match these chairs—one of the few times when he crafted a furniture set.

For another example of Corten, see Richard Serra’s Joe, on view in the Pulitzer’s outdoor courtyard.

15. *Steel Furniture: Chair*, 1978

Lacquered steel
Collection of Linda and George Kurz,
Cincinnati, OH

16. *Slat Chair*, 1985–86

Ash, lacquered
Collection of Linda and George Kurz,
Cincinnati, OH

17. *Aluminum Chair*, 1980–81

Aluminum, lacquer
The Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of
Lannan Foundation

With its sharp profile, sleek polish, and hole-punched surface, #17 resembles a futuristic Adirondack chair. An iconic fixture on suburban lawns and rural porches since the early twentieth century, the Adirondack chair was one of Burton's most important furniture muses. He referenced its signature design elements—a slanted back and seat, elongated arms and legs—in multiple sculptures. Here, Burton modernized the rustic, wooden Adirondack chair, using perforated aluminum to evoke industrial machinery and aerodynamics.

18. *Onyx Table*, 1978–81

Onyx marble, steel, and fluorescent lights
The Museum of Modern Art, New York.
Scott Burton Fund, 2000

Onyx Table emits a warm glow. It is made of polished stone, sliced thin and lit from the interior with orange and pink fluorescent bulbs. Burton appreciated what he called the “primeval chaos” of the material, with its colorful veins, bands, and gradients. He intentionally made the legs wide and blocky, partly to make space for the light bulbs, but also to prevent the table from feeling too precious. Burton said “I wanted to make sure that it was forthright and substantial; assertive rather than frail or discreet.”

19. *Perforated Metal Settee and Perforated Metal Chairs*, 1988–89

Aluminum
The Museum of Modern Art, New York.
Scott Burton Fund, 2000

One of Burton's favorite challenges was to make seating from a single piece of material. In these works, the artist used a sheet of aluminum to achieve a streamlined design with an airy, weightless effect. The many perforations also solve a potential problem: if used outside, rainwater will not collect in the seat. When Burton designed the *Perforated Metal Settee and Perforated Metal Chairs*, he had been making public art for nearly a decade. He considered not only aesthetics but also practicality, including the furniture's ability to withstand bad weather.

Burton on Brancusi

Scott Burton: Shape Shift

In addition to artist and critic, Burton occasionally worked as a curator. In 1989, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York invited Burton to organize an exhibition from their collection. He chose Romanian sculptor Constantin Brancusi (1876–1957) as his subject, calling the exhibition “Burton on Brancusi.” Burton had admired the elder artist’s work for decades. He often referenced Brancusi’s refined geometric shapes, method of stacking and flipping forms, and favored materials—wood, stone, and polished metal—in his own “furniture sculpture.”

This gallery includes work by both Burton and Brancusi. Also on view are photographs of “Burton on Brancusi,” as well as Burton’s writings about the artist and the exhibition, which you can read using the QR codes below.



“Burton on Brancusi”
digitized exhibition
pamphlet



Burton's “My
Brancusi” article in
Art in America

20. **“My Brancusi” spread in *Art in America***,
March 1990
Pulitzer Arts Foundation

Burton outlined his opinions and observations about Brancusi in the exhibition pamphlet for “Burton on Brancusi” (#21). He expanded his argument into a feature-length article in *Art in America*, which was published posthumously in March 1990 (#20). To read Burton’s writing about Brancusi in his own words, use the QR code at left.

21. **“Burton on Brancusi” exhibition pamphlet**,
1989
Pulitzer Arts Foundation

22. **Photographs by Mali Olatunji
and Kate Keller**
**Four installation views of “Artist’s Choice:
Burton on Brancusi,” 1989**
Gelatin silver prints
Scott Burton Papers, V.41. The Museum of
Modern Art Archives, New York

These photographs capture the “Burton on Brancusi” exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Burton used his status as an artist to overturn curatorial conventions of the time. He designed a table-style pedestal for two works at the exhibition’s entrance in the form of a Parsons table, a modernist type with legs and top of equal width. His most provocative claim centered on the wood and stone pedestals that elevated Brancusi’s bronzes: Burton argued that these elements are not only

functional but are also sculptures of pedestals and should be appreciated as such. To underline this claim, Burton boldly installed a Brancusi pedestal alone, without the sculpture on top, and placed a bronze directly on the ground, without a base. Criticized by some and praised by others, “Burton on Brancusi” made an impact. It was one of Burton’s final projects and became the first in an ongoing series of artist-curated exhibitions at MoMA.

23. *Mahogany Pedestal Table*, 1982

Mahogany
Collection Walker Art Center, Minneapolis;
Gift of Barbara and Siah Armajani, 2001

Burton was fascinated by the idea of the pedestal—a piece of furniture that mainly exists to display something else. He made several “pedestal tables,” including #23. Burton stacked horizontal layers of dark wood veneer at the base and elongated the table’s profile with four tall legs. Its tiered top flares outward, ready to showcase whatever is placed on it.

24. *Tripod Table*, 1984

Plywood, stained
Collection of Linda and George Kurz,
Cincinnati, OH

25. Constantin Brancusi

***Sleeping Muse II*, 1926**
Polished bronze
Private Collection

**26. *Inlaid Table (“Mother-of-Pearl Table”)*,
1977-78**

Galvanized steel with inlaid mother-of-pearl
The Baltimore Museum of Art: Bequest of
the Artist in Honor of Brenda Richardson

Inlaid Table (“Mother-of-Pearl Table”)
Burton combined luxury and industrial materials. Squares of iridescent shell shine on its top and near its base, contrasting with the soft gray of the galvanized steel surround. Here, the artist references the tradition of inlaying expensive materials like mother-of-pearl into fine furniture. He adds a modern twist, however, by creating variations on the grid and cube. While these abstract, geometric forms were favored by artists associated with 1960s Minimalism, Burton’s

representational gesture—the white mosaics alluding to the negative space between table legs—was a significant departure from that movement.

27. *Café Table*, 1984-85

Verde Fontaine granite
Philadelphia Museum of Art, Promised
Gift of Keith L. and Katherine Sachs

Café Table reveals Brancusi’s influence on Burton. Its blocky base and inverted pyramid top resemble shapes that frequently appear in Brancusi’s work (see #28). But *Café Table* also aligns with Burton’s goal of creating practical and publicly accessible sculpture. Made of stone, it was designed to be placed outdoors, perhaps in a park or along a busy street. Burton celebrated *Café Table*’s usefulness, saying: “This is a small table that you and your friend would sit on either side of and put a cup of coffee [on] or something.”

28. Constantin Brancusi

***Mademoiselle Pogany III*, 1933**
Polished bronze, limestone and wood
Private Collection

In Mademoiselle Pogany Brancusi distilled the appearance of art student Margit Pogany (1879-1964) to the barest essentials. Her gleaming bronze head tilts forward. The arched forms of her brow and downcast eyes echoed in the ornate bun at the nape of her neck. The simplification of forms is a hallmark of Brancusi’s approach. So is his combination of materials: a highly polished bronze atop a limestone cube, supported by an elaborately carved wooden pedestal. Burton consistently drew material and formal inspiration from Brancusi. He particularly appreciated the pedestal forms in the elder artist’s work, drawing attention to their status as sculptures in their own right.

Stage Performances

Scott Burton: Shape Shift

From the late 1960s through 1980, performance was a key part of Burton's practice. He rarely appeared in these works. Instead, he acted as choreographer, using other people and furniture to explore social conditions and hierarchies. Burton was fascinated by body language. The way we position ourselves can subtly or overtly communicate with other people. Burton's performers suggested a range of individual attitudes and group dynamics through pose, gesture, spacing, and orientation. These encompassed class, age, gender roles, sexuality, sexual availability, and interpersonal relationships.

To create his choreography, the artist drew on art history, pop culture, and texts on nonverbal communication. Another inspiration was the *tableaux vivant*, or "living picture," a form of entertainment popular in the nineteenth century, with costumed models frozen in theatrical scenes. Burton's performances were also partially informed by his identity as a gay man. He said: "I try to get the poses that I see in the bars and baths and on the street corners that I frequent. . . . Your work is nothing if its content isn't your personal experience."

29. **Views of *Twelve Poses*, performed by Peggy Leary; *Bathers*; and *Furniture Pieces***, all performed as part of *Eighteen Pieces* at Finch College, New York, 1971
Gelatin silver prints
Scott Burton Papers, II.31 and II.33. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York

These photographs document *Eighteen Pieces*, a series of performances Burton staged at Finch College in 1971. A women's college in Manhattan, Finch was known for its active and experimental arts program.

In *Twelve Poses*, a performer reclines on a chaise longue (French for "long chair"). She resembles a pinup model or an actor caught in a cinematic freeze-frame. In *Bathers*, two women sprawl head in hand, re-creating a common eroticized motif in Western art. With these two performances, Burton drew attention to the clichéd representations of women in art history and pop culture. In fact, he was friends with many people involved in the feminist movement and looked to their social critiques as a model for the gay liberation movement.

Two of these photographs capture *Furniture Pieces*. Here, Burton placed

chairs or tables on an otherwise empty stage, asking the audience to consider how the objects suggested different social relationships, classes, or ages through their form, design, and material. Two of the furniture “actors” in *Furniture Pieces* were *Table I* (#30), on view nearby, and *Bronze Chair*, on view in the first gallery of the exhibition (#1).

30. *Table I*, 1973

Stained oak (found object altered by the artist)
The Museum of Modern Art, New York

31. Photographs by Robert E. Mates

Pair Behavior Tableaux, performed at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1976
Gelatin silver prints
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum Archives, New York

These photographs document *Pair Behavior Tableaux*, staged at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York in 1976. In this performance, Burton explored the possible range of relationships between two people: “friendly, harmonious, aggressive, intimate, competitive, avoidant, hostile, dominant, indifferent, submissive, and so on.” To keep the audience focused on the performers’ body language, Burton downplayed their individuality. He dressed the two men identically, used makeup to neutralize their facial features, and sat viewers more than fifty feet from the stage. There was no narrative or sound, aside from the occasional cough or rustling from audience members.

The only props were two chairs and a bench. Burton often included furniture in his performances, modifying it slightly to achieve certain effects. For instance, the legs of each chair on the stage merge into a blocky base, echoing the performers’ platform shoes. Burton used these familiar yet altered objects to highlight how architecture and furniture can shape people’s social behavior.

32. Photographs by Ben Blackwell
Eight views of Individual Behavior Tableaux, as performed by Kent Hines, 1980
Gelatin silver prints
Scott Burton Papers, II.22. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York

For more information about these works, see #33.

33. *Individual Behavior Tableaux*, 1980
Single-channel video (color, sound), 36 min.
University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive

Only one video recording of Burton’s performance is known to have survived to the present. In *Individual Behavior Tableaux*, we see a man wearing only platform shoes act out a series of movements at a glacial pace. In some vignettes, the man poses in space. In others, he interacts with a geometric bench. Each sequence is separated by a blackout, and title cards outline three sections: Dominance Displays, Appeasement Displays, and Gender Displays.

Burton said: “There are dominating and commanding postures, and then there are attitudes and signals of being subordinate or secondary. All these are overt sexual presentations, alternately aggressive and passive, macho and femme.” Eight photographs (#32) on the wall nearby capture some of these poses. Some appear timid and subservient. Others look confident, confrontational, or seductive.

34. Poster for Scott Burton’s *Individual Behavior Tableaux* performance at the University of California, Berkeley Art Museum (MATRIX 32), 1980
Scott Burton Papers, II.91. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York

35. Notes and diagrams for *Eighteen Pieces*, performed at Finch College, New York, 1971
Ink on paper
Scott Burton Papers, II.34. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York

This case contains materials Burton used to meticulously plan his performances at Finch College (#35) and *Individual Behavior Tableaux* (#36–37). The artist used charts, diagrams, snapshots, and note cards to brainstorm, choreograph, and sequence his performers’ actions. Never before exhibited, these documents provide unprecedented insight into Burton’s choreographic process.

36. Ten *Individual Behavior Tableaux* choreography notes, ca. 1980
Scott Burton Papers, II.91. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York

37. Four photographs of *Behavior Tableaux* poses, 1977
Polaroids
Scott Burton Papers, II.75. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York

Inside and Out

Scott Burton: Shape Shift

In his work, Burton often complicated our notions of inside and outside. Sometimes he did this literally, installing domestic furniture in a forest or altering common outdoor seating so that it could only be used indoors. On other occasions, Burton used both sculpture and performance to speak to the psychological aspects of interior and exterior. Burton knew that vulnerability, visibility, identity, and self-protection all affect how we operate in public and private spaces. The works in this gallery address these ideas in intricate and layered ways, expressing a range of personal concerns. Some also touch on aspects of the artist's own biography, including his childhood memories.

38. *Child's Table and Chair*, 1978. Wood, stainless steel, leather, paint on cushion and mirror. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Scott Burton Fund, 2000

This work combines petite scale with unexpected materials. Its size and color scheme recall classroom furnishings. The mirrored desktop, silver seat, and brass leg casters are impractical features for children's furniture, however, imparting a sense of the surreal. One of the few chair and table sets Burton created, this sculpture may relate to his childhood memories. The artist said that his favorite toys were "a tiny table and chair which were, in fact, not mine but only loaned to me, and in some way all [my] furniture is some attempt to repossess—to possess—those pieces."

39. *Five-Part Storage Cubes*, 1982
Painted wood. Courtesy of Ugo Rondinone

One of several storage cabinets Burton made, #39 nearly approaches human height. Burton hid latches that open on different faces of the cubes so that users would have to reorient themselves around the structure to open multiple boxes. The colorful, modular structure recalls the influence of De Stijl, a twentieth-century Dutch movement whose artists often employed geometric forms, bright hues, and vertical and horizontal planes.

40. **Table IV (“Spattered Table”)**, 1977
Wood, paint, and lacquer. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Exxon Corporation Purchase Award, 1978

Nearly all the surfaces of #40 are splattered with colorful paint. This technique is a sly reference to American artist Jackson Pollock (1912–1956), who poured, dripped, and splashed paint onto large canvases to emphasize the physical act of art making. By employing furniture as his canvas, Burton playfully undermines the vigor and machismo of Pollock’s gestures.

When Burton exhibited *Spattered Table* in 1977, he placed it on a high pedestal, allowing visitors to glimpse its soft white underside. With this unusual display, Burton emphasized the table’s status as a work of art while introducing a sense of vulnerability.

41. **Oak Chair (prototype)**, 1989 (fabricated 1989). Stained oak
The Museum of Modern Art, New York

42. **Hectapod Table**, 1982
Nickel-plated steel, polished
Courtesy of Geoffrey Diner Gallery

Made from a single sheet of steel bent into seven triangular shapes, *Hectapod Table* has a bold form. Its geometric design directly recalls an origami-inspired table made by American sculptor Isamu Noguchi (1904–1988). Noguchi was a preeminent public sculptor at the time of its making, working in a material vocabulary that Burton favored. Instead of Noguchi’s color-coated surfaces, Burton used mirrors that reflect and absorb *Hectapod Table*’s surroundings. Camouflage and visibility were frequent themes in Burton’s sculpture and performance.

43. **Seven installation views of Furniture Landscape**, 1970
Scott Burton Papers, V.48. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York

This series of photographs documents *Furniture Landscape*, a performance Burton staged at the University of Iowa in 1970. Burton placed household objects in forest clearings, selecting the decor for its floral patterning or

wood composition. These surface treatments camouflaged the furniture amid the greenery and alluded to wood’s origin in trees, Burton invited the audience to move from space to space, as if navigating the rooms of a house. By reversing what we expect to see indoors and outdoors, Burton created a surreal, dreamlike experience.

Furniture Landscape also references the history of painting, recalling the work of French artist Henri Rousseau (1844–1910), who often depicted subjects in dense, junglelike environments.

44. **Settee**, 1986–87. Oak and ash
The Eli and Edythe L. Broad Collection

With its rail back and slender seat, *Settee* appears more like a fence than a bench. But rather than creating a straight barrier, Burton added a graceful curve and a bench to sit on. He sometimes used the arc because it is “a comfortable shape for people to sit within. It turns people slightly toward each other. . . . And it’s an embracing form. I liken it to a pair of arms—the father standing behind, and the little children in the father’s arms. So it’s psychologically a rather comforting or stabilizing form.”

Burton made indoor and outdoor versions of this *Settee*, swapping weather-resistant aluminum for softer, finely finished wood here. The pale color of the ash seat contrasts with the dark oak backrest, seeming to float against it.

- 45–46. **Window Curtains**, 1978. Pigment on cotton sateen. Collection of The Fabric Workshop and Museum

Burton made #45–46 during a residency at the Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia in 1978. This experimental venue encourages artists to work in new and unfamiliar materials. *Window Curtains* are Burton’s only cloth-based works. Here, Burton played with dimensionality and flatness. The pattern also toys with ideas of interior and exterior, replicating the structure of the window and the deep blue of the dusky evening sky.

47. **Lawn Chair (“Adirondack Chair”)**, 1976–77 (fabricated 1979). Lacquered pine
The Museum of Modern Art, New York

48. **Rustic Table**, designed 1977, cast 1978, surface grooves added 1982. Bronze
Collection of Eduardo Costa

49. **Formica Lawn Chair**, 1979. Formica over plywood. Cincinnati Art Museum, Gift of RSM Co.

Vernacular furniture made by nonspecialists was a constant source of inspiration for Burton. He appreciated the ingenuity of the anonymous, rural, do-it-yourself maker in crafting useful items. In particular, the artist loved the Adirondack chair as an American icon, with variations appearing across the country since the early twentieth century. As with much of Burton’s work, these Adirondacks (#47 and 49) feel both familiar and odd.

Adirondack chairs are traditionally made of wood, which expands and contracts with environmental changes. With #49, the artist covered the chair in Formica laminate, typically used for countertops and floors. Formica cracks, peels, and fades when outdoors. This move ensured that Burton’s chair could only be used inside, undermining its potential as a lawn fixture. Burton deployed another material inversion with #48. He took a rural stick-leg table and cast it in bronze. With this gesture he immortalized a folk object as a work of art.

Nearby is a selection from the artist’s vast archive of images (#50), revealing the broad range of vernacular furniture that inspired his sculpture and public art practice.

50. **Flyer for Scott Burton’s “On furniture as sculpture” lecture at d.c. space in Washington, DC**, 1978
Scott Burton Papers, II.85. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York

51. **Photographs of various furniture and landscapes from Burton’s personal archive**, 1970s–80s
Scott Burton Papers, II.60. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York

The Public and Private Self

Scott Burton: Shape Shift

In 1969, Burton participated in “Street Works,” a five-part performance art series that unfolded in public spaces across New York City. People passing by may have been unaware of this event, becoming an unwitting audience to the blurring of art and daily life. Photographs, leaflets, and typed scripts (#52–57) document Burton’s contributions to “Street Works,” which explored public vulnerability, social transgression, and the unconscious.

The artist continued his exploration of these themes in several later performances and installations. *Self-Portrait as Modern Artist* (#58) and *Closet Installation* (#59) stand out as direct engagements with gender and queerness.

52. Announcement for “Street Works” performance event, designed by John Perreault, 1969

Scott Burton Papers, II.13. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York

53. *New York Magazine* with announcement of upcoming “Theatre Works” performance series at Hunter College, 1969

Scott Burton Papers, II.17. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York

54. Description of *Self Works* performances for “Street Works” series, 1969

Scott Burton Papers, II.17. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York

55. Description of *Dream* performance for “Street Works IV,” 1969

Scott Burton Papers, II.17. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York

For “Street Works IV,” Burton drafted a set of instructions (#55) to first dream in public view and then enact the dream. He drugged himself to sleep at the exhibition opening (#56), where he dreamed that he walked the street nude. Consumed with anxiety about the illegality of this act, Burton stripped off his clothes and paced naked through a secluded area, away from both bystanders and police (#57). Despite his reservations, Burton’s illicit exhibitionism had an ideological purpose. He said, “if art can help to undermine the legal system in this country, I think that would be good.”

56. Photograph by Peter Moore
View of *Self-Work: Dream* performance at the opening party for “Street Works IV,”
1969

Gelatin silver print

Scott Burton Papers, II.14. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York

57. View of *Self-Work: Nude* performance for “Street Works IV,” 1969

Gelatin silver print

Scott Burton Papers, II.14. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York

58. *Self-Portrait as Modern Artist.....FIRST VERSION*, 1973

Gelatin silver print

Scott Burton Papers, V.53*. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York

In *Self-Portrait as Modern Artist*, Burton confidently gazes forward, hands on hips. He wears high-heeled boots and paint-splotted overalls, with a dildo protruding comically from his crotch. This photograph depicts the “modern American artist,” Burton’s parody of the hypermasculine persona some male artists assumed in his era. He used it to critique how the art world rewarded “a generalized mystified image of the ‘free-thinking,’ creative individual (the so-called Artist),” while simultaneously excluding queer people and women. Burton experimented with the character between 1973 and 1976, before abandoning both appearing in his own performances and the satirical approach.

59. View of Scott Burton’s *Closet Installation* in the P.S. 1 exhibition “Rooms,” 1976

Gelatin silver print

MoMA PS1 Archives, II.A.83. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York

In 1976, Burton participated in the first exhibition at P.S. 1 (later known as MoMA PS1), an experimental arts space in a former public school in New York City. Burton installed his work in a closet—historically a symbol of queer repression and suppression. The audience was prevented from entering by a thick metal chain. On the rear wall, Burton installed the male symbol penetrated by a rubber forearm sex toy. Below hung a banner with “Fist – Right of Freedom” printed in Old German lettering. This is the title of a 1975 German film by R. W. Fassbinder that was celebrated for its representation of gay life. Burton described his *Closet Installation* as a devotion to “homosexual liberation,” openly embracing sexual freedom.

Public Artist

Scott Burton: Shape Shift

In the 1980s, Burton focused on public art. Determined to bring his work to new audiences, he realized more than two dozen commissions for public art projects across North America and Europe.

For Burton, bringing art outside of galleries and museums, which serve more privileged audiences, became a moral obligation. He believed that art should exist in public spaces and serve a social function, responding to the needs of everyday people. Burton used his “furniture sculpture” to achieve these goals. Installed in parks, university campuses, museum courtyards, building lobbies, and along busy streets, Burton’s combinations of tables, seating, and lighting reflect his attention to space, environment, climate, and pedestrian movement. Like much of the artist’s work, these designs are so utilitarian that they often do not appear to be art—a fact that Burton relished.

The drawings, preparatory models, and slideshow in this gallery depict some of the public art projects that Burton created in collaboration with architects, engineers, fabricators, officials, and landscape architects. Although some have been dismantled or are under threat of removal, many are still in place, continuing Burton’s legacy of offering spaces of rest, relaxation, nourishment, social activity, and people-watching.

60. Model for *Picnic Table and Benches (Inverted Pyramids)*, 1983
Painted wood and Plexiglas
The Museum of Modern Art, New York

In 1983, Burton made *Picnic Table and Four Benches* for Artpark, a state park and arts center in Lewiston, New York. This model reveals what is not apparent to picnickers. Aboveground, the table and benches look like upside-down trapezoids. Below the surface (represented by a flat plane of smoked black Plexiglas) we see that the furniture actually consists of five inverted pyramids. With this gesture, Burton underscored that although his public art was functional, it was also conceptual: the true design is hidden to the unaware.

61. Hand drawn sketches of proposed designs for Geier Esplanade in Cincinnati, Ohio, ca. 1979
Scott Burton Papers, II.88. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York

Drawings and sketches were important planning tools for Burton’s public art and “furniture sculpture.” The artist sometimes produced rough sketches such as #61. His studio assistant, Thomas Abate Marco, translated Burton’s ideas into more formal renderings like #62. These could be

shared with officials for approval or with fabricators for manufacture. You may recognize the undulating perforated metal seating installed in the large gallery upstairs, here aptly proposed for a seaside location.

62. Tomas Abate Marco

Design for benches at Sheepshead Bay Piers, 1987

Scott Burton Papers, II.144. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York

63. *Low Piece*, 1985

Red marble

Collection of Linda and George Kurz, Cincinnati, OH

64. *Model for Public Table*, 1979

Board, paint, wood

Princeton University Art Museum, Gift of the artist

Here, a flattened cone balances on a low, cylindrical base. Burton used this small model of *Public Table* to support his public art proposal to Princeton University. The table, made of cast concrete, is fourteen feet wide and can seat over twenty people. It was the first of his permanent public art designs to be realized. He created one at the General Mills Campus in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in 1979 and another at Princeton University in Princeton, New Jersey, in 1980—both of which are still in place today.

Public Table was partially inspired by Constantin Brancusi's World War I memorial *Table of Silence* (1937–38) in Târgu Jiu, Romania. Brancusi's table consists of two broad, stacked cylinders surrounded by low stone stools. For Burton, the *Table of Silence* fused two important concepts that guided his own approach: "it is both a functional work and a moving and elevated work of art."

65. *Model for Pair of Benches, University of Houston*, 1986

Painted wood

The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Burton as Critic and Collector

Scott Burton: Shape Shift

Although he is best known as an artist, Burton began his career as an art critic. He worked first at *ARTnews* (1965–74) and eventually served as a senior editor at *Art in America* (1974–76). These positions established Burton’s reputation and connected him to people working at both the center and the margins of the art world.

Many of the qualities Burton lauded in his criticism paved the way for his own art to be accepted: the interactions between a work and its surroundings and art’s potential to produce emotional responses. The case in this gallery includes several of Burton’s most important writings, which you can read using the QR code. Some of the artists he wrote about—Alex Katz (b. 1927), Tony Smith (1912–1980), and John Button (1929–1982), Burton’s former partner—gave artworks to him. This gallery presents artworks and furniture that Burton knew intimately. He either displayed or used these objects in his home or published writing about them.



Scan the QR code to read Burton’s arts writing and criticism.

As a critic, Burton wrote about the prevailing movements of the time: Minimalism, which centered on pared-down, abstract, geometric forms, industrial materials, and universal experiences; and Postminimalism, which often focused on method, unexpected materials, and personal concerns. Burton also celebrated artists such as Alex Katz (#66) and Philip Pearlstein (#67), who produced realist and figurative painting, which was often dismissed by the establishment as retrograde during Burton’s lifetime. This combination of interests may have seemed at odds in the 1960s and 1970s. In retrospect, Burton’s practice reveals how figuration and abstraction are mutually supportive representational strategies, an approach embraced by contemporary artists today.

This case includes books, magazines, and journals in which Burton’s writings were published (#66–71). You can read these using the QR code at left.

66. Alex Katz

Praeger Publishers, 1971
Pulitzer Arts Foundation

67. Philip Pearlstein

Hirschl & Adler Modern, 1985
Courtesy of Jess Wilcox

68. ***Live in your Head: When Attitudes Become Form, Works – Concepts – Processes – Situations – Information***, 1969
Scott Burton Papers, VI.B.2. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York
69. “**Furniture Journal: Rietveld,**” *Art in America*, November 1980
Pulitzer Arts Foundation
70. “**Old Master at the New Frontier,**” *ARTnews*, December 1966
Pulitzer Arts Foundation
71. “**An Article on Scott Burton in the Form of a Resumé,**” *Art-Rite*, no. 8, Winter 1975
Editors: Edit deAk and Walter Robinson
Scott Burton Papers, VI.C.24. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York
72. **Mailer for *Tables and Chairs: Vintage Modern and Recent Burton* exhibition at Max Protetch Gallery**, 1983
Scott Burton Papers, IV.5. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York

73. **Tony Smith**
Untitled, 1962
Oil on canvas
The Baltimore Museum of Art:
Gift of Scott Burton, New York

The artist and architect Tony Smith had a significant impact on Burton. In 1966, Burton wrote a feature on Smith in *ARTnews* titled “Old Master at the New Frontier” (#70). The article, which you can read using the QR code on the front of this card, drew distinctions between Smith’s expressive form of Minimalism and that of a younger generation of artists who used Minimalism to create repetitive units of “Primary Structures.” Burton also celebrated how Smith’s work was abstract while still referring to things “outside of itself.”

Smith gave this painting (#73), which was illustrated in the *ARTnews* essay, to Burton. The simple composition suggests the profile of a table—a horizontal surface supported by two legs—a resemblance which may have appealed to Burton. These “legs,” however, are uneven. This subtle departure from the ideal and the norm, and its provocation of emotion in the viewer (which may range from empathy to uneasiness) are aspects of Smith’s work that Burton emulated.

74. **Alex Katz**
White Petunia, 1969
Color lithograph on paper
Collection of Weisman Art Museum at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis.
Museum purchase with funds from the Faculty Women’s Club

75. **John Button**
Portrait of Scott Burton, ca. 1962
Oil on canvas
Collection of Eduardo Costa

76. **Gerrit Rietveld**
Crate Chair, designed 1935
Pine and brass screws
Collection of Linda and George Kurz,
Cincinnati, OH

77. **Sol LeWitt**
Table, 1981
Painted wood and glass
Courtesy of Lisson Gallery

78. **Gerrit Rietveld**
Zig Zag Stoel, ca. 1937–40
Elm
Collection of Linda and George Kurz,
Cincinnati, OH

Dutch designer and architect Gerrit Rietveld (1888–1964) was a major influence on Burton. He admired Rietveld’s ability to unite high style with the commonplace. In a 1980 feature in *Art in America*, which you can read using the QR code on the front of this card, Burton wrote:

[Rietveld’s] furniture’s rigor of form and intensity of structural definition give it an idealism, an epiphanic concision, even a sublimity, that is far from popularizing; yet its materials (mostly common-stock wood and bright-colored paint), its scale, and its very simplicity give it an unpretentious attractiveness of democratic character.

The artist particularly respected Rietveld’s *Zig-Zag Chair*, a version of which he kept in his home. He praised the chair for its clever, stackable design, which perfectly balances the human body while recalling its shape and posture. Here it is paired with Rietveld’s rustic *Crate Chair* (#76) and a coffee table (#77) designed by Burton’s friend, conceptual artist Sol LeWitt (1928–2007).