QUEER BEHAVIOR

Scott Burton and Performance Art

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INTRODUCTION

Scott Burton's Queer Postminimalism

Late one night in the summer of 1971, Scott Burton rode his bicycle to Donald Judd's loft building on Spring Street in Manhattan and hurled a brick through one of its floor-to-ceiling windows. Burton's close friend Eduardo Costa called the act a "secret art," but for Burton it wasn't art. It was rage: "Me and the rock and Donald Judd's window was pure hatred."[1] Burton's postminimalism drew from that same anger, which was not directed solely at Judd but at Minimalism more broadly. He saw in artists like Judd and Carl Andre a profound hypocrisy between their rhetoric and their actions.[2] As Burton's friend Mac McGinnes recalled, "Scott's hostility was more towards the posturing of Donald Judd."[3] In particular, Judd's acquisition of an entire building in the gentrifying area known as SoHo was, for Burton, a symbol of excess and elitism.[4] "Scott had no tolerance for gentrification," as Costa explained it.[5] McGinnes agreed: Burton's visceral act was generated by the visibility of Judd "sitting there gloating in the midst of his own piece."[6] For Burton, the building was proof of the hollowness of Judd's claims to have rejected received traditions and to have leveled hierarchies. A few years before the window vandalism, Burton had written that Judd's sculpture was a "parody of rationality" and that "sometimes this work even seems to mock us."[7] Judd and others who had been grouped together (however reductively) as "Minimalists" had asserted cold rationality as equitable and open, but Burton saw it as authoritarian and closed.

The exclusiveness Burton disliked in many Minimalists was found not just in the dogma of their formal convictions but also in their performed masculine and heterosexual identities.[8] They had claimed to want to remove the presence of the artist, but in their work—and in their participation in the New York art world—they asserted their experience and their

perspective as universal. This left little room for women, artists of color, or openly lesbian or gay artists like Burton.[9] As many argued at the time and after, the neutrality and lack of historical indebtedness claimed by some Minimalists were often tied up in a rhetoric of power and masculinity.[10] Burton recognized this dominance for what it was, and he sought to undermine it. He turned to performance art; he made work that was explicitly about queer sexual cultures; and he lampooned the macho posturing of Minimalist artists like Andre. For Burton, what was needed after Minimalism was a departure from its exclusions, imposed universals, and hierarchies of gender and sexuality.

At the same time, Burton did not wholly reject the ideas that were associated with Minimalism and its moment. Since the mid-1960s he had been an art critic participating in debates about minimal art and its alternatives. When he started making art in 1969, he pursued central questions that Minimalism raised. He believed that art should embrace fully the radical idea that he saw as its greatest promise: that of the shift from the artist to viewer. He aligned himself with artists who sought to question the universal rather than coldly illustrate it, as he thought Judd did. These artists, who would soon be labeled "postminimalists," included a contingent of important women artists (such as Lynda Benglis, Hannah Wilke, and Jackie Winsor) who similarly rejected Minimalism's masculinist universalisms and sought to find a place for difference. Burton identified with this version of the postminimal and with their critical voices. Performance became a way to reconsider the relationship between artist and viewer and, more importantly, to thematize the queer experiences that informed his perspective (and that made him inadmissible in many circles of the New York art world).

It is easily forgotten how few openly lesbian or gay artists there were in the 1970s New York art world, despite the emergence of the gay liberation movement during the decade.[11] As Michael Auping (the curator of Burton's final performance) reminded me in a conversation, "Scott's dealing with gay issues was so radical in the 1970s."[12] There were plenty of lesbian and gay artists in the New York art world, but few made work overtly *about* their queer experience, and even fewer were allowed to exhibit it in the late 1960s and early 1970s.[13] Burton understood this terrain and made queer performances that infiltrated sanctioned spaces such as the Whitney and Guggenheim Museums. But he also increasingly made work that left no doubt about its queer themes, as when he exhibited a work in 1975 that fantasized about fisting artistic competitor and erstwhile Minimalist Robert Morris "up to the elbow," as I discuss in chapter 4.

Burton advocated for lesbian and gay artists, and in the mid-1970s he

attempted to organize one of the first compendia of their history (see chapter 4). He drew support from other gay men in his circle of artists and critics, such as Costa, John Perreault, and Robert Pincus-Witten. Of equal importance, however, was the inspiration Burton drew from feminism and the seismic shift it was enacting in the 1970s New York art world. In a 1980 interview, Burton remarked about the conditions of the 1970s: "There are a number of gay dealers and curators and museum directors and a number of gay artists, but absolutely nothing equivalent in the art world—in relation to gay liberation—of the feminist movement which has had a tremendous impact on contemporary art. It changed everything, in the 1970s and all for the better. It was so healthy."[14] His feminist friends such as Jane Kaufman, Marjorie Strider, Sylvia Sleigh, Wilke, and Linda Nochlin all provided models for how to value difference and critique structural inequities. At a moment when artists were not allowed to foreground queer experience or desire (or were not taken seriously if they did), Burton looked to (and supported) the work of feminism and its denunciation of exclusion. Consequently, his story offers a link between the art histories of feminism and those of gay male artists, often assumed to be unrelated. For Burton, both were allied in their fight against hierarchies and biases operative in the art world—and in society at large.

Burton saw promise in postminimalism—a term coined by Pincus-Witten—as an open project, initiated by temporality, the lived body, and above all the capacity for differences and variability. These elements resonated strongly with his own experiences in an art world that still expected and enforced the silence of gays and lesbians. Burton developed tactics of infiltration and confrontation as means to undermine the art world's omissions, gendered hierarchies, and sexual normativities. More than that, he began to envision a utopian mode of artistic practice that would not just embrace differences among viewers but, more precisely, reject art's elitism and be approachable across class lines. As he would write in 1974, he sought a new conception of art that would "relate to more than a small part of the rest of the people" and have a "vital relation to the energies—expressed or frustrated—of the whole culture. Only if we do so can we serve the better of those people and energies."[15]

This book charts the untold story of Burton's art in the 1970s. In the multiple practices he developed in this decade, his central concern was *behavior*. Burton sought to catalyze behaviors and the viewer's self-awareness of them through performances, editorial projects, and objects. For him, behavior was inculcated; it had expectations, deeper meanings, and rules. It could also be subverted or hijacked, and he took his own queer experience as the starting point for understanding how to propose a mode of

resistance to the expectations of how we are told to behave. Burton pursued these ideas through multiple modes. Some of his performances went undercover to question accounts of the "normal," while others would be bombastic and explicit about their queer themes. He created works that referenced fisting, dildos, and bathhouses even as he was making arch performances that taxed their viewers by withholding narrative and psychology. Concurrently, he began making sculptures of furniture that prioritized dissemblance, submission, and use.

My argument is that Burton's art took his queer experiences as core resources. In particular, he looked to street cruising, exploring the ways in which coded communication could occur in public spaces underneath the gaze of the unwitting. The activity of cruising blurs class distinctions (however temporarily) and affords opportunities for new contacts, communities, and solidarities. Burton studied this activity seriously, and he turned to behavioral psychology and anthropological studies of nonverbal communication to better understand how acts and actors could have very different meanings to those who knew how to look. Ultimately, this research into cruising would be what he transposed from performance to sculpture as he began to make functional sculptures that were open to all, hiding in plain sight as benches, tables, and chairs. As I will argue throughout, any account of Burton's work that denies the centrality of queer themes is not just impoverished—it has been duped by the camouflage that he wryly deployed. Those practices of infiltration *were* the content of his work, and he learned about their complexity from the tactics of survival and pleasure involved in navigating public streets queerly in the 1970s.

I believe the story of Burton's first decade as an artist is important because it revises and expands our received histories of art of the 1970s, complicating accounts of Minimalism, postminimalism, performance art, and queer art. Burton modeled a distinct mode of performance in which queer experience was a key framework, and he did this in dialogue with sculpture theory and in contrast to other forms of performance art that privileged the artist-as-performer. He presented major performances at the Whitney, documenta, and the Guggenheim (which, in 1976, represented the museum's most extensive commitment to live art with a six-week run of performances). Consequently, his works were among the more widely seen performance artworks of 1970s New York. Received histories have registered neither this visibility nor the queer content of much of Burton's work in the decade. When Burton's performances have been discussed, by and large the complexity of their durational and relational experiences have become reduced to single, static images that tell little about the events. One of the aims of this book is to redress this situation by recon-

structing the history and themes of Burton's performance practice. Using firsthand accounts and oral history interviews with performers, attendees, and curators, I provide a more replete analysis of the experiences of these works and Burton's ambitions for them. However, this book is not strictly about the kinds of live art normally considered under the heading of "performance art," and I (like Burton) pursue the ways that performance can capaciously enfold sculptures, pictures, objects, spaces, and audiences into scenes of behavioral negotiation.

In the remainder of this introduction, I will lay out the foundations for Burton's work of the 1970s in six sections. First, I will provide a biographical account of Burton up to the 1970s. This detailed history is necessary because it has not been fully narrated elsewhere, and because his work of the 1970s is indebted to influences and networks that shaped him in the decades before he began making art in 1969. Second, I will briefly examine Burton's art criticism of the 1960s, focusing on its engagement with central debates around Minimalism and theatricality. Third, I discuss postminimalism and the ways that it was employed by artists who embraced difference—as with Burton's alignment with women artists and feminism in these years. With these foundations established, I will then turn to what I see as the primary resource for his multivalent work of the 1970s—street cruising. The sexual, erotic, and social elements of cruising underwrote the central concerns for his artistic practice and its focus on behavior and public space. Fifth, I then turn to a discussion of my usage of "queer" in this book as a way to understand the range of Burton's performances and artworks, from the confrontational to the infiltrating. I conclude with a discussion of the ways in which Burton's queer work has become obscured from view in its reception.

Rather than an account of an artist making work *about* their identity, this book is about how Burton made work *from* his experience. His aim was not only to bring to light themes that had been excluded from cultural representation but also to develop from queer experience a more wide-ranging reevaluation of art's role and potential. Burton's significance lies in how he made work that cultivated its forms and priorities from queer content and queer methods with the ultimate aim of being demotic, approachable, and—he hoped—open to all.

Detours and Mentors: Burton's Path through the 1950s and 1960s

Burton's artistic career started when he was thirty, in 1969, after being an art critic and a (less well received) playwright. His earlier life—and espe-

NOTES

Introduction

1. Some months after the incident, Burton claimed that it was "unrelated to art or politics," by which he meant that it was neither properly an artwork nor a political statement. Burton to Costa, 5 September 1971. This later qualification came in response to a letter from a 31 July 1971 letter in which Costa wrote, "I am telling everyone about that secret art work a friend of mine did, so that they can see how good the real new American art is and not get misleading information through official art publications about its degree of development." Both letters in ECC.
2. For a discussion of the complexities of Minimalism's political claims, see the chapters on Carl Andre and Robert Morris in Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009). An illuminating account of the politics of Judd's empiricism and of his interest in leveling hierarchies can be found in David Raskin, "Specific Opposition: Judd's Art and Politics," *Art History* 24, no. 5 (November 2001): 682–706. See also Robert Slifkin, "Donald Judd's Credibility Gap," *American Art* 25, no. 2 (Summer 2011): 56–75; Dominic Rahtz, "Indifference of Material in the Work of Carl Andre and Robert Smithson," *Oxford Art Journal* 35, no. 1 (March 2012): 31–51.
3. Telephone interview with Mac McGinnes, 29 April 2010.
4. Burton was not the only artist angry at Judd in the summer of 1971. See Andrew Wasserman, "Judd's Space: A Marginal Absence in the Fight for SoHo Housing," *Visual Resources* 31, nos. 3–4 (September–December 2015): 155–76.
5. Telephone interview with Eduardo Costa, 16 March 2010. In 1969, Burton had been among the twenty-four signatories (along with others such as Eva Hesse, Robert Indiana, and Michael Snow) of a letter to the editors of *Artforum* (Summer 1969, pp. 7–8) protesting the controversial plan for a Lower

Manhattan Expressway that would have fundamentally altered the Lower East Side, Little Italy, and South Village neighborhoods.

6. Telephone interview with Mac McGinnes, 29 April 2010.

7. CW 50.

8. On the centrality of such assertions of masculinity as supposedly neutral and performatively reasserted, see Amelia Jones, "Dis/playing the Phallus: Male Artists Perform Their Masculinities," *Art History* 17, no. 4 (December 1994): 546–84; and Amelia Jones, *Body Art / Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998). For a discussion of the heteronormativity of postwar art and the proscriptions on being visibly queer in it, see Gavin Butt, *Between You and Me: Queer Disclosures in the New York Art World, 1948–1963* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); and Jonathan D. Katz, "The Silent Camp: Queer Resistance and the Rise of Pop Art," in *Visions of a Future: Art and Art History in Changing Contexts*, ed. Kornelia Imesch and Hans-Jörg Heusser (Zurich: Swiss Institute for Art Research, 2004), 147–58.

9. As Anna Chave has argued, "The erasure of artistic subjectivity that seemed such a radical prospect to certain male artists in the 1960s could hardly portend the same for their female contemporaries, for whom erasure was almost a given." Anna C. Chave, "Minimalism and Biography," *Art Bulletin* 82, no. 1 (March 2000): 154. While there were women artists associated with Minimalism (such as Anne Truitt, Jo Baer, Adrian Piper, Judy Chicago, and Mary Corse), their work was met with discrimination, and they experienced uphill battles to acceptance.

10. For example, Joseph Masheck, "Corn-Fed Egotism [Letter to the Editor]," *Studio International* 177, no. 911 (May 1969): 209–10; Karl Beveridge and Ian Burn, "Don Judd," *Fox* 2 (1975): 129–42; Anna C. Chave, "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power," *Arts Magazine* 64, no. 5 (1990): 44–63. See also Lynn Zelevansky, *Sense and Sensibility: Women Artists and Minimalism in the Nineties* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1994); Susan L. Stoops, ed., *More Than Minimal: Feminism and Abstraction in the '70s* (Waltham, MA: Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, 1996).

11. The writer John Preston declared in 1980, "The public has a view of the art world that sees an unbridled bohemia filled with free spirits doing, saying and depicting outrageously free things. . . . Here, certainly, must be one arena of life where gayness is truly liberated. *It's not true*." John Preston, "The New York Galleries: Non-competitive Exposure," *Alternate* 2, no. 12 (March/April 1980): 13 (emphasis added). See a similar assessment in Walter Weissman, "John Perreault: The Road to Art Criticism Starts with a Small Success in Poetry [Interview]," *Artworkers News*, April 1980, 18. More overt queer work was being done in New York's underground theater and film scenes, notably Charles Ludlam's Ridiculous Theater Company, Andy Warhol's films, Jack Smith, Kenneth Anger, the Angels of Light, and the Hot Peaches. As well, a greater range of out artists in the 1970s worked in photography—a me-

dium that, at the time, had distinct historical trajectories and supporting institutions that were not always coextensive with the art world. Within the art world, silence about and nondisclosure of gay or lesbian identity were more common—indeed, they were modes of resistance to homophobia, as argued in Katz, "Silent Camp."

12. Telephone interview with Michael Auping, 13 July 2017.
13. Gay-focused commercial galleries began to emerge in New York City in the second half of the 1970s, but they privileged figuration, photography, and erotica. See Preston, "New York Galleries." Lesbian art production (nationally) was more robust in the 1970s, in part supported by the alternative institutions created out of the feminist movement. See discussion in Laura Cottingham, "Eating from the *Dinner Party* Plates and Other Myths, Metaphors, and Moments of Lesbian Enunciation in Feminism and Its Art Movement," in *Seeing through the Seventies: Essays on Feminism and Art* (Amsterdam: G+B Arts, 2000), 133–59; Jennie Klein, "The Lesbian Art Project," *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 14, nos. 2–3 (2010): 238–59; Tara Burk, "In Pursuit of the Unspeakable: *Heresies*' 'Lesbian Art and Artists' Issue, 1977," *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 41, nos. 3–4 (Fall/Winter 2013): 63–78; Margo Hobbs Thompson, "D.I.Y. Identity Kit: The Great American Lesbian Art Show," *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 14, nos. 2–3 (2010): 260–82. Also of crucial importance was Jill Johnston's *Lesbian Nation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973).
14. DeCelle 10.
15. CW 244.
16. They moved some time in 1952. John Button explained, "[Hortense] moved to Washington, in the first place, because Scott had been tested for IQ and psychologically at the U. of Alabama when he was 12. The results showed that he was far above average in intelligence and very 'different' psychologically. Hortense, with unerring instinct, decided on the spot to get out of the small town and into a big city where Scott would have more opportunity. HOW RIGHT SHE WAS." John Button to Gerald Fabian, 5 June 1966, JB/GF.
17. "Radford E. Mobley, 64, Dies, Retired Newsman, Publicist," *Washington Post* 1969, B6. Burton described him as "the hero of our family—my father was absent, so the man of the family was my mother's brother, who was a journalist and writer and college poet." Kachur I, 3. Burton attributed his interest in literature to his uncle's influence.
18. John Button to Gerald Fabian, 5 June 1966, JB/GF.
19. Kachur I, 15.
20. For instance, Pincus-Witten remarked in 1976, "Burton now understands this fascination [with furniture] to be an evocation of his 'longing for an ideal family life.' He construed the reordering of the furniture in his room as 'the re-living of one's childhood in an ideal way.'" Robert Pincus-Witten, "Scott Burton: Conceptual Performance as Sculpture," *Arts Magazine* 51, no. 1 (September 1976): 114.

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