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SCOTT BURTON

COLLECTED WRITINGS ON ART & PERFORMANCE, 1965–1975

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The Primacy of Sensibility: Scott Burton writing on art and performance, 1965–1975

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Scott Burton is often narrowly associated with the art of the 1980s, the decade in which his functional and intentionally self-effacing sculpture was widely exhibited and discussed. However, Burton was an active participant in the art world of the 1960s and 1970s—as an art critic, as an editor for *ARTnews* and *Art in America*, as a curator, and as a performance artist. He only turned to sculpture as his primary practice around 1975, after becoming established as an artist with his *Behavior Tableaux* performances, which were shown throughout the 1970s at major venues including the Whitney, the Guggenheim, and Documenta VI. Burton's identification with the burgeoning field of performance art in the 1970s, too, transformed his earlier reputation; up to that point, he had been known principally as a critic.

This book brings together Burton's writings on art and performance from these years, tracing his development as an art critic and including his early artist statements. This period, from 1965 to 1975, was foundational for Burton's later artistic practice and was remarkably varied in the commitments he pursued. After he started making art in 1969 amidst his active engagement with art writing, Burton became a unique and opinionated example of the artist-critic that characterized the contentious period and its heated debates.

Despite the fact that Burton produced a substantial body of art writing—including important texts such as the introduction to the groundbreaking exhibition of Postminimal art *Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form* in 1969—his criticism has rarely been discussed. This is perhaps due

to its eclecticism: Burton championed positions that others held as mutually exclusive and antagonistic. He advocated for reductive abstract art at the same time as he did figuration; he wrote extended evaluations of artists as different as Tony Smith and Alex Katz; and he argued for the urgency of considering time-based and ephemeral artistic practices in the same years that he curated exhibitions of realist painting. Burton also loved the underdogs, and he often chose to write about artists whose work needed articulate spokespersons to differentiate them from dominant tendencies. This was especially the case with Burton's critical relationship to Minimalism. He immersed himself in the ideas surrounding Minimalism and came out on the other side with an appreciation of its emphasis on the viewer but also with a suspicion of its rarefied and homogenizing account of that viewer. By contrast, he came to advocate for artists who used reductive formal vocabularies quite differently than the "methodical cerebrations of a Judd or a Noland."[1] Indeed, when Burton emerged as an artist he became exemplary of "Postminimalism," the term coined by Robert Pincus-Witten to describe the time- and process-based reactions to Minimalism that emerged in the late 1960s.[2]

I began to be interested in Burton's writing as part of my own research on his early performance art. I was struck by the moments of perspicacity and prescience in the texts and by the unexpected collisions he offered. As I came to realize, most important in these writings is the central role he gave to the theatrical, the temporal, the affective, and the performative. One can find in Burton a critic who argued for the cross-fertilization

1. "Ralph Humphrey: A Different Stripe," p. 101.

2. Pincus-Witten would write two essays on Burton's work in the 1970s: Robert Pincus-Witten, "Scott Burton: Conceptual Performance as Sculpture," *Arts Magazine* 51, no. 1 (September 1976): 112–17 and Robert Pincus-Witten, "Camp Meetin': The Furniture Pieces of Scott Burton," *Arts Magazine* 53, no. 1 (September 1978): 103–05. The former was reprinted in Robert Pincus-Witten, *Postminimalism* (New York: Out of London Press, 1977) and both essays were included in the expansion of that book as Robert Pincus-Witten, *Postminimalism into Maximalism: American Art, 1966–1986* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1987).

of sculpture and performance as a means of understanding how art could be social, personal, and accessible.

Taken together, these texts do reveal Burton's early formulation of a desire to make public and demotic art, his critique of the art world's hermeticism and elitism, and his critical grasp of the implications and exclusions of mainstream narratives of 1960s art. He pursued his writing with humor and purpose, hoping to establish alternative positions from the dominating and normative critical positions. Distinct in the texts is Burton's increasing concern with art's appeal to affects, empathies, and subjective responses. His own Postminimalism involved finding a place for particularity and difference contra the blanked universalism that the Minimalist invocation of the viewer implied. Accessibility was a consistent theme of his artistic and critical practice, up through his development of public art. In these early years, he came to see realism, figuration, and the literalist address to the viewer's co-presence as key terms for moving art away from elitism and as incitements for individual and public engagements.

At the same time, these texts are valuable beyond the ways in which they inform Burton's own art. He was an adroit commentator on art theory, often making wild and perverse connections across party lines. Art criticism became urgent in the 1960s because of its participants' awareness that they were formulating a new canon, and many writers were narrow in their advocacy. Burton, however, remained consistent in his ethics and interests but promiscuous in the styles and positions he defended. Consequently, his voice is distinct from his contemporaries, and readers from many different positions will recognize their own priorities in Burton's texts. This openness is what he intended, so those concerned with the status of figuration or with reductive geometric art will both find Burton making insightful observations. Many of the artists about whom Burton wrote will be unfamiliar to all but

the most specialized of readers, but each of the essays contains discussions of larger themes for the art of the 1960s and 1970s that are relevant to an understanding of this contentious period of artmaking. These are joined by Burton's contributions to the theorization of performance art in the early 1970s—texts that provide important commentary on the status of performance as well as Burton's own varied practices.

Burton always saw himself as a bit of an outsider. Born in Alabama in 1939 and raised by a single mother there and, later in his teen years, in Washington, D.C., he understood his entry into the New York art world as one of the infiltrator. His attachment to the vernacular and the rustic that would emerge in some of his earliest sculptures was an expression of his critical position toward the self-congratulatory culture of New York as cultural center. He did, however, receive a focused education in art, most importantly from the Washington-based abstract painter Leon Berkowitz and his wife Ida Fox, both of whom were important influences on the teenage Burton. In addition to his own teaching, Berkowitz was also instrumental in arranging Burton's study with Hans Hofmann in Hofmann's summer school in Provincetown in the late 1950s. It was there that Burton also found his first sustained engagement with gay culture, and his sexuality grew to become a central theme of much of his work in the 1970s.[3] Referring to the small town's historic role as a haven both for artistic and for gay and lesbian communities, Burton recalled, "Hofmann was a very important teacher, and I was one of his last students. I learned something from Hofmann about art, but I learned a great deal more from Provincetown about life—and about art."[4] For his undergraduate education, he moved through a few colleges starting in 1958

3. I discuss the relation of Burton's sexuality to his artistic priorities at length in the chapter on Burton from the book I am currently completing.

4. Audio recording of March 1980 interview with Burton by Edward de Celle, Edward Brooks de Celle Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

(Goddard College, George Washington University, and Harvard University) before moving to New York in 1959, where he would complete his BA magna cum laude at Columbia University in 1962. It was in New York that he became romantically involved with the figurative painter John Button (around 1961), who proved to be a decisive influence during their almost decade-long relationship throughout the 1960s.

Burton's ambition in this decade was to be a writer, and he stopped painting during his undergraduate years. He went on to receive a master's degree in English literature from New York University in 1963, and his first related job was as a reader for the notable New York literary agency Sterling Lord from 1964 to 1965. Theater became his main focus. He wrote a play based on the Ganymede myth titled "The Eagle and the Lamb," and his "Saint George" was produced at the Shakespeare Memorial Theater in Stratford, Connecticut, in 1964, with the support of Lincoln Kirstein. Button, older than Burton by a decade, was instrumental. He introduced his younger partner to the gay social networks that ran throughout the New York artistic and literary scene, and it was in this milieu that Burton spent most of his twenties. It was there that Burton came into contact with and often was befriended by the likes of Kirstein, Jerome Robbins, Frank O'Hara, Edwin Denby, Edward Albee, and his fellow Columbia student Terrence McNally.[5] (He also became friends with other figurative artists such as Sylvia Sleigh and Philip Pearlstein.) These same circles introduced Burton to the New York School poets, and Burton's earliest professional entrées came from gay men associated with theater, poetry, and criticism.[6] These years were formative for Burton's

5. See Scott Burton interview with Lewis Kachur, Oral History Project, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., Interview I: May 22, 1987.

6. On this milieu, see, for instance, Maggie Nelson, *Women, the New York School, and Other True Abstractions* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2007) and Gavin Butt, *Between You and Me: Queer Disclosures in the New York Art World, 1948-1963* (Durham and London: Yale University Press, 2005)

attitudes on art, and his engagement with both figurative art (as in the work of Fairfield Porter, Pearlstein, or Alex Katz) and the more lyrical strain of Abstract Expressionist criticism (exemplified by O'Hara) can be understood to have come from this social network. It was only after his break-up with Button in the late 1960s that Burton made a decisive social break that manifested itself, in part, as an embrace of conceptual art. This artistic education of Burton's set him apart from the largely heterosexual group of Minimalist artists that he came to see as dominating the late 1960s, and his sense of both outsiderness and purpose was fueled by it.

Burton was largely unsuccessful as a playwright. His most important theatrical contribution of the 1960s was to write the libretto for an experimental ballet created to accompany an Aaron Copland composition for the New York City Ballet in 1965. The ballet, *Shadow'd Ground*, was based on Copland's *Dance Panels* (composed some years earlier in 1959 and revised in 1962). It premiered on January 21, 1965, and took the unorthodox format of having four screens behind and above the dancers onto which were projected contextual and narrative images. This experiment did not meet with critical approval.[7] Nevertheless, this was the first manifestation of Burton's interest in tableaux as a means of storytelling, for Burton's libretto was conveyed through the projections of staged photographs of a man and a woman acting out the story. This use of successive still images or tableaux would return in his performance art of the 1970s.

Soon after *Shadow'd Ground*, Burton started writing art criticism. He published his first substantive essay in *Art and Literature* in 1965—the same year that journal republished such heavyweight contributions as Clement Greenberg's "Modernist Painting" and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's "Cézanne's

7. Allen Hughes, "Notes on New Ballets," *New York Times* (31 January 1965): X7.

Doubt."[8] Also in 1965, he began writing capsule reviews for *ARTnews*, a magazine at that time associated with both Abstract Expressionism and the New York School poets, many of whom worked as reviewers. As Carter Ratcliff recalled,

> All the poets I was interested in were writing for *ARTnews* or had written for it at some point. Frank O'Hara had written for the magazine. Barbara Guest, James Schuyler. Ted Berrigan, Peter Schjeldahl a little later. Jill Johnston wrote for them at a certain point. And Scott Burton, who wasn't a poet but was very much a part of that world. Bill Berkson. Gerrit Henry. Kenward Elmslie. So many on that list of editorial associates were poets. [. . .] The *ARTnews* review was almost a genre of poetic writing.[9]

Burton joined *ARTnews* as an editorial associate in November 1965, and began writing the short and often unsigned capsule reviews that characterized the magazine's attempt to cover every exhibition in New York. He would start writing regular feature articles the next year and eventually became an assistant editor at the magazine in 1972. Two years later, he became senior editor at *Art in America*, a position he held until 1976. While working at *ARTnews*, Burton also taught English at the School of Visual Arts for five years (from 1967 to 1972), even co-editing a textbook of writings on art for SVA in 1969.[10]

Burton wrote his first major feature article for *ARTnews* in 1966 on Tony Smith. (He had, earlier that year, written an

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8. Both in *Art and Literature* 4 (Spring 1965). In addition to new pieces like Burton's, *Art and Literature* (under its editor John Ashbery) sometimes republished important writings such as the 1945 and 1960 essays by Merleau-Ponty and Greenberg, respectively.
9. Carter Ratcliff in Amy Newman, *Challenging Art: Artforum 1962-1974* (New York: Soho Press, 2003), 41.
10. Dorothy Wolfberg, Scott Burton, and John Tarburton, eds., *Exploring the Arts: An Anthology of Basic Readings* (New York: Visual Arts Press, 1969).