

Scott. Chairs. Eloquently

Ana María Torres

Ana María Torres

is a doctor in architecture, who practises in the United States and Spain. In 2000 she founded the studio At Architects in New York. She has lectured at the Escuela Superior de Arquitectura in Madrid. She is the author of the books *Isamu Noguchi: A Study of Space* and *Carme Pinos: An Architecture of Overlay*, both published by The Monacelli Press. She is the editor of the architecture section of the magazine *NY Arts*.

"I was very distressed to learn that my granite settee, donated to the Tate Gallery by you and Jaqueline de Botton, will not be displayed there as I had intended and hoped, that is, in a "non-art" area of the museum, and for a long-term period rather than in the context of a special exhibition. If a sculpture extends a functional element, it is of course betrayed when this use is denied. My settee cannot be understood simply by being regarded. It must be sat on."

This protest, in a letter to Gilbert de Botton in 1987, expresses Scott Burton's ambition to twist and stretch traditional categories of art, which he considered obsolete. Burton's work, assertive in its simplicity, pushed the formal qualities of the Minimalist tradition into functioning chairs and tables. His objects, like his earlier performances and *Street Works*, stimulate the viewer's emotions, memories and associations while surveying American life. His inspiration came from a large, diverse group of sources: the Bauhaus tradition, Modernist architecture, Pop Art, and, most importantly of all, from Burton's own sense of glamour and aesthetic sophistication. The artist's intentions, his choice of materials, his method of arranging these materials (his style and his product: the work of art itself) are inextricably bound. A survey of Burton's furniture can be seen as a reflection of the history of modern design.

Everything that Burton did came through embracing the concept of change as an intrinsic part of his activities. He was born in Greensboro, Alabama, in 1939, and grew up in Eutaw. An only child, he was raised within a proper Presbyterian upbringing by his mother, Hortense Burton, a legal and social secretary, who helped him recognize his unusual intellectual aptitudes. With no emotional attachments to the South, the family moved to Washington, D.C. in the early 1950s. Later Burton would say, "I'm a Southerner, but I don't identify with it."¹ He and his mother lived with his uncle in Georgetown for a couple of years before they found their own house in Glover Park. This uncle was his mother's brother, Radford E. Mobley, a journalist for the Knight newspaper chain, and also a writer and a college poet. Mobley stood in as the "hero" and man of the family in the absence of Burton's father, whom Burton described as a "roughneck" oil well driller in an interview for the Archives of American Art. "The important thing is my uncle, who is the literary person. Because, in later years, I took a detour from art into literature. It was very much the family influence."² He was exposed as a child to the Bible, Dickens, Shakespeare and the American poet Vachel Lindsay. But he was most influenced by children's books. "I think I'm artist because of the children's book illustrations and comic books. An American kid, I had the best collection of comic books in town—really a

serious comic book collection." Speaking further about this influence, Burton said: "They are a blend of visual and verbal, of pictorial and narrative. There's a strain in me which is in abeyance, but it comes out in the performances and in a few other works."³ Burton used to say that he learned the "sensation of color" and composition from decorating Christmas trees with his mother. As an unhappy child, he developed solitary activities: reading, drawing, swinging and climbing trees.

When the family moved to Washington, his mother worked for the government as a secretary. Burton's memories from Washington include the activity surrounding World War II, which he loved, the National Gallery, the Klees at the Phillips Collection and the city's architecture. "I love what we call 'Greek Revival' architecture. The whole thing of eighteenth-century architecture and neoclassical style, even into the Twentieth Century, I feel are very much part of my sensibility."⁴ His first experience with art was when he was fourteen or fifteen and he went to a couple of Saturday classes at the Corcoran and to evening classes at the Washington Workshop of the Arts, run by Leon Berkowitz, who two years later was to be his high school art teacher and became a mentor and very close friend. Burton felt both the Corcoran and the Workshop were too sophisticated for him and they frightened him; in one

¹ First interview conducted by Lewis Kachur for the Archives of American Art at Scott Burton's studio, 115 West 28th Street, New York, New York, on September 22, 1987, pp. 2

² *ibid.*, pp. 4

³ *ibid.*, pp. 9

⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 6

Scott Burton de niño /
 Scott Burton as a child
 Eutaw, Alabama, ca. 1945
 (MoMA Archives, N.Y.: S.B., box 12)



class Morris Louis taught students how to stain and pour paint on big bed sheets.

The artist Leon Berkowitz and his wife Ida Fox, a poet, became, as Burton described them, his "real family." They were a major influence and, as eventually Burton would conclude, "one I had to reject very radically."⁵ These surrogate parents introduced him to modernism and helped him to move away from the conservatism of his own family. Because of this relationship he discovered de Kooning, became aware of the importance of the emerging Washington Color School and was introduced to the writings of Clement Greenberg. Through these exchanges he learned of the heroic generation of New York painters. At the age of sixteen Berkowitz sent him to the Hofmann School in Provincetown to study painting; it was the first time he left home. But after this experience "I stopped painting abruptly and never touched a brush again. I lost all desire. I used to draw compulsively, and I have no interest in drawing, in releasing that energy in that form now at all. I haven't since 1959 or 1960."⁶ He reverted to an early influence, literature, and moved to New York in the fall of 1959 with the determination to get a literary education, following in the footsteps of his uncle, the patriarch of the family. Burton became familiar with New York downtown theater; and tried for a number of years to write plays and poems. "They were terrible," the artist declared. He also was commissioned to create a libretto and epitaph for a ballet by Allen Hughes entitled *Shadow's Ground* for the New York City Ballet. The performance garnered horrible reviews. He began to write regularly for *ARTnews*, *Art in America* and *Art Scene*. However, "I never became an art critic," the artist explained, "I was a reviewer. But I never developed at all into a mature critic."⁷

Between the late sixties and early seventies, Burton was a part of the New York Street Works group. This group was created by the poet John Perreault with the idea of reforming traditional theater and reconsidering

the proscenium stage and the physical elements of the theater itself. The group included conceptual poets and artists including, in addition to Perreault and Burton, Vito Hannibal Acconci, Hannah Weiner, Bernadette Mayer, Eduardo Costa, Anne Waldman and Marjorie Strider. John Perreault created various *Street Works* during 24-hour periods in different streets in Manhattan. *Street Works*, as Perreault describes them, "were intended mostly for those who were in the area, shopping, strolling, and doing various things during the natural course of their lives, rather than for the usual art audience." Other artists and poets like Arakawa, Lucy Lippard, Les Levine, Abraham Lubelski, John Giorno, Dan Graham, and Bill Creton joined them in an alternative, under-the-radar art scene. As John Perreault wrote in a *Village Voice* review in 1969, "Perhaps the most invisible and most sensational work was 'performed' by Scott Burton. The ghost of Rose Selavy made her appearance. Burton walked the area in disguise and went completely unnoticed. He wore pink octagonal glasses with blue frames, a green floral print jersey slip-over with a large cowl (worn down), uncuffed navy blue elephant bells, a beige coat, low-heeled shoes with matching gloves. He also wore a short brown wig, pink-orange lipstick, Guerlain perfume, and carried a plastic, flower-printed shopping bag and umbrella decorated with white daisies. He was completely invisible."⁸ In *Street Work IV (Self-Work III) A: Dream*, Burton slept at an exhibition opening; for *Street Work IV (Self-Work III) B: Enactment* he walked naked on Lispenard Street at midnight. In these events the artists tried to change the nature of art; they wanted to dematerialize the art object. Burton continued this line of thought throughout his career, saying in a 1987 interview, "I would like to change the nature of art much more towards design at this point."⁹

In a major turning point during the summer of 1970, he was guest-teacher at the University of Iowa, together with Marjorie Strider. They decided to organize a series of performances entitled "Two Evenings." Burton

5 *Ibid.*, pp. 26

6 *Ibid.*, pp. 41

7 *Ibid.*, pp. 60

8 Perreault, John. "Free Art," *The Village Voice*, New York, New York, May 1, 1969, pp. 14

9 First interview for the Archives of American Art, September 22, 1987, pp. 67



Burton en su graduación, con toga, acompañado de su madre / Burton at graduation, in gown, with his mother (MoMA Archives, N.Y.: S.B., box 11)

performed his first tableaux pieces, *Ten Tableaux*, and created a temporary outdoor installation, *Furniture Landscape*, where he used, for the first time, furniture. The furniture: sofas, tables, chairs, etc., was borrowed from friends. The criteria were "if the pieces were upholstered, they had to be floral or leaves. If they were wood, they had to be painted green or natural color wood. There was not contrast –no acrylic, no steel," the artist explained, "it was a turning point –two different things."¹⁰

During the next decade, Burton would develop a series of *tableaux vivants*, among them *Behavior Tableaux*, *Solitary Tableaux*, *Individual Behavior Tableaux*, and *Figure Tableaux*. These pieces were performed in places such as the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Guggenheim Museum in New York, and the Berkeley Art Museum in California. They evolved from his experience with literature and theater. He took his *Street Works* pieces to another level, but with the same intention of trying "to be on the edge."

Burton defines a "tableau" as a frozen moment full of significance, adventure, and usually drama; a focused instant which happens to be looked at in the proper frame and draws your entire attention. The American Heritage dictionary defines a 'tableau vivant' as a scene presented onstage by costumed actors who remain silent and still as if in a picture. Tableaux originated in France with the purpose of creating a living picture. In the Renaissance and Baroque periods, political and evocative imagery was integrated. By the beginning of the 19th Century they were strictly for upper class amusement. They served as art appreciation lessons and titillation for the wealthiest men. "My *tableaux vivants* imitate painting and dance, two arts I studied before starting to write. They are the non-verbal half of this work of autobiographical literature". Burton recognized and represented in his tableaux that all human behavior is over-determined and suggested the complexity of its depths. "The tableaux are secretly completely

theatrical, but I try to make it look sort of real. The costumes, for example, are carefully edited street clothes."

In the performances nothing was improvised. Everything was composed, rehearsed and controlled. The performers, usually male, wore make-up over their eyebrows and on their lips. They were selected to have similar physical features. They performed naked or in simple clothing with platform shoes as a reference to the theater of ancient Greece. (The origin of the platform or high heel dates back to 1000 BC in Egypt, where heels probably indicated the high position in society of those who wore them. This idea prevailed in Old Greece, where Aeschylus, the first Greek theatrical author, mounted his actors on platform shoes of differing heights to indicate each character's social status.) In most of Burton's tableaux the performers looked around, sat on the furniture and lay on the floor; the behavior was never sexual. They stylized these common movements by performing them slowly, formally, in an unvarying rhythm. "I used the people like models. Like my furniture, the *Behavior Tableaux* are pseudo-sculpture. When I work with models, I just touch their bodies and push them around." The use of blackouts before and after each tableau underlines the movement. In some pieces, like *Pair Behavior Tableaux*, the blackout interrupts a performer in mid-movement, using the concept, in film vocabulary, of a 'cut' rather than a 'dissolve.' Also, the distance between the stage and the audience was predetermined, varying from 50 to 75 feet, allowing Burton to augment his control of the viewer's experience. Burton's silent performances of austere, slow, small movements could be described by Gertrude Stein's statement, "endlessly the same and endlessly different."

The performers enacted recurrent themes related to Burton's theories of movement: with their body postures they told each other about hierarchical relationships. The works emphasized both the



Scott Burton en su apartamento de la calle Thomson, Nueva York / Scott Burton at his apartment Thomson Street, New York, 1981 (MoMA Archives, N.Y.: S.B., box 33)

11 Second interview conducted by Lewis Kachur for the Archives of American Art at Scott Burton's studio, 115 West 28th Street, New York, New York, on September 25, 1987. pp. 22

12 Romine, John. "Scott Burton", *Upstart*, Columbia University, New York, 1991. pp. 8

performers' individual movements (body language called "kinesics") and the relationships of one body to another (called "proxemics"). In performances where Burton used furniture, like in *Behavior Tableaux*, and where the actors interact in precise ways with each other and with the furniture. Burton specifically characterized the performers' actions with terms like role establishment, intimate space, threat aggressiveness, appeasement and disengagement. His performances, like his later furniture work, embodied the intention he stated in the Young American Artists exhibition catalogue in 1978: "I want the furniture to be a factor in the behavioral dynamics of a social situation," and he continued, "so, by controlling the distance between people as they sit at my table, I am making a conscious effort to adapt what I know about behavioral dynamics to the design of my furniture."

Burton's use of furniture varied through the years. In the early seventies, he used found objects or replicas in a pictorial manner; simultaneously, in 1973, he began to design his own furniture. One of his first objects was a bronze replica of a mass-produced Queen Anne chair. The chair had been left by the previous tenant, Ernest Cardinale, at Burton's apartment on Thomson Street in New York. Burton was intrigued by how the chair represented the old owner, following the artistic tradition of objects as symbolic of people, one of the most famous examples being *Gauguin's Chair* (1888) by Vincent Van Gogh. The chair was cast in bronze in 1975. He showed the chair outdoors, in one of his first temporary installations on Wooster Street in New York in 1975, across the street from Artists' Space in SoHo. Some people sat on it, many passed by without noticing it and some tried to steal it. "First I did the chair, and then I found where to put it. It kind of almost developed that way –by putting the movable pieces (I mean, even if they're heavy, they're portable) into different situations and figuring out how to make them look good as sculptures, [and] how to make them make sense as chairs and as tables."¹¹

In 1976 Burton was invited by the New York State Council on the Arts' Visual Arts Special panel to submit a competition entry for a public project in Smithtown on Long Island. Burton based his proposal on the concept of using replicas, like the bronze chair and his *Pastoral Tableaux*. He proposed an outdoor bronze living room on a grass carpet, the furniture reflected all different periods of American design, from simple to more complex. The artist started to develop his ambition of approaching the design of a public space from a different perspective, where the placement of chairs, tables and benches led to discernible spaces. Burton's public spaces and furniture were conceived to meet specific user's needs and specific social environments. They are understood as both sculpture and furniture by the users. Maintaining this equilibrium was not only a complex process during the creation of the pieces, but also included the carefully calculated introduction of a "human quality" as defined by Roberta Smith. The results of Burton's study of "proxemics", the relationship of one body to another as used in his performances, were introduced in his plazas and parks and in the design of his furniture. The chairs were one of the most important elements for the artist, representing duality and flexibility. "There's an implied confusion between the indoors and the outdoors, taking the natural and making it artificial and vice versa."¹² In the same year, Burton designed his *Lawn Chair*. The design replicates an Adirondack chair, an economical, do-it-yourself American outdoor chair of the beginning of the century, billed as a "lawn chair in a few hours." Burton's chairs manipulate the basic concept of the prototype with his own aesthetic variations. He eliminated the roundness of the original wood pieces and extended the rear legs, defining a space surrounding the chair.

In the 1980s Burton started series of *rock chairs* made from natural boulders culled from rivers and mountainsides, from which wedges were cut out so they could be sat upon. Also during this period, Burton began to conceive geometric granite chairs and

Three-Quarter Cube Bench (Banco tres cuartos de cubo) (Versión ampliada / Enlarged version), 1985 Grupo de cuatro bancos / Group of four benches, 83,8 x 83,8 x 83,8 cm cada uno / each. Edición de 2 / Edition of 2 Collection Jerry Ganz, Chicago, Illinois



settees. His first *Chaise Longue* was executed in 1983. He first made a small model in rubber and glass. A glass backrest was inserted in a sloping position on the rubber base, forming an asymmetrical triangle. The artist described the model and his experimentation with form as follows: "This first model concerns questions such as the penetration of volume by plane, the question of hard versus soft, the grammar of the object, the grammar of sculpture, the grammar of furniture."¹³ Another significant piece that Burton designed in 1983 was the *Asymmetrical Settee*, which consists of six snugly interlocking parts which are fitted together without fixings.

Furniture also mediates between a building's spaces (interior or exterior) and the space of the human body.

Burton's work not only stretched Minimalism but also speaks to the devotion of architects to furniture design. As the architect Mies van der Rohe declared, "A chair is a very difficult object. A skyscraper is almost easier. That is why Chippendale is famous."¹⁴ For Walter Gropius, the difference between designing a great building and a great chair was a matter of degree, not principle; when he created the Bauhaus in 1919, one of the main precepts was the unity between fine art and craftsmanship. Frank Lloyd Wright treated furniture as part of the architecture, following the Japanese tradition of creating an ambivalence about where the architecture ends and the furniture begins. Burton's thinking was significantly influenced by Gerrit Rietveld and the De Stijl movement, both of which he admired greatly. By the early 1920s, De Stijl had

explored an elemental design vocabulary in search of a harmonious aesthetic. They approached their design through a balance of verticals and horizontals, and the use of the primary colors of red, yellow and blue in addition to white and black. In 1924, Gerrit Rietveld's design for the Schröder House in Utrecht was one of the most striking iterations of his vision, where abstract, geometric forms, symbolically compatible with modern mass-production, were manipulated with regard to both external detailing and internal spaces and furniture.

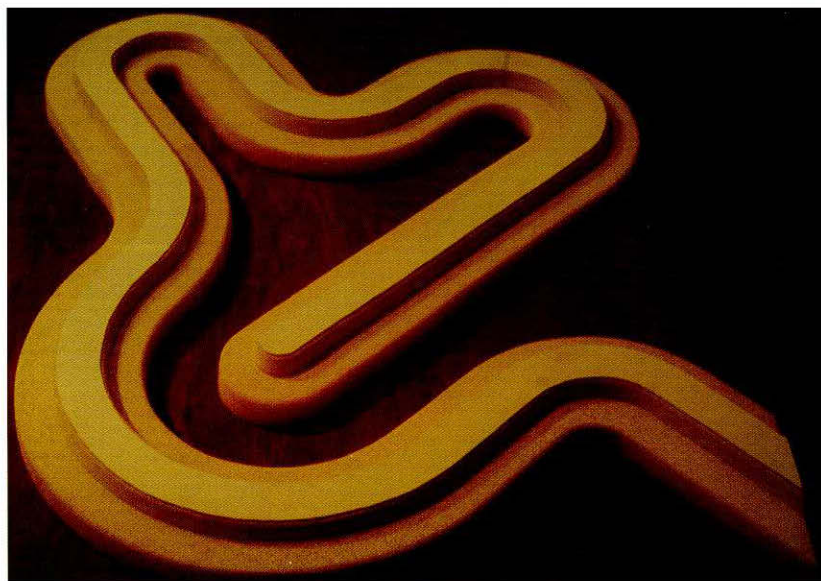
In 1979, the artist made a full size mock-up of *Public Table* for an exhibition at the Neuberger Museum. An inverted cone measuring thirteen feet across, it was his first piece on a public scale. Another important piece in the show was *Serpentine Double Banquette*, a two-sided bench. He would go on to use this concept in several of his public works. By moving his furniture into public environments, Burton was compelled to adapt his designs to site-specific conditions and create strong relationships to the existing architectural contexts. The artist was concerned with the tradition of non-monumental art placed in public spaces established by the Romanian artist Constantin Brancusi's *Table of Silence*, and the American-Japanese sculptor Isamu Noguchi's concept of the "sculpture of space": approaching public designs as the creation of an environment rather than an arrangement of a series of sculptures. Scott Burton's projects offer a diversity of methods that suggest a new range of possibilities in redefining not only sculpture and furniture, but also the role of public art. As the artist explains: "It's not a sculpture of a table; it is a table. It's not a depiction of a table. It's an actual table."

Before his death in 1989, Burton worked on several public commissions. In 1983 he created a garden viewpoint above the lake in front of the Western Regional Center building of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration in Seattle. The terrace, composed with a polished granite planter as a settee

13 Conversations with Angelica Zander Rudenstine in New York, May 21, 1987. Published in Angelica Zander Rudenstine, *Modern Painting, Drawing & Sculpture*. Collected by Emily and Joseph Pulitzer, Jr. Volume IV. Harvard University Art Museums, Cambridge, 1988. pp. 600

14 Page, Marian. *Furniture Designed by Architects*. Whitney Library of Design, New York, 1980, pp. 78

Maqueta para el banco
Serpentina doble / Model
Serpentine double benche
 Expuesta en / Exhibited at
 Neuberger Museum, 1979



and a series of rock chairs, is, as the artist explained, "the culmination of the rock chair idea." In 1985, Burton developed the design for the rehabilitation of the Pearlstone Park in Baltimore after spending hours observing the walking patterns of the pedestrians that crossed the site. He eliminated the serpentine main pathway and made it absolutely straight. "It's wonderful," he said. "It's like being on an airport runway. There's a slight grade, so you shoot up or you shoot down in a straight line. And it's very pleasurable."¹⁵ In the Atrium for the Equitable building, commissioned in 1986, the artist had the opportunity to apply once more his philosophy of public art sculpture. "It should be wonderful to a non-art audience, to whom it may even be invisible as a work of art," he continued, "they don't know it is a

conceptual element of the floor, but still it is –so I think it works both ways." His largest work was the plaza at Battery Park City in Manhattan, in collaboration with the artist Siah Armajani, architect Cesar Pelli, and landscape architects Diana Balmori and M. Paul Friedberg. The waterfront plaza design creates a series of spatial sequences that allows for a stroll or contemplation while sitting on Burton's double sided settee.

One of his last projects, in early 1989, was in collaboration with Kirk Varnedoe, who at that time was Chief Curator of Painting and Sculpture at The Museum of Modern Art in New York. The exhibition, entitled *My Brancusi*, was part of the *Artist's Choice* series initiated by Varnedoe, in which contemporary artists were invited to organize an exhibition from the

Museum's collections. Burton explained why he had selected Brancusi's work: "Brancusi is even more important than we know, and he has definitely had a great influence on me." In the show Burton presented his own vision by giving particular emphasis to the bases and pedestals of the sculptures because he considered them "a fascinating study of themselves." The rigorously ascetic concept of utility in the oeuvre of Brancusi had played an important role in Burton's own development.

Burton's performances, furniture, and public spaces reveal his brilliance as an observer and his provocative attitude towards art. He understood the design process as a way to produce an object that *does* something, and where problems can be solved intelligently. "Would it matter to an anthropologist? A piece of furniture is a cultural object, right? An anthropologist doesn't distinguish between a chair and a vase and a painting. For an archeologist, it's whatever is left. What matters is how intensely it reflects the history of its moment, how much it reveals of what history is about at that time." He reduced his furniture to its essence, transforming a boulder of gneiss or a cube of polished granite into a chair. At the same time, his works are impregnated with an anthropomorphic quality that carefully calibrates the balance between two identities, sculpture and furniture. This ambiguity invites questions about extending the boundaries of art and proves the possibility and the necessity of joining aesthetics and social commitment. Burton's work reflects his main concept that art justifies itself by being functional.

Scott Burton died in New York City in December 1989 after a long battle with AIDS. In 1984 he wrote "But I feel very lucky that, at this point in history, what I love best has a new, wider significance. A friend of mine, Edit deAk, once wrote about me and ended with a paraphrase of Gertrude Stein: "Scott. Chairs. Eloquently." That is how I would like my epitaph to read."¹⁶

15 Second interview for the Archives of American Art on September 25, 1987. pp. 44
 16 Domergue, Denise. *Artists Design Furniture*, Abrams, New York, 1984. pp. 59