

# Posing Queer

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BOOK REVIEWED: David J. Getsy, *Queer Behavior: Scott Burton and Performance Art*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022.

In the 1970s, New York-based artist Scott Burton created a series of performances that wordlessly explored an almost encyclopedic range of human behaviors. Derived from the form of the *tableau vivant*—a kind of “living picture” in which the body signifies meaning through pose and arrested gesture—these works rejected narrative and psychology in favor of decontextualized propositions about the ways in which humans relate to objects, to space, and to each other. In the same decade, Burton began exploring sculptural and installation works that featured pieces of furniture that had been altered or fabricated to suggest an uncanny or off-kilter “double” of familiar, functional, often vernacular pieces Americans would recognize from daily life. These mischievous works, which were both functional objects and representations of functional objects, anticipated the public art installations which Burton created in the 1980s and for which he is best known.

This decade of Burton’s life and work is the central subject of the art historian David J. Getsy’s intelligent and compelling monograph *Queer Behavior: Scott Burton and Performance Art*, which is both an exhaustive analysis of the pieces Burton created during this period and a useful contribution to our understanding of the relationship between gender, sexuality, and aesthetics. Getsy’s previously published work, which includes an edited volume of Burton’s writings, published in 2012, has consistently labored to expand the frameworks that allow us to see the *queerness* of art, particularly when it doesn’t literalize the desire or identity of the artist creating it. In *Abstract Bodies: Sixties Sculpture in the Expanded Field of Gender* (2015), he considers non-figurative sculpture from the 1960s through the lens of transgender studies, asking how the human body continues to serve as an implicit reference in abstract sculptures (such as those of Dan Flavin and Nancy Grossman) that seem to eschew the human form.

Some of the central sections of *Queer Behavior* take up that argument and apply it to Burton's work. Tracing a process by which Burton increasingly understood his desire for men as both disruptive of hollow cultural norms and potentially productive of democratizing, radically inclusive structures of community, Getsy carefully tracks how this evolution manifested in Burton's compositions of bodies and furniture in space. On one level, this is a story of the gradual demolition of the "closet." The five-person *Group Behavior Tableaux* (1972), the first of Burton's Behavior Tableaux performances, which Burton once referred to as "behavioral minimalism," was coy in its reference to same-sex desire. At one point in that piece, a (male) figure turned his face slowly away from another who had just entered, which Getsy reads as suggesting queer rejection or alienation. His *Pair Behavior Tableaux* (1976), at the Guggenheim Museum, included a moment in which one man put his hand on the shoulder of another; responding in a review, John Perreault asked: "Why does this turn out to be so sexual?" By 1980, in *Individual Behavior Tableaux*, performed at the Berkeley Art Museum, the poses of the performer Kent Hines (who performed the piece naked except for a pair of platform boots) referenced cruising and sexual contact in such undisguised ways that Michael Auping, the museum's curator, reportedly had second thoughts about having commissioned it.

On one hand, Getsy shows how Burton's increasing immersion in queer communities pushed him to be more confrontational in including queer desire and contact in his work; by 1978, he was working as a bartender at The Mineshaft, which Getsy characterizes as "the epicenter of New York's leathersex scene," and he was deeply engaged—both as spectator and participant—with the kinds of coded, ritualized behaviors that he would find in leather bars, bathhouses, and cruising spots. While the art world remained entrenched in homophobia throughout the decade, Burton took advantage of the gradual opening up of the culture at large to press the limits. Discussing the Berkeley performance, at one point he admits that he was trying to capture the poses that he'd seen in the bars, baths, and street corners that he frequented, as well as exploring those that characterize the top and bottom positions in a sexual act.

Getsy's more interesting argument, however, has to do with the ways in which Burton resisted *representing* his own desire or identity, choosing instead to use the knowledge he had gained inhabiting queer worlds to posit something more universal about the gestural transactions that comprise human behavior, which hopefully spectators could recognize as pertaining to their own lives. As Burton says at one point, the positions one takes in sexual relations are also the positions found in social relations. In this reading, the aspects of the performance which veil or abstract the literal queer content are not the result of the closet or self-censoring; they are, rather, a prolonged attempt to build a gestural vocabulary of human behavior that seeks to include *all* of that behavior, without judgment or exclusion. As Getsy puts it towards the end of the book, "behavior, performance, and bodily

communication were central questions that Burton drew from queer experience in his search to make works that did not so much represent that experience as, rather, draw more wide-reaching lessons from it."

While the arc of Getsy's study emphasizes the Behavior Tableaux and the furniture work, there is space given to other projects and details in Burton's career, including his *Modern American Artist* series of static performances and photograph collages in which he dressed in a pair of overalls with a dildo protruding from the fly in an apparent attempt to intervene in an art-world dialogue between Lynda Benglis and Robert Morris. Getsy also recounts Burton's attempt to guest edit a special "Gay Issue" of the magazine *Art-Rite*, the plans for which became so Versailles-like in their ambition that the whole enterprise had to be abandoned. (As Getsy shows, however, the work Burton did on this contributed significantly to Dan Cameron's influential 1982 exhibition *Extended Sensibilities: Homosexual Presence in Contemporary Art* at the New Museum.) I was fascinated by Getsy's lengthy description of Burton's demands during preparation for many of the Behavior Tableaux pieces that the audience be seated extremely close together and fifty to seventy-five feet away from the performers, an arrangement which was intended to create a kind of Brechtian alienation from the stage, replacing identification with analysis and an immersive experience of discomfort with one's neighbors. In one case, this required roping off the permanent seating area and forcing spectators to sit on folding chairs crammed together just behind it.

Getsy's powers of description are strong, which is helpful given the dearth of visual material documenting Burton's work, especially the Behavior Tableaux performances. This is often a challenge for performance analysis, and Getsy does an excellent job of using what he has to speculate past the contact sheet and offer a plausible account of what it might have been like to see the performance. At times, however, this strength in describing and analyzing the moment can also become a weakness of the book. Because Getsy writes in such a narrative way and builds an argument over the five chapters of the book, it is worth reading in full. At several points in the book, however, the exhaustive attention to description can arrest the narrative momentum. This made me, at least, sometimes lose the forest because of the too-vivid trees.

As the title suggests, Getsy chooses to frame his book as a study of performance art, despite the fact that most of Burton's furniture pieces didn't involve human performers and would more conventionally be classified as sculpture or installation. I found this choice convincing and compelling; on one hand, Burton was creating the furniture pieces alongside his performance work (though their analysis occupies separate chapters in Getsy's book), and his altered chairs and tables were constantly moving between his home, his studio, and the stage of his performances. Because his tableaux were reduced to the minimum of elements needed to create a

meaningful pose or gesture, it seems logical that the furniture components would begin to take on anthropomorphic qualities. Getsy argues that this phenomenon carries over into the furniture pieces that don't contain humans, such as the *Pastoral Chair Tableau* at Artists Space in 1975 in which groupings of altered furniture with different aesthetics signaling social attributes such as class and gender were arranged to suggest a "drama" of flirtation, exclusion, gossip, community formation, etc. For Getsy, these installations suggest the action they *could* contain in such a way that the spectator encounters them with a strong *feeling* of narrative and duration. The individual pieces that make up the installations also, in Getsy's terms, behave "as if" they were furniture, in a way analogous to the performer's "behaving as" in a work of performance.

On a broader level, however, Getsy insists on the language of performance because he believes it is the form of art-making which connects most deeply with Burton's "utopian thinking about the possibility of a demotic, egalitarian art." This possibility relies on exploring, and achieving, a shared temporality with the viewer so that even when Burton was creating site-specific public installations in the last decade of his life, what interested him was, in his own words, "the transaction with the viewer." Burton's public art pieces sit, or have sat, outside locations such as the Equitable Center in Midtown Manhattan and the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. Getsy testifies to his own observation of people who approach the works not knowing if they are "artworks" or functional objects intended for use. As he watches them, these members of the public end up navigating—often joyfully—how to admire *and* use them, which he sees resulting in a kind of pride and excitement around being included in the work of art rather than being told it's just for the experts. Burton was always interested foremost in activating behavior, and Getsy's loving and comprehensive study grounds the artist's unique, broad-ranging life and career in that fundamental investment in the human body – something that signifies differently, loves differently, wields power differently, builds community differently, all depending on how one makes and takes a *pose*.

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