

**Landmark Exhibition of the Art of Scott Burton
Comes to Chicago's Wrightwood 659**

One of Three Exhibitions at Lincoln Park Art Space this Fall

Scott Burton: Shape Shift

October 3 – December 20, 2025



CHICAGO, IL, August 5, 2025 — *Scott Burton: Shape Shift*, a critically acclaimed exhibition surveying the seminal—and subversive—art of Scott Burton (1939-1989), opens on Friday, October 3, 2025, at Wrightwood 659 in Chicago.

Burton, who once described his work as “sculpture in love with furniture,” was a true American original. By the time of his death at the age of 50 from an AIDS-related illness, he had succeeded as sculptor, public artist, performance artist, social choreographer, art critic, and exhibition curator. This landmark exhibition spans that career, bringing together works from the 1960s to the ‘80s, including some 30 sculptures and more than 40 photographs, drawings, and ephemera. The exhibition is installed on Wrightwood 659’s third and fourth floors.

As the most comprehensive survey of the late artist's work ever mounted in the United States, *Scott Burton: Shape Shift* is curated by Jess Wilcox, independent curator, and Heather A. Smith, Assistant Curator, Pulitzer Arts Foundation. It premiered last fall at the Pulitzer Arts Foundation, St. Louis, and is presented at Wrightwood 659 by Alphawood Exhibitions.

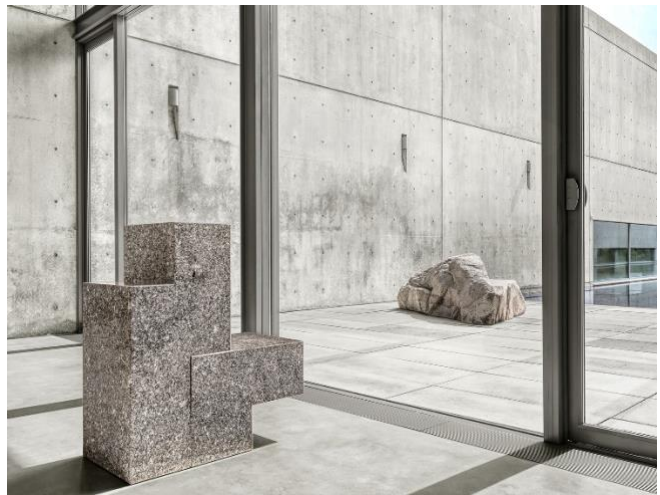
The Exhibition

Rather than progressing chronologically, the installation of *Shape Shift* responds to the architecture of Tadao Ando, as did the Pulitzer Arts Foundation's presentation in 2024. The Pulitzer Prize winning architect designed both art spaces, the Pulitzer in 2001, and Wrightwood in 2018.

Among the highlights of the fourth floor are two groupings of chairs that illustrate Burton's ideas about community. Placed in front of a curtain glass wall looking out to the street is a tableau of steel chairs—among them two curved chairs installed face-to-face and a solo minimalist take on the wire bistro chair. In another grouping, Wrightwood brings together a variety of Burton's chairs for visitors to sit on.

On the third floor, the visitor encounters *Two-Part Chair* (1986/2002), a pair of granite polygon slabs balancing one atop the other for mutual support. Although highly abstract, when viewed in profile the sculpture loosely resembles two bodies in a sexual embrace.

On the same floor, the sculpture and performance element *Bronze Chair* (1972/75) is displayed next to a photograph showing it on a cobbled-stone street in New York City's Soho neighborhood in the early '70s. Burton had found the Queen Anne-style armchair abandoned in an apartment, cast it in bronze, and put it outside on the street, where it sat enigmatically against a brick wall. At Wrightwood, this installation is echoed by the brick wall of Tadao Ando's gallery.



Burton's anthropomorphizing of furniture was linked to his study of proxemics, the inquiry into the relational systems and nonverbal cues inherent in social spaces. As he once said, "You could say that people are like furniture. They take different poses and suggest different genders." In *Shape Shift*, this dictum is illuminated in an array of furniture forms, each conveying a distinct character and connotation through form, material, surface finish, scale, and stylistic lineage.

Demonstrating Burton's radical, but elegant, formal inventions is *Two-Part Chaise Lounge* (1986-87), where a pair of V-shaped pieces of pink Rosa Baveno granite, set flush with each other, transform into stable seating. In an example of the expressiveness of finish, the visitor will find *Spattered Table* (1974-1977), a simple wooden table that Burton found, splattered with primary colors, and exhibited atop a large horizontal pedestal, transforming it into minimalist sculpture. As Burton intended, Wrightwood 659 will display the work so that visitors will be able to glimpse its white underbelly, which playfully contrasts with its Abstract Expressionist-inspired outer surfaces. Installed nearby is the diminutive *Child's Table*

and *Chair* (1978), which could be an example of a Bauhaus playroom set, were it not for its scale and red, blue, and yellow stretchers and splats.



Still another play on the formal possibilities of a vernacular form is seen in *Onyx Table* (1978-1981), a Parsons-style table so massive and heavy that it morphs from a piece of furniture into a work of art. At once opulent in its fine surface and luminosity and humorous in its mixed functionality, it anticipates the materiality and approach of Burton's later public works.

A star of *Shape Shift*, the spectacularly extroverted *Five-Part Storage Cubes* (1982), dominates a landing leading from the third to fourth floor. The stack of large yellow, red, orange, blue, and green cubes will be displayed with one of its doors open.

The artist continually riffed off the American vernacular, seen here in homages to the Adirondack chair, including one fabricated in yellow Formica and others conceived as abstract experiments—like *Aluminum Chair* (1980-1981), where the shape echoes the Adirondack sloping form, but the chair is constructed from triangular aluminum plates punctured by large circular apertures.

Scott Burton: Shape Shift features an array of little- or never-before-seen video, photographs, Polaroids, a poster, notes, and sketches related to Burton's proscenium performances. These include an oak table found and altered by Burton and repurposed as a performance prop; sketches that diagram movement and directions for performances; and *Individual Behavior Tableaux* (1980), the only known video of Burton's performance oeuvre, which documents the artist's last performance before he turned to furniture/object making full-time. Shot at the Berkeley Art Museum, the video captures the glacially slow enactment of a variety of gestures, poses, and behaviors. The poses stem not only from Burton's study of nonverbal communication but also allude to the bodily cues that signal sexual availability within gay cruising culture.



Wall and case displays document Burton's writings for *Art in America* magazine and other publications; seminal performances, including his early, site-specific installation *Furniture Landscape* (1970) at the University of Iowa where he brought pieces of furniture outdoors; the exhibition he organized of works by Brancusi at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) (1989); and his own sculpture, installed in MoMA's sculpture garden (1989). The MoMA garden installation featured his Parallelogram chairs, two of which have been added to the Wrightwood showing.

Finally, a slideshow presents views of Burton's many public art installations, including major works on the grounds of the Des Moines Art Center, Princeton University, the University of Houston, and the Waterfront Plaza at Battery Park City, in New York.

The Artist

Remembered as an artist, critic, and curator, Scott Burton was born in 1939 in Greensboro, Alabama, spent his formative years in Washington, DC, and received a BA degree from Columbia University (1962) and MFA from New York University (1963).

His critical writing appeared regularly in *ARTnews* and *Art in America* and in exhibition catalogues, including that for Harald Szeemann's landmark post-minimalist exhibition, *Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form* (1969 Kunsthalle Bern, Switzerland).

By the early 1970s, Burton was exhibiting in New York City, first with like-minded artists on the street, then in galleries and museums including the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, P.S. 1, and, in a solo exhibition, Artists Space. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Burton created an array of performances, furniture as sculpture, and public art environments inspired by his studies of body language, art history, and design. He also curated the inaugural exhibition in the Museum of Modern Art's now-lauded Artist's Choice series. Burton died of an AIDS-related illness in 1989.

His work is in dozens of collections, including the Art Institute of Chicago, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Museum of Modern Art, National Gallery of Art, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Princeton University Art Museum, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Tate, and the Walker Art Center. Almost all of the archival photographs, diagrams, drawings, and ephemera in the exhibition are on loan from the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) Archives, which maintains the Scott Burton Papers, its largest single-artist holding.

Performances and Special Events

On October 24 and 25 at Wrightwood 659, the New York-based founder of the Center for Experimental Lectures, Gordon Hall, will present a performance meditating on the condition of waiting and Burton's legacy. Public programs will also include a talk by art historian David J. Getsy, author of *Queer Behavior: Scott Burton and Performance Art* (University of Chicago Press, 2022). Getsy's lecture will take place at the Art Institute of Chicago at 6pm on October 9. Getsy will co-lead a tour of *Scott Burton: Shape Shift* the following day with the exhibition's curator Jess Wilcox. (Registration to come.)

Publication

Scott Burton: Shape Shift, the accompanying publication, is expected to serve as an essential source for scholars, artists, and others interested in the intentions and legacy of Scott Burton. The volume features essays by David J. Getsy and Jess Wilcox; writings by the artists Brendan Fernandes and Gordon Hall; contributions by Jeremy Johnston and Heather Alexis Smith; and a never-before-published excerpt from the transcript of a 1988 lecture by Burton.

The volume is co-published by the Pulitzer Arts Foundation and Alphawood Exhibitions and distributed by Yale University Press. Price \$50.

Also on View at Wrightwood 659

The Joffrey + Ballet in the U.S. is a large-scale exhibition celebrating the rich history of The Joffrey Ballet and the life of Robert Joffrey. The exhibition premiered at The New York Public Library for the Performing

Arts at Lincoln Center in 2024, marking the first major retrospective of the company. Drawing from the Joffrey archive, acquired by the Jerome Robbins Dance Division in 2017 as the Library's largest acquisition in a decade, the exhibition offers an in-depth look at the Joffrey's contributions to ballet in the U.S. Highlights include rare film from the original performance of the groundbreaking ballet *Astarte* and Anna Sokolow's *Opus 65*, as well as costumes, props, pointe shoes, posters, correspondence, and other ephemera from the company and Robert Joffrey's life. *The Joffrey + Ballet in the U.S.* is organized by The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts and curated by Dr. Julia Foulkes with assistance from Nicole Duffy. It is presented at Wrightwood 659 by Alphawood Exhibitions.

Ellen Altfest: Forever is a selection of 15 oil paintings by the American representational painter Ellen Altfest, known for her painstakingly labor-intensive canvases and her observation of things in the world often overlooked in art. From roughly tactile rocks, tangled branches, and tree bark, to the smoothness of houseplants, fabric, and men's skin—she condenses everyday essences into expressions of absolute clarity and intensity. Her paintings are characterized by surprising pairings of subjects, unorthodox cropping, and, perhaps most notably, scrupulously rendered naturally occurring textures and intricate surface features. Working directly from observation without photographic sources or references, she often spends months—and sometimes more than a year—on a single painting. *Ellen Altfest: Forever* is organized by the Frist Art Museum, Nashville, Tennessee, where it premiered earlier this year, and is curated by Mark Scala, Chief Curator, Frist Art Museum. *Ellen Altfest: Forever* is presented at Wrightwood 659 by Halsted A&A Foundation.

About Wrightwood 659

Wrightwood 659 hosts exhibitions on socially engaged art and architecture, on issues facing LGBTQ+ communities, and on Asian art and architecture. Located in Chicago's Lincoln Park neighborhood in a building transformed by Pritzker Prize winner Tadao Ando, Wrightwood 659 encourages visitors to engage with pressing issues of our time in an intimate and beautiful space. For additional information, please visit wrightwood659.org.

Hours of Operation and Tickets

Wrightwood 659 is open Thursdays 12 noon-7 pm; Fridays 12 noon-7 pm; Saturdays 10 am-5 pm. Tickets for the trio of exhibitions opening October 3 go on sale Thursday, September 4. Admission is \$20 and is available online only at <https://tickets.wrightwood659.org/events>. Please note, admission is by advance ticket only. Walk-ups are not permitted.

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PHOTO CREDITS:

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2. Installation view of *Scott Burton: Shape Shift* at the Pulitzer Arts Foundation, September 6, 2024–February 2, 2025. © 2024 Estate of Scott Burton/ Artists Rights Society (ARS), photograph by Alise O'Brien Photography, © Pulitzer Arts Foundation and Alise O'Brien Photography.
3. Scott Burton, *Onyx Table*, 1978–81, onyx marble, steel, and fluorescent lights, 29 3/4 × 62 1/4 × 62 1/4 inches, (75.6 × 158.1 × 158.1 cm), © 2024 Estate of Scott Burton/ Artists Rights Society (ARS), The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Scott Burton Fund, 2000, photograph by Alise O'Brien Photography, © Pulitzer Arts Foundation and Alise O'Brien Photography.
4. Scott Burton, *Study pose for Individual Behavior Tableaux included in "Documenta 6,"* 1977, Polaroid, 4 1/4 × 3 1/2 inches (10.8 × 8.9 cm), Scott Burton Papers, II.75. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York, © 2024 Estate of Scott Burton/ Artist Rights. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY