

1–2 pm

Gordon Hall

[Lecture-performance originally presented in conjunction with *Scott Burton: Shape Shift* at The Pulitzer Arts Foundation, October 19, 2024. Re-presented at *Tom Burr: The Torrington Project* on October 25, 2024.]



Good afternoon, and thank you all for joining me here today. I love being in the audience waiting for a performance to start. Anticipating what will happen next . . . attuned to every sound and change of light. Is it starting? Has it already begun? Sitting in a crowd, all pointing our attention in the same direction, oriented away from ourselves, anonymous and together, here for a purpose. *Waiting*.

I usually enjoy this part more than what happens once it begins, but anticipation requires an object, something that comes next, an after to the before. So here we are, and eventually it must begin.



I'll start with a memory: I'm on a train heading south through New York State toward Manhattan, somewhere between Beacon and Yonkers. The train tracks run parallel to the Hudson River, which is glistening blue and orange outside the western windows. It's May 12, 2023, and at 4:56 p.m. the sun is low in the sky over the river. The sun's yellow light passes through the train car window and hits the phone screen of a young woman sitting across the aisle. On the ceiling darts a glowing rectangle, punctuated by the crisp shadows of her thumbs as they move about the bottom of her phone screen. Fixated, I pull out my phone and capture a video of this refracted ceiling broadcast. She shifts her position and the bouncing light vanishes.

Over the next several months, I made an artwork from this experience, a digital animation which I titled *May 12, 4:56 pm*. When I make my sculptures out of wood, concrete, fabric, or paper, I'm often painstakingly remaking objects I find in the world, seeking the intimate connection with a thing I find through carefully studied replication. Only here, instead of concrete or wood, I have light bouncing through a lens dictated by a digital file. It's a portrait of this fleeting interstitial conversation between the sun, the train, and this stranger's phone. I was seeing the form, but not the content, of another's solitude as we waited to arrive at our destinations, together, side by side, each absorbed in our own private realms.



May 1986: Scott Burton stands near his recently completed public artwork, titled *Modular Six-Unit Seating*, in downtown Pittsburgh. Six polished red granite L-shaped forms gather in a circle, facing in toward each other. Burton gestures toward a group of women standing nearby and remarks, "That's my audience—people waiting for people."¹

Most people do not like to wait. When we wait, we are held captive in time by forces we don't control. Oriented toward an unknowable future, we lose our agency as we feel trapped in a perpetual present that we can only hope to endure. Do I sound hyperbolic? Waiting, from what I can tell, is one of the most universally reviled human experiences, whether one waits for a subway, a meal, a paycheck, a package, or a text message.

¹ Patricia Lowry, "Artist Pulls Up Chairs at One Mellon Plaza," *Pittsburgh Press*, May 15, 1986.

Artist pulls up chairs at One Mellon plaza

By Patricia Lowry

The Pittsburgh Press

The tall man in the dark suit watched intently as artist Scott Burton directed the installation of his six polished granite chairs in the plaza of One Mellon Bank Center.

"What's your interpretation of this?" he asked Burton.

Burton turned to the man and smiled. "Chairs don't need an interpretation."

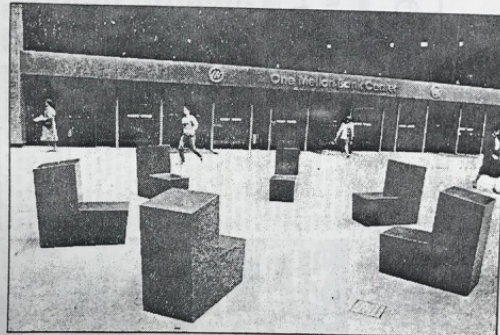
Burton flew in from New York City yesterday to position the massive, geometric, L-shaped chairs, purchased by Mellon Bank from the 1985 Carnegie International. He had considered placing them randomly around the plaza, but because of the openness of the space, "with people coming at you from every direction," he opted instead to group them in an informal circle. "If the circle works, it will make a kind of room. It's all architecture."

Burton, 46, is an affable, modest man and one of a handful of artists who started out making more traditional art and now are on to something else — art designed specifically for public places, art that is a hybrid of sculpture and landscape architecture.

"In the '60s, painting and sculpture were the most meaningful of the arts. Now I don't think they are," Burton calls today's art "vapid" and consumer-oriented, and believes art has "very much lost its social meaning."

He believes that "in some way my work is a critique of painting and sculpture, of art as we know it." He is looking for "some kind of restored connection to a larger society than just the art world."

Born and raised in Alabama, Burton moved to New York City in the late '50s to attend Columbia and New York universities, and has lived there ever since. He dabbled in conceptual and performance art ("I know, who didn't?") and even art criticism before making a name



John Sauer/The Pittsburgh Press

Scott Burton's granite chairs at One Mellon Bank Center

for himself as a furniture artist in the '70s. His first granite chairs were exhibited in 1980, and he has since completed commissions in public and private buildings around the country, often designing not only the seating, but the surroundings — the lighting, floor design and plantings.

Current commissions include the atrium of the Equitable Center's Tower West Building in New York, the plaza of the World Financial Center in New York's Battery Park City, and the courtyard of a new federal office building in Portland, Ore.

Burton says he owes his evolution to the

opening up of the art world in the early '70s to feminist, political, conceptual and performance art, allowing "an oddball artist like myself to emerge."

He wants his works to succeed "on a level where they are attractive and useful to people," and says he'll be pleased if Grant Street regulars sit on his six granite chairs and take note of the architectural details in the Frick Building, Two Mellon Bank Center (formerly the Union Trust Building) and the courthouse.

"You see those three women behind you, standing there? That's my audience — people waiting for people."

The philosopher Henri Bergson offers an analysis that articulates the particular discontent of waiting. Bergson's phenomenology makes a crucial distinction between time as it is measured and time as it is lived—the time of clocks as opposed to our inconsistent first-person experience of time. Bergson points out that when we are absorbed in activities, we do not viscerally register the passage of time. But when time fails to conform to our needs, when time is not doing what we want it to do, we become aware of its existence. And painfully so. "It is we," he writes, "who are passing when we say time passes."² Waiting, for Bergson, is agonizing because it thrusts us, without our consent, into a palpable awareness of our own troubled relationship to time. "Impatience" is what we call this agitation.

How, then, can we describe what waiting is? In a recent interview between the historian Helmut Puff and the political theorist Bernardo Zacka, they explore what they call "the architectures of waiting" as spaces in which we assemble in expectant idleness, offering this working definition of waiting: Waiting is a "temporally bounded condition in which time becomes experiential."³ Now, it is plausible that mobile technologies, specifically our phones, have minimized the amount of time we all wait, unoccupied, insofar as they offer

² Henri Bergson, "Duration and Simultaneity," in *Henri Bergson: Key Writings*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson and John Ó Maoilearca (Continuum, 2002), 265. Also see Harold Schweizer, "A Brief Theory of Waiting: Henri Bergson's Lump of Sugar," in *On Waiting* (Routledge, 2008), 14–35.

³ Helmut Puff, "Waiting in the Antechamber," in *Timescapes of Waiting: Spaces of Stasis, Delay and Deferral*, ed. Christoph Singer, Robert Wirth, and Olaf Berwald (Brill, 2019), 19, quoted in Helmut Puff and Bernardo Zacka, "The Architectures of Waiting: Helmut Puff and Bernardo Zacka in Conversation," *Contemporary Political Theory* 22, no. 2 (June 2023): 266.

infinite ways to engage and entertain ourselves. We live in the era of mobility and immediacy, and one could argue that the situations in which we purely wait, without anything else to occupy us, are becoming an endangered species of experience.⁴ Perhaps this diminishment of waiting is a nonevent, or even a desirable development. Who will miss waiting? Is the disappearance of unoccupied time a loss worth grieving?

Simultaneously, the large-scale power differentials between groups of people express themselves in the language of waiting. Whether one needs government support, medical benefits, asylum, passage through a checkpoint, or permission to leave prison, millions of people around the world wait for conditions needed to sustain life. Who waits, for what, for how long, and from whom is a map of domination and subjugation. This global topography of waiting has been described by anthropologists Andreas Bandak and Manpreet K. Janeja as “the politics of waiting”—defined as “the structural and institutional conditions that compel people to wait.”⁵ Here, they distinguish the politics of waiting from what they describe as “the poetics of waiting”—“the existential affordances of being placed in temporal relations, gaps and intervals where the outcome is uncertain.”⁶ If we define “affordance” in the tradition of James J. Gibson’s theory of affordances as an object’s possible range of uses in a given situation,⁷ we can ask ourselves: What are these “existential affordances” that waiting offers? In other words, what happens in these gaps?

We often experience waiting as a suspension of time—we are at odds with time, and this misalignment casts us outside the shared temporal world we usually inhabit without friction. Theorist Lisa Baraitser describes her book *Enduring Time* as “an unfinishable book about time’s suspension—modes of waiting, staying, delaying, enduring, persisting, repeating, maintaining, preserving, and remaining—that produce felt experiences of time *not passing*.”⁸ For Baraitser, it is specifically these contexts of time’s suspension to which we must direct our attention. She goes on to explain the value and meaning of these experiences of suspended time, despite the fact that they are often “arduous, boring, and mundane, or simply unbearable.”⁹

Waiting is an insult to capitalism’s temporality that links time and usefulness. It is a waste of time; a rebuke to the internalized demand to make the most of our time. Time’s standardization makes it a resource that can be used well or used poorly, and waiting is widely believed to be a poor use of our time.

But waiting is more than just an obstacle to productivity. These intervals of wasted time can exceed the distaste we have for them. Beyond the discomfort of waiting lies an orientation toward an uncertain future. In this uncertainty, the agony of waiting sometimes gives way to

⁴ For an extended discussion on waiting and smartphones, see Ellie Anderson and David Peña-Guzmán, hosts, *Overthink*, episode 57, “Waiting,” August 2, 2022, <https://overthinkpodcast.com/episodes/episode-57>.

⁵ Manpreet K. Janeja and Andreas Bandak, eds., “Introduction: Worth the Wait,” in *Ethnographies of Waiting: Doubt, Hope and Uncertainty* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 3.

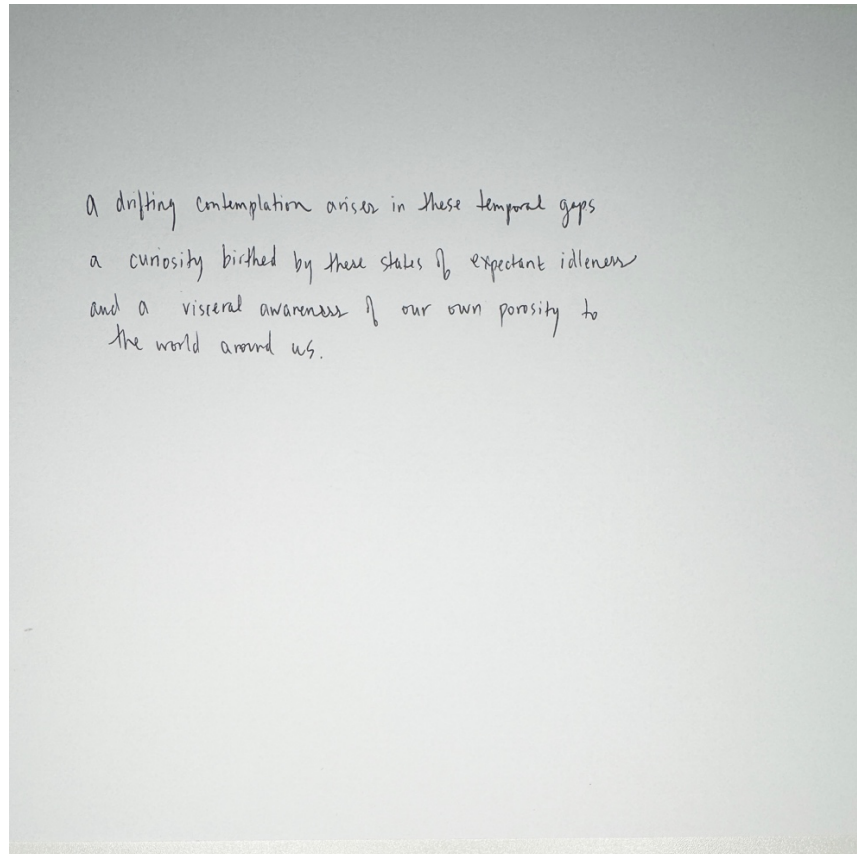
⁶ Janeja and Bandak, “Introduction,” 3.

⁷ James J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (Houghton Mifflin, 1979).

⁸ Lisa Baraitser, *Enduring Time* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 2.

⁹ Baraitser, *Enduring Time*, 2.

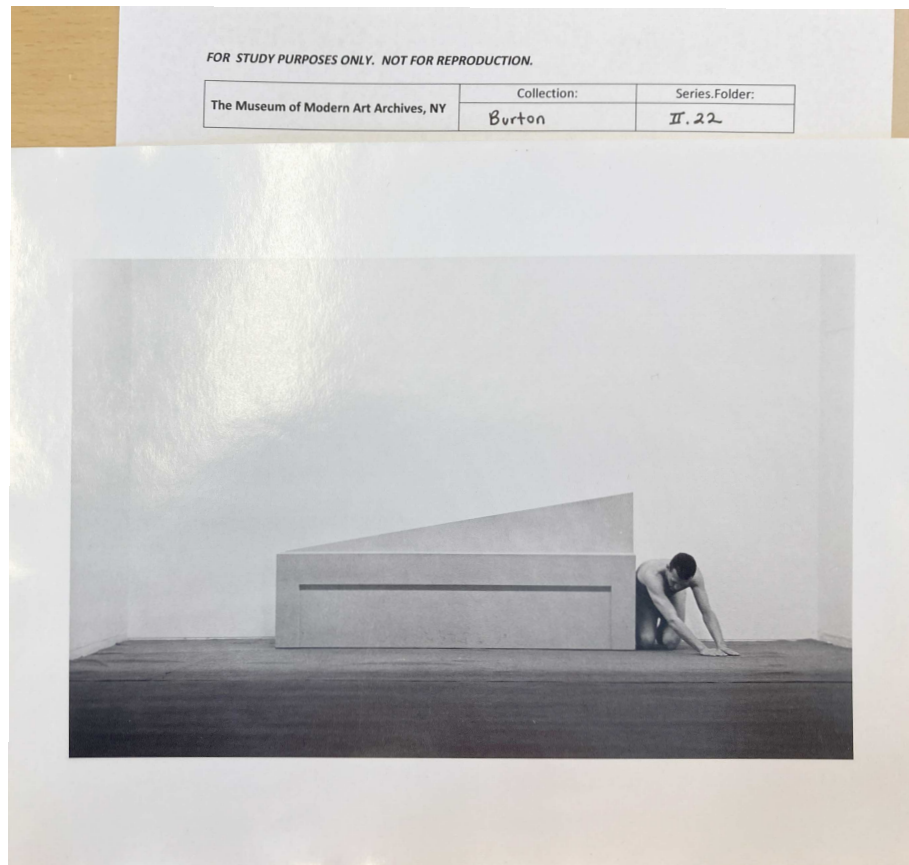
other sensations: A drifting contemplation arises in these temporal gaps, a curiosity birthed by these states of expectant idleness, and a visceral awareness of our own porosity to the world around us. The agitation of waiting sometimes feels like a door. Estranged from my regular momentum, I walk through, and I find myself in a new orientation to my surroundings.



Thinking about this array of waiting's capacities, it is unsurprising to discover that waiting plays a central, yet overlooked, role in creative work. I sit in a chair in my studio and look at my sculptures and wait to know what to do next. I sit in front of my computer writing this lecture and wait for the right word to come to me. There is no way to rush it; all I can do is position myself to meet what arrives, *if* anything ever arrives. There is risk in waiting, as we use up our time with the hope—*but never the assurance*—that something useful will come from it. In creative work, we *always* may be wasting our time. This refusal to guarantee anything of value draws me to waiting as a method and an object of inquiry, despite—or perhaps because of—waiting's inefficiency and uncertainty.

Scott Burton's interest in waiting began long before his public sculptures offered people places to wait. His *Behavior Tableaux* performances of the 1970s used waiting as a primary method, asking—or forcing—his audiences to endure long periods of silent expectation in close proximity to one another. Burton seated his audience in two tightly packed rows of chairs arranged some fifty to seventy-five feet away from the glacially slow and silent

movements of the distant performers. This arrangement divided the audience's attention between the performance itself and the proximity of the hands, thighs, and breathing of the strangers sitting on either side. Audience members became increasingly aware of one another as the minutes passed. The audience watched but also waited—together, side by side, in the dark. Scott Burton's friend Jane Kaufman recalled that "Scott always said: 'On the other side of boredom is creativity.'"¹⁰



By the 1980s, Burton had stopped making performances and shifted toward his public seating sculptures. Gone were the lithe naked men in platform shoes, the slow-motion movements modeled on the poses he knew from gay bars and bathhouses. Now, everyday people sat on his sculptures, often with no knowledge that they were artworks. By design, the overtness of Burton's performances of the '70s transformed into the anonymity of his public sculptures. The audiences of the *Behavior Tableaux* performances transformed to become the public itself, Burton's ideal audience: "people waiting for people."¹¹ While on the surface this shift could be seen as a rupture in his practice, Burton's public sculptures of

¹⁰ For a beautiful account of the audience experience of the *Behavior Tableaux* performances, see David J. Getsy, "The Emotional Nature of the Number of Inches Between Them: *Behavior Tableaux*, 1972–80," in *Queer Behavior: Scott Burton and Performance Art* (University of Chicago Press, 2022), 118–30.

¹¹ Lowry, "Artist Pulls Up Chairs at One Mellon Plaza," *Pittsburgh Press*.

the 1980s were in fact a continuation of his performances' investigations into the power relations between bodies, objects, and architecture in public space.

We could say that Burton's public seating sculptures offer more interesting places to wait—the sculptural equivalent of beautiful, well-designed public waiting rooms.¹² Seen through the lens of today's cities' deeply ableist and anti-homeless relationship with sitting, exemplified here in what is known as “hostile architecture,” there is radicality in providing an accessible place for people to sit, rest, or sleep.¹³



But this is just the first layer of Burton's engagement with both the politics and poetics of support. One of Burton's last projects was his MoMA Artist's Choice exhibition, in which he exhibited only the bases of Brancusi's sculptures. Brancusi's bases were, to Burton, “*sculptures of tables*”: “The object as object but with a (supportive) role the *nonfunctional* works do not

¹² This criticism of Burton's work as complicit in the exploitation of workers in late-capitalist urban environments was articulated by Rosalyn Deutsche and Benjamin Buchloh. For an account of this critique, see David Getsy, “On Being a Public Artist with AIDS in 80s America: Scott Burton and Conformational Masking,” lecture at the Art AIDS America conference, University of Chicago, March 11, 2017, <https://vimeo.com/208840307>.

¹³ Sometimes referred to as “hostile architecture,” this approach to urban space reduces public seating to combat loitering and homelessness. New York's Grand Central Station, in particular, the destination of the train mentioned at the opening of this essay, no longer has any seating that is not for paying customers. For more information about hostile architecture, see “‘Hostile Architecture’: How Public Spaces Keep the Public Out,” *New York Times*, November 8, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/08/nyregion/hostile-architecture-nyc.html>.

have.” Burton described the pedestal-table that holds up a Brancusi sculpture as a “*usable* meditation on utilitarian form.”¹⁴

Similarly, his public seating sculptures are both places to wait and places to consider waiting in all of its permeability. Rather than distracting us from our waiting, Burton’s public seating sculptures frame waiting itself as meriting our attention. His sculptures operate as he describes Brancusi’s pedestals—as objects of both function and contemplation of the meaning of their supportive use. They wait for us to use them to wait for others.

In numerous contexts, Burton described art as a venue for radical politics and a “moral example”: “Any chair is useful but a very striking looking chair—something that isn’t like a usual chair—can make people perhaps more flexible in their attitudes to accept more things—to become more democratic about what a chair is. They may even become more democratic about what a person is. Art can be a moral example.”¹⁵ Burton’s many chairs, seats, benches, and stools attest to the promise of the chair itself as a *moral example* that privileges anticipation, subordination, need, and an erotics of receptiveness. His description of art as a moral example is distinct from art that moralizes, telling us what to think and feel. Instead, he offers us objects that invite us into modes of relating that reflect values that differ from those with which we may be familiar.

Burton’s focus on seating in its generosity and openness to the bodies of strangers cannot be unwound from the context of the early years of the AIDS crisis and his own diagnosis around 1983. During a time when bodily contact was pathologized and stigmatized, he made sculptures that welcomed the bodies of strangers, supporting anyone who arrived in need of rest. Burton’s engagement with waiting as a category of experience mirrored the role that waiting played in the AIDS crisis itself, and in many experiences of illness and disability.¹⁶ Waiting for your test results, for assistance, for a friend to visit, for new treatments to become available, to live, to die, in hope, doubt, fear, and anticipation. Might Burton have wanted us to consider the experience of waiting itself as a form of living nonetheless, under the most precarious circumstances?

As the art historian David Getsy has compellingly argued, those that couldn’t see, or actively rejected, Burton’s embrace of objects of support “did not appreciate the resilience, the fortitude, the control, and the generosity that it takes to be the support, to be the bottom.”¹⁷ Getsy describes this mode of valuing the work of supporting and receiving as “critical passivity.”¹⁸ This critical passivity is at the core of the politics of Burton’s work, manifested across his performances, sculptures, and public art, and, ultimately, extending to what he

¹⁴ Scott Burton, “My Brancusi,” *Art in America*, March 1990, 150. The exhibition *Artist’s Choice: Burton on Brancusi* was presented at MoMA from April 7 to June 28, 1989. Burton passed away in December 1989, and “My Brancusi” was published posthumously in *Art in America* in March 1990. For more information, see “Artist’s Choice: Burton on Brancusi,” MoMA, <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/2133>.

¹⁵ Scott Burton, interview by Edward Brooks DeCelle, March 1980, quoted in David J. Getsy, *Queer Behavior*, 272.

¹⁶ Waiting recurs as a theme across theories and accounts of disability. For two recent examples, see Carolyn Lazard and Jesse Cohen, *Notes for the Waiting Room*, 2017, and Taraneh Fazeli, “Time After Time,” in *Waiting*, ed. Avram Alpert and Sreshta Rit Premnath, *Shifter* 25 (2021): 29–33.

¹⁷ Getsy, “On Being a Public Artist.”

¹⁸ Getsy, “On Being a Public Artist.”

came to understand as the artist's relationship to the public: to serve.¹⁹ When we consider waiting through the lens of Burton's work, we find that waiting's devaluation originates from our discomfort with the receptiveness and lack of control that defines it. We revile waiting as a scene of interdependence and need. When we wait we are beholden to one another and to the world, open to *what might happen*. Scott Burton welcomes us into this critical passivity, pointing us toward the value and erotics of experiences of waiting.

In 1970, some sixteen years before Burton describes his audience as "people waiting for people," he writes a one-sentence performance score that reads as follows:

Standing on a corner, waiting for someone, who does not come.²⁰

Can we accept Burton's invitation to orient ourselves toward waiting itself? In hope and fear, we loiter, linger, tarry, daydream, wait for someone who might not come. We find ourselves on the outskirts of usefulness, adrift in the mirrored pool of suspended time. The sun is setting in the west, inching ever so slowly across a pair of hands in an adjacent lap. We submit, and to our surprise, we find that we enjoy it.



¹⁹ As Burton said, "What office workers do in their lunch-time hour is more important than my pushing the limits of my self-expression." Quoted in Rui Mateus Amaral, "Garden Court," in *Garden Court, Scott Burton* (Amaral & P., 2022), 8.

²⁰ David J. Getsy, ed., "Literalist Theater (1970)," in *Scott Burton: Collected Writings on Art and Performance, 1965–1975* (Sobercove Press, 2012), 219.

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