Scott Burton's performance works focus on an essentially hidden language system, which in day to day experience is drowned out by a barrage of verbal distraction. The subject matter of Burton's performances is the non-verbal, social interaction between the psychologicalists refer to as body language and personal space behavior. Since 1970, Burton has developed a series of performance works collectively titled Behavior Tableaux. In each work, a performer or group of performers present a series of body movements symbolizing various themes: dominance/submission, attraction/rejection, acknowledgement/rejection, among others.

These communicative body signals are distinct from either emotional expression or sign language (i.e.-gestures). They are, rather, subtle, unconscious signals our minds unconsciously send out and which communicate on a subliminal wavelength. Burton's performances are precisely calculated to isolate and focus on this micro-language system in such a way as to unravel it from the larger system of signals that constitute human communicational behavior.

While Burton's method of presentation in the form of live tableaux is distinct from the performing arts of dance and theater on the one hand and static sculptural or pictorial imagery on the other, each of these disciplines seems to have helped shape his work to some extent. A characteristic immediately apparent in Burton's performances is a sense of pictorialization or flattening out of the imagery. As in his earlier performances, Burton's work for MATRIX, Individual Behavior Tableaux, 1980, utilizes the format of tableaux vivant or "living pictures." The work takes place in a long, narrow gallery space. The audience, limited to 20, is situated some 80 feet from an unclothed performer elevated on platform soles. The performer--Burton does not perform himself--is a male of tall and slender proportions who is presented anonymously. Other than an elegant wooden chaise lounge of minimal form designed by the artist, there are no backdrops or props. The stark back wall of the gallery frames the silent performance. Both the performer's presence and surrounding environment are neutralized in order to focus the spectator's attention on the behavioral vocabulary. Informed by the aesthetic associated with Minimal sculpture of the mid 1960s, Burton's performances are characterized by an assertive, conceptual control combined with highly reductive, visual form.

Running approximately 40 minutes, Individual Behavior Tableaux consists of three subject themes, each represented by 10 to 15 tableaux separated by blackouts. The performer moves at a controlled and deliberate pace suggesting slow motion. The performer's movements are essentially stripped of both technical virtuosity and narrative context--and thus operate just outside the vocabulary of dance, both kinetically and temporally. Individual Behavior Tableaux is less about the aesthetics and continuity of movement than it is about human behavior abstracted and expressed through a kind of sculptural positioning of the body. The element of stillness in Burton's work is considerable. Also, the prolonged duration and lingering character of each action gives the performer the appearance of being very literal and object-like. The performer's elevated foot gear functions as a kind of pedestal, further reinforcing a relationship with sculpture. As such, Burton's performance establishes a peculiar, almost surreal sense of time, as narrative is dissolved by the silent, sculptural character of the performing figure. Burton's Behavior Tableaux bear some relationship to his furniture pieces, which take the form of abstracted and highly formalized functional objects such as chairs, tables, benches, etc. These works define themselves somewhere between furniture and sculpture. Like Chair, 1979 (currently on view in Gallery 5) or the minimal chaise lounge used in this performance, Burton's tableaux are also a kind of enigmatic pseudo-sculpture--or living sculpture, as it were.

It is difficult to categorize Burton's work in any specific genre. He establishes a form of expression more immediate than that of static painting or sculpture, and at the same time challenges the basic premises of live theatrical narrative. At the expense of traditional dramatic development, he reduces action to a minimum in an attempt to isolate a system of emotional signals to the point of acute focus. Burton's intense concentration of vision results in an ultimate sense of focus and detachment that verges on aggression. Confronted with a frustratingly cool and precise investigation of behavior, we are simultaneously engaged and repelled, but, ultimately, attentive.

Individual Behavior Tableaux, 1980 was performed in an early version, using a female performer (Elke Solomon), at the Idea Warehouse, Institute for Art and Urban Resources, New York City in 1975; another version was performed, using a male performer (Alfred Guido and subsequently Julius Smith) at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, the Philadelphia College of Art, and Documenta VI, Kassel, West Germany all in 1977.


Michael Auping
Associate Curator
Works in MATRIX:
Individual Behavior Tableaux, 1980, performed by Kent Hines, 40 minutes.

Selected Performances:

Selected Bibliography about Burton:
de Ak, Edit and Walter Robinson, "An Article on Scott Burton in the Form of a Resume," Art-Rite, no. 8 (Winter 1975) pp. 8 - 10.


Selected Group Exhibitions, Furniture Works:

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