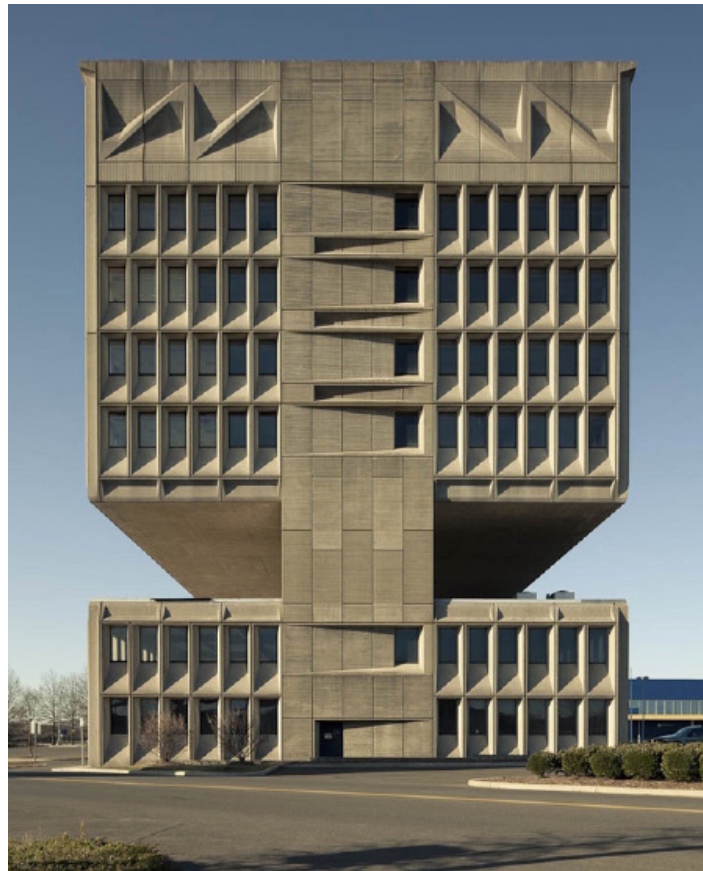


ARTFORUM



Marcel Breuer, Pirelli Building, 1969, New Haven.

For nearly three decades, Tom Burr's sculptures, writings, collages, and photographs have tended to focus on access, site-specificity, the confluence of public and private environments, and the constructed persona. Here, he discusses his yearlong project "Tom Burr / New Haven"—conceived as part of Bortolami Gallery's "Artist / City" initiative—for which Burr will occupy and activate the ground floor of the IKEA-owned, Marcel Breuer-designed Pirelli building in New Haven, beginning in March 2017. Also in New Haven, Burr will participate in a talk about the project on February 22 at 5:30 PM at the Yale University Art Gallery. Additionally, in 2017, he will present solo exhibitions at Maureen Paley in London from June 2 through July 22; the Westfälischer Kunstverein in Münster from June 10 through October 1; and Galerie Neu in Berlin from October 26 through November 30, 2017.

WHEN THE POSSIBILITY TO DO THIS PROJECT AROSE, I thought about the Dia Art Foundation in an earlier era: It was all about going outside, creating an exoticism through location and geography. I wanted to do something more banal than those Dia projects though, something that wasn't utopian. And then I thought, "Well, New Haven." It's such a banal city in some ways but it also has an autobiographical fold for me.

I was born there a handful of years before the Pirelli building was built, so it was always in

my mind while I was growing up. Armstrong Rubber commissioned the building in 1968 for its factory and executive offices, and it became an iconic emblem as the entrance to the city off Interstate 95, particularly at a time when the city was gaining attention for its urban renewal and restructuring. I'm interested in how this type of Brutalist architecture in New Haven, and elsewhere, came to represent failure, as its progressive utopian strategy and sense of optimism against the economic and racial problems of the inner city quickly dissipated. It failed to produce the results it promised. That is the New Haven that left an impression on me.

About fifteen years ago, the Pirelli building was purchased by IKEA with the intention to use the site for a new store. The building originally had a horizontal warehouse extension that was then amputated (in my mind, it became a body that was dismembered), in order to make room for the IKEA parking lot. The rest of the existing building was left standing, abandoned, as we know it today.

Leasing the building from IKEA was not a problem. But complications of access, and how to adhere to local codes—fire codes, capacity issues—became problematic and therefore became a real part of the project and part of how I think about what I'm creating there. There are all sorts of issues with the use and rehabilitation of this building—this concrete corpse—that inspire me. I think of it as an object to be activated, and I want to treat these activations as a series of swipes, iterations, or phases.



Excerpt from Tom Burr's interview for 500 Words.

I always feel I walk within structures that have preceded me, conditions already produced. Marcel Breuer designed the building based on a six-by-six modular, which is my height. I'm working on a series of images depicting the surface of the walls of the house that I grew up in: rough plaster walls that feel like concrete—they resemble a sidewalk. They were never painted. It's an enigmatic surface that was strangely productive for me as a child. I would find patterns in it and scrape myself against it—a very sensual and sensory experience that feeds into my relationship with the materiality of the Breuer building, which has concrete as its skin, as its envelope. I want to conflate that domestic space with this other space, a former factory and executive office: one skin onto, or into, another.

I often wonder whether my works are decoys: Am I telling anything about myself when I make references to my own name, my own body? I'm aware that these things are

constructed and possibly leading you nowhere. But at the same time, there is something. There really are these specific walls, and I'm concerned with how to construct something out of that materiality while always having this distance that I find meaningful. I'm often suspicious of anything that smacks of truth-saying in artmaking, maybe because of the mythology that we're always trudging through, so much bullshit about what it is to be an artist, and about authenticity—with the art object or with the artist—that we're trying to navigate. However, there are things to be said; there are stories to be told.

So much of my specificity as an author, as an artist, has to do with being a queer subject. And yet I'm other things beyond that. We're multiple things simultaneously. I'm also white, and male. I became interested in throwing these things into the foreground, not letting them exist in an anonymous vessel. I'm interested in this project being a culmination of these facets, these problems/masquerades/privileges/disappointments, of both this particular building and my own body. All of these conditions that operate both metaphorically and actually, manifest in the presence of the building and in the hopes and dreams and expectations and all the disappointments and abandonments as well. Whether or not these subjectivities are "meaningful"? I don't know. They're materials that are there to use, like the building itself.

— *As told to Julian Elias Bronner*