

# TOM BURR/NEW HAVEN BODY/BUILDING: ALWAYS ALREADY HAPPENING

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450 Sargent Drive, New Haven, Connecticut

Bortolami is pleased to announce the third and final phase of Tom Burr/New Haven, alternatively titled *BODY / BUILDING*, the third project of the gallery's Artist/City programming initiative. Over the past six months, Burr has occupied and activated the first floor of the Marcel Breuer-designed Armstrong Rubber Company, later and more colloquially known as the "Pirelli Building" for the Pirelli Tire Company. This Brutalist masterpiece has served as the site of an evolving exhibition that commenced with the first phase, *Pre-Existing Conditions*, and will conclude with the final phase, *Always Already Happening*, an ongoing durational performance consisting of simultaneous readings throughout the space.

Through a consideration of the building as a body, and conversely, thinking of bodies (including his own) as a building or construction, Burr is collapsing one into the other. Located in the artist's hometown, the Breuer-designed building constitutes a cipher for the various social and political concerns central to Burr's work, not to mention the artist's own autobiography. As he explains, "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. The building was envisioned and constructed as a symbol of utopian urban strategy but, like many examples of Brutalism, became a representation of the failure of Modernism's idealistic aspirations.

IKEA purchased the building in the early 2000s, at which time the two-level extension that contained the warehouse and Armstrong's research and development departments was removed to make way for IKEA's use. Since IKEA initially granted Burr the opportunity to use the building, "complications of access and how to adhere to local codes—fire codes, capacity issues—became problematic and therefore a real part of the project and part of how I think about what I'm creating there," Burr explains. The resulting works that comprise *Pre-Existing Conditions*, the initial installation, serve as elements of code-compliance, while at the same time grappling with issues of the body, identity, and site-specificity.

After extensive demolition and remediation to the lobby's original interiors, local codes required new railings. Burr produced and engraved new stainless steel railings with the complete text of Jean Genet's "May Day Speech" delivered at Yale on the occasion of the 1970 May Day Rally (shortly after the construction of the building) in support of the Black Panthers, and their recently imprisoned founder, Bobby Seale. Burr named this site-responsive sculptural work *The Railings (May 1970)*.

Local code also deemed that several sections of remaining floor tile—footprints of former restrooms and washrooms—were tripping hazards, and required that they be enclosed with additional railings. In Burr's imagination, these zones form Brechtian stages, rooms without walls, spaces for the construction of identity as well as privacy. They also form a rejoinder to his 1994 photographic series and text, "Unearthing The Public Restroom," a group of eight images that documented public restrooms in Manhattan at the time of their imminent destruction surrounding the AIDS crisis. Burr has made new sculptural compositions inside these railings that reference cultural figures strongly associated with New Haven in popular culture and his own personal history: Anni Albers, Jean Genet, J. Edgar Hoover, and Jim Morrison.

Burr's sculptural composition entitled *Women Who Work*, consists of a group of IKEA chairs facing away from a printed aluminum panel featuring a textile design by Albers. Burr positioned a book called "Women's Work: Textile Art from the Bauhaus" open on one of the empty chairs, suggesting an absent audience. In another composition, *Bae Genet / Grey Genet*, a portrait of Genet as a young man is positioned next to another portrait

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of him as an old man, a urinal partition original to the building separates the two. Works against the west wall of the building feature a sequence of images of The Doors's Jim Morrison performing at the New Haven Arena in 1967, just as a local policeman was arresting him for obscenity and incitement to riot, before dragging the rockstar offstage. Next to two bathroom doors, one labeled "Gentlemen" and the other without any label, Burr positioned a portrait of J. Edgar Hoover brandishing a gun. As the presiding FBI Director in 1970, Hoover ordered his agents to disrupt and discredit radical groups, like the Black Panthers who were on trial in New Haven at the time.

Burr also created a series of sculptural objects that toe the line between classical figuration and abstraction. Mounted on plywood pedestals, metallic coat stands display clothing and other personal effects, serving as "actors" that populate the exhibition space, conjuring absent bodies and former uses of the working environment.

Surrounding the original bay of elevators, Burr built a plywood and plexiglas structure that both prevents access to an open elevator shaft and exposed electrical equipment while allowing viewers to see the original granite details of the architecture. This structure supports several convex security mirrors, frequently used in parking garages, hospitals, office buildings, among other institutional spaces. These mirrors "catch" viewers both from above and below as they pass by the structure and peer into its interior.

Burr also addresses the site of the building's renovation. As per the artist's description, "The far-end wall of the demolished warehouse was brought in to cover the redeveloped northern end of the building, suturing the concrete skin onto the remaining portion of the gaping hole with few visible scars." The artist draws attention to this part of the building with a narrow white banner stretching across the length of the sutured wall like a long, unfurled bandage, a gesture that mirrors the building facade's current function as an advertising surface for IKEA's products and local community events.

After making this initial set of sculptural interventions, this past June, Burr presented the second phase of *BODY / BUILDING* at Bortolami, New York in a two person exhibition with Andrea Zittel entitled *concrete realities*. For this phase, Burr made a new suite of six "bulletin boards", a typology of work that he has been making since 2001. These works use *BODY / BUILDING* as their source material and form a dialogue with Burr's *Brutalist Bulletin Board* series (2002) that featured images of Brutalist architecture from New Haven in juxtaposition with images of Jim Morrison. Consisting of wood boards that Burr has pinned photographs and archival materials to, these boards respond to *Pre-Existing Conditions*, referring and responding to the figures present within the installation.

For the third and final phase, *Always Already Happening*, Burr will activate the ground floor of the Breuer-designed building with a group of "actors" reading texts by or responding to the legacy of Anni Albers, Jean Genet, and the Black Panthers. Spread throughout the installation, positioned near "zones of intensity" each person will read a specific text for the duration of the four-hour performance. Rather than reading in sequence, the actors will read simultaneously with one another. As viewers move around the space, they will catch snippets of text, in many ways mirroring the experience of reading *The Railings (May 1970)*.

Tom Burr (b. 1963 in New Haven, Connecticut) lives and works in New York. He has shown extensively throughout Europe and the United States. He most recently was the subject of a solo exhibition entitled *Surplus of Myself* at the Westfälischer Kunstverein concurrent with his participation in Skulptur Projekte Münster. His work was recently featured in "Questioning the Wall Itself" at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN. Upcoming projects include a solo exhibition at Savannah College of Art and Design in February, 2018. Burr's work has been collected by major museums internationally, including the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY; Migros Museum, Zurich, Switzerland; MOCA, Los Angeles, CA; MuMOK, Vienna, Austria; New York Public Library, New York, NY; Sammlung Grasslin, Germany; Sammlung Verbund, Vienna, Austria; Ludwig Museum, Köln, Germany; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, CA; FRAC, Champagne Ardenne, France; FRAC, Nord-Pas de Calais, France; Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, MD; and the Israel Museum, Jerusalem, Israel. Burr attended the School of Visual Arts and the Whitney Independent Study Program in New York.

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