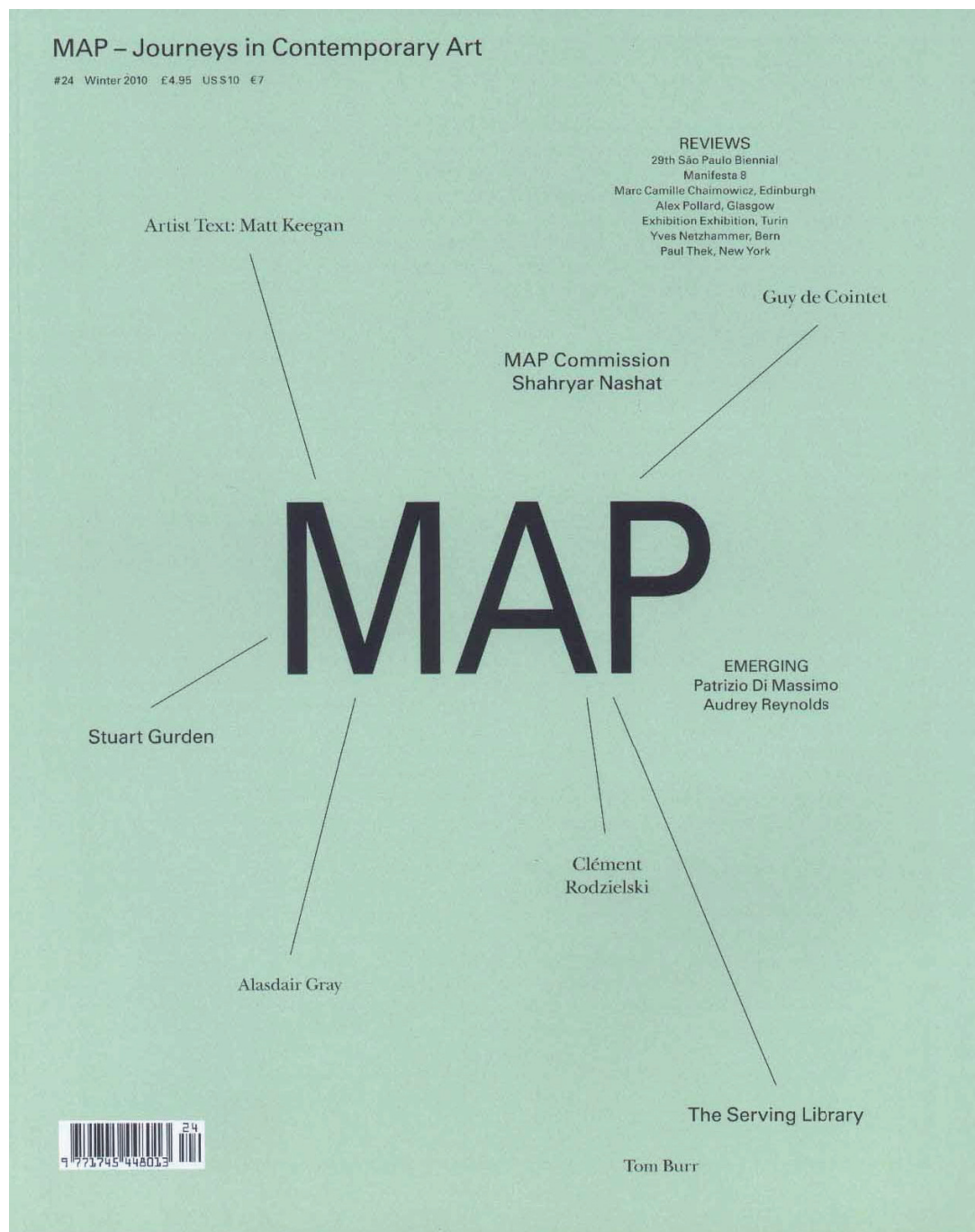


MAP magazine : *In conversation : Tom Burr*, par Steven Cairns
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In Conversation: Tom Burr

American sculptor Tom Burr talks to *Steven Cairns* about 'the persona of the artist', being categorised within genres, and the influence of great cities on his practice

Steven Cairns: I'm curious how you ended up coming to Edinburgh.

Tom Burr: My Berlin gallerist, Alexander Schroeder from Galerie Neu, had told me about the Randolph Cliff residency a while ago and I've always had a lot of Scottish fantasies, so I let them know that I was very much open to it. I'm here for a month, that's the longest stay possible. A lot of artists come for a week or two, which seems too short. Even a month is too short despite it not being a production related residency: it's not long enough to space out completely.

Cairns: When I was in Berlin for the biennale I saw your show at Mehringdamm 72.

Burr: That's Galerie Neu's second space, sort of. It's Galerie Neu, and it's not. The space is not dissimilar to this Edinburgh apartment actually, and I stayed there prior to the show. It's the kind of apartment that you get confused with over time: you think it has endless possibilities, but it becomes kind of claustrophobic, and a little overwhelming.

Cairns: I guess you shipped all that work over from the US?

Burr: Some of it, and some of it I produced in Berlin with people I've worked with for a long time. I don't really have any assistants who work with me full time, for better or worse. Just a person who does all the big work when I'm there—which is nice because they know my vernacular.

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Courtesy the artist and Bertram New York



Above: 'Movie Theater Seat in a Box', 1997, plywood, silver plexiglas mirror, carpet, theatre seats, chewing gum
Below: 'Dark Brown Murmur', 2010, plywood, mirrored plexiglas, fabric

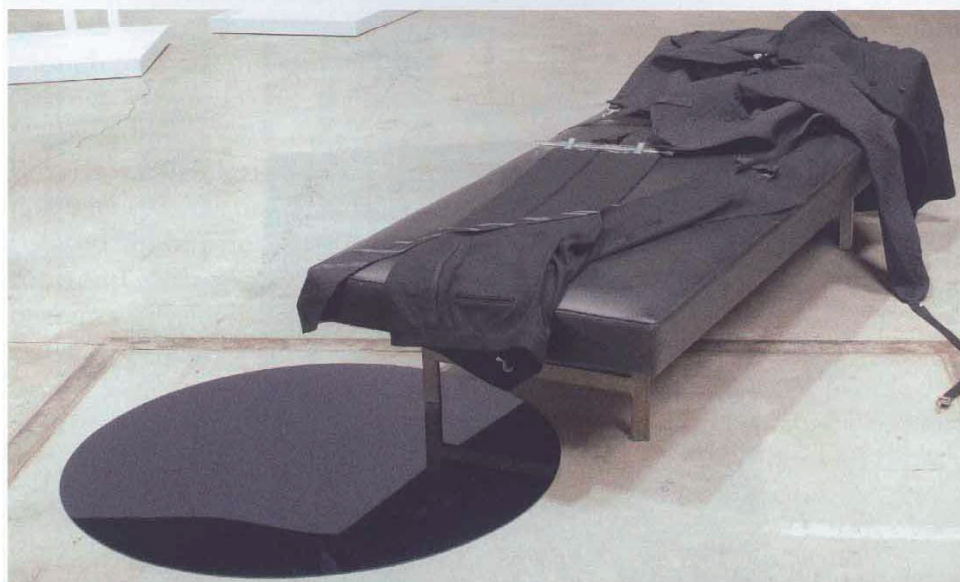
Courtesy the artist and MIZ2 Berlin. Copyright Stefan Corne





Above: Installation view *Addict Love*, SculptureCenter, New York, 2008

Below: 'Light Conversation', 2008, vinyl psychiatry couch, tuxedo, recreational straight jacket, neck tie, plastic hanger, mirrored plexiglas



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Cairns: Edinburgh's quite different from Berlin.

Burr: You know, I've talked to a lot of people in Edinburgh about the scene here, or the stillness here, and the conservative nature. For this kind of residency it's quite nice because you end up with nothing to do on many nights. Places like Berlin, or the same in New York, if you don't live there, are all-consuming. There is a romantic quality to Edinburgh—you find yourself taking long walks and thinking—it's not a bad place for that.

Cairns: You had some work in the *New Décor* group show at the Hayward Gallery, London this summer. There was a lot of amazing work in that show, but framing it all with a décor theme was difficult for me to get my head around.

Burr: It's kind of perverse, it had a punk thing going on—to be out there and not try to be elegant about it—that's what saved it. A little bit rough and ready with the idea of décor.

Cairns: What do you think about your work being classed under that kind of umbrella?

Burr: Maybe I'm too easy going. I didn't used to be, but I like being categorised under any umbrella because there are so many of them. My work gets located in so many places it doesn't really bother me. I even like it, encourage it sometimes. If I was in one particular niche I would think differently but I'm not. People say my work is about sex, or identity, or brutalism, or site-specificity—these things are cumulative and only understood over time. But if I were only under the rubric of décor, I'd probably hang myself.

Cairns: I see romantic notions in your work, and there's some sex in there as well.

Burr: Not necessarily the same thing (*laughs*)

Cairns: So does Edinburgh reflect that?

Burr: Does Edinburgh have a sexuality? Every place does. There are a lot of codes here and I don't know them, but I sense them: it has a conservatism, which seems frayed around the edges, *that* intrigues me. Something is breaking down and reinforcing itself simultaneously.

Cairns: You have been writing here too?

Burr: I always write when I'm travelling: sketching, making notes and synopsis of shows and ideas for new works. I've also been writing poems. It's not required, but it's encouraged that you leave some

sort of residue behind. So I've been working on a few poems. One is about a suicide bridge and another about a piece I had in the exhibition in Mehringdamm you mentioned—called 'Dark Brown Murmur'—I'm going to leave them here somehow, inside a closet door in one of the bedrooms, or just taped to a wall.

Cairns: Are your poems ever published?

Burr: They have been, a couple of times. You know it's funny, I think I've only written about five poems, but when *October* journal published 'sculpture in a constricted space' in 2007, I got more excited than I ever have been over an exhibition. It's not the Paris Review, but it's a start.

Cairns: I remember seeing your SculptureCenter show *Addict-Love*, 2008, a short while after that.

Burr: I hadn't worked with a New York gallery for many years—that was a strange masochistic thing to do, great in retrospect but it didn't feel like it then, it felt lonely. Historically I worked with a gallery called American Fine Arts which closed when Colin de Land died in 2003. I worked briefly with another gallery and then I just didn't. It was five of six years before I had a New York gallery again. I had galleries in Europe and everyone thought I had moved there. I was producing a lot of work in places like Berlin, a place New York hadn't entirely discovered and devoured. With *Addict-Love* I wanted to put my work out into New York again and try to find out who I'd like to work with. I'd done shows at the Swiss Institute and the Whitney but not any commercial gallery shows.

Cairns: And it worked out?

Burr: It did. It's a brutal kind of process, because I'd worked for a certain amount of time and everyone has these expectations about the decisions you should make—there are all these little networks and expected routes. It's tiring. There are benefits to some of that, but there are also lots of benefits to diversifying your situation—to challenges and change. American Fine Arts was the ultimate clubhouse, and I had done that for many years. Those were my private neuroses and I've worked them out.

Cairns: So in between the gallery closing and that show, you were making shows in Europe. Did that affect things in New York? Do you think Europe influenced your practice?

Burr: I think so. Maybe now people in New York like this notion of sensibility, affectation and affect—this notion of the interior and space, of dress, posture, pose and the artist as a persona. A self-conscious relationship to sensibility. I think these things are explored more in Europe.

I have always played with the idea that when you make work people are always searching for the artist within it. I made these pieces that were much more about sexuality and sexual space. People experienced this as a transparency, that it was directly about me, in an unmediated way. Maybe some viewers didn't seem to get that this was like a drag act with many layers of make-up. There is always going to be a looking for authenticity or clues to who I am, so I'm continually trying to make that more interesting. I think that came out of a European sensibility, or more exactly, my approach found affinities in Europe for a while.

Cairns: For me there is an absence of a figure, a person or people. The whole time I'm trying to think about where you are in the work, what you are

saying? Are you throwing people off intentionally, or is the fact that you are throwing people off in the first place the thing that calls you out?

Burr: I think I walk on both sides. I do think of it sometimes as a series of decoys. Someone once asked me about the figures I sometimes reference—Jim Morrison, Truman Capote, Eva Hesse or Kate Bush. Why do I choose them? It's always for about five different reasons. One is that I happen to like those people, or maybe identify with them on some level. Then there's a part of me that's a 17-year-old boy who wants to pin up these pictures on a bedroom wall, the Karen Kilimnick in me. And that's not quite interesting enough, so I want to question that, mess it up more and offer something else; a persona that is starting to unravel or fall apart. The Capote that I'm interested in isn't necessarily the young successful writer, but the drunk on TV that I remember when I was little, who was completely falling apart. Kate Bush when she retreats to the countryside and you don't quite know where she's going. She's probably crazy—these

Installation view, *Sentence*, Bortolami, New York, 2009





'Caged Kate', 2009, newspaper clippings, magazine pages, album sleeves, plastic record protectors, stockings, push pins, on dyed board

kinds of myths get created. So I'm dealing with the idea of the myth, a myth of myself, not in a strictly autobiographical way, but also in terms of what shoes I step in to and how I get through the day imagining myself in the third person. At the same time I try to allow earnest gestures to come through to make that drag, or that costuming, less exotic and very normal, and more ambiguous as well. It's a way of talking about how identity or subjectivity might be somewhere between a construction and a natural impulse.

Cairns: Do you think the viewer looks at your relationship to the work before they look for a relationship of their own? Does their relationship to the work come after they have done that?

Burr: Maybe, I haven't really thought about it like that.

Cairns: For me the idea of the figure being absent in the work can quite easily be translated to the

author being absent. You're looking at the absence of the author. In a way you're looking at *that* dialogue before you look at the work.

Burr: That's really interesting, and if what you say is true, if you have that flash of recognition, maybe it's funny that I start out by trying to create decoys, because people are looking for me. In fact, I make it all about that. (*laughs*) I did these pieces that were about my name, and I include my clothing sometimes too, so there are shreds of possibility, of authenticity. I think people are lured in by that like I am. Hopefully there is a residual relationship to wondering about yourself as a viewer. That's why I tried to work a little bit around the idea of Kate Bush, because it makes things more complicated. And because I happen to like her name. (*laughs*)

Steven Cairns is co-editor of MAP