

THE POEM

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Tom Burr

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Tom Burr's five *Polaroids (42 Street Structures)*, presented in the exhibition at The Poem, are situated within a broader corpus of works exhibited in November of 1995, on the occasion of the artist's now canonical exhibition, *42 Street Structures*, at American Fine Arts Co., New York.

This body of work must be understood in light of the immediate context of ideological policies aimed at the systematic eradication of sites of homosexual sociability, encounter, and sexuality—particularly establishments belonging to the adult entertainment industry in the Times Square district, largely concentrated along 42nd Street—and implemented under the mayoral administration of Rudolph Giuliani beginning in 1994, as part of the so-called “Quality of Life” campaign. These dynamics of normalization and spatial reconfiguration find a precedent in measures initiated by Fred Papert, notably through the “42 Street Redevelopment Project,” which already sought to profoundly restructure the urban fabric of 42nd Street starting in the mid-1980s. The project led, among other transformations, to the redevelopment of a building located between Seventh Avenue and Broadway that housed a peep show. In the wake of this legacy, and beginning in 1994, increasingly restrictive zoning measures were implemented, designed to prohibit the establishment and operation of businesses associated with queer practices within areas encompassing private residences and educational institutions.

Constrained by these regulations, such venues were progressively displaced toward the urban periphery before nearly disappearing altogether in the ensuing years. The process of erasure of spaces of queer life in Manhattan is closely intertwined with an ideology deeply hostile to homosexual forms of experiences, exacerbated in the aftermath of the HIV/AIDS crisis and the persistent criminalization of minoritized sexual practices. As Blake Oetting observes in *Retrospeculation: Tom Burr's 42 Street Structures*, “the gentrification of Times Square was intimately related to the conservative response to the AIDS crisis epidemic,”¹ drawing in part on the work of Sarah Schulman, who identifies the forms of subjectivation produced by these transformations as involving intensified racial and class stratification, the homogenization of consumption practices, the standardization of aesthetic regimes, and the normative privatization of urban space². Oetting

¹ Blake Oetting, *Retrospeculation: Tom Burr's 42nd Street Structures*, Oxford Art Journal, 2025.

² See: Sarah Schulman, *The Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination*, University of California Press, 2017.

further argues that “this attack on adult entertainment businesses in Times Square came on the wings of a more general crackdown and paranoia about public sites of sexuality initiated by the epidemic.”³ Concurrent with these closures was the increased surveillance and repression of other sites of sexual sociability, including certain streets in the West Village, bathhouses, public restrooms, and various locations in parks and along waterfront piers. These spaces became the locus of intensified policing, often characterized by disproportionate uses of force, also targeting racialized individuals and sex workers. Similarly, so-called clandestine and underground venues, such as gay clubs and bars, continued to be routinely surveilled, patrolled, and subsequently shuttered on often dubious or arbitrary grounds—“the venues shuttered by Rudolph Giuliani (...) were important locations within a subaltern cartography in which sex and social life congealed.”⁴

Tom Burr’s exhibition *42 Street Structures* opened in November 1995, only a few months after the first measures aimed at eliminating queer sites across Manhattan. The exhibition was structured around the installation of a series of sculptural elements operating as autonomous sites within the gallery, mapping references to these locations—through models, architectural fragments, texts, and photographs—that bear the memory of places then under the imminent threat of disappearance. In this regard, it is crucial to apprehend the immediacy of Burr’s conceptual and material production within the political context of the early 1990s, mobilizing the exhibition format itself as a discursive apparatus through which the lived experience of the impending erasure of New York’s historical queer geography was articulated. In his essay published in 1998 in *October*, “Sleazy City: 42nd Street Structures and Some Qualities of Life,” the artist wrote: “It was constructed both out of an immediate response to a set of transitions occurring in New York City in general and Times Square in particular, and my longtime contemplation of those conditions as they’ve evolved. The exhibition was mounted to position itself, however marginally, in relation to the highly visible spectacle of change rendered, being rendered, and soon to be rendered by the 42 Street Redevelopment Project, and the production of ‘The New 42 Street’ and ‘The New Times Square.’”⁵

Upon entering the exhibition, the viewer was initially confronted with a grey, carpeted platform supporting a wooden structure clad in mirrored tiles, recalling the stages on which live peep show performances took place (*Foor*, 1995). In this respect, the work inscribed itself within a lineage to 1991’s *Untitled (Go-Go Dancing Platform)* by Felix Gonzalez-Torres. Proceeding further into the space of American Fine Arts Co., the viewer encountered a series of plywood sculptures

³ Blake Oetting, *Retrospeculation: Tom Burr’s 42nd Street Structures*, Oxford Art Journal, 2025.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Tom Burr, “Sleazy City: 42nd Street Structures and Some Qualities of Life,” *October*, MIT Press, 1998.

collectively reproducing other structures common to porn theaters and peep shows in the Times Square district. This was followed by three interconnected units referring to the ones in which visitors would watch pornographic films (*Video Booths*, 1995). Subsequently, a miniature diagram of a typical theater's architectural organization (*Model in a Box*, 1995) offered a synoptic view of the spatial circulation within such erotic venues. Moving toward the final room of the gallery, the viewer was confronted with a series of Polaroids arranged in multiple rows, capturing the architectures of pornographic venues in Times Square.

The five Polaroids presented in the current exhibition at The Poem derive directly from this original body of work, and may thus be seen as addenda—simultaneously supplementary and constitutive—emerging from a broader corpus produced by Tom Burr in preparation for his exhibition at American Fine Arts. Insofar as these documents were presented in the final room—most notably, the office of Colin de Land—they already assumed, in 1995, the status of a quasi-backstage device, contributing to the articulation and alignment of the discursive field established across the first two galleries. Their placement operated less as a concluding gesture than as a structural inflection, extending the exhibition's internal logic into its own site of production. Within this framework, the Polaroids continue to function today from their generative position in relation to the sculptures of *42 Street Structures*, operating as both procedural and conceptual matrices. They extend the artist's body into that of the exhibition itself, producing a continuum between subject and display, and articulating simultaneously a point of departure and a point of closure—thereby configuring the exhibition as a circular, self-reflexive structure.

Tom Burr's *Polaroids (42 Street Structures)* attest, first and foremost, to the presence of the artist's body within these sites, and to his immediate relation to the history of homosexual cruising as a mode of self-inquiry within the broader enigma of the world. As Oetting further observes, “these images provide an important point of comparison between the artist's sculpted simulacra of the theaters and their crucial appearance, operating as referential documents whose indexical relationship with Times Square jars with Burr's ghostly sculptural scenario in the main room of the gallery.”⁶

The series foregrounds an embodied mode of perception in which the camera operates as an apparatus of the self within the vast architecture of sex and radical experience, establishing an alignment with the sonic, corporeal, and visual dimensions of these environments, apprehended in their total experiential duality—between self and other. As the artist notes: “The familiar riffs of synthesized music, generally from the late 1970s and early 1980s, create a continual backdrop of

⁶ Blake Oetting, *Retrospeculation: Tom Burr's 42nd Street Structures*, Oxford Art Journal, 2025.

sound within the video booth setting. Artificial music—synthesizer-based and disco or new wave in flavor—is particularly central to the male/male video booths, producing a fragmented canned sound, a synthetic slickness which is central to the mood of gay pornography.⁷

— H.B.B

Tom Burr (b. 1963 in New Haven, Connecticut) is an artist who lives and works in New York and Connecticut. He attended the School of Visual Arts and the Whitney Independent Study Program in New York. Burr's work has been collected by major museums internationally, including the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; MOCA, Los Angeles; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; Baltimore Museum of Art, Maryland; Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio; Centre Pompidou, Paris; Musee Cantonal de Beaux Arts, Lausanne, Switzerland; Migros Museum, Zurich, Switzerland; MuMOK, Vienna, Austria; Sammlung Verbund, Vienna, Austria; Ludwig Museum, Koln, Germany; and FRAC, Champagne Ardenne, France. Torrington Project, a major monograph dedicated to the artist's 2021-24 landmark installation-studio-exhibition space of the same name, was published by Primary Information in August 2025. Burr was a 2025 Guggenheim Fellow.

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⁷ Tom Burr, "Sleazy City: 42nd Street Structures and Some Qualities of Life," *October*, MIT Press, 1998.

