An Interval of Its Own

Art

Over three years, Tom Burr transformed an abandoned Connecticut factory into a shifting stage for his past and present work. Now it lives on in a book as layered and unsettled as the space itself.

Words by

Sahir Ahmed

August 26, 2025

A disco ball hangs from a pipe in a stairwell, scattering points of light across white brick and beadboard walls. A bare bulb glows overhead, the ceiling cracked at its socket. Captured in a photograph, the scene appears on the cover of *Torrington Project*, Tom Burr's document of the past three years in which the artist worked inside the vacant factory in his native Connecticut. He chose the book's image for its "low-tech glamor," he tells me, its "zero-degree reflection" a reminder of the '90s clubs he knew in New York, dispersed along 14th Street or buried deep in the Meatpacking District. "They looked like nothing from the street, but came alive inside." The Torrington space—ordinary at first glance with its raw brick walls, concrete pillars, and worn hardwood floors—similarly revealed itself in time.

In 2021, Burr, who splits his time between New York and the rural town of Norfolk, Connecticut, was searching for a space that could do more than house new work, a place to bring past works into view. He wanted something outside the logic of the white cube, which he felt flattened memory rather than complicated it. So when he first walked through 535 Migeon Avenue, he nearly dismissed it as any other industrial shell. But the space's appearance reminded him of Marfa, where Donald Judd's concrete blocks had inspired his *Container 1, 2, 3*—a trio of plywood and rubber vessels he'd first built in 2001 to hold the paintings of his late partner, Ull Hohn. Restaging the piece in Torrington's similar setting convinced him to move in.

With his sharp profile and measured cadence, the artist still looks a little like the New Englander he is: reserved, precise, but quick to puncture severity with wit. Now in his early 60s, he arrived in Manhattan in the 1980s and came up as part of the American Fine Arts, Co. circle, the loose downtown network of artists like Jessica Stockholder, Cady Noland, and Mark Dion who revolved around art dealer Colin de Land—a group shaped by both the AIDS

crisis and the collapse of the downtown art world into real estate. Over the following decades, Burr established himself as a sculptor and conceptual artist whose work addresses the tension between minimalism's rigid structures and autobiography's messier registers.

In Torrington, 111 miles from New York, Burr created what he considers a living archive rather than a studio. He reconceived the factory as a staged environment, laying out zones—some enclosed by new walls, others left open—structured by its grid of wooden columns and bisected by a heavy brick wall. Openings cut into that wall, including one dubbed "The Fireplace," turned it into a passageway rather than a barrier. At times the rooms were crowded with objects; at others, nearly bare. Works from 1993 might sit across from 2001, or 2010 beside 1988. Others were reconstituted and transformed. His *Construction of an American Garden*, 1993, first built as a plywood planter outside American Fine Arts, Co. and hastily assembled for a month-long run, was remade in Torrington. His rendition was engineered with drainage, built with stronger plywood, and planted with species grown in the Ramble in Central Park—a designated wilderness that doubled as one of New York's storied cruising sites, its dense foliage sheltering both birdwatchers and clandestine encounters. Unlike the month-long version on Wooster Street, this one required constant tending: plants died, were replanted, and cycled in and out with the seasons. The maintenance itself became part of the work, a choreography of care folded into its form.

Such transformations were also visible in how the works were received. Burr occasionally invited curators, critics, and friends to walk through the ever-shifting arrangements. His impulse to draw out converging meanings in physical spaces traces back to his childhood, when he would turn closets and crawlspaces into improvised zones of refuge, reshaping his bedroom like it was its own stage. But he always needed a way out. Torrington was no different: The inevitability of its ending was part of its psychic architecture. Even at the start, Burr knew it couldn't go on indefinitely. "I didn't want to be the play that doesn't know when to end," he says. "And I think this has something to do with the finality of death for me. I've developed strategies for ducking out before something exhausts itself."

"It was about desire," Burr continues—and control. "I wanted to be able to decide where the conversation started," he says. Like Anne Carson's book, *Eros the Bittersweet: An Essay*, 1986, in which the poet argues that desire lives in the interval between two bodies, Torrington occupied an interval of its own. It existed outside the centers of the art world, apart from daily routes. You had to want to get there; making the trip meant consenting to Burr's terms. And then he controlled the sequence—first through his renovations, and then in guiding his visitors.

Just as he decided how people moved through Torrington, Burr also shaped how they would later move through its afterlife. Conceived as the project's final element, at 400 pages, *Torrington Project* is less a catalog than a ledger that refuses to resolve, sustaining digressions and re-entries without losing coherence. And like the space it's modeled after—a place where objects and histories resurfaced, were reworked, and took on new roles—it refuses linearity. "We wanted the reader to be able to start anywhere, move in any direction," Burr says. Self-reflections, touching ephemera, and contributions from friends who visited the space, including George Baker, Jordan Carter, Aria Dean, Jody Graf, and Renée Green, punctuate the record, cultivating a space as contradictory, provisional, and personal as the factory—as Burr puts it, "a spatialization of my own psyche."