Now 36 born and raised in Michigan, living in Canada since 1972, Tom Sherman is a fairly high-ranking official in the cultural and federal government. He heads the Media Arts Section of the Canada Council. Sherman is also a productive artist of some distinction within the orbit of Canadian video and performance art. How an artist gains distinction there remains a mystery since we have yet to read discussions of Canadian video or performance art equipped with the critical competence to grasp artistic distinctions that is another problem. Let it suffice that Sherman is respected by his peers and has succeeded institutionally. Gallery curators and journals devoted to art approve of him.

Cultural Engineering is a retrospective gathering of Sherman’s writings between 1974 and 1982. The book is not intended to stand as a work of art on its own, like a novel or a play. It is an anthology of texts accompanying Sherman’s video and performance pieces accompanied by bits of criticism and some highly prescriptive essays on the destiny of Canadian video art. Most of the texts are a pleasure to read, frequently both diverting and amusing. It is useful to mention these impressions, first because Willard Hogue’s introduction is heavy going, second because the book comes dressed in the drapery of a government report or policy statement and third because the illustrations, taken from Sherman’s art shows, are set out with modernist pretension.

For us long is it as can. Cultural Engineering avoids the sinister topic broached by its title. The arrangement of the texts postpones colliding with the idea that the traditional (i.e. Romantic) artist is doomed in a world of technological ‘information’ and is about to be replaced by the ‘culture engine’. Sherman does play on and with the artist-figures, thinking him as the slightly chummy outsider and sometimes as the protagonist of so many of the novels. The later pieces ‘More Dead Artists’, ‘The Artist Attains Heil Olympics’, ‘A Statement from Inside the Cultural Industries Compound’ and ‘Die’ (modified version) by Andrew Cressall do turn the issue but Sherman uses science fiction irony—his final tactic of postpossession making yet again the ambivalence of the whole book toward the question.

When playing SF dystopian ironic Sherman still cannot abandon his incurable fascination with the techniques of fiction writing. This needs to be qualified, but let it wait. The trajectory of Cultural Engineering does take the reader to the high-tech frontier of ‘My Brand of Video Aesthetics No. 1:’ and Sherman’s shop-worn exercises in ‘information theory’. However, the book is not schematic. In fact, mostly Sherman dawdlies and the real interest in the texts lies in the importance dawdling has for Sherman’s authorship. The essays, like ‘Video Aesthetics’ and ‘The Rabbit Theory of Data Transformation’ and ‘Videoactivity in Canada Generates a New Breed of Time Killers’ do get snatched when they take on the velocity of logical argument. What is so interesting about the fictive texts is Sherman’s devotion to a ramshackle rhythm, to depictions of solitary, directionless voices, to the inter-weave of aimless isolation and the daily comings and goings of a banalized but sensitive and often witty persons. This persons, in equal parts TV viewer and protagonist, forms himself and reforms himself as the central character, the digestive presence really, through which Sherman’s narratives pass.

And they are narratives. On first encountering ‘How to Watch Television’, ‘Television: A Human Nature’, ‘Puckers: Window View’, sections of ‘What Channel Are Your Readers on Tonight?’, and ‘Time Sharing Between Friends’ (to mention the best things in the book) the reader might imagine Sherman is another autobiographical video artist. This is not the case. The voice that speaks I here and the author are as distinct as they would be in Dickens. The fictional voices throughout Cultural Engineering, just like the book’s economy of incident and metonymy of description, are those of short story writing. But the echo in which these conventions are executed, Sherman’s flat, literalist prose, is not that of a creative writer. We are back again at the question of Sherman’s literary writing. Let us sample some of this writing.

I have lunch alone today, I’ll make myself a couple of sandwiches and watch some TV with a cup of coffee and a cigarette. Then I’ll go down to the park and watch the ducks swim with the social life of my neighbours. Park, La Fontaine is full of young men and women sunbathing. The old men hang around and stare at the young women. It is basically a singles scene with plenty of overt exhibitionism and voyeurism. The men walk up close and look at the girls with binoculars. There are adolescents on bikes and teenagers on roller skates. And, of course, there are dogs of all sizes and descriptions with their owners on the beach. There are a few portable TVs with the game on. The Excels are losing to the Dodgers 2 to 1 in the sixth.

The first-person narrator, of course, is an obvious short story device, as is his suicide. With the eyes of the second person view through a cheap plastics frequen- quent in Sherman—the poor guy has to eat his lunch alone. The previous paragraph has just detailed his abandonment and looked to the past. Now it looks forward to his after- noon. Suddenly, at Park La Fontaine the tense shifts to the present, at first apparently a ‘few people’ but by the end, a specific present of the ball game score. By that point, the character has almost vanished into an impersonal list of descriptions. The shifting point comes just after ‘exhibitionism and voyeurism’ and their tone of sexual resentment soon to be replaced by the presence of radios and a few portable TVs.

Apart from the whining, sometimes a feature of Sherman when he wants to inject some psychology into his protagonist, the prose here belongs to a digest or essayist or plain note-taker. The composition, however, the structure, traces the action of a fiction.

CULTURAL ENGINEERING

by Tom Sherman

Edited with an introduction by Willard Holman

(Octawa, The National Gallery, 1983)

Sherman makes him/herself out to be an artist, a painter. Amid a shower of one-sentence stories, listings of the objects, etc., Sherman proves she/he cannot possibly be an artist but goes on asserting she/he is an artist. The joke is, of course, that very idea of an artist is beyond Sherman’s method of literal accounting.
In one of his essays, Sherman claims of video that, "besides writing, there is no better medium for telling a story." He should also have added that English-Canadian video art uses images of almost no narrative force but relies instead on prose narrative not unlike his own. The distillation of sound and image that results is of no interest to Sherman. In fact, one of the points of his video criticism is to pinpoint the failure of Canadian video art to tell stories. Of course, Sherman is aware that commercial television derives its narrative energies from using the editing techniques of feature filmmaking, and he does not recommend video art do the same. The strategies necessary for a narratively elegant video art are underdeveloped in his view because video art wound up as a branch of "experimental" cinema. Sherman demands narrative come into video.

Now, he does not call it "narrative." He calls it "information" and dabbles a bit in "information theory." However, his illustrations are good examples of what I mean by a device—a rather vulgar one—of commercial narrative writing and films. Sherman's TV writing is a full-scope even if it is at

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