

**Now** 36 born and raised in Michigan, living in Canada since 1972, Tom Sherman is a fairly high-ranking official in the cultural branch of the 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 grant artistic distinction. But 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

When playing SF dystopian ironist 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.2' and Sherman's shopworn exercises in 'information theory'. However, the book is not schematic. In fact, mostly Sherman dawdles and the real interest in the texts lies in the importance dawdling has for Sherman's authorship. The essays, like 'Video Aesthetics' and 'The Rabbitt Theory of Data Transformation' and 'Videoactivity in Canada Generates' and 'Time Killers' do get a Snappish when they take on the velocity of logical argument. What is so interesting about the fictive texts is Sherman's devotion to a rumative rhythm, to depictions of solitary, directionless voices, to the *mise-en-scene* of aimless isola-



## CULTURAL ENGINEERING

by Tom Sherman

Edited and with an introduction by Willard Holmes (Ottawa, The National Gallery, 1983)

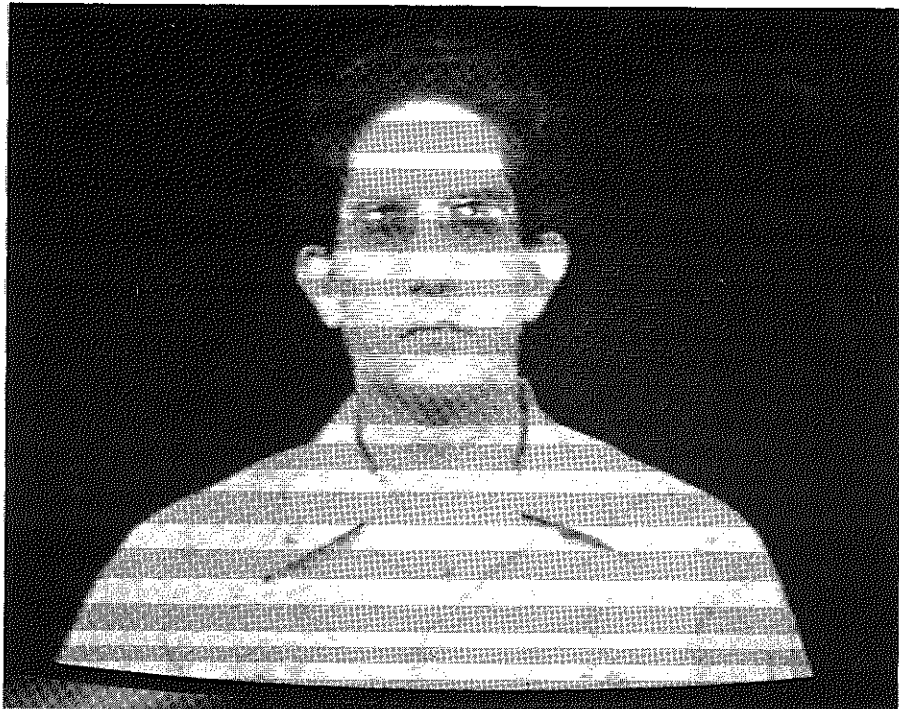
tion, are those of short-story writing. But the style in which these conventions are executed, Sherman's flat, literalist prose, is not that of a 'creative writer'. We are back again at the question of Sherman's literary writing. Let us sample some of this writing.

I'll 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 neighbourhood. Parc LaFontaine 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 adolescent radio boys on bicycles and teenagers on roller skates. And, of course, there are dogs of all sizes and descriptions with their owners on the leash. There are a few portable TVs with the game on. The Expos 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 solitude. Both set up point-of-view through a cheap pathos frequent 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 'I' looks forward to his afternoon. Suddenly, at 'Parc La Fontaine' the tense shifts to the present, at first apparently a 'frequent' 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 diarist or essayist or plain note-taker. The composition, however, the structure, traces the action of a fiction.

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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 Holme's introduction is being going, dressed in the drab cover of a government report or policy statement and third because the illustrations, taken from Sherman's art shows, are set out with modernist pretension.

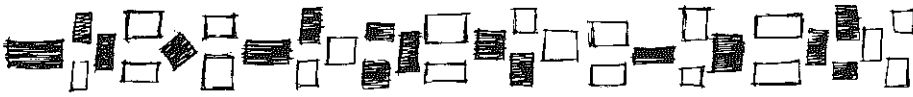
For as long as it can, *Cultural Engineering* avoids the sinister topic broached by its title. The arrangement of the texts postpones colliding with the idea that the traditional (i.e. Romantic) artist is doomed in a world of technological 'information' and is about to be replaced by the 'culture engineer'. Sherman does play cat and mouse with the artist-figure, depicting him as the slightly seedy outsider and using him as the protagonist of so many of the texts. The later pieces, 'More Dead Artists', 'The Artist Attains Ham Radio Status', 'A Statement from Inside the Cultural Industries Compound' and 'TBDF (Transborder Data Flow) by Andrew Czeszak', do turn to the issues but Sherman uses science fiction irony: his final tactic of postponement masking yet again the ambivalence of the whole book toward the question.

tion and the daily comings and goings of a banalized but sensitive and often witty persona. This persona, in equal parts TV viewer and protagonist, forms himself and reforms himself as the central character, the digressive presence really, through which Sherman's narratives pass.

And they are narratives. On first encountering 'How to Watch Television', 'Television's Human Nature', 'Picture Window View', sections of 'What Channel Are You 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 descrip-







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 disjunction of sound and image that results is of no interest to Sherman. In fact, one of the points of his video criticism is to complain about the failure of Canadian video art to tell stories. Of course, Sherman is aware that commercial television derives its narrative energies from aping 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 just good instances of 'suspense', a device—a rather vulgar one—of commercial narrative writing and film and TV. Sherman's own writings are full of suspense even if it is attenuated by verbal techniques of dawdling, though sometimes, as in the text cited above, the dawdling is dressed up in pathos followed by the quick cuts of exposition.

None of this should be construed as a complaint against *Cultural Engineering*. The reader should come to the conclusion, however, that as a video critic addressing his peers, Sherman talks through ill-fitting hats. Sherman's writing typifies a strong narrative-but-verbal tendency in English-Canadian video art. The obsessive narratives of General Idea, Derek Graham and especially Vera Frankel and Jane Wright (in *The Mississippi Tapes*) all exemplify that, even in the absence of a visual narrative style, Canadian video work is preoccupied with narrative modes. Sherman also typifies how such video narrative is constructed—on the soundtrack. Video script-writing emerges out of the conflation of traditional narrative structures of character, incidents, etc. taken from short story and novel forms, and the prose style from the stylistics of

essays and diaries. The results—a flat iteration, invariably delivered on tapes in tonelessly declarative readings—are at once literary (in what they basically do) and anti-literary in locution and rhetoric (in how they do it).

The process that generates this style of script has a great deal to do with the convention of the 'voice-over' as it has developed in video art in Canada. To a remarkable degree, both video and performance art have gravitated to the voice-over as the main vehicle of language and narrative. There is nothing new about this. Documentary films have been using voice-overs to this end for over 50 years. But this is not the source of voice-overs in video art. Rather artists' statements, language art and the anti-theatrical use of language in performance have provided the conduits that flow toward video voice-overs.

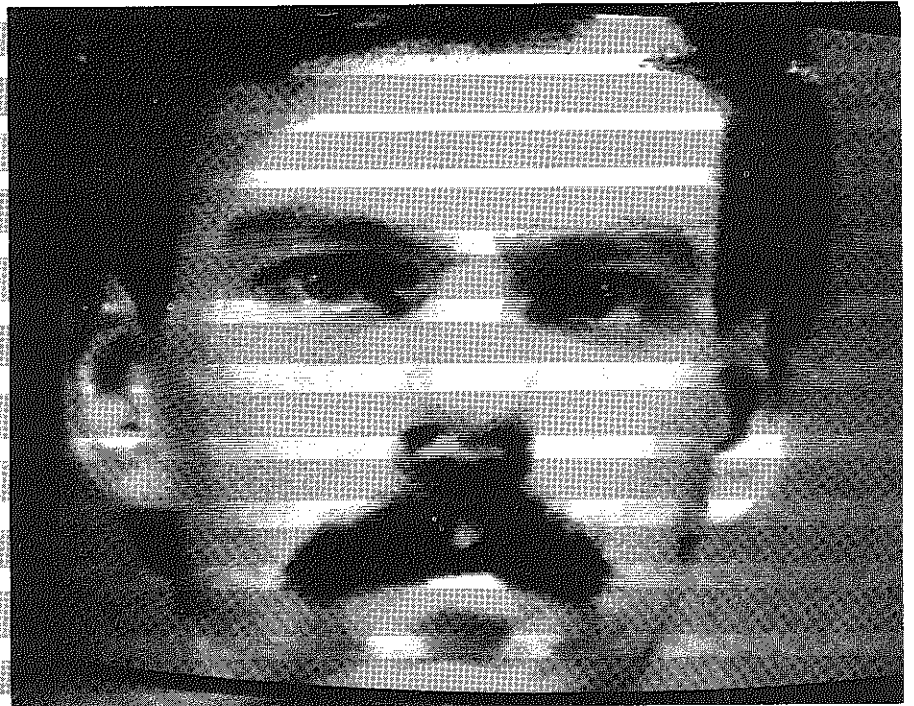
Now, the voice-over resembles the essay because it interprets in a narrow, literal way, weighing evidence and enigma around the play of fact and appearance. The voice-over is like a fiction because, when it does not pretend to 'divinity' (Lorne Greene's voice-over for the NFB are divine in this sense), off-screen speech creates the perspective of a character. The interpreting character is a persona Vera Frankel, Jane Wright and Tom Sherman have been complicating and expanding in Canadian video (Frankel with greater sophistication than anyone) for some time now.

The power of Sherman's attenuated version of Romantic anguish lends to his video work a self-reflexive realism quite different from the work of many of his colleagues in

video art. Sherman is clear about this when addressing nine photographs in a chapter of *Cultural Engineering*, supposedly as a critic but really as a storyteller of an especially literal bent. The most interesting of these deals with a photo by Toronto video artist Rodney Werden. Characteristic of Werden, the image depicts a sexually ambiguous figure standing against a cheap shelving unit containing various shabby knick-knacks and a TV. Sherman makes him/her 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 the very idea of an artist is beyond Sherman's method of literal accounting. It is a minor instance of *Cultural Engineering's* theme—the failure to identify the artist. On the other side of the Werden essay is the biography of the artist, 'Voluntary Handcuffs'. Accompanying a photograph of Jay Yager's sculpture of the same name, Sherman relates the biography of 'Russ'. The character carries on like a very well-organized workman who has renovated a shack behind his house. It is 'Russ' who finally makes the photographed sculpture. In Sher-

man mark out the contours of that contemplation-within-routine.

In this way, *Cultural Engineering* manages what Young could not sustain in *Incognito*, the translation of traditional literary modes into the so-called 'post-modern' moment. Where Young sought to reconstitute the Homeric quest-narrative into a post-modern novel by seizing on Homer's use of tale-telling excursus, Sherman nudges the Romantic's introspection into the literalist TV-camera vision. Young's attempt proceeds by variations on autobiography and sub-literary folk tale. Sherman's project progresses by dawdling, postponing ideas, denying his authorial persona 'poetic' language, by flattening. Arranging the bits of language to make it move, especially move sideways into description, and giving his characters patience and good attention span, Sherman plays interiority against its own literalized language. The ironies that arise are still Romantic for they individualize the characters and carefully centre them, though without letting them be what they want to be: artists. When they try they whine, wheedle and cannot do their work. Sherman has the good sense to say simply they need to be in love, and to be at work.



man's account the piece is a rather naive, solipsistic little exercise in self-help therapy from a man who does not apparently talk very much. But the point is—the artist cannot appear to Sherman, only the art-work does.

'Voluntary Handcuffs', perhaps the sweetest and most affirmative piece in *Cultural Engineering*, conveys in a compressed fashion what so much of this book does—a depiction of 'artistic' contemplation ruled by order and routine. The relationship between the writer and his typewriter and between the solitary viewer and his TV screen for Sher-

The later texts, like 'More Dead Artists', mark a diminution in Sherman's *Cultural Engineering* and it is no wonder that he so long postpones them. The style of the book changes to clumsy parody. 'More Dead Artists', for example, rehearses 'A Modest Proposal' using Canadian artists for the Irish babies of Swift. 'TBDF' is a fair but unremarkable imitation of J.G. Ballard on a bad day. Sherman's critical essays, a thorough discussion of which would take a whole other review, may be considered important to the state of Canadian video art criticism. By any other measurement, however, they are poorly argued and aesthetically ungrounded. Moreover, in terms of the carefully set up and rigorously sustained play of themes and strategies characteristic of *Cultural Engineering* as a whole, they are an unfortunate bastardization of the problematic status of art and artists in the supposedly high-tech cosmos now being manufactured in electronics labs around the world.

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