

Stuart Sherman



Stuart Sherman
1977
Performance
documentation
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8OWSE Galleries, New York University /
Participant Inc, New York, USA

Less than a decade after his death, Stuart Sherman already seems like some distant, mysterious figure – slightly mythic, a bit hazy around the edges. But then, he was always rather distant and mysterious, always out of step with the world. He didn't go wholly unrecognized during his lifetime: his solo performances and short plays were reviewed in the *New York press*, discussed in academic journals. He got a Guggenheim Fellowship, had various residencies, travelled the world. When he died of AIDS in 2001, there were obituaries in *The New York Times* and *The Independent*. He was no outsider artist. But his work – small, private, obsessive, ephemeral – lived so far away from the places where art and money touch that it usually went under the cultural radar. It could easily have been lost to history. Sherman always struggled – personally, financially. He got by, barely, on temp jobs and the occasional low-level grant; a few individual patrons probably helped him along. Yet he kept making art, lots of it, more than anybody ever knew.

So of course there is something poignant – and perhaps a little frustrating – in the belated regard suddenly directed Sherman's way. In 'Beginningless Thought/Endless Seeing', the astonishingly thorough retrospective at New York University's 80 Washington Square East Galleries, the full range of his production was shown for the first time: all the extant video documentation of his performances, his films and sound works, as well as drawings, collage, sculptural pieces and writing – most never

exhibited while he was alive. 'Nothing Up My Sleeve', showing concurrently at Participant Inc, was a different sort of affair: a group exhibition inspired – in a free-associative sort of way – by Sherman's work. Only a few of his pieces were presented, on monitors in the gallery's first room, but he presided over the whole curious exhibition, quite literally a guiding spirit.

Both shows offered a chance to view the work Sherman was best known for: the small-scale performances he called his 'Spectacles'. Produced in numbered sequence from the early 1970s through to the late '90s, these pieces – usually solo, mostly wordless – are precisely choreographed manipulations of small, mass-produced objects. Like some high-concept mountebank, Sherman would set up a cheap folding table, open a suitcase, pull out his props – toy cars, dollhouse chairs, rolls of masking tape, sheets of newspaper, wind-up teeth – and, with a kind of awkward urgency, he would arrange and position them in cryptic, patterned interactions. He did some of these performances in theatres, some in his own apartment; but he often set up his table in parks, or on the deck of the Staten Island Ferry, doing his 'act' for puzzled passers-by. Watching them is a bit like listening to a speech in an unknown language that somehow, magically, hovers just on the border of comprehension. It's clear there is a logic to the performer's gestures, a coherent grammar – and more than that, there is wit.

'It was just like sweeping my apartment,' Sherman said about the 'Spectacles'. 'I didn't become a character, I didn't emphasize anything. It was more in the style of the performance of household chores.' It's a telling analogy. There is something of the everyday

in all of Sherman's work (for a time in the '90s, he self-published his writings in a photocopied 'literary journal' called the *Quotidian Review*). There is also a sense that making art was, for him, a necessary task: if you don't sweep, dust piles up. That 'dust', as much of his visual work suggests, was linguistic in nature. Sherman explored language compulsively, all the accretions of meaning that appear in the spaces between objects and their names. Some of his drawings are made from patterns of repeated words and alphabets; some are spare, ideographs that punningly dismantle phrases: 'Chair Manned, Man Chairred, Chair Man/Man Chair.'

While the NYU exhibition was organized by a trio of Sherman's friends and former collaborators – John Hagan, Yolanda Hawkins and John Matturi – the curator of the Participant Inc show, artist Jonathan Berger, who is a couple of generations younger, came late to Sherman's work. He never knew him or saw him perform live. But when Berger first saw a video of a 'Spectacle' performance, he had the realization: 'That's exactly how I think.' That identification led to an oddly compelling group exhibition of artists using 'reality as a subjective medium' – a diverse, eccentric collection of art works, ephemera and assorted documentation. A tabletop piece by Carol Bove and a couple of Matthew Brannon's paintings (hung almost out of sight) were the most conventional works; there was also an archive dedicated to the fictional recording career of drag queen Vaginal Davis, photos of the surreal architectural 'SITE' projects produced in the '70s, assorted spiritualist paraphernalia, and artefacts from the collection of Harry Houdini. Absurdist comedian Andy Kaufman occupied a central place, with bits and pieces of his personal effects on display. These had a haunted, post-mortem air, with Kaufman's childhood record collection in a vitrine, and James Lee Byars' gold suit laid out on a pedestal. That seemed right for a posthumous tribute. The connections between the works, and the full back-stories behind them, often seemed oblique, difficult to puzzle out – and that seemed right too. After his unexpected resurrection, Sherman still feels like a cipher, though a strangely familiar one.

In the late '60s, before he began his artistic career, Sherman showed up uninvited at the New York home of author Carson McCullers, then a recluse. He ended up moving in with her for a year – the last year of her life. As he wrote years later, they spent the time reading together, but shared almost no details of their personal lives. 'No pretense was made to intimacy,' Sherman wrote, 'and for this very reason, one day, quite suddenly, intimacy appeared between us, like an uninvited guest whose presence is nonetheless entirely welcome.'

Steven Stern