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Stuart Sherman Makes a Spectacle of Himself

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Stuart Sherman presented his first performance piece under the slogan “Stuart Sherman makes a Spectacle of himself” and has at times used *Stuart Sherman Spectacles* as an overall title for his work. There is clear irony in these characterizations. In their lack of theatricality and often miniature scale, Sherman’s object-manipulations are, on the surface, distinctly unspectacular. Moreover, his rapid, uninflected performance style contains none of the exhibitionism suggested by “spectacle”. The irony, however, is neither gratuitous nor self-deprecating. In asking his audience to reconsider the nature of “spectacles” Sherman is pointing to the paradoxical nature of his performances.

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A Stuart Sherman spectacle begins with the presentation of a heterogenous set of objects placed either along the side of the performance space or, in smaller scale shows, massed within a briefcase which Sherman opens as the spectacle begins. During the briefcase shows the performance area consists of one or more folding tables.

A spectacle is organized into a series of discrete object manipulations. At the beginning of each manipulation, Sherman glances at an index card; he gathers several objects, places them within the performance area and proceeds use them in a highly structured series of actions. A manipulation might also contain gestures independent of the objects, utterances, and stylized facial expressions. The internal structure of a manipulation is precisely delineated by a slight, but noticeable, pause after the completion of each action. The spectacle as a whole at times receives a final punctuation with the performance of a stylized “thank you” to the audience.

In his work Sherman does not assume a fictional role. His is a theatre of objects and his function is to manipulate those objects, not to create a character. All personal expressiveness becomes subordinate to the structural clarity of the manipulations. His dress is simple, dark and unassuming. He is mostly silent and deadpan, and any utterances or facial expressions are performed without affect. His gestures are precise, controlled and extremely rapid. By suppressing his individuality in his performance style, Sherman comes close to making his body just one object among many, although, unlike the others, it does persist through the entire performance and uniquely has the ability to act independently on the other objects.

A relatively simple manipulation, from the *Seventh Spectacle*, utilizes a footstool and two small books. The performer gathers the objects from the side, places the stool in the performing area, and places one of the books open on the stool. He walks away from the stool, carrying the second book. He returns to the stool, sweeping the book off with hand. He sits on the stool. He takes the book in hand, extending arms forward, with one hand on each side of the book. He drops the books, maintaining hands in position. He brings hands together. He moves hands forward, covering face. He falls forward to the floor, maintaining hands over face. He rises, gathers the objects and returns them to the side.

The formal structure of this manipulation is clear. It begins with placing of the stool and ends with the punctuating action of the performer’s fall to the floor. Between these parallel actions, the manipulation is constructed of several other parallels: placing the book and sitting on the stool; holding two hands and two books in front of his face; dropping the book and falling himself to the floor. The manipulation as a whole is framed by carrying

the objects from and back to the side.

This manipulation, as do they all, has the character of a performed hieroglyphic and thus almost demands a reading. It is itself a representation of the act of reading. The series of parallels between the body, its parts, and the books indicate an identification of the books with the performer: in the act of reading, the book and reader become one. This acquires an implicit eroticism as the hands-become-books touch the face. The surrender of the reader to the text is indicated by the covering of the face which precedes the fall: the external world becomes dissolved in the purely subjective union of book and reader. The fall in this context has an orgasmic quality which is confirmed in a later spectacle, "The Erotic," where the act of reading is explicitly identified with orgasmic experience. Because the manipulation is itself a kind of text, it might be read as a referential representation of the audience's attending to itself in the act of interpretation of the spectacle.

-II-

To 'make a spectacle of oneself' is to make others attend to one, to present oneself to the world in a particularly conspicuous manner, usually implying a false or exaggerated pose. Throughout history theatrical spectacles have been criticized for the ontological deceit of such performances.

In his performances, however, Sherman avoids the projection of illusionistic persona. In his suppression of personal expressiveness, however, he seems to be avoiding the manifestation of *any* personal identity, fictive or authentic. In the manipulations, the idea-structure is very clear but the personal presence of the performer is far more ambiguously defined. The body and its parts take on the status of abstract signs, simply standing for ideas, at times the very idea of the body. This conceptualization of the performer's body becomes most apparent when stylized facial expressions are performed: the schematic character of these gestures subvert emotional empathy and simply allow the emotion to be read off the face. Sherman's performances have at times been called robot-like and this association is occasionally reinforced by the use of small toy robots in the manipulations. Sherman has instrumentalized his body into an object for the representation of abstract ideas. It might seem, then, that Sherman is more denying than making a spectacle of himself.

Sherman, however, claims that his performances are manifestations of himself. Commenting upon the stylized use of his body, he remarks: "The way I move on stage is the way I would like to move at all times." He notes that he performs out of the belief that there is "an obligation to show each other who we are." When asked what would be missing from his life if he did not perform, he notes "I would be missing from my life . . ." Sherman thus does not perform to present fictive identities but to directly evidence his own self.

A central paradox of Sherman's work is here disclosed: how can such an evidencing of the self be accomplished through a performance style that seems to deny personal presence. For Sherman's statements to be accurate, his most authentic self would somehow have to be disclosed within an apparent absence of a self.

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There is in the "Eighth Spectacle," which consists of twenty-two performance portraits of personal acquaintances, a manipulation that directly illuminates this paradox. The portraits use none of the traditional techniques of theatrical representation; he does not impersonate the subject of the portrait but enacts an idea-object structure that abstractly represents what Sherman claims to be the essence of his experience of the person.

At the end of this spectacle, Sherman epitomizes the paradoxes of his work by performing a self-portrait. Any representation stands in for, and thus implies the absence of the object represented. A performer, however, is present during his performance. While enacting a self-portrait, therefore, the performer must somehow, within

the boundaries of his identity, simultaneously stand before his audience as both present and absent. This is particularly true where there is a claim on an essential evidencing of the self. The paradox is hyperbolized still further as Sherman's self-portrait reveals itself as being about its own creation and as it re-enacts within itself the moment of that creation. In his self- portrait, the paradoxes of Sherman's work move toward a limit and, as a point of singularity is approached, the nature of the work becomes disclosed.

Sherman's written description of the self-portrait reads as follows:

Two tables adjacent

On left table: 2 panes of glass, each with hole near center of bottom, narrow edge; empty cap gun, pith- helmet, monocle (on black string), black crayon, colored (yellow, green, orange, violet, red, blue) crayons bound together with tape

On right table: cassette recorder, 3 cassette tapes, a white blow-out (horn with curled tip that uncurls into long straight line when horn is sounded)

X, behind left table, holds pane of glass over face (hole in front of mouth) and switches on cassette recorder: sound of lions roaring. X gnarls fingers of right hand and twice makes clawing-motion toward white blow-out, then lifts blow-out and inserts it through glass-hole into mouth. Switches off sound of lions roaring, picks up black crayon and, on outside of glass, marks horizontal lines over eyes, vertical line over nose, horizontal line (broken in center by blow-out) over mouth. Sets down black crayon. Blows into blow-out. It sounds, uncurls into long straight line, curls back. X removes blow-out, sets it down. Switches on recorder: sound of lions roaring. X gnarls finger of right hand, twice making clawing motion in front of and toward face behind glass. Reverses glass. Picks up colored crayons, draws them across glass (leaving colored slash marks). Sets down colored crayons, picks up gun, inserts gun barrel through glass-hole into mouth, pulls gun-trigger (gun makes clicking sound), sets down gun, switches off sound of lions roaring, removes and sets down pith-helmet, sets down color-slashed glass, picks up clear glass-pane and places it over face (hole in front of mouth). Changes tape, switches on recorder: sound of sheep bleating. Sets down glass, picks up monocle, places monocle-string around neck and monocle in right eye- socket. Regards, through monocle, "off" button on cassette recorder, switches off sound of sheep bleating. Takes one step back, drops jaw and widens right eye, monocle pops out of eye-socket. Closing jaw and replacing monocle in eye-socket, X takes one step forward, picks up black crayon. Marks monocle (as marked first glass pane) with horizontal lines (over eye-positions), vertical line (over nose- position), horizontal line (over mouth-position). Then X picks up gun with left hand, points at objects on table, places blow-out in mouth, changes tape. X sounds (and uncurls) blow-out and clicks gun five times. Switches on recorder: sound of blow-out sounding and gun clicking, repeated 4 times (followed by silence on tape). After 5th horn-sound and gun-click on tape, X sets down gun, blow-out, and monocle, and switches off silent cassette recorder.

An appropriate starting point for an interpretation of this manipulation is its central moment of transition, as the performer places a pith-helmet on his head, assuming the identity of a big- game hunter. This identity lasts only as the performer represents shooting himself. Thus, it is Sherman (as subject) himself who is the 'big-game', as

is further indicated when the performer (signifying Sherman) makes a clawing motion with his arm. The shooting is an act of self-conquest: after it a lion's roar is replaced by a sheep's bleating: a wild self has become domesticated, ordered.

Such an ordering of the self is described by Sherman the critical moment in his creative process when wills a disassociation from what he considers to be his material self:

I don't think of making pieces. It's what I do, but it's the result of developing strategies for personal salvation, for escape from the intolerable, from certain existential cul-de-sacs. For instance, I quite often feel that I have lost my mind, that there is no mind, but only a body. That I am locked into it to the point at which I do not know what thought is, or I cannot manifest thought. Then I, through a sheer act of brute will, create thought-structures; but, beforehand, I have to activate the faculty of thought, and to do this I have to believe in thought itself. So that it's an act of faith that there is a counterpart to matter, the ideal, the realm of the ideal.

The shooting represents an act of brute will that prepares for a transition from a material to a noetic mode of selfhood.

As represented, even the disordered self has a capacity for thought and order: an idealized representation of a face, a self, is drawn upon the pane of glass that initially mediates between the performer and world. In its undisciplined state, however, it can only experience disorder: claw-marks sully the pane of glass and thus the experience of the world. The nature of this lion- self is indicated by the impotent action of the blow-out, which echoes the act and sound of a petulant child sticking out his tongue. For Sherman, to confront the world without disciplined thought is experience "chaos and disorder."

After the self has oriented itself towards thought, experience is ordered and clarified: the sullied pane of glass is replaced by a clear pane, which in turn is replaced by a monocle, a lens which not only transmits light but focuses it into a single unified image. The noetic activity further increases self-control: instead of manipulating the cassette recorder without consideration as earlier, the performer now scrutinizes it through the monocle before switching it off.

This self-conquest is followed by a still further movement into the realm of the ideal: the performer steps back from an unrepresented event and indicates awe. The monocle drops: this event is beyond even the focusing power of thought. Sherman speaks of an experience of pure ideality as the ultimate source of his work:

There is something, an invisible something, that I try to place myself in relation to. I try to place myself in the glare of its heat. It's as if you were to try to approach the sun and get as close as you can to it without being burned up.

He further notes that this experience is so intense that he must return to ordinary experience after a short time: the performer resumes his position and replaces the monocle.

Sherman believes that this is an experience of a transcendental order and that his work is a medium for this order:

even though I created the pieces and they have an order and logic to them, I cannot claim that I created logic, or even the logic of my pieces. I simply oriented my being and consciousness in such a way that I can manifest logic and order. But I haven't created them. So really my act

of will is just a limited act of will; it's just a question of orientation, self-orientation. And once I orient myself in that situation, logic and order, you might say the forces of logic and order, take over. I just surrender to them.

In the manipulation, the surrender leads to a further self- transformation which is represented by drawing an ideal face on the monocle. This parallels the earlier drawing of a face on the glass pane of the undisciplined self, but while the glass only transmits experience, the spectacle can act to concentrate that experience into a focused image. The ordered self's image-making capacity is an image of the creative self of the artist.

For Sherman's art is based on the complicity of the artist in the forces of order; he imposes thought on inchoate matter, in his own work by contexting objects into thought-structures. Imposing self-order was indicated when the performer shot himself; the imposition of order onto objects is here indicated by five times shooting those objects, the five shots paralleling the five claw marks left on experience by the lion-self. The energy of the undisciplined self has become harnessed by thought: the claw becomes a noetic hand which can manipulate objects into coherent structures. A fanfare on the blow-out accompanies each shot, visually forming the image of five long fingers, in a celebratory gesture of triumph; the blow-out, an object most associated with New Year's Eve, now indicates a self renewed by an act of ordering:

The work is creation itself, but then I feel newly created. I think its incumbent upon us to participate in the creation of the world, to feel oneself at the center of creation.

The self-portrait represents Sherman as artist. The objects ordered by the gun-shots, however, are precisely the objects used in this particular manipulation; the piece thus most specifically represents its own creation. This self-reflexiveness is indicated by the echoing of the shots and of the fanfare on the cassette recorder.

This echo, however, has another meaning. Sherman does not conceal the cassette recorder from his audience; it is present on stage among the other objects. With this denial of illusionism, an attentive audience might reflect that the sounds were recorded at that very point in time when Sherman, alone in his studio, first created this manipulation. What had been metaphorically represented from within the boundaries of the manipulation now, with the transcendence of those boundaries, takes on a literal meaning. We are, in a very real sense, listening to an echo of the artist's creation of his self-portrait.

Stuart Sherman stands before us on the stage, but now we hear the echo of another Stuart Sherman, who must necessarily be absent from this and every other performance of his work. Yet this other Sherman, though always absent, pervades with thought this image of himself, moving on stage with such precise and controlled gestures, which is his representative to our world. After the completion of the spectacle, the performer moves backstage. Within this duplicitous self, the paradoxes of Sherman's work begin to dissolve.

-IV-

Before each manipulation of a spectacle the performer glances at an index card, presumably containing a list of manipulations. Yet, if he can remember the complex manipulations, he certainly can remember their order. Formally, the act serves to clearly define the boundaries between the manipulations, but more than this, the gesture represents the performer receiving his orders from the absent creator whose image he is. Like the cassette recorder, this act is placed within the performance as a subtle trace of Sherman as artist, as creator.

The disjunction between Sherman as performer and as creator is most explicit in the self-portrait but its structure pervades the work. In a literalization of the basic theatrical act of acting out a script, the mechanical quality of Sherman's movements on stage is understandable: the performer, like the toy robots he manipulates, can only

perform the structures of his absent creator. The robot is an image of the performer as the performer is an image of the creator and neither exists in the work except as such an image.

As such an image, the performer must discard the accidents of individuality to become a vessel for the order imposed by the creator. Any gesture not entirely subordinate to the structure, any movement not precise and controlled, any flicker of arbitrary facial expression or distraction of clothing or manner, would interfere with the imaging of the thought-structures which are precise and must be precisely embodied. In the self-portrait, the removal of the seductively colored claw-marks represents a turning away from the seduction of personal individuality and expression. In saying that he would like to move in everyday life as he does on stage, Sherman is aspiring to a life of embodied thought and order.

Sherman's major interest in this work is not the particular manipulations, which serve only as traces of the earlier process of thought: "You shouldn't identify with the structures, but with the structure-making process. That's what is essential."

This explains why the spectacles consist of a series of independent manipulations: each constitutes a particular approach towards the process of thinking, but none can in themselves fully instantiate that process.

What the self-portrait represents is not so much Stuart Sherman as particular individual but that "creator" whose essence is contained in the process of thoughtful ordering. In "making a spectacle of himself," Sherman is not so much his specific personality as he is manifesting the human capacity for thought and ordering. Stuart Sherman Spectacles, like the monocle of the self-portrait, are instruments which help him focus raw experience, material objects, into ordered structures. In making a spectacle of himself, Sherman is acting as a public witness to thought.

-V-

Sherman's work embodies an aspiration towards transcendental order, but it also recognizes the limitations of such an embodiment. After each manipulation, the objects return back to the chaotic pile from which they emerged and after every spectacle Sherman presumably returns to a life which is not fully thoughtful. In his self-portrait Sherman depicts a self defined by a movement between various levels of participation in the cosmic order; essential to that depiction is a return away from order. The creative act, in fact, occurs not as the unrepresentational order is approached, but only after the return to the world. Art, composed both of ideas and matter, can only exist after such a return to the material world.

Even within the creative process, the inchoate materiality of the objects can never be fully transcended. The fanfare of the blow-out is triumphant as the objects' transformation is celebrated, but it also echoes the sound of a Bronx cheer, acknowledging that the objects stand unchanged on the table. In this magic-like performance, the transformation is always mental. The objects may be rigorously contexted into an idea-structure, but their physical presence resists full assimilation into it. He notes:

I don't think an object is ever violated in identity. I think that it is almost impossible to see an object without contexting it... You take it into the bloodstream of the mind... You assimilate it and change it according to your make-up: mental, physical, emotional, spiritual... But the object is always there, in its mystery and plenitude.

The achievement of an ontological vibration between object-as-idea and object-as-matter helped motivate Sherman to stop making almost purely conceptual ideographic drawings and to begin enacting performances using real objects.

There is a moment at the end of the *Tenth Spectacle, Portraits of Places*, when the performer, having exercised total control for seventeen manipulations, lifts up a dustpan and, with a celebratory ringing of a bell, allows a gold scroll to extend from it, releasing five small balls which bounce about the stage; as they come to rest in a random pattern, the spectacle is over. This manipulation had described a trajectory from a lost world of the past, St. Petersburg (an image, here imbued with a rich nostalgia, of the not fully ordered experience standing before the revolution of thought), to an abstract, ordered, world of the present, identified with Los Angeles. The moment of loss of control is, the title indicates, a representation of Eden. Here the return from order is not simply a return to the world, but also a return to a ground out of which all embodied structures emerge. Sherman has stated that the balls represent possible new worlds which might now be created.

Kleist, in his *Essay on Marionettes*, argues that grace is possible only for God and for puppets, for absolute consciousness or for beings without consciousness. Sherman's performances represent both: there is Sherman the creator who, like God, is indicated by, but not within, the world of ordered objects and there is Sherman the performer, who aspires to a state of abject surrender to the creator, who desires to be a puppet of his thought. Within the continual vibration between thought and materiality, however, Kleist's ideal of grace dissolves. Objects accidentally fall, the performer often fumbles. In an exemplary moment during one performance, Sherman cut his finger, his blood assimilating itself into the piece as a trace of his material existence outside of the idea-structures. The nature of this work is such that such accidents, indications of the interplay between idea and matter, order and chaos, thinking and moving, must be accepted. However obsessed with order and ideality Sherman may be, chaos and matter are an equally primal source of his work.

For Sherman, "making a spectacle of himself" does not mean adopting a role but publicly manifesting thinking. He has created a theatre of intricate structure in which he can continually re-enact, in the privacy of creation and in public performance, participation in the ordering process and the inevitable loss of that order. It is this process which he represents as his essential self and in his work Sherman devises an arena in which he can enact that selfhood with a particular clarity and exhibit to the world.