

Tom Sherman - Cultural Engineering

by Michael Hymers

What are the ways and means in and by which we may define environments? What, if anything, differentiates a natural environment from a cultural environment?

These questions and their answers play an important role in *Cultural Engineering*, an exhibit by Canadian artist Tom Sherman, now on display at the Dalhousie Art Gallery.

Sherman, who became a Toronto resident in 1972 after leaving his native Michigan, presently makes his home in Ottawa where he holds the position of Media Arts Officer with the Canada Council. His present exhibition comprises about one half of the works presented at Ottawa's National Gallery from May to July of this year, also under the title *Cultural Engineering*.

A large portion of the display consists of short written works which range in tone from sensuous to almost sinister. Some, such as "My First Tape Recorder" (1974) and "3 Cat Stories" (1977), are primarily literary works unto themselves, but Sherman's background as a sculptor reveals itself in their expanded physical dimensions. We are led to speculate on when a piece of literary art may also be considered a piece of visual art, indeed, a sculpture.

The majority of the written pieces, however, are based upon photographs made by other artists. In "Portrait of Martin Heath; Writing from a Photograph by Jeremiah Checik" (1976) we find what appears to be, most straightforwardly, a description of the photographic contents. Others, including "Writing from the Photographs of Lucinda Devlin" (1983), seem concerned largely with imaginative extrapolations of the given scenes.

Most contain a combination of these two lines of thought. All are considered by Sherman to be attempts at equivalent statements in an alternate medium, as well as his personal attempts to see the photographs more clearly.



According to Sherman, the observer forms another element in addition to the photographs and writings of these works, as he or she tries to derive what might be termed a third equivalent statement.

The artist's fascination with technology's role as a cultural influence is evident throughout the display. We are constantly confronted with ways in which technology places boundaries and definitions upon our environments. This idea is most noticeable in his video recordings.

"Transvideo" (1981) makes the suggestion that at one time we moved through the information; now the information moves through us. This seems somehow ironic as the viewer looks through the TV screen and out the windshield of a moving car. A similar theme is supported in "East on the 401" (1978), as we are greeted with the statement, "You can't watch television and drive a car at the same time."

In "TVideo" (1980) restrictions are placed on environment, as caffeine addiction and ear, eye and back ailments conspire to control the manner in which Tom Sherman lives his life. Meanwhile, "Television's Human Nature" (1977) presents portraits of individuals who attempt to

redefine their environments by treating the TV the way it treats them.

Television and the computer revolution exercise an enormous influence on western culture to the point where, as Sherman puts it, "...people now brag about their antennas, rather than their cars."

One of the most fascinating instances of environmental definition to be found in the display involves what may best be called "sound sculpture." At three separate locations in the display "white noise" is piped through speakers of different tonal ranges, while electrons dash madly across a blank television screen against one wall.

This white noise defines different locations in space, thereby creating different environments and making the person reading the pieces on display instinctively move to a comfortable distance from which to read. Any temptation to stand in the centre of the room becomes almost negligible. We are reminded at every turn of the huge number of possible influences on our living environment.

Tom Sherman's *Cultural Engineering* will be on display at the Dalhousie Art Gallery until October 30.

Penguins in the Garden

by Robert Speirs

Last Thursday The Garden was the setting of a highly energetic dance party. The Hopping Penguins are not a group that can be merely viewed from afar. Dissimilar to some bands that frolic endlessly in a state of tedium and boredom, The Hopping Penguins, truly communicate with their audience.

It was disappointing that The Garden could have held more people. If you were one of those people who did not have the pleasure of witnessing this event, you missed something quite worthwhile. What was heard was a variety of ska, reggae and vintage rock 'n roll.

The show opened with a little boogie woogie. Frontman Andrew Lordly's sax wails added the highlights for the band's

instrumental textures. This character is certainly not boring with his dance routines, and his occasional rampages through the audience.

Mark Glover, the guitarist, played beautifully and unconventionally. He is well suited to this form of music, which gives him ample opportunity to indulge in avant-garde solos.

Donning shades and churning out solid bass patterns was Peter King. Gary Edwards gave us the crash of cymbals and the beat of the skins.

Keyboardist Conrad Thomas was splendid. He took over the lead vocals on several songs, adding a true reggae feel. The percussion and harmonica were supplied by Bruce Vickory.

Their performance was inspir-

ing, bursting with energy. Superb covers of Madness' "One Step Beyond," "Police & Thieves" popularized by The Clash (Registered Vote's lead singer helped out), and a UB40 number displayed the band at their best. People kept their toes tapping throughout the sets, not really wanting the band to leave.

We had a very special treat when John Alphonse arrived and helped out with the percussion and the drums. At this point everyone had their turn at soloing.

Great musicians and great music—an event. For a closing tune came The Specials' "Nite Klub." Solos and jamming concluded the night, leaving the audience with the utmost satisfaction. Halifax needs more bands like The Hopping Penguins.

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