

Introduction

One day, about three years ago, I was on the phone to my friend Lena and she was telling me about a trip to New York where she had carried out research on the estate of the American performance artist and filmmaker Stuart Sherman (1945–2001), who I had not come across before then.

“I am sure you would like the work,” she said at the end of our call.

A few months later Lena and I organised a private-screening session of Sherman’s films for a circle of friends at my Berlin-based gallery Scriptings. Some people in the audience knew nothing about the artist, some knew bits and pieces from information that was available on-line, and one or two people in the audience had intimate knowledge of Sherman, as they had met him and worked with him back in the 1980s, when he had been artist-in-residence at the DAAD in West-Berlin. Over the course of the evening the private memories of and professional encounters with Sherman became, with the best intentions of the individual speakers, historical facts of reference for our readings and reactions to his works. Interpretations of his personality, his private life, and the consequences for his artistic practice were mingled in our minds and through our conversations. A necessary differentiation and separation of artist life and work was hard to achieve in the dynamics we shared.

The following text is not a response to the evening, but simply an occasion to re-think elements of Sherman’s artistic practice within its contemporaneity that we rediscovered - with all the inevitable difficulties embedded in such a process - during our gathering at Scriptings.

The Deadpan Projectionist

Achim Lengerer

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A small boy from the audience approaches Stuart Sherman after a performance of the Third Spectacle.

Boy: I didn’t get whether it was a magic show or not. What is it?

Clumsy, his arms extended out above the cheapest things the consumer world has to offer, intentionally balancing on the verge of instability in front of his folding table and his spectators – us – activating a sense of instability in our own bodies. That is how Stuart Sherman (1945-2001) is depicted on a black-and-white photograph taken by the photographer and filmmaker Babette Mangolte, who continually accompanied Sherman both photographically and cinematically during his performance series *Spectacles* throughout the 1970s and 1980s. In his *Spectacles*, which Sherman either staged as live performances for audiences or performed exclusively for the camera, Sherman ritually set up a small folding table, placed in front of him next to a suitcase filled with everyday objects. He would then take these objects into his hand, only to put them down again. He would display them, introduce them to an audience or point them towards one another. Appearing and disappearing. Associative actions. Thus, attempts to record Sherman’s performances in writing frequently end in a chaste orgy of verbs: “Takes ... Puts ... Turns ... Replaces ... Takes out ... Reads and replaces ... Picks up ... Removes ... Places ... Removes it without ... Replaces ... Repeats this three times ... Lowers hands. Raises them ... Replaces ... Removes ... Moves both hands ... Lowers hands to sides ... Replaces objects.”¹

For me, a picture depicting him during a single action, locked in a physical stance, captures it much better. A lunge by Sherman, his right hand is stretched out towards us presenting an object: “**Holding Heinz Ketchup Pouch**”, the picture’s caption indicates. Stuart Sherman was someone who presented objects for his as well as our inspection. In doing so, his facial expressions remained the same throughout all of his performative actions: static, inert. The word *deadpan*² expresses it most accurately and succinctly. And indeed, what kind of facial expression should one use when presenting a tube of Heinz ketchup?

The little tray table served as Sherman’s very own mobile stage, a production requirement that was simultaneously performative and portable. It didn’t take much else: merely the appearance, disappearance, presence and absence of objects and people in mobile constellations, a basic theatrical situation. Sometimes there were two tables, other times just one set up in a white gallery or a black theatre space, and yet other times he would arrange his tables in a public space in New York City. There were also times when Sherman would place the table on a head, in fact his own one. Viewing a picture of the latter situation immediately makes me think of a different head in another sentence, in which a man and the world are floating in free rotation: “*He felt no fatigue, though at times it bothered him that he could not walk on his head.*”³

SHERMAN: Did you like it?

BOY: I liked it, yeah.

SHERMAN: But you’re not sure what it was?

BOY: No.

No matter how my mind tries to grasp it, the only things that truly remain of Sherman’s style of live performance are the recorded traces that were preserved through media; only a mere fraction of what one would call “the actual work” has survived. This “actual work”, the series of acts that Stuart Sherman concocted for his objects, has faded

with the passage of time; it’s the past, but it’s not dead. However, one must distinguish between cinematic documentation and performative action. On the surface, the deliberately staged studio film clips and videos of Sherman’s Spectacles series seem to correspond to performance theorist Philip Auslander’s⁴ concept of theatrical or performed photography, i.e. works for which on-camera documentation constitutes an integral component of performative articulation and thus cannot be comprehended as the reproduction of a live event (through the presence of Babette Mangolte’s camera as Sherman’s artistic counterpart). To illustrate his point Auslander refers to Cindy Sherman, among others, as one compelling example – although the Shermans, Cindy and Stuart, are not related to one another in a twofold sense of the word. Stuart Sherman’s performances play with absence, as where Cindy Sherman’s works are more than present – especially commercially. The *Spectacles* undermine the *society of the spectacle* by featuring objects in ways contrary to their use or exchange value: The *Spectacles* are unspectacular. And the *Spectacles* – which could just as well be named after another meaning of the word “spectacles”, as in eyeglasses, an instrument of increased visibility – communicate through their intermediary presence in Sherman’s performances their actual modern-day absence. Admittedly, the cinematic *Spectacles* were performed (just as Cindy Sherman’s are) without an audience and exclusively for the camera, but the performances never entirely give way to – or *dissolve in* – the cinematic format. They lack Sherman, and by doing so they give way to a moving, projected image of him in our minds. The resulting show – which happens to be the third meaning of the word spectacle – arises in our heads, constructed over and over again as we piece together our perception of him, his work and his series of acts with objects: “I dissolve these things into a solution of my mind. I put them on a table in front of me and look at them really hard.”⁵

So I set up an impromptu table made of a wooden board and two trestles and lay the following things on it: a hard disk with Sherman’s

films and videos, documentary reports and reviews in American performance studies magazines from the 1970s and 1980s – one of them bears the apt title *Autoperformance* –, and a sheet of paper with my notes from when I visited the exhibition *Stuart Sherman und Babette Mangolte Spectacles* at Kunstverein Harburger Bahnhof in the summer of 2013.

BOY: ... Your sign says Third Spectacle. What's your definition of Third Spectacle?

SHERMAN: I did two before this one.

BOY: Oh.

One of the texts begins with a specification of the location: “On October 4, 1975, Stuart Sherman, a former actor with Charles Ludlam’s Ridiculous Theatrical Company and Richard Foreman’s Ontological-Hysterical Theater, presented his Third Spectacle on the corner of Bleecker Street and La Guardia Place in New York’s Greenwich Village”.⁶ With this, Sherman’s mobile (and ever-moving) venues are localised within a city, within the scene(ry) of New York and its eras, background and underground, upon which Sherman built and from which he distanced himself as he developed his works. This included his collaborations as a performer in New York’s avant-garde performance scene of the 1970s-1990s, which was characterised by groups such as the *Wooster Group* and the *Performance Group* as well as the two groups named in the quote. Foreman’s Theater, in particular, repeatedly provided Sherman with opportunities to present his performances, including his later works, which waywardly reverted back to classical theatre: “Compared to earlier pieces of his ‘performance art’, Sherman’s Classical Trilogy is big-budget, ‘serious’ theater, despite its truncated timing: Sherman’s Hamlet lasts twenty-five minutes, his Oedipus ... thirty, and his Faust only five...”⁷ His second underground base was New York’s avant-garde film scene of the late 1960s centred around the emerging *Anthology Film Archives* and the American film scholar P. Adams Sitney’s concept of structural film. Sherman’s approximately thirty short

and often silent 8 and 16 mm films (not counting the video clips and recordings of his Spectacles) loosely adhere to the type of structural filmmaking propagated by Sitney: They are works that either feature a static camera position or conceptual camera movements and are edited in such a way as to emphasise the articulatory capability that is allegedly solely inherent to the medium of film. It is not entirely coincidental that these elements, which were also displayed in Sherman’s works, are reminiscent of people such as the Canadian artist Michael Snow (born in 1929). Much like Sherman, Snow was a crossover artist who worked with various methods, forms of media and artistic groupings and whose film *Wavelength* (1967) rather unwittingly became a prime example of the *structural film* genre. Moreover, Snow and Sherman, who was the former’s junior by a decade and a half, shared a distinct penchant for cheerfully failing humour. In Snow’s late-1960s works, “humour” served as an adversary of structural composition: e.g. the continuous use of zoom and the sounding of a sinusoidal tone appeared to be in opposition to the terse, off-camera narration of the murder mystery featured in *Wavelength*. In Sherman’s works, structure presents itself self-mockingly. The film *The Discovery of the Phonograph* is arguably the best example of this.

Entrance on the scene: a record player. The camera captures the way its turntable spins and how its needle courses over the record’s grooves, 33 revolutions per minute. Sherman plays a record for us. After a while, the initially static camera begins to imitate the record’s rotation as a matter of course, assuming the rhythm of its revolutions – two technical inventions from two centuries ago united in concerted action as they sway to the music. The camera comes to a stop a couple of times, and voilà: According to Sherman’s established narrative language it is only logical that the music should stop as well. Two synchronised movements. This pattern is repeated several times until an impending break in the continuum ensues: The camera refuses to continue spinning and simply stops. What can be done? The orchestrator of the action is forced to intervene. Sherman’s own head begins to imitate the record’s rotation and then continues to spin: *performing the turntable*.

Like a movie camera with spring mechanisms (i.e. without a motor, such as the 16 mm *Bolex* brand cameras that were extremely common among the filmmakers of the 1960s), Sherman thus symbolically winds up the camera anew, and the camera soon falls back into its familiar pattern of spinning while recording 24 frames per second. Triple action in the most literal sense of the term: Sherman's rotating head, captured by a camera spinning to the rhythm of a revolving record player. In the aforementioned issue of *Autoperformance*, Sherman talked about this exact instance of taking things literally: "You do this all the time with language ... the transapplicability of words and ideas. When you do it with objects, it is rather startling at first. I take the metaphor quite literally."⁸ And not only did Sherman take the series of acts and their unfolding storylines literally, he also took his means of demonstration literally, namely the 16 mm camera.

Perhaps one could say that instead of taking up an idea and applying it to an object, or instead of engrafting something onto an object, he took both the idea and the object metaphorically "into his hands". In an ongoing process he allowed them to work both together and against each other in steady rotation. If only you two had known each other, I think to myself: The German *deadpan* comedian, author and filmmaker Karl Valentin, and you.



CUT

Der neue Schreibtisch (The New Writing Desk) is a 1915 silent film by Karl Valentin (1882-1948) in which Karl positioned his protagonist VALENTIN directly in front of the camera, just as Stuart did with his performer SHERMAN. This film is firmly rooted in the language of early cinema, set up like a funfair attraction, a peep box framing a single storyline: The protagonist is awaiting the delivery of a new desk. The item delivered is faulty; it is much too tall and seems to resemble a lectern more than it does a desk. Both Karl himself and the chair he places in front of it bemoan the object's wayward proportions. But our hero Valentin knows what to do: He simply has to trim the lectern's legs to a length appropriate for a desk. However, to his great misfortune, he miscalculates how much to cut off. Soon the chair is much too tall in relation to the legs of the desk. And thus it continues on: Step by step, the legs of the desk and chair are overcorrected all the way to the bitter end – and beyond. Once the mutilated lectern/would-be desk and chair ultimately lay flat on the ground, our hero has no other choice than to draw the final consequence and continue his endeavours with a last show of strength – underground. He hammers holes into the floor in a last attempt to establish the "correct" proportions, which of course he will never actually attain. The hole is not the ultimate answer, and he falls through – into the shop beneath him – right along with his plan. "Often, manipulations are necessary by the performance demands, as when ... two props were on the floor, having been used and put aside. Both ... needed to be reintegrated into the piece. Solving these problems gives Sherman an opportunity to concretize his thought patterns".⁹ And reading this makes me wonder if the difference between Sherman and Valentin could be seen in the way they display their *performance demands*: Valentin uses his table to drive a cinematic plot – *what the story demands* – whereas Sherman's table serves to drive the performance itself.



CUT

My notepad from the Harburg exhibition. What did I take note of back then? The abovementioned solely intermediary presence of the *Spectacles* performances, the way they do not entirely give way to – or *dissolve* in – the cinematic format. The sore point of the performances: They lack Sherman. That means that we observers are left without the chance to actually witness the *Spectacles* at the moment of projection, we lack the right vision aids, so to speak. *Spectacles* in the sense of the optical tool of the camera lens: a lens, an artificial *EYE* and thus acoustically identical to the word I, the I of the subject. These cinematic (power) relations have been illustrated by artists such as Sherman's "camerawoman" Babette Mangolte in her film *The Camera: Je / La Camera: I* (1977), which was featured as part of the accompanying programme of the exhibit, as well as – with utterly different cinematic means – by Samuel Beckett in *Film* (1964). In the leading role Beckett cast Buster Keaton, a third *deadpan* performer, who was as much a comedian without comedy as Stuart Sherman was a magician without magic. Unlike Mangolte, who designed her film based on and in question of her own photographic-cinematic experience behind the camera, Beckett structured his *Film* solely on the basis of the script. And it is perhaps no coincidence – Keaton's legendary remarks on *Film's* quality are resoundingly negative – that these few typed pages have remained

Beckett's only surviving film script. The Sherman/Mangolte exhibition, on the other hand, displayed a neatly compiled selection of Sherman's film scripts, most of which were likewise short-format and consisted of just one or two pages in total. Deviating from the standard 'script' form, which primarily relies on narrative and dialogue in spatio-temporal settings, Sherman provided a sequence of cuts on each page, conceptualising the performance as both a series of acts and cuts, which only together could form his cinematographic notation. The individual actions and scenes are joined through the use of CUTs, a term which simultaneously denotes separation and conjunction, as in the physical act of cutting and splicing the analogue film strip.

One thought that came to me back then in Harburg: Should the objects and series of bodily acts in the *Spectacles*, which are characterised by abrupt appearances and disappearances, also be interpreted as CUTs in the continuum of events (much like the literal cuts imposed during film editing)? "Why do you go so fast? ... I don't think I go so fast. I was shocked the first time someone said that to me. I was giving each gesture the exact amount of time due to it ... the right amount of time."¹⁰ Sherman's precisely conducted gestures – *the exact amount of time* –, their onset and seamless appearance or disappearance, the concept of *suddenly-there-it-is* conceived by him as an analogue sequence of cuts. This understanding would also shed a different light on the velocity of the performance – *why do you go so fast?* – as a CUT can never be too quick, it takes place in 1/24 of a second between two images. Sherman's gestural actions in front of the camera as a performative presentation of plot cuts in real time: *live cutting, live editing* of the performance. His folding table as an editing table with Sherman as the editor, presenter and projectionist on the (cinematic) stage.

The simplest kind of film editing: Much like how in early cinema the recording device, the camera, was one and the same with the projection device, the projector, Sherman's performances are likewise presentation and editing at once – staged with and in Sherman's body.

A cinematographic body like in early cinema (perhaps that is the reason why he chose to present us with only one single facial expression, much like Chaplin and Keaton) which physically performs various speeds, transitions, connections, shifts, twists, articulations and cuts. Early cinema at its best, particularly when one recalls the beginnings of cinema as vaudeville shows at funfairs and the amazement that ensued over the wondrously moving objects and people being projected on screen. In his essay *Der wunderliche Realist* (The Curious Realist), Theodor W. Adorno wrote of his childhood friend and Weimar Republic film critic Siegfried Kracauer: “The Latin word for thing is res. Realism is derived from it. Kracauer gave his theory of film the [English] subtitle ‘The Redemption of Physical Reality’. The true translation into German would be ‘Die Rettung der physischen Realität’: so curious is Kracauer’s realism.”¹¹

CUT

Recording the elements of a curious performance.

CUT

Back when filming, the “recording” of real-life things and people, and the curious projection of the resulting work of fiction were united in a single apparatus, the film presenter and projectionist was tasked with the live projection of film reels in an individually created sequence, essentially editing before the invention of montage. Similarly, Sherman “spliced” his series of acts together live in his performances, editing without montage. Sherman, *the deadpan projectionist*, a projectionist presenting without a film in a “...magic show, but magic without tricks.”¹² The aforementioned and frequently cited description of the *Third Spectacle* by Brooks McNamara commences with a preface to a fragment of dialogue: “A small boy from the audience approaches Stu-

art Sherman after a performance of the Third Spectacle.” In the brief dialogue that follows, Sherman gently rejoins the young boy’s questions, claiming his right as the Spectacle’s presenter to perform a productive distance to the performance itself – in doing so, he takes the boy utterly seriously as an independent observer of the events: a conjoint balancing act on the verge of instability.

Boy: I didn’t get whether it was a magic show or not. What is it?
Sherman: I like people to decide for themselves what it is. I have my ideas and you have yours.
Boy: What do you think it is?
Sherman: Your ideas are as good as mine.¹³

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Text #5 in “We Write, Right?” a project by gold extra

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