

Art & Design

ART REVIEW | STUART SHERMAN

A Tabletop Conjurer, Rediscovered

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We lose good artists to the past all the time, because their work was ephemeral, or difficult, or fashion wasn't on their side. The performance artist Stuart Sherman, who died of AIDS in 2001, was a candidate for disappearance on all three counts. But thanks to two exceptional exhibitions, one at the [New York University](#) 80WSE gallery, the other at Participant Inc., an alternative space on the Lower East Side, he's back in a big way, big at least for him.

Sherman's signature pieces, which he called "spectacles," were evanescent and minute. They featured just one performer, himself, and were initially presented in his downtown Manhattan apartment for friends and in city parks for passers-by.

His stage was a small folding table; his props everyday items: a pen, a light bulb, eyeglasses, a roll of tape, toys. The performance consisted of him rapidly, usually soundlessly, always precisely arranging and rearranging the objects, putting one on top of another, taping some down, tossing some away, creating the equivalent of still lifes seen in a flipbook.

Each spectacle lasted just a few minutes. Even later pieces on a larger scale, using several performers, were disconcertingly succinct. An adaptation of Sophocles' "Oedipus" came in under half an hour; he did a 20-minute "Hamlet," a 5-minute "Faust." In the solo performance his demeanor was always the same: dressed in plain dark clothes, focused intently on the table in front of him, he looked at once geeky and Olympian, a combination of obsessive kid and master magician.

Anyone expecting traditional rabbit-out-of-a-hat tricks, though, would be disappointed. The spectacle itself — the materials he used and the wit, speed and rhythm of their manipulation — was the trick, the magic. If you didn't get it, you didn't. If you did, you wanted more.

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Fales Library, New York University

"Stuart Sherman": The visual and performance artist's work is being revived at New York University's 80WSE gallery and Participant Inc. Above, his collage "Child in Flight From Low-Flying Planes, Trees Advancing, 2/6/96."

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[Audio Slide Show: 'The Works of Stuart Sherman' \(NYU.edu\)](#)

[Stuart Sherman Videos, Part I \(YouTube.com\)](#)

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More is what you'll find in "Beginningless Thought/Endless Seeing: The Works of Stuart Sherman" at New York University. All aspects of his creativity, as a performer, writer, reader, filmmaker, sculptor and draftsman, are touched on in the show, which has been organized with immense tact and care by three of Sherman's friends and collaborators, John Hagan, Yolanda Hawkins and John Maturri.

Sherman was born in 1945 in Providence, R.I., and even when very young he read voraciously and had a yen for performing. Asked in a 1980s interview about the sources of his art — and there were many, from gadget demonstrations on 1950s television to the Judson Dance Theater and Fluxus art in the 1960s — he said: "I'm influenced the most by myself as a child. I don't feel so very different from when I was 5."

After graduating from Antioch College in Ohio, he came to New York City in the late 1960s. At the time he thought of himself primarily as a writer, then as a visual artist; samples of his chance-generated poetry and diagrammatic drawings are in the show.

But in New York he ended up immersing himself in the world of experimental theater, working with two men, the writer-director [Richard Foreman](#) and the actor-director [Charles Ludlam](#), then in the early stages of influential careers.

In the mid-1970s Sherman introduced his spectacles, documenting them on video. Several videos are in the exhibition and they bear repeated viewing. What at first looks like improvisation turns out to be tightly scripted. Patterns of movement have the rhythms and rhyme schemes of poetic structure.

Apparently random objects begin to suggest psychological narratives about confusion, self-destruction and self-definition.

Sherman experienced bouts of paralyzing depression, which brought on profound inertia. Task-oriented performance was, he found, a way to circumvent it. It was also a way for him to engage with people immediately but indirectly. For him performing for an audience was a way of hiding in plain sight, a way to express himself indirectly, even invisibly.

"I don't think of making pieces," Sherman once wrote. "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."

With time he expanded his performance in scale and extended it into films, all short, some with sound. Several were "portraits" of fellow writers and performers like George Ashley, Stefan Brecht, Edwin Denby, Bérénice Reynaud, Black-Eyed Susan and Scotty Snyder. The likenesses are whimsical and oblique, studies in how the subconscious processes our perceptions of others. The act of thinking, rather than the completed thought, was always Sherman's subject.

Although he received steady, if bare-bones, institutional support in the form of awards and grants, Sherman's work was increasingly out of step with the New York art world of his day. Even in the 1970s, when he introduced his spectacles, another avant-gardist, [Robert Wilson](#), was gaining wide attention for producing traditional

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John Maturri

Stuart Sherman (1945-2001) doing one of his performance pieces in Battery Park City.

spectacles, performances that lasted many hours. One of them, “Einstein on the Beach,” became an opera with a score by [Philip Glass](#) and was performed at the Met.

By the 1980s small and ephemeral were out.

Painting and sculpture, whatever could be marketed and collected, were in. During these years Sherman sublet his Manhattan apartment and traveled tirelessly, to the West Coast, to Europe, Asia, Australia, wherever he could get gigs, focusing more and more on films and videos until illness slowed him down. At the time of his death, in San Francisco, he must have seemed, even for some people who had long admired him, a figure from an earlier era, lost in the shuffle of cultural commerce.

But a revival of his reputation is under way, one that may give him a larger presence than he had in his lifetime. His films are being conserved by the Museum of Modern Art. His archives are in the hands of New York University’s Fales Library, which did much to make the pristine and comprehensive 80WSE Gallery show possible.

Next weekend several of his plays will be revived at the Emily Harvey Foundation in SoHo. (A schedule is available at [emilyharveyfoundation.org](#).) On Dec. 8 Electronic Arts Intermix in Chelsea will host a short survey of Sherman videos followed by a discussion with Mr. Foreman and the artist Paul Chan ([cai.org](#)). At Participant Inc. the group exhibition called “Stuart Sherman: Nothing Up My Sleeve” is on view through Dec. 20.

The Participant show, organized by the artist Jonathan Berger and billed as “inspired by the work of Stuart Sherman,” begins with photographs of Sherman’s stage pieces, then turns into an ambitious visual essay on magic acts, invented personas and other illusion-making strategies used in art and popular culture alike to create alternative realities.

An ensemble of Spiritualist artifacts takes the theme back to the 19th century, implicitly casting Sherman’s tabletop manipulations in the tradition of séances. Documentary material on the escape artist [Harry Houdini](#), from photos of him encased in a locked chest to one of his vintage mouth-operated lock-picks, illustrates the notion of performance as extended exercise in deception that can still, minute by minute, evoke genuine emotion.

And for a model of the artist as self-creation Mr. Berger also brings into the show the spirit of the cult comedian [Andy Kaufman](#), whose characters and actual personality were, to all appearances, indistinguishable. In the show’s selection of musty, relic-like personal effects — Kaufman’s 1950s record collection, a suitcase full of his Transcendental Meditation paraphernalia — we presumably see evidence of the man himself, but who knows? With life, as with performance, where does realness begin and end? Some fans believe that Kaufman’s reported death of cancer in 1984, when he was 35, was part of his act, that he is still alive and waiting to make a comeback.

The show also has a smart mix of work by contemporary artists — Carol Bove, James Lee Byars, Matthew Brannon, Vaginal Davis and others — who in one way or another play with existential truth as something both genuine and fake, heartfelt and cooked up, and do so with something like Sherman’s enigmatic, punning wit.

Whether he influenced any of them directly is a question. More certain is the example he sets for young artists now: how to make art that’s about yourself but isn’t, using nothing, or almost nothing, materially speaking; and how to keep making it whether you have an audience or not because you need to stay alive and want to stay awake.

“Beginningless Thought/Endless Seeing: The Works of Stuart Sherman” continues through Dec. 19 at 80WSE Gallery, 80 Washington Square East, Greenwich Village; nyu.edu/pages/galleries. “Stuart Sherman: Nothing Up My Sleeve” continues through Dec. 20 at Participant Inc., 253 Houston Street, near Suffolk Street, Lower East Side; participantinc.org.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: December 4, 2009

An art review on Monday about two exhibitions of the work of Stuart Sherman, at the New York University 80WSE gallery and Participant Inc. on the Lower East Side, misstated the name of a subject of one of his film “portraits.” He was Stefan Brecht, not George Stefan Brecht.

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