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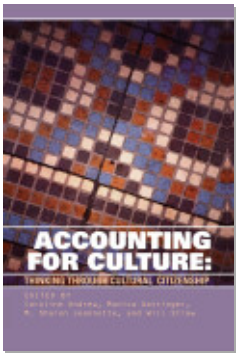
6. Artists' Behaviour in the First Decade



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6.

Artists' Behaviour in the First Decade

Tom Sherman

Someone asked me what I thought of the idea of cultural citizenship.[1] The first thing I thought of was whether or not I belonged to a specific culture. I guess I could claim my birthright. If I were born and raised in a specific locale, I would have the right to participate culturally without inhibition, and hopefully with some sophistication, in the culture I was born into. If I inhabited that locale for a sustained length of time, my citizenship would undoubtedly be strengthened. If I decided to move or I was uprooted for some reason I would still carry the sensibility of my original culture forever.

If by chance I landed somewhere worthwhile and decided to invest in a new culture, I suppose I'd have to work harder than the locals to earn my new cultural citizenship. But I would already have an idea of what it's like to belong somewhere. I could apply my previous experience to my new context. I would be that much richer having two cultural identities. Eventually I would learn to blend my duality into something special. When I would travel the world I would have a choice of expressing the sensibilities of my first or second culture. Depending on my day-to-day position in transit, it would be interesting to see which citizenship made more sense in this place or that, with different kinds of people, or when I was alone in a foreign landscape. Even a couple of cultural citizenships can be confusing. Where would my allegiances lie?

In the first decade of the new millennium people are conflicted about a lot of things. Distances separate children from parents, workers from offices and co-workers, people from the landscapes they belong to. Everyone I know is networked in a profound way. The glue isn't a familiar place where everyone knows the rules and shares a water cooler, or a whiteboard, or a vegan menu. Telecommunications devices facilitate the connections that people make today. People connect through devices like telephones and computers, and speakers and screens, with the goal of eliminating the distance between each other.

Sure people still meet and press the flesh. Meeting people in person is great as long as you wash your hands frequently. There is still something to be said for a sense of smell and our rusty instincts. But in such unusually intimate circumstances people find it reassuring to be augmented by cameras, recording devices, and surrounded by all kinds of supplementary memory.

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Flipping back to my thoughts on cultural citizenship, I suppose I have an opinion on such an abstract, slippery concept because I'm an artist. Artists are usually oblivious to the fact that they are out of their depth. Artists are very comfortable with the notion of cultural environments because they are obsessive, compulsive consumers of information. My eyes bleed and ears ring every third day. I'm a voyeur and I can't get enough of the things people say, and the way they dress and act and display their relationships with machines. That's my particular fetish: person-machine relationships.

As an artist, as a general rule, I never trust a sociologist,[2] or anyone who poses as one. I buy into the idea of cultural citizenship because as an artist I contribute to the cultures I am living in through my work. I'll even go so far as to claim special status as I participate far more than the average citizen. I take pride in my work, although most of the people who appreciate my efforts do so from a distance. I meet almost total indifference in my immediate physical environment. In fact, when I display my work locally it seems to make my associates very uncomfortable. They pretend I don't exist. Sometimes I'm happy to hear that most theorists agree that the meat body is disappearing in the digital age. I'm certainly uncomfortable in mine when people don't know how to respond to the things I make. Thankfully I'm networked to a string of kindred spirits residing in other jurisdictions.

I think the root of this indifference bordering on hostility has to do with my inability to accept thanks or the gift of art in return. I'm learning how to give and receive art, but I've been conditioned by the culture at large to be competitive. As an artist I go to great lengths to try to give back to a culture that steadfastly refuses my gifts. I vomit in the face of a culture dominated by industrial crap: the waves of violent, titillating cinema; the wasteland of totally banal formulaic music; the blanket of broadcast propaganda, state-issued or private. Our media environment is structured as a one-way, top-down, irreversible flow of manufactured instruction sets on how to act and look and feel and consume. Our radio, television, and newspapers invite our response, our participation in call-in, talkback forums, or letters to the editor or through text messaging or audience polls via the World Wide Web. This formal reversibility of the media, the apparent "interactivity" of the culture, couched as a utopian fantasy of true reciprocity, is nothing more than a repeated exercise in controlled feedback, a spectacle of cybernetic manipulation. The power always resides with the one who can give *and cannot be repaid.*[3]

But surely we can vote with our dollars, our consumer power, or ultimately through our indifference. After our letters to the editor are rejected or our calls put on hold—after our submissions by e-mail are acknowledged by avalanches of spam—we tend to pull back and withdraw. Who needs the rejection and subsequent harassment? Everyone knows the only feedback the media will accept is that which demonstrates obedience. Talk back to the media critically and you will face public humiliation. The audience is thus trained to accept a culture designed to be received by a polite, compliant populous conditioned to accept programming determined by the lowest common denominator. Pabulum for the pabulum eaters.[4]

As an artist I am left stranded with all those rejected by the predominant culture. Misery loves company. There are a great number of us. I understand that power always resides with those who can give *and cannot be repaid*, and admit that I am suspicious when people identify with and tell me they appreciate my work. My first instinct is to mistrust and reject positive feedback. If people can identify with and embrace what I'm doing, I fear it must be too close to standard fare. It is hard to be a good citizen when one is locked in such a double bind. I beg for attention and space in the culture, and yet when I get some respect I tend to want to bite the hand that feeds me.[5] This double bind used to inevitably shorten my relationships with curators and producers, but since I've shifted

my work from objects and installations and the kind of things that make sense in relation to bricks and mortar architecture, institutions like museums and galleries have stopped being interested. I have made concept-based video and audio and performance art for over thirty years.

I have found institutions, most of the museums and galleries and broadcast media, to be dreadfully slow to evolve. I used to be ahead of my time. Now I'm smack dab in the middle of a burgeoning media culture supported by a decentralized infrastructure of networked personal computers. These computers are connecting people through opportunities to exchange art. Sometimes the screens are big. Sometimes they're small. Opportunities to display to audiences are suddenly everywhere. I'm finding it a lot easier to give and receive in this new environment.

Let me describe the media saturated world I'm living in. First, let me say I hesitate to use the phrase "new media" because it is a business term being used deviously to extend the reach of converging broadcast, publishing, communications, and security industries into our communities, our homes, and our personal gear. Saturation is the name of the game. There are only so many hours in the day. The "new media" bridge the gaps between movies, live performances, and recordings while in transit. Content is diluted so everything can be overlapped. We surf the Web while we talk on the phone. We listen to recorded music while we converse over ambient television. If we're not talking, we're doing something else with our mouths, like eating or drinking or smoking. Talking across distances is very popular. Talking while doing something else is as big as it gets. The more things we can do at the same time the better. High-density overlaps are a generational thing. Multi-tasking is the primary skill set of youth.

Camcorders, notebooks, downloading players, and personal digital assistants help us manage our information flow. All of these devices are getter smarter and have even begun "talking" to each other. People are getting so stressed out managing their personal information; they have to take a break from time to time. Video games offer an escape. Video games are immersive. They demand our complete attention. That's the limiting factor with the interactive forms; you can't do anything else at the same time. Camcorders are different. They transform live experience into opportunities for documentation. Your immediate world is cloned in real time, appearing in the camcorder's LCD screen while it is being recorded. We can save our experiences for later on. With our computers we can organize our recordings, mixing and matching downloads and streams, and shuffling files to make something new out of ordinary experience. When you double your experience, you can end up with a lot of unmanageable time. These information appliances are turning us into very stylish librarians![6]

Today's personal media environment is the hot turf of contemporary art. The idea of the pro-sumer, the complete synthesis of the *pro*ducer and con*sumer* of information, fostered by Japanese consumer technology firms in the 1980s, is now fully realized. Well-equipped individuals are producing and moving information around at unprecedented rates. Artists are bypassing anachronistic institutions such as museums, galleries, broadcasters, and publishers. Individual artists manage to compress pre-production (research), production, distribution and exhibition, once discrete and specialized time-consuming functions, into the same week. Middlemen and middlewomen everywhere are being cut out of the loop. Artists are aligning themselves strategically into co-operative groups. Co-operation replaces collaboration in an effort to conserve and enhance personal autonomy. Playing in parallel beats compromise.

There is little money involved at ground zero in the twenty-first century information economy. The rush is in the open exchange of information. Art, like science before it, is now functioning as a gift economy.[7] One's status among peers is based on giving away things that are useful to the community. Science has been a gift economy of ideas

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for a long time. Scientists *give* papers and openly share research findings, hoping to make significant, lasting contributions with their "gifts." The scientist who contributes the most to his or her field is held in the highest esteem. Scientists have been able to sustain their gift economy because institutions like universities and research institutes have supported them.

Artists have been supported by different kinds of institutions. Museums, galleries, and publishers "commodify" art by being selective and exclusive. There is a collective, open-source mission in every art scene, but these institutions force so much redundant, unattractive, competitive behaviour. Arts councils have been better at supporting art as a gift economy. Governments have tended to spread their funding across a wider spectrum of activity, mainly because public officials tend to get in trouble when they interfere with businesses trying to make a buck. The number of practicing artists has exploded over the past three decades, and the proliferation of digital media art (video, photography, animation, interactive installation, net.art) has increased the volume and circulation of contemporary art to a whole other level. Institutions still trying to function as gatekeepers are moving too slowly and will never catch up with the excellent work swirling through regional and international gift economies.[8]

Universities have been busy credentialing artists with M.F.A. degrees and most recently through Ph.D. studio/theory programs. The art gift economy is now composed of a mix of university-based artists and independent, institutionally unaffiliated artists working day jobs as designers, technicians, computer programmers, cooks, waiters, carpenters, models, etcetera, etcetera. Young artists have always done whatever they needed to do to support their art habit. Digital media art scenes are trans-generational. The unknown mingle freely with the notorious. What you've done in the past doesn't matter as much as what you're doing now. The technology and media are ubiquitous and inclusive. International work is freely exchanged in shows, screenings, and festivals. Local scenes make use of artist-run spaces, ad hoc-quick hit galleries, vacant storefronts, music clubs, community centres, cafés, restaurants, and bars (any "third place" between work and home). On-line shows link any variety of third places with homes, libraries, schools, and wireless laptops.

Despite the efforts of universities, museums, and publishers to privilege a select group of professional artists, in fact the speed of change and complexity of activity in the digital media arts sector is having a leveling effect on all active participants. Reputations are hard to maintain when the technology is evolving quickly and the territories and jurisdictions are fluctuating between popular culture, underground art, technosocialism, and the expansive hybridity of recombinant aesthetics. Cultural citizenship today must be established through local commitment and presence, along with simultaneous international initiatives and recognition abroad, technical competency, increasingly refined media literacy, punctuated by occasional successes in expanding audience by crossing-over into the spotlight of pop culture.

A university education will definitely help one stay afloat in such a complex world, but degrees in themselves will not insure professional status. Everything rests with accomplishment in the arts, and with the digital media arts you are only as good as your latest work. Media art history is sketchy and poorly known. The DIY (do it yourself) culture holds the sophisticated amateur in the highest esteem. As sexy trends and the sheer velocity of change undermine the notion of professionalism, young artists emerge very quickly, self-taught, self-promoted, self-screened, and self-streamed. Information on how to be a digital media artist is abundant. The tools of the trade are everywhere. Is it really possible to be a folk artist in the information age?

This elevation of the amateur and the devaluation of professional status are in line with relentless attacks on the elitist status quo launched repeatedly by the avant-garde throughout the twentieth century. Marcel Duchamp's initial attack on retinal art, Dada's spirited critique of the bourgeoisie, the ridicule of abstract painting by the nouveaux realists, the anti-establishment message of Fluxus, and conceptual art's assault on object-based art have taken their toll on the status of the individual creative genius and the institutions that perpetuate this myth. Andy Warhol and Joseph Beuys, extremely prominent artists in the 1960s, both proclaimed that everyone is an artist and that anything can be art. Warhol went so far as to state that he wished he was a machine (and not an artist). Beuys, in his sermons on social responsibility, said everyone, in all walks of life, was obliged to be creative. Art could no longer be separate from life. This rhetorical bravado signaled the dawn of a post-modern chaos that has now spanned five decades and shows no sign of abating. Artists have enthusiastically embraced this black hole of freedom (absolutely anything goes) and have recently dumped the whole delicious mess into a transcontinental blender called the digital revolution. Total fragmentation doesn't begin to describe the current state of affairs.

To close I would like to touch on the idea of cultural citizenship in this era when institutional, economic, and aesthetic order in the arts continue to collapse. Artists will lead their societies into a future where the consumption of art and culture is balanced with real creative output by a majority (not a minority) of its citizens. Artists will be respected as skilled managers of information, not individual creative geniuses, and art will be seen and valued as information. Artists will no longer be defined by medium or discipline. They will work with media appropriate to the task at hand. Practically everyone works with a computer these days. When the problems or opportunities call for different technologies or media, artists will adapt and alter their approach accordingly. National borders will continue to fade, but exact geophysical positions will be as crucial as dates and times in defining point of view and intent. Global positioning systems (GPS), and Geographic information systems (GIS), will anchor psychological, social, and spiritual exposures physically and statistically. Artists will continue to think locally and globally. Regionalism will be redefined as micro-regionalism. Contemporary art history will be tracked like the weather is today, by information scientists, using computer models to predict the near future. Museums, galleries, publishers, and broadcasters will keep trying to ride out the storms.

The gap between personal and industrial culture will continue to widen. Corporate and government media will hammer away at social and psychological anomalies, attempting to control perception and ideology cybernetically.[9] Artists, in the broadest sense of the profession, will respond with combinatorial play, playing in parallel, improvising with recombinant strategies. Power will reside with the one who gives and receives in equal measure. Initially these human "transceivers" will be heavily mediated, simulated, and virtual, but registered and tracked by micro-region. Security issues will slow real social change. Mediated behaviour can be tagged with less risk. The psychologists, sociologists, and economists will get their data. Corporations and governments will attempt to maintain their gag orders on artists through the enforcement of copyright law. Gordon B. Thompson, the renowned engineer and theorist at Bell-Northern Research, once told me "copyright is theft."[10] He knew that intellectual property law would be used to sew up the media environment, restricting the two-way flow of information by preventing reciprocity of manipulation (i.e., talking back to the media using the actual media environment as the subject and substance of discourse). Consumer rights advocates ultimately defending the rights to personal autonomy, free speech, and privacy will protect the personal media domain.

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Collage, in visual art, and montage in cinema, set the stage for sampling and the remix in music. Video, the supreme reproductive technology of the twentieth century, has been incorporated into the twenty-first century's maturing digital media forms whose principal advantage is endless reproducibility without loss of quality. Digital, non-linear editing has engineered the increasing use of repeat structures in audio and video. "Phrases" of images and sound are recombined to establish the form and substance of video compositions. The analogies for all digital media are minimalist musical structures, or more profoundly genetic recombination, where the building blocks of DNA are reassembled in seemingly endless combinations to yield the diversity of life. The recombinant aesthetic strategy is environmentally friendly in that it permits the recycling of used mediated content into fresh new permutations of message.[11] The finished work of art is a thing of the past.[12]

Artists' behaviour in the first decade of the twenty-first century is characterized by a desire to interact in tight local communities, rubbing shoulders through exchanges in gift economies, in two-way, back and forth exchanges, whether these exposures[13] are comfortable or not. The analogy of collective, open-source programming is transformed into a prescription for social change. These exposures, live and mediated in degrees, or mediated across distances through networks, will be most effective in the long run if registered by micro-regional origins (GPS, GIS data: exact time and place). Tracking and measuring the volume and describing the nature of the flow will yield important insights into the psychology and behaviour of artists. The practice of recombinant aesthetics will permit a direct, critical discourse with a toxic industrial media culture, and foster a healthy disregard for corporations and governments attempting to repress this discourse.

The concept of cultural citizenship will only be useful if the public understands and embraces it. The first question artists will ask is whether or not they belong to a specific culture. Time and place, in this era of dematerialization, dislocation, and alienation, are extremely important. Being able to get and keep one's hands on the actual substance of the media environment, to probe, reconfigure, and cleanse the ether of this place, is crucial.

Notes

[1] Colin Mercer, *Towards Cultural Citizenship: Tools for Cultural Policy and Development* (Hedemora, Sweden: Bank of Sweden Tercentary Foundation and Gidlunds Forlag, 2002).

[2] Art & Language is an English group of conceptual artists founded in 1968 by Terry Atkinson, Michael Baldwin, David Bainbridge, and Harold Hurrell. In May of 1969 they established the journal *Art–Language*, and began issuing multiples in various media, including a phonograph record where one of them issued the warning: "never trust a sociologist."

[3] Jean Baudrillard, in response to Hans Magnus Enzensberger's "Constituents of a Theory of the Media," a discussion of a concept that might be called interaction. See Hans Magnus Enzensberger, "Constituents of a Theory of the Media," *New Left Review* 64 (Nov.-Dec. 1970): 13–16, reprinted in Stuart Hood, trans., *The Consciousness Industry* (New York: Seabury Press, 1974). See also Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, Charles Levin, trans., (Saint Louis, MO: Telos Press, 1981), 164–84, from the French *Pour une critique de l'economie politique du signe* (Paris: Galliard, 1972). Baudrillard states: "On a more practical level, the media are quite aware how to set up formal 'reversibility' of circuits (letters to the editor, phone-in programs, polls, etc.), without conceding any response or abandoning in any way the discrimination of roles. This is the social and political form of feedback. Thus Enzensber-

ger's 'dialectization' of communication is oddly related to cybernetic regulation. Ultimately, he is the victim, though in a more subtle fashion, of the ideological model we have been discussing."

[4] This phrase was issued by the group General Idea (A. A. Bronson, Felix Partz, Jorge Zontal) in the 1970s. I don't know where they picked it up, but it was used to describe a culture based on the lowest common denominator. Probable source: *Press Conference*, a video recording made at the Western Front in Vancouver, British Columbia, March 10, 1977.

[5] *Cultural Engineering*, was the title of a solo exhibition of my video and text-based installations at the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, May 19-July 10, 1983. *Cultural Engineering* was an existential portrait of the artist (Tom Sherman) as product of the combined cultural policy of the Federal Government of Canada. The exhibition featured a series of photo/text works featuring configurations of the logos of Canadian agencies in 1983: The National Film Board, The Canada Council, The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, The Science Council of Canada, and The Department of Communication (the split-Canadian flag logo covered many additional departments).

[6] For a full description of the contemporary media environment, see Tom Sherman, *Before and After the I-Bomb: An Artist in the Information Environment*, in Peggy Gale, ed., (Banff: Banff Centre Press, 2002).

[7] Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: The Erotic Life of Property* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983).

[8] Tom Sherman, "Museums of Tomorrow," *Parachute*, No. 46 (March, April, May, 1987).

[9] Tom Sherman, "Artificial Perception as Reality Check: Thinking About MIT's Tangible Bits," in *HorizonZero* 3 (Banff, AB: Invent, 2002), available at http://www.horizonzero.ca/textsite/invent.php?is=3&art=0&file=14&tlang=0.

[10] Gordon B. Thompson, *Memo from Mercury: Information Technology is Different* (Montreal: Institute for Research on Public Policy, June 1979, Occasional Paper #10). Besides being a senior engineer at Bell-Northern Research, Gordon B. Thompson speculated in music copyrights. Having discovered that the rights of the Canadian national anthem had lapsed and were available, he purchased it. He then informed the Federal Government of Canada that they were violating his copyright. After making his point, Thompson sold the anthem's original score (back) to the Government of Canada for one dollar.

[11] Tom Sherman, "An Addiction to Memory [and the Desire to Annihilate Images]," in *NOEMA.lab, technologie & societa* (Universita di Bologna, Italy 2002), http://www.noemalab.com/sections/ideas/ideas_articles/sherman_memory.html.

[12] Tom Sherman, "The Finished Work of Art is a Thing of the Past," in *C*, no. 45 (Spring 1995); and as "L'œuvre d'art 'achevée' est un concept du passé," in *Où va l'histoire de l'art contemporain?* (Paris: l'Image et l'École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, 1997).

[13] Cary Peppermint, a performance artist, calls his performances (and Web-based photo/text works) "exposures," a compression of the idea of personal, psychological disclosures with the act of exposing photographic film to the light of day.