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## "Me Calling Him-Him Calling Me"-Tom Sherman's Recent Video Work

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"ME CALLING HIM—  
HIM CALLING ME"—  
TOM SHERMAN'S  
RECENT VIDEO WORK

by Caroline Seck Langill



A community is the presentation to its members of their mortal truth...<sup>1</sup>

—Jean-Luc Nancy, 1991

We've always dreamed of speaking nature's own language, of being part of the big picture. But when we talk to nature, we find we are just talking to ourselves or, more accurately, to each other. Just like the birds singing in the darkness before dawn, they're not singing for us; they're singing to the other birds. When we look into a sky or a mountain or at a tree's mighty bough, when we speak directly to nature, we're talking to ourselves. We shouldn't expect a reply. Nature has nothing to say to us. It stands mute, ignoring us. That is simply the way it is.<sup>2</sup>

—Tom Sherman,  
in *Talking to Nature*, 2002

In Tom Sherman's video work *Talking to Nature* (2002), a flower (*Daucus carota*) held by the artist is the sole visual subject, bobbing around the frame, an active agent in a self-reflexive narrative. According to Sherman, when we talk to nature, "we are talking to ourselves, nature stands mute in response." Nevertheless, people and nature are co-dependent and it has clearly become our responsibility to maintain the health of the organic substrate upon which we live. Sherman recognizes what is at stake here and his recent works clearly demonstrate his understanding and concern for new relationships developing among subjects, media, modes of dissemination and the natural world where they all interact.

*Talking to Nature* was shot near Port Mouton, Nova Scotia, where Sherman has been spending the summer months since 1979. The artist acknowledges that he has lived two lives: urban artist and rural naturalist. Thus, this video work might be considered an extension of the artist's established body of work, which is known for its rigorous investigation, analysis, and interrogation of society's relationship to technology. In any case, the new millennium has seen Sherman focusing his art-making almost solely on the community around Port Mouton, Nova Scotia, although he has cited his earlier long, monologue-based work, *Exclusive Memory* (1987), as being firmly located in Nova Scotia. (In actual fact, by the late 80s Sherman's work was fully entwined with the rural.)

Nature is the foil to the machine. But for Sherman, in a perpetual homage to information theorist Claude Shannon, the delivery system for his mode of communication is as significant as its content. He has vehemently defended video as his medium of choice based on its "complete integration of acoustic and visual space."<sup>3</sup> For Sherman, "Video is

like an x-ray technology. It sees through fiction."<sup>4</sup> More recently, Sherman's video works have been posted by the artist on YouTube and Vimeo, signifying a strategic expansion of screenings in art galleries and physical venues. In her recent publication, *Learning from YouTube*, Alex Juhasz stresses that media praxis "must integrate theory and practice with the local and global."<sup>5</sup> For Juhasz, activists working with digital processes "...should lead and learn from conversations in real communities about the impacts, meanings and power of the media."<sup>6</sup> But Juhasz's strident statement begs the question of how one defines community, how it inheres, how it is produced. In *The Inoperative Community* (1991), Jean-Luc Nancy deeply considers the production of community. As iterated in the opening epigram, a community is bound up with the presentation of its "mortal truth," and Nancy notes that, although the world has changed, no new figure of the community has been proposed and "perhaps this in itself teaches us something."<sup>7</sup> He also asserts, "It is a matter rather of *thinking community*, that is thinking its insistent and possibly still *unheard* demand,

beyond communitarian models or remodelings."<sup>8</sup>

For artists, community is "thought" through the sharing of art, which is carried out through the exhibition and presentation of work—both to each other and to the broader public. Dissemination is thus the necessary evil in the equation of moving work from the studio to the street. That said, Sherman is more than aware of the power of dissemination by alternate means. His experience as an officer in the Media Arts program at the Canada Council for the Arts in the 80s saw him funding programs as disparate as single-channel video production and artworks using proto-Internet systems like Telidon.<sup>9</sup>

In this essay, I interrogate Sherman's relationship to the Port Mouton and Liverpool communities in Nova Scotia as manifested through his recent video works. In an attempt to think through the complexity of Sherman's tripled position as ethnographer, artist and resident, I will also speak to his utilization of online distribution as a means of dissemination that bypasses the traditional art system, thereby enabling broader access to material that has the potential to effect positive social change.

Like many artists in the 70s, Sherman came to video through other means, notably performance and installation art. In March of this year, Vtape, the Toronto-based distributor of video art, mounted the exhibition *New Work by Tom Sherman*, presenting three works: *Hyperventilation 2011* (2011), *You speak my language* (2011), and *Danny Roy's POV* (2011). The first documents a re-enactment of Sherman's 1970 performance and video work, *Hyperventilation piece*, forty-one years after the original. It is a demanding experience for the viewer. Watching the artist breathe deeply in and out until he faints was likely difficult for viewers in 1970, but it impacts us in new ways as we see Sherman's much older self fall and disappear from the screen. At Vtape, *Hyperventilation* was in rotation with the other two featured works, however, this writer's initial viewing was not in a projection/exhibition space, but on Vimeo on a laptop.

In recent years, more and more of Sherman's work has been appearing on Vimeo or on YouTube prior to, or in parallel with, gallery exhibition. In many cases, it is the only means of dissemination of particular works. The merit of online distribution has caught Sherman's attention. Taking note that attention is the "commodity" cultural industries know is in demand, cultural historian

Jonathan Crary recognized the threat of inattention to new forms of industrialized production, and posed in a 1996 essay that it is “possible to see one crucial aspect of modernity as a continual crisis of attention.”<sup>10</sup> The crisis, Crary claimed, lay in the changing configurations of capitalism and in the endless streams of information and its modes of dissemination. Attention remains significant with a proliferation of methods to harness it. Postmodernity (if indeed we have not moved on) is shackled with numerous digital devices to make sure our attention is always already captured. In the new millennium, mobile technologies, laptops and wireless communication signify a collective adaptation to this crisis, with the consumer complicitly embracing these products/platforms.

Several of Sherman’s works anticipate this level of connectivity. In his tape *HALF/LIVES* (2001), the artist provides us



with images of nocturnal webcam users, looking literally half dead, while the voiceover is provided by a series of answering machine messages, left by the artist for a friend he was unable to connect with. *HALF/LIVES* could be considered a watershed moment in Sherman’s oeuvre. This is a desperate representation of technology, of the hold it has over its users, and the pathos of our complicity with it. His creation of a video archive of listless bodies in front of monitors, demonstrated the power of the PC to garner attention from an untapped audience, and perhaps led him to see online distribution as a viable option for exhibiting his work. It isn’t an accident that *Talking to Nature* was made the following year, with just one image of a flower in a pastoral setting.

In *Rethinking Curating: Art after New Media* (MIT Press, 2010), co-authors Beryl Graham and Sarah Cook reflect on the changes wrought on video practice with the onset of online

distribution. They quote from Sherman’s book *Before and After the I-Bomb* regarding the exhibition *Art, Technology, and Informatics*, co-curated by Sherman for the Venice Biennale in 1986, in which he comments in retrospect about the arrival of real-time digital video, but in the sluggish form of low-resolution and slow-scan video.<sup>11</sup> Graham and Cook point out how very different the situation is now: “Today, however, not only the speed but the structure of moving images on the Internet has changed, with the many-to-many nature of filesharing sites fundamentally affecting velocity of distribution, liveness, and the kinds of narrowcasting that are feasible.”<sup>12</sup> While Sherman undoubtedly recognizes the opportunity “many-to-many” offers, putting video art online does not necessarily guarantee an audience, but bringing the work to the audience through a file-sharing site they already frequent holds more promise.



In the late 60s, the National Film Board launched a program called Challenge for Change, pre-dating projects such as Sherman’s work on the fishing industry in Nova Scotia. The intention was to use film as a participatory medium to facilitate positive social change for communities under duress. For their 2010 anthology, *Challenge for Change: Activist Documentary at the National Film Board of Canada*, editors Thomas Waugh, Michael Brendan Baker and Ezra Winton amassed an impressive number of essays on the Challenge for Change program, which lasted from 1967 to 1980. The book covers the gamut of issues associated with the NFB project, including writing by those involved at the beginning. Regarding distribution, Winton and Jason Garrison quickly establish that the constraints of dissemination limited the audience. Citing distribution as the

TOP & ABOVE  
Jan Pottie and Tom Sherman,  
*Michael Swim’s Catch*, 2011, video still  
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS

dark secret of the film industry, they note that despite simplification of the attendant technology and its reduction in size and the cost of production, without distribution mechanisms, the voices of counter-publics will not be heard. "If social change is still on the drawing boards for policy-makers and documentary filmmakers, then they might do well to shift some attention away from production notes and away from the commercial theatre system and set their sights on those spaces in between, the dynamic, fertile, and, dare we say, promising spaces of grassroots distribution and exhibition. Change only comes through dissemination—like dissent itself."<sup>13</sup> Online distribution has proved a fertile ground for Sherman, resulting in an abundance of work that speaks to a community struggling to maintain its traditions and economic viability. A litmus test for what is to come



for much of our world's oceans, Sherman's recent video art is evidence of an artist working at capacity to use his influence and expertise to secure his community's quality of life.

Citing Challenge for Change is not intended to suggest that the NFB project influenced Sherman's method for his advocacy work on the East Coast. An essential component of the CFC was putting cameras, and eventually editing, in the hands of the subjects. Participatory film- and video-making played a significant role in the attention the project received from the international community of social activists, who cited the innovative NFB program as a new model of advocacy. Sherman was well aware of the CFC process; however, since he began this current body of work he has remained in control of the camera. That said, it is worth examining how Sherman has been able to insert himself into the Port Mouton community as an artist and how he has been able to produce intimate works that deal with

issues at the heart of the people living there.

Sherman's videography over the last decade demonstrates a gradual turn from descriptive, somewhat ethnographic documents to work that advocates more directly for policy change from a federal government that seemingly fails to recognize what is at stake for men and women who have depended on the fisheries industry for their livelihood. *You Speak My Language* (2011) is composed of a series of vignettes revolving around life in and around Liverpool, Nova Scotia, and Syracuse, New York. There is a shot of a bride trying to hitchhike and pick up a mate; a group of girls dancing at an outdoor, low-tech funk concert; an insect trying to right itself; and a drag racing sequence on a very hot tarmac. On cursory viewing, one might consider these to be relatively banal images, but what they reveal is the level of comfort the community feels with Sherman and his camera and vice-versa. Jean-Luc Nancy sheds some light



here on how actions that lie outside of worklife are crucial to community.

Referring to the work of Maurice Blanchot, Nancy notes that community "takes place in what Blanchot has called 'unworking' referring to that which is before or beyond work, withdraws from work, and which no longer having to do with production or with completion, encounters interruption, fragmentation, suspension."<sup>14</sup> Sherman's scenes are representations of "unworking," of the activities lying outside of obligatory labour. But what needs to be recognized, and what makes communities like Port Mouton and Liverpool unique, is that the boundary between worklife and leisure is porous. All actions create community. The opening shot of *You Speak My Language* is an image of intensely red lilies that gives way to the hand of Ken Burrows, juxtaposed against his ham radio operation. Burrows proceeds to discuss his

TOP & ABOVE  
Tom Sherman, *You Speak My Language*,  
2011, video still  
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

experience with continuous-wave Morse code communication, the dialogues he once had via this encrypted language, and the efficiency of the system for its time. Burrows' voice is captivating. He mimics the machine—*daa dit daa dit daa dit daa*—and describes a conversation as “me calling him” and “him calling me.”<sup>15</sup> The art of Morse code is evident in Burrows' performative turn, and he points out that its simplicity enables quick messaging to occur between boats at sea. One senses, from Burrows' ease with the camera and his extensive and detailed description of the process of communication between fisher people at sea, that he is aware of Sherman's longstanding interest in communications technology. These are two men deeply passionate about technical modes of messaging, but Burrows' own relationship to this technology bridges his work and home life, tying him to his fellow seamen and women, at work and at play.



The third piece screened at VTape, *Danny Roy's POV* (2011), focuses more distinctly on the crisis in the lobster fishery in Port Mouton as a result of salmon farming. This issue persists as you move from one community to another along all shores of Nova Scotia. In her book about the fishery industry on Grand Manan Island, off the coast of New Brunswick, Joan Marshall notes the significance of place for coastal cultures: “Historical, personal and collective identities that had been inextricably woven into a profound sense of place [are] being challenged and transformed by events and circumstances that islanders scarcely understand and over which they [have] very limited control.”<sup>16</sup> People who make their living off of the land—and sea, for that matter—are becoming disenfranchised across Canada for various reasons, but aquaculture is unique in its doubled effect on loss of income for fisherwomen and men, and on the devastation of the coastal ecosystems. Wild

fishing has been in decline since the promotion of industrial aquaculture in Canada by the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, while aquaculture profits have risen steadily. Sherman recognizes the dramatic effects of this shift on the market economy of the fishing community. *Danny Roy's POV* is just one of numerous tapes Sherman has produced over the last few years documenting the declining fishing industry through the words of the people who are feeling its effects. No stone remains unturned as Sherman and his partner, Jan Pottie, document all manner of interactions and activity in *The Word from Port Mouton Bay #1: Bob Swim Speaks—Justin Huston listens* (2010), *The Word from Port Mouton Bay #2: Clyde Fisher speaks about lobster behaviour* (2011), *CoastalCURA [Community University Research Alliance] visits Port Mouton Bay* (2011), and *Michael Swim's Catch* (2011). Most of these recent works are full collaborations with Pottie, a writer, activist and biologist



who sharpens their ongoing conflict with fin-fish open-pen aquaculture and the Department of Fisheries and Oceans. The majority of these videos are posted on YouTube, thereby making them accessible to the subjects who generously allow their lives to be documented in the hope of having public sentiment swayed. Sherman speaks to the local response to his work: “The fishing videos have had a very strong effect on Port Mouton... Bob Swim's strong statement against fish farming and increasing government regulation of the lobster fishery has had 1,100 hits. Everyone locally has seen the video and when I travel to other parts of the province, I find that people know this tape wherever I go.”<sup>17</sup>

If one tracks Sherman's YouTube posts/presentations/screenings retrospectively, there is a series of works that predate the archive that also focus on the fishery industry but which are set in Alley 9,

TOP  
Tom Sherman, *You Speak My Language*,  
2011, video still  
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

BOTTOM  
Tom Sherman, *Danny Roy's POV*, 2011, video still  
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

a karaoke bar in Liverpool, Nova Scotia. In these videos, Sherman and Pottie document members of the local community singing pop and country hits: 3 *Mikes sing Purple Rain* (2010), *Luke sings Another Brick in the Wall* (2010), *Don Don sings House of the Rising Sun* (2010), and so on. There are also videos posted of a local band called The Cransons, as well as a heartfelt tape of a senior couple singing an original song (*Doin' Country: Dale and Sue Verge perform We Believe in Happy Endings* [2011]). This parallel archive of video art that focuses on local community singing is curious, but it provides an opportunity for reflection back by local folks, and for building trust in the artist. In any case, the assorted footage of individuals in the bar is moving. Well shot and edited, these works create a joyful and tight-knit community backdrop for the advocacy work that deals with the fishing industry. When Sherman and Pottie finished a single-channel work titled *Alley 9* (2010), based on the first of their karaoke documentation nights, they sent stacks of DVDs to the staff at the bar, and sent copies to everyone they knew who appeared on the video.<sup>18</sup> Over a hundred copies were also distributed around Liverpool. After this initial influx, Sherman and Pottie began to post "singles," including the aforementioned works, on YouTube and Vimeo. The effects have been numerous, with the DVD being played at living room parties all over Queen's County. As Sherman has observed, "People here know they sing well and know how to have a good time. We are simply representing this

cultural phenomenon in media."<sup>19</sup> But Sherman acknowledges that the videos land within a deep and broad culture based on families, their stories, personal histories and music. The impact of the karaoke videos shows, as well as the reaction to the videos focusing on the fishing industry, alignment with Nancy's iteration of community as something that is "gifted." But, as he explains, it is "a gift to be renewed and communicated, it is not a work to be done or produced."<sup>20</sup>

Sherman knows the existing gallery system does not provide an adequate site of exhibition for his ongoing body of work. In order for the dissemination of his work to keep pace with his production, he opts for modes of dissemination embedded in the community where both artists and subjects live. Thus, YouTube and Vimeo have the potential to not only act as a vehicle for facilitating social change, but also to provide an alternative to the gallery or the screening room, enabling access to art for anyone with Internet connectivity. This means that Sherman's approach to production and exhibition of the aforementioned bodies of work has the potential to break down the dominant aesthetics that traditional modes of display reinforce, suggesting that art's ability to activate a community to social action lies not only in its content, but also in alternate approaches to its distribution and modes of display. x

→ *Caroline Seck Langill is a Peterborough-based artist whose academic scholarship and curatorial work pertain to the intersections between art and science, as well as the related fields of new media art history, criticism and preservation. Presently, she is an Associate Professor at OCAD University where she teaches courses revolving around technology and digital culture.*

Tom Sherman and Jan Pottie's videos may be viewed on YouTube (channel: twsherna) and Vimeo (channel: Tom Sherman)

#### ENDNOTES

- 1 Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, ed. Peter Connor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 15.
- 2 This quote appears in both Tom Sherman's video, *Talking to Nature*, 2002, and his book, *Before and After the I-Bomb: An artist in the information environment* (Banff, Alberta: The Banff Centre Press, 2002), 360–61.
- 3 Tom Sherman, "Cinematic video: while film is dying, 'film' is being born," *Indie Slate* 46 (November 2006).
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 Alex Juhasz, *Learning from YouTube* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011). <http://vectors.usc.edu/projects/learningfromyoutube/textco.php?composite=122> (It should be noted that this text is the first online publication for MIT Press.)
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 *Ibid.*, 22.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 Telidon was a Canadian proto-Internet system of videotext developed by the Canadian Department of Communications. For information on its history, see <http://www.friendsofrc.ca/Projects/Telidon/Telidon.html>.
- 10 Jonathan Crary, Dr. Mabuse and Mr. Edison, in *Art and Film Since 1945*, ed. Kerry Brougher (Los Angeles, CA: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2010), 265.
- 11 Tom Sherman, quoted in *Rethinking Curating: Art After Media* by Beryl Graham and Sarah Cook, (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2010) 93.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 93.
- 13 Ezra Winton and Jason Garrison, "If a Revolution is Screened and No one is There to See It, Does It Make a Sound?: The Politics of Distribution and Counterpublics," in *Challenge for Change: Activist Documentary at the National Film Board of Canada*, Eds. Thomas Waugh, Michael Brendan Baker and Ezra Winton (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010) 424.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 31.
- 15 It is worth noting that Samuel Morse was a painter who was discouraged by his lack of success as an artist, and his system for facilitating remote conversation via telegraphy was what brought him fame in the end.
- 16 Joan Marshall, *Tides of Change on Grand Manan Island: Culture and Belonging in a Fishing Community*, (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009) 4.
- 17 Personal e-mail communication with the artist, September 22, 2011.
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 Nancy, 35.