

Robert G. Sherrin/INTERVIEW

Bill Schermbrucker and Ann Rosenberg interviewed Bob Sherrin in Dorothy Jantzen's home in Vancouver on August 27, 1985. That conversation was emended by Sherrin, and then edited for presentation here. Speakers are identified by initials.

AR Let's talk about your recent photographic work first.

RGS The work is done, more or less. Large prints again. But it goes off in a direction a little different than what's been seen before. These are not long exposures. This work in a way is site-specific because I designed it for a black basement-like environment. These will be 38" x 50" prints which are already printed. They will hang about ten feet apart in a very, very black space, and they will be very softly lit so that they will just emerge out of the blackness. And they will be bracketed by photograms placed at either end of the space. These photograms will be about six feet high and on them will be the words of the show. One is "vers" and the other is "us," so "versus." One photogram will have a female figure on it; the other, a male figure. So there'll be eight photographs and two photograms. And for me they will be something along the lines of a poem.

AR Well, I've noticed in the exhibited works I've seen of yours words of introduction, words as titles, words on the image are important.

RGS Yes, and this time I decided to use the words more than I have in the past, and to use them directly in the image. To use as images in a way. Also I wanted to use words that had values within their syllabification, if one can use that word. And I was looking for words that had within them the possibility of other languages affecting them. Those were some of the considerations that went into the choice. I also wanted a background grid of images that were somehow urban.

AR It looks like it's taken from Robson Square.

RGS It's actually Nathan Phillips Square (Toronto), but it's similar.

AR That Bank of Nova Scotia, is it site-specific, local?

RGS No. The photographs are site-specific only inasmuch as the works have been designed for a specific space.

AR In an aesthetic sense, not in a referential sense?

RGS There are some references that are local, like Expo, but there are images that come from New York, from Toronto, from off the T.V. Some are collages I created, and all these different things were rendered photographically in the final prints. So this work really draws together in one way all the stuff I like to do with images.

AR Seems to me these also refer back to that T.B.A. multi-media project (see *TCR* #33) mentioned in the section we published on Ed Varney in 1985, taking things out of the cultural context.

RGS Well, as I said to Dorothy before the interview started, one thing I've been doing consistently for the past two years is to make a calendar a month. Every month I sit down, make a collage which gets turned into a calendar, and this calendar gets posted on the darkroom door because more than one

person uses it—there has to be a place to sign in and sign out, a mechanism for doing that. So I decided to generate a calendar. Some of those have been photographic, some have been photograms, some have been drawings, some have been pasteup collages—all kinds of things and almost all of them have had language in them somewhere.

BS Was that the interest in the grid?

AR Yeah, I can see it right there, all those calendar associations. . . .

RGS I hadn't even thought of it. . . .

AR Even move in move out, clock in clock out. . . maybe you should design three-dimensional calendars and sell them!

RGS I've got to learn how to sell something pretty soon! (*Laughter.*)

AR Photograms are where you put a shadow image of something on photosensitive paper by flashing a light so that it makes an image instantly and to scale on the paper?

RGS Yes, you simply don't use any film at all in the process. You take photographic paper and expose it to light in some fashion, with an object between the light and the paper.

BS We used to do that with leaves in a printing frame. . . .

RGS And I've been told you can even do chlorophyllograms. You can place a negative on a leaf and let it react with the sun, and it will form an image on the leaf because of the whole process of photosynthesis. When Edward Weston took photographs in Mexico and other places and made 8 x 10 negatives, he'd sometimes contact print them in the sun, which is one way to do it without a darkroom.

AR These big prints, the photograms you're planning will be largely black with grey shadows, the reverse of the others which are going to be quite light, white with some dark moments?

RGS Yes.

AR The smaller photographs involve collage techniques. How were they made?



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RGS I started off with a photographic print made from the negatives that I took in Toronto; then I pasted on these prints words that I wanted. I purposely took all the words from newspapers—just tore them out and pasted them on. Next, I shot each “collaged” print in a process camera on lith film which removes all the greys so you get a stark black, stark white negative. Then I cut windows in those negs, slipped in other negs that I wanted to use, contact printed those on glossy photographic paper, then copied those prints on 4 x 5 negs and then enlarged those negs to 38 x 50 as the final images.

AR The scale will be very impressive.

RGS Well, I’m a little disappointed with the technical quality of the final prints, but I can’t do any better with what I’ve got in my darkroom. I have to print these on the walls and the walls are not perfectly flat... so the prints aren’t quite as sharp as I’d like them, but they’re the best I can do. Now the other thing I was interested in, in this show, was the idea of generations and that’s

AR a real photographic idea.

RGS Yes, it’s photographic, but it’s also human. We all go through generations, and we’ve all changed by the generations we’ve gone through or the generations we’re aware of. So, here I wanted to create with those two photograms a little visual bracket, within which I could look in my own way at male/female values, or interactions, right now, as I sense them. I didn’t try to create a statement; I tried simply to respond, in the way that I make collages, by combining elements as they strike me at the time, thinking about them, and adjusting them slightly. I wasn’t trying to dictate a thesis. I wanted to make references, and try to create, in the selected words, references that the viewer could take and begin to work with the visuals. That’s why I broke all the words into syllables or parts: so that you could take one syllable, or what might be one word, and apply it to various aspects of the imagery and play around.



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AR Do you want to discuss the connection between your writing and your visuals if there is one? Or are they separate activities? For example, in this recent piece there are words and you've described them as poems.

RGS At one time I used to think of writing and visual art as very separate things and I certainly work in a very different way when I make photographs than I do when I write. But now I'm working generally a lot more slowly than I ever have—perhaps that's because I know I'm not going back to my job, so I have the time to think about things. I take more time; I get more pleasure out of it. But I realize that, when I look back at some of the stories I've written, almost all of them, aside from whatever image content might be in them, have to do with photographs—with photographs that spawned them. There's a story called "Man in the Black Magic Box" that actually makes reference to photographs my father made and the story called "Alone Together" comes out of a travel experience, but also I worked from photographs when I wrote that story. There's an image in it of a horse dying in a street in Egypt which I have a photograph of. And that image, during the creation of that story, constantly stuck in my mind. So I think photographs and my writing have, at least in the last few years, been related.

BS I was thinking when you were talking about generations in at least two senses of that word—generations in the photographic process and in human generations—that there was, perhaps, some correlation between this and your use of point of view and person in your writings. You use the second person more often than any other writer I know, and that's a very curious person to use. It sets up a very uncomfortable convention. You are telling the person you are addressing what they did. I put that also together with the theme of the first story of yours that I knew which was "Schadenfroh," that we published in the review (*TCR* #8/9), which is all about looking down on other people. So I see a connection with what I see *here* in the photography and in your photographs on the walls of my own house, a kind of dislocation of normal perspectives, and what happens in some of the stories where you get a very nervous-making second person usage.

RGS When I think back on the use of the second person, I realize I'm really attracted to it. Using the second person suggests that you might be speaking to a reader, you might be speaking to another character, but it really also opens the possibility that you are actually speaking to yourself because we often do refer to ourselves in the second person. I think I became aware of this when I read Edna O'Brien's novel, *A Pagan Place*, which is a novel written in the second person. It's ostensibly addressed to her sister, but it is also a lot about what that character speaking from the "I" point of view experienced as a girl of, say, thirteen, in Ireland. So, I am also looking inward at the same time as I'm speaking to that possible other person. There's another sense of dislocation there too: you can't help but look back in a piece of writing, just as you can't help but look back in a piece of photography.

BS I want to ask you about rewards of age. (*Laughter.*) You've chosen difficult media, not popular media. Your first novel was published in 1977 (*The Black Box*) and you didn't get any reviews?

RGS Well, there was supposed to be one. *The Ottawa Citizen* actually wrote the publisher and said that if we supplied a photograph they'd write a review. So I provided a photograph, then I was out of the country for a while and when I came back I happened to be in Ottawa and phoned the *Citizen* and asked them when the review was coming out. The guy said, "We wanted to review it, but there was this theme of incest and we didn't think it was going to be acceptable to our readers," so that's as close as I got.

AR You should republish it this year, it'd be a hot seller!

BS So you've had this novel published by one of the smallest publishing houses in Canada and it got no reviews, you've published stories in magazines and they haven't been collected, you've been working for five years on a second novel and it hasn't seen the light of day, you've collaborated with me on supposedly a money-making commercial fiction and put enormous effort into it and it hasn't seen the light of day; how much farther can you continue with this writing that hasn't gotten serious attention and doesn't generate some money?

RGS Probably for my lifetime. You'd be a fool to think you're going to make money writing!

BS So what is the reward then, from writing, for you?

RGS Sheer pleasure, I suppose. But that's a good question. I guess I'm principally attracted to taking a point of view—which is really nothing more than investigating my thoughts and feelings about something—and the language I discover through that exploration. It's a habit I have, a pleasure I indulge—I can't explain it any more clearly than that right now. I love the making of something—the falling into the activity and the comfortable, quiet, but usually pretty intense place I discover there. I remember writing a short story and even though I took notes and worked on it for several months I got the core story down in five solid hours of writing and I can't recall that five hours of writing. All I know is that I was absorbed in a way that I'm not even when I'm making photographs... it's the satisfaction of just believing something. The other satisfaction I get is that sometimes people read what I've written and respond to them, sometimes people look at my photographs and respond to *them*. The satisfactions I get right now are really from the contact with other people the work has provided for me: the fact that I may be able to collaborate with you again is a satisfaction. Also a photographic collaboration with someone else. The more of those satisfactions I get, the fact that I don't get any money or not much, doesn't matter any more. I live in a society that's totally wrapped up with money, so if I really want money, need money, then I can't see that much problem going out and getting *some* of it.

BS Have you thought of assembling your published stories into a book?

RGS Hmmm. There are a number of stories. They go back a lot of years, but I don't think that if you put them together you'd see any kind of connective thread. Some of them are out of a surrealist phase that I was in when I started to write, some of them go through a much more disjointed, kind of filmic mode, and when I look at those now I see many different types of writing, all rather unconnected. Those stories that were published in [*TCR*] issue #18 for example jump around quite

radically. When I look at one now, or have a chance to read one aloud, I always edit them down, because they're over-written.

BS But publication in a volume now would allow you that option, to edit them down.

RGS I'd have to *rewrite* them—it wouldn't be editing! The stories I can see right now as the basis of a collection are "Alone Together," perhaps "The Man in the Black Magic Box."

BS *That* has certainly attracted some attention. Didn't it get into the Oberon *Best Canadian Short Stories* of 85 or 84?

RGS Yes, but that's one story. I remember years ago driving with you South and at that time I said I'd like to write a collection of stories with the title *That Boy in his Narrow Bed*. That idea turned into a short story that was since published in *TCR* [18], but that collection has never gotten any further than that and those three stories might have been the start of a collection.

BS Why didn't you do them?

RGS I just haven't been able to go any further with that material—at least not yet.

BS For someone who's happy with collage in his photographic work it seems to me you have a remarkable desire for uniformity or continuity in your stories.

RGS I hadn't thought about that, but I guess I judge collections of stories partly by what I see in terms of their similarity, in terms of their developing in a single vision, or adopting it.

AR That's apparently how short story anthologies get published, but I don't like that, I mean, the idea that you can predict the mode, or that there has to be a theme. Unless that theme is twisted and turned formally I'm going to get bored. I don't know enough about publishing, but I just hear say that unless you have a collection that meshes it's going to be hard to get in print. So go for the opposite, be a quirk.

BS Yes, exactly. Think of the quality of stories like the one about motorcycles, beautiful, beautiful work. You have several stories of tremendous power. I think you should do a collection.

AR You do it in your other work too. I mean, you've talked to me sometimes about how you want to change your mode, change your attack or something, and that's like changing your style or like changing your projected image, whatever you have in mind for that and I think that is refreshing.

RGS But I also know I have a limited range that I can change within.

AR Yes, but at least you're giving it a good shove in various directions. I mean you could have gone on with those wonderful images that you made for the Coburg show, made those the centre of your art, worked them into a formula, sold a lot, got them into bank foyers, if you'd been into that.

RGS Yeah, I could probably have sold them to provincial governments to use as anti-drunk driving ads. (*Laughter.*)

AR But you wouldn't do that.

RGS Oh, I don't know, if the circumstances were right. . . .

AR Now what I'm saying is that I like it that you didn't stand in the same place. This new series has urban images too, but they are different.

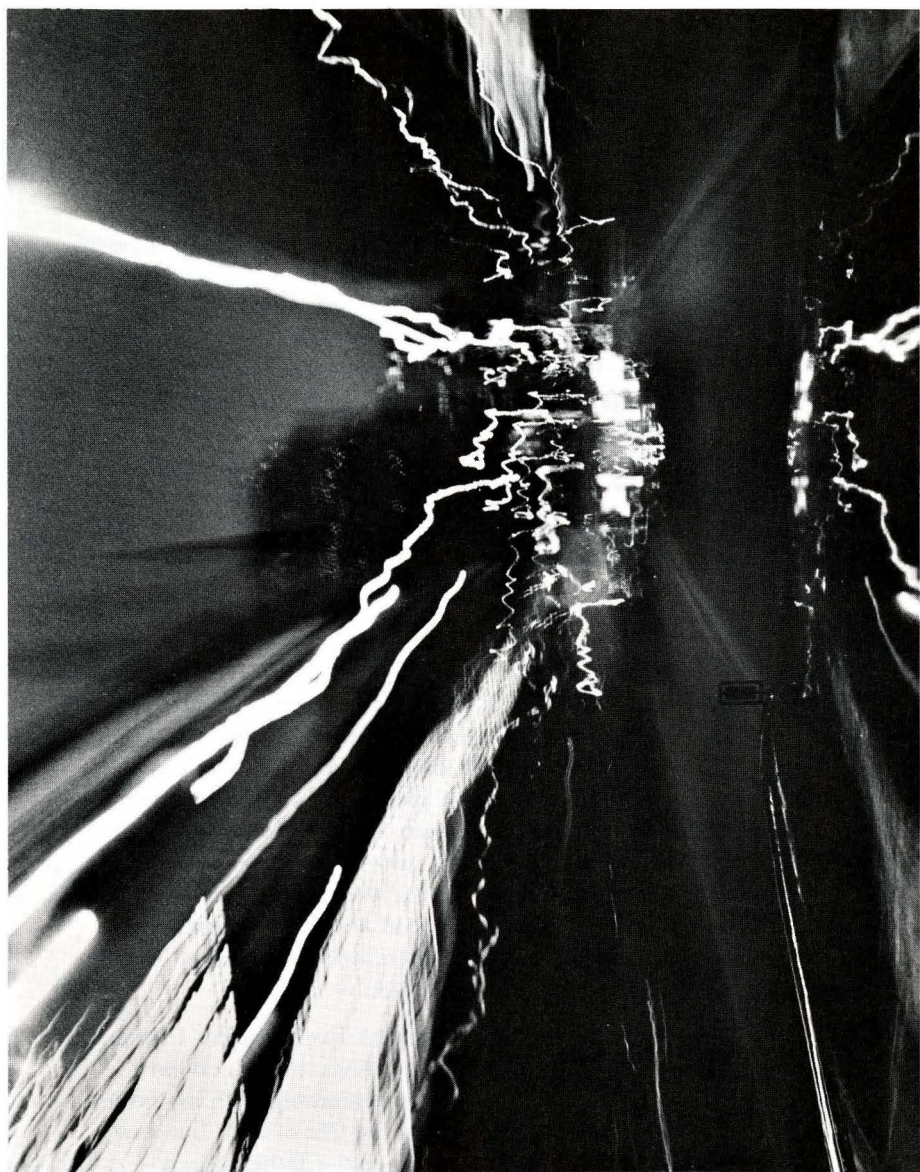
RGS Well, I thought I'd better do something different. I thought I'd better try something different. Technically I'd never done it before, so that was a learning process. Also it affords me a chance to use images in a way I hadn't used them before.

AR I want to go back to connections between your writing and your photography. In the photography, time lapse is important. In the last story you published in *TCR* I had a sense that it was written by putting together a series of written moments; is that any kind of valid comment to make?

RGS The long exposures I've done are just that. I began to put the camera in situations in such a way that it would simply record what was going on, because that's what a camera does: it just records what happens in front of it. What intrigues me is that our eyes don't work like a camera yet we grant photographs a special veracity, a proof of some kind of what actually







happened. Sometimes I think we believe the photograph more than our eyes. I think it's fascinating and abominable that we now have photo I.D.: a photo of me is more real, more accurate, more acceptable than my human presence. So, in those photos that were at the Coburg, I decided to play with time, to open it up and close it down. The same thing happens to me or for me in a piece of writing or when I'm working on a piece of writing—you deal with time, you deal with memory, you deal with the loss and the gain that you find within that. It's amazing how time gets stored up or looked at, speeded up or slowed down in a piece of fiction. That's what makes straight recording within writing boring. Like somebody's journal or diary entry of what they did at eleven o'clock doesn't interest me in the least, and probably doesn't interest anyone else either, because there is no attempt to deal with time except as recording one second after another.

BS Can we go on to something completely different? Is that O.K.?

RGS Sure.

BS It's clear to me that after I met some relatives of yours (*laughter*)—that in the earlier writings of yours that I knew and especially *The Black Box*, you were writing, I wouldn't say therapeutically, or even with a therapeutic motive, but in order to define yourself. You were writing in order to define yourself under the onslaught of quite enormous psychological forces. In other words your writing was a form of rescuing your identity, out of your childhood and growing up and so forth. Now it seems to me that there isn't that kind of impulse or compulsion; do you think that you've changed?

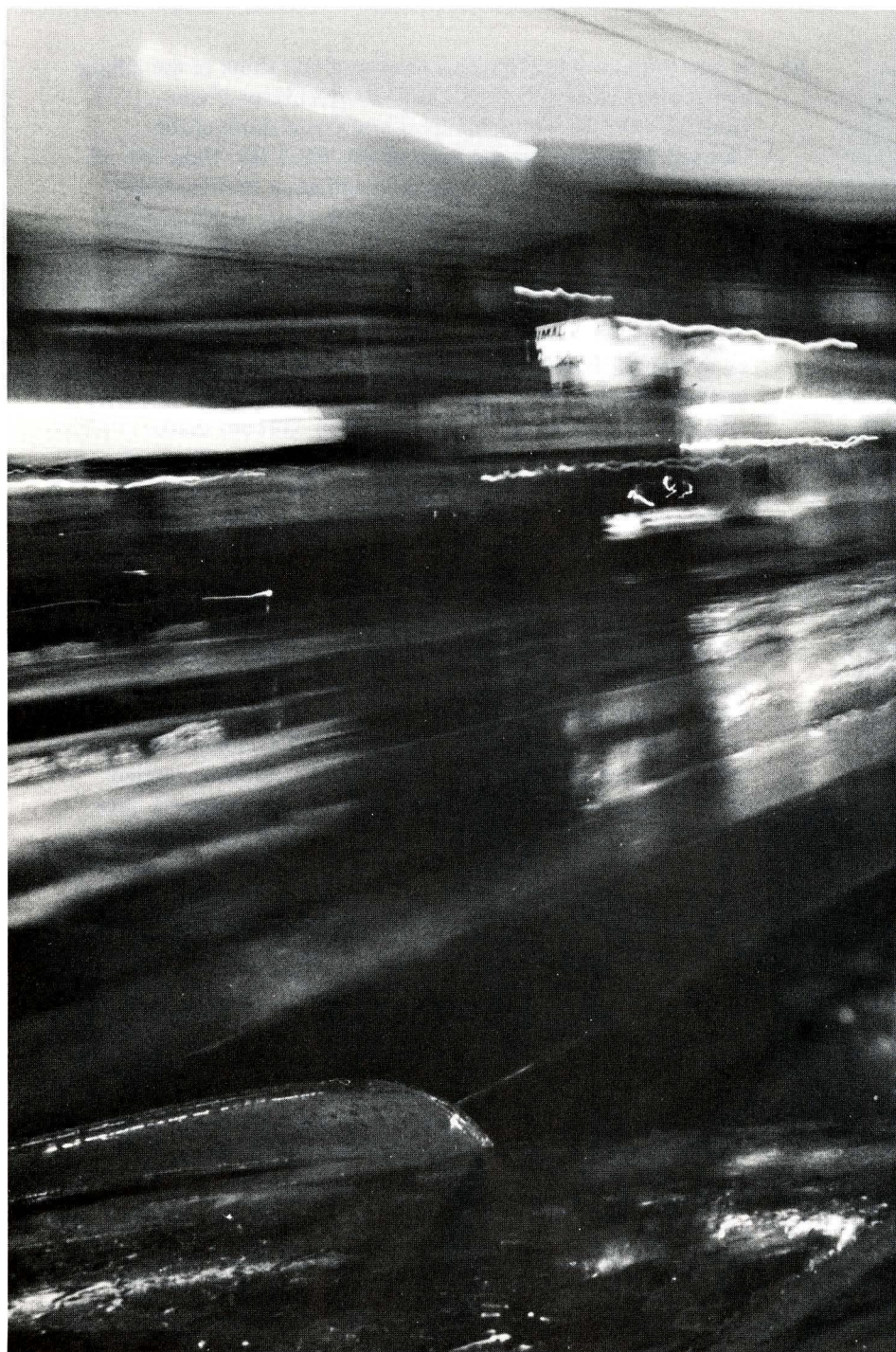
RGS Well, I hope I've changed and I think I've changed. I think I'm still interested in a lot of those things, though. What you're basically referring to is my relationship with my father. At one time, of course, I wanted to be free of that, but now I'm more concerned with learning what a father *is*, not avoiding the notion of it or dwelling only on the painful aspects. And that goes right back to the image of generations. I can't escape that and I don't really care to because I no longer want to define myself *in reaction to* some other people—I'm more interested in how we mesh rather than how we might diverge.

BS If you think of *The Black Box*, or even if you think of the killing the gophers story ("Forced Out," *TCR* #13), or if you think of "Dream Three-hundred" or if you think of the claimed biography on the back of *The Black Box*, those are all stories that involve an enormous imaginative stretch—a lie, perhaps; certainly an invention—but the later writings from my personal experience and from discussions with you have shown almost a reverence for literal accuracy about things. How do these two things go together in your mind as a writer? On the one hand the ability to exaggerate, to metamorphose or to transform and as, for example with these pictures, to create collage, to take a picture that comes off a T.V. screen and shove it in a window on a square in Toronto that's been through four or five generations of photography; and on the other hand to be concerned, as you say in the note you wrote in *TCR* #18, about not simply making things up but getting them accurate.

BS Well, I don't know, but I don't see them as two different directions. The desire to be accurate: I don't know if it's at all wrapped up with trying to be factual. I find a good deal more truth inside fiction than I do in non-fiction, in factual writing. And when I stop to think about it, when I look back at what I've written, when I realize what I'm doing when I'm working, I see that I don't have much of a resource beyond my own experience, so I have to draw upon whatever I have as experience, upon whatever I recollect about that experience. I suppose to make it important enough for me to work with it, I have to make it as clear to myself as possible while at the same time realizing that it has gone through a set of eyes, and mind, and a set of biases that are mine alone. So my views of anything, be it an object or be it a state of mind, are to a degree an assumption for everyone else.

BS There seems to be a preoccupation with violence in your writing, I wonder how you explain that? There's the clubbing of the gophers, the death of those children on the road, there's the blowing up of the whole past at the end of *The Black Box*. I think the last sentence is, "We didn't come from anywhere."

RGS I can't remember the last sentence of *The Black Box*, but I meant it to be ambiguous, the house doesn't really blow up. But yes there is a lot of violence in those earlier works and





even in the recent ones. I can explain part of that, by the fact that the gophers *were* clubbed. That was the environment I lived in at that age, I lived on an airbase.

BS But the sun set and people kissed, also, all those things went on too.

RGS Yeah, but not at the age of nine and ten. . . .

BS Sure they did. But if you select out the clubbing of the gophers. . . .

RGS Well, that *impressed* me. It's what I recollect more profoundly and therefore it's part of that bias, that assumption I referred to. Those clubbed gophers were a horrible form of truth for me. At that point I began to become aware of the kind of world I was living in, which was not necessarily the bigger world, but the world I occupied in 1960 in Alberta on a little airbase, where you went to baseball fields and watched baseball games, and for distraction people would appear with plastic bags with gophers in them because they got 3¢ for a tail. If somebody protested about the agony you were putting the gopher through, you didn't let it go, you beat it to death so you could take the tail off and claim it. I didn't trap gophers, and I didn't beat them to death but I saw people who did it, and that certainly affected me. I lived in an environment that was full of violence or implied violence. Bombers landed every day around the houses I lived in. . . .

BS So is it partly from being an army brat. . . .

RGS Partly, sure it is. I can remember being on an airbase in 1965 in Germany when a Canadian who happened to be passing through there briefly said to me, "You're crazy to be on this base, you're stupid to stay here if you can get out because this is a violent environment," and I thought he was crazy to see it that way, but years later I don't.

BS Your access to the base, to the military was through your father, wasn't it? That was the circumstance that brought you there, but he wasn't a soldier or a gunner or something, his function was more a civilian function.

RGS Well, his function was administrative, but still, at the same time, at the age of fourteen, I lived in a place where at least once a month air raid sirens went off and your fathers would disappear for a day and they'd pull out their sidearms and

play war for a day. And bombers would take off and bombers would come back.

BS What I'm trying to get at is if your father had been platoon leader or something, from that kind of role model you might be voting for Reagan.

RGS Oh, I don't know. . . .

BS What I mean is, did the fact that your father had an administrative role, something like an observer, make you an observer. . . .

RGS Well, he made me an observer as much as we moved around, so I had to go where he went.

BS But you never saw him go in and kill the enemy.

RGS No, I never saw him go in and kill the enemy, but I knew that was what he was there to do, or help bring about if certain powers felt a need for it, because that was what was bragged about. . . .

BS But *he* couldn't brag about it because he didn't do it.

RGS No, and he didn't brag about it, but his reason for being there was not only to make it possible to build houses on airbases; he was there as part of the whole function of what made it possible to drop bombs on people. When he had to go out to play his little tactical evaluation game, he wasn't there to determine how much coal was to be brought in next year. He was there to help get those planes refueled, and rearmed, and back in the air in twenty minutes. So I lived in that environment for fifteen or sixteen years and I can't say that I disliked it, but I can't say I enjoyed it either, because there was a lot of gratuitous violence and there was a lot of talk about the ability to do away with things and people, and I found that very strange and, in a sense, ironic—to live in Germany in the 1960s when we were there as occupiers as much as guests . . . basically administrating someone else's territory, and to conduct a war, if necessary, and at the same time being in a culture that was so obviously to me, from the first day I got on the bus from France into Germany, much more deeply rooted, much more developed than our own in terms of having been *in just one place* for several hundred or a

thousand years and having done things in that environment with your mind and the materials available to you, I mean, driving through a little town in France with a shit pile on the side of the road was a lot more interesting to me than, say, walking through Barrie, Ontario and trying to catch perch at the end of the wharf. And there was this constant juxtaposition for 3 years of fighter planes flying overhead, screaming, and at the same time I'd want to walk through the woods to get to a castle that had been there for five hundred years. There was this constant battering up against one another of two cultures, one, which was basically rather violent, and the other, I suppose, was kind of violent too, but it was also thick and rich and baffling and held out whatever heritage the Germans had to offer.

AR So is that why you went back to The Wall, to make that early set of photos, because you'd lived in Berlin when you were younger?

RGS No, I'd never been to The Wall until 1981. I'd never been to Berlin and we weren't permitted to go to Berlin, at least I couldn't have gone with my parents because my father was a servicemen and you weren't permitted to go to an Eastern bloc country.

AR Your parents were born in an Eastern bloc country? Is that why you've travelled to The Wall and beyond in recent years, to discover your roots?

RGS My communist roots, my pinko background? (*Laughter.*) Yes. But, actually, they were born here. My family comes from the Ukraine and Bessarabia, but the farthest I've gotten so far is Bucharest, and I may well go back there again.

AR Do your parents retain the language or any parts of those cultures?

RGS No, not really, and that's one of the reasons why I'm interested in going back. My father told me that during the war, people came around to his base, his camp or whatever, and asked for people who spoke any Eastern European languages and he didn't admit to the fact that he did. That interested me, not so much his hesitance to try and be useful, but because he'd come from a life where he was denigrated because he was a "bohunk." So he wasn't going to be a "bohunk"; he didn't

have a "bohunk" name; he wasn't going to admit he spoke Romanian, he wasn't going to admit anything. He spoke English partly as a reaction to being harassed and more obviously as a means to become acceptable in Canada. My grandmother, now dead, spoke mainly Russian and I have relatives in Eastern Canada and the United States who speak Eastern European languages still. Mainly, I want to go back to see the people who came from the same part of the world as my father and mother. And that's probably why I'll go back again, simply to find out. But I don't think it's to find out where I come from but rather to see and sense the influences on my parents, to see what's there.

AR Do you find yourself stirred by elements of that culture, the music, etc.?

RGS I do like some of the music. I certainly like Enescu and Dvorak, Bartok. To me they're "eastern"—only Enescu is actually Romanian. When I go to Bucharest what I'm aware of is not a vibrant culture but exactly the opposite, a culture that's dying because it's being kept down by a foreign power, a culture that's dying because the most talented people within it are leaving the country. I don't know if that's analogous to Canada—we're awfully sensitive about our own culture and how exactly it's constituted, but I know to me it's interesting to go back there to see how people cope with the day-to-day fact of their culture's being slowly dismantled, packaged up, part of it deported, then to come back here to a culture that has analogous fear. . . . Yet we're willingly and totally captivated by American culture. We hate it, but we love it. We'll gladly put ourselves up as movie extras to make a few dollars. The same thing, in a more serious way, goes on in Romania where every day you're being more and more pushed into being this amorphous thing called "soviet," which all of them deny is of any value to them but which none of them can deny has an impact on them every day, whether it's standing in line to buy toilet paper or trying to get a job.

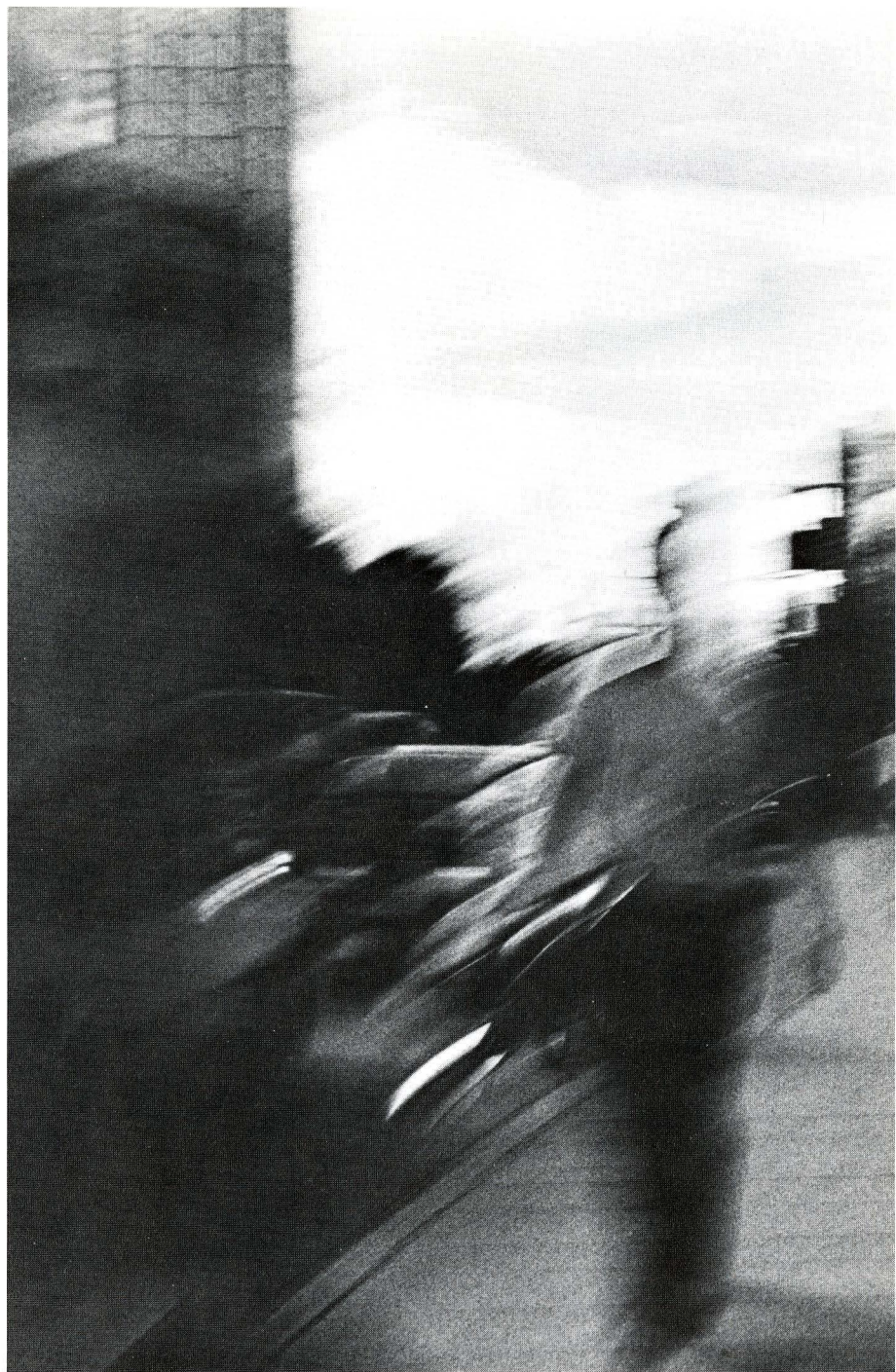
BS Well, recently I read something about Ceausescu who's supposed to be someone who has managed a defence against cultural co-option and with his passing there will just be, *the flood*.

RGS I think that's a lie, to a degree. Romania's seen by the West as being one of the more Western of the Eastern bloc countries, yet it has an internal situation that's even worse than that in Poland because there's no core around which the people can solidify to try and create something for themselves. There is no strong religious centre, there's no union movement. What I think Ceausescu has done is to strike a deal with Moscow, saying, you keep your troops off our soil and we'll keep our people in line for you. So Romania did quite nicely deny Russia access to Czechoslovakia in 1968, but it's still shipping people to its own gulag which is called the canal zone. And, I hear, it is requiring writers to register their I.B.M. balls, so the authorities can check to see if people are writing propaganda. You must hold an internal passport and if you get caught travelling in the wrong part of the town, you'll be questioned. They have fabricated a wonderful history for themselves. Ceausescu is a Romanian Socialist hero, who was in prison at the beginning of the war for having dared to be a socialist, but I'd heard he was in prison for murdering his master when he was a cobbler's apprentice. So it's interesting that there is a museum you can go into in Bucharest, a museum of the Socialist history of Romania, and there the history of the country since the beginning of W.W. II has been reconstructed for the edification of budding young Romanians.

BS So your original country is something the same as my native country except that in mine they pay deference to the West and in yours, to Moscow. . . .

AR I think that some of these experiences, and some of these points of view that come from a person with Eastern European roots have something to say in your current writing. Are you working on a novel now?

RGS The novel I'm starting is going to deal, in part, with my experiences as a sixteen year old in Germany, that airbase, the town we lived in. I've made note of certain instances that I'm interested in looking at again, and I will be trying to say through the characters something about things German now and Canadian now. I am interested in where cultural border-lines cross, the interzone, which is an interesting German expression. At some later date I may deal specifically with the











space between the two walls, because there are two walls in Berlin. There's a two block gap between the wall you saw a photograph of and another actual wall further into East Berlin. You can look across the gap at them watching you while you're watching them. But right now I'm more interested in where cultural lines cross and . . . I'll be trying to create a character that is German that will allow me to carry on discussions . . . so, it will be a combination partly of fact and partly of fiction.

AR Did the novel you wrote with Bill have a political dimension? Are there characters or ideas that connect with this future novel of yours?

BS Well there must be, Ann. I was looking at Bob's first novel and there was a character in there called Hilary and she speaks just like a character Bob created in our collaboration detective novel ten years later. So there will be some connections.

AR Sure, there have to be, but I'm asking are there any conscious connections.

BS Bob would like to build the Berlin wall along the 49th parallel here (*laughter*) and stand there watching them watching us. It's interesting that some of the material we wrote in our collaborative novel about B.C. has actually come true and we've begun to collaborate on another one: so far, two days of brain storming.

AR I guess you'll have to get back to it next year.

RGS When we started that first joint novel it was over a number of beers, with the idea of doing something collaborative and commercial. It started off with pages that were left in a desk drawer, then responded to.

BS At that time Bob and I were sharing an office and so I would go to the office with some anticipation to see what was in the drawer. When you'd written some more you would add the page numbers on the outside of the envelope and initial it. And so the story grew, it was fascinating. All we'd agreed

upon was that we'd write a book but after a few weeks, I began to wonder if we'd agreed in any way what kind of book it was to be. I didn't know if it was to be a thriller or serious literature or what it was supposed to be. A year and a half later we realized we'd produced a monster, so as we began a second one, we went about it more methodically.

AR The way you describe the first joint novel venture is like a Surrealist so let's get back to your first writing style. You went to U.B.C.'s creative writing department where there's a surrealist bent. As a student were you encouraged to writing that went with the flow?

RGS Free association?

AR Yeah, that kind of stuff.

RGS Well, I happened to be there when that kind of writing was pretty popular, at least among the students. . . .

AR And that too was the height of hippie times, right?

RGS Yeah, right, it was 1969. I suppose my greatest influence there was J. Michael Yates. He was also a very interesting man. So yes, there was a tendency to write along certain lines. As anywhere else, you're influenced by the people who teach you. . . . I can't say that much of what I wrote then or what I write now has much to do with instruction at U.B.C. It has more to do with my trying to keep writing, which is difficult enough.

BS In your last year there weren't you in Audrey Thomas's fiction seminar and did that have any influence?

RGS I was in a class that Bob Harlow was teaching and Audrey was there as a presence—she wasn't a student, she wasn't an instructor. She was very helpful because she would comment quite freely about our work, but Harlow was the instructor and he had a certain "diplomatic" role to play. In that situation Audrey criticized your work and did not compromise you. She asked questions and dropped hints and hence she was helpful. But she has remained an influence since then partly through her writing but, in some respects, more because she's continued to write. Being around someone for ten years who

has chosen to write and who encourages me to do that myself, or if it's not writing, it's the pursuit of other goals, is very helpful. I mean being around people who, aside from anything else they might have to do to pay their bills, create their work is a great boon. And being around you, Bill—you teach, but, at the same time you write—that's an instruction you can't get any other way except being around people who're doing it. I don't think Audrey has given me much criticism or vice versa ... it is more the thing of just watching her proceed as a writer and that, I think, is more helpful than having someone come to you to change this adjective for that. Being around people who are committed to whatever it is they think is important has helped me.

BS Bob, I want to ask you about how you perceive yourself as a writer and a photographer and an image-maker in terms of the question of privacy and the public. Do you have a public role as an artist?

RGS Well, in one way right now I don't, because I'm not known publicly, so, as much as the work is me, I'm not known publicly so I don't have a public role. As an artist, as a writer, as an image maker, I feel more and more inclined as time goes by to try to find a way to be more public with what I do, not only by getting work noticed but also by taking a public position on things to do with the arts, which probably comes from my work in the Writers' Union, and wanting more to speak out, or somehow be active in how arts are perceived in the country, in how arts are supported in this country, how arts are understood to be part of what we do or are excluded from what we are as a nation. But as far as being someone who sits down to write or someone who goes into the darkroom to make photographs, I don't think of that very often as a public act and I don't think if I did I would be able very long to continue doing what I do. Whenever I sit down to write, whenever I go into the darkroom to make images, I don't think of the public at all. At that point I don't even know what the public is.

BS Are you conscious of any change that has occurred either in your literary or in your photographic work that coincides with the change from yourself as a very private person to yourself as both a former B.C. rep of the Writers' Union and as a teacher, including taking on the job of department co-ordinator which is a responsible and public job? Are you aware of any change reflecting that change in you?

RGS I don't know if it's effected a change; maybe it's part, maybe they're all part of a change that reflects what I've sensed about myself in the last couple of years: that I'm more willing to take what I might call risks. Yet, I don't think it's anything more than a willingness to be more open about what I do and probably to be less apologetic about what I do, less inclined to rationalize what I do. Now I'm more inclined to go ahead and do what I do and appreciate for myself the pleasure I get from doing it. I think in being B.C. Rep. and from being co-ordinator, and from being a teacher, I've had in all those cases to perform in public. What I've learned—I think mainly from teaching and perhaps a bit through co-ordination—is that what it takes to be a performer in public is making public what is private, making public what is yourself, making public your private beliefs. And I suppose that's what was a bit of a surprise and a pleasurable one to me: to realize that in teaching I could say what I actually believed about literature, and about language, and not only have it accepted but realize after a period of time that it was probably useful and to a degree accurate and to a degree truthful. It was a surprise to realize that in being a co-ordinator, I could actually represent, think, the desires of a whole group of people while at the same time express my own beliefs. I found, curiously enough, that what I believed and felt was important was similar to what other people felt was important, and that was not only a very positive feeling, but simply an encouragement for me, because then I felt I could just go ahead and do what I had to do.

BS In other words you found, you felt, a sense of community.

RGS Yeah. And maybe that's more important than discovering you have some talent. In a community you find support as well as give support to other people.

IMAGES

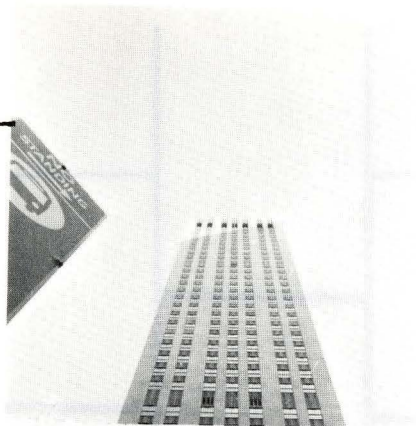
Except for the portrait of Bob, which was taken by Arden Williams, all illustrations in this issue are reproduced from untitled black and white prints by Robert G. Sherrin.

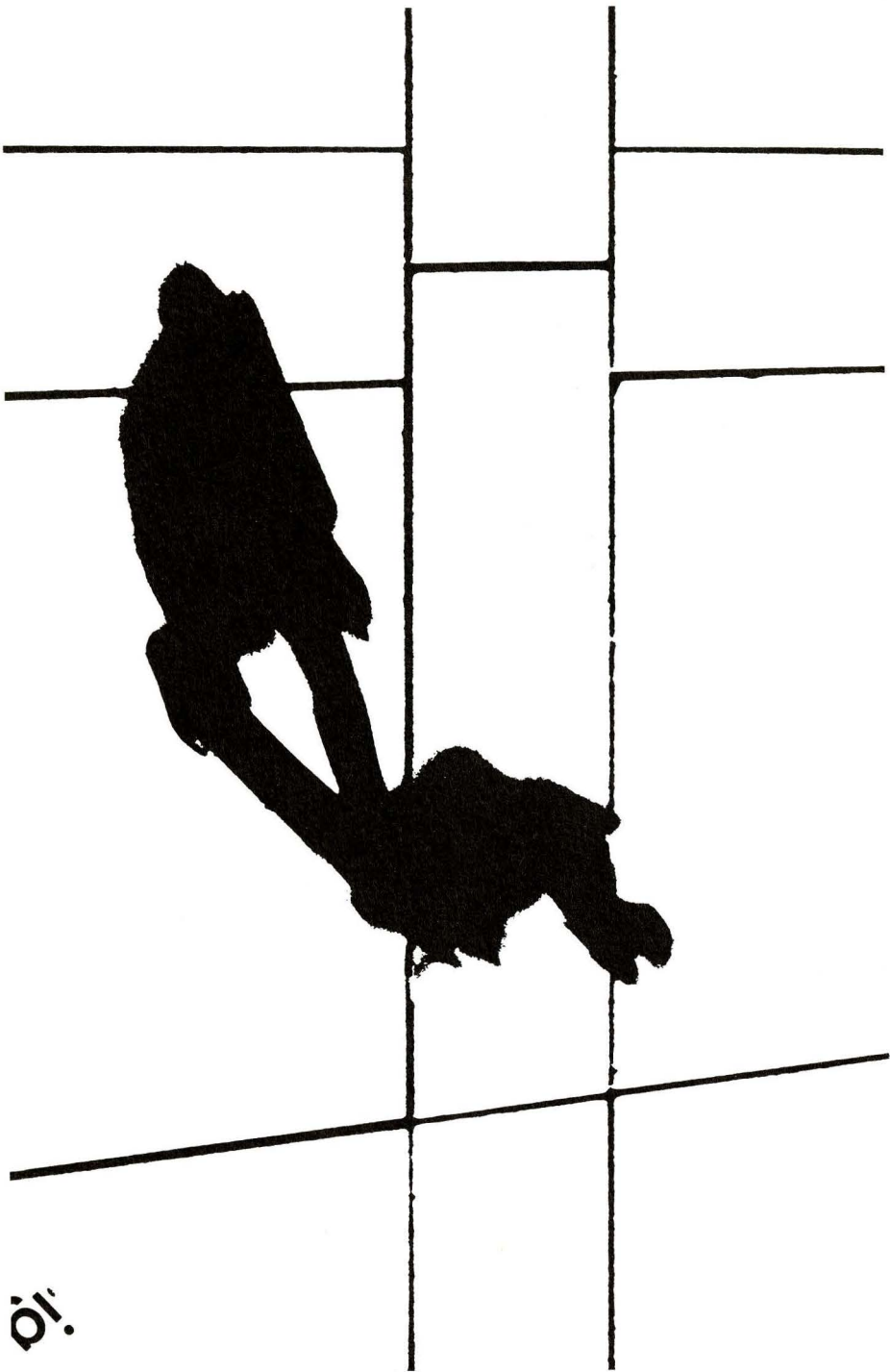
Works from a series which Sherrin began in preparation for his Coburg Gallery Show, *uSAGE*, in 1984 are identified here by number. That series is still in progress. Images which will appear in a future exhibition, entitled *VERS US*, are identified here by letter in the order of their appearance in this issue.

The cover image is a detail of *No. 10* [untitled].

PAGE

4	Detail of <i>No. 9</i> [untitled]
27	Robert G. Sherrin. <i>photography</i> : Arden Williams
28	Detail of [A] from the <i>VERS US</i> series
32 & 33	[A] from the <i>VERS US</i> series
35	Detail of [B] from the <i>VERS US</i> series
36 & 37	[C] from the <i>VERS US</i> series
43	<i>No. 10</i> [untitled]
44	<i>No. 9</i> [untitled]
45	<i>No. 8</i> [untitled]
48 & 49	<i>No. 6</i> [untitled]
55	Detail of <i>No. 12</i> [untitled]
56 & 57	<i>No. 12</i> [untitled]
58 & 59	<i>No. 13</i> [untitled]
65	Detail of [D] from the <i>VERS US</i> series
66	Detail of [D] from the <i>VERS US</i> series





01.

METHOD OF PRODUCTION OF ONE "VERS US" PRINT

- 1 Print on 11x14 inch paper a negative of people walking on grids (shot from city hall ramp, Nathan Phillips Square, Toronto).
- 2 Apply to that print a word, taken from a newspaper, and broken, sometimes into syllables.
- 3 Select another image, or images, that will be "inserted," an image or images that refute, reflect, or comment on the "base" print, or the word applied to it, or both.
- 4 Cut a piece of black paper into a mask that exactly fits the dimensions of the "inserted" image(s). Apply that to the original print.
- 5 Original print, now a form of collage, is placed in a process camera and a line negative is made.
- 6 "Inserted" image neg(s) is placed in the window created by the black mask through the line shot process.
- 7 This completed collage neg is then contact printed on 11x14 inch paper.
- 8 This contact print is copied on high resolution 4 x 5 inch continuous tone film.
- 9 This large neg is enlarged into final exhibition print, approximately 40 x 50 inches. (exact final print size yet to be determined).

NOTE: the size of the "inserted" image may be changed to 4 x 5 inches after further tests have been done following step 7.