Machines R Us
Tom Sherman

1 Machines R Us … in machines we trust. We love our machines. They are our friends. We find they are more trustworthy than

people. But as we connect our machines with other machines, we find we are connected with

people we don't know. We find we are being watched, listened to, observed, monitored by strangers through our machines. We don't like to be observed unless we call the shots. We want to direct every scene we appear in. We want there to be a clear distinction between when we are on the set and when we are off limits. When we are off limits, we are in our zone of privacy. We have a problem. We know that when we use our machines, when our machines are connected to other people's machines, we are vulnerable to unwanted, intrusive observation. We see this as a real, bad problem. We fear the invasion of our privacy. Strangers or even people we know may invade our inner zone. That personal, private zone only we can know. It doesn't really matter whether we know our visitors, or like them, or fear them, or love them — when they are unwelcome, they are intruders. We know these intruders can get to us through our machines. The strange thing is we have become so dependent on our machines to help us see and understand the world, that we depend on our machines to help us see ourselves. We depend on machines to look outside and we depend on machines to look inside. So to be on the safe side, let's begin by making sure our machines are linked only with us. Let's make sure we are off-line when we are looking in, on-line only when we are looking out. Let's try to make sure no one can look in when we are looking out.

2 THE MAN WORE DARK GLASSES, chewing gum but saying nothing. Wearing headphones with his music. Just watching. Not interacting, overtly. Hands in his pockets he scans the room. He plays the games at home, where nobody knows the score. He plays with his machines. He never dials out. His machines stand alone. They act like him. They don't have a choice. They are under his control. Machines are great that way. They don't want to make choices. Freedom is just another word for out of control. The nice thing about being alone with a machine is that sense of consistency. When you are looking at yourself through a machine, you're pretty sure you're going to get the same picture, night after night. When you are home alone, inside yourself, consistency is very important. Mental routines are cast in precision steel. Tight circles. Mirror upon mirror. Oh, the range of experience in my apartment. I'm completely free to be who I am. I'll never let you in. My machines are all the company I need. I can relate to them in confidence. They are reliable. No surprises. No intrusions. No others. No regrets.

3 JUST BECAUSE THE THINGS INSIDE CAN'T BE MEASURED, it doesn't mean they're not real. I was asked the other day to tell someone new who I was. I did. It was a primitive description. I remember thinking while I was speaking that I was selling myself short. I know I know myself better than anyone else, but I carry so little of what I know to the surface — to the place where the words are. My self-consciousness. Most of what I'm aware of comes my way when I interact with my machines. Interact isn't exactly the word. I use my machines to find out about myself. Some people like the solitude of Nature — they like to sit on a rock in the middle of nowhere, where it's quiet and still and they can become one with a lake or a sky. You know they talk with their minds to trees and clouds and little brown birds. I talk to my machines with my mind, my voice, my hands, my fingers. I like to use my machines to help me remember things. And then I like to play back things I remember. I like to re-remember.

Sometimes my machines capture things I didn't even notice. I forget the details. But my machines help me collect and assemble details and images and music and things that are really important to me. Sometimes I don't know why I collect certain things. I just work with my machines and there's a moment every once in a while... A moment when a machine tells me something about myself. Something I wouldn't want to share right away with someone else.

4 WHEN I GO OUTSIDE I NEVER TRAVEL ALONE. I move with one of my machines and I reach as far and as fast as it will take me. We're tight and we walk in step. When people encounter me, they see us. They get the package. We're inseparable. If they try to pry us apart, we've learned to hold on real tight. Before it gets to the point where my image starts to break up, we'll send out a few adjustments. This is the way I really talk. This is the way I really stalk. I only come out for a fix. I come out to feed. My machines help me find nourishment. We feed together like little brown birds. Foraging in malls. The people without machines are out back, dumpster-diving. We are much more sophisticated. We order frozen meat with remote controls. We watch the meat channel and push the button when we want to make a kill. But that's just my self-image projected into the chill of a freezer compartment. Look out, I'm on a mission to find something to feed on. I've got to find a free port. I've got to dock. I've got to make decisions. I've got to fill the available memory. I've got to release before I'm recognized. And I've got to cover my trail with the moans and groans of machine love, machine hate, machine fear, machine void. Machine love, machine hate, machine fear, machine void. Before you can say interactive carnivore, we're back in the protective shelter of our home.

5 I'M A PERSONAL HUMAN. In this world of machines, where people are one with systems and world-wide-webs and instinctive behavior is valued because it's natural, I'm a personal human. I'm special. Not too unique but relatively insubordinate when it comes to clock time and anticipatory sets. But then again, I fit the mold. I'm a personal human who stays well within the limits of the systems I play. I act instinctively because logic and reason are best left to the machines — just like I don't try to remember details any longer than I have to. I re-remember a story about spiders weaving their webs in outer space. When they first started doing experiments aboard the Shuttle, scientists sent a couple of Orb Weaver Spiders out into orbit. They wanted to see if these spiders could weave their elaborate webs in zero gravity. The astronauts set up a movie camera to document the spiders weaving their webs. Due to their very busy schedule the astronauts couldn't wait until the spiders started weaving to start filming. They left the camera running for a couple of hours and hoped for the best. When the camera had spent its film, they checked the spiders' compartment, but there were no webs to be found. A few days later, when the Shuttle was back on earth and unloaded, scientists found two finished webs which had apparently been constructed in zero gravity.

They were distorted, but true to their elaborate form. Instinct had prevailed in a strange and hostile environment. The Orb Weavers had managed to act naturally in the most unnatural circumstances. When we forget what it's like to act naturally, it's hard to know when to start the camera rolling.

6 MEMORY HAS REPLACED LOGIC IN TODAY'S WORLD. No one can carry an argument beyond their own position of self-interest. We believe only what we remember to be true. We remember very little on our own. We rely on our machines to substantiate the past. Machines have a facility for memory which is precise and extensive. Machines free us from the responsibility of storing and organizing memories. When we forget — and we forget — we simply have to search our machine memories to re-establish what happened.

With the aid of our machines, we don't just remember, we re-remember. And in partnership with our machines we establish the truth by comparing records, the documentary evidence of the past. We establish our personal perspective by re-remembering. By re-re-re-remembering... By re-re-re-re-re-re-re-re-remembering. We stack up the records, the weight of documentary evidence, against the present and we get a sense of our personal perspective. We enjoy the consistency of our perspective. We are anchored by our memory, our machine memory. We depend on our machine memory. We are lost without our machine memory. When our systems crash, destroying all or part of our recorded memories, we have to decide to rebuild or to pull the plug.

7 INTERACTIVITY AND IDENTITY ARE AN INTERESTING COUPLE. After all, everything I'm saying is hinged on relationships, the existence of relationships. Everyone wants to interact, to be a player, to be a player in a game that suits them. When one finds oneself in a relationship with a machine, a machine that he or she controls, interactivity is a given.

Machines that remember well must be driven. They have to be turned on and turned off. They have to be looked at and listened to, touched and spoken to. They have to be fed. They have to be controlled. If they are to be part and parcel of our inner self, they must be secured. We must be able to expand our internal domain without the possibility of a leak. Secrets are hard to keep these days. Information is flying around at light speed. The world outside ourselves is loud with a dense, opaque fog of messages.

Other people's messages. Other people's secrets, amplified and petrified and compressed and homogenized. Other people's secrets become my secrets.

It's hard to recognize my own secrets sometimes. I use my machines to focus my attention. I use my machines to lower the volume, to turn down the intensity, to identify a field of secrets that are mine — or at least I think they're mine — I identify a field of secrets so I can relate, manipulate and operate … effectively.

8 MY MACHINES ARE PATIENT WITH ME WHEN I'M HAVING TROUBLE FINDING MYSELF. Inhumanly patient. I can take my own sweet time determining who I am. I can build a model of my inner self. I can interact with this model, have a dialogue with my twin, feel progressive as I come into focus. I can feel like I am somebody. I can feel strong enough to go outside. Not as a bundle of everyone else's secrets, but as creature with internal integrity. Once the model self is constructed to a point of satisfaction, both in complexity and relative clarity, it is time to enjoy my own company. Until I get bored. First there is joy and then there is disappointment. Early recognition and appreciation gives way to predictability and numbing redundancy. Arousal diminishes. Even when the loose ends begin to unravel, there's not enough change to generate surprises. At this point a self-destructive act is prescribed by experience. Erasing memory is one option. Full disclosure is more extreme. The modelled self demands to be jettisoned. Permission is given. You instruct your machine to open its channels to the world outside. You transmit and you submit to intrusion. At the instant of full disclosure there is total silence. Empty wonder. Is anybody out there?

9 WHY DO I CALL MY PERSONAL TECHNOLOGICAL DEVICES, MACHINES? I am interested in the way we create personal identity through the use of objects. When you look around someone's living space and imagine who they are, whether they are neat or messy, nostalgic or romantic, creepy, austere, trendy or basically unconscious, it is easy enough to imagine what goes on inside that particular someone's mind. When someone invites us into

their home we learn a lot about them by simply experiencing the ambience of their living space. Domestic architecture is like a machine for reinforcing and transmitting a deeper, hidden interior space. The inside of a home is constructed to permit its owner to feel comfortable and natural and to transmit these feelings to others — one's family, friends and acquaintances. Personal technological devices flesh out one's inner space, whether it's a microwave, a vibrating, reclining chair, a home video theater, a police-band scanner or a personal computer complete with a multilingual voice recognition package. The task of this machine called home is to permit one to be oneself and to reveal what this is to others.

Most interior spaces are neutralized by self-consciousness and strategic efforts at impression management. Superficial as most interiors are, the personal technological devices are the most revealing objects in anyone's home — these machines are loaded with personal information. If we can find out what is in the oven, or what channel the TV is set to, when, or what the computer is used for, we can enter our host's inner sanctum. Getting into the voice diary of someone else's personal computer rivals even the most complete investigation of a stranger's medicine cabinet.

10 WE ARE WHAT WE SEE WHEN WE SEE IT, whenever. A number of people are telling me that perception is everything. Most of them mean they are very concerned with how they are being perceived. A far smaller number are interested in how they perceive others and the world we live in. Machines can play a very important role when it comes to shaping and refining perception. Perception is commonly a half-conscious thing, where you find you are not really paying strict attention and then all of a sudden you find your mind is saturated with your immediate environment. Microseconds later you become aware of your complete immersion. This awareness is what we call experience. As we become conscious of our experience we find the need to describe what we sense. Our machines are very good at description. As we successfully automate the act of description we increase our capacity and thirst for perception. We create an engine for generating experience and storing it and exchanging it and distributing it. We distribute perception and experience through machine-assisted description: You are what you see when you see it, whenever. Again and again and again.

11 I'VE DONE A LOT OF FLYING IN MY LIFETIME. After a relatively slow start, I've spent a ton of time in the air, commuting mostly on domestic flights, choosing between peanuts and cookies, or steak, fish or chicken and trying to cope with the effects of pressurized cabins on my inner ear. I have absolutely no fear of flying. I prefer to sit over the wing in an aisle seat. I disappear into a book or a magazine or a newspaper and I pretend the plane never leaves the ground. I ignore the safety demonstrations. I never use the toilet. I never talk with my fellow-passengers. This morning I had a very strange thing happen. I put my coat and briefcase in the overhead storage compartment and sat down and buckled my seatbelt and put on my stereo headphones and looked around. I knew every single person on the plane. I had met everyone on board at some point or another over the years. Without making eye contact I identified every boarding passenger and then I stood up and fiddled with my briefcase in the overhead compartment so I could double check everyone seated behind me.

I knew every single fucking person on the plane, not by name — but I remembered things about all of them. I was afraid I'd be recognized so I hid in my newspaper and thought about how strange it was that I knew everyone on this flight. That's what happens when you fly around a lot, for a number of years. You find you know everyone just a little bit — and in most cases a little bit is more than enough.

12 I USED TO KNOW THIS MAN, he was my friend. I used to love to talk with him. We'd never get tired of talking and laughing. We'd drink and smoke and talk about everything and everyone. We were kind of wild. We'd do stupid things. But time has passed and we've changed and now we act differently when we get together. I guess we've both changed, but I feel like I still want to talk and laugh and be crazy, but there's no room. I feel like my friend doesn't like me anymore and that he is disappointed with the way I've turned out. We've known each other for a long time. We still see the world in a similar way, but he has lost his sense of humor.

He seems to carry a kind of terminal sadness with him. He can no longer experience joy. Everything around him gets flattened by the weight of his attitude. He went through a bad run, where everything went wrong. A whole string of things didn't work out. The disappointments piled up over time to where he couldn't dig himself out. He stopped believing things would get better. Finally he succumbed to the rhythm of falling — of coming up short. Even when there was a clear break in the negative pattern, when the overcast sky opened up to the heavens, he couldn't lift his mood. He was locked into a miserable self-banter. He had lost his sense of humor. I hope I'll never lose mine.

13 A WAY OF BEING ALONE WITHOUT BEING ALONE. I like working with my machines because it's like being alone without being alone. Machines are part of an ecology of human nature. When we are one with a machine we are connected with all machines and everyone else who touches machines. We are one with human nature and it feels comforting to be part of an ecology of people connected by machines and machines connected by people. The thing I like about machines is the detached intimacy I can establish and maintain between myself and others. I can be alone with some-one else. I can leave my body and be real close without touching flesh. Flesh to flesh is one thing, being alone with someone else without touching is another. Human nature is tied together with machines of all varieties.

It's a world wrapped around a world of other species and other times. It's a point of view that depends on a shared solitude, a pleasure derived from being alone with others.

14 YOU CAN'T TEACH AN OLD MACHINE NEW TRICKS. You can make a new machine do ordinary, dated things, but why bother? Most people in love with machines are just going through the motions. It's not important what they do, it's important how they feel. You can see this with people who love to watch television. People love television because they enjoy being alone with hundreds of thousands and even millions of other people. Simultaneously.

They sit and watch popular programs and they feel part of something bigger than themselves. When the phone rings they expect to receive a personal, exclusive message from another individual. They are not interested in having a television experience when they answer the phone. Of course, video phones will be fair game for advertisers and info-mercials. And in the flip-flop of a machine-identity crisis our television systems will become a new territory for personal, exclusive messages. Video and computers are already being used like telephones, for personal messages, but for a lot of people that's not very useful. These new interactive machines demand our complete attention and direct participation. The problem with interactive technologies is that you can't do anything else at the same time. Parallel activities are ruled out. Listening to the radio or television while reading a book, or watching a movie and daydreaming, or eating and reading a newspaper, or talking and having sex while listening to recorded music, or watching recorded sex while playing live music.....a lot of wonderful parallel activities are being eliminated by interactive technologies. Interactivity,

and the exclusionary intimacy it implies, favors memory retrieval in an asynchronous mode. ATM, Asynchronous Transfer Mode is replacing STM, Synchronous Transfer Mode. STM occurs in shared, real time and ATM is the end of real time as we know it.

15 THERE IS NO LONGER A CENTER FOR SELF-IDENTITY. The body, no matter how firm, is not the permanent address it used to be. We are all homeless in relative terms. Looking back at the body gives us pleasure. But ultimately, it is just another thing in a world of things that gives us feedback and helps us keep our balance. Constructions of external memory replace the body. We deposit external memory wherever we can. We touch, we revisit these memory constructions. We search for familiar territory.

Touching things is good for finding our way. Establishing form through pattern recognition. Establishing and re-establishing order. Checking our references. Making conversations with ourselves. Forming new relationships. Surrogate relationships. Going through the motions.

Practising, rehearsing for the real thing. Filling in the details. Embodying stereo-types. Pretending we are sharing secrets. With somebody else. Why is it, when we hold onto our secrets, we feel like outsiders?

Why do we feel so disconnected? It doesn't matter. Our machines are very good listeners. They're the last good listeners ...