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hirsch perlman

projects



**The Museum of Modern Art
New York**

March 28 – May 21, 1996

Re: a tough act to follow

Dear _____,

First, I want to thank you again for participating in my work. I really couldn't be more pleased with how the pieces will turn out, and I feel very fortunate and very grateful not only to have worked with you, but also to have made new friends whose endeavors are not as far from my own as I might've thought.

In a story called "House Monument" from Benjamin Weissman's book *Dear Dead Person*, a character says, "The quicker I end a discussion the easier it is to keep it meaning what I want."¹ I love that sentence and I think that it's because that's not only something I have a terrible time allowing the characters in my scripts to do—but it seems that I also can't end the discussion that's been triggered by your participation in my work.

I'm faxing you because the Museum will publish a brochure in conjunction with the exhibition, and I'd like to do something other than the usual artist interview that attempts to make the works plain as day, thereby, in my opinion, limiting rather than elaborating on what kinds of engagement might occur between the viewer and the work. If an interview does manage to edify, I still think it can't help but corral the viewer's experience. What I'd like to do instead is to construct a more casual brochure out of a few rehearsal stills combined with some comments from you and the other participating actors.

My motivation for doing something different for the brochure and asking for your help with it is to introduce these works to the audience by breaking the "fourth wall" in a way that may show up my relationship to you as actors as not so different from the viewer's own relationship to the works themselves. That is, not only did the hollowness and occasional literalness of my scripts ask for you to fill them in with more nuance than I was usually willing to direct, but the content of what was being said in the scripts and the relationships expressed in each piece are not so different from what I consider to be the conversation/relationship between a viewer and a work of art—a relationship each viewer can only reconcile for him- or herself. And if the brochure can mimic that predicament of coming to terms with the work, I think the show and the audience will benefit more than they would from an interview where no matter what I say, it's likely to end up being a way out of the predicament—a sort of primer on just what relationship to have to the works.

So, I hope that you won't think it too much of an imposition to respond to a question and fax your answer back to me. As I did when we discussed, rehearsed, and shot the works themselves, I'm going to ask you to respond in any way you see fit—as long as you're engaged, that's still my favorite criterion. So, by all means take the path of least resistance if you'd like and off the top of your head, tell me what you inferred your job to be in your performance. Or, in other words, who did you think you were?

I'll just add that this isn't a roundabout way of looking for you to "indulge my conceit" (really) and tell me how different this was from the work you usually do—whether it differed a lot or not, I'd be interested in your response to the same question. If you think the question misses the point altogether then, as you might have already guessed, I'd be just as happy to hear about that. If you think "I've got my head in the clouds and I'm out of touch," let me know that. Or, if you think I'm essentially asking you a non sequitur now that your work is done ("do I walk to school or carry my lunch") then let me know that. If the question sounds like it's coming from an artist who's trying to understand acting from what may seem to you a rather rudimentary place, then let me know that. But I hope that my reasoning makes clear that I'm not simply trying to get out of doing an interview, and instead I hope that you can imagine why comments from you, no matter what form they take, will parallel the ways that the scripts themselves and I directed you (or refused to) implicate me, who I am and how I act. At any rate, if you could take a few minutes to respond and fax me back in a day or two, I'd be super grateful.

Warmest regards, and I'm looking forward to having more fun/working with you in the future,

Hirsch Perlman

Dear Hirsch,

If I could equate this work to the great sport of surfing, it felt like a groove, except you didn't know if you were going to wipe out or slide through the tube . . .

All one can do is give up one's ego and try to bring life to the words on the page. That's my job. I can only be myself. That's who I am. The work we performed for you differs little from any art, just take a deep breath and hurl yourself into it at warp speed . . .

I'll see you on the other side.

Sincerely yours,

Stephen H. Vaughn

P.S. Hope I didn't fool myself by tryin' to say something profound . . . I think your viewers just have to work it out and come to their own conclusions.

"Cannons to the left of 'em. Cannons to the right of 'em." At times I found myself emotionally "afloat" with not so much as a moral compass to guide me . . . Mother? Mother . . . is that you??? Stand back!!! Hirsch said he'd use me again. Just like all the rest . . .

Russi Taylor

I was me in this work. It wasn't the kind of acting where you get into another being. It was the kind where you get to explore your own. This is rare. I got a chance to play with all the conversations that went into this particular installation because you asked me to see if I could help you find some of the people to participate in them. I got to worm my way into what went on inside these microcosms. They could be, for an actor, just a really neat exercise. But, of course, they are more than that, as I really found out the night A and I shot the one we ended up doing. A and I have been friends for twenty-nine years and have only worked together once before and that was just on an audition piece years ago. So much got said in the ad infinitum repetition of your words. I laughed. I cried. Really. I wonder if I could have gone so deep with someone else. Probably would have just gone somewhere else, but I was grateful for the moment.

Carl Weintraub

Dear Hirsch,

Working on your project "you indulge my conceit . . ." I felt like an old canvas duffle bag that had been lost between the point of departure and its intended destination and, having been stolen from the bus depot Lost & Found (having no name or I.D. tags), was now being ransacked on a service road, the contents randomly and carelessly strewn about the shoulder by unknown vandals. Looking forward to working with you again soon,

Arye Gross

I am the sum of all misery and laughter and I tch and shake and quiver all over. I am as compelling as a car accident.

Mervyn Cedarhurst

When we were doing this piece, Hirsch, I started off thinking, "Okay, I'm A and he's Carl." I like to get my head around the basics, as you can no doubt tell.

And I kept remembering a night some twenty-five years ago when he and I got tired of talking and started hitting each other with heavy pillows off some old couch. We got to a point where we were simply taking turns whaling on the other man's skull with all our strength. It went on 'til utter exhaustion set in (I remember finally stumbling outside and puking) but it never seemed like a fight so much as a progressively more strenuous attempt at defining the most important part of our relationship.

I love this guy. If I needed to kill him, would I die trying?

Two things I really loved about your piece—I got to keep my dinner in my stomach, and I didn't have a headache for two days after.

A Martinez

I am myself . . . living truthfully, out of the behavior (yours and mine) that exists in this now present reality . . . under imaginary human circumstances!

Kirk Woller

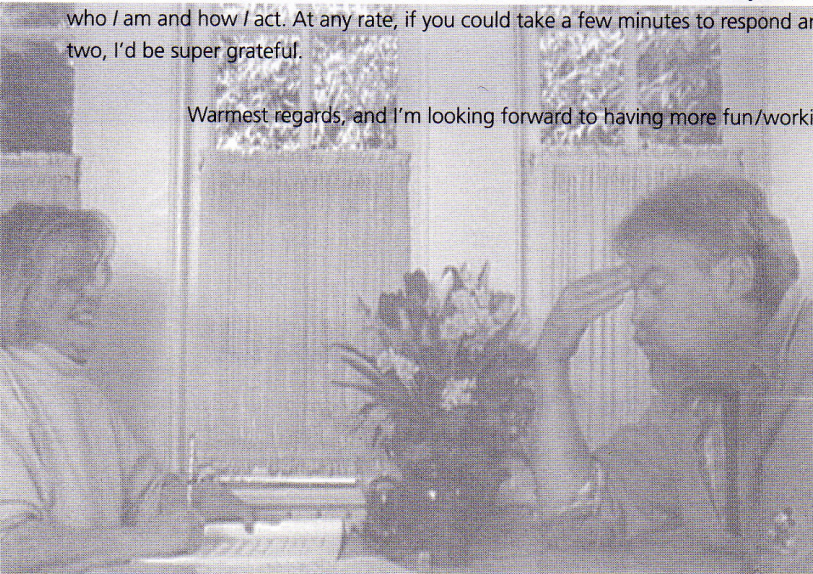
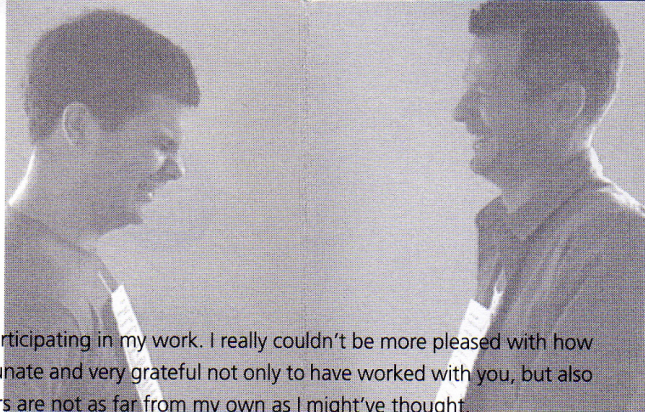
I thought I was myself—my job as an actor being what it always is. That is, to listen and respond naturally under the imaginary circumstances.

Anonymous

Musings on A Nearly Perfect Conversation:

Russi and I were like two jazz soloists playing a duet. Each take was an emotional improvisation around a central theme, the "musical line" or structure provided by your script. Each of us would play a line, and then, with that wonderful inner anticipation an actor or free-form musician feels, we'd wait to see what surprises the other "cat" would answer with. . . . And, when it's right, all you can say is "Yeah . . ."

Russi Taylor and Wayne Allwine



about the artist

I think I'm not so much trying not to have a morality [that is didactically present in the work], as much as actually trying to value that point of self-consciousness, when one has to choose an interpretation and leave the other possibilities behind. . . . [Y]ou are complicit in the interpretation, but you may or may not be aware of how you are complicit. What happens before you even get to an opinion? What happens in the process of reading that puts you through the dread [laughs] of having to commit yourself? I'm interested in . . . a kind of imperative that demands that the viewer read his/her intentions.²

The meaning of a work of art is produced through a complex set of relations among artist, art object, and audience. Hirsch Perlman has made the examination of each of the terms in this equation and their mutual inflections the subject of his practice for the last decade. As he suggests above, then, it is always more useful to come to his work asking not "What does it mean?" but, rather, "How does it mean?"

His principle strategy has involved confounding his viewers with ensembles of suggestive but enigmatic images and texts that continually promise but defer meaning. They stall the interpretive process at the level of self-reflection and initiate critical engagement with flawed communication systems. Grappling primarily with the latter, Perlman has relentlessly challenged speech, writing, and photography in his cool but intriguing installations, forcing each of these systems to fail repeatedly and to reveal its tenuousness through those failures. A 1989 series of "documentary" photographs, for example, documents both institutional architecture and the basic technical glitches and operator blunders that prove the eye/camera and vision/photography analogies faulty. In *Exhibit P* of 1990, live actors perform as a script the intermixed transcript pages from seven unrelated trials, leading viewers through a maze of legal language that is finally revealed to be all form and no coherent content, all style and no discernible substance. Perlman's 1992 piece, *A Layman's Guide to Interrogation Techniques and Practices*, comprising an illustrated instruction manual and videotaped performance exercises, draws a sometimes humorous and sometimes painful connection between day-to-day conversation and techniques of interrogation.

As with his previous work, Perlman's new installation draws attention to the annunciatory modes employed in the work of art, but more than ever it highlights reception and the active role of the audience member in locating meaning through a triangulation of her- or himself with artist and art object. To the extent that the question "What does it mean?" is ever answered, the fraught interpretive process points to the interpreter, with her or his own specific subject position and agenda, as complicit with the artist and object in making the work's meaning—as perhaps even largely or wholly responsible for it. In this way Perlman is able to undermine confidence in the univocal reading, the privileged truth claim.

Though he avoids explicit statements about social or political issues, Perlman is well aware that the general implications of his proof concerning the instability of truth claims pertain to all human relationships and thus extend beyond the realm of art. In typically oblique but humorous fashion, he addresses this issue as fundamental to the conception of his **projects** show:

Every work of art has its own internal logic—its own vocabulary, syntax, and grammar. The interesting thing is that, like characters in fiction or actors in dialogue, there are always some aspects to that logic that are feigned and others that aren't. Of course the problem is that the first question asked of that unique logic always seems to be Humpty Dumpty's: "The question is . . . which is to be master—that's all." I'd like to know how Humpty Dumpty actually fell over (I'd have given him a push), but since I can't know that, and his question remains inevitably and unfortunately privileged, then I think one way to at least unpack it is to restage Tweedledum and Tweedledee fighting it out.³

Thomas W. Collins, Jr.

Beaumont and Nancy Newhall Curatorial Fellow

Department of Photography

biography

Born 1960

B.A., Yale University, 1982

selected solo exhibitions

- 1995** Kunstraum, Vienna
Galerie Claire Burrus, Paris
- 1994** Monika Sprüth Galerie, Cologne
Interim Art, London
- 1990** Donald Young Gallery, Chicago
Feature, New York
Galerie Hufkens, Brussels
Shedhalle, Zurich
- 1989** Feature, New York
- 1988** The Renaissance Society, Chicago
Galerie Claire Burrus, Paris
- 1987** Cable, New York
Multi-Cultural Gallery, San Diego

selected group exhibitions

- 1995** *The End of the Avant-Garde—Art As a Service*,
Kunsthalle der Hypo-Kulturstiftung, Munich
- 1994** *Radical Scavenger(s): The Conceptual Vernacular in American Art*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (catalogue)
- 1993** *Aperto*, Venice Biennale, Venice (catalogue)
Backstage, Kunstverein in Hamburg; Kunstmuseum, Luzern,
Switzerland (catalogue)
Kontext Kunst, Graz Künstlerhaus and Neue Galerie am
Landasmuseum, Joanneum, Graz, Austria (catalogue)
- 1992** *Génériques le visuel & l'écrit*, Hotel des Arts, Paris
Exhibit A, Serpentine Gallery, London
- 1991** *Wealth of Nations*, Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw (catalogue)
A Dialogue About Recent American and European Photography,
The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles
- 1990** *Word as Image: American Art 1960–1990*,
Milwaukee Art Museum
The Photography of Invention: American Pictures of the 80's,
National Museum of American Art, Washington, D.C.; Walker
Arts Center, Minneapolis
*Play of the Unsayable: Wittgenstein and the Art of the 20th
Century*, Wiener Secession, Vienna; Palais des Beaux Arts,
Brussels (catalogue)
- 1989** *1989 Biennial Exhibition*, Whitney Museum of American Art,
New York (catalogue)
- 1987** *The Hallucination of Truth*, P.S. 1, Long Island City, New York
- 1986** *Dull Edge*, Randolph Street Gallery, Chicago (catalogue)

awards and fellowships

- 1991** Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Grant
National Endowment for the Arts Artists Fellowship
- 1989** National Endowment for the Arts Artists Fellowship

¹ New York: High Risk Books, 1994, p. 124.

² Hirsch Perlman in Kathryn Hixson, "Hirsch Perlman: Reading the Meaning of Mistakes," *Flash Art*, May/June 1991, pp. 114–15.

³ Hirsch Perlman in conversation with the author, March 2, 1996. Quotation from Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass* (New York: Heritage Press, 1941), p. 112.

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