

repeat after me

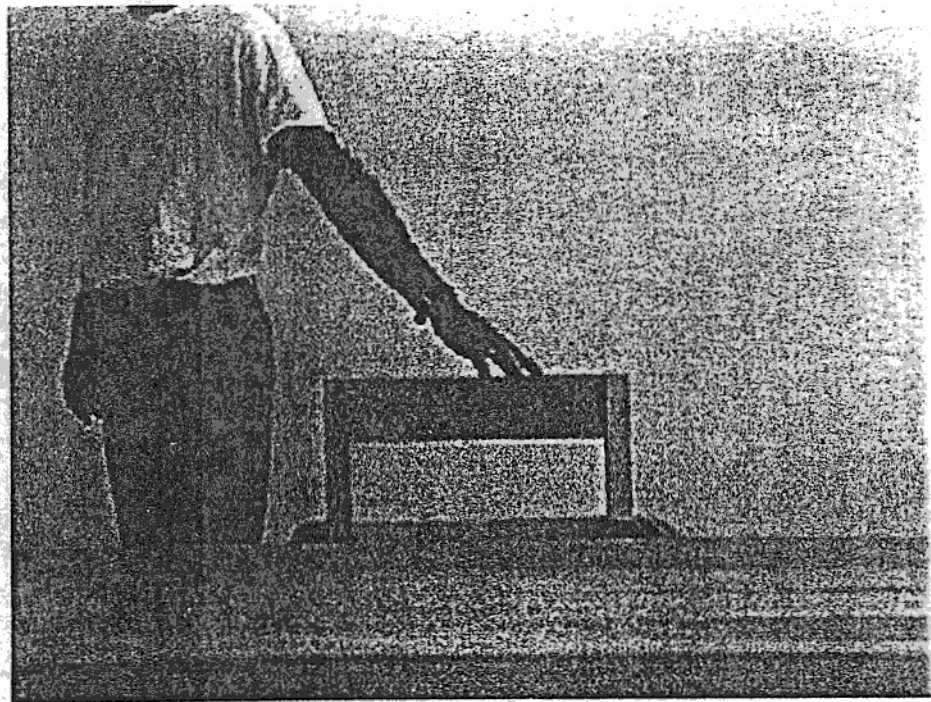
Repeat After Me: 'You're going to find out sooner or later so I may as well tell you now.'

The room is small and close. Where do you sit? There are only two chairs. One is a metal S-shape with a woven cane seat, which would bounce up and down with even the smallest movement; the other is fixed, with a low centre of gravity – you know if you sat there you wouldn't move. Where do you sit? You have a split second to decide, and endless hours to consider your decision.

The video frame is tightly cropped. The man (the 'source'), seated at a table, looks directly at us, one eyebrow cocked in an anticipatory angle of awareness, like a drawn bow. The disembodied voice of the interrogator occasionally takes form as a headless torso passing slowly behind or in front of the source while walking around the table, carrying the script, flipping pages. He reads from *The Layman's Practical Guide to Interrogation Techniques and Practices, Second Draft*: 'View all information with scepticism. If you can disrupt the source's train of thought, it will be much harder for them to maintain the concentration required for them to lie.' The source repeats each phrase, not as if to commit it to memory, but as an exercise in listening. If he gets it right, the interrogator continues, if he screws up – stumbles, inverts the sequence, substitutes a word, blanks out – the interrogator repeats the phrase. The source is concentrating hard. When he's stumped, his jaw locks sideways. When he feels he's succeeded, his face subtly registers relief, followed by a gulp and the bobbing of his Adam's apple, in anticipation of the next volley.

You say hello and there is a nod and silence. The interrogator smiles, or else is stony faced, waiting for you to speak first. It is difficult. There is a lot of tension in the room. How to begin? 'How was your day?' You could begin anywhere: the weather, or a story about someone sitting across from you on the train, how they seemed to be staring, how you dropped your purse, lost your keys. Before uttering a word, you begin to sweat. You can feel a thin trickle slipping down your right side, pooling against your shirt.

The gallery is large and high-ceilinged. The video plays on two monitors at opposite ends of the room. A series of stills on one long wall illustrates techniques of interrogation: 'pacing', 'flirting', 'confiding', 'relenting' – and on the other wall, sample attitudes of the interrogator: 'irreverent', 'coercive', 'obliging.' In these, the chair itself – wooden and straight-backed, hard, cold, but with arms – stands in for the source. It is pushed over,



A Layman's Guide to Interrogation Techniques and Practices
Appendix to the 2nd Draft: Body Language and Gestures

FLIRTING

A Layman's Guide to Interrogation Techniques and Practices: Appendix to the 2nd Draft: Body Language and Gestures: Flirting 1993
Electrostatic print on paper. 96 x 77.5cm.

shaken, 'obliged', and 'coerced' – the gestures of the man's body towards this inanimate object illustrating choreographed approaches for extracting truth. ('Interrogations typically produce conflicting information.')

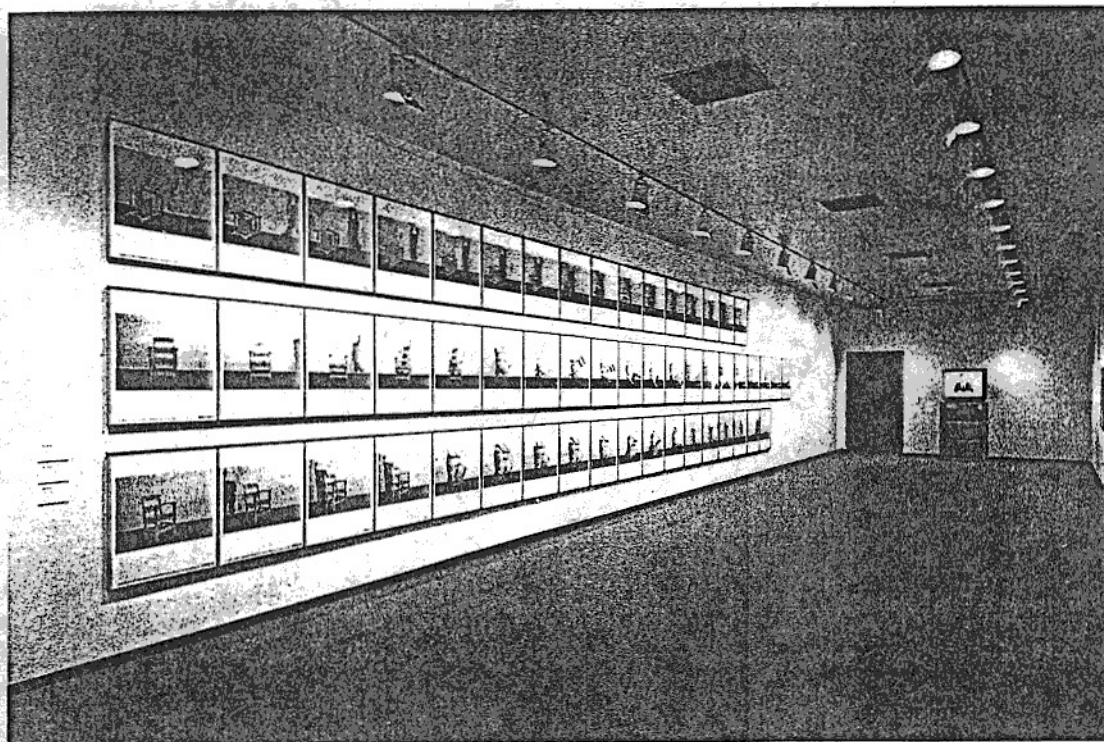
No matter where you begin, the focus will return to the topic at hand: what's happening in this room; the fact that you don't look at her; the way you jiggle your foot. Every utterance is doubled by a self-conscious awareness of another level of meaning, a language of gesture, intonation, and interpretation, a language you speak without knowing you are speaking it.

In Hirsch Perelman's video, what's said doesn't

originate with either speaker, but with the written text, *The Layman's Guide...*, which is, after all, only a draft, one of many versions. The knife-twist in the text is the exquisite torture of the source, who must speak out the strategies he is subject to, except that he seems oblivious to the content. The priorities of communication have been shifted from semantic content to the differences between translations, between text, speech, and echo, as well as to the non-verbal effects of the interaction and the power differential that structures their expression.

In an earlier piece, Perlman concentrated on the public spectacle of a courtroom trial. Here he

Laurie Palmer on Hirsch Perlman's 'The Layman's Practical Guide to Interrogation Techniques and Practices, Second Draft'.



A Layman's Guide to Interrogation Techniques and Practices... 1993
Installation view (part of the group show: 'Radical Scavengers' at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Spring 1994)

has shifted his attention to the pressure and intimacy of a private interrogation, where there is no third party to call foul play. He has traded the literal nonsense of legalese for the practical language of instruction. But the text is redundant. As the source echoes his instructor's words, it is not the sense that one listens for but the differences between the first and second utterance – sequence, intonation, substitution, elision – exactly the things the source is being tested on: the stuff of the matter (semantic content) slips in only subliminally. Symptoms of psychological struggle in the source and the body language of the interrogator are what make it possible to continue to call this an 'interrogation' even though no questions are asked.

It is difficult for you to remember, exactly – you get it wrong in the short run, screw up, invert the sequence, cause and effect, who did what to whom, etc. – but eventually, with his

encouragement, you get it right. Eventually, you walk in, and when he says, repeat after me, you do. The relationship becomes smoother. There is less resistance. Memories start to come fast and furious. You speak the structure of your unconscious in response to the questions posed; you have learned through the language of analysis the shape of your own thoughts, by having them told to you, as if by dictation, or by rote: repeat after me.

In this stripped-down scenario, truth value is revealed as a symptom of position only, with the 'source' not a well or a fountain but a ventriloquist's dummy – necessary only as a place to locate the utterance. Horror stories of false confessions in police state interrogations reverberate alongside the worst case fears of psychoanalytic practice, in which diagnosis not only precedes the utterance, but elicits it. 'False Memory Syndrome': assisted

facilitation; the case of Cardinal Joseph Bernardin... Perlman's tightly constructed installation creates a porous matrix through which one could play out any number of interpretations regarding language and power. But the basic elements of this scenario – that intimate and private room; the ruses used by one to trick the other into revelation; and the unequal positions make transference easy, and I find myself in the doctor's office.

This is the place where we work out secrets, where truth still seems to matter, where we are looking for some bodily acknowledgement in the form of unwilling eruption – the testimony of an authentic self. This is where we might be revealed to ourselves, our defences pried open thanks to the persistence and skill of the interrogator... But this space is also one in which we are too easily spoken through, in which the questions of the analyst beg their

own answers, and memories can be induced or implanted as well as recalled. Truth is not extracted or discovered but produced; it is placed like a wafer on the tongue.

The legal residue in this scenario comes from the authority invested in the interrogator, and from the way in which any revelation produced in this room might be used. Sensational media coverage of 'recovered memory' lawsuits, by those abused and accused, seems ready to dismantle a century of Freudian theory as easily as the toppling of sculptures of Lenin from their plinths. Even *Time* magazine has recently reported that Freud, like Marx, is evaporating in the mists, and with him a notion of selfhood of which memory is the source and bulwark. Of course, the media's challenge to psychoanalytic techniques has only occurred where the law has been involved – once what has been kept secret for so long becomes evidence.

Perlman has wrestled abstractions of language and power into a form that clearly resonates with familiar institutions, and questions where resistance and identity might originate. In the jump from the interrogation room to the analyst's office, the idea of the 'source' as the unconscious comes up empty, a hollow echo – or else it suggests, in less deterministic form, a self that is relational, collaborative, ungrounded except as a function of an interaction. In this piece, the artist has cast himself in the position of interrogator: it is his body we see tipping over the chair and shaking it, his voice in the video stating each phrase that the source attempts to repeat. As a viewer, I identify with the chair (coerced and obliged). In the dizzying vacuum of this interaction, in the large high-ceilinged gallery which might also be a small and private room, how much of what gets said is what he was waiting for me to say, what he made possible for me to say, what his questions elicited?