



Hirsch Perlman, *Shoving*, 1994, video still.

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Hirsch Perlman's first solo exhibition in Austria contained only three works, each consisting of a video accompanied by a framed black and white film still and a brief descriptive text. Unlike some of Perlman's earlier pieces, which dealt with architecture, the police, and legal systems, it was extremely difficult to establish a frame of reference for this work.

On one level the relationship between the text and the images was very clear, as the work seemed at first to involve a faithful translation of the visual into the linguistic, or vice versa. The text that appeared in *Shoving* (all works 1994), for example, read: "Two people taking turns shoving each other over and over again as deliberately and forcefully as they can." In this work, the only one that was installed as a video projection, two men carried out the action described—that is, they alternated pushing each other out of the field of vision—against a neutral background. The actors' peculiar lack of emotion, despite obvious signs of bodily exertion, was striking.

So what did the description reveal about the image? On the surface, everything; in terms of the motivation for this physical

conflict, nothing. This lack of explanatory power—language functioning like a picture that merely shows—forced the viewer to consider more closely the seeming convergence of word and image, to wonder, for example, whether the men's almost ritualized action had anything at all to do with combat or aggression. Here Perlman seemed to be probing the ease with which language can take neutral images in a definite interpretive direction.

At first glance *Expressions*, which depicted a frontal view of a decidedly "average" man in a white shirt and a tie, seemed to be making a more concrete connection between word and image. The text read: "A man making these expressions: 'Worry,' 'Resignation,' 'Bemusement,' 'Fatigue,' 'Anger,' and 'Relief,' one after another, as completely as he can, and beginning and ending each expression with a blank stare." The facial expressions, however, are by no means as easy to decipher as this list of emotional categories would suggest. At the same time, what was still an open question in *Shoving* becomes clear here: namely, that the man's activity follows the prescribed verbal abstraction. Perlman subtly demonstrates that on the level of visual representation everything is theater; that without knowledge of the context, nothing can be safely assumed about ostensibly "universal" signs. Given the manipulative potential of today's media, skepticism toward the truth of images has become commonplace. Perlman takes this skepticism further, by questioning perhaps the earliest and "most authentic" sign system.

Conversation showed two men seated at a table, the piece of paper, pot of coffee, and water glass in front of each suggesting a business meeting. If the focus of *Shoving* was bodily action and gesturing, that of *Expressions* was verbal communication. The text in this work—"Two people, each using only ten different sentences, carrying on a potentially endless conversation until they reach an impasse"—proved to be far more selective than that of other work. It referred only to communication on a verbal level, whereas the two men were making extensive use of nonverbal forms of communication. This conversation, the content of which was again unspecified, had a much greater emotional effect on the viewer than that of the purely physical confrontation in *Shoving*, because of the emphatic body language and the varied intensity of the voices. And yet the action was every bit as theatrical, staged, and schematic. What was most interesting in all this was that, without knowing the respective positions of these men to one another, any interpretation of the situation was totally out of the question. The formulaic nature of the scene, as well as the reductive stage on which it is enacted, might well have derived from some communications training course for managers and politicians, but again, there was no way of verifying such an association.

—Christian Kravagna

Translated from the German by David Jacobson.