

Hirsch Perlman at the Museum of Modern Art

Things look simple in Hirsch Perlman's art, at least at first. For this exhibition, the museum's Projects space was divided into three adjacent rooms. In each, a videotape showed paired actors performing scripted conversations, while captioned stills from the video hung on the walls. The conversations have the recognizable intonation, expression and gesture of dialogue, but what the actors say does not make obvious sense. Two of the dialogues are strings of clichés, while the third is a confusing knot of non sequiturs. On each tape, the conversation is repeated several times, with slight variations.

One of Perlman's stated aims was to parallel the way actors interpret and perform their scripts, and the way viewers actively interpret art. The parallel was strong and effective. The longer one watched the actors deliver and redeliver their lines, the more one marveled at how they made the lines sound infinitely varied, infusing them with fresh nuance and meaning. Beyond the actors' readings, the words themselves started to convey independent messages about understanding art and making meaning in art, and about how people communicate or fail to communicate with one another. Which is not to say that the works were easily comprehended. As one struggled to make sense of essentially ridiculous conversations, such phrases as "I'm not trying to put something over on you," "this has got to be more than they bargained for," or "they don't have a clue" leaped out of the conversational context and nestled among the viewer's standard anxieties about interpreting and understanding. As Perlman describes it in the exhibition brochure, this "predicament of coming to terms with the work" is most acute in the piece involving a man and woman who speak around each other, in a disconnected dialogue that strained the viewer's mind as well as the actors' options. In all of the videos, there are many painful moments when the characters seem to challenge,



Hirsch Perlman: Still from *A Nearly Perfect Conversation*, 1996, video installation; at MOMA.

misinterpret and retaliate, just as people do when they are not getting along or, worse, when they are trying to hurt one another. (This discomfort was intentionally exacerbated by the doors between the rooms, which slammed whenever viewers passed through.)

Perlman combines the roles of playwright, director, producer and editor, and he speaks through the videotape format, the actors and the dialogue. Overall, the works recall Bruce Nauman's videos of numbingly senseless repeated phrases and absurdist violence; Perlman's art is more analytical and schematized than Nauman's, but equally affecting. Inviting the viewer out on a limb, Perlman forced a kind of complicity: with a mounting sense of foolishness and frustration, one watched the videos several times to decipher them. The artist has said that he intended the works to be funny, and there is a kind of awkward humor running through the show. There is also, however, an equally powerful demonstration of strained human relations.

—Susan Hapgood