



Hirsch Perlman, *House for Weissenhofsiedlung, 1927, Le Corbusier, 1988*, C-print, polyethylene fluted sheet, frame, plexiglass, laminated black and white photograph, sintra and honeycomb board, Left: 21¼" × 22½", right: 44½" × 33". Courtesy Feature Gallery, New York.

# Hirsch Perlman

In a quietly refined installation, Hirsch Perlman presents architectural photographs of historically significant public and private buildings built in the 20th century. They are accompanied by descriptive captions, pristinely employing appropriate pictorial and linguistic systems in an effort to legitimate the objects as works of art and to ensure that the experience of the work be an aesthetic and informative one. All of the cues are there. The viewer indifferently (normally) accepts the authority of photographic representation as documentation, of text as descriptive and didactic, of graphic design and physical presentation to create significance. From within this layering of normalcy, Perlman subtly alters the dialogue between the systems of authority through the details of the pictures, creating a radical rupture, a slippage along the fault lines where the systems interface.

The conventions of presentation of the photographs are shifted to level out the hierarchy of the codes. In previous work, Perlman has reproduced reproductions of geologic and architectural documentation lifted from textbooks, eliminating the descriptive caption, erasing it to underscore the closure of the picture/caption marriage. In this work Perlman reinserts the captions, making them larger than

the architectural photographs they seem to describe, so that the pairing becomes an equalizing diptych of image and text. *Armory (altered)* 1917-19 *Holabird and Roche* shows a massive old brick structure dominated by Modernist buildings behind and a chain-link fenced-in playing field in front, and is informed by another piece: *Chicago Historical Society* 1987-88, *Holabird and Root*. This recently constructed building is a postmodern duplication of the massive armory quoting the old style, designed by a related firm seventy years later. Perlman places the historical valorization of these institutions in the captions, and lays the contemporary reality of the buildings in the photographs. The armory will soon become the new site of The Museum of Contemporary Art (sure to be realtered) and the most postmodern (post-historical) edifice houses the Historical Society.

Perlman directly confronts the contradictions of Modernist architectural idealism with its questionable historical authority in *Stoneborough Wittgenstein House* 1928 *Peter Altenberg and Ludwig Wittgenstein*. Two pictures of the exterior of the severely geometric house (Wittgenstein's only architectural project)—one in the enlarged black-and-white screened dots of the academic text, the other in color

with blue sky and shrubs and curtains in the windows—are separated by a text panel reading: "Switches (Knobs recessed, flush with surface of wall)." This (like the other texts with the houses) is from a book about the Wittgenstein house that represents for Perlman the apex of the Modernist failure, the unconscious switch. A philosopher who seeks to ground his work in everyday language repudiates his wealth, and spends a fortune on fabricating a house glorifying Modernist purity. The historic importance of the monolithic architecture is re-laid onto the shifting ground of economic and domestic experience.

Perlman's critique of architecture and interior decoration extends into the presentation of his own work. The artist alters the gallery space to more directly assert his intervention into the gallery space. He redesigned the vestibule leading into the gallery—the neutral space of entry—to become a self-contained "empty" space, placing bleak black door handles (obliquely referring to Wittgenstein's insistence on purely functional door handles) on stark white doors, and removing all referents from the four doors (the closet, the office, the exit, and the entrance look exactly alike). Inside the gallery, Perlman shifted the exhibiting walls to be off-perpendicular, too thick, or too high, and opened up windows previously blocked off to accommodate artwork. The architecture of the gallery (vaulted ceiling, weird cornices, operative grid suspended from the ceiling for lights and fake-wall support) becomes obviously manipulative and self-congratulatory in its white self-defacement. Perlman mimics the architecture in the making of his pieces: closing off the architectural photos in tight art-frames (sealed in history), and mounting the text panels on honeycomb board-edges left ragged (torn out of their contexts).

In his ruminations on architectural photography, Perlman implies that the driving Modernist fear that "objective" photographic representation would make subjective painting obsolete is simply wrong. Photography itself is a subjective media—potentially bankrupt, transcendently meaningful or informative as any abstract painting. Interpretation lies with the complex ideology brought to the work by the viewer—the reader decides. Perlman lays open the critique to include his own works already ensconced in the legitimacy of the institution. The work embraces its own failure within the tradition of failure (of Modernism) but acknowledges that this inferiority is dialectically dependent upon a belief in the possibility of an exterior from which to critique. Melancholic but resolved, Perlman's gesture is the acknowledgement of the mutual dependency between the inside and the outside. (*Renaissance Society, University of Chicago, October 2–November 6*)

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