

Hirsch Perlman's project *The Layman's Practical Guide to Interrogation* offers strategies for questioning others, including the one outlined in "*Silent Technique*" (all works 1992) whereby information is elicited simply by staring down one's interlocutor. Large sheets of paper (later to be collected in book form), some framed and hanging on the walls and others spread out on a table for the viewer's perusal, feature handwritten texts accompanied by loose gestural drawings that ostensibly illustrate those texts. The drawings depicting two people in conversation recall old detective movies: anonymous institutional settings, the private eye perched on the edge of his desk, the suspect or witness' face viewed over the interrogator's shoulder. Even when domestic trappings such as side tables and couches suggest more personal encounters, the grimaces, frowns, and anxious faces remind us that something other than friendly conversation is going on.

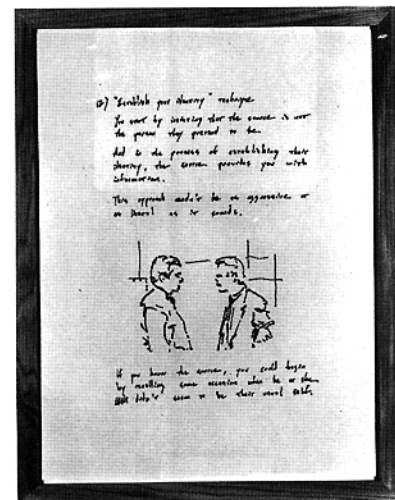
Despite this seemingly straightforward presentation, Perlman's pointers are offered in no particular order and are often disrupted by baffling non sequiturs. Moreover, while we are told exactly how to proceed, the motives for interrogation are never discussed. Indeed, the texts at times suggest that there may be no motive. In *Nonsense*, the subject of interrogation is gradually unsettled by the illogical questions posed. As Perlman indicates, "This can become so nerve-racking that it will be a great relief to answer questions that can be understood," and the subject will be more likely to confess. So far, so good, until Perlman cryptically remarks, "This tech-

nique can also be useful when you don't have any particular objective."

Previously, Perlman used captions that did not relate, or at least not directly, to the adjacent images. In an untitled project from 1990, he combined fragments of legal prose with the consciously constructed, seemingly nonsensical sentences of Gertrude Stein to underline how closely the two resemble one another. By showing the inept attempts of human beings—be they lawyers or judges, philosophers or rhetoricians—to manipulate language to their own ends, Perlman makes such enterprises seem absurd though no less insidious. It is doubtful if anyone could carry out a "successful" interrogation following Perlman's *Guide*. Written after extensive study of the legal process of cross-examination and using one military manual for reference, it portrays the "science" of interrogation as essentially absurd.

In presenting the *Guide* as art, Perlman invites facile analogies between the act of interrogation and artmaking. Certainly, both manipulate specific vocabularies and techniques to achieve certain effects, using rhetoric to persuade and seduce. In turn, we interrogate works of art, seeking to discern the truth through their "lies" or fictions. But just as the *Guide* turns out to be full of holes and rent by contradictions, Perlman's art resists such tidy interpretations. Standing amid Perlman's drawings, shuffling and reshuffling his false clues, these things that are not what they seem (didactic language that does not teach, illustrations that do not match their texts, a manual that poses as art), I felt both like the victim of an incomprehensible interrogation and like a frustrated investigator. Thwarted in my attempts to pin down, to explain Perlman's proceedings, I realized that one cannot grasp that slippery thing called art.

—Lois Nesbitt



Hirsch Perlman, "Establish Your Identity Technique, 1992, marker on paper, 26 x 20 3/4 x 1/8".