

Hirsch Perlman

Museum of Modern Art,
New York

Few clichés about glamorous Hollywood are true; go there and you'll discover that it's just a business, like any other. But one LA chestnut is indeed accurate: everyone in town is writing a screenplay.

The artist Hirsch Perlman, a recent migrant, is not immune. His contribution to MoMA's 'Projects' series is a trio of works on video, all featuring professional actors reciting his scripts. Perlman's dialogue is fashioned entirely of platitudes and non-sequiturs: in *Acute Conversation* (all works 1996) three consecutive pairs of male actors spew the same litany of phrases at each other, inflecting the words to imply that a moral lecture is being given, and taken. The lecturer emotes lines like 'You'll never learn', and 'You're out of touch', while the lecturee repeats them, sometimes defiantly,

Hirsch Perlman
Acute Conversation
1996
Video still

sometimes beseechingly. Black-and-white production stills on the gallery wall depict the three couples, along with the caption 'This is for your own good'.

The centrepiece of the show is entitled *Complete Conversation*. In

it, two men, shown on large video monitors at opposite ends of a room, hold an ostensibly intimate dialogue using a different set of fragments, like 'Who would've thought', 'All's well that ends well' and 'It's almost too good to be

true'. The wall caption here reads, 'You indulge my conceit by saying only what you think I want to hear in order to encourage me to do the same for you'. (The third video is called *A Nearly Perfect Conversation* and features a man, a woman



and a non-sequitur.)

Despite their impressive efforts to make Perlman's empty words comply with the wall captions, all the actors in his videos cannot help but appear at turns confused and uncomfortable with their task. This is because Perlman's vignettes violate the first rule of writing for the stage or screen: that a relationship cannot be convincingly portrayed (no matter how skilful the actor) without a bit of back story – i.e., a narrative. And since Perlman's scripts assiduously avoid exactly that, we can surmise that his scenes are *not* about drama, but about Art: for to deny us narrative – to bore us so that we may look beyond our petty need for a beginning, middle and end – is art's job. It's for our own good.

Perlman's exercises do mimic the circular, often faulty logic of some works of art, presenting style but no substance (or perpetually deferred substance) to viewers – even the most erudite and patient of whom are caused to walk away, disappointed. But here, even style is hampered by the artist's palpable presence: Perlman as ham-handed *auteur*, his actors visibly torn between suspicion and awe of their novice director's fine-art pedigree. Distracted, we are denied the opportunity to speculate on the relationships between each video's characters – and later to reflect on the process of our speculation, when we discover there is indeed no real relationship to be found. As in much recent art about language, syntactical incomprehensibility

becomes an end in itself: yet another contrived demonstration of language's failure, rather than a risky attempt at its rehabilitation.

In the gallery documentation, Perlman reprints a post-performance fax he sent to his actors; in closing, he says he hopes to work with all of them again. This last phrase is the kind of (empty) promise Hollywood freelancers live for – and which squeezes a gland of obsequiousness that saturates any subsequent attempts at sincerity. The sometimes excruciating responses from the actors are what you might expect.

But by Perlman's giving his actors what he thinks they want – a seemingly avant-gardish acting exercise and the opportunity to work with a 'real' artist – and by

the actors' giving Perlman what they think *he* wants in their game performances and fawning faxes, all parties fill the roles previously described in 'Complete Conversation'. If such a result was Perlman's intent, then the artist is as canny as he is brave; for such a self-effacing act virtually guarantees that Perlman won't *ever* work in that town again. In this scenario, Perlman's moral mission is to make himself and his collaborators look stupid to prove how stupid it all is – Hollywood and Art and their mutually ignorant and insecure obsessions with each other's shiny surfaces, at the expense of toiling to understand their uncomfortable and interesting affinities.

David A. Greene