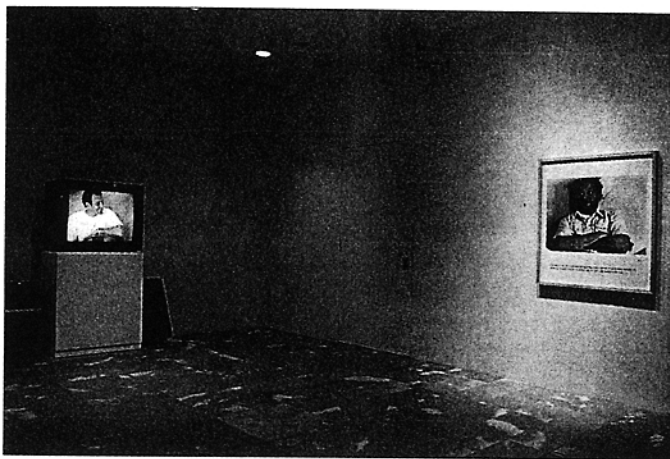


Right: Hirsch Perlman, *Complete Conversations* (detail), 1996. Video, black-and-white fiber photos, and frames.



Sculpture December 1996

Hirsch Perlman

Museum of Modern Art

Television creeps in and out of our collective lives, and we've grown accustomed to its space in our daily existence. However, that space extends well beyond the faux-wood entertainment center and the room it commands into the space of our active consciousness. We reserve time for PBS or *Seinfeld*. We talk about Monday Night Football at work on Tuesday. We retell the story line from *The X-Files* as though we're experts on abnormal phenomena. We lust after the stars of *Baywatch*. Television informs contemporary awareness like no other medium can; it stimulates impulses at every turn, provoking time-based actions from the masses: "Just Do It."

Responding to the consequences of the medium, Hirsch Perlman has dissected television media with three studio-produced videos and a suite

of complimentary photographs in his "Projects 54" exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. His crisp yet unembellished video work refers to the look and pace of soap operas, situation comedies, and prime-time dramas. His photographs are documents in the simplest terms: straightforward images and text representing the thematic tenor of his videos. As such, these still images act as footnotes or appendices for the exhibition as a whole. The videos and photographs as objects are humble props quietly articulating three separated and minimally appointed spaces. Perlman's architectural manipulations (temporary walls and hinged doors) control the flow of visitors from one specified environment to the next while inventing margins of familiarity, recall, and the perversions of communication.

In his videos, Perlman couples the improvised performance of fairly recognizable, seasoned actors with the unresolved rhetoric of his own scripts, in order to further explore models of communicative behavior. Casting actors like Arye Gross (from *Ellen*) and A. Martinez (from *Santa Barbara* and *L.A. Law*) in roles somewhat akin to their television personalities, Perlman makes familiar the gap between "art videos" and "Must see TV." By adding this element of displaced acquaintanceship, his project becomes part television-trivia quiz and part video-based installation. And with those familiar tenets in

place, the stage is set to address more complex behavioral models.

Perlman's videotaped "conversations" foreground the essence of interpersonal posturing and dialogue. *Acute Conversation* has A. Martinez and Carl Weintraub squaring off in a heated debate. Bobbing and weaving while reciting clichéd exchanges like "It's written all over me," and "I'm sorry, but it's written all over you, you can ask anyone." Throughout, Martinez is fairly submissive to Weintraub's eager provocations, in an exaggeration of the patronizing conceits of verbal maneuvering.

Complete Conversation places visitors literally in the middle of a conversation (between two facing video monitors), as Arye Gross and Mervyn Cedarhurst lob phrases like "Who are they trying to kid?" and "Face it, they don't have a clue" back and forth in a relaxed, confident manner. In the process, the actors reveal the insecure postures underneath their cocksure facades.

The third video program shows a middle-aged heterosexual couple, sitting at a sunlit kitchenette table, comfortably rambling on in a way that counters the posturing of the previous two installations. *A Nearly Perfect Conversation* boldly attempts to strip the pretense and posturing away from conversation, hoping to render it void of manipulation. In so doing, this piece sets forth Perlman's most earnest question: Do we consistently manipulate conversations for our own ends or do we occasionally have brilliant, unfettered moments in which a rush of true sincerity lights up the room, like the scene in the morning-fresh kitchen suggests?

—Brad Killam