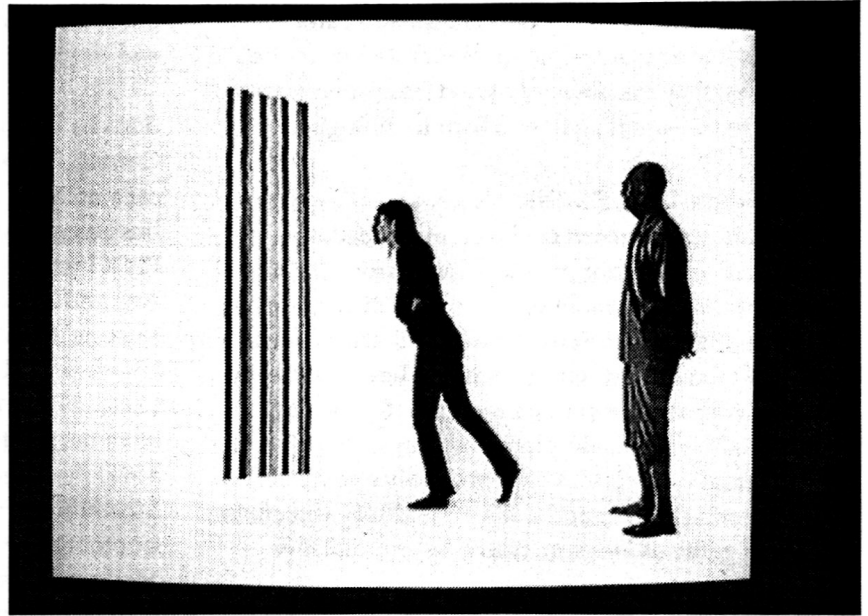


# New Media at the Johnson

## Alix Pearlstein: *Partners*, 1998



When television and video games are blamed for youth violence, when relationships are forged in Internet chat rooms, when correspondence has been replaced by e-mail, and when virtual reality challenges reality, has the nature of human relationships themselves been subtly changed? In her video work, *Partners*, artist Alix Pearlstein poignantly and wittily investigates a series of interactions, playing out one half of a partnership with a variety of other players. From man to woman, from friend to lover, from infant to child, from cat to dog, Pearlstein creates brief "encounters" with each, exploring the way in which we communicate with each other, or don't. In each of these cases, it is Pearlstein who initiates and carries the dialogue because her "partners" are in fact cut out figures from magazines. These figures are placed close to the lens of the video camera while Pearlstein herself is positioned far in the distance. The result is an approximately accurate scale which temporarily fools the viewer into believing that both partners exist on the same plane. Eventually the viewer sees the joke. But in the process, Pearlstein raises a multitude of issues about relationships, about media, about art. One issue she raises with her dialogues are the ways in which people communicate with each other. The dialogue with an infant is much different than that

with an adult which in turn is different than one has with a modern painting ("Hmmm"). The nature of her dialogues with her various others is telling and runs the gamut of life's encounters with other people: "Do you hear me? Do you hear a word I'm saying? Forget it!"; "Don't rock the boat"; "I'm so sorry"; "Whatever!"; "What's your problem?"; and "Don't worry". Pearlstein also includes non-verbal patterns: Sometimes she tickles another person's feet, looks at a work of art, looks at whatever someone else is looking at, kisses someone, has sex with someone, dances with someone.

At the same time, Pearlstein raises issues which surround people's relationship with media. Many viewers will become aware that he or she has seen some of these partners in magazine ads, and therefore the issue of the role of media in the life of the late twentieth-century viewer can not be ignored. Just as relationships are a part of everyday existence, so is the barrage of images from the media. Whether in the print media, as is the case here, or in other forms such as television, radio, and web-sites, daily life is filled with images of happy, successful people who are the result of purchasing a particular product or service. But what are these people really selling? Are

they selling happiness? Does the reader/consumer really become the people pictured in these advertisements? Who are these people? Are they real? In Pearlstein's use of them, they become readily two dimensional. They are flat, illusory, and impossible to truly relate to. Separated from their product, they become only what Pearlstein wants them to be—a foil against which to dialogue.

On another level, Pearlstein's juxtaposition of the cut-outs and her own position much further away in space raises the more traditional artistic concern of illusion and perception. The depiction of depth and spatial recession has challenged artists since ancient Greek and Roman times. Here, Pearlstein plays with the viewer's perception of space by making the two main planes appear as one. Pearlstein's deadpan voice-over seems to be very close to the viewer and adds an auditory dimension to this game of location, nearness and distance.

So this simple work slowly reveals itself as a fascinating play of ideas on several interwoven topics. Alix Pearlstein succeeds in creating a work which investigates and questions the many relationships which exist in everyday life. How does

space exist, both real physical space and the psychological or emotional space that exist in relationships one experiences? How are relationships "mediated?" How are they communicated? Pearlstein subtly knits these issues and questions together in a clever, funny, and thought-provoking work.

Born in 1962 in New York, Pearlstein graduated from Cornell University in 1983 with a BS and went on to earn an MFA in sculpture at SUNY-Purchase. She has since taught at various institutions, including the Pratt Institute of Art and Design, Maine College of Art, and Illinois State University. She has been a Visiting Artist at many schools including Rhode Island School of Design, New York University, Otis College of Art & Design, and Cornell. Her works have been exhibited at Postmasters Gallery in New York, the Hirschorn Museum in Washington, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, and the Museum of Modern Art in New York, as well as across Europe, including London, Bologna, Berlin, Milan, Rome, and Amsterdam.

SEAN M. ULMER  
ASSISTANT CURATOR OF PAINTING AND SCULPTURE

Alix Pearlstein's *Partners* is on view in the Johnson Museum's New Media Space (floor 2) in October 1999.

The artist will give a talk about her work on Thursday, October 21 at 5:00 pm.



Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art  
Cornell University