

Critics' Picks
By Sam Pulitzer
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Xavier Cha

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945 Madison Avenue at 75th Street
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It is not every day that one is greeted with cries of anguish when entering the lobby gallery of the Whitney Museum. However, thanks to Xavier Cha's performance-based work *Body Drama*, 2011, such wails are standard fare for visitors through the remainder of this exhibition's tenure. In the first component of this gravely austere two-part work, at the top of every hour, a hired actor—an ostensible stand-in for the artist—emotes an anguished state of extreme anxiety as part of a roughly twenty-minute live performance in a bare gallery. For the work's second part, a video projection of these histrionics is then looped during the scheduled forty-minute gap before the next performance.

Most important to these two components of the work is the technical-*cum*-aesthetic tool that enables this single act to be parsed into two—a camera mounted to the actor's body, its lens trained continuously toward the actor's pitiable face. Extending out of the performer's torso like a bionic prosthesis, this videographic device mediates the experience of observing the dramatic scene by presenting vision as not synaptically linked to a conscious mind but rather immanent in the body's technological aura, its "optical unconscious." Suggesting cinematic techniques commonly used to evoke vertiginous states of absentmindedness, from sleepwalking to drunkenness, the theatrical images relayed by Cha's body-mounted third eye echo the affectation cultivated by the apparatus's objectifying dictates.

All in all, Cha's exploration of psychosomatic alterity convincingly pastiches Bas Jan Ader's *I'm Too Sad to Tell You*, 1970, and Dan Graham's *Body Press*, 1972, for the hermeneutics of a contemporary moment marked by social media, reality television, and the virtuosic body drama of Natalie Portman's self-martyring ballerina in *Black Swan* (2010).



Xavier Cha, *Body Drama*, 2011, performance view.

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