

Xavier Cha

47 CANAL

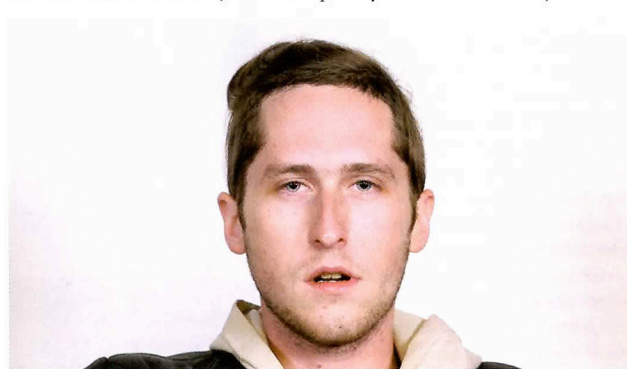
“Room tone,” or “presence,” in filmic parlance, is shorthand for ambient “silence,” the specific quality of background noise at an actor’s position, recorded to convincingly render his or her voice. A sound inspired by room tone—and amplified to an intense, dissonant whine—is the foundation of Xavier Cha’s *Untitled*, 2012, a four-channel video work installed on large flat screens that recently filled the constricted space of 47 Canal.

Moving across the screens, eighteen slightly larger-than-life-size portraits (showing the front and then the back of each individual’s head) linger for various durations, appearing one after another. Set against clinically white backdrops, Cha’s carefully selected cast, culled from an open call in Baltimore, represents a diverse range of ages, races, and genders. Their intently locked gazes meet the viewer’s (that is, the

camera’s), always revealing little to no expression. Subtle shifts in facial movements—the twitches of an eye, the curling up of a mouth’s corners, or the tightening of the brow—are all rendered in high-def precision, with any blemishes and surface details of face and hair magnified.

That the participants’ affect springs from a sense of self-awareness, a consciousness that is particular to our age of technological exhibitionism and oversaturation, becomes quickly evident. Each subject’s self-

Xavier Cha, *Untitled*, 2012, four-channel HD video, color, sound, 13 minutes 15 seconds.



awareness presages a ready and anonymous audience: someone, *somebody*, who is ready to receive his or her performed affect. Cha’s anonymous sitters contrast revealingly with the subjects of Warhol’s Screen Tests, underscoring a disparity between intimacy (Warhol filmed his friends and associates) and vacuity (Cha’s portraits reveal nothing about their subjects). Cha individually placed the performers in a small room and had each one fix his or her gaze on concentric, targetlike rings (only revealed in the exhibition’s announcement card), with the camera’s lens at the very center. The target was a focal point, a means for the person to self-regulate his or her attention and concentration while being recorded. It’s as if the participants were in an enclosed chamber with a one-way mirror, fully conscious of being viewed, though the spectator is unseen. Language enters the work only once, when a young woman says “Fox” (purportedly her name); the moment recalls the reclining woman in Chris Marker’s *La Jetée*, whose blinking eyes in that stilled photographic world provided a glimmer of sentience and life.

The noise emitting from the screens ranged from a low rumble to a piercing, high-pitched screech, evoking at moments blades being sharpened, nails on a chalkboard, and tinnitus. Musician Jonathan Coward based this room-tone-inspired sound track on his reading of Cha’s videos and each subject’s mien. The sound also brought to mind physically painful screen-related disorders, such as computer-vision syndrome (which affects 90 percent of people who stare at screens for three or more hours a day). Within the noisy and uncomfortable environment is a single constant: the continuous silence of the gaze. For Cha, the silent gaze is an aesthetic tactic, employed in *Untitled* to gently remind viewers that presence in media today is always a stand-in, an avatar. Faces as screens. Visage as veneer. Cha’s voids are an objectification of the nothing they contain.

—Lauren O’Neill-Butler