Xavier Cha:
'I'm attracted to manipulating the viewer's sense of logic, time and perception'

The multimedia artists talks about exploring the physical and psychological relationships between the human body and technology, and why the apparatus and artifice of any human pursuit in contemporary life is of interest to her

by A WILL BROWN
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Xavier Cha. *Body Drama*, 2011. Installation view, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Photograph: Sheldan C. Collins.
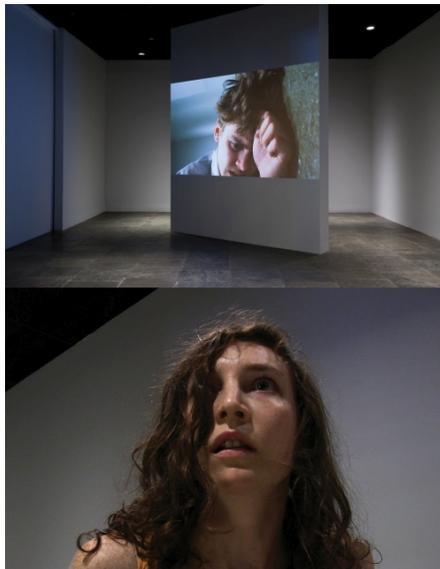
Xavier Cha. *Body Drama*, 2011. Installation view, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Photograph: Sheldan C. Collins.

Xavier Cha is a multidisciplinary artist based in Brooklyn, New York, who works in video, performance, film and installation. Her work usually combines two or more forms as a video develops from a live choreographed performance and installation, or a performance evolves from a series of videos and documentation. Cha's work is concerned chiefly with exploring the intertwined physical and psychological relationships between the human body and technology. Her work navigates notions of the personal v the universal and the private v the public, specifically in relation to the performance of personality and behaviour, which are frequently played out over internet-based social and digital media platforms.

A Will Brown: I would like to begin with Untitled 2012, your four-channel high-definition video work. Can you briefly describe the piece?

Xavier Cha: I wanted somehow to capture individuals as completely blank vessels void of any conscious organisation of the representation of their egos for the screen – the opposite of pieces in the past for which I have formalised and isolated the craft of acting as a highly sculptural/manipulative practice. I did not include the means of achieving this vacant state in the press release or in conversations surrounding the show, asking my gallery to mention only that the filming of the subjects took place while they were in a transcendental out-of-body state. Each cast volunteer was on a low dose of DMT [the hallucinogenic drug N,N-dimethyltryptamine] administered by someone who specialises in its research and use. I did not want the piece to be about DMT or drug use, I only wanted to make tangible the unsettling vacancy of various people's faces when they are unable to curate their visage.

AWB: Untitled has been written about and interpreted extensively. Do you find critics missing the point? How has your work shifted since the exhibition of that video?

XC: I do not really remember anything that was notably off the mark. I'd have to go back and read what was written, but I recall mentioned the blank, glazed stare amid technological inundation, which is certainly relevant. My latest video work, Abduct, a Frieze Film commission, produced in conjunction with the Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland, where an extended version will be exhibited for a solo show in January, deals similarly with the alienating nature of our relationship to our bodies and how emotions feel worn physically after experiencing the seamlessness of our virtual expressions.

Xavier Cha. *Clown Gala*, 2007.
Sculpture Center Winter Gala honouring
Jenny Holzer.

AWB: Using untrained participants, gathered through an open call, is a very specific decision. Why did you work this way for Untitled 2012, and why did you choose to film in Baltimore in particular?

XC: I did not want actors; I wanted "real" people who would volunteer to be filmed while in this highly dissociative state. I wanted all the faces to be anonymous – it would have felt very different if I had used volunteers from NYC where it was shown, where people might have recognised their friends etc … It would have felt too personal, rather than conveying the overwhelming emptiness I wanted to achieve.

AWB: For your newer works, and those with actors or dancers, how do you usually select these participants? Do you work with a roster of people? As a choreographer and director, you seem to inhabit a number of interdependent creative roles?

XC: When I work with actors, I usually post a casting call, go through submissions, then schedule auditions by appointment. The casting process is quite rigorous. When working with dancers, I typically work from a pool of contemporary dancers and their peer group by recommendation. For some performances, I require a very specialised skill – for example, a performance at the Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara [in October] involved a professional and experienced symphony conductor. In these cases, I seek out people who excel in their specified field, or have a unique voice.

Xavier Cha. *Clown Gala*, 2007.
Sculpture Center Winter Gala honouring
Jenny Holzer.

AWB: When did you first begin working in video and multichannel video? What are the central aspects of this medium and display style that are of interest to you?

XC: I guess in ways, I was always considering video since doing performances in graduate school. There was always the challenge of figuring out how to have the piece exist in an interesting way that makes sense as a document, does not feel too flat, and somehow captures the essence of the live experience. I think a slight disappointment in these dry, straightforward performance documentary videos led me to consider videos that felt autonomous. I believe the first time video installation I created was 8:30 AM, which stemmed from a live public performance, but was considered specifically to be a four-channel video installation.

I guess with video, I am attracted to momentarily manipulating the viewer's sense of logic, time, perception, and sense of relating to oneself and one's cultural surroundings, in a very minimal, non-dramatic way. I am attracted to playing with familiar tropes of film production and narrative structures in a perplexing non-gratifying way, preferring to remain anti-narrative and not readily granting viewers a fulfilment or pleasure in viewing.

Xavier Cha. *Fruit Machine 1*, 2012.
ICA Philadelphia; Mount Tremper Arts.

Xavier Cha. *Fruit Machine 2*, 2013.
Performance at the New Museum.

Xavier Cha. *Fruit Machine 2*, 2013.
Performance at the New Museum.

AWB: Let's go back a step to Body Drama 2011. How does that piece function in a gallery space, and how did you make it?

XC: The piece alternated between live performances by an actor wearing a body-mounted camera directed at his or her face, and video projected on to a freestanding wall that cut diagonally through the gallery. Six times a day, an actor wearing the camera rig would enter the space and act ambiguously terrified and alienated to the point of psychotic breakdown. This I asked them to achieve without indicating any specific narrative. The space became a vacuum for the object and craft of acting itself. Encased in the cyborg-like camera extremity, the actors were clearly splintered from the reality of the audience, rendering their extreme emoting of a separate order – that of filmic space.

When the uncut video captured by the body-mounted camera is projected on to the freestanding wall, the viewer encounters a large cinematic closeup of the actor's countenance filling the width of the forcefully diagonal, monolithic wall. The footage captured by this style of camera rig creates a disorienting effect, where the actor's face remains in focus while his or her surroundings are blurred – [a technique] often used in film to convey a hallucinogenic, psychologically tense, or horrifying moment. The camera's perspective of the actor's performance, captured as a single 20-minute shot, displays the internal perspective without prioritising the cinematic image as the product, or devaluing it as the document. Both the live performance and the captured video hold equal weight, neither distinguishing a true or authentic centre. Like a mould and cast with no original object, Body Drama creates an empty circuit where the referent is misplaced or elsewhere.

AWB: What is the central idea or ideas for this work, and others like it?

XC: There are a few ideas I am thinking about, one being the peculiarity of the craft of acting itself. I find acting a highly sculptural practice. For the de la Cruz Shoot, which happened just before Body Drama was shown at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 2011, to achieve two specific cinematic moments, I conducted a live film shoot that was open to the public and functioned as an installation in the De La Cruz Collection Contemporary Art Space in Miami. Something shifts energetically in the entire room once the camera rolls and the actors move into character. This shift in the actor's focus is able to mould and manipulate the surroundings. This objectification or use of "acting" as material was central to Body Drama and other works that involve a formalisation of this psychic manipulation of space through acting, performance or language.

Another idea central to Body Drama is the dimension and displaced/privileged perspective of the camera, and how the presence of this vantage point affects our relationship to time, space and representation and curation of self, affecting our overall relationship to reality.

AWB: Are you familiar with Daria Martin, and in particular her film Soft Materials from 2005? I see some nice resonance between your work and hers, in particular the relationships between choreography, apparatus, dancer and setting.

XC: I am familiar with some of her work, but have not seen Soft Materials. I tried, unsuccessfully, to find it online but did see images – it looks amazing.

AWB: Soft Materials was shot in the artificial intelligence lab at the University of Zurich, where scientists are researching embodied artificial intelligence. The film, shot in 16mm in the style of an essay film, documents a series of interactions between two nude dancers and robots that are learning their AI protocols, their programming, through interaction, mimicry and experience with physical human bodies. The machines learn about the world and their own AI through touch. Pretty amazing, and I definitely see an interesting association with your own work, particularly the relationship between apparatus and human, and the ways behaviour is modified and documented across both sets of experiences. How do you see your work affecting not only the performer and the content, but also the apparatus, the camera specifically?

Xavier Cha. *Portal*, 2010.
In collaboration with Danny Johnston

XC: That sounds fascinating. In a past performance, Portal (2010), I worked with a contemporary dancer, Danny Johnston, to choreograph a very balletic movement piece, with very slow controlled and fluid movements, jumps and elegant leaps. A Steadicam operator was hired to document the piece. Generally, during performances, the audience is trained to mentally edit out the presence of the camera, but in this case, the cyborg-like Steadicam operator became integrated into the movement, like a strange duet, and the movement / behaviour of the camera apparatus was dictated by the virtuosic movement of the performer.

I don't have lofty aspirations to affect the evolution of technology through performance – that may be beyond my scope. But it is curious to think about the cyclical back-and-forth development of technology and human behaviour, for instance the behaviour of taking selfies, then the inclusion of front-facing cameras on all cell phones. It's interesting how psychology affects tech development, and subsequently a more fluid immersion and communion with this development mutates our psychology, and so on and so forth. The chicken or the egg dilemma – it's kind of disturbing when you think about it.

AWB: Your exhibition Front Room: Two-Way Mirror (2010) at the Contemporary Art Museum St Louis, looks as if it was fascinating – incredibly performative and somehow minimally spare, yet based on a self-aware voyeurism. How does voyeurism, observation and the revelation of both your working methods and the apparatus of the camera or device of observation play into your work overall? I am thinking here of [the German film-maker] Harun Farocki and his constant awareness of the device and ability to make the viewer aware of, yet not solely and unaesthetically focused on, the apparatus of control and observation.

XC: The performance of Two-Way Mirror was performed twice before St Louis. The original version was performed during a sculpture centre gala and then a more focused version was performed during a solo show entitled Third I in 2009 at the Taxter & Spengemann Gallery in New York.

In the context of Third I, I was thinking about a vast loneliness in the development and untangling of subjectivities, of the (often desperate) search for a strain of clarity within the nebulous and duplicitous constellation of who we can be. This performance was paired with photographs of spa treatments superimposed with Nasa satellite images of Saturn and its moons, and a looped video of continuous applause from the audience at the Palais Garnier in Paris. I chose professional clowns because clowning is a studied art form; clowns practise and develop a signature style and expertise – like any other creative practice. What you witness is an intense focus and skilled transformation, which is an odd example of voyeurism, one of curiosity of an unfamiliar specialised skill rather than the typical objectification or fetishisation involved in voyeurism.

I think Farocki's work is brilliant. The apparatus and artifice of any human pursuit in contemporary life is of interest to me – the levels of delusion and false sense of agency we have as we struggle to find a way out of the loop, moments of transcendence, to feel for fleeting moments a sense of what is real, meaningful, valuable, or powerful.

AWB: What I am finding so difficult, or interesting, in our current moment, in thinking about the apparatuses that surround us, is their interconnectedness – the non-distinctions between phone, computer, television, car, radio, internet, etc. It's simultaneously exciting and confounding. The internet is like electricity, flowing through every wall and corner of our lives – what an incredible thing. It's almost, quite simply, a moment of not knowing what to be wary of, if not everything. What do you think?

XC: It is disturbing that what I am so completely reliant on to function is controlled, biased, monitored, purchased and sold. I am wary that reality is pretty much an inescapable living advertisement. The fact that I don't know code, that I don't know how to hack, makes me feel illiterate, incompetent and inferior in many ways, manipulated and programmable. I suppose that's why I feel art and physicality (my physical practices are a very important aspect of my life) are so vital to my freedom, to my self-expression, as capable of existing outside of logic and pre-determined pathways.

AWB: What is it about clowns that are so endearing and enduringly troubling? Why did you work with the idea of the clown and in particular the process of transformation into a clown for that exhibition?

XC: I think the hyperbole of emotion, stylisation and the uncertainty of who is being ridiculed is uncomfortable. The fool or jester whose role is to entertain does so self-consciously and often through means of subversion. Originally, I had three two-way mirrors set up around the periphery of the sculpture centre gala and plainly dressed clowns would walk up to the mirrors, meticulously transform while donors and trustees dined, then aimlessly wander around while a new set of clowns transformed – there were nine clowns in total. The discomfort of this forced voyeurism, and the resulting spectacle of the clowns uselessly wandering around the seated tables felt somehow appropriate to the event of a fundraising gala. For the next iterations, at Taxter & Spengemann and the Contemporary Art Museum St Louis, the clown was chosen because of the professionalism and formal methodology of clown makeup application, custom costumes, etc, and in relation to the underlying ideas behind Third I, to demonstrate our individual pursuits to discover our most elevated or enlightened "I".

AWB: For Surveil 2014, at the Kunsthalle in Dusseldorf, how specifically did you translate the idea of online user behaviour into specific physical movements for your performers to enact? How minute were the behavioural differences and charted actions? Did you have to create a catalogue of 10 or 50 gestures and choreographic moves?

Xavier Cha. *Surveil*, 2014.

XC: For Surveil, the online user data was transposed very specifically into a choreographic score. The dancers' movements represented in real time the content and navigation of the user under surveillance, by seconds. The software simultaneously records the user's screen and the user's face through their computer's webcam, creating two separate video files with internal and external audio. I selected segments from different users and created a spreadsheet of their activity. For example at 2 minutes 15 seconds, a user opens a new tab and visits Facebook, then at 2 minutes 35 seconds switches between open tabs to the New York Times, scrolls, then switches tabs again back to Facebook at 2 minutes 50 seconds. We developed different movement phrases to represent different sites visited, such as Facebook, or news sites, shopping, Twitter and email, then created different rules for navigation actions – opening a new tab is kicking up into a handstand, switching between open tabs is a jump, scrolling effects the speed of the movement, etc. The choreography was quite complicated to learn and get in the dancers' bodies.

AWB: The process seems as if it could be quite scientific, exact and mathematical from the outside, yet I imagine there is a great deal of subjective decision-making involved. Would you agree?

XC: As far as developing the different languages of choreography representing various web content, this was subjective and created in the beginning through an improvisational process before firming up each phrase of movement. Then, in sections where a user stays on the same site for a while, the dancer can improvise within the set choreographed phrase representing that data.

AWB: In making works such as Surveil, how has your understanding of computers, the internet and technology   changed? Observing and charting behaviours that are so freshly part of our behavioural vernacular and presence seems like a difficult and exciting idea and task?

XC: The most interesting part of the surveillance was seeing how everyone has a very specific "style" of using the internet. This felt almost as distinctive and representative of the user as a way of speaking or walking. This was something that no one else can really replicate. It wasn't necessarily the sites visited or information searched that set people apart, it was little things like how they would open links in new tabs and not ever switch to that tab, or highlighting information and pasting into notes, or listening to the audio of one tab while viewing the content of another, the way people close, open or switch between tabs.

AWB: I am fascinated and still a bit perplexed by both Fruit Machine 1 (2012)and Fruit Machine 2. Could you explain the works? The ideas of translation and the losses and gains in understanding and conveyance across varying subjectivities or sensory observations – blindness, deafness – is clear and amazing to watch unfold throughout the performance and video. Where did the idea develop for you, and will this work have a third iteration?

XC: Well, the original fruit machine was named that because slot machines are called fruit machines in the UK, and the digital application developed to randomly assign the actors to set roles was designed based on the slots. Fruit Machine (2012) formalises and empties narrative from otherwise hyperbolic theatrical expression. Four actors are assigned a graphic fruit worn on the back of large white T-shirt. A digital application developed for the piece is based on the function and appearance of a slot machine that projects on the wall behind the actors. The app spins at random every minute, resetting the four corresponding fruits within four slots for a duration of 32 minutes. Each slot represents four set roles performed from stage left to stage right. With each spin, the order the fruit shapes fall determines which role the actors must play.

Xavier Cha. *Ring*. 2010.
Courtesy of The Kitchen's Archive.

The four roles range from passive to melodramatic, so the actors must be prepared to switch from extremes of expression within seconds of each spin of the fruit machine. The chance element negates the over-the-top theatricality of the performances and abstracts the gestures into randomly set roles. The frequent and regular spins of the fruit machine app create a psychotic scene within the parameters of a very logical and orderly structure. Again, acting is isolated as a formal element, rather than used to manufacture a specific narrative or emotional response.

Fruit Machine 2 is quite a departure from Fruit Machine 1, with the exception of the abstracted gameshow format, and the random selection created an element of chance. I wanted Fruit Machine 2 to have a slight dystopian future gameshow vibe. The costumes are designed by Eckhaus Latta, and I discussed with them a uniform that felt slightly sci-fi civilian/prisoner for the contestants, the MC's uniform having an aristocratic flare, and the MC's translator having a servant or assistant class distinction – like in films such as The Hunger Games, or The Island.

The idea stemmed from thinking about sign language and sign language interpreters – how they must not only translate the meaning of what is signed, but also the manner or tone in which it is being expressed, which is fascinating to me – accents and cultural backgrounds as expressed in physical translation. Therefore, I was curious to see how language would translate across different sensory registers, personal experiences and background, and even subconscious influences on how language is understood, interpreted and expressed. It was interesting how, in some rounds, the phrase would pass through a significant departure, but then end up very similar to the original phrase again after passing through a few more contestants' translations. Somehow, the psychic essence, and the texture or character of the phrase, was retained. Language channelled and performed through various subjectivities became the fruit machine. I honestly have not thought about a Fruit Machine 3, but I am definitely open to the possibility. Could be fun to evolve the game and take it to another level.

AWB: If we could imagine the next level, what would the rough outline be for a Fruit Machine 3? Would there be a new goal in mind, or a new idea to interrogate? Is working in series something you think about? You could, theoretically, keep doing Fruit Machine's in ever-evolving perpetuity, which could be quite interesting, or perhaps limiting?

XC: A sequel hasn't presented itself to me yet. But I feel it would have more to do with a kind of interaction rather than chain of language. Like some kind of very stripped down and abstracted dating situation, where the fruit machine somehow randomly matches people, or there could be the swipe right or left function, like Tinder or something. I really don't know.
I don't generally think about working in series. But I am interested in how a piece can continue and still provide insight over time, like Surveil, which could potentially be restaged as long as people are using the internet. It could be interesting to see how web content changes and navigational behaviour evolves with each new batch of volunteers. It also differs regionally.

AWB: What are you working on now?

XC: I have just finished the Frieze Film commission in partnership with Channel 4's Random Acts [which premiered at Frieze London in October]. A longer edit will be the content of a solo exhibit at Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland opening in January 2016. I had a performance in October at the Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara involving a professional symphony conductor conducting a piece of music without the orchestra present. This month, I have a solo show at 47 Canal Gallery, which is an ongoing live performance. I am doing a performance for Art Basel in Miami Beach public sector in December. It has been a very busy and exciting time!

AWB: In either your work or other artists' work, what are some of the most compelling ideas you see emerging?

XC: I do not know what are the most compelling, but I do see a trend in revisiting or addressing the body or a human position amidst virtual and technological hyperspeed. I think we are in an awkward phase, like a teenager, when it comes to how we relate to the cumbersome limitations of our physical bodies, when technology and the potentiality of our virtual lives feel so infinite, and boundary-less. I think this can leave many in an uncomfortable and confusing state of crisis, psychosis or despair when learning to manage multiple states of being, when left facing the vulnerability of our physical presence, our human faces and bodies, which age, and betray emotions and contradictions that were easily concealed digitally.

AWB: Have you seen any great exhibitions or projects recently that were important for you?

XC: Pierre Huyghe's film Human Mask is one of the best things I've seen in a long time, I'm still processing it, even though I saw it earlier this year. Not many works stay with me that way.

Xavier Cha: Abduct will be at the Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland, 29 January – 8 May 2016.