

Art in America

APRIL 2013

XAVIER CHA

47 Canal

Xavier Cha is a young New York-based artist who has garnered attention for works involving live performance. For her 2011 installation *Body Drama* at the Whitney Museum, Cha employed actors to perform states of anguish while a body-mounted camera captured each wearer's face in close-up; the recordings were then played back following each making. But in Cha's recent solo presentation, the action has moved completely into the apparatus.

The show consisted of a single work: a four-channel untitled video (2012) displayed on four flat-screen televisions, spaced evenly around the walls. Each monitor played a series of "portraits," brief segments featuring a single shot of a face filmed against a white background. Each face was accompanied by its own soundtrack, consisting of low hums and buzzes created by sound engineer Jonathan Coward. The same faces appeared at intervals on different screens, so that they seemed to jump around the room.

The subjects usually stared directly into the camera, rarely blinking. Their blank stares have been related by some critics to the slack-jawed look of today's computer user, mesmerized by any number of possible distractions or engrossed in large quantities of information. If the work records an interaction between subject and machine, there is an utter lack of distinction at the level of affect between boredom and interest. When Cha presents an image of the back of a head without explanation, the result is both frustrating and unsettling, although also subtle enough to pass by without comment. In another instance, a woman, whose disheveled hair and glassy eyes cue associations like "strung-out," speaks



the word "fox." This is the only word uttered, and it comes as a shock even though it lacks any meaningful message. These disruptions to the standard format of the work do not serve to distinguish their subjects, but instead help to establish the work's status quo of non-incident.

That nothing much happens seems to be the point. Cha has referred to her performers here as "empty vessels," and in appearance, they are both anonymous and familiar. They are all relatively young, healthy and attractive, although their skin color and gender vary. They were all filmed in Baltimore, where Cha cast the piece with Coward's help in order to find "a diverse spectrum of anonymous faces," according to the gallery. Instead of the professionals that Cha has worked with in the past, here she chose non-actors who were filmed while in the midst of what she calls "an out-of-body experience," although she has not elaborated on how this state was achieved. More significantly, whatever each figure experienced while being filmed remains completely opaque to the viewer.

In a printed e-mail exchange between the artist and her gallerist that serves as the show's press release, Cha points to a psychic dimension emerging from the contemporary entanglement of bodies and machines. She describes contemporary technological society as "a schizophrenic state of psychotic simultaneity." The phrase is suggestive, and aligns Cha's concerns with those of other young artists like Ryan Trecartin and Frances Stark. But the unspeaking portraits also have an obvious and compelling connection to Andy Warhol's "Screen Tests," which established the genre of the filmic portrait in the mid-1960s. Where the "Screen Tests" recorded the very process of becoming an image, and Warhol's subjects sometimes seem to come undone in front of the camera, Cha's contemporary analog suggests how frictionless that process has become.

—Megan Heuer

Xavier Cha:
Untitled, 2012,
four-channel video,
approx. 13 minutes;
at 47 Canal.

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

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

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-



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