

XAVIER

CHA

BODY

DRAMA

Whitney Museum of American Art

Though she works in the genre of performance art, Xavier Cha is best described as a composer of situations: she imposes certain conditions and then invites performers to act within these parameters. For Body Drama (2011), these include the architecture of the Whitney's Lobby Gallery and an exhibition cycle that alternates between live performance and projected video. Several times each day throughout the run of the show, an actor performs in the gallery while wearing a body-mounted video camera trained on his or her face. Cha has instructed the actor to communicate emotions provoked by exploring a terrifyingly unknowable environment, using only facial expressions and physical movement. Between performances, the footage from the body-mounted camera is projected onto a freestanding diagonal wall in the gallery, offering an alternative, cinematic view of the actor's performance.

Working in the legacy of artists such as Dan Graham and Bruce Nauman, here Cha adopts performance, video, and installation as tools with which to speak to broad ideas about subjectivity, perception, and spectatorship. Like these artists, Cha uses the properties of stage performance and video delay to create formally defined spaces and activate the imagination of the viewer.

Body Drama continues her interest in illuminating how our physical surroundings and social conventions guide the ways in which we regard and interact with others and our environment.

Cha's earliest works explored the boundaries of public and private space. For topiary tags (2003), her first public work, she sheared her name into

topiary tags, 2003.
Performance
(Los Angeles, April–
May 2003)





hedgerows in affluent areas of Los Angeles, leaving a transient yet culturally transgressive “tag” on the leafy facades that shield private homes from the street. Cha selected only hedges that appeared to be maintained by hired workers, drawing attention to their constant, invisible labors as well as the economic disparity between those who live behind the facade and those who tend it. The following year, Cha presented Looking Glass (2004) in a group show at Peres Projects, Los Angeles. For this work, Cha engaged a dancer to periodically perform outside the gallery, accompanied by a boom box and using the storefront window as a mirror. The dancer, absorbed in his reflection, appeared oblivious to the scene and spectators inside the gallery and on the street around him.

Looking Glass, 2004. Performance with dancer (Peres Projects, Los Angeles, And if you think you see with just your eyes you are mad, September 18–October 23, 2004)



As physical barriers, hedges and storefront windows are at once fraught with social implications and rich with possibility. Each demarcates the public sphere from private space; by transforming these facades into sites for performance, Cha highlighted the boundaries they establish while subtly subverting their function. At the same time, both works drew out an innate identity hidden within the material properties of the surfaces, revealing the shrubs as a sculptural medium and casting the window as a looking glass.

Looking Glass, 2004. Performance with dancer (Peres Projects, Los Angeles, And if you think you see with just your eyes you are mad, September 18–October 23, 2004)

As it addressed concepts of inside and outside in territorial terms, Looking Glass also played with the psychological interior of the audience and their suppositions about the performer. The dancer’s position facing the storefront did not



invite spectators in a conventionally performance-oriented way. Rather, watching the performance was like accidentally catching someone scrutinize his appearance in a street-side window, compelling viewers to perceive themselves in the role of voyeur. Cha further developed the idea of exposing an interior moment for public consumption with Two-Way Mirror (2009), for which she invited professional clowns to arrive at a gallery in street clothes and don their makeup and costumes in front of a large two-way mirror. The performer's quiet interaction with his or her reflection presented a private experience in an incongruous, very public context, making the audience privy to a transformation usually hidden from view: the creation of the performer's persona.

Cha's work has most recently taken up the technical trappings and formal language of film production, teasing out the privileged vantage points and simulated spaces intrinsic to theater and film. In the 2010 performance Portal, Cha engaged a dancer and a technician wearing a Steadicam, a stabilizing camera apparatus, to perform a type of duet. The cameraman circled the dancer, carefully documenting the choreographed movements. The performance, however, reversed the standard dynamic of filmmaking: rather than editing the Steadicam operator's presence out of the work and screening the resulting footage, Cha made him a protagonist of the artwork, instead withholding his footage from the audience. For Auditions, a 2011 performance at the de la Cruz Collection in Miami, Cha issued a casting call and instructed auditioning actors to interpret three

Two-Way Mirror, 2009. Performance with clown and two-way mirror (Taxter & Spengemann, New York, Third L, February 28–March 28, 2009)

Two-Way Mirror, 2009. Performance with clown and two-way mirror (Taxter & Spengemann, New York, Third L, February 28–March 28, 2009)

Portal, 2010. Performance with dancer and Steadicam operator (Vox Populi, Philadelphia, December 3, 2010)



Video still from audition for [Body Drama](#), May 21, 2011



emotionally specific but situationally generic cinematic scenes, such as staring into a mirror while expressing confusion, doubt, and fear. The scenes were filmed using formalized camera angles familiar from classic and popular movies, such as one in which the camera spiraled around the actor on a circular dolly track. Each scene depended on the actor conveying complex emotions without words. The resulting performances seemed at once highly personal and completely imitative. Cha is especially intrigued by this melding of emotion and mimesis, and the ways that actors project this hybrid mental space onto their environment.

Auditions, 2011. Performance with actors (de la Cruz Collection Contemporary Art Space, Miami, February 12, 2011)



Body Drama, Cha's newest work, extends her interest in the psychological dimension of acting and film production. For the first time, she investigates the perceptual qualities of video feedback by displaying the footage from a performance in the same space where it took place, offering two versions of a single experience which are never witnessed at the same time. During the live performance, the tension of watching an actor projecting his or her intense emotional experience is accentuated by the cyborg-like camera rig that encases and accompanies the actor. The performance provokes a sense of alienation on multiple levels. Emotionally, the actor seems to be exploring an entirely different environment from that of the viewer; physically, the camera rig ensures a material distance from the viewer. During the periods of video projection, the actor's countenance offers a psychological portrait disconnected from the actor's physical movement through the gallery. Viewers are confronted by

Auditions, 2011. Performance with actors (de la Cruz Collection Contemporary Art Space, Miami, February 12, 2011)



a disorienting perspective of the space that is nearly impossible to reconcile with their own position in the gallery.

Despite the use of actors and scheduled scenes, Body Drama does not present a typical performance structure: there is no climax and it does not begin or end with each cycle. Rather, Cha conceived the pendulum-like shift between live and recorded experience as a condition of the room. The tone of Body Drama is inspired in part by choreographer Yvonne Rainer's signature dance Trio A (1965), in which narrative is stripped away in favor of continuous, unpredictable movement. Neither the performance nor the projection is to be valued more than the other, as neither offers a complete picture: the camera's point of view is inaccessible to the viewer during the live performance just as the actor's physical presence is absent when the video is shown. Both experiences compel the viewer to mentally construct the alternate perspective, imagining either the footage being recorded or the recent performance. Throughout, the viewer is left with a sense of mysterious lack. Cha has noted that Body Drama "creates an empty circuit—the referent is always misplaced or elsewhere."

Body Drama builds on a thread running through Cha's work since the topiary graffiti: probing the boundaries between public and private on physical and psychological levels. While she has focused these explorations on encounters between performer and audience, Cha draws connections to broader experiences. She invites clowns, dancers, and actors into her works to reveal the ways



Video stills from audition for Body Drama, May 21, 2011

that provocation and artifice are inherent to performance, perception, and social interaction in general. To expand on this idea, Cha has increasingly used cameras to reference deferred access and to suggest, in the artist's words, "simultaneous realms." With Body Drama, she has created a situation that reflects fractured contemporary life, in which virtual interaction via social media and a seemingly infinite flow of information, mediated through myriad screens and channels, continually offer portals into previously inaccessible viewpoints. Body Drama disorients us because it feeds into the conflict between our powerful instinct to understand the world more fully through multiple perspectives and the anxiety produced by the constant stream of options. Cha demonstrates that, paradoxically, this proliferation of viewpoints creates an experience in which there is no center, as no single view can encompass the full encounter.

Diana Kamin
Senior Curatorial Assistant

Born in Los Angeles in 1980, Xavier Cha currently lives and works in New York. She received her BFA from the Rhode Island School of Design in 2002 and her MFA from the University of California, Los Angeles, in 2004. In addition to her 2010 exhibition at the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, Cha's performance-based work has been shown in solo exhibitions at Taxter & Spengemann in New York: Third I (2009), VoiceDoor (2008), and Holiday Cruise! (2006). Her work has been featured in several group exhibitions, including The Absolutely Other (2010), at the Kitchen, New York; Convention (2009) at the Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami; and In Practice (2006), at the SculptureCenter, Long Island City, New York.

Xavier Cha: Body Drama is on view in the Anne and Joel Ehrenkranz Gallery June 30–September 2011.

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Performances occur every hour
on the hour, starting at 12 pm on
Wednesday, Thursday, Saturday,
and Sunday, and at 3 pm on Friday.

For a list of participating
actors, please visit [whitney.org/
Exhibitions/XavierCha](http://whitney.org/Exhibitions/XavierCha).

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