FROM INSIDE

Xavier Cha works in performance, video, and multimedia installation, always with a human focus. In various forms—live and recorded, choreographed and chaotic—her projects concern the ever-evolving ways in which we compose and communicate our selves. Actors and dancers are among her favorite subjects, as she often looks closely at the body's training, the languages and skills it can learn.[1] Directed through abstract and illogical scenarios, her performers are reduced in disarming ways, made strange to themselves and to others. These encounters can be pleasurable, unnerving, and disorientating. They make you feel things in your own body: a tensing or quickening of the pulse, a heightened awareness of your surroundings, and how you might appear—or disappear. An abiding sense of how absurd it is to navigate the world inside such a peculiar, fleshy container.

In abduct (2015), Cha pushes these investigations into cinematic territory, exploring the ways in which our minds, bodies, and images are "taken." Opening with a soft haze, a young man comes into view, clothed in white undergarments and standing in a brightly lit plastic chamber. He appears euphoric but also seems confused by his pleasure; the subtle movements of his eyes and mouth softly impart relief and terror. A total of seven men and women are successively pictured in this ambiguous space, all with intense, conflicting emotions passing through them. These feelings "are like foreign agents battling for dominance over the vessel of the face," at times thrown off with a shudder, at others slowly dissipating.[2] Studies in cognitive science have shown that reading the facial cues of others automatically triggers bodily responses that "operate at multiple levels, some of them below the level of any kind of awareness."[3] As viewers track the ambiguous expressions in abduct, mirror neurons flash-flash-flash, but the signals are shorted, crossed.[4] With no clear, genuine expression to hold onto, and a complete lack of context or narrative, empathy is denied, and the actors become distinctly other.

Many of Cha's past works have featured emotions in a similar way: constructed and compressed. In Fruit Machine (2012), four actors donned t-shirts with different symbols (grapes, banana,

cherry, corn) and stood in a row, their order determined by a spinning slot machine reel projected on the wall above. Each position on the line designated a different emotional state (two complacent, two hyperbolic). Undergoing radical shifts with each spin, the actors were subject to a system that created an increasingly manic atmosphere through its own "logic." A dictation of mood also occurred in Feedback (2015), unified among a larger group of actors seated on bleachers in an empty room. Over the course of 15 minutes, they careen through a score of expressions, from stone-faced to joyous to bored to enraged. Viewers are alternately caught up in these infectious states or ruthlessly assailed by them. In the press release, Cha quoted from a Wikipedia article on animal echolocation, accompanied by her own Instagram selfie captioned "another day, another #mask bounding off immaterial walls reflecting distances and velocities in non-space."[5] How is call and response used to locate ourselves virtually?

In their psychotic pacing, these works speak to the synchronization of feelings via entertainment and online platforms—waves of mob mentality that seem to be getting stronger and more forceful.[6] The term "emotional contagion" is used to describe how people tend to reflect each other's moods; this implies that emotions are corrupting, "viral."[7] In abduct, such connotations are stressed by the spare, clinical set, as if these bodies are under quarantine. In Fruit Machine and Feedback, expression is determined by external factors (rules, signals, and cues); in abduct, the outward signs of authority (isolation, exposure) serve only to emphasize the uncontrollability of the forces moving within.

Some of the most ominous and unsettling aspects of abduct are relayed via the camera itself. It studies these humans hawkishly: circling them, languidly eyeing their torsos, diving at their faces. Well-versed in the shot tropes of sci-fi and horror films, Cha uses them to heighten a sense of fracture and distress. Because the actors' emotions are so difficult to associate with, viewers

8

might find themselves identifying instead with the mechanical gaze and feeling its power. Cha has often deployed the camera as an active agent in her work, highlighting the ways in which it can manipulate moods and alter human behavior. In 8:30 AM (2005), four couples met on different corners of a busy Manhattan intersection every morning for one workweek, each locking in a passionate ten-minute embrace. The performance was recorded by cameras spinning around the pairs in a familiar cinematic technique meant to evoke the joyous absorption of the lovers; here, redundant and prolonged, it creates an uneasy sense of confinement. A tightly packed mob of photographers roamed around a gallery in Ring (2010), incessantly clicking and flashing. The paparazzi-like formation implied something of a hunt, closing in on celebrity/prey, but the markedly absent subject left a vacuum filled with a circular exchange: people "paying attention to people paying attention."[8] Cameras elicit instinctual responses, and while some of those manners become overstated, others are much more unconsciously assumed. It's one thing to pose for a portrait, your body and face contorted into the most attractive configuration—it's another to glance up at your laptop's webcam and feel a sudden flush of self-consciousness and a lingering sense of trespass. Without yet being physically implanted in our bodies and brains, the camera is already a part of them.

Cha gave brutal form to this integration in Body Drama (2011), where the camera became a cyborg-like appendage, strapped to the bodies of actors and trained on their faces as they entered states of extreme confusion and panic.[9] Between live performances, recorded video was projected on a floating wall bisecting the gallery, the blown-up actors held in closely cropped frames with swirling backgrounds and lurching perpendiculars. Even when they were in the room, the actors

9

in Body Drama occupied a separate filmic space established by the camera's punishing gaze, which seemed to intensify their breakdowns. In stark contrast, the overly serene subjects in Cha's untitled (2012) four-channel video installation hold this different space within themselves. The participants, not professional actors in this case, were filmed from the front and back while experiencing an induced out-of-body state. Unnerving in their lack of focus, the men and women stare blankly ahead, giving no defining clues to their interior conditions.[10] While a camera usually prompts people to become highly conscious of their self-presentation, here that learned response was rendered impossible, and the faces become impassively hyper-sculptural.

In Disembodied Selfie (2013) Cha facilitated a similar state of mind, this time on the move as the participant roamed the Lyon Biennial armed with a smartphone. He broadcast a flow of images online—un-composed shots, dick pics, blurred disarray—attempting to situate himself in space, to establish some connection or cultural validity.[11] In a text that Cha wrote to

10

accompany the piece, this trip becomes an ambling, existential journey, with the camera both solidifying and dissipating the individual:

> Capture this non-particular self. Reconstitute into units of light and color. Here you see I am the same. Merged amidst colors and brightness levels I am one. Just a dumb face that fills him with feeling. A self-reflexive narrative, floating in this mattified cloud, captured in this self-conscious image. Transform into representation—where am I in this?[12]

It ends with a declaration of validation-via-visibility: "Seen, my selfie enters bodies and I anxiously become."[13] Pics or you didn't happen.

As we navigate the growing disparity between expanding virtual realms and our limiting physical bodies, the face becomes increasingly fraught, a representation of who we "are," but one that seems to be increasingly less assuring. Asserting the primacy of the face in our contemporary moment, cultural theorist Anna Munster describes this apprehension:

> We do not dismantle the face via multiplication of the media; we only create an endless wall of faciality to bounce along. Here we are, trapped in the psychosis of the digital makeover, which denies its relation to the organic but desperately solicits the human face to "communicate," to engage, to permit expressivity. Here we are, balancing precariously between the before and after face, the human and technologically reconstituted face.[14]

Headshots from abduct actors. Left: Aurelien Gaya, photo: Katherine, Hollywood, LA. Right: Summer Bills, photo: Emily Lambert.

Modular cleanroom. Courtesy of Terra Universal.

Xavier Cha, abduct production still, 2015. Photo: Alex Gvojic.

Drama and literary critic Lionel Trilling suggested that in the theater, the spectator "contracts by infection the characteristic disease of the actor, the attenuation of selfhood that results from impersonation."[15] This affliction might spread across all apparatus of hyper-visibility and self-presentation; as we craft different versions of ourselves, it becomes more difficult to recognize a stable center. But perhaps this only reveals that the cohesive "individual" was an illusion all along, a construct that we operate under. The body has always been a fluctuating sum of parts—cellular, microbial, chemical, and technological. As these components, and their interconnected functions, become more studied and manipulated, this understanding "not only makes our bodies more machine-like, it also makes them seem more like packs of animals."[16] The body at the center of Cha's investigations is not a symbol but an evolving system, a turbulent network of psycho-, social-, and physiological structures. In abduct we see this wildness unleashed, but we also look closely at the mechanisms for its sublimation and restraint. At the movies, our eyes blink in unison.[17]

1.   Drawn to highly physical pursuits, Cha has also collaborated with costumed entertainers (Clown Gala, 2007), opera singers (Voicedoor, 2008), and athletes (supreme ultimate exercise, 2015).

2.   Xavier Cha, email to the author, September 7, 2015.

3.   Rhonda Blair, "Cognitive Neuroscience and Acting: Imagination, Conceptual Blending, and Empathy," The Drama Review 53, no. 4 (Winter 2009), 100.

4.   "The discovery of mirror neurons in monkeys and related mirroring mechanisms in humans has shown how we can experience empathy with others automatically, without consciously having to reconstruct the person's state of mind." Roger F. Cook, "Embodied simulation, empathy and social cognition: Berlin School lessons for film theory," Screen 56, no. 2 (Summer 2015), 161.

5.   Xavier Cha, Feedback press release, 47 Canal, November 2015.

6.   In Dave Eggers's 2013 novel The Circle, social-emotional infection reaches a fever pitch in a not-too-distant future, leading to the death of a character hounded by user-controlled drones. Yet one need not look to fiction for increasingly frequent examples of violence and death resulting from unchecked digital wildfire.

7.   Studies examining the emotional impacts of online media consumption are in a nascent stage; meanwhile, social media sites have begun to analyze their users' data, and, in the case of Facebook, to conduct experiments. See Robinson Meyer, "Everything We Know About Facebook's Secret Mood Manipulation Experiment," The Atlantic online, June 28, 2014.

8.   Xavier Cha, "Xavier Cha Speaks with Aspect Ratio," Xavier Cha: Hourglass (Chicago: Aspect/Ratio, 2013), unpaginated.

9.   At times Cha has done this very poetically, as in Portal (2010), where she worked with dancer Danny Johnston to choreograph a piece performed with a Steadicam operator. The dancer's slow, controlled movements and graceful leaps echoed the fluid motions of the equipment in a responsive duet.

10.   Participants were given a low dose of DMT (N,N-Dimethyltryptamine) administered by someone who specializes in its research and use. This information was not readily available to viewers as the drug itself was not the subject of the work, rather, the state it induced.

11.   "Xavier Cha | Disembodied Selfie," DIS magazine online, n.d.

12.   Xavier Cha, "Disembodied Selfie," 2013, PDF, 5.

13.   Ibid., 6.

14.   Anna Munster, materializing new media: embodiment in information aesthetics (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 2006), 130.

15.   Lionel Trilling, Sincerity and Authenticity (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 64.

16.   Andrew Murphie and John Potts, Culture and Technology (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 129.

17.   Tamami Nakano et al., "Synchronization of spontaneous eyeblinks while viewing video stories," Proceedings of the Royal Society, published online July 29, 2009.