

## CROWD CONTROL: XAVIER CHA CHANNELS UNSEEN FORCES AT 47 CANAL

BY *Andrew Russeth* POSTED 11/12/15 6:11 PM



Before the start of Xavier Cha's performance, *Feedback* (2015), at 47 Canal.

Let's begin with a warning.

If you are going to be able to see Xavier Cha's current show in New York at 47 Canal—a five-day affair that closes this Sunday, November 15—it would be best to stop reading right now. The exhibition consists of just one work, a formidable, vertiginously thrilling performance, and while I think it is potent enough to work its magic even on those who have read spoilers, I hate to risk diminishing the experience. So head to the gallery. You will regret missing it.

And now, a brief review.

When I popped by the gallery yesterday a few minutes before 4 P.M., a handful of attractive, casually dressed young people were sitting on a modestly sized metal bleacher—the type you might find in a middle-school gym—in the center of the room.



The clock.

The gallery had announced that performances begin at the top of each hour, from 1 P.M. to 5 P.M., and as 4 P.M. neared, more and more people wandered out of a side room, taking up positions on the bleacher. A few stretched, and some chatted quietly. About half a minute before the start, 16 had gathered on the long seats, waiting. Something felt off. It took me a moment, but I realized they were all glancing occasionally at something on the white wall across from them—a digital clock with red numbers near the ceiling. Only one other audience member (I assumed he was an audience member) was in the room with me. We waited together.

As the clock clicked to 4:00 P.M., all 16 people suddenly fell silent, straightened their backs, and stared straight ahead, not moving. The room felt utterly, soothingly still. I began to imagine a lengthy meditation session, a live version of the videos that Cha showed in her 2012 to 2013 outing at 47 Canal, which were close-up portraits of people as they tripped on Salvia and DMT.

But then, exactly 30 seconds after 4 P.M., all hell broke loose.

The performers started screaming and cheering. They leapt out of their seats and hugged like they had just won the lottery, like their underdog football team had just won the championship game, like the Beatles were playing on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. It grew to be painfully loud, the performers egging each other on, the sounds ricocheting off the walls of the room, but it was also exhilarating. I realized after a few moments that I was laughing uncontrollably, caught up in the tide of emotion. The other guy in the room was too.

And then, after about 30 seconds, they suddenly stopped screaming and let out soft, halting, pained oos, like they had witnessed something fairly bad or embarrassing beyond the blank wall in front of them. But then they applauded, relieved. The mood in the room brightened—catharsis!—and they let out the sort of *awws* one makes when seeing a little puppy or a newborn baby. It was now 4:02 P.M.



The performance.

A man came through the gallery door, took off his jacket, and walked up onto the bleachers so gamely that I at first assumed he was part of the performance, but rather than participate in the action he just recorded some video as the mayhem continued, the performers careening from horrified, shocked gasps to adoring guffaws to roaring applause. A few times they fell silent, all still again.

After a few minutes that guy left. I still don't know if he was a choreographed part of the piece, but I feel safe saying that those photos and videos will not be able to convey even a trace of the giddy, topsy-turvy excitement that Cha's work induces on the body and the psyche.

Pretty soon the crowd on the bleachers was booing with unmitigated rage and laughing with rank disgust, and at those moments the work induced darker feelings in me—a kind of paranoia, a terror that I was the object of their anger, even though they seemed to be lost in their own self-contained world. (The piece, it seems worth noting here, is titled *Feedback*.)

After a little more than 15 minutes, the performers laughed intensely, fell silent, and then walked off. It was over.

All day today I have been watching the clock, knowing that at the top of every hour, a room on the second floor of a Lower East Side building is exploding with shouts, screams, laughter, and applause. Performers are feeding off one another, losing their minds, enrapturing and enraged. Ears are ringing, and emotions are shifting in strange, unsettling ways, spilling over into the audience members, who just may be outnumbered.

But Cha's work is, of course, about more than any single event or place. She is a master of channeling and picturing unseen energies, of making you feel them. So while her *mise-en-scène* recalls at first glance the cheering section of a sporting event or a game show, in its actual operation, in its capricious shifts in tone, it perhaps resembles nothing so much as the digital timelines on which information flows today, controlling users' attention—and their state of mind. Out there, as users watch and weigh in, one person's disgust grows almost instantaneously into a collective rage, only to be interrupted a moment later by a bout of maniacal laughter. The updates keep flooding in.

Rendering that hidden, behind-screen activity with absolute clarity, *Feedback* is one of the definitive works of the present moment. It is also one of the most brutal and chilling.

*"Art of the City"* is a weekly column by ARTnews co-executive editor Andrew Russeth.