

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.

TOPICAL CREAM

Simulating Feeling: Xavier Cha On Feedback 11.16.2015

Words by freda nada



Xavier Cha's latest performance titled "Feedback" at 47 Canal is a clear departure from tropes of the ever-downwardly trending net-art stratagems.

Following several exhibitions dealing more directly with sousveillance, mediation, and the body, Cha's latest performance for the Chinatown gallery is notably unmediated. The casual observer steps seamlessly from the street into the performance: a group of students sitting on bleachers rigorously acts out a succession of reactive emotions characteristic of a syndicated American talk show audience. The reenactment of audience lacks a visible referent or technical apparatus. The only visual anchor for the piece is its performers. Nevertheless, the piece reveals the affective intrusion of social media currently hijacking our emotional lives; it zooms in on the virtual bodies which "lmao" and "smdh" the way physical bodies can only simulate.

"It definitely relates to the way we become alienated from the physical expression of our emotions after becoming used to the seamlessness of our digital lives," Cha says elaborating on the project.

“Feedback is another representation of this state” which she calls an “awkward state of crisis.” Cha has previously investigated ontological emptiness at 47 Canal in *Untitled* (2012) where participants on DMT and Salvia were filmed in dehumanizing states. For *Feedback*, Cha uses animal echolocation as a metaphor to understand our developing relationships with new modes of interaction. “I relate this to posting selfies or whatever on instagram” she explains. “You check on your relevance and place. You identify yourself in relation to your surroundings based on how quickly things bounce back, how many likes you get, who these likes are from, etc.”

Appropriately, I first came across the work via hyperlink; specifically an ARTnews post titled “Why Not Apply To Be In A Xavier Cha Performance in New York?” Googling to verify, I found the referenced casting ad. The ad clipping refers to an open call for basically any person living in downtown Manhattan or Brooklyn lending the performance a pedestrian quality.

Performers | Male or Female | Any Ethnicity | Age: 18 - 80

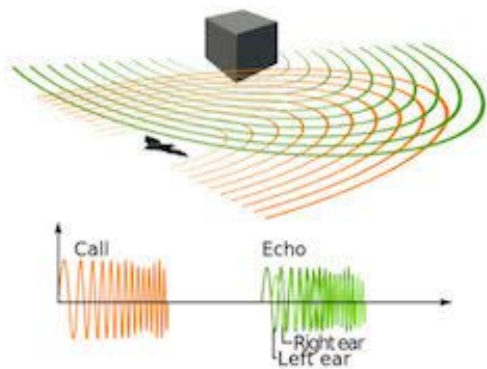
Looking for performers of all types to participate in visual artist Xavier Cha's piece. Previous acting skills are highly preferred. Actors, singers, dancers, and comedians may all submit.

At the rehearsal the following week, it was clear that *Feedback* would be a live continuation of *Abduct*, a Frieze Film commission which premiered in October. Participants, mostly MFA types, were given a printout of an excel table with timed sketches to be acted out. These micro-performances ranged from blank staring to deadpan applause to hysterical disapproval. *Feedback* is an intense and confrontational exposition. Gallery staff could occasionally be spotted wearing earplugs for protection. At the rehearsal, the performers collectively acknowledged how conveying so many feelings was more draining than expected. Without a significant material component, the focus shifts to the emotional labor of the actors.

Even strict theatrics cannot escape the scrutiny of the “post-internet” anthropocene. The syndicated casting ads online are proof of a kind of art that’s inherently sourced from invisibly networked participants. In a 2008 interview with *Rhizome*, Guthrie Lonergan presciently commented on the future of net art saying, “Right now I’m scheming how to take the emphasis off of the Internet and technology, but keep my ideas intact. Objects that aren’t objects...” Cha’s choreography executes this vision of the body which is undoubtedly “internet aware”.

“The effort is inextricably linked to its central conceit: the endless affective work of instagram. When I asked her about this unifying concept, Cha responded over email saying, “I was thinking about how so much of our behavior and interaction with reality is premeditated and determined by the feedback, the likes and comments, re-posts etc.” The eternal return of validation constitutes the circulatory system of an information-driven social body. The collapse of instagram model Essena O’Neill, the viral mediocrity of Amalia Ulman’s *Excellences & Perfections* are driven by remote forces of collective validation, disapproval, and boredom. These are emotions that *Feedback* reifies like a “lol” that is actually “laughing out loud” or the often comatose state of passive attentiveness which outwardly registers as nothing more than blankness. Our fear/hope of becoming the machine is being actualized as the body becomes a vehicle abducted by Cha in the service of script. Human feeling is savage technology where culture acts as software. Culture as a technical code embedded in us. In much of Cha’s work, the dramatized body is deployed as media player translating hidden directives. When I asked her how much of the work came from a personal experience, she explained, “It is definitely not based on personal narrative- rather the opposite- I intentionally didn’t want to allow viewers to be able attach to any character, narrative, emotional arc, empathy or desire.” Cha’s absence as a performer highlights further the simultaneously detached and depersonal way we have come to invest ourselves emotionally in social networks.

Animal echolocation



A depiction of the ultrasound signals emitted by a bat, and the echo from a nearby object.

Echolocation, also called **bio sonar**, is the biological **sonar** used by several kinds of **animals**. Echolocating animals emit calls out to the environment and listen to the **echoes** of those calls that return from various objects near them. They use these echoes to locate and identify the objects. Echolocation is used for **navigation** and for **foraging** (or hunting) in various environments. Some blind **humans** have

xaviercha 27w



56 likes

xaviercha another day another #mask bouncing off immaterial walls reflecting distances and velocities in non-space

The ability to participate in elaborate systems of validation gives us a sense of autonomy which is ultimately illusory and unstable. The virtual self is in actuality—disembedded from content which Cha calls “secondary, and almost arbitrary”, functioning as a site for asymmetric interaction. Feedback is essentially void of direct content. The intense expression of its performers create an illusion that something interesting is happening on the gallery walls when in fact the space is barren. As a temporary installation, the work attempts to resist traditional modes of commodification in a cultural moment when mere spectatorship can be extracted as market value in the form of personal data.

freda nada is a writer and new media theorist. Her work has appeared via new inc, bullet magazine, new bloom and the huffington post. she is currently working with live programming at ps1 and focusing on web/electronic based projects. her social networks identifier is @spxghett1.

AUTRE

IN XAVIER CHA'S "FEEDBACK" THE AUDIENCE ARE THE PERFORMERS @ 47 CANAL IN NEW YORK

November 20, 2015



When I entered 47 Canal, I immediately assumed that the metal bleachers in the otherwise empty gallery were an open invitation to take a seat, only to be gently ushered to the opposing wall by a smirking gallery staff. After a while a group of young people entered the gallery from a side door and started taking their seat on the bleachers, lightly chatting and exchanging cordial glances only to fall completely silent on the hour. The silence spread into the audience, the focused stares of the performers all gathering on the digital clock behind us. Out of nowhere, the performers erupted in cheerful screams and started hugging each other in ecstasy similarly as a crowd cheering on an iconic band or during a charismatic speaker. The laughs and screams ricochet off the empty walls and filled the entire room, sweeping the audience up in the excitement. The performers continued to change their reactions every 30 seconds, going from happy, to outraged over to embarrassed and completely stunned. Each emotion filled up the entire room, washing over the audience with such intensity that at times it felt as though the 18 people were actually laughing at us. With that sense of paranoia it became harder and harder to sit and watch the performed reactions, each laugh became accusatory and each open mouth became a judgment. It is this that truly characterizes Xavier Cha's work, the ability to channel unseen energies through an almost banal scene that makes her audience reflect on indivisible stimuli we face everyday. The work is a meditation on our own self-centeredness and shows how quickly we take other peoples reactions personally.

Xavier Cha's "Feedback" was on view from November 11 to November 15 at 47 Canal in New York. Images and text by Adriana Pauly