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IMMEDIACY

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Photography by
Harry Griffin & Eva O'Leary

Xavier Cha

on nudity,
exploded ego
and
the absurdities
of
being human.

In conversation with
Carmen Winant

Don't describe Xavier Cha as an artist who uses technology. True, she engages it—recent works at the Whitney and New Museum have involved performers who are harnessed to live-stream video recording device and a man taking a constant stream of selfies, respectively—but never for its own ends. Cha's real concern is attachment and isolation, or, what she described in her 47 Canal press release as the dual condition of "alienation/transcendence." Here, the Los Angeles-born, New York-residing artist speaks to Carmen Winant about casting performers, how working as a director has affected her social life, and the relationship between surfing and martial arts.

Carmen Winant: Can we start with your 47 Canal press release from 2012? It was a casual but really lucid email exchange between you and Margaret Lee, the gallery director. How did that come to be the release, and what effect did you feel it had on how the work was read?

Xavier Cha: It can be really difficult with press releases to actually explain the work, or guide the viewer in how to approach the work without feeling either pretentious or completely meaningless. I often find that press releases don't really say much, and instead tend to speak in circles around the work. The email correspondence was a real conversation with Margaret prior to the show, so although it still has that lofty, vague tone, it was genuine.

CW: Considering that press releases intend to 'explain' the work in some measure in service of its salability, did you or Margaret feel that was a risk to take a more experimental approach?

XC: When it came down to submitting a press release, I wanted to play with how little press releases can really say while at the same time give generous insight into the mood behind the work.

CW: In it, you wrote that technology "is not the focus of the work" but rather its vehicle; your real concern is how humanity functions in and relates to its contemporary moment. This is really interesting for me in light of seeing *Body Drama* at the Whitney, in which actors performed while wearing body-mounted cameras that were



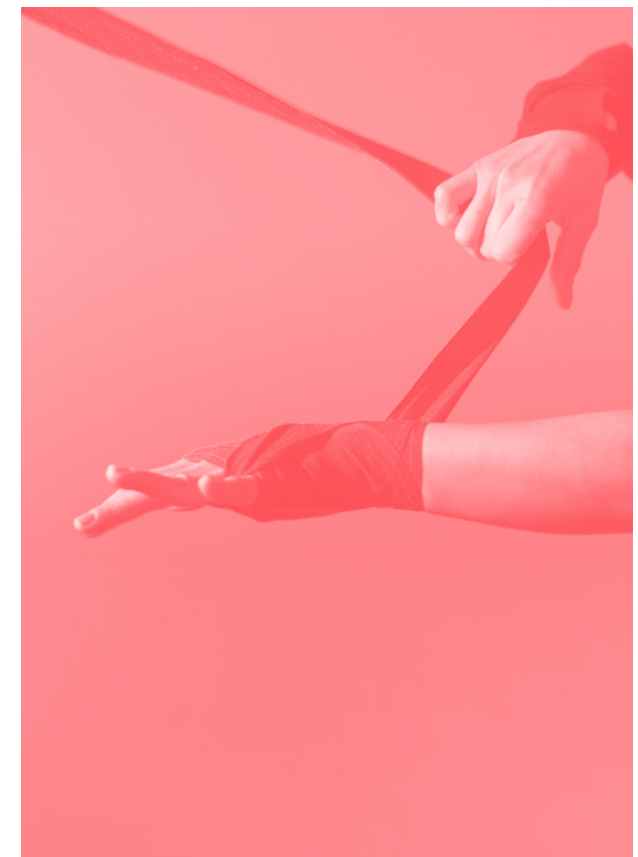
streaming live video, for instance. In the email exchange you allude to your interest in the conditions of "alienation/transcendence." That slash symbol really interested me—I didn't know what to make of it.

XC: I'm glad that slash combo struck you. No one else has ever really inquired about that.

CW: Did it imply those could be the same thing? Or the opposite: that they are contradictory impulses?

XC: In the context of the press release, I meant it as a simultaneous, almost schizophrenic, existence of

Body Drama, 2011. Performance with actor and body-mounted camera; projected digital video.



feeling both disconnected by this virtual omnipresence and at the same time elevated by the endless opportunity for connection. Isolation and access all at once. It's as if we are at once frustrated and ecstatic by the potentiality. It's an awkward phase, like a developmental adolescent on a larger evolutionary scale. We are transitioning into a new reality that can feel both alienating and transcendent, where our physical boundaries and limitations can feel lumbering compared to how infinite our virtual realities can be.

CW: For a recent show, *Disembodied Selfie*, you had an actor roam around the New Museum taking photos and videos of himself and putting them up online.

XC: Actually this performance took place at the Lyon Biennale and the New Museum hosted the live stream of selfies that were uploaded as he took them.

CW: I see. What function did you see his nakedness serving?

XC: Well, he didn't start off nude. He entered the museum as a regular museum patron, started taking selfies with the art then got so engrossed and lost in his "selfies" that he began taking shirtless selfies—he had a great body—then eventually dick pics with the work in the exhibition. It wasn't really about his being nude as much as it was the character's journey into the selfie-hole, attempting to validate his existence within the Lyon Biennale and the "world."

CW: Speaking of online presence, when I google your name, the first image that comes up is from *New York Magazine*. It was taken when you were twenty-seven; you're sitting in a chair nude. How do you feel about that image being in circulation, and representative of you as an artist (who in many ways harnesses the Internet as material)?

XC: This was not strategic at all. The photographer tried a bunch of different shots then suggested it. I'm very comfortable with nudity; it's really not a big deal, we all have bodies. And it seemed to make sense for the article. I'm a performance artist, or as another critic referred to me, a neo-body

artist. I didn't, and still don't, think about it much, honestly.

CW: You are in your own work less and less these days, and have spoken a fair amount about transitioning from a performance artist to a director. Is there space to be uncertain when you are managing other people?

XC: There is so much uncertainty built into many of the performances; I feel even more when working with other performers. I have to trust in their talent, and often leave many elements up to them. There is usually a rigorous casting process for this reason. But once I find the right match and develop trust in the performers, it's exciting to collaborate. In some sense, their specific skill becomes a material in the piece, like selecting textures or colors for a piece.

CW: What's your casting process like?

XC: I usually have a pretty clear idea of what I'm looking for when I plan a performance. I post casting calls requiring a headshot and résumé, then hold pretty formal auditions by appointment only. If the decision is still difficult, I will hold callbacks with a narrowed selection.

CW: Does casting performers and learning how to be an adept director and collaborator change your social skills at all in life? Or affect the way you engage within your 'non-art' relationships?

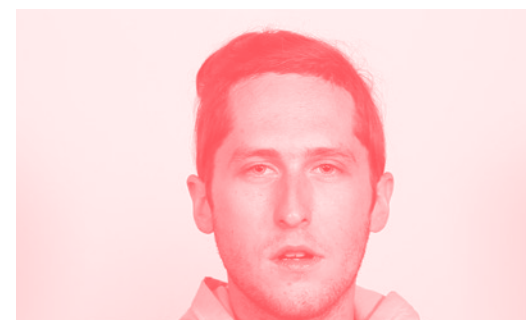
XC: I often perceive public situations, scenarios, and interactions with a filtered distance, like I'm watching reality TV or something. It's not judgmental; it's curious. I'm genuinely amused by and fascinated with the way people interact, the patterns and roles that emerge. I'm best engaging with people in intimate one-on-one situations. In large groups I often slip into observing/processing mode, or tend to lose myself in the action. I have to admit that I sometimes can't help scanning people in 'non-art' relations as possible collaborators or 'material.' I do feel I interact very differently when I am directing rehearsals though. Typically I am reserved, but laid back. When working with performers, I become sharply present, open and sensitive to their reactions and input...it's a hyper-level of engagement and open-connectivity

compared to everyday interactions, which I love. That level of openness, generosity and trust is not ordinary. People can be so guarded; I try to achieve the opposite through collaboration. I want performers to feel good about their participation, like they are letting their talent shine in something they believe in and feel supported by.

CW: In a recent interview in *V Magazine*, you described your work as "creating a tangible environment through emptying out ego." I am wondering about this idea of ego in the work, starting with *which* ego. Do you use the word in a colloquial sense—as in, holding one's self in high esteem? Or in a psychoanalytical sense, as in, the part of the mind that mediates between the conscious and unconscious? In either case, I kept returning to that line. In some ways I had read the work as being about a filling up of ego. Can you elaborate on that line?

XC: I believe this was in reference to the [untitled] video installation at 47 [Canal]?

CW: Yes, exactly.



Untitled, 2013.
Four channel HD video and sound installation.

XC: The people on the screens in that show were filmed while in an out-of-body state. Their egos were basically exploded. I wanted to capture

individuals with their sense of self or identity, removed; to make the remaining vacancy palpable. Usually when we are on screen or in front of a camera, we do the opposite: become hyper self-conscious or aware of constructing and maintaining a certain image. We become very aware of how we appear to others, down to how we hold minute muscles in our faces. The people in this video, by chemical means, were incapable of curating their face and, as a result, stare very blankly into the camera. Their emptiness and lack of performativity becomes unsettling, partially because of this inverse knowledge—how much goes into representing our "selves." So, I meant it in the psychoanalytical sense.



CW: What 'chemical means' altered the faces of the performers?

XC: I intentionally did not discuss this in any press materials surrounding the show as it was not in any way the content of the piece, just a means of achieving this tangible state of emptiness. They were all on a low dose of DMT, which makes it near impossible to keep your ego intact.

CW: I was not surprised to learn that you are a surfer; your work is not only profoundly physical, there is some...innate curiosity in improvising, solitary performance, and straining to feel the boundary of one's own body/skin. Did you start surfing as a grad student at UCLA?

XC: No. I always wanted to, but was so immersed in grad school. I wish I had met the right people to start surfing then. I learned in the Rockaways and immediately fell in love. You're right in saying that I love pursuits that require extreme dedication and focus, that challenge physical and mental boundaries.

CW: Though perhaps it is too simplistic to flatten out your work and surfing to both being about the body or something—in some ways, your work to me enacts a kind of confinement, whether it be confined by a piece of attached equipment or confined within a large physical space. This is sort of the opposite of surfing, which is so much about tapping into expansive space.

CW: I've heard that you are starting a martial arts class.

XC: Well, it's not a class, exactly. I work everyday with an incredible Muay Thai and MMA trainer named Laszlo Huve. I love the discipline, the mental and physical strength is required to get in the ring and fight.

CW: I imagine that feeling is not so different than surfing. Or, as you say, forgetting you are human somehow in the 'losing' of your body through action.

XC: Right. Not to be nihilistic, but there's something so absurd about being human. This goes back to the alienating/transcendent conversation as well. We are conscious beings with 'higher' thoughts and emotions but still exist in these cumbersome bodies that age, fall apart and require so much ridiculous maintenance. It feels amazing to push myself to extreme mental and physical performance. I might as well use the hell out of this body, because I don't see the point otherwise.

XC: This paradox is important to my work; there are often constraints within my work, though ultimately they serve as a means of expressing very expansive concepts and experiences. When there is a more rigid structure in place, it's easier to perceive how peculiar things are that seep through the cracks, that don't fit the mold. Think about how weird Play-Doh looks squirted through a cut out hole. If everything is completely chaotic, then it's easy to dismiss or lose sight of what is... off. My work often tries to point out how absurd or bizarre typically sublimated concepts are by formalizing or re-contextualizing the constructs supporting them.



On Procrastination

1. In writing about procrastination, I procrastinated heavily. It wasn't deliberate or ironic; I just couldn't make myself begin...

2. I will not make a case for procrastination, which is often a self-destructive—or at least counter-productive—indulgence in behavior. Nor will I make suggestions on how to overcome it, as the Internet is already full of practical solutions (watch out, I'm told that surfing the web is a delaying tactic). Rather, this will be an inquiry into procrastination's relationship with and to productivity and immediacy

3. Procrastination is a condition that suggests something about the nature of action and humans' relationships to work. So many of us put things off, avoiding certain efforts even if they don't actually involve much suffering. Rest assured that yours is not a moral failing but a complex physiological issue fettered to inner feelings, fears, memories, hopes, doubts, and pressures. It's a problem between one's self and one's self; I can't imagine a more intimate relationship.

Carmen Winant