



XAVIER CHA

/ DELIBERATE ART

WORD EMILY MILLAR

IMAGE XAVIER CHA

If there was such a thing as a conventional performance artist, Xavier Cha would stray pretty far from it. She's done things from dressing as a giant shrimp and gyrating on a street corner to strapping cameras on actors to capture their expressions as they run through public spaces. Cha leads the charge of emerging artists exploring the relationships between the audience and media.

Are your performances and installations intentionally designed to provoke a reaction from your audience? And for you, what's been the most interesting or unexpected reaction?

I wouldn't say I am trying to provoke my audience, but I do want to offer an experience that shifts the viewer's relationship to the phenomenon at hand. I guess for my show "Holiday Cruise! 2006," the daily collaborations with complete strangers from diverse and often completely non-art related communities was totally unpredictable and exciting. Since the gallery was transformed into an open arena for anyone to participate and perform, the audience also grew broad and layered in its expectations and relationship to the gallery and art in general.

Looking through your work, I am noticing how important your "cast" must be. Are your participants specifically chosen for each piece?

I hire and work with people who excel at what they do and most appropriately embody the form of the particular piece stripped of extraneous narrative. If the work requires actors, the casting process is rigorous and based on professionalism and skill. The same goes whether I am working with actors, dancers, sopranos, or clowns. In a few cases, I do not edit the participants, but maintain an open invitation within certain parameters, such as in "Rehearsal Space 2009," and "Holiday Cruise! 2006."

One of your works, "Body Drama," uses a body-mounted camera to exclusively capture the facial expressions and emotions of the actor it's attached to; a technique often used in horror films. Was that an influence in the way you portray emotion?

Straightforward horror movies are not my favourite genre—it is very difficult for me to get past the undisputed artifice of the film, although I also find that interesting. I love a good psychological thriller. Michael Haneke is among my favourites. Everything involved in film—acting, cinematography, sound, narrative—is fundamentally manipulative. He is such a master of using this nature at once against itself and forcibly behind it. It places the viewer in a psychotic position.

With the type of art you create, do you ever feel embarrassed or nervous before performing? Or is embarrassment just not part of your lexicon?

When I performed in the work, I was for the most part fully disguised so I didn't feel nervous, and as long as I believe in the work, I don't feel embarrassed. So, dancing as human advertisements or as Cornrow Hairbraid was fun, and the adrenalin of performing blocked out other emotions. I get more nervous before performances I am not in; like a nervous stage mum, I want every detail to go well.

So, do you then tell your actors anything when you're getting them ready for one of your performance pieces?

I want the actors to feel comfortable with their participation in the performance. I hope that everyone involved feels good about their contribution and feels justly compensated for their efforts. I really want the performers to get as much out of collaborating as possible, and I'm pleased if I can provide a platform for others to be recognised. What I tell the actors varies from piece to piece, but I try to establish a mutual confidence before entering into the performance.

Is anonymity important? What if a well-known Hollywood actor asked to be part of your performances—would you consider it?

It depends on who and for what piece. I do not want the performer's celebrity status to over saturate or eclipse the content of the performance, unless it was specifically about celebrity status. For "Body Drama," I did imagine Willem Dafoe as an ideal participant. He has such a strange physicality, and with his Wooster Group background, I could envision him effectively forming the space while remaining abstract.

Could you ever imagine yourself becoming a more conventional artist, a painter or a photographer or sculptor? Why does being primarily a performance artist feel the most comfortable?

Photography I can occasionally see, and objects or environments, yes, but painting, not at all. It's not the way I'm oriented. I think it is extremely difficult to create a successful painting, and without placing value it is not a language I speak or think. Performance suits my interest in the tangibility of space-objects, people, and ideas expand beyond the physical space they occupy (psychic and metaphysical space)—and when isolated or re-contextualised, how differently these invisible structures can mean.

I assume you have a lot of ideas in various formations; what are you working on at the moment that you are most excited about?

The upcoming projects involve dance and hired actors. One is a synesthetic translation of the body's sight—conflating sensory experiences of physical movement, space, and vision through a dancer architectural divisions; graphic colors and patterns; body-mounted cameras; and live-stream video projections. I, however, have a few other performances in the works at the moment.

Are there other things you would love to be involved in?

There have been many points in my life that I wished I was a dancer. I would definitely be doing something physical that involved the body. Oh, and surfing.