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Archive of Korean Artists in America (AKAA) Interview

- Interviewee: Xavier Cha
- Interviewer: Joo Yun Lee
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- Recorded and transcribed by Joo Yun Lee (AKAA Research Fellow 2016-2017)
- This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity
- Open for research use

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Joo Yun Lee (JYL): Performance seems to be at the core of your body of work. How did you find your interest in performance and start to interweave performance into different mediums?

Xavier Cha (XC): I've always been interested in orchestrating and elaborating layers of things, working with other people, even in high school when I made lots of photography. I drew a storyboard first and arranged different elements in specific compositions and that was the beginning of directing and working with people in collaborating. When I was an undergraduate at RISD, I was in the Sculpture Department but I always did performance-based work because I just felt it was the easiest way for me to communicate my ideas and make them experiential, involving the body.

JYL: In your work, performance is integrated with different media apparatuses as well as genres such as film, video, text, and audio among others. How did you develop your idea of collaborating with people and making experiential events into more interdisciplinary performances and cross-genre projects?

XC: It is very specific to concepts, so it's very concept driven. I develop ways to execute the idea the clearest. That drives the decision whether it is going to be a video, performance, or sound.

JYL: Your work that integrates performance is often presented in the space of a gallery or a museum and the performer mediates his or her own body with the viewer's and communicates with them in very interesting ways. In *Body Drama* (2011), which was executed at the Whitney Museum of American Art, the performer's body is integrated with the media apparatus, revealing the mediated, fractured subject, which is often controlled in our media environment. What did you aim to address in this project by exploiting the museum space as a site of the performance and engaging with the viewers?

XC: That project happened at the old Whitney Museum, the Breuer Building, and there was a gallery space by the elevator. Six times a day actors wearing body-mounted cameras came in. You can imagine a selfie stick, but what the actors were wearing was actually a huge body mounted camera rig so that the camera was attached to them. As soon as the actors walked into the gallery, they started acting extremely and intensely. Between these performances the camera footage was projected on the wall in the space. I thought of it as almost isolating the craft of acting itself as the material. That is, formalizing acting or objectifying acting itself, the skill of it. As soon as they walk in, you feel the craft of acting and you understand everything is fabricated and manufactured for the screen. It was really challenging for the actors to have that apparatus because the performance was twenty minutes long and the video was unedited so they were character acting for thatlong. My instructions for them were that I wanted them to be extreme but not have any narrative thread. It was just *acting*. That was also difficult for

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them to do, not creating narratives in their acting.

JYL: So, although this project took place inside the museum, you gained more access to the viewers because it was performed right near the elevator, kind of a space between the gallery space and public space. It was interesting to learnt that you developed and performed many of your earlier projects in public spaces, including *8:30 AM (2005)*.

XC: *8.30 AM* was performed at the intersection of 53rd and Fifth Avenue by MoMA. I chose the location because it was full of commuters – a lot of businessmen and people in a nine-to-five Midtown area. The performers were like human clocks, there every morning at 8.30 a.m. There were four couples for each different corner of the intersection. They would be there at exactly 8.30 a.m. to kiss for five minutes, then walk away. It was a routine, it wasn't supposed to be romantic or passionate, but like clockwork.

JYL: *Feedback* (2015) further elaborates on the proposition of intense acting asan object in an exhibition space and engaging directly with viewers. Can you explain it further?

XC: Usually, if I am invited to do a more performance-based project, the first thing that drives the piece is the very context of the specific site. The audience demographics in that particular neighborhood, that city or, what kind of institution and what kind of people are going to be there are also important. So I keep that in mind when I consider how I develop the work, kind of wanting to push against that. In the case of *Feedback*, it was conceived for my solo exhibition at my gallery 47 Canal in New York. Even though it was a performance, what I wanted was for it to be treated almost sculpturally, like an autonomous object that exists in its own reality within the gallery space. A group of actors were seated on freestanding bleachers and performed, acting autonomously, and audiences came in and walked around them. For the performance, I stalked the audience's reactions and I wrote very specific scores out of them and let the performers memorize the scores that happened every hour. The performers sitting on the bleachers went through cheering, booing, or being really angry or laughing, kind of like a talk show audience. But there was nothing they were reacting to, so it was as if they were in a vacuum as an autonomous object.

JYL: How did the viewers respond to that?

XC: It seems people really felt kind of uncomfortable being in front of them because they are supposed to be the viewer but they were placed in the other position of being viewed. Even though the performers were not really reacting to the viewers, it just felt like it because the acting was so intense and their emotions were so intense. Usually how I gauge if a piece is successful is whether I am able to achieve an emotional or

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psychological response in the viewer, because that's what I really want to achieve when I conceive a piece. That takes a psychological reaction. I get responses by other people, not necessarily myself, but through the curator or write-ups.

JYL: In collaborating with a dancer, actor/actress, and many others, your role as an artist seems to be like that of a producer or film director. What's the meaning of collaboration in your practice and how do you proceed the collaboration to ultimately realize the variety of work you produce?

XC: With collaboration, I'm trying to find the talent or expertise of people to express the concept in the clearest way. I'm trying to find that clarity and precision. I can't achieve that by myself and that is why I remove myself from the performance, because it is difficult for me to be in my own piece without other people projecting the narrative of identity – being female or Asian-American, among other things – that will automatically come into it. Instead, I want the narrative to be clean. When I choose collaborators, I select someone who is an expert in their field who will execute with precision.

JYL: Your collaboration with experts in other fields seem to enable your work to become truly interdisciplinary, integrating your special interest in the very nature of different artistic genres such as film and dance.

Xavier Cha: I think about the systems behind things. When I watch a movie, I think about how it was created, filmed, and the process of acting, and sometimes how absurd that is. I imagine the set in between cuts and how ridiculous that can be. Even if it is a serious or scary movie, I usually think about that. In the same way, people can function, but I want to find out why. Are we all zombies, or something else? Also, I love watching dance and I am moved by it. I used to feel very envious of dancers. It is rare you can combine intellect, soul, and physicality in your body into one pursuit. I always thought it was beautiful that all of your energy can go into one goal.

JYL: In much of your work, the performer's body reveals the mediated, fractured subject, who is often subject to control in our media environment. This is epitomized in Fruit Machine (2012-) in which the performer's body is integrated with the framework of a game.

XC: In *Fruit Machine*, the plot originally came from the idea of a slot machine. They are called fruit machines in the U.K. In *Fruit Machine*, there were four actors with a slot machine app projected on the wall spinning every 30 seconds. Each actor was a different fruit, and every time the projection re-set, the actors would have different roles – quickly go from upset to passive, for example – and they would have to keep switching, so it became really psychotic. *Fruit Machine 2* was set up more like a game show. The contestants were two blind actors and two deaf actors, each with a sign language interpreter, and one sighted and hearing actress. In each round the host

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would deliver a line of text in either broken English or sign language and the slot machine app would randomly select a contestant from the room, so they would either hear or see the original text and convey it to the other contestants. Now, the blind contestants' sensory registers - or what they focus on, or are more sensitive to - in language are different from others. All the original texts were very descriptive of something visual or aural, from novels and so on. Some of it might describe a blue sky. A blind person would interpret that very differently from a sighted person. The description of a crashing roar to a deaf person would also be translated differently from a hearing person. It was seeing how something [sensory] would translate not through spoken language but through action and their own subjectivities. Language becomes more about experience. Something that I thought was peculiar was when a child actor is asked to play a role about something terrible, something that is beyond their experience, how are they able to express that? Is it based on emulation or imitation, since it isn't based on something they have experienced? That was also the thinking behind *Fruit Machine 2*. Language can be translated through imitation without feeling, or based on your experience, so you end up translating it differently.

JYL: Your special interest in the self and subject in contemporary society penetrates the wide range of your work, which involves the emotional and psychological state of alienation, manipulation, and estrangement that is forged by social media and digital experiences at large. Could we read your *Surveil* project in this respect?

XC: Yes, *Surveil* was originally part of a group show at Kunsthalle Düsseldorf. It is about digital capitalism, the information society, and surveillance. For this piece I had volunteers allow me to install spyware on their computers that would record the screen and the webcam to create two simultaneous video files. They would go about their usual online behavior, whatever they naturally did at home, at work or wherever. I went through the files, made selections and developed a choreography that exactly matched their behavior minute to minute. For example, if a user was on Facebook, we developed choreography that would represent Facebook, and the same for news or YouTube. When you are looking at the dancers, they are representing what the users are doing with their time. You can hear the audio, because the software records the audio too, so you can hear the user's sighs, or if he or she is listening to music, or whatever they are playing on the screen. You only see the webcam's view though, and the dancers are performing the user's Internet behavior.

JYL: Such emotional and psychological states of the self embody the physicality or body of the performer. Can you tell us more about your special focus on the nature of physicality in our mediated world, which is saturated with virtual bodies?

XC: There is a real awkwardness to having a physical body now.Our experience with everything is digital, perfect, and filtered. We can consume so much [online]. What is our place in relation to that as a human with a physical body? I think that's why I

address it physically against the backdrop of the digital experience, to try to feel that awkwardness, that place in-between where these things fit together. It has the most impact when you bring it back to the body, this thing [pointing to herself], and ask, "What is its role right now?" It's confusing and that's what I am trying to question. For instance, in *Feedback*, I was addressing a phenomenon that happens digitally but I did it live. You're only seeing the reactions, the booing or applause. The content [that triggered the reaction] is irrelevant. That's kind of how we exist – it's just about the 'Likes' or comments, the feedback loop where we lose ourselves. We lose sight of the content itself. It's gone missing. That work is an example of a visceral experience in a gallery, where you hear the reactions but think about a digital experience. It's an analogue version of the experience.

JYL: How does the acting, manipulation, or revelation of self serve to delve into such issues? For instance, in *abduct* (2015-), the hygienic stark space is fully charged with the actors' emotional fluctuations, especially with "non-verbal emotional registers." What are the most important aspects when you produced this project?

XC: We are walking consumer products.e are just advertisements. Within that experience, it is hard to know what is real emotion and how much of it is a result of manipulation. We are constantly being pulled into so many different directions by capitalism. I am trying to see what emotion is, and what makes it real. In *abduct*, all the emotions feel so uncomfortable to the actors and that is what I was trying to express: that you feel so alienated from even smiling now, because it is almost like a distortion, as though you are out of control when you should be a perfect, filtered selfie. You feel something on your face, and you think you should Botox that away instead of expressing it. It feels as though you are being betrayed by your own emotions. Emotions are the enemy. For *abduct*, I wanted it to feel sterile, as though it were a sci-fi movie where the subject is undergoing some form of examination, as though the actors had been abducted by aliens and were under examination. Or a form of quarantine in a sterile, safe place, because something is wrong. I was also aiming for a mix of a quarantined, sterile place with a high-fashion shoot, like a manufactured situation of media constructs.

JYL: The actors play a very important role in this piece. Did you hold an audition to find them?

XC: For *abduct* I did two full days of auditions. I wanted them to express one feeling that was betraying another emotion. A lot of them couldn't do it – they could either cry or laugh, but not feel both of the emotions disrupting each other. I found some amazing people who could do that. Generally, I have open calls, auditions, or do research. It is a collaboration and I don't want them to feel that someone hired them. I want them to be invested creatively, understand the concept and appreciate it. I never want it to be exploitative of their talent. I want it to be a challenge that they enjoy.

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JYL: Do you have any upcoming exhibitions or are you working on any new projects?

XC: I have a performance in Warsaw, Poland in July and August, 2017. I am trying to hire a hypnotherapist for that performance and work with him or her to write a script, so that I would superimpose my script over his or her regular conversation. I would insert the idea of new material and how impossible it feels to have an original thought. We are so inundated with images that you wonder whether you are capable of coming up with an original image. It also reflects my personal frustration with myself.

JYL: Another important project would be *Buffer* at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. How was it different to direct a theater piece in relation to presenting your work in fine art institutions?

XC: I am used to things at a gallery setting where people don't have to sit and watch the whole piece from the beginning to the end. Usually people can come and go. It was interesting to work with Holly Shen [Ed. note: curator of visual arts at BAM], having the time to thoughtfully plan every step, including hiring actors. Usually at institutions, the budget for performances are comparatively smaller and the performances themselves are tagged on to something else such as lectures and talks, which are satellite to the main exhibition. My main concern is having everyone compensated.

Buffer is live on stage but emulating our experience of viewing and consuming digital content. It flips between three different channels, as though you were toggling between tabs. In one, there is a conversation between a man and a woman, as though from a domestic scene of a play. It is very intimate but you feel this distance between them. Sometimes, the conversation will freeze, as though it is being streamed online and buffering, but I wanted it to be subtle so you won't know if it is a pause written into the script or they are just staring. Sometimes things will loop or repeat. There is also a dance channel accompanied by a live opera singer. The opera singer will also freeze mid-aria in sync with the dancers, like a digital 'glitch'. I wrote it all and choreographed it and it is coming along. The script is written. I have a composer working on the opera score, which is going to be sung by a male soprano. We've had a rehearsal with the dancers. I would love for the project to tour but we don't have such specifics. We are trying to raise the funds.

JYL: Thank you so much for your time, Xavier.