

# Art in America

## THE NOTHING ACT

**Alix Pearlstein thwarts her actors' standard techniques in order to heighten a viewer's awareness of video-mediated perception.**

**by Paul David Young**

ALIX PEARLSTEIN MAKES videos in which professional actors perform in anonymous spaces, doing almost nothing and speaking not at all. Deeply influenced by Minimalism, her abstract esthetic is informed by theater and dance, and even more by how we see the world through film. Pearlstein's most recent New York gallery show, at On Stellar Rays on the Lower East Side in 2012, capped a run of work that began with a 2008 installation at the Kitchen in Chelsea. In this series of exhibitions, she refined her subject matter and the vocabulary she uses to express it.

As in a repertory company, Pearlstein repeatedly employs the same contingent of professional actors, many of them (such as James Urbaniak and Steven Rattazzi) well known in the downtown New York theater scene, though she does add new faces in each body of work. She makes her actors perform, however, without the traditional essentials of their craft, such as text, character and the development

of narrative or thought over extended periods of time. The camera moves among the performers as they follow a series of instructions. Some kind of group dynamic develops, a wordless play, with the only sounds resulting from the camera moving on its tracks or the actors breathing and walking.

In part, Pearlstein's purpose is to get actors not to act, which isn't as easy as it might sound. Their training generally teaches them not to be neutral, but rather always to make strong choices about voice and body movement and to connect deeply to the rest of the cast. Pearlstein's disabling of such skills serves to crack the mask, blunting the actors' use of their standard tools in order to hint at the primacy of the moving image in human experience and its complex effects on the perception of performance.

Pearlstein's minimalistic videos are typically shot in a deliberately bland studio environment, often starkly black or white. In her installations, the screens and projections are

Detail of a production still from Alix Pearlstein's *Moves in the Field*, 2012, video, 20 minutes.

All images, unless otherwise noted, courtesy On Stellar Rays, New York.

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usually at viewer height, so that the unmarked settings in the videos seem at one with the equally anonymous gallery spaces in which they are presented. The circulating camera makes its presence felt, registering the actors' reactions to the lens in front of them. Sometimes they peer directly into it, in effect connecting through the screen with the viewer and his or her surrounding space, then letting go.

Pearlstein has taken some time to develop her esthetic. Born in New York in 1962, she continues to live and work in the city. She got her BS at Cornell in 1983 and an MFA in sculpture from SUNY Purchase in 1988, and began working in video in 1992. Initially, she appeared on screen. Eventually she moved out of the eye of the camera and assumed more the role of a film director, though she is still sometimes a peripheral presence or off-screen voice.

Her use of professional theater actors links Pearlstein to other contemporary artists, such as Gerard Byrne, Pablo Helguera and Liz Magic Laser, who refer to or incorporate theater in their work. While Pearlstein acknowledges the influence of theater as well as the postmodern choreographic tradition growing out of Judson Dance Theater of the 1960s, she states that she is more concerned with "the difference between live and mediated performance, and how filming changes a performance and our relationship to it as viewers."<sup>1</sup>

She has named as her antecedents the choreographer and filmmaker Yvonne Rainer, along with artists Dan Graham, Bruce Nauman, Vito Acconci, Joan Jonas and Hannah Wilke, and the next-generation artists Mike Kelley, Paul McCarthy and Michael Smith. All are known for their performances and for work in a variety of mediums, including video and installation. The influence of Rainer, Nauman and Graham is the most easily recognized. A founder of Judson Dance Theater, Rainer choreographed everyday movements and generic tasks and held a deep antipathy for the conventional emotional expressiveness of dance; these ideas may be recognized in the rule-based movements of Pearlstein's actors and their efforts to attain neutrality. Pearlstein shares with Nauman an approach to art that sometimes looks like an experiment in human behavior, as she in essence traps her actors in a room and sets the conditions for their interactions, though Nauman's tastes are generally more extreme. Like Graham, she is fascinated with the mirror and representation, and is attracted to conceptualism. Indeed, Pearlstein's art is consistently rather cool, cerebral and detached. She is neither a feminist advocate like Wilke nor a provocateur like Kelley, McCarthy or Acconci. The fact that she does not perform in her videos separates her from nearly all of those whose influence she claims.

IN HER LATEST WORK, Pearlstein has departed from the ambiguous but legibly allegorical narratives characteristic of some of her videos from the early 2000s. *Forsaken* (2003), for example, enacts the rise and fall of a leader (Rattazzi), which involves his ostracization and eventual softcore "beating" by a crowd. In *Two Women* (2000), Pearlstein gives off-camera voiceover directions bristling with sexual double entendres to a male actor interacting with a cutout



photograph of a naked woman. The costumes in *Crash* (2004) identify the outsider, a woman in pink among a group dressed in black and blue; she disrupts the group's effort to build a tower of stacked rubber blocks and is subjected to an invasive physical examination. Similarly, *All Day and a Night* (2005) features a clearly identified outsider (Urbaniak) who is isolated from the group and its collective activity, which includes the destruction of the set.

For her 2012 show at On Stellar Rays, Pearlstein shifted her attention to a kind of group interaction that's harder to identify and more interesting. The performance rules that she established for each piece function more loosely than in her earlier work. What was captured on video has more of the controlled chaos and indeterminacy of live performance. "I'm interested in the tension created between the psychology and range of affects that actors bring into the work, on the one hand, and, on the other, the minimalist space and conditions that I set up for performance," Pearlstein explains. "I've always wanted to work in a range of performance registers within individual pieces. I don't think I'd ever achieved that until this show."

The exhibition's two videos amply demonstrate her approach. On the entire wall opposite the street, Pearlstein projected *Moves in the Field*, and on the wall to the right, *The Drawing Lesson* (both 2012), in a smaller format, about a quarter of the wall's size. The videos functioned on their own, but since each involved an identical set of performers, as well

as a continuous, restless camera movement, one was tempted to look back and forth between the two, and felt dizzyingly swept into the action on both sides. Both videos were made in Brooklyn, in an all-white cyclorama (a theater space with curved walls designed to create the illusion of infinite space). Pearlstein exploits this device's disorienting quality, depriving the viewer of landmarks in a horizonless world.

For *Moves in the Field*, she gave her actors simple directions (walk, pause, turn, look at each other, look at the camera), and a fixed and overarching order to "act neutral." Though she edited the footage to create the illusion of one long take, in fact there are breaks, during which she gave additional instructions to individual actors. The sole source of illumination is a light mounted on the camera, and its built-in microphone supplies the video's soundtrack, the footsteps of the actors. The camera follows the actors, watching them watch each other. Throughout, very slight interactions occur momentarily, swiftly passing. They might involve a shared stare between two actors, or one of them freezing their gaze at the camera/viewer. The actors' lost, detached wandering, and the uncertain, discontinuous action are commented upon by the kitschy, tongue-in-cheek introduction of a fog machine toward the end of the video.

In this restrained context, deviations can be shocking. The actress Brenna Palughi changes her costume from white to black and runs at the camera a few times. Another actor, Ariel J. Shafir, eventually violates the neutral code, using

Opposite top, view of Pearlstein's 2012 exhibition at On Stellar Rays, showing *Moves in the Field* (left) and *The Drawing Lesson* (right), 2012, video, approx. 7¼ minutes. Photo Adam Reich.

Middle, *Moves in the Field* (production still).

Bottom, *Crash* (production still), 2004, video, approx. 7¼ minutes.



*Finale*, 2009, video, approx. 10¼ minutes, at On Stellar Rays. Photo David B. Smith.





*The Dark Pavement (Yard)*, 2013, video, 1½ minutes. Courtesy Atlanta Contemporary Art Center.

animated facial expressions and gestures to activate his encounters with the other actors. He nuzzles sweetly with the actress and dancer Valda Setterfield and sidles up suggestively to Palughi.

Pearlstein's inspiration for *The Drawing Lesson* was Jean-Baptiste Siméon Chardin's painting *L'étude du dessin* (1748), which shows the artist drawing a model, with another person observing. She also looked at Giulio Paolini's sculpture *Tre per Tre (ognuno è l'altro o nessuno)* [Three by Three, Each Is the Other or No One], 1998-99, which transformed the image of Chardin's painting into plaster casts of three men in 18th-century garb seated on white cubes.

Pearlstein's video consists of a series of restagings of Chardin/Paolini in which she progressively increased the number of actors in the tableau from one to four then decreased to one. They are all seated, as in Paolini's version. The camera circles each grouping three times: the first time the actors look only at each other, the second time they regard the camera, and the third time they intensify their look into the lens. Pearlstein likens this to drawing a portrait from life, as the artist gains more of the likeness with each observation. The sequence draws attention first to the relay of gazes within the tableau, and then, as the actors stare into the camera and thus into the gallery, to an act of visual engagement with the viewer. Like *Moves in a Field*, there's no dialogue in *The Drawing Lesson*; instead, you hear the squeak of wheels on the dolly track on which the

camera is being pushed, a purely natural sound under the circumstances but somehow ominous here.

Although filmed in the same Brooklyn cyclorama as *Moves in the Field*, in *The Drawing Lesson* a black curtain on a proscenium stage comes into the frame from time to time as the camera circumnavigates the groupings. Since Pearlstein's work is so stripped down, the presence of much of anything demands interpretation. "In *The Drawing Lesson*, you do see a curtain, and it is a clue," she explains. "It suggests a connection to theatrical conventions and calls attention to the formal staging of the piece."

The circling camera of *The Drawing Lesson* was a device Pearlstein also used for her 2008 show at the Kitchen. Having created the four-channel video *After the Fall* in the venue's black box theater downstairs, she then showed the piece in the white box gallery upstairs, alluding to the differing modes of performance in theater and art. Filmed using a set of four cameras, the video first shows a couple on the verge of having sex, and then the interplay between two groupings of actors, one in pink-and-red costumes and the other in gold-and-black. A couple of the actors feign injury from altercations. The way the actors are divided by costume and actions harkens back to Pearlstein's earlier, more allegorical work. But the constant observation of the actors by the camera, as well as the greater immediacy of their connection with the viewer, makes the work feel more elemental.



Building on such effects, Pearlstein went on to adapt the premise of the musical *A Chorus Line* (the 1975 play and 1985 film) for her video *Talent* (2009). *A Chorus Line*, which ran for over 6,000 performances, setting a Broadway record, is about actors auditioning for parts in a new musical. They laugh, cry, sing, dance and tell heartbreaking stories about themselves and their careers. Pearlstein stripped the musical of its songs and dialogue, leaving only the wondrous, spontaneous ephemera of actors at an audition: waiting, hopeful, bored or yearning for attention. At one point they share a loaf of bread. They turn their acting personas on and off and mingle occasionally, though they mostly stay in line as the camera moves in a parallel track back and forth across them.

*Finale* (2009), a related piece, was created in the same rehearsal space as *Talent*, but as night settled over New York and the evening sky altered the light. Here a wall-sized mirror opposite the windows becomes a character as it darkens with nightfall, setting a somber mood and also calling more attention to the camera and film crew through reflections. Pearlstein said she was inspired by Dan Graham's *Performer/Audience/Mirror*, a video he made in 1975, the same year *A Chorus Line* was produced. Graham's piece shows him performing, with the audience clearly visible in a mirror behind him.

MOST RECENTLY, PEARLSTEIN created, using local actors in Atlanta, a set of commissioned pieces for the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center. One work, *The Dark Pavement (The Window)*, 2013, was filmed inside the space in which it was then shown. The camera dollies among a group of actors as they pose inside and outside a large, square window at the back of the gallery.

The rest of the show consisted of what might be called urban landscape group portraiture. The center is situated in a gentrifying neighborhood in Atlanta, marked by some unlovely, haphazard city planning. There is a bridge to nowhere overlooking the parking lot, part of an abandoned highway project. Train tracks run alongside the museum. Pearlstein placed the actors in and around the center, filming them in the parking lot, among the shrubbery and on an outside stairway. One video consists of a series of group poses in a dark, unfinished cellar with a slanted floor.

The videos look like photography, until something moves—but it's never the actors. They hold their poses. Some stare steadily into the camera. Others look away fixedly. Many are dressed somewhat formally, in black. The women often wear heels. There's a red scooter that reappears in several shots. A few birds fly by in one of the takes. A train chugs past in another vignette, its smoke creating a trail in the sky just above the walled-in parking lot. The actors are at once just figures in a landscape, elements of composition and nothing more, yet still alive, curiously present enough to provoke questions about who they are and why some of them are looking at us.

Pearlstein's invocation of the tableau vivant as a modality for video is something she shares with many

artists today, such as the Zimbabwean Kudzanai Chiurai or the German Ulla von Brandenburg. What distinguishes Pearlstein's tableaux is the studied austerity; there are neither overt references to politics (Chiurai) nor crazy costumes (Brandenburg).

"This project marks a shift towards a foregrounding of architecture and landscape," Pearlstein says. The abandoned bridge and highway—landmarks unusual in her work—reminded her of the sculptor Tony Smith's famous description of driving on the not-yet-completed New Jersey Turnpike at night as he rhapsodized about the possibility of a new kind of art experience in the industrial landscape of America. Tellingly, Smith's experience was in turn cited by the mid-century modernist critic Michael Fried in his 1967 essay "Art and Objecthood" as an example of what he deplored as the theatricalization of art. By filming trained actors in this landscape, Pearlstein literalizes Fried's feared intrusion of theater into Minimalist art and appropriates Smith's unpeopled highway.



Her recent work shows Pearlstein coming into her own as she strips down her videos and finds her subject matter in what is left behind: looking and being watched, acting while not acting, the speaking silence of humans not talking and the illusion of live performance as constructed through the artifice of video. The development of Pearlstein's work from here will depend on how well she can continue to focus her minimalist esthetic to excite thought about space, performance, bodies, actors and the perception of mediated reality. ○

1. All quotes and observations by Alix Pearlstein are taken from interviews conducted by the author before and after Pearlstein's exhibition "The Drawing Lesson," at On Stellar Rays, Sept. 9-Oct. 22, 2012.

"Alix Pearlstein: The Dark Pavement" was on view at Atlanta Contemporary Art Center, Jan. 11-Mar. 16.

*The Window*, 2013, video, 20½ minutes. Courtesy Atlanta Contemporary Art Center.