ABSTRACT VIDEO

THE MOVING IMAGE IN CONTEMPORARY ART

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FOREWORD BY KATE MONDLOCH

FIGURE 11.3
Alix Pearlstein, *Moves in the Field*, 2012. Single-channel, HD video, color, sound; 20 minutes. Courtesy of the artist and On Stellar Rays, NYC.

Alix Pearlstein's work is unparalleled in its "walk-around" capability; her camera is liberated from the established rules of illusion in regard to the objectivity of the camera or the person holding it. Although the camera moves in *a* space, that space often remains undefined, even if the set may be entirely specific to the institution where the videos are shown. For Pearlstein's 2008 exhibition at The Kitchen, she shot three video works—*After the Fall, Goldrush* (both 2008), and *Two Women 2* (2007–2008)—in the black box theater to be shown in the white cube gallery (painted black in this instance). While this particular site is charged with a history of experimental theater, one could argue that to the general public, it is a void like any other empty set. For *The Dark Pavement,* her 2013 exhibition at the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center, she shot in the institution's cellar, parking lot, and gallery space; yet, even for a viewer watching these videos inside the exhibition space, the sites can still remain anonymous or foreign. Pearlstein's videos usually refute any immediate references to the outside world but can draw upon other historical video or film works; many writing on her work have observed that the videos feel like laboratories for human experimentation, a sealed world of her own design. Even though artifice, in the expected theatrical or cinematic sense, is removed from the work, this affective tension between her performers is what keeps the viewer fully engaged in Pearlstein's world and convinced by the abstracted time depicted within.

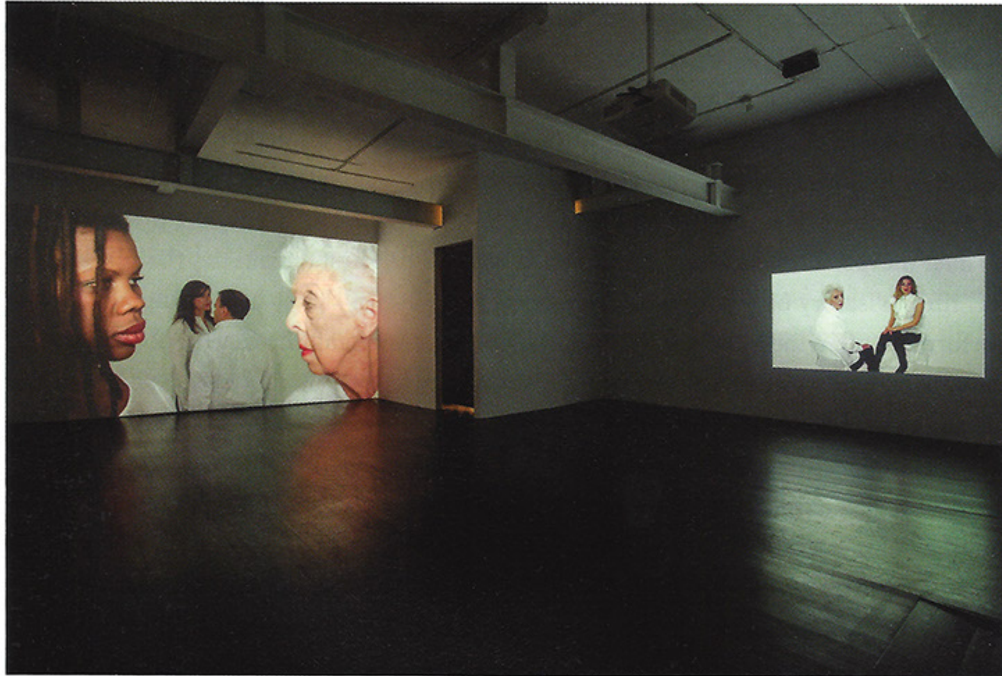

FIGURE 11.4
Alix Pearlstein, installation view: *Moves in the Field*, 2012 (single-channel, HD video, color, sound; 20 minutes), and *The Drawing Lesson*, 2012 (single-channel, HD video, color, sound; 7 minutes, 13 seconds). Courtesy of the artist and On Stellar Rays, NYC.

In *The Drawing Lesson*, Pearlstein's 2012 exhibition at On Stellar Rays gallery, two videos with shared sensibilities, *The Drawing Lesson* and *Moves in the Field* (both 2012) (figs. 11.3 and 11.4), were shown in one space. Both pieces share casts diverse in age, race, and gender, dressed in white tops and black pants; both were filmed against a white cyclorama typically used for commercial photography shoots. There is a complete absence of mise-en-scène in these spaces, and when any hint of a physical space is revealed, it comes as a relief to the viewer that these characters are in a "real" space. In *Moves in the Field*, there is no soundtrack, only the diegetic sound of footsteps, the actors' breathing, or the air against the microphone as it accompanies a fast-moving camera. The term "moves in the field" is from figure skating and refers to basic skating skills and edge control—essentially, the smoothest and fastest way to travel around the rink. This motion is reflected in the freehand camera work and delivers the perspective from eye level, mimicking a human manner of observation. This human quality is enhanced in moments when the camera pans too quickly from side to side, so that the field of vision blurs, or when it moves uncommonly close to an actor's face so that light bounces off skin, or when it is allowed to shake. Responding to instructions by Pearlstein, the actors shift from facing each other in pairs to gathering in seemingly random groups, to moving off camera and suddenly appearing in another, unexpected spatial plane.

Crucial to Pearlstein's videos, the performers are professional theater actors or other performers who are able to express psychological intensity without any narrative framework; they are neither actors playing a part or amateurs being natural. In a 2012 interview in *BOMB* magazine, Pearlstein quotes another of Henderson's observations in reference to *Moves in the Field:* "His [Godard's] camera serves no individual and prefers none to another. It never initiates movement to follow a character, and if it picks one up as it moves, it leaves him behind haphazardly."[12] At first encounter, the movements feel improvisatory or random, but repetition and pattern slowly become apparent. The performers often look directly into the camera, reciprocating the careful observation by the viewer. Halfway through the video, a performer jogs through the set as if he missed his cue and is trying to hit his mark; this seems to indicate a point when the action diversifies. Hand gestures and expressions of smiles or disappointment begin to occur, and performers even make physical contact—an act that feels radical in this scenario. Other small actions become monumental: a female performer has a costume change into a black dress, runs towards the camera barefoot, repeats this action minutes later, and then eventually appears back in her white shirt and pants. A fog emitted from a noisy machine rolls into the scene and then disappears without affecting the performers. The effect here is highly theatrical; the tight framing of the camera allows the viewer to imagine that the actors move off stage, exiting and entering the scene as directed. However, this effect is disturbed by Pearlstein's seamless editing, in which the video appears as one single continuous take. In each of her works, this tension between the expectations of theatrical and cinematic constructions of time are complicated by the illusion of real time. Pearlstein has remarked, "As soon as you're working with duration, you're working with contingency. Working with longer durations allows the sense of the immediacy of a live performance (that it's never the same from one performance to the next) to be translated into a mediated situation."[13] The viewer has a trust that the camera is capturing what we are *supposed* to see, even when the camera's point of view is completely disorienting in terms of space and depth.

In *The Drawing Lesson,* the action is far more simple, consistent, and repetitive. The camera begins by circling around a female performer sitting in a white folding chair, who at first looks straight ahead, ignoring the camera. On subsequent tours around her, her look follows the camera, swiveling quickly to catch it, similar to a dancer "spotting" while turning. Although the camera here is also freehand, the movement is significantly smoother, simulating a camera on a track, with a calming rhythm to how it negotiates the room. As the camera captures the off-stage areas, it exposes the edges of the cyclorama, rooting the action in the physical space and hinting that the set is on a proscenium stage. The camera returns to find a different configuration, adding one performer at a time until the group reaches four, then removing an actor until only two remain. The effect is not theatrical here as in *Moves in the Field;* the viewer does not imagine that there is a stagehand scrambling to reset the chairs before each cycle, and there is no sound of footsteps to denote this off-stage action (which is especially notice-

able since this video also features diegetic sound). Additionally, the viewer can predict the action in a way not possible in *Moves in the Field.* The camera approaches the group with a long shot and then zooms in as it approaches the performers; by establishing this set trajectory, the camera differentiates itself from the viewer's perspective. Thus, the piece is more illusionistic and establishes itself in the realm of cinema. When taking *The Drawing Lesson*'s reference point into consideration, Pearlstein can be seen as literalizing Henderson's idea of cinema's third dimension of time; the video is based on a sculpture based on a painting. Giulio Paolini's *Tre per tre (ognuno è l'altro o nessuno)* (Three by three [each is the other or no one]; 1999) is a life-sized sculpture that thrice replicates the artist figure depicted in Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin's *The Drawing Lesson* (1734). However, in Paolini's work, only one of these figures actually functions in the role of the artist with pencil and paper in hand. One figure is the model being observed by this artist, and the third merely observes the two others, off to the side. This unusual configuration of artist, model, and viewer was somewhat mirrored in the installation of *Moves in the Field* and *The Drawing Lesson* at On Stellar Rays; the viewer was physically caught between inclusion and exclusion and the structural differences within each scenario, which, at first encounter, seem extremely similar.

This analogy can also be extended to the transposing of performative roles within the works of both Pearlstein and Tajima-New Humans-Atlas. Tajima said of *The Pedestrians,* "Charlie [Atlas] has a seminal film, *Hail the New Puritan.* It has a lot of elements that I wanted to translate for the new situation: the director as actor, viewers as performers, musicians as extras, artworks as props."[14] Pearlstein has said, "The focus is on the actor, and that's a focus on us—they stand in for us, for the viewer, for everyone. That focus animates the relationship between performance, theater, and film. These forms all trade places in my work: film acts like theater, performance acts like film."[15] Each of these shifts between the roles of artist/director, performers, audience, and setting is echoed in the perception and production of time as well and points to the instability of any of these positions in contemporary art or even culture at large.

No longer is it as simple as believing that performance is live and anything on a screen is edited or mediated, as it may have been at the start of the intersection between video and performance. Even the "live feed" is almost never as labeled; even though the Internet makes a live feed relatively simple to achieve, audiences expect regular minor or major delays in the transfer of the image or the buffering of video. These delays are thus delays in communication, clarity, and comprehension. An act like Atlas's live mixing complicates this dynamic further; this act is quite performative in itself (his presence on stage is akin to a DJ at a club, a conductor who is slightly removed from the center of attention), and these effects are overtly synthetic, making a live experience less realistic, more processed, while adding another layer of temporality that is as instantaneous to the audience as the live performance. Is either experience more "live" than the other? Although these effects are more common now with digital imaging, that these viewing experiences can overlap without conflict speaks to a common expectation of

immediacy. More often than not, at least one mediated image is apparent in our field of vision, and we're able to differentiate between these multiple temporalities with ease—think of how effortless it has become to absorb an automatically updating feed of words or images on a phone while holding a conversation with a person sitting in front of you. Pearlstein's use of professional actors or performers has the same effect as Atlas's act but with opposing means, subtlety heightening the degree of reality or liveness in her performers' behavior. The performances are able to capture the tension between natural and affected, improvised and directed, announcing their own mediation the longer one watches. The artificial environment of the cyclorama (or the black box theater or the white cube gallery) limits the conception of time; the artist's camera further delineates it. Both performers and viewers are made exceptionally aware of the camera's presence as a simultaneous interloper and enabler. Time truly unfolds in these works, only to be collapsed back onto itself as the video loop starts again with no warning.

In Godard and Anne-Marie Miéville's *The Old Place* (1998), a video essay on the history of art commissioned by the Museum of Modern Art, Miéville states, "Art was not sheltered from time. It was the shelter of time." As has been demonstrated over the last forty years, video art has generated more fluid perceptions of time but has also absorbed more dominant forms of media in order to reflect them back to the viewer. Whereas the audience for early video art could effortlessly understand their intimate rapport with the television monitor, the contemporary audience has become increasingly removed from the immediacy of the experiences depicted in the works discussed in this essay. Though we as a culture are more invested in the moving image than ever before, we are more accustomed to the portable small screen than the wall-sized projection, to handheld cameras in lieu of camera crews and dollies, to abbreviated videos instead of ones of long duration, to viewing alone instead of among a crowd.

We can now coerce time into being accessible; it stops and starts to fit the contours of our daily lives, leading to an adaptation of time that has become absolutely quotidian and automatic. The works by Pearlstein, Tajima, and Atlas disturb this ease, putting forth individualized versions of abstraction formed through their gestures towards a sense of reality but never settling there. This reality is not subverted through narrative or illusory images seeking to deceive, but rather through our relationship to time and its production—particularly through the use of the camera. These works do not ask us for a suspension of disbelief but grant a deeper investigation of how temporal abstraction has become the new standard. Bringing about this awareness has been the priority of video artists since the origins of the genre, concurrently debunking the chronological tropes of film and television while providing innovation in the conception and reception of time. It may be the case now that in order to be displaced, to remove ourselves from our present tense, we need the elements particular to video installation: the darkened room or the contained set, the physicality of an installation where other bodies, real or projected, look back at us, move next to us. Ultimately, it remains the viewer's choice to

exit the gallery at any point, leaving the work to be "just there, ongoing, as itself," existing in its own particular temporality.

NOTES

1. Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (New York: Verso Books, 2013), 8.

2. Philip Auslander, "Liveness, Mediatization, and Intermedial Performance," *Degrés: Revue de synthèse à orientation sémiologique* (Spring 2000): 1.

3. Paul Sharits, "Statement regarding Multiple Screen/Sound 'Locational' Film Environments—Installation," *Film Culture* 65–66 (1978): 79–80.

4. Michael Auping and Bruce Nauman, "1,000 Words: Bruce Nauman Talks about Mapping the Studio," *Artforum* (March 2002): 121.

5. Christine Ross, "The Temporalities of Video: Extendedness Revisited," *Art Journal* (Fall 2006): 83.

6. Mika Tajima, quoted in Patricia Maloney, "Interview with Mika Tajima," *Art Practical*, August 2, 2012, www.artpractical.com/column/interview_with_mika_tajima/.

7. Suzanne Hudson, quoted in Charles Atlas, Suzanne Hudson, and Mika Tajima, "1,000 Words: Charles Atlas and Mika Tajima Talk about *The Pedestrians*, 2011," *Artforum* (May 2011): 259.

8. Charles Atlas, quoted in Atlas, Hudson, and Tajima, "1,000 Words," 260.

9. Mika Tajima, quoted in Atlas, Hudson, and Tajima, "1,000 Words," 260.

10. Mika Tajima, quoted in Maloney and Tajima, "Interview with Tajima."

11. Brian Henderson, "Toward a Non-bourgeois Camera Style," *Film Quarterly*, Winter 1970–71, 10.

12. Henderson, "Towards a Non-bourgeois Camera Style," 2, quoted in Alix Pearlstein and John Pilson, "Alix Pearlstein," *BOMB*, Winter 2012–13, 133.

13. Alix Pearlstein, quoted in Pearlstein and Pilson, "Alix Pearlstein," 133.

14. Mika Tajima, quoted in Atlas, Hudson, and Tajima, "1,000 Words," 261.

15. Pearlstein and Pilson, "Alix Pearlstein," 126.