

# PLATFORM 14

alix pearlstein



## PLATFORM 14: Alix Pearlstein

### The Park

Alix Pearlstein's videos explore performance within everyday spaces and environments. She choreographs actors and her camera, in equal measure, to create distilled moments of familiar strangeness—common actions that are made anew through performed and repeated gestures.

For PLATFORM 14, Pearlstein presents *The Park*, a three-channel video conceived for and filmed at deCordova as a composite “portrait-in-flux” of the Sculpture Park. The defining features of the institution—people, landscape, artworks, and the interactions between all three—comprise the ‘cast’ and subject of this work. Projected in the round as an immersive installation, *The Park* brings the outdoor experience into the museum to create an uncanny reflection of the visitor's encounter with art and nature.

Each screen features variations of the same key components: the main, grassy lawn of the Sculpture Park shot from three different angles; the same group of actors dressed in blue and black and choreographed in various states of repose; and the sculptures, Sol LeWitt's *Tower (DC)*, 2009 being the most prominent with cameos by additional bronze and steel works (Fig. 1). Over the course of four minutes, the actors move slowly and deliberately through the landscape, in and out of the frame, under Pearlstein's direction. They are arranged on the grass or stand near artwork, in the foreground, in groups, or alone, mimicking the leisurely gestures of park visitors. The soundtrack begins as soft ambient noises of a New England August afternoon—chirping of crickets and birds—to growing murmurs of human conversation. Meanwhile, the camera starts its equally choreographed movement—a relentless march into the lawn in a slow, forward tracking and zoom shot. As a result, background figures come to the fore while others are unceremoniously cropped away, and sculptures seen in the distant horizon take center stage. While all three scenes are variants of one another, the camera movement is the one constant, creating a feeling of expanding and shifting space in the gallery. In the final moments, the actors regroup and turn, en masse, to the camera—staring into the center of the room. Suddenly, you, the viewer, are surrounded and become the subject and performer of this staged moment in the park. The effect is ultimately an estrangement from a place you knew, or thought you knew.

While each frame of *The Park* begins with LeWitt's architectural, concrete structure—a tome to Minimalism—they conclude with markedly different artworks (Fig.1). On the left screen we see John Wilson's bronze *Eternal Presence*, 1987, a study for a seven-foot tall sculpture designed as a tribute to the history of African American people in Massachusetts (Fig. 2a). In the center, a large Cor-ten steel abstraction by Fletcher Benton (2002) fills half the frame (Fig. 2b); and in the right scene is William Tucker's bronze and gestural *Chinese Horse*, 2004 (Fig. 2c). In form, material, and subject matter these three metal sculptures stand in distinct contrast to *Tower (DC)*, a spiraling tower of concrete blocks, produced from a set of plans. In effect, the movement from the contained, geometric object to the figurative and metal works amplifies the contrast that Pearlstein sets up throughout *The Park*—the tension between direct and indirect gazes, solitude and gathering, acted and performed gestures, and art and nature. It is the space between each of these various poles that Pearlstein mines as her material for this expanded portrait of a place.

In addition to its function as a foil, *Tower (DC)* provides an apt pivot point for Pearlstein's video. One of LeWitt's late structures, it exemplifies the core tenets of LeWitt's Minimalist and Conceptualist sculpture, of repeated forms and actions that aggregate around language (in the form of the artist's instructions). Pearlstein similarly grounds her work in repetition and language, owing a great deal of her spare aesthetic and careful choreography to Minimalist sculpture. Like a Donald Judd metal stack or a LeWitt structure, Pearlstein uses limited and repeated elements in her direction: the color of the actor's clothing, the finite set of actions in each scene, and the direct, uniform camerawork. Whereas in this structure LeWitt used machine-made, identical elements, Pearlstein applies this legacy of modularity to a less controllable subject—human performance—not to reiterate sameness but to emphasize difference.



The people that populate *The Park* are all professional actors—whom Pearlstein has chosen for their precise training and control over their movements and expressions. And while they are broadly unified in blue and black dress, the actors stand out as a unique individuals and are recognizable as they appear throughout the three screens. For Pearlstein, the specificity and psychological potential of each person is important. What captures our attention and imagination in *The Park* is the suggested interactions between the actors and the camera, and the possible implications of those meetings. What could appear as a vignette of an afternoon in a park becomes a quizzical experience oscillating between natural and studied interactions and ending with an abrupt confrontation with the viewer. This tension is achieved, in part, by Pearlstein’s active direction of each actor’s gaze.

The machinations of the gaze—of the actors’ and the camera’s—has long been a subject and tool for Pearlstein as the connective element between video, cinema, and art’s long and winding history. In the nineteenth century, Modernism, one can say, was ushered in by a series of ‘self-aware’ paintings. Édouard Manet’s post-impressionist painting introduced jarring realism into the medium with a penchant for using prostitutes as models and through subjects that stared back, as if to acknowledge the viewer and artist.

Manet’s *Le déjeuner sur l’herbe* (*The Luncheon on the Grass*), 1862–1863 was a then-outrageous take on the classical genre of bathers in the landscape (Fig. 3). The painting features a nude woman addressing the viewer with her gaze as a group of dressed men talk amongst themselves, while another woman in a shift crouches in the background. If this configuration of figures in the landscape looks familiar it



Fig. 3

is no accident. Manet’s picnic scene yielded the formal armature for Pearlstein to structure her composition of contemporary figures in deCordova’s landscape. By doing so, Pearlstein uses compositional conventions from painting’s history in a time-based tableaux as a means to reveal contemporary manners of looking.

In this, Pearlstein falls in line with video and film artists who turn to painting as their structural models. A notable example is Bill Viola’s *The Greeting*, 1995, which restages Jacopo da Pontormo’s *Visitation*, 1528–29—portraying the New Testament scene in which Mary tells her cousin Elizabeth that she is expecting a child—as an embrace between two women in modern-day dress and setting. The 45-second interaction is slowed to ten minutes, giving their movements and minute gestures the weight and elegance of a choreographed dance. By quoting the well-known scene, Viola appropriates the emotional power of this historic and religious painting.

Like Viola, Pearlstein’s videos are rife with references to art historically significant paintings for their roles in establishing normative structures of representation.<sup>1</sup> As an artist invested in performance, she applies these tropes of image-making to the distinction between acting and performing. For Pearlstein “acting” is representation and performance is the lack of pretending.<sup>2</sup> And it is the dissonance between the two that she mines in her video work. In *The Park* we see this most explicitly in the moments when one actor is staring into the camera, acknowledging the viewers—enacting Manet’s nude’s direct gaze—while the others, in contrast, are talking amongst themselves, seemingly oblivious to the zooming camera lens.

A critical and defining presence in *The Park*, Pearlstein’s forward moving camerawork not only provides consistency throughout the three screens but reiterates this interest in the self-aware image. Here Pearlstein loosely quotes Michael Snow’s 1967 *Wavelength*, an



Fig. 2a

b

c

iconic work of structuralist film that can be described as a 45-minute-long zoom. Snow's fixed camera moves forward into an apartment space as people come and go, sit and have drinks, until a man enters and collapses. Indifferent to the events in the room, the film ends with a perfect focus on a photograph of the sea pinned on the back wall. Similarly, Pearlstein's camera in *The Park* is not linked to her actors' movements but moves in spite of them. Their presence is almost inconsequential to the camera. Here, the video once again reiterates that we are 'watching' as it directs attention to the park landscape and the sculptures lurking in the shadows.

As invested as Pearlstein is in her actors, the largest character in *The Park* is the setting. In fact, it is the title character. Pearlstein uses the landscape to both set and reflect the conditions of her performers' behaviors. While mise-en-scène is an important cinematic element, Pearlstein's distilled focus on the landscape setting links her to a generation of early performance / video artists along the lines of Bruce Nauman. His self-described *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square, 1967-68*, or *Stamping in the Studio, 1968*, operate as ruminations on what an artist does in the studio and the conditions set by the studio space as the defining and limiting factors to his actions (Fig. 4). In *The Park*, the rolling lawn, spiked with trees, rocks, and sculptures, defines the physical and conceptual framework for the actors.

While *The Park* uses the tropes of painting composition, film technique, and photography to create tension between the figures in the landscape, its subject and structural key is the three-dimensional sculpture in the landscape. This same dimensional space is reiterated in the three-channel installation, each scene projected on a different wall to envelop the viewer. By doing so, Pearlstein transports us into a video space version of the outdoors—one that is indeed fabricated and composed of impossible simultaneous views—to make us hyperaware of the physical act of watching and being watched in the landscape. She ends the video with a sharp



Fig. 4

underscoring of this point—turning each actor's gaze back into the gallery, onto you, the viewer. As a "portrait-in-flux" of a place shaped by and for artwork, *The Park* maintains the act of looking, as a spatial condition, as its primary subject and the defining characteristic of the Sculpture Park.

Dina Deitsch  
Curator of Contemporary Art  
deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum

<sup>1</sup> Also, when Pearlstein began working in video in the early 1990s, the image quality was very flat due to the limitations of the technology. Pearlstein opted to exaggerate these limitations rather than work against them by specifically using two-dimensional references from painting and photography. See John Pilson, "Alix Pearlstein," *Bomb Magazine*, Number 122, Winter, 2012 / 2013, p.130.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129. For Pearlstein, acting is representation and, as she explains, "by performance I mean that the performer is not pretending."

#### IMAGES

Fig. 1 and Fig. 2  
Alix Pearlstein  
*The Park*, 2014, 3-channel composite video stills  
3-channel HD video, 3:55 min.  
Courtesy of On Stellar Rays, NY

Featured in Fig. 1  
Sol LeWitt, *Tower (DC)*, 2009  
concrete block and mortar  
Courtesy of Barbara Krakow Gallery, Boston, MA and The Estate of Sol LeWitt and funded by Museum supporters at the 2008 deCordova Annual Benefit. © 2013 The LeWitt Estate / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Featured in Fig. 2  
a) John Wilson, *Eternal Presence*, 1987  
bronze maquette  
Museum Purchase to celebrate Director of Curatorial Affairs Rachel Rosenfield Lafo's 20th Anniversary at deCordova 2004.10

b) Fletcher Benton, *Donut with 3 Balls*, 2002  
Cor-ten steel  
Gift of Eva and Yoel Haller in honor of Barbara and Paul Pontecorvo, deCordova  
Permanent Collection 2006.38. © 2013 Fletcher Benton / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

c) William Tucker, *Chinese Horse*, 2004  
bronze  
Lent by the Artist, Courtesy McKee Gallery, New York, NY

Fig. 3  
Édouard Manet, *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe (The Luncheon on the Grass)*, 1863, oil on canvas,  
Photo: Hervé Lewandowski. Musée d'Orsay, Paris France © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY

Fig. 4  
Bruce Nauman, *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square*, 1967-68.  
Courtesy Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York.

## BIOGRAPHY

Alix Pearlstein was born in 1962, New York, NY, and lives and work in New York and Orient, NY. She received her B.S. from Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, and an MFA from Purchase College, SUNY, Purchase, NY. Selected solo exhibitions include Ballroom Marfa, Marfa, TX; Atlanta Contemporary Art Center, Atlanta, GA; On Stellar Rays, New York, NY; Contemporary Art Museum, St. Louis, MI; The Kitchen, New York, NY; MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, MA; and Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, IL. Performances have been presented at The Park Avenue Armory, Esopus Space, and Salon 94, NYC. Her works have been included in exhibitions at Whitechapel, London; The Center for Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv; The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY; ICA Philadelphia, PA; and The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY.

## PROGRAMMING

September 27, 2pm: Alix Pearlstein in conversation with playwright and *The Park* actor Masha Obolensky



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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special thanks to the wonderful cast and crew of *The Park*: Sarah Lasley, DP, Post-Production, Conform; Matt Thurber, AC; Djim Reynolds, Sound; Dan Boardman, Still Photography; Eduardo Restrepo, PA; Cindy Burton, PA / Media Loader; Brandi Diaz, Continuity; Erin Poor, Production Coordinator; Paul Geluso, Audio Mix; Georgia Lyman, cast; Paula McGonagle, cast; Omar Robinson, cast; John Kuntz, cast; Masha Obolensky, cast; Andrea Southwick, cast; Julia Moody; Carlie Bristow; and On Stellar Rays, New York, NY.

## PLATFORM

PLATFORM is a series of solo exhibitions by early- and mid-career artists from both the New England and national arts communities. These shows focus on work that engages with deCordova's unique spaces, both indoors and outdoors, and social, geographical, and physical location. The PLATFORM series is intended as a support for creativity and expression of new ideas, and as a catalyst for dialogue about contemporary art.

**MAY 16–OCTOBER 13, 2014**