

## Art

# In Alix Pearlstein's "Talent," All the Art World's a Stage

*A Chorus Line* gets an unusual downtown video revival

By **Martha Schwendener** Tuesday, May 4 2010



Production Still, Talent.

If it makes your stomach turn to hear that the musical is the Great American Art Form, you're not alone. But this shouldn't stop you from seeing [Alix Pearlstein's "Talent,"](#) two new videos at [On Stellar Rays](#) that start with a musical and end up revealing, with subtle, controlled mastery, some uncomfortable truths about the contemporary art world.

Pearlstein takes *A Chorus Line*—the gritty, consciously stripped-down mid-'70s musical that sprang from interviews with real-life "gypsies," the dancers that make up the supporting casts on Broadway—and cuts it with some seriously hardcore culture: structuralist and auteur filmmaking; the movement researches of Yvonne Rainer and the Judson Dance Theater; Brechtian theater; and early video art à la Bruce Nauman.

In *Talent*, the eponymous video projected on the wall upstairs, Pearlstein pans a line of actors standing in front of a mirror, holding head-shot photos in front of their faces. In *Finale*, downstairs, the camera is rooted in the center of the space and captures, as if by centrifugal force, the "informal"—but, of course, staged—scenarios of the actors taking a break around the room.

The narrative tension of *A Chorus Line*—will the auditioning dancers get a part?—is subverted by absurd gestures, like the actors passing a loaf of bread down the line, tearing off a hunk, and chewing it. Pearlstein breaks the fourth (or is it fifth?) wall by showing herself directing in the mirror behind—or, depending on your vantage point, in front of—the actors.

*A Chorus Line* provides a framework and auteur cinema a touchstone, but experimental film, performance, and video references pile up as well. Day turns to night through the windows, reflected in the mirror—a classic aperture/light meditation. At one point in *Finale*, the camera fixes on the lead casing of the windows and you're transported, by association, back to Michael Snow's 1967 *Wavelength*. Minutes later, we're staring out the window at the Empire State Building, conjuring up Warhol's eight-hour slow-motion epic *Empire* (1964). And the entire lateral setup of *Talent*, with performers before a mirror, mimics Dan Graham's 1975 *Performer/Audience/Mirror*.

Then there is theater. In her 2008 installation, *After the Fall* at the Kitchen, Pearlstein juxtaposed—or, essentially, collapsed—the experimental black-box theater with the white cube gallery space that has come to dominate the display, and ultimately the production, of contemporary art. In his *Artforum* essays collected as *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, published in 1976, Brian O'Doherty identified how, as the exhibition space overtook our perception and experience of art, "context became content."

Little has changed since O'Doherty wrote. The white cube still reigns; *A Chorus Line* succeeded partially by taking that stripped-down aesthetic of

experimental theater and packaging it for Broadway audiences. But Pearlstein takes the issue of context and how art's presentation and packaging affect its reception a step further. What the Broadway gypsies confront in *A Chorus Line* is the brutality of a dancer's career, brief and full of rejection. Remember the notorious number in which a female dancer sings about plastic surgery and how "tits and ass" are as important to casting directors as talent? Art suffers from the same tits-and-ass syndrome, a similar celebration of surface and packaging, except it's often buried under discussions of Kantian aesthetics or, more recently, the libratory philosophy of [Jacques Rancière](#).

To grasp this fully, it helps to know that Pearlstein's project shares a title with a sort-of-famous artwork from the 1980s: [David Robbins's \*Talent\*](#) (1986), a grid of black-and-white, actor-style headshots of art stars like [Cindy Sherman](#), [Jeff Koons](#), and [Jenny Holzer](#), which offered a deadpan demo of how celebrity culture had invaded art. Robbins later dropped out of the art world and moved to [Milwaukee](#), but he was in the generation of artists whose careers, and work itself, were impacted—both negatively and positively—by an unprecedented American art market boom. Post-conceptual artists became painters; art became larger, more colorful, and hence, more salable.

Pearlstein came of age in the early '90s, with a generation weaned on a bust and buoyed by an extended boom. But her own career and the fate of "difficult" (read: hard-to-sell) art like video and performance serve as a subtext for "Talent." *A Chorus Line* may offer a starting point for the work, but you end up far from entertainment and the rousing finale of the musical's closing number, "One." Instead, you're left contemplating the failed radical-utopian-aesthetic promises of the '60s and postmodernism's irony-laden critiques, and wondering, perhaps, where we go from here.