

82–87 Death Defying

Alexandra Pirici's  
materiality-burdened  
performances

By Wendy Vogel



*Co-natural*, 2018. Performed at New Museum, New York,  
2018. Photography by Julieta Cervantes. Courtesy of the  
artist and New Museum, New York.



*Aggregate*, 2017. Performed at Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, Berlin, 2017. Photography by Joseph Devitt Tremblay. Courtesy of the artist and Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, Berlin.

In "Alexandra Pirici: Co-natural," held at the New Museum in New York this spring, a performer recites an excerpt from President Ronald Reagan's 1988 speech at Moscow State University on the "information revolution," emblemized by the silicon chip. "In the new economy, human invention increasingly makes physical resources obsolete. We are breaking through the material conditions of existence to a world where man creates his own destiny," he says. A few lines later, the techno-utopian character of the address pivots to the biblical – namely, Genesis. "In the beginning was the Spirit, and it was from this spirit that the material abundance of creation issued forth." This collapse of technological, spiritual, and political discourses is at the heart of *Co-natural*. Pirici began her research with a simple question: Where does our body begin and where does it end? The resulting work includes a cast of five live performers and one holographic image, who enact a complex script over the course of each day (seven or nine hours, depending on the museum's schedule) for the exhibition's ten-week run. The pace of the non-looping work ebbs and flows, with performers accumulating and dispersing throughout the day. The human actors perform for four hours each, synchronizing their speech and movements with the hologram's one-hour looped recording. They perform vignettes ranging from treatises on horizontal gene transfer between plants and bacteria to embodying art-historical masterpieces – Pirici's now-trademark gesture. Throughout, heavy questions are posed about the weight of bodies, the value of life, and how a disembodied image might come to dominate the public imagination. Pirici's use of holograms is new, but she has long argued against a strictly oppositional relationship between the body and technology. "I have heard it theorized that the performative comes to contradict the alienation that is produced by technology and the digital, so that there's still a separation between the digital (meaning an image) and the live encounter with a body," she says.<sup>1</sup> "Whereas I see both the body and images as technology and media." To that end, *Co-natural* is an extension of her line of thought; even its title refutes the binary between natural and unnatural phenomena. Over the past few years, Pirici has become known for her often-irreverent performances that use bodily presence to interrogate symbols of power. The Romanian artist learned to be skeptical of historical grand narratives from a young age. Born in 1982 in Bucharest, Pirici experienced the 1989 Romanian Revolution as a child. She

began her training in classical ballet shortly thereafter, studying at the Vienna State Opera Ballet School as a teenager. Returning to Bucharest for her university studies, she branched out into contemporary dance. Her interests ran to the theoretically inclined pedestrian movements of the Judson Church group and "non-dance" artists like Jérôme Bel, who frequently casts amateurs in his works. As a young artist, she found a receptive community to her work at the city's National Dance Center. A series of works from 2011, "If You Don't Want Us, We Want You," confronted the monumentality of public sculpture. Their catalyst was protest. After the National Dance Center lost the lease on its space, due to lack of public funds, Pirici focused her attention on a group of statuary that the city had recently erected for millions of euros. She directed a group of dancers to mimic the statue's poses in front of it. Pirici wished to call attention to the discrepancy of value assigned to permanent artwork and performance. The public intervention provided, she has said, a cheaper alternative to the sculpture. Later performances from the same series revealed a more poetic sensibility, such as dancers lying in a shadow cast by a monument to the Romanian Revolution. A motivation to rewrite (art) history from the margins led to her breakthrough work two years later. She and her collaborator Manuel Pelmuș burst onto the world stage when they represented Romania at the 2013 Venice Biennale with *An Immaterial Retrospective of the Venice Biennale*. Every day, a group of dancers reenacted artworks shown throughout the exhibition's 118-year history, from paintings to scandals. Their "retrospective" challenged public memory and the received Eurocentric history of the biennial. *Public Collection*, a related work with Pelmuș from 2014, was a site-specific commission by Casino Luxembourg and MUDAM Luxembourg to "enrich" their museum collection with reenactments of artwork. Pirici continued to create performances in the theater context as well as that of visual art, which inspired the pop-driven *Delicate Instruments Handled with Care* (2014). In this work, dancers perform from a list of around fifty performative actions for the audience on command, from footballer Zinedine Zidane's famous headbutt to President Bill Clinton's apology to the nation. Pirici herself enacts a rendition of the music video to Beyoncé's "Drunk in Love," which shows her anti-theatrical sensibility. The move-for-move interpretation of Beyoncé's choreography – highly stilted when performed as a solo dance without the

effects of video montage – matches the awkward melody of the produced track sung a cappella. Pirici performs Beyoncé's pelvic thrusts on the beach and muscular dance-club moves without affect, visibly exhausted by the end of the song. Embracing the position of the amateur, Pirici calls attention to the currency of visibility, and what she has described as "the accelerated and heightened exchange between internet culture and high culture." *Signals* (2016), Pirici's commissioned work for the 9th Berlin Biennale, curated by the collective DIS, epitomized her fascination with what she calls "the protocols of the internet rather than the aesthetics." During the performance, a group of performers wearing motion-capture suits presented content selected by viewers, like Kim Kardashian's "Break the Internet" *PAPERMAG* cover and Janelle Monáe's protest track "Hell You Talmhout." Although Pirici choreographed the list of performed actions, Facebook's EdgeRank system determined the order in which they were viewed – and allowed the audience to see the ranking system. The performers' motion-capture suits were intended to simulate the mechanical vision of the camera, Pirici says. Performers only come into view as they approach the viewer, under specific lighting conditions. A year later, her work *Aggregate* at Neue Berliner Kunstverein utilized more than eighty performers (both amateur and professional) to enact a list of actions that addressed the "ark" of collected human data, such as the NASA Golden Record launched into space in 1977. With her swarm of performers, who often outnumbered viewers, Pirici also hoped to probe the neutrality of the white-cube gallery space, which implies that space is empty and open to colonization. Two related performances from 2017 diverged from pop-culture territory to engage with specific political histories. Pirici conceived *Parthenon Marbles* at the Acropolis in Athens as a performance that symbolically repatriates the stones, which are part of the British Museum collection. Five performers recited a text – authored by Pirici and writer Victoria Ivanova – that considered the circulation of cultural artifacts alongside the concept of the derivative as a tool of finance. At Skulptur Projekte Münster last summer, Pirici sited her contribution, titled *Leaking Territories*, at the town hall where the Treaty of Münster was signed in 1648 as part of the Peace of Westphalia. The treaty inaugurated the concept of the nation-state through international law. Her performers recite the distance between Münster and various events of international significance, such as



the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, and represent them, envisioning an alternative to the rising political current of isolationism.

*Co-natural* opens a new chapter in Pirici's work, one that is burdened with heavy materiality. Not only must the five live performers be compensated for their daily labor, but the work — a New Museum commission — includes a high-tech holographic performer (a recording of Farid Fairuz, one of Pirici's longtime Romanian collaborators). Pirici explains that the hologram is actually a "Pepper's ghost" projection, "a technique that removes figure from ground." The illusion has been used to create "holographic" images of dead musical artists such as Tupac Shakur, Maria Callas, and Roy Orbison for recent live tours. Pirici says that very few people call into question what it means to be able to remove and contextualize an image at will. Nonetheless, the technique remains controversial. Just days before Pirici's exhibition opened in February, rumors flew that a hologram of the late musician Prince would accompany Justin Timberlake during the Super Bowl halftime show. Prince called virtual reality "demonic" in an interview in 1998, and friends and family felt the technology went against his Christian beliefs (he converted to the conservative Jehovah's Witnesses denomination in 2001). Prince's image was instead projected on a diaphanous sheet, as tall as a building. Developed in the mid-nineteenth century, the Pepper's ghost illusion technique involves reflecting an image through a glass or foil placed at an angle to the viewer. For *Co-natural*, three projectors are mounted above a glass pyramid and reflected into a mirrored surface at its base. The light bounces through the pyramid, giving the effect of a three-dimensional performer moving inside. As the exhibition's curator Helga Christoffersen says, Pirici wanted an image that could be circumambulated — a viewing experience distinct from the highly orchestrated concert tours. There is no algorithmic dimension to *Co-natural*, but in a way, it synthesizes all of Pirici's earlier themes: data circulation, enactments of historical symbols and artworks, speculations on

geographical distances and affinities. Pirici says that she has become interested in technologies of "extraction and abstraction," relating philosopher Arjun Appadurai's notions of "slicing and dicing" in financialization to data economics and holographic technology. She likens financialization — the ways that "one's credit, one's mortgage, one's debt can be bundled into financial instruments, further recombined and sold as derivatives on the stock market" — to the way that online data can be monetized outside an individual's control. So, too, can one's image (and, perhaps soon, consciousness) be reanimated for profit.

In *Co-natural*, live actors walk slowly around the darkened space or perform on a low plinth that resembles a photographic lightbox. Their sequences begin with one performer making eye contact with an audience member, explaining, "I will attempt to produce meaning. You might watch and interpret. I will transmit all I can from relations that are lost, forgotten, or hidden." A list of data recited by individual performers moves from the specific to the general — their own heights and weights, the weight and electricity used daily by the hologram — to the going rates for various commodities, from an abalone to a human slave (calculated in dinars). Like some of Pirici's earlier performances, text is privileged over images. The holographic performer uses sign language, destabilizing the boundary between speech and image. At regular intervals, Paula Gherghe, a frequent performer in Pirici's work, performs Puccini's famous aria "Un bel di, vedremo" from *Madame Butterfly* while pacing through the space. For the opera-ignorant, it's a crowd-pleasing meme; for the opera-savvy, it's a song of longing in a work that questions the politics of colonization.

The most searing sequences in the work imagine futuristic forms of anticolonial activity. In one scene, a performer announces "the soul has not yet passed to the image." The live actors and the hologram hold invisible banners, which the artist describes as a demonstration "against the totalizing power of the image" and its claims of wholeness. Indeed, evocations of protest imagery pervade *Co-natural*. There are references to

artworks and iconic photographs, such as South African artist Gerard Sekoto's social realist painting *Song of the Pick* (1946–47) depicting black farm workers; Tommie Smith and John Carlos's 1968 Black Power salute; and Cuban-American artist Ana Mendieta's performative work *Rastros Corporales* (*Body Tracks*) (1982). Some of the performed images relate to the ongoing debate about the removal of Confederate statues in the United States, like the (preserved) Christopher Columbus statue in Central Park and the (removed) Confederate General Robert E. Lee sculpture at the University of Texas. Pirici says she is surprised it took so long for the U.S. to deal with the semantics of public monuments, which became a matter of civic debate in the former Eastern Bloc shortly after the end of the Cold War. After walking out of *Co-natural*, with its heavy questions about life and death, what lingered in my mind was the recitation of this stanza from the late Iranian poet Forugh Farrokhzad's poem "Reborn":

A body traveling along the line of time  
impregnates time's barren cord,  
and returns from the mirror's feast  
intimate with its own image.  
This is how one dies, and another remains.

In Farrokhzad's verse, the "line of time" could as easily be a length of cable as an umbilical cord. I was chilled thinking about the reproduction experiments of the film *Blade Runner 2049*. What Pirici's piece brings to light are the complications around capture and, in a moment that is marked as deeply by the #metoo movement as anticolonial sentiment, notions of consent beyond physical death.

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*If You Don't Want Us, We Want You*, 2011. Sculptural addition to the equestrian of Carol I. Performance in Bucharest, 2011. Photography by Tudor Borduz. Courtesy of the artist.

1 From a conversation with the artist, January 2018.

2 Forugh Farrokhzad, "Reborn," in *Sin: Selected Poems of Forugh Farrokhzad*, trans. Sholeh Wolpé (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2007), pp.79-82.