

FIGURE AND WOUND: THE HUMAN BODY IN SHAHRYAR NASHAT'S PRESENT SORE

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Shahryar Nashat's Present Sore (2016, video, 9 minutes), viewable on the Walker Channel February 18 through March 18, 2016, is part of the second set of Moving Image Commissions; his piece responds to the rich conceptual legacy of Belgian poet, filmmaker, and artist Marcel Broodthaers.

In 1983, when feminist scholar Donna Haraway began writing “A Cyborg Manifesto,” her landmark essay that would come to redefine forms of gender classification and the conditions of what it is to be human, she speculated upon describing the limits of physicality. “Why should our bodies end at the skin?” Haraway’s question was not an attempt to create a definition but an extension. Rather than articulate a body’s limit, this was a provocation to imagine an array of new possibilities—possibilities that would dilate *the idea* of the body beyond the purely descriptive notion of flesh and bone, and reposition physicality within a discussion of power and identity. Three decades on, her provocation remains integral to considering how one’s most absolute form—one’s own body—is presently described through culture and aesthetics, subjected to law, and conditioned by access to and use of technology.

Reflecting upon what the “ideal body” might look like in the 21st century, artist Shahryar Nashat’s new Walker Moving Image Commission, *Present Sore* (2016), engages Haraway’s question by constructing a moving image of a human form whose mobility, physicality, and sensuality are comprehensively mediated by a series of objects and technologies that Nashat

loosely groups under the term “prosthetics.” Clothes, exfoliants, lubricants, artificial limbs, prophylactics, money, medication—these are contemporary industrially made objects that are displayed upon, attached to, or ingested into the body on a metabolic level. Akin to the ways in which classical painting would seek to augment the persona of a human figure with attributes, emblems, or allegorical objects, the human form in *Present Sore* is so completely embedded (and occasionally obscured) within this array of objects that it surfaces only *through* its interaction with the synthetic; the artificial is ingested into or presented as an extension of the human form.

“I don’t think Greco-Roman, muscular, or athletic qualities represents the body that is in any way ideal, but rather the body that demonstrates itself through its dependencies and vulnerabilities,” says Nashat of the work. “I’m interested in how expressions of injury, difficulty, and dependency expose certain qualities and values of contemporary life.” *Present Sore* thus seeks to articulate elements that might constitute a body’s “aliveness.” It supposes that the body can never be fully described in perfect isolation, but rather through a composite of objects that signify discomfort and pleasure, as well as attempts to control such experiences. Starting at the feet and ending at the head, the human figure in *Present Sore* is, in the artist’s words, “gentrified”—an active participant in the replacement and displacement of values within a given site, which is, in this case, the cultural body.

“We know nothing about a body until we know what it can do,” write theoreticians Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their 1980 essay “Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal, Becoming-Imperceptible.” “What its affects are, how they can or cannot enter into composition with other affects, with the affects of another body, either to destroy that body or to be destroyed by it, either to exchange actions and passions with it or to join with it in composing a more powerful body.” Here, the composition of the human figure is not a container of an individual’s agency, but rather something externally constructed and enabled. Capacity is thus determined from the outside; the body is governed by the force of others, their violence or tenderness, and by rules about what it can be or should do.

It is significant that Nashat’s video was commissioned in response to the ongoing legacies of Belgian conceptual artist Marcel Broodthaers (1924–1976). Throughout his work, Broodthaers’s repeatedly used the term “figure” (which he commonly abbreviated “fig.”) to indicate the double role of an object, calling attention to the difference of an object observed and an object as an image.

He would often deploy his own adaptations of friend and artist René Magritte's notorious painting *The Treachery of Images* (1928–1929) and its depiction of a pipe next to the phrase “Ceci n'est pas une pipe” (“This is not a pipe”). Broodthaers was not so much interested in an expression of lack between meaning and symbol but rather sought to foreground the infidelity of and impossibility of embodied meaning. Curator and art historian Dirk Snauwaert's definition of “figure” provides a useful parallel to thinking about *Present Sore's* representation of the contemporary human body—its resistances to interpretation, as well as its vulnerabilities. Snauwaert describes “figure” as:

the stage of observation when things are on the point of being named, when the object is about to be connected with a concept. Figure thus implies seeing, observing, but not yet explaining. Unlike the symbol, which is recognized and defined within a discourse, the figure is open and unconstructed. In this respect it corresponds to a work of art, which is open and ambiguous as well, and operates by evading definition. Figure cannot be reduced to a single meaning.

Where Broodthaers assembled a sophisticated rebus of a practice constituted through poetry, graphics and film—one engaged in exposing the indiscriminate and varied attachment of meaning to images and words—Nashat's relationship to image-making calls attention to the similarly promiscuous and often queer relations between the desire for a body and desire for the image of a body. The latter's art presents an often contrarian space, where sensuality is both performed and interrupted, displayed, and redacted. In its complex editorial structure, for example, *Present Sore's* rapidly switching screen wipes and composite images of the human body paradoxically pushes the eye away from the subject it seeks to comprehend. The combination of the lingering camera and the restless cut work to simultaneously animate and suppress visual cognition of the figure. No longer caressing the body with a subjective gaze, even the viewer's eye is reduced to the mechanism of scan, running into the black margins of the image. Thus the represented body remains plural and inexplicably embedded within objects and moving parts.

Incorporating mediums of sculpture, photography, installation and moving image, Nashat's work of the past decade has singularly committed itself to looking at the human body, asking: what are the cultural trappings that make a body desirable, heroic, pornographic, or vulnerable? What are the modes of access, regulation, conditioning between an eye and the body it comprehends? In his later videos especially, Nashat's camera probes forms both organic and man-made for attributes that could be described as hominal—the texture that might resemble skin, the bend and flex of a substance that appears animate, a gesture that appears human and is

not or, inversely, a human gesture that appears mechanical.

Frequently, his works use representations of visual pleasure as a substitute for the other senses of the body. Short video works like *One More Time With James* (2009) depict two men in a high-end perfumery performing a transaction that is, in essence, denied to the viewer (purchasing a fragrance) but rendered instead as a glassy dreamscape, while *Hustle in the Hand* (2014) comprises the theatrical presentation of a grazed arm to the camera, where the act of injury is suppressed in favor of a fixation on the aesthetics of a human wound. In each of Nashat's works, physical theater is uneasily presented as high artifice, consciously and sometimes painfully aware of how its sensuality is fetishized for the camera. Diegetic sounds of human action are eliminated to make way for the feigned authenticity of foley effects, while human movement is exaggerated to the point that chance gestures are repeatedly looped to appear premeditated or inevitable, recalling the abstracted advertising imagery of conceptual artists and filmmaker Peter Roehr (1944–1968).

Present Sore is the most aggressively constituted image of Nashat's work to date. It is a conglomeration of hard wipes, a dissonant database of sounds, and a forensic image of a single body that has in fact been rendered from many individuals (including stunt men, actors, sex workers) whose different skin tones and ethnic heritages appear graded into a uniform median color. "Organic, digital, mediated, injured, veteran," lists Nashat, "any kind of body is now available for representation."

Even intimacy is shown as an effect produced via camera. What might in isolation be considered archetypal expressions of emotional closeness in film—a close-up of the body, discreet hand gestures and touching, over-the-shoulder camera positions—are mechanized through loops and discordant foley. And on a structural level, physical intimacy with the viewer is fabricated through the 90-degree rotation of the widescreen aspect ratio into 9:16, a format most commonly experienced through hand-held mobile devices. Not simply primary portrait format of the 21st century, *Present Sore*'s aspect ratio is a frame optimized for holding the image in proximity to one's own body. It is the ubiquitous yet private "user" view for most moving images today.

Yet, despite these aggressive technological interventions upon the human body, at the very center of *Present Sore* lies not an archetype or composite, but a found object: Paul Thek's 1965 sculpture, *Hippopotamus from Technological Reliquaries*, which is housed in the Walker Art Center's permanent collection. Presented as an interlude from the juddering mechanics of the

composite body, this dream sequence imagines an interior altogether different from the body scenes that bookend it. The symbolism of this dream space escapes contemporary mechanisms, and imports a different time into *Present Sore*—the period of the Thek work itself, one that is notably pre-AIDS but concurrent with another humanitarian crisis: the Vietnam War.

Thek's *Hippopotamus* consists of a lump of flesh placed within the sanitizing and museological conditions of a transparent vitrine. Made in direct response to the political campaigns that supported American military intervention in Vietnam, Thek noted of the work:

I was amused at the idea of meat under Plexiglas because I thought it made fun of the scene—where the name of the game seemed to be “how cool you can be” and “how refined.” Nobody ever mentioned anything that seemed real. The world was falling apart, anyone could see it.

With Nashat's highly selective camera positions and macro shots of *Hippopotamus*, this “interior” scene is slowly revealed not so much the desired escape from the pressures exerted upon the contemporary body, but an indication of the wound beneath. The negative and unseen space that Thek rendered in order to provoke the unspoken horror of war is here shown to persist within the contemporary body. This is an atrophied cultural wound that, like the term of the “figure,” remains open and unreconstructed—the present sore.

<https://walkerart.org/magazine/figure-and-wound-the-human-body-in-shahryar-nashats-present-sore>