

Leaver-yap, Mason, "Figure and Wound: The Human Body in Shahryar Nashat's *Present Sore*," *Question The Wall Itself*, Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2017

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Mason
LEAVER-YAP

In 1983, when the 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 on describing the limits of physicality. "Why should our bodies end at the skin?"¹ Haraway's question was an attempt to create not a definition but an extension. Rather than articulating 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 on what the "ideal body" might look like in the twenty-first century, the artist Shahryar Nashat's 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, money, medication—these are contemporary industrially made objects that are displayed on, 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,

1 Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 178.

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muscular, or athletic qualities represent 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."²

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 must be defined 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.³

2 Shahryar Nashat, conversation with author, January 2016.

3 Ibid.

Shahryar NASHAT, *Present Sore* (at left); installation view, *Model Malady*, Portikus, Frankfurt am Main, 2016

"We know nothing about a body until we know what it can do," wrote the theoreticians Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, "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."⁴ 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 legacy of the Belgian Conceptual artist Marcel Broodthaers. Throughout his work Broodthaers repeatedly

4 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 257.

used the term *figure* (which he commonly abbreviated *fig.*) to indicate the double role of an object, calling attention to the difference between an object observed and an object as an image (p. 157). He would often deploy his own adaptations of his friend René Magritte's famous painting *La trahison des images* (The treachery of images, 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 and impossibility of embodied meaning. The 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 resistance to interpretation as well as its vulnerabilities. According to Snauwaert, the term *figure* "applies to 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."⁵

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 the desire for an image of a body. The latter's art presents an often contrarian space, in which sensuality is performed and interrupted, displayed, and redacted. In its complex editorial structure, with rapidly switching screen wipes and composite images of the human body,

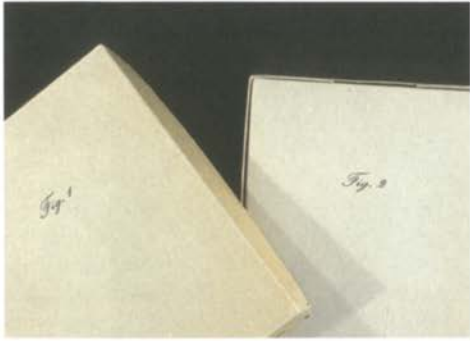
Present Sore paradoxically pushes the eye away from the subject it seeks to comprehend. The combination of the lingering camera and the restless cut works to simultaneously animate and suppress visual cognition of the figure. No longer caressing the body with a subjective gaze, even the viewer's eye 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, and conditioning between an eye and the body it comprehends? In his more recent 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 but 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. The short video work *One More Time with James* (2009; p. 157) depicts 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 Hand* (2014) consists of the theatrical presentation of a grazed arm to the camera, in which 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

5 Dirk Snauwaert, "The Figures," trans. Kaatje Cusse, *October*, no. 42 (Autumn 1987): 128.

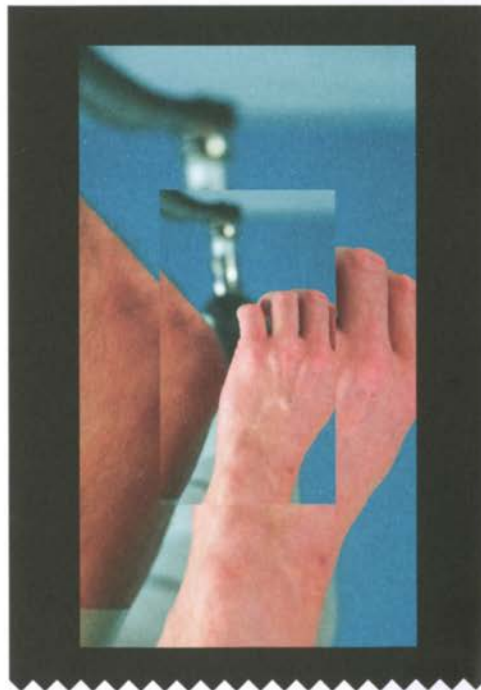
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Marcel BROODTHAERS.
Film als Objekt—Objekt als Film
(Film as object—object as film), 1971

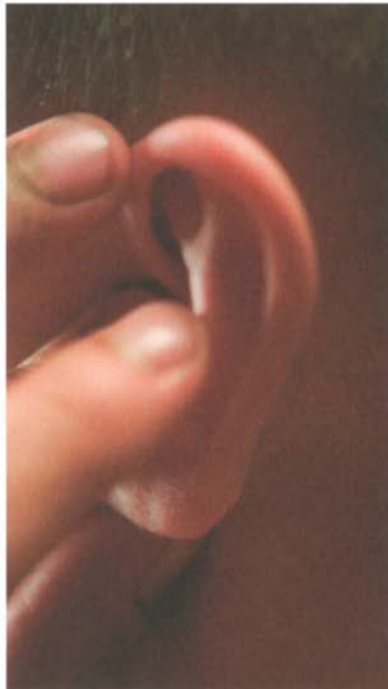


Shahryar NASHAT.
still from *One More Time*
with James, 2009



Shahryar NASHAT, *Present Sore*; installation view and still.
Model Malady, Portikus, Frankfurt am Main, 2016

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chance gestures are repeatedly looped to appear premeditated or inevitable, recalling the abstracted advertising imagery of the conceptual artist 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 stuntmen, actors, and 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."⁶

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 ninety-degree rotation of the wide-screen aspect ratio into 9:16, a format most commonly experienced through handheld mobile devices. Not simply the primary portrait format of the twenty-first 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.

Despite these aggressive technological interventions into the human body, at the very center of *Present Sore* lies not an archetype or a composite but a found object: Paul Thek's sculpture *Hippopotamus* (1965), from the series *Technological Reliquaries*, which is housed in the Walker Art Center's 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 book-end 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*, made in direct response to the political campaigns that supported American military intervention in Vietnam, consists of a lump of flesh placed within the sanitizing and museological conditions of a transparent vitrine. 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."⁷

With Nashat's highly selective camera positions and macro shots of *Hippopotamus*, this "interior" scene is not an escape from the pressures exerted on 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 figure, remains open and unreconstructed—the present sore.

6 Nashat, conversation with author.

7 Paul Thek, quoted in Richard Flood, "Paul Thek: Real Misunderstanding," *Artforum* 20 (October 1981): 49.