

ARTFORUM

Adam Linder and Shahryar Nashat

MOMA - THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

Curated by Stuart Comer and Ana Janevski with Giampaolo Bianconi



View of "Shahryar Nashat: Force Life," 2020. Foreground, from left: *Brain (are you nervous in this system)*, 2020; *Barre (when will you get rid of my body)*, 2020; *Brain (you no longer have to simulate)*, 2020. Background: *Blood (what is authority)*, 2020. Photo: Denis Doorly.

CONTEXT MAY NOT BE EVERYTHING, but it is inescapable. And for the New York performance/art world, no context in recent memory was more highly anticipated than the Marie-Josée and Henry Kravis Studio, unveiled as part of the Museum of Modern Art's celebrated \$450 million renovation. The Studio was billed as a "new live space dedicated to performance, music, sound, spoken word, and expanded approaches to the moving image." That seemed like a lot to relegate to what was revealed to be a modestly sized "state of the art" gallery (standing capacity: 175) with wood-block flooring and a glass wall overlooking tony Fifty-Third Street. For those of us hoping the institution would finally dedicate a fair cut of permanent space to the rich history of performance, the favoring of expensive views over an expansive, flexible footprint indicated, dispiritingly, that the museum had given greater consideration to real estate than to the works that would be presented inside of it.

Expectations and budgets were high for the Studio's inaugural commission, which in the public eye would serve not only as evidence of MoMA's investment in contemporary "process and time-based art," as they put it, but also as a benchmark for the artistry deemed worthy of the museum's ranks. On this occasion, Department of Media and Performance chief curator Stuart Comer anointed Shahryar Nashat and Adam Linder, who presented a diptych of sorts: *Force Life*, Nashat's three sculptures and fourteen-minute video, remained on view throughout museum hours, except when interrupted by *Shelf Life*, Linder's hour-long performance, which occurred two times a day, three on Fridays. I attended twice.

Conceived as complements to one another (the Los Angeles-based but peripatetic duo are also romantic partners), the works were intended to address how systems—physical, technological, institutional, aesthetic—frame, shape, and move a body. In Nashat's frenetic, large-scale, single-channel HD video *Blood (what is authority)* (all works 2020), a voice-over incanted the titular question, "What is authority?" in the dulcet, synthetic-feminine tones that telegraph late capitalism. (Think Siri's angular sonority or Laurie Anderson's erstwhile brand of sing-speak.) Answers were occasionally offered up too: "In a nutshell, it would be the ability to—in the most dominant sense of the word—to sort of punch out someone's lives. To take away their agency and to take their brain apart." Images of a supine, comely boy were intercut with closeups of his body, the carpet beneath him, found footage of two kids goofballing for the camera, specters of abstracted figures, and solarized shots of monkeys and wolves.

Nashat's sculptures were reticent in comparison. *Brain (you no longer have to simulate)* and *Brain (are you nervous in this system)* were monochromatic, made of milled marble, and stood like stubby sentinels near the Studio's entrance. *Barre (when will you get rid of my body)*, a fiberglass monolith



Shahryar Nashat, *Blood (what is authority)*, 2020, 4K video, color, sound, 14 minutes 15 seconds.

that looked as though it had been crushed and felled, bisected the gallery's center. Each of the installation's elements was meant to evoke a mode of receiving and perceiving art: via the eye, the body, and the mind, here fractured across the space to mirror the ways our experience of the world is fractured across media and technologies. If the video was at times flat-footed, the objects materialized their subjects obliquely, looking perfectly pricey while feeling only half-resolved.

When a piped-in voice announced, "Switching Nashat to Linder," the performers entered and rotated the video screen to reveal a shallow stage and a barre mounted to its verso. *Shelf Life*, per the brochure, was Linder's exploration of "how a choreographic structure can be contained by the space and time of an exhibition . . . and how the virtuosity and ephemeral nature of performance are defined within the context of a museum," with the performance rooted in three elements—blood, brain, and barre—essential to dance. Each iteration featured four distinguished performers from a rotating cast of six—Leah Katz, Justin F. Kennedy, Mickey Mahar, Angie Pittman, Brooke Stamp, and Sandy Williams—all but one sporting a bronze-green bodysuit that hit a semiotic note somewhere between modern-dance unitard and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle, and all but one doing surprisingly little dancing.

Linder's performance frayed as it unfolded—busily, fussily—its pieces and parts never achieving a fineness of focus. One performer presided at the barre wearing what looked to be a small oxygen tank and whispered into a headset throughout the piece. Another (a magnetic, muscular Williams, both times I watched) stuttered and writhed around the room. A pair of dancers spent time together on their hands and knees marking animal-like poses, lifting their hands like paws and cocking their heads as though catching the sound of a nearby predator. Then one of them, equipped with another headset mic and emulating that generic AI voice, recited a long list of seemingly arbitrary questions:

"How much energy does it take to keep your eyelids open?"
"Are there hierarchies of intelligence?"
"Who makes you feel algorithmic?"
"Have you ever accidentally called your teacher 'Mommy'?"
"How fragile is your masculinity?"

Of course, questions can be potent rhetorical devices: Gregg Bordowitz's book-length treatise *Volition* and Padgett Powell's novel *The Interrogative Mood* (both 2009) are precise and provocative exemplars, relentlessly immersing readers in the condition of inquiry in part to liquidate form—their onslaughts of questions exerting an almost material force. *Shelf Life* deployed this strategy so softly as to demote it to mere reference, signaling thought rather than conjuring or manifesting it.

It's not an unusual shortcoming in contemporary art: *Questioning* has become the default mode of the savvy artist. And while art isn't always expected to provide answers, it should present vivid visions that arrive from the artist's rigorous investigations of their own craft; at the very least, some kind of passion for the work itself should be palpable. Here, I felt that I was watching a performance of an idea of performance, a self-immolating bid for



Adam Linder, *Shelf Life*, 2020. Rehearsal view, January 31, 2020. Brooke Stamp and Justin F. Kennedy. Photo: Denis Doorly.

relevance that, in its “questioning” of authority, had sacrificed the explosive potential of dance to serve the museum’s image of itself. I began to wonder about the limits of a conversation about the ways power shapes bodies and artworks when that conversation is burnished by a shiny institution’s even shinier dime.

IT DIDN’T HELP anyone’s cause when Magazine, MoMA’s online publication, posted two essays on *Force Life* and *Shelf Life*, one by Shannon Jackson, a professor of rhetoric and performance studies at the University of California, Berkeley, whose take on Linder’s and Nashat’s works underestimated her readers’ intelligence. Perhaps as a subversive gesture, she mirrored the choreographer’s unfortunate disquisitive tic:

Once Linder’s piece begins, are the objects now props? Is the installation a set?

While the show was up, Gladstone Gallery announced representation of Nashat, who also works with David Kordansky Gallery and Rodeo Gallery. I’ll therefore vote that his installation lands squarely in the category of art.

What to make of the slight shock in hearing a moving body talk?

I wonder what to make of the slight shock of learning that a performance professor was shocked by a talking body?

For Linder, the time is right for noticing the material virtuosity and historic skill of the dancing body.

While I heartily welcome a reproach to the grand arc from skilling to de-skilling, merely *noticing*—like *questioning*—is not enough. The work must also work.

Inside the Kravis Studio, the question “What is authority?” could never ring only as a political challenge; it was also going to resound as an aesthetic one. Sharing space with masterworks of the Western canon spanning more than one hundred years, contemporary artists will be expected to possess at least some of the qualities this context implies: mastery, decisive action, vision. In this regard, this room, though not large, is an enormous space to fill.

MoMA has succeeded brilliantly with its historical performance-oriented shows, most recently the sublime “Judson Dance Theater: The Work Is Never Done” (2018) and last year’s invigorating “member: Pope.L, 1978–2001,” both of which took up multiple spaces and galleries. But its track record with “emerging” artists is spottier and often irresponsible, bringing some to attention—I think of Juliana Huxtable in 2015 and Alexandra Bachzetsis in 2017—before they were able to hold it. For an institution of MoMA’s magnitude—a public institution that perpetually risks seeming like a concierge for private interests—to present new talent is a complicated undertaking. The curators would do well to remember that while the museum and the Kravis

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