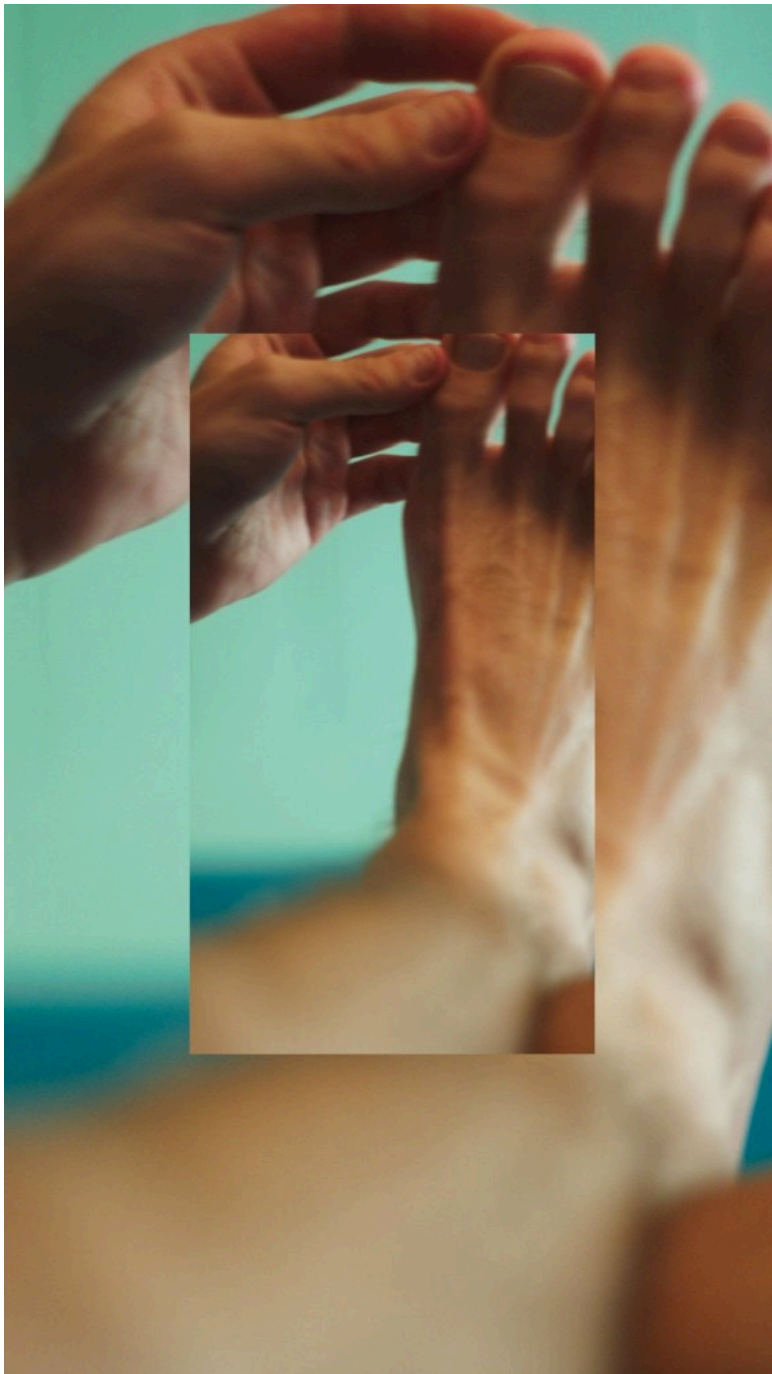


Leaver-Yap, Ilsa, "A Narrative for the Body: Shahryar Nashat's 'Present Sore'," *Blogs.WalkerArt.org*, April 13, 2016

## WALKER ART CENTER

### A Narrative for the Body: Shahryar Nashat's *Present Sore*

BY ISLA LEAVER-YAP



Shahryar Nashat, *Present Sore*, 2016, video, 9 minutes. A Walker Moving Image Commission

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*Artist Shahryar Nashat recently made Present Sore (2016), a composite portrait of the 21st-century body mediated by substances both organic and fabricated. In this new interview, Walker Bentson Moving Image Scholar Isla Leaver-Yap and Portikus curator Fabian Schöneich ask Nashat what drives his work—the politics of the body, its digital and physical augmentations, and its obsolescence.*

*Present Sore is presented on the Walker Channel from April 8 through May 31, 2016, as part of the Walker’s Moving Image Commissions. It is also featured in the Portikus exhibition Model Malady (April 22–June 19, 2016).*

**Fabian Schöneich:** Your most recent video, *Present Sore*, streams online via the Walker Channel and is installed in your gallery exhibition at Portikus. The format of this work is vertical: 9:16 instead of 16:9. It reminds me of the way people shoot video on their phone. Can you tell us what led to your decision of rotating your camera?

**Shahryar Nashat:** It’s true—smartphones have generalized the use of vertical framing. When I came to Portikus for an initial site visit and saw the gallery, I immediately saw how a 16:9 format video would be crushed by the height of the space. On top of that, I had always struggled with the horizontal format of 16:9 because you can never fill the frame when you want to capture a limb vertically. *Present Sore* is an oblique high-definition figure study of a composite body. The video’s upward progression (from feet to head) necessitated a vertical format.

**Schöneich:** Your work often questions and highlights the homogeneity between object and body. Abstract but clean objects are representational of the body, or else the body is representational for the object or the sculpture. In *Present Sore*, we see the human body not as a whole, only in detail—like a close-up of the knee or the hand.

**Isla Leaver-Yap:** Totally. *Present Sore*’s focus on detail fragments the subject, showing the mechanical moving “parts” of the body and isolating their function as tools. This fragmentation implicates a wider cultural landscape that has preferences for certain types of bodies, pointing as well to an economic landscape that obfuscates the parts of labor—both human and inhuman. Shahryar, I was wondering if you could speak to this “composite” quality you referred to earlier, and talk about the bodies, types, and genders you choose as your subjects?

**Nashat:** Mainstream cultural representation of the human body privileges a homogeneous and wholesome body. I have always searched to represent bodies that sit outside those traditional ideals. The bodies I’m interested in might have diverse motor functions, cosmetic interventions, and applications. Like the injured elbow in *Hustle in Hand* (2014, video, 19 minutes). That’s why I like wounds or prosthetics. They signal injury and, therefore, anomaly. Limbs are similarly interesting. Framed away from the rest of the body, they question it, while also allowing some psychological distance from the notion of persona. For me, this is where you open the door for desire and projection.



Shahryar Nashat, *Hustle in Hand*, 2014, HD video, 10 minutes  
Courtesy Rodeo, London; Silberkuppe, Berlin

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**Leaver-Yap:** What do you mean by "desire" and "projection"? Both terms seem particularly resonant with how your work intersects with ideas of queerness. Your work blurs lines between fetish and tool and often trades in promiscuous formal relations, by which I mean things that resemble or "stand in" for that which they represent but also complicate that representation: a vertical format as a body, a Paul Thek artwork of a rotting piece of flesh for a psychic human wound, or an artificial prosthesis as a 21st-century ideal tool for the body.

**Nashat:** I think art has always operated with the mechanics of desire and projection. Not only as an incentive for an artist to make work but the way the work is appreciated and consumed by the audience. The "stand-in" is a powerful strategy because it works through deception, which is another powerful ingredient. It all sounds very theoretical, but what I guess I am trying to say is that the frustration of meaning is central to any work because it creates desire. The tools I use in my work—framing, editing, a geometric object next to the close-up of a wound—participate in that enterprise.

**Schöneich:** Does imperfection define desire for you?

**Nashat:** "Perfect" versus "imperfect" sounds like "good" versus "bad." I don't think it's about morals. When I watch a movie or TV show, for example, the interesting characters are not necessarily the ones that have personality flaws or act inconsistently. I don't care whether they're good or bad people. But I do like it when there is a perversion in them, some kind of inconsistency. Incoherency creates a compelling and complex character. That's desire.

**Schöneich:** How important is gesture in this work? I'm thinking especially of the sections of *Present Sore* where a lip is pulled or an ear is touched or plugged.

**Nashat:** Capturing a body that is inanimate or frozen in action made sense in the 1990s when photography was concerned with creating tableaux vivants. But for me, the body in action is more interesting because it's not just "on display" for the camera to get the best shot. It competes with the camera and forces it to find different strategies. It's less mannered than a pose perhaps, and the formal and aesthetic gesture is not coming from what you look at but the way you look at it. When you invest the body with actions and gestures, you write a narrative for the body. You give it agency. I must say, though, that there are very active ways for the body to be passive—like a smoker or a sleeper, which are equally powerful images.

**Schöneich:** How did you film *Present Sore*? Tell us about the overlayering of images throughout the video.

**Nashat:** The layering was an accident that I ended up keeping. I have been relying on software bugs and my own technical mistakes a lot lately.

**Leaver-Yap:** Your work is so carefully choreographed and edited that it's really interesting to hear about the importance of accident within your practice. Accident seems to me to be such a human quality, while being attentive to accident is something very digital—a quality of being watched or surveilled. I was struck by something Moyra Davey said to me about shooting video last year. Moyra shoots mostly analogue photographs, and now she shoots digital video. She told me she liked how "video hangs onto accident" in a way that is particular to the form. The digital captures physical vulnerabilities as much as it can augment or erase those very qualities in post-production. I was wondering if you could speak to the notion of error, mistake, and accident in your work a bit more?

**Nashat:** In *Hustle in Hand*, my editing program was interrupting the playback of my video. One frame from a completely different section of



Shahryar Nashat, *Present Sore*, 2016, video. A Walker Moving Image Commission



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the video would intrude into the clips. I ended up keeping this glitch because it breaks the linear narrative of the timeline—it's like a preview of the footage that is yet to come. In *Present Sore*, meanwhile, I brought the wrong resolution into the project, but then I decided to keep it as it complicates the view of the body. Capturing body limbs is such an ordinary image to do. You need these kinds of tricks to ramp up attention. Technological accidents are what make the work more vulnerable. If you keep them, you can of course normalize them, but I find it useful for them to remain as anomalies that serve the work.



Shahryar Nashat, *Factor Green*, installation view, 54th International Venice Biennial, 2011  
Courtesy Rodeo, London; Silberkuppe, Berlin. Photo: Gaëtan Malaparte.

**Schöneich:** Already in early works, like in *Factor Green* (2011), or in your exhibition at the Folkwang Museum in Essen, you investigated the meaning and the visual presence of the pedestal or plinth itself. At Portikus and the forthcoming Walker exhibition *Question the Wall Itself*, you present a series of sculptures—pedestal blocks—resting on chairs that you say are designed for them to “relax.”

**Nashat:** Yes, the pedestal is to the artwork what the foot is to the body. It provides the support that allows the artwork to stand and be on display. It's like a pair of crutches. *Present Sore* toys with the fact that high-definition imagery being now at the service of “supporting” the body. It makes the pedestal obsolete. *Chômage technique* is a French term used when, say, a factory lays off its workers but maintains their salary. In a world of bodies shown in pixels, pedestals are a kind of “*chômage technique*”—they have no one to support anymore. In my installation, they can retire and enjoy the viewing of the bodies they once would have supported. The pedestal has always been an underdog, or in the service of something else. But in this configuration it as if it's won the lottery and is off to retire in Florida.

**Present Sore is a commission by the Walker Art Center with major support from the Bentson Foundation, and Portikus, Frankfurt/Main.**