

# ***HIGHLIGHTS: SHAHRYAR NASHAT ALMOST MIRRORING***

**Formally elegant and strategically ambiguous, the works of Berlin-based artist Shahryar Nashat employ a “converse archaeology” to address issues of monumentality, patriarchy, normality and power.**

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Palindromes may be easy to define, but they are still kind of awkward. After all, although they read and mean the same thing in both directions, they don't necessarily look it. From their mid-point, they're not mirror reflections—since individual letters are usually asymmetrical—and they often nonchalantly violate the rules of syntax and grammar. They are language anomalies, existing mainly as writing games, and yet in certain instances, their straightforwardness can belie a structural complexity. You can't help but check that they do actually work in reverse, but to do so, you must go against the habitual way of reading, stepping along tentatively, acknowledging the palindrome character by character.

This quality of “almost mirroring” is an integral part of the work of Berlin-based artist Shahryar Nashat. The formal simplicity of Nashat's works automatically relates them to the broad visual gamut of aesthetic modernism, yet they also show evidence of an attempt to create puzzles, distractions, misunderstandings and unexpected associative relations, and even occasionally require of a suspension of disbelief. Experiencing Nashat's work is like taking a Rorschach test—the images are strategically ambiguous enough to open a view through the subjective eye, leading towards unexpected interpretations.

In the video *The Regulating Line* (2005), a man with an athletic physique wearing just sports slacks enters a gallery in the Louvre dedicated solely to Rubens paintings that depict dramatic scenes from the life of Maria de Medici. The athlete's torso is situated here in clear physical

relation to the Renaissance idyll, and even the redness of his trousers draws a parallel to some of the clothing and curtains in the paintings. After sitting before the paintings for a couple of minutes, he gets to his feet and then executes a one-handed handstand—a posture he holds for what feels like quite a while. Previously presented in the Swiss Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2005, the canon of art is perceived as upended from the unlikely perspective of a European male’s brawn rather than his brain.

Notions of monumentality are revisited in numerous works by Nashat, including the video *Plaque (Slab)* (2007), which takes as its point of departure archival footage of the celebrated Canadian classical musician Glenn Gould. In it, Gould is playing the piano on a television soundstage. Behind Gould and his piano are three monolithic slabs seemingly made out of marble. Much of Nashat’s film documents the production of a large concrete slab, highly reminiscent of the ones in Gould’s television performance, in a factory out in the Berlin suburbs. This footage is interspersed with the archival footage of Gould, which has been modified to resemble more of a stop-motion animation. This locational “split” in the focus of the film creates a kind of game for the viewer, both in determining the actual subject of the video and in reading what exactly is happening in the imagined fissure between these two settings, which almost mirror one another in their virtuosity—skilled manual work and creative endeavor converging, both politely encouraged to echo the performance of the other.

Nashat’s practice of display has a distinctly prosaic yet deliberate aesthetic. Two of his recent exhibitions at the Kunstverein Nürnberg and the Kunsthalle St. Gallen, entitled “Line Up” and “Remains to be seen” respectively, looked closely at institutional traditions of museological display. Not institutional critique exactly, these exhibitions were rather about digesting the spatiality of display techniques and imagining what they can embody with the benefit of post-conceptual art hindsight. Benches, plinths, vitrines—all the familiar apparatuses that are usually there to help us feel contemplative—are mimicked using opulent stone materials such as marble and granite. In the case of “Line Up,” these objects were all positioned as if queuing, evoking the historic linearity of techniques for display, as well as the formal similarity between museological display modes and those seen in luxury retail environments. Nashat thus displayed the performativity of display. Figure and ground were reversed, with the near-absent artworks here represented by a few sparsely scattered, simple metal sculptures, given the status of mere surrogates. Also exhibited was *One more time with James* (2009), a short video that documents a transaction at the perfume counter of a department store. A sensual episode occurs when two young men test perfumes and then smell the scent on each other’s wrist. The opulence of the

different bottle designs is accentuated by Nashat's camerawork, giving both men the appearance of advertisement models in a moment of choreographed rapture, and touching explicitly on the commercial exploitation of our vanity.

For one of the projects at this year's upcoming Frieze Art Fair in London, Nashat has been musing on the art fair context, and will portray, via the medium of film, a series of artworks on display in the fair. In this parallel space to the art crammed into the booths at Frieze, the artist will adopt the gaze of audience members through the gaze of his camera. Offering a perspective on the transformational quality of film, this selection of artworks, all by other artists (who are complicit in the project), will look to generate an impromptu dialogue with the fair's exhibits, placing fair artworks and non-fair artworks in close relation. Again, not critique exactly, just advantaging the space of opinion for artists and their works by offering them a fast-track into appearing on view at one of the focal points of the art calendar.

Nashat's 16mm film installation from 2005, *Hide & Seek*, also offers us his conspicuously subjective eye. It focuses on the façade of the Museo della Civiltà Romana in Rome, which was erected by Mussolini in celebration of the Roman Empire. The neo-classical style of the building acted as an homage to Roman antiquity and imperialism—interpreted, however, in a more symmetrical and rationalist style—that ultimately alluded to the authoritarian desires for symbolic restraint, obedience and submission. The imagery we see in Nashat's film is of the three facades of the museum, each presented on a separate screen. Different colored filters pass intermittently in front of the camera lens, tinting for short periods the architecture in dense monochromatic light, while the ambient noise fades into the sound of the artist's breathing. The title here, evoking the children's game, grapples with the possibility of finding room for new interpretations when confronting something as historically freighted as fascist Italian architecture.

The series *Perspectives* from 2006 is an unassuming set of prints that have been made using found images from the Internet, each incorporating short textual statements that work in a highly associative way. One in particular, *Perspective #8*, consists of a sequence of four images, evidently taken in short succession, of Pope Benedict XVI, in which a gust of wind slowly causes the lapel of his white regalia to cover his face entirely. The text underneath this image simply states "PALINDROME." When read in reverse, from right to left, the images suggest that the bastions of morality and power, if examined in the right way, can be glimpsed unveiling their contrived self-representations. In relation to the appropriation of imagery and construction

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of meaning, this series nods to André Malraux's seminal book *Le Musée Imaginaire* (translated in English as *The Museum Without Walls*), in which Malraux discussed the dissemination and flux of images. There are symmetries and repetitions in the *Perspectives* pictures, including classical and pornographic sources, flirting with each other in the same creative space.

You could take this adage from Nashat's world view: things as they are, are worth taking another look at. But *how* do we take another look? Though Nashat's work might initially resemble the recent "historiographic" mode of making art—i.e., an investigative use of historical materials and sources, sometimes curatorial in appearance—it actually approaches its themes from a different perspective. Nashat employs a bit of what might be called a "converse archaeology": rather than tracing back over the path of linear history, he begins from alternative places, no matter however obliquely determined, in order to speculate on how to move things forward. The works selectively use ideas, artifacts, images or subjects as a kind of median, that is, as markers from which to depart in different directions, and with which to remain in relation, before drawing them into the frame of contemporaneity. Refreshingly, one can sense quite palpably the liberation Nashat must feel in having the license to deal with significant things in such a way.