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Shahryar Nashat: An Image is an Orphan

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Rigged to a free-standing display system, close but not touching the wall nor grounded, eight screens stand on their side, upright, sealed in a grid. Together their 8, 16:9 aspect ratios form a 5:4 aspect ratio. The unknown aspect a provocation to the now. The now, a provocation unto itself. On either side a speaker, by the entrance/exit door a subwoofer faces the screens, the body. The image holds the body. The space between simulation and failure holds the image. The words: «an image is a hustler » resonate. Shahryar Nashat's *An Image is an Orphan* is a newly commissioned 18'22" HD video with sound, the core piece within Nashat's solo exhibition *The Cold Horizontals* at Kunsthalle Basel. Below are notes on the content of the video and its mediation.





Shahryar Nashat, Installation view, The Cold Horizontals, Blick auf Image Is an Orphan, 2017, Kunsthalle Basel, 2017. Photo: Philipp Hänger / Kunsthalle Basel

Within eight screens a single image of a film light, the type of light used to simulate daylight. It’s enveloped by a pink color field. The daylight light rotates clockwise for a moment, then springs back and repeats. The repeats differ, each varying with a development of the color field and increasing complexity within the frame of the daylight light itself.

A sequence, void of human presence though emotive through sound, a slow-paced chord progression, signifies a decoding between technology, body and image; blurring the boundaries of each.

Fade in to a purple and green veined surface, a pastel of optic opposites, a simulation of retinal imaging, of visual cognition between eye and brain, between technology and reception. The multiscreen body continues as a single image, though now it observes itself.

One after the other. The film daylight repeating a clockwise motion then a simulation of retinal imaging creates a larger-scale simulation of the physiology of the media, the media a body: eight screens, rigging, two speakers, and a subwoofer.

A Hollywood actress voice, distinguishable as such through timbre.

«Why are you so depressed?»
«How do you sleep at night?»

Another voice though the same, older or in less health.

«Well you know»

Both voices are protagonists nodding toward the noir genre, «noir» aforementioned. Cynical, fatal and post useful. The same voice in two roles, asking, answering, bemused shifting the

position of spectatorship from direct and private toward a voyeur of the intimate and instrumental.

«How do you stay awake?»
«I stay because I am awake.»

The emphasis on «stay » and «I am», an assertion. There is weakness in the rasp of the voice, though the intonation is determined. The question exasperates. The answer pertuse, exact. The question, the answer, and lagged annunciation a psychodrama. One form, trance. The past. The past now fictionalized. The protagonists: female, machine, perturbed, and other.

«How do you feel otherwise?»
«Otherwise?»
« Hm.»
«Right.»

The acknowledgment «right» again pertuse. The power dynamic inverts within the body, tech-tension, techno-emotive.

«An image is an orphan.»

«An ‹image› is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time.»[1] Classic or? A complex, a grid, a matrix are permeable. An image on and on. The system is going through a remote routine, an emote routine. Emote a single unit of routine. Testing single units.

«Shall we continue?»
«Sure.»
«How will I die?»
«Who will carry me?» The sound denotes a pulse.
«Who will feel my aftereffects?»
«How will I die?»
«Who will carry me?»
«Who will feel my aftereffects?»
«How will I die?»

Soundtrack kicks in. Fade from retinal imaging to simulation of late artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s 1991 image of an empty bed, *Untitled*. Simulation becomes a trope for homosexual loss. Physicality nulled by simulation. Simulation as nothing. Nothing as death.

The field of depth a used bed sheet. Single hairs or threads appear on the screens as if on the lens of the camera. A shift of the physicality to the individual screens heightens the reception of the technology and breaks the depth of field. A single thread, a reduction of the image, a single unit of the plain of field, the bed sheet. Measured dominations shift the physical to the detail.

«Who will carry me?»
«Who will feel my aftereffects?»
«How will I die?» Color shifts, pulse starts, purple.
«How will I die?» Role switch.
«Who will carry me?»
«Who will feel my aftereffects?»

The intonation and the single voice having two bodies places the dialogue not within a fictional narrative but within a rehearsal. A monologue dialogue not a dual monologue. Questions are self-answered in a second voice. A conversation not with oneself but with a self. A self is more complex. The rehearsal acting as a circuit analyzing syllables, varying tones, testing the possibilities of the single units and their emotive nuances. Repetition heightens the spectator's sense of body and collapses each word.

«How will I die?» Role switch.
«Who will carry me?»
«Who will feel my aftereffects?»

From unmade bed to square window, a hue of pink to purple shades the window. The window beating to find the exposure of the lens to find the pulse. The image and its physiological functioning explicit. The body profound yet absent.



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«How will I die » A slow morphing.
«Who will carry me?»
«Who will feel my aftereffects?»

Light, window, and pulse grapple.

«Dead bodies».

A failure in black and white. A boy backflips, he bites the curb.

«Why am I bleeding? Why am I bleeding?» Video
«Your face.» Protagonist.
«Your face.» Video.

The video overlaps the protagonist’s voice. It’s barely noticeable. It curbs masculinity.

Guy faints recording selfie. Fail.

Image upside down, tech static, body flipped. Profile shot. A guy on a rollercoaster, gravity removed.

«No. No.»
«Get off. Shit.»

Laughing. Image held. The sound pulsates in anticipation. A dramatic device being tested by the body. The body in anticipation to rev up. The tech as the body. Failure sits next to high dulled color simulation. Low and high technologies.[2] Aesthetically-coded power dynamics at play. Between poor and rich: image.[3] An image is a hustler.

Repetition. The fourth fail. All failures black and white. A guy runs, jumps through a doorway. Short loop progresses with the pulse. Time given.

He jumps through the doorway. Hits head into door frame. Head into frame.

«Oh my gosh.» Protagonist.
«Oh my gosh.» Video.

No overlap, one voice straight after other. The voices, first protagonist then video, play both the body of the image and an observer detached from the image.

Split, upside down, anticipating, a rollercoaster stood pre-take off.

Back to retinal simulation. Green and purple fades. Simple pulse to piano chord progression. Antecedent. Static. When the field moves, it moves as an eye taking note of the periphery.

Voice slows. Muted. Protagonists underlining emphasis.

«How will I die?»
«Who will carry me?»
«Who will feel my aftereffects?»
«How will I die?»
«Who will carry me?»
«Who will feel my aftereffects?»
«How will I die?»
«Who will carry me?»
«Who will feel my aftereffects?»
«How will I die?»
«Who will carry me?»

Subtle.

«Who will feel my after effects?»

Black and white prank. A guy held horizontal by two men’s shoulders. He grips the guy at the back’s head between his feet, jerks his knees, the man’s head forced into his butt. Backside headbutt four times. Of light heart. Boys being boys.

A simulation of Andy Warhol's electric chair. Dead gay artist simulation, of loss, of death, simulated. Stretching, distorted, death abstracted, geometrical forms, a moment upside down. Stabilizing, the image stabilizes, the body stabilizes. A light panel emerges on one side, pulsates. Clockwise rotation, time starts again, antecedent.

The electric chair pans in and around and out of focus and flips upside, briefly. Now not abstracting but decoding. The electric chair, the reference, its symbol, its simulated mediation all questioned.

«How will I die?»
«Who will carry me?»
«Who will feel my aftereffects?»
«How will I die?»

Key change. A man fists another in the face. Knuckles to jaw. No noise from footage shown. Soundtrack continues.

«Who will carry me?»

The gap between questions grows.

«Who will feel my aftereffects?»

Body slam. No video noise just soundtrack.
Repeat. Body slam. Video noise and soundtrack. Comparative emotional response, no video sound to video sound, both soundtracked.

Body slam. A woman slams a man. Defense.
Body slam. A man slams a man. A prank.

Electric chair upside down. Bodies slamming screaming continues.

«How will image die?»

Fat child slides like superman in a stylish manner across wet floor. Electric chair correct way round. A third protagonist. The voice androgynous, transient, non-gender specific.

«These hung bodies, fake bodies, real body, strong bodies, hung bodies, drunk bodies»

Plural and singular blur as words are cut. Now the body one and plural.

Black and white failure. A girl hangs from a living room mezzanine. The living room a life room. She falls, clips a fish tank, glass smashes, clip repeats.

«Sharlena what are you doing?»
«Ah, help me, don't just sit there»

Barely audible multi-layered sound, a plea for help, a laugh, a scream and crash. Overlaid, the soundtrack continues. Pitch high, distorted squeal. Vocab sculpts away the words closer to the meaning. Six loops and the violence concentrates. The voice becomes music. The percussion starts, signifying crescendo.

A mannequin makes a man jump. The man unaware of the other body.

Gravity goes. Upside-down footage of a speed boat. Two sways and a loss of control.
Back to the previous, one last time, perceived astute.

«Sharlena what are you doing?»
«Ah, help me, don’t just sit there»

Speedboat back upside down. Five loops. Two sways each and bodies thrown. Sharlena continues, precursive percussion continues, the list of bodies plays on.

«Striped bodies, broke bodies, dead bodies, real bodies, clean bodies, changed bodies,dead bodies, quick bodies, flipped bodies, formed bodies, dead bodies, strong bodies, hung bodies, drunk bodies, dead bodies, fake bodies, ripped bodies, slow bodies, dead bodies, real bodies, clean bodies, changed bodies, dead bodies, quick bodies, flipped bodies, formed bodies , dead bodies, tall bodies, for bodies, core bodies, dead bodies, strong bodies, hung bodies, drunk bodies, dead bodies, straight bodies, gripped bodies, smoked bodies, dead bodies, real bodies, clean bodies, seen bodies, dead bodies, quick bodies, flipped bodies, strong bodies, dead bodies, strong bodies, hung bodies, dead bodies, straight bodies, quick bodies, small bodies, dead bodies, strong bodies, hung bodies, drunk bodies, dead bodies, straight bodies, gripped body, smoked bodies, still bodies, real bodies, clean bodies, changed bodies, dead bodies, quick bodies, slick bodies, torn bodies, dead bodies, tall bodies, form bodies, for bodies, dead bodies.»

Lists and contingencies stop. Sound and image wash. Chord progression continues. Filtered mass. A portrait builds, layered geologically. Time laying stone abstracting the image. Bad filter washes. The block form sways, solid, liquid.



Shahryar Nashat, Installation view, The Cold Horizontals, Blick auf Image Is an Orphan, 2017, Kunsthalle Basel, 2017. Photo: Philipp Hänger / Kunsthalle Basel

«Who says it’s not alive when it’s not awake?»
«Who says it’s alive when it’s awake?»

The conscious state of mediation questioned.

«My Father died when I was awake.»
« I am an orphan.»

Motherhood questioned.

«Am I an orphan?»
«An image is an orphan.»

The image questioned.

«Do you wake up every night?»
«I wake up every night because of my liver.»
«I am water and cells.»
«I am zeros and ones.»

The singular units, organic and programmed. An other body. Non-powers come into play. Refining back to the single units, the thread a block an entity.

«Image is a hustler»
«Image is a hustler»
«Image is a hustler»
«Image is a hustler»

Four times the intonation unique on each. Emphasis placed differs.

«You’ll die anonymous.»
«I won’t die anonymous because my lineage stops with me.»

The end of a line is queer.

«You’ll die alone while you try.»

The Image revealed from behind the cheap filter. A male nude, shoulders, head, a bust. A hustler fresh to porn.

«Who was that?»
«An actor.»
«Actors act.»

An address to the spectator and unto itself.

[1] Ezra Pound, «A Few Don’ts by an Imagiste»,in *Poetry Magazine* (March 1913).
[2] A. L. Rees, «Working Both Sides of the Street: Film and Art in Michael Snow», in Michael Snow: *Almost Cover to Cover*, edited by Lucy Steeds and Catsou Roberts (Bristol, 2001).
[3] Hito Steyerl has described the aesthetically coded power dynamics at play between the «poor» and the «rich» image that infiltrate all aspects of contemporary video production.

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Ian Wooldridge (b.1982) is a British artist based in Zurich. In 2017, Wooldridge was scholar in residence at artist moving image centre LUX, London. His work deals primarily with questions around queer narratives and the skewing of media. He’s currently pursuing a PhD - Queer Space, Video Space and Hermetic Space: States of Self Unhinged - under the supervision of Professor Ute Holl, University of Basel & Professor Mary Ann Doane, UC Berkeley.

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