

# ADAM LINDER AND SHAHRYAR NASHAT'S ENTANGLED BODIES

The artists' joint presentation at MoMA considers the ways human biology  
both coexists with – and is subsumed by – modern technology

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'Who controls the air in here,' a performer, clad in bronze neoprene, asks without inflection in Adam Linder's *Shelf Life* (all works 2020), one of two inaugural commissions for the Museum of Modern Art's lofty, technologically modular Marie-Josée and Henry Kravis Studio, dedicated to live art. The question is a valid one for a piece pervaded by ambiguities that arise from an experimental spatial coupling. *Shelf Life* doubles as *Force Life*, a video and sculptural installation by Shahryar Nashat, such that the studio morphs, without cessation, between live dance and film screening throughout the day.

Best to plunge uninformed into this strange, oscillating world. MoMA's literature on the works, each of which probes varying metabolic registers of human and machine, does little to provide useful conceptual entry points. It also claims the works to be 'on view' only one at time, which, in practice, isn't strictly true: atmospheric elements cut across both without perceptible termination, instead involuting into one another with each subsequent iteration. These elements encompass light and sound, but also those amorphous qualities of tonality and texture: a slippage of sensibility honed, perhaps, through Linder and Nashat's earlier collaborations. (Partners in life as well as in art, the couple have worked together previously, including on the exhibition 'Some Strands of Support / Hard Up for Support' at Berlin's Schinkel Pavillon in 2016.) On the floor, Nashat's trio of 3D-rendered, machine-hewn marble and fibreglass sculptures, with delicate gill-like corrugation – *Barre* (*are you nervous in this system*), *Brain* (*you no longer have to simulate*) and *Brain* (*do you feel nervous in this system*) – remain during both presentations. A frame from his video, *Blood* (*what is authority*), depicting a cell pulsing like an eyeball under scrutiny, is visible, from one side, as a reflection in MoMA's street-facing glass wall, further complicating any easy fiction of separability between the two works.

In both *Shelf Life* and *Force Life*, the studio space is configured around a large LED screen, which serves as an

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interface and threshold between the two. Each side is activated by dancers, who rotate the device from back to front to initiate or conclude each respective piece. In *Shelf Life*, dancers use a ballet barre and connected platform as a support structure for movement, eventually ‘righting’ the screen to display Nashat’s rapturous video, which plays on loop for an hour. ‘These are the last moments of *Shelf Life*,’ a recorded female voice asserts in the same airport-announcement tone she repeats in *Force Life*. (The artists worked separately with sound designer Steffen Martin, albeit drawing from the same ‘pool of material’, Linder told me when we spoke about the project.)

Four dancers, from a rotating cast of six, activate *Shelf Life* between two and four times daily. Personifying the barre, blood and the brain, the roles aren’t gender-specific. Only two of the dancers are granted the capacity for speech, audible as a stream of repeated, fragmentary provocations over thickening ambient electronic tones: ‘What makes you feel algorithmic?’ ‘How does a body know its home?’ ‘Are you nervous?’ ‘I think they’re going to tell us when we don’t need our bodies anymore.’ Of the two speaking performers, the most vocal is Barre – albeit in a tricky-to-hear, ASMR whisper-range – who remains behind the screen support throughout, traversing its extent in warm-up mode, while the audience, though free to roam, remains largely stationary. A mute performer, Blood roams and vogues robotically; occasionally proffered a hand by Barre, Blood also puppeteers a soft cylindrical appendage – ‘a malleable “muscle” prop’, as Linder described it to me. The two remaining dancers, Brainer and Brainee, perform as a pair, their attenuated interaction quadrupedal, twitchy and kinematic at first, before they move into upright postures in a montage of evolving behaviours.

Barre’s attachment to the barre support is an umbilical relation of sorts. The sense of their entrainment to the screen, as a digital mothership, is heightened by a respirator tank attached to their bodysuit-clad back; others don something resembling a parachute pack. At one point, Blood disconnects from Barre’s leash-like arm, only to audibly gulp for air, before Barre whispers, ‘Drip, drip,’ and coaxes Blood back for a fix. Towards *Shelf Life*’s conclusion, all four performers gather in chain formation and recite a sequence of zeros and ones, code for a digital genome, extending the work’s titular allusion to data encryption and storage, and to the corporeal capacities of biohacking, as much as to the physical finitude of a dancer’s performing body. Linder’s musings on the rewriteable plasticity of hardware, software and wetware bring us nearer to Nashat’s video, in large part composed by machine intelligences via the use of robotic cameras. Both artists, it seems, are sceptical of brains without bodies.

The electroacoustic tones and gelid fluorescent light are sustained as *Shelf Life* slides into *Force Life* – a transition eased by a percussive recording of heartbeats. This soundtrack conjures a stethoscopic mood, as if heard *through* bodies. Now screen-side, Nashat’s video floods the studio. ‘What is authority?’ queries

the voice-over, in the first of many such incantations, over a still image of a male body draped on a floor. The camera moves closer, then retracts in a panning, forensic gaze that foregrounds the ensuing video, which was composed partly using motion-control technology. A slicing, metallic sound of a machine accompanies the camera as it gestures for us. 'My blood touching the ground,' says the same female voice-over, soon to elaborate how blood pools at the feet when the heart stops pumping. Carpet, filmed in extreme close-up by a machine, is chased by what appears to be different footage of the same body: an epidermal dance, a leitmotif of Nashat's work, of elbow, ankle, auricle and inner thigh.

The experiential schism between analogue body and distributed machine intelligence, in an era of increasing automation, propels both *Shelf Life* and *Force Life*. How, ask Linder and Nashat, will digital worlds eventually absorb or augment the sensate body? While *Shelf Life* activates and upholds the interpersonal nature of labour by presenting live performing bodies within a gallery context, *Force Life* inhabits the more hidden machinations of cellular and metabolic processes: the very labour of life itself, of a heart pumping until it doesn't – a version of machine failure. That Nashat registers the body in *Blood (what is authority)* by way of a machine's 'vision' moves us into an emergent realm – one with new stakes – of the agential and perceptual capacities of machines as composers. What happens when we train a machine to sense as well as to learn? *Force Life*'s pairing with *Shelf Life* makes a case for co-existence on this front, for continuing to wear our biological bodies alongside novel forms of future embodiment.

*Adam Linder, 'Shelf Life' and 'Shahryar Nashat, 'Force Life' was on view at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, until 8 March.*

<https://www.frieze.com/article/adam-linder-and-shahryar-nashats-entangled-bodies>