

# SHAHRYAR NASHAT AND ADAM LINDER

Review by Aram Moshayedi  
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*An artist and a choreographer challenge the term collaboration, which they see as an approach rather than an outcome or frame of interpretation.*

I first met artist Shahryar Nashat and choreographer Adam Linder in 2013, just before the two—they are a couple—relocated to Los Angeles from Berlin. In the years that elapsed since, I’ve worked with them separately and together in my capacity as a curator on a handful of occasions. Most notably, Linder and Nashat were included in the Hammer Museum’s 2016 iteration of *Made in L.A.*, an exhibition I co-organized with the inimitable Hamza Walker.

Linder, for his part, produced a stage work with an accompanying installation, titled *Kein Paradiso* while Nashat developed the installation *Hard Up for Support*—a video object “in conversation” with a polished pink marble polygon. Although these projects were conceived of and shown independently, it became clear that the artists consulted each other throughout the process, offering ideas and making suggestions that were crucial but provokingly left uncredited.

In recent exhibitions like *Adam Linder and Shabryar Nashat: Some Strands of Support / Hard up for Support* at the Schinkel Pavillon in Berlin (2016) and *Adam Linder: Service No. 5: Dare to Keep Kids Off Naturalism* and *Shabryar Nashat: The Cold Horizontals* at the Kunsthalle Basel (both 2017) the artists prodded the concept of the solo show. For the latter venue, they staged a “handover”: their successive solo exhibitions seamlessly and ceremoniously followed each other in a matter of minutes—one closing, the other opening. Projects such as these illuminate how notions of “collaboration” are often part of a nuanced endeavor that can’t easily be summarized. Linder and Nashat’s way of working together is as much about practicalities and critical affinities as it is about tenderness. Their romantic proximity—which includes generosity, support, and

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exchange—is an integral part of their respective processes.

—Aram Moshayedi

**Aram Moshayedi:** *In which context did you two form a creative partnership? I hesitate to use the word collaboration, though perhaps partnership sounds a bit too corporate.*

**Adam Linder:** It started in 2011. Shahryar was working on a show for Studio Voltaire in London and he wanted to include a dancer in the piece. His prior video work had focused on professionals doing what they do—for example, a cement maker making cement, a stunt person doing a stunt. He had seen my performance work and got in touch.

**Shahryar Nashat:** Previously, I had only worked with people who used their bodies as they do in their daily work, and I wanted someone who was conscious of movement and could compose physicality. So I naturally gravitated toward a choreographer. The piece was eventually called *The Rehearsal of Adam Linder* (2010). It was a constellation of sculptures in a space that was noticeably missing the human body, and as the visitor traversed the exhibition, they found at the end this monitor with images of Adam rehearsing in the studio. The video functioned a bit like a user manual, giving you the physicality the sculptures were missing.

**AM:** *Adam, how much agency as a choreographer and dancer did you have in this work?*

**AL:** It was the result of several conversations. At the time, I had just made my first solo stage work, called *Early Ripen Early Rot* (2010). Shahryar said, “I would like to observe your rehearsal as a readymade and videotape it in a very subjective way.” He wasn’t making decisions on the content but on how it was registered.

**AM:** *Shahryar, what’s your relationship to material that hasn’t been directed or scripted by you?*

**SN:** I like to frame and compose the image, but where I really get off is in the editing. That’s where everything happens. As we know, you can give the same footage to three different film editors and the results will be quite different.

**AL:** As someone responding to your work, Shahryar, I see your primary interest being in how things are displayed or situated in relation to one another and how the politics of looking affect value and the way an image/object resonates. You intervene in terms of how something can be looked at.

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AM: *Did the performance piece have a life independent of Shahryar's filming it?*

AL: It did. Shahryar's intervention consisted of these subtle relational instructions or preferences in how he was setting up the shots. And this definitely put a different lens on the material—in terms of viewpoint, sequencing, and literally taking sections of the choreography and making them exist individually. The dynamic flow was completely changed. When I look at *The Rehearsal of Adam Linder*, it doesn't really feel like *Early Ripen Early Rot*.

SN: It was important that it not be a finished choreographic work.

AL: It was really a rehearsal and to a certain degree it was content rehearsing itself for the camera or within this new context. We didn't know each other then; it was the first time we'd met.

AM: *Did this interaction inform your next works? Did Shahryar's specific interests influence you?*

AL: Yes. When I'm performing my own choreographies, my tendency is to work from within. Shahryar has an opinionated gaze on content and a nuanced sense for editing, framing, and timing. Being around him resulted, unintentionally, in a kind of integration of inside and outside perspectives. I started to work with the splicing of bodies—one type of body suspended in time while another choreographically rides up underneath it. Or a kind of cross-fading of different bodies. I don't know if that came out of being around Shahryar, but I would say that his proximity has given me tools to amplify my own interests in editing, timing, and splicing content.

AM: *Shahryar, can you talk about what Adam calls your "opinionated gaze on content"?*

SN: *(laughter)* Um, what do you want to know?

AM: *Well, you're involved in practices that are structurally and formally very different. Since you talked about the points of overlap, are there points of departure or aspects of working together that don't make sense?*

SN: Well, let me put it this way: for me, desire is a very important starting point in making a work. The opinionated gaze is connected to desire and to obsession with an image. I don't think Adam's material comes from that impulse. Maybe that's where our methods differ. I start from the notion of an image—a person or an action—and then the work builds from there. Adam begins with research. Is that correct?

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AL: You use methods of framing, cropping, and editing in relation to the content in front of you. In that sense you're a stand-in for the viewer's relationship to a given body or scenario. While you intuitively "critique" what's in front of you, I often find a critical friction in staging meetings of otherwise incongruous modes, like criticism and gliding.

AM: *After developing a relationship, at times you've chosen to work together or, in other instances, not to. Would you say it's a collaboration of convenience where your respective roles—as a visual artist and a choreographer—come with certain expectations?*

AL: It's got nothing to do with how something results in a specific medium. It's the different and complementary thinking that we have because of our backgrounds and experiences. Working on projects in which our roles interweave, we don't start with Shahryar as the maker of sculptures or of moving images. Because he's worked in those mediums, his way of thinking has a particular texture. And because I've worked in performing arts and with liveness and theater, my way of thinking has a specific texture. What interests us is how these textures either complement or productively resist each other. It's not about the formal outcome of these mediums being combined. And that's where I would ontologically separate our way of working together from the notion of the "interdisciplinary." We don't care about disciplines meeting, but about our sensibilities crisscrossing.

AM: *I agree that the interdisciplinary model can become something of a gimmick. What you're saying is that there's a lack of fixity in your working relationship.*

AL: Shahryar might give me a choreographic thread to carry further or even a decision related to the performer's presence or their facial expressions. And it's because he comes from somewhere else that he can think elastically about choreography. Or vice versa, there's a certain freedom for me making suggestions and decisions about video or sculpture.

AM: *You're overstepping your own disciplinary bounds.*

AL: Exactly. We are using the other's shoes to dress up in. It's like dragging disciplines.

SN: Adam and I always joke that we should do an anti-collaboration manifesto. One reason is that we both had such poor experiences working with people who had preconceived ideas about authorship and what it means to bring your craft to the table. The art world works within a lot of non-scripted parameters, so there can be major misunderstandings. The reason why Adam and I say we never collaborate and are not

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interested in doing so is that we don't really make work together. When he comes to me asking if I would do the stage design for a piece he's making, I'm happy to work within his concept and apply my skills to his vision. For an artist, it can be playful to have these limitations—in an applied arts versus visual arts kind of way. Adam becomes a bit like my client. He tells me what he has in mind and I come up with an idea for a stage design or a sculpture-cum-prop. He might respond, "Actually, that doesn't work because it restricts the dancers." And then I'm like, "Okay, no problem. I'll adapt it."

When two people sit at the table and start together from scratch, I think we can call that collaboration. But that's never the case for us. Our mutual works are stronger when they are individually helmed yet permeable to each other's influence.

AL: There's a loftiness and playfulness to wearing the other's shoes. What bothers me, especially in contemporary dance and theater, are these onetime coauthorships where people team up on "fair and equal" terms and after it's over, they go their separate ways. I'm more interested in fluid and undefinable influence, like the way Ralph Lemon and Sarah Michelson have been in conversation with each other over many years.

If Shahryar asks, "Can you perform in this work?" he's not asking me to coauthor his work. It's not about a symptomatic, singular situation. The work evolves from his thinking and particular practice over many years. I don't claim coauthorship but instead become woven into his work as someone who brings in my own sensibility.

SN: Of course, we know that history has erased the contributions of important coplayers. And it's undeniable that anxious authorship negotiations are often bound up with ego. But if my own plate is full, I don't always feel the need to capitalize on my contributions to others or ask for equal credit, visibility, or compensation.

It's assumed that if someone gives you an idea for your work, there has to be a negotiation about acknowledgment. In my opinion, art is not made like that. I believe in generosity: if you have an excess of ideas, pass them over to those you respect. For artists it's natural to talk about your work with friends and peers. But do we have to claim credit for sharing a perspective that might influence someone else's art? I don't think so.

AM: *Parade (2014)* is a good example of what you're describing. To discuss the film, a single-channel video by Shahryar Nashat, first requires mention of the original 1917 ballet *Parade* with music by Erik Satie and a scene by Jean Cocteau, conceived

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*for Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes; then a discussion of Adam's intervention, which resulted in a liberal remake of the original; and, finally, the layer of Shahryar's own treatment of Adam's stage work as a source material for an entirely new work of art.*

SN: And people still give us shit for that. We still have to justify that *Parade* the film was not made by Adam Linder.

AM: *Or coauthored by Adam.*

SN: There's *Parade* the stage work and there's *Parade* the film. Even the galleries and curators we work closely with were like, "Why is Shahryar taking credit for the film when it's Adam's work?" And Adam always had this very clear answer: "I am not interested in making films. Although my original material is being depicted, I was not making decisions for this work."

AL: I think collaboration can only be talked about as a kind of alchemical process between two people. It can never be discussed as a product. And that goes back to your question of the interdisciplinary. Collaboration is not a definition for an outcome or a frame for understanding a finished work; it can only be a particular process between two or more parties.

AM: *Well, it's a different concern when one's identity is at stake. Terms like collaboration and interdisciplinarity—two quite different concepts—only apply when identities are on the line, or when a specific name is needed for marketing purposes. What about working with an actor or dancer who is just performing an image in a manner that is relatively anonymous?*

AL: That's fulfilling a role that is likely one part of a larger project. The artist, or artists, instigating the work take responsibility for it. I should say, though, that no one is ever anonymous in my work. Getting fair credit for a contribution is crucial but coauthoring is a different thing.

AM: *When the relationship is contractual, questions of collaboration or interdisciplinarity don't even come up.*

SN: Don't we agree that interdisciplinarity is redundant today? At this point, visual artists have the liberty to integrate any kind of practice in their work.

AM: *In the context of visual arts, interdisciplinarity seems to be a way of absorbing other disciplines. It's an infrastructural logic that doesn't quite exist the same way in other fields.*

AL: To me, it often seems that this sort of billing is a symptom of institutions looking for novelty to

promote and fund their programs. So they combine names and labels for effect.

SN: But when does it really apply anymore? It's a model of the '90s, or some past moment when it was radical to have video on stage. The boundaries between disciplines are invisible now. I find it more interesting to bring in a sculpture and treat it like a prop instead of making a big deal over inviting your art neighbors over for dinner, so to speak.

AL: I would hope that my thinking as a choreographer working in 2018 is already interdisciplinary.

AM: *It's about being nimble when thinking through problems rather than thinking through them in disciplinary terms. To emphasize the interdisciplinary is to limit one's vocabulary.*

AL: Totally. It's like you come to the party with only one look, but then you see Christina Aguilera hosting the MTV awards and realize you actually need something like eight outfits. It's about expanding your repertoire.

Being around Shahryar, my repertoire has expanded because his thinking pushes mine. His approach has resisted, provoked, buffered, and propped up my own.

SN: Adam is also a bit, like, on a *cheval*. How do you say that in English—being on a horse?

AM: *Straddling.*

SN: Yes. He's straddling—one leg in dance and one leg in visual art.

AM: *How much of that is a result of your personal relationship?*

AL: That's a chicken or egg question.

SN: Adam has experienced resistance to his work in theater, whereas the visual art audiences have been more receptive.

AM: *Isn't it often the case that disciplines selectively embrace and fetishize the other?*

SN: Yes, the visual art world tends to absorb practices that are involved in thinking outside the box of

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their own milieu.

AM: Did you just say “thinking outside the box”?

SN: I don’t know the words. C’mon guys!

AM: I would say what’s illustrated in your relationship is different because it’s not about absorption. Often you see certain dancers emerge as reoccurring collaborators in the art world—they’re typecast in a way.

AL: Independent from Shahryar, my work most likely would have taken the same path anyway. Yes, it’s been shaped and influenced by our relationship, but I was always around visual artists and my gravitation toward art relates to who I am and the work I make. I come from this camp of dance that sees the body as a socially inscribed text rather than a tool for movement exploration. For want of a better analogy, it’s the Brechtian perspective of the performing body. And there is an interest in that in the fine art context. I’ve had more productive conversations about the material, role, and value of dance with artists and curators than with people in the theater world.

I like working through aesthetic choices that have critical reflexivity—like the graphic branding of the *Parade* logo all over the set, or the third-person voice from offstage that gives instructions to the dancers. These nuances have a different register for theater or dance audiences.

AM: Shahryar, are you even aware of your own work’s reception beyond an art context?

SN: Not really. What I do like about performance is the direct feedback that comes from the audience. When we premiered *Parade* the film at the Berlin Biennale, the visceral reaction of the cinema audience was something I’d never experienced in the arts. You get to see in real time how your decisions and strategies affect the viewers.

AL: And in performance, not only do you experience it in real time, your person is the material that mediates your audience.

AM: Right, that’s a good point. When Maria Hassabi presented *PLASTIC* (2015) at the Hammer Museum for a month, we were very taken by how the reception was processed in real time through the interactions the dancers had with the audience. The performers would hear what people said and internalize these reactions. They also heard how the institution mediated and discussed the work. You’re right about being the main interface as a performer.

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SN: If Adam wasn't my boyfriend, I don't know if I would invest so much energy in his work. When Adam asks, "Can you help me do that?" of course I will help.

AL: It's a labor of love! Artists can be competitive but my relationship with Shahryar is noncompetitive in a way I've never experienced. We're able to share naturally. Whether it's a menial work or a huge undertaking, how we interact with each other doesn't really change.

SN: Fuck collaboration.

AM: *Hub. How do you both characterize your more recent projects at the Schinkel Pavillon in Berlin and at the Kunsthalle Basel? I believe they were billed as solo endeavors at each institution, though you both thought about creating a kind of scenography or context for the other's work. Specifically, what you called "The Handover" at the Kunsthalle Basel seemed to address the very definition of what constitutes a solo exhibition. At Adam's closing, visitors were ushered out of the gallery by the dancers in his installation. Then we all went downstairs to listen to Elena Filipovic giving a speech introducing Shahryar and his exhibition that was about to open. It was all very ceremonious. Shahryar's show had been plotted out in advance and was installed to open in the same space within an hour of the doors closing on Adam's exhibition. How did this idea come about?*

SN: After *Parade* and the experience of how the audience perceived and interpreted these moments when our works came together, we became more conscious of wanting to pull the strings. The Schinkel Pavilion show gave us the opportunity to superimpose two independently conceived solo shows in the same space. Temporality became a key part because when Adam's show was on, mine was on standby and vice versa.

AL: When Elena invited us to do something at the Kunsthalle, she understood that we were going to play with how both of our works would be present. It was important for us to not repeat the configuration for Schinkel and, straight up, we both wanted to have the space for ourselves. But we shared elements, such as very specific light and objects, which in my show were used as props and space dividers, whereas in Shahryar's show they came out as sculptures. And we staged "The Handover," the passing of the baton, which happens in all programming but it's usually invisible.

SN: It was a very special hour. A lot of people we knew and worked with got to witness this intimate ritual of vacating and occupying, giving and receiving.

AM: *This brings me back to the notion that all of us are involved in intimate forms of exchange. And the most decipherable is the one that's romantic. I have to say, it's a new phenomenon to speak about this candidly. I mean, the bulk of the history of art is a*

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*series of intimate relationships, but they're never discussed as such. There's a social dimension that often propels things forward, but this can be messy, so it's hardly ever acknowledged formally. Or when it is discussed, people seem surprised that there was also a personal, romantic, or even just sexual relationship at play.*

AL: Right, and a circumstantial one.

SN: Looking at the “homo duos” in art history, has there been much discussion of how they impacted each other's work?

AM: *Mostly it's done in a pejorative way or discussed in terms of influence of one over the other.*

AL: Several years ago at the Barbican they had this show about Duchamp's influence on Merce Cunningham and John Cage, as well as on Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg. I didn't find a single mention that they were couples. The premise was the influence of Duchamp—any discussion of their influence on each other (or how they helped each other to digest Duchamp) fell by the wayside. The personal, circumstantial, and social life is an ecology of its own, and often it's not exposed.

SN: I tried to talk to people close to Cy Twombly, but no one wanted to share memories of Twombly's relationship to Rauschenberg.

AM: *Desire is often seen as an ulterior motive that impedes the creative prowess of an artist. So, Shabryar, where does this leave you?*

SN: What are we talking about?

AM: *Are you uncomfortable talking about desire, even though it's a theme in your work?*

SN: No, but I'm generally uncomfortable with the fact that everything has to be labeled! You work with someone, and it's collaboration. You bring another medium into your work, and it becomes interdisciplinary. These words are good for the institution, but for the artist it's not generative or meaningful. “Collaboration” is like a contract. What about narrative associations and ideas passed by word of mouth? They are equally important when contextualizing a work and identifying others' contributions to it.

AM: *True. There are so many interpersonal connections and conversations that we have on the path of whatever we're working on. And it's not that one's work has to acknowledge all these conversations, but there is a failure to understand the importance of more*

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*intimate forms of exchange that determine how certain decisions get made.*

SN: This is why I like reading biographical accounts of people's practice. You get to see the "recipe" and learn about the background, their private and social lives.

AL: If we're tying this back into how Shahryar and I operate, there's a kind of fluid definition of how we're working together and a commitment to that flow—this is probably because we are honest about the power negotiations between us. However, I do understand that in any broader definition of collaboration or authorship, that background-foreground dynamic is still a source of controversy.

AM: *I also think of this in terms of artist-curator relationships. Often, I have heard curators wanting credit when in fact they were facilitators.*

SN: In my view, wanting a return on an idea you shared with someone is a capitalist notion. It probably also comes out of an anxiety about your status in a larger discourse.

AL: It's interesting to talk about it that way—the curator's return on an investment in a shared situation with an artist. I'm thinking of the post-exhibition dinner, which is such a staple of how we meet and relate and share ideas. There's so much slipperiness and non-recordability in these social gatherings. So the question is: Are you more interested in having your name printed on an institution's credit page or in the porousness and seat-swapping of the post-event dinner?

AM: *You're right in saying that the porousness is more interesting and less stable. For some, the fear of not participating in a public forum is related to a fear of disappearing.*

AL: Disappearing is significant to think about when we discuss the ego. Shahryar aka Shasha Lusha Kasha and I don't have a fear of disappearing from each other. And that allows for this very natural and spontaneous way of working together.

<https://bombmagazine.org/articles/shahryar-nashat-and-adam-linder/>