PERFECT PRETENCE

In Shahryar Nashat's films and sculptures, dodecahedrons, dance and desire come together in delirious studies of impossible ideals by Jörg Heiser.

This July, in the Museo di Capodimonte in Naples, I came across a stunning portrait of the Franciscan friar and mathematician Luca Pacioli standing behind a table covered with mathematical tools and models (*Portrait of Fra Luca Pacioli*, attributed to Jacopo de' Barbari, c. 1495–1500). One of the objects depicted is a dodecahedron – a symbol of the harmonious order of the universe.

A few weeks later, on holiday in the countryside outside Berlin, I was playing football with a group of eight-year-olds and damaged my knee. There is no denying that the earlier experience in Naples was more rewarding than the latter, but both made me see things in Shahryar Nashat's work that I hadn't seen before. (You never know what a museum visit or snapped ligaments might be good for.) There are obvious connections here: the dodecahedron has appeared several times in Nashat's work and in his video *Prosthetic Everyday* (2013) the camera focuses on a knee, which belongs to the body of a fit man walking around an art museum. With one leg of his trousers rolled up, we can scrutinize his joint as he bends and twists to dramatic bursts of music and comically creaking sounds. From the perspective of my own mishap, I now see all-too-clearly how a fear of pain and decline can relate to an odd-ball form of humour. Those who long for perfection (of which the dodecahedron is a symbol) must one day face the abyss of reality.

Hustle in Hand (2014), shown at this year's Berlin Biennale, is a case in point. We see a close-up of a woman's mouth devouring a grilled chicken in a manner that suggests she is starving, brutal or both. The scene, interspersed with split-second shots of the woman flexing her arm and hand, is flickering and layered, as if viewed in a state of drugged paralysis. The camera often lingers, like a fly circling an animal or an inquisitive child inspecting an adult a little too curiously. Such pronounced concentration makes

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it impossible to forget that we're looking at the bodies of well-toned performers, often dancers; and that these sequences are not necessarily serving the logic of filmic narrative or vision (though the camera and editing can certainly, inevitably, touch on these), but of Conceptualism, performance and modern dance. This tension between embodiment and observation, fetishistic fixation and unhinged perspective, drives Nashat's work. As if to add fuel to the fire, he brings into play abstract sculptures and images, insignia, museums and homoerotic innuendo as further pawns in the game. But what's the game? And what's at stake?

In 2012, Nashat's solo exhibition at Silberkuppe in Berlin, 'Replay the Ruse', comprised the eponymous video (2012) and a series of photographs: framed images of abstract geometrical figures – Platonic solids such as a pyramid, cube or dodecahedron – as well as unframed ones showing a single performer in a green unitard. The constellation implied a comparison between clean geometric volumes and the dancer's muscular body, emphasizing how mortal flesh – even when it's trained – will never meet the cruel demands of idealized perfection: four hands struggle to open a zipper; a seam becomes slightly unstitched, like a small wound; and then we see an actual cut under the protagonist's knee.

The video collects these clues into a whole: once set in motion, the green unitard simultaneously evokes modern dance, chroma-key effects and Kermit the Frog. The colour becomes a conceptual signature; the camera zooms in and out of the Platonic solids making them appear like mechanical beating hearts. This is set against handheld footage of the dancer manically running up concrete stairs until he stumbles. A woman in a matching green unitard looks over the man's shoulder into the camera, but the lens keeps drifting about, as if it were too embarrassed to maintain eye contact. 'Have we finally overcome our dreams of a perfect medium?' the woman asks. It's a question originally posed by the American science historian, Lorraine Daston, and it identifies a desire that has run throughout history of finding a perfect unity with the cosmos – or god or nature or mankind – via a medium, be that a blank state of mind, a drug or a big screen. Of course, once you've subtracted the glory and the money, isn't it the desire for perfection that unites all artists?

The five Platonic solids, of which the dodecahedron is one, are an exact expression of such a desire. Plato assigned each of four polyhedra – pyramid, cube, octahedron, icosahedron – to one of the classical elements of fire, water, air and earth; but what did the dodecahedron correspond to? 'God used this solid for the whole universe,' Plato wrote, 'embroidering figures on it.' For him, the dodecahedron – with its 12 sides corresponding to the 12 signs of the zodiac – was the cosmos itself, the perfect medium that encompassed all things.

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This brings us back to *Hustle in Hand*. The chicken-devouring protagonist, by means of half-suppressed threats, exchanges some cash for a black coat. In one of the pockets is a green dodecahedron, about as big as an apple. Initially, it seems as if she's about to bite it; instead, she licks it and it turns from green to beige. The films cuts to another dodecahedron the size of a pumpkin, also beige, in a museum vitrine; in the background is what appears to be an Andy Warhol camouflage painting. As we hear a man cursing under his breath ('This is unacceptable ... This is fucking ... Grrr ... You're in a museum.') the camera drifts towards the canvas and back to the vitrine, before moving left and right in sync with the man's false, neurotic laughter. It's as if the camera itself has become the anxious man: I can move right and left just as I like, ha ha!

The search for a perfect medium is like looking for the perfect kick (from drugs to sex or anything else money can buy), or the perfect art object (in a vitrine, on a pedestal, on a museum wall), or the perfect way to forge social bonds and a career (nervous laughter and anxious self- positioning). It is also the impossible dream of unifying different disciplines – dance, sculpture, photography, film, Conceptual art – into one dodecahedron-like whole. Instead of falling for some esoteric Bill Viola *Gesamtkunstwerk* ideal, however, Nashat stages rehearsed collisions in which materials, movements and media brush up against another.

The artist's approach is already laid out, with simple clarity, in his three-minute video *The Regulating Line* (2005). In it, a young athlete takes off his top in the Peter Paul Rubens Gallery of the Louvre. Despite the fact that the camera observes the young man's sculpted body with more restraint than in Nashat's later work, the attraction is evident. Surrounded by the imposing 'Marie de' Medici Cycle' (1621–25), the athlete calmly takes his position in front of *The Meeting of Marie de' Medici and Henry iv at Lyons* – in which Marie, Queen of France, is depicted as the Roman goddess Juno – and performs a one-armed handstand. Before his stunt, he stands with his back to the painting; but, during it, he inevitably views it upside down. Rubens's voluptuous, allegorical ode to royal rule is contrasted with the skill of the acrobat, which itself has become an allegory of inverting hierarchies, of grace under pressure. Which is simply another way of saying that an artwork which questions its own conditions would be boring if it didn't simultaneously question the conditions of what it means to live in the world.

In the mid-to-late 2000s, videos such as *The Regulating Line* ran parallel to Nashat's installations, which elegantly played with sculptural tradition (from pedestal to readymade, from autonomous to decor, from Modernist to Mannerist). The artist also makes digital inkjet-print collages in which, for example, duct-tape-like chroma-key green stripes hide sections of black and white reproductions of sculptures by artists including Auguste Rodin, only revealing details such as an elbow, knee or scalp ('Nashat's New Fit for the Old Guard', 2013).

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With the installation *Factor Green*, which premiered at the 2011 Venice Biennale, the different aspects of Nashat's work became increasingly dynamically intertwined. It features a video of a young man interacting with a chroma-key green cube in the Gallerie dell'Accademia in Venice, in front of a painting by Tintoretto – a scene that viewers watched while sitting on ornate, fake-marble benches. However, the pinnacle of this integration of different strands of Nashat's thinking into one work is *Parade* (2014), a 40-minute film based on a ballet by Adam Linder – the protagonist in the Venice piece.

Three dancers – one male and two female – appear on a stage from behind recesses in a fake marble wall, which is emblazoned with a repeated 'Parade' logo, which is reminiscent of the headquarters of a tacky fashion label. The performers move in circles around Nashat's Platonic solids, which are the size of beach balls, before holding them up or handing them to each other. Wearing black unitards and skirts and corsets made from Rattan chairs (designed by artist Tobias Kaspar), they continue dancing solos, duos and trios that veer between deadpan and possessed. Linder's *Parade* – which premiered in October 2013 at Hebbel am Ufer, Berlin – is an adaptation of Jean Cocteau's eponymous 1917 one-act scenario, which was transformed into a ballet for Serge Diaghilev's Ballets Russes with theatre set and costumes by Pablo Picasso, music by Erik Satie and choreography by Léonide Massine. Linder's adaptation is not straightforward: wary of nostalgia it embraces self-parody. Nashat, in turn, adapted Linder's piece (the two are partners and have collaborated before). The opening scene, for example, is badly lit; a male voice complains and the screen is suddenly ablaze in high-definition glory, duping expectations of a grainy artist's film. A smug, sonorous baritone ridicules his own pretention by being all the more pretentious. One of his last lines is: 'Where's my motherfucking horse? Gonna ride this ballet right into the canyon.'

In the same way that Cocteau's *Parade* introduced circus elements to 'serious' ballet, pioneers of contemporary dance of the early 1960s – such as Simone Forti, Steve Paxton and Yvonne Rainer – honoured everyday gestures with repetition in order to question conventions of skill, authorship and cultural aloofness. Minimalist language itself has become a convention and our routine movements embody repetitions – become memes – that ricochet from celebrity culture to social media and back, oversaturated with mannerisms and codes. Consequently, Linder's choreography ricochets too, but between parodies of straight and sincere camp, the quote and the unquote. Nashat absorbs Linder's work into his own, interlacing it with comments based on quotes that lead to asides. The intervention is brutal but loving (and probably only possible between artists who know and trust each other well).

In 1596, Johannes Kepler was struggling to explain our planetary system using Platonic solids nested inside perfect spheres. In fact, it wasn't until 1605, when he considered ellipses instead of circles, that he

finally made sense of the Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe's observations about Mars. In his 1980s tv series 'Cosmos', the late Canadian physicist Carl Sagan delivered a solemn narrative, filmed against a backdrop of the Greek coastline, in which he considers why the idea that the universe was built on the symmetry of Platonic solids remained so persistent throughout the ages, despite scientific observations that countered them. 'These teachings,' he observes calmly '[...] provided, I believe, an intellectually respectable justification for a corrupt social order.' Which sounds wholly contemporary when we think, for example, of how influential Friedrich Hayek's mid-20th-century doctrine of the supposed 'spontaneous order' arising from deregulated, free markets still is. In Nashat's works, such connections between ideals of perfection and life's less-than-perfect realities are observed with keen precision.

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