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2+2=4 aber mit liebe

The performance *2+2=4 aber mit liebe* [2+2=4 but with love] presents three different solos in an empty atelier space in Gießen. The solos happen in parallel at exactly the same time for four continuous hours, with the audience coming and going as they please. The three performances work independently from each other – sometimes there are moments where they seemingly work together, and other times they remain on their own.

Herbert Graf is sitting on a chair and eating peanuts. From time to time, he gets up to balance a spoon on the windowsill. On the far side of the spoon, he places a small candle and lights it. After some time, when enough wax has burned, the weight shifts to the front, resulting in spoon and candle falling to the ground.

Eva Kirsch is in the space in two different versions. Physically present, she is from time to time preparing ice cream for the audience, but mostly waiting and lying on the ground. In parallel, a digital version of her is visible on a screen. Screen-Eva is in a different studio-like space and is playing around and performing with different elements that have a connotation of summer holidays – among them an inflatable dolphin, a parasol, sunglasses, ice cream, swimming goggles and other accessories.

In the meantime, I am moving through the space with a rolling drawer attached to me with some tape. On this drawer there is a projector that is projecting text onto my body. I am only wearing boxer briefs and socks, so the projection is visible on my skin. There are two more modes of presenting text to the audience. Two microphones are positioned in the space, and from time to time I move to them and read a text from pieces of paper stored inside the drawer. Additionally, I write short sentences on my skin with lipstick and eyeliner, all in different shades of red and purple. The source of all of these different texts is the subreddit “r/NoFap”, a forum for people who want to stop watching porn. The texts are encouraging messages between the participants of the forum as well as lists of purported benefits of stopping pornography consumption.

NoFap

NoFap is the name of a website (nofap.com) as well as the aforementioned subreddit. On the website, NoFap is described as

a comprehensive community-based porn recovery website. We offer all the tools our users need to connect with a supportive community of individuals determined to quit porn use and free themselves from compulsive sexual behaviors. With our website, forums, articles and apps, NoFap helps our users overcome their sexual addictions so they can heal from porn-induced sexual dysfunctions, improve their relationships, and ultimately live their most fulfilling lives. (“About”: n. pag.)

The website admits that “the American psychological community has yet to officially recognize porn addiction as a disorder.” Nevertheless, it claims that the excessive consumption of pornography reshapes the brain in a negative way and leads to symptoms such as “PIED”, an acronym for “porn-induced erectile dysfunction” (“Porn Addiction”: n. pag.). The forum then acts as a self-help group: individuals post success stories or admissions of “relapsing”, encourage each other and track their progress by counting how many days they’ve spent without watching porn. While NoFap highlights that it is open for people of all genders and sexual orientations (“About”: n. pag.), a large majority of the users are heterosexual men (cf. Taylor 2018: 624). The methods and exact modes of abstention vary from person to person, with some people abstaining only from pornography, while others abstain from pornography and masturbation. Additionally abstaining from orgasming altogether is labelled “hard mode” (“Rebooting”: n. pag.).

While NoFap’s rejection of “malestream” pornography could potentially find an analogy in feminist criticism of the genre, it is important to point out that NoFap approaches the topic from a different angle. In their article titled ““I Want That Power Back”: Discourses of Masculinity within an Online Pornography Abstinence Forum”, Kris Taylor and Sue Jackson note that

[NoFap] forum participants used discourses of autonomy and heterosexual agency to account for their refusal of pornography, as opposed to ethical or moral concerns about the content of pornography itself which remained somewhat ironically amorphous and unexamined. (Taylor 2018: 634)

“Heterosexual agency” as a main reason for the rejection of pornography points towards a patriarchal worldview that “NoFappers” want to defend. This notion is echoed by Scott Burnett in the article “The Battle for ‘NoFap’: Myths, Masculinity, and the Meaning of Masturbation Abstention”. According to him, one of the main tenants of NoFap adherents is a “theory of the transmutability and limited reserves of their masculine energy, which

they lose when they masturbate to pornography” (2022: 491). Thus, according to NoFap, “malestream” pornography is not a problem because of its potentially misogynistic qualities or methods of production; instead, it is the patriarchal status quo that is supposedly in danger through excessive porn consumption. Burnett summarizes this by saying that “NoFappers’ rejection of porn is motivated not by feminist critiques, but by the threat it poses to the stability of the patriarchal order” (2022: 479).

The (hetero-)normativity of NoFap is also apparent in its differentiation between “real sex” and pornography. Here, “real sex” is penetrative heterosexual sex, and pornography is defined in opposition to it, as it supposedly hinders a successful performance during “real sex” (cf. Taylor 2018: 627–29). “Real sex” functions not only as a normative but also as a heteronormative concept, as “‘abject’ desire that exceeds heteronormativity is seen as proof of the pathological nature of masturbation” (Burnett 2022: 485). In this way, desire outside the heteronormative framework is not a “real desire” and becomes pathologized as a consequence of excessive porn consumption.

That the precise genre of pornography that is rallied against by NoFap remains “amorphous and unexamined” (Taylor 2018: 634) is by design. One of NoFap’s strategies to avoid relapse is a banning of discussion of pornography on the forum.¹ It is implied that most people are talking about “malestream” pornography accessible through free websites, but it is nevertheless clear that NoFap’s problem with pornography is not the cis-hetero-male focus of most free online porn sites (which could be remedied through consumption of different media). Instead, all pornography is viewed as a threat to patriarchal masculinity.

An additional important point of discussion is the relationship and overlap between NoFap and the so-called “Manosphere” and Alt-Right movements. For the same article as cited above, Burnett systematically collected tweets containing the word “nofap” to analyse and categorize them based on their content. He found that there was a significant overlap between NoFap and Meninist/Alt-Right Ideology. In this group, pornography is viewed as a plot with the goal to “drain[] men of their ‘vital fluid’”. The focus

¹ Excerpt from the subreddit rules: “Pornography is strictly forbidden. Posting pornographic images, videos, text, etc will quickly result in a permanent ban from NoFap. Be sensitive to those who may be easily aroused - all details, descriptions, stories, etc about sexual topics should be blocked out [...] Images that might be artificial sexual imagery for another rebooter might be removed. While a shirtless gym selfie might not be arousing to you, it might be for other users” (“Rules”: n. pag.).

lies not only on the self-improvement, but also on blaming the propagation of pornography “on almost interchangeable villains, with liberals and feminists, socialists and Jews often constructed as being of a piece” (Burnett 2022: 492). While the website describes itself as a space for people of all political beliefs (“About”: n. pag.), the connection is significant enough to warrant further analysis.

Staging

In the performance, the aforementioned topics are present, but not made explicit. Instead, the source text is presented without commentary in three different forms of textuality that relate to my own body in different ways. My interest in NoFap is on a linguistic level, while the performance deals more abstractly with notions of embodiment of text.

The projected text is the most static of the three and is constantly there, which gives it a kind of anchoring role. With orthography typical for online discourse and spelling mistakes preserved from the sources, its status as a quote is clear from the very beginning. However, while the text remains static, the canvas does not. The skin is the medium (and thus, as McLuhan would say, also the message [1968: 7]) that puts forth the text. This makes a neutral reading of the text impossible, as the audience has to more or less stare at me in order to process the words.

My voice is one of the only sounds in an otherwise quite quiet room, and it only occurs from time to time when I move towards one of the two microphones. These are positioned at an awkward height, which leads to me only being able to talk while bent over. Even though the microphones imply a certain publicness, the volume of the associated speaker as well as my speaking voice are both rather low. This means that the texts either become a murmur in the background, or the audience has to come uncomfortably close in order to understand what I am saying. Without the orthography of the online forum discourse as a hint, the source of the texts is less clear, though the relationship of the content implies that the projected and the spoken text share the same origin.

The last mode of presenting the NoFap texts is by writing them on my skin with lipstick and eyeliner in different shades of red and purple. This happens gradually over the course of the four hours of the performance, marking not only my body but also the time that has passed. Linguistically, the texts presented here are much shorter than in the

other two modes in order to fit on my body. They are also the most uneven: the texts curve and wrap across my skin, change color, size and shape as well as legibility. As my back remains completely clear of text, its creation is clearly a solitary activity. This mode puts a strong emphasis on the production of the text with me moving my body in order to write on it.

Throughout the three modes, the textual material stays relatively similar; what changes is the relationship between it and my body. This becomes especially clear when contrasting the projected and the written text. Both are visibly controlled by me. I write the words, and I steer the rolling cart with the projector on it; if I want to, I can turn it off or leave, there is no outside manipulating or regulating force (e.g. director, technician). Both texts mark my body, with text that I did not originally conceive/write. However, the perceived agency of the writing stands in stark contrast to the stiff projection on my body. The writing seems to come closer to me, my body, both through my hand as well as through its adjustment to the shape of my body. While the projector projects the text onto my skin, it seems to me that my writing on myself has a higher chance of entering me and thus being perceived as part of me, both visually as well as semantically.

It is important to note that I understand this embodying not as representation or appropriation of the content. It stays outside of me, on my skin. What enters my body is not the semantic layer, but the graphic material. Obviously, this differentiation is not so simple, and might not even happen for the audience of the performance. But it is precisely this tension between signifier and signified which interests me, and which I want to explore further in future works.

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