

Porn: the gaze, body and ethics - interview with Glitcher about Porn Horror Musical 2

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I had the privilege to interview artists *Josefine Fri* and *Martin Paul* from the Finnish performance art collective Glitcher. I was especially interested in their exploration of the gaze, the body and ethics through porn in their piece *Porn Horror Musical 2*.

Glitcher describes the source of inspiration for their works as "exploiting genres, diving deep into pop cultural narratives and examining contemporary societal constructs through comedy and the grotesque". *Porn Horror Musical 2* (2023) is a physical theatre piece which revolves around repeating a porn narrative of two Daddys and two stepdaughters in a rural cabin. The piece includes extreme physicality in simulating mainstream porn on stage, as well as elements of a musical and horror (as the name suggests). The piece also has participatory elements through the actors being very aware of the audience in the space and it breaks the 4th wall for example with the gaze, direct questions and actors going into the audience.

Could you shortly describe what piece is mostly about for you?

J: Porn. But I would say that this production is about exploiting the pornographic body in a sense. Or also the pornographic gaze and the kind of pornographic shared bodily knowledge that we have.

M: And also, commodification of personhood and the human body. That's a result of capitalist society and how through pornography we've all become entangled in that. It's a form of conditioning. I think that we've been conditioned to view sexuality and the body in a certain way.

J: I think horror also ties into that because they share many of the same qualities. Horror can be sexualized and porn can be horrific. Combined, they create a kind of nightmare landscape of performative pleasure, performative sexuality, and performative fear. It's about the core feelings of humans, as horror and porn work with very instinctual feelings, even if they've evolved in such a way that they're completely disconnected from the body.

How did you end up using repetition in the dramaturgy of the piece?

M: There is this repetitiveness to porn, where you can watch the same video over and over again or scroll through to a certain part. There's a violence in that as well - having the power to replay. We strive not to make moralizing shows. We don't want to point the finger and tell people what they should look at, what's wrong or right. Instead, we aim to

create a space of ambivalence. By working with these cultural references, we want to water down the actions or their meaning. If you do something enough, it loses its tension and the initial sense of what it was loaded with.

The loops have a different effect every time because they stand in relation to each other. As performers, pushing ourselves to do it again and again exhausts the space, the audience, and ourselves, pushing past the point of "this is fun."

J: We also take away the shock value. We've described ourselves as exploiting genres. If you use just a little bit of a genre, it might be tasteful, and if you don't go all the way, you can still somehow distance yourself from it. But exploiting porn in repetition over and over again makes people become bored with what they see. When they know exactly what's going to happen for a third time, it gives the audience room to sit with their own thoughts. When there's nothing new happening, even if it's evolving, they reach a point where they're bored with this extremely sexual piece. I think that's super interesting when they're thinking: "Please move on."

M: We've played around a lot with the rule of four. There's the rule of three, where on the third time something changes. If it doesn't change, it becomes repetitive, exhausting, boring, irritating, or frustrating. But when you reach a point of exhaustion, not only does that create space for the audience to sit with those feelings, but it also opens up delicious possibilities to surprise them. That's where the twist in this piece comes in, after the 3rd loop when everyone is thinking: "Can we just stop this?"

J: That's how we work in general: with contrasts. We like to create really strong contrasts. You have to water something down, you have to exploit it for it to be stronger as a contrast to something else. It's a tool we use.

You mentioned the pornographic gaze. What is the kind of gaze that you are proposing, or what is the kind of gaze you are working with?

J: In the case of porn, we worked a lot with the audience being the camera - being the one who views porn, the consumer. We also put that label on them very freely. It's been very important to have the audience present with us, and through gaze, invite them in. The pornographic gaze is also about body parts, isolating through my gaze. I tell the audience to look at this specific thing. This is where the camera goes. We work with how we can make the audience zoom in and zoom out.

M: There's something interesting about doing these porn scenes on stage. With theatre, there's already a quality of objectification in the audience's gaze. But it's much more complex than that, especially when you, as a performer, start looking back at the audience. Then the power dynamic shifts, and playing around with that becomes a game. We assign the audience the role of porn consumers, which many people are. But

they're not watching us like they're watching porn, which becomes really interesting. People don't sit there and masturbate or feel safe behind a camera to just objectify a human being on a screen. The power is more in our hands than in the so-called consumer's hands. We have control over how people look, where they look, and what role they play. It's an interesting dynamic to play around with on stage.

Can you clarify what's the relationship or what's the research been like with the body in this piece?

J: I think it's been kind of a choreographic work in the sense of us being more athletes than it is about actual sex. For me it's both disconnected and connected to sexuality at the same time. It is still a very sexual act or claims to be, and the body knows that. But at the same time, it's very much about endurance. I think porn is about endurance and tricks and bendiness - more like a circus. It demonstrates that I can bend this way, and I can do this while you lift me up there. It's kind of a showcase for athletes.

M: At the same time, it objectifies, as porn objectifies the sexual experience. The display objectifies porn and makes it into this really disgusting, weird, disconnected thing. For me, and we've talked about this in the group, whenever we perform it, my libido is at an all-time low because you become so estranged from your sexuality.

J: It's very interesting because we talked a lot about how our own sexuality plays into it. It would be easy to say that we're separating our sexuality from that, but we're not. We can't. It's what porn asks: is this sexuality? And it is, but it's also not. We worked choreographically with the body and were very precise in trying to mimic porn - with faces, voices, movement, dynamics, and energy. So, it's been very precise work, which has also kept us safe. It is very choreographed; it's not like we're going to improvise porn for two hours, because that creates issues.

M: Speaking of the relation to the body, another thing that makes it feel safe is that these are your friends' bodies in the weird landscape of the performance. It's nice to recognize my friend's body. It's your eyes looking, your smell, your touch, and everything.

J: I think we're not very interested in losing ourselves to any kind of character work or artistic transgression. The power we have is that we play very much with the meta levels of performer and character. That level shifts throughout the performance, but we're always very present as performers, which is fun as well.

How did you end up making the decisions you made around nudity, and how was your discussion around that?

J: The dildos and the fake genitals were a choice because it's dressing up as a character, and that part is vital to the porn characters. Also, I'm not a trained porn actress, so I wouldn't be able to simulate that or do it live action in front of like 100 people - to have that actual real-life stamina. It's also a very strong statement that it is very disconnected from our actual genitals. It's a part of the outfit.

M: To borrow from queer vocabulary: do you pass or do you drag? Do you fit into the norm, versus highlighting the norm and playing around with it or making fun of it?

J: And highlighting what is fake as well. We made a very strong decision in the performance about having the sperm not be realistic or trying any kind of theatre magic of it coming out of the dildo. We are very clear that this is a performance. We are playing porn characters and not trying to be porn actors.

What about consent, what was your discussion and decision-making around that? Both towards the performers as well as the audience?

J: The foundation here is actually that we are friends. Consent discussions look different if you're with strangers. We have a shared knowledge of how to read each other. We have a shared space where we can speak up more freely. But of course, we've had discussions about what we're comfortable doing, what we're interested in doing but maybe don't know if we're comfortable doing it in the show but want to try during the process, and what is something that we absolutely don't want to do.

Consent flows between us in a more organic way, but we have moments where I ask, "Can I touch you here? Can I touch you there now? I'm going to do this. Is that OK?" We are so intimately platonic as friends outside of work that that type of discussion is, for me at least, natural and very safe.

M: And it enables us to have an honest relationship between what we want to do, our dreams for the stage, and the protocol of going through questions of consent, safety, and intimacy. I think that no matter how good your protocols are for intimacy, it's impossible to always be honest with yourself and with others. What helps with being such close friends is that we recognize in each other when something's wrong. It's not always on you personally to know yourself in a certain situation where you might be in affect or processing feelings that you can't distinguish. It's a great help to have a friend who knows you, who sees when you start functioning in that way and can then ask, "Hey, is everything OK? Do you want to do this in another way?" That isn't always there when systematically following a protocol.

J: In sex in general, but also in what we do, there is risk involved. That's something I accept. There is risk involved with doing things that are highly sexual or highly physically sexual. There's trust and safety in knowing that if something goes wrong or somebody

feels their boundaries have been overstepped, we can fall back on each other. There's no question in my mind that any of us would abuse that power or that there's any kind of abuse of the material for personal gain. So, I really trust that if my friends cross my boundaries, it's not intentional. There is no abusing the structure there.

As for the audience, first of all, the title - Porn Horror Musical - is one step on the way. Then we have these content warnings you can choose to look at. It's about the audience being self-aware enough to know if they want to know exactly what's in this show, if they might get triggered or not. Some people want to go in blindly and experience it without any indications of what might happen. I think that freedom is important - to make that choice for yourself as an adult attending a performance. If you look at the content warnings, pretty much everything that can be triggering and sensitive is written out.

We've talked a lot about creating a brave space instead of a safe space. I want our theatre to be a place where people can challenge their bravery. I think there is room for that. There are other theatres that want to create more safe spaces where you don't have to challenge your own boundaries, and that's completely fine. I think there's room for both, but for me it's been important that we're in this together and we're doing this together.

M: To me, safety is more about the people and being safe as a person rather than about a space. You can't create a safe space without having safe people in it, and that's something we've talked a lot about. In order to create this brave space, we need to be both brave and safe in what we're doing.

With the gaze, looking at the audience, which we work with a lot in this piece, and establishing contact with the audience - that's both challenging the audience not to look away and be brave, but also indicating a certain degree of safety, like we're here together. Then we have the part where we move up into the audience and start touching and holding hands and really getting in their faces. It communicates that this is a game, this is theatre. If you want it to be funny - and still awkward and horrendous, but funny - it will be that, and we can do it together.

Of course, there are always people who leave and need to either take a break or can't handle it. But most often it's not because of some sort of breach of audience contract with us looking at them or moving among them or talking with them. It's more when people have visceral reactions to what they see, because it can be so disgusting, and you can have a really corporeal reaction to it. That's why we feel it's important to also have the possibility to leave.

J: That's what I mean also by being present as a performer and not losing yourself in some kind of character work. To do the things we do, especially with audience

involvement or crossing that 4th wall boundary, we have to be present and sober in that instance to be able to read their body language. I think that is an expertise that performers who want to break that wall must have - to multitask in that sense, to be in character, but also be a performer and be in that space of reading the energy in the room.

M: Also important is the dramaturgy. There has to be this balance and insightfulness in how to carry the audience through the show. There has to be a balance with humor, disgust, and the horror that comes in at the end, which is a sort of cathartic release. Another thing about horror and porn is that horror is much more honest about what porn and horror have in common, which is this violence against the body. This violence is more hidden and neutralized in porn.

Do you have a link people can go to beforehand for the content warnings or how do you deal with it practically?

J: Yes, both online and also in the space there will be a list printed out with content warnings.

M: It's an interesting discussion with the content warnings. There was one period when we and people in general called them trigger warnings. But calling them trigger warnings can become triggering in itself, making it more loaded. So we started talking about content warnings.

J: I think trigger warnings are also more related to trauma - triggering trauma - and I think content warnings is more fitting in that sense.

M: Last time we performed, we changed "warning" to the word "notice."

J: And it's voluntary content you can choose to see. They are always printed out in the space, but placed upside down, and the audience host will say that the content notices are there if you want to look at them. You can always also find them behind the link. But it's voluntary.

When you've performed this piece or other similar pieces, what kind of audience reactions have you gotten and have they informed you in some way?

J: Very different reactions. Everything from being really provoked and not understanding or relating to the piece, to people having to leave to vomit, to people loving it and being really touched by it. We've had people being horny and sort of coming onto us afterwards. It's really the whole spectrum.

M: What many people have said is that they don't really know exactly how to put it into words. We want to create a very ambivalent effect, where you might get turned on but

also be disgusted at the same time. A lot of people say they feel physically exhausted after, and for me that's a sign that we've taken their bodies on some kind of journey. They didn't have the chance to completely disconnect from what's happening and just be there analytically. They had to be present with their bodies. That's what I'm striving for - for people to be very present in their bodies.

J: I would say I'm happy with every reaction, as long as there's a reaction.

How do you take care of each other or yourselves as performers?

J: For example, when we're touring, we don't party or go out late. The aftercare continues after the show in the sense that we're really trying to stay present in what we need. We might have plans for going to see some mountain in Norway or something, but we cancel it if we're too tired. Emelie [Zilliacus] had such a good quote in an interview with Essi Rossi. It was along the lines that the things we do on stage are so dirty, so after the show, we go and read the Bible and play role-playing games and nerd out somehow.

Of course, there are individual performers' warmups and things like that. But we have a routine. Always before every show we have a chant where we shout: "Let's fuck!" And then afterwards, the first thing we do when we get off stage is we hug and tell each other we love each other.

M: That's like a ritual at this point.

J: I would say those are the bookends of every performance.

M: And then it seeps out into how we spend our time together afterwards and in between shows. We try to take care of each other and talk a lot, not only about the show but about life. We make food together and play role-playing games together. I think what works is that we take care of our friendships outside of work, so that when we get to work, the foundation is already there, and we continuously build that trust and take care of each other. It is disconnected from work, but it does connect to work. We really enjoy spending time together, we really have fun together, and we really like traveling together - pretending to live with each other, making food, and doing laundry. I think that's how it differs if you tour with people you don't know that well. Maybe then you have your own rituals, more alone time. But I feel like I can really rest in our friendship afterwards.

Is there something important I forgot to ask about the piece or your work?

J: I think what's most important is to have fun and to feel joy and love through what we do, but also to invite the audience to have fun and to laugh at the darkness somehow,

and to connect with really grotesque material through laughter. To have fun together - to look at this, look how fucked up this is, and then laugh at it. Not laughing it away.

M: With pushing through the darkest places, we also want to come to the other side where things are really hopeful and beautiful, where you can not only see the shitty, dark parts of humanity, but also the beautiful and hopeful parts and let them shine through. That's really important for us - to not only be provocative but also fun, and not only be dark, but also hopeful.