Foreplay in Many Axioms

A Theoretical Voguing on Performance, Labor, Pleasure and Multiplicity

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What I call ›foreplay‹ is a mode of performance production existing outside of pre-asserted structures of recognition, in terms of professionalism, artistic achievement and a logic of eventfulness. Such production is constituted of forms of artistic labor that question, in their enactment, a pre-asserted order of value. I call foreplay circumstances of performance that, just like queer voguing in the ballrooms of 1980s Harlem, are sustained by a labor of pleasure on the part of performers and spectators, and exceed the frame of a singular event; performances that exist outside of a market rationale, or at least are not yet recognized as valuable in any profitable system of performing arts; performances that are not organized according to a climax, but develop in an extended interval of leisurely enjoyment, and within a complex economy of attention and distraction.

Welcoming the invitation to think in a horizon of multiplicity, proposed by *The Art of Being Many*, I shall present here the theoretical hypothesis I call foreplay, which I have developed in my work over the last years, in a series of multiple propositions, which you can take – if you wish – as a form of ›theoretical voguing‹, with each axiom asserting itself on the catwalk of your reading, and competing for your attention. Alternatively, you can think about these propositions as the many points of a pamphlet, claiming the rights of a disavowed, multiple, and nameless pleasure of performing against the orgasmic sovereignty of the ›event‹. Finally, you can take these many points

as many possible beginnings of this essay: as an open-ended series of preludes to my piece on foreplay.

- Foreplay – a concept I borrow from sexual terminology – is a way of thinking about playful activities that are both implicated in, but yet somehow also avoid, the teleology of productive labor. By ›foreplay‹, I mean an a-teleological mode of activity which, in a sense, anticipates and postpones a productive outcome, and in so doing stands as an endless prelude, preceding and multiplying an event that never takes place as singular, enacting a production which is nevertheless not recognized as ›proper‹.

- In *The Oxford English Dictionary*, the word foreplay features as an entry under the suffix ›fore‹, and it is defined as: »stimulation or love-play preceding sexual intercourse« (1989). According to *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary,* foreplay is also any »action or behavior that precedes an event« (2003). The nature of the event whose advent foreplay announces and prepares is not clearly specified: Shall we understand it as the coitus? Or rather, as orgasm? How to measure what is preliminary, propaedeutic, serving as a teaser and appetizer, and what is in fact ›the real thing‹?

- According to its definition, foreplay appears as a slippery territory of *crescendo* that cannot claim the status of an arrival. Foreplay, that is, is a praxis not allowed to be its own stable signifier, relegated to the status of a parasitical entity: its function is ascribed retrospectively, as if only a future occurrence were entrusted to open the time proper to the activity itself.

- Foreplay, therefore, is a labor of pleasure inhabiting an ›improper‹ time: a time projected towards the possibility of consummation, without the guarantee of arrival. It occupies surreptitiously an interval which is not legitimate, if not submitted to and disciplined by a future development.

- The concept of foreplay, however, inhabits a structural paradox: The event that might possibly secure its ontological status, which might transform it into a ›legitimate‹ praxis of production, is what puts an end to foreplay as such. In other words, if the accomplishment of foreplay – in

coitus, or in its supposed climax, the orgasm – is what justifies its temporality of deferral (along with the pleasure accumulated in its duration) the ›event‹ would be, after all, both the temporal and purposive end of foreplay.

- The teleology intrinsic in the common understanding of foreplay is clear, for instance, if we consider the linguistic equivalent of this word in other European languages, such as Italian or French. The sexual activities preceding intercourse are here referred to as *preliminari*, or *préliminaires*, and therefore point directly to the teleological aspect of sexual intercourse: an outcome, understood as actualized pleasure. ›*Preliminari*‹ conjures the achievement of a goal: Each gesture of desire would be ›preliminary to‹, entailing the expectation of a linguistic object supposed to complete the finality of the sentence, the finality of *pleasure as an event*.

- Foreplay is also a useful figure to discuss the way pleasure is mobilized and exploited in contemporary capitalism: a context in which labor time is too often blurred with the worker's own free time, serving as an endless deposit of labor power, available for exploitation and self-exploitation especially when conditions of employment and remuneration are slippery. In this context, artistic work is rarely recognized as such in the moment of its enactment, but mostly happens in a projection toward the horizon of its potential realization as value. For example, too often artistic labor is not paid up front, and its articulation is sustained by virtue of ›love labor‹. This predicament takes several different forms, among them that of the application, deferring the moment of a project's enactment to a potential future; that of voluntary participation in artistic projects for the sake of passion, good will, eagerness or ›professional training‹: supposedly key ingredients in the demand to undertake work for the sake of love rather than of wages.

- Like foreplay, such effort of love, such experience of pleasure in working regardless of economic recognition, inhabits a time seemingly dependent on a future outcome, which could retrospectively turn love labor into what could be considered, and remunerated as, proper ›work‹. Like foreplay, such labor of pleasure is haunted by its condition of being preliminary, by its own parasitical relation to a possible, forthcoming futurity.

- In the same logic in which pleasure is mobilized as a key ingredient to keep alive the promise of future recognition for labor, such forms of exploitation – framed either as training, as preparation for work, as gratuitous work services or the like – are gladly welcomed as ante-chambers of productivity, although in most cases they constitute the structural base of production proper.

- What happens, however, in the space between the promise – projected toward a future outcome – and its potential accomplishment? How can we think about the time of foreplay outside of its future and retrospective evaluation as ›preliminary‹? Can we? What remains of foreplay if we tear off *telos* from its horizon? What remains of such labor of pleasure if we imagine it outside of a progressive course of evaluation?

- My proposal abstracts foreplay from the common language and opens it up to its own etymological potentiality. I regard foreplay as a concept and praxis hiding in its own linguistic predicament pointers toward an understanding of itself as something other than a preliminary praxis. While pointing towards a future play, in fact, the term foreplay also conjures a longing for the play that was *before*, the previous times in which pleasure took place, even without reaching a climax. However much expectation towards an event the ›fore‹ might create, the word *play* itself puts finality under question, reshuffling it backwards in a semantic and temporal imprecision. If we consider it carefully, we shall notice that in foreplay the ›event‹ is extended beyond its own singularity, either in time, position, order, or rank.

- By liberating this other sense, I appropriate foreplay's intrinsic functioning as a counter-technology of pleasure and labor. I appropriate it as well as a counter-technology of value for labor as praxis.

- Learning from foreplay, in a sense, means learning a different form of inhabiting what is presented as a parasitical and disenfranchised position for us love laborers, disobeying at the same time a logic of futurity which exhausts both the pleasure and the continuity of work.

- Claiming such a different sense of foreplay means affirming a powerful disobedience to the ›diktat‹ of achievement presiding to sex, as much as to work, and haunting the enactment of both labor and pleasure.

- The idea of foreplay I reclaim undermines the supposed progressive temporality of sex, according to which there is a duration considered preliminary insofar as it prepares for a ›real‹ event. Such temporality configures pleasure as something growing to a point of extinction, standing as the ultimate actualization of pleasure, and its value.

- Obviously, such a progressive structure of sexual pleasure is historically constructed, conceptualized and supported according to a distinctively androcentric model. Female orgasm, in fact, has long been regarded (and treated) as a problem, precisely because of its structural ›failure‹ to meet the androcentric logic of pleasure, according to which orgasm marks a point of no return in the sexual act. The potentiality for reaching multiple orgasms during sex, which is intrinsic to female sexuality, is itself a powerful threat to the idea of ejaculation as the ultimate goal of coitus.

- Foreplay, as female pleasure has known for long time, is not preliminary, neither preparatory, nor surrogate to orgasm. On the contrary, it enables a multiplicity of orgasms, neither of which is sovereign on pleasure nor on the temporality of love-making. Outside of any progressive logic, foreplay puts in question the sovereignty of the event of orgasm, and in so doing it multiplies the potentiality of the event, as well as the possibility of persistence beyond the event itself.

- Foreplay counters the notion of ›event‹ as that which exists in a rhetoric of actualization and subsequent disappearance, a logic which is forgetful of both the longue *durée* of labor, and of value. That is, the contemporary emphasis on the event – as ephemeral, singular climax – overshadows the slippery path which artistic labor undertakes in its becoming value, its toil and its pleasure, its possibility of existence outside of an achievement considered as ›outcome‹.

- Foreplay is a way of thinking about the endurance of pleasure as a tactical occupation and organization of time and labor. It is an idea countering

the trajectory of finality haunting the temporality of potential value realization, which is central in the most common demands placed upon the potential worker in the artistic field.

- The notion of foreplay addresses the mode of production of artistic labor outside of a logic in which ›preparation‹ (in the form of workshops, training, stages, etc.) is either something already marketed as a consumable commodity, or is an antechamber of supposed productivity, haunted by an always forthcoming future career.

- Foreplay names a mode of engagement with performance-making that, from within the production system in which, necessarily, it is embedded, possibly disavows its implication in a teleological ›end‹, sustaining the pleasure of its doing as work – hence struggling with the temporality constructed by the necessity of its future valorization.

- Such a mode of engagement assumes pleasure as an engine of continuation and renewal of work. It reconfigures artistic work as a doing, as a praxis, rather than as a horizon. It mobilizes pleasure as a measure of production and as tool for cooperation (with co-workers and spectators alike), rather than as profitable function of a delayed future accomplishment.

- The temporality I call foreplay, moving back to where we started, can be recognized as inherent to certain artistic practices, disavowing their eventfulness and their potential valorization, playing with the pleasure of multiplying their own units of accomplishment, outside of a progressive logic of completion.

- The ›vogue‹, in this respect, is a brilliant example: Instead of an event to be witnessed in a state of concentration, voguing entails a series of numbers, poses, performances, all of which constitute a climax of sorts, and all of which, however, participate in the continuing enjoyment of the evening as well. It is a performance praxis born out of a common pleasure of ›doing‹, in a collective scene of recognition. It is a performance practice that longs, in fact, for the pleasure which was before: the previous times in which a performance took place in a particular circumstance (for

example, in a particular ›house‹), for the previous time in which dancing and striking poses was enacted, witnessed, celebrated in the social scene of a common invention.

- The mode of performance labor I call foreplay calls upon a sense of deferral, rather than an accomplishment of pleasure. It brings about an idea of loitering, of over-staying in a condition of work understood first and foremost as pleasure. In the vogue, the structure of the competition plays with the supposed final horizon of achievement: performing as well as possible the glamorous image that one has chosen to present, and enjoying performing for and with others, is the horizon of achievement, rather than a vehicle to a final validation. In a sense, the structure which the vogue assumed, at least in its early incarnation, mimicked and subverted the very grammar of success and public recognition presiding in show-business: By voguing, the performers claimed and affirmed an autonomy of the act of exposure, as radical as the affective community sustaining such performances as praxis.

- Foreplay also names a mode of performance-making characterized by a lack of mastery and professionalism, at least in the traditional sense in which these categories are understood and marketed in capitalism. The vogue, at least in its heydays, challenged the idea of professional performance, along with the training supposedly necessary for performing. Voguing, in fact, is not embedded in a developmental process where procedures, knowledge, and skills are put under scrutiny and trained or organized towards the professional stage of an artistic craft.

- At the same time, the vogue is a praxis producing its own technology of performance, one elaborated collectively as creative self-invention. Voguing can be regarded as a performance work indifferent towards being not, or not yet, recognized and remunerated as professional performance.

- Foreplay names, as well, a specific mode of attending performance, one in which the event is received distractedly as part of a spectrum of leisure activities, rather than becoming the focus for a more studied or ›labored‹ attention, such as it is expected in the ›legitimate‹ theatre venues. Hence,

it entails a mode of spectatorship assuming on itself a mimetic relation with the performance labor which produces it, and which, on its part, is produced by such leisurely attention.

- Foreplay names a state in which performance does not happens for spectators ›paying attention‹, but rather in a condition of unfocussed eroticism.

- Countering the orgasmic logic that views sex as a labor that reaches a point of exhaustion and then vanishes, the idea of foreplay names a longing for performance exceeding the logic of an itch that might be scratched and extinguished in the time and space of an event. It points to a desire which over-stays, queering the singularity of performance as event, multiplying its focuses in a multiplicity of forms and temporal articulations.

- Hence, with the idea of foreplay I also want to trouble the very unfortunate, value-oriented expression by means of which, in the common language, the pleasure of sex and that of theatre have somehow fallen into association: the definition of ›sexual performance‹, where pleasure emerges as something to be achieved, and the very process of achieving is rated in terms of performance. Such expression, explicitly flirting with the domain of business, attests to the achievement of a given result, and the process through which the result is attained. Such result is not a feature of production, but an evaluation on the behavior *in time* on the part of the ›performer‹: it is the feat she realizes during her service.

- The logic of foreplay regards performance as something other than a service, other than a feat. It points to the autonomous temporality which artistic labor might elaborate as its own measure, undermining the constructed, progressive temporality of work in contemporary capitalism. In this different measure, I call for a liberation of the temporality of work from the horizon of value realization, and a liberation of pleasure from its position of supplementarity to the always forthcoming domain of capital.

- Multiplying the points of climax, rather than making the event the climax, multiplying the pleasure in its duration is a call for the liberation of love labor from the absolute domain of value, *at least for the time being*: setting it in a multiple present, rather than an always forthcoming futurity. Foreplay is the name of all the many, nameless moments of pleasure in love-making, striking poses in their duration, in their excess.

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