

University of Tartu  
Department of Semiotics

Shion Yokoo-Ruttas

**Anti-theatricality in performance art in Estonia: Semiotic approach**

Master's Thesis

Supervisor: Katre Pärn

Tartu

2024

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|   |    |
|---|----|
| INTRODUCTION .....  | 3  |
| 1. OVERVIEW AND DELIMITATION OF ANTI-THEATRICALITY.....             | 8  |
| 1.1. Anti-theatricality and theatricality .....                     | 8  |
| 1.2. Performativity .....   | 13 |
| 1.3. Postdramatic Theatre .....                                     | 16 |
| 2. CONCEPTUALISATION OF ANTI-THEATRICALITY IN PERFORMANCE ART ..... | 18 |
| 2.1. Signs of signs in anti-theatricality .....                     | 18 |
| 2.2. Features of anti-theatricality .....                           | 26 |
| 2.2.1. Reflexivity .....  | 27 |
| 2.2.2. Authenticity .....   | 28 |
| 3. ANTI-THEATRICALITY IN ESTONIAN PERFORMANCE ART .....             | 33 |
| 3.1. <i>Holy Rage</i> (2018).....                                   | 33 |
| 3.2. <i>So You Think You Can Dance</i> (2023).....                  | 40 |
| 3.3. <i>Floor on Fire: Ask My Body</i> (2024).....                  | 47 |
| 3.4. Discussion.....  | 55 |
| REFERENCES .....  | 59 |
| MAGISTRITÖÖ KOKKUVÕTE.....  | 65 |
| APPENDIX 1 .....  | 66 |
| APPENDIX 2 .....  | 67 |
| APPENDIX 3 .....  | 77 |
| APPENDIX 4 .....  | 90 |

## INTRODUCTION

The present work aims to conceptualise anti-theatricality in performance art from a semiotic perspective to offer an approach to its fundamental semiotic mechanisms. The current performance art in Estonia is focused on defining anti-theatricality as a reaction against certain conventions in theatre.

Estonia is rich in theatre culture. In the copious opportunities to visit performances, performances I research on are said to be complex and challenging to understand due to their unconventional and interdisciplinary form. Performance art forms only a minor part of Estonia's performing arts. I have noticed seeing familiar faces at the performance institutions I regularly visit, and rarely get to know new people. Unfortunately, the performance art discipline has a closed community. Authors (or directors or choreographers), performers, light designers, sound designers, technicians, dramaturgs, producers, spectators, and even critics quite likely know each other, if not befriended.

Performance art has been developing transdisciplinarily, including a close relationship with theatre. I treat performance art that is derived from performing arts, unlike performance art *per se*, which originates from fine art. Despite the original direction of performance art in the West, nowadays, in Estonia, performance art is not strictly limited to its original sense. Instead, it could involve different disciplines, including those that have been performing arts from the beginning. It is undeniable that a terminological gap between Estonian and English plays a role. '*Etenduskunst*' and '*performans*' or '*performance*' are jargon that is differentiated from each other. Those which do not exactly fit under contemporary dance ('*nüüdistants*') nor performance art ('*performans*') are called '*etenduskunst*'. Moreover, '*etenduskunst*' and '*performans*' are sometimes closer to each other than to contemporary dance.

Today, the boundaries of forms of art, especially in contemporary performing arts, are unclear and instead tend to be subjectively set by each related party according to a specific intention. In this thesis, I choose the term 'performance art' to describe the type of performances

under study that take place on stage, including conceptual stages, have concepts, and involve interdisciplinarity. Specifically, I consider those with a dominant emphasis on visual physicality.

However, the artistic field I'm interested in is not easily subsumed under a specific label. Initially, I used the term 'contemporary dance' to describe the domain of my interests. The problem raised is that 'contemporary dance' may give a misimpression that it orients in established sets of technical skills in dance *per se*, in line with ballet and modern dance. The works and the field of art I am interested in do not always fit into the category of dance; in other words, they are interdisciplinary and intermedial. These works may not contain dance as it is generally conceived, or there are people who are known or identify themselves as actors, musicians or even sculptors rather than dancers. Instead, they could all be called performers without any additional specifications of activities they may perform on stage. Therefore, my supervisor and I decided to apply 'performance art' and provide the delimitation of this term's use to convey my intentions correctly.

The problematic situation of my research field I call 'performance art' in this thesis, could be clarified by Dick Higgin's (2001) concept of intermedia and Ludwig Wittgenstein's (2009) idea of family resemblance.

Higgins utilises the concept of intermedia "to define works which fall conceptually between media that are already known" (2001: 52) and claims: "continuity rather than categorization is the hallmark of our new mentality" (Ibid., 50). I use 'performance art' in my own definition, which patently shares nature with his concept of being continuous rather than discrete. In the continuum of the intermedia that I intend to inquire about, I see performance art, conceptual art, contemporary dance, and contemporary theatre.

Ludwig Wittgenstein's family resemblance is applicable to these elements and the relationships among them. The concept refers to the relationship of "a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing" (Wittgenstein 2009: 36) just as physical and mental features of family members grouped as a family (Ibid.). In analogy with this family resemblance, works of performance art here do not necessarily share every feature in common but form network-like affinities. Works may rely on or make use of verbal language, music, video, movements, execution of practical actions, and other elements. They may be regarded as a piece of theatre performance, dance, or performance art. In this thesis, performance art is, thus, treated as a family in Wittgenstein's idea.

I would take one group within performance art in Estonia, which has a tendency to be connected to performing arts. I see different original orientations: dance (Mart Kangro, Ruslan

Stepanov, Sveta Grigorjeva), theatre (Juhan Ulfsak, Eero Epner, Liisa Saaremäel), visual arts (Emer Vark), fine arts (Nele Tiidelepp, 'tema'). In a broader picture, these artists' educational backgrounds are often found in theatre or dance; thus, they may tend to utilise tools from their backgrounds. For instance, the use of natural language is not scarce in performance art nowadays. Those with dance backgrounds frequently apply physical means but do not have established styles of dance. Instead, it can be described as movements in general, which sometimes do not necessarily require any specific skills.

Stage art does not completely escape from the relatedness of theatre, and this type of performance art retains the link with theatre. Therefore, I find it relevant to consider theatricality in performance art in Estonia.

However, in contemporary theatre, contemporary dance, and performance art, the 'theatrical', including expressivity, has been treated critically, at least by some parties. This avoidance of or opposition to theatricality, one of the prevalent conceptual approaches observed in performance art, seems paradoxical; on the one hand, performance art is related to theatre and, on the other, distances from being theatrical. This calls for a better conceptualisation of anti-theatricality in performance art.

Anti-theatricality in theatre and drama has been treated from a historical perspective by Jonas Barish (1981), Laura Levine (1986), Martin Puchner (2002), Alan Ackerman (2006, with Puchner), and Lisa A. Freeman (2016), among others. Terminologically, they express anti-theatricality in the terms including 'anti-theatricalism' and 'anti-theatre' besides 'anti-theatricality'. Each term seems to set its own opponent in forming antithetical relations with theatre. However, I could not find a relevant treatment of anti-theatricality in the post-modern period and, more precisely, in performance art.

Theatre semioticians have treated theatricality with special attention in a contemporary context (Fischer-Lichte 1991; Sauter 2000; Féral 2002b), contrasting it with anti-theatricality. These scholars aimed to create a universal model of theatricality. However, in the 1990s, they seemed to have agreed that one universal model did not exist (Postlewait, Davis 2003: 25). Even though the search for one discrete model of theatricality failed, theatre semioticians viewed certain semiotic mechanisms as central. I would thus focus on one of the possible mechanisms.

Conventions in performing arts, or conventions in general, are often formed and re-produced in relation to societal and cultural contexts. Regardless of its contextuality, one of the theatrical conventions concerns the specific sign process and its appearance, which is regarded

as unique to the theatre or even defining the nature of theatre. It also seems to be the very foundation of performing arts. A folklorist and a member of the Prague Linguistic Circle, Petr Bogatyrev, was one of the first to propose that theatrical signs are signs of signs in 1938 (Bogatyrev 1984: 33), which was later elaborated further by Erika Fischer-Lichte, a theatre and performance scholar, notably in *The Semiotics of Theatre* (1992). The notion of signs of signs specifies the details particular to theatre and is used by authors of theatre studies. I would approach anti-theatricality in performance art through the sign process, focusing on that of signs of signs.

This thesis looks at anti-theatricality in performance art as one possible common nature, which challenges specific traits of theatre by focusing on the semiotic process of signs of signs in performances, relying on Petr Bogatyrev (1983) and Erika Fischer-Lichte (1992). The research aims to conceptualise the anti-theatricality in performance art in Estonia to better understand the fundamental semiotic mechanism of current performance art, which helps to draw a more general picture of this art form. I will investigate anti-theatricality in performance art in Estonia, concentrating on the roles of signs of signs. The thesis aims to answer the following questions:

- In what ways do signs of signs behave in performance art?
- What kind of features could be observed in anti-theatricality in performance art?
- How is anti-theatricality created and perceived in Estonian performance art?

In the first chapter, I will give an overview of anti-theatricality, taking a closer look at the concept of theatricality and the related notions. The literature on theatricality, anti-theatricality, and reflection on the definition of theatre and theatricality in cultural and sociosemiotics, as well as theatre and performance studies, will be used.

In the second chapter, I conceptualise anti-theatricality through modelling the appearances of signs of signs and inspecting the relationship of the concept with reflexivity and authenticity.

The third chapter is devoted to the analysis of three works of performance art created in Estonia from the viewpoint of anti-theatricality, including both authors' and spectators' perspectives. The performances' authors' perspectives are provided in interviews and reviews on the works are used to understand the reception of them.

As a criterion, the chosen performances are those that I find pertinent in consideration of anti-theatricality. In order to provide different perspectives of anti-theatricality, I have selected Ruslan Stepanov's *Floor on Fire: Ask My Body* (*Floor on Fire: Küsi minu kehalt*)(2024), Unholy Trinity's *So You Think You Can Dance* (2023), and Stella Kruusamägi's *Holy Rage*

(2018). The chapter provides the reception of anti-theatricality, relying on personal experiences and reviews of performances, as well as the creational side, which relies on the semi-structured qualitative interviews with the works' authors (see Appendix 1, 2, and 3).

Since I have lived in Estonia since 2016 and have taken part in the local performance art scene as a viewer, performer, and author, my study is delimited to the Estonian context, and performances produced and performed in Estonia are analysed.

## 1. OVERVIEW AND DELIMITATION OF ANTI-THEATRICALITY

The term ‘anti-theatricality’ is not omnipresent even in performance studies and theatre studies. I would delimit anti-theatricality through analysing previous research on anti-theatricality and theatricality, as well as related terms, such as performativity and postdramatic theatre.

### 1.1. Anti-theatricality and theatricality

‘Anti-’ does not necessarily mean the total rejection of the following. Compared to ‘non-,’ ‘anti-’ stresses the connection with it, resulting in the reflexivity of anti-theatricality.

According to Oxford English Dictionary (OED *sub* **anti-**, **prefix**), the prefix ‘anti-’ is originated in Greek word component, and means ‘opposite, against, in exchange, instead, representing, rivalling, simulating’. Another dictionary, Macmillan Dictionary (MMD *sub* **anti-**), offers three more detailed explanations: “1. opposed to someone or something: used with many nouns and adjectives antiwar protesters 2. with the opposite qualities or effects: used with some nouns and adjectives an anti-hero 3. preventing or curing something: used with some nouns and adjectives antibacterial, an anti-tetanus injection”. In the second and third cases, the prefix ‘anti-’ does not express a total opposition – the second one highlights the contrast, and the third one indicates directly what the word deals with.

Anti-theatre as a part of anti-theatricality has existed in the antithetical relation with theatre, and its impacts on people are observed throughout history. In theatre and drama, Jonas Barish (1981), Laura Levine (1986), Martin Puchner (2002; 2006), Alan Ackerman (2006, with Puchner), and Lisa A. Freeman (2016), among others, have looked at the oppositional movements towards theatre and theatricality. Barish and Freeman provide a historical overview of anti-theatricality. Puchner and Ackerman concentrate on modernism, and Levine focuses on the Renaissance. Modernist anti-theatricalities, overall, target a chosen aspect of qualities of theatre (Puchner 2002; Ackerman and Puchner 2006; Barish 1981). Levine (1986) introduced



anti-theatricality as a fear of feminization in the Renaissance. Barish (1981) starts with Plato and reaches to modernist theatre reformers and argues that anti-theatricality before modernism was against the existence of theatre itself because of its negative influences on people (audience and citizens of society overall). Notably, Freeman (2016) takes an event from 1998 to conduct a case study, albeit limited to the Anglo-American context, whereas the others do not tend to extend the period beyond modernism.

Till modernism, anti-theatricality, and anti-theatre seem to have meant a critical opposition to or rejection of theatre. Nevertheless, theatre still exists, and the objection may instead be an indispensable factor in the development of theatre, as Barish states:

The theatre has undoubtedly never lacked a streak of antitheatricalism of its own. Perhaps a vigorous dose of it forms an essential ingredient in its vitality. When the theater grows self-satisfied, when it ceases to question itself, when it believes too uncritically in its own poms, it begins to suffer from a kind of fatty degeneration. (Barish 1985: 450)

Adequate self-reflection seems to have functioned in theatre, observing reformers such as Bertolt Brecht, Antonin Artaud, Jerzy Grotowski, Konstantin Stanislavsky, and Hans-Thies Lehmann, among others.

It is suggested that Michael Fried (1980; 1998) introduced the concept of anti-theatricality, distinguishing theatricality from theatre. Fried (1998) observes theatricality in paintings and sculptures, especially in minimal art, and expresses opposition. Here, theatricality is separated from the art form of theatre, and it is treated as a quality theatre dominantly possesses. For Fried (1998), theatricality is the quality of a piece of work that demands subjects to receive the work, without which the art is incomplete. He does not intend to criticise the existence of theatre; instead, he brings out Bertolt Brecht and Antonin Artaud as theatre-makers who built unconventional relationships with audiences, which distanced them from theatricality (1980: 163). What Fried means would be Artaud's idea that "the spectator is in the centre and the spectacle surrounds him" (Artaud 1958: 81) and Brecht's alienation effect, which enabled spectators to actively interrogate what is seen (Brecht 1961). Fried's approach to theatricality, thus, enables anti-theatricality to function as productivity based on self-reflection and does not aim to eliminate theatre's existence.

Besides the subject's appearances in Artaud and Brecht's theatre, they are considered theatre reformers for establishing the theatre of cruelty, and alienation affects each. Artaud

(1958a: 85), with his theatre of cruelty<sup>1</sup>, seeks to “make out of the theater a believable reality which gives the heart and the senses that kind of concrete bite which all true sensation requires” by using text, visuals, and sound. Brecht (1961) criticises old dramatic forms, techniques, and lack of communication with the public.

In addition to these two reformers, Grotowski (2002: 19–22) proposes poor theatre<sup>2</sup> by violating taboos and eliminating superfluous from the theatre. He brought a fundamental change to the definition and role of the performer, focusing on the mind rather than the embodiment of a role (Fischer-Lichte 2008a: 83).

Konstantin Stanislavski’s pursuit of authenticity in his established method could be considered a pursuit of anti-theatricality. According to Barish (1969: 3), Stanislavski used ‘theatrical’ to refer to the negative traits of theatrical plays.

Even though Artaud, Brecht, and Grotowski all seek their own ideal in theatre, differentiating it from the existing theatre, Stanislavski’s realist or naturalist view merits additional attention since it seems to position itself to the opposition to theatre in the classical dichotomy of theatre vs everyday life. Nicolas Evreinoff (2013: 140–148), a theatre theorist and practitioner in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, claims that theatre should be conventional and create illusions and directly criticises Stanislavski’s works for being “far too conventional and theatrical” regardless of his effort to be “ultra-naturalistic” (2013: 137).

Theatre reformers, including Stanislavski, brought about their ideals based on the conventionalised theatre known to them rather than criticising the existence of theatre. In modernist anti-theatricalism, the prefix indicated the transformation of some elements within theatre through “resistance” (Puchner 2002: 2). Thus, anti-theatricality in theatre could be viewed as a reaction against certain conventions within theatre, which I intend to infer by anti-theatricality in performance art today not as an opposition to theatre as such.

The use of the term anti-theatricality or anti-theatricalism seems to be limited to the retrospective treatment of theatre in a stricter sense, which is often drama theatre with the help of natural language. I could not find evidence of the theoretical treatment of anti-theatricality in performance art.

---

<sup>1</sup> “Penetrated by the idea that the crowd thinks first with its senses and that it is absurd to attempt as the ordinary psychological play does, to address itself to the understanding, the Theatre of Cruelty proposes to have recourse to mass effects; to seek in the agitated behavior of significant mass grouping thrown one against the other in convulsive action a little of that poetry which is found in p festivals and in crowds on those days, now too rare, when the people take to the streets”. (Artaud 1958b: 75–76)

<sup>2</sup> “A term coined by GROTOWSKI (1968) to describe his performing style, founded on an extreme economy of stage resources (sets, props, costumes) and filling the remaining void with high-intensity acting and a heightened actor/spectator relationship”. (Pavis 1998: 278)

Theatricality, however, has been extensively studied by scholars from various fields, and multiple definitions are offered, not limited to usage in theatre or performing arts. However, in line with anti-theatricality, theatricality is primarily discussed in the context of and in relation to theatre in a traditional manner. I have yet to notice the specific treatment of theatricality in performance art. Since anti-theatricality literally includes the term ‘theatricality,’ it is worth reflecting on theatricality for the conceptualisation of anti-theatricality.

In *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts, and Analysis*, Patrice Pavis (1998: 395) admits that ‘theatricality’ “covers too much ground” and does not discretely define it. Tracy C. Davis and Thomas Postlewait (2013) similarly regard theatricality as “a sign empty of meaning; it is the meaning of all signs” (Postlewait, Davis 2003: 1). It is generally a floating signifier, as Erika Fischer-Lichte (1992: 88) states since none of the particular meanings are assigned to it due to lack of hegemonic party, even after the emptying process. William Sauter also points out the lack of consensus on the idea of ‘theatricality’ distinguishing it from the adjective ‘theatrical,’ which gained general agreement to express “shallowness and exaggeration” (Sauter 2000: 50). Albeit his distinction, the words’ forms make it challenging to differentiate implications.

I suggest that there should be two ways to use ‘theatrical’. One refers to the negative evaluation of certain forms of expression in certain contexts, such as in the realist and naturalist approaches to theatre, and the other is a neutral adjective form of theatre. This thesis uses theatrical in the latter sense as a rule unless stated otherwise. I do not intend to delve into various notions of the theatricality of the abundance of thinkers, plurality, and the impossibility of agreeing upon one definition, but I will continue by introducing some pertinent aspects.

A special issue of *SubStance* (2002) features theatricality in seeking clarification of the notion, in which each article provides perspectives from various disciplines, including theatre studies by Féral (2002). Sauter (2000: 51) provides an overview of the approaches to theatricality by categorising them into metaphoric, descriptive, binary, and epochal. Metaphorically, “theatricality is reduced to mean something which is pretended”; descriptively, it “is more or less equivalent to what other scholars call *mise-en-scene*” In a binary approach, theatricality is “an antithesis to naturalism”, and epochal one approach theatricality as dependant on “a certain time or a certain culture” (Ibid.). The epochal approach is supported by Josette Féral (2002a: 4), who notes that theatricality requires a constant redefinition in accordance with the changing notion of theatre. This position could be further understood in accordance with the idea of treating conventions as a key to theatricality.

Quite a few scholars from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century up until the 21<sup>st</sup> century put an emphasis on conventionality in theatre and regard it as one of the critical elements of theatricality, such as Nicolas Evreinoff (2013, initially written in the 1910s or 1920s), Elizabeth Burns (1972), Willmar Sauter (2000), and Josette Féral (2002a; 2002b). For instance, Evreinoff (2013: 148) defines theatre by conventionality and regards ‘theatricality’ in opposition to everyday life as the essence of theatre. Some of the conventions used to define theatricality are related to creating fictional, theatrical magic on stage compared to everyday life, relying on the implicit agreement between doers and viewers.

Elizabeth Burns (1972: 13) claims that it is the “mode of perception” which determines theatricality. Sauter (2000: 70), however, expresses disagreement with her and suggests the importance of two elements: actions by performers and reactions by spectators, whereas the performers play roles as “person and artist”, and argues that theatricality situates “between actions and reactions” (Ibid.). Féral (2002b: 98) similarly argues that theatricality is a process of creating fiction/illusion by “looking at or being looked at” (Ibid.). This is analogous to Kirby’s (1987) taxonomy of acting, which derives from actors’ or viewers’ recognition of acting reflected on situations from quotidian to stage. It is undeniable that theatricality is tied to communication through the semiotic process – perception of something as **signs of signs**. In this regard, Fisher-Lichte’s direct approach to signs can be considered relevant. Honzl (1984) and Bogatyrev (1984) precede Fischer-Lichte (1992) to propose the unique sign process of theatrical signs. A folklorist, Petr Bogatyrev, who belonged to the Prague linguistic circle, analyses signs in theatre in an article “Semiotics in the Folk Theatre”, first published in 1938 and in English in 1976. Despite the title, which orientates towards the folk theatre, his arguments on signs in theatre are found to be valid generally in theatre, not limited to folk theatre. Fisher-Lichte proposes a definition of theatricality:

Theatricality may be defined as a particular mode of using signs or a specific kind of semiotic process in which specific signs (human beings and objects of their environment) are employed as signs of signs by their producer or recipient. Thus, a shift in dominance within the semiotic functions determines when theatricality appears. When the semiotic function of using signs as signs of signs in a behavioral, situational, or communication process is perceived and received as dominant, the behavioral, situational, or communicational process may be regarded as theatrical. (Fisher-Lichte 1992: 88)

However, these three authors’ explanations of signs do not highlight the unintentional sign appearances, i.e., ‘performers as a person’ in Sauter’s words. Burns (1972: 36) argues that this performer’s unavoidable two-fold role is compositional quality, and Puchner (2002: 6) does so as anti-theatricalism in the context of modernism. Burns (1972: 36) explains it with an example of a theatre audience member wondering about the meaning of scratches on a lead actor’s leg,

which turns out to be an unintentional sign. Both authors treat this quality as a problem for the audience. Nonetheless, these kinds of unintended or non-composed elements are unavoidable and yet cannot be ignored when considering the performances as a presentation of a prepared piece. On the one hand, any type of sign-in performance is worth attention, even when concentrating on signs of signs; on the other, taking it as a conceptually structured piece, some signs are not supposed to be ‘looked at’.

Theatricality is discussed chiefly in traditional theatre, which includes the uses of natural language in verbal form. Roland Barthes, however, defines theatricality as “theatre-minus-text” (1972: 26). Following his definition, the whole, except for the written plot as “text”, in a strict sense, belongs to theatricality. This theatricality applies to any performance, even those without “text”.

Additionally, both Sauter (2000) and Féral (2002b), as well as others, including Juri Lotman (1976) and Messinger *et al.* (1962), consider theatricality independent from theatre *per se* and inquire about theatricality in daily life. The latter two depart from the theatricality, while the formers develop the consideration of concept to the quotidian.

There is not much previous research on anti-theatricality compared to theatricality, and it is mostly considered in historical context and about traditional theatre. Performance art has not been given theoretical attention in terms of both anti-theatricality and theatricality. Nonetheless, I think that the term is still relevant today and in intermedia, such as performance art, outside of traditional theatre. Despite various approaches to theatricality, it is found to be a floating signifier, which makes the conceptualisation of anti-theatricality challenging.

In this thesis, I rely on Erika Fisher-Lichte’s definition of theatricality it is a use of “signs of signs by their producer or recipient” (Fisher-Lichte 1992: 88). I define anti-theatricality as a reflexive opposition to certain aspects of theatricality, more specifically, I would look into anti-theatricality as a reflection of the use of signs of signs.

## **1.2. Performativity**

Discussing and practising performance art, theatre, and dance, I have encountered the term ‘performativity’ even more frequently than ‘theatricality’. I think that these two terms may lead people to similar ideas and associations, especially when the two terms are presented at the same time, even though they could be clearly distinguishable from each other being closely

looked at. It is assumable that the word ‘performance’ easily leads to ‘performativity’, similar to the case of ‘theatre’ and ‘theatricality’. The links between them are linguistically apparent and logical. Nevertheless, ‘performativity’ deserves careful attention from a broader perspective before focusing merely on one specific aspect of it in performance art. In this subchapter, I will consider how we could differentiate performativity from theatricality for the sake of further discussion of anti-theatricality in performance art.

Performativity’s concerning fields are not only limited to performing arts and its performances; rather, it has been attracting scholars’ attention even from broader disciplines such as philosophy, linguistics, anthropology, and feminist theory, departing from Austin’s performative utterances.

It was John Langshaw Austin, a British philosopher of language, suggested and conceptualised performativity (Austin 1962). In his close examination of ordinary usage of natural languages, Austin explains performative utterances as “it is to do it” and his examples include the utterance at a marriage ceremony “I do” (Ibid.: 5–7). However, his interest is only found in ordinary language usage, and he excludes the use of performative utterances in certain situations, claiming it to “be in a peculiar way hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy” (Ibid.: 22). Hence, his concept of performativity does not extend to performance art. This performativity of natural languages is further discussed in the same philosophy of languages by John Rogers Searle (1995).

Judith Butler famously conceptualises performativity in their feminist theory. “[G]ender is always a doing” and “there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (2002: 33). In accordance with the term usage by philosophers of languages as a doing, performativity is applied rather broadly to everyday human utterances and behaviours. Gender identity is one of the cultural performances, and many scholars, including Eve Sedgwick (1993) in queer theory and Karen Barad (2003; 2011) in gender studies, have studied its performativity.

In performing arts, however, the term ‘performativity’ is prominently connected to performances as live presentations of performing art pieces to the audience. In accordance with the previous treatment of the term, a theatre researcher, Pavis, argues that “performativity becomes almost synonymous with ‘practical application’”(Pavis 2020: 164). Despite the common foundation with the above-mentioned performativity, performing arts often struggle with the relationship between performativity and theatricality.

Some authors compare theatricality and performativity and show them as contrasting qualities. Davis and Postlewait describe that with the emergence and development of performativity, “a new opposition or polarity has emerged: theatricality (in its essentialist strain as the defining trait of dramatic and performance texts) versus performativity (in its imperialist strain as the unifying idea for cultural and social behavior)” (Postlewait, Davis 2003: 31). The core idea that performativity concerns ‘doing’ seems to be shared among theatre researchers too, although the approach to the polarity calls for discussion. Josette Féral (2002: 5), who once supported that idea of opposition, claims that it is merely a rhetorical opposition and that performativity and theatricality exist hand in hand in any living art form, enabling it to function as supposed to by making it meaningful (thanks to theatricality) and alive (thanks to performativity). Moreover, Féral (Ibid.: 5) considers performativity to be a component of theatricality. I second this idea that theatricality and performativity are both essential in performances in a living art form. Strictly speaking of this context, I, too, believe that theatricality entails performativity, not vice versa. It is due to meaningfulness a performance *per se* exists, which is executed by ‘doing’. In the discussion of the anti-theatricality of performance art, the ephemeral ‘doing’ as performativity is unavoidably present due to its difficulty to clearly separate performativity from theatricality, as shown in the term ‘performance art’.

Following this understanding, theatricality belongs to a piece of performance art as thought through plan, while performativity belongs to each live performance. A performance is defined by the co-presence of performers and audiences, ephemerality, transitory and reflexive meaning-making, and events (Fischer-Lichte 2008b: 1). Performativity of art could be then characterised by the ephemerality of performance. Here, performativity requires a performance situation in which one presents something to an onlooker.

However, performativity in the sense of doing, as in linguistics, may have been introduced into performance art. Performativity now means two things: practical doing and performing for someone. Since a performance of performance art could integrate both of them, this leads to a discussion of reflexivity and authenticity in anti-theatricality.

### 1.3. Postdramatic Theatre

Postdramatic theatre should be mentioned when discussing anti-theatricality because of some shared features that may cause confusion. I consider anti-theatricality to be a quality that can be found regardless of genre. In the meantime, postdramatic theatre seems to expand the boundary of theatre.

Postdramatic theatre was proposed by Hans-Thies Lehmann (2006), a distinguished theatre scholar and critic. It is a form of contemporary theatre, which I find to be related to anti-theatricality, which I try to conceptualise in this thesis.

Lehmann theoretically established a form of contemporary theatre, postdramatic theatre, which is explained in his book *Postdramatic Theatre* (2006[1999]). Lehmann (Ibid.: 55) claims that it is postdramatic theatre “when the theatrical means beyond language are positioned equally alongside the text and are systematically thinkable without it”. Here, ‘language’ most likely refers to a natural language and ‘text’ to a plot. On the one hand, a text in natural language plays a central role and seems to be almost a requirement in the drama genre. On the other, ‘drama’ may well mean a play, which is accompanied by words in natural language. Hence, postdramatic theatre actively approaches the use of natural language in theatre. He then explains the nature of postdramatic theatre as follows,

The adjective ‘postdramatic’ denotes a theatre that feels bound to operate beyond drama at a time ‘after’ the authority of the dramatic paradigm in theatre. What it does not mean is an abstract negation and mere looking away from the tradition of drama. ‘After’ drama means that it lives on as a structure – however weakened and exhausted – of the ‘normal’ theatre: as an expectation of large parts of its audience, as a foundation for many of its means of its representation, as a quasi automatically working norm of its drama-turgy. (Lehmann 2006: 27)

It is unneglectable that postdramatic theatre continues to be theatre. Since pieces of dance and performance art (as a general genre) are reflected on by Lehmann, postdramatic theatre does not have to be regarded as a theatre piece by majority of the audience. Rather, it is one possible framework to apply when perceiving a performance, in accordance with the difficulty in categorisation of performances in performing arts (cf. Introduction). ‘Theatre’ here may be considered in a broader sense than merely a presentation of a play on stage in a traditional theatre house relying on Lehmann’s clarification of “a structure of the ‘normal’ theatre (Lehmann 2006: 27)”.

The significant gap between Lehmann’s anti-theatricality and post-dramatic theatre lies in the initial identification of artworks. The former is a quality, while the latter is a form of contemporary theatre. As a result, the latter frames some suitable performances as



postdramatic theatre, likely on the basic idea to identify it as a theatre in either a broader or narrower manner. The former, anti-theatricality could be possibly spotted in a piece of postdramatic theatre.

I argue that performance art could be perceived sometimes as postdramatic theatre for it is for each perceiver to feel and categorise an experience. However, I would wish to conceptualise anti-theatricality as a quality in some performances independent from their form or genre, which may not fully define their identity. The quality may not dominate the wholeness of performances.

## **2. CONCEPTUALISATION OF ANTI-THEATRICALITY IN PERFORMANCE ART**

In order to approach anti-theatricality in performance art, I would engage in three aspects: signs of signs, reflexivity, and authenticity. To be more precise, I would focus on concepts of how to express oneself and messages on-stage – a communication plan in a piece. The sign process in theatre has been investigated by scholars of the Prague linguistic circle since the 1930s. Since then, the theatre and performing arts have changed, and I find that this perspective should be treated in a new context as well. In consideration of anti-theatricality in performance art, I consider signs of signs as a core concept. When the conventional use of signs of signs is replaced by signs of signs used in a different way, anti-theatricality appears. I argue that anti-theatricality requires theatricality as a precondition and reflects some aspect of theatricality. Reflexivity is one of the aspects of anti-theatricality. Moreover, the discussion of signs of signs and of two kinds of performativity leads to a contemplation on authenticity. Authenticity is sought for by creating seeming signs instead of signs of signs. With the help of these three chosen aspects, which are merely possible ones out of countless numbers of elements to be taken into consideration, I approach anti-theatricality in performance art in the following subsections.

### **2.1. Signs of signs in anti-theatricality**

Juri Lotman (1991: 208), in discussing stage semiotics, pays attention to the dynamics of conditionality and naturalness. According to Lotman (1991: 208), the frequent misunderstanding is to link semantics only with theatrical conditionality; however, semantics exists both in conditionality and everyday lives. Hence, the conditionality and naturalness of the “represented object“ must be discussed on “another level than signification”<sup>3</sup> (Ibid.). On the

---

<sup>3</sup> Kujutatud objekti loomulikkus või tingilikkus asuvad hoopis teisel tasandil kui märgilisuus. (Lotman 1991: 208)

one hand, I second his fundamental idea that naturalness and conditionality could be dealt with inside theatrical situations, including performance art, in my research. For the anti-theatricality's appearances, it is thus necessary to deal with "another level" in Lotman's words (Ibid.). On the other, there may appear to be several conditionalities at different levels. The one Lotman discusses could be a specific condition, such as a certain genre or style in art. Another conditionality I take with great importance would be conditionality as a condition to make a performance. This framing process allows spectators to experience a theatre illusion', distancing themselves away from the everyday lives outside the performance. Juri Lotman (1991: 188) claims that the knowledge of theatrical language allows spectators to understand performances. Burns has a similar idea: "The double occasion of theatrical performance presupposes a readiness to accept, for the time being, the code (the subset of generative rules) and the world of social relevance established for the duration of the performance" (Burns 1972: 106). In contrast, it was Brecht (1961) who theoretically and practically developed the distancing effect, which enabled audience members to be aware of the life outside theatre in the course of a theatrical illusion. This conditionality would be approached in its semantic system in the following.

At the semantic level, there are at least three distinguishable levels that are relevant in consideration of anti-theatricality's appearances. As Lotman (1991: 208) states, semantics is in everyday life outside theatrical fiction. The second level is a conditional setting for a non-daily circumstance, i.e., a frame as a performance that differentiates it from quotidian life. In this phase, spectators are offered an opportunity, or more precisely a rule, to see what is happening in the delimited space as a performance. The following level needs more of an abstract synthesis to reach symbolical understandings, such as a grand narrative and a canonical message, just as in folklore, still dealing with actual performances. The fourth one would be a meta-level in which performance itself, together with related social structures, organisations, problems, etc., could be regarded as a whole, not necessarily treating each detailed sign process.

It is worth noting that 'performance' and 'performativity' find relevance in the sociocultural reality of everyday life, as discussed in 1.2. In contrast, elements from life outside stage would often be brought into a fictional world, playing a role in representing quotidian lives by presenting extracts of it.

Elizabeth Burns (1972: 36) brings out an intriguing example, which I find helpful to draw an overview of these levels. A film fan went to see a drama piece, remarked a scratch on one actress's leg, waited until the end of the piece wondering, if her scratch led to some kind of

connection in the given narrative, and got disappointed for not finding any resolutions (Groucho 1967:199 — cited in Burns 1972: 36). This spectator sought a complete accordance with the theatrical conventions of conditionality to see the scratch with a semantic charge. However, this case failed to meet his expectations and thus highlights the very problem in relation to the first and second levels.

Let us imagine that the scratch was drawn intentionally on the leg of the actress with the specific role in the given piece as a part of costumes and make-up. The scratch would have possibly meant to be a reference to a past event in the theatrical narrative, which may have played a crucial role. The scratch, thus, was borrowed from everyday life, recreated, and represented on stage, in a fictional world – the second semantic level. It could be even further understood symbolically. The mere scratch could symbolise her lifestyle – say, a peasant, personality – carelessness, nature – vulnerability.<sup>4</sup> I consider this to belong to the third semantic level of symbolic.

This example of the unintentional scratch certifies that it is challenging to construct a perfect illusion, especially with people and life. There is a dual semantic system in performances, yet it is not always possible to interpret only the signs meant to be interpreted. Bogatyrev (1976: 45) points out that in comprehension of the signs of natural language and signs of art, there is a difference in principle. In the former situation, the communicative function dominates, and redundant noise or mistakes are ignored, whereas the latter takes everything as meaningful, perceiving “as a whole” (Ibid.). This is supported by Roman Jakobson in his six functions of language, in which the poetic function focuses on the message itself (Jakobson 1960: 356). This function lets a message receiver take a message as a whole, including the errors and mistakes that Bogatyrev describes in terms of artistic signs.

Since the scratch seen by this audience member was unintentional, assumably, what had caught his attention was a real scratch the actress as a person had; it did not own any meaningful part in the performance. It was an unintentional scratch accidentally left in a drama piece, which contains a risk to be understood and interpreted as a part of the narrative. Reflecting on this fact, the meta-level allows us to perceive the whole picture, that there may be some accidental signs on stage that were not supposed to be seen or paid attention to by spectators.

In this thesis, I concentrate on the second semantic level. The signs process in this phrase would be better explained by the notion of **signs of signs**. Bogatyrev’s concept of signs of signs

---

<sup>4</sup> Personal email exchange with Katre Pärn on 19.04.2024. The interpretation suggested by advice on the interpretation of the scratch at a symbolical level.

is relevant in performance art for performance art to frequently include most of if not all, the elements Bogatyrev treats (people or actors, speech, gesture, costumes, scenery, props, etc.). I would rely on his arguments of signs in theatre to inspect signs in performances. Later, in 1983, a prolific researcher in theatre and performance studies, Erika Fischer-Lichte, provided a thorough theory of theatrical signs. Her publication was made 45 years after Bogatyrev's articles appeared, during which time I believe that theatre and performing arts have changed. For instance, contemporary theatre and dance became known as well, and performance art, in a conventional sense, flourished. Notwithstanding the alternation of theatre itself, Fischer-Lichte also finds the relevance of Bogatyrev's treatment of signs in theatre and further investigates and develops them. Even though Fischer-Lichte's work has been criticised by several academics, including a prominent theatre semiotician Keir Elam (2002), for its structuralist approach, I find her claims on theatrical signs significant to figuring out the sign process in performance art and approach anti-theatricality.

The notions of representation and presentation relate to the concept of signs of signs. Representation is defined in semiotics quite broadly, for example by Stuart Hall from the constructionist approach in the following way: "Representation is the process by which members of a culture use language (broadly defined as any system which deploys signs, any signifying system) to produce meaning" (Hall 1997: 61). However, I rely on the approaches of representation and presentation in theatre studies considering the language used later in the analysis of performances. Anneli Saro, Kristiina Reidolv, and Tanel Lepsoo argue that presentation is autoreferential and "as which presentation is shown and perceived"<sup>5</sup> (2014: 10) and define "[r]epresentation as artistic or conscious activities"<sup>6</sup> (Ibid.: 11). Thus, signs of signs are predominantly representation, which is tied rather to theatricality, and the way how signs of signs are put on stage would be a part of the presentation, which is relatable to performativity.

Bogatyrev (1976) proposes that signs in theatre are signs of signs of material objects or signs of the material objects themselves, while the former dominates and the latter are often in rituals seen as performances. I consider the former relevant in regard to anti-theatricality in performance art. For an example of signs of signs of material objects, he brings out a diamond ring for a rich man on stage, which, as a theatrical property, does not have to be with a real diamond stone at all, but it must look like a diamond ring (Ibid.: 34). In this case, the seeming diamond ring on stage as a prop is a sign for a character of a man who may well wear a real

---

<sup>5</sup> "Presentatsioon on see, millena seda esitletakse ja tajutakse" (Saro, Reidolv, Lepsoo 2014: 10).

<sup>6</sup> "Representatsiooni kui kunstilist või teaduslikku tegevust" (Ibid.: 11))

expensive diamond ring in an ordinary situation outside the theatre. This eventual purpose to express the wealth of a man could be fulfilled through other means or props. Besides a diamond ring, a fur coat or expensive wine could similarly send a message, whereas expensive red wine could be a glass of real wine or raspberry soda (Ibid.). These stage properties should be chosen to signify the end purpose by a creator, even though chances are that some unintentionality comes into play, which I intend to discuss later in this subsection. Bogatyrev finds this possibility of choice in costumes, construction, and speech in theatre. “Theatre uses only those signs of costume and construction which are necessary for a given dramatic situation” (Ibid.: 31). And he adds: “As in the matter of costumes, so in that of language, the dramatist and actor select only a small part of the systems of signs which practical language possesses” (Ibid.: 39). Hence, signs in theatre are extracted and purified form of what we experience in our life outside the theatre. The materiality of a sign in theatre does not have to match to a material object it refers to, instead, the crucial factor would be the functionality as signs of signs of a material object. When stage properties are taken a closer look, their appearances may be disappointing. A diamond ring may well be created quite simply and even oddly. Glue could be visible under a fake plastic stone. Wine could be represented by raspberry soda, as Bogatyrev introduces, or by grape juice. The substitutions successfully present the suitable colour for some wines, whereas the smell of these is distinctively different from that of wine. Nevertheless, these properties still serve the purpose of signs in theatre since they deliver the selected and necessary aspects for the audience to understand the meaning, who only look at the ring and wine from a distance. This selection is unavoidable in theatre as it is created as or formatted as theatre. The ordinary signification process is intervened by one additional meaning process; the first sign on stage is added to the process in everyday life outside of theatre.

In terms of materiality, a theatrical sign has its unique nature. Erika Fischer-Lichte explains in the following way.

Theatrical signs [...] can in principle be materially identical with the signs they are meant to signify: a linguistic sign can signify a linguistic sign, a sign of external appearance can signify a sign of external appearance, a gestural, architectonic, or musical sign—each can signify the respective equivalent sign. Any random object that can function in a culture as a sign can, without its material nature being changed in any way, function as a theatrical sign for what it itself represents. (Fischer-Lichte 1992: 130)

While other forms of art, such as poems, music, and painting, utilise only one set of artistic signs, the theatre has the privilege of sign plurality. Among plural choices, signs of signs could express themselves in the same way as signs. A glass of wine could be represented on stage by a glass of wine, not necessarily grape juice or raspberry soda. The poetic expression of a glass of wine must be in natural language, musical expression relies on sound, and a painting would

be a two-dimensional graphic figure. Reflecting on this nature to be materially identical to the signified, signs of signs tend to be icons when their appearances and the materiality of them are not altered. The preservation of material quality is unique in signs of signs in performance.

Moreover, the mobility and polyfunctionality of signs are notable as characteristics of signs of signs in this context. On the one hand, the materiality can possibly be preserved, as seen above; on the other hand, it can be transformable. An average standard performance would physically present performers, stage property, light, sound, and stage decoration on stage during a performance procedure. Each of them offers different means to carry meanings. While the material preservation rather sticks to daily life, by bringing the sameness onto the stage as signs of signs, signs of signs have a great creative opportunity to utilise the system of the fictional world in other ways. This is thanks to the rich variety of sign systems co-existing in one performance. Fischer-Lichte explains:

[W]ords, for example, can substitute for stage décor, props can be replaced by gestures, gestures by sounds, lighting by props, etc. [...] Because these heterogeneous theatrical signs can partly substitute for one another, they can also be used interchangeably. Thus, rain can be signified by sounds, lighting, costumes, props, gestures, or words: a raincoat may fulfil the same function here as the sound of falling raindrops; a hand held protectively over one's head; dim, flickering light; an umbrella being opened; or the words "it's raining" being uttered. (Fischer-Lichte 1992: 130)

One material object, to which signs of signs aim to refer, could take various forms on stage. Besides, performances may structure themselves owing to signs of signs, which are flexible in their choice of sign systems. The signs of signs in performances "may belong to any other sign system at random" (Ibid.). One has greater freedom in the encoding procedure in this manner, whereas a spectator may struggle in interpretation as it is meant to be.

Polyfunctionality accompanies the semantic mobility (Ibid.: 131). These two qualities may likely be two sides of one coin.

[A] chair can, for example, be utilized to signify not only a chair, but also a mountain, a staircase, a sword, an umbrella, an automobile, an enemy soldier, a sleeping child, an angry superior, a tender lover, a raging lion, etc. The chair takes on those meanings which the actor's acting imparts to it. (Fischer-Lichte 1992: 131)

Sign mobility enables signs of signs to be flexible and offers wider freedom of choice on stage. One signified could be expressed in various means. This is where Lotman's (1991: 208) conditionality functions to understand significations. By contrast, one means or material object transformed into a sign on stage can carry ample meanings, as Fischer-Lichte describes.

These nature and behaviour of signs of signs appear to be ubiquitous regardless of time periods and types of performances. Performance artworks may incorporate performers, stage properties, decorations, sets, lighting, sound, etc., just as Bogatyrev and Fischer-Lichte explain

signs of signs in theatre. Furthermore, the context of activities as a performance remains the same in performance art. Hence, I would approach anti-theatricality in performance art from the perspective of appearances and behaviour of signs of signs.

Relying on the concept of signs of signs, I will propose different types of appearances and behaviours attributed to signs of signs, which guide the reception of anti-theatricality. When the following qualities are remarked, one might notice a difference from a conventional theatrical experience and feel what I call anti-theatricality. Seeking for better clarity, I would describe each with an example. A typical sign of a sign could be a glass of red grape juice on stage, which signifies materially a glass of red wine, and symbolises blood and danger of a narrative if needed to be interpreted.

Signs of signs in a performance could pretend to be signs, which I name the quasi-signs. Once put on stage or in a context of performances, it is inevitable to become signs of signs. However, thanks to the preservation of materiality, it is possible for signs of signs to pretend to be signs. The material objects in everyday life can be transposed to a context of performances without any alternation in their materiality. In order to ‘deceive’ spectators so that they would perceive seeming signs, authors and performers of performance should pay enough attention to the context in which they intend to create seeming signs. The predominant reason for the appearance of signs of signs is in the framing and setting as a performance. Therefore, once a performance’s distinction from daily life blurs, the conventional situation for signs of signs becomes less significant. Even though it seems impossible to deny signs of signs in a performance, one can discourage them by manipulating the conditionality. It shifts the way people perceive a performance situation. One possible perspective is to focus on presentation instead of representation.

A glass of wine represented by a glass of grape juice is borrowed from quotidian life. If that glass stays on stage without the audience’s reach, it is not central to care about the details but to regard it as a mere prop for representation. When performers offer the wine to spectators and drink actual alcoholic wine during a performance, it wins the trust of people that it is an extension of the everyday life they live in, and the performance offers a real experience of wine. The first case represents wine, while the second one makes an effort to present wine. This dichotomy of representation and presentation plays an important role in the perception of signs of signs as signs.

Despite being quasi-signs, signs of signs could be consciously and openly utilised. In being aware of the semantic process in a performance that signs are taken for granted as signs



of signs, it is possible to play around with this process. One possibility is to extravagantly present them with consciousness of the effects they may cause as signs of signs. The quasi-signs aim to hide the double coding, but here, the opposite strategy may have an effect. For this approach, utilisation of signs of signs in a self-ironical way is suggested. It is closely related to the reflexivity of anti-theatricality in such a way that it largely aims to bring out some aspects under light by focusing on those. A glass of wine represented on stage with grape juice follows a structure of standard semantics of signs, which may well include the extracting process from everyday life to the fictional world. If these signs of signs were used ironically, a glass of wine represented a glass of grape juice, making a joke of a common tip on stage. Or a glass is filled instead with some wine-coloured plastics or optical filter that is not at all liquid or like, and its fakeness could be shown to the audience by throwing the glass in the air. The 'wine' part may fly away from the glass, clearly proofing the fakeness. This is a self-irony because the topic handled on stage concerns the signs of signs themselves, which are supposed to be a medium for the realisation of the art. In this manner, extravagant use and self-ironical use of signs of signs overlap with each other.

In contrast to the quasi-signs, single-coded signs may be interpreted as signs of signs in certain situations. Theatre researcher Michael Kirby (1987: 3–20) proposes a scale of acting, which he defines as “to feign, to simulate, to represent, to impersonate”. Non-matrixed performing or not-acting with the least degree of acting as a simple being without matrices of character, situation, place, and time. Secondly, there is a symbolized matrix when costumes bear the acting without the actors' intentionality. Furthermore, received acting is when acting is imposed by an audience. Simple acting is intentional acting, including extra-theatrical acting such as speeches. Finally, complex acting is a kind of acting used typically in classical theatrical pieces with plots. (Ibid.) This taxonomy suggests that acting emerges when the audience and/or actors recognize the acting as such. Even though Kirby considers only human behaviours, the same could be applied to signs of signs not limited to acting. Hence, signs of signs may appear not only when signs of signs are intentionally created in a performance but also when simple signs in everyday life situations are received as signs as signs.

I find the conferences of the Estonian Witches' Association suitable as an example of received signs of signs. I visited their conference on the 4<sup>th</sup> of March, 2023, at the Russian Culture Centre in Tallinn. There were four speeches by different witches who obtained a PhD from some kind of international university. Their speeches include repetitive phrases, which do not make sense because of random sequences of words, and a gesture as if they are trying to

receive messages in the air. The witches sold bottles of water, which cured certain symptoms. The conference room was full of participants; most of them seemed to be regular participants and deeply appreciative of the witches. These people likely perceive the conference seriously as a part of their daily life, while I saw it as a performance. Though I am unsure about the intention of organisers and speakers – in a way, authors and performers – it is possible that the conference is supposed to belong to everyday life and not taken as a performance in line with a performance in a theatre house. If there were wine instead of water in a bottle or on ‘stage’, I would have interpreted wine as a prop, signs of signs in a performance. The performance would have been about, say, a world in which witches are recognized by the members of the medical and academic community. However, for those participants buying the water as a remedy, it should be a material object itself rather than a mere sign. The similarity is found in Estonian Government sessions and other situations from the quotidian, in accordance with the idea of life as theatre.

One of anti-theatricality’s appearances, I suppose, is an effort to escape from the labyrinth of signs of signs. Relying again on the example provided by Burns with a scratch on an actress’ leg, the scratch could be presented as an unintentional and natural (not a make-up) and at the same time be treated as a meaningful element, not as an artificial scratch of a character of a performance. Representation is avoided, and an approach is made towards presentation and doing, loading them with meanings still as signs of signs.

## **2.2. Features of anti-theatricality**

For its multi-layered semiotic structure, anti-theatricality demands further inspection in terms of its context and related issues. In this thesis, I would approach reflexivity and authenticity, both of which are closely related to the above-mentioned usages of signs. It is unavoidable to consider the matter of reflexivity, especially because of the term itself ‘anti-theatricality’ that remains related to theatricality and thus its conventional semiotic structure. As anti-theatricality appears when using signs of signs in a non-conventional manner, the mechanism of signs of signs is reflected in anti-theatricality. Authenticity has been one of the key components of performing arts history. It is approached through an effort to present signs in place if signs of signs. Following that, I would like to clarify these two aspects of anti-theatricality for the sake of a better conceptualisation of the notion.

### 2.2.1. Reflexivity

**Reflexivity** is discussed in various fields of study, such as semiotics, philosophy, anthropology, sociology, law, and physics. Also, when discussing anti-theatricality, this perspective cannot be ignored.

In the field of art, reflexivity or self-reference is found to be discussed more in film, photography, and media contexts. Robert Stam, who studies reflexivity in films, suggests: “All art has been nourished by the perennial tension between illusionism and reflexivity” (Stam 1985: 1). In this polarity, reflexivity is thus constantly present, and it can be enounced in some cases of art pieces. In this thesis, reflexivity is defined as “an examination of the foundations of frameworks of thought themselves” that focuses on “an examination of the apparently self-evident” (May, Perry 2017). In this subsection, reflexivity will be discussed from two perspectives: anti-theatricality *per se* is unavoidably reflexive, and in anti-theatricality, signs of signs are used reflexively.

As seen in subchapter 1.1, anti-theatricality does not always oppose theatre’s existence or entirely refuse theatricality. Instead, it questions some aspects of theatricality. This recalls the prefix ‘post-’ used in post-dramatic theatre. Lehmann, who theorised postdramatic theatre, explains:

Postdramatic theatre thus includes the presence or resumption or continued working of older aesthetics, including those that took leave of the dramatic idea in earlier times, be it on the level of text or theatre. Art in general cannot develop without reference to earlier forms. It is only a question of the level, consciousness, explicitness and special manner of reference. (Lehmann 2007: 27)

In the same way, the use of the prefix ‘anti-’ referring to theatricality proves an undeniable relationship with theatricality, providing the contexts and references in a similar way as ‘postdramatic’.

Hence, it is suggested that anti-theatricality, as I define in this thesis, is constructed upon its reflexivity. Theatricality is constantly referred to and reflected on in appearances of anti-theatricality. The pre-existence of theatricality is a pre-condition for anti-theatricality. Consequently, anti-theatricality is observed in contexts and situations that can be viewed as theatrical to some degree. One could spot theatricality on the street in everyday life, but not anti-theatricality. It may not be incorrect to state that it is a characteristic of the context of performance.

Hereby, I would focus on signs of signs as an object being reflexed in anti-theatricality.

Hans Robert Jauss conceptualises horizons of expectation in terms of literary perception. When one comes across a new work of art, it is tied to his or her earlier experiences and expectations based on these, regarding genre, style, or form. Now, due to new experiences, the horizons of expectations “are then varied, corrected, changed or just reproduced”. (Jauss 1970: 13) Jauss’s concept could be applied to other forms of art. It is thus the accumulated experiences and understandings towards art that constantly renews itself when a new piece of information is added.

In the current thesis, it is assumed that the universal component of horizons of expectation in performing arts is an application of signs of signs. However, the use of signs of signs on a fundamental level could be universal to some extent. Therefore, I suggest that offering a new perspective on the functioning of signs of signs would likely cause an audience a major reconstruction of horizons of expectations. Since this semiotic process is, in my opinion, “the apparently self-evident” (May, Perry 2017). Examining this by applying non-conventional signs of signs usages, which characterises anti-theatricality as introduced in 2.1, leads to reflexivity.

### **2.2.2. Authenticity**

Another aspect of anti-theatricality I would regard essential is **authenticity**. There are various meanings in ‘authenticity’: veracity, authority, genuineness, sincerity, accuracy in a copy, the condition of being true to oneself, and being real (OED *sub authenticity*). Among these meanings, on the one hand, authenticity in general cannot exist due to the signs of signs. On the other, a performance’s authenticity is present. For instance, a performance does exist as “real” (an audience visits a performance), a performer’s expression could be sincere (one’s nervousness on stage), or a content of a performance may be in accordance with facts (telling a statistic data).

When discussing anti-theatricality, I find authenticity in general to be pertinent, even if it is not possible to realise authenticity in this sense. It is because a performance’s authenticity is apparently present and thus there is no room speaking about it. Precisely for this controversy, authenticity is introduced in the discussion on anti-theatricality in performance art.

According to Patrice Pavis, a theatre scholar:

The term ‘authenticity’ is found in many types of discourses and contemporary disciplines: in philosophy, from where the notion originates; in ethnology, whenever the question of the authenticity of culture or practice arises; and in artistic life, especially in actors’ performances and in various contemporary ‘performative’ experiments. (Pavis 2020: 17)

In addition to these discourses and disciplines, the term ‘authenticity’ is ubiquitously used in the quotidian life. Marketing utilises the term ‘authentic’ to attract consumers’ attention, stressing goods’ high quality and genuineness. It is “one of the most common terms in both gastronomic writing and the popular culinary imagination” (Weiss 2011: 74). As a juridical jargon and in a computer context, authenticity proves the origin and verification (Lindholm 2013: 362–363). Reflecting on today’s usage of the term in English, Lindholm claims: “there are at least two overlapping but distinct modes for characterizing an entity as authentic: genealogical or historical (origin) and identity or correspondence (expressive content)” (Ibid.: 363). These common usages could be narrowed down to the context of performance art. Performance art as a contemporary art form rarely treats historical authenticity. Historical authenticity could be relevant in domains such as the history of performance art and performing arts that treat performance art at a meta-level.

Walter Benjamin’s concept of aura could be associated with authenticity. Benjamin proposes in his article *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (2007): “Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be” (Benjamin 2007: 220). Considering the authenticity of content, his aura seems to be a part of authenticity in a larger sense. In a binary of original and copy, it is the original which is associated with aura and remains authentic. In this regard, each ephemeral performance, as a live showing of a piece, owns authenticity, or none of the performance could be of authenticity since there are, so to say, reproductions of the piece. For the piece itself not to be capable of being present without performances, I consider the former applicable here.

However, authenticity appears to be more varied than that of general treatment in the context of performances. For the fundamental mechanism of performance art to infold signs of signs, it does not seem realistic to seek the authenticity of content in the same way as in everyday life. The binary of original and copy requires a closer look. Ultimately, performances of performance art present signs of signs, which are copies or reproductions of signs.

The question arises, however, whether signs outside the artistic framing are original. Juri Lotman offers an insight into the influence of art, theatre in particular, in everyday life (Lotman 1976[1973]). Lotman argues that the early 19<sup>th</sup> century was “a period that lived under the sign of the invasion of art — primarily the theatre — into Russian life” (Ibid.: 57), and “it

is precisely because the life of theatre differs from everyday existence that the view of life as spectacle gave man new possibilities for behaviour” (Ibid.: 56). As early as two centuries ago, the fictional theater and everyday life interrelated and affected each other.

Furthermore, Jean Baudrillard provides a postmodern understanding of society in *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994).

By crossing into a space whose curvature is no longer that of the real nor that of truth, the era of simulation is inaugurated by a liquidation of all referentials – worse: with their artificial resurrection in the systems of signs, a material more malleable than meaning, in that it lends itself to all systems of equivalences, to all binary oppositions, to all combinatory algebra. It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real, that is to say of an operation of deterring every real process via its operational double, a programmatic, metastable, perfectly descriptive machine that offers all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes. (Baudrillard 1994: 2)

The relationship between original and reproduction is no longer a simple binary. Accordingly, the relation between signs and signs of signs is blurred in postmodern daily life. There no longer exists such a everyday life for signs of signs to directly refer to.

Baudrillard’s distinction of representation and **simulation** and situating them in a polarity:

Representation stems from the principle of the equivalence of the sign and of the real (even if this equivalence is utopian, it is a fundamental axiom). Simulation, on the contrary, stems from the utopia of the principle of equivalence from the radical negation of the sign as value, from the sign as the reversion and death sentence of every reference. Whereas representation attempts to absorb simulation by interpreting it as a false representation, simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation itself as a simulacrum. (Baudrillard 1994: 6)

In such a daily life as a “simulacrum”, in which everything is built upon simulation, signs of signs to lose the references – are involved in the simulacrum. Nonetheless, as long as that kind of everyday life can be told from performances of performance art, the mechanism of signs of signs continues functioning. It is no longer of great importance to trace down a material reference. Instead, it should be agreed to seek a Baudrillardian simulation to find out what signs of signs refer to. When discussing authenticity, there is a possibility to find a reference to a simulation which verifies the identity of signs of signs.

A foremost literary critic, Lionel Trilling, argues: “The concept of authenticity can deny art itself, yet at the same time it figures as the dark source of art” (Trilling 1972: 11). Even though I am uncertain whether authenticity is “the dark source”, it certainly is an inspiration for creation in art. For instance, the seek for authenticity in art leads to naturalism and realism in the context of performance. Stanislavski’s method is suggested as a typical way to approach theatre in this manner. However, realising a true naturalism or realism in a context of performances, including theatre, is challenging. Nicolas Evreinoff criticises Stanislavski for

being against theatricality in the wrong direction and argues that if he were seeking naturalism, his play should have been played in a place just as written in a plot, not on stage and lasted for an extended period of time as long as the time the story is for fictional characters (Evreinoff 2013: 136–137). He reasons:

It is not the naturalness but the *convincingness* of things seen on the stage that gives birth to theatrical illusions. Hence, it is not the subject itself that must be shown in the theatre, but a *picture* of this subject, not the action itself, but the *representation* of the action. (Ibid.: 142)

Evreinoff sums up the core of theatre: “The theatre is from beginning to end a lie, a deception, a premeditated lie and a prearranged deception” (Ibid.: 144). Therefore, instead of seeking naturalness compared to daily life, it is encouraged to augment the convincingness in the given frame, the stage, to remain within the theatre as an art form.

In line with Evreinoff’s claim, which is based on the fundamental existence of theatre as a lie, Pavis too stresses the performance mechanism, arguing that “both in theatre and performance, authenticity is rejected as idealist and impossible” (Pavis 2020: 18). They have the same understanding about theatre. Pavis, however, addresses Evreinoff’s convincingness as “an authenticity effect (as Barthes talked about the ‘reality effect’): a stylistic or artistic effect that uses a few details deemed to be authentic and adequate to create an illusion” (Ibid.:19).

One of the possible ways to achieve this authenticity effect could be in the performativity (cf. 1.2) of performers. To give a specific idea, I would propose some approaches: inviting non-performers onto the stage, performing oneself, depending on chances, and erasing the border between daily life and performance.

By involving non-performers in a performance, it is possible to create an authentic moment in a fictional context of the stage. Non-performers could be some audience members who do not have a mentality to perform but to see a performance or a non-professional performer who is professional in other domains or whose identity, appearance, etc., is relevant in certain contexts. Instead of a performer imitating or pretending to be the character, a real ‘character’ can be appointed to the character. Even though the principle of signs of signs remains due to the context, non-performers are more likely to be authentic in that they are not professional ‘performers’ but professional in some other area. Bishop remarks that “one of the most conspicuous manifestations of the “social turn” in contemporary art since the 1990s has been the hiring of non-professionals to do performances”, and they are meant “to perform their own socioeconomic category, be this on the basis of gender, class, ethnicity, age, disability, or (more rarely) profession” (Bishop 2012: 91). It is thus a means to increase an authenticity that is in fact convincingness or authentic effect in performance.

Another possibility is to depend on at least some parts of a performance on chance. When all details on stage are fixed, and performance becomes a mere repetition of rehearsed content, there would be no doubt that what an audience sees is prepared and consciously shown signs of signs. This certain stability, however, is characteristic of artificial situations. In everyday life, unpredictability is unavoidable, while in performance, everything is ideally under control. The moment which relies on chance and randomness recalls everyday life. For instance, Merce Cunningham rolled dice and flipped coins to make decisions when creating a piece.

Furthermore, merging daily life and art by transposition art into everyday life or everyday life into art is found to be effective in increasing authenticity. Nikolai Evreinov's *The Storming of the Winter Palace* (1920) is a relevant example. It was a re-enactment of the October Revolution for its third anniversary in Russia, including at the Winter Palace, and more than 8,000 performers (ballet dancers, circus artists, workers, soldiers, and members of the Bolshevik party) and armed cars and tanks were used in the performance (Deák 1975: 15–21). It is thus quite the idea of how Evreinoff imagines Stanislavski to accomplish naturalism.

For another approach, Augusto Boal theorises and practices Invisible theatre.

It consists of the presentation of a scene in an environment other than the theatre before people who are not spectators. The place can be a restaurant, a sidewalk, a market, a train, a line of people, etc. The people who witness the scene are those who are there by chance. During the spectacle, these people must not have the slightest idea that it is a 'spectacle', for this would make them 'spectators'. (Boal 2008: 122)

This type of performance is only for the performers themselves. Art is integrated into daily life, so it is not a piece of art for those who do not know about it. Conceptually, it is a salient example of achieving authenticity in a performance.

Performing self on stage could be considered under this approach. Being self on stage is unachievable; however, performing self in performance as in everyday life augments authenticity by blurring the border of daily life and art.

On the one hand, signs of signs with clear references to signs approach authenticity; on the other, making an effort to present signs instead of signs appears to be a way to realise authenticity in a context of performances; in other words, convincingness or authenticity effect. The latter is what matters in relation to anti-theatricality.



### 3. ANTI-THEATRICALITY IN ESTONIAN PERFORMANCE ART

I will analyse the three works of performance art in regard to anti-theatricality in order to investigate the applicability of the theoretical framework of anti-theatricality and its appearances from both the viewer's and producers' perspectives. *Holy Rage* (2018) by Stella Kruusamägi, *So You Think You Can Dance* (2023) by Unholy Trinity, and *Floor on Fire: Ask My Body* (2024) by Ruslan Stepanov are chosen for analysis as I find anti-theatricality in these works. To be precise, I will concentrate on three aspects: signs of signs, reflexivity, and authenticity.

In order to understand the authors' intentions and thoughts, I have conducted half-structured qualitative interviews online with each author individually. For *So You Think You Can Dance* (2023), I interviewed Kärt Koppel, one of the members of the trio, based on the knowledge that all the members equality create and perform as one collective. I prepared ten guiding questions (see Appendix 1) to structure the interviews and asked a few additional questions when necessary. One interview lasted approximately one hour. Interviews were recorded and transcribed (see Appendix 2, 3, and 4).

The perception of the audience relies on published reviews and critiques. Additionally, I consider my own experience as an audience member. I have seen all the pieces live – when there were possibilities, more than once. This chapter hopefully provides the readers with some hints on how the concept of anti-theatricality could practically be spotted in Estonian performance art.

#### 3.1. *Holy Rage* (2018)

Stella Kruusamägi's *Holy Rage* (2018) treats rage not by imitating or playing out but by taking herself to that specific emotional state. The piece was performed three times: in Viljandi Koidu

Seltsimaja, Tartu Uus Teater, and in Tallinn at Kanuti Gildi SAAL. The other two planned performances did not happen due to her health condition, which was caused by the earlier performances. Instead, Kruusamägi created an installation on the theme and the performances.

The performance project is not produced by the two main and almost only performance art (or officially contemporary dance) institutions in Estonia, Kanuti Gildi SAAL or Sõltumatu Tantsu Lava (STL), but by Viljandi Koidu Seltsimaja, a local small-scale institution in Viljandi, Estonia. It is exceptional in organisation in the larger picture of the Estonian performance art scene. The project involved an author and performer, Kruusamägi; an opera singer and performer, Grete Teearu; a musician, Sten Sarv; dramaturgs Ruslan Stepanov and Kain Valtna, and a light designer, Rommi Ruttas.

The performance started with already raged Kruusamägi's entrance. She drew lines around her half-naked body on the long paper expanded on the floor, which accelerated in tempo and energy level. She brought a skateboard, tape, chairs, and other additional elements through which she expressed her internal state. With the accumulation of rage and energy, she went towards the audience seats, climbed to them and even deprived chairs of some of the spectators. She took a big roll of transparent plastic tape, with which she wrapped herself so that she could no longer freely move or walk. This disability caused her to become further rageous and led her to get a knife or scissors to open up the tightened parts. One moment, silence dominated the space when the performer went outside and shouted. Together with her coming back, the electric guitar music played live by Sarv intensified the atmosphere. When Kruusamägi got tired, Teearu entered the space and sang an opera song.

At the premiere in Viljandi, Kruusamägi used a knife to free herself from the entangled tape around her body. She accidentally cut her thigh with it yet did not realise the pain till the end of the performance. The blood stain was left on the stage, causing the audience members a truly shocking experience. She then replaced the knife with a pair of scissors for the other performances for better safety.

The role of the audience assigned by the author-performer differs from the other performance I try to analyse in this thesis. The spectators were not included in the activities executed by the performers; instead, they stayed passive onlookers. The incident with the knife left some of the spectators with helpless feelings and dilemmas about whether they should have interrupted the ongoing performance and helped the injured performer. I find that Marina Abramović approaches this issue in her famous work *Thomas Lips* (1975). Assumably, it was

not Kruusamägi's clear intention to pressure the audience with this specific dilemma; however, the premier inevitably played with the spectators' feelings inasmuch as these about rage.

It is truly unfortunate that this performance project did not acquire the attention I believe it deserved. The performances in Tartu and Tallinn were not visited by many people compared to the space capacity.



Figure 1. Stella Kruusamägi, *Holy Rage* (2018)<sup>7</sup>

*Holy Rage* (2018) was an extract of Kruusamägi's life as such, outside the artistic activity. Kruusamägi pushed herself to live in the way of the piece's theme, in rage, or in the author's words, "psychological states, specifically anger states" during the creation process. In the interview, Kruusamägi explains the working process in the following way.

I was making myself angry every single day. I was doing what I used mostly. I was watching very violent movies and series. And then I went to my own trauma, like in a childhood. And, I was imagining this, as they say, like images of my childhood. And there were things that helped me to trigger, let's say, this state.

This statement proves that the author's everyday life was the rehearsal process itself. It is not an autobiographical project *per se*, yet Kruusamägi, as the author and performer of the piece, turned back to their own, even personal, everyday life to form a foundation for the piece. In this regard, authenticity is present in this piece.

---

<sup>7</sup> Stella Kruusamägi. Kruusamägi's online portfolio: <https://stellakruusamagi.portfoliobox.net/selectedartworks>

Moreover, it is suggested that the project affected the author's everyday life when proceeding to the performances.

Y: And I feel like your reality was extended outside the stage or that theatre building.

K: It was, because in one point my friend started telling me "What are you doing with yourself? You cannot do this anymore. I'm not gonna be your friend if you do this". My parents were shocked. I was also shocked, I mean, but I kept doing it in one point when I couldn't anymore. I reacted to very little, tiny things and I realised that I was, I mean, one point I realised that I didn't like the way I became. But I didn't know also how to help myself anymore. But then I figure it out in one place the first step was that I quit performing it. I decided to rather talk about it, because the last performance that had to be a performance was more of a talk and installation in the darkness. And then after that I started going to therapist. And taking my old self back. (Kruusamägi 2024)

The rehearsal process that was entangled with Karuusamägi's personal everyday life resulted in negative impacts on life as an individual, not as a performer. The border between an artistic expression and personal life was so blurred that it was impossible to distinguish them from each other; rather, the piece was framed as part of everyday life. Or, in other words, the performer's role invaded her personal life. Hence, there appeared quasi-signs instead of signs of signs in a conventional way.

Retrospectively, Kruusamägi comments on the piece and working process:

But uh, it's also very weird to talk about it now because it was also like I was self-inflicting myself. Because I was, I took myself as a, what you say, like a test puppy[test puppet], you know? And these are the things I feel like I have gone past or like over like. I'm not interested anymore or... hurting myself in order to give a message to the audience. This is something I have learned from that.

Accordingly, Kruusamägi, as an author and a performer of the piece, conducted an experiment and placed its outcome onto the stage as a performance, while the outcome continued existing and affecting daily life even after the project's completion.

It is thus assumed that the author intended to present her authentic emotions and feelings in the piece. These are authentic and thus add authenticity to the performance that are shown as quasi-signs on stage. The character or role as such cannot be easily associated with Karuusamägi's approach; instead, Kruusamägi, in a certain psychological state, was on the stage, just as in everyday life, before and after the performance and series of performances.

I mean it was framed as a performance. But the things that happened that happened in real. There are things that I'm not proud of. There are things that I wasn't expecting to happen. There are things that surprise me also. There are things that later made me start psychology and reach out for help in other ways. (Kruusamägi 2024)

Kruusamägi brought out some incidents that happened during a performance, such as when an audience member kicked the performer in the stomach. I witnessed that Kruusamägi accidentally cut her thigh with a knife, wrapped plastic tape too tightly around her body, and

passed out for a while. While a conventional theatre play with a plot tends to minimise chances for uncertainty, *Holy Rage* (2018) bravely left chances by letting the performer's psychological state simply present on stage, which was yet realised through quasi-signs.

This feature of the piece was reflected in the audience's reaction. According to Kruusamägi "[W]hy I put it [the piece], maybe, under the ritualistic experiences also because there was this releasing moment, and the aftereffects. And it didn't go to this normal applause, close, traditional...[moment]". Conventionally, spectators realise the moment, which is appropriate for applause regardless of the genre of performing arts. Hence, it is suggested that *Holy Rage* (2018) did not provide the audience with the necessary signs for them to start clapping.

In line with the lack of applause, which appeared as a consensus of the audience, some reviews of the performances express their general stance towards the piece. Alissija-Elisabet Jevtjukova writes:

In general, it is indeed nice that everyone has an opportunity to express themselves. I just do not understand why one may want to transfer the painful condition to others, instead of "curing". [...] In conclusion, a big respect and thank you for showing this topic specifically in this kind of honest way without alternation. (Jevtjukova 2018)

Jevtjukova appreciates the direct way of expression, even though Kruusamägi's way of expression does not personally suit her.

A theatre critic and dance practitioner, Marie Pullerits, agrees with Jevtjukova that Kruusamägi is "undoubtedly honest as a performer, really experiencing the emotions" (Pullerits 2019)<sup>8</sup>. However, Pullerits expresses her strong doubt about the way of expression, which I consider to be an appearance of anti-theatricality.

Art speaks through the artist's ability to express ideas and emotions through the certain vocabulary of a medium. The expression of a basic, timid message, although forcefully and boldly honest, does not use metaphorical filters through which the poetic function of art can be expressed. The naked demonstration of hatred, albeit in a certain temporal and spatial organisation that frames the work as a stage production, does not open up the questions behind the action, which would allow the content to be expanded. Rather, it raises the suspicion of the recreation of violence. (Pullerits 2019)<sup>9</sup>

And she proceeds: "'Holy Rage' feels like a demonstration of anger and violence, and a search for a redemption from suffering, which seems to be addressed mainly to the author-performer

---

<sup>8</sup> "Ta elab selle valangua laval välja ja on etendajana kahtlemata aus, kogedes emotsioone reaalselt". (Pullerits 2019, I used DeepL to translate sentences in Estonian and corrected by myself when needed.)

<sup>9</sup> "Kunst kõneleb tänu kunstniku oskusele väljendada ideid ja emotsioone teatud meediumi sõnavara abil. Pelga baasemotsiooni väljaelamise puhul, olgugi et autor on jõuliselt ja julgelt aus, ei kasutata metafoorifiltreid, mille kaudu saab avalduda kunsti poeetiline funktsioon. Viha alasti demonstreerimine, ehkki teatavas ajalis-ruumilises korrastatuses, mis annab teosele lavastuse raamid, ei ava tegevusakti taga peituvaid küsimusi, mis võimaldaksid sisu laiendada. Pigem kerkib vägivalda taasloomise kahtlus". (Pullerits 2019)

herself.”<sup>10</sup>. This description assures that signs of signs worked as authenticity, and one may have found signs, which eventually were quasi-signs.

Erik Alalooga, a performance artist, seems to support Kruusamägi’s way of expression by concluding his article with “Respect, Stella!” (Alalooga 2019). Moreover, he pays attention to the ending as follows:

I have always fancied performances, which ending melt into life so organically, in such a way that the audience does not get an opportunity to applaud as a format’s obligation. “Holy Rage” actually ended before the end. The guitarist finished his gig, thanked the audience and left the space. After that was an epilogue.<sup>11</sup>

His remark on the smooth ending of the performance (as Kruusamägi also pointed out in the interview) is found to be in accord with the author’s idea of the piece as an experiment without a concrete distinction from everyday life.

I believe that this way of audience’s reception at the end of the performances is connected to the unique approach to signs of signs in this piece and performances. As Pullerits (2019) claims in the quoted part above, the piece has “a certain temporal and spatial organisation that frames the work as a stage production”. Notwithstanding Pullerits’ argument, which implies Kruusamägi’s work is not art, this frame itself already suggests the piece is a performance (which, in my opinion, always has the potential to be regarded as art). Therefore, one may well expect signs of signs in a performance.

Kruusamägi, however, did not follow the conventional usage of signs of signs and instead placed a seeming everyday life onto the stage. In other words, these signs of signs are shown as mere signs – quasi-signs – as introduced in 2.1, just as in everyday life outside the performance space. The performers’ emotions were authentic, and that was made clear to the spectators during the performance. It led to Jevtjukova’s and Pullerits’ perception of authenticity, which I, too, felt even with brutality. This appearance of quasi-signs of her rage is exactly why one could get confused by what he or she sees in *Holy Rage* (2018). Regardless of this manner of signs of signs, the format as a performance does not allow the performance to be a non-performance by any chance, in which signs of signs cannot function. The poetic function of art, as Pullerits (2019) mentions, would not disappear anywhere. If one wishes, the symbolical and meta-level of interpretation would surely be possible. For example, according

---

<sup>10</sup> „Holy Rage” mõjub peamiselt viha ja vägivalda demonstratsioonina ning kannatusest lunastuse otsimisena, mis näib olevat suunatud eelkõige iseendale”. (Pullerits 2019)

<sup>11</sup> “Mulle on alati sümpatiseerinud etendused, mille lõpp sulab eluks üle nii orgaaniliselt, et publikul ei teki võimalust täita oma formaadist tõukuvat kohustust plaksutada. “Holy Rage” lõppes tegelikult enne lõppu. Kitarristil sai *keikka* läbi, ta tänas publikut ning lahkus ruumist. Edasine oli juba epiloog”. (Alalooga 2019)

to Kruusamägi, the theme is universal and actual even today when the world is facing aggression.

In this piece, authenticity is approached through signs presentation as I have discussed in 2.2.2. As Kruusamägi certifies in the interview, the daily life and the piece are intended to be situated in the same spatio-temporal plane. As the author's intention, the spectators perceived Kruusamägi's honesty as a performer and the smooth transition from the performance to reality, if there were any differences. Hence, this piece's authenticity appears in the attempt to show signs instead of signs by transposing daily life onto the stage.

Reflexivity, too, is tied to the unique use of signs of signs in this piece. I have argued in 2.2.1 that reflexivity is an indispensable quality of anti-theatricality in general. Even though Kruusamägi did not seem to consciously deal with the reflexive quality of the piece, it certainly stands out in terms of reflexivity. I would stress again the inescapability of creating signs of signs due to the format as a performance. It thus leads to the fundamental structure of anti-theatricality that stays within theatricality, where anti-theatricality is opposed to some features of theatricality functions. In this regard, *Holy Rage* (2018)'s reflexivity proves the pivotal quality of anti-theatricality.

Moreover, the reflexivity of this piece and its performances are spotted in Kruusamägi's artistic expression. I believe that the honesty of expression takes shape through the integration of everyday life and performance state on the psychological level. Although it reminds me of Stanislavski's method, unlike Stanislavski's method, which utilises a memory of real experience from everyday life, "past" everyday life, in the case of *Holy Rage* (2018), the performance project itself is connected and affected by "present" everyday life. Performance art is imposed on and influences daily life, not vice versa – in a way, art dominates everyday life. This may easily develop into an argument about whether an artist is 'crazy' or exceptionally talented, recalling Vincent van Gogh, who cut his ear off and shot himself, or Salvador Dali, who was known for his eccentric public behaviour.

Kruusamägi's approach seems to have a reflexive quality towards the manner of performing. It permits one to reflect on pre-existing manners of acting or performing by not relying on them and offers a new perspective by being honest and real in a performance situation, seamlessly continuing everyday life on a stage.

Anti-theatricality is observed in *Holy Rage* (2018) for its exceptional use of quasi-signs in place of conventional signs of signs, reflexivity of performing arts, and authenticity as being

rather than acting. Its use of signs of signs has so a great influence on reflexivity and authenticity that these three are inseparable.

### **3.2. *So You Think You Can Dance* (2023)**

Unholy Trinity is a trio of performance artists: Annabel Tanila, Daniela Privis, and Kärt Koppel. They formed the trio when studying at Viljandi Culture Academy and created their first dance performance as professional artists in 2023 at Sõltumatu Tantsu Lava named *So You Think You Can Dance* (2023), being selected in a competitive open call<sup>12</sup>. Besides this big achievement as an emerging collective, they have made choreography and performed together with chosen performers at a music festival called “Kõu” and participated in the “Made in Estonia Marathon” with 10-minute long pieces every year since their formation as a collective-----, and given workshops to younger generations. I find Unholy Trinity’s strength in its ironical view towards the current society and meta-level conceptual utilisation or play with formats.

The performance art community in Estonia could be characterised by its individuality, unlike the theatre scene, due to the institutional structure. Being involved in performance projects myself as a performer and performance artist (or author), I observed that the crucial factor in performance art and, more generally, in the culture and art industry in this country, after all, is finance. Compared to the stably financed governmental and private theatres, performance artists work on a project basis, i.e., the support money is sought mainly from the Cultural Endowment of Estonia for each project, and a project team is limited to its minimum for financial reasons. To my knowledge, I am aware of only three collectives who could be regarded in this thesis: Unholy Trinity, Flak and Roosna, and The Biofilm Sisters.

Unholy Trinity created the piece in the frame of Premiere 2023, organised by Sõltumatu Tantsu Lava after being selected in the open call. The Premiere project allows emerging artists to create their very first dance piece, and two artists or collectives are given the opportunity every year. They performed the piece five times in Tallinn at Sõltumatu Tantsu Lava, later in Tartu, as well as in Viljandi. Each member of the trio was an author and a performer. They included one professional dance teacher as the fourth performer, Birgit Plaser, whom they chose in an audition. The audition to find a performer does not seem so usual in performance art,

---

<sup>12</sup> Performance description on Sõltumatu Tantsu Lava’s website: <https://www.stl.ee/lavastused/so-you-think-you-can-dance>



where connections and a relatively tight community often play an important role. Additionally, a DJ, Stefano Matozzi, joined the team on the stage.

The performance is categorised under dance due to the requirement of the open call. However, this chosen dance performance differentiates itself from other dance performances in that it takes a theme of dance itself, more specifically dance competitions in Estonia, and creates a performance about it. Typical dance movements cannot be detected much in this work; instead, the audience gets acquainted with the Estonian dance competition scene, which inevitably involves children and youth. The work seems to have used artistic research by choosing an additional performer who lacks professional education in dance but works as a dance trainer, participating in a competition as a team of four and winning a prize, and interviewing several experienced dance trainers at the competition. As a result of the research, they brought the essence of their view towards the Estonian dance scene to the stage of professional performing arts.

The discussion on the topic of dance was conducted as a half-improvised scene, the documentation of their participation in the dance competition and interviews were shown as videos and a winner was chosen from the audience without any clear criteria, at least it was unclear to me, one short sequence of choreography was taught to the spectators and danced all together to the famous song, *Dancing Queen*. The space did not offer seating for the audience, and relatively high podiums were set in the middle of the space. During the performance, the performers moved the podiums so that the spectators were forced to move in space to find a better standing position as well. I cannot say that it is strictly a participatory theatre.<sup>13</sup> since audience participation is organised in such a way that audience members can choose on their own if they participate in the performance when the opportunity is offered and the performance takes place functionally even without the audience's participation.

Their focus could be positioned on the fragmentation of dance scene in Estonia. Plaser is a professional dance trainer who lacks higher education in dance or dance pedagogy and contact with an artistic dance scene<sup>14</sup> unlike the others who are members of the Unholy Trinity. This effectively brings out the contrast between them or, in other words, between competitive and often amateur dancing and artistic dancing to which each party belongs.

One scene described the contrast well. Plaser reads parts of her diary out loud before showing her short choreographies of street or show dance, which left me with the impression

---

<sup>13</sup> A performance in which audience members' participation constitutes a performance.

<sup>14</sup> Personal experience at the audition in the season-opening event "Greenfield" at Sõltumatu Tantsu Lava, September 16, 2022

that every day is filled with happiness by teaching nice sequences of dance and positivity in life. Its simplicity distances away from the questions they discussed on stage or throughout the ongoing performance. All performers' costumes, too, were distinguished from those we often come across on stages of contemporary dance or performance art. The street style is accentuated with hanging cloth and tight fit to the performers' bodies.



Figure 2. Unholy Trinity, *So You Think You Can Dance*<sup>15</sup>

Overall, the performance could be situated in the meta-level of the Estonian dance scene, in which the fragmentation of the competitive and artistic dance is remarked, and successfully realises the audience-friendly participation theatre, in which anyone has an opportunity to participate for it to be rather an event than a performance to merely watch from a distance.

Contrary to the other two works analysed in this thesis, *So You Think You Can Dance* (2023) appears to be colourful and expressive both visually and conceptually. I consider irony to be a key term in this piece.

The title of the piece explicitly functions as a summary of the piece. *So You Think You Can Dance* is also an American daily life television show that premiered in 2005. It is well known not only among people who are interested in dance but also among more general television audiences, assumably in America in particular. It takes a format of competition and

---

<sup>15</sup>Sõltumatu tantsu Lava. s.a. *So You Think You Can Dance: Unholy Trinity*. <https://www.stl.ee/lavastused/so-you-think-you-can-dance>

thus features dance techniques alongside the excitement of competitive drama as entertainment. To my knowledge, the program goes beyond television, as is often the case in contemporary culture, and its contents are largely accessible on Instagram, YouTube, etc. As a dance and performance art practitioner for almost my whole life, I would dare to say that its contents, such as highly skilled dance, have attracted dancers regardless of their countries of origin and certainly have had a great influence on them almost as a phenomenon. The reality show, however, predominantly focuses on techniques and show elements and seems to distinguish itself from dance as art. This is precisely the nuance Unholy Trinity applies to their piece *So You Think You Can Dance* (2023) by quoting the title of the TV program.

Thus, the main concept of the piece is to deal with the fragmentation of the dance scene in Estonia – between dance as an amateur and children’s activity that involves shows and competitions for thousands of related people, and dance as an art form performed on stage by and among people with higher education in dance, which is for few hundreds of people (Koppel 2024). The former is represented by the fourth team member, Birgit Plasler, who ‘won’ the audition organised by Unholy Trinity. Unlike the conventional process of choosing performers that is through friends or acquaintances, they organised an audition. The audition is a part of their project, reflecting on the amateur dance world through the use of the audition format. The three members of Unholy Trinity represent the art side of dance. It follows that the process and background have a crucial role in the finally materialised piece presented as a performance to the audience.

One of the members of Unholy Trinity, Kärt Koppel, answered my interview and proved that:

We decided to make our own open call for an audition for a dance teacher who comes from a different background than us. And we found Birgit who had been working as a dance teacher for five years by the point that we started to collaborate and her students [...]. [O]ur two worlds were quite far apart and then we try to find these connecting points by doing research. We went to her world in dance competitions and some of her classes. And then for the performance we invited her into our world, into our stage and also her students came to some of our shows.

The performers-authors conducted research in the everyday world, which resulted in an artistic performance at the end.

Moreover, this project should be regarded as one part of a larger context. Koppel explains:

[B]ecause of the fact that we are usually doing these one-time things, we treat them all as one project. It’s like different parts of the same project that is Unholy Trinity rather than we take them separately. We always put them in the context of the other things we have already done, which might be a bit confusing for the audience who doesn’t know us.

In a way, Unholy Trinity as an artist collective is a continuous project. The collective exists outside each performance situation, and therefore, the border between their artistic project and daily life is ambiguous.

Despite the similarity to *Holy Rage* (2018), the project *So You Think You Can Dance* (2023)'s final fruit as a performance transpired in a unique way. According to Koppel: “[I]t’s a simulation of entertainment and the dance performance, but not the dance performance, meaning that it starts from the body, but rather a performance about dance as a content”. The research result was reflexively transformed into and presented yet as a performance as such, clearly distinguishable from everyday life.

What she reckoned as a “simulation” should be scrutinised further. Unlike Kruusamägi, who placed authentic rage onto the stage as it was, Unholy Trinity extrapolates a piece from the research result. Koppel admits that the simulation of the collective use as Baudrillard conceptualises in *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994) that simulating becomes a everyday life. Additionally, Koppel refers to Guy Debord’s *the Society of the Spectacle* (2014) and influencer culture. Both are on the border of daily life and non- or quasi-reality.

[T]he appearance culture has moved out, or it’s now everywhere. It’s also in our daily lives. And this is what we tried to do with blending the fiction and the reality to also question how big of our realities already fiction basically in our lives if we don’t put it on the stage. So, we don’t often recognise the difference between fiction and reality. We try to blend them. (Koppel 2024)

Accordingly, Unholy Trinity creates a mixture of reality and fiction (or spectacle following Debord) in the form of simulation. From one perspective, this simulation in an artistic context is an application of signs of signs in accordance with a conventional usage of signs of signs. At the same time, if it is a simulation in the Baudrillardian sense, the simulation becomes a everyday life (see 2.2.2). Here, signs of signs are reduced to quasi-signs. Either way, the Unholy Trinity stresses this intertwined situation.

Practically, form and transposition seem to be their core ideas in doing so.

[W]e always start from the format, which is a very important concept of the work that we have listed a very long list of different forms such, you know, conferences, seminars, movie premieres, cocktail show, party set, cooking show, whatever. These are these forms that we would like to play with one or another time. And when we start, we take the formats that we choose. We can also choose multiple formats, as we did in *So You Think You Can Dance*. We had the dance performance format, we had the reality TV show like format, we had audition format. We start from the outside, from the formation, and then the content of the piece comes within it. [...] [W]e try to dislocate the format that we choose [...]. (Ibid.)

They play with formats:

[T]he formats also give a quite good code for the audience, whoever if it’s an audience member, or if it’s a participant. But like the conventional norms and behavioural norms that come from one format. [...] [C]onventions come from the fact that most probably everyone has at one point participated in a ceremony

of such thing and they know when it's announced that this person is being awarded something, we should all clap, and we sort of made the play out of these conventions that are already in people's head. The way how to utilise them for our concept. (Ibid.)

Therefore, their methodology consciously utilises the meaning-making of everyday life. The compositional work is found in the selection of suitable formats and in the transposition from daily life to context of performances.

It follows that Unholy Trinity uses a double structure: they spotlight signs of signs by creating a form on stage and try to use signs in simulation (Baudrillardian sense). It appears to me that entangling them with each other eventually turns out to be signs of signs since the Unholy Trinity composes them as a piece. As I argued in 2.1, signs of signs cannot essentially transform themselves as signs in a context of performances.

Transposition implies that they bring signs of signs to light. In order to accomplish the simulation, which is transposition to the stage, it is necessary to explicitly create signs of signs so that the audience would understand the simulation as referred formats. For this reason, signs of signs are placed to the foreground of their expression.

Besides the importance of signs of signs, I observe irony in the way how they dislocate and simulate. Koppel acknowledges that they aim "to not only create it as an entertainment piece and joke, although the jokiness, the irony, the entertainment is such a big part of what we do, it shouldn't be the only thing". These "jokiness" and "irony" seem to be constitutive of their works including *So You Think You Can Dance* (2023). Their application of signs of signs accompanies an ironical tone since the deed of transposition oftentimes requires the signs to be used in a particularly explicit way. For instance, their costumes reminded me of young participants of a dance competition who dance street dance with a sexual nuance. The award-giving scene involved party poppers. In the final scene, in the laminarity of the performance and at the end, the performers presented a list of supporters on paper, as in a dance competition, but they ranged from Baudrillard to a teacher at their university. By explicitly using the codes for creating forms, they rely heavily on signs of signs and their mechanism, which turns to be an irony.

It is especially intriguing that they do not hesitate to show the signs of signs *per se*. These are not always of the same quality as in everyday life. Instead, most of the simulated forms are low-budget looking, which is in accordance with the irony. It thus accentuates the core of how one would understand the situation. In line with this thought, I feel the irony of targeting conventional theatre with plots and the use of material identity in signs of signs such as national theatres.

The well-known dance and theatre critic Danzumees praises the piece: “It offers how, dance and dancing, humour and authentic dancehall feeling – cool and interactive”<sup>16</sup> (Danzumees 2023). He perceived the jokes as well as the authentic feelings triggered by simulations in the piece. Besides, the transposition and fine integration of daily life and illusion are observed by him:

[T]he audience are also transformed into (passive) contestants/witnesses – literally bringing to life Shakespeare’s “all the world’s a stage” – the whole space is a stage, and if at one point the audience was really “on stage” and it started to quietly disappear from under your feet, you got the feeling that even just staying on it is still 1 more competition?!<sup>17</sup>(Ibid.)

The transposition of forms onto the stage, as realised by the authors of the piece, has an influence on the audience members, so they are transformed into people who are suitable in the context of the created forms. In addition, this critic experiences the integration of two worlds.

Kaja Kann remarks on the effect of simulations as follows: “It was all so strange: it was as if nothing important was said, no dances were actually danced, no problems were solved, but the whole worked perfectly.”<sup>18</sup> (Kann 2023). I think her critique assures that Unholy Trinity succeeded in simulating *So You Think You Can Dance* (2023).

Authenticity as everyday life and naturalism cannot be applicable to this case because the piece relies on fictivity or transposed simulation. However, even in a simulation, the audience could get an experience of formats such as participating in an award-giving ceremony or learning some choreography. The experience, however, is filtered through the work of the authors. Since the audience still do things, such as learning a choreography and moving in space because the podiums are moved, it may lead to one sort of authenticity.

In addition to the main theme of the piece on the dance scene in Estonia, they “deal with very contemporary problems” (Koppel 2024). In *So You Think You Can Dance* (2023), they reflect a specific case. Thematically, they reflect the Estonian dance scene, concentrating on the gap between the two dance worlds. Moreover, according to Koppel: “We consciously try to reflect STL (Sõltumatu Tantsu Lava)’s dance performances”. They also faced several barriers due to the programme regulations, such as the duration of the piece, small budget, use of chairs, and minimum stage setup, and instead of fitting themselves into these, they utilised them as a source of inspiration in the piece (Ibid.). Hence, the dance scene in STL and expectations from

---

<sup>16</sup> “[S]howd, tantsu ja tantsimist, nalja ja ehedat dancehall’i feelingut- lahe ja interaktiivne”. (Danzumees 2023)

<sup>17</sup> “[K]a publik muudetakse (passiivseteks) võistlejateks/pealtvaatajateks - elustub sõna otseses mõttes Shakespeare’i “all the world’s a stage”- kogu saal on lava ja kui publik oligi ühel hetkel tõesti “laval” ja see vaikselt jalge alt kaduma hakkas, siis oli tunne, et kas isegi lihtsalt sellel püsimine on ka veel 1 võistlus?!” (Ibid.)

<sup>18</sup> “See kõik oli nii imelik: justkui midagi olulist ei öeldud, ühtegi tantsu päriselt ei tantsitud, probleeme ei lahatud, aga tervik toimis ideaalselt”.(Kann 2023)

the production side bear reflexivity in *So You Think You Can Dance* (2023). This is in accordance with their concept that the piece is about dance. The dance scene in STL is surely a part of a broader picture of the dance and performance art field. Therefore, the piece has a reflexivity which aims at the dance scene as well as, more specifically, the situation of STL. It might not be too wrong to say that *So You Think You Can Dance* (2023) is built upon its reflexivity of the Estonian dance scene.

*So You Think You Can Dance* (2023) presents anti-theatricality since it is characterised by the ironic usage of signs, reflexivity of the dance scene and signs of signs used in the fundamental approach in creation, and authenticity may come out through simulation.

### **3.3. *Floor on Fire: Ask My Body* (2024)**

Ruslan Stepanov is an experienced performance artist, choreographer, dancer, and educator in Estonia. His earlier works of performing arts include *Gangstarap* (2021), *Performance in STL (Performance STL-is)* (2019), and *Weightlessness (Невесомость)* (2018), besides many other works he created in or in collaboration with educational institutions.

The piece I would focus on in this thesis is his most recent work to date, titled *Floor on Fire: Ask My Body [Küsi minu kehalt]*<sup>19</sup>, which premiered on the 4<sup>th</sup> of April 2024 at elektron.art's art hall in Tallinn.

The stage design is minimalistic, and no theatre light is used at all; instead, only the usual fluorescent lights are equipped for the space. The audience seats surround the stage area from all four directions. The stage area is about 10 cm higher than the original floor and covered with brown coloured surface. The audience seats are placed around the stage floor so that those who are seated put their feet on the higher stage floor. It is remarkable that the audience seats are numbered seemingly at random, not in the order of the mathematical numbers nor in the uniform size or font. The sound is created live with a single guitar played by Artjom Astrov without any additional sets, including amplifiers. The guitar player was positioned behind one side of the audience seats, looking towards the backs of the people on that side of the stage, and in the middle of the performance, he walked to the opposite side of the space, taking a seat again behind the spectators. There was one vase filled with branches and flowers in red tone next to each of the musicians' seats.

---

<sup>19</sup> Performance description on elektron.art's website: <https://lab.elektron.art/projects/fire>

There are seven performers on stage: Ruslan Stepanov, Elle Viies, Maryn-Liis Rüütelmaa, Sigrid Savi, Johhan Rosenbeg, Igor Lider, and Karl Saks. While Stepanov is mentioned as the author of the work, the other performers are also described as the co-authors of the performance piece in the official description, which is not uncommon as the creation method of performance art. Their costumes were not uniform but created harmony among each other, having colours partially in common. The clothing could be described as sportive, casual, and ordinary.

All the performers are found to be technically strong in dance, and no natural language is used during the entire performance. Even though I categorise the piece here as performance art in my definition, it could simultaneously be regarded as a contemporary dance piece without any measure of disagreement, for its features, or rather, is built upon the physical movement. The performance utilises the playful method of a dance jam, specifically either jam circle or cypher, in which participants form a circle, leaving a space in the middle, and one or two people step into the circle to show their skills. The performers who are not 'showing their skills' sit down on the chairs among the audience members. Thus, the spectators are automatically involved in the jam circle regardless of their will or consciousness. The performers did not explicitly hide the way how they follow the rules of this format, however, it was obvious to me, at least, and assumably for most of the audience members who have experienced this kind of exercise or format, that the performers are constantly aware of the other performers' body languages and looking for eye contacts to go to the 'middle of the circle' in case of movements, which are supposed to be executed in pair.

Unlike the dance jam in a conventional way, the performers' aim does not seem to be the presentation of their very best skills in a competitive manner. Instead, it is formatted as a coherent performance utilising the format as a basic structure to rely on during the entire performance. The performers keep their casual presence, just as I have remarked in their choice of costumes. It is, however, notable that they paid special attention to the minuscule details of their movements and, thanks to that, brought smiles and laughter to the spectators' faces by making jokes in their body language, consciously or unconsciously. These function as jokes thanks to common understandings, including social conventions and common sense in Estonia among the performers and spectators. It cannot be denied that some are targeted to a narrower audience group, so to say, inside jokes, such as those who personally know some performers, who have earlier experience of seeing them on stage in other works, or those who regularly go see performances of performance art and are familiar with the whereabouts of the area.



Next, I would introduce some jokes that made sense to me.

A female performer raises and carries a male performer to the opposite side of the stage area in such a manner that a man would do to his partner. In the work, a female performer, Savi, takes Stepanov from his knees and upper back, and Stepanov puts his arms around her neck.

Savi's solo part includes a falling on her one elbow, resulting in a heavy sound caused by the falling and seemingly painful situation due to putting all her body weight on one elbow, a fragile body part to be avoided when falling or landing on the floor. Similarly, Rosenberg falls from the headstand position to the floor with his straight back, which is taught to dancers to refrain from doing so due to the high risk of injury.

Stepanov and Saks are both university teachers and middle-aged men with decent fame in Estonian performance art. They chase one another with their full strength, just like children playing tag.

The rhythm was effectively used to bring out funny moments by introducing a surprise or repeating a monotonous one. I found this playfulness in all the performers and during the entire duration of the piece.

The ending is worth mentioning for its playfulness and unique quality. All the seven performers stand up and gather on the stage, take each other's hands, create a wave, and let the hands go. At the premiere of the work, Stepanov uttered "thank you" after the wave. It is again not a dramatic ending but rather a casual, friendly way to finish the event.

The performance's title includes "Floor on Fire", which refers to the structure of the performance itself, referring to the dance jam format. I think that element completes the interpretation of the entire performance, especially once the game rules become clear to the spectators.

The official description of *Floor on Fire: Ask My Body* (2024) starts with a paragraph as follows:

In this piece, the performers approach choreography as a language. Dealing with it as fixed physical material that, in turn, needs a text. Text that describes it, however, following the nature of the work itself, does not give a definitive answer as to what it is, but rather creates an opportunity to take it for what it is.<sup>20</sup>

The author and performer, Ruslan Stepanov, explains his ideas further:

[I]t was interesting if we can create these kinds of quotes directly with the body not to translate something to the body, but it's coming from the body. And that because maybe this form at the end was kind of like in school exam that you come in? You show. And you go away and nothing more. At the beginning and at the end, it should look like a book. When every page is with some few quotes, what you look and then

---

<sup>20</sup> Performance description on electron.art's website: <https://lab.elektron.art/projects/fire>

because there is not such like... The logic is quite simple, I guess. When you start to watch because we don't develop it. And even in this logic, you actually don't, can't be sure 100% what will be next, because everything was there, happens, solos and duos.

Stepanov compared each solo and duo, or in general a sequence of movements, to a quote. The immediacy of the body and non-coherence among the presentation of solos and duos, together with unexpectedness, function as separate quotes. However, the performance format forms a coherent whole as a piece out of these individual 'quotes' that forms 'a book'.



Figure 3. Ruslan Stepanov *Floor on Fire: Ask My Body*<sup>21</sup>

In order to achieve his intention, the format of a dance jam plays a crucial role.

And I wanted to keep it simple for the form that it will be that the audience can understand it and doesn't need to be interpreted so much what's going on. So, they see immediately, OK, it is the one person on stage doing choreography, and that's all. That's all the information. And then it's like a book you open. There is no design, there is an empty white page and there is a text, and its text is content and the content for me was the most important in this work like how we can focus on the content without any design, without any style. So, it was minimalistic. (Stepanov 2024)

The simplicity seems to be the core of the piece, which realisation is supported by, or rather created by, the format of sequential presentation of solos and duos. This feature of format reflects today's social everyday life, especially among younger generations. Stepanov explains about the choice of format as follows.

---

<sup>21</sup> elektron.art's event website: <https://elektron.art/schedule>

And then you need to keep attention of the audience with this short information. And without any meaning. So, information by itself, like choreography by itself. And I think this was the most interesting part for me, like how to find the material which is more or less understandable for everyone, and something like in a choreography that you don't need to interpretate. Even, it doesn't matter, are you professional and dance or not? Are you used to watch it or you see it the first time. So, for example, if I smash my head on the floor so you understand what's going on. So, you don't need to exterminate your stories.

This simplicity is connected to an effort to present signs instead of signs of signs, which eventually appear as quasi-signs.

In a way, the piece is made with an awareness of the tendency. On the one hand, the application of the format is followed by similar issues regarding social media, which include attractivity and immediate understandability. On the other hand, Stepanov focuses on simplicity, which does not necessarily happen in the short form of social daily life, where filters and editing are of great importance.

According to Stepanov, this focal point on simplicity stems from his observation and understanding of people in general:

So, like old words exist that sometimes you just need to take the things simpler and not to make them so complicated, especially for the others because I felt that people always want to develop and always want to make it more complicated. They can't deal that sun is just shining and that's all. They need to always develop to bring some designs, to some extra meanings.

It is thus assumed that Stepanov intended to reflect on this tendency of people and conceptually utilised it for this piece.

However, the simplicity of this piece is not only primitively straightforward, instead, it is simultaneously complicated. The author of the piece named it as “complicated simplicity” and draw a parallel with aphorism. Stepanov claims that there is no need for interpretation and accentuates the simplicity. The viewers, however, do not necessarily “take it for what it is”<sup>22</sup> as the performance description states. In critiques, both Iiris Viirpalu and Triin Kauber find some elements confusing. Kauber expresses herself:

I find myself confused because some of the movements seem to be clear references or gestures, such as the short duet by Karl and Ruslan, which seems to refer to Ristsema and Burrows' “Weak dance, strong questions”, or the unambiguous gestures that emerged in Ruslan and Johhan's in trickster-like etudes of sitting on the audience's laps and putting a hand on the knee of the person sitting next to you”<sup>23</sup> (Kauber 2024).

Viirpalu takes a more general position:

---

<sup>22</sup> Performance description on electron.art's website: <https://lab.elektron.art/projects/fire>

<sup>23</sup> “[L]eian end segadusest, sest mõned liikumised näivad olevad selged viited või žestid, näiteks Karli ja Ruslani lühike duo, mis näib viitavat Ristsema ja Burrowsi teosele “Weak dance, strong questions”, või üheselt mõistetavad žestid, mis tulid esile Ruslani ja Johhani triksterlikes etüüdides publikule sülleistumisest ja kõrvalistujale käe põlvele panemisest”. (Kauber 2024)

[F]or a spectator who is not used to see dance, this work may remain somewhat inaccessible and abstract – it is a niche production. Because of the number of dislocations, those who don't go to the dance performances might be confused when they experience the performance. They would ask: “what did I just see?”<sup>24</sup> (Viirpalu 2024)

By “dislocation”, she appears to think of such an example of the couple position of ballroom dance, which would not develop into anything but ends up with two performers going back to their seats,<sup>25</sup> and arbitrarily presented classical ballet poses, which are “usually heavily coded and formal.”<sup>26</sup> (Viirpalu 2024). Their confusion is originally caused by the piece's high referentiality that they perceived. I, too, received these elements as jokes or irony while watching the performance. Even though Stepanov said: “it doesn't matter, are you professional and dance or not? Are you used to watch it or you see it the first time”, Viirpalu finds it to be niche.

Causing confusion means, on the one hand, those who are confused try to interpret and understand; on the other, the piece offers “complicated simplicity”, as Stepanov claims in the interview. The former idea admits his remark that people have difficulty in not trying to understand or interpret, including myself.

In regards to signs in *Floor on Fire: Ask My Body* (2024), Stepanov seems to challenge conventionality and tries to de-semiotics the movements on stage. As Viirpalu and Kauber imply, perceiving what is presented as it is would be difficult to achieve. I suspect it largely depended on each audience member's perception of it and whether to interpret it or not. This openness of the piece could be associated with Stepanov's initial idea to create a simple performance for everyone regardless of the viewer's knowledge, experience, skills, etc. Certainly, some sequences of performers' movements, i.e. choreography, were signs of signs. However, I would not consider it as an essential component to enjoy the performance. The simplicity, or complicated simplicity, welcomes any kind of perception.

Following Stepanov's concept, signs of signs take the form of quasi-signs. These ‘signs’ are not meant to be interpreted but remain as they are. A chair on stage could be a sign of signs, for example, of a tender lover, as Fischer-Lichte takes as a possible example of a chair's meaning on stage (1992: 131). In contrast, if *Floor on Fire: Ask My Body* (2024) was to involve a chair, it would have been just a functional chair as one uses in everyday life. The author's idea

---

<sup>24</sup> “Tantsukaugemale vaatajale võib see töö aga jääda mõnevõrra kättesaamatuks ja abstraktseks – tegu on nišilavastusega. Kuna palju tegeletakse lavastuslike nihestustega, võib inimene, kes ei käi tantsu vaatamas, sattuda etendust kogedes segadusse: „mida ma siis nüüd nägin?”” (Viirpalu 2024)

<sup>25</sup> “Näiteks: kaks tantsijat võtavad sisse seltskonnatantsude tantsuvõtte, vaatavad teineteisele otsa ning ... midagi ei järgne, lastakse kätest lahti, minnakse kohale tagasi”. (Ibid.)

<sup>26</sup> “Tavapärased tugevalt kodeeritud ja formaalsed klassikalise balleti poosid on rõhutatult suvalised”. (Ibid.)

is that falling onto the floor from the elbow was simply a movement for the sake of the choreography, and the audience is not expected to further decode the signs of signs.

It is, however, dissimilar to Kruusamägi's usage of signs of signs as signs. Unlike *Holy Rage* (2018), which placed itself on the same plane as Kruusamägi's everyday life, *Floor on Fire: Ask My Body* (2024) is distinguishable from the performers' everyday lives. The movements, even those that are borrowed from daily gestures, are abstracted, and contextualised enough so that they serve as a choreography.

In a similar manner, the subtly elevated stage space on which spectators kept their feet during the performance created a physical situation that had an influence on their mental setting. This is intentionally caused by Stepanov, originally the idea by Kivi, that purely served for the psychological play as he said: "it's real psychology". Although it is entirely possible to infer that the elevation is a sign of sign of a stage because of a unique way of the audience position, according to Stepanov, its purpose is to influence the audience's mentality in such a way that they would feel involved.

Therefore, I suggest that the piece, as Stepanov planned, could be imagined just as a functional entity whose function is to be looked at. For its function to be looked at, there would not be any understanding required – looking at it fulfils its function. The movements, which could refer to concrete gestures, are distilled into a choreography, losing their original meanings. As Stepanov said in the interview, it is just like listening to a foreign language that you do not speak at all, for instance, the Japanese language, for him, sensing only some general ideas. In this manner, *Floor on Fire: Ask My Body* (2024), as a collection of signs of signs, functions as aquasi-signs.

The author explicitly reflects on performing arts in Estonia, both in general and specifically in some respects. Stepanov's initial motivation comes from the general picture of the field: "Not so much is happening in Estonia in a dance field. So, it's kind of. I felt like it's the right time just to try to do this kind of dance piece". Focusing on dance, his conceptual core of simplicity is found by reflecting on the common tendency of performances.

I think in the dance performance, which is for example more political, you always need to choose a side. "Do you agree with it or not agree? What is your position? What your thoughts about this? Where you live, what you watch?" And it's so many things you need to do during watching some performances as well as dancing where you feel that artists have a political position behind it, and you wanted to sometimes it looks like a propaganda. And you can't relax because you always need to make choices about it. (Stepanov 2024)

It is suggested that Stepanov consciously avoided the politicisation of the piece. His solution was simplicity, which bears the unique sign mechanism as seen above.

More specifically, the piece is composed with the clear intention to differentiate from his earlier works and deceive spectators' certain presumptions. Following Stepanov:

The people who know how I work or how Artjom work or they, for example, have never seen Karl in this situation that he's dancing with the Renaissance music. And it was a risk as well, but I think for us it was really interesting.

The reason for seeking something new for the audience is backed up by his principle: "I always try to surprise my audience, because I love my audience" (Stepanov 2024).

Hence, *Floor on Fire: Ask My Body* (2024) exhibits reflexivity in that it explicitly avoids the trends and conventions of the field as well as team members' typical images and seeks alternatives. Since the simplicity derives from the structure of signs of signs, it is supposed that reflexivity remains tightly connected with signs of signs.

Besides reflexivity, I suggest that the simplicity of this piece is linked to authenticity. For Stepanov, it is precisely this simplicity through which he seeks authenticity. He explains:

[T]he simple idea is stronger than the complicated or something which is designed so much. That because this simplicity of all of the piece in every composition, a set design, with the music with the lights, with everything, with the audience, with a psychological trick. I was searching more fundamental, which will work for us together.

In the search for simplicity, an authentic moment emerges as honesty. Hand in hand with this honesty, the signs of signs become purified as simple 'quotes' without context. These 'quotes' remain powerful for their simple existence, in other words, the performers' presence.

On top of this simplicity, there are some elements which appear to lead to the realisation of authenticity in the piece. Viirpalu finds:

There is beauty in the presence and curiosity about reactions and other bodies: the dancers really 'listen' to each other, both with their mental presence and with their bodies. This can be perceived in the fleeting exchanges of glances, the way one catches or supports another's falling limb or body.<sup>27</sup> (Viirpalu 2024)

Kauber agrees with her on this moment of genuineness:

There is tension between the performers before each solo and group movement. In this moment of waiting, it is interesting to observe the exchanges of glances between performers, from which it is possible to guess who will be the next to come to the fire and how pauses are played within and between choreographies.<sup>28</sup> (Kauber 2024)

---

<sup>27</sup> "Kohalolus ning uudishimus reaktsioonide ja teiste kehade suhtes avaldub ka ilu: tantsijad tõesti „kuulavad” üksteist nii oma mentaalse kohalolu kui ka kehaga. Seda võib tajuda põgusatest pilg vahetustest, viisist, kuidas püütakse või toetatakse teise kukkuvat jäset või keha". (Viirpalu 2024)

<sup>28</sup> "Etendajate omavahelises suhtluses on pinevust märgata enne igat soolot, duot ja grupiliikumist. Selles ootuses on huvitav jälgida etendajatevahelisi pilg vahetusi, mille põhjal saab välja lugeda, kes astub järgmisena tule kätte ning kuidas mängitakse pausidega koreograafiate sees ja vahel". (Kauber 2024)

In addition to the genuineness, both remark on the unexpectedness and strong presence of the performers (Kauber 2024; Viirpalu 2024). As a member of the audience, I similarly noticed the glances among the performers and guessed what game they were playing – the order of solos and duets was unfixed, and the performers decided on the spot by ‘listening’ to each other’s thoughts. This playfulness allowed each performance to be fresh thanks to the need to be constantly aware of each other, which resulted in a genuine presence of performers. The simple structure of the piece carries a truthful and intense moment that causes authenticity.

*Floor on Fire: Ask My Body* (2024) features seemingly simplified usage of signs of signs in a form of quasi-signs, reflexivity in means of expressions based on conventions Stepanov remarks, and authenticity as presence. All things considered, it is suggested that the piece involves anti-theatricality.

### **3.4. Discussion**

In the theoretical part, I suggested that unconventional use of signs of signs leads to appearances of antitheatricality. Even though I understood that signs of signs are related to authenticity and reflexivity, I discussed authenticity and reflexivity separately in other subsections, proceeding to the section on signs of signs. In analysing the performances, I have realised that authenticity and reflexivity are so tightly connected to and intertwined with signs of signs that it was not possible to talk about these without mentioning signs of signs. In the case of Kruusamägi’s *Holy Rage* (2018), both of the qualities are directly the signs of signs appearances themselves. Rather than being the features of antitheatricality, these could be considered as features of signs of signs in antitheatricality in the range of my theses. When authenticity or reflexivity are found in performances, it would be highly likely that they could be traced back to how signs of signs appear.

Antitheatricality is recognisable only in theatricality and constantly reflects theatricality. Similarly, signs of signs and authenticity are brought to light when authors of performances reflexively pay attention to those in a conventional manner. It is the contrast between the conventions and something new that bears antitheatricality. Therefore, reflexivity plays a much more significant role than I discussed in the theoretical part. It may even be a fundamental principle in performance art.

For reflexivity to require an object to reflect and refer to, I would like to stress that antitheatricality, too, is ephemeral, depending on trends and conventions. In today's performance art scene in Estonia, I find that Stepanov and Unholy Trinity have distinctive styles. (Kruusamägi moved to another country and has not been active in Estonia.) It might be this reflexivity they apply that makes them and their work unique.

It is often said that everything is already done on stage. However, and precisely because of this reason, reflexivity may play a more critical role. When nothing is new, 'quoting' and 'citing' in the context of performances in a creative manner is one of the ways to say something new through 'old'. Unholy Trinity and Stepanov's chosen works have this quality in common. Unholy Trinity simulates forms, reflecting the Estonian dance scene and precisely STL's expectations. Stepanov creates a choreography using simple structure, gestures and simple everyday movements and performs it instead of dancing, paying careful attention not to recreate what a conventional dance piece does. Stepanov was very conscious about 'quoting'.

Intriguingly, both Unholy Trinity's and Stepanov's works seem to explicitly refer to dailiness in their performances. Kruusamägi, in contrast, integrates dailiness and performance. Considering that *So You Think You Can Dance* (2023) and *Floor on Fire: Ask My Body* (2024) were made recently, while Kruusamägi premiered the piece back in 2018, the current antitheatricality is possibly related to this kind of method. If many spectators could see these, or if one found similarities in other performance art pieces, this clear referencing and reflexivity may become the next convention. In such a case, these analysed performances could no longer be considered in antitheatricality. Instead, it seems to be tied to Lotman's conditionality in theatre (Lotman 1991: 208).

Interviewees did not necessarily use the same vocabulary as I theorised antitheatricality. Being a practitioner in the same field as them and studying semiotics, I find some terminological gaps. The authors of the performances think pretty similarly to me yet express themselves in other ways. On this point, I have an impression that performance artists for whom concepts are essential could be said to think semiotically. I am sure that some of them are very aware of how communication functions so that they can construct a performance as they wish. It may be to simply convey messages, to offer opportunities for interpretation, or to manipulate them. For a performance to be predominantly about communication between performers and audiences, anti-theatrical performance art is, in this regard, conceptually thought through and does not follow how conventional theatre or dance pieces communicate.



## CONCLUSION

This thesis titled *Antitheatricality in performance art in Estonia: Semiotic approach* provides one possible concept of antitheatricality in the context of performance art in Estonia. I define antitheatricality as a quality that reflexively reacts against certain conventions in theatre, such as theatricality. In the theoretical part, I rely on literature, and in the analytical part, on semi-structured interviews with authors of analysed performance artworks, as well as reviews of the performances. Performance art, which I focus on, is an art form characterised by live presentation on stage, visual physicality, conceptuality, and intermediality. It is defined through Dick Higgins' (2001) conceptions of intermedia and Wittgenstein's (2009) family resemblance.

The thesis explores the appearances of antitheatricality through signs of signs. Signs of signs are conceptualised by Petr Bogatyrev and further developed by Erika Fischer-Lichte. I consider them to be central to the semiotic mechanism in performances. By creating signs of signs in specific ways instead of following the conventional use of signs, there appears to be antitheatricality. Signs of signs that result in antitheatricality could be shown as quasi-signs, or on the contrary, the function of signs of signs is sometimes stressed self-ironically. As a performance, however, it is impossible to escape from the labyrinth of signs of signs.

It is suggested that reflexivity and authenticity are connected to these usages of signs of signs. Reflexivity is fundamental to Antitheatricality since Antitheatricality reflexively resists certain aspects of theatricality. In this thesis, I investigated it in terms of signs of signs. Authenticity is sought through the effort to produce and present signs instead of signs of signs, which eventually result in quasi-signs.

The analysis of three performance artworks focusing on signs of signs, authenticity, and reflexivity revealed practical manifestation of antitheatricality. I analysed Stella Kruusamägi's *Holy Rage* (2018), Unholy Trinity's *So You Think You Can Dance* (2023), and Ruslan Stepanov's *Floor on Fire: Ask My Body* (2024). *Holy Rage* (2018) is characterised by antitheatricality in using quasi-signs, reflexivity in performing arts, and authenticity in being rather than acting. The author-performer's daily life was extended to a

performance. *So You Think You Can Dance* (2023) presents antitheatricality since it stresses signs of signs in an ironical approach, reflexivity is observed in its thematical and conceptual choice, and authenticity may come out through simulation. *Floor on Fire: Ask My Body*(2024) features quasi-signs, reflexivity owing to the methodical simplicity, and authenticity as presence. It is suggested that each analysed performance art piece involve appearances of antitheatricality.

Thanks to the analytical part, it became clear that signs of signs are so intertwined with reflexivity and authenticity that it is difficult to treat them separately. Thus, signs of signs could be treated as one of the central ideas in antitheatricality, and other qualities of it develop around it.

Indeed, there are more possible approaches to antitheatricality. Researching the performance on symbolical and meta levels would be intriguing, which I did not treat in this thesis. Moreover, looking into antitheatricality in some other cultural or geographical contexts via signs of signs could possibly provide a further understanding of the concept.

## REFERENCES

Ackerman, Alan; Puchner, Martin 2006. *Against Theatre: Creative Destructions on the Modernist Stage*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Alalooga, Erik 2019. Püha raev. Stella Kruusamägi „Holy Rage” Supersonicumis ja Kanuti Gildi SAAL-is. *Tantsukuukiri* 2.2019, 84. <https://kuukiri.tantsuliit.ee/artikkel/puha-raevstella-kruusamagi-holy-rage-supersonicumis-ja-kanuti-gildi-saal-is/>

Artaud, Antonin 1958a. *The Theater and Its Double*. New York: Grove Press.

— 1958b. The Theatre and Cruelty. *The Tulane Drama Review* 2(3): 75–77.

Austin, John L. 1962. *How to do Things with Words*. London; Glasgow; New York *et al.*: Oxford University Press.

Barad, Karen 2003. Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter. *Signs* 28(3), 801–831.

— 2011. Nature’s Queer Performativity. *Qui Parle* 19(2): 121–158.

Barish, Jonas A. 1965. *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*. University of California Press.

Barthes, Roland 1972. *Critical Essays*. Northwestern University Press: Evanston.

Baudrillard, Jean 1994[1981]. *Simulacra and Simulation*. University of Michigan Press.

Benjamin, Walter 2007[1955]. *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books.

Bishop, Claire 2012. Delegated Performance: Outsourcing Authenticity. *October* 140: 91–112.

Boal, Augusto 2008[1974]. *Theatre of the Oppressed*. Pluto Press.

- Bogatyrev, Petr 1984[1938]. Semiotics in the folk theatre. In: Matejka, Ladislav: Titunik, Irwan R. (eds.) *Semiotics of Art: Prague School Contributions*. Cambridge; Massachusetts; London: The MIT Press.
- Brecht, Bertolt 1961. On the Experimental Theatre. *The Tulane Drama Review* 6(1): 3–17.
- Burns, Elizabeth 1972. *Theatricality: A Study of Convention in Theatre and in Social Life*. Harper& Row Publishers.
- Butler, Judith 2002. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York; London: Routledge.
- Danzumees 2023. Sõltumatu Tantsu Lava PREMIERE'23 / Ka vaikus oli väljakannatamatu – Liisi Hint / So you think you can dance - Unholy Trinity. 28.02.2023.  
<http://danzumees.blogspot.com/2023/02/soltumatu-tantsu-lava-premiere23-ka.html>
- Debord, Guy 2014. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Bureau of Public Secret.
- Deák, František 1975. Russian Mass Spectacles. *The Drama Review* 19(2): 7–22.
- Elam, Keir 2010. *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*. London; New York: Routledge.
- Evreinoff, Nicolas 2013. *The Theatre in Life*. Mansfield centre: Martino Publishing.
- Féral, Josette 2002a. Foreword. *SubStance* 31(2/3): 3–13.
- 2002b. The Specificity of Theatrical Language. *SubStance* 31(2/3): 3–13.
- Fischer-Lichte, Erika 1992. *The Semiotics of Theatre*. The Indiana University Press.
- 2008a. *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*. London; New York: Routledge.
- 2008b, November 24–25. *Culture as Performance: Theatre History as Culture History*. Actas/Proceedings Historia do Teatro e Novas Tecnologias, Lisbon, Portugal.
- Freeman, Lisa, A. 2017. *Antitheatricality and the Body Public*. Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press.

- Fried, Michael 1998. Art and Objecthood (1967). In: *Art and Objecthood*. Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 148–172.
- Fried, Michael 1980. Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot. *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 47(2).
- Grotowski, Jerzy. 2002. Towards a Poor Theatre. In: *Towards a Poor Theatre*. New York: Routledge, 15–25.
- Hall, Stuart 1997. Representation: *Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. SAGE Publications.
- Higgins, Dick 2001. Intermedia. *Leonardo* 34(1): 49–54.
- Honzl, Jindrich 1984[1940]. Dynamics of the Sign in the Theater. In: Matejka, Ladislav; Titunik, Irwan R. (eds.) *Semiotics of Art: Prague School Contributions*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: The MIT Press.
- Jakobson, Roman 1960. Linguistics and Poetics. In T. Sebeok (Ed.), *Style in Language*, 350–377. Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press.
- Jauss, Hans Robert 1970. Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory. *New Literary History* 2(1): 7–37.
- Jevtjukova, Alissija-Elisabet 2018. 187. Holy Rage. <http://eksperiment.kinoteater.ee/187-holy-rage/>
- Kann, Kaja 2023. Kõik ei peagi olema eakohane [Everything does not have to be age appropriate]. *Sirp* 10.03.2023. <https://www.sirp.ee/s1-artiklid/teater/koik-ei-peagi-olema-eakohane/>
- Kauber, Triin 2024. Tants koreograafia ja juhuse vahel [Dances between choreography and chance]. *Tantuskuukiri* 04.2024, 137. <https://kuukiri.tantsuliit.ee/artikkel/tants-koreograafia-ja-juhuse-vahel/>
- Kirby, Michael 1987. *A Formalist Theatre*. The University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Lehmann, Hans-Thies 2006. *Postdramatic Theatre*. London and New York: Routledge.

Levine, Laura 1986. Men in Women's Clothing: Anti-theatricality and Effeminization from 1579 to 1642. *Criticism* 28(2): 121–143.

Lindholm, Charles 2013. The Rise of Expressive Authenticity. *Anthropological Quarterly* 86(2): 361–395.

Lotman, Juri 1976[1973]. Theatre and Theatricality in the Order of Early Nineteenth Century Culture. In: Baran, Henryk (ed.), *Semiotics and Structuralism: Readings from the Soviet Union*. New York: International Arts and Sciences Press, 33–63.

— 1991. Lavasemiootika [Semiotics of Stage]. In: *Kultuurisemiootika*. Tallinn: Olion, 182–216.

May, Tim; Perry Beth 2017. *Reflexivity: The Essential Guide*. SAGE Publications Ltd.

Messinger, Sheldon. L.; Sampson, Harold; Towne, Robert D. 1962. Life as theater: Some notes on the dramaturgic approach to social reality. *Sociometry* 25(1): 98–110.

MMD. *s.a.* Macmillan Dictionary. <https://www.macmillandictionary.com/>

OED. *s.a.* Oxford English Dictionary. <https://www-oed-com.ezproxy.utlib.ut.ee/>

Pavis, Patrice 1998. *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts, and Analysis*. Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press.

— 2020. *The Routledge Dictionary of Performance and Contemporary Theatre*. London and New York: Routledge.

Postlewait, Thomas; Davis, Tracy, D. 2003. Theatricality: an introduction. In: Davis, Tracy, D.; Postlewait, Thomas (eds.) *Theatricality*. Cambridge University Press.

Puchner, Martin 2002. *Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-theatricality, and Drama*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Pullerits, Marie 2019. Püha viha, mis ei lunasta. *Sirp* 01.02.2024. <https://sirp.ee/s1-artiklid/teater/puha-viha-mis-ei-lunasta/>

Saro, Anneli; Reidolv, Kristiina; Lepsoo, Tanel 2014. Representatsioon, presentatsioon ja kohalolu teatris [Representation, presentation, and presence in theatre]. *Methis. Studia humaniora Estonica* 14.

Sauter, Willmar 2000. *The Theatrical Event: Dynamics of Performance and Perception*. The University of Iowa Press.

Searle, John R. 1995. *The Construction of Social Reality*. New York: Free Press.

Stam, Robert 1985. *Reflexivity in Film and Literature from Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard*. Am Arbor; Michigan: UMI Research Press.

Trilling, Lionel 1972. *Sincerity and Authenticity*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England: Harvard University Press.

Viirpalu, Iris 2024. Kehakõne [Body speech]. *Sirp* 10.05.2024. <https://sirp.ee/s1-artiklid/teater/kehakone/>

Weiss, Allen S. 2011. Authenticity. *Gastronomica* 11(4): 74–77.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig 2009. *Philosophical Investigations*. Blackwell Publishing.

## Performances

Abramović, Marina 1975. Thomas Lips. Innsbruck, Austria.

Estonian Witches' Association 2023. Conference. Russian Culture Centre, Tallinn.

Evreinov, Nikolai 1920. The Storming of the Winter Palace. Petrograd.

Kruusamägi, Stella 2018. Holy Rage. Koidu Seltsimaja, Viljandi.

Stepanov, Ruslan 2018. Невесомость [Weightlessness]. Kanuti Gildi SAAL, Tallinn.

— 2019. Performance in STL. Sõltumatu Tantsu Lava, Tallinn.

— 2024. Floor on Fire: Küsi minu kehalt [Floor on Fire: Ask My Body]. elektron.art's art hall, Tallinn.

Stepanov, Ruslan; Astrov, Artjom 2021. Gangstarap. Kanuti gildi SAAL, Tallinn.

Unholy Trinity 2023. So You Think You Can Dance, Sõltumatu Tantsu Lava, Tallinn.



## MAGISTRITÖÖ KOKKUVÕTE

### **Antiteatraalsus Eesti etenduskunstimaastikul: Semiootiline lähenemine**

Käesolev magistritöö käsitleb antiteatraalsust Eesti etenduskunstimaastikul, defineerides seda kui kvaliteeti, mis refleksiivselt vastandub osadele olemasoleva teatraalsuse iseloomudele. Töös lähenetakse antiteatraalsusele kirjanduse toel ning analüüsi osas lavastuste autorite poolstruktureeritud intervjuude ja lavastuste arvustuste põhjal. Etenduskunsti defineerimises pean olulisteks kehalisus, kontseptsiooni tugevus ja intermediaalsus ning seda mõistetakse läbi Dick Higgins'i intermedia ja Wittgenstein'i perekondliku sarnasuse kontseptsioonide, vabastades seda hierarhilisest liigitamisest.

Töö raames uuritakse märkide märkide ilmumist ja nende erinevaid kasutamise viise, ning antiteatraalsuse aspektidena autentsust ja refleksiivsust. Tuginen Petr Bogatyrev'i kontseptualiseeritud ja Erika Fischer-Lichte edasi arendatud märkide märkide teooriale, et lava kontekstis on märkide märgid, mis osutavad igapäeva elu tasandil olemasolevatele märkidele. Pakun, et antiteatraalsus ilmneb nende ebakonventsionaalsel kasutamisel nt nendesse irooniliselt suhtumisel ja märkide näol kasutamisel. Üritatakse märkide märkide süsteemist vabaneda, kuigi etenduse olukorras see ei ole võimalik. Seega refleksiivsus on antiteatraalsusele fundamentaalne st antiteatraalsus sõltub teatraalsusest. Autentsuseni jõutakse märkide märkide asemele märkide otsingute kaudu.

Uurisin praktilisi ilmumisi analüüsides kolme etenduskunstilavastust keskendudes performatiivsuse kontseptsioonidele: Stella Kruusamäe *Holy Rage* (2018), *Unholy Trinity' So You Think You Can Dance* (2023) ja Ruslan Stepanovi *Floor on Fire: Küsi minu kehalt* (2024). Märkide märgid on praktikas refleksiivsuse ja autentsusega niivõrd kokku põimitud, et nende eraldi käsitlemine on keeruline.

**APPENDIX 1**  
**Questions for the interviews**

1. What kind of work is it? Do you see any relationship between your work and other categories of art?
2. What is the concept of the work?
3. What did you utilise and avoid in creating the work?
4. What are the roles of conventions in your work?
5. What are your work's similarities and dissimilarities to the traditional theatre and dance?
6. How do you relate your work to theatre illusion and reality?
7. Do you present or represent in your work? How do you create communication with the audience in your work?
8. Do you reflect on art or else in your work? Please elaborate.
9. Is there authenticity in your work, and how do you create it?
10. Did you face any limitations because of institutional organisations?

Interview transcription 1

Interview conducted: 4.05.2024 from 11:30-12:30 online

Interviewee: Stella Kruusamägi (author-performer of *Holy Rage* (2018))

Kruusamägi (K): Hi.

Yokoo-Ruttas (Y): Hi, so, I have some questions to guide the interview, but you don't have to stick with those questions or stick with the idea to just answer concretely to those questions. I'm interested in your work *Holly Rage* (2018). And even though it has been some years already since the performances, still I'm thinking about it sometime. And I find it quite relevant even though I didn't find much feedback in Estonian context. So, I'd like to ask some things about it. What kind of work is it and was it? Just the general question.

K: It was about working with psychological states, specifically anger states. So, looking into like what we have all inside and how much we suppress. And if you work with it in a way that you are invoking it, let's say every single day and what's going to happen with the person's psychological mind and what it will bring on the surface. So, I was making myself angry every single day. I was doing what I used mostly. I was watching very violent movies and series. And then I went to my own trauma, like in a childhood. And, I was imagining this, as they say, like images of my childhood. And there were things that helped me to trigger, let's say, this state. Like now I see that there are people who are working with that more, but sometimes I question because it's like every other emotion. No, I mean, it's like if you're happy or if you're sad, I mean, anger comes from sadness anyway, and then it's like people don't know how to deal with this emotion or somehow the society takes it as a bad thing. But it's like I don't know if you think about animals then. They also have emotions, but they don't know of maybe our emotions, I don't know even how to talk about it because... OK, there are scientists that are doing explorations on animals, but in conclusion, no one actually knows anything about animals. We think we know, we make all sorts of theories, but we don't. But what we know is that they have instincts like we have. And I think animals, I mean animals, they react based on instincts and the same humans do. But we have thought to behave. And then I think like from this behaving or when people haven't work with their issues or the past or the trauma then, like these things occur in a more extreme way, let's say. So, maybe that

was my way of working with some kind of anger that I was keeping inside and then also what interest me was the anger around us, like how people project the anger. And in Estonia also, we have a big history with Russia and with other different countries like Denmark, Sweden, all the countries who have occupied us. But especially Russia, I would say. But then. It's this like I was talking today also with my friend. What I don't understand about the world is that white people are projecting their anger on the citizens. It's not citizens' fault. It's not like it's fault, it's Russians' fault. No, it's not Russians' fault. It's the fault of the government, you know. And then these things are not that good. And then this anger is put on these citizens, these poor citizens. And this I find very disgusting. So, I think this work is not like only personal, it's more of going into the personal, but then all the things around us that come to inside and then from inside to the outside. I don't know how to explain that but. Yeah, it is like connected in two ways, yeah.

Y: It is a universal issue.

K: Exactly. It's very much universal. It's just like it. People don't want to deal with it, people are lazy in that sense. Like there are people, who are dealing with it, but what I find there should be more interaction because as I said before, also usually what is behind that is sadness. And then people don't know how to react to certain things and then they faced with this emotion. And maybe end up hurting themselves and other people around them. And at the same time, I find it is important to show this emotion. But then the question is how and where. I don't know. Like maybe you need to go scream there, you know. Or maybe you scream to your pillow or, maybe while you dance, you scream like these kinds of things. Because I think letting this voice out is also important. And then I think if there are this kind of possibilities. Then people don't tend to get violent as well. What are the ways of working with these emotions?

Y: Yeah. So, you format that anger as a stage format, as a performance.

K: Can you say it again?

Y: You formatted the rage or anger as on stage...as a performance.

K: Right. Yes. I mean both frames.

Y: Yeah. How do you?

K: Uh, sorry. What do you say? How do you?

Y: How do you identify the performance, the work?

K: I mean it was framed as a performance. But the things that happened that happened in real. There are things that I'm not proud of. There are things that I wasn't expecting to happen.

There are things that surprise me also. There are things that later made me to start psychology and reach out for help in other ways. How do I identify it?

Y: Or maybe in a simpler way. For example, was it Performance art? How do you position your work into the map of different categories of art?

K: I think it was more of like a Performance art, and body arts, some kind of mixture of that. I actually don't like to categorise. I think it boxes a lot. But it's like you must always somehow if someone asking you have to say what it is and how categorised and where it belongs. In one way, I think that it belongs there, but at the in reality I also don't know. It's also, I think it was also very political. In any way, whatever you put on the stage little bit. I think it was some sort of protest also. Some kind of manifestation or like or some manifesting. And reflecting. Something that. Hasn't talked about so maybe it was also like a reality check to our own country or to the citizens and the people who live in that country.

Y: You mean Estonia?

K: Yeah.

Y: OK. Yeah. What was the concept, main concept of your piece?

K: The main concept I mean the thing is that I never really worked on making a story or something. I mean, people create their own stories and whatever you put on a stage. There will be like thousand different stories for whoever comes to see. I work specifically with elements and with the state. So, the state of anger was the main concept in that sense because I was working more of around like how to make myself angry. And what comes out of it so it's... As final and simplest way has to put this that. And I was just interested in what happens with the emotional states and the body. That was my interest in that sense. And then there all the other things started to come around it like the social sphere and I mean, it is hard to say also because everything comes from the social sphere or the everything that has been constructed like I have always been interested in breaking some sort of norms or ... Let's say also provoking but, not to terrorise people or not to that has never been there. Intention rather to wake up, a little wake up call. Or paying attention to something because I feel as an artist, we have this our power. This is our tool to...why do you invite the audience? You know, if you invite the audience, you want to say something. You have something to say. And what is important thing is that you want to channel, what you want to say. And then. How the audience perceives it, or how will they translate the information. In one point is it is my responsibility and then and the other side of it is also their responsibility. It's like two ways. Again, I feel there is always, maybe I'm going too far now, I don't know.

Y: It's great. Then, related to that, how do you communicate with the audience? How do you create a communication with audience?

K: All right.

Y: Or maybe rather, how did you create a communication in that specific piece? I think you have already answered half for that question.

K: Yeah. Yeah, I mean, how did I create in like now? If I think back, how did I create? In the ugliest way that if you think of. When you have, I don't know, I tell you that there all the behaviours that we have are learned from someone. From someone like all the behaviours that we have, we have heard from someone. And from either from home or the movies or from our friends or whoever you have. And for this performance, I mean, I was doing very weird and crazy things like taking the chairs and doing the chairs and taking chairs from the person and crawling to the audience. What I was also interested in was how the audience would react to be in a communication with them and the communication was in Kanuti [Gildi SAAL], I got kicked in into my stomach. Remember. In other times, there was a person who left in Tartu, I don't remember, but. I think I wouldn't do it this way now you know. In the past, it was in that point I guess it was important to happen the way it had to happen because I didn't set any boundaries and I think this is what happens when you don't set any boundaries. Then these kind of things...So, basically, I gave myself a freedom in the communication with the audience. But I mean, there were of course some sort of boundaries in the sense that I didn't go and hit someone, or I didn't go with a knife to someone like these kinds of things didn't happen. And I was very aware of these kinds of things. So, then there were some sort of boundaries, but. I think the communication was very straightforward, let's say.

Y: Could we use the words such as presentation and representation to describe the situation, or what you want to do?

K: Presentation representation. Presentation as a as a performing you mean.

Y: For example. Where you just... were you just present or did you try to represent something or someone?

K: I think in a way, we always... It's a difficult question because I feel like when we are performing, we are showing some parts of ourselves that we don't show usually. Like I think on a stage we are exposed, and we are present, but at the same time we are also performing. So, it's a very complicated, complicated subject because you are performing and at the same time you're not performing. You're performing some part of yourself when you're performing a lot of part from something that you have perceived or you have seen, or you have

experience. And then maybe this, this that you have experienced or seen. What I try to do is to put this in my body in my mind. And to activate that. Manifested or not to like channel it to the audience.

Y: Well, the other format then, it was still a performance. Do you see any similarities or dissimilarities to the traditional conventional theatre and dance?

K: Yes. Can you repeat the question? I didn't hear the beginning.

Y: Could you relate your work to traditional theatre and/or dance in terms of similarities and dissimilarities?

K: No, I think it's very far from traditional. Traditional theatre or dance.

Y: But it still keeps the format as a performance.

K: Yes, yes, I think it is.

Y: Well, how different? What are the differences?

K: I mean, there are similar elements not. I would say it's more of like some kind of ritualistic experience. Every performance is ritual. No? So, it had the beginning, it had the middle part, and it had the end. Even if performances are not named rituals, then every performance is a ritual in that sense. And why I put it, maybe, under the ritualistic experiences also because there was this releasing moment, and the aftereffects. And it didn't go to this normal applause, close, traditional...

Y: Moment.

K: Exactly.

Y: Oh. Yeah. It is a great difference from traditional or conventional performance, I would say. Do you see anything else? I'm sure it's quite far.

K: I mean the similarities maybe were also that with traditional dance, I use music. But the way I used music wasn't the same way. The performer was also on the stage. He was doing just to like; he created the atmosphere. He was inside. He knew also that he's part of it. Things happened also to him, like this kind of. So, in that sense, it became still different. Only lights that we use was a lamp, regular lamp, so not any kind of specific lighting shoulder wasn't body work, but not in the sense of, maybe, the similarity between dance it was the body produced a moment, but the different part was that to produce the movement, it had to come from here. Like I gave an action to my brain. In reprogramming my mind. So maybe it was like a psychological theatre. I don't know. But uh, it's also very weird to talk about it now because it was also like I was self-inflicting myself. Because I was, I took myself as a, what you say, like a test puppy, you know? And these are the things I feel like I have gone past or

like over like. I'm not interested anymore or... hurting myself in order to give a message to the audience. This is something I have learned from that.

Y: Yeah. Did you avoid something to create a work?

K: Did I avoid something to create the work?

Y: It seemed to me that you have chosen the method to reflect on social reality and you choose to be present rather than playing the role-playing character on the stage, right?

K: Yeah. Yes.

Y: Yeah.

K: Yes. And also, in that part I avoided happiness. Like I looked into only dark things around us and talk things in myself. I think that was what I was waiting, for example, now it's opposite time I am avoiding now to. I'll read news. But if I feel it's too much for me, then I stop. I take a break from reading news. This is one example and before when I was doing this, performance was opposite. I was only looking into. Negative stuff.

Y: You mean consciously looking for the dark side, right?

K: Exactly. Because in that point I felt like that was the only possibility to make this happened on the stage.

Y: So your everyday life as a reality was strongly connected to the piece, right? Do I understand correctly?

K: Yes, yes.

Y: Yeah. Then how do you relate your piece to an illusion and reality?

K: I mean the relation was that it was the reality like that was the reality, that weird, strange reality that I created.

Y: But you still created the reality by yourself. It wasn't existing before you intervened.

K: No, of course. I mean, I took the full responsibility, and I created this reality for myself and for my audience.

Y: And I feel like your reality was extended outside the stage or that theatre building.

K: It was, because in one point my friend started telling me "What are you doing with yourself? You cannot do this anymore. I'm not gonna be your friend if you do this". My parents were shocked. I was also shocked, I mean, but I kept doing it in one point when I couldn't anymore. I reacted to very little, tiny things and. I realised that I was, I mean, one point I realised that I didn't like the way I became. But I didn't know also how to help myself anymore. But then I figure it out in one place the first step was that I quit performing it. I decided to rather talk about it, because the last performance that had to be a performance was



more of a talk and installation in the darkness. And then after that I started going to therapist. And taking my old self back.

Y: Could we call it as authentic performance, authenticity? Could you elaborate on it?

K: As I said in the beginning, also that everything that happened in this, happened.

Y: In that reality, that was happening there.

K: Mhm. And. Yeah, I don't have really much to say about it.

Y: Yeah, that was really well said. Everything what happened there was happening here too.

K: Yeah.

Y: Yeah. Well, OK, maybe we switch the focus just a little bit. And question that did you face any limitations because of institutions?

K: Actually. OK. No, I didn't. Because I was presenting it in Koit [Viljandi Koidu Seltsimaja], in Kanuti [Gildi SAAL], and in Tartu Uus Teater. And then Koidu is very experimental. Quite. Yeah, Koit was very experimental, and it still is the most experimental theatre in Estonia.

Kanuti Gild is very open to whatever, I think. And I think the thing is that no one knew also, what I'm gonna do. One thing was that I was writing about it and how I was presenting my work to these people from whom I was writing the space. Another thing was when they saw the performance. And in Tartu Uus Teater was the same like... They, I think like the artistic directors who came to see the show was from Kanuti and Koit, because Evelin was also the producer. But Evelin also didn't see the work before that. Yeah. And actually, also, I'm surprised that no one didn't say like hey like also anyone from my team. In that sense, no, there wasn't any kind of complications. It was more the after effect I remember when in *Sirp* there was, that Marie, I don't remember her name.

Y: Pullerits.

K: Pullerits, she wrote a very critical article I remember. But she is also the most traditional thinking critic, I know. But there were a lot of good points that she brought out. That me as an artist maybe didn't think about. So, in that sense, I'm always happy to hear the critics. It's something from what you can learn.

Y: Yeah, well, unlike performances happening or Co-produced with Kanuti Gildi SAAL or Sõltumatu Tants Lava, you did mostly by yourself. How was it?

K: You mean when I was producing by myself to perform?

Y: Mm-hmm.

K: I mean. This is how I started in Estonia, so I mean you have to do everything by yourself. I mean, for me, who helped me a lot was Evelin. Evelin Lagle[-Nõmm]. I learned a lot, thanks

to her. She was helping me. But she more gave me guidance and then I did most of the things she maybe did like... She reached to the press to people, and to audience. And at the same time on the side, I did also the same you know. So, it was very much of shared producing, let's say in that sense or communication. And but there was never, ever like a big team or. Like 10 people working and trying to put the work out there. I mean Kanut was also in a way very good because they put they made like this little game on Facebook and somewhere else I don't remember where it in the newspaper was or somewhere, but people had to in Facebook. I remember they had to comment like something about the rage. And then there were people who could want the tickets and that attracted a lot of people. Yeah. But other than that, yeah, it's. Somehow you have to do. I mean I didn't have any chance. So, you want to make a performance you have to. You have to do it somehow, figure it out on the way, because these things no one taught me at the university, I mean.

Y: Yeah, in a sense, maybe the career after graduation is quite different from what you see inside of university.

K: Yeah. Yeah. And the more I right now also when I graduate at the master here in Stockholm like 2 years ago, I realised that I again realised that the paper is not what makes you an artist or I mean you will be an artist anyway, but it's all about the contacts. Or like contacts, the people you know. And then nowadays it's more even about the mingling and these kinds of things that I actually don't like at all. Because I believe that there is a lot of \*\*\*\*\* out there that gets to perform and and then you go to see the performance and you're asking many times like "OK. Why I'm watching this? What does it say to me? I don't think". For me when I want to go to see something and I pay a ticket for it, I want to feel, I want my every single cell to vibrate in my body, and I wanted to make me feel emotions. And so, I can resemble with something I can have a like a slap in my face or opposite. Like it makes me cry or I want it to make me feel. And a lot of times when I go to see things, it doesn't happen. And then when the times when I see something that is very special, I am so thankful because this is why we need art. Also, you know. art is something that gives you time and space to read, reflect and to... it gives you time to feel. Because the society is not in any anything like everything anyway. So, it's a powerful tool if you know how to use.

Y: Yeah. And as you mentioned earlier, it's two-way communication, that artists gives us something, us as audience, on the other hand, it also depends on us as audience how to receive it, right?

K: Yes. Of course.

Y: So maybe it is quite natural that there are hundreds of millions of ways to get the message or feel, or if you feel or not. Well and it seems to me that you're now going to a bit another direction in an artistic way.

K: Yes.

Y: How does it feel to you?

K: If it is refreshing, I'm trying out things that I have not maybe tried. I mean, what I still work with always is like a psychological state. I put it somehow everywhere. For me it's important because I feel like everything that has made in the world or everything that I don't know even like this thing noise made by someone. So, this it has an emotion inside. In order to be here, someone had to use their hands and to make it and use their brain. So, it comes from emotional state. And this is something that now, since I for example, I work with the music, if I work with the music, why I started even work with the music. Because I wanted always to work with music, but I didn't know how, I was afraid. And then after graduating the masters, I just started and then I realised that actually I entered into state where I don't think. And this is something that I really like. I don't think I choose to listen. And this, uh, music or these vibrations or these sounds they bring, they activate my body. So, it's not just that I do a movement dance movement. This doesn't for me. This doesn't say anything if I do this, but if there is a music and this music somehow activate something, so then I'm interested of like, "what is this? What is that gets activated and how it gets expressed?" Like it's not. Like 12345678 and I'm doing this. But it's something else that happens, right? I feel the music is a powerful tool for that. So, in a way like this part always has somehow stayed. Like now also when we were doing the *Dust Bunny*, working on working title as well. There was one part where I was 8 minutes protesting like from zero to maximum but not for this time no physical contact with an audience, but more of a staring one point and getting into psychological state to express the express the social \*\*\*\*. Yeah. Or I'm making the question more of like "why are we here?"

Y: So, we all are looking for the aim while we are here.

K: I guess, yeah, of course, I mean. I think we have to, I mean we. It's important to think of these things. But yeah, anyway, but what is different is that I don't take myself as a puppet anymore. I don't, as I said before, I don't want to hurt myself.

Y: That's good to hear.

K: I want to try out just different things and different forms and whatever interest comes to.

Y: Yeah. It seems like the core of the foundation still stays, in that psychological state. Yeah,

K: Yeah, this for sure.

Y: Well, nice.

K: I mean, we have to have something. No, to hold on to. I think we all have something that you are still interested in anti-theatricality, for example. But you are working with it in a different form, let's say different ways, but you still somehow grab onto it.

Y: True. Yeah. Anything, do you have anything to add, share?

K: I don't know, it's also very funny to talk about this work because it for me it's like so. It seemed like in the past, no? The past is always with. Sometime past is always with us also. But I think I have made. I don't know. I feel that. I mean, this work will live its life, of course, was there and. And it is still in people's minds, as you said, you're still sometimes think about it. I also sometimes think about it, and I have realised a lot of things why I did what I do and "Why did I need to invite the audience there? why was it so urgent? why? why did I do things that I'm not proud about and all this kind of like?" I don't know. Psychologically, it still lives with me. That's it. As a person and as an artist. And I guess the same with the audience that was there to witness it.

Y: It is indeed a powerful way to communicate with people.

K: Yeah. When I felt like, I don't know in that time I felt like Estonia needed the little shake, another kind of shake. Yeah.

Y: Yeah. Well, I think I got much information from you. So maybe we could wrap it up.

Thank you.

K: I hope. I hope it helped you.

Y: Of course it did. Yeah. Thank you so much for sharing and thinking about the past.

K: Uh, yeah. Yeah. Thank you for inviting for this.

Y: Thank you.

## APPENDIX 3

### Interview transcription 2

Interview conducted: 1.05.2024 from 14:30-15:30 online

Interviewee: Kärt Koppel (one of the members of Unholy Trinity and author-performer of *So You Think You Can Dance* (2023))

Yokoo-Ruttas (Y): Hello Kärt. Thank you for taking your time to talk with me today. It's going to be about one hour, and I have some questions to guide, but you don't have to stick with those questions precisely. Please elaborate or develop your thoughts. So, I would like to ask about your work of Unholy Trinity with the two others, *So You Think You Can Dance* (2023). Could you describe what kind of work it is?

Koppel (K): Well, first of all, I would say that it's more of a four person or four people collaboration rather than three of us. I think it's a simulation of entertainment and the dance performance, but not the dance performance, meaning that it starts from the body, but rather a performance about dance as a content. We created as sort of tongue in the cheek, meaning that when the open call came for a dance performance, then we did it with a tongue in cheek and we never thought that we would be selected. It was rather a statement of trying to apply to things rather than expecting to actually be able to create something and then when we were chosen, we understood that, OK, we do have to do something. We also wanted to do something and then we decided to find a common topic from our own experience that this dance scene seems to be rather fragmented between the dance that appears on the stage and comes from university background versus the very large dance scene that is in, the extracurricular activities after school for, I don't know, students' or children's and all of their dance like competitions and showcases which have thousands of them. Versus, our very small-scale fields where you either know one performance with five shows as you usually seen, and by like 300 to 500 people. And yes, and it also was sort of stepping into Söltumatu Tantsu Lava and their expectations. To us, it seems that they know what dance is. And then trying to navigate between it and to make it work to not only make it like a sort of a description from our side but also why it is so fragmented. We decided to make our own open call for an audition for a dance teacher who comes from a different background than us. And we found Birgit who had been working as a dance teacher for five years by the point that we started to collaborate and her students [...]. [O]ur two worlds were quite far apart and then we try to find these connecting points by doing research. We went to her world in dance

competitions and some of her classes. And then for the performance we invited her into our world, into our stage and also her students came to some of our shows.

Y: So, I understood that you dealt with the dance, but in dance there are two separate worlds. The one the one in which Unholy Trinity is and Birgit is in the other side of the dance. It's both a kind of dance, I guess to some extent. So, for the next question, do you see any other relations of your work with other categories of art or dance?

K: Yes. Well. Maybe we as Unholy Trinity, we don't necessarily see ourselves as part of the dance world, but we have studied it. So, we saw our education as part of the dance world, and maybe not one side or the other side, but rather that we are a very big, not big, very small periphery area, just to think about the numbers of the people who are in the larger part of the dance world and then our little thing on the side, although we think of ourselves as very important.

Y: Alright.

K: Yes, but well, Unholy Trinity as a trio, it initially came from the influencer's world. How our world is consuming so much, and it seems like it's revolving around social media. Now the most important people aren't the ones who actually know about the things as scientists or cultural workers or anything. It's just the people on social media who get the large following, and to us it seems that that they know they have the possibility and the ability to do everything. And it's socially accepted that on one day they are writing a book. On another day they are doing DJ set and then they are also launching their own products and they are giving mentorships and coaching and they're also hosting and just everything. They seem to know about everything as well in quotation marks or they feel that they have the right to talk about everything which they do, but it's also socially accepted that it might be truth. So, it came from that. I guess we see a very large connecting point with the social media with pop culture and with what is mainstream at the time. And then playing into that work, we also tackled a bit of reality TV and the stigmas that come from that and also the glitches that come from that. So, I see connections with the reality TV, pop culture, and social media. And then also, I thin, contemporary visual arts. Because to me it almost seems that whether you say about it, contemporary dance or contemporary performance art, it seems to be more connected to contemporary visual arts than I don't know *sōnateater*, I don't know how it's in English.

Y: Me neither, but I often say a theatre with the words or plot.

K: Yes. So, to me, ideologically, it seems that the contemporary visual arts and the performance art are going in their parallel ways. Even if you read reviews or something, it

seems that it's very similar how it's meant to be experienced and how it's taken in by the audience. Yes, maybe those.

Y: Well, that does make sense. Then, what are the concepts of your work? I understand so far that your identity as Unholy Trinity is quite similar to what your work is.

K: Yeah.

Y: Could it be your concepts?

K: I think it is. It's necessary to say that this *So You Think You Can Dance* is the only thing that we have done as a trio that's meant to be or that's been about repeating the piece. Because we rather focus on things that will be done one time or one time action like acts of performance or one time showcases, and I think we have also sort of understood through this process of *So You Think You Can Dance* as well that it is meant for that. We are better at doing these one-time things and it should be this way. But coming back to what the concept is, I think because of the fact that we are usually doing these one-time things, we treat them all as one project. It's like different parts of the same project that is Unholy Trinity rather than we take them separately. We always put them in the context of the other things we have already done, which might be a bit confusing for the audience who doesn't know us. But we sort of go with it right now and we see it as a plus side, so we sort of are creating our own library of these one-time things that overall make a one project that is Unholy Trinity at these smaller projects that are very much inspired by the influencers. As I said. OK, formats. When we start, we always start from the format, which is a very important concept of the work that we have listed a very long list of different forms such you know, conferences, seminars, movie premieres, cocktail show, party set, cooking show, whatever. These are these forms that we would like to play with one or another time. And when we start, we take the formats that we choose. We can also choose multiple formats as we did in *So You Think You Can Dance*. We had the dance performance format; we had the reality TV show like format, we had audition format like. We start from the outside, from the formation and then the content of the piece comes within it.

So, also what pieces the format consists of and what can you do with them to dislocate. This dislocation is very important for us. And we try to dislocate the format that we choose, yes.

Y: OK, sounds like the context as well as the format or the play with format are quite important for you guys or for the work. It seems like it's not only for one work but also for the whole, everything that you do, but are there anything you consciously avoid doing?

K: Yes, yes, there is this one thing. But it's not that we consciously avoid it, but it is something that always comes to our table and we always deal with it that to not only make a joke out of the thing, that to not only create it as an entertainment piece and joke, although the jokiness, the irony, the entertainment is such a big part of what we do, it shouldn't be the only thing.

Y: So you try to stay in the world of art, so to say, if you separate the world into two, entertainment and art.

K: Yes, or I think it's more of bringing entertainment into the arts world. But yeah, at the same time, not just that.

Y: It seems to me that, for example, to make jokes or entertain people, we need to rely on some conventions which are known to some extent, so that people can get the jokes or can be entertained. So, specifically, what are the conventions you could use or what are the roles of the conventions in your work?

K: I think the conventions come from the formats that we choose. Because the formats also give a quite good code for the audience, whoever if it's an audience member, or if it's a participant. But like the conventional norms and behavioural norms that come from one format. Or another, how do you act in an award ceremony? We also gave this award to one person in our show. And so, how to create a sort of atmosphere that people understand what it is and also how to manipulate into reacting to this situation. And these conventions come from the fact that most probably everyone has at one point participated in a ceremony of such thing and they know when it's announced that this person is being awarded something, we should all clap, and we sort of made the play out of these conventions that are already in people's head. The way how to utilise them for our concept.

Y: Well, then, it moves a bit further away from the traditional dance or theatre, even though the format wise it stays on the stage, and then it requires more experience in life, generally not in theatre. That sounds interesting. Do you find any similarities and dissimilarities to the traditional dance or theatre in your piece?

K: What type of traditional dance do we talk about? Just to or get a bit of a context, maybe you can ask more. Yes, I I think of something and then I ask if it's if you think of it as a traditional that's piece because then I understand. So, you would say that Mart Kangro's *Enneminevik* [Kangro, Mart 2019. *Enneminevik* [Past Perfect]. Kanuti Gildi SAAL, Tallinn] is a traditional dance piece?



Y: I think it goes right on contemporary side, I imagine more like a ballet piece or in case of traditional theatre, then it's still in the black box with plot and actors.

K: OK. And traditional theatre. Would you say that Tiit Ojasoo directs traditional theatre?

Y: It depends on the piece, I think.

K: OK. And if you now ask about similarities and dissimilarities, you mean *So You Think You Can Dance*, right?

Y: Mhm.

K: Rather than our other things, maybe blinded about overall field of traditional theatre and dance, because to me it seems that everybody plays with all types of norms. Like, who's the audience and who's the performer when's the start? And when's the end? What is the stage and what is the like? How do you say *saal*, hall? Yeah. So, it seems to me that everybody plays with context, and it's almost become like... of course you play with these things and of course you play with the pauses. And so, it's still quite traditional. But at the same time, maybe it isn't that traditional. If compared to the larger stage, I think the dissimilarities we wanted to be a piece that people move around in, their perspectives and standpoints. And we wanted to offer an opportunity for the people to engage with us, but not to pressure them into participating, rather offering a possibility. We do heavily rely on what is, but I guess it's like everybody does, maybe it's a similarity. We heavily rely on what is happening outside of the hall, like the stage, on the life around this. We reflect on what is happening in the world, and again, I don't know if it's a similarity or dissimilarity, but it seems that we deal with very contemporary problems rather than, well, I don't know the word, '*igavik*', like the problem of lifetime.

Y: Timeless.

K: Yes. Rather than with timeless subjects or questions.

Y: OK. Yeah, in that sense, I think I would consider it as a dissimilarity, but it depends how we perceive it, I think.

K: Although I'm now starting to think...but not ready to say it as such, but obviously if you dive into the things that there are very timeless subjects in the thing. It's almost like fragmentation. It's very timeless question and self-identification through the words that you use to describe yourself or your work etc. That we dealt with, and we try to like tackle in *So You think You Can Dance*. These are, I think, timeless. But they don't initiate from the timeless topics they initiate. Contemporary problems, yeah.

Y: Well, then, how did you relate your work to reality and then to theatre illusion?

K: Yes. Maybe this is a big concept of our work as well, trying to seamlessly blend the fiction and the reality. And, appearance, I think it is called appearance in English. Guy Debord has written *the Society of the Spectacle* (2014). He talks about how we find ourselves now in a society that is very appearance-based, and this appearance is very important for us as well. But the appearance is also a big part of theatre culture as a whole. But the appearance culture has moved out, or it's now everywhere. It's also in our daily lives. And this is what we tried to do with blending the fiction and the reality to also question how big of our realities already fiction basically in our lives if we don't put it on the stage. So we don't often recognise the difference between fiction and reality. We try to blend them.

Y: So that people don't recognise what is their reality or what is the art part, let's say?

K: I think they do recognise it in our pieces. For example, we blended, we took Birgit's real diaries that she keeps. Well, she took them, and she was willing to share them, but it's not like we grabbed them. And she was reading her real diary. Basically, showcasing what she had done, we started the performance with the two-minute introduction into our wonderful Unholy Trinity. What the Unholy Trinity has done with the two years, and then came to stage and she was reading her diaries and she sort of had been up to for the past two years. And it's both of our realities. But we put them into a very staged context. If it makes sense.

Y: It does. Did you stage it? How would you describe it?

K: How would I describe it? OK. So, our reality had been that we had done, we had built our ourselves, a performance arts centre, we had done book launches, we had done much, we had celebrated the birthday party, etc, which are the actions that we have done, and we put them into a like a trailer video or a intro video. So, we staged our reality in that way that we made a lot bigger and cooler than it actually was. And for Birgit, we intertwined or it's not that we intertwined them, it's rather that she had these small bits of choreography that she had created on certain days, and for those days that she had created these small pieces of choreography, she also read out what her day was like from her diary. So, we blended her choreography creations with her daily thoughts over the past three years.

Y: Yes, it's a great answer, thank you. So, the reality and fiction are intertwined. Do you present or represent your work?

K: Can I say both?

Y: Yeah, of course. But how?

K: Well, presenting is maybe easier, it's easier to describe it, because obviously when we are creating a piece, we very much think of an audience member who comes to see the thing and

we created for them, how to showcase something to them, and how to share something with them. And representing is like I said, the concept of Unholy Trinity is that we are a trio, and we create these things. These are our creations, and they go into the library of our things and we always have the same personas, you would say. I think when we are on the stage as Unholy Trinity and our, we are also not afraid of creating something that we are sort of creating our own handwriting. In a sense that, maybe I'm off track a bit, but let me get to it. Collaboration, you know, collaboration can be a quite difficult thing you can work with because if you try to approach the collaboration as such that each and every one of the authors would sign it as their creation like "oh I will write like I will sign all of these. Artistic choices as yes, these were great, and these were like I totally support them as a person myself. It's very difficult to find all of these artistic choices that each and every member agrees with, and it's not like compromises. It is easier to create a sort of blend like a separate author, so we also have the separate author of Unholy Trinity like what would Unholy Trinity like. What are her tastes? What are her choices? Because when we disagree on something, it's easy to, well, it's not easy, might be wrong word, but I think it's effective to rely on something, but do we think it actually like goes with what Unholy Trinity does? I don't know. Use a lot of trash for pieces and we play with contexts etc. So, we can always backtrack to the fact that maybe me as Kärt I wouldn't 100% agree with what Unholy Trinity does, and neither would Daniela nor Annabel, but as a trio, as Unholy Trinity, we understand that this piece is very much Unholy Trinity's handwriting. So, all of the pieces represent Unholy Trinity's identity. But not maybe the three of our self-identity.

Y: Not as individuals, but as a team.

K: Yes, not as individuals, but as a collective, we represented.

Y: OK, then how about on stage, while performing? Do you present, represent or both?

K: I think also both. I think it would be very cool if we would just represent Unholy Trinity through and through, but I myself don't think I'm that strong as a performer. I would be able to do it. I crack. I crack sort of my own identity, or me as individual. I come through the cracks at times. And then the representation gets a bit like hazy. Is it that we are presenting on originality and I'm representing myself or are we representing? Like Unholy Trinity and I just crack through it. It's difficult. And this I think this is one of not a strong suit of Unholy Trinity.

Y: Well, on the other hand, because it's still representing something and someone on the stage as you mentioned, this appearance is now across the border between the fiction and reality.

Appearance is important in reality as well. So, in that sense, even if you're not in the role or character, you're still representing yourself. On the other hand, maybe you are still representing something, not only the personality or individual, or the collaboration. Are you trying to represent something? Or is it purely a presentation rather?

K: It's difficult to answer. Because I feel that I need to divide myself from that equation. Because our Unholy Trinity's idea is to, basically it's all about us through us with us and it's very much like us. Just, just as it is with influencers out there we are representing ourselves, and this is all you get basically. But as individuals we obviously present or not present, but as individuals we always obviously represent our own values. And these values of, I don't know, these differ along ourselves. I would like to think they represent critical thinking, but I'm not sure. Let it come through.

Y: OK. Well, maybe if we think representation as a wilder thing, not only... Well, let's say maybe it's in a narrow sense, if you're playing between and around the fake and reality, then I think there should be some a sense of representation., but it's not totally situated in the reality outside of the theatre stage, still happening in the fictional sort of, say, fictional world. Do you see any representation in this sense?

K: I'm sure I do, but then I don't like to get what you mean. Do you have some examples?

Y: Yeah, I think I can go a bit extreme. Let's take just a normal chair, functional, with the functionality, and we put it on the stage on the podiums you guys had on the stage and say that this is my lover, it is a representation for lover. It doesn't have to be some objects, can be some events.

K: OK. Yeah. Rolls.

Y: Maybe no. Could be, but the representation can be done in terms of some events or messages.

K: OK, if I if I understand you correctly then like representation comes again from the formats that we play with. So, if we're trying to, if you're simulating a TV show, then we represent the hosts. And we have participants and if we are, if we are taking use of, I don't know, the dance competition, then we understand that they like. How much of this is random sponsors, who helped the competition to happen like some oil company, just is the sponsor of it. Like random, there's no connection with it and...

Y: Yes, OK. I think you rather try to make a simulation, not the representation. That's the thing now. Yeah, but it's still, I think, try to position yourselves in reality rather than in the fictional world that everything should be the representation of something.

K: Maybe.

Y: That it's not the play that we don't play it out.

K: Yeah, no.

Y: But you just simulate, and you're consciously simulating in a way that everyone knows that this is simulation. It's not real.

K: Yes, maybe, maybe, maybe. Yes. I'm not sure that we play with symbols as such.

Y: Hmm, yeah, I think I don't mean that symbols are related so much.

K: OK. Yeah, maybe we don't play with the representation in that sense then.

Y: Yeah, 'simulation' is a nice word. Yeah. Did you take that term from somebody, some authors?

K: Yes, Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994).

Y: That also was mentioned in the list of authors or what was it? How did you write it?

K: It's a list of supporters.

Y: OK, supporters, nice. Well, then maybe the next question, is there authenticity in your work and how do you create it?

K: It's something that we tackled a lot in this project. We tackled it from a sense that three of us felt that we are not authentic at all. And then Birgit from her world saw that everything that is being created is authentic and original. But maybe it's that we are, we all consist of other people's thoughts and ideas and words and concepts and everything, but we are still an original mix of these. And authenticity. I'm not sure if you can call us authentic. But maybe like I tried to describe beforehand that when we are struggling with artistic choices, we backtrack to OK, what would Unholy Trinity do? What would Unholy Trinity as a collective brain? What are their choices? And through these choices, maybe we do find a bit of authenticity.

Y: As I understood Unholy Trinity as a collective brain is, so to say, a creation of you three. So it blurs the authenticity. Is this what you meant that you are not sure about how to call it? If it's authentic or not. Or did you mean something else?

K: I think I meant that it's a collective brain helps with Unholy Trinity's authenticity, because it's something that we have created, not that we have written it down sort of values or anything, but it's something that all three of us have created in collaboration. We all know it sort of and we can always lean back to it or it's like the safety net sort of. And. Thus, when we are making the choices, we can ask from ourselves, OK is this is the choice in line with other Unholy Trinity's choices and sort of authentic Unholy Trinity.

Y: Right, yeah. But I think I also would consider your created simulations as a part of authenticity that you are consciously creating a simulation. That's honesty that you don't say that this is actually fiction, but you present as a real event. Yeah, I think so. How would you create a communication with audience in your work? You earlier mentioned that you try to offer the opportunity for the audience to participate or get something.

K: Yes.

Y: Is there anything to add?

K: Yes, we treat it as an offer. An opportunity? Sharing. And invitation, maybe invitations. Even greater word for that. We try to create invitations.

Y: So soft, sort of, participatory theatre or performance.

K: Yes.

Y: Nice. Well, in that sense, you already are thinking about other performances. Right? That usually, it's a convention to do and that's the way to invite people to be involved in a performance. Yeah, they also reflect on other factors or other sides of the art or performances in your work.

K: Most probably yes. Unfortunately, oftentimes I think subconsciously, because it's not a deliberate decision to choose. It comes like subconsciously, but because obviously everything that we've seen, everything that we've experienced, everything that we've heard, it influences our choices. And we might even not know that we are doing this. But consciously we are. Yeah, I think it's *So You Think You Can Dance*. We consciously try to reflect STL's dance performances.

Y: What specifically?

K: Well, sort of. We just went over the things that we have seen from STL and how, why and whatever these performances had been in this space and what they had done in that space. And we tried to dislocate but also quote, maybe some of these pieces. And the same with the dance competition as a format.

Y: So, in a sense you guys take some elements into your work. And at the same time, somehow dislocate those borrowed elements so that you can take it as your own.

K: Yes. Or at least that's what we tried to do.

Y: OK, nice that I understood to some extent. You're consciously doing this process in your creation, I understood. But it also involves some process of exclusion. You include some elements, but do you also omit some part consciously? For example, in case of those performances in STL that you guys don't want to do for sure.

K: Maybe you can even narrow it down to, although we talked about like a lot of the...not only this premier, but also other STL performances, but I think taking into account like the premiere project format or programme format that it's been done for 15 years now, I think, or 13 or something, but it's always they choose two choreographers for their first piece and they have the same rules for 14 years that it has to be 40 minute length and it has to, I don't know the two performances on the same night and the budget is really low etc. There's a lot of guidelines which already gave to us and like we read them, and we were like, OK, so they know what they want. They want the piece that it's very easy to set up that is very much movement based. There aren't many props because the props are very difficult to put on the stage so quickly and they want the two shows together. So, basically you would need one choreographer and dancer and performer because it's easy, all team and you want the short, the sellable piece, that can go on to tour on the festival. This is the guidelines that they have created, and this also gives an idea of what they are expecting. So, we quite consciously tried to dislocate these rules if it makes sense.

Y: By dislocating, do you mean...?

K: Or bending.

Y: To refuse, oh bending.

K: This wasn't dislocation.

Y: Bending like you consciously not doing those things, well, partly doing it but not as they expect or STL expects from you guys.

K: Yes.

Y: Right. So that's kind of the institutional limitation I would say. Did you face any other things in terms of institutional organisations?

K: Absolutely. Absolutely. I'm not sure that like this. Will you have to take it with a pinch of salt because it was our first project under an institution we just came out of school, we were learning a lot. And also our project manager Kärt (Kelder) was, it was her first projects as a project manager as well, so there was so much learning from both sides that like and now already I would act differently in some situations. But yes, these guidelines from premier that they already stated in the application form we did, and this is our thing, we did interpret them as limitations rather than possibilities. So, when we see it oh. It has to be 40 minutes. Then we think like, aha. So you're saying that this can't be longer rather than that? Oh, what a great opportunity to create a 40-minute piece. But this is our own interpretation of it. So yeah, and

then another limitation, but we did we were able to get over this limitation was that they were very certain that we need chairs.

Y: How did you solve it?

K: With a lot of dialogue. We were like, OK, but we can put chairs. On the side of the room that if anyone wants to sit, then they can sit, but it's not something that we offer. So like, yeah, everybody just sits down. And I have to admit, like to this day, I do not understand why they were so certain that we needed the chairs. It's 40 minutes and it's not... and we never said that because we never said that, that if someone needs a chair, we are not giving it to them. Obviously if there are older people or there are people with like limited movement or anything.

Y: Right.

K: We aren't like demons, of course we offer them, but it's not something that we would like to set out chairs and then limit people's viewpoints.

Y: Yeah. It's nice to hear that you actually wanted to. Actually, not to limit the audience's perspective, rather than limiting their possibility to be comfortably sitting and watching you guys. Maybe. Just some gap in our understanding. It seems like you guys took the limitations as part of the elements on which you can work on to make a project that's quite creative in a sense. They often work on this kind of meta level, though I don't know if it's the right word, but I would call it meta.

K: I think yes.

Y: Consciously?

K: Yeah. Yes.

Y: And maybe another point I found was that those limitations are quite general in this performing arts world or performance art that it's not only the case of Premiere, but also in case of just general projects in STL, or Kanuti Gildi SAAL. Do you feel in that way?

K: So and so. I am now doing a piece and so I guess I'll find out. But right for now, what we've done, like the collaboration that I've had with Kanuti Gildi SAAL, it seems a bit less frigid. And it is possible to... the rules aren't that written in. And I've collaborated briefly or a bit with "elektron", and it's like a great place overall. Just the trust that they have in their artists is wonderful. I don't know if there are any more such places in Estonia right now. As "elektron" you mean as "elektron" is because. This is just a general thing of maybe what I think about producing is that maybe in Estonia the field is small, a lot has to be created. To me it seems that maybe the institutions start collaboration with the artists a bit too easily. And



this creates a scenario that. Oh yes, let's do something together...writing the applications and etc.. Then when the artist enters the institution to rehearsals, then at that point, the producer isn't actually 100% sure in the artist's abilities, nor the idea or the concept of the work. And then this creates the sort of working environment where the artists feel that they also have to prove themselves to the producer and to the house. Although it's like maybe I'm too naive or idealistic, but I think it's like at that point the only focus should be the work and the audience who will experience it, not the institution which is like in between them. Or the institution should not be, I think that the institution should not be between artists and the audience, but rather behind the like artists back.

Y: Yeah, I second it. I would also prefer if the institution were always supportive, supporting partner.

K: Yeah. Or like, and it's not that. I'm not saying that "Oh my God, all of the artists in Estonia, they deserve to be like told 100% supported etc". But I think this proving part, proving yourself part, should be beforehand so maybe it should be a bit more difficult. The opportunity to go and work somewhere.

Y: Alright, thank you for your time and sharing your ideas and thoughts. See you soon.

K: Yes, I hope you got something out of it.

Y: Sure, I did. Thank you.

## APPENDIX 4

### Interview transcription 3

Interview conducted: 3.05.2024 from 9:45-10:45 online

Interviewee: Ruslan Stepanov (author-performer of *Floor on Fire: Ask My Body* (2024))

Yokoo-Ruttas (Y): Hi. Thank you for taking your time and I was really interested in your new piece *Floor on Fire: Küsi minu kehalt* (2024), maybe in English it's *listen to my body* or how do you call it?

Stepanov (S): *Ask My Body*.

Y: Yeah, sorry. So, first question would be how what kind of work is it for you and do you see any relations of your work with other categories of art or in a sense, how do you identify the piece? Just to have a general idea.

S: I mean, it's a dance piece officially, but for me we are not dancing. It's all about the choreography. And I think because I didn't do it for many years, something like dance piece. So, it was challenging for me as well. Can I today be interested in this kind of dance species by myself? Because I also don't watch a lot. But also, nothing... It's not. Not so much is happening in Estonia in a dance field. So, it's kind of. I felt like it's the right time just to try to do this kind of dance piece. So, basically, it's a dance piece, but we're doing with the choreography. Or anything like a language.

Y: So, I feel like when we dance, there's a choreography to some extent. Do you see choreography and dance separately?

S: The choreography is more specific. It's fixed, fixed material that you can repeat. It's like we can talk now, for example, and it's for me, can be more a dance than a choreography, but then you need to write your work and you will fix the sentences. You will choose it. And for me, the choreography is the difference. It's the same that it's a fixed material.

Y: So, is it possible not to dance choreography?

S: Yes, of course.

Y: Did you dance or?

S: For me.

Y: Yeah, of course.

S: No, no, I don't feel that I'm dancing on stage. I'm performing. I'm showing the choreography, but I don't feel that I'm dancing this part, which for me was always connected

with music and freedom. Dance, like you hear the music and you wanna be free when you dance. But in in this situation, we are not free like it's opposite you always need to remember every detail and especially the parts when you have a partner. It's everything is fixed 100%. You both know what you need to do so you can repeat it.

Y: Yeah. Do I understand correctly that this not dancing choreography was for everyone, not only for you, but for the all the dancers or performers? How do you call them?

S: I think it's a personal we even didn't talk about it. We didn't talk.

Y: All right.

S: You need to perform. We all know it, but we didn't define what you are doing because sometimes if you ask this complicated question "what are you doing when you are dancing?", and it can be like just a forest. It can be just... You can't answer actually what is going on with you when you're dancing, but when you're also performing on stage, you don't know what you do else because you are performing, and you need to be present. How much? So, it's not about some feelings or some emotions, which is for me connected to the dance very much.

Y: Alright. This not dancing a choreography sounds like one of the concepts of the piece. But are there any concepts of the work and in the work?

S: Yes, at the beginning I had a concept, and I had a form for a performance and performers. Then they got free hands to solve it. And it's a new direction in the concept which I used, but the basic was, I don't know how it is English, *tsitaat eesti keeles?*

Y: Citation. A quote?

S: Like, yeah, like a quote, something like a quote. It can be also like an old word (saying) like *vanasõna* like it can be aphorism. It can be every good, formulated idea, something which is fixed. Because if you can get a book where is done only aphorisms for from some philosopher for example some quotes only. And for me it was interesting if we can create these kinds of quotes directly with the body not to translate something to the body, but it's coming from the body. And that because maybe this form at the end was kind of like in school exam that you come in? You show. And you go away and nothing more. At the beginning, at the end, it should look like a book. When every page is with some few quotes, what you look and then because there is not such like... The logic is quite simple, I guess. When you start to watch because we don't develop it. And even in this logic, you actually don't, can't be sure 100% what will be next, because everything was there, happens, solos and duos. You see only solos and then you see only duos and then again solos. And even in this situation you can surprise people with the logic. So basically, if you see only duets like for example, we have

some 30 duets in a row and then you see again the solo. So, you basically don't know what it will be next again, duos or next solo and if it's next solo who will come, it's always like a small surprise for the audience. But at the same time, you understand the logic, what is going on. Because it's simple. And I wanted to keep it simple for the form that it will be that the audience can understand it and doesn't need to be interpreted so much what's going on. So, they see immediately, OK, it is the one person on stage doing choreography, and that's all. That's all information. And then it's like a book you open. There is no design, there is an empty white page and there is a text, and its text is content and the content for me was the most important in this work like how we can focus on the content without any design, without any style. So, it was minimalistic. We didn't even have some light design, which we took it away. So, it was a normal working light with some light from the outside from the windows. What was the content then? So yeah. This information for choreography, the choreography by itself, because this correctly what we did, we try. I tried to give them for research. There're different short forms. What I can't find and. Just like for like how to write sentences which is doesn't need to be changed. Something like, uh, aphorism or this old word which is existing many hundreds of years. And the people repeated the same, so we keep it. Nothing's changing and I wanted to give them out of some nowadays examples for example in the hip hop culture in the music there is in albums you have this form like a skit. It's something like before the track. Like sometimes they say something. Whoa, whoa. Like it could be like, 10 seconds. It could be like one minute, and it could be a preparation for the main track. Or it could be separated as well. Like it's names like a skit. And then I asked them also to like to try to do something which is just like a preparation, and some shot and it can be also like some 10 seconds or 20 seconds. So, I wanted to keep it a short form. Also, nowadays all this content what we watch on the social media, it's the same. It's a picture. It's a short reel. So, we all understand it and like short information. And then you need to keep attention of the audience with this short information. And without any meaning. So, information by itself, like choreography by itself. And I think this was the most interesting part for me, like how to find the material which is more or less understandable for everyone, and something like in a choreography that you don't need to interpretate. Even, it doesn't matter, are you professional and dance or not? Are you used to watch it or you see it the first time. So, for example, if I smash my head on the floor so you understand what's going on. So, you don't need to exterminate your stories. You see what I'm doing? And honestly, smash full power. My head

to the floor and then that's all. That's the information. And we will, yeah. Yeah, we're searching this kind of information.

Y: Yeah, I have thought on two questions now that is that form kind of a play among you guys? That I saw that you were looking for eye contacts.

S: Yes, OK, it's a secret now, but I mean, it's obviously secret, but. So, I'm always afraid to be a professional or I'm always afraid to know where I'm going. So, I need this moment of risk, the moment of adrenaline, on stage, in life as well, but on stage it was important for me and when we got all this duets together and we wanted to try to fix it to make some chronology. And that's in some moment we tried, but it starts to be for us a little bit boring. Like just to perform the right order. And you know what will be next. So, I suggest having only like the first two and the last one [fixed]. And then and inside, so it's a random, nobody knows what will be next and we decided at the same time, so every show was a little bit different with the duets, chronology.

Y: Yeah, that's what I saw.

S: And it gives us some extra presence because you have this pause and it's not fake pause like that we know what will be next we watching to each other and waiting who will be who will offer something. And that's what's so interesting and so simple for us. And it keeps us, like, collect all the time. And sometimes. You don't know if everyone does his duets, and now it should be the last one. You're just waiting, OK. OK. And sometimes, because the last one I decide when it's been finished, so sometimes I forgot if all of the duets was there and then you can interrupt the duets and to do the last one. And then you will talk after the performance and they say, "Oh yeah, we forgot to do this one earlier". Yeah, sometimes yes. And sometimes it's all opposite. We show all of them. And then in the same situations that you don't know, you can't remember everything but what was now in the right order, so there is no right order, only the beginning and the end. So, this was the. The small trick for us like for performance to be more alert and a little bit adrenaline.

Y: Yeah, I found that those pauses, so to say, caught our attention or at least my attention that it functioned just as those duets or solos of short forms, I think. Yeah. So, I understood that that the, I don't know, the playfulness or risk taking was utilised effectively and maybe the concept seems to be quite strong. In a sense, it's going against what you have experienced in Estonia and its performance world or dance world. Do you consciously avoid something or utilise something in creating the work or did you?

S: No, I mean, of course I don't follow the trends. This may be the one, it's a position of my life that I can't copy, and I can't go in the direction where most of the people decided, let's go to here and it's something mode now or trend, so I don't follow this and I always try to surprise my audience, because I love my audience. And if I will do the same, what now is popular. So, I will not surprise it, so I will be just doing the right thing or that they can say "oh yes it's an important topic now it's a trend so it's good", so they can talk about it and if you surprise them that they can't wait that we gonna take just the acoustic guitar and dance with it. So, I guess for some people it was, at the beginning like a shock. The people who know how I work or how Artjom work or they for example, never seen Karl in this situation that he's dancing with the Renaissance music. And it was a risk as well, but I think for us it was really interesting. Can we solve it or not? Like this? Like we are primitive.

Y: I think you succeeded in it. On the other hand, it sounded, like before you mentioned social media, the short forms and reels and trying to keep the viewers' or audience's attention constantly, in a sense you took that element from outside of dance, theatre, or performing arts. It seems like that's kind of one of the trends.

S: You mean... that I'm using just the pure psychology, so things on stage always. So, it's not a psychological theatre, it's real psychology and it's what I understand very well when I communicate with the people. And I guess also there was a small trick which maybe you don't put attention on from the beginning like in this performance because it's so simple. For example, the audience is sitting and their legs on the stage. And then you immediately connecting it to the stage. So, it's there. No distance. Even like you're on stage immediately and your legs can feel when we are jumping or like running. And also, because we sit in the same level with you. So, are involved from the beginning and for some people it's not comfortable because it's visible everything what you do. For some people it was like a surprise for us that many people start to talk from the first showing that they wanted or they felt they need to go on stage.

Y: I did as well.

S: And to do this primitive thing. And because it was not a concept because you never know like what the audience will feel this kind of psychological things. But I guess it was some my inside psychological tricks that I create the situation where they wanted to be part of it. At the beginning you are part of it and maybe you don't want to be it, but at the end you want to go also on stage, or you feel free in this uncomfortable situation because also we sit there. And we felt not comfortable. And you know that everyone watching you when you're sitting and

we decided not to, to be so playful with the audience, with this eye contacts and. You are just “OK, you watch me”, and you see the people like turning their head when you’re just sitting and waiting for the moment, and they watch you. And it’s also not so comfortable. But it’s interesting like not to watch back and to have a contact and to. Just for them, so probably unconsciously I offer them to be a little bit dominant in this position. Because it’s so easy to dominate from the stage. When you’re a performer that you know the audience came to watch you and then you are like a boss. And here we wanted for example I work with my present different because I’m so much flirting on stage with audience like directly like psychologically and have contact without any big situation so directly I can watch you smile to you, and you smile to me. Or you can hate me, and I can love you. And I always work with the audience like really simple and really directly with the pure psychological situation and this and this time I decided not to dominate, like with this flirting and this was also interesting.

Y: Yeah, I felt that stage and audience were part of the jam circle, that the game or play that I also felt that maybe, maybe, it’s the consciously created situation for the audience. On the other hand, this dominance is quite interesting. I find that it started from the format as a performance. I feel most of the times as you mentioned, performers are dominating. So, relating to that, what are your work’s similarities and dissimilarities to the traditional or conventional theatre and dance?

S: I don’t know. You tell me. I don’t know. I’m not, when I’m doing some work, so I’m inside of this work or I can also. I have an experience with some other works of mine, but you always try to do the next step. You keep something from all your works, something some logical things, some aesthetic what you like. Of course, but most time you take the risk that not to be so confident. And you think, OK, like this. I never tried and sometimes at the beginning, for example, when our Artjom brings his guitar and we all were kind of sceptical, because when he starts to play guitar, you need to for example ignore the music. You can’t ignore the music because guitar is so strong. And you, kind of your body wants to do to, to be together with this music, with the melody. And for some of us, he couldn’t find anything for example, for me, he couldn’t find anything, and he decided to give me just one accord. “Bring”. That’s all what he found for me and for some people, opposite for Karl, this Renaissance music was brilliant, like successful connection. And for some other some pop songs or like some his own songs with some more, with some Russian folklore. And for everyone, he was searching for something like special, which could be like almost fixed, like

all almost together, but there are some errors because all, almost all of the dancers at the beginning couldn't deal with this music. And it's took time, because it was for them, it was a shock and I just was in the same way, like Artjom, OK, we'll always take risk with him and even it sounds like absurd to use a guitar and dance, there are some intuitions told me that we come get up now and we need to make research. And to give a chance to it.

Y: Yeah, that's an instrument maybe it was a new combination. For me as well, on the other hand, making music according to or like in a collaboration with the choreography is also in ballet.

S: Mhm, mhm.

Y: Yeah, so there are. There can be some similarities.

S: Yeah, the primitive or simplicity of this piece that what I was searching from the beginning like something simple, but the simple is doesn't mean that it's actually simple, it's I named it complicated simplicity that it's a kind of things which is all this form of aphorism. So, like old words exist that sometimes you just need to take the things simpler and not to make them so complicated, especially for the others because I felt that people always want to develop and always want to make it more complicated. They can't deal that sun is just shining and that's all. They need to always develop to bring some designs, to some extra meanings. And I think in this works I took all possibilities to be complicate it, but in, I mean, it's a kind of music of Arvo Pärt. It's so simple. But at the same time, it's kind of complicated to find this or to do this minimalism and...

Y: All right. How do you then relate your piece to theatre illusion and reality?

S: Shion, I'm not thinking about the theatre. I'm not thinking about what's this theory is different theories for searching for. I'm not thinking about it, but I'm thinking a lot about our audience, and this is for me and, also for performers and for the people who work in with me in this team and this centralization of a process, it's a one. One thing what I'm doing I think last few years and I'm trust. I'm really in a trust to the people with whom I'm working. And I can't say them. You should do this one because I want this. No, I offer a form and concept and then we work together, and everything is open. We discussed together, we are giving feedback together, and if there are some complicated moments where we need to decide something, then I take a position and I decide if we have a kind of moment where we take a moment so we can decide. So, then I take responsibility and that's how.



Y: Yeah, I think I worded that not so in a clear way. I'm thinking in this way that I think your piece was quite in line with our daily life that we didn't need to go to see a performance with fancy clothes and so on.

S: Yeah, there was a one of our friends who came from Vienna from Austria to watch. And she also said something like this that this work is out of trends and there is nothing what is now popular. So, it's a kind of opposite so. It's the... in one moment, it seems so old school, and some moment it seems so avant-garde. And she was so happy to see it because when you go to watch some dance performances in the in Austria, they kind of look the same with the aesthetic, with the style, with the colours, with the clothes, with the topics. And here you come, and you have no style. You're no design. It's so simple. And the one of the most comments what the audience gave that they felt joy after the show. And it was so interesting. They say that wanted to come and see it one more because it's the feelings what they got was so warm. And also, it doesn't need to I guess the also the trick of this piece how to make choreography that you don't need to do work like an audience to interpretate what it means or what they are doing they quite understandable things from the beginning. Maybe the first solo was uh, not so simple because it's a lot of information from Sigrid and silence. But then from the first duo you kind of relax. And then you start to understand that you don't need to understand. You can just enjoy like when you listen to music. You don't need to interpretate so. What you hear.

Y: Yeah. To me it seemed like, maybe as you said earlier that it's not dancing, but rather pure form of presentation that...

S: I mean of, of course you can interpretate it if you want and it's it will be right interpretation. It's just there is maybe some of the performance they can say that they are dancing. But I was not dancing. And I'm not dancing many, many years. Even it's a dance piece. I'm not dancing. And for some people, it's a kind of problem that I'm not dancing and using only choreography, but for that for some people it's a possibility to understand that it's also a language because and this language we have some sort of gestures what we recognise. Like when we say "hello" and what we say and we hug, I mean when you see it from outside, you understand what's going on. When the people hug each other, but then you can also do a little bit abstract. And for example, if I just touch you so it has more meanings than the concrete hugs or like, say hello with the hand sign or something when I say like this "hello" when I take my hand because you understand what it means. But if you start to do it with the tool and so it's, it's not so clear anymore. It's it starts to be abstract. But the logic is the same.

It doesn't mean anything. It's just a language. It's something if you start to talk with me now in Japanese language so I will not understand what it's about, but I will understand the melody. I will understand maybe your emotions and the beauty of it. So, and for me it's enough. And I think in in the music and the dance and some visual works it works the same.

Y: In a sense to you, then communicate with the audience through that kind of language.

S: Yes, of course.

Y: Yeah. Do you have any more thoughts?

S: But this but I don't know how it's working; you know because it's kind of I try to talk with them in the in the language which they don't understand like 100%. So, and I even don't know what I'm talking I'm just trying to talk. It's so maybe young for me something like when I just learn to talk. And then because everything what offers in a choreography is the simplicity, and they make a clap. You understand that it's a clap. And nothing more. And I don't give there some extra information. It's if I can communicate with all this kind of things, like with the walking, with the sticking, with watching and making some geometrical situations with the two bodies and the composition with the two bodies abstract. And then you like an audience, you can see other the beauty of for visual beauty of two bodies or one body or it's just like an interesting material for you and because, actually, it's not so easy to be a choreographer because you need to think up movement, which is not existing because if you will take some technical things which is existing, so the audience some of the audience already knows and some of the audience already tried this. For example, if I do some cartwheel or some other tricks which is you know, which you've already experience in your life. Then of course you understand more how to do it. But if you give something abstract to them or something understandable but like new that you found this kind of movement. And you share with them, and I guess it's some somehow will surprise them, and they will understand that it's it. Yes, you found it. You found it. It's not. You took it from some classes or some techniques or something. And life that you created. Sometimes you just take some modification of the movements which is which you like to do with your body likes to do. And then this freedom for every performance to work with your own logic of the body and your own abilities. I guess it was so interesting for me to make extra research how the people work. How this choreography starts to born. This. Because how you find the first movements from the beginning and then how you start to work with them later. Because sometimes, for example I found like 50% of what I was showing at the beginning of the process that my body gives me this information and then I work it on to make it more clear or more comfortable or

more effective. But I found it quite at the beginning and I was carrying it with me till then, because sometimes start to change it and you don't like what you found at the beginning. You always feel "it's no, no, no, it's not so good now". So, it was interesting how everyone was searching and what kind of tricks they used to find the material for themselves. And there are so many. And they were just surprised what different people needs to find the choreography.

Y: Can we? You mean people as performers, right? Yeah, yeah. Can we?

S: The performers, yeah.

Y: Could we describe those found movements as authentic? Of their own?

S: For me, yes, especially when I saw a process. But maybe at the end it's seems like not so authentic for the audience. I don't know. I mean for me, definitely. If I watch Sigrid's solo at the beginning, which is I guess I don't know 1000 movements inside. And my solo has 15 movements, for example, so it's a different way of work, with the choreography and every time I watch it, I found every time I found few new movements which has not put attention all the time. And for if you see some like Karl. His solution was through some images, concrete images and from his plastic of the body. And that's all at the I worked with one movement in a row. So, I needed to find one movement and if I found it, I was happy and I kept it. For me, it was important, every word. Then, because they had so less, different things and they had some room between them. Yeah, because I just like changing in the space and placing walking from this. And then I "OK here I want to do this one. OK, it needs. Now I go there and see here. I need to do this few movements". So it was, yeah, so different and authentic for me. But I don't know how it was for the audience, maybe it seems that we are doing the same.

Y: I think it also depends on people how they look at it. As author, let's say, was it intentional choice to look for, seek for authenticity?

S: Oh sorry, ask one more time.

Y: So, you as an author of the piece, did you seek for authenticity? Did you treat it as a special factor, element of your piece? Or is it just?

S: That I'm on stage.

Y: In the work or piece did you treat authenticity as one of the factors you wanted to stress?

S: Yes, of course, from the beginning. I mean, all my decisions were made before I started, but I needed to make a proof for the others that this will work. And because psychologically it's so, I don't know how to say it, so you gave the idea to the performance so the concept of the form, which is so simple, it's like  $2 + 2$  is 4 and you work with it. And then you for yourself in your head, you understand why you chose it. Because you can find a lot of free

space in the simplicity inside. It doesn't mean that it's empty or there is no room. But for the others, maybe it seems like nothing's happening. It's it seems so simple, and everyone wants to develop immediately to offer some complicated composition works, blah blah blah. And in one moment of course I give this possibility, and because they...It's so rare when I say no. Only if I immediately understand that waste of time now is to work with this idea because and I know that we will not use it. But most of the time I give them to try. "OK, you can develop, and we then we discuss". But inside I knew that we. Anyway, Will go back. But they needed to understand it by themselves to experience it. But the simple idea is stronger than the complicated or something which is designed so much. That because this simplicity of all of the piece in every composition, a set design, with the music with the lights, with everything, with the audience, with a psychological trick. I was searching more fundamental, which will work for us together. And where you need to. I think in the dance performance, which is for example more political, you always need to choose a side. "Do you agree with it or not agree? What is your position? What your thoughts about this? Where you live, what you watch?" And it's so many things you need to do during watching some performances as well as dancing where you feel that artists have a political position behind it, and you wanted to sometimes it looks like a propaganda. And you can't relax because you always need to make choices of it. And if you avoid all this information. Which is anyway existing in social media, which attacks you, and where you don't need to have a choice. The only choice you need to understand is "Do you like it or not?" And it's the simplest you directly understand if it's interesting, it's interesting for you. It's not interesting. It's not interesting and that's all. And you and it's not interesting for you. You still can find what to do there. You can watch the audience how they look. You can watch the windows and its extra information.

Y: Yeah. There was cosy atmosphere that the choices were not so limited for the audience members.

S: They were not limited, but we didn't want to attack. You know them that you have to be like this. A dancer like this. We just wanted to love you in one hour. And we wanted to love to do each other and the material what we're showing. It's always, yeah delicate duos. When two people come on stage together and they together for one minute on stage doing something. It's quite delicate for me always how this rotation where I met with one person. What we feel when we do it. When I feel with another person what I feel and what they feel. And how this combination with some person you find the material immediately without doing like trying it. Like it's just "whoa. Let's do this one look. Uh, yeah". And we understand without discussing

and with some people, you need to have more time to find the material, and it was interesting also for me how different it works with the different performers to find the material. With one it's so easy with the other one it's more complicated. But it's not about the quality, but it's just how fast and how comfortable.

Y: Mikk-Mait was on the board. But the final result didn't seem... some lights for the performance was the usual light. Did it lead to some problems? For example, the funding problems.

S: No, he did the light design, but it's in the last week we decided that it's not.

Need it. So, he did a lot of work. He created by his hands some lamps. So, basically, he was always there and creating lamps. And putting them. And connect it with the computer. But it was just. Yeah, I guess it was something out of context. And then in the same moment there was too fancy lamps and there was too technology, so. And they didn't give enough lights. And it was like hard decision also for him. He understood in some moments that probably it's not working like we were planning. But he didn't want to be some of the artist said "it's my art. You choose me. We need to keep it". I think that the centralization was on the thing that he also understood. He was thinking about the whole thing not only about his part.

And then yes, I guess we took it, like maybe three days before the premiere.

Y: Oh, right.

S: All set away and, but from Mikk-Mait there was idea for example the set design all these podiums what we had on the stage. What we created, it was from him, basically. So, it's sometimes it seems that he didn't do work, because there was no light, but he was all these weeks with us. He was sitting there and making the slams and watching and he all his idea was to use the stage like this podium. So, he came, he saw some podiums in the elektron[.art art hall]. So yeah, we needed to bring them away, like hide them and they say maybe you can use them like a stage you don't need to hide them. And then I was like, "yes, it's a beautiful" and we created some stage inside of this room and the first thing was logically found when you step on stage. You'll feel different. Even it's just the fake one. But you go somewhere, and you have all attention. Like you go a little bit higher off the floor and that was interesting because it's so like... looks theoretical, this is a stage, name it a stage and you go on it and you feel different. You feel that everyone watches you now and that you are performing. So yes, his idea was open windows with these podiums. And ventilators in English as well? So it was also his idea.

Y: The process is not always visible.

S: It's not visible but. Two really important things came from him, the stage, these podiums, and this ventilator which gave permanent dynamic really slow. They always were working the same speed. Basically, when we had the like these pauses, there was dynamics inside. Always. And it was beautiful. So, to make it so simple again. We even change it in this description that the stage design is Mikk-Mait, not light design.

Y: All right, OK. One last question, I heard elektron[.art] has been quite a welcoming home place to host performances. But did you face any limitations? Difficulties because of institutional organisations?

S: No, absolutely not. I mean, that I knew it. It was luxury because we got the full month to be inside in this room and we didn't have any interruption. So, the only things what we needed to do for us, was to organise a space so we did together. We cleaned it this big room, but we together took away this kitchen and this corner what was there and also some of them were painting in white. And it was if they needed some help and they asked it, yes. We would agree to help immediately. It was so. No, there was always a good communication. We could be there 24 hours; we got our keys and I mean everything what we needed they immediately offers to us. Some free coffee, for example, some simple things, which is important for you. They gave us the office and they went to some Lithuania for a week. So, we were alone there in the full week. And the most important for me is that it was not interrupted by some other performers and some projects. It was kind of, yeah, it's the best even you don't use this room sometimes, but you always know if you feel inspiration, you can come and be there and nobody will make in some other project.

Y: Well, that's great to hear.

S: Yeah, the team is warm and. Yeah, they solve a lot of things what I don't like to solve. Communication things and organising and the Annika (Üprus) was the producer of the space from the beginning. Annika was the first person to whom I talk about this idea in general. She was from the beginning with me. So, it was also an important person, and without her I don't know if could manage it. Yeah, you know I have problem with organising, organising things and to write something so. I mean it's you. You write very beautiful as well, but I don't have this possibility in my brain. What I can do is actually something what was inspired when I talked with Karl about his study, how to write this work, what he is writing as his doctors, the study. And he was just talking how these professors help him to formulate. Something like "this sentence is too long", "these combinations of three words, you can use one word instead of this". And then this is like when you hear it and then you understand that you do actually

the same just in your art like the compositions, it's to make the choices what to show them to the audience. And I guess it was also something which helps me to be confident in this concept and to formulate, because at the end it looks like different on the composition of bodies and all of this work. The composition is the main part of any art project, and in that matter, if you write the music for your painting or your writing, the composition. It's always there, but the form and nowadays is something is more important sometimes than the concept and the content. Because we can talk about the same things, the content can be the same topics, but how to show it, and how to solve it? This is nowadays I guess the strong and important thing.

Y: Yeah. And after all, we just want to communicate.

S: Yes, I guess this is what I also use as a trick. This fundamental people's needs. And I know that we need to communicate. I know that we need to dominate. I know that we need to believe in something. I know that we need to deal with our ego and that's all. And if you know and then you can go to some basic things and work with them because they always work. They always work. Nothing is changing. And then if you know that it's working, so you start to be working with this basic fundamental like things, but then they realise they are so big actually. It seems like so simple like talking about the love, love your audience, but it's such a big and complicated thing. How you can love somebody you don't know for one hour and only for one hour, not for four hours. I don't need to respect anyone when I'm alone. And I don't need to love anyone when I'm alone, and this is the beauty of this when I'm alone, I come, I live in a different way. When I go out and I meet people, then I need to respect immediately. And I need to not be honest and open to tell everything what they think, what is going on in my head. And I began to control and use some filter.

Y: Yeah, but I hope you even if you're alone, you still respect yourself and love yourself.

S: Yes, because I deal with it every day, I'm with myself so. And but you know, I just realise that I don't need to think about it, because it's a permanent, if I love myself. So, I knew it. I don't need some confirmation because it's everything, go directly. I understand "OK, you love yourself or you don't love yourself". You know immediately. It's not like the other person wants to know from you do you love him or not.

Y: True.

S: And I guess I don't have these problems with myself, I know that I love myself and I don't ask anymore: "Do I love myself or do I not love myself?". I know that I love myself. And I feel it. And that's OK. And I also know that I respect myself and I know my weaknesses. It's

everything I know because I can't hide it from myself. But with the others it's quite interesting. I just realise that when you are alone you don't need to use this function. Like nobody next to you, so you don't need to think about that so much, what that other people, the other person will feel is next to you and all.

Y: Yeah. And I feel like on this stage it's the opposite side of the scale than being alone.

S: Mhm. But sometimes I'm also alone on stage and it's OK. And you show your loneliness, and you also manipulate with this one. It's also beautiful when some loneliness, and especially today, this collective direction is so strong now that we need to believe in something one and to follow some rules or some deals which is not sometimes connected to you, but the collectively this mass. Otherwise, you will cancel. I mean, it's a hard life now and the same time it's the easiest life what we have.

Y: OK. But I think we can wrap it up for now. So, thank you so much for sharing your thoughts and for your time.

S: Yes, thank you. Thank you.



## **Non-exclusive licence to reproduce the thesis and make the thesis public**

I, Shion Yokoo-Ruttas,

1. grant the University of Tartu a free permit (non-exclusive licence) to

reproduce, for the purpose of preservation, including for adding to the DSpace digital archives until the expiry of the term of copyright, my thesis

Anti-theatricality in performance art in Estonia: Semiotic approach,

supervised by Katre Pärn.

2. I grant the University of Tartu a permit to make the thesis specified in point 1 available to the

public via the web environment of the University of Tartu, including via the DSpace digital archives, under the Creative Commons licence CC BY NC ND 4.0, which allows, by giving appropriate credit to the author, to reproduce, distribute the work and communicate it to the public, and prohibits the creation of derivative works and any commercial use of the work until the expiry of the term of copyright.

3. I am aware of the fact that the author retains the rights specified in points 1 and 2.

4. I confirm that granting the non-exclusive licence does not infringe other persons' intellectual property rights or rights arising from the personal data protection legislation.



20.05.2024