

Poetics and Perception of Interartistic Performance

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Abstract: The article investigates the poetics and perception of interartistic performances, using two theatre productions – *NO47 A Girl That Was Looking for Her Brothers* (2014) and *NO33 Hysteria* (2017) – by Estonian performance artist and scenographer Ene-Liis Semper at the Theatre NO99 as case studies. A theoretical and methodological framework will be developed for the purpose of the analysis, based on Erving Goffman's notion of the frame and on transformative aesthetics elaborated in art research and psychology.

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The idea of interplay and interaction of different art forms goes back at least as far as the end of the 18th century when Johann Wolfgang von Goethe argued – as Richard Wagner ([1849] 1993) would do later – that opera, a genre that combines all other arts, can be considered the apex of arts. Since the beginning of the 20th century and as a result of (post)modern explorations, diverse examples of interdisciplinary and interartistic exchange in arts abound. For example, Futurists, Dadaists and Surrealists in their performative events of the 1910s and 1920s brought together art forms such as literature, theatre, dance, music and visual arts. In Futurist *serate*'s, Dadaist *soirée*'s and Surrealist performances traditional barriers between different art forms were dismantled, artists crossed these boundaries and created events that united old and new heterogeneous tools of expression, stressing intuitive synesthetic reception. As Meltzer (1994, 196) claims, "all of the techniques of one art seemed to stand ready to serve all the others." In the early 1960s, what could almost be called a performative turn took place in Western art, since performance penetrated all art forms and a new genre – performance art – was (re-)created (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 18, 22). Performance art as a predominantly interdisciplinary field was born as an initiative of mainly visual artists when exploring theatrical tools of expression at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s (Goldberg 2011, 7–9).

As these historically influential examples show, interdisciplinary art (the term *combinatory art* is also sometimes used) usually takes place between the disciplines and tends "to displace boundaries out of the field of genre determination rather than merely crossing them" (Soussloff and Franko 2002, 35). Nevertheless, the notion of interdisciplinarity does not cover all types of relations between fine arts and this is

the reason why I prefer a less widely used term *interartistic* (or *interart*) for the purpose of this research. This term is not widely known in English but has been used by some theatre scholars. For example, French researcher Patrice Pavis has pointed out in *The Routledge Dictionary of Performance and Contemporary Theatre* that the notion of the interartistic sphere, which has been used increasingly more widely since the 1960s, covers very different realities: 1) the gathering of arts, 2) the system of arts, 3) the synthesis of the arts (like Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk*), 4) the fraying of the arts, 5) application of one art to another (Pavis 2016, 103).

While the first definitions of the interartistic overlap with interdisciplinarity to a considerable extent, the latter ones suggest a more specific approach where "the principles of an art are projected onto one or more different arts" (Pavis 2016, 103). Pavis's example of the approach is performance art and installation, which enjoy the privilege of quoting and adopting techniques and aspects of other arts. Yet what could interartistic performance mean in this context, considering the long history and interdisciplinary nature of performance? I argue that since the wide and vague notion 'performance' has been used for different art, cultural and social events, certain conventions have been either maintained or established for the inner sphere of performance that create particular expectations. Both sociologist Erving Goffman (1974) and theatre scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte (2008) have described a wide array of performances throughout history that have been falling between different frames of expectation and, as a result, caused confusion, anger, excitement, but also transformation of frames and social and aesthetic experiences. Interartistic performance is topical also for this special issue of *Methis*, since the concept of performativity has been of utmost importance in the development of interart studies (Fischer-Lichte 2016, 17) by helping to show the dynamics between arts, but also between art and life.

There has been a long tradition of interartistic performances, and the discussion surrounding them is still relevant even in the 21st century when blending and merging of different arts is rather common, as can be seen also in the switch that has occurred from using the term 'theatre' to preferring the term 'performing arts', and in the development of interart studies (Fischer-Lichte 2016). In Estonia, an exceptionally heated debate on the topic took place in 2014, initiated by Alvar Loog's review of the Rakvere Theatre's production *Inner Tourism. Star Ship* that was entitled "The Degradation of Theatre into Performance." Loog expressed his disappointment with the developing trend in which innovative local theatre makers' extreme forms of expression had come dangerously close to the point where theatre started to vanish alongside with drama. "That is acceptable, if the outcome is not marketed as theatre." (Loog 2014) Loog makes an important point in his article, since the blur-

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ring of the boundaries between different arts and genres and the vanishing of the tradition of familiar genre terminology (see for example Karja 2020, 69–77) have made it extremely difficult to find one's bearings on the terrain of performing arts, especially when one is not an art connoisseur.

Another intriguing aspect of the review is Loog's distinction between theatre and performance art, and noting how the production, typically for interartistic work, has fallen into the gap between them. Loog accuses *Inner Tourism* of being too long for a performance, and too open and abstract for a theatre production. In addition, the stage as a theatrical frame is, in his opinion, too broad for a performance and generates false (elevated) expectations. "People, who came to theatre for a thrill (*elamus*), got an experience (*kogemus*)."¹ (Loog 2014) Theatre and performance art, indeed, no more differ from each other by any clear formal qualities, but mostly by the institutional frame in which a work is presented and by the type of reception strategy suggested for the spectator.

This article investigates two interartistic works where performance art and installation are projected onto theatre performance. These works are *NO47 A Girl That Was Looking for Her Brothers* (2014) and *NO33 Hysteria* (2017), both directed by Estonian performance artist and scenographer Ene-Liis Semper at the Theatre NO99. The two productions did not cause any metacommunicative discussion in the media comparable to that sparked by Loog's review. However, as rather radical examples of interartistic poetics, the confusion and cognitive dissonance they inflicted on the audiences (incl. the author of the article) help to elaborate the discussion further. The productions were chosen for the analysis primarily because they exemplify the implementation of different artistic strategies in a condensed form, but also because research on works of Semper is quite scarce (the most noteworthy being Allas 2007; Epner and Epner 2020).

Thus, the main foci of the article are interartistic poetics (i.e. the material from which the interartistic performances are composed and the ways in which this is done) and perception (i.e. the effect the interartistic performances have on spectators). First, a special theoretical and methodological framework is developed for the analysis based on the notions of the frame by American sociologist Erving Goffman (1974) and transformative aesthetic experience as sketched out in philosophy (Dewey 1958), psychology (Pelowski and Akiba 2011) and theatre studies (Fischer-Lichte 2008; Fischer-Lichte and Wihstutz 2018). Relying on the interdisciplinary framework developed in the first part of the article and the empirical case studies introduced in the second part of the article, I intend to elaborate the reception model of transformative artistic experiences further and substantiate it by the collapse of

habitual frames and collision of different frames, often initiated by interartistic works.

Methodologically, the article combines performance analysis and reception research when tackling the case studies. Considering the traditional limits on space, only the beginnings of the two productions are analysed and the rest of the performances will be introduced only when a change of frame takes place. For the reception research, I used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (auto-IPA) method, registering all physical sensations and cognitive associations I had during the live performances and afterwards when watching video recordings. I did not take notes during the performances, but registered my sensations and associations immediately after them. Video recordings were used as a memory aid, mostly for accurate stage descriptions and to a lesser extent for refining the reception. The description of stage activities is combined with my own reactions to them and synthesised with the analysis of cause and reactions. (See, for example, Smith et al. 2009)

Frame and transformative aesthetic experience

Since Erving Goffman's sociological works to a greater or lesser extent rely on the model of theatre, the use of his frame theory in the context of the article on interartistic performance need not come as a surprise. Also, Chapter 5 in his book *Frame Analysis. An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (1974), "The Theatrical Frame," is entirely dedicated to theatre, highlighting the parallel between theatrical and social frames, while a wide variety of examples are drawn from the theatre throughout the book.

Goffman borrowed the notion of the frame from Gregory Bateson (1955), who, together with his colleagues, also developed the double bind theory of schizophrenia that rests on contradictory or ambivalent communication dilemmas. In principle, Goffman defines the frame along the lines similar to Bateson's:

I assume that definitions of a situation are built up in accordance with principles of organization which govern events – at least social one – and our subjective involvement in them; frame is the word I use to refer to such of these basic elements as I am able to identify. [. . .] My phrase "frame analysis" is a slogan to refer to the examination in these terms of the organization of experience. (Goffman 1974, 10–11)

Consequently, frame analysis is used for the investigation of social life, but also for structures of social experience that might be highly individual and subjective but are usually governed by certain social frames.

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In general, frames help people make sense of different social scenes and be involved in them in an expected manner. Goffman understands involvement in a scene as a social, cognitive and emotional process, stressing that the subject might even become unaware of the direction of his feelings and cognitive attention. (Goffman 1974, 346) Still, even when some frameworks are “presentable as a system of entities, postulates, and rules; others – indeed, most others – appear to have no apparent articulated shape, providing only a lore of understanding, an approach, a perspective.” (21) Nevertheless, a person who is familiar with the existing cultural and social conventions tends to know which frame organises which scene. Some occurrences do not fit the habitual frame, however, i.e., a break can occur in the applicability of the frame, resulting in bewilderment and chagrin on the part of the participants. (347)

In the chapter titled “The Manufacture of Negative Experience” Goffman states:

When an individual is lodged in a stream of framed activity, he sustains some check upon his immediate, spontaneous involvement in it. This will vary in degree with boredom at one end [. . .], nearly full engrossment at the other. Along with affective reserve [. . .], there is likely to be a measure of cognitive reserve also, a wisp of doubt concerning framework and transformations, a slight readiness to accept the possible need to reframe what is occurring; and this reserve, as well as the emotional kind, varies. (Goffman 1974, 378)

Thus, Goffman’s frame analysis also involves a shift of frames that depends first of all on the cognitive and affective reserve of a person, as indicated above, but also on the availability of competing frames. Frame breaks as a strategy can have different functions: sometimes they are used for entertainment only but sometimes they carry the effort to destabilise a social occasion or even cause a change in the social order (Goffman draws the majority of his examples from theatre, sport and criminal records). In general, frame breaks tend to require extra energy and mental work, and are often found to be disturbing. Goffman stresses the vulnerability of both frames and framed experiences and this vulnerability also affects our perception of the world despite the real physical circumstances.

Frame, as it is understood by Goffman and the author of the article, is based on a person’s earlier experience and knowledge, often shared with a group or a society, and forms a rather coherent conceptual entity. Because of that, the concepts of frame and frame analysis provide a useful framework for investigating the poetics of interartistic works in which two or more artistic frames of two or more art forms with their specific materials, media, aesthetics, etc. are used either simultaneously or consecutively. Theatre scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte (2008, 47–48) has used the

term 'frame' sporadically in her seminal book *The Transformative Power of Performance* where she tackles the destabilisation, collision, blurring and eventually invalidating of habitual conceptual frames, which might lead to the establishment of a new frame. When a subject is suspended between two frames ("orders of perception"), s/he experiences perceptual multistability, which Fischer-Lichte (2008, 148–49) compares to a ritual liminal state of being at the threshold ("betwixt and between"), in the transition from one order to another. It is exactly this processual nature of liminality and not so much the transformativity that intrigues me in inter-artistic performances because, according to Goffman's (1974, 378) theory, one needs an affective and cognitive reserve for reframing and transformation. Thus, an artistic experience only rarely culminates with a transformation.

I have developed the idea earlier under the notion of the poetics of ambivalence (Saro 2021). When contradictory flows of information, expressions or moods cross or intertwine, intentionally or accidentally, ambivalent nodes are created that are supposed to activate different reception and interpretation strategies in the perceiver. When ambivalence is the main poetic means or idea of a work, we are dealing with an example of the poetics of ambivalence. The main strategies of the poetics of ambivalence in theatre are 1) playing at the thresholds of different genres and types of theatre, or 2) different art forms, or 3) at the threshold of art and non-art. (Saro 2021) Yet what actually happens with the organisation of art experience and with the recipient when two artistic frames overlap and the spectator's previous perceptual and expectation frames fail?

American philosopher John Dewey, in his "Art as Experience" [1934] 1958, has tackled disruption in the viewer's interaction with art and the viewer's response to that. He distinguished two strategies in the reception of arts: facile recognition and meta-cognitive perception. While the former strategy represents successful matching of pre-expectations to perception and reducing discrepancies, the latter stands for a re-organisation of a viewer's expectations and frames, also inducing meta-cognitive mode of self-reflection.

Psychologists Matthew Pelowski and Fuminori Akiba (2011) have further elaborated the idea, substantiating the theory by psychological evidence. They identify five stages in meta-cognitive perception of transformative aesthetic experiences: 1) pre-expectations and the self-image, 2) cognitive mastery and introduction of discrepancy, 3) secondary control and escape, 4) meta-cognitive re-assessment, 5) aesthetic outcome and new mastery.

Pelowski and Akiba (2011, 87) stress not only the importance of pre-expectations (comparable to the horizon of expectations in Hans Robert Jauss's reception theory), but also the self-image of a receiver in the reception process and the urge to be

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masterful in meaning-making. Due to that, receivers tend to decrease the amount and importance of discrepant information because it threatens their self-image (stage 2). Discrepant or ambiguous information also disturbs the process of identification and classification of a work of art that aims to form one coherent meaning. When neglecting information is impossible, it is assimilated into the classification. When discrepancy can be neither ignored nor assimilated, a switch from a lower, often unconscious order of perception to a higher order, involving conscious assessment and greater cognitive involvement, takes place (stage 3), but it causes tension and anxiety. (Pelowski and Akiba 2011, 88) When re-classification of a work fails, there are two options: receivers might attempt to escape, either physically or mentally, or they move to stage 4, meta-cognitive reassessment where they revise their expectations and perceptual schema, but also reframe their own involvement with the situation and achieve a relative self-transformation. When this re-assessment is successful, a new aesthetic outcome of perception and new mastery is reached (stage 5). This successful completion of schema change is often described as causing an epiphany or cathartic feelings. (Pelowski and Akiba 2011, 89)

In the following, I will use the model of transformative aesthetic experience by Pelowski and Akiba and auto-IPA as a method to analyse my own reception process of two interartistic productions by Semper. When frame as a notion and collapse of habitual frames/expectations are familiar concepts in theatre studies, a detailed and systematic analysis of the process of a collapse of a frame, or transformation from one frame of perception to another has not been carried out earlier.

Poetics and perception of interartistic works of Ene-Liis Semper

Ene-Liis Semper (b 1969) is Estonian scenographer, performance artist and director. She graduated from the Estonian Academy of Arts as a scenographer in 1995 but had gained fame as a video and performance artist already during her studies. Since 1993 she has exhibited videos that explore corporeality, often through her own body and using a theatrical lens (Epner and Epner 2020, 9). Semper quickly gained recognition as a set and costume designer, working mostly with postmodern Estonian directors like Mati Unt, Hendrik Toompere and others. She has been awarded with the annual prize for the best scenography by the Estonian Theatre Union in 2002, 2003, 2006, 2007 and 2014. From the beginning of the 21st century, Semper's ambitions of authorship in theatre grew and she started to stage performances in collaboration with other beginners, but mostly together with director Tiit Ojasoo. In 2004, they established a new state-supported experimental theatre NO99, which hosted different directors, artists and forms of performing arts, including one-off performative events. Individually, Semper has staged three productions:

NO47 A Girl That Was Looking for Her Brothers (2014), *NO42 El Dorado: The Clowns' Raid of Destruction* (2015) and *NO33 Hysteria* (2017). While *NO42 El Dorado* was an example of physical theatre and was relatively easily accepted by spectators as theatre,¹ the other two caused inconsistencies in reception and thus deserve special attention in this article.

In the following, I focus on the beginnings of the two productions and the rest of the performances will be given closer attention only when a change of frame takes place. The frames of perception and expectations are created partly before a performance but predominantly during the first scene(s). (In Estonia, 57 percent of spectators admit that they attend performances accompanying somebody else and do not participate in the decision-making process (Kivirähk 2016, 8). Based on my own observation, spectators often have no previous knowledge of the forthcoming performance.) Semper herself has pointed out in an interview to the art critic Anders Härm that she is interested in what happens among audiences when there is "a change of code," in either style or design, several times during a performance. She thinks that during the first ten minutes the audience obtains a code that explains the performance and becomes very confused or upset when it is changed. Nevertheless, for Semper it is most important that these code changes should fit together and not leave audience in peace. (Härm 2003, 26) What follows is that, according to her intentions, performances should keep the spectators alert during the whole event and should make them conscious about the meta-cognitive dimension of reception, i.e. changes of codes.

Since *NO47 A Girl...* was Semper's first individual theatre production, I had no clear advance expectations, but was aware of her former works as a video and performance artist and scenographer. The beginning of the work tackled many ontological questions of theatre and arts in general – first, when the work started, and second, the type of the work. The production was performed in the big hall of the Theatre NO99 on a slightly raised stage, which spectators could observe from their fixed seats and from one side – all that spatially created an obviously theatrical frame of perception. The stage space created an impression of an installation of a white cube (white walls and floor of the stage area) in a black box (the hall). It looked empty, even sterile and strongly lit, resembling a studio or a gallery. On the left side as seen from the audience were a table, two chairs and a sofa on its back, the right-hand side was empty at first (later it was equipped with a carpet and a microphone)

¹ *NO42 El Dorado* was nominated for the annual theatre award of performing arts as an experimental production that combines different forms of performing arts; together with *NO43 Filth* (in collaboration with Tiit Ojasoo), it represented Semper as a leading European female director in the theatre programme of the Venice Biennale in 2017.

and a black piano stood next to the stage. The stage had ambivalent identities, since the right side could refer to an installative space of a gallery, and the left one to a representational space of a theatre performance. The sofa that was first lying on its back manifested first its materiality and non-functionality, but later, when turned onto its legs, started to represent a functional living room together with the table and chairs.

When the spectators arrived in the hall, “a technician” (actor Jõrgen Liik) was fixing wires with a tape, but it seemed to be more a make-believe work than a serious need. At a certain moment, a naked woman (Rea Lest) joined him on the stage and stood or sat there in graceful poses with a disinterested gaze. Liik rolled out a carpet and set up a microphone for her but without paying any attention to the woman. While the quotidian work of “the technician” signalled the preparation phase of the performance, the performative appearance and stance of the woman suggested the beginning of the performance. Since nothing more than what has been described above happened on the stage for the first fifteen minutes, this raised questions about the beginning and type of the work. Thus, according to the model of Pelowski and Akiba, in stage 2 of the reception process, receivers could not demonstrate their cognitive mastery because of the lack of sufficient information and because the given information was discrepant and ambiguous. The limited flow of information caused boredom, but also suggested that the audience should concentrate on the micro details of the performance and combine phenomenological perception with cognitive analysis (stage 3). The described scene activated the following discrepant perceptual and interpretational frames:

- *Theatre*. The institutional frame of the Theatre NO99, the frontal frame of performance and the representational frame of performing all suggested a theatrical frame for reception.
- *A sculpture, or figurative art more broadly*. The body of the actress Rea Lest was predominantly motionless during the performance and her disinterested look suggested that her inner world also seemed to be motionless. Her minimal movement could be described as successive striking of different poses, where the refinement of body parts and relaxation of muscles recalled classical sculpture and the beauty standards of the antiquity. The skin of Lest’s body was faultless, its colour pale, even and unvaried. Later during the performance, when confronted with other characters, the static sculptural body became a representation and a symbol of beauty and arts in general.
- *Performance art*. Some qualities of Lest’s body stressed the biological nature of “the represented object” described. Thus, the perception of the body became one source of cognitive dissonance in the production. When the visual image of

the body referred to a sculpture, the auditive information, breathing (though mediated through microphone and speakers) referred to a living organism. Since Lest is a relatively well-known actress in Estonia, her social body was here exposed as an installation material. One could even say that the materiality and figurativity of the body was put under observation, since first of all the body/nakedness/beauty was performed. The duration of the scene was extended consciously to focus the attention of the spectators and magnify the influence of the body. A naked body in public space always acts as a provocation, irrespective of the context. When the first uneasiness due to the potential provocation was overcome, the spectator was encouraged to use her/his glance as an instrument for critical observation of the body and the communicative context.

Performance art, in contrast to theatre, tends to expose the process of making a performance. Jörgen Liik, who used a microphone and random objects on the stage to create a looping sound design, presented this aspect throughout the performance.

- *Fashion, advertising, commerce.* Lest's body also implied a sexual, desiring and desired body that is often used in fashion, advertising and commerce. Lest's instrumental body could be interpreted as a tool for the presentation of the high-heeled shoes she was wearing. In theatre reviews similar kinds of observations were made: for example, one critic referred to the "empty enigmatic eye of a model" (Herkül 2014).

I reached stage 4, meta-cognitive reassessment of the performance, and my own initial reception process gradually changed during the rest of the performance. After the first fifteen ambiguous minutes, the theatrical performance started. Marika Vaarik (Mother), Raivo E. Tamm (Father) and Eva Klemets (Aunt) came on stage and started acting grotesquely, also infecting their Son (Jörgen Liik) with their strange behaviour. The acting strategy stressed the difference between an actor and a role, between natural and theatricalised behaviour, implicitly mocking the traditional theatrical code of re-embodiment. Rea Lest also acquired a role – she was called Bride by the other characters – although she retained her former "role," that is, was emotionless and speechless. Lest was ontologically at the same time a representation (either Bride, beauty, or art) for others and a presentation of herself. The production investigated the influence of beauty/art on people, stressing from the beginning the discursive incongruousness of beauty/art (Lest) with everyday life and its logic (represented by the other characters) and people's eternal admiration of, even craving for, beauty. The two distinctive spheres were represented in different styles: Lest used the tools of expression of performance art and the other performers the traditional tools of acting where embodiment of a character is the main principle.



Figure 1. *N047 A Girl That Was Looking for Her Brothers* (2014, Theatre N099). Eva Klemets, Rea Lest, Marika Vaarik and Jörgen Liik. Photo by Tiit Ojasoo.

Spectators who decided to escape the performance, either mentally or physically, because their cognitive reserve was insufficient for the reception of the inter-artistic performance, could look for the first aid of meaning-making on the theatre's web page. "Even kids know that beauty is absolute. [. . .] What happens with people, who find themselves too close to this absolute? The production of Ene-Liis Semper tells about a family, who burst into bloom at the unexpected vicinity of beauty for the last time." (N099) The guideline leads spectators to follow a theatrical and, more specifically a representation, reception frame, i.e. to ask implicitly what the stage activity stands for, what it depicts. However, this frame (alone) is invalid and the sense of failure forces the spectator to look for other frames of perception available to her/him.

In her book *The Transformative Power of Performance* Erika Fischer-Lichte describes two types of perception and meaning-making that might take place when habitual theatrical elements are isolated from each other. She does not use the term 'interartistic' but the types are characteristic also of the reception of interartistic performances:

In the first case, the phenomenon is perceived as what it appears, i.e. in its phenomenal being, so that materiality, signifier, and signified coincide. In the second case, they markedly diverge from each other. The phenomenon is perceived as a signifier that can be linked to a diverse range of signifieds. The meanings ascribed to the phenomenon are not dependent on the subject's will but appear in consciousness spontaneously – even if, retrospectively, they can oftentimes be explained rationally. (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 144)

The beginning of *NO47 A Girl...* was semantically ambivalent, since it opened up different interpretational frames, which led to different associations and meanings, which all together created a void of meanings characteristic of abstract or non-representational art. In this case, Fischer-Lichte's two types of perception and meaning-making were attached to each other: type two led to type one, and after that type two again as will be shown below.

Of course, other spectators could perceive other types of ambivalences in this performance. Kadi Herkül, for example, admitted that the production brought on stage a hundred minutes of sexual fantasies but left the audience as cold as a fish – "It is a clinically sterile stage picture lacking eroticism." (Herkül 2014) The quote demonstrates the overall estrangement that an interartistic performance might cause.

Altogether, both the reassessment (stage 4) and the whole reception process was successful for me, providing a new challenging aesthetic experience, strengthening my self-confidence and leading to a relative self-transformation. The blending of different aesthetic discourses in the production sharpened and dislocated my perception but estranged grotesque acting and some features of the bourgeois mentality being criticised caused also strong psycho-physical reactions like abomination and a suppressed urge to escape from the performance. In a broader context, the director made the spectators recognise their biological, psychological and social determination, since the body is the site where all these aspects overlap.

The audience may have been better prepared for Semper's third production – *NO33 Hysteria* (2017) – but not entirely. The performance started as performers of the NO99 theatre Rasmus Kaljujärvi, Eva Koldits, Rea Lest, Jörgen Liik and Marika Vaarik, all dressed in pink, exaggerated, even vulgar costumes came on stage that was equipped with two sofas and panel room dividers, a screen and a couple of spotlights and cameras. The visual context was clearly theatrical, associating partly also with a film studio. The performers sat on the sofas and started to laugh one after another, seemingly without any particular reason. This collective hysterical laugh lasted without interruption for the next forty minutes. At the same time, nothing significantly representational happened: performers fooled around on the sofas, drank water, unexpectedly changed costumes and used cameras as mirrors for

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self-inspection and self-presentation. The cameras and the screen were used to accentuate and exaggerate the corporeality of the performers and their attempts to change their appearance, rejuvenate themselves, try out different identities or amuse others. The hysterical laughter, a physiological reaction with accompanying sound, and the visual amplification of that on the screen dominated the whole situation. No verbal interaction took place between the performers.



Figure 2. *NO33 Hysteria* (2017, Theatre NO99). Rasmus Kaljujärv, Jörgen Liik and Eva Koldits. Photo by Ene-Liis Semper.

During the hysterical laughing scene, the spectators did not laugh because the stage activity and the hysteria that was definitely performative slowly became more and more appalling. On the 28th minute of the performance, I myself experienced so strong physical queasiness and disgust that I seriously considered escaping from the theatre (stage 3 in Pelowski's and Akiba's model). I checked my watch at that moment because I predicted intuitively that the performance had lasted at least forty minutes already and probably would continue in this way until the end. Nevertheless, I decided to stay because it is not customary to leave in the middle of an act in Estonia and I did not want to attract any attention. When the opening scene of *NO47 A Girl...* left the receiver enough mental freedom to invent and test different reception strategies and cultural contexts, then *NO33 Hysteria* created an overflow

of discrepant visual and auditive information and had a psychophysically aggressive effect on spectators, almost paralysing their cognitive capabilities. According to the home page of the theatre, the psychophysical condition created during the performance is characteristic of the current society at large: "The cornucopia of information has the same effect as every other cornucopia: it inebriates. [. . .] The cornucopia and void, baroque and hysteria." (NO99)

Here, Semper had used a strategy that is well known in performance art – *endurance art* or *durational performance*, the most famous representative of which is Marina Abramović. Endurance art usually puts to the test the physical endurance of a performer but definitely also the mental and psychological, sometimes also physical, endurance of the receiver, not to mention their cognitive capability. Luule and Eero Epner have mentioned that the first parts of *NO47 A Girl...* and *NO33 Hysteria* are "purely performative scenes that focus on the physical capability and durability" (Epner and Epner 2020, 16). They do not explain how they understand the performativity in this context, but presumably the physical capability of performers is intended to have primary psychophysical effect on the spectators.

To develop the notion of performativity further, I believe that the first forty minutes of the performance when the spectators were faced with abiding hysterical laughter and their own psychophysical reactions, represent non-representative theatre that is aesthetically close to performance art, since the performative function dominates here over the representative one. Nevertheless, the stage actions are not natural physical reactions, i.e. the performers are not caught up in the uncontrollable hysteria but they represent it, copying physical reactions typical of hysteria. In addition, even if they are caught up in the hysteria, the theatre stage as a medium and a perceptual frame makes everything presented there a representation. Thus, at the beginning of the performance, a spectator / I fell in the breach of two opposing reception frames, switching constantly between the representational or theatrical and the action-based or ritualistic frame of performance art, and finding neither of them entirely effective. According to Pelowski's and Akiba's model, I was circulating between stages 2 to 4. When I thought I had achieved a certain cognitive mastery (found an appropriate reception frame), some new discrepancy was introduced (stage 2) that made me move to the level of secondary control, revise all the available information again (stage 3) and invent new perception frame (stage 4, meta-cognitive re-assessment).

Erika Fischer-Lichte has also stressed the perceptual multistability in reception, i.e. shifting between such perception orders [frames – A. S.] as presence and representation [or performativity and referentiality – A. S.]. The transitional moment from one order of perception to another is accompanied by a sense of destabilisa-

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tion, a feeling of liminality. The threshold is highly ambivalent because it enables transformation of the perceiver and causes physiological, affective, energetic and motoric changes in the body. But the fluctuating state of instability might finally end up by the establishment of a new stability. (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 147–48, 174, 205)



Figure 3. *NO33 Hysteria* (2017, Theatre NO99). Rasmus Kaljujärv. Photo by Ene-Liis Semper.

Little by little I reached some kind of a new mastery and new aesthetic experience (stage 5) in *NO33 Hysteria*. Despite the first impression that performers were just improvising some random actions and trying to create fluid unfixable identities, some visual details, performing principles, relations and sensations recurred and converged into bigger clusters and figures. Thus a spectator learns the implicit rules of the new game. The performers did not act as actors do, but just performed different playful activities; nevertheless, their theatrical actions led to psychologisation and character-building in perception. *NO33 Hysteria* highlighted the difference between stage and off-stage behaviour in social life, as was pointed out also by Goffman, but did it in a reverse mode: performers were alone (off-stage) in front of the cameras where they tried out new physical identities, and on stage when being with others. Their stage behaviour was exaggerated, hysterical, and off-stage behaviour mechanical or emotionally and existentially vulnerable.

Conclusion

The article analysed the poetics and perception of interartistic performances using two productions of Ene-Liis Semper as case studies. According to Patrice Pavis (2016, 103), interartistic work is a merger of different art forms, a case when the principles of an art are projected onto another. In her works, Semper has projected some principles of performance art onto theatre performances and the other way around. The productions analysed bear many similarities with Semper's videos: the human body serves as the centrepiece, the situations (activities, costumes, set design) and the communication frame are theatrical, in her own words, the visualization of "concentrated states of mind" (*kontsentreeritud meeelseisund* in Estonian, Härm 2003, 26) dominates over narrativity. The earlier quote about a change of code and the following quote vividly exemplify her aesthetic principles.

I have never been particularly interested in social critique, neither in theatre nor in art. What I am interested in is testing the concurrent influence of things. There are so many components in the world and when you put them next to each other, they have a different effect. (Epner 2014)

Considering the statement, and looking at Semper's artworks where she is constantly looking for new and surprising connections between different materials, media and artistic conventions, it can be stated that interartistic aesthetics is Semper's conscious poetics, i.e. a principle of creation, even when she does not use exactly the same words.

Luule and Eero Epner have labelled Semper's style hybrid aesthetics because she blends the tools of expression of theatre and performance art, which creates

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ambivalence in perception, since some elements refer to the presence and some others to representation (Epner and Epner 2020, 29). Interartistic works that connect and blend techniques and contexts of different arts create hybrid artworks that highlight the discrepancy between produced perceptions and information, and lead to an ambivalent situation where the spectator is either confused, unable to find an appropriate reception frame, or caught between different reception frames. Semper's productions were performed in theatre buildings, on traditional frontal stage and used exaggerated, theatrical aesthetic language, which all suggest the theatrical perception frame. However, especially the beginnings of both productions relied on techniques commonly associated with performance art, highlighting the physicality of the performers, the materiality of the environment and the duration of the situation, avoiding or deferring representation and meaning-making.

Earlier I have analysed other works of Semper and Ojasoo through the lens of poetics of ambivalence, pointing out that the hybridity and ambivalence stem from encounters of different arts, but also of different genres and styles of expression (see Saro 2021). Thus, issues raised in the article can be extended to other hybrid artforms and are not confined only to interartistic performances.

The main aim of the article was to test the reception process of interartistic works and their potential for transformative/performative aesthetic experience. I used Pelowski's and Akiba's five-stage model and my own perception of two performances by Semper for the test. The model appeared to be useful for the analysis of an aesthetic experience but, as models often are, it seemed too simplified and rigid. First, it is difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish between different stages of the reception process because some of them seem to progress in parallel. Second, the model seems to be inspired by the reception of visual objects that can be grasped in a glance. In art works where the temporal dimension is essential, the constant flow of new stimuli makes the receiver restart the modelled process over and over again, moving constantly between stages 1 to 4.

I would like to finish the article with a longer quote from Semper that exemplifies some aims and potentials of interartistic works.

Lately, society seems to be expecting more and more that art should offer ready-made responses. But I think that the true phenomenon of an image is its polysemy. We are living in a terribly descriptive world, words are devaluated and simplified and because of that everything becomes banal. [. . .] This is the reason why preservation of the ambiguity of artwork is important, connection between different layers, because the connection is not verbal and cannot be devaluated. A brilliant art work is able to create such a flow of associations that nobody is able to articulate them because so many human experiences have been deposited there. (Epner and Semper 2021, 8–9)

Interartistic and other hybrid artworks open up new possibilities for self-expression, enabling artists to cross borders between arts, and art and non-art. More importantly, interartistic works revitalise the perceiver's senses and sense-making apparatuses, break habitual perception frames, and through that highlight the logic of existing perception frames, leading to meta-cognitive analysis of art, society and self. Interartistic performances, which are able to accumulate in themselves the tools of expressions of almost all other arts, and even non-artistic spheres, are especially powerful performatives, since their wealth of stimuli, average duration of the performance and expected perception frame(s) have a strong transformative potential for the perceiver, and maybe even the potential for transgression of a whole community or society.

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Kunstidevahelise etenduse poeetika ja taju

Anneli Saro

Märksõnad: kunstidevaheline etendus, transformatiivne esteetika, poeetika, taju, Eesti teater, Ene-Liis Semper

Artiklis uuritakse kunstidevaheliste etenduste poeetikat ja taju, tuginedes kahele juhtumiuuringule – etenduskunstniku ja stsenograafina tuntud Ene-Liis Semperi lavastustele „NO47 Tüdruk, kes otsis oma vendi“ (2014) ja „NO33 Hüsteeria“ (2017) Teatris NO99. Selleks arendati välja spetsiaalne teoreetiline ja metodoloogiline raamistik, lähtudes Ameerika sotsioloogi Erving Goffmani terminist *raam* ning filosoofias (Dewey 1958), psühholoogias (Pelowski ja Akiba 2011) ja teatriteaduses (Fischer-Lichte 2008) tuntud transformatiivse esteetika käsitlustest.

Kunstidevahelise etenduse defineerimisel on tuginetud Patrice Pavisile, kes termini *kunstidevaheline* (*interartistic*) puhul on eristanud viit tähendusvälja, millest viimane ja kõige kitsam tähistab ühe kunstiliigi printsiipide projektsiooni ühele või mitmele teisele kunstiliigile. Ta on toonud kunstidevaheliste teoste näiteks etenduskunsti ja installatsiooni, mis tsiteerivad ja adapteerivad teiste kunstiliikide tehnikaid ja aspekte. (Pavis 2016, 103) Kuid kuidas mõista performatiivse pöörde järgses kultuurisituatsioonis, kus etenduslikkus on tunginud peaaegu kõikidesse kunstiliikidesse, kunstidevahelist etendust? Väidan, et etenduses kui heterogeenses ja laialivalguvas nähtuses on siiski säilinud või tekkinud teatud sisemised konventsioonid, mis loovad vastuvõtul kindlaid ootusi.

Artiklis vaadeldakse Semperi kunstidevahelisi teoseid, kus etendus- ja installatsioonikunst on projitseeritud teatrilavastustele. Analüüsitud lavastustel on palju sarnasusi Semperi videotega: fookuses on inimkeha, situatsioonid (tegevused, kostüümid ja lavakujundus) ning kommunikatsiooniraam on teatraalsed ning kontsentreeritud meeleseisundid (Härm 2003, 26) domineerivad narratiivsuse üle. Semper otsib oma teostes teadlikult eri materjalide, meediumite ja kunstikonventsioonide kombineerimisel tekkivaid uusi ja üllatavaid kokkupuutepindasid ning nendest tekkivaid mõjuallikaid. Tema loomemeetodid võib seega nimetada kunstidevahelise esteetika poeetikaks.

Metodoloogiliselt on etendusanalüüsi kombineeritud retseptisiooniuringutega, täpsemalt enesekohase interpretatiivse fenomenoloogilise analüüsiga. Uurisin kahe lavastuse näitel, kas ja kuidas töötab psühholoogide Matthew Pelowski ja Fuminori Akiba (2011) transformatiivse esteetilise kogemuse mudel, kus nad eristavad metakognitiivse taju viit faasi: 1) eelootused ja enesekuvand, 2) kognitiivsed oskused ja lahknevuse ilmumine, 3) sekundaarne kontroll ja põgenemine, 4) metakognitiivne ümberhindamine ning 5) esteetiline tulemus ja uued oskused.

Kokkuvõtteks võib öelda, et see mudel osutus küll kasulikuks analüüsivahendiks, kuid nagu mudelid ikka, on liiga lihtsustav ja jäik. Esiteks on keeruline, kui mitte võimatu eristada vastuvõtuprotsessis eri faase, sest mõned neist näivad toimuvat paralleelselt. Teiseks, kuna see mudel näib põhinevat selliste visuaalsete objektide vastuvõtul, mida saab haarata tervikuna ja ühe pilguga, siis ajalise kestusega teoste puhul on uue info pealevoog pidev ja see sunnib vastuvõtjat alustama mudeldatud protsessiga ühe uuesti ja uuesti, liikudes pidevalt faasist 1 faasini 4.

Kunstidevahelised ja teised hübriidsed teosed loovad uusi eneseväljenduse võimalusi, võimaldades kunstnikel ületada eri kunstiliikide ning kunsti ja mitte-kunsti vahelisi piire. Kuid olulisem on see,

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et kunstidevahelised teosed värskendavad vastuvõtja tajusid ja tähendusloome mehhanisme ning lõhuvad harjumuslikke tajuraame, valgustades nii läbi subjekti käsutuses olevate tajuraamide loogika, ning juhivad kunsti, ühiskonna ja vastuvõtja metakognitiivse analüüsi juurde. Kunstidevahelised etendused, mis suudavad endasse akumulierida peaaegu kõikide teiste kunstiiliikide väljendusvahendid ja isegi mitte-kunstilised valdkonnad, on eriti tugevad performatiivid, sest oma stiimulite rikkuse, etenduste keskmise kestvuse ja oodatava(te) tajuraami(de) tõttu on neil suur potentsiaal vastuvõtjat tugevasti mõjutada – transformeerida ning võibolla isegi häirida kogukonna või ühiskonna traditsioone ja norme.

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