

*Stop Making Sense*  
*Desubjectivation and Bodily Present in Karl Saks' and*  
*Renate Keerd's Performances*

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**Abstract**

This article reappropriates Fredric Jameson's literary theoretical concept of affect from his 2013 book *The Antinomies of Realism* to describe and interpret our strictly subjective experiences, as two literary scholars, of some prominent examples of contemporary Estonian performance art – Renate Keerd's *Pure Mind* (Tartu New Theatre, 2013) and Karl Saks' *Planet Alexithymia* (Kanuti Gildi SAAL, 2020). We sensed that the affective space and presence we experienced in these performances reduced us as spectators exclusively to a pure bodily present of impersonal consciousness, to a state that precedes language and meaning where subjectivity is temporarily dissolved to a transformative effect. We elaborate what kind of performative features make such an affective experience possible? Which mechanisms are used to create narrative interruptions and temporal discontinuities? Which strategies lead to the disruption of “meaningful” connections and the dispersal of the so-called coherent subject? We argue that the performances of these two fundamentally different artists are a good example of how the affective dimension of (performance) art decisively transforms the ways it is possible to perceive, think, say, or do.

**Keywords**

contemporary performance, literary theory, affect, meaning, Fredric Jameson

*Introduction: A(n) (Im)personal Experience*

In our humble experience, a not uncommon reaction to many works of contemporary performance and dance has been a simple outburst of incomprehension. We've witnessed this every once in a while. At the extreme, it is people walking out mid-show while muttering half-demonstratively: "I cannot understand any of this!" or "What is the meaning of this?" And we must admit that years back, this was our reaction as well. The frustration was deepened by our disposition as *literary scholars* since it is we who are by trade used to being proud of the many symbolic tools available for precisely *the extraction of meaning(s)*. But our disposition also urged us to stick with it and be persistent. And we slowly came to realize that the parts we understood the most, we enjoyed the least, and vice versa: the parts that we understood the least, we enjoyed the most. Furthermore, we became convinced that in a very specific way, comprehension and enjoyment might be mutually exclusive.

But what we've also come to understand is that "comprehension" and "meaning" are some of the least efficient registers for elaborating the real effect of many contemporary performances. "I cannot understand any of this!" / "What is the meaning of this?" – a semiotician would simply say that such is the reaction from somebody who uses the wrong code – that of the conventional drama of spoken theatre – to approach and interpret contemporary performance and dance. This is definitely true in most cases. But we suspect that sometimes, incomprehension is a symptom of a specific bodily state that in itself entails transformative potential. "I cannot understand any of this!" / "What is the meaning of this?" – we claim that sometimes, at the crucial fleeting moments that might also provoke this reaction, *there is no I that can do the understanding, no self-conscious subject that could extract the meaning*. And those are the moments – the impersonal moments *without an I* – that we have come to value the most while experiencing contemporary performance and dance.

According to our (im)personal experiences, described here as best we can, one such "crucial fleeting moments" occurred when we watched the video of Anna Teresa de Keersmaecker's

classic *Rosas Danst Rosas*.<sup>1</sup> A woman with short hair leans her head on a wooden chair, opens her eyes and sits up. The clock starts ticking, fragmented music in the background. We're in an empty, dreary hallway with a linoleum floor. A woman runs her right hand smoothly over her hair and neck and shifts a loosely fitted beige shirt to expose her right shoulder. She thoughtfully pulls her shirt back over her shoulder and turns her head sharply: it turns out that there are three other female performers in the corridor, also sitting on chairs – they look at each other and nod. This introduction activates a primary, *representational* register, engaging our meaning-making apparatus: the meaningful signs created by the bodies and the movements *represent* an allegory, a manifesto of the female body. Soon, however, the representation turns into a *presentation*: intellectual and rational interpretation gives way to aesthetic pleasure. We no longer focus on “What is the meaning of this?” but rather enjoy the mastery of the dynamics between bodies. The four women begin to move synchronously, the sharp horizontal axis alternates with smooth verticality: the left hand suddenly moves away from the body and retracts, the performers sink into a tangle, then again, the head sinks onto the right hand like Rodin's *Thinker*. Grace and strength, introspection and expressivity, eroticism and numbness, softness and aggression alternate. But suddenly the presentation turns into *performativity*. The grammar of the language of movement, which was established at the beginning, is subverted internally as different types of inconsistencies occur: unpredictable minute differences start to emerge in the orchestrated synchronicity of movements. These differences establish the potential to be immersed in pure rhythm. Symbolic meaning (representation) and aesthetic pleasure (presentation) are gradually disjointed, disrupted, and then altogether disintegrated, along with any traces of personal identity necessary to support it, as our own bodies are drawn into a rather different temporality of the flow of motion emanating from the performing bodies. This seemingly eternal moment doesn't last very long in linear time (about two or three minutes) since the interpretational apparatus inevitably starts to re-establish itself together with identity and the self. But when it has passed, it is difficult to escape the feeling that we have

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<sup>1</sup> See de Keersmaecker 2012.

been somehow fundamentally transformed.

The present essay is an attempt to theorize such moments and their impact in terms and concepts available in the literary theoretical toolkit. Literary scholars are used to using certain kinds of words to analyse a certain kind of use of words, and it is doubtful whether these kinds of words are able to exhaustively analyse contemporary performance – a form of art that very often uses no words at all, and very often deliberately attempts to disrupt the linguistic apparatus and its interpretive registers. Nevertheless, during the last half-century, and especially after the so-called affective turn, literary theory has been persistent in trying to tackle the strictly (im)personal, the non-linguistic or even non-cultural bodily experience that might be gained from an encounter with a work of art. Roland Barthes' well-known distinctions between the text of pleasure (*plaisir*) and the text of bliss (*la jouissance*) in literature,<sup>2</sup> or between *studium* and *punctum* in photography<sup>3</sup> are good examples of that, as are Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic notion of *le réel*,<sup>4</sup> and Derrida's deconstructive notion of *différance*.<sup>5</sup> *La jouissance*, *punctum*, *le réel* and *différance* are all motivated towards a move away from naming and meaning, from narrative desire, and from definable space-time, towards the disruption of the eternal linguistic machine, to get closer to the essence of phenomena or some primal state, to precisely a certain pure impersonal bodily experience. This gives us good grounds to believe that literary theory can also say something *meaningful* about the kind of elusive performative experience we've tried to describe above.

In the following, we will test this belief by reappropriating Fredric Jameson's recent theory of literary realism – and his specific concept of affect therein – to analyse the performative effect of two notable works of contemporary Estonian performance and dance: Karl Saks' *Planet Alexithymia* (2020) and Renate Keerd's *Pure Mind* (2013). We claim that the affective space and presence we experienced in these performances reduced us as spectators exclusively to a pure bodily present of impersonal consciousness, to a state that precedes language and

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<sup>2</sup> Barthes 1975.

<sup>3</sup> Barthes 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Zupančič 2000.

<sup>5</sup> Derrida 1973.

meaning where subjectivity is temporarily dissolved to a transformative effect. We elaborate what kind of performative features make such an affective experience possible. Which mechanisms are used to create narrative interruptions and temporal discontinuities? Which strategies lead to the disruption of “meaningful” connections and the dispersal of the so-called coherent subject? Despite the fact that Jameson’s theory of realism focuses on the nineteenth-century literary movement, it has been fruitfully appropriated to the analysis of other faculties and more contemporary topics numerous times.<sup>6</sup> Here, we find it especially useful for characterizing the effect of contemporary performance because of the special focus and role it attributes to the body. Methodologically, the application of Jameson’s theoretical framework in the following case studies has a lot in common with the phenomenological approach to performance because the latter, too, focuses on the bodily faculty, the sensory perception, and the subjective experience of the individual. Nevertheless, we have decided to stick with Jameson because his conceptual distinction between emotion and affect enables us to efficiently articulate the experiential moments when subjectivity and individuality themselves start to dissolve.<sup>7</sup>

*Affect and the Present of Consciousness: Fredric Jameson’s Antinomies of Realism*

Fredric Jameson’s *Antinomies of Realism* (2013) is a book on the dynamic inherent to nineteenth-century literary realism. In the course of establishing that dynamic, Jameson makes a useful distinction between emotion and affect. The distinction between categories related to various emotional states – between emotions, affects, feelings, moods and so on – has been the focus of thorough discussions in affect studies.<sup>8</sup> While acknowledging some of these

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<sup>6</sup> See Ojam 2023; Tomberg 2023.

<sup>7</sup> In our descriptions and analysis of *Pure Mind* and *Planet Alexithymia* we have mainly relied on individual viewings of video recordings obtained from the authors and compared our experiences over the course of multiple lengthy meetings. Nevertheless, both of us have experienced multiple performances of *Pure Mind* in 2013 and 2014 and remember the affect it generated. Only one of us has experienced *Planet Alexithymia* live in 2021, but the other has seen its recording multiple times. The descriptions of *Pure Mind* were initially written by Susi and then supplemented by Tomberg, with the descriptions of *Planet Alexithymia*, it is the other way around.

<sup>8</sup> See Ngai 2005; Flatley 2008; Gregg & Seigworth 2010; Brenkman 2020; for recent distinctions in relation to drama, theatre, and contemporary performance, see Tait 2022.

discussions, Jameson makes his own “very local and restricted” distinction for his own literary purposes.<sup>9</sup> We will now delineate the parts of his argument that are relevant to our discussion.

He begins his account on literary realism, as so many have done, by noticing the historical emergence, in the middle of the nineteenth century, of large blocks of descriptions or descriptive details that suddenly inhabited the novelistic form side-by-side with the more conventional “story” or “narrative” – anyone who has read Hugo, Balzac, Flaubert, or Zola can easily testify to this. For Jameson, the poetics and the inner dynamic of realism is upheld by a delicate balance between two different kinds of temporalities. The first is that of the story or the plot (Jameson prefers the French term *récit*), which entails the recital of finished events on a linear scale of time. *Récit* focuses on characters with their clearly defined personal identities, histories, and positions in the symbolic web of social relations. *Récit* is thus oriented towards fate: towards the meaningful realization of the protagonist’s personal destiny on a continuous temporal axis that runs from the past through the present towards the future.<sup>10</sup>

This linear temporality of the meaningful realization of the protagonist’s personal destiny is, in realism, frequently disrupted by lengthy blocks of description that, as Barthes once pointed out, seem to bear no immediate function with regard to the novel’s plot but nevertheless evoke *l’effet de réel*.<sup>11</sup> But Jameson says these descriptions represent another kind of temporality whose representation is also necessary to sufficiently convey the new nineteenth-century experience: that of the impersonal and eternal present of consciousness.<sup>12</sup> Sensations and perceptions that circulate in this sphere of the bodily present are *affective and impersonal*. They resist language and naming and remain autonomous with regard to attributes that functionally contribute to the formation of personal identity. It is here that Jameson, insisting upon the reifying effect of naming, differentiates between named emotion and affect: “The new implication is that affect (or its plural) somehow eludes language and its naming of things (and feelings), whereas emotion is pre-eminently a phenomenon sorted out into an array of names.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Jameson 2013, 29.

<sup>10</sup> Jameson 2013, 15–24.

<sup>11</sup> Barthes 1989.

<sup>12</sup> Jameson 2013, 26–9.

<sup>13</sup> Jameson 2013, 29.

Thus, if the category of emotions can be articulated through an array of names (joy, sadness, regret, and so on), affects in their fleeting essence inhabit an autonomous sphere outside symbolic language and nameable meaning. Corresponding to this distinction, Jameson also decisively separates personal identity from consciousness as such and outlines their respective modes of temporality. On the one hand, we have the narrative regime of the past-present-future, of personal identities and named emotions, and the symbolically meaningful realization of destinies. On the other hand, we have the spatial regime of the eternal present, of impersonal consciousness, of affects and (micro)singular bodily perceptions that resist language and symbolic meaning.

But in what sense do the descriptions in literary realism *not mean anything*? They are after all, like all literature, written in symbolic language. Jameson suggests that in a literary text, physical sensations can be represented in two distinct configurations: either as pure physical sensations or as physical sensations that already carry some kind of meaning or allegory. He outlines the development of nineteenth-century realism by comparing an earlier descriptive paragraph by Balzac to a later one by Flaubert: “For in Balzac everything that looks like a physical sensation—a musty smell, a rancid taste, a greasy fabric—always means something, it is a sign or allegory of the moral or social status of a given character: decent poverty, squalor, the pretensions of the parvenu, the true nobility of the old aristocracy, and so on. In short, it is not really a sensation, it is already a meaning, an allegory. By the time of Flaubert, these signs remain, but they have become stereotypical; and the descriptions register a density beyond such stereotypical meanings.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, by the time of Flaubert, the descriptions have ceased to designate the meaningful structures of social hierarchies and started to register the pure bodily present of affect. And despite the fact that in his book, Jameson focuses on affect and bodily experience to discuss nineteenth century literary realism, it is remarkable that he applies more or less the same theoretical framework to emphasize the centrality of bodily experience in twenty-first century reality: “I believe that the ‘contemporary’ or postmodern ‘perpetual

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<sup>14</sup> Jameson 2013, 33.

present' is better characterized as a 'reduction to the body', inasmuch as the body is all that remains in any tendential reduction of experience to the present as such. But I would not necessarily want to argue that in such temporal isolation the body's senses gain a heightened existence, something that is more likely to happen when, for whatever reason, one sense is given priority over the others (...). Rather the isolated body begins to know more global waves of generalized sensations, and it is these which, for want of a better word, I will here call affect."<sup>15</sup> Contemporary reality, Jameson seems to hint, is to an even greater extent framed by the structural dominance of the impersonal consciousness of the bodily present. And we have a strong temptation to assert that contemporary performance and dance is especially attuned to articulating that present, and to engaging with the "more global waves of generalized sensations" that it primarily consists of and generates.

It is here that we can reappropriate Jameson's definition of affect in his theory of realism to describe our experience with contemporary performance. Namely, the ones we've enjoyed the most have, however temporarily, managed to disrupt our linguistic apparatus and its interpretive registers, dislocated us from the linear time of meaningful destinies and named emotions, dissolved our personal identity – and *pushed us or drawn us*, for a lack of a better word, exclusively into the affective bodily present of impersonal consciousness. And in that immediate bodily present, there's no use for interpretive registers like "understanding" or "comprehension." And no use in asking what it means. In the following section, we will analyse our experience of two notable contemporary Estonian performances to detect the poetic features that contribute to evoking the affective bodily present in focus.

Since the bodily present we've tried to describe with Jameson's help ultimately resists language, it is very difficult to bring artistic examples that everyone (or hardly anyone) can agree on. In our case, it's not that the choice of examples is too subjective. On the contrary, the conditions for the dissolution of personal identity, or what we've called desubjectivation in our title, are themselves *impersonal* or *pre-subjective*. They are largely dependent on the singularity

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<sup>15</sup> Jameson 2013, 28.



of one's physical set-up, and its relative innate availability/readiness for being drawn into the *particular configurations of attention and influence* enacted by the performative bodies in the room. In this sense, we can only beg for identification on the basis of possible similar experience.

*Renate Keerd's Pure Mind*

Renate Keerd (b. 1978) is an eminent, award-winning Estonian choreographer and theatre director, whose works are characterized by physicality, the absurd, social awareness, and humour. At first glance, a large part of her productions may resemble school theatre études stacked on top of each other, where at the same time, somewhat paradoxically, both fragmentation and connectedness emerge – scenes change at dizzying speed, but metaphors and symbols merge into each other, slide into each other, before more concrete patterns of meaning start to reveal themselves. In the performance *Pure mind*,<sup>16</sup> the relationship between the figures becomes evident in the very first minutes: the hunched performer wrapped in gauze crawls onto the stage, trembling and slightly struggling, starts to jump, gets up on his hands, does reverse somersaults and cartwheels. He resembles some kind of a creature, the spectator is faced with a hyperbole, a symbol, a stereotype whose layers of meaning remain strictly unclear.

As soon as a specific meaning starts to emerge, the figure changes direction or is completely replaced by a new one. During the first half an hour, there is a whole range of contrasting, grotesque images on the stage: a cloud of smoke or a white creature resembling a spider's web descends on the stage, a Quasimodo-like performer with a water bucket wraps himself in a web and turns it into his beard; three performers in white coats appear, with black tapes on their faces instead of beards and eyebrows, and green plastic bags on their heads, which they begin to wave, turning into trees swaying in the wind; a woman crawling into a man's pants; a man and a woman frolicking and chasing each other on stage; a loudly laughing woman eating a green plastic bag; a woman in a gallant black outfit, with a *ridicule* in her hand, tapping on a

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<sup>16</sup> The title can be read in both English and Estonian, simultaneously containing (1) pure mind, (2) the injunction to bite the first-person singular.

black plate with her high heels; performers drumming with sticks on a black plate; performers eating a single apple together at the same time.

The *récit* of Keerd's productions is almost always subordinated to fragmented representation. Poetic space-time is so displaced that the whole composition can be subjected to all kinds of readings, which seem equally motivated: it is a constant transformation and demolition of gender and status hierarchies, of late capitalism, and of the patriarchal way of thinking. However, as Jameson wrote about Flaubert, the driving force behind the demolition of these hierarchies is the (almost meaningless) stereotype – by nature too common to refer to anything except its bare existence – which ceaselessly disrupts the (meaningful coherence of) narrative. Thus, literary and theatre critic Alvar Loog aptly states that *Pure Mind* is an “uncompromising take-no-prisoners type of artwork that empties its cartridge into the audience. Keerd's playfully provocative performance abandons most of the conventional meaning-making mechanisms and (...) loses the slightest connection with literature and literariness, which have traditionally been the only conceivable foundation of any theatrical work for centuries.”<sup>17</sup> Indeed, this kind of figure creation refuses interpretive shackles, and thereby the potential for affect is created, which avoids the linguistic naming of things and feelings, and provides the spectator the opportunity to physically immerse in the movements.

The underlying poetic method of *Pure Mind* is the incessant dislocation of stereotypes and everyday details (gauze, red tape, inflated condoms, hats-gloves, blower, etc.). All kinds of everyday materials and objects, gestures, and situations appear on the stage, and are taken out of the ordinary context of their use. The linear sense of time is constantly broken by the transformation of details. This kind of sliding over, merging into each other, provides ground for more static scenes. Thus, two men look into each other's eyes, one puts his fingers in the other's mouth, takes a piece of yarn from there and starts to pull it out of his mouth, moves away from the other performer, slowly continues to pull the yarn and gathers it together; at the end, the two men approach each other, it looks like the scene could go on forever, the yarn that

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<sup>17</sup> Loog 2014.

comes out of the performer's mouth seems infinitely long. However, suddenly it ends, and the performer falls to the floor. The scene lasts about six minutes, but in contrast to the previous incessant fragmentation and displacement, this period seems to contain everything that has been before and everything that is yet to come. Then – and for about the same duration – a strangely laughing and somewhat insecurely coquetting woman in a white coat appears on stage, fixing red tape onto the floor.

Fairly soon, the performance returns to its earlier dynamics of figure-making mechanism: a male and female body are intertwined at a fashion show; the performers move grotesquely back and forth until the last of them collapses, exhausted and bloody; a strange headless creature appears on stage; a woman in high heels takes the red tape from the floor, ties it in a bundle and throws it at a man's face; the performers appear on stage in theatrical masks with intense make-up; the performers' sweaters are stuffed with inflated condoms, creating hyperbolized male and female body stereotypes; a man and a woman start to kiss each other, but the woman turns into a saxophone that the man plays; for a while a woman in a gauze dress jumps on stage; the gauze is pushed under the performer's jacket and the performer is lifted to the ceiling; performers in white clothes wear winter hats, scarves and gloves, and glide across the stage, and so on.

The prerequisite for the experience of pure bodily present in Keerd's – as well as, for that matter, de Keersmaecker's – production is that initially, we are to some extent in the domain of symbolic order, of linguistic naming, of *recit*. But it is precisely the initial actualization of the allegoric or representational mode of interpretation that ultimately enables its own renunciation. The dynamic here is exactly the opposite of what we often experience when watching the so-called material theatre, where the exploration of physical matter, the material experience of the performers is more important than the telling of the story. For example, in the production *Fluids* (authors and directors Juni Klein, Jarkko Partanen; Sõltumatu Tantsu Lava, and Wauhaus, 2018) the stage is covered with powdered lubricant, which the performers have to start learning like a foreign bodily language: they are nervous and do not feel comfortable in the new environment, their bodies gradually enter into a dialogue with the lubricant as the central material. Very quickly, however, the new environment becomes safe, there is nothing

new about it anymore, the slipperiness becomes the internal rule, the normality of the performance. Or as in Tiit Ojasoo and Ene-Liis Semper's performance *NO 43 Filth* (NO 99, 2015): the stage is covered with a layer of mud, nine performers rhythmically jerk their bodies, the audience enters the hall, and for about ten minutes the performers continue their physical jerks in a more and more intense fashion. The material is unknown, the movements are unhinged from their meaning and the pure materiality of movements is revealed. In *Filth*, too, one can perceive how the eternal present of the beginning of the performance begins to recede gradually, when the dirt becomes a self-evident condition that defines the space-time of the play. The unknown, the inaccessible gets a clearer character, obtains a point of reference, and starts to *represent something*. These two examples illustrate how the conceptualizing, narrativizing impulse of meaning-making inevitably dispels the initially established pure bodily present of the impersonal consciousness. The performance now wants to tell us something about our world, matter begins to mean something, and our bodily involvement weakens while our interpretive urge gains strength.

Keerd's performance, in turn, creates an experience that could be compared to several works by Romeo Castellucci: metaphors and symbols are piled on top of each other, as a result of which they begin to empty, generalize, mix, and lose their outlines. Incessantly, narrativity begins to rear its head, the layers of meaning start to concretize, the narrative desire begins to materialize, but suddenly – and this is always the case with Keerd – we are deprived of temporal and referential concreteness, the hardly established meaning being all of a sudden completely cancelled. Keerd constantly straddles the line between meaningful representation and radical absence of meaning. Her performance is an incessant oscillation between the establishment and the cancellation of meaning: the meaning is within reach, it is almost possible to grasp it, but everything remains only an *almost*.

What happens to us as a result of this constant disruption of the drive towards meaning? As soon as we are immersed in the poetic logic of the performance, we completely give up the search for subjective meaning and let the rhythm of the alternation of self-emptying figures lead our bodies to the Bergsonian *durée* or the Lacanian Real of the impersonal present of

consciousness. Instead of the metaphoric and meaningful reinforcement of our personal identities, Keerd's performance thus affords us a desubjectivized, affective, bodily participation in what Jameson called "more globalized waves of generalized sensations".

*Karl Saks' Planet Alexithymia*

Our second example, markedly different from the first but leading to a similar bodily experience, is an episode from *Planet Alexithymia*, a 2020 performance by Karl Saks that premiered in Kanuti Gildi SAAL. The author – a highly praised freelance dancer, choreographer, director, and composer born in 1982 – has described his performance as "a science fictional radio drama and spectacle, which draws information from experiments, procedures, syndromes and diagnoses".<sup>18</sup> The material space of the performance is made up of a white floor that curves upward in the background, turning into a wall. There is a sole object in this space – an examination chair, in the forefront, slightly to the left. The performative space is established by the choreographed movement of two male bodies – those of Karl Saks and Ruslan Stepanov, wearing black sports clothing and white socks.

There are roughly six or seven sequences in the ninety-minute performance. The first (8') presents the over-lit all-white stage set-up against the background of micropolyphonic music reminiscent of Ligety's in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. The second (11') contrasts this with total darkness, an ambient drone, and a decidedly unemotional audio-account of the nature of an exotic, vivid, colourful, and happy planet. In the third (11'), Ruslan Stepanov slowly takes different standing angles on the stage in silence. In the fourth (30'), Karl Saks performs a clinical examination of Ruslan Stepanov. In the fifth (10'), they deconstruct the examination chair and follow a small mechanical bird that hops on the floor, flapping its wings. In the sixth (20') they wrestle, using what look like authentic grabs and holds.

The sequence that is of particular interest to us is the fourth, which is also the longest in the performance. The white stage is over-lit and quiet throughout. Ruslan Stepanov (R) is sitting in the examination chair, Karl Saks (S) starts to examine him, with calm and calculated

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<sup>18</sup> See <https://saal.ee/en/performance/planet-alexithymia-261/> (17.10.2023).

movements. The sequence of movements can be described roughly as follows: K sets R's hands to different positions in his lap. Slowly checks his shoulder symmetry. Examines the tension of his outstretched arms. Tests his coordination with an exercise involving an alternating movement between K's finger and R's nose. R then places his right palm on top of his left, alternating both sides, repeating the movement several times. K then thoroughly examines R's right hand. Gradually controls the functioning of his wrist joint. The functioning of his elbow joint. Snaps the elbow back into the joint. Checks his left hand: the functioning of his wrist joint, the functioning of his elbow joint. They touch each other's hands: fingers, thumbs, fists, palms. K then checks the reflexes of R's right hand: forearm, elbow. Tests his pain tolerance: forearm, elbow. Same with the left hand: wrist, elbow. Stabs the surface of R's right forearm and index finger with a needle-like object; R mutters something flat and unintelligible in response. K repeats the move and R responds – action and reaction, four to five times. The same with the left forearm, index finger. And then the same thing again, repeatedly, with a cotton swab-like object: both hands, forearm and finger. K produces a tuning fork and causes it to vibrate. Places it in different places on both of R's hands. Repeats the move: four to five times. K examines the flexibility of R's right little finger, R mutters in response. K examines the flexibility of R's right wrist. The same with the left hand: little finger, wrist. K then takes a few steps back, looks at R from a distance. Then approaches again. Examines the flexibility of R's right leg. Then R himself begins to examine both of his outstretched legs while sitting. Then again, K touches the surface of R's right leg in different places with a needle-like object: thigh, foot, and toes. The same with his left leg. The same again with a cotton ball-like object, on both legs. K then taps the tuning fork on R's forehead, R mutters in response. The same with the tip of his toe; with the same response. K then tests the plantar reflexes of R's left foot with a sharpish object. The same with the left foot. K adjusts the examination chair, makes R sit upright. Judges him from a distance. Fixes his head in different positions with both hands. Covers one of his eyes with one of his hands, R answers with the same. K raises his hand; R covers the other eye. K moves a sharp object in front of R from top to bottom and from right to left, closer and further, in different directions. R follows it with his eyes. K touches R's right

shoulder with both hands. R mumbles something longer. K touches R's left shoulder, they talk to each other very quietly. K raises his hands and moves away, turns around a few times, rubs his hands and starts to come closer again. Strokes the right arm of the chair. Fixes R's head in his hands. Pushes R slowly against the backrest. Distances from the chair.

The whole sequence lasts about thirty minutes, and since it is thematically set up as *an examination*, we are, at the beginning, firmly in the meaningful realm of the *récit*: the procedure has a clearly defined subject, object, spectators, and a narrative pull towards the expectation of *a result*. Nevertheless, in a few minutes, the measured technicality of the movements, the calm of the facial expressions, the slowness of the bodies, the patience of the repetitions, the clinical cleanliness of the choreography, the minimalist black-and-white of the set-up, the lengthy period of silence and, in the end, the sheer duration of the whole episode – all these contribute to the decisive dissolution of this meaningful linear temporality, to the gradual weakening of narrative expectation, to the subtraction of our sensory perception from the clamour, speed, and relative messiness of everyday interactions wherein our personal identities are used to making up meaningful stories about themselves. The meaningful connection between the past, present, and future is disrupted and replaced by an eternal bodily present where there are no longer clearly distinct subjects, objects, spectators, and narrative expectations but only the impersonal immanence of singular sensory perceptions, a field of unnamed emotions encompassing and penetrating all bodies present in the room.

In Saks' case, a crucial factor in the establishment of this space-time of pure bodily present is the *patient and persistent* attention to the specifics and behaviour of minute bodily details: the emphasis on the sensitivity of fingers and toes, the physiognomy of palms, the flexibility of elbow joints, the symmetry of shoulders, the rigidity of neck muscles, the speed of plantar reflexes, and so on. Over the course of this heightened attention and emphasis, attention to the (subjective) wholeness of the performers' bodies, as well as to the totality of the stage set-up and the narrative progression, gradually reduces. In other words, we no longer focus on the bigger picture at these levels, but only on the microscopic and relatively isolated physical details in the centre of movement. As the sense of the (subjective) wholeness of the performers'

bodies weakens, our own personal identity gradually dissolves as well, giving way to the autonomy of impersonal, micro-singular sensory perceptions of particular organs and body parts, now no longer observed or examined from a (scientific or medical) distance, but rather *immediately perceived* as the potential range of available perceptions, as the awareness of “more global waves of generalized sensations”.

We have deliberately chosen to focus on a single scene in *Planet Alexithymia* to try to flesh out its potential as fully as possible. It is not our intention to claim that the performance as a whole does not constitute a meaningful narrative, or that the spoken parts as well as the title do not offer ample possibilities for symbolic interpretation. Nevertheless, the fleeting moment of powerful bodily present described above is the most significant to us here: *Planet Alexithymia* reduced us to a state of impersonal consciousness that precedes language and meaning where subjectivity is temporarily dissolved or taken apart – and later put back together in a reconfigured way when the linguistic apparatus of symbolic meaning inevitably re-establishes itself. Alexithymia is a subclinical phenomenon involving a lack of emotional awareness or, more specifically, difficulty in identifying and describing feelings and in distinguishing feelings from the bodily sensations of emotional arousal. The pronounced topic of the performance is thus in fact very serious and sinister. But from our perspective, this episode from Saks’ work effaces emotional awareness in favour of a heightened awareness of a different kind – namely, of the affective undercurrents that are always at work underneath wherever a body is. The French philosopher Jacques Rancière has said that art’s main function is to redistribute the sensible – to transform the ways it is possible to perceive, think, say, or do.<sup>19</sup> Works like *Planet Alexithymia* reveal how much of that transformation takes place on an affective level.

### *Concluding Remarks*

We have distinguished two very different examples of contemporary performance from the horizon of Frederic Jameson’s treatment of affect. *Pure Mind* is characterized by multiplicity: baroque imagery, kaleidoscopic colour, *élan*, dizzying pace; *Planet Alexithymia*, instead, by

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<sup>19</sup> Rancière 2004.



clinical precision, absolute monochrome, slowness, statics, patience, and technicality. The former demands a blurred, chaotic, all-encompassing attention from the spectator, while the latter requires a focused attention to detail, to every single movement. The poetic dominant of the first is primarily established on a compositional level through the (de)construction of metaphor-symbols, while in the case of the second, the focus is on the non-metaphoric, material gesture, and movement itself.

Despite all their differences, these two productions have for us resulted in a similar experience: the emergence of the potential to reduce us exclusively to a pure bodily present, to a state that precedes language and meaning where subjectivity is temporarily dissolved to a transformative effect. What is it that these productions ultimately have in common? The decisive factor here is that by creating narrative interruptions and disruptions, fragmentation and repetitions, accelerations and decelerations, these works undermine their own symbolic language and free the spectators from the injunction of meaning-making, offering a pure bodily present as a counterweight. For literary scholars, this might resemble reading a language poem where meaning is based primarily on the *material* similarity and/or difference of the signifiers, in other words, on the radical self-referentiality of poetic language.

If the spoken word of the conventional drama can lift us to a transcendent meaning or truth, then works like *Planet Alexithymia* and *Pure Mind* take the opposite direction: they can draw us to the pure immanence of impersonal consciousness which is in constant becoming but which we nevertheless lack a clear access to, since it is always overwritten with language, meaning, and personal identity, and cannot escape them for too long. Here again, a semiotician could claim that the emergence of such an experience requires the acquisition of the right code – and this is probably correct. Perhaps it is the literary scholar's paranoid desire to use the poetic toolbox and bring out the interpretive inexhaustibility of a work of art that works against the narrative injunction in the case of such productions? Be that as it may, in any case, experiencing the pure bodily present requires relinquishing the drive towards meaning.

Contemporary performance has often led us to an introspective path where we begin to doubt whether we are cultured and educated enough. This is no longer a question of "What does

it all mean?” because subconsciously we are suppressing the question “Am I cultured enough?” Thus, it is not rare that one discovers that she has gone through all kinds of interpretative possibilities, has already given up the effort a quarter of an hour ago, and has started thinking completely different thoughts. The same thing can sometimes happen when we enter a contemporary art exhibition and face a huge mute object, waiting for a long time for it to speak to us. And then, giving up, we turn to the complex but comforting syntax of the curatorial text.

Exclusively experiencing the perpetual bodily present, the Jamesonian affect, becomes possible by maintaining performativity as an experiential possibility. It takes *studium* and educated attention for the attention to begin to dissolve – as has happened in our case, watching Keerd’s and Saks’ productions – and the paranoid gaze to begin to eat itself from the inside. In other words, in order to unlock the potential of the experience of the pure bodily present, one must take a step back, give up civility, one’s cultural surface layer that has been built up for so long – and embrace one’s animality. And isn’t art almost the only place where it is possible to do that safely?

### *Acknowledgments*

Research for this article was supported by Estonian Research Council’s grant PRG636.

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### *Performances*

*Filth.* Theatre NO99. Directors-Art Directors: Ene-Liis Semper, Tiit Ojasoo. Bodywork: Jüri Nael. Light Design: Petri Tuhkanen. Musical Design: Jakob Juhkam, Tiit Ojasoo, Ene-Liis Semper. Cast: Marika Vaarik, Helena Pruuli, Rea Lest, Rasmus Kaljupärv, Ragnar Uustal, Gert Raudsep, Simeoni Sundja, Jörgen Liik and Reimo Sagor. Premiere 17.10.2015, Theatre NO99.

*Fluids.* Sõltumatu Tantsu Lava. Authors and directors Juni Klein, Jarkko Partanen. Performers: Karoline Suhhov, Keithy Kuuspu, Karolin Poska, Sigrid Savi, Joonas Tagel. Sound designer: Heidi Soidinsalo. Scenographer and light designer: Samuli Laine. Costume designer: Laura Haapakangas. Technician: Marko Odar. Production: Sõltumatu Tantsu Lava, W A U H A U S. Premiere 3.5.2018, Sõltumatu Tantsu Lava.

*Planet Alexithymia.* Karl Saks' performance. Author, sound design: Karl Saks. Dramaturg: Maike Lond. On stage: Ruslan Stepanov, Karl Saks. Artist: Johannes Säre. Light: Henry Kasch. Project management: Maarja Kalmre. Co-producers: Kanuti Gildi SAAL, e-lektron. Premiere 1.7.2020, Baltoscandal Festival.

*Pure Mind.* Renate Keerd's performance. Author, Director, Artist, Sound Design: Renate Keerd. Costumes: Epp Peedumäe & Salong Manna Couture. On stage: Liisa Tetsmann, Taavi Rei, Maarja Roolaht, Gerda-Anette Allikas, Imre Õunapuu. Premiere 27.9.2013, Tartu Uus Teater.