

TEO ALA-RUONA & THE WORKING GROUP

Damnat

2027



Photo: Vikram Prahdan

CONCEPT

Damnat is a performance for two performers, and a chef. The work continues Ala-Ruona's long-term practice and artistic research into the effects of sociopolitical norms on how we relate to and understand the body. It follows Ala-Ruona's previous works *Lacuna* (2021) and *Parachorale* (2024). *Damnat* is a co-commission with **Zodiak – Center for New Dance**, premiering in May 2027.

Damnat explores the philosophical and poetic possibilities of non-normative embodiment, transforming theory and autobiographical experience into dance through the performers' embodied research.

Damnat directs this research toward medicalized ways of thinking that categorically divide the body into parts, focusing particularly on the brain and the gut. *Damnat* explores pathologization and diagnosis as methods of organising and separating body parts. How do classifications of body parts as normal or pathological manifest as experiences of discontinuity or fragmentation in the body? What does it look like to transcend categorizing thought—linguistically, physically, symbolically? Ala-Ruona approaches these questions through two personal experiences—

intestinal pain and trans identity—reflecting them against theory and philosophy. The research behind the piece addresses the history of pathologizing trans people, but the work ultimately expands to consider broader questions about conceptions of the human. The piece is a performative inquiry into the societal body.

Damnat is a multi-year research on how the language used to describe bodies begins to define the subject, organizing the body — and all its parts — according to societal norms. In the process performers attempt to “digest” these words through the body’s digestive processes, allowing a more indeterminate sense of self to take shape. The goal is to open deep para-poetic modes of expression in the performing body while dismantling projected, categorizing interpretations.

Trans embodiment has often been approached in psychological discourse as a neuroanatomical disorder—through structural differences in the brain, including disturbances in neuronal networks in the hypothalamus. In *Damnat*, this “disturbance” represents the performers’ capacity to transform limiting and categorising thought into a merged, holistic, and category-transcending bodily experience. Likewise, the gut becomes a site where categorical thinking dissolves, breaking down and mashing like food. The term “second brain” refers to the nervous system of the gut, which is connected to the brain. In *Damnat*, the brain and the gut are both the subject and the material: tools for research and choreographic practice. On stage, the chef prepares and serves food that supports the gut microbiome’s breaking-down power, such as fermented products.

Ala-Ruona is the director of the performance and one of the performers. On stage Ala-Ruona is joined by dancer/choreographer **Mina Tomic**. The performance also features a food artist **Pola Sutryk**, who prepares and serves food on stage. The dramaturg is **Ami Karvonen**, sound designer is **Tuukka Haapakorpi**, light designer is **Sofia Palillo**, costume and spatial designer is **Teo Paaer** and producer is **Sanna Ritvanen**. Throughout the process, Ala-Ruona is mentored by Associate Professor of Gender Studies **Julian Honkasalo** to refine the work’s historico-theoretical foundation.

ON THE PERFORMANCE MATERIALS AND RESEARCH

Architecturally, *Damnat* examines the hospital as a modernist institution designed to diagnose and classify bodies, separating the “sick” from the healthy. The research includes visits to 20th-century hospitals, which have influenced the set design, evoking abandoned medical interiors and a hospital room. The set is constructed using surplus materials. The audience is seated on three sides of the performance space. In the center is a tiled stage referencing the hygienic spaces of hospitals. At one end of the space stands a large welded table referencing an autopsy table, on which the chef cuts abstract jelly sculptures referencing various organs, which are eventually consumed by the performers and audience members. An artistic dialogue about food and digestion, as well as the symbolic potential of food between Ala-Ruona and Sutryk, becomes a central part of the work’s research.

Damnat delves into the performers’ brains and digestive systems, searching for a corporeality that transcends symbols and words. Karvonen’s dramaturgical precision combines with both Ala-Ruona’s and Tomic’s finely tuned performance skills, honed over a long rehearsal period. The choreography emerges from digestion, from holding the brain and applying pressure to it, and from the imagined repositioning of body parts. The performers articulate a movement language in which the positions of body parts are continuously renegotiated. The piece combines growling,

singing, heavy metal, and minimalist composition. The script, co-written between Ala-Ruona and Karvonen, focuses on the brain's internal dialogues, which gradually unravel into incomprehensible language.

Ala-Ruona works with extensive source material. One of the key philosophical foundations in *Damnat* is **Deleuze** and **Guattari's** cult work *Anti-Oedipus*, particularly their concept of the "body without organs" and schizoanalysis, which is reflected on in relation to the pathologization of the trans body. Ala-Ruona asks how gendered and diagnosed symbolic meanings assigned to different body parts have shaped their significance in particular ways, and how the categorical division of the body into gendered or psychologically "disturbed" parts affects our understanding of its potential.

In addition to Deleuze and Guattari's theoretical texts, the work dialogues with the plays of **Samuel Beckett** and **Sarah Kane**. Ala-Ruona studies their texts, which break down language and continuously navigate the extreme boundaries of body and mind. Language—and its power to categorize, as well as its potential for reimagining—is at the center of *Damnat*. Language and food symbolize each other in the piece. In the world of the performance, words are "force-fed" to the performing bodies in the form of food. However, during the performance, these words are ingested again as food and metabolized, breaking down and mashing categories.

PREMIERE

Zodiak, Pannuhalli, Helsinki, May 2027

PRELIMINARY SPATIAL INFO

- adaptable to different sized spaces
- audience seated around the stage on 3 sides
- 50 - 400 audience members depending on the space: it is possible to discuss and adapt to other venue dimensions and audience capacity ratios with the Artist and set designer.

WORKING GROUP

Director, performer: Teo Ala-Ruona

Performer: Mina Tomic

Chef: Pola Sutryk

Dramaturg: Ami Karvonen

Sound designer: Tuukka Haapakorpi

Light designer: Sofia Palillo

Spatial and costume designer: Teo Paaer

Producer: Sanna Ritvanen

PRELIMINARY SCHEDULE

Year 2025:

Preliminary production, applying for residencies and grants, seeking co-producers. Inviting musicians, and a chef to the process. Writing texts in collaboration with Karvonen, and preliminary development of performer practices. Initial design work with sound, set, and costumes.

January - June 2026

Residency work, refining performers' work, choreography, and dramaturgy. Initial rehearsals with the chef.

August - December 2026:

Residencies. More rehearsals with the chef. Finalizing the script with Karvonen.

January - May 2027:

Intensive rehearsal period. Premiere of the work in Zodiak, Pannuhalli, in Helsinki.

June 2027 onwards:

Touring with the work.

BIO

Teo Ala-Ruona is an interdisciplinary artist based in Helsinki, working within the expanded field of performance. His practice explores the potential of somatic fiction to shift our perceptions of the human body, navigating the intersections of linguistic, semiotic, and biological existence. In using the performing body as a site for speculative narratives, he investigates how alternative stage politics can transform the perceptual frameworks of both performer and audience. Grounded in theory and embodied scores, his work treats the performing body as both a reflective surface and an active agent in negotiating inherited categories.

His work derives enjoyment from the absurd, the transgressive, and the impure, weaving carefully crafted audience engagement with deeply embodied performance practice. It balances emotional and psychological tension with moments of humor and tenderness.

Ala-Ruona's work has recently been shown in **The Biennale Architettura 2025** (Venice), **Performa Biennial** (USA), **The Vilnius Biennial of Performance Art** (LT), **The Finnish National Gallery Kiasma** (FI), **The Institute of Contemporary Arts in London** (UK), **Sequences** festival (FI) and **Toaster** (DK). In the spring 2025 he will show new work in **the 19th International Architecture Exhibition in Venice**, in the **Nordic Countries Pavilion**.

MORE INFO OF THE ARTIST

Website: <https://teoalaruona.net>

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/teoalaruona/>

Email: teo.alaruona@gmail.com

Email of Ala-Ruona's producer: sanna.ritvanen@gmail.com

TEASER

<https://vimeo.com/1109095644/38ccb59fac?share=copy>

PHOTOS

All photos by Vikram Pradhan.

