

# Thinking Through Circus



This could be what a conversation is—  
simply the outline of a becoming.  
Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts*

# *Table of Contents*

- 7 – 15      Thinking (Through Circus) Together  
*Bauke Lievens, Quintijn Ketels,  
Sebastian Kann & Vincent Focquet*
- \*\*\*
- 17 – 29      Making Space, Space, Space  
*Camille Paycha & Bauke Lievens*
- 31 – 39      Dialogues of Disobedience  
*Dana Dugan*
- 41 – 53      Footnotes on Mastery  
*Vincent Focquet, Mardulier  
en Deprez, Francesca Hyde  
& Josef Stiller*
- 55 – 64      A Dark Liquid Begins to Drip...  
*Graphic Novel by  
Natalie Oleinik*
- 67 – 77      Interrogating Fantasy  
*Sebastian Kann & Natalie Oleinik*
- 79 – 86      A Circus Facing the World  
*Anna Tauber*

- 89 – 102      Leeway, or How to Move (on) From Here  
*Floor Van Leeuwen, Alexandre Fray,  
Iris Carta & Bauke Lievens*
- 105 – 121      “I often have the feeling that words are  
not enough...”  
*Monotypes by Aline Breucker*
- 123 – 132      Writing to Erase  
*Aline Breucker & Quintijn Ketels*
- 135 – 141      A Plastic Text  
*Fran-Tank*
- 143 – 153      Mother Nature Says Goodbye  
*François Bouvier (& Sebastian Kann)*
- 155 – 165      Some Queer Notes on Doing Dramaturgy  
with Love  
*Sebastian Kann (& François Bouvier)*
- \*\*\*
- 167 – 169      Works cited
- 171 – 175      Biographies



# Thinking (Through Circus) Together

Thinking starts from what they call a certain *charme*, a spark that lights up between people, turning them into friends. This

friendship is not based on sharing the same ideas, but instead inheres in and arises from the momentum of having something to say to one another; such momentums result not only in thought, but also in thoughts that move.

— Maaïke Bleeker, 'Thinking No-One's Thought'

## Doing, thinking, doing

Thinking can happen without words.

It can produce thoughts without language, unfolding in matter or in bodies. It can happen between a circus artist and an apparatus, for example. Or it can materialise as circus movement. Indeed, in circus we think *through* the body: through corporeality, we shape and perform relations, feelings, states and ideas. The physical practice of circus is, in that sense, an embodied thinking practice. Yet physical circus practice and thinking are often imagined to happen in *separate* spaces and at *separate* times. It is through this separation that circus tricks are worked and perceived as 'thoughtless' physical doings which can be filled with any meaning or content. Consequently, the thoughts and values already present and performed in the repertoire of circus disciplines become hidden from view and are made undiscussable.

Ours is a world in upheaval, and artists are actors in the public sphere. When we position ourselves in that sphere (e.g. when we make work), we do so by *crafting* what it is we want to share and perform. Circus tricks are never, therefore, neutral 'doings': each one is a proposition, a 'thoughtful' articulation of a particular relation between body and world, between instance and norm, and between performance and spectator. *Thinking Through Circus* wants to tend to these embodied relationships between contemporary circus and today's world, defending circus as a field in which experimental thinking is already happening and can continue to happen. Doing so, with this book we hope to contribute to a more sustainable circus, expanding both accountability and agency within our field.

## Asking, dialoguing

*Thinking Through Circus* gathers tendialogues with and between circus artists. Each entry bears witness to how a specific circus practice is (also) a practice of critical thinking. The thinking done in this book happens in and through dialogue. We consider dialogue to be inherently political: the ways in which we are able to *think* together shape, to a great extent, what we are able to *do* together (Bohm 2004). Conversely, the material possibilities of dialogue affect and delimit the thinkable and sayable. The spaces in which we think together, the constellations in which we do it, its temporalities and mediations: all of these elements shape the way we think together. Dialogue, then, is not simply about language: it, too, is an emphatically embodied practice.

This book came into being in the context of *The Circus Dialogues*, an artistic research project in which we, the four researchers and editors of this book, first found each other around questions of freedom and agency in the circus field of which we are part. As circus makers, performers and witnesses, each of us experience recurring frictions (or even a certain violence) in our practices. Repeatedly encountering resistance while attempting to move forward, to create change, or to point out a problem (or even to just continue unchanged), we are bound to ask ourselves: why and how do we continue practising? For whose benefit? And urgently: where can we find the space and energy to keep on keeping on?

Adopting the image of the 'brick wall', feminist scholar Sara Ahmed helps us to envision the blockages we discover within our field and institutions when attempting to challenge the norm. Especially in a field structured by narratives of freedom, both on and behind the stage, doing so can be hard work. We noticed that while circus performance often uses technical virtuosity to (re)present freedom, in reality, circus bodies tend to be (come) highly disciplined, normed, shaped and sculpted by fixed (sometimes internalised) commands. At the foundation of the virtuoso body is a relation of domination that actually grants very little freedom. Moreover, the freedom that circus performance tends to stage through its focus on technical virtuosity often relies on the mastery of and control over things, animals and other bodies. These are just some of the myths of freedom from any social and physical constraint that (contemporary) circus continues to spin around itself, making the tacit disciplining that goes on harder to see.



In a field invested in portraying itself and its artistic practices as an autonomous free zone on the fringes of society, some will even claim that these blockages don't exist at all. This is why, according to Ahmed, brick walls are so hard: "You come up against what others do not see; and (this is even harder) you come up against what others are often invested in not seeing." (2017:138) So, we ask ourselves, what does circus hide in order to stage freedom? And, secondly, how are these brick walls maintained and held in place? *Thinking Through Circus*, then, is a collection of experimental encounters between circus practice and theory, each time guided by a few interwoven questions: What does contemporary circus do? What does it perform? What conventions and norms structure our field? How can critical thinking help us see beyond those norms? And, finally, how can both circus and critical thinking fuel our fantasies for the future, opening up space(s) to act?

### Caring, writing, speculating

Often, we tend to think of critical thinking as something done at a distance. But the dialogues in this

book suggest otherwise: we are never completely inside nor entirely outside the systems and discourses we critique, just as we are never completely inside nor entirely outside the shelters we build. There is, however, a long history within academia of researchers projecting their own agendas and theoretical frameworks on the humans and human-implicated assemblages they study, regardless of whether those agendas and frameworks are shared by the studied. Such gestures are often endorsed by the institutional power of the university within today's discursive and symbolic economy. The research to which this book bears witness is of an *artistic* nature, and we are not academics *per se*. But being aware of the institutionally embedded position we find ourselves in as artistic researchers and editors, we asked ourselves what it would mean to operate with care in the making of this book.

For one, we did not want to theorise the circus 'in general'. Taking contemporary circus as a whole as the object of discussion would mean deciding on its boundaries and definitions; it would suggest it was up to us to decide what circus is and what circus isn't. This kind of abstract, normative thinking tends to shut down potentiality and produce exclusion: exactly what we wanted to push against. We wanted to think together with others, multiplying standpoints and approaches. As a result, this volume does not reflect *about* circus but *through* specific circus practices.

Through the written publication of the thinking produced by circus practitioners, we hope to help open up the notion of what it means to be a circus artist. In the same way, we hope that the written forms in which these dialogues have crystallised resonate productively with the practices they make visible.

Writing can criticise, it can persuade and it can argue a point. But writing can also call into being that which was hitherto unimagined or unimaginable. It is this capacity of fantasy and speculation which, more than any other, brought us to make this book. Through writing, we conjure big dreams on a small budget, skipping (and thereby drawing attention to) the practical, societal and institutional barriers that render their material realisation impossible—for the moment. Moreover, we discovered that dialogues *about* new spaces tend to *become* new spaces: intimate, shared shelters which are themselves replenishing and empowering. Through language, we carve space for action; by describing, we make the invisible tangible; sensing the world, we feel moved to write.

## Redistributing, plumbing, living

Each of the authors gathered here proposes bodies and practices which, in our opinion, have been less visible in the circus field. In that sense, each entry is an invitation for a shift in ‘the distribution of the sensible’: each one tends towards making visible what and who has previously been hidden. **1** These bodies and practices are put forward as ‘matters of care’. **2** So, the following dialogues are not only about practices and experiences, but also about their conditions of possibility—about the support, space and thinking they require. Through language, the authors prefigure cracks in the circus field, through which other bodies, other forms, other futures and other dramaturgies of circus can be seen. Slowly, traces and visions of other contemporary circus

landscapes start to appear, working together in a lively, interconnected ecology.

**1** The expression ‘distribution of the sensible’ (here derived from the French *sensible*, that which can be sensed, or that which is sensitive), was coined by philosopher Jacques Rancière (2000). For Rancière, political power is maintained by and through patterns of sensing. What is ‘sensible’ for whom, in which location and under which conditions?

**2** In *Matters of Care* (2017), Maria Puig de la Bellacasa suggests to reimagine scientific ‘matters of fact’ as ‘matters of care’. She asserts that the things we know are always things we are involved with, and studying them should mean studying the conditions under which they can flourish. The forms in which ‘matters of care’ are represented should be chosen with reference to this potential for flourishing. Similarly, the circus practices gathered in this book are represented as things that are and deserve to be cared for.

Through their respective practices, the artists gathered here reflect on what passes and what doesn't pass, what is encouraged and what is blocked. Tensions emerge between experimental artistic practices and the work field in which they are embedded, revealing that field's investment in maintaining certain aesthetic norms, body images and labour relations. Again turning to Sara Ahmed, we started to talk about the writers of this volume as 'institutional plumbers': discovering blockages experimentally, by doing the wrong thing, with the wrong body, in the wrong place and at the wrong time.

Turning an experience of blockage into a generative encounter can mean inventing ways of revealing and delegitimising power. It can mean engaging in institutional critique. But the writers who take on institutions in the following pages do not do so in a straightforward way. Here, modes of artistic production, aesthetic practices and forms of contemporary living are often written as entanglements. Many of the authors are deeply concerned with the dividing line (or lack thereof) separating work and life. Their texts give insight into the way life, both in circus and in broader society, is often characterised by exhaustion, loneliness, dislocation and separation. We suggest that such experiences are not simply individual cases but systematically produced by contemporary circus as a (sometimes dysfunctional) ecology. In other words, circus makes some lives difficult to live.

Similarly, we learned how circus life and long-term, geographically dispersed collaborative writing processes like these seem to conflict. One could even say that circus work does not tend to allow time or space for this kind of process. Repeated missed calls, miscommunications, internet failures due to remote working spaces, forgotten emails and unexpected emergencies sometimes made the writing slow to a plod. Some collaborations went through waves of tension and reconciliation. Nevertheless, each dialogue persisted. This is partly why this book became important to us: it created alternative spaces, however precarious, for continuing to think against the grain of circus life.

## **Feeling, persevering**

Affectivity, sensitivity and emotion run through these texts as subtle, yet unmistakable, undercurrents. Feelings are not somehow 'beside the point', nor are they opposed to 'clear thinking': giving feelings their place within this volume is a gesture in defiance of the normative separation of the rational and the

intuitive, knowing and sensing, the mind and the body. Defending circus as an embodied thinking practice within the discursive framework of artistic research means being attentive to the ways in which ‘serious writing’ has been historically constructed as unemotional writing. It will come as no surprise that circus artists, whose thinking practices are so emphatically embodied, are hard at work dismantling this myth.

A recurring question in these texts is the following: what would it mean to imagine circus practice as something sustainable in the long term, especially in the face of the troubles and blockages we encounter? While no one answer is given, what emerges is a specific ethic of perseverance, conjoining pure stick-to-it-iveness with deep sensitivity to the broader ecology in which that perseverance is enacted. ‘Staying with the trouble’ (as Donna Haraway would have it)—not turning away from or abandoning what causes friction, what’s messy, painful or discouraging—is for many here a working method, a way of caring (for circus) from within.

## **Worlding, tuning, relating**

The authors of this book sketch the outlines of other possible circuses and, by extension, of other possible worlds. They do so using fantasy, poetry and poetic imagery, making alternatives tangible. These speculations sometimes take shape through a gesture of gathering, dismantling the elements of what hurts and rearranging them in a more affirmative constellation. Sustainability, care, tuning and relationality are prioritised within these ‘worldings’, and the notion of agency is repeatedly rearranged. While circus traditionally puts the (white, male) human at the centre of the ring, in many of these texts, this centrality is reconsidered. While some writers have criticised the way circus artists appear to ‘dominate’ their apparatuses, this book attests to a variety of post-human strategies, adopted as lenses through which the relationship between humans and more-than-human others can be experienced afresh. However, this is not the only way these texts attempt to redistribute agency among the circus field. Agency is fought for in other domains, ranging from neoliberal working conditions to gender.

## **Reading**

True to the hypermobile character of circus work, the artistic practices chronicled in this volume are situated geographically in

different places—Belgium, France, the Netherlands, the UK, the US, Canada and Sweden. Despite the relative homogeneity of these places in terms of geopolitics, there are some vast differences between them when it comes to arts funding (or lack thereof), proximity to current political discourses used to delegitimise the arts, access to circus training and creation spaces, touring possibilities, audience expectations and the presence and connectedness to circus history and/or to critical discourse within related arts sectors. Although the chapters meet at several crossroads, each text is situated in its own world. So, too, does every writer advocate for specific, and sometimes contradictory, changes in relation to context-specific concerns.

Many of the writers, for example, are concerned with ecologies, be they artistic or natural. With sustainability in mind, they explicitly voice a desire for de-growth and downscaling. Others, tired of less-than-adequate conditions, call on artists to demand *more*. ‘More’ with regards to the ‘precarisation’ of artistic lives and the devaluation of artistic work within neoliberalism, but also ‘more’ space for diversity, aesthetic and otherwise. Some authors appeal for a stronger commitment to criticality within the circus field—an expansion of the critic’s voice—while others chafe against the constraints imposed by (normative) critique, implicitly calling for a quieter, more listening-oriented mode of discourse. With these curious contradictions in mind (amongst the many others that are to be found in the pages ahead), we can only advise the reader to take the location of each dialogue into account in their reading of this book. We hope this polyphony can plant a seed that sprouts the dialogical tendrils of the not-too-distant future.

Another recurring question the reader might encounter is that of legibility. Parallel to the desire to make space for ‘unusual’ contents and voices within this volume, we were curious about ‘unusual’ phrasings and relations to language. At the same time, our institutional location as artistic researchers and editors brought with it certain expectations in terms of content and readability. How much did we want to craft and shape these voices in order to mediate? How could we reconcile expectations around legibility with a concern for the specificity of each voice and speaking position? How and to what degree did we inscribe these voices in the web of power relations that structure the existing discourse in and on artistic research? Artistic research tends to connect specific instances of embodied

practice to broader social and political issues, moving from a micro to a macro level. But not every artist wanted to make this link and articulate their practice as a dialogue with some broader phenomenon. And so we sometimes found ourselves caught between an instinct to tend to the singularity of the emerging texts and our institutional position, not to mention our own convictions about what good art writing should or should not do. Dwelling in that ambivalent zone, we hope that we managed to bring forth texts that mould a space at the fringe of both artistic research and circus—a space from which a critical relation might be nourished.

## Expanding: doing

*The Circus Dialogues* started out with a shared concern with questions of freedom and agency within circus as a field and an artistic practice. And, indeed, agency remained central to our research—a concern underlying the ethical thrust of the thinking practices gathered in these pages. Agency: one's context-specific ability to *do*. Agency is the space that is granted, it is the relative degree of one's wiggle room. When we expose and critique the blockages we experience in circus, we are discussing the limitation of agency through the imposition of a norm. When we speculate about the circus of the future—and when that dream is a good dream—we expand the scope of the imaginable, prefiguring an expansion of the possible. When we meet in dialogue, training our imaginations to 'go visiting' someone else's practice, we construct temporary, shared spaces in which something new or different becomes possible. **3** We find 'temporary beliefs', we find shelters; we are temporarily dispossessed by a vision of the unexpected, or surprised by an ability we didn't know we had. **4** To us, both the writing of this book and the thoughts that emerge within it are attempts at making more wiggle room, expanding our ability to act in the circus field and in this world. We hope that, with *Thinking Through Circus*, we can make a gesture of affirmative criticality by which you, the reader, will feel empowered to build more future circuses, more future worlds.

**3** "To think with an enlarged mentality means that one trains one's imagination to go visiting." (Arendt 1989:43)

**4** During the research project, temporary belief became an important working methodology. In order to think along with someone's discourse or practice—as opposed to thinking against it or through it—it is sometimes necessary to temporarily adopt a new set of values and goals. We learned about the notion of temporary belief from Eleanor Bauer, who credits Daniel Linehan for the formulation.

**Bauke Lievens, Quintijn Ketels,  
Sebastian Kann & Vincent Focquet,  
Ghent (BE) — September, 2019**





# Making Space, Space, Space ... — Camille Paycha & Bauke Lievens

*A re-staged dialogue  
between Camille Paycha  
& Bauke Lievens about  
circus, violence and gender.*

The seeds of this text were sown three years ago when its authors, Camille Paycha

and Bauke Lievens, entered into a lively conversation on the pressing necessity, and the slowly unfolding troubles, of the #metoo movement and its circus variation, #theshowisover. At the time, female performers, actors, dancers and directors were starting to speak out, revealing how gender violence towards women is embedded in the structure of the working field. Our mutual enthusiasm for this movement went on to nourish a spirited, yet discontinuous, dialogue, which gradually evolved into a conversation on several other forms of violence that underlie and connect our circus practices.

Thanks to the Belgian dancer Ilse Ghekiere, we stumbled upon the compelling book *Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning* (2012) by American poet, writer and art critic Maggie Nelson. ¶ Nelson's book gradually became the "whetstone which sharpened our thinking" together. In what follows, we articulate and question different forms of violence that underlie our artistic practices, trying to 'think with care': 'thinking with', 'thinking along' and 'thinking through' the writings of Maggie Nelson. In this way, we hope not to ignore our proper embeddedness in several intricate webs of being, doing and thinking.

Flowing along the bends of our long conversations, this text tries to restage a shared balancing exercise between critique, a belief in the strategy of revealing violence by making that violence explicit, and the need we feel for alternative imaginations. Indeed, talking and thinking together, we felt our critique expand towards an exploration of possible strategies for empowerment that not only tackle the violence present in our practices but also start to imagine alternatives.

Bart  
Verschaffel

Maria  
Puig de la  
Bellacasa

¶ It is from Nelson's book *The Argonauts* (2015) that we borrowed the spatial referencing in the margins of this text.

*Binary thinking:  
reality, fiction and  
anthropocentrism*

**Bauke:** Camille, in what ways do you experience violence in circus practice and /or performance?

**Camille:** “I graduated from circus school four years ago, specialising in aerial straps. Since then, my training has changed drastically. A significantly less intense training practice made me realise how I was imposing a certain insensitivity to pain on my body. When I was studying, it was ‘normal’ to experience a high intensity of physical pain. As circus artists, we often hide this pain so that our movements and actions look smooth or even seductive to a spectator. Paradoxically, because I trained so much I didn’t feel pain. Looking back, I find this ‘painless pain’ to be a very interesting phenomenon. The problem, however, is that I was convinced at the time that there was no other way. Painless pain was not a conscious method of practice. Today, it reveals itself as proof of my embeddedness in a (neoliberal) structure in which success is the goal and pain is the only way to reach it.

**Bauke:** Do you think that, as a female circus artist, you experience this ‘violence’ in more immediate and embodied ways?

**Camille:** Circus technique shapes your body. In my case, aerial straps made me strong, with a lot of arm muscle. Simultaneously, I feel how the circus market asks me to perform a stereotype of physical femininity. My strong arm muscles need to be somehow combined with the set characteristics of how a female body should look in aerial: tall and with long legs, not unlike a classical ballerina. I tried to reconcile those two things when I was studying, working on my pointe, on having good lines, etc. I’d skated all my life, but it took me a long time to realise that that was how I wanted to do straps: with the softness of a freestyle sport. I perform with shoes now and allow my body to be relaxed.

(...)

I think I started to make my own work because I didn’t fit the predefined ‘types’ of femininity in aerial performance. Physically, I’m just not able to make an act that would fit a stereotypical performance of femininity. Indeed, there is a strong relationship between how a body looks and

the (political) potential of what one can possibly ‘say’ and perform with that body. Yet we often treat the techniques we practise as if these were void of meaning. When I’m on a stage, I’m not free from power structures; maybe I’m even more subjected to them, as my body is extremely visible. A concrete example: a very common movement for a female aerial performer is that of lifting her open legs above her head and turning upside down. Supposedly, this is a functional movement that allows her to invert herself. But when I remove the filter of the technical aerial code, I see someone who is literally showing her vagina to the spectator. Imagine the same performer executing that same movement without any clothes on: the veil of technicality becomes transparent and reveals the violence embedded in the repertoire of aerial technique.

Laura  
Murphy

(...)

In my opinion, many circus artists practise in a false idea of freedom, thinking they operate ‘outside of society’. This myth of outsider-ness is probably rooted in the nomadic history of circus. Paradoxically, it reinforces the creation of normative work, including in terms of gender. Maybe things were less messy back when clowns and freak shows were still part of the circus and the tent was known as a place of trickery. Nowadays it’s as if, in trying to become more ‘authentic’ by becoming more theatrical (what a paradox!), the circus has started to believe it’s really free—as though cultural narratives and representation somehow didn’t apply to it.

**Camille:** Bauke, you are not a circus performer but a circus maker and dramaturg. Where do you see violence in the circus and, more specifically, in what ways do you experience it in your practice?

**Bauke:** The extent to which fiction and reality tend to become entangled in circus, and the lack of awareness of their entwinement, is definitely one way in which I experience circus to be violent. In 2017, I co-created *Raphaël*, a ‘forced duet’ in which one active performer treats a second passive performer as an object. The performance takes place on a stage shaped like a corridor, with the audience sitting on either side. The staged

violence that is inflicted on the body of the passive performer (whose name in real life is Raphaël, by the way) was meticulously rehearsed so as not to cause real pain. However, while we were making the piece in the studio, the binary relationship of active versus passive very much played out in reality. Necessarily, Raphaël had to adopt a state of physical and mental relaxation, needing to trust and let go whenever he was ‘manipulated’. But this also played out on the level of his (artistic) agency, which was literally being taken from him, even more so in a collaboration with two ‘authors’, one of whom was the active physical manipulator and one of whom was watching and directing from the outside. If the performance explored the power mechanisms at work in the circus artist’s relationship to bodies and objects, so, too, did the co-creation process become a struggle over who got to be a subject and who was objectified. Asking, in other words: who gets to act, and what does agency mean in a co-dependent relation? Those are, I think, very much the same questions circus itself deals with. Looking back, I feel the performance was presented without acknowledging enough the violence that had been involved in its creation. We stopped touring the performance shortly after its premiere. It was just too tough, both physically and emotionally. So yes, one way in which circus is violent is that it doesn’t own up to its conflicted relationship to reality, instead romanticising and depoliticising the tight and confusing bonds between representation and reality under a capitalist disguise of so-called authenticity. I think it is the field in-between that we need to consciously occupy, even if it is arduous work.

If I could say, Simulated cruelty performs no cruelty at all, then there would be no discomfort. I could relax [...] ignoring the full-fledged assault on the barriers between art and life that much twentieth-century art worked so hard to perform. I could draw my line in the sand each time, and rest comfortably on the ‘art’ side—just as those who regularly root on the humiliations of reality TV are accustomed to dissolving whatever guilt

or reservations they might otherwise have about the treatment of their fellow humans by resting on the 'TV' part of the equation. (At least, that is what I typically do: this woman signed up to be encased in a coffin full of biting rats for an hour; this cruelty therefore does not count as 'real' cruelty; it need make no claim on my conscience.) [...] Conversely, if I could say, Simulated cruelty does perform a sort of cruelty, and if one is 'against' cruelty in all its guises, whatever that might mean, then one should also be 'against' cruel simulations, whatever that might mean—then I could join the ranks of those working overtime to criminalise and prosecute anime depicting the rape of prepubescents, for example, or just partake in a good old-fashioned book-burning at my local library, tossing everything from *Lolita* to *The Pillowman* on the pyre. (Nelson 2012:95)

**I think circus continually deals with questions of freedom and agency. What is performed in traditional virtuosity is, in my opinion, a rather violent and eventually false understanding of freedom. In traditional virtuosity, the circus body is staged as physically (super) able: it is a body that masters the laws of nature, the animal kingdom, and the trajectories of objects and other bodies. But this so-called freedom achieved through mastery always means the capture and control of someone or something else. This is why I have a hard time understanding it as the performance of freedom. Freedom for whom? And freedom to do what? Another issue with virtuosity is that it works as a disciplining mechanism. In order to be able to master and rule over nature, objects and (other) bodies, the circus artist has to go through a long process of training, which actually disciplines the circus body itself, often making it into an almost machine-like and 'un-free' body. Thus, the circus body itself becomes an object, you could say, and the circus artist partially loses agency as a subject, author and individual.**

**Camille:** Is traditional virtuosity always normative in terms of what it can possibly represent, perform or produce?

**Bauke:** When we look at the historical-cultural context in which (according to many European sources) the modern circus was born at the end of the 18th Century, we see how it is closely linked to the ways Western modernity thinks about progress and freedom. Underlying these ways of thinking is a specific framing of how the human being is/ acts in the world. Crucial to this is the idea that Man is at the centre of all things, as the measure of, and active ruler over, all that surrounds him. In this ‘anthropocentric’ worldview, the subject ‘acts’, while everything else is passive matter. This division grounds a specific way of being in the world in which the subject has the right to exploit, mine, control and subdue everything and everyone counting as passive (traditionally: things, nature, animals, women and ‘others’). It also grounded to a great extent the project of Western modernity, which was (among other things) enacted through colonisation. Indeed, the subject at the centre of all things is not just anybody. It is he who appears as Da Vinci’s Vitruvian Man: the physically perfect, white male. Traditional virtuosity in circus, then, embodies and celebrates this modern ideology of progress and its accompanying binary understanding of freedom. Underlying the poetics of the circus is the same anthropocentrism: in the circus, we see how the physically perfect and ‘able’ subject tames animals, controls the trajectories of objects, masters the laws of nature and objectifies other human beings. This comes with a whole set of normative practices of exclusion. Everything and everyone who deviates from the norm of the white, heterosexual male is objectified, naturalised or racialised: things, women, people of colour, sexual minorities, animals, etc. Think, for example, of how female hand-to-hand acrobats are frequently thrown around like objects, seemingly without a will of their own. Often, the reason what female acrobats are flyers and male acrobats are bases, is said to be ‘simply’ physiological. In other words, the roles are divided this way because women are lighter. But this lightness is of course only required if the goal is to perform a specific understanding of human freedom, expressed in flying high in

Ihab Hassan,  
Edward Said

Rosi Braidotti

the air. Moreover, the cultural norms that are performed in how a male base throws the female flyer high up in the air as if she were a thing, are being erased. So, yes, I would say that traditional virtuosity performs normative and violent power relationships between humans, things and nature. I think it (re)produces and reinforces a harmful way of being in the world, of which we can now see and feel the consequences in politics, migration and our climate.

(...)

In my own artistic practice, and more specifically in *ANECKXANDER* (2015) and *Raphaël* (2017), I have tried to reveal the objectifying mechanisms at work in circus' relationships to things and other bodies. But in doing so I also reproduced the violence that comes with that objectification, both physically and emotionally. That is why, personally, I have a hard time defending the idea that the revelation of the violence embedded in virtuosity is norm-challenging.

*"She is roaming  
a world of balloons,  
armed with a pin"  
(Nelson 2012:85),  
or the strategy of  
revelation*

**Bauke:** We spoke a lot about gender-related processes of objectification in circus. Do you feel that being 'objectified' as a female performer and maker necessarily takes away your agency as an artist? Or could we use this violence as an empowering or political tool,

particularly aimed at the empowerment of women?

**Camille:** Circus is heavily sexual in the way it interacts with the spectator, yet it is a repressed kind of sexuality. Often, female circus artists are either implicitly seductive (the pleaser, the whore) or childlike (the virgin). I think we need to recognise our embeddedness in what we critique. One way of doing that might be through making this gender violence visible and explicit, revealing how women are controlled and stigmatised. An example could be to imitate violence in the context of a shared, explicit awareness, instead of only reproducing it. In other words, you would actively communicate that you're imitating a totally inappropriate

role by using strategies like ridicule, the clown, or the grotesque. Conscious (sexual) seduction of the spectator could also be an empowering tool. As in: I'm aware of the projections made by the male gaze on my body, but I can choose to perform these, and thus be in charge. I tried to do that in my graduation piece (2015), a solo inspired by *Les Précieuses ridicules* (Molière 1659), in which I did straps as a camp, clownesque 'précieuse' who wore a corset. But I think we're too deep in to use this strategy. I actually think we need to break patriarchy, instead of building feminism. Or as Maggie Nelson writes, discussing contemporary female writers who are known for their violent or cruel writing:

Does it come as a surprise that most, if not all, of these writers are known for writing in relation to—and often in explicit protest against—male violence, misogyny, or patriarchy? Is that one of the injustices of 'phallocentrism' itself—that is, its suggestion that there's nothing else imaginable under the sun—not even a form of female aggression or rage or darkness—not shaped by or tethered to the male? (Nelson 2012:67)

Taking on the object position can only be empowering if we manage to escape the binary thinking that frames the object as passive, in opposition to the subject as active. Similarly, we need to understand that empowerment isn't about taking on the role of the doer of violence. Again, it's about escaping the active-passive binary. In *Ice Skates and other Cruelties* (2020), the piece I'm currently making, I work with glass, and the breaking of it. Glass was often used in the sixties and seventies by feminist performance artists such as Gina Pane, Valie Export and Hannah Wilke. They questioned the objectification of the female body through the use of shattered glass, which functioned both as a symbol of and a tool for self-inflicted pain. Their work proposes an alternative to the binary: these women are not passive receivers of violence, but act as active inscribers of violence onto their own bodies. They take back control of their bodies. Interestingly enough, they did not perform the physical pain their actions provoked. I do not want to re-enact a performance from the seventies, but the idea of using my own body as a material site is very interesting to me.

Gina Pane,  
Valie Export,  
Hannah  
Wilke



**Bauke:** But do these strategies of revelation ever reach further than being a critique that leaves the status quo unchanged?

Virginie  
Despentes

**Camille:** In her book *King Kong Théorie* (2006), French writer and filmmaker Virginie Despentes argues that the object position does not necessarily imply a victim position. Her writing pushes me to reconsider the way I interact with objects on stage. I search for a less human-centred interaction, thus allowing other possibilities in terms of the representation of my body, and opening the possibility of escaping the dominant female body image. When you try to consider yourself a bit less anthropocentrically, and slightly more as an object, new things may arise and old things might collapse. It's maybe cynical, but I think it can be powerful: if you own something, it stops being a threat. In *The Hangman Radioshow* (a 2018 co-creation with Noortje Sanders and Thijs Veerman), we experiment with what we call 'scaling up': adopting a time-space perspective that is more than human or non-human, we try to see things from the faraway future and from the perspective of the Voyager I probe as it circles in outer space. For me, getting as much distance on things as I possibly can is a means to escape the idea of the individual human being at the centre. In *The Magnavem Project* (2020), Noortje Sanders and I try to imagine how animals will evolve in the long-term, experimenting with 'speculative biology'. Similarly, in the research of *Ice Skates and other Cruelties*, I try to consider glass through its materiality and not through the question of what I can do with it. I find this an interesting approach with which to practise circus. I'd like it to be a piece in which the human and the non-human act together to produce certain forms of violence (glass-breaking) that are neither moral nor amoral, where neither the object nor the human is victimised, where neither the object nor the human is objectified. I want to create a space without hierarchy or binarism. This space also includes the relationship between spectator and performer: I agree with Jacques Rancière when he writes that in order to make artworks that might be empowering, we first must undo the thinking that frames the spectator as a passive being who needs to be 'activated'.

Jacques  
Rancière

[...] an art is emancipated and emancipating [...] when it stops wanting to emancipate us. (Rancière in Nelson 2012:97)

Another possibility would be that of the ‘Provisional Autonomous Zone’ which Maggie Nelson refers to (via David Graeber). Philosopher Paolo Virno prefers the term ‘Temporary Autonomous Zones’ (TAZ), calling for “ephemeral but crucial gaps in an otherwise suffocating global capitalist order, gaps that, at the very least, make other forms of social organization and perception seem momentarily possible” (Virno in Nelson 2012:45). This means: act as if you perform or exist in a space where there is no doer and no victim, no dominant and no dominated. If you’re free in a temporary way and you’re aware of this temporality, you can change the equation of violence by withdrawing women from the position of the victim. Maybe if violence doesn’t make victims one can attribute to it a new power?

**Camille:** Can you picture a circus without violence?

**Bauke:** Definitely! On a personal level, working towards a circus without violence means that I try to develop ‘ways of doing’ that find a way out of binary structures such as acting/not acting, doing/watching, subject/object, etc. Concretely, I ask myself how I can develop and organise my artistic practice so there is space for me to act (as a citizen, individual and artist), instead of being made into a (female) ‘emancipatory’ dramaturg by others. In the end, it feels like as, a dramaturg, I’m often there to maintain the status quo by giving a ‘thoughtful’ cachet to the work, while actually not having or taking up space to challenge the many ways in which normative performativity can affect a piece. More generally speaking, I think we need to own up to the violence that is embedded in the tangled idea of traditional virtuosity as a performance of freedom. Instead of acting as if circus is a space in which we are (already) free, I imagine our future circus practices as spaces in which we can ask ourselves where our capacity and our responsibility to act are situated. Those are urgent questions to me. Precisely because the relationship to the object is so central in circus, I think it is a space in which we can develop and perform other possible ways of relating to what surrounds us. This asks for a different understanding of what it means to act and, ultimately,

Jane  
Bennett

of what it means to be ‘free’. Thinking along with political theorist Jane Bennett, agency is a matter of affecting and being affected. In that sense, agency in circus is maybe more a matter of mapping and performing the many ways in which objects, nature and other bodies affect us and are affected by us, instead of showing how well we master and control them. To me, this means asking what it means to take space, to make space with and for others and to allow ourselves to be affected by (more-than-human) others. Ultimately, this also points to the development of more sustainable ways of working so as to be able to keep practising. This is why I started the *Circus Dialogues* artistic research project together with Quintijn Ketels, Sebastian Kann and Vincent Focquet. In our work together we have searched for ways of ‘dissenting within’—not agreeing, but continuing to build conversation. It’s also why I wanted to make this book together with many others: recognising the thinking already happening in circus and thereby hopefully helping to undo the binary division that separates thinking from doing in circus.

(...)

Donna  
Haraway

I don’t think that agency can only lie in criticism. I feel the need to imagine and construct alternatives, alone and together with others. This can take on different forms. For me, it happens through performance making, through dramaturgical work, and through writing. Recently, I stumbled upon an interview in *The Guardian* with the American biologist and philosopher of science Donna Haraway that really resonated with me. She says:

It seems to me that our politics these days require us to give each other the heart to do just that. To figure out how, with each other, we can open up possibilities for what can still be. And we can’t do that in a negative mood. We can’t do that if we do nothing but critique. We need critique; we absolutely need it. But it’s not going to open up the sense of what might yet be. It’s not going to open up the sense of that which is not

yet possible but profoundly needed. The established disorder of our present era is not necessary. It exists. But it's not necessary. (in Weigel 2019)

## *On boundaries*

**Bauke:** Do you feel that it's empowering to claim your femininity as a circus maker and/or performer?

**Camille:** In reality, I notice that I'm often pushed towards trying to erase the fact that I'm a woman when I'm performing and making my work. In *The Hangman Radioshow* (2018), we experiment with this anonymity. We work with radio, where we can remain invisible. When I do become partially visible in the straps, it's unclear if I am a man or a woman. I could argue that erasing gender specificity is a way of behaving as if I were already free from oppressive cultural narratives. But I think that this approach leaves the problem largely untackled. Still, I think it can be empowering to claim my femininity as a circus maker if this means claiming what *kind* of woman I am. Plurality is of great importance to me: to show as many possibilities as I can of what it means to be a woman. That way, I can start to subvert a contained, easily described and patriarchally constructed idea of what it is, or means, to be a woman. Transgressing the borders between genders is not the same, however, as erasing gender altogether. Moreover, being a woman is only one part of who I am. That is not to say that I am free to completely decide who I am or what it means to be a woman in this society. But if I'm aware of how constructions like gender affect me, then there is also more space for me to act in relation to those constructions and more space to position myself.

**Bauke:** What would a feminist circus look like?

**Camille:** Oh, my ideal feminist circus would be one in which I needn't feel frustrated about being called a female artist. In a feminist circus, we would have transgressed the borders between genders so that being a female artist could mean anything. Until then, I'll attempt to keep on practising circus in a way that deeply questions how patriarchal society functions, while trying to avoid its traps of stigmatisation, alienation and the enforcement of a certain kind of auto-biographical and binary thinking. Recently, I had the chance to meet Phia Ménard in Switzerland. As we were talking about the relationships between the personal and the

political, she was insisting on the power of imagination, which I found very encouraging. Her words help me want to continue working as an artist, instead of focusing more exclusively on activism. Imagination is a way to make space; it does not put the artist in the role of the pedagogue with the audience at the other end, as passive receiver. Indeed, I do not want to make something ‘new’, but rather to ‘make space’ by questioning the structures on which circus is based. I try to participate in the articulation of the many possibilities of making circus that exist already but that remain largely invisible. I try to make pieces that speak for themselves by refining my aesthetics and exploring the power of humour, violence, objects, bodies, morality, immorality and everything in between. In short, I try, as John Cage says, to ‘make space’ in that whole locked system.

John Cage

Space is distinct from alienation. It is fundamentally about volume, rather than about distance. Space also defies the vertical logic of revelation, which insists there is something beneath the surface of our every day—be it ultimate meaning, the face of God, our fundamental nature, a final error, ecstasy, or judgement, or some combo of the above—that will be revealed when the veil is finally lifted. In lieu of this logic, space offers a horizontal spreading, the possibility of expansion into dimensions no one yet thoroughly understands. Space is also intrinsic to the creation of freedom. As Arendt once put it in a very different context (in 1953’s ‘Ideology and Terror’), ‘The one essential prerequisite of all freedom... is simply the capacity of motion which cannot exist without space.’ (Nelson 2012:104)



# Dialogues of Disobedience: An Excerpt — Dana Dugan

CUNT-fessions  
(Read aloud)

The scholar? The artist?  
reappears  
transformed  
embodying an  
anthropomorphic catlike  
seductress

Shifting, destabilising conventions in  
a single embodied site

The energy shifts

Backlit and crouched in the doorway of  
the cave,

2 tasseled breasts dangling on  
the floor,  
playfully grinding her cunt  
like a pussycat in a mint bush

A grotesque body queering and  
feminising the space

What is this creature?  
Is she human?  
Animal?  
Is she a tabby or a taboo?  
A mother?

Tits dangling and protruding from her  
torso indicate as much

Oh yes... her bio from the start...  
artist. mother. lover. fuck the rest!

The cunty cat preps, swaying back  
and forth on all fours over the word  
'habit'.

SHIFTING WEIGHT, FRONT TO REAR, BACK  
AND FORTH, AGAIN AND AGAIN

The pussycat mother inverts—voilà!  
Hand balancing?

Verdi's requiem continues to  
quietly spill into the large  
black box.

The inverted cuntty cat creature with its  
plethora of tits drooping toward the floor  
floats its extended legs  
effortlessly over 'permission'  
Is this animal testing gone wrong?

After some time, the legs descend and  
the four-legged creature reappears  
A sound emanates from the lower region  
of the creature

PfphBlphbFLLPpopfph

The creature pauses.

Discomfort and uncertainty emanate in  
a single muffled laugh from the audience  
closely nestled in the pink box

The air fills with ... surprise?  
Confusion? Uncertainty?

It is clear the audience is caught off  
guard and unsure

Where did the noise come from?  
From the creature or a fellow  
audience member?

What was that noise?

A fart?

A pussy fart?

Invisible

patriarchal

gaze

induced shame

emanates

With no regard for the discomfort of  
its onlookers, the creature continues on  
all fours across the chalk line toward  
'disobedience'.

Tempo and rhythm increase as the  
creature approaches disobedience.



INVERSION!

Closer to the audience, centre stage,  
she floats inverted with squatted cat legs  
DESCEND

PUSSY FART!

Tension builds.

The pressure of laughter is mounting  
in the audience.

A small titter of laughter erupts.

The audience is still unsure if it is  
permissible to laugh.

Does the audience need permission?  
Didn't the creature already  
give consent?

It's releasing, letting go, freedom,  
liberation, pleasure!

The creature's pace accelerates to en-  
courage her audience to simply release.

INVERSION

DESCEND

PUSSY FART!

Collective laughter bursts forth  
from the audience

Awwwwwwwwwwww—the release

INVERSION

DESCEND

PUSSY FART

LAUGHTER

Continuing along the chalk line to  
the word 'failure'.

Again, lessening the gap between  
creature and audience

INVERSION

DESCEND

NO PUSSY FART?

What?! No pussy fart?! The creature is  
saddened and disappointed by its failure.

LAUGHTER

The creature moves across the line  
into 'UNdo, new ways'.  
Again, even closer to the audience

INVERSION

DESCEND

PUSSY FART

LAUGHTER

The creature is  
relieved, satisfied  
and accomplished

Mission success, subversion complete

As the creature plants the stilettos  
and stands,

the scholar reappears

Staggering yet empowered, she promenades  
for the audience.

## (Dis)obedience

I am a self-proclaimed American artist, mother, lover. Pushed by a desire to immerse my practice into a world of questions and critical examination that so rarely exists in mainstream contemporary circus practice, I (re)turned to academia. Here, I continue my dedication to reflecting on my practice through practice-based methodologies. With *Dialogues of Disobedience* (both a performance from 2018 and a thesis finished in 2019), I propose the revival of the age-old concept of ‘disobedience’ as a critical artistic practice, and seek to challenge and hack a binary logic bolstered by blind obedience. I attempt to straddle the performative worlds of both artist (stage) and scholar (lecture), reflecting the oscillating nature of my research between practice and theory. I playfully totter between artist and scholar; both are always present.



Sticker by Dana Dugan

In *Dialogues of Disobedience*, (dis)obedience materialises as both a critical theory and a reflexive practice that works toward the undoing of my naturalised circus practice assimilated through the overdetermined technical focus in North American circus culture. So, I question: how does my embodied subjectivity manifest as embodied obedience toward authority? Is this obedience wilful and examined, or not?

Disobedience cannot exist without obedience. **I** Mutually dependent, these function as two sides of the same coin. In order for me to *(dis)obey*, I must critically understand how I exist in relation to obedience. One can obey

broader (social) norms or personal values. This is the first kind of obedience that I am interested in.

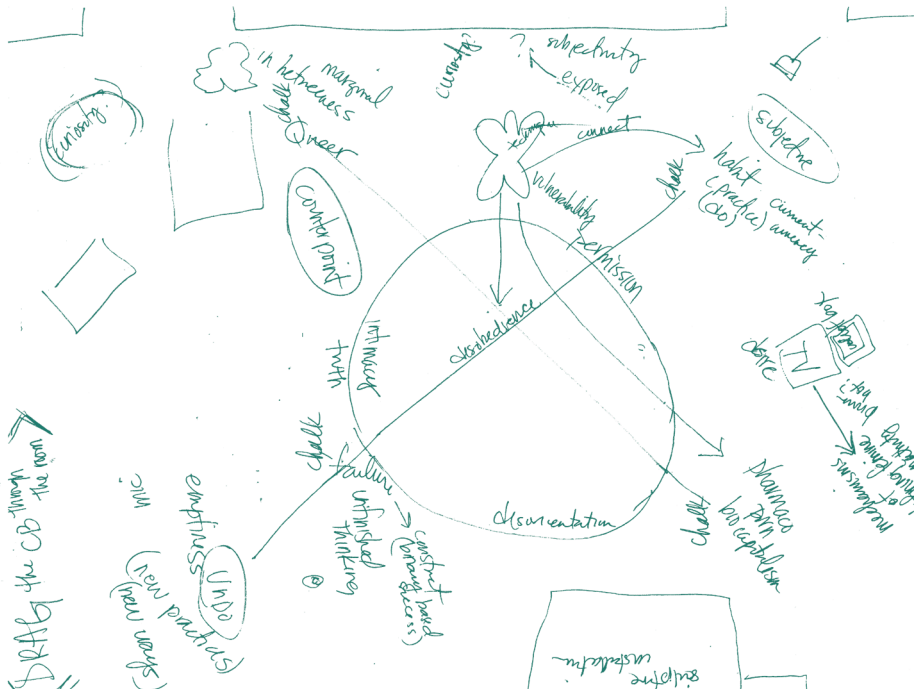
My technical circus practice serves as the mechanism that shapes and sculpts my material and immaterial circus body. The technique of my circus

**I** The parenthetical designation (in its unconventional spelling) indicates the dependence of (dis)obedience on obedience. The parentheses also function as a demarcation, (dis)obedience – critical subjective disobedience – versus its villainized banal use. They illustrate the critical distance that the (dis) creates between me – the subject, my subjectivity – and my obedience (conscious or unconscious). Or: subject/subjectivity + (dis) + obedience = critical social disobedience. The (dis) – critical distance – illuminates and suspends my obedience before me, for questioning and reflection. Does my obedience (conscious or unconscious) oppress others and/or contribute to or prop-up oppressive norms? My questioning also applies to (dis)obedience.

practice, laden with codes and traditions acquired from previous generations of circus bodies, functions as the basis of my inquiry into embodied knowledge. From this understanding, I explore what my circus body can *UNdo*. In my practice, (dis)obedience thus emerges as a transgressive undoing of my obedient, habitual, embodied practices, giving rise to a concrete behaviour that challenges the beliefs, ideas, values, symbols and expectations of my circus community.

## Falling/failing

My primary objective as a hand balancer is not to fall, but to remain balanced, inverted, on my hands, with effortless elegance.



Sketch by Dana Dugan

Falling is my biggest fear. But my hand balancing circus body lacks, or fails to embody, the North American mainstream, normative circus body, characterised by an idealised, Vitruvian aesthetic derived from overdetermined technical athletic practices and traditions. These ideals manifest as sterile hyperextended/straight legs, ultra-pointed (or flexed) toes, and impeccable execution of virtuosic technique dressed in enticing, gender-normative costuming, with complimentary music or sound.

‘impossibility’, ‘perfection’, ‘frustration’, ‘anxiety’, and ‘shame’ thus haunt my practice. I feel enslaved by these words. *Failing* is intimately understood by most humans, and with it, its accompanying feeling of *shame*. Falling (without control) represents failure in the disciplined and obedient Vitruvian hand balancing body. The mechanism of shame works toward instilling and maintaining the success/failure binary. These sentiments echo my experience as an American mother and artist: as an ageing tomboy and bisexual artist and mother, I deviate from normalised notions of femininity and motherhood.

In *Dialogues of Disobedience*, I focus on undoing failure, subverting or even collapsing the binary logics of success/failure. I seek to forge falling into something useful and purposeful. I consciously and deliberately turn inward and embrace the continuum of my body sensations. I use active listening as a creative research method.

Alone, in silence, I practice; I listen.  
I embrace my embodiments. Words, images  
and sounds materialise in my thoughts.  
Images of Picasso’s cubist women and  
female cyborgs emerge.

Engaging in this kind of ‘introspective awareness’, “we momentarily break the hold of the habitus, we ‘unbraid’ movement practices from the ideological ends and open up the possibility of no longer perpetuating ‘social structures at the level of the body’” (Noland 2009:210). (Dis)obedient self-awareness demands a specific kind of listening: undoing deafness to discover the subtle ways in which I may begin to see disobedient events (Loizidou 2013:4) within myself, and beyond.  
I reflect.

These avant-garde images mutate the classic female body and offer a transformation into the uncanny, the magical, the uncanny. Picasso’s patriarchal male gaze sexualises and dehumanises the female body.

The listening practice feeds the conceptual development of *CUNT-fessions*.

# A pussy fart

Floating, bent legs.

Un-pointed toes, draped  
in Dollarama hosiery and dressed in a  
vinyl titty corset.

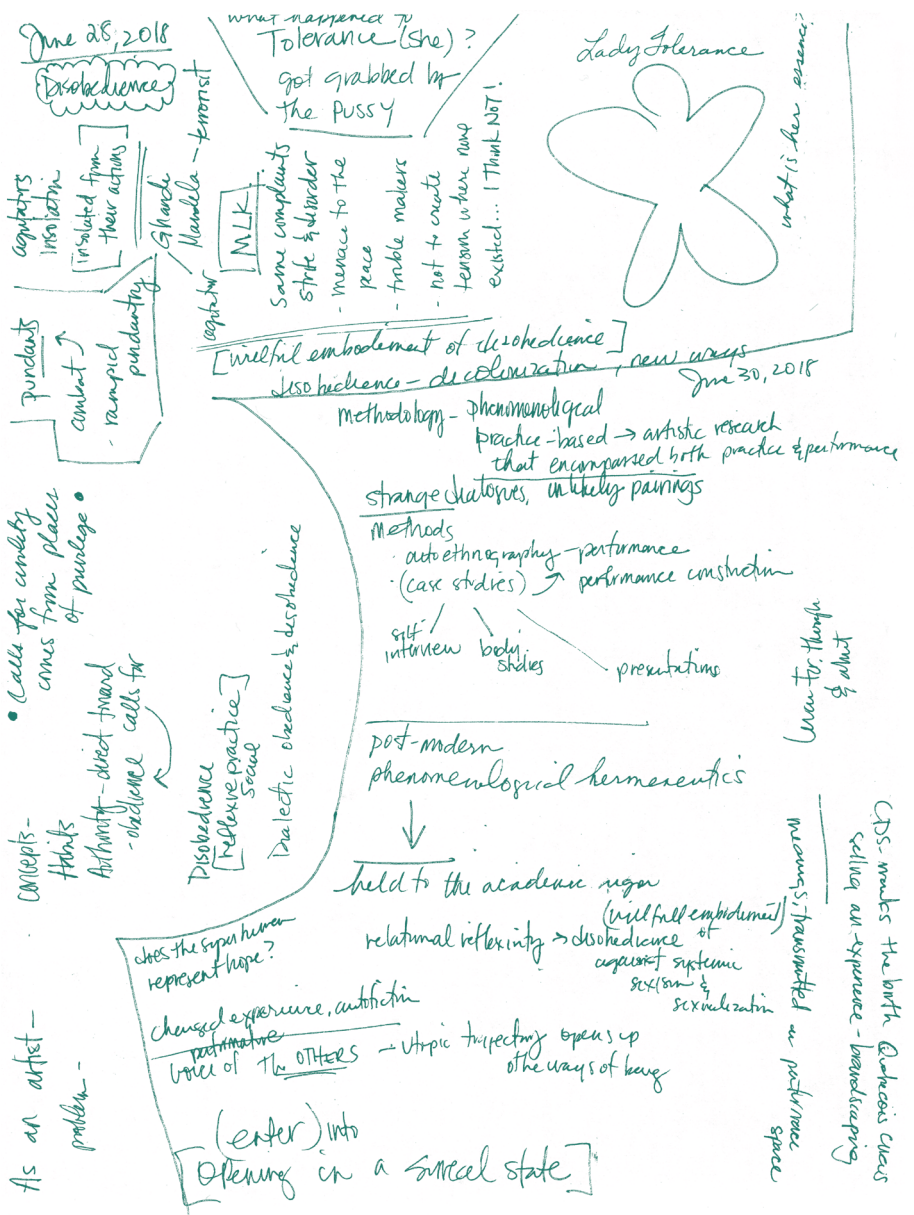
Bodily hierarchy turned upside down.

The production of the boisterous sound  
of a pussy fart.

The pussy fart exists only through failure—falling. It marks the death of failure and a transformation, a rebirth, through habits undone. The degradation of the intent of hand balancing from perfect inverted balance (without falling)—doing—to pussy fart (falling)—undoing—completes the subversion. It works as a simple inhale and exhale and speaks from the female sex (versus the mouth). Specific to the female sex, it is typically taboo and a source of discomfort and shame. It carries a horrifying stigma, not just socially, but also in the context of circus.

At first, it quietly dwells as a secret ‘weapon’ within my circus body. Then it appears as an undeniable voice; it cannot be ignored. Rather than stifling it, I encourage its possibility. It reveals itself as the missing link between my circus body and its larger socio-political context. Hidden in plain sight under an auto-surveillance implemented and maintained by the invisible patriarchal forces of shame, it unlocks the undoing of falling as failure.

The pussy fart empowers my female body: the male phallus (or patriarchy) cannot produce such a sound or speech of the body. Embracing the improper and unwelcome, it provokes a laugh that is fuelled by the irreverence of the deviant and disobedient. The transference from the apparatus of speech to a sexualised organ, more specifically a female sexualised organ, the pussy, uncrowns the patriarchy-imposed taboo. The strict codes and dignity of hand balancing technique juxtapose with the shameful sound of the pussy fart, creating the phenomenologically absurd. The death of the classic, narrow and quotidian steers my circus body—its practice and performance—towards a queer feminist vivification. New embodied knowledge, ways of doing, and aesthetics emerge. The pussy fart surfaces as a wilful voice, as an act of self-determination and freedom (from shame). With it, I am selling a perverse, punk revolution that is vulgar, grotesque, feminist and queer.



Sketch by Dana Dugan

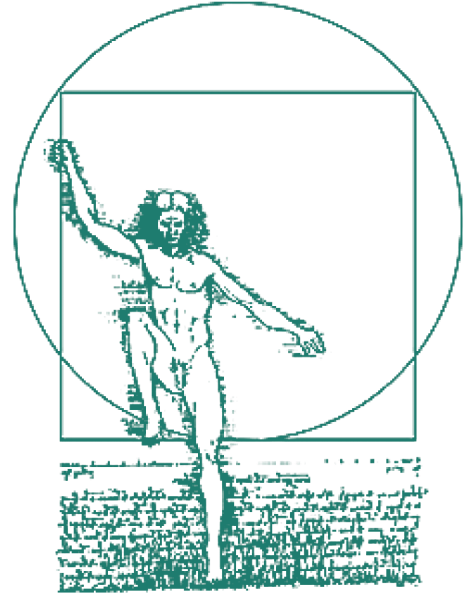




# Footnotes on Mastery — Mardulier en Deprez, Vincent Focquet, Francesca Hyde & Josef Stiller

This text consists of new footnotes by Mardulier en Deprez, Francesca Hyde and Josef Stiller\* added to a pre-existing text by Vincent Focquet. The article ‘Towards a Humble Circus’ was originally written in

Dutch for Rekto:Verso, a Belgian magazine of arts and critique (2018). In an attempt to make explicit the way circus practices do or do not relate to the original article’s thinking, Vincent asked these four circus artists to add footnotes to the text. Here, these footnotes are imagined as echoes, stylistically inspired by notorious precursors such as David Foster Wallace’s *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999) and Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* (2000) The Oxford Dictionary defines an echo as: “A sound or sounds caused by the reflection of sound waves from a surface back to the listener.” With this in mind, the question was: How can the thinking in this text reflect on the practices, bodies and ideas of circus artists? In search of an answer, we’ve made this attempt to extend, challenge and distort the original piece.



\*

- Francesca Hyde
- Josef Stiller
- Mardulier & Deprez

Vitruvian man climbing out of his frame. Unknown artist. Appeared in conversation between Wendelin Küpers and Rosi Braiddotti, published in BRAIDOTTI, R. (2017). *Posthuman, all too human: The memoirs and aspirations of a posthumanist*. [Tanner Lecture]

# Towards a humble circus

## — Vincent Focquet

**1** — I am a footnote. Feet tend to be at the bottom of the body, supporting it, helping it to stand up. But that's not all we do, and we have some ideas of our own. These feet are growing. Perhaps becoming too big for their boots! "But what is this?" I hear you say. "A talking footnote?"

Humans are pretty undefined things—their only defining characteristic has been said to be their ability to recognise themselves. Think of me in the same way—my only characteristic is to know myself as a footnote. I revel in the idea of being undefined, there is a freedom in it that allows me to extend beyond my own body (a freedom which is denied to us when defined by others). I hope you do not find me too rambling for a footnote—I would just like you to know, I am happy to meet you, and look forward to continuing our relationship, indefinitely.

**2** — Look at how the juggler is stuck in this picture. He slotted in there so neatly, it was so easy to slip in, he barely noticed the chains creeping in, the locks snapping shut. Trained by the neoliberal ringmaster who now hands him a never-ending stream of objects, denying him the time to stop and consider his position. But look, it makes him feel good, he is applauded, it's a relationship that works for him, for the time being. He owes his 'freedom' and 'success' to the objects he is juggling, and, on face value, it looks like this goes barely acknowledged. But his body knows. His fingers know, the sweat on his brow knows, the pit of his stomach knows. And although he has separated himself from the objects that he juggles, they are also a part of him, and they know. Break him apart and zoom in on all the parts of him that have something to say. The individual we have learned to see hides this from us—"look at the bigger picture" it says. No! Says your friendly footnote (being a stickler for fine details). Listen to the smaller pictures. Look how his hands know those objects, their weight, their texture, how they sit in his palm, how he has spent hours with them, listening to gravity, to repelling electrons, to the air in between the object and his skin, to the light that must be just so, to time and repetition.

I'm just a footnote, so what do I know, but I do believe there's hope there if we look closely and pay attention to it. If we can care for, cultivate, and give value to this relationship, perhaps the juggler can be released from this image.

The virtuoso juggler might be the **1** ultimate symbol of Western anthropocentrism: a human juggling with objects of the world, forcing them into orbit around himself as the triumphant subject and centre of attention. The wretched ecological state of the earth, that little ball slowly melting in his juggling hands, is only one hint that this kind of domineering relationship between humans and their environment is problematic. **2** A 'humble circus' **3** could offer alternatives to this imperious relationship between humans and things.

Last year, on the 6th of February, 2018, the American space firm SpaceX launched a Tesla into space. The launch was part of Elon Musk's master plan to send people to Mars, in return for huge sums of money. According to Musk, leisure excursions like these must necessarily culminate in the colonisation of the planet. Only in this way, says Musk, can the future of the human species be guaranteed. **4** Following the spectacular launch of the Falcon Heavy rocket with the Tesla on board, the electric car is now orbiting the Earth. At the wheel is a dummy called Starman, David Bowie's 'Life on Mars?' playing through the speakers. **5**

These absurd images were avidly viewed on the internet. Although they initially make us laugh, upon closer inspection they are above all repulsive. Not only is this (promotional) stunt naively contributing to the dire quantity of space debris, but the worldview and concept of mankind that underlies

**3** — Maybe it would make sense to create some genres in circus—if only to make people realise the variety within circus practices. It might also help circus professionals to explain things if they could specify their circus genre. Even if traditional circus, nouveau cirque, and contemporary circus are already quite well-used, I think that these three genres still aren't enough to cover the variety of different aesthetics within circus. In the world of music, it seems to work quite well to just create a new genre whenever someone feels like it. In rock music alone there are now more than 200 subgenres. If we went a bit deeper into genre divisions in circus, we could also think about the way that genres age and their relationship to specific periods of time. I mean, at a certain point we're sure to run into problems with the contemporary circus label. Just imagine contemporary circus in 200 years. I guess they won't be doing the same things we do now in the contemporary field. A humble circus thus both links us to a certain timeframe (of ecological disaster) and allows us to differ through our circus practices.

**4** — I am an almost unnecessary footnote. I may not make the cut in the editing process, but I couldn't help myself: Musk is a fool for saying this—that's all! I know I'm not supporting or adding anything. I'm superfluous and useless, but there we have it, I exist and I'd like to live in a world in which superfluous and useless things are allowed to exist. If the focus is always on the 'future of the human species' (coupled with a limited notion of what is human) we are doomed. As a footnote I could easily outlive you, I need no food, no water, no sunlight. But I also must acknowledge that I am partially what you call human. I am the hands that write me, the mouths that talk about me, the eyes that read me or ears that hear me, the organs that interpret me and the bodies that act on me. If that's the case then you must admit that you, in turn, are partially footnote.

**5** — **Before we start footnoting, a little warning: the words in the text and those the footnotes consist of are not to be trusted; they only indirectly refer to the bodies and things they talk about. In Chuck Berry's words: "What I have seen, felt or thought cannot possibly be transferred to another without a difference born from this journey." (Chuck Berry:313) But hey, let's try.**

**6** — Tell me about it, I'm a footnote written by somebody inflicted with this Western hubris. It seeps into the tone of my voice, the shape of my letters and—I am truly sorry for this—into your eyes or ears. The author who is 'giving me voice' feels clever for showing my agency by making me a 'character', while the

this operation is problematic, to put it mildly. One could see it as cosmic hyperbole for an anthropocentric worldview in which mankind conquers his material environment with the aid of technology. Meanwhile, the irony is almost tangible: Musk imagines he can solve the catastrophe that arose as a result of the human longing for control over the world with yet more control.



Space X's Tesla shortly after its launch (© Space X)

## Replenish the earth and subdue it

This kind of hubris is deeply ingrained in Western culture. Indeed, it is underpinned by a religious imperative: "Replenish the earth and subdue it, have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth", the book of Genesis tells us. The scale of this subjugation took on global proportions in the wake of the Enlightenment—a moment in the history of thought in which mankind as (Kantian) subject, diametrically opposed to the world as object, took centre stage—and was carried forward in the subsequent industrialisation and colonial expansion. **6**

author of the paper feels good about himself for allowing me more space than the usual footnote is allowed. Look how this colonialist mindset has created an object, chained it, and then praised itself for allowing the object some small 'freedoms'. What am I doing that the authors had not intended? Who am I when I am with you, reader? What do we become?

I wonder if my author is aware of their position. Sure, they have placed me at the centre, they have considered my subjectivity, but they stand just behind me, and it is not me who will be credited for these words. But just as I have been produced in part by them—and I am probably blissfully unaware of all of the repercussions of this—they have been produced by centuries of colonialist and capitalist ideology in a way that makes their position and attitude feel natural to them. That is a lot to unpick in their lifetime and they must consider a different timescale if they are to remain optimistic. My author is a fool—not something the text should say explicitly, normally that is read between the lines and it is for the reader to decide, but this is what happens if you give the text its own opinion.

7 — I think that circus has often made use of the technical achievements of the moment. When steam engines appeared, they were used in the circus too. We see the same happening today: think of the big stage shows of Cirque du Soleil for example. But I'm also making use of technological inventions within my own work. For example, in my new performance, I make use of a wireless system for guitar players that connects to a sound system. Obviously, the people working within the circus are and were people living in the world, with all its achievements. So, of course the world and its achievements are used in the circus—and by that process the circus itself influences the world. For me, it is important to emphasise here that there are different ways of working with technology in circus. One is described above, the 'Hey look what I can do!' style. As with Musk, that's an approach that just shows what's possible and takes pride in it. Another way for me would be to look at how these technologies can help develop your ideas for a performance. Circus could even be a space to reflect on technological development.

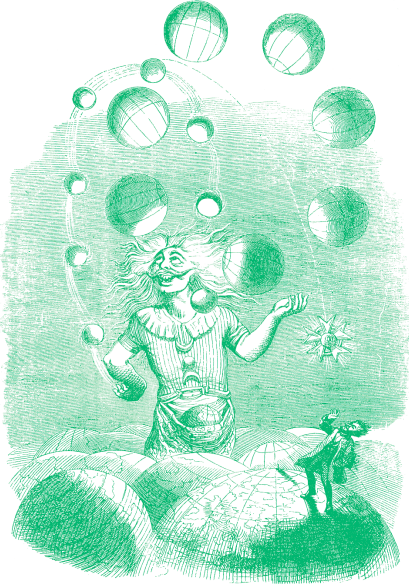
8 — **Michiel, do you think we just add the somersaults as an ornament to cover up the fact that the teeterboard is actually doing all the work?**

9 — **Could we have a visual footnote? If we were to put this on a scale it would look more or less like this:**  
 spectacular      humble      self-effacing

It is striking to note that during the Industrial Revolution—a temporary pinnacle of anthropocentrism—the circus arts flourished as never before. This parallel is no coincidence. Circus' celebration of the extraordinary capabilities of the human being is remarkably similar to the dominant values of that time. By means of technical excellence, the all-powerful human being can control and manipulate his environment. The similarity between the depiction of the man juggling globes in Grandville's satirical book *Un autre monde* (1844) from this period and Musk's current project is striking in that regard. Isn't catapulting a sports car into space the ultimate circus trick? This makes Musk the ideal cosmic juggler. 7

## Beating a retreat

Thinking sustainably means we cannot obstinately try to cling to our grotesque supremacy. Rather, it demands a kind of abdication: we (in the West) must dare to stop regarding mankind as the centre of the world. If we want to tackle the climate catastrophe, we will not achieve this by 'hacking' the climate by means of 'geoengineering'—i.e. with yet more technology and control—but by rethinking the relationship between humans and things. This demands a radical recasting of hierarchies, and a search for a more horizontal relationship in which people and things exist on the same level. Call it a Copernican movement: mankind beating a retreat from the centre of its own worldview. Philosophies of this kind have been mainstream for centuries in non-Western cultures. When we speak of the retreat of mankind, we are therefore not



J.J. Grandville, *Le Jongleur*. (Collection: Ronny Van de Velde)

**10** — In contrast to Joseph above (see footnote 3), I wonder if we really need another label? What will that bring us? Then again, it might—just might—be that what’s productive about a label is precisely the resistance it generates. Labels always produce counter-movements, they provide you with as much to work *with* as to work *against*. Our work could be described with a lot of labels: dance, writing, visual art, circus. These labels always bring us something but they make us rebellious too. Wouldn’t it be cool to come up with a new label for each performance?

**11** — I don’t want to seem picky, but as a footnote, I am caught up in language; if the aim is to move away from Western hubris, the language that re-enforces it must be challenged. Just as my author’s body may flip this way and that, so words and ideas may also flip around, twist and contort. Words are great magicians, they can divert attention, act as invisibility cloaks, and make you believe the fictions they weave.

The term ‘Anthropocene’ is wildly anthropocentric (I feel I can say this with some authority, speaking as an anthropomorphised footnote). I’m not saying this to relieve my authors of their guilt, but just to say they’re maybe not so special as they think they are!

referring to mankind as a universal idea, but to the Western, enlightened and (neo)colonial version of it.

The circus is a place in which this kind of recasting of the subject away from the centre of things is both possible and desirable. Indeed, might the circus not be an arena in which to portray this movement? If a juggler juggles six balls, then the juggler overcomes their inertia by seemingly effortlessly forcing them into a standardised pattern. If the acrobat performs a double somersault, then they vanquish gravity by means of their human ability. **8** We can describe this archetypal kind of circus, in which the heroic human creates a spectacle by subjugating his environment, as a spectacular circus. **9**

By contrast, I should like to define a second kind of circus, which we could describe as a humble circus. **10** This is a type of circus in which the human deliberately vacates their dominant position to seek out a more deferential relationship to the circus object. A recalibration of this kind is necessary if the circus arts want to move away from a worldview that has been seriously dented by climate change and the Anthropocene. **11** A humble circus can thus act as the arena of this retreat.

Moreover, a humble circus is in no way a successor to a ‘spectacular circus’; it is not a ‘next step’. My argument is neither a call for progress, nor an altering of existing practices, but a fantasy of a future circus: a belief in the possible. Therefore, it in no way replaces the existing practices, but is an autonomous practice which can be created alongside other, entirely different practices. **12**

The word is also widely criticised for drawing us into a universal 'we', encompassed in the responsibility and agency involved in destroying (and creating) the world. Responsibility is shared while agency is still denied. I don't have the space to elaborate here, but perhaps you might want to take up the conversation with people who've inspired me to think about it, like Malm and Hornborg, Kathryn Yusoff and Donna Haraway, to name a few.

**12** — I would argue that this circus already exists. If we look for it carefully, coax it out, and when we find it, if we attend to it, care for it, nurture it and question it—we may see more and more of it, we may notice that it's bigger than we had ever imagined. For me, it is not a looking forward, but a listening closely. But how do we listen closely? How do we extend listening beyond our ears? I don't even have ears as such.

**13** — What about the audience? I think for art or circus to happen, there needs to be a receiver of some kind, but could this receiver also be an animal? Like with exhibitions for dogs in visual arts. I'm sure there must also be a way to create art which can be received by a plant, or maybe even by an object. The question that then remains is what do we as humans get from a performance for objects or animals? Do we even need to get something? Probably we would not get anything except a happy dog or a fast-growing plant. Which sounds like a humble idea to me. If all actants (human, non-human, material/non-material) work with each other without any hierarchy, are all of them still needed? Could two balls also perform for each other without a juggler?

**14** — When I worked with Darragh McLoughlin as a teacher in ACaPA, we experimented a lot with the importance of each object. By reframing the environment, by working with music or text, or by adding even more objects, it was possible to let the objects perform without a lot of action from the performer. In McLoughlin's piece *Stickman*, there is a moment where a wooden stick and a TV are performing without any human interference, which is a nice moment for the (human) audience.

**15** — It is true that often there is a kind of set repertoire of tricks that a student needs to learn. This happens due to the fact that there is a plan for how to progress and achieve a good technique. You need to go through a set of steps in order to achieve a certain skill. Thus, a set repertoire makes it much easier to teach, because it is clear what to do at which point, and it allows teachers to grade, because the norm is clear and

But how do you juggle humbly? Let us begin with the objects. An anthropocentric worldview reduces objects to passive heaps of material that are waiting to be activated by subjects—i.e. humans. Conversely, a humble circus would understand things as *actants*, a term from the work of the French philosopher of science Bruno Latour. Latour rejects the Kantian distinction between object and subject and tries to spread agency (which in Enlightenment philosophy is neatly reserved for the white, male subject) across all *actants* in a network: material and non-material, human and non-human. **13**

Treating circus objects as *actants*—'objects with agency'—demands a circus technique that is no longer a virtuoso form of control, but rather a collaboration between humans and objects in which causality flows in both directions. **14** Thus a possible first step would be to recognise the impact that objects have on us and to show this on stage. This would not only have implications for the 'things' that the circus artist interacts with, but also for the person themselves. For the worldview that is constructed around the Kantian subject is not only disastrous because of the relationship to objects that it entails. It also directly damages the human *actants* in the network that we call the 'world'. Non-white bodies, or bodies that fall too far outside the already too-narrow norm of 'able', are excluded from subjectivity. This is a problem that affects the circus. For example, how does someone with paralysis fit into the role of the cosmic juggler? Thus a horizontalisation of *actants* not only benefits so-called 'non-humans'.

universal. If every student would develop their own technique it would be much harder to grade, as well as to teach. During my time at ACaPA, all the jugglers had a personal repertoire, which created a difficult situation for the teachers. It didn't make sense to work towards the same repertoire for everyone, because the strength of the jugglers was their individuality. This meant that the teachers had to create methods to push personal development. So in group classes, we focused on improvisation and creation instead of a fixed repertoire. This way of teaching is often more challenging for the teacher. Imagine you have a one-hour class and your teacher is sitting in front of you. A typical way to start this lesson would be with the question, "So, what do you want to do?" After that, there would be several options. I could show some technique and maybe the teacher would have ideas about it. I could work on certain routines and we could talk about the rhythm and dramaturgy of it. Or I could play around in a completely free way, and try to find new techniques with the teacher. I think this process is closer to tuning than to training.

**16** — In general, it is possible to juggle three balls, clubs, rings or chainsaws and use the exact same pattern. A lot of these classical figures relate to classical requisites which have existed for hundreds of years already. A trapeze, for example, is an apparatus where the tuning process probably happened 200 years ago. My experience in school is that the teachers of aerial disciplines or handstands often have a clear plan of what techniques the student must learn to become a good performer—because the techniques for these objects are already clearly defined. Therefore bringing in new objects might help us in our tuning.

**17** — Here we see a recurring problem within the text: the confusion of ontology and representation. What should be problematised is the way representation happens (see the pictures of Musk and Grandville). But ontologically speaking, circus artists are not actually heroes and they do not actually dominate things. There is already so much tuning happening in our practices. Maybe it is just about making the friction visible, showing the slips.

**18** — You know Joseph Beuys' *I Like America and America Likes Me* (1974)? In this performance, the German artist shares a gallery space in New York with a wild coyote for three days. My question is: who is in his comfort zone here, Beuys or the coyote? It seems pretty clear to me that it is actually the coyote that is out of his environment and thus it is the coyote, not the human, who is aggressed. I tell you this

A new approach to circus technique also demands a rethinking of one of the foundations of circus: training. Circus training is traditionally focused on developing a kind of virtuosity in a particular circus discipline. Through physical training, the student learns to perfectly execute a repertoire of figures in relation to the object. These figures and the discourses around them frequently involve the idea of taming the object. **15** Often, the same figures can be performed with different objects, an interchangeability reminiscent of the capitalist principle of exchange, which erases the identity of the individual under the guise of the interchangeability of things through money. **16** Moreover, the performer's staged effortlessness reinforces the sense of human domination and invincibility. **17**

But imagine that we now present the circus object as a 'hyper-object', to borrow the contemporary British philosopher Timothy Morton's concept. Morton often alludes by way of example to climate change—a 'hyper-object' that goes beyond human perception due to its magnitude and temporality. This kind of hyperobject is therefore 'hyper' in relation to humankind: it is impossible to comprehend, let alone to curb or overcome through human subjectivity. The hyperobject is untameable. In other words, it puts an end to the ontological hierarchy: objects are no longer reassuring—passive, at the service of, and subordinate to, humans—but are suddenly disturbing, active and nearby.

Morton suggests an alternative relationship to these objects which he calls 'tuning'. **18** What he

**anecdote just to say: location is essential. We have to be careful with the contexts in which we show and do certain things. The gallery space, or the black box for that matter, is not neutral. This is why we so often work in situ. Should a humble circus not (also) try to meet things outside of the black box, in their environments, around their predicaments?**

**19** — This reminds me of the practice Julian Vogel and I had for our show *122x244—and a lot of little pieces*. In this show, we work with sheets, planks and pieces of wood in different sizes. The starting points for the show were two questions. What is possible with these different objects? And what techniques can we find and perform with the different sizes and formats? We went into the studio with these questions and a lot of stuff became obvious quite quickly. Every piece of wood had clear specificities. For example, there is a moment in the show where Julian is performing a sequence with a single big plank. To create this sequence, we didn't have to think a lot about what we wanted to do with that plank. Instead, we quickly saw that it's not super easy for one person to handle alone, and started to create a sequence from that realisation. Same with all the smaller pieces. Julian said: "Let's just throw all of them to the other side of the room and see how long it takes." These first, simple thoughts often became part of the show, because it was so obvious what to do with each piece of wood. When you see the show now, it is much more about how the different wooden planks affect the two humans working with them—how it affects their relationship and physicality.

**20** — This will require great honesty. It will be very easy for us (humans and footnotes alike) to say we are tuning. It is one thing to hear these 'good' words, and to want to be valued and loved (as I do) and thus say we are tuning. It's another thing to truly do it. To pay attention to what a non-human person is possibly saying, to be open to receive information we don't understand and to care for it and nurture it—and to do this only with the intention of listening. It's very easy to show humility, to pretend. To know when we're kidding ourselves, to stay honest, we have to listen to ourselves and those around us very carefully. We must pay attention to honesty—it often expresses itself in vague but recognisable ways, perhaps in the pit of the stomach or on the back of the neck. It is a practice that is difficult to define, and as you know, I am into in-definition.

I have noticed in my relationships with circus artists that there is a tendency to focus on what all of this 'tuning into the non-human' research means for humans,

means by this is that we try to tune our presence to the objects that surround us. In attempting this, it is impossible to include objects practically or theoretically, in the way Grandville's juggler or Musk still believe to be possible. Rather, we must repeatedly relate to their greatness and to the impossibility of understanding them (or juggling them). **19** Morton explicitly alludes to the arts as a field which can engage in this practice. One could describe this changed relationship as 'humiliating'—it points to our human humility. **20** However, this need not be a negative experience: finding a decentralised place in a lively universe can go hand in hand with pleasure and connection.

## Virtuoso sensitivity

So what does all this mean for circus training? It means that training no longer looks like a battle in which the circus artist attempts to tame their object, **21** but like a never-ending endeavour of the artist to tune themselves to the objects that influence them and that repeatedly slip away from them. The circus artist recognises that they are part of an assemblage that acts on them to a degree that is equal to their influence on it. Philosopher Isabelle Stengers calls Gaia, our earth's system, a "ticklish assemblage" and assigns to humans the following simple task: "to compose with Gaia". Only when we understand that all our actions take place in a web of other *actants* can we try to relate to these *actants* in a sustainable way. In order to occupy a sustainable place in it, we must therefore first recognise this assemblage.

This is a quest that can probably be more effectively carried out in



on a human reflection, on serving a human need. It often happens that the non-human relationships that are being listened to are converted into human material. This is all well and good, my author learns a lot from these interactions and I'm not saying no good can come from this, but for me tuning could be a collaboration, an improvisation, that is open to the situation at hand and ready to change direction at any moment—it could be possible that nothing 'useful' for the human comes from it.

I make no claims to want to decentralise myself as a footnote. I am proud of who I am. I will be read! By people! But then, I've not spent much time at the centre of things.

**21** — I can really relate to the idea of the battle. When I was in school, I used to rage against an object when I failed to do a trick after hours and hours of preparation. I used to get so frustrated that I blamed the object and yelled at it.

**22** — As a footnote with a background in circus, I have noticed that some things get stuck in still bodies hunched over laptops. How can we move with these words, ideas, power structures—what do they feel like, how do they move us, what force do we have to use to move them? What is their weight? What is their scale of time? How do they interact with our breath? What do they sound like? How can we hear them? What is underneath them? These are some of the questions we ask ourselves in the rehearsal room when moving, improvising, training and thinking.

**23** — What I value in circus is the practice. I couldn't care less about circus as a genre, art form, or as a form of representation. The specificity is not to be found there, it might just as well be called theatre or dance. What makes circus relevant is the way we actually do things and how that's different from the way theatre and dance does it.

**24** — That's us!

**25** — That's me!

**26** — This makes me think again of *122x244— and a lot of little pieces*. Making this performance, we noticed the impact the wood had on us. For example, one huge plank can take a lot of load, but is very hard to handle if you're alone. If you cut this plank into a lot of little pieces, the impact of the wood changes. These pieces can be stacked on top of each other or thrown around much more easily. The smaller you cut a big plank the more fluid it becomes. Which doesn't mean that all these little pieces are much easier

practice than in theory.**22** However, it should not prevent us from formulating a number of basic principles. First, humble training (or 'tuning') must be based on the specificity of the object, rather than on an established repertoire of figures. We also need to search for new objects that challenge our yearning for triumph, or even render it impossible. So we are not searching for what we can do with the object, but focusing on what objects do *not* allow us to do, or what they compel us to do.

So what remains of the virtuosity that forms the premise of the circus? Is virtuosity without domination even conceivable? I believe that a new kind of virtuosity can be created in learning to read and feel (im)material environments. The practice of the circus, in which human bodies spend hours with things in the studio, allows us to explore specific circumstances (i.e. *assemblages*) and our place within them.**23** Perhaps that is what virtuosity means in a humble circus: a sensitivity to the characteristics of environments, and the physical ability to relate to these in a variety of ways.

## The unjugglability of things

This movement can already be seen today. In contemporary circus, a number of strategies are taking shape. Some makers are working with figures in such a way as to render the objects no longer interchangeable and to allow the specificity of each object to assert itself. Others opt for a categorical role reversal.

The latter strategy was employed by the Flemish circus artist Michiel Deprez in *Piste* (2017): at the end of this performance, Deprez had

to handle: just imagine cleaning up after you threw 200 small pieces of wood around for a few hours. The transformation of the wood, and the way we were forced to deal with it, created a lot of relations between the two of us and the wood itself. These relations only came into existence because of the wood.

## (Josef)

Maybe just preparing the stage for the objects and then

Objects performing for other objects?

Or maybe not even a stage,

theatres are houses for human amusement.

to navigate between the trajectories of five spheres that circled through the space, attached on cords to a single overhead point. Here there were no human patterns; there was only a person who was trying—with visible difficulty—to fit into a network of non-human trajectories. In this way, the circus stage became a lively and hybrid assembly of *actants*, a place where a human being can repeatedly search for a new, decentralised place in the universe.

Alongside young circus makers such as Mardulier en Deprez (BE) **24** and Klub Girko (DE), **25** French circus artist Phia Ménard goes in search of ways to relate to objects that are too big or too slippery to juggle in the series I.C.E. (Injonglabilité Complémentaire des Elements). Her performances *Vortex* and *L'après-midi d'un foehn* (2008) are about the wind. In *Belle d'Hier* (2015) the element of water plays a central role. Ménard demonstrates the unjuggleability of things by opting for insubstantial or elusive objects and elements and by emphasising their impact on people. Thus the limits of her virtuosity suddenly become abundantly clear. Acknowledging these limits punctures the popular illusion that for the virtuoso human being the possibilities are endless. Circus artists no longer take on the role of the

A tree falling  
in the woods  
only recognised

by the other  
trees, slowly  
falling apart  
over the years.



**27** — The idea of control is a loophole in this text and maybe in circus in general. How much can you stage yourself to be affected by things? It makes me think of the clown who designs a ladder in order for it to break under his weight. If we are designing our own humility, how much control are we really giving away?

**28** — She is great! Her work is such a rich contribution to our field, and part of this is how she is truly moving away from an idea of mastery over the environment. But what if we are a little more playful here, and I mean all of us—artists, reviewers, audiences, writers, footnotes alike. What about reviewing the material? The ice? the temperature? The gravity? How can we talk about what is happening without *glorifying* the human artist? Perhaps this is not the right way to go? I know that my authors need a little encouragement, a nod, an applause that they know is for them. How can human artists be proud of the situation itself, of non-human collaborators? What else is at play, what else is making a show—visible and invisible? Perhaps this can also be liberating—one has to relinquish some praise, but at the same time, one is also freed a little from responsibility. What if we pay attention to the role of fear? The role of capitalism? The role of the audience? The space? How can we change how we talk about the work we are part of?

virtuoso subject who forces objects into a framework. Rather, they are humble humans who demonstrate that influencing always goes hand in hand with being influenced. **26** When Ménard tries to juggle ice in *P.P.P.* (2008), it melts in her hands. **27** The ice cannot be grasped and therefore cannot be juggled. Spectacle, and thus human domination, is rendered impossible.

Thus Ménard makes the addictive experience-machine of triumphant anthropocentrism falter. The traditional relationship of the subject to its submissive environment literally melts away. The world is no longer

a juggling ball in the hand of the (white, male) subject. In *P.P.P.*, balls of ice hang above the stage, waiting threateningly before falling at random and smashing into pieces on the floor. The melting ice makes Ménard stumble repeatedly. Similarly, our environment in the Anthropocene can no longer be depicted as if it has been created on a human scale, but instead becomes an unpredictable and often inhospitable web of interactions. **28**

In a humble circus, abandoning the dominant position makes room for new kinds of relationships to objects: a caring relationship, a dependent, subservient, balanced, intimidated, threatened or accommodating relationship. Thus the physical practice of the circus offers space in the Anthropocene to go in search of possible futures of coexistence. We see a humble human, in negotiation

with active and elusive things.  
The contrast with the hubris of Musk  
could scarcely be more marked.



Or the small  
fish travelling  
on the back of  
whales, cleaning  
the skin of  
the whale.

Or just a piece  
of rock rolling  
down the mountain  
taking more  
and more stones  
going down  
the valley?

Not recognised  
by any human.

**(Footnote 1)**

I am a footnote  
Something a-  
foot-juggling notes  
Alive, kicking,  
climbing quotes  
I am me and I am  
everything I am  
you and you are  
everything  
it's nothing, really  
I am the hamstring  
of a tightwire walker  
I am drawn tighter  
I am breaking out  
I am your breath  
breathe me in and  
release me  
in smOke rings  
I run around  
footloose, fancy free  
meaning  
less and less and  
more or less  
and mess and lore  
and S and roar  
and and and or  
ssssssssssss  
O O O O O O  
Grrr OW HO HO  
WHO HA  
U R A  
!

## (Mardulier & Deprez)

### TUTORIAL IN BASIC HUMBLE JUGGLING

1. Let an object appear to you. Be open to what presents itself as wanting to take part in the juggling.
2. Accept the thing(s) as your partner(s).
3. Establish an understanding, a not-yet-physical relationship of listening and proposition.
4. When the situation is satisfying for both parties, establish a dialogue.
5. Observe the existing relationships between the objects; find a place in this complex web.
6. When the research has been exhausted and the dialogue comes to an end, thank the object.



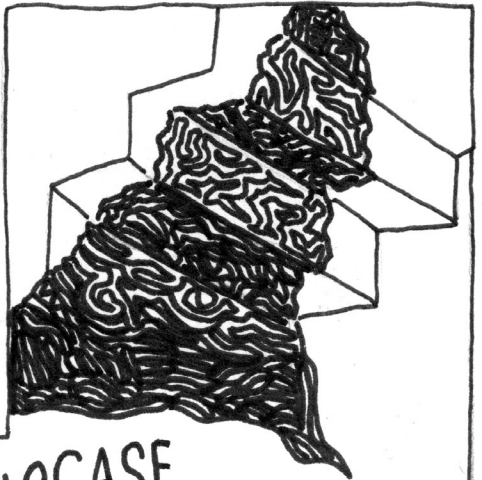
A dark liquid  
begins to drip...  
— **Graphic Novel**  
by **Natalie Oleinik**





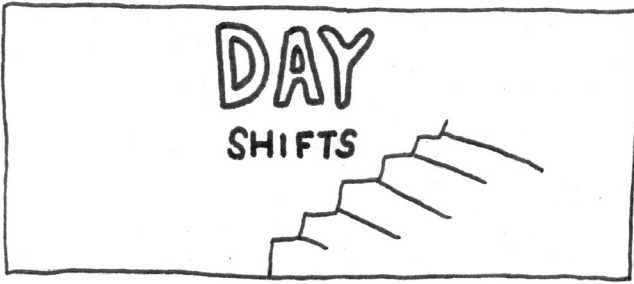
welcome to

# MANOR HOUSE



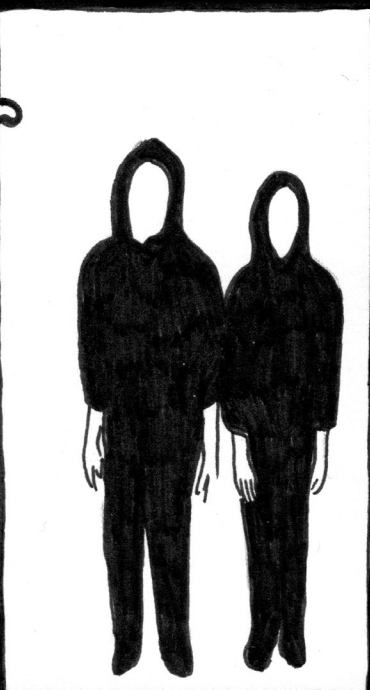
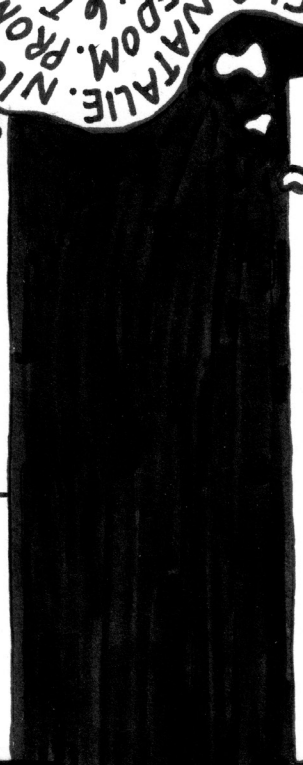
AN INTERIOR SCENE UPSTAGE  
RIGHT THERE IS A SMALL STAIRCASE.  
THE STAIRS ARE LINED WITH HIDEOUS  
SHAG CARPET—THE KIND THAT  
BUGS GET STUCK IN—WHICH  
REACHES THE FLOOR AND PROCEEDS  
IN A SERIES OF S-BENDS, WIDENING  
UNTIL IT SPILLS OVER THE EDGE OF  
THE STAGE LIKE A RAGGEDY,  
FROZEN WATERFALL.







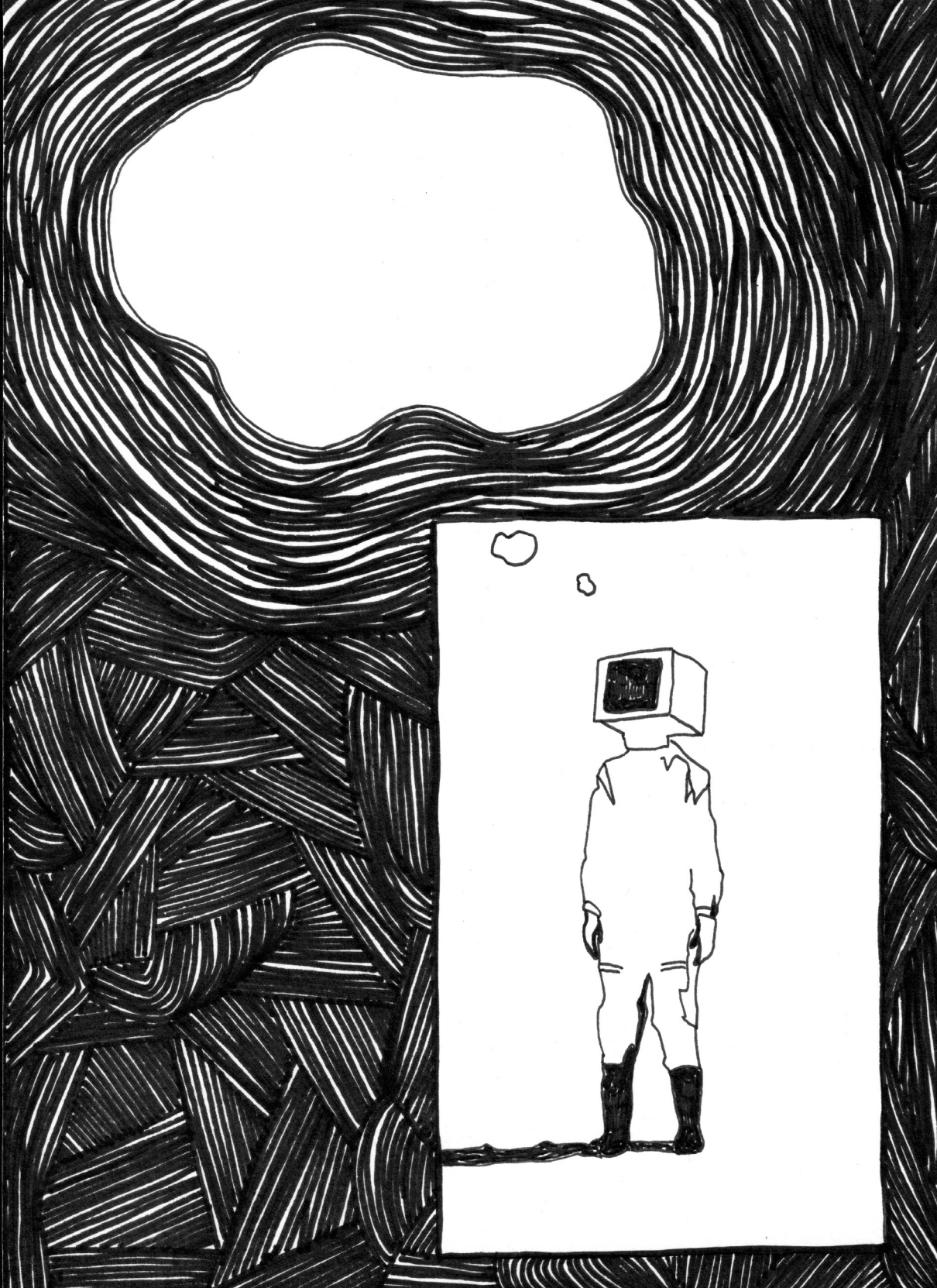
DREAMS. GATHERING. INK. SMALL SPACES.  
TEENAGER. PORNO. LONGING  
BITTER-SWEET. FLOATING  
HUMAN SACRIFICE.  
MELTING. POPSTAR. BUFFALO SIXTY  
CANNIBAL/BOREDOOM. NATALIE.  
MORNING. CANDY. FROM NIGHT  
WIND. WINDOW. STALKING. RUNNING.  
UPPER. STALKING. NIGHT + DAY.

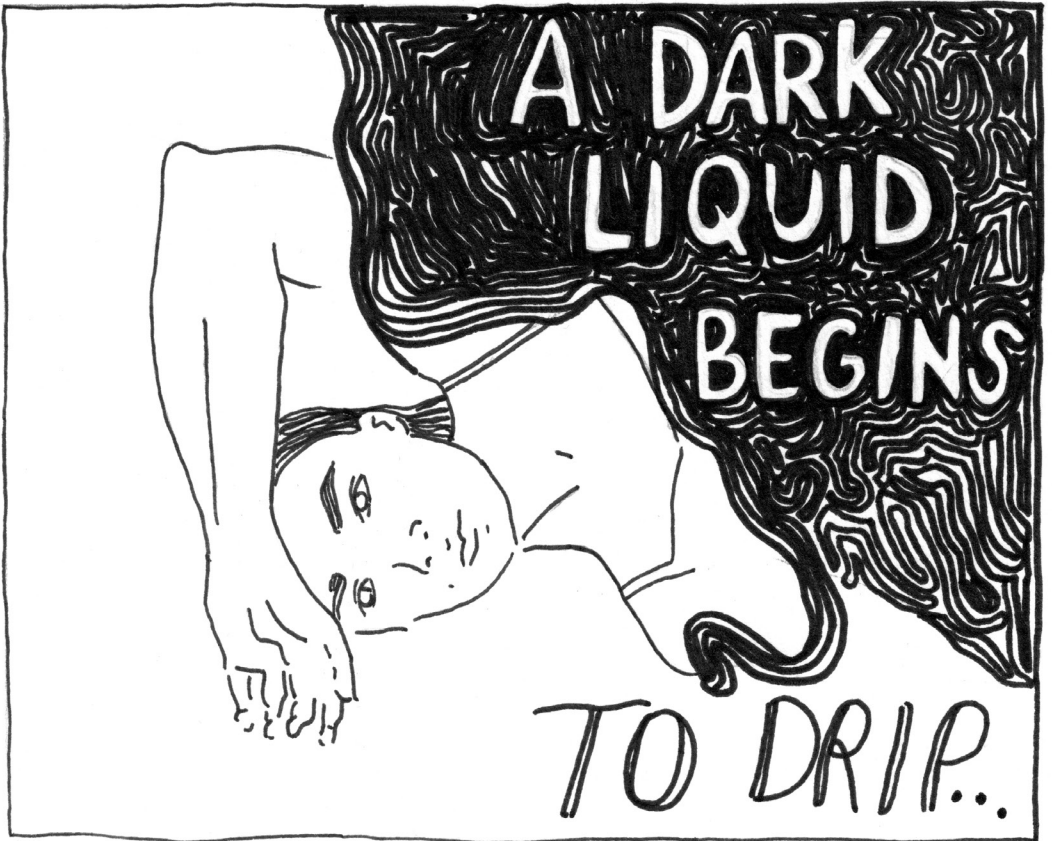


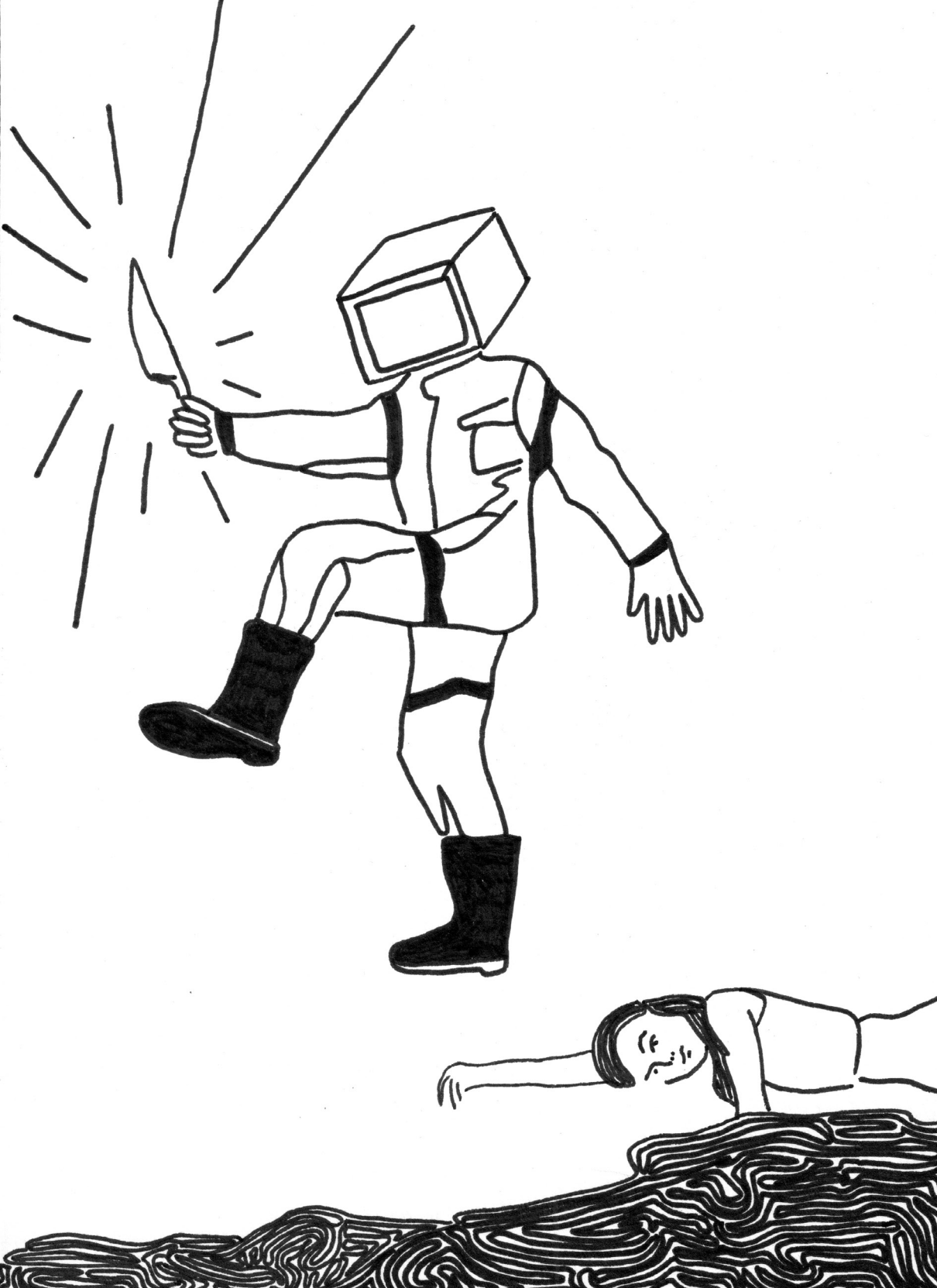
a sinister energy begins  
to make itself felt,  
forcing us to begin to  
recognize  
ourselves



and each other **BENEATH**  
**THE DISGUISES WE WEAR...**















# Interrogating Fantasy — Sebastian Kann & Natalie Oleinik

In 2013, we formed Manor House. Our first work (also called *Manor House*) was to be a cinematic duet performance in dialogue with a majestic staircase,

a life-size tree, a rotating platform, a large suspended climbing net, a window, a red telephone and a custom-made shag carpet in the shape of a flowing river. After several research residencies in between autumn 2013 and spring 2014, the project fizzled out: we never applied for funding.

Fast forward to the present (2019): we're very different artists, working on a very different piece. In the studio, we got to wondering about that older piece, *Manor House* the show, the work that never materialised. What happened to it? Where is it now? What potential energy lies in the bundle of concepts and images that it gathered, even now in their dormant / defunct state?

To find out, we resurrected the piece, performed above as a short graphic novel (*A dark liquid begins to drip...*). During a parallel series of self-interviews, we re-encounter its unrealised potential, wondering what thinking can still be generated in its proximity.

What was *Manor House* an attempt to think about?

**Natalie:** When I think about our past work, the word that comes to my mind is 'fantasy'. We were enacting certain fantasies that we had in our lives at the time, fantasies that we couldn't act out offstage. Like our obsession with overplaying emotion: looking back now, it feels like it was a reaction to being an American living in Europe, wanting to be dramatic and excited about certain things and feeling we had to repress our reactions. Then our 'twins' figures: they had this very 'us against the world' vibe, which I think was less about Europe and more about the circus world in general, about feeling we didn't fit in. Through these twin characters, we were imagining ourselves as kind of sinister teenagers, hanging around on the outskirts. And your character in a business suit: to me now, this character looks like us wondering, "What is a good job? What is good work?" It was a lot of fantasy.

We were also—and I didn't realise it then—living out our own fantasy of what it meant to create a show. We were doing things in a kind of fantasy bubble. We imagined

a show that would have been impossible for us to make. And we lived for a year as if it was actually going to happen.

**Sebastian:** Remember we went to [Festival CIRCa in] Auch? We had all these meetings with people who represented important institutions. We presented them this elaborate dossier that was like: WE WANT ALL THIS STUFF! A full staircase, a custom shag carpet, a full-size tree on stage. They were like, “Well, what can we do for you?” And we were like, “I dunno, what can you do for us? We have nothing yet, and we want it all.” We were operating as if this super ambitious show was realistic for us as unknown artists, inexperienced in production, in administration, in selling. We were operating as if those institutions were actually fantasy-to-stage wish-granters. As if their approval would mean that anything could happen, that all of these steps we would have needed to have taken would have been taken care of for us. Maybe this totally inappropriate way of operating was itself an artistic gesture.

The work presented here in graphic form—*A dark liquid begins to drip...*—is a re-interpretation of the performance you tried to make in 2014. But making a performance and making a graphic novel are fundamentally different kinds of creative processes. How does the process of performance-making differ from drawing or writing?

**Sebastian:** With aerial hoop, all of the thinking that happens through hoop stays on and in me in a very characteristic way. My particular history of aerial is so obviously present in my thinking through aerial. The body holds onto stuff; it has inertia, and it can only change at a certain speed. Sometimes, it is hard to define the specificities of different aerial projects. This is, I think, largely because of the centrality of the body. Whereas in writing, I find it easier to adopt a particular style and then drop it. I can write something and then forget about it. Writing sits outside my body.

Writing is also less material. Of course, it is somehow ‘about’ the materiality of printed text, but it’s mostly about what’s represented

*through* that text, at least for me. It's a friendlier medium for fantasy. Versus with circus, the layer of reference or imagination or virtuality feels much thinner. And the layer of concreteness is much more present.

**Natalie:** Writing and drawing are also less dependent on the hard practicalities and logistics of moving bodies and objects around. I'm always alone when I draw. I've always been with other people when I make performance. That's a really different place to be. When I make a performance, I'm dependent on other people from the very beginning. Thinking: what kind of space do I need? Who do I need to ask to find the space? What kind of funding is available? You need some kind of insider information to get funding and support, and asking people for this information: is always tricky. I'm also not a lighting designer, I'm not a musician: I need to ask all these other people for their input.

With my drawing practice, I'm just in my house at a desk trying things out. It's easier to be spontaneous. It's also easier to let go of something that isn't working. Sometimes I look down and it's clearly shit, so I just turn the page.

There's a sense of resolution or closure in the creative gesture you perform here, tending to this show as it migrates from the stage to the page. Do you think that impossible projects deserve some kind of conclusion?

**Sebastian:** I don't know! I think the best projects are the ones that aren't completed. They stay in a state of potential. There's something inevitably disappointing when the infinite potential of a project becomes a humdrum, everyday reality. How many shows do we go and see? It becomes such an everyday thing. When you're working on a project, it has the potential to go beyond the everyday, to be truly extraordinary. Then at a certain point, it becomes just another show in the brochure.

When I think about impossible projects, I think about things that I'm still optimistic about: finding a home, being part of a queer community, living a lively, durable intimacy that's rooted in a feeling of at least semi-permanent investment in

a place. That's where my first thoughts go. With all of those things, there's a somewhat vague endgame. I don't know what those things could look like in reality. The fact that the fantasy is vague and out of reach does do something to drive me. I keep on wondering: how will it happen? What will it look like? I never experience the everydayness of the fantasy.

On the other hand, there are some impossible projects that I've abandoned and feel fine about. I was training to be a contortionist. That's an impossible project that I no longer feel motivated by. Where do I keep that? That one I keep in my body, I guess. There are traces of that in my body.

**Natalie:** I think we actually avoided this first performance becoming too possible. It was always an impossible project. Turning *Manor House* into a graphic novel made it dangerously real for me. If we had drawn this out at the time, we would have seen how many steps away from reality we were. We didn't have the staircase, we didn't have the platform, we didn't have the tree. It would have been harder to push for because we would have seen just how impossible it was. But there is also something about delusion that gives you energy. An impossible project is like having a crush on someone: you're excited all the time and it keeps you going. There's hope. It's disillusionment that's draining.

**If you had the resources, the expertise and the network, would you stage this performance now?**

**Natalie:** We both had a rude awakening after the fantasy period was over, realising how hard it was to make a living doing circus, and how much energy it takes to keep so many different projects going. I feel like I hit a wall after no longer being employed by a big company, after realising *Manor House* would never happen, kind of taking all of that in. And because of those experiences—after being through that and starting to understand what it takes to make a big production—the kind of almost 'cinematic' work we had been dreaming about was no longer what I wanted to make. Now I see shows like this and I think, "Wow, impressive, but where did the money come from to make this? What did the artists go through? And whose idea *is* that, actually?"

Now, I tend to feel a little put off by something so big and so spectacular. So no, I don't think I would want to stage this show now. The amount of money, time and resources that it would take: it's not something that I would want to be responsible for, nor something that I would want to show people or to see, because I know what's behind it.

**Sebastian:** Everyone knows that it's hard to make a living in the arts. But in the period after we shelved this first performance, I started to see that *no one* in the arts is having an easy time. In this kind of large-scale production, what's *represented* on stage feels very disconnected from the working experience of the *people* on stage. The performers look as if they're inhabiting a parallel universe where they don't even need a job. It covers up the problem of sustainability of the arts. Maybe that kind of fantasy isn't what any audience needs to see.

When and how did notions of the political start to become important in your practice? For example, were you already thinking about power and gender in 2014, during the research period which inspired the graphic novel?

**Natalie:** It's kind of funny how we had these really gendered roles in *Manor House*. I'm thinking about our actions, the way we moved and the characters that we tried to create. I love dresses, and you wore a suit and a spacesuit! Today, we tend to wear the exact same thing as each other. Part of what I like is experimenting with how similar we can be, and, at the same time, I think that now you somehow see the differences between us as individuals more.

I'm trying to remember when I first felt sexism in circus. I always knew it was a big part of the world. But we never talked about it at circus school. There was so much sexist shit at school, but somehow *everyone's* bodies were objectified, not just women's bodies. We were all just struggling with and against it together. Since entering the professional world, I've felt sexism much more acutely. Most theatre directors seem to be men. Men tend to have the most powerful role in institutions. In production meetings and during feedback, people turn to speak to the man in the room.

**Sebastian:** I remember travelling with you [Natalie] during the (un)making of *Manor House*. It's when I really felt chauvinism and misogyny for the first time. Homophobia I was more familiar with—in commercial settings, male gayness is only allowed on stage in certain forms, under the heading of glamour or comedy, especially in venues with high production value. We're particularised and in that way objectified. And of course, I was witness to the way women's bodies were objectified routinely in even more obvious ways. But the day-to-day of sexism, the way it plays out backstage and in the sociality of circus work—I didn't feel it until you [Natalie] taught me how to pay attention. The way people would interact with us when we were pitching the show together; the way that people would always turn to me to ask a question or for clarification. And *especially* when it came to the budget. I had no fucking idea. Neither of us did! But they would look to me.

When we first started working together, power and gender weren't things we talked about. But I did have a sense of relief while working in the studio with you. I had a sense of escaping something heavy, something that had been dragging me down. So I suppose there was an element of criticality in our work together: we were certainly choosing to operate differently, and thus to reject a certain 'heavy' work environment.

As our shared practice began, faltered, and then began again, I became more and more familiar with contemporary circus institutions. I was disappointed to realise that normativity and exclusion aren't any less present in apparently 'artistic' circus settings than in avowedly commercial ones. In the world of contemporary circus, there are still arbitrary hierarchies and structures of privilege, they are just a little bit more discreet. It's all about being an insider, about speaking the language, about fashion, trends and knowing how to navigate institutional politics. As we realised this, the question of what kinds of bodies and practices are allowed to become visible in circus, and who or what is made invisible, started to become central to our thinking.



## Can you fantasise about what a perfect circus institution would look like?

**Natalie:** In the perfect circus institution, people would have time for other people. Now, everyone feels underappreciated and overlooked because everyone is overworked. In my perfect dream space, people would—somehow—not be overworked. And when you met with someone, it would feel like they actually cared about what you had to say. And you could feel you had the time to listen to what they said. We wouldn't be thinking: "I need to go to my next thing. When is this over?"

This fantasy institution is a creation space. There would be space for people who don't have a set plan of action, who don't have tons of sponsors and a pitch, but who want the space to think on their own. Now there are training spaces, but they don't provide the right conditions to be creative. I'm always hoping when I open the door to a training space that it will magically be empty and I'll be able to work on my own. I think that's never actually happened to me in Toulouse [where I live].

**Sebastian:** I think that if it were less complicated to find good workspace, I would feel less complicated about my relation to other circus artists. As it is now, every time other artists walk into the training space, I have a feeling of being obstructed because I wish for my own space. I feel crowded. It sucks to see other people as obstacles. And to be frustrated by their presence. It's sad.

**Natalie:** There would also be a library in my dream space. A quiet place where you could open a book, write in your journal, draw something, talk to the librarian. And it would be in a building that's shared by other kinds of artists. Circus spaces—I know it's really complicated to find the kind of space that can have rigging and all the things that I need, but they then tend to be outside of the city, pretty often in industrial spaces. So only circus artists enter the building. In circus spaces, we're isolated: it would be great to be able to see other kinds of artists—or not even artists, just people—at work, and to get inspired. The circus bubble is really hard to break. Oh yes, and I would add an affordable restaurant to this fantasy. Or at least a place to cook your food where you don't feel awkward, where people aren't glaring at you.

You are artists who are critical of institutions yet who benefit from their support. How do you reconcile these two positions?

**Sebastian:** Now, when I criticise the way things work, in Belgium [where I live] for example, there's always a little voice in my head saying: "Whoa whoa whoa, wait up, you're lucky that there's any arts funding available at all." There is always a part of me that wonders if I'm being a spoiled brat. On the other hand, the notion that we should just be grateful for everything that we *do* have is one way of silencing criticism about what's messed up about the system. When I think about the way we were operating in the face of circus institutions during the creation phase we're documenting here—assuming that they could grant our wishes 'for free', so to speak—I think: "Wow, we had such an entitled attitude." But I also believe that there's a grey area where entitlement overlaps with simply demanding this world be the best world it can possibly be.

**Natalie:** I'm not sure that we felt entitled. I think we were naive. I wonder: is that the same? As artists, it's important not only to be grateful for good things that come our way, but also to be critical. Part of being critical is knowing what you think you deserve. Maybe that is being entitled. And I think it's a good thing. Because really often, people say that artists should just be happy with what we've got. "Aren't you lucky that you have anything at all? There are so many who have nothing!" It's true—we are lucky. But that doesn't mean there aren't some basic things still lacking. It doesn't mean we can't want more.

Your use of the word 'entitled' stuck out for me, because to me it implies demanding without understanding. Asking for more for yourself regardless of what others are willing or able to give, regardless of their situation: that's entitlement. We need to understand how things work, what's available and what's sustainable, but still be able to say: "I don't think this is right, we need to imagine a way to make a change." We need to push to realise our fantasies, even if institutions try to convince us they are outsize or inappropriate.

## Can fantasy and sustainability coexist? Or does sustainability always appear as fantasy's limiting factor?

**Sebastian:** Before, our fantasy world had a lot to do with imagining away personal constraints. They were fantasies about identity, about ourselves as individuals and the things we might be able to fantastically mobilise. We ignored the question of the real-world consequences of these fantasies. But fantasy and sustainability *can* coexist: actually, I think we *need* to create fantasy models of the future to aim towards. It's only a specific kind of fantasy that is problematic: the fantasy of a world without limits. Or maybe without certain kinds of limits. It's hard to put your finger on it. It's just important not to be overly strict one way or another, saying "always be realistic" or "always speculate wildly". There are different flavours of being a free thinker. If you imagine away the limit beyond which an image becomes boring, that's a very different kind of naive imagination of a world without limits than imagining we could just keep on chugging gasoline, or whatever. The way we push the boundaries of the imaginable needs to be context-specific. The work we're making now is still totally based in fantasy: fantasies of horizontality, for example. Fantasies of shared authorship. These fantasies are different in kind than fantasies of being an astronaut, or of touring with an enormous set. They have more to do with fantastic structures, institutions and practices than fantastic identities and abilities.

## Does professionalism ruin art? Can one do art in the 'real world', or does it only exist in protected spaces?

**Sebastian:** When I hear you [Natalie] talk about drawing, when I see how excited you were to make a graphic novel—partially, I guess, because of not being immersed in the politics of the publishing field—there *is* a sense of the real world 'ruining' art or something, corrupting it or making it impossible. Boris Groys [in 'The Loneliness of the Project', 2010] writes about the depression and 'jetlag' artists feel when project-time is forced

to realign with ‘real’ time, when the loneliness of the project is no longer socially sanctioned, when all of a sudden it needs to do *work*: the work we all do, of convincing, persuading and earning. I don’t know if amateurism is the solution to that feeling of jetlag, but it’s definitely tempting.

**Natalie:** Bringing a piece into the ‘real world’ always involves convincing people of something. For example, this graphic novel: if I was to produce it independently, how would I convince people to see it, how would I convince people to buy it, who would promote it, what kind of person be able to see or buy it or know that it even exists?

Often, this convincing is also continued *in* the work itself. There’s the convincing that goes into setting up the work, and then there’s the convincing within the work, convincing whoever’s consuming the work that it’s very delicious. All of this convincing: it comes with the transition into a capitalist world, a world of money. That’s where a lot of the pain comes from. I wonder, would there be critique in the ideal institution we were talking about earlier? Or would it be an anything-goes institution, without convincing? If the convincing could be eliminated, that would be ideal.

**Sebastian:** What I’m hearing in what’s flowing between us now is that, on the one hand, we want art to be outside of critique, or independent of the evaluations of critique, because critique places art objects in an order of value for a market. But on the other hand, we want to be critical of the systems in which we’re embroiled. So artworks get a free pass, but systems do not. Is that what we’re proposing? It’s the opposite of what’s going on now.

I think the power of criticality is diffused when it gets turned on consumer objects—as even artworks are—and turned away from political systems. The institution is a political system. It’s not something that is there for me to consume. The fact is that today, professional art criticism has transformed into what amounts to glorified consumer reviews. This takes all of the power out of critique. Maybe it would be interesting to lay a strong claim to performance as a consumer object, and the moment of performance as a moment of

production and consumption, a moment of work. We could argue that this moment itself should not be the object of critique. Rather, critique should be turned on the political systems and institutional systems which *produce* particular experiences of production and consumption. What do you think about that?

Self-interviews conducted by and with Sebastian Kann and Natalie Oleinik on the 7th of June, 2019 (PERPLX/Arts Centre Buda, BE) and on the 21st of June, 2019 (Cirqueon, CZ).



# A Circus Facing the World — Anna Tauber

What does it mean to do what we do? Why write this article? Why make circus? How can we find a way to not be ashamed of what we do?

When first

approaching the question of how to articulate an artistic, intellectual activity to the world, it's tempting to draw on the stereotypes laid out by Geoffroy de Lagasnerie in his lecture 'Pour une éthique des oeuvres' (2017):

The stock of clichés [...] that reassures us by telling us that culture brings us together, that art transforms our experience, that art is destabilising, that art is a worthy accomplishment for the mind, or even that art belongs to a sphere of meaninglessness and that by this very fact it disturbs the normal order of things, and in particular the capitalist order.

When I look at the arts I feel that culture does bring together and fulfil those who live by it. And yet the capitalist order seems less disturbed or destabilised by art than it is nourished by it. When a show elicits only boredom and indifference, or just the feeling of belonging to a privileged class, I tell myself that art has no purpose, or rather that art only serves to reinforce the reproduction of existing social structures. I notice the injustices, the domination, the violence (rarely perceived as such), and I see that I'm often on the side of those who benefit from this world rather than those who are oppressed by it. Faced with these discouraging facts, Geoffroy de Lagasnerie's book *Penser dans un monde mauvais* (2017) gives me something to hold onto:

There is no ontological responsibility for what happens in the world. On the other hand, as soon as we write, as soon as we take the decision to publish, to research, to create, everything changes. To launch oneself into such activities means that one has decided more or less consciously at one moment or another to become a producer of ideas, to circulate a certain discourse, and therefore to help shape the course of the world. As a consequence, at that moment, we have chosen to commit ourselves. We are committed to a certain course. And then we can neither reverse nor deny the political dimension of our action. (12)

Taking a stance publicly commits me to the attempt to make this world fairer and nourish its transformation. So, what can circus do in a bad world? How can we refuse to accommodate it, and not be complicit in its injustices? How can circus participate in these battles?



*Le Lion* © Paul de Cordon



I am currently finishing the creation of *Dans ton cirque* (2020), in which Viivi Roiha, Fragan Gehlker and I ask exactly these questions. We look for answers, translating them into actions and words on the stage.

One of our starting points is that we have been wary of borrowing the codes and fashions of other art forms as a way of ‘ennobling’ and legitimising the circus that we make. We are looking to avoid the lexicons imposed on us: we are not ‘quirky’ or ‘unexpected’; nor do we misuse the word ‘poetry’ to hide what is strange, blurred, incomprehensible and boring in what we present. By pushing back against this language, we attempt to undo the bourgeois taste—and distaste—which insidiously shapes contemporary circus. Here, some might blame me for the vagueness of the term ‘bourgeois’, arguing of a ‘moralism’ or ‘simplification’, or of the risk of a certain populism. To them, I would answer that this fundamental question of the bourgeoisie in the artistic sphere is much better addressed by others, notably in *Histoire de ta bêtise* (Bégaudeau 2019). Reading this book made me blush. I recognised myself and many of my colleagues and friends.

Working against the grain does not cause a simplification, reduction or impoverishment of the subject—quite the contrary. The task of recognising and undoing prescriptions of form and language invites us to be more precise, more explicit—more surprising even. It also invites us to put our artistic choices to the test by tackling that enduring and radical question (inherited from Fragan’s previous work with the Hungarian theatre director Árpád Schilling): “Why do [*sic*] the public have to see this?” This short, yet concrete, question focuses us on what every element of the project, right down to the smallest detail, can give by way of an answer. Why this gesture? Why this arm position rather than another? Why that costume?

Circus is not *only* a bourgeois art. Taking into account all its different manifestations, circus is a performing art that reaches a broad audience. There is a classless, communal element to it which we can celebrate. Circus acts, containing few words yet rich in powerful actions, can appeal to a large public: children and adults, locals and foreigners, rich and poor. And alas, in this way circus, adapts itself extremely well to the capitalist system... Nonetheless, as a ‘tool’, circus has several uses, and if we look deeper into the capacity

of circus to bring people together, into its potential as a transformative social event, we might shake the balance of power and increase our ability to act in this world. From this perspective, *Dans ton cirque* defends the idea that the physical feat can be the impetus for us to gather together and form collective ideas. For the feat seizes and interrogates: an extraordinary event invites us to stop momentarily and to come closer—even if we have little time to spare, don't speak the same language, or don't know the *codes* of the performance. A person who inverts the established order of things often provokes strong emotions. Facing danger, ridicule and disgust, acts are charged with fear, laughter, surprise, wonder, melancholy, anger... Drawing on this, the circus can become a testimony of what a single person can do, and even more so of what a group of people can do together. The extraordinary act of circus is an amalgam of the absurdity *and* the importance of any life. It speaks of the necessity of connection, solidarity and joining forces in order to do out of the ordinary things together.

One can speak in this way of the eloquence of the gesture, yet it is true that the mind also unfolds in words—and since the beginnings of the modern circus words have never been entirely at ease there. In *Du théâtre équestre au cirque, le cheval au cœur des savoirs et des loisirs 1760–1860* (2018), Caroline Hodak shows how the Licensing Act in Britain (in 1737 and 1744) and Napoléon's French theatre decrees (1806–1807) limited the use of the spoken word in modern circus, which had emerged in the 1760s. Shaping itself to circumvent this censorship, circus came to work with 'indirect' voices between the acts. A written programme described the order of events in the show, for example, and the Ringmaster or 'Monsieur Loyal' guided the audience by ear. But while the spoken word remained present between the acts and outside the ring, or on its edge, it was in precisely these (rare) words that a point of view and a political posture were pronounced as a complement to the action.

In our own work, there is, strictly speaking, neither programme nor Ringmaster. We create another kind of indirect voice through a recorded audio track that addresses the public. Several voices are mixed together: recordings of our own words blend with those of others, taken from diverse contexts. They formulate questions and answers on the subject of the relationship art, and more specifically

circus, has with the world. As a collage of voices and perspectives, it seeks to challenge those in our field who, in our own opinion, whether by their activity or passivity, contribute to an atmospheric *marasme*. **1** Amid the tumult of words, communal and popular references appear (popular music and familiar voices, noises that sometimes say more than words, grotesque juxtapositions), counterbalancing the seriousness of our research and opening a joyful and playful dimension, or even a space for uncertainty and derision.

Gestures and words make a circus. But what devices do we choose so that this doing and saying are ‘useful’ and so that we make a real contribution to social transformation? **2** Where do we perform? Who do we perform with/for? How do we not become a product that works and turns around itself?

*Dans ton cirque*, a performance we have been working on since 2017, will have its official premiere in January, 2020. The core discipline is an aerial one, performed on a 10-metre *corde lisse*. When we were imagining how we might tour the performance, we asked ourselves how we could build a tour that wasn’t dictated by technical parameters and restricted to ‘high’ venues. In order to be more independent, we therefore looked into ‘making (a) space’ that would be at home both outdoors and indoors. We finally took the time to build our own structure, a large metal arch which becomes a ‘space’ through its capacity to draw a crowd. Beyond the need to resolve technical issues, we also didn’t want *Dans ton cirque* to be primarily addressed to the audience we already knew—the bourgeois, calm, polite audience, drowsy in their comfortable seats, who would afterwards discuss our ‘artistic proposition’ over a few drinks. Indeed, here there are no theatre seats. The space is not comfortable. Coming together demands that we organise ourselves: the ‘seats’ are unlimited

**1** An abstract definition of the French word *marasme* would be ‘a stagnant situation’ or ‘an overwhelming and profound apathy’, but I also discovered that the word refers to a small, tough-stemmed mushroom, of which one variety, the *marasmius oreades*, is edible. The similarity to the capitalist system is striking.

**2** The term ‘useful’ is often banished from the vocabulary of the arts field. It seems to provoke a kind of anxiety, recalling the pressure to answer to practical and economic necessities. Reclaiming the term here feels like a political gesture: ‘stealing’ it back from a strictly economic and neoliberal rationale in order to speak instead of social utility.

and unnumbered. In this disorder, the audience builds a space with us. The whole performance team is there to welcome the audience, to accompany them upon their arrival. We offer some sweets while they wait, giving a literal taste to the show. We chat with them.

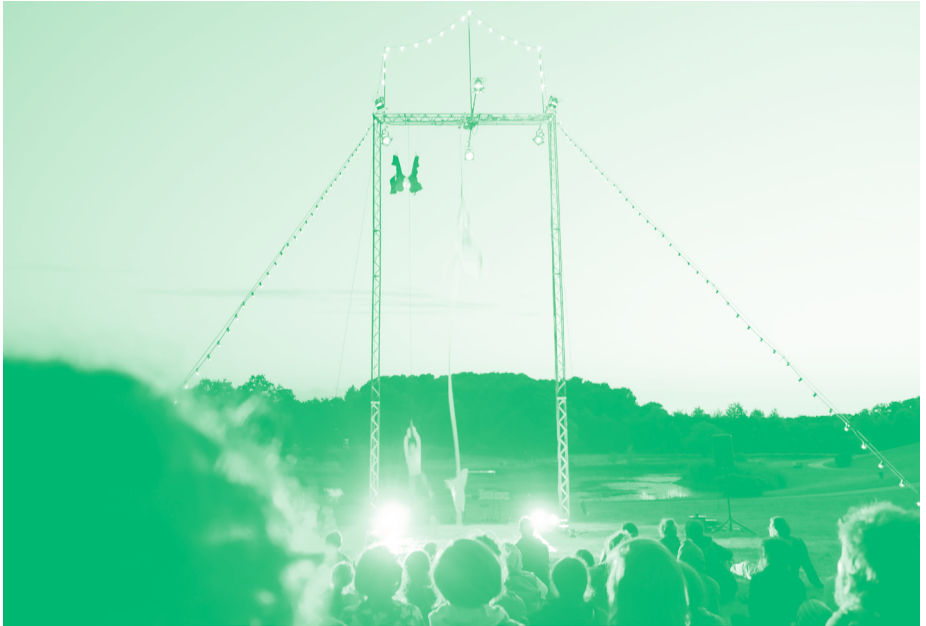
We take a lot of care in welcoming them in order to build a common space and a shared moment. There is a festive flavour to it, at once derisory and grand: glitter, lollipops, lights, music!

To take a public stance, to ask for the attention of others, is a commitment. We have to be careful with this moment. It also testifies to a privilege: we can speak while others cannot. In consideration of this privilege, we take up as little time as possible. Right now, 30 minutes seems to focus and sharpen the sense and meaning of what we're doing, and it's clear to us that the typical show duration—an hour or an hour and a half—is one that has been gradually imposed from outside. Doing less means that we step outside of normal methods of programming and restrict the project's access to certain opportunities. But if we stuck to the prescribed format, it would distract us from what we are doing: we would stretch or shorten the performance for the wrong reasons.

I'm not saying that a short piece is better than a long one (even if a bad short performance irritates me for less time than a long one), but I do hold to the idea that we need to consider the time we're taking from our anonymous audience members when we put ourselves in the spotlight. It is important to figure out if what we do interests 'the world'. I also think a certain humbleness is necessary to build community. Shortening doesn't mean going faster. Quite the contrary: creation processes take a long time. Indeed, fighting against consumerism also means 'producing' fewer performances, and producing them slowly (even if the politics and funding of creation and touring encourage the opposite). We should never cease returning to our work, nor stop daring to modify and improve what has already been shown. Our responsibility is to be present rather than to re-present—as long as there is something to refine in the core idea.

Of course, a performance really comes into being when it is faced with an audience, who give a shared weight to its ideas and actions. And yet the audience does not 'make' the performance. The encounter with the audience can fail; and when it does, I would say that it can only be improved. Meeting an audience confronts us with what we've been doing, and this confrontation can only sharpen what it is we want to do, inevitably clarifying the underlying meaning. "Why do [*sic*] the public have to see this?" We should be

able to give ourselves the time to reply to this question, to readjust and clarify what it is we want to say, hoping that the next encounters can be ever closer to that which is, for us, important to share publicly.



*Dans ton cirque, Sixt-sur-Aff (FR), 27th of July, 2019 (© Marion Denier)*

When attending a ‘failure’ as an audience member myself, I have often heard seemingly embarrassed artists saying they must ‘rework’ their piece. I have also heard programmers say that a project needs time to ‘develop’, only to see (almost) the same show, in the same unsatisfying form, touring a list of pre-sold dates before it is discarded in favour of a completely new project. In such cases, there is time and space for only a few small changes, not a full reworking. The life of the performance was preordained, and changing course became impossible. This is why, when making a living from the creation of performances, it is better to do something new than improve what you already have. Once again, consumerism has invaded artistic creation. To produce, to consume, to throw away... Can we speak of planned obsolescence in the realm of performance in the same way that we talk about it for washing machines?

If we don’t fight against these dynamics as they impose themselves on our artistic societies, we subtly validate

them through our passivity. It damages the quality of performance in general and harms the joy of making and watching it. We are just making, then, another show among many. I believe that we should find economies in what we consume, reducing both the rate of performance production and the amount of stuff we buy to make performances. It is about doing a lot with fewer resources. It is about creating a ‘poor circus’, or making fire with only a few sticks of wood. When the extraordinary is born from the ordinary, and when it does so without an ostentatious set or ceremony, it strengthens both the spectacular and the sensitive. The less artifice we use, the more we make visible the time spent honing and refining the work—and the more we make art a political engagement against the capitalist world.

There are many ways in which we can fight against what is unjust and participate in inventing alternative societies. Through its actions, words, and modes of production and touring, circus can contribute to this effort, can create the space and the energy necessary for political action and deep reflection. Whenever it is not intrinsic and apparent that art both brings us together and disturbs the established order of things, it is up to each of us to demand disruption and community through our actions and choices—or, at least, to stop pretending. For we can no more escape this responsibility than we can escape the world itself. Art is always committed, whether it conforms to or opposes the given order of things.







# LCCWAY, or How to Move (on) From Here

— Floor Van Leeuwen,  
Alexandre Fray,  
Iris Carta &  
Bauke Lievens

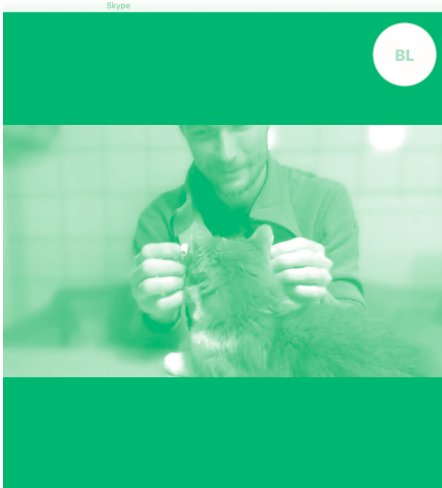
## An impossible conversation <sup>1</sup>

The different voices in this text were never all together in the same space. In the meandering dialogue that follows, however, they are. The polyphonic conversation set out on the following pages is, therefore, a somewhat

artificial (re)construction: in reality, there was not one single dialogue, but multiple conversations between one or more voices, spread over several years. Every encounter, every discussion was rooted in a specific location and a transitory context that shaped what was said: long conversations in a cafe at a Belgian train station, early morning dramaturgy sessions in a cold car on the Breton coast, Skype calls, email conversations, hours spent travelling together in the cab of an ancient lorry or drinking coffee in Amsterdam, a handful of intense residencies spread across Europe, and other sporadic, yet memorable, meetings. What follows is a complicated fabric of voices speaking from different times, with different timbres, and in different spaces. At the loom sits one of the speakers, trying to weave together all the voices, moments and spaces. She sets the warp, the structural lines that the weaving must pass under, over and through, but she also selects the weft, the bright threads of the other three voices as they are slowly drawn together into a woven polyphony. The final tapestry will speak, therefore, of her way of thinking, looking and understanding as much as it does of the conversations it draws on.

So where to begin? Perhaps the first thread was spun in the dramaturgical dialogue between Alexandre Fray and Bauke Lievens during the creation of *Face Nord* (2011, *Un Loup pour l'Homme*), a piece performed by a male physical quartet on

a square of green tatami mats?



Skype conversation between Alexandre Fray, Bauke Lievens and Alex' cat (16th of April, 2019)

<sup>1</sup> The name 'Impossible Conversation' is adopted from *Building Conversation* (2013), a cycle of conversation performances by Dutch theatremaker Lotte van den Berg and visual artist Daan 't Sas.

Or perhaps it began two years earlier when Iris Carta (Cie Circ'ombelico) and Bauke Lievens met for an informal job interview? At the time, Iris (and Jef Naets) had just made *Da/Fort* (2010), an intimate performance set in the belly of an old Scania lorry. Shortly after their encounter, Bauke took on the bookings of *Da/Fort* and sometimes joined the tour. Fast forward to 2017 and Alexandre is making *Rare Birds*, Un Loup pour l'Homme's third production, in which six performers search for flow and a sense of continuity through a gentle dismantling of hand-to-hand acrobatics. Here, the dramaturgical conversation between Alexandre and Bauke continues. This time, the stage direction is done by Floor Van Leeuwen, a mime artist and theatremaker who Bauke had met a few months previously at a circus festival. Floor had been the very last spectator to remain seated whilst watching the 'false ending' of *ANECKXANDER*, Bauke's first creation (made with Alexander Vantourhout), in which a naked male body engages in a tragic battle with a handful of prosthetic objects. Inspired by their shared experience with *Rare Birds*, Floor and Bauke continue working together during the creative process of Floor's first creation *Muur* (2018), in which a group of mime artists, dancers and circus performers run themselves into a wall over and over again. Around the same time, Iris Carta also begins a new adventure. In her next creation *NU...* (2020) she works around connection and ritual.

And so, working, thinking and living gradually intertwine gradually intertwine, before once again going their separate ways, branching out, or disappearing underground. Distance and intimacy alternate. Questions about the sustainability of artistic circus practice emerge as a red thread running through our momentarily shared practices, times and spaces. Is there any such thing as a sustainable (re)presentation of extremely physical work? Do we need practice and (re)presentation to be on a par with one another, or not? In what way is striving for sustainability related to what we do and/or (re)present? Are there more or less sustainable ways of viewing, or to put it differently, are there more or less sustainable audience relationships? What about working methods and conditions?

In recent months, a motif seems to appear in the collective fabric. The different conversations narrow, and a pattern emerges, focusing on the relationship between work and life. All the speakers articulate the urgent need for more sustainable ways of organising and working to-

gether. And at that very moment, the fabric starts to fray. The tangle of threads and voices begins to unravel and the fabric falls apart again. There is simply not enough time to talk. Things are too busy. Life and work are too tightly and too frequently intertwined.

An attempt at (re)construction.

*Feeling free,  
feeling caught*

**(Alexandre)**

I feel caught;  
it's never enough for the company, while it's  
too much for the family.

It's hard,  
I'm carrying it.

It is heavy.

We cannot afford the unexpected anymore.  
(Life is too full.)

Dreams are what carry us on.

**(Iris)**

Often, we consider circus as a metaphor for life. I hold onto that image. Its intimate connection of life and work generates a great sense of freedom, however paradoxical that may sound.

Circus breathes a potential timelessness and spacelessness: time suddenly becomes suspended, and I remember a quieter rhythm—that of living with the horses. In those brief moments, everything seems possible.

I feel free. I breathe.

But more often circus, life feels like a metaphor for the capitalist society we live in.

It's non-stop, 24/7 work.  
And no matter how hard I work, it is never enough.

Speed. Acceleration.

The interconnectedness of life and work exhausts me;

circus life and circus work,  
they drag me down.

*Restore, relate,  
rethink*

We speak of the fragmentation, absence and exhaustion experienced in our working lives. They become a shared experience. We try to move away from what hurts, while attempting to stick with the questions and frictions it generates. We try to keep the conversation going. We ask ourselves how to “process life and continue practising”.<sup>②</sup>  
The conversation slowly starts to shift.

### (Floor)

Allow for doubt.  
Expand.

### (Iris)

Restore, rethink. Standing outside the system is not sustainable; I am already poor as it is. In the long term, there is a destructive energy in that. We try to fit our company and our way of living into an existing social model. This demands an intensive process of rethinking: how do I join in without feeling as though I am failing, bending or breaking? Ultimately it boils down to loving myself and the people I work with. The idea that an artist has to suffer for their art is just an idea. It can be done differently.

### (Alexandre)

Redefine what ‘successful’ means. But also: renew and reinvent slowly. Think of agriculture: a supermarket is not the only possible link between the carrot and the person eating it.

<sup>②</sup>With thanks to Heike Langsdorf (choreographer and Bauke Lievens’ fellow artistic researcher at KASK School of Arts) for reframing the issues at hand in this manner. Some passages here have been ‘recycled’ from a text Bauke wrote for *Practicing Futures through Voicing* (2019), which was co-edited by Heike Langsdorf and Tawny Andersen, and forms part of the series *Choreography as Conditioning*. The book series is rooted in a cycle of work sessions, entitled CASC at KASK, in which students work together with invited guests. *Practicing Futures through Voicing* questions how to process life in a way that allows us to create and take up space, and find our (tone of) voice—first in our immediate surroundings, and then, through this, in the world as it struggles and moves toward futures still being shaped.

## (Iris)

The choice to become a circus artist is deeply connected to the hurt child that lives inside me. And I reckon I am not the only one. It is as if we circus artists construct a suit of armour around an inner wound. We do this literally, by developing muscles. But also figuratively: it is as though we are calling out "mummy, daddy, look what I can do!". Recognition for a physically extreme achievement works as a kind of drug. But that is not sustainable. I, myself, have long believed that I had to suffer pain or excel to achieve recognition. I went ever further, higher and deeper. But rather than emerging on a summit, I reached a zero point. Beneath the conviction that you have to excel or suffer to gain recognition lies a great deal of loneliness and sadness, but also the potential for approaching circus in a different way. It asks for a minor revolution, a process in which you try to rethink yourself. In the meantime, the child in me has healed somewhat. Do I still need to perform a handstand to prove myself? My body doesn't want to do that anymore, as if it is resonating with my ethics. I no longer have to be superhuman.

## (Floor)

I notice how, in order to create 'sustainable work', I often enter into a whole host of unsustainable connections in other areas. Thus, there is often little care left for others, for natural ecologies—little left for the informal as a style of knowledge transfer, as an organisational form, or as a resistance to professionalism. The performing arts organise themselves pretty much like a market: is this commodification not diametrically opposed to sustainability? With our company Schwalbe, we want to push the boundaries of what is regarded as content. <sup>3</sup> What counts as 'work' for the artist? How can we expand that? Indeed, the artistic cannot be separated from the organisational: work conditions, communication, production.

It all belongs to the 'content' of a work. How do you give attention to these things? Linking the work itself back to all those connections is a key step towards sustainability. In other words: content = organisation = content.

### (Iris)

I already notice how hard it is to connect with people in my small circle, let alone in a broader context. How do you lead the life of a nomadic touring circus if you don't have a circus family? And how do you create a community that supports you?

### (Alexandre)

Tribe/troupe/ensemble. I'm not a solo artist.

There's a sharp cut between where I live and where I work: I want to be surrounded, but I haven't got working partners at home.

How and where can we be together in the same place?

*Leeway:  
taking space,  
making space*

Winter-spring 2016. A brainstorming session for the title of what will later become *Rare Birds*. Alexandre, Floor and Bauke are all present. The session takes place in a Soviet-style apartment on the outskirts of Berlin—or was it a residency space in an old coal mining complex in the north of France? Regardless, this was the moment the term 'leeway' found its way in. 🍷

<sup>3</sup> Schwalbe is the name of the Dutch collective of mime performers/creators that Floor Van Leeuwen is part of. On their website, the collective describes their work in the following way: "Schwalbe is a theatre collective, comprised of six performers and creators. Our work is physical by nature. Every performance is born out of the body. Physicality is pushed to the limit and displays itself to be fickle and unpredictable in extreme circumstances. Liveness and the unexpected are captured in a theatrical setting. We search for reality, on the border of theatre and performance." [www.schwalbe.nu/schwalbe](http://www.schwalbe.nu/schwalbe)

<sup>4</sup> Thanks to Sebastian Kann and the whole team of Un Loup pour l'Homme, who were also present at the time.

## (Alexandre)

Leeway is a concept from navigation. It describes how decisions are affected by external forces: ships drift under the force of ocean currents, planes are forced off course by strong winds. It's a way of understanding that you might not end up exactly where you wanted. When you allow for leeway, you accept that reality, and, instead of struggling against what's unforeseen, you simply adjust course in order to carry on. As an artist, it means taking a certain distance from what you do and being careful with saying something as definite as "I need to create". Is there actually freedom in that kind of desire?

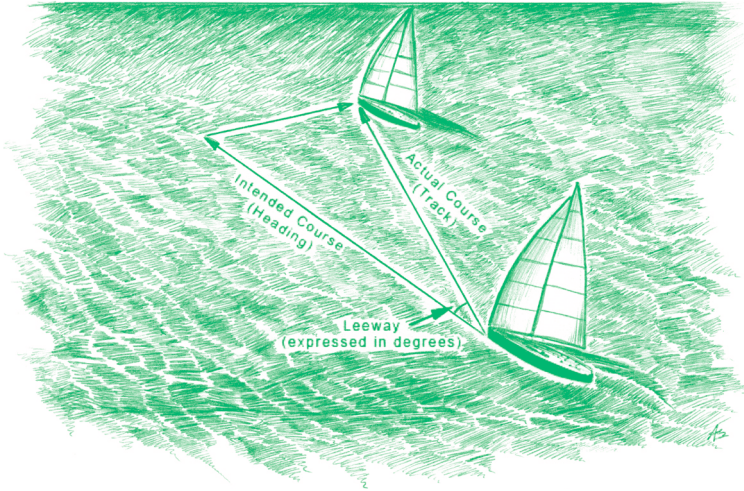
## (Bauke)

I think of Hannah Arendt, who writes that freedom has nothing to do with a feeling of inner freedom, since that feeling only exists as an answer to outside realities of capture and non-freedom. Freedom is not a matter of freedom of choice, nor of the ability to overcome limits and achieve aims and goals. Motives and goals, Arendt writes, determine action, and thus render it un-free. She understands freedom as the extent to which we can "call something into being which didn't exist before, which was not given [...] and which therefore, strictly speaking, could not be known" (Arendt 1986:142-169). Trying to think along with Arendt, organisations of power and the frictions they create in our artistic practices are not obstacles on the 'freeing' path towards the realisation of an idea or desire. It seems, rather, that these so-called 'hindrances' underlie our artistic practices (and the circus!) in a fundamental way, actually shaping and producing the ideas and desires upon which we act.

## (Floor)

Finding leeway in the circus could be about redefining what 'to be able' means. 'Ability' is linked to a specific performance and to specific

material. In *Rare Birds*, for example, the skill lies in the playfulness, in the fragile openness and attention with which we performed the mate-



Leeway by Aline Breucker (2019)

rial. The suppleness and softness with which Sergi Parez walks on Alexandre Fray can only be achieved by someone with an acrobatic background—and only by him. He never treads on the wrong muscle. Moving on someone else is a skill, and

the many different types of contact that emerge from it constitute acrobatics as a technique distinct from dance. In acrobatics, where the traditional goal has been to always reach higher and higher, Sergi's work is a kind of redefinition. Seen from an acrobatic point of view, this is leeway.

### (Iris)

When working within a playing (or performing arts) field and its rules, you can easily get caught up in trying to fight against something you can't control. But you can also try to come up with alternatives from the inside, working with what you have at hand. Finding a coherent approach that encompasses ways of making, working and organising, as well as the performance itself, is always a balancing act. It is something precarious. In truth, finding some space in this situation is already progress. Understood this way, leeway is about daring to reposition.

### (Alexandre)

Less water, smaller plants.



## Expanding universes

How might we articulate more sustainable ways of taking space in the future—for ourselves, for (more-than-human) others and for the circus? What happens if we imagine circus as an ecology—a universe of time, matter, energy and space. What does it need to keep on existing? Is sustainability about making place, finding time and renewing energy?

## Time

### (Floor)

In many of Schwalbe's performances, our task as performers has been to be present—to give all of our attention and energy to the movement and the idea of the performance. We did this no matter how much or how little we had to give: sometimes 'giving it everything' meant walking; sometimes it meant running flat out. This, to us, was surrender: an attempt to lose ourselves in what we were doing. And yet, thinking and working from a sustainable base means keeping an eye to the future, and allowing its perspective to change how you use your body. When you use your body differently, what you are saying also changes. Put simply, the 'how' and the 'what' are indivisible.

### (Alexandre)

Working with elderly people for *The Grandmother Project* (2006-...), I learned a certain economy of effort and the ability to see big things in small details.<sup>5</sup> Older people last. They are old and are still here, which makes them quite good examples of sustainability. Older people have developed 'tricks' in how they move, in how they push on their hands or fists to get higher up. Small movements become very important. They practise within a comfort zone, not over their

limits. There's also a certain vanitas-motive: they have time. They are waiting. Their way of being in the world gave me

<sup>5</sup> Since 2006 Alexandre Fray has been working with older people under *The Grandmother Project*. While the research investigates what it means to physically carry another person, the encounters always begin with a lot of conversation: "It is out of the question to rush the relationship. It is about finding intimacy, imbued with a great delicacy. [...] The idea is then to bring people into the world of hand to hand balancing, where intimacy and the relationship to the other prevail. Going as far as possible, gently, with each one, listening to their fears, to their desires... To see what can be weaved in these extraordinary moments, where you accept for the first time to be lifted off the ground." <http://unloupourhomme.com/en/#projets>

a certain distance from the rush for success and a career. Suddenly those weren't so important. What is important is health. If you just want to walk, then life is pretty clear. The desire for sustainability somehow takes away the importance of the ego, replacing it with care and attention for others.

### (Floor)

In *Rare Birds*, we tried to reinterpret an existing acrobatic vocabulary: we tried to pronounce it differently—and through that different pronunciation, the vocabulary itself also changed. We reinvented words, since the existing vocabulary spoke about height and we wanted to speak about other things, too. Thus the creative process of *Rare Birds* was in fact about the development and rehearsal of a shared practice. This is a long, slow work. It is a process-oriented way of working, a bit like knitting.

### (Alexandre)

We need to walk. Walking is more sustainable than running. What we have is already unlimited: I could do an infinite choreography with walking. The feeling of freedom is true in a triple back-flip, but I also feel free when walking.

Sustainability means the ability to keep on being a circus artist over time. Nobody forces you to be a circus artist; it's a choice.

*Space*

### (Alexandre)

Territory  
Terre  
Ground  
Earth

Itinerancy = "a home that changes sometimes". Our tent is a home, a mobile base. I want to attach an address to it.



*The Grandmother Project, Alexandre Fray (© Miriam Kooyman)*

When I'm on my laptop in Amsterdam, I am not in Amsterdam, but in Toulouse or Lyon... I need to gather the different parts of me in the same space. I need one space at a time.

The question is: where is here?  
I have to take here with me, otherwise I'm away and I don't want to be away.

**(Iris)**

Before you enter the Marae (community grounds) of the Maori in New Zealand, there is an introductory session in which you, as a visitor, say your name, where you come from, who your mother and father are, what their professions are, and finally what your river, your mountain and your forest are. So I say: the Scheldt, but also the Mediterranean Sea. There are no mountains in Flanders, but I do feel a connection with the rocks and cliffs of Sardinia. And the forest? I often walk my dog in the Sint-Annabos on Antwerp's Left Bank. And they nod understandingly. It is good to recognise that the places we come from are so different, just as it is important to honour the link with your country of birth. Many Maori have moved to Australia, but, in spite of this, they often find a way to have their children's placentas buried at home. They believe that this will always enable them to find their way home, which creates a sense of rootedness. But where do you root when you have a double nationality, like I do? Or where is home if you're always on the road with your circus?

*Energy*

Energy is not an infinite resource.  
It needs to be taken from somewhere  
and built up.

What energy goes where?

**(Floor)**

With *Schwalbe*, we felt a pressing need to physically 'clear it all out'. We wanted to get away from the restrictive subtlety and nuance which permeated our training. We wanted to take action, to take a position, and we wanted to do that with focus and love, by giving it our all. With that energy, we jumped up and down for an entire 50 minutes in *Spaar ze* (2008) and *Spaar ze till we die* (2015). During the creation process of *Schwalbe speelt op eigen kracht* (2010), we called the concept of 'energy' itself into question, culminating in a performance in which the theatre

lights and the heating were turned off. The only thing we did in it was cycle, and as long as we cycled, there was light. Through this extremely physical work, we attempted to be in the here and now, to be *with* the things around us. But the specific kind of energy needed for this way of working is temporary. Looking back now, I also see the capitalist roots of this specific take on 'work' and the exhaustion it brings with it. In *Muur*, we search for a more sustainable, slower and more respectful relationship to the things and people that surround us. We were trying to find a way of reimagining that relationship, but we found how complex it is to dare to rest, to dare to act with calm. We discovered that audiences found it hard to see what the work was and what 'work' we did: many people felt the performance lacked 'drama'. Indeed, we didn't run blindly towards a wall, destroying our bodies, but tried to contain our research within a movement that seemed to be unchanging.



*Muur* (2018) (© Bart Grietens)

**(Alexandre)**

The desire for lightness. Horses. To find a rhythm.

**(Iris)**

I would like to learn how to 'do' less and to 'be' more.

**(Alexandre)**

Take care of yourself.  
 Agree with what you perform.  
 Do nothing.  
 Stop struggling.

*Afterthought***(Bauke)**

In *Matters of Care* (2017) by Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, I find a restatement of the generic definition of 'care' as given by feminist political scientists Joan Tronto and Bérenice Fischer in their book *Ethics of Care* (1993). It reads as follows: "[Care is] everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair 'our world' so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web." (De la Bellacasa 2017:3)





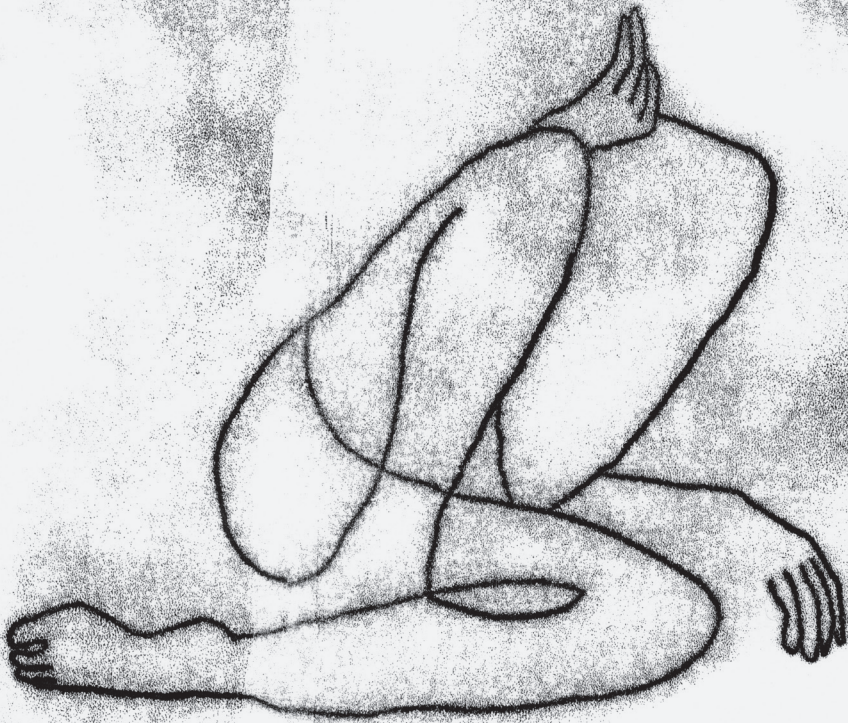


“I often have the  
feeling that words  
are not enough...”  
— Monotypes by  
Aline Breucker

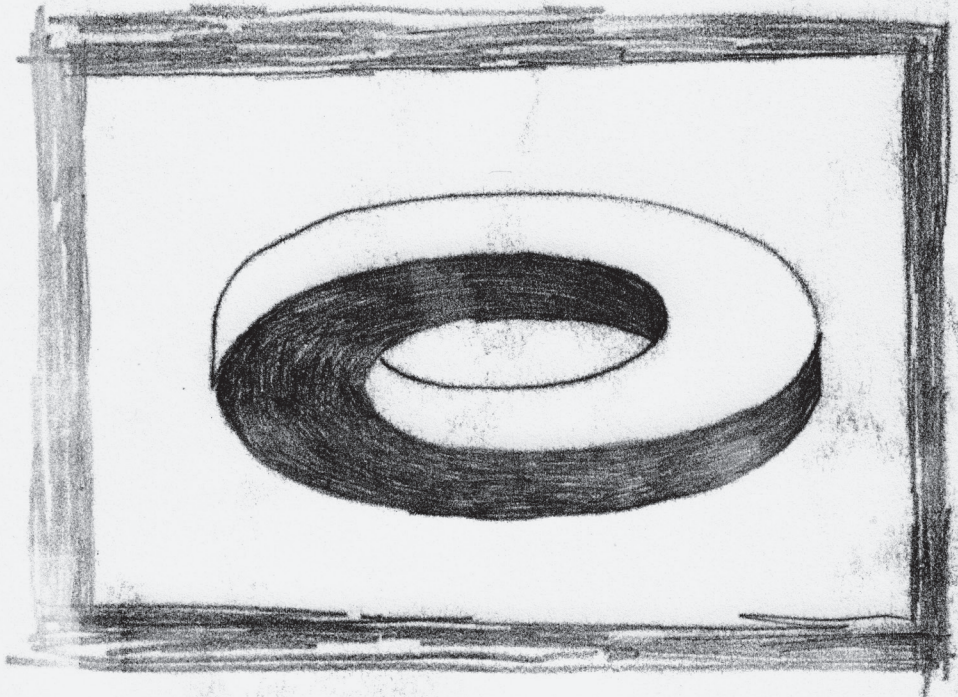






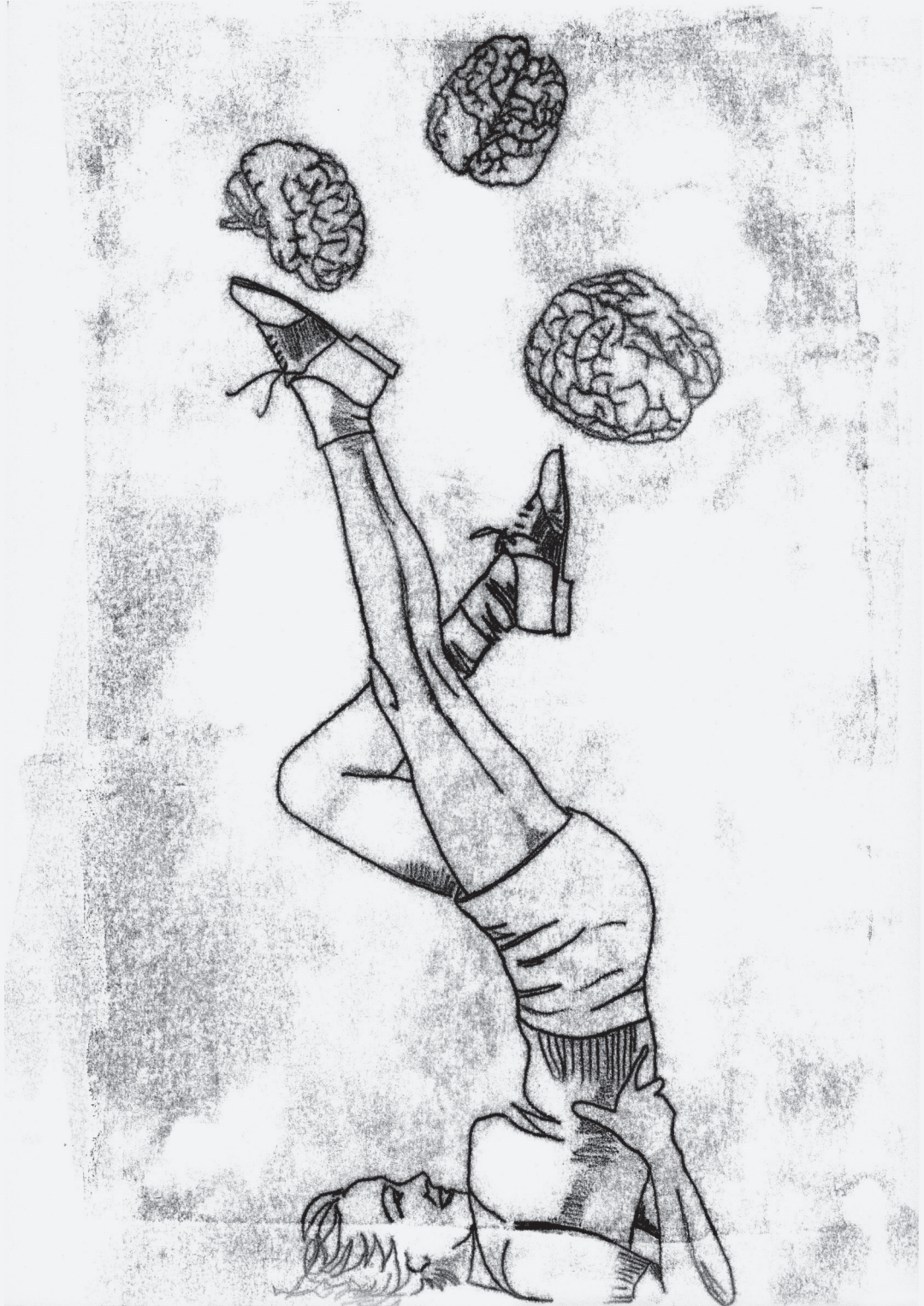


6th of March, 2019



2nd of April, 2019

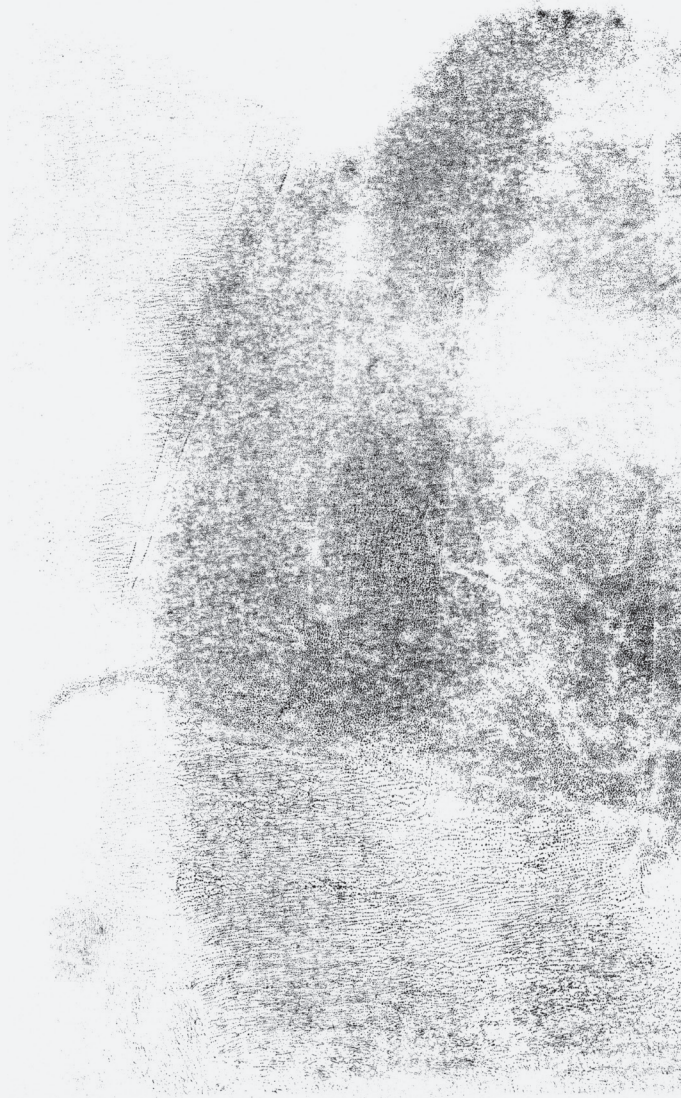
2nd of April, 2019

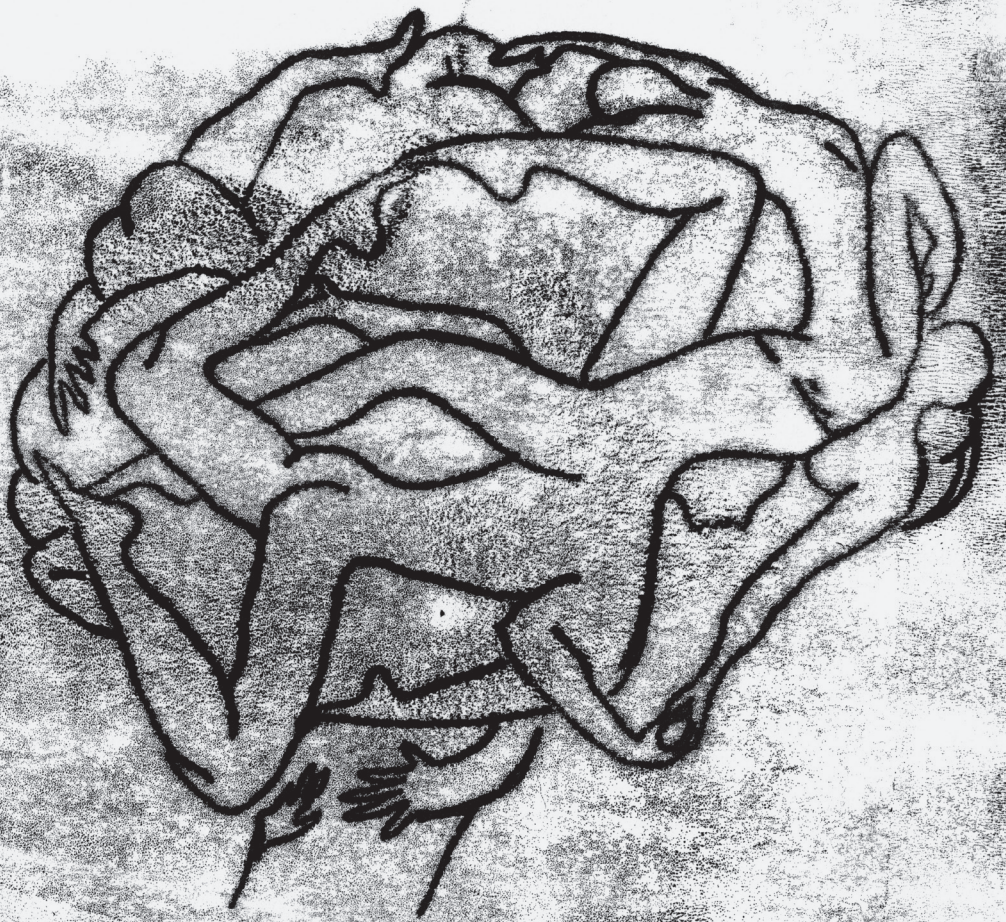


2nd of May, 2019





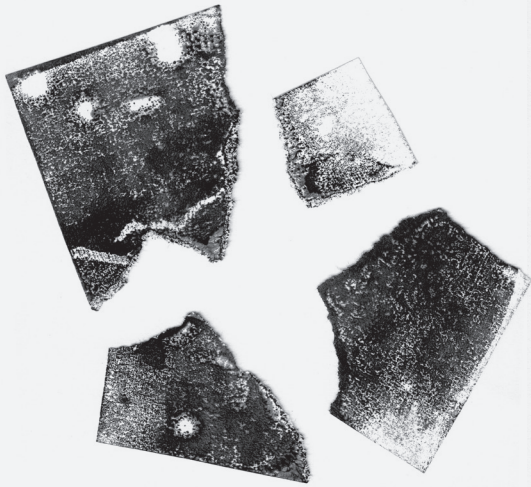




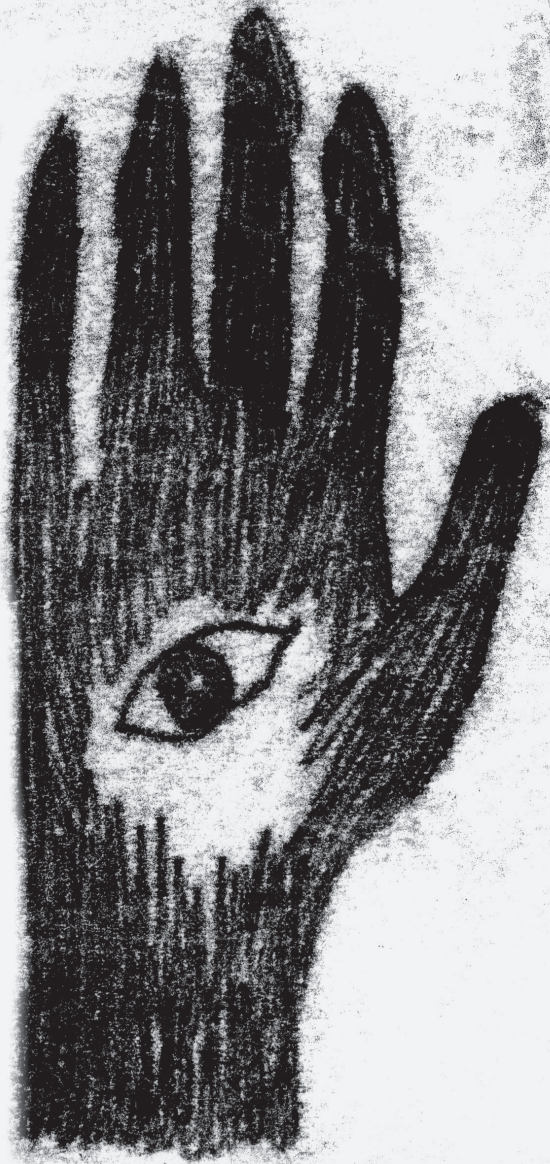
7th of June, 2019



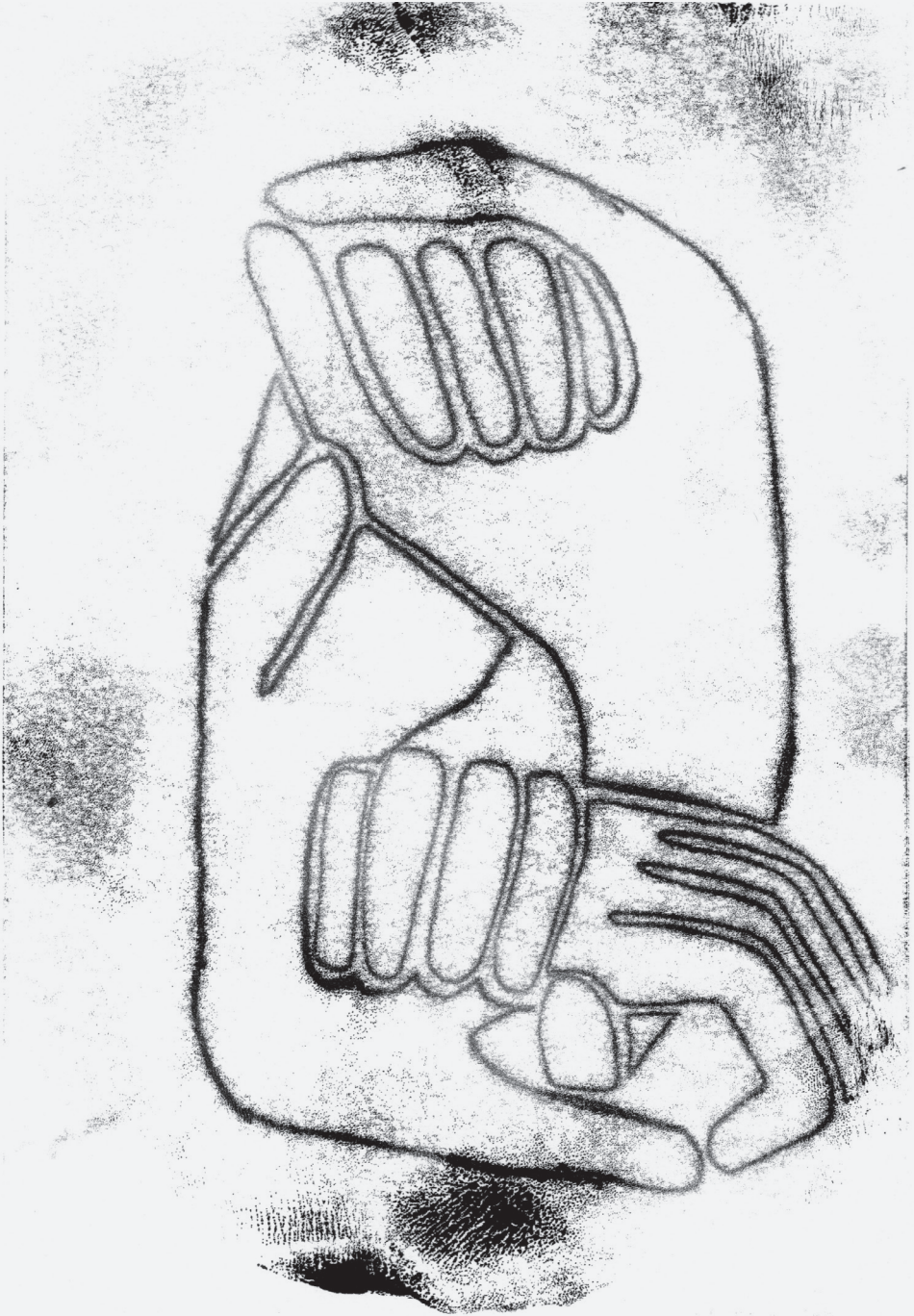
7th of June, 2019







10th of July, 2019



15th of August, 2019







# WRITING TO ERASE — ALINE BREUCKER & QUINTIJN KETELS

*Early March, 2019,  
Brussels*

A: “I’d rather talk about our work than our kids...”

## Action... Discourse... Discourse... Action...

Being in the action, the movement, doing, working on the body, working with our hands. Through doing, we structure our thoughts. The physical action of our hands and bodies allows us to formulate and develop our vocabulary.

We think about what we’re doing while we’re doing it; there is no separation. We consider physical work to be a work of reflection. Each gesture that we make is deliberate, analysed, chosen. Reflection does not take place in a time before or a time after; rather, reflection and action are linked. In one of our current projects, *Sho-Ichidô*, a work of unicycle calligraphy, the physical material is created at the same time as the concept. A unicycle dipped in Indian ink becomes the brush with which we paint upon enormous canvases. The physicality of the unicyclist flows from the act of working with the paint as well as from consideration for the entire composition.

Our performative actions are a way to reflect; each of them carries its own consideration. For us, strong images are verbs: they contain our thought processes.

**Our work aims to charge action with thought.**

*6th of March, 2019*

**Survival mode** within the family. Four of us, parents, children. It’s intense. **No time to rest**, a marathon with no finish line, a lack of oxygen...

When will we have a chance to work? To escape into our creativity?

Count down... four hours to go... then bedtime... Monday is coming, yeehaaa!

The hope to one day *enjoy* the weekend...

Working together, just the two of us, is so much better than going on holiday.

Leave: here. Destination: imagination.

The escape into our imagination, into a place safe from the expectations of normality and the crushing weight of conformity—far, far away from mediocrity.

Objectivity is relative and the imagination proves it.

**A:** “Where on earth do you find all these grand truths!?”

*25th of March, 2019*

**Q:** “I love our initials! **Quintijn and Aline / Q&A / Question and Answer.**”

*2nd of April, 2019*

## **INSIDE-OUTSIDE/ BACK AND FORTH**

We are looking for a way of making work in which every element is lead by us both. For the moment, we do this by using an ‘inside/outside’ approach. A hazardous choice, and until now one that has imposed itself upon us. But it has given us time to discover, refine and defend a hybrid artistic identity.

Together on stage, both of us directors, inside-outside, in the action, reflecting, directing the team; the constant back and forth between the stage and the lighting desk, either Quintijn, or Aline, or both of us together.

We often take the position of witness. A sort of ‘meta-position’. Come off the stage, sit down in the audience, switch roles so we can watch each other. In this way, we create a movement of dissociation that allows a certain distance. Often, changing our point of view invites us to adapt the work to the needs of the creative process and to the requirements of the show’s theme.

*16th of April, 2019*

**Q:** “Difficult to talk about our work without talking about our kids...”

**Life—Watch—Step outside—Watch—Life—Step outside—Life**

Create impulsively, intuitively, follow your instinct  
Study, get better, question, do, redo, rehearse  
Look at the bigger picture and make connections

**A:** “Always try to look at the bigger picture.”

It's a necessary exercise if we're going to channel our emotions—at work and in the creative process, as well as at home in our family life.

Since we became parents and began to learn how to live with a child who has a complex form of Tourette's syndrome, our perception of the world has changed radically. It is constantly shifting.

Nothing is a given; in each moment, we are building, destroying, rebuilding. Everything is possible. A destabilising way of life, but one from which we try to draw strength. A philosophy that helps us to grow and develop our personal lives and our artistic practice.

We evolve on a sandy terrain where our feet sink deep at each step. We walk in a swamp: it often immobilises us, sometimes engulfs us, but we always find a path to take, accepting that our feet will become covered in mud... Our equilibrium and source of positive energy is our company. With Side-Show we create a safe space, a breath of air, an environment where one can feel good, and that helps us to get through the intensity of our daily family life. What will it bring, the next second, the next minute? The discovery of a fabulous landscape or the Loch Ness monster? A moment of happiness, of games and laughter, or a moment of uncontrollable convulsions wracking the small body of our child? A storm where the reptile brain is king. **YOU NEVER KNOW, YOU NEED TO BE READY!** In the creative process, very little destabilises us, even if many things move us! We have become the Sovereigns of Organisation, or at least we're trying; it helps ready us to welcome the unforeseen. The sturdier the frame, the greater the painter's freedom of expression.

*2nd of May, 2019*

**YOU NEVER KNOW...** In these moments, I'm Alice in Wonderland in the middle of her physical transformations—totally out of place and unable to rationalise the world around me. And yet they are a kind of physical and mental training, like circus: rehearsing the routine to master the situation, so as not to lose my grip, so as not to feel tiny... This world where I feel trapped (like Alice) is interesting and inspiring. I attempt to shape and develop this world, this place where logic has been abandoned to madness, through our artistic practice. Then I see a colourful and ingenious world, reigned over by the absurdity and surrealist beauty of infinite possibilities.

**A:** “Don’t you think that last paragraph is a bit ‘poetico-kitsch’?”

**Q:** “Only kitsch can make you rich... Only art can break your heart.”

*11th of May, 2019*

I walk into a circus tent and the accordions are playing again. I hate it. It’s kitsch. Audiences love it, they find it special... but I’m developing an allergy to circus nostalgia. Mediocrity sells like hotcakes. The banality of lots of pieces is sadly what makes them so successful. The NORMALITY... surely, there’s a link between the mediocrity of the artists’ ideas and the normativity of programmers.

**Q:** “Can we concentrate on our work a bit?”

**A:** “I don’t know how to express myself... reading definitions helps me.”

Normalité, wikipedia.fr:

La normalité est ce qui est conforme à ce dont on a l’habitude, ce qui ne surprend, ne dérange ni n’attire la curiosité car moyen (norme) est considéré de ce fait comme règle à suivre. ¶

For us, what is normal, what is agreed upon, expected and evident is rarely within reach. Instead of exhausting ourselves trying to hold onto it, and ending up destroying ourselves, we have learned to accept its faraway-ness. To accept difference, to love and champion it for ourselves and others. It’s a way of seeing things that has radically changed our ways of loving, working, living and creating.

The way our child sees the world imposes itself on us, rubs off on us—sensitive souls that we are. Because yes, this difference is fragile and defenceless. To accept it requires arming ourselves against the gaze of others, those for whom ‘normality’ is so important. The expectations of society, friends, family and audience—we have been forced to learn to distinguish between them and our subjective reality.

¶ “Normality is that which conforms to what we’re used to; that which does not surprise, nor bother, nor attract curiosity, because it is average—normal. In this way, it is considered as a rule to be followed.” From: [https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Normalité\\_\(comportement\)](https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Normalité_(comportement))

Subjectivité, wikipedia.fr:

Dans son sens ordinaire, « subjectif » désigne le caractère de ce qui est personnel, en opposition à « objectif » qui tient de la neutralité. La subjectivité est une question philosophique. **2**

*7th of June, 2019*

## **OTHERNESS AND CIRCUS**

Circus interests us; we're fascinated by its corporeal expression and tradition. In circus, everything has been done; the public has seen everything.

Magic, virtuosity, but also monstrosity...

In the past, the sideshow—the spectacle that was literally off to one side of the circus—showed everything that was outside of what was defined as ‘normal’. Everything quirky, strange or extraordinary—even new inventions, such as electricity and the moving image, were presented there.

At what point is a divergence from the norm considered virtuosity or monstrosity? Is the circus a safe space, a place where difference, singularity and the unusual have the right to exist? Or is it even a space of endless possibility, where uniqueness and singularity are necessary, primordial qualities?

This safe, reassuring space that belongs to us, where we can express ourselves as we like: our circus?

**We start from the principle that we do not defend an already existing liberty; rather, we create it, we do it into being.**

“If you don’t like something, change it.  
If you can’t change it, change your attitude.”  
— Maya Angelou

**Q: I always add: and don’t complain.**

*19th of June, 2019*

**A: “We have to send the draft text, it stresses me out. What should we talk about today?”**

**Q: “I already packed all my notebooks in the boxes for the new house...”**

**2** “In its ordinary sense, ‘subjective’ defines the character of that which is personal, as opposed to ‘objective’, which is supposedly neutral. Subjectivity is a philosophical question.” From: <https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Subjectivité>

What gives you more satisfaction: doing what you please, or doing what pleases others?

Resistance is our motivation: not to give in to the desire to please. To take the risk of swimming against the current. To stay on course while moving upstream.

It's exciting to participate in a developing ecology, a field still relatively unrecognised in comparison to cinema, dance or theatre. We like to believe that we can still deceive ourselves, that circus artists can reinvent the wheel.

There's a lot of possibility, but there's also plenty of opposition towards new forms: they stick in the throat, rub people the wrong way, hurt sensibilities, bother people. Change is scary. This is the paradox of the desire to modernise the image of circus while at the same time wanting to freeze it in an image of romantic nostalgia.

The terrain of exploration is still vast. We love exploring and we don't care if we get lost. We believe that this is part of the process; everything is a preparation. By going astray, we discover new paths. If we can truly accept that searching takes time and that we won't find answers immediately, a whole field of possibilities emerges. Sometimes what emerges takes the form of a performance, sometimes it's a discussion. Sometimes it's a 'failed' attempt with an interesting history. Everything is linked, and everything feeds everything else constantly.

**We don't know what we're looking for, but we do know what we're not looking for.**

What counts is not what you're doing, but **how** you're doing it.

We don't have any expectations. We don't expect our audience to like us or to understand our intentions. Either our work devours the audience, or it leaves them indifferent.

*24th of June, 2019*

## **ASSEMBLAGE AND FRAGMENTS**

**A:** "I often have the feeling that words are not enough..."

We work in several mediums, often without speaking to each other. We speak different mother tongues, but are coupled together in life and on stage. We do not communicate only with words. We observe each other. I draw, you move, we think, we document. The search to



find the right frequency continues, and we adjust our thermometers to the same temperature. **TUNING:** modifying our way of being in order to shape ourselves to each other, to make that effort, day after day, to create a common vocabulary and our own unique nature.

*10th of July, 2019*

**A:** “I can’t stop myself from thinking in images.”

We are mirrors, me for you and you for me. *Spiegel im Spiegel* (2017), our second performance, evokes this systematic back and forth from me to you in a *mise-en-abîme* of the self in the eyes of the other: I build myself through you. “I’ll be your Mirror / Reflect what you are, in case you don’t know.” (The Velvet Underground & Nico 1967) Our way of working evolves. It moves like everything else; it moves onwards like time. It is the living matter that shapes our thoughts, which in turn shapes our ways of working, which then shapes the matter—and on and on. When we know the rules of the game too well, we have a better chance of winning (and boring ourselves in the process). We prefer playing by inventing new rules, and we accept the possibility of losing.

**A:** “I’m going to draw, writing isn’t my thing.” **Σ**

*12th of July, 2019*

**Change the rules when we start to know them too well.**

Taking risks... we still haven’t talked about it.

It’s an important theme in circus...

**Risk, Routine and Drum Roll:** the three **R**’s of circus.

Follow the routine, do and redo the same thing.

Being in perfect control, being sure not to take any risks, or at least to reduce the danger as much as possible. We often confuse risk and danger.

It’s fascinating how risk aversion conditions our

way of thinking about, of acting through, and of tackling the creative process. Of course, we mustn’t put ourselves in

**Σ** A: In order to be able to write, I need to draw, just as much as Q. needs to move. To complete the process of this essay, I felt like using monotypes for its illustrations. This printmaking technique is always single-use—and that’s what I find so interesting about it. No matter how much you work on the plate, no matter how long it takes you, each time you print it, when you pull the plate off the paper, you basically just have to live with what you’ve got. That’s the beauty of it. It is the process that is important. It is about endlessness, the eternal possibility of another image to be made.

physical danger in our practice: rather, a kind of ‘good danger’ emerges in our approach to, and our imagining of, our practice. Without putting our team in physical danger, we try to take risks by slightly modifying the standard set-up. This also happens when performing; it is a technique that lets the material of the show live. We hold onto the idea that each performance can be unique, as if we were performing it for the first time every time.

Parts of our shows are improvised. We want the reality of the moment to have an effect on our physicality and performance. And this freedom to improvise, to find something new each time, doesn’t only apply to the bodies on stage: the same goes for our technicians. All of our collaborators know that what fascinates us is transformation—the promise that the material itself might never be identical. What is important is engagement. To write in order to erase, to cut and paste, to allow ourselves to act purely through intuition, on stage, before the audience—and to stand together by what emerges. To be active with, and ultra-conscious of, the other, to become a larger whole: to create and recreate the performance each night together.

*5th of August, 2019*

**“You can’t always get what you want, but you can try to get what you need!”**

You can’t always get what you want  
 You can’t always get what you want  
 You can’t always get what you want  
 But if you try sometimes you just might find  
 You get what you need  
 (The Rolling Stones 1968)

Dictature, wikipedia.fr:

Une dictature est un régime politique dans lequel une personne ou un groupe de personnes exercent tous les pouvoirs de façon absolue, sans qu’aucune loi ou institution ne le(s) limite(nt). 4

4 “Dictatorship is a political regime in which a person, or a group of people, exert power in an absolute sense, without the limitation of law or institutions.”  
 From: <https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dictature>

The dictatorship of Tourette's syndrome, the dictatorship of the other, of oneself, of the passing of time, of the urge to create.

Between us, we use this word when we have the sensation that a certain thing absolutely must be formulated, must be said, must be written, must be realised somehow. We are obliged to let it find its proper formulation, to give it a place and a value, even if it is 'dictated' to us and we have trouble rationalising it. We must satisfy and relieve the obsessive disorders of our child all the time. In the same way, we simply have to respond to our creative impulses and satisfy our urge for making. This urgency is often accompanied by a feeling of chaos or senseless production. Our minds have trouble following, and yet by *doing* we structure our thought processes.

Cyrano de Bergerac:

Que dites-vous?... C'est inutile?... Je le sais!

Mais on ne se bat pas dans l'espoir du succès!

Non! Non, c'est bien plus beau lorsque c'est inutile! **S**

(Rostand 1897:5:6)

**Q:** I love that phrase.

**A:** Me too.

I don't like traditions, I hate Christmas  
I like disguises, camouflage,  
transforming myself  
I also often make mistakes, me too  
I like it when people think  
I am someone else  
I love cooking, but I don't know how  
to follow a recipe  
I refuse to follow a recipe  
I'm a very bad loser  
I would have been Robin Hood in  
the Middle Ages  
I love cheating, but I can't stand it  
when others cheat  
I love people, I love their stories,  
I'm terrible at telling stories  
I don't know how to tell jokes but  
I'm funny all the same  
I love working, exhausting myself,  
being inefficient, right til  
the last drop  
I love sleeping, I love dreaming  
I love imagining  
I love Quintijn, I love Aline  
I hate overblown egos and dishonesty  
I love paradoxes, opposites, black  
and white  
I don't like being coherent, one mustn't  
be coherent





# A Plastic Text — Fran - Tank

**I am a plastic text.** A chain of ideas clinging to one another with a limited variety of possible movements. If we go chem and mind my C's and H's, these movements

are: asymmetrical, symmetrical, scissoring, twisting and rocking. I melt under exposure to high temperatures.

I am a Fran-Tank. I am a High-Density Poly-human-ethylene Jerrybeing. I am made to hold 20 litres of water. In fact, there are a lot of different beings involved in who I am. I don't have the space, language, time or capacity to credit them (or even to know them). Fran and Tank are but two of them. I should probably switch to the pronoun 'we'.

We hope to attend to a dialogue between what we call 'human' and what we call 'non-human'. We are doing this in the realm of the circus arts, in which humans and non-humans are already cultivating intimate relationships operating through different languages or forms of communication. Through asking questions, we try to understand each other. Trying to understand ourselves through each other not only gives us a splitting headache, but also a feeling of splitting identities. Through this, we try to understand the world we produce and are produced by. As Karen Barad writes in *On Touching: The Inhuman That Therefore I Am* (2012), "Thinking has never been a disembodied or uniquely human activity." (208) We are thinking together—everything with which we are entangled is a living, thinking, wondering being.

We try to develop and give value to a variety of ways of thinking—particularly through movement and touch. The irony that our way of expressing this here is through a written text is not lost on us. Our work is riddled with conflicts like this. This kaleidoscopic experience has lead us to feminist thinkers such as Donna Haraway, who have made us feel more positive about this approach.

The split & contradictory self is the one who can interrogate positionings & be accountable, the one who can construct and join rational conversations and fantastic imaginings & change history.  
(Haraway 1988:586)

In this spirit, we will now split, unnaturally and ungracefully, into a HDPE jerry can (who goes by the name Tank) and

a human being (who goes by the name Fran). While we both remain authors, Tank will be the narrator and Fran will be the translator. This is a text influenced by Western thought, and Western thought loves to split—people, ideas, hairs...  
We split. I explode. This is Tank speaking.

## Being me being you? A matter of boundaries

I don't have my own hands and I am being translated through the hands of my long-term collaborator Fran. What does it mean to be written into existence through the hands of another? How can you truly know my experience when you have no real access to my ontology? We all know that I am a fiction, and a water Tank will never be credited for writing an essay in any meaningful way. What I don't understand is that Fran's 'I' is also a fiction, and I'm wondering how many people have to buy into a fiction for it to become a reality. What's my tipping point? How are you (and I'm talking to the humans now) so effortlessly able to believe in yourselves?

In an effort to understand, and maybe even one day be able to believe in myself with such conviction, I will try to 'tune to you'—to understand things from your perspective. It is, of course, difficult for me to conceive of your abstract notion of space-matter-time. Until I was given my identity as Tank, that had not been my mode of perception. Now I live in-between the spaces of Tank, who is spaced, timed and mattered, and in the dimension from where I came. I wish I could explain my dimensions to you, but I do not really know them myself (a conundrum I think you can understand). One may call it the plastic dimension but it would be inadequate, just as one could describe you as flesh, but, of course, that is not all you are.

I am a material and a space, as are you, as is Fran, as are our audiences. Each material has its own properties, its own coordinates, its own background, its own way of seeing, its own ontology. I am interested in exploring the other materials in the room, as well as the different spaces and how to experience them, dance through them, become them, acknowledge them.

The question of matter and space draws up the notion of boundaries.

If space does not have boundaries, do things then extend infinitely? (Tschumi 1996:54)





From the inside: a Tank in which an image of Fran & I is reflected in many directions using water, Perspex and mirrors. (Francesca Hyde)

At first, I took this to mean all of space/wider space/outer space, a kind of ‘whole space’. Then, as I started to think of different kinds of space, the question became more complex. Do I extend infinitely? Does Fran? Where do we end? Is it naming things that forms boundaries? Or consciousness? Can we extend our consciousness further out beyond nouns? How is our ‘Tank-Fran’ relationship maintaining the subject/object binary that we wish to work against, and how can we deal with that? Who and what are we excluding with the boundaries we create? If space does not have boundaries, but boundaries exist, what dimension do they exist in and how can we explore them physically? Are we in control of forming boundaries? Do boundaries have their own agency? Why does Fran feel like she ends at her skin, and that I begin on mine?

One thing that has become clear to me is that when we present our work, we are in a human space made for and by humans, in which various human boundaries emerge. I am a non-human who has been ‘allowed’ agency. It is perhaps because of working in and around these spaces that improvisation has become an important part of our dialogue—listening to and moving within spaces to which we have different experiences of (not-)belonging. It is a movement method, a joyful dance and a survival technique. In improvisation, we can use boundaries to our advantage—we can bring them in as part of our game.

I’ve noticed that people often speak about boundaries as containers—with things on the inside and things on the outside of them. At first, I didn’t understand this perspective,

but the more I live inside my Tank Identity, the more I become fascinated and seduced by the idea of an outside, a way out, a way of looking in. This is indeed a tragic position if there is no outside. Perhaps this is to do with how consciousness is experienced. The way consciousness seems to be presented to me is as an immaterial phenomenon. Perhaps this position gives the illusion of being outside of physical space.

At the level of the person, a divide between consciousness and being has long been a feature of Western thought, and has come under sustained critique. (Crang & Thrift 2000:7)

We work with an ‘away’ Tank. This is a Tank like me (a slightly smaller version) with the letters ‘away’ carved out of it. Inside, we throw away all the waste we accumulate whilst working. Of course, the ‘away’ Tank overflowed and we’ve had to move the waste into a larger Tank.



Away Tank (Francesca Hyde)

## What am I in theory?

Architecturally, if space is the medium for the materialization of theory, is a space the materialization of an architectural concept? (Tschumi 1996:55)

Am I the space through which theory is materialising? It certainly feels like that, and it's painful. My matter is (producing) ideas. Is my experience of that as important as the ideas are? Are they the same thing? Do I get to say what ideas are materialising, or is that spoken for me?

When we are in a shared space through which theory is materialising, do we have a shared sense or feeling of that? How does that feel? How can we be aware of what is materialising? Are we theory materialised through space?

Michel Foucault and Judith Butler have been helpful in understanding how thinking and ideology affect human bodies, and, lucky for me, my ally Karen Barad brings the non-human into question.

While Foucault analyses the materialization of human bodies, he seems to take non-human bodies as naturally given objects. (Barad 2007:204)

The materialization of an apparatus is an open (but non arbitrary) temporal process: apparatuses do not simply change in time; they materialize (through) time. (203)

I wish to hijack this quote and take it in a direction some people may see as slightly out of context. Whether or how I/we can be considered as an apparatus, or in what context, is another question for another time. Nevertheless, this description seems closer to my experience of what is called ‘time’ than the more linear timeline often employed in my field, and it allows for a more balanced relationship with Fran. I imagine our work together ‘materialising in space’ like that of a body teleported in a sci-fi movie. What apparatuses materialise that we are not aware of? How can we remain open and listen for them? This angle of thinking also allows me to look at the spectator as part of this process—as integral to the existence of the work. The work is materialising out of our being there together at this point in space/time.

He [the spectator] ties up what he observes with many other things that he has observed on other stages, in other kind of spaces. He makes his poem with the poem that is performed in front of him. (Rancière 2007:277)

## Taking distance

In the relationship between artist and spectator, our various notions / types of distance play an important role. We want the perspective of the participants to be shifting, changing and questioning.

Distance is not an evil that should be abolished. It is the normal condition of any communication. It is not a gap which calls for an expert in the art of suppressing it.

The distance that the “ignorant” has to cover is not the gap between his ignorance and the knowledge of the master. It is the way between what he already knows and what he still does not know, but can learn by the same process. (275)



Part of our exhibition created by spectators. (Francesca Hyde)

**If I may riff off of distance for a second... The space between you and me, I and me, ID and entity, in and difference, here and t here, here and w here...**

If things are intrinsically withdrawn, irreducible to their perception or relations or uses, they can only affect each other in a strange region out in front of them, a region of traces and footprints. (Morton 2013:18)

Drama undermines the fake perspective that makes things appear to be really happening against some neutral background. You realize that causality is happening in your face, closer than breathing. (99)

**I'm interested in the distance between things, a balanced distance, a changeable distance, a space of mystery. I would like the spaces I am part of to have more possibilities for not-knowing and wondering. My lifespan as a thinker has so far been quite short, so I realise I may be off the mark, but the studying I have done of the past few centuries has lead me to wonder if the value that is given to 'knowing' has not been somewhat problematic.**

## In-between worlds

Working between physical and imaginary realities has been a helpful tool for me to create spaces of wondering. Layering different realities and accepting them as real allows me to experience them and explore them with both authority and ambivalence. Because everything is both simultaneously real and not real, space becomes more plastic (which as HDPE, I can't help but want to reproduce), more stretchy, more malleable, more playful (which, I understand, is a great privilege).

This in-between space is also a way to avoid being crushed by, or becoming, the institutional space that we are part of. These spaces are created by, for and with humans. I, as a plastic, have been graciously given space inside these institutions, but it does not, and can never, make sense to me, nor can it properly represent me—an experience I feel some of you may understand. Many institutions we are working in are circus spaces. The relationship between humans and objects (including other humans) in these spaces can look quite problematic to an outsider, I can tell you.

But I do notice small things that give me hope. Maybe these are the reason I am here. I see the ropes, the poles, the hands, the balls, the joints, the air in a different way; I see the non-human shaping and directing events.

I see the intimacy between humans and non-humans, the way they touch each other, the way they know each other, nothing spoken.



# Mother Nature Says Goodbye

François Bouvier is a Montreal-based circus artist. Sebastian Kann works as his dramaturg. In the first half of 2019, Sebastian and

François began editing François' artistic notes and writings, recording the conversations emerging along the way. What follows is a freeze-frame of this articulation from François' point of view [added text in brackets by Sebastian].

What is to take the place of the state—and all these institutions? [...] We look forward to the rebirth of the tribe and tribal communism [...] We look forward to freeing the spirit of art, to the day when we all become artists because we all participate in creating our environment.

— Arthur Evans, *Witchcraft and the Gay Counterculture*

...how do you find your way? I was in a studio in Montreal with no rigging, only a small blue mat, a white chair, a round window and a sound system. It was really by chance that I had this studio time, and I was not prepared for it. I did not know what to do, so I started to train vogue to warm myself up and to get the satisfying feeling that I had done something valuable with that precious time. But soon, I was warm, and still did not really know what to do. I started playing with the mat, trying to do acrobatics on it, even though I didn't really feel like it. The colour of the mat made me feel—or think—*oh, that's the Saint Lawrence River*,<sup>1</sup> and I played that song from Pierre Perrault's movie series about life in the Lower Saint-Lawrence on my laptop.<sup>2</sup> It escalated in me quickly: the mat was blue, and I knew it

was the Saint Lawrence, and that 'Saint Lawrence' is a colonial name.<sup>3</sup> This knowledge triggered long-ing and conflicted feelings: I latched onto them, and they somehow resonated with my conflicted feelings about acrobatics, about how I feel I'm quickly losing my circus body and don't know how to retain it. I remembered when my sisters and I were young,

<sup>1</sup> The Saint Lawrence flows from Lake Ontario past present-day Montreal and Quebec City and into the North Atlantic. The river has played an essential role in Indigenous lifeworlds for over 9000 years, sustaining Mohawk, Huron-Wendat, Abenaki, and Innu cultures, among others. But the Saint Lawrence also proved a crucial route for early European exploration and colonisation of North America. Control of the Saint Lawrence became a matter of vital strategic importance for European war and commerce, and the river frequently appears as a motif in Quebecois literature, cinema, poetry and music, often with nostalgic connotations.

<sup>2</sup> The song is called 'C'est sur les bords du Saint-Laurent'. Pierre Perrault was a Quebecois documentary film director, and one of the most important filmmakers in Canada. He directed 20 films between 1963 and 1996. All of his movies can be seen at: [www.onf.ca/cineastes/pierre-perrault](http://www.onf.ca/cineastes/pierre-perrault)

doing rolls on my parents' bed on Saturday mornings. I sat on the chair in the studio and started drumming with my feet, like the dancers in *Pour la suite du monde* (1963)—another movie by Pierre Perrealut.<sup>4</sup> It was really just to do something, anything, because it was still hard to move my body. So I sat there tapping my feet, and I remembered Pauline Julien playing an intellectual in *La Mort d'un bûcheron* (Gilles Carle, 1973). I never know what to think of Pauline Julien anymore because she's so tied up with the Quebec independence movement<sup>5</sup> and I'm not really into nationalism anymore.<sup>6</sup> I was born in 1992. Brought up in the aftermath of the independence movement, I was raised to feel that Quebec should rightfully be independent from Canada. Now I'm 27 and I'm reading Zebedee Nungak, Vine Deloria Jr., Gord Hill and Lee Maracle—amongst others—and learning from them how the most important figures of the independence movement blatantly ignored the reality of Indigenous people in their projects for a new francophone country during the 60s when separatism first took off.<sup>7</sup> So all of this came up in the first improvisations I did in that studio in Montreal. It came up so quickly that I knew I had something that I wanted to stick with. I did not know if it was worth anything or how I could work with it, but I knew I wanted to stick with it because I wanted to dive back into it: the Saint Lawrence River, Pierre Perrault's movies, the destruction of the land, exhaustion of resources,

and repression of Indigenous people and cultures in the establishment of present-day Quebec, circus, my body, nationalism, Pauline Julien, and my childhood.

This was a while ago, and as I continue to work on that material it has become a lot about my grandma, too.<sup>8</sup> The music changed. I don't remember when Neil Young came in, but when he did the scene shifted. There is definitely a lot of longing in it. I also got a joke in there because the song is so cheesy: every time the chorus hits, I start

<sup>3</sup> 'Saint Lawrence' is the English name (derived from French) given to the river by early colonist Jacques Cartier. Indigenous names for the river include: *Wepistukujaw Sipo* (Innu), *Moliantegok* (Abénaki), and *Kahnawá'kye* (Tuscarora).

<sup>4</sup> *Pour la suite du monde* is a cult documentary shot in 1963 that follows the inhabitants of L'Isle-aux-coudres as they attempt to resuscitate porpoise-hunting on their island. It was co-directed by Michel Brault and Marcel Carrière.

<sup>5</sup> The movement for Quebecois statehood gained traction in the 1960s. There have been two referendums on the matter, in 1980 and 1995. Both times, Quebec chose to remain in Canada.

<sup>6</sup> The line between nationalism and patriotism seems blurred in Quebec. The Patriot Movement started the armed conflict of 1837-38, which was the first attempt by francophones to overthrow the British military and establish a sovereign state in what is now Quebec. The 'patriot flag' is a thing and you can still see it today at rallies and events for a sovereign Quebec.

<sup>7</sup> In the order cited: *Wrestling with Colonialism on Steroids* (2017), *Red Earth, White Lies* (1995), *500 Years of Indigenous Resistance* (2002), and *My Conversations with Canadians* (2017).



to repeatedly collapse on the mat as if someone had shot me. **9** I don't know if it's visually clear and I don't think Seb and I have ever discussed this explicitly, but I sort of 'die' about 20 times in that scene now. I also think during that scene, *I should definitely do some acrobatics so that it's clearly circus, for me and for the audience.* And when I think that, I do some acrobatics. I stay lazy, though, sort of collapsed: the material is also about my relationship to acrobatics. So I play with irony and yearning, being earnest but also having fun, enjoying being dramatic.

## And when you find something ...

There's a documentary about Alexander McQueen where he says something like this: it's hard to trace the origin of an

idea. It's never one thing, nor two, nor three. It is always a bunch of things that you mash up together, without really doing it on purpose and without really understanding it, to make something new. **10**

'Gathering' is the way of working on and deepening material that I describe above. In each scene, I'm working physically, but I'm also telling myself a story. There's always imaginary subtext. When I'm practising a scene, sometimes I start imagining new subtext: I connect to an image or story that seems to not have so much to do with the first. And rather than going from one to another, I keep both. I add layers. This is what gathering means to me.

I don't really care how understandable this subtext is. I'm interested in the way gathering creates clusters of subjects and makes complicated or conflicted material. I'm a conflict-avoidant person, but I experience a lot of conflict within myself, and I think that's present in the work. All of these subtexts create ambiguity, living next to each other.

\*\*\*

**8** I never met my mother's mother, but I know this much : Sally Burke was of Irish descent and was born somewhere in the United States. She met my grandfather, Laurier, while performing with a troupe of cancan dancers in the Gatineau region. Despite getting married and having kids with Laurier, she fell in love with his brother, Gaston. A divorce followed and she was kept away from her kids. She started to drink and died at 40 from cirrhosis of the liver.

**9** The song is 'Unknown Legend' from Neil Young's 1992 album, *Harvest Moon*.

**10** From the BBC documentary *Cutting Up Rough* (1997): [www.youtube.com/watch?v=542vMeyma4g](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=542vMeyma4g)



This is me as a kid watching TV in the family living room. The photo is from the late '90s and I am wearing my sister's dress.

When I was young (about 8 or 9), I had this dream about what seemed like the end of the world. I was in a crowd of people in a desert-like landscape, and it was dusk. Some of the people in the crowd were my elementary school friends and the rest were strangers, adults and kids. There was this line encircling us and it was closing in, making the circle tighter and tighter. Some people had already jumped the line, and somehow I knew this meant that they were going to eat us. It wasn't explained why, but this is how the whole scene functioned. The people jumping the line would be the ones eating, and the people staying inside the circle would be the ones getting eaten. There was no other choice for survival than to jump the line and eat human flesh. I remember seeing some of my friends jumping the line to the outside area. I knew this was the only way to survive, and I did not want to get eaten, but I couldn't decide what to do.

**... what do you do with it?**

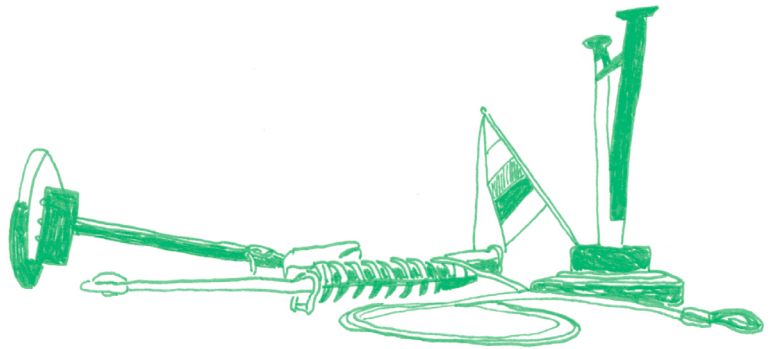
I'm for a circus that looks empty. **11**  
It's boring, nothing happens. You're expecting the unexpected, but nothing happens. I take my time. In a world that's constantly accelerating, that's already hard to take. You're

**11** Here, I'm only talking about my own studio practice and only about this particular moment in time: I'm not trying to tell others what they should do.

bored and you think, *this isn't circus*, and then after one hour you can see my penis. Then you think, *well, I shouldn't have brought my kids*.

I'm going for a high school drama club aesthetic, using homemade props and costumes. It looks cheap, and this alienates people who want to see something shiny. So it's cheap and 'nothing happens'. But actually, a lot happens. There's a *bunch* of stuff onstage for you to look at. Poems, a computer with a screen that's playing a video of me telling a story, a tightwire rig. The sound is coming from the computer and plays in the whole space. There's some music.

Queerness: if a 'good' performance means fitting into pre-set ideas, then, as a queer person, I can go anywhere. Queerness as a theoretical discourse helps me understand how success can be a tool for control and normativity (this comes from Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure*, 2011). Seb and I often talk about the way queer bodies are being integrated into capitalist society to generate capital (like the Sephora ads running in Montreal this summer, in which images of queer people of colour 'expressing themselves' are used by a multinational corporation to sell makeup). Queer theory reminds me to insist on trying to (re)invent a queer body that's not commercial, that doesn't generate capital (although of course I still want to tour, so there's some kind of buying and selling going on).



Success is a set up

Success is a set up / it's a trap / she said. / Resistance is futile / though / I think.

Queerness is not only about ‘failure’. It’s also a culture, a scene and an aesthetic. It’s a theoretical discourse, but also a pop discourse. So it’s useful to me in another way: it gives me something that I can relate to that exists across many forms, from pop to experimental to radical to apolitical—there’s queerness everywhere. And I can pick up on these things with a feeling of belonging and community. That’s also important. *[it’s something about the cultural object itself, but it’s also a way of reading cultural objects]*

\*\*\*

On falling off the tightwire:

Before, I used to think: *It’s OK to fall down. Get back up, do it again or continue the number. Keep the thread, stay committed, and follow through on the performance.*

Now, I think: *What’s going on? Where is my body in space? What’s next or what could be next? Which direction, which action—what’s there for me here in this moment?*

## A digital smile ...

Whenever I am alone in a hotel room, out on a circus contract, this recurrent ritual has taken form, I dress up and act out in my room, often filming myself with my webcam. I dance, read texts, tell stories, try out costumes—a whole production. One night, I filmed myself reading a story from Jerry Mander’s book *In the Absence of the Sacred* (1991). The story I read is about the utopian digital body, and it’s full of irony, although one needs some context to be sure it’s ironic. The night I filmed it, I was wearing golden lashes in my bed. I sent the video to Seb. He said it made him think of Sister Unity, an online drag storyteller from the UK. *[actually, I think she’s an American putting on an accent but I’m not sure]*

I film myself a lot, like many circus artists, to watch what I have done. I also use these videos to break the isolation of the studio. During creation, I reach out a lot through online media to Seb and other friends, as well as through Instagram. Sometimes, I like the quality of the material on the video better than the live material itself so it ends up presented as video material in my stage practice. I appear alongside myself as a digital presence. I like the feeling of intimacy that results from using footage filmed with my private computer.

... a room I'm not leaving ... A lot of my work has to do with scenography [*creating environments*], or just laying things around and seeing how they feel and what they prompt me to do. I dwell in these spaces. I usually get a restless feeling. I have to fight to stay in it. I tell myself that I am actively listening to my instinct, but I also often feel like all I want to do is just leave the room as soon as possible. I play with that feeling: *I want to leave the room, this is hard to bear, I should do something, but what? What makes sense?* No exit: the trouble we are in is not something we can resolve by simply turning away.

Now I'm reading a book on Inuit cosmologies (*Stories of Being and Rebirth*, Bernard Saladin D'Anglure, 2018) and making connections between this concept of 'no exit' and the notion of rebirth. There's no exit if there's no real death. It changes the way time [*and responsibility?*] is organised. No exit: not letting go, engagement, commitment, sticking with something even in the bad times.

When I first started *I miss grandma so sad* (my current project), I didn't touch the wire at all for the first couple of weeks because I didn't know what to do with it. I let it sit for a while. The rigging material was in the room, but I wouldn't touch it. One day, I put on some very loud dancehall music, closed my eyes, and tried to rig the wire without looking. The first time I succeeded it took me 45 minutes, and I laughed a lot out of nerves (just try and carry a spring and a tirfor through an invisible studio without falling and you'll see what I mean!).<sup>12</sup> But after that day the wire disappeared again.

It reappeared in the south of France. I was in Bourg-St-Andéol after a gloomy winter in Western Germany and Brussels, where there is almost no sun. Canada is cold but sunny in the winter. The cabaret work I had done over the winter had drained me. In the south of France, it felt like summer. I rigged the wire and decided that it would be part of my daily practice. That already made me emotional. I exchanged my tightwire shoes for sneakers: I had been voguing in sneakers in the studio, and as soon as I tried walking on the wire in them, my body felt different. I couldn't run, jump or turn efficiently. I felt my attention to my sensations and the presence of my body in space increase. The importance of showing off technique and my habit of relying on routine movements to find flow fell away. So the sun was entering the studio and warming the air. I was completely alone, without even my props (I had forgotten my suitcase on the train), and I started my explorations on the wire.

Seb and I had recently seen a show by Meg Stuart in Brussels (*Built to Last*, 2014). Meg Stuart has some way of finding fun within a contemporary aesthetic that's appealing, to me. Or at least I read that in how her performers improvise on stage. For example, the dancer with the huge sweater, when she screamed: I'll always remember that as a moment of great performance, as an inspiring approach to the body and to space. With that show in mind, I began to think of my body as something that's evolving on stage, as an event in itself. I lay down and thought, *there's already all this negative space around me*, and took the time to absorb that reality. The line between what was happening on



<sup>12</sup> Tightwires are tightened with a tirfor, a kind of giant manual winch, and a very heavy-duty industrial spring.

and off the wire started to blur: ‘being on the wire’ became an event among many others. I wanted to give equal attention to every action.

Because it was still relatively cold, I was wearing a huge sweatshirt I had bought during the cabaret contract in Germany. I had found it in a thrift store for one euro. It’s a huge, blue, tie-dye sweatshirt with something like ‘Everybody must do their part, be yourself, be real, for sure for real’ written on it, and a small picture of the Earth. It was so bad I couldn’t resist. In the studio, I was wearing it inside out, hiding the text, but I think my sense of irony entered the improvisations somehow. I was wearing a pink and green hat, this cheesy sweatshirt, black thermal tights and white sneakers. My body wasn’t staged as muscular; if anything, it gave importance to my feet and hid my upper body. I felt very powerful with that look, very comfortable, and it influenced the way I moved.

Cassie had sent me some music she had made by recording the sound of people ice skating in Parc Lafontaine.<sup>13</sup> I put Cassie’s one-minute track on repeat. The ice skating sounds ended with a climax (it’s great for improvisation to have a climax coming every minute!). I loved thinking that people were still skating in Montreal at that time.

I was so happy that I sent an email to Cassie that exact night, with pictures and videos attached:

Hey Cassie,

thanks for bringing the winter into the studio for the first day of this residency, it was really great, and brought back a lot of reminiscence for me.

Hope you are an amazing winter,<sup>14</sup>

hugs

Xx

I also sent the videos to Seb and he said that I should be happy with it, that I had worked enough for the day. I remember thinking he was actually right.

<sup>13</sup> Cassie is my roommate in Montreal.

<sup>14</sup> I know this isn’t standard English, but this is what I wrote.

Do you know where  
you stand?

‘Do you know where you stand?’ means: do you know how these streets were made, how all of this happened, the events that shaped our world and our reality, the way we live, the way we think, the way we feel. But also: where do you stand in all this, what’s your opinion? It’s important to remember other realities so that we don’t start taking this reality for granted, as if it’s natural or something. But in my work, I don’t give that explanation. I just give you the question: ‘Do you know where you stand?’ I don’t intend to explain the work while working.

When we consider the way our lives are structured, the way we live, the direction the world is taking, there’s obviously a problem. I’m not in denial about it: I have a feeling of powerlessness, because of course I (circus?) can’t change the world. So I develop coping mechanisms, and my practice is one such coping mechanism.

I’m working on a scene in which I’m on an island. I focus on being lost, as if literally on an island, but also just in life. That is probably very cheesy, and I move around being cheesy, earnest, knowing it, making fun of it, enjoying it. I focus on going somewhere, being with someone who is absent, reaching a place together, and continuing to do it even while knowing that it’s impossible.





Seb took this picture during an improvised rehearsal in Montreal. He was helping me put together my first outdoor solo performance.



I took this picture in Gatineau in 2019. My friend I had taken a little bit of mushrooms and we went for a walk along the Ottawa River.



# Some Queer Notes on Doing Dramaturgy with Love — Sebastian Kann

*Marginalia by  
Francis  
Bouvier*

Is this even a booth? In this booth there is room for one. Get in here and hold me up.

I would fall without you. Why are we not told plainly? What good as a booth is this, what booth if it be one? Feel the first drop, as from a shearwater ocean bird held high for miles on the cyclonic air, blown far inland, never otherwise seen. The barometer is bottoming. This booth of ours is an eye of the storm simulation.

— Brian Blanchfield, from 'Man Roulette'

## Warm dramaturgy: professionalism is negligence

I am a dramaturg. I admit it, I arrive at work with some vague ideas about being the 'one who sees'. I get serious and sharp, hoping to catch a whiff of the emerging general will, tuning into potentials. I sit, often with pencil in hand (\*with apologies to Marianne Van Kerkhoven), listening, watching, earnestly thinking along, letting things proceed, not getting too worked up about anything, maintaining an air of expertise.

But pretty soon, this pretence of cool distance falls away. Something shifts, and I get involved with my guts. I can pretend to be some kind of disinterested 'circus scientist', but it's just not the case: I'm a human with attachments, powered by pleasure, by concern, by love. And this tendency to attach doesn't easily discriminate between the personal and the professional, between movements, people, concepts, characters and images.

Often, I work with friends or lovers, people who are meaningful to me beyond the context of each project. And so, at one point or another in the process, I find myself caring for

*You do get carried  
away very easily, I  
see it in your driving.  
You get carried away  
listening to music or  
talking and I have to  
say "Seb, you're at  
140 now, please slow  
down".*

the performance through caring for the other people involved. In other words, things get personal at work. Not every dramaturg relishes the way sociality and labour get muddled up in the places we practice. Bojana Cvejić, for example, greets the notion of the dramaturg as ‘company psychotherapist’ with a shudder: “This dark and shameful side of dramaturgy is worth mentioning only to make crystal clear that the moment the dramaturg is relegated to the role of a ‘caretaker’ of the moods and tensions in a working process—a filter between choreographer, performers and other collaborators, for instance—she has lost the power of creation, and perhaps, even joy” (Cvejić 2010:41). True enough—it is sometimes hard to suppress a sigh in those moments, wondering how you found yourself playing the part of the fabulously overqualified nanny.

Nevertheless, it seems absurd to want to circumvent the personal entirely, as if being in a professional setting suddenly exempted us from being human. I think this is what Harney and Moten are getting at when they equate professionalism with negligence (\*in *The Undercommons*, 2013). Under the auspices of professionalism, “the personal aspect of the relationship is evacuated” (Cvejić 2015:51) to make place for something else: an aesthetic, a project, a dream, a certain politics, or a particular desirable future. But we should be suspicious of this sort of vanguardism, which places the needs of an abstract ‘that which is to come’ over and above the needs of the many others who populate our present (\*thinking about Charles Taylor and revolutionary vanguardism).

Anyway, I have to wonder: how are we still getting away with ignoring, devaluing and denying the importance of the social and affective work of maintenance and repair? Traditionally “the realm, and existential confinement, of women, especially from underprivileged class and racial backgrounds”, it’s time that the deep thinking of care be given its due (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017:14). Caring is not somehow besides the point: in the studio, we’re working on inventing relations, and the dramaturg is

That feels close to your work as an artist also and your thesis I think.

entangled in these relations, not apart from them. The questions of real-world relationality which emerge in the circus field today—a field of precarious subjects, struggling with questions of belonging, of commitment, of intimacy, of “how to best live on, considering” (Berlant 2011:3)—seem equally, if not more, pressing than questions of aesthetics and representation. Moreover, producing knowledge about relationality requires paying attention to exactly those ‘moods and tensions’ Cvejić decries.

What is warm dramaturgy? It’s a practice of attachment, of fidelity to a project *and* to the people it gathers. It involves doing the work of thinking the personal, the aesthetic, the conceptual and the practical at the same time.

Here, the labour of care is not something we have to get through in order to arrive at more serious matters. Relationality is what’s at hand and at stake, not something relegated to the lunch break. What circus performance could be more important than the people making it?

Logistical clusters,  
grant application  
writing, anxiety...

## Queer relationality is being in the impasse

Queerness is about permanently holding open the possibilities of relationality. In other words, in a queer framework, sex, intimacy, friendship, family, allyship are genres of being together which are formulated as open questions. What does being a lover require? What space for experimentation does it promise—not in general, but here and now? Can kinship exist without the ties of blood? What new modes of support are called for to deal with the specific precarities of the present?

Because there is no definitive model for ‘the queer life’, we can say that queer lives are performative: they need to be ‘done’ into being. Queers are, therefore, ‘whatever’, “like letters with no addressee” (Agamben 1993:6). We emerge in process, constantly discovering and passing through new roles, identities, practices and relations. But though this ‘whatever’ quality is a great gift, it is also the source of nagging problems. Being continually in negotiation is

tiring. If we follow the feminist assertion that 'the good life' is a heteronormative genre of fantasy, we're faced with a paradox: the power of "the good life's traditional fantasy bribe" might be worn out, but the need for a good life is not (Berlant 2011:7; \*see also Sara Ahmed's *Living a Feminist Life*). And deprived of the comforts of genre, the path forward is never a given. This creates a feeling of slowness, as well as a lingering doubt about long-term commitments. We could be anything: is this really it?

So queerness thrusts us into 'the impasse', a genre of unsettled and unresolved time in which "the world is at once intensely present and enigmatic", calling for no-one-knows-yet-what kind of performance (Berlant 2011:4). According to Lauren Berlant, the impasse "demands both a wandering absorptive awareness and a hyper-vigilance that collects material that might help clarify things, maintain one's sea legs, and coordinate the standard melodramatic crises with those processes that have not yet found their genre of event" (4). Faced with not-yet-knowing, we must be both rigorous and open, observant and reflective, and work on reaching some kind of temporary, but good-enough, resolution.

What about Deuze's idea of speed in the 'Dialogues'? Something moving fast, regardless of it's speed, something like that... Also Jerry Mander's idea that we're out of step with nature's pace that we live too fast because of modern technology.

is already Sounds like a job for a dramaturg.

"Neither blessed like the elected, nor hopeless like the damned", we are "infused with a joy with no outlet" (Agamben 1993:6). When I try to focus on the open 'whatever' -ness that Agamben describes here, the quality of being that's temporalised by the genre of the impasse, my attention flickers between professional and personal life. In both cases, we do not yet know what the performance will be. It has to be unfolded in the doing, carefully and critically, guided by a practice of attending to and caring for what's emerging between people and things (\*with reference to Maaike Bleeker's "Thinking No-One's Thought"). In any case, you set the scene as best

you can for things and you let them unfold and hope. You have to give in at some point and let go because there are a lot of elements you can't control.

## We shape a language between us

I'm remembering that silently devastating experience of language-loss which you go through when your time with a lover must come to an end [...] that tiny, intimate, beautiful little linguistic eddy of in-jokes and shared tics [...] your shared little pocket-idiolect, you know, \*your\* argot, because you made that together, without ever really meaning to, over however long a time it was, and by the time you're aware of it, it's already become instinctual, and the time you're most aware of it is when all of a sudden you can't use it anymore, and seriously if you could just switch it off then the blank glassy few weeks after a breakup would be a great deal less fucking hurtful, because you know what happens, for a while now you will be walking down the street or sat in a cafe and something will make your brain leap at the potential for a particular kind of wordplay, and then you will be silent, and very, very alone for a few seconds, because there is nobody else who speaks that little language.

— Timothy Thornton in *Not here: A queer anthology of loneliness*

Reminds me of Paulo Freire's idea that, through engaging in dialogue, one makes the world, and that's politics. Something like that

We do not exchange words as we exchange goods: me over here, you over there, exact change and a receipt to seal the deal. Language is not about trading packets of information. Rather, language is something which is constantly transforming through use, and which transforms us in the **process**.

Within each project, a dialect develops: sometimes multilingual, sometimes with an invented vocabulary, sometimes almost indistinguishable from the dominant tongue except for a twist in usage or in logic. Often, the most remarkable idiosyncrasies are the shortcuts which arise, linkages in meaning by which **you don't even have to explain** where you're going with a thought—the other is already there with you, carrying your language along and further.

When we transform language together, we build an attachment. We are no longer foreigners: here, with you, I am at home in language, speaking from the 'centre' and without stuttering (as I might do in the 'outside world'). Our language

In Paris I told you that I had two ideas for the showing, one that flaws but that I liked less and one which had a bit in but which I liked most. You said go for the one you like the most.

is an “eye of the storm simulation” (\*Blanchfield, see epigraph). What is intimacy if not this: the sensation that we inhabit a language together?

Or maybe what I’m talking about is not language precisely, but rather an ongoing *conversation*. François and I write to each other on four different platforms (is the postal service a platform?); we speak through three different apps, and send vocal messages through two. When we’re together, sometimes our words get transcribed into a notebook or onto a computer, sometimes they’re recorded. Sometimes they echo out onto a landscape; sometimes, they resonate quietly between us, in a car, in a cafe, in one of any number of ‘whatever’ spaces, temporarily inhabited.

Something (else) the dramaturg and the lover have in common: both hold open a space for ongoing conversation without agenda (\*I learned about intimate talk from Leo Bersani in *Intimacies*, 2008). To speak amorously or dramaturgically is to conjure an open discursive space for its own sake. Anything that talk might produce here is transversal or adjacent to its animating intention, which is first and foremost *to be talking together*. These conversations, proliferating across locations and media, are perhaps only superficially linguistic, maybe having more in common with the kinaesthetic or the tactile: “Le langage est une peau : je frotte mon langage contre l’autre. C’est comme si j’avais des mots en guise de doigts, ou des doigts au bout de mes mots [...] Parler amoureusement [dramaturgically?], c’est dépenser sans terme, sans crise; c’est pratiquer un rapport sans orgasme” (Barthes 1977:87).

Only you know how  
camping got into the  
aesthetic of my work.  
You can follow the many  
intersections and inspirations  
that show up in my practice.

Are you  
thinking  
about  
Slovenia?  
...

I told you I  
feel like you touch  
me when you look  
at me sometimes.

Working together  
is erotic

Same here  
I feel

Today, there’s something deeply ambivalent about the way work intersects with both pleasure and a sense of self. I return to circus because I love it, or have loved it; because I love or have loved the people who work there with me; because I don’t know anything else; and because without it, I wonder who I am. Circus is redolent with the elusive promise of good feeling (usually



*I am roadtripping with my computer while writing this. I cannot get away from screens for 3 days without getting behind on paperwork. My mum tells her colleagues about my life of travelling. They all say I'm lucky, but now she feels she has to point out the fact it gives me anxiety problems, because she witnesses the crises I regularly have. I often feel burnt out. I want to stop, give it all up.*

relegated to the past or the future), and this promise functions as a bribe, or maybe a threat: keep on working because it might turn out for the best; keep on working because without circus, you are nobody. Of course, all of this is only ever just-enough lubricant in the ongoing getting-fucked by actually trying to get by in the day-to-day.

Bojana Kunst explains it another way:

“The more the pleasure of capital is projected into the artist’s way of life—in other words, the more artistic life represents an obscene excess of economy—the more the artist is excluded from this economy (and thus from life).” (Kunst 2014:150) As artistic production comes to represent a kind of ideal compromise between pleasure and labour, living conditions for artists tend to become worse and worse. In circus, we have not been spared in this process.

No doubt, getting people to work overtime by dangling the carrot of deep satisfaction is a very contemporary form of exploitation. But work without satisfaction hardly seems a good alternative. Feeling lost, I turn to Audre Lorde, who speaks from a time before the demand for passionate work shifted from radical to sinister. In ‘Uses of the Erotic’ (1978), Lorde suggests the “principal horror” of capitalism lies in the way that it “robs our work of its erotic value” (1984:55). For Lorde, the erotic is satisfying pleasure as such, an affect rather than an activity, an aspect of both good sex and good work. Emerging in the rub of skin on skin, but also in the drape and hang of a fantasy on a person, a place, or a project, it “flows through and colors my life with a kind of energy that heightens and sensitizes and strengthens all my experience” (57).

For whom and in what cases is work or sex something to enjoy or to endure? In Lorde’s writing, the erotic becomes a political tool insofar as it becomes the measure of what’s energising and what’s exhausting in our lives: “Once we know the extent to which we are capable of feeling that sense of satisfaction and completion, we can then observe which of our various life endeavors bring us closest to that

fullness” (54–55). The erotic names the pleasure and fulfilment that’s possible in both work and sex—a pleasure and fulfilment which for many circus artists, despite the myths and slogans which swirl around artistic production and artists’ lives, remains largely spectral. Could circus be a place in which we experiment with and demand erotic experiences? In which we invent pleasures which might become the standard against which the injustices of life are measured?

Today, countless capitalist market fantasies are projected onto artistic work: “artistic work supposedly abounds in pleasure, is committed, creative, fused with life itself, committed to incessant consumption, etc.” (Kunst 2014:152). The decadence of our profession is something we are forced to continually deny, fighting to keep working conditions from getting even worse. But perhaps we deserve pleasure, and perhaps we can generate it in unusual ways. What if we took the erotic seriously in our work? What if we resisted the devaluation of erotic knowledge by resorting to subterfuge, **covertly making space for enjoyment** by ‘forgetting’ to mention it—repeatedly, strategically—in our sales pitches, production meetings, and after-talks? We can re-erotise artistic work in secret: we don’t have to tell the bureaucrats, the demagogues, or the journalists.

This is something you've told me before, and since then I have thought that my projects might be a way of getting together with my friends. Like I want to bring Cassie into the newest project partly because I want to keep a relationship with her and I feel that's the best (only?) way.

## Letter to F: performing circus and a good life

Dear François,

I think back to the week we spent reading *State of Insecurity* together (\*Isabell Lorey, 2015).

We only had one copy and we read it aloud, softly. We were travelling at the time. Everywhere we went, we built nests, sweet spaces of voice, body and text. Turned towards each other and toward this book, we conjured a small permanence, a point of reference: the landscape scrolled by, countries and languages faded one into the next, but, holding Isabell between us, we had a place to return to.

In Europe and North America, freelance circus work means being held aloft and buffeted by the general flow of things; it means making a habit of 'moving with the world', getting used to the way people, contexts, projects and practices come and go (\*Kunst). Our precarity is not just about money or lack of money: relationality in general appears fragile and insecure, at risk at any moment of fading. Where will I work two years from now? Where will you live? Who from now will still be around then? Which of today's dreams will still appear fresh and convincing?

Sometimes, mapping out the good life as we try to live it, it seems that "the labor of reproducing life in the contemporary world is also the activity of being worn out by it" (Berlant 2011:28). You know this: we will not arrive at an 'untouchable place', we will not shake off precarity's long, cool shadow, and we cannot afford to wait until crisis abates to begin living (\*thinking about Jan Verwoert's lecture 'Artists, what is your value?', on YouTube).

What I'm discovering with you is a practice of living together in the interstices of the "crisis ordinary" (\*Berlant again). It requires tending to a delicate metabolism: can we afford to come together? What does each encounter generate, and what does it cost—as a projection, as an event, as a memory? Which institution (artistic, social or otherwise) still powers a wave big enough for a moment of surfing, lightness—a respite? Will this or that feat of adaptability—paying the costs of a little more time—leave us inside out, unrecognisable to each other? Or will it be the key to a door, leading to some small garden, some form of living-with that feels like sustenance?

Isabelle Stengers  
also talks about  
"trouver les interstices" in  
'La Sorcellerie capitaliste'.

- Reboot the metabolism!
- From that same Verwoert lecture.

I sense promise in the notion of tending together to something, in carving out modest shelters, in letting things be multiple. I feel strengthened by a refusal to let labour totalise our relation to the present, or to let crisis management totalise our relation to the future. And I notice I feel better able to think with someone else thinking along.

There's a track on Colin Self's *Siblings* called 'Emblem'. Self sings of the importance of "shifting the narrative focus to one of becoming with others as family". I like this as a way of conceptualising becoming from a more-than-individual perspective. It helps us imagine what it might mean to transform, shift, travel, learn and adapt while caring for, learning from, and sticking by significant others. Perhaps we no longer know what a good life should look or feel like, and that's OK: we're entangled in relational networks that call for attention, and we're improving what that means together, edging towards something that feels right.

A dramaturgical task; a spiritual or shamanic one; or the task of the circus artist: accept that precarity will not be banished, cannot be immunised against, and nevertheless persist in our attachments. The how: well, that is the thinking that circus lets us do.

Is that freedom?  
 We were watching  
 that Pierre Perrault  
 documentary about Innu  
 hunters, you said  
 there's no freedom in  
 that kind of culture  
 because there's no  
 choice in their way  
 of life, they just  
 live like this, it  
 might be fulfilling  
 but it's not freedom  
 in the sense that you  
 don't choose your  
 avenue. This made  
 me reconsider what  
 I thought freedom  
 was

Communal metabolism: From Venroot again..

I finished reading  
 this while staying in a  
 rented house in Fillmore,  
 Saskatchewan. Crossing Canada,  
 I keep thinking I'm catching a  
 glimpse of this continent before it goes  
 to waste. I'm so scared about the future,  
 I've been watching TV tonight and I had to  
 stop because it made me sad. This society makes  
 me anxious, our times make me nervous. Seb, I'm  
 sorry I can't always be with you. I want to say  
 that I miss you very much and I understand you are my  
 home. You're my eye in the storm, and I really wish  
 I could hold you.





# Works Cited

- AGAMBEN, G. (1993). *The Coming Community* (M. Hardt, Trans.). Minneapolis, & London: University of Minnesota Press. (Original work published 1990)
- AHMED, S. (2017). *Living a Feminist Life*. Durham & London: Duke University Press.
- ARENDT, H. (1968). What is Freedom? In *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (p. 142–169). New York: Viking Press.
- BARAD, K. (2007). *Meeting The Universe Halfway*. Durham & London: Duke University Press.
- BARAD, K. (2012). On Touching—The Inhuman That Therefore I Am. In *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 23 (3), 206–223.
- BARTHES, R. (1977). *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*. Paris: Tel Quel.
- BÉGAUDEAU, F. (2019). *Histoire de ta bêtise*. Paris: Fayard/Pauvert.
- BENNETT, J. (2010). *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- BERLANT, L. (2011). *Cruel Optimism*. Durham & London: Duke University Press.
- BERRY, C. (1988). *The Autobiography*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- BERSANI, L. & PHILLIPS, A. (2008). *Intimacies*. Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press.
- BLANCHFIELD, B. (2014). Man Roulette. In *A Several World* (p. 28–29). Brooklyn: Nightboat Books.
- BLEEKER, M. (2015). Thinking no-one's thought. In P. Hansen & D. Callison (Eds.), *Dance Dramaturgy: Modes of Agency, Awareness and Engagement* (p. 67–83). Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire & New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- BOBET, J. & DANSEREAU, F. (Producers), BRAULT, M. & PERRAULT, P. (Directors). (1963). *Pour la suite du monde* [Motion picture]. Canada: National Film Board of Canada. Retrieved from [https://www.nfb.ca/film/pour\\_la\\_suite\\_du\\_monde\\_en](https://www.nfb.ca/film/pour_la_suite_du_monde_en)
- CRANG, M. & THRIFT, N. (2000). *Thinking Space*. London & New York: Routledge.
- CVEJIĆ, B. (2010). The Ignorant Dramaturg. In *Maska*, XXV/131–132, 40–53.
- D'ANGLURE, B. S. (2018). *Inuit Stories of Being and Rebirth: Gender, Shamanism and the Third Sex* (P. Frost, Trans.). Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press. (Original work published 2006)
- DAVID, P., LAMY, P. (Producers), & CARLE, G. (Director). (1973). *La mort d'un bûcheron* [Motion picture]. Canada: Canadian Film Development Corporation, Famous Players Limited, Les Cinémas Unis Ltée, Les Laboratoires de Film Québec Ltée, Les Productions Carle-Lamy, Les Productions Mutuelles Ltée.
- DE LA BELLACASA, M.P. (2017). *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- DE LAGASNERIE, G. (2017). *Penser dans un monde mauvais*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- DE LAGASNERIE, G. (2017). *Pour une éthique des œuvres* [recorded lecture]. Retrieved from <https://geoffroydelagasnerie.com/2018/02/19/video-pour-une-ethique-des-oeuvres-conference-aux-beaux-arts-de-paris>
- DELORIA, V., JR. (1997). *Red Earth, White Lies*. Golden: Fulcrum Publishing.
- DELEUZE, G. & PARNET, C. (1996). *Dialogues*. Paris: Flammarion.
- DESPENTES, V. (2006). *King Kong Théorie*. Paris: Grasset.
- EVANS, A. (1978). *Witchcraft and the Gay Counterculture: A Radical View of Western Civilization and Some of the People It Has Tried to Destroy*. Boston: Fag Rag Books.
- FREIRE, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (M. B. Ramos, Trans.). New York & London: Bloomsbury. (Original work published 1968)
- GROYS, B. (2010). The Loneliness of the Project. In *Going Public* (p. 70–83). Berlin: Sternberg Press.
- HARAWAY, D. (1988). Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective. In *Feminist Studies*, 14(3), 575–599.

- HARAWAY, D. (1991). *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century*. In *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, 71–80. New York, Routledge. (Article published 1981)
- HARAWAY, D. (2016). *Staying with the Trouble*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- HILL, G. (2002). *500 Years of Indigenous Resistance*. Oakland: PM Press.
- HALBERSTAM, J. (2011). *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham & London: Duke University Press.
- HODAK, C. (2018). *Du théâtre équestre au cirque, le cheval au cœur des savoirs et des loisirs 1760–1860*. Paris: Belin.
- KUNST, B. (2014). *Artist at Work: Proximity of Art and Capitalism*. Winchester & Washington: Zero Books.
- LANGSDORF, H. & ANDERSEN, T. (Eds.). (2019). *Practicing Futures Through Voicing*. Ghent: Art Paper Editions.
- LOIZIDOU, E. (2015). What is Disobedience? In E. Loizidou (Ed.), *Disobedience: Concept and Practice* (p. 1–5). London: Routledge.
- LORDE, A. (2007). Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power. In *Sister Outsider* (p. 110–114). Berkeley: Crossing Press. (Original paper presented 1978)
- LOREY, I. (2015). *State of Insecurity: Government of the Precarious* (A. Derieg, Trans.). New York & London: Verso. (Original work published 2012)
- MANDER, J. (1991). *In the Absence of the Sacred: The Failure of Technology and the Survival of the Indian Nations*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books.
- MARACLE, L. (2017). *My Conversations with Canadians*. Toronto: Book\*hug Press.
- MORTON, T. (2013). *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- MORTON, T. (2013). *Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality*. London: Open Humanities Press.
- MOTEN, F. & HARNEY, S. (2013). *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*. Brooklyn: Autonomedia. Retrieved from <http://www.minorcompositions.info/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/undercommons-web.pdf>
- NELSON, M. (2011). *The Art of Cruelty*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- NELSON, M. (2015). *The Argonauts*. Minneapolis: Greywolf Press.
- NOLAND, C. (2009). *Agency and Embodiment: Performing Gestures/Producing Culture*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- NUNGAK, Z. (2017). *Wrestling with Colonialism on Steroids*. Tiohtià:ke / Montreal: Véhicule Press.
- RANCIÈRE, J. (2000). *Le partage du sensible: Esthétique et politique*. Paris: La Fabrique.
- RANCIÈRE, J. (2007). The Emancipated Spectator. In *Artforum International*, 45 (7), 270–281. (Original paper presented 2004)
- SELF, C. (2018). Emblem. On *Siblings* [Spotify].
- SMITH, T. (Director) (1997). Cutting Up Rough [television series episode]. In BBC (Producer), *The Works*. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=542vMeyma4g>
- STENGERS, I. & PIGNARRE, P. (2007). *La sorcellerie capitaliste*. Paris: La Découverte.
- STENGERS, I. (2015). In *Catastrophic Times: Resisting the Coming Barbarism* (A. Goffey, Trans.). Online: Open Humanities Press. Retrieved from [http://openhumanitiespress.org/books/download/Stengers\\_2015\\_In-Catastrophic-Times.pdf](http://openhumanitiespress.org/books/download/Stengers_2015_In-Catastrophic-Times.pdf) (Original work published 2009)
- TAYLOR, C. (2004). *Modern Social Imaginaries*. Durham & London: Duke University Press.
- TSCHUMI, B. (1996). *Architecture and Disjunction*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- THORNTON, T. (2017). In R. Dodwell (Ed.), *Not here: A queer anthology of loneliness*. London: Pilot Press.
- VAN KERKHOVEN, M. (1994). Looking without pencil in the hand. *Theaterschrift*, (5–6), 140–149. Retrieved from [http://repo.sarma.be/PDF/Theaterschrift\\_5\\_6\\_On\\_Dramaturgy.pdf](http://repo.sarma.be/PDF/Theaterschrift_5_6_On_Dramaturgy.pdf)
- VERSCHAFFEL, B. (1996). Over kunst, ontroering en kritiek. In *De Witte Raaf*, 10(60), 1–2.
- VERWOERT, J. (2015). Artists, what is your value? Jan Verwoert on Seduction Value and Metabolism [recorded lecture]. Retrieved from [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n15\\_Lr4gEo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n15_Lr4gEo)



WEIGEL, M. (2019, June 21). Feminist cyborg scholar Donna Haraway: 'The disorder of our era isn't necessary'. On *The Guardian*. Retrieved from [https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/20/donna-haraway-interview-cyborg-manifesto-post-truth?fbclid=IwAR2bs2lumVLpGMjH8mUSGC-zEOn\\_ojgHrP9INrwoULEHobtkBmffc5LU4Ww](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/20/donna-haraway-interview-cyborg-manifesto-post-truth?fbclid=IwAR2bs2lumVLpGMjH8mUSGC-zEOn_ojgHrP9INrwoULEHobtkBmffc5LU4Ww)



# Biographies

**François Bouvier** (CA, 1992) had been a good-enough gymnast for eight years, and an attempted ballet dancer for two, when he walked through the doors of the École nationale de cirque (Montreal) to engage in a becoming-circus-artist. For five years, he practised tightwire so much he barely thought of anything else. After his studies, François worked for circus companies and cabarets across Europe (Circus Monti, NoFit State Circus, Stephan Masur's Varietespektakel, etc.). He won the Fratellini trophy at the 2015 Festival mondial du cirque de demain in Paris, sporting blue hair and sequined tights. Later, he volunteered for Association Caméléon, working with survivors of sexual abuse in the Philippines, teaching circus and making shows. Since 2018, François has tried to make his way by creating his own work. A show for theatres—*I miss grandma so sad*—is in the works for 2020.

**Aline Breucker** (BE, 1981) is a visual artist, performer, scenographer and costume designer. She graduated from L'École nationale supérieure des arts visuels de La Cambre in Brussels in 2005. Her fascination with the relationship between body and space, and with the machinery of theatre, soon lead her to explore new forms of presenting her work. Since 2009, she has co-directed the circus company Side-Show together with Quintijn Ketels. She co-created and performed on stage in the first two pieces of their 'trilogy of the imagination', *Wonders* (2013) and *Spiegel im Spiegel* (2017). She is currently working on the final part of the trilogy, *Permit, oh permit my soul to be rebel* (2022).

**Iris Carta** (BE, 1983) has a background in dance, theatre and partner acrobatics. She is co-founder of Compagnie Circ'ombelico, which toured throughout Europe with *Da/Fort* (2010), a performance in the belly of an old-time truck. In recent years, Iris has done freelance work for various theatre, circus and dance companies, and has also started directing. Authenticity and connection play a key role in her work. Today, she remains a driving force behind Circ'ombelico, surrounded by a new team with whom she is working on a new project, *NU* (2020), which interprets circus as a ritual.

**Dana Dugan** (US, 1975) Artist. Mother. Lover. Fuck the rest.

**Vincent Focquet** (BE, 1997) holds a degree in Theatre Studies Theatre Studies from the University of Ghent. Since graduating, he has worked as a dramaturg, production manager, author and everything in between. He is part of the editorial board of *Rekto:Verso* and writes reviews for *Etcetera*. Vincent accompanies Bauke Lievens, Quintijn Ketels and Sebastian Kann in *The Circus Dialogues*.

**Alexandre Fray** (FR, 1979) has a background in judo and foundational mathematics, but circus soon took over his life. In 2005, together with Frédéric Arsenault, he founded Un Loup pour l'Homme, a circus company dedicated to exploring partner acrobatics as a mirror for the dynamics of human relations. The iconic duo piece *Appris par corps* (2007) established the basis of this approach, which was then further developed in *Face Nord* (2011) and *Rare Birds* (2017). *Face Nord—Reprise Féminine* (2018) was a reworking that explored gender and social issues in the circus field, while Alexandre's current initiative, *The Grandmother Project*, reimagines his experiences as an acrobatic base through work with elderly people. He frequently shares his methodology in workshops and other interventions.

**Francesca Hyde** (UK, 1984) likes to live and work between different realities. She easily gets mixed up between what could be called fact and fantasy, and is interested in playing with the boundaries between them. She has worked with her circus company Collectif and, for the past decade, as a performer, writer, organiser, runner, fundraiser, monster, driver and cleaner, among others. She is currently enrolled in the Master's in Contemporary Circus Practice program DOCH, Stockholm where she works with a 20-litre water container who goes by the name 'Tank'. She is also taking part in the Magie Nouvelle training at CNAC. Her new performance *Tank & Me* will premiere at The Lowry in autumn 2020 as part of their Developed with the Lowry programme.

**Sebastian Kann** (US, 1991) is a circus artist, theorist, pedagogue and performance dramaturg. While studying at the École nationale de cirque in Montréal, he met Natalie Oleinik; together, they make circus work under the moniker Manor House. Their newest piece, *Always/Beautiful* (2019), explores care as a motor for aerial movement improvisation.

In his theoretical investigations, Sebastian is currently preoccupied by the politics of improvisation, taking somatic dance practices as a case study. Along with Bauke Lievens, Quintijn Ketels and Vincent Focquet, he is one of the researchers behind *The Circus Dialogues*. Sebastian often works as a dramaturg for choreographers and circus artists, both in Brussels and Montreal. He lives in Brussels.

**Quintijn Ketels** (BE, 1983) graduated from the Ecole Supérieure des Arts du Cirque in Brussels in 2004 with a specialization in group acrobatics (teeterboard/banquine). With five of his fellow graduates, he then worked until 2009 under the name Hopla Circus. Their piece *La Familia Rodriguez* played more than 350 times over the course of a wild, international tour. In 2009, together with Aline Breucker, he co-created the company Side-Show as a platform for research and creation connecting circus and visual arts. In 2015, Quintijn received a grant from VGC (the Flemish Community Commission) for his research project *Permanent Laboratory 'From A to B'*, which led to the performance *Sho-ichidô*. He is currently one of the researchers in *The Circus Dialogues*.

**Floor van Leeuwen** (NL, 1984) graduated from the Mime School of the Academy of Theatre and Dance in 2008. She co-founded the theatre collective Schwalbe (creating performances such as *Schwalbe is looking for crowds* and *Schwalbe performs a time*) and collaborates with Lotte van den Berg (*Building Conversation* and *Dying Together*). She worked with Un Loup pour l'Homme on *Rare Birds* (final direction), and in 2008 created the performance *Muur* in collaboration with artists from both mime and circus.

**Bauke Lievens** (BE, 1985) studied Theatre Studies at UGent and Philosophy of Contemporary Art at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. She is a lecturer and researcher at the Drama department of KASK School of Arts in Ghent, where she is currently working on the two-year artistic research project *The Circus Dialogues*. As a freelance dramaturg, Bauke works with various circus, dance and theatre companies such as Un Loup pour l'Homme and Floor Van Leeuwen (Schwalbe), among others. Since 2015, she has also been making her own work, creating *ANECKXANDER* (2015) and *Raphaël* (2017)—both with Alexander Vantournhout. Bauke has published two books on artistic research in circus and is part of the editorial board of *Rekto:Verso*.

**Mardulier en Deprez** (BE) consists of Ruben Mardulier (1993) and Michiel Deprez (1989). They met each other when studying at ACaPA, and since 2016 have been working together as interdisciplinary artists. As a duo, their multiform practice encompasses writing ‘technoproze’, making non-action paintings and building interactive installations in public space, among other things. Their work can be seen as an ongoing process, often witty and site-specific, which always makes sure to blur boundaries.

**Natalie Oleinik** (US, 1989) is a circus performer, introvert, sour beer fan and visual artist. In 2016, she co-founded Cie Catalyst. Their show *Amygdala* creates living installations—in the Latvian woods, around Italian industrial sites, and in circus tents. In spring 2019, she was happily surprised to be recognised for her duo rope piece with Joachim Ciocca. Their act ‘No Longer Strangers’ won the gold prize at the Young Stage Festival, proving to the world that slow rope is interesting and worthwhile. This year, her long-term collaboration with Sebastian Kann grew and blossomed into the gentle and provocative piece *Always/Beautiful* (2019). She looks forward to the world tour. Natalie is working toward a future in which she combines her drawing, ink making, and textile art practice with performance and circus.

**Camille Paycha** (France, 1992) graduated from the Academy for Circus and Performance Art in Tilburg in 2015, and is now based in Belgium. Since 2015, Camille has been making her own work—first with Helaba Compagnie for the piece *I ate the entire fruit salad* (2016); then with Noortje Sanders and Thijs Veerman for *The Hangman Radioshow* (2018), a site-specific performance on the dimensions and capacities of radio. 2019 marks the beginning of a period full of exciting projects for Camille as a creator or performer: with the company Radio Sancha; on the performance *Ice skates and other cruelties* (2020); and with choreographer Janni van Goor.

**Josef Stiller** (DE, 1995) attended Die Etage—Schule für die darstellenden und bildenden Künste in Berlin, followed by the Academy for Circus and Performance Art (ACaPA) in Tilburg. In 2017, he founded KLUB GIRKO together with Julian Vogel and Laurence Felber. Their first production is titled *122×244*—and a lot of little pieces. Also in 2017, Josef joined Compagnie Trottoir, an interdisciplinary performance group based in Switzerland. Currently, Josef is

developing the project *Responsive Round*, an interactive juggling performance with bamboo sticks.

**Tank** (2017) spent the first years of his life as a tool, holding water and releasing it when instructed to. His debut was a scratch performance of *Tank* (2017) at The Chameleon Theatre, Berlin. This piece has also been shown at Katapult, The Pfefferberg Theatre and Zirkus Quartier. Shorter acts were performed at Cirkus Mlejn's Fun Fatal Festival, Splore Festival, and the Berlin Juggling Convention. In 2017, Tank took part in a residency at BigCi, New South Wales that explored the effect of the environment on artistic practice. His new performance *Tank & Me* will premiere at The Lowry in autumn 2020.

**Anna Tauber** (France, 1988) navigates between different forms of creation (artistic, administrative, and even a little technical). She is an 'off-piste' acrobat—almost—(de)formed by a large family, then at Sciences Po Toulouse and Université Paris IX, as well as through other (mis)adventures. But what is she doing now? As a core member of the company Association du Vide, she is responsible for the touring of the piece *Le Vide* (2011), and is co-creating a new short-form work titled *Dans ton cirque* (2020). In 2017, she founded the company Avant La Faillite, within which she continues her research into circus, in particular developing a documentary film based on Les Antinoüs—an old act from the 1950s/60s.

## COLOPHON

APE#155

### *Thinking Through Circus*

Bauke Lievens, Sebastian Kann, Quintijn Ketels & Vincent Focquet (eds.)

© 2019 Art Paper Editions  
ISBN 9789493146358  
www.artpapereditions.org  
www.circusdialogue.com  
First edition of XXX copies  
January 2020

Editors: Bauke Lievens, Quintijn Ketels,  
Sebastian Kann & Vincent Focquet.  
Final editor: John Ellingsworth  
Proofreader: Tawny Andersen  
Design: 6'56"  
Translator: Vicky Morrison, Lawrence Williams

Printed and bound in Tallinn.

*Thinking Through Circus* was published in the framework of *The Circus Dialogues*, a two-year artistic research project (2018–2020) initiated by Bauke Lievens, an affiliated researcher and professor at KASK School of Arts. Quintijn Ketels and Sebastian Kann were the associated researchers, accompanied by Vincent Focquet. *The Circus Dialogues* was financed by the Arts Research Fund of University College Ghent (BE). The publication of this book has been co-funded with the support of the Flemish Government (Department of Culture, Youth and Media).

This book is a co-production between KASK School of Arts (Ghent, BE) and I knew these people VZW.

© 2020 Art Paper Editions & editors  
(Bauke Lievens, Quintijn Ketels, Sebastian Kann & Vincent Focquet)  
© 2020 of the texts: the contributors  
All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction in whole or in part in any form.  
© 2020 of the images: Aline Breucker, Bart Grietens, Dana Dugan, Florence Bresson, Francesca Hyde, François Bouvier, Marion Denier, Miriam Kooyman, Natalie Oleinik, Paul de Cordon, Sebastian Kann, SpaceX.



With the support of the Flemish Government.

Special thanks to: Department of Drama at KASK School of Arts (Ghent, BE), Château de Monthelon (Montréal, FR), PAF (Saint Erme-outre-et-Ramecourt, FR), and all the participants of the *Third and Fourth Encounter on Artistic Research in Contemporary Circus* (2018).

All rights reserved.  
No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording or any other information storage or retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publisher and the editors.