

Falling – The Thought of Circus

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*I fell for you
Your
World wide eyes and
love me to death
Oxytocin smile.
Mouth...mouth like rainbows after rain.
You were love songs buzzing in my lungs,
Lyrical spiders spin spin spinning, wanting to be
sung.
You were
Fairy dust filling my veins,
a pollen storm, thick, firefly warm.
You were
Sticky resin quivertip prints
Tickling my pores with a promise
To be your prince.*

*Curled, curled like long lost lovers
In a world, where for 5 minutes
There were no others.*

*You had my blood on your strands
I had your fibres on my hands.
I was your movement mathematician and you my
love magician
Have always been my mission.*

*This circus romance is something
That should not be spoken
There's a chance you'll ruin it
So leave the promise unbroken
You'll blow it away, knock it dead
Leave it the fuck unsaid.
Those words cannot be unheard.*

*But against my better judgement
and all the things I know,
When we're spunk-wet and fuck-spent
the inkling grows and glows that I'm too weak
to say what my skin is thinking.*

*Circus shows it does not speak
But you stare at me without blinking
And
The word-seeds sown with spit
Sit like pomegranites on my tongue
Waiting to be split
And I know I must swallow,
Don't say it. Don't say it. Just swallow.
For the sake of the magic.
Swallow.
I'm so tummy ache in love with you
It's tragic.

Because I remember being
Curled like long lost lovers
No circus, no dope, no tricks, no crack
In a world, where for 5 minutes, for no cost
There were no others,
And that time is lost, we'll never get that back,
It was mythic,
There's no repeating it.
Think on that for a while.
I opened my big mouth
And it wasn't to smile.*

1972

Edge of a mountain, white light in his eyes, blue bowl of sky; he can see the whole world slowly uncurl from its sleep and begin to shine deep in his mind: a bright, stinging beautiful world brimming brains, bones with light.

He wants to fling himself into that blue. Use his wings, take his flight. But he is whisked back from the edge by daddy's strong arms always there to catch, before he gets too close, snatched up by those arms that adore him the most, keep him on track, keep him from harm. Everything curls back.

He has to played by the rules, do everything they said: not play with sharp tools, or jump on the bed; not climb high trees, put his fingers in sockets; graze his knees or swim with stones in his pockets. His time will come.

Conclusion:

Circus artists are inadvertent philosophers, just as philosophers are intellectual acrobats. They look to the limits of what might be possible with the body as the philosopher does with thinking. They are also both lovers: obsessive ones. Yet a circus performer is rarely asked to train their muscles of articulation and the philosopher is never expected to do a back-flip in a seminar. This gives a sense of the gambit this book offers – that circus is a yet to be articulated thinking that has something to do with love.

The circus act is an inadvertent confession – yet mostly it doesn't know what it's 'fessing up to. Not the same as a religious confession, it is not asking for forgiveness, not directly, but it may want to reveal something perhaps inappropriate, abject or just downright unpleasant. It is a disingenuous form of accounting. It repeats the same tale, returns to the same place to tell it night after night, until it does not need to any more – like a ghost, like a recurring dream.

If the circus act gives an account then perhaps it is of an early relationship, perhaps the one that founded the "I" in a relation that is forever opaque to us, our origin story. This is what I see to be one of its experiments - is this moment possible to re-stage? The moment of what Lacan called the mirror stage?

This is of course, before the practice gets caught up in the demands of the Circus - be spectacular, almost fail but don't actually fall, almost drop the ball but catch it at the last minute for maximum effect etc. The thought experiment here is to try and separate the practice of circus from the demands of the circus - to separate from demand to get to the desire. It's this desiring "self" this experiment might be trying to find. It is this self, rather than the historical weight of demand that will be the most valuable material to be used for the circus-to-be: the post-circus, the next-circus, the non-circus, the anti-circus. If it is trauma that sends so much of that early material into the unconscious, then the act is either a reparative account wherein trauma is mastered, or a utopian scenario within which the ego never gets to be established at all. Is this the opaque place the act looks to re-stage, or is this the material the experiment looks to produce? When I think of being in the thick of the act, the "I" isn't really operating at all. Or we could say it is put to sleep so that the unconscious gets a turn, like in the dream, like in the symptom. The years of repetitive training to handle that dangerous material and domesticate it, tame it (perhaps we are the only animals left in the circus says Jonathan Priest) makes the (en) act (ment) a zone of impersonal intensity where the body surges to the fore at the expense of identity. Of course, this only happens when everything is going very well, when everything seems to bend towards making the space whole, undifferentiated, where the gaze of the crowd latches onto the artist's body and the artists' tricks hook them and reel them in, where the music shakes through the bones of the room and the architecture of the bodies in it and the space is just pulsing blood and eyeballs, a communal lung, a collective mouth shocked open in awe, a beat driven by adrenalin. Then there are no "I"s, not even a "we", as in community, or collective, but an aggregate, a bundle, an assemblage. Backstage, returning to the sweaty, panting "I" was sometimes occasion for melancholy, perhaps because I felt I had touched on that fantasy of the pre-"I", that fantasy of full immersion in the body of that other whose caresses once kept me alive and taught me the idiom of love. This is where one forgets oneself. Or perhaps is beside oneself. To put oneself to sleep, like an old dog, a sort of temporary suicide. Does circus unconsciously think of the ego as an old dog to be put to sleep?

Much like the fairy tale, whose gentle tone and soft mode of enunciation masks the horror of its content, the circus act glosses over the traumatic conditions of its production with smiles, tricks, glitter and beautiful form. So, like the horror story in soothing form for children, the circus act can also be a polemic strategically disguised as meaningless, an incitement to norm critique carefully packaged as simple escapism. In its “fuck you” to the norm of walking on one’s feet, the handstand is a work of sarcasm. The aim of this work is to make legible the horror and passion that never seem to surface onto the commercial stage.

It takes time to process these unconscious undercurrents into something useful for the craft. Circus as rapid production line has not allowed its subjects much space to voice or use their conditions of production as appropriate material for their work. It’s as if the secret must be kept in order for circus to do its work and play its role in culture so far. If this is so then the circus we have seen has been so over-processed that it has lost its taste, everything culturally nourishing about it and maybe then its social potential.

There is however a slow emerging movement reducing the refined sugar content of circus, removing the heroic caffeine rush, peeling away the artificial colours and stripping it back to its uncooked meat, bones and nerves, revealing something like a circus unconscious.

In light of what I consider to be the repressed currents of the circus, psychoanalysis is my main ally here in a discussion of how such a potentially anti-normative critique became so thoroughly commodified. The sanctioning of a subculture can undermine its subversive potential; when it is invited to table it no longer has to fight for the scraps. With nothing to resist, no axe to grind it joins the neo-liberal party and enters the smooth flow of capital. It no longer sticks in the throat in a joyful gag. It seems we have lost that particular reflex from over-consumption.

Yet it would be a violent gesture to speak for circus as a whole. So I will anchor this in just one circus. My own. The circus that now emerges as a book is written by a vertical rope artist; a confessional, a love story, and polemic written against a backdrop of an ideologically normative circus. It does backflips with writing styles and is as much a hotchpotch of seemingly disparate theories as the circus itself is a jukebox of contrasting rhythms, dynamics, sentiments and mixed metaphors. If watching a calm wire walker, then a frenetic juggler, a clumsy clown, a flying trapeze act and then a Zen-like handstand number is nothing strange in the circus, then binding together psychoanalysis, a break-up monologue and memoir shouldn’t come as a surprise.

It draws upon all the people I have met over the past twenty-five years engaged in the life project of circus and most particularly those that dared to account for themselves, not just on the stage or in the air but also on the circoanalytic couch where they took risks some might consider more frightening than the act itself. They came to the circus consulting room to uncover the facts behind their creative, curative fictions and in some cases to be cured from those compelling narratives. Those narratives, with permission, form a part of this weave.

This book is structured like a cotton 3-ply circus rope. Three thick strands woven together to hold the weight of an, at first, impossible task. Each strand made of a hundred fibres, each not able to hold that weight, unless they work together within the tension of the weave.

These three strands, that on their own make a linear sense – memoir, psychoanalysis, dramatic address – together make something implausible, something fantastic – of fantasy – that does not really make any sense, has no reason to be but for its own sake. This book then, takes shape like a circus act. Useless, but hopefully useable.

Each end of the circus rope is bound so it retains the tension woven into it; its form. The bottom is whipped with waxed twine. Standing on two feet approaching the rope, the artist rarely sees this first, it's as if he skips the introduction and goes for what is front of his eyes, Chapter One, perhaps, The Approach. The top is held by the end being fed back onto itself, spliced into itself to make a loop as if it did not want to end but rather wanted to go back to its beginning, as if it wanted to start the story over again and never reach the satisfaction of a conclusion, resolution. The artist never quite reaches this Final Chapter. The loop is meant to be kept out of sight, above the eye line of the public so that the conditions of the suspension are never disclosed. It is also unwieldy to hold this thick loop tied onto itself like the uroborus, where mouth meets tail, a self-swallowing. But it is this loop, this conclusion never properly reached, that allows it to be attached to the grid, the rafter, the beam, the hook. It grounds the aerial act. It's a topsy turvy kind of ontology. The artist, so goes the overarching narrative of this work, forgets there was an origin and avoids the logical conclusion, in order to keep enjoyment going. In this way, the artist is always in the tension of the middle.

This rope can be read as a series of short stories, case studies, fictional philosophical essays, rants, or as pure fact. All of these are needed to reproduce the circus in words, to produce what might be called a circus thinking.

I am a circus artist who has read Barthes with Butler, Freud versus Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari against Lacan with Marx ghost writing the whole process. I am a circus artist who values thinking as a practice as rigorous, thrilling and potentially dangerous as somersaulting in the air over concrete. I am a circus artist who writes as a way of measuring, indexing and exposing what circus practice is not allowed to express within the conditions the market offers him. My practice comes from circus but I no longer want to reiterate myself in that system called The Circus.

This work is somewhat suicidal. Even if it derives its matter from material things – bearing in mind that “material” in psychoanalysis is often fantasy and delusion – real situations, encounters and histories, it pushes the logic of these “facts” to the point where they become something else – in order to end them. It follows then, some of the way at least, the operational mode of circus – to push something almost to failure and then take a step back to recover and reflect. But rather than withdraw from failure and to go back to what is known to be achievable, it attempts to push the failure further. It treats failure as the condition of creativity – breakdown and breakthrough are contiguous. If we suspect that we are on the slow-motion cusp of failure (every epoch has its own version) then the creative act might be a way of thinking imaginatively over that edge, and, unlike the cartoon cat running off the cliff, and hovering for a moment before the drop, actually reaching the other side. A leap of artistic faith. Circus practice is predicated on just such a manoeuvre.

Conclusion over, now for some introductions.

The circus thought is threaded deep in muscle fibres and streams through inaccessible neural pathways. It is hidden, withdrawn. It thinks away, twitching, responding and formulating new ways of approaching the objects of the world, re-thinking the body's cultured repetitions towards the environment. We never hear that thinking, we only

see its taut, supple, spectacular results. Its satisfactions rely precisely on not being spoken. Circus keeps its discoveries to itself in this respect as much it keeps them from itself. Enjoyments like these are resistant to discourse, they are unsocial. The seemingly impossible task here is to make them communicable, in another register.

Enjoyment is a private affair. In the public arena of the circus, I give away a small portion of what I desire. I have to keep something back, to keep the public safe from what actually drives me: drives that are far from innocent, pretty or merely pleasing. Trauma lurks behind that grin we associate with circus. These are the origins I have to ignore in order to climb the rope. Uncovering those drives might do something to that enjoyment, it might problematize this frictionless performance that works so very well; night after night. We want pretend near-death; we don't want suicide.

If I rely on my desire and the fantasy that enables it in order to get my difficult, painful job done then I avoid confronting that earlier impulse, a more primal *thing* than desire, which is to say *drive*, that thing that cannot be spoken.

So to the first strand, psychoanalysis, the "talking cure". What better way to get the circus to speak its mind? Or rather that forbidden thing that gives the performance its allure; its pure body, its apparent absence of "mind".

Since psychoanalysis looks to the origin of a symptom, which some analysts would describe as one's preferred way of interacting with the world, so I was interested in the possible common origins of the circus in those that decided to be chosen by it. Having been so invested in the circus for more than half my life, this investigation could not but be biased towards certain trends that I recognized in myself. So to the second strand – memoir.

Positions of authority bring with them some notion of having the answers. Analyst, parent, professor, doctor, teacher. No matter how hard you try to divest yourself of that authority and by dispersing it through a group so that each takes responsibility for their own position, people still seem to want a master. Someone who can tell them what to do. I am used to having influence as a circus artist. People handed over so much to me for those eight minutes of the act. Students do the same, analysts too, in the first phase of analysis. The analyst is after all the "one supposed to know". The journey of analysis consists of the client remembering what they did not know they already knew. The analyst, of course, knows nothing so the education has to go both ways. Memoir here, acts as a corrective to the authority perceived as having knowledge about something universal. Circus is not per se queer, Marxist, feminist or progressive. But my circus was. My recollections of what drove me to the circus, in the third person, making of myself a case study, are as a series of footnotes to the theories I have gravitated towards during my journey. Having schooled myself outside of formal education, I tended to Freud only because he spoke to my history, not because he was on a syllabus I was made to follow. I return to Lacan, again and again because when I read his seminars, I read circus as seminars on the same subjects: masochism, desire, drive, transference.

However, memoir is not a resource of fact put up against a theoretical model such as psychoanalysis. Narrative is a part of psychotherapy and the fictional element of what happens in analysis is crucial. Memoir is, in fact, a form of creative non-fiction, which is why the third strand is not philosophy but philosophical fiction. A Foucauldian walks into a circus training space. A phenomenologist, a Foucauldian and a queer Marxist walk into the circus. It sounds like the beginning of a joke, and yes, the joke is also something deployed here, as something that makes light of itself, that hides its seriousness by playing a *trick* on the recipient's expectations.

To treat philosophy as fiction both robs it of its master status but also elevates the latter to a rival position of thinking and formulating ideas. If circus is a programme of thinking, it is also a fiction, a not-real, an imaginary, a fantasy. The only way to attend to it philosophically then, considering fiction to be a component of both memoir and psychoanalysis as a form of storytelling, often in the form of lies, is to make up a philosophy for it. This philosophy should be as bastard, illegitimate, hotchpotch and perhaps implausible as the circus itself. And it should take risks, and it should, more often than not, fail.

There is no GUT of circus, no General Unified Theory or no CUT, no Circus Unified Theory. Since its entrance into the University system there is now research beyond that done for production, so there is now Circus Research And Production, CRAP. But it is resistant to discourse, since as psychoanalysis says, to speak the primordial drive is to cure oneself of the masochistic satisfaction had from its power over you. Circus Usually Negates Theory.

Through tracing my own history and those aspects that others have shared with me, I come to see what I must bracket to get some theoretical understanding of my practice. With the caveat of never divorcing a practice from theory I could say the following,

- A practice produces a theory, a theory of the kinds of knowledges, or propositions that the practice gives up, propositions that have no other way of being transferred to the non-circus person than through discursive means.
- Market forces give the practice its teleology and its role, not merely its exchange value. These are manifest and exposed in the performance so a theory of the practice does not need to enumerate these meanings and values since they form the visible, hegemonic theory of purpose or utility that needs supplementing, undercutting or just plain reversing.
- A theory of practice is as much a practical tool as the whole array of “how-to” techniques that comprise circus disciplines, just in another register. To reiterate: practice and theory are parallel endeavors and when their streams meet, a thinking emerges. Instead then of “how to rotate myself in space?”, one might ask “how do I open the space up to the possibility of revolution”. Philosophy can be as practical as a hammer or a trapeze – hammer affects nail effects a nailing, trapeze affects elbows effects a hang. Artistic practices are well placed to create, more than produced things with monetary exchange value, but aesthetic tools that lie in the interstice between conceptual (immaterial) and practical (material).
- A “what does it do” theory of a practice folds back into the movement of embodied thinking (itself a tautology, where else does the thinking happen, in a transcendental bubble?) that the practice already is. It is then that one knows what is essential to it and what is not (market forces for example, the practice does not need them, only the product does). A theory of practice can last well beyond one’s ability to actually rotate in the air. A theory of practice could give rise to more conceptual or transdisciplinary rotations with applications across a variety of heterogeneous fields.

Any sort of discursive map of the circus would have to take a number of paths through its field. Circus faces particular directions because it is comprised of a variety of different subject positions in space that overall constitute a specific intentionality or way of moving through the world. It's a non-normative perspective, slightly odd, slanted, inverted, transgressive etc....that one might provisionally call queer.

If I questioned its identity choreographically, I would be asking how it moves through the world, what lines (of thought) it followed and what it chooses or is forced to have within its sights at the exclusion of others. This would open onto what perspective it holds and from which point of view, and how that point might be upside-down or narrowed down to a very exclusive, skewed frame. Circus choreographically instructs its subjects' identity into a particular place. The queer, slanted and inverted suddenly seem more like the normative. Queer here is posited, not so much as a settled identity but as an active questioning of normative modes of moving through the world and creating ever-shifting new positions from which to view and change it.

Normativity is linked with the law, with "getting in line", often behind others that have come before. So, Circus has its traditions, its laws, yet at heart innovation, rule-breaking, the surprising and the novel are its prime motivators. The law is passed down in lines of succession, a set of prohibitions ("don't jump on the bed, don't climb too high, don't play with fire") set in motion against particularly dangerous and exciting ways of moving, against the acquisition of certain perspectives or approaches. Circus takes the breaking of those laws as its central law and makes the breaking of that law the norm.

What is the view like when you are rotating at x km/hr., head over heels, three or four times? What sort of perspective, on the body, does this way of moving have? When the body lands back on its feet – or hands, why must we always land on our feet? – what "other" knowledge does it bring back with it, from this journey not many of us take?

This doesn't just pertain to circus. Circus merely does it in a particular way, under a specific set of conditions. It is the desire for perspectival shift that also motors rock-climbing, par-cour, bungee jumping, danger sports, the fairground ride etc....But it is also, within a different register, what motivates self-improvement programmes – meditation, yoga, psychoanalysis.

As a self-improvement programme then, it's a stabilized and sanctioned set of guidelines for transgression. It is anything but queer.

When Freud, Marx and Nietzsche, amongst others, decentered the agency of the human subject, the Copernican revolutions in their respective disciplines (all of which were already multi-disciplinary and hotchpotch) ushered in the proposal of post-modernity. With that something was lost. Acceleration then is an issue in this work, as is the constant pressure of needing to be a multi-tasking virtuoso totally at ease with precarity as a default. Circus has something to say about this. The question of not being able to mourn what has been lost, or not knowing precisely what in the lost object one has exactly lost brings up the two major defences against grieving: depression and mania.

Circus is a homeopathic anti-depressive in the form of a manic display of mastery. It demonstrates a desire for a non-normative, creative and fully-owned, one might romantically say, "authentic", perspective. It describes an orientation within space but never fully manages to share that perspective, only show it. It cannot succeed in sharing

what can be seen from this apparently authentic subject position it claims for itself. The circus demonstration is a *result* of that orientation to the world rather than a critical examination of the transferrable possibilities of that position in space, that relation towards the neo-liberal law of precarity and of instability.

Circus has a playfully codependent relationship to law. It both invokes and displays the law, making the rules or the limits absolutely explicit. It shows how the law both forms it and allows it limited, enjoyable room to contest it. In its ideological form, congealed like a reiterative, choreographed identity, circus becomes reified. The normal. In fact, it becomes reified *as* resistance. Resistance becomes an unspoken imperative, a path to follow. It is already laid out before the me as a dictate to adhere to, to not stray from, all the while suggesting to me that I am breaking boundaries, discovering new paths and movements within the it. Freedom, authenticity, transgression and control of the self- or other –in gravity are the protagonists in the grand romantic narrative of the circus. It needs to believe in these things to sustain itself. Mourning, like critical reflection, would be an inconvenience to the pleasure gained from its success at overcoming the odds. This work attempts to address just that.

What kind of project is the circus? As a programme of disciplines, what is it for? What is it trying to discipline exactly? What does the circus aim at? And how might its procedures shed light on how we live, right now, in and with precarity?

1974

Things fit or do not fit. Spillings smashing, slottings slidings. Wood does not melt metal will not fold, water can't be bent the wind he cannot mold. When he asks who drank the water in his bedside glass Mum says "The sun." When he asks why he can't touch it, that stuff there, Dad says "It's the most poisonous thing in the world, little one." Are they telling him the truth?

So he takes his glass and dissolves a scoop of that poisonous thing in it to see if the sun is stupid enough to drink it? At that time he is high with too many other projects. Some ice cubes made of juice which will be yummy and he ate apple seeds to see if his father would be right that a tree would grow in his tummy.

So he forgets, doesn't he? about the experiment with the sun. Until he gets home one day, sky like grey mud and when his home work is done sees the glass has been half drunk.

What have I done, I've ruined it for everyone, I've only gone and killed the sun. I am the worst sinner. It drank the poison, dropped out the sky, I deserve to go to bed without any dinner, I deserve to die.

He promptly confessed. "You can't kill the sun, it'll come out tomorrow, alright?" It doesn't help, he is too depressed so he doesn't sleep that night. And it isn't guilt that does it but the knowledge that he has limits; what is true inside his mind is not the case for the outside.

This is his first fall from having been too high. He doesn't understand it all, he's too small to grasp why one can be this thing called existentially sad. But for some reason, young as he is, sad does not equal bad.

Circus as Death Writing

The Work of Life Writing Conference, King's College, London 2009

There is no escaping the impression that Circus is dream-like, with its unrealistic endeavours and impossible desires, its unremittingly childish pursuit of the fantastic, the omnipotent, the rebellious. Instantly metaphoric, far from naturalistic. This endless joy and satisfaction which circus provides provoked me to ask whether there is something it avoids, some enabling condition that if remembered, would wake it from its innocent delirium, in the same way that the latent content of a dream is distorted into the less disturbing manifest content in order to conserve sleep.

The spectacular effects that are the manifest Circus Act could be seen, I thought, as a distracting display of success against insuperable odds that keep its latent content at bay. If we take the Act to have the same construction as a dream – a dream perhaps of flight, of mastery, of adventure, of pure uncritical pleasure – then the latent desire within would have had to have undergone the distorting, repressive procedures of reality, with all its demands of acceptability, reliability, testability. The latent content, warped via displacement, condensation and overdetermination (what Freud called the 'dream-work') into the obscure image-puzzle of the manifest dream, may be really quite banal, really rather obvious after some thought, some interpretation. So why the censorship, the distortion? What wish needs such repression in order to be expressed in this way? (Freud, S, 1901.)

The experience of being at height, or juggling many balls gives me a rush of adrenalin, instigates the fight or flight mechanism, not inherently a pleasurable experience, more like a state of emergency wherein everything is at stake. Hardly a comfortable, contented, pleasurable experience. Desire and pleasure in this instance are at odds with each other. Then of course there is the pain, disappointment and failure experienced in training. As artists the wish we want to be fulfilled then is not a wish for pleasure, at least not of a direct sort.

In the dream the latent idea is nothing very mysterious once it has been discovered, it is often a quite banal worry, need or demand and often not even sexual in the final interpretation – I have a deadline for a paper, a friend was off-hand with me this evening. What is more interesting is the reason why this latent demand has been submitted to such censorship, distortion or repression in order to keep it from consciousness. Žižek explains that the only reason why this banal or 'normal train of thought', one that could be expressed in everyday language (secondary process) is submitted to the dream-work (primary processes) would be "if an unconscious wish, derived from infancy and in a state of repression, has been transferred onto it". (Žižek. 1989, pp 12-13)

What could be so terrible about this infantile desire that it can never see the light of day? What offends us so about its nature that we repress it, strangle it with metaphors so that we can't see it for what it is?

Dream, symptom, desire, metonym and metaphor and finally the *drive*, that horrific meaninglessness of enjoyment resistant to discursive capture.

I introduced the term Circoanalysis into my methodology as artist/mentor/director in response to what I saw to be a stagnation in the training and production of circus works, due, I thought, to the predominance of the circus object over the circus subject, of artist as mute object/product instead of speaking subject/process. So, to the talking cure, to remind us *who* we talk of when we speak about Circus and not *what*. Here is where I allowed the Circus

Artist to recount the story or demand that brought them to the circus in order for them to maintain a desiring, rather than demanding relationship to their craft, one not overly determined by the remits of the market or university.

It is to ask why this way to make a living, make a life, live a life, tell/share a life?

Circus is not just life writ large, not only life's success story of overcoming gravitational challenges, it is also a way of describing life's failure, of telling its possible death. The object of circoanalysis is to discover what it is that drives someone to choose as their aim in life, their way to make their living, an aim so physically dangerous to that life and to index the ways in which that subject denies or obfuscates it.

It is within the context of circoanalysis and the blind repetitions it unearths, that the darker edges of the innocent, pleasure-seeking circus can be found; circus as a form of death-writing, writing-toward death. Heroin addict, prostitute, paranoid schizophrenic, anorexic, circus artist – subjects attempting either symbolic failure or real suicide, staging attempts at bringing death closer. They repeat a way of “absenting” from the present reality, from the symbolic universe whose injunctions we obey to partake in our share of the social goods. By replacing the pathological repetitions of a death-seeking drive with the sublimated repetitions of a more life-affirming, libidinal circus the artists seemed to have found a way of elucidating, alleviating the friction caused by a difficult desire, keeping one foot in anomaly, the other in cultural legibility. This was not as simple as replacing the symptoms of obsessive compulsion with the symptoms of circus. Rather it was to suggest that they might well have found a way of so limpidly describing, enacting or exposing their symptoms, in the symptoms own language of metaphor, not to have to suffer from or be subject to them.

So, when we ask what Circus is about, what it tells, I would propose that it speaks of that perversely pleasurable compromise formation we call the symptom. This is what we repeat in the circus act, this is how we creatively, usefully compromise. The circus act, in my view, is the story of the symptom and the fantasy that it masks. The sparkling costumes, the fixed grins, the childish nostalgia of the circus then come to be seen as repressive procedures, palliatives that make bearable the unpalatable sub-text of the act. The bravura, the ‘meaninglessness’, ‘pure entertainment’ are analogous to the manifest contents of a dream whose latent content is a fantasy of return to an earlier state, to non-life, often intimated in trauma, that indescribable event that could be seen as either the ultimate failure, or the final accomplishment.

Trauma

In ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’ Freud recounts watching a little boy play with a cotton reel on a piece of string. He throws it away with a sound that Freud interprets to be “fort” (the German for “there”), he drags it back accompanied by “da” (“here”). What he is doing is staging a loss, making a game of the fact that his mother comes and goes over which he has no control, a game based on her absence followed by her presence. Freud describes the game as an endeavour that “could be attributed to an instinctive urge to assert control” in which the traumatic loss the child was subjected to is acted out in the form of a game in which he is now the master. (Freud, 2003, p42-43)

Circoanalysis did not seek to squeeze the circus act into the Oedipus complex. The rope is not interpreted as a penis-substitute and the swing is not the going in and out of the mother's vagina. However the two poles of here and there do provide a useful way of extracting the base metaphor, or game, operative in the act.

It is visible in the wire-walker, the wheel artist and acrobat who go back and forth, travelling here to there and then back to the beginning to start the game again. It is the inevitable route of the rope artist who climbs up in order to come down only to climb back up again. The swinging trapeze is another back and forth and the juggler could be seen as the perfect echo of the game with the cotton reel – the ball is here in my hand, then it's there in the air, then it's here again in my hand.

It recalls children throwing their toys from the pram, the fork from the table. They are not just testing their parent's patience, they are "reality-testing", testing whether or not the fork will really return, testing the rules of coming and going, testing how dependable their care-givers are. The sooner they understand the rules the sooner they will master their anxiety of abandonment, of loss and take responsibility over the coming back of the toy, the fork. The juggler is playing the same game, except this time he is in control.

Play, as symbolization is an early form of theatre for the self.

Is circus reality-testing in the way it symbolizes its desires? Why these stories of control, mastery, danger and the threat of death or failure? Does it recall a previous trauma that it seeks to control, master retroactively? Is this recall the game of here/there, with its stakes raised so much higher, where what is at stake is survival not just the retrieval of a cotton-reel? If, in my reading, here/there is a representation of presence/absence, are then circus artists playing with the possibility of their own absence, their "not-being-here"? No circus artist consciously wants to die, they are not reckless risk-takers or suicidal melancholiacs otherwise the turnover of circus performers would be too high to be sustainable. Certainly we don't pay to see them die, just for them to get close, closer than we may dare. It is the possibility of it that haunts the spectacle, that ghost-writes it. The game they play with their bodies is not thoughtless, they know the rules but they are however intent on pushing, testing those rules to their limits with their big 'death-defying' tricks.

Melancholia- a circus over-writing of Kristeva.

The 'big trick' is the moment in which years of accumulated embodied knowledge condense in a tightfisting of muscle and mind, the life/death moment where every cell strains to persist, wherein the organism lives most intensely because it is precisely living that is at stake. In order to properly exist there one must first posit the not-there: the condition of being-there's possibility. This is the edge the artist nudges, the story he/she intimates.

There is a sensuous fullness in the Circus Act. Much like the decision preceding the suicide, they are bestowed with an independence from the injunctions of the symbolic universe we "normal" living beings mundanely operate under. In this fullness the ego is absolutely integrated, whole, not at war with itself since all psychic energy has been devoted to the physical task of survival while simultaneously striving for the moment nearest death (the closer we get to failure the more applause we get); Eros and its legion of life-drives that seek to bind, connect, enhance life is bent on creating the beautiful while Thanatos, with its blind, lizard-brain death drives must take the back seat. Thanatos is the slave to Eros, to the creation of the beautiful thing that will bind us all together in

applause. In this instance we psychoanalytically and literally cheat death. For that precious moment the Circus subject reclaims the imaginary lost paradise of the integrated self. (Kristeva, 1989, p20)

There is too often a disavowal here of the Act's melancholic constitution, producing, as we see today, the denial that is the manic, over-compensating Circus, desperately fleeing meaning, a gratuitous, shallow, narcissistic act using the spectator as its mirror. Is not sadness as much a motivation for the production of culture as guilt?

Is melancholia the affect that founds the distinction external/internal? Is it not a primary loss that throws us back into ourselves, wounded, hateful, frightened? Is not loss the instigator of internal, psychic space?

An impossible mourning for the maternal object (much like the post-coital calm, replete with memories of safety, satisfaction, the protection of love, trust, of belonging) which the paternal metaphor can never quite live up to or make up for.

It is paternal law that wrests the infant into the symbolic world and forever away from the maternal object via the prohibition against incest. It is synonymous therefore with language, signs, symbols. It signals the loss of narcissistic omnipotence and our entrance into subjectivity, into metaphor. As subjects, we are born of loss.

So is melancholia biological or metaphorical? Or at their crossroads? Could it be said that melancholia, is, in fact the passage from the biology of drives to the metaphors of demand, the sad, but necessary journey to subjecthood?

Mania

How can one not see something of mania in the circus?

When the infant feels that his destructive impulses and phantasies are directed against the complete person of his loved object, guilt arises in full strength and together with it, the overriding urge to repair, preserve or revive the loved injured object. These emotions in my view amount to states of mourning, and the defences operating to attempts on the part of the ego to overcome mourning. (Segal 2004, p74)

Winnicott says that some of these defences are manic, in that they “deny the depressive anxiety that is inherent in emotional development”. (Phillips, 2007, p 57)

They are attempts at negating psychic reality, denying the existence of the internal bad objects in an omnipotent gesture of control, triumph and scorn. (Kristeva, 2001, p77-78) Manic denial is a form of repression.

“Omnipotence, denial and idealisation” (Klein, 1998, p 349) are the tools that mania uses to counteract the inevitable “grief that affords us a soul”. (Kristeva, 2001, p89)

When a colleague who we know to be grieving walks into a room elated, being overly positive about everything we say that they are ‘over-compensating’. Mania is a denial, a coping mechanism, a temporary way-out from an unmanageable psychic pain. It is associated with speed, with the belief that one can achieve anything and everything, sometimes all at once. It is impulsive, meaning it does not take into consideration the consequences of an action and so is aligned with a pathologically high self-esteem. Mania is a ‘high’ that has its corresponding and

enabling 'low' in melancholia – “mania doesn't mean liberation from introverted mournfulness, but rather an illusory triumph over mourning”. (Birnbau, D. and Olsson, A. 2008, p74) Kristeva imagines mania as “it walks onstage and becomes the tool that builds a shield against loss.” (1989, p50) Her theatrical metaphor, that implies a state that is a show for others continues to describe the “aesthetic exultance” which rising by means of ideal and artifice above ordinary constructions suitable to the standards of natural language and trivialised social code, can partake of this manic activity. (p50)

Mania is a way of managing a psychic injury by denying it, via a controlling action that reminds us of the notion of control that goes to the heart of what Circus does; controlling balls from falling to the ground, the swing of the trapeze, the partners body as it lands into ones arms after a brief flight. Control and failure are antithetical terms. Superman is a hero for this very reason; controlling his body in flight and falling (because of a proximity to kryptonite for example) when he becomes human. Failure is refused entry into the world of the manic because he denies its possibility. It is an assertion of omnipotence, absolute control. Circus then stages merely the possibility of failure – I may fall, drop, fail to be caught – yet to be circus it must not fail. Only in grief does one admit to some fundamental but also enabling failure, that of life itself. Failure, as lack of control over internal impulse or external environment is traumatic for an ego that wants its own way. Mourning is precisely that integrative activity that accepts this fact, slowly building failure into the life-story of the ego. Circus does not allow itself to fail and if it did it would cease to be circus, as such. The Superhero is a fantastic idealisation yet the journeys that superheroes take are riven by failures that are explicitly human. This is where the popularity of these narratives is to be found, where our empathy resides and this is where Circus, aspiring to the superheroic, the omnipotent, falls short, forestalls its own internal narrative, its own communicative potential. It does not include the failure in the telling of its story.

In this way, Circus remains split, a 'part-object' that refuses to integrate trauma and anxiety, projecting them out in a gesture of omnipotence that is reminiscent of the angry infant resisting the internal demands of the depressive position, denying, often in a manic way a portion of the conditions which enable it. (Klein, 1997, p63)

Superhero stories may be phantastic, but because they integrate the necessary failures implicit in success, they are more realistic than the circus that aspires to them. The perfect circus object then, the one that succeeds on every count, is still just a 'part-object', still only show us Klein's 'good breast'; an idealisation. Circus it would seem still has much left to mourn.

But let me speculate then on what remains to be integrated into the circus act. If, in my reading it can often be an act representative of mania, what has been left behind, what has been repressed? An anxiety scorned as useless, unproductive? A mourning derided as worthless? Is Circus then merely a symptom?

There is no time for mourning in the act, it operates at a superheroic manic speed. Mourning, on the other hand, is a deeply internal process, defined by its interminable slowness. With its rapid pace, its colourful costumes and its fixed grin the infantile Circus actively denies, distracts from this internal, involving self-reflection and seems forced to in order to define itself as circus. It needs to avoid thievery thing that defines it. In the schema of here/there we could say that the artist seems focussed on only one of these poles, that in its corporeal concern with climbing to new heights of spectacular distraction it must necessarily ignore its depth of psychic involvement.

The Act attempts, not to recreate this oceanic feeling of wholeness and unmediated sensuality of the impossible, phantasmatic maternal object that has been lost, but rather to produce a manically nostalgic

compensation of its imaginary substance, to approximate it in as purely sensuous terms as possible and it can only do this by bracketing off the very real 'bad breast', the loss that initiates it.

This brings us to the contingent object of our desire that enables the game of here/there (rope, juggling ball, trapeze) as medium, mediator, metaphor – not the real object but an approximation. As such it operates on the level of the virtual, just in the same way that our own death is virtual, an inevitable potential that supports/ allows/ encourages the actual to persist.

Nostalgia

In staging our limits so clearly do we not fantasize about the un-rememberable time when we didn't have any? Infantile kings and queens overseeing a realm that held nothing but us? Is it the loss of primary omnipotence and the final, necessary recognition of the other that occasionally "makes us blue"? This is the feeling circus can give us, like the last wisp of a dream shaking itself off or being burnt away by the morning sun, this feeling, waiting to be worded, told, on the tip of your tongue, this ineffable... what was it again? If it is a nostalgia it is one without referent, without object, or at least not an actual object. It is more like what Kristeva, in 'Tales of Love' calls "the vertigo of a love with no object other than a mirage." (1987, p104) This is the fundamental fantasy that sustains us, this mythical place we yearn for and nostalgia is the vague sensation of that light warming us again, rousing our skin; the light of which we are only a reflection. Melancholia proper on the other hand is without even this phantasmatic object, the subject has unmoored itself from the world of objects, disinvested in everything and everyone except, and only in a purely negative way, itself. Psychic space is its object and this is what reserves suicide for the melancholic and denies it to the obsessive who still has his objects keeping the horizon of death at bay. Working through this essentially melancholic self-contemplation, this narcissistic self-love is what can make art, thought and our fictions possible by externalising and multiplying this reflective capacity. So, in performing the relationship of object and self, their romantic, deathly intertwining we make clear, or present what the dyad self/object is dancing within, with; some unsignifiable horizon/limit.

This is the bottomless memory invoked by the sublime (up to the limit, but then why should the limit not be down below as opposed to up above?) which disrupts our very notion of 'limit'. This is Barthes' text of bliss; we choke, are reeled out into an abyss, opposed to the text of pleasure which comforts, reaffirms our limits, keeps us limited. But why should we reel out? Why should this be vertigo? Why not a falling, a sinking, a drowning, a pissing the bed? (Barthes, 1975, p 19) This has to do with our metaphors of height and depth and how perhaps the Circus Artist should treat these metaphors fluidly, as fluidly as she treats gravity.

When the Swinging Artist throws herself out at the front of her swing she experiences the 'dead point'. She takes such a long time to make the 180 degree arc in space, going from flying to falling and then back to swinging, hanging by her ankles that our hearts stop. It doesn't take so long, a second maybe but because this move makes our 'heart stop', time slows and thickens almost to a standstill because in that 1 second what was seemingly at stake was her life. Is not melancholia slow like this? Does everything not stretch out interminably? A doubt, infinitely elastic

connecting life and death? A slow, unbearable tension that feels like it will never snap, where life itself is permanently at stake, a question. The days are long and the nights longer. Whereas mania, its superheroic opposite seeks to do exactly that, snap the continuum that connects right with wrong, light with dark, falling with flying up.

Melancholia, when all you want is not to be despite (to spite?) the recalcitrant heart that knows only to beat; the state wherein you have no choice but continue living. It is only the parasite of desire that keeps the heart beating, the “alien” of language subsisting in the warm corpse.

No, the word I was looking for was not nostalgia, it was melancholia, with its historical resonances, its disavowed origins and its profound ambivalence. Yes, Circus provokes, among other things nostalgia, but if it is to be more than a divertissement it may need to redefine its emotional limits and provoke an engagement with the melancholic and the death-drives that fuel it. This would be to acknowledge that its boundaries are no longer defined by the sentimental, the infantile, the manic omnipotent, super-heroic and the spectacular narcissist but by an ambivalent antagonistic and ultimately fragile, grieving, vulnerable humanness.

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1976

Outside, concrete council estate: ramps, steps, railings, lampposts, dustbins, doors.

Inside, ledge-lamps, table-shelves, cupboards, armchairs and toilets, stool-sinks, socket-chests, plug-holes rug-pipes and toilets are combined, reconfigured or undesigned. Building, climbing, testing, unfixing the straight forward, the practical till things break forward into something bent, something magical. Whisks, knives, scissors, string, screws, scales and caustic sodas, the magician's apprentice with his thermometres, matches disinfectants, bleaches and batteries.

She comes and undoes everything he makes. Sees a mess where he sees a world, according to him, unfurling. He ties two things together to make a new synthesis. She unties and puts it back where it belongs. He turns something upside down, she turns it the right way up.

She is his nemesis.

He can write in invisible ink. He can follow people without them knowing. He can hide. He can do a cartwheel. He can lie. He could be a double agent, a spy. He only wants to be a superhero: reduce gravity's (and everyone else's) resistance to him to zero.

Fly, telepathy, telekinesis, x-ray vision, invisibility, make everyone like you. He just can't decide. He kinda wants them all. Why can't he have them all?

1977

Power cuts and candles.

Seventy two steps to the ninth floor. The lift is often broke. It groans and creeks and whines as if there were bodies stuffed along its sides, dragged up nine floors scraping against the walls.

He has dreams of the lift never stopping, faster and faster up till he's popping out the roof or faster and faster down till he's buried deep underground.

Nine floors up he throws water balloons onto cats [his favourite game] watching them smash [the balloons, not the cats] wonders if his body would do the same. Only once had someone let themselves fall, Paddy Smith from Number 99, just down the hall. That gap in the window, his chance of escape, to see if he can fly.....or just the melancholic desire of wanting to try.

Paddy Smith, by the way, did not fly.

In dreams he jumps to escape vampire parents, but does not crash like a boy balloon guts splashed on the pavement. He rather feels the rush, the sound of the air in his ears to land soft on the ground without any fear but a thrill in his spine; he is learning to fly.

The Circus Experiment

Circus practice can be seen as a constant experimentation with the limits, edges and forces of the materials at hand. The scientific formula of repeatability is, however haunted by the pressure of the imagination to create and not stay still. New possibilities always arise, inversions, subversions, reactions and counter-hegemonic versions of “successful” results.

Reality testing in a child simply allows them to understand, through play, whether or not the world conforms to their desire. They soon learn that they cannot fly, as they do in dreams, but that they can do other things they had never dreamt of. Above all they learn to test the theses of their caregivers and those experiments put those theses in brackets, during play and during the liberated movement of the dream. Not so much a phenomenological bracket, but as Avital Ronell says “parent-theses”: parentheses.

In the circus act a certain reality is put into those parentheses – it says “imagine for a moment I were not bound by that reality, law, restriction, prohibition.” It is a “what if?”. Well then, let’s just say it operates the same way as fiction and be done with it. An experiment in how to convince another of something that does not really exist or never really happened. Or like a pathological narcissist.

Only this does exist, it’s happening right in front of you, not as representation – you don’t actually believe that I’m a sailor on that rope, you know I’m a circus artist – but as presentation. I am actually falling through the air to catch myself by a hip twist into a knot that prevents me smashing my head on the floor. There is some small piece of consensual reality that I have worked to change. There is some small piece of legislation that I have outmanoeuvred. This side-stepping of the probable, of the expected, of what one thought of as law, is precisely what a circus trick is. The knot is a loop-hole. This gives then some sense of what the criteria for an experiment might be in the circus.

If a certain group of critics, spectators or artists are looking for something that might be called *meaning* in the circus act, this might be a good place to start. Perhaps the meaning of the act is to get away with something, murder maybe, the loot. Or even to get away from it all? All meaning? Is that its meaning?

One should ask though, upon whose behalf this search for meaning is initiated in the burgeoning discourse upon and sometimes within circus? For the artists I have met, its lack of symbolic meaning or representational value is not an issue, yet a pressure emerges from somewhere, for it to *be about something*. There is an imagined need to give it reference points borrowed from consensual reality, so that we may orient ourselves towards it – to know where we stand with it. This is counter perhaps to the effect it has on the artist performing or enacting it, which is to be momentarily disoriented with respect to this prescribed reality.

The task in training is to make this inversion, or skewed perspective, the norm – for example to be as secure on ones hands as one is on ones feet – so that the effects of disorientation are minimised through repetition. The drive is queer but the aim, or final destination is normativity: to be at home upside, to domesticate the uncanny. The dangerous process ends up with a safe product. A crisis loses its edge or its force and becomes assimilated into the profitably comfortable. Cosy craft not edgy art. The public that consumes it is not disoriented.

It’s hard to do the improbable when it was expected all along.

*Has to be said. I love you.
When I circus, when I fly.
Violent. Isn't it. A bit one-sided. I know
Question is: Am I lying?
You don't have to respond.
It's not that kind of show.*

*It's more than being fond,
Cos I really need you here
You're indispensable
Can't do this without you
That would be weird*

*But you're incomprehensible,
You don't give much away,
So I'll just have to assume,
That so far this is going okay.*

*I said it too soon?
The I love you?
Some words can't be unheard.
I said it too soon.
Right
It was just ripe on my tongue
To go to sleep tonight
I needed that job done.*

*This, you and me has been a fantastic pyrotechnical
orgasmatration
So thank you.
That's not love, It's just a gymnastic technique of
infatuation.
Which I've been rather good at.
Shock lust and awe.
More an artillery than a vocabulary,
Cock thrust.
"Knock em dead", "Blow them away", "Light it
up"
You know – like war.*

*I'm a firework you don't want me going off in your
face
That's one thing I've learned.
To keep the space, just give you a small dose
Would'nt want you getting burned
From getting to close.*

*I'm sorry but,
Adore me is not I love you
Applaud me is not I love you
Award me, thanks very much, is not I love you
And I do love you
I do
Love you.
You you you.*

*So I'll just come out and say
I'm genuinely sorry
For seducing you,
Even though you did ask me
To reduce you to waves of applause,
Stick you wet to your seat.
Don't worry, that's what you signed up for,
It's there in the first clause
Enjoy him, the acrobatics of meat,*

*Get a thrill down your spine, a little jump in your
seat,
A little ooh, a little aah, glass of wine, stamp your
feat
At something spectacular
Sexy impossible...etceterar, eceterar...*

*I mean, don't worry, but you did write your name
on the dotted line
When you walked through that door
You knew what this was for
So it's not a crime.*

It's just a shame

*That in these 5 minutes when I'm flying, we get so
swept up in our merriment
That we forget that it's all an act. A game to make
you come back
I do not really love you.
This is just an experiment.
I'm trying to apologise
For glueing your eyes on me
But i do need two hundred eyeballs
To keep me from falling.
You are my safety device,
My prophylactic in a crisis
So I don't crash,
So the venue can profit from my antics.*

*Sorry,
For making you think that perhaps I cared,
that I was doing it all for you,
When there were 99 others behind you and 99 in
front,
Which from this point of view, dare I say it, puts
you in a queue.*

*How could you not see,
That this was all just for me?*

*Forgive me for winding you up,
Wrapping you round my fingers,
Dropping you catching up dropping you again
But that's the act,*

*Night after night.
And in those 5 minutes if I do it right
you'll fall for me, temporarily -
If I don't fuck up – which I don't, ordinarily,
Trust me, for you, I will never fall. Amen.
Trust me , I will never fall for you. Not Again.
Although...you do come time after time, with the
hope,
somewhere deep inside,
that I might, drop off that rope.
I love that I make you come.
It helps me to sleep at night.
Knowing my job's been done.*

The Fall – into the knot of narcissism

“I love you.” A performative if ever there was one and a violent one at that. These words act upon you when sent your way. Just like a circus act they presuppose a response even if that’s a silence – itself full of meaning.

Desire is desire of the other – I want your desire; I want you to return the performative so I can have the assurance of a future. Not quite like a circus trick where I don’t have to love you to make you adore me. But what if I conducted myself *as if* I loved you, meaning there would be no need for you to applaud me and no need to do what I do best – seduce or stun you. I might have to learn a different set of skills. I would have to hand back some of your agency, which, admittedly, you handed over to me when you paid for your ticket...when you bought some time with me.

My circus technique is a pyrotechnic lexicon that blinds you to the fact that I don’t really feel anything for you. It’s more artillery than vocabulary. And you wouldn’t want me in your hand. I’m a firework display because the sounds you make when I perform are the same I hear on Guy Fawkes’s night.

If I love you, I should let you be free to leave. Circus is capture, fixation, a gravitational draw, a mesmerism. It has more to do with momentary infatuation than it does with love. There are shades of war here, the violent seduction – the perpetrators being the ones first conquered, overthrown, out of reason by a compelling, powerful figure. There are shades of prostitution, transaction, the real thing but with some distance, the prophylactic of the fourth wall making sure you do not get sticky. A war without casualties.

Consider this my aesthetic choice for a circus address. If the shiny blue mermaids or twinkly pinkly sparkle girls have for some reason made that their choice, why should I not make this book mine? If the muscly shaved dolphin men sleek and pumped have chosen to display testosterone throbs of bulge, then can I not display my rather subtler choices?

These words are a pre-emptive strike towards a possibly hostile other, I am as much weapon as whore.

The instant I project myself into the state of loving you I stop having to prove myself. I am not at stake. We are. If I feel that I must constantly put you in a position of rapture or submission, then I am kneading you into a place where you have little choice but be fixated on me. This, I believe, is the demand Circus has placed upon me, its willing subject – to fascinate, compel, to fend off complaint and along with it dialogue, to seductively conquer you, the other and make you comply with my desire that I be the sole object of your interest.

You, spectator-reader are a metonym of circus – you stand-in for the Big Other, the Big Circus, in the form of a validator, surveillance mechanism, examiner. You are a part of the jury that will give a decision to the Circus that presides as judge. The one we have to prove ourselves to. You are always watching. Through word of mouth and ticket sales you are part of the apparatus of distribution and production made up of councils, designers, copy-writers, think-tanks, market research, focus groups - where you vote for my eligibility. And all this constitutes the machinery of desire. Of watching. Love is something else.

Desire I could fake. Love, I cannot.

Falling implies a lack of mastery, a slip-up, fuck-up, mistake. Even when you choose to fall you are choosing to forsake control, which is one of the supposed signifiers of circus. If I think of “falling in love” I get a sense of something powerfully outside of my control, which I will consider in another chapter. Circus is a powerful craft, it seeks to enhance power, even if it wants to highlight fragility. The metaphor of castration, of the force of the law coming down to prevent incest, or an immersion in the m(O)ther has something to do with the place of the Father, that symbolic position occupied more by a Name than a real human being. This Name is about the power of the Law for which the real father, or other (or many) secondary carer(s), is a placeholder.

The potency exhibited in circus, the mastery over falling/failing responds directly to the law in the sense that its practices repeat forbidden situations – climbing a tree, playing with fire, jumping on the bed, testing the parameters of safety, testing or willfully challenging the theses of the parents (by putting them in parent-theses). These pleasures have been cut short by the Law (castration again), the Law that seeks to prevent harmful or inappropriate behaviours and establish the subject as an ego within social space. Circus thus repeats child-like activities that sought mastery over the external environment through its experimentations and theory-making – a practice that sought to understand the world through a direct material practice – play. Thus breakage, destruction, and annihilation are both part of infantile fantasies of omnipotence and ways of testing the boundaries of a new and exciting world. This too is the testing ground of circus – the human body in the world – and its theses comprise of ways of approaching annihilation (or shame) but never fully jumping off the edge, always keeping the thread (the safety line) back to life firmly in hand, always knowing that the safety net has been checked and passed the regulations. It is a more mature experimentation with individual power and the limits of human material.

Adult force is exerted upon infants from the get go. They learn about forces and flows – of bowels, milk, gravity, fire, heavy objects, the hands and arms of parents who pick them up, pull them away and put them down – and they learn the difference between the force of a caress, kiss or cuddle and the force of tight clothes, being snatched away from a candle or sharp knife. They experience the force of being submerged in the bath or thrown in the air. They learn of their own forces and what can and cannot resist them – plastic, wood, earth or aunty, sibling, stranger, spider. Circus is about testing force, it is will-to-power.

William Blake expresses clearly how the infant struggling for freedom in tight swaddling decides to bide its time for the moment it can express its force.

“Struggling in my father's hands,
Striving against my swaddling bands;
Bound and weary I thought best
To sulk upon my mother's breast.” Infant Sorrow.

Is this the birth of what Nietzsche called *ressentiment*? Helpless at the hands of superior powers, something at least is born, the desire for control, agency, to prove one's autonomy or that one has desires of one's own. Lacanian analysis helps the subject to remember this: one's desire is the Other's, or in plain speak, our original desires are repressed to make way for the desire of the Other which “becomes” our own.

This is what lies beneath the aesthetic adornments, the ideologically or historically congealed ornamentations of circus – a pure will-to-power, a proving of potency or a fantasy of force long given up, swamped by the demands of the Other. It is perhaps a fantasy of power against apparently immutable laws – gravity for circus, language for the psychotic, the mother’s castration for the pervert and the position of the master for the hysteric.

The artist is perhaps swaddled by circus.

Dependent on how this early moment is dealt with lies the emergence of the structures of neurosis, perversion or psychosis. To ask “What happened?” or “Why circus?” is ultimately to look to this moment which we will never remember, this origin of desire when law swaddled *jouissance* and language relegated the drives to the unconscious and to the edges of the body. It is an origin that will remain forever opaque but it is the place from which we repeat, staging substitutes in order to sustain life, movement, desire.

This moment is somewhat like a fall, in the Biblical sense – a fall into the world of symbolic beings where difference rather than sameness with the world reigns. What was before the fall can only ever be a fantasy, the fantasy of *jouissance* of the Other, full immersion in an undifferentiated state.

Omnipotence.

There is a moment in performance that touches upon this notion of undifferentiation, or what Freud called the oceanic. It is to be found in religious ceremonies, rock concerts, political rallies and in the feeling of fusion that can occur in the sexual encounter.

I am the soloist with all eyes focused on me. What kind of narcissism must this require to hold that space? And why link a political rally with an orgasm two people have during sex? The key is *fantasy*; the Lacanian motto that “there is no sexual relation” means that the idea of a sexual “relationship” is a fantasy, that the union one might feel, with political ideas, with the intense feelings of one’s sexual partner or one’s identification with a rock star or circus artist is a delusion constitutive of subject formation. And of course, I am ignoring right now the fact that he was talking about a “relationship” between the “sexes”.

To return to the circus artist - what sort of sheer narcissistic confidence, or masochistic manipulation must it take to demand so many people’s attention with an act which is defined by its potential to mess-up and shame?

She drops a ball, she cannot disguise it, she has failed. Yet she is allowed to fail once, if only to show how difficult the trick is. She drops again, our hearts, so keen for her to succeed also drop but then pump or swell with...what? Pride, hope, love? Our voices push her on, support, encourage her, as if she were a child, a child desperate for approval. It’s coming, the famous third try, third time lucky and if she makes it, the house will erupt with applause because we are so invested in this drama of a woman and her task, a woman trying to juggle life, keep things going, stay on top of it, trying to not drop the ball, miss a trick, prove she is up to the job. She drops, she cannot try again. She’s fucked. She just died onstage. What (a) shame.

We want to turn away, to pretend, polite as we are, that it never happened. We want to turn away from what has suddenly fallen from the sublime to the abject. Just a minute left to go and then an aerialist will come on to restore balance to the Utopian fantasy of mastery that we pay to believe in for an hour or two. At least this aerialist won’t drop - because, as aerialists say, no such thing as third time lucky from ten metres, not even a

second time. Because we can't really fly – we are dead weight. If there is a matt or net, then climbing the rope back up is a longer walk of shame than just picking up a ball.

"What happened?" is to ask what is being re-staged. The falling object is a sign of the failure that produces shame. The successful completion of the act(ion) fends off the possibility of that shame. Success equals control over the situation, failure means that the situation was too much for you. But it is not the objects themselves that shame the juggler - she does not feel shame in the training space, only disappointment - she does not flush red, feel her heart race and her palms sweat, she does not want to shrink or disappear from sight, she might merely shrug her shoulders and try again or swear and throw the objects violently to the floor. We, the spectators are the cause of the shame.

She is not merely controlling the airborne flight of a number of objects, she is controlling the fixation of our gaze, the investment of our libidinal energy in her. She is not merely "manipulating" gravity, she is manipulating how we gravitate towards her, pulling us in. She makes the objects orbit around each other in celestial patterns with mathematical precision but she also manages to catch us in her orbit. She is, quite literally a star and in order to be so her action must be dense, dense enough to warp the affective space around her to such a degree that we are drawn in, caught in the centrifugal system she has crafted.

This density affects time. When an object is mis-thrown, or a timing is misjudged, the attempt to save the fantasy from falling apart involves a burst of adrenalin in a scenario wherein she is already fighting for her life. Imagine that glass of red wine falling off the table towards the pristine white carpet - doesn't time slow down? Isn't your reaction to catch the glass almost superhuman? Beyond your comprehension? Each ball is that wine glass and the fantasy shatters with the same sound and the stain shame leaves is as hard to remove.

Utopias are enclaves, there are things that must be kept out. Shame is not invited to the Utopic fantasy celebrated in the circus.

You're at a party and you meet someone so full of charm that everyone seems to gravitate towards him. He is so generous with his warmth that you want to bath in his light, have his attention warm your skin and his charisma light you up. He is the life of the party. He lives for these moments in public when no real depth of engagement is necessary, no intimacy or commitment is required. Yet his engagement with you feels absolutely genuine. You feel necessary to him and as charming as he is. He makes you feel interesting, beautiful and he laughs at your jokes. His job is to fuel your fantasy, and fantasy is the scenario within which desire swirls. Without fantasy there is just the blind, dumb, unrelenting too-much-ness of the drive. He doesn't do or say a thing out of place, makes not one wrong step to break the illusion he can only maintain he if keeps on moving around the room. So he turns away to shine his light on someone else, having maybe already forgotten your name, but your skin nevertheless still tingles with his glow, the privilege of having sustained his attention for a moment or two. Don't get sucked in, he is not a sun, he is black hole. This is how narcissists darkly shine.

I choose the case of the juggler because, when she is manipulating her balls, or clubs or rings, we, the other, are effectively erased. It shares an edge with narcissism, that pathology that does not need the other, but it is more like obsession. The concentration needed to view the constellations and orbits she sets in motion is intense, an extreme distillation of the present tense. She literally has no time for us. However, in disciplines where it is possible to make contact, to respond, to do something for the other, upon an other's request, it is possible to literally loose oneself, in the waves of applause, the chorus of approval. This can feel like a form of union where I, as an artist, am the catalyst. You may even warm to my arrogance of knowing that I not ashamed

of the power I have over you. This confidence can be something to celebrate. In this instance, there is no anxiety of falling, or at least it is parceled away somewhere and in this way the space of the act becomes Utopic, just like those religious and political ecstasies that can be so dangerously conflated.

You don't fall down, you come down.

While I was up there in the warmth of the lights and adoration I sent out signals to the spectators that came back to me amplified, signals that filled me and fueled my efforts to thrill them further - a feedback loop of mutual response, like Wordsworth in the valleys or an infant's joy at seeing herself respond to herself in the mirror. A gasp of shock or delight caused by a shocking, delightful cascade down the rope shocks and delights me to shock and delight them more. I do not notice the difference anymore, I am ecstatic (*ekstasis*, formed of *ek*, outside or beyond and *stasis*, the place in which one stands). Ecstatically outside myself, both here and there and the spectators are also ecstatic, not just there, over there in their seats but here, inside me, we are beside ourselves (in an extreme state of emotion: "I am beside myself with joy, with anger, with grief").

Here and there (*fort* and *da*) are one and the same, collapsed into each other, difference has been eliminated and in this way, it is reminiscent of psychosis. (The only difference between the individual psychotic and a religious movement is that the latter is *sanctioned* by others into a Law, the former is *sectioned* by the Law – apart from that the two share the same delusional structure.)

When I land again, catch my breath, change into everyday clothes and go to the bar for a drink I suddenly feel the acute separateness of social reality. What I felt up there was real but it now feels like it has been a delusion. The spectators are now just people having a party. What did I sacrifice for that moment of intense pleasure that now runs riot in the others? Did I help cause that? Is that my job? And why do I feel so removed from it, unable to participate?

I shrink into the corner with my drink(s), watching the people laugh and dance. I cannot enjoy like them, I can only nurse a certain melancholy or loss, like waking up from a beautiful dream and taking a few seconds for the comparative meagreness of reality to register. The sadness seems not to come from the impossibility of being able to be in that imaginary space indefinitely, I know this to be absurd. Rather it is that this imaginary space, this feedback loop of mutuality, this oneness, reminds me of something so far back, so archived in my pre- history, before thinking, that could only have registered as sensation or affect, that could not be aligned with a thought or a representation. The sadness is due to the inaccessibility of that feeling via anything but wistful reminiscence.

Years later it happens again. In the moment that I remember the context - a benefit performance for a circus friend that had died rehearsing the act - I realize that the previous event had also been a benefit gig, for an AIDS charity. Something then to do with death, with charity, with giving.

I seem to recall that in the AIDS event I was technically unprepared and so was surprised by the jubilant reaction of the crowd. Now, in the recollect of this linked event, the benefit performance for my friend, I think of being at the height of my powers, absolute mastery. The spectators were silent but for one moment when they "inappropriately" applauded, so, nothing like the frenzied cheers at the first event, but I felt that I completely "had them". With every movement, contraction, extension, swirl, drop and curl, I felt that I my materials were not just my own muscles, tendons and bones but the very fibres of the mass. It is this connection,

not just with the fibres of the rope, that I think of as masterful, aggressive.

A colleague afterwards tells me that I had been "on fire, I just wanted to be up there with you." The person is over excited, cannot stop touching me. I feel very differently from the person who previously wanted to shrink into invisibility, perhaps because of a shame of having exposed myself in my unpreparedness. It feels more like I have finally understood what I've been doing all these years and that therefore I can soon give it up.

Love

At an infantile stage, things fall away - a black bit of umbilical, a flake of skin - and things are expelled - faeces, urine, vomit in the form of rejected milk, excesses. If in Freud faeces are gifts, then in Klein vomit and urine can be corrosive attacks upon the bad breast, or absent mother. These part-objects that fall away, as well as those that remain attached - eyes, breasts, genitals, indeed any body part that forms a bridge between inside and out (including the voice), the erogenous zones, the border zones - become Lacanian *petit objets a*, small other objects which he describes as object *causes* of desire, rather than objects of desire.

There are similarities with Winnicott's transitional objects - baby turns away from the breast and fixates on another object to gratify its needs, to attain security. The infant falls from the breast to the blanket/teddy and then one day drops the blanket/teddy and forgets to pick it up again.

These objects resurface in many forms - sometimes quite literally in the concreteness of the fetish. In the case of the ordinary, "normal" neurotic, this *objet a*, this cause of desire, this line of lip, timbre of voice, sway of the hip when she walks, pallor of skin, shine on his nose - these objects return as metonyms for the experience of passionate desire. And so the fall happens again, the fall into love, which Freud of course, describes as having the same structural elements as a neurotic delusion, an infantile fixation - an illness in essence. Once again and maybe for a very short time, or for very many short times, this object will cause a sense of completion, of mystery, oneness, rightness, goodness, of things making sense. It's not only an ineffable object, it is also invisible. It only becomes visible or knowable as the fetish because the pervert is, at the end of the day, the only one who actually knows what he wants.

Could it be that this object intimates or draws us towards the state of the pre-fallen?

Circus artists have a passionate relation with the objects that they use to generate pleasure in the Other. However the juggling balls are not the object of desire, unless, from a perverse position I concretely believed them to be the phallus. Nor do I believe that I am manipulating gravity itself, believing that I have special powers outside of the known, placing me outside the system of references that is the symbolic realm making me a psychotic.

The rope, the balls, the trapeze all set desire in motion, they are *object causes of desire*, objects that cause the movement of desire between performer and spectator. The anxiety dream of the aerialist is not so much to fall, but to walk on stage and for there to be no rope. Desire breeds in this circus space and where there is desire there is its enabling scenario, fantasy. Fantasy, in Lacan, is the narrative of primordial loss, the fall away from the mythic state of grace - the pre-Oedipal, pre-differentiated space of Oneness, being immersed in the Other. Fantasy stages the fall caused by the Law. It is a fall into difference (castration), law (the Name of the Father) and language (the Symbolic) that founds us as speaking subjects, speaking beings (parl-être).

Love?

Where does love sit in all this talk of desire and drive and *jouissance*? What about this affect/state/situation/event that Freud remarked had a similar structure to neurotic fixation? We know that fixation means a libido arrested at an infantile stage. Love is an echo for Freud which is why the transference is so important to analysis, to regress clients to their earliest fixations and libidinal investments. We think ahead but we love backwards.

What comes back to us in that echo is adoration, approval (applause), validation, a mirror that shows us our ideal self, the ideal-ego in Freudian parlance. Who do we need this from in circus? Who is the spectator for us? Freud's use of the Oedipus of literature to describe the passionate drama of infancy points us to the emergence of desire and how that re-iterates itself, as if for the first, over and over again in our lives. Love, care, need, desire, demand and sensuality share porous borders. Civilization tries to erect and defend clear, distinct boundaries between these territories to keep things polite, but civil unrest, falling in love and art always show how unstable and arbitrary these policings are.

Much has been written about how the law is complicit in creating desire by prohibiting something that was not considered desirable before we were told we couldn't have it. We know that the sensuous care of the infant is infused with adult sexuality and is psychoanalytically perceived as a violent if unavoidable intrusion. Care and sensuality overlap. It prompted Freud to re-formulate his early claims that child clients had been seduced by their parents by re-framing them as infantile fantasies and not real events. This is perhaps the clue to what matters in analysis – not real objective facts but how we distort life events so that they may be in accordance with our fantasies. Or as Lacan might say, with the primordial fantasy that conditions how we desire.

We know that need (say hunger) becomes coupled with a vocal demand (the infant cries when she is hungry) and that the satisfaction of that need as a result of the demand brings with it the concept of love – love becomes the satisfaction of my needs due to a demand placed on the other to help me survive. There can be enough food, but there can never be enough love.

The circus artist wants us to love him. In exchange for the risks, the dangers, the spectacular feats, all he wants in return is approval, applause, adoration. Is this his food, what keeps him going, what helps him survive and not give up and die? He performs a double twisting back somersault to a safe landing. He turns to us and opens his arms. It is both a sign that the trick is over, cueing us to respond, indicating that it is our "turn", but it is also the sign of an invitation of an embrace. We fill his arms with applause, with sound. We are his voltage, this mirror he turns to in order to receive back what he has sent out – the ideal-ego, the image of perfection and complete mastery, seen in the infantile mirror stage but which does not correspond to the chaotic reality of an, as yet, un-coordinated infantile body. For Lacan, this relationship to image, as opposed to position, or place/role within a structure is Imaginary. And yet he says that it is only love that will force *jouissance* (which is of the order of the real) to condescend to desire, which is symbolic. What does this say of love then?

1983

Two rows of twenty-five iron beds with an aisle in between: stacks of white sheets at their heads, names at the foot, cupboard, Bible, stool. Chaos of cock-flashing, wrestling and spitting, laughing, swearing and hitting; they jump on the beds, swing from the rafters, show off their new pubes and stiff bouncy shafters. They wank and they hoot playing at buggery, overturning the beds of those destined to nerdery. All he can do is sit on the edge and wonder how well his mum thought this out 'cos there is no doubt he is in his own personal hell.

Past the cubicles, urinals and rows of porcelain sinks are the slippery white showers monitored by the priests. He is in the wrong place, he is not made the same; not quite the right shade; a thin, smooth slice of night amidst bulging, bristling males whose skin glows like the day.

He lives in constant fear that they will attack, so when they come near he simply goes slack. It'll hurt less that way for the working-class fairy boy to be the limp object of their daily joy: first as tragedy but then as farce as he learns the escape routes quick, to hear the rhythm of a room. Stick-out ears quiver at the pulse of conversation, shiver-skin signals the shift that might trap him or constrain him.

So soon they never catch him, these pale beautiful predators chasing the cinnamon-skinned impersonator. He is out before their plan can hatch, in the panicked euphoria of adrenalin he thinks much faster than they can act. So, with each step up the ladder as he gets nearer to being like them their goal gets clearer to drag him down again to his knees, to the gutter, to the hole they are digging him, so he doesn't clutter their pristine white space with his big 'ole lips and the trace of charcoal on his face.

1984

What must it be like to be so white: to look down on the world from such a great height as if it was all yours, and there he is, down there hiding in plain sight, an innocent soon to be turned to spite.

So, he creates what will be the greatest show of his life. Learns to be a man he does not want to be with a magical cloak of lies he's rehearsed so many times he can perform it in his sleep. And though his parody of a man is only skin deep it is enough to keep them at bay. Until he realizes there might be another way.

If he can't make them truly believe his is something he is not, then why not be make-believe full stop.

If the belonging he needs is to be forever beyond him, then beyond belief is just what he'll become then.

1986

The Cathedral where they file into Mass every Sunday is the highest of the spaces overseen by the monks. Surveilled by the Saints studded along the columns and witnessed by Apostles, Cherubs and golems, the early morning sun swirls like opiated water in the stained-glass windows above the Holy altar. Spirals of incense from burning, bright bronze bowls wafts over the boys who are praying for their souls. Here he feels the most intense, flung up far out high into space. Kneeling he breathes out a hymn filled with praise, but it is him, there, the boy with blue eyes, unruly hair anointed by God's sun, broad shoulders and kind smile that makes him truly undone.

This is what really sends him down to his knees, breathless to pray: "Why make something so beautiful and put it so very far away?"

Falling in love – a utopian uroboros

Circus is an amorous discourse.

F(r)iction.

It started with affect. Not emotion, feeling or sensation, but that intensive material called affect. It isn't something we can own because it happens too quickly for us to name and it always surprises us – we react despite ourselves. Only after can we perhaps name it as disgust or shock, but at the time it acquires an infinity (this will never change, I will always feel this way) that our minds, so often wrenched out of the body by many discourses, cannot process it.

He walked into my office and, like a rabbit in the headlights, I just stared. My breath was “caught”. “I” didn't catch my breath, my body did it for me. It was the beginning of a journey of understanding just how much my body was not mine.

In the coldest possible way, I tried to analyze the aesthetic effect he had on me, this perfect configuration of objects, the line of the lip, the colour of his eyes, the pallor of his skin, his tics etc.... In my head, I paraphrased Barthes: “Who could have put you together,” I thought, “that knew how to construct, so precisely, an image that, to me, defined the word beauty?”

When Scotty in Hitchcock's *Vertigo* finally falls in love with Judy, it is because, after training her speech, her walk and mannerisms to mimic the dead Madeleine whom he fell in love with at first sight, he finds the one thing that will spark his desire alight again – a suit. This object is not desired in itself, that would be a fetish, Scotty doesn't want sex with the suit, but it does cause desire to flow and swirl in the apartment around them. It is the last piece completing the jigsaw of *fantasy* – that scenario that allows desire to live, breath, feed and invade psychic and social space. The irony is that Judy was Madeleine all along. The Madeleine he fell for was a fake. He was set-up. Scotty fell in love with a fiction and it is this artifice, this theatrical set-up or staging that he must reconstruct to fall in love again. Perhaps this is the vertigo Scotty should have been warier of. *A suspension of disbelief.*

Desire works metonymically, the lover comes to complete, is a placeholder for, the signifier of love. He walked into my room and became the part-object that defined beauty for me, once and for (the time being) all.

I should have turned away, looked at my notes, avoided eye contact. I know my symptoms – my mouth tenses so that I can't so much smile as grimace, I blink like a butterfly in a gale, I speak either too softly or loudly and I slip all over the place, in a Freudian way. So, I decided against all the above, these tactics to repress the anxiety that beauty induces in me. I forget that Lacan said that beauty is but the mask of death. I looked him in the eye and drank. I opened up to his words, his slips, his tics, fumbles and fidgets and in doing so opened myself to the transference as an affect rather than a position. It wasn't hard then to see him as the rabbit confronted with the headlights of an approaching car. I was having an effect on him also. That was my first mistake.

When he left, I took a sharp inhale of breath because there was suddenly air again. My body needed oxygen, since the room had been crammed with a desire that had swallowed it all up. Up till then I had been smothered, suffocated, unable to move: my heart skipped a beat and then leapt into my throat, I was dizzy and out of breath, my knees felt weak, my hands trembled, from my chest an effusion of firefly hormones discharged

themselves through my veins flushing my body warm and soft and weak and silly. There, at least six clichés for depicting love at first sight.

These clichés describe affects. Things that happen to you – nose wrinkles at smell, stomach cramps and throat clenches, eyes spurt tears - before the reaction can be filled in with meaning. You leap from your seat, you cover your eyes, you grip your thigh, you shout, you applaud, you spontaneously spurt out “I love you” when the “I” had nothing to do with it. Something happens. Some *thing* happens to you, a material thing, that affects your body, your materiality. The materials of psychoanalysis, the facts of it, are such stuff as fantasy, dream, language and symptom; those things that affect the body because of its inseparability with the material consequences of having a mind. Where psychoanalysis and the philosophy of vital materialism meet is the place where we understand how impersonal affect can be, how it has so little to do with the “I” and its symbolic desires about where and how that “I” should be positioned within the social realm.

Fantasy scenarios are always waiting to happen, waiting for this one small piece, this tiny invisible object to light the dormant fuel and set the place on fire and suck up all the air; to get the engines of the unconscious churning and producing and spurting their flammable, enflaming, toxic and intoxicating images into everyday reality. Be calm, analysis teaches you, you are not in control, you are in the passenger seat, you are most certainly not the one driving, so you might as well learn how to make the most of it.

His transference: erotic, child-like, admiring, seductive, star struck, infatuated.

If transference is fake, if in the analytic setting it is allowed to go its course, as if in a safely bordered playground where unresolved loves and hatreds of the past get to flirt, fuck and fight it out, it is nonetheless true in a felt way - it makes you feel, it stirs those old passions and aggressions, jealousies, loves and desires for revenge. So far so circus. You act them out with words since the couch restrains the drive from expressing itself where it wants, in action. Some say that transference love is truer and more powerful than “real” or “actual” love, which is perhaps why the analyst is warned against taking it to heart, taking it personally. My second mistake waiting to happen.

In circoanalysis I did not enter into the studio with the artist to see their work. This is where I drew the line so that the therapy could deal with their unconscious symbolic attachments to various others and finally to circus as big Other. To be in the studio would have been to get caught in the thrall of their spectacular, imaginary productions, to feel the pull of their demand for complicity and approval, to fall in love with their seductive lures rather than remain intimately detached so as to help them work through the mystery of their desire, which is symbolic not imaginary.

It was a line I had been waiting to cross.

During my doctoral studies, I made frequent analogies to actual psychoanalysis. Here, studio participation would have been tantamount to watching the analysand make love to the partner they spoke about in analysis and to give them an interpretation on their love-making. Circoanalysis stayed on the couch where the motility of the drive was inhibited and was forced to emerge in (or beneath) the word. If the action in psychoanalysis was sex, the action in Circoanalysis was circus.

The Category error.

The next evening, weak from an infatuated mind and unable to master or resist the counter-transference: erotic, loving, paternal, proud, seduced, dazzled I ventured over that line and invited him into the studio to

develop a rope practice with me. I phrased it like a good rhetorician or a seasoned seducer might have, leaving plenty of room for refusal and in doing so no room at all. By playing it down I raised it up. In order to be close to him, to collapse the distance between my seat of power and the couch, I gave him an offer it would have been foolish for him to refuse. Unethical with distinction? The "professor" image was the one thing separating us but also the one thing that set desire in motion, it was a key to the fantasy we inserted each other into. Fantasy is that scene wherein you are desired. My desire-enabling fantasy had been known to me for some time, it just had never been so completely synchronized with someone else's. And so, inhibition, one of the reasons why middle-class Westerners, who can afford it, go into analysis in the first place, was suddenly not an issue. And why? Because it wasn't desire asphyxiating me in that hour, it was the blind, wordless, persistent, dumb, ignorant, lizard-brain pressure of the drive. I am about to attempt the wrongest thing possible. It feels so right; it feels like my only option. I am the bloke in *Death in Venice*, I am in *Lolita*, *Oleanna*, I am the worst cliché. In the schematic of imaginary, symbolic, real, the drives are real. They correspond to the Freudian id. The source of fucking things up.

The imaginary element was clear: I was fascinated by his image. That word includes within it something of the made-up, fake, mistaken. I was fixated with his aesthetics that dazzled me into confusing form and content which Lacan describes as the misrecognition of the mirror phase and of the ego: you see yourself as whole in the mirror and think you are in control of your actions that you are identical with what you see, "that's me" you say. The fact that it's more complicated than that is why he calls it misrecognition. His flirtations were flickers in the mirror of my own need for approval. So far so circus.

The symbolic positioning of authority was sexy and transgressive which signaled desire. There was affect, something unavailable to signification or description or understanding, something that could not be explained or even given a cause, because it was only visible by its effects, and that, I would say, was the real of it, which is to say the drive of it, there, in that room. I was being driven against my better judgement. And I wanted to deal with the drive, I wanted to deal with that body; three actually – mine, his, the body of the rope. So, the line was no longer horizontal, drawn between the chair and the couch, but vertical - a rope - and we would be closer but there would still be a line which we would not be able to cross. Pure sublimation on my part: a way to deal with drive via a more appropriate, cultural means. Until, that is, we got horizontal in another way.

So, there were two spaces; the Professor's room, where I attended to his words and gave him a ground upon which to dance his ideas, and the rope studio where our practice involved my body becoming a platform for him to play upon, where I could test my ability to support. So, the rope became another playground for the transference.

Soon he offered the possibility of a third space, a space of friendship, which he defined as a secret space, one hidden from view. It became a space demarcated by secret gestures, glances and innuendos during the practice, where all forms of fantasy and identification fermented and frothed. It took ten weeks and the end of his position as student for that space to materialize as a concrete platform upon which to explore a third, other kind of practice, in a third, more intimate room.

(Cr)ar(f)t.

There is a cluster of signifiers - virtuosity, skill, risk, strength - and practices - aerial, equilibristic, manipulation and acrobatics - quilted together by a central master signifier - circus. Remove circus, what happens? What would they mean, exactly? Liberty, freedom, equality, praxis, action are empty concepts if that central position is vacant, say if it isn't filled with democracy or feminism or Marxism etc. Ropes, trapezes, balls, balances are also up for grabs until they are pinned down by circus, given a ground to plant themselves into and grow from. They are not inseparable from it.

So, to the idea of two men, a rope and the practice that brings them together. Although still a performative practice, what would happen if circus were not the nodal point it referred back to? What if something else were at the centre, or what if you left the centre open for a time and let the practice define what best should occupy that place? The place of S1 in the schema of Lacan's discourse theory?

Rope duets involve knots. The base (or catcher, the person who holds the flyer) winds themselves into a stable position so that they are stable enough to manipulate or allow the flyer (the person who does the tricks) to perform flips, slides, twists, drops and twirls. This disengages one half of the body, it is fixed, locked in, so the other half, usually the torso can pull, grip, glide, enlist, stop and unfurl the flyer into spectacular positions and sequences. Only half the body is in play and the base must remain in the same position. In analysis this would amount to the analyst never shifting, never allowing the game to be played at its full stakes.

On the couch he described me as his rock which he knew would always be there for him, while he flew around the room like a little bird. The gravity of this rock pulled him back time after time to himself, to what mattered, but he spent a good deal of time fluttering from subject to subject distracting himself as best he could. At some point in the session he knew he would have to land. This dynamic helped us establish the first rule of our practice, that the base should not be locked, there should always be the possibility that the base could slip, let-go, weaken, slide or fall. The base might not always be there for him. No rocks, no knots.

Why did this seem like a relatively new proposition? Because it is so difficult, on the rope, to base a flyer without being in a knot. Gravity, and common sense says that you shouldn't try it, it isn't reliable. The base should not move, the base should be a fixed platform, a fixed position; there are, after all, enough variables within the interaction of torso and flyer for mistake, for negotiation and split-second adjustments, why complicate matters? This would seem to me to be the point of artistic research; to complicate, to problematize, to challenge assumptions that fix *(cr)ar(f)t* practices into stable, fixed positions. So, when the analysand starts to get used to a position that the analyst takes the analytic work stops, the analyst must shift, throwing the analysand off guard with regards to what the analyst wants. If desire is desire of the other, this procedure helps propel the question "What do I want?" for the client will forever be asking "What does he want from me?"

I started by hanging from my hands on the rope. Then he hung from my feet; "10%, 40%, 80%, 100%" he said as he gradually applied more of his weight to mine. I began holding 70 kilos of my own weight from my hands on a rope whose logic asked my hands to slide down and I ended up holding 130. This was how we started the practice. The wraps, winds, knots and binds that allow spectacular falls and amazing partner choreography all obscure, I thought, the dramatic simplicity of the straight line of the rope and the straight downward tendency of the body against gravity. I wanted to expose this, the basic conditions of the practice, before it gets caught up in the demands of speed, movement and convolution. I wanted to unconceal the signifiers at play on the ground of the practice before it flew, flung, flipped and faked falls.

Freud said that life, full of its desires and playful, creative distractions, was merely a detour to death. He was talking about the death drive, in his mind the tendency for all energy to seek a prior state, entropy or the previous experience of not-being. For him, this was a tendency of the human condition, to seek the zero-level of excitation, to be at peace, to not fight, to not crave. He describes it as beyond pleasure, since the pleasure principle denotes rather the tendency to be in homeostasis, balance rather than zero-level-nothing. The aerialist fights this tendency of gravity to bring her back to the ground yet at the same time courts the possibility of not-being there at all in the process. The knot distracts us, aerialist and seated spectator alike, from that tendency, from the potential of the fall.

A potential is not the same as a possibility, it has non-envisioned results which may not end but which may proliferate. Potential contains many things and a possibility has an end. The potential for falling opens many paths, the possibility of falling contains only a few ends and one of them is a dead one.

If the craft maintains that we erase the possibility of falling, art reminds us that the potential should remain. There is potential in falling, there is potency in failing within a form that privileges mastery as its guiding principle. And this produces a strange distortion to the signifier “virtuosity”. Since we were not interested in signaling things – this is about something, this represents something, this tells something – we produced no signs consciously, we were too immersed in the difficulty of the practice to think about what it meant. But there were parallel processes happening, one at a level of personal desire i.e. our relationship as rope partners and another at the level of the signifier. We spoke of holding, supporting, bearing weight, enabling, providing platforms. This triggered a writing process in me where I tried to deal with the signifiers that were at play in our play, because elements of language were being re-crafted as we worked. We were bringing unconscious materials into play and so it was only after we had done something that we understood its implications on these many levels. This afterwards is where I began to write. This afterwards would also be where we continued to play together in other, less arty but perhaps more crafty ways.

We took a practice embedded in circus, the rope, and took it out of circus, its comfort zone. He had limited experience of circus, being a dancer, but he knew a lot about what the body could do with an other. We followed our bodies instead of the paths circus had laid out. We experienced intimacy in a place where, really, it’s very hard to be intimate – the harsh necessities of survival are more often the concern. It was like being in bed with each other and in bed is where you start to work unconsciously, where you produce what, in psychoanalysis really matters. It’s one of the places where the deliberation of the waking mind relaxes and gives way to liberation. The possibilities of waking life that have several determined outcomes—I could do this, go there, find that, meet him, choose her – give way to potentials that have unimagined or even better, unimaginable consequences.

So, we didn’t know the consequences of beginning this difficult practice. All we knew was that we were student and “professor” with all the symbolic positioning that this entailed, with all the laws that the symbolic ushers in to prevent *jouissance*. And yet *jouissance* was what drove this. Not just by breaking the rules of circus, or working outside the rules of circus, but by bending the rules of the University. We had begun something illicit, in full view of those, students and trainers alike, that subscribed absolutely to the specific code of practice engineered to produce a certain legitimate circus artefact. *Jouissance*, like a fingerprint, does not need approval and *jouissance* for me, has always been at the heart of circus training and practice, its drive, its real, until the circus itself, as law, or the conscious part of the superego, demands it to conform to its dictates.

Craft Fiction: when you make fiction out of the body.

I was on my way up when I met him. The situation was already difficult but I'd gotten used to that, bearing myself was just something I'd gotten accustomed to. A precarious situation, not much room to manoeuvre, easy to fall if your concentration would slip. Already heavy, perhaps because, alone, there's no-one to take up the slack when you tire, no-one to keep you going if you lose the will to continue, no-one to hold you when you can't bear yourself anymore.

We meet in the middle, me going up, he coming down. Impasse. I can't go up, he can't continue coming down, someone has to budge, we're stuck. He has to go through me to get where he needs to go. I need to make space for him, I need to make an opening, let him in, to allow him to get on with whatever it is he's doing. For me to be on my way. This seems obvious enough from my point of view. He clearly has a different take on things when he rests on me, gives me his weight, and relaxes for a moment, so that I can no longer make the opening for him to continue. Evidently he needs this, but do I? Now that the weight I bear has doubled there is a risk of falling where there was none before. He did not try to negotiate himself around me to continue his journey, he decided to stay a while. I decide, in turn, to help him understand the position I'm in, so I make the opening, with great effort, so he can feel that I am supporting the both of us and there is a very real danger that if he doesn't get on with his mission and let me get on with mine that we may fall. I want him to know that he is welcome to be on his way. This is where the other baffles me. Perhaps that's why I've been alone so long.

He pushes me away, into an even more precarious place and it should have seemed strange, after all I was trying to help him, but it feels.... wonderful, or my body feels it is doing something wonderfully unnecessary with his help (since up till then it had all been about necessity.) I feel a bit freer, actually even beautiful, which is not something I am concerned with, on my own, climbing, dealing, coping, bearing myself. I feel freer from my own weight even though I am bearing more than before, freer from the constraints of my own position, from the habitual, functional paths I take. There is space.

It's over quickly, it's quite unsustainable this position we find because even though it gives a certain joy it is a difficult joy, it is difficult to create the sensation of flying in circumstances that dictate that all you should do is fall. So, the space collapses again and we find ourselves crammed into a small space, face to face, though not really able to look each other in the eye for this would mean being with, seeing a person and the situation is too fraught with the possibility of fatality to consider something as luxurious as personality, identity or subjectivity. We exist there purely as genus-similar, we have life in common, nothing else. We are things that have life, we are not-yet people. That's what we can take care of here: life hanging by a thread.

But being so close and having been so alone, with only the space around me for company, the heat of his body and the sensation of his breath and the possibility of some softness, some wetness in the harsh environment of my world, relaxes my tensed muscles for a moment. For a second I feel I am about to lose my grip. He was going down, not falling down, I don't want to be the cause of his downfall, so I bring myself back to myself, I have not got the strength to allow his heat, his softness, his wetness to distract me. So, I let him go rather than stay in that position where I might have felt less like a mere thing trying merely to persist. He goes his way down and I go my way up. I hope we meet again and I hope I will be stronger next time to do more than just survive or persist, to try not to fall.

Craft from F(r)iction.

The stories we tell about ourselves change constantly with each new event. The past changes, key actors change from villains to heroes, events are uncoloured and recoloured and with this our picture of the potential future is altered. We make life up as we go along.

I said I would never perform again yet here I was, after a few weeks of training, planning to create a piece again. It was true though, that this piece was not something to be performed, it was merely going to be produced in front of other people. This meant that it should not be reproduced, or represented, or repeated as these were the conditions of art (re)production that made me leave the stage and become a Professor. I had felt unconvincing, not because I needed more technique, but because I couldn't believe it anymore, this repetition, reproduction, representation. I was faking it. How was I going to fool anyone if I could not fool myself? And why did the word "fool" suddenly crop up in my vocabulary; was it because of its association with "trick", the circus trick? The action on the rope would need to be real then, there would have to be the force of necessity there, and this would be to return to the real textures of circus practice, the ones that give a dose of *jouissance* – grit, gristle, burn and blister – so often smoothed over and planed down to a tacky sheen so that no-one has to confront the palpably resistant materials we are composed of and interact with in the world.

Our relationship was not polished, it was rough, granular, abrasive. As it progressed I wondered why we would Photoshop this partnership, paint over the grain of our materials to show something smooth and uniform and perfectly functioning. That would be a lie.

Words emerged from a practice and a craft developed out of a fiction, out of the textures in the space rubbing between us, mediated by this rope woven tight of frictive strands. We started to spin tales, that we kept to ourselves - except in moments of (Freudian) slippage - trying to weave our fantasies together, to see if they would knit, hold us in place within the same story. While improvising (story-telling?) on the rope together we were not just second-guessing the other body's next position, path or action, we were also second-guessing each other's next symbolic position, intention or desire. Flirting with each other in a dangerous place.

These were the materials in the space, what we were working with – bodies, rope, fantasy, desire – not ideas, and certainly not knot ideas. There was to be no allowance for stability, for being tied in and so we slipped in and out of each other's grasp and we fell and burned and bruised as the space between us continued to sizzle and fizz, to spark and spit out ever-shifting symbolic positions for us to take.

It was real enough; these textures, these intensities – the gristle as well as the glide, the stony hardness of a muscle pumped for survival as well as the moment of comfort within which a softness could emerge where there was soothe and not just scrape – these affects produced an addictive fascination. As in most addictions, there was *jouissance* here. In the moments of pain, you bear there is an intense pleasure, when your partner's weight imprints or scratches his marks on you, that will remind you of him, that you will bear as memories – bruises, cuts, blisters, burns.

I bore the memory of him, our history, on my skin and in my joints – I could have told you the story of our practice by navigating you around my body, shown you where he had travelled, where he had rested – like so many pages he had helped me to write. But away from him I felt the keen absence of his textures and what they provoked; I missed the shock of his presence, I wanted my eyes to smart again, to be dazzled, short-circuited

again. This, I thought, this is the fascination that makes one work, this scintillating enigma of the materials at hand that provokes the curiosity to find out what the material wants, thinks and does. Yes, I described him as a material, just like the rope, but he was an agential material whereas the rope was merely an actant. And I was material also, stuff re-acting or responding, a bunch of materials re-surfacing and living their own life. I accepted that control or agency was distributed across me in ways I would never fathom. He catalyzed a second order fascination with my own materiality as an artist. I fell back into my body and it rose up to catch me. And it caught me in ways that were not always pleasant. It rose up when I didn't think I needed catching. It caught me out.

It was violent with me, intrusive, invasive, it surged up through me, it filled me, extruded me in inappropriate ways, poked out into the space in ways that shamed me. It communicated with me forcefully, reminding me of itself with volume and speed and in ways too literal to be ignored. My body was taking me literally, to my word. When he took my breath away, the affect was literal not literary, when I was dazzled, I literally saw stars, like I had been knocked on the head. It produced circus affects. Months later, watching a student perform a triple somersault for the first time my throat contracted and my eyes spewed out tears. It reminded me of the tears that rose up and splashed themselves out into the open at the shock of his rejecting me, rejecting my body, when he dropped me, when he let me fall.

It should be clear by now that the story we were writing was a romance of sorts. But beneath that narrative operating in the symbolic, as desire does, was the wordless, non-metaphorical drive of my body. If the practice was real enough it was still not the real thing I was after. So, the practice was metaphorical and the symptoms of the body that were emerging were reminders that I was inhibiting what the body wanted, not inhabiting it – I woke up several times a night to dry the sweat pushing up through my pores. Sublimation was not working out so well.

We were so careful not to let each other be hurt in our practice. Circus, suddenly, was nothing at all to do with risk. I wanted the possibility of real hurt. Real flight. Of really falling.

Our fiction of falling in love, and it is always a fiction constantly being written, re-written, whether it's a short story or a nine-volume masterpiece, gave rise to a craft; the practice of falling.

We wove words around this rope; care, concern, containment, safety, support, strength, holding, handling, hanging, playing, producing, providing a platform for each other and within this something like a system of values started to emerge. Like most love stories what was really being written was some sort of speculative Utopian manifesto, which needs to exclude a set of unwanted, inconvenient elements in order to make sense as a closed, exclusive system. Fantasy needs to foreclose a bit of the real, screen it off, in order to operate, that's why it enables us to desire. Perhaps the Utopian fantasy is what drives the fictions of both love and art, which may account for our fascination with both. Those excluded elements are what, eventually, would make this an unsuccessful romantic novel, but there was still something Utopian in the practice, still something about love. Something that might lift, I thought, utopian fiction off the page and into reality.

A writing practice.

A blot for the words the body sloughs.

I got too close to him and I got burnt.

Things fall by the wayside in a research process – movements, ideas, images, equipments – they get dropped. The writing process was a way of making sure they survived. Perhaps this text is like dead skin rubbed off against the rope, him. Perhaps the words in artistic research writing are like scabs falling away when the time is right, when the wounds have healed, when new skin needs to emerge and a new future can breathe.

Rope burn, for example, has an amazing life span and its journey to scab is colourful.

You slide down too fast trying to catch him and your foot lets you know it. Adrenalin, a hormone associated with survival, makes sure that it only registers as a gentle hum, the skin sounds, it sends something out, a pulse, a rhythm. Then it begins to glow because you clearly didn't hear it sing, or you simply ignored its voice and got on with other things. So, it shifted its call to another register. Now it throbs heat as cells scurry to the rescue, there is a small zone of emergency and a task force of actants need to be marshalled to repair it. The limb the skin covers is not broken so you carry on working. You cover it to not make it worse, yet you know it can only heal with the drying sting of the air. It mutates from pink to red to oozing yellowpinkred to whitish infected-looking rot. It sticks to your socks; it sucks itself like a slug to bedsheets. You hobble like an invalid, mince like a drag queen or walk bow-legged like a cowboy.

If you weren't aware of it before you are open to the world and all its magical infections, nourishing particles that act upon you every day. We are full of holes, the demarcation of our bodies being ambiguous considering how porous we are. We place a lot of attention on what comes out of those holes – words, sneezes, yawns, pukes, poop, farts and a whole range of fluids – especially when we didn't mean to excrete them, like that spontaneous "I love you", that shameful puke or pant-shitting, those night sweats. There is *jouissance* here in those moments when the body asserts itself, its own satisfaction, or release of tension, without a thought for what the social body wants. But those holes also take in and ingest the world in many more subtle ways than we can be aware of.

Then the "bacon" stage, a smooth leathery pink texture. After that comes the scab which never manages to do its job because you are constantly harassing it by climbing the rope. If the symptom is like an itch, then the scratching is where the enjoyment is found. If you scratch till you bleed and the wound opens up again then that would be a good description of getting scraps of *jouissance*.

Half formed scabs drop off every now and again. Circus artists are proud of their wounds. They are metonyms of practice, marks of desire. Perhaps they try to sustain them as long as possible, perhaps that's the point of the practice, the proof of commitment. In this way, they become symbolic. Which would make it, I suppose, a masochistic practice, because the never-quite-healing wound renders you partially disabled and so you are always struggling against something and never getting complete satisfaction. That's a neat way of describing the drive, never getting complete satisfaction which is consequently a neat way of describing masochism which both Lacan and Freud see as primary to our constitution as subjects.

So, scabs tried to grow. As the wounds of a love affair tried to heal they re-opened each time I saw him. Cuts, bruises, burns happen when you are dropped from a great height, which is often where infatuation puts you. One tends to put the safety net into storage when you open yourself up to that event of falling in love, when

you decide to take the leap. So, words fall onto the page like scabrous accumulations, signs of the process of healing. They break up and scatter across the journal to be organized, fixed, ordered, so that the affect can be indexed, re-configured in order for there to be a future again. Love is infinite in the moment; “I will always feel this way”, because “I have never felt like this before” you say. So, writing is both a curative practice and an archival method of not wasting what was experienced along the way, of registering the excess, so that the process can leave a trace somewhere, even though the process may well leave its echoes, ghostly, subliminally and perhaps impalpably in the artefact. The paper, or computer screen collects, absorbs, blots this excess falling off, falling away and somehow fixes it, like an old fashioned photographic process. A tear cried, in the research process, no longer falls uselessly to the writing table, to get wiped away as some unusable surplus production. It lands rather on paper, blossoms, grows, spreads outward and takes its shape, its space. It stops, it dries and makes a permanent stain which you can go back to and read. You can say “I was there, that happened. One day I will use that as material.”

The scab and the tear are the textures excluded in Utopian fiction.

LoveCraft:

When we finally made it into the third room our actions there choreographically mimicked the paths we took on the rope, except that the tangible twine-thing between us that mediated our public practice was replaced by another, more private material. This is how thoughts, affects, emotions and fantasies can be said to be material if they engender and are implicitly woven into such an explicitly material practice, or craft, such as love-making. I’ve said earlier that this rope thing was *petit objet a*, the object cause of desire; it gets desire moving but it is not the thing desired. It gets a whole fantasy apparatus in motion that includes the spectators as essential parts of the machinery in the factory of desire that is the circus.

Žižek’s example of the *objet a*, is the old crone who functions as chaperone to the young girl and her lover; the chaperone is not the desired object in the room, but she gets the lovers in a state of excitation and desire. She makes the situation sexy. What happened when we took away the rope/chaperone and performed the same entwining of limbs?

Dramaturgically the circus act follows the shifts, negotiations, calls and responses, dynamic pulses and climatic eruptions of the sexual act. The only difference is that a lot of people are watching. When the Sailor on the rope does a big trick, we forget he is a sailor because of the realness of his action. It is just like in pornography when it sets up a fictional scenario for the actors before they get to the real of fucking which disrupts the narrative we started to follow, that short-circuits the symbolic.

I experienced the affects in the analyst’s room and the rope studio as just such a series of short-circuits, dysfunctions of understanding, reason- rattling moments that reminded me of the effects that circus has on the spectator.

I thought then that the Borromean knot of Real, Symbolic, Imaginary might be applied to the circus act wherein it

- is imaginary, to do with aesthetics, identification, the mirror stage and misrecognition (i.e. both parties are momentarily fooled, caught in the fantasy), call and response (the feedback circuit of trick/applause/bigger trick/bigger applause)
- finds moments of affective or kinaesthetic empathy where the real erupts in the form of *jouissance*, (as a

form of satisfaction that opens the border between pleasure and pain) moments of dazzle, disorientation, delightful distress

- occurs within some symbolic frame where we know (not always consciously) our position in relation to the Other (Circus, capital C).

The dazzle did not happen in that third room. There was something missing, someone, the chaperone, the students in the circus hall, my fellow teachers or the rope – in other words the props and scenographies of fantasy. What happened in that room was symbolic, not real as I had hoped, it was coordinated or choreographed by a series of social or cultural vectors, by our transferences trying to get a purchase on reality. They should have remained in the transferential playground of the analyst's room and the training space (see above my three mistakes). The rope choreography remained, a rapid improvisation of grips, grasps and convolutions, clings and unbindings, attachments and uncouplings, calls and responses. It was a circus fuck. But we also found also a vocabulary of sliding, gliding, spilling, swelling, swerving, wriggling and giggling. There was no real friction, only symbolic fiction playing itself out.

There was more than just a small element of horror in these meetings and the best horror movies rely as much on anxiety as fear. Anxiety is the psychoanalytic affect par excellence, says Lacan, and it is *not without an object*. He says this because anxiety, unlike fear, is normally figured as having no reasonable or concrete cause, it is uncanny – unheimlich, un-home-like – its source cannot be placed. For Lacan, it does indeed have an object – the absence of *absence itself* as an object. This means that when the possibility of absence as the lack which funds desire, is itself absent or missing, anxiety arises to signal that *jouissance*, the affect that accompanies a drive satisfaction, is too close to desire – that is to say perhaps they are in the same room. Fantasy (the rope, circus) functions as a screen between the two. A mother who loves and cares too much for her infant may provoke anxiety – (s)mothering too much may prevent the infant from having breathing space. Hysterical, phobic and obsessive (read for this “normal”) defences, mechanisms and rituals are, for example, measures to prevent *jouissance* getting too close to desire, in order for the subject to keep on desiring. Too much desire leads to death. The drive should not be satisfied, it should not find its object, it should circle around the void where the object is thought to reside, expend some its energy and return back to the subject's body to start the circuit anew. This is the economy of addiction – a little *jouissance* is had but total satisfaction is out of bounds, so it must be repeated and this is why *jouissance* is an economical function of the death drive. It should be given just a little satisfaction so that we can continue to desire. In this way, the drive (along with *jouissance* and the fundamental fantasy) is essentially masochistic. When drive and desire get too close, when the fantasy is no longer there to mask the horror of the void, then we experience the anxious, delirious vertigo of having finally attained what we really want and discovering that it is actually just a fantasy, that it is groundless. We then understand that desire, so fundamental in keeping us going, pushing us forward or toward objects, projects and achievements is not based in anything remotely justifiable, concrete or even ethical. It can give us no guarantee. The ultimate conclusion of which is, there is no Other justifying the authority of the Other – whether this Other is the legal system, if you are a lawyer, the Circus, the analyst or language itself. In the simplest terms, there is no God beyond God, no other authority before which God must justify Himself to. The Other is ideology at its purest. In that third room the fantasy that I had never managed to stage successfully, the scenario within which there had always been a piece missing, was finally complete. And instead of anxiety, there was just the disappointment of

having been mistaken.

The transgressive frisson, the naughtiness, the law breaking, the “fuck-you big Other, I follow my desire to the end”, fizzled out the moment all those prohibitive, castrative conditions were removed. I experienced *jouissance* in not being able to have sex with him, in only partially satisfying the drive through this mediating object of the rope as a way of sustaining desire, the rope as a circuitous, repetitious journey around a void. These sexual moments with him were just not it, this was not the thing, the real thing. In the real we were on the rope. In the symbolic, I was in love. In the imaginary, I was fascinated. Something new had to be made, some new weave of three strands, after we failed at “making” the fantasy of passionate love last.

Circus is a fantasy scenario in a vulgar sense, it portrays a dream-like, magical world. It is also a fantasy in the psychoanalytic sense – a scenario that separates desire from drive. This scenario operates like a projection screen in a movie theatre; desire flickers on the screen in the form of super-heroic mastery, seduction and trickery but behind it all the non-human, persistent, “unthinking” or un-desiring, non-choice making, “in-agential”, texturally gristly, oily, boney mechanisms of materiality are kept safe from view so that we can enjoy. As Žižek remarks, film (or circus) teaches us how to desire – which in his eyes are the propaganda material for contemporary ideology par excellence. In the geography of this space the spectators’ gaze, as much as the theatre, cinema or circus tent is an essential part of that fantasy.

We could include the bedroom, that third space within the geography of this fantasy - “No-one was watching us when we made love.” We know that this, after Foucault, is a lie. Someone is always watching.

The latent horror of the scenario was that the (counter) transference was about authority, a paternal one – homosexual incest. Pederasty. It doesn’t get more Greek than that - Socrates and his lover boys caught up in the romantic *philia* of learning, lovers of knowledge philosophizing in the bedroom, a friendship based on erotic education. But also, the horror of transgressing some boundaries between inside and outside and the wetness, the swerving, skidding, slippery interplay of two bodies unable to catch each other, to hold each other. It was not a surprise when he let me go, let me fall, when he dropped me.

From this we had to negotiate, with difficulty, a new space, free from the roles of pretend analyst/analysand, the imaginary demands of circus and the symbolic narrative of romance. The knots unraveled and we were left with the strands. Something new had to be crafted. Lacan remarks that only love can make *jouissance* condescend to desire. And this is where the Utopian fiction of love and work could properly begin.

Love Working:

The symptom is the somatic return of an unsymbolized repressed object. On the couch these emerge as the truths of the subject, even if to a cool mind they appear as hot-headed delusions. In analysis, they can assume a more beneficial configuration – one can learn to use the symptom, rather than be used by it. On the rope, our actions were analogously repressed objects finding their way to symbolization. We want to fuck but we do this instead. The process of working through those actions, working those actions over by dedicated, conscious repetition freed the drive from its itchy, scratchy, scabby symptomatic coffin and allowed for a less *jouissance*-tinged enjoyment. No fuck fantasy left, let’s rather then get on with the work.

At the level of the craft we were able to enjoy, produce, explore and articulate new and more imaginative responses to each other. We were freer to enact the drive (or speak our minds). The gliding, curling and sliding textures of the bedroom unfurled within our movements. We no longer moved from one position to another, we

rather shifted fluidly through them since we were free from their symbolic weight. Fucking had improved our practice. It caused the textural paths of our rope practice to smoothen, soften and we became slippery. Our bodies had learned something.

At the level of the personal I experienced, first the depression that usually accompanies the end of analysis(or the end of a PhD) – the dull grey of fantasy-free life, the structural equivalent of alcohol-free wine; same taste, same form, same circumstance but none of the kick. What if we don't really care for the form, taste or situation – but just the kick? Then the object is never really the aim of drive, only the satisfaction it can achieve from mistaking it, missing it, circling it. He was never really my aim.

I had never claimed that I came to the end of my analysis. Now, I realised that perhaps I had done that final stage of work in a different way. One of the hallmarks of the end of analysis is the traversing of the fantasy. That is to say going through the screen: from desire to drive. The analyst is finally in the place of *objet a*, the real, without the comforting veil of fantasy that gives the relation (transference) some fake, transitory substance. Reading Kristeva helped me appreciate that this depression that ensues from the new, kick-free life precedes the resumption of passing, playful illusions; to be momentarily enjoyed, to be understood as fleeting and in the same swoop allowing meaning to have its proper fluid, processual and contingent place. Fantasy now returns to psychic life but no longer as a cause for complaint, dissatisfaction or source of dogma. Now it provides energy for another kind of artifice, the art, the play of living.

I began to experience fantasy or illusion as a material that could be worked with differently, impersonally. I had traversed it, found the drive on the other side and returned to words, that is, desire. I worked every day with that pen holding it as if it were as heavy as him, weighing my words with the same care as I held him, transcribing the fantasies you have read in this chapter so that the power in them would not be wasted, as *jouissance* invariably has to be (*jouissance* isn't useful, it just has to be expended, spilled, ejected). Kristeva encouraged me to restore to illusion its full therapeutic and epistemological value and put it to work in its capacity as a tool.

Our work was generating a respect for how the other fills space and how you share it with them. Here, care was more nuanced than looking after each other on the rope. We had to be careful with each other in many more ways because we had shared space in different ways; disabled vertically on a rope, limited horizontally on a bed and backwards/forwards on a shared psychic platform known as the transference. All three are dangerous, difficult, exciting spaces. Our work on the rope now was informed by the work in those other spaces and the system of values springing up began to coalesce around the notion of conjoined agency brought about by the difficult, dangerous exciting materials of the situation. The words rolled out into the space more like a developing, transient manifesto than a fiction or an autobiography.

Articles of Faith

1.

I am in trouble, in need of your help. I may not know exactly your position and you may not know mine exactly, I'm not sure how you can help me but I know that you must; for both our sakes. You know this, not because you are telepathic, but because you know that I am a platform for your survival. You cannot help me if you feel my weakness, if you take it on to relieve me. I asked for help not sympathy. To help me you have to be stronger than you are just now in order to do something that may hurt you. You'll have to calculate this quickly because I'm loosing my grip. If you do save me, then it will be from an injury far greater than you sustained in the act of saving me.

2.

You trust me to hold on you when things get tough. I don't, however, trust myself to the same extent. Where you feel 100% secure, I only feel 75% in the faith that I can live up to that. We do not feel the same thing. This is not some form of magical fusion, that's a fantasy. It is an ongoing split-second negotiation. Our safety, enjoyment and the achievement of our personal aims in that shared, fraught, disabling space depends on an absolute faith in the values that we have noticed emerging since we started doing this together – care, concern, support, holding, love, shared space, absolute presence etc...

3.

For the action to work we have to have faith in those truths or values specific to our practice. These are not fixed, because we tried that and it didn't work. We can't just repeat, because we are not in the same place, we are changed and so the site where we meet today will impinge on us differently to yesterday. It will do something unexpected, we both know that and this is what gives the work its enjoyable urgency. These values we find ourselves having need refining, day to day as we find ourselves more and more fully present. Love is urgently, as art perhaps should be, transformational. When we repeat an action without that urgency, that presence, that commitment, it feels as though the material has died, settled into an answer, that we are merely carrying it like a dead weight, a lump of knowledge, rather than being it, being the material transforming so that tomorrow we'll have a new question to deal with. There is no faking this, repeating what worked last night because you will know I am only following a script, that a part of me is somewhere else, trying to remember the answers.

4.

If we can speak of giving each other pleasure, it is in the sense that I attempt to give you a platform upon which you can experience and develop qualities I see latent in you – you are strong, light, beautiful, easy to bear, kind, considerate, playful - qualities that I think are part of your journey of expansion, your self-esteem. I strive to be this platform for your psychic and physical health. I enjoy seeing your face light up when one of these qualities has widened its scope, made your body more expansive, capable.

When I feel solid, supportive, understanding, clear, when I feel enabling, powerful and generous without effacing my own needs it is because you work hard to help me succeed in experiencing myself in these ways that you have noticed are important for my happiness. You like seeing me excited when I become a new, stronger scaffold to

support your playfulness. The communication between us is a moment of grace that we have realised is the only guarantor of gracefulness. Grace is that assistance that enables us to love widely and unselfishly. We are in pursuit of graceful pleasures.

Circus Taxes

When we don't do this, when we don't think of each other's pleasure, when we don't keep present the idea that we feel different things, it all fucks up and someone, inevitably, will fall. There is no disgrace or shame here. No talk of impotency. The disappointment is mutual, the failing is mutual and so is the work to prevent each other from falling. We accept the part we play in the scenario of the other's pleasure and success. We have faith that the other has us in mind.

The rope in this scenario is a potential Utopia-producing space, Utopia being a not-yet- here, a to-be- aimed for. Utopia is a response to a situation that needs correction, is a projection into the future of hope or desire – my Freudian typing slip here was “protection”, as if Utopia protects potential as if Utopia protects hope. In a difficult situation we are forced to commit, to be faithful to an idea, at once relational and aesthetic. This idea is brimming with ethical decisions to be taken about how to share a space with another. These decisions are hard to articulate, since so much hope and desire, divergent personal interests and wishes, not to mention unconscious drives and uncontrollable affects are involved. In some way, the practice simplifies all that complexity, refines it and perhaps, in the analytic sense, purifies it. Why? Because it is a situation of crisis, ongoing, intractable. There is no solution here, only an ethics of persistence.

Another hallmark of the end of analysis is the decision to become an analyst oneself, or at least to aspire to the desire of the analyst. This is the purified desire that seeks, as its object, the other's reconciliation with her/his unconscious desire, freedom to play with fantasy rather than be played by it by helping the client construct a knowledge of it. It is cathartic (purifying) to be released from those constant pressures, forces (*constant Kraft*) of the drive by the dissolution of the knots that prevent their flow into productive sublimations, real attachments, productions, actions. This is the drive of psychoanalysis, what makes it a craft in a material sense and an art in a creative sense in that, with each new uncluttered unconscious, we can continue make it up as we go along, just a little bit better.

*Are you still here? I thought you were bored,
wanting a change, something more "real",
something more plain.*

*I'm sorry. Did I mis-hear? I quote "It's not enough
being in awe." So I widen my range here, we see
how it feels to change the rules of this game.*

*Was a little queer; I float and you sit transfixed
hoping I won't fall, that's not a fair game, not the
best deal, not for me, not anymore.*

*I'm trying not to be fantastic, to grab your
attention, so right now I feel like an hysteric acting
out to an obsessive sat there with anal retention.*

*So I'm trying to slow it down, be less sexy,
Leave gaps, less tricky orgasmatration
So you can make some links
Perhaps something might sink
Into that lapse
Of concentration
That some have called boredom.*

*But you keep your thoughts pretty close to your
chest
I admit that's how I liked you best,
Only able to express feelings through applause
Now my cards are on the table, to talk about our
dealings, and how they were perhaps flawed
Over my 20 year addiction to you.
I know, I oughta told you sooner.
You
My nightly fix, enabler, torturer, my savior.*

*But then you stopped calling
I got bored of never falling, never ever dropping the
ball.*

Am I way off here? Or am I correct

*In thinking you got bored of me being so perfect?
So refined in my impressive actions
Designed to cause you spontaneous physical
reactions
In this co-dependant choreography,
Of client and commodity.*

*Let me say it again to hit the point home.
Client and commodity.
Me bending over backwards to please.
I really ought to say it like it feels.*

*Sodomy.
Not the fun sort.*

*That's an analogy, by the way
The ology of anal.
So just for the sake of argument,
Let me explore it a little more,
Make a metaphor from the meat
To explain what I truly meant.*

*This is me spelling it out
Just in case you were in any doubt this far of the
kind of scar I'm trying to tell you that this flying
you pay for inflicts.*

*Just saying.
You're paying for it.
Paying.*

*You know you can't keep me right?
It's just that sometimes you forget about
The agreement that we didn't speak
but was set out in advance.*

*Should really be printed on the ticket:
And if I was yours to keep
Would you be so quick*

*To see
if
I
could*

be
broken
while flying,
for you.
Only asking,
'cause you insist on trying
To bend me over backwards,
to
see
if
i
would
snap.

You not the first, won't be the last
No need to grip so tight
I'm not running away.
Or...do you think I might?
You're paying.
So I'm staying.

Okay, so hold on tight
I get it.
I'm a paedo-porno-disney flick, circus of tricks
exploding in your head
A fairground ride, right here, in your make-believe
bed.

If I leave you queasy,
If I gave you vertigo,
If you thought this would be easy,
If you think you know how far I will go
If my stink is unfamiliar
Is cos you bored of the similar
Of the straight, of the pale,
Of the weight of a male.
Try the curly, the girly, the smoky rich scent
Of a boy truly bent
Out of shape
Under the weight of your

Pennies, your euros, your rupies, your cents.

So back to the meat.
You seek, I thrill, you don't speak
But I spill my guts onstage for your delight
Pour my heart out so it bloody glitters under the
bright lights
And you never
You never stay the night,
So when the lights are out,
It's just me,
Mopping this shit up.

Why did I let you?
Because you kept coming back,
For those 5 minutes, of dope on rope,
Your 5 minutes of circus crack.
I wanted to give you 8 minutes or 20, a day,
No more, plenty,
How long would you like?
How about telling me your name.
Or just stay the night.

Just 5 you say, you're fine at 5.
So that's where we're at. Just the 5.
Will satisfy.
Just enough to drop your jaw.
Would'nt want you getting bored.
I think my time is up.

Or maybe yours is.

Are you still here?
you're waiting for the 5.
I don't think I've got them in me anymore.
Find a younger version, that's a better fit
For this mutual perversion, this attention deficit.

I think our time is up.

I think our time is up.

Our time is up.

My time has come.

I think we're done.

Will you let me drop you?

I think I need to drop you.

I'm dropping you.

You're dropped.

Falling to your knees – a manifesto for masochism

There are moments when an aerialist literally falls, in an action calculated to provoke surprise, shock or delight; moments where she lets go, leaves the safety of her equipment, her adopted ground, in order to execute a manoeuvre - a twist, spin, somersault or drop. As she catches the rope again, so our breath is caught in our throats. Our response is a result of direct physical empathy, an intense moment of identification. In this way, we are quite literally moved - when we jump in our seats, put our hands over our eyes or spontaneously bring them together in rapid succession to produce this noise called applause. We empathize, with our bodies, with the possibility of damage, breakage and as an extension the breaking of a promise, the shattering of a dream or illusion we want to believe in. Perhaps what we want from the circus is the illusion that we have control of our own safety, health or that we have some self-ownership or authorship in a world that is radically contingent. When the handstand fails, when the ball drops, when someone falls, a promise is broken. It's the moment you tell your child that you've been Santa all along.

What is at stake in this calculated attempt to make us believe in the magic of human potential? To believe in the impossible. It is not just a return to fairy tales, although some circus of the sugary variety does have the same tone, and it's also not as simple as a demonstration of the will-to-power. Our identification (which is necessary for empathy) is not just with the superhero as some form of ideal, even though young male circus artists in my research identified superheroes from childhood as inspirations to begin circus. There is actually an element of *shadenfreude* here (sorry, shades of Freud?). Rather than the Utopic Enlightenment fantasy of overcoming human limitations in order to achieve perfection (via exclusion, or expulsion of certain elements), albeit by physical prowess rather than Reason, many circus actions actually bring forth a choice to be disabled rather than excessively abled. It is not the story of the *Urbemensch*. It is more the story of the Under(wo)man rather than WonderWoman.

Take the trapeze artist who leaves the safety of her ground for a moment, where she is at home, to execute this trick. This ground upon which she trains, upon which she practices is nothing more than a thin strip of metal bar hung from two ropes – this is the minimal area she must return to. Circus limits, constrains, traps the body, forces it to make certain choices at the expense of others, opening up different possibilities for expertise. Perhaps the juggler chooses his discipline for the very reason that it means he can occlude the spectator from his field of vision. Psychoanalytically this would imply a practice that obliterates the other, an obsessive technique for control, rather than say a hysterically seductive one.

Perversion - wanting to disable oneself.

So, rather than focus on the manifest action, an analysis could instead look to the ground the action arises from. The wire walker has chosen a restrictive space to be at home upon, to perform an action as basic and assumed as walking. Has walking on the ground with full, flat feet become boring? Is boredom the right affect to explain why an artist has turned her attention to something that problematizes, complicates and makes arduous a task assumed to be the simplest, most natural or naturalized physical presupposition of being (an "able-bodied") human? The infant learns to walk, then skip, run, twirl, climb etc...Why not leave it at that? What happened? What infantile desire was prohibited that made it re-surface to correct or re-author that mode? The wire-walker's

practice arises out of walking, just as the hand-stander's emerges from standing and the rope aerialist from climbing.

When she is standing on her hands instead of her feet it serves no useful purpose in the world at large, one could say. It doesn't fix anything, produce anything one could use. In a sense she disables herself by choosing to spend three years studying, practicing this at school. She limits her scope of movement, shuts down the space, cramps her range of choice and in so doing injures herself and is, as most circus artists, in a state of constant "pain". Then maybe she spends many more years making her living standing on her hands to impress people. Someone confined to travelling in a wheelchair has had to find other ways to pursue this naturalised action of being-human in a world that is not built with their needs in mind – a world that disables them. She has chosen to disable herself.

She creates a piece about a person who walks on her hands in a world designed for people who walk on their feet. She goes about re-designing the basic, reified architecture of being-at-home: getting undressed for bed, brushing her teeth, eating, making the bed, in order that she can perform these actions on her hands. Some of the experiments work, some of these banal practices can be translated 180 degrees. Others are more challenging such as drinking for she comes up against the physics of water, gravity and the habits of the throat.

I don't think she does this out of boredom but perhaps from dissatisfaction. Every philosophical, religious or political program arises from dissatisfaction and perhaps every artistic artefact also, in that the *Thing* that responds to one's desire is not visible in the world. Here resound the ethical implications and imperatives of Lacanian psychoanalysis, to not give way in the face of desire, to go to the end, to stay true no matter how injurious the path may be (*Antigone*). Again, it is not to look at the manifestation of the desire or the manner it produces itself that provides an understanding of what the art form is for, its function, but to perceive a more general mechanism in circus that forces these distinct practices to emerge. This is to involve Heidegger's distinction between the ontic (the particular) and the ontological, that which holds and grounds all circus practices, despite how differently they surface into the world or where they were appropriated from and colonised for the circus. This would be to say that she has disability in common with the juggler and the aerialist, although they manifest limitation and constraint in different ways and that their desires produce different ontic practices that emerge from the same ontological ground.

In some way, maybe still thinking with Heidegger, walking might be broken. It is no longer self-evident, a naturalised presupposition, something ready-to-hand, congealed into a solid, unassailable given through performative re-iteration. Some, the circus artist, the dancer, the rock-climber and snow-border, the *parcour* enthusiast, the roller skating drag queen question it, reinvent it, adapt it to conform to their desire. It is broken in so far as it is not enough, the psychanalytic "that's not it!" of desire in hysterical mode. Or, in another formulation, the desire is to break what has become so solidified and unquestioned as walking, so that it is not merely there, ready to be repeated, but brought to presence so it can be re-authored.

"Ready-to-hand" has an implication that it is given already, pre-formed for performance, its uses prescribed. The movement artist, of whatever genre, elaborates on that given, reforms its purpose, re-writes its script, if a script is taken to be something that is to be followed. This is to contest Law, Power or Tradition to create new possibilities, new paths the human could take. Circus does this in a very particular way. Purposefully breaking something makes it violently "present-to-hand", available for re-consideration, re-invention, re-inscription into the world within which it has become congealed or reified as "this and only this". Perhaps

“falling” is one of those possibilities that has not been fully accepted as a practice, something seen merely as an unfortunate result/effect of the failed or unforeseen with the result that something gets broken when you drop it - “dropped on his head as a child” was the way my aunt tried to explain the reason for my cousin's learning-disability.

Manhandle, pervert, mis-use, appropriate, adapt, queer, adopt, twist, divert, recycle could well be the signifiers that come, in the future to define contemporary circus.

What if circus practice actually intends to mend, via its breaking of behavioural codes or ideologies of free movement? Is it too counter-intuitive to propose that by in some way purposefully disabling itself the human body seeks to mend other forms of breakage, rupture, trauma? What kind of compensation is circus practice for the artist?

Death drive.

She “re-wires” the hard-drive of circus, rewrites the software in order to find a place within it. Setting herself up for failure by trying to follow the perceived demands of circus – “pretty, fluid movements performed by strong, skinny, flexible girls” – she decides, in circotherapy to stop demanding these things of herself and root out what’s really going on in her engagement with circus practice, this “self-imposed torture”. These demands constrain and trap her, or properly speaking, limit her desire. Demand disables the free metonymic movement of desire, hems it in, squashes it in a cage of metaphors when it would rather sprawl or rhizomatically drift, send out connective shoots and spores. She decides to re-fashion her practice.

At the age of four she finds herself in the passenger seat of a car with two other cars crashing into her from either side. The catastrophic physical breakage requires her to be literally re-wired. She is placed within a network of wires, screws and plates that resembles a cage.

It is with this in mind that she describes the swinging trapeze as a place where the “odds are good”, despite it being a place of “abject terror”, where, in certain tricks it feels like she is “puking up” her soul. This is a state she feels often in everyday life, a state of perpetual adrenalin. At least here, in this painful, terrifying practice her constant anxiety has a place, a reason.

Circus practice does not just transform a body’s shape, extension and possibility, it transforms psychic trauma – which is associated with and lives in the body, inseparable from it – into a “good object”. The more good objects one has to rely on, the less precarious or uncertain life seems, the less one feels the need to be always ready to fight or take flight. Fighting in order to take flight is a neat way of describing the aerialist's action.

Anxiety, terror, disorientation, terror – the lack of a safe grounding, a lack of strength or control, the inability to protect oneself, the constant sense of being threatened by something unknown. Circus is a form of homeopathic immunisation against these affects, a preemptive strike for the subjects that practice it.

“What do you do in your act?” my analyst asks me.

“I shock, I seduce, I stun. I surprise you. I draw you in, but I know that you know that I am unavailable, a fantasy. I manipulate you, I control you, I make you look only at me. I thrill you, keep you fixed in your place

so you will not leave me until I say you can or at least until I've left the room, and then I don't care what you do. I make you gasp, grip your seat, push you to its edge and make you cover your eyes. I make you so anxious and in love that your palms sweat and your heart beats faster. I confound you, trick you, master you, make you want me, make you want to be me, with me, on me or beside me. I make you fall for me.”

“But John-Paul, what kind of person does that?”

Masochism

At first glance then, a fantasy of overcoming limits imposed by the law and obversely a setting of limits to become one's own law or to castrate the law before it castrates you. Looking deeper into the actual practice and the ideological force of its aesthetics and imperatives, those positively existing forces of bending, stretching, throwing, burning, constricting, numbing, tearing, building, strenghtening, loosening and squeezing of bodies, we can see a law far more authoritarian and demanding, far more super-egoic, tyrannical and unforgiving than any that may have said “Don't climb that tree too high.” In fact, it is tempting to posit that it is that same voice, internalised, magnified and libidinally over-invested that goads the artist on.

In training one must assume in that case that the eventuality and unknowability of the spectator is always already there, an imagined other that one must prove oneself to, even though a student may think that it is herself, her ego image that she is proving something to. However the ego is built up of many aspects of many others, significant and not, that have accumulated through its history. It is layer upon layer of identifications, a crypt of lost loves and rivals. One could say that the ego is encrypted and analysis is the science of decoding. And then the superego, on the cusp of conscious/unconscious, as much an aspect of the imaginary ego as the real id, with its blind, unrelenting, dumb drives on the one hand, manifesting itself as a voice of conscience on the other, a repository of symbolic mandates, an internalised authority, whom we can never please until we decipher what fragments of dead voices its chorus is composed of. So, death drive and conscience blurred into one voice.

The Voice in circus, as a part object, as an object cause of desire, manifests itself most clearly in masochism, that art of finding pleasure in failure. My mind, running ahead of my ability to write makes a Freudian slip and thinks “fascism” instead of “masochism”. And there is good reason for this – the voice of the leader is a site of huge libidinal investment that erases, following Arendt, the ability to think. It is the voice that suspends a masses' need to think rationally or critically. It is the voice, following Reich, that makes us want to be shackled, when he asked why people desired their own enslavement. Why would you desire to be trapped on a thin line of metal suspended by two ropes hanging ten metres above the ground? Or caught in the painful binds of a rope knotted around your waist squeezing your kidneys for the amusement of others? This surely is the stuff of nightmares. Of course, to deliver one's agency as citizen, one's free choice with all its vertiginous existential dilemmas over to something else does give one a certain freedom, a freedom from responsibility, which creates the tautological ideology of “we do this because this is how it's done.”

The association with fascism perhaps shows how the structure of masochism provides a fertile territory for fascism to grow. Masochism demands the voice in its full super-egoic, totalitarian dimension. It seeks to bring the law into full being, full presence so that the ego identity can be shattered under its weight. A form of sacrifice that provides a hefty dose of *jouissance*.

The law says different things in different periods. If at the close of the 19th century Freud made it say

“Don’t sleep with your mother”, laying down one commandment from which all other prohibitions derived then now the command may well appear in a more positive form as “Enjoy!” Guilt now appears, not from having kinky sexual fantasies but for not having kinky enough sexual fantasies. Guilt arises from not enjoying enough. It is moderation that is prohibited and it is temperance that is considered perverse because excess is the new norm, even if that means excessive abstinence, for example in the *jouissance* of anorexia.

When she cried in class because “circus” demanded a person of her that she could never be, because “circus” told her she was lazy, despite having trained all day, the “voice” she was describing to me was superego. It is highly indicative that the voice should have arisen after a successful day of training – this is precisely when the superego comes down on you to remind you that it is always one step ahead of you. If you were to watch her train a twisting somersault on the rope, when she flies for a second and then not quite catches the rope again, over and over again, failing again and again, you would wince, again and again, at the thought of her fingernails tearing and the skin on her fingertips breaking and blistering. How does the superego rise up against the waves of endorphins smothering the mind, those natural opiates we aim for in training that melt our muscles? As if the superego hadn’t done enough lacerating her fingers it has to shred her self-esteem too.

I am at the height of my career. Copy-editors have cut and paste quotes and articles from the past into a hyperbolic biography that verges on the mythic. Full page photographs in broadsheets and the trendiest magazines. Full houses, rapturous applause. Invitations to appear in French Vogue alongside leggy Brazilian models. Alone, at home I howl in the darkness tears pouring down my cheeks. How is it that they have been convinced? I am nothing. I could win the Nobel Prize for Circus, and still, I would be worthless. The imposter complex.

The perversity here is that this is how the masochistic subject organises enjoyment. Fantasy, a narrative or scenario, or a framing of objects, is an organisation of elements – a fur coat, high heels, a whip, a cold demeanor, a series of punishments, or a rope, a trainer, a viewer, a set of aesthetic conditions or parameters. It is a set-up, both in the sense of some arrangement of contents that is set-up, like a theatrical scene and also in the sense of being a lure, a trap set for a victim – in other words you are bound to fail, you’ve been set-up, framed. The action of the bind (legal), of being bound (contractually) and the sense of being fated or doomed (psychoanalytically, to repeat), is perfectly visible in the convolutions and knots of rope practice. I set myself up to fail – this is the masochistic game, success is not what will generate *jouissance*, although that’s what I tell myself. I want to be in a position to fail, to not meet the standard I (my mother, father, school etc...) have set, the responsibility for which I have handed over to circus. Just as Sacher Von Masoch hands the responsibility for his physical discomfort and emotional pain over to his cruel mistress, having had her sign a contract to such effect, so I have forced the hand of circus to sign its name on my contract. Rope students tell me they were not like this before they came to the circus. Perhaps they came for a (dis)satisfaction they could not find elsewhere.

The demand of the masochist – “Make me fail, make me fall (to my knees)”. This has nothing to do with physical pain – I am brave, strong, tough, I can endure much. It is not physical pain that makes me cry.

“You’re not enjoying enough.”

Instead of being satisfied with my hard work or having pride in my wounds, there is always someone, somewhere enjoying more. If the superego is violent in its demands or prohibitions, what does this say about the

contents of the unconscious? What does this say of the superego as a function of those contents and of circus as an example of it?

She spoke of “self-imposed torture”. The masochist of literature draws up a contract detailing the tortures or humiliations to be delivered unto him. In another context, where it is another person that imposes it, torture is bound up with the notion of truth-telling – “tell the truth, confess!” Of course, the literary masochist expels his superego, of which he cannot take responsibility and invests someone else with it, contracts someone else to perform the function he cannot perform himself. The psychoanalytic masochist projectively identifies someone else as that function, binds them in a contract they were unaware of signing. So have these two versions of masochism anything to do with telling the truth?

In *The Body In Pain*, Scarry points out a contradiction within the practice of torture; extreme pain closes down linguistic capacity, shuts down the ability to communicate since one retreats into the pre-verbal body where one can only scream. The subject here, reduced to a fact-filled object is victim to a sadistic procedure, whereby the truth is bled from the victim, extracted like a tooth, extruded like an object squeezed, regardless of whether the torturer is an actual sadist or just, as Arendt put it, a “clown”, a “beurocrat”, a “banal” executor of orders from above. Freud describes the superego as “conscience” at times when he is reaching for pedagogic clarity in front of laymen. To “tell the truth” is a moral imperative, an aspect of a certain, perhaps, Christian tradition, of confession. The circus artist tells the truth with her body, but fails in some respect because she continually repeats the facts of circus and not the truth of her desire. You tell the torturer what he wants to hear, in order for the pain to stop – this is the contradiction – a lie will satisfy. She tells the facts circus wants to hear, to stop the voices telling her she sucks. The superego has been projected into the circus because of an issue she has with an introjected moral authority that somehow she cannot take responsibility for. In this way she is in control, and this notion of control, I must repeat, goes to the heart of circus. She is not trying to control some very difficult and improbable physical action, she is trying to be in control of her enjoyment in dissatisfaction, so that someone else cannot and in this sense it is a pre-emptive strike. Enjoyment in dissatisfaction is an apt way to describe the movement of the drive (as opposed to desire) and the drive is on the side of *jouissance*. Drive satisfaction is one way to partially satisfy desire; drive satisfaction is a way of remaining unsatisfied since it always misses its object and instead circles around it and returns back to itself in order to maintain the movement of desire.

The superego makes demands that cannot be met, of which she will always fall short. However, the maximum approval possible, in the form of applause, happens when she falls short of absolute failure – that is to say, just missing meeting the floor at a lethal velocity - sublime, *sub limen* - just below the threshold. The spectators, invested with the superego, are momentarily tricked into thinking that their unconscious sadistic demand has gained a purchase and their reward is intense pleasure. Only in the suicidal melancholic does the superego actually win.

This may well be one formulation for the circus “trick”.

1991

London. Thatcher. Reagan. As if the 60's had become undone. He finds himself in a toilet with a Conservative MP. He thinks:

Maybe he just can't see this hatred that I won't confide, maybe he's too hungry for me to keep his dignity, his pride: he's hungry 'cos he's poor of soul, poor from licking the state's arsehole – a state rotten to the core, like this MP, who's as much of a whore as me.

John, trick, client, customer.

DaddyGodBoss MP, on his knees, pays me a fee to pee in his face. Guess he must like the taste.

I want to say: "Take off your uniform, look me in the eyes, before you bury your head in the chloroform of my thighs. Forget you wife, the oaths you swore, the executive decisions that you adore. What do you want? To forget for a while? Can you really afford this cute arse and smile?"

"You see I'm very versatile, I can perform in almost any style. I could be your boy, or your mummy, I can do coy, or just suck suck it like a dummy. I can be weak, even frail. Whatever you seek DaddyGodBoss. I won't fail. This shit's for sale."

But there is no justice for me right here: common slut, nigger, queer. If the law is a weapon of the ruling class, then forget the law honey and use your arse, 'cos when he's bent double, staring at his feet he just won't see me take the rubber of my meat: won't feel the difference, gripping the cistern - my spunk and its house-guest deep
in
his
system.

It's guys like him who use their vote to prevent a cure, who let us choke.

Now, I don't spend my mind in some hypocritical career living in dead time, my product is here, my product is mine. I am not selling my soul. I am only selling my hole. And I have an anger inside raging like a twenty-four man on the verge of suicide, trapped in a room the size of a coke can counting up the lies of whiteman-kind. So tell me that I'm mad, tell me that I'm wrong, tell me that I'm just too fucking gone, but I'm too tired and too fucking wired trying to deal with the pain of keeping myself sane. I can't stand it anymore. Daddygodboss you got a lot to fucking answer for.

Falling in line - a Seminar on sadism.

The Stockholm School of Dance and Circus, April 2010.

“The masochist is the one who is humiliated, controlled, punished and manipulated like an object. At least that's how it seems.

“Actually he is the subject, the one that sets the parameters of the humiliation, the one that sets the scene, the one who manipulates his accomplice into following his carefully detailed list of punishments: the masochist is the one in control, the employer. He watches his accomplice agree, he watches his victim sign the contract.

“It says “I want you to follow these simple rules. Applaud when I succeed at something dangerous, difficult, which might even be painful. Laugh when I hurt myself by walking into the door, or fall on my face.

Furthermore, make me believe that you *want* me to do these things. Make me believe that you are *forcing* me to do these painful, humiliating things *purely and only for your satisfaction*. And then, let me thank-you.”

“Don't worry I'm not calling you a sadist if you enjoy watching me suffer or risk for your pleasure. But I might be calling you an accomplice.

“The difference is this: the masochist contracts you and the sadist forces you. The difference is between an agreement and an institution, as Deleuze puts it. The difference is between the masochist's dialectic and the sadist's Idea which he forces upon his victim, as if to prove it, to demonstrate it.

“Is Circus itself, as an institution, actually not rather sadistic then, putting its artists through tortures in order to prove its Idea? Has it been reified as this? If this is the case then the artist is not a masochist but a helpless meat puppet convinced of his own agency. Or is it the artist, who, co-signing a contract with Circus, makes Circus a possible accomplice to his/her perverse pleasure? Sex and death, ladies and gentlemen.

“San Francisco 2000, Chalon 7yrs ago, Roni, 2 yrs ago, Blackpool Circus teeterboard act, Cirque du Soleil, headstand on shoulders in rehearsal, Emma Insely, student, colleague, friend 2006. Dead friends. Were they masochists or were they in the hands of sadists?

“I have six things left to say about sadism in relation to Circus:

“Firstly:

The sadist derives pleasure from acts of destruction but he never approaches the pure negation he wants. All he can do is accumulate these acts, to feel like he's got some mass of evidence, as De Sade does in *120 Days of Sodom*. She gets buggered and then they have to fuck her vaginally with a red hot iron and then they put hungry rats there and they have to XXXX while she is XXXX just as another 3 XXX start doing the XXXX on her XXXX oh yes she's almost dead, but not quite, let's bring in the XXXX with their XXX to XXX her XXX a bit, oh and here come the jugglers, make them juggle more balls, let's have more jugglers, and now an aerialist, no, let's have three, and some balloons too, and some swinging, no, wait spinning, swinging and spinnings and acrobatics, yes, no, wait MORE acrobats, and then an explosion! and so on and so forth. The analogy I hope is clear...this is the accumulative Circus. The more is better Circus that wants to approach a sort of sublime of quantity, of mass. Cirque Du Soleil's new show should be called *120 Days of Circus*. That was my first point.

“The second thing is that the death instinct is never pure except as an Idea. It only materialises when 'alloyed' with Eros, till then it remains mythical, speculative, silent. The Idea of the Death Instinct then, can only ever

materialise when it is somehow hitching a ride on the life-drives, so in de Sade's case it can only emerge in particular acts of sexualised aggression. The sadist wants to coldly and rationally demonstrate the grand Idea with a stark and totalising logic. Remember now Deleuze: sadism is of the institution, the University is sadistic. Here, where we sit today

“And for Freud, all extreme sensations stimulate the body in a sensual way. We experience a sensual act in circus, tactile, manipulative, muscular and supple that verges upon either death or humiliation. The artist is in some form masochistic.

“Third Thing: Following this logic, Circus, would be aiming at presenting these particular instances of negativity – death or humiliation or pain – in a particularly sensual way.

“Thing number Four:

“The masochistic circus is more likely to be what De Sade would have called pornographic than what Deleuze calls de Sade's *pornological* method. The pornographic has graphic presentations of distended bodies that display themselves in a non-utilitarian, non-useful, and therefore purely aesthetic way and it does so with passion, enthusiasm and emotional investment unlike the mathematical repetitions of an apathetic, rational sadist. In fact this sort of pornographic circus would totally piss a sadist off.

“There is an aesthetics to masochism, the construction of scenes, scenarios, roles that both parties agree to play, and then there is the cold, cerebral, brutal instrumentality of sadism and its stark totalising logic. Play and fantasy and theatrics are on the side of the masochist, as are metonymic and metaphorical substitutions, which is why the masochist so often employs the fetish – glove, whip, shoe, fur, or rope, ball, trapeze bar, wire, ring, clown nose.

“Thing number 5: This has to do with narrative being the context for the death drive, merely the vehicle for the death drive to escape its silent and purely mythical status. Narrative as continuity, binding together of themes and ideas, being an expression of life, libido. Here is that *gap* in continuity that Winnicott attributes to the trauma of believing that the mother is not only absent, but dead, after which the infant must begin story building all over again.

“So, in pornography we have the set-up of some sort of storyline:

“I'm here to clean your pipes.”

“Oh, yes, my pipes are *really* dirty, you're going to need a really big tool to clean them.”

“Oh, I have just the thing...”..etc..

“Then as soon as the action proper starts, we forget the story. Žižek makes the example that if in the film *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, Meryl Streep and Jeremy Irons *actually* started fucking, in the obscene detail that we have in pornography, there would be a kind of short circuit of the symbolic universe which the narrative creates. The second the artist performs something dangerous, real, we forget the story, as if an intrusion of the Real momentarily “wakes us up” out of the fake scenario. That's the gap, the little death.

“And it's just the same as the Juggler who comes on as a Postman, with a bag full of “letters” he has to post, and the second he starts juggling them, his balls which stand-in for letters, I know, sorry, it's a poor metaphor, but I haven't made this up, I've seen this!....as soon as he juggles, both he and us could'nt care less about the story...just as in porn..get to the fucking! Story is superfluous, because it tries to ground the act (circus or

pornographic) in the realm of the symbolic, in the realm of things that mean, that are useful, that are continuous, whereas its true power may be that it just is what is, it has no meaning, no use. This may be what it truly ethical about it. And that always disturbs us. Especially with ethics – how excessive ethics is. In my view, circus could be psycho-graphic, it could show us, graphically, instances of perversion, obsessive compulsion, hysteria, post-traumatic disorder, with very little help from extrinsic narratives, because I believe that these *are* it's intrinsic narratives. And therefore show us something of the ethical problems we are dealing with, right here and now. “And the Last Thing: Because of the inability to demonstrate the Idea of negation, the death instinct, sadism operates, as I've said by accumulation. De Sade's tedious repetitions of particular negative acts are a poor substitute for that *one* supremely negative act that would continue to negate long after it has taken place. So where could we possibly find sadism in Circus? Well, imagine a Super Circus, what I've called the accumulative Circus, which gives us a constant succession of amazing death-defying acts that finally numb us with awe; all this a concession, a poor substitute for the Director who is never able to demonstrate his idea in its purity. Director as Pervert. Choreographer as Sadist.

“At forty, which makes me about the same age as New Circus, I no longer want to commit my life to the reproduction of a fantasy, an infantile fantasy, unless, that re-presentation of the infantile fantasy also includes within it the purpose, the psychic purpose of the fantasy. I want Circus to admit how Real it is.

“If we play at superheroes, if we play this game of mastery, of control, of testing our limits beyond the everyday to achieve the "fantastic" then let us admit why we need to in the first place. Because this primary cause is fundamental to all human experience.

“Sadistic fantasies of the big spectacle where performers are meat puppets to prove or demonstrate some big idea, or masochistic contracts that seduce the spectator seem to be just so many infantile repetitions of previous enjoyments that keep Circus fixated with the past.

“I mean, the only way it can do this is to exclude the conditions that bring it into being in the first place. Whether that be trauma, perversion, mania, melancholia or obsessive ritual. I have to forget for example the hysteria or narcissism that brings me to circus, that circus is a medicine for, in order to produce this lovely, pleasurable, acceptable performance. Circus will remain this empty, pretty, satisfying thing if I continue to forget. Great works of art do not forget, they make us remember. They involve us, rather than distract us. I think that Circus is in denial. Sometimes I think it's a manic defense against mourning, grief. Mania being this aggression towards the external world, believing itself to be omnipotent, capable of anything. Maybe if Circus would allow itself to do some grieving, it might grow up, stop trying to be superhuman. And maybe what it has to lose, what it has to grieve, is its own fundamental, supportive fantasy. The fantasy of being invincible.

“The faster, bigger, more dangerous, skillful, difficult things I can do, the less time I have to consider. Circus is uncritical of itself. It's having too much fun. It's self-satisfied. New Circus is 40 years old but it still behaves like an adolescent. I am 40 years old but I am expected to act (out) like an ambivalent teenager.

“We have no idea what an adult circus might look like.”

1992

When he's here he's sad that he's not there, when he's there he misses being here, back here a part of him stays there, that place he almost didn't come back from that one time when all the words combined so that night meant day and dog meant cat, white was the same as the word meant for black and right was wrong in the way that bad was good: mad sane same, language a game he was on the verge of losing, reality just a plot he could remove himself from, hanging by a thread barely alive, which was the same as fairly dead.

To be so beyond belief that he was indeed not, he was make-believe, he wasn't real, he was all made up.

In psychoanalysis this is a form of suicide from within language, a death, so to speak, as if you've fallen through the safety net of words that supports us as beings and find that there is no bottom.

It takes years to pick away at it so that suddenly it unreels, full frontal lobotomy, me me me is not what it seems.

The psychotic break is a fiction that deals with the way our shared narrative feels unbearable to the one losing their sanity, understanding as they do that identity is a vanity.

He did of course crash land on a ground of cracked words, fractured sentence spines he had to mend. Not just one but all, a fiction he had to craft back into the real. And it took time to heal from this great fall of his mind through the floor. The circus seemed like a better deal, if it was to death that he was in thrall: break the body instead of the mind. It just seemed less painful and maybe more kind.

1994

The School:

Everybody responds differently to torture.

The cold electric jazz of a nerve pinched in a vice. The spasm sot up the spine in a spurt. Upside down go all the old names of hurt, now, they seem to have been quite nice. Bones bend, sockets scroll sans friction skins hum, burns glow, joints ache and tendons fire, muscles stoned, sinews wired. Physiology and pain passed off as fiction.

He had no idea what his body could contain.

The Discipline:

Choose your weapon, Circus asks.

He finds the rope, as futile in its up-and-down-and-never-getting-anywhere as all the others. Climbing, falling, climbing, falling, here, there, here, there and the hardest place to stay - the middle with gravity tugging at your heels. On the fence between top and bottom.

No-one has any idea of what it's capable of.

It's hung, heavy, droops limp, waiting; cotton soft yield, supple in the ply. Flick, wriggle, palm it grip it, it'll sway to your tune. Step on it it'll tense, every strand'll draw tight, draw in and condense into an unbending line. It won't give. It will bite. Stay awake with it or it will burn you – fingertips, armpit, seam belly hip bone, backs of knees, across the calf, top of the foot, behind your ear. Those are the places it likes. Your density makes it stiff, draw tight: to make a dent you'll have to find a kink in your own weight.

1995

The Trick:

sycamore seed, arms and legs like helicopter blades straight line like a dew drop on a spider's thread like someone falling through the nine floors and ceilings of a block of flats backwards off a cliff edge and catching with one foot upside down like a fish caught by the tail wrapping, winding and wriggling like a lover in bedsheets feverish damp by night sweats.

Admirers wonder what it might be like to be that rope or to be buoyant on a warm spiral up-drift where gravity is soft and oxygen thick enough to rest upon.

What it might look like if a dolphin could dance.

Make the air like water.

That's what the trick is.

A miraculous thinking that says we have no idea what the body is capable of.

The Show:

life like a tongue testing a live wire.

fibres in space twitch and jitter and latch gaping eyes, wonder full mouths

hooks, lures and traps

and then the trick,

the splash into applause,

the flap in the seats,

out of breath

lost control,

into the net they go.

"You killed them." might be said as he passes the next act.

"Knock 'em dead." might come the reply.

1996

The Life:

The slick of stale beer sticking their soles to the floors in the fag-stained air of nightclubs in daytime as they unravel their ropes to rig.

The climb into roofs where glitter from bombs mixes with dust and the oily spew of smoke machines.

The wide-open fields clattering with kids and candy floss,
swinging under a blue bowl of sky, scattering spells like confetti

or climbing into the stars to the sounds of chants as revellers stomp joy into grass.

Blue canvas clapping in the gale or drummed by rain and he is warm and safe in the throb of the wind and drum and bass.

The fiddles and spoons and after show fires with bottles and bottles, under moons on the grass to drop soft drunk into knowing he did not die that time.

The pop stars and princes, photographers and DJs, the magazines and videos and all you can drink galas high on a cloud of music and magic underwritten by the rush of riot and dissent.

This was the circus to him.

Falling through the cracks - Circosis

Limits

Circus, in its experimental stage, its training phase, before it becomes product/thesis, produces something other than just circus, something far more wide reaching than a circus product, something the institution of circus does not need. It does not need it to the same extent that the University may not require an analysis of the conditions of producing a doctorate from the candidate who actually wants to pass. The University simply wants you to comply with its age-old traditions.

That knowledge rarely goes anywhere for others to learn from. It rarely even goes as far as the consciousness of the subject producing it. This is where psychoanalysis comes in, as a method of bringing to light what you did not know you already knew you were doing.

To answer the first question begs another – why be in the circus to begin with? This question is the first question of this book and it recalls the first question implicit upon entering the analyst's office that first time – “why are you here?” Or “what has stopped working?”

The impetus or to write this book comes from way before walking through the doors of the training hall that first time. This impetus created the event that opened up circus as the only feasible thing to do in lieu of the fact that circus attempts the unfeasible. It was the safest thing for me in spite of its dangers. I'd been playing with more dangerous things.

Circus is often described by its practitioners as concerned with limits – principally those of the body. A quick look at its practices yields not so much an illustration of limit but a description of edge. The Cyr wheel is nothing but an edge, the trapeze and tight wire are edges, the trampoline is defined by edges upon which and beyond which lies injury or worse.

Yet the event that brought me to this precarious place was both limit and edge. I had reached the limit of what discursivity could provide me with for my experiment. Or, I had tested words so thoroughly or recklessly that I had broken them. Pushed words to their limit. So I left them, discarded behind me like so much rubble and found myself at an edge. Why go back, hobble back over that syntactical debris when I had got so far in my experiment? Free from their weight I took the leap, wary that I would need to hold at least some thread to guide me back into the world of speaking others and share what I had found on the other side.

I spent just one evening on that other side, best described as a non-place, free falling through a language that had lost consistency. I landed heavy, broke my word skull, my syntax bones, splintered and poking every which way, ruptured the organs that processed meaning. Then months in recovery stumbling over words, stunned, slowed, injured. Language was not the place to take the risks I needed to take. That way being sectioned lay.

So I joined the circus. They shared many contours, circus and this non-place but the odds were better in the circus. It sanctioned my risk-taking. So I continued my experiment using different materials.

Do we mean what we say?

There is a literality in the act of circus even if it can sometimes work within a system of representations. When a juggler pretends to be a bunny rabbit juggling Easter eggs, he is nonetheless keeping many eggs airborne in complex and virtuosic patterns. It is, tautologically, what it is.

The vertical rope artist really is hanging by her hands alone, ten metres above a non-metaphorical ground. There are no hidden wires supporting her, no suspension of disbelief necessary, this is the real thing. Suspension would only be required if she really wanted us to believe that she was an astronaut or a mermaid.

At base it is a literal craft. No matter how much you embellish a pot, it is still a pot, with a function. Contemporary circus understands this, after the New Circus detour through theatre, character and narrative. It is not literary. The circus versions of Shakespeare, Voltaire or Aristophanes relegate the circus artist to representation - the performance at the banquet, the sailors in the storm, the fairies or other strange creatures, the dream sequence, the battle scene or the heightened emotion of the love scene. What is less clear, or perhaps assumed is its function.

Because it is not literary does not mean it isn't replete with signs, full of translations or displacements, stuffed with metaphors or the potential for interpretation. If circus artists do not use words it does not mean that their actions are not tied to them.

"I'm a bit tied up. I'm just hanging around. I'm juggling three projects at the moment. Sorry I dropped the ball on that one. Tomorrow I'm doing a crash course. That's a wrap. We just tied the knot."

What happens when you take a metaphor, or a trope, seriously? That is to say take it at face value, as the thing-in-itself and not a substitute. Well, either you've slipped into the territory of psychosis whereby you've made the literary literal, or perhaps you've just joined the circus.

As a way of explaining something unavailable to direct communication, as a means of carrying meaning over, transferring meaning from one place to another more appropriate place, - (its home perhaps, when meaning has lost its way) the metaphor must always retain its rhetorical roots i.e. it should stay in the symbolic, be tethered to the symbolic fabric of the consensual universe of speaking subjects. When it takes on a life independent of the symbolic, when it is no longer a rhetorical device but an index of reality, a piece of the real, then it becomes the delusional metaphor of the psychotic. In other words when a piece of fiction takes on the concrete quality of actually existing it is called an hallucination, a visual delusion. If we are asleep we call it the dream. If we are in the throes of religious ecstasy, then social scientists will call it an opium, a collective dream or a consensual hallucination. The psychotic gives birth to a new universe with the same logic as the dream, except that he is awake, which is probably why Lacan says that psychotics have no unconscious. The delusional metaphor is a coping mechanism for a subject unable to bear the reality of her situation.

This is also the universe of the poet, but we can share the poet's utopias and fantasies because of her reference to the Symbolic, the Universe of meanings that we agree to mostly forget has only been contingently fixed. It is this forgetting that makes it bearable to get on with living in legible ways and makes it possible for us

to function: the net of language that supports our communications is by and large never in the forefront of our thoughts, which is perhaps why Agamben says that at base, communication is not about content, but communicability itself.

The psychotic has fallen through this net and realized that there is no bottom. His metaphor has become real, concrete, like a stone sewn in his stomach. As such we cannot understand his language, because it doesn't refer to anything other than itself. In speech he falls too fast through puns and double-meanings, rhymes and neologisms that we cannot catch what he means.

If, for example, at the beginning of his writings, of his metaphor-production, he uses the word "angel" to denote a certain mixture of grace, love or transcendence, he is still using it as a metaphor to refer to something else. It is at the point when the angel's existence becomes real, or *returns within the real* that the literary becomes the literal, that the metaphor has turned to concrete reality. It is at this point that he starts his fall away from us. We don't know how he feels, but we can see the effects of what he feels on the language he uses. We can feel the suffering of the subject for whom language is no longer a stable ground but one forever giving way beneath him.

The circus artist who is literally hanging by a thread cannot convey what it feels like to be up there but we can empathize with the suffering of that circus subject in that universe so alien to ours, or the joy that subject feels in overcoming danger or conflict so effortlessly. We don't feel the disorientation of the fall when she lets go and drops, merely the shock and delight at her catching, at her mastery over this precarious position she has placed herself in, this place she returns to night after night. Or one might say that where the unconscious puts her, the same way the unconscious puts one in a particular dream scenario, is not the same place where the spectator sits. However, if you spend enough time with someone caught within a delusional metaphor and attempt to understand them, that is when you will feel the disorientation for real. Circus artists want you to feel what they are feeling, they want you to be in the same place, so they tell me. Unless you get the spectator in the air that will not happen – otherwise turn the circus into an amusement park. It is just the same with the psychotic who wants you to understand him and believe his reality as he does, so that you will stop trying to cure him and let him free to continue to produce the shifting architecture of his universe. Unless you fall through the net with him you'll never understand how radically polymorphous and randomly contingent his structures are. What the circus artist really has to show us is never visible in the act.

The gravity of language.

What happened? Why circus?

My first theory posited death (as a possibility in circus) as a corrective for ideology. This was before, of course, I noticed the strength of ideology within circus itself.

There was something naive in thinking that because we circus artists risked our lives or put ourselves close to life-threatening situations we were consequently less interested in following the well-trodden path laid out by our habitat. Somehow this daily dose of trauma, this habituated shock of narrowly evading a fatal moment kept us awake, kept our eyes open. We were authentic, in the full romantic sense of the word, authentically ourselves and not part of *das Man*, the herd, the crowd, because, as Heidegger would say we were running-

towards-death, our "ownmost" death, the only truly authentic experience, rather than running from it.

Despite the arrogance of presuming to be "ideology-free", the practice of coming close to "not being here" on a daily basis, emphasised the importance of our choice in being-here. We may as well follow our own path of desire rather than one laid out for us by some law or authority and so we do the transgressive thing and join the circus. This, of course, is the sugar coating of an altogether more insidious circus ideology.

However this jolt made us appreciate something, anew, everyday I thought. "Don't die today" was the pre-performance pep-talk, not "Break a leg" on one particular job. One day, mid-way through the eighteen month contract, Suzy fell - she did not die, but she did break many bones.

So, what happened? How does one fall into circus? It's true that as an actor/dancer I fell into it, by accident, I tripped up and found myself there. On another level, the suspicious level of hermeneutics, it was an attempt to fall again, and this time in a more controlled way. What happened was that, in a thought experiment inspired by Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*, I had so detached, designified, desubjectivised myself, unhooked, unmoored, untied myself that I had experienced a momentary free-fall of psychosis. So, a note of caution to the post-structuralist mission to thoroughly dismantle the humanist subject.

In this brief break, or suspension in a delusional metaphor that occurs prior to psychosis proper, I often found myself at a metaphoric cliff-edge contemplating a leap of faith. Sometimes I was faced with a door, sometimes with the entrance to a maze. Before I took the leap, the step or made my way in I would check that I had a thread to guide me back - I just wanted to see what was over the edge, on the other side, or at the centre, I didn't want to stay there and I had every intention of coming back. But Ariadne's thread kept slipping through my fingers. No surprise to find my primary circus discipline in the rope.

Hanging from a thread. This can describe the proto-psychotic's abstracted relationship to our shared reality yet also the concrete practice of the aerialist's game.

At the time I did not know that what I was courting was a kind of death, a social death, which Lacanians call subjective destitution, whereby you follow your desire to the very end; it is for this that Antigone is Lacan's heroine of choice. Psychosis is a form of suicide within the social, a death in the symbolic, unlike the real death that beckons the melancholic within whom an over-invested super-ego has become a tyrant rising above a shrinking, shamed and fallen ego.

The thread and the edge, both precarious places: thresholds, borders, just at the limit, which is why there is something sublime about them (sub-limen- just below the threshold.)

The wire-walker steps across, less a line than a thin edge of metal hovering above an abyss, as does the trapeze artist trapped within two ropes and the wheel artist, disabled by an edge made into a circular rim holding a void. Edges, rims and borders are where *jouissance* is amassed, parcelled away discretely after polymorphous perversity gives way to the policings of genital sexuality - the edge and the rim are the borders between inside and outside, the erogenous zones.

Psychoanalysis speaks about latent psychosis as a hairline fissure, a fault-line waiting for an event that will crack it open to reveal nothing, or the no-Thing.

The rope artist finds his *jouissance* on a mass of interwoven threads that threatens to slip through his fingers if his anxiety, a warning signal, makes his hands sweat and he falls into an abyss; not always of death but always of shame. Considering these woven strands that kept me suspended above the ground, the metaphor of the net was apt for the experience of psychosis. Language unravels in psychosis - the ties that knit together

signified and signifier slip free, unknot. When those ties loosen stable meaning slips off words like water -or to put it another way (because I was a metaphor-making machine in the lead-up to my break, my fall) they leak meaning so they are empty before they leave for their destination, before they can be carried over, before they can be carried out. Like the functional pot mentioned before, these pots were broken and words were broken, no longer up to their function.

At the height, or perhaps the full fall of psychosis, words were empty the very same moment they were uttered or thought. Empty and therefore reversible, interchangeable.

Madsanemadsanesamesamenamenamegameshame.

Again, to make a distinction with melancholia and its cold, mineral reality of having crash-landed into a dark hole with no hope of crawling out, psychosis is a constant fall; so much thinking, so much production of metaphor, writing, theory, cosmology, mythology, so many signs, portents, signals, patterns, constellations, shifting architectures of meaning, built and then erased and then re-built -- anything to get a hold, drive a pin into the ever fluttering fabric of reality, to stop it moving, to stabilize it. The delusional metaphor is just such a hold - "I'm an angel, an alien, an android.", "The scientists are controlling our minds.", "The Virgin Mary speaks to me through the television." The analyst is wise to support this metaphor, even encourage it, if it holds the world together, stops it from breaking into bits and floating up into the sky. Language and gravity are the terms I'm using here to link circus thinking and psychosis. A practice of production to support what is otherwise unbearable in reality.

Language pins us down just like gravity does - it pins us down to what we mean, gives us names, stops us being slippery; it is something we all share while rarely being conscious of it. If the psychotic falls through the net that has unravelled and finds no bottom, no ground beneath it, no real basis for language, no reason for language to exist the way it does then he has revealed the *Thing* the everyday neurotic must repress in order to live. He has exposed the fact the normal neurotic academic knows but prefers nonetheless to forget, to put into the background for the sake of sanity, for the sake of believing that his work is something more than an elaborate word game based on contingency.

The circus artist's limit or horizon of possibility is this very same Thing that he must push towards to satisfy the demands of circus - to fall, to stop at the limit, just before the threshold, the door, the cliff edge, entrance to the maze, the rim, edge, border of the apparatus, death. The limits of language for the psychotic, the limits of gravity for the circus artist. For one a symbolic death, for the other an organic one. What the psychotic has to say is unsayable and therefore we might propose that it has to do with the limits language places upon us. In psychoanalytic terms these limits are to do with the fact that the moment you speak about your *jouissance* you sacrifice it, lose it and this is to accept one's castration. This is the metaphor that Freud, and Lacan after him, use for the moment when absolute satisfaction is denied by law and decreed impossible, even though its possibility is only ever a retroactive fantasy. Perhaps what the circus artist wants to do with gravity is as impossible as the psychotic's message is unsayable. Perhaps neither of them want any truck with castration.

The psychotic inadvertently breaks a cardinal rule, the rule upon which everything social hinges - (you could say that the psychotic is "unhinged" in that the door of the unconscious can't be shut and so the subject is

flooded by *jouissance*) – she transgresses a first rule. This is the rule of difference that keeps the differential system of language working, that keeps cat meaning something different to dog, so that they don't collapse into each other. It is as if there was a pin, too small to notice, stuck into a whirling chaos of meaning-strands that allows a net to be formed, that stops those strands moving about arbitrarily, interchangeably, promiscuously, a pin that keeps language in place.

An event may occur that pops that pin out of place and the whole fabric suddenly unravels, the connections on the web or net break free and whip and flail and connect randomly and without reason. If the pin is the same in all circumstances on the social level then we get something called consensual reality, what Lacan described as a Borromean Knot holding the realms of Real, Symbolic and Imaginary in place, registers with nothing less than the symptom (or *sinthome* in his later writings) binding them together in an uneasy but necessary tension. If elsewhere he says that there is no subject without the symptom and that the psychotic has no unconscious – in that he lives it, he is living the dream – then this would imply that the psychotic not so much wears his heart on his sleeve but is exposed to the pure drive of the symptom; the psychotic is flooded by *jouissance* in the real and not at the level of the imaginary or symbolic. It is this *jouissance* that I believe the circus artist wishes to snatch moments of.

A thinker, or poet pushing at the limits of language's capacity always risks this pin popping out. What is important is the thread back, that leads the way out of the temporary and controlled psychosis of artistic creation back to the consensual reality the artist must insert her work into: language, society, the Other.

That pin is what is missing in the structure of the latent psychotic, that's where the fissure is, where that stabilizing object is has not been installed. The delusional metaphor is a thin piece of masking tape over that crack. It papers over the contingency of meaning, of language, of Law. For Lacan this is the Name-Of-the-Father which is really only a piece of software, but which, I propose, seems to the rest of us like hardware, in the sense that it is reified, naturalized, normalized. This, perhaps, is a psychotic line of reasoning.

Circus has a particular relation to the law, the law that prevents access to total enjoyment, *jouissance* of the Other. Rather than having a place within language (the Other), a proper name, the psychotic is invaded by it. The Circus artist naughtily grabs moments of it in a programme, I think, designed to steal back moments of *jouissance* – it is a practice of safely re-finding *jouissance* and perhaps this is why anxiety is the affect that never leaves artists and prevents them from really falling, as the psychotic does with his certainty that he can fly, because certainty is concrete for him, as concrete as a tombstone in his gut.

In that same 18-month contract we were required to acclimatize ourselves to the height of the space before rehearsing. Used to climbing ropes 10 metres high, 50 metres was an altogether different experience, even if we were attached to harnesses. The exercise consisted of a ledge one walked out onto, while attached to a safety line. At the time it reminded me of the scene from *Peter Pan* where the pirates make Wendy Darling walk the plank. 50 metres below and all around was space, empty but for the muffled sounds of distant terrestrial activity. My head popped and fizzed with bubbles as my eyes widened and my brain seemed to expand and fill with nothing, just space. I thought about the angel in Wim Wender's *Wings of Desire* standing upon the rooftops listening to the whispering thoughts of the thousands of inhabitants of Berlin falling in love with a melancholic trapeze artist in a tawdry, un-fantastical circus. Soon I would be jumping off the ledge and free-falling for a few seconds before the motors kicked in and slowed my descent to land me gently on the concrete that would later

meet and smash Suzy's bones. I would wear a white silk shirt open to the waist and it would flutter in the uprush of air that made my long curly hair expand and come alive and make me grin with delight in the blue and pink spotlights. A seductive ideological fantasy a la Disney, Soleil. The death drive anesthetized by aesthetics. A prophylactic procedure.

But I had been here before, I just didn't know it yet. Or more psychoanalytically phrased: I did not know what I already knew – about this place, this scenario – and there was plenty I wanted to know, about death in particular. And I did not want to be protected from it. Even if it was to be administered in homeopathic doses I wanted to feel the concrete possibility of the fall, to master it in the material, so I would never again fall into the concrete metaphors which once bashed out my brains.

1997-2001

He could flip and he could fly but he never questioned why
Rolling Stones, Spice Girls, Kylie and Jamiroquai.
He did it for the Queen, Tony Blair, the T.V. screen
Cabarets and techno nights, purple hair and shiny shiny tights.

He was shiny and he was t-t-tight.

He was super sexy, slinky, twinkly go go circus boy
Mission to amaze, all he wanted was your g-g-gaze.
The crazy things he did made the people go insane
His muscles got so big he forgot about his teeny- weeny brain

He forgot about his.....what was that?

He did the fairy and the merman, the vampire, hunky sailor
Could do spicy, gave good sweet, he did all the fucking flavours
He was stunning and so versatile, a crowd pleaser in overtime,
Now that shit is so defunct and he is well and truly dumped.

Doesn't matter how many people he humped.

2001

Circus boy your party's done, you on borrowed time,
Get ready for the fun to end, the last stop on the line.
Cos the time is of apocalypse, the shit has truly hit the fan
Are you gonna done more backfuck flips, is that your new cool masterplan?

You are having too much fun being pretty and spectacular
Endorphins in your veins help you to forget the fact you are:
A sex labour avatar, a porno star equivalent
This pointless happy pleasure has always been ambivalent.
That black and white photography, just middle class pornography,
You were trained to impress, but now you're paid to get undressed.

Who gives a shit about your bouncy flouncy tricky minky kinky moves
You're way past irrelevant, an old empires' entertainment
We're headin into nowhere without a fucking clue
Read a paper, read a book, do your homework, take a look
Close your legs, keep your shirt on, what have you got to loose?
Have you so little to say that you need to be half nude?

2016

Neoliberal machinations
Inauguration celebrations
Prosthetic masturbations
Dumb as fuck imaginations

Ideologically prosmicuous
We repeat this shit like Sisyphus
This is a sugar-coated suicide
A circus in formaldehyde.

Fuck this.

Testosteronic privilege
Perfect body pilgrimage
Cross-fit ripped up percentages
Profit tripping on the vertical edges

Of a body-fascist superiority
A beauty formed by virtuosity
Aesthetic supplements to conservatism
Advertisements for anarcho-capitalism.

Fuck this.

A date with corporate rohypnol
A rape with conglomerate protocols
Your brain floods with cortisol
Into its arms you fall.

DeSadean sublime of accumulation
120 Days of Circus castration
Putting you in your fat disabled place
With an affective cock slap in the face.

Fuck this.

Fuck this.

We could be more than this.

Introduction:

Circus shows us more about the way we live through fantasy than at first meets the eye. This will be a critical celebration of the circus act, treating it as a rigorous program of practices that are as much artistic as scientific. The gambit of this writing is that circus practice, after Badiou, has the possibility of being a “thinking”; that set of practices and theories that are non-dialectically bound. In order to do this, those practices need to be first lifted out of their ideological enframements and treated to a form of phenomenological reduction – circus must be placed in parentheses. By pulling the plug on circus, we retain its practices but bracket, or bucket, how those practices become enmeshed in its prerogatives and demands. If this were possible then maybe these practices could offer some understanding of the world we have made from a critically novel and surprisingly hopeful perspective.

A potential first strategy would be to see circus as a reflection of the society it emerges from, a superstructure whose mechanism is discernible at the economic base. The circus of the late 19th century reflects the exhilaration of modernity and the Enlightenment values of progress, the striving towards perfection and man’s dominance over nature. Now, with the global success of Cirque Du Soleil, the fantasy of circus may well reflect a rate of innovation and accumulation of prowess that fast approaches the post-human.

Students arrive at the Circus School with a variety of competing dreams. Some just want a professional job when they leave, make the good money that can be made, live the good life that can be led. Their high skills may never find their way into an actual circus; variety, cabaret, cruise ships, commercials and pop music tours yield more cash. And so their skill will augment the mainstream entertainment industry with a splash of risk, danger and exuberance, qualities perhaps lacking in the product that takes centre stage or qualities the product wants to be associated with. They are hired to do the superhuman, to illustrate the perfect functioning of a piece of technology: a car, a mobile phone. This profile of circus, its champion Cirque Du Soleil and its derivatives mirror perfectly a neo-liberal ideology of production. They are its perfect aesthetic supplement, an integral prop in a fantasy being played out that corresponds to those values of progress, innovation and self-renewal necessary to drive the engines of capital. The ground of that particular professional is however the same as that student who chooses to be an artist, who may remain poor in order to create work that explores the frailty, fallibility and disabling effects of the world as opposed to the naturalised, apparently universal values of success and unlimited freedom of choice.

Ideology works by disavowal – something happened, something is going on but we are unaware of it, because we pretend it isn’t happening. Marx’s “they are doing it, they just don’t know they are doing it” gives way to Sloterdijk’s version of cynical ideology whereby “we know full well what we are doing, but we are doing it anyway.” The first version corresponds to the psychoanalytic category of repression proper to everyday “normal” neurosis, the second to disavowal, the defence mechanism of perversion – “I know this furry tea cup is not a vagina but I will get excitement from it as if it was.”

For someone entering circus now, the situation is very different than it was. There is no need for circus to be a family tradition, you don’t need to live in caravan or tour in a tent or even perform in an actual circus. However, its mobility remains, dispersed across culture rather than within one bounded segment and its traditions remain, in the actually existing practices. If there are new ideologies or systems of values in circus,

they remain informed by its practices, the structures that support them and the uses they are put to, for ideology is nowhere more evident than in the reiteration of practices, no matter where or how they are applied, whether they are disavowed or celebrated in the open, accepted or challenged.

The second strategy would invert the first. It would put forward the notion that the aesthetic effects of circus actually have a concrete impact on the way life is lived in the social. It would state that the aesthetic, far from being merely superstructural to the real business of running society, actually colours the political and social landscape more than we might imagine. Society, in this view, can be seen to reflect circus and not the other way around. The perfectly functioning superbodily, as championed in the Olympic games, finds its aesthetic elaboration in circus and is just as implicated in national identity, product and funding. It is an ideal-image to live up to, not merely that perfect-looking body one must obsessively selfie and advertise on social media but that ability to juggle and risk in order to self-renoate, stay ahead, to innovate, self-renew, to be outside the system in order to achieve within it, to think outside the box in order to maintain a place within it and avoid the risk of becoming obsolete. In this way, it is less that circus has been co-opted, but rather that it proffers a paradigmatic image, and this is especially true of Cirque Du Soleil, of a successful model of survival and production within neo-liberal capitalism – to reach, quite literally in the case of Soleil’s director, for the stars, appropriating the anarchist slogan “Be realistic. Demand the impossible.”, and announcing a sort of anarcho-capitalism or libertarianism possible only with the collaboration of the zombie of capital.

The third strategy, taken by this book, looks to the potential of circus, its yet-to-be, as an art form, to reveal something about universal social parameters of the condition of being-here, an embodied subject in the world dealing with objects and others. The theories put forward in this strategy, both those arising from qualitative research and those that are speculative, come from the position of an artist – engaged, embedded, concerned, historical.

More than anything, this book is an experiment in thinking with circus, thinking as circus and reading theory through circus to ask one question: what is circus thinking?

*In the morning things might be just fine.
If you're not going to stay the night,
Then let's give it some more time.
the older you get
the more time things take
sleep on it.
Maybe admit, that this might've been a mistake.*

*Dunno know how to end this
I don't want to end this
I still love you
But
I can't sustain this
I should'nt try
And neither should you.
Let's face it. People cannot fly.*

*Stop paying for me.
That would be a start
I don't want to make a living out of you
Money doesn't buy the heart.*

*So I don't want to say goodbye
But maybe we should give it some more time,
Maybe close your eyes
Stop looking at me
'Cos you making me confused.*

*You still light my fuse
But I don't want to be a firework anymore
That much is true
But I do, want us,
just for a second or two,
To dream of another place,
A slower pace,
For me and you.*

*We're out of time,
I need to say goodbye.
In the morning things might be just fine.
If you're not going to stay the night,
Then let's give it some more time.
the older you get
the more time things take.
Sleep on it.
Maybe admit, that this might've been just
A wonderful mistake.
I will never forget you, don't worry
This is not regret, I'm not sorry
For the things you paid me to do
Like falling in love for a modest fee
But there are better things that this could be.
That we
Could be.*

I'M DROPPING YOU

