

The Socio-Political Dimension of Circus.

Key Terms, Methods and Practices: *Jouissance* - Genealogy - Psycho/Circoanalysis - Phenomenology - Ethics - Affect - Endocrinology - New materialisms - Rope - Butoh - Love

Introduction

Some of these pieces were made to explain something.

Some were made as therapies, as pieces of closure. So I could move on and make other things.

Some of these pieces were made so that other things could be made, by others. Tools then, although they have the look of artifacts. Hidden in the artifact is a tool and that is the process, which is where the writing comes in, as a means to mop up the unwarranted excess that is not permitted at the site of performance. (Appendices 1 and 2.)

Many of them, I hope, expose process. Since I'm not that interested in final product. Which means they have the texture of the unfinished, because it probably will not be me that will finishes them.

There was an exhibition element which you experience on entering. There was a lecture element which I guess started the second I said hello. Also a performance element, and I'm not quite sure when that started, if at all, since part of the ambition of this project was to break down the barriers between artist and other. A writing element too, that informs it all but really only comes into being when you read and finally a fairground element which emerged slowly as spectators were asked to participate in our actions. These elements were sometimes not discretely parceled in this piece, a form of which you are reading now. They formed compounds, some of which were stable some of which are not and so continue to have life.

This amounts to a 32-day research project taking off from the concluding paragraphs of my PhD in psychoanalysis and circus - in those paragraphs I hoped that within circus practice, within each circus practice there was an ethics at play that the circus itself, as an apparatus of the market repressed and excluded. That in the product, (this does not only go for circus) the ethical dimension was unwanted or unwarranted, an excess and therefore the possibility of any political dimension or potential was foreclosed. Let me be clear - I'm saying that ethics are the precondition for politics, they are meta-politics or proto-politics. So, an exploration of ethics, this comportment or orientation towards the other, came to be the focus, as if I could not even begin to explore the socio-political dimension of circus before I had dealt with its potential ethics.

To get at this ethics one would have to phenomenologically bracket what one could term the manifest values of circus – the ones it proudly displays – to extract a practice that was no longer circus, whose central, organising motivation was not circus. What else could be that central organizational point that would draw into its orbit the appropriate signifiers with which to write an ethics? Well, the human beings that do it might be a good start, I thought.

If some of this seems naïve to you, it could be that I have tried to cultivate a momentary wonder at what appears to us as simple things, simple processes. I place a lot of emphasis on child-like desire in circus, on a simplicity and directness of experimentation and reality-testing that is difficult to complicate or problematise due to the sheer gain of pleasure. So, having done the psychoanalytic account of that pleasure I decided to focus on the materials that get produced, the materials that get the thing produced. I became fascinated again with the human body, and the kind of ethics it might imply.

The report that follows aims, like the presentation, at a popular readership and is the ground work for a Research application and is therefore not fully referenced.

Circoanalysis as Genealogy, the ground of making against Aetiology and a system of classification.

Circoanalysis cures the subject of the Circus as an ideological Other, it does not look to cure it of those practices that provide a homeopathic dose of trauma. There is mourning to be done when one successfully removes practice from the frame of circus - when the Other is robbed of its power over the practice.

For this, one would need a new programme, an ethics or conceptual apparatus arising from the individual, established and emerging practices that make up the circus rather than the reified apparatus, *dispositif* (Other) that is the circus. These conceptual apparatuses forming the thinking behind the creation of the work would merit being called makings, as analogies to Badiou's thinkings. (Infinite Thought)

I would not be surprised if readers of my doctoral dissertation saw a conflation of genealogy and aetiology in the circoanalytic process. This would certainly be the case if I always considered the circus act as a symptom of a neurosis and as an acting out of repressed desire. To be clear, I see the practice of circus as pure sublimation, a healthy expression of an excess with no where else to go.

"Circus artists may not have circus as their symptom, nor as a dream/fantasy/unfulfilled wish, they may not be compelled or obsessed or neurotic but they may well have found a way of so limpidly describing, enacting or elucidating their symptoms, in the symptom's own language of metaphor, not to have to suffer from them or be subject to them." (Circoanalysis)

I know, for my part, that I am probably still here thanks to circus practice. I'm not the only artist who would say this. I was headed for far worse than scabs, scars and burns if I had not sought out the therapeutic or homeopathic traumas of circus practice as a substitute. Where I see symptomatic behaviour, or acting out, is in those instances where the demand from the institution (big Other) of circus comes down so heavily on the subject that their own desires are squashed. Circoanalysis cures artists of the Circus as hegemonic *dispositif*, not of their practices.

Genealogy then becomes, not so much some form of psychoanalytic detective story of origins but more a geological procedure. Or a soil analysis. It is materialist. It asks "why are you here?", what is your present moment comprised of? Which is to ask, what materials do you have at your disposal to make what you want

to make - whether that's a process or a product? And it is to put into question the notion of what "material" is, or what counts as "material".

The philosopher, the maker of concepts (What is Philosophy?), who is concerned with the particular practice of thinking, of fabricating thought or structures within which to think has at her disposal certain materials to do that with. To get to this place, she has to study, she has to know her Hegel in the same way that a dancer knows the barre or the acrobat the back flip and she needs to know her Kant and Schelling, her Fichte and Marx, her Heidegger and Derrida, her Foucault and Nietzsche – and she has to know how they agree or disagree with each other, how they steal, adapt, move on from each other, how they stay faithful to each other and when and how they rebel against their tutors whom they once admired - how they bugger, bury or denounce their fathers. She has to know all this to be a philosopher. She has to be literate in a history of (in this example) dead white men, to just get started.

So, what do we need to know to be artists? If our aim is subjective truth, our ownmost truth, if we (still, nostalgically, erroneously) prize authenticity, as is the case for many students, what then do we need to be literate in, if not ourselves? Which would mean, psychoanalytically, a series of (un)dead selves? (Un)Dead selves encrypted in the increasingly crowded tomb of the ego.

When I suggest the ego is a tomb, I mean that it contains all the traces and inscriptions of past identifications – it's a build-up, a construction, an accumulation, not just of your parents, school sweetheart, best friend, arch enemy but also of the book you read when you were eleven, the show you saw when you were eighteen, your recent love interest in neuroscience or eco-feminism but also that Hollywood romantic comedy that affected you against your will – those things that have settled safe and warm into your earth but that you no longer consider to be a part of the world you are making for yourself, that you are projecting for yourself. These are the materials with which you are making work. Or rather, these are the materials that are putting you to work.

For example, that queer situationist performance artist I was is (un)dead, he is no more, but traces, pulses of him remain, in my history, forming who I am now, framing how I read participatory performance or Lacan or a newspaper. I need to be aware of that, I need to be literate in him to understand *how* I read now, I need to be conscious of how and why I read *now*, conscious of what I pick up on when I approach Circus or Heidegger and why I gravitate more towards some of their practices and concepts rather than others. And this means I am aware of what lives on in me, the undead, despite my best efforts to live as something else, as something original or authentic or towards the future. It means I am not abstract, I am, unlike Sloterdijk's philosopher, alive, teeming. I historicize myself. (The Art of Philosophy)

So, to perform a genealogy, as an artist, is to be aware of the dead matter that you are composed of, that provides a rich and fertile ground or earth from which to read, or from which to produce.

A common place view of Psychoanalysis is that it would like to sift that soil into its particles, pick apart the symptom bit by bit, going further and further back into the past until you get to the *root* of it all. Artists have said to me "I'm not going into analysis, I don't want to open that can of worms.". But those particles are already meshed, mulched, moulded together to form aggregates, or compounds that are particular to you. They belong in the earth, as your earth, the earth from which you produce your world. And what's so bad about worms anyway? They do us humans an incredible service for which they get little credit. (Vibrant Matter)

So you perform a genealogy, not from the abstracted position of the thinker, but from the embedded, decayed, aggregated, compounded, worm-full, mournful, meaning-full historical subject that makes things/artefacts in the world. Impure things, because to even say "subject" is over-simplifying – we are many subjects, many authors, many artists. (A Thousand Plateaus) And each moment or place of that genealogy will be altered slightly with every new event that occurs.(Lacan)

And these things, these artistic artifacts can be seen as our equivalents of philosophical concepts or ethico-political positions - ways to view the world, positions to take in the world, tools to shape the world, *fabricated* visions of how one may move in the world, *make* the world. We are artists, we make things up, just as Nietzsche *made-up* the will-to-power, to respond to *ressentiment* or *decadence* or *weakness*, just as Freud made up the unconscious to explain some mystery of the human mind that was unaccounted for in the neurology of his day or Deleuze and Guattari who (re-)invented the body-without-organs as a materialist metaphor for mind from an obscure text by the schizophrenic theatre maker Artaud. They needed this concept for what they wanted to build - a new way of envisioning how we might produce the body anew against what they saw as the normativisingly Oedipal corpus of Freud. But they acknowledge that the corpse of Freudian psychoanalysis nonetheless fertilized the ground from which they could nurture the tools they and countless others would go on to use to such rhizomatically proliferating effect.

To understand the force of the historical materials that have shaped us helps us to understand the artistic processes that we want to take care of. To focus solely on the most obvious, clearly present forces, in this case circus and socio-politics, may be to miss what is most original about us as artists and may foreclose what might be most fertile in our creative contribution to the field in which we practice. That which has withdrawn into the dark warmth of the earth can be brought back into the analytic light of the world for recycling, re-signification and re-purposing.

A Phenomenology of Practice

Bracketing is one technique I use to help circus artists understand what they are doing. When asked "What are you doing?" they might reply "A double propeller into a half catchers slide ending with a front salto." If I asked a spectator what the artist was doing would they respond with the same answer, I ask? When asked to probe further into this series of actions we put into question what an action means, what a trick means, what a sequence means, how labour and work can be distinct from action. (The Human Condition)

This is both a psychoanalytic procedure to hysterise what the subject thinks she knows about what she is doing and an ideology critique that seeks to break up the reified assumptions that he thinks are natural but are in fact *naturalised*.

So, when asked to bracket reified concepts like circus, performance, spectator or even culture it means viewing the action as if these did not exist. The window for such a gaze stays open for a very short time. The clarity of our vision, of our opening onto the world is always threatened by meaning or narrative rushing in to the rescue, to stanch the wound of the event, of contingency, to prevent the flood of randomness into our neatly ego/anthropo-centric story about ourselves.

To the seasoned viewer or critic of circus that bemoans its lack of content or its insistence on borrowing content from other sources, I would say one only has to look briefly at *what is actually happening* to see that it is loaded, stuffed, overdetermined with content. I use the word overdetermined here in its strictly Freudian sense, as one of the operations of the unconscious that combines many divergent streams of ideas into one image, explaining the dense, complex and confusing scenarios in dreams. The phenomenological gaze opens the gash that ideology tries its best to suture and render in narrative or meaningful terms so as to keep its consistency against the trauma of contingency. So, none of the texts you will read here are truly bracketed - if that were even possible - but render themselves, in one form or another, in such a way as to not create too much disruption to ideological space. This was not a choice, this was just how the various texts emerged and they are both indices of the difficulty of the phenomenological *epoche* and the productive results of attempting the impossible.

The handstand artist is performing a sort of religious or perhaps compulsive ritual. She is trying to push the earth down to prevent it from floating up and away.

The juggler is trying to disprove gravity, or is dreaming that he is telekenetic..

The circus training hall is a rehabilitation facility for suicidal maniacs, or gifted but autistic youngsters, which would account for the high ratio of carers per patient (teachers per student).

A focus group of artists at a Pair Acrobatics*Convention came up with the following when asked what their practice was:

- To understand another body and feel it like my own
- To magically communicate without words
- To control your own ego and your body's energy to provide an open space for

the other

- *Two people working as one*
- *To take responsibility, to take care of someone's life, to create a safe practice*
- *An acceptance of all possible physical states i.e. strength and fragility can co-exist in the same moment/space*
- *To allow oneself to be scared and use that to dare, risk*
- *To develop a trust towards oneself, the other and to life – the concentration of fear making one acutely aware of one's limitations*
- *To understand dialogue and compromise*
- *The knowledge of a technique to be present in the here and now*
- *A knowledge about weaknesses, your's, their's, our's – highlighting the gaps between who you are and who you want to be. (Pair Acro Convention 2012, 1-14)*

These were the primary statements this group of experienced professionals discussed. If we were to replace the context of pair acrobatics with that of being human in the world, their fundamental propositions could be seen as the philosophy of an idea of health predicated on an inseparability from the other, embracing fear, weakness and fragility as indispensable for a strong safe practice of living that involved daring, risk and responsibility in an inter-subjective space of trustful communication. Pair acrobatics here reads like an ethical programme detailing how one could act in the world with the Other. It conjures a world in which we are irrevocably tied to the Other, whether we like it or not, an ethical stance articulated in Butler's *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2006). Taking this as an example, I would propose that this would be a next possible phase of circoanalysis, a research into ethics and social responsibility via circus. This would be a circus as a non-dialectical unity of a thought/concept and an action. (Zaccarini, 2014, pps 195-196)

I include, in the Appendices, an equally bracketed piece of writing concerned with describing a short sequence of actions from the research that attempted to lift a practice out of its circus enframement. As it describes a sequence rather than, as above, a practice as a whole, it reads as a narrative rather than a manifesto. What it revealed to me was a step in the process of understanding bodies in space and so, therefore, one step towards a working with ethics as a *comportment*.

Ethics

As seen above ethics can simply be put as a comportment towards the other. It implies a position in and a sharing of space and so involves a bodily practice. It is a corporeal orientation. (Levinas) The acrobats put forth a set of propositions that concerned a body and an other. My doctoral thesis concluded that the other, as spectator, was a significant omission in the discourse of circoanalysands, so that an exploration of the ethics of circus practice would be a logical next move rather than the grander and more ambitious field of socio-politics.

To start from the point of politics as an idealism, with an intellectual or cognitive emphasis removed from the daily, concrete practice of artists could only have produced ideas alienated from real conditions, induced by speculations of circus removed from lived affect. *The Socio-Political Dimension of Circus* was already a non-starter.

The notion of a socio-politics of circus was one I thought needed work, burdened as it is by romantic presuppositions and ideological enframements that perhaps do not serve artists more than they do pervasive and concealed commercial powers. I conveniently forgot the conclusion of my PhD, which presented ethics as the next logical move for circoanalysis. Socio-politics sounded so much cooler, trendy, sparkly and jargony. It was a sign of intellectual hipsterism because there was actually no content to the idea. It sparkled on the surface of a rhetorical ocean, it was foam. It had nothing to do with me as an artist, it was not what motivated me as a pedagogue and it was not my concern as an analyst. It was lazy because, as I have come to believe, there is no socio-politics without a practice based ethics of the other.

So the ethics returned, like the repressed from the undertow of the unconscious - a notion not so flashy or spectacular and the theorists I went on to use would not be the trendy ones I enlisted in my application for research funding. This was the work I needed to do, within artistic practice, to build the foundations of a research that could call itself, one day, both artistic and socio-political.

Simon Critchely's *Infinetly Demanding* came to the rescue with his proposition that politics, as that which names a concern around which subjects can congregate, has to be local if it is to have a connection with actually lived reality and actually acting people. These people, bearing in mind that they live and act together in some form, would have to conjugate their concerns, then, around the notion of the other. Ethics, for Critchely, is a meta-politics and he uses Lacan's Seminar 6: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis as a key element, the Seminar I used to form the conclusions of my PhD. This concerns the shift in analysis from desire to drive.

The analyst's couch prevents the drive from expressing itself in its real mode, action. Drive is what happens when action gets caught up by language, entangled with it. A simple oral instinct like hunger that dissipates once enough food has been eaten is different for the need for constant oral stimulation whether that's bulimia,

something "innocent" like thumb sucking or something sexual, something verbal, something narcotic. These drives never find their object of satisfaction, they circle around a void and return to themselves - in other words there can be enough food but there can never be enough satisfaction.

The inhibition of motility on the couch forces the drive's partial expression in the word, the arena of the symbolic which constitutes desire. The transition from the babble of ever skipping, metonymically shifting desire to the silent bluntness of the drive (when the patient has nothing left to say) is one hallmark of the end of analysis. And it is to the drive and the real that Lacan points when he speaks about ethics in Seminar 6. This is to say that the drive cannot be fully spoken, it can only be acted. When we speak about it, we lose some of the pleasure to be had from it - and that's what desire is, a concession.

Each participant in this research had been through a Circoanalytic process with me consisting of between ten to twenty sessions. I recognised elements of their discourse in my own genealogy as a rope artist, concerns and preoccupations around which we could group and produce a studio practice together. This was my question - how does the Circoanalytic procedure on the couch (the word, desire) transfer to the studio (action, drive)? How does the studio become the clinic? How does the pedagogue/analyst make art? And what are the ethical implications of each of these positions?

To give myself a working analogy I used the image of the rope, 3 thick strands woven together to form one - analysis, pedagogy and art:

1. Pedagogy as an artistic practice - neither my students nor my participating artists could be called my artworks, but the improvised mode and spontaneous performance of teaching and directing/choreographing are artefacts in themselves, with significant others watching and participating. Artworks presented in a formal context (theatre, gallery etc..) would have to retain this element, which is to say that the artist directs, choreographs and informs the watching/listening participants.
2. Analysis as a pedagogic practice - the subject is brought to what they did not know they already knew about themselves. If a formal art piece were to adhere to this then the participants of the experience would have to come to some realisation about themselves.
3. Analysis as an artistic practice - here the artist, in the position of the analyst (catalyst), produces the unconscious in the spectator via the transference and allows them the time to realize something about their own desire. This involves, like in analysis, leaving enough space for desire to get moving, and enough time for the conscious mind to relax its repressive grip on unconscious desire. It is to produce affect (bodily truths) that can later be understood cognitively as knowledge.

Affect

".....my heart skipped a beat or 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 – the nose wrinkles at a smell, or the stomach cramps and the throat retches, the eyes spurt tears before the reaction can be described or inscribed in the symbolic, or 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. A *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 absolute inseparability with the material consequences of having a mind. Where psychoanalysis and the philosophy of vital materiality 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."

Circus is a space crammed with immediate affects, rather than cognitive understandings or even registratable emotions. What possible link could there be between ethics and affect? My gut (see below: Endocrinology) told me that somehow there was a way that ethics could slide into the theoretical gulf between affect and cognition as some kind of mediator. I searched for answers and found them in neuroscience.

It appears that deontological ethics is on the side of gut instincts - the reaction to an event that provokes affect causes a reaction/decision based on passivity. Consequentialism on the other hand relies on some form of cognitive process which signals a form of active engagement with the problematic. Since, neurologically activity and passivity in the face of an event are dual processes, it would seem that cognitive and affective response are also dual processes. Ethics is one example of how these are coterminous and how ethics as such could act at their borders.

The claim that circus can have no content appropriate to its form or does not provide material for thought based on its own conditions of (re)production is one that I wanted to challenge in this research. The fact that when you are flooded with affect it is hard to think straight, if at all, helped me understand what the circus does. It actively wants the spectator to be overwhelmed with affect, perhaps so that its lack of so-called

meaning, logic or consistency on the cognitive level is never an issue. Just like a lot of politics, it works with the "knee-jerk" reaction.

The only way out of this problematic I thought was to strip the act of its orgasmic bursts (what we call the tricks) to try and achieve instead a plateau of intensity. To use a somewhat contestable terminology, to produce a practice less phallic.

Endocrinology

Hormonal activity, emanating from not only the brain, but also the lungs, the heart, the gut, the lymphomal system, can be produced not only from an event but also the memory of an event. Thought creates matter. Thought changes material conditions. How we think can change what we are (composed of, composing ourselves of).

A reaction to a dangerous situation produces adrenalin which enables us to act in certain superheroic ways. A physical practice, such as extreme exertion, can produce the "reward" hormone of dopamine, oft associated with drug addiction. Pain will release the body's homemade opiates, endorphins. Eating dark chocolate will stimulate the production of serotonin, our built-in anti-depressant. A physical practice such as caring for a child can raise the levels of oestrogen in a man. A competitive sport can increase the production of testosterone in a woman preventing her from menstruating. Hugging someone for more than twenty seconds will release the bonding hormone, or the "love" hormone oxytocin flooding into the bloodstream. Practices generate movement in matter at a level that is microscopically withdrawn from our perception.

Affects share ground as much with psychoanalytic drives, on the threshold of somatic and psychic as with hormones and neurotransmitters which are actually existing material things. There is a materiality to affect and yet cognitive processes can also produce materials. Language can create matter, even if that matter is microscopic. With respect to the drive, simple instinctual actions gets caught in a net of signification and lose their transparency. External and concrete stimuli - the threat of danger - activates a material shift in the body's composition and so, in turn do internal stimuli - memories and thoughts, drives, image representations and word representations. (Freud)

Testosterone is produced when you compete - against external, concretely existing others, or against yourself (internal, imaginary others). Combined with adrenalin it forms the backbone of many circus practices, especially those concerned with high physical risk, such as the rope. It may even be produced by those, such as handstanding or juggling where the risk of failure is humiliation producing the affect of shame - that affect that flushes one's body irrepressibly hot-red. The pay-off for those risks are the mind-melting, pain soothing endogenous drugs of endorphins and the feel-good-success confidence of dopamine.

Something emerges in the research about the masculine environment promoted by circus training and it has to do, perhaps, not merely with cultural manifestations of gender but with testosterone. It isn't because

culturally girls are "supposed" to cry more than boys that girls in the training facility *do* cry more than boys. It could be because the ideals that are set up are "masculine" and require more testosterone than estrogen. Many of my young female students want to be able to do what the boys do. Never has a young male student cried on my shoulder because he physically couldn't do "girl" things. This is not gymnastics where the boys and girls compete according to their sex. Supposedly here in the "gender-utopia", or merely gender-ignorance of circus, measurements are supposedly taken without bias. This only means that they are, invisibly, taken, with extreme bias. This naturalised placing of masculine ideals - mastery, control, puissance, speed, logically progressive (Vertical) strength and ability i.e. the inevitable prospect of human perfection casts the medium in a Humanistic light. The huMan's centrality appeared most concretely when he dominated animals as a sign of his superiority - even if some of these trainers were women. The animals are gone but he somehow remains the motor of the movement - both the physical movement practice and the circus as a "movement", as a set of ideals and concerns.

This "movement", with its educational, vertical premise of progress is something in need of critique.

It is in this sense that my analysis brings me to the phallicism of Circus, it's exhibitionism, it's fast, flimsy flashiness, it's strong, stupid sublimity.

The "statistical average or middle ground..... spells out a systematized standard of recognizability – of Sameness – by which all others can be assessed, regulated and allotted to a designated social location. The human is a normative convention, which does not make it inherently negative, just highly regulatory and hence instrumental to practices of exclusion and discrimination." is one way of describing the hetero/masculinist reification of circus. (The Post Human)

In *Testo Junkie*, Beatriz Preciado experiments with externally administered testosterone to measure and document its effects. We decide to generate practices that will balance out the testosterone fuelled arena of the circus training facility with a dose of practice-produced, internally manufactured oestrogen. If practices of mastery, competition and success both produce and are fuelled by testosterone and adrenalin, then practices of care, concern and fragility should promote the production of a hormone, a material called oestrogen, to generate more of the same. If affect is transmissible or inducible, why shouldn't hormone production be?

The effect we aim to have as artists, is, therefore, material and there is no reason for that to be opposed to the cognitive. Considering the speed inherent in both testosterone and adrenalin, an environment centralising oestrogen as its preferred drug would privilege slowness and inclusivity or multiplicity and so the plateau rather than the orgasmic burst of climactic activity that defines the trick, the plateau that might allow pleasure and thought, affect and cognition to collaborate in the same space/moment.

New Materialisms

The evening begins with the guests tasting a homemade vegan chocolate mousse, to set a feeling of conviviality as they guess the ingredients. Avocado, coconut butter, chilli, salt, cocoa powder, chocolate, cherries they guess, all correctly. I say "and the ingredient of love." Made with love, we say. Not just a feeling during the process of making, but an ingredient - made *with* love, as evidenced in the bonding thing-hormone oxytocin. The evening is all about ingredients, what happens when a set of materials - avocado, chilli, chocolate, bodies, ropes, salt etc.... - spend some time with each other, bond. At first view the pot of chocolate mousse is inert, but processes of amalgamation, aggregation, morphing, joining, and decaying are happening all the time. Once this apparently inert substance hits the taste buds, it begins to flush the bloodstream with the cocoa that will release the neuropeptides from their latency to riot in the body looking to connect to the to release serotonin. Not so inert after all.

Feeling good is a movement.

Feeling not so good one night, painfully in love, I try to write some poetry fuelled by wine and what seemed to me some hormones I hadn't felt since adolescence - that period where hormone and affect firework themselves throughout the body. This unreciprocated love, I wrote, was a fine, granular mineral in the blood stream exfoliating my veins and causing the pain in my heart - full of grit, yet beautiful, scrubbing me, making me feel.

The next day I embark on a childish art project to make salt crystals.

Take boiling hot water. Dissolve salt in water until it is saturated. Pour in glass beaker and place coin on a string (small rope) into the solution. Pour in food colouring (optional). I choose blue. Put on window sill. Cover and wait.

I didn't know why, I did not see the link, except that it gave me some form of satisfaction. I was clearly sublimating. I wrote a genealogy.

1975 - I dissolved caustic soda crystals in a glass of water - my father told me they were the most poisonous thing in the world - and put it on my window sill to see if the sun would drink it- this has been my mother's explanation for evaporation. If it drank it was clearly stupid and I knew more than it. A week later, having forgotten about the experiment - I had many on the go at the same time - the glass was half drunk and the sky was a uniform metal English grey. I think this may have been my first recollection of shame - I had killed the sun, I had ruined it for everyone and we would never be able to go to the beach ever again. After that I would learn how to bracket my parent's theses - put them into parentheses (Avital Ronell) - and find my own way about the materials of the world.

1980 - At school we made copper sulphate crystals grow in little jars as a combination of science lesson and art project - the aesthetic, affective appeal of art combining with the abstract, cognitive satisfaction of understanding. Inorganic things grow too, there is life that is neither human, animal nor vegetable.

1991 - The moment before a psychotic break. I am sitting in a bar. No-one sees me. I am invisible, or only a projection (trust a psychotic to change their metaphor very few seconds). I realise that I am not human, that I was given to my parents to look after (cue Messiah complex, or paranoid alien origins). If I were to cut myself and see blood that would only be due to my human conditioning. I am, in fact composed of something translucent. The game is up, I no longer believe in my "self", my projection (ego, Habitus, ideology, human apparatus). I see right through it. People see right through me. I am *crystalline*.

1997 - I'm reading a lot of Jung, alchemical texts, re-reading *A Thousand Plateaus*, and am obsessed with the spiritual healing properties of crystals which seem to have something to do with their aesthetic value. They too are living, they vibrate at post-human frequencies.

2012 - the Turner Prize is awarded to an artist who fills a derelict council flat in South London with copper sulphate solution to produce a sparkling grotto of deep blue crystal formations. It reminds me of 1980 and I am awed by its simplicity.

2014 - I read Jane Bennet's *Vibrant Matter* and I feel like a child looking at the world anew. I fall in love, write some bad love poetry and make some salt crystal sculptures.

I meditated long and hard over this simple, childish experiment and its possible links to both the experience of falling in love and artistic research as an ecology in which things grow. The various entities growing in me; ideas, affects, images. Crystals on my window sill sedimented and grew on that little rope as two bodies in a studio on a thicker rope accumulated layers of experience and shed layers of skin, grew fond and afraid of the feelings fizzing between skins and in the evening the excess of all that spilled into writing while I stared at my little mineral garden. Wine and tears were also spilled, but not wasted, since they too were mopped up by my writing pad.

The water has to be boiling - therefore at the point where it becomes something else, where it *sublimates*.(Jung, Alchemy)

The solution has to be saturated with salt - it has to be loaded *until it can take no more*.

As the solution cools around the object plunged into this boiling, intensive solution, the water starts to "*give up*" the salt to the object. Materials begin to bond and stabilise in that harsh, urgent environment.

Over the weeks those first salt crystals grew. This was the object of the exercise, this was the teleology of the process and yet this object could not take *all* the salt. This was my discovery. The aesthetic object just cannot

cope with the intensity of the process or the solution or the materials and so salt falls away and forms a thick, solid crust at the bottom of the jar.

The resulting object reminds me of the circus artefact. It is a beautiful, fragile, sparkly thing. The process has been intense, boiling, saturated, *too-much* and so there must be an excess that goes somewhere. Something must be sublimated. It does not go into the artifact. This thick, solid aggregate of crystals at the bottom of the jar is a discarded over-production of the process, a waste product.

This is the substance that interests me in artistic research - the unintended, real discoveries, the chance, surprising by-product/off-shoots of a specific aim. These writings are the fallings away of what the acts presented these evenings could not contain. Ethics is excessive of the act. How do I record this the way that the thick crust records the too-much, the waste, the inadmissible *jouissance* of the sparkly object? Perhaps it should be the act that is discarded so we can get to what is really going on. Circus as an ethical act.

Unrequited love made me make those salt sculptures. And why should I be embarrassed about that? I should, rather, be embarrassed if I made my work with no passion, or commitment so that I might remain safe, unaffected and therefore a pure, cynical technician.

Love, an excess with nowhere else to go, was sublimated into these aesthetic objects. Love as "the thing you don't have, that you give to someone who doesn't want it" (Zizek via Lacan) is just as excessive as ethics. But oxytocin is a thing. Love is a material. And so ethics, in my reasoning must be material. (Levinas)

The Ethical (Circus) Act

Aerial rope is a practice that is found within the circus. But it wasn't founded there. It is also found on ships, in gymnasiums, in jungles, on mountains, in massage practices and in Indian sports. Its purpose within the circus is defined by the circus. Here we placed a phenomenological bracket around circus and explored only the materials available in the room - not only two bodies and a rope but also the psychoanalytic materials of desire, fantasy, projection, transference, identification and drive.

What do these two bodies want to do on this rope with each other? What happens when all these materials spend some time with each other? Meshing molecules, transferring past others, negotiating desires, managing drive? Colliding techniques, trying to stay on the same page, finding a common language and not mixing our metaphors, when we have bracketed the vocabulary we usually use, were all processes that we were not accustomed to. Our histories had brought us to this moment and our pasts were as much a material as our muscles.

We would try to do everything possible to create a rope practice with an other that did not bend to the demands of the circus performance as we had analysed it.

This approximated a sort of No Circus Manifesto (Yvonne Rainer)

No to the spectacular

No to the cool or the "wow" factor

No to displays of pure strength or agility or speed
No to knots whereby the base is locked into the rope
No to tricks
No to fixed positions - base and flyer should be interchangeable
No to presentation of a position/figure so as to maintain fluidity and movement
No to elaboration, ornamentation or anything superfluous to the task
No to configurations that we have seen before or that are part of existing circus rope vocabularies

This manifesto combined a simplicity of intent with an impossible content. With never the intention of producing a finalised circus act or performance (although we were seduced several times along the way by the spectacular, cool, strong things that emerged) the tasks we gave ourselves seemed impossible, or rather, infinitely demanding.

The phenomenological bracketing of valued qualifiers of circus suggested a link to Žižek's deployment of Lacan's *nodal point* or *point de capiton* in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*.

For example there is a cluster of signifiers - virtuosity, skill, risk, strength - and a series of practices - aerial, equilibristic, manipulation and acrobatics - quilted together by a central master signifier - Circus. Remove circus, what happens? Would they still exist in the same field? Žižek makes the point that Liberty, Freedom, Equality, Praxis, Action are empty concepts, in that they have no positive content if that central position is vacant, say if it isn't filled with democracy or feminism or Marxism etc... If the master signifier is feminism then all those concepts such as liberty and equality will only be achievable when women are treated and have the same opportunities as men, if it's Marxism then it is only when the proletariat revolutionary class takes power that we will have such a thing as justice, if it's environmentalism then freedom will only be available to us once we have restored some ecological balance 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 and given some teleological purpose (upwards, vertically). They are not inseparable from it. To assume that they are is to have accepted their naturalised or reified status and to not see how the master signifier traps and constrains their movement and potential.

If you placed something else at the centre of those signifiers and practices what would happen? It suggests a re-signification of all the terms in the field.

So, to the new idea of pair rope practice. Although still a performative practice, what would happen if the notion of performance itself were not the nodal point it referred back to? The place of S1 in the schema of Lacan's discourse theory? (The Other side of Psychoanalysis)

As is clear, it was ethics that came to reside there and we saw the shift it made to the practice. We were to be joined by two other circus artists, who would work in the medium of solo actions. I decided to draw up the conditions of engagement, or comportment that emerged from the duet process to help them understand the importance of the other in the work. Something perhaps not fully visible or articulable in the practice and so something that I came to see as an excess of the practice, a by-product.

At the same time I used this as a writing exercise to see in what possible ways I could communicate the experience to a reader. This meant leaving the rigour of effective writing and risking something more like affective writing.

In a writing workshop for choreographers in Athens, I read these articles out loud for the first time, as an example of deriving an ethics from a physical practice and how to re-introduce the other if s/he had been forgotten. It demonstrated the phenomenological bracketing of circus, performance and rope practice so that the written version of the practice, the "what does it do?" could be applied to other fields. This was my intention but I had no idea of its efficacy until I had to read it to my participants in the workshop. Because it is written in the first person and addresses a second, (I to you) I understood, while reading that this was equally applicable to the situation I was in within the workshop; the Greek choreographers became my significant others (the ones I was caring for, holding a space for) and also my *signifying* others, since they provided the content for the ethics, it's anchor - "the master signifier is you" I thought at the time.

Pedagogically this places an extraordinary, one might say excessive, responsibility upon the student to draw out from the teacher the very best, to support the teacher in such a way as to allow her/him to flourish.

When we presented the work in Stockholm, a participant remarked that one of the articles was uncannily similar to what she had written for her marriage vows. I understand now why the word *conjugate* was the verb of choice to describe how different concerns come to centre around the notion of the other.

Just as, in analysis, every truth event retroactively shifts, reorganises and recolours events and sequences of the past, so in the studio and "real" life, the truth event of the duet practice reorganised and re-choreographed the other rope practices that I would bring to the research. If ethics was at the centre, then love was its first corollary.

We presented the practice for the guests. We did not perform but rather managed the difficulty situations that we had set up. North African acrobatics did not begin as a performative form for a human spectatorship. It was a form of spiritual Sufi devotion - walking on the air. It was as performative only inasmuch as prayer is. (Aurelien Bory, Compagnie 111) Later it is colonised by the circus for its formal attributes only and is filled by the content/purpose of the master signifier. The duet practice reversed this movement and made an ethical practice from a spectacular one.

I ask a pair acrobat, in an early presentation what prerogatives she has when she walks into a studio. She says 1) to generate material, 2) to meet the other, 3) to solve a problem. These are the ethical considerations under

which she practices. I ask her "Do you have these in mind when you walk out of your door and into the world?" She smiles and shakes her head, "No, but I will."

I liked the idea that when she left her home on her way to the bus, the shop, the studio, she would make it her goal to generate material in a meeting with the other in order to solve something.

Butoh

You are invited to hold a bowl brimming with water imagining that it is a lake. Every ripple is a wave splashing at the rim. Try to keep the water calm, still. To help with this task imagine that at the rim are villages, farms, forests. Every wave sweeps away a village, drowns a farm, wipes out fauna.

How still do you have to be to prevent the water moving? What kind of self-mastery do you need to achieve stillness? Every tremble of your hands, every creak of knuckle and joint, every breath and beat of the heart sends tremors through the lake splashing thousands of fish flapping to their death. And now you must walk causing as little casualty as possible.

We are never still because we are full of things that have nothing to do with us, things as intimate as lungs, blood cells excited with oxygen, bacteria dissolving and processing matter, skins scurrying with microbial actants busy busy busy with life. These things are alien to us - like affects, like desire which Lacan calls *ex-timate* - things so intimate to us that they are alien.

Of the many things one could say about Butoh the most important here is its emphasis on *thing-ness* and the false distinction between inside and outside. A proto-Object Oriented Ontology, it practices the notion of non-human materiality bringing one to an anti-anthropocentric experience of being a thing - wave, black fog, pocket, tree on cliff edge, ice field - alien to our selves. It also works in non-human time - a rock experiences time differently than we do. Considering how full of holes we are, what we ingest from our environments without knowing and what we expel into them, it seems ridiculous now that there should be a distinction between us and that rock. If we could ask the salt crystals they would tell us as much but that would be to anthropomorphise them!

She starts to climb the rope. Her hips are a bowl filled with the bright, sparkling water of a lake. She carries the lake and the responsibility for the many life forms within her. What she contains is precious in a way so vast that it approximates what Timothy Morton has coined a *hyperobject*. We put down our bowls and consider what it is she must do to climb the rope, becoming what she has. Yes, this exposes the sublime difficulty of what we do in circus but that is not the point of the task.

Attempting to operate at the speed of a non-human object - it takes 12 minutes to climb the rope rather than, say, 12 seconds - she not only makes no ripple in the bowl but as a consequence of her care she makes barely a ripple in the entire space. The drops, falls, twists, cascades, tumbles and bursts of the circus act shock the

space and awe the spectator; they send waves through them. It is an artillery more than a vocabulary that makes us puke up our responses, gasp, jump in our seats, grip the thigh of the person next to us or half-cover our eyes. This imaginary realm, this affective feedback-loop leaves no space for anything but the "knee-jerk reaction". Here she is giving us a choice, even to look away, that the circus act cannot conceive of, since the aim of its manic display of potency is that we look, that we fixate. What Freud has to say about fixation concerns only the childish in us.

I suffer, like many, from information overload, from being offered too much choice that is no choice at all. It paralyzes me at times so that I simply don't choose, I opt out instead. She opts for one thing - it takes time, she takes her time to understand the simplest thing for a rope artist, the thing that is presumed, taken for granted as a means to the end of a trick - the climb. She is a counterpoint to the circus act that is a frantic consumption and exhaustion of stimulus, a frenzy of choices, packed full, ejecting indiscriminate testosterone-fuelled spurts of force in multiple directions in order to evade the fact there is no point to the action except to slap us into affective reaction. In a way she has found the point that the circus act is desperately looking to avoid. They both have the same energy but they use it in different ways. They are both portals to *jouissance*, but the circus act expends it, ejaculates it, attempting to exhaust it, sweats, vomits and celebrates it while she stores it, saves it, savours it, stretches it out without spilling a single, sacred drop. The analogy I would like to make here with regard to stimulus is that the circus act is bulimic and she is anorexic - she *refuses, she takes her stance against what circus will have her be, she has made an ethical choice*. I use anorexia here in its psychoanalytic framing, that it is the modern symptom of hysteria (as opposed to 20th century fainting, paralysis, coughing etc...) and to be absolutely clear that it has nothing to do with feeling fat. It is to do with revolt against what the masculinist discourse (which I have already mentioned structures circus practice) tells her she should be. And to be absolutely clear, hysteria is not a positioning exclusive or essential to biological females, it is, rather, a neurotic (and perhaps gendered, and therefore historical) comportment in relation to the Other.

I find here a position of strength not unlike Antigone's. I find a force that is continuous like the undertow of the ocean or the persistence of a mountain. It is that hard crust of blue mineral at the bottom of the jar supporting the delicate glitter of the salt crystal around the string but which the little brittle ornament need not acknowledge in order to be beautiful. For all the force, prowess and potency of the circus act, in this research it comes to be seen as a very pretty, brittle ornamentation desperately trying to avoid its ground.

She gave us time to think rather than taking our time by filling it with distracting ornaments, she made space for us to be rather than filling space. This is how we can consider the other in our practice as a concern for our project, by giving others some freedom to move, by allowing for some choice. This practice gets me one step closer to the idea that the artist can be analyst by allowing space and time for a transference to establish itself without demanding or telling us what that relation should be. It is the transference that produces the

opening of the unconscious and if the literature on circus is thin, it is because circus practice is an opening onto *jouissance*, an experience that avoids the word precisely because it would rob it of pleasure.

She is the Angel of Circus looking back at the debris of a testosteroneic ejaculation of progress. (Walter Benjamin)

She is an anti-accelerationist.

She redefines virtuosity by placing careful concern at the centre of her web of significance.

She does not need to impress us, or gain our approval, she is not working with desire - based on lack, a lack in the Other we try and fill - she is working with the constant, silent pressure (*Kraft*) of drive which permits no lack. *Jouissance* has no lack, it is always already *too much*.

Circus is always, already *too much*.