

Freedom through Restriction

- an artistic project which investigates movement, freedom of expression and the value of restrictions in creative processes.

by
Gaia Santuccio

Stockholm University of the Arts

Master Degree, 15hp

Contemporary Circus Practices

2022

Supervisor: Marie Andrée Robitaille

Examiner: Ana Sanchez-Colberg

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A RESEARCH PROJECT BY GAIA SANTUCCIO IN COLLABORATION WITH ROPE

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- Chapter/Section title
- Key words/sentences
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ABSTRACT

Freedom through restriction is an artistic project which investigates movement, freedom of expression and the value of restrictions in creative processes, through my experience. Through this study, I aim to develop innovative methods to encourage myself and fellow practitioners to connect with the body, to expand awareness and knowledge of the circus practice through the self, and to think through movement for creative, artistic, and pedagogical purposes. The source material is videos of my movement research, relevant literature and texts that I have been writing throughout the two-year Master Programme at the Stockholm University of the Arts.

I start by introducing the concept of restricted verticality, an involuntary alteration of the normalized environment of aerial disciplines, where the vertical space is stripped to the minimum. Adaptation, sensing, rope manipulation are methods extrapolated from the exploration of the limited vertical space. Learning to shift conditions voluntarily becomes a method to unlock new possibilities and to acquire deeper knowledge of the circus practice. The purpose of this thesis is to propose a less anthropocentric approach to circus apparatus and a shift in virtuosity that differ to the standardized ones of athletic prowess and dominance over the objects, to enable circus artists to become active creators and improve a sense of availability towards other animate and inanimate bodies. The last chapter is dedicated to my Final Major Project, a physical representation of my study at the end of the Master course, and how this experience informed my practice further.

Restriction is throughout a framed space of investigation, where environment, bodies and task-based improvisation approaches are all intended as spaces within which there is an infinite number of possibilities to explore freely and discover their full potentialities. The mutual relationship between restriction and freedom of movement is opportunity for artistic research processes.

WHO AM I? RETRACING MY FOOTSTEPS

Movement, embodied knowledge, and knots are the main core of my investigation. My main method of research is aerial rope. I am interested in freedom of movement and self-expression, in opposition to a standardized virtuosity designated by pre-existing ideals of aesthetics that force people to conform and repeat without questioning. I would like to be an advocate for all those aerialists who experience the contradiction of an art that is sold as the embodiment of freedom while all it does is to impose physical, creative and artistic boundaries to be followed and mastered in order to fit in.

Let's take a few steps back and retrace to some specific moments in my life. Moments that became the pillars of my project: in other words, happenings that produced important reflections which turned out to be the essential reasons that brought me to grow and cultivate my current concerns. To explain my present, it is significant to open a little window into my background story and my past, because both past and context are indispensable elements that bent my curiosities and purposes.

Moving and expressing through the body always represented a safe space for me and inspired immense curiosity since a young age when dance technique felt limiting and I was rather passionate and intrigued by exploring the meaning of body language and the billions of ways to articulate, move and use my body. Starting from when I was about ten and scavenging for connections between movement and emotions, through the everyday life and performance. I remember watching and participating in dance shows. I sensed, or had the impression, that often what I witnessed was a series of shapes and sequences, and I struggled to connect with the emotions that the performers (me included) were supposed to represent. At the time, I experienced choreography as a set of fixed moves to which personal emotions could be glued to. Taking for granted that we all experience and perceive the world subjectively but inhabiting a context where I am encouraged to repeat preconceived steps, in the same manner as everyone else, I wondered how I could apply my singular, intimate emotions. I felt like I was trained to conform, stuck in a standardized way to express feelings imposed by fixed motions and qualities, and I could not find space for my own self-expression. Emotions were stereotyped, objectified.

How can I express myself and what I feel?

I knew the answer was in the body. So, I began to grow an interest in body language. More specifically, I started to dissect daily gestures. I wanted to understand how we could embody, enact, and symbolize emotions, to express through the body in motion, and to bring clarity to my movement so for the audience to comprehend what I mean to express. This specific curiosity brought me to study **Etienne Decroux' corporal mime technique** at Moveo, centro de formacion y creacion en teatro fisico in Spain in 2009 where I learnt to represent clear gestures and actions by physically practicing how to articulate my body.

I have been training rope for the past ten years, including studying at two **contemporary circus universities** in United Kingdom. After doing a foundation degree at Circomedia, centre for contemporary circus and physical theatre in Bristol, I took my bachelor's degree in 2014 at the National Centre for Circus Arts in London. In this time, I often felt claustrophobic within my discipline. I experienced rope as a piece of equipment on which I drilled a set of tricks. And I saw tricks as boxes that I had to tick. You are either mastering rolling technique, dynamic rope, or you are more of a drop kind of person. I enjoyed dancing with and exploring rope. I was intrigued to learn to understand the knots that I automatically do without thinking and I wondered how to transform them. However, I felt like I did not specifically fit in a category and I was not good enough to satisfy the standards to be a successful, known rope artist. Could I create new tricks? Was that even a thing? I remember the first time I invented a new trick, and I asked my teacher if that were okay. I did not know it was possible to create your own tricks. I came from a mindset through training sports, skiing competitions and the

drilling of tricks where technique is the vocabulary you use to move on the apparatus. So, if I want to be creative, I should find space to incorporate my emotions or ideas to the set of preconceived moves that I was taught. I never thought that there could be alternative possibilities or tools to create new pathways. I felt restricted in what I could do. I was learning prepacked tricks which I then performed over and over, always the same, possibly in different order, puzzled and reorganized. Learning technique and tricks, I always knew it was a fundamental part of my training as that is the words we use “to speak” on our apparatus. Without that common knowledge, without that vocabulary we wouldn’t be able to navigate through our apparatus and physically explore. But during creation time, I felt like I missed the tools to do that. I didn’t know how and where to even begin with.

Can I move freely?

What tools or methods can I use to allow freedom of movement and expression?

How can I be creative?

I felt like climbing the rope between freedom and restriction, imprisoned in a fake representation of freedom, creatively limited.

Since 2014 I have been working with **NèonTeatro**, a theatre company from Sicily that works with people with different abilities. That year marks a new beginning for me as a person and as an artist. Working with them and witnessing their life and creative approaches, it has been a life changing experience because it opened my eyes to a whole new way to research movement and to understand myself as a human being. With and through them, I began an ongoing process of exploration of my own self-expression on an entirely new level. NèonTeatro uses task-based improvisation activities and proposes images and concepts that everybody can relate to. The aim is to encourage each single person to respond to and to interpret the instructions subjectively and freely. This type of approach is not one of a kind and it is used by several companies. Similar principles have been adopted by many other somatic practices, like in the case of Gaga (a dance style founded by Ohad Naharin in Israel in the sixties) or contact improvisation. What made it incredibly essential for me was to observe and to be part of a group of extremely diverse subjects, physically and mentally, and to be astonished and empowered by the beauty of such a diverse variety of responses to the same task, and modalities of bodily, and verbal expressions.

Today, when I look back at my project proposal of my application to the Master Programme in Contemporary Circus Practices at the Stockholm University of the Arts, I observe how faithful I kept to the concerns and objectives that I had set for myself. Moreover, I see how the process has informed my terminology which, as a result, contributed to grasp a deeper knowledge and understanding of my practice.

MY PRACTICE YESTERDAY

For years, my practice was a one-way approach to rope which consisted in the repetition of drilling tricks. A process that required a lot of physical preparation, where the body learns to automatically follow fixed routines with the aim to perform an extreme physical display, effortlessly. On one hand, that was stimulating. I personally love to be pushed to my limits and beyond. For me, enough is never enough, and it can always be better. Moreover, being circus a physical art form, it is fundamental to learn how to navigate the apparatus one specializes in, as well as to strengthen the body to be able to do that comfortably. On the other hand, though, it started to lack personality and vulnerability. I could not see myself through my work. I felt more and more like a robot, less and less of a human. Again, being circus a physical art form, the machine-like training on its own did not provide either space or tools to explore my own self-expression.

While studying circus at school, throughout the years, I remember there was often the common joke: *“circus people are just circus people... you know! We do. We don't talk nor think”*. I am not just a body. At the time, I felt as if we naively underestimated ourselves as circus performers, as thinkers, as human beings.

I began to grow an interest in analyzing the actions entailed in the rope-doing which my body automatically does without thinking when I wrap myself in and out of knots. I matured a curiosity in searching ways to adopt a body-mind approach to my discipline. Rather than thinking of rope as a mere object used to perform pre-packed tricks, I started to think of it as a body with agency. A nonhuman body I interact with.

MY PRACTICE TODAY

With these questions in mind, there came a change in the way I explore and experience the apparatus. The focus of my practice shifted from being a one-way approach to rope to an interdisciplinary one. My practice now involves artistic research in movement, writing, video, photo, and crochet so to investigate rope through several lenses and experience it from multiple perspectives.

WRITING is a tool that I use to voice the body, verbalize movement, and reflect.

“Our major skill, the primary value of our culture, is communication through words. We are a verbal culture. We understand through words. We depend on words for contact with each other. We think in words. We can even talk without listening to ourselves and listen to others without hearing.”
(Whitehouse, 1999, p. 32)

Writing is an indispensable vehicle to listen to and better understand the body and the meanings implied in the movement and gestures enacted by it. Words is how we express our wants and needs; verbal language is how we communicate, make sense, and understand one another. When translating movement into words, or when writing thoughts about movement, it is as if we contextualize our actions. We find meanings associated to them. Meanings serve purposes which, consequently, enrich the physical action performed, setting intentions and clearer directions. Moreover, writing opens a window into self-reflection and imagination, which allows to observe oneself from within.

I want to dance like I write and write like I dance.

When I write, I like to write in the form of letters and reflections through a stream of consciousness. The thinking happens through the action of writing. Only after that, I read them back, edit and perfection my texts. Thinking or planning is not a process that happens prior to it. I don't know what I think until it is written down. I like this approach because it allows me to lose control and to free my thoughts. Contrarily, when I move on the rope, I always premeditate my tricks and sequences before I climb it. So, I thought, I should experiment to move like I write. To move as a stream of consciousness. This method is to encourage myself to *think through making, as opposed to make through thinking* (Ingold 2013, p. 12). In his book, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture*, Tim Ingold shares his own reflections on what it means to create things, through a series of examples and experiments. He explains how "*making is a correspondence between maker and material*" (Ingold, 2013, p. 12), where for me the doing is my movement, and the making is the interaction between rope and I, and through this process I learn. Writing is for me a space for reflection, and stream of consciousness as a style inspired my approach to movement research.

I use **VIDEOGRAPHY** as a medium for self-observation. How do I move? Is it how I imagine it? Watching myself from the outside increases a higher level of awareness of myself and how I move. Witnessing my body encourages me to recognize my habits which allows me play with altering and distorting them to generate original routes, meanings, patterns, and situations.

"Changes take place only in a process of development, the development of your awareness, your capacity to observe, your willingness to feel. It is this process that is the creativity." (Whitehouse, 1999, p. 34)



CROCHETING is one of my hobbies. During the pandemic, and after crocheting a lot of baskets, I started to crochet ropes. Crocheting ropes requires the repetition of the same knot for the whole length of it. It has been a meditative practice for me. While making ropes I think about whatever I feel like at that specific moment, random thoughts flow. I would like to share a quote from the book *What I talk about when I talk about running* by Murakami where he writes a memoir on running and writing. I mention it because it made me reflect on the value that my crochet practice had for me and it made me acknowledge that I was doing had more to it than simply crocheting.

"What exactly do I think about when I'm running? I don't have a clue. On cold days I guess I think a little about how cold it is. And about the heat on hot days. When I'm sad I think a little about sadness. When I'm happy I think a little about happiness. As I mentioned before, random memories come to me too". (Murakami, 2008, p. 18)

When you perform the same action repeatedly, you familiarize with it to a point that it gets easy, and you get used to it, so you stop focusing on the action itself. Your mind gets busy. Actually, it always is. In this repetitive action you start to be aware of your thoughts. Every day I want to reach a longer length, knot by knot, until the thread is over just as much Murakami does with his jogging and, step by step, he tries to reach more kilometers and more length than the day before. And while his objectives shift with getting older, there is always a process of pushing the boundaries he sets for himself. While I engage my hands in the action of weaving and knotting, I let my thoughts flow and I listen to them go by. Crocheting, I weave memories. When I put bundle and needle down, at times, I like to reminisce of my contemplations and put it on paper so that for every rope I associate a story. All the ropes that I crochet represent and embed thoughts of a specific moment of my life.



Inspiration came when I stopped searching,
and I began to observe.

2020: A year to remember. It marks the arrival of Covid-19 in Europe, a worldwide pandemic. As a result of it, institutions called a state of emergency and declared what we called a general lockdown. Everybody had to stay home, work from home, never leave home, if not for some extraordinary exemptions. A system of restrictions was created: going to the supermarket was only allowed until a certain time, curfew hours were imposed, and more. Like everyone else, I was stuck at home. We went through a period when we had no access to circus facilities or infrastructures. Aerialists (me included) needed rigging points to train their disciplines and, even if we did have one at home, we did not have the appropriate height to practice the way we were taught. We also could not work as we were taught. Events were canceled and, considering circus is a physical art form, it is necessary to be physically present when teaching it. So, classes became impossible too, at first. The beginning of a universal crisis. We lost everything we had built and worked for, we had no idea how long it would last, nor its consequences, and it felt like facing a wall with no way out.

The truth is that I had always dreamt of rigging a rope at home, but up until that moment I did not see a reason for it. Why rigging a rope at 1.80 meters height, off my attic, in my living room, where I can barely move and where it is impossible to practice the tricks that I need for the shows that I had planned? Every time the idea came to my head, I was always too busy or rushing somewhere to try it out. And now, for once, I had all the time in the world.

Time of quiet,
time of reconciliation with myself,
time in silence,
time to think,
time to look around.

Without any doubt, quite naturally I would say, I realized that for me **it was not a matter of whether I do rope or not, rather it became a question of how to do it?**

I searched through my ropes, and I found my very first one which, a while back, had broken into two perfect halves, each of four meters length. I decided to hang the half incorporating the top part with the carabiner, off the 1.80 meters high point I had available in my house. For every high point, there is a long rope and for every low point, there should be a short rope, I thought. This way it made more sense for me. To have a rope that fits my new workspace with the intention to recreate a miniature of the standardized version of my practice. A point as high as I am tall. Well... actually, I am 1.60 meters tall. So, I, standing straight, extending my arms up, I can reach the ceiling, with my hands perfectly flat. Rope occupies the same vertical space my body occupies, from one extremity to the opposite. From my feet to my hands. Head to hands, tail to feet.

At first, I tried to see what tricks I could train, and which would suit that small vertical space. I began to observe how the tricks changed or, for instance, how the way I performed them differed to what I used to do at a height, as well as investigating how to make them work or, perhaps, mutate them. I started to explore how to enter and exit sequences and moves that I knew, but this time, using the ground to push off instead. I reflected that we move more naturally on the floor. In the air, standing requires arm strength; on the ground we just stand. This means that we gain more time to think and to look through available options, as well as to experiment ideas we might have never thought of. This new approach to rope stimulated to study how such findings would inspire alternative options and pathways and how these can be transposed to the conventional use of rope with the intention to further inform the practice.

Restricted verticality is a focal point of my research, from which everything else unravels. Limited vertical spaces offered me on a golden plate the opportunity to experience, research movement and explore my practice further and deeper, far from the standardized approach to rope. The dark context imposed by the pandemic, it transformed into a precious opportunity, which taught me that if I stop and observe, innovation can be just before my eyes. All I had to do was to really look. Ironically, I had never felt as free as when I had to restrict my vertical space.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wtihXyDGXbA>

Restriction forced transformation in inspiration.
At times like now, at times of stagnation
I thought I had lost my craft, my major medium of work and communication.

So, I searched for new directions,
I scavenged parallel orientations,
I manipulated my foundations to build solid bridges with the intention
to connect the islands of my technique and my art
through my imagination.

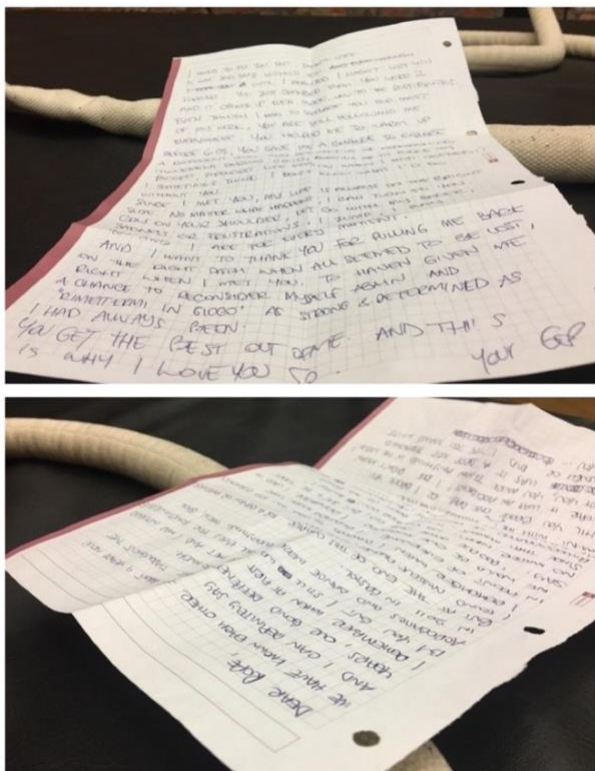
There is no possible talk about future nor evolution
unless we understand the value of play and innovation.
Without embracing alteration,
inhibit mutation,
challenging change, allowing information to reshape your act of creation.

To move on is to keep on moving, in life and in circus.
At times like now, at times of stagnation
I choose to make art by orchestrating adaptation.

Since the age of 16, I traveled and studied in multiple countries across Europe. My life choices have brought me to move and to adapt to new environments, cultures, friends and so forth on a regular basis. When the pandemic began and we were stuck at home, it was natural for me to look for a way to adapt my rope practice to the new workspace. Walking my first steps across the realm of restricted verticality, I remember thinking how intriguing it was the opportunity to do rope in such a dissimilar surrounding and context. I was curious to see how that would inform the quality, content, and approach to rope and if, after a while, it would change my habits.

Adaptation is a constant in my personal life. I value the ability to adapt, and I believe it is a great skill to have. Adapting is an opportunity-occasion to experience newer situations and environments that differ to what I am normally used to, and to learn from them. Every place I have been to, it has enriched my knowledge and my sense of adaptability. Every place I have been to, it contributed to make me the person that I am today. Change has always scared me for as long as I can remember, until the moment when I finally understood that change never means the end, rather it means evolution. So very naturally I adopted the same attitude to my rope practice. My experience informs my circus approach.

I would also like to share a brief reflection regarding the concept of adaptation in relation to circus in general. Circus is well-known for being a nomadic art form. Like I do in my personal life, traditional circuses travel across towns and countries and perform their shows. They take the same tent and execute their acts in the same space, every day. It is a circus that moves unchanged. But how could it be, a circus that moves and adapts to the spaces it meets? How would that inform and shape our approach to our disciplines?



DEAR ROPE...

As part of a task given at the beginning of the Master Programme as part of the Creative Writing module taught by John-Paul Zaccarini, we were asked to write a letter to our apparatus, individually. The style was a stream of consciousness. I ended up writing a letter specifically to my very first rope. The four-meter-long one I talked about in the restricted verticality section. The same one that I hanged at 1.80 meters height. The first rope I have ever made. My very first rope. This letter is where I had my first encounter with the term *adaptation*. It was already present in my physical work, but I hadn't realized it until the moment that I saw it there, written on paper. Soon after that, I created what I call [Adaptation Series](#). It is a collection of videos of my research where I experiment with several, alternative systems to rig the rope inspired and in accordance with the availability offered by my living room.

"You inspired me so much over the past year a new beginning for both, new content was born, and the concept was then adapted to other ropes".

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N3slo1ir9vM>

I slowly turned my living room into a jungle of rope experiments. Once, I tied as many knots as possible on a long rope hanged vertically straight from the ceiling from a point at four meters height (I had built a metal truss in my living room by then) trying possible ways to move through the knots. I took this further by making a daisy chain knot with the tail feeding through the middle of the slack part, and to repeat the action for the whole length of the rope. I then connected the remaining tail to another available point in the room, about one meter away from the first one. One day, I tried to do rope at 1.80m height but on the sofa instead of on the floor, with both long and short ropes. Traveling through adaptation and observing the discoveries found in the restricted vertical space, I realized how **modifying the state of the rope** and **cooperating with the opportunities found in the space**, it changes the way I approach it and makes space for new possibilities and discoveries.

"Objects are products of processes of folding. As Rovelli explains,

In the world described by quantum mechanics, there is no reality except in the relations between physical systems. It isn't things that enter into relations, but rather relations that ground the notion of things. The world of quantum mechanics is not a world of objects: it is a world of events. Things are built by the happening of elementary events. As the philosopher Nelson Goodman wrote in the 1950s, with a beautiful phrase: 'An object is a monotonous process.' A stone is a vibration of quanta that maintains its structure for a while, just as a marine wave maintains its identity for a while, before melting again into the sea.

In other words, according to Rovelli, the conditions of objects, including spacetime, are not other objects but relational processes. Objects are emergent features of fields". (Nail, 2018, p. 225)

Thomas Nail talks about objects through quantum gravity theory and focuses on the value of objects. He sees objects as agents, not things and the world of objects as a world of **events**. As Nelson Goodman says in the quote here above, an object by itself is a monotonous process. Objects, alone, stay unchanged. Nothing happens. It is how we relate to the objects that shapes our understanding of them. So, if we practice rope at the standard height, for example, the way we do rope will hardly change. Rope does not speak, nor it can offer new stimuli on its own. For it to change, it is necessary I actively create an event so to adjust conditions. **Shifting the conditions** of the rope alters my relational process with it, so the way I approach it. Shifting conditions is an occasion to investigate alternative ways to relate to rope. I see here adaptation being the event, the objects-agents being the rope and I, relating through the medium of adaptation. Discoveries from the events are what shape my understanding of it. A loop process of continual feedback and mutual transformation. A process of constant becoming. By shaping the rope, I generate new possibilities. I transform rope and that mutation informs our relation. This way I can experience rope from newer perspectives so to grasp its essence. From this process I learn to learn from it.

Now I share an example I love to tell my students at my workshops, it is a simpler way to explain the same thing, so that they can relate to my research on adaptation on a personal level. It is a bit like when we have a new friend or a girl or a boyfriend and we want to get to know this person more. To do that we plan events together: going to the park, going for a glass of wine, meeting family members, etc... We create events that allow us to get to know that person better. The more events, the more chances to learn about someone. With rope and adaptation, it is the same. The event of adapting my discipline to other spaces informs my practice and it further deepens my knowledge of it.

Something changed in my approach to rope. The trick is not the heart of the action anymore, but the ability to displace conditions with the intention to adapt to the space to benefit from its potentialities. Relating to the space through adaptation makes me an active creator. It is an opportunity to re-think rigging creatively and to acquire innovative experiential knowledge of the apparatus.

I imagine people being big, walking heads. With a useless, pendulous body attached to them.

We see, we hear, we smell, we taste, we think. All these processes, except touch, happen in our heads. We live in a society where we learn to communicate verbally and we associate ourselves with our heads. We grow up identifying with our heads. Since a very young age, we go to school and sit at desks. We are taught to use our brains to think and to express ourselves through words, while keeping our bodies still. The only times when we learn to use our bodies is through practicing sports. We are disconnected to our own bodies and we often objectify them to meet the standards. We naturally adapt to the norms. We decide how to move before we do so. We think with the brain and the body is our puppet to get us through the world. With this conception of myself, it is as if my body and my mind are two separate things.

In my research, I am interested in tacit knowledge. I am a kinesthetic and multisensorial type of learner. In circus, when approaching a new apparatus, for example, it is important for me to have some time alone with it, to allow my body to experience and intuitively explore it before learning tricks and technique. I perceive through movement and, through the body, I acquire knowledge. I believe that the body is entirely made of mind and that we cannot make a distinction between the two. Through motion, we experience and so, we learn.

Capire significa sentire,
quando si riferisce al corpo.

(To understand it means to feel,
When referring to the body)

I searched for the meaning of the verb *to feel* in Italian, my mother tongue. The translation of *to feel* is *sentire*. *Sentire*, it means to perceive and recognise the outside world through the senses and to have consciousness of it. Therefore, *to feel* does not limit itself to express the moment in which we perceive “the thing” as we are used to think of it, but it goes deeper than that. It also means that we acknowledge that perception cognitively and that we reach a state of awareness. We become conscious through the body and so, through feeling, we understand.

At the early stages of my investigation, my goal was to better understand body language and non-verbal communication. Can I voice my body? Can I understand the words my body speaks? How does my body speak? Does it speak words? And, if not, how do I understand it so that I can communicate through it? I was interested to comprehend how to think and speak through movement, in opposition to thinking before speaking or, in the case of circus, before moving. As we know it, rope does not speak words either. What can it be the language of rope? Can I have a dialogue with rope? Is there more to learn about rope? It was not clear yet how I would answer to these questions, but I began to approach rope like I would naturally do with a new apparatus. Inspired from my writing style (stream of consciousness) and through adaptation (where I could experience rope through new perspectives), I tried to feel, play, and familiarize with rope instinctively. Like in the case of *Husserl's bracketing theory*, I experimented to relate to rope on a bodily, experiential level, in opposition to the standardized way to approach it. In a nutshell, *bracketing*, in phenomenology, is a method used to allow the exploration of an object to its potential, far from any preconception of it. A method created with the intention to allow the experience and investigation of objects subjectively. For example, how would you use or interact with a fork if you did not know it were a fork? I know, it is not easy to do that. Once we know what an object is for and how it is used, it is hard to pretend that we don't. The essence of the body of interaction / object is not its standardized purpose as we know it, but it

becomes its materiality, shape, or its physical features. At home, in my small vertical space, I adopted a similar tactic. So, to move instinctively, to think through movement, to learn through sensing.

During a conversation I had after my Final Major Project with my supervisor Marie Andrée Robitaille, I realized that *language* was not the appropriate word to describe this non-verbal dialogue between rope and me. We substituted *language* with *sensing*. Understanding came after doing, Terminology came after exploring. I theorized my doing. It was only after preparing, performing, and discussing my Final Project that I concluded that this approach is the answer to a lot of questions regarding my research. By analyzing my process, I can give a name to my approach. By giving it a name, I can get a clearer understanding of it in my head. I approach rope through sensing, and through sensing I amplify my knowledge about rope. Sensing is my code of communication channeled by the body that feels.

How does rope move?

Can I move like rope?

Can rope choreograph me?

What is there of rope in me?

EYES

I want to move like rope, I want to fit in.

Simply, I hang. And I observe rope, paying specific attention to its *qualities*. Rope can be either tense or slack. When I put weight on it or simply, I hang, I find myself at the breaking point between the two. Wherever I hang there is a transformation in the quality of the rope. Above my hands, rope is tense. Below them it is slack. I am the point and the reason of change. One of the experiments I played with was literally to experiment with embodying rope's qualities and to move like a rope would. Doing this felt like being part of the same world and that we spoke the same way. Isn't that what we are used to do, usually, anyway, in our everyday life? To adapt to fit in. Besides, integrating rope's qualities to my movement added emotional value to the actions I performed. For example, being in a Russian Climb (one of aerial rope's basic positions), holding on with one hand and allowing the other arm to fall heavy to the side, following the orientation of gravity. I spent a long time observing how to control and move my dead arm intentionally. Studying how to tense my body to achieve to direct my loose hand to grip the rope. This process stimulated me to explore how to articulate my body in the air. Creating a space for tension and slackness to co-exist within my body allowed me to explore short narratives where body parts communicate with one another.

TOUCH

In the small space in my living room, with my eyes closed and my feet on the ground, I also noticed how much I relied on the actions of grabbing and letting go. I do it to hang, to move across the rope, to change positions, I do it for support, to lean onto it, to manipulate and to touch it. Two very simple and fundamental actions that make the rope-doing. I wanted to explore the physicality of these two actions and the conceptual value embedded in the relation between them. So, eyes opened, I started to experiment with focusing on my hands and repeating these actions in as many ways as I could, allowing my imagination to flow through improvisation. Thinking through movement. Experiencing and later observing these sessions, it was as if I gave life to my hands. As if my hands were dialoguing between them and, at times, I felt like I, Gaia, was an outsider observing these conversations and, eventually, stepping in. Using writing and assembling videos of my improvisations from home and my Final Major Project, I collected a lot of narratives that I am currently developing into short stories. I decided to call these *Body Stories*.

Inspired by *Body Stories*, I also developed what I named *Rope Spaces*. While experimenting with adaptation, I hanged a very long rope from my low point at home. This way, I had a lot of tail available which I used to create several shapes on the ground that designated the perimeter of elaborate

spaces for my feet to explore. I put my eyes, on my feet, on the ground. And I followed a similar task that I used for my hands. My mind is all over my body, so my feet are made of mind too. I let my feet drive my body, and I experience the world from the perspective of my feet. My feet then embarked a route of inspection of those spaces. Exploring, sensing, acting upon, and embodying humanly reactions through my feet was a way for me to learn to articulate them further. Most importantly, though, this process has been a great opportunity to focus on the moments prior stepping into the air. Instead of leaving my emotions out of the training room, this way I get in contact with my inner self before going to the air and, by acknowledging it, it becomes integrating part of my practice. How do I feel today? What takes me to the rope today? Can that inform how I move later in the air?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q8FjcLNWEYI>

To tell you a secret, chronologically, maybe, it didn't really go this way. Was it Rope Spaces that came first or Body Stories? I am not sure myself, but this is how I can make sense of it now. It doesn't really matter what came first but how, within me, things formed and informed one another throughout time. What Body Stories and Rope Spaces have in common is how I tell stories about the world from the perspective of my body parts. Through them I want to reinforce my idea that the mind is all over the body. Here below, a video of my feet, talking from their perspectives. A video made as a response of one of Pernilla Glaser's classes as part of the module Material and Space where we discussed and explored the concept of *the extraordinary in the ordinary*.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DYkM2eAT-oU>

Furthermore, can I communicate with rope without physical contact? What is sensing without touching? Sensing is for me to switch on your senses and to be aware and attentive to your surroundings, so that you can learn from it and you can communicate with it. I spent a lot of time observing rope quietly, and I noticed that stillness was one of rope's natural *agencies*. And while I observed its stillness, I realized how restless I was in my brain, in a constant hunt for things to do with it. Stillness made space for thinking. I decided, then, to move my racing thoughts, and to see how rope's stillness could choreograph me. I played with the idea of moving around and in relation to it, while keeping rope's stillness unchanged. Gradually, I started to build some contact with it, from touching it slightly to intensifying my touch by horizontally pushing and pulling it harder. This allowed me to study various ways to move rope and to observe how it moves back, allowing me to have a wider spectrum of possibilities to respond to and to learn from it. It is like animating the rope and having an exchange where we move together (I give rope an input and then I follow rope's lead) or in contraposition to one another.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Aj40zRuXRZc>

EARS

To spend time so closely to rope in silence, I had the opportunity to really listen to the sounds it makes because of our interaction. I used sounds as a reason to move, creating rhythms and moving to them. I remember how I liked the sound it made when I once quickly slid my hands on the rope. The sound invoked an image of my hands being burnt and, even though they were not physically burnt, that image inspired my next action, and so on. It was interesting to notice how I could be moved by sound, instead of music.

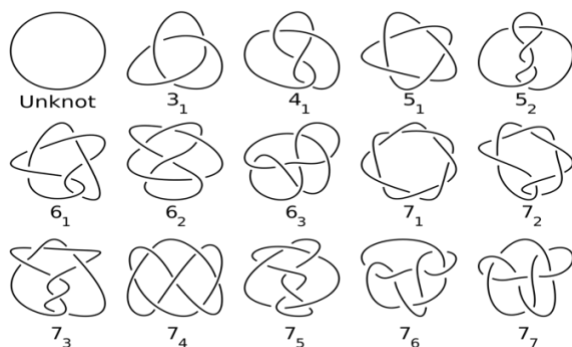
Sensing is one of my methods to approach rope now. By letting my body flow instinctively and intuitively across improvisations and tasks, I train to think through movement and to allow my body to make memories. There is no right or wrong, there is exploration. When the body tries a pathway that does not work, it is not a mistake, but it is an opportunity for it to acquire knowledge. Through sensing, we learn.

ROPE MANIPULATION – UNDERSTANDING KNOTS

Tying shoelaces, boating knots, macrame are some of the first things that come to mind when thinking about knots. I associate them with my hair, for instance. Knots are everywhere and they are very commonly used in our everyday life, both physically and metaphorically. When practicing aerial rope, knots is what binds the rope and the person together. They are one of this discipline's constants.

They are rope terms like dance steps with names,
They help and guide us along the way.
As body moves,
So, rope knots.
It is our language,
One of rope's ways to talk.

Even though I had been doing rope for ten years, I had never had the curiosity to investigate the etymology, symbolism and meaning of this word. When I began my research an infinite number of options and descriptions came up. I was interested, though, to find one that I could use in relation to rope and to inspire my practice. So, I decided to go along with the definition of **mathematical knots**.



A knot, in maths, is a closed curve embedded in three-dimensional Euclidian space.

The most basic knot is literally a circle, or loop, which takes the name of UNKNOT.

To speak in aerial rope terms, every time one end of the rope is joint to another end, a knot is formed. Whatever you do on rope, you repetitively create a series of loops. Foot locks, hip locks, S-lock are all examples of names of knots – or rope's vocabulary - which aerial acrobats use to move across the vertical space.

Analyzing my rope practice through videos, I can gather three typologies of **knot-making**:

- Applying one end to another end
- Twisting the rope
- Creating a loop and pulling the tail through that same loop until generating friction (this is the closest example to how we normally intend knots). For instance, daisy chain knot is one that I use on rope a lot, because it is easy to do and undo in the air.

The idea of understanding the knots that I used always fascinated me, rather than just wrapping myself into knots automatically, without thinking. If I can understand them knowingly, I can also learn to modify them or to enter and exit them in millions of other ways. Furthermore, thinking in terms of

knots as loops or circles, I realized that knots are not just what binds the rope and the person together, but they are also that negative space created when two separate ends of one or two subjects together touch, forming an empty circle. For example, going through a loop instead of another creates new opportunities and alternative pathways. Knots are, then, possibilities.

Rope manipulation is a series of methods that I have developed over the last two years in my living room, focused on the study and understanding of knots. This approach is based on task-based improvisation sessions. The importance of creating task-based improvisation methods is to create confined spaces of research within which the practitioners can experiment freely. It allows the researcher to explore an exercise in detail and discover multiple possibilities to do one thing, so to investigate its full potential. For instance, exercises where I learn to make loops in various ways from standing and hanging, exploring ways to go from a given A to a given B (for example from foot lock to S-lock) without going through the neutral position of hanging from the hands, transferring loops from a body part to another leaving the knot intact, making slack loops, and learning to fall into them to tighten them. It is a methodology I use to explore rope through the notion of loops. The more loops I create the more possibilities to new trajectories I have. And when there is no loop, if that is the case, I can manipulate the tail of the rope to create one. One of the exercises as part of this method is literally that. One move at a time. Creating and going through loops.

Although the word manipulation might have negative connotations, like the control of someone or something to get advantage of them, the way I intend it is the action of manipulating something in a skilful manner. The goal of manipulating, in this case, it is the training of the mind to be as present as the body is. This approach is to stimulate the improvement of awareness of rope's knowledge, the ability to make decisions on the spot. Manipulation is the process of changing and moving through change, with the intention to explore new possibilities. The material created through this type of approach varies depending on the circus artists' rope vocabulary, technical level, and strength. The more you know, the more the options, and the more you can articulate the body. By rope's vocabulary I do not mean the **tricks**, rather the **technique**. Technique is the matter of doing (like Ana Sanchez-Colberg told me once), it is rope's vocabulary, it is knowledge that can be alternatively articulated through creative approaches with the outcome of possibly generating new tricks. Rope manipulation is assemblage of tools to stimulate to articulate these words and form sentences of my own. For example, in the case of roll ups or drops. While in the past I had fixed knots that I used to practice rolling technique and drops, through this approach I could create my own pathways and integrate my technical knowledge to it. This way, I blended technique and creativity together and I discovered a way to train both simultaneously.

Since working in the confined vertical space, I spent a lot of time with rope with my feet on the floor. I took this opportunity to go through the loops that I used when practicing in the air but on the **ground**. This way, I could break them down and take my time to study them. I had all the time in the world to think and make decisions as I did not need to worry about my strength. I learnt to recognize them, as well as exploring ways to enter and exit them differently to what I was used to do before. I could use the floor to push off, lean onto the rope and examine original ways to wrap the rope around me so to make loops with no name, which allowed me to go to directions I had never experimented with. There is also another realization I made during this process. When we do rope in the air, we tend to always make knots around our legs. Foot lock, S-lock, catchers, hip lock and so forth are all happening in the lower part of the body. It makes sense because we use our arms to hold ourselves up mostly and we make loops with our legs, so as soon as we put weight in them, they tighten. I noticed that standing on the ground I finally began to use my **upper body** more. When I made knots around my neck or on my arm, they stayed slack. So, I started to use this concept in the air too. I make a loop, I put it around my neck or armpits. That knot is my next step. While resting the loop there, I can change my legs, and I transfer it somewhere else. And I carry on after that.

I also created an exercise where I hang, and I use my **hands as a fixed point**. The point of the exercise is to use the rest of the body to create knots and searching ways to go through them, while keeping the hands in the same spot. What might happen, for example, is that I create a loop, but it might be too small, and I want to open it. Usually, I would use my hands, but I can't. So, I am forced to think of alternative options to find a solution, like getting my elbow or knee into it which might take me to explore original pathways. I use this as a warm-up task, for both the mind and the body. Like in the case of crochet, you do something to do something else. I realized that I was so immersed in the task that I began to hang for longer and longer each time. I was training my stamina, while warming up my grip and my creativity together. Rope manipulation in general is a great exercise for **endurance**. When I used to train technique before, I used to climb, do a trick, and go back down. The focus was the repetitive drilling of tricks. Or I create sequences for my performances and train my body to perform that specific sequence, perfectly and effortlessly. But once I adopted these methods, I found myself spending infinite amount of time on the rope, exploring and searching new possibilities. The purpose became the research instead of the trick. Exploration requires time.

One more exercise I developed is **no knots at all**. The goal is to move on the rope without ever creating any rope knots, so that one end of the rope is never getting in contact with another end. This approach also serves the purpose to show the essentiality of knots in our practice and how hard it is to get rid of them. Most importantly, I use this in my workshops to help practitioners focus on the notion of knot as that negative space between the rope and the person, not just the loops we tighten around our bodies.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a4bElrMe6-k>

What does it mean to explore rope horizontally? How does it differ to the standardized practice of aerials? What is verticality?

Verticality is an abstract conceptual and perceptual construct that is used for orientation in space and time. It refers to a position or direction exactly perpendicular to the horizontal plane. Vertical spaces are aerialists' territory of expertise. Aerial rope is a line that crosses entirely the space vertically, connecting the ground and the air, with its tail reaching to the floor and its head reaching to the highest point. Visually and symbolically, verticality implicates a sense of hierarchy and freedom. In this section, I will explain the inborn associations rooted in the notion of verticality and why it is important for me to reconsider my use of the vertical space to redefine my practice. Even before I began the research in my living room, I was already aware of the connotations embedded in the concept of verticality when I performed rope. I did not identify with the values of hierarchy and apparent freedom represented through the acts I staged. I felt objectified through my work. Rather I was interested to subjectify my process.

Let's imagine for a moment me climbing the rope. The more I climb, the more I further myself away from the ground, vertically. I elevate myself above all else, creating a distinction between earthly and un-earthly. Figuratively but also meaningfully, this elevation evokes a sense of **hierarchy**, putting at the top of the world the aerialist. *"In Traditional Circus the performers, in particular the top aerialists, and circus stars, were often presented as superhumans, or sometimes as aristocrats"* (Lavers, Leroux and Burt 2020, p. 103). Aerialists such as Lillian Leitzel (1892 - 1931) and Luisita Leers (1909 - 1997) are remembered wearing cloaks of aristocracy during their shows and described literally as *"making it look easy"* (Bradna and Spence 1953, p.150 cited in Lavers, Leroux and Burt 2020, p. 103). There, the apparatus is an object used by the aerial performer to showcase his/her tricks. The purpose of this sort of illustration is to accentuate an illusion of hierarchy and to emphasize the aerialists' dominance over the object. The human taming the object. The object being consumed to serve the human. This standardized approach to verticality makes a disparity between who is up and who is down, creating social inequality. It denotes division. The focus of the circus acts is, in this case, the athletic skill, the performers' embodiment of super heroism and aristocracy, and the man's supremacy over the objects. The representation depicted is of a narrative dedicated to the potency and strength of the human-superhuman, which encourages an anthropocentric view of humanity where mankind is the most important thing in the world, above all.

On the contrary, in my living room, verticality was stripped down to a minimum. The low vertical space created a clear contrast in representation, visually, symbolically, relationally. Even when hanging by my hands off the two-meters-high point, I was still at (wo)man's height. In this space, elevation is naturally eliminated, and I experience a less anthropocentric approach to space and apparatus. That is what I call **horizontalized verticality**.

"Given this changing and increasingly complex understanding of the nature of the relationship between people and things, the Traditional Circus relationship in which the artist demonstrates mastery of the apparatus, can be seen as restricting and limiting the range of contemporary subjectivities that could be investigated through performance with objects" (Lavers, Leroux and Burt 2020, p. 9).

Relating to the props and environment horizontally in opposition to relating to them vertically, it symbolizes the abolishment of hierarchy and proposes a change in the relational processes with rope. *Rope does not have a right or a left, nor a front or a back. It only has an up and a down.* When taking away space from the vertical plane, how does it inform my rope practice? Can we still call it aerial

rope? What does it mean to explore rope horizontally? Reducing the vertical space, and investigating rope horizontally does not mean to reduce the possibilities, rather it transforms how I relate to rope. I felt equal to rope. Rope was as tall as me. Both of us, there, respectively hanging and standing.

“Thinking sustainably means we cannot obstinately try to cling to our grotesque supremacy. Rather, it demands a kind of abdication: we (in the West) must dare to stop regarding mankind as the centre of the world [...] by rethinking the relationship between humans and things. This demands a radical recasting of hierarchies, and a search for horizontal relationship in which people exist on the same level” (Lievens, Ketels, Kann and Focquet 2020, p. 44)

Rather than approaching rope as an object to master with the intention to display my tricks, I became interested in a process of re-introduction to my discipline through my subjective, intuitive approach. In this context, I decided to stop defining rope as an object, but I prefer to refer to it as a body. So, rope and I, we are two bodies, equally involved in the research process. Rope being the inanimate body and I being the animate one. Rope is now a body I interact with through a series of events that I actively create (adaptation series), not an object I prevail over with the intention to make me look good. Our relationship is defined by this process (the events). Face to face, rope and I, face to rope. Rope practice became an intimate space of exploration to feel and to get to know it subjectively, through my experience. By horizontalizing my approach to aerial, I felt a sense of cooperation between rope and me. In this framework, I was more available to explore the other body's full potential and I created an environment of mutual dialogue and, through it, I could stimulate alternative responses. The centre is not me anymore, but my relationship with rope and what that generates.

Verticality is also correlated to an ideal of **freedom**. Imagine acrobats dancing, suspended in the air. Air, par excellence, is the element that we associate with freedom. I asked four people in a row, literally five minutes ago: “what is the first thing that comes to your mind when I say, air?” and the answer was always *freedom*. The air we breathe is life. Aerial performers dance vertically, getting at every climb, a step closer to the sky and furthering themselves from earthly matters. They do it while presenting tricks effortlessly and smiling. Smiling even when there is a mistake. Pretend it never happened, mask it, and keep going. The meaning embedded in the action of dancing in the air, together with the how the work is chosen to be represented, it gives not only a sense, but also a message of freedom and, I believe, hope.

“But this so-called freedom achieved through mastery always means the capture and control of someone or something. This is why I have a hard time understanding it as the performance of freedom. Freedom for whom? And freedom to do what?” (Lievens, Ketels, Kann and Focquet 2020, p. 21)

Freedom from what? Is it the performer that dances in the air, free? How can I define freedom and, what is freedom for me? Can you be free if you restrict verticality? If so, how? These are all questions that I dealt with throughout my process.

I, like many other circus artists, spent my training hours drilling tricks and ordering them into sequences, like a puzzle, with the objective to perform it at cabarets, shows, and so forth. The routine would be the same at every show. I felt stuck in this repetitive training and performative approach. Besides, even when I learnt new, harder tricks, I would still rather do the older ones when on stage. The newer tricks, especially dynamic ones, require the use of a mat. Often at shows, you don't use mats, which creates a higher sense of risk and danger. The performer could fall off and die if she/he makes a mistake. This constant repetition allowed little variation in the sequences I prepared as well as in the content and structure of my training sessions. I did not identify so much with the work I presented. Even though my body was super strong, I felt only partly empowered. The goal of my work

was to create acts that could wow people as quickly as possible, with the intention to keep them on a thin line between the fear given by the height and the trust given by the ease at which I performed. This type of approach to my practice is fully focused on producing a product to sell and does not value creative process. I felt neglected as a subject and as a creator. Imprisoned in a fake representation of reality. Embodying a freedom I did not feel. How is it possible to feel trapped even though I am flying, smiling, and so close to the sky (or ceiling...)?

The fact that I was not being able to perform and train the tricks the same way as I was used to, and realizing this shift in directional approach to aerial from vertical to horizontal, made space for new possibilities and investigations that required me to be attentive to the space and bodies present in the space, to listen to them and consciously interact with them. An opportunity to allow myself to be vulnerable. I am not saying that the feeling of being in the air does not give me a sense of freedom as well. But, ironically, in the restricted vertical space, I felt like not only my physical body was free. I felt, for the first time, that my whole self was free to explore and create. There was space for critical thinking and sensing the rope, to experience and learn from it, to allow my body to feel and make memories, to generate new possibilities to move and original pathways.

“[...] by continuously fostering the same narratives of ‘freedom’, the circus genre as a whole restricts its own development as skills such as critical thinking, and interdisciplinary approaches to performance-making, become neglected or outweighed by the emphasis on purely physical training” (Murphy 2018, p. 66). The freedom portrayed in the traditional circus representations is an illusion of freedom. Rather than setting the aerialists free as creators, it restricts them. Fixed structures, fixed training, fixed tricks to create fixed acts that display the reality of a numb society that we are not. Freedom is for me the possibility and ability to speak and move, and to actively understand, craft and participate in my creative process. Confined verticality and researching rope so close to the ground set me free. In the restricted verticality, I felt free. Relating to rope horizontally set the conditions to cooperate with rope, so to allow rope to choreograph me. I developed valuable, other than physical skills like the ability to make creative decisions, the ability to be available so to be shaped by other bodies, while I also improved awareness of myself and these bodies (rope and space).

Taking height, risk, and danger away, is it still circus? If I reduce the height to a minimum, can we still call aerial, aerial? Can we still call this practice, circus? Am I still a circus artist? I think I am. And I think that this approach is one evolution of circus, towards a meditative practice that not only focuses on the physical aspect, but the interpretive, subjective one of its practitioners.

“Perché la parola è tutto. La parola data, la parola pensata, scritta, detta, non detta, ma comunque espressa, che sia sguardo, cenno o spasmo non importa. Dalla parola sgorga quel che poi si riversa sulla scena. La parola conosciuta, le parole dei testi originali. Tutto modellato per farne una voce chiara a tutti, l’elogio della comunicazione, la sacralità della comunicazione, che è degli umani, che ci rende umani”.

(Words written by Piero Ristagno, Nèon’s artistic director, in occasion of one of the company’s shows).

English translation:

Because the word is everything. The word given, the word thought, written, said, unspoken, but in any case, expressed, whether it is a look, a nod, or a spasm, it doesn't matter. From the word flows what is then poured onto the scene. The known word, the words of the original texts. All modeled to make it a clear voice for everyone, the praise of communication, the sacredness of communication, which belongs to humans, which makes us human.

Nèon is a theatre company based in Sicily since 1989. It works with the objective to contribute, through the medium of theatre, to the creation of a society founded on the respect and the value of identity and life’s dignity, with an approach to diversity centred on mutual interaction and well-being. Nèon’s work relies on the significance of the *word* and free speech. Through her methods, Monica Felloni, the company’s director, channels new codes of communication where movement and physical expression and interpretation of the bodies, no one excluded, are the words we speak. Through Nèon I learnt to be attentive to other forms of communication that differ to mine, or to the usual verbal one. I learnt to make myself available to others’ ways of speaking and to respond, so to be understood, so to enter in dialogue. Working with hermeneutical approaches with the intention to encourage self-expression stimulated me to re-introduce myself to my own body and to how I move and can move, which allowed me to make space for new possibilities to articulate my body.

At the beginning of my relationship with the theatre company, I noticed how physically skilled I was compared to others, but I also couldn’t help but feel how unable I felt regarding creative movement. *So physically abled, so creatively disabled*. It is not like I was not capable of being creative. I wasn’t sure how. So, I started a process of adaptation to a new approach to movement research and to others, and to experience bodily interaction as a form of dialogue. To explore myself as a human through my senses, to find my essence in relation to others’. I stopped to make a difference between ability and disability, and I transformed it into a matter of *availability*. Moving became a celebration of life in all its aspects and forms.

Nèon is to be here and now. Awareness develops to be a sixth sense. You must be perceptive to be able to communicate and be an active participant of your surroundings. You must be ready for all sorts and forms of communication that other bodies have to offer, to learn to feel one another and, in that intimate space, to exchange verbally and non-verbally. This is what happens in rehearsals and at every show. Each show has its own solid structure, but a big part of the work is to stay present and available throughout. Here an example to better explain what I mean. I am on stage with Danilo Ferrari, one of the company’s interpreters. Danilo is a journalist, affected by spastic / dystonic tetraparesis with the absence of language. We both know the context of that specific scene, but we are not asked to exchange specific sentences. We are told to be there, attentive and to communicate as it comes, in the moment. Of course, being on stage and in front of an audience, there are all sorts of emotions running through our bodies and, when we look into each other eyes, it is clear the amount of adrenaline we both feel. One day, he might look at me in a way, the day after in slightly another, his hand (which he does not control) might be pointing one direction today and another at

the next show or get stuck in his chair. Depending on what we have, we respond to it. We learn to stay vigilant and careful to one another, to play with the unexpected. For every show we know the context, but not always the content of the words we will exchange.



I would like to share a specific moment part of the show *Anima Mundi*, directed by Monica Felloni, and premiered in 2021. The scene portrays Angela and I on the rope. Angela Longo is one of the performers of the company. She is affected by spastic / dystonic tetraparesis, a disease that affects her body and verbal language. I offer my arm to her. Angela grabs it. Then she offers her leg while staring at my right foot. She looks at it, then collects my eyes with her eyes, and looks back at my feet. So, I know she wants to rest her foot on mine. So, we take our time to meet there, in the middle. Foot on foot. We don't need the words to talk. Just our eyes, open and attentive to one another. Waiting to hear one the propositions of the other so to be able to answer back, like in a dialogue. Step by step, together, we build our trajectory. We smile and explore as one. This type of approach regarding how I relate to other bodies influenced hugely my circus practice and how I relate and interact with rope as a body. I finally envision bodies as realms to discover, great sources of inspiration for my own movement research.

Within the walls of my skin, there is everything I am.
Within the limits of our body, we find the realm of freedom.



After one of our rehearsals together, I asked Angela to write some reflections about her experience on the rope with me. The way she writes is by placing her phone on a solid surface and pressing the letters on her phone with her nose. She wrote a few texts on various occasions after rehearsals. I picked some of them and I incorporated them in written form as part of a short video which I presented as part of my Final Major Project. She writes: *"You feel an immense sense of freedom when you outreach your limits"*. Working with restricted spaces and

working with Nèon, more specifically with Angela using these writing exercises inspired by my own practice, I saw *restriction* not only as a space, but as a body as well. **The body as a space**. Angela might not be able to do rope technically, but she feels it. And being present and available in the space together with me, she finds her subjective way to interact and familiarize with it. Rope, Angela, and I experienced each other through each other. I see the body as a physical confined space. The body

that everything feels, and everything can. There is so much freedom when you see your body as a multiplicity of possibilities.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eBrzWO7-wIM>

With the outbreak of Covid, we suddenly had time to stop and reset. A period of fear and crisis where we had to spend time with ourselves. A moment of introspection, a moment to look within. A space-time fraction of my life where, through the shift in conditions and, as a result, a change in the approach to my practice, I learnt to reconnect to myself as a human.

There was something that my tutor Ana Sanchez-Colberg said, a thought over the Final Major Projects of my Master colleagues and I that became a point of reflection for me as well. She found a common element that connected all our works, and she called us: *the circus that won't leave the ground*. And it was true! We all remained deeply rooted and connected to the floor. Even those who did aerial – most of us do, I included - we were always very close to the ground and we kept a strong relationship with it. As if we all needed to rejoin with our earthly matters, with ourselves. That is partly due to the spaces' limitations and the change of environments during lockdown or the non-possibility to research in proper circus infrastructures. We all shared the same classes, but this time, studying digitally from home, and distant from the rest of the group, our main source of inspiration and interaction became our personal spaces. We did not inhabit the same circus space. The new setting and circumstances impacted, informed, and shaped our research. I also see the concept of not *leaving the ground* as a subconscious, or perhaps unconscious, opportunity we grasped to further ourselves from an approach to circus as superhuman-performers, and to become human-creators. Throughout our journey, we went through a process of rewiring that gave us access to a more vulnerable aspect of ourselves. Can we be strong and vulnerable at once? What does it mean to be human? With the outbreak of Covid, we had time to stop and reset. So, I did. It was a time for empowerment and great discoveries. Having so much spare time and the possibility to research rope through the lens of restricted verticality made me focus more on me as a human. Through restricted verticality, the approach of rope horizontally and my experience with NèonTeatro, I redefined my relationship with rope. Rope practice became an intimate space of exploration where I reintroduced myself to it, where we got acquainted again. I experienced it, this time, through my skin and senses. I let it direct and choreograph me. I let it inform my actions. Rope is now a body whom I am in dialogue with. *"Today there is not even a single instant in which the life of individuals is not modeled, contaminated, or controlled by apparatus"* (Agamben 2009, p.15). Let's take our society and how we relate to objects as an example to help us understand how much we are impacted by them. The use of digital tools, for instance, informs our everyday life. Mobile phones, computers, iPads, and what not. They changed massively our approach to how we do everything, and we dedicate a lot of time to them. We depend on them. We spend hours on social media, we advertise ourselves, we research and work, we play and spend our free time with them. A few years ago, they did not even exist.

I want to dance like I write and write like I dance.

The freedom given by the fact that I could explore aerial on the ground, and I could easily move anyhow I wanted to, the intimate space where it felt like everything is allowed and no one is watching: all these factors created the perfect setting for me to move freely. I made a distinction between moving circularly, instead of linearly. I decided that I wanted to investigate how to be one with the rope-body and the space-body. How to experience rope as an extension of myself. I wanted to learn to be physically, mentally, and sensorially present. My writing style inspired me to move circularly, so to move and be one with the space and other bodies. It signifies to let my body-mind move intuitively, instead of because it was a premeditated decision of the brain. Restricted verticality is a space-source of inspiration which stimulated the development of observational and creativity skills. This process endorsed improvement of my ability to blend in with the environment, so the ability to adapt through circus and to be more present and available. Experiencing circus "things" (rope in my case) as an extension of my body just like digital objects are in our society and moving

circularly allow the rope-body and the environment to shape and inform my movement, while opening to new possibilities.

My process made me question whether it could be possible, then, to be experiencing a **shift in virtuosity**. Virtuosity means to have a great technical skill. In the case of circus, we refer to the virtuoso as the artist capable of performing arduous tricks. The virtuosity of the circus person is, therefore, his / her physical skill. When practicing in small vertical spaces, I realized that what I was training was not my strength and my ability to perform the tricks, but it was my skill to adapt, to be here and now, to be present, to be conscious, to improve my critical thinking and cognitive approach. Decision making, awareness. The way I experience virtuosity in the case of confined verticality is my ability to bring back the human me, my subjective interpretation and, most importantly, the value of my experience in my work. Isn't this a skill as well?

I would like to share two extracts from the chapter *Posthumanism in Practice*, written by my tutor Marie Andrée Robitaille as part of her Doctoral project *Circus as a Practice of Hope*. What she shares is relevant to my research and in accordance with my approach to bodies/objects and the necessity to shift from an anthropocentric approach to circus to a practice that re-considers our relationship with *the other-than-human forces* (as she calls them). The shift in virtuosity concept is very present in her work as well and it arises from her investigation with foil. In this section, Marie Andrée talks about her experiments. How a non-circus object becomes a circus object and how a process of *"defamiliarization of standardised and normalised modes of composing and performing"* (Robitaille 2022, p. 4) can allow to reconnect with our human selves and let circus practitioners discover new possibilities.

"The assessment of my success and failure moved from an ability to control to an ability to let go of control. As my work progressed in the studio, I wondered less about losing control and gaining control, but rather about the potential of displacing control. Displacing control disrupted the notion of virtuosity. The virtuosic gesture moved away from the spectacularism of my human ability to master and manipulate the bodies and transformed into the ability of phasing with my environment" (Robitaille 2022, p. 9).

Marie Andrée makes a distinction between the ability to control and to let go of control. To control and to let go of control means to be perceptive and to enter in dialogue with the other bodies present with us so to allow to be shaped by them. In the restricted vertical space, I am one with the environment and I let myself experience myself and my practice through the worlds I create, managing to produce circumstances that surprise me and that allow myself to discover myself and the other bodies further and deeper. If I act upon rope or the space by creating an event like in the case of my adaptation series, it is me taking control. To let go of it, it is to move circularly, so to see where that possibility can take me. Being in control it means to be active creators, meanwhile, to let go of it, it means to enable the spaces we work in and the other animate or inanimate bodies to inform what and how we move. The importance of displacing control is to allow a mutual dialogue between the person and the surroundings.

"It invites us to rethink the professional practice of "fixing" a circus act, as it prevents us from enacting other possibilities. Rather than "fixing" the circus act and controlling/transforming the environment to enable the pre-decided trajectories, the process here is reversed, enabling the environment to define how bodies can move, relate, and organize. aware of the habits we have in circus to "fix" the circus piece and "control" the environment in order to maximise human virtuosity. They also concretely demonstrated the potential of diverting from these habits" (Robitaille 2022, p. 13)

Restricted verticality represented for me a new way to do circus and for circus to become for me a medium for self-discovery and empowerment. From my practice I extrapolated a series of methods and approaches (adaptation, sensing, rope manipulation) that I share with other circus practitioners at my workshops so to encourage them to experience the same that I have, and to experience rope practice from original perspectives. The aim of such methods is to stimulate to practice the ability to be vulnerable and present. It changes the why and who we do what we do, so it changes the quality of the work being made. Furthermore, the approach of extrapolating methods from my own practice is a method itself. On one hand, the objective of working this way is to theorize the physical and, coming directly from investigating and dissecting principles of the rope practice, it is all material that rope artists can relate to. On the other hand, though, this kind of approach is an example to inspire and motivate other practitioners to do the same. Experimenting with adaptation, for example, creates the conditions for other practitioners to experience rope through several circumstances of their own liking and choice. By being present and attentive, they can actively create a variety of circumstances according to the availabilities and potentialities that they find in the space. When observing carefully, they can discover habits and constants of their own and, from them, deduce methods and exercises that can contribute to a deeper understanding of the rope practice and the development of more creative tools.

Pre-z^{ant} or pri-'zent? To be present or to present? Are we experiencing a shift in virtuosity?

Throughout my process, virtuosity is the ability to make myself available. Availability is awareness and presence, attentiveness to the other bodies. With what I am saying, I do not intend to replace the idea of virtuosity in circus completely, neither I affirm that virtuosity should be changed or substituted. Rather I believe that we should make space for multiple virtuosities to co-exist. Circus should be diverse just as humans are. Some might be prioritizing or be more interested, fascinated or even be more prompt to a technical training dedicated specifically to the athletic abilities. Others, on the other hand, might be more interested in a vulnerable, hermeneutical approach, through the exploration of circus creative tools as a medium to reconnect with the body. Some could be interested in nurturing both. To acknowledge this shift in virtuosity should be a steppingstone **to allow multiple virtuosities to co-exist** and to support not only one, but several ways to do one thing. By widening the number of creative possibilities, we increase the number of circus subjectivities, which gives access to a broader range of aesthetics and a more diverse circus, while contributing to the evolution of circus as an art form and possibly to the creation of multiple circus genres.

FREEDOM THROUGH RESTRICTION: FINAL MAJOR PROJECT

DEVISING: FIRST STEPS

The Final Major Project was the occasion to share my research and the outcomes of my process. It was part of CirkusMania, an annual circus festival gathering venues and artists of the Stockholm's region.

At the very early stages of brainstorming, I literally had no idea what I should do. Up until that point, I thought of my research as many branches of interest which I struggled to connect. There was my movement research in small spaces, there was the methods I had developed with knots, there was my body stories, there was adaptation and so forth. But how could I put everything I had done, in one room, in 30 minutes? While analyzing a series of options, my imagination kept taking me back to my living room and the 1.80 meters high space I had been practicing in. I decided, then, to create a space resembling the one of my living room, and to make it as more realistic looking as possible. The idea was to build an installation and to interact with it. This way people participating could enter my research world with me and witness bits of my investigation. It was important for me to recreate the living room for several reasons. Firstly, because I wanted the audience to be active watchers by being able to relate to it on a personal level. The pandemic was something that we all dealt with. Both circus and non-circus people had to find alternatives and adapt their daily activities to their home environment. So, to take my living room with me it was a way to stay close to the current social context and for the people to understand and strongly relate to my work. Besides, every time I would talk about my research, I always went back to the restricted vertical space and how that shaped my process and approach to rope. That is where everything started. Everything went back to that. Adaptation, horizontalized verticality, rope manipulation, sensing, change in virtuosity. They were all developments and discoveries occurred in that space. Without that, perhaps, it would have never happened. Restricted verticality was the umbrella under which everything gathered.

Because I usually tend to overcomplicate my ideas, the first proposition I had was to build a big, glass cube and to have an installation portraying my living room inside of that. The idea of glass, though, felt claustrophobic and breathless. It did not represent the joy I felt when creating and researching in my living room at all. Actually... quite the opposite. Moreover, the audience would not be so active as I wished them to be if I created a closed space, with real walls. Rather, I would create division between the audience and me. Furthermore, the shape and geometry of the cube erases the value in importance of approaching aerial apparatus horizontally, because rather than emphasizing the contrast between the vertical and the horizontal planes, it makes them look equal. The space I wanted to be build was a space within a space. Not a closed one though, but an open one. The emphasis of the limitation is in the vertical space, so to unlock a horizontal approach to exploration.

I remember being asked by one of my colleagues Jason Dupree how I would transfer the work done in a small sized room to a big one. Or how I imagined keeping the memory of the material generated in the low verticality, when changing space. It took me sometime and probably the whole Final Project's process to answer these questions. I decided to recreate my workspace literally as it were, back in Budapest, where I lived during the pandemic. The focal elements I needed to have were a ceiling at two meters height, a floor and a rope going from the ceiling to the ground. A big area containing a small one. Like a Russian doll. Once the lights went on at the end of the performance, it was noticeable the difference in proportions which helped to emphasize the smallness of the space where I worked in comparison with the one that aerialists usually train in. And the memory? The memory is stored and lives in my body. I take it with me wherever I go to. Until I get to another space which will inform it further.

As part of the course, we had a module called Creative Rigging, taught by Saar Rombout and Matthew Horton. At the end of this module, we were asked to come up with a creative idea involving rigging and the knowledge learnt throughout the module. We made miniature models, did the calculations to collect the equipment we wanted to use to build it, and attempt to put it together in real life. It was a great opportunity to focus on the rigging plan for my Final Project.

To replicate my home workspace, I thought, it would be the simplest idea ever: all you need is a rope hanging off a two meters high ceiling. I also reflected that, aesthetically, I would like to go for simple and straight to the point. What from the sound of it seemed like the simplest idea, it turned out to be more complicated than I expected it to be. There were many options as of how to make and build the ceiling of the living room which vary depending on the materiality and the availability of rigging points at each venue and which will affect the movement of the ceiling itself and my movement when interacting with it. Simple on the outside did not mean simple in the making.

I imagined five rigging points: one for the rope in the middle and four at each corner of what it will be the ceiling. These points should also be anchored to the ground, with the objective to make the structure stable, so that it would not move at all.

At first, I thought I should make the ceiling with fabric material and connect each corner. But then I realized that it would not have the effect that I had in mind. The fabric would bend when putting pressure on it or it would wave at every slight touch or interaction with either the rigging points or the rope. Then I imagined what it would be like to weave crochet ropes and then pull them tight. But still something was not right. The aesthetic, materiality and the effect were not what I meant to represent. The material was yet unclear to me. I was looking to recreate a more concrete structure, more resembling a solid roof.

As a result of this process, I felt as if I had more issues to solve than a clear vision of how the idea that I had in mind could be achieved. I did not see how helpful it had been to start attempting several possibilities, and how this directed me to narrow down the options and take me back to my purpose. Physically doing (like Tim Ingold says, *thinking through making*) helped me to answer questions and find solutions. I wanted simple. So soon after that, I decided to take away the anchor points and to keep only the top ones, and to use wood instead.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RZy7PICjshQ&t=19s>

(Interview post residency)

During the last semester of the Master Programme, we were asked to organize either a residency or an internship. After two years of research, I felt like I needed to have a full-immersive time fragment to look back and re-order my thoughts and discoveries. The residency I organized was ten days long and it took place at INAC, Instituto Nacional des Artes do Circo, in Vila Nova de Famalicao in Portugal. Here following extracts of my residency report, a reflective document that I wrote at the end of it regarding my experience and the outcomes of such. It shows where I was at with my research back then, two months prior my Final Project, and my thoughts and understanding of my process at that specific moment. The residency happened from November 29th until December 10th, 2021.

I decided to split my time into Week One and Week Two to be able to focus on both the two branches constituting my research.

On Week One I immersed myself in planning my Final Major Project, concentrating on experimenting with creating restricted vertical spaces. More specifically, searching for ways to re-create them in a bigger space. This is inspired by the work I developed during Year One of the Master Programme when I minimized the rope's height to 1.80 meters. This setting stimulated a re-evaluation of my relationship and approach with my aerial apparatus while encouraging a sense of adaptation which consequently stimulated me to develop a new ideology that I call *Horizontalizing Verticality* and to reflect on how this alteration changes my perspective of and the way I experience rope. During the residency, the goal I set for myself was to understand technicalities such as rigging and the building of a wooden platform that will serve as representing a ceiling, at two meters height, which limits my working space.



On Week Two, I focused on the pedagogical side of my research. Collecting and strategically structuring my methods into a workshop format of 8 hours. The objective of the residency is not only to have a space-time frame to research, but it is an exchange of such process with the institution hosting me. Generating creative methods represented a great part of my research during the Master Programme, so it seemed like a great opportunity for me to test them in a safe environment like a professional circus school where I have the chance to work with young professionals while also getting feedback from them.

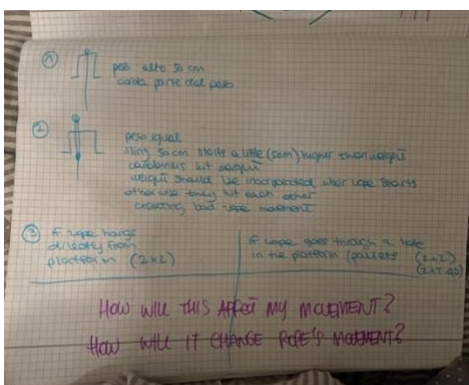
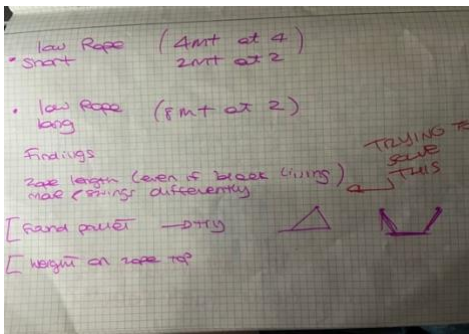
These two branches of my research are deeply connected and related to one another. It was a crucial time for me to think about how they interweave and inform each other.

WEEK ONE

I structured every single day of my stay in a way that I could have both time for physical research and reflection, so to keep a constant dialogue between theory and practice. My method is usually to deduct and extrapolate theory by observing my own practice and, therefore, it was important for me to constantly keep bouncing back and forth between the two to enrich and inform one another. Hence, I used journaling through writing and videos as methods to keep track of my progress. The day I entered the space I found a wooden pallet which I used to try out different prototypes of the ceiling platform I wanted to custom for my FMP. These tests were of fundamental significance to help me better understand how to build and how to rig this construction, as well as to understand the kind of environment and atmosphere it creates once it is up. The inspiration for this project came from my own home's ceiling in Budapest, so the main question for me was how to manage to re-create and build a ceiling as strong as a real one but, this time, suspended in the air. A small space within a big space. The first phase of Week One was to work on how to arrange material and how to configure the best possible way to assemble and space it with the objective to create a solid platform. It was vital to keep the original concept as well as to keep an open mind. Building and testing physically, it produced new options and possibilities which helped me better understand what I missed to achieve what I had in mind, as well as to getting an idea of what it was actually doable.

At first, I wrapped the two opposite sides of the pallet that I had found at INAC with two slings, and I hanged it from one rigging point. My first concern was to understand whether I was interested in exploring with a low ceiling and a short rope or a low ceiling and a longer rope. So, I gave myself some time to play with both ideas and I concluded with my preference for the four meters long rope rather than the eight meters one. From the perspective of movement research, I found very intriguing to play with the freedom offered by the restriction not only of the space, but the lightness of the rope too. Conventionally, rope practice consists of a long rope hanged from a high point (at least six meters

high), touching and extending on the ground for a few extra meters. The higher you climb, the heavier the rope gets, so rope artists are used to roping with the weight of the rope. The light quality of the rope that I found when exploring with the low space and short rope, where the tail of the rope was barely touching the ground, it was an innovative approach of investigation. For example, I discovered that it is possible to make knots holding the end of the tail, instead of holding the middle of the rope which changes the way I wrap loops around me and alternatively brought me to explore original possibilities I could not do before.



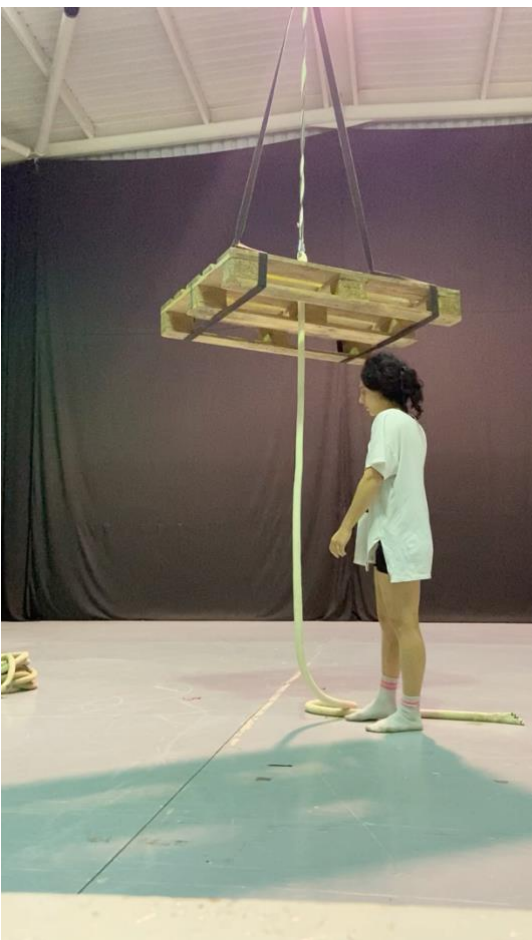
The next step of my experimentation was to understand how to rig it. During the process various questions arose, such as: What should it be hanging from? Is it better to have both the platform and the rope hanging from one single point or separate ones? What happens when we do that? Or how would that change the movement of the rope? Would that inform my movement underneath? Should the pallet be

hanged off four points, each pulling each corner? Or is it better to only have two? How stable should

the ceiling be? And what will it be its breaking load? Do I need to calculate its breaking load if I am not hanging off it?

I had no ideas what the answers to these questions were because I had never done a work of this kind. Through trying many options out, I slowly started a process of answering to all of them, one by one, which helped me narrow down the possibilities so that I could begin to have a better idea of what it will look and feel like.

I found that the most stable, option was to have four points, one at each corner of the platform and to hang it from either four or two points (one per side). This way, I should be able to prevent it from moving too much. I used a swivel so that I can it spin in either the same or, perhaps, opposite direction as me. It looked beautiful to play with the directions, though I felt it did not meet my intention of building a solid roof over my head.



I played and danced and climbed on top of the platform keeping a continuous interaction with my rope and I tried out a few potential scenarios, but I came to the conclusion that I need to stay faithful to my objective. For as much as there was a lot of interesting investigation being found, I realized how important it is to remember to simplify and to dig deeper within that simple space. There was a lot of material I have generated throughout the two years at home and so much more since playing with this platform underneath, I decided to stick with exploring that space and not overcomplicate it with going above it. In addition, that would mean that the ceiling would only serve a decorative purpose and I would not need to worry about the type of wood I used, nor its breaking load. This will make it easier when searching wood. Using the pallet also helped me to make a decision about its size and shape as well. At INAC I had a rectangular pallet of 1.20x80cm. At the end of the residency, I concluded that a perfect size would be 1.20x1m. I wanted it to be slightly bigger and I decided to keep working with the rectangle shape, so to avoid falling into symbolisms given by other shapes like the circle, the square or the triangle. Furthermore, my home's ceiling had a rectangular shape, so that represented for me the best solution at the time.

Lastly, I spent some time collecting videos of my past physical explorations back when I was at home in Budapest, so to start to have an idea of what material I had and that I could use and develop. I went through some of my sequences and tried them out below the pallet. I filmed a few improvisation sessions to see how the new space and the new set up informed my work, and to get a rough idea of the potentialities of the space I recreated and whether it would inspire more material. Here a video link which I named *Thinking Out Loud* to show stages of my thinking process through the testing of various rigging options of the wooden ceiling-platform:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E2LnNEdmLro>

WEEK TWO

During Week Two, it was key for me to spend time articulating my research verbally. Being able to express what I do can help me to better understand my process, progression, and outcomes. Throughout this week, I focused on the value of these explanations, so to allow circus practitioners attending my workshops, not only to explore my methods physically as if they are exploring a series of random tasks, but to give them an insight into my work so that they can understand the why, how, and what we are doing. Listening to my research can encourage participants to relate with it and to better engage with the topics I explain, and it makes space for thinking and discussing.

I divided my material in three main chapters: Rope Manipulation (three hours long), Technique (two hours long) and Voicing the Body (three hours long). I had decided on these titles and specific lengths about one month before approaching my residency because I had two workshops scheduled straight after the end of my stay in Portugal, one in Granada and one in Torino. This was to challenge myself with a deadline, and to force myself to have the workshops content ready by a specific date.

The exchange with INAC ended up being a three-hour seminar with some of the students from the second year of their professional course. So, I collected some of the most significant exercises from each of the three chapters mentioned above and created a taster version of all of them. At the end of the workshop I taught at in Portugal, Spain and Italy, I asked participants to share feedback with me. It was very useful to hear their opinions on how they had felt throughout it. I asked them what they understood and whether I was clear throughout my explanations. I was curious to know how they experience my work both from a pedagogical and conceptual point of view. They were very enthusiastic and confirmed how interesting and valuable they found my work and research. One of the students called it (textual words) a “*very human approach to rope and aerial disciplines*” and underlined the importance of expressing these topics verbally as an honest, clear, and intimate way to let them into my world, and my experience on movement research.

Writing these methods and getting feedback by the students made it clearer to me that what I am offering is not only a practical approach to rope, but that it also allows participants to establish a less anthropocentric interaction with their apparatus. They started to establish strong bonds and a deeper connection with their equipment, and they finally start to generate stories as a result of this approach. That for me proves that to create a “story” it is not always necessary to search far, but there is enough there to be found within oneself and the interaction-relationship with rope. Moreover, I felt like they understood my approaches to rope’s language and its million possibilities of dancing with it, knotting and creating. A series of methods developed with the intention to offer structured improvisation approaches which stimulate practitioners to find freedom within the walls of restriction provided by the exercise being practiced.

As part of *Voicing the Body*, I shared the value of verbalising our bodies and actions as a great tool for to access creativity and the development of movement research through writing. It was of great relevance to introduce and focus on the importance of perceiving rope as a body which we constantly interact with and respond to, rather than a mere object to be manipulated. Writing about the actions performed by my body means to understand the emotional value behind a gesture and how, for example, engaging with a body part rather than another changes the whole meaning of an action. The final part of the workshop was inspired by the idea about my Final Major Project. I set up two ropes, one of two meters length hanged at two meters height, and one of four at four meters height.

CONVERSATIONS ON AESTHETICS

Just before my residency started, I had begun a series of Zoom conversations with Pedro Gómez-Egana, Professor of Sculpture and Installation at the Oslo National Academy of the Arts. The time spent talking to him about my process and the Final Major Project was necessary to voice and to listen to my brain thinking and devising out loud. Time to put my reflections and imaginations out and to get out of my head a bit. With him we mostly focused on aesthetics. We pondered about the installation and analyzed several options through the lens of aesthetics, which helped me to clarify how to present what I want to represent.

For example, how the use of colors would impact the appearance and the perception of the environment. Studio 10 is where the installation had to be built is a big black room. The idea we had was to put emphasis in the space between the ceiling and the ground, so the focus would be where the rope and I are. If we imagine soft lights, and we have the platform painted black on the top, then whatever is above it vanishes and it will be one with the rest of the space. To paint the below part of the platform white, matching a white carpet, it would create that effect we imagined as it would highlight that space. With the fact that now the anchor points were taken away, the space could be free on the floor and the audience could roam around without worrying about extra cables or anything to trip over. The reference point would be what I called my white island. A space within a space.

PROCESS AND REPRESENTATION

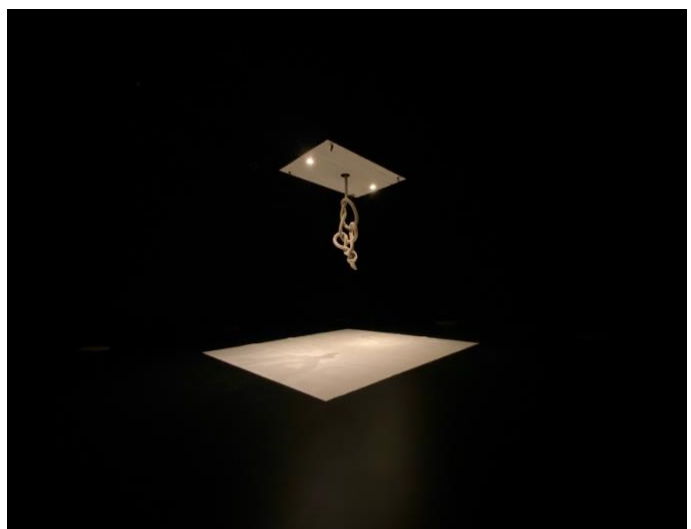


Pitch dark, lost even knowing where I am
My body shares my memory's shapes
Memories of an intimate, small, inside space
New forms excogitated by my versatile frame
Where dark turns to light
In the year of contradiction
In the year when all seems lost
In The year of new beginnings
I lose control thus take control,
I free myself while stuck at home
I lose a ground to find a new
Budapest, 2020

Reminiscing research and self-growth days
Re-entering this freedom space
Re-creating my safest and most intimate place
Overflowing of discovery
A white island dispersed in this
pitch-dark reality
Lost, even knowing where I am
Rope jam tastes like sweet dreams

In loving memory of the billions steps we talked and the
trillion words we walked, rope and I, in the rectangle
space of my living room in the year of Covid.

When I arrived in Stockholm, I recreated the platform as I had planned it and I finalized the work by adding lights to it. Tom Richmond, our light technician, suggested to use bathroom lights which would create a cozier feeling, so to recreate the atmosphere of my living room. We incorporated the lights to the ceiling, which added an amazing effect when moving the platform around. In addition, the possibility to rig the wooden platform off four points for each corner and the height of the space allowed me to play with the movement of the ceiling as well, having its lights brightening different places in Studio 10 depending on how I moved it.



The title of my Final Project was *Freedom Through Restriction*. The installation was up when people entered the space. During the first fifteen minutes, I shared bits of my movement research. I used sequences I had created with my methods of rope manipulation; I used the body stories and the qualities discovered through sensing the rope. I assembled extracts of my writings about adaptation

that I had been writing over the past year in my living room during the pandemic. The texts were recorded and accompanied my movement, alternating silence, and music. At the end of this, I talked about my research process to the audience. People were sitting on the ropes I had been crocheting and, under each one of them, I stuck a barcode to the floor that each one could scan with their phones and watch the short video I had made with Angela Longo (see section *Restriction as a body*).



During the pandemic I crocheted about fifteen ropes. I took ten with me because we were told that we would be allowed no more than ten people per show, because of Covid restrictions. I ended up using eight finished ropes, one still in the making with the crochet needle and the bundle still attached to it and a rope that, unfortunately and fortunately (I will explain better why in the next section), broke during that final week. I wanted to make the space as personal as possible, so I thought that to have the audience sit comfortably on soft ropes instead of on the hard floor would serve this purpose best. The limited number of people allowed per show helped to keep an intimate atmosphere. That was not up to me, but it made me reflect on the question of intimacy. How can you keep intimacy when you have a bigger crowd in the room? Will it change the feeling of being in a private space like the one of my living room, if I had more people?

Moreover, the seats were placed in a circle, each seat at the same distant from one another and from the centre, where the installation was. The circle placement of the audience is typical of a circus show. I liked the idea to keep it that way because, without having a fixed front, it allows to see multiple aspects of the performer. Circle is an important shape for me because it resembles the concept of knots.

During our first presentation, open only to colleagues, at the end of it, I asked people to step inside and play with the installation as they felt like it in the moment. It very soon turned into a playground. Two girls used the rope to hang from it and began sliding the carpet around on the floor. It was inspiring to watch how other people instinctively interacted with the space, in ways that I had never thought about. Observing them inspired me to try to use other material for the floor instead of the soft carpet and opened to new ideas about moving the floor around, so to make that movable like the ceiling.

One of the reflections I made during the months of investigation was concerning the ceiling and how it functioned as an upside-down floor. It became a point of reference like the ground. One parallel to the other. Because the wooden material was not so heavy, I could not put a lot of pressure on it, but I could place my feet on it, and use it to change the direction that the rope span in. Also, placing my hands on it or creating shapes parallel to the shape of the platform would accentuate the effect of the limitation of the vertical space. Working between these points of reference, the floor and the ceiling, I found that I began to integrate movement inspired by vertical dance. It was interesting to find moments where I could mix the rope and the vertical dance knowledge.

The Final Major Project was not only the opportunity to share my study with colleagues and an audience, but **it was a continuation of my research**. During the process and the presentation of my work, I adopted the concept of adaptation on several occasions which allowed me to discover more regarding how shifting conditions continues to inform my practice, alters what I do and allows the creation and experimentation of new discoveries and possibilities.

After my residency, I created two different wooden platforms: one in Catania (in the south of Italy where I am originally from) and one in Stockholm for the final presentation. The two venues I was at are very different to one another. In Catania the space is about five meters high and in Stockholm it is around ten. In Catania I could only hang the platform from two points and at SKH from four. Height and rigging, as I noticed when experimenting with both, changed a lot the movement of the ceiling. While in the first case, the space of motion was smaller, so it was more on the spot and it could only be moved front to back or side to side, in the second case I had wider allowance of space to move it and it could go around in a circle, tracing the line of the perimeter of the soft carpet that I used as the floor.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9EyfhqwpXz0>



Another shift happened when my four-meter-long rope broke a few days before the show. I replaced with an eight-meter-long one which went from the top ceiling, through the low one I had built and reaching to the floor, making sure that the length of the tail would be the same as with the previous one, so that the physical material I had created wouldn't change so much. The rope was of a different kind. The shorter one was a covered smooth and the second was a covered rough one. At some point I noticed that if I grabbed the rough rope, turned my grip from vertical to horizontal and kept hold of it for a few seconds, when I let go with it slowly, the shape of my hand stays. The rope kept the **memory** of my hands until I touched it again to change it. Different ropes, different agencies. Some ropes are easier to grip, some have less friction because they are smoother, some facilitate dynamic work, some rolling. Every type of rope feels different depending on the material it is made of or the amount of rosin it has been applied on it. All these

conditions facilitate or make harder the performance of specific movement, the smooth slides better

on the body and the rough makes more friction. That obviously informs my experience, and it changes slightly how I wrap into knots.

In addition, I used this chance to collect sequences I had created during the lockdown at home, and specifically a section dedicated to exploring the actions entailed in the rope-doing: grabbing and letting go. This part was not planned. I let myself play free on the spot with this task-based approach as explained in the section *Sensing* to see, each time, where it would take me. I took videos at every improvisation, including the performances with the audience, and I intend to collect all the stories I find interesting and assemble them to carry on working on them after the Master is over.

Halfway through the project's process, I noticed how many **shifts in conditions** were accidentally happening. Adaptation was everywhere: adapting to venues, ropes, environment. And every time something changed, I would discover and learn so much about multiple potential ways to move and interact with the installation. It was like gathering more and more information. What at times felt exhausting to constantly adjust my installation to all the variations and changes occurring, the more I realized that that was the whole point of my research, so I started to see the benefits in each alteration. So, I decided to play with one more element: sound. During rehearsals and shows, I alternated several combinations. At times I used text and silence, other times I used text and music, interchanging two tracks. I was curious to see how different soundscapes would impact and inform the content and quality of my performance. Each show I experimented with a slightly different version. The intention was to surprise myself and to see how, each time maintaining the same content's structure, my interpretation, flow and intentions were informed or changed by the **sound**. So, the effect of sound on my work.

Can I move freely, while creating quality contents?

A lot of times when we think of free movement, we think of chaos. And for as much as movement might look chaotic during the research process, it does not take anything away from the fact that material can be extrapolated and used for presentations and shows. For my Final Major Project, for example, that is exactly what I have done. I took sequences produced during the research process, re-worked them with the intention to perform them. Setting an act as in polishing it to one's liking is still possible if that is the purpose of the circus maker to set a sequence. The investigation is an experience as much as it is tools used to generate material that can be refined and developed further and deeper to reach the quality desired. The value, I believe, is still in the process. There is no right or wrong, what matters is the means, not the ends.

Here a link of one of my rehearsals prior the final showing:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=94BbHT0te6Y>

A conclusion might be a formality, but it is necessary. A finale of this two-year process to make sense of my purpose and direction. An opportunity to frame my exploration in time and space.

Restriction and freedom are two very opposite words. When someone is restricted, it means that they are not free to do whatever they want to. This is how I felt in the past. Creatively limited, stuck in a fake representation of freedom. Freedom for me has always meant the ability and possibility to speak and move, respecting my voice, my interpretation, my experience, my essence and the one of others. Learning to listen to my body and being aware of my feelings, to move from my perception, and to understand, they all encourage the ability to respond subjectively, so to be actively involved in bodily and verbal conversations with other bodies.

Conformation represents for me a restriction that takes my freedom of movement and self-expression away. If I hadn't felt creatively limited, I would have never wanted to look out for alternatives. Restriction is, for me, opportunity. Opportunity to look deeper into something or someone. Restricting is designating a perimeter of a specific space and to explore inside of it. Like a castle. A space confined by walls. If I focus on what is out of it, I miss the chance to explore the values, abilities and availabilities inhabiting that space. When we see restrictions as boundaries that cannot be trespassed, then we are stuck, restricted, we lose our freedom. But when we see restrictions as spaces to explore, then we allow ourselves to discover its millions of possibilities and potentialities.

Restriction as spaces. Physical spaces.

Restriction as bodies. Bodies as spaces.

Restriction as task-based methods. Research spaces.

I am my own castle, approaching others, I keep moving.

There is an immensely pleasant sense of freedom within the walls of restriction when flying at two meters height that I had never experienced when flying at eight.

The pandemic has been a period of limitations, but a constant, uninterrupted flow of ideas. One of the most fruitful moments of my life as a creator, an artist, a pedagogue and a person. Writing this thesis generated even more ideas and reflections. The more I go into detail, the more I get closer to it and understand more of it. Or better, the more I read it back, page by page, the more I see and wish to add and expand on. A mutual dialogue between words and me of endless transformation. For example, I will share one more reflection from today. Restricted verticality has been an involuntary innovative approach to my practice which led me to discover more possibilities to adapt rope to the space of my living room. But how many more rope adaptations of my living room or other spaces could be created and shared? As many people as there can be? If adaptation is to adapt rope to new spaces and explore rope through myself and an environment that differs from the standardized one, could that mean that we should take rope workshops focused on the concept of adaptation to new environments, to non-circus spaces? I am happy to share the methods developed through restricted verticality and to be inspired by the material generated by others, but I am also interested, and it would be amazing to witness and allow workshops' participants to explore their own forms of adaptations and investigate within the spaces that they wish to create.

It has been such an amazing journey which changed my whole perspective of myself as a human and as a circus performer and creator. To say conclusion, it would take away from what it really is. Conclusion means the end, but this is not it. It is a process and process never ends. Rather, I would prefer to refer to this conclusion as a new beginning.

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