CIRCUS AS A PRACTICE OF HOPE

The last Human on Earth (is a circus artist)
Sensing the world through circus arts
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Published in Circus talk April 5th 2021.

Keywords: circus, circus arts, contemporary circus, circus research, artistic research, climate change, posthumanism, new materialism, posthuman ethics, hope.

Note from the curator/editor:
In times of climate catastrophe, refugee crises and Covid-19, the question of the responsibility that artists and scholars have is becoming increasingly urgent. What is the role of circus within society? How far does this form of art and entertainment correlate with historical and contemporary social interests? How does circus research position itself as a relevant field of research within academia in the 21st century? Those questions will be explored within the series Adventures in Circus Research– Facing a New Decade, curated by academic Dr. Franziska Trapp. By featuring circus researchers, we give them the space to explain the nature and significance of their research directly to the circus community and to highlight the practical impact of their research on the circus world and its relevance for society.

In the sixth article of the series, Marie-Andrée Robitaille, PhD at the faculty of Artistic research at Stockholm University of the Arts in Sweden, provides insights into her doctoral artistic project in which she searches for ethical alternatives to human exceptionalism in circus art.

To quote this article: Robitaille, M.A. (2021), Circus as a Practice of Hope, The last Human on Earth (is a circus artist) Sensing the world through circus arts, Adventures in Circus Research– Facing a New Decade, ed. Franziska Trapp, Circus talk.

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Amidst the fourth industrial revolution, the sixth mass extinction, global warming, and a world pandemic, we face an increasing number of complex, challenging situations and crises. While the performing art sector has been paralyzed for more than a year now, the pandemic is forcing us to revise how we work and think about circus arts. On a larger eco-socio-political scale, it invites us to revise what it means to be human and what it means to be a circus artist today. How can circus arts be relevant in times of crisis?

In the circus, we are good at dealing with unpredictable and precarious situations: On the teeterboard, you have to land on a small board; you can be injured and die if you miss. When touring with the circus tent, you need to attune to the weather. We work collaboratively when it comes to safety while spotting and catching each other. We work with proprioception combined with other senses to locate bodies in space and control movement, thus enabling us to perform complex body trajectories. Circus is an embodied practice manifesting in "real-time" and in-person; thus, the circus situation requires adaptation, presence, and assessing risks. Circus arts also appeal to creativity; we do things differently, generating different ways of apprehending the world and thinking of human ability.

Based on these aspects, circus arts can be qualified as an excellent candidate for opening fields of possibilities. Despite of the circus' subversive potential, in circus practice we are often confronted with an opposite tendency: the standardization of the circus acts, a propensity to objectify bodies, representations and narratives which reinforce western dualities, an emphasis on self-sense expressions, the predominance of monological forms, authoritarian processes and elitisms, what qualifies as risk, how mastery is understood and virtuosity embodied. By situating the circus artist at the center of the ring, the circle seems to be closing down on itself. Circus performances most often underline the super supremacist human's narrative of an autonomous, independent, and dominating protagonist at the center of the universe, who controls and masters the environment for its glory. The constant search for these types of virtuosity often provides the same old tricks and illusions. It is this posture that I challenge throughout my project. I am therefore asking: Is there another virtuosity, a more inclusive circus that is aligned to the challenges of our times?

In my project, I engage with posthumanism as a navigation tool (Braidotti, 2019) and ethical compass to contribute to a feminist new materialism's understanding of my circus practices.
How can posthuman concepts be enacted through circus practices? How will it transform my practices? Can circus arts contribute to the emergence of new ethical ways for being within and as part of the world? The overarching exercise at play in my project is revising (rather than devising) my circus composing and performing; the exercise is anchored in the material world and takes an interest in the bodies’ vulnerable limits. I am working with concepts that enable thinking about human and more-than-human bodies and worlds simultaneously (Rogowska-Stangret, 2017).

This project manifests through a series of experiments involving circus performance, live art, kinetic art, sonic art, photo, and text. The overarching entry points to the project so far have been to explore the opportunities and consequences emerging when attempting to shift away from anthropocentric circus making to one that takes significant consideration to the other and more than human entities involved.

Concretely in the first year of my doctoral project, I have worked with nonhuman bodies unconventional to circus arts, all relating to states of crisis and vulnerability. Bubbles\(^1\) in the shape of a dodecahedron will remind us of the form of a virus. Foils developed in NASA for its use on spacecraft’s exterior surfaces for thermal control, become aerial dancers. Mooring fenders commonly used to absorb a boat or vessel’s kinetic energy become sonic pendulums.

Within my project, I am working on the articulation of a methodology that pertains to the circle\(^2\). The circle as a form and as a motion, metaphorically and literally. Evolving from Johan Le Guillerm approach to circus as a minority practice for which the circle is its natural architecture (Quentin, 1999), circus is, to me, to apprehend the world in a circular manner. A practice of going around, spiraling, spinning, swinging, twisting, encircling, circulating, turning, and returning in and out in cyclical, circular flows. Circle as a methodology in this context accounts for how and where the circle is formed, how, who, and what is or not part of it. The evolving methodology insists on a sensibility for the peripheral, the unheard, the hidden, the avoided, the unknown. It recognizes the radical interdependency of all beings and

\(^1\) The Bubbles, designed by Rachel Wingfield are hand woven three-dimensional structures that are crafted into lace-like bubbles. Springy fiberglass rods are bowed into rings and woven into several dodecahedra that in turn are joined together. Their structure is based on the principle of self-similarity, enabling it to work from the nano to the macro scale. It can be seen in our natural environment in the formation of bubbles, living cells and water molecules. With plants creeping and crawling around the structure, BioWall can become an indoor, living hedge.

\(^2\) I am aware and respectful of the circle as a figure and practice being present in diverse manners in many various cultures. In this project, while I am not engaging in the study of the numerous circle’s symbolic traditions and meanings, I am nevertheless honoring the traditions of Circles that Indigenous People in North America use and have used for millennia. I am a non-native, born in the immediate periphery of Wendake, home of the Huron-Wendat nation in the Canadian province of Quebec. I recognize that I am deeply indebted to those who have carried the Aboriginal Circles traditions into our times.
wants to encourage a pluriversal world of many centers (Escobar, 2020). It is to be noted that the circle here is conceptualized from a circus perspective. The circus ring includes an opening that allows for moving in and out, thus involving circulating as a process of change.

Practically, I explore different modes of performance and composition through an emerging body re-orienting practice (my proposal for an alternative to object manipulation in circus arts). In the performance named Multiverse (Ferrando, 2019), I actualize the art of Bear Taming as an un-taming practice which involves the methods of Monstering (Armstong et al. 2020) and Queer walking tours (Springgay, Truman, 2018). I explore Sensing Practice (Grasby, 2014) through the coupling of sound and motion by means of motion capture technology, playing with perception and attention, attending to how relations are reworked across entities, environments, and technologies. I invest in the art of quick change as slow change, which involves a slowing down of thoughts and actions (Stengers, 2017). Working with the agency of assemblages (Bennett, 2010), I exposed three interactive and sonic installations that are studies on connections and non-contact, positioning and degrees of freedom, body excess-body access, and intermediality (Hayles, 2010). Future artistic work will revisit escapology through inertia as a disappearing mode (Virillo, 1999). Through these technopoetics (Bachelard, 1953) experiments, I investigate fabulation (Scholes, 1975) as an artistic practice of reality and discourse forming in circus arts.

Early in these processes, control appeared as a central notion. As my work progressed in the studio, I wondered less about losing control and gaining control but rather more on the potential of shifting control, displacing control. While control dislocated, the same went for the notion of virtuosity. The virtuosic gesture moved away from the spectacularity of my human ability to perform control over the environment, Instead it re-localized as a virtuous poetry of care and into vulner-able/affect-able (Daigle, 2018) relations to the environment; a transition from spectacularity to spectrality.

An upcoming stance of the project is entitled Vulnerability as Virtuosity. A group of researchers and artists from the Swedish Defence University, Stockholm School of Economics, Södertorn University, and Stockholm University of the Arts will engage in a dialogue to discuss how the notions of vulnerability are manifesting throughout disciplines. Through discursive and artistic practices, we will explore how rhetoric and narratives around the climate crisis and vulnerabilities can be transformed. The outcomes of this part of the process will be presented in June 2022 at the International Sustainable Development Research Society annual conference hosted
among others by SKH, with the theme: “Sustainability and courage: culture, art and human rights”, in Stockholm, Sweden.

My doctoral artistic project bounces from the idea that “our task is to make trouble, to stir up potent responses to devastating events, as well as to settle troubled waters and rebuild quiet places.” (Haraway, 2016). We ought to develop abilities for meaningful responses and the emergence of ethical alternatives to human exceptionalism. Circus equates to divertissement, as in the ability to divert. The ability to divert is the circus agency that I am preoccupied with here in this project. In these troubled times, the circus may serve as a diversion tool, not in the sense of taking away the attention from, but rather in engaging in the act of diverting the course of these troubling events."

In coming full circle, the last human on earth's utopian gesture of faith is to sense the world through circus arts. The project's outcomes are planned to be shared as practices of hope for the 21st century.

I wish to express my gratitude to the artists and collaborators that have participated in the project so far; Thank you! The list is long, your names and contributions will be mentioned in the documentation of the doctoral project.

Anyone who would like to engage in a dialogue in relation to a topic or any aspects of this project is welcome to contact me. marie-andree.robitaille@uniarts.se

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Bio
Marie-Andrée Robitaille is a multidisciplinary circus artist, pedagogue and researcher. She pursued her studies in human sciences while developing as a dancer at École de Danse de Québec and as a circus artist at the National Circus School in Montréal, Canada. Since 1998, Marie-Andrée has worked as a performer, choreographer, director, and producer on various international projects. Additionally, she has contributed her talent scout expertise to the Cirque du Soleil casting team. From 2009 to 2018, she was an assistant professor of circus and head of the bachelor’s degree Programme in Circus at Stockholm University of the Arts in Sweden (formerly DOCH). In her previous artistic research projects, she investigated the representation and agency of women in circus (Gynoides Project), modes of sonic interaction (Sound of Circus), and sensing practices (Hidden Circus). Her current research interests encompass circus arts, choreography, composition, performative and kinetic new materialisms, posthuman ethics, embodiment, and transdisciplinarity. In her doctoral project Circus as Practices of Hope, she articulates circus specificities and their relevance for navigating the contemporary planetary paradigm shift.

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