Hope for the Future
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To quote this article:

Amidst the fourth industrial revolution, the sixth mass extinction, global warming, and a world pandemic, humans face an increasing amount of complex and challenging crises on planet Earth. Over the years 2020 and 2021, the performing arts sector has been paralyzed and now in 2022 we are oscillating between coming back to normal and moving to a new normal. Our modes of creation, production, and dissemination have been disrupted. On a larger eco-socio-political scale, during the pandemic, the impacts of human activities on Earth seem to have been made more distinctly visible, inviting us to ask: what does it mean to be human today? More specifically, however, the Covid-19 pandemic is forcing circus artists to revise how we work and think about circus arts. What does it mean to be a circus artist today? How can circus arts remain relevant? And what connections might circus arts have with the wider question of human involvement in the world?

Circus artists are good at dealing with indeterminacy and precarious situations: on the teeterboard, you have to land on a small part of the apparatus; you can be injured and even die if you miss. When touring with, and performing in 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 and 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; hence, circus requires adaptation, presence, and the assessment of risks. Circus also requires creativity; we do things differently than in “habitual” day-to-day life, generating alternative ways of encountering the world and thinking about human ability. Circus arts help us to imagine and experiment in ways that push the boundaries of what is considered to be normally possible.

Based on these circus specificities, the art form offers an excellent discipline for opening fields of possibilities. However, circus often manifests the opposite of its subversive potential in the standardization of circus acts; objectification of bodies; representations and narratives which reinforce Western binaries; an emphasis on self-sense expressions; the predominance of monological forms; and authoritarian processes. Circus can be exclusionary and elitist.

Circus performances often reinforce a humanist narrative of autonomous, independent, and dominating agents through super heroic protagonists able to
control and master the environment for their own glorification. The search for these familiar manifestations of virtuosity creates tricks and illusions that are mainly perpetrated for the sake of risk and triumphs. What can be learned about our modes of presence and engagement in the world when the circus artist recognises and integrates vulnerability in circus composition and performance rather than aiming at transcending it? It is this perspective that I propose to challenge in my circus artistic practices and pedagogies; I am asking: are there other virtuosities that meet the challenges of our times?

I am a circus artist. I have been performing as a dancer, as an acrobat and as a stunt woman for most of my career. In the last decade, I have been focussing on the pedagogical aspects of my work as the head of the bachelor program in circus at Stockholm University of the Arts in Sweden. In the same University since 2019, I am a doctoral Candidate in Performative and Mediated Practices with specialization in Choreography. In my project, “Circus as a Practice of Hope,” I am looking at the parallel between my role as a circus artist and the larger perspective of my involvement as a human in the current ecological and societal challenges we are facing. I aim to revise the dominating posture of the human/circus artist, exploring how to transform it and examining what insights can be gained for transiting towards a more “humble circus”¹ and becoming a more responsible human subject. To revise my circus practices, I engage posthumanism as both “a navigation tool”² and ethical compass to establish a feminist new materialist approach to my circus practices. As discussed by Francesca Ferrando:

“Posthumanism...provides a suitable way of departure to think in relational and multi layered ways, expanding the focus to the non-human realm in post-dualistic, post-hierarchical modes, thus allowing one to envision post-human futures which will radically stretch the boundaries of human imagination.”³

Besides entertaining for pleasure, thrills and delight, circus arts also function as a divertissement (from divertir in french), as in, they engage with the development of abilities to divert, and it is this circus agency that I am preoccupied with here. In troubled times, circus arts may serve as a diversion tool, not in the sense of taking away attention from the challenges that we are facing, but rather bringing our attention to these challenges so that we can engage by working with and through them.

How can we honor and revive the diverting agency of our artistic and pedagogical circus practices? How can we identify and embody the circus practices that are not ones of domination and capture? What are the ethical implications, tensions, challenges and opportunities that emerge when embarking in a revision of our habitual practices? What are the circus practices that aligned with the challenges of our times? These are some of the questions that my doctoral project tries to answer through circus practice. In the following section are a few examples of circus practices and thoughts that are currently being developed through my doctoral project.
Re-circularisation
I situate circus as proposed by Johann Le Guillerm⁴ which defines circus “as a minority practice for which the circle is its primary architecture”⁵. Expanding from this definition, I approach circus as a site for “other” perspectives to manifest. Furthermore, I am working with circularity as an element of composition; in my research, circus arts are understood as the act of moving around, spiraling, spinning, swinging, twisting, encircling, turning, and returning in and out in cyclical, circular flows. Here, the circle is conceptualized from “nomadic ethical considerations”⁶ which are echoing the nomadic circus perspectives that involve a form neither fixed nor closed: the circus ring is always moving from place to place and always including an opening that allows for moving in and out of it, consequently involving movement as processes of change.

To adopt circularity as a basic element for composition and performance is an effort to counter a vision of the world as linear which appears to often reinforce fixity, hierarchy, and duality. By, instead, engaging in the world’s re-circularisation ⁷, I wish to revive systems of value based on non-linearity, non-duality, and relational ontology. In my project this concretely means among other avenues, to engage the circus site as a circular physical space, to pay particular attention to circular motions, to pay particular attention to circle as a linguistic form, to emphasize cyclical processes rather than tending toward a final product.

From Mastering to Mattering
An overarching entry point to the processes in my doctoral project has been the attempt to shift from anthropocentric circus making to practices that take significant consideration of the more-than-human forces in circus composition. Fifteen years ago, I was a dancer acrobat; climbing poles, swinging on ropes, defying gravity, and performing displays of extreme physical abilities. Today even if I still identify as an acrobat, my circus discipline revolves around “object manipulation”. However, rather than using the word “object“, I will refer to the objects as “bodies” in an effort to move beyond the object/subject dichotomy. A strategy to work from a less dominating posture has been to work with non-circus “bodies”. The “bodies” I predominantly worked with were “bubbles” (handcrafted circles made of flexible fiberglass rods bowed into rings and woven into a dodecahedron)⁸, “foil“ (pieces of metallic sheets originally manufactured as safety blankets).

Early in the process, working with the “manipulation” of these non-conventional circus bodies, the notion of control appeared as a central notion. I turned to the tensions emerging between the differences it makes to my gestures when I am gaining control or losing control over the bodies. 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 “objects’ and transformed into the ability of phasing with the bodies and the environment. Therefore, ‘object manipulation’ as the appellation of my circus discipline no longer made sense.
Instead of “object manipulation”, I propose a “body re-orienting” practice that suggests the idea of distributed agency, an “agency of assemblages”.

Dislocating/Decentering
Another example of a concrete exercise I undertook to challenge the humanist approach to circus performance has been to dislocate the artist from the center of the ring. Invited by Gävle Konstcentrum, an art center in Sweden, I exposed a series of circus installations which included non-circus “bodies” that are associated with crisis and human vulnerability. In the next section, I describe the installation with foil. The installation with foil is a floating piece of foil attached at the four corners by ropes which circulate through pulley systems attached to four corners in the ceiling of the room.

In the exhibition hall, foil attracts the eyes. The visitors were often timid and did not touch the ropes. However, once permitted beyond the conventional art gallery’s boundaries and behaviors, the visitors began to grab and pull. With just a small pull, the foil deployed, generating a surprising amount of movement and sound while other visitors were trying to pass under the foil without being touched by it. Sometimes the foil was still, floating, and visitors would pass by without paying much attention to it; then, with some delay, the piece would shiver magically, a phantom in the room, reminding us of its presence.

One of the key realizations with this installation is that, while the installation has been mounted in different spaces and that the environmental specificities changed between the different places the installation was mounted, the positions and dimensions of the foil did too. While the spatial intervals between the parts of the installation changed, the physical degrees of freedom changed too, impacting how the foil moved, thus transforming how people experienced the entanglement of bodies forming the installation. This type of realization may seem elementary at first, but when analyzing the results from a circus perspective, it invites us to rethink the professional practice of “fixing” a circus act. 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 be taken in consideration regarding how bodies can move, relate, and organize.

The foil installation is an example of the potential of posthumanism in practice. Engaging circus practice through a critical posthumanist perspective opened up ecosophical dimensions of the composition and performance. The performativity involved in the foil installations made me aware of the habits we have in circus to “fix” the circus piece and “control” the environment in order to maximize human virtuosity. The installation also concretely demonstrated the potential of diverting from these habits. By considering the other-than-human forces at play as central, different virtuosic events were enabled; other types of expressions and virtuositites emerged, which decentred the circus artist involvement in inviting other-than-artist participants to experience the more-than-human forces at play.

Circus-Walks
Multiverse is a circus performance created as part of my doctoral project for which I am the author and the performer. Multiverse is an unfixed, open-ended circus event, meaning that the piece is always in process and varies according to the context. The choreographic approach to Multiverse is the exercise of circumambulation (to walk around). I was inspired by the methods developed by the Walkinglab, an international queer-feminist art collective based in Canada. The Queer walking tours they offer are a form of place-based research that draws on Indigenous, anti-racist, feminist, and queer frameworks to open up different conversations around the notion of place. “As a research methodology, walking has a diverse and extensive history in the social sciences and humanities, underscoring its value for conducting research that is situated, relational, and material.” The performative site of “Multiverse” is conceptualized as an integrating circular place, in which the artist (the walker) walks in a circular motion. This circumambulation involves an attentiveness to the interconnected parts of the circle, the site in which the circle forms, and care for the manner in which one accesses, crosses, and occupies the circle in each step. In the circular site of Multiverse, the walker parts in processes of objectifications, atmospheric, sonic and light phenomena. The walker observes, orient, and is being re-oriented, while moving and walking in circular flows. Walking as a mode of circus artistic research is generating productive tensions. It invites the circus artist to meet the circus disciplines through other spatial, material and temporal relations and through other dynamics, thus transforming the circus disciplines.

Slow Circus
The decrease of speed has been an essential aspect in each of the exercises described above. In the studio working with foils and bubbles, in the circular circus-walks of Multiverse, I moved at an insistent slow pace. To slow down has created the conditions that helped me as a circus artist to better attune, listen, pace, and phase with my environment.

“Slowing down means becoming capable of learning again, becoming acquainted with things again, reweaving the bounds of interdependency. It means thinking and imagining, and in the process creating relationships with others that are not those of capture.”

When the circus gestures are being captured as commodities, circus art’s subversive potential gets neutralized. The circus act gets normalized and standardized; a product consumed rather than a poetic, diverting, provoking, and useful tool. Furthermore, slowing down is enabling going more in depth through subtle variations. Rather than wanting to maximize risk, increase virtuosity through higher speed and quantity, we work in resistance to it so that we can enable other sensibilities and other types of success to manifest. Today, to go slow is often harder than being quick. An entire article should be written on the undercurrent of a discreet but existing and insisting “Slow Circus” movement in Contemporary Circus. As a pioneer of that movement one can think of Chloé Moglia and her suspension practices; slow circus as practices of hope.

Vulnerability as Virtuosity
To anchor my relations with the more-than-human bodies in the material world, in practically challenging linearity and cartesian dualities in my circus practices has shed lights on the body’s sensibilities, boundaries, limits, and vulnerabilities. Vulnerability appears to be an important concept to reconsider when it come to our modes of composition; by acknowledging and working in sympoiesis\textsuperscript{15} with the bodies vulnerabilities, our circus mastery may transform from an ability to dominate over the environment into a virtuosc poetics of care and vulner-able/affect-able\textsuperscript{16} relations to the environment. As virtuosity relocated and other types of virtuosities manifested and emerged from the circus practices briefly expose in this article, I as circus performer, embarked on a transition, from mastering to mattering, from spectacularity to spectrality, and from transhumanist pretensions to a transition that tends towards more-than-human solidarities.

The current crises we face force us to revise what it means to be human. But how is circus relevant in this necessary revision? If one can equate circus to divertissement (as in the ability to divert), perhaps circus can be a constructive diversion to focus on the differences, the hidden, unheard, unseen, and misunderstood. By diverting us from the illusion of control over our environment, we may bring attention to vulnerability as a tool to nurture other types of virtuosity. It is in understanding the importance of vulnerability that we may better appreciate humans’ delicate relationships with all living and non-living beings. And in engaging circus from less dominant postures, there is the attempt to nurture our ability to respond sensitively to the challenges of our time as well as to revive circus arts as nomadic poetic forces; as circus practices of hope\textsuperscript{17}.

\textsuperscript{1} In his master thesis, Vincent Focquet reflects on the concept of a “humble circus”. He analyzes tactics for implementing “careful dramaturgy” and developing a discourse grounded in politics of care (Focquet, 2019).
\textsuperscript{5} Quentin, Anne: Johann Le Guillerm in: Mémoire du Cirque d’aujourd’hui. 1999.
\textsuperscript{8} The Bubbles are designed by Rachel Wingfield: http://loop.ph/rachel-wingfield/
\textsuperscript{10} Circusperspektiv. Circus meets Visual Arts. www.gavlekonstcentrum.se/19-09-20-cirkusperspektiv/ (Zugriff 30.03.2022)
\textsuperscript{11} WalkingLab. www.walkinglab.org (Zugriff 30.03.2022)
\textsuperscript{13} Stengers, Isabelle. Another science is possible: A manifesto for slow science. New Jersey 2018.
17www.uniarts.se/english/research-and-development-work/phd-project/circus-as-a-practice-of-hope