

A person wearing a white protective suit and sneakers is walking across a wet, paved city square. They are carrying a large, crumpled thermal blanket that is half gold and half silver. In the background, there are modern buildings, including a tall, cylindrical structure with a grid-like facade. The sky is blue with scattered white clouds.

#33

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CIRCUS AS PRACTICES OF HOPE

A Philosophy of Circus

Marie-Andrée Robitaille



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Circus as Practices of Hope

A Philosophy of Circus

Marie-Andrée Robitaille
Doctoral Candidate
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Fine Arts in Performative and Media Based
Practices with Specialisation in Choreography

The documented artistic research project (doctoral thesis)
consisting of

1. The live performance, *Multiverse*
2. A digital spherical exposition
3. A written exegesis
4. Artifacts

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My project is entangled with many people, ideas, and practices, all intricately woven together. For further insight into these collaborations, influences, fluences, and flux, please refer to the survey of the field in the annex and the additional acknowledgments.

Abstract

My doctoral artistic research project, *Circus as Practices of Hope: A Philosophy of Circus* responds to the growing complexities emerging from the convergence of the fourth industrial revolution, the sixth mass extinction, and the eco-socio-political turmoil of our time. What does it mean to be human today? What does it mean to be a circus artist today? How is circus relevant in today's context?

Core to this inquiry is the assertion that although circus arts hold the potential to foster significant knowledge, they simultaneously perpetuate outdated worldviews that restrict their transgressive potential. With this research, I investigate alternatives to regressive models of thoughts and modes of composition, aiming to identify and articulate circus' inherent epistemic, ontological, and ethical specificities and their relevance for navigating and steering the current planetary paradigm shift.

I conducted my research through embodied practices as a circus artist, as a pedagogue, and from the perspective of a human on Earth. My inquiry occurred through *Multiverse*, an iterative series of compositional performative experiments and discursive activities. I engaged critical posthumanism and neo-materialist philosophies to challenge and evolve my relation to risk, mastery, and virtuosity.

The project conceptualizes circus arts as nomadic and fabulatory practices, culminating in a series of artistic, choreographic, and conceptual tools and methods that articulate circus arts within and beyond their disciplinary boundaries. The project advances a philosophy of circus that highlights circus-specific kinetic, aesthetic, and embodied relevancies in today's context, situating circus arts as hopeful practices for the future.

Keywords: circus, choreography, composition, posthumanism, posthuman ethics, new materialisms, performative materialism, kinetic materialism, body-reorienting practice, defamiliarization, practical fabulation, nomadic practices, nomadic images, nomadic practices, multiverse, technopoetics, material imagination, embodiment, hope, hopepunk

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Introduction to Documentation

This section introduces the parts of the documented artistic research project (doctoral thesis). As such, it is a navigation tool for moving across the project's parts and a guideline for "reading" the entire project's documentation.

The documented artistic research project (doctoral thesis) consists of

- The live performance *Multiverse*
- A digital spherical exposition
- A written exegesis
- Artifacts

By combining several modes of documentation, I wish to affirm the various modes of research, honor their discursive and aesthetic specificities, and recognize their linguistic impossibility.

Live Performance

The live performance *Multiverse* has been continuously developed throughout the research project through a series of iterations. It has been presented internationally in different contexts and will be presented at the making public of the thesis on April 29th, 2024, at Stockholm University of the Arts. *Multiverse* offers direct access to the research as performance and aesthetics praxis. The performance contains elements considered "unarchivable", necessitating it be experienced live.

Digital Exhibition

The digital exhibition, located on the Research Catalogue,¹ an international database for artistic research, provides a spherical exposition of the research processes through a repository of images, texts, and diagrams. The exposition intends to honor the aesthetics of the research by employing the concepts and principles that emerged from and steered the process. With a diffractive structural mode of composition, the exposition offers transversal and anarchic ways of moving within the project's various mediality. By adopting a cosmological approach to documentation, I wished to explore the potential of non-linear accesses, multiple partial views, and the built-in ambivalence that comes with these. The digital exhibition has been fed and transformed throughout the research project through evolving and unstable indexicalities, manifesting the fugitive and kinetic aspects of knowledge formation.²

Exegesis

The exegesis is a critical textual articulation of the research project. The text exposes and discusses the research's questions, methods, and findings. The text accounts for why and how I conducted the artistic research project. It elaborates on and discusses the concepts and processes that were activated through and emerged from the project.³

¹ www.researchcatalogue.net

² www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1244452/2066028

³ The author follows Bloomsbury Publishing Plc. Academic and Professional Division's, House Style Guidelines for Authors and Editors.

Artifacts

The artifacts—one volvelle, one bubble, and one piece of foil—are physically archived at Stockholm University of the Arts. The purpose of the physical archive is to give material access to a few of the bodies/objects/materials that have been significant in conducting the research project.

Notes on Documentation

Alternative modes of knowledge production (such as knowing through circus) require alternative ways of articulation. The field of artistic research enables researchers to develop alternatives to traditional academic documentation. In this doctoral thesis, I aim to provide a situated account of my project without conforming to academic conventions but without rejecting them entirely. The above-mentioned parts constitute my doctoral thesis. Each part is distinct yet complementary. While this documented artistic project is best understood in its entirety, my hope is that each part is independently valuable and accessible.

PREFACE

The Feeling of Hope

Stockholm, 1999. Under the bridge Västerbron, Långholmen. I found myself in a free fall of about ten meters. After a rehearsal session of my circus act on swinging rope, my technical rigger used to help me down back to the floor using a rappel system. My technical rigger was absent, and the substitute for my rehearsal had mistakenly grabbed the wrong rope, causing me to fall from my rope onto the stage below.

Sitting on my rope at nine meters above the floor, I received the signal and let go of the rope. I felt the friction of my arms slipping from the rope, which was locked between my back and under my shoulders. As my toes pointed downwards towards the stage, my body slid down the rope, and I felt every sensation between the rope and my arms, all the way to each fingertip. While secured and attached in a harness, I was supposed to be rappelled down by hands, but as I lost contact with the rope, there was no counterbalance of someone bearing my weight, and I was descending too fast, way faster than I should have been. A long nine-meter fall went much too quickly.

At one moment in the fall, I consciously chose not to turn my head and eyes toward the person meant to ensure my safety. Instead, an instinct within me made me look at the floor. As I saw and touched the floor, I melted like water. Resistance could have resulted in breaking both my legs. Instead, I released onto the floor being-water,⁴ rematerializing as a sitting body.

After landing, I don't remember if I laid down on my back first, but I found myself sitting on the stage floor, my legs and torso at ninety degrees. I placed my right hand on top of my head and my left hand on the sternum close to my heart. I took deep breaths. Colleagues rushed to check if I was alright. I went to the hospital to assess what injuries I had. I could walk. The MRI showed no broken bones. The fall left me in tremendous pain. I had just a week until the premiere of the show. The following nights were restless, filled with flashbacks of the fall in the confined space of the caravan where I was living.

Reflecting on this first professional circus contract in Sweden, I realize that giving way and letting go into gravity saved me from serious injuries. I often relive this fall while daydreaming or dreaming in my sleep, and I wonder whether my body or mind guided me to release into the floor rather than panic and tense up.

Later in my journey as an acrobat, I worked as a stuntwoman. I performed a series of high jump stunts in the opera *Tosca* at Norrlandsoperan in Umeå, Sweden. I was the stunt double for the singer playing the role of Tosca, the main character. In the closing act, Tosca is surrounded by the police and military, but she resolutely refuses to surrender, choosing instead (despite her Christian faith) to leap from the building. Ultimately, she has no hope in

⁴ Be like water is a famous quote from Bruce Lee: "Be water, my friend. Empty your mind. Be formless, shapeless, like water. You put water into a cup, it becomes the cup. You put water into a bottle, it becomes the bottle. You put it into a teapot, it becomes the teapot. Now water can flow, or it can crash. Be water, my friend."
<https://bruceleefoundation.org/initiatives/>

living without her beloved Mario and is at the mercy of the authorities. The opera ends with Tosca's fatal leap from the roof. My job was to perform the stunt of a deadly fall into a small square hole filled with foam across the orchestra pit. During this period, where I simulated Tosca's death, I revisited, in practice, my earlier high fall, attentive to how my body and mind operated during the fall.

This series of high jumps required extreme precision and an engaged but relaxed body and mind. It made me realize that my body and mind were in sync during my earlier fall from the rope—I couldn't distinguish between them. I genuinely trusted that they were both as one, harmoniously. The instinct to prevent injury (or worse) emerged as embodied hope—a feeling of knowing how to respond.

Circus Trajectory

I am a circus artist. I have a long history in dance, sports, and circus arts. I spent my youth studying and training in classical ballet, jazz, and gymnastics and competed as a cross-country runner. I remember the urgency and realness of racing as something very exciting, scary, difficult, and rewarding. I consistently broke speed records and was recruited by Le Triastre (now Rouge et Or), a competitive track and field club at the University Laval in Quebec, where I am from. My specialization was a demi-fond (middle-distance) course, but I also excelled in sprint, high jump, and long jump. I ran faster, jumped higher and further, won medal after medal, and qualified for the Nationals. When the dream of competing in the Olympics was just a few races away, I seriously injured my right ankle. The injury prevented me from participating in the National competition that year.

To rehabilitate, I started to dance at École de danse de Québec and never went back running for medals. Through my teachers Lucie Boissinnot, Michelle Cormier, and Johanne Dor I was introduced to Graham and Limon techniques. Simultaneously, I studied human sciences in the dance program art and studies in collaboration with CEGEP de Ste-Foy. Following these years dedicated to exploring my dancing body, I traveled out of Quebec into the Metropole to audition for a spot at the Montreal National Circus School ENC. I was attracted to circus arts from a young age, coming from a city that had seen the spectacular growth of Cirque du Soleil. Circus arts allowed my dance and gymnastics training to manifest through acrobatics and explore the body's possibilities to move differently. I enrolled as a circus artist. Flipping, twisting, flying, stretching, balancing, and juggling occupied the first year at the school. In the second year, I wanted to practice Chinese pole, but women were not allowed to specialize in it then. However, I was invited by Viktor Fomine, a renowned aerial trainer, to specialize in swinging rope (cloud swing), which also required upper-body strength and agility in the air.

After my first professional contract in Sweden with the swing rope and a near-fatal fall from nine meters, I returned to the pole, supported by the visionary circus director Tilde Björfors. With the pole, I worked with the pioneering Swedish circus company Cirkus Cirkör, touring the world as a female Chinese pole solo act.⁵ While Cirkus Cirkör's motto was *sky's the limit*, I eventually realized that the sky was not the limit but that my body was. After seven years of touring, I stopped being a circus performer and became the head of the circus preparatory program run by Cirkus Cirkör in Sweden. I eventually returned to Canada as a talent scout for the Cirque du Soleil and finally returned to Sweden in 2009 to work at the Stockholm University of the Arts, SKH. From 2009 to 2019, I led the bachelor program in circus at SKH as an assistant professor of circus while simultaneously conducting a series

⁵ To my knowledge, I was the first female Chinese pole solo act if not the only one touring at the time.

of multilayered artistic research projects within circus and choreography. In *Gynoides Project*, I addressed the agency and representation of women in circus arts by exploring feminist strategies in circus performance. In *Sound of Circus*, I explored the relationships between sound and motion by integrating interactive technologies. In *Hidden Circus*, I developed sensing practices as modes of composition. This research evolved into my doctoral artistic research project, *Circus as Practices of Hope: A Philosophy of Circus*.

Research Context

In researching my doctoral project, I participated in a wide variety of seminars, symposiums, and think tanks. These have been instrumental in developing my research project and have contributed to maintaining continuous discussions about my research and practices and their relationship to the research and practices of other practitioners in circus arts and beyond. Throughout the project, I have engaged in conversations in large and small groups, one-to-one dialogues, and larger assemblies. My research has been processed and shared in interdisciplinary contexts. I have been a member of several networks involving researchers from circus arts (practitioners, students, and scholars), scholars in humanities, post-humanities, military studies, economics, and philosophy, and practitioners in other art forms (film, photography, drawing, sound art, fine arts, choreography, and music). I have been teaching, supervising, and hosting workshops for students of educational programs and professional circus artists. I have presented my project internationally and locally to audiences of different demographics (artistic research, academia, students and professionals in circus, fine arts, primary school and high school students, and general audiences). My project is entangled with a multitude of people, ideas, and practices, all intricately woven together. To learn further about these collaborations, please refer to the survey of the field in the annex and the acknowledgements sections.

Circus as Practices of Hope: A Philosophy of Circus reflects timely considerations, aspirations, and aesthetics. Several PhD theses in or about circus practices have been produced before and after my doctoral research project, which projects share similarities, differences, and potential for complementarities. We are multiple circus scholars and circus artists aiming to engage in circus practices that are responsive to the current planetary conditions, and I understand my project taking place as part of this movement. I consider my project sharing affinities—coinciding familiarities and aesthetics—with the work of several other circus artists and artists from other fields. While our projects may have briefly and, in many cases, never crossed direct paths, the aesthetics or topical affinities we share inscribe us in a similar movement. I look forward to interacting with them in the future.

This doctoral artistic research project was conducted between 2019 and 2024. Significant global and personal events impacted my relationship with hope during this period. Some of these events were extreme climate disorders, a global pandemic, the #metoo movement, a revival of the Black Lives Matter movement, a resurgence of the “space race”, also known as the “billionaire space race rivalry”, the invasion of Russia in Ukraine, the ongoing Israel-Hamas war. Closer to home, my first child began school, I gave birth to my second child, and I returned to the circus ring after a fifteen-year break from performing, during which time aging impacted my physical condition. Currently, I am facing a precarious professional and economic situation, making it harder to nurture hope.

Although these events occurred at different locations and scales, they should not be considered independent and distinct. The infinitely small cells of my aging body transform as the universe continues to expand; the intimate event of picking up my child from school occurs at the same time as the global broadcast of the Chandrayaan-2’s landing on the

moon. I learned about the invasion of Ukraine while hosting the workshop *Vulnerability as Virtuosity* for the group of artists/activists Acting for Climate, where the participants communicated in real time with distressed Ukrainian circus friends. The wildfire raging in the north of Quebec, where my brother-in-law was working, tainted New York's sky red, where my supervisor Juliette Mapp was teaching. While Swedish citizens voluntarily observed social distancing and could meet via telecommunication, some people were involuntarily held in the detention center on Manus Island, deprived of free movement and access to communication. Simultaneous collective realities clash with individual ones. Interconnectedness and yet growing divides. Hope and hopelessness all as one.

The combination of rapid technological development and fast deterioration of the planet blurs the lines between what used to be local or global, virtual or real, past or future. Today, we can no longer consider these categories dissociable or qualitatively distinct. Within these blurs, our values are disputed and disrupted; there is a growing confusion between morality and ethics, liberty and responsibility, identity and commonalities. How can we reorient and nurture new hope within these blurs?

Throughout my project, I have been mindful of these current philosophical and political concerns. However, I did not seek to solve them; instead, I aim to contribute an articulation of a philosophy of circus to nurture a circus ethos responsive to today's context and complexities.

FIELD OF INQUIRY

Circus Ways of Knowing

“One can know more than one can tell.”
(Michael Polanyi 1966)

My initial claim is that circus arts have specific ways of knowing that are relevant to today’s context. As such, my research addresses the legitimacy of circus arts as an art form with distinct specificities.

As a circus artist, a pedagogue, and a human on Earth, I have always felt that I know more than I can explain. In the moment of doing a volt, I feel that I understand the whole universe but can’t explain it. Michael Polanyi termed this the tacit dimension of knowing, a knowledge we cannot tell (Polanyi 1966). The desire to articulate, abstract, and conceptualize the tacit dimension of my knowledge has driven me to engage as a doctoral candidate.

The field of artistic research has been the adequate academic context for me to address circus philosophical questions. The field encourages and values artistic practices as generative of knowledge. Even though I am trying to abstract, theorize, and conceptualize circus ways of knowing, I have done so by indwelling bodily practice, attending to these philosophical questions by relying on bodily awareness rather than the other way around—or at least I have tried to.

Through my experiences as a professional circus artist, student, teacher and head of program in higher educational circus programs, I observed a disparity in resources allocated for the technical training of circus disciplines to enhance productivity and meet market demands vs. resources that focus on circus artistic development. This is not surprising as, in general, mastering circus skills and attaining virtuosic heights require devoting time and consistent commitment. Whether standing on your hands, walking on a wire, or juggling nine balls, circus requires bodily practice and repetition-based devotion.

The emphasis on technical proficiency and employability in circus education is exemplified by FEDEC,⁶ an international network for professional circus education; FEDEC’s mission statement includes, among other aims, to “enrich and develop circus arts education” and to “promote employability and synergies with the professional sector”.⁷ The pedagogical resources developed by FEDEC and its affiliate schools focus predominantly on teaching and learning circus skills, often categorized by disciplines, with limited attention given to deepening artistic development. While I do not deny the importance of the technical and market-driven realities, to support other capacities and dimensions inherent to circus arts will require a shift of emphasis in our conception of the art form.

⁶ www.fedec.eu/en/resources/?label=& current_page=2& nb_items_per_page=12

⁷ FEDEC (Fédération Européenne des Ecoles de Cirque) is an international network for professional circus education. The Federation supports the development and evolution of training, teaching and learning in the field of circus arts. www.fedec.eu/en

Additionally, the imposition of techniques from sports or other art forms, like ballet and acting, often constrain these other capacities and dimensions. Rather than looking outside the circus arts for inspiration or validation (while not denying that different areas of practice can contribute), my pedagogical project attempts to articulate and prioritize artistic methods and techniques inherent to circus arts while acknowledging and incorporating external influences without subjugating them. I think the circus field would benefit from shifting its focus to endogenous methods generated through circus arts.

Circus arts have been increasingly researched within the humanities in the last decade. As a result, theory has been more present than ever in circus arts. This theoretical turn might be an attempt to emancipate circus arts from being reduced to its techniques/disciplines. However, focusing on theories external to circus arts may reinforce a gap between theory and practice.

On the one hand, there is a discussion about circus-making focused on producing circus work (poiesis). On the other hand, there is a theoretical discussion about what circus is, which concentrates on thinking about circus (theoria). While these two types of knowledge development are important, they come from perspectives different from my research. While I conducted my research through circus-making and discursive activities involving thinking about the making, the knowledge perspective I focus on is the one of a circus as praxis.

Praxis, poiesis, and theoria are three types of activities that produce knowledge. While praxis, poiesis, and theoria may overlap, they are three different discussions of knowledge. The organization of knowledge in these three types of activities in my project “primarily serves the purpose of elucidating the difference between theory and different forms of practice in a way that directs our attention to the doings and makings, the actions and materializations of knowledge, rather than singularly to the mediation of epistemic claims” (Nilsson Hammar 2018).

If the project has been conducted from the perspective of circus as praxis, it does not exclude that making and thinking are involved in the project’s exercises. For example, this text articulates (or thinks of) the research conducted through circus making. However, what has been examined through circus poiesis and reflected upon through theoria is a circus praxis: the act of circus. My research has not been conducted from the perspective of enhancing knowledge about circus making or elaborating a universal definition of what circus is. My motivation has been to understand and articulate what circuses do and can do, to articulate circus as praxis. By praxis, I refer to the ability to act with ethical concerns for the quality and value of an action. These transversal paths between circus as praxis (doing), circus as modes of knowing (theoria) and circus as a mode of making (poiesis) are what I understand the promise of artistic research to be: fostering slippages between theory and practice.

Even if these differences fluctuate between subtle and/or obvious, they are necessary to orient the reader on how to understand the project and this text in particular. During this project, I have not equated circus to its disciplines or as a mode of thinking. I intentionally do not equate circus practice with thinking; in fact, I have developed circus practices and methods that aim to “let go” of thinking and prioritize kinetic and aesthetic forms of knowing, becoming, and meaning. This is not a move to separate and reinforce a body-mind opposition but rather an attempt to right an imbalance where, within cartesian thinking, body and mind have been put on opposite sides of knowledge development. I

want to understand how I can, in practice, challenge the concept of the ontological separation between body and mind, theory and practice, and object and subject, which I believe is a dichotomy leading to anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism.

In this text, I will use the term circus gesture to refer to a circus action. I prefer circus gestures since a “circus act” is commonly used to describe the form of an artistic product, a short seven to nine-minute circus performance. In this text, I refer to circus making as the production of a circus work and circus gesture to refer to a circus doing, or praxis, which inevitably involves making and thinking.

With this research, I have aimed to:

- deepen my understanding of the epistemic potential of circus arts as praxis beyond and within their disciplines
- contribute to the further articulation of a philosophy of circus
- cultivate a circus ethos responsive to today’s context
- embody hopeful practices for today and the future

Posteriori to this project, I have been exploring circus arts through practice from the perspective of their epistemic, ontological, and ethical dimensions. I have been working to identify circus arts specificities and conceptualize circus arts as a praxis that can work across disciplines. As a result, I have articulated methods that are endogenous to circus practices, in other words, that are generated from within circus arts, enabling the growth of the art form from within.

Circus Perspectives

An early component of my project was, as suggested by Johan Le Guillerm, to situate “circus arts as a minority⁸ practice for which the circle is its natural architecture” (Quentin 1999). I also looked to the etymological root of the word circus to situate it more precisely. Below, I have performed slight linguistic shifts to clarify circus arts’ purposes and meanings for my research project.

The linguistic origin of circus, “ring”, leads us to the word-forming *circum*, which means “around”, “roundabout”, “all around”, literally “in a circle”.⁹ The reference to circus as a site takes its roots in ancient Rome from the Latin *circus*, signifying a ring or circular line that Romans applied to circular arenas for performances and contests and oval courses for racing (especially the Circus Maximus). Circus also refers to *Kirkos* in Greek as a circle, a ring. The meaning of circus as a performing company and entertainment, or “traveling show”, came later in 1838.¹⁰ In this project, I kept the idea of a nomadic circular site for performance—a circle on the move.

⁸ I refer to the Deleuzian and Guattari concept of *minority*: “A minority is a deviation from the model or a becoming of everybody (tout le monde). The majoritarian model is a constant while its minoritarian counterpart is a subsystem” (Conley 2013). Minority is also linked to the idea of revolution; “only by becoming ‘other’, by passing between the poles of binary oppositions and blurring clear categories can new possibilities for social interaction be created” (Bogue 2013). Deleuze and Guattari argue that in the political sphere, in art, philosophy, and sciences “all creativity and mutation necessarily come from a minoritarian position ... Minorities and Revolutions are both becomings” (Watson 2013).

⁹ www.etymonline.com/search?q=circum

¹⁰ www.etymonline.com/word/circus

Through the text, I will often refer to the term “nomadic”. My relationship to the term comes from the works of Deleuze and Guattari, Édouard Glissant, and Rosi Braidotti, who all explore the term from various perspectives. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari use nomadic to describe a fluid and non-hierarchical mode of existence, challenging fixed structures (Deleuze and Guattari 2015). Édouard Glissant, in his concept of “relational identity”, sees the nomadic as a way to navigate cultural diversity without assimilation (Glissant 1990, 1997). Rosi Braidotti, in her nomadic theory and feminist philosophy, views nomadism as a dynamic identity that resists fixed categories (Braidotti 2011a,b, 2013). These thinkers engage with nomadism as a concept that challenges rigidity and embraces movement in different dimensions.

The word circus originates from the root “sker” or “wer”, which forms the verbs “to turn, bend”.¹¹ This introduces the concept of circus as an activity, a circus doing that is to turn, to bend. In circus arts, there is the bending of bodies, and through circus arts, circus artists bend the way reality is perceived.

The circus root “wer” forms part of the word divert, from the old French *divertir* in early 15c., *diverten*: change the direction or course of; change the aim or destination of, to turn aside or away. *Divertissement* in French (entertainment in English) is from circa 100c.: to draw off from a particular intention or state of mind, hence the meaning “amuse, entertain.”¹² If one keeps to the early purpose of diverting: “to change the direction or course of,” thus involved in circus is the notion of change.

In the same associative logic, the form of root “sker”, meaning “to turn, bend”, is also a word-forming for research.¹³ Research: “to investigate or study (a matter) closely, search or examine with continued care”. Research is also from the Latin *circare*, “to go about, wander, traverse”.

I am referring to the origins of and associations with the word circus to highlight the aspects of circularity, motion, diversion, and research within its meaning. Through my research, I have posited circus as an art of showing minority events, and circus’s main activity is understood as a mode of inquiry in which one circumvents by wandering in circles, bending perceptions, and enabling diversion from a specific course.

¹¹ www.etymonline.com/word/~sker-#etymonline_v_52738

¹² www.etymonline.com/word/divert

¹³ www.etymonline.com/word/research

The Researcher's Perspective

I have conducted the project from three complementary perspectives: as a circus artist, a pedagogue, and a human on Earth.



Figure 1 Photo series *STUDIO 16 - COVID 19*, Stockholm, Sweden, 2020. Credit Einar Kling Odencrants. Courtesy Marie-Andrée Robitaille.

Circus Artist

I am a circus artist. During my years as a circus performer, I mainly worked as an acrobat and dancer while also being multidisciplinary and doing a little of everything. I stopped performing for fifteen years, during which time I focused on research as a choreographer/director and circus pedagogue/educator. I have conducted this project through artistic practice. My PhD marks a return to a bodily circus practice and to performing. In this project, as a circus artist, I am developing choreographic circus tools through compositional studies.

Pedagogue

My research is grounded and inspired by my pedagogical inquiry and aspirations. While teaching and researching circus arts in an interdisciplinary school of higher education, I searched for methods that expand circus practice without letting go of the richness that specialization in a singular circus discipline offers. Transdisciplinarity (rather than interdisciplinarity) is a way to understand circus arts as a whole. Circus arts involve a vast range within singular disciplinary practices. Visual arts, architecture, sound art, sculpture, technology, language, narrative, composition, movement, and philosophy are all integrated into the circus disciplines. Circus arts are transdisciplinary, encompassing many different perspectives while remaining highly specialized. The specificity of circus specialization

opens up a multitude of perspectives. Mindful of articulating circus arts specificities (without closing down their multiplicities), I grew more interested in exploring circus arts on their own terms. My research has moved across circus arts' disciplinary borders and beyond the rigidity of their technical, disciplinary expectations.

My pedagogical focus in this research is to identify the specificities of circus arts from artistic and practical perspectives. These perspectives encompass circus disciplines, conceptualizing artistic methodologies and methods, and articulating other dimensions inherent to a circus as praxis.

Human on Earth

Throughout the project, I have engaged in a planetary practice that entails feminist, decolonizing, and environmentalist perspectives, striving for geopolitical solidarity and ecological justice. For Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the critical notion of the planetary lies primarily in offering a mode of identification that does not define itself in opposition to the others (Fowkes and Fowkes 2018). In response to the pressing need for a planetary unified approach to the ecological crisis, adopting the concept of the planetary enables a shift away from identity-based impasses. Despite recognizing the subjective nature of my perspective, I will frequently use "We" and "World" in this text. When I say "We", I primarily refer to "Us", humans on Earth, as well as "Us", the circus artists and pedagogues who are reading my discourse. However, mindful of the entangled nature of our human being, my usage of "We" acknowledges it as co-constituted. By "World", I mean the planetary realm that is best encapsulated by Escobar's concept of "pluriverse, a world where many worlds fit" (Escobar 2017). Throughout this project, I aimed not to weaponize differences but to be attentive to our capacity and power to differ within ourselves and among each other. As Rosi Braidotti aptly expresses, "We Are In This Together, But We Are Not One and the Same" (Braidotti 2020b).

I've chosen to adopt these three perspectives (circus artist, pedagogue, and humans on Earth) to resist and rebel against dominant dualistic paradigms and as a practice of "thirling-as-othering" (Soja 2017).¹⁴

¹⁴ Soja draws on Henri Lefebvre's trialectics of spatiality to "bypass the lure of binarism: the compacting of meaning into a closed either/or opposition between two terms, concepts, or elements. Whenever faced with such binarized categories (subject-object, mental-material, natural-social, bourgeoisie-proletariat, local-global, center-periphery, agency-structure), Lefebvre persistently sought to crack them open by introducing an-Other term, a third possibility." This critical "thirling-as-othering" is, according to Soja, "the first and the most important step in transforming the categorical and closed logic of either/or to the dialectically open logic of both/and also" (Soja 2017).

METHODOLOGY

My methodology has been to revise my bodily circus practices from posthuman, new material, and compositional perspectives. Through a critical posthuman lens, I investigated how circus arts can remain relevant and ethically responsive to the current planetary paradigm shift. My main interest in posthumanities lies in critically revising the very notion of the human and understanding how to develop and enact posthuman ethics in practice. I engaged neo-materialisms as a framework to challenge the presumed separation of body and mind, as well as theory and practices, thus exploring circus arts' dimensions and their material-discursive potential from an ethico-onto-epistemic perspective. As a circus artist-researcher, I used composition as a choreographic and experimental methodology. In the next section, I expand upon each of these approaches.

Posthumanism in Practice

My journey into posthumanism began through my research in *Gynoïdes Project* (2010-2019), where I became familiar with Donna Haraway's criticism of anthropocentrism (Haraway 1985, 1998, 2016, 2018). I also came to posthumanism through transhumanism. I was interested in the body enhancement modus operatus of circus arts. In 2018, in the lecture *Our Posthuman Vulnerability: A Material Feminist Inquiry* by Christine Daigle (Daigle 2018)¹⁵ at the Posthumanities Hub in Sweden,¹⁶ I turned my attention to the potential of engaging circus arts from the perspective of vulnerability rather than from a transhuman enhancement perspective. Daigle's proposal "to render our ontological vulnerability generative", which she would expand upon later in her book *Posthumanist Vulnerability An Affirmatives Ethics* (Daigle 2023), became instrumental in developing my methods and practices and a gateway to philosophical and critical posthumanism.

The term "posthuman" often elicits ambiguity and confusion. The prefix "post" is frequently perceived as indicating a period following the extinction of humanity (one iteration of my compositional studies, *Multiverse*, was titled: *The last human on Earth (is a circus artist)*, a nod to that concern). But even an alternative to the posthuman, such as *The Ahuman Manifesto* proposed by Patricia MacCormack (MacCormack 2020), which speculates on the possibilities of "an after without human", is also working towards the necessary posthuman project of rethinking how we can recompose the notion of the human differently. Thus, the "post" in "posthuman" isn't temporal nor denotes a time when humans will be extinct. "Posthumanism is a philosophical stance that wants to move beyond humanism, literally an after humanism. Posthumanism is a position that rejects the central tenets of humanism and wants to reconceptualize [the notion of the human] ... and offer alternatives to human exceptionalism and anthropocentrism" (Daigle 2023). My interest in the posthumanities lies in critically revising the notion of the human (what kind of being we are in the process of becoming) by engaging parallels between being a human on Earth and being an artist in circus arts today.

¹⁵ www.brocku.ca/humanities/philosophy/christine-daigle

¹⁶ www.posthumanitieshub.net

During maternity leave in 2019, I immersed myself in Francesca Ferrando's *Philosophical Posthumanism*, exploring its origins and emerging branches (Ferrando 2019). The preface by Rosi Braidotti led me to delve into *The Posthuman*, a foundational text that moves between posthuman debates and future-oriented perspectives (Braidotti 2020a).

In *The Posthuman*, Braidotti outlines the various origins and strands of posthuman theory, identifying: "three major strands in contemporary posthuman thought: the first comes from moral philosophy and develops a reactive form of the posthuman; the second, from science and technology studies, enforces an analytic form of the posthuman; and the third, from [her] own tradition of anti-humanist philosophies of subjectivity, proposes a critical post-humanism" (Ibid.).

I do not align with the first reactive form of posthumanism. This strand develops "a defense of Humanism as the guarantee of democracy, freedom and the respect for human dignity, and rejects the very idea of a crisis of European Humanism ... defending the need for Universal humanistic values" (Ibid.). I am skeptical of viewpoints that aim to "reinstate liberal internationalism, especially given the role liberal ideologies have played in perpetuating colonialism and other global inequalities" (Jones 2021). In my doctoral artistic research project, I have not aimed for a universal definition of what circus is, nor did I take a moralistic stance on how the circus artist should (or not) be. I consider subjectivity and embodiment from the perspective of a feminist politics of location and post-colonialism, who are aware that they do not restore a humanist vision of the subject" (Ibid.).¹⁷

The second posthuman development that Braidotti describes is an analytic form of posthuman theory. "Science and technology studies tend to dismiss the implications of their positions for a revised vision of the subject" (Ibid.). Trans-humanism is one of these posthuman stances. "While contemporary transhumanism(s) is not one homogeneous movement but formed by many different schools of thought ... they share the goal of human enhancement" (Ferrando 2019). "Trans-humanism combines a humanistic belief in the perfectibility of Man through scientific rationality with a program of human enhancement" (Braidotti 2019). In the scope of my project, transhumanism exemplifies a dominant approach to circus training and pedagogy, which influences the types of beings, gestures, and narratives circus artists embody. I am not aligned with transhumanism's embrace of enlightenment humanist ideals based on linear progress and rationality. Ferrando acknowledged that "Transhumanism would benefit from implementing a substantial critical approach not only to the humanist paradigm but also to the notion of technology" (Ferrando 2019). I suggest circus arts would also benefit from implementing critical approaches to the humanist paradigm and their relationship to technology. Through my research project, I am experimenting with and affirming alternatives to a trans-humanist and linear approach to circus arts.

Posthumanism's third stance developed throughout Braidotti's body of work, a critical posthumanism (Braidotti 2011a,b, 2013, 2014, 2018, 2019, 2020a,b, 2022, 2023). In her critical posthumanism, Braidotti defines "the posthuman subject within an eco-philosophy of multiple belongings, as a relational subject constituted in and by multiplicity. That is to say, a subject that works across differences and is internally differentiated, but still

¹⁷ To read on the politics of location see Adrienne Rich Notes towards a politics of location in Feminist Postcolonial Theory, De Gruyter. www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/9781474470254/html?lang=en#contents

grounded and accountable” (Braidotti 2020a). As an artist-researcher, I focus on the emergence of posthuman ethics of becoming, asking the questions: what kind of beings are we in the process of becoming? What does it mean to be a circus artist today? These questions were notably inspired by “a talk with the philosopher and humanist Rosi Braidotti about what it means to be human in a changing world” (Andrés 2019). Braidotti responded to the question “What does being human mean today?” with:

Being human today is a concept under discussion. I am not sure that there is any agreed consensus on defining what human means. The Enlightenment left us with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, but women did not have human rights, nor did Jews, blacks, or children. The concept of human has always been associated with relations of power, exclusion, and inclusion. It has never been a neutral or inclusive concept. Today, more than ever, the notion of being human is undergoing evolution. The human being has to define itself within the context of the fourth industrial revolution, with the boom in science and technology ... What is necessary is a radical transformation, following the basis of feminism, anti-racism, and anti-fascism (Ibid.).

These aspirations inspire my research. Attuning to Braidotti’s revolutionary tone in searching to articulate circus dimensions and specificities, I hope to contribute artistic methods and embodied knowledge to support the need for the radical transformation Braidotti is referring to.

Throughout this artistic research project, the critical and philosophical posthuman approaches that oriented the ethics of my project are encapsulated in the affirmative posthuman feminism that traverses Rosi Braidotti’s body of work. My encounters with Christine Daigle, her proposal of a “vulner-able”, “affect-able”, and “transjective being”, and her contribution as an opponent to one of my doctoral seminars have been my “True North” throughout this project. I have been inspired by Francesca Ferrando’s agility in exposing and discussing the multiple posthuman branches without opposing them, and I have frequently reflected on their philosophical posthumanism.

New Materialisms

I encountered new materialism through Rosi Braidotti’s teachings,¹⁸ which led me to Spinoza, Deleuze, and Guattari’s vitalism and philosophies of immanence. I have navigated across numerous historical materialisms and the range of neo-materialist articulations within contemporary posthuman contexts.

“Materialists have split into a seemingly endless series of subcategories: neo-materialists, feminist new materialists, agential realism, matter-realists, object-oriented ontologists, speculative materialists, relational ontologists, posthuman materialists, vital materialists ... bringing into being the emerging interdisciplinary field of new materialist studies.”¹⁹

¹⁸ I have studied with Rosi Braidotti at Utrecht Summer school intensive courses *The Posthumanism and New Materialism* in 2021, *The Posthuman Life of Method* in 2022, and *The Intersectional Posthumanities* in 2023.

¹⁹ See the Series *New Materialisms* edited by Iris van der Tuin and Rosi Braidotti at Edinburgh University Press.
www.edinburghuniversitypress.com/series-new-materialisms

Starting from the suggestion that new materialism “proposes a cultural theory that radically rethinks the dualisms so central to our (post-)modern thinking and always starts its analysis from how these oppositions (between nature and culture, matter and mind, the human and the inhuman) are produced in action itself” (Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012), in this research project, my primary focus has been on the “action itself” that is my “circus gesture”. How does the “radical rethinking of dualisms” manifests in circus practice? Moreover, how are these “rethinkings” practicable? How can circus practices be informed and inform new materialist theory from and through practice itself?

The many historical and contemporary materialisms potentially contribute to my interrogations, albeit to differing degrees and with different goals. However, there are fundamental divisions between the different branches. It was not feasible nor necessarily desirable for me to embrace them all. My understanding of the different historical and contemporary neo-materialist strands comes from reading Karen Barad’s *The Universe Halfways Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Barad 2007); Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin’s *New Materialism Interviews & Cartographies* (Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012); Rosi Braidotti’s body of work; Manuel DeLanda’s *A thousand Year of Nonlinear History* (DeLanda 2021); Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman’s *Material Feminisms* (Alaimo and Hekman 2008); Stacy Alaimo’s *Bodily Natures Science, environment and the material self* (Alaimo 2010), and *Exposed: Environmental Politics and Pleasures in Posthuman Times* (Alaimo 2016); Diana Coole and Samantha Frost’s *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Coole and Frost 2010); Helen Palmer’s *Queer Defamiliarisation: Writing, Mattering, Making Strange* (Palmer 2020); Rick Dolphijn’s *The philosophy of Matter: A Meditation* (Dolphijn 2021); *From Deleuze and Guattari to Posthumanism Philosophies of Immanence* (Daigle and Mc Donald 2022) and Christine Daigle’s *Posthumanist Vulnerability: An Affirmative Ethics* (Daigle 2023). These texts led to a web of connected authors and thoughts, providing me with historical resources and interdisciplinary approaches to matter and embodiment, subjectivity, post-dualism, and posthuman ethics.

Complementary, the kinetic materialism articulated by Thomas Nail responds to my aspiration to articulate the specificities of circus arts and their potential from a kinetic perspective. Thomas Nail’s work on developing a philosophy of movement significantly contributes to my project.²⁰

According to Gamble et al., “There is ... no single definition of new materialism but at least three distinct and partly incompatible trajectories: vital materialism, negative new materialism, and performative new materialism” (Gamble, Hanan and Nail 2019).²¹

²⁰ I have studied with Thomas Nail at the School of Materialist Research in the course *The Philosophy of Matter, Death and Extinction* in Autumn 2022. My research is widely influenced by my ongoing reading of Thomas Nail’s body of work especially his book on an ontology of motion and philosophy of movement (Nail 2019a,b, 2020a, 2021a,b, 2024), and Lucretius (Nail 2018, 2020b, 2022).

²¹ This categorization by Gamble and colleagues may not be canonical and endorsed by the broader academic community of new materialisms. To this extend, the reader can consult *Methods and Genealogies of New Materialisms* which “contextualize, archive and consolidates new materialisms as a distinguished field of scholarship by bringing together the key proponents of the field as well as providing consonant, dissonant, and feminist genealogies of the state of the field” (Coleman and van der Tuin 2023). In the frame of my research and at this specific time, I use Gamble and colleagues’ categorization (Gamble, Hanan and Nail 2019) in order to orient and situate myself within the wide web of new materialist approaches.

Vital New Materialism

In 2019, I explored a “shift from anthropocentric circus making to practices that take significant consideration of the other-than-human forces in circus composition” (Robitaille 2023). My use of the term “forces” was influenced by a vital materialism. However, “the concepts of external forces (as with Newton) or internal immanent forces (as with Spinoza, Deleuze, and other vital new materialists’ thinkers) prioritize forces, constructing an ontology centered around force rather than motion” (Gamble, Hanan and Nail 2019). In my compositional performative exercises, relying on forces became inadequate, partly due to the difficulty in circus practice to relate to forces outside the dichotomy of internal and external forces. However, I do not reject vitalism nor understand it as incompatible; instead, I know it as a transversal ethical trajectory. If I am more interested in investigating from a primacy of motion rather than force, my project is set in movement by a “Spinozist undercurrent”, a vitalist groove that enables me to consider hope as a force, something I relate to.²² But to function in practice at a bodily level, my methodological attraction leans toward motion rather than force.

Speculative Materialisms

A wealth of contemporary speculative materialisms is currently circulating in academia, art, and activism (Åsberg et al. 2015). Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) has lately been gaining traction in contemporary circus arts. The attraction to OOO is reflected in the 3rd edition of VOICES magazine, *Re-thinking Objects The Nonhuman Turn*, published in 2022 by CircusDanceFestival and Overhead Project (Patschovsky 2022).²³ The popular interpretation of OOO that “things have quasi-autonomous subjectivity ... an agency of their own, is why quite a few ecological thinkers [and circus artists] have picked this up and have endorsed object-oriented ontology as a sort of good way of looking at the world, which promotes ecological thought” (Raud 2021). However, as Graham Harman argues, “OOO is not a form of materialism; OOO has no interest whatsoever in the concept of ‘matter’, let alone materialism” (Harman 2018). Harman proposes the division of objects into two categories: the real object and the sensory objects, which withdraw and withhold from reality, and in which real objects cannot relate to one another directly, but only indirectly, by means of a sensual object (Ibid.). This approach can be understood as a form of negative new materialism. “What is termed negative new materialism here is the theory that matter is non-relationally external to thought, denying the relation between thought and matter” (Gamble, Hanan and Nail 2019).

In the case of my circus practice, OOO does not provide fruitful concepts nor contribute to any ground for methods. OOO seeks to “uncover the true existence of things, favoring concepts of stability, essence, solidity, and permanence over notions of flux, relationality, process, and contingency” (Lenke 2017). As conducting research that is situated, relational, and material is core to my project ethos, OOO re-insertion of dualism and denial of entanglement is impractical.²⁴ In addition, “negative new materialism tends to privilege a

²² I borrow the expression from Rick Dolphijn. In *The Philosophy of Matter: A Meditation*, Dolphijn uses the term “Spinozist undercurrent” to define a kind of thinking that resists the religious, humanist and capitalist realities of the present. The “Spinozist undercurrent”, as he suggests, causes revolutions in thoughts, installing activism and an urgency that sets every field of knowledge in movement. While I am only newly acquainted with the Ethics of Spinoza (Spinoza 2001), yet I am finding in his Ethics, a vocabulary, a logic and practical concepts which resonate and infiltrate my circus practices, I feel and feed the undercurrent.

²³ www.circus-dance-festival.de/en/cdfthek

²⁴ For a detailed account of how the attempt of OOO ends up erasing any account of situatedness or contextuality, see Thomas Lenke’s article *Materialism without matter: the recurrence of subjectivism in object-oriented ontology*. In the article, Lenke demonstrates that OOO’s promise to break once and for all with subject-object dualism results in a revived form of subjectivism (Lenke 2017).

Western canon populated by white male philosophers, bringing to light the political limitations of its agenda” (Gamble, Hanan and Nail 2019).

I think it is important for circus communities to engage critically with Object-Oriented Ontology. Object-Oriented Feminism (OOF)²⁵ (Behard 2016) is a feminist intervention into speculative realism, object-oriented ontology, and new materialism—reestablishing feminist theory as a primary source for thinking about objects, things, and environment.²⁶ If the circus artists aim to resist anthropocentrism and experiment with the agentic capacities, affect and effects of objects, they are more likely to align with relational ontologies discussed in indigenous studies literature, vitalism and feminist approaches to materialisms than with the negative materialism embraced by OOO. For an alternative avenue to OOO, if interested in relation to objects, one can turn to Thomas Nail’s *Theory of the Object*, which, together with his ontology of motion, offers “a historical material kinetic approach to object as process” (Nail 2021a). This brings us to performative materialism.

Performative New Materialism

A performative approach to new materialism insists matter “is [...] a doing” (Barad 2007); matter is what it does or “how it moves” (Nail 2018). In this conception, body and mind perform as matter; they are what they do or how they move.

Performative new materialism can be exemplified notably by Karen Barad’s agential realism. Agential realism is a philosophy that challenges the presumed separation of subject and object, nature and culture, human and non-human, organic and inorganic, epistemology and ontology, and materiality and discursivity by emphasizing the intra-acting, co-constitutive undetermined nature of entities (Barad 2007).

Intra-action is a term introduced by the physicist Karen Barad. Barad’s intra-action offers an alternative to the usual notion of interaction, which assumes that individuals independently exist as entities or agents preexisting acting upon one another. Instead, according to Barad’s agential realist ontology, “individuals” do not preexist as such but rather materialize in intra-action (ibid.). Thus, “intra-action marks an essential shift in many foundational philosophical notions such as causality, agency, space, time, matter, meaning, knowing, being, responsibility, accountability, and justice” (ibid.). The beauty of Barad’s agential realism is that it is grounded in the physical material world and can work across multiple scales simultaneously; it is “an intertwining of ethics, knowing and being” (ibid.).

Barad’s agential realism emphasizes material-discursivity, the entangled inseparability of discourse and materiality. Combined with the notion of “situated knowledge” (Haraway 1998), which also involves political dimensions, the understanding of ethics, ontology, and epistemology as intertwined (ethico-onto-epistem-ology) is significant in my project’s methodology and methods.

In my research, I do not take a definitive stance while navigating the various proposals and articulations surrounding relational ontologies, ontologies of immanence, and branches of

²⁵ Another approach to an anthology of immanence is the Actor Network Theory (ANT) by Bruno Latour, which proposes a relational ontology where relationships take precedence. My approach of engaging compositional exercises through the lens of relations aligns with ANT, however my knowledge about ANT as a method is superficial.

²⁶ The text *Speculative Before the Turn: Reintroducing Feminist Materialist Performativity* will give the readers enough references to the feminist archives for understanding that the radical newness claimed by OOO has already been worked out for years through feminist studies, additionally clarifying why “the vision of speculative realism to research reality ‘in itself’ is reinserting a new dualist distribution of the world, (which) remains translatable into the ‘old’ subject-object divide that we know already from transcendental philosophies” (Åsberg et al. 2015).

new materialisms. Instead, I combine critical posthuman feminism as an ethical standpoint and performative new materialism as a practical framework. While refining and specifying my interests within the genealogies and articulations of materialisms, I am evolving within a kinetic materialism, in other words, a materialism that situates motion as primary (Nail 2024); that is, material in motion.

New materialisms share affinities with indigenous knowledge. As such, I am aware and mindful that the present text lacks and would require “a greater recognition of and sustained engagement with the affinities (and differences) between a performative ‘new’ materialism[s] such as Barad’s ‘agential realism’ and the many and varied agent ontologies discussed in indigenous studies literature” (Gamble, Hanan and Nail 2019). I understand my doctoral project as a groundwork that will enable me to orient myself toward indigenous studies literature further and develop and sustain “respectful anti-colonial engagement” (Rosiek et al. 2019).²⁷

Material

In my project, I have delved into and engaged new-materialist approaches to circus composition. This process involves “giving special attention to matter (materiality, processes of materialization)” (Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012). By material, all through the text, I mean matter, energy, and information, not only matter in the narrow sense (Hayles 2017). The material entities I have prominently worked with in my circus practice are the human body, my own and with others, foil, bubbles, sensors, sound, light, and images.²⁸ As main compositional materials, I have worked primarily with form (in particular the circle), relation, and motion.

²⁷ Using Karen Barad’s concept of agential realism, in their article “The New Materialisms and Indigenous Theories of Non-Human Agency: Making the Case for Respectful Anti-Colonial Engagement” (Rosiek et al. 2019), the authors offer an inventories of the ethical, political, and intellectual reasons social scientists [other scholars and (circus) artists] should also be reading and citing Indigenous studies literature on agent ontologies.

²⁸ I know that this list is incomplete and inexact to some degrees. For example, I also worked with time, space, dynamics, but these to me are not primary, they are emerging from the relational motion of matter.

Composition

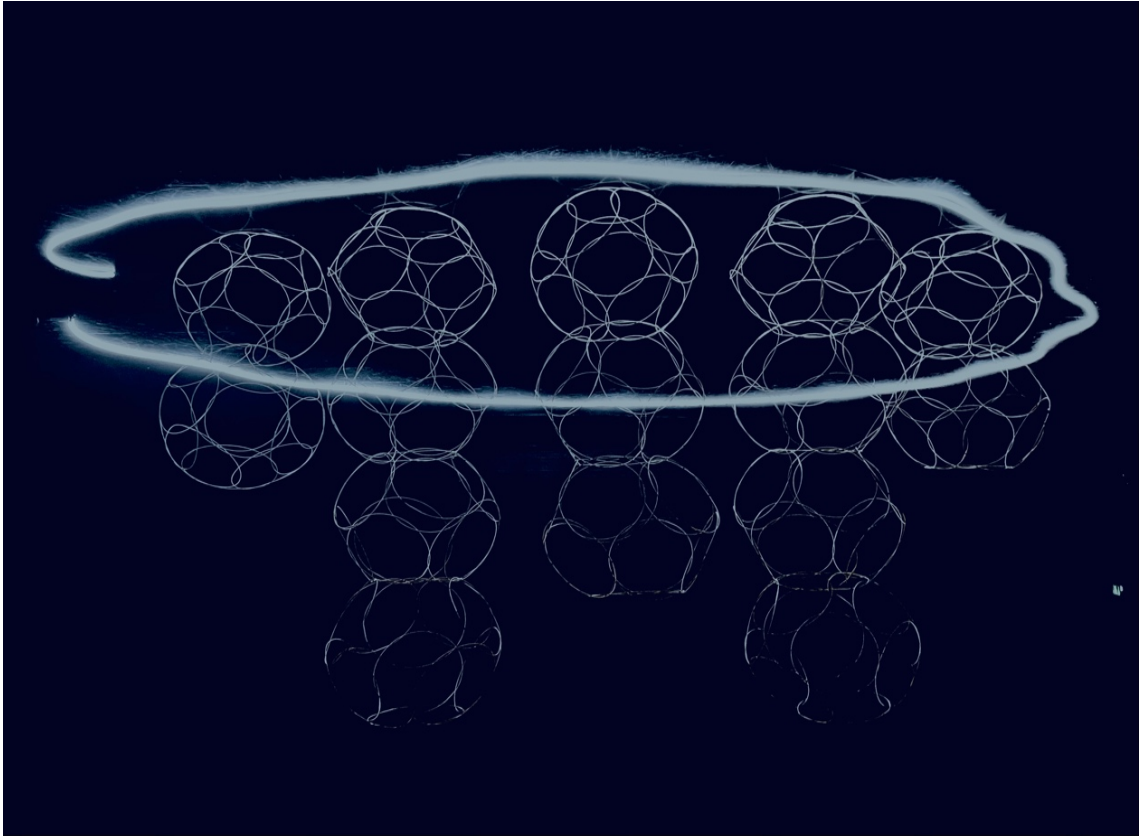


Figure 2 Photo series *Multiversalities*, Stockholm, Sweden, 2021. Credit and Courtesy Marie-Andrée Robitaille.

As a circus artist-researcher within this project, my practice embodies a form of composition broadly understood as the art and action of combining. I consider composition to be the manner in which a thing is composed, put together, or assembled.

My research project consisted of a series of compositional studies that manifested through live embodied performances and choreographic works. I have been less interested in aiming for specific results through composition and more intrigued by how different modes of composition can orient, inform, and transform my circus practice.

My approach to composition developed through experimentation and choreography. Through material-semiotic experiments, I sought to understand how my composition maintains or breaks away from linear, static, and dualistic approaches to composition. My compositional studies were not created from the perspective of challenging dominant narrative and dramaturgical structures but from the perspective of the moment of composition, which would impact narratives and dramaturgical structures. I came to work with three predominant compositional elements: the circle, motion, and relation.

Circle

I approached composition in circus arts through the circle and circularity. In 2021, I wrote: “In my project, I am working on the articulation of a methodology that pertains to the circle as a form and as a motion, metaphorically and literally” (Robitaille 2023). At the start of my

project, while I tended to situate the circle as a methodology,²⁹ I later understood the circle as an element of composition. The circle was useful for experimenting away from linear approaches to composition. However, my research is not a study about the circle, nor does it situate the circle as pure or as a solution. Instead, the circle is an element that informs alternatives to linear modes of composition. To use the circle as a form, a motion, and a metaphor is an effort to counter a vision of the world as linear. With the circle as an element of composition, I came to the importance of motion over that of form. Motion became a lens that turned my attention to, among other qualities, flow, fold, loop, cycle, spiral, circulation, and transition. Thus, I adopted a kinetic approach to composition with the circle, focusing on motion as primary to form.

It is good that, when feeling off-center, I return to what the Roman poet and philosopher Lucretius wrote in his poem *De Rerum Natura* “There can be no center in infinity” (Englert 2003).

Motion

In this project, I have been exploring the primacy of motion from a material perspective; the material is in constant motion and can always undergo change or recomposition.

I refer to the primacy of motion through the philosophy and ontology of motion articulated by Thomas Nail, which builds on Lucretius’s primacy of motion (Nail 2018, 2020b, 2022). Lucretius emphasized “the primacy of movement” in his poem *De Rerum Natura* (Englert 2003). Lucretius believed everything in the universe is in a perpetual state of motion. According to Lucretius, this constant motion is what creates all phenomena and forms in the world, emphasizing the significance of movement as the fundamental principle shaping reality. This idea radically differs from deterministic, mechanistic, causal approaches to reality. A primacy of motion offers a shift of perspective, which implies that we compose reality and comprehend the world from a kinetic point of view rather than through static or fixed phenomena (entities, objects, or identities). Within the scope of my project, I designed and engaged compositional and performative studies from kinetic perspectives to better comprehend circus arts’ inherent dimensions and potential.

Motion and movement are broad concepts. However, prioritizing them in composition shifts the focus away from forms and functions toward processes. For example, as we will see later in the text, engaging with “foil” from the perspective of their kinetic material qualities rather than predetermined forms and functions, the emphasis shifts to transitions rather than positions. The principle of primacy of motion becomes an ontological perspective from which to work from and through.

Considering motion as primary suggests that time and space are not separate containers or frameworks but emerge from the dynamic processes of motion itself.³⁰ In this view, motion generates time and space; they are not pre-existing, independent entities but products of motion. It suggests that our experience and perception of time and space are shaped by the continuous flow of movement, with spatial and temporal dimensions emerging due to this ongoing motion.

²⁹ I am inspired by aboriginal knowledge transmitted by Fyre Graveline in her book *Circle as Methodology* (Graveline 2000).

³⁰ “If being is in motion and motion is infinite, then the origins of motion cannot come from anything other than motion. In other words, flows are neither irreducibly temporal nor spatial. Flows do not occur in a fixed background of time or space— ‘motus nec tempore certo nec regione loci certa’, as Lucretius sings. Rather, time and space emerge through flow” (Nail 2019a).

But how can this philosophical view become practicable at the scale of my actual circus practice? How can I research from the perspective of primacy of motion while everything that composes me and my environment seems to be in an ongoing process of (re)stabilization? In the scope of this project, I have explored compositional tasks from the perspective of movement: my bodily movement, the ways things move, the sound produced through motion, the moving images, the intervals in which images are captured, the cyclicity in variations of movement, the movement of my writing, etc.

Engaging composition from the primacy of motion highlights the specificity of circus arts as kinaesthetics. Kinaesthesia pertains to motion and sensation; to perceive through motion. From Greek *kinein*, “to move, to set in motion”, and *aisthēsis* “sensation, to perceive”.³¹ If we consider circus arts through kinaesthetics, we can refer to circus arts as a technology that sets in motion senses and perception, enabling us to perceive through motion. Experimenting with composition from a primacy of movement highlights circus arts embodied knowledge as kinaesthetic,³² prompting the question: how does circus move?

Relation

A dualistic approach to composition involves viewing elements in a binary or oppositional manner, emphasizing distinctions between them. In contrast, a non-dualistic approach considers the elements of the composition as inseparable and interconnected, a distributed assemblage of agency, power, and knowledge.

A relational ontology is a philosophical perspective that emphasizes the interconnectedness and interdependence of entities, rejecting rigid distinctions between subjects and objects. For example, posthumanism challenges anthropocentrism by examining the blurred boundaries between humans, other-than-human, and technology. New materialism builds on relational ontologies by focusing on the agency of material entities intra-acting. This perspective contributes to the dissolution of dualisms in favor of entanglement. Aboriginal knowledge is grounded in relational and agential ontologies and is deeply embedded in ecological and cosmological understandings, highlighting the relationalities between humans, nature, and the spiritual realm. In the posthumanities, scholars increasingly adopt relational ontologies to challenge traditional disciplinary boundaries and explore the entanglements of cultures, languages, and power dynamics. These approaches encourage interdisciplinary collaboration and a more nuanced understanding of the complex relations shaping human experiences.

How do we compose relations when adopting a relational ontological perspective that considers entities as fluid, interconnected, and constantly evolving? What are the markers if not fixed, determined, and oppositional? How do we create value without fixed (binary) structures? Can we develop the ability to work with unstable, indeterminate, and continually shifting interconnected relations? Can we render the relations more visible and tangible to better acknowledge the distributed agency that shapes our co-existence?

³¹ www.etymonline.com/word/kinesthetic

³² The concept of kinaesthetic within circus research is often discussed from the bodily experience of the spectator and how the spectator relates to other bodies moving on stage. For example, Petra Tait and Jonas Eklund along with others, engage in discussions on kinesthesia and how the body on stage moves the body in the audience (Tait 2005; Eklund 2019). Another example is Mathilde Perahia (Perahia 2021) who, in her thesis, refers to the concept of kinesthetic empathy to discuss how circus performances are experienced from the perspective of the spectator. While the topic of how a spectator relates to the language of the circus artist through kinesthetics empathy has its importance, my reflection in this project is less on the spectator than on the circus artist.

To explore relations as material for composition, I worked through different strategies that shaped the project and are ongoing: I engaged in a composting's logic, nurturing a doing together in difference.³³ I explored variations of locations, scales, and intensities. I worked with broadening relations by emphasizing "other than human entities" and the senses. I complexified relations by exploring combinations such as vulnerability and virtuosity, sound and motion, slowness and urgency. To explore other relations, I worked with differentiation by performing small, temporal, spatial, material, and textual shifts and paying attention to what differences these differences make.

The accumulation of circle, motion, and relation as compositional materials led me to engage and conceptualize circus arts from "nomadic ethical considerations" (Braidotti 2011a,b), which echo the nomadic circus perspectives of circus arts, involving forms and content neither fixed nor closed: the circus ring is constantly moving from place to place, relational, material and situated, always including an opening that allows for circulation, consequently always caught in a process of transformation.

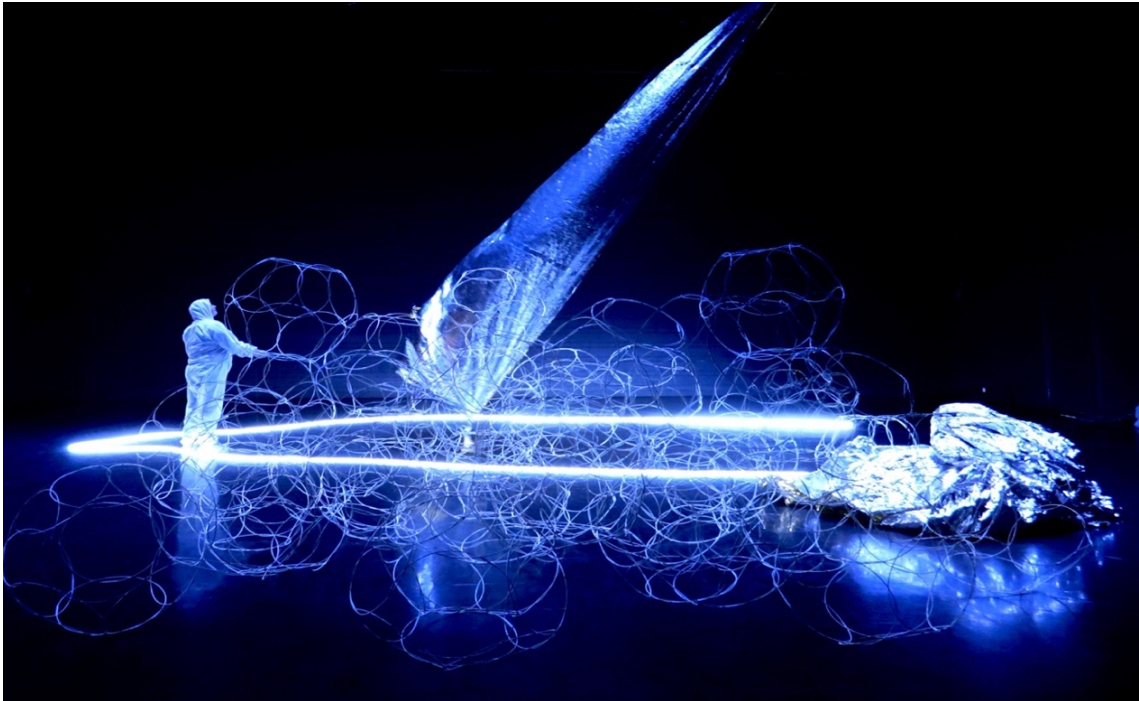


Figure 3 Photo Series *Multiversalities*, Stockholm, Sweden, 2021. Credit Einar Kling Odencrants. Courtesy Marie-Andrée Robitaille.

³³ A composting approach to practice entails attention to the inseparability of theory and practice, the quality of our responses to climate emergencies, and a feminist ethics and politics of citation. For more on composting as a feminist practice see Neinamis and Hamilton (Neinamis and Hamilton 2023).

Circomposition

Circomposition is a blend of circus and composition. It draws from the etymological roots of circus, “sker”, meaning “to turn, bend”, and “to change the direction or course of”.³⁴

Composition, on the other hand, denotes the action of combining and constructing meaning. I understand circomposition as a choreographic mode of inquiry characterized by wandering in circles, “in-forming” through circular motion, bending and shifting perceptions by turning, returning, and enabling diversion from a specific course.

Circomposing is practicing circling, accounting for how the circle is formed and who and what is included or excluded in the circle. To circompose is an attempt to consider all entities as “entangled” and “intra-acting” (Barad 2007), and “trans-corporeal” (Alaimo 2010), encouraging a “pluriversal world of many worlds” (Escobar 2017). Circomposing as such is a move towards a “re-circularisation” (Sioui 1999) to enliven a system of value based on a plurality of viewpoints, nondualism, and relational ontology.

Beginning again and again is a natural thing even when there is a series.

Beginning again and again and again explaining composition and time is a natural thing.

It is understood by this time that everything is the same except composition and time, composition and the time of the composition and the time in the composition.

Everything is the same except composition and as the composition is different and always going to be different everything is not the same. Everything is not the same as the time when of the composition and the time in the composition is different. The composition is different, that is certain.

(Gertrude Stein 1925)

³⁴ www.etymonline.com/word/circus

METHODS

Ethics of Affirmation

In writing this text and throughout my project, I have used affirmation as a form of pacifism and posthuman ethics (Braidotti 2018); affirming instead of negating, proposing instead of imposing, suggesting instead of denying, differing instead of conforming, and exploring artistic and pedagogical gestures which do not weaponize differences, rather acknowledge and work through these differences. I am aware of the great privilege of being granted the resources to conduct my doctoral artistic research project within the conditions of Stockholm University of the Arts. I have tried throughout the project to be worthy of it.

Worldviews

Through my research, I wish to affirm circus arts and honor the work of the artistic circus communities. As such, though, I am not engaging in a critique of circus artists and their works. However, during my research, I became aware of approaches to circus composition and performance that restrict circus arts' transgressive potential: staticity, linearity, and duality.

Staticity

The assumption of stability and stasis offers a comforting way to cope with the disorienting complexities of human existence. To a certain extent, any entity needs a degree of stability to be formalized and recognizable, at least for human perception. But deterministic worldviews also translate as models for maintaining power and dominance. This inclination may be partly explained by the historical dominance of a deterministic worldview in Western discourse.³⁵ In circus arts, this static outlook translates into striving for fixed routines, maintaining esthetics and technical conventions, specific patterns and figures, or replicating established forms. This adherence to staticity is motivated by the desire for replication, consistency, productivity, and ownership. However, this approach results in standardization, normalization, and limitations inhibiting circus arts' creative and transformative potential.

Linearity

From a circus perspective, linearity refers to the value of quantitative growth. For example, aspiring for more balls in the air, more height in a balancing act, increased time one can stand on one arm, or the accumulation of multiple single feats performed simultaneously, such as walking on a slack wire while playing the violin. These pursuits treat time, space, and human actions as linearly cumulative. Without dismissing these minoritarian feats entirely, I criticize the transhumanist pursuit of human enhancement based on

³⁵ Thomas Nail, in his work *Being and Motion*, discusses how Western thought has often been dominated by deterministic worldviews. He explores how this deterministic perspective has influenced various aspects of philosophy, science, and societal views on change, time, and causality. Nail's examination highlights how these deterministic notions have shaped Western discourse, particularly in understanding and conceptualizing the nature of reality and existence (Nail 2019a).

enlightenment ideals of progress and rationality (Ferrando 2019). Linear approaches are outdated because valuing human/reason/mind/quantity over the other-than-human/feelings/body/quality exacerbates anthropocentric practices and human exceptionalist narratives.

Linearity corresponds with reductionism in science, which focuses on understanding natural systems solely through their individual parts. However, this approach fails when dealing with complex systems where interactions among parts lead to emergent patterns and cooperative assemblages.

Duality

Discussions surrounding binaries and dualities, extensively explored in intersectional feminist, gender, and race studies, are essential in addressing discrimination against the naturalized, racialized, and sexualized “Others”, which the LGBTQIA2S+ community members are one example of. Although gender was central to my artistic research project, *Gynōides Project*, I moved beyond the focus on identity in my doctoral project. I shifted to challenging the presumed separation of body and mind, as well as theory and practice.

A duality that prevails in circus arts (especially in training and pedagogy) is evident in the separation between what is identified as “artistic content” and “circus disciplines or circus techniques”. These persistent divisions create a conflicting dynamic, re-enforcing the division rather than acknowledging the inherent artistic potential within circus disciplines. This division limits the recognition of circus disciplines as an artistic form.

Another duality is between theory and practice. Circus artists and researchers inside and outside academia are eager to engage with and defend the discursive potential inherent to their circus gestures. However, by prioritizing text over embodied experiences in circus education programs, we risk reinforcing hierarchies and maintaining a gap between theory and practice.

How can we reconcile these perceived separations? What are the alternatives to these dualisms? How will non-dualistic approaches transform subjectivities and embodiment? In other words, what kind of circus artists may we become, and what praxis may emerge?

Embracing a multitude of scales, nuances, approaches, and perspectives requires and involves shifting our current roles, value systems, and conventions. Throughout my research, the practices and concepts I’ve explored aren’t explicitly aimed at criticizing binaries but rather at seeking alternatives to binary modes of composition and performance.

In my project, determinism, reductionism, and dualism are understood as ontologically flawed models of thought and paradigms to be transformed. These worldviews have proven unsustainable for circus arts but also for human activity in the current planetary context. They reinforce human exceptionalism and anthropocentrism and uphold systems like patriarchy, imperialism, colonialism, and authoritarianism. If we (circus artists) wish to address these inadequate models and systems through circus arts, we must move beyond static, linear, and dualistic approaches to composition and performance. And, I think we can.³⁶

³⁶ The form and articulation of my critique are in resonance with Thomas Nail’s philosophy of motion (Nail 2019a,b, 2021a,b, 2024) and his rereading of Marx’s doctoral dissertation (Nail 2020a) which aims to restore the philosophical primacy of movement to Marx’s work and overcome the three axes of critique that have defined its decline. These axes of

Multiverse

I envisioned my research project as a Multiverse. The name Multiverse is inspired by Francesca Ferrando's thought experiment, *The Posthuman Multiverse*, from her book *Philosophical Posthumanism* (Ferrando 2019). I refer to the notion of the Multiverse as introduced by Lucretius in his poem *De Rerum Natura* (Englert 2003) and expanded upon via Deleuze (Deleuze 1996), the Guattarian notion of transversality (Guattari 2015), and Escobar's notion of pluriversity (Escobar 2017).

My connection to the Multiverse is not about speculating on the existence of a plurality of alternate realities; instead, I am interested in the multiplicity of possibilities within the thick present, a term defined by Haraway as "a tentacular web of troubling relations that matter now" (Haraway 2016). *Multiverse* encompasses multiple artistic materials and processes, modes of artistic research, forms of exposition, and documentation formats.

My interest in multiplicity is not a desire to produce more. Instead, I want to develop the ability to orient across multiple scales and perspectives. Multiplicity is a practical concept for developing nuanced, flexible, adjustable, situated research postures rather than fixed positions. My *Multiverse* is the research site and the whole research assemblage, which comprehends a multiplicity of compositional and performative experiments.

Multiverse I

On the occasion of the centenary celebrations of the Bauhaus movement in 2018, I was invited to participate in an experimental circus project at the Bauhaus School in Dessau, Germany. The collaboration, initiated by Jenny Patschosvsky,³⁷ Benjamin Richter,³⁸ and Cox Ahler,³⁹ was to investigate the relevance of Bauhaus ideas in contemporary circus arts. This collaboration laid the groundwork for my research project's first phase, which consisted of nine weeks of practice-led research at Stockholm University of the Arts between January and September 2019. During these periods, I worked with several groups of artists who specialized in various disciplines. We explored Bauhaus principles through circus practices. This exploration led to performances in Stockholm and Dessau in September 2019.

Another part of the first phase of my research project was my encounter with the project *Music in Disorder: Counterplay, Complexity and Collective Improvisation*—an artistic research project established at the Royal College of Music in Stockholm.⁴⁰ In November 2018, I was in the audience at the project's closing presentation. The project had affinities with my desire to research complexity, reciprocal interaction, heterogeneous assemblage, transversality, and playfulness. I was particularly drawn to "lines of variation", a method generated through the project *Music in Disorder*. I invited the project's leader, Klas Nevrein,⁴¹ to join the Bauhaus artistic process, envisioning a transdisciplinary context in which circus artists, visual artists, and musicians could explore lines of variation as a method for circus composition. This method would challenge conventional relations to virtuosity, mastery, and risk.

criticism are: historical determinism, reductionism and anthropocentrism. My critique also organizes and expands upon the nomadic theory and the critical posthumanism of Rosi Braidotti (Braidotti 2011a,b, 2013, 2014, 2019, 2020a,b, 2022).

³⁷ www.chamaeleonberlin.com/en/a-network-that-makes-things-happen

³⁸ www.benjaminrichter.net

³⁹ www.coxahlers.com

⁴⁰ www.musicindisorder.se

⁴¹ www.nevrin.se

I understood lines of variation as open compositional structures through which I could explore trajectories along which elements, concepts, or ideas evolve, transform, or diversify. Lines of variation denotes a virtual path of change or development. In other words, it is real without being actual (Deleuze and Guattari 2015), showcasing the potential for diversity or differentiation within a particular framework. These lines represent potential directions for variations, adaptations, or modifications within a given context, emphasizing the multiplicity of possibilities within a specific set of parameters or conditions.

“Deleuze has mobilized the concepts of variation in order to insist ... that existence is not characterized primarily by units but by continual movement and change” (Roffe 2010). *Music in Disorder* builds on Deleuze’s concept of variation, which Deleuze exemplified through music. “In Western music, the octave concept divides sound into repeatable scalar units. For Deleuze, we must consider these structures secondary to the movement of sound itself, which has no intrinsic notes or scales. Fundamentally, there is only the continuation of the pitch. A pure movement of difference without identity” (Roffe 2010).

Circus arts are mainly organized as forms, tricks, and figures, which divide bodily motion into repeatable motives or sequences. Following Deleuze’s logic on the units of music, these are structures that are secondary to the movement of the circus itself. There is fundamentally only bodily motion. Mobilizing the concepts of variation to insist that circus arts are not characterized primarily by forms, tricks, and figures but by their movement, one can ask: what type of movement would define circus arts? This question became an undercurrent of my project, a question that flows in many unforeseen directions and always surfaces.

Lines of variation as a mode of composition and as a practical concept is a mobile architecture that focuses on nurturing the quality of emerging responses rather than the form a response should take. Instead of conditions that enable us to replicate predetermined and predictable trajectories, it provides the conditions for flow and continuous qualitative differentiation. Lines of variation as a method/concept can be used at different scales and for different purposes. Rendered as a diagram, they can be understood as abstract machines (Deleuze and Guattari 2015). “These abstract machines could become operative in different fields or domains, in other assemblages.”⁴²

Approaching circus composition and performance through the prism of variation has fostered generative tensions and new questions: How does the virtuosic transform when rejecting the static, linear, and dualistic approaches to composition and performance? How does mastery transform when circus gestures’ sensory, spatial, temporal, material, and dynamic aspects are different? What new risks emerge when the values and practice of mastery and virtuosity are challenged and transformed?

The Bauhaus principles are another prism through which I engaged these questions. Rather than methodically researching how circus arts relate to the Bauhaus movement, I used Bauhaus principles as a lens to revise my circus practices. The revision and re-articulation of the Bauhaus principles and how Bauhaus impacted the revision of my practice are embedded through the body of work that forms my documented artistic research project.

⁴² See summary in the section result of the *Music in Disorder* project’s website. www.musicindisorder.se/?page_id=1953

Within the exercises of this first iteration, it was imperative to acknowledge and understand the similarities and differences in other's artistic practices while exploring lines of variation and Bauhaus principles as a collective. This included establishing shared terminology with my collaborators, agreeing on the design process (duration, extent, and nature), and understanding how to discuss each experiment. Embracing a slow, cyclical, and continuous process in a multidisciplinary context was crucial.

The first phase involved practical artistic experiments and discursive activities. This enabled me to research through artistic practice while allowing philosophical concepts to shape experiments while paying particular attention to "how conceptualization and practice can modulate each other within the research process".⁴³

Navigating the complexity of qualitative transformation and collaboration in this first phase made me realize I needed to make the research conditions more intimate and manageable. As a result, I limited the number of collaborators and resisted producing a final product. I shifted away from being a director and moved towards a choreographic approach. I returned to my research in the spring of 2020, after my maternity leave and during the social distancing of the COVID-19 pandemic. These new conditions enabled me to research through my bodily practices and choreographic aspirations.



Figure 4 Photo Series *STUDIO 16 - COVID 19*, Stockholm, Sweden, 2019. Credit Einar Kling Odencrants. Courtesy Marie-Andrée Robitaille.

⁴³ See method in the *Music in Disorder* project's website www.musicindisorder.se/?page_id=1334

Multiverse II

In September 2020, Gävle Art Center commissioned me to curate an exhibition based on my doctoral artistic research project to explore the convergence of circus and visual arts.⁴⁴ This exhibition corresponds to the second iteration of *Multiverse*. The introduction to the exhibition *Circus meets Visual Arts* reads:

*Contemporary circus arts possess strong potential for inquiry about collaborative processes, interdisciplinary approaches, and interactions with the environment. Amid the global pandemic and climatic crisis, the necessity to renegotiate how we interact with the world becomes increasingly imminent. The body of works by circus artist Marie-Andrée Robitaille is part of a process where she investigates a shift from human-centered circus making to one that considers the other-than-human forces in circus composition.*⁴⁵

In this phase of the project, I delved into understanding an unmediated form of circus performance and a decentering of the human/artist. What does the circus event consist of that does not require the presence of the circus artist?

At this stage of my project, I turned to materiality. Working in the studio, I found myself alone with things. I had an attachment to the material I chose to work with, but none of the materials or objects were conventional circus objects or props. I did not begin by reproducing known circus patterns, tricks, or forms, but I researched compositional and choreographic principles that would lead to the emergence of new and familiar patterns.

Instead of referring to “objects”, I use “bodies” to counter the binary between object and subject. The bodies I predominantly worked with were “bubbles” (handcrafted circles made of flexible fiberglass rods bowed into rings and woven into a dodecahedron),⁴⁶ “foil” (pieces of metallic sheets originally manufactured as emergency blankets), and mooring fenders (inflatable protective bodies that prevent scratches and other damage to the hull of a boat). Additional bodies included three juggling balls, six inertial sensors, a computer, cables, ropes, rigging gears, one two-meter-long wooden stick, one phone, and a few white disposable coverall protective suits. The bubbles, foil, and mooring fenders are all bodies associated with states of crisis and human vulnerability. These bodies became material for exploring relations to mastery, risk, and virtuosity.

During this period of COVID-19 restrictions, I spent considerable time alone in the studio, moving at a deliberate, slow pace and practicing deep listening (Oliveros 2005) to my body and movements. I developed pacing, spacing, oscillating, and phasing techniques to foster conditions conducive to deceleration and listening. These techniques echo the suspension practices of Chloe Moglia⁴⁷ from the company Rhizome, in which she explores durational bodily suspension events. In these events, little happens, but the intensity of bodily engagement gives access to the elasticity of time and flexibility of space through motion. Pacing involves slow and sustained durational phrasing of movements, developing an awareness of speed. Spacing relates to making space through motion, where pathways, intervals, and distances between events or things enable a movement that shapes spaces. Oscillating refers to bodily locations by engaging subtle shifts of positions, inner spiraling

⁴⁴ www.gavlekonstcentrum.se

⁴⁵ Extract of the program for the exhibition *Circus meets Visual Arts* at Gävle Konstcentrum, September 2019. Courtesy of the author.

⁴⁶ The Bubbles are designed by Rachel Wingfield www.loop.ph/rachel-wingfield

⁴⁷ www.rhizome-web.com

rather than expansive circus explosions, and developing an awareness of the amplitude of motion. Phasing involves a durational relation to space and synchronization with an environment. It also aims to create an awareness of transitions. These techniques are modes of attunement to heighten awareness through sensory perception while deepening inner relations to time and space through motion. Pacing, oscillating, spacing, and phasing are intra-locating movements that counter the assumption of fixity. While these may be close to tai-chi and yoga, two practices that I am loosely familiar with (i.e. I am not an expert, but I have engaged with as a dancer and acrobat), they resonate with my study of Body-Mind Centering⁴⁸ with Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen.⁴⁹ Pacing, spacing, oscillating, and phasing are all evolving inner-scaping and intra-spacing techniques, transforming through infinitely small qualitative shifts in perpetual motion.

Simultaneously, I began reconfiguring the Bauhaus principle “form follows function”. By placing a greater emphasis on motion as a compositional principle, I asked: What if form followed motion instead of function? By motion, I mean that movement is primary to the emergence of sensory forms, ideas, or patterns and, on a larger scale, primary to space, infinity, and time (Nail 2018). With this approach, I crafted a series of kinetic installations for the *Circus Meets Visual Arts* exhibition, composing them based on their relations to sound and motion.



Figure 5 Photo Series *Circus meets Visual Arts*, Stockholm, Sweden, 2020. Credit and Courtesy Marie-Andrée Robitaille.

⁴⁸ Body-Mind Centering® (BMC®) is an integrated and embodied approach to movement, the body and consciousness. Developed by Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, it is an experiential study based on the embodiment and application of anatomical, physiological, psychophysical and developmental principles, utilizing movement, touch, voice and mind. I studied with Bonnie in Spring 2021 in the course *Opening and Strengthening Our Heart through the Consciousness of Embodiment* and Autumn 2022 in the course *Building Vitality, Strength, Flexibility, Flow, and Ease through Embodying Our Muscles: A Body-Mind Centering Approach through Movement, Touch, and Cellular Consciousness*. www.bodymindcentering.com

⁴⁹ www.bodymindcentering.com/about/bonnie-bainbridge-cohen

The kinetic and sonic interactive installations were made of bubbles in the shape of a dodecahedron, reminiscent of the form of viruses; the bubbles could be moved, built, and rebuilt. Foil commonly used as emergency blankets to protect, for example, against fire or hypothermia could be manipulated to modulate visual and sonic landscapes. Mooring fenders commonly used to absorb a boat or vessel's kinetic energy became a horizontal juggling sonic installation.

These installations prompted me to reevaluate the professional practice of “fixing” a circus act. Instead of “fixing” the circus act and orchestrating the environment to facilitate predetermined trajectories, the process was reversed, enabling the environment to suggest how bodies could move, relate, and organize. These were studies on decentering the artist, allowing the visitor to participate in the circus event as a responsive co-constituent of the assemblage.

While I was busy decentering the artist from the circus event, I accumulated a substantial amount of artistic material that was not used for the circus installations. Parallel to the exhibition, I performed a series of demonstrations that rerouted the foil, bubbles and sound. These live circus performances were composed of the surplus or the leftovers generated during the installation-making process.

Multiverse II marked the first iteration where I transitioned from being outside the performance area as a director/choreographer to becoming a performer/choreographer. Eduardo Hidalgo Cardozo⁵⁰ assisted me in the exhibition and performance and supported me in sustaining the process.

By making an accessible circus installation without mediation from the artist/human, I achieved my initial goal of decentering the artist. When the performer was removed, the ring stood empty. The empty circle prompted the question: what is the qualitative presence at the center of the circle? What is included in the circle, and what is excluded?

Multiverse III

During this period, I regained a circus bodily practice, working in the studio through choreographic exercises and walking outdoors with foil and bubbles. I engaged my circus revision through the lens of the bear tamer, the quick-change artist, and the escapist.

My approach to foil and bubbles organized and developed through flow and fold; exploring how the material flow and various ways of folding and unfolding the material. I attended to the difference between moving with and moving the foil, listening to and producing sound, and walking in circles. With the foil the main focus is on sensing through motion. With the bubbles, I moved in the circle and moved in circles. With the bubbles, I focused on sight and space oscillating between producing sound and listening to sound. With the bubbles, the main focus is on sensing through sound.

From these studio explorations, in November 2020, I performed a new iteration of *Multiverse* at *Alliances and Commonalities*,⁵¹ a conference on artistic research organized by Stockholm University of the Arts. The conference was mainly online due to COVID-19 restrictions. In this live performance setting, I tried to access the same attuning conditions

⁵⁰ www.ctf.pe/en

⁵¹ www.uniarts.se/english/news/news/news-autumn-2020/immense-interest-when-alliances-commonalities-held-digital-conference/

that I access alone in the studio, involving deep listening and a slow approach to movement. The live composition explored a kinetic approach to position, figures, stasis, determinate and stable forms, and other research methods of transitions, patterns, variations, meta-stability, and transformation of forms.

Simultaneously with my solo work in the studio, my outdoor walks, and performative public events, I experimented with choreographic devices that complement each other. Diffractive device, future perfect, and volvelle started to shape. These will be further articulated in the practical fabulation section later in this text.

I wanted the audience to circle the performative space at the *Alliances and Commonalities* conference. However, I performed in a frontal setting, and due to the pandemic, I ended up performing for a remote audience that watched the performance through the flat screens of their computers around the Earth. The experience reminded me of a quote by singer/author/composer/musician Jean Leloup : “La terre est ronde, mais le monde est platte.”⁵²

Multiverse IV

This version of *Multiverse* was the first opportunity to gather a larger audience for a live seminar. It was the most deconstructed iteration up to that point. I invited a group into a dance studio for a slow promenade. I gave minimal guidance with only three signs: “Welcome”, “Non-Verbal Zone”, and “Move with Care”.

Participants entered the space without further instructions. During this phase, my exploration included working with foil, bubbles, and sound and adding extensive flexible tubes of lights and a luminous stick. My promenade was composed of five open performative tasks:

- Shaping circular spaces
- Moving with lights
- Listening
- Slow walking
- Attention to relations

My main focus was on the orientation of my body, foil, bubbles, light, sound, sensors, and the participants’ bodies within the room. I was intrigued by whether movement could be the guiding element without any verbal directives.

These seemingly simple tasks proved complex, yet the slow and concentrated ambiance within the studio created gradual constellations of bodies. People cautiously engaged with the bodies, creating small, distinct events that weren’t centralized but observed from a multiplicity of perspectives by small groups spread-out across the space. At times, I became an observer of other bodies moving. The space evolved into a type of *entre-sort*, not merely in terms of physical space in caravans or enclosed rooms, but in the sequence of events—small events surfaced and concluded, giving way to others.⁵³

⁵² “The Earth is round, but the people are flat.” Johnny the Wolf. Free translation, personal conversation with Jean Leloup.

⁵³ At the circus or at the fair, an *entre-sort* is a space, for example a caravan, where someone enters, experiences an unusual phenomenon, and exits. *Entre-sort*, literally entering and exiting.

Movement became the source of events intertwined with artistic expression, aesthetic cues, tactile encounters, spatial references, and attractions. This was when my focus turned toward circus arts' narrative specificity as a non-verbal aesthetic mode of "narration".

The posthuman concepts I investigated in *Multiverse II-IV* were human exceptionalism, post-anthropocentrism, and the feminist proposal of de-centering (hooks 1994). Using the circle as an element of composition, a metaphor, and a material spatial marker, I explored centering and decentering from the circus ring. In this fourth iteration, I conducted some of the experiments with a tube of light that formed a circle on the floor, with which I explored different relations and imaginations to the inner, outer, center, and periphery.

De-centering as a strategy to remediate domination over the environment and its elements seemed promising, but it was easier to theorize about de-centering than embody it through practice. In *Multiverse II*, I explored circus making that decentered the circus artist from the circus events by addressing and, to some extent, resolving the questions: What does it mean to de-center? How can I de-center? Through *Multiverse III* and *IV*, the questions transformed: Don't I always carry my center everywhere? Aren't I always at the periphery of another center? How do I account for my presence in the center? In *Multiverse V*, I would explore how to account for the centrality of my presence in the circle.

Multiverse V

At this point, I still needed to explore performing within the circle for an audience. As I approached the conclusion of my doctoral artistic research project, the anticipation of having to provide new knowledge and final artistic results felt troublesome. It clashed with my search for non-static, non-linear approaches to composition.

At the time of this phase of the research, I was reading Thomas Nail's *Being and Motion* (Nail 2019a), in which he develops a historical ontology of motion. I was analyzing and engaging my composition from the lens of motion, paying increased attention to how the flow between the conditions and principles transforms my compositions. I also paid increased attention to how the description and inscription of my circus gestures evolved from the perspective of motion. I wondered about the fixity and fluidity of this iteration. What if my performance would remain stable, and what would be open to change? Essentially, what will be improvised and what will change, and how?

The composition of *Multiverse V* is close to what writing a poem feels like. I composed the verses so that they could resonate and assume forms in relation to each other. Here, I synthesized the previous *Multiverse* studies and research. I use various lines of variation to compose each verse—I conceived the piece as a non-verbal, sensory experience for an audience gathered around the performative circular site, who can look and feel the material's sounds and wind. Lighting is not primarily designed to illuminate the artist but to be emitted by the artist. A series of verses are performed as open narratives through the poetics of relation and matter in motion. Uniting the conceptual personas that have guided my process, the piece is a culmination of ongoing development through performance as research.

Having spent half of my research time during the COVID-19 pandemic, I wanted to engage audiences with the work I did in my solitary studio practice. During the composition process of this fifth iteration (2022-2024), I presented the piece to audience at twenty-three occasions; five times to specific private audiences and eighteen times to public audiences. *Multiverse V* was presented twelve times as part of contemporary circus festivals in

Colombia, Denmark, Sweden, and the United Kingdom, for audiences of between 30 and 200 people. Six performances were in Sweden at the Stockholm University of the Arts. Four public performances were for audiences of youth and children between seven and eighteen years old. The rest of the public performances were for general audiences. *Multiverse V* will be performed at the making public of my documented doctoral artistic research project (the thesis) on April 29th, 2024.

Multiverse VI

Through my research, I came to envision being a circus artist as a semaphorist and the circus apparatus as a semaphoric device. Semaphore is derived from the French *sémaphore*, etymologically, “a bearer of signals”. Derived from Ancient Greek *σῆμα* *sêma*, meaning mark, sign, signal, and ancient Greek *-φόρος* meaning *phóros*, a suffix indicating a bearer or carrier.⁵⁴ A semaphore is a carrier of signs and signals that transmits audio and visual signals through motion and distance. The Swedish optical semaphore, using what is called today a binary system, was a predecessor of modern data signal networking systems.⁵⁵ Continuing my doctoral studies and as an ongoing research development project, I intend to further explore circus kinetic and aesthetic modes of transmission and their potential for enabling qualitative shifts to mastery and skills, fostering distributed approaches to risk and democratic relations to virtuosity.



Figure 6 Photo Series *Walking with Snow*, Stockholm, Sweden, 2022. Credit Einar Kling Odencrants. Courtesy Marie-Andrée Robitaille.

⁵⁴ www.etymonline.com/word/semaphore#etymonline_v_23178

⁵⁵ In Sweden, in 1794 - the optical telegraph was invented by the Swedish poet and scientist Abraham Niclas Edelcrantz, the Royal Counsellor to Gustav III.

Other Verses

The other verses are the in-between iterations, excess, results, or impulses for each multiversal performative exercise described above. They could be understood as transversal pathways through the *Multiverse*. They are circus echoes, reverberances, fields of studies, methods, principles, practices, and, at times, results. These are other significant perspectives through which the research manifested.

Slow Circus

Throughout the research, I engaged slow sensory kinetic bodily processes to generate minoritarian “apperceptional”⁵⁶ kinomena.⁵⁷ In the studio and in public spaces; in the performative space of *Multiverse*, I engaged in “deep corporeal listening” (Oliveros 2005), which increased proprioception and the senses. Slowness and listening have been an integral and essential part of my research methods and are practices in themselves.

I’ve devised techniques like pacing, spacing, oscillating, and phasing to cultivate an environment supportive of slowing down and attentive listening. Within these practices, events unfolded minimally, yet the depth of physical attunement allowed time and space to be malleable. Pacing, oscillating, spacing, and phasing are (dis)alignment methods. These techniques are ever-evolving and are pathways to inner exploration, spatial reconfiguration, and continual transformation through subtle yet profound shifts in perpetual motion.

Engaging in slow motion while listening to the body’s transverses material and immaterial realms. As such, slowness involves a slow approach to bodily motion and the materialization of thoughts. This is one of circus’ embodied knowledge: in generating slippages between reality and fiction, not by opposing them, but by finding a physical passage or path through them. What was qualified as fictional, through circus gestures, transverses into the realm of the real.

Circumambulation

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 (Springgay and Truman 2018). In 2019, Benjamin Richter invited the *Bauhaus Impulse* workshop’s participants to take a walk: “Take a twenty-minute walk. Go out of the building and let your foot lead; don’t think of a destination or a goal. From a sense of time, find your way back here in approximately twenty minutes. Once you are back, find a quiet place and write for approximately ten minutes. Come back to the group. We will share.”

Walking without a goal.
Letting of all impulses that comes to mind
Still having to make choices not to make choices
Walking towards sun and water
Feeling my knee, no longer swallowed, still fragile
Feeling cough coming

⁵⁶ By using the term “apperceptional” I am referring to the process of perception and apprehension. I expand on the meaning of becoming conscious of one’s own ideas, to becoming conscious through the senses.

⁵⁷ I borrow this term from Thomas Nail’s *Being in Motion*, chapter 2 (Nail 2019a). My use of “Kinomena” follows Nail’s use; to affirm the thesis of continuous motion. “There are no static phenomena to appear to a stable observer, but only kinomena, or bodies in motion.” I use kinomena to affirm the kinetic specificity of circus arts and move away from the dichotomy between an anthropocentric understanding of material process which requires the consciousness of a human to appear as in “phenomenon” and to steer away from the “nounemon” metaphysic of a reality in-itself.

Trying to breathe, relaxing throat
Coughing
Feeling the weakened of my abdominals
The lack of strength
Feeling that sorrow
Coming to water, enjoying colors
The feel of the cold wind on my skin
The warmth of the sun contrasting
Listening to water
And the city and water and sounds and colors moving
Letting go of thoughts
Looking at the lively ducks from the deck
Looking at the clock
Seven minutes to get to water and all these feelings and thoughts
Elastic time zone
Letting go and reset, reconnect with what is
Let go of control, lead with dreams
May your body be someone important to you
Remembering the death of colleagues, friends, family members
Remembering Camille's first weeks
Standing at the threshold of life and death
Not fearing fear
Place of slowness
Slow art, slow circus
Let there be space for vulnerabilities.

Marie-Andrée Robitaille⁵⁸

During the pandemic, I wandered through Stockholm's silent and deserted public spaces. I walked with foil, with no destination. Walking significantly shifted my focus from thinking to sensing and individuality to entanglement. Walking was about the means, not the end, the process, and not the results. It helped me work on presence and orientation.

Walking became a type of wandering in circles, a circumambulation activity. Circumambulation typically refers to encircling or walking around sacred objects or idols, which is prevalent in many religious and cultural practices. In my project, circumambulation did not entail adhering to a fixed pattern around an object or worshipping / idolizing objects. I circumambulate to situate myself using a slow pace while recognizing and acknowledging what composes the environment.

⁵⁸ Author's Diary, White Box Linnégatan, SKH, Stockholm, February 12th, 2019.



Figure 7 Photo Series *Walking with Wind*, Stockholm, Sweden, 2022. Credit Darya Efrat. Courtesy Marie-Andrée Robitaille.

Pedetic motion is nonlinear motion without a clear or singular cause. It emerges from the interactions and relations among various parts.⁵⁹ Walking disrupted and problematized the concept of virtuosity. For example, I had to compose with how the wind, sun, rain, and snow acted upon my foil and could not rely on habits or predetermined trajectories.

By prioritizing a pedetic approach to motion in my project, I resolved some tensions around intentions: the initiation of movement, the motivation behind actions, and the rationale for movement. Rather than grappling with these questions, I walked and oriented myself from there.

Some of these walks have been photographed, resulting in a series of images that serve as fabulatory signs pointing me to questions and tasks to be further explored.

⁵⁹ I refer to the notion of pedesis as derived from pedetic motion, scholastic motion and Brownian motion which asserts that all matter is a product of pedetic motion. Pedesis, from the Prouto-Indo-European root ped-, meaning "foot", is the motion of semi-autonomous self-transport: the motion of the foot to walk, to run, to leap, to dance unpredictably. Nature has no straight-lines because it moves" (Nail 2019a).

Technopoetics

Using interactive technologies with sound designer Hara Alonso,⁶⁰ my choreographic studies on the relationship between sound and motion culminated in a series of experiments in which movement modulates sound and sound modulates movement. Alonso and I performed an embodiment of sound whereby my body movements shaped the sound, and the sound materialized as a sonic body. Together, we accessed the inseparability of sound and motion, a type of “intra-space”, a space where entanglement becomes tangible, audible, and visible.⁶¹

In the first half of the project, while paying increased attention to the other-than-human, the sensors were placed on the bubbles rather than on me. Instead of looking at the bubbles, I would listen to their motions. By relating to other bodies through other modes of perception than sight, “the registers and practices of sensing are shifting from an assumed human-centered set of perceiving and decoding practices to extended entities, technologies, and environments of senses” (Gabrys and Pritchard 2018). More on these processes can be read in the chapter “Posthumanism in Practice” (Robitaille 2023).

Throughout the first half of the process, I practiced slow movement and listening with the sensors on my arms and legs. In my work, sensors were a tool for exploring alternative relations between sound and motion. I defined my relation to the sensors and eventually understood the circus apparatus, settings, and assemblages as technopoetics or practical poetics. I propose the term “technopoetics” after the philosophical use of the term “technoscience” as imagined through the work of Gaston Bachelard (Bachelard 1972).⁶² I did not work from the perspective of enhancement or accompaniment; instead, the sensors were tools to explore what Haraway termed “sympoiesis”: a making with (Haraway 2016).

Eventually, I transitioned to a sonic machine designed by Alonso, who made a series of mappings of sonic universes available to me through several channels. With the machine, I could perform autonomously, but it lacked the infinite variables of human intelligence. Even if the machine enabled me to work with the modulation of sound through motion, it remained within the constraint of determined parameters, which, after a while, made using the sensors predictable. My interest was in exploring the parameters further with a co-researcher to access more subtle variations and textures. Despite being instrumental in providing apperceptive comprehension of intra-acting phenomena, I lost interest in the machine. During one of my last sessions with the device in the studio, I removed the sensors from my body and left them on a table after a listening-to-movement session. I assumed the sensors were off. A few hours later, I heard a sound coming from the speakers I had never heard before. The sounds were like little bodies screaming through the speakers, living sonic beasts that gave me the chills. Spooky. Maybe machines can think after all, but that question is beyond the scope of this research.

My main interest with the sensors was to understand how to use relationality to compose where “entities” do not preexist as such but rather materialize in intra-action. Instead of the sound being pre-recorded or a live performance of an extant piece of music the sensors generated sound through movement and movement responding to sound.

⁶⁰ www.haraalonso.com

⁶¹ The term and description for “intra-space” is borrowed from the research “INTRA-SPACE”, Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna, 2017 www.icinema.unsw.edu.au/projects/intra-space/

⁶² The term has been attributed to Gaston Bachelard (1972) but, Gilbert Hottois points out “Bachelard never literally uses the term, although in various passages he comes very close to doing so” (Hottois 2018).

From the third trimester of my project, I abandoned sensors and the sonic machine. I set out to explore what would happen if the practical knowledge attributed to the sensors and computer were attributed to the “other bodies”, namely my human body, foil, stick, and bubbles. What difference would my composition and performance create when the practical knowledge assumed to be handled by the inertial sensors and computer are given to analogous entities? How would relations to distance, intensity, speed, and frequency transform? What would become of codes and signals? How would the assemblage transform? What difference would these differences in the location of knowledge make?

I shifted from working with the sensors to searching for analogous access to the “intra-space”. This opened up a new, ongoing part of the project. It situates circus arts as semaphoric devices and circus artists as semaphorists, carriers, or barriers of signs and signals.

Nomadic Writing

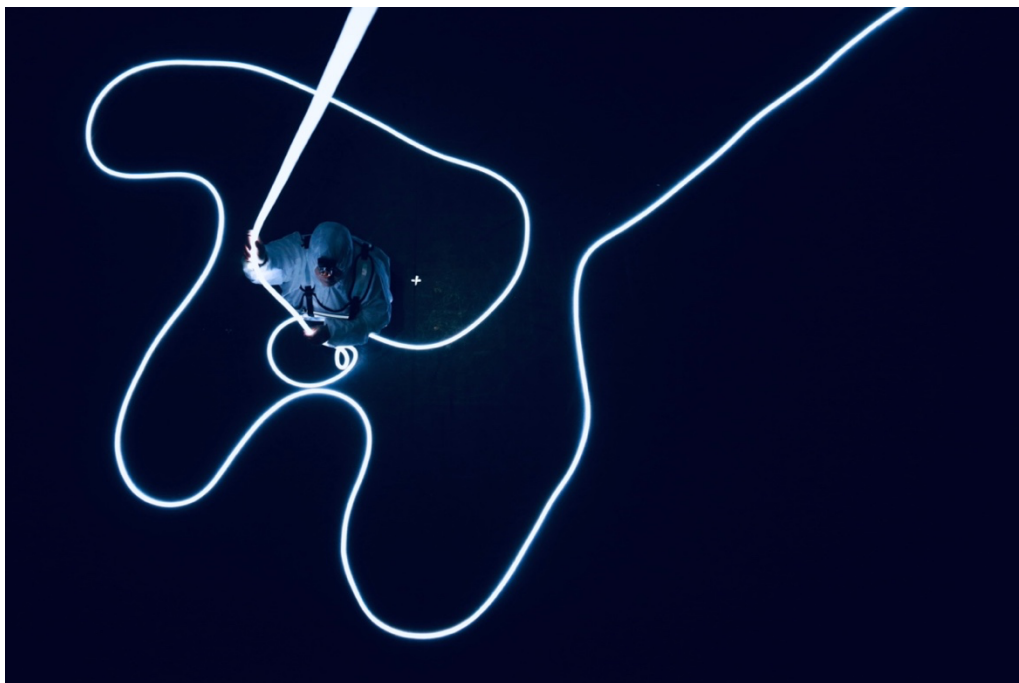


Figure 8 Photo Series *Nomadic Writing*, Stockholm, Sweden, 2022. Credit Darya Efrat. Courtesy Marie-Andrée Robitaille.

My interest in circus arts’ discursive potential led me to try to better understand matter and meaning as co-constitutive, coalescing and mutually shaping each other. I explored the materiality of language and how meaning (whatever meaning) emerges from matter. Through my compositional studies, I challenged the idea that artistic creation begins with rationalized concepts. By reversing this process and starting with matter, I aimed to redress the imbalance where mind/rationality dominates body/materiality. Part of my inquiry was to challenge the idea that text embodies a material entanglement with meaning beyond its physical medium. This led me to question if and how I could apprehend the materiality of discursivity.

My nomadic writing is a method to navigate towards the intra-spaces where meaning is materially shaped. Through techniques like “nomadic subject” and “writing in motion”, I explored the materiality of meaning in its formative stages, challenging traditional hierarchies between meaning and matter and fostering a deeper understanding of the creativity of matter.

Nomadic Subject

This technique works with the nomadism of subject, space, and time as ungraspable markers. It refers to the dislocation of text and the bending or contortion of meaning. In circus arts, dislocation is different from contortion, but in both cases, these circus disciplines work with unfamiliar formations or compositions of bodies. A dislocation happens at the level of the joints between the bones. Contortion is achieved through the elasticity of the muscle and spaces between bones and muscles. What difference does it make to the text when it dislocates the address, the space, and the time markers? In the following text, pronouns are given as names, temporal markers, and state of beings becomes spatial location.

Nathanaëlle
I is human.
I is in the Now.
There were many of Us in the Then, but I is alone of I in the Now.
I is alone aside of Them in which I part partly.
Them want to morph I.
I is attracted to Them.
I is not sure I is ready.
I have no Us to play and dream with.
I is falling into Feelings.
I like to dream of Then and After.
But it's risky.
I is unshaped and Them can move I when I dreams.
Sometimes, I hides in Inertia.
In Inertia, I can't be sensed by Them.
Sometimes I want to give into Them.
Them is circulating through I.
Them want I.
I resists the movement of Them.
I is afraid to mutate.
I is afraid to forget.
I is dreaming in the Then.
I is fixed in the Now.
Them passes I.
Them covers I.
Them is a land moving.
If I move with Them, Now will be After without Us.
Into After, I will be Them.

Marie-Andrée Robitaille 2020⁶³

⁶³ Written by the author as part of the artist's doctoral artistic research project *Circus as Practices of Hope: A Philosophy of Circus*.

Writing in Motion

In exploring the materiality of a text through motion, I worked with ways of writing based on the senses of forms, and in the text below, circular and square forms. I wrote the text as part of writing exercises in the course *Text genres, author positions and discourses in writing as exposition in artistic research* or, as our teacher Juliette Mapp⁶⁴ named it, *Form and Freedom*. The exercise was on “noticing”. The prompt was to notice something, an event, a conversation, a process, to write about it with a keen focus on detailing “A pinpoint of awareness”.

Circular objects in studio attract human eyes. Two silver wheels, immobile. Two giant shiny hoops, standing against studio’s night blue sky coloured walls. Three dimensional white bubbles attracting human eyes. Twelve sticks bend into closed circles. Twelve circles weaved into each other. Shaped as baskets, shapes of viruses. Eyes on human body, looking through bubbles. Body moving, eyes looking at bubbles, looking into bubbles. Eyes sees twelve circles, twelve stars, twelve pentagons shaping bubbles. Eyes look through bubbles, eyes see through bubbles.

Early morning. Inside studio. Human bodies moving into circular patterns, this morning in studio lines. One human gravitating around another. Musician playing violin. Acrobat gravitating around musicians. Sound intensifying in volume, movement intensifying in speed. Musician body is standing on two feet, stepping on one place, turning. Acrobat contortionist, upside-down on hands, gravitating around musicians.

Juggler juggle cascade of white balls. A sonic visualization of waltz. A fountain of particles. A trajectory of three circles with no traces. Juggler tracing invisible circular lines in motions with hands. Juggler accelerated and circulated around acrobat in wheel. Large silver wheel. Human in middle of wheel. Wheel surrounded by circular trajectories of juggler circling around human in middle of spinning wheel, in middle of circle of people sitting in circle, looking in. A world made of circles, circularity and revolutions.

Circle of thoughts, literally. In circle sitting ten humans, forming circle, speaking thoughts. One juggler, three violinists, two wheelers, three acrobats all acrobats, one clown all clowns, one saxophonist, one base, one flyer, one composer, one choreographer, one aerialist, one pianist, one dancer all dancers, one course’s director, one mother, five boys, five girls, seven students, three teachers. More identities than humans populating the circle of thoughts.

Worlds of words. Words put together, one after each-others, together forming lines of thoughts. Traveling in circle, coming back as questions, transforming into lines of variations. Closed line forms circles. And world is flat again.

Circle is a circus site. Circus is lost in flattened box. Flattened, interrupted as still. Pandemoniac timing of round virus. Circus revived outdoors. Circus back in middle of circles. Panoptical, multiversal worldviews. Transparence. Circle as resistance.

Marie-Andrée Robitaille 2020⁶⁵

⁶⁴ www.newschool.edu/lang/faculty/juliette-mapp

⁶⁵ Written by the author as part of the artist’s doctoral artistic research project *Circus as Practices of Hope: A Philosophy of Circus*.

I approached these nomadic writings as choreographic circus textual essays. They deal with the fugitiveness of identities, representation, knowledge, and meaning. They consider the text as signs pointing toward meaning, not at finite meaning. It is writing that does not claim ownership of knowledge or authorship of ideas; rather, they are technopoetics devices enabling a choreographic approach to ideas and meaning in formation. These nomadic writings are in concert with my circus bodily practices in *Multiverse* and *Other Verses*.

Nomadic Images

Through the project, I have taken photos and worked with several photographers. Through the process, questions arose about the nature and potential of the images produced as documentation. While they document my artistic project, they aren't meant to prove it occurred; rather, they convey feelings about the research. These images are not representations but integral parts of the process. I titled them nomadic Images since, although they are still images, their meanings are not fixed, what Ernst Bloch refers to as "Not-Yet-Closed" (Bloch 1986). The humans in the pictures are icons, alter egos, and avatars. The nomadic images reveal hidden aspects of the project, such as figures that I could not see or sense before seeing or feeling the image. They suggest what the photos could not capture, like the wind. The nomadic images convey feelings, meaning, direction and hope. They are wishful images, which Ernst Bloch calls "Not-Yet-Conscious" (Bloch 1986). The Nomadic images fabulate a present, pointing towards the yet unperceivable and potential futures—a feed-forward.

Through the various iterations of *Multiverse* and *Other Verses*, I've explored multiple topics through practical explorations inherent to my circus gestures. They are ongoing studies. I grouped them as follows:

- Exploring variations for performing qualitative transformation
- Exploring form (the circle in particular), relation, and motion as material for composition
- Re-visiting, intersecting, and actualizing Bauhaus principles and traditional circus feats
- Heightening awareness of other-than-human in circus performance and composition
- Investigating the possibility of non-mediated circus events through the creation of circus installations
- Centering and decentering presences
- Prioritizing motion and senses as a guiding principle for composition
- Exploring at the threshold of the materiality of text and embodiment of meaning
- Exploring kinetic and aesthetic signs and signals



Figure 9 Photo Series *I stole the Sun*, Stockholm, Sweden, 2021. Credit and Courtesy Marie-Andrée Robitaille.

As I walk the *Multiverse*, the performative site is filled with images of planetary constellations, minerals, elemental-biological ecological beauty and devastation, life and extinction; a universe folding and unfolding in and out of itself in which I am not the master but instead a responsible part of the whole. *Multiverse* is neither an achieved nor achievable fixed circus act but rather a mutable live fable that composts and re-composes each time.

(Marie-Andrée Robitaille 2023)

RESULTS

Nomadic Practices

Nomadic practices are conceptualized circus practices that offer alternatives and complement to discipline-specific circus practices. These alternatives can transverse (be applied to) all circus disciplines (or other disciplines) and develop according to the specificities of each artist, project, and context. Nomadic practices can provide a fertile ground for the emergence of each artist's circus ethos.

Circus as Defamiliarizing Practices

Defamiliarization, a concept associated with Russian formalist literary theory, involves presenting the familiar in an unfamiliar or strange way. It aims to disrupt habitual perception by engaging ordinary objects, events, or ideas in a manner that challenges the usual understanding or expectations, forcing us to engage more deeply. Defamiliarization can create a sense of estrangement, prompting a reexamination of what we thought we knew.

Defamiliarization, as coined by Viktor Shklovsky, is a “technique of estrangement” or “art as technique” (Shklovsky 1998), a “making-strange”, also introduced in Braidotti's Nomadic Theory (Braidotti 2011a,b) and discussed by Helen Palmer in her book, *Queer Defamiliarisation Writing, Mattering, Making Strange* (Palmer 2023). Circus practices as defamiliarizing practices are affirmative processes of “queering” (Palmer 2020, 2023), “othering” (De Beauvoir 1949; hooks 1984, 1990), “thirding” (Lefebvre 1974; Soja 2017), “weirding” (Ulstein 2023), “monstering” (Armstrong and Hugues 2020), or diverting from the familiar; bringing attention to hidden, different, and minoritarian dimensions, inviting to reconsider what is taken for granted in our understanding of the world.

These hidden, different, and minoritarian dimensions are encapsulated in Duchamp's concept of the infrathin. Infrathin refers to the sensory, elusive, and ephemeral traces that the live circus gesture leaves. I believe these ungraspable traces can be of value by expanding the circus gesture qualitatively. These “infrathinities” are sensory potentials that are not measurable, not reproducible, not quantifiable or as, “in his famous *Notes on the subject*, Duchamps declares with characteristic irony that ‘one cannot define the infrathin, one can only give examples’” (Perloff 2021). Examples of “infrathinities” during a live experience of *Multiverse* are the wind produced by the foil, which is felt through the audience's skin. Another example is an audience member looking at another, gazing at others, and looking at the shimmering rays of light diffracted from a bent mirror onto the audience's bodies. The interpretation of circus gestures by audience members or the meanings generated by circus events is “infrathinities”. Immeasurable but valuable.

Circus arts defamiliarize through technopoetics. Technopoetics refers to a poetics of the bodies (Guyez 2017), as ways of knowing and generating meaning through the bodies in motion, advocating for poetics and imagination as valid and valuable.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Resonating with the values of the infrathin dimension of a circus gesture is the notion of “altered acrobatics” by Marion Guyez. In her doctoral thesis *The hybridization of acrobatics and text in circus arts*, Marion Guyez conceptualizes an approach to acrobatics that she termed “altered acrobatics”. Altered acrobatics are “transformed and liberated from the

Defamiliarizing has enabled me to tap into my circus practices' sensory, infrathin, and technopoetic potential. Defamiliarization may remind circus artists of the need to disrupt normativity through material aesthetic distortions. Acknowledging defamiliarization as a core function of circus arts can help us remember that circus implies "moving differently", which requires ethical processes of qualitative differentiation. Defamiliarizing requires leaving comfortable conditions and abandoning the pursuit of familiar results. Defamiliarizing generates new questions that require ethical considerations and a revaluation of our gestures' implications. Attention to defamiliarization as a core function of circus arts impacts how we compose, teach, perform, and shape a circus gesture.



Figure 10 Photo series *Safe in the City*, Stockholm, Sweden, 2020, Credit Einar Odencrants. Courtesy Marie-Andrée Robitaille.

Circus as Body Re-orienting Practices

Twenty years ago, I was a dancer-acrobat with extreme physical abilities. I could climb poles, swing on ropes, and defy gravity. In 2019, alone in the studio, my relationship with these circus disciplines transformed, and I became closer to what is called "object manipulation" in circus arts. However, rather than using the word "object", I referred to the objects as "bodies" in an attempt to move beyond the object/subject dichotomy.

While I problematized my relation to virtuosity, risk, and mastery throughout the project, my circus gestures moved away from my ability to master and manipulate the bodies. It morphed into the ability to respond to and phase with an ecology of bodies. Thus, object manipulation, as the appellation of my circus gesture, no longer made sense. Instead of

purely visual virtuosic and performative visual dimension to accentuate sensible, kinaesthetic, invisible expressions" (Guyez 2017).

object manipulation, I called it a body re-orienting practice. Orientation culminated as a core concept in my project by prioritizing motion, broadening the range of sensorial relations, and embracing non-linearity through circular forms, patterns, and trajectories.⁶⁷ My body re-orienting practice is an amalgam of object manipulation and acrobatics characterized by a slow approach to circus arts.

In traditional and contemporary circus, the rerouting of day-to-day objects appears, notably in juggling. Rerouting also manifests in clowning and other circus disciplines, such as when a high-wire walker uses an umbrella. This repurposing of daily objects is one of the common denominators of circus arts. Just as we can rescale the art of juggling into the art of manipulating objects, we can expand the understanding of objects to their materiality. Rather than engaging in the relationship between an object and myself, a body-reorienting practice shifts my relation to the object's materiality. I believe that when this shift operates, we can witness the forms of circus apparatus and the boundaries of the circus disciplines expanding and transforming.

Researching through body re-orienting practice meant anchoring my practice in the material world and researching from and through motion and sensations. Juggling balls, flipping on a tight wire, and swinging on ropes are all body re-orienting practices that open up new minoritarian trajectories and enable new forms of thoughts and practices to appear. As finite as they seemed, the circus practices are as nomadic and fluid as we practice them to be.

Circus arts, as body-reorienting practices, foster ways of moving differently from what is assumed to be possible. By experimenting with these different ways of moving, circus arts foster new ways of becoming and being in the world.

Circus as Fabulatory Practices

In common usage, fabulation is inventing or relating false or fantastic tales. Through my project, I understood circus arts as fabulatory practices—the act of embodying “fantastic truth”—an artistic gesture that envisions new possibilities while simultaneously enacting them. I grew interested in “fabulation” as a literary genre articulated by Robert Scholes (Scholes 1967, 1979), a philosophical concept influenced by Bergson (Bergson 2001) and further conceptualized by Deleuze (Deleuze and Guattari 1996), a feminist approach proposed by Donna Haraway (Haraway 2016, 2018), and the critical fabulation of Saidya Hartman (Hartman 2008).

Deleuze only elaborates a little on the idea of fabulation. Still, fabulation forms part of a rich complex of concepts central to his approach to the ethics and politics of art (Bogue 2016). Deleuze re-oriented the Bergsonian concept of fabulation and gave it political significance. For Bergson, fabulation is counter to reasoning, thus “a negative force that emerges in a vertiginous moment of disorientation in which images bypass reason and work directly on the senses to induce action” (Bogue 2016). From a Deleuzian perspective, and in my project, bypassing reason and working directly on the senses to induce action is not understood negatively. On the contrary, it is an opportunity even an aim. Drawing parallels

⁶⁷ My engagement with orientation echoes Sara Ahmed's queer phenomenology (Ahmed 2006) yet differs in rhetoric. While Ahmed examines, among other things, “orientation” aspects of “sexual orientations”, my approach to orientation does not stem from the perspective of cultural identity. Thus, I am less invested from the perspective of deviation, (away from norms, although I assume that norms can be altered through circus). My starting point for a body re-orienting practice is through a focus on diversion; to divert from a specific course, to change direction, addressing processes of change, transition, and transformation across various scales.

between fabulation and circus arts, I situate the circus gesture as a fabulatory act, where reason and meaning are re-oriented from and through images, senses, and motion.

Donna Haraway introduced the concept of speculative fabulation throughout her work in feminist science studies and cyborg theory. Her use of and ideas on fabulation are articulated in various writings, including “SF: Science Fiction, Speculative Fabulation, String Figures, So Far” (Haraway 2013), and *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Haraway 2016). These texts, among others, discuss the importance of storytelling, speculative narratives, and imaginative thinking in addressing contemporary socio-environmental challenges. In *Staying with the Trouble*, Haraway describes speculative fabulation as a “mode of attention, a theory of history, and a practice of worlding”. Early in the project, I engaged and defined my performative and compositional multiversal performances as “material-semiotic fabulatory experiments” and mutable live fables that are composting and re-composing each time.⁶⁸

Critical fabulation is a concept attributed to the writer Saidiya Hartman. In *Venus in Two Acts*, Hartman describes her writing practice as critical fabulation (Hartman 2008). Hartman’s critical fabulation is a method that “troubles the line between history and imagination” (Okeowo 2020). Critical fabulation seeks to create speculative narratives that shed light on overlooked or suppressed aspects of history. Hartman’s critical fabulation inspired me to coin the term practical fabulation. Through practical fabulation, I critically examine traditional disciplines and enact them responsively to and in today’s context. My use of fabulation has been practical: a method that troubles the lines between historical, actual and potential future circus practices.

Robert Scholes wrote about fabulation as a literary genre of fiction. He refers to fabulation as “the form of a tale, within a tale, within a tale” (Scholes 1967). Like in many conventional circus shows, there is a tale (a story that the circus performer enacts, or what the circus performer pretends to do, like climbing on a tree) within a tale (what the circus performer actually does, like climbing on a Chinese pole), within a tale (the entire show is composed of several tales or circus acts). I became fascinated by this meta-fictional aspect that characterized circus arts. The audience knows that the circus artist is a human; they understand the reality of the gesture, yet it is presented to them as a fictional situation.

In his book *Fabulation and Meta-Fiction*, Robert Scholes wrote, “Fabulation is fiction that offers us a world clearly and radically discontinuous from the one we know, yet which returns to confront that known world in some cognitive way” (Scholes 1979). Rather than mere speculation, in the context of circus arts, the notion of imagination involves an embodied commitment to that which is imagined, a material imagination. In circus arts, bodily matter is at stake, a here-and-now, in-person commitment to what is speculated upon.

If fabulation is “practices of investigating possibilities outside our present terms of order” (Nyong’o 2019), it follows that the investigation through circus arts involves the necessity to act upon the present conditions and transform them to enable new ways of moving. By evoking and invoking latent potentialities (Deleuze 2013), the circus artist demonstrates their feasibility, acting upon the missing elements in the present conditions to enable or

⁶⁸ I am inspired by Donna Haraway’s “The Camille Stories; Children of Compost” (Haraway 2016), as well as by “composting” as a feminist practice (Neimanis and Hamilton 2023).

sustain these potentialities in the future—circus as a practical fabulation is a fabulation of the present.

In the next section, I expand on how the concept of fabulation practically manifests within circus arts.

According to Roland Bogue, an approach to narrative fiction via the concept of fabulation may be divided into five components (Bogue 2010):

- Becoming-other
- Experimenting on the real
- Legending
- Inventing “a people” to come
- Deterritorialization of language

Even if these components work differently for circus arts than literature and manifest differently in specific disciplines and practices, they are relevant to conceptualizing circus arts as a praxis that works across disciplines.

Becoming-other

“Becoming-other entails a passage between categories, modes of existence, discrete entities such that stable elements are set in metaphoric disequilibrium” (Bogue 2010). Through circus arts, becoming-other is notably achieved via moving differently. A “setting in motion” that is unfamiliar and subversive to our usual ways of moving, generating other forms, relations, meanings and modes of beings.

Experimenting on the real

Circus arts experiment on the real is referring to the “here and now” aspect of the circus performativity. The notion of performative materialism is included in the experimentation of the real, which accounts for historicity, present conditions and power relations that “through fabulatory experiments can be reconfigured and further transformed” (Bogue 2010).

The experiment with “the real” in circus arts is not fictive. What is at stake is the life of the performer. The circus gesture is a material commitment to the present. The speculation is not only a virtual “what if” but an actual “what would become of x if y”. This way, circus arts open a threshold, reconciling the virtually possible and the physically feasible. Circus arts experiment through material imagination and embodied imagination. Conceptualizing and practicing circus as a fabulation move it beyond representation without getting disoriented by virtual possibilities.

Legending and inventing “a people” to come

Legending, according to Bogue, is to treat characters (in the case of circus arts, the circus artist themselves) and their actions as sociopolitical in nature (Bogue 2010). At the heart of the circus gesture and at its most extreme is an embodied hope for achieving what is considered impossible. These impossibilities are achieved through a series of risky moves. The transcendence of mortal conditions and the concept of liberation is manifested through circus gestures and the figure of the human who defies “the laws of nature”. These heroic gestures shape a type of “giant to come” as Deleuze would have it; they evoke the people we are becoming. This prompts the question: what kind of giant are we in the process of becoming? What is it that we hope for?

Deterritorialization of language

According to Parr, deterritorialization “can best be understood as a movement producing change. In so far as it operates as a line of flight, deterritorialization indicates the creative potential of an assemblage. So, to deterritorialize is to free up the fixed relations that contain a body, all the while exposing it to new organization” (Parr 2010). The deterritorializing aspects of fabulation can then be understood as one of the potential results of circus arts—a reterritorialization of our modes of knowing, meaning, and becoming.

Even though these are not mutually exclusive, earlier in this text, I equated defamiliarizing practice with alternative ways of knowing and re-orienting practices with alternative ways of being and becoming. Here, I associate fabulation with alternative ways of meaning. I conceptualized defamiliarization, body re-orientation, and fabulation as nomadic circus practices. They could also be understood as straightforward methods, functions, or even large disciplinary categories of practices. They offer methods to tap into the art forms’ ethico-onto-epistemic significance.

Practical Fabulation

In my project, practical fabulation is a series of conceptual choreographic devices. They are future perfect, diffractive device, and volvelle. These methods and instruments support circus arts’ defamiliarizing, re-orienting, and fabulatory potential. They are tools to reconnect and maintain the performative elements that are still relevant while performing “shifts” so that the practice can transform in relation to the present conditions. They are partly processes, partly types of results, and evolving practices. They can work individually and are complementary to each other. These devices do not have one application or use; instead, they can be transformed with context, conditions, and aspirations at the user’s discretion.

Future Perfect

Throughout the project, I have worked with conceptual personas based on traditional circus feats, exploring the ethical considerations, knowledge, and principles embedded within these disciplines. Starting with the bear tamer, quick-change artist, and escapologist, I eventually added femme orchestre and billboard women. By revisiting and practicing these personas and their feats, I aimed to revise what qualifies as risk, how mastery is embodied, and where virtuosity is located in them. The future perfect supports designing questions and tasks for strengthening the defamiliarizing, reorienting, and fabulating potential of the circus gesture.⁶⁹

The future perfect tense describes the completion of an action by a specified time that has yet to come. It speculates on something that will have occurred in the future if the present goes a certain way. The future tense suggests a deadline; it is a future bound by the present condition from which it emerges but a future that can still be transformed.

The question that prompted the revision of my circus practice through conceptual personas was not what if. What would have become of my circus practice if? Using the future perfect conditional tense, what would have happened to the bear tamer if the bear tamer had been

⁶⁹ I have named this method after my reading of Rosi Braidotti’ thoughts on the possibilities contained in the future perfect tense (Braidotti 2014).

substituted for the bear? Or what would have happened to my walking practice if I had always returned to point A instead of walking from point A to B?

Future perfect explores how the conditions change when the practice changes by departing from historical and conventional practices.

Diffractive Device

An important choreographic approach I explored is diffraction. Diffraction emphasizes mapping interference rather than replication or reflection. “A diffraction pattern does not map where differences appear, but rather maps where the effects of difference appear” (Barad 2007). My choreographic diffractive device consists of performing shifts in a circus feat while exploring the difference these differences create. In practice, diffraction led me to conceive the circus assemblage as a diffractive apparatus. By performing shifts in dynamics, materiality (including textuality), spatiality, and temporality, I transformed escapology into an act of presence, bear-taming into an un-taming practice, and quick-change into a slow process.

For example, in *Multiverse*, the role of the bear, enacted by other bodies, bubbles, and foils, is reversed from that of the artist. Instead of showing how the bodies obeyed me, I let myself be impacted by the other bodies; rather than trying to tame the bodies and control the environment I engaged in dialogical relation with their unleashed possibilities. Performing shifts in the material involved in the feats by substituting foil for bear, provoked differences in how mastery came to be embodied, where virtuosity came to be located, and how risk came to be defined, transforming the circus gesture.

A diffractive approach to composition was generative and led to a variety of outcomes. On the one hand, the diffractive approach generated a lot of material. On the other hand, it was nearly impossible to retrace and map where the effects of difference appear. Through the documentation of the project, one of the challenges was to trace the trajectories and patterns without resorting to conventional data collection methods while preserving the artistic subtlety and diffractive potential. At times it was disorienting and difficult to manage too many possibilities. *Volvelle*, the third practical fabulation, was an effective tool for dealing with the multitude of outcomes.

Volvelle

The circle presents an intriguing case study. From a formal perspective, it is a geometric vessel at once adaptable, flexible and pure, simple and streamlined, culturally and categorically neutral. From a symbolic perspective, it is a mutable icon whose symbolic role can be vividly traced through numerous disciplines, including cosmology, cryptography, astronomy, and astrology; mathematics, meteorology, and medicine. However, from a mechanical perspective, the circle’s capacity to be dialed, rotated, counter-rotated, notched, spun, stacked, sliced, sub-divided, and die-cut reveals a simple and remarkably sophisticated engineering principle. Here, the circle is miraculously transformed from an ordinary piece of static geometry into a dynamic and quite extraordinary interactive tool, one that is able to rationalize large amounts of complex information with remarkable practicality, precision, and purpose.

(Helfand 2002)

Volvelles are movable circular charts used to compute or display information. They comprise rotating discs or concentric rings with printed data. Volvelles use multiple concentric circles with pointers (Helfand 2002) to display their data either peripherally, centrifugally, or radially. By rotating and aligning the discs, a volvelle helps visualize or compute various relationships, such as astronomical positions, calendar dates, or other data points.

The volvelle is a precursor to computer science and computation theory by using combinations, differentiated equations, and relationships. Historically, volvelles are used in a variety of ways, such as the astrolabe, tools to calculate or predict in medieval times. The Zairia was a volvelle device used by medieval Arab astrologers to generate ideas by mechanical means. The Ars-Magna invented by Ramon Lull, was based on a set of principles activated through combinations and cumulatively through an iterative process.

Twentieth-century volvelles—often called wheel charts—offer a way to calculate everything from inventory control, color calibration, and radiation exposure to animal breeding cycles and taxes. There are fortune-telling wheels and semaphore-charting wheels, emergency first-aid wheels, and wheels to prevent pregnancy (Helfand 2002).

The Oxford English Dictionary traces the etymology of the word volvelle to the Mediaeval Latin *volvellum*, or *volere*—to turn. It describes it as a device consisting of one or more movable circles surrounded by other graduated or figured circles used to ascertain the rising and setting of the sun and moon and the state of the tides (Helfand 2002). I have been familiar with and attached to volvelle from an early age. My father and I observed the sky using the volvelle (or Planisphere) to locate the stars, planets, and constellations during long summers in the North Hemisphere.

When “thinking my project”, I visualized it as a virtual volvelle, a cosmology of ideas, topics, theories, and methods organized in a shifting spherical manner. I often visualize or think in this way. Eventually, I conceived of a physical volvelle to help me materialize my thoughts and locate elements of the practice within specific ranges, perspectives, or components. I thought of the volvelle as a device that can help me think at different scales simultaneously; it is an analog thinking machine that slows down a process and reduces the disorientation caused by too many possibilities. The volvelles disrupt linear thinking and provoke new images and thoughts. The volvelle is a visualization, conception, defamiliarization, orientation, and fabulation tool.

The main example I documented for the thesis is a volvelle that works with the future perfect and the diffractive device. It functions with four overlapping moveable circles. Volvelle offers relational thinking by mixing the combinations of the following trios:

- Bear tamer, quick change, escapology
- Temporality, spatiality, materiality
- Risk, mastery, virtuosity
- Ontology, ethics, epistemic

By spinning the wheels, you can explore combinations that create unique properties or attributes. For example, by overlapping quick change, temporality, virtuosity, and ethics, you can think about the ethical implications of virtuosity based on speed and the temporality of quick change by changing speed from fast to slow. The different alignment of properties serves as othering the habitual relation to gesture.

My desire to approach the revision of my circus practice from an onto-ethico-epistemic perspective influenced my use of the volvelle. My volvelles are modes of recombining in a non-mutually exclusive, non-binary, non-fixed, and non-pre-determined manner. To some extent, volvelle is the materialization of transversal, diffractive, and plural ways of thinking and composing. The materialization of my process through volvelle arrived quite late in the project, perhaps as a necessity to deal with the multiplicity and complexity of materials within and generated through the project.

DISCUSSION – TOWARDS A PHILOSOPHY OF CIRCUS

From Mastering to Mattering



Figure 11 Photo Series *STUDIO 16 – COVID 19*, Stockholm, Sweden, 2020. Credit Einar Kling Odencrants. Courtesy Marie-Andrée Robitaille.

An overarching entry point to this research was my desire to shift from anthropocentric circus making to practices that take significant consideration for the other-than-human in circus composition. This endeavor resonates with Julietta Singh’s “dehumanist solidarity”, which proposes that solidarity can extend beyond humans to encompass non-human entities and the environment. Singh advocates for reassessing human exceptionalism and promoting a more inclusive solidarity that acknowledges the interconnectedness of all beings (Singh 2018). Aligning with this perspective, I questioned hierarchical and anthropocentric approaches to my circus performance, striving for a more comprehensive and accountable understanding of my attachments to the humanist conceptions of the circus arts’ “best practice”.

Through my research, I have been trying to understand how I embody mastery, what happens when mastery is disembodied, and what other relations to mastery develop. I critically examined how my practice maintains forms of exclusion, violence, and erasure. These zones of tension seem never to resolve.

As Cixous writes, “mastery is everywhere” (Cixous 1986); we, as humans on Earth, need mastery to survive. How can we approach mastery from an equitable and just perspective? Paraphrasing Julietta Singh on the exercises in her book *Unthinking Mastery*, to engage in a circus gesture that seeks to undo the dynamics of colonial mastery, we can begin to understand how pervasive and intimately ingrained mastery is in the fabric of our artistic practice, subjectivity, and politics. My artistic research is to begin—simply to begin—to

trace and transform some of the desires and aims of mastery across my circus gestures (Singh 2018).

Early in the process, I considered the tensions between gaining or losing control over the other bodies composing my circus gesture. As my work progressed, I wondered less about losing and gaining control and more about the potential of displacing control. Displaced control disrupted the notion of virtuosity. Eventually, I welcomed not needing to be a master but instead being a responsible part of the whole.

Besides entertaining for pleasure, thrills, and delight, circus arts also function as a *divertissement* (to divert). I consider this a core “function” of circus arts. Circus arts may serve as a diversion tool, not in the sense of taking attention away from the challenges we are facing, but rather bringing our attention *to them* so that we can work with and through them. Diverting here involves discontinuity, requiring letting go of power and embracing vulnerability.

Vulnerability as Virtuosity

Circus performances often reinforce a humanist narrative, where protagonists, through assumed autonomy, independence, and dominance, control and master their environment for their glorification. The search for these familiar manifestations of virtuosity creates tricks and illusions that are performed to make risk and triumph visible. Circus artists learn to hide, control, dominate, and ignore their vulnerabilities through these processes, perpetuating illusionary narratives and models. I have challenged this perspective throughout my project and research. What can we learn when vulnerability is recognized and integrated into circus performance rather than aimed at transcending it?

Virtuosity is from the Italian *virtuoso*, meaning “skilled, learned, of exceptional worth”.⁷⁰ Virtuosity is the skills or abilities of a *virtuoso*. I am interrogating the notion of exceptionalism and excellence embedded in the idea of virtuosity and take a particular interest in challenging what is valued as virtuosity.

Through the research, I situated vulnerability as a generative condition. Rather than working towards becoming a non-vulnerable being, I am interested in how virtuosity transforms when acknowledging and working through vulnerabilities. I am building on Christine Daigle’s observation: “It is the permeability of beings that makes them [us] vulnerable. This permeability makes us vulnerable, but this should not be understood in a negative way. This vulnerability can generate a new kind of ethical responsibility” (Daigle 2023).

In the project, I worked within compositional and performative exercises anchored in the material world, interested in the bodies’ vulnerable limits. I worked within the limits of my aging body and with material that connects to human vulnerability in crisis (safety blankets, mooring fenders, etc.). For example, I could not control, predict, measure, or replicate the foil’s behaviors, requiring special care and attention as the material always is in a process of transformation. At any moment, foil can rip and change the trajectory of a performance. Before and after each performance, the foil required long hours of meticulous care and repairs. Ironically, I often prioritized caring for the foil over caring for my body. The foil also

⁷⁰ www.etymonline.com/word/virtuoso

fulfilled its original function as a safety blanket, albeit abstractly, protecting my body by providing a spectacularity that my body no longer provides.

I am far less vulnerable in the societal and planetary context than many others. I do not speak of vulnerability as something that should be understood as a strength or a weakness but rather as a condition that should be integrated rather than transcended, ignored, overlooked, or denied.

Throughout my project, I have attempted to expand the scope of circus arts by articulating its potential beyond a transhuman bodily display of human enhancement. I have been attentive to what becomes of virtuosity when vulnerabilities are embraced rather than attempted to be transcended. The title *Vulnerabilities as Virtuosity* encapsulates the following supposition: what if our most virtuosic circus act today was the mastery to address, respond to, and ultimately eradicate the vulnerabilities of all others? Imagine a world where no one is left vulnerable, where we harness our collective resources to uplift and protect one another. A world where no one is left vulnerable is a utopian concept, yet it ignites my passion. Until we achieve such an ideal, I am dedicated to developing, engaging, and articulating practices that nurture an ethic of vulnerability and foster the conditions that will be required of us to pave the way for a more compassionate and equitable future.

From Spectacularity to Spectrality

The notion of risk in circus arts warrants critical reevaluation. While addressing the unequal distribution of risk between artists and production companies is crucial, my focus has instead been on my relationship with risk. From a critical posthuman perspective, I asked: what type of risks am I willing to take and why? Is pursuing risk for triumph and individual heroics suitable in today's context? Do feats deemed exceptional in the past still hold relevance today? While juggling nine balls or executing daring vaults are commendable, what type of risk do they involve, and what kind of narrative do they foster and maintain? How are the risks related to the wider context and conditions that came to shape the spectacle in the first place?

Throughout 2021, I collaborated with a cluster of researchers from the Swedish Defence University, Stockholm University, Södertörn University, and Stockholm School of Economics. Together, we explored the notion of sustainability through the lens of vulnerability under the provocative title *Vulnerability as Virtuosity*. While addressing vulnerability, the idea of risk was central to our conversation and reflections. Upon viewing a highly virtuosic and risky acrobatic performance on the teeterboard, Frederike Albrecht, Senior Lecturer in Political Science at the Swedish Defence University, who researches risk analysis in situations of crisis at the Centre of Natural Hazards and Disaster Science (CNDS), remarked: "We often encounter crises in fiction, while others experience them in reality. Maximum security is paramount in circus performances, with safety measures like mattresses and safety nets, extensive practice, and repetitions. However, vulnerable groups face extraordinary tasks in real-life crises without such safety nets or prior training" (Robitaille 2022).

Through a concerted effort to revise my circus gesture from a posthuman lens, my relations to mastery, risk, and virtuosity shifted. My skills and virtuosities transformed from an ability to dominate over my environment to a virtuosic poetics of care and vulnerable/affect-able

(Daigle 2018) relationship to my environment. As other types of virtuosity manifested, different elements were at stake, other means of mastery developed, and I took other types of risk. Even though the virtuosic is no longer as explosive as a circus volt, even if I do not master keeping many objects in the air for a moment to wow the audience, there is still virtuosity, risk, and mastery involved in my performative circus gestures. To do less, to perform slowness, and to sustain the audience's attention with subtler minoritarian phenomena requires another approach to mastery.

I refer to this process as a transition between spectacularity and spectrality. By spectrality, I mean variations of what is considered spectacular, variations of what is measured, normalized, and standardized as spectacular. By spectrality, I mean to bring attention to the yet unknown, unseen, unheard, hidden, overlooked, different, and minoritarian potential elements within the circus gestures.

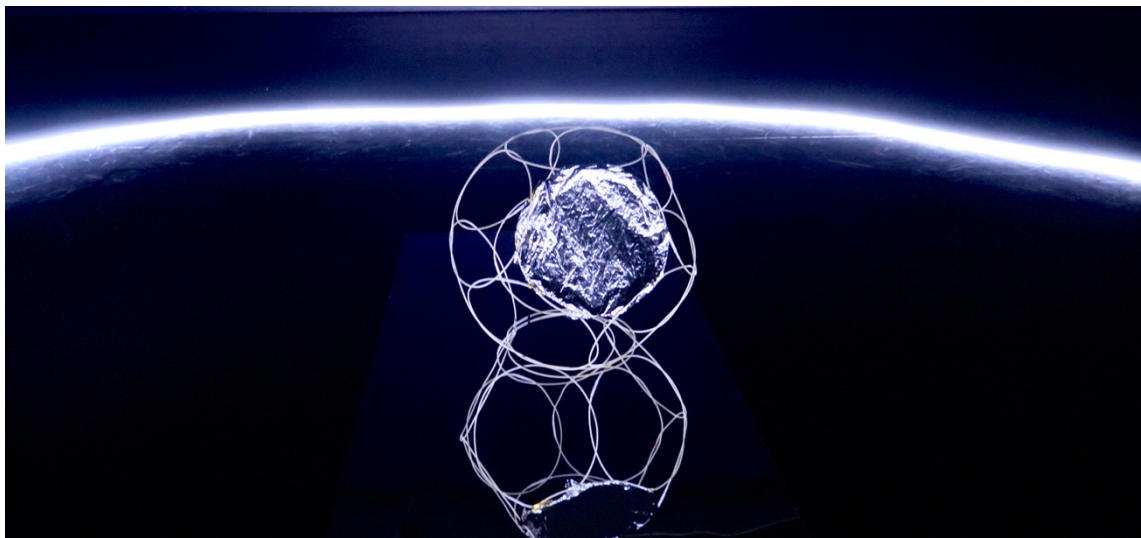


Figure 12 Photo Series *Spectralities*, Stockholm, Sweden, 2023. Credit and Courtesy Marie-Andrée Robitaille.

Living in a time of planetary climate disruptions and rapid technological advancements means dwelling in unfamiliar realms where relations and values are destabilized and the outcomes uncertain. Navigating these uncharted territories requires maneuvering through nonlinear processes and ambiguous situations toward uncertain destinations. Developing skills to navigate through intuition and ambiguity becomes crucial in such unstable contexts. Therefore, the insights offered by circus can provide valuable guidance for finding a path through these contexts and conditions. Circus arts offer ways of re-orienting us through undefined, scattered transitional processes, helping us to develop abilities to maneuver through senses and motion. The relevance of circus-embodied knowledge provides essential insights for navigating the complexity of today.

NOTES

Ethics of Entanglement

Now that I have written this thesis, I am formulating many ideas that have been shaped through my practice but also in intra-action with the practices and ideas of others. I am not so concerned with owning ideas but articulating ideas that can strengthen the circus field.

Maintaining an existing circus repertory of forms or “getting inspired” by others is contemporary circus’ un-dealt with (yet hot) topic. It is beyond the scope of this research to examine the need for an ethics of acknowledgment/citation in circus. However, circus art’s troublesome relation to “innovation” combined with limited resources and access to audiences often divide circus artists rather than uniting them. This is an ethical problem that the field needs to address by working towards an ethics of distributed authorships.

Creating methods for referencing and crediting that emerge from circus ways of doing is relevant to the circus field. How can we better recognize the work of the artist, the director, the outside eyes, the trainers, the riggers, the producers, and the audiences as part of an ecology? How can we strengthen and develop our own archive? How can our ethics reflect the specificities of circus arts and vice versa? These questions need to be addressed and given more attention in the future.

Sustainability

While I am advocating for the legitimacy of circus as an art form, I also know that circus is an insufficient response to the turmoil of our times. I recognize the limitations of my practice, which has, in the doctoral project context, primarily engaged artistic researchers, scholars, and contemporary circus communities in Scandinavia and Europe. I acknowledge that the activist potential of my project has yet to materialize fully and that I could do more. Nonetheless, I embrace my role as an artist-researcher and circus artist, which involves continuous awakening rather than static knowledge. The introspection and solitude demanded by my research are legitimate and necessary for me to revise and account for my artistic gestures meaningfully.

Through my project and artistic gestures, I strive for practices where mastery, virtuosity, and risk may expand beyond personal achievement and toward solidarity with “others.” In the context of my research, it meant confronting and navigating the tensions that resulted from rejecting the dominating postures of a circus artist within an academic setting and as a scholar in the field of artistic research. My process shed light on the circus artist’s precarious status in society and academic settings, where other art forms are more dominant due to their being better established and more prominent. Circus is already an underrepresented, underfunded, and often misunderstood art form at the periphery of or in the process of being assimilated into other traditions. Therefore, my research could only have occurred with the support of the Stockholm University of the Arts. Besides immense gratitude, I hope that my doctoral project might provide tools to advocate that the circus subject be given the necessary resources and conditions to ensure its endogenous

development (development from within), which is, I believe, the only feasible path for sustainable development of circus and areas beyond circus.

Hopepunk

Throughout the project, I practiced hope. Hope as a practice of nurturing motivation to act responsively, dream, imagine, and envision new possibilities. I practiced hope for working towards the affirmation and embodiment of my ideals.

Hope, a concept as strong and vague as freedom, defies fixed definitions and evolves through practices and subjective interpretations. Much like freedom, hope begs the question: hope in pursuit of what, and hope of and for whom? In this respect, hope remains elusive, its meaning shaped by individual perspectives and experiences.

The term hope has faced skepticism and criticism and is often dismissed as passive and complacent. Yet, personal crises frequently shed light on hope's profound significance. For me, hope emerged as a force after my first son, Camille, was born in 2016. Camille underwent three major operations within the first three weeks of his life, hanging precariously between life and death. Each second stretched into eternity in those agonizing moments, and despair immobilized me. Paralyzed by the bleakness of a future without my newborn son, I found myself unable to envision a brighter tomorrow, succumbing to the darkest depths of sorrow, struggling to find any sparks of hope.

What gave me the courage to face another day of harrowing medical procedures and the haunting prospect of Camille's mortality was to focus on his presence, his life. Embracing the present rather than the idea of tomorrow gave me the strength to provide him with, for whatever time we had together, beauty, joy, and comfort. I sang to him and told him tales while holding his little hand in mine. What sustained me through those interminable first three weeks and the years preceding his complete recovery was the desire to make every fleeting moment count. Narratives of survival and perseverance emerged from there. A shimmer of hope appeared within a dark present.

Aligning with Spinoza's description of hope; "Hope is nothing but unsteady joy, arising from the image of a future or past thing about whose issue we are in doubt" (Spinoza 2001), it is often in the loss of hope or while in doubt that hope's true potential is revealed. As in moments of disillusionment and despair, what we hope for drives us to act and disrupt what we are doubting.

Hope is a practice.⁷¹ Hope is something we do rather than have (Macy and Johnstone 2012). Hope is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart; it transcends the world that is immediately experienced and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons (Solnit 2016).

The circus arts I wish to engage with embody the ethos of hopepunk. First coined by the author Alexandra Rowland, the term refers to a speculative subgenre that finds its narrative

⁷¹ Hope is a discipline argue Mariame Kaba. Marime Kaba (www.mariamekaba.com) works to reimagine and create a system not rooted in punishment and oppression. She argues that hope plays an important role in building a long-term abolitionist movement and laying out a framework for mutual aid. See *Hope is a discipline: Mariame Kaba on Dismantling the carceral state* www.theintercept.com/2021/03/17/intercepted-mariame-kaba-abolitionist-organizing/ and *Hope Is a Practice and a Discipline: Building a Path to a Counterculture of Care* www.nonprofitquarterly.org/hope-is-a-practice-and-a-discipline-building-a-path-to-a-counterculture-of-care/

motivation in optimism—embodied in acts of love, kindness, and respect for one another—as resistance. “The opposite of grimdark is hopepunk”, declared Alexandra Rowland, a Massachusetts writer, in a two-sentence Tumblr post in July 2017. “Pass it on.”⁷² In 2019, hopepunk was one of Collins English Dictionary’s new and notable terms, Hopepunk: a literary and artistic movement that celebrates the pursuit of positive aims in the face of adversity.⁷³ “Hopepunk says that kindness and softness doesn’t equal weakness, and that in this world of brutal cynicism and nihilism, being kind is a political act. An act of rebellion”⁷⁴ In the face of adversity, hopepunk makes us move forward, urging us to stand up and fight with kindness and care for what we believe in.

Circus as hopepunk celebrates perseverance and the relentless collective pursuit of a better world through acts of daring, defying, cooperating, reorienting, defamiliarizing, and fabulating. It challenges the status quo while imagining and embodying new possibilities. To me, it is a defiant declaration that other ways of moving together into the future are possible!

Drawing from the insights of pedagogues Paulo Freire (Freire 2018, 2021) and bell hooks (hooks 1994, 2003), my project has reaffirmed my belief in the transformative power of education, hope and the arts. They argue that education (and, for me, circus education) is intrinsically linked to hope, catalyzing social transformation and collective actions.

As we navigate the world’s complexities, circus as a practice of hope can help us to resist, enact, and embody other possibilities, inspiring us to dream boldly and act courageously. May circus arts continue to serve as beacons of transformation and hopepunk aspirations.



Figure 13 Series *Running on Empty*, Stockholm, Sweden, 2023. Credit Einar Kling Odencrants. Courtesy Marie-Andrée Robitaille.

⁷² www.vox.com/2018/12/27/18137571/what-is-hopepunk-noblebright-grimdark

⁷³ www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/hopepunk#

⁷⁴ www.ariaste.tumblr.com/post/163500138919/ariaste-the-opposite-of-grimdark-is-hopepunk

CONCLUSION

As a circus artist-pedagogue and human on Earth, I have always felt I know more than I can explain. Although circus arts' broad range of insights and potential may not always be explicit, they are unique and relevant. By working on further articulating circus arts' specific ways of doing—as circus praxis—I hope to shed light on circus arts' significance. I have researched, assessed, and transformed my relation to mastery, risk, and virtuosity through a critical posthuman lens, new materialist approaches, and compositional studies.

In this research, I've situated circus arts within their specific kinetic, aesthetic, and embodied realms of knowledge. These specificities offer alternatives to dominant ways of knowing, becoming, and meaning. In my doctoral project, I aimed to broaden and deepen the scope of circus arts by providing practical alternatives to acquiring disciplines-based skills. I have delineated these specificities through a series of conceptualized practices and methods. Nomadic practices (defamiliarization, body re-orienting, and fabulation) expand circus arts as praxis, transcending their disciplinary boundaries. Practical fabulation (future perfect, diffractive devices, and volvelle) supports an ethico-onto-epistemic approach to circus arts, which can help navigate and steer the current planetary paradigm shift. I hope these practical concepts, conceptualized practices, and other elements of my documented artistic research project contribute to advancing a circus philosophy and enriching the discourse within circus arts and beyond.

My work in circus arts and artistic research is only one moving star in an ever-expanding and interconnected cosmology of practices and concepts. I hope the community of circus artists, artists, and scholars from other fields (and anyone who encounters my work) will receive it as a hopeful gesture.

In conclusion, I would like to echo the words of Suzanne Langer, a process philosopher I grew fond of during my research project. Paraphrasing the preface of her book *Feeling and Forms* (Langer 1953):

Nothing in my thesis is finished, nor could a circus gesture never be finished. There may be new circus arts in the future and new modes of circus arts. But as *Circus as Practices of Hope* was a promise of *A Philosophy of Circus*, this thesis, I hope, is a continuation of something capable of indefinite continuation.⁷⁵

With hope in motion

Marie-Andrée Robitaille, Stockholm, April 2024

⁷⁵ Suzanne Langer wrote: "Nothing in this essay, therefore, is finished, nor could art theory ever be finished. There may be new arts in the future; there may surely be new modes of any art; our own age has seen the birth of the motion picture, which is not only in a new medium, but is a new mode (see the Appendix, 'A Note on the Film')- But as *Philosophy in a New Key* was a promise of a philosophy of art, this book, I fondly hope, is a beginning of something capable of indefinite continuation."

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ANNEX

Survey of the field – Circus Arts Within the Field of Artistic Research

In this text, I am situated within the academic field of artistic research in Sweden and, to some extent, beyond, accounting for my own artistic research lineage. The text also relates significant circus influences, fluences, and fluxes with which my doctoral artistic research project has evolved.

Artistic Research Within Circus in Sweden

My research project takes place in the academic field of artistic research at Stockholm University of the Arts, SKH.⁷⁶ This means that research is carried out from the starting point of and through artistic practice. SKH is at the forefront of artistic research in Sweden, and in 2016, it became the first institution to admit doctoral students. As of February 2024, there are over twenty-four doctoral students, fifty ongoing research and development projects, a recurring artistic research conference, *Alliances and Commonalities*,⁷⁷ and an academic journal, *VIS – Nordic Journal for Artistic Research*.⁷⁸

When I returned to Sweden as an assistant professor in 2009, circus as an art form had only recently entered into the curriculum of artistic education at a university level and into the field of artistic research (Damkjaer and Robitaille 2011). The University of Dance and Circus, previously DOCH, now a part of SKH, has hosted artistic research projects in circus arts since 2004.⁷⁹ Efva Lilja,⁸⁰ who served as the rector at DOCH from 2006 to 2013, has been instrumental in establishing Sweden as a center of artistic research and advocating for the recognition of the *artist as researcher*.⁸¹ Between 2004 and 2013, DOCH has welcomed several professors and guest professors in circus arts: Ana Sanchez Colberg (2006),⁸² Tilde Björfors (2004, 2008),⁸³ John-Paul Zaccarini (2007-2020),⁸⁴ Irena Purschke (2009), and Daniel Gulko (2011).⁸⁵

In 2004, Tilde Björfors became a visiting professor at DOCH and conducted an artistic research project through her dramaturgical work and interdisciplinary creative process with Cirkus Cirkör⁸⁶ performance 99%. The project was done in collaboration with LIME at the Karolinska Institutet, funded by Sparbankens Jubileumsfond.

In 2006, Ana Sanchez Colberg, with the circus bachelor's degree students and as part of her residency as a visiting professor, led the artistic research project *Making the Invisible*

⁷⁶ www.uniarts.se/english/research/

⁷⁷ www.uniarts.se/english/research/research-conferences/alliances-and-commonalities

⁷⁸ www.en.visjournal.nu

⁷⁹ DOCH was founded as the Institute of Choreography (Koreografiska institutet) in 1963; in 1978 it was renamed the University College of Dance, "Danshögskolan"; in 2010 it became the University of Dance and Circus, "Dans och Cirkushögskolan" (DOCH).

⁸⁰ www.efvalilja.se

⁸¹ www.efvalilja.se/pdf/art-research-empowerment---the-artist-as-researcher.pdf

⁸² www.anasanchezcolberg.com

⁸³ www.cirkor.se/tilde-bjorfors

⁸⁴ www.uniarts.se/english/people/co-workers/john-paul-zaccarini

⁸⁵ www.cirkor.se/en/daniel-gulko

⁸⁶ www.cirkor.se

Visible: We: Implicated and Complicated An (Artistic) Research Project,⁸⁷ a devised work exploring multiple notions of space informed by Henri Lefebvre's concept of spatial practices. As a teacher, Ana Sanchez Colberg has been involved considerably in implementing the artistic research components within DOCH's BA degree curriculum until 2012. She has been involved as a guest lecturer with the master's program since 2014 and was head of the master's program in contemporary circus at SKH from 2020 to 2022. Her contribution has been significant in elaborating and implementing artistic research within the circus bachelor's degree and master's degree curriculums.

Between 2008 and 2012, Tilde Björfors was a professor of circus, leading the project *Circus Transcending Boundaries in Art and Society*⁸⁸, the first artistic research project in circus to be funded by the Swedish Research Council. Björfors, through her practice as a circus director, addressed the notion of risk and interdisciplinary creative process. From a dramaturgical perspective, she articulated seven dimensions that she identifies as the linguistic tools of circus arts. My work follows in the steps of Björfors, seeking to articulate the specific knowledge that circus arts and circus artists hold.

Between 2007 and 2008, John-Paul Zaccarini⁸⁹ was a visiting professor in contemporary circus. Between 2009 and 2012, he was a doctoral candidate at Stockholm University in the Faculty of Humanities, Department of Musicology and Performance Studies, in collaboration with DOCH. At the time, DOCH did not have the credentials to examine doctoral candidates in artistic research. His project draws parallels between psychoanalysis and circus through an ethnographic immersion in circus education at DOCH. In 2013, he defended his thesis *Circoanalysis: Circus Therapy and Psychoanalysis*, which brings circus arts into a discourse with Psychoanalysis and articulates circo-analysis as a theory and circo-therapy as a method to "produce a (circus) practice that would attend to the neglected voice of the circus student" (Zaccarini 2013). Zaccarini's PhD thesis and my artistic research projects intersect in the effort to bring circus into larger societal discourses as well as generate methods that foster a move towards deepening the scope of circus arts as artistic research practices.

Between 2009 and 2018, at DOCH and SKH, I conducted *Gynoïdes Project*, a multilayered artistic research project on the representation and agency of women in circus arts, which included the artistic research projects *Women in Circus*,⁹⁰ *Sound of Circus*,⁹¹ and *Hidden Circus*.⁹² With these projects, I searched, from circus choreographic perspectives, alternatives to dominant modes of composition in circus arts. Between 2011 and 2019, I curated five editions of the *Women in Circus Consortiums* in Sweden, Denmark, and Finland in cooperation with Cirkus Cirkör,⁹³ Dynamo Stage and Working Space for Circus and Performing Arts,⁹⁴ and Circusinfo Finland.⁹⁵ These projects have informed my artistry and have been instrumental in the design, development, and implementation of the circus bachelor's degree curriculum between 2009 and 2018.

⁸⁷ www.researchgate.net/publication/236631234_Making_the_Invisible_Visible_We_Implicated_and_Complicated

⁸⁸ www.yumpu.com/sv/document/read/20577661/slutredovisningen-till-vetenskaps-radet-vr-tilde-bjorfors

⁸⁹ www.uniarts.se/english/people/co-workers/john-paul-zaccarini

⁹⁰ www.uniarts.se/english/research-and-development-work/research-projects/women-in-circus/

⁹¹ www.uniarts.se/english/research-and-development-work/research-projects/sound-of-circus/

⁹² www.uniarts.se/english/research-and-development-work/research-projects/hidden-circus/

⁹³ www.cirkor.se

⁹⁴ www.dynamoworkspace.dk/?lang=en

⁹⁵ www.sirkusinfo.fi/en

In 2009, Irena Purske was a visiting professor of circus and conducted her project *Endless Rope*. In 2011, Daniel Gulko was a visiting professor of circus and researched circus dramaturgical methods with the BA class of 2012 in the ensemble work *Under the Bridge*.

In 2012, DOCH held the first international conference on artistic research in a circus: *CARD–Circus Artistic Research Development* (Damkjaer and Skjönberg 2012). In 2014, the Stockholm Academy of Dramatic Arts, the School of Dance and Circus, and the University College of Opera merged into a single organization.

In 2014, John-Paul Zaccarini became an affiliated professor of circus and, from 2016 to 2020, head of the first Master's program in Contemporary Circus Arts at SKH. During this period, he conducted a series of artistic research projects, notably *The Melancholy of Lost Movements*⁹⁶ and *The Socio-Political Dimension of Circus*.⁹⁷ In 2015, Zaccarini curated the *International Conference CARD 2: Circus on the Edge*.

In 2016, SKH became the first Swedish school of higher education in the arts to be authorized to issue doctoral degrees. In 2016, Jonathan Priest began his doctoral thesis, *A transposition of the Circus trick into fields of value Knotcircus*, exploring how circus arts “speak” and may relate to a “circus thinking”.⁹⁸ Priest defended his thesis as a doctoral candidate in choreography specializing in circus at DOCH in 2019.

From 2019 to 2023, I am a doctoral candidate in the subject area Performative and Media-Based Practices with Specialisation in Choreography at SKH. In 2022, in the same program, Erik Åberg became a doctoral candidate with his project *Object Ideation*. In 2023, Christina Koch⁹⁹ was appointed Professor of Circus and the new head of the Master's program in contemporary circus arts at SKH.

Between 2004 and today, only a few circus artistic researchers, other than the ones mentioned above, have conducted artistic research within circus at SKH, notably Camilla Damkjaer and Thierry Maussier¹⁰⁰ with their project *Pedagogies of Hand-Balancing*¹⁰¹ and Jan Rosen's¹⁰² artistic research project *Acrobatics and Choreography of the Teeterboard*.¹⁰³

Artistic Research in Circus Abroad

During this time in Belgium, between 2013 and 2017, circus research projects were also initiated within the academic field of artistic research. Bauke Lievens conducted the artistic research project *Between Being and Imagining: Towards a methodology for artistic research* at the School of Arts KASK/Conservatorium (Ghent, BE). In this project, Bauke Lievens researched a part of contemporary European circus creation from the position of dramaturg, critic, circus-maker, and spectator. From 2018 to the present day, at KASK, *The Circus Dialogues* and *The Circus Dialogues (continued)* are artistic research projects that investigate experimental encounters and exchanges between circus practice and theory, are led and conducted by Bauke Lievens, Francesca Hyde, Quintijn Ketels, Sebastian Kann, Vincent Focquet, together with multiple co-researchers.¹⁰⁴

⁹⁶ www.uniarts.se/english/research-and-development-work/development-work/the-melancholy-of-lost-movements

⁹⁷ www.uniarts.se/english/research-and-development-work/development-work/the-socio-political-dimension-of-circus/

⁹⁸ www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1282354/FULLTEXT02

⁹⁹ www.uniarts.se/english/people/co-workers/christina-koch

¹⁰⁰ www.uniarts.se/english/people/co-workers/thierry-maussier

¹⁰¹ www.uniarts.se/english/research-and-development-work/development-work/pedagogies-of-hand-balancing

¹⁰² www.uniarts.se/folk/medarbetare/jan-rosen

¹⁰³ www.uniarts.se/english/research-and-development-work/research-projects/acrobatics-of-the-teeterboard

¹⁰⁴ www.circusdialogue.com/circus-dialogues

During the same period in Germany and Belgium, Dr. Franziska Trapp hosted a project entitled Circus | Studies. Circus | Studies is an interdisciplinary and international research initiated in 2015 at the Universität Münster (DE). It spent two years at the Freie Universität Berlin (DE | 2022-2023) and was relocated to the Université Libre de Bruxelles (BE) in November 2023. The studies of Dr. Trapp situate and investigate circus knowledge and potential as an interstitial art form.¹⁰⁵

These are prolific years for establishing circus arts within the academic field of artistic research in Sweden and abroad. While these years mark the arrival of contemporary circus in the academic field of artistic research, it is essential to acknowledge that artistic research has been central to circus arts outside of academia throughout history.

Artistic Research in Circus Within and Beyond Academia in Sweden and Parts of Europe

In 2008, Tilde Björfors created and led Cirkör LAB Center for Circus Research and Interdisciplinary Research (Björfors and Lind 2009). From 2014 to 2019, Olle Strandberg Colling¹⁰⁶ and Fanny Senocq¹⁰⁷ became artistic leaders of the Cirkör LAB, renamed Laboratory for Artistic Brilliance. Even though Cirkör LAB does not explicitly use the term artistic research in the remaining marketing information online, the initial idea, according to Tilde Björfors, was to enable artistic research to circulate between academia and the professional field and for circus arts to be activated within interdisciplinary research contexts.

From 2008, mime artist and performing arts director Åsa Johannisson¹⁰⁸ conducted a series of circus artistic research projects through her company Circus Glass Royale. With the artistic research projects *Beyond & Within* (2008 to 2010) and *Circus Phoenix* (2013 to 2016), Johannisson explores the fusion between circus arts and glass art. The artistic research projects are in collaboration with diverse Swedish municipalities, circus organizations, and higher education programs.¹⁰⁹

In 2017, Olle Strandberg Colling and Sara de Vylder, through their company Sarolanta & De Vylder,¹¹⁰ undertook an ongoing project entitled *The Sphere*.¹¹¹ *The Sphere* is a research-creation project exploring and developing new ecologies of funding for the performing arts led by main researchers Olle Strandberg Colling, Sara de Vylder, Erik Bordeleau, and multiple collaborators. In 2018, the multi-layered project was partly funded by Kulturrådet¹¹² for the creation of circus performances using Blockchain as a method, and in 2018-2019 by Kulturbryggan¹¹³ to develop *The Sphere 1.2* into a tangible “software/Digital infrastructure/set of tools”. In 2020, the project received a *Creative Europe Grant*, which expanded the project’s capacity to collaborate with circus artists, coders, cultural workers, and circus partners across Europe and develop multiple new connected projects.

¹⁰⁵ www.circusstudies.com

¹⁰⁶ www.ollestrandberg.se

¹⁰⁷ www.fannysenocq.com

¹⁰⁸ www.uniarts.se/folk/medarbetare/asa-johannisson

¹⁰⁹ www.circusglassroyale.se/en/research-innovation

¹¹⁰ www.salorantadevylder.com

¹¹¹ www.thesphere.as

¹¹² www.kulturradet.se

¹¹³ www.konstnarsnamnden.se/stipendier-och-bidrag/kulturbryggan

Independent artists such as Klara Mossberg¹¹⁴ also conduct artistic research outside academia. Her artistic project *Correlational Space Wire* (2021-2025), funded by Kulturbryggan, is an explorative interdisciplinary project combining tight wire and architecture. Through her artistic research project, Klara is developing a new movement technique on the tight wire, which challenges our usual relation to balance and gravity while seeking alternative ways of existing within our troposphere.

An initiative that has supported experimental artistic practices in Sweden since 2018 is Cirkus Syd. Cirkus Syd is a networking platform for international research, development, and innovation in circus arts based in Lund, Sweden. We can read on their website: “We are excited by innovation, entrepreneurship, DIY, DIT, and artistic research, and we champion culture as an agent for democratic participation.”¹¹⁵

Outside Sweden, the grassroots initiative of Roberto Magro and Circ Bover, the International Circus Centre for Artistic Research ICCAR, was founded in 2021 as a place to reflect on and practice circus creation and dramaturgy in Mallorca. Roberto Magro has been active as a guest artistic teacher at DOCH and SKH since 2011.

These few examples of artistic research initiatives in the professional field of contemporary circus arts in Sweden (and beyond) demonstrate that artistic research exists outside academia. Still, the difference in culture between artistic research and market-based research and development is substantial. The lack of resources to finance and present experimental circus works makes it hard to engage in artistic research outside academic settings.

While surveying the scope of artistic research through circus arts within and beyond academia in Sweden and parts of Europe, it was evident that a more comprehensive survey is needed. The exercise also underscores the intertwining of artistic research within academia and market-driven research and development. Notably, the involvement of circus artists in educational programs at institutions such as DOCH and SKH blurs the lines between these realms, pointing at a liminal space of circus artistic research practices emerging at the threshold of these realms.

Independent artistic researchers such as Jay Gilligan,¹¹⁶ Daniel Gulko, P. Nalle Laanela,¹¹⁷ Benjamin Richter,¹¹⁸ Olle Strandberg Colling,¹¹⁹ and more, engage in extensive and profound artistic research processes, which significantly inform their professional artworks and pedagogical practices. However, as they do not expose their artistic research within the field of artistic research or publish text-based reflection in the academic field, their artistic research is not explicitly acknowledged. These artists navigate multiple spheres concurrently, straddling various funding systems, production cultures, and dissemination platforms. It is imperative to further investigate the differences, affinities, and complementarities among these distinct circus economies, not with the intention of division, but given that artistic research is a space of experimentation where practices can inform and transform the art forms and societal matters in ways that are different or not necessarily possible in the market-driven circus realms, these liminal hybrid zones of artistic research between academia and market base production are essential to evolving the art form. By

¹¹⁴ www.klaramossberg.com

¹¹⁵ www.cirkussyd.com

¹¹⁶ www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jay_Gilligan

¹¹⁷ www.laanela.se/nalle-clown/nalle-clown1

¹¹⁸ www.benjaminrichter.net

¹¹⁹ www.ollestrandberg.se

fostering greater support and recognition for artists operating at the margins, we can elevate their status and contributions, potentially establishing distinct heterogeneous funded zones of practices within circus arts. This would facilitate the development and circulation of circus practices as artistic research within and beyond academia.

Circus Research – Research About Circus

In the last decade, there has been a growing circus research in academia. Reflecting and supporting this growth is the International Conference *Circus and its Others* (CaiO), a conference which grew out of the Montréal Working Group on Circus Research led by L. Patrick Leroux (Concordia University). The co-directors of CaiO are Charles R. Batson (Union College) and Karen Fricker (Brock University), co-directed the project's first international conference (Montréal, 2016) with Leroux.¹²⁰ CaiO is an international, cross-disciplinary research initiative that explores how contemporary circus artists and companies relate to the concept of difference in their practices.¹²¹ The founding members initially proposed to collectively explore questions: “to what extent and in what ways is circus always already different, and about difference? How does the mainstreaming of circus in our era affect its status as a haven for the different, the outsider? What is happening to the circus’s historic status as a site for the celebration and exploitation of differences, from stagings of exceptional performing bodies to the display of “freakery”, in the context of the increased mainstream popularity of the genre? In what ways are contemporary circus artists and companies embracing and exploiting the (or not) differences in their practice?”¹²² CaiO’s ever-blossoming inquiry along the way has started to feel like a movement.¹²³

Readers eager to engage with other scholarly research in and about circus arts can consult the Circus Artistic Research Platform (CARP).¹²⁴ CARP is a collaborative project between circus arts resource centers, circus networks, and researchers around the world.

Pedagogical Research

My research projects are grounded and inspired by my pedagogical inquiry and aspirations. My thirty years’ commitment to a pedagogical practice is reflected and supported by the work of educational organizations such as FEDEC, an international network for professional circus education.¹²⁵ FEDEC is an international network for professional circus education with roughly eighty-five members (as of March 2024). Since 1998, the main aims of the organization have been to support the development and evolution of training, teaching, and creation in the field of circus arts. The schools, working groups, and projects that are part of FEDEC contribute to developing pedagogical resources available through the FEDEC website, which is mainly dedicated to developing good teaching and learning practices.

At DOCH and SKH, pedagogical research was carried out notably in 2011 by Camilla Damkjaer and me, with a project that asked: “Which pedagogical methods can we develop to prepare the students for the methods of artistic exploration and research, specifically in Circus?” We shared the research findings “Learning the method of teaching the methods of artistic research” at the *Colloquium on Artistic Research in Performing Arts* in Finland (Damkjaer and Robitaille, 2011).

¹²⁰ www.cliquezcirque.com/artistes/montreal-working-group-on-circus-research/

¹²¹ www.circusanditsothers.org/cfp-english

¹²² www.performancematters-thejournal.com/index.php/pm/issue/view/7/22

¹²³ www.circusanditsothers.org/cfp-english

¹²⁴ www.circusartsresearchplatform.com/

¹²⁵ www.fedec.eu/en/resources/?label=¤t_page=2&nb_items_per_page=12

Pedagogical research which addresses the art of teaching was further conducted in 2015 by Camilla Damkjaer and Thierry Maussier¹²⁶ with their artistic research project *Pedagogies of Hand-Balancing*,¹²⁷ which aimed to enhance the understanding of hand-balancing as a physical art form in order to develop new pedagogical methods for teaching balancing. Camilla Damkjaer, in 2016, published the book *Homemade Academic Circus: Idiosyncratically Embodied Explorations into Artistic Research and Circus Performance*, in which she addresses “knowledge production from the perspective of an academic researcher attempting to learn to do circus, discussing the impact on the researcher’s understanding of knowledge and thinking” (Damkjaer 2016).

Tilde Björfors’ artistic research projects at DOCH led to several collaborations and interdisciplinary circus research projects with, among others, the Stockholm School of Economics, where she, together with Emma Stenström and Kajsa Balkfors, developed methods for *Circus Transfer*,¹²⁸ transferring circus knowledge to other disciplines and areas of activity such as pedagogy, dramaturgy, neuroscience, leadership, and cross-border collaborations. The methods of *Circus Transfer* were further developed in the *Teeter Trust* project funded by Vinnova in 2021.¹²⁹

In 2024, Alisan Mac Neal Funk defended her dissertation entitled *A Theory of Applied Circus Creativity* at McGill University’s Department of Integrated Studies in Education. In her doctoral research, she conducted a constructivist grounded theory inquiry into the relationship between curricular experiences and the apprenticeship and application of creativity by interviewing twelve professional circus artists who had completed DOCH’s BA in circus between the years 2008 and 2018.¹³⁰ Funk has been the Head of the Bachelor Programme in Circus at SKH since 2019 and Head of the Circus Subject since 2023.

A Multiplicity of Influences; Fluences, and Flux

In contemporary circus internationally, the works of three leading artists have significantly influenced my approach to circus arts. Not only have they been pioneers in establishing circus as an art form, but they are consistently contributing to novelty approaches grounded in profound artistic research approaches to circus. Johann Le Guillerm of Cirque Ici has developed an interdisciplinary approach to circus arts by visiting visual arts, pataphysics, ecological alternatives, engineering, and art in situ.¹³¹ I have been strongly influenced by encountering his work through the performance *Secret*, his *Project-Manifesto Attraction*, and engaging in conversations with him and his team in 2012. Phia Ménard from Cie Non Nova¹³² has been researching and performing the meeting between the elements of air, ice, water, and vapor, exploring the limits of control and surrender. She explored the notion of unpredictability in real-time. Her work, which I encountered with *Vortex*,¹³³ *L’après midi d’un Foehn*,¹³⁴ and engaging conversation with her in Copenhagen in 2013, has significantly impacted how I think about circus arts.

¹²⁶ www.uniarts.se/english/people/co-workers/thierry-maussier

¹²⁷ www.uniarts.se/english/research-and-development-work/development-work/pedagogies-of-hand-balancing

¹²⁸ www.cirkor.se/en/circus-research

¹²⁹ www.vinnova.se/en/p/teeter-trust

¹³⁰ www.mcgill.ca/education/channels/event/alisan-funk-oral-defence-dise-355597

¹³¹ www.johannleguillerm.com/en

¹³² www.cienonnova.com/en/phiamenard

¹³³ www.cienonnova.com/en/portfolio/vortex-en

¹³⁴ www.cienonnova.com/en/portfolio/lapres-midi-dun-foehn-version-1-2

I encountered the work of Chloé Moglia / Rhizome¹³⁵ with her *Opus Corpus*¹³⁶ in 2012, at the festival Elles en rient encore at Le Prato in Lille, France.¹³⁷ I consider Moglia to be a pioneer of a *slow movement* in circus arts. The development and articulation of her work on suspension as an expanded approach to the trapeze disciplines exemplifies how artistic research can support the liberation, deepening, and singularity of a circus gesture as a philosophical movement.

The Contemporary Circus Practitioners' Voices

Recent publications in contemporary circus aim to increase attention to the voices of contemporary circus practitioners working in the field. A few examples are: *An academic graphic Novel* (Trapp 2017), *Is There a Way out of Here?* (Lievens and Vantournhout 2017), *Thinking through Circus* (Lievens et al. 2017), *Contemporary Circus* (Kavers et al. 2020), *Notes on Creation, Perspectives from Contemporary Circus* (Pinchbeck and Mee 2022). Throughout the years, I was honored to be invited to contribute my voice in several interviews¹³⁸ and numerous publications (Robitaille 2022a,b,c,d, 2023).

Acknowledging the diversity of artistic research projects, initiatives, and voices within the field of circus arts is crucial. Advocating for the recognition of artistic research as a valuable form of circus practice and seeking to strengthen the conditions and status of the circus artist-researcher necessitates further comprehensive surveying and articulation. I acknowledge that these tasks exceed the scope of my doctoral project. Instead, my thesis aims to provide a distinctive perspective on the rich plurality of entangled voices and practices shaping the art form. By adding my voice to the conversation, I aspire to contribute to the ongoing dialogue and evolution of circus arts within the field of artistic research, enriching the collective understanding of circus specificities and relevance in today's context.

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¹³⁵ www.rhizome-web.com

¹³⁶ www.rhizome-web.com/spectacle/opus-corpus

¹³⁷ www.leprato.fr

¹³⁸ See, among others:

The Deconstructing Circus series conducted by John Ellingsworth and published by Sideshow Magazine in 2013. www.sideshow-circusmagazine.com/magazine/deconstructions/marie-andree-robitaille-gynoides-project-beta-test-v
 Changing the World and Other Circus-Related Things, Episode 7 in 2019, hosted by Eliana Dunlap from the Circus Action Network
www.podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/ep-7-marie-andree-robitaille/id1443619610?i=1000441742079

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www.circus-dance-festival.de/en/cdfthek/circus-as-practice-of-hope-for-the-future
- Robitaille, M-A. (2022b), "Circus as a practice of hope: the last Human on Earth (is a circus artist). Sensing the world through circus arts" in F. Trapp, *Adventures in Circus Research– Facing a New Decade*, Circus Talk. www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1848778/FULLTEXT01.pdf
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APPENDIX

Chapter “Circus as Practices of Hope”, *Posthumanism in Practice*, C. Daigle and M. Hayler (eds.), Bloomsbury Academic, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc. 2024.

Circus as practices of hope

Marie-Andrée Robitaille

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. Since March 2020, the performing arts sector has been paralysed for more than a year. As of September 2022, we are still experiencing unforeseen effects; thus, our creation, production, and dissemination modes 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 distinctively visible, inviting us to ask: what does it mean to be human today? More specifically, however, the Covid-19 pandemic is forcing circus artists, in particular, to revise how we work and think about circus arts. What does it mean to be a circus artist today? How can circus 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 superheroic 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. It is this perspective that I challenge throughout my project and research; I am asking: is there another, as of yet unidentified virtuosity that meets the challenges of our times? What can be learned about our modes of presence and engagement in the world when vulnerability is recognized and integrated into circus performance rather than aimed at being transcended?

In my doctoral 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 role as a human in the current ecological and societal challenges we are facing. I engage posthumanism as both 'a navigation tool' (Braidotti 2019) and an 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. (Ferrando 2013)

Besides entertaining for pleasure, thrills and delight, circus arts also function as a divertissement, as in, they possess the ability 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. Through poetics, which calls for imagination, creativity, and alternative modes of being, circus arts and circus artists may evoke and support the development of our ability to divert. In adopting a critical posthumanist approach to my circus praxis, I aim to revise the dominating posture of the 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.

The exercises described in this chapter are motivated by the aspiration to explore how my circus practice is transformed when it is influenced by posthumanist ideas. I want to understand, how I can, in practice, challenge the concept of the subject and the object as ontologically separated, which I understand as a dichotomy that leads to both anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism. An overarching entry point to the processes and thoughts conveyed in this chapter is the attempt to shift from anthropocentric circus-making to practices that take significant consideration of the other-than-human forces in circus composition. This approach involves defamiliarization of standardized and normalized modes of composing and performing in order to look for the ways in which 'otherness can prompt, mobilise, and allow for flows of affirmation of values and forces which are not yet sustained by the current conditions' (Braidotti 2013). By doing so, I aim to develop circus practices of hope, practices that affirm the possibility of other possibilities. Otherness, here, infers the remediation of a dominating centralized fixed posture of the circus artist to revive the poetic potential of the circus arts and re-affirm them as 'nomadic' (Braidotti 2011), a gesture of hope for 'future habitable and flourishing worlds' (Haraway 2016). The exercises are anchored in the material world and are interested in the bodies' vulnerable

limits as an important modality as I revise my circus praxis from less dominating postures. This chapter conveys the strategies and thoughts which have emerged from this exploratory process so far.

Circle as methodology²

In my project, I am working on the articulation of a methodology that pertains to the circle as a form and as a motion, metaphorically and literally. Johann Le Guillerm³ defines circus 'as a minority practice for which the circle is its natural architecture' (Quentin 1999). Expanding from this definition, I approach circus as engaging the world in a circular manner; in my research, circus is understood as the act of going around, spiralling, spinning, swinging, twisting, encircling, turning, and returning in and out in cyclical, circular flows. As opposed to a Western-based linear world vision, I aim to share, with that of the Amerindian, a circular world vision.⁴

I propose 'Circle as methodology' which involves the act of 'circumposing'. Circumposing, in this context, is practising circling, and accounting for how the circle is formed, and who and what are included or excluded. Circumposing involves intra-positioning movements such as spacing, pacing, oscillating, and phasing, thus countering the idea of fixed positions; this evolving methodology insists on attention to the peripheral, to the unheard, the hidden, the avoided, the unknown. It recognizes all entities as 'entangled, intra-relating' (Barad 2007) and 'trans-corporeal' (Alaimo 2010), and wants to encourage a 'pluriversal world of many worlds' (Escobar 2018). 'Circle as methodology' 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-circularization (Sioui 1999), I wish to revive a system of value based on a plurality of viewpoints, nondualism, and relational ontology. Here, the circle is conceptualized from 'nomadic ethical considerations' (Braidotti 2011) which echo nomadic circus perspectives that involve a figure 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 a process of change.

From mastering to mattering

When the World Health Organization (WHO)⁵ declared the novel coronavirus a global pandemic in March 2020, I found myself in a studio with no other people. The physical distance recommended by the health authority encouraged me to return to the role of a solo circus performer after a fifteen-year hiatus, during which I worked as a pedagogue, choreographer, and director. Fifteen years ago, I was a dancer acrobat; climbing poles, swinging on ropes, defying gravity, and performing displays of extreme physical ability. However, in that instant, alone in the studio, my circus discipline changed and became what is called in circus arts 'object manipulation'. In this chapter, rather than using



Figure 7.1 Photo series *Safe in the City*, Stockholm, Sweden, March 2020. Credit Einar Kling Odencrants. Courtesy Marie-Andrée Robitaille.

the word ‘object’, I will refer to the objects as ‘bodies’ in an effort to move beyond the object/subject dichotomy.

The bodies I ended up working within the studio were not random, it had been a long time coming, a growing attraction for these ‘things’. The bodies I predominantly worked with were ‘bubbles’ (handcrafted circles made of flexible fibreglass rods bowed into rings and woven into a dodecahedron),⁶ ‘foil’ (pieces of metallic sheets originally manufactured as safety blankets) and mooring fenders (inflatable protective bodies that prevents scratches and other damage to the hull of a boat). Other bodies included: three juggling balls, six inertial sensors, one computer, cables, ropes, rigging gears, one two-metre-long wooden stick, one phone, and a few white disposable coverall protective suits.

Studio Work with Foil 15 April 2020

I play with one piece of foil, focusing on its lightweight quality. My brain is looking for different entries to control the motion. I stand with the foil in a zone where I try not to lead but rather follow where the material is leading me. The will to create effects is predominant. I want to break this compositional reflex and spend more time in ‘the zone’ where I ‘move with’. This deceptively simple exercise appears to be more complicated than I thought. I need to spend time developing the ability to attend to the material, and not to the ideas of how the material should serve. Easy in theory, hard in practice. It will take time and now I must go home to feed the baby.⁷



Figure 7.2 Photo series *STUDIO 16 – COVID-19*, Stockholm, Sweden, June 2020. Credit Einar Kling Odencrants. Courtesy Marie-Andrée Robitaille.

Studio Work with Bubbles 29 June 2020

I am more and more at ease in the studio, I mean ease in the way that I feel brave and accepting to be disoriented; ease at being uneased. Not to lead and not to achieve any pre-decided effects is counter intuitive but with practice, I start to feel that the dynamic has changed. I experience an increased ability to sense what is happening rather than to think about it. It feels as if time goes by slower, like being between time. It is no longer of my body, of objects, or of the space but rather my body, other bodies and space working together. Moving with bubbles and not moving the bubbles is actually not as simple as it sounds. I must engage in a ‘deep corporeal listening’ (Oliveros 2005), increase proprioception and opening of the senses.⁸

Early in the process of working with foil and bubbles, 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. 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. Therefore, ‘object manipulation’ as the appellation of my circus discipline no longer makes sense. Instead of ‘object manipulation’, I propose

a 'body re-orienting' practice that suggests the idea of distributed agency, an 'agency of assemblages' (Bennett 2010).

Dislocating bodies

Summer 2020. In Sweden, we experienced a lull in the virus spread and we were far from the silent deserted streets of the spring's lockdown. The murder of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter⁹ movement brought people together in the streets to protest and raise awareness of police brutality and systemic racism. That summer, the second wave of #metoo denunciations propagated through social media and Greta Thunberg was gathering large crowds to call for stronger actions on climate change, emphasizing that 'we can no longer look away from what our society has been ignoring for so long, whether it is equality, justice, or sustainability'.¹⁰

At the time, I was invited by Gävle Konstcentrum,¹¹ an art centre in Sweden, to explore the potential of a meeting between circus arts and visual arts. A series of pictures and three circus installations were displayed in the exhibition hall, which included non-circus objects that are associated with crisis and human vulnerability. In the next section, I describe the installations with foil and with mooring fenders.

Foil

Foil is a participant in the human ambition to explore and conquer. First developed by NASA in 1964, metalized polyethylene terephthalate (MPET) reflects up to 97 per cent of radiated heat. Sheets of MPET are commonly called space blankets as they are used to protect Earth-made crafts from the harsher environment of space. Manufactured as safety blankets, foil has been used to warm marathon runners who experience a rapid cool-down after the finish line; mountaineers and campers have them in their survival kits; hospitals use them in the chilled environments of operating theatres. Foil is used after natural disasters such as earthquakes and after terrorist attacks. In the European migrant crisis, foil has been life-saving, especially for people who crossed the sea in winter. In Berlin, 2018, the golden refugee space blankets were brandished as flags and became a symbol against the rise of right-wing groups across Germany. A few artists have also been working with foil. From his art installation 'Flag for No Nation', artist James Bridle¹² said:

A single technology – the vacuum-deposition of metal vapour onto a thin film substrate – makes its consecutive and multiple appearances at times of stress. . . . These are moments of hope as well as failure; moments when, properly utilised, technological progress enables us to achieve something which was beyond our capabilities before. And yet: we are still pulling bodies from the water wrapped in material which was meant to send us into space.¹³

My foil installation is a floating piece of foil attached at the four corners by ropes which circulate through pulleys systems attached to four corners in the ceiling of the room.

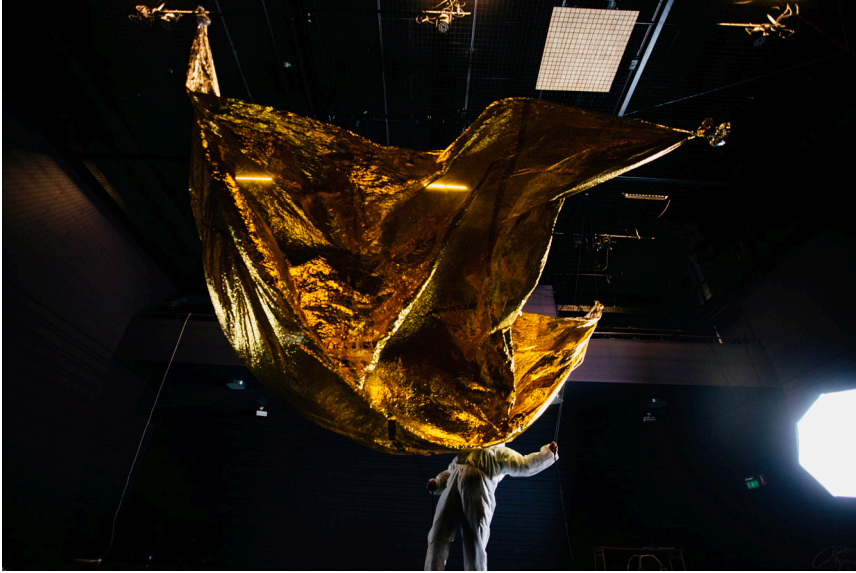


Figure 7.3 Photo series *STUDIO 16 – COVID-19*, Stockholm, Sweden, June 2020. Credit Einar Kling Odencrants. Courtesy Marie-Andrée Robitaille.

Through my fingers, I held the four strings and spent hours engaging in slow, meditative, and sensuous choreography of movements, forms, and sonic textures. Foil, ropes, floor, roof, pulleys, and I became one body, an assemblage in which none of its constitutive parts could be subtracted without changing the nature and potential of that body.

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 behaviours, 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, a phantom in the room, reminding us of its presence.

Mooring fenders

In boating, a mooring fender is a bumper used to absorb a boat or vessel's kinetic energy. If a crash occurs, the mooring fenders prevent damage. As in boating, the circus artist will often use protections to ease the impact of a bad landing after a somersault. In these pandemic times, physical distance appeared as its own invisible protection. The coronavirus not only increased our awareness of the physical distance between people but also the socio-economic disparity between them. The installation with mooring fenders sparked from the combination of these observations.



Figure 7.4 *Circus Meets Visual Arts*, Gävle Konstcentrum, Sweden, September 2020. Credit Marie-Andrée Robitaille. Courtesy Marie-Andrée Robitaille.

The installation consisted of seven white mooring fenders, attached with strings in suspension from the ceiling. The mooring fenders moved as pendulums when pushed or pulled. Under each mooring fender was placed one ultrasonic sensor. An ultrasonic sensor is an electronic device that measures distance by emitting ultrasonic sound waves (such ‘no-contact’ distance measuring is used in automation, robotics, and instrumentation). The visitors were invited to walk through the space and swing the mooring fenders which, in turn, created visual patterns and sonic responses.

One of the key realizations with these installations is that, while the environmental specificities changed between the different places the installation was mounted, the positions of the bodies and the space in-between the bodies did too. While the spatial intervals between the parts of the installation changed, the physical degrees of freedom changed too, impacting how the foil and the mooring fenders moved and how the installation sounded, thus transforming how people experienced the entanglement of bodies forming the installation. This type of realization may seem elementary at first, but when analysing the results from a circus perspective, 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.

Physical and social distance between us has been made more distinctively visible during the pandemic. While the physical distance between bodies became increasingly important, we accepted a decrease in freedom of movement and an increase of distance

between bodies as a way to care for one another; our relation to freedom and control of movement shifted. We might think of this in terms of the Japanese principle of *Ma*, that is, interval, or pause, as it applies to both space and time. The innovative modernist Japanese architect Isozaki Arata wrote:

In Japanese architectural space, *Ma* is expressed in a conception of indefinite space in which, for example, the permeation of light or lines of vision is determined by a layer of flat boards so thin as to be almost transparent. What appears from the space is a flickering of shadows – a momentary shift between the reality and a world of unrealities. *Ma* is an empty moment of waiting for this change. (Rodger 2020)

The space in-between or *Ma* can be understood as a void holding the possibility of possibilities – the void in-between bodies; ‘the void as a lively tension, a desiring orientation toward being/becoming’ (Barad 2012). The importance of the in-betweenness as understood through the making of the installation is not that something may happen in-between bodies; the events happen where the bodies are. Instead, the in-betweenness is necessary because the intervals of time and the distance or the void in-between bodies define who, what, and how one can move, be seen, and be heard.

The installations described earlier are 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, emphasizing the inter-meshed parts of the circus installation as a whole which can ultimately be autonomously experienced without the need of the circus artist as the central mediator. The 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. They 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 possibilities were released through small shifts in the spatial, temporal, and material thinking and the making of these circus installations. Other types of expressions and virtuosities emerged, which decentred the circus artist’s involvement in inviting other-than-artist participants to experience the non-human forces at play.

One afternoon, I passed by the gallery, unannounced. A child was playing relentlessly within and between installations; the bodies’ liveliness exceeded their primary functions and capabilities. The child was kicking, avoiding, listening, watching, sensing, in short *co-constituting* the installations. Another day, I was alone in the gallery, with no other human; the circus sonic installation was standing still, as time stood still. The foil, bubbles, and mooring fenders were in, what appeared to be, a state of inertia. I stood, aware. The foil would suddenly move for no evident reason, reminding me that simply breathing can impact our surroundings. In this quasi-immobility of things, I paid attention to the sonic drone produced by the installation, a reminder of the almost invisible oscillation of the mooring fenders. A reminder that nothing is ever really still.

Fabulating the present

Pictures seem still. The still image is the capture of a moment, a remembrance of the past or a 'present fabulated.' 'Fabulation is fiction that offers us a world clearly and radically discontinuous from the one we know, yet which returns to confront that known world in some cognitive way' (Scholes R. 1975). In my project, I am interested in 'fabulation' as a philosophical concept (Deleuze 1989), a literary genre (Scholes R. 1975), a feminist approach (Harraway 2016), and a circus act. As I have described in the earlier sections of this chapter, my research engages in exercises of dislocating time, space, and bodies while paying attention to the differences these combinations create. Transposing this method to my writing, I wrote a series of poems based on 'Safe in the City,' a collection of pictures with me and the foil in the empty streets of Stockholm, Sweden, just when the spread of the '(novel) coronavirus' was declared as a global pandemic. The following text emerged from 'fabulating' the picture:

'Nathanaëlle Ravelling the Multiverse'

I is human. I is in the Now. There were many of Us in the Then, but I is alone of I in the Now. I is alone aside of Them in which I parts partly. Them wants to morph I. I is attracted to Them. I is not sure I is ready. I have no Us to play and dreams with. I is falling into feelings. I likes to dream of Then and After. But it's risky. I is unshaped and Them can move I when I dreams. Sometimes, I hides in inertia. In Inertia, I can't be sensed by Them. Sometimes I wants to give into Them. Them is circulating through I. Them want I. I resists the movement of Them. I is afraid to

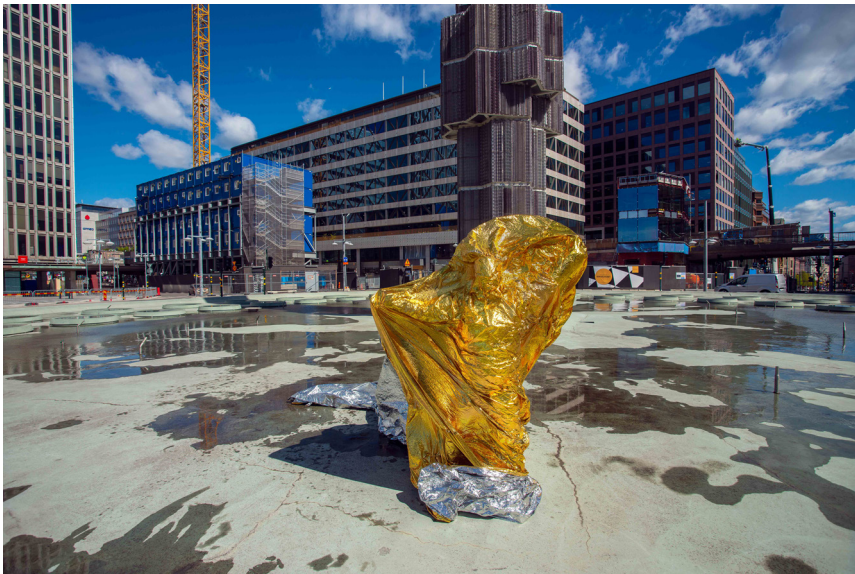


Figure 7.5 Photo series *Safe in the City*, Stockholm, Sweden, March 2020. Credit Einar Kling Odencrants. Courtesy Marie-Andrée Robitaille.

mutate. I is afraid to forget. I is dreaming in the Then. I is fixed in the Now. Them passes I. Them covers I. Them is a land moving. If I moves with Them, Now will be After without Us. Into After, I will be Them.¹⁴

This poem is an example of fabulation as an artistic practice for fostering possibilities. The picture does not only hold a fixed past but also holds exceeding potential and possibilities. As Karen Barad points out, ‘possibilities and potential are not about what might yet be, so much as what is already active, in motion, in this Thick Now’ (Barad and Gandorfer 2021).

With this in mind, I came to think of circus as fabulation. The poetic circus gestures evoke other possibilities while simultaneously demonstrating their feasibilities in real time and in the flesh. Rather than speculating the future (showing what could be possible by maximizing the virtuosity and navigating the risk), the circus artist ‘evoke[s] and invoke[s] latent potentialities, possibilities, and abilities, the artist is a seer, a becomer’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1996). The bare bones of the circus acts are beyond representation and are anchored in the present time. At any given circus moment, there are bodies that commit embodied actions; presence and immediacy are two crucial factors. In circus, ‘rather than speculate on alternative possibilities as a mental exercise, the speculation takes place by repeatedly creating the conditions for alternatives to appear, or not to appear, in and through the practice’ (Arlander 2017). ‘In this sense, a posthumanist circus has a “fabulatory function”, thus detaching from the spectacle’s dynamics to instead give insight into spectrality; into the “Thick Now”’.

Sensing bodies, ‘technopoetics’ and hidden possibilities

Music has traditionally been an important component in circus performance:

Since the creation of the modern circus in England by Philip Astley in 1770, music . . . [has] follow[ed] the action on stage and stir[red] up the audience during the show. Music is used for setting the mood of the audience, indicating the tempo of the acts, highlighting specific tricks, accentuating the suspense of the anticipation, and marking . . . success . . . Overall, music is there to enhance the performance by emulating its dramaturgical development. (Elblaus et al. 2014)

I became increasingly involved in exploring sonic modes of composition to break from circus’ traditionally binary relationship to music. First, based on listening to the sound of the human bodies on the apparatus, came a series of works involving the use of motion capture technologies to explore different relationships between sound and motion. In collaboration with researchers from the sound and music-computing group at the Royal Institute of Technology,¹⁵ we investigated different modes of sonic interaction: accompanying,¹⁶ amplifying¹⁷ and interacting.¹⁸ The work with sound became another precious tool to break with habits that came with years of

micromanaging circus tricks. Suddenly, we, the performers, were listening to what we were doing, and the habits started to fade.

Early in my doctoral project I conducted a series of experiments with Guillaume Karpowicz,¹⁹ a diabolo specialist, and Hara Alonso,²⁰ a sound designer. The diabolist holds two sticks which are joined by a rope. With this apparatus the diabolist throws and catches an object (a body) named 'diabolo'. On each forearm of the diabolist, we place a 'Myo armband', a device which reads the electrical activity of the muscles and the motion of the arm. We explored the coupling of the motion and muscular activity with sound.²¹

One of the interesting revelations of this particular experiment is that one would lose track of who/what was leading who/what. Was it the juggler responding to the sound, or the sound responding to the movement of the juggler? We discovered that who led no longer mattered; the intra-acting parts generated new sequences of movements in a material dialogue. There was no longer separation between subject and objects, but rather a becoming-with in a type of 'intra-space, a space where the human and non-human bodies' experiences are aesthetically reformulated and theoretically challenged in their spatial, temporal, and transversally entangled spheres.²²

In my choreographic studies, over the course of the last decade, the motion capture technologies we deployed were mostly placed on the human body. More recently in the studio, the sensors have been placed on other-than-human bodies, namely bubbles, balls, and sticks. The practice of listening comes as an important step in my attempts to shift away from anthropocentric circus-making. Instead of looking at the bubbles, I would listen to their motions; by relating to other bodies, through other modes of perception, 'the registers and practices of sensing are shifting from an assumed human-centered set of perceiving and decoding practices, to extended entities, technologies, and environments of senses' (Gabrys and Pritchard 2018).

Feedback received from the public exposed to my sonic works with the bubbles was interesting: by placing the sensors on the bubbles, I was giving them agency, or giving a voice to the bubbles. This line of thinking adheres to the posture of the human as the manipulator of the object. However, in my research, bubbles already had agency; by sonifying them, I was not giving the bubbles agency, but rather un-taming them, unleashing their possibilities. While the human intentions, decisions, and cognitive processes remained central, their orientations changed, and hidden possibilities appeared through these intermedial and technopoetic²³ sonic essays.

Composting in *Multiverse*

Multiverse is an experimental circus performance named after Francesca Ferrando's thought experiment: 'The Posthuman Multiverse', from her book *Philosophical Posthumanism* (2019). In the context of my research, *Multiverse* is a live fabulated universe that forms out of the exceeding possibilities of matter(s). *Multiverse* is an accumulation of multiple remnants of re-cycle-able bodies/material from the exercises

described earlier. 'By 'material' I mean matter, energy, and information, not only matter in the narrow sense' (Hayles 2017).

Multiverse is a circus act understood as a *monstration*. *Monstration* is an Old French word that refers to both *monstre* (monster) and *démonstration* (showing). In *Multiverse*, the exercise is to problematize who and what is being shown, and how. This is done by actualizing the art of bear-taming, *montreur d'ours* in French, as an un-taming practice. A bear-tamer was formerly a man who led a bear cross-country. Tamed bears were used in the blood sport of bear baiting and in circus acts. In *Multiverse*, the role of the bear, enacted by other bodies, bubbles, and foils, is reversed with that of the artist. Instead of showing how the bodies obeyed the artist, the artist let herself be impacted by the other bodies; rather than trying to tame the bodies and control the environment the artist engages in dialogical relation with their unleashed possibilities.

The performative approach of *Multiverse* is one that appropriates the act of 'monstering'. Monstering here is understood 'as a tool to generate qualitatively new encounters . . . It challenges normative protocols and existing practices by embodying the unknown' (Armstrong R. et al. 2020).

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.²⁴ 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' (Springgay and Truman 2018).

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 encounters foils, bubbles, and sticks. The walker observes, carrying, orienting, and being re-oriented while moving and walking in circular flows.

Circular
 Flowing
 Integrative
 Honouring Interconnectedness of All
 Balancing Mental
 Spiritual
 Emotional
 Physical Dimensions
 How do I get from here to there?

(Graveline 2010)

The walker holds a two-metre-long sonified walking stick. The walking stick draws parallels with the Indigenous traditions of the Talking Stick. The Talking Stick,



Figure 7.6 *Multiverse*, circus performance/lecture *SLOW CIRCUS*, Alliances and Commonalities Conference on Artistic Research, Stockholm University of the Arts, Sweden, October 2020. Credit: Eduardo Cardozo Hidalgo. Courtesy Marie-Andrée Robitaille.

used in many Indigenous cultures, is used as a communication tool and democratic instrument.²⁵ The stick, sometimes a feather, is passed around a group of people and it gives the opportunity to all members of the group to participate, be heard, and for their words to be accounted for. Similarly, in the context of the performance ‘Multiverse’, the sonified walking stick is a reminder of the ‘*response ability*’ of the circus performer and the importance of listening.

The walker, walking in ‘ruins’ (Tsing 2015; Stengers 2020), is wearing a disposable white protective suit. This was an aesthetic choice to emphasize the human ability to build, construct, deconstruct, extract, conquer, plant, destroy, rebuild, shape, transform and so on. Hence, the white costume of the builders, the painters, the forensics on a crime scene, the scientists in their lab, the explorers, or the astronauts. While alone in the studio, as well as when performing for an audience, I wear the white suit as a ritual inviting me to leave my own self-expression at the door and enter a state of being which allows me to observe how I situate, position, and act in relation to others.

Through the triangulation of these emerging methods: Circumambulation, monsterring, and un-taming, the performance site filled with images of planetary constellations, minerals, elemental-biological-ecological beauty and devastation, life and extinction; a universe folding and unfolding in and out of itself in which I am not the master but instead a responsible part of the whole. ‘Multiverse’ is neither an

achieved or achievable fixed circus act, but rather a ‘material-semiotic experiment’, a mutable live fable that is composting and re-composing.²⁶

Vulnerability as virtuosity

The exercises described in this chapter were motivated by the aspiration to explore how my circus practice is transformed when it is influenced by posthumanist ideas. The common aims of these processes were to challenge the human–non-human dichotomy and to destabilize the idea of human exceptionalism in my circus practices. The intent was to explore the opportunities of, and develop strategies and methods for, a posthumanist circus in practice.

The decrease of speed has been an essential aspect in each of the exercises described in this chapter. In the studio working with foils and bubbles, and in the performance of ‘Multiverse’, I moved at an insistent slow pace. To create the attuning conditions for listening and slowing down I have developed and used pacing, spacing, oscillating, and phasing techniques. With the emerging methods of circumambulation, monsterring, un-taming, sensing, and dislocating, and the evolving ‘Circle as Methodology’, I investigated the potential of shifting spatial and temporal dynamics for revising my circus practices from less dominating postures. These tactics helped me defamiliarize from the usual, normative and standardized modes of production and creation of my circus practices; opening up the field of possibilities for alternative reality forming.

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. (Stengers 2018)

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



Figure 7.7 Photo series *STUDIO 16 – COVID-19*, Stockholm, Sweden, June 2020. Credit Einar Kling Odencrants. Courtesy Marie-Andrée Robitaille.

consumed rather than a poetic, diverting, provoking, and useful tool. In this sense the exercise of approaching circus from posthumanist and new materialist perspectives enabled me to re-engage circus gestures as a poetic act of resistance.

To anchor my relations with the other-than-human bodies in the material world helped me to consider the body's sensibilities, boundaries, limits, and vulnerabilities. Through all the processes, vulnerability appeared as an important concept. By letting my body and other bodies re-orient, my circus mastery transformed from an ability to dominate over the environment into a virtuosic poetics of care and vulner-able/affect-able (Daigle 2018) relations to the environment. As other types of virtuosities manifested I, as a circus performer, embarked on a transition from spectacularity to spectrality.

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 the circus can be a constructive diversion to focus on 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 can better appreciate humans' delicate relationships with all living and non-living beings. And in engaging circus, a seemingly invulnerable art, as the embodiment of a humble posthumanist thinking, there is the attempt to nurture our ability to respond sensitively to the challenges of our time as well as to revive poetics as a force for changing the world. It is a circus practice of hope.

Notes

- 1 In his master thesis, Vincent Focquet reflects on the concept of a 'humble circus'. He analyses tactics for implementing 'careful dramaturgy' and developing a discourse grounded in politics of care (Focquet 2019).
- 2 The title 'Circle as methodology' is inspired by Jean Fyre Graveline's article 'Circle as methodology: Enacting an Aboriginal paradigm' a poetic narrative, a Trickster tale and a descriptive of an Aboriginal method in use. (Graveline 2000).
- 3 <http://www.johannleguillerm.com/en/>
- 4 I am aware and respectful of the circle as a figure and practice present in many cultures. In this project, while I am not engaging in the study of the circle's numerous symbolic traditions and meanings, I am nevertheless honouring the traditions of Circles that some of the First Nations' peoples use and have used for millennia. I am a non-native, born in the immediate periphery of Wendake, home of the Huron-Wendat nation located in Québec, Canada, and I recognize that I am deeply indebted to those who have carried the Indigenous Circles traditions into our times. For more about Circle traditions see *Huron-Wendat: The Heritage of the Circle* (Sioui 1999).
- 5 <https://www.who.int>
- 6 The Bubbles are designed by Rachel Wingfield – <http://loop.ph/rachel-wingfield/>
- 7 Artist personal archives, studio diary, April 2020.
- 8 Artist personal archives, studio diary, April 2020.
- 9 <https://blacklivesmatter.com>

- 10 Greta Thunberg: Climate change 'as urgent' as coronavirus, by Justin Rowlett, 20 June 2020 www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-53100800
- 11 www.gavlekonstcentrum.se/19-09-20-cirkusperspektiv/
- 12 <https://jamesbridle.com>
- 13 <http://booktwo.org/notebook/a-flag-for-no-nations/>
- 14 Written by the author as part of the artist's doctoral project 'Circus as Practices of Hope'.
- 15 www.kth.se/hct/mid/research/smc/sound-and-music-computing-1.780604
- 16 Gynöides Project_Bêta Test V_Contortion-distortion – <https://vimeo.com/89224891>
- 17 Gynöides project_Circus female Intelligentsia Acoustic Acrobatics <https://vimeo.com/240357172>
- 18 Gynöides project_EggSystem_BêtaTestVIII_2015 <https://vimeo.com/305464479>
Gynöides Project_Bêta Test VI_CyborgAcrobat <https://vimeo.com/88395101>
Gynöides project_Sonified Wheel <https://vimeo.com/87856666>
- 19 <https://www.diabolofoocus.com/service-page/diabolo-act-guillaume-karpowicz>
- 20 <https://haraalonso.com>
- 21 <https://vimeo.com/233954455>
- 22 The term and description for 'intra-space' is borrowed from the research *INTRA-SPACE*, Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna, 2017. www.icinema.unsw.edu.au/projects/intra-space/
- 23 I propose the term 'technopoetics' in my project, after the philosophic use of the term 'technoscience' as introduced by Gaston Bachelard (Bachelard 1953), to specify my relation to technology in these processes which advocate for the power of poetics for changing the world.
- 24 www.walkinglab.org
- 25 In relation to the traditions of the talking sticks, it is important to note that each First Nation is unique in their culture, traditions and history, so each nation have their own protocols.
- 26 The artist is inspired by Donna Haraway's 'The Camille Stories; Children of Compost' (Haraway 2016).

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My doctoral artistic research project, *Circus as Practices of Hope: A Philosophy of Circus* responds to the growing complexities emerging from the convergence of the fourth industrial revolution, the sixth mass extinction, and the eco-socio-political turmoil of our time. What does it mean to be human today? What does it mean to be a circus artist today? How is circus relevant in today's context?

Core to this inquiry is the assertion that although circus arts hold the potential to foster significant knowledge, they simultaneously perpetuate outdated worldviews that restrict their transgressive potential. With this research, I investigate alternatives to regressive models of thoughts and modes of composition, aiming to identify and articulate circus' inherent epistemic, ontological, and ethical specificities and their relevance for navigating and steering the current planetary paradigm shift.

I conducted my research through embodied practices as a circus artist, as a pedagogue, and from the perspective of a human on Earth. My inquiry occurred through *Multiverse*, an iterative series of compositional performative experiments and discursive activities. I engaged critical posthumanism and neo-materialist philosophies to challenge and evolve my relation to risk, mastery, and virtuosity.

The project conceptualizes circus arts as nomadic and fabulatory practices, culminating in a series of artistic, choreographic, and conceptual tools and methods that articulate circus arts within and beyond their disciplinary boundaries. The project advances a philosophy of circus that highlights circus-specific kinetic, aesthetic, and embodied relevancies in today's context, situating circus arts as hopeful practices for the future.

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