

Bauke LIEVENS and Sebastian KANN

## Open Letters to the Circus

This document comprises three letters by Bauke Lievens and a later conversation she had with Sebastian Kann. This conversation can be read before or after the three letters.

*Editor's note*

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE: Bauke Lievens (Belgium, 1985) works as a dramaturg, maker, teacher and artistic researcher in various performing arts disciplines. Lievens studied Theater Studies at the UGent and Philosophy of Contemporary Art at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (Spain).

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### A short conversation between Bauke Lievens & Sebastian Kann

**Bauke:** Do you remember how during *The Circus Dialogues* (2018-20), we jokingly called our respective dialogical strategies ‘confrontation vs shelter’? I see it reflected in our *Open Letters*, how I am taking on a very critical perspective, while your letter has a much more conciliatory tone.

**Seb:** Reading back my own letter, my hidden agenda is so evident to me between the lines. On the surface, my claim is on behalf of all circus artists. But my personal stake was marking out and defending a space for a specific kind of circus practice – I guess a critical one, or one that draws connections between circus practice and the wider (political) world ‘outside’ of circus. My strategy was to try to defuse the defensiveness that these kinds of practices seem to trigger. But behind the scenes, my fantasies about what (at least part) of the circus world could have been, were similar to yours: a milieu in which critical discourses like those we read in your two letters are given the space to grow.

**Bauke:** Your letter critiques the previous two *Open Letters* for erasing their own embeddedness within the field they critique and speaking with a false objective voice. I still really agree with this critique. Even if the tone I chose for my letters was partly a performative gesture to try to set things in motion, now I can’t imagine writing from such an allegedly know-it-all-position. I spoke with so little awareness of my own positionality and of what privileges are at play that allowed me to speak with that particular voice.

**Seb:** At the same time, the content is beautiful. The tone is grandiose, but the content is fertile and energetic. When I say ‘content’ I mean the figures that the letters propose – the apparatus, the superhuman circus artist – as well as the multiple scenes – modernity, romanticism, the touring life,

and so forth. They have a real élan for circus practice, I think, still today. They are like friendly ghosts which hang around circus spaces—potentials or doorways.

**Bauke:** How do you look back on the thoughts and ideas that emerge in your *Open Letter*?

**Seb:** There are quite a few things I would never say now. For example, in my letter I take the position that we are in fact dominated by our own desires — by ‘personal taste’ — and that we need to free ourselves from the pressure we put on ourselves to make ‘good’ performance, even according to ourselves. Now I’m not so sure. There’s something zen in this separation from desire, but it also smells like depression. If good performance doesn’t hang like a delicious carrot from the long stick of practice — if we have no particular attachment to ‘product’ — then are we doing anything more radical than hanging out with friends and building careers? The figures you propose come from an investment in performance. For you, the meaning of performances is important—the stakes are high. I kind of miss this attachment to the moment of public meaning-making.

**Bauke:** Yes, sometimes it feels like practice and process seem to have taken over the performing arts. And I get it — thinking about meaning is somehow always disciplining bodies into convention. Also, my focus as a dramaturg involved in creative processes has shifted a bit: taking care of how the workspace and relations are organized in terms of power and positionality takes up much more space now — which is definitely also a necessary evolution.

**Seb:** During the last iteration of the project, *The Circus Dialogues (continued)*, co-researcher Fran Hyde wrote a fourth open letter (‘Between Us’). It was never published but is available on the new website you and I worked on.<sup>1</sup> In that letter, Tank, a twenty-litre plastic water container, speaks about object-oriented ontologies and vital-materialist notions of space and practice. Now that the ten-year-long project of *The Circus Dialogues* has come to an end, I wonder: what do you think an imaginary fifth open letter would be about?

**Bauke:** Maybe a fifth open letter could speak about pleasure? About the pleasure of committing to a certain (circus) practice and about devotion. About centering pleasure in performance as a way to oppose neoliberal labor conditions. It’s also interesting to think about the turn towards party, sex(iness) and rave in the performing scene. This turn clearly centers on pleasure. There’s a claim to community at work there, but I also see new alienations being produced in those spaces — in terms of hyper individualism for example. I think approaches which center pleasure have a common problem: they center on a personal experience that’s neither debatable nor transmittable. But it fascinates me — I guess in a similar way that circus did: it performs a spectacle of freedom and makes us dream.

1. <[www.thecircusdialogues.com](http://www.thecircusdialogues.com)>.

**Seb:** And pleasure today is also totally wrapped up in consumerism, right?

**Bauke:** Yes, exactly. It's very much a double bind. Do you think the 'confrontation vs shelter'-binary that we thought existed between our respective strategies for mobilizing circus (thinking) still holds? I mean, if I would write a fifth open letter, I would almost want to write it like a spell – a secular prayer to murmur together, because in that collective murmur we could maybe find shelter and hopefully bring something into being that didn't exist before.

**Seb:** There's definitely a continuum between the notion of shelter and all of the prefigurative approaches which seem to be so important at the moment. Doing utopia right now; 'being the change you want to see in the world', as the slogan goes; creating a space which is distinct from the world 'out there', a space which functions both as a prophecy and a protective circle. This approach was at the core of *The Circus Dialogues (continued)*, and I see it in the turn towards party and rave you mention. Prefigurative projects are supposedly not about a represented world, but rather about what you do and experience directly; more about the process than the 'product'. I think when we were digging into shelter versus confrontation, shelter was on the side of process, and confrontation on the side of product. Indeed, now this binary seems unsatisfactory. What kinds of confrontation, and what for? Shelter from what? I'm curious about a process in which what holds us is not only a desire for a collective experience, but a common task, a shared practice of making and re-making meaning. A process of deconstructing and assembling signs and representations, where the community which emerges in the process is not just whatever community, but specifically a community stitched together by an engagement with something profound: our capacity to generate meaning-experiences. To me, it always feels magical to experience meaning emerging, shifting, and transforming during the creative process, to witness new links being forged, new associations: it's vertiginous, kaleidoscopic.

**Bauke:** Absolutely, and I still hold dear what for me is one of the most beautiful ambitions of dramaturgy: to share that emergence with an audience, to invite witnesses into the magical process of emergence of meaning in the role of spectators.

## First Open Letter to the Circus: The need to redefine

(Bauke Lievens, 2015)

Dear circus artists,

This is a letter. Or rather, the first in a series of letters to be published through the next two years. Together they will attempt to address what I see as an urgent need of the contemporary circus landscape in which we work: that is, the need to redefine what we do. To talk about *how* we do it. To search for answers to the question of *why* we do it. And, last but not least, to develop complex and diverse tools that help us to do it.

The impulse to write these letters has arisen from the lack of surprising, multi-layered and artistically innovative performances that I experience as a spectator, but also from the lack of common language, of shared footholds or references, that I experience for myself and see in others when I work on a performance as a dramaturg.

Of course the two are connected, because the key thing missing from our landscape is what I want these letters to open: a wide dialogue, encompassing many voices and strong points of view, that can address our diverse practice in all its conflicting forms of expression. Beginning this conversation, which really is a conversation about circus' present state and future possibilities, will mean beginning with circus' past.

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For most of its history the circus was occupied almost entirely with skill and technique, and thus with form. This does not mean that it had no content: in traditional circus, the mastering of physically demanding, dangerous techniques and the taming of wild animals can be seen as expressions of a belief in the supremacy of humankind over nature and over natural forces such as gravity. This heavy focus on skill expressed, and even helped to propagate, a contemporary image of man that was inspired by a belief in the 'big stories' of the time — cultural narratives like the Idea of Progress, which emerged from the Enlightenment and became so influential in the modern era that spanned the 19th and beginnings of the 20th century. Traditional circus was also born during the Industrial Revolution, at a time of rapid urbanisation and in the midst of a sudden boom in entertainment that sought to please the quickly growing working class audience. In this context, circus performers were 'first and foremost skilled workers and professionals who sold their physical abilities to the circus director, agent or promoter (Purovaara, 2012). Shaped in this way by commerce and culture, the forms of the traditional circus were neither innocent nor meaningless. They functioned as a frame, reinforcing a particular way of seeing and experiencing the world.

Fast forward to the 1970s, France. A group of young theatre directors is looking for more accessible and popular forms of making theatre, faithful as they are to their May 1968 beliefs that art should be brought to the people. In their quest, they happen upon the circus with its immediate accessibility, physical language, and use of public and popular spaces — the street and the tent. Initially, they insert techniques from the circus into their theatre performances, but their work soon influences the circus itself. Circus education, which was traditionally passed on from father/mother to son/daughter, is taken out of the family context and by 1985 is ready to be institutionalised in the first government funded higher education circus school, the Centre National des Arts du Cirque (CNAC) in Châlons-en-Champagne. In this prestigious school, circus techniques are combined with the narratives of (mainly) French theatre and dance of the time. Nouveau cirque is born, and the vision of man expressed by traditional circus is *seemingly* exchanged for something else: the dramatic personae and the linear story. At the root of nouveau cirque, then, lies the idea that form and content are two separate entities, which can somehow be divided without loss on either side: traditional circus skills (form) are isolated in order to combine them with the narratives of the theatre of the 1980s (content). Common to all art forms, however, is the interweaving of form (how?), content (what?), and context (why?). The three are intimately linked and inseparable. In other words: the choice of the form and/or medium always expresses a certain vision or content, which, in turn, is always linked to the context in which an artist makes work and the question of why they make work. Or as Flemish dramaturg Marianne Van Kerkhoven (2013) has put it: ‘Have we now worked out that form and content are inseparable, and that every revision or reworking of whatever kind also touches on both, and influences both?’.

This three-way relationship is not simple, however, and at the same time as nouveau cirque was emerging, theatre and the performing arts were adapting to wider shifts in the fundamental nature of representation in art. For a very long time, art (painting, sculpture, theatre) threw its energy into creating ever more detailed and convincing imitations of reality. Along the way it developed many imitative techniques (think for example of the invention of perspective in painting). Life itself was the original, and art was the imitation of the original. With the invention of photography, however, in 1839, art suddenly lost its imitating function. Photography could simply ‘frame’ reality, and the distinction between the original and the copy became blurred. Around the same time, visual art embarked on a quest for abstraction, as the different components of painting and sculpture were separated into their independent parts: colour, material, shape, concept.

Theatre, though, retained its imitating function, because in the theatre people could see moving action, something that photography was unable to capture. About 50 years later, around 1890, cinema was born, and at last theatre was freed of its function to imitate and re-present moving action. Different avant-garde theatre directors (like Artaud, Meyerhold, Appia, Craig, Kantor) started experimenting with theatre, and, mirroring the developments that had taken place in the visual arts, the different components of

theatre — text, movement, voice, light, costume, storyline — gradually became more independent. In the 1980s, with the boom in new communication technologies, this tendency was sped up, leading to a theatre beyond representation which the German theatre scholar Hans-Thies Lehman called post-dramatic theatre. In Lehman's vision (1999), this theatre no longer re-presented what was not there (life outside the black box), but presented what *was* there with a heightened intensity.

The danger that exists in circus, and the high level of reality embodied in its physical actions, naturally creates this heightened intensity, and the form itself can never be a good match for the kinds of old-fashioned, 'dramatic' theatre that respect the fourth wall and try to make the spectator believe in a fictitious world on stage. Circus, with its love of physical skill and its history of placing the audience in the round, does not attempt to create an illusion. Instead, it focuses on a real meeting of bodies. There is no fourth wall. Whatever happens does so in real time, in the here and now of the big top. There is no story, but a succession of acts. Except for the clown, there are no dramatic personae. The failure of *nouveau cirque* was in trying to combine real presence with make-believe at exactly the moment when the innate qualities of circus resonated with the emergence of post-dramatic theatre. This is why, in the *nouveau cirque*, circus acts always interrupt the narrative. It is simply not possible to combine the two in one smooth whole. At the moment of physical danger (of presence), the story (the re-presentation) simply stops.

Unfortunately, the decision to combine a narrative with circus arts is not limited to a handful of obscure performances from the early days of *nouveau cirque*. The majority of the circus performances that we make today still function like this — which is to say that they don't function at all. Luckily, the field is gradually becoming aware that this isn't working out, and as a result many artists have placed a renewed focus on technical skill. Much of the work we make today is therefore based on formal (that is: technical) research, with one result of this being the turn to mono-disciplinary performances.

However, what is often missing is the understanding that the mastering of technical skill (the form) expresses that old, traditional vision of Man, and of the world in general. What we present on stage are heroes and heroines, often without any critique or irony, in a way that is anachronistic and implausible in the context of our post-modern, meta-modern or even post-human experiences of the world surrounding us. Our contemporary Western world can no longer be bound together by one big story, nor by the belief that one coherent narrative can give meaning to our experience of that same world; attempts to do this generally come across as trite or naive, or as escapist fantasies.

Something else, though, is taking the place of these big stories: with the obvious disruption of the ecological, financial and geopolitical systems that surround us, it feels as though we are gradually moving away from the dead end of the postmodern aversion towards binding narratives. It is as if we have hesitantly started to articulate a growing desire for sincerity, community and change, but always with the awareness that the ground on which



we stand is drenched with irony. The Dutch scholars Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker (2010) have called this emergent feeling ‘meta-modernism’. They coin the term as an oscillation and negotiation ‘between the modern and the postmodern. It oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity’.

To be able to relate to these wider movements in culture, I think it is important that we become more aware of the fact that the skillful forms of circus are expressions of a very particular way of seeing and experiencing the world. As long as we continue to replicate the model of the past, we will fail to connect our craft to the underlying questions – of what we’re doing, why we’re doing it and how we do it – and we will keep on communicating exactly that: craft.

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It is true that we cannot start to create and express a different content to that of the traditional circus if we do not master the technical skills that are the language of the art. But we will not create artistically renewing work only through the repetition of technical skill and existing ‘repertoire’, and skill itself does not have to be placed at the core of our practice; rather, we can attempt to define our medium in other terms.

There are many possible approaches, but here I’d like to suggest an understanding of circus as a form in which the virtuoso body is central. However, I would also like to redefine virtuosity. What the circus body does on stage / in the ring is not meaningless; its actions are always part of an attempt to overcome some physical limit. The circus body constantly pushes the limits of the possible, and incessantly displaces the goals of its physical actions, such that it never attains these goals and limits: they are always moving to be just out of reach. What is expressed through the forms of circus is not the old vision of mastery, then, but an understanding of human action that is fundamentally tragic. Virtuosity is nothing more than the vainly striving human being ‘at work’. What appears in the ring is a battle with an invisible adversary (the different forces of nature), in which the goal is not to win but to resist and not to lose. Circus is both the promise of tragedy and the attempt to escape from tragedy. This makes the circus performer into a tragic hero.

We can also consider the relationship of the virtuoso body to objects that are external to it, be they props or pieces of apparatus (a trapeze, a cloudswing, a juggling ball) or the bodies of other artists. In a 2009 essay the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben proposes a distinction of beings into two large groups: ‘on the one hand, living beings (or substances), and on the other, apparatuses in which living beings are incessantly captured’. His understanding of an apparatus, building on the work of Foucault, encompasses ‘literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviours, opinions, or discourses of living beings’, from language itself, to cell phones,

cigarettes, the pen and computers. A subject then, to Agamben, is the third category that results from the relationship, or ‘the relentless fight’, between living beings and apparatuses (Agamben, 2009: 14).

The dance scholar André Lepecki has already applied this Agambian understanding of the division between living beings and apparatuses to contemporary dance and performance, but the circus seems to be a battleground par excellence on which Agamben’s ‘relentless fight’ between human beings and apparatuses can take place (Lepecki, 2011). The traditional circus stages the human being in a relationship of supremacy and dominance over the objects in the ring (other bodies, animals, circus equipment), but the technique itself also functions as an apparatus that disciplines the body: it is shaped to a specific standard of perfection, and in this way its identity is erased. The traditional circus performer, who is meant to be heroic, then appears as a mere anonymous body – meaningless and without subjectivity.

If the circus is to be capable of staging contemporary subjectivities and identities, it is crucial that we start experimenting with different relationships to our apparatuses, techniques and/or objects. Already the relationship between the body and the object has changed dramatically over the last twenty years. It has gone from physical dominance over the trajectories of the object (traditional circus and *nouveau cirque*), to the object dominating the trajectories of the body (contemporary circus). This is a very important shift, and one that perhaps reflects or engages with our contemporary experience of the world. Like the understanding of human action as fundamentally tragic, it connects circus to the culture and the times in which we live.

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It is time for the circus to redefine its *raison d’être* and for us to redefine our *raison de faire*. If we want circus to become more innovative, surprising, weird and disturbing, we need to understand the intimate bond between the forms of the circus and the content that we can express within those forms. We need to find out what specifics define circus as circus, and this beyond technical skill. Any attempt at defining what we do must be matched by an attempt to mark out the field for artistic research within circus. The two overlap. They are two poles on the same continuum. Without research no ‘new’ definition of the medium can be reached, and without a ‘new’ definition of the medium there can be no possible pathways for artistic research beyond technical skill.

Since circus has historically occupied a somewhat marginal position within the performing arts (as it did in society in general) we need to understand the dynamics of our changing position. Maybe it is time to go beyond circus. Let us search for countless different answers to the questions of why we want to do circus, how we want to do circus, and what we (can possibly) express by doing circus. Let us do that together. Let us discuss and contradict each other.

I’m very much looking forward to hearing your thoughts. Over the course of the following two years, I will be organising several encounters



to talk over and discuss together the different topics that these letters try to raise. Meanwhile, your letters, emails and comments are most welcome on [bauke.lievens@hogent.be](mailto:bauke.lievens@hogent.be).

Speak soon,  
Bauke Lievens

This is the first letter of a cycle of Open Letters to the Circus written in the framework of the four-year research project ‘Between Being and Imagining: towards a methodology for artistic research in contemporary circus’ – funded by the research fund of KASK School of Arts (Ghent, BE).

## Second Open Letter to the Circus: The myth called circus

(Bauke Lievens, 2016)

Sweet is the lore which Nature brings; Our meddling intellect  
Mis-shapes the beauteous form of things:— We murder to dissect.

William Wordsworth

Dear circus artists,

The above lines from William Wordsworth’s poem *The Tables Turned* are a striking expression of a number of the central elements of Romanticism: a penchant for the mysterious, the glorification of nature and the unknown, and an accompanying aversion toward intellectualism. *The Tables Turned* dates from 1798. At about the same time, the English poet John Keats grumbles to a writer friend at a dinner that the work of the scientist Isaac Newton had “destroyed all the poetry of the rainbow by reducing it to its prismatic colours” (Doorman, 2012: 100).

As a cultural movement, Romanticism started in Europe at the end of the 18th Century and lasted until the end of the 19th. However, Keats’ Romantic feelings appear to be deep-rooted. Even now, at least a hundred years later, they are latent in most reactions to my First Open Letter (December 2015). The authors of these reactions are angry and wonder why we should think about circus, why it should be or become art and why craft is not sufficient. Their objections are ones that John Keats might have recognised: that the magic of circus is destroyed by reflecting on and writing about it. That circus is an experience that cannot be captured in words. That the circus is a place where we can get closer to who we truly are, away from the everyday world and from everyday thinking. The majority of the reactions were from people who are themselves professionally involved in circus, in one way or another,

whether it be as a teacher, a social circus worker, or a circus performer — and it is the last of those which worries me. After all, I often encounter it in my practice as a circus dramaturg, working with artists who are reluctant to give a name to what they do or want to do for fear of ruining ‘it’. ‘It’ stands for intuitive creativity, physicality, sincerity, flow, and inspiration. But ‘it’ is also the authenticity and the utopia that the circus embodies for many people. In this way, the dramaturg, and by extension these Open Letters, becomes the unsettling embodiment of that which will ruin ‘it’: thinking.

As the Dutch cultural philosopher Maarten Doorman suggests in his book *De romantische orde*, this interpretation of theory and analysis as a distancing function that detaches us from what life is really all about is one of the enduring legacies of Romanticism. Another stems from the Romantic project to set body and mind, and thinking and doing, against one another as opposites. The Romantic line was to extol, and to long to return to, the physical and the natural as sources of spontaneous creativity and inspiration in an otherwise corrupt world. In fact, in Doorman’s view, an essential characteristic of the Romantic attitude is that it framed its thinking always in terms of paradoxes or things that are seemingly opposed (Doorman, 2012).

This is what Wikipedia has to say about the paradox: “A paradox is a seemingly contradictory situation that appears to conflict with our sense of logic, our expectations or our intuition. “Seemingly”, because the supposed conflict is usually based on a logical fault or an error of reasoning”.<sup>2</sup> So a person who thinks in paradoxes introduces boundaries and divisions between statements, propositions or concepts which are not in fact opposed. Doorman also argues that most Romantic paradoxes emerge from the basic emotional structure of Romanticism, that of impossible longing (Doorman, 2012: 11-48). This longing mainly centres on the Romantic ideal of freedom as authenticity, spontaneity and uniqueness. These Romantic fault lines are in their turn intimately linked to the cultural context of the 19th century: the belief in progress, the emergence of capitalism, industrial expansion, and colonialism. The modern nomadic circus, which came into being in roughly the same period, also arose out of the paradoxes of this cultural context: the self versus the other, reason versus emotion, norm versus difference, old versus new, etc. Since then the world has changed considerably, and yet contemporary circus often presents itself as a practice that redraws old Romantic fault lines between reason and emotion, centre and margin, and physical ideal and aberration.

Today’s circus rests much of its identity on a self-devised, and quite Romantic, image of its own practice as a marginal art form enjoying its own freedom. Even putting aside the question of whether this image is accurate in the contemporary scene, it has become very difficult to separate the romantic clichés that surround the circus from an understanding of circus as a medium.<sup>3</sup> As a result we still reproduce the same romantic myths of the

2. <<https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paradox>> (logica).

3. Thanks to Alexander Vantourhout for initiating this idea during the First Encounter on Circus, January 2016, KASK/Vooruit, Ghent, Belgium.

circus in our contemporary practices, which in turn leads to performances that always take circus itself as their theme. If we want to mark out an area for specific artistic research in circus, it is worthwhile reflecting on the Romantic paradoxes and images that shape and surround circus. Even if only to be able to ask the question underlying the myth: is there such a thing as circus as a medium? Is there anything left once we have stripped away all the myths? Or is circus in fact simply that entanglement of myth, Romantic paradox and nostalgia that repeatedly obscures itself?

### Myth # 1

Let's start with what may be the first great myth of the circus: its 'free' position on the margins of society, embodied by the nomadic convoy of caravans and tent, and by the idea that physical virtuosity in the ring expresses freedom.

The modern European circus first appeared in 18th Century England, where the military rider Philip Astley combined his horseback skills with a variety of visual and acrobatic acts. Working initially in open-air arenas, he later moved to covered stone or wooden 'amphitheatres', where he merged the circle of the ring with the rectangle of the stage. This gave rise to a European model of stone circuses: round or polygonal buildings where the middle-class could be entertained on payment of a substantial admission fee. At that time, the circus was firmly anchored in towns and cities. It did not go on tour. The first nomadic circuses, which travelled around by train or in wooden wagons, appeared in America slightly less than a century later (about 1850). The tent and wagons were in their turn 'exported' to Europe and in this way the circus also became a nomadic activity in our part of the world. It gradually moved out of the amphitheatres in the centre of the towns and cities and pitched its temporary tents on the outskirts.

When we zoom in more closely on the context in which American nomadic circus arose, we see that – in spite of the myth – it was not born from the quest of a handful of outlaws searching for the ultimate romantic freedom. On the contrary. Nomadic circus is in fact an extreme outgrowth of a 19th Century belief in Progress. Caravans and tents were strategies in the push for capitalist expansion spearheaded by great American circuses such as Barnum & Bailey and Ringling Brothers (Jacob & Raynaud de Lage, 2005). They were pragmatic decisions taken from the centre of a fierce competitive struggle: travelling simply brought in more money. The aesthetics of physical risk also sprang from the desire for money and growth, as the competition between circuses played out in the ring as a struggle to present the most spectacular act (Jacob & Raynaud de Lage, 2005: 13-24). This capitalist rivalry also made use of such aesthetic categories as the new, the bizarre (the freak show), the exotic, the wild, and the unknown. Each one of these elements could be traced back to Romanticism as an art movement, but there are more similarities between Romanticism and nomadic circus:

- A focus on craft and physical work as a reaction to the alienation that rapid industrialisation had brought with it.
- A cult of the perfect body and the rejection of reason.

- A cult of the ‘marginal’ identity or a position on the fringe of society: the romantic artist / circus performer as an outlaw, the cult of ‘being different’.
- A cult of the creative subject: the romantic genius and the circus hero.

The romantic cliché has it that the circus is a nomadic (and free) marginal practice — an isolated and chaotic state of exception, where different rules apply to those that govern ordinary, well-structured lives. In this view, circus is thought to have a subversive and perhaps even political power as a form of cultural expression — a fanciful idea, however, that forgets the roots of nomadic circus in a mainstream capitalist system.

But the circus has itself always benefited from the cultivation of its ‘differentness’. Nowadays, this differentness is eagerly maintained in various forms of neo-traditional circus. The romantic-nostalgic characteristic is employed as a sales strategy (though often not deliberately). In this way we repeat the same 19th Century (paradoxical) fault lines between reason and emotion, margin and centre, and tradition and renewal — at least in the image we present of our practice. We can (should?) ask ourselves what it is exactly that makes this nostalgia ‘different’ or unique.

It seems that many young circus collectives touring with tents today also see their artistic practice as an act of freedom, subversiveness and ‘differentness’. And that is strange. By cultivating a ‘free’ position on the margins, we characterise our practice as something in opposition to a broader, ‘unfree’ society. In this way, the circus we create becomes a ‘minority’ practice in relation to the prevailing (‘majority’) culture. But in the meantime, the myth of the margin influences our artistic practice: when we always characterise it as something that is in a romantic and idealised conflict with the world surrounding the circus tent, it becomes very hard to draw this world into the tent. The result is that our work is mainly about circus itself, and only rarely about the world. In this spirit, it is almost impossible to create subversive work.

## Myth # 2

Seen in the context of its cultural history, circus is a portrayal of the capacities of modern man and his relationship with technology. As already mentioned in the previous Open Letter, it is an expression of the 19th Century belief in progress and technological evolution. Several fault lines that ran through 19th Century beliefs about nature and culture manifest themselves in the circus performer’s body. In the ring, for instance, performers embody the hope, common at that time, that man would become ‘free’ with the aid of technology. At the same time we see that technology is not employed to surpass nature so much as it is used to ‘become nature’ by mimicking flight, states of balance, etc. This effort to turn technology to nature seems like a contradiction, but it is in fact a paradox. After all, it is characteristic of the emotional structure of Romanticism that it is all about longing for an ideal. Romantics are mad about ideals such as the authentic ‘free’ subject, the exotic, the wild, the unknown, the childlike, untouched and unspoiled nature and an Arcadian past — and all this in the full awareness that it is impossible

to coincide with / to reach what they're longing for. The ideal of the natural man or *l'homme sauvage* is a project that is doomed to failure, but this does not prevent either the Romantic artist or the circus performer from continuing to try to achieve the ideal (Doorman, 2012: 38). Thus circus and Romanticism reach out together towards the radiant horizon of utopia, but both also circle in vain around the gaping hole of the tragic (and the impossible).

But what of the circus that we create today? In his book *Rousseau en Ik*, Maarten Doorman indicates that Romantic ideals still shape aspects of our contemporary thinking. Just like the Romantics, we are searching for our 'true' and 'free' selves. We long for an honest way of living that should bring us closer to who we 'really are'. According to Doorman, in this quest we are (just like the Romantics) obsessed by authenticity — a mania typified by the current predilection for craftsmanship in the arts, organic food, emotionality in the media, reality tv, day trips in the 'real' slums of Rio de Janeiro, the sudden popularity of knitting, glamping, and making your own jam. The ways we eat, shop, travel and dream show all the signs of the greatest of Romantic desires: the longing for authenticity.

Unlike theatre, circus has always emphasised that everything that is presented in the ring is real. Real tigers, real danger, people who really can fly. In 19th Century circus, this supposed authenticity could (paradoxically enough) only be achieved through the use of technology and new techniques (electric light, motors, circus devices and objects). In today's circus, many people want to get away from this type of spectacle and from the representation of man as a superhuman. Our obsession with authenticity then takes the form of a romantic longing for everything that is old, rusty and 'genuine', or as a quest for the humanity of the circus artist, for the personal story. In this way, the present day circus ring becomes no longer a place where one 'shows', but a place where one simply 'is'.

Here too we seem to forget that the desire for authenticity is an impossible longing. After all, when we present or label something as authentic or pure (whether it be hamburgers made of real beef or the pureness of the circus), we immediately make it into a staged and thus unreal phenomenon. Or, as Doorman puts it: "Anyone who wants to be real is by definition not real, because the consciousness of this desire brings unauthenticity with it too. [...] In this way, our desire for authenticity is met with play-acting" (Doorman, 2012: 38). So in fact we can only call it "*staged authenticity*".<sup>4</sup> When this vexed question of authenticity is brought into the world of the performing arts, the play-acting is doubled.

Yet in the discourse of many present day circus performers, circus is 'more real and sincere' than theatre because it involves real physical risk. And in a certain way this is true. But it is also slightly 'less real'. After all, while the ability to make an audience accept the action on stage as possible (or plausible) was for a long time one of the most crucial tests of theatre, when it comes to physical virtuosity it is precisely the opposite: circus tries to make us believe that something is impossible, thus increasing the status of the circus performer, who nevertheless succeeds in achieving it, and thereby

4. BERKELJON, S. (25/02/2012). Authenticiteit is nep. *De Volkskrant*. <<http://bit.ly/3zW2haj>>

creating an experience of magic. This experience arises in a similar way to puppet theatre: we know that the puppet is an inanimate object, and yet we (like to) believe that we are seeing a living being move. This switch between belief and disbelief generates an experience of magic.<sup>5</sup> The physical danger the circus performer exposes himself to only strengthens the appearance of authenticity, but in reality a circus performer will never carry out a trick that he or she has not completely mastered. This mastery is a product of the constant repetition of the same movements throughout a period of training. Or in other words, training increases the performer's physical potential with the aim of creating an illusion of impossibility which is then briefly undermined by the 'success' of the trick.

However, our over-identification with the romantic image of the circus as a place of realness and sincerity has made us start to believe in the myth of authenticity. A myth, moreover, that circus itself devised. But magic and wonder are not so much related to the fact of whether something *is* 'authentic', as with our own conditioned gaze, which likes to label things as 'real'. And it is precisely this awareness of 'double-ness' that contemporary circus seems to be forgetting. The consequence is that there is at present a huge and unfortunate confusion between practice and performance in contemporary circus creation. Many of us think that practicing circus is the same as creating and performing circus. Nothing could be less true. Practicing circus is high-level sport. Creating circus is something different. Creating circus takes place in the space of the performance, not in that of circus practice. Creating (and performing) circus is always about a staged 'doing', a staged 'now', a staged 'here', and a staged 'being'. What links these four together is that — from the point of view of the spectator — it is always a staging of realness, and never realness itself. The space between practice and performance is therefore the space of translation and design. The distance between the two is the space of dramaturgy.

However, many of us are afraid of this dramaturgy (and by extension of the dramaturg too). Why? Is it because the dramaturg points out that art and life are *not* the same? That this too is yet another variation on the Romantic longing for an ideal in which art becomes (part of) life and life becomes art? Or is there another reason?

### Myth # 3

Let's take a closer look at what can be seen in the ring: the circus body in relation to an object (technology). They are related to each other functionally: body and object 'work together' to achieve a common aim, which is to tame and to try to overcome natural laws such as gravity. We also see that the circus body is not a natural body, but a highly-trained and technological one. In fact it is a body that is disciplined, and the functional relationship with the object makes the body itself into an object.<sup>6</sup>

5. Flemish theatre critic Tuur Devens calls this 'The Fifth Wall'. See: DEVENS, T. (2004). *De Vijfde Wand: Reflecties over figurentheater en circustheater*. Gent: Pro-Art, pp. 6-10.

6. See previous Open Letter and Giorgio Agamben's notion of the 'apparatus'.



In other words, the circus body embodies a romantic ideal of freedom (flying, floating, super-strength), while itself being an extremely unfree, disciplined and perfect body. In this way, the circus creates the appearance of freedom (in performance) by applying an extreme discipline to the body (in practice). In this way, the circus would seem to propagate the notion that discipline and technology are essential to achieving a particular degree of (physical) freedom. But is this really the case? And, above all: is this a view of man that connects with the way we currently think about who we are or want to be?

Let's zoom in for a moment on this disciplining of the body. In his renowned book *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison* (1975), the French historian and philosopher Michel Foucault outlined a new conceptual framework which began to take shape at the end of the 18th Century. Foucault says that the great increase in the European population at that time necessitated a more profitable employment of the people; there were more people, so production (of goods and services) had to be increased. This development required a shift in the ways power was exercised. Whereas before the 18th Century power made use above all of external display and explicit forms of oppression, from then on there were simply too many people to be able to exercise power in this way. People had to be prompted to assimilate for themselves the idea that it is important to employ their bodies usefully and divide up their time and space in a useful way. For this purpose, those in power designed a number of 'disciplining' mechanisms that make sure that the citizens' bodies 'internalise' the operation of power. This approach is the most effective in places that have direct access to the body, such as the prison, the army, the school, the hospital, and the psychiatric clinic.<sup>7</sup> The major 'disciplining' mechanisms that see to the production of the 'useful man' (*l'homme machine*) are repetition, gearing body and action to one another, and the coupling of body and object (Foucault, 2010: 255). Comparison enables a standard to be set and to determine who or what deviates from the norm of productivity. Those who do not fulfil the norm (children, the ill, psychiatric patients, prisoners, etc) are those whose bodies receive the most discipline by means of exercises, observation, supervision and therapy. The aim is always to increase the usefulness of the body through the internalisation of physical obedience, and so there is always a proportional connection between the increasing efficiency of a body and the increase in political power over that body. Or, in Foucault's words: "Discipline makes the strengths of the body increase (in terms of economic usefulness) and the same strengths decrease (in terms of political obedience)" (Haegens, 2016: 36-39). Foucault emphasises that in this way the disciplining power 'manufactures' individuals or subjects (in French he writes "*les sujets*", which literally means 'those who are subjected' (Foucault, 2010: 237). So in this way, in our social system, the individual is 'not amputated, harmed or suppressed: on the contrary, it is carefully manufactured with the aid of a tactic of bodies and strengths' (Foucault, 2010: 299).

7. The production of the 'useful man' (*l'homme machine*) takes place by way of the division, comparison and classification of the actions of the body and of the time and space where the body is located.

The circus is in fact the ideal (because public) externalisation of this changing way of thinking about the subject at the end of the 18th Century. The circus too is an ‘institution’ where the body was and is disciplined by exercise, repetition and the functional linkage of body and object (training). In this way, the virtuoso trained body incarnates the ideal of the useful body. Through exercise and repetition, the circus body becomes highly individualised and distinguished from the crowd. Yet a circus performer is not an individual who deviates from the norm, but is an ideal incarnation of the norm: strength, time and space are not wasted, but perfectly optimised. And here too the rule applies that the political obedience of the body increases as the strengths of the body expand in terms of (economic) usefulness.

### Artistic research: writing new myths

Throughout history, circus has insisted upon its freedom and differentness and has made these values its image and trademark. In the 19th Century, the disciplined circus body was, paradoxically enough, the ideal embodiment of the desire for freedom – and so this romantic circus becomes a delightfully misleading hall of mirrors. As a true master of illusion, it makes clever use of the space between real physical condition (emerging from discipline) and what is staged (freedom), and this area of difference is exactly where the circus shines, shows off and flourishes. It thrives precisely in the distance between the real and unreal, between what is actually going on in the ring and what these actions do with our imagination. It is, actually, one great delightful paradox. And this is also precisely the reason why the circus itself has always been the shrewdest promoter of its self-invented myths.

But, more than a hundred years later, Foucault teaches us that the third great myth of the circus, that of physical virtuosity as an embodiment of freedom, is in fact precisely an externalisation of the power that curbs the freedom for which the circus longs.<sup>8</sup> After all, it is in discipline that the norm becomes extremely visible. Still, the images and myths with which we surround our practice and the sources from which we draw in our creative processes haven’t changed all that much. In fact, it’s the opposite: we have actually come to believe our self-devised myth that says that physical virtuosity is an expression of (artistic and political) freedom. As a result, the space between what surrounds the circus (image, myth) and what actually takes place in the ring is no longer a paradox. It has become a real contradiction. A contradiction that is in turn reinforced by the present confusion between practice and performance and the accompanying conviction that what we do in the ring is real.

For all these reasons, circus that relies on virtuosity in the traditional sense does not embody freedom. Not to our 21st-Century eyes. It is not rebellious, nor subversive. On the contrary, it is repeating an existing repertoire, working a stale, dated myth into the ground. It is a parade of perfectly

8. Doorman indicates that Foucault’s subject critique doesn’t escape the romantic paradigm either. After all, “his Nietzschean and almost malicious ardor to reveal the authentic subject as fiction implies a utopian desire for a free living individual, one who is not captured in the fine-grained structures of the discourse that disciplines it” (Doorman, 2012: 13).

trained, disciplined bodies that conform with the norm of what is considered beautiful, useful, virile or sexy. However hard this sort of circus tries to present itself as a subversive place on the margins of society, it (now) lacks all political and artistic power.

So it is crucial that we become aware of the ways the body is disciplined by most circus techniques. It is time to want more from an audience than their ‘aaahs’ and ‘ooohs’ of wonder. It is important to want to be more than obedient machines whose bodies, through the discipline of ‘training’, show us who satisfies the norm and who does not. It is necessary to experiment with other relationships to virtuosity. Other relationships with the objects that make us into objects. A critical space full of potential is to be found in the relationship between the object that trains our body and the individuals that we are — a whole realm of possibilities.

When we cease to identify with virtuosity, a space may appear in which we can say something interesting about the things, dynamics and mechanisms that discipline our present day bodies. When we stop ‘showing’ our superpowers, a space may appear in which we can be ‘seen’ as ordinary human beings. The challenge is not to merge with the discipline that trains our bodies but to carve out a ‘free’ space for the individuals that we are.

Let’s stop thinking that the nostalgic display of caravans and tent, and our knowledge of the repertoire and tradition, are acts of artistic freedom. Let us once again enter into that exciting area of difference between practice and performance that is characteristic of every art form. Let us once again yearn longingly, fully aware that the freedom we seek is an impossible goal. Let us once again dare to be ironic and tragic.

But let us above all try to forget all the Romantic myths that surround and shape our practices. Let us look for the potential of circus as a medium rather than repeating the myths that obscure it. Let us depart from shows that confirm the norm and let us invent new myths. Let us reflect on what it means to be a virtuoso body in the ring. Let us examine our relationships with our objects. Let us seek out how all this can tell us something about our contemporary world and our place in that world.

I’m very much looking forward to hearing your thoughts. Over the course of the following year, I will be organising several encounters to talk over and discuss together the different topics that these letters try to raise. Meanwhile, your letters, emails and comments are most welcome on [bauke.lievens@hogent.be](mailto:bauke.lievens@hogent.be).

Speak soon,  
Bauke Lievens

This is the second letter of a cycle of Open Letters to the Circus written in the framework of the four-year research project ‘Between being and imagining: towards a methodology for artistic research in contemporary circus’ — funded by the research fund of KASK School of Arts (Ghent, BE).

## Third Open Letter to the Circus: Who gets to build the future?

(Sebastian Kann, 2018)

This is the third letter in a cycle of *Open Letters to the Circus*. This letter is written in the context of ‘The Circus Dialogues’, a two-year research project led by Bauke Lievens, Quintijn Ketels and Sebastian Kann. ‘The Circus Dialogues’ expands on Bauke Lievens’ previous research project, ‘Between Being and Imagining: towards a methodology for artistic research in contemporary circus’. Both projects are financed by the Arts Research Fund of the University College Ghent (BE).

And I can see another world  
And I can make it with my hands  
Who cares if no one understands?  
I can see it now  
I can see it growing  
And moving by itself  
And talking in its own way  
It’s realer than the old one

Stephin Merritt<sup>9</sup>

Dear circus artists,

We need to talk. Not about your circus practice, though — not here, not this way. It’s not that I don’t want to; honestly, I do! But there’s a snag, something special about today’s arrangement that keeps us from getting to the bottom of the matter.

Here’s the shape of it: from where I’m sitting, safe behind my computer screen, *I just can’t know what you’re up to*. Who are you, actually? I don’t know what circus is for you, what need it fills, what future lingers tantalisingly on its horizon. And I refuse to guess, out of respect for your particularity, and the particularity of your practice. I won’t do it, I won’t go there.

I admit, I’m guilty in the past of having jumped on the ‘what is circus’ train, proposing a universal definition, a specificity, an essence.<sup>10</sup> I projected my own interests on you and made you the object of my knowledge without your consent or input.<sup>11</sup> I thought I saw clearly, I thought I had access to the

9. ‘71: *I think I’ll Make Another World*, from ‘50 Song Memoir’ by the Magnetic Fields (2017).

10. See ‘Taking back the technical: contemporary circus dramaturgy beyond the logic of mimesis’ (Kann, 2016, online).

11. If I claim to know what you are, do I not also cut away all the parts of you which are not visible from my limited perspective? And if I’m the one who has the power to define common knowledge — if I’m the one whose writing is being published, for instance — what happens to the elements of your being which I cannot know or sense? In *Poetics of Relation*, Édouard Glissant urges us to drop the Western fantasy of objective knowledge — of “discovering what lies at the bottom of natures” (2010 [1997], 190). Rather, Glissant suggests we turn our attention to the “texture of the weave and not the nature of its components” (190). Instead of making claims for others about *what* they are — claims which perform violent reductions — we might be better off to examine the nature of the contact we manage to establish. To ground an ethical practice of knowledge, we need to stop asking ‘who or what is this?’, wondering rather ‘what does it feel like to come into relation with this person or object?’.

truest truth about circus. I'm sorry: now I see how presumptuous it was to try to confine your practice to the box which suited my own needs.

No, today I don't feel the urge to talk about circus practice in a general way, nor the desire to perform the cut between circus and non-circus which would make such a discussion possible. It is not my decision (incision?) to make. Rather, I want to talk about circus as a community — the people of circus — and speculate about one possible future for us. This is it: In the future, circus artists will feel empowered to create work on their own terms.

What do you think? It seems uncontroversial enough. I hereby declare it as my own mission and I propose to share it with you, if you want to be part of it. I hope you do, because it's a future we need to work towards *together*. Although we live in a culture that idealises self-sufficiency and independence, the reality is that we *can't* conjure empowerment for ourselves out of sheer force of individual will, just by loving ourselves a little more or pushing a little harder. If creative agency is something that we value, we need to tend to circus as an *ecology*; that is, an enmeshed network of bodies, practices, institutions, images, moods, and concepts, which lean on, support, and transform each other in complex ways.<sup>12</sup>

Let me explain, starting with this word 'agency'. It's a word that we deserve to have in our arsenal. An agent being 'one who acts', agency is more or less 'power-to-act'. When we think about our own agency as artists, the question we're asking is: am I free to define the goals and values of my practice? Or am I forced to shape my practice in certain 'normal' ways in order to receive the material, emotional, and intellectual support necessary for making?

The opposite of agency is *overdetermination*. We say we are overdetermined when we don't have as much freedom to choose how to act as we would like. Think about it this way: when we begin creating a circus piece, be it an act or a show, how much about it is determined in advance? What kinds of elements appear non-negotiable? Do I need to put in my best tricks? Do I need to keep the work to a certain length? Do I need to appear masculine or feminine? Do I need to avoid certain kinds of movements? To the extent that *saying no is not an option* — to the extent that our consent to these conditions is never asked for — we can say we are overdetermined, and our agency is compromised.

In 21st-century humans, overdetermination tends to create anxiety.<sup>13</sup> When we feel we are not given a choice about our movements, when we feel

12. Why is it so counterintuitive today to think of agency in terms of ecologies? Judith Butler, among others, has pointed out the way neoliberalism wages "war on the idea of interdependency" (2015: 67), shifting all responsibility to the individual. In neoliberal climates, we tend to think of agency as something that belongs to the agent, rather than as something *granted* to the agent. But, as Butler argues, "Human action depends on all sort of supports — it is *always* supported action" (72; emphasis mine). We have only to think of the circus apparatus to understand what she means. Climbing is unthinkable without a rope. In the same way, touring would not look the same without networks of cultural institutions, training is shaped by the networks of sociality that grow in the training space, and artistic practices develop in ways that are inseparable from the ebb and flow of critical recognition.

13. Some of the most compelling descriptions of the lived experience of overdetermination come from decolonial literatures. Overdetermination is not a dry, practical affair, a simple arrangement of open and closed doors: it also works on and through feeling, sensation, and mood, and has serious (and deleterious) effects on the inner lives of the overdetermined. Works such as Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (and especially chapter five, 'The Fact of Blackness') bring the emotional and psychological effects of overdetermination into painful focus.

held in our place by others and denied the power to decide for ourselves, we get sad, stressed, lonely, angry. Sometimes we don't even know *why* we feel this way — sometimes overdetermination is so built into our lifeworlds that the lack of choice doesn't appear explicitly. But we can sense it, and it hurts.

I see a lot of circus artists in my community suffering the squeeze of overdetermination. For every circus artist whose career rolls on without a hitch, there are a handful whose work is not supported, not cared for, not allowed to take space. These are the artists whose practices fall on the wrong side of the split enacted between 'good' and 'bad' work. When this happens, we are *overdetermined by critique*: whatever system of evaluation happens to be in fashion that year swoops in to deny these artists the power to act.

This sort of overdetermination is very obvious to the artist. Less obvious — but no less discouraging — is the overdetermination effected by *fantasy*. How much do our cherished visions of 'good circus' actually limit our power to act in a given creative process? How much do mirages of a particular future cloud our access to the full potential of the present? When bodies, objects, images, and language gather under the spell of a project, their gathering manifests an unruly, incoherent, swirling cloud of potentiality: on the way from the present to the future, anything could happen! When that cloud of potentiality appears to narrow, ushering us with all the force of violent destiny in one direction, agency is replaced by fate.<sup>14</sup>

Of course, we are never totally free to act. The only real question is: are we free *enough*, is our space of agency adequate?

Well, is it?

\* \* \*

In today's circus world, critique and fantasy are entangled with each other in an elaborate and messy fashion. Critique punctures fantasy: it derails careers, deflates practices, disables creativity, and detaches the spectator from the situation of the performance.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, critique *constructs* fantasy: the critical environment we're immersed in feeds us values and tells us what good and bad performances look like. Critical culture encourages us to

14. For radical performance theorist Bojana Kunst, the fantasy of the 'good performance' poses a major threat to artistic practice. The strict control we need to exercise in the creation space in order to move towards a certain desirable outcome means there is actually no space to produce anything new: 'frozen in the future', we keep on circling around what is already imaginable, continually reproducing new versions of the same (2015, 153). For Kunst, this means that the potential of art as a space of freedom — as a space in which bodies can move in defiance of the rules which bind society at large — is barred: when we hold on too tight to fantasies of critical excellence, "the possibility of the future is actually in balance with the current power relations" (168). Avoiding overdetermination by fantasy perhaps means operating with a looser grip...

Since Freud's writings on the subconscious, it has become very hard to argue that there's any real freedom in fantasy. I fantasise about futures *despite myself*. And as Hannah Arendt points out, "The power to command, to dictate action, is not a matter of freedom but a question of strength and weakness" (1960: 445). Agency — at least in the way I'm interested in understanding it here — is not about being able to actualise what we already imagine is good. Rather, it appears when we are able to transcend 'motives and aims', calling something into being "which did not exist before, which was not given, not even as an object of cognition or imagination, and which therefore, strictly speaking, could not be known" (444). In terms of artistic creation, this means treating the image of 'good performance' as a material which is present in the space of creation like any other material, appearing as a possible interlocutor rather than a totalising ideal.

15. In the sense that critique requires analytical *distance*. When we sit in the audience with our critic's notebook on our lap, the experience of spectatorship acquires quite a different flavor.



fantasise about ourselves as critics — when criticising others, we help build a hierarchy of taste, with ourselves sitting at the top, as if we and we alone had access to the truest truth.<sup>16</sup> The circus world, diffracted through the binocular prisms of critique and fantasy, appears as an arena of struggle — taste against vulgarity, artistry against clumsy flailing, authenticity against artifice — rather than as a delicate ecology requiring common tending.

This state of affairs is held in place by a secret. If the secret were to be spoken, the whole drama would be revealed as hollow. And I'm going to speak it here, so get ready! Here it is: There is no objective 'good' or 'bad' in performance, only personal taste and local criteria.

I'll repeat: in performance, the only basis we have for making judgments of value are personal taste and local criteria. Anything we might want from a performance — entertainment, social commentary, political import, impeccable design, clever decision-making, originality, style, whatever — none of these things are universal values for performance, nor do they look the same in different places around the world (or even for different people in the same place).

It becomes pretty clear if we examine the different places circus is presented. The criteria which hold at a nightclub in London look pretty different from the criteria which hold at a street theatre festival in Spain. 'Good' and 'bad' mean different things at Festival CIRC*a* than they do at Adelaide Fringe. This is obviously not because different geographies grant us fuzzier or clearer access to the Truest Truth: in each location, we are bound by a local resolution, whose reality is performatively maintained.<sup>17</sup> We have to keep judging — and judging *our way* — in order for 'good' and 'bad' to appear at all.

These local critical criteria *sometimes* become a problem for artistic agency. In the commercial world, artists make work for the pleasure of a particular audience, and manage to find space for creative freedom within the confines of those criteria. Commercial artists *agree* to abide by the demand for entertainment — they consent to work within the constraints drawn by the critical culture local to the commercial world. When submission occurs with consent, the results can, of course, be rewarding for everyone.<sup>18</sup>

Things are different for circus practices which understand themselves as art. That's because in contemporary art, the audience doesn't *need* to be entertained — not necessarily. In fact, the artist gets to define her own ends:

16. The critical gesture is one of *revelation*: it is "predicated on the discovery of a true world of realities lying behind the veil of appearances" (Latour, 2010: 474-475). By making this gesture, the critic claims "a privileged access to the world of reality" (475). Critique only functions if the critic stages herself as more-objective, and her critical criteria as unassailable. This is what commentators like Armen Avanesian mean when they frame critique as an instrument of power: it has a stabilising and legitimising effect for the critical subject (Avanesian, 2017: 35-36).

17. I borrow this formulation — and the metaphysical worldview grounding this letter — from philosopher Karen Barad. In 'Posthuman Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter', she unfolds a performative approach to the production of realities, which imagines all being as local, contingent, and relational: "A specific intra-action [...] enacts an *agential cut* [...] effecting a separation between 'subject' and 'object'. That is, the agential cut enacts a *local resolution within* the phenomenon of the inherent ontological indeterminacy. In other words, *relata* do not pre-exist relations; rather, *relata-within-phenomena* emerge through specific intra-actions" (2003: 815).

18. I think problems of agency mostly arise in the commercial world when artists are asked either to overtly sexualise themselves or to take more significant physical risks than they are comfortable with. These are problems of no small import, and deserve to be treated in a study of a different kind.

she becomes her own local resolution of reality.<sup>19</sup> The circus practices which we call ‘contemporary’ can be informative, emotional, exciting, meditative, confrontational, confusing — *or not*. This is the space of agency promised by the contract of the contemporary. And increasingly, I’m concerned that that promise is not being kept.

Despite loudly claiming that rules are meant to be broken and that all conventions are arbitrary, we continue to critique artists as if our local criteria and personal taste were as real to them as they are to us. We continue to enact the division between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ work which keeps some practices visible and some in the shadows. And when we voice our criticisms in certain ways — ways which erase the particularity of our criteria of judgment — artists get trapped in certain ways of thinking, overdetermined by fantasies they feel they cannot ignore or negotiate.

In Bauke Lievens’ first open letter — ‘The need to redefine’ — critique and fantasy intersect in yet another arrangement. In my reading, the whole letter is grounded by a *fantasy of critical circus*. Lievens imagines the circus artist as a kind of skilled cultural operator, whose practice is based on the virtuosic navigation of conventions — both artistic and social — and their critical deconstruction through performance.<sup>20</sup>

What does this mean? Well on the one hand, Lievens wants the artist to take a hard look at circus as a medium, to pull back the curtain of misunderstanding and reveal its reality. In her letter she states:

The circus body constantly pushes the limits of the possible, and incessantly displaces the goals of its physical actions, such that it never attains these goals and limits: they are always moving to be just out of reach. What is expressed through the forms of circus is not the old vision of mastery, then, but an understanding of human action that is fundamentally tragic [...] What appears in the ring is a battle with an invisible adversary (the different forces of nature), in which the goal is not to win but to resist and not to lose.

So Lievens’ critical circus reveals something essential about the medium which had been hidden. On the other hand, critical circus offers up a critique of contemporary culture (“our post-modern, meta-modern or even post-human experiences of the world surrounding us”). The artist’s task, then, is to propose, through performance, an ‘innovative, surprising, weird and disturbing’ relation between medium and world.

There’s no denying that the figures of thought Lievens develops have a palpable force of presence: her concept of the tragic circus hero, for example, radiates a compelling productive energy. This energy has already been

19. Which is not to say that her local resolution goes unchallenged. In ‘Why Is Art Met With Disbelief? It’s Too Much Like Magic’, art critic Jan Verwoert describes the tension wrought on the artist by the constant demand to explain herself: “It’s a classic among the top twenty conversations from hell: getting cross-examined over Sunday dinner by prospective in-laws who, with increasing persistence, try to elicit a confession from you that [...] art is a big fraud [...] In such a situation, *defending art as a realm in which value can be freely negotiated seems hardly worth trying*” (2013: 92; emphasis mine). Should we as artists echo this assault on artistic freedom through holding each other to inflexible critical standards? Or should we devote ourselves to ensuring that art *remains* a space in which value can be freely negotiated?

20. I owe this formulation to Jan Verwoert (2016).

and will continue to be mobilising for circus artists. But I think we need to be clear that her writing is so rich precisely because it is particular to her embodied experience: she's expressing *her* truth, which has emerged through her own particular circus practice.<sup>21</sup> There's a particular vision of circus behind her writing, one which deals with risk, danger, and difficult physical skills. There's a particular world — one which is, strangely enough, *both* meta-modern / post-human *and* characterised by a dialectical struggle between Man and Nature.<sup>22</sup> Lievens also imagines a very particular task for art: to stir up the social and aesthetic fields, to take the flaming sword of critique to each, to make hidden truths public and to motivate public engagement with them through persuasive staging.<sup>23</sup>

This is totally one valid way of thinking about arts practice. Is it the only one? No. When I think about Lievens' approach in relation to my own practice, what I notice is that one very important element of my work — the intuitive body — is missing from her account. Because Lievens' circus seems to be all about making clever jabs at social and aesthetic conventions, the body of rational planning seems to be very much in charge.<sup>24</sup> Sometimes, though, I'm more curious about feeling than reasoning; sometimes I'm more interested in a state than a statement. Sometimes, material emerges during creation which *is* romantic, which *is* autobiographical, which *is* unreadable. Sometimes I make decisions without knowing why — not always, but sometimes.

In her letters, Lievens gives us a peek of the kind of things that she desires. But what I notice is that, rather than offering those fantasies to us — saying 'hey, I've got this crazy idea, maybe we can share it, maybe you vibe with part of it, go wild guys' — she presents them as non-negotiable. She sows a seed of division in the circus world — are you Team Bauke? — and,

21. Lievens is not trained in a particular circus discipline, but she is a circus artist in the sense that she composes with circus, interacts with circus, deals with circus, feels with circus. In other words, she is a circus artist because she has a circus practice; she's both immersed in it and speaking back to the world through it. If we are to claim, as I would like to, that making circus technique is a kind of thinking, equal in worth to thinking-through-speaking or thinking-through-writing, then we can't be snooty about including dramaturgs, directors, and choreographers-of-circus in circus proper. We are all circus artists.

22. Strange because post-human thought is characterised by the deconstruction of the division between the natural and the cultural, and is animated by the imperative to think in terms of ecologies rather than dialectical oppositions. Post-humanism tries to undo what Alfred North Whitehead called the 'bifurcation of nature', which names the attempt to separate meaning from matter as spearheaded by European Enlightenment thought. Rather, post-humanism tries to "speak in one breath of nonhumans and other than humans such as things, objects, other animals, living beings, organisms, physical forces, spiritual entities, and humans. Encompassing this ontological scope is vital as it has become indisputable, if it ever wasn't, that in times binding technosciences with naturecultures, the livelihoods and fates of so many kinds and entities on this planet are unavoidably entangled" (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 1). With this in mind, a post-human tragic hero at war with nature is difficult to imagine.

23. The fact that this prescription hides within her text as an *implication* make it all the more dangerous for artistic agency. It's the belief we have to adopt, at least temporarily, in order to make sense of Lievens' critique. In the act of reading, we don't only encounter *information*; we also immerse ourselves in a whole *context* which allows the information to resonate as truth. This is what Deleuze and Guattari call a *mot d'ordre*: it's what goes without saying in what is said. Such rhetorical strategies are problematic because they stage particular beliefs as if they were objective knowledge. Unless we're explicit about the fantasies which ground our critiques, we end up indoctrinating readers rather than liberating them to think for themselves (Massumi, 1992: 29-34).

24. The culture of critique finds its roots in the European Enlightenment: thinkers of this period challenged the old orders of Church and State by the use of reason and persuasive argumentation. In the process, they denigrated and marginalised 'affect, the subjective, the particular, the familial', and so forth. In the quest for objective knowledge, Enlightenment thought attempted "to divorce reason and cognition from experience, intuition, and affect" (Dhawan, 2014: 23-29). What resulted was a hierarchisation of thought, with Western models of objective criticality at the top. Taking embodied practices seriously as valid ways of doing thinking means putting this hierarchy into question.

as added incentive to get on board with her vision, insists that other ways of thinking about circus are old-fashioned, backwards, or stuck in the past.<sup>25</sup> She constructs a normative timeline for the development of circus without asking other artists if they want to join her in her charge. But is there only one circus future worth pursuing? Is there only one contemporary?<sup>26</sup>

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I want to speculate about the practical conditions of a future in which circus artists feel empowered to create work on their own terms. I think this begins with a culture of respect: when you read a dossier, feedback a work-in-progress, or see a show, assume the artist knows what she's doing. This should be a sort of baseline principle. When something doesn't seem right and you want to point it out, first ask the artist questions: is coherence important for you? Is it essential to your practice that the audience remain engaged the whole time? Are you interested in clarity? Do you think circus needs to be difficult? If the answer is 'no', maybe your critique is more about your fantasies than theirs.<sup>27</sup>

I think the biggest threat to circus artists today is critique that refuses to relativise its grounding fantasies. In a contemporary circus context, nothing should be absolutely required of a circus show. But all too often, artists end up juggling demands which appear both non-negotiable and incompatible with their practice. For me it all started in circus school: in today's schools, all work is graded according to the same criteria, and critical culture tends to run rampant. At school, we internalise overdetermining fantasies about 'good circus' which then take years to un-learn. What if teachers were asked to work with their students to write evaluation criteria tailored to their actual interests? What if circus schools made a habit of articulating and problematising their own aesthetic values?

Although the grading stops after school, evaluation — mostly oral, although sometimes also written — does not. Occasionally these critiques make it back to the criticised artist, but more often they just infect the defenseless listener with an imposed set of values. If we don't criticise carefully, we end up forcing our fantasies on others in ways we might not even be aware of: if I hear 'too bad they didn't fully explore the scenography' enough times, it's hard not to start thinking of scenography as something which *must* be 'fully explored'. So if we're serious about circus as a place where artists can choose to shape their practices in multiple ways, we might need to take a look at our

25. If we continue to talk about ourselves like this, we put ourselves in a very difficult position! It's only possible to imagine that we are somehow behind, late, or caught in the past if we believe in history as a single, inevitable process of progress; a universal movement towards one kind of future. But who gets to decide what this future is? And what becomes of diversity when the nature of progress is dictated from only one standpoint?

26. Rather than simply *adding* practices coded as 'old-fashioned' or 'primitive' into a revised version of the present — forming a 'new totality' — Homi K. Bhabha suggests the space of difference opened up by 'time-lag' (that is, the perception of certain practices as old-fashioned) as heralding an opportunity for the inauguration of a horizontal plurality of presents (2000).

27. Jan Verwoert on critique: "We all have the required amount of kitchen psychology at our command to figure out the reasons why [a] person must have uttered the hurtful judgment. It's the golden rule of criticism: Critics reveal as much, if not more about themselves (their fixations, complexes, and grudges) as they do about the object of their judgment" (2013: 32).

habits of speech. We might need to think about how our criticism is quietly building norms which hem artists into particular kinds of fantasies — fantasies which they might struggle to accord with their creative practices.

Being careful about the way we think about and communicate critique doesn't mean an end of analysis and debate. Far from it! It just means deploying analysis as one possible tool for performance-making, rather than understanding performance as an excuse to do analysis. It means 'destabilising' our standpoints, so that when we use language to come into relation to someone else's practice, it's not only *they* who are vulnerable, but also *us*.<sup>28</sup> We have to grant the work the space to speak back, and that involves signposting the particularity of our own speaking positions, instead of presenting ourselves as all-knowing keepers of universal truths.<sup>29</sup> Until we're ready to do this, it's maybe better to remain quiet, rather than assume we know better than the artist what her practice requires.<sup>30</sup>

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The circus field is populated by a diverse crowd, with a plurality of artistic practices. Some of us begin creation thinking in terms of story, some in terms of images, some in terms of physical tasks. Some of us are addicted to language and some feel trapped by it; some of us are inspired by the 'real world', and some need to shut that studio door tight in order to feel comfortable exploring. Sure, some circus artists romanticise a kind of off-the-grid, chapiteau-and-caravan existence, but many of us are also expert digital citizens, even using the internet as a kind of alternative performance space. Rather than trying to correct 'undesirable' tendencies by pointing to what circus *should* be according to one particular understanding of the here-and-now, we need to nurture and cultivate precisely this diversity. Otherwise, we privilege one approach — and one local set of evaluative criteria — over another, adding more arbitrary stratification to a planet already bursting at the seams with it.

It is especially important in contemporary circus that we stop undermining each other with insensitive critique. Taking each other seriously as artists means first asking the question: what would it mean to understand my experience watching this piece as a *valuable* experience? What if the artist

28. In *OVERWRITE*, literary theorist Armen Avanessian puts forth a theory of the ethics of critique. For him, critique is merely activity of self-legitimation unless the act of criticising also transforms the critic: "The search for a path that leads beyond or emancipates from the status quo always also implies a poetic labor on oneself. In the absence of such labor, changes are just cosmetic changes" (2017: 40-41). In other words, unless the critic is willing to be changed by the process of criticism — unless she's willing to revise her grounding fantasies — criticism actually produces no real effect in terms of the dominant culture.

29. Thinking along with Mieke Bal, I'm proposing circus performance as a *theoretical object*. In Bal's conception, a theoretical object is not an object to theorise, but an object that theorises itself: "the term refers to works of art that deploy their own artistic [...] medium to offer and articulate thought about art" (1999: 104). Her formulation reminds us to think of the critical instance not as the bestowal of words upon a mute object, but rather the awkward and tentative meeting of two 'speaking' subjects, who *together* negotiate the production of knowledge.

30. Verwoert describes the 'articulate silences' of the critic who decides not to speak as 'forms of mourning'. Mourning for what? Perhaps these moments of silence commemorate the failure of her attempt to make contact with the artwork: the tragedy of non-relation that undergirds our irreducible difference (2013: 43).

is not incompetent, but actually doing something strange totally perfectly?<sup>31</sup> Unless there's an ethical problem with someone's practice — if it's promoting sexist stereotypes, for example, or if the work is physically or emotionally damaging for the artists involved — everything and anything *must* be received in a spirit of unconditional hospitality.<sup>32</sup> Otherwise, contemporary circus loses its political potential as a space of freedom, simply becoming another normatively-defined aesthetic or style.<sup>33</sup>

If there's an issue with circus, it's not that the work is lacking some magic ingredient. Perhaps there's a certain conservatism that frustrates artists trying to think differently about their practices. But proposing a 'better normal' is not the answer to the problem. We can't think progress only in terms of our own aesthetics and value systems; we need to consider the field as a holistic ecology, shaped by artistic practices but also by social, administrative and epistemological ones. The goal should not be better shows but greater artistic freedom. And in these spaces of creative agency, artists — not critics — will find themselves empowered to define a plurality of circus futures.

Let's do it together! Your reactions are welcome and eagerly awaited at [sebastian.kann@hogent.be](mailto:sebastian.kann@hogent.be).

With love,  
Sebastian Kann



31. I think a key concept here would be *temporary belief*. If we want to engage in a generous practice of dialogue, we need to make the effort to imagine that the other's point of view is valid — we need to experiment with adopting their critical criteria, if only temporarily. This goes for the artist receiving feedback just as much as the critic who gives it. Without making this effort of empathy — without adopting temporary beliefs — our critical positions would never transform or change. I owe the concept of 'temporary belief' to Eleanor Bauer, who introduced it in a workshop as a way to think about the dancer's relationship to a choreographic score. Bauer herself credits Daniel Linehan for the formulation.

32. For French philosopher Jacques Derrida, the host is always torn between two forces. On the one hand, we have the ethical or moral principle of hospitality, which obliges us to provide space for anyone who needs, without judgement or expectation of repayment. On the other hand, we have the conditions and laws governing hosting as a practice — think of immigration law, for example — which translates the unbearable burden of caring for everyone who needs it into practical terms. Because we don't have large enough houses to take in everyone, nor the social or emotional resources to be a good host for just anyone, we make selections, perform exclusions, and subject prospective guests to a series of measurements and evaluations, either consciously or subconsciously.

By making this distinction — between the principle of unconditional hospitality and the practice of conditional hospitality — Derrida wants to point at a space of injustice. What to say to those who fall into the gap between doing the right thing and doing what you can? No-one deserves to be excluded, yet total inclusion — in the arts as much as anywhere else — remains a logistical impossibility. Derrida concluded that the vain quest for total inclusion needs to remain a mobilising force, even if the work of inclusion is never complete (2000).

33. André Lepecki's distinction between the choreopoliced and the choreopolitical is helpful here. If contemporary circus becomes a set style rather than an open-ended invitation to redefine itself, we fall into a situation of *choreopolicing*: that is, contemporary circus would appear as field in which "to be is to fit a prechoreographed pattern of circulation, corporeality, and belonging" (2013: 20). If this happens, artistic freedom in circus risks vanishing. On the other hand, a *choreopolitical* field is one which welcomes "movement whose only sense (meaning and direction) is the experimental exercise of freedom" (20); movement of which, in other words, no particular performativity is required, and which doesn't need to wait for critical legitimization.



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