

Contemporary and auteur circuses: an overview

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Abstract

The article begins with the fact that the classical and contemporary circus modalities are two branches of the same performing art insofar as they have common anthropological roots and respond to the body-intellect-emotions triad. It identifies the essences of the traditional circus show present in the auteur and highlights the positive aspect that current creators—performers attach less importance to some classic canons to develop their shows in total creative freedom. It analyses some of the aspects of the current evolution of circus, reflects on the characteristics of the artists, explores the intimate relationship with the apparatus and props, and describes the trends of auteur circus and the dramaturgical elements that make up *personal circus*.

It also examines the artistic and social reasons for the decline of some classical circus disciplines, and chronicles, using specific examples, their revival and updating by contemporary circus to adapt them to the sensibilities of today's audiences. Finally, it includes a section on the decisive dramaturgical role of the circus spectator.

The study's methodology is based on analysis of different shows, theoretical reflections, statements by artists from different trends and acts, and specific references to texts by authors from various periods.

Keywords: Circus, classical, contemporary, creator, artist, performer, dramaturgy, spectator

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Introduction

The article analyses significant aspects of the current state of development of circus in Catalonia, contrasting it with achievements of European circus and implicitly or explicitly highlighting the most obvious differences, caused, among other circumstances, by dissimilar cultural policies. It covers the development of the circus show from Philip Astley's modern circus (London, 1768, today known as traditional or classical), documents the beginnings of a *new Catalan circus* (Barcelona, 1976), and leads to the current experimental creations that make auteur circus possible. It places each phase of this exploration in the corresponding social and political context, and gives a voice to artists, scholars, theorists, historians and critics who bear witness to the various trends of classical, contemporary circus and auteur circus.

It describes the essence of the circus show and argues that tradition enables contemporaneity (all circus styles and trends spring from the same root, even if they can attract slightly different audiences). It notes the desire of contemporary circus creators to deal with individual or collective issues specific to today's societies in their shows, while highlighting the close connection between circus and community. It details some of the virtues of circus artists and illustrates the intimate relationship they maintain with their apparatus and props; it analyses trends in contemporary auteur circus and theorises about the personal projection of the artist in what it calls *personal circus*.

It sets out some hypotheses about the artistic and sociological causes that motivate the lethargic impasse of some acts of traditional circus and details with specific examples how auteur circus attempts processes of revival using dramaturgical tools, integrating them with contemporaneity and the tastes of today's audience.

Finally, it speculates on the very important role of the spectator as the driving force and supreme receiver of any stage product, points out the perceptual heterogeneity and personal interests of the audience and, in this

respect, highlights the essential seduction that circus creations must exert from the ring, the street or the stage in order to captivate the widest possible range of spectators' sensibilities and expectations.

The circus show

Classical circus has evolved into contemporary circus at different speeds depending on the cultural policies of each country. In the Catalan case, and despite the audience's positive reception, from the first attempts to do "another circus" (*Tripijoc Joc Trip*, La Tràgica company, 1976; Germans Poltrona, 1976; *Circ Cric*, 1978), until today, when we speak unwaveringly of auteur circus,¹ contemporary circus has grown in a challenging and difficult context in aspects such as the training of the artists, the creation and performance of shows, and relations with cultural authorities not overly enthusiastic about circus and more concerned with commercial aspects than with artistic evolution.

Federico Fellini, one of the few filmmakers who has approached circus with remarkable knowledge of this art and an intimate personal vision, asserted:

Circus is the father of all shows known and to be known. The circus show is a way of simultaneously creating and experiencing, of immersing oneself in the action without the rules that usually restrict the work of a writer or painter. And it seems to me that cinema is exactly the same. (Strich, 1990, p. 115)

The iconoclast clown Leo Bassi, heir to a circus lineage founded in 1850 by his great-grandfather Giovanni Bassi, explains:

Circus is based on a critical and open attitude. Circus people had sold themselves to a system based on nostalgia and a child audience. But the strength of my ancestors was that circus became a free place where everything was permitted. And also a space of knowledge: it is in circus that Europe sees for the first time an electric light bulb, cinema or exotic animals such as elephants or lions. There was a philosophical movement for the liberation of the human being, a popular, proletarian liberation, opposed to shows like opera, made for the upper class (Gutiérrez, 2013, p. 48).

Leo Bassi refers to the so-called traditional or classical circus, the one that his ancestors and he himself experienced, but that *critical and free attitude* is still present in the projects of contemporary circus creators.

With nearly sixty years of history² and among other constitutive factors, contemporary circus differs from classical circus in aspects such as stage codes, the language of symbols and the systems of creation, production,

1. It is important not to confuse the terms *contemporary circus*, *auteur circus* and *current circus*. *Auteur circus* is a branch of contemporary circus, and it should be noted that the denomination *current circus* — as the name suggests — encompasses all the modalities of circus currently undertaken, including classical circus.

2. Let us recall that in Europe, the French *nouveau cirque* appeared at the time of the events of May 68.

communication and performance. The social function of many shows of this type is not so much to entertain or amuse the audience (which is also the case) as to offer them shows that bring them emotional experiences, material for reflection and some existential benefit.

This circus expression is developed from a colourful diversity of aesthetic and conceptual universes arising from the creative drive of each soloist or company, a drive very often motivated by an experimental obsession that entails some sector of the audience, mirrored in the aesthetics of classical circus, debasing auteur circus shows with the argument – as recurring as it is inaccurate – that *this is not circus*.

Although, since the show formula established by Philip Astley in 1768, circus has historically been – like all the arts – a living being in constant evolution and mutation (Thétard, 34), the appearance of contemporary circus in the last century stirred the mental structures of some directors and impresarios of traditional circus, who considered the incipient stage formula as a usurpation, a kind of heresy perpetrated against the circus of old, while disqualifying it with arguments as outlandish as “the new circus is just a bunch of incompetent people in need of a shower.” A good example of the most rigid and reactionary fundamentalism, which, fortunately for the evolution of the circus arts, is increasingly residual today.

But the argument that *this is not circus* was heard again, for example, when in April 2014 Cesc Casadesús programmed at the Mercat de les Flors the solo show *Secret*, by the balancer, juggler, inventor and manipulator of objects Johann Le Guillerm (Cirque Ici). Let's look at the reasons for that reaction.

In the mid-20th century, the art and entertainment critic Sebastià Gasch (1897-1980) said that “the four pillars on which the circus is supported are strength, balance, grace and dexterity,” a statement equally as valid for the traditional circus that Gasch knew in depth as for the contemporary circus that he had just seen born.

Both in *Secret*³ and in later shows,⁴ Johann Le Guillerm⁵ does not work with conventional circus apparatus and props and, from a formal and visual point of view, his productions have little to do with those of any other circus artist, neither classical nor contemporary. However, this creator brings together, maintains and enhances, with an inventiveness that seems infinite, the four basic ingredients of the circus tradition proclaimed by Gasch (strength, balance, grace and dexterity), to which he adds the fruits of his experiments in the fields of physics, biomechanics and the dynamics of solids and fluids, among others.

For Johann Le Guillerm, circus means “questioning the limits and opening up the possibilities” (Le Guillerm, 2014). This experimental artist tests his physical strength by making a spiral from a round metal bar to then use it as a dance partner; he risks balancing on fragile wooden constructions made

3. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eqd6f_KrEUM (1')

4. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OSftcUxFt5U> (3' 48")

5. *De l'idée à l'objet*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4x05rBrfzQU> (1'33")

in the moment; he builds a dome by intertwining joists of more than two metres and then knocks it down with a single touch, or causes a spectacular rotating column of air that rises brightly to the roof of the tent. We are talking about feats that require strength, skill, balance, ingenuity, risk, prowess and emotional tension. In other words, we are talking about circus. As Joan Brossa argued, “the experimental tone always accompanies the evolution of art” (Brossa, 1985). A few years later, Woody Allen personalised the same concept: “You can’t move forward as an artist if you’re afraid to experiment, and I had no intention of limiting myself to what I already knew I was good at” (Mora, 2020).

All arts (including circus) respond to a way of looking at and understanding the world and of communicating this perspective while assuming the risk of being (and therefore the right to be) wrong. In this first third of the 21st century, the themes and arguments of contemporary circus shows multiply, as in consequence do the difficulty of transferring concepts and sensations to a basically kinetic and usually non-text-based theatrical expression.

It is interesting to observe how many European circus companies agree on some thematic lines that reflect (or create a metaphor for) certain issues or individual and/or collective concerns of our time: harmony, conflict/integration between people and/or social groups; forays into the subtle border between humanity and animality; concern about climate disaster; action-reaction-action between subject and object, and so on. We note that they are thematic lines that demonstrate the attempt to delve deeper into the human soul through research into the expressive capacities of acrobatics, clowning, balance, object manipulation and other physical skills.

Let’s look at three examples (in a small sample of the range of arguments that can be approached using circus language): through acrobatics, *NUYE* (Companyia de Circ “eia”, Mercat de les Flors, 2021) explores couple relationships and some personal affinities still stigmatised today; *Insània*, by the trapeze artist and clown Aïda Pascual (Ciacaïda, Fira de Circ de la Bisbal, 2023) raises the delicate issue of mental health in today’s societies; *L’absolu* (a “metaphysical circus” show by the company Boris Gibé/Les Choses de Rien – self-defined as a taming of the void, Grec 2023) shows the vicissitudes of a human being in a dangerously hostile space of air and water.

These are three examples that demonstrate that contemporary circus shows, far from inviting only contemplative escapism, look for answers to the individual-social being dichotomy and develop an awareness that, returning to Brossa, invites us “to travel without fleeing” (Brossa, 1982, pp. 156-157).

Legacy and conquest in auteur circus

Ever since Philip Astley, the circus show has always been receptive to technical and technological innovations, as well as crossovers with other artistic genres. This is an essential characteristic continued by contemporary circus, in which the creators prepare their shows with total creative freedom and experiment unapologetically in techniques, acts, apparatus, methodology, stories or dramaturgy. Following Giorgio Agamben, Professor Pere Martí

Bertran argues: “Those who keep a tradition alive are not those who conform to it, but those who transform it” (Martí Bertran, 2023).

In circus, contemporaneity and tradition are two inseparable realities that feed off each other.

A remarkable example of this assertion is *Vetus Venustas (Bella vellesa, Cíclicus company, SAT, Grec 2023)*.⁶ The show, which brings together classical and contemporary circus artists between the ages of 30 and 78, explores a very effective way to pass on tradition while renewing it. In the collaboration throughout the creative process, the veteran artists have passed on a wealth of knowledge to the young. And during breaks, meals, relaxed conversations and jokes, they have all shared the essences of circus, the different ways of facing life and the craft, little anecdotes, great stories and, above all, the essential circus ethics. Being able to live and work together for a few months has been a stimulus to innovation, for both young and veteran artists.

In an article published in the Italian journal *CIRCO*, stage pedagogue Alessandra Galante-Garrone wrote: “Beyond denominations and, especially, beyond fashions, what really matters is the link between memory and modernity, between the past and the present, because an art is always located between history and creation” (Galante-Garrone, 2000, p. 9).

Her criteria fully coincided with that of Joan Brossa, who in his speech at the Jocs Florals de Barcelona in 1985 declared that “one way to overcome tradition is to continue it, not to repeat it” (Brossa, 1985, p. 561). And, in a eulogy to the poet Enric Casassas, he ended by saying: “That is why I am one of those who believe that tradition must be understood as a conquest rather than a legacy” (Brossa, 1997, p. 740). Indeed, Joan Brossa knew, intellectually and empirically, that in order to evolve a tradition, the artist must find what best suits his personal parameters and then apply his innovative talent.

If we look at the careers of artists as different as Carles Santos, Benet Casablanca or Pina Bausch, and at contemporary French circus companies such as Cirque Archaos, Baró d’Evel, Bartabas’ Théâtre Équestre Zingaro or the aforementioned Johann Le Guillerm, we will see that some elements of tradition have been adopted to build a language of their own that undoubtedly contributes to the evolution of the respective arts. They are artists who make good the motto of the French poet and playwright René Char (1907-1988) defending the perpetuity of tradition: “Our heritage is not preceded by a testament.”

In reality, contemporaneity is nothing but the sum of tradition and the passage of time. It is worth bearing this in mind when some artists of *current circus* renege on tradition while continuing to think that they have discovered something new, or when some traditional circus artists and impresarios still feel that *contemporary circus may be contemporary but it’s not circus*.

6. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BgonYUVG-v4> (3’20”)

The circus artist

The Romanian acrobat Nicolai Oprescu “The Great Nicolai”, who performs an act using straps, told me in a 1992 interview: “Even if an act is technically complicated, the artist must know how to sell it as a simple and harmonious creation. Physical strength and effort must always come second” (Jané, 1998, p. 85).

Circus is obviously a performing art, but it is also an act of love for a craft that requires responsibility, passion, sacrifice, resilience and the capacity for personal and group improvement. For the artists who dedicate themselves to it, it is a philosophy of life, a way of being, and of being in the world. As Sebastia Gasch noted, “circus is games of the body and the spirit” (Gasch, 1931, p. 5).

Stage sincerity

I consider this an indispensable requirement. In the circus creator and artist, sincerity manifests itself by emptying oneself physically and sensorially throughout the creative process; in other words, from the first idea of the future show to the meeting with the audience. Gasch considered that the circus is the empire of truth (Gasch, 1954*a*), and that the naked truth of artists is the key to success, the strength and permanence of the circus show. A show, I would add, based on the joint dramaturgy of body and image, two elements that play with time and space to create emotionally significant figures.

In auteur circus, virtuosity, risk and technical prowess are not the primary goals of the artist or the greatest desire of much of the audience, but the aforementioned considerations of Sebastia Gasch and Nicolai Oprescu on truth and harmony are still present in contemporary circus. The creator and performer uses circus disciplines as a vehicle for ideas and stories – and this places contemporary circus art on another level of performing increasingly more difficult acts, so characteristic of traditional circus. Indeed, this added difficulty of contemporary creations lies in the transformation of circus techniques into a dramatic language that is put at the service of narratives that are not necessarily diegetic or descriptive, in which almost everything is suggested and open to free reception and personal interpretation by the spectator.

The anthropological substrate of contemporary circus emerges in the body-intellect-emotions triad. The artist and creator needs to be constantly connected with the audience and attuned to the pulse that emanates from the stalls, the stands or the street. And he must know how to play with such fragile tools as rhythm, intention, metaphor, abstraction, symbolism or poetic image (I think it was Paul Valéry who established that the strength of poetry lies in images). Contemporary circus has a great variety of techniques, formats, intentions and results but, like all arts, ultimately and with greater or lesser intensity, it addresses the human soul. Contemporary circus is as diverse and atomised as the different personalities and geographical origins of its creators/performers.

In this first third of the 21st century, auteur circus has experienced a certain inclination towards formal minimalism, and some soloists and companies put on small-format shows in yurts or small tents, while returning to the ring – which is a return to the circle, to the space of a more direct and sensorial relationship. Ignoring for now the economic and market factors that undoubtedly contribute to these minimalist choices, I would like to think that this trend is mainly due to the fact that the current generations of artists have reconnected with the essential drives of the human being and that they want to share with the audience from proximity and immediacy. Today, the circus creator and performer swings between prowess, stage writing and the poetic body (I borrow the concept from Jacques Lecoq to refer to the artist who seeks to convey sensations, suggestions or moods by basically using physicality). It could be said that with auteur circus we also travel through the passage that goes from the traditional circus show to poetic circus.

A matter of names

I have recently noticed that some young circus artists (especially those who, due to the lack of a higher circus school in Catalonia, have had to train abroad), prefer not to call themselves *artists*, but *performers* or *circus actors*. Although the name does not do the job, I consider that an artist is someone who creates art, a performer is someone who creates a performance, and that the noun actor refers to a theatrical performer. According to the *Dictionary of Theatre. Terms, Concepts, and Analysis* by the semiologist and professor Patrice Pavis, “performance art brings together visual arts, theatre dance, music, video, poetry and film, with no preconceived ideas” (Pavis, 1998, pp. 339-340). And he defines performer as an “English term sometimes used to signal the difference with the term actor, considered too exclusive of the actor of the theatre play.” Regarding the word actor, he explains: “The actor, when playing a role or embodying a character, is at the very centre of the theatrical event” (Pavis, 1998, p. 33).

It must be kept in mind that, as much as the circus show is porous and flirts with theatre, dance, fakirism, mime, illusionism or visual arts, it does not mean that the circus artist is an actor, dancer, mime, illusionist or visual artist. Even if he has acquired a certain mastery of these specialties, he remains a circus artist, a designation that very precisely specifies the person who dedicates himself to any modality and discipline of this millenary art.

Beyond the epithets, however, the important thing is that contemporary circus artists make their shows a communicative act that elicits emotions and provides some kind of existential content to the audience. The authentic circus creator is the one who possesses a solid artistic, technical and human background, has something new to say, and knows how to express it through his own and distinct stage style and language.

For this very reason, artists and creators must be ever more versatile. Charlie Chaplin said that the craft of the circus artist consists of twenty crafts at once. I would add that it is these twenty crafts, plus a creative soul, and a rootedness in their time and geographical space that can truly shape the universality of a circus artist.

Artist, apparatus, object

The circus's investigative spirit is also reflected in the props, apparatus and scenography: from the flying trapeze invented by Jules Léotard⁷ (Strehly, 1903, pp. 173-183) to the wooden planks of the company XY,⁸ the history of circus is full of stagecraft findings.

In a fragment of an ultimately unpublished interview from 2018, the wirewoman and tightrope walker Mariona Moya (La Córcoles company) told me: “Current artists, instead of conforming to the limitations of the apparatus or the object, shape the objects and apparatus to their criteria and their expressive needs.”

The relationship of some artists with the apparatus and props they work with is particularly interesting. In contemporary circus, the artist's physical relationship with the object can go beyond functional utility to enter a less tangible dimension. For understandable reasons, the artist maintains such an intimate bond and interdependence that their working relationship becomes almost a subject-object symbiosis (and, in some cases, even establishes something of a love-hate bond). The stage poetry that sometimes erupts between artists and their apparatus is more the result of an emotional relationship than that of a strict mechanical manipulation — anyone who has read *Traité du funambulisme* by Philippe Petit (Petit, 1997) will know what I mean. The relationship with the prop or the apparatus can even become a way of projecting the self, a metaphor for the “I, individual ↔ I, social being” dichotomy.

However, I also agree with the circus director and choreographer Samuel Jornot when he says that the object or apparatus should not be understood from an animist conception. Certainly, what is needed is for the artist to relate to it by following its physical behaviour, to establish a dialogue with it based on how it responds to its stimuli — an attitude that does not exclude the poetic event commented on in the previous paragraph. It means, simply (!) that artist and object create the show *together*.

A good example of the artist-apparatus conjunction is the stagecraft investigations of the juggler and wire walker Manolo Alcántara: *Locomotorio* (2005),⁹ *Plecs* (2010, in collaboration with Enric Ases and Karl Stets),¹⁰ *Rudo* (2014)¹¹ and *Maña* (2023)¹² are four shows in which artistic personality merges with machinery, apparatus and objects to produce an elevated and surprising poetic level.

7. Gymnast born in Toulouse (1838-1870), Léotard presented *Flight from trapeze to trapeze* in 1859 at the Cirque Napoleon in Paris (today Cirque d'Hiver) and was the first trapeze artist to do a somersault between two trapezes. Léotard worked with very tight-fitting leggings that were a novelty at the time and are still used today with the name 'leotards' in his honour.

8. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fV2sIEqod4A> (4' 10" to 4'48")

9. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_l2jTFhKTo (2'56")

10. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Th8Hz-Frjco> (2'55")

11. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KZtxxVngx9E> (1'42")

12. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=txkorumlfl> (2'437")

In the same orbit we can place the performances of the choreographer and performer Jordi Galí¹³ or shows such as *Le vide / Essai de cirque* (2009-2016)¹⁴ in which Fragan Gehlker reflects on the absurdity of life through a performative relationship with the vertical rope that establishes a parallel with the suffering relationship between Sisyphus and his rock.

In this section, it is also necessary to mention the kind of artists who take their relationship with the object or apparatus to the limit of obsession. I can mention, among others, the juggler on wheels Professor Karoli,¹⁵ fascinated by riding all kinds of circular apparatus, and the wire walker, tightrope walker, and one-man band Karl Stets, who with the shows *Cuerdo*¹⁶ and the aforementioned *Plecs* puts both classic acts on another conceptual level. Also the *Senyor de les Baldufes*,¹⁷ in which the Chilean Pablo Potocnjak (Penélope y Aquiles company) plays with *invisible* spinning tops and also the “biggest spinning top in the world”, or the French juggler François Chat, who classifies his relationship with objects as a symbiosis, to the point of giving the feeling that it is not him manipulating the object, but the object that manipulates him (Moreigne, 2010, p. 39).

A similar case is that of Swiss Maedir Rigolo (Swiss Nouveau Cirque), creator of *Sanddorn*,¹⁸ a balancing act with long petioles of palm leaves that seems inspired by Alexander Calder’s mobiles. The artist begins by delicately placing a light bird’s feather in horizontal balance on top of a petiole. He then places feather and petiole on top of another palm vein and places all three on another petiole. With one hand he holds the petiole he has just placed under the unstable ensemble, and with the other hand (then with the toes of one foot) he picks up the next petiole from the ground and places it under the mobile under construction. It is like a slow, leisurely, penetrating Zen dance.

Thus, calmly, in an assembly process similar to the building of a *castell aixecat per sota*¹⁹ (and with a constant swinging that threatens the delicate stability of the ensemble and causes a magnetic tension in the audience), he builds a mobile of thirteen levels of palm nerves in fragile balance, one on top of the other, with the feather always swinging at the top, like an *enxaneta*. When the whole assembly is completed, it is carefully balanced on his head. Then, with a cautious but skilful gesture on one foot, he lifts and places vertically a much thicker petiole that was also lying on the ground. It is the base on which the mobile is placed, which continues to swing in a manifestly unstable balance. The feat draws fervent applause from the audience (or sometimes not, as they are absolutely sucked *into* the action).

13. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fothwk_M8_Q (2'10")

14. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3PYO7h94eeY> (1'36")

15. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lZVqTBJ46KI> (2'27")

16. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RF9T57f_Snw (1'22")

17. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LGb5EMloB6c> (1'31")

18. Currently presented by Marula Rigolo: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DpXLc-WkMoU> (14')

19. *Castell*. Catalan tradition in which a group of men and women climb each other’s shoulders in order to build a human tower of several layers. The *enxaneta* is a little boy or little girl who climbs to the top of the *castell* and crowns it. A *castell aixecat per sota* (raised from below) has the logical difficulty that the *castellers* must start from below and climb to the top.

But the act has not yet finished. When the applause subsides, the artist approaches the mobile and removes the light feather from the top. The construction collapses violently all by itself. A metaphor?

Personal circus

Some of the trends observed in this first third of the century reflect the concerns of the current generations of circus creators. There is, in general, a desire to be honest, to communicate more or less personal experiences through the show. It is not – speaking in general – about individualism or personal or team egotism, but an uninhibited and positive attitude to life that seeks to exhibit and share experiences, fears, anxieties, wishes, dreams, hopes, frustrations... with the spectators (who are, let us not forget, the ultimate motivation for any show).

With the title *Personal circus* I intend to establish a prudent distance from the concepts *self-narrative* and *autofictional theatre*, which have recently caused so much outcry.

Self-narrative can range from the memoir genre to poetry and song through narrative and the novel (categories that all admit a variable margin of self-fiction). The writer Carlota Gurt argues that, to one degree or another, the author's life is always present in her work (Gurt, 2024). But I want to emphasise a basic aspect: between the literary author and the reader there is always a distance (in time and space).

In the case of autofictional theatre, the character played by the actor or actress can be a more or less close reflection of certain features and experiences of the playwright or the actor, but (with some exceptions, such as Ada Vilaró, who with *360 grams* or *La memòria del gel* directly tells of real moments of her life experience), the truth is that the actor or actress *plays* characters that are not exactly them, and that, therefore, to one degree or another, they are *faking*.

But personal circus is a case unlike those of self-narrative and autofictional theatre: circus is not, in any of its modes and formats, a fictional art. In addition, and unlike the temporal and spatial distance between the writer and the reader, in circus the artist and the spectator live and breathe in the same moment and in the same space. And it must be said again that all the actions and situations take place in a strictly real way: a flying trapeze artist may or may not achieve the triple somersault, but the fraction of a second that separates both possibilities leaves no room for deception. As Gasch proclaimed, circus is the empire of truth.

On the other hand, and unlike autofictional theatre, in personal circus the artist does not perform: he does what he does. His (poetic) body obeys his natural impulses. This difference, which someone might consider minor, is decisive. It is nothing new: the historical avant-gardes already proclaimed the abolition of the border between art and life.

The reader of this dossier has probably seen auteur circus shows in which there seems to be no distance between the production and the life experiences of the artist or company. Moreover, sometimes the show seems

to be a sublimated extension of the inner life of the artist and creator: if so, it may well be a consequence of the fact that, looking *inward* on his way to understanding the world, the circus creator uninhibitedly projects himself in public as he is: this is precisely the artist who does *personal circus*.

Let's analyse some examples:

In *Le Grain* (Venice Biennale, 2000), the French juggler Philippe Ménard amply demonstrated the results of his obsession with achieving new records in juggling feats. Transsexual since 2008 and now Phia Ménard (Non Nova company), she has projected her (internally difficult and painful) process of personal metamorphosis into the metamorphoses of the stage material of her show *P.P.P (Position Parallèle au Plancher)*,²⁰ in which she manipulates ice ("a material in constant transformation"). The same temperament is seen in *L'après-midi d'un foehn*²¹ and *Vortex*²² (Mercat de les Flors, 2014), two hybrids of juggling, ballet and puppetry in which she transforms the props and transforms herself by metaphorically stripping off her hindrances, disguises and accumulated taboos.

In the circus-opera *Sama Samaruck Suck Suck* (Carles Santos, La Villette and TNC, 2002), the exceptional Quebecois contortionist Angela Laurier channelled the self-hate of her own body in an exercise of contortionism in which she slowly emerged from a large snail shell, contorting herself and narrating aloud (with the technical difficulty that this simultaneity entails for contortionists) the traumatic relationship she experienced with herself and which drove her to become a contortionist.

In *Pelat*²³ (2013, still on tour in 2024), Joan Català reflects his state of stupor from when he was a child and watched the farmers working in the fields, or when in a locksmith's shop he observed the almost choreographic movements of the old locksmiths engrossed in their work. Based on these experiences, in *Pelat* Català he explores the choreographic possibilities of manipulating a four-metre-long log, with which he ends up involving the spectators in a ceremony evocative of lost rafts, popular folklore, community songs and resonances of pagan rituals.

In the children's show *Com els pingüins*²⁴ (Temporada Alta, 2023), the clown Helena Escobar "La Bleda"²⁵ draws on a personal physical difficulty (which she declares and reveals bluntly) to construct a positivist claim of how to face life's problems.

In *Cuirassa oberta* (L'Estruch, 2024), the Mallorcan Marilén Ribot's performance is a profoundly intimate revelation (and also hard and poetic, abstract and metaphorical), which revolves around a double and intense personal vicissitude. To convey this life experience, the creator and performer uses acrobatics (Cyr wheel and aerial prism), balancing on bottles,

20. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EqnzJJWwh5M> (2'55")

21. <https://mercatflors.cat/espectacle/lapres-midi-dun-foehn-6/> (1')

22. <https://vimeo.com/562692455> (1'31")

23. <https://vimeo.com/59304557> (4'06")

24. <https://www.lasalateatre.cat/ca/programacio/c/93-com-els-pingins.html> (2')

25. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9w9MKlwS3Uo> (1'32")

walking and lying on broken glass and throwing knives. Ribot declares that “I needed to tell the story of this personal moment, because I find that what is personal is also universal, even if each spectator’s interpretation is completely their own.”

There is also a great deal of personal projection in the *circ d’entranya* (visceral circus) of the Catalan company Los Galindos. Shows such as *Maiurta* (2011),²⁶ *Encara no sé, Lola* (2017)²⁷ and *Udul* (2018)²⁸ share genuine life experiences and communicate feelings (often surrealistically), through stage pieces that, simple only in appearance, have an emotional impact on spectators of all ages.

In the preparation of this category of shows, improvisations play an important specific part, which bring out all kinds of personal experiences that then need to be worked on dramaturgically. The aforementioned (p. 9) tight-rope walker Mariona Moya stated in the interview cited (p. 9) that the link between the creative act and personal life is precisely what gives body and meaning to the work of art and makes it authentic: “In the circus creation processes that I have experienced, you work from improvisations, and you pour all your emotional baggage into the improvisations, everything that stirs in your guts, the good and the bad, the crises and wonders” (Jané, 2018, p. 6).²⁹

A particular area of projection of one’s own self in a show is that of the contemporary clown, in which it is very often difficult to disentangle the character of the person who creates it (it is worth saying that this projection is also found in some classical clowns). The true artist clown does not perform the actions or the stories but simply (!) is a clown and does who she or he does. And not because, psychologically, *the character consumes the person*, but because *the person expands into the character*.

Indeed, all clowns or clown artists search within themselves (sometimes in the most intimate and darkest corners of their interior) looking for those characteristic features of their own personality which, exaggerated, minimised or distorted, will allow them to face any stage situation with a temperament, an attitude to life and a spontaneity that are wholly believable because they have emanated from their inner truth.

In the lecture *El clown ritual, una figura fonamental en altres societats*, the professor of Religious Anthropology at the UB Manuel Delgado reflected: “[the clown] warns us, in one way or another, that everything could be taken from another perspective, with a more philosophical, more intellectual dimension. [...] In the end, what the clown does is to place us, basically, in a sudden and sometimes somewhat cruel way (remember that there is nothing crueller than humour, irony) in front of another truth, another mirror” (Delgado, 2007).

Undoubtedly, the clown is still an (often uncomfortable) broken mirror in which the virtues, defects, hopes, contradictions and frustrations of

26. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MaGsz5AzWXI> (1’03”)

27. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d2Gpb5mC_Uw (4’)

28. <https://www.apcc.cat/ca/espectacles/389/udul> (2’08”)

29. <http://www.girona.cat/cultura/cat/entreactes.php?idreg=2980>.

human beings are reflected. Because, ultimately, the clown provides us with reliable information about the paradox of our lives. This has been done or is being done (to mention just a few names) by Rhum, Grock, Ramper, Rivel and Zavatta among other classic clowns and by contemporary clowns such as Dimitri, Jango Edwards, Leo Bassi, Tortell Poltrona, Claret Clown, Laura Herst, Pepa Plana, Monti, Los Excéntricos and Alba Sarraute. All of them have extracted bits of themselves and combined them with their own creativity to develop intelligent and socially responsible humour.

Some questioned and reformulated disciplines

To try to approach both the close link between circus and society and some of the various fluctuations experienced over time between them, it will be useful for us to go back to the 19th century to talk about the American circus impresario Phileas Taylor Barnum (1810-1891) and his freak shows, first at the Museum of Broadway and later at “P. T. Barnum’s Grand Traveling Museum, Menagerie, Caravan & Hippodrome”.

These attractions, deceptively scientific, consisted of the exhibition of teratological phenomena: giants, dwarfs, bearded women, deformities, chimpanzee girls, elephant men, Siamese twins, and so on, as well as hoaxes, such as sea monsters, talking heads, the mermaid of the Fiji Islands or the black woman Joyce Heth (“one of the greatest natural curiosities of all time”), who, according to Barnum, in 1835 “was the 161-year-old nursing mummy of President George Washington”). Most of the audience — at that time ignorant and gullible — swallowed these and other hoaxes with a combination of admiration and fear. Barnum’s lucrative business had many imitators for a long time — and until recently. The director Tod Browning featured such sordidness in the film *Freaks* (1932), in which, by the way, some of the artists-freaks of Barnum’s circus took part.

Sebastià Gasch, who mentioned he has seen *Freaks* at the (then cinema) Arnau in the Avinguda del Paral·lel in Barcelona, defined it as “a terrible show, with a disturbing charm and a rare quality” (Gasch, 1961, p. 58).

In the 1970s, some Spanish circuses still put on acts with men and women affected by dwarfism, and I do not recall any comments of rejection from the public. But in life things are “normal” until they stop being so: in this first third of the 21st century, no circus impresario would dare to present this double humiliation (to the artists and to the audience), and this is a significant sign of the (excessively slow) changes in social sensitivity.

With the disappearance of freaks as an attraction, in recent decades the evolution of European society has shown a gradual lack of interest in — and, in some cases, a head-on rejection of — some acts that had been very successful throughout the 19th century and first three quarters of the 20th but which today are *unpleasant*. Among others — and without going into the controversial, problematic and still unresolved issue of animals in circus —, strong men and women, hair hanging, human projectiles (also called cannonball), knife-throwers, fakirs and even contortionists.

We should ask ourselves if this current lack of interest and/or rejection is caused by a progressive awareness shared by circus creators and society, if it is motivated by the *politically correct* precept, or if perhaps it is the result of a lack of spirit of renewal on the part of professionals in each speciality act. Could it be a combination of all three cases?

The verifiable fact is that today's audience appreciates the effort of some original circus artists and companies to adapt some of these disciplines to contemporary social sensitivity. Let's look at five specialities (strength, fakirism, knife-throwing, contortionism and apnea) to see that, without ceasing to be inspired by tradition, the inventiveness of current creators reformulates them and gives them a new dimension in terms of conceptual, ethical, aesthetic and social approaches.

Hercules (strength acts)

This is an act practised mainly by men who, like Sebastià Llull "The Mallorcan Samson" (1930-2007), can lift a hundred kilos with one hand as well as bend 24 mm diameter iron bars using his head as an anvil, or drag lorries loaded with people with the force of his teeth. It must be said that there have also been strong women, although in smaller numbers, such as the American Laverie Vallee "Charmion, the strongwoman", filmed in 1901 by Thomas Alva Edison.

The circus strongmen had a reputation for being rough and aggressive people. I do not know if this is true, but if it were there are some exceptions, like "The Great Apollo", a strong Uruguayan who made a living in the Gran Circo Mundial by ripping out thick telephone wires and hammering huge nails with his bare fist into a plank of wood. This burly specialist told me in 1992 that what in his person may seem like a paradox at the same time is not: "The circus artist must know how to push his physical, artistic and human possibilities to the limit. Our job is not to create a fictional universe, but to perform a task of synthesis that consists of choosing our best experiences, turning them into a show and offering them to an audience that comes to the circus thirsty for excitement" (Jané, 1998, p. 85).

Although this discipline has lost the admiration it had aroused in other times, Le Cirque du Soleil demonstrates its validity by integrating into the dramaturgy of the show *Alegría* (versions 1998 and 2024) several appearances of a strongman who uses doses of tenderness in his stage relationship with a fragile character ("Little Tamir") and a kind and protective attitude towards his fellow performers in the ring.

In 2019, at one point in the show *Un cirque plus juste*, the robust Finnish juggler and object manipulation artist Jani Nuutinen (Circo Aereo, Mercat de les Flors 2019), evoked the classic figure of the strongman juggling heavy iron spheres, an act that ended with him throwing one in the air and catching it with the nape of his neck, in the manner of traditional strongmen.³⁰

30. <https://circoaereo.fr/spectacle/un-cirque-plus-juste/> (2'37")

Fakirism

Fakirism is an art of self-control
and a challenge to oneself
and will always exist.
(Tortell Poltrona)

This discipline based on resistance to physical pain is performed in several types of shows, including circus. Although the existence of the so-called *fake fakirs*, who simulate mastery of both hypnotism and telekinesis, fakirism does not admit fakes because everything in it is physical and takes place before the eyes of the spectators.

The range of fakirs is quite varied: among other demonstrations of pain control, they swallow swords, chew light bulbs, pierce their cheeks with needles, insert daggers into their nose, play with fire, swallow or spit it out as if it were a volcano, lie on a bed of nails or a carpet of broken glass and often show off their skill by hypnotising snakes and crocodiles. Today, these exercises can still elicit reactions of anguish or rejection among some members of the audience.

Josep Miret “Fakir Kirman” (“I don’t master pain; in fact, I don’t feel it”) is probably the best known in Catalonia and in Spain, but he also performs in international circuits. Joan Brossa’s favourite artist, his most famous acts consist of eating light bulbs or the enormous volcano of fire emanating from his mouth, among other feats. Kirman, who also performs (real) hypnosis under the name of “Professor Kobrak”, has earned the prestige of legendary 20th-century Catalan fakirs such as Lluís Molist “Tamara Bey”, Francesc Piñol Regàs “Sager” and Antoni Moreno “Fachín”.

Although recently fakirism has not been very common in circus shows, the audience continues to enjoy acts with fire, as shown by those performed by Kirman himself and Jaime Oms “Fakir Testa”,³¹ the African artists who perform limbo and food juggling with burning objects, a Mister Burn (who in the 1990s set himself on fire in the circus ring), the extremely rapid jugglers with fire from *Alegría* (Cirque du Soleil, 1998 and 2024) or the participatory *fire jam* at the Festival de Circ de Terrassa 2023.

In *Instintos ocultos* (Grec 98), Leo Bassi lay bare-chested on a surface of broken glass and got up with his back covered with scratches and blood.

Marilén Ribot performs with the same veracity in her show *Cuirassa oberta* (p. 12) in which she walks, sits and rolls over broken glass. Both Bassi and Ribot show that circus disciplines may not cause anguish or rejection among the audience if, transformed into dramatic material, they form part of a story.

31. Testa also performs acts of great physical risk, such as lifting and swinging a butane cylinder suspended from two tuna fishing hooks fixed under the eyelids: <https://bit.ly/3YomjtH>.

Knife-throwing

Introduced into European shows by the Chinese troupe Arr-Hee in 1832 (in 1864 they performed at the Gran Teatre del Liceu in Barcelona),³² this is a circus speciality within the so-called target disciplines, which also include shooting a rifle, handgun and crossbow, or throwing darts, among others.

It is a traditionally male technique consisting of throwing knives and other cutting tools from some distance into a vertical wooden board as close as possible to the contours of the body of a person (generally a woman) standing against the board and facing the thrower. It is a dangerous act, even more so when the board is a spinning wheel, also vertical, on which the girl-target is immobilised. With the wheel spinning, the thrower throws one knife after another while the audience holds their breath because of the obvious risks to the human target.³³

At Circ Raluy, the much-missed Silvano Giribaldi performed this act with his wife Daniela Coatti immobilised on the spinning wheel. The stage posture, concentration and cold blood with which this artist worked made me wonder, one night after the show, whether they had ever had an accident. He replied to me modestly, without a shadow of affectation: “Ciascuno il suo mestiere”.³⁴

However, trust in the thrower does not prevent the audience from having their hearts in their mouths throughout the act because human error is also possible. Sebastià Gasch used to say that people go to the circus to enjoy, not to suffer. But this speciality act has a morbid – and quite macho – component, even though on some occasions (few), the target is male.

Some circus artists have overturned the approaches of knife-throwing by replacing the woman-target with a drawn silhouette (sometimes, that of the thrower or his shadow, a detail that, depending on the narrative of which the act forms part, can open an interesting range of dramaturgical possibilities). Some examples of this variant include Jordi Aspa (Escarlata Circus), Martí Soler Gimbernat (Compagnie Daraomai) or the production *Suspensión* by the Madrid company Nueveuno.³⁵

The artists can also throw the knives against themselves, as Marilén Ribot does in the aforementioned *Cuirassa oberta*: standing or lying on a horizontal wooden board, she lets the knives fall – which pass by her body as if they were drops of water – to test herself in a metaphorical choreography of female empowerment.³⁶

The Russian-Argentinean duo Domichovski & Agranov performs a musical version of this act in the show *Davaiiii* (2019). Sasha Agranov starts playing the cello. There is no person or drawn silhouette on the board. Pablo Domichovski starts throwing knives against the board accompanied by the music of the cellist Agranov. When he has thrown all of them, Agranov stops

32. Diario de Barcelona, 3/11/1864.

33. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SMM4WbcZNvo> (1'14")

34. To each his craft.

35. <https://vimeo.com/428969687> (2' 38")

36. <https://vimeo.com/893831401> (2' 03")

playing the cello, moves to the board and with two drumsticks performs a short concert playing the knife blade as if it were a xylophone.

Breaking point,³⁷ by Alexander Weibel, has a strong component of invention, abstraction, technical precision, vindication and staging. This artist overturns the classic dynamic of the act: he does not throw the knives against a participant or against his own shadow, but against the violin that he has played delicately at some points of the performance, during which he has explicitly shown the extreme care with which he treats the musical instrument.

Weibel fixes the violin to the revolving wheel (once the audience has followed him until here, the contours of the instrument can suggest a woman's silhouette; in any case, replacing the woman-target with the violin can be read as a metaphorical reference to female fragility). Once the violin has been fixed, the artist attaches a little further down another very delicate instrument: his laptop.

Weibel takes a few steps back. The board starts to revolve and he keeps throwing knives. When some of the knives do not stick in the board and bounce on the floor, that sound makes the same thrill as when there is a woman on the target.

The act ends happily. Alexander Weibel picks up his laptop and connects it to a large screen. The computer camera has recorded the whole act, so that the audience become the person who is usually immobilised on the revolving wheel. In other words, Weibel gives the audience the same objective vision as the woman when she sees the knives coming. This impression experienced and shared with the audience is direct, visceral and, at some moments, frightening.

Not even Joan Brossa had gone so far:

The camera placed on the trapeze
swings over the spectators
(the acrobat's point of view).
(Brossa, 1987, p. 259)

Weibel's rereading of the classic act is a clever contribution that, along with having unquestionable artistic value, elicits some sociocultural reflections. Among some of those possible, I personally make two: the subsidiary role of the woman as an object in a certain way of doing circus, and the overvaluing of risk and virtuosity as a dramatic resource to stir up the morbid vein of some audience members.

These examples of knife-throwing in contemporary circus evidence the aim to abandon the typical (and sometimes clichéd) risk inherent in the physical feat to explore another type of risk: that of renewing tradition through the stage language while responding to the sensitivity of today's society.

37. <https://vimeo.com/185126501> (tightrope walking and knife-throwing, 4' 55'')

Contortionism

Also called *rubber* in classic circus jargon, it is a branch of acrobatics that works based on body flexibility taken to extremes that ordinary people cannot achieve.

It is a mostly female act, as women's anatomy is generally more flexible than men's. In the mid-20th century, the Portuguese contortionist Fatima Zohra attracted many female artists to this act, but there have been male contortionists in all periods, such as the American Chester Kingston, who in 1920 and 1935 performed in Barcelona dressed as a Chinaman performing the exercises at hitherto unseen speed, which he peppered with his comic talent. In 1959 and 1961, at the Circo Americano and the Circo Nacional de Italia respectively, the Barcelona audience could applaud the contortionist Joy Kay in an act of "delicate poetry", as Sebastià Gasch wrote in *Destino* in 1961.

In 2002, in the production *Junior 2002, el sueño de una estrella* (Gran Circo Mundial), the Argentinean contortionist Zamorate fitted into a glass carafe, in a feat that had we not seen it with our own eyes, we would have sworn was completely impossible.

Usually, contortionism acts were formerly unpleasant to watch, deprived of any grace or elegance. The Chinese, by combining dislocation with balance and juggling, infused contortionism with rhythm and harmony. There is no monstrosity in their movements, and nor do these cause the impression of fatigue or effort, but a feeling of purity, that something supernatural that captivates us in circus and music hall. (Gasch, 1959)

It is curious (and at the same logical) that the master of critics qualified contortionism as a *formerly* unpleasant act. I say curious because today, so many years after that 1959, contortionists and dislocation artists still provoke a series of reactions that can range from admiration to rejection as well as uneasiness, morbidity and even an obscure erotic perturbation. In fact, the popular imaginary has also seen contortionism as a show closer to the old fairground stalls than to the standards of beauty usually attributed to circus.

And I say that it is at the same time logical that Gasch used the adverb *formerly*, because in 1959 he had already had the opportunity to applaud Chinese artists who innovated with Western forms of contortionism (today he would show more enthusiasm if he could enjoy the harmonious perfection of Mongol contortionists in the Cirque du Soleil or at the International Circus Festival of Monte-Carlo). The reason for this *curious and at the same time logical* dichotomy is quite simple: both now and in Gasch's time, among the audience attending a show, each person has a world of their own and personal experiences that condition their aesthetic tastes, sensorial impulses and spontaneous reactions.

In *L'acrobatie et les acrobates* (1903), considered one of the three bibles of acrobatics (along with *Acrobatica e Ginnastica* by Alberto Zucca, 1902, and *Trois dialogues de l'exercice de sauter et voltiger en l'air* by Arcangelo Tuccaro, 1599), Georges Strehly argues that contortionism is an unhealthy

curiosity, that of all circus acts it is the least attractive and the one that deserves less encouragement, and ends by predicting it an uncertain future by arguing that all the figures against nature of the dislocation artists are not only contrary to aesthetics, but align them with fairground phenomena (Strehly, pp. 173-183).

More or less sustained over time, this relative rejection of contortionism began to diminish with the emergence of auteur circus contortionists, who re-dressing this discipline with a new aesthetic and dramaturgical approach have taken a great step forward so that it can be accepted by more people.

I already mentioned (p. 12) Angela Laurier's contribution to the production *Sama Samaruck Suck Suck* by Carles Santos. I will add two more examples.

The practical and non-scholastic experience of the Biscay-born contortionist Ane Miren has provided *kontorsionism*³⁸ with an aesthetics that escapes many of the parameters of the act. She currently expands her praxis in this area as a teacher of body awareness, flexibility and contortionism. It is very likely that the spectators who were able to see the production by Lluís Danés *Tranuites* (TNC, 2006) remember Ane Miren contorting on Lluís Llach's grand piano to the song *Com un arbre nu*³⁹ or fitting into a suitcase while from a strange music box Llach was playing the tune of *Viatge a Ítaca*.⁴⁰ With her silent and properly expressive body, Ane Miren largely overcame the illustrative language to enter an abstract symbiosis with the spirit of the lyrics and the music of those two songs. As the dancer and choreographer Montse Colomé points out, "from abstraction it is possible to reach the specific" (Colomé, 2022).

The Quebecois Andréane Leclerc developed *Cherepaka* (Fira Trapezi and Mercat de les Flors, 2014, and Sismògraf, 2015) taking inspiration from three sources: the book *Logique du sens* by Gilles Deleuze, the paintings by Francis Bacon and the duality that exists between the perennial nature of a turtle's shell and the fleetingness of the reptile's life. The contortionist Leclerc does not seek to prove her excellent technical level. On the contrary, she leaves aside the codes of classic contortionism and puts her anatomy at the service of a communication language that manages to convey a deeply human drama. Leclerc transforms the body technique into a ritual of transformation in which she transubstantiates into a suffering soul and gets that the audience, stuck to their seats, to breathe with her, and with her we almost fall into despair. For this artist, "physical capacity and feat are, only, the vocabulary to build metaphors and distorting mirrors of reality" (Jané, 2015).

The examples cited show that if the acts considered *unpleasant* come to form part of a dramaturgy they can erase the negative components that bring them into question.

38. Ane Miren García writes (*kontorsionism*) with a k "to differentiate body technique from the idea culturally associated with contortionism."

39. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P6TTGi4WS3A> (4')

40. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c1ngTrGNt7Y> (3'36")

Apnea

Although it is quite a typical discipline in circus, the journalist and writer Antoni Rué Dalmau records that in 1877 a Miss Luslyne performed at Barcelona's Teatre Tívoli, a French woman who smoked, drank and ate underwater inside a glass tank (Rué Dalmau, 1947, p. 75). According to Rué, the audience did not know if it was a trick. He also explains that, two years later, an imitator of Miss Luslyne performed in Barcelona, advertised as the “fish woman”.

At the same time, the famous trapeze artist and woman-projectile Miss Zaëo was fired out of a cannon and into water (De Ritis, 2008, pp. 197 and 499, note 26).

In March 1940, the Barcelona-based Circ Olympia (written Olimpia in Franco's time) introduced *The seal man*, who spoke, ate, drank and smoked while submerged in a container full of water.

In the Circo Ringland of the Raluy family, in 1978 the diver Luis Castanera “Jimmy Stevenson” swam dodging two sharks in a glass aquarium filled with cloudy water. The attraction made a great impression, but it was later revealed that in fact the sharks were animatronic.

In 2014, while the law to prohibit animals in circuses was considered in the Catalan Parliament, Fabio Zavatta's Circ de Catalunya was provisionally authorised to perform an act included in *Piraña Show* in which a swimmer dived into an aquarium full of piranhas and emerged unhurt. Faced with the danger that, if the law was passed, Zavatta had to remove this attraction from his show, he exclaimed: “But they're only piranhas!” (Segura, 2014).

In the 2015-2016 season, the Mercat de les Flors programmed *Apnea*, by Rodrigo Sobarzo, resident artist at the Jan van Eyck Academie in Maastricht. According to the press dossier, the show developed “based on immersion, the creation of a space in physical and mental suspension underwater.” Sobarzo sought to “immortalise the body by holding his breath and immersing in water, reaching a light discomfort due to the lack of oxygen and water pressure.” *Apnea* aimed to confront the audience with “everything that we always take for granted, which is the presence of air around us.” Regardless of the result, it was quite a conceptually different approach from the previous examples.

The show *La veu submergida*, by the acrobat and former artistic swimmer Maria Palma, is much more ambitious. Shown in an open rehearsal in June 2023 within the programme *Guaret, creacions a foc lent* (FiraTàrrrega), in July the Grec 2023 programmed it at the Centre de les Arts Lliures, where it returned more fully developed in January 2024.

Maria Palma's production revolves around the symbolism of breathing, and conducts an introspective examination of the psychology of a woman who does not accept her Christian name: Maria. This starting point leads to a sometimes hypnotic show, with an abstract beauty that epitomises the *Lecoquian* concept of the poetic body. The lighting and sound space complement Maria Palma, who dances, confesses aloud, suffers and at moments gets mad and, along the way, offers us harmonious dance figures that immerse the audience into a state of mind that is difficult to calibrate.

La veu submergida is a clear demonstration of how tradition can be updated from a contemporary vision and encourage the spectator to make intimate reflections.

The circus artist and the spectator

The audience's responsibility is to interpret
what they see on the stage

(Bob Wilson)

Contemporary circus is a metacultural show that enters through the senses and targets both the emotional system and intellect. Generally, it offers different levels of reading to the audience, regardless of age, culture or social background.

Undoubtedly, the audience is the main reason, the determining goal of any show: creative ideas are meaningless if they do not serve to construct a stage piece and share it with the audience. Heiner Müller (1929-1995) gave the audience the role of final interpreter, as the recipient of the whole creative process.

The critic Sebastià Gasch wrote in the magazine *Destino* (Gasch, 1954b):

The most curious impression, and also the most profound, given by the audience in the circus is that cluster of individual sensations that merge with each other, until they acquire a unanimity that can only be compared to that of fevered multitudes. This human boiling pot, which invades the stands on all four sides, has only one soul. They react in the same way and the feelings experienced overflow in unison.

This vibrant article by Gasch is quite accurate, both in terms of the circus audience from the pre – and post – Spanish Civil War period and the spectators with whom the critic shared a stand in France during his exile (1939-1942). However, as the stubborn advocate of avant-gardes was very familiar with the wisdom of the saying “there are as many opinions as there are people”, he concluded the article with these words: “Every country has a different audience. What am I saying? Every country? No, every city and even every day of the week.”

Gasch was referring, of course, to the audience of classical circus, but we note that in the four sentences of the end of the article he qualified (albeit partially) his statement about the *unanimity of individual sensations*. And in the seven decades that distance us from that text, the aesthetic and conceptual interests of the circus audience have diversified so much that it is no longer possible to generically speak of the *audience* or of the *spectator*, because this category of people has ceased to be that more or less homogenous whole of the 1950s. Today, being a circus spectator is an exercise in freedom which has a lot of the creative and, consequently, also the unpredictable, as the Brossa of post-theatre and object poems knew very well.

Today's circus audience is a conglomerate of individualities that can be very different from each other – to the extent of having completely opposed criteria faced with the same stimulus and, moreover, the capacity to support them with well-founded arguments.

Although they can share emotions and reactions with the other audience members of the same show, the perception experienced by each individual is strictly personal and, as already mentioned (p. 19), among other determining factors of their cultural background, mindset, sensibility, social status, lived experiences and personal expectations – it depends, in short, on everything that makes up the character of the people and determines their tastes and preferences.

Following the conversations with his friend Charlie Chaplin, the Latvian director Serguei Eisenstein contrasts the creative gaze of the maker of *Modern Times* with the receiving gaze of the audience of his films, while reflecting on how the different context and lived experiences of each spectator, each analyst and each society influence the perception of the same artwork.

It is advisable, therefore, that when putting on a show the artistic team should take into account the social, economic, cultural and political contexts of the specific audience they want to target, because the reception and the reaction (active or passive) it will provoke from the audience are a key dramaturgical element, given that auteur circus not only seeks to show, but – and above all – *share*.

Thus, during the creative process the artist and creator should have the capacity to simultaneously make the twofold effort of examining each scene or sequence respecting their own creative impulse, while trying to imagine the possible responses that can come from the mood of the audience.

Nevertheless, *listening to* the reactions of the audience and taking them into account does not at all mean that the creators have to build the shows abiding by the average spectator's tastes and capacity for interpretation: as in all arts, the real artist is the one who produces the work depending on their world of reference and creative drive. What this actually involves is the opposite: attracting the audience to the terrain of the creator because giving them what they normally want is artistically sterile. It is therefore a question of balance that needs craft and sensitivity.

The relationship between the circus artist and the spectator is a bidirectional communication, a two-way journey: the circus artist sends to the audience a set of emotional impulses in the guise of body language (acrobatics, balance, skills, comicalness, and so on). The audience receives them, interprets or reinterprets them (sharing them or not), and their response (whatever the type and energy intensity and whether they express them vehemently or hermetically silent), always reaches the artist.

For example, the French acrobatic company XY moves under the motto "If you go alone you go faster, but together we go further." And this "together we go further" also embraces the audience, who gradually, intensely and irreversibly immerse themselves into this company's shows. In the presentation of *Il n'est pas encore minuit* (*It's Not Yet Midnight*, Grec amphitheatre, 2015),

one of the most agile members of the company, Airelle Caen, illustrated it with a personal experience:

When you are in the air, flying, with the thrust of the acrobatics and the little moments of tension, experiencing that undesirable feeling of lightness, you sense that the audience feels your reactions and responds. We feel them. Our own reactions and those of the audience in a very powerful exchange. It is priceless.

It would not be necessary to invoke Jakobson to realise that we are speaking of the universal structure *sender* → *message* → *receiver*, and that in this structure we also have to consider the communication channel (type of production and circus techniques used), the physical and social context in which it takes place (big top, yurt, auditorium, street, type of audience and, among many more, even the time of the performance). In circus, the return reaction/response is usually immediate despite very diverse qualities and intensities depending on the variety of spectators, but in any case, it always follows the sequence *stage action* → *spectators* → *emotional reaction or reactions to the stimulus received* → *artist*.

The art of seducing

In any performing art — and very particularly in contemporary circus — a show is not really complete until after the premiere, because the reactions of the audience and the biological level of their response in the first performances usually suggest, recommend or oblige some changes or adjustments that will round off the production. For these reasons, increasingly more circus companies propose open rehearsals, to assess the reactions of the audience step by step — which at the same time are, as they are spontaneous, one of the active functions of the spectator and a valuable source of information for the artist.

To achieve these spontaneous reactions, the creator and performer needs tools to gain the unavoidable mental and emotional engagement of the audience. And, in circus, the fundamental tool to conquer this engagement is seduction. Classical circus has always known this, and begins its shows by capturing the audience with an explosion of *light, music and colour* through the opening parade, a lavish initial spectacle in which the whole company bursts into the ring exhibiting their act among a wonderful play of lights and a spiritedly uplifting music. If the opening parade packs a punch, the show has already started with the audience on its side.

For obvious reasons, contemporary circus must seek out forms of seduction alternative to the opening parade. And here, the stage sincerity of the artist plays a decisive role: I have stressed (p. 7) that this sincerity manifests emotionally in contact with the audience. And given that circus is not an art of fiction, the veracity of the show and of the artist should be explicit and visible from the outset, in order to capture the audience and seduce them, although they do not enter intellectually in the message — although one thing usually leads (or can lead) to the other. And, let's repeat, the artist

must possess the necessary duality to intensely experience the show while constantly *listening to* the audience to stay connected to them.

There are auteur circus productions that invite us to *feel* rather than to *understand*, and because of their intention, content and form require from the audience a given receptive attitude, a predisposition to let the show penetrate, not forcedly into the intellect, but, and above all, into their sensory perceptions (a goal that cannot always be completely achieved: let's remember that the audience is an extremely diverse entity and, moreover, subject to such unpredictable variables as their state of mind or fatigue, whether they see the show alone or accompanied, and so on).

No more or less than other contemporary arts, auteur circus invites the spectator to go beyond the mere entertainment to *place themselves within the show* with a non-passive attitude and assuming their own role in this interactive ceremony of a circus performance.

Of course, when I say *place themselves within the show* I am not referring to the spectator being obliged to go into the ring or onto the stage to participate against their will but to that spectator who is predisposed to a free and personal interpretation of what is offered to them on the stage: I am speaking of the spectator with an active gaze (the verb to look involves action: it is a transitive verb, like to love). In the performing arts, to look should also involve to experience what the artists do — or, better still, to let oneself be absorbed.

The active spectator

The activity of the spectator consists of internally remaking what they see, feel and understand throughout a show and analysing, comparing or rejecting it. If the show has seduced them, if they have let themselves be absorbed, if they have been able to feel it *from within*, deploying all their senses, this spectator will have more elements of judgement to decide about the interest and quality of the show seen. “[The active spectator] is not an individual that limits themselves to be merely ‘in front’ of a show, but with their dynamic experiences constitutes a necessary pole of the show itself” (Sofia, 2015, p. 23).

The idea of the dance critic Bàrbara Raubert (2011, p. 286) is very enlightening when she distinguishes between “the spectator harvester” (who harvests what the creator sows) and “the spectator recipient” (who, along with harvesting what the creator sows, integrates it into their own universe and undergoes a transformation that enriches them as humans).

Speaking of the current generations of circus spectators is to speak of people with their own criterion, of spectators who are aware that their role goes beyond a moment of entertainment and aesthetic enjoyment (which is very good thing, because the fact of enjoying is both a lure and a means of entering into artist-spectator communication).

In this aspect the circus audience workshops have proven to be very useful. These workshops have been conceived so that they can learn about the creative process of the show they are about to see while relating it both with previous productions of the company and productions by other companies,

introducing them into the specific circus terminology and providing them with tools to understand and enjoy contemporary and auteur circus shows. After the performances, the workshops usually end with the exchange of opinions, concepts and emotions elicited from the audience, an exchange that is generally very rich in nuances, which exemplifies the enormous usefulness of these experiences.

In the end, the artist-audience connection is a particular case of connection between humans, a mainly neuronal issue. In *Las acrobacias del espectador*, the researcher Gabriele Sofia calls for a dialogue between the worlds of theatre and neuroscience in order to investigate “the cognitive dynamics and the neuromotor techniques that the spectators trigger in a theatre relationship” (Sofia, 2015, p. 22). And in the second foreword to the same book, Clelia Falletti⁴¹ explains: “Cognitive neurosciences demand that theatre studies focus attention on an extremely precise aspect: there is a level, the biological level, which has continuous repercussions and relations with the other levels (psychological, behavioural, experiential, etc.) both on the actor and the spectator” (Sofia, 2015, p. 17).

In his turn, the researcher and theatre director Miguel Ribagorda periodically publishes in the digital journal *Artez* an interesting series of articles in which he reflects on the actor-spectator neuronal connections in the fields of theatre and body expression, with criteria that are perfectly valid for circus artists (classical and contemporary).⁴²

Conclusions

More or less consciously, circus performers from all aesthetic trends are closely linked to an essence and a perennial anthropological mystery that, with changing names and in all periods of history, continue connected to life drivers and the primitive emotions of the human being. If something varies in the perennity of circus it is the format and style with which these drives and emotions are conveyed, which has the virtue of continuously adapting to the variable receptivity (general and particular) of the audiences of each historical and social context.

Thus, any confrontation — ignorant or interested — between the different trends of circus is absurd and sterile. These polymorphous trends enlarge and enrich the power of seduction of this performing art among all kinds of audiences.

The link that contemporary and auteur circus establish with the traditional repertoire and speciality acts is a luminous sample of the transmission of knowledge and of assumption of the techniques and spirit of traditional circus. Brossa’s postulate “we must understand tradition as a conquest rather than a legacy” is shared by circus performers, managers, activists and thinkers who in their daily work show that circus, like all arts, develops by absorbing those elements of tradition with which each creator identifies,

41. Associate Professor at the Università La Sapienza (Rome).

42. Journal *Artez*: <https://www.artezblai.com/revista-artez/> > Firmas > Miguel Ribagorda.

and freely reinterprets them through the *trial* → *error* → *path* → *finding*, which will help them to build a personal language that will contribute to the evolution of circus (both contemporary and classical; in fact, two artistic expressions that feed off each other).

This working method is the factor that makes it quite likely that, on their innovative path, contemporary circus creators continue to revive acts that are no longer in tune with the social sensitivity of this first third of the century and which, moreover, they manage to provide with a stage language in harmony with the perception channels of the current generations of spectators.

Today, the spectator is the object of studies based on neuroscience, which researches the energy of the psychophysical response reactions to the different stimuli of a show. In perpetual involvement with the audience, contemporary and auteur circus seek out new expressive territories by going beyond mere entertainment, but they continue to sustain themselves on the Gasch's four columns: strength, balance, grace and dexterity — four inalienable characteristics of all circus artists.



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