

Knot of Contemporary Aesthetics in Circus

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English translation, Neil CHARLTON.

Abstract

The text "Knot of Contemporary Aesthetics in Circus" is the result of research and reflection on circus, with special focus on theories of art, anthropology of the body, and the posthumanism perspective, with Barcelona as the central point. It draws on research, carried out with the support of La Central del Circ and the collaboration of the photographer Marta Garcia Cardellach, in which I have explored several practices and interviewed artists in order to understand the relationship between the circus body, techniques and artistic creation.

The reflections arise from the hypothesis that the circus body, disciplined in the different techniques, has a specific way of mediating with reality and, therefore, a specific perspective when creating. Moreover, the article deals with aesthetics from its foundations and links it to sensorial perception and the sensing-thinking theories within the arts, as exemplified by the Aymara weavers.

Throughout the sections, it examines the relationship between body and circus practice in depth while introducing concepts such as body techniques, circus pedagogy, and aesthetic perception. It also analyses the relationship between bodies and objects in circus creation, outlining the concept of agency and interconnection between body, thinking and sensing.

Moreover, the notion of the circus body is approached as a mediating element, capable of creating new perceptions of and consensus on reality.

Finally, it should be noted that the text includes bibliographic and testimonial citations, while experimenting with an embodied and hybridised form of writing in which the analytical sense is unconnected from aesthetic perception.

Keywords: circus, body, aesthetics, body work, sensing-thinking, creation, agency, co-presence, tertiary processes

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Knot of Contemporary Aesthetics in Circus

It matters what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories. (Haraway, 2016)

Rather than speaking of circus, I would like to write with circus, to think with circus. Where can circus take me? What kind of dialogue do I want with circus? Over twenty years ago I got involved in the circus world of juggling and object manipulation, the pleasure of the physical practice and technique, love and friendship, cultural activism, and squatting. But, however involved I have been, as an enthusiast, cultural mediator or supporter of artistic processes, I am still an outsider. And this will be a strange, partial and unnecessary tale, a tale of shortcomings, doubts, and few certainties. A completely failed somersault speaking of something about which I neither know little nor too much, but with which I share life, many lives.

It is a dialogue with artists and their practices, their creation, which will not do justice to so much sweat. A form of philosophising and performing yet another fiction¹ about circus. A mixture of theories knotted in a network, a pit in which to fall, without hurting oneself, to learn and learn again, to wander. To make the mind wander and, eventually, awaken the intuition involved in continuing to search.

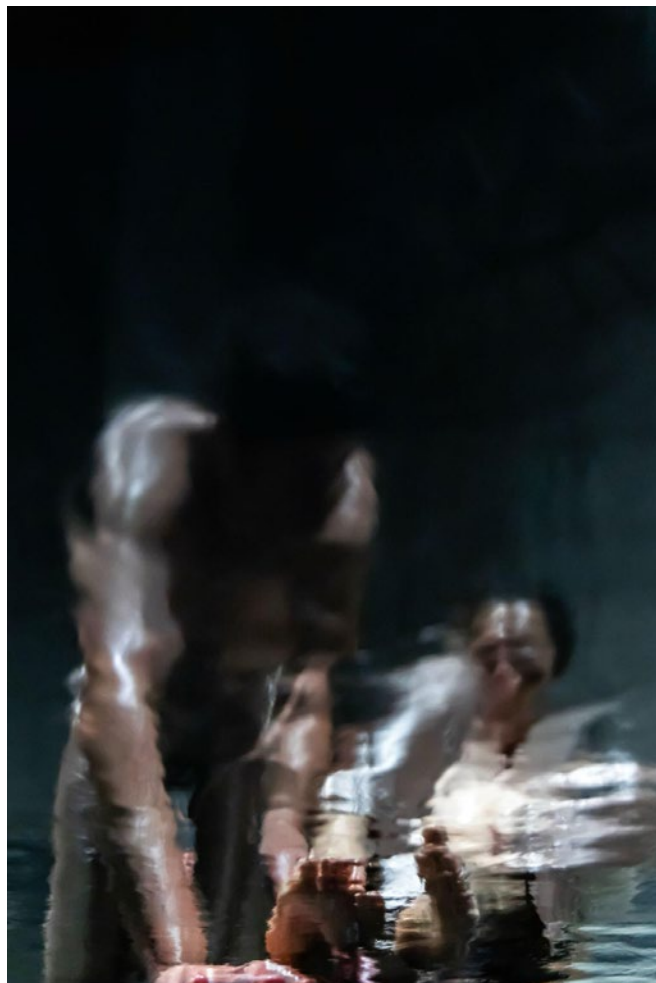
CIRCUS BODY-1: body work

I am not associated with a circus body [...] I have always wished to have huge shoulders or trapeze artists' shoulders, but never have. The musculature is there, but it's very hidden. I'm always told I seem an extremely ordinary person and then it's quite surprising what you can do with a body that is not associated with a circus body. (Trapeze,² 22 February 2023)

1. For Jacques Rancière, fiction "is a structure of rationality. It is a form of presentation through which different things, situations and events become perceptible and intelligible. Meanwhile, it is a mode of articulation that constructs forms of coexistence, succession and random enchainment between events that, at the same time, gives these forms the modality of what is possible, real and necessary. However, we cannot lose sight of the fact that this dual operation is required when it is necessary to produce some sense of reality. It is required, for instance, when the aim is to define the conditions, the means and the effects of an action; in other words, the very meaning of what acting means. It is equally necessary in those cases in which one devotes oneself to defining the objects and character of an understanding; in other words, the very meaning of what it means and who performs the act of understanding. The political action that identifies situations and that designates their respective actors, that links events and deduces from this link possibles and impossibles, uses fictions, as novelists do" (Rancière, 2019, p. 1).

2. I have decided to maintain the anonymity of the testimonies. At the same time, to refer to it and provide more context to the quotations, I have used the name of the main practices of each artist at the moment of the interviews.

I want to float and slide, moving through the water without fighting against it. I want to feel my body involved in advancing effortlessly. I focus on the technique and I remember. I remember the repertoire of movements and gestures that throughout my life I have been incorporating through repetition. I am obsessed with and passionate about the aim of floating and sliding effortlessly. My body has not yet embodied the right movement. A much more experienced swimmer teaches me outside the water. I don't know how I swim. If I am outside the water, I can emulate the movements I perform inside. I need more practice. The experienced swimmer tells me how, by pushing with the arch of the foot, I can push from the hip. The experienced swimmer raises his elbow and lowers his hands when he simulates a stroke. He pushes the air like he pushes the water. The experienced swimmer's posture does not disappear when he takes off his gear. It continues even when he drinks a coffee or makes a phone call. My non-form of swimmer is my non-form of circus artist. My non-form of circus artist recognises a circus body. Or perhaps it could guess at it. A circus body that is present and available, which has taken on the techniques of its discipline, which knows every inch of skin and muscle, which knows where it breathes, where it tightens and where it loosens, a body "busy in solving the task of modern circus, the sublimation of the limit". (Ull extern, 26 January 2024)



Photograph by Marta Garcia Cardellach with Palimsesta for the *Nus* research (5 May 2023)

The form of swimming, the form of juggling, the form of handstand, are plural forms, culturally and socially well situated. A multiplicity of body techniques passed on one to the other within specific historical and social frameworks. Here we are referring to body techniques in the sense understood by Marcel Mauss, a French sociologist and anthropologist known for his work on the body and body techniques in different cultures, who, with this term, referred to all gestures, movements and body skills acquired and passed on within a specific body or culture. Mauss explored how these body techniques are not only the result of individual factors, such as biology or psychology, but are also shaped by the social and cultural environment in which they develop. “The techniques of the body can be classified according to their efficiency, i.e. according to the results of training. Training, like the assembly of a machine, is the search for, the acquisition of an efficiency. Here it is a human efficiency. These techniques are thus human norms of human training”. (Mauss, 1996, p. 77)

Accordingly, we could say that the body is not mere nature but a knot between social structure and personal action, matter that transforms and mutates. Mari Luz Esteban (2004) explains that the body is the personal space self-constructed under premises of social control through diets, physical exercise and a treatment of sexuality regulated from outside, but of which people are the direct protagonists. She notes that social judgement is not only determine our behaviour through internal censorship and the feelings of guilt it awakens, but indirectly structures our body in the same measure in which it rules its growth (with weight and height norms), its maintenance (with hygiene and nutrition practices), its presentation (with aesthetic and clothing concerns) and its affective presentation (emotional signs). Mari Luz Esteban emphasises that these external social norms are interiorised through what Bourdieu calls *habitus*, schemas from which the subjects perceive the world and act on it. This *habitus* is learnt in the body through an unconscious process of practical familiarisation that does not involve awareness. They are a set of dispositions shaped for the exposure to given social conditions. As Pierre Bourdieu (2007) explains, the *habitus* could be understood as the incorporation of social structures. It is also constituted by reified power relations. The class incorporated into the body is the *habitus*; the objectified class would be the position this body occupies in the system of social relations. The *habitus*, the product of history, originates individual and collective practices and therefore history; the *habitus* ensures the active presence of past experiences, which, recorded in each organism in the form of schemas of perception, thoughts and action, tend, with more security than all the formal rules and all the explicit norms, to guarantee conformity with the practices and their constancy over time. “The *habitus* — embodied history, internalised as a second nature and so forgotten history — is the active presence of the whole past of which it is the product. As such, it is what gives practices their relative autonomy with respect to external determinations of the immediate present”. (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 56)

With my background in circus, I have to approach the present with these memories, this experience [...] the training on handstands and all this... I don't know if I'm being sentimental if I say that my body is a circus body and a way of laying a cable to the past. I say this from my mind. From my body I could say that I do circus even when I sleep, when I think, and I think about everything through circus. But I'm not sure... If you've been training for 10 years... when you approach a new discipline, whether it's boxing, cooking... you'll draw from this box of memories and you'll say "you have to bend like this and then finally..." and you'll think about the front flip pike or the bridge. You've spent so long exploring a thing in depth that you'll see everything through this filter, and it helps. You've done a lot. You can say to your body "this is like that, do you remember?". (Movement, 8 February 2023)

As Loïc Wacquant explains in "Pugs at work" (1995), "What we may call body work thus consists of highly intensive and finely regulated manipulation of the organism whose aim is to imprint into the bodily schema of the fighter postural sets, patterns of movement, and subjective emotional-cognitive states that make him into a conversant practitioner of the Sweet science of bruising [...] And it practically reorganizes the entire corporeal field of the fighter, bringing to prominence certain organs and abilities and making other recede, transforming not only the physique of the boxer but also his "body-sense", the consciousness he has of his organism and, though this changed body, of the world about him", the consciousness he has of his organism and, through this change body, of the world about him" (Wacquant, 1995: 73).

The hands ... when I practised dance and freed my hands from any contact with the iron, the floor, etc., I also realised that they were very important for balance, complete control of the body, even an important element to direct the body, to send it in a direction. And with the springboard and the teeterboard, the aerial acts, the precision of the movement was very defined. I noticed that they greatly conditioned the turn, the height, the rotation... like a kind of pen that helps you draw the circles that you have to describe to do a jump, a pirouette, a somersault. There was geometry within what the hand did, which was important. Being aware of the hand helped me greatly to complete the repertoire of the body and the movement. (Hand to hand-1, 8 February 2023)

To acquire so much skill and so much knowledge, being an "available body, which is aware of its environment and is alert [...] A body with quite a lot of discipline and autonomous intelligence" (Hand to hand-2, 27 January 2024), you need specific pedagogies. As L. Wacquant (2004) explains in relation to boxing, training in the circus disciplines is a process of educating the body and a particular socialisation of the physiology, in which education has the function of constructing an accustomed body; in other words, corporeally structured and physically remodelled, in keeping with the demands of the field. It is achieved through an intensive discipline that seeks to convey in a practical way, through direct incorporation, the mastering of the fundamental body, emotional, visual and mental schemas of each of the circus disciplines. The assimilation of these techniques,

(...) is the fruit of a labor of mutual involvement of the body and mind, a labor that, produced by the infinite repetition of the same moves, proceeds through a discontinuous series of infinitesimal motions, difficult to discern individually but the accumulation of which over time produces appreciable progress, without one ever being able to separate them out, date them, or measure them precisely (Wacquant, 2004, p. 77).

Wacquant explains that “The transmission of pugilism is effected in a gestural, visual, and mimetic manner, at the cost of a regulated manipulation of the body that somatizes the knowledge collectively held and exhibited by the members of the club at each level in the tacit hierarchy” (Wacquant, 2004, pp. 99-100) and adds that “skills are handed down like clothes in a large family. Each kid is but the custodian of the know-how some bigger kid has entrusted to him and is obliged, in turn, to pass it along to the next youngster in line” (Wacquant, 2004, p. 122).

Circus pedagogy has a lot to do with your discipline. There are many facets and not just one: it's not just strength or balance or elasticity... it's more a global thing and is related to having good reflexes. The body, along with developing in certain shapes, learns to organise itself to be efficient in movements, because they have to be repeated many times. It's like learning to walk, and doing so using the least possible strength. And how to be economical to reach the places as easily as possible and unusual places of the body. And understanding your body in a different way. Because before doing circus, you walk on two feet, you sit down. You have some postures that are useful in daily life, related to your work or your way of socialising and the actions your body demands. And with circus you perform actions that have nothing to do with what is every day, and your body has to adapt. (Hand to hand-2, 27 January 2024)

These forms of transmission of learning can take place in circus schools and/or with coaches, but much of it is disseminated informally because many people who work on the diverse disciplines, learn them by themselves. For this reason, the more or less official meeting places are very important.

If you are self-taught it's different to being in a training centre or enrolling in a circus school. It's very different if you train at the Parc de la Ciutadella, because your times, your involvement, everything will change. It's different if you go to La Central, La Grainerie, or to a random gym ... than if you're in a school, where your involvement is greater. The figure of the teacher is present in the school or, if you take private classes, at La Ciutadella or where you train [...] The circus spaces are a mess: someone stretches somewhere, another takes their time... There is a kind of lack of urgency. It's a lot about listening to your body, and time stretches... “I'll get there in the end”... Everybody learns, but everybody is persistent in their discipline. (Movement, 4 February 2024)

For technical and infrastructure reasons, there are disciplines that are much more accessible than others: while juggling, handstands or hand to hand can be done anywhere, aerial acts, for instance, need very specific conditions. Access to these spaces also limits the practices, while making circus practitioners move to find these learning spaces:

In Uruguay, in the late 1990s or early 2000s, we didn't get any information about what was going on in the world of circus. From time to time, someone turned up in a convention who did juggling differently and you kept it in your memory archive and went to the park to see if you discovered something, you began little by little. YouTube didn't exist and it was very difficult... all those people came from Buenos Aires and you had to go where a Basque juggler had once come and had changed how everybody saw all this... it was a treasure hunt. Going to find what you don't know what exactly, but which makes a difference... (Juggling, 8 February 2023).

These pedagogies are aimed at constructing a body capable of accumulating, through body work, a specific type of capital that in its materialised embodied form is exclusively appropriated by agents or groups of agents. According to this way of understanding social energy in the form of reified or living work:

We may conceive boxers [circus artists] as holders of and even entrepreneurs in bodily capital of a particular kind; and the boxing [training room] in which they spend much of their waking time as a social machinery designed to convert this "abstract" bodily capital into pugilistic capital [circus capital], that is, to impart to the fighter's body a set of abilities and tendencies liable to produce value in the field of professional boxing [circus artists] in a form of recognition, titles, and income streams (Wacquant, 1995, p. 66).

In the case of boxing, to maintain this body capital:

Boxers have varied formulas for preventing their hands from excess swelling, from excessive pain, or from being broken. [...] But fighters continually seek nostrums and exercises for improving their bodies. One practiced Yogi [sic], another became a physical cultist, a third went on periodic fasts; others seek out lotions, vitamins, and other means of improving their endurance, alertness, and punching power (Wacquant, 2004, p. 129).

As for circus, "as it is so physical, diet, practice, training, consistency and hygiene is necessary. A discipline of the body is needed which is not 'ah, I'll read a book and I'll be up to date'; if you don't keep up with it every day, it's lost" (Rope, 6 February 2023).

This investment in the body, in the embodied capital, means that life and work are completely intertwined. The daily dedication to these practices and the changes they create in the bodies and the day-to-day of these professionals can be understood as body itineraries that are, according to Mari Luz Esteban, "individual personal processes but which always relate us to a group, which happen within specific social structures and in which we attach all centrality to the social actions of the subjects, understood as body practices" (Esteban, 2004, p. 54). In her view, what characterises these processes is that body activity enables a form of self-appropriation, so that the body work and the life project are intimately articulated, and through this articulation, a lifestyle, identities, a specific way of being temporarily and permanently in the world is put into operation.

One becomes a circus performer. The desire to perform an art is already invalidating; they say to you, how are you going to make a living? We all had to fight with family and society; who supports you to do what you want to do? And in the end you can, and you can even have a child (laughs).

Before I was pregnant, I thought: what will my abdomen look like? I was worried that it would be so firm that it wouldn't stretch. But my practice changed a few years ago. At the beginning I managed only with the rope on stage, and to enter the circus school and the auditions, the physical level was very demanding. Then, when I set up my school, I was able to relax and start looking for what I wanted beyond technical practice. My body continued in this relaxation [...] In this way of relaxation, motherhood arrived and the growth of the womb was very fluid. And now that I don't have it anymore, it's quite fascinating how it's lost again and I can feel the muscles again. I'm impressed by how it's going, how long it takes to come out and how little time it takes to taper off, and I'm confident that my body will get back into shape. (Rope, 6 February 2023)

These itineraries are traversed by moments of great physical energy, by moments of downtime due to injuries, by travel, by the uncertainty of the passage of time... by constant and intense care of the body.

And I ask myself if I really want to spend my whole life with this cult of the body... I know that in my practice it's very necessary to withdraw for a while, to focus on something else, to be able to return there with the baggage I was able to take during the withdrawal. And that so far it has also been possible for me to recover physically quickly, but I also wonder if at the age of 40 I do these withdrawals, will I be able to resume work... There are no horizons, there are no role models. It's a very great abyss to see a future that is finite because we work with the body. And the body reaches an age where it can't work anymore [...] I've been working as a performer for other projects for many years and at the end of the auditions, castings, and all that... I don't know if it's my feeling, but I think that in general people take on young people. There is a time when being a performer is more difficult. It's something that has a shelf life; when you leave school and for a few years everything is great because you are within the age ranges. I think that, as a project manager, there are not so many problems, but as a performer, young and mouldable bodies are prioritised. Because, at the end of the day, being a performer means being malleable and adaptable to someone else's creative process. Perhaps contemporary circus can allow practices to be adapted to make them more durable. It's very complex... the word Circus would have to be redefined to be able... (Trapeze, 22 February 2023)

In his "First open letter to circus", Bauke Lievens (2015) sets out the need to redefine circus. She explains that, throughout its history, circus has primarily emphasised skill and technique, and prioritised form over content. This priority, however, does not imply a lack of meaning, as physically demanding and dangerous performances, as well as the taming of wild animals, reflect the belief in human supremacy over nature. This image of Man,³

3. Capitalised in the original. Here we refer to the modern paradigm influenced by enlightened and liberal ideas that prioritise progress, reason and individualism and that promote unequal power relations as well as the separation between culture and nature. Separation that justifies different modes of oppression such as patriarchal and colonial.

influenced by modern narratives such as the idea of progress, was propagated by the traditional circus that emerged during the Industrial Revolution. Traditional circus was born at a time of rapid urbanisation and in the midst of a sudden boom in entertainment for the rapidly growing working-class public.

In this context, mediated by the industrial economy, the traditional circus was not only a form of entertainment, but a framework that reinforced a certain way of perceiving and experiencing the world. Lievens points out that we often lose sight of the fact that the mastery of technical skill expresses an ancient and traditional view of Man and the world in general. What is often presented on stage are heroes and heroines, often without criticism or irony, in a way that is anachronistic and implausible in the context of the experiences of the world today. In conclusion, Lievens notes that it is crucial to become aware that the skilful forms of circus are expressions of a particular way of seeing and experiencing the world. And she argues that as long as models of the past continue to be reproduced, it will not connect with the underlying questions of what and why, and will continue to be conveyed without artistic depth, but will go on being a craft, in a similar mode to what Wacquant explains in relation to pugilism:

Prizefighters have often been compared to artists, but a more apposite analogy would look to the world of the factory or the artisan's workshop. For the Sweet science resembles in manifold aspects a skilled, if repetitive, manual craft. Professional boxers themselves consider training as work [...] and their body as a tool (Wacquant, 2004, p. 66).

CIRCUS BODY-2: sensing-thinking

What helps me express myself most are my arms. My hands mark the details. What gives the magnitude to the movement are the arms. What I decide to outline with my arms and hands, my legs carry; in this way you can explain something from a spatial point of view. The arms are like brushes that draw in space, but it's clearly a three-dimensional and ephemeral painting, which disappears. (Juggling, 8 February 2023)

Hanging eight metres above a French stage, voluntarily suspended. A harness, pulleys and carabiners, and my hands gripping the rope tightly. The rope that links me to and separates me from Elena. The balance between her movement and my stillness, between my comfort and her pain. Our line creates invisible ones, in space and time, between the stage and backstage, between the performance and the audience. A tangle of relationships, a mesh of rope and knots that covers her face and surrounds her head and that allows my body to rise to eight metres while she distributes her gesture on stage. An assemblage of bodies and things, agencies and desires. We are in *EZ*, with Elena.⁴

4. <<https://www.theatredelacite.com/page/manipulaciones>>.

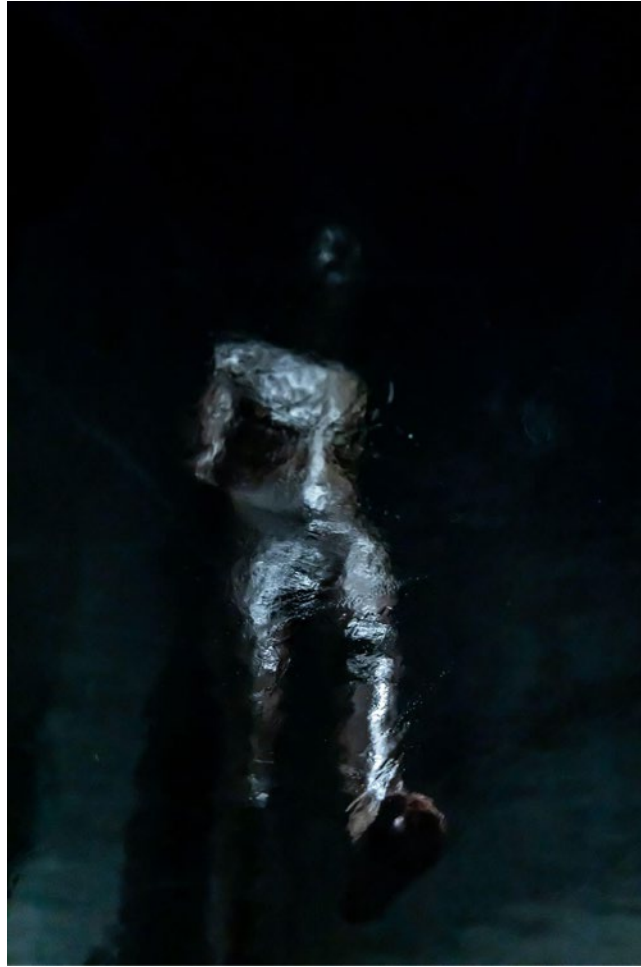
Hanging is a common situation in circus and also a potential space-time for artistic creation and critical thinking. Once the fear of falling has been overcome, once a pact of trust has been made, hanging offers me the conditions to inhabit what in psychology is called the “third space”. I cling to the thought and epistemological genealogies that Eva Marxen traces in her book on art and therapy (Marxen, 2011). In it, she describes the potential space named by Donald Winnicott as a third space that lies between the inner (psychic) world and the outer (real) world, a place where the child develops games and the individual experiences creativity and culture. This intermedial space is where what Héctor Fiorini calls the “creating psyche” and the tertiary processes take place. The primary processes (associated with the impulse) and the secondary ones (associated with thought) are defined extensively in traditional psychology. But Fiorini points out that the involvement between primary and secondary alone does not explain the processes of creation. Tertiary processes are those that can, with the intervention of consciousness, link the paradoxes. It emphasises the modifying power over the world that these processes entail and also the transformations that occur in the same subject from the creative act. Tertiary processes disorganise established forms and work on the reorganisation of new forms or new meanings; they also link oppositions and establish new networks of meaning.

Not putting your feet on the ground, being in another space that is not the continuation of the space you inhabit on a day-to-day basis. This is the main characteristic that seduced me to want to be a trapeze artist. You really get out of an everyday space, beyond what you do with your body, simply because it's not on the same plane. I have thought a lot about this space. I think that, depending on the day, it can have many different meanings but, in general, it's a space of total abstraction. Both social – because in the end it's a solitary, individual practice and you abstract from the whole world – and in the realm of thought. I think that being suspended in the air, alone, is a kind of parenthesis where I can work on things that are both artistic and personal. (Trapeze, 22 February 2023)

A drop of oil suspended on a fishing line that crosses the space. The transparent thread, slightly curved, along which the unctuous liquid slides. The light that is reflected in its brilliance and the black floor, which, gradually and with the action of the oil, becomes the mirror of nothingness. Time passes slowly, unsteadily. Breathing in silence. The breaths. Two figures, one at each end of the path-line-mirror of nothingness. A possibility appears. We are in *Masha* by Palimsesta.⁵

In 1750, Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten published his *Aesthetica*, where he presented aesthetics as a form of knowledge relative to sensorial perception. Martin Seel explains in *Aesthetics of Appearing* (Seel, 2010) that Baumgarten denominated as “sensitive knowledge” (*cognitio sensitiva*) that faculty of perception to differentiate it from conceptual knowledge, clear and differentiating. For the author, aesthetic knowledge is a confused

5. Creation residency of *Masha*, by the company Palimsesta, at the Nau Ivanow, 5 March 2022.



Photograph by Marta Garcia Cardellach with Palimsesta for the *Nus* research (5 June 2023)

cognitio specialised in the perception of complex phenomena. Its objective is not to analyse in order to classify and look for generalisations, as in the sciences, but to pay particular attention and make its perceptual density present. Aesthetic perception does not seek to determine things, but is dedicated to perceiving the exuberance and density of phenomena, a confused *cognitio* that, instead of analysing in search of universalities, is distracted in the depth of particularity. In order to access this sensuous knowledge, there must be a body available and willing to fall into the void. A carabiner, a safety line, a wrap.

We read that we cannot see the knot because it is covered by the same thread that creates it (Ingold, 2021). In fabrics we see the surface that is generated while the multiplicity of lines that make it up cross and knit. If we unravel Western epistemologies and allow ourselves to be entangled by other knowledge, we can learn from the Andean weavers who in Aymara speak of *Amta yarachh uywaña*, which comes to express the mutual nurturing of thoughts and feelings. Elvira Espejo Ayca (2022) says that feeling and thinking cannot be separated and are together in the sense-thinking, who cultivates thoughts, and thoughts are inside their body, inside the landscape, inside the instruments. The sense-thinking reads with his hands, feet, body.

Internally, it's like a sensory journey [...] The hands and feet are the tactile part, like antennae... the practice of the trapeze artist, the hanging person, is truly super-animal. I use both hands and feet to orient myself in space. What characterises my work is delicacy, and I achieve it with my hands by feeling the material I work with, to take care of it. The material I work with my body in the air is the air itself, the empty space. And I open my feet a lot, as if they were practically hands and they help me sensorially... I really like to feel the material of the trapeze bar, the material of the trapeze rope, to be able to feel the friction of my body with the object. And, in the end, I can feel the rub of my body on my hands and feet, because I always cover up. Internally it is a sensory journey that my feet propose. Training with socks or barefoot makes a big difference for me. I don't like training with socks at all because I don't feel anything... if it's for pleasure, I prefer going barefoot a thousand times and being able to feel where I am all the time and train more safely. It's completely illogical because if something happens to me, it will happen to me equally with or without socks, but I need to be able to feel with all four limbs. (Trapeze, 22 February 2023)

The sensing-thinking does not rationalise or dominate, but requires the connectivity of experiences and sensitivities to be able to generate the shared thinking that enables creativity. Elvira Espejo Ayca continues to explain that this connectivity affects the relationship with objects. In the Aymara worldview, things are not inert objects, but subjects that take care of us and that we take care of.

Containment is what I do with the mud, bring it all the time towards the centre and finally to my hands; on the trapeze I would also link it with the idea of containment, holding you, sustaining you. Holding is what I do in the end both on the trapeze and with mud to make it grow. With my hands, I think that one of the things that motivates my work is delicacy and that this delicacy is used to feel the material I work with, to take care of it... just as in the air. (Trapeze, 22 February 2023)

Care is present in the sensing-thinking circus body. One of the interviewees refers to the mast as *him*, clarifying that it is not a person, but with which he relates and talks:

My way of speaking to the mast is very soft, very laid back, relaxed. The slings are under a lot of tension and I receive this tension. When he is bent he is very fragile and so am I. And my movement may cause him and me to fall. But the microbalance of his geometric form can also cause his downfall and mine. Then we are together in a fragility that is calculated but has a margin of rupture [...]. And I don't stop taking care of him, all the time.

There is a task of relating to the mast, I speak of him in two ways: when he is assembled and deconstructed. With the mast mounted there is a constant force, a tension. It's as if the guy is constantly holding on to something... He's not calm, he's tense. And that leads me to do the opposite. And when he's dismantled, it's paradoxical because I feel like I'm re-appropriating an action, but in fact it's not like that because he's heavy. Then he actually drives my movement a lot more than when he's fixed. Apparently, I'm the one manipulating him, but really he's

manipulating me because they're two-metre-long pieces of pipe that have a weight. This conditions me emotionally because he wins me over, he leads me where he wants. And, at the same time, I don't stop taking care of him, all the time. (Mast, 10 February)

In this conversation we can appreciate what Alfred Gell (2016), in his anthropology of art, considers "secondary agent". According to the author, art objects are agents as they have the ability to cause social interactions. For him, the notion of agent is always relational and he calls people who act with an intention "primary agents", and the artefacts, with which an intense experience of "co-presence" is established "secondary". In the case of circus, this "co-presence" in the artist's relationship with the artefact creates a situation that enables aesthetic perception and, therefore, creation. One of the artists explains how clothes are a second skin:

Clothes, as I perceive them, are an extension of skin, of the dermis. I wear them loose. So for me, on a sensory level, because of the hairs and pores, this greatly influences my feeling of the space. I have a sense of space. I feel, within the space, a microspace. It's like... when I move, I feel the ripples [of the clothes], the hairs go through here ... and that makes it easier for me to access different qualities. For me clothes have been very influential when I change from one quality of movement to another. This is very influential. To inhabit the movements, I wear a type of clothing where I feel inside a space where I can inhabit different qualities. (Movement, 8 February 2023)

In juggling, for example, the geometry of the object and the weight modify the path of the movements

The object falls. This faculty of being able to fall... I handle clubs, the geometric shape of the object is very important because it distributes the weight in a certain way in the object and then my body relates in a certain way to this weight and this shape. The geometry of the object and the fact that it can fall are factors external to your own body that condition it. Within the scenic field it also conditions many other ways. The geometry of this strange object and the fact that it can fall. There is much to accept and much to transform with these two elements (Juggling, 8 February 2023).

The possibility of falling is a constant in the different circus disciplines, very present in the aerial acts, but also in other devices on the ground in which the slide is what activates and determines muscle tones and displacements of bodies.

Anything that slides influences, because I work with body oil and it means I discover completely new possibilities of the body because I have to do isometric work... in which all the muscles are worked intensively. It's a total blockage of my body, but at the same time it's available and it's like you have the whole body blocked and you unlock small parts of it to transit to another place. Above the oil we try to keep the body on the vertical axis despite the forces acting on this body. They are forces that come from the sides sometimes, other times

they are transversal from the diagonals, from top to bottom... then, to maintain the position or even recover it, since they do not have any kind of fixed support, it's your centre, your isometric force, the one that leads you to keep your body in this position or in this displacement. We try to look for some kind of anchorage within this space that doesn't have any kind of fixed point (Hand to hand-1, 8 February 2023).

These ways of approaching circus objects, of understanding their agency, are linked to what has been called affect theory. Jo Labanyi (2016) explains that the affect is not a property of the self, but a reaction of the interaction of the being with the world in the capacity to affect and be affected. Affect arises from the contact of the self with the world in an interactive process of human and non-human agencies that challenge the idea of the autonomous individual constructed in modernity. These theories have the potential to decentre the anthropocentric axis of Western culture. Marie-Andrée Robitaille, artist and thinker, explains that:

An overarching entry point to the processes in my doctoral project has been the attempt to shift from anthropocentric circus making to practices that take significant consideration of the more-than-human forces in circus composition. Fifteen years ago, I was a dancer acrobat; climbing poles, swinging on ropes, defying gravity, and performing displays of extreme physical abilities. Today even if I still identify as an acrobat, my circus discipline revolves around "object manipulation". However, rather than using the word "object", I will refer to the objects as "bodies" in an effort to move beyond the object/subject dichotomy. [...]. Early in the process, working with the "manipulation" of these non conventional circus "bodies", the notion of control appeared as a central notion. I turned to the tensions emerging between the differences it makes to my gestures when I am gaining control or losing control over the bodies. The assessment of my success and failure moved from an ability to control to an ability to let go of control. As my work progressed in the studio, I wondered less about losing control and gaining control, but rather about the potential of displacing control. Displacing control disrupted the notion of virtuosity. The virtuosic gesture moved away from the spectacularism of my human ability to master and manipulate the "objects" and transformed into the ability of phasing with the bodies and the environment. Therefore, "object manipulation" as the appellation of my circus discipline no longer made sense. Instead of "object manipulation", I propose a "body re-orienting" practice that suggests the idea of distributed agency, an "agency of assemblages" (Robitaille, 2022).

My breath anchored in my chest, sustained, watching the tension of the cable that raises up a moped. My breath holds the question: what if the risk changes sides? And if the risk changes sides? Every time my lungs inhale the life-giving oxygen and my nervous laughter follows the absurd temerity that erupts on stage, I sense danger and refrain from breathing. And if the risk changes sides? We are in *Random* with Joel Martí and Pablo Molina.⁶

6. Presentation of *Random*, by Joel Martí and Pablo Molina, 23 March 2018 at La Central del Circ, in the programme "Extended Performance" (EP).

CIRCUS BODIES: mediations

Mayonnaise is an oil-water emulsion. As all emulsions, it is unstable. When an emulsion curdles, the ingredients become separate from each other. But that is not an altogether accurate description: rather they coalesce toward oil or toward water, most of the water becomes separate from most of the oil—it is instead a matter of degrees of coalescence. The same for mayonnaise: when it separates, you are left with yolky oil and oily yolk [...]

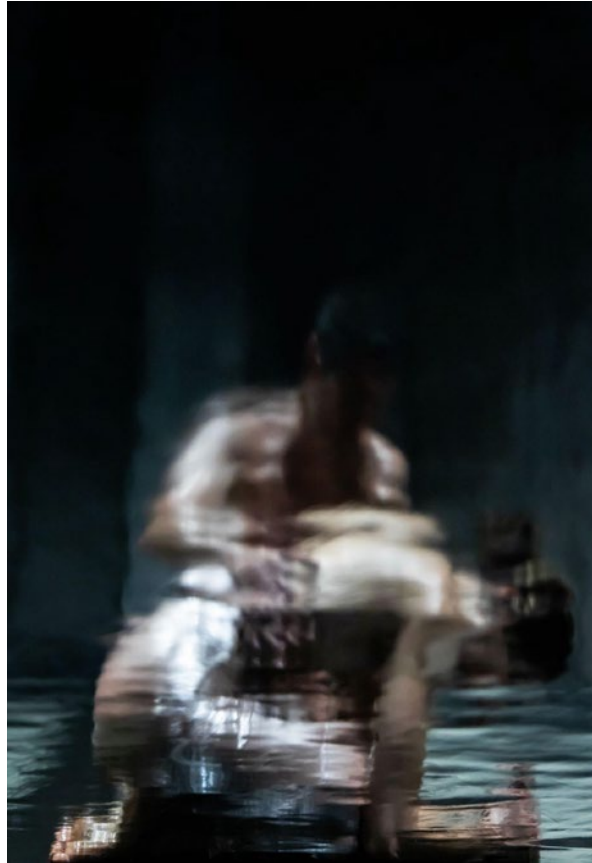
When I think of *mestizaje* I think both of separation as curdling, an exercise in impurity, and of separation as splitting, an exercise in purity. I think of the attempt at control exercised by those who possess both power and the categorical eye and who attempt to split everything impure, breaking it down into pure elements (as in egg white and egg yolk) for the purposes of control. Control over creativity. And I think of something that is in the middle of either/or, something impure, something or someone *mestizo*, as both separated, curdled and resisting in its curdled state (Lugones, 1994, p. 458-459).

We have seen how the body trained in efficient gesture, separates and analyses, dissects each part of the body involved in a movement in order to transcend physical limits. We have also introduced the sensing-thinking body, that which is connected and co-present with the objects and reality that surrounds it in a form of *cognitio confusa*. Both conceptions are involved in circus creation in a kind of mixed body, impure, in a hybridisation that allows mediations to operate and create new senses of the common.

If we refer, for example, to the creation of *Masha* by Palimsesta we see, on the one hand, the centrality of a *habituated* body that executes the efficient gesture in an alienated way. A body that mobilises an incorporated knowledge that separates and analyses, that seeks to understand each of the movements, dissects them, seeks their purity. This search for purity, however, is impossible since the slippery floor covered with oil curdles the precise progression of tricks, makes them impossible and tarnishes virtuosity.

On the other hand, in *Masha* we encounter the sensing-thinking body, attentive to the agencies of the spectators with whom they share the aesthetic situation, as well as to the elements that make up and determine a space-time that breaks with what is everyday and that leads to a slippery and deep infinity, uncomfortable and absurd, a nonsense that does not drink from the metaphor and leaves the intellect helpless. This helplessness, the difficulty of giving meaning and closing the circle of understanding, helps the people who have the experience to do so from the *cognitio confusa* characteristic of sensuous knowledge.

To make this possible, they take into account several elements that break with the usual codes of circus and create an estrangement. On the one hand, the linearity of the device contrasts with the circularity of the traditional circus ring; on the other, horizontality and proximity place audience and performers on the same plane with the intention of democratising relations between them. All this requires a new relationship with time and space, where proximity and co-presence are central.



Photograph by Marta Garcia Cardellach with Palimsesta for the *Nus* research (5 May 2023)

[...] when the project started, the question of time was very important. In one of the first presentations we ended up sitting without doing anything for about twenty minutes, before making the first move. Then, of course, very interesting things happened, the audience started to be more present than us. But not because they were doing something big, or something premeditated, but because of the simple movements of changing positions, changing feet, relocating the chairs, it even seemed that the gazes made noise. These gazes that pivoted between the two bodies and wondered about things. This was very interesting. Time as... people came in, they saw these two people sitting on the chairs, as if apparently something was going to happen, but suddenly nothing happened for a very long time. Because when nothing happens, a quarter of an hour or twenty minutes is quite eternal. And I remember that we also began to perceive many things. The drops of sweat that fell from our armpits, their path... we had micro-movements in our hands, in our bodies, all this began to be perceived. Every time that, through hearing, we perceived this activity, the people watching saw all these micro-movements, micro-things that happened to us thanks to eternity, to dilated time. It was a presentation in which the people who saw it were familiar with and understood the proposition. But of course... Maybe it was a bit of a selfish act, but, hey, it served our purpose. So we thank the people who put up with those twenty minutes (Hand to hand-1, 8 February 2023).

In this example, the break with the usual notion of time and space causes an estrangement that, as Silvio Lang (2019) says in his “Manifiesto de la práctica escénica”, allows sensitive practices to be invented. These practices

are modes of use and protocols for experiencing space, time, body organs, movement and perception. And he goes on to say that any practice fabricated in artistic activity is a practice of subjective mutation and social connection. The relationship between artists and audience is a game of recognition and affectation in the manner of BDSM erotic practices (here Silvio Lang quotes Claire Bishop). A reference in circus that makes these dynamics evident can be found in *EZ*, by Elena Zanzu, who puts the dynamics of consensus and mutual affect at the centre of the scene, and extrapolates them with the relationship through the audience.

The relationship between artists and audience within the framework of the performing arts has been the subject of exploration and questioning until today. One of the key theorists is Jacques Rancière (2010), who in *The Emancipated Spectator*, argues that art and politics are intrinsically connected through their ability to challenge hierarchies and redistribute shared sensibility. Rancière points out that all individuals have the capacity to be emancipated spectators, that is to say, people capable of perceiving and interpreting art and the world in an autonomous and critical way. This emancipation involves rejecting traditional ideas of cultural superiority and recognising the equality of all forms of expression and experience, with the focus on the creation of communities of storytellers and translators. This refers to creating collective spaces where the transmission and transformation of knowledge and stories takes place, where the different agents reinterpret and recontextualise the contents to give them new meanings and forms of understanding. In this respect, Rancière highlights the importance of these communities as places of resistance and cultural creation, where hierarchies are challenged and alternative voices are strengthened. He explains that there have been several explorations in this area that have given rise to various strategies to break with the supposed passivity of spectators, by generating a distancing in the style of Brecht's epic theatre or by losing all distance to bring about a vital participation according to Artaud's theatre of cruelty. Between creating distancing or losing all distance, Elena Zanzu, in *EZ*, leaves the monologue on the rope to ask for the collaboration of someone else while laying the foundations of a relationship. She presents care and consensus, the need for others to create and the limits to be agreed. In this case, a relationship is established in which the skills of the artist are linked with the skills of the audience to produce a new context. A device that binds agencies, a mediating artefact that creates aesthetic situations that imply a new possibility of the common.

As we can see, in the case of circus, the body constitutes the raw material to configure worlds; it is the mediating element in the creation of aesthetic situations that involve another sense of reality, a new possibility of the common. Following Jacques Rancière (2010), we can say that "common sense" is a community of sensitive data as well as a way of being together based on a consensus between words and things. What the author considers problematic is how other forms of "common sense" can be constructed, other forms of arranging space and time, other communities of words and things, of forms and meanings.

Only a sensing-thinking body, a body connected with sensuous knowledge, the *cognitio confusa* of aesthetic perception, connected and co-present, can be sensitive to the agencies of the elements involved in creation. Bodies-other that not only affect the creators, but have an effect on the configuration of the space and the narrative possibilities. Thus, the story of a path traced by a mast or a rope is perceived differently from the closed space drawn by a trapeze with its angles.

The mast combines the ground, because you start from the ground. In the trapeze there is a disconnection. And there is a space that produces something else, it's like you're in a vacuum. There is always something on the mast that ties you to the ground. At the mast you work the fall. There is a story on the way that is very different... to do and to undo, always on a kind of path. In the trapeze it is much smaller. I've worked with very long bars that gave me the same feeling that a mast can, that you can develop a kind of crossing. But on the trapeze... in the end it's a closed space. It provides other things, but it's still like a rectangle. The rope also offers a route, a continuity very different to the trapeze. In the end, mast and rope, there are no angles, it's all one line (Trapeze, 22 February 2023).

At the root of everything, we find a deep exploration of the relationship between the body and the environment, a constant dialogue between sensory experience and artistic creation, which put presence at the centre, in the sense of embodied presence and with full attention, essential to establish a relationship with the audience:

What I prioritise is being able to humanise the circus in some way and for me it's very important that what I do can resonate and can connect with the audience. Therefore, I have limited my practice to removing all the acrobatic, more spectacular part, and focus on the smallest things that, in the end, when developed, can go a long way. But what interests me most is that the audience can recognise themselves floating with me. Not presenting a ready body that does 'x' or 'x' and that can get in tune with what I propose physically. And I think presence is important. What is important for me is to offer a sincere presence, which is closely related to what I say about the body, that the audience can recognise. Not to dramatise what I do, but to humanise what I do as much as possible and to find sincerity in the gestures, both technical and in the stage moment that I share with the audience. I've always thought that performance interests me because it values what really happens and isn't acted out, and circus, in the end, is very interesting because in general it's not a figure acting, but what's happening in that moment. And it's this sincerity that interests me about the circus (Trapeze, 22 February 2023).

This sincerity and this humanisation of relationships on stage can be, as Marie-Andrée Robitaille (2022) considers, a hope for circus that seeks to deviate from the illusion of control in order to be able to appreciate the fragility of relationships between beings and the environment, while nurturing the ability to respond sensitively to contemporary challenges.

CODA

One does not see anything until one sees its beauty. Then, and then only, does it come into existence. At present, people see fogs, not because there are fogs, but because poets and painters have taught them the mysterious loveliness of such effects. There may have been fogs for centuries in London. I dare say there were. But no one saw them, and so we do not know anything about them. They did not exist till Art had invented them (Wilde, 2020).

We end as we started, with one more circus fiction. A story that cannot be told without fingers that press keys, a tired look behind lame glasses, a tattered shirt, stories that create tangled stories of ideas and creations, readings and conversations, companionship, generosity and trust. Thanks to the involvement of Verònica Capozzoli, Alejandro Dutra, Carla Farreny, Sergio González, Emilia Gutiérrez Epstein, Pablo Molina, Johnny Torres, Andrea Rodríguez de Liébana and Elena Zanzu. Thanks for the shared moments, for your entanglement, for your sincere presence and, above all, for the love and passion for circus. Thanks to Marta for lending her eye and sensitivity to it and to La Central del Circ for their support. Thanks to those who love this art for making fog into beauty.



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