Dedicated to k.r.

“How do you do I forgive you everything and there is nothing to forgive.

Never the less.”

- Gertrude Stein
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Introduction

Imagine “circus.” What does it look like? What color is it? What sounds does it make? What bodies are part of it, and what are they doing?

The word “circus” has meaning. Among circus practitioners and researchers, that meaning is changing, rapidly. New theories and methods are brimming in the circus community, giving life to a new kind of circus, one that probably looks quite different from the circus in your mind. This is contemporary circus.

Several definitions of circus exist, but this research orbits three of them, all of which attempt to capture “contemporary circus.” The first is that of performance critic Karoline Skuseth, who writes, “Contemporary Circus is typically a dramatic work that is performed with/gets help from/uses circus disciplines.” The second is written by Tomi Purovaara in his book An Introduction to Contemporary Circus, stating, “Contemporary circus is the artists’ personal interpretation of past and present circus, often related to other art forms” (126). The third is an excerpt drawn from the CircusNow\(^1\) manifesto: “Circus is a vehicle for beauty, meaning, self-expression, and social commentary, unique from dance, theater, or any other form. Circus skills have their own histories, training methods, physical vocabularies, and capabilities. They convey their own power” (About Circus Now).

The Skuseth definition allows for a loose interpretation of circus performance, within the enormous confines of theatrical/dramatic performance. When circus technique is used as a tool in dramatic expression, that expression may be considered

\(^1\) A U.S. circus advocacy network, to be discussed in future chapters.
contemporary circus. However, this definition seems to accept a generalized understanding of “circus disciplines.”

The Purovaara definition is artist focused, allowing for the possibility of completely different understandings of circus disciplines/technique between individual artists. This seems to follow understandably from the incredible variety of movement vocabularies that exist as “circus disciplines,” as circus technique can include anything from contortion on the floor, to acrobatics on a pole, to riding a unicycle, to an all new invented apparatus. It also reflects a similar understanding of movement technique as appears in American post-modern dance, with different dance artists curating their use of movement technique differently with respect to their particular voice and style.

The CircusNow definition takes this understanding of technique further, more closely defining “circus disciplines” without limiting them. It connects the performance to practice, by addressing the distinct training methods between disciplines. By characterizing “circus skills” as they exist in connection with their own histories, it establishes a separatism of circus from other performance arts. It contextualizes circus performance within its history, one that continues to affect and define circus performance today. This is the least interdisciplinary definition I’ve come upon, one that does not accept circus as a “dramatic work,” but as a form completely different from dance and theater, a contentious point of understanding in contemporary circus.

A quick note: I am a dance student and circus performer, conducting research for the dance major, studying a discipline that is not known as dance, and is
historically divergent from dance. In fact, there exists a camp of circus artists who actively defy the label of “dance,” as they feel that circus can be named an art form unto itself without relying on a pre-established artistic label\(^2\).

This research may read as more circus than dance. However, the dance-based inquiry is deeply embedded in the circus-focused research presented here, rooted in the universality of physical practices, and the new choreographic methods arising in contemporary circus which remarkably resemble practices already at work in the dance world.

Circus is a movement based performance discipline that begins with the body as dance does. It may be considered divergent from dance by virtue of its history, but not far at all in terms of its contemporary practice. Both dance and circus artists construct their work from embodied vocabularies, often with specific technical bases. While “dance” addresses an incredibly broad range of cultural, traditional, and contemporary approaches, “circus” is a more specific form, but one that crafts with many similar methods.

Extreme practice distinguishes circus – circus training is, at times, overwhelmingly physical, requiring fortitude and focus. I know it well, as a circus student training at a pre-professional level in wire-walking, with additional training in contortion and Chinese pole.

\(^2\) There also exists a group of circus-trained artists, operating and creating with circus technique, who refuse to identify as creators within the “circus” category, as they feel the word misrepresents the seriousness of their work. See page 86.
Figure 1. A (highly) condensed history of Western circus.

- **3000 BCE - Middle Ages** (Encyclopedia Britannica)
- **1768 - Mid 19th Century**
- **Late 18th Century-Mid 20th Century**
- **1970s-Present**
- **1990s-Present**

**Circus Movement Disciplines:** Ritual, Entertainment, Occupation

- **Itinerant Circus Performers**
  - **Modern Circus**
    - **Traditional American Circus**
    - **Soviet Circus**
  - **Traditional Style Circus**
  - **Nouveau Cirque/Cirque Nouveau**
    - **Cirque du Soleil/Cirque-Style**
    - **Contemporary Circus**

Images courtesy of Encyclopedia Britannica, Cirque du Soleil, Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, and Einar Kåre H. Odencrantz.
My circus training has run parallel to my dance education at Wesleyan. I only began dancing at the latter end of my high school career, and was drawn by the physical practice in the dance major. It was only upon graduating high school that I began learning circus technique, not very distant from my start in dance.

The emphasis in my Wesleyan dance classes on a felt, somatic dance practice, rather than one based on what a dance move or phrase looks like, was confusing at first. I had spent the first years of my dance career trying to make my body do things that looked ‘cool.’ I had done the same for my first experiences in circus training. However, looking ‘cool’ suddenly wasn’t worth as much. I was asked not to look at myself in a mirror. Instead, I was asked to turn my gaze inward, and investigate movement from within my body.

What did that mean for a circus practice, which, according to my experience at the time, was entirely based on a vocabulary of tricks and gestures defined by look, by wow-factor, by virtuosic ability?

In pursuing dance studies, while taking off-campus classes in contortion and aerial disciplines, I questioned both the vocabularies with which I was provided. The circus vocabularies had the propensity to feel flashy and uncomplicated, but were honestly embodied, and genuine at least in physical effort. The introverted dance explorations I found so much satisfaction in executing didn’t capture my interest choreographically, and didn’t sweep my body into the full-blooded movement I found salient in my circus technique.

The important distinction between my quickly converging educations appeared most obviously when I began making dances: the circus technique I was
learning tended to be purely technical, absent of content, while the dance I was being taught to make was fraught with representation. I was surrounded by professors willing to show me how to make dance that reads to an audience, to make dance that means something. In circus class, I learned rote technical vocabulary, and didn’t yet have the tools to parse the distinction between a technical practice and a creative one.

Can a trick mean something? If not, is it inherently useless? I was struck by the notable lack of acrobatics in the dance pieces my professors showed in class, as well as those which my peers were composing. Does dance have a place for tricks? Are the circus arts in opposition to dance?

After studying contemporary circus from my position in the dance major, I think not. Contemporary circus is certainly interdisciplinary, albeit somewhat distinct from dance as a technique and a form. As will be described in detail, it comes from a different tradition, one that still affects it in performance today. However – I am of the opinion that there is inherent and necessary value to addressing contemporary circus in a dance context. It is a very new form, one that follows in the footsteps of modern dance’s evolution in the twentieth century, by similarly defying the choreographic standards of the traditional forms preceding (Anderson 154).

Upon examining circus tradition, the significance of contemporary circus’s emergence comes to light. To perform circus disciplines unapologetically as circus, in a revitalized form that acknowledges its history, has learned from it, and has changed from it, is a political act. It rejects the exploitation characterizing freak shows. It rejects the menageries of humans and animals, the objectification of beings in their
presentation as attractions\(^3\). It rejected the 18\(^{th}\) century American laws outlawing performance and certain forms of expression (Stoddart 21). It rejected the hypergendered expectations of the Victorian Era, with men performing ‘feminine’ grace and women performing ‘masculine’ musculature in their artful flying trapeze practices (Tait 31-35). It rejected the attempts of post-feudal aristocrats to restrict the mobility of those who once were serfs (Wall 45-47). All throughout its reformation across history, circus performance has managed to challenge and subvert expectations, both with respect to cultural norms, and to the physical possibilities of the human form.

A creative practice based in a cultivated technical understanding of movement in relation to bodies and apparatus, circus is not very different from dance. Like dance, circus uses the body as an instrument. Like dance, circus comes in many different forms, some more pointedly technical and/or traditional than others.

As will become clear in the coming chapters, contemporary circus is not Cirque du Soleil, nor is it the commercially marketed contemporary circus that inhabits the American entertainment sector. It is a form that, like dance, uses dramaturgy, narrative, and/or a choreographic research process. It inhabits the performance art world in European and Canadian circles, and is only just beginning to find roots in the United States. It combines the physical power of circus technique – eye-grabbing, attention-holding, and audience-attracting – with an expressive understanding of the technique, as expanded with vocabularies attributable to theatre

\(^3\) A principle further emphasized in the form’s typical pedestrianization and humanization of the performer.
and dance. Contemporary circus is circus speaking (Purovaara 122-124, 126, 146-149).

Contemporary circus has emerged from an extensive history, which has included exploitation of non-normative bodies, inhumane treatment of non-human animals, and an emphasis on commercial production as opposed to creative freedom. In reacting to and rejecting these components of its history, the contemporary form opens a new door of artistic expression through storied movement disciplines.

The form made its first gestures in the context of the experimental French theatre scene of the 1970s, one celebrating the radical perspectives of Antonin Artaud⁴, the stylistic categorization of Peter Brook⁵, and the physical theater of Ariane Mnouchkine’s Théâtre du Soleil⁶ (Purovaara 94-96). It descends from an extensive lineage, beginning with ancient practices, evolving into nomadic performance structures, surviving vagrancy laws, plagues, and laws forbidding gatherings and festivals, eventually developing into the street theatre and tented spectacle of the nineteenth and twentieth century, and transforming from these iterations into the experimental contemporary form.

Much of the writing on the artistic development of circus, which has been rapidly progressing in the past fifty years, exists from an historical perspective. However, little existing academic study exists on the creative methods of circus-making, particularly as artistic research. This is changing as contemporary circus finds its way to the forefront of European performing arts, with publications such as

⁴ For further reading, see his manifesto, The Theatre of the Cruel.
⁵ For further reading, see the collection of his writings and lectures, The Empty Space.
⁶ For further reading, see Trajectoires du Soleil: Autour d’Ariane Mnouchkine by Josette Féral
those produced by circus advocacy network Hors Les Murs\textsuperscript{7}. The Montreal Working Group, a collective of circus dramaturgs associated with École Nationale de Cirque in Montreal, is also a significant group of academics publishing work on circus-making, sometimes examining the contemporary form (Leroux and Batson 13-14). However, at present, creative research in circus is generally stagnant in American performance academia (Wall, \textit{Moving Beyond the Big Top}).

Introducing circus to the academic environment, first in Russia, then in Europe, Canada, and Australia, had lasting repercussions on its development, and made room for the contemporary state of the form – one that makes use of dramaturgy, research, and choreographic intention (Purovaara 67). As circus has yet to find a place in the academic environs of American universities (Wall, \textit{Moving Beyond the Big Top}), dance is the only accepted academic field in the U.S. with the developed understanding of movement, composition, and embodied athleticism and expression that a close analysis of contemporary circus requires.

The integrated physical and written practices that characterize a choreographic research process in dance are rarely taught in the classes usually found at recreational circus schools, a generally technical education. However, these methods of dance-making are the same methods being used to create contemporary circus overseas.

A particularly developed example is Marie-Andrée Robitaille’s Gynoides project, which is researching the role of women in circus performance, and seeks to develop new methods of addressing gender in circus creation and performance. The

\textsuperscript{7} The French National Resource Center for Street Arts and Circus Arts, which manages the CircoStrada Network, a collective of circus and street arts across Europe. See Circostrada.org and artcena.fr
project is being executed in a series of “Beta Tests,” begun in 2011, described by Robitaille as follows:

“The Beta Tests are explorative periods of a few weeks to a few months where I have been working with one to six female circus artists at a time. We’ve had 8 Beta Tests so far with the ninth happening in September 2015. Each Beta Test explores a topic. We don’t engage in creating any characters or composing choreography to set music, nor do we compose from a series of set ‘tricks’ but instead try to find another order to the composition practice. We take away layers of costume, we use skin colored attire so that you can clearly see the shapes of the different bodies. The Beta Test also reinforces the relationships on stage between several women.”

(Robitaille, 2015)

The Beta Tests culminated in a full-length production called “GYN♀IDES – CIRCUS FEMALE INTELLIGENTSIA,” which debuted in January 2015 in Stockholm, Sweden, and continued to tour into 2016 (The Sh♀w - Gynoïdes Project). The project at large is described as “an academic enquiry through artistic practice that raises and examines the question of women agency in circus art.”

Robitaille’s process speaks from equally academic and artistic perspectives. Since the origination of the Gynoides project, she has presented research addressing sonic components of her artistic endeavors (Robitaille et al.; Bresin et al.), created the
Women in Circus consortium, and collaborated with researchers in philosophy, feminist studies, sociology, and circus (Robitaille, 2015).

In the Beta Tests, the performance operates using circus as the technical basis for movement, with the research facilitating the choreography of that technique. In Beta Test V, the choreography serves as a framing and arranging of technical skillsets, with a soundscore generated by the movements onstage. The performers have the ultimate agency in this piece, not only performing their highly virtuosic “amazing acrobatics” (Robitaille, 2015) but orchestrating themselves sonically, expressing female independence in a performance discipline that is presently male dominated (Robitaille, 2013).

Robitaille’s creative research is a model for how circus might flourish within a choreographic research process. The Gynoides project makes essential and relevant commentary, both upon the circus world for its expectations of female performers – sexiness, flirtiness, playing as minorities to male performers – and upon the larger audience who lives in today’s patriarchal societal structures (Robitaille, 2015).

Robitaille’s approach is remarkably similar to the one cultivated by the Wesleyan dance department. It begins with research questions, engages both a written and physical practice, and interacts at length with related academic fields. The Wesleyan dance department asks its students to consider all of these actions as necessary components of dance-making. My dance education, it would seem, has prepared me well to make meaningful contemporary circus.

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8 From http://www.cirkusperspektiv.se/wmen-in-circus-consortium/: “The consortium is an International reunion inviting all circus artists and other parties to a series of lectures, performances, discussions, workshop and networking activities in relation to the agency of women in circus. An occasion to meet, raise and discuss the question of women in circus.” Accessed 3/31/17.
If dance will consider itself an expansive field addressing diverse movement disciplines, it must address contemporary circus, which is quite new, and largely unaccounted for. But, if dance is going to address it accurately and thoroughly, it must be addressed on its own terms.

Context is key to grasping contemporary circus in performance and research. This paper makes use of literature by circus historian Duncan Wall, who has taught circus history at École Nationale de Cirque in Montreal as a visiting scholar from McGill University. His book, *The Ordinary Acrobat*, traces the development of circus technique from ancient origins to contemporary productions in the heart of the French theater scene. Much of his research is corroborated in scholarship by authors Ernest Albrecht, an American circus historian who has written several books addressing the changes afoot in circus performance in the past century, Ruth Manning-Sanders, whose 1950 book *The English Circus* begins with ancient circus traditions in cultures worldwide and examines their transformation into the modern/traditional style that emerged in 18th century Great Britain, and Tomi Purovaara, in the collection *An Introduction to Contemporary Circus*, which gathers essays from current European circus artists addressing the origins and contemporary landscape of the form.

The 2016 collection *Cirque Global* is the first of its kind, by compiling scholarly articles from circus researchers of Quebec to examine the province’s effects on the international circus scene. *Cirque Global* “showcases Quebec circus’s hybrid forms, which have merged the ethos and aesthetics of European circuses with American commercial and industrial creativity” (Leroux/Batson, back cover), casting
projections for the future and theorizing best practices for the present. This collection makes a model of what research in contemporary circus might be.

More research in the developing creative mechanics of contemporary circus exists in journals based in Europe, including that known as Circostrada, or Stradda to Francophones, distributed by the previously mentioned organization HorsLesMurs. The mission of the **Circostrada** publication is advertised on their website as follows:

“Research into circus and street arts, and outdoor artistic creation in general, is still underdeveloped in Europe and worldwide. Circostrada supports and promotes research by regularly carrying out and publishing thematic studies and guides that shed light on innovative practices and identify the emerging trends impacting and challenging our sectors” (“Key Themes”).

Featured content includes criticisms of performances, critical theory with respect to artist representation, and emerging practices in the contemporary circus field, both artistically and academically. Other research resources exist on the Circostrada website, but many of them are in French, Italian, Spanish, or Scandinavian languages, often without translations available, as research in the contemporary circus arts is largely a phenomenon taking place within these countries and within the European Union⁹.

As the abstract of circus scholar Peta Tait’s *Circus Bodies* (2005) states, the field of circus studies is “increasingly popular and largely undocumented.” Although

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⁹ For further reading on European cultural research regarding circus arts, see Circus Work Ahead! at circusworkahead.eu
some scholarship exists, much of it examines traditional circus forms. In my research, I’ve had difficulty finding resources, particularly of the scholarly variety, addressing perspectives on contemporary circus – that is, beyond those examining individual works of contemporary circus, as critical writing in contemporary circus publications tend to do. The scholars currently researching contemporary circus appear to generally be practitioners themselves. Therefore, much of the resources for this paper come from contemporary circus artists, whether videos of their work, interviews regarding their artistic processes, or their own analyses of the contemporary circus world.

Online sources have been a valuable resource, as I’ve been able to compile articles which would otherwise be unavailable in print in the United States. I’ve also been able to access footage of contemporary circus performances which have never toured in America.

Organizations such as CircusNow, which is an American non-profit supporting the development of contemporary circus in the United States, publish online articles written by circus performers and scholars, offering researched perspectives on the contemporary form. I’ve made use of several of these articles, including Sebastian Kann’s two-part “Disappearing Acts,” an extensive examination of circus works pushing the present boundaries of the field. Other such online resources, including the contemporary circus media outlets Sideshow Magazine and Crying Out Loud, include interviews with artists such as Phia Ménard, Sverre Waage, Naomi Francis and Skye Gellman, all of whom have created ground breaking contemporary circus work.
Commercial circus, which I define as gig-style performances executed for marketability, is not addressed in this paper, being distinct from the contemporary circus that is taking steps into the art world. However, commercial circus and its role in the field of circus arts may be a fertile topic for future research.

As this study is an integrated research process, with both written and choreographic investigations, I’ve created two attempts at contemporary circus. By doing so, I begin to develop an understanding of how the circus trick can exist and thrive in a choreographic research process. My choreographic experiments served as practical laboratories for making work that not only included circus tricks, but required them in order to be the fullest iteration of the work at hand.

Contemporary circus is a largely western phenomenon, with its predecessor, *cirque nouveau*, possessing French origins, and its grandparent, modern circus, generally recognized as beginning with England’s Phillip Astley. Although circus has appeared all over the world, notably with unmatched virtuosity in China’s acrobatic tradition, my research turns its focus on western forms of circus, as it is those which are closest in lineage to the contemporary circus this paper addresses.

I hope to establish an understanding of contemporary circus as an expressive movement discipline with specificity of technique, which possesses unavoidable cultural and historical baggage. It is my aim to communicate to my audiences, readers, and dancers a dynamic approach to circus-making and performance which follows from an education in dance-making.

To understand the contemporary form of circus, I determine that one must first understand its origins. In my first chapter, I describe the evolution of western
circus performance, beginning with ancient accounts of circus performers, following these traveling performers through the Middle Ages and into the modern era. I take an in-depth look at the characteristics of traditional American circuses, and the ethical quandaries thereof. Because the word “circus” is charged with colloquial meaning, we must understand the roots of that meaning in order to examine how it affects the form and its perception today.

In my second chapter, I address the transition from traditional circus to cirque nouveau to the still growing field of contemporary circus. I present Cirque du Soleil as a key figure in current perceptions of circus performance, and distinguish traditional, cirque, and contemporary styles of circus performance. I look at early instances of dramaturgy and storytelling in circus in order to better understand the creative mechanics of today’s contemporary circus.

In my third chapter, I concentrate on the particular challenges of contemporary circus, from artistic and practical perspectives. I look at the tools some circus artists are implementing to navigate these challenges, and express my own understanding of contemporary circus making, from my perspective as a dance student.

In my fourth and final chapter, I describe the choreographic components of my research, which resulted in two twelve-minute pieces, Ticky Tacky and Pushmepleasure. I describe the methods I used in making my interpretation of contemporary circus. I explain a hybridized approach to dance-circus with Ticky Tacky, and address a more theatrical and circus-emphasized approach in Pushmepleasure.
Circus engages the physicality of the human form in ways both old and new. Making use of ancient practices, its contemporary form is acting in opposition to tradition, rejecting the exploitative and the limiting, and beginning to examine and create circus from a post-modern perspective. Studies in dance have equipped me to develop an understanding of this evolution, what it means for this growing performance discipline, and how it will affect our understanding of circus in relation to dance.
Chapter I: The Roots of Western Contemporary Circus

WORLD’S MOST EXCITING SPECTACLE
Wonderfully Different from
All the Circuses You Have Seen
Unbelievable Feats of Skill and Daring

... Incredible...
Amazing...
Electrifying!

- Popov and Company, 1967

Ancient Practices

For thousands of years, movement disciplines now considered “circus arts” have appeared in cultures all over the world. Evidence of juggling and object manipulation dates back as far as 3000 BC, seen in Egyptian tomb engravings (Wall 60). In ancient China, state-sponsored acrobatic troupes served as emissaries of the emperor’s power (43-44). Some Native American tribes, including the Nez Perce and the Hopi, celebrated the coyote as a clown-like figure, a clever character who deceived and amused (43). In ancient Greece, performers of “the Pyrrhic Dance” tumbled and balanced, on floors and on each other (Manning-Sanders 17). According to Xenophon’s Symposium, Socrates himself witnessed a hoop-dancer, and deemed her and her juggling talents evidence that “woman’s nature is nowise inferior to man’s” (Wall 60). Equestrian demonstrations, juggling, and acrobatic feats were all common at fairs and festivals of ancient Rome (Manning-Sanders 16).

These skillful movement disciplines, once separate exercises of acrobatic ability, now exist under the wide category of circus, and continue to be performed today. Recreational circus schools exist in almost every major city, and almost anyone can learn the same juggling patterns, contortion skills, and acrobatic feats that have graced the stages of cultures worldwide. After twisting through a charged
history and several hundred years of evolution as an art form, a new incarnation of circus is becoming increasingly apparent. This form, known as contemporary circus, has given rise to a renewed sense of expression and relevancy in this ancient practice, and is a recently developing landscape for performance artists.

Here, the history that birthed the form is briefly traced, to facilitate a better understanding of its underpinnings. To understand the newest body of circus performance, one must first look at its heritage. Contemporary circus is both old and new, an old form embodied by a new praxis; to attempt to understand the new, we begin with the old.

**European Circus in the Middle Ages**

Traveling performers, known widely as *saltimbanques*, became common in Europe after the fall of Rome, and typically practiced a variety of disciplines, from rope-walking to contortion to fortune-telling. (Wall 43, 48)

Interdisciplinary tradition in circus can be traced in Europe as early as the Middle Ages, beginning in the 5th century. Highest among the saltimbanques, in what would later be known as England, was the class of musical performers, or, as they were known before the Norman Conquest, “gleemen.” One of the most well-known performers of that time was one Widsmith, whose writings illuminate the status of the era’s bards: “Until it all shall pass, light and life together: he who maketh songs of praise shall have lasting honour…The wandering gleemen are always welcome, and have joy in their art.” Performers tended to travel in groups, so these gleemen often accompanied early circus performers, both in travels and in performance. Music was a constant in these early circus performances. Most performers of circus disciplines
also tended to be competent in many instruments, to better accompany their fellows\textsuperscript{10} (Manning-Sanders 18-19).

In the Middle Ages, dancing, too, was integral to the performance. In fact, in the Early Middle Ages, dancing and tumbling were considered interchangeable in language – in \textit{The English Circus}, Ruth Manning-Sanders provides an account of how a bible story included circus performance to the Anglo-Saxon eye:

“We are told by St. Mark that the daughter of Herodias ‘came in and danced and pleased Herod’. But, in the Anglo-Saxon version of the story, the damsel did not merely dance, she tumbled before Herod; and in more than one monkish illumination we find pictures of this acrobatic maiden walking on her hands, or arrested, it would seem, in mid-performance of a flip-flap, such as the gleemaidens (for there were gleemaidens as well as gleemen) were accustomed to perform to the pious horror of these same monkish chroniclers.” (22)

\textit{Figure 2}. One such illumination of Herod’s daughter, Salome, performing contortion. Note John the Baptist’s severed head in the accompanying illumination. Image from the Amiens Missal of 1323 (The Hague, Royal Library, KB MS 78 D 40).

\textsuperscript{10} Circus was more marketable when it came with song – this is parallel to first the live band that accompanied Phillip Astley’s modern circus in 18th century England, then musicians that traveled by train with American circuses of the 19th and early 20th centuries, and now the practice of live music in Cirque du Soleil style performance, in which original music is performed by singers as virtuosic as the circus acts performed around them.
Trained animals become increasingly important to traveling circus performance, in Europe as early as the tenth century. Animal-based performance notably appeared in Roman amphitheaters, particularly in the Colosseum, where acts of bloodshed served as entertainment – a possible precursor to the appeal of death-defying risk in later circus performance. The arenas of Ancient Rome lent circus its modern staging, in the round. The word “circus” is a Latin word, once referring to the ovular tracks where chariot- and horse-racing, as well as trick riding took place. But it was in the Roman amphitheater that Martial and Pliny the Elder recorded displays of tame beasts: panthers drawing chariots, tigers demonstrating unusual docility, and wounded elephants kneeling before the emperor (Carcopino 237-239; Manning-Sanders 16).

The trained animals of circus performers in the Middle Ages were a far cry from the lions and tigers found in the Colosseum. Horses in particular show a prominence in illuminations of the time, performing such feats as carrying an ox upon their back, dancing, beating a drum, and even rope-walking. However, there exists evidence of performers traveling with dogs, monkeys, hares, cocks, and even bears (Stoddart 22-23).

The enormous European outbreak of bubonic plague in the 14th century put an end to the public gatherings that wandering performers found so profitable, and for a time, it was dangerous to be exposed and traveling. Some performers found shelter with aristocrats who held property outside the cities, and who had need of an installed human distraction. The city streets were no longer so popular, making busking moot. But circus performance proved irrepressible, and the skills lived on (Wall 45).
Fairs, Festivals, and Astley’s Modern Circus

With the advent of a post-feudal migrant class of roving merchants, soldiers, and pilgrims, harsh vagrancy laws further troubled the nomadic tendencies of European circus troupes. Even more itinerants sought residency-like positions with local aristocrats. In this way, a performer could win favor with the upper class, and continue their craft with the blessing of room and board, or even just a letter of safe passage (Wall 45).

Over time, migrant labor grew more acceptable – and inevitable – to the ruling class, and the sanctions on traveling workers diminished. Merchants and visitors descended on the rejuvenated sites of fairs and festivals, to sell their goods and to hear and share news. With the influx of moving bodies, the rediscovered fairground became a lush and lucrative venue for performers. Festivals would occur on a regular basis, some lasting more than a month at a time. Those who had performing talents could hop from fair to fair, sharing them with the larger community, and profiting from them on a consistent, scheduled basis. Groups and individuals swapped talents and traditions; the highly specified knowledge of these physically advanced disciplines could be shared among artists. The fairs grew increasingly multi-cultural: Italian ropedancers, Roma communities, traveling Jewish families, and metalworkers and musicians of Northern India all found a home in the European festival circuit of the 15th and 16th centuries (Wall 46-47).

Even though disciplines such as rope-walking and juggling had existed for thousands of years previous, with the circus innovators of the eighteenth century, horsemanship was considered the principal component of circus. The word “circus”
came to mean the site of a riding school, typically with a 42-foot sand- or sawdust-footed ring and seating all around, where the public could take riding lessons as well as witness equestrian spectacle. The display of an individual who would “distinguish himself with many Feats of Horsemanship, Vaulting, & Agility,” or “carry his young pupil on his shoulders in the attitude of Mercury, standing on two horses in full gallop,” or even “pick up several handkerchiefs and likewise a watch, from the ground, when the Horse is in full speed”¹¹ (Stoddart 1) served a commercial purpose, advertising the lessons which the school offered.

In 1768, with his first trick riding demonstration, Phillip Astley, the so-called “father of modern circus,” became one of the first circus innovators of modern times, and in doing so, defined the modern circus as one performed as feats executed in the round, in at least one ring (Manning-Sanders 35; Wall 108). A cavalry man in the Seven Years’ War, and avid horseman, Astley opened a riding school in London and began performing feats of horsemanship “never attempted by anyone,” (Kotar/Gessler 9) reportedly, “‘not the DOG and DUCK’” his competitors had to offer (Stoddart 1). His productions grew more elaborate over time, evolving from rote tricks to elaborate shows with comic skits and storylines. One skit, introduced as “The Taylor Riding to Brentford,” would become the model of a classic clown act repeated for centuries around the world. In its essence, it is the portrayal of a man failing to mount his horse, who goes on to chase his master around the ring (Kotar/Gessler 9). Astley’s performances put in place what Kotar and Gessler call the two primary ingredients of circus: horsemanship and comedy (9). For the first time, skillful movement

¹¹ Quoted respectively from handbills of Codet, Ricketts, and Pepin & Breschard, all circus proprietors in the 18th and 19th century.
disciplines were being presented as cohesive shows, rather than individual
demonstrations (Wall 108).

Menageries, trick riding, and rope-dancers appeared in what were then
English colonies of North America as early as 1716 (Kotar/Gessler 48). Equestrian
displays comparable to the likes of Astley’s appeared by 1771, but during the
American Revolution, a 1774 Act of Congress prohibited all public demonstrations
and entertainments, for a few years stunting the development of circus in America
(Stoddart 21). But in 1793, already a riding school had erected a circus in
Philadelphia, courtesy of John Bill Ricketts. An Englishman, Ricketts had witnessed
Astley’s performances, and produced spectacles in much the same style – an
adaptation of “The Taylor Riding to Brentford” even made an appearance. Rickett’s
equestrian circus, like Astley’s, was housed in a permanent or semi-permanent local
venue and performed in the round. (Kotar/Gessler 49-50). However, his
performances, unlike the later renditions of Astley’s, never developed dramatic depth.
Kotar and Gessler write that American audiences looked to the riding schools, those
of Ricketts and other emerging performing groups, for entertainment, preferring
“horsemanship, clowning, light pantomime and gymnastics” to more sophisticated
and dramatic substance, for which they attended the theater (57-58).

Here emerges an important distinction between American and European
circus audiences. By the 19th century, circus in Paris was rising to the same high-art
stature as opera and ballet (Wall 156). Circus in Europe became romanticized, with
figures like Madame Saqui, master of theatrical ropedancing and consort to

12 1765-83
Napoleon\textsuperscript{13}, and Jules Léotard, inventor of the flying trapeze\textsuperscript{14} and fantasy object of the Parisian public, capturing the imagination of their wide audiences, and constantly innovating in their performances (140-143; 155; 158). In the United States at this time, circus/riding school performances presented a cruder show than that praised by the Parisian patrons of the arts. Audiences attended the shows for entertainment, rather than artful enlightenment (Kotar/Gessler, 58; 78-79).

In 1859, the possibility of human flight was introduced to the world of circus. Eighteen year-old former gymnast Léotard, upon pondering the high ceiling above a pool, and the ropes that hung there, began to design what would become the flying trapeze. He later created a rig on which he soared over straw mattresses, to the wonderment of the local residents of Toulouse, France, his hometown. He called his act, the performance of releasing one trapeze and catching another midair in a series of three and four, “the race of the trapezes”, and he took Paris by storm. The circus-viewing French public became fascinated with this young man’s ability to seemingly escape gravity, and his fame spread worldwide. After a decade of performing across Europe, he died of smallpox at age thirty-two. His death was remarkable in being unrelated to his trapeze practice, unlike many of those who followed in his pursuit of flight (Wall 155-158).

The introduction of the flying trapeze occurred in confluence with a growing trend in circus performance. Wild animal trainers were suddenly a circus staple. Acrobatic experimentation with more adventurous and difficult apparatus was taking

\textsuperscript{13} Born Marguerite-Antoinette Lalanne, she would later claim for herself, with the favor of Napoleon, the title “First Acrobat of His Majesty the Emperor and King” (Wall 140-143).

\textsuperscript{14} And also inventor of the leotard costume, originated for its practical use on the flying apparatus (Tait 12).
place, resulting in disciplines such as teeterboard and trampoline. A marked increase in gruesome circus accidents took hold, and audiences started going to the circus for a new reason – the feeling that something could go catastrophically wrong, the realization that what these performers are doing could easily kill them, and the thrill of recognition that the audience could just as easily bear witness to the accident. When or if the performers completed their skills successfully, the suspense paid off for those breath-holding audience members. Occasionally, even often, performers did not escape unscathed; the expectations of circus performance became increasingly risk-centric (157-160).

Figure 3. “Isaac Van Amburgh with his Animals,” by Sir Edwin Henry Landseer. Isaac Van Amburgh was one of the best known American animal tamers, performing with big cats in menagerie displays, as well as in scripted melodramatic plays (Wall 157; Appletons’... 659). Retrospectively, he became known for the cruelty of his training methods, starving and then beating the animals with a whip or crowbar in order to provoke first ferocity in performance, then submission (Velten 138-9).

Joshua Purdy Brown’s collapsible tent made the American circus show portable in 1820. Brown’s tent was created with the intention of bringing the American circus westward, where much of America was headed as well. These shows still featured primarily equestrian acts, but evolving to the tastes of those for whom they were performed – a “rough-and-tumble” crowd. The circus performers, subject
to long days of travel and performance, with slim profit margins, became “rough-and-tumble” as well, often inciting brawls at their own performance destinations. With these disruptive habits, circuses became the target of religiously motivated anti-circus legislature. While its reputation declined, the traveling circus market boomed, and over thirty companies were following the trend by 1852 (Wall 190-192).

Menageries would later accompany these traveling shows, adding to their value and ticket sales. Sideshow became a profitable endeavor, and companies collected so-called “human curiosities” to enhance their allure (Kotar/Gessler 267-276).

A History of Exploitation

A study of American circus cannot ignore the inclusion of so-called “Freak Shows.” These were productions that were known to make profit at the expense of disabled individuals, to brand exoticism for profit, and to objectify human beings without their consent. Such shows fed Social Darwinism and supported the racist norms of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in America. In contributing to their popularity and profits, these shows are linked inextricably with the touring circuses of the era.

In the interest of portraying American circus with accuracy, as well as demonstrating the development of contemporary circus, I have attempted to present a brief but comprehensive review of American freak show, and its connection to circus. I do so without a background in disability studies, an enormous field that I unfortunately cannot portray in its entirety here. I am therefore limited in the determinations I am able to make with the information at hand. I have tried to present
the history factually, with the perspectives of the authors of my resources in plain view.

Much of the literature documenting American freak show refers to its performing subjects as they were referred in the eighteenth and nineteenth century: “freaks.” From a twenty-first century perspective, I find the use of the term reductive and anachronistic, and have replaced it in my research with the term “performer.”

Robert Bogdan takes note of the empirical interest nineteenth century Americans took in “human curiosities” (27), a fascination also reflected in the scientific bent given to advertisements of contemporaneous trapeze demonstrations (Tait 26). To be a scientist was not yet a career – curious amateurs had an interest in attempting to quantify, record, and otherwise categorize humanity as it was not yet known to the Western collective mind. According to Bogdan, “the developing science of teratology, the study of monsters, was bent on establishing a ‘scientific’ classification of lusus naturae.” Lusus naturae was the industry term for the “monsters” on display, individuals working as living attractions who are born “with demonstrable difference,” typically those with physical disabilities (6). Much of the scientific discourse of the time was focused on nomenclature, rather than the origins or mechanics, or indeed the ethics of exploitation, of the physical or mental difference in these individuals (3-7).

While freak shows rose in popularity as small traveling human menageries in the late eighteenth century,15 but generally weren’t prolific or institutionalized affairs until human oddities began appearing in museums, known as Dime Museums for

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15 Animal menageries only just began to tour in America in 1716, when the first lion was exhibited; human menageries came not long after (Bogdan 32).
their admission cost, in the early nineteenth century. By far the most successful of these was P.T. Barnum’s American Museum, opened in 1841 in New York City. Here, the performers were the main attraction, in an upscale environment considered “quite fashionable” (32).

Barnum’s marketing strategies – bold banners, wild backstories to each attraction, a live band on the steps of the museum itself – became iconic to the American freak show, and indeed reflected marketing techniques applied to the circus to which his name later belonged. (32-33).

Individual human attractions would travel with some circuses as early as 1800. Museums toured with their human attractions – Barnum had the Barnum Caravan Museum Show beginning in 1851 – but it wasn’t until museums of “human oddities” began touring with traveling circuses that “freak show” became “sideshow,” an extra show, for an extra ticket, literally to the side of the circus tent where the main show took place. The first of these was Waring, Raymond, and Co. in 1837, which advertised itself as the triple-threat circus, menagerie, and museum16. George Bunnel, who had operated such museums in New York, and as recently as 1969 owned a sideshow with the Stone and Murray Circus, would later assist in the ownership and operation of the “Place of Wonders” sideshow that traveled with one of the circus operations belonging to Barnum in 1875 (41).

Admission was offered for the sideshow before the performance, a lucrative opportunity to amuse early-arriving audience members. Spectators entered a separate

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16 A term generally recognized at the time as a display of freak show performers.
tent and traveled what was known as the midway – the long length of the oval-shaped
tent that led to the entrance of the main performance tent (46).

The human exhibitions in the sideshow tent included those performers
considered “lusus naturae,” which might include “little people (dwarfs and midgets),
giants, hairy people, human skeletons, armless and legless wonders, wild men, fat
people, albinos, Siamese twins, people with extra limbs, half men/half women, people
with skin disorders, and anatomical wonders” (7). Also featured were exhibitions of
non-white or non-Western individuals, sometimes forcibly displaced from their
cultures and displayed as primitive beings, billed to be educational looks at the vast
variety of mankind. Such presentations were however, in most cases, factually
inaccurate and intentionally sensationalized, e.g. presenting a person of color with a
disability as a representative of a mythological tribal race, all of whom possess that
disability. Bogdan writes that such exhibits “kindled belief in races of tailed people,
dwarfs, giants, and even people with double heads” (6).

The majority of traveling circuses contained a sideshow component by the
1870s, and it remained a fixture of American circus until the 1950s (46), by which
time most travelling circuses were bankrupt, having been unable to compete with new
developments in entertainment, such as the rising popularity of vaudeville and movie
houses, and of course, film and television. The Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey
circus had a sideshow at their opening in Madison Square Garden in 1956, but had
done away with the tent format by then, and were no longer traveling with a sideshow
(46).
Resistance and Decline

Some writers, often social activists who had also spoken out against slavery, or whose relatives were ardent abolitionists, protested the treatment of sideshow performers, and even praised greater society for eventually turning from sideshows as fashionable entertainment. One such writer was Oswald Garrison Villiard. In 1908, he wrote the following as part of an editorial in *The Nation*:

“The giant, for example, when considered as a physical superman, or even as the villain of the nursery tales, was worth going to see. But we are taught now that he is not a superman, but the victim of a disease which in other forms kills after horrible disfigurement, that something at the base of his brain is responsible for the extraordinary and disproportionate growth, that the giant is usually sickly, dies young, and is inferior to an able-bodied man of ordinary size in any test that involves sustained effort. Just so when the patrons of the circus realize that the human pincushion, the elastic-skinned man, the blue man, the dog-faced boy, and their ilk are all victims of rare diseases with ten-syllabled names of Greek origin, and that, in all probability, other sufferers, who are unwilling to exhibit their afflictions, are under treatment by physicians, these, too, lose most of their fascination.” (passage cited by Chemers, 87)

By pathologizing freak show performers, the moral imperatives of Victorian society began to lean in part towards distaste for the display of such shocking and unseemly attractions, and in part towards an awareness of their humanity, as this was a group of people who were largely disadvantaged, largely existing outside the mainstream norm, and also largely sane, possessed of their own consciousness and experience (86-89).
In 1899, a secret meeting supposedly occurred among the sideshow performers in Barnum and Bailey’s touring sideshow and “Greatest Show on Earth.” In this meeting, the term freak was voted as offensive, and a strike of the performers was announced until such time as the word was removed from all promotional materials, and indeed, no longer used in reference to such individuals. The word “prodigy” was accepted in its stead, and allowed the appearance of some reclamation of autonomy by the performers (97-99).

By appropriating the term here, the freaks invoke the same science to generate a “narrative of peculiarity as eminence,” citing Darwin’s principle that random variation was a necessary function for the survival of a species and, therefore, that any particular trait cannot be definitively said to be injurious or advantageous without the perspective of much time. Perhaps the freakish body is the next step in human evolution; perhaps freaks will turn out to be better suited to survive some unknown future disaster; perhaps it is the freakish body that got the “double good” genes. Who can say, since the powerful engine of genetics operates invisibly to humans? The Revolt of the Freaks hijacks the medicalization of human difference and makes people with disabilities the victors, not the victims, of Darwinian evolution. (99)

Variation in nature is deemed necessary for the continued adaptation of a species to its habitat. It is by this mechanism that different bodies emerge, via Mendelian genetic patterns. As “prodigies,” rather than “freaks,” these performers are relabeled, not the offcuts of a natural process, but instead, the goal (99).

Medicalization of difference arose in part from a society newly possessed by Darwinism, upon the publication of *The Origin of Species*. It took an ugly turn when applied to human social structures, theories of social Darwinism and eugenics arising

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17 In 1977, John Lentz wrote an article for Bandwagon, the journal of the Circus Historical Society, presenting a compelling case for the possibility that this revolt may never have happened, and was in fact constructed as a publicity hoax – a distinct possibility in an industry defined by its gaffs.
from certain medical communities, which concerned themselves with the prospect of these pathological conditions entering the gene pool. Such theories were put into practice in the United States in the early twentieth century, at which time institutionalized medical practice was gaining traction, and in most factions involved the isolation of individuals who deviated from norms in physiology, mental health, or behavioral conducts. These practices targeted the underprivileged, individuals who were often uneducated, had little money, and were generally nonwhite (Chemers 92-96). In 1895, Connecticut was the first of many states to pass a law with eugenic foundations and implications, in this case, barring the marriage or carnal relations of any man or woman “either of whom is epileptic, imbecile, or feeble-minded, or a pauper” (“Public Health”). Though these practices, coming to light as a component of many racist and pseudoscientific ideals held by the nationalistic German Nazi Party, would be discredited as such during and after World War II, the concepts thereof continued into the twentieth century, sometimes manifesting in pseudoscientific investigations of freak show performers, which continued to plague freak show performers into the twentieth century (Chemers 96).

Ultimately, the lens of genetics and medical scrutiny is a reductive process. By effecting pity for the performers, it took a toll on their popularity; by the new moral standards, any proper citizen would not pay to witness individuals exhibited by virtue of their “illnesses”. This principle of pity for these performers is also refuted by the contemporary field of disability studies (103-105).

“It is a primary concern of disability studies to seek a more socially conscious and inclusive model for examining the identity politics surrounding disability than ones offered by medicalized and moralized reductions of disabled lives to diagnoses or pithy
epigrams. This new paradigm is called the “social model” of disability and turns its critical eye toward the social contexts in which attitudes about disability are shaped and then examines how those attitudes affect the lives of persons with disabilities....The problem that needs curing, in other words, is not the disability, but the social matrix that identifies disability as aberrant” (105).

The othering of these performers was socially created, not pathologically. By removing disability from the pathological narrative, the performers are humanized.

Another reason the freak show fell from favor was due to newly developing carnival technology, namely, rides. A freak show manager was responsible for an entire menagerie of people, some of whom had very particular needs, and most of whom expected a cut of the profits. In contrast, a small rollercoaster took two employees to run: one to collect tickets, and one to operate the ride. The experience took only a minute or two – quick turnaround and easy profits. After discourse on social theories surrounding the freak show, Chemers summarizes the beginnings of its demise as follows:

“The grand cultural evolutions to which the activist discourse attributes the collapse of the freak show’s Silver Age probably in the final analysis had less impact than the mundane ones. The freak show was difficult and expensive to run and became obsolete in its traditional form in the face of advances in entertainment technologies....But perhaps it was only after the freak show had become increasingly rare and alien, due to these economic forces, that it became a favorite target for eulogists and other critics and suffered an associated historical reenvisioning that further exiled the tradition from mainstream culture. These factors notwithstanding, the freak show does continue to survive and revive in American culture” (117).

Parsing the morality of the American freak show is a complex process. Consideration of the performer’s consent is obviously essential, and there does exist a storied past of performers being exploited or mistreated by virtue of their disability.
At face value, a display of disabled individuals, marketed by virtue of their disabilities, sounds unquestionably exploitative. On the other hand, individuals like Otis Jordan have legally fought legislation that sought to put an end to the freak show genre that defines their career, and have sought and received favorable verdicts that allow them to continue their career as freak show performers. A myriad of experiences existed in the freak show world, with some performers acting knowingly and playing along with the construction of their stage character, and some being horribly taken advantage of. However, the freak show historically offered a stage for differently abled bodies to take control of their unique skills and physiologies, in order to support themselves and in some cases be independent in ways otherwise unattainable. These individuals have the right of self-determination, and some theorists would say there is no place for someone else’s interpretation of exploitation in the choices of an individual other than themselves, which might be inflicted on the differently abled minority by the able-bodied majority (105-135).

David A. Gerber, an American historian, feels strongly that self-determination exists within parameters more narrow than scholars like Bogdan, who has been an outspoken supporter of freak show performance rights, would suggest. He puts forth a model determining the possibility of consent in a freak show performer. His stipulations are as follows:

“1. One makes a free choice not only when one is uncoerced, but also when one has a significant range of meaningful choices. One must have freedom, in other words, to make choices from a number of options as well as freedom from the necessity of choosing only one course of action.

2. Such freedom is greatest in societies in which the social environment fosters the opportunity for individuals to play a number
of different roles that do not excessively limit one’s choices to take on other roles.

3. One must have occasions for choice—that is, times when one may exercise independent agency rather than have things done for one.

4. One must have the physical and mental capacity to make choices and carry out the course of action they suggest.

5. One must have information about the alternatives one needs to evaluate.

6. One must have sufficient time and physical and mental security to evaluate options.” (cited by Chemers, 113)

If a differently-abled individual is forced by circumstances beyond their control, such as discrimination in hiring, poverty, etc., to work as a freak show attraction, that individual’s genuine consent comes into question. The question at large becomes whether American society could have accepted these individuals as individuals capable of other careers. When faced with this question, Chemers, who appears to take a more moderate approach somewhere between those of Bogdan and Gerber, leans into a case-by-case basis. Some historic freak show performers loved what they did. Some were hideously mistreated, and may not even have known it. Some certainly were given no choice. Some were in on the joke, and laughed as they took money from the society that discriminated against them.

The Sideshow Today

The “last traditional 10-in 1 continuous sideshow performing in a circus or amusement context” (Coney Island Circus Sideshow) is none other than the Coney Island Circus Sideshow, which contains in its description an address towards concerns of exploitation in their production: “…we’re excited to welcome [a] group of assertive young ‘born different’ performers this summer who think the talented and
handicapped have as much right to be rock stars on stage as doctors and lawyers” (Coney Island Circus Sideshow). This sideshow, founded in 1985 by Dick Zigun, an MFA graduate from Yale, features acts “scripted with traditional dialogue going back half a century,” and advertises itself as a representation of American theater’s beginnings, “starting with PT Barnum in 1842, and continuing through the mid-20th c. changes to entertainment culture with Houdini, Ringling Bros and Ripley’s Believe-It-or-Not” (Coney Island Circus Sideshow). In a 1992 New York Times article, Zigun shares a founding principle of the freak show: "Nobody would be exhibited because of a deformity….It must be performance-oriented, rather than gawker-oriented” (Martin). Indeed, Otis Jordan, who was diagnosed at birth with arthrogryposis multiplex congenital disorder, and as a result had permanent flexion in his arms and legs, performed at the Coney Island Sideshow under the billing “Human Cigarette Factory,” a title attributing his actions rather than his physiology. At previous shows, his act had been marketed as “Otis the Frog Boy” (Chemers 103).

Sideshow, historically, is about showing an audience something absurd, horrifying, and unexpected. It therefore makes sense that it found no cultural assimilation with the popularity of Cirque Du Soleil, as most disciplines under the circus umbrella did. It doesn’t lend itself to sweeping storylines and broader themes – it is gritty, and grounded in the reality of the risk involved. In no way is the risk of sideshow parsed, disguised, excused somehow by a fictive premise; it is, essentially, the point.

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18 From 1987 until his death in 1990, at age 64
By shifting to a skill-based focus, however, sideshow is following a similar path to that of contemporary circus arts, which also rejects the menagerie entertainment principle, taking a technique-founded base that mirrors dance or theater. Emphasis lies in what exactly a body onstage is doing – not the nature of that particular body intrinsically. It removes the element of menagerie and simple display. The circus body is not an elephant, it is not a freak. This human is a trained and skilled individual, who is here to put on a show, a show that only they can dictate for their own self, and a show that only they can perform.

This focus on the training of the body diverts the performance from an exotifying and objectifying display, and instead it becomes creative choice of the performer themselves.

The connection between freak show and circus is undeniable. Troublingly, much of the literature on contemporary circus neglects this historical association, perhaps because contemporary circus has rejected the use of animals and other such ethical quandaries.

What must be noted is that circus will be, for the foreseeable future, married to its history. Traditional circus, as traveled in tents, with menageries of both animals and people, existed in America as recently as the 1950s. It is essential that any contemporary art by the name of circus acknowledges this, and demonstrates its diversion from these traditions. Audiences will continue to perceive these associations, and artists in this form must consider them part of the dialogue in presenting circus on contemporary stages.
Contemporary circus is a form that is descended from exploitative origins, ones that targeted the disabled, the nonwhite, and the nonheteronormative. It has emerged, in part, in reaction to these traditions, making performance with ethical underpinnings, concentrating a lens on humanity. By being such, it is an inherently political form. It turns from anachronistic conducts to original creation, and does so using many of the same movement practices as those traveling circuses fostered in their performers.

A history of repurposing and versatility lives in circus. What began in many cultures as ritual, in others as games, in still others as a way to make a living or earn favor, became in the eighteenth century a tasteful entertainment for the rich with Phillip Astley; in the nineteenth, an accessible traveling spectacle for the working class with the advent of Brown’s circus tent; in the twentieth, a grotesque indulgence of Social Darwinism, followed by decades of unpopularity in a quickly advancing technological world. The form of circus that would emerge from this troubled history was a new and exciting one, which found theatrical roots, used the physical circus practice with a renewed sense of dramaturgy, and led to the development of further branches from the circus tree.
Chapter II: Circus Reborn

“*Their bodies were like texts, the texts they inspired, hymns to a lost poise. But because Romantic acrobats could only transfigure reality, they needed that magical light if they were to do their work.*”


The New Circus, And Its Off-Shoots

What is known today as traditional circus has a quality of interaction, between audience and superhuman/inhuman performer. Audiences flocked to the circus to witness the impossible, to jeer, leer, gasp or clap. Sometime the impossible was rooted in exploitation, or cruelty; sometimes it was rooted in discipline and artistic commitment. Even after traveling circuses fell out of favor in America, in part due to rising transportation costs, in part due to a tougher crowd now equipped with more diverse entertainment options, the magic of impossibility remained appealing.

In 1919, by order of Vladimir Lenin, the circus of the Soviet Union became nationalized. According to Lenin’s order, “circus was to be cleansed of its bad elements and its artistic standard improved” – in practical terms, this meant being subsidized in its advancement with government support, leading to a cultural elevation of its status from that of entertainment and street theatre to that of opera and drama (Purovaara 66).

In 1927, the Moscow circus school was founded, the first state program for educating new circus artists. Collaborations between choreographers and visual artists were integrated into the multidisciplinary circus education, with the intention of producing an innovative generation of circus directors. In 1930, a five-year plan for
Russian circus was released, and a committee for overseeing Russian circus was created (66).

Sixteen years later, the Moscow Theatre Institute offered the first professorship of circus art, linking research, performance, practice, and education. This development, which Purovaara calls the “newly born avant-garde circus laboratory,” formed a foundation for depth of study in the circus field, generating opportunities for new levels of understanding and creation in performance (66-67).

With roots in representations of state power, Soviet investment in circus intended to “maximize Soviet people’s abilities and physical power of expression” (67). By combining superlative technical training with interdisciplinary artistic research, a new model for circus was created.

On the other side of the world, the golden age of traditional American circus was just ending, coincident with the economic expansion the United States enjoyed between 1870 and 1915 (Albrecht, “The New…” 1). Upon fading from its once glorious popularity, as economic conditions in the U.S. became more tumultuous, American circus remained entrenched in firmly held traditions, changing very little in the first half of the twentieth century. It is to this that some scholars, including Tomi Purovaara, attribute circus’s survival, persisting in spite of the appeal of film and music halls. Traveling circuses made use of what technology they could to remain relevant, but “fought certain types of progress” to preserve the traditional way of life, and performance (Purovaara 54). As Purovaara points out, it was a form that existed without the status of “major arts – theatre, painting and music,” forced to “fight its battle for existence virtually unaided” (54). Those that sought to preserve traditional
circus were the individuals making traditional circus, the performers, showmen, animal trainers, and others. The more traditional circus was challenged by the contemporary landscape, the more insular its community became.

With a changing world came changing art forms. Conventions were rapidly being shattered, with movements of modernism and futurism taking hold. Pioneers of modern dance were changing the landscape of performance, breaking from technical and artistic norms to explore expression with medium and composition. Visual artists broke from standard mediums, using glass and metal in place of canvas and paint. Andy Warhol painted soup cans, and called it art. The Bread and Puppet Theatre Company made puppets the size of giants, and staged politically motivated parades and performances (55; Wall 259).

In the 1950s, circus performance had faded into commercially unsuccessful irrelevance. But in the 1970s, theatrical artists found new expression through old circus skills. The English company, the Footsbarn Traveling Theatre, started to tour in a tent. Peter Brook’s 1970 production of a Midsummer Night’s Dream with the Royal Shakespeare Company turned Bottom into a clown, and had fairies fluttering on trapezes. The politically motivated San Francisco Mime Troupe used clowning, physical theatre, and commedia dell’arte as the basis for their street theatre performances (Wall 259).

In 1970, Victoria Chaplin cofounded Le Cirque Bonjour with her husband Jean-Baptiste Thierrée, and together, they made delicate, theatrical confections, with use of illusion and puppetry, but with a central vocabulary of circus. In 1973, Christian Taguet founded the company Le Puits aux Images, intending to marry
circus with drama in collaboration with circus students and theatre artists. In 1975, Paul Roulaud and Pierric Pillot\textsuperscript{19} founded the traveling caravan circus, Le Cirque Bidon, “a theater of art and poetry” that still travels by horse and performs on tour to this day. In 1976, an “Angel of Possible Miracles” presided over the softly-lit tent of Bernhardt Paul and André Heller’s “poetic circus,” Circus Roncalli. In 1980, from Cirque Bidon would stem Archaos, which swapped horses for motorcycles, colorful costumes for corrugated sheet metal, and the big top for an industrial scrap yard (Purovaara 123).

\textbf{Figure 4.} Victoria Chaplin and husband Jean Baptiste Thierrée in Le Cirque Imaginaire and Le Cirque Invisible; photos c/o The International Chronicle (Left) and The Daily Express (Right).

These companies are representative of the \textit{cirque nouveau}\textsuperscript{20} movement, thought to have begun in France in the early 1970s. This “new circus” had performances in traditional circus disciplines, including acrobatics and wire-walking. It was connected to apparatus, including puppetry and object manipulation. It was considered “poetic,” containing political themes, conceptual art, and intentions beyond athleticism. It also re-evaluated animal use in performance, often removing

\textsuperscript{19} Later to change his name to Pierrot Bidon. All founding members of Le Cirque Bidon took the surname (Purovaara 123).

\textsuperscript{20} This term appears as both cirque nouveau and nouveau cirque, both noting this particular shift in circus performance.
animals from productions altogether. Menagerie was interrogated and rejected. Movement disciplines became the forefront of circus performances, removed from the previously perceived spectacle of othered bodies. New circus makers extracted the magical and the touching from the traditional circuses they remembered from their childhoods, while rejecting the exploitative characteristics by which some circuses were known. Circus became a civil voice, speaking for a renewed sense of humanity (Purovaara 122-129).

Cirque nouveau wasn’t limited to Europe – in the wake of 1960s activism and street theatre, politically motivated circus arose in America as well. Larry Pisoni founded the Pickle Family Circus in 1974, after an influential run with the San Francisco Mime Troupe. Communality was an essential and political element to the Circus’s organization, and the company functioned with distinct ethics in mind.

“The innovative form of circus portrayed the ideals of a generation, so there were no animal acts and the elements of ownership, abasement and control that were conventionally linked to circus were rejected. Women in performances were equal to men, not mere assistants or eye candy….The performances were characterized by the collaboration involved, the exhibition of skills and communality. Erecting and dismantling the tent and other chores were done by everyone” (124).

Circus became a medium of personal, political expression, not only in the performances, but even in the facilitation of those performances. Here is the first mention of a distinct change in gender dynamics, a function of a form deeply rooted in tradition. Here as well is described Pisoni’s approach to producing circus, one emphasizing equal status of all company members – all helped to put up the tent, and
all were essential to making the show. With politically oriented and originated performance, circus traditions were being questioned and overthrown.

Another former member of the San Francisco Mime Troupe, Paul Binder, in 1977 founded another American company of the cirque nouveau generation: The Big Apple Circus. This circus was aesthetically in-line with the modern circus descended from Phillip Astley’s one-ring wonders. In a single arena, the non-profit Big Apple Circus presented intimate productions created by premier artists, and later became known for its community outreach programs. Their shows included some animal acts, but as an organization, they were recognized for their humane and considerate treatment of their performing animals (Jones; Purovaara 125).

A revival of circus was taking place, renewing the practice in new and meaningful contexts, in both Europe and America. Cirque nouveau was characterized by integration of circus and visual arts, by a humane and informed approach to using animals in performance21, a political awareness, and the inclusion of theatrical methods (Purovaara 122-9).

Although these characteristics became clear in budding companies on both sides of the Atlantic, today, clear differences continue to exist between European and American understandings of circus performance. Abroad, there exist national circus schools, grants for circus artists, and a recognition of circus on par with that of drama and dance. American understandings consist of a circus arts world that is largely commercial, with most circus schools being private and recreational organizations,

21 That is, if animals were used at all; cirque nouveau ushered in the first generation of circuses to omit animal acts as a standard.
funneling professional-level students into the entertainment sector (Wall, *Moving Beyond The Big Tent*).

This split took place in the 1980s, when the governments of European nations began funding circus arts with spending from cultural funds. At this time, a lack of public arts funding for circus became apparent in America, ultimately leading to the form’s turn to commercial production. While circus arts experimentation and creation boomed in Europe, privately owned circus studios emerged in America, circus arts became popular as a recreational and fitness-based practice, and circus artists turned to a gig-based working structure as commercial entertainers (Wall, *Moving Beyond The Big Tent*).

It was this American profit-driven atmosphere that, Purovaara conjectures, created the opportunity for entertainment behemoth Cirque du Soleil to rise to power. Wall takes note of the company’s proclivity for “melding commercial entertainment with luxury experience,” as well as the scale of their ticket sales, which annually outsells all of Broadway combined (Wall, *Moving Beyond The Big Tent*). Though of humble roots, Cirque du Soleil created a performance product that shook the circus world, and which has forever altered North American perceptions of circus performance.

**Cirque Du Soleil: An Even Newer Circus**

The street theatre trio, Chatouille et Chocolat, began in Montreal, making performances of clowning and physical theatre. In 1974, they applied for and were

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22 Before 1979, circus arts funding in France came from the Department of Agriculture. They were then transferred to the Department of Culture. (Wall, *Moving Beyond The Big Tent*)

23 Tickles and chocolate
accepted to a two-year training program at a Hungarian circus school. Among the three was Guy Caron, an influential director in the early days of Cirque Du Soleil (Albrecht, “The New…” 76; Babinski 23). At the time, Hungary was under Soviet rule, and likely held its circus students to the same artistic standards by which other Soviet national schools operated; this may have been Caron’s first exposure to Soviet circus, and its interdisciplinary, storytelling tradition. A seasoned performer, he was also exposed to the eclectic European circus scene of the 1970s, having studied under various troupes there, and could have drawn inspiration from the poetic circuses of cirque nouveau (Albrecht, “The New…” 73). Inspiration for what would become Cirque du Soleil certainly came from Caron’s exposure to Chinese acrobatic troupes, including Madame Xia Juhua’s troupe at a 1982 performance in Montreal. In an interview Caron recalls: “It was so pretty, so fine. Everything was there, the costumes, the music, the lights, everything. This is what we are to do” (86).

Caron would return to Montreal, after completing the Hungarian program in eleven months. He then succeeded in founding Montreal’s first national circus school, École Nationale de Cirque, in 1981, which would become an institution of great repute for professional circus training, as well as a source for Cirque du Soleil’s artists and performers (Babinski 23).

Guy Laliberté, a street performer, fire breather, clown, and organizer, originally pitched Cirque du Soleil as a temporary project, a performance that would tour Canada and provide “an impact that would be larger than just a show” (Babinski 51). Being an animal-free show, with clean Art Deco stylings, the show that toured beginning in 1984 was clearly distinct from the traditional traveling circuses of the
past (Babinski 70). Though still not yet divergent from the cirque nouveau companies of the decade before, much of North America was not exposed to the new stylings taking root in the circus form, and Cirque du Soleil was therefore able to present, to these audiences, something very new.

The shows Cirque du Soleil debuted in the following years developed a “painterly” approach in creation, highly visual, with inspiration through image and presentation (Babinski 86). As the company began to expand its tours, first into North America, and then internationally, they found more and more success with their clean aesthetic and atmospheric spectacle. The performers of the company had a motto: “Behind each perilous leap, there is a purpose, an intention, an individual, an emotion” (Albrecht, “The New…” 76, quoting 1991 Cirque du Soleil program).

Figure 5. On left, promotional image for the DVD recording of Cirque du Soleil’s first touring show; c/o Columbia Tristar Home Entertainment. On right, promotional image for Cirque du Soleil’s latest touring tent show, Luzia (debuting April 21, 2016); c/o Cirque du Soleil.

These productions were not the transient traveling affairs of the early twentieth century, taking as many as thirty days to set up the tented venue used in the
company’s touring shows (91-92). They were theatrical, borrowing dramatic techniques for an affective delivery of highly technical circus movement. By using theater, narrative, and the unified vision of artistic directors, Cirque du Soleil was able to deliver stories, spectacle, and beauty, transforming North American perceptions of circus as a static form (95-96).

Cirque du Soleil has since become a billion grossing entertainment company (Gittleson), producing shows of spectacle theater. Shows are performed on a round thrust stage, allowing audience to view from all angles. The worlds that Cirque du Soleil creates exist beyond the stage; characters fly in from above, tunnel up from underneath, explode from the dark regions upstage. The staging takes advantage of vertical space, typically requiring very high ceilings, and serious rigging capabilities, of its venues. The stage itself often has ramparts that climb well above the audience’s heads. All this serves to make a larger than life environment for the superhuman, even inhuman, performances to come. As seen in the colorful images of *20 Years Under The Sun*, Cirque du Soleil’s costumes create strange silhouettes, reshape the human form, or otherwise use elements of strangeness to place the performer in an otherworld.

The directors behind Cirque du Soleil’s productions intend to portray surrealized aspects of life, using character, theatricality, and design to make otherworldly interpretations of the everyday. In Guy Caron’s words, “The characters we invent have to have something to do with life at large” (Babinski 69). But by creating such absurd atmospheres, peopling them with colorful, abstractly decorated characters, and further pairing these qualities with a movement technique based in the
extreme, the company constructs a scene that presents as anything but real life. A Cirque du Soleil show takes the audience into a space beyond imagination, surrealized in every detail. The staging, story, and costumes all serve this purpose, even before the impossibilities of circus performance take place.

The shows follow a mostly traditional circus format, alternating between “acts,” a discrete unit of circus performance, and interludes, wherein a featured clown – a ringmaster-like character – ushers characters and acts in and out, and perhaps guides interactions (audience to performer, performer to performer, performer to audience) along the way (Albrecht, “The New…” 81).

Interludes will often contain bits of clowning, theater, or dance, and allow for the changing of apparatus onstage in the midst of performance. This is a key distinction between Cirque du Soleil and traditional circus; a pretense, a world, or an atmosphere exists to justify anything that happens on the Cirque stage (beyond, of course, the fact that this is a circus performance, and that the audience is attending to see feats of strength, risk, and surprise). Interludes where performers help to move apparatus, or adjust the technical aspects of the space to accommodate the next act, are only empty space in traditional circus performance; these moments are left to the crew. It’s not part of the show, but only a liminal placeholder for onstage actors. In Cirque du Soleil, transitions become part of the performance, and include performative movement on the part of the crew and accompanying performers. In some productions, performers are the only visible members of the crew. No expense is spared to uphold the sanctity of the imagined Cirque du Soleil atmosphere – every
moment visible to the audience is painstakingly crafted towards the completion of the world at hand (Babinski 62).

The very shape of the performers is manipulated out of the realm of reality. By use of makeup and costume, bodies are colored and distorted. In the 2007 evening-length show Kooza, the ringmaster character known as “The Trickster” is adorned with full-body stripes, as well as a tentacle’d headpiece. In a scene featuring a macabre skeleton ball, the visible anatomy of the “skeletons” is obviously humanoid, but adjusted for the absurdities of the Cirque world to be tweaked out of reality. Some have headdresses that elongate the visible necks of the performers by several feet, making them unnaturally tall, with distorted skulls on top; others are missing bones from their anatomy, but include extra bone-pieces on top of their heads. The hairdressing of the dancing and tumbling ensemble includes protruding shapes, such as horns and cylinders, changing the silhouette of the head. In O, Cirque du Soleil’s permanent water circus in Las Vegas, a fleet of acrobatic swimmers are, too, striped from head to toe, and, also similar to “The Trickster,” have tentacle-like extensions from the back of the head.

*Figure 6. The aquatic zebras of Cirque du Soleil’s “O”.*
Cirque du Soleil acts, created by an overseeing director, tend to consist of one circus discipline each, and are designed to add to the performance aesthetically as well as serve as the next step in a loose storyline. In much the same way as Broadway productions, performers will take a role in the act, and when their contract with the company or with the show expires, be replaced by a performer of equal technical skill (*Fire Within*).

Performers with Cirque du Soleil are some of the most technically skilled individuals in circus disciplines, worldwide. This template of interchangeability prioritizes controlled virtuosity over artistic grounding; the artists performing the act are not rooted in the content emotionally, as they generally did not originate it. This is not to say they are not engaged in the act itself. Being as trained as they are, performers with Cirque du Soleil know their discipline/s intimately, and have dedicated their lives to achieving this level of ability within such a challenging medium. This commitment to their abilities makes for a palpable connection between performer and medium, even if the connection to the material is minimal. When one watches a Cirque du Soleil act, one recognizes the devotion at play (*Fire Within*).

Cirque du Soleil acts include moments of “ta-da!” Gestures are made to the audience, like a gymnast flaring their hands, smiling to the judges after sticking the landing: “this incredible feat was done for you.” Audiences are encouraged to applaud, to audibly support the onstage action. A feeling of camaraderie exists between the watchers and the players. The audience too is invited into Cirque du
Soleil’s otherworlds, applause encouraged even in the midst of the onstage action\textsuperscript{24} (Babinski 110).

It should be noted that Cirque du Soleil is a form unto itself, yet not limited to itself. Other circus groups have followed its format of enormous atmosphere and incredible technical accomplishment; often, Cirque du Soleil alumni perform with these groups. Cirque Dreams and Cirque de la Symphonie are two such entertainment companies which create within the confines of the Cirque du Soleil style, as characterized by the following: superhuman virtuosity, extreme atmosphere in staging, and emphasis on performed visuals.

**What Does Contemporary Circus Look Like?**

Since Cirque du Soleil took the world by storm in the 1980s, contemporary circus has emerged as a reaction to its surrealization of the human form. It is an approach to circus as a human form – unlike Cirque du Soleil, which translates human experience into imaginative and unreal characterizations, it takes the opposite tack, by pedestrianizing. Artists are often younger, take personal responsibility for the subject matter of their pieces, tend to be costumed in pedestrian wear, and will often use a choreographic research process in creating their work. It too took inspiration from the Cirque Nouveau movement, using age-old circus technique, often on a theatrical stage rather than in a ring, free of non-human animals, in pursuit of expression (Feldman; Purovaara 105, 111,115).

\textsuperscript{24} This is unheard of in most modern dance and theater shows, where applause is limited to moments between scenes, and at the production’s conclusion.
The Trick Vocabulary\textsuperscript{25} which characterizes the tradition and cirque styles of circus performance is challenged in contemporary work. The goal is not the gratification of the audience, but to further the questions, research, or essence of the piece at hand. Artists use their technical training to create a movement vocabulary that is representative of the research, theme, or question at hand. Each “trick” is completed with intent. It is intention that makes a work of circus “contemporary circus;” it is a form characterized by its dramaturgy (Kann, \textit{Part I}).

Contemporary circus does not necessitate the “wow-factor” typical of Cirque du Soleil and traditional circus. Rather than honing virtuosity, it attempts to translate technical movement onto a stage with intention. It is a new and unexpected form to many eyes; audiences often leave contemporary circus performances feeling as though they actually just witnessed a form of dance (Kann, \textit{Part I}).

By virtue of being a very new and diverse form, contemporary circus is often best understood with a series of examples. In her workshop “Making Circus That Matters,” circus dramaturg and playwright Lauren Feldman shows several. One piece, a hand-to-hand acrobatics act, directly addressed the trick vocabulary typical of circus. It was created and performed by circus artists Christopher Schlunk and Iris Pelz, who advertise their duo as simply Chris & Iris. In the piece, a tall man, Chris, performs as base, and a petite woman, Iris, performs as flyer. Both wear tight fitting clothes, functional for both, skin-revealing for her. They break down their act into one “trick” sequence at a time, in between, speaking into a microphone at the audience. With the microphone, gender dynamics of their acrobatics become clear. Being so

\textsuperscript{25} A term more thoroughly addressed in the following chapter
much taller, Chris can easily adjust the stand to be well over Iris’s head, and at perfect height for his to speak into. At times, he takes it away from her altogether, leaving her to speak unheard while he maintains an amplified voice for himself. The text begins with the words, “It makes me nervous when you look at me,” delivered by Iris, and directed to the audience. After a skillful sequence of tricks, she returns to the microphone: “But actually, I like it.” Later commentary includes comments on the execution of the tricks, with Chris mentioning Iris’s ticks that tell him she is nervous, specifically discussing topics on which, she has told the audience, she prefer he not speak. Chris has agency over Iris’s body much of the time, carrying her about, propping her limply on his hip, and throwing her into the air while she holds a fetal position, a visual much like a man tossing a ball.

A moment midway through the piece shows a change in dynamics; the pair perform a stunt where Iris stands on the side of Chris’s face. It looks uncomfortable for him, and reads like an act of revenge.

The conclusion of the piece continues to interrogate the power dynamics at hand. After introducing a stunt, informing the audience that they just learned it, and that Iris needs time to “breathe and concentrate,” Chris makes a clicking sound into the microphone. She collapses, completely loose, the opposite of the tension required for the handbalancing in their movement vocabulary. He peels her off the ground, into a vertical handstand position, and they execute “the trick.” A final portion of it fails. Afterwards, she adjusts the microphone, and addresses the audience: “And now, he needs a moment to breathe.” She returns to him, and they complete the trick as intended. She returns to microphone, clicks, and he collapses. She exits.
The tricks propel the narrative, each one a new movement in the vocabulary of the piece, each one actively portraying a change in the dynamics between the pair. They use no music, further emphasizing the importance of their movement, as well as the text they perform with and without the microphone. Iris appears to be violently vulnerable, in that she is wearing far less clothing, that she is significantly smaller than the base, and that she is subject to being carried, pulled, lifted, and dropped repeatedly. The piece presents a doll-like use of female body at the hands of a male mover.

However, Iris, the female body in question, appears to be incredibly strong: she executes handstand after handstand, tumbling in the limited space of her base’s palms, demonstrating considerable power and control. The base is, however, more obviously powerful. The dynamics come into question with respect to who is speaking, and who is responsible for the success of each trick. Ultimately, the onus of each sequence’s success falls to them both, but because of the interludes between
each trick sequence, the audience is given the perspectives of the performers on exactly who is directing the performance. In the end, Iris reclaims control, and addresses the gaze of the audience as its manipulator, by exiting without acknowledging her watchers or her base.

Sebastian Kann, arts writer and performance artist, also mentions several exemplifying works of contemporary circus works in his writing on the form. Among them is Phia Ménard’s one-woman show, P.P.P. 26, one of the most extraordinary evening-length representations of circus in recent history. In it, she performs isolated on a stark stage, accompanied by large blocks of ice on the floor, and threatened from above with small globes of ice, frozen on strings hung from the lighting grid, which randomly crash to the floor as they melt. She seems to be in mortal peril by these projectiles, but appears generally unconcerned. Each time a globe falls, she halts, turns, and takes notice of the change. Ménard juggles ice with her bare hands, performing complex and quick patterns while she putters about the space. She manipulates shredded ice with a shovel, changes costumes often, enters moving cubicles that transport her through the space and release her a changed woman.

In many of the scenes in P.P.P., she is manipulating the ice with bare skin, and her discomfort is palpable not through her performance, but through the reactions of the audience. When, in her scant underwear, she suddenly falls in and settles into a pile of shredded ice, one can hear the gasps and groans from those feeling her frosty pain empathetically.

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26 Position Parallele au Plancher, or, Position Parallel to the Floor
Ménard uses her juggling vocabulary to express, at times, uncertainty, joy, weariness, and struggle. She takes different patterns and attaches significance to them by giving them recognizable, mundane moments. In one section, she sits, juggling one and two balls closely with isolations, and midway through the pattern sweeps an ice ball across her forehead, as though wiping sweat off of her brow – as though she would like to rest.

The use of ice as apparatus in this contemporary juggling act adds depth of meaning beyond the three-dimensional stage, by incorporating in a very physical sense the use of time. As the performance proceeds, more and more globes melt and fall, more puddles form on the stage, and the hard lines of the large ice blocks soften. Phia Ménard’s work focuses on her personal experience, offering the audience glimpses into her life as a trans woman.

There is an implication of audience complicity in the piece. By entering the theater, and sitting in the house, their body heat increases the speed at which the suspended ice spheres melt and fall. In Stine Degerbøl’s study of P.P.P., she recounts an anecdote of a theater staff member who approached the stage at the end of the performance, to present Ménard with flowers, and was vigorously shown away from the stage on account of the still dangling ice balls (Degerbøl). The piece itself is genuinely potentially fatal to Ménard, and the sense that she is constantly escaping death or injury by narrow margins is inescapable. (Tait, *Ice Burns*).

In an interview with Crying Out Loud, she intimates the heart of the piece: “**P.P.P.** tells of someone who decides to change sex, to change fundamentally their path in society and life.” The stage being a dark world, empty but for Ménard and the
slowly melting ice, depicts the loneliness of this experience. But also, the literal softening of the edges onstage mirrors the softening of the edges of the physical body. Ménard describes it as the appearance of curves where there were once edges, an image evocative of her act of transitioning (Ménard).

Figure 8. Note the suspended balls on ice in the left hand image. Left photo c/o Performance Research: A Journal of Performing Arts; right photo c/o Magazine Poly.

Another work mentioned by Kann is *Mue*, by French company La Manoeuvre. Onstage, movers manipulate mannequin limbs in accordance with their own, at times making the illusion of a many-legged creature, or of another body in the space holding a mover’s hand. An aerial rope is rigged in the space, and occasionally ascended by one or two movers, who perform vertical phrases. Performers softly manipulate flesh-tone juggling pins, moved magically, seemingly an embodied extension of the mover herself. Use is made of a projection screen and onstage camera, with which performers interact live, bringing media into the space as another unlikely body. The piece concludes with a sequence of human limb manipulation, where a quartet of movers use each other’s arms to make shapes and moving systems through the space (Kann, *Part II*).
The use of limbs questions how the audience perceives the human form, an important element to consider in a form as physically extreme as circus. The limb becomes a discrete unit of humanity and movement, and an interestingly distorted one. Not everyone has the same limbs, in the same configuration. What does it mean to be differently limbed, to connect via limbs, to allow your limbs to be controlled by another’s? Can one throw one’s limbs away? Can one join the limbs of others? *Mue* ultimately asks questions of embodiment and connection.

*Figure 9. Mue, by La Manoeuvre. Note the disorientation the reversal of the mask provides. Photo by Florence Delahaye, c/o CircusNext.*

The aerial rope is historically associated with circus, as is the juggling pin, and their use in this piece – perhaps even their placement onstage – help secure the circus-ness thereof. However, as circus critic Viktoria Dalborg writes, some circus artists and academics make the claim that *Mue* is too interdisciplinary, draws too much from dance and performance art. Interestingly, La Manouvre’s artistic director Gaëlle Biesellach-Roig states that she makes no claim to the categorization of *Mue* as circus performance. This however leads to some genre confusion, as well as protest from prolific contemporary circus academic and French Cultural Ministry researcher, Jean-Michel Guy: “The three of you are circus artists performing a piece, this makes it circus, he exclaims” (Dalborg).
Both *P.P.P.* and *Mue* use lighting similar to that of dance productions; an emphasis is made on side light, on darkening lines around the body. The incorporation of theatrical lighting into circus performance is a recent occurrence, and one that seems to lead to further genre confusion, begging questions of circus purity, whether an interdisciplinary approach to circus making can still yield a work known as “circus”. Because circus, dance, and theater all use vocabulary based on movement of the human body, they can easily coexist in the same work of performance. Can definition of genre be as simple as Guy claims, by virtue of artistic self-identification? Or must it exist external to the artist, as categorization for the sake of audience understanding and/or grant designation? This appears to be simple when an artist exists in a vacuum, but becomes more complicated when audiences receive a work very different from expectations, or when grants for the self-identified circus arts are not available.

**A Reactive Form**

Contemporary circus has emerged from a long and varied tradition. It is built on the foundation of circus movement disciplines, a series of traditions with extensive heritage. As described in Chapter I, this heritage includes the exploitation of disabled bodies, as well as the mistreatment of animals, both of which were components of significant circus elements as “circus” was known in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

With the emergence of American commercial circus in the wake of Cirque du Soleil’s billion-grossing empire, contemporary circus ricocheted in the opposite direction. Rather than present a surreal, creature-like human form, the pedestrianized circus performer emerged. Rather than creating a marketable brand, circus artists
turned their focus to dramaturgy and research, questioning the norms of their form and making new, at times unrecognizable work. Rather than pine for a tradition lost in the face of technology and generational values, contemporary circus makers create in opposition to the exploitation of the past.

The word “circus” is charged. As long as artists are making work under the label “circus,” that charge will remain, palpably, even if their art looks nothing like the traditional circuses of the 20th century. By creating work this way, in defiance of tradition, while maintaining the label associated with that tradition, contemporary circus cannot help its politic. It will inherently contain humanity, and it will inherently reject exploitation, by repurposing these movement traditions to speak to contemporary audiences.

For example, Phia Ménard’s use of circus, a form that historically capitalized upon the otherness of non-cis bodies, is a radical act, one that empowers her artistic voice, and demonstrates the power of contemporary circus. Hers is a reclaiming of circus as her own. By using circus to examine and question the human experience, by diverging from the long history of circus as spectacle, circus as objectification, circus as dehumanization, contemporary circus artists are making circus a statement of radical humanity.
Chapter III: Making Circus Speak

“Is it inside my head that decides? Is it inside my head that is me – or is it the body, with arms, legs, feet, hands, fingers, toes, that decides?”

- Sverre Waage on Amber

Is It Circus?

As discussed in the introduction, there are a few definitions of contemporary circus in the existing critical circus literature. I’d like to briefly revisit them now, to better enhance an understanding of the discussion to follow. The first is Karoline Skuseth’s brief and broad definition: “Contemporary Circus is typically a dramatic work that is performed with/gets help from/uses circus disciplines.” This definition is generous in its vagueness – by characterizing Contemporary Circus as a “dramatic work,” it avoids the strict categorization with which interdisciplinary productions struggle, examples of which appear later in the chapter. By this definition, a play that also uses acrobatics might be considered contemporary circus. The second definition is that of nonprofit circus advocacy agency, CircusNow: “Circus is art. Circus is a vehicle for beauty, meaning, self-expression, and social commentary, unique from dance, theater, or any other form. Circus skills have their own histories, training methods, physical vocabularies, and capabilities.” This definition directly acknowledges the interdisciplinary conflation, and starkly opposes it. In doing so, CircusNow makes an argument for separation of the forms, and also equal recognition among the forms. Because circus is not the same as dance and theater, it can be considered its own equally valuable entity, just as legible and with just as much expressive power. And the last is that of Purovaara: “Contemporary circus is the artists’ personal interpretation of past and present circus, often related to other art
forms” (126). With Purovaara’s openness to individual understandings of circus, I’ve offered my own definition of circus, contemporary or otherwise, using the series of questions below.

1) Is something at risk? Does there exist the possibility of someone or something being injured/dropped/lost etc., at the expense of the performer/s?

2) Is the discipline at hand challenging, requiring specific, ample, technical training to master?

3) Does the artist responsible for the performance identify as a circus artist?

4) Does the performance include an apparatus or practice historically linked to circus, such as clowning, juggling clubs, a wire to walk on, etc.? 27

A “yes” to any of these questions appears to yield work that is in dialogue with circus tradition, either in subverting it, recreating it, or innovating it.

Using the historical context developed in the two chapters previous, from interviews with contemporary circus producer and artist Dic Wheeler, and from the critical studies presented by Montreal Working Group dramaturgs Louis Patrick Leroux and Charles R. Batson, I would categorize works considered Circus, as they are performed today, into three distinct forms: Traditional Circus, Cirque du Soleil/Cirque-Style, and Contemporary Circus.

Traditional Circus is the form that is most closely related to the American traveling tent circuses of the 19th and early 20th centuries, including The Ringling Bros. & Barnum and Bailey and the Carson & Barnes Circus. The show is paced by a

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27 With the rising abundance of recently invented circus apparatuses, this query may not help to clarify the designation of a performance piece.
designated Ringmaster, may take place in several rings at a time, is always in the round, may feature a menagerie, has no central storyline, and tends to include glittery trappings. Traditional Circus is virtuosic, focused on technical spectacle, with an eye to an aesthetic aligned with sensory overload. It is a form in pursuit of astonishment, meant to elicit a “wow!”

As Leroux states in his study, “A Tale of Origins: Deconstructing North American ‘Cirque’ Where Québécois and American Circus Cultures Meet,” “The French term for circus when used in English has become shorthand either for Cirque du Soleil-styled circus or, more generally, for theatrical, narrative-based contemporary circus” (36). Cirque du Soleil/Cirque style is aesthetically beautiful. It is constructed with a world and story (however loosely defined) in mind, with distinct characters and theatrical tendencies. Less presentational than the traditional form, it still seeks spectacle, although it is spectacle given some context within the performance. Shows often have a ringmaster figure, although that figure may have a persona unlike that of a traditionally defined “ringmaster.” Live music, often original to the show, will typically be performed. The performers will be exclusively human – though portraying distinctly unhuman characters, absurdly virtuosic, interactive, and decorated to appear otherworldly or surreally realized.

The show exists on an enormous scale, and performs in mid-range to expensive venues. Cirque-style productions have a distinctly commercial aspect, with the polished nature of shows produced with ticket sales in mind.

28 Here, Leroux is referring to circus performance that is occurring in contemporary times, rather than the contemporary circus movement.
Contemporary circus exists in opposition to the ethereal cirque style, by pedestrianizing dangerous virtuosity with costume, performance quality, or dramaturgical leanings. Typically taking an urban color palate, it embraces theatricality while avoiding glitter, not seeking a “wow!” as much as a “hm.” It tends to be less marketable than the other forms. It puts down roots in a choreographic process, as well as in the personal experience of its performers. This is the style of circus that is beginning to permeate the art world, which dance and theater have inhabited for some time.

Which Circus is “The Circus?”

In 2016, Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey ran a mid-election-cycle ad with the tagline, “Take Back The Circus.” The video promo, making the claim, “The circus wants the circus back,” plays off of common colloquialisms, especially politically oriented ones. It is a series of circus artists addressing the camera as a body of the media, with lines like, “People keep calling politicians clowns, but we’re real clowns, and we take clowning seriously,” followed by a pie to the face. A flying trapeze artist asks, “you think you live in a swing state?” Contortionists, balancing on each other in backbends, inform the camera, “Politicians bend the rules. But this is real bending” (Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus).

In conversation, circus is used more often as metaphor than as an entity unto itself. The media is a circus, a gaggle of drunk hooligans are a bunch of clowns, one bends over backwards to help an ungrateful friend, one walks the wire to navigate a problematic social situation.
Circus is conflated with its rich and controversial history. But in many ways, use of circus technique in performance art then becomes referential, rather than an expressive use of the technique itself. This could be due to the insular nature of the circus community, a situation that is becoming less significant as recreational schools and social circus programs grow in popularity. But, at this time, the circus most American adults aged 45+ experienced in their childhood were circuses executed in a traditional form, as touring units of spectacle for commercial entertainment purposes.

As an observer from the contemporary circus community, I’ve noticed the existence of a certain cultural consciousness surrounding circus performance, and a somewhat limited one. In my personal experience, upon mentioning my circus practice, I’m often asked, “Are you going to join The Circus?” By referring to “circus” with a definite article, the many individuals who ask me this, independently of each other, seem to all have just one circus in mind.

That circus almost always turns out to be The Traditional American Circus, one that travels on trains, performs in rings, and includes menagerie and sideshow. In the American idiom, there exists some understanding of what circus should look like. This understanding also exists internationally, particularly in Europe, where circus history doesn’t have quite the same historical associations as in America, but is still represented by tents and red noses and balloons (Lee).

In discussing the advertising materials for the Circusstad Festival\(^2^9\) in Rotterdam, NL, organizers describe the difficulty of reaching audiences with

\(^{29}\)A weeklong series of contemporary circus performances, some in final form, and some in workshop, all presented to the public. Pieces shown tend to be full-length works by established contemporary circus companies working at the edge of the circus world, pushing at boundaries of what circus can do and be. See circusstad.nl.
contemporary circus, an unfamiliar form to most. What audiences do recognize, however, are iconic symbols of circus performance:

“Maaike van Langen, artistic director of Circusstad Festival in Rotterdam, speaks candidly of the difficulties she faced in building a bridge between traditional circus and its newer form in order to introduce the public to the contemporary style. To pull people away from the dominant perception of circus as an art form ‘for children’ or one ‘with animals’, and to bring them to the contemporary circus we see today, she ironically first had to make sure that in the festival programme the ‘circus looked like circus’” (Lee).

The poster for Circusstad 2016 is loudly patterned, featuring stripes, jugglers, and bright colors, using marketing techniques reminiscent of those of traditional American circus, which included brightly colored banners and patterned costumes (Bogdan 39-41).

*Figure 10. Circusstad 2016, advertised to “[look] like circus.” From circusstad.nl*

Because of a cultural understanding of “circus” as a particular set of images and themes, circus can exist as a point of reference for other forms, in language,
dance, or even film. An example of this can be seen in Phillip DeCouflé’s short film *Abracadabra* (1998), a dream-like vignette in which the laws of physics seem suspended for a group of acrobats. After a long zoom-in on a tired young man’s yawning mouth, goofy, highly presentational performers execute acrobatic shapes that make no sense. At the same time, the technique they use is fundamentally based in circus work. Some of the movement vocabulary is true to circus training in group acrobatics – but the piece is built around taking that vocabulary and making it increasingly more ridiculous than its origins. Special effects make the movement quality dreamy, and seemingly eliminate gravity, allowing the achievement of group shapes that are otherwise inconceivable. The piece itself reads like a satire of traditional circus, making the seemingly impossible genuinely impossible. In it, circus is a reference point, possibly representing the absurdities of dreamspace, or as a fantastical seed of movement for a visually driven work – but clearly reads as “circus [that] look[s] like circus” (Roussillon/Decouflé).

*Figure 11. Phillipe Decouflé’s impossible acrobatics, in the short film Abracadabra. Photo courtesy of Phillipe Decouflé/DCA.*
An Ancient Practice in Post-Modern Form

By essentializing “circus” into a cultural reference point, or even into a historically accurate representation of its traditional presentation, its potency as an expressive and artistic form is ignored. Circus cannot be separated from its history. Traditional circus, as Jane Mullett writes in her introduction to her translation of Martine Maleval’s essay, “An Epic of New Circus,” laid a foundation that defines what circus practices look like today, and how circus performances are perceived by contemporary audiences.

Circus is a physical practice with a movement vocabulary based on techniques surviving thousands of years. It is a practice in engaging and interrogating a historical past, and looking to a future that engages audiences socially and intellectually. Ethical underpinnings exist in the origins of contemporary circus. The form rejects the use of performance animals, menagerie, and capitalization upon disability, and instead emphasizes humanity in skill, in theatricality, in imaginative and new dramatic portrayal. It makes use of specific and ancient physical practice, and looks to its transformative power.

In my time at circus schools, from the New England Center for Circus Arts in Brattleboro, Vermont, to the School of Acrobatics and New Circus Arts in Seattle, Washington, I’ve seen circus bodies become stronger, more flexible, and more capable. They can catch and throw with intense precision, portray a clown with uncommon honesty, or dangle by their hair, or all three, at the same time. With the physical progress a body finds in circus, a body also finds success, and satisfaction: “I
didn’t know I could do that!” All over the world, social circus programs, a topic discussed later in this chapter, tap into the inspirational power of the circus practice.

Beyond the impact on the individual, circus has shown power of reformation as a genre, as described in Chapter II. In the last thirty years, training practices have become more sustainable for the bodies engaging them, making for a practice that fosters its pupils and takes steps to ensure their safety, even in the most extreme of disciplines (Wheeler). Vulnerable works of circus are appearing, breaking the mold of the invincible, impossible circus performer. Again and again, contemporary circus affirms its humanity as it continues to develop. And it is developing, as journalistic residencies partnered with contemporary circus festivals note extensively.  

By integrating circus technique with interdisciplinary methods of making performance, it becomes an emerging performance medium that brings new voices and a new language of technical vocabulary to the performance arts. With this territory comes new challenges – how to make what was once a strictly skill-based discipline into an expressive form, and how to pull from existing circus vocabularies to expand the physical practice into an artistic process.

The Trick Vocabulary

The first of these challenges is making expressive use of the Trick Vocabulary. In his two-part dissection of contemporary circus, “Disappearing Acts,” Sebastian Kann begins Part II by addressing the formal core of circus: the trick. This is an echoing of statements made by other circus academics, including John-Paul Zaccarini’s claim: “[the ‘trick’] comprises the basic vocabulary of circus and the

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30 See Circostrada/Stradda and Unpack The Arts
building blocks of the circus artefact” (Zaccarini 47) The Trick Vocabulary may be defined as a set of movements, technical in nature, that are common across a circus discipline – for example, the many variations of the “angel” maneuver commonly taught in beginner static trapeze classes.

It is typical for movement education in circus to consist of learning one “trick” after another, leaving a student with a foundational technique vocabulary that consists exclusively of virtuosic units, forever connected to the athletic rather than the dramaturgical (Kann, *Part II*). Learning transitional paths between these movements becomes key in creating circus performance, and transitional movement in circus choreography is often used as moments of expression between tricks, with the dramaturgy of a piece sometimes existing only in those transitions between moments of technical movement.

How does a performer pull movement vocabulary from the Trick Vocabulary, from the realm of spectacle into a dramaturgical world of research and expression? It is easy to perceive circus as less expressive than other performance forms, on account of the superficial appreciation of a movement vocabulary composed entirely of behaviors that seems only to function as “wow-factor.” Circus currently straddles two worlds, that of the art world and that of commercial entertainment, and while “wow-factor” is often the desired effect for the latter, it can even be detrimental to the former – a distraction from a central point, or warping intention by performing movement that reads as purely athletic.

Kann makes a salient comparison between circus arts, and competitive diving:

“…the difference in expression-value between one trick and another, especially within one circus discipline, is similar to the difference in
expression-value between a backwards-facing dive and a front-facing dive with a somersault—that is to say, not very great. And how much can be expressed using a set of elements that have more or less the same expression-value?” (Part II)

Many contemporary circus artists making work as part of the art world, rather than making work for an entertainment-based market, seem to take a few broad approaches to making circus that reads beyond “wow-factor.” The trained technical movement vocabulary is expanded by using creative approaches drawn from dance, theater, or other performance art that serve to break the mold of the learned circus technique. With this, or through other creative means, the tricks themselves become somehow conflated with intentions aside from virtuosity.

These approaches can be broken down into several specific tools artists use to their advantage in navigating the Trick Vocabulary effectively, so as to instill the meaning and research behind their work into their physical technique.

One such tool is text.

In Square Peg’s production Rime (2012), performers recited sections of Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “Rime of The Ancient Mariner” in juxtaposition to acrobatic and lyrical movement, using the text-guided movement to tell the story of a groom approaching his wedding. This allowed the words of the epic poem to be presented critically as part of a circus performance, driving certain movements, providing context for others, and, in the rehearsal process, being a starting point for devising of movement, allowing the choreography to comment on the poem as the poem colors the movement (Rime | Square Peg).

In Circus Xanti’s Amber (2011), scenes of the full-length performance began entirely as text, written by director Sverre Waage, which then became scores for
movement within the performance and the larger sense of the piece’s direction. The text was then incorporated as spoken word, delivered by solo performer Karoline Aamås, whose gentle delivery of thoughtful, question-filled soliloquy lends the work its tender power. In a piece intended for an audience of children, the goal of its creation was to honor the curiosity of childhood, and its connections to nature. Such words as, “Tiny little fish, when I was a child was I a child? Or was I just the memory of a child,” delivered to a goldfish in a jar, have impact in their strangeness. The audience is gently prompted to wonder at the nature of such ponderings, looking to the scene for clues. “[Coming down from the rope, looking at her hands] When I look at my hands are they mine, or do they belong to my arms? Are my arms mine, or my body’s? My body is mine. I feel the weight through my legs and feet...” The text is physically relatable. We all have bodies we consider our own. And the demands we ask of our body often exist in separation from the contemplations we harbor regarding our physical form. To ask “are my arms mine, or my body’s?” in a circus context makes this divide striking, by juxtaposing physical exertion with questions of agency and ownership. In climbing her rope, is Karoline reclaiming her arms as her own, or relinquishing them to her body? Or simply experiencing the curiosity driving the creation at hand, onstage? (Waage)
In both cases, text serves as a source for movement material, and as a component of the performance. It is a point of access for performers to bring their associations and expression into the piece, as well as a point of access for audience members to pull textual connections into their own personal experience and viewing.

Another technique is subverting apparatus, or challenging the expectations of working with a certain apparatus or within a certain discipline.

When an aerialist trains all of their movement above an 8’ x 4’ crashmat, their performance work tends to take place entirely in a crashmat-sized space – vertical, but limited. Some artists expand their work beyond apparatus, making use of the performance space they inhabit with and apart from their apparatus. An example of this appears in a short-form Chinese pole piece by London-based artist Antonio Harris. In *Hi, my name is.... and I am an...*, (2015) the pole – the apparatus of the piece – is adjacent to a circle of chairs, most of which are inhabited by an ensemble. They sit silently while Harris walks into their ranks. He begins moving around and with the pole, in the clearly technical vocabulary of Chinese pole, combined with looser phrases of dance.
It becomes clear, through the title and through pre-recorded audio, that the context is one of addiction, the setting made up to be representative of Alcoholics Anonymous. Throughout the piece, ensemble members leave their chairs as Harris takes their place. Harris is, by turns, halfway up the pole suspended, downstage moving through struggling phrases on the floor, standing on and straddling chairs. Although it is a Chinese pole act, one created as part of the National Centre for Circus Arts (London) BA Degree graduation requirements, the artist is not stuck to his apparatus – far from it.

By adding interdisciplinary moments of dance apart from circus technique, and creating and inhabiting a space onstage entirely independent of the apparatus, the “tricks” Harris performs on the pole begin to mean something in context. As ensemble members leave, his progress up the pole gets higher each time, his drop back to the stage more dramatic. His navigation of the pole becomes more frantic in direct proportion to the time he spends away from it. A metaphor emerges: the pole is his addiction. As he dives in and out of it, engages it more and more, his stagemates leave more readily, and his movement up and down the pole becomes more fraught. At the piece’s haunting conclusion, the stage is empty, but for scattered chairs, and Harris perched bird-like at the pole’s summit.

Costuming also functions as a point of access for meaning in some works, giving tricks context or connection.

Contemporary circus represents a trend of pedestrian costuming, a sharp deviation from the traditional form, recognized for its loud aesthetics and brightly dressed performers. There also exists in pedestrian costuming a ricochet from Cirque
du Soleil-type stylings, with full-face makeup, flamboyant patterns, and a big-picture sense of unity – those costumes are meant to be viewed from faraway, on large groups of performers. The opposite is more often seen in contemporary circus. Performers might wear jeans and a t-shirt, or functional everyday clothing in a certain color palette, or even do as Yvonne Rainier encouraged, and don rehearsal clothing in performance. This pedestrian costuming avoids the referential flashiness of traditional circus, which keeps their work from being only metaphorically circus. It also circumvents an impression of “showing-off”, by being purely functional and bland at first glance, as well as starkly human in nature.

Figure 13. Costuming for Cirque du Soleil’s La Nouba (1998). Note the projections from the nose, elbows, and knees, which distort the human performer’s natural body. Photo c/o Disney Springs.

“Mothlight” (2010), created and performed by Naomi Francis and Skye Gellman, deviates from the pedestrian costuming trend. What Francis describes as a “Glad Wrap nightmare” features both performers wrapped head to toe in plastic wrap, against and within a giant webbed plastic wrap installation. At the beginning of the performance, they resemble moths in cocoons. Francis quickly breaks free of hers, and her human form, dressed in black, appears. Gellman stays in his cocoon, attached to a wall, while Francis enters his space, and begins to climb on him in a distortion of
partner acrobatics vocabulary. Here, the costuming allows for an otherworldly masking of the human form, but not one that surrealizes it as Cirque du Soleil costumes might. Instead, the “Glad Wrap nightmare” allows humanity to burst forth, monochrome and recognizable. By making the bodies cocoon-like at first, the costume and set allow for the bodies to transform into human bodies, making their humanity rawer, as it appears onstage before the audience’s eyes (Francis/Gellman).

*Figure 14. Mathlight’s “Glad Wrap nightmare”. On the right, human form emerges. Photo by Jake Buchan, c/o Skye Gellman.*

Gandini Juggling’s “Smashed” (2010) creates a Bauschian feel through costuming, with all male performers in suits and female performers in formal dresses and skirts. Consisting of unsettling male-female interactions, with some clear references to Pina Bausch, the structures underlying the work function even without a working knowledge of Bausch’s art, by virtue of the directness of the costuming. The formal nature makes certain premises of the piece clear to start with – gender will be addressed, as will the rules surrounding it (Gandini).
These works of contemporary circus all pull from the same creative toolboxes as other, more established performing arts. These efforts are in pursuit of expression within the form, making use of already developed artistic methods and applying them to a new form with unique challenges.

**Trouble in Perception**

Audiences for contemporary circus are often diverse – CircusNow founder Adam Woolley makes this observation:

“…families who might not be interested to go see, you know, some very avant-garde modern dance will still go see the circus. You know, people who would prefer to watch movies or television than go see a play will probably still come see the circus” (Lunden).

Contemporary circus can usually be enjoyed at many levels of interpretation. Circus disciplines present an unusual and often risk-based movement vocabulary that can be engaging for viewers of all ages to watch.

But when a work of circus avoids operating as entertainment, it might be faced with audiences of mismatched expectations. Phia Ménard’s *P.P.P.* (2010) was received by one audience member as devoid of joy (Skuseth). Circus critic Karoline Skuseth poses the question, “Isn’t circus supposed to be life affirming?”

Kann mentions that in other non-commercial forms of performance art, this question of what the art ought to look like, or ought to make an audience feel, doesn’t appear to be raised, certainly not with the frequency it appears towards contemporary circus. Skuseth responds:

“What Contemporary Circus has access to this range of feelings in its lack of the spectacular: it’s not a dramatic premise that the players on
stage constantly have to surpass themselves — climb higher or fall more dramatically. When a discipline is applied, it can just as easily be interpreted symbolically.”

Contemporary circus is a changing form that departs from the expectations rooted in its history, using traditional practice as a springboard for the new, the strange, or the previously unfelt. By nature of its newness, and its present marginality, audiences don’t yet recognize contemporary circus as a medium for unlimited expression (Kann, *Part I*).

Cirque du Soleil has made a significant impact in worldwide circus perception, since its first performances in 1984. Because of its popularity, its high budget productions, and appealing sense of citizenship, international audiences can easily perceive Cirque du Soleil as peak circus representation. Cirque du Soleil reaches so many audiences, through live performances, televised performances, feature-films, and even the 2002 docu-series “Fire Within.” Not only are they accessible to all ages, they feature the most technically skilled individuals in the world – from the performers to the backstage technicians. These performances are enormous, beautiful, and focus-tested in marketing groups (Barone). In comparison to the image of traditional circus so entrenched in the Western consciousness, Cirque du Soleil has a distinct air of innovation, of faint narrative where there previously was none, of aesthetic and art and acrobatic wonder (Albrecht, “The New…” 76).

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31 From Cirque du Soleil’s webpage on Global Citizenship & Social Involvement, 2017: “Cirque du Soleil wants above all to take its place in society as a good citizen, with all the duties and responsibilities that go with citizenship. A responsible organization must not only seek to balance its social, economic and environmental interests, it must also propose original and innovative ways of transforming the world around it.” Accessed 2/3/17.
However, Cirque du Soleil is now a commercially driven enterprise, one producing works of incredible skill, but artistic direction defined by marketability. The shows are created to appeal, just like all other commercial entertainment, and on account of its booming popularity, become conflated in intention with contemporary circus, a genre of the same disciplines, but taken in the opposite direction (Wheeler).

Audiences may misunderstand performances billed as contemporary circus, expecting a product as thoroughly packaged as Cirque du Soleil’s productions. In many cases, they in fact receive something less mainstream, and possibly much darker and deeper than they may be expecting (Wheeler).

Methods of addressing this include, again, tacking to the interdisciplinary. By advertising a performance as performance art, or as a theatrical production, audiences are less likely to expect spectacle, and may be more receptive to meaning or narrative. New York’s Only Child Aerial Theatre pointedly avoids the label “circus.” “There is the implication that the skills or the spectacle is sort of paramount rather than the narrative, and we really have tried to keep the narrative the most important element, and have the skills really drive and support the narrative,” says co-founder Kendall Rileigh (Lunden). Both companies making work with explicit use of circus technique, Zimmermann & De Perrot and James Thierée’s Compagnie du Hanneton also follow this doctrine, not wishing to be reduced to a form considered by many to be children’s theater or empty spectacle (Hivernat).

This challenge exists not only in contention with audiences, but also with the greater arts community. Contemporary Circus reads to some as a particularly athletic form of modern dance, one that is weirder and more thoughtful than what the
mainstream considers “circus,” but with more attention to virtuosity and risk than many dance companies offer. An outstanding exception is STREB’s work, which involves aerial movement, immense risk to dancers, intense training to accomplish, and does occasionally use apparatus linked to circus performance historically (Boynton; Vranish). However, STREB is considered a dance company.

Dance and circus are both forms of movement, with distinct histories and proclivities, often easily distinguishable by the background of the participants, if not the content of the specific performance. But STREB bleeds into both, including trained circus performers in the company ensemble, and using a movement vocabulary that includes acrobatics derived from circus technique, while still being branded as dance. This branding affects grant availability, marketability, and reception by the surrounding community; while little to no NEA grants exist for the self-identifying circus artist, STREB has received grants annually ranging from $15,000 to $80,000 from the NEA within their discipline category of dance, since 1998.

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32 see “The Whizzing Gizmo” in “FORCES” by STREB, which bears remarkable similarity to the circus apparatus Wheel of Death
33 For further reading on Elizabeth Streb, the STREB company, and POPACTION technique, see How to Become an Extreme Action Hero by Elizabeth Streb with Anna Deavere Smith.
34 See streb.org/company
35 According to the NEA Grant Search Application, with organization search term “Streb”. See https://apps.nea.gov/grantsearch
At this time, under NEA guidelines, circus disciplines are categorized as Folk and Heritage Forms, in reference to the history of circus in America being an inherited form. This is a limiting action for artists considering themselves contemporary circus artists, as it packages arts funding to seemingly preserve the traditional forms of circus that inhabited America in the 20th century, rather than supporting the rapidly developing contemporary form of circus art (“NEA National Heritage Fellowships”).

CircusNow, a volunteer-run nonprofit, seeks to change that, by fostering support for circus schools and companies across the nation. The organization’s mission is presented in threefold on their website:

“**Educating** the public, media outlets, and arts venues on the diversity, sophistication, and potential of the circus arts today. **Producing** events and leveraging social media to connect and inspire US circus artists and practitioners. **Nurturing** the creation, production, and distribution of emerging quality circus” (About Circus Now).

In the first sentence, the use of “circus arts,” rather than circus, is a distinct choice, serving to emphasize the artistic value of the form as distinct from the ethereal public sense of “circus,” as in the previously mentioned “The Circus.”
plurality of “arts” also makes reference to the multiple distinct movement disciplines that fall under the category of circus, making clear linguistically that the form literally contains multitudes. In this mission statement, emphasis is given to the newness and possibilities of today’s circus arts. It seems significant that the first bullet point is “educating,” making it clear that CircusNow sees the public perception of contemporary circus as not entirely informed as to its current state – that is, the “diversity, sophistication, and potential” thereof.

To these members of the “public, media outlets, and arts venues,” as mentioned twice previously, CircusNow offers its own definition of contemporary circus, quoted here in its threefold entirety:

“**Circus is art.** Circus is a vehicle for beauty, meaning, self-expression, and social commentary, unique from dance, theater, or any other form. Circus skills have their own histories, training methods, physical vocabularies, and capabilities. They convey their own power. **Circus is practice.** Circus is a unique combination of creative physicality and performance, open to anyone of any age, background, or physical ability. Circus is a vehicle for personal growth, health, self-esteem, and communication. **Circus is community.** Because of its inherent playfulness, physicality, and non-competitiveness, circus brings people together in a unique and powerful way. Both circus art and circus practice are important possibilities for the creation of civil society. They provide distinct opportunities for people to meet and build relationships, across class, ethnic background, gender, or sexual orientation” (About Circus Now).

The first point focuses on expressive value, that circus functions as “a vehicle” much like other performing arts – but remains distinct from those already recognized as high-art forms. The second and third points mention the ethical
underpinnings distinct to contemporary circus, that circus can operate as a social good as well as artistic expression.

“Circus skills have their own histories” is an essential statement to this definition. A taxonomy should be located that allows circus to continue in dialogue with its past, without limiting its future iterations.

By shedding the label “circus,” as Only Child Aerial Theatre, Zimmermann & De Perrot, and Compagnie du Hanneton have, companies can avoid preconceived expectations of their work. Alternatively, by investing artistically in contemporary circus, and continuing to make “circus” named as such, performance companies might be able to forge a path for the recognition of contemporary circus as a form as versatile as dance and theater.

**Social Circus: Speaking For Good**

The vast majority of American circus education occurs in recreational schools. At least seven such schools\(^{36}\) in America offer one-, two- or three-year programs geared towards preparing students to be professional circus performers. Such programs are generally also intended to be preparatory training for auditions at international schools. Many in the circus community recognize that the offerings in America often don’t offer the same in-depth look at circus creation and technique that schools abroad do – therefore, many advanced American students go on to study at École Nationale de Cirque in Montreal, or further afield at schools in Great Britain, Europe, and Australia (Wheeler).

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\(^{36}\) Actor’s Gymnasium, Aloft Circus Arts, Circus Maine, Circus Warehouse, MOTH Contemporary Circus Center, NECCA, SANCA
Circadium is the latest American effort\textsuperscript{37} to create an institutionalized circus school, one with the accreditation that would allow a recognizable degree in circus arts. Theirs is a three-year program, following closely in the footsteps of the European model that is currently the norm for state-recognized collegiate circus education. According to Circadium’s website, with the first class being accepted Fall 2017, the curriculum will include “Acrobatics, Aerials, Object Manipulation, Equilibristics, Physical Theatre, Movement, Strength and Flexibility, along with supplementary work in Business and Marketing, Theater Tech, Prop building, Rigging, Circus History and Theory. A strong emphasis will be placed on Creation and Entrepreneurship.”

The European model is based on developing the utmost virtuosity, to reach the technical standards of international performance companies like Cirque Du Soleil. Students study dance and theater, learning creative processes as developed in those forms. Not having attended any of these programs, it’s difficult to determine the exact nature of the choreographic processes cultivated in these students. However, FEDEC, the European Federation of Professional Circus Schools details the goals of their member schools (which includes the vast majority of state-recognized degree-granting circus arts programs worldwide), emphasizing student creation as a top priority:

“FEDEC schools place creation and empowerment at the heart of their educational approach and support students with their artistic research and with defining their stage character. One of the primary

\textsuperscript{37} The previous attempt being the Portland, ME based Circus Conservatory of America, which never received the accreditation it sought.
goals is to encourage the emergence of new forms and break new ground.”

In addition to the high level technical skill these schools cultivate, they are entrenched in creative emphasis, with creation first on the list of FEDEC’s focus-group-determined “key priorities.” The significance of the including the term “artistic research” should not be overlooked; this reflects relatively new territory in the circus world, and indicates a direction aligned with that of other performance arts that are recognized more readily under the designation “art,” as opposed to “entertainment.” That a “primary goal” is development of circus forms and the making of new and inventive work reflects the changing territory of circus arts.

I discussed some of the changes within circus arts, as well as change effected by socially motivated circus arts, with Dic Wheeler, a longtime director of socially motivated circus programs for low-income communities in Connecticut. In the past twenty years, he has consistently engaged residents of local housing projects with circus arts and theater workshops, as well as helping to establish and direct the Middletown Children’s Circus, a program that provides five weeks of summer programming to approximately two-hundred forty youth, about half of whom are low-income. As founding director of the performing arts organization ArtFarm, he creates politically motivated circus arts and theater productions, and provides educational programming for local schools (Wheeler).

Wheeler notes that most of the students in these programs do not intend to become professional performers. However, he has observed the effect of circus training on at-risk individuals, something he describes as profound.
“When you see someone doing circus, it looks impossible. You think, ‘I can’t do that.’ But when you find the discipline, and you overcome the challenge and accomplish the skills, that has implications on how you look at the rest of your life. Once you do something impossible, you can do anything.”

Other studies corroborate this theory. As part of a Finnish publication of the Centre for Practise as Research in Theatre University of Tampere, social development researchers Jukka Lidman and Riitta Kinunnen write the following of social circus students in their report “Wellbeing Effects From Social Circus:”

“The circus is a place where they can learn challenging, enjoyable and interesting tricks that are previously unfamiliar to them. It is crucial to concentrate on controlling the body and equipment, balance and movement. Focused practice leads to success. The atmosphere is positive and failing is acceptable, because everyone fails at some point; willingness to try is what is needed to learn new things… Circus gives more confidence to perform which encourages self-expression and makes it easier to be the centre of attention elsewhere too. Accumulating new skills and learning new things strengthen the self-esteem. Having to wait one’s own turn in circus teaches patience and helps the participants be more considerate” (Kinunnen/Lidman; translated from Finnish to English by Eerika Kokkonen).

The inherent physical challenge of circus technique seems to be part of its potential for empowerment. Circus training is a never-ending process of overcoming, expecting extremes of strength, hyper-coordination, flexibility, and/or balance. By providing a constant practice of achieving what was once “impossible,” at-risk individuals can experience of their potential for achievement in all things.

Much like recreational circus schools, social circus programs exist all over the world, coming into existence following the cirque nouveau movement in the 1970s (Purovaara 91-92). The Sirkhane Social Circus School exists near the Syrian border,
in Mardin, Turkey. According to Sirkhane’s Circostrada profile, the school offers free circus and music classes year-round, as well as outreach workshops and performances, providing arts education and support to more than three thousand youth in schools and refugee camps in the Middle East in the past three years (“Sirkhane Social Circus School”). Cirque du Soleil’s social outreach program Cirque du Monde travels internationally, providing circus workshops to diverse communities with different struggles. Cirque du Soleil’s “Social Circus” webpage describes some of Cirque du Monde’s international operations: “in South Africa, it is used to motivate kids born with HIV to follow their treatments. In Mongolia, workshops were held in juvenile prisons. In Quebec, social circus was used as a truancy prevention tool and, in Australia, with women survivors of sexual violence” (“Cirque Du Monde, Global Citizenship”). Circus Harmony, an organization based in St. Louis, provides “basic circus classes for organizations that cannot afford them,” as well as workshops in “financial literacy, injury prevention, nutrition, conflict resolution, goal setting, [and] job/college/circus school readiness and preparation” (“About Circus Harmony”). Circability is an organization in New Zealand which “teaches circus to all ages and abilities with the aim to celebrate difference,” with classes in a broad variety of circus disciplines for all bodies, with some classes designed for a class of “mixed abilities” and others for classes wholly of students with physical disabilities (“Circability - Community Circus Classes.”).

These are just a few examples of the many socially motivated circus arts organizations worldwide. With the rising popularity of recreational for-profit schools,

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38 Circostrada is a worldwide network of circus schools, companies, and programs, supporting the development of circus arts. See www.circostrada.org.
the field of contemporary circus and its ethical underpinnings are growing as well. Social circus programs are just one indicator: not only are organizations using circus to empower individuals worldwide, but they are also doing so with a revitalized circus practice, one with increasing industry standards.

In our interview, Dic Wheeler described the development of technique over the past thirty years as “explosive.” He explained that the field of circus is bigger now that it ever has been in recent memory, with skill levels at higher levels than ever before, in part due to the contemporary movement’s integration with Soviet, European, and Canadian academia and the relatively new conservatory-like approach towards circus training that emerged as a result. Technique has developed extensively, not just with respect to enhanced technical skills, but now also including principles of physical therapy and “pre-hab” in order to facilitate a life-long circus career. This may avoid many of the traditional technique’s physical tolls, and usher in a new generation of circus artists performing well past their “youthful prime.”

Because recreational circus schools are now interested in being insured, to be insured, their teachers and facilities must meet industry standards – and therefore, the industry is forced to create standards to begin with. Wheeler explains this as a mission of American Circus Educators (A.C.E.)39, who have been key in developing the safety standards of American circus schools in the last decade (Wheeler).

Social circus is a continuation of contemporary circus’s emphasis on humanity, and rejection of menagerie and objectification. It is technical movement education, as well as artistic creative education, making strides to empower

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39 For more on A.C.E., see their website: www.americancircuseducators.org
individuals with this unique and newly accessible form of expression. This accessibility extends further into the widespread nature of recreational circus schools – no comprehensive list of American circus schools exists, but CircusNow has recorded eighty-five circus schools across the country which have self-registered to CircusNow’s US Circus Map Project. Individuals in every major city appear to have some form of circus available to them – and research in social circus programs has found circus to be a valuable pursuit of study.

Social circus proves that circus is more than spectacle – it is a safe form for every body, no matter the age, circumstance, or ability. Substance exists not only in the performance of circus, but also in the practice. The physical engagement of circus technique is a meaningful experience, to be further researched and better understood.

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40 All of which are considered recreational, as no circus conservatory or school for aspiring professionals alone yet exists in the United States.
41 N.B. three out of five recreational circus schools I myself have attended are not included in CircusNow’s list; the registry itself is obscure in many local circus communities, such that those counted ought to be considered a fraction of the current circus schools in the U.S.
Chapter IV: Contemporary Circus in Practice

“What risks and promises are there when circus is pervaded by, or merely lends its codes to, the very flesh and temper of its performers?”


Definition in Approach

My practical translation of research in contemporary circus was to make two attempts at works within the form. Both pieces, about twelve minutes long, took interdisciplinary approaches to the task. They look to both the Skuseth definition of contemporary circus, as dramatic works making use of a circus vocabulary, and the Purovaara definition, as an individual’s interpretation of the circus technique itself.

The CircusNow definition of contemporary circus bears mention here, because it makes a point of distinguishing circus from “dance, theater, and other forms.” In both of these pieces, I am operating as a dance student within my university’s dance department. From the perspective of my studies, it is difficult for me to claim I am creating work that is not dance – especially as I am the only human in either of my casts with circus training, among humans who typically perform dance and theater. Both pieces make extensive use of theatrical techniques, with facial expression, vocalization, and text. Both pieces as well have moments of absolute dance movement, including an avirtuosic movement vocabulary drawing only from somatically derived material, and not from techniques of circus training or theater.

My work is strictly interdisciplinary, and rather than looking at how circus differs from dance and theater, instead looks at how tools from dance and theater can lend themselves to making cogent and interesting circus performance. It is my belief that the humanity emphasized in contemporary circus as a form must draw from dance
and theater, two physical forms of human expression, both of which use the body as an instrument, and which fundamentalize human expression in more direct ways than circus can achieve in performance of virtuosic technique alone.

I did not make attempts at “pure” circus – that is, circus performance, contemporary or otherwise, that uses circus technique in isolation from other performance disciplines – because I was more interested in bringing students of dance, theater, and music into my process, than limiting myself to only the circus vocabulary I’ve studied. “Pure” circus ought to be an experiment unto itself: can contemporary circus maintain its commitment to dramaturgy, research, and/or narrative without pulling from dance or theater vocabularies? However, it should be one undertaken by a performer more technically skilled and trained than I am at this time.

I define choreography as the generation and arranging of movement material. In both pieces, my dancing collaborators contributed extensively to the movement generation process, but I retained complete authority over the arrangement of said material. The creative process was like collaging. We first gathered our phrases, gestures, and techniques as a group, and then I set each colorful chunk of movement in the timeline of the whole, composing with juxtaposition and placement. This is how I’ve made all of my “dance” pieces at Wesleyan; this is how I made my two hybridized circus pieces.

Both practices began with cultivating a circus movement vocabulary in rehearsal. This technical vocabulary served as a fertile foundation in which to develop the vocabulary idiosyncratic to each piece. Both pieces made use of voice/text,
engaging the vocal powers of the body as a component of the physical, with potential for virtuosity. In both pieces, attempts were made at distinct costuming and world development, seeking to construct an immersive experience. Set pieces were included, both as functional circus apparatus and as aesthetic additions. The movement vocabulary in both pieces ranged from moments of challenging technical circus vocabulary to simple, aphysical theatrical exchanges. Both pieces had moments that could be considered simply theater, or simply dance, or simply circus. In both pieces, cast members had little to no prior exposure to circus technique.

Significantly, individuals of diverse gender presentations were featured physically lifting each other in a partner acrobatics vocabulary. In partner acrobatics tropes, a muscular, cis man is responsible for manipulating the body of his slight, cis female flyer. This was the first circus tradition I sought to overhaul in my rehearsals; all movers, regardless of size and gender identity, both based and flew all of the partner acrobatics vocabulary we practiced.

The two pieces differed distinctly in approach. The first began strictly as a question of medium, beginning with the question, “how do I make circus that feels like dance?” Feels like dance, as in, it feels like an art form that comes tied up with meaning. And feels like dance, as in, I am a dance student, making work within the context of a liberal arts dance department. This first iteration of choreographic research pursued an understanding of movement vocabulary, particularly navigating the Trick Vocabulary in creative practice. The overarching thematic content of the piece came after developing an understanding of our movement vocabulary, and pulling what themes had already appeared into greater emphasis.
Approaching the second piece, I felt I had a strong enough grounding in making use of circus vocabulary to make a piece of contemporary circus with an even more specific question in mind, beyond questions of form and practice. The second exploration looked in-depth at virtuosity, and the physical and mental pleasure, pain, and dissonance thereof, using circus technique as both medium and metaphor.

Practical Methods

To the best of my knowledge, few circus makers have published their personal artistic methods and best practices when it comes to circus-making. As an experimenting student, at the very beginning of my career in circus arts, I offer the methods I found natural in my creative process.

For both pieces, my creative methods consistently began in the technical, as I was determined to maintain the essence of circus technique at the heart of both. I describe my discipline-based approach to generating contemporary circus material as follows:

Step One: Establish circus discipline, and the vocabulary thereof. Expand the mover’s access to its vocabulary, with technical education by experienced circus professionals.

Step Two: Once the desired technical vocabulary is cultivated, interrogate the practice. I have a list of questions I incorporated into my process, including the following: What thematic elements appear? What does the practice feel like, physically and emotionally? What relationship dynamics do moments within the vocabulary suggest? How does the practice interact with my identity, physically,
socially, politically? What do I want to see within the practice? What is unappealing about the practice? How might the practice be used as a tool for subversion?

These questions I would contain as I engaged the technical practice physically, and then write down afterwards, with what answers I could provide. New questions often arose in movement; I addressed these in a writing practice as well.

The vast majority of my rehearsals were recorded; looking back on the recordings was invaluable to this step of the process.

**Step Three:** Extract responses from the written practice, and translate them into the previously established movement vocabulary. This might mean manipulating the vocabulary, adding interdisciplinary techniques, or finding meaningful ways to juxtapose the vocabulary. The vocabulary may have to expand, evolve, or distort. I asked myself to note the following: what must this vocabulary communicate, and what is the most effective way for that to occur?

*Ticky Tacky: A Study in Medium*

In my first piece, *Ticky Tacky*, the cast consisted of an interdisciplinary group of performers. Looking at the classical ties between circus and music, I was interested in bringing musically inclined performers into the rehearsal process, as well as individuals whose talents lent themselves to an exploration of physical theater/clowning. From the beginning, I was aware of the endless and often interdisciplinary options available that are historically “circus” – I wanted a versatile group, who could try anything.

Emily Murphy ‘18 is a trained dancer, who has some acrobatics experience in a studio dance context. Unique Wenxuan Xue ‘19 is an actor who specializes in
musical theater, with an immense history of vocal training. Amira Leila S. ‘19 is a mover with extensive training in Balinese pendet, who also acts and sings. I also chose to participate in the choreography, as I felt strongly about having a body with a history of circus training in the mix.

I was determined to work in opposition to the traditional circus aesthetic, operating in contemporary circus’s ricochet from alternative forms (both traditional and cirque-style). From the beginning of our process, we avoided limiting ourselves to tricks, and let our movement impulses expand from the bare circus techniques we practiced. Beginning with fundamentals of partner acrobatics, we branched into playlike methods of investigation: how can this technique be blown out of its original definition? By switching flyer and base, by manipulating costume, by incorporating dance-like movement with technical circus movement, can it be subverted?

I wanted to remove expectations from this iteration of circus performance. A 10’ by 4’ mat sat onstage, but never as a necessity for risky acrobatics. All of our most difficult technical movements were performed off the mat. Instead, the mat was a set piece, contributing to a sense of a cluttered world, and at the very end of the piece, used as a site of rest rather than virtuosity.

Because this piece was an experiment to develop an understanding of articulately incorporating tricks into a larger whole, I chose to focus on a sense of world creation – I wanted to construct an environment in this piece that allowed for the sensible inclusion of circus tricks. I wanted the tricks to feel like natural components of the world’s vocabulary.
This idea of world creation was inspired by Zimmerman and de Perrot’s Öper Öpis, an evening length work of hybridized contemporary circus, making use of astonishingly technical circus vocabulary with high proportions of theatricality and many moments of dance movement. The piece, performed by five circus artists and a dancer, takes place on and around a stage upon a stage. The top surface is elevated and balanced in the center, propped at different corners at different points in the piece, at times tilting to dangerously steep angles. The dynamic nature of the stage makes for an entirely new experience of proscenium performance, removing the work from the standard stage and ejecting it into a performative world all its own (Born; Riolon).

Performers are costumed eccentrically, with some in business apparel, others in sweat pants, and one strange character who appears to be the size and shape of a pullover sweatshirt. The piece has a logic all its own, generally absurd, but naturally so – the characters and the odd physics of the world they inhabit are created to be so whole and embodied, that all their actions are entirely believable. I aspired to creating

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42 Somebody Something, in Swiss.
a world like this, which would accommodate the absurd and extreme nature of circus
(Born; Riolon).

*Figure 16. Öper Öpis features acrobatics performed on a tilting stage. Photos by Mario Del Curto.*

Before I could begin turning circus tricks into access points in service of the
greater piece, I had to first establish in what discipline the circus tricks would be.

As the ’92 theater does not have rigging capabilities, my dancers and I were
limited to ground apparatus. Partner acrobatics seemed like a practical choice, as a
decent mastery of its beginning vocabulary can be accomplished in a short period of
time.

In seeking another appropriate apparatus, I stumbled upon enormous, seventy-
seven gallon fiber drums, industrial-quality barrels for transporting goods
internationally. These seemed suitable for a number of reasons. Concepts of
containment and escape seemed continuous in the movement material which we had
already been working in – introducing an actual person-sized container seemed to
follow and enhance these themes. Also, the two barrels we introduced into our
rehearsal process were large and sturdy enough to let us cultivate our own Trick
Vocabulary with and around them; over the course of the piece, they came to serve as
musical instruments, cylindrical rolling globes, tiny German wheels, and more. The barrels allowed us as creative movers to develop our own apparatus vocabulary and relationships.43

Aside from apparatus, what else could stand to be subverted in movement that reads as traditional circus? Upon discussion, we collectively decided the “ta-da” characteristic of traditional performance ought to be questioned. In order to do so, our piece featured moments of “ta-da,” a gesture to the audience for praise, without any accompanying tricks. The actual “tricks,” or technical vocabulary from circus, were intended to be understated moments. We integrated them as moments of increased energy, used to adjust the pace of the piece, and to highlight different relationships and social dynamics onstage.

Figure 17. Unique and Amira use the fiber drum as an apparatus. Photo by Ray Miao.

43 As I’ve come to understand it in the world of circus vernacular, this is considered a case of “invented apparatus,” defined as the creation anew or repurposing of existing materials to make an object that facilitates movement cultivated in the circus practice. A circus artist might use this object as analogous to another apparatus, using an already cultivated movement vocabulary with minor adjustments, or invent an entirely new movement vocabulary unique to the new apparatus, but making use of technical circus staples, e.g. risk, extreme strength, flexibility, inversion, etc.
We also made an effort to include the illusion of “tricks” alongside circus vocabulary. In one section, Emily Murphy used a roll of tape to create the image of a line on the floor, on which she performed a phrase of wirewalking technique, followed by a “ta-da!” gesture to the audience. Although the challenge of the technical was not there – she was dancing on an expansive horizontal surface, marked by a two-inch thick line of tape, not a half-inch wire – Emily was still making use of a distinct circus vocabulary, belonging to the library of distinct circus disciplines. Can she still claim a “ta-da!” after a phrase that takes no physical risks? Must circus be risky to deserve a “ta-da?” Is it still circus if not risky?

I would argue that, in this instance, with the illusion of circus, combined with technical knowledge, Emily’s tape-walking phrase is indeed to be considered an act of contemporary circus. Even though her apparatus, the tape, does not have historical ties to circus, her technique does. In rehearsal for this section, Emily learned the phrase by actually walking on a low-wire, professional practice equipment for wire-walking (which will later appear in the second choreographic gesture, *Pushmepleaseure*). The phrase subverts traditional expectations of circus, by being obviously easier than Emily’s “ta-da!” would imply. But it also draws accurately from the historical circus practice, by originating in wire-walking technique as performed on an actual wire. The tape is a placeholder in representation of the wire. It is my belief that a representation of circus apparatus can serve as simply an apparatus,

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44 Although it might make an interesting invented apparatus!
when the technical understanding between the “real” and the “illusion” remains the same.

In addition to our interpretations of circus apparatus, we also created our own take on the live musical tradition in circus. A section of the piece was self-scored, choreographed a Capella interaction with an object onstage. Three movers are faced with the enormous fiber drum, large enough to contain a human form. This situation quickly evolves into an opportunity for clown-like wonder – the drum container becomes a literal drum, banged upon percussively, turned vertically from having been rolled on its side, and sung into for an exploration of reverb.

Singing and noise-making came naturally through the rehearsal process. Two of the four of us were trained singers (Amira Leila S. and Unique Wenxuan Xue), and the third (Emily Murphy) and I both bring vocalizations into our movement compulsively. In one section, a line of three acrobatic body-passing movements traveling down the diagonal, it became clear that as acrobatic bases, three bodies were functioning as a machine to pass a fourth body across the stage. Once that was
established, each base then created a “machine” noise of their own to emit as we chugged through the sequence.

With facilitation of sound, the tricks of the acrobatic vocabulary could then be read. The onstage bodies became representations of machinery executing an action intended to move another body. This new framing, especially for a moment at the beginning of the piece, allowed a point of access to perceive the performers as gears in the machinery of the larger piece.

The greater soundscore, prerecorded, was atmospheric and twinkly, edited by sound designer Anthony Dean into greater and greater distortion as the piece proceeded. This sound was intended to enhance the world of the piece, by creating a sonic space for its proceedings to occur. As the movement onstage became more frantic, so did the sounds, reacting to our choreography and corresponding with atmosphere.

From the beginning, we are bodies inhabiting something larger, with a larger purpose than our individual acrobatic tasks. We costumed ourselves in gray, vintage suits, non-identical, but of similar styles. We wore ties and undershirts in highlighted greens and yellows. These wacky outfits further contributed to our clown-like personas, as well as being loose enough to move in, and somewhat stretchy.

I was determined to avoid the flashy images that are associate with traditional circus. I wanted us to be free in movement, but also to avoid being read as “dancers.” In costume, I wanted pieces that were pedestrian and relatable, and also highly functional.
These costumes offered the audience a point of access into the piece’s underlying dramaturgy, suggesting corporate imagery, or other suggestions of conformity and power relations. As our suits and appearance become disarrayed over the course of the piece, and our movement explorations become freer and less structured. Visually, we appear to be breaking out of the suit-wearing system.

This costume choice led to the addition of another apparatus, neckties. The piece began with a solo performed by Amira, who was directed to create movement with the tie acting as a tether. Her solo, performed on the floor, became centralized around the tie being trapped under her supporting arm, keeping her from moving away as she executed a flexibility vocabulary. This was in keeping with the ideas of confinement within a system – later in the piece, acrobatic moments would serve as both representations of escaping a system and of being reconfinement within it.

![Figure 19. Amira, trapped by her tie. Photo by Ray Miao.](image)

The final piece was a hybrid of theatrical, clown-inspired interactions, danced movement sections, and affected, distorted circus technique. I believe it succeeded as an interdisciplinary work, presenting circus, dance, and theater together onstage in the context of a dance concert. However, without entering the process with a question
beyond that of medium, the reading of the piece could be seen as having little
dramaturgical meaning.

This was reflected in the feedback I received, which generally indicated little
understanding of an underlying message. However, what I did hear from my
professors and peers was a distinct sense of world, with its own logic.

From audience members, I received a few interpretations. One individual told
me she perceived a commentary on office work, and a descent into madness as a
result of a long workday. Another said he read the piece as “finding wonder in
finding traditionally corporate, un-wonderful things,” and that he saw clowning in the
work, as removed from “traditional clowning contexts.”

My research leads me to believe that contemporary circus itself is an act with
a message, by defying the problematic tradition preceding it. That said, it is a form
that is unique from tradition for its dramaturgy. Even though “Ticky Tacky” did
possess underlying dramaturgy within the creative process, the themes we addressed
in rehearsal did not necessarily read in performance. How essential is audience
perception to these pieces, not just in terms of the usual challenges contemporary
circus faces with audience understandings of circus, but in terms of grasping these
particular short-form circus works as works that are making attempts to
communicate?

I entered my second piece seeking to tackle this question. Could it be as
simple as beginning the creative process with more specific questions?

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45 Feedback from fellow student Masha Baucom. Personal communication. 92 Theater, Middletown,
CT. 5 Nov. 2016.
46 Feedback from fellow student Griffin Deary. Personal communication. 92 Theater, Middletown, CT.
3 Nov. 2016.
Pushmepleasure: Interrogating Sensuality

Can pleasure exist in a practice that includes pain? In what ways does that specific pain differ from other kinds of pain, induced by different practices, such as social ones? How do emotions tie to physical sensation? Can a technique rooted in the image of impossibility still manage to be sensually relatable? “Pushmepleasure” began with these questions, and looks to circus technique as a challenge to push expressive boundaries, and to explore new territory with an old technical practice.

Where “Ticky Tacky” could easily be categorized as a contemporary homage to clowning, “Pushmepleasure” was intended to be a bit more difficult to place.

This piece was originally inspired by Raphaëlle Boitel’s contortion solo in James Thierée/Compagnie du Hanneton’s Symphonie du Hanneton (1998). Her movement is technical, using a vocabulary of tumbling, dance, and extreme flexibility. From my own contortion training, I recognize the pain that must be part of her movement – but her embodiment of technique is defined by pleasure. The set pieces she interacts with as she travels wildly around the stage are covered in velveteen, as is her full-body unitard. The soft texture of the costume and set translates in the luxuriating movement of Boitel herself: everything she touches, including her own body in tangled contortion poses, appears to be immensely satisfying to experience, and every move she makes, even the most technical and painful pieces of the vocabulary, reads as nothing but pleasurable. As I watched, I felt this solo physically, having a contortion practice of my own, one that has been a painful and difficult process. But witnessing Boitel’s performance of such a
vocabulary, I experienced her pleasure for myself. I wanted to see if I could express, or even feel, that much pleasure in a practice open to pain.

My collaborator for this piece was Emma Pasarow ’18, a theater major, with a great deal of acting and performance experience and some childhood dance training. We both performed, and both contributed to the piece’s creation.

I chose for this piece to be a duet in order to accommodate a small, personal feel, both in rehearsal and in performance, and also to allow for a greater range of technical possibilities. The possibilities for acrobatic movement seem to increase with number of bodies, and not wanting to limit myself to my technical knowledge, I was committed to bringing another human into the work, particularly one so well-versed in performance art. However, I knew I wanted to explore themes of embodied pleasure, and felt that by minimizing the bodies in the space, our experience and that of the audience could be made more intimate.

We began our rehearsals with a basic contortion practice, based on sections of a two-hour contortion masterclass conducted by circus performer and trainer Naja Muller. In particular, we took efforts towards understanding backbending as a challenging practice with potential for dramatic effect. In later rehearsals, studies in wire-walking and partner acrobatics helped us to construct a fracturing of virtuosity, pleasure, and pain.

In creating our duet, we used a few excerpts of text by Gertrude Stein⁴⁷, a queer writer known for her impressionistic approach to language, and, in keeping

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⁴⁷ For further reading on Gertrude Stein, see “Stein’s Life and Career” by Linda Wagner-Martin from *The Oxford Companion to Women’s Writing in the United States*. See also Stein’s works *Tender Buttons*, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, and *Everybody’s Autobiography*. 
with the circus tradition of live music, performed the text live onstage. We juxtaposed it with circus technique, and distorted the circus technique in layers with the distortion of the text. In addition to this live constructed sound score, an underlying track of summer crickets and cicadas played in the background, reminiscent of a world in which American circus was performed in outdoor tents.

The rest of our recorded soundscore was made of sampled amplifier feedback sounds, mechanical sound effects recorded from a grandfather clock, and a gentle percussion score. I mixed these elements in the sound editing program Audacity to create a melodic but synthetic atmosphere that gradually built on top of a foundation of crickets and cicadas, climaxed with the addition of drums, and then faded again into nature sounds. I wanted to begin with the suggestion of a comfortable environment, a natural one. For me, the sounds of crickets evoke warm summer evenings, spent outside with friends; I wanted the audience to feel these pleasurable associations as well. By layering mechanical sounds on top of it, I was able to construct a more artificial environment, mimicking the process of a body beginning in a “natural” state, engaging a movement process, and then evolving into an “unnatural” form – as some audiences perceive contortion as being an “unnatural” representation of an otherwise normal or “natural” body.

By starting with contortion techniques of backbending, we began with a very specific movement vocabulary that is paired with very specific sensation. For my body, backbending has induced headaches, harsh stretching sensations, and on occasion, sharp, lasting pain.\footnote{\textit{Since studying with coach Naja Muller, I’ve learned more essential techniques than I’ve received from past contortion coaches, and have as a result had less pain in my practice. However, in training}}
cultivated in rehearsal, I could then interrogate these sensations, with my original
method questions\textsuperscript{49}, and more, including the following: can I feel the sense of
backbending, without bending physically? Can I make a movement phrase expressing
how backbending feels? What is the best way for me to communicate how I feel in a
backbend?

As a result of these investigations, I decided that restriction of my voice
sonically best reflects the challenge I feel in my body while executing the bending
vocabulary. I strung together a phrase of technical backbending, and paired it with
Gertrude Stein’s \textit{Study Nature}. As it appeared in the final piece, I, with a wireless
microphone in hand, walked forward with my body bent in half backward. As I
Wipe her less. Was a disappointment. We say it. Study nature.”\textsuperscript{50}

Use of Gertrude Stein in particular was highly intentional. Emma and I were
two bodies onstage, coded in appearance as female, interacting intimately. There are
moments of the piece when our pelvises are pushed together, when one of us clings
upside-down to the middle of the other, or when our mouths are in close proximity.
We wanted an impression of closeness, of implied sensuality in our relationship, and
a relationship that was not heteronormative. By including the writings of a queer
female author, as well as vocalizations that were delivered with a sexual affect, we
sought to enhance these impressions.

\textsuperscript{49} See Practical Methods, page 99
\textsuperscript{50} “Study Nature,” Gertrude Stein
In each performance, we included approximately forty real apples onstage, and manipulated them over the course of the piece. The apples bring bright spots of color to the stage, as well as pleasing and relatable sensation. We bite into them, and they make incredible crunching sounds. The satisfaction of biting into a crisp, sweet apple is a familiar and sensual experience to most, and one we hoped would resonate throughout the piece.

We wore identical gray unitards, as well as handmade caps in cream, blue, and lavender tones. We also donned neutral toned leather wire-walking shoes, to protect our feet in the sections involving wire work. In showings, suggestions were made for more “colorful, playful costumes, in circus colors.”\footnote{Feedback from CFA Costume Designer Cybele Moon. Personal communication. Schonberg Dance Studio, Middletown, CT. 28 Feb. 2017.} However, as with the first iteration of my choreographic research, I was seeking to defy circus tradition – so something that would read to audiences as “circus colors” would not serve that purpose, as the circus most American audiences are familiar with are those in the traditional or cirque form. After the performances, my choice was reconfirmed in feedback from Professor Hari Krishnan: “Your costume color choices brought the performance to the forefront, and highlighted the bodies and the staging\footnote{Personal communication. Cross Street Dance Studio, Middletown, CT. 3 Apr. 2017.}.” This is precisely in the interest of creating contemporary circus: emphasizing the actions of the humans onstage, rather than their mere spectacularity.

The process of generating material consistently began with technical movement, in either contortion, wire-walking, or juggling disciplines. We learned to manipulate the apples as though they were as consistent as juggling balls. We learned
to investigate the extreme bodily sensation of contortion vocabulary, and to link the vocabulary with the feeling in the form of movement phrases. We looked at wire-walking as both an example of virtuosity, but also a representation of vulnerability; it is an apparatus cultivating a shaky movement quality, one visibly precarious, opening up possibilities for communicating that vulnerability to our audience.

Beginning with technique, we asked ourselves: what does this feel like? If painful, we explored the movement until it could become pleasurable. If pleasurable, we explored the movement until it was difficult to execute. And in both cases, we generated performance material in attempts to communicate our sensations to the audience. In Emma’s words: “Fluid and graceful movement came after sweat and bruises.”53

The piece opened with our entrance. We walked onstage in pedestrian clothes (emphasizing humanity), and our swim-cap like hats (a more surreal gesture, towards a slightly less mundane world), both holding an apple in the downstage hand. We bit into our apples and held them. Staring into the audience with apples in our mouths, we removed our clothes in unison, revealing identical gray unitards underneath. We commenced the beginning of the piece, costumes revealed. Our clothes, and our one-biteTaken apples, remained stashed at the feet of the front row, bridging the gap between the audience and the stage.

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Onstage is a small practice tightwire, on a shallow diagonal from upstage right to center stage. On the small platforms of the tightwire are perched two red apples. Next to the tightwire, upstage center, is a small bright blue umbrella, opened, with five red apples hidden in the shell of the umbrella. It is tilted such that the apples are not visible to the audience at the beginning of the piece.

Following our clothing removal prologue, each of us had phrases based on breath, with Emma’s being an effortful series of transitions between poses sprawling over the tightwire, and mine being a seated, almost still phrase, with my right hand performing a gestural representation of deep breathing: curling into a fist on each deep inhale, unfurling on each deep exhale. We are on the diagonal from upstage right to downstage left, as aligned by the tightwire, with Emma laying across the wire with her head toward the audience, and me sitting a few feet downstage of center stage left. I wanted to give an impression of contrast between struggle and pleasure, with both being equally embodied and vocalized. For this section, I received feedback from a peer that commented on the breath, noting: “You’re not doing anything as
hard as what Emma’s doing. But you’re breathing just as hard, like what you’re doing is just as hard.”

Emma’s phrase gets more frantic and effortful, and when her breathing is at its loudest, she starts singing syllables “swee” and “tea” from Gertrude Stein’s *Susie Asado* (“Sweet sweet sweet sweet sweet tea”). I sing too, my voice clearer in contrast for not having engaged in effortful movement, voicing the syllables of the words “Susie Asado.” This poem, which uses sounds and syllables to evoke the image of Flamenco dancing (O’Clair 177), was used for its sensual nature and imagery. Later in the piece, the poem returns in more legible form. Here, the voice served to create a basis for a multitask, on top of which would be layered acrobatic vocabulary.

In rehearsal, professional circus artist and teacher Allison McDermott helped us construct a series of acrobatic phrases and poses that we could execute while singing. Authentic circus vocabulary, as trained and taught by experienced practitioners, was essential to ensuring that this piece might be considered “circus” as much as it could be “dance.”

Traveling as we sing, we meet in the downstage left, join hands, and execute a series of partnered backbends that travel to stage right. We continue our vocal score as we move. Rising out of the backbends, I climb onto Emma’s back, and stand. I wanted to make the content more challenging for us to execute; performing an acrobatic vocabulary while executing a very specific vocal score makes the physical components much more difficult to accomplish successfully.

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We continue singing into the next acrobatic gesture; I crouch on Emma’s back, lean forward gripping her middle, and lift my legs over my head, mirroring hers. We dismount from the pose abruptly, and stop singing. We perform a phrase we called the “evil twin phrase” – again mirroring each other, and then briefly circling each other with intensified eye contact, almost adversarial.

As our bodies were costumed almost identically, with certain details (hat and shoes) being distinctive in color, I sought to create a binary between our similarly-sized bodies, but also a deeply seated connection. This was meant to reflect the connection of pain in virtuosic practice with the satisfaction of virtuosity; the pain of training leads to the pleasure of achievement, and the pleasure of achievement fuels more training, and consequently more pain.

After we circle, I exit, and Emma notices the audience, coming downstage center. I reenter loudly, bearing a rattling metal bucket of apples, which I then pour out at her feet. We look at each other, then perform a symmetrical one-legged squat to pick up apples with our mouths, an effortful gesture. We do not attempt to hide our
effort, visibly struggling with the task. Once our apples are in mouth, we return to standing.

We then perform what we called “apple juggling,” a manipulation consisting of an invented passing pattern of three apples between the two of us, involving a system of both perching apples on the body and exchanging them with tosses. While performing this creative interpretation of partner juggling, we sing an a Capella tune based on a Reggie Watts performance. When an apple drops out of the pattern after effectively juggling at length, we stop singing. The virtuosity of the moment, derived from a challenging structure of multitasking, is suddenly shattered, and the song, a simple, jaunty tune, one in contrast to the tense atmosphere of the rest of the piece, suddenly halts. The pleasure of the moment, taken in fun musical style, is overshadowed by failure, a chronic side effect of attempting virtuosity.

Emma performs a solo, beginning with a gesture of anguish, as a result of dropping the apple. I follow the dropped apple offstage into the audience. Emma’s phrase is pulled from a video of playing cats, with a feline vocabulary of wiggling and stretching. I picked cats as inspiration for this moment because of their inherent intention for pleasure – a cat will do what feels good, with disregard for human expectations. Emma’s transition from anguish to pleasure through feline movement is meant to represent an embodiment of choosing pleasure in practice. This also is ostensibly the only moment of the piece that pulls exclusively from a dance technique. It is atheatrical, with minimal facial expression. Emma’s expression of anguish/pleasure is limited to her body alone, with her face remaining neutral. Unlike

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55 See “Reggie Watts at Radiolab Live Apocalyptical Nov 21, 2013”
56 See “Awesome Cats in Slow Motion”
other moments in the piece, none of her solo is necessarily virtuosic, and none of it pulls from an acrobatic or circus technique.

While Emma performs her solo, I venture into the audience, where I planted a microphone with an audience member before the piece began. I hand that audience member the apple I’ve retrieved, in return for the microphone. The audience member keeps the apple. While I sit, I ask them if I can put my head on their knee. If they say yes, I rest there until Emma finishes her solo; if not, I quietly sit next to them for the remainder. With this interaction, I wanted to enhance the sensuality of the piece. Apples are objects everyone has held, has bitten into, and has experienced. By pulling the apples physically out of the abstract stage space, I seek to remind the audience of the concreteness of our practice.

Circus, for its use of hypercoordinated and trained technique, can be one of the most abstract forms to grasp physically as an audience member, particularly if one has not trained in circus, dance, or theater at all. Even if an audience member doesn’t know what a backbend feels like, I wanted them to have a reminder of their own physical presence during the piece – by touching someone, by asking them to hold objects and have contact with me, I sought to give that individual a part of the piece, and a piece of the practice.

In performance, none of the audience members I addressed declined the invitation of contact. For the first two shows, the audience members were friends of mine whom I had invited to the concert, and who I knew would be comfortable with physical interaction. In the third and final show, I addressed an audience member
whom I did not know. This individual seemed comfortable with the interaction, and accepted the offer of contact.

I reenter the stage space with the microphone in hand. Inhaling into it audibly, returning to the practice of breath at the beginning of the piece, I bend backward. With my face toward the audience, I walk to the upstage left corner where Emma is prostrate at the end of her solo. This backbend walking is the beginning of the phrase constructed around my contortion vocabulary. The walking is difficult, made more perilous for the apples lying in my path. And I’m not only visibly struggling, but also audibly, reciting Stein’s Study Nature. To achieve proper form, which will preserve my lower back, I keep my cervical vertebrae contracted. This in turn contracts my speaking faculties, limiting my breathing and my volume, dramatically affecting how I speak.

As I move to the floor, continuing my bending vocabulary, Emma takes the microphone from me, and pushes it into my face, pressing me into a more challenging position. In this bend, my breath is still restricted, but I am also experiencing the satisfaction of having achieved a challenging component of contortion vocabulary. I often found in rehearsal that my voice grew stronger at this moment in the piece. At this point in my recitation of the poem, I am about halfway through: “I am pleased thoroughly,” I claim. This moment returns to the adversarial “evil twin” imagery, with Emma seemingly inflicting a moment of painful effort on me. But before Emma removes the microphone from my mouth and finishes the poem, I exude a sighing exclamation, almost sexual in nature: I’ve found the pleasure in the practice, including the pain.
Emma delivers the rest of the poem to the audience, directed to be “sensual.” In delivering the text, she moves from her hips, translating sensuousness to the pelvic area. I maintain my contortion, advancing to a more difficult iteration of the pose. When Emma finishes the poem, I relax, and she hands me the mic. She then yanks the umbrella, close at hand, off the ground: the hidden apples fly. Fast moving suspended objects, especially brightly colored ones like our apples, are an exciting visual, one that reads like spectacle. The apples fly by my head, adding an element of risk.

Then follows another section of acrobatic vocabulary. I take the umbrella from Emma, who is sitting with her knees raised. I climb first onto her shoulders, and then onto the front surface of her knees, leaning out as Emma counterbalances my weight from the floor. I do this with the umbrella in my teeth, with both our bodies facing stage left. The umbrella completely hides my head and shoulders.

While balanced, I remove the umbrella from my mouth, and fold it at a joint near its head, transforming it into its intended form, a fan assisting with ease of movement on the tightwire. I then hand it to Emma, beneath me, who has released a hand to receive it. I dismount, and trade her the microphone for the umbrella.
We begin the wire-walking section of the piece. I travel to the far platform of the wire, in the opposite upstage right corner of the stage, and inhale the apple there, using my whole body to express the breath. Simultaneously, Emma inhales into the microphone – we return to the synchronicity of our “twin” bodies, as well as a sensuous pleasure-taking in the objects around us.

Figure 23. Two uses of the tightwire apparatus. Photo by Ella Israeli.

I perform a practiced sequence of footwork on the wire, as Emma sweetly recites the first six lines of Susie Asado, leaning on the center stage platform of the wire. Upon the sixth line, “A lean on the shoe this means slips slips hers,” Emma becomes more militant, turning to the audience, and repeating the line with increasing volume and fervor. I repeat a phrase of tightwire vocabulary, a prepatory footwork gesture and a single changement jump. As Emma recites faster and more loudly, my phrase gets more frantic and visibly difficult, proceeding until I fall off the wire. Emma stops reciting, in the face of failure. I toss the umbrella away upstage.

We repeat a moment of our beginning acrobatic vocabulary, with a simple weightsharing over the wire. Emma, still holding the microphone, hands it to me as
we turn around each other to sit on the wire. We do what we called our “secret handshake,” a quick series of hand and foot gestures together as we sit. Then we stand, and Emma mounts the wire, walking back and forth as I support her with my arm. I begin humming into the microphone, singing Emma’s part of the apple passing a capella tune. We’ve now replaced each other – Emma takes to the wire, and I take her vocal part.

Emma comes off the wire, and we perform a backbending duet, one that begins with our pelvises joined, and then with Emma in a bridge position with me bent over her backwards, my hands supported on her upper thighs. We execute paired backbending vocabulary, established in rehearsal after an investigation of entering and exiting backbending positions, a facet of most backbending contortion classes. We end facing each other, on our bellies, just downstage of the tightwire. I pick up an apple from the many scattered on the floor, and bite into it, holding it in my mouth. Emma bites into the other side, the apple drops, and we chew our bites as we stretch ourselves upwards.

We ended the piece in the reverse, again approaching the audience, and putting our clothes back on. I wanted the piece to feel like an encounter, one in which the audience is implicated, and connected with somehow. By opening and closing with the intimate act of removing/replacing ones clothes, I wanted to establish a personal and sensual understanding of the piece.

An established rule of our performative affect in the piece was to treat the audience blankly, and only share smiles between each other. We had an interior world to the piece that lived only within these small exchanges – pleasure was embodied in
some of the movement phrases, but also in our relationship. Outside of the relationship between the two of us, we received the audience like a mirror, looking for factual self-evaluation, but without warmth.

I entered the making process of this piece seeking to foreground the discomfort of virtuosic circus movement, and the pleasure of accomplishing the challenging physical feats that exist within the technique. This dissonance was the ultimate goal, ideally an embodiment of conflict between satisfaction and physical limitation. What we created once we cultivated a sense of intimacy between our onstage characters ran deeper for us in performance; the work felt like an expression of effort in our bodies, effort in the reflection of an audience, but also pleasure between ourselves, an act in opposition of norms when that physical pleasure exists in a non-heterosexual relationship.

Addressing physical limitation head on is something circus has always done, simply by drawing from a technique that pushes extremes of the human form. I wanted to take this question of possibilities available to the human form one step sideways, looking at what pushing extremes does to a body, especially when both failure and success are had.

In *Pushmepleasure*, Emma and I rarely executed the piece without minor failures in our virtuosic sections. In fact, opening night was the first time we ever completed the apple juggling phrase without unintentional drops. In our second performance, I fell off the tightwire well before I was choreographed to – and, as usual, we continued the piece as though the fall was planned. Falls and drops were choreographed in the piece, giving space to unintentional ones to exist without being
interruptions. Feedback we received throughout the process reinforced the sense that these small failures had a certain place within the piece – noting “this piece has an allowance for mistakes, where they aren’t distractions, but feel like part of your experiment onstage.” This was an unintentional effect, but one in keeping with the overarching principles of contemporary circus, namely the rejection of the systems at work within commercial and traditional circus performance. Rather than the standard performative exchange of spectacle – I do a trick, and you applause – the failure in performance rejected this transaction before it could begin.

Movement work focusing in physical extremes can be thick with sensation; in my contortion classes, I’ve seen the practice induce panic, anxiety, or even euphoria in myself and my fellow students. Different bodies experience the practice differently – in scraping at the edges of range of motion, certain bodies might do so joyfully, others with more apprehension.

Like dance, circus is a powerful vehicle for emotion. In a practice so heavily felt, performance is imbued with immense feeling. This is part of what makes circus so compelling as an expressive art form. Spectacle is eye-catching, and superhuman movement appeals to wide audiences – making it all the more likely to be pursued and witnessed – but beneath the spectacle is years of physical, emotional depth, bleeding into the work onstage.

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Conclusion

Imagine “circus.” What does it look like? What color is it? What sounds does it make? What bodies are part of it, and what are they doing?

Has it changed?

This study has attempted to establish the context of contemporary circus performance, and in doing so, its significance. It has addressed some of the particulars of making contemporary circus, from both abstract and hands-on perspectives. I’ve described a few of the methods various artists use in making contemporary circus, and through research in practice, I’ve determined creative methods of my own.

The long history of circus resonates in contemporary circus practices, leaving lasting traces which affect both perception in performance and action in practice. The form exists in a pre-determined socio-historical context. This provides for an inherent understanding of contemporary circus as an act rejecting the mores of its past incarnations, rendering it inherently grounded in ethical underpinnings, and therefore inherently political in its varied expressions. To make circus in its contemporary style is to defy circus in its discarded forms, ones which included exploitative components. Contemporary circus is also a retaliation against circus present, including traditional-style circus that, to an extent, seeks to recreate the traditional circuses of the early 20th century, as well as cirque-style circus, which simplifies the humanity its performers through aesthetic and commercialism.

As a form entrenched in historical association, not just as a genre, but also with respect to technical practices, contemporary circus faces unique creative challenges. These include, but are not limited to, a system of physical training based
on units of purely technical vocabulary known as the Trick Vocabulary; audience expectations of “life-affirming” performance; unavailability of grants; and misconceptions in the arts community of contemporary circus’s expressive value. Circus artists have made many paths to navigating these challenges, both in their creative processes and in their performed practices.

In some cases, navigating these challenges led artists to reject the label “circus”. As this study discusses, the associations accompanying “circus” may only be assuaged by practicing new usage, and applying the label to such works as wish to exist alongside those of more recognized performance forms.

I hope that this study will contribute to more prolific discourse in circus studies, particularly from the lens of choreographic practice. As contemporary circus becomes a more richly developed field, it is my hope that more artists will engage a written practice and disseminate their creative processes and research methods, in order to facilitate progress and recognition within the arts. At this time, Marie-Andrée Robitaille’s Gynoides project, which places written study and physical practice/performance as equal components of research, is not unique, but does represent the minority of circus arts. It is singular in its abundance, consisting of both a massive collection of performed research by a large group of female circus artists, as directed by Robitaille, as well as papers and an annual consortium continuing the research and the discussion. I hope, by addressing circus making as I’ve been taught to address dance making, that more circus artists will engage and record artistic research practices, and their effectiveness in this emerging form.
From *Ticky Tacky* and *Pushmepleasure*, I’ve been able to track my methods of creative work within the established circus technique, and to expand from that technique in collaboration with peers previously untrained in circus performance. This began with a learning process, in which we reached out to local coaches and developed our physical understanding of a circus vocabulary. We could then address the vocabulary semiotically, with our research questions in mind, first solely with respect to medium (which yielded a hybridized performance that read as a successful blending of art forms, without an underlying message per se), and next with personally rooted questions of content (which yielded a performance of almost exclusively circus technique which received a wide variety of semiotic interpretations). In doing so, I established my own understanding of contemporary circus methods in practice, as well as created works attempting to contribute to the current performance landscape.

Contemporary circus is a valuable movement discipline. It is a new vocabulary, derived from old traditions. It is a revolution in motion – pressing hard against the norms of what society expects from circus performers, from what audiences look for in performance, and from what one might expect of themselves. Circus rejects exploitation and gravity alike, emphasizing humanity while pushing its limits.

As a wire-dancer, or fil-de-fériste, my practice differs from that of the funambulist, by being performed on a low wire – I work just a few feet from the ground. With a larger margin of error comes greater creative freedom: I can dance, jump, and swing on my low wire, without much fear of mortal peril.
When I conduct my wire practice, I am using the same techniques to hold my position on the wire as the rope dancers in Ancient Rome used to perform at festivals, and the same techniques Madame Saqui used to secure her captivating power over the French public, and the same techniques Nik Wallenda used to make his historic wire-walk across the Grand Canyon.

A historical through line exists in my practice. In the time I spend on the wire, I am connected to every soul that has performed that technique. The practice is so unique, and belongs to a rare few. We all know the very specific muscles it takes to stay balanced, to keep the ankle from twisting off a rolling line, to move freely in such a tiny space. My core muscles squeeze – they hold me up there, and they hold my predecessors too. We’re all on the wire, together, performing our ancient practice.

The human race is obsessed with our own capability. We push our boundaries, constantly developing ourselves and our environments. Circus is a physical embodiment of this inclination. But, rather than feeding into systems of production, destruction, and division, as so much human development does, circus is a constructive practice, one that feeds into empowerment and greater social good.

Circus movement is an exercise in inspiration – one based in pushing one’s own boundaries, and pushing those of others. In Rings of Desire, Helen Stoddart writes, “the body of the aerialist is weighed down by no regulation and is governed only by its singular self-discipline and strength” (7). There exists independence and self-reliance in a circus practice, and the satisfaction of accomplishing something one couldn’t do yesterday.
In terms of medium, contemporary circus is dance. It is a body in space, moving with intention. But it is circus for its training, its technique, and most importantly, the history from which those originated. It is contemporary circus for its reaction to that history. It is a bold and exciting and very young form, newly evolving, testing possibilities of performance every day. It is humanity at the forefront. It is a physical expression of overcoming. A circus body is human, and a circus body can say and do it all.
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