



**Reflections from
The Metamodern Circus
symposium, 26/05/2023**



**The
Really
Fantastic
and the
Fantastically Real:
Doing Circus Now**

"A space for circus research must be a space for sharing knowledge and expertise between scholars and practitioners. It must be a place to enrich the discourse but also to contribute to the practice"

(Leroux, 2017)

Edited by Katharine Kavanagh and Thom Hamer.

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In partnership with The Circus Diaries.

This book project has been inspired by the *Circus Thinks* publications created by

Cirkus Syd's online Circus Thinkers community. New members always welcome!

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Welcome

Thanks for joining us on these pages to explore ideas of how and where circus and metamodernism intersect. This booklet is designed to serve as an introduction to, a taster of, and a companion that sits alongside emerging thoughts on how circus today reflects and refracts the metamodern cultural moment. It is a creative documentation of The Metamodern Circus symposium, held in Cardiff on 26th May 2023, and has been produced collaboratively by attendees of the event, who contribute their perspectives from diverse backgrounds of academic and performance practice.

Circus hit a peak of public recognition in the 'modernist' era of the twentieth century when mass media reified the ephemeral and dynamic field of practice into a time capsule image of the period's popular Western form, delivered first through cellulose on the silver screen, then later broadcast into people's homes. This perception still dominates many people's expectations of what circus means, despite continual evolution and growth (and global difference). Since the 1990s, for example, experiments in 'contemporary circus' have especially embraced the postmodern, deconstructing technique, foregrounding critical subjectivities, and revelling in intertextual reference. Our current era, though, is now described by some cultural theorists as 'metamodern', bringing together elements of thought and feeling inherited from both the previous zeitgeists. Important aspects of metamodernism include reappreciation of craft, reconstruction of authenticity, postirony, and a renewed sense of spirituality (Van den Akker, Gibbons & Vermeulen 2017).

We recognise that this is also a particularly Westernised perspective, developed primarily by theorists of the Global North. In this collection we write largely from perspectives shaped by British and European cultural immersion. However, we hope our insights will be of interest wherever circus happens, and look forward to seeing these thoughts taken forward and developed through alternate viewpoints, to further explore ways that circus can deepen our understanding of the times we're living in.

The content of this book follows the format of the live symposium, tracing thoughts from the day's opening, keynote speeches, activities and performance. In the contents list, you will see that extracts and imagery taken directly from the day are listed in **bold font**, while later reflections from attendees are listed in regular font. The items listed in *italic font* are the combined thoughts of multiple attendees, as shared in the final workshop portion of the symposium.

The Metamodern Circus is the second edition of the Metamodern Festival, founded by Thom Hamer. It was funded by the AHRC South, West and Wales Doctoral Training Partnership, and the creation of this booklet was funded by the ESRC Wales Doctoral Training Partnership and Cardiff University Doctoral Academy. The whole project has been devised in partnership with The Circus Diaries, an online platform dedicated to critical discussions of circus in the UK and beyond, which celebrates its 10th anniversary this year. Thanks are due to all of the above, to our organising committee (Shehana Gomez, Emma Page, Beatrice Pagliarone, Iona Ramsay and Pete Yelding) and to event co-producers Thom Hamer and Katharine Kavanagh.

Special thanks also to NoFit State Community Circus for hosting us, and to the fabulous V21 Oaks Garden Nursery for lending us 40 juggling partner pot-plants for the day without batting an eyelid. And finally, of course, thanks to all the presenters and attendees who made the event so engaging and inspiring. We are very happy.

Online documentation from the day can be found at
www.TheCircusDiaries.com



Foreword

Hi Katharine

I'm just about to leave for a meeting, but I've penned this, somewhat clumsily. As an academic I see a lot of seminars, symposiums, conferences etc pass by my screen... usually I am not that tempted. My academic career was preceded by a 'career' in performance, ranging across stage, screen, radio, acting, directing, managing, producing. I sometimes hesitate to engage in academic discussions about performance, as they can often seem quite distant from the place I started, which was in making.

But this was different. Firstly, it's Circus! Such a fundamental performance art form, unshackled from the control mechanisms of high art, high cost, exclusivity that permeates so much of art. Secondly it was being held locally (yes it was convenient) at the home of the excellent NoFit State circus, a Cardiff phenomenon that has become an international name. And finally, 'metamodern'. That caught my eye.

The programme was intriguing, ranging from keynote presentations to workshops and film presentations. I wasn't disappointed.

The keynote introduction from Katharine Kavanagh was informed by her academic study but also sustained by her enthusiasm and obvious engagement with practice. As I looked around the room I saw a great mix of people, some who just 'looked' like circus practitioners (young, eager, smiling, joyous, wearing comfortable clothes); there were a few older academics like myself, and a range of others, many of whom had travelled the length of the country to be there. It was such a supportive and engaged atmosphere. I knew I had chosen the right event to attend.

The first keynote was excellently presented by Dr Tom Drayton, tackling head on the 'metamodern'. Dr Drayton is a well organised and effective speaker, who gave us extracts from a forthcoming publication. His content really resonated with me, reflecting questions I pose to my students – his headline quote had me hooked *"It's all so pointless, ah, but it's not though, is it? It's really real and when you feel it you can really feel it"*. Here we were looking at fundamental

questions we find ourselves asking with our young students, as we try to establish an intelligent pathway through the AR/VR/LIVE/AS-LIVE/HOLOGRAM/GAMING/GREENSCREEN world of performance we now work in. A thought provoking keynote, that had me laughing out loud with recognition.

Luke Hallgarten gave us a different perspective. Very much a performer and producer, Luke nevertheless gave us a thoughtful and inspiring talk from his perspective as an early / mid career circus maker. Full of insights and provocations, self-awareness and self-questioning, this talk was a perfect balance to Tom Drayton.

I participated with some trepidation in the workshop. In front of my students I tend to 'play' the lecturer, and rarely get the chance to make a fool of myself, to fail. Juggling with plants seemed a sure way of doing just that. I have a working-class built-in suspicion of anything remotely... what is the word I'm looking for... we used to say 'Airey Fairey' but I don't know if that has pejorative connotations I don't mean it to. Esoteric may be a suitable stand in. But the room seemed to fully engage, and so I too found myself breathing next to my plant, lying on the floor, leaving all thoughts of failing behind. It was surprisingly moving, and surely sat squarely within the metamodern discussion we were having. And I danced for my plant!

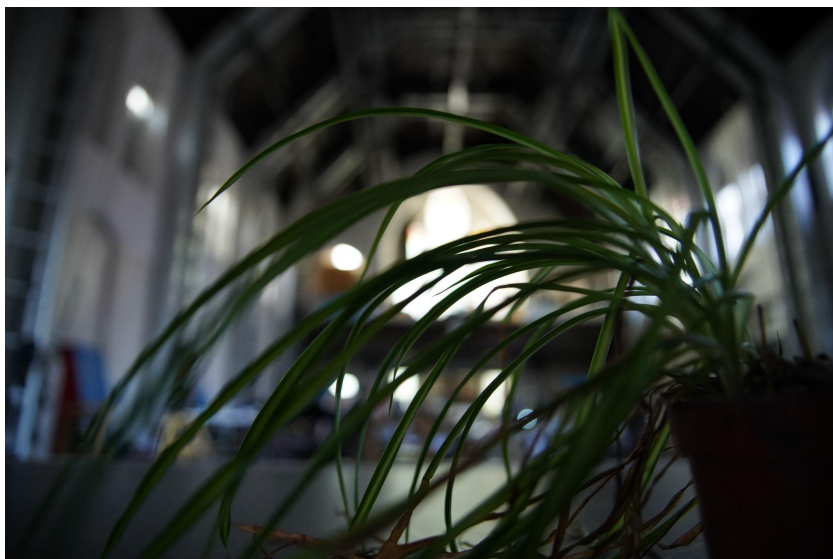
Sadly I had to miss later sessions for reasons beyond my control, but I caught up with Hobbit's film which was hugely revealing about the art and science of flying, and the enormous personal commitment it requires.

This was a joyous and engaging seminar day, and left me filled with renewed thinking about my subject area. I am so glad I was able to attend and look forward to any future iterations. I will absolutely attend anything that the team come up with in future and can only wish all my conferences to be as engaging, thought provoking, relevant and welcoming as this was.

Steve Fisher

Senior lecturer Performance and Media
University of South Wales





CONTENTS

Welcome	i
Foreword	iii
By Steve Fisher	
Contents	vi
Introduction – Katharine Kavanagh sets the scene	2
<i>Metamodernism is...</i>	5
Keynote 1 – Dr Tom Drayton on metamodern performance	6
Notes on [a] Metamodernism [conference]	8
By Tom Drayton	
Keynote 2 – Luke Hallgarten gives a circus example	12
Circus Artists and Audiences	14
By Jaine Lumsden	
<i>Circus in the 21st Century is...</i>	16
Workshop – Co-Creating with Plants	17
By Valentina Solari	
<i>Together, circus and metamodernism make me think of...</i>	23
5 D's of Ecological Skill	24
By Elliott Rooke	

Social Circus in the Metamodern Time	28
By Serena Cafferatta Rivas	
KNOTCIRCUS remix	32
By Jonathan Priest	
<i>Highway to Infinity – Work in Progress from Symoné</i>	37
In Conversation: Circus Bodies, Vulnerability and Performance	38
By Dr Lizzie Hobson and Symoné	
<i>Fight or Flight – Short film by Hobbit</i>	44
A Metamodern Director: Circus and The Human Condition	45
By Hobbit	
Head for Heights: A Dialogue between Jazz and Aerial Acrobatics	47
By Thom Hamer	
<i>Circus and Genealogy – Talk by Pete Yelding</i>	49
NoFit Feedback	50
By Rob Smith	
The group discuss:	53
<i>Metamodern Circus is...</i>	54
Contributors	55
Bibliography	58

Introduction

– Katharine Kavanagh sets the scene

Metamodernism is a relatively new development in fields of philosophy and cultural theory, so if you're here wondering 'what's this all about then?', then don't worry, I'm certain you're not alone in that! And, similarly, circus studies is also a new field for academic interest. Although, of course, many people already have connections to circus, or understandings of what circus might mean, based on their own experience, or from popular representations such as films and story books. What we often find, however, is that there are many differing perspectives on what circus is, or does, or means, and so we hope everybody will be able to discover something new here to take away that enriches their understanding both of circus, and of current cultural trends.

Before anyone arrived at the symposium, everyone who booked to attend received a small zine mailed out in the post. I pasted some quotes, and jotted some thoughts, on the concept of 'generative paradoxes', which I find especially fruitful when considering circus. Let me share those again with you here:

"metamodernism reconstructs things by joining their opposing elements in an entirely new configuration rather than seeing those elements as being in competition with one another."

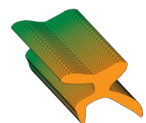
(Abramson, 2017:np)

"the prevalent sentiment is one of irreconcilability; of the awareness that one position is irreconcilable with another in spite of one's need to occupy them both at once"

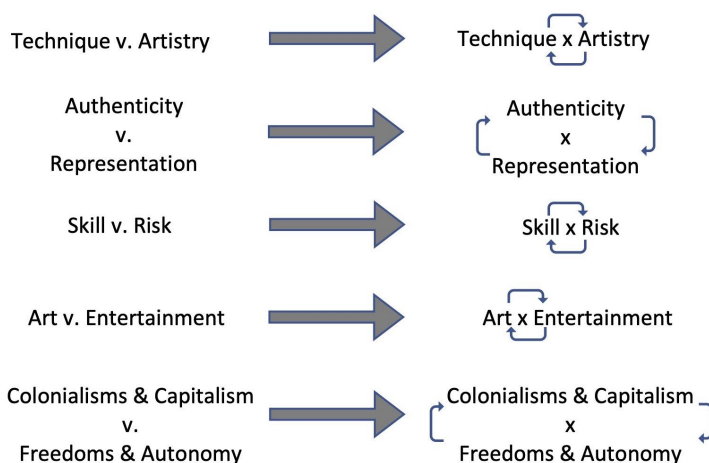
(Vermeulen & Van den Akker, 2015:np)

"Realities are not flat. They are not consistent, coherent and definite. Our research methods necessarily fail. Aporias are ubiquitous. But it is time to move on from the long rearguard action which insists that reality is definite and singular."

(Law, 2003:605)



A key feature of metamodernism, then, is the oscillation between seemingly oppositional positions or perspectives. Circus discourse often highlights supposed binary paradoxes of co-existing oppositions. Reframing these so-called paradoxes as oscillations – disrupting the binary – seems a productive way of interrogating these relationships to achieve deeper understanding: *How do opposing elements of experience co-exist to create the practices and experiences we understand as circus?*



The next page shows an Instagram post by artist @BlinkyDoodly. I love how it illustrates one of these generative paradoxes: the effortless sensation we receive from physical displays which we KNOW – from our experience of living in similarly human bodies – to be effortful. A phenomenon Kate Holmes (2021) has characterised as ‘the kinaesthetic fantasy of weightlessness’.

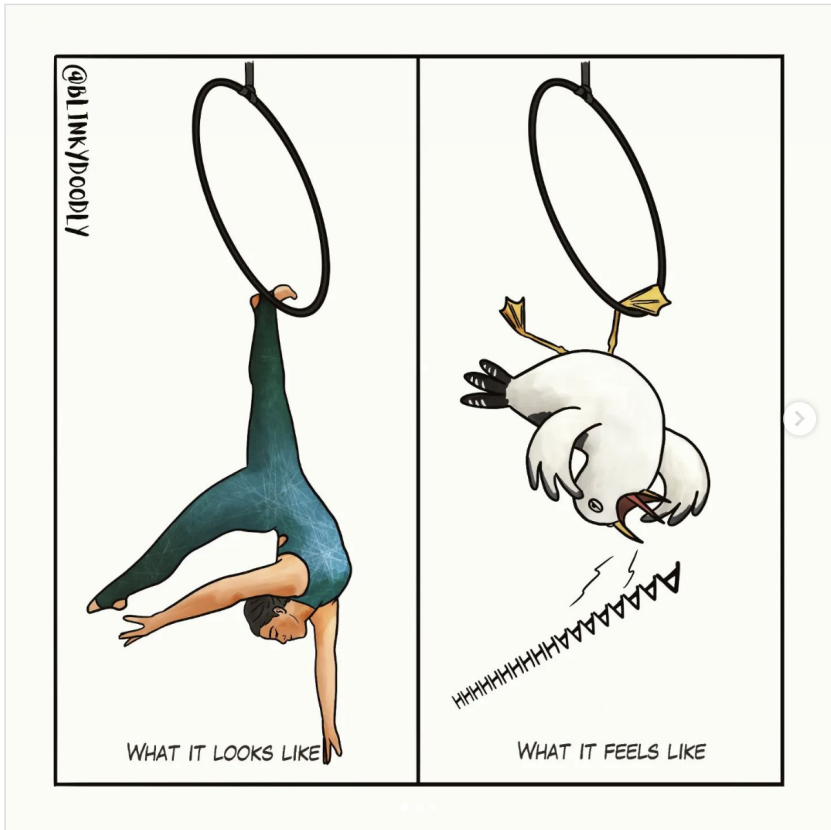


Image credit: @BlinkyDoodly

"that world is both real and illusory at the same time. The circus embraces both elements. They are not diametrically opposed, and one does not necessarily exclude the other."

(Ward, 2023:16)

Metamodernism is...

a big word!

challenging the existence of dualities

the ironization of irony, through which we can be sincere again

a reaction and response to the present moment in which failing capitalist systems and climate change threaten our way of life

an attempt at putting words to a shift in cultural aesthetics and methods that don't comfortably fit with previous categories of traditionalist, modern or postmodern.

a useful lens + communication tool for making art and deconstructing the human condition

a trick by which you depart from something you perpetuate

*well I am not sure but today I keep
finding that it is almost quantum. Two
things at the same time but only one
at a time when it's perceived.
Pendulum.*

one methodology of considering cultural creation

Post-postmodern

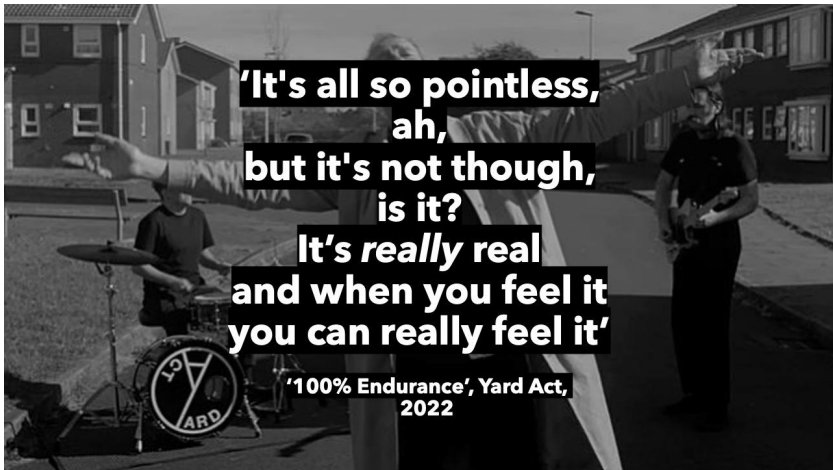
relevant more today than ever

whispers **"softness is human"**

Keynote 1

– Dr Tom Drayton on metamodern performance

Watch the talk via <http://bit.ly/TMCTomD>



"Ok, so if, at its basest level, postmodernity was detachment, irony and depthlessness, there are works now that offer the opposite of that: engagement, sincerity and... depth-iness. But, at the same time, still exhibit elements of detachment and irony. They're works that cannot escape elements of the postmodern, but also move beyond it; that swing—let's say—between sincerity and irony; that are "ironest", to steal from Greg Dember..."



"It is an oscillation between connection and disconnection; a feeling of being dis/connected that permeates our theatrical experience."

"It is this genuine connection. Genuine search for engagement, sincerity, hope and in some ways betterment, both in terms of the personal and the performative that offers else, something beyond the reach of the postmodern."



"There is something to be said about the increasing development of work by professional companies, companies on the fringe and, importantly, students, that offers connection, affect and hope through within and between disconnection, disaffection and hopelessness."

Notes on [a] Metamodernism [conference]

by Tom Drayton

in 2011, artist luke turner published the metamodernist manifesto

'thus,'

he proclaimed

'metamodernism shall be defined as the mercurial condition between and beyond irony and sincerity, naivety and knowingness, relativism and truth, optimism and doubt, in pursuit of a plurality of disparate and elusive horizons'

applause

quizzical harrumphs

continuing questions

you're reading

this at least 12 years later

this is not a response

this is not a manifesto

this is not academic

this is an observation, an intrigue, a possible future

this is scribbled notes on a plane and a train but no automobile or i would get carsick

trying to put to words an

experience of a

symposium?

in a way that makes sense but that also seems to transport me to the

wanky

16 year old wannabe poet

that perhaps is not as far removed from my aged self as i thought

this. here.

is seeing something happening that is both new and old

and neither

the watching

of telling stories over webcams

pretence of performance disappearing

in a jumble of zoom boxes

our living room auditoriums

our families castmates

of a circus



built for and around a community
 by a coterie of graduates
 not travellers, but travelling
 not *trying* to be travellers, but learning, adapting, respecting
 that tries to be THE CIRCUS
 despite – and because of – the issues that THE CIRCUS carries
 the conquering of all by man

so blasé

instead – what do we want to see? What do they want to see? Who are we, so
 small and human and not mighty in the sense of conquering those poor lions
 and tigers and bears oh my or of conquering the fickle force of gravity but
 mighty in the sense of actually coming together for a time outside of our busy
 little lives in the marketplace and experiencing *something* that makes us laugh
 and maybe cry or at least break a little smile in the drudgery of the day and
 perhaps it's a child's first time seeing something like this and they didn't know
 that you could all come together and experience a collective intake of breath
 like that and perhaps it will stay with them a little bit longer because this isn't
 on netflix or disney plus but right here

in the round
 in a tent that was
 raised
 by friends

what do you want to see in the circus ?
 expect to see at the circus ?
 what about if that was both turned on its head and not?
 can a circus do both ?

this is the watching

of (not circus) sitting together – a circle
 the performer telling us a story
 us telling the performer a story
 it is real and not
 never both – not really
 sometimes real, sometimes not
 the performer reminds us of the inevitability. of. it. all.

we will *burn*
 the ending is sad
 that is the truth

it is too late

the ending is not happy
but we tell the story anyway

sometimes the performer is the performer
othertimes we are the performer

this is needlessly obtuse

really, this is awful

who do i think I am to write in pseudo-prose (if that even is the right way of describing this mess) whilst others work their fingers to the bone on keyboards writing – wrighting – something into being to describe this not to mention the performers making this stuff who have worked their arses off not to create metamodern performance because who sets out to create something that sounds so ridiculous but to create performance that just *is* that speaks to them and the community and their peers and says something *good* or makes them feel *good* or *bad* or *something* and here i am writing this down sounding as deep as the graffiti on a wall of a mens' toilet

one year before turner manifested a manifesto, art critic jerry saltz saw something *new* happening in art and artists

'i know the work I'm creating might be *silly*, or that it may have been done before, but that doesn't mean this isn't *serious*' (2010)

it can be both – not at once – but it moves between the two because at this time

when we know what the ending will be
awful

what can we do but be silly
but we cannot remove the serious

we want to be sincere now but we exist in irony
we want to be authentic but performance isn't real
and yet – we try anyway we try

there is – in our lives and our art

and our performance and our circus

a shift beyond just hopelessness though it is
not a removal of responsibility or an escape into irony or a comfort in the completely silly

we are not detached

but we oscillate between – silly and serious
 – connect and disconnect
 – depth and depthlessness
 – irony and sincerity

we return – from black-box irony – to the circus tent not wholly to modernist revival ([white] man's dominion over animals and gravity and other[ed]s shall never be returned to so help us god) but the

joy
 that can come
 from some of
 the circus
 can be *sincere*

what i'm trying to say:

something has been happening in performance and elsewhere that moves *beyond* the ironic cynicism and detachment of postmodernism (whatever that means) things *mean* something again but also they don't they can't but authenticity engagement hope sincerity are there amongst the inauthentic the disconnected the hopeless and the ironic

i have tried here to be authentic, to express my immediate thoughts following the symposium full of brilliantly interesting circusy things and people and possible futures but come on in this form its pseudo intellectual garbage but i have *tried* although i both love and hate this writing i have *tried* to be authentic

at no fit state community circus on 26 may 2023 i saw many people trying to create to understand to connect with some success of course to work out how to create in the world at the moment and i'm not sure we fully understand what that means yet but there is a place for the circus and there is a place for the theatre and there is a place for the joy in sadness and there is a place for the sincere in the ironic and there is a place for this

there is a place for (circ)us



Keynote 2 – Luke Hallgarten gives a circus example

Cirque Pardi!



Collectif Malunés



Cirque La Compagnie



Station Circus &
Zirkus FahrAwaY

Circus I Love You

"Around the world there is this new movement that is starting to develop. A new way of looking at and doing things, which I think is not only a reaction to the work that was made on the stage, but also the avenue that was being forced... I mean created for how we tour, how circus [school trained] artists can tour, how circus artists can present work, and therefore who we can present work to. And the more that it became based on theatres, and based on festivals, and those kind of bookings, meant that our audiences were no longer the people in the street. Our audiences were no longer the people who were coming into big tops, who were going to local parks. Our audiences were festival directors. Our audiences were old white men with £60k salaries, telling us what we should and shouldn't be making. And I think that is the fundamental shift and why I think talking about the creative producing side is really fundamental to how our form is developing."

The Revel Puck Circus

Manifesto:



Real

Anti-idealism. Reject the spectacular body and embrace the body that does spectacular things.

Popular

For and of everyone. The work is as much defined by who it is made for, as who it is made by.

Dramaturgy

Create a logic. Have and know and understand the reason for the work. Without comprehension there is no conviction.

Punk

Do it yourself. Define the work for ourselves. Carve our own path. Reject the stuffy gate keepers, put the work on in front of their gates.

Set Precedent

We set our own guidelines. Strive to go above and beyond in our positive impact on our environment, our company, our audience, and our partners.

Spirit

A heart. Create, love and perform together. Never forget the history and don't be scared of the future.

Watch the talk via <http://bit.ly/TMCLuke>



Circus Artists and Audiences

by Jaine Lumsden

My understanding of metamodernism is a societal change from postmodernism, with its emphasis on irony, cynicism and deconstruction, to a more optimistic approach. Metamodernism reflects society's yearning for stories, for sincerity and for some downright silliness. However, it can embrace seemingly opposing perspectives, so the irony of postmodern work can simultaneously be present with sincerity; a show could be both silly and serious.

How could a metamodern approach to making circus shows affect the audience experience and would this conflict with circus artists' creative intentions?

Circus artists taking this approach would likely focus on storytelling, light-heartedness and creating a fun audience experience. This would meet some audiences' preconceptions of what a circus show is – big top, slapstick humour, thrills and high technical skills. The introduction of a story into the mix would require a happy ending to fulfil these audiences' expectations. This genre of circus will always have an audience. There is something to be said for "a good night out" that will likely require limited intellectual concentration from the people watching, cause them to laugh and scream, but may ultimately be a forgettable experience. This could be seen as giving audiences what they want, or, more importantly, what they think that they want. This is not to say that circus artists should ignore their intended audiences when creating shows, but this approach could be constraining for some artists' ambitions and stunt the development of their practice.

However, is this truly a metamodern approach? This ignores the delicious apparent contradictions metamodernism comprises. There is potential for circus shows to embrace these. Notions of hope and despair can be beautifully physically depicted using the various circus sub-genres; circus is perfectly placed to move from seriousness to silliness and back again.

Post pandemic there is a widespread opinion within the cultural sector that what audiences want is an uplifting, positive experience, which may explain the

increase of happy musicals being mounted. There is definitely a market for this, but I disagree that this is all that some people want. Motionhouse's *Nobody* had some dark themes of self-despair while ultimately having the characters supporting each other to navigate their way through life's tribulations: a perfect example of a metamodern approach. Its recent performance at the Festival Theatre, Edinburgh, seemed to be pretty much sold out and received standing ovations. It's obviously not possible to know the audiences' reasons for attending the show, but Motionhouse has a reputation for tackling "difficult" subjects combined with the virtuosity of its performers and choreography.

Circus can, of course, tell stories and there are some circus artists that use spoken text. However this is not necessary for a circus show, neither is it necessary for a show to have a linear narrative. Audiences for Alice Langley and Melanie Jordan's circus show *Flight, Fight, Fawn, Freeze* (working title) encountered scenes from the central character's life out of sync, with no spoken words. Part of the audience experience was to work out what had happened to the character. The same can be said of Al Seed's wordless bouffon show *Oog*.

Some people don't need a show to have story, but do want to experience work that has meaning, possibly quite abstract. This kind of work could be seen to be more focussed on what artists want to make but it does not necessarily ignore audiences. Ellie Dubois' work often has no "stories" as such but are definitely about something. *No Show* explored the challenges that female circus artists face within the sector and the preconceptions about body shapes, all from a feminist perspective. It is also a great example of a show moving between seriousness and silliness.

If circus artists choose to truly embrace a metamodern approach to creating shows there is no reason that this should mean that artistic experimentation will be constrained. It could be argued that the apparent contradictions metamodernism holds necessitate the development of practice while simultaneously offering meaningful engagement to audiences. There is no reason why innovative work, which is pushing artform boundaries, cannot also be entertaining.



Circus in the 21st Century is...

still growing and relevant even if people might think it has disappeared

*more varied, surprising and complex
than I initially imagined*

of variable quality

not exploitative (or at least trying)

considerant of current social & political issues

offers a choreography rather than a commentary of late capitalism
(climate change)

actively invested in creating spaces (literal and abstract) with
inclusivity as a focus

pure madness, but also very gentle, incredibly self-aware and
never-ending

facing fears...

explorative, relevant + playful

un-circus

bending (body/meaning)

investigative

tautological

alongside

fugitive

Workshop – Co-creating with Plants

by Valentina Solari

The Plant-Juggling project aims to find methods of how to co-create juggling material with plants, in the hopes to transform human-plant relationships in public space through juggling practice. Plant-Juggling acknowledges our assemblages with plants and treats them as agents in public discourse, co-producers of space and partners in circus, rather than living objects in the landscape.

This 1h30min workshop includes a demonstration of material devised through the plant-juggling approach, followed by practical exercises and starting points on how to begin to collaborate with a plant partner. No juggling experience is required to take part in this workshop. We focus on different ways in which to get to know and start a conversation with a plant partner, and you can use different creation techniques (writing, drawing, movement).

The plant-juggling performance demonstration can be accessed at <http://bit.ly/TMCValentina>



*What do a plant and a juggler have in common? Sounds like the start of a very bad niche joke, but it is actually the first act of a new circus that's in town. With artists that come from all over, from all the species, up high in the mountains and deep beneath the soil. In this new stage, vegetals of all kinds are welcome to come as they are and perform for the changing gaze of a startled audience. So...
ROLL UP! ROLL UP! It's a new era for the circus world!*

Welcome everyone to this page, here and in the ones that follow I will introduce you to ways in which you (presumably a human), can engage in a co-creative process with a plant partner using your creative practice (any kind of circus discipline, drawing, writing, whatever you like). Yes reader, you shall become a doer for this portion of the book, but I know it might take some convincing. So, why? Why embark in this process, what can it do for circus, for yourself, for plants, for the world? Well...

Anthropocene... We live in the Anthropocene, an era in which the dominant perspective views humans as, not only separate, but superior to other beings. Plants, animals, minerals, and others are seen as resources for human consumption and benefit, rather than as subjects on their own regard. Following years of exploitation of the “more-than-human” world [1] fuelled by this anthropocentric perspective, we are now living through an environmental crisis with deadly consequences for everyone, including the supposedly almighty humans.

Circus... Meanwhile, the art of circus offers, paradoxically, both more problems and potential solutions to this idea of human exceptionalism. On one hand, as Bauke Lieven's explains, circus can be a perpetuation of these values of dominance by representing the “supremacy of humankind over nature” through gravity defying stunts and taming of animals (Lievens, 2015). On the other hand, circus practice is based on adaptability and continued listening to non-humans. Jugglers adapt to their juggling balls and trapeze artists move through the space that the trapeze allows them to. This process of being-with and responding-to in circus is called by Vincent Focquet ‘tuning’[2].

Plants... There is so much to say about plants, and about human-plant relationships, and Critical Plant Studies is a fantastic place to start when wanting to critically analyse these (so go check this field out when we are finished with the doing!). However, in the exercises that come, we are going to tackle what Wandersee and Schussler call “plant blindness”. The term itself refers to the cognitive bias that humans experience in the way that we reduce plants to a collective background landscape or a backdrop to activity (Wandersee & Schussler, 1999). We fail to properly see plants so much that we even forget that they are alive and view them more as living objects rather than subjects.

Change... I think we need to change the superhuman complex that fuels this “plant blindness”, and I also think that we can train our awareness to do so. How can we use these “tuning” skills from circus, this awareness and responsiveness to truly see, focus on and listen to our plant partners? And, what can we make from this experience? How can we use this experience to form bonds of care and respect towards plants? Well, look no further! I have the answer(ish) for you here, right here! So let's get to it.

Exercises for Co-Creating with Plants

Participants: plant partner and yourself.

What you need: whatever you need to do your craft (juggling props, pens, paper), space (the best thing is to be outside with your plant partner)

Duration: about 1h30min but it can be as long or short as you want really, just adapt the steps to fit yours and your partner's needs.

Step 1: Find a Plant Partner

Go out and find a plant partner that seems keen to embark with you in this process. I believe it is best to meet plants where they naturally grow, outside, but you can alternatively stay in and do this activity with your pot plants. You want to do a little bit of research about your plant partner as well: are they very fragile? Potentially poisonous or irritating to humans? Make sure you have enough information to keep you and your plant partner safe and unharmed during this process.

Step 2: Warming up (30min)

David Abram's Inter-breathing (15min): Now that you have found a plant partner, we are going to begin to build a connection with them through breathing. Get into a comfortable position and mindfully breathe, thinking about our breath as a membrane that connects us with all living beings, including your plant partner.

"Bring attention to your breathing, becoming mindful of the air as it streams in through your nostrils, filling and swelling your chest before you exhale. Notice that your exhaled breath is now blending with the air currents around you. Are there grasses nearby, or a few trees? These too, of course, are metabolising, breathing beings" (Abram, 2018).

John Hartigan's Plant Interview (15min): Ethnographer John Hartigan has a fantastic publication titled *How to Interview a Plant*. For this exercise we are borrowing *Step 3: Description*, attempting to get to know our plant partner through all our senses and taking notes and sketches (Hartigan, 2017). Everything your plant partner puts out into the world is a decision that they made to engage with the world around them in a particular way. Maybe not a decision in the same way that humans make them, but a choice, nevertheless.

Take some time to **look** at your plant partner; what is their form? In what way is each leaf, petal, branch different from each other? What pathways did they grow through? Now focus on their **smell**. Can you smell anything? Do different sections of the plant smell different? If your plant is sturdy enough, carefully try a tactile approach. What textures can you **touch**? How do they vary? Be mindful that touch can be quite disruptive and only use it on occasions that you believe your plant partner will not suffer from this. If it feels right, you can also have a **taste** of your plant partner, but again, be cautious with how you decide to approach this decision. It may be that it's not needed or productive, remember, make sure to keep yourself and your plant partner safe. Remember to take notes of the information you gather.



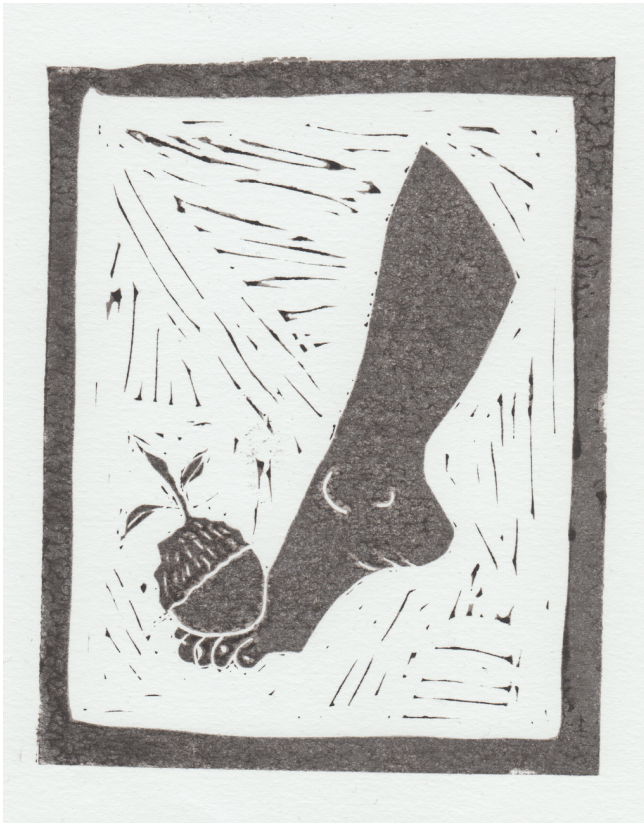
Step 3: Making (40min)

‘Plant Focused’ Improvisation (20min): I hope you know your plant partner a little bit better by now. We are going to keep this intention of awareness, but now we are going to start bringing in our practice into the mix by doing this improvisation exercise.

Keeping this awareness we are going to start responding to the stimulus we receive from our plant partner using our creative practice. You can guide yourself from your notes, go back to things that you noticed, or explore a more open approach responding to a general sense of your plant. For example: if one of the things you noticed have to do with how the plant reaches its body to the sun, you can try to do this yourself. Or draw the plant's structure keeping your gaze fixed on your partner, not looking at the paper. Exploring different forms of imitation of your plant partner may be a good place to start.

‘Plant Projection’ Improvisation (20min): Now we have just been working with the information that we get from our plant partner through our senses right now in the present, but we can also explore the unseen underneath the soil, past occurrences, and potential futures of your plant partner. Using your imagination and curiosity keep the focus on your plant partner, but allow yourself to be invested in what is out of your grasp right now. What shape could their roots have taken? Will their leaves drop? When and how will this happen? Will their stems grow to follow the sunlight or face away from it? Will their flowers turn into something else? Build your improvisation around the things that you cannot perceive right now and use your practice to explore these questions and possibilities.





Original print by Valentina Solari

[1] 'More-than-human' is a term coined by David Abram in his book *The Spell of the Sensuous*, which refers to 'earthly nature', fungi, plants, animals, and other non-human beings (Abram, 2017).

[2] 'Tuning' is a concept that circus scholar and dramaturge Vincent Focquet borrows from Timothy Morton's work and repurposes for circus. It is a process of continued listening and adaptation to the subtle agency of the network of actants that the artist is immersed in, both human and more-than-human (Focquet, 2019).

Together, Metamodernism and Circus make me think about...

the irreconcilable aspects of being in a human body
 being at home with one's fear of falling
 social responsibility and the place of the arts
 the exhausted body and choreographies of care
 how humour, irony + detachment can emphasise sincerity and honesty
 rather than undermine it

*possibility and (comfort?). I feel like I
 have the permission to try wild things
 as I understand that it's not that
 serious, but also it's fuelled by my
 passion which is extremely serious*

inclusivity in the entertainment industry
 how to empower circus creators
 the socio-political climate
 breaking the fourth wall (again
 again
 again)

*the 'as if' of performance – the inherent inauthenticity
 combined with authenticity -> performance isn't real, but
 like, the act of performance is?*

What does a post-ironic circus look like or engender?

pricelessness

meaninglessness

weightlessness

5 D's of Ecological Skill

by Elliott Rooke

"It is a bad worker who blames their tools," or so the saying goes. But what influences do the tools of our trade truly hold over our successes and failures? Traditional understandings of skill would answer 'very little.' Skill was viewed as something possessed by an individual which spoke to their ability to dominate their surroundings within a given context. These 'mastery' narratives conflated capability with control and, in doing so, missed the nuances of skill almost entirely. They were too caught up in the idea of human exceptionalism to truly appreciate the extent to which our ability to achieve anything results from a complex network of interactions, some of which may be so small as to be barely perceptible. Over the last few decades, those working in the social sciences and humanities have proposed new approaches which are alive and alert to the role of the material world. These approaches (and there are many) recognise that skill is not a human activity, but a more-than-human one. As such, they call for us to look further afield to understand skill, moving beyond ourselves and into the context within which we act. One of the most prominent of these is the 'ecological' approach, its name a reflection of the quasi-organic way that the networks from which skill arises grow. Intertwined and co-constituted, these ecologies cannot be readily unpicked and broken down. Here, I outline five characteristics of ecological approaches and through them suggest the value that they offer to reflections on our own practices.

Skill is Distributed

The idea that skill is distributed was most prominently put forward by anthropologist Tim Ingold at the turn of the century. Ingold claims that skill is so embedded in the environment that we cannot study one without the other, that our performances are so intricately tied into a network of other people, things, and places, that the study of it "*demands an ecological approach*" (Ingold, 2000: 353). While Ingold gets much of the credit, we can trace this idea back even further to work taking place in the field of cybernetics in the 1940s. Cyberneticians argued that it is "not communicationally meaningful" to distinguish between a person and the tools they used (Bateson, 1972: 251). It was this position that gave rise to the original idea of the 'cyborg' – a

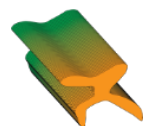
portmanteau of 'cybernetic organism.' When Clynes and Kline coined the term, they envisaged biochemical and technological augmentation being used as a means to allow astronauts to function in the unfamiliar and hostile environment of space (1960). These theoretical cyborgs used biotechnical modification to render the unfamiliar familiar. Ecological approaches are less concerned with overwriting difference in this way, and instead emphasises an appreciation of the myriad interactions that compose any given performance.

Reflection: What other actors directly or indirectly contribute to your performance? Think about other people, nonhuman objects, and inhuman forces and environments

Skill is De-centred

If we imagine distributed skill to be a web of (inter)actors and (inter)actions, then to claim it is de-centred is to say that there is no human actor sitting in a privileged position at the centre of this web. Indeed, it is to say there is no centre per se at all. On one level, this is about recognising that many of our actions are *reactions*. Our behaviours are prompted by the world around us and the tools we use. But it can also go beyond this to suggest that humans do not hold a unique ontological position as intentional actors. In other words, not every action originates from a person's decision or act. Within my own discipline – Geography – this perspective has been prompted by a post-phenomenological position that experience transgresses bodily boundaries (Lea, 2009), meaning that even those experiences we might think of as personal and/or individual are actually part of a bigger network of actions. Core to this is acknowledging that other actors are, in fact, acting, even when they appear passive. Outer space is a good example of this. Space is not *doing* anything per se, but nothing the astronaut does can be done without consideration of the agency space possesses to determine the outcomes of actions. This doesn't mean that space is the centre of this ecology either, rather it highlights the importance of thinking in terms of networks, relationships, and interactions, rather than individual actors.

Reflection: What seemingly passive things or spaces are influential to your performance?



Skill is Dialogue

While terms like 'distributed' and 'de-centred' speak the general structure of a skilled ecology, it is through identifying skill as a dialogue that we can understand the mechanics of how ecological skill works. The relationships that underpin skill, the lines in its web, take shape through communication. When we think about communication, we tend to privilege the verbal (i.e., writing or speaking) but this is an anthropocentric position. We communicate in a myriad of ways, comparatively few of which involve codified text. We have entire 'languages' of bodily movement, pheromones, social cues, behaviours, aesthetics, and more. There are languages in everything we do and, likewise, nonhuman objects, animals, and environments communicate in their own ways. We just have to learn to listen and interpret them. To learn to fish, you must learn to 'read the river' (Bear and Eden, 2011) to spot good fishing spots and potential obstructions. Becoming a beekeeper entails learning to deduce the health of a hive from its built structure and the behaviour of the bees (whose own communicational repertoire involves signalling via dance) (Adams, 2018). As an archer, I was taught to analyse the patterns of arrows on a target to calibrate my bow. The important thing about these languages is that they are often highly contextual – potentially even unique to a specific performance. But, it is our ability to engage in this dialogue that determines how skilfully we can perform.

Reflection: How do the non-humans in your skilled performance express themselves? How do you listen?

Skill is Dynamic

Skills are not constant and, despite the saying, it is possible to forget how to ride a bike. If we stop practising something, we can actually lose that skill surprisingly quickly. We might think of this as a kind of skill *degradation*. However, skills do overlap. Practising one skill might help us retain another, or at least make it easier and faster to recover when we return to it. We can re-learn to ride a bike (because that's really what's happening) very quickly because the basic principles it uses – balance, rhythm of movement, proprioception – are all things we practise every day when we walk and in almost everything else we do. So, as individual skills, these are unlikely to degrade. We just have to

re-learn how to combine them in a specific way. But the dynamism of skill is not just about getting rusty, it's evident when we learn them too. Practising a skill is not a straightforwardly repetitive process, although it may look it at times. Repetition is doing the same thing over and over again without any changes, but the learning process does introduce changes. We experiment with variations to see which are more successful, comfortable, or appropriate for the task at hand. We also get more confident and precise with our movements. Ingold makes this distinction by saying that learning skills is not a matter of iteration (to do with repetition) but itineration (to do with journeys) (Ingold, 2006).

Reflection: How has your performance (/had to) change over time?

Skill is Disrupt-able

Because skill is distributed and not something that we, as individuals, possess within ourselves, it is vulnerable to disruption. Any change, no matter how small, can impair the whole ecology by collapsing or overwriting the communicative pathways. Have you ever been writing something while holding a conversation and suddenly realised you have started writing what was being said, not what you meant to write? We can also see this happen when there is a change to the context within which we perform a skill – such as changing the environment or tools we use. These disruptive events can be very small and personal in scale (tiredness, hunger, a papercut and so on) or much bigger and all-encompassing (a global pandemic, a financial crisis, climate change). Because these events reshape the ecology within which skilled performance takes shape, they can render the skill unfamiliar. They *disorder*, *disorientate*, and *disrupt*. The good news is that these disruptions are not inherently permanent. Just as we learnt the original skill, we can learn adapted variations that suit the new context. When the changes to the ecology are subtle or frequent, we may not even consciously notice this adaptation process. Where it is important to maintain a certain level of skilled performance, we can deliberately simulate changing conditions to develop 'nested redundancies' (Sternard, 2018).

Reflection: How has a change to your environment or the tools you use affected your ability to perform a familiar skill?



Social Circus in the Metamodern Time

by Serena Cafferatta Rivas

*I wrote this essay initially as an industry analysis for my MA. It was a critical and investigative process, dependent on academic restrictions. Here, however, it functions as a resource exemplifying how metamodernism and circus cross over through praxis, negating performative allyship. Social circus in metamodern times is a **call to action**.*

It may be necessary to start by defining the titular concepts as they are conceived in this essay...

Metamodernism, as it is widely understood, is the progression of postmodernism. (Although many understand it as oscillating in some ways between both postmodern and modernist outlooks, this essay does not engage with that definition). Postmodernism was characterised by being self-aware and self-referential. Metamodernism, in simple terms, takes this one step further. It references its self-reference. This process happens through the globalising effects of recent events and of online spaces, and within the context of the Contemporary era (1940s onward), it proposes disambiguation through ambiguation. This creates layers of meaning that can be difficult to navigate and describe when broken down. These layers hinge on the collective knowledge and data banks of globalised information, on irony, sarcasm and dark, surreal or observational humour popularised online as memes.

Social circus has a more contested definition, but can be loosely conveyed to be that which engages with or comments on social issues. It could be argued that most circus does so on some level by the mere act of participating in the arts within a given sociocultural context. The American Circus Educators Association (ACE) proposes that Social Circus is "... [a] medium for social justice and individual wellness and uplifts the role of art and culture as powerful agents for change. Social Circus practitioners support participants as creative change makers through the collective development of self-esteem, solidarity, and trust" (Agans and Brookes, 2017). This essay will use this as a relative definition, unless stated otherwise.

Social circus is actively engaging in conversations around accessibility. While this is not a recent development in the arts scene, the way in which we approach those conversations is. Circus spaces have often been hailed as multicultural beacons of diversity. Our history begs for popular reconsideration of the mechanisms that circus employed until only recently.

For a very long time, the travelling circus was a tool of imperialism and colonisation just as much as any other form of entertainment (Arrighi, 2021). The inclusion of non-western cultures and marginalised groups was not a matter of their empowerment, but of capitalism's investment in global subjugation of Difference as a marketable, sellable good – exoticism as a product (Barry, 2012): bodies, traditions, lives as merchandise. Circus actively socialised individuals all over the world to recognize the bodies of its performers as tools dedicated exclusively to their entertainment – essentially painting them into objects (St. Leon, 2008).

It's important to understand that a serious reconsideration of the "how" surrounding accessibility cannot happen amid continued erasure of said history. This may seem obvious to many. This essay would argue that, alongside the moral reasonability of this statement, metamodern social theories and thought structures support and contextualise it.

Metamodernism is born from accessibility of information – at times inclusive of misinformation – and the discussions that surround this. The new generations have grown up developing critical analysis tools for discerning the meanings behind metamodern expression. The metamodern mind learns to absorb information through layers of symbolisms and (de)contextualizers, holding these layered meanings and their varying symbolic values simultaneously. These are the building blocks of common sense and general knowledge in current culture.

The social issues of our time are recorded in new, indelible ways through online methods, using semiotics that often escape older generations – it is almost impossible to keep up with the metamodern cultural scene unless you are deep in its belly (Couture, 2019). The ability to hold multiple realities, multiple truths in one space is crucial for survival of the metamodern human in a hyper-individualistic, hyper-specialised multitude. The reality of our

fragmented condition becomes inescapable through postmodern society, as it was established through literary, philosophical and psychological dialogue at the time. Metamodern social theory argues – in potential opposition to postmodernist thought – that our ability to change our condition is in believing and acknowledging the invisible ways in which we hold power over ourselves and others, taking steps towards this new reality while simultaneously existing in the converse. This is underlined by theories that are older than the metamodern thought: Marxist theory, Gabor Mate’s analysis of trauma through the generations, intersectionality in feminism, and the efforts of Black, Indigenous and People of Color to reframe the racist history of the West, for example.

BIPOC people are changing the narrative and reclaiming their history and autonomy. They are creating safe environments in which to challenge assumptions. In Australia, Na Djinang Circus and BLAKflip and Beyond are projects proposing intentional inclusivity within circus spaces (Lavers and Burt, 2017), while *Natives go Wild*, a First Nations circus cabaret created for the Sydney Opera House, is one of many recent performance examples of this reclamation of history. Guardian arts critic Larissa Behndret (2019) wrote, “[...] peppered throughout *Natives Go Wild* is a mocking and deconstructing of racial stereotypes, a pronouncement of identity, and a celebration of enduring cultural connections.”. The show highlights our skewed public perception of slave trader PT Barnum, conventionally hailed only as a great(est) showman and businessman. *Natives Go Wild* honours the lives that he affected.

With the growing empowerment of BIPOC, neurodiverse peoples, the differently abled, and queer individuals, progressive artforms are applying and testing models for alternative economic and political systems (Kershaw, 1992; Dugan, 2019). The UK circus scene has seen the rise of such methods with companies and projects like Extraordinary Bodies and Can’t Sit Still. Another example would be the use of Open Space as a tool to facilitate conversation, collaboration through dialogue, and communal effort towards a shared goal, where we centre that the value of individual contributions is not equal to the value of individual people (who hold value by virtue of existing, and whose intention to collaborate is simply welcome). This, alongside Metamodernism’s propensity to communicate through the vague-explicit, is encouraging

methods of making which propose alternative ways of conveying meaning and value (Bouissac 2012.; Hadley, 2017; Storm, 2021). Ockham's Razor and NoFit State are further UK examples of this, as their work uses rigging and devices dedicated to the development of circus-specific imagery and aesthetics where movement possibilities are expanded (along with their semiotic potential).

Social metamodern circus is proposing re-connection with the senses through sensory play in a world where dissociation is key to survival – it recognizes the difficulty and encourages spaces where quiet, slow development of thought can take place in the unconscious brain. Its metamodern quality (the layers) is exposed by further insisting that we consciously seek out these experiences and that this slowing down of our selves may serve to enact fast social change. A distinguishing feature of metamodernism is its ability to rush past historical events with force – it is able to consider them just as easily once it has left them behind and made humorous relation with them, due to its layered referential nature, so it doesn't need to stay and process. It can seek safer spaces in future times where it can adequately analyse the happening. This is a natural progression for circus and for society in a world where time is considered to actively shrink (Harvey, 1990). As we move faster through time, making space in it has become the focus of every metamodernist movement; even when that requires that it happen in abstract spaces. Circus is no exception to this. In the metamodern frame, *making space* is the goal of social circus everywhere.

To summarise, this essay proposes the basis of many current circus-makers as dependent on the metamodern period that we occupy. The metamodern circus-maker is intent on presenting the world with true value through performance, rather than performed, false values we encounter outside of it. The growing scene is focused on making socially significant work, and developing tools and mechanisms for creation that allow previously marginalised peoples to have their say. Inclusivity, accessibility, and creative collaboration are the developing aspects of social circus in metamodern times.



KNOTCIRCUS Remix

by Jonathan Priest

I run a Masters Program in Directing/Making Circus at Circomedia, a program invested in interrogating the role of artistic research questions in the production of new circus work, which is open to makers of circus of all kinds. My own research delves into the paradoxes, tautologies and loops of simultaneous logic that are held within the technical execution of circus itself. I even wrote a Doctoral Thesis that addresses these concepts, so tied to the metamodern dissolution of binary realities.

Here is a small loop from that work. The rest can be excavated at <http://bit.ly/KNOTCIRCUS>



"Today's circus rests much of its identity on a self-devised, and quite Romantic, image of its own practice as a marginal art form enjoying its own freedom. Even putting aside the question of whether this image is accurate in the contemporary scene, it has become very difficult to separate the romantic clichés that surround the circus from an understanding of circus as a medium." (Lievens, 2016)

There exists a Romanticism in circus that all too readily matches with the romantic assumptions of corporate ideology masked as post-ideological individualism, that we can make our own freedom. I propose the trick here not as the activation of an actual Romantic ideal of freedom, but as something that needs to acknowledge the fictional nature of this agency so that the trick becomes a question about the parameters of meta-positionality, rather than taking this for granted.

This [thesis] is an investigation of the trick as it relates to three fields; gravity, language and capital.

TRICK ONE: exposes the limits of a system.

TRICK TWO: conceals the limits of a system.

TRICK THREE: jumps out of the system entirely.

The approach I have taken is to think of these three tricks as occurring within fields of value; in which there are two separate registers: the qualitative and the quantitative.

For me then what is exposed, concealed or jumped out of is something I feel is inherent to the subject's position within a field of value. This is the conflation of incompatible registers of value.

This conflation, or false union, is a cause of tautology within the field that can lead to either subjective or systemic compromise, depending on how the trick is performed.

Theatre has performativity, dance has choreography, I am proposing perhaps tautology is the over-arching theory that relates circus practice to the world.

[The point being that logical tautology such as the ones discussed in [[this thesis]] relate structurally to the kind of aporias, paradoxes and contradictions that are held in weightless suspension within the notion of metamodernism.]

As such the main internal relation of the trick for me, and its place in relation to the formal limits of the system through which it proceeds, is one of contradiction, paradox, impasse, bind or knot.

The trick is therefore proposed as a tool for reconfiguring systems of value; in that its relation to exposing or concealing tautology define how the system of value is perceived; either as limited or total, respectively.

The [thesis] speculates upon systemic restriction and interrogates, through its transposition as a mechanism of tautology, what the trick is supposed to 'do'. This is done in awareness of what circus practice supposes about itself as well as the way circus is embedded in fields of value as it makes proposals about mobility, agency and individual freedom within them.

In reference to both the trick functioning around a knot in value and my own circus practice as a 'rope artist' there will be complexity ahead.

But there is also a charge within Lieven's Open Letter that identifies the fascination with insoluble paradox as a Romantic trait.



ROMANTIC GESTURES:

In regard here with my own fascination with the loop, I would answer that I am aware here that instead of focusing on romanticism's relation to nature and rational thought I have related romanticism to its capture within rational systems that peddle it while negating it, and I am definitely guilty of circling the paradox, and chasing my tail, the kind of activities that pass for a noble hopelessness in the Romantic oeuvre that Lievens identifies.

Although this is the case I feel that the lack of theoretical rigour in the circus field that has not only allowed a rejection of reason as being supposedly antithetical to circus vitality (or vitalism) but that this designation also prevents circus from seeing that the context in which it is permitting itself to 'romanticise' is in fact paradoxical. I reiterate here that 'unthinking' romanticism is the dark face of circus precisely because in expounding this as an approach the artist only expounds a neoliberalnical enforcement of being free 'from' thought, free 'from' any ideological position, without offering anywhere for freedom to be 'to', which is precisely the conflation of Isaiah Berlin's two forms of liberty. The injunction is almost to 'be romantic' so that the institution that grants freedom to be is also the one that demands you be free from institution. It is neoliberal precisely because it offers a formless freedom that rejects anything except the continuation of this image of liberty, which might draw attention to the supporting self-repeating enclosure within which such post ideology is possible.

I will discuss this mutation [in thesis] but I think the fascination of paradox for me is not the emergent trait of a general Romanticism; it is a response to a double bind that is generally felt by the subject. We are already embedded in a paradox, the Romantic aspect is just one way of dealing with how this tautological ground is concealed from us. It is more productive to say that there are better ways perhaps to address this ground than the pointless doomed romantic gesture of circus. The circus subject feels it and sometimes expresses it precisely because it causes an excess of fascination as the meaning of freedom, of agency, mobility, by which circus erroneously defines itself is embedded in a self negating loop by power.

The doomed feeling is an adaptation to an insoluble double bind, in which circus insists that operations within gravity will yield an agency that is simply not possible. This impossibility is forestalled by the applause one receives through the precise performance of a doomed romantic pose. The only way to feel saved is to act like there is no hope; this is a gothic, teenage bow followed by rapturous adult applause in response to a no win scenario in which victory is epic failure. We need to get past it, but it is there understandably. It is perhaps the result of getting stuck in Trick One, in the impasse of a doomed fiction.

TRICK ONE: exposes the limits of a system.

TRICK TWO: conceals the limits of a system.

TRICK THREE: jumps out of the system entirely.

**This is an investigation of the trick as it relates to three fields; gravity,
language and capital.**

This will be addressed in the [thesis] on Trick Three, but I feel it is worth noting that perhaps this Romance is only the repetition of what is a rational response to an unwinnable game.

Ironically the love of paradox that Lievens levels at circus is indeed a problem for circus because this kind of paradox (you must be free) forms the backdrop upon which circus must survive. Circus is conflicted because it is trying to be different to a post-ideological neoliberalism with which it agrees. I feel that this problem is processed as hopelessness, which a certain kind of circus, in trying to be the image of freedom, can only cope with the impossibility of by striking Romantic poses. The trick has to be re-invented to deal with an enclosure that demands it.

We are far from free yet and I do not see anything Romantic in the paradox that makes that so. I do feel circus, in its obsession to move freely and its haste to act as a conduit to create 'free' individuals, has forgotten its role as a purveyor of fictional escapology.

Such fictions, far from being ineffectual and hopelessly 'doomed' are important not in their capacity to falsely represent freedom now, but to point at the perplexing conundrum of constructing images of what freedom might look like

within a formal system that permits every freedom but one; leaving the field entirely.

Circus is important in its ability to point to a 'freedom to come' but this is not to be mistaken for 'special status' in its position within a system of insurmountable restriction.

This [thesis] aims to discuss the complicity of circus in the same gravities that affect us all, but to highlight its central mechanism as being a model for the construction of such fictions. Fictions which can either perpetuate the restriction for profit or remind us that it is possible and perhaps preferable to point outside of restriction...this I feel, is its fictional power, not its resigned Romantic swan dive.

It may be that I am guilty as charged; that I am also striking a Romantic pose, but in a situation of double bind, in which all the other more viable positions are occupied, in which all the other costumes are taken, at least I am trying to wring something useful out of this ridiculous get up, rather than wearing it at face value.

In very simple terms a difference is drawn here between tricks.

For me in this particular 'circus time', there are those tricks that acknowledge their 'trickiness' and there are those that conceal it in order to privilege some kind of gain for the trick- making subject. A third kind might be said to be the performance of a trick on the difference itself that seems to separate the first two forms. All will be performed [in this thesis].

This is not an ethics but merely an attempt to show that contradictions, paradoxes and tautologies are perhaps better examined in the open rather than internalised in an unspoken manner.

In this sense it begins in exposing the defined form of the trick by transposing it into language; by attempting to 'speak circus' as a way of getting all of its 'moving parts' into the open. This will be the first step that links the body in gravity to the subject in language and the act of signification to the inner workings of capital.



Highway To Infinity

– Work in Progress from Symoné

Highway to Infinity is a 20-minute atmospheric and episodic movement and sound-based piece about the power of the human unconscious. Through voguing, high heel roller-skating, alt-circus, and lip-syncing, *Highway to Infinity* references inner thoughts, our sense of self, the characters we play both privately and in society, and playing pretend. This piece is a work in progress, created and performed by Symoné in collaboration with Sammy Metcalfe.

A short extract of the live showing
can be accessed at <http://bit.ly/TMCSymone>



In Conversation: Circus Bodies, Vulnerability and Performance

by Lizzie Hobson & Symoné

Symoné suggests reading this interview under the influence of fresh juice or tea and sitting somewhere you feel calm.



Symoné
(Photo Credit: Ana Jobson, 2021)

Symoné (S) is an alternative circus performer, live artist, and video game developer.

Music – ABC By Park Hye Jin

Drink – Beetroot Juice

Food – Celery sticks and hummus (sorry if that makes you cringe it's hot here and I love vegetables!)

Film – Free Guy (a big reference for *Highway to Infinity*)



Lizzie Hobson
(Photo Credit: Jim Wileman, 2023)

Lizzie Hobson (LH) is a lecturer in Human Geography at the University of Exeter and an amateur aerialist. Lizzie's research explores gender and landscape.

Music – Comfortably Numb by Pink Floyd

Drink – If I say coffee it feels cliché

Food – Ice pops (do these count?)

Film – Memento

LH: My first encounter with the idea that circus bodies exist somewhere between 'the real' and 'the unreal', fantasy and fiction, truth and deception, was reading Angela Carter's (1984) *Nights at the Circus*. Gorgeously slippery, the novel's main protagonist is aerialiste Sophie Fevvers, a winged woman who

performs in a travelling circus. Through American journalist Jack Walser's desire to discover the truth of Fevvers story – are her wings real? – Carter explores the nature of circus performance and the role of the performer in society. Fevvers, at six-feet two inches, tall, curvaceous and peroxide blonde, resists heteronormative ideas of femininity. At the beginning of the novel, Walser, when watching Fevvers, refers to illusion, *"Something fishy about the Cockney Venus [...] one lash off, one lash on, Fevvers leaned back a little to scan the asymmetric splendour reflected in her mirror with impersonal gratification [...] She tipped the young reporter a huge wink in the ambiguity of the mirror and briskly stripped the other set of false eyelashes"* (Carter, 1984: 8). Fevvers herself resists a binary between real and illusion, aware that her identity is a kind of performance – "acting like" herself – and that she often seems to exist outside her own story (Jordison, 2017).

Audiences everywhere appreciate circus bodies, but they remain a site of struggle. Hanging from suspended ropes and swinging from trapeze bars, circus artists invite wonder and astonishment that seems to elevate them beyond humanness. Circus artists appear superhuman, and their steely muscular strength and light gracefulness have seen circus bodies compared to those of living statues (The Sketch, 1895: 85). Paradoxically, the dangers of physical risk-taking have also seen circus bodies – particularly the female figure – condemned for being immodest, overtly sexual and socially dangerous (Tait, 2005: 21). At the centre of this outrage is an unease that derives from a perception that the circus body performs gender disturbance, that the circus body is 'freakish', transgressive, ambiguous, excessive and unnatural (Russo, 1994: 79). Beyond ideas of gender and identity, control and agency, is the messy and multifaceted embodied pleasure of taking part in physically demanding and dynamic performances. These tensions emerged throughout the day at The Metamodern Circus conference, but manifest – for me – poignantly in a statement from Luke Hallgarten, artistic director of the Revel Puck Circus. Designed to promote the contemporary circus, 'for everyone, from everywhere', the Revel Puck 'Ethos' highlights the Real (see page 13).

For me, Symoné's *Highway to Infinity* unfixes supposedly fixed alignments of bodies, desires and identities. At first, *Highway to Infinity* seemed to be undeniably making a point about a robot that reflects perfection but is unable to feel real love. Then, I thought about it from a different angle and it became more about a sensation, an uneasy feeling of voyeurism. There's work that

plainly states how power is experienced through the body and what should be avoided and resisted, *Highway to Infinity* isn't that, and isn't interested in being that. Instead, there are constant questions and interrogations of reality, looping around a high heeled roller skating, hula hooping, cyberpunk.

LH: I'm really excited about what you do because I don't know if it's ever been done before/ I mean. Are there other hula hooper, circus artist, cabaret performing videogamers who also incorporate high heel skating in their live art?



Symoné hula hooping, *Highway to Infinity* (Video still credit: Andy Wain, 2023)

S: Not too sure! As an artist, I'm quite happy to delve intermittently into my community, but enjoy creating and researching as a lone wolf. I bounce between live art, cabaret, circus, hula hooping, roller-skating, and voguing communities... I like to kind of do my own thing and research inspiration from places outside of my own practice, i.e. musicals, fine art, costume design, to see how they influence my own work.

LH: When I saw you perform *Highway to Infinity*, I was really excited to see how much video games influenced your performance.

S: Possibly in an unusual way! I have phases where I become fixated on certain aspects of media that I hope will inspire me to see and create in a different way. For example, I recently had a phase where I was watching television shows

that got cancelled halfway through. I was interested in how that made me feel, why, and reimagining what could have happened next. I'm now really interested in 'background characters' in film, television and in video games. In video games, there are different types of non-player characters, some might follow you around through the whole game and speak to you, but I think I'm most fascinated about these characters that have short significant moments and how they just stay in your mind. So, I would say these NPCs are what inspired me with the character I portrayed in Highway to Infinity. I'm also influenced by what kinds of video games I don't see existing. There are a lot of games that have big stakes in their plot, i.e. 'save the princess, save the world, fight in this war'. Though there are some indie games about more simple life questions and I'm just thinking a lot more about what it means to be human, how memories are a vast part of that, and creating a videogame/stage character who at its core is code, but craves more. There are other references to videogames around movement styles, atmosphere, and sound that also come into Highway to Infinity. However, I would say the above is where it all started.

LH: Where do circus and video games intersect?

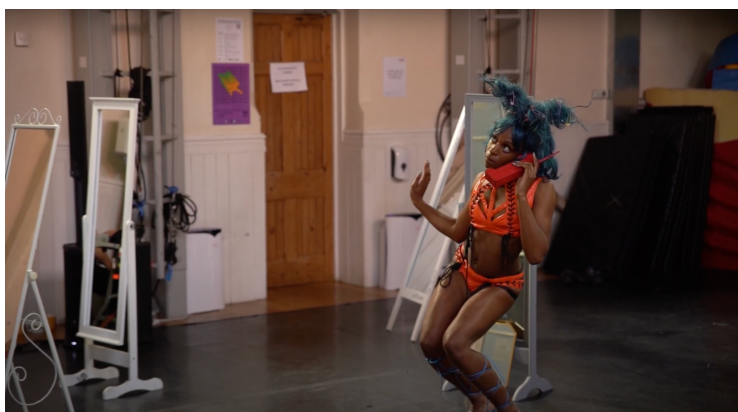
S: They are both extremely difficult, that's pretty much it!

LH: I read that you're also a Drag King....

S: Yes, I started drag in 2020 with a collective of circus artists. We did a kickstarter, made a drag king heist circus film and it's now touring the world. My character's name is Barry Badass (@barrybadass.drag on Instagram). and I created him when I was watching a lot of blaxploitation films, but craved these hyper masculine characters to be queer. Barry feels like a positive role model, because I wanted to see more of that rather than drag taking the piss out of people, but he definitely has character defects to him. After that project finished I really craved being on stage, but felt nervous to do drag king performing solo. I feel fortunate to now be working with Pecs Drag King Collective, which is kind of a dream. I first came across the collective in 2016 and have been a huge admirer of Pecs and their productions for years. It's a whole other side to my artistic expression that I never could have pulled out had I not created my drag character. Drag is so inspiring and I'm really grateful to have come across the community

LH: There's something extraordinarily compelling about seduction, even if it can be somewhat suffocating, do you agree?

S: *It's a powerful and empowering tool. Gaze and fetishisation is something I use in my work a lot, sometimes it's silly, sometimes aggressive, sometimes it's soft... I often find that it still gets watered down to 'a male gaze' and I just think this word is not how I perceive the world anymore. I think gender and sexuality are so complex and the gaze I'm creating is intentional for all humxns. I work a lot in the LGBTQIA+ cabaret scene, and I think it possibly makes more sense in this context. I often feel like my work is for queer audiences.*



Symoné lip-syncing to collaborator Sammy Metcalfe's text, *Highway to Infinity*
(Video still credit: Andy Wain, 2023)

LH: When creating work, do you need to separate the personal self from your artistic self, to allow the work to occur? Or, are you attempting to fictionalize your own life?

S: *Sometimes, perhaps even a mix of the two feel vital. I think an artist should use a part of them when performing. I can't see how it would work to pretend to be something you have absolutely no connection to or understanding of. Otherwise it would feel false to watch. So unless you want the audience to not believe what you're doing I think that is the only way that could work. I'm speaking from a place of the kinds of work I make and perform, so I can't speak universally, only for myself here. I'm pretty devoted to my art, so much so that*

my entire home and surroundings are focused on working and creating. Although still, I have a private life I just don't share on social media and parts of myself I just keep totally separate; as much as it is for privacy, it's also for sanity.

LH: Is any catharsis that might come from your work secondary or even consequential?

S: *The projects I get the most passionate about making are me making something I've always wanted to see that does not exist and/or me trying to understand something about the world and myself. I am big on 'process focused making', there is something really exciting about researching, dreaming and trying to understand something and I think that has involved some self-healing. I'm pretty aware of this too and it's why I'm happy to spend so much time in this phase of creation, because it's bringing a lot of joy and understanding for myself.*

LH: Watching *Highway to Infinity*, you felt very intimately acquainted with strangers without ever manifesting an actual relationship with them.

S: *I don't have anything particular to say here, more of a nod to this reflection. I honestly find that when I'm in the early stages of making, the audience might tell me more about what the experience was than I knew. I think there is something about creating art and how ideas and intentions come through subconsciously. I definitely had a different type of character in *Highway* than I would in my cabaret performances, where I'm usually portraying a more distant relationship to the audience and slick performance. I think this is why I love performance art, there is space for slowness and between that you can really get to know and connect with the person on stage.*

LH: What does vulnerability mean to you?

S: *Softness, honesty, failure.*



***Fight or Flight* – Short film by Hobbit**

Falling is a primal fear. By engaging with the things that scare us, considerably, are we able to feel more alive? *Fight or Flight* is a viscerally engaging film following five aerial acrobats working with flying trapeze. From nihilistic training tactics to the authentic dramaturgy inherent in circus, this film hopes to contribute to a body of work that intersects metamodernism and circus.

****//CW//**** This film contains depictions of height-related injury.

You can watch the film at <http://bit.ly/TMCHobbit>



A Metamodern Director: Circus and The Human Condition

by Hobbit

As an emerging circus director I want to make work that authentically reflects the human experience and I think metamodernism facilitates this creation. With specific reference to the oscillation between relativism & truth and the mechanism of storytelling through ironic sincerity.

Relativism & Truth

I made the film *Fight Or Flight* as part of my MA research into how an audience experiences the thrill of the circus. The main component was the tension between safety and danger in circus, and what I found is that both ends of this spectrum are incredibly subjective. In the hope of making something universally meaningful, the film explores both performer and audience perception of risk, from a trauma informed perspective. I'm sure you can already see the paradoxes appearing!

We enjoy narratives where we see ourselves in the characters and are subsequently more invested in their survival. It becomes about our survival! As a circus performer in a circus audience I understand the blood, sweat & tears that go into making these performances. I therefore appreciate them on a different level to that of a non circus audience. But what about the other physical bodies in the room? The climbers, the sky divers, the athletes & motorbike riders. In fact anyone with a hint of the thrill seeking drive, anyone who can speak to a group or those who have honed any kind of physical skill. Every circus performance is perceived differently, depending on experience. And the fact of what is happening is still present. Gravity, friction and acceleration are physical forces that everyone, particularly circus performers, are well acquainted with. Even if we don't acknowledge them directly. As a circus director, who wants to make universally relevant work that speaks to the audience directly to the body, working with physical truths enables me to speak to the breadth of human experience.

Falling is an innate fear (Visual Cliff Experiment, Gibson & Walk, 1960) and a universal experience that circus regularly manipulates to thrill its audience. "One move, one second. Maybe it's only falling that every body will understand"

(Elizabeth Streb, *Born To Fly*, 2014). I think circus has something meaningful to offer everybody that exists in a body, regardless of subjective experience. The dramaturgy inherent in circus is authentic and relevant to everyone that interacts with gravity. The truth speaks to the body and the relativism personalises and deepens the experience through the mind.

Storytelling Through Ironic Sincerity

The desire to make work that is universally meaningful drove me to consider what I was trying to say about circus. For me circus has always been a way to engage with my environment and quiet my mind through my body. Uncovering my queerness and neurodiversity later in life lead me to discover that adrenaline chasing has been an unconscious method of focus generation since childhood. Pushing any kind of boundary has a physiological response designed to keep the body alive by creating intense focus on the task at hand.

If circus is a culture of boundary pushing it is important to acknowledge what happens when a boundary is breached: Muscles are pulled, bones break and our nervous system has a variety of responses that shut down and divert our intentions. Death is the ultimate boundary. We all die eventually: It is inescapable. How we deal with this fact of life is determined by the cultures we live in. Living in India I noticed that death is a culturally present part of living. It is held in public ritual and is a stark contrast to many Western cultures, where we don't see birth or death but hide it behind curtains, as if it is avoidable. I think circus serves as a vital yet manageable reminder of death & our human vulnerability. Held in the safety of the social contracts of the spaces it exists in; Industry health and safety standards, the innate risk assessment processes of performers and safety teams. Even the seats we sit in to watch those risking their bodies. It is thrilling to both perform and watch people taking risks with their bodies. Take more risks- but careful now- but do it & be present. This is how we grow. Or not!? This is also how we die! By dancing with death we are alive! But it's just a show. Right!?



Head for Heights: A Dialogue between Jazz and Aerial Acrobatics

by Thom Hamer

Settle down, make a cup of tea, get cosy, and *brace yourself*—for this 19-second jazz piece: *Head for Heights*. With a gradually descending glissando (jargon for a note that is held yet moves pitch), the brass alludes to the *vertigo of existence*, approached in a way that is certainly ironic, but at the same time presents difficulties in terms of psychological integrity. This is a dialogue, bordering on free association, between jazz and aerial acrobats.

Listen at <http://bit.ly/TMCjazz>



The Vertigo of Life

In *The Concept of Anxiety* (1844), Søren Kierkegaard describes anxiety as a kind of vertigo, induced by, on the one hand, a virtually infinite amount of options that we as individuals have and, on the other hand, the finite amount of options that can be realised. It is a sort of commitment anxiety. How can we make a decision at all, amidst an ocean of possibilities? Kierkegaard calls this phenomenon “the dizziness of freedom, which emerges when [...] freedom looks down into its own possibility, laying hold of finiteness to support itself.” (Kierkegaard 1844: 331) A century later, Jean-Paul Sartre expands upon this condition of dizziness, highlighting the vertiginous nature of human existence: “Vertigo is anguish to the extent that I am afraid not of falling over the precipice, but of throwing myself over.” (Sartre 1943: 29). Technicalities aside, the point is this: we are constantly faced with possibilities, both options in our own control and forces from the outside, while each and every time only one possibility can come to fruition.

This vertiginous anxiety should not be confused with fear, as Allard Den Dulk observes in his reading of Kierkegaard:

“While fear is always directed at a (supposedly) specific aspect of the world (snakes, heights, the monster under the bed), the object of anxiety is nothingness: it is directed at the undetermined situation of the individual, his freedom to form himself.” (Den Dulk 2015: 219)

Although the distinction between fear (object-oriented) and anxiety (directed towards nothing) is vital, representations of fear can serve as *allegories* for anxiety, teaching us through the specificity of fear how to deal with more existential forms of anxiety. This is why vertigo presents such a compelling picture of the mind-boggling potentiality of life: it makes the abstract tangible.

Living Life Detached

One can approach this vertigo with ironic detachment: the ironist pretends to be in total control, playfully, near-frivolously, while simultaneously knowing that one is always under the yoke of uncertainty and powerlessness.

While certainly helpful as a way to respond to a threatening stimulus, irony can also pose a threat of its own. Underneath the surface of non-anxiety, emotions may bottle up, which may ultimately pressurise into a much more threatening release of anxiety, perhaps in the form of rage or panic. Thus, irony seems to undermine itself from within, by catapulting itself back into attachment, though now of a more malignant and volatile species. The pressing question thus rises: do we allow anxiety to exist?

Beyond Detachment

This is what Hobbit's short film *Fight or Flight* seems to highlight: the need for both detachment and presence. By way of allegory, the aerial acrobat offers a powerful response to the aforementioned anxiety. In confronting a concrete fear in vertigo, the anxiety of possibility is allowed to exist and at the same time not taken as a cause for inertia.

Of course, this willingness to engage in head-on confrontation with the vertiginous is not exclusive to *today's* trapeze swingers and other aerial circus performers. It has been a trick of the trade since its advent—lifetimes before the earliest traces of a metamodern age. The point is therefore not to contrast the present with the past, but to illuminate the metamodern potential that inheres in height-related performance as such. That is to say that this kind of act instructs us to face the vertiginous, not only in its literal form, but its allegorical twin as well: the vertigo of life. We need to develop a head for heights if we are ever to reach for higher planes.



Circus and Genealogy – Talk by Pete Yelding

Pete is a cellist, sitarist and vocalist from a family of travelling Showpeople. While his grandfather was the last Yelding to live a Showman's life on the road, Pete continues the family's trade of performing into at least its 7th generation. His talk reflects on his experience of circus complexity, through the lens of personal history and embodied genealogies of practice. He tells the story of his family, the Yeldings, who were once one of the most prominent circus families in Western Europe, and connects his own Romani lineage to that of his musical Ustad (Master Teacher). Themes of fear, otherness, belonging and memory bloom through the narrative, entangling threads of identity that shatter some of the West's more recent myths about circus as a distinct, hermetic object.

You can watch the talk at <http://bit.ly/TMCPete>



NoFit Feedback

by Rob Smith

Who am I? Dr Robert Smith, a senior lecturer and researcher at University of South Wales. I also lead a community band that focuses on participating in making and sharing, or performing, music. It is a community band with a communitarian outlook.

What did I expect? I came here to listen to people's ideas about circus performance in these times that feel like a chaotic endgame. What work are circus makers creating in response to these times?

I've always been torn between seeing circus as technical display on the one hand and art on the other. The tension between these modes often stops circus engaging me in an artistic experience and therefore a view of the world as expressed via circus arts. I wanted reassurance – I have seen positive creative work made through the media of circus and want to see more. I want to see the way forward.

I wanted answers to my own questions about how a non-semantic medium (my own medium of music without lyrics – purely instrumental – although I do also write musical theatre) could give positivity to performances about where we are now as humans and where we might be heading. I almost want to apologise for bringing up the climate crisis again but I have to get over that shame if I am to become a responsible artist and academic in... again... 'these times'.

So I come with three burning questions:

1. How can I make work that celebrates nature without shying away from the problems around preserving it?
2. How can I communicate urgency to people with their heads in the sand?
3. How can my work help build sustainable communities?

... and of course what are other artists, including circus makers and performers, doing about the above?

So what did I learn? Luke Hallgarten spoke to us about Revel Puck Circus and really did tap into some of my concerns with a positive outlook. They make and perform circus taking it to the people in a traditional circus way, touring, setting up in or near existing communities. They communicate with these communities

bearing in mind their manifesto of making circus (see page 13). As someone running a community band, the implications of this are all very empowering. It's good to have some of our ideas and method reflected in other groups' practice, but it's even more affirming to show how we can go further in setting and acting out our aims and ambitions.

Valentina Solari led us through a 'Juggling with Plants' workshop, the title of which filled me with fear for any plant at the mercy of my rudimentary juggling skills. I would struggle to be a beginner. Luckily no plants were harmed. We were encouraged to be and breathe with, and contemplate our potted plant partners. This allowed us to relax about the session. Then we interviewed the plant, finding as much about it as possible using our main five senses. After this we responded to the encounter in the medium of our choice. I chose to create a piece for improvisers and I had an ensemble of wind instruments in mind.

I made a piece that began inspired by the mulchy soil in my *Trailing Petunia's* plant pot – a sort of fertile breathy sound from all the players that gradually twists and solidifies into melody that represents the miraculous growth of the plant. Of course this is not 'circus' music – it's highly abstract and definitely not the feelgood music commonly associated with circus performance. But it had to start somewhere; so it started there. I was certainly surprised to come away from the session with the ingredients of a new piece!

Finally, I got a sense of tradition and continuity in circus from Pete Yelding. Being part of something bigger than yourself, respecting the past and contributing to the future of one's art is affirming and optimistic. Yelding looks at lineage by tuition in Indian music (see Sanyel & Widdess, 2004) and also spoke of genealogy in circus tradition. Genealogy was the way families and tribes created sustainable communities in the past; in some cultures now, pedagogical traditions create performance traditions. Now we urgently need to create sustainable communities to weather the coming storms; we must listen to and learn about the individual artist and practitioner as part of a continuity – being gifted from the past and handing on their knowledge to the future.

Pete's story, thoroughly researched and documented, was a kind of auto-genealogy of his own forebears; a tangled tale of Romani roots, the stigma and sometimes shame of 'gypsy' ancestry and the difficult attempts to shed these identities and enter mainstream society. Pete's grandfather had attempted to claim that the family were Jewish and not Romani – an interesting

position given what we know about itinerant Eastern European musicians in the 18th and 19th century, where gypsy and klezmer styles were quite closely related and musicians from either tradition could fill in on each other's engagements if extra players were needed. Of all European musical forms, the practices of gypsy and klezmer musicians were distinct in keeping extemporisation, composition and a distinctive modal tradition alive in parallel (Sapoznik, 1999). Of course, other forms of folk music did this – and there are of course many flavours of gypsy musical tradition, as Tony Gatlif tried to show in his 1993 film *Latcho Drom*.

But gypsy music had a big influence on the music we traditionally think of as 'circus music' – part composed, part extemporised and part improvised – possibly the nearest thing in Europe to the jazz that emerged from the United States in the late nineteenth century. And of course jazz intermingled with klezmer and Jewish theatre music in the US, producing a string of great Jewish jazz performers such as Benny Goodman, Bix Biederbecke and so forth.

So for me, as a musician with an interest in trying to build sustainable communities, this is where the notions of tradition, genealogy and lineage by tuition all meet up. Pete is studying Indian musical traditions for his PhD. His *Ustad* (music teacher and tradition bearer) has knowledge of the intermingling of classical North Indian musicians and those bearers of the origins of 'gypsy' musical traditions, focused in the state where the original Romani communities are believed to have emerged from (Rajasthan in North Western India). I am aware of two things; firstly that I am giving this circus genealogy presentation a very musical spin based on my own areas of interest; and secondly that I am conflating the ideas of genealogy and traditions passed on through pedagogical lineage (something Pete only really touched on in his conclusion) to find my own answers to my own questions. But I've always been fascinated by the way music has spread through the world and how traditions have intermingled. I've also always been fascinated by how the seemingly ad hoc performance practices of 'circus music' emerged as a recognisable musical form of outsider in Europe and beyond, and then went on to fascinate western classical music composers as a form of musical exotica.



The group discuss:

Drawing on the talks and work presented over the course of the day, this discussion panel further interrogates how circus and metamodernism intersect. An opportunity to hear more from our speakers and artists, and for participants to share their own thoughts and questions.

Footage from the discussion can be viewed at
<http://bit.ly/TMCdiscussion>



*What is your favourite part of this book and why?
How has this book changed your thinking?
What will you tell your friends about this book?*

Metamodern circus is...

Catching up. Corrective. Aware. Room to grow and a catalyst for change.

an oscillation between the body and mind

a combination of old and new

something I don't fully understand 😊

exemplified in the Revel Pucks show that was built on the premise of the circus performers wanting to create a show that had everything an audience wanted from a 'big C' Circus and, in doing that, both deconstructing the circus and, in this act, also creating a 'big C' Circus show. It's both/neither at the same time.

a contemporary form of artistic expression, which considers issues outside what was expected

one approach to creating work (is this necessarily exclusive of other ways of creating circus?)

a word that speaks to a specific group

happening, and it kind of is an antidote for cynicism

a show?

performing in a venue inside you, but you can't afford a ticket

cringe – and I love it

CONTRIBUTORS

Tom Drayton is a Senior Lecturer in Acting, Performance and Directing at the University of East London, and is currently writing the first book dedicated to metamodern theatre. He's interested in how the millennials' generational experience has influenced their theatrical practice, and how new forms of performance strategy can engender new political pathways.

Steve Fisher is Snr. Lecturer in Performance, University of South Wales. Originally a physical theatre performer in late 1980's; then Stage, TV, Radio actor and Director. Former Associate Director and head of education and youth theatre, Sherman Theatre, Cardiff. Also directed tv arts documentary for BBC. Focus on Wales based writers and mediated live theatre.

Thom Hamer is a full-time doctoral researcher at Cardiff University and University of Southampton, funded by the AHRC SWWDTP. His research investigates "existential post-irony," asking to what extent the metamodern notion of sincerity can provide a viable response to an absurd life. He founded the Metamodern Festival in 2022.

Hobbit is studying for an MA in Directing Circus at Circomedia after 17 years as a professional circus performer, specialising in acrobatics, children's theatre, and stunt work. Their directorial work is inspired by the ingenious and intuitive craftwork of Derren Brown and the primal and brazen stunts of Elizabeth Streb.

Dr. Lizzie Hobson is a lecturer in Human Geography at the University of Exeter. Her work critically explores how circus arts deepen our understanding of the times we're living in. Beyond this, she teaches 'Gender and Geography', an undergraduate course reflecting on powerful ideas about appropriate bodies.



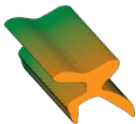
Katharine Kavanagh is a circus writer and researcher, and founder of The Circus Diaries. She's currently an ESRC funded PhD student at Cardiff University, investigating the representation of circus audience experience in the UK. Teaching includes Circomedia, National Centre for Circus Arts, and Stockholm University of the Arts (formerly DOCH).

Jaine Lumsden is the physical performance specialist (circus, outdoor and physical theatre) for Creative Scotland. Other areas of work include independent producers, theatre and dance touring. She is a trained Liz Lerman Critical Response Process facilitator.

Jonathan Priest currently runs the Masters programme in Directing Circus at Circomedia. He holds a PhD in Choreography Specialising in Circus from DOCH (now Stockholm University of the Arts), and has been referred to in writing as an 'all-around rope king'.

Valentina Solari is a circus artist specialised in juggling, static trapeze, and trapeze-juggling (integrating both). With a BA from Circomedia and an MA in Performing Public Space from Fontys University, she explores methods for collaboration between artist, audience, and non-humans. Valentina also works as a circus teacher and freelance performer.

Rob Smith has worked as a busker, composer, performer, improviser and workshop leader, written for theatre, film, television and radio, and performed throughout the UK and Europe, as well as in Africa and the USA. He researches community music (leading Wonderbrass), music for media and carnival performance. He teaches Performing Arts and Music at the University of South Wales.



Symoné is an alternative circus and performance artist whose work explores what circus is and could be, between the underground club scene, videogame development, cabaret, installation work, and West End shows. She is a Guinness World Record holder, a member of Pecs Drag King Collective, and enjoys creating a sensation.

Serena Cafferatta Rivas is an artist, musician and performer producing multidisciplinary work through installation and live performance. As a Fine Art graduate, she now studies a Directing Circus MA, researching ways to propose, create and disrupt space (on and offstage), and questioning audience expectation. Her process centres sustainability through decolonization.

Elliott Rooke is an associate lecturer in Human Geography at the University of Exeter. His work engages with ideas of skill as a more-than-human phenomenon which emerges from networks of communicating agents. He is particularly interested in how these networks can be disrupted and maintained.



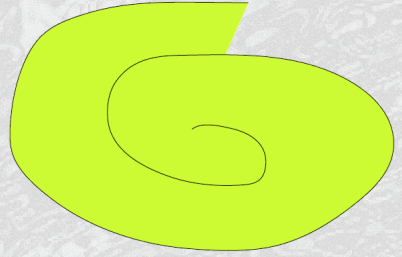
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WELCOME TO YOU reading this amalgamation of words – we feel deeply honoured by your gaze. This book is an exhibition of thoughts, feelings, and lived experiences relating to the intersection of metamodernism and circus, following the second edition of the Metamodern Festival – The Metamodern Circus – that took place on 26th May 2023 in Cardiff (UK).

Participants came together to reflect upon and document their impressions of metamodern circus, sharing the love for the fantastical, the spectacular, and our attachment to what is really real. If this feels cringe, sure, np tbh, *this is cringe*

— as is metamodernism –
and we love it.

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