

A support scheme
for emerging creators of contemporary circus in Europe



Think Circus!

Supporting CircusNext, a researcher on an immersion mission

Comments around the Think Circus! Conference

European Conference *Think Circus!#2*
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I joined as a researcher associated with the CircusNext project in summer 2014.

I was a spectator, I followed Jeunes Talents Cirque then Jeunes Talents Cirque Europe presentations in Paris at the Théâtre de la cité internationale. I remember aesthetic discoveries, long debates, surprises. CircusNext 2013-2017, that I was lucky enough to follow from a researcher point of view this time, brought me much more. The Think Circus! European conference was for me the opportunity to share what I observed, wrote down, scribbled, heard, for several years. These preliminary remarks are therefore based on what we call, in our human sciences and social sciences jargon, 'field research'.

In 1958, Claude Lévi-Strauss wrote: 'Anthropologists need field experience, that represents a crucial part in their education'¹. In the process that I followed to become an adult researcher on circus, CircusNext was this opportunity that one only seldom has, a field experience with various sides to it, meetings that fuel your desire to do research. I would gladly define my position in this project as a "companion". Accompanying means observing, but mainly listening. In order to do so, I took part in all the major steps of the project, but also in some meetings (with the co-organisers and / or associated partners). This observation work also came with surveys (sent to artists and audiences) and with long qualitative interviews done either during an event (which makes it possible to go back to this event and understand what happens at a given time) or afterwards (which makes it possible to tackle issues in a more analytical way).

No matter the status of the interviewee, some issues are common to all and have to do with the way the approach is perceived, as well as the position of the actor in this approach. Other discussions made it possible to update the way we see the creative process, as well as the production, support, issues related to writing and languages, but also the tools at stake, professional interactions, sharing knowledge and know-how.

This research is therefore part of the fields of art, social and human sciences. My main topics therefore mainly tackled issues related to artistic work and its timeline, the notion of innovation in contemporary art, aesthetic norms and the relationship with artistic excellence, the sociology of circus artists, and more generally speaking, work relationships and professional careers in this field. Lastly, I explored the notions of territory, whether artistic or geographical, and studied identification processes for the main items mentioned in the project, mainly by questioning the perception of the approach, in order to understand and analyse how each player grasp the project. In order to share the texts I had written for the introduction and the conclusion of the Think Circus! European Conference, I chose to go back to a few key-dates in my research path at CircusNext, and to share a few observations and analyses.

NB. Quotes were extracted from interviews that took place in the field and that were anonymised.

1. Claude Lévi-Strauss, Structural Anthropology [1958], Pocket, 2003.

Wednesday 25th November 2015

Arrival in Neerpelt for the selection week, cold winter

Crossing the border

It is cold under the Neerpelt sun. All companies have arrived and presentations have started. Fifteen companies from fifteen countries, 5 shows a day, 5 jury meetings, 5 professional meetings. Lively discussions during the breaks. Informal fruitful chats at the bar, at night. Belgian beer. Neerpelt like a Europe dream. Borders closing, police blockades. Everybody made it. This is November 2015 and on the Opt de Markt Theatre stage, a number of emerging artists tell us about their Europe. The Europe of innovation, freedom to create, to move around, to invent. This is November 2015 and I wonder how, together, artists, technicians, producers, cultural operators and researchers, we can still believe in it for 2 years.

If you think in terms of centres, suburbs, borders and circus circulation in Europe, it has to be noticed that in the European circus landscape, France and Belgium (because of their university training programmes and their history in terms of cultural policies) remain the two mains clusters of attraction. All the same, circus and artists support at various points in their professional career in these two countries are far from setting the example, and other more experimental models are invented elsewhere. In the moments that the project offers to the partners to discuss, CircusNext is an opportunity to compare these models. We can for example mention the Northern Europe countries that are built in another economic reality and a very different way of looking at public cultural policies. What I saw very quickly is that behind the will to cooperate, these 'fields' or 'worlds' are so far still not very porous at all.

All the same, for those who support artistic creation that I talked to – programmers, administrators, distribution managers – there seems to be a real will to better share knowledge and know-how despite very different economic, political and cultural realities. However, the desire for Europe or, at least, the awareness of a European network is far from being shared by all artists 'even if CircusNext is a rather free space', as one of them said, 'we can feel that in real life, it's not that easy to go from one country to another. There are issues related to money, but also related to how to welcome artists. Europe is interesting, yes, but it's not a priority.'

Currently there are several aspects coexisting together. Certain artists-authors try to fight against all obstacles and resist as much as they can offers from cultural policies to lead an artistic project which they want to go beyond borders (following the idea that the territory is less important than the project itself). Others, on the other hand, are not so much driven by this travelling dimension but rather by the will to be known on a *market* and in places or distribution circuits that seem safer and better known, such as France and Belgium amongst others, following a visibility approach designed by the cultural policies in both these countries.

The third way is the one followed by those we will call cultural operators (structure directors, programmers, cultural policy managers, etc.) that have to deal with complex economic realities in a sector which is still fragile, but who try to assert circus legitimacy at local level to fully welcome these free artists.

In order to have a dialogue between these various realities, we should probably go beyond these approaches (economic, aesthetic, cultural) that lead to the clusters or centers in this field. One might therefore wonder about impulse'. What gives the first impulse? To start an artistic career, to open up to other territories, to build a project? The answer is probably a mix of need and space.

The space used or felt, as Thomas Riffaud explained during the European Conference, our private and public spaces, the tensions between the two. Moving around, for example, it's challenging your space. What seems important is also to build a common but multiple space, a space for « social friction », to share, to discover, to fight for, together.

In that respect, how can one open up to other territories and develop peripheral thinking?

I think it happens with too-seldom self-taught artists that take part in this project. Behind the classical images of circus artists-authors, there is another reality. What do it mean to be an artist in Zagreb or Porto, Cork or Athens? In countries where there is no educational training and therefore little visibility, CircusNext becomes not only a bridge, but also makes it possible to launch a dual legitimacy process: given the local cultural policies and the European partners' view in this field, it becomes possible to put an end to a certain isolation. As such, the approach is seen as a public space to educate artists, but also cultural operators, and audiences.



10th September 2014

First Lab, la Seyne-sur-Mer, tent facing the beach

Putting things together

This peripheral thinking is shaped in the labs, travelling experiments which have been organised several times during CircusNext 2013-2017 in European or third countries².

One of the first CircusNext moments I observed took me right to the heart of that issue. In September 2014, I went to La Seyne-sur-Mer for the LabMed, focused on cooperation between European artists and artists from third countries from the Mediterranean region. To me, the Mediterranean is more like a border which is impossible to cross, rather than a place for meetings between various artistic dynamics.

However, here they are, nine artists, all together, trying to build something. The Lab is like time which has stopped, it's unique. The Lab means taking time to meet various artists and mixing into their creative process, it means thinking together about what artistic work is, supported by mentors (Claudio Stellato and Ben Fury). The Lab occurs outside timeframes, outside production schedules and tours: it offers possibilities. What strikes me are not so much formal times, that enable meetings between artists and regional cultural operators, but informal ones, where there is a real horizontal collaboration. The artists in La Seyne-sur-Mer are objectively very different. One of them learnt how to use straps on YouTube, strapping them to posts on a Moroccan motorway, without anybody watching, whereas others when to major European schools, already have their company or their first show. Artistic meetings happen. Mutual help and sharing are more than just words.

The Lab makes it possible, according to artists, to 'go further in the process carried by eight other people, and go to places you didn't expect'. But apart from this personal journey, it also wakes a collective awareness. Together, artists assert this collective will to make this Mediterranean collaboration tangible, as well as the hope to build a political and artistic project between countries; a project for which the Lab would be the first step; 'Peace in the Middle-East' could be heard under the circus tent.

2. Six Labs were organised by CircusNext between 2013 and 2017 :

INTERNATIONAL LABS

La Seyne-Sur-Mer, France, Mediterranean Lab, from the 1st to the 13th September 2014, co-organised by JTCE and moderated by "Janvier dans les étoiles".

Recife - PE, Brazil 28th October – 11th November 2016, co-organised by

Tananarive- Madagascar, Indian Ocean Lab, 10th-23rd October 2016, co-organised by JTCE and the PPCM (The Smallest Circus in The World, Bagneux, France, associated partner), and hosted by l'Aléa des Possibles.

EUROPEAN LABS

Guimarães, Portugal, 29th September – 10th October 2014, co-organised by JTCE et organised by Centro Cultural Vila Flor, Czech Republic, 25th-30rd August 2016, co-organised by Cirqueon.

Prague, Czech Republic, 20th September to 2nd October 2016, co-organised by JTCE and hosted by Cirqueon.

It's also the partners' responsibility to encourage this approach, to find a basis for it, whether institutional or not, that would turn this possible into doable. In order to do so, it takes a strong will to go beyond geographical gaps, especially between centers and suburbs, that is imposed on us. 'Once again, our broken suitcases were piling up on the pavement', says Jack Kerouac in *Sur la route*. We had a long journey ahead of us. But it didn't matter: journey is life³. The future could be to think of these circus journeys. Not so much the place, but the path to get there. Think of a passageway between creation places, think of the path of an artistic project through several territories, and, most importantly, offer the possibility to get lost on the way. Walking does not mean going straight from one place to another, but rather being porous to the world. We talk about nomad art, but do we really circulate in it?

There are numerous cooperation projects in the field of circus. Mixing, borrowing, being porous, European circus could be a transit place between Europes. Artistic movements which are paradoxical, in times when European borders are closed to human beings' free circulation.



3. Jack Kerouac, *Sur la route*, translated from English by Josée Kamoun, Folio Gallimard, republished in 2012.

24th March 2017

Rouen, professional meeting in a huge room, emergence of a dialogue?
Accompanying, even if it means inventing

We could then maybe dream of a cooperation in actions where the key word would be accompanying. This word, which raises so many issues, was at the heart of a day during which we thought together, during the first part of Think Circus! as part of the SPRING festival in spring 2017⁴.

The issue of 'how to accompany' was often at the heart of the discussions between peers and partners: artists, projects, but also audiences (often not very familiar with innovative aesthetic approaches in the field of circus), as well as supporting cultural operators. Professionalization in the field of circus did not only impact artists, but also programmers, structure directors, technical directors, lighting directors, production or distribution managers, they all learnt how to welcome circus, which opened the door to new professional careers. It's an interesting phenomenon; in Europe, we see artists who, despite having been trained and spent most of their career in France or in Belgium, go back, with this experience, in their country of origin to try and develop festivals, training sessions, decentralised residency places, in order to disrupt local cultural policies and offer to today's artists what they could not benefit from during their career.

These journeys exist and can be identified, but the European territory network (its logic, its dynamics) remain rather vague for most players. CircusNext is seen as a network by cultural operators more than by artists who identify this meeting place but are not necessarily aware of the overall logic of the project. However, based on discussions with co-organisers, whatever their role and their history in the project, there is a real need to circulate but also concretely share experiences in order to better know each and everyone's practices and realities: in other words, to accompany. Putting all these elements together without any reward or compensation goes against the evolution of our societies towards a growing uberisation of services and striking individualism. In this context, we reassert the fact that collective thinking is possible. Indeed, for artists questioned on that topic, the will for companionship is strong, especially for long term, collaborative visions. An artist was imagining the following: 'We would need real time. Doing things with local partners that we choose together... Sometimes you are here but you spend your time doing things, going from one place to another. It should be on the long term, I think that could be interesting. Just to be able to say 'I want to build a new project', and that somebody tells you 'right, we are here, we will help you find a network'. Accompanying in order to co-build and protect a certain form of autonomy.

Artists autonomy, far from being included in circus artist' initial training, is however crucial in their professional careers. This is CircusNext's stake with its mentoring program that offers artistic support (helping to grow a thought, a creation project) as well as structural, in designing a company and a professional project.

4. *Think Circus!* professional meeting and artistic path 23rd and 24th March 2017 as part of the SPRING festival, in partnership with the 2 Pôles Circus platform in Normandie.

When they write their application, artists first of all mention the will to assert a unique artistic vision thanks to CircusNext, but the need to organise a process and to build a project are there all the same in the mere fact that they send their application. One of the artists mentioned how taking part in CircusNext helped him 'grow up', not only for this creation project, but first and foremost for his professional project. A lot of artists insist on the way the approach 'forces them to structure the steps', so time becomes of prime importance. In the same way, a young company said: 'With CircusNext you have the opportunity to learn, but to learn faster, and then you leave your comfort zone to know a bit better where you're going with all this'. For most pre-selected and selected candidates, CircusNext is like a trigger that makes you 'change level'. It's often going from a small format to a whole show, and embracing a project leader role that triggers a change.

During this year which was so specific for laureates, the stake was dual: looking, building a work-in-progress that will be presented at the Théâtre de la cité internationale, but also find room for this author and project leader role within professional careers that are often varied and bumpy.



3rd June 2016

Presentations at the TCI

Interviews in dressing rooms n°3, how is it going?

Roleplays

The key points in the project, and in particular the shows at the Théâtre de la cité internationale in Paris, are often the opportunity to better understand the relationship with work and at work that are created in the field of contemporary circus.

It is therefore possible to draw a map of various professional careers depending on various territories realities, both for artists and cultural operators: the potential support, whether there is an 'artist' status or not, and the availability or not of known schools. But apart from the choice of the territory, artists have to juggle between various identities: interpreter, author, project leader or entrepreneur, as well as various practices. They therefore have to be taken into account, it is necessary to look at everyone's building's process rather than assessing the compliance or not with a given professional model: 'CircusNext is a platform to try', as an artist once told me. 'I have the body of an acrobat, I see myself as a dancer, and I do theatre', he said, thus showing that the stake is not so much to identify with the circus professional, but rather to invent and assert one's vision as an author and interpreter. The relationship with these activities (and the possibility or the need to identify with them or not) vary greatly depending on European contexts. They are very academic in their vast majority, but professional paths seen in artists applying for CircusNext show gaps in the process to build oneself as an author and a project leader.

The need to learn in order to identify and to embody both roles is then strongly felt. The selection week becomes a learning place. Technical support, ability to talk about one's project in various contexts, etc. Even when candidates are not awarded, going to Neerpelt is a turning point in a project's life. The impact of CircusNext remains major as companies benefit from the project's visibility and fame, but even more than that, this time spent working is a means to confirm an artistic project, to bring it towards a potential implementation, and, more importantly, to feel legitimate as an author and a project leader. CircusNext makes it possible to feel supported in this professionalization process.

Even before talking about the nature of this professionalization, it is important to mention the position of the person bringing support. Amongst the persons working around artists who were questioned, this issue became frequent and now brings me to think of them as 'maître ignorant' as described by Jacques Rancière in *Le Maître ignorant. Cinq leçons sur l'émancipation intellectuelle* published in 1987⁵. The 'maître' has got an emancipating power whilst being emancipated himself, and only knows what the other teaches him. Being this 'maître ignorant' means testing one's ability to make others aware of their power, and not to impose it. In other words, I could mention one of the people who accompanied CircusNext artists, who highlights the difficulty of this position, and the humility it requires: 'The idea is to put the thinking structure around a project which isn't mine, and will never be mine. The stake is not to know whether the project is relevant or not, but to offer people the possibility to stop and sit down, discuss together'.

5. Jacques Rancière, *Le maître ignorant. Cinq leçons sur l'émancipation intellectuelle* [1987], Poche, 2004.

We might also need to switch thinking patterns so that people bringing support also listen, as one of the jury members and structure director said: 'It's for artists and operators to perform this change. How can we rethink relationships? Accompanying on the long-term means imagining together the stakes and results of this collaboration. We could think of this equation the other way round and wonder what artists would do if they supported structures.'

Finding the right place for artists and for those who support them seems to be a necessity to allow a productive dialogue, and for the professional sector to be structured. Artists perceive this approach as a place where thinking together would be possible: 'CircusNext gives you this peace of mind, you don't need to ask yourself certain questions anymore, and you can ask others,' explained one of them. As such, is accompanying not thinking about the relationship in the widest sense of the term, its duration, its nature, from love at first sight to the slow seduction process, and, unfortunately, the potential splitting up. We would therefore have to imagine the necessary time and space needed to create the right conditions for the meeting, for listening: developing exchanges, being surprised by what comes from elsewhere, being immersed, being contaminated by others' practices, create porous spaces. People bringing support are also those who are between: between the piece of art and the artist, the artist and the institution, the institution and the audiences.



16th December 2014

*Laureates residencies, Paris suburbs, working step:
doubts, wishes, questions.*

In Writing(s): experiment, (being) transform(ed)

While in residencies, during the 'support' period, before the presentations at the Théâtre de la cité internationale, artists often mention the difficulty in identifying their various roles and thinking of their professional careers as 'circus authors'. This can partly be explained by the fact that in Europe, circus is still a professional field which is under construction; recognising this art as an autonomous language is far from being a reality everywhere. Legitimacy processes in various geographical areas are not all at the same level. The process of 'artification', a notion which was described by the art sociologist Nathalie Heinich and explored for circus by Magali Sizorn⁶, amongst others, is the process that brings from non-art to art. You therefore have to think of the way cooperation networks take part in this process while maintaining strong and independent artistic identities.

Indeed, in artists-authors careers, it is probably difficult to avoid aesthetic dominating trends carried by schools or more prosperous, stronger, more visible distribution circuits. In this context, how is it possible to keep an open model without reproducing what already exists? How can we leave room to experimentation, without risking comparing it with 'what works' here and there? To specify those stakes, we might have to focus on the notion of author rather than circus author. One of the project players explained: 'By author, we mean being aware of a dramaturgic stake, having something to say about the world in general, something that goes beyond your own capacities or the fact that you are addressing people you know.' This is what juries seem to look for during interviews, even if there is still a paradox between the will to hang on, at any cost, to the 'circus' projects (especially in terms of technical references), and the will to encourage certain visions, writing approaches, specificities. It is therefore frequent to see juries wanting artists to benefit from the opinion of a choreographer or director, the so-called 'external look' which is challenging when talking about authors (can you think of offering a writer an 'external look' on their latest book?). Writing notions belonging to other fields (dance, theatre) are also often mentioned, and it is still complex to be emancipated from a vision that sees dramaturgy as a story, whereas there could be a type of dramaturgy related to the body, the actions, the senses. In that respect, the very word 'author' should be questioned.

However, it is interesting to look at the experimental processes that make it possible to assert the artist's singularity (both through the language and the formalisation of this language), going beyond the mere identification of the piece of art as belonging to the world of 'circus'. 'Circus has to do with your story more than what you do on stage', as one of the jury members explained. The idea is therefore not to think of projects as frames that already work, but rather to let these frames the possibility to emerge from artists' practices in order not to be trapped in a single thinking process regarding what circus contemporary writing should be. This raises the question of the look cast on the creation process, which is fully part of the writing process in which CircusNext artists are drawn.

6. Magali Sizorn, « De « La course aux trapèzes » aux Arts sauts », in Heinich N. et Shapiro R., De l'artification, Enquêtes sur le passage à l'art, Paris, Editions de l'EHESS, 2012, pp. 133-150.

Thinking of the action of creating, the method at stake, its social, political impact, these are constant concerns for the jury members when they select artists. The latter mainly look at the beginning of the creation process, the production of the material, the combinations to be invented. As such, CircusNext forces people to investigate on 'how to watch', going beyond the scene, guessing intentions, deciphering drawings, notes, understanding staging, entering the intimacy of the artistic work. The number of machines playing in the 2015-2016 session could for example question the way body techniques find a way of reinventing themselves when they are confronted to objects. In the same way, the 2013-2014 shows highlighted a specific approach of the gesture, looking at it in details, what Myriam Peignist would describe as 'rare sensations'⁷ in the acrobatic movement; something like a vertigo, looking for a kind of in-between in reinventing a balanced language.

During the conference, we talked for a long time about the 'sensitive' dimension and the questioning of experience. Numerous artists came to give their testimonies on their practices, methods, looks, stakes, researches; on their bodies at work and their writing processes. Researchers' visions (Sebastian Kann, Jean-Michel Guy, Franziska Trapp) came to complete this impressionist picture of circus writing, and made it possible to assert this central stake, the 'how to watch', and reassert the importance of being aware of 'where I speak from'. Each point of view is legitimate, and confrontations are fertile. Obviously, there is still a lot to look for, to find a common terminology, agreeing on certain words, but is it really necessary? At the end of the day, the fascinating discussion and chaos have many benefits!



7. Myriam Peignist, 'Anthropological history of acrobatic dances', *Corps*, n° 7, 2009/2, pp. 29-38.

13th April 2016

Platform meeting.

Working groups, finding a common language and imagining the rest.

Innovations or discrepancies in perception?

Another word that often comes back in CircusNext debates is the word 'innovation'. In April 2016, in Paris, during the latest Hautes Tensions festival at the Parc de la Villette, CircusNext partners and friends got together during a platform meeting to debate about the project together, to talk about words and issues.

One of the discussion points focused on *innovation*. What is innovative is first and foremost related to a reception context, and therefore to the art market. The issue of innovation should therefore be investigated deeper; we should maybe use the word 'evolution' (within a system whose rules are determined by the artist and not by the market), which enables innovation. In that respect, what are the spaces and the time that can make that invention possible? Despite a strong technical and disciplinary anchorage, contemporary circus was for a long time the place where it was possible to play outside frames and codes.

CircusNext is therefore the place where imagining is possible, but as a member of the jury said: 'it should not only be possible in the artistic approach, but also in the thought process. This is where there is Europe. If you only focus on the artistic offer, it is only a sum of cultural differences. The only way to federate is not to rely on what we are, but on what we are going to invent together'. This renewal, to go back to what another jury member said, this is what *Next* is all about. And then he added: 'circus is associated with risks, with specific techniques. What is '*Next*' is what will offer a new viewpoint on this'.

It seems relevant to think of innovation in terms of 'taking risks', not physical risks, but something more complex. 'having the feeling of taking risks', as an artist says, 'if you can't feel it, you are not part of it'. Having the 'feeling to take risks', not only on paper, but risks included in a kind of artistic commitment that is related to artists as well as to those who support them. There is therefore a stake related to responsibility. Choosing not to accept, choosing to be transformed, choosing to move the framework, or even to improvise. In a text about improvisation, Serge Margel describes it as such, and could be inspiring to translate the innovation stakes elsewhere and differently: 'Improvising is playing. It's doing as if something was invented on the spot, without simulating. Being cunning without cheating. Finding tricks to move forward or to carry on. Improvising is looking for the means to carry on playing while relying only on the rules of the game. It means finding a solution based on the resources of a place. Improvising means overcoming the obstacle, bypassing the accident, being one's way, one's path, one's gesture, one's pace, or the sequence of a plan. In other words, improvising means playing with time, continuity, succession, simultaneousness, in order to invest them, modify them, switch them, upset them, but it also means playing with time as you play with fire. It means taking risks, being in danger, moving forward in the dark, jumping in the unknown without any safety net or parachute'⁸.

8. Serge Margel, *Improvisation practices*, A Contrario, 2017.

One could therefore talk about an experimentation process, as one talks about a revolutionary process. It has not to do with disturbing aesthetic dimensions, but rather implementing the necessary means to make it possible for things to change. 'CircusNext has a real potential to be the unique place to take risks in experimental art', says one of the jury members. 'It is the place where you learn about circus as a form of art, and where it is allowed to try something else.'

17th June 2017

Stroll in 'les Inédits'

Surprises and meetings: of artists, places and audiences.

Public Curiosity

Of course these debates on artistic innovation or risk taking are also interesting to compare depending on the audiences for various CircusNext events: working steps during residencies, shows during the circus arts European season, presentation of the laureates' work at the Théâtre de la cité internationale or specific shows never seen before at CircusNext. Surprise, reinvent and share. This is probably what happened at the Espace Périphérique, one night in summer 2017, when 4 former laureates - Julia Christ, Sandrine Juglair, Jur Domingo and Marion Collé – presented to a mixed and curious audience the in-situ creation as part of the 'Inédits de CircusNext'⁹.

How can circus be an exhibition place for new shapes, and how can we support as best as we can this meeting between artists and audiences, which are as varied as the territories they live on? Audience studies performed during the presentations of the CircusNext laureates show that the main motivation for spectators is their curiosity for experimental projects, and the interest for work which is still 'under creation', as if they had the opportunity to be at the heart of the process. Audiences going to the Théâtre de la cité Internationale, for example, frequently go to places offering contemporary circus programmes (which corresponds to other studies on circus audience habits), but about 70% come for the first time to CircusNext (or JTC/JTCE) presentations. This figure can indicate that these audiences take the risk to come and see shows for which they only have very little information. A lot of respondents mentioned their interest for the 'research' approach, in parallel with a great level of technical and artistic expectations. It is therefore interesting to notice that despite the formal dimension of the presentations and the high stake for artists, new types of writings, with various shapes, meet a type of audience which is much more open than we might think. Contemporary circus languages seem to be sharable and shared.

As such, in order to maintain this liveliness, to create festivals here and there, to accompany a circus structure, support audiences and artists, you have to think of the relationships, in plural. Indeed, we have to remain open to the unknown, as circus loves are well complex.

9. JTCE offers to 3 or 4 authors who were supported in the past the opportunity to answer an order that will be presented in one or several partner places in the Ile-de-France region. This order can be presented as little sketches or various shapes presented by the authors, to be reconstituted in situ. The authors have 2 research and creation days in the partner location before presenting their work during an event organised by the partner. This event dedicated to the Ile-de-France audience is mainly focused on pleasure: inventing European contemporary circus creation in Paris and beyond the Paris radius while getting rid of the usual pressure related to production stakes.

22nd January 2016

La Cascade, Bourg-Saint-Andéol, CircusNext internal seminar

Looking for... ? Taking the risk to become unproductive

In order to allow this risk-taking approach, CircusNext also has to be a research place. It might be an ideal, but utopias are structuring too. One of the artists said the following: 'So far, the project is built so that you enter a place, but it's not the place where it should happen. I think we have to invent a place outside the usual production scheme to uncover things that wouldn't be uncovered otherwise, with all the economic issues it raises. Currently, the expectation is to have residencies with objects at the end of them. Something is not working.'

Amongst the multiple identities of the artist / author / project manager, there is also the artist / researcher, or shall I say a definition of artistic work as non-productive work. The notion of research remains very abstract for most of the artists questioned, but discussing it shows the need to rethink the working place in order to allow the right research conditions. Once again, the Labs set the example regarding this issue. One of the mentors explained that 'Somebody who comes to a Lab is not the same person in the beginning and in the end. Labs disturb the way we work through positive confrontation with other people'.

Introducing disruption seems to be an interesting direction. Artists who were questioned hesitate between guaranteeing a safe space, the distribution, and the will to take to risk to disrupt the order of things, without any safety net, without perceiving an overall framework that would actually make this possible.

There is the issue of the place, and also the time. What is the timing for artistic work, and, in current socio-economic production schemes, is there really time to lose oneself? Getting lost, does that not mean going beyond the result on stage, and trying to enter the research process; understanding more than seeing: questions, aborted ideas, doubts, traces. The schedule the way it was organised for 2013-2017 does not really let artists dig into research. In our European societies, our relationship with time is more and more impacted by project organisation; time is cut, stopped, interrupted. However, to take artistic research to another level, it would be necessary to develop accompanying time, build work relationships, time to create a common language or, at least, a certain type of dialogue. Ways of doing, ways of seeing, ways of talking. The so-called 'visibility' times at CircusNext set the conditions for a certain way of doing things, and are often seen as a goal in itself. When expectations in terms of results, as well as a certain look, impact artistic production, is it really possible to be emancipated from productive work?

3rd June 2015

Jury n° 1 meeting, Paris, Théâtre de la cité internationale.

Negotiation table

Invisible virtuositities: time to disobey

In a very nice piece on musicians' bodies, Peter Szendy goes back to a text by Thomas Bernhard inspired by the Glenn Gould character, the pianist who, during his whole life, tried to get away from the performance exhibition and representation system: 'The ideal would be for me to be Steinway, I could do without Glenn Gould [...] by being Steinway, I could make Glenn superfluous'. This is the fantasy of the fusion between the body and the instrument, that Peter Szendy balances, by revealing the impossibility inherent to living arts: 'Neither Glenn, who is a triumphant virtuoso, nor Steinway on his own, but the tension between the two, and the reciprocity between the two, this is what the Glenn-Steinway combination seems reluctant to name'. Getting away from productive work means rethinking this tension felt by those exposed, on their own. As such, the representation would not be an arena for exploits and achievements, but rather a place for questioning and experimenting. The place for potential disruption between bodies, an opportunity (or failure) to go even further in the sensitiveness that the philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy would call *panick*¹⁰.

Without being as radical as the post modern American choreographer Yvonne Rainer, her *Manifeste du non* published in 1974 deserves to be reviewed in light of current questions and artistic proposals: 'No to the spectacular dimension, no to virtuosity, no to metaphors and illusion, no to spells and the empire of the artist image, no to the hero and anti-hero characters, no to fake images, no to the interpreter and spectator commitment, not to style, no to the interpreter, no to eccentricity, to emotion'¹¹.

It has not to do with a 'programming' vision, but we could underline the fact that in order to think of artistic work and support it as best as we can, we will probably have to leave behind certain expectations, especially in terms of 'what does circus look like', 'what is a show' and a 'creation process', or everything that is related to 'excellence' (a very normative notion). Yes to failure. Socio-political works from the Italian philosopher Paolo Virno are interesting in that respect. Working on the notion of 'virtuosity', he turns it into a key concept to analyse 'shapes in contemporary life'¹² and in particular the status of worker. For this philosopher, virtuoso production is only related to the other's look: doing things in order to be seen. If you shift this equation, could virtuosity not move from a space where it is not seen, an unproductive space? Making artistic work more unproductive is giving it all its virtuosity. For circus artists, the right conditions should therefore be created to undo codes in order to invent one's own order of things.

10. Jean-Luc Nancy, "Les arts se font les uns contre les autres," in *Art, regard, écoute: La perception à l'œuvre*, St-Denis: Les Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, 2000.

11. Yvonne Rainer, « *Manifeste du non* », in *Work 1961-73*, New York, The Presses of Nova Scotia College of art and Design of New York University, 1974.

12. Paolo Virno, *Grammaire de la multitude. Pour une analyse des formes de vies contemporaines*, Eclat, Editions de L' octobre 2002 pour la traduction française. Édition originale en italien : *Grammatica della moltitudine : per una analisi delle forme di vita contemporanee*, Roma, Derive Approdi, 2002.

During the Think Circus! European conference, Alix de Morant, in a round table on research places and practices, mentioned the notion of 'uncertainty' and Alexandre Fray spoke about 'undecidable'. These are unstable states, the potential to be wrong, to be in-between, the potential for un-definitions. Artists' identities, which are numerous, as well as those who support them in various places, those who build projects, those who think about these projects and practices, are multiple and change depending on their paths, their stories, their context, but it is the notion of undecidable which is the driver.

Questioning production media and spaces, as well as views, is an approach common to various artists. One of them describes it as such: 'the notion of spectacular in circus is something that has been driving me and circus for the past fifteen years: how can you twist it, what is dramaturgy (without any relationship with theatre), these are fascinating questions. How can you exist in places that are not institutional or made for shows?'. These questions are obviously not new for living arts, but reviving them in the current society would certainly make it possible to shift visions and invest margins. This is what is striking in the artist-author approach: it is not so much its virtuosity as excellence in a given framework (which would be normative and would answer orders or aesthetic and/or political, cultural and social dominations), but rather the way virtuosity shifts that framework.

Transgressing and going further. Is it not the whole stake for the circus author? Going further sends back to the idea of pushing one's limits, whereas transgression implies going beyond a limit seen as forbidden, it is seen as disobeying. Disciplinary regimes have been replaced on contemporary scenes, and it feels more than ever necessary to leave room to unruly virtuosity: going beyond but also having the opportunity to go further or elsewhere. In the 21st century, the notion of the body, full of freedom, desire and pleasure, is paradoxically conscious of a norm which is now integrated. In the twenty-first century, the norm has to be shifted again. Supporting artistic work, does that not mean offering the possibility to create this shift?



18th May 2017

Boris Vian room, La Villette, Alexandre Fray asks the question of 'the body'

The body at work: resistance, revolt and utopias

How could I not conclude with this issue of the body, which percolated through all the project debates and discussions, and was the topic of one of the sessions during the European conference.

This circus body, this working body, this body questioned on a daily basis on stage and around the table. Instead of talking about artists and authors, I prefer talking about craftsman. Craftsmanship makes it possible to put at the centre of the debates the notion of work on a daily basis, the notion of workshop and of shaping. Formal, informal, working times are numerous: discussing a project in a café, working elsewhere, observing, meditating, drawing, being in a studio, around a table... What do these steps reveal in the writing process, when the body is at stake? At that point am I working, what puts me to work? How can one find the urgency, the need to create? Apart from a programme with visibility and residency times, in an intermittent system by nature (creation), duration and continuity are at the heart of the process. Holding a project, holding time, but how? CircusNext laureates benefit from a kind of breathing moment in this time which is constantly cut by living shows (related to artists' multiple activities and to economic constraints in this sector), but this moment remains complicated for many of them. It only lasts for a short time and the main stake is not so much to be there, but rather to imagine the future and the race for co-productions, residencies, tour dates...

In order to do so, each day, the body is put at work, is shaped, is invented and reinvented far from norms. Every day, when you push the door of the empty studio, every day, you have to question yourself, physically and creatively speaking. Every day you have to grow your performerartist and performer-athlete, every day you have to reassure your body, such a virtuoso but so fragile as well. This is what artistic work is about. We therefore talk about a process, a word which was often used in discussions during the European conference. When looking at writing processes, research and artistic work, what is important here is not so much to know whether there is a result or not, but rather to keep questioning and documenting the process to reinvent it. And the body shows the marks of this process in its very essence and thoughts.

Innovation therefore has a true meaning when it starts fighting. We will probably have to fight for much longer in Europe with circus tents and black boxes, trapezes, balls, poles, twists and balance, with a lot of virtuosity. Not the most visible one, the one that reassures and classifies circus as entertainment. Invisible virtuosity, the one that is present in every single movement of our muscles, the one that is the basis of that disposition to act, and which turns circus artists into the most able to resist. It's a fight led with the body, in the body. It's a fight to defend what is disturbing, what is fun, what is challenging, what resists, the fight of those for which the fall goes beyond the body's ability to resist, to reach a balance, to stand on a rope, to hang on, to hold on, again and again.

One of the most prosperous aspects of CircusNext is that the project challenges the notion of circus. For some, the risk to see circus becoming conservative is high. For others, CircusNext makes it possible to 'support audacity and contemporaneity'.

Lastly, for many, a project such as this one offers the possibility to ask questions: 'there is something at stake in terms of questions related to society', as an artist explained. 'The room left to circus, and to shows in general. There are things that become scarce, we can feel it, such as people's will to do well when it comes to making decisions, their objectivity and their ability to look at society while taking a step back... Culture is in danger, there might be a certain vitality in circus that would make it possible to do that'

In order to envisage the 'Next' in CircusNext, we might have to go through revolt and then utopia. In a world full of inequalities, rejection by others, fascism and ultra-liberal policies, is there no other territory to conquer? If Circus is Next, it will be In resistance. Because of its history and shapes, circus could be the convergence place for fights, like it was the convergence place for arts. In order to do so, it will have to occupy space. Giving meaning to moving places by reasserting freedom of circulation: for ideas, knowledge, and know-how. In that respect, the body has to be put at work, not by applying political and social pressure, but by resisting. All the artists, all the authors and supporters mentioned it to me: the type of body that is reinvented, by space, objects, and by the others. The type of body that asserts its presence.

During a famous speech given to students at Berkeley University in the United States in 1964, Mario Savio, the leader of the Free speech movement, said the following words that resonate today: "There is a time when the operation of the machine becomes so odious, makes you so sick at heart, that you can't take part; you can't even passively take part, and you've got to put your bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels, upon the levers, upon all the apparatus, and you've got to make it stop. And you've got to indicate to the people who run it, to the people who own it, that unless you're free, the machine will be prevented from working at all!"

Stop everything. Look for, getting lost, invent, resist, revolt. In circus like elsewhere, this is the space we need today. This space has to be taken, as it won't be given to us.



As a conclusion...

"Punk rock set out to deliberately undermining society's liberal assumptions.[...] What the media didn't see was that punk was representing the representation."¹⁴

What I remember from these three days spent in la Villette for the Think Circus! European conference is that we took time to represent representation to better question it, distort it, put it at stake, in the body and in words. What we managed to do was to talk, to think, to discuss, and most of all, to debate. Going from discussion to debate is asserting a kind of vitality, a need, time dedicated to thinking, as this one. The debate was fruitful, lively, humble, and I wanted to thank all participants and audience members for contributing to it. I can only be happy that we took time to think, there is a real emergency, I think, in keeping producing thoughts and not only in circus. We have to hear it, thoughts can not only be embodied in words in a written form, but also in the body, in space, in relationships.

What we debated the most was the need to be displaced: by circulating, being transformed, questioning our careers and the way we do things. What we did together is not simple: we put words on experience and formalised the informal. Together, we decreased speed, as we said yesterday morning. Losing speed, stopping, breathing. What these three days taught us is that we have to keep being watchful, not rest on models that will far too fast become dominations and norms, and, in this European context, keep working on our preconceived ideas.



14. Dan Graham, *Rock My Religion : writings and project 1965-1990*, MIT Press, 1993. Textes réunis dans, Dan Graham, *Rock/Music Writings*, New York, Primary Information, 2009. "Punk rock set out to deliberately undermine society's liberal assumptions.[...] What the media didn't see was that the punk was representing the representation."

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