

## “Unusually superficial”

An Interview with Artistic Duo Mardulier and Deprez

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“De meeste van de wereld is mooi en goed  
onderhouden en voorzien van een aantal zaken.”

Excerpt from *Technoproza*

The long history of the circus still evokes romantic images of spectacle: a red-and-white striped tent where one goes to gasp in awe at acrobatic *tour de forces* and marvel at the sight of dangerous, exotic animals. Although the days of this old-fashioned trope might have passed, there is still a great deal of fuss about how circus acts are practiced these days and, moreover, how to define them. Most notably, artistic researcher Bauke Lievens continues to dig into the different possible interpretations of contemporary circus from a dramaturgical perspective which started during her earlier research project, *Between being and imaging: towards a methodology for artistic research in contemporary circus*.<sup>1</sup>

The current follow-up, called *The Circus Dialogues*, defends circus as a locus for experimental thinking, which makes it impossible to pin down just one particular definition.<sup>2</sup> In the exchange of open letters she initiated in the cultural magazine *Etcetera*, Lievens established a dialogue with other thinkers in the field, such as artist and theorist Sebastian Kann. In his letter of reply, Kann touches upon various topics that also shape the work of circus duo Mardulier en Deprez. The unlearning of a circus school system, the plurality inherent in the field of circus, and the Internet as an alternative performance space, are crucial elements in the universe Ruben Mardulier and Michiel Deprez have created during the last few years.

During a studio visit and accompanying interview, I tried to gain some insight into the magic of Mardulier en Deprez's circus. The attempts at theoretization I tried to initiate, although unsuccessful, recurred throughout the conversation. The obvious parallels I set out between historical antecedents related to spectacle culture and the experimentation within their creations, were met with the claim that it was not really something they consciously worked with or were aware of. They called themselves 'rather superficial'. It connects to what Kann criticizes in his letter as the problem of overdetermination. According to him, circus artists are continuously plagued by personal expectations of what 'good circus' is and should be, usually fuelled by what critics expect of them. As a result, it rules out a certain element of surprise and excitement that is so crucial to the circus tradition.

It might be precisely this that Mardulier en Deprez try to safeguard through their unpretentious attitude. As Kann comments on Lievens' first open letter, contemporary circus does indeed promise a space of agency for the artist to reflect, but should not be reduced to only "making clever jabs at social and aesthetic conventions".<sup>3</sup> The duo do indeed exchange the rational, reasoning body for a primordial element of almost child-like fascination and intuition. During

the dreary afternoon on which I visited the two artists in their place of residence, something as simple as the schizophrenic weather, oscillating between extreme rain showers and bright summer sun, managed to captivate them. Whilst showing us around, the small corner of the warehouse that they occupy next to one of Antwerp's hip summer bars, Bar Paniek, appeared to be completely covered by a gigantic rain puddle. It adds an extra dimension to their latest creation *Doemdenken* (feeling low). It consists of a cart which you have to lie down on, putting your face through an opening in order to watch the ground pass by when someone pushes the cart around. A simple rain puddle suddenly gains a whole new dimension from this unusual perspective. "Look at those colours!", admires Michiel, whilst his companion pushes him around.





Mardulier en Deprez do also definitely like to have fun. A few weeks after this interview took place, I found myself drinking a 'golden colada' (Belgian beer served in a coconut) and eating 'stoempia's' (an Asian take on the typically Belgian dish of mashed potatoes and sausage) whilst both of them attacked a piñata filled with Flemish sweets. The occasion for this vibrant event was their retrospective *Retrospectie* at the Nona arts centre in Mechelen. Mocking the way exotic foods are often turned into more indigenous forms in this way fits the idea of approaching circus as a laboratory for executing all kinds of fantasies and cherishing the uninhibited, wondrous gaze of a child. "Sometimes we still see things that people consider to be part of their daily environment, without any questioning," Ruben says. Take a look into the irrepressible minds of Mardulier en Deprez.

### **Tell me, what do you see that others no longer notice?**

R: For example, we've just come back from a residency in Lithuania where some new architectural styles caught our eye. Newly-plastered façades. Somehow, they always leave a tiny square of the original wall visible, so that you can still see the original bricks in the wall. A few square centimeters of the original wall peeps through the new layer. We wanted to explore this detail further. Lots of people in Vilnius wore ripped jeans which is, in a sense, a similar way of showing the original structure underneath. We photographed those people, in front of these walls, confronting those two forms of layering with each other. The end result is a series of photos called 'Punk is not Dead'.

### **How do you start creating? Do you have any rituals?**

M: Actually, we only need two essentials: a table and some coffee. Very simple. Add some walking around exploring the surroundings to that – here we can even do that inside – and you have our recipe. I usually find the reception hall of a building the most inspiring place to start brainstorming. Then we start working with the stuff that we find on location. We were actually not able to bring a lot with us this time, as we cannot even enter Antwerp with our car anymore... (laughs).

We get most inspired by our surroundings... or by things that we have done before and want to extend. During the 12-hour long event Night Shift that took place in Antwerp in May 2019, we were able to use two tiny rooms. So we wanted to make something very intimate. We wanted to develop further the idea of doing a survey in the most literal sense. How can we keep asking the audience questions?

### **And what did you present precisely then during this event?**

**R:** We did several things. We showed our recording of a triptych of experiments *opmerkelijk zijn, onzichtbaar zijn en aanspreekbaar zijn* (being remarkable, being invisible and being approachable). As a way of research, we explored the city and set up a direct dialogue with the environment we were in. Michiel managed to be invisible on a terrace of a bar for 2 hours and 8 minutes. Placing an empty cup in front of you is apparently a very effective strategy.

We also performed another short-lived one-to-one experiment, *Geven en nemen* (Giving and taking). We asked one person one question at a time, and they were asked to reply with either yes or no. During the 'giving' part, we asked them to do something with us, during the 'taking' part we asked their permission to perform some acts on them. When they said no, they were simply allowed to leave the room. In this way we managed to slap lots of people in the face whilst being naked (laughing).

### ***Welcome to the circus***

#### **How did you actually start working together?**

**R:** We studied together at Fontys Academy for Circus and Performance Art in Tilburg. It is hard to really pinpoint the moment when our collaboration started. At school we already felt a connection, but as a student you are way too focussed on your solo practice. You are really self-centred and concentrate on what you are learning.

**M:** Only afterwards we started ping-ponging our ideas back and forth. At a certain moment, we were both invited by Circuscentrum to do a research project. We were able to either do it individually or together, so we started experimenting.

#### **And you have become inseparable now?**

**M:** We do see each other a lot, that's true (laughs).

**R:** There has never been more than one month, or one month and a half, between the different projects that we have done. But besides our joint projects we also still have our own artistic practices.





**How do you actually end up becoming a circus artist, especially in ‘new’ circus?**

R: Purely because we derive pleasure from it. Both of us started doing it as a hobby. You can spend time together with other young people, without there being a competitive atmosphere around. You learn how to build trust and work towards accomplishing the same goals in a group. But then when you start training officially, everything gets a little more serious. Twice a year, you have to create a conventional act of around ten minutes long. You present it in front of a panel, so you become more focussed on yourself than on the actual format you are presenting.

It’s very difficult to let go of the conventions whilst you are still in a school. Only afterwards do you really start your very own practice. You look for something that others can also recognize. That is how we started working with Virtual Reality. We can attempt to modify someone’s vision or perception yet they do not have to do anything technical for that to happen. When we reverse sight with VR, it almost feels like doing acrobatics. You constantly have to navigate and re-orientate your limbs.





## *An anecdotal approach*

**On your website, I found the following definition of your artistic practice: “anecdotal circus, installation art, post-internet art, prose and new elements supplied with things”... I think I need some explanation here.**

M: Anecdotal is quite a negative term that is often used for things that are considered very superficial.

R: It is funny how that definition does bring together quite a lot of negative connotations. Both circus and the anecdote are not the most appealing terms to work with these days. A lot of contemporary artists also hate the label of post-internet. We do also write poetry and prose, but we are not too sure whether we can legitimately call ourselves writers or poets. And this new elements thing... That is something that came out of one of our phone calls. We just liked it.

**And what do you actually mean by ‘anecdotal’?**

M: We’re very superficial.

R: An anecdote does not remain an anecdote when it is constantly being repeated.

M: But when you weave several anecdotes around one theme, you generate a sort of continuity once again, which can become very powerful.

*At this point, Michiel and Ruben start showing us around the place, demonstrating what they have been working on: the ‘doom thinking’ cart Doemdenken (feeling low).*

R: You see, the most miniscule, blue detail suddenly becomes way more interesting because you are so close to it. This tiny pink spot too, or this five-cent coin, it can be totally fascinating. You start seeing connections between everything, everything is a little bit extra. The banality of the everyday becomes spectacular in its own way.





## *Primary colours*

**Colour plays a prominent role in your work. Besides performative works, Ruben has also shown work in a group exhibition in the Ostend gallery Den Ouden Zeebaersch. You opt for a flashy fuchsia lay-out for your website. Has colour been a central focus point from the beginning, or did it come later on in the process?**

R: Colourwise, we only use red, yellow and blue - primary colours. First of all, because we like them, but also because it limits our possibilities. With those colours we are always able to generate other colours. I think it is a good decision, because it forces us to find alternative ways to deal with them. We never paint with a painting brush to be honest. There's a certain power to it which is very different from the skill of creating fantastic colours. Like, what does that actually mean, a beautiful colour? We don't have a clue about the way a painter does this, it's not our field of expertise. So we need to rely on a different approach.

And the magenta on our website, it goes way back. Although it is not a primary colour, it's one of the four colours in a printer. So maybe it is a primary colour that came out of technology. We were attracted to it. It might be because you wouldn't immediately associate it with two men.

M: Our school was also a pink circus tent. So that might also have influenced us.

R: (Laughs.) We were probably brainwashed by all that pink. But like, look at the balloons over there. You could opt for simple white, because that is sterile. That is not interesting for us, or at least the decision is a little forced. We want to stay as much as possible with a certain logic, we don't want to dig too deep. Because you have to justify all those choices as well. If you ask someone, "Which colour do balloons have?", no one is ever going to answer just one colour. These just exist in different colours.

### **Which colour would you ascribe to one another?**

R: Michiel is definitely a blue guy. But it fluctuates. Baby blue, dark blue, several shades of blue.

M: I think of Ruben as somewhere in between sun yellow and mustard.







## *The clown and the acrobat*

### **Do you have any inspirational artistic duos that you admire?**

R: Fishli and Weiss. They make incredibly absurd films and installations. The movies *Rat and Bear* were made during the 80s. Amazing stuff! Dressed up in third-rate carnival costumes, they ridicule and question the world while dressed as a rat and a panda. They mock everything and everyone. And these Swiss artists were also the first ones to construct sculptures with cheese and meat.

### **Do you use a similar kind of humour with *Mardulier en Deprez*? I have the impression that you straddle a border between the absurd and serious.**

M: Sometimes yes. It is important to be consistent in the execution. It is like the dynamic of a joke: even though it is only a joke, you still have to execute it well.

R: Otherwise you kill the joke. If we weren't to take our work seriously anymore... Who would? Imagine a stand-up comedian finding his own jokes so hilarious that he barely manages to tell them anymore.

### **Which brings us to two archetypes within circus: the figure of the clown and the acrobat.**

R: It is not only the acrobat who needs to be technically strong, the clown too. I think the clown even needs more skill in terms of timing. It is not something we consciously refer to though. We do not really identify with these figures.

M: Those are archetypes from a kind of circus we are not really connected to. We do use the same techniques, I suppose, we experiment with similar effects.

### **How do you think about your own practice in relation to spectacle?**

M: I guess we create a sort of a counter-reaction. The tradition of the circus almost coincides with spectacle. We believe it can be something else. That's why we often go for the most boring option. Something can become spectacular again in a different way, through a specific kind of curation for example.

R: There are two ways to build up a classic circus act: either you start with an impressive trick in order to catch the attention of the spectator immediately, or you build up slowly towards a spectacular apotheosis. It is a very tight rhythm.



There is no traditional circus act that actually involves even a minute of doing something unspectacular. So when we introduce greater time intervals between tiny spectacular effects, it might even create a better spectacle in the end, because you have been waiting for it for so long.

**Situationist Guy Debord's artistic strategies of *détournement* and *dérive* are very present in performances where interaction with the urban environment plays a central role, as well as in the many experiments with popular media. As this notably highlights the everyday spectacle, do you in fact rely on historical references such as *La Société du Spectacle*?**

M: We happen to be familiar with situationism, but we don't necessarily really work with theoretical material.

R: There could potentially be so much you could link to what we do. That is part of the reason why we enjoy talking to people who have an external perspective about our work. Our concepts are always born out of an emotional, rather than rational, trigger. The rational might slip in when we start observing mechanisms of human behaviour and what it is that fascinates us about that but at the same time it's also a very emotional trigger. Both of us must be totally obsessed with something before we are able to actually start working with it.

**Would you call that the common denominator in your oeuvre up until now, the emotional reaction which in a way also links back to circus?**

M: I do think so. Enthusiasm is the key.

**Do you ever have the feeling that you are being taken over by the spectacle itself, whilst performing?**

M: Sometimes I have the feeling, in fact, that I am not absorbed by it enough.

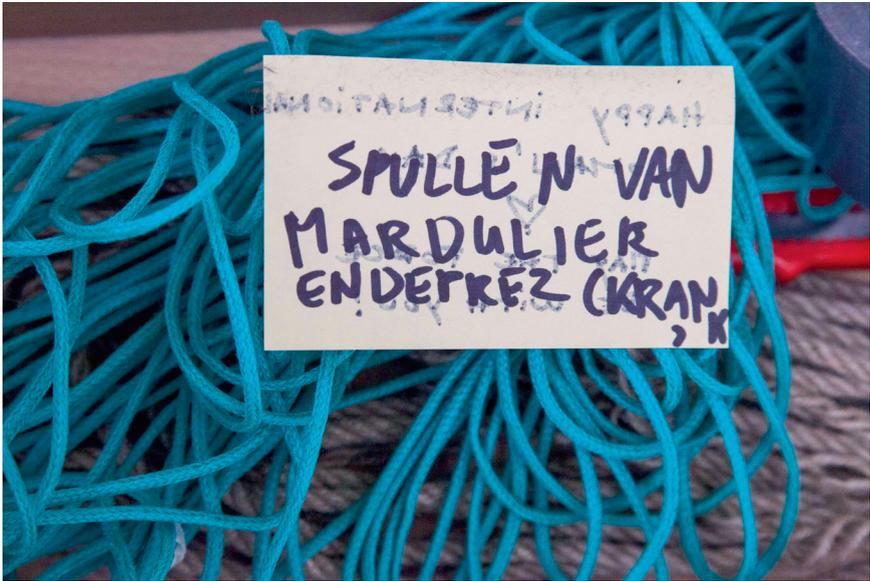
R: We are still trying to find our role within the entire set-up.

**How to position yourself?**

R: Rather, how to add ourselves to it all.

M: We still need to find the right flow sometimes, the right attitude. Those moments where I completely blend in are the best.





**Sometimes you create performances for audiences, but another aspect of your work is showing recordings of interventions you perform in public. What is the role you attribute to an audience?**

R: When we decide to make something for an audience, we take a one-to-one approach. We made this cabin for example, *Oord kijken* (*seeing*), where spectators can take a seat and watch the tourists in the city. We play music inside to act as a soundtrack to the passers-by they observe from there. An audience is crucial in this instance. They are no longer a passive element, whilst that is often a given in circus performances. Although there is, of course, also the clown who picks out one person from the audience and then forces them to participate.

M: We carry a similar responsibility in relation to the audience. I try to trust the fact that, when I like something, chances are that others might think the same thing. We are normal people, we are not that exceptional. Liking bizarre things is not so weird.

To be honest, I actually think the concept needs to appeal to them in order for them to be able to enjoy the result. Without having any notion of the motivation behind it, or the enthusiasm, it's very difficult to understand our work I suppose.

R: Sometimes the recording of a piece works extremely well, so much so that the initial idea or concept even benefits from it. This was the case during *inbreken* (breaking in), where we tried to undermine the motion sensors of a security camera. The video recording is very accessible material. I think it is just something beautiful to look at.

But I agree with Michiel in most cases, when you don't have any feelings about the initial concept, it will be hard to make the recording powerful enough to overcome that. You need to be triggered by the initial idea. So you could say that we work in quite a conceptual way.



## The playground of a post-internet world

### Why do you mention the post-internet theme?

R: The notion of post-internet slipped in about three years ago when we were working on a piece called *Zeno*. We made hand-written copies of our Facebook wall, which we tore up and handed out at the central station in Ghent. At the time, we were working quite a lot with this idea of rendering digital platforms analogue again, which is something that still pops up every now and then in our practice. During a discussion with the artist Noortje Sanders, she said that the notion of post-internet is often a real pet hate of visual artists, they do not like it. So we thought we could give that concept a place within our sub-text and artistic practice.

**You've already briefly touched upon the temporal nature of circus, of building up and creating tension. Is this also an underlying layer of reflection that you introduce in your ASMR<sup>4</sup>-inspired video project *PLANTEN ASMR PLANTS*? I find ASMR a fascinating post-internet phenomenon, precisely because it seems to indicate a free space, a practice where time is being de-capitalized in a sense, but at the same time its goal remains rendering the viewer more relaxed in order to be more productive afterwards. Is there a certain political aspect to Mardulier en Deprez's approach in this video work, one experimenting with a temporal experience?**

M: It was not political in our case. Or at least it was not our intention. We never start out from a place where the end product is anticipated, neither do we work in a very goal-orientated way. How it turns out is something we only consider later on in the process. Once again, I think we work in a very anecdotal way. We are very superficial in that sense: we are not very considerate towards our audience, we do not really think about what we 'offer' them at the end. Precisely because of this approach really beautiful things come about, which would not happen if we were to think too much about how we could make something explicitly beautiful or good.



R: Take the example of *slaapstudie 03* (The artists allow themselves to fall asleep on a train, having not slept for 24 hours and film each other during the process, holding a handcam.) We could have made it shorter and acted 'as if' we were falling asleep. But what good is it to us?

M: For the text of *Technoproza* (Technoprose), we collaborated with a writer on one occasion. We were attempting to create a story with sentences received by us from the audience's smartphones. He suggested that we should add text as otherwise it wouldn't be readable. We found that a little sad. If we were to add our own text, then why would we even start out at all with the idea of whatever a smartphone would generate? The result is indeed not very readable, but at least it is what it was supposed to be. Sometimes it turns out in a pleasing way, sometimes it is more difficult. That's just how it is.

**You introduced the theme of technoself in order to group these technology-related performances together. This notion, coined by Italian philosopher Rocci Luppini, nuances the negative aspects of research about the impact of technology these days. Coincidence?**

R: Oh, we didn't realize that, cool! We really have a minimal amount of knowledge about what we are actually doing when we carry out technological experiments. That's how we can shed a different light onto it. The technopoetry we made shows how bad technology actually is at doing what it is supposed to do. It's incredible to see what technology can already produce, but it is still completely different from what a human would do in the same situation.

**Your upcoming show (cf. May 2019) is called Retrospectief, which means retrospective. The concept of a retrospective is quite weighty for two young artists, isn't it?**

M: For us it is just an opportunity to show our creations. We always have relatively little residue, even when we perform continuously during an entire year. This is just our way of presenting work. We did not really consider the tradition behind the concept.

R: We'll make it even worse: on the second day we'll also do a retrospective of the first day (laughs).

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<sup>1</sup> Lievens, Bauke. "Between being and imagining: towards a methodology for artistic research." Last accessed September 4, 2019.

<https://www.circusdialogue.com/between-being-and-imagining>.

<sup>2</sup> Lievens, Bauke. "The Circus Dialogues". Last accessed September 4, 2019. <https://www.circusdialogue.com/circus-dialogues>.

<sup>3</sup> Kann, Sebastien. "Open Letters to the Circus, #3: Who gets to build the future?" Last accessed August 30, 2019. <https://e-tcetera.be/open-letters-to-the-circus/>.

<sup>4</sup> ASMR is a YouTube phenomenon where people make videos of themselves whispering to the camera or creating other calming and repetitive noises in order to attain a relaxing effect, or even deal with anxiety.