First Open Letter to the Circus

"The need to redefine"

Dear circus artists,

This is a letter. Or rather, the first in a series of letters to be published through the next two years. Together they will attempt to address what I see as an urgent need of the contemporary circus landscape in which we work: that is, the need to redefine what we do. To talk about *how* we do it. To search for answers to the question of *why* we do it. And, last but not least, to develop complex and diverse tools that help us to do it.

The impulse to write these letters has arisen from the lack of surprising, multi-layered and artistically innovative performances that I experience as a spectator, but also from the lack of common language, of shared footholds or references, that I experience for myself and see in others when I work on a performance as a dramaturg.

Of course the two are connected, because the key thing missing from our landscape is what I want these letters to open: a wide dialogue, encompassing many voices and strong points of view, that can address our diverse practice in all its conflicting forms of expression. Beginning this conversation, which really is a conversation about circus' present state and future possibilities, will mean beginning with circus' past.

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For most of its history the circus was occupied almost entirely with skill and technique, and thus with form. This does not mean that it had no content: in traditional circus, the mastering of physically demanding, dangerous techniques and the taming of wild animals can be seen as expressions of a belief in the supremacy of humankind over nature and over natural forces such as gravity. This heavy focus on skill expressed, and even helped to propagate, a contemporary image of man that was inspired by a belief in the 'big stories' of the

time — cultural narratives like the Idea of Progress, which emerged from the Enlightenment and became so influential in the modern era that spanned the 19th and beginnings of the 20th century. Traditional circus was also born during the Industrial Revolution, at a time of rapid urbanisation and in the midst of a sudden boom in entertainment that sought to please the quickly growing working class audience. In this context, circus performers were "first and foremost skilled workers and professionals who sold their physical abilities to the circus director, agent or promoter" (Purovaara 77). Shaped in this way by commerce and culture, the forms of the traditional circus were neither innocent nor meaningless. They functioned as a frame, reinforcing a particular way of seeing and experiencing the world.

Fast forward to the 1970s, France. A group of young theatre directors is looking for more accessible and popular forms of making theatre, faithful as they are to their May 1968 beliefs that art should be brought to the people. In their quest, they happen upon the circus with its immediate accessibility, physical language, and use of public and popular spaces — the street and the tent. Initially, they insert techniques from the circus into their theatre performances, but their work soon influences the circus itself. Circus education, which was traditionally passed on from father/mother to son/daughter, is taken out of the family context and by 1985 is ready to be institutionalised in the first government funded higher education circus school, the Centre National des Arts du Cirque (CNAC) in Châlons-en-Champagne. In this prestigious school, circus techniques are combined with the narratives of (mainly) French theatre and dance of the time. Nouveau cirque is born, and the vision of man expressed by traditional circus is *seemingly* exchanged for something else: the dramatic personae and the linear story. At the root of nouveau cirque, then, lies the idea that form and content are two separate entities, which can somehow be divided without loss on either side: traditional circus skills (form) are isolated in order to combine them with the narratives of the theatre of the 1980s (content). Common to all art forms, however, is the interweaving of form (how?), content (what?), and context (why?). The three are intimately linked and inseparable. In other words: the choice of the form and/or medium always expresses a certain vision or content, which, in turn, is always linked to the context in which an artist makes work and

the question of why they make work. Or as Flemish dramaturg Marianne Van Kerkhoven has put it: "Have we now worked out that form and content are inseparable, and that every revision or reworking of whatever kind also touches on both, and influences both?" (15).

This three-way relationship is not simple, however, and at the same time as nouveau cirque was emerging, theatre and the performing arts were adapting to wider shifts in the fundamental nature of representation in art. For a very long time, art (painting, sculpture, theatre) threw its energy into creating ever more detailed and convincing imitations of reality. Along the way it developed many imitative techniques (think for example of the invention of perspective in painting). Life itself was the original, and art was the imitation of the original. With the invention of photography, however, in 1839, art suddenly lost its imitating function. Photography could simply 'frame' reality, and the distinction between the original and the copy became blurred. Around the same time, visual art embarked on a quest for abstraction, as the different components of painting and sculpture were separated into their independent parts: colour, material, shape, concept.

Theatre, though, retained its imitating function, because in the theatre people could see moving action, something that photography was unable to capture. About 50 years later, around 1890, cinema was born, and at last theatre was freed of its function to imitate and re-present moving action. Different avant-garde theatre directors (like Artaud, Meyerhold, Appia, Craig, Kantor) started experimenting with theatre, and, mirroring the developments that had taken place in the visual arts, the different components of theatre — text, movement, voice, light, costume, storyline — gradually became more independent. In the 1980s, with the boom in new communication technologies, this tendency was sped up, leading to a theatre beyond representation, which the German theatre scholar Hans-Thies Lehman called post-dramatic theatre (2006). In Lehman's vision, this theatre no longer re-presented what was not there (life outside the black box), but presented what *was* there with a heightened intensity.

The danger that exists in circus, and the high level of reality embodied in its physical actions, naturally creates this heightened intensity, and the form itself can never be a good match for the kinds of old-fashioned, 'dramatic' theatre that respect the fourth wall and try to make the spectator believe in a fictitious world on stage. Circus, with its love of physical skill and its history of placing the audience in the round, does not attempt to create an illusion. Instead, it focuses on a real meeting of bodies. There is no fourth wall. Whatever happens does so in real time, in the here and now of the big top. There is no story, but a succession of acts. Except for the clown, there are no dramatic personae. The failure of nouveau cirque was in trying to combine real presence with make-believe at exactly the moment when the innate qualities of circus resonated with the emergence of post-dramatic theatre. This is why, in the nouveau cirque, circus acts always interrupt the narrative. It is simply not possible to combine the two in one smooth whole. At the moment of physical danger (of presence), the story (the re-presentation) simply stops.

Unfortunately, the decision to combine a narrative with circus arts is not limited to a handful of obscure performances from the early days of nouveau cirque. The majority of the circus performances that we make today still function like this — which is to say that they don't function at all. Luckily, the field is gradually becoming aware that this isn't working out, and as a result many artists have placed a renewed focus on technical skill. Much of the work we make today is therefore based on formal (that is: technical) research, with one result of this being the turn to mono-disciplinary performances.

However, what is often missing is the understanding that the mastering of technical skill (the form) expresses that old, traditional vision of Man, and of the world in general. What we present on stage are heroes and heroines, often without any critique or irony, in a way that is anachronistic and implausible in the context of our post-modern, meta-modern or even post-human experiences of the world surrounding us. Our contemporary Western world can no longer be bound together by one big story, nor by the belief that one coherent narrative can give meaning to our experience of that same world; attempts to do this generally come across as trite or naive, or as escapist fantasies.

Something else, though, is taking the place of these big stories: with the obvious disruption of the ecological, financial and geopolitical systems that surround us, it feels as though we are gradually moving away from the dead end of the postmodern aversion towards binding narratives. It is as if we have hesitantly started to articulate a growing desire for sincerity, community and change, but always with the awareness that the ground on which we stand is drenched with irony. The Dutch scholars Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker (2010) have called this emergent feeling 'metamodernism'. They coin the term as an oscillation and negotiation 'between the modern and the postmodern. It oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity.' (Vermeulen and Van den Akker).

To be able to relate to these wider movements in culture, I think it is important that we become more aware of the fact that the skillful forms of circus are expressions of a very particular way of seeing and experiencing the world. As long as we continue to replicate the model of the past, we will fail to connect our craft to the underlying questions — of what we're doing, why we're doing it and how we do it — and we will keep on communicating exactly that: craft.

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It is true that we cannot start to create and express a different content to that of the traditional circus if we do not master the technical skills that are the language of the art. But we will not create artistically renewing work only through the repetition of technical skill and existing 'repertoire', and skill itself does not have to be placed at the core of our practice; rather, we can attempt to define our medium in other terms.

There are many possible approaches, but here I'd like to suggest an understanding of circus as a form in which the virtuoso body is central. However, I would also like to redefine virtuosity. What the circus body does on

stage / in the ring is not meaningless; its actions are always part of an attempt to overcome some physical limit. The circus body constantly pushes the limits of the possible, and incessantly displaces the goals of its physical actions, such that it never attains these goals and limits: they are always moving to be just out of reach. What is expressed through the forms of circus is not the old vision of mastery, then, but an understanding of human action that is fundamentally tragic. Virtuosity is nothing more than the vainly striving human being 'at work'. What appears in the ring is a battle with an invisible adversary (the different forces of nature), in which the goal is not to win but to resist and not to lose. Circus is both the promise of tragedy and the attempt to escape from tragedy. This makes the circus performer into a tragic hero.

We can also consider the relationship of the virtuoso body to objects that are external to it, be they props or pieces of apparatus (a trapeze, a cloudswing, a juggling ball) or the bodies of other artists. In a 2009 essay the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben proposes a distinction of beings into two large groups: "on the one hand, living beings (or substances), and on the other, apparatuses in which living beings are incessantly captured". His understanding of an apparatus, building on the work of Foucault, encompasses "literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviours, opinions, or discourses of living beings", from language itself, to cell phones, cigarettes, the pen and computers. A subject then, to Agamben, is the third category that results from the relationship, or 'the relentless fight', between living beings and apparatuses. (2009)

The dance scholar André Lepecki has already applied this Agambian understanding of the division between living beings and apparatuses to contemporary dance and performance, but the circus seems to be a battleground par excellence on which Agamben's "relentless fight" between human beings and apparatuses can take place (Lepecki). The traditional circus stages the human being in a relationship of supremacy and dominance over the objects in the ring (other bodies, animals, circus equipment), but the technique itself also functions as an apparatus that disciplines the body: it is shaped to a specific standard of

perfection, and in this way its identity is erased. The traditional circus performer, who is meant to be heroic, then appears as a mere anonymous body — meaningless and without subjectivity.

If the circus is to be capable of staging contemporary subjectivities and identities, it is crucial that we start experimenting with different relationships to our apparatuses, techniques and/or objects. Already the relationship between the body and the object has changed dramatically over the last twenty years. It has gone from physical dominance over the trajectories of the object (traditional circus and nouveau cirque), to the object dominating the trajectories of the body (contemporary circus). This is a very important shift, and one that perhaps reflects or engages with our contemporary experience of the world. Like the understanding of human action as fundamentally tragic, it connects circus to the culture and the times in which we live.

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It is time for the circus to redefine its *raisons d'être* and for us to redefine our *raisons de faire*. If we want circus to become more innovative, surprising, weird and disturbing, we need to understand the intimate bond between the forms of the circus and the content that we can express within those forms. We need to find out what specifics define circus as circus, and this beyond technical skill. Any attempt at defining what we do must be matched by an attempt to mark out the field for artistic research within circus. The two overlap. They are two poles on the same continuum. Without research no 'new' definition of the medium can be reached, and without a 'new' definition of the medium there can be no possible pathways for artistic research beyond technical skill.

Since circus has historically occupied a somewhat marginal position within the performing arts (as it did in society in general) we need to understand the dynamics of our changing position. Maybe it is time to go beyond circus. Let us search for countless different answers to the questions of why we want to do circus, how we want to do circus, and what we (can possibly) express by doing circus. Let us do that together. Let us discuss and contradict each other.

I'm very much looking forward to hearing your thoughts. Over the course of the following two years, I will be organising several encounters to talk over and discuss together the different topics that these letters try to raise. Meanwhile, your letters, emails and comments are most welcome on bauke.lievens@hogent.be.

Speak soon,

Bauke Lievens

This is the first letter of a cycle of Open Letters to the Circus written in the framework of the four-year research project 'Between Being and Imagining: towards a methodology for artistic research in contemporary circus' – funded by the research fund of KASK School of Arts (Ghent).

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