

# **WITHDRAWAL TO A HUMBLE CIRCUS**

three careful dramaturgical tactics

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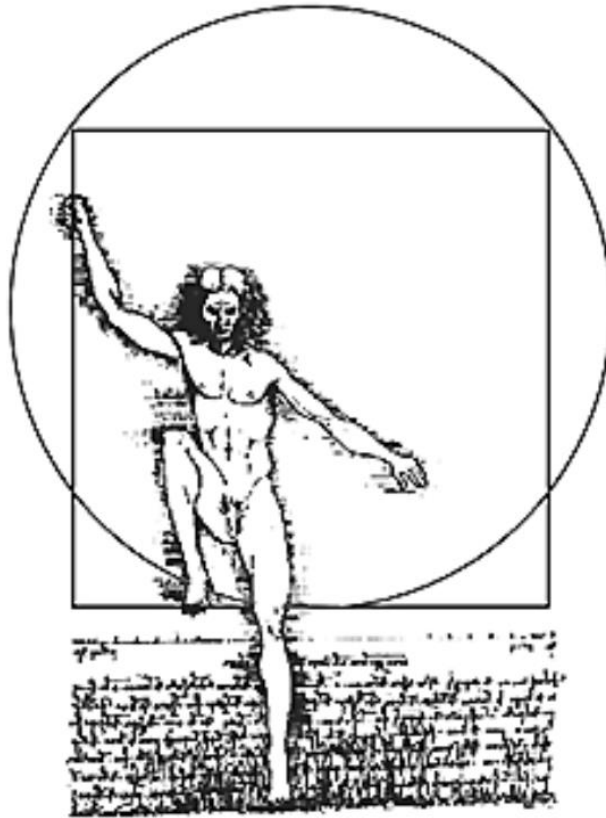


Figure 1: *Vitruvian man climbing out of his frame.*

And that every single body bleeding on its knees is an abomination  
And every natural being is making communication  
And we're just sparks, tiny parts of a bigger constellation  
We're miniscule molecules that make up one body

...

But it was our boats that sailed, killed, stole, and made frail  
It was our boots that stamped  
It was our courts that jailed  
And it was our fuckin' banks that got bailed  
It was us who turned bleakly away  
Looked back down at our nails and our wedding plans  
In the face of a full-force gale, we said  
“Well, it's not up to us to make this place a better land  
It's not up to us to make this place a better land”  
Justice, justice, recompense, humility  
Trust is, trust is something we will never see  
Till love is unconditional  
The myth of the individual has left us disconnected, lost, and pitiful  
I'm out in the rain  
It's a cold night in London  
And I'm screaming at my loved ones to wake up and love more<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kate Tempest, *Tunnel Vision*, from *Let them eat chaos* (California: Universal Music, 2016), CD.

## ABSTRACT

This thesis formulates alternative and more sustainable ways of making, doing and attending circus. These approaches to circus are termed 'humble circus' because of the decentralized position of human beings and their staging of careful relations between humans and nonhumans. In the light of the contemporary ecological disaster, a humble circus wants to resist the anthropocentric *fantasies of mastery* which I consider to be present in a lot of circus practices today. Drawing from potential inherent to today's circus practices, philosophical texts and the way they speak to each other, three dramaturgical tactics are composed. These tactics are TUNING, CRAFTING and DWELLING. All of them are characterized by the cultivation of careful relations. By looking closely at the way circus artists like Phia Ménard/Compagnie Non Nova, Klub Girko and Un loup pour l'homme tune, craft and dwell, and by thinking through this potential, a humble circus assumes form.

Deze thesis formuleert alternatieve en meer duurzame manieren van circus maken, doen en bijwonen. Deze benaderingen van circus worden 'nederig circus' genoemd vanwege de gedecentraliseerde positie van mensen en de inscenering van zorgende relaties tussen mensen en niet-mensen. In het licht van de hedendaagse ecologische ramptoestand wil een nederig circus zich verzetten tegen de antropocentrische *fantasies of mastery* die ik als zeer present beschouw in veel hedendaagse en historische circuspraktijken. Het potentieel inherent aan hedendaagse circuspraktijken en filosofische teksten en de manier waarop deze twee zich tot elkaar verhouden, wordt benut om drie dramaturgische tactieken samen te stellen. Deze tactieken zijn TUNEN, AMBACHT en BEWONEN. In al deze tactieken staan zorgende relaties centraal. Door de manier waarop circusartiesten als Phia Ménard / Compagnie Non Nova, Klub Girko en Un loup pour l'homme tunen, aan ambacht doen en bewonen nauwgezet te bekijken en hun potentieel door te denken, krijgt het nederige circus vorm.

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Being part of this research project allowed me to enter the circus field in ways that would have not been possible for me individually. The Encounters organized by the project and other research events like the preparations for *Smells Like Dialogue: a circus symposium* and the publication *Thinking Through Circus*, provided contexts in which I could exchange views and ideas with numerous circus artists without whom this thesis would be unthinkable. Thanks to all these artists for their engagement.

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## INTRODUCTION

### what is withdrawal and why is it vital?

Belgian visual artist and theatre maker Benjamin Verdonck, ends his performance *notallwhowanderarelost* (2014) with the following statement, written on a piece of cardboard: “In the end I asked K. What more do you think there is to do? To withdraw gracefully, he said.”<sup>2</sup> Later, when working on this thesis, this phrase accumulated meanings and triggered several questions. What could it mean to withdraw? And what would it imply for the circus arts?

As the picture introducing this thesis indicates (fig. 1), the withdrawal I’m trying to think here is a human withdrawal. A humble circus shows a withdrawal of the human from a dominant and central position. Thus, it opposes the anthropocentrism present in a lot of circus practices today. However, it would be far too simplistic to state that it is *the* human who should withdraw from the centre of the world/circus. This would imply that all humans find themselves at the very centre of their worldview. Anthropocentrism is a situated thing. If an age of ecological disaster demands withdrawal, it will be that of a very specific human. That human, I will argue, is present in circus practices. In this thesis, I formulate three dramaturgical tactics for circus to move away from anthropocentrism towards something I call a humble circus.

In her *Staying with the trouble: making kin in the Chthulucene* (2016), Donna Haraway provides us with two archetypes for thinking about the subject of withdrawal: Homo and humus. “Human as humus has potential, if we could chop and shred human as Homo, the detumescing project of a self-making and planet destroying CEO.”<sup>3</sup> she writes. Both Homo and humus are models for humans and the way they relate to their environments. Homo is the Vitruvian man, dominating his surroundings in Ancient thought. As Grandville’s extraordinary drawing shows (fig 2.), this image only accumulated presence in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In today’s society finally, we see him as the multinational CEO, the technology guru and as the triumphant circus artist. Human as humus on the other hand, is Haraway’s name for what she calls the chthonic ones: those living of, in and on the earth. These humans live in explicit connection with nonhumans and acknowledge their dependency on nonhuman environments.

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<sup>2</sup> *notallwhowanderarelost*, Benjamin Verdonck, (Brussel, Kunstenfestivaldesarts, 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the trouble. Making kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 32.



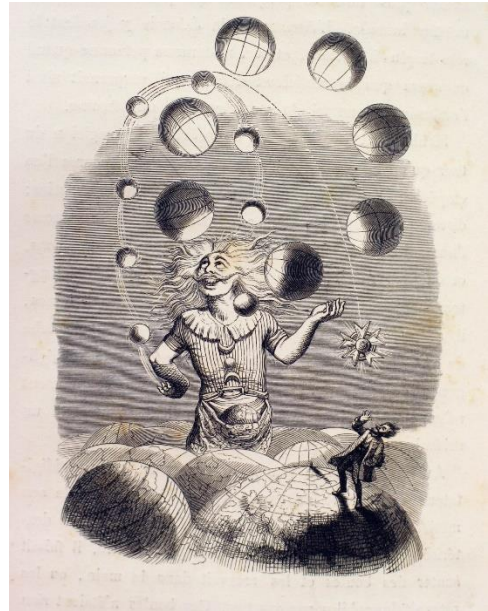


Figure 2: Jean-Jacques Grandville, *Le jongleur*, 1844, woodcut, Antwerp, Collection Ronny Van de Velde.

In an issue appropriately titled *Exit Homo*, I called the troublesome figure of Homo ‘cosmic juggler’, linking hubris in broader society to circus. CEO of Tesla and SpaceX, Elon Musk, served as a provoking example, his launching of the rocket carrying one of his electric cars as the perfect circus trick.<sup>4</sup> As Haraway indicates, Homo is detumescing (de-swelling). In a time where the consequences of his worldview become more and more visible, Homo as the phallic governor of worlds deflates, withdraws. Taking his place is humus, an archetype for the human that is living and dying in a complex web of entities. As the comparison between Musk’s rocket launch and a circus trick provocatively shows, this thesis wants to look for ways to make Homo withdraw from circus practices in order to find more humble alternatives.

It is not just any human withdrawing in the first picture (fig 1.). Leaving the stage is the Vitruvian man. It is he, and I explicitly gender this archetype, who thinks himself to be the centre of the anthropocentric world. Other names for him could be: the hero, the *dompteur*, the manager, the CEO etc. Thinking of himself as the user of his environment, a mechanistic pile of dead matter, it is Homo who is the antropos in the Anthropocene. In the introduction to her seminal *The mushroom at the end of the world* (2015), Anna Tsing sketches the broader worldview in which Homo gives himself a place.

Ever since the Enlightenment, Western philosophers have shown us a Nature that is grand and universal but also passive and mechanical. Nature was a backdrop and resource for the moral intentionality of Man, which could tame and master Nature. It was left to fabulists, including non-Western and non-civilizational storytellers, to remind us of the lively activities of all beings, human and not human.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Vincent Focquet, “Naar een nederig circus,” *Rekto:Verso*, nr. 83 (2018): 58-62.

<sup>5</sup> Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The mushroom at the end of the world. On the possibility of life in capitalist ruins* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2015), vii.

My argument here is that a lot of circus practices both today and historically tend to stage humans as Homo, while presenting Nature, more concretely all nonhumans on the circus stage, as passive and mechanical. In this thesis, I will follow Tsing, in situating these ideas in the historical era of Enlightenment, not coincidentally the time where many historians identify the first origins of circus as we know it today. Crucial for the way this worldview is alive in circus practices, is what Tsing calls mastering and taming. I will borrow Bennett's phrase *fantasies of mastery*, to problematize this human attitude of taming the environment.<sup>6</sup> Each chapter will try to find its own ways leave these fantasies behind and find alternative directions for the circus to take.

In her *Vital materialism: a political ecology of things* (2010), Bennett uses the phrase rather aside, in a description of all the *actants* at play in the North American Blackout she presents as an example of an *assemblage*. These fantasies of mastery, a rather immaterial actant populating the assemblage, could be seen as the fantasy of Homo to rule over his environment: the self-assigned vocation to tame it. Withdrawing, the prerequisite for a humble circus, would mean letting go of the representation of these fantasies.

To the vital materialist, the electrical grid is better understood as a volatile mix of coal, sweat, electromagnetic fields, computer programs, electron streams, profit motives, beat, lifestyles, nuclear fuel, plastic, fantasies of mastery, static, legislation, water, economic theory, wire, and wood - to name just some of the actants.<sup>7</sup>

I take Bennett's casual mention quite seriously here. For a humble circus to surface, we will have to leave the image of Homo and his toxic fantasies of mastery and look for other fantasies about our relation to the environment. Fantasies of mastery is an especially fitted concept here since they are fantasies. Mastery over objects, so I will argue is never real. Objects act no matter what, mastery is thus primarily a problem of representation and discourse. However, its impact is way broader than circus performances.

Since the withdrawal in the title is that of Homo, it is not at all the case that a humble circus should be devoid of humans. A humble circus is devoid of Homo and his destructive fantasies. We will see that alternative images of man necessarily come with alternative worldviews. Re-thinking being human, requires re-thinking the environment. The worldviews I wish to work from decentralize man in favour of a world consisting of different but equally valuable actors, all interwoven in a complex web to affect and be affected. What would it mean for circus practices to be Tsing's fabulists and remind of the lively activities of *all* beings?

Not all animals that we describe as human, fit this category of Homo. As Tsing already points out, there exists a wide variety of non-anthropocentric worldviews. Think for example of the Navajo, indigenous inhabitants of North America described by Haraway as co-inhabiting an interweaved world with among others, Churro sheep.<sup>8</sup> Or what about Inuit people, who, centuries before Western thought 'invented' something like an ontological turn, already inhabited animated

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<sup>6</sup> Fantasies of mastery is a phrase I borrowed from Bennett in my bachelor thesis. During the research project *The Circus Dialogues* at KASK School of Arts, this term was elaborated on at several occasions, for example in the seminar: *Circus and theory: undoing fantasies of mastery*. This is how it acquired the richness of meaning that I will now draw from and hope to contribute to.

<sup>7</sup> Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter. A political ecology of things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 25.

<sup>8</sup> Haraway, Donna J., *Staying with the trouble*, 89.

cosmologies.<sup>9</sup> We could even say that the direction of the imperative of withdrawal points, is precisely that of Haraway's human as humus. In this thesis, I will take it as my goal to compose three dramaturgical tactics for staging this withdrawal in circus.

### **what is humble about a humble circus?**

Why would the circus arts be the context for this withdrawal from Homo towards humus? To answer this question we first have to address the unavoidable question of circus' ontology. What precisely am I thinking of when I use the word circus? Proposing an answer to this question necessarily involves power dynamics. Who gets to decide what is (not) circus? This is why I do not use a definition, but prefer to work with what Sebastian Kann calls a *temporary belief*. This temporary belief is an understanding of circus that is a necessary building block for this text but makes no truth claims beyond it. In order to enter into a dialogue, we need to adopt a *temporary belief*, which we can enter together to think from a certain shared viewpoint.<sup>10</sup> The temporary belief I wish to adopt together with you, the reader, is the following: circus is a relational arts practice.

This relational understanding of circus arts entails that circus is a set of performing art practices in which the relation between humans and nonhumans is critical. Through various practices like training and performing, circus artists create, shape and sustain relations between themselves and their (im)material environment. The art form belongs to what Bruno Latour imaginatively calls the Middle Kingdom. This is a place in between everything the moderns wanted but finally could not separate: importantly object/subject and nature/culture.<sup>11</sup> On a representational level however, a lot of practices today and before show that the Homo paradigm is firmly in place. This paradigm re-enforces the modern object-subject divide by showing man as triumphing over his environment. This results in a specific type of relations. These relations could be called relations of victory and subjugation. By staging the victory of Homo over his environment, these practices are exhibiting and furthering the hubris of anthropocentrism.

The specific ways anthropocentrism is present in today's circus practices are addressed in the CARING chapter. For now, it suffices to say that circus often stages anthropocentrism by exhibiting the image of Homo spectacularly conquering his environment. Think of the victorious acrobat executing a perfect double somersault and thus conquering gravity. But, if we want to withdraw from that position, where should that withdrawal lead? What kind of alternative positions to anthropocentrism can we formulate in circus? I term these alternative positions 'humble' in contrast to the hubris of anthropocentrism. It is precisely the goal of the three dramaturgical tactics described in this thesis to formulate more humble ways of doing, making and attending circus and thus provide an insight in what could be a humble circus.

If a humble circus is to function as a refuge for the fantasies of mastery dominating a lot of circus up until today, we should make sure to define the way it would fulfil this function. What could it

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<sup>9</sup> Zoe Todd, "An indigenous feminist's take on the ontological turn: ontology is just another word for colonialism," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 29, nr. 1 (2016): 4-22.

<sup>10</sup> Sebastian Kann, "Open letters to the circus #3: Who gets to build the future?," *Etcetera*, accessed 16<sup>th</sup> April 2019, [https://e-tcetera.be/open-letters-to-the-circus/#\\_ednref23](https://e-tcetera.be/open-letters-to-the-circus/#_ednref23).

<sup>11</sup> Bruno Latour, *We have never been modern* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 77-78.

mean to be humble and how does it resist the anthropocentrism I problematize here? It should not surprise us that, when searching for virtues for ecological restoration, environmental philosopher Ronald Sandler bumps into humility: “Our capacity to predicate and control the outcomes of our ecological interventions is likely to be reduced. Even greater humility regarding our ability is therefore justified.”<sup>12</sup>

Sandler might just as well have found this virtue in Anishinaabe thought. In the ancestral teachings, in which the people of Canada and the North of the United States describe ways to live sustainably on the land, humility plays a vital role. Nicole Bell defines the value as follows:

The recognition of ourselves as a sacred and equal part of Creation, and in the honoring of all of life which is endowed with the same inherent autonomy, dignity, freedom and equality which leads to a sensitivity toward others and a desire for good relations and balance with all of life.<sup>13</sup>

Because of this explicit reference to humility, this Anishinaabe thought will be a recurring theme in this thesis. The contrast of this worldview with the Western Cartesian image of humankind and environment, further addressed in the CARING chapter, does not need much explanation. A new figure for the human in circus turns up. The Homo/CEO is replaced by a more humble figure. This human figure, as we shall explore in the next chapter, relates to her environment with care.

Zoe Todd’s argument discussed above, is more than applicable again. The stream of “new” ontologies that the West is producing in response to the climate catastrophe, were already present in areas that were colonized by the West. The Anishinaabeg and their relational worldview for example, were violently fought by the hubris inherent to colonialism. It is the same hubris that we have to acknowledge as the ontological prerequisite for Global Warming. A humble worldview, like those made invisible by colonialism, can be excellent guides in imagining alternatives to the fantasies of mastery that got us here.

Anishinaabe thinker Deborah McGregor powerfully argues that ‘Minobimaatisiwin’: good life, understood in terms of cycles, and of relationships within and among these cycles, is not only ecological knowledge, it is a practice.<sup>14</sup>

Minobimaaatisiwin, therefore is so much more than *knowledge* about how to live sustainably. Rather, it is *living* sustainably. It is not just about understanding the relationship with Mother Earth, *it is the relationship itself*.<sup>15</sup>

This practice is not only sharply contrasting with, but was aggressively attacked by capitalist colonial thought and its distinctive hubris. Particular important for this research is the emphasis on the relationality of being. Minobimaatisiwin is, among other things, about shaping and maintaining good relationships with the Universe. In a way, this is the goal of this thesis. Since circus is defined

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<sup>12</sup> Ronald Sandler, “Global Warming and virtues of ecological restoration,” in *Ethical Adaptation to Climate Change. Human Virtues of the Future*, ed. Allen Thompson and Jeremy Bendik-Keymer. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012), 63-80.

<sup>13</sup> Nicole Bell, “Anishinaabe Bimaadiziwin: living spiritually with respect, relationship, reciprocity and responsibility,” in *Contemporary Studies in Environmental and Indigenous Pedagogies*, ed. Andrejs Kulnieks, Dan Roronhiakewen and Longboat Kelly Young. (Rotterdam, Boston, Taipei: Sense Publishers, 2013), 95.

<sup>14</sup> *Buen Vivir*, a term stemming from South-American thinking has a similar meaning and is currently gaining resonance in broader academic research.

<sup>15</sup> McGregor, “Anishinaabe environmental knowledge,” 79.

as a relational art form, looking for a humble circus is looking for a way to shape these relations as well as possible.

Donna Haraway has a similar understanding of storytelling as the one described by McGregor. She too, sees stories as relations to the environment. They are not only to be seen as knowledge about this environment: they are the relationship to the environment itself. If done in what I would call a humble way, the practice of storytelling could thus contribute to what Haraway calls earthly survival.<sup>16</sup>

Just like stories, circus arts shape relations. But what kind of relations do circus practitioners (want to) cultivate between themselves and their environment? In this thesis, I will look for more humble stories for the circus to tell, more careful relations to sustain. In the first chapter, I look into relations of tuning. In these relations, entities (be they human or nonhuman) attune their activities to each other. Thus, tuning serves as an alternative to relations of mastery, while asking important questions about agency. After that, I explore craft as dramaturgical tactics. Craft is an interesting concept to think circus practices with because it offers insights in knowledge, materiality and socio-economical organisation. The last chapter is probably the broadest of all. It is also the one that is most directly related to today's ecological catastrophe. In the chapter, I describe how a humble circus can take dwelling as a structuring element. What does it mean for circus arts to see, the relations which circus practices give rise to as constituting and maintaining houses or worlds? How do we inhabit worlds through circus?

All these tactics are already present in circus practices, we just have to look carefully and wonder how to intensify them, which is precisely what this thesis aims to do. As will become apparent in the next chapter, all of the tactics decentralize human beings in order to relate to environments in a careful way. Could we imagine the circus doing what stories like those of the Anishinaabeg have been doing for centuries: exercising careful relations to the environment? And what could that feel and look like? Before we can address this, we have to deal with the subject of the next chapter: how could one write about something like this?

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<sup>16</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the trouble*, 102.

## METHODOLOGY: THINKING ABOUT DOING A HUMBLE CIRCUS

In a sense, this is a meta-methodology. It revolves around the following question: *how to write* about *how to do* something in circus. The methodology of this thesis will in itself be the formulation of a kind of methodology for circus. The form that this proposed methodology will take is that of dramaturgical tactics.

### dramaturgical tactics

Now that we built an understanding of humility and have a better idea of how it relates to circus practices, we can start putting together a methodology for thinking this humble circus. The methodology I am proposing in this thesis, is that of dramaturgical tactics. It cannot be the goal here to fully explore the meaning of the contested term 'dramaturgy'. However, when trying to identify and shape dramaturgical tactics, we cannot get around building a basic understanding of what dramaturgy means in this context.

For her understanding of dramaturgy, Maaïke Bleeker draws from the conceptualization of thinking by Deleuze and Guattari made in *What is Philosophy?* (1991). Here, they imagine thinking as something that happens in-between:

If thinking does not happen in the head of the autonomous thinker, but rather happens in-between and through the specificities of the medium, what emerges from this process (thought) can neither be considered exclusive to a thinker, nor as existing independently of the medium in which it takes shape.<sup>17</sup>

This thinking is not only happening in between people, it is a process that happens between and through things, ideas, humans, movements etc. Thinking is relational too. Next to that, the temporality of this thinking is important: it is constantly emerging. From this point, Bleeker starts building a concept of dance as thinking and dramaturgy as the thinking of no-one's thought.

I therefore argue that dance or performance understood as a product of such collaborative practices of thinking consists of thoughts materialized in performance. These thoughts are not those of one of the individuals involved in the creation, but those which emerge from the collaborative process. They are no-one's thoughts.<sup>18</sup>

If, with Bleeker, we see circus practice as a way of thinking, could the dramaturg be what Adrian Heathfield calls: "the steward on the journey of thought"?<sup>19</sup> This thesis will try to cultivate this dramaturgical point of view. That means that I try to co-think no-one's thoughts in circus practice and formulate tactics for more humble ways of doing this thinking. These tactics set out some lines, some rules for playing if you like, for thinking within and through circus.

Next to Bleeker's concept of dramaturgy, we need another one to fully understand the way dramaturgy is active in the dramaturgical tactics. André Lepecki describes dramaturgical work as looking for and enabling possibilities, while not knowing where they will bring us. He gives us the following guideline for doing this.

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<sup>17</sup> Maaïke Bleeker, "Thinking no-one's thought," in *Dance dramaturgy: modes of agency, awareness and engagement*, ed. Pil Hansen and Darcey Callison. (Houndmills: Pallgrave, 2015), 67-83.

<sup>18</sup> Bleeker, "Thinking no-one's thought," 71.

<sup>19</sup> Adrian Heathfield, "Dramaturgy without a dramaturg," in *Rethinking dramaturgy. Errancy and transformation*, Manuel Bellisco, Maria Jose Cifuentes and Amparo Ecija. (Centro Parraga: Murcia, 2011), 110.

Here, an imperative must always be attended to. Let's call it an immanent imperative, to attend carefully to all the elements present in the situation, even if supposedly peripheral, even if supposedly insignificant.<sup>20</sup>

Dramaturgy as a careful search for possibilities and the call to render them capable to grow is something that will be central to this thesis. I discuss it at length in the next subtitle.

In this thesis, I will thus take on the dramaturgical perspective of thinking no-ones thoughts and looking for the possibilities in them. Elements, like training, nomadic lifestyles and performance architecture, that might not seem to be at the core of circus practices will be discussed in order to see how they might possibly bring us closer to a humble circus. The dramaturgies I'm thinking of here do not (only) concern the performance and its creation process. The concept is broadened so that it encompasses the entire practice of circus artists. The temporality of emergence, crucial for Bleeker, is stretched beyond the time of the project. The dramaturgies I'm thinking of span the whole scope of a practice. To more or less confine this constantly expanding field of dramaturgy, I highlight three points where these dramaturgical tactics are at play. These three points are: doing, making and attending. The dramaturgical tactics de- and prescribed in this thesis are therefore tactics for doing, making and attending circus.

In her *Homemade Academic Circus* (2016), Danish circus researcher Camilla Damkjaer argues that although creators, performers and spectators all create, do and spectate, the three activities give access to different kinds of information.<sup>21</sup> To make explicit these specific kinds of knowledges and the possibilities inherent to them, it makes sense to structure the dramaturgical tactics in these three activities. I call them: making, doing and attending. A big part of the already scarce theory on circus, is concerned with performances. It is the aim of this research to broaden up this perspective on circus by including 'doing' and 'attending'. I emphasize this because I believe these two aspects of circus are too important to forget or naturalise, as is happening right now. There are too many possibilities to be found there. As I hope will become clear during this thesis, it matters how we do and attend as much as it matters how we make.

Attending circus is a clear category. It is the circus practice I'm most familiar with myself. However, because of the all too common misconception of the passive spectator, it might seem unusual to include dramaturgical tactics for attending. To resist this misconception, I want to include the ones attending as a crucial and active element in the dramaturgical tactics, whether it is a professional one (critic, programmer or director) or an amateur (aren't we all?).

The other two activities, doing and making, mainly concern the ones we see as circus artists. The distinction between these two activities might need some clarification. A big part of circus practice is not directly aimed at a performance. This importantly includes training, but also building up tents and the (affective) labour of living together. These are the practices I will cluster as 'doing', while 'making' refers to activities directly concerned with a specific performance. In her *Second Open Letter to the Circus: The myth called circus* (2018), Bauke Lievens introduced me to this distinction.

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<sup>20</sup> André Lepecki, "Errancy as work: seven strewn notes for dance dramaturgy," in *Dance dramaturgy. Modes of agency, awareness and engagement* ed. Pil Hansen and Darcey Callison. (New York: Springer, 2015), 61.

<sup>21</sup> Camilla Damkjaer, *Homemade academic circus. Idiosyncratically embodied explorations into artistic research and circus performance* (Alresford: John Hunt Publishing, 2016), 36.

Many of us think that practicing circus is the same as creating and performing circus. Nothing could be less true. Practicing circus is high-level sport. Creating circus is something different. Creating circus takes place in the space of the performance, not in that of circus practice.

However, I disagree quite strongly on the reduction of circus practice to 'high-level sport'. In the three dramaturgical tactics, I will elaborate on 'doing circus' as a rich practice, full of (humble) potential.

What is the place of tactics in this conceptualization of dramaturgy? The three tactics that will take shape below, are ways of structuring the dramaturgical work done in this thesis. I will try to demarcate the playing field for this thesis by gathering (no-one's) thoughts about how to do, make and attend circus around three verbs: crafting, dwelling and tuning. It is not so much the case that I will see circus practice as thinking *about*, for example, craft. Rather, I want to argue that *through* crafting circus artists think. In the following chapters I will describe how in the crafting, dwelling and tuning happening in circus, there is potential for more humble practices. Since dramaturgy as a mode of looking is not exclusive to the dramaturg, these dramaturgical tactics are not (only) tactics for the dramaturg.<sup>22</sup> They are employable and of value for virtually every agent in the circus field.

Crafting, tuning, dwelling: for now, it is not so important what these three verbs mean. What is crucial is the mere fact that they are verbs. You can actually *do* them. This brings us to the idea of tactics. At this point, we have no other choice but to dive into Michel de Certeau. In *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), the Jesuit scholar distinguishes between strategies and tactics. While strategies are hegemonic plans from 'outside', de Certeau's examples are mainly institutions and power structures in consumer society, tactics are everyday practices by subjects 'inside'.

A tactic is a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus. No delimitation of an exteriority, then, provides it with the condition necessary for autonomy. The space of a tactic is the space of the other. Thus it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power. ... It does not, therefore, have the options of planning general strategy and viewing the adversary as a whole within a district, visible, and objectifiable space. It operates in isolated actions, blow by blow.<sup>23</sup>

Lev Manovich powerfully argued that since *The Practice of Everyday Life* the picture has changed considerably. Strategies, now flexible and personally customizable, increasingly start to look like tactics.<sup>24</sup> However, the distinction here is still important in the sense that the dramaturgical tactics described are not coherent wholes as seen from a stable, totalizing position of overview.<sup>25</sup> They find 'opportunities' in the space of the other of spectacular circus and looks for ways to turn them around. Strongly related to the DWELLING chapter, tactics work to make environments habitable.<sup>26</sup> Although I join the tactics under one verb, they are always multiple. They are not to be seen as a unified whole. Each chapter harbours sets of related but distinct tactics, each taking

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<sup>22</sup> Maaïke Bleeker, "Dramaturgy as a mode of looking," *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory* 13, nr. 2 (2003): 163.

<sup>23</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The practice of everyday life* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2011), 36-37.

<sup>24</sup> Lev Manovich, "The practice of everyday (media) life: from mass consumption to mass cultural production?," *Critical Inquiry* 35, nr. 2 (2009): 323.

<sup>25</sup> Dramaturgical tactics thus also resist the idea of dramaturgy as coming from an *outside eye*, reminiscent of Haraway's god trick, which is closer to the strategy. It is an inside mode of looking.

<sup>26</sup> Manovich, "The practice of everyday (media) life," 322.



advantage of specific elements in circus practice. Blow by blow, we try to come closer to a humble circus.

We could see the dramaturgical tactics as rules for playing. This thesis relates to the embodied practice of circus by providing these bodies with tactics to play around with in practice. These rules are setting bodies in motion by imposing productive constrictions upon them. Like in any game, these rules make playing possible. Concretely, I'll use the tool of tactic to structure the dramaturgies that I will compose out of promising elements in case studies. Interweaving these traces in such a way that they form a dramaturgical tactic, they start to point to a possible, more humble future. A future that is worth imagining.

### **feeding the possible**

“The possible is what we have to feed and sustain.”<sup>27</sup>

This thesis does not only consist of descriptive parts. It has a prescriptive side too. Drawing from potential that I recognize as inherent to circus practices today, I will identify a set of tactics that point towards a possible, more humble, future. This means that each chapter will start from an analysis of a recent circus work. These are works that sparked this research. In the way they do, make and (allow to) attend circus, they carry traces of the careful dramaturgies we are looking for. Each of these practices promises a humble circus. The same holds for theory. In theory too, I will look for possibilities that promise a more humble future. By collecting the traces of the possible in practice and theory, grouping them around a verb and making them interact, I will reflect on how they could be intensified and structured into a dramaturgical tactic. For reasons of clarity and coherence, these dramaturgical tactics are split up in three parts. In each chapter, I will shape tactics for doing, making and attending circus.

The promise of the cases, just like the temporality of the tactic, is futural. It points towards a possible future. In this thesis, you'll read “it is x” as often as “it could be y”. These ideas are central to the thought of Belgian philosopher Isabelle Stengers. Her philosophical attitude is my guide for thinking here. In *Cosmopolitics I*, Stengers understands learning to think as follows:

Learning to resist a future that presents itself as obvious, plausible and normal ... To resist a likely future in the present is to gamble that the present still provides substance for resistance, that it is populated by practices that remain vital even if none of them has escaped the generalized parasitism that implicates them all.<sup>28</sup>

As opposed to a likely future, Stengers devotes her thinking to ‘the possible’. The possible is what she calls ‘substance for resistance’ above: a substance available in the present, that is capable of subverting it into an improbable future. This is precisely the way I will relate to cases here. When discussing performances and practices, I'm searching for the possible in them, in order to make that possible echo in the dramaturgical tactics of tuning, crafting and dwelling.

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<sup>27</sup> Isabelle Stengers, “Thinking with Isabelle Stengers,” (Brussels: Kaaithheater, 13<sup>th</sup> May 2017, accessed July 31<sup>st</sup> 2019, <https://vimeo.com/204158683>).

<sup>28</sup> Isabelle Stengers, *Cosmopolitics I* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 10.

In *Futurability: The Age of Impotence and the Horizon of Possibility* (2017), Italian philosopher Franco 'Bifo' Berardi develops a similar idea. Reacting to the difficulty of our age to produce the change we so desperately need, Berardi, like Stengers, describes possibility as something immanent to the present.

Possibility is not one, it is always plural: the possibilities inscribed in the present composition of the world are not infinite, but many. The field of possibility is not infinite because the possible is limited by the inscribed impossibilities of the present. Nevertheless, it is plural, a field of bifurcations. When facing an alternative between different possibilities, the organism enters into vibration, then proceeds making a choice that corresponds to its potency.<sup>29</sup>

For Berardi, power is what actualizes one possible and not another. Berardi and Stengers thus both describe the present as populated by multiple possibilities, some of them get to be actualized, others not. I follow Stengers in her devotion to improbable futures. For this thesis, this implies that I'll try to identify possibilities in circus practices that could make Homo withdraw from his no longer tenable position.

Between the possible inside of the present and the improbable future stand the tactics. These dramaturgical tactics will try to use Stengers' and Berardi's possible and by systematizing them, render them more capable of being actualized. To his lengthy definition of tactics above, de Certeau adds:

*It takes advantage of "opportunities" and depends on them, being without any base where it could stockpile its winnings, build up its own position, and plan raids. What it wins it cannot keep. ... It must vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers.*<sup>30</sup> (emphasis added)

Following Berardi and de Certeau, we might say that power structures shape predictable futures, preventing the subversive potential (Stengers' substance for resistance) immanent to the present to actualize. Tactics on the other hand, might help us resist these power structures and battle for a more improbable future: a humble one. This way, I'm trying to use tactics to formulate possible circus futures beyond what is predictable: the triumph of Homo. I identify de Certeau's cracks or opportunities in the power of circus' anthropocentrism as: tuning, dwelling and crafting. Each chapter tries to exploit this possibility in order to come closer to a humble circus. In the epilogue, I will intensify the traces of the possible into a blueprint for a performance that has never happened. There, I imagine what could happen if these seeds would germinate. This possible performance is informed by the dramaturgical tactics that I constructed in the course of this thesis. It functions as a specific locus, to see what the dramaturgical tactics could do.

Being the imagination of an unlikely future, this thesis wants to be a plea *for*, rather than against practices. It's dedicated to all the possibilities in circus practices, not to trying to get rid of practices that I would find problematic. Thus, while critique is certainly part of the thesis, it is not the main *modus operandi*. Performance philosopher Bojana Cvejic writes: "Proceeding by the critique as a general operating principle prevents one from producing ("fostering", "augmenting") the

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<sup>29</sup> Francesco Berardi, *Futurability. The age of impotence and the horizon of possibility* (London: Verso Books, 2017), 1.

<sup>30</sup> Certeau, *The practice of everyday life*, 37.

situation.”<sup>31</sup> Since fostering the situation of the seeds of a humble circus is exactly my goal, critique cannot be the starting point.

Related to that, while the exclusive legitimacy attributed to practices discussed in academia is inevitable, it is not at all my goal to legitimize certain practices in spite of others. This too, is why I prefer *for* over *against*. Therefore, it is important that the practices I describe as pointing towards a humble circus are not more or less contemporary than other practices. Operating within a philosophical framework so firmly anchored in the era of ecological catastrophe, we have to avoid the desire to ‘contemporize’ circus practices. Withdrawal is not about updating. Circus is already happening in the here and now, if some people describe it as backwards or not. As Kann argues, we should shun installing a normative timeline for the “development” of circus.<sup>32</sup> If the withdrawal movement is progressive, it takes one direction in a situation in which an unlimited set of other directions are just as possible and legitimate.

From the point of view of knowledge politics, not only the philosophical framework is risky, so is the term dramaturgy. In *Anxious Dramaturgy* (2003), Myriam Van Imschoot powerfully argues how dramaturgy can function as a mediator, undoing practices of their possibilities by making them adhere to an art system or canon.<sup>33</sup> This is a danger we can do no more about than reminding ourselves of it. This is necessary if we do not want to end up uncritically writing circus into the main art institutes and their discourse. Since I will be using quite some theory from dance (dramaturgy) and philosophical text that circulate in the dominant institutes, I will try to deal with this problem in knowledge politics as well as possible by looking at circus’ specificities.

### **theory and practice**

According to the Belgian dramaturge Marianne Van Kerkhoven, without whom no account of dramaturgy is complete, dramaturgy is to be found in the twilight zone between theory and practice.<sup>34</sup> In my dramaturgical tactics, theory and practice relate to each other in quite a peculiar way. First, the distinction between these two fields is hard to retain. After all, theory is a practice. The thinking for this paper is done through the practices of writing, reading, watching, talking etc. The other side of the line seems to be as blurry: practice is also a form of theory. Above, Bleeker already argued how performance is a form of thinking and Sennett, a leading figure in the CRAFTING chapter, famously states: “Making is thinking.”<sup>35</sup> When circus artist make circus, they are thinking through doing. More specific for this thesis: they are thinking through relating.

The practices I’m thinking of are broad. As described above, I will look at dramaturgies that extend themselves beyond project-time. I will thus not only discuss performances, but also include practices like training, watching circus and even traveling around to work. Rather than proposing concrete aesthetics, I would like to propose tactics for the way the circus functions as a field. These

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<sup>31</sup> Bojana Cvejic, “The making of the making of,” *TkH* 15, (2008): 32.

<sup>32</sup> Sebastian Kann, “Open Letters to the Circus #3: Who gets to build the future?,” *Etcetera*, accessed April 16th 2019, [https://e-tcetera.be/open-letters-to-the-circus/#\\_ednref23](https://e-tcetera.be/open-letters-to-the-circus/#_ednref23).

<sup>33</sup> Myriam Van Imschoot, “Anxious dramaturgy,” *Women & Performance* 13, nr. 2 (2003): 59.

<sup>34</sup> Marianne Van Kerkhoven, “Kijken zonder potlood in de hand,” *Theaterschrift*, nr. 5-6 On Dramaturgy (1994), 140-149.

<sup>35</sup> Richard Sennett, *The craftsman* (London: Penguin UK, 2009), i.

interventions range from changes in embodied micro relations, like the one between the human and the nonhuman body during training, to broader structures like the way companies work and live together and how they disseminate their work.

The natures of the theories I'm thinking with are as diverse as that of the practices I'm bringing up. However, the philosophical framework of what Richard Grusin termed the 'nonhuman turn' and that is often called 'new materialism' or 'posthumanism' is crucial for the conceptualization of a humble circus. While these terms are different, constantly questioned and not one of the thinkers cited in this thesis will agree with all of them, I follow Grusin when he broadly characterizes the fragmented philosophical project as follows:

decentering the human in favor of a turn toward and concern for the nonhuman, understood variously in terms of animals, affectivity, bodies, organic and geophysical systems, materiality, or technologies.<sup>36</sup>

We should keep Zoe Todd's critique in mind and remember that the nonhuman turn only turned things around in the West and that new materialisms are only new for some people. However, these philosophies are so fitting because they had to deal with the fundamentally anthropocentric history of Western thinking in order to withdraw Homo from their worldviews. It is this movement of withdrawal that inspired the movement towards a humble circus.

As a last remark about the relation between theory and practice in this thesis, it is important to address the slightly awkward relation the circus arts have to theory. While in the last few years the scope of theoretical reflection on circus has been growing strongly, it still feels like the first steps in new territory. While before it was too easily accepted that there was a lack of discourse in circus arts, it is better to say that the discourse is implicit. A lot of reflection is already happening in circus arts, it's just seldomly recognized as such or made explicit.<sup>37</sup>

This realization gave rise to the artistic research project *Between being and imagining: Towards a methodology for artistic research* (2013-2017) by Bauke Lievens. This project was followed by *The Circus Dialogues* (2018-2020) at KASK School of Arts Ghent, again guided by Bauke Lievens but joined by co-researchers Sebastian Kann and Quintijn Ketels and eventually by me, an apprentice who was lucky enough to be able to stick around long after his apprenticeship had ended. Next to the University of Ghent, this is the institutional framework in which this thesis found the support it needed to grow. In the project, we try to make the thinking of circus explicit, so that it can grow and feed circus practices. In that context, a publication called *Thinking Through Circus* is forthcoming, the thoughts emerging in this process fuelled the thinking for this thesis.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Richard Grusin, "Introduction," in *The nonhuman turn*, ed. Richard Grusin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), vii.

<sup>37</sup> As an anecdote: the Performance Studies section in the library of the University of Ghent, where I am writing this thesis, has four books on circus, one of them is on visual art about circus. Next to that, too my knowledge there is little to no academic reflection on any of the cases I discuss in this thesis. This is part of the reason why I'm bringing in so much theory that is not directly related to Performance Studies.

<sup>38</sup> The entangled but sometimes conflicting frames of thinking and doing will be addressed thoroughly in the CRAFTING chapter.

### how could a methodology be humble?

Avoiding fantasies of mastery is a task we have to give ourselves in knowledge production too. Knowledge has, in a Western/Cartesian tradition, pre-eminently been thought of as relationship of dominance with one's environment.<sup>39</sup> These fantasies often show their nasty faces in the theoretical field in the form of what Donna Haraway calls 'the god trick'. This term points to the illusion of knowledge being produced by an eye "seeing everything from nowhere".<sup>40</sup> In the same article, she provides the alternative of the partial perspectives she terms 'situated knowledges'. This notion will remain vital in her later work. In *Staying with the Trouble*, Haraway explicitly points out the fantasies of mastery involved in knowing, and situates their origin in colonial imperialism: "Like all offspring of colonizing and imperial histories, -we- have to relearn how to conjugate worlds with partial connections and not universals and particulars."<sup>41</sup>

Archetypal for such a partial perspective is the 'modest witness', proposed by Haraway as a figure for technoscientists in *Modest\_Witness@Second\_Millennium.FemaleMan\_Meets\_OncoMouse* (1997).

S/he is about telling the truth, giving reliable testimony, guaranteeing important things, providing good enough grounding—while eschewing the addictive narcotic of transcendental foundations—to enable compelling belief and collective action.<sup>42</sup>

The affinity between the words modesty and humility should not be left unnoticed. This would mean that a humble methodology is a methodology for producing situated knowledge. Thus I have tried to avoid the god trick, still so present in academia, and tried to take on the role of the modest witness. That my perspective is partial could not be clearer. I am not a circus artist and have not experienced any (professional) training. I am primarily a circus audience member. And even in that sense, I only have access to the few shows playing in Belgium or nearby and mainly focus on what is often, not unproblematically, termed 'contemporary circus'. The last remark on a humble methodology concerns the theoretical framework I will be using. Here, my perspective is that of a man on theories that are often feminist at their very cores: an access that is of course very specific and limited.

What does this mean for this text? Here, we come back to the very beginning of this introduction: this text has nothing to say about the circus as a 'universal'. Rather, it is a situated account of what I register as possible in the heterogeneous field of circus. However, the situatedness of this writing should not be mistaken for sheer individuality. This thesis is not just my view on circus and where it could be going. The thinking happening here is what María Puig de la Bellacasa calls *thinking-with*.<sup>43</sup> This text is built from knowledge that exists in a complex web of entities. It could not exist outside the framework of the KASK School of Arts research project *The Circus Dialogues* in which Sebastian Kann, Quintijn Ketels, Bauke Lievens and myself share thoughts. This goes together

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<sup>39</sup> Thanks to the team of The Circus Dialogues, especially Sebastian Kann, to point this out so thoroughly.

<sup>40</sup> Donna J. Haraway, "Situated knowledges. The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, nr. 3 (1988): 581.

<sup>41</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 13.

<sup>42</sup> Donna J. Haraway, *Modest-Witness@Second-Millennium.FemaleMan-Meets-OncoMouse. Feminism and Technoscience* (Hove: Psychology Press, 1997), 22.

<sup>43</sup> María Puig de la Bellacasa, "Nothing comes without its world: thinking with care," *The Sociological Review* 60, nr. 2 (2012): 199-204.

with a more private context of friendly thinking together as well as a broader exchange with the circus field.

It is important to conclude with the fact that circus practices as well as ecology are things I care for as a researcher. This care, often condemned to the acknowledgements in texts like this one, even sparked this research. It is a specific expression of Bellacasa's thinking with care. "It is for me a specific meaning of thinking with care that appears here: the embeddedness of thought in the worlds one cares for."<sup>44</sup> A humble methodology relates to the environment it is speaking of in a careful way. Feeding Stenger's possible will thus require care. "We can learn to examine situations from the point of view of their possibilities, from that which they communicate with and that which they poison. Pragmatism is the care of the possible."<sup>45</sup> Since humility and care start to interact here, we are working our way towards the next chapter. In this chapter, I will explore care as a central concept for a humble circus that connects the three dramaturgical tactics of tuning, crafting and dwelling.

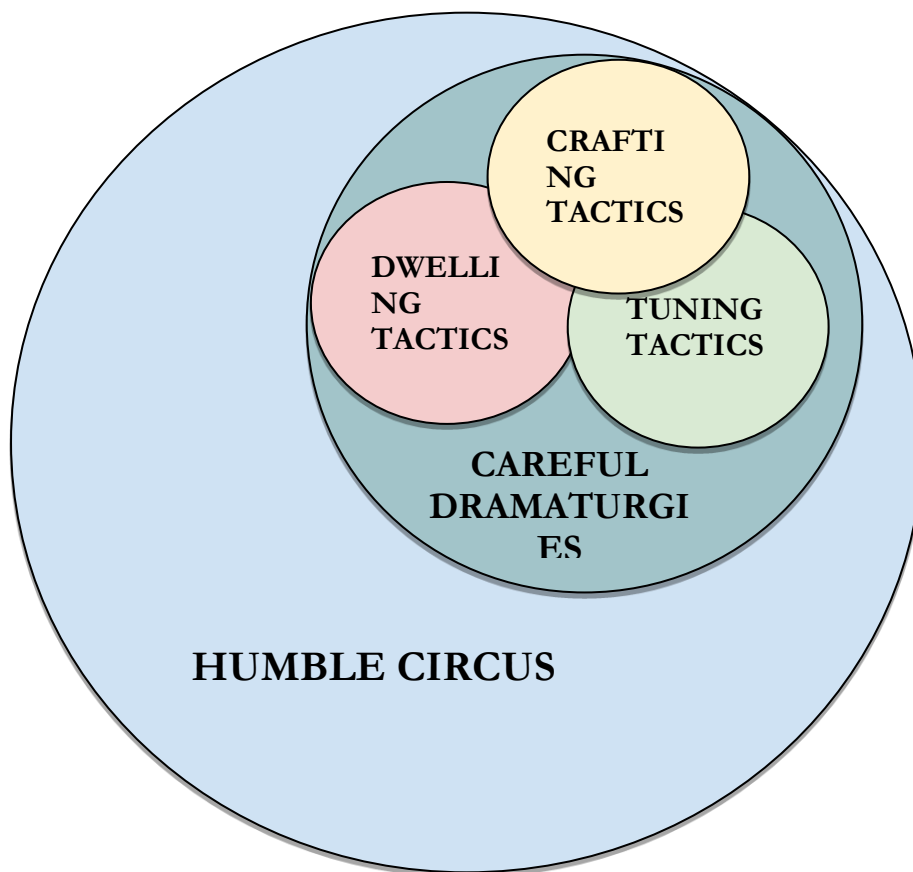


Figure 3: diagram Vincent Focquet

<sup>44</sup> Bellacasa, "Nothing comes without its world," 202.

<sup>45</sup> Isabelle Stengers and Erik Bordeleau, "The care of the possible," trans. Kelly Ladd, *Scapegoat* 01, (2012): 12.

## CARING

*Care obliges us to constant fostering, not only because it is in its very nature to be about mundane maintenance and repair, but because a world's degree of liveability might well depend on the caring accomplished within it.*<sup>46</sup>

The dramaturgical tactics of tuning, crafting and dwelling all share a common value: care. Before starting the body of this thesis, it is worthwhile to investigate this common thread. To better understand how care is paramount to a humble circus, I will take a detour along its reverse. It helps to first dive into the relations of subjugation, to start arguing why a humble circus might need more careful relations. These relations of subjugation have an extensive history in circus practices. Their presence is directly related to the anthropocentric idea of Homo in the centre of the world, a cosmic juggler subjugating his environment to his superior rational intentions. Withdrawing from that position thus implies leaving mastery as a way of relating. This chapter will research care as an alternative way to structure these relations. But first, let's try to understand how Homo and his fantasies of mastery show themselves in circus arts.

### **circus arts and the triumph of Homo: fantasies of mastery**

Crucial for the understanding of this artform is its history. Of course this is true for nearly everything, but it is especially applicable to circus. Perhaps because of the strong presence of tradition and nostalgia in (the discourse around) the artform. Therefore I will now shortly plunge into a historical aspect of circus in order to trace back the fantasies of mastery, I discussed in the introduction. Where exactly do we situate these fantasies of mastery in the circus and where did they come from? This historical excursion is not, as is often the case in literature on circus, intended to show the roots and true core of circus. On the contrary, I want to show the historical embeddedness of these fantasies of mastery and link them to a specific timeframe, philosophy and corresponding ontology. If we learn to spot and understand them better, we might be more capable to formulate tactics for turning them around.

As Karel Vanhaesebrouck describes in his characterization of circus as an art form, “In each performance, the art form’s history is shimmering through, even if that performance uses a jackhammer to tackle it.”<sup>47</sup> If the ones populating a humble circus are the ones with the jackhammer, then it is definitely important to remember what we are drilling into. What part of history is continued by practices and their representations on stage and could we refuse it? The coming historical inquiry should not lead the reader to think that the entire history of circus is problematic, that we would need to break with it in a simplistic avant-garde fashion. Or that a more humble circus, would have to get rid of everything circus has meant up until today. On the contrary, it is precisely in the historically grown specificities of circus practices that I look for possibilities to feed and sustain. Caring, dwelling, crafting and tuning, as I will show, are all inherent to the rich historical practices of circus. They too are present today. It is about seeing them and trying to find ways to cultivate them.

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<sup>46</sup> Bellacasa, “‘Nothing comes without its world,’” 198.

<sup>47</sup> Karel Vanhaesebrouck, “De magie van het circus,” in *Cirq’onstances II* (Gent: Circuscentrum, 2018), 4. (My translation)

Circus' roots are to be found everywhere. There is the Latin etymology, linked to the circular racetracks of Ancient Rome, but the Chinese region has an equally long history of acrobatics.<sup>48</sup> Although it is impossible to track one single root, most western historians of circus agree to start the history of 'modern circus' with Philip Astley (1742-1814).<sup>49</sup> After becoming familiar with horse riding as a sergeant in the army, Astley developed a practice of *trick riding*, which was already popular at that time. Later, he started showing this to an audience in London and added extra entertainers like jugglers, acrobats and musicians to his performances. It is 1773 in Dublin, Ireland and Astley's Amphitheatre is born.<sup>50</sup>

"You at command make brutes obey, walk, work, or dance, with movement gay", writes a spectator at one of these eclectic spectacles to Astley.<sup>51</sup> The representation of the triumph of Homo, making 'brutes' obey, is thus already present in this mythical origin of western circus. Philip Astley is exemplary for the cosmic juggler. The fact that exactly Philip Astley is historicized as the starting point of circus is telling for the way we conceptualize the art form. When we are looking back for early traces of circus, part of what we are looking for are traces of performances thematizing and glorifying the subjugation of the environment by man's problematic alter ego Homo.



Figure 4: *Philip Astley*, woodcut.

Of course, the timeframe in which Astley's practices are situated, is not neutral. Important lines need to be drawn between the representation of human victory over his environment and the presence of this heroic idea in the societies surrounding this performance practice. Think again of the way Anna Tsing describes man as taming and mastering nature in the Enlightenment. Astley's late 18th century in Britain is a time of enlightenment, industrial revolution and colonialism. It is

<sup>48</sup> Peta Tait and Katie Lavers, "Introduction. Circus perspectives, precedents and presents," in *The Routledge circus studies reader* ed. Peta Tait and Katie Lavers (Oxon: Routledge, 2016), 4.

<sup>49</sup> Tait and Lavers, "Introduction," 4.

<sup>50</sup> Dominique Jando, "Philip Astley," accessed 12<sup>th</sup> July 2019, [http://www.circopedia.org/Philip\\_Astley#Astley.27s\\_New\\_Amphitheatre\\_of\\_the\\_Arts\\_and\\_the\\_Olympic\\_Pavilion](http://www.circopedia.org/Philip_Astley#Astley.27s_New_Amphitheatre_of_the_Arts_and_the_Olympic_Pavilion).

<sup>51</sup> *Astley's cuttings from newspapers*, 1785, Th Cts. 35, 673, London: British Library, quoted in Marius Kwint, "The circus and nature in late Georgian England," in *Histories of leisure*, ed. Rudy Koshar (Oxford: Berg, 2002), 45.



not an accident that Grandville drew his *jongleur des mondes* (fig. 2) in precisely this era. While the idea of human governance over the environment certainly was not born during the Enlightenment, early traces of the idea are already there in the Bible for example, it is drastically intensified during this period.<sup>52</sup>

Astley was active in a time in which Descartes' mechanistic worldview got interwoven with the practice of rapid industrialization. Both philosophers and industrialists were roughly dividing the world in subjects (*res cogitans*) on the one hand and resources (*res extensa*) on the other. For Descartes, the second category is ontologically inferior. At the same time, the growing industry similarly sees this category as mere things to be capitalized on.<sup>53</sup> It is this bifurcation that Latour problematizes in *We have never been modern* (1993). The attempt of splitting the Middle Kingdom, discussed before, is what we call modernity. It is in this divide, that the possibility of subjugation is to be found. After all, a hierarchy requires an ontological split, we cannot master anything, if it is not different and separated from us. Thus, the circus repertoire that is still common today, is rooted in this particular timeframe and ideology. Homo can only triumph over his environment once he is separated from it by the modern object/subject distinction.

Bauke Lievens introduces us to the final aspect of the Cartesian worldview that I would like to point out in relation to the circus.

Through exercise and repetition, the circus body becomes highly individualised and distinguished from the crowd. Yet a circus performer is not an individual who deviates from the norm, but is an ideal incarnation of the norm: strength, time and space are not wasted, but perfectly optimised.<sup>54</sup>

As Lievens argues, individualism is a Cartesian trait that strongly came to characterize the circus repertoire in this timeframe. If Homo is triumphalist, it is most of all the individual. The image of Philippe Petit crossing a tightrope between the Twin Towers is therefore telling. Not only do we see an individual overcoming balance problems and massive affects of fear, Petit performs his stunt between two towers that are the archetypical architectural representatives of capitalism itself. The similarities in the way the triumph of man over a defeated environment are present in both Petit's picture and the one depicting Astley are striking.

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<sup>52</sup> Joshtrom Isaac Kureethadam, *The philosophical roots of the ecological crisis. Descartes and the modern worldview* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018).

<sup>53</sup> Johannes Beetz, *Materiality and subject in Marxism, (post-)structuralism, and material semiotics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 10.

<sup>54</sup> Bauke Lievens, "Second open letter to the circus: The myth called circus," accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> August 2019, <https://circusdialogue.com/between-being-and-imagining>.



Figure 5: AP, *Philippe Petit crossing a tightwire between the Twin Towers*, 1974.

The following quotes from Petit's lyrical report of his stunt, *To reach the clouds: my high wire walk between the twin towers* (2002), testify to the presence of the ideas of domination (dominion) and victory over the environment (now defeated) in his performance.

Leaning against the steel corner, I offer to myself, for a throne, the highest tower ever built by man; for a ceremonial carpet, the most savagely gigantic city of the Americas; for my dominion, a tray of seas wetting my forehead; while the folds of my wind-sculpted cape surround me with majestically mortal whirls.<sup>55</sup>

Victorious, I linger at the very middle of the crossing, exactly where the void, now defeated, used to vent its might.<sup>56</sup>

"Techniques are efficient technical reductions of dance ideologies."<sup>57</sup> writes Bojana Cvejić in her *In the Making of the Making of: The Practice of Rendering Performance Virtual*. While her article focuses on the contemporary dance practice of Mette Ingvarstsen, this statement can be extrapolated to circus technique. Following Cvejić's way of thinking, we could say that the ideology that is reduced in triumphant circus technique is often that of individualist capitalism of which fantasies of mastery are a core component. It is from these three ideologies that a humble circus wants to withdraw. They are part of the same world system and are all based on the violent exploitation of the environment by an exclusive category of the individual.

### is there a way out?

From Astley's time onwards, these ideologies only expanded and intensified. The interlinked Cartesian ideologies of individualism and capitalism are most prominent today. In circus too, techniques are bearing witness to these fantasies who induced arguably the most massive problem we are facing today: Global Warming. A worldview made up of users and utensils is a fertile ground for ecological disaster.<sup>58</sup> Now that the ramifications of the worldviews based on fantasies of mastery are so harshly clear, could we come up with an alternative?

<sup>55</sup> Philippe Petit, "To meet the gods," in *To reach the clouds. My high wire walk between the twin towers* (New York: North Point Press, 2002), n.p.

<sup>56</sup> Petit, "To meet the gods,".

<sup>57</sup> Bojana Cvejić, "In the making of the making of: the practice of rendering performance virtual," *T&H*, nr. 15 (2008): 27-37.

<sup>58</sup> Kureethadam, *The philosophical roots of the ecological crisis*, 148.

In a publication that looks back on Bauke Lievens' first research project *Between being and imagining*, Bauke Lievens, Raphaël Billet and Alexander Vantournhout ask themselves the question: "Is there a way out of here?" Specifically, they are wondering if there is a way out of the (violent) disciplining of the body in circus.<sup>59</sup> I want to re-open this question in the context of circus' (of course related) history of fantasies of mastery. Is there a way out of the triumph of Homo? And what would that way look like? This is where we move beyond critique, towards the possible.

If we want to come up with techniques that are embedded in other ideologies, other stories, that would mean to think beyond the frames of the fantasies of mastery of enlightenment philosophy. The way out that I'm proposing here is care. This care manifests itself in the dramaturgical tactics of tuning, crafting and dwelling. Researching each of the dramaturgical tactics to leave fantasies of mastery behind, I increasingly found them breathing into each other. Trying to think of ways to leave mastery as a way of relating to worlds, a new sort of relations slowly found its way to the surface. This to the point that I became suspicious of a possible bigger story that underlays them all, something that all the cases and theories shared. It turned out that this bigger story must be the story of caring: the fourth verb tying the three previous ones together.

Through the next three chapters, it will become more clear how dwelling, tuning and crafting are related to caring. For now it suffices to point out that this connection has to do with the kind of relations that are present in circus practices. As described above, circus practices are relational. The question remains: what kind of relationships are we talking about? My core argument here is that we should roughly distinguish between relationships of domination (mastery) and relationships of care. While a lot of circus practices have been cultivating relationships of subjugation, there are seeds of the possible to be found in the careful relations that come into being by dwelling, tuning and crafting. Care is to humbleness what subjugation is to hubris. To come back to Donna Haraway's humans: Homo is subjugating while humus is caring.

For my understanding of care, I draw from María Puig de la Bellacasa's work on care in more than human worlds. *Matters of care: speculative ethics in more than human worlds* (2017) is especially interesting in the context of circus practices because it is explicitly engaged with care in worlds consisting of "things, objects, other animals, living beings, organisms, physical forces, spiritual entities, and humans."<sup>60</sup> In other words, she is thinking in the Middle Kingdom, beyond the violent splitting of worlds into subjects and objects. Furthermore, *Matters of care* regards care as a hands-on activity, something you could practice. "In this vision, to care joins together an affective state, a material vital doing, and an ethico-political obligation"<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Raphaël Billet, Bauke Lievens and Alexander Vantournhout, *Is there a way out of here?*, ed. John Ellingsworth (Ghent: Not Standing VZW & KASK School of Arts, 2017), 56.

<sup>60</sup> María Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of care. Speculative ethics in more than human worlds* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 1.

<sup>61</sup> Bellacasa, *Matters of care*, 42.

The work departs from Joan C. Tronto's widespread definition of care as

everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair "our world" so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web.<sup>62</sup>

It is important to note that for Bellacasa caring cannot be a normative practice. What exactly care entails is always dependent on the specific context one is caring in. Hence, if circus practices want to generate careful relations, these relations will have to be re-negotiated in every specific world. We'll have to keep looking for new potentialities and new tactics to make use of them. The meaning of "well" in the "as well as possible" in Tronto's definition, is to be redefined time and time again according to and together with the entities involved.<sup>63</sup> This unsure 'well', will be a central idea to the CRAFTING chapter.

But do we not become victim of our own trap by focusing on the human-centred imperative of caring? Do we then again situate all agency in a human being that is now simply doing different things to his still lifeless environment? Bellacasa provides us with two ways out of this problem. First, one has to see every personal practice as collective. Second, we need to decentre ethical subjectivity. That means that caring is always done by a world, rather than by an intentional individual subject, and that this caring subject is decentred in the doing.

Affirming the absurdity of disentangling human and nonhuman relations of care and the ethicalities involved requires decentering human agencies, as well as remaining close to the predicaments and inheritances of situated human doings. We are thus caring from a more marginal position in our lifeworlds and the way we care is co-determined and co-afforded by all actants involved in these environments.<sup>64</sup>

We can conclude this chapter with the fact that, as a researcher, I care too. The presence of fantasies of mastery in today's circus and all the problems related to and flowing from them, form the backdrop for my care about a more humble circus. Next to the fact that it is present in tuning, crafting and dwelling, it runs through this thesis in the form of academic care too. Thus, in a way care was the very starting point of this thesis.

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<sup>62</sup> Joan C. Tronto, *Moral Boundaries. A political argument for an ethic of care* (Hove: Psychology Press, 1993), 103.

<sup>63</sup> Bellacasa, *Matters of care*, 7.

<sup>64</sup> Bellacasa, *Matters of care*, 2.

## TUNING

*Learning to compose will need many names, not a global one, the voices of many peoples, knowledges, and earthly practices. It belongs to a process of multifold creation, the terrible difficulty of which it would be foolish and dangerous to underestimate but which it would be suicidal to think of as impossible.*<sup>65</sup>

Tuning is the set of tactics that appeared in my research first. While doing research for my bachelor thesis, I came across Timothy Morton's concept of tuning in *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*.<sup>66</sup> This triggered so much thought about circus practices that it became one of the central concepts for that text. In hindsight, the reason why tuning was and is so attractive, is that it provides human circus artists with a different way to relate to their environments. It made mastery impossible and reversed causality. All of a sudden, it was not the central human subject reviving its environment but that environment was so all pervadingly present that the human circus artist could do nothing but tune to it. The ideas of my bachelor thesis will form the baseline for this dramaturgical tactic but will unfold and change shape because of new insights and theoretical frameworks. Where I at first thought of tuning as happening between human circus artists and things, I will extend the scope of the concept considerably here to make it into dramaturgical tactics.

### **making tuning**

In Phia Ménard/Compagnie Non Nova's *P.P.P.* (Position Parallèle au Plancher) (2008), ice balls are hanging threateningly from the ceiling (fig. 6).<sup>67</sup> In random order, they fall and splash on stage, making Ménard stumble and fall. Thus, the order of action is reversed. What we see is not a human actant forcing things in a predetermined form. Rather, a gloomy web of actants (heating, body warmth etc.) is making the ice balls heat up and causes them to fall. This is an environment acting upon a human being, forcing the human to adapt.

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<sup>65</sup> Isabelle Stengers, *In catastrophic times. Resisting the coming barbarism* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2015), 50.

<sup>66</sup> Vincent Focquet, "To withdraw gracefully. Naar een nederig circus," (Bachelor thesis, University of Ghent, 2018).

<sup>67</sup> *P.P.P.*, Phia Ménard/Compagnie Non Nova (Lyon: Subsistances, 1st January 2008).

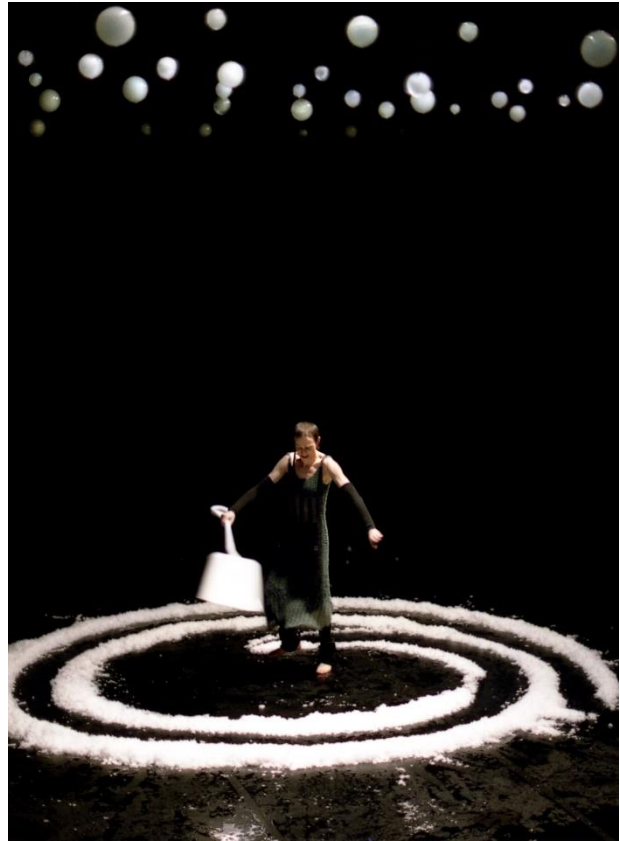


Figure 6: Jean-Luc Beaujault, *Phia Ménard / Compagnie Non Nova : P.P.P.*, 2008.

*P.P.P.* is one of these performances that stirred up the circus field. After making the performance, Cie Non Nova felt like there was more to be explored. The encounter with ice as an ‘unjugglable’ element became the starting point for years of making and doing circus called I.C.E. (Injonglabilité Complémentaire des Éléments). After ice came wind (*L’après-midi d’un foehn Version 1* (2008), *L’après-midi d’un foehn* (2011) and *Vortex* (2011)) and water/steam (*Belle d’Hier* (2015), *Contes Immoraux – Partie 1 – Maison Mère* (2017) and *Saison Sèche* (2018)). Ménard links the constant transformation of matter to that of bodies and minds. This was heavily influenced by her own transition from a male to a female body.<sup>68</sup> It is worth remarking that Ménard’s body is all but fitting the category of Homo, but however crucial for Ménard’s work, I’m not so much interested in this parallel here than in the idea of ‘unjugglability’, the idea of matter that evades human subjugation.

Of course, in times of Global Warming, the image of melting ice in *P.P.P.* is telling. Precisely because of the catastrophic state of our ecological environment, it is key to better understand how landscapes act upon us. Today, the ecological circumstances force us to question the Enlightenment ideology of man as the origin of all action in the world. In the introductory quote Isabelle Stengers calls to compose with Gaia in an epoch she appropriately terms ‘catastrophic times’. Stenger’s Gaia consists of the set of relations between all things on earth. It is a ‘ticklish assemblage’ that in times of Global Warming is intruding our lives. It tolerated human presence for a long time, but the careless action of a select group of humans “those who have both provoked

<sup>68</sup> Phia Ménard, “I.C.E.,” accessed 25<sup>th</sup> May 2019, <http://www.cienonnova.com/i/en/i-c-e-2/>.

her intrusion and now decipher it through data, models, and simulations,” provoked her to intrude.<sup>69</sup> The intrusion of Gaia is a catastrophe for all beings on earth, regardless of their share in the provocation.<sup>70</sup>

The only possible reaction, to compose with Gaia, is close to what I will call tuning. Of course, Stengers in no way means to say that Global Warming is unavoidably here, we simply need to adapt a bit. The implications of the intrusion of Gaia are far more fundamental. It turns the tables. Now that the fixed causality of subject acting upon will-less object has been undone, we can only compose or tune.<sup>71</sup> Training to compose is not only *possible* in circus arts where (embodied) contact with nonhumans and their agency is ubiquitous, but, as Stengers shows us in the introduction quote, it is also *necessary*.

Think again of how in *P.P.P.* an invisible alliance of actors makes the ice balls fall down on Ménard and the stage, requiring her to tune to the events provoked by the eerie ecology she is part of. Who exactly is acting here? The concept of agency, being able to act, seems to be crucial. Pivotal for the dramaturgical tactics of tuning is their redistribution of the potential to act. Since there is no space here to thoroughly discuss the contested term, I will go straight to political philosopher Jane Bennett’s work on agency in *Vibrant Matter: a political ecology of things* (2009). Building on phenomenology and Spinozism, Bennett contributes to the debate on agency by introducing the concept of ‘distributed agency’. While Kant reserves agency for human beings, since they are the only ones having reason and therefore intentionality, Bennett argues that agency is dived across a network of actants.<sup>72</sup> Following Deleuze and Guattari, the American political theorist terms this network ‘assemblage’.

The locus of agency is always a human-nonhuman working group. I move from the vitality of a discrete thing to vitality as a (Spinozist) function of the tendency of matter to conglomerate or form heterogeneous groupings.<sup>73</sup>

Matter tends to group together and because of the specific way the assemblage, the agglomerate of matter, is structured, it effectuates a specific agency. This is why Stengers describes Gaia as an assemblage. *P.P.P.* lucidly shows us how assemblages are present in circus. The specific assemblage consisting of Ménard, the audience, the building, the heating etc. brings about the melting of the ice balls. This melting of course impacts Ménard’s activities again. A feedback loop of influencing and being influenced is started. A vital system of things is up and running, the question for the rest of this chapter is how to tune into that as a circus artist.

This image of acting assemblages generates human humility. The way the worldview is linked to humility becomes clear in Anishinaabe knowledge. Underlying the importance of humility in the ancestral teachings, is a concept of the world as an animated universe. The emphasis of the Anishinaabeg on humility is closely linked to their vitalist ontology. Encountering one’s

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<sup>69</sup>Stengers, *In catastrophic times*, 50.

<sup>70</sup> Stengers, *In catastrophic times*, 43-50.

<sup>71</sup> It is important to remark the irony here. Precisely the idea that humans can govern over a will-less planet, the fantasy of mastery, proved itself wrong by provoking the intrusion of Gaia.

<sup>72</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant matter*, 20-38.

<sup>73</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant matter*, xvii.

environment as a vital assemblage rather than a neutral reservoir of commodities requires one to think and act with humility. “One’s very existence depends on the web of interconnectedness between the self and the community and between the community and nature.”<sup>74</sup> writes Bell. Since the world is not a lifeless lump of matter, but a vital and interconnected web, the figure of the human in it cannot be the Cartesian manager or hero. Nature here is not passive and mechanical but animated by Creation.<sup>75</sup> The realization that human beings are only a part of an interacting network, automatically creates a kind of humility. A humility that is, Nicole Bell accentuates, inevitable for ecological flourishing.<sup>76</sup>

What does all of this teach us about the concept of tuning? Before, I argued how a humble circus calls for careful relations. In the vibrant assemblage of circus performances, we can say a little more about the nature of these careful relations. I want to propose the following: if we accept the fact that we are part of vital assemblages that act upon us as much as we act upon them, that agency is thus distributed, we will have to adopt a tuning attitude. The careful relations we can look for and sustain in these dramaturgical tactics are relations of tuning.

As mentioned above, the idea of attunement is central to the work of British philosopher Timothy Morton. His concept of hyperobjects in the widespread *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (2013), leads him to formulate a way of relating to the grandeur of these hyperobjects. He will call that way of relating ‘tuning’. Because hyperobjects are massively distributed in the time and space around us, they force us into an intimate relation with them. They seem to stick to us.<sup>77</sup> Here too, the order of things is reversed: rather than being the origin of all action, human beings are acted upon and have to tune to this intimate activity of things.

This is immediately made clear in the case of his main example: Global Warming. Global Warming is a hyperobject that is always everywhere. It’s uncanny absent presence sticks to us. Morton describes that the reaction it provokes from humans is to attune ourselves to this intimacy.<sup>78</sup> The British philosopher uses the image of Jonah waking up inside of a whale, to describe how Global Warming made us wake up inside of a hyperobject.<sup>79</sup> Tuning as a verb is particularly well chosen since we do not simply tune, we tune *into* something.<sup>80</sup> Tuning confuses boundaries between ‘us’ and the environment. The realization that we are inside of a hyperobject, a powerful environment threatening us, forces us to tune into it. In the rest of this chapter, I examine how tuning and the ecological potential it has plays out in circus practices.

In *P.P.P.*, Phia Ménard is inhabiting a gloomy environment. Her surroundings are no longer the peaceful decor for human action that we used to call nature. *P.P.P.* demonstrates how in times of

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<sup>74</sup> Bell, “Anishinaabe Bimaadiziwin,” 98.

<sup>75</sup> Bell, “Anishinaabe Bimaadiziwin,” 86.

<sup>76</sup> Bell, “Anishinaabe Bimaadiziwin,” 103.

<sup>77</sup> Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects. Philosophy and ecology after the end of the world* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 139.

<sup>78</sup> Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 1.

<sup>79</sup> Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 20.

<sup>80</sup> In the *DWELLING* chapter, I will examine the ecological importance of a position *inside* of environments, rather than the comfortable outside position in Cartesian ontologies.



Global Warming ice can no longer be the object of innocent contemplation. Where things like glaciers used to belong to the category of ‘natural beauty’, they start to slowly turn against us. “Nature dissolves just as hyperobjects start to ooze uncannily around us.”<sup>81</sup> We had to wait for the agency of nonhuman assemblages to grow extremely lethal, like Stengers would say we had to wait for Gaia to intrude, before acknowledging it. It is clearer than ever before: it’s time tune.

Tuning is the other of dominating, this is why it is part of what I called careful relations. André Lepecki provides us with beautiful words to describe the failed project of domination. In the first chapter of his *Singularities: Dance in the Age of Performance* (2016), the dance theoretician at NYU calls dominating “running things”.<sup>82</sup> It is the desire to run the show, to push things in predetermined forms. Discussing Maria José Arjona’s work at IN TRANSIT 09, Lepecki describes how bubbles rebelled against the format of the performance. A specific change in the weather, caused them to fly all over the venue the festival took place in. While Ménard did know beforehand that the ice would fall, the similarity between her *P.P.P.* and Arjona’s *Untitled* is striking. The recalcitrance of assemblages, be it meteorological circumstances and bells or heating and ice, is palpable in both situations. Opposing the Cartesian and world-destroying mantra Lepecki calls ‘running things’, he simply acknowledges that ‘some things want to run’.<sup>83</sup>



Figure 7 : Jean-Luc Beajault, *Phia Ménard/Compagnie Non Nova : P.P.P.*, 2008.

That things want to run, that they have an agency of their own (however only in relation to other things), is something Phia Ménard understands very well. In *P.P.P.*, Ménard shows us this among others by trying to juggle ice balls (fig 7). The cold and the melting prevent her from containing matter in the predetermined pattern of juggling. There is no use trying to run ice. The stingy cold

<sup>81</sup> Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 181.

<sup>82</sup> André Lepecki, *Singularities. Dance in the age of performance* (London/New York: Routledge, 2016), 30.

<sup>83</sup> Lepecki, *Singularities*, 34-39.

water runs through her fingers, avoiding fantasies of mastery. How far are we now from Astley ‘making brutes obey’? If some things indeed want to run, the only thing we can do is trying to catch up. In a lengthy discussion of the performance, John Ellingsworth calls this catching up ‘adaptation’.

It's a substance with a stubborn life of its own, predictable but also contrary, so that the same block of ice that slides frictionlessly across the stage can hold Philippe fast in the trap of her wet dress. *It forces adaptation*. First, Philippe's ideas of how to use the material (most of the plans she brought to the earliest stages of the making process were impossible to realize), and then physically she has had to learn to control her response to contact with ice—to be at home with it.<sup>84</sup> (emphasis added)

Like it is impossible to impose the pattern of juggling on ice balls, wind resists a lot of human intentions. Wind features as the most important element in *L'après-midi d'un foehn* (2011), in which Ménard stages Nijinsky's ballet on Debussy's music danced by little plastic bags and some fans, and *Vortex* (2011), in which the wind undoes a being of its many layers. In a video on her wind pieces, Ménard calls wind a ‘troubling material’ because it is in constant transformation, it erodes and changes. It is unstable, impalpable and invisible.<sup>85</sup>

This reading of wind reminds us of Lepecki's description of the events surrounding Arjona's *Untitled*.<sup>86</sup> Warned by a phone call that the bells had rebelled, and technicians were trying to catch them with butterfly nets, Lepecki enters the building right before the opening of IN TRANSIT and wonders why all their attempts at mastery had failed:

What had led to this failure of governance over the movement of things, this breakdown in the forms of control that had been so well prepared and mapped and tested beforehand? Simply this: outside, the movement of things atmospheric had conspired with the movement of things enteric and an unforecasted summer storm was now blasting a gusting wind against the building, disrupting whatever draft patterns we had mapped in the foyer months ago, gusts of wind barging into the HKW building and its cavernous foyer, lifting up skirts, spreading scattering printed programs, propelling the bubbles, bringing out the butterfly nets.<sup>87</sup>



Figure 8: Jean-Luc Beajault, *Phia Ménard/Compagnie Non Nova : L'après-midi d'un foehn*, 2011.

<sup>84</sup> John Ellingsworth, “Compagnie Non Nova: P.P.P.,” *Sideshow*, accessed 9<sup>th</sup> June 2019, <http://sideshow-circusmagazine.com/magazine/features/compagnie-non-nova-ppp>.

<sup>85</sup> Phia Ménard, interview by Nouveau théâtre de Montreuil, accessed 15<sup>th</sup> July, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tRmf9cHt37E>. (My translation)

<sup>86</sup> See also Tim Ingold's introductory quote in the CRAFTING chapter.

<sup>87</sup> Lepecki, *Singularities*, 31.

These examples show how intentionality is a key problem for a humble circus. Ever since Enlightenment thinking, intentionality has been thought of as an exclusively human (a category that is again not including all humans) feature. It has been a means of dividing and ordering the world in intentional beings who act and non-intentional beings who undergo. Intentionality or human will, next to intersubjectivity, were thought of as prerequisite for agency. Action springs from rational intention, this is why humans act and objects undergo.<sup>88</sup>

New materialist approaches to performance like this thesis, are often criticized to be paradoxical because performances are made by humans, for a human public. When I shared this research with people active in the circus field, similar comments often arose. According to me, this has a lot to do with the problem of intentionality. The claim seems to be: we as humans intentionally stage something for other humans, it does not make sense to decentralize ourselves from this always already anthropocentric form of art. Similarly, one could argue that in *P.P.P.* Phia Ménard stages the environment to affect her. From this perspective, tuning is merely the efficient human design of acting environments. The key is still human intentional inventiveness, mastery is just hidden now. How humble is that? This reaction, which ultimately traces all action back to human intentionality, is an efficient gateway out of acknowledging nonhuman agency.

This specific suspicion approaches thus consists of two parts and in this specific case can be summarized as follows: first, circus is anthropocentric because it addresses humans. Next to that, when humans stage and control their own withdrawal, it is not really humble. I will address the last one now, saving the first for the final part of this chapter called ‘attending tuning’. For Bennett, and I agree, there is no such thing as an autonomous intentional act. Which does not mean intentionality is not a real thing. Everything one could see as an intentional act however, is always already a collaboration in a complicated assemblage. As Bennett argues with two beautiful analogies: “For an intention is like a pebble thrown into a pond, or an electrical current sent through a wire or neural network: it vibrates and merges with other currents, to affect and be affected.”<sup>89</sup>

One could argue that everything happening on stage is just Ménard’s will working through will-less matter, but this view neglects all the material agencies she is negotiating with in order to stage work. Like she accounts for herself in an interview in *Sideshow Circus Magazine*, a lot of research with the materials precedes her performances.<sup>90</sup> Whatever the intentions, it requires an awful lot of tuning to stage a person that is tuning. Probably just as much as it takes to stage a person mastering.

Here we can see a paramount difference between ontology and representation. We could think of the distinction between making and doing that I adhere to in each chapter in this light. Making is then more concerned with a representational framework: how do we *show*? Doing on the other hand, is more situated in the ontological sphere: how do we *do*?<sup>91</sup> Ontologically speaking, every

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<sup>88</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant matter*, 21.

<sup>89</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant matter*, 32.

<sup>90</sup> Ellingsworth, “Compagnie Non Nova: P.P.P.,”

<sup>91</sup> Of course, like any dualism, this one does not hold all too firmly. As one of the leading thinkers in feminist science studies Karen Barad argues in her article *Posthumanist performativity. Toward an understanding of how matter comes to matter* (2003), there is no such thing as an ontologically discrete entity awaiting

circus performance is a tuning into material agencies. These agencies simply never stop acting, even if we choose to neglect and dismiss them. Climate change is still occurring if we deny it, gravity is still at play even if we stage ourselves as victorious superhumans flying around unbothered by it. As I remarked in the introduction: fantasies of mastery are only fantasies. So when Phia Ménard is tuning, she is not simply faking it. If on an ontological level we are tuning no matter what, a humble circus is about where we go from that realization. In making, the question is how to make these agencies and the tuning to them more visible on stage. Phia Ménard showed us some possibilities for this above. In doing, it can encourage us to work through and with these agencies and to find new ways of relating to them. One of these ways is tuning.

### **doing tuning**

There is a lot of tuning in circus artists' practices that are not presented as performance. These practices are not directly intended for the gaze of an audience and are thus more concerned with doing than showing. I would even argue that it is precisely the negotiating with nonhumans that happens far away from audiences, is what makes tuning such an interesting possibility. Next to a few side-tracks to distribution and production, I will mainly focus on how tuning is related to training in circus arts. Training is a core aspect of doing circus. A great share of the time, energy and space available in the circus field is dedicated to training. Thus, training as a practice matters.

Not only is it a core feature of circus schools' program, training is a big part of a lot of circus artist's daily practice. The enormous amount of time circus artists spend explicitly relating to nonhumans while training is part of what makes circus interesting for this thesis. Training could be seen as a possibility, something in the present of circus practices that we can work with and by building dramaturgical tactics around it, intensify in order to open up unexpected humble futures.

First, let's try and understand a bit better what circus training means. As said, circus artists spend a dazzling amount of studio hours in the company of things, fantasies and other human beings. But what do they do in that time? "What do you do when you get in the studio? There's nothing to do there!" The empty room gives us nothing, nothing but space and time. A sterile luxury." writes contemporary dancer Eleanor Bauer in *Method Monster* (2006). Thus, we must look for what it is, that makes circus artists act in the sterile space of the studio.

Sticking to the definition of circus as an art form that thrives of relations between humans and nonhumans, these nonhumans and the relations they call for, can be described as what makes circus artists act in the studio. The question remains: what kind of relations do we train in that studio? The pedagogical vision of *ésac*, a world renowned circus school in Brussels, states the following: "In a field where the body is the primary means of expression, the school must give the student the opportunity to acquire the highest possible degree of mastery."<sup>92</sup> Prominent discourses about circus training like this one, often highlight the attaining and maintaining of a specific type of body

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representation. This would reassert the passivity of matter. However severe this simplification, for clarity's sake, the separation is necessary here.

<sup>92</sup> "Pedagogical and artistic vision," accessed 24<sup>th</sup> May 2019, <http://esac.be/cursus/pedagogical-and-artistic-schooling-plan/>.

that can do specific kinds of things. The empty room is thus given a direction: the highest possible degree of mastery. The call of the object is answered with a very distinctive relation: domination.

This type of discourse is not only harmful because of the human-nonhuman relations it implies, but also because of the way it affects circus artists' bodies. In an interview, former artistic director Virginie Jortay claims that because of the physically demanding virtuosity circus arts require, these bodies have an "expiration date".<sup>93</sup> Seen this way, circus seems to be a field that quickly consumes bodies until they are used up. The unsustainable implications of mastery show themselves once again, this time the body of the human circus artist. The mastery of the own body, can be detrimental for that body itself, so Jortay's claim proofs.<sup>94</sup> Next to that, this statement shows the close relation between this ideology of the studio and capitalism.

This direction for the studio brings us to the concept of virtuosity. The idea of virtuosity is so widespread in circus practice and their evaluations, that it goes largely unquestioned as that which circus artists are striving for when training. A lack of sustained dialogue allow this ideology to be naturalise. The concept of virtuosity is mostly discussed in the context of musical performance, where for performers, the quality of virtuosity is at least as important as in circus arts. In *Virtuosity as rhetoric: Agency and transformation in Paganini's mastery of the violin*, D.L. Palmer examines the Vienna performance by Italian violin player Niccolò Paganini in 1828. Paganini is often seen as the culmination of the romantic cult of the virtuoso. The definition of virtuosity proposed by Palmer in his article, is highly applicable to circus performers too.<sup>95</sup> The scholar describes virtuosity as a public performance that requires great technical skill and is able to seduce its audience.<sup>96</sup>

Palmer is right to accentuate the strong presence of individualism in the virtuoso ideal. Although the romantic movement of which Paganini was part, sought to distance itself from Enlightenment thinking, especially because of its rationalism, the period's celebration of the individual genius is strongly related to Enlightened ideals. The reason why virtuosity is interesting here, is the combination of that strong individualism and the factor of technical skill. This heroic autonomous mastery of an individual, that according to Palmer was attributed to figures like Paganini, is strongly

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<sup>93</sup> Hanna Mampuy, "ESAC: Babel in Brussels. A conversation with director Virginie Jortay," *CircusMagazine*, trans. Craig Weston, accessed 9<sup>th</sup> July 2019, <https://www.circuscentrum.be/en/artikels/esac-babel-in-brussels-a-conversation-with-director-virginie-jortay/>.

<sup>94</sup> When asking a befriended circus artist and researcher if he knew about any texts that bear witness to the harmful effects circus practices can have on bodies, so I could refer to them here, he replied tellingly: "my body is a text".

<sup>95</sup> When considering virtuosity and training, this chapter starts to intersect with the following: CRAFTING. This has to do with an important paradox. While virtuosity heavily relies on training, it is often hidden as much as possible at the moment of its performance. This in order to stress the individual genius of the virtuoso who effortlessly triumphs over his environments. What often happens, when moving from doing to making circus, is the erasure of training. In shows, tricks are made to look as easy as possible, erasing as much friction between object agencies and artists' intentions as possible. With this erasure of friction in representation, comes the erasure of the agency of things. We will go deeper into this problem in the CRAFTING chapter.

<sup>96</sup> It is outside the scope of this thesis to address Paolo Virno's conceptualisation of virtuosity which differs from Palmer's in many ways. However, it is interesting to point out Virno's argument about how virtuosity has become the dominant mode of production in post-Fordist economies.

present in (often implicit and naturalized) discourses around circus, like in the pedagogical vision of *ésac* that was cited above. Thus, the problem fundamentally is a problem of agency. Who gets to master who/what? “Virtuosity is alluring because it both translates and transcends ideals concerning the creative power of individual agency.”<sup>97</sup> The cult of the virtuoso is the celebration of omnipotent and autonomous human agency.<sup>98</sup> The contrast with Jane Bennett’s concept of distributed agency in which things only act in vital alliances, could hardly be bigger.

This image, in which the virtuoso masters his material environment, is the polar opposite of the agencies at play when Stengers describes the intrusion of Gaia. The virtuoso is so attractive because the figure overcomes the limits of human capabilities. In Stengers’ description, Gaia is intruding on us. Human figures, responsible for the ecological crisis or not, are incapable of even grasping the powers working in on them. Mastery, the fantasy that brought us here, is out of question in this situation. All there is left to do, is to compose, to tune.

However, reactions to global warming do not necessarily adopt a humble standpoint like that of Stengers. In a thesis that is so fundamentally entangled with ecological thinking, it is interesting to dive a bit deeper into this. In an article published in *Rekto:Verso*, I already argued how the belief in ‘techno-fixes’ or ‘geo-engineering’, two apt names for the promise to face climate change with technological innovations without having to question capitalism and its fundamental growth, reproduces a deeply ingrained human hubris. In a lot of ways, the virtuoso in today’s society is a CEO.

Anyway, the seducing impact the virtuoso circus artist has on an audience, according to Palmer, is something he shares with the techno-fixer. This contemporary figure of the CEO reveals an image of the world in which some humans are capable of heroically taming an entire planet. The associations with circus triggered by the verb ‘taming’ are important. Some techno-fixes look uncannily much like circus tricks. The ideal of the virtuoso, be it a juggler keeping seven balls in the air or an acrobat doing a triple summersault, is all about taming nonhuman environments. To make this human-only victory thinkable, a worldview radically different from that of Stengers and her colleagues is necessary. While Gaia is part of an animated universe, the CEO and the virtuoso circus artist are part of a worldview governed by the hierarchical nature-culture divide.

This short opposition of two reactions to climate change (roughly: tuning and fixing) should make clear what kind of problematic assumptions underlie the common acceptance of virtuosity as training’s final goal. The technofix could be seen as virtuosic juggling, only now the ball is the warming earth. Next to that, it sharpens our understanding of why mastery in circus should be questioned precisely today. Now the damage of the worldview is so visible, working from a (humble) worldview more similar to that of Stengers, becomes increasingly decisive. Since tuning acknowledges the agency of nonhumans and trains the capacity to recognize, feel and adapt to

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<sup>97</sup> David L. Palmer, “Virtuosity as rhetoric: Agency and transformation in Paganini’s mastery of the violin,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 84, nr. 3 (1998): 341-357.

<sup>98</sup> Like enlightenment was picky on who got to be a subject, virtuosity is an exclusive category. An important feature of this exclusivity is the ableism involved with it. The representational norm of the disciplined body mastering its environment is something only certain bodies can fulfill.

these different agencies, it becomes much more acceptable as alternative tactics for training. But what would that look like concretely?

Ménard's I.C.E. cycle shows us one alternative reaction to the call of nonhumans in the studio. What is thought provoking about this reaction, is the way in which nonhumans are not presented as something that must be overcome. "Working with matter such as ice, air or water often requires us to take hazardous, empirical paths in our experimentation before there is any sign of something worth presenting."<sup>99</sup> During her research project I.C.E., as she claims herself above, Ménard relates to things that are by nature not susceptible to that kind of mastery. In Lepecki's words: these things want to run. The presence of ice, air and water in the studio force Ménard and her company to adjust. Tuning becomes a guiding principle for her practice, in and outside of the studio.

From Ménard's tuning practice in I.C.E., we can also learn that she departs from the specificity of the (im)material environments she is tuning into. This approach is drastically different from a virtuosic one, where specificities are something to be overcome in order to perform mastery. In virtuoso juggling for example, things are often interchangeable. In *Zebra* (2017), one of the world's most celebrated jugglers, Wes Peden, balances an LP on his head. Just a bit later, the same happens with a lamp. There is no real difference between the two moments. It is not so much important what kind of things are involved, what matters is the fact that an artist is able to organize them in a predetermined figure. Specific qualities of objects are not cherished or researched. It does not matter that a lamp can give light or that the LP can play music, or the way both are shaped. Where shape and specificity are something to be overcome for virtuosity, the dramaturgical tactics of tuning, like in Ménard's work, take them as their starting point.

What is it precisely that the dramaturgical tactics of tuning could bring us? In the call for their forthcoming *Dust & Shadow Reader*, titled *On Attunement*, FoAM, the transdisciplinary network of research labs that interweaves science, nature and art, writes the following:

We understand attunement as a *particular sensitivity* (with beings or situations) characterized by a *careful*, receptive, open awareness. It assumes a willingness to *be touched* by external circumstances; to be lured, affected and changed by them. Although it is an innate (somatic) ability for many people, it can be *developed, enhanced and refined through practice*. The practice of attunement can foster experiential, situated learning across different scales. ... A kind of "*ecological intimacy*".<sup>100</sup> (emphasis added)

This description of attunement brings us far in answering the question of what tuning is and what it might generate. First of all, tuning shows itself as a practice, something one can do, in the studio for instance. Still following FoAM's statement, this practice could help us developing something like an 'ecological intimacy'. Intimacy, a word Morton consistently uses to describe the experience of a hyperobject, is defined as a particular sensitivity. This sensitivity presupposes that we allow ourselves to 'be touched', which implies acknowledging the agency of nonhuman others. Adopting tuning as dramaturgical tactics for the studio and beyond could teach us the important skill of being touched.

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<sup>99</sup> Phia Ménard, "Belle d'Hier," accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2019, <http://www.cienonnova.com/i/en/portfolio/belle-dhier-2/>.

<sup>100</sup> Maja Kuzmanovic and Nik Gaffney, "Open call: Dust & Shadow Reader #2. On attunement," accessed 5<sup>th</sup> July 2019, <https://fo.am/blog/2018/11/07/open-call-dust-shadow-reader-2-attunement/>.

In a way, some sort of virtuosity re-enters through the back door now. It is characterized by a careful sensitivity, based on the ongoing practice of tuning. In that sense, virtuoso circus artists in a humble circus are those who are trained in ecological intimacy. However, this form of virtuoso sensibility, can never be mastered. Like Morton writes, it is an ongoing task of openness. “Adaptation just is movement in adaptation space, and perfection would mean the end of adaptation.”<sup>101</sup>

Now is a good time to shortly think of how circus practices that involve nonhuman animals, relate to this conceptualization of tuning in training. In the DWELLING chapter, I will elaborate on the possibilities of nonhuman animals in the circus using Donna Haraway’s concepts of sympoiesis and making kin. It is important however, to tackle the idea that I’m talking about tigers and elephants jumping through burning hoops. The circus practices I’m thinking of include animals who have a long history of living together with human beings. Think of birds, pigs and dogs.

Dogs are central to *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People and Significant Otherness* (2003), in which Haraway writes the following about her interaction with them: “We are training each other in acts of communication we barely understand.”<sup>102</sup> First, it is important to notice that dogs and humans train *each other*, training as tuning confuses mastery. Haraway describes how her interaction with her dogs changed her as much as her dogs. Together, they form a quirky natureculture, a space where nature and culture are impossible to separate because of their intense interaction. If we extend these ideas to circus practices involving nonhuman animals, it shows again how tuning confuses boundaries. According to Haraway, what is happening between humans and dogs is not the human training the dog, but them training each other by learning to speak to each other, by tuning. Thus, when nonhuman animals enter the circus, tuning is a required approach to start working. About the company’s work with nonhuman animals, Camille Decourtye of the French circus company Baro d’Evel says the following: “It is a question of knowing *how to adapt to each other*, to reinvent education patterns, to recognize the other’s signals, to know how to connect with their feelings, to respect their physiological and psychological limits, to allow them to evolve, to feel linked.”<sup>103</sup> (my emphasis)

The fact that in Haraway’s quote dog and human barely understand each other but continue tuning, is important too. Tuning, to animals or other nonhumans, implies a radical otherness that we can never fully grasp. This radical otherness is something Morton notices too.

Since a thing cannot be known directly or totally, one can only attune to it, with greater or lesser degrees of intimacy. This is not a “merely” aesthetic approach to a basically blank extensional substance. Since appearance can’t be peeled decisively from the reality of a thing, attunement is a living, dynamic relation with another being.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Timothy Morton, “Attune,” in *Veer ecology. A companion for environmental thinking*, eds. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Lowwel Duckert. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 151.

<sup>102</sup> Donna Haraway, *The companion species manifesto. Dogs, people and significant otherness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 3.

<sup>103</sup> Camille Decourtye, “Animals,” accessed 30<sup>th</sup> July, <https://barodevel.com/en/animals/>.

<sup>104</sup> Morton, “Attune,” 151.



It is not by accident that Morton came up with the verb in reaction to gloomy hyperobjects like Global Warming and the internet. Like Ménard's elements, they resist mastery and thus sabotage Cartesian worldviews in which Homo (culture), dominates nonhumans (nature).

By introducing the concept of naturecultures, Haraway sabotages this worldview. These hybrid environments, similar to Bruno Latour's Middle Kingdom discussed earlier, are made up of dogs, humans and their interactions. Circus practices are very specific naturecultures. They can be spaces where the human-nonhuman hyphen can be re-negotiated time and time again. One way to do this, could be called tuning. This also helps us realize that tuning is not something only humans do. I emphasize human tuning precisely because it is so often neglected and hidden. This because Western ontologies have historically situated human beings *outside* of ecologies, governing them from a distance.<sup>105</sup> Nevertheless, it is important to remark that the ice balls in *P.P.P.* are tuning as much as Ménard is. Ecologies or assemblages are made up of entities that are in constant shifting relation to each other. To speak with Haraway again: "The world is a knot in motion."<sup>106</sup> Because entities in ecologies are constantly affecting and being affected, we could say they are tuning.<sup>107</sup>

We are now slowly leaving training in a strict sense. Departing even further from this part of circus practices, we can observe how tuning is happening in the way circus artists make and distribute their work. To make work, a lot of circus artists rely on a residency system. Although this system is almost identical to that of contemporary dance, both stay largely separated and while the critical discourse around the system has recently grown in dance, it remains mostly undiscussed in circus. German dancer and choreographer Martin Nachbar summarises how travelling becomes a condition.

Producers from around the world offer living and work spaces, and sometimes financial backing too, for choreographers to be able to work there. The latter travel from one place to the next, follow their work, and thus become travelers who not only distance themselves from the world in order to create, but turn travelling into a condition, in order to keep their heads above water financially.<sup>108</sup>

Thus, both the work itself and the individuals making it travel in between manifold contexts and have to be integrated and detached time and time again. This way, doing circus requires artists and their work to repeatedly re-tune.<sup>109</sup>

A similar tuning movement is at play in the distribution of works. At the very moment I write this, compagnie Un loup pour l'homme is travelling along countries in Central and South-Eastern Europe, meeting local companies and institutions, playing their shows and doing workshops. This project is called *Ride & Camp* and aims to exchange knowledges. What struck me when following this project on the companies' Facebook page, were the pictures of the show's I had seen before. Time and time again, these shows would transform in relation to the varying settings they were

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<sup>105</sup> The problematics of an outside perspective will be discussed in the DWELLING chapter.

<sup>106</sup> Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto*, 3.

<sup>107</sup> In *Vibrant matter. A political ecology of things*, Jane Bennett relies on Spinoza and speaks of 'conati'. These are elements that are prone to interact and derive their power to affect on their capacity to be affected.

<sup>108</sup> Martin Nachbar, "Travelling, Fleeing, Passing." *Sarma B-Chronicles* (2006), quoted in Annelies Van Assche, "Dancing Precarity. A Transdisciplinary Study of the Working and Living Conditions In the Contemporary Dance Scenes of Brussels and Berlin," (PhD. Diss., University of Ghent, 2018), 213.

<sup>109</sup> The tuning happening here is not entirely positive. Next to the ecological impact, this production apparatus is detrimental to the artists who make a living in it, as described by Nachbar.

performed in. Watching the show change in the pictures, we could say that the show itself was not a fixed ‘original’ but a constant tuning into the environment (audiences, landscapes etc.) it was set in.<sup>110</sup>



Figure 9: *Un loup pour l'homme, Face Nord*, 2017  
(Split : Room 100, 6th July 2019).



Figure 10: *Un loup pour l'homme, Face Nord*, 2017  
(Pula: PUF Festival, 5th July 2019).

The possibilities opened by Phia Ménard, Isabelle Stengers and Timothy Morton, can be fed and sustained. This could render us more capable to think and do circus in a more humble way. In this circus, training can become a practice in which we experiment and negotiate relations to nonhumans by tuning into them. Again, a lot of this tuning is already happening in circus. After all, nonhumans, be they material or immaterial, are acting everywhere and anywhere. To work with their agencies, tuning is required. However, tuning is rarely acknowledged or made explicit. Narratives of Homo’s dominance, like the one in ésac’s pedagogical vision, are simply too present

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<sup>110</sup> This form of tuning will be further thematized in the DWELLING chapter.

to take tuning seriously as an approach to circus practices. Therefore it is important to intensify these possibilities as dramaturgical tactics and see what this tuning could actually make us do.

To end this part of the chapter, I would like to come back to care. Why is it that tuning relations are careful relations? Care is paramount to tuning because we need to care for what is present in the studio in order to actually start tuning. These questions the politics of the studio, what do we look for and how do we approach it? Who gets to *do* circus and who is merely subjected to it? As described by Fo.AM above, tuning into things requires us to see and feel them. To tune, we must shift our attention to things we used to treat as ‘mere’ matter because they could not speak to us. Bellacasa calls this: caring for ‘neglected things’. This phrase has a double layer, since caring itself is something that has been structurally looked away from too, it is itself a neglected thing.<sup>111</sup>

### **attending tuning**

To start thinking about how attending circus practices is affected by dramaturgical tactics of tuning, it is worth the effort to address the question that was raised in the first part of the chapter. To repeat: the claim is that circus is anthropocentric by nature, since the final goal is the spectator. First of all, this statement only holds if we limit circus to a performance genre. Circus practice described above as ‘doing circus’, does not necessarily imply a spectator in the common meaning of the word and is so much more than only preparation for the moment of performance or ‘high level sports’, as Bauke Lievens called it before. Circus practice has value in itself, if it takes performance as its aim or not.

If there is an audience involved however, this presence of a human audience in no way justifies anthropocentrism. Who is it that we address in a humble circus after all? Nonhumans do not have to worry about withdrawal. If we see circus practice as storytelling, like Haraway describes her own thinking practice, this implies an audience. Thus, we need to think about what kind of stories we tell. As an analogy, Australian field philosopher and storyteller Thom Van Dooren’s *Flight Ways: Life and Loss at the Edge of Extinction* (2014) is a book full of stories that interweave the extinction of bird species with human existence. While the stories consist of and testify to the entanglement of the living and dying of humans and nonhumans, these stories are written for human readers.<sup>112</sup> Reading *Flight Ways* knots together unexpected lives in the mind of humans. Like the Anishinaabe stories from the introduction, they function as vital relations between us as humans and (almost) extinct nonhumans. A human addressee is anything but an excuse for anthropocentrism. Moreover, it is precisely human listeners who need to hear these stories. Since Western ears have been so accustomed to anthropocentric stories, a humble circus makes no sense without these listeners.

This brings us back to the topic of this part of the chapter: what does tuning mean for attending? Let’s return to where we started: Phia Ménard/Compagnie Non Nova’s *P.P.P.*. When entering the performance space, one is struck by coldness. The temperature in the room in which *P.P.P.* takes place is 17 degrees. The body of the audience members has to take time to adapt to this temperature. At the same time, all these bodies, and the food they are burning, are heating up the

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<sup>111</sup> Bellacasa, *Matters of care*, 27-67.

<sup>112</sup> Thom Van Dooren, *Flight ways. life and loss at the edge of extinction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

space.<sup>113</sup> There can be no doubt, tuning in circus is not limited to circus artists. Attending tuning is not simply attending to someone tuning into things. Attending itself is a form of tuning. When attending circus performances, audiences tune to a lot of things. To list some of them from micro to macro: the performers, the things on stage, the space, each other, the structure of the piece, the institutional context. The cold in *P.P.P.* and the movement of the bags in *l'Après-Midi* not only demand attunement from their co-performers, they force the audience to tune into them as well. This attunement does not necessarily have to be physical. That means that, as an audience member, there is no way out of tuning.

It is rather obvious that audiences tune into what is present on stage. A little more abstract is the way you can tune to the structure of a performance. Circus performances are structured in a variety of ways. Some jump from one spectacular climax to another, others follow a narrative structure, still others give shape to a more abstract performance development. Of course, each of these shapes invites the audience to adapt. We could even say that they all give rise to different audiences. Structuring performances around a series of climaxes, often helps making performances more “comprehensible” for viewers. Its logic is predictable and, so the applause following each climax accentuates, based on a historically grown repertoire of audience expectations. This approach can be contrasted to shows that seem to develop from within. Instead of reproducing more or less stable conventions regarding the organization of performative material, these shows flow from principles that are inherent to the (movement) material. In the light of this chapter, the second approach in which dramaturgic choices flow from the inside, opens possibilities for tuning. These shows can be too long, too slow, too overwhelming or too silent to grasp.

But why would you not want a show that fits human capacities, interests and expectations? If we go back to the Vitruvian man depicted in the introduction and the anthropocentrism this image carries out, this becomes more clear. The idea that the world seems to be made for human consumption, that it is tailored to human occupation, is precisely the ontological assumption that I’m arguing against here. The micro-world of a performance is able to oppose this anthropocentrism by trying to assume forms that require tuning. That way, the work as a whole starts to function as a hyperobject and in therefore demands attunement. Stripped of most tools for watching, the spectator cannot help but tune to the work. These dramaturgies can help us finding ways to be in worlds that are unwelcoming to human beings.

In *Un loup pour l'homme's Rare Birds*, a show that will be central to the DWELLING chapter, something similar happens. The semi-improvised movement of six acrobats and the accompanying music seems to flow from interior principles. Because these principles are never made explicit for an audience, the work is largely unpredictable for them. In the chapter by Lepecki that was discussed earlier, the theoretician digs up Yvonne Rainer’s desire to “move or be moved by some thing rather than oneself.”<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> In the beginning of my research, the last part of each chapter was called ‘watching x’ instead of ‘attending x’. Writing this specific paragraph made me realise the profound ocularcentrism underlying this phrasing. A lot of the tuning happening in circus in general and *P.P.P.* in specific concerns other senses than the visual.

<sup>114</sup> Lepecki, “Moving as some thing (or, some things want to run),” 40.

That vagueness surrounding the thing setting performers in motion, is crucial for Rainer and Lepecki. However, they never speak of what that implies for audiences. The spectator in *Rare Birds* for example can never be sure of what it is that is propelling the performers. This way, *Rare Birds* negates the audience a sense of mastery, generating an audience relationship that looks more like tuning. One of the accomplishments of *Rare Birds* is thus that it interpellates its audience as humble, since it is impossible for the audience to fully grasp the performance. However, the performance does not attempt the opposite either. A show might just as well try to master its spectator. *Rare Birds* avoids this by providing time and a looseness in meaning-giving, which leaves the audience plenty of space for interpretation and wandering. Fantasies of mastery are just as present in the audience as on stage. Tuning can be a tactic for bypassing these fantasies just as well in attending as in making and doing.

## CRAFTING

*We say 'the wind blows', because the subject-verb structure of the English language makes it difficult to express it otherwise. But in truth, we know that the wind is its blowing. Similarly, the stream is the running of water. And so, too, I am what I am doing. I am not an agent but a hive of activity.*<sup>115</sup>

If the previous chapter would have created the impression that skill must be eliminated, this is the chapter to correct that. There is nothing wrong with physical skill. Moreover, it is an aspect of circus arts that we should cherish. For craft, skill is fundamental. Because circus practices require so much skill, they are often associated with craft. Craft is then seen as something that is not quite art yet, because it is too concerned with skill and too little with innovation/creation. In a similar trend, Bauke Lievens states the following in an interview about her collaboration with Alexander Vantournhout: “We mainly talked about circus and our discontentment with the current state of the circus field. How circus is often the parade of craft.”<sup>116</sup>

While craft, both in the circus field and beyond, is thus often used as a pejorative, I want to turn it into a possibility in this chapter. Recently, craft has regained its status as an object of interest in both academic and artistic research, however not in the context of circus arts. These fresh approaches to craft will help to shape this chapter. Among others because of the strong emphasis on materiality, socio-economic organization and the question of knowledge and the body, these accounts of craft are an important part of the dramaturgical tactics for the humble circus. They will help us understand what kind of possibilities there are to be found in the many ways circus artists work in and through material environments.



Figure 11: Klub Girko, 122 x 244 - and a lot of little pieces, 2018.

<sup>115</sup> Tim Ingold, *Being alive. Essays on movement, knowledge and description* (Oxon: Routledge, 2011), 17.

<sup>116</sup> Billet, Lievens and Vantournhout, *Is there a way out of here?*, 33.

## making crafting

In a particularly interesting scene in Klub Girko's *122 x 244 – and a lot of little pieces* (2018), the young circus duo balances on both ends of a wooden board that is resting on a tower of little blocks made from the same material (fig. 11).<sup>117</sup> Looking each other straight in the eyes, Josef Stiller and Julian Vogel take little steps back, causing the wood to bend further and further. This is a balancing act for a trio: two human circus artists and a wooden board of standard dimensions. The capability of the board to bend that far, while staying strong enough to keep the two in the air, is at least as impressive as that of Stiller and Vogel to keep the balance.

*122 x 244 – and a lot of little pieces* consists of a series of similar techniques developed by and for wood and humans. Before entering the performance space, a video is shown of how these wooden boards are made in a factory. In the performance, the material appears in all shapes and sizes. There are little blocks that can be thrown around, but also large boards that can carry humans. Different sizes generate different relations. In what follows, Vogel and Stiller show an extraordinary skilful sensibility for a material that we know above all because of its standardized industrial production. While some of the figures they perform are reminiscent of the mechanical movement of mechanical production, shimmering through is a profound familiarity with the material. Industrial production is thus brought together with skilled touch. Looking at *122 x 244* as a product of craft is thus all but farfetched.

Let's start by building an understanding of what craft is. Doing this, I'm not so much interested in the controversial distinction between art and craft. However, it is important to note that circus has been historically neglected as a performing art.<sup>118</sup> This might have to do with precisely the fact that circus is a highly technical art form that explicitly celebrates skill, and can thus be put away as craft, not art. This is what happens in Lieven's quote above too. Next to the fact that craft has been a means of devaluing practices like circus as 'not quite art', I consider this distinction rather useless here. Circus arts for example shows us that a practice can both be artistic and craftwork. Craft is not to be differentiated from art but from unskilled and thoughtless work, if something like that exists.

But what is craft really? In this thesis, I'll focus on sociologist Richard Sennett's and anthropologist Tim Ingold's work on the concept. Both authors substantially broaden the concept's ordinary meaning of skilled handwork that produces useful objects. Because of this extension, circus that involves not just the hands but whole bodies and does not produce a stable final product, can be seen as a craft in both theories since it is a highly skilled practice that deals with material environments as well as possible.

In his *The Craftsman* (2008), Sennett characterizes craft as highly skilled work that combines head and hand (thinking and doing) and is done well for its own sake.<sup>119</sup> Ingold has a slightly more unorthodox take on the matter that derives from his anthropological research and is situated, as

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<sup>117</sup> *122 x 244 – and a lot of little pieces*, Klub Girko (Zürich: Zirkusquartier, 22<sup>nd</sup> April, 2018).

<sup>118</sup> Damkjaer, *Homemade academic circus*. 30.

<sup>119</sup> Richard Sennett, *The craftsman* (London: Penguin UK, 2009).

expressed in the introductory quote, in the animic worldview of “a world in continuous birth”.<sup>120</sup> His theory for making is based on the image of the knot and the practice of weaving. In Ingold’s view, makers make things by interweaving materials in constant flux. Ingold does not see craft as the exertion of external force according to a predetermined plan. Rather, the craftsperson works with the life of materials from the inside.<sup>121</sup>

Now we have a better understanding of what is meant by craft here, we can start looking for how we can understand circus as craft and what that might bring us in the context of a humble circus. Let’s start with a very general remark. Circus has an intimate relation to nostalgia. Bauke Lievens questions this nostalgia in her *Second Open Letter to the Circus: The myth of circus*.<sup>122</sup> While there are plenty of good reasons to challenge the romantic nostalgia the circus carries out, as Lievens convincingly argues, I’m more interested in staying with this nostalgia and regard it as a possibility. What if we do not try to get rid of nostalgia, which would put us at risk of trying to update the circus until it finally gets to be ‘contemporary’, but think with it for a while and see where it can bring us? In 2019, craft is inseparable from this nostalgia. Even in the 19th century, thinkers like the Victorian John Ruskin and his Arts and Crafts movement nostalgically longed for craft in an era that triumphantly welcomed industrialization. In *122 x 244*, this link between nostalgia and craft is manifest. But Klub Girko’s nostalgia is not simply a yearning for times long gone in which things were slower and made by hand. The potential of craft in their work is more profound than that.

One of these possibilities of craft is shown quite clearly in *122 x 244*. This has to do with the fact that craft requires an extraordinary *material sensibility*. This way, craft is an excellent way to describe and understand the material relations in circus. All this of course takes place in the worldview of a world consisting of interwoven vibrant materials, that runs through this whole thesis. Ingold summarizes these ideas quite accurately and at the same time links the worldview to his theory of making and craft:

The abstract concept of materiality, I argue, has actually hindered the proper understanding of materials. *We would learn more by engaging directly with the materials themselves*, following what happens to them as they circulate, mix with one another, solidify and dissolve in the formation of more or less enduring things. We discover, then, that materials are active. Only by putting them inside closed-up objects are they reduced to dead or inert matter. (emphasis added)

*122 x 244* is a good place to start thinking this from. The performance itself starts from a particular material: wooden boards cut into different sizes. The performance testifies of a curiosity for that specific material and what it can (make us) do. In a time in which careless approaches to technology are destroying worlds, the duo is right to be nostalgic for a culture that celebrated making materials things well. Of course, it is problematic to uncritically idealize the entire pre-industrial epoch. The fact that the wood in *122 x 244* is industrially processed and the spectator is explicitly reminded about that by the video in the beginning, punctures this bubble of escapist nostalgia. Klub Girko’s work is an exercise in craft in a time that is so clearly ours. Therefore, it is another form of nostalgia.

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<sup>120</sup> Ingold, *Being alive*, 63.

<sup>121</sup> Sennett does not neglect the problematic gendering in the word ‘craftsman’, but nevertheless decides to stick with the term. I will use the genderneutral craftsperson here to indicate the people practicing skill; Tim Ingold, *Making. Anthropology, archaeology, art and architecture* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 1-31.

<sup>122</sup> Lievens, “*Second open letter to the circus*”



I would argue that this nostalgia, if it chooses its target precisely, can be critical. In the case of craft, it can show us that the way we tend to relate to materials today is not the only possible way. Where Stengers finds seeds of the possible in the present, we might very well be able to find them in the past too. They open the possibility to skilfully make things in more than human worlds. Could this be the leading tactics for doing circus?

Both Ingold and Sennett argue how making things requires craftspersons to interact with material agencies. “First, the practitioner operates within a field of forces set up through his or her engagement with the material: secondly, the work does not merely involve the mechanical application of external force but calls for care, judgement and dexterity.”<sup>123</sup> writes Ingold in *The Perception of the Environment* (2000). The emphasis on care stands out again, a craftsperson is able to carefully register material situations in order to be able to work with them. Sennett in turn remarks how, when building cities or installing sewers, the existing environment gets in the way of the planner’s will.<sup>124</sup> Here too, material agencies are blocking human intentions and require the craftsperson to work with and in them. In a presentation at the Tales of the North Conference, Ingold summarizes these ideas beautifully when he calls the maker “someone who has to join his or her life to the life of the material.”<sup>125</sup>

A clear link with the tuning tactics discussed in the previous chapter shows up here. Since crafting cannot be understood as the skilful exertion of one’s will over dead material, the craftsperson works inside and with (the agencies of) his lively environment. If we see circus practice as a craft, it means that it is a place where people can carefully work within the forcefield of materials. Thus, circus as a craft can be a way to learn how to read material agencies better and look for ways to deal with them. Circus is able to teach us, as Ingold writes in *Being Alive: Essays on movement, knowledge and description* (2011): “to follow the material.”<sup>126</sup> Next to that, if we see circus practices as craft, it will urge us to question and share the ways we do that following and what we learn from them.

But if that is the case: what are we working towards? In what direction do we follow the material? How do we know how to craft well? Sennett calls ‘doing things well for their own sake’ the fundament of craft.<sup>127</sup> However, *The Craftsman* does not offer fixed criteria for crafting well. The criteria for a good cup or a good knife are quite obvious, the first one should enable you to drink without spilling, the second needs to cut smoothly. But since Sennett radically opens the field of crafts to practices like nursing and engineering, ‘well’ becomes much harder to define.

That brings us to the question: what is a good circus craft? In *122 x 244*, the environment the craftspersons work within, consists mostly of industrially processed wood. What is crafted are different techniques, in which all the actants on stage interact. Most of them involve the balancing of either wood or the artists. Skilfully, the two artists balance pieces of wood on one another or try

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<sup>123</sup> Tim Ingold, *The perception of the environment. Essays on livelihood, dwelling and skill* (Hove: Psychology Press, 2000), 347.

<sup>124</sup> Sennett, *The craftsman*, 214-218.

<sup>125</sup> Tim Ingold, “Thinking through making,” Presentation at the Institute for Northern Culture ‘Tales from the North.’, accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ygne72-4zyo>.

<sup>126</sup> Ingold, *Being alive*, 213.

<sup>127</sup> Sennett, *The craftsman*, 8.

to keep themselves up while standing on high towers of rattling pieces of wood. But since the movement material bears almost no resemblance to classical circus repertoire like juggling patterns or acrobatic moves, it is hard to say if these techniques are performed *well*.

The attentive reader might have noticed that the similarity of this problem with Bellacasa's handling of the definition of care in the CARING chapter. Good care cannot be normative and therefore must be renegotiated time and time again. The same goes for crafting, 'well' is defined in the practice itself, in negotiation with all actants involved. Crucial to Sennett's conceptualization of craft is that it joins the hand (doing) and the head (thinking). Ingold too, advocates a view in which one thinks through making.<sup>128</sup> Knowledge about material practice is essential to craft. While and through making, craftspersons think and thus determine what is good. That this thinking is crucial and should be fed is illustrated by Sennett in his description of the creation of the atom bombs by engineer Robert Oppenheimer. We could say that Oppenheimer did his job, making an extremely lethal weapon, 'well'. Thus, Sennett concludes, we have to take the thinking in craft serious in order to constantly question and negotiate what good craft is. In an argument against Arendt, he asserts that this thinking about what is 'good' is done *while* making, not before or after.<sup>129</sup>

This idea contrasts with the idea of the virtuoso, in which 'well' can be defined as mastery or domination. For the virtuoso, good craft has a stable meaning, and thus does not require further questioning. The standard is fixed, you either reach it or not. The same goes for circus tricks, they are either executed well or not. Think of a perfect somersault, or a flawlessly executed juggling pattern. Notice how the fantasies of mastery are active here. Because virtuosity celebrates is sheer technical prowess, Sennett contrasts craft to virtuosity.<sup>130</sup> Similarly, we could argue with Ingold that craft is not about the showing of technical skill, but about carefully weaving together of materials.<sup>131</sup> Doing that well, will require skill, the result of years of thinking and doing in material worlds. We could see the balance Vogel, Stiller and the board manage to keep, as a result of this.

"It is at the level of mastery, I will show, that ethical problems of craft appear." writes Sennett provocatively in the introduction to *The Craftsman*.<sup>132</sup> As an answer to the idea of virtuosic mastery, Sennett proposes a form of work that is between that of the amateur and the virtuoso.<sup>133</sup> In this work, 'well' is never sure. Thus, we are forced to critically re-asses circus practices time and time again. A reflection that is often lacking now. It is precisely by not defining the well, while still regarding it as the goal and reason of our work, that a material culture assures itself of the necessary place for experimentation and critical thought. Like a journey that constantly reconsiders its destination.

Until now we have treated craft in circus as the handling of materials. In 122 x 244, what was crafted were techniques. But what about the craft of making a circus performance? Making

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<sup>128</sup> Ingold, *Making*, xi.

<sup>129</sup> Sennett, *The craftsman*, 1-8.

<sup>130</sup> Sennett, *The craftsman*, 117.

<sup>131</sup> It should not surprise us that the metaphor of the weave is central to the thinking of both Haraway and Ingold, it powerfully transmits an *inside* perspective on more than human worlds.

<sup>132</sup> Sennett, *The craftsman*, 20.

<sup>133</sup> Sennett, *The craftsman*, 117.

performances is a specific craft that is to be somehow separated from the craft of making these techniques. Thus, we are reminded that performances are not simply showcases of craft, they are a craft in themselves. In that sense, Lievens is obviously right when she condemns circus as a 'parade of craft'. We do not do craft any justice when we see performance as the superficial showing of craft. Here, I think Lievens has a very important point. Performance is not a neutral form to show our craft in. Therefore we have to think about the way we craft performances.

Think again of the distinction brought up by Lievens between 'doing' and 'making' circus. "Creating circus takes place in the space of the performance, not in that of circus practice. Creating (and performing) circus is always about a staged 'doing', a staged 'now', a staged 'here', and a staged 'being'."<sup>134</sup> Thus, when thinking of craft in circus, we should not forget that whenever we are *showing* this craft, like in *122 x 244*, a new framework is activated. The showing is a craft too. This is not to say that I argue for something like a 'well-made circus play'. There are no fixed criteria for making a performance. Again, 'well' is to be defined in the making of the performance itself.

When Sennett problematizes the virtuosic, it is partly because it pacifies audiences by leaving them in awe for something they could never do themselves.<sup>135</sup> The staged being, to stick with Lievens' terms, is thus mastering the audience by exposing them to seemingly infinite capabilities. *122 x 244* is staged differently. While awe is not far away at moments like the balancing described in the beginning, it is a different kind of awe. It is an awe for material sensibility, for the collaboration between humans and nonhumans, something anyone could do if they learned to feel material environments like that. In that sense, the craftsperson is more humble, in the most common sense of the word, than the virtuoso.

### doing crafting

An important aspect of the way craft is done, is the knowledge inherent to it and how this could be passed on. Both Sennett and Ingold describe extensively how craft is transmitted from master to apprentice. This raises interesting questions about the ways knowledge is present in the circus field, an arts field that often gets labelled as 'undertheorized'. In a beautiful passage, Tim Ingold writes the following about how a learner acquires craft:

The learner is placed, with the requisite equipment, in a practical situation, and is told to pay attention to how 'this' feels, or how 'that' looks or sounds – to notice those subtleties of texture that are all-important to good judgement and the successful practice of a craft. That one learns to touch, to see and to hear is obvious to any craftsman or musician. As Gibson succinctly put it, learning is an 'education of attention'.<sup>136</sup>

In circus practice and education something similar happens. Circus artists, in schools or at other places, learn to do circus by physical practice and explorations, just like craftspersons do it in their workshop.<sup>137</sup> Skill is not passed on in the form of pre-made plans, but by acquiring a specific sensibility through a lasting physical encounter with materials.<sup>138</sup> In the introduction to this thesis,

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<sup>134</sup> Lievens, "Second open letter to the circus"

<sup>135</sup> Sennett, *The craftsman*, 116.

<sup>136</sup> Ingold, *The perception of the environment*, 416.

<sup>137</sup> Notice the profound similarities with the tuning chapter. The ecological sensibility and intimacy breath through this chapter as strongly as in the previous one.

<sup>138</sup> Ingold, *The perception of the environment*, 415.

I briefly mentioned how circus' relation to theory is somehow uneasy. This might have to do with the way this embodied knowledge of 'touching, seeing and hearing' contrasts to the written and/or verbal theory that circulates in academic contexts. Starting to see circus as a craft, will require new conceptualizations of knowledge, in which knowledge is not confined to the timeframes before and after physical practice.<sup>139</sup> Rather, craft calls for a conceptualization of thinking that is happening *in* and *through* practice. In other words: a paradigm in which *doing circus is thinking circus*.<sup>140</sup>

Sennett calls the specific type of knowledge that is present in the craftsperson's body 'tacit knowledge'.<sup>141</sup> Similarly, one of the most influential authorities on craft, Glenn Adamson, describes the knowledge circulating in crafts as 'material intelligence'. He goes on to define it as follows: "a deep understanding of the material world around us, an ability to read that material environment and the know-how required to give it new form."<sup>142</sup> In this definition, craft's preoccupation with materiality on the one hand and knowledge on the other meet again. Circus practitioners have loads of this tacit knowledge or material intelligence. These types of knowledge fundamentally challenge the mind-body dualism at the core of the Cartesian worldview that was problematized in the introductory chapters. Ideas and things, the body and the mind, start to get up mixed in circus practices. The question then remains how to make this form of knowledge explicit and accessible for people who are not directly involved in the practice so that reflection about the practice could flourish.<sup>143</sup>

Around these specific forms of knowledge, socio-political organizations are built. These institutes of craft might tell us something about the way the circus field is and could be structured. According to Sennett, community and the workshop are essential to craft. While it is the first time this chapter mentions community, it is absolutely central to (Sennett's conception of) craft. The sociologist argues how this community in medieval times was held together by the institution of the workshop. Assisted by ritual and religion, the practice and transmission of craft in the workshop weaved together groups of craftspersons consisting of masters and apprentices and made them function as a collective agent. However, when the Middle Ages came to an end, Renaissance subjectivity gave rise to the appraisal of individual authorship and autonomous creativity. This would change the workshop thoroughly.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> The idea that specific sorts of knowledge are available in art practices has acquired a lot of recognition since the rise of 'artistic research' in contemporary art institutes and schools. In contrast to the Danish circus researcher Camilla Damkjaer for example, I choose to not use this framework here but look for something more close to circus: craft.

<sup>140</sup> Think again of Maaïke Bleeker's definition of dramaturgy as the thinking of no-one's thoughts from the introduction. Bleeker too, describes thinking as happening through physical practice. Dramaturgical tactics, like crafting, are ways to structure and guide this physical thinking practices. Since thinking takes place inside of the doing, this thinking is now also performed by circus artists themselves instead of being confined to the enclosed spaces in which academics or critics move.

<sup>141</sup> Sennett, *The craftsman*, 183.

<sup>142</sup> Glenn Adamson, *Fewer, better things* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018), 4.

<sup>143</sup> For example, what could I know about the material intelligence of circus artists if I myself only practiced circus on an amateur level and at a very young age? How could I write of it? I research this question further in the part of the chapter on attending.

<sup>144</sup> Sennett, *The craftsman*, 51-80.

The medieval workshop resonates with circus practices today. This is why I will use it as an archetype for the (possible) circulation of knowledge in circus, as a tactic to make this knowledge flow. After all, in circus too, communities are held together by craft. Although from 1985 onwards, circus schools took over the monopoly on circus education from families and companies, especially these last ones still function quite similar to workshops.<sup>145</sup> Like medieval workshops, some circus artists even live together to practice their craft. What would it mean for us to see circus practices as centred around workshops and how would that contribute to a more humble circus? Again, training will be central in the answer to these questions. After all, skill is a trained practice.

First of all, the workshop challenges individualism. More concretely, it transforms the idea of training individually. Training in the workshop cannot be the individual struggle to overcome an object. Rather, training comes to stand for a collective engagement in material practice. It is the sharing of knowledge and, together, finding out what is good or better. Of course, we should always be critical of the necessary exclusions this collective makes. The medieval workshop for example, consisted only of men.<sup>146</sup> But that does not make the collective obsolete. In a publication on the place of collaboration in craft, Helen Carnac writes: “Working together we traverse paths in order to find something, where to know more of something we need to handle it.”<sup>147</sup> Starting from a “mutual and visceral attraction to stuff”, crafting together enables circus artists explore, share and question ideas about how to handle material environments together.<sup>148</sup> The knowledge that was so central above, can in that way be shared and passed along, always slightly differed by diverse communities and circumstances.

In the context of today’s work, there are obviously objections to be made about a view that interweaves life and work so strongly. How would tactics of craft help in this time in which (circus) artists are so overworked? However, craft as a concept came into being precisely as a reaction against capitalist production systems and the related realities of work. It was precisely because of the mechanization of work that craft as a concept became thinkable.<sup>149</sup> While the craft described above indeed firmly connects life to work, the work that is meant is thoroughly different from that in late capitalism. Next to the anti-individualism, this anti-capitalism that became inherent to for example British Arts and Crafts movement, is an important to the way craft as a dramaturgical tactic challenges socio-political structures in the contemporary circus.

This aligns with how throughout its history, circus arts have built the image of an art form ‘outside’ of society. According to Lievens however, circus arts today do not really succeed in realizing this self-selected marginal position. In contrast, she notices the related values of individualism and

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<sup>145</sup> Bauke Lievens, “First open letter to the circus: The need to redefine,” accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> August 2019, <https://circusdialogue.com/open-letters-circus-1>.

<sup>146</sup> Sennett, *The craftsman*, 58.

<sup>147</sup> Helen Carnac, “Moving things around ... collaboration and dynamic change,” in *Collaboration through craft*, eds. Amanda Ravetz, Alice Kettle, and Helen Felcey, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 34.

<sup>148</sup> Amanda Ravetz, Alice Kettle, and Helen Felcey, “Collaboration through craft: an introduction,” in *Collaboration through craft*, 5.

<sup>149</sup> See for example: Michael S. Kimmel, “The Arts and Crafts movement: handmade socialism or elite consumerism?,” *Contemporary Sociology* 16, no. 3 (1987): 388-90. and Nicholas Salmon, “The political activist,” in *William Morris*, ed. Linda Parry. (London: Philip Wilson Publishers, 1996), 58-72.

capitalism in circus practices in enlarged form.<sup>150</sup> Organizing circus as a craft practice and thus working against the ever accelerating and individualizing modes of productions in today's capitalism, might be a possible way for circus to actually claim this outside space. The workshop, where knowledge is collectively found, shared and questioned, could be such an outside-space. Since it is the capitalist system and its related ideologies of individualism and extractivism, that provoked the ecological catastrophe so fundamental for the concept of a humble circus, finding this outside place for slower, more careful and more collective ways of doing circus is paramount.

There is one final thing craft can teach us about doing circus. This has to do with the direction of working in circus practice. This sounds rather abstract at first, but the question comes down to the following: what direction does the dramaturgical arrow of a circus practice point? On this matter, Ingold has a clear preference for the idea of *working forward*. In this view, rather than through abduction, we make through improvisation. This means that when doing circus, we do not just make up an idea in our minds, and then simply execute it, working backwards from that idea. Rather, we join ourselves to the flow of material, which generates ideas and material transformation.<sup>151</sup> When we look at circus practices in this way, it becomes less interesting to work backwards from the pre-existing mental plan of a trick than to work forwards from material circumstances. In a forthcoming publication, Josef Stiller describes how when making  $122 \times 244$ , the collective started experimenting with the specific materiality of the wooden board split in different shapes. By physically relating to this materiality, the techniques the performance consists of came into being.<sup>152</sup> Such a studio protocol clearly points forwards.



Figure 12: Klub Girko, *122 x 244 - and a lot of little pieces*, 2018.

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<sup>150</sup> Lievens, "Second open letter to the circus"

<sup>151</sup> Ingold, *Being alive*, 216.

<sup>152</sup> The Circus Dialogues, *Thinking through circus*, (Ghent: APE, 2019). (forthcoming)

### attending crafting

The question of knowledge has been central in this chapter. This poses a significant problem for this part of the chapter in which the audience is taken into consideration. The knowledge in the craft of circus seems to be “first-person knowledge”, meaning that it is only accessible for those directly involved in physical circus practice.<sup>153</sup> This is what motivated Camilla Damkjaer, who was mentioned a few times already, to start her research for *Homemade Academic Circus* in which she as an academic gets up from her desk to develop a physical circus practice. In the delightful book reporting on that research, she writes:

So much information about the art-making process and the thinking it can produce was lost to me as a spectator. Most of it took place beforehand, and much of it was never shared. This project was triggered by a need to be in an active relation to the work of art, interfering with it, struggling with it, learning from it - in order to get other kinds of information about art and artistic processes.<sup>154</sup>

But where does this view leave the audience? Is all skill, knowledge and sensibility inherent to the craft of circus hopelessly lost to the spectator or do the dramaturgical tactics of craft still have something to say about attending circus?

In the previous chapter, I quickly referred to the problematic tendency of a lot of circus performances to hide the labour or training behind particular moves. Here, the concepts of making, doing and attending are helpful. While doing circus is full of training, tuning and working, this is hard to grasp when one attends circus practices. As a spectator, you get to see effortless victory. That in turn, has to do with making circus. When making circus shows, the work required to perform figures is often eradicated to produce the semblance of effortlessness crucial to virtuosity and heroism. This is where the attendance of craft carries the possibility of a more humble circus. Could we make the process of crafting in which, as described above, humans are trying to follow the life of materials, visible to audience?

What if Ingold’s idea of ‘following the material’ was not only applicable to circus artists, but also to circus audiences? How could circus render audiences capable to follow the material themselves and develop their own relation to its agencies and trajectories? In his presentation entitled *Ta-da!: watching making and everyday materiality* at the New Materialism and Contemporary Craft seminar in 2019, Stephen Knott describes what happens when audiences watch craft. When discussing the way he himself showed the work of visual artist and jewellery designer Felieke van der Leest during the exhibition *Tendenser 2018* at Galleri F 15, Knott describes how he intended to show the excessive amount of time it takes her to make the crocheted and knitted textile jewellery figures. For example, one of the puppets made by van der Leest was accompanied by things like the crochet pattern book, showing the complex and time-consuming interlacement of stitches and colours.<sup>155</sup> Thus, instead of mind-boggling mastery, a more humble image of the craftsperson as a patient negotiator or a hive of activity appears.

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<sup>153</sup> First-person refers to the mode of storytelling in the ‘I’ form. It is the world as seen from inside by the subject.

<sup>154</sup> Damkjaer, *Homemade academic circus*, 35.

<sup>155</sup> Stephen Knott, “Ta-da!: watching making and everyday materiality,” Presentation at Oslo National Academy of the Arts, New Materialism and Contemporary Craft, April 5th 2019, accessed 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2019, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tq37GD\\_zm5k](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tq37GD_zm5k).

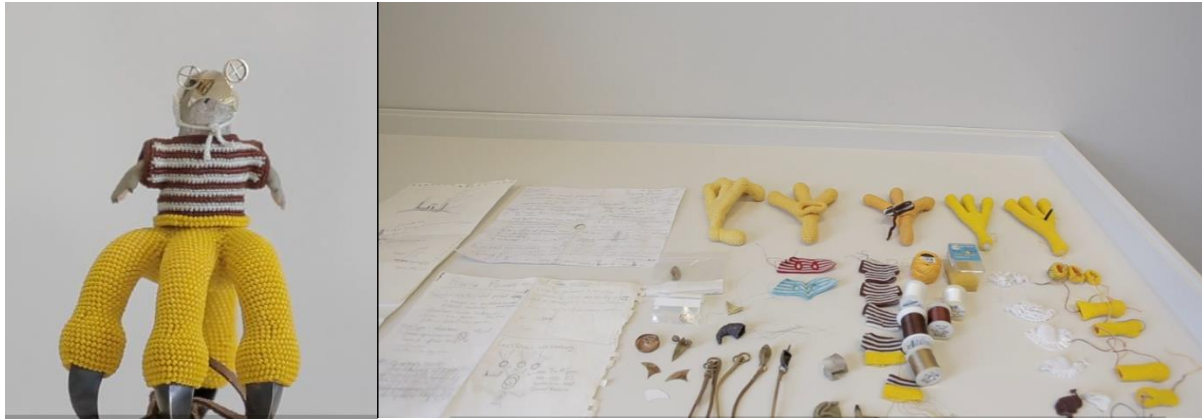


Figure 13: Felieke van der Leest, *Prairie Pioneer*, 2012, bracelet and object at Tendenser 2018, Oslo, Galleri F15.

If we try to stretch this idea towards circus practices, artists have to look for ways to show all the negotiations with material environments that happens before performance. As we discussed before, this is the case in Phia Ménard's/Compagnie Non Nova's work in the I.C.E. cycle. Another example, *Rare Birds* (2017), will be central to the next chapter. In that chapter, I will describe how *Un loup pour l'homme* in *Rare Birds* shows acrobatics in perpetual becoming. In the performance, process is privileged over climactic result. While exercised with care, the acrobatics also look like hard work. This way, the audience gets to attend something similar to the exhibition of van der Leest. Circus practice is not seen as virtuosity *ex nihilo* but as continuous becoming-with of humans and materials. A practice that requires time and care. Finding similar sorts of tactics to show the process of craft to circus audiences would have two great advantages. First, the labour is made visible. This gives circus artists a way to avoid the troubling clash between the ontology of hard and painful work and the representational image of the effortless superhero. Second, it gives audiences an insight in the material negotiations and the embodied knowledge that circus is so rich in. Being able to follow the path of the circus artist might help us as audience members to follow the material ourselves.

According to Knott, the showing of process does not undo the allure of craft by simply explaining everything. It does not make craft into science.<sup>156</sup> This matters because of circus' fear that discourse will contribute to 'the loss of magic' as described by Lievens.<sup>157</sup> There is still some sort of attraction in physical skill, even if the long pathway of working with and through materials is visible. For example, the scene from *122 x 244* that opened this chapter, is preceded by the careful build-up of the construction on which the two artists will proceed to balance. While the audience gets an insight 'inside' the technique, it does not diminish the wonder of what follows. Moreover, one could even say that it adds to the marvel of the collaborative potential of humans and nonhumans.

Let's end this chapter by looking at attending as a craft in itself. As mentioned in the introduction, I chose to give so much space to the role of the audience in a humble circus to provide some counter-weight to the idea of the spectator as passive and neutral. Audience members do not only receive circus, they are always doing a lot of things. This forces us to think about how to attend

<sup>156</sup> Knott, *Ta-da!*

<sup>157</sup> Lievens, "Second open letter to the circus"



circus ‘well’, and thus about the craft of being a circus audience member. Again, attending as a craft implies a definition, however temporary, of ‘attending well’. In this thesis, I already proposed or will propose some of these criteria: care, responsibility, openness... Finding these ways of attending needs training by circus audiences themselves and on the other hand needs to be allowed by circus performers and makers.

If we look at professional spectators like the critic or the programmer, it gets clear how attending can be a craft. Both figures have specific and different skills in attending. Like these professional spectators, “amateur” spectators have to watch a lot of work in order to develop a skilled way of attending. This shows us how spectators too, need to bodily work with circus material in order to acquire a specific sort of knowledge, a feeling for attending circus. An audience member that has seen enough circus shows will be able to recognize the repertoire and the way it is handled in a specific performance. Even more interestingly, a skilled circus audience member might be able to see what kind of training or suffering a specific movement requires or the body of a circus artist is shaped by a technique. Thus, as Damkjaer argued in the beginning of this part of the chapter, audiences develop a different knowledge than circus artists. That does not mean however, that it is necessarily less rich.

## DWELLING

*I. A child in the dark, gripped with fear, comforts himself by singing under his breath. He walks and halts to his song. Lost, he takes shelter, or orients himself with his little song as best he can. The song is like a rough sketch of a calming and stabilizing, calm and stable, center in the heart of chaos. Perhaps the child skips as he sings, hastens or slows his pace. But the song itself is already a skip: it jumps from chaos to the beginnings of order in chaos and is in danger of breaking apart at any moment. There is always sonority in Ariadne's thread. Or the song of Orpheus.*

*II. Now we are at home. But home does not pre-exist: it was necessary to draw a circle around that uncertain and fragile center, to organize a limited space.*<sup>158</sup>

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's introductory quote confronts us with the concept of dwelling. In it, a child who is afraid of the dark starts singing a song.<sup>159</sup> That song brings into being a fragile but comforting world around her. By constructing something from elements in her environment, the child skips from chaos to the beginning of order. The song starts to function as a home. But that home does not pre-exist, there is an activity creating it. Better, the activity is the home itself. I will call this activity dwelling. It is the organization of a limited space in one's environment. By doing this, one comes home. There are countless ways to do this. The child sings a song, spiders weave webs and others build cities. My point here is that circus practices are forms of dwelling too. We could look at what circus artists do as the organization of their environments. This organization of chaotic environments into meaningful relations makes their world habitable.

Circus artists dwell by training, traveling, building and performing. All of these organize a limited space. By ongoing interaction, circus artists give rise to complex and meaningful webs of relations between themselves and their environment. We could call these webs worlds or dwellings or we could call them *Umwelten*. This term stems from Jakob von Uexküll's early work in biology *Streifzüge durch die Umwelten von Tieren und Menschen: Ein Bilderbuch unsichtbarer Welten* (1934) (fig. 17). *Umwelten*, according to von Uexküll, differ from environments in the sense that they are not the 'objectively perceptible' surroundings of a subject. Rather, they are built by the subject itself. An *Umwelt* consists of the coming together of what von Uexküll calls the perceptive space and the effected space. Thus, the world a (non)human animal perceives and the world it creates by practice, results in its *Umwelt*.<sup>160</sup> In this chapter, I will focus on the idea of the effected space. How do we create our environment through practice, specifically a circus practice?

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<sup>158</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A thousand plateaus. Capitalism and schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 311.

<sup>159</sup> This chapter functioned as the basis for "Een huis in een huis in een huis en dan de wereld," a forthcoming article in *Etcetera* 158.

<sup>160</sup> Jakob von Uexküll, "A stroll through the worlds of animals and men: A picture book of invisible worlds," in *Instinctive Behavior. The development of a modern concept*, ed. & trans. Claire H. Schiller. (New York: International Universities Press, 1957), 5-80.

In circus, Umwelten are shaped by the organization of a company, but also by a movement phrase or a dramaturgy. The construction of these worlds is central to the ecological worries a humble circus is based on, as described in the CARING chapter. If we take dwelling seriously and care about the worlds it creates, circus could be a place for experimenting with ecological relations. After all, ecological practice is about inhabiting the heterogenous house that is our planet. Circus practices carry in them the potential to train this tricky skill. If circus is about dwelling, we can think about how to dwell ‘well’.<sup>161</sup> This is similar to the Minobimaatisiwin, discussed in the introduction, which can be seen as looking for sustainable forms of dwelling. These teachings aim to find ways of living well on the planet and to pass them on.

This is why circus artists’ dwelling practices matter, they are thinking about ways of shaping worlds by inhabiting them. Dwelling is an ecological practice that we desperately need to train in this era. In circus, it is self-evident that the inhabited worlds are ontologically diverse. To speak with Bellacasa, these worlds are ‘more than human’.<sup>162</sup> Among others, circus weaves together things, (non)human animals, institutes, hopes and fantasies. If we acknowledge the relations that arise through dwelling and try to shape them carefully, the worlds they bring about have the potential to grow more sustainable and enable all the actants involved to flourish as well as possible. This is why I will argue that in these dwelling practices, there are possibilities for a more humble future. This chapter aims to locate these possibilities and bring their ecological potential to the surface. To start thinking these tactics, I explore the possibilities opened by the French circus collective Un loup pour l’homme in *Rare Birds* (2017).<sup>163</sup>

### **making dwelling**

At the very start of *Rare Birds*, one of the performers welcomes the public in the companies’ tent. He then proceeds to give some additional information on the location of the performance and how the company understands acrobatics in it. This gesture of invitation transforms the tent into the acrobats’ home. It is a dwelling gesture in itself. The idea of the circus practice in all its facets as a house, resonates throughout the performance and strongly defines *Rare Birds*.

In *Hyperobjects: philosophy and ecology after the end of the world* (2013), the British philosopher Timothy Morton explains how the image of the house is related to ecological thought. He refers to Ann Hoberman’s classic children’s book *A house is a house for me* (1978) to picture earth as houses that wrap each other like Russian dolls.<sup>164</sup> This is more than just a beautiful metaphor. After all, the etymological stem of ecology is the Greek ‘oikos’: house, household, dwelling.<sup>165</sup> “Ecology is the thinking of home, and hence world.”<sup>166</sup> Like the song surrounding the child in the introduction quote, the environment is surrounding us. But the environment is not given, it is created by

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<sup>161</sup> Think again of the definition of care and crafting.

<sup>162</sup> Bellacasa, *Matters of care*.

<sup>163</sup> *Rare Birds*, Un loup pour l’homme, Alexandre Fray (Cherbourg-en-Cotentin : La Brèche, 23rd March 2017). . .

<sup>164</sup> Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 117.

<sup>165</sup> Astrid Schwarz and Kurt Jax, “Etymology and Original Sources of the Term “Ecology”,” in *Ecology revisited. Reflecting on concepts, advancing science*, ed. Astrid Schwarz and Kurt Jax. (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2011), 145–47.

<sup>166</sup> Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 116.

dwelling. In that sense, circus can help us thinking about the way we create dwellings by shaping meaningful relations.<sup>167</sup> However, we can only reach this by constantly questioning in what way, by what sorts of relations, the worlds are shaped and how they allow different actants to be. To use Bennett's words, we need to examine the politics of the ecology.<sup>168</sup>

Next to the physical practice in *Rare Birds*, possibilities for the dwelling tactics are opened by two main theoretical planners: Tim Ingold, who was central to the previous chapter too, and Donna Haraway. In *The perception of the environment: essays in dwelling, livelihood and skill* (2000), Ingold draws from Martin Heidegger and his seminal essay *Bauen, Wohnen, Denken* (1951) to come to the concept of dwelling. Around this concept, he groups the first set of essays in the book. From Heidegger, Ingold draws the core insight that building and inhabiting cannot be separated. His essays describe the switch from a 'building perspective' to a 'dwelling perspective'. Where the building perspective believes that we organize our conceptions of our environment first in our mind -as a kind of blueprint- to later build them, the dwelling perspective assumes that we construct our environment by practice, *while inhabiting*.<sup>169</sup> At the basis of this idea is the thinking of phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty:

In short, people do not import their ideas, plans or mental representations into the world, since that very world, to borrow a phrase from Merleau-Ponty, is the homeland of their thoughts. Only because they already dwell therein can they think the thoughts they do.<sup>170</sup>

Ingold thinks from what he calls an animic ontology, an image of the world in perpetual vital becoming. This view has strong similarities with the ontologies which Grusin termed under the nonhuman turn and non-Western worldviews like that of the Anishinaabeg, both underly this thesis. Ingold writes: "In the animic ontology, beings do not simply occupy the world, they inhabit it, and in so doing – in threading their own paths through the meshwork – they contribute to its ever-evolving weave."<sup>171</sup>

Contrary to Ingold, Donna Haraway never mentions Heidegger's term 'dwelling', this probably in order to distant her thinking from the "grumpy, human-exceptionalist" Martin Heidegger.<sup>172</sup> However, her 'worlding' in *Staying with the trouble: making kin in the Chthulucene* (2016) relates closely to the dwelling sketched above. She calls this venture of worlding 'becoming-with'.<sup>173</sup> In that way Haraway strongly emphasizes the relational and communal aspect of this task of worlding.<sup>174</sup> To fully understand Haraway's worlding, the notion of string figures is crucial. These string figures are an ancient and globally appearing game in which patterns are formed by strings in between the participants' hands. Haraway, characterizes them as following: "String figures are like stories; they

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<sup>167</sup> *Oikos* is the stem of economy too. In contrast to the *logos* in ecology, *nomos* stands for habit, rule, law. Economy is thus the law of 'good' householding for profit. Ecology on the other hand, is a creative and speculative practice of dwelling in which intimate relationships are interwoven into a house, not for profit but because it is necessary. It is this skill which we can practice in circus.

<sup>168</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 108.

<sup>169</sup> This insight is very similar to the idea of 'working forward' that I described in the crafting chapter.

<sup>170</sup> Ingold, *The perception of the environment*, 186

<sup>171</sup> Ingold, *Being alive*, 71.

<sup>172</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the trouble*, 11.

<sup>173</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the trouble*, 11.

<sup>174</sup> See for example the next part of the chapter in which I emphasize the concept of sympoesis.

propose and enact *patterns for participants to inhabit*, somehow, on a vulnerable and wounded earth.”<sup>175</sup> (my emphasis) These games are particularly interesting for Haraway because they intertwine thinking and doing and because they weave worlds. Haraway describes how during the enactment of the patterns, the Navajo, living in the Southwest of the United States, tell stories that give the somehow order the universe. Thus, string figures give meaning and form to a chaotic universe, and in that way makes it inhabitable.

Navajo string games are one form of “continuous weaving,” practices for telling the stories of the constellations, of the emergence of the People, of the Dine. These string figures are *thinking* as well as *making* practices, pedagogical practices and cosmological performances.<sup>176</sup>



Figure 14: Donna Haraway, *Ma'ii Ats'áá' Yíhvoí* (*Coyotes Running Opposite Ways*).

The metaphor of weaving threads as relations, is already present in von Uexküll's work. He writes: “*As the spider spins its threads, every subject spins his relations to certain characters of the things around him, and weaves them into a firm web which carries his existence.*”<sup>177</sup> Since according to Haraway, making string figures is a playful task, it should not surprise us that Haraway points to the arts as a site for worlding/string figures. “Perhaps it is precisely in the realm of play, outside the dictates of teleology, settled categories, and function, that serious worldliness and recuperation become possible. That is surely the premise of SF.”<sup>178</sup> This makes the circus a possible playfield. Could we see the circus too, as enacting patterns to inhabit? It is the function of these dwelling tactics to more or less structure this realm of play within circus arts. To make some new figures and rules to weave with.

Even more than Ingold's, Haraway's ideas about worlding ground in the current ecological catastrophe. Her philosophical practice is a flight from the horrible times of the Anthropocene: a

<sup>175</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the trouble*, 10.

<sup>176</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the trouble*, 14.

<sup>177</sup> Jakob von Uexküll, “A stroll through the worlds of animals and men,” 14.

<sup>178</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the trouble*, 24.

time in which the sixth extinction testifies of precisely the failing of multispecies worlding. “Right now, the world is full of refugees, human and not, without refuge.”<sup>179</sup> Thinking against the present context of the Anthropocene, Haraway gives us Terrapolis: an imagined interspecies dwelling. Terrapolis is a string figure in which Haraway carefully weaves together actants as well as possible. A world that offers refuge for all beings. She describes it as follows:

Terrapolis is n-dimensional niche space for multispecies becomingwith.

Terrapolis is open, worldly, indeterminate, and polytemporal.

Terrapolis is a chimera of materials, languages, histories.

Terrapolis is for companion species, cum panis, with bread, at table together—not “posthuman” but “com-post.”<sup>180</sup>

The parallels between Ingold’s dwelling and the worlding of Haraway are remarkable. Both outline an active process in which beings make worlds by giving shape to meaningful relations in their environments. For both Haraway and Ingold, these relations can be material, like actually building a house, and immaterial, like storytelling. Like the one about Terrapolis, Haraway’s stories are immaterial ways of inhabiting worlds. Think again of Deleuze and Guattari’s singing child. Ingold argues:

the forms people build, whether in the imagination or on the ground, arise within the current of their involved activity, in the specific relational contexts of their practical engagement with their surroundings.<sup>181</sup>

In this description, we can notice the convergence of craft and dwelling. They are both about agents involved in activities that shape their environments.

With Ingold and Haraway in the back of our minds, let’s return to *Rare Birds*. The welcoming introduction to the performance emphasizes how the acrobatic practice keeps evolving through performance, there is no fixed choreography. By showing the coming about of their acrobatics in *Rare Birds*, we can register the emergence of a home night after night. The concept of dwelling is accentuated because of the setting in which this emergence takes place. We are invited into a tent which has a significant meaning as a, to speak with Haraway, material-semiotic marker. In a portrait of the company, Bauke Lievens writes

In addition, *Rare Birds* is an experiment in social sustainability: all members of the company live in caravans and the space of performance is a company-owned tent, set up by the company itself. Hence, the audience pays a visit to the company in their home. They sit down in a circle, a shape that is traditionally creating some sort of commonality. This sense of community is also present among the acrobats themselves: their glances reveal an extraordinary confidence, a shared sense of responsibility and a unifying work ethic.<sup>182</sup>

As the emblematic image of the tent indicates, *Un loup pour l’homme* explicitly stages their own practice of living and working together in *Rare Birds*. The practice is a way of creating an environment by dwelling. It is not so much the case that the tent simply is their home. With Ingold and Haraway, it is more accurate to say that by doing the things they do, they make that tent into a home. By interacting with each other and their environment they create a dwelling. But what

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<sup>179</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the trouble*, 100.

<sup>180</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the trouble*, 11.

<sup>181</sup> Ingold, *The perception of the environment*, 154.

<sup>182</sup> Bauke Lievens, “Het mensbeeld van de acrobaat,” *Etcetera* 152 (2018): 34-39.

exactly do and could we do in circus to form houses? How can we dwell in circus? The movement material that follows the introduction imagines a form of *main à main* acrobatics that is not so much focused on spectacle, the triumph over the other, but on ways of doing circus together that care for every actant involved in the practice. Seemingly improvising, the performers go through a set of exercises that are more about supporting than dominating. The question is not, like modernists building office towers, “how high can we go?” but rather, what can we do together and how could we imagine doing that for years? Artistic leader and performer in *Rare Birds* Alexandre Fray states in an almost all-embracing statement: “It is no longer important to win or to lose, but to continue.”<sup>183</sup>

Fray’s statement should remind us of the fact that careful dramaturgical tactics cannot only aim to create dwellings, it must look for ways of sustaining what is built. As is apparent in the introduction quote, the house is always in the in danger of breaking apart. It is a fragile, fleeting entity. That means, we need to keep creating circumstances to continue building and inhabiting. We need to care for the relations the house consists of. It is of great important that for dwelling to be repeatable, it requires care. This is quite clearly at stake in the worlding praxis of Un loup pour l’homme’s *Rare Birds*. Because care is so present in it, the acrobatic technique allows the dwelling to be reconstructed time and time again. Not only is the movement material itself based on ideas of sustaining, carrying and catching, it seems like the performance as a whole is able to sustain itself on a long term.

Often, the performers in *Rare Birds* are more reminiscent of a bee colony than a group of individuals. Efficiently negating individualism, so central to Cartesianism and its fantasies of mastery, they form something that is close to what Bert Holldobler and E. O. Wilson call a superorganism. These superorganisms, like honeybees or ants, are a collective of social insects that together behaves much like an organism. Superorganisms do not know internal competition. They organize internally to achieve a set of tasks.<sup>184</sup> The performers in *Rare Birds* are organized similarly, reshaping themselves for every collective movement. In one scene for example one performer walks around the circle in the air, each step supported by the hands of the collective (fig. 15). It is not only interesting to remark how they undo individualism, we should have a look at how these superorganisms dwell too. “In social insects species-typical nest structures result from the collective actions of many individuals.”<sup>185</sup> Could we see *Rare Birds* as the nest resulting from the collective actions we call circus?

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<sup>183</sup> Alexandre Fray, “Note d’intention,” accessed June 5<sup>th</sup> 2019, <http://unlouppourlhomme.com/rare-birds/>. My translation.

<sup>184</sup> Bert Hölldobler and Edward O. Wilson, *The superorganism. The beauty, elegance, and strangeness of insect societies* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2009), 4.

<sup>185</sup> Hölldobler and Wilson, *The superorganism*, 470.



Figure 15: Slimane Brahimi, *Un loup pour l'homme : Rare Birds*, 2018.

The superorganism reminds us of the link between the inhabitant and the environment. This link works both ways. The inhabitant shapes the environment, but the opposite is true as well. Certain environments create certain inhabitants. As explained by Betti Marenko using the example of the child singing a song, Guattari and Deleuze have argued how the creation of a territory, a dwelling, also creates subjectivity.

When a component of the milieu is extracted and deployed as expression against the chaos of forces, a milieu is territorialised, given a specific landscape, and subjectivity emerges. Deleuze and Guattari tell the story of the child in the dark singing a refrain, the song as an audio sketch of a 'happy place', marking a territory. Territory and subjectivity are created simultaneously.<sup>186</sup>

If we dwell carefully, the subjectivity emerging is that of the human circus artist as a humble inhabitant. To go back to Haraway's archetypes for humans, a good dwelling practice gives rise to humans as humus, not Homo. A similar circus might resemble Haraway's story of Terrapolis, a terrestrial territory giving rise to a humble form of subjectivity, strongly connected to the environment.

This Terrapolis is not the home world for the human as Homo, that ever parabolic, re-and de-tumescing, phallic self-image of the same; but for the human that is transmogrified in etymological Indo-European sleight of tongue into guman, that worker of and in the soil.<sup>187</sup>

As Lievens describes, *Un loup pour l'homme*'s acknowledgement of their dependency on networks that physically and mentally support the artist, a new figure of the circus artist, and thus a new form of subjectivity, appears. While not explicitly linked to the nonhuman environment, the collective does emphasize relationality and dependency in contrast to the autonomous Homo.

The acrobat in the oeuvre of *Un loup pour l'homme* is always an embodiment of a specific image of man. Here, s/he is no longer involved in a tragic fight with her environment and the other. In contrast, a human figure appears that depends on her/his position in a network of actants.<sup>188</sup>

Together, they find a way of flying, however this flying is not rooted in a fantasy of overcoming human limits, of mastering the environment. Rather, this flying is an explicitly collaborative project

<sup>186</sup> Betti Marenko, *Deleuze and design* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 199.

<sup>187</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the trouble*, 11.

<sup>188</sup> Lievens, "Het mensbeeld van de acrobaat". (My translation)



in which the catching is at least as important as the flying itself (fig. 21). That way, fantasies of mastery are radically left behind and replaced by collective fantasies of sustainability.

Un loup pour l'homme thus reminds us that there are other possible stories to be told. The proposed stories or fantasies acknowledge limitations to human capabilities, emphasizing interdependence. In that sense, they are humble. In that sense the acrobatics give insight in how exactly Homo could withdraw in circus practices. The dramaturgical tactics of dwelling come in handy here, if circus artists see their practices as constituent of their environments, of that in which they must live, they have to tread with care in order to sustain the precarious relations that environment consists of. This can only happen by themselves ourselves as part and product of these relations. Sticking to Morton's image of the world as a Russian doll of houses, this dwelling quest is easily extended to the sustainable inhabiting worlds bigger than a circus practice: ecologies, planets, the universes. This increase of scale clarifies why it is crucial to dwell in a sustainable and careful way. Circus practices can help us experimenting with ecological relations and critically reflecting on the way this happens. In a time in which the ecologies we inhabit are so damaged by the way we dwell, finding new ways of dwelling is key.



Figure 16: *Un loup pour l'homme* building up the companies' tent.

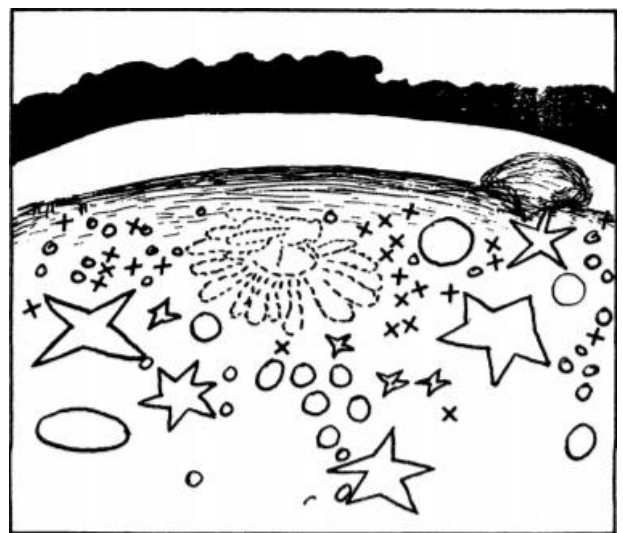


Figure 17: Georg Kriszat, *Umwelt of the honey bee*, 1934.

### doing dwelling

As discussed in the previous chapter, life and work in circus arts are often closely intertwined. This entanglement ensures that doing circus is also about living and dwelling. Since the system of production and distribution often causes life and work to converge, dwelling inevitably gets involved in circus practice in a rather literal way. Circus practices somehow have to become circus artists' homes. As addressed when introducing *Un loup pour l'homme*'s *Rare Birds*, we need to care about these specific working and living conditions. Dwelling is not only or primarily, taking place when making performances. Worlds exceed the time of performance. They are not only created for an audience, but also for circus artists themselves. Long before making a performance, circus artists make worlds. But what is it in the way circus artists live and work that provides us with fertile ground for humble dwelling tactics?

The guideline for this part of the chapter will be Donna Haraway's imperative of making kin. Making kin is an answer to the boundless individualism that has reigned over Western thinking for so long that our catastrophic ecological situation became thinkable. By shaping and sustaining meaningful and risky relations between the ones inhabiting the earth, we can re-make worlds that consist of string figures, not of individuals.<sup>189</sup> Circus has been about making kin for a long time. Kin in the usual sense of (family) relations has an exceptional place in circus practices and the narratives surrounding them. The idea of the circus family and the circus as a makeshift family for marginal figures is an important part of the way circus is (auto)mythologized. Today, Un loup pour l'homme makes kin through circus as well. We could see the practice developed for *Rare Birds* as consisting of string figures. By coming together in different assemblages, the collective creates a careful web that allows for certain movements. The company, much like a superorganism, renders individuals able to fly by catching them and to walk through the air by supporting them. As an audience, one can imagine and sense the amount of hands-on training and touch that preceded the performance. This training matters.

As the performer doing the introduction explicates in the beginning, the company does not separate practice and performance. Their physical research is an ongoing process that spectators help furthering. Since training is not hidden, we are offered a glimpse of what happens while doing physical research. That seems to be remarkably different from other training practices which, like discussed in the TUNING chapter, aim at the passing of limits and the mastering of a trick. These goals often require a significant amount of mental as well as physical suffering. *Rare Birds* shows a different kind of exercising. As they describe it themselves, it is not about seemingly easy victories over everyday limits. Rather, this practice is a collective search for a perfect imbalance and ways to maintain that.<sup>190</sup> If this search requires suffering, it is hidden nor glorified. The acrobat's panting is clearly audible because of the extremely minimal soundtrack and acrobat Arno Ferrera's soaking wet back is firmly highlighted at the end. This way, the companies' exhaustion and effort is made as visible as possible. While the movement material is thus not without suffering, this suffering is collectively carried. This way, the company generates kin: sustainable relations between themselves. Even before a single spectator has entered their tent, what arises is a collective body, reminding us again of the superorganism. This collective body consisting of kin relations is a dwelling worth inhabiting.

When the piece is touring, Un loup pour l'homme often lives together in trailers next to the tent. This specific mobility, that characterizes a lot of circus artists' lives, is an important part of how they dwell. While the circus is on a constant move, the narrative of belonging is strongly present. Rebecca Sheehan examines the relations between home and mobility in *Making home 'under the big top': materialities of moving a small town every day and wintering in place*. The circus performers she is describing tour around the whole country and spent the winter in Hugo, USA. One might say that a big part of their material and nomadic practice is the building of a home. While they spend their

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<sup>189</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the trouble*, 99-103

<sup>190</sup> "Présentation," accessed 5<sup>th</sup> June 2019, <http://unlouppourlhomme.com/rare-birds/>.

days constantly moving around, home plays a key role in their lives.<sup>191</sup> By spending days and days carrying and catching each other and ending and beginning these days together, circus company members make kin.

*Rare Birds* showed us how dwelling carefully plays out in an assemblage consisting of humans. Of course, the exclusive humanity of this assemblage is merely semblance. The assemblage importantly includes the materiality of the tent, the narrative of belonging so present in circus and the institutional context of circus. However, on an explicit level, the performance deals mostly with human beings. The strings of the string figure called *Rare Birds* seem to connect primarily human beings. According to Haraway, in order to inhabit this planet better, kin relationships have to be expanded beyond the self-evident: she calls these relations: oddkin, a radical queering of kin.

I think that the stretch and recomposition of kin are allowed by the fact that all earthlings are kin in the deepest sense, and it is past time to practice better care of kinds-as-assemblages (not species one at a time).<sup>192</sup>

While it is fairly self-evident that we should care for human lives, it is harder to think of maintaining meaningful, sustainable and careful relationships with nonhumans. It is precisely the goal of this thesis to look for decentred positions for human being. How could we extend the dwelling practice as proposed in *Rare Birds* to explicitly deal with nonhumans? All these things implicit in the dwelling of *Un loup pour l'homme* need to be cared for if circus practices want to be sustainable.

This idea of oddkin brings us to another inevitable point of contact between Haraway's thinking and circus practices. We have to consider circus' history of working and living with nonhuman animals. As we have seen in the case of Philip Astley's horses, nonhuman animals have been a part of circus practices for centuries, however not unproblematically. These practices, especially those in which "wild animals" appear, have undergone fierce criticism.<sup>193</sup> This to the point that companies like Ecocirque Bouglione proudly claim "For a circus without animals, for the animals."<sup>194</sup> The French circus company claims to care for animals by not making them part of their circus practice. But is this the right way to go? Should we simply continue dwelling on our own? This abstaining from relations with nonhumans is what Donna Haraway calls innocence. However, it is an innocence she does not believe in. In her *When species meet* (2008), she explains:

Many critical thinkers who are concerned with the subjugation of animals to the purposes of people regard the domestication of other sentient organisms as an ancient historical disaster that has only grown worse with time. Taking themselves to be the only actors, people reduce other organisms to the lived status of being merely raw material or tools.<sup>195</sup>

By undoing all entanglement with nonhumans, these critical thinkers, and organisations like PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals), recreate the same old Cartesian bifurcation between nature as dead matter, as backdrop, and culture as human agency. The two rules of thumb 'rule over nature' and 'leave the animals alone', are two sides of the same problematic dualism. The idea that you can either do whatever you want with animals or that every interaction is problematic, is

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<sup>191</sup> Rebecca Sheehan, "Making home 'under the big top': materialities of moving a small town every day and wintering in place," in *Event mobilities: politics, place and performance*, ed. Kevin Hannam, Mary Mostafanezhad and Jillian Rickly. (New York: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>192</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the trouble*, 103.

<sup>193</sup> See for example the case of Ringling Brothers' treatment of animals on page 66.

<sup>194</sup> "Accueil," accessed May 18<sup>th</sup> 2019, <https://www.ecocirquebouglione.com/association>.

<sup>195</sup> Donna J. Haraway, *When species meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 206.

based in an ontology of acting humans and suffering animals. Furthermore, the fake innocence of the 'leave the animals alone' strand keeps up the impossible appearance that human lives do not impact others. But as Stengers argues: "Nothing that is real is self-sufficient."<sup>196</sup> Others are always implicated. In defence of Beatriz da Costa's artistic-scientific collaboration with pigeons, that came under PETA's attack, she pleads for

noninnocent, risky, committed "becoming involved in one another's lives." Making-with and tangled-with the tentacular ones, which are gripping and stinging for an ongoing generative Chthulucene, each is a sf string figure of multispecies becomingwith.<sup>197</sup>

Therefore, the dramaturgical tactics of dwelling plea for becoming involved, for dwelling together in circus.

In other words, in order to shape worlds similar to Terrapolis, we need to engage with lives across ontological categories. The circus could be a house for taking these risks. It could be what Haraway calls contact zones, world making entanglements.<sup>198</sup> This would require us to see circus practices as sympoesis. Sympoesis is Haraway's imaginative alternative to autopoiesis, which is obviously impossible if nothing is self-sufficient, like we argued with Stengers before. "Sympoesis is a word proper to complex, dynamic, responsive, situated, historical systems. It is a word for worlding-with, in company."<sup>199</sup> The concept of worlding, explored above, is thus always already a worlding-with, we should not continue dwelling on our own. After all, dwelling is always done in company. For circus practices, this implies that the history of dwelling with animals is to be re-thought, not thrown away.

Some circus companies already work their way through this delicate sympoesis. The French team of Baro d'Evel for example does not only consist of human members. In performances like *Le Sort du Dedans* (2009) and *Bestias* (2015), that generated quite some resonance in the circus field, they thematize their interspecies collaboration with horses and birds. Of this collaboration, Camille Decourtye writes: "To work, play, invent, and create with animals is mainly to live with them and explore new relationships. They help us develop a more sensitive perception of the world. Our artistic approach is inspired by this everyday life at their side."<sup>200</sup> Baro d'Evel thus knots together human and nonhuman lives. This is a risky practice, toxic relations are always lurking around the corner. However, in times like these, practicing these relations is key. Looking at these sort of practices always opens the question: how are the different beings knotted together?

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<sup>196</sup> Didier Debaise and Isabelle Stengers, "The insistence of possibles: towards a speculative pragmatism," trans. Angela Brewer, in *Parse*, nr. 7 (2017): 15.

<sup>197</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the trouble*, 71.

<sup>198</sup> Haraway, *When species meet*, 4.

<sup>199</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the trouble*, 58.

<sup>200</sup> Camille Decourtye, "Animals," accessed 30<sup>th</sup> July, <https://barodevel.com/en/animals/>.



Figure 18: Baro d'Evel, *Bestias*, 2015.

Research like that of Baro d'Evel has similarities with Haraway's account of her agility training with her dog Cayenne in *When species meet*. Although at this point Donna Haraway has not come up with the term yet, Cayenne and her agility training is a form of sympoiesis.

Agility is a team sport; both players make each other up in the flesh. Their principal task is to learn to be in the same game, to learn to see each other, to move as someone new of whom neither can be alone. To do that with a member of another biological species is not the same thing as doing it with a cheating, language-wielding, hominid partner.<sup>201</sup>



Figure 19: Fabrizio Terranova, *Storytelling for earthly survival*, 2016, screenshot (2019; Icarus Films). DVD.

This form of becoming-with could hardly be further from the relations of domination I have sketched before. These fantasies are not only at play between so called 'inanimate' matter and

<sup>201</sup> Haraway, *When species meet*, 175-176



humans, but also between human and nonhuman animals. “Taming” animals is the enactment of the same violent dualism: triumphant Homo and his obedient environment. We can see this dualism pictured in this photo of superstar *dompteur* Günther Gebel Williams (1934-2001) (fig.20). If we compare it to the one depicting Astley victorious over a couple of horses (fig. 4), the similarities are unavoidable. Both men represent Homo and his fantasies of mastery who, like the spectator wrote to Astley, ‘make brutes obey’.



Figure 20: Paul de Cordon, *Günther Gebel Williams and his tigers*, 1976.

Are we at risk of tolerating unmodified practices just by speaking and writing of them in a different way? Of course, this is in no way a plea for the collaboration with animals like elephants and tigers. We have to take collaborative dwelling seriously in the sense that the dwelling of nonhumans is to be respected. Contrary to Heidegger, Tim Ingold’s dwelling theory extends itself far beyond the human. Moreover, this activity happens for every species, through their very entanglement.<sup>202</sup> A more humble way of dwelling thus shows up. It is characterized by the idea of sympoesis, the co-making of worlds that is aimed at “living and dying well together”, not at mastery.<sup>203</sup> How to live and die “well”, like in care and craft, needs to be re-addressed in every context. However, it should be taken as a guideline to respect, care for and help sustain the dwelling practices of nonhumans. If worlding-with is done with care, it is of course unthinkable to chain and physically harm elephants, like Ringling Brothers, probably the most famous company in circus history, was accused of in 2009.<sup>204</sup> It is by moving away from these fantasies of mastery, by withdrawing towards a humble co-dwelling, that we can enable the seeds of dwelling practices to grow.

In this chapter the world might feel a lot more welcoming and comfortable than the one in the tuning chapter. However, we should be wary of idealization. The environment we need to learn how to dwell in, is a damaged planet, we should be careful not to idealize dwelling. As Haraway noted above, these relational practices are never innocent. Force is always lurking around the

<sup>202</sup> Ingold, *The perception of the environment*, 187-188.

<sup>203</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the trouble*, 23.

<sup>204</sup> Mark Eichelman, “Ringling Brothers on trial: circus elephants and the endangered species act,” *Animal Law Review* 16, nr. 1 (2009): 154-164.

corner, just think of the rates of domestic violence. In *Rare Birds* too, suffering is not absent. The possibility of darkness is always involved in the intimate close ties of a house. We cannot make norms for avoiding this darkness. Dwelling “well”, if our co-dwellers are nonhuman or not, is always unsure.

However, we can make use of two principles that I learned from Donna Haraway and Isabelle Stengers. There is no space here to fully address them, but I would like to point them out very shortly. The principles are Stengers’ cosmopolitics and Haraway’s response-ability. Thought in this context, they are strikingly complementing. Both concepts provide guidelines for interaction while avoiding being normative. We can understand Stengers’ provoking cosmopolitics as the need to make political decisions in the presence of those who will be affected by them.<sup>205</sup> Response-ability on the other hand, is lively characterized in an interview with Haraway as the cultivation of the capacity to respond.<sup>206</sup> If we extrapolate these principles to the practice of dwelling-with, we need to act close to all those concerned and render them and ourselves able to respond or look back. As Haraway summarizes: “The lovely part is that we can know only by looking and by looking back. *Respecere*.”<sup>207</sup>

### attending dwelling

There is a last implication of the dramaturgical tactics of dwelling, that we cannot get around. For an audience, entering the tent on the companies’ welcoming invite is a special kind of interpellation.. Here, I will understand the practice of watching particularly as a dwelling practice and try to think what dramaturgical tactics might allow the spectator to dwell. In the dwelling perspective, spectators are not asked to *watch* the piece but to *inhabit* it. In Dutch, my mother tongue, this beautifully translates to the movement from ‘bekijken’ to ‘bewonen’. (Ecological) art, like a humble circus, is now not *about* the environment but it *is* an environment.<sup>208</sup> This is rather abstract. While it might show physically in the way audiences are placed in the space, or the way they are addressed, it is mostly a shift in concepts.

As argued before, *Rare Birds* interpellates the spectator as inhabitant. Just like performance, spectatorship in the humble circus is a continuous task of ethical-political positioning: how and with whom do I inhabit this environment? After all, the environment is not pre-given. Like von Uexküll’s Umwelten, spectators’ worlds are created by their perceiving and effecting. This undoes the idea of a neutral audience, only there to watch what is presented. It replaces it by a conception of an audience as co-creating its environment by attending. Thus, being an audience member

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<sup>205</sup> Isabelle Stengers, “The challenge of ontological politics,” conference paper at *The Insistence of the Possible* (Goldsmiths, University of London), quoted in Tarvu Elfving, “Residencies and future cosmopolitics,” accessed 31<sup>st</sup> July 2019, <https://www.flandersartsinstitute.be/research-and-development/residencies/3579-residencies-and-future-cosmopolitics>.

<sup>206</sup> Martha Kenney, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene. Donna Haraway in conversation with Martha Kenney,” in *Art in the Anthropocene. encounters among aesthetics, politics, environments and epistemologies*, ed. Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin. (London: Open Humanities Press, 2015): 256-257.

<sup>207</sup> Haraway, *When species meet*, 164.

<sup>208</sup> Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 143.

entails a responsibility, or response-ability, as member of the ecology of the performance.<sup>209</sup> A position that is not at all self-evident.

But what exactly is this responsibility? Here, we have to return to the idea of care. Like above, the relations between *Rare Birds*' performers can be described as careful. Now, what would it mean for an audience to take care as a leading value for watching circus. How to watch carefully? Going back to the definition of care as proposed by Tronto in the CARING chapter, we conceive care as a way to maintain, continue and repair "our world". That the spectator encounters the performance as her world should be clear by now. Attending this world would thus imply being present in a way that maintains, continues and repairs that world.<sup>210</sup> If we accept that attitude, what should be appreciated are practices that are able to be maintained and continued. Thus, we should not only imagine the spectator as an inhabitant of the performance, but of a broader circus practice. As actants in the field of circus, their scope and care needs to reach beyond the time of performance they witness. What would it mean to train that move? Or to do it 200 times a year? How do all actants live here, and, following Fray's statement above: how do we continue together?

This obviously flows both ways. We could demand the spectator to behave in this or that way, but that also means that circus has to be made with that spectator in mind. Here watching and making circus cross: what would it mean to make circus for an audience that is not hungry for spectacular triumph, but consists of careful inhabitants? Performances would have to allow audiences to enter the performance in that way. One possible tactic is employed by *Un loup pour l'homme* as they explicitly stage their tent as their house and invite the audience in to become part of it. As Lievens argues, the archetype of the round tribune helps the company to achieve this communal feeling (fig. 21).<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>209</sup> The ethical-political responsibility of the spectator recalls André Lepecki's distinction between 'spectator' and 'witness'. Where the spectator is a 'silent accomplice', the witness is an ethical-political figure that takes responsibility of and bears witness to the performance. Andre Lepecki, *Singularities*, 179-180.

<sup>210</sup> The professional spectator, be it the critic, the dramaturg or any other professional in the circus field, is assigned a specific role. As someone who, to speak with Adrian Heathfield, writes of the performance, they have to extend their careful dwelling to the discourse produced around performances.

<sup>211</sup> Lievens, "Het mensbeeld van de acrobaat", *Etcetera*.





Figure 21: Jostijn Ligetvoet, *Un loup pour l'homme* QAA Rare Birds, 2018 (Tilburg : Circolo Festival, 2018)

In *Rare Birds*, the lure of what Tom Trevatt calls the idea of ‘the audience as final guarantor’ is avoided. It undoes the distinction between the (art) object and the human subject watching and completing it. According to Trevatt, this conception would reproduce the schema in which human cognition (culture) is seen as dominant over its environment (nature).<sup>212</sup> As Tim Ingold stated above, only because people already dwell in an environment, they can think the thoughts they think, the world is the homeland of their thoughts. This is also true for the audience, only because the spectator dwells in the performance, it can think its thoughts. The re-knotting of thought and artwork as inseparable and mutually dependent, is something we can achieve by dwelling together. Similar to the way we asked ourselves before how actants are knotted in a practice, we can question how we knot the spectator in the dwelling? The figure of the knot is not arbitrary. In *The life of lines* (2015), Ingold argues how knots are the basis of building. According to him, knotting is the fundamental principle of coherence in a world where everything is continually coming into being. Lively things grow by knotting themselves together with other things.<sup>213</sup> Similarly, Haraway thinks of knots as the way species come together but also the way thoughts are thought. Her string figures too, are aimed at creating careful attachments and rethinking the way we weave ourselves into the dwelling of the planet.<sup>214</sup>

As the border between spectator and performance becomes increasingly porous, the spectator is not a disembodied outside eye, but finds herself *inside* the performance. The ecological potential of this inside perspective has been thematized by Bruno Latour and Tim Ingold. Similar to Haraway’s problematization of the god trick, both scholars dismiss the Western image of the world as globe because it positions the human ‘outside’ of it. Though Latour and Ingold propose different alternatives, the critical zone and the sphere respectively, both propositions are worlds seen from

<sup>212</sup> Tom Trevatt, “The cosmic address,” in *Speculative aesthetics*, ed. Robin Mackay, James Trafford and Luke Pendrell. (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2018), 26-32

<sup>213</sup> Tim Ingold, *The life of lines* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 13.

<sup>214</sup> The idea of weaving and knotting will come back in the CRAFTING chapter.

the ‘inside’, worlds that come into being by lived experience, by dwelling.<sup>215</sup> Seeing audience members as inhabitants can help us cultivate this inside perspective, both in circus worlds and broader ecologies

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<sup>215</sup> *Inside*, Bruno Latour & Frédérique Aït Touati (Nanterre: Théâtre Nanterre-Amandiers, 20 November 2016). and Ingold, *The perception of the environment*, 209-2018.

## CONCLUSION

I started this thesis from the observation that a lot of circus practices tend to stage a specific view of human and world. I described this set of beliefs as anthropocentrism. With this, I wish to indicate that circus arts, both historically and today, often represent human beings as Haraway's Homo, triumphing over their passive environment. Central in my description of this problematic representation, were Jane Bennett's fantasies of mastery: the desire of man to reign over his environment. These fantasies of mastery are firmly linked to the ecological catastrophe we are facing today. Moreover, the ontology of acting humans in neutral, will-less environments, that grew in the Western world after the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution, is what brought us in this dramatic situation. This shows the importance of finding alternative ways of relating to (nonhuman) environments. Necessary for thinking these alternatives is the withdrawal of Homo from the centre of his worldview.

Circus arts, so I argued, could be the arena for this withdrawal. As an art form in which relationships between humans and nonhumans are central, circus can help us make, do and attend other types of relations. In this thesis, I proposed three ways out: tuning, crafting and dwelling. These three ways out are conceived as dramaturgical tactics. Each of them feeds on certain possibilities inherent to contemporary circus practices. In a Stengerian way of thinking, the tactics identify and systematize possibilities in the present in order to provide an insight in a more humble future. Just like in Stengers' title *Another science is possible* (2017), I believe another circus is possible. The careful dramaturgical tactics of tuning, crafting and dwelling provide us with paths that might bring us closer to this possible humble circus.

To be able to observe these tactics a bit closer, I introduced three focus points: making, doing and watching. Thus, in each chapter, I tried to track down possibilities in the way circus artists make, do and watch. Looking at theory through these practices and vice versa, the dramaturgical tactics came into being. The first one, tuning, provided quite a clear sort of relation. In that chapter, circus arts appeared as a practice in which different entities tune to different agencies. Phia Ménard/Compagnie Non Nova's I.C.E. cycle took a leading role in showing how dramaturgical tactics of tuning could evolve. Crafting started from a similar starting point: working in and with material agencies, but introduced knowledge as a second crucial theme in this thesis. Especially important in this (implicit) knowledge was the idea of doing things 'well'. With care, craft shared the tendency to determine what is good in the practice itself. This vibrated through the rest of the thesis. Tuning, crafting or dwelling 'well' can never be set normatively, the tactics only provide room as well as rules for playing. This brings us to the last tactics: dwelling. Dwelling well is an indispensable skill in times of ecological disaster. Thinking and doing circus as a dwelling practice might both make circus practices into better worlds and help us conceive of other ways of inhabiting things bigger than the circus.

These three ways to withdraw are characterized by care. In contrast to the relations of mastery present in circus arts, tuning, crafting and dwelling cultivate careful relations in more than human worlds. That way, I have tried to paint a picture of circus as a world consisting of things, (non)human animals, fantasies and institutes. All of these entities require care in order to be able

to flourish and continue. This thesis proposed three careful dramaturgical tactics in order to give shape to these possible careful relations within a humble circus.

## EPILOGUE: THINKING THROUGH FISH WORK

In this epilogue, I explore a possible performance.<sup>216</sup> This final chapter lays out a dramaturgical framework for a performance that never took place: *fish work*. This imagined circus performance could possibly take place in the future, but in fact, even that is of relative relevance to this speculative endeavour. What matters is that it exists in thought between the reader, some co-thinkers and me. Imagining this performance will allow me to elaborate on the three dramaturgical tactics shaped above and explore the potential inherent to them. Next to that, *fish work* shows how closely the three tactics are connected. When they are thought in the environment of *fish work*, it becomes clear how they start from the same assumptions and depend on each other. The cases discussed above, all implicitly vibrate through the dramaturgical outlines for *fish work*.

For me personally, the writing of this text became a tool for gathering thoughts about circus practices that do not already exist. Writing this thesis was a constant battle between *what is* and *what could be* and the relation these two have to each other. That way, *fish work* became a home for a lot of ideas that were homeless, since they were not so much connected to existing practices as to fantasies of what circus could be. The possible performance became a membrane to think, watch, read and care through. Not only did I start imagining what the theories I was reading and co-creating would mean for this performance. I also started reading theory through this possible performance. This text is the result of the combination of these two streams of thought.

Like the rest of this thesis, I see this epilogue as a form of resistance against a predictable future. I want to do this through speculating about another possible future, embodied by one specific work. This imagination however is not hare-brained, I draw from the possibilities I explored in this thesis, Stengers' substance for resistance, and intensify and structure them into the form of a dramaturgical blueprint for this performance: *fish work*. The choice to end this thesis this way, is somehow similar to and certainly inspired by Donna Haraway's Camille stories at the end of *Staying with the trouble*.<sup>217</sup> In these stories, she imagines a personage, Camille, living through five generations. Similar to my attempt here, Haraway's storytelling allows her to think improbable futures that go against the grain of the present.



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<sup>216</sup> This epilogue is a highly adapted rework of the paper "Possible dramaturgies, imagining *fish work*," written for the course Dramaturgy (2018-2019) by dr. Jeroen Coppens at the University of Ghent.

<sup>217</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the trouble*, 134-168.

*fish work* Looks more or less like this: there is a set of acrobats (x/v/m) and some mechanical flying fish, commercially available as *Air Swimmer*. The question at play is: how to knot these entities together well? That means: how to create a world that is sustainable by inhabiting it? Of the three perspectives that I cultivated in this thesis, the making perspective will thus prevail here. Which doesn't mean that doing and attending play no role.

Of course, this question can be thought doing circus. This would mean that we take this question to the studio together with some *Air Swimmers* and acrobats and start working through embodied practice. This is one possible way of thinking through circus. Although extremely valuable, this thinking happening *in* and *through* circus practices is often overlooked, as Camilla Damkjaer argues. As mentioned above, she tries to do precisely this in her research.

I am trying to challenge the academic mind-body set-up and to examine not only if the academic's mind is a muscle (as one of Yvonne Rainer's titles suggest: *The Mind is a Muscle*), but also if her muscles are a mind.<sup>218</sup>

In this epilogue however, I will obviously not take this path of thought. I'm sitting behind a computer in a small office, not in a circus studio. Still, I'm not only thinking *about* circus, circus is also a membrane to think *through*; not in the embodied studio way, but in a more conceptual fashion.

The careful dramaturgical tactics of tuning, crafting and dwelling as developed in this thesis, will shape *fish work* and vice versa. That way, a dramaturgical blueprint comes into existence. It is different from a script, because it allows for more openness and does not directly describe what should happen on stage. Rather, it proposes ways of weaving: methods for relating.

This dramaturgical imagining of *fish work* is not the innocent fabulation it might seem. Building this possible dramaturgical framework tells us important things about circus practices. By leaving the habitual framework of existing practices, a new world of possibilities is opened. Because it clearly identifies the elements in today's circus practices it wants to leave behind and those it wants to take along, this world tells us as much about what circus already is, as about what circus could be. It helps us to resist an obvious future for circus practices. But at the same time, it allows us to cultivate what is already present in today's circus and look for ways to intensify these seeds.

## dwelling

The circus is a dwelling place *par excellence*. Circus practices have been weaving together ontologically different entities for centuries. The question is: what kind of relations do we actually cultivate while practicing circus? Can circus arts instead of an arena for the human victory over his environment, become a site for sustained construction of careful worlds, a mental and physical space for what Donna Haraway calls *multispecies flourishing*?<sup>219</sup> Imagining how that would play out in *fish work*, might help us think the broader movement towards a humble circus.

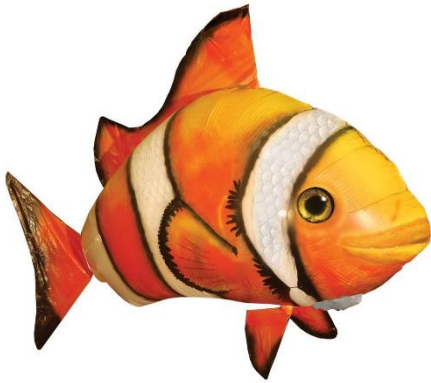
An obvious first question presents itself: what entities are precisely inhabiting the world of *fish work*? A non-exhaustive list could be: audience members, *Air Swimmers*, circus institutes, acrobats, narratives of ecological disaster, fantasies of mastery but also of care. The dramaturgical tactics for

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<sup>218</sup> Damkjaer, *Homemade academic circus*, 16.

<sup>219</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the trouble*, 2.

dwelling are semi-systematic methods for weaving them. This text, if only imaginary, takes a first shot at this weaving.



Let's start with the audience. As elaborated in the 'watching dwelling' section, spectators are essential parts of the dwellings shaped by a performance. From a dwelling point of view, we cannot think the spectator as an external, disembodied eye. In contrast, *fish work*'s spectator is belonging to and co-sustaining the space in the ecology of the performance as a feeling body. Just as much as the performers, she is an inhabitant of the dwelling. This could be spatialized by undoing the distinction between the performer's space and that of the spectator. Sticking to the circular form, traditional in circus, this would cause the performers (both acrobats and *Air Swimmers*), to make their ways not only inside but also around and above the circle of spectators. The spectator is now an inhabitant of a careful ecology: she is now inside.

What would then happen in this world the spectator is inhabiting, rather than watching from the outside? What kind of circus practice would be a 'good' worlding praxis for the different entities on stage? How can we all call this performance our home? The ontological status of the *Air Swimmer* is interesting in this case: it represents both a nonhuman animal and a machine. It is reminiscent of the tricky but important circus tradition of dwelling with nonhuman animals, as well as that of man's contemporary challenge to inhabitant technological worlds. Today, finding sustainable relations to nonhuman animals and technologies is crucial. Thus, *fish work* needs to look for careful relations between humans and inflatable fish.

Next to that, the gloomy ecological connotations the cheap plastic balloons and exhaustible helium carry with them is important. Making worlds is not a Disney story. In *fish work* as well as in our broader environment, there are things that could cause serious damage and will outlive us by centuries. The task is to build a physical and mental environment that allows divergent beings to co-exist. This means that *fish work* needs a performance space, a tent for example, that is both high enough for the *Air Swimmers* to go their way and fit for a group of spectators. Also the practice that acrobats and *Air Swimmers* develop together, needs to care for and sustain the different entities and their precarious relations.

### **tuning**

For a web of entities to sustainably exist, these entities have to attune to each other. Therefore, dwelling requires tuning. How could the acrobats present in *fish work* not dominate the *Air*

*Swimmers*, like a juggler dominates the five balls she keeps in the air, but rather develop a relationship of attunement towards them. In this sense, the *Air Swimmer* is an interesting co-performer, since it has a clear agency and impedes a lot of pre-existing figures. How to do *main à main* acrobatics when your partner does not have hands? How to juggle flying fish? Like Phia Ménard's ice or wind, *Air Swimmers* are hard to tame, which makes tuning a more plausible option. Thus, the human actors are humbled in the sense that they can no longer be the *dompteurs* of their worlds. In another way, *Air Swimmers* are constantly tuning to the air, the impact of wind or changes in air pressure they experience are visible. This too, can be a way of tuning.

Tuning would thus mean that what happens on stage is not based on preconceptions fed by repertoire, but on the specific actors in the performance. For example, the soundtrack of the performance could consist of the constant sounds made by the *Air Swimmers*, captured by contact microphones and dictating the pace of the performance. A constant uncanny nonhuman buzz remembering us of the radically other, even potentially dangerous, entities surrounding us. Another interesting capacity of the *Air Swimmer* is its capacity to move independent of exterior control. The patterns the fish move in could be new patterns to explore, to tune to. In that way, circus artists start their work from the specificities of the (im)material situation they find themselves in.

Of course, the tuning strategy also requires us to rethink the position of the spectator. Tuning does not only happen between things on stage but also between the audience and the entities on stage, like the meditative effect the repetitive sound of the *Air Swimmers* on audience members, as well as between the audience and the work as a whole. If we think dwelling through, it is even impossible to make this distinction between *on* and *off* stage. As a whole, *fish work* is shaped in such a complexity that it is never fully graspable for an audience. In that sense *fish work* itself becomes some sort of a hyperobject, constantly overflowing with meanings and movements and thus preventing an audience to master it.

If we leave behind representation for a while, we see that working with these *Air Swimmers* requires an incredible amount of tuning. Personally, I was once involved in a performance that shortly featured one of these fish. Quickly, we found out that before we could even start thinking about what it looks like from the outside, we had to spend hours and hours working with the material agencies of these particular mix of helium, plastic and radio technology. For example, to keep one of them floating, we had to precisely adapt the weight to the air pressure in every space we were working in. This way, tuning is not only something you might want to *show*. Before all that, it is something you have to actually *do*.





### **crafting**

Like the anecdote above shows quite clearly, working with the material agencies of these fish, takes quite some experience. Within the crafting idiom, we could say that what you need in order to make work together with these actants, is a specific material intelligence. By spending time joining their lives to the lives of the *Air Swimmers*, circus artists can become skilled co-performers. That way, they develop a specific craft. Craft shows itself again as a sensibility for (im)material environments. Circus artists have to learn to work with helium, the air pressure, the sound and movement of the fish, but also how to deal with the narratives, fantasies and associations through which these fish move, for example: discourses around nature and nonhuman animals or technology and robotics.

This way, techniques can come into being. A starting point for developing these techniques is the specificity of the things involved and the different possible relations to them: following, moving, catching etc. That way, *fish work* becomes an attempt at developing a specific skill, an extraordinary capability for sensing and interpreting an eerie and mechanical environment and being able to join ones life to it in a careful way. This careful craft makes sure that all entities involved in this world are able to carry on as well as possible in the practice. This shows us that we do not only craft techniques, performances, movements etc. but also a position for ourselves. We need to carefully register what kind of position we give ourselves and where that leaves others, be they *Air Swimmers* or audience members.

Of course, showing craft to these last ones, is yet another thing. To do this, we have to enter the realm of representation. In order to avoid the representation of mastery, *fish work* shows the process preceding the techniques. When watching *fish work*, you do not see finished tricks but an ongoing process of relating to ontologically different things. That way, circus artists in *fish work* are not represented as virtuosos who have mastered the *Air Swimmers* among others, but as craftspersons, in constant negotiation with the agencies in their environment. Since there is no climactic resolution of the tension between different entities but the showing of an ongoing process and negotiation, fantasies of mastery are avoided.

But if we follow the tuning tactics and do not start from a standardised circus repertoire, but from the specificities of the (im)material situation in the studio, what are the criteria for working? How do we craft *fish work* well? This question beautifully shows the limitations of this text. From this thesis, we can draw some criteria to approach this 'well', for example: careful relations, sustainability (being able to continue), a decentralized human position etc. However, it is precisely the nature of

craft that it looks for that ‘well’ *in the doing*. Thus, the dramaturgical tactics of crafting do not prescribe what is well in the context of *fish work*. Rather, they teach us that, when working with the *Air Swimmers*, we have to constantly look for the criteria for doing, making and watching ‘well’. These criteria have to be made explicit, shared and permanently questioned: is what we do, make and see a good practice for us, and why?

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